



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

Monday April 29 2024, 3.40pm, The Times

[Share](#)

[Save](#)

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

[PREVIOUS ARTICLE](#)

[NEXT ARTICLE](#)

News

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

[PREVIOUS ARTICLE](#)

[NEXT ARTICLE](#)

News

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.

ADVERTISEMENT

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.

[PREVIOUS ARTICLE](#)

[NEXT ARTICLE](#)

News



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 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.

[PREVIOUS ARTICLE](#)

[NEXT ARTICLE](#)

News



Shortwave hyperspectral imaging produces legible writing from the charred manuscript

AAAS

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.

[PREVIOUS ARTICLE](#)

[NEXT ARTICLE](#)

News

World in 10

Hamas warned Middle East peace is solely in its hands

 29 April 2024 • 10 min • [Listen later](#)

[View terms](#)

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.

ADVERTISEMENT

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.

[PREVIOUS ARTICLE](#)

[NEXT ARTICLE](#)

News



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

GETTY

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

[PREVIOUS ARTICLE](#)

[NEXT ARTICLE](#)

News

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.

UK

Greece

Read more

Tories urge Rachel Reeves to ‘come clean’ over donations

April 29 2024, 7.00pm

Seren Hughes

THE TIMES DIARY

Ed Balls gets blast from the past to calm TV nerves

April 29 2024, 11.00pm

Patrick Kidd

Prince and Princess of Wales release unseen photo to mark anniversary

April 29 2024, 1.55pm

Kate Mansey

Most commented

[PREVIOUS ARTICLE](#)

[NEXT ARTICLE](#)

News

- 2** Trans patients may have own room if...

3 'Huge disruption' anticipated from ne...

4 Labour poised to profit from SNP cha...

5 We won't take back asylum seekers from...
- 7** Chris Packham calls Heineken a 'vandal' fo...

8 Bright and beautiful? Hymn is depressing,...

9 Fall of Yousaf exposes green pledges as hot air

10 Cameron urges Hamas to accept 'ver...

SPONSORED



Gear up for re



The unexpect

Comments (137)

Comments are subject to our community standards and participation guidelines policy, which can be viewed [here](#). By joining the conversation you are accepting our community rules and terms. Update your commenting notification settings [here](#). Our policy is for readers to use their real names when commenting, find out more [here](#).

Rhys Blakely STAFF



R

Sort by Recommended ▾

↓ View 16 new comments

L

L I Shigaev

17 HOURS AGO

Note to ToL: I wish you had more articles like this in your paper

every day. I left this article more informed and intellectually

[PREVIOUS ARTICLE](#)

[NEXT ARTICLE](#)

News

M **M Greenhead**

15 HOURS AGO

Absolutely yes.

[Reply](#) · [☆ Recommend \(44\)](#) · [Share](#)**M** **Mr Gary Gray**

15 HOURS AGO

Oh I do so agree.

[Reply](#) · [☆ Recommend \(35\)](#) · [Share](#)[↪ 1 reply](#)**S** **Simon King**

10 HOURS AGO

Indeed. Much better than the garbage 'first person' and Daily Mail stuff that is now cheapening this paper.

[Reply](#) · [☆ Recommend \(4\)](#) · [Share](#)[↪ Show 2 more replies](#)**L** **Louis Sheehan**

17 HOURS AGO

Just WOW!

[Reply](#) · [☆ Recommend \(130\)](#) · [Share](#)**M** **M Driscoll**

16 HOURS AGO

Yes! Wow!

[Reply](#) · [☆ Recommend \(23\)](#) · [Share](#)**C** **C Atkinson**

17 HOURS AGO

Excellent report - I hope we will see updates as this project uncovers new text.

[Reply](#) · [☆ Recommend \(125\)](#) · [Share](#)[PREVIOUS ARTICLE](#)[NEXT ARTICLE](#)

News

interesting stuff.

[Reply](#) · [☆ Recommend \(45\)](#) · [Share](#)

↪ 1 reply



Hugh Mackay

17 HOURS AGO

A testament to how patience and restraint can be rewarded in the very long term. Because these documents were left essentially unharmed by earlier investigators, frustrated as they must have been, we are now able to read them with a technology finally equal to the task. This has not always been t...

See more

[Reply](#) · [☆ Recommend \(114\)](#) · [Share](#)



Martha Watkins

17 HOURS AGO

All this is so incredible. I am so happy that the contents of these carbonised manuscripts are being brought back to life and we, in the XXI century can know more about life 347 BC, when he died, so many many centuries ago.

[Reply](#) · [☆ Recommend \(74\)](#) · [Share](#)



Andrew McNamee

15 HOURS AGO

Absolutely agree, and we have the hope that the other papyri in the villa will give us so much more. As someone who is often uneasy about the role of tech in life today, delighted to see it serving such a positive purpose.

