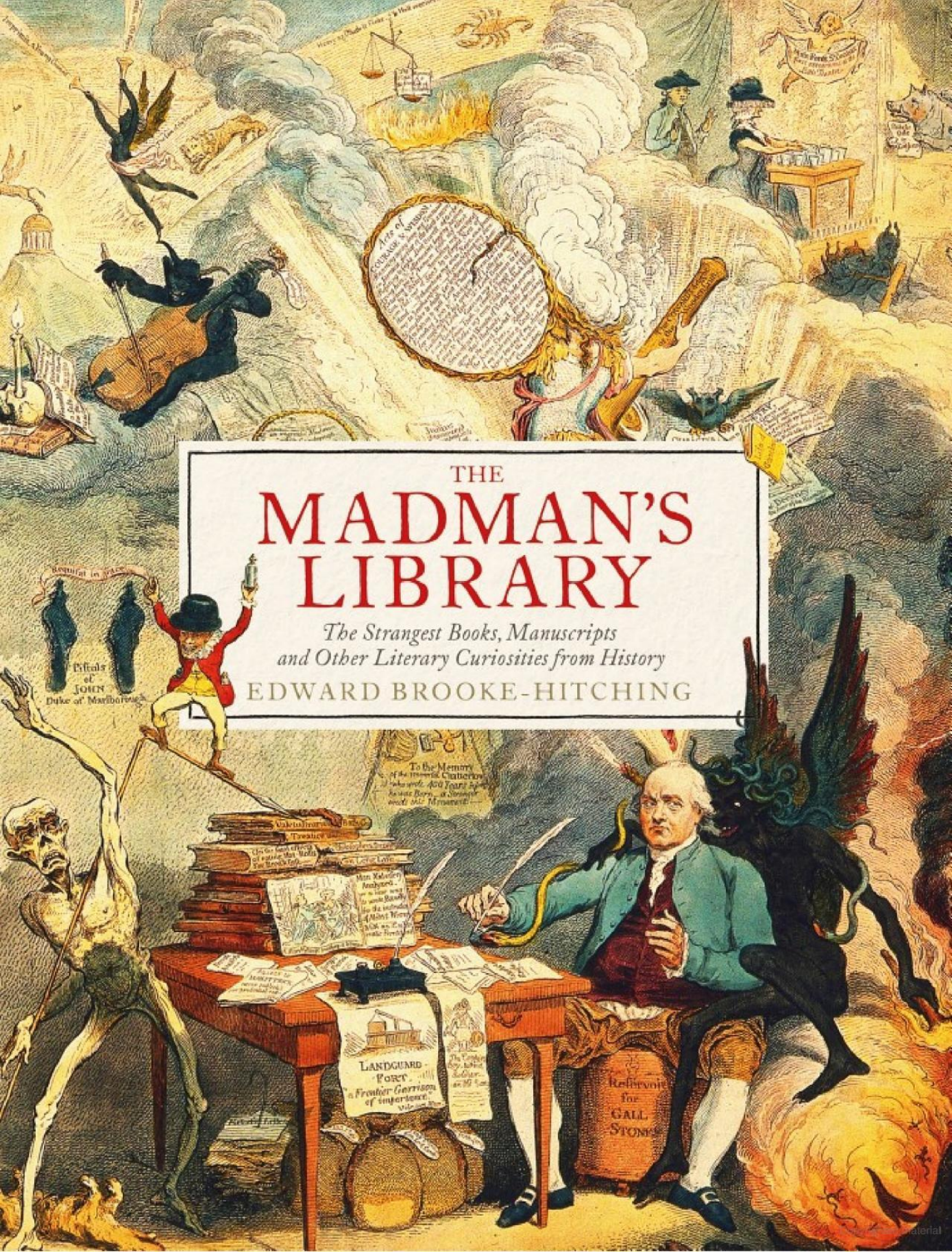
THE
MADMAN'S
LIBRARY
The Strangest Books, Manuscripts
and Other Literary Curiosities from History
EDWARD BROOKE-HITCHING
Pistols of JOHN Duke of Marlborough
LANDGUARD FORT
"a Frontier Garrison of importance"
Reservoir for GALL STONES

To Franklin and Emma
A finely bound pair of 'God's copies'

