



URS GRAF VERLAG, LAUSANNE; BY COURTESY OF THE BRITISH MUSEUM

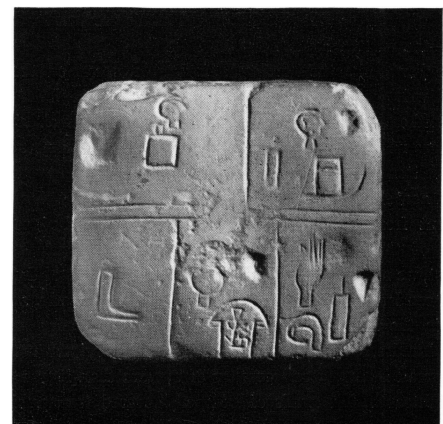
(Hight, Gilbert, "The Wondrous Survival of Records," *Horizon*, Vol.V, No. 2, November 1962. pp.74-95)

Though holocausts, hatreds, and forgetfulness have obliterated vast treasures of past cultures, occasional good luck, later circumspection, and modern recovery have rescued a priceless part of our written legacy from oblivion

THE WONDROUS SURVIVAL OF RECORDS

By GILBERT HIGHET

An eloquent instance of the chances and mischances that surround the survival of precious records is given by the Lindisfarne Gospels (opposite), a book inscribed about A.D. 700 at a monastery on the northeast coast of England, lost at sea, and miraculously recovered. The illuminated manuscript, a rendering of the four Gospels, carries above its Latin lines a translation in the old Northumbrian dialect, making this the earliest "English" version of them in existence. The page shown here opens the Gospel of Saint John, reading (with its first three letters conjoined) IN PRINCIPIO ERAT VERBUM ET VERBUM ERAT APUD D[EU] ET D[EU]S. But, old as it is, the Lindisfarne book is young compared to the limestone tablet (right) found at Kish in Iraq. Dated c. 3500 B.C., this is the oldest example of picture writing yet discovered. Among its images are a head, hand, foot, and sledge. [p.76]



The other day I met a friend of mine, an author who is successful and ambitious. Asking him about his work, I found him profoundly depressed. In a few years, he said somberly, there won't be any books. They will all be destroyed, and there will be nobody left to read them. It is difficult to argue with anyone who thinks he foresees the end of civilization; but I tried to console him. Mankind has endeavored to kill itself off before this, and its books have nearly all been destroyed. Yet as long as there was someone who wanted to read, books and records have been saved.

Nevertheless, it still strikes me with amazement when I open a book of speeches by Demosthenes and begin to hear the voice, the very syllables and cadences, of a man who died some twenty-three centuries ago. Surely it is almost miraculous that we can take up the *Aeneid* of Vergil, printed by machinery that would have astonished Vergil himself, on a material he had never seen, in a format he could scarcely have imagined, and after two millennia find that, undimmed by time and change, his poetry still sings, his mystical visions still transport us as they did his first readers, and the subtleties of his poetic architecture still hold secrets only half-discovered.

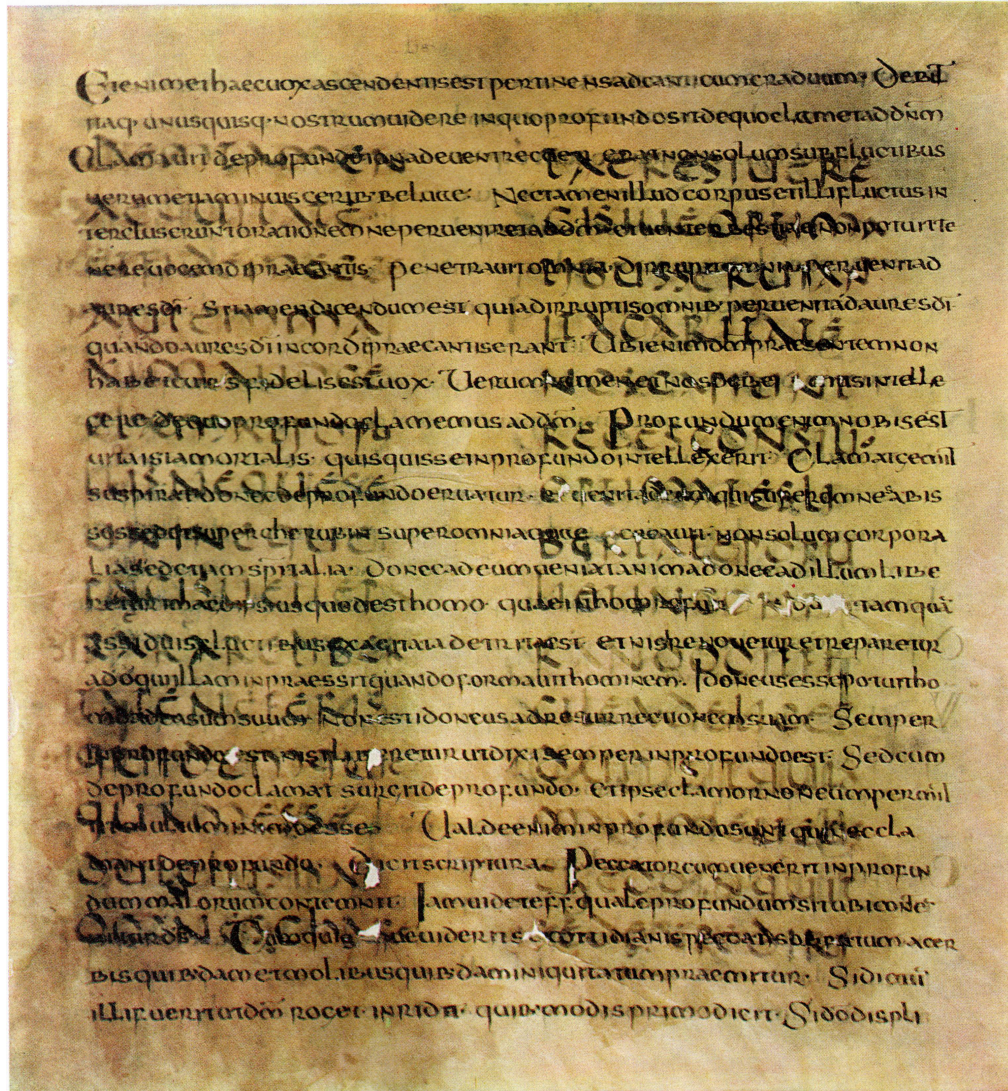
The miracle of the preservation of thought through marks on a smooth surface is commemorated every week by one of the most impressive little religious ceremonies in the world. Every Sabbath in every Jewish synagogue, a handwritten copy of the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, is taken out of its palace. After a reading, the book is carried through the congregation before it is returned to the ark, and every pious Jew kisses it. It is always handwritten with a quill pen. It is always in the form of a parchment roll. Its text is always exactly the same as that of its predecessor, from which it was copied: the very letters are counted so that they may never vary by a jot, any more than the law of God Almighty can vary. By doing homage to the book in this way, the Jews express their devotion to the name of the Creator contained in the Torah; but they also, by implication, express reverence for one of man's greatest inventions—the written book.

The Jews, like the Moslems, have always carried their sacred writings with them: the book and the people have sustained each other. But among the Greek and Latin classics there are no such sacred books: the nations for whom they were written have disappeared; their very languages have assumed new shapes and sounds—remote, although not wholly different from the original tongues. How have the great books of the past survived through so many centuries?

First, we must sadly admit that many, very many, of them have been lost. In Greece and the Greek-speaking world, and later in the Roman world, there were many libraries and many hundreds of thousands of books. Literacy was more widespread in the second century of our era than it was in the eighteenth. The walls of Pompeii, covered with public announcements and private scribbles in three languages (Latin, Greek, and Oscan), show how natural and commonplace was the use of writing then. Nearly all townsfolk could read, freemen and slaves alike. Only on the farms and ranches were many people illiterate. In Egypt excavators now dig up large private book collections buried under the sand near villages where today few of the fellahin own a single book, or could read it if they did.

Although some authors of antiquity composed only a few works, to which they gave all their life's energy, there were many who produced an amazing number of them. The comedian Aristophanes left fifty-four plays. Aeschylus, first of the great tragic dramatists, wrote at least eighty. Livy's history of Rome ran into one hundred and forty-two volumes; and such polygraphs were not exceptional. But of many of the most famous authors we have only a few scanty though precious relics. It is as though we had the titles of all Shakespeare's plays, with some fragments quoted from most of them, but possessed complete only *Hamlet*, *Henry V*, *A Midsummer-Night's Dream*, and *As You Like It*. Of Aristophanes' half a hundred comedies, we have just eleven. Of Aeschylus's four score plays, only seven survive. We have a summary of virtually all of Livy's Roman history, so that we know what he covered in each volume, but only thirty-five of his one hundred and forty-two

volumes remain. And while these great writers have survived in however meager a proportion, dozens of others have vanished almost without a trace. Aristophanes was only one of a large school of competing comic dramatists. From quotations and allusions, we know the names of about a hundred and seventy poets of the “Old Comedy” (the group to which Aristophanes belonged) with 1,483 titles of their plays. Except Aristophanes, not one survives. Where is his great rival, boozy old Cratinus? Where is the energetic Eupolis, whom Horace linked with the other two in a gay triad? Gone, except for a few jokes, some famous passages preserved in quotation, and many play titles. It is delightful to look through the titles and reflect how much fun the Athenians had in the fifth century before Christ; it is painful to remember how much of it has vanished.



