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ROLL VERSUS CODEX – A NEW APPROACH?

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In Scritti in Onore di Orsolina Montevecchi, Bologna 1978, pp. 373-376, I published a note entitled "Was re-rolling a papyrus roll an irksome and time-consuming task ?", in which I described experiments with rolls cut from rolls of wall-paper, on the basis of which I concluded that re-rolling a roll was much easier and quicker than had been supposed, and that the secret lay in letting the roll do the work of rolling through its natural tendency to roll up. I assumed that a roll of papyrus, having been rolled up at the time of manufacture and kept constantly rolled up except when opened for the purposes of writing and reading, would have possessed the same tendency to roll up, but of course I had no means of proving it. Now the proof has come to light in a surprising way. Among the great find of papyri at Dishna, not far from the better-known Nag Hammadi, were a number of papyrus rolls. The owner of one of these rolls tried to unroll it, but found that the papyrus began to break. He thereupon immersed the roll in warm water, after which he found that he could unroll it without damage either to the roll or the writing. He left it unrolled, and five minutes later the roll had rolled itself up. It is surely remarkable that 1500 years or so after its manufacture a papyrus roll should still retain its capacity to roll itself up and thus completely confirm the results of my experiments.

Now that what has so often been claimed as one of the signal disadvantages of the roll has been eliminated, we may perhaps look again at the question of why it took so long for the codex to replace the roll. I myself have long thought it possible that the roll might have possessed some psychological advantage in that reading a roll is a continuous process, unbroken by the necessity for page-turning, which cuts the reader off from all that has gone before and gives only limited access, in the form of the facing page, to what is to come. To put this to a practical test I chose a fairly abstruse article of which I happened to have photocopies, viz. Walter F. Snyder, 'When was the Alexandrian Calendar established ?', American Journal of Philology, lxiv, 1943, pp. 385-389, and pasted the pages down on to a roll of stout paper, forming a roll exactly 2 m long. The result was remarkable. Not only did I find the argumentation easier to follow, but there were several practical advantages. For instance, the article is illustrated with four Charts, each occupying most of a page. Chart I, in the original, comes on a right-hand page while discussion of it cames on the following page, which meant that Chart and discussion could not be viewed simultaneously. Chart II also begins on a right-hand page, while discussion of it follows on the next two pages, from which the Chart is of course invisible, Discussion of Chart III begins two full pages before the Chart itself appears. With my 'roll', on the other hand, it was quite easy to unroll it so

that one could view four or five pages at once, so that, e.g., Charts I and II and the discussion of them could all be seen simultaneously. I found this extremely helpful.

Of course I would not claim that my single experiment is sufficient to prove my point. But I would suggest that this is an aspect of the contest between roll and codex which deserves consideration. One has only to think of such examples as the Parthenon frieze or the Column of Trajan to realise that the advantages of a panoramic or narrative presentation were fully appreciated in antiquity, and may have influencced the literate classes whose views determined the form of ancient books.

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