A SHORT ILLUSTRATED BOOK

The Story of Papyrus

How a reed from the banks of the Nile became the page of the ancient world



The use of paper is what civilised life depends on most, and memory above all.

Pliny the Elder, on papyrus
Natural History, Book 13

INSIDE

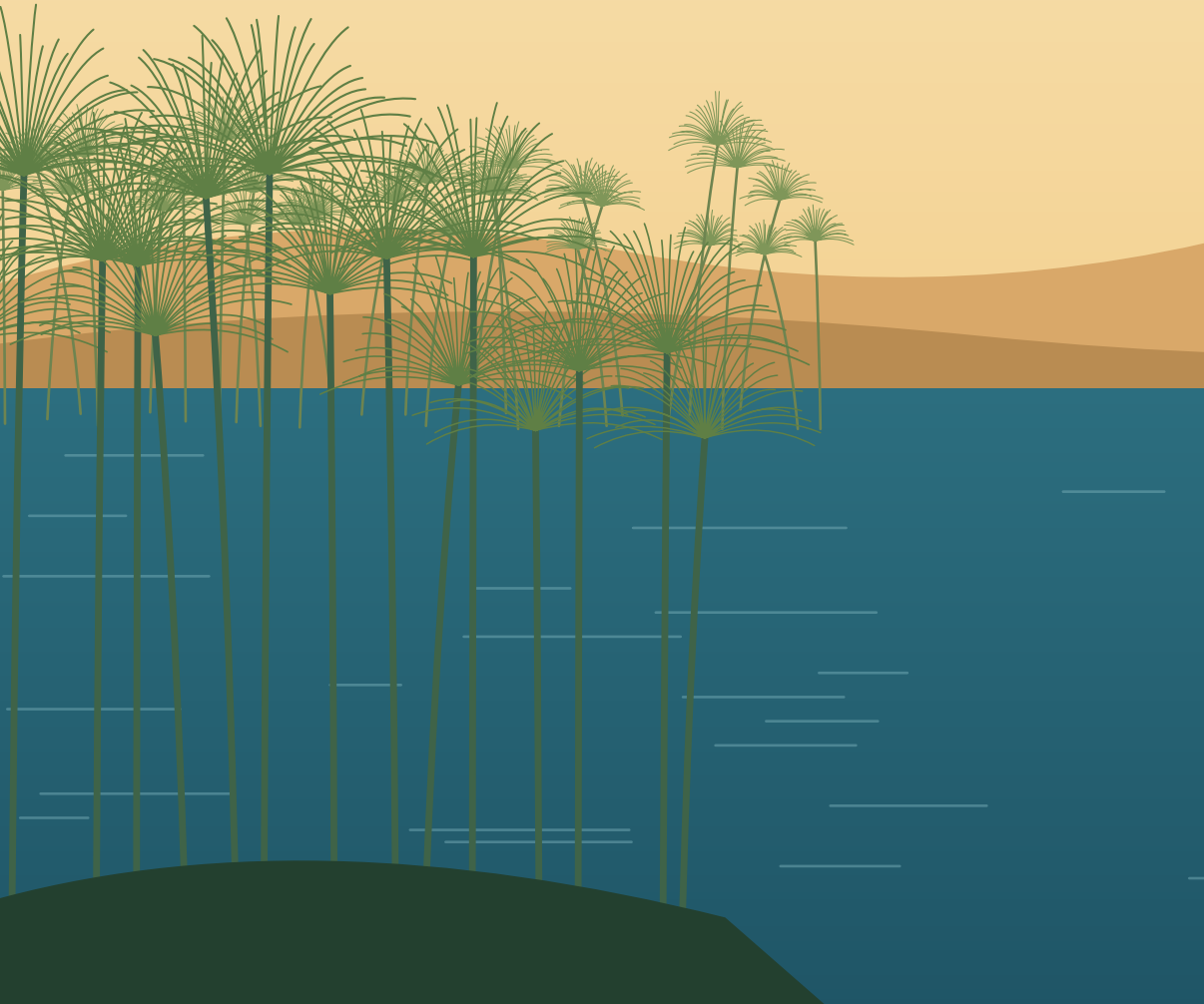
Contents

1	A reed by the river	4
2	From stem to sheet	8
3	Rolls and libraries	10
4	What survived, and what it left us	12
5	From scroll to screen	14

Turn the page by dragging its corner, or use the arrows. Chapter one opens across two pages, so the river runs through the fold.