This antique double exposure is a page from one of the most famous of palimpsest (“rescaped”) manuscripts. During the Dark Ages it was a common practice to scrape the writing from unread books and use the valuable parchment over again. But the ghost of the old text often lingered beneath the new, waiting to be discovered by the scholars of a later age (nowadays aided by chemicals and infrared photographs). In this case a fourth-century manuscript of Cicero’s On the State (double columns) was found to underlie a late seventh-century copy of a work by Saint Augustine. Until the Vatican librarian Angelo Mai recovered it from these pages in 1822, the Cicero was known only in fragmentary form. [p.78]

But not all. It would scarcely be worth studying classical literature if it were a heap of insignificant debris. It is not. It is like a city which has been bombed and partially burned, so that whole sections are in ruins and some streets with their houses are irrecoverable; but at its heart many of the most important and beautiful public buildings stand unscathed, full of statues and pictures and memories, while others, although damaged, retain a noble tower or one magnificent wing. The two epics of Homer (or of the two Homers) are safe. All Vergil's poetry is intact. The works of Plato are complete and have even acquired some "Platonic" forgeries in the meantime. We have all that Horace ever published. We can read virtually all of Lucretius and Terence and Catullus in Latin, virtually all of Demosthenes [p.77] [p.78] and Thucydides and Herodotus in Greek, and virtually all of a few other first-rate writers in either tongue. Furthermore, we have the complete works of a number of authors who, although not "classics" either in their own time or now, are amusing, shocking, informative, or creatively eccentric. We do not have too many of the classical books from Greece and Rome, but we have much of the best.

The great books of Greece and Rome were written down between 800 B.C. and A.D. 450. They were first printed and disseminated to many modern readers between A.D. 1450 and 1550. Once printed, they were likely to survive because they were so good or because there were now so many copies of them (duplication means preservation). But between the distant centuries when the classics were composed and the comparatively recent centuries when they were reproduced by the man with the machine, grave obstacles and recurrent perils often threatened to obliterate them.

First came the danger that haunts us all. Anyone born since 1900 has grown up with it always in his mind. It is the great destroyer, the waster, the terrible simplifier—war. It is always more violent than we expect. It is capricious. In the conflict of human wills, deliberation and choice and purposive action are often sacrificed to sheer destructive energy. When the Crusaders were sacking Constantinople in 1204, a drunken soldier was seen tearing up the sacred books of the Hagia Sophia.

King Matthias Corvinus of Hungary (1440-1490) had collected a magnificent library of manuscripts, some written for him by Italian calligraphers and some bought by his agents in Greece and Asia Minor (see cover and page 95 [p.24]). Part of it was captured by the Turks in 1541 during their advance into central Europe and some specimens were sent back to Istanbul. The others were left in storage, damaged by fire and carelessness, recaptured in 1688, and divided up among the conquerors. And yet a few manuscripts of the original library still remained together—at least until the end of the nineteenth century—in the Grand Seraglio at Istanbul, after the drums and tramlings of four centuries.

The most famous of all libraries in ancient times was the collection at Alexandria. In the Western world it was the first large public library; it was the cradle of literary scholarship and of responsible publishing; it was part of the earliest university. In one form or another it seems to have lived for seven hundred years, although many doubtful legends have grown up around it, and its final destruction is wrapped in silence almost total.

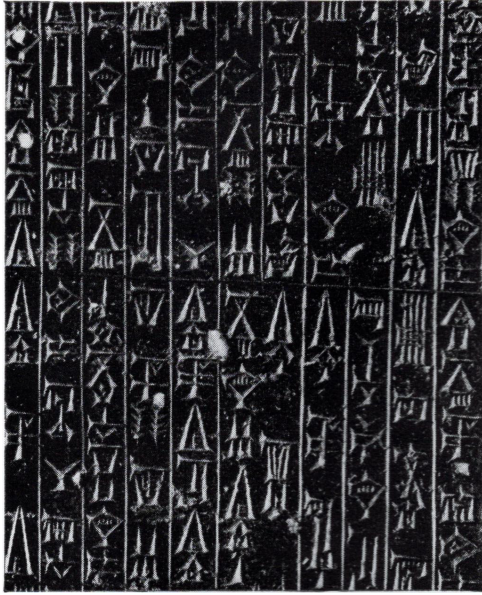
The library, along with the Home of the Muses (or Museum), was founded by Ptolemy I, Alexander the Great's marshal and his successor as king of Egypt. Its administrators strove to have the best, the most authoritative, copies of all important books, collated and catalogued with utmost care. After two hundred and fifty years it was burned during Julius Caesar's difficult struggle to displace the twelfth Ptolemy and set up his own mistress Cleopatra as monarch. Mark Antony, who succeeded Caesar both as the real ruler of Egypt and as Cleopatra's lover, gave her as a replacement two hundred thousand books from the rival library of Pergamum in Asia Minor; these were stored in the sanctuary of Serapis, and this new library survived until the Empire went Christian. (Tertullian says that the original manuscript of the Hebrew Scriptures translated into Greek, the Septuagint, was one of its treasures.) Then the pagan sanctuaries were turned into churches, and Christians and pagans

fought a cultural and religious war in the streets. In A.D. 414 the Christian historian Orosius wrote that the stacks of the great library “were emptied by our own men in our own time.” If anything survived for the Caliph Omar to condemn as fuel to heat the public baths in A.D. 640 (according to a late legend), it was only a group of departmental libraries.

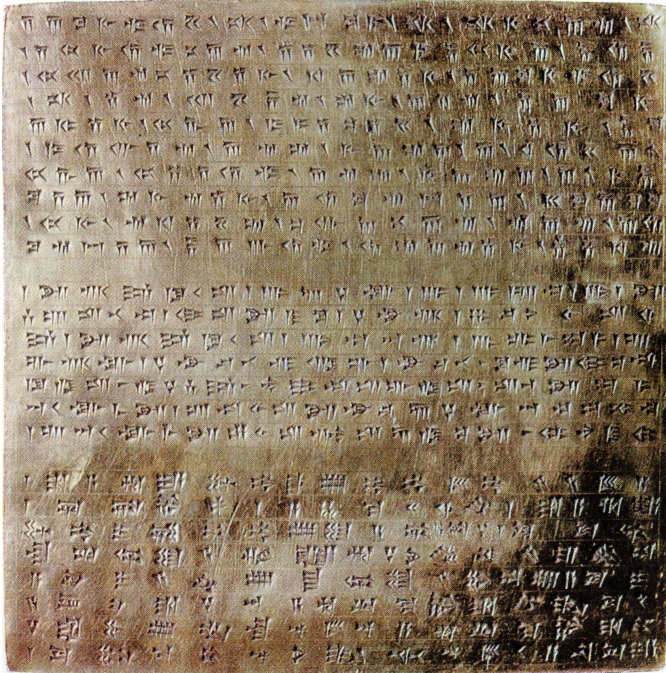
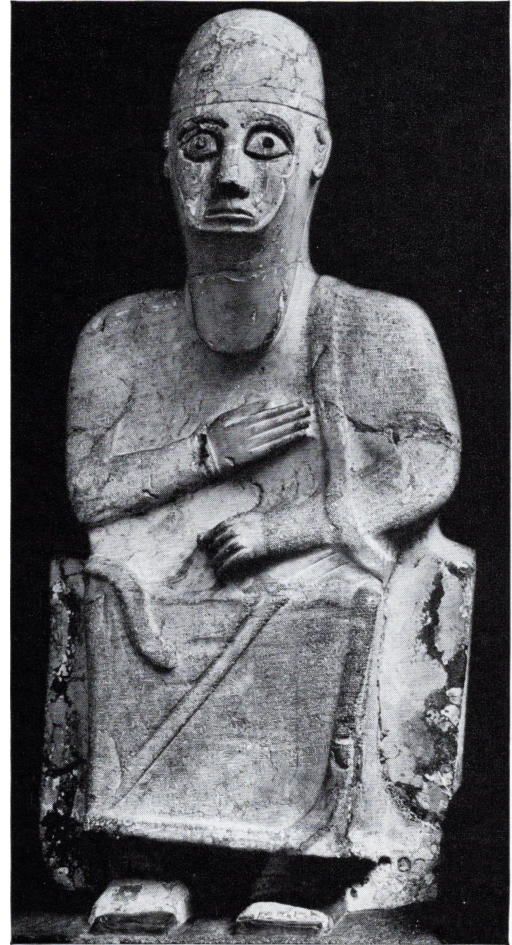
The imperial library of Constantinople, in an even more turbulent city, had still more drastic adventures. Its founder, the Emperor Constantine, intended it to contain both Christian and pagan works and caused fine copies of rare books to be made on durable vellum. Revolt, civil strife, and invasion struck the library again and again, but it was constantly restored by the Greek passion for culture. A rebellion and a fire in the fifth century A.D. destroyed it, with over a hundred thousand books, including one monstrous object, a copy of Homer’s two epics written in gold letters on a snake’s gut one hundred twenty feet long. Three of the most famous Greek statues perished in the same blaze. Rebuilt, refilled, reopened, the library was closed again for almost a century during the religious conflict over the worship of images and holy pictures. It was burned and looted, at least in part, by the Fourth Crusaders in 1203-1204. Restored once again, it was still in existence when Constantinople fell to the Turks in 1453. The Archbishop of Kiev, an eyewitness of the invasion, said that more than 120,000 books were destroyed. And yet many precious manuscripts survived in private collections. Lost in the outbuildings or substructures of some old mosque, some deserted church or forgotten barracks, there still may lie, in sealed jars or dust-covered chests, priceless relics of the classical past, more precious than the Hebrew manuscripts found not long ago in the Genizah, or storeroom, of a synagogue near Cairo. One of our foundations, which find it so difficult to spend all their money, could make its name world-famous by financing a really successful document hunt in the chief cities of the former Turkish Empire.