Illustration from a mysterious supernatural manuscript of c.*1775 in the collection of London's Wellcome Library, known as the* Compendium of Demonology and Magic *(see p. 150 for more).*

INTRODUCTION

'Books are lighthouses erected in the great sea of time.'
Edwin Percy Whipple

I had just turned one when my father first used me as a bidder's paddle at auction. With an antiquarian book dealer for a parent, home is a house built from books – figuratively, and structurally. Every square inch of wall space is rigged with shelves groaning with leather bindings of radiant colours: rich red morocco (goatskin), white vellum (fine calfskin), naval blues, jungle greens, solid golds and older, moodier antique browns, all glittering with varied degrees of gilt tooling.

The books *breathe*, too, exhaling a perfume of aged papers and leathers, the smell of centuries, varying just perceptibly by place and era of origin. The romance of this atmosphere is, of course, entirely lost on a child. At least, initially. By the age of ten I couldn't imagine there being anything less interesting in all existence than old books. By eighteen I found myself working at a London auctioneering company, spending every hour in their company; and by twenty-five, now hopelessly in love, I was siphoning funds away from comparative inessentials like food and rent to fill the few shelves of my own. ('I have known men to hazard their fortunes,' wrote the great American rare-book dealer A. S. W. Rosenbach in 1927, 'go long journeys halfway about the world, forget friendships, even lie, cheat, and steal, all for the gain of a book.')

At around the same time, across the Atlantic a team at Google were completing a calculation that no one had ever dared attempt. The Google Books initiative, codenamed Project Ocean, had been secretly launched eight years earlier, in 2002, with the remit to source and digitize a copy of every printed book in existence. In order to do this, the team members determined that they'd need some idea of just how many books this would involve. And so they amassed every record they could find from the Library of the United States Congress, WorldCat and various other global cataloguing systems, until they reached a billion-plus figure. Algorithms then whittled this number down, removing duplicate editions, microfiches, maps, videos and one meat thermometer added

to a library card as an April Fools' Day joke long before. Finally, they reached an approximate total of every book available. There were, they announced, 129,864,880 existing titles – and they intended to scan them all.

This number, of course, expands exponentially when considering all the lost works of history, worn away by use, swallowed up by natural disasters (Shakespeare's Third Folio is actually rarer than the First, because the bulk were destroyed with the rest of booksellers' stock in the Great Fire of London in 1666), and, of course, deliberate destruction – whether from burning in great pyres (sometimes accompanied by their authors), or even, in the case of 2.5 million Mills & Boon novels in 2003, shredded and mixed into the foundations of a 16-mile stretch of England's M6 toll road to help bind the asphalt. The British politician Augustine Birrell (1850–1933) found Hannah More's works so boring that he buried the complete nineteen-volume set in his garden. Sometimes, in acts of 'bibliophagia', literature has been literally devoured: the engraved oracle bones (see p. 22) of the ancient Chinese, for example, were often mistaken for dragon bones and ground up for medicinal elixirs. In Italy in 1370 a furious Bernabò Visconti, Lord of Milan, forced two Papal delegates to eat the bull of excommunication they had delivered to him, silk cord, lead seal and all, while the seventeenth-century German lawyer Philipp Andreas Oldenburger was sentenced to not only eat his controversial writings, but to be flogged while doing so, until he had consumed every last page. One of the most spectacular losses was that of the luxury London bookbinders Alberto and Francis Sangorski, who had spent two years completing 'The Great Omar', a magnificent binding featuring over a thousand precious jewels for a manuscript of the *Rubaiyat* for the wealthy American bibliophile Harry Elkins Widener. He excitedly boarded a ship to take the treasure home with him in 1912. The name of that vessel? *Titanic*.[1]

Within that figure of 129,864,880 books are all the great classics of literature that survive today – continually studied, reprinted and retold, and the focus of past literary histories. But as the Google choice of codename – Project Ocean – illustrates, these famous works are, of course, mere droplets in an ancient, endless literary sea. The books I have always been interested in finding are the sunken gems twinkling in the gloom of this giant remainder, the oddities abandoned to obscurity, too strange for categorization yet proving to be even more intriguing than their celebrated kin. Which books, I wondered, would inhabit the shelves of the greatest library of literary curiosities, put together by a collector unhindered by space, time and budget? And what if these books have more to teach us about the men and women who wrote them, and their periods of provenance, than might be expected?

