

A papyrus scroll containing an account of Plato's final hours was buried in ash when Vesuvius erupted

Papyrus scrolls carbonised by Vesuvius recount Plato's last evening

Imaging technology has deciphered a manuscript written about the Greek philosopher's final hours, in which he criticised a slave girl's musical skill

Rhys Blakely, Science Correspondent
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A papyrus scroll that was buried under metres of volcanic ash when Mount Vesuvius erupted nearly 2,000 years ago may have revealed how Plato, one of the fathers of western thought, spent his final hours.

The Greek philosopher, who was the founder of the first

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The scroll includes a previously unknown account of how one of history's most influential figures spent his last evening, describing how Plato listened to music played on the flute by a Thracian slave girl. It claims that he was unimpressed and criticised her sense of rhythm.



Until recently, the scroll was completely unreadable D P PAVONE



The technology assesses differences between how light bounces off words and paper

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suggests that Plato was mentally lucid until the end. "Until his very last hour, he was able to express an aesthetic judgment," he said.

The description is part of the *History of the Academy* by Philodemus, a poet and philosopher who lived in the 1st century BC. "It is the oldest history of Greek philosophy in our possession," Ranocchia said.

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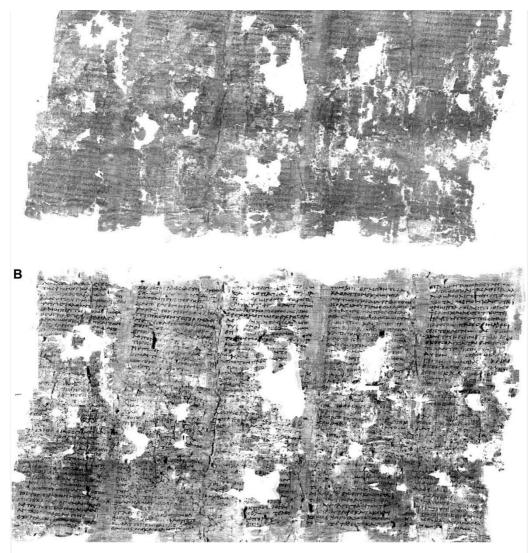
Until now, however, it had been unreadable: it is written on a roll of papyrus that was charred and rendered almost entirely illegible when Vesuvius erupted in AD79, burying both Pompeii and the smaller nearby Roman town of Herculaneum in metre upon metre of pumice and ash.

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Vesuvius, in the Bay of Naples, erupted for about 18 hours in AD79 ALAMY

The scroll had been kept in a grand villa in Herculaneum. The building, which was was discovered in 1750, was thought to have once been owned by the father-in-law of Julius Caesar. Since then, generations of scholars have searched for ways to read the contents of its library. Although still only partially excavated, the "Villa of the Papyri" has been found to contain hundreds of scrolls, many of which were transformed by the heat of the volcano into what amount to brittle ingots of black carbon.



Shortwave hyperspectral imaging produces legible writing from the charred manuscript

The Philodemus scroll describing Plato's life was painstakingly unrolled during the 18th century — a process that was later abandoned because the carbonised papyrus often ended up being completely destroyed.

But even when the scroll was unravelled, most of the writing was indistinguishable. Ranocchia and his colleagues are the first people to decipher it in 20 centuries. They used a range of techniques, including shortwave infrared hyperspectral imaging, which detected tiny differences in how light bounced off the black ink and the blackened papyrus on which it was written.

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Scholars believe that Philodemus would have had access to earlier sources than Diogenes Laertius, a biographer of the Greek philosophers who lived in the 3rd century AD, whose account of Plato's life was influential.

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Philodemus's history also describes Plato as hosting a visitor, referred to only as the "Chaldean guest", on his last night alive, possibly in his apartment inside the Academy. This was despite him suffering from attacks of fever. "He exercised his duties; hospitality was sacred for the Greeks," Ranocchia said.

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Ancient ruins in Herculaneum, the smaller settlement that, with Pompeii, was destroyed by the volcano

Last week, it was reported that the Philodemus scroll had also revealed new details of how Plato was buried in a garden at the Athens academy, near a shrine to the muses. It also appears to rewrite a significant element of his biography. It had been thought that Plato was sold into slavery in 387BC by Dionysius, the tyrant ruler of Syracuse, to curb his growing influence.