The invading barbarians from the North, after many attacks, at last split the Greco-Roman world into two parts, an eastern and a western realm. In the west, those who were the heirs of the Roman Empire spoke Latin and tried to teach it to their conquerors. In the east, the language was Greek. For some centuries the civilized Mediterranean world had been bilingual by practice and by sympathy; but after A.D. 500 or so, nobody in the west could speak or write [\[p.79\]](#) [\[p.80\]](#) Greek and nobody in the east could speak or write Latin. Now and then one still hears stories about Irish monks who alone were able to keep the knowledge of Greek alive in the west. Laudable, if true; but unfortunately false. An occasional scribe might copy out an occasional Greek word during the Dark Ages in the west, but the tradition of reading, understanding, and transmitting the Greek tongue—although it was the language in which the Gospels and the Acts and the Epistles were written—virtually died out (with the exception of a few lonely geniuses such as Grosseteste and Erigena) for a thousand years.

The second danger that confronted the Greek and Roman classics was not violent destruction but peaceful change. Nowadays it is almost impossible to purchase the piano works of Alexander Scriabin or to find scores of the music of Lully. Scriabin died in 1915; most of his music has been allowed to go out of print. Much of Lully still remains in manuscript, unpublished, unperformed, unknown. In the same way, those books which ceased to interest the Greek and Roman reading public ceased to be copied and studied, and were therefore not transmitted from one generation to another. After Vergil’s *Aeneid* was issued, it was accepted at once as the great epic poem in the Latin language. It was learned at school, it was read for pleasure, it was admired and imitated. Naturally, it displaced all earlier epic poems, even the *Annals* of Vergil’s greatest predecessor, Ennius. For a few generations, Ennius was respected, although little read. Then he was forgotten; his poem vanished. Nothing of it is left now, except fragments quoted by Roman scholars to illustrate oddities of archaic style—five hundred fifty lines in all: no fragment larger than a page. Only four poets of the early Roman Republic have survived entire, or almost entire: Lucretius, the philosophical missionary; Catullus, the brilliant lyricist; and the comic playwrights Plautus and Terence. All the others were

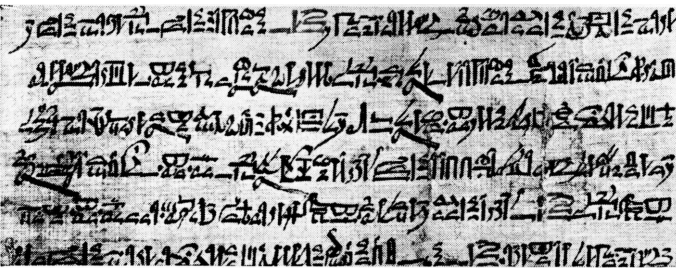
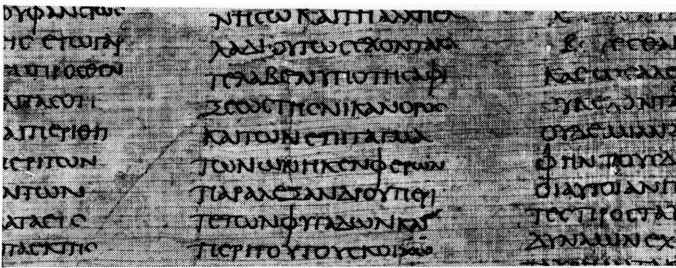
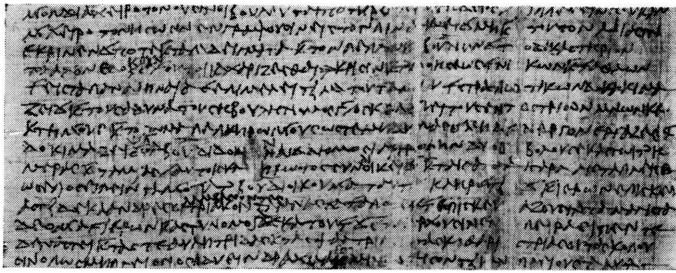


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LUC JOUBERT-ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM, TEHRAN

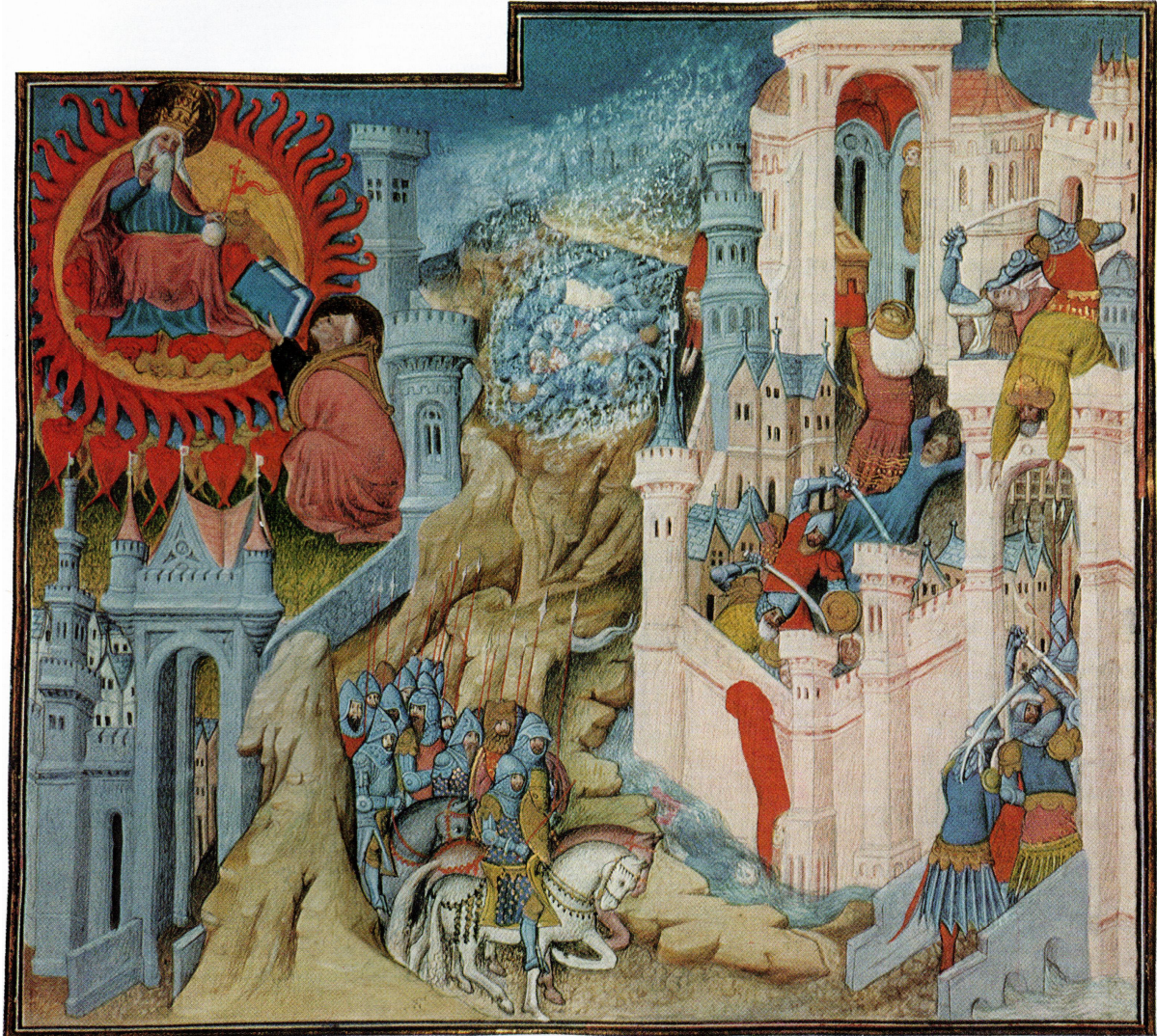
Many ancient kings have achieved immortality by committing their boasts and biographies to stone. Augustus's terse record of his achievements was carved, among other places, on a temple wall in what is now Ankara (above [right]). The great Babylonian king Hammurabi (1728-1686 B.C.) insured the permanence of his famous law code by having it engraved on a diorite stele ([top] left). A lesser monarch, Idri-mi of Alalakh (c. 1400 B.C.) is known to us only because he covered his own statue with his autobiography ([bottom] right). The Persian Darius put an inscription on a gold plaque (below [left]) in three languages: Old Persian, Babylonian, and Elamite. [p.80]



Above [left] are portions of three famous papyri discovered in inexhaustible Egypt. From the top, they are: Aristotle’s Constitution of Athens, copied in the 1st century and found in 1888; the speeches of Hyperides, found in 1847 and the first lost work of classical literature to be recovered in papyrus scrolls; and The Tale of the Two Brothers, the world’s oldest fairy tale, written in Egyptian hieratic script in 1220 B.C. The Greek fragment at right, a label, bears the tantalizing words “Complete Pindar,” but the book it accompanied was never found.

neglected and eventually disappeared. No doubt some of them were trivial and others crude, but there were several masterful writers among them, such as the satirist Lucilius, and several lively works in minor genres, such as the Atellan farces, which we should dearly love to be able to read.