The first problem one faces is the question of what exactly constitutes a curiosity. To an extent the idea is, of course, subjective: strangeness is in the eye of the book-holder. But after nearly a decade of searching through catalogues of libraries, auction houses and antiquarian book dealers

around the world, following leads and half-remembered anecdotes, works of undeniable peculiarity leapt out. Each has a great story not just inside it but behind it, and as the books gathered, themes gradually emerged and the uncategorizable began to fall into the bespoke genres that form the chapters herein. 'Books Made of Flesh and Blood', for example, examines the history of anthropodermic bibliopegy (books bound in human skin) and other bizarre bodily means of book production. These practices are not as antiquated as one might think. Take a modern case like the Blood Qur'an of Saddam Hussein (p. 63), a 605-page copy of the holy book commissioned by the Iraqi dictator in 2000, written over a period of two years using 50 pints of his own blood.

The dangers of handling arsenic-covered items including book bindings, from the periodical Annales d'hygiène publique et de médecine légale *(1859). Artists who applied the paint would often poison themselves by licking the tip of their brush to get a fine tip.*

A lethal seventeenth-century binding. The green paint is rich in arsenic, added by binders to hide their cost-cutting use of old manuscript vellum for the boards (and later, as pest control). It's thought that many such deadly bindings lie unidentified in collections around the world.

He-Gassen *(literally: 'Fart competitions') is a Japanese scroll of the Edo period (1603–1868) by an unknown artist, depicting characters exercising flatulence against each other, likely as satire.*

Thought-Forms: A Record of Clairvoyant Investigation *(1901), compiled by two clairvoyant London Theosophical Society members, Annie Besant and Charles Leadbeater, who claimed they could observe and illustrate the 'substance of thought' and other intangible things. In the upper image we can see 'the intention to know', otherwise known as curiosity; below it is 'vague pure affection'.*

We can see the music of the French composer Charles Gounod.

The chapter 'Curious Collections', meanwhile, features similar projects of obsessive dedication, from medieval manuscripts of fantastic beasts, and guides to criminal slang of Georgian London (with plenty of lascivious highlights provided), to Captain Cook's secret 'atlas of cloth' and the unexpectedly homicidal story of the origin of the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Elsewhere, 'Literary Hoaxes' presents the best of the ancient tradition of deceptive writing – lies in book form – whether it be for satire, self-promotion or as an instrument of revenge. The latter is best exemplified by Jonathan Swift's series of pamphlets written under the pseudonym Isaac Bickerstaff in 1708 (p. 91), a successful campaign by the author to convince all of London of the premature

death of a charlatan prophet he despised. 'Cryptic Books', on the other hand, offers highlights in the history of encoded writing. Some of the texts have at one point been cracked to reveal surprising contents, like the seventeenth-century letter from the Devil and the manuscript detailing the eyebrow-tweezing rituals of a German secret society of eccentric ophthalmologists. Other puzzles remain unbroken, presented here for you to attempt your own decryption and collect the reward on offer by more than one of the enduring enigmas.

'Works of the Supernatural', meanwhile, collects scarce examples of sorcerers' grimoires (spell books) and other magical literary arcana, with some truly astounding illustrated material. Included is the automatic writing of spiritual mediums, through which long-dead authors managed to produce works post mortem. Believers included the poet W. B. Yeats, whose wife George 'relayed' 4000 pages of spiritual dictation in the first three years of their marriage. (A compilation of George's automatic writing was published as *A Vision* in 1925, but through seven editions it was only Yeats' name that was credited on the title page.)

On and on stretch the shelves of this eccentric library, around the world and back through millennia. Invisible books, books that kill, books so tall that motors are needed to turn their pages and books so long they could destroy the universe. Edible books. Wearable books. Books made of skin, bones, feathers and hair. Spell books, shaman manuals, alchemist scrolls, sin books and the ancient work known as the 'Cannibal Hymn'. Books to communicate with angels, and books to summon treasure-hunting demons. The lawsuit filed by the Devil, and a contract bearing his signature. Books worn into battle, books that tell the future, books found inside fish or wrapped around mummified Egyptians. Leechbooks, psychic books, treasure-finding texts and the code-writing hidden in the Bible. Japanese rat-mathematics manuals, thumb bibles, the smallest book ever made and the shortest play ever staged. Books of made-up fish, books of impossible shape, books of visions and writings of the insane, a war diary written on a violin and another on toilet paper. A few others are even stranger.

