Allison Thomason

Tablets, Scrolls, and Codices: The Origins and Early History of the Book

Perhaps the best way to explore the importance of the book is to study its origins in the ancient world. In this panel, we propose to outline and discuss the earliest forms of “books” and the contexts of their reading in the world. The “book” form that we have been accustomed to use, in which a folded pile of paper opens to two pages of text, was in fact known as the codex in its earliest iteration. However, the codex was one step in a long line of experiments with different media and formats to communicate the written word. We will explore what the earliest “books” looked like and how they were used. This exploration will begin with a discussion of the invention of writing in cuneiform tablets, in a presentation entitled “Clay ‘Books’: Reading and Writing Tablets in the Cuneiform World” delivered by Allison Thomason, Professor in the Dept. of Historical Studies. The next paper in the session by Myles Cameron, graduate student in the Department of Historical Studies and entitled “What Did Early Books Look Like and How Were They Read?” explores papyrus scrolls as “books” in the Greco-Roman world. Finally, Greg Viessman, another graduate student in Historical Studies, will present on “Christianity and the Coming of the Codex.”

The work in this panel arises out of a graduate readings course on papyrology, the textual medium of the ancient world, led by Dr. Thomason. Thus the panel emerges out of a collaborative faculty and student research and teaching project that embodies many CAS values and the idea of the teacher-scholar model.