There was another habit of taste that tended to make books obsolete in the ancient world. This was sheer laziness. Partly to cater to lazy adult readers, and partly to create handy texts for use in schools, editors in later Greece and Rome reduced the complete works of many distinguished authors to small, neat anthologies, assimilable with little effort and easily portable. Thus, out of the eighty-odd plays by Aeschylus, the Seven Best were selected; out of more than a hundred by Sophocles, the Seven Best. These selections ousted the complete works, which fewer and fewer readers requested or even knew. So all the other plays of Aeschylus and Sophocles have vanished. With Euripides we are luckier because we also have part of one set of Complete Works. [p.81] But aside from these three, we have no Greek tragedies at all. Many of the lost books of Greece and Rome were not destroyed: they were allowed to slip into oblivion.

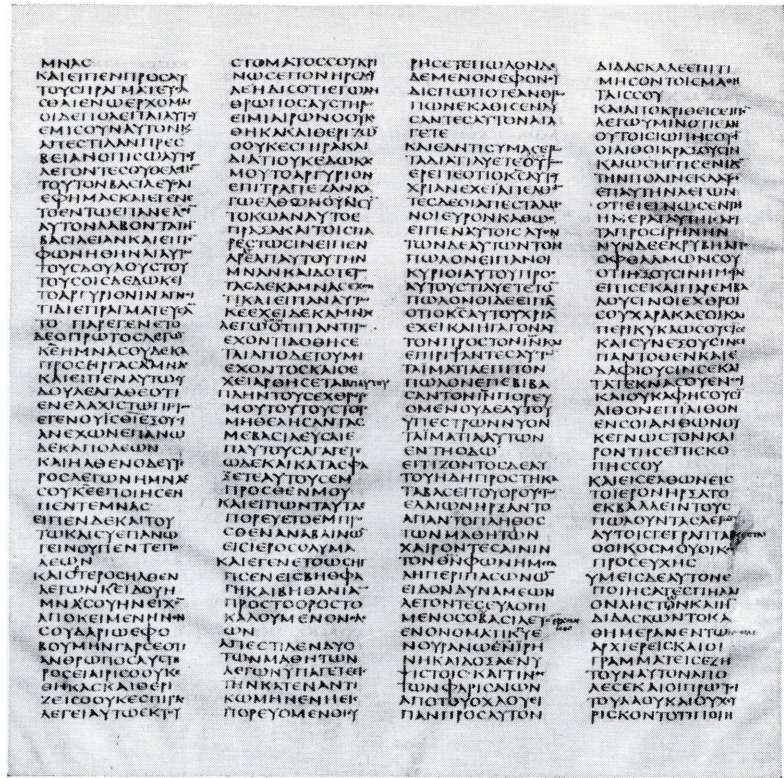


If war is the supreme destroyer of books, it also, in another sense, creates them—as happened when the sack of Rome by Alaric and the Goths in A.D. 410 inspired Saint Augustine to write The City of God. He conceived it as a reply to those who argued that the disaster, which in effect ended classical civilization, was a retribution for abolishing pagan worship. This French miniature was painted exactly a thousand years later, and shows Augustine offering his book to the pope even as the Goths are raging through the streets. [p.82]

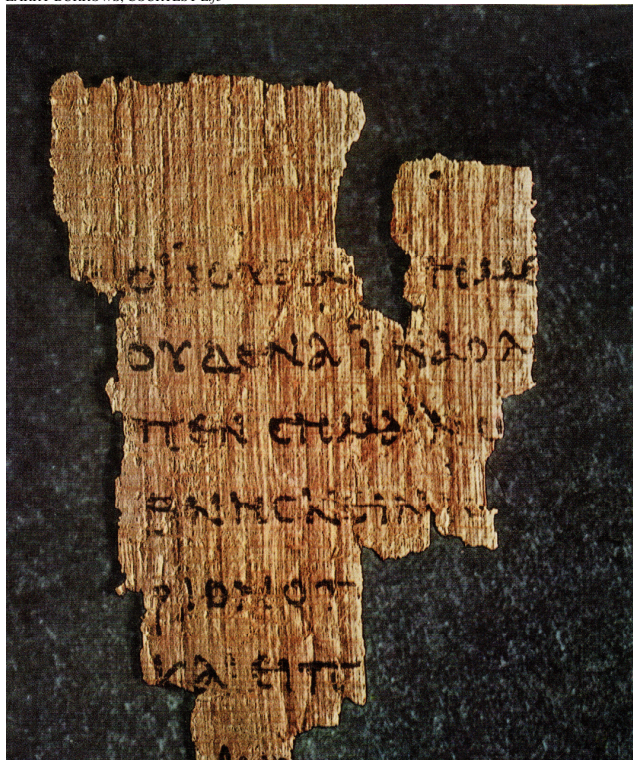
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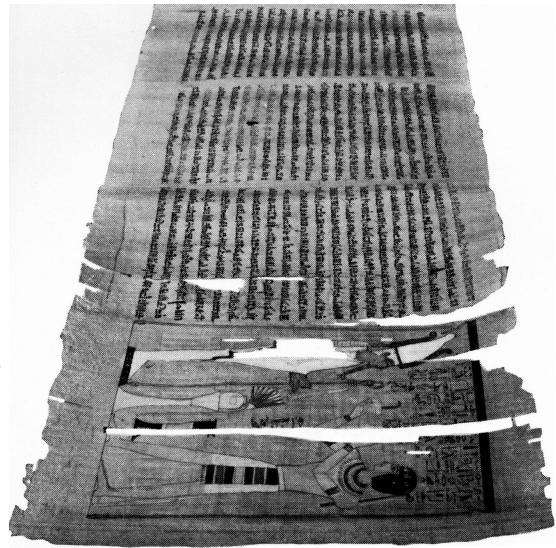
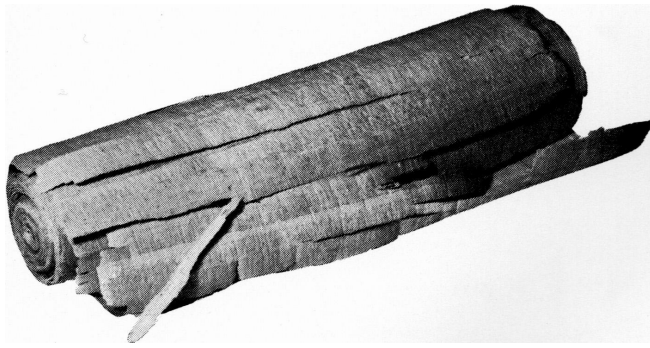
Konstantin von Tischendorf



LARRY BURROWS; COURTESY Life



The page above is from what is probably one of the two oldest Bibles in the world, the fourth-century Codex Sinaiticus discovered by the German scholar Von Tischendorf on Mount Sinai in 1844 and brought by him to Russia fifteen years later. It is now in the British Museum, except for forty-three leaves in Leipzig and some fragments elsewhere. Its only rival for antiquity is the Codex Vaticanus of roughly the same date. Older than either, however, is the scrap of papyrus at left bearing part of verses 3133 of the eighteenth chapter of the Gospel of Saint John. It was found in Egypt in 1920 by Bernard P. Grenfell and has since been dated to the first half of the second century A.D.—making it the earliest known fragment of any part of the New Testament. [p.83]



Three thousand years after it was buried in the tomb of an Egyptian high priest, this papyrus Book of the Dead (a sort of guidebook to the next world) was unrolled in 1960 at the British Museum. It proved to be twenty-two feet long and, except for some wear at the beginning, in excellent condition.

Illustrated London News

There were two further hazards that the classics had to survive before they could reach the age of printing. One was a change of format, the other was a change of script. The two changes sound unimportant, but they drastically altered our intellectual history.

Suppose that in 1970 all publishers decided to abandon publishing books in their present form and began to issue them only on microfilms; and suppose that we all accepted this, rearranging our homes around microfilm-readers and storage cabinets. If so, all the new books would be produced exclusively on microfilm. All important old books would be transferred to microfilm: the Bible, the encyclopedias, the scientific and technical manuals, the law books; and Shakespeare, Milton, Pope, Shelley. Keats ... but who else?¹

At once the question becomes difficult. Should Butler's *Hudibras* be microfilmed? and Langland's *Piers Plowman*, which nobody reads except specialists? and Cowley's epic on King David, which nobody reads at all? A selective grid has been created. Through it must pass any book in the English language that is to reach the postmicrofilm future. The rest will be kept in storage for a while, will be forgotten, and in a few generations will fall into dust. (We have in our own lifetime seen a similar series of changes in recorded music, from the old phonograph cylinders to the flat 78 rpm discs, then to LP discs; and now tape threatens to make all discs obsolete.)

Suppose also that we were to introduce a new phonetic alphabet, say in 1970: all our important books would have to be transliterated into the new simplifaid speling. Within a couple of generations only a few experts and antiquarians would be able to read the older script. All the books that remained untranscribed would be neglected, difficult, remote. Soon they would sink into decay and oblivion.

Now, these two changes actually took place during the centuries after the Greek and Latin classics were composed and while they were being transmitted to us: the format and material of books changed, and then the scripts in which they were written.

¹ See "On the Horizon" (page 105 of this issue) and "Where Will the Books Go?" by John Rader Platt, in *HORIZON* for September, 1962.

THE GREEKS HAD A PICTURE FOR IT

This stylish battle scene is proof that the lavish picture book is no recent invention, for it comes from what must have been an extremely handsome copy of the Iliad produced—possibly in Constantinople—between the third and fifth centuries A.D. It is the earliest extant example of a Greek illustrated book, and in its original state it probably consisted of some 380 vellum leaves. Of these, only fifty-two separate fragments survive and they only because a thirteenth-century collector who evidently preferred the pictures to the text cut some of them out and pasted paper over the backs. They came to rest in the Ambrosian library in Milan, where they were bound and catalogued merely as “a book of pictures.” In 1810 Father Angelo Mai, the expert who discovered the Cicero palimpsest on page 77 [p.4], peeled off the paper and recognized the text underneath as part of the Iliad. The inscriptions and captions had been added by later hands and were often inaccurate. This plate—which Mai numbered XXIX—shows the Greeks and Trojans in battle. At the left young Teukros is being congratulated on his successes by Agamemnon (wrongly identified as Diomedes), while overhead float the goddesses Athena, Hera, and Iris.



