

**Monks to the Rescue:
How Latin Literature Survived**

by L.A. Curchin

How did Latin literature survive the Dark Ages? The standard reply, "Well, the monks copied it", is true but unsatisfying. Why were these works of pagan antiquity saved by Christian monastics? How do we identify the original authors of these texts?

With the fall of Rome in the fifth century AD, the Roman world was overrun by barbarian peoples. In the seventh century the Muslims seized North Africa and eventually Spain. In the ninth, the Vikings terrorized much of western Europe. Amidst these invasions and uncertainties, education and the study of literature declined. Classical Latin had already given way to the vernacular dialects that would become the Romance languages. Yet a knowledge of Latin was essential in theological training: the clergy needed to be able to read the Vulgate and the writings of the Church Fathers. So the Church extended a lukewarm tolerance to classical writings, if not as literature, at least as an aid for learning proper Latin. Only a few enlightened clerics such as St. Isidore appreciated Latin literature for its own merits.

The survival of Latin literature owed much to the Irish missionaries who founded monasteries on the Continent (such as Bobbio in northern Italy) in the seventh century and encouraged the study and copying of Latin texts. Scholars flocked to Rome looking for old manuscripts containing the wisdom of the ancients. In the eighth century Charlemagne, who had himself crowned Roman Emperor by the Pope, promoted a rebirth of learning in the monasteries of France and Germany, without which such writers as Tacitus, Catullus and Lucretius might not have survived. Other authors were more widely read. Cicero was admired for his philosophical and rhetorical works. Vergil was regarded as a prophet of Christianity (his fourth Eclogue predicted a Messiah). The younger Seneca was also popular, not only for the humanity and morality of his writings, but because of a mistaken belief that he was a correspondent of St. Paul. Even some of the poems of Ovid (who was anything but a moral writer!) were given a Christian interpretation.

The Romans wrote on papyrus, but by the late fourth century this had been overtaken in popularity by vellum (parchment) made from calf, kid or lamb skin. The vellum sheets were folded in half and assembled in quires of eight leaves (four sheets); the quires in turn were sewn into a codex (book). Being of animal skin, each sheet had a "hair" side (where the hair had been shaven off) and a "flesh" (interior) side, the latter being smoother and of lighter colour. When sheets were gathered into a quire, they were arranged with flesh-side facing flesh-side and hair-side facing hair-side, so that the two pages facing the reader at any moment would match. Each quire normally began with the hair-side. A "catchword" was often written at the end of the quire, giving the first word of the next quire, so that they could be assembled in correct order. The scribes used a quill or reed pen and made their own black ink from soot or other substances. When a text was no longer needed, or there was a shortage of vellum, the ink could be rubbed or scraped off and the parchment reused; such a recycled document is called a palimpsest. The erasure of the original writing was rarely thorough, and by using chemical treatments or infra-red photography it is often possible to see the underlying classical text which some zealous monk "erased" in order to copy the Gospels or St. Augustine.

How do we know the authors and titles of these texts? When a monk copied a book he would start with the formula "incipit" ("here begins"), followed by the necessary bibliographical data, e.g. "incipit Vergili Maronis Georgicon liber I". At the end of the book he would write "excipit" ("here ends") and repeat this information. If, as sometimes happens, both the first and last sheet of the codex are missing, we can usually identify the work by comparison with other manuscripts, or by internal evidence (content or style). This is not always an easy game. In 1924 an Italian scholar claimed to have found some of the lost books of Livy, and scholars worldwide greeted the news with excitement. But within days of the announcement, the great English textual critic A.E. Housman proved that the manuscript in question contained the dialogues of an obscure writer named Sulpicius. Even when the author is named in the "incipit", internal evidence sometimes suggests that all or part of the work is interpolated or spurious.

In the course of recopying manuscripts, scribes made mistakes, and there are frequent "textual variants" and corrupt passages in Latin texts. There are established procedures (many of them laid down by Housman himself) for determining which of the variants is likeliest to be what the Roman author really wrote, but uncertainty sometimes remains, even in famous writers like Vergil and Cicero of whom many manuscripts survive. Comparison of the date and peculiarities of the various manuscripts of a particular author allows scholars to reconstruct the "manuscript tradition" (the history of the text's transmission) and to draw up a stemma or "family tree" showing which codex was copied from which.

Though not all of classical literature survives, the wonder is that so much has reached us at all. Many ancient texts survived the Middle Ages in a single copy only. A fifth-century manuscript of Livy, containing five otherwise lost books, sat on a shelf in a German monastery until the 16th century without ever being copied. A fire or other accident might have destroyed such works forever. But were it not for the efforts of the monastic scribes, virtually all of Latin literature would now be lost.

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