More than most, these are books with real stories to tell. Each redefines, in its own way, the concept of just what a book can be; each brings a skip to the heartbeat of the bibliophile, rewriting and expanding our sense of what it is we love about books. And yet for one reason or another these volumes were banished to the silted depths of obscurity. But these books breathe. They hold thoughts, knowledge and humour otherwise long gone. Their stories – and to a degree, their authors – are alive upon opening them, undiminished by the violence of time. It seems only right to reach out and recover them, to bring them all together in the pages of this book, a dedicated library all their own. The oddballs, the deviants, the long-lost misfits – the forgotten recollected.

A life-saving book. This copy of the 1913 French pocket edition of Rudyard Kipling's Kim *was carried by the legionnaire Maurice Hamonneau in his breast pocket during an attack near Verdun during World War I. When he regained consciousness he found that the book had stopped a bullet, saving his life by only twenty pages.*

Nancy Luce (1814–90), the 'chicken poet of Massachusetts', posing with her beloved feathered companions Ada Queetie and Beauty Linna. Luce sold the photograph to tourists, along with copies of Poor Little Hearts *(1866) and other books of her poetry, all devoted to her love of chickens. Today the grave of the 'Madonna of the Hens' is decorated with plastic chickens and serves as a tourist attraction.*

Revolving book reader to allow the reading of multiple large, heavy books with ease. From Recueil d'Ouvrages Curieux de Mathematique et de Mecanique *by Gaspard Grollier de Serviere, 1719.*

Parole in Libertà Futuriste *('Futurist Words in Freedom') of 1932, a radical experiment in book design of the early twentieth-century Italian Futurist movement which celebrated technology. The book is made entirely of tin, printed with texts by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti.*

Aurora Australis, *the first book ever written, printed, illustrated and bound in the Antarctic, produced by Ernest Shackleton and the other members of the British Nimrod Expedition (1908–09). Bound with the wooden boards from their supply crates, fewer than seventy copies are accounted for.*

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1 If only the Sangorskis had possessed the prescience to follow the example of the Italian poet Gabriele D'Annunzio (1868–1938), who ordered his books be printed on rubber, so that he could read them while lazing in the enormous sunken tile bath that he shared with his goldfish.

BOOKS THAT AREN'T BOOKS

Writing in *The Histories* (4.131.2) Herodotus tells how the Persian King Darius invaded Scythia (now mostly Kazakhstan and southern Ukraine) in *c.*513 BC, and sent a message to demand the surrender of its ruler, Idanthyrsus. In response, a Scythian herald delivered a bird, a mouse, a frog and five arrows. When the Persians asked what this meant, the messenger replied that they had to figure it out for themselves and left. The Persians scratched their heads. Darius decided it signified the Scythians were meekly 'surrendering themselves and their earth and their water to him'. Or, wondered his advisors, if Darius was not going to fly away like a bird, hide like a mouse and flee to water like a frog, were the arrows threatening war?

As it turned out the Scythians were indeed making a declaration of defiance, but it is the unusual form of the message itself that is most interesting here.[1] When we use the word 'book' we refer specifically to the codex form, i.e. quires (folded sheets) of paper bound together and sandwiched between some form of protective outer binding. The idea of this chapter is to look back farther and wider, to find curious literary forms beyond the simple codex definition, from the extremity of Idanthyrsus's example of transmitted meaning, to other works that, thanks to some fit of inspiration, challenge our preconceptions of the limits of literary form.

The embroidered linen jacket of Agnes Richter (1844–1918), a seamstress incarcerated in the Heidelberg psychiatric hospital in 1893 until her death twenty-six years later. She embroidered biographical fragments in the cloth, such as: 'I am not big', 'I wish to read', 'I plunge headlong into disaster', though much of the rest of the writing is indecipherable.