[p.86]

In the flourishing days of Greece and Rome nearly all books were written on long narrow strips of papyrus, in parallel columns arranged from left to right. When not being read, the strip was rolled up around a central rod and (although its material was thinner and its dimensions generally smaller) looked rather like the “scrolls of the law” kept in Jewish synagogues today. Although brittle, papyrus is quite a good material for books: if it does not get damp, it will remain firm and legible for a long time. The dithyramb of Timotheus can be easily read today although it was written on papyrus three hundred years before the birth of Christ. However, the specially treated leather called parchment (named for Pergamum in western Asia Minor, where it was perfected about 170 B.C.) is far more durable. Since it has a finer, smoother surface than papyrus, it will take smaller and clearer letters. And furthermore, a book with separate pages sewn together at one edge is far easier to use than a long continuous strip which must be laboriously unrolled in order to find and read a single column of writing.

Therefore the Greeks and Romans gradually stopped using papyrus and gave up the roll format. (Actually, “volume,” which comes from the same root as “revolve,” means a roll. The word for the flat book with pages is “codex.”) This change-over was not at first encouraged by governmental [p.84] [p.86] authority and took quite a long time. But the Roman lawyers liked the codex shape because it was so easy to consult. The Christians, too, who wished to read parallel passages in the four different gospel narratives and to compare the prophecies of the Old Testament with their fulfillments in the New, preferred the large book which could be opened out flat; and scribes, both pagan and Christian, found that a parchment page would take graceful script and elaborate decoration far more readily than papyrus. The eminent British papyrologist C. H. Roberts suggests that the change in format was connected with the first written versions of the life of Jesus. Saint Mark, author of the earliest gospel, wrote it in Rome in the handy format of a parchment notebook with pages. This he took to Alexandria, and there (although they continued to use the cheap local material, papyrus), the early Christians grew accustomed to having their sacred writings in the form of a flat-paged book. By A.D. 400 the roll was obsolescent, whether in papyrus or in parchment. Any book that had not been recopied into the new format could survive only by exceptional good luck. And some Greek and Roman classics now lack their beginnings because the outside of the papyrus roll, with the first few columns of writing on it, had perished before it could be transcribed. Others are only part of a once larger set. Aristotle’s *Poetics* was a two-volume work, one part dealing with tragedy and the other with comedy; but the second was lost before it reached the codex form and will now never be known—unless through a fortunate find.

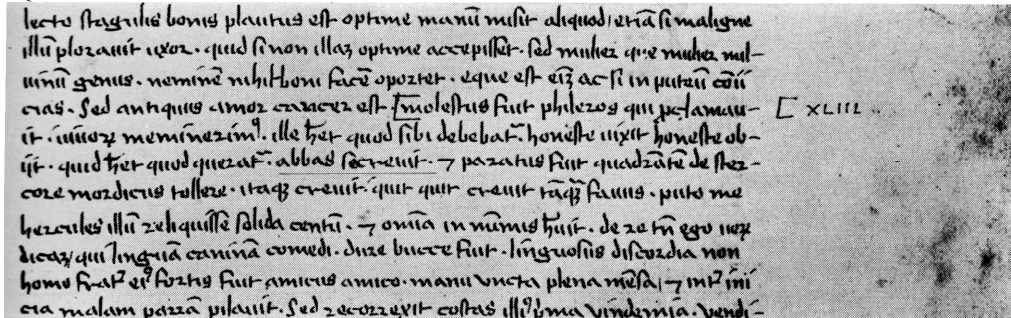
All Greek and Roman books were, of course, written by hand. Great changes took place in Greek and Roman script between the fourth and the eighth centuries of the Christian era. In classical times the Greeks wrote most of their important books in what we call capital letters, without much punctuation and often with no spaces between words. (The Romans, after hesitating for some time, followed them.) But, after many experiments both in the Greek world of eastern Europe, Asia Minor, and Egypt, and in the Roman west, a radical change to a script more like our own was carried through: a script in which words are separated from one another and most of the letters are unemphatic, curved, and small (hence called “minuscule”), while only the emphatic letters beginning sentences, lines of verse, and proper names are capitals, or majuscules.

Then and thereafter all the books written like this, “ARMAVIRVMQVECANOTROIAEQVIPRIVSABORIS.” had to be copied in the new script, with its word divisions and emphatic capitals: “*Arma uirumque cano, Troiae qui primus ab oris. ...*”² But the work of transcription from one form of writing to another was laborious and difficult. A scribe

² The Romans had no sound in their language corresponding to our *v*. They used small *u* and capital *V* for both the vowel-sound *oo* (as in *IVSTVS*, *iustus*) and the consonant *w* (*VIR*, *uir*).

Since all books were copied by hand until the invention of printing, opportunities for error were limitless. At the left [below], underlined, is an example from the codex (i.e., flat book with pages) containing Trimalchio's Dinner by the Roman satirist Petronius. The copyist, probably a monk, has written *abbas secrevit*, "the abbot isolated him"; but the phrase in the original was no doubt *ab asse crevit*, which means "he started with a nickel."

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who was accustomed to reading and writing "*Italiam fato profugus Lauinaque uenit*," sometimes made mistakes in reading and transcribing "*ITALIAMFATOPROFVGVS LAVINAQVEVENIT*." Therefore when a scholar today sits down to edit a Greek or Roman book, one of his most important jobs is to reconstruct the various phases of copying and recopying through which it has been transmitted and to determine just what types of error were liable to be introduced at each transition. When a sentence in a Greek or Roman author looks doubtful or senseless, one of the first devices that scholars try is to write it out *INTHEOLDVNDIVIDEDCAPITALS*, and then see whether the misreading of one or two letters, or a failure to separate the words correctly, led to the error.

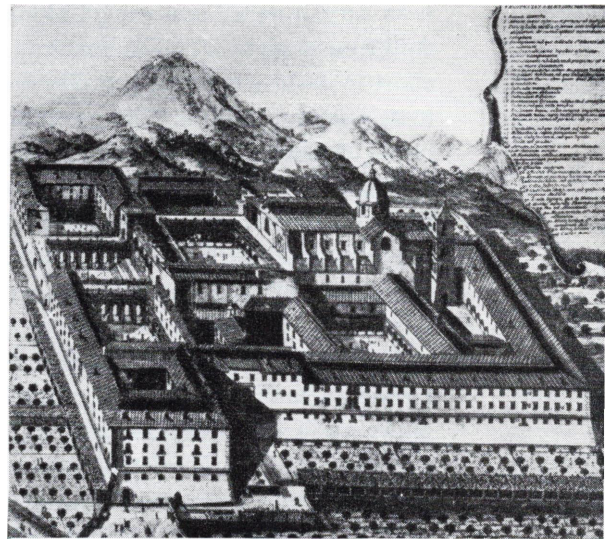
My favorite mistake of this kind is a matter of word separation. At the vulgar millionaire's dinner party in Petronius's *Satyrical*, the guests are discussing a friend who has just died. "Ah, he had a good life," they say, "the abbot isolated him, and he died a millionaire." There were no abbots in the days of Petronius, and anyhow the second clause is meaningless. In majuscules the phrase reads *ABBASSECREVIT*. Divide the words differently and drop one superfluous letter, and you get *ab asse crevit*, "he started with a nickel" (see above).

These particular ordeals—the transference of books from one type of script to another and from one format to another—were mechanical hazards to the survival of literature. There was another, far more destructive, which depended on [p.87] [p.88] the will of men. This was censorship. In pagan Greece we hear very little of censorship: although the emissaries of Antipater brought Demosthenes to his death, they made no effort to destroy his speeches. The emperors of Rome were more touchy. Even the clement Augustus felt himself compelled to exile the orator Cassius Severus and burn his books, which were full of personal attacks on the Roman aristocracy and the imperial court. Labienus's history of the civil war, which treated Julius Caesar as a traitor to the Republic, was destroyed; and, rather than survive his work, the historian killed himself.

The Christians, although considered an antisocial group by the authorities, were at first not known to possess any books worth destroying. But in the last of the pagan persecutions (A.D. 303) Diocletian ordered the Scriptures to be burned. That persecution, however, soon ended; and we know of no Christian books which were irrevocably lost in it.



The Italian writer Giovanni Boccaccio (portrayed here by Andrea del Castagna) paid a celebrated visit to the monastery of Monte Cassino (below) in, most probably, the winter of 1370. According to one of his disciples, he wept in despair at the neglect of its once-great library and was given some books to take back to Florence with him (it has been suggested that he simply smuggled them out). Among them may well have been a great eleventh-century codex that turned up in Florence about that time. This invaluable book contained the only surviving copies of Books I-V of the Histories of Tacitus and Books XI-XVI of his Annals; Apuleius's Metamorphoses, better known as The Golden Ass, the only Latin novel that has come down to us complete; and two less important works by Apuleius.



A. RUSCONI-Montecassino, 1929

[p.88]

A generation later the Christians came to power. Soon they were destroying the books of the pagans. Because of this policy, although we possess a good deal of Christian propaganda from the early centuries, no pagan counterpropaganda is preserved intact. The great Neo-Platonic philosopher Porphyry wrote a destructive analysis of the Christian doctrine and the Christian Scriptures in fifteen volumes. It was burned by imperial order, and only a few fragments, quoted by his Christian opponents, now remain.