CHAPTER ONE

A reed by the river



For about four thousand years, a plant from the marshes of Egypt carried the words of the Mediterranean world: its letters and accounts, its poems and its laws.



Papyrus, *Cyperus papyrus*, is a tall sedge that once grew in dense thickets along the Nile and across its delta. Its smooth stems, triangular in section, can rise as high as five metres from the shallow water, each one crowned by a soft burst of fine green rays.

The Egyptians found a use for almost every part of it. Stems were tied into bundles to build light river boats, and they were woven into mats, baskets, sandals and rope. The roots served as fuel. Parts of the plant could even be eaten.

Its most lasting gift, though, was a smooth and light writing surface. The oldest roll we know of came from a tomb at Saqqara and is around 5,000 years old. It was buried blank, which tells us that the craft was already established.

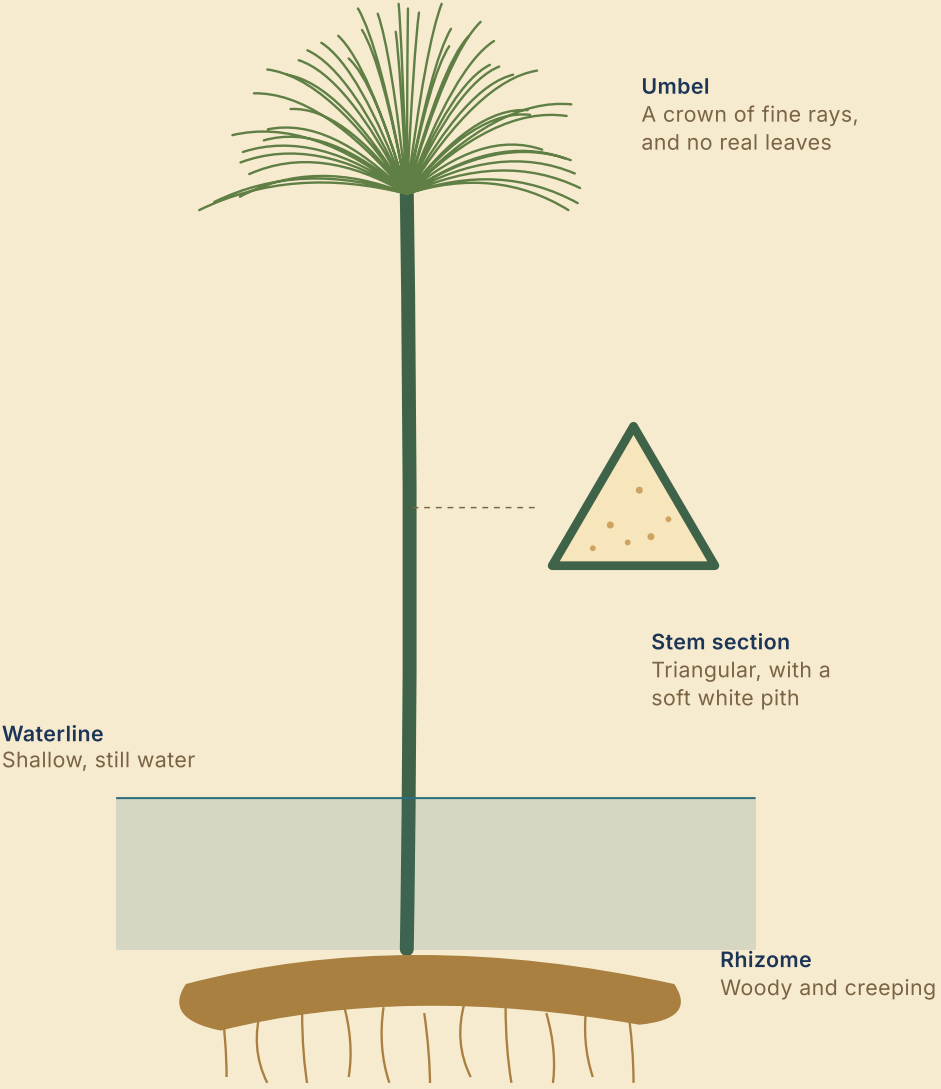
> *The plant was so tied to Lower Egypt that it became the symbol of the land itself.*

The oldest papyri with writing on them were found in 2013 at Wadi al-Jarf, on the Red Sea coast. They include the logbook of an official named Merer, who recorded his team's work carrying limestone for the Great Pyramid of Khufu.

Today the plant has largely vanished from the wild in Egypt, although it still thrives in other parts of Africa. It also grows along a small river near Syracuse, in Sicily.

FIELD NOTES

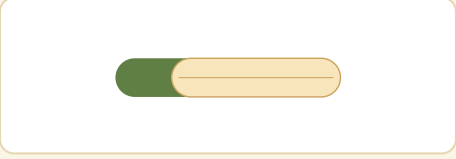
Anatomy of a reed



CHAPTER TWO

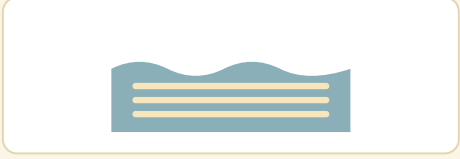
From stem to sheet

A sheet of papyrus needs no chemistry at all, only patience and pressure. No Egyptian manual has come down to us: our best ancient account is by Pliny the Elder, and modern craftspeople have filled in the rest by trying it themselves.



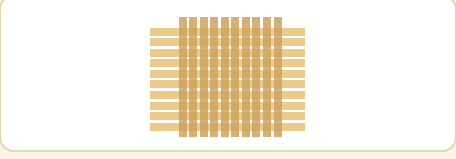
1. Cut

The green rind is peeled off the stem, and the white pith is sliced into long, thin strips.



2. Soak

The strips may be soaked in water so that they stay soft and flexible.



3. Lay out

One layer of strips goes down side by side. A second is laid across it at a right angle.



4. Press and dry

The layers are pressed and dried. The plant's sap is thought to bind them into one sheet.

Held against the light

Two layers at right angles: you can still see the pattern on an ancient sheet. Scribes usually wrote first on the side where the fibres run along the line, which guides the pen. A finished sheet was polished smooth, then glued to the next one to make a roll.

CHAPTER THREE

Rolls and libraries



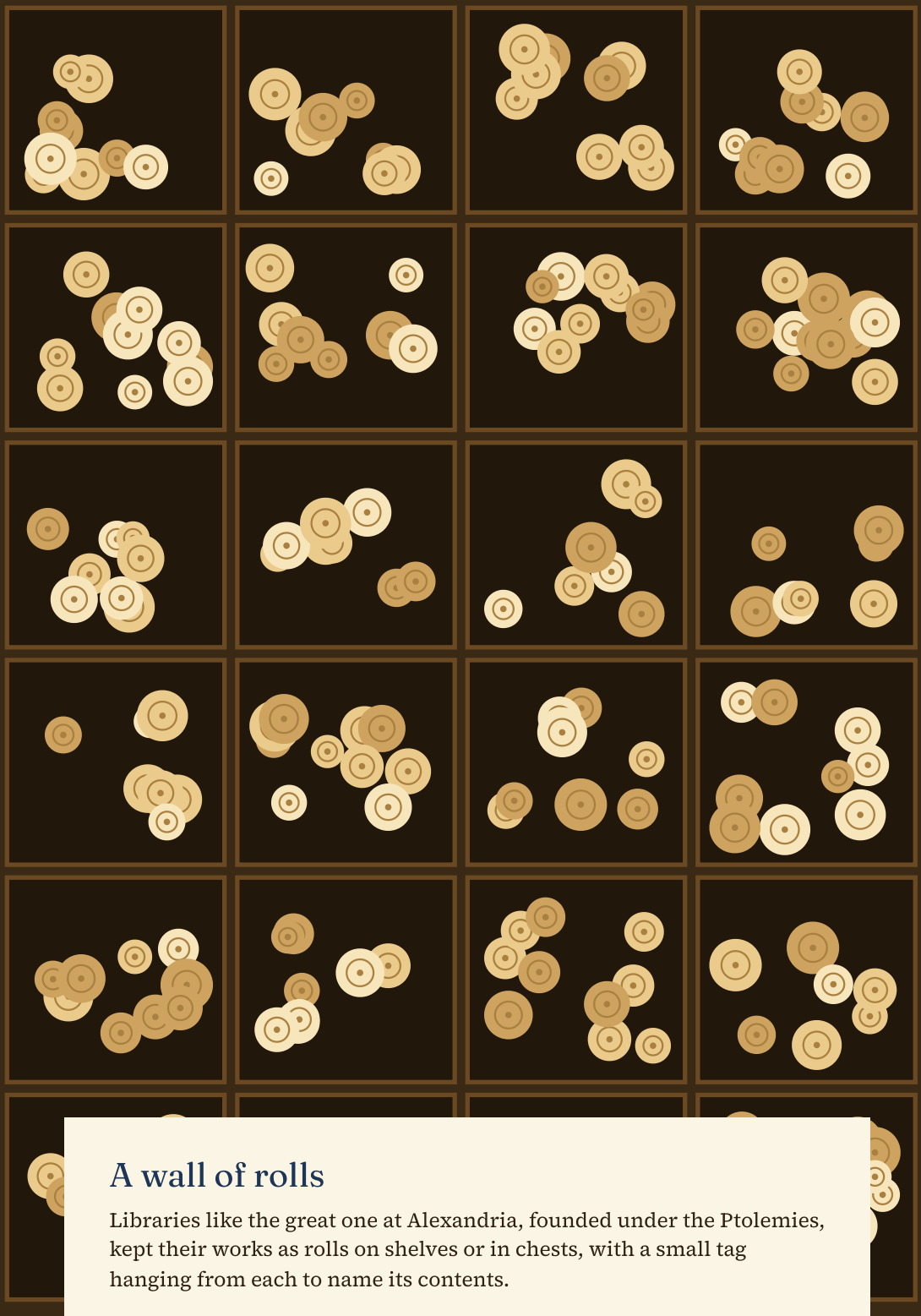
A roll is read one panel at a time: one hand unrolls while the other rolls up.

