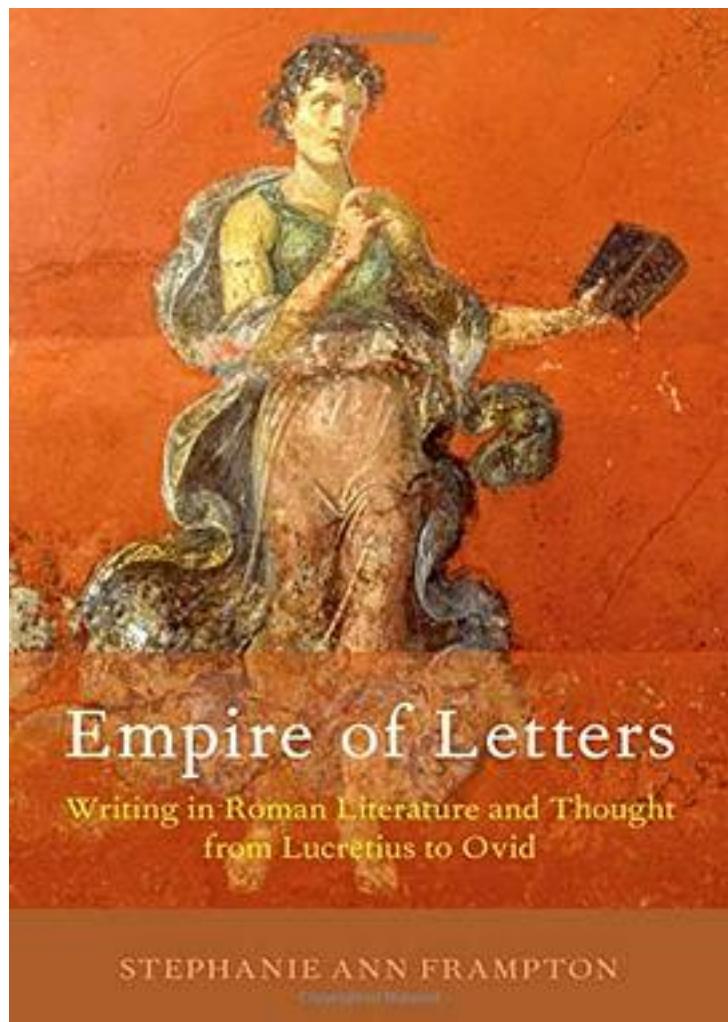


Empire of Letters



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Shedding new light on the history of the book in antiquity, Empire of Letters tells the

story of writing at Rome at the pivotal moment of transition from Republic to Empire (c. 55 BCE-15 CE). By uniting close readings of the period's major authors with detailed analysis of material texts, it argues that the physical embodiments of writing were essential to the worldviews and self-fashioning of authors whose works took shape in them. Whether in wooden tablets, papyrus bookrolls, monumental writing in stone and bronze, or through the alphabet itself, Roman authors both idealized and competed with writing's textual forms.

The academic study of the history of the book has arisen largely out of the textual abundance of the age of print, focusing on the Renaissance and after. But fewer than fifty fragments of classical Roman bookrolls survive, and even fewer lines of poetry. Understanding the history of the ancient Roman book requires us to think differently about this evidence, placing it into the context of other kinds of textual forms that survive in greater numbers, from the fragments of Greek papyri preserved in the garbage heaps of Egypt to the Latin graffiti still visible on the walls of the cities destroyed by Vesuvius. By attending carefully to this kind of material in conjunction with the rich literary testimony of the period, Empire of Letters exposes the importance of textuality itself to Roman authors, and puts the written word back at the center of Roman literature.

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