In the Christian church there was always a sharp division between those who thought all pagan literature vicious and dangerous and would gladly have consigned it to annihilation, and those who believed that some of it was potentially good so that it could, under proper guidance, be used for teaching and study. Christians of the first type were responsible for much wholesale abolition of the Greek and Roman classics. Christians of the second type selected most of the books we now possess, copied them, taught them in schools, and so preserved them for the age of printing.

Of the many thousands of plays enjoyed by Greeks and Romans, all were allowed to rot away except eighty-one: forty-three tragedies (thirty-three Greek and ten Roman) and thirty-eight comedies (eleven Greek and twenty-seven Roman). One more complete Greek comedy and large fragments of others have been found in the last seventy years: these were not, however, transmitted through the ages by copying, but preserved as though in a time capsule. Drama was particularly repellent to the early Christians, for many reasons. They therefore banned plays. The professional [p.89] theatre ceased to exist: for a thousand years men forgot the full power and meaning of drama, and the few plays that were permitted to survive were preserved mainly as models of fine Greek and Latin poetic and conversational style.

The pagan Greeks and Romans had also loved lyric poetry, which embodies or evokes song and the dance. Many of their lyric poems were loving glorifications of carnal experience: an invitation to drink (“the snow is deep outside and life is short”) or rapturous desire for a beautiful body (“my eyes dazzle, a delicate flame runs through my limbs”). Others were hymns doing honor to pagan deities. Such poems were particularly hateful to devout Christians, so that the vast majority of them were allowed to perish. In Latin we have four books of songs by Horace and half a book by Catullus. In Greek almost all lyric poetry has vanished (or had vanished until the recent discoveries began): only Pindar survived, and only his Victory Odes. The rest disappeared, and even the Victory Odes came through the Dark Ages in one manuscript alone.

There was one curious way of survival for classical books, although it led through apparent destruction. For the sake of economy, scribes used to scrape or wash off the ink from pages on which a book had already been written and inscribe another book upon the cleaned surface. This could be done with papyrus, but it was both easier and more profitable with the tough surface of parchment. Usually it was a pagan book that was erased, and the Bible or a work of Christian divinity was written on the palimpsest, or cleaned-off, pages. But traces of the old writing would still remain legible underneath.

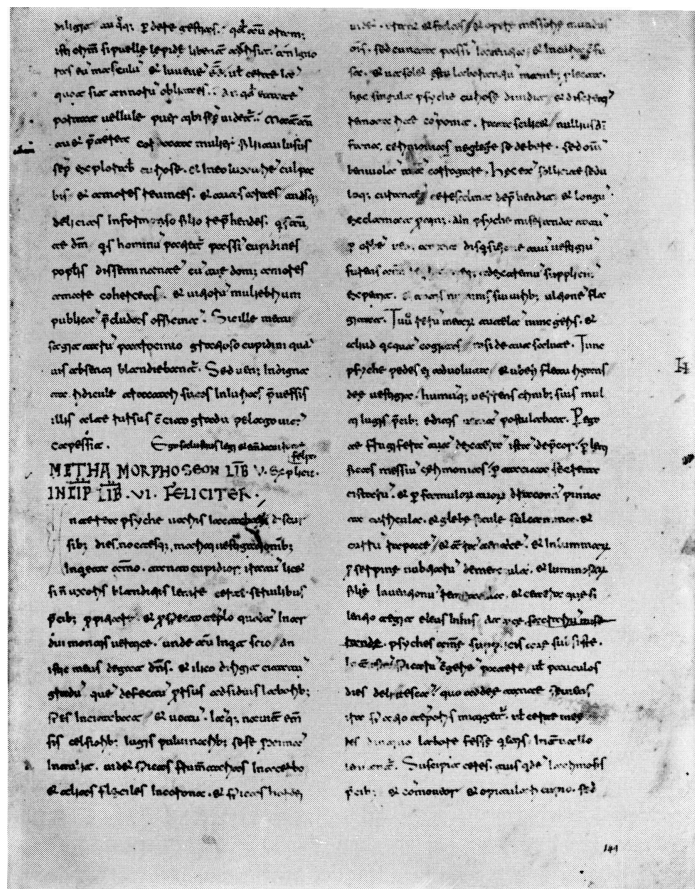
For instance: one of the best books by Cicero was his dialogue *On the State*, in which he discussed the rival claims of democracy, aristocracy, dictatorship (or monarchy), and a mixed constitution in which the powers should balance one another. He published it in 51 B.C. It was much admired and long read, but during the Dark Ages it vanished. Some medieval writers quote *On the State* as though they had actually handled a copy; but such citations are very shady evidence, for they might be secondhand or third-hand. The great book hunters of the Renaissance were never able to discover a copy, although it was on their list of the Most Wanted Books.

However, in 1819, Angelo Mai, an expert in discovering old books beneath later books on a palimpsest surface, was appointed head of the Vatican library. There he discovered [p.90]



THE LAURENTIAN LIBRARY

Whether it was Boccaccio or someone else who saved the Tacitus-Apuleius codex from decay at Monte Cassino, the world has reason to be grateful. It found a home (beside an earlier codex, from Germany, containing the first six books of Tacitus's Annals) in Florence's magnificent Laurentian library. Here the books were piled up on carved lecterns ([top] left), with shelf lists at the ends, and secured by chains. Now there is only one to a desk and they are all protected by glass. At the right is a page from Apuleius's Golden Ass—a portion, in fact, of the charming story of Cupid and Psyche, which became famous in this version.



BIBLIOTECA MEDICEA LAURENZIANA-SCALA

[p.90]

a commentary on the Psalms by Saint Augustine, which had been inscribed in the northern Italian monastery of Bobbio in the uncials of the late seventh century, over a manuscript of Cicero's *On the State* inscribed in the taller capitals of an earlier era (see page 77 [p.4]). Cicero's words could still be read and Father Mai published them in 1822. The book was incomplete, but at least a quarter of it was there. How many forgotten libraries still contain forgotten copies of forgotten works of doctrine, beneath which there sleep great classical masterpieces?

If you wish information to survive for many centuries, however, cut it on stone or bake it in clay; you can even paint it, if the surface is durable and protected from weather. Do not try casting it in metal, for someone will almost certainly melt it down.

The Emperor Augustus wrote his own autobiography, listing his chief honors, benefactions, and victories. It was deposited at the Home Hearth of Rome, with the Vestal Virgins, and a version in bronze was set upon his mausoleum in Rome. Both the original and the metal transcript have vanished. But a stone-carved copy was found in 1555 on the walls of a mosque in Ankara (see page 79 [p.7]): since then, two more copies, fragmentary but helpful, have turned up in southern Turkey. Only through these bits of stone do we know what one of the greatest rulers in history considered his greatest achievements.

Fifteen hundred years before him the king of a little state in what is now the Turkish frontier province of Hatay, after an adventurous and successful career, composed his own life story. His name was Idri-mi, and he was king of Alalakh in his time. He possessed less taste and less money than Augustus, so he had it carved upon his own statue—not even upon an epigraphic tablet, but over his actual face and his hard-earned regal robes (see page 79 [p.7]). Gazing out from eyes of black inlaid stone, his effigy sat enthroned in a temple for two centuries, speaking his adventures to those who could read. Then, in 1194 B.C., his kingdom was invaded by the northern barbarians called the Peoples of the Sea. His statue was wrenched from its throne and smashed into fragments. But after the invasion had passed over, a loyal courtier of the fallen monarchy crept back and salvaged the statue of the King, and buried it with respect. And there, underground, it was discovered by Leonard Woolley in 1939, and its long-silent boasts were read, and its eyes looked out again on a changed world with the same blank arrogance as before. His name and fame were forgotten; yet the stone that carried his message remained, with an immortality for which he could scarcely have hoped.

Two hundred years after Augustus, another public benefactor, on a smaller scale, went to a stonecutter with a document to be perpetuated. He was an elderly gentleman who lived in the small Greek-speaking city of Oenoanda in Lyda. Now it is a lonely heap of ruins in Turkey; then it was prosperous, civilized, but (the old gentleman thought) not quite happy enough. He was a devoted adherent of Epicurus. Epicureanism had taught him that the gods have no interest in this troublesome little earth; that terrifying phenomena such as illness and earthquakes and comets are all explicable, not through divine malevolence, but through nature; and that the duty of man on this planet is to cultivate his garden, keep quiet, and be happy. Old Diogenes, as he was called, had had a heart attack. He determined to use some of his remaining money and energy in showing his fellow citizens and their descendants the road to happiness. So he had a huge inscription cut and set up in the central square of his little city, explaining the chief tenets of the Epicurean doctrine. Now, all the voluminous works of Epicurus himself have perished; we have nothing from his own hand except three letters and some fragments and apophthegms. But the inscription set up by old Diogenes of Oenoanda, rediscovered by explorers and read by scholars in the nineteenth century, is one of the chief witnesses to an important philosophical creed that is not yet dead.

Laws and state announcements were often displayed on stone, for permanence and publicity. The earliest Greek legislation in existence is the code of Gortyn: it was incised on the curving stone wall

of the odeum and still stands, perfectly legible, among the ruins of that city in central Crete. The names of Roman magistrates, some of them unrecorded in history books, appear on tablets of stone; so do the sums paid by the subject-allies of Athens to her imperial treasury; and so, too, the last effort of Roman bureaucratic government, the gigantic edict of Diocletian fixing the price of virtually every object of commerce throughout the Western world.

