



Figure III: Reconstruction of the Villa Dei Papiri

Figure V: What happens when you try to manually unroll a carbonised scroll.

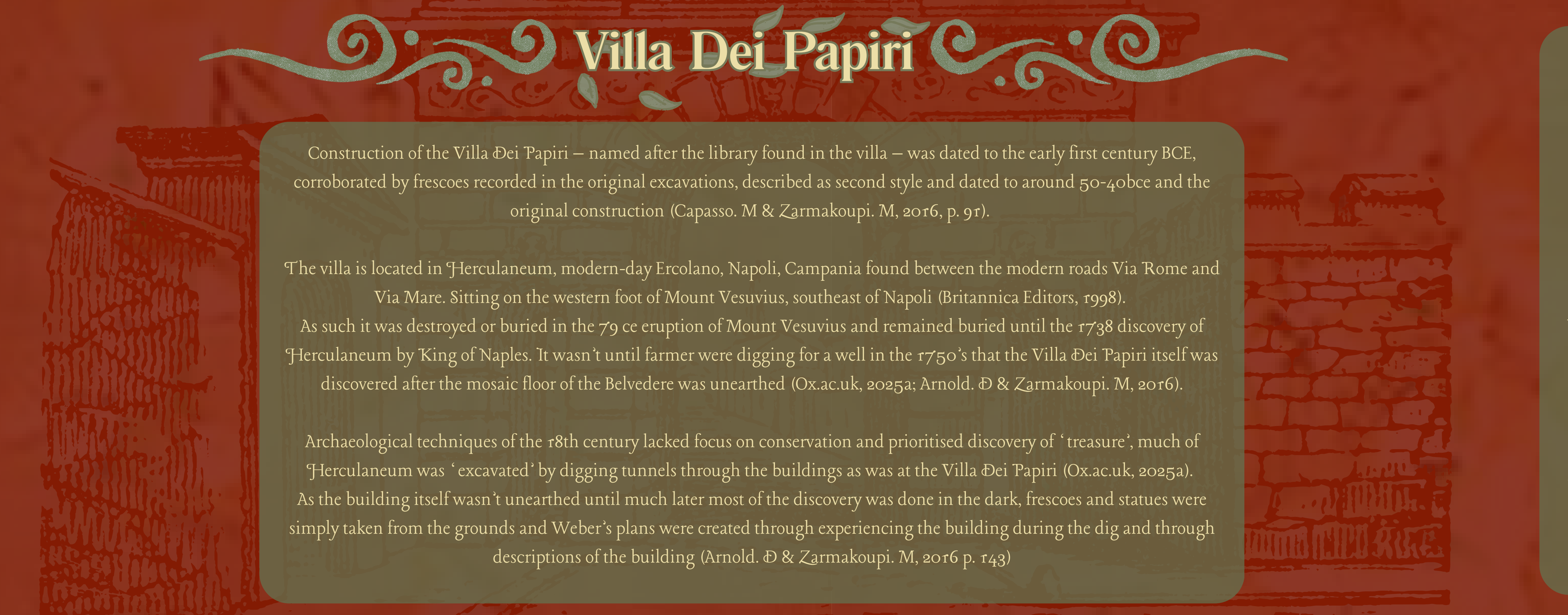
As the name suggests, 'The Villa of the Papyri, one of the most significant elements of this complex is the 'library' found within its walls. The Complex itself is both impressive and beautiful, standing across 200 metres and at least three floors that have been found though only part of the atrium is unearthed but the library – as it's referred to as – is one of the largest, classical libraries remaining today, primarily containing the epicurean philosophy of Philodemus with an estimated 1,100 scrolls recovered though many were destroyed during excavations, not just the eruption (Ox.ac.uk, 2025a).