The team from the University of Pisa are the first to decipher the scrolls in 20 centuries DANILO PAVONE CNR ISPC

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when the Spartans conquered the island, or alternatively in 399 BC, immediately after the death of Socrates. That would have been before he amassed followers of his own.

"He was young, he had not yet founded his school, he had not yet become a leader, he had not yet written any of his famous dialogues," Ranocchia said.

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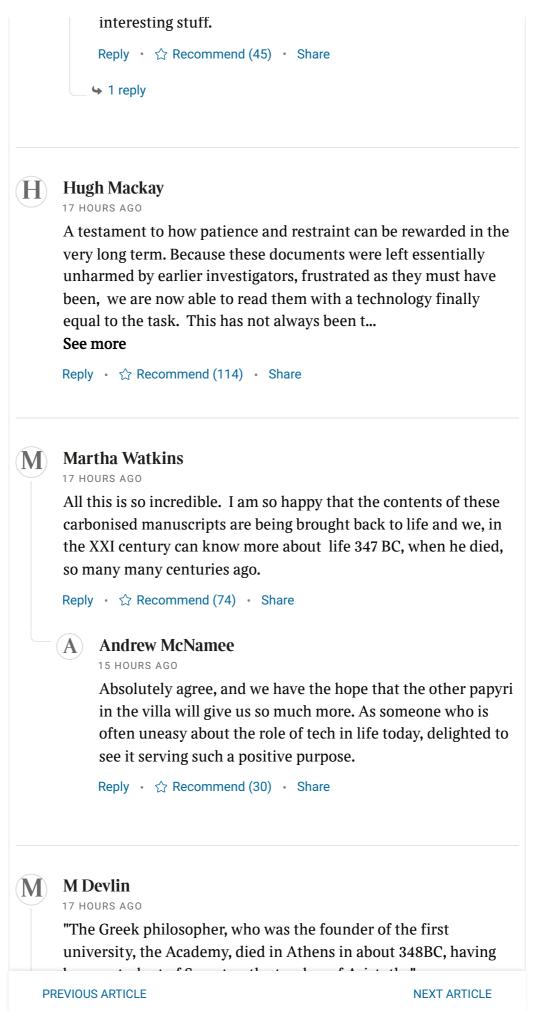
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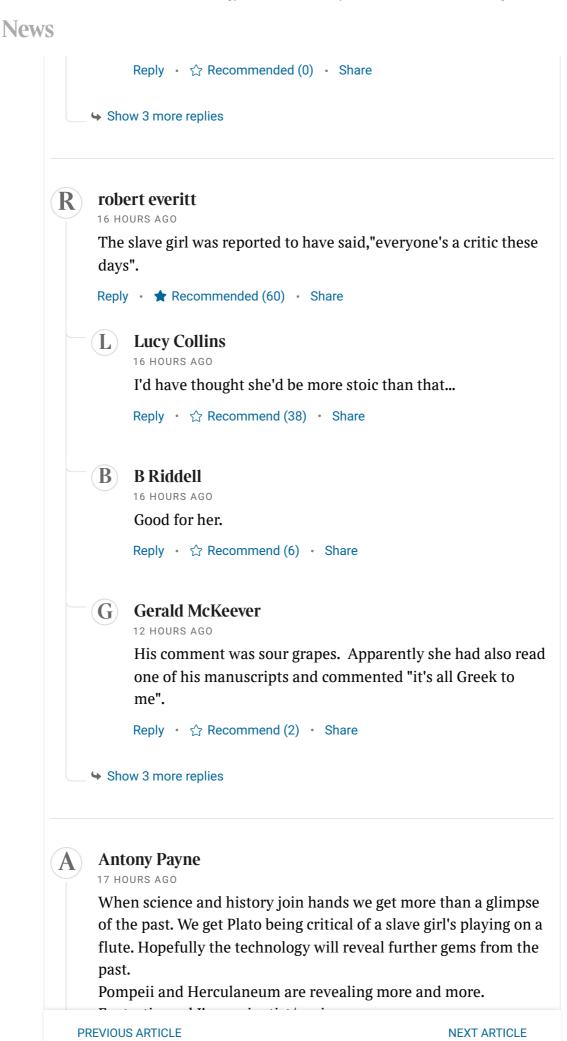
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