Records cut on stone or cast in metal were intended to survive as long as possible. Books passed from hand to hand and constantly recopied were deliberately kept alive. But there is a huge and steadily growing assemblage of documents that were, in the eyes of those who wrote them and used them, quite temporary. Many of them were actually thrown out as rubbish. Yet, by a combination of good luck and crazy chance, they have survived and become valuable. These are things written on ephemeral substances like papyrus and clay.

The records found in Mycenaean palaces (first in Crete) and deciphered by Michael Ventris in 1952, were apparently scratched on clay tablets that were not even fired: they became permanent only when the palaces were burned down.³ Almost all of the papyri written in Greek or Roman lettering that we now have were found quite literally in rubbish dumps or in the ruins of abandoned houses. Since it scarcely ever rains in Egypt, they lay quite comfortably beneath the dry earth until modern searchers dug them up. The modern Egyptians thought it was about as stupid as digging in Western dumps for tin cans, but they co-operated, for a [p.91] [p.93] wage, and even imitated the excavators when they found how valuable the rubbish was. In one day's work at Oxyrhynchus (one hundred twenty miles south of Cairo) Bernard P. Grenfell and A. S. Hunt got thirty-six basketfuls of papyrus rolls out of one mound alone. These had apparently been discarded as worthless.

Some papyri have been preserved because they were deliberately buried. One of the oldest Greek literary manuscripts, containing the only known copy of a dithyrambic poem by Timotheus, was rescued in this way. It is an absurdly bad poem (although interesting to literary connoisseurs); however, someone prized it, for it was discovered in a leather pouch, laid carefully in the coffin of a dead Greek soldier buried in Egypt. And a truly magnificent copy of Book II of Homer's *Iliad*, now in the Bodleian library, was set in a coffin as a pillow beneath the head of a young woman, whose fine skull bones, small regular teeth, and black hair make us believe she was a beauty: certainly she was beloved. Other papyri—mainly letters, accounts, and official documents, though including a few treasures of literature—were found glued together or squeezed tight with water, to make cheap mummy cases molded to the shape of the corpse. (Out of one of these cases came part of the lost tragedy *Antiope*, by Euripides.) Even stranger were the finds at Tebtunis, where Grenfell and Hunt came on a cemetery of sacred crocodiles. One dead sacred crocodile is very like another, and the job of excavating these saurian mummies soon palled. Eventually a workman lost his temper and smashed one of them to pieces. Then it appeared that the crocodiles, too, were incased in molded papyri, and some even had rolls stuffed into their mouths “and other cavities.” From such absurd hiding places do we recover the records of the past.

We have as yet no idea of the treasures that are hidden in the dry sands of Egypt and the neighboring countries. The oldest Latin papyrus ever found and the oldest text of Cicero (part of his most famous set of speeches), written down not long after his death, is now in Leipzig: it was bought from Egyptian dealers in the Fayum in 1926—and where did *they* get it? In 1945 a Gnostic library of thirteen volumes was found in Upper Egypt, containing, among other things, a Gospel in Coptic, adapted from a Christian work written in Greek, which evidently preserved some beautiful traditional words of Jesus. And an Oxford expert once told me, with affliction in his eyes, that among a pile of

³ See “Homer's Age of Heroes,” in *HORIZON* for January, 1961.

THE LIVELY REVIVAL OF A CLASSIC

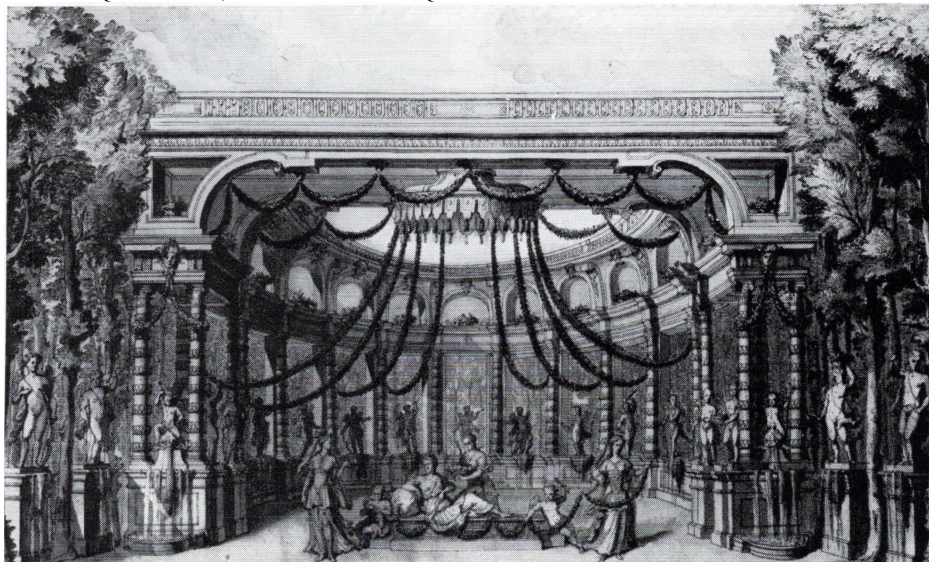


GUILLEMOT; *Connaissance des Arts*



Ever since the recovery of Apuleius's Golden Ass from oblivion (page 80 [p.15,17]) the romance of Cupid and Psyche has been a favorite theme of artists and writers—nowhere more than in France. A typical example is the painted ceiling in the seventeenth-century Hotel de Sully in Paris (above). So is *Les Amours de Psyche et de Cupidon*, written by Jean de la Fontaine in 1669 and illustrated a century later by Nicolas Rene Jollain (left). Even more popular was Moliere's *Psyche*, produced in 1671 with music by Lully, dancing, elaborate settings (below), and machines for wafting the various gods and goddesses to the heavens and back.

BIBLIOTHEQUE NATIONALE. SERVICE PHOTOGRAPHIQUE



[p.92]

We would know a good deal more about the Mayan culture of Yucatan if Spanish priests and missionaries had not systematically destroyed the Mayan books. Only three survive. This is a page from one of them, known as the Codex Perez from the name written on its wrapper in a seventeenth-century Spanish hand. No one knows who Perez was, or how the book got to Europe, or why it ended up among some dusty papers in a basket in the Bibliothque Nationale where it was discovered in 1859. It is written on bark paper and is thought to be a ritualistic manual. Until a few months ago nobody could decipher the Mayan glyphs, but last March a group of Soviet scholars announced that by using electronic computers they had succeeded. Translations have not been published as yet.



ON THE MOST-WANTED LIST

Gilbert Highet writes: Many hundreds of important Greek and Roman books have been lost that may yet be found moldering in a forgotten storeroom or buried in Egyptian sands. Every scholar will have his own list of longed-for works, but the following would most delight me:

- 1) The collected poems of Sappho
- 2) *Prometheus Unbound* and *Prometheus the Firebringer*, the two other tragedies in Aeschylus's trilogy (we already have *Prometheus Bound*)
- 3) Epicurus's masterwork. *On Nature*
- 4) The satires of the Roman republican "Whig" Lucilius
- 5) Livy's *History of Rome* complete (out of 142 books. only 35 survive; what we need most—hear me, Jupiter!—is his account of the civil wars that ended the Republic)
- 6) The emperor Claudius's *History of the Etruscans*
- 7) The autobiography of Hadrian
- 8) Porphyry's treatise *Against the Christians* [p.93]

papyrus fragments he was classifying he had found a label (see page 80 [p.8]) bearing, in Greek, the simple words:

COMPLETE

PINDAR

In vain I besought him to go back to the collection and look through it again. “No,” he said gloomily, “it isn’t there. It must have been on the site in Egypt. But perhaps the excavator missed it when he was digging, or it had already been found and lost again, or someone stole it and sold it in Alexandria. It may turn up in twenty years. It may turn up tomorrow. It may be lying at the back of a drawer forgotten.”

Last, most absurd, and yet most natural of all the hazards through which the classics had to pass was the barrier of human stupidity. When barbarism comes to outweigh culture, through foreign invasion or social revolution or deliberately nurtured sloth and ignorance, works of art are often taken to be “useless” and destroyed. In waves of materialism and in revolutions, everything old is apt to be judged obsolete. It is a barrier to progress; or it is lumber; or it is reactionary; or it is inedible and unspendable—away with it! Only last year the commissioner of antiquities in modern Greece, Spyridon Marinatos, told a sad story of the Second World War. A farmer in the western Peloponnesus was digging a well. Twenty feet down he came upon a stone box. He smashed in its lid. Inside there was a big object “like a bundle,” dark in color and crumbly in texture. He thought he saw letters written on it. He informed the police, who informed the local director of antiquities; but for some time they could not get out to the farm. It was 1944-1945, and Communist squads were trying to control the roads. When at last the director was able to reach the farm, the object was gone. The farmer had thrown it on the dunghill “because it was not a treasure: it looked like dung and it fell to pieces quite soon.” Others, however, had seen “many letters” on it and said that, although fragile, it held together on the dunghill for some days. Clearly it was a book roll: papyrus, or more probably parchment; clearly it was precious to the man who buried it in a stone casket; certainly it would have been precious to us. But it was of no use to the farmer, and it is gone.

And so it has always been. Boccaccio, who was a great booklover and book finder, once visited the monastery of Monte Cassino (see page 87 [p.15]). He was particularly eager to see the library, with all its treasures of handwritten books. Very humbly he asked one of the monks for admission to it. “Walk up,” said the monk, “it’s open.” It was. It had no door; grass was growing on the window sills; the shelves, the benches, and the books themselves were shrouded in thick dust. Some of them, he found, had lost pages or even whole quires, others had their margins cut off. Boccaccio wept. He cried tears of pity “that the work and study of so many illustrious geniuses should have fallen into the hands of scoundrels.” As he left, he asked a monk how such valuable books could have been so odiously mutilated. “Well,” said the monk, “some of the brothers wanted to earn a few pennies: so they took a page and scraped off the writing and made little psalters to sell to children; and from the page margins they made gospels and breviaries and sold them to women.”