Further 'treasure' though is found in the 85 bronze and marble statues 'recovered' from the complex. Statues and Frescoes were the main aim of the excavations and Weber kept notes, that were for the techniques of the time quite thorough. It was in looking for these statues that some of the scrolls were destroyed as in their carbonised state they were mistaken for firewood (Ox.ac.uk, 2025b; Mattusch, C.C & Zarmakoupi, M, 2016, p. 87)

Figure I: Bronze Statue of Silenus, Inventory Number 5007

Weber's excavations carried out in the eighteenth century gained criticisms even at the time, decrying that the excavations were carried out poorly and much would be destroyed. We know this to be true though to what extent is not discernible due to time and destruction. They gained access to the complex through vertical access shafts, moving through each room as they came to it with materials that were not considered valuable moved to the room behind rather than up to the surface (Ox.ac.uk, 2025b; Arnold. D & Zarmakoupi, M, 2016, p. 148-149).

After these excavations ended the complex was left for around 240 years. Planning and excavations for the site were taken back as early as 1971, with the aim to re-discover the villa complex, it is't until the 1980's that this is realised with investigations and explorations of the villa to get a idea of how to go about the excavations. Later excavations took place between 1994 and 1998, which found the lower floors of the atrium as well as a monumental structure on the grounds; and 2007-2008, it is not until the early 2000's that methods of conservation is really considered (Simone De. A & Zarmakoupi, M, 2016, p. 1-9)



Villa Dei Papiri

Construction of the Villa Dei Papiri – named after the library found in the villa – was dated to the early first century BCE, corroborated by frescoes recorded in the original excavations, described as second style and dated to around 50-40bce and the original construction (Capasso, M & Zarmakoupi, M, 2016, p. 91).

The villa is located in Herculaneum, modern-day Ercolano, Napoli, Campania found between the modern roads Via Rome and Via Mare. Sitting on the western foot of Mount Vesuvius, southeast of Napoli (Britannica Editors, 1998).

As such it was destroyed or buried in the 79 ce eruption of Mount Vesuvius and remained buried until the 1738 discovery of Herculaneum by King of Naples. It wasn't until farmer were digging for a well in the 1750's that the Villa Dei Papiri itself was discovered after the mosaic floor of the Belvedere was unearthed (Ox.ac.uk, 2025a; Arnold. D & Zarmakoupi, M, 2016).

Archaeological techniques of the 18th century lacked focus on conservation and prioritised discovery of 'treasure', much of Herculaneum was 'excavated' by digging tunnels through the buildings as was at the Villa Dei Papiri (Ox.ac.uk, 2025a). As the building itself wasn't unearthed until much later most of the discovery was done in the dark, frescoes and statues were simply taken from the grounds and Weber's plans were created through experiencing the building during the dig and through descriptions of the building (Arnold. D & Zarmakoupi, M, 2016 p. 143)

Despite the discovery of the Villa in the mid 18th century, the lack of knowledge meant the scrolls which had long since carbonised went unidentified. Though there was of course destruction of both the complex and the scrolls during the earthquake there was further destruction upon the discovery of the villa as they were mistaken for firewood and burned, or broken due to the fragility (as can be seen in figure five when there was an attempt to manually open a scroll in 1860).

When one broke – on the 19th October 1752) and it was discovered to hold texts inside attempts to open them were made which destroyed much of it. Over the years further attempts to read the scrolls destroyed them as they were read and little was able to be deciphered modern imaging however has been able to read these scrolls without opening them giving us closer insight into the information inscribed (Ox.ac.uk, 2023; Ox.ac.uk, 2025b).

According to Weber most of the scrolls were discovered in the Northeastern corner of the Villa, however some scrolls were found on the floors as though victims of the eruption tried to take them as they escaped, or maybe they were just messy. Either way, the destruction of these scrolls and possible attempts to save them speak to the importance of knowledge in society and as society advances, we open doors to learning more about our history.