Far before the arrival of the codex, we find the book's origins in the ancient use of clay and wax tablets, which evolved to the use of papyrus scrolls, in turn replaced with parchment and vellum (animal skin). Then came the codices, and onwards to paper, the printing press and beyond. But to set the scene, for an early form of curious literature we turn to China. While so many written works of ancient civilizations around the world are lost to us, there are certain ancient Chinese texts that have, remarkably, survived the millennia intact. This is due to the material on which they were written. 'Oracle bones' are animal bones and shells, often from oxen and turtles, upon which questions were written and anointed with blood by fortune-tellers. A heated poker was then pressed against the bone until it cracked, and in these patterns of splits and marks the client's future was divined.

Oracle bones are of such interest to historians because they were often carved with records and predictions of everything from weather forecasts to the outcomes of military campaigns. Surviving examples are, of course, fantastically rare, in part because when discovered in the past they often were mistaken for dragon bones, and were ground up and eaten for their supposed medicinal benefit. The oracle bone shown here, the oldest object in the collection of the British Library, was etched sometime between 1600 BC and 1050 BC. The writing predicts an absence of bad luck for the coming ten-day period, and on its reverse side carries a record of a lunar eclipse.

The ancient Mesopotamians also recorded celestial events and superstitions, in the rather less edible form of clay tablets. Cuneiform, the oldest known system of writing, was developed by the Sumerians from *c.*3500 to 3000 BC and used by other cultures of Mesopotamia; it is named for the wedge- (in Latin, *cuneus*) shaped style of the letters that were pressed into soft clay before being fired into robust tablets. While these relics have provided countless insights and discoveries, a particularly interesting kind of cuneiform-inscribed object served a practical purpose with magical means. In ancient Sumer, construction workers would insert thousands of prayer-inscribed clay cones resembling giant nails into the foundations of new buildings, seeking the gods' protection. One might, from their age and peculiarity, assume these artefacts to be as rare as oracle bones, but in fact they were produced in huge numbers for each construction project, and so great quantities have frequently been unearthed in archaeological sites in modern Iraq, eastern parts of Syria and south-eastern Turkey.

Filling one's foundations with divine charms solved one problem, but what was the Mesopotamian everyman to do about the evil devils and sprites that routinely sprang from below the ground to cause mischief? Again, inscribed material provided a solution. Often found in excavations of the regions of Upper Mesopotamia and Syria, incantation bowls, also known as 'demon bowls' or 'devil-trap bowls', were a form of protective magic used in the sixth to eighth centuries. A spiral of dense Jewish Babylonian Aramaic text of magical words would start at the rim of the bowl and corkscrew inwards, often with illustrations of bound devils at the centre. Essentially, the items acted like spiritual mouse-traps. One buried the bowl face-down in the corners of rooms (where devils could sneak through the cracks between wall and floor), doorways, courtyards and cemeteries, and any evil spirit emerging from the ground was snared in its writing.

Chinese oracle bone carved between 1600 BC and 1050 BC.

An Australian Aborigine message stick is a form of proto-writing traditionally used to transmit messages between different clans, often invitations to corroborees *(dances), set-fights and ball games.*

Though the majority of recovered incantation bowls were written in Jewish Aramaic, others have been found in Mandaic and Syriac, Arabic and Persian. An estimated 10 per cent, however, were written in total gibberish. These, it's thought, are cheap knock-offs, done by scribe-impersonators to con money from illiterate customers.

While the Mesopotamians filled their walls with cones and sprang devil traps in their living rooms, the makings of a literary mystery involving the longest surviving text of the ancient Etruscan civilization (roughly located in what is now known as Tuscany from *c.*900 BC) was under

way. Following Napoleon's campaign in Egypt and Syria between 1798 and 1801, Europeans were gripped with 'Egyptomania' and many were inspired to see the treasures of the country for themselves. One such happy wanderer was a junior Croatian bureaucrat named Mihajlo Barić, who was so overcome with wanderlust that in 1848 he quit his position in the Hungarian Royal Chancellery for Egypt. On arrival in Alexandria, he found a bustling tourist trade in authentic archaeological treasures, and purchased for himself a souvenir in the form of a mummified female corpse housed in a large sarcophagus.