When a bibliophile sees good books neglected and on the road to destruction, his first impulse is to rescue them. Say [p.94] not “steal.” “Convey” the wise it call” as Pistol says in *The Merry Wives*. Some splendid books from Monte Cassino are now in Florence. If it was not Boccaccio who “conveyed” them there, it was an even more fanatical booklover. Niccolo Niccoli; or an agent of his and of the house of Medici. One of these manuscripts alone—bless the hand that saved it—is the only surviving book that contains Tacitus’s account of the civil war after Nero’s suicide and of the reigns of Claudius and Nero; it also has Apuleius’s wonderful romance *The Metamorphoses*, sometimes called *The Golden Ass* (see page 89 [p.17]). This magnificent codex, written in the eleventh century, now rests peacefully in the Laurentian library, above the cloister of the church of San Lorenzo. Near

it is the only surviving manuscript of the first six books of another work by Tacitus, the *Annals*, found in Germany. Had these two manuscripts not been “conveyed,” they might well have been cut up into amulets, and we should have lost one of the greatest historians who ever wrote of absolutism and the degeneracy of despotic power.

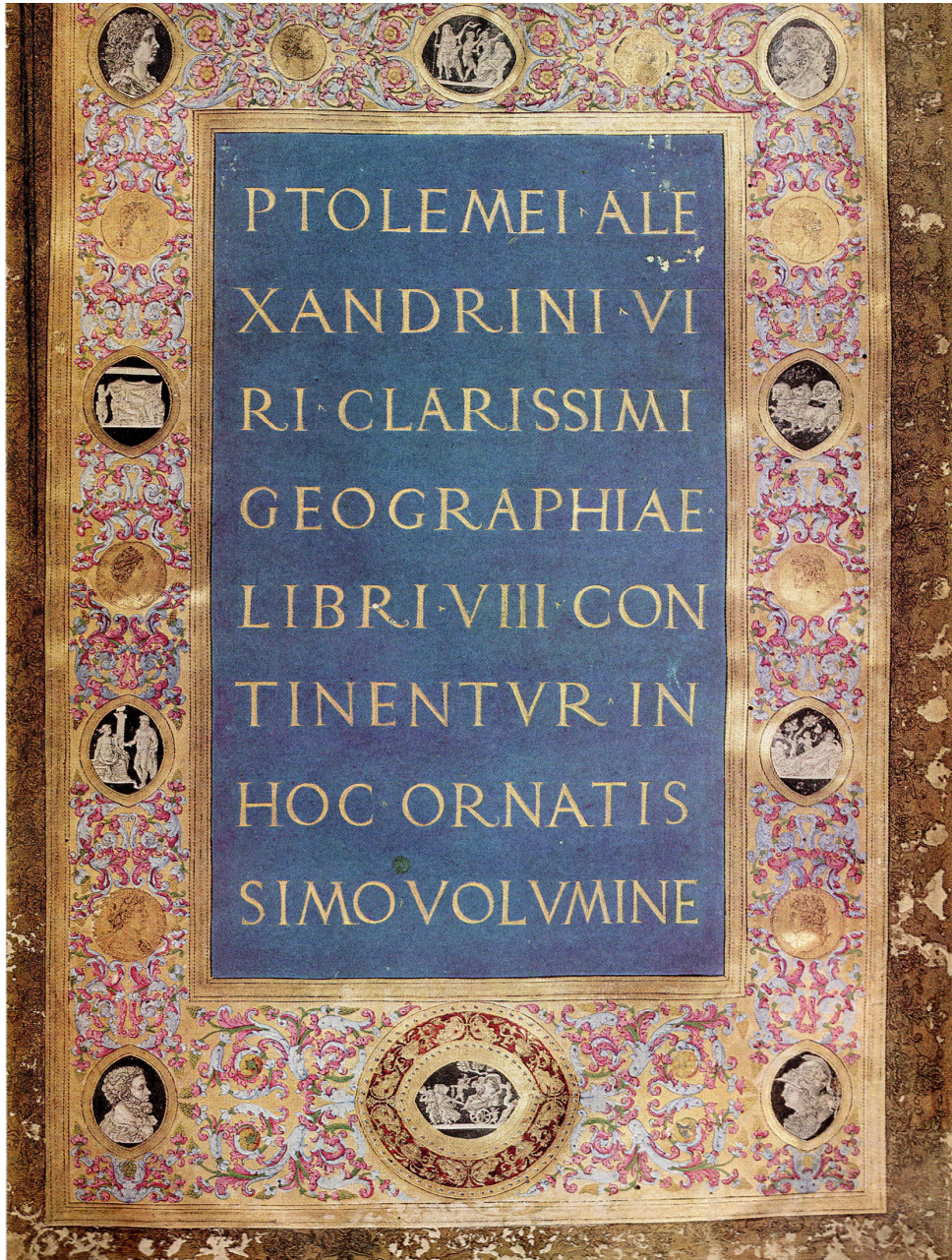
In 1844 a young Biblical scholar, Konstantin von Tischendorf, visited the remote monastery of Saint Catherine on Mount Sinai. There he found a great old book reduced almost to the same state as those which Boccaccio discovered in Cassino. It was a manuscript of the Bible, written in beautiful clear script between A.D. 330 and 400 and carefully corrected in or near that time. The book (see page 82 [p.10]) is now one of the chief treasures of the British Museum, which bought it from the Soviet Government in 1933 for a hundred thousand pounds. But when Tischendorf first saw it, nobody had paid any attention to it for seven hundred years. In the monastery, the latest intelligent markings on it, comments by readers, had been made in the twelfth century. Since then it had been brutally neglected. Fortunately, Tischendorf scented the value of this heap of waste. He copied out some of it and managed to get the monks to give him forty-three pages, which he took back to Europe and published. Fifteen years later he returned to the monastery, backed by funds from the Czar of Russia. This time he obtained the remainder of the poor battered Bible, which he carried away and published. In exchange, the monks received nine thousand Russian rubles. They were disappointed. They said that Tischendorf had promised to get them a steamboat.

Stupidity; censorship; changes in format and changes in taste; war; and of course the inevitable accidents, especially flood and fire—such are the hazards to the frail life of books. How did the great classics, Greek and Roman and Hebrew and others, ever survive them?

Ultimately, they were kept alive by men who loved books and knew that books are an essential element in civilization. The biography of one single book would fill many chapters. The British Museum owns a copy of the Gospels in Latin (see page 74 [p.1]), together with some writings of the early Christian Fathers, that has outlived storm and fire, savagery and greed. A big book, over a foot high, with two hundred fifty-eight stout vellum pages, it was inscribed about A.D. 700 by Bishop Eadfrith in the monastery of Lindisfarne, now Holy Island, off the northern English coast. His successor, Bishop Ethelwald, bound it; and an anchorite living on the island made a jeweled case for it. In A.D. 875 the Danish pagans invaded England. The then bishop of Lindisfarne fled westward, carrying the sacred relics of Saint Cuthbert and this book. In a storm on the Irish Sea it was lost, but it was recovered at low tide as though by a miracle. For seven years it wandered; it survived more moves and invasions, and returned to its home at Lindisfarne, where it was catalogued (the simple boring work of librarians, which they think so unimportant and which is so valuable!). Next it survived the Reformation and the Protestant sack of monasteries, although it lost its jeweled case and its episcopal covers. Then, like many valuables during a revolution, it came into the possession of a government official (Robert Bowyer, Keeper of the Records in the Tower). From him it was acquired by someone who really knew what it meant: a genuine collector, Sir Robert Bruce Cotton. From him, because of a political dispute, it was confiscated by the Crown. It is now in the British Museum.

The most moving of all such stories, however, and most encouraging, would be the biography of an ancient book as a work of art and thought. First we should have to describe its author and the contemporary audience whom he meant to read or hear his work. Then, some time later, the Greek or Roman scholars who accepted it as a valuable achievement and edited it (as the work of Joyce and Eliot is being edited today); and then, as the Dark Ages set in, the farsighted optimists (pagan like Symmachus or Christian like Cassiodorus) who preserved it from obliteration; and, after them, the monks who saved it once again by recopying it, to live on for many centuries; later we should meet the fine-scented book hounds like Petrarch and Boccaccio and Poggio and Aurispa who discovered it when it was forgotten and sometimes copied it out with their own hands; until finally, after more

perils than a displaced person and more sufferings than a tormented prisoner, it emerged fifteen hundred or two thousand years or twenty-five hundred years after its birth, to be copied on a miraculous machine and multiplied through the work of scholars and publishers, and—incredibly—to reach an audience who loved it as dearly as those who were present at its distant birth. Even then the life of such a book is not over. It will be read by Shakespeare. It will inspire a picture by Rembrandt, a satirical parody by Pope, and a lyric by Keats. It will be edited by Housman, distorted by Picasso, translated into music by Ravel, and remain inexhaustibly vital, immortally versatile, today and tomorrow and into a long future, as long as there are a few men and women who can read, and understand, and appreciate true greatness. [p.95]



Made in Italy for the fifteenth-century Hungarian king Matthias Corvinus, this copy of Ptolemy's Geography (title page shown here) was carried off to Constantinople by the Turks in 1541, bought by the French government in 1778, and is now in Paris.