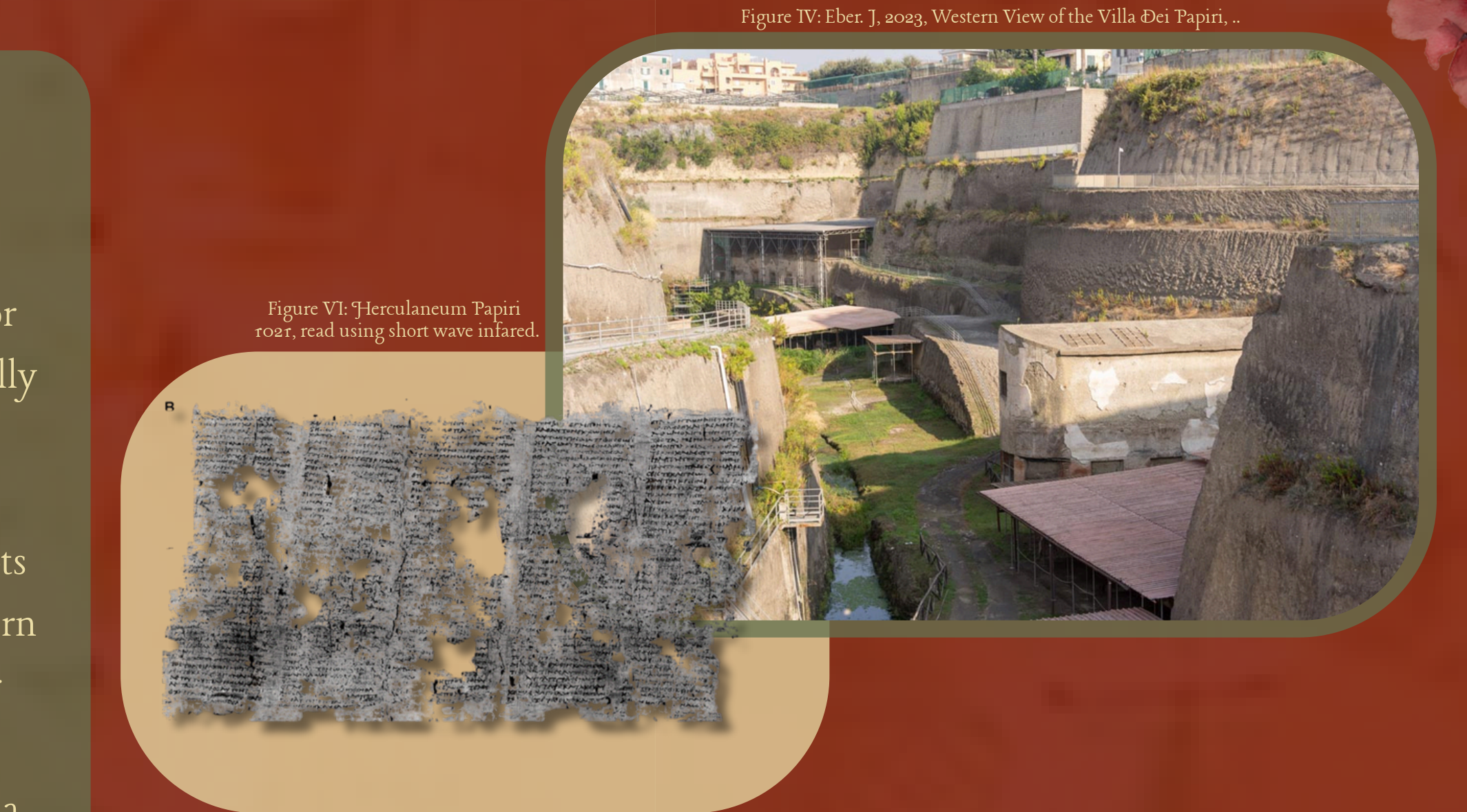


Figure VI: 'Herculaneum Papiri rool', read using short wave infrared.

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Figure II: Bronze Statue of Silenus, Inventory Number 5011