On his return to Vienna, Barić put the mummy on display in the corner of his living room and removed its linen wrappings for display in a separate cabinet. There the mummy stood until 1859 when Barić died, and his brother, a priest, donated it to the State Institute of Croatia, Slavonia and Dalmatia in Zagreb (the present-day Archaeological Museum in Zagreb). A museum employee spotted strange markings on the linen and made a note, but it wasn't until 1891 that this was correctly identified as Etruscan text by an expert named Jacob Krall, who also realized that the strips of bandage could be reassembled to form a semi-complete manuscript.

Dated to *c.*250 BC, the work, now known as the *Liber Linteus Zagrabiensis*, had started out as a canvas about 3.4 metres (11ft 2 ½in) wide, which was then folded into twelve pages and used as writing material with black and red ink.

Incantation bowl with an Aramaic inscription around a demon: sixth–seventh century.

The Liber Linteus Zagrabiensis, *strips of manuscript found wrapped around a mummified Egyptian corpse.*

The Etruscan language has not yet been fully deciphered, but among the 1200 legible words of the manuscript are recognizable dates and names of gods that suggest the text is a religious calendar, which from Roman examples we know were used to record religious ceremonies and rituals. But what, it was wondered, could the explanation be for an Egyptian mummy with Etruscan wrappings, considering their disparate geographic origins? From a scrap of papyrus that accompanied the corpse, her provenance was deciphered: she was an Egyptian named Nesi-hensu, wife of Paher-hensu, a tailor from Thebes. She had died at a time when mummification of the deceased was just becoming a popular technique, and linen for it was in such high demand that there was a severe shortage. Egyptians turned to whatever they could get their hands on, shredding clothes, sails – and even manuscripts imported by foreign traders.[2]

In comparison, the kind of literary material sometimes found with the deceased of ancient Rome and Greece is of a decidedly more vindictive and personal nature. *Defixiones*, or curse tablets, usually take the form of lead sheets scratched with messages calling for god-inflicted revenge on thieves of both property and loved ones, written in fairly angry language. The translation of one curse tablet in the British Museum reads: 'I curse Tretia Maria and her life and mind and memory and liver and lungs mixed up together, and her words, thoughts and memory; thus may she be unable to speak what things are concealed, nor be able.' All but one of the 130

curse tablets found in the English city of Bath beg the goddess Sulis Minerva for the return of stolen goods, and for curses to be placed on the thieves. Other examples are inscribed with love spells, wrapped around locks of hair of the intended. Some have blank spaces instead of the names of targets, suggesting that one could buy curses in bulk for revenge against multiple enemies. Not all can be translated, however – some bear language of *voces mysticae*, 'mystical voices', enigmatic nonsense (similar to 'abracadabra') made up by the scribe to seem like the language of demons.

A gold Orphic tablet, or totenpass*, second half of the fourth century* BC.

Curse tablets have also been found at the grave sites of the young and unjustly killed, apparently to help soothe the deceased's soul after an untimely death. In this way they share a purpose with *totenpässe*, or 'death passports'. When rolled into a capsule tied around the neck of the departed, a golden *totenpass* acted as a kind of Baedeker for the dead, aiding the journey of the deceased, with instructions on how to best navigate the afterlife, and carrying pre-prepared answers for the interview with the judges of the underworld. *Totenpässe* have been found in a variety of tombs, from the burials of presumed followers of the mythical ancient Greek figures Orpheus and Dionysus, to ancient Egyptian and Semitic graves, and in Palestinian graves dating to the second century BC.

It is astonishing that such items could survive so many centuries, especially given the widespread destruction and repurposing of manuscripts evinced by the *Liber Linteus*, which later finds a recurrence on a mass scale across Europe in the Middle Ages. The arrival of printing

established the supremacy of the codex book, and in doing so catalysed the obsolescence of parchment. Manuscripts were destroyed *en masse* in Europe, their materials repurposed for a range of uses, from strengthening book bindings to even, as shown overleaf, use in clothing. The accompanying image of a parchment text lining for an Icelandic bishop's mitre is one of the more curious modern discoveries of these wearable books. The object, in the collection of the Arnamagnæan Institute, University of Copenhagen, conjures quite a picture – a bishop soberly conducting a service, completely unaware of the profane Old French love poetry hidden within his headpiece. In 2011, another wearable book curiosity was found by textile conservