

**HISTORY OF ANCIENT
MANUSCRIPTS: A LECTURE
DELIVERED IN THE HALL OF
THE INNER TEMPLE; PP. 1-109**

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History of Ancient Manuscripts: A Lecture Delivered in the Hall of the Inner Temple; pp. 1-109
by William Forsyth

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WILLIAM FORSYTH

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HISTORY
OF
ANCIENT MANUSCRIPTS.

A LECTURE
DELIVERED IN
THE HALL OF THE INNER TEMPLE.

BY
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Treasurer of the Inn.

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HISTORY
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E see on our shelves, in handsome Volumes, the Works of old Authors who lived and wrote before the invention of printing ; but how few of us ask ourselves the questions, Where are the originals of which these books are the copies ? And what authority have we for the genuineness of the text ? Take, for instance, the Classic Authors of Greece and Rome. As might be expected, from the perishable nature of such materials as parchment and paper, not more than a few fragments of manuscripts which are older than the Christian era now survive. If, then, the originals of these works are lost, what

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guarantee have we for the genuineness of the printed copies in our libraries? So impressed was the Abbé Hardouin, born in 1646, with this difficulty, that he gravely propounded the theory that the so-called works of the classic writers of Greece and Rome were nothing but forgeries of the monks—just as Chatterton tried to pass off his own writings as the poems of Rowley, which he pretended to have found in some old manuscripts in a chest which I have seen in the tower of the Church of St. Mary's Redcliffe, at Bristol. The Abbé affected to believe that the so-called ancient classics had been composed in the thirteenth century, by the help of the remains of Cicero and Pliny, the Georgics of Virgil, and the Satires and Epistles of Horace, which he declared were the only relics of antiquity that had come down to that period.* He attributed the *Æneid* to a

* In an epitaph written upon the Abbé, by Vernet, of Geneva, he is called :

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Benedictine Monk, who wished to describe in an allegory, the journey of St. Peter to Rome. It is, indeed, difficult to believe that this was not a literary joke; but the Abbé seems to have been thoroughly in earnest, and if so, it appears not to have struck him that there is such a thing as internal evidence and moral impossibility. The idea of mediæval monks being able to compose the works of Homer and of Plato; of Cicero and of Virgil; does not deserve repetition. We shall, by-and-by, see how in reality it was that long after the revival of letters many of the ancient manuscripts, containing the writings of the classics, were recovered or restored; but it must be borne in mind that even those ancient documents are not the originals, but only copies of some one or more manuscripts

Venerandæ antiquitatis cultor et depredator.

Scepticum piâ egit,

Credulitate puer,

Audaciâ juvenis,

Deliriis senex,

Verbo dicam, hic jacet Harduinus.

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now utterly and for ever lost to mankind. I say "some one or more manuscripts," for consider what must have happened when a man set down to write a book before the invention of printing. Let us suppose him to have lived in the time of Augustus, and to have been a Poet or an Historian. He would commit his thoughts either to a waxen tablet or to a papyrus or parchment roll, and this would strictly and properly be the only original. But clever slaves were kept as scribes, whose sole business it was to multiply copies of their master's works, and so far as this was done, under his supervision, such copies may fairly be considered entitled to rank as originals. But none of these exist now, they have all disappeared, swallowed up in the gulf of time—and speaking loosely, but with sufficient accuracy for our present purpose, we may assume that the oldest MS., containing the supposed poems or history, is not earlier than the sixth century,—that is to say, there is a gap

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of 500 years between their first appearance in the world and their appearance to us in the shape of a MS., which, however clean and fresh and bright when originally written twelve centuries ago, is now dirty and dusty and worm-eaten, and very probably mutilated and torn.

But next comes the question: As we are not likely to adopt the Abbé Hardouin's theory, and assume that the work in question was the forgery of a clever monk, we ask, What was the original which the writer had before him when he made the copy, and what has become of it? As to the latter part of the question I fear we must answer it by saying that it has become dust and ashes—either wilfully or accidentally destroyed or crumbled into nothingness by the slow process of decay. Nor can we in most cases even guess what the identical MS. was of which our *existing* MS. is a copy. By this I mean that unless the writer has happened to furnish the information, which is, I believe, very seldom, we cannot tell