

Martial wrote his witty epigrams in Rome in the last decade or so of the first century A.D. His first book (of twelve) was published in about 85 A.D. He tells us quite a bit about how to obtain a copy of one of his books in a number of different epigrams. Whether Martial jotted down his poems while composing them, or whether he dictated them right away to his librarius (copyist), we cannot be sure, but most likely the latter. At any rate Martial knows the value of a short book:

at nunc succincti quae sint bona disce libelli:
hoc primum est, brevior quod mihi charta perit;
deinde quod haec una veragit librarius hora . . .
tertia res haec est, quod si cui forte legeris,
sis licet usque malus, non odiosus eris. Bk. II,1.

Not only will the poet save paper (charta), and his copyist's time, but if anyone reads him, he may be bad, but at least he will not be boring.

The charta is not quite like our paper. Instead of being rolled and dried out of a porridgy material, as our paper is, charta is made from layers of pith from the navvus reed.¹ first soaked and beaten together, then bleached and dried in the sun before being scraped smooth.² Sheets of papyrus (schedae) were usually cut to approximately six by nine inches, and then twenty or so schedae would be glued side by side to form a roll (volumen). On the volumen the poet's copyist would write with a reed pen (calamus) and black ink (atramentum), made from soot or cuttlefish 'ink', in pages like this,³ with a wide margin around each column of writing:

The titles, author's name, headings and so on were often written in red ink.

When the roll was finished it was trimmed, smoothed at top and bottom with pumice stone, oiled with cedar oil as anti-moth and-mice protection, and the edges painted black. A tag of parchment (titulus) with the author's name and the title on it was attached to the umbilicus or turn-stick:⁴

Next the umbilicus was given gilded or decorative knobends (cornua), and the roll was popped into a parchment cover (involucrum), sometimes an expensive purple colour. Often the separate books of one poet's works would be bundled together into a round wooden box (scrinium or capsa) with a lid and sometimes a handle to turn it into a sort of briefcase.⁵

Elsewhere Martial tells us how to carry his poems around while travelling:

How Martial's Poems were first published . . .

Qui tecum cupis esse meos ubicumque libellos
et comites longae quaeris habere viae
hos eme, quos artat brevibus membrana tabellis.
scrinia da magnis, me manus una capit (I,2)

The tabellae (originally 'writing tablets', here 'pages') are the leaves of a codex or book made of parchment (membrana) and bound together at one side into a spine as our books are. Bookboxes, says Martial, are splendid for the great poets who write great long poems, but Martial can be held in one hand--an impossibility with the two-handed volumen!

These libelli (little books, 'slim volumes') are what the poet suggests we should buy as reading material for a journey, and in another poem he tells us where to go to get them:

Argi nempe soles subire Letum:
contra Caesaris est forum taberna
scriptis postibus hinc et inde totis
omnes ut cito perlegas poetas
illinc me pete. nec roges Atrectum
(hoc nomen dominus gerit tabernae):
de primo dabit alterore nido
rasum pumice purpuraque cultum
denaris tibi quinque Martialem. (I,117)

So Atrectus the bookseller, with his shop down by Caesar's Forum, will sell you a nice new Martial for a mere five dollars. After the volumen is finished with, we can tear up the paper to wrap up spices and incense in the kitchen, or fried or salted fish in the market, or to provide scrap paper for schoolboys to write their exercises on (Martial; III, 2; IV, 86).

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