

## Codex

Codex, (plural *codices*), is the name given to a form of book used in antiquity that would eventually replace the roll and become the standard format for the book for more than a thousand years until the development of paper and printing would transform it into the book form we use today. Although a prototype for the modern book form, the term codex is used only for manuscript books produced from Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages. The codex is a collection of sheets of any material, (usually papyrus or parchment), folded double and fastened together to form quires or gatherings and usually protected by covers (Roberts, 1). The codex was developed from the wooden writing tablet which was made from two or more flat pieces of wood held together by a clasp or by cords passed through holes. The centre of the tablet consisted of a hollowed out section that was filled with wax that could be inscribed with a bronze or iron stylus. The wax was reusable and therefore the tablets lent themselves to more casual usage than the scroll. It was commonly used for taking notes, school exercises, drafts, legal documents and keeping accounts. The nature of the material used for the wooden tablet meant that there was a limit to the number of leaves that could be used and there are no more than ten in the surviving examples from antiquity (Roberts, 12). The Latin word for a plurality of tablets or for multi-leaved tablets was *codex* and the term would eventually come to denote a book (Roberts, 13).

The Romans were responsible for substituting the wooden leaves of the writing tablet with parchment to form parchment note-books (*membranae*), in codex form that were used for casual purposes similar to those of the original wooden tablets. The first indisputable reference to a literary publication in codex form however, comes from the poet Martial towards the end of the first century AD (Roberts, 24). In a poem that celebrates the gifts for the Saturnalia (the Roman feast of the commemoration of the temple of the God Saturn), Martial lists a number of writing tablets and books. Martial distinguishes between the books that are in the form of papyrus rolls and those that are in codex form. Furthermore, Martial goes on to commend the parchment codex on the basis that it is a convenient book for travellers and it saves space in the library compared with the roll (Roberts, 25). The oldest surviving example of a parchment codex is the *Fragmentum de bellis Macedonicis* and is probably contemporary with Martial (Bischoff, 182).

The papyrus roll and codex and the parchment roll and codex remained in use in varying degrees in different periods and in different areas for many centuries (Roberts, 5). The parchment codex achieved parity with the roll in *circ.*300 and by the fifth century the roll represented only ten percent of the market and had disappeared altogether in literary production by the sixth century (Roberts, 75). The codex form only gained momentum gradually in the first three centuries A.D. and was a slow and piecemeal process. The one exception to this was the use of the papyrus codex form by the Egyptian Christians from well before 100 A.D (Bischoff, 182). The Christian's total and complete adoption of the codex form from the outset cannot be explained by

practical concerns alone. It has been argued that one of the possible explanations for the adoption of the codex form by the Christians is that it differentiated them from both Jews and pagans.

The study of the codex is called codicology and involves the study of the physical make-up and modes of production of codices. It is hugely important to any study of the history of the book and equally important as a source of information on history in general. Codicology involves a consideration of such issues as the history of ink and paper usage and production, the history of the layout and form of the book, book bindings, cultural history, the history of book readers and reading practices as well as literary tastes, library history and scribal practices. The development of the codex is recognised as a major turning point in the history of the book - only to be surpassed by the invention of printing in the fifteenth century.

### **Works Cited**

Bischoff, Bernhard. Latin Palaeography: Antiquity and the Middle Ages. Trans. Daibhi O Croinin & David Ganz. New York: Cambridge UP, 1990.

Roberts, Colin H, and T.C. Skeat. The Birth of the Codex. London:Oxford UP, 1987.

*Loretta Brady, Department of English, UCC.*