41 m

The length of the Great Harris Papyrus, one of the longest rolls known from ancient Egypt.

Most rolls were far shorter, and a long Greek work had to be split across several of them. That is why the "books" of Homer or Herodotus are the size they are: each one was a roll.

Papyrus was also a major export. Egypt supplied it for centuries to Greece and to Rome, whose whole administration ran on it.



A wall of rolls

Libraries like the great one at Alexandria, founded under the Ptolemies, kept their works as rolls on shelves or in chests, with a small tag hanging from each to name its contents.

CHAPTER FOUR

What survived

Papyrus is tough in dry air and fragile in damp. Most of what the ancient world wrote on it has been lost, and much of what remains owes its life to an accident.

A rubbish heap

At Oxyrhynchus, in Egypt, the townspeople threw old documents onto their dumps, and the desert sand preserved them. Excavations from 1896 onwards brought up hundreds of thousands of fragments: lost poems, gospels, contracts, private letters.

A volcano

In AD 79, Vesuvius buried a villa at Herculaneum with its library inside. The rolls were carbonised, too fragile to open. Today, scans and machine learning have begun to reveal their words without unrolling them.

WHAT IT LEFT US

Words from the reed

The material is long gone from daily life. The vocabulary is not.

Paper

From Latin *papyrus*, although true paper is made in a completely different way.

Bible

From Greek *biblia*, "books". The word is linked to Byblos, the Phoenician port through which papyrus reached the Greeks.

Volume

From Latin *volumen*, "something rolled": a scroll.

Chart, card and charter

All from Latin *charta*, from the Greek word for a sheet of papyrus.

Protocol

From Greek *protokollon*, the "first glued" sheet of a roll, which carried details about the document.

CHAPTER FIVE

From scroll to screen

c. 3200 BC
Clay tablet
Wet clay, marked with a reed stylus in Mesopotamia.

c. 2900 BC
Papyrus
The oldest known roll, buried blank at Saqqara.

2nd c. BC
Parchment
Prepared animal skin. An old story credits Pergamon with it.

c. AD 100
Paper
Pulped plant fibre, developed in China.

4th c. AD
The codex
Folded leaves between covers overtake the roll.

11th c.
Papyrus fades
The papal chancery is among the last to give it up.

1450s
Printing press
Gutenberg's movable type reaches Europe's readers.

1993
PDF
A file that looks the same on any screen.

YOUR TURN

Try the viewer

This little book was made to test Papiro PDF. It is an ordinary PDF: every page is drawn from the file, and the text stays selectable. Try the following.

Try this	What to look for
Zoom in on the small print	Letters stay sharp at any size
Select a sentence	You can copy it and paste it
Go full screen	The art fills the display
Open it on a phone	The toolbar adapts to fit

Small print to test zoom: papyrus sheets were glued together with their joins smoothed down so that a pen could cross them without catching. Roman writers graded sheets by quality and gave the finest grades imperial names. The account we rely on most comes from Pliny the Elder, though scholars still debate how to read some of its details.



Papiro PDF

A sample book by OK Multimedia
Text and illustrations are our own

made with care

OKM

www.okmultimedia.com/en