[Reply](#) · [☆ Recommend \(30\)](#) · [Share](#)



M Devlin

17 HOURS AGO

"The Greek philosopher, who was the founder of the first university, the Academy, died in Athens in about 348BC, having

[PREVIOUS ARTICLE](#)

[NEXT ARTICLE](#)

News

See more *(Edited)*[Reply](#) · [☆ Recommend \(60\)](#) · [Share](#)**S** **Steve Leegood**

17 HOURS AGO

I suspect poor grammar, or subediting. Would “and was the teacher of Aristotle” work for you?

[Reply](#) · [☆ Recommend \(16\)](#) · [Share](#)**R** **Rhys Blakely** STAFF

17 HOURS AGO

Replying to Steve Leegood

Thanks Steve - yes, exactly this -- it will be corrected.

[Reply](#) · [☆ Recommend \(16\)](#) · [Share](#)**M** **M Devlin**

17 HOURS AGO

Replying to Steve Leegood

It would be accurate, at least.

I think basic knowledge of the Classics would have been a baseline requirement for writing in the Times not so long ago.

[Reply](#) · [☆ Recommend \(3\)](#) · [Share](#)**D** **D Dolphin**

5 HOURS AGO

Replying to M Devlin

They are still deciphering the charred instructions.

[Reply](#) · [☆ Recommended \(0\)](#) · [Share](#)**D** **Dannys Cody**

17 HOURS AGO

Submit your cv to TOL, they desperately need you. Thank you.

[Reply](#) · [☆ Recommend \(11\)](#) · [Share](#)[PREVIOUS ARTICLE](#)[NEXT ARTICLE](#)

News

[Reply](#) · [☆ Recommended \(0\)](#) · [Share](#)

↪ [Show 3 more replies](#)

R

robert everitt

16 HOURS AGO

The slave girl was reported to have said, "everyone's a critic these days".

[Reply](#) · [★ Recommended \(60\)](#) · [Share](#)

L

Lucy Collins

16 HOURS AGO

I'd have thought she'd be more stoic than that...

[Reply](#) · [☆ Recommend \(38\)](#) · [Share](#)

B

B Riddell

16 HOURS AGO

Good for her.

[Reply](#) · [☆ Recommend \(6\)](#) · [Share](#)

G

Gerald McKeever

12 HOURS AGO

His comment was sour grapes. Apparently she had also read one of his manuscripts and commented "it's all Greek to me".

[Reply](#) · [☆ Recommend \(2\)](#) · [Share](#)

↪ [Show 3 more replies](#)

A

Antony Payne

17 HOURS AGO

When science and history join hands we get more than a glimpse of the past. We get Plato being critical of a slave girl's playing on a flute. Hopefully the technology will reveal further gems from the past.

Pompeii and Herculaneum are revealing more and more.

[PREVIOUS ARTICLE](#)

[NEXT ARTICLE](#)

News

D **Dannys Cody**

15 HOURS AGO

You have a noble profession.

[Reply](#) · [☆ Recommend \(3\)](#) · [Share](#)[↩ 1 reply](#)**M** **M Marron**

16 HOURS AGO

This is why I still take the Times. It makes a change from the gossipy tittle tattle that has taken over in recent years

[Reply](#) · [☆ Recommend \(30\)](#) · [Share](#)**P** **Paul Bickerdike**

15 HOURS AGO

I much prefer the gossipy tittle tattle of a couple of millennia ago.

[Reply](#) · [☆ Recommend \(25\)](#) · [Share](#)**J** **J Potter**

16 HOURS AGO

Pretty amazing to be living through this

[Reply](#) · [☆ Recommend \(18\)](#) · [Share](#)**C** **Chris Cottrell**

13 HOURS AGO

I actually find it ridiculously exciting that this technology exists and has the potential to fill in the gaps of our knowledge. Those writers where you hear "he was known to have written 17 books but only 3 survived" will hopefully have more of their work found. Thrilling.

[Reply](#) · [☆ Recommend \(9\)](#) · [Share](#)[View more comments](#)[PREVIOUS ARTICLE](#)[NEXT ARTICLE](#)

News

[BACK TO TOP](#)



Get in touch

[About us](#)

[Conta](#)

[Help](#)

[The T](#)

[The Sunday Times Editorial Complaints](#)

[Place](#)

[Classified advertising](#)

[Displ](#)

[The Times corrections](#)

[The S](#)

[Careers](#)

More from The Times and The Sunday Times

[The Times e-paper](#)

[The Sunday Times Wine Club](#)

[The Times Archive](#)

[Sunday Times Driving](#)

[The Sunday Times Rich List](#)

[Good University Guide](#)

[Newsletters](#)

[Best Places to Stay](#)

[Podcasts](#)

[Times Luxury](#)

[Best Places to Work](#)

© Times Media Limited 2024.

Registered in England No. 894646.

Registered office: 1 London Bridge Street, SE1 9GF.

[Privacy & cookie policy](#)

[Licensing](#)

News

[PUZZLES ARCHIVE](#)

[AUTHORS](#)

[Commissioning terms](#)

[Terms and conditions](#)

[PREVIOUS ARTICLE](#)

[NEXT ARTICLE](#)