

STRIKING MODERNITY OF ANCIENT “TABLETS”; MICROSCOPIC ANALYSIS OF WOODEN ITEMS FROM EGYPT

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Writing supports are exceptional archeological finds. The interest in the written texts is such that usually it overshadows the nature of the object itself.

Some well-diversified materials like parchment or papyrus, find their true place within their historical context but others, like wooden tablets, are more neglected and rarely analyzed in depth.

In this work we have analyzed through Laser Scanning Microscopy (LSM) and Environmental Scanning Electron Microscopy (ESEM) the samples from two wooden supports from Egypt, dated to the Roman Period and exposed at the Museo Papirologico of the University of Salento, in Lecce, directed by Mario Capasso, professor of Papyrology in the same University.

Preliminary microscopic analysis revealed that these tablets are not made of wood, intended as a portion of secondary xylem, but are the result of complex fabrication processes. In one case the material consists of wood but it presents evidence of extended manipulations; in the second case the tablet apparently made of wood is in fact made of compressed fibers. In both cases a specific and unknown technology was used to produce these materials.

The existence of dedicated technologies to produce woody writing supports from ligno-cellulosic materials is not documented in the different historical periods. The need of specific technologies to produce large amounts of writing supports without the direct consumption of good quality wood was evidently stronger in those environmental conditions in which hard wood was imported and probably expensive. It was the case of the ancient Egypt, the area of recovery of the analyzed samples.

More attention has to be paid to the reconstruction of the ancient technologies to produce ligno-cellulosic materials that appear striking modern and provide information on the value given to the written documentation and writing in general in the studied historical context.