

FROM PAPHYRUS TO POSTERITY

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Prologue

Thirty years ago, a philosophy graduate student heard his professor refer to Aristotle's students as playing an important role in preserving the writings of this first great systematic thinker. But this passing comment did not really explain how Aristotle's works were transmitted to the present, but was much more the posing of a question itself—How did the works of the great writers and thinkers of ancient Greece and Rome actually survive for more than 2,000 years? After all, Aristotle's students themselves could only preserve his writings for a single generation. What of the remaining millennia? How could these works survive the wars, linguistic change, religious cataclysms, technological upheavals, and all the other drama of European history that separate Aristotle's time from our own?

Three decades and a career later, I found myself still wondering about this question, and I resolved to find the answer. As I began my research, I did not realize the scope or intellectual excitement of the task ahead. Nor did I anticipate that my investigations would ultimately lead to the publication of this book, which explains in broad outline how the ancient works of Greece and Rome, such as the works of Archimedes and Aristotle, traveled from their authors' pens to the libraries and bookshelves of the modern world.

In so many instances, the entire corpus of Greek and Latin antiquity came within a hair's breadth of being lost entirely. While much was lost—some estimates suggest 99 percent of all classical works have disappeared—almost all of the most important writings of antiquity have survived. These works form the very intellectual and cultural bedrock of western civilization, and without them the very ways in which we think and feel would be vastly different. That they did survive to give our civilization

its present form, depends on a truly miraculous sequence of events.

This story of survival extends vastly in time and space, and even beyond the entire range of Western culture. The chief events of the tale fall in the period from 500 B.C. to 1515 A.D. At the beginning of this period the great scholars of Greek civilization were writing and copying their works on papyrus by hand. By 1515 A.D., hundreds or even thousands of copies of these writings reposed in books of paper on library shelves across Europe.

Geographically, the story starts in the ancient Middle East with the development of the writing systems that led to Greek and Latin. But before long the geographical compass of the story includes the entire Mediterranean basin, Egyptian trash dumps, Irish monasteries perched on barren and windswept rocky islands, refined intellectuals in the court of Persia, Muslim Spain and its coterie of Jewish intellectuals, Scandinavia with its emerging Germanic tribes, and the steppes of Asia, home to the nomadic tribes that would sweep away the Roman Empire.

Compared with its time and geographical bounds, the cultural expanse of the story is much greater still, reaching into almost every dimension of Western culture: religious, technological, social, political, intellectual, and even those most primitive cultural expressions of war and mass migrations. In the religious dimension, the rise of Christianity led to a depreciation of the classics, yet proved instrumental in their preservation. From 500 B.C. to 1515 A.D., the technology of books underwent successive transformations, with writing surfaces changing from papyrus, to parchment, to paper, each with its own implications for the preservation of ancient texts.

Socially, the Middle Ages witnessed the devaluation of learning, serious reductions in literacy, and a sharp diminution of material culture, all with unpleasant consequences for the preservation of the Greek and Latin classics. Similarly, the political organization prevailing in the Middle Ages was fractured compared to the unity of the Roman Empire. The division of medieval Europe into a myriad of fiefdoms reduced trade in both goods and ideas, impairing the preservation of the classics and the development of thought. Intellectually, the great awakening that began in fourteenth century Italy and flowered into the Italian Renaissance provided a crucial stepping stone to the modern world. In the process, scholars rescued many classical works from the edge of oblivion.

At a fundamental level, the late Roman Empire was riven by mass migrations of barbarians from north to south and east to west, transforming the social, political, and cultural landscape of Europe and providing a harsher milieu for the appreciation and preservation of the great works of Greece and Rome. Across all of this time and space, war played an intermittent and almost always harmful role in the continuance of classical learning, from the burning of monasteries in France and Britain by the Norsemen to the capture and sack of Constantinople by the Fourth Crusade.

Yet, across the wide sweep of time, geography, and culture, the story of the transmission of the classics from antiquity to the modern world forms a continuous thematic narrative that plays out against the entire development of European culture. As we will see, our narrative also involves excursions into non-Western cultures, side trips into the folly and meanness of man, acquaintance with the great minds of the West, contact with the limits of human knowledge, and an appreciation of the benefits and disasters of chance.

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