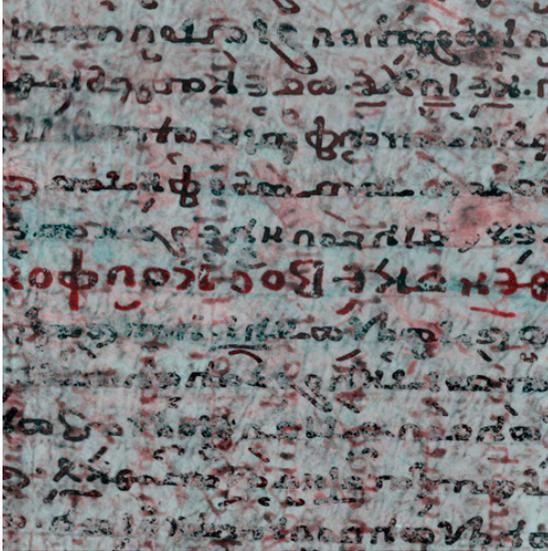




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From feasts to palimpsests

17-02-2014

We have just passed through the intense period of holidays around the World and are back facing the year now well under way. We might even have contemplated the beliefs and historic celebrations that mark the Winter Solstice, the re-born solar year and this week Lupercalia - the Roman end of winter (hard to believe in freezing Europe) and how we know of them.

This cycle is a clear indication of how our culture has not only historic depth but also undergoes processes of capture and usurpation and, simple reality. Festivals, punctuation marks give clarity to a calendar. They graphically and physically define the passing of time and they also, by their constant and increasingly profound absorption into our cultural cycle - define that culture.

When we celebrate something, tradition and culture have a place in that process - the talismans we use, the images we remember, the ideas that define are all passed down to us and as we increase in numbers and skills so does the variety of the media and interpretation we use.

Imagine if we stripped away some of those images, ideas - or if they were destroyed and they no longer existed - we would have lost not just the comfort and pleasure they bring but also the history that makes them so important to what we are - to what we call our culture. Facing a new year would be more bland, more bleak.

Culture and tradition is not defined by Governments or leaders - whether religious or political (though it is of course, can be used ruthlessly by both) - we don't need to be subject to either to enjoy the power of our historic messengers.

The messengers' power is contained in images and works done by man - for man (and I am, of course using man as a definer of species not gender) or the personification, the presence, the perceived reality the artist, the creator, the reciter has given us. Our luck is that we now begin to understand that recording those things is possible - almost for the first time we can do this permanently and accurately, not in temporary refuges based on surfaces in written or painted messages but digitally and perfectly.

We have the luck to have available to us a vast history and narrative that has been given to us visually and physically - objects that carry our traditions, thoughts, culture that makes us what we are. Civilisation is based on these things - based on the stories, the images, the structures and, as we are human, the hopes they contain.

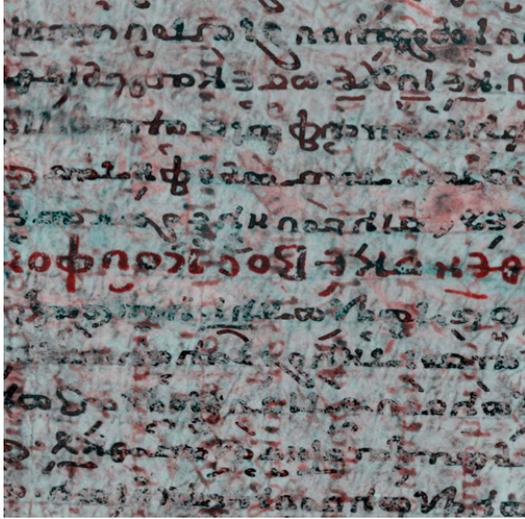
You know, of course, what comes next if you have been reading these Opinion pieces. These things are not immutable, not impervious to change, are vulnerable to present and future interference, intervention and intrusion. So we must save them, save their stories, save their encoded messages, their images and - let's change that word save - let's say record. We can now record them, we can place in digital arrays, perfect preservation vaults, these things so that not only do the narratives survive together with their sources but they can evolve while we can now be sure that as their narrative evolves and their images develop the reflections we were given offer up to the future so much more vividly.

When we look at history, something that makes it live is the idea that Cicero and Socrates, Mohamed and the tellers of the Mahabharata and Confucius and the Chalchiuhtlicue diviners were no more ignorant, primitive, simple - they just had less history or recorded fact to work with and to build on.



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What is now possible is that we can, through our digital skills, be sure that nothing is lost from our inherited images, objects, texts, sounds and that the future can have all we have - and more by interpretation- to work with and to enjoy and understand and analyse and benefit from. For the first time we can pass on what we have in the knowledge that all of it can be our future's, our descendants' culture not just the parts that survive through extraordinary lucklike the Archimedes Palimpsest. And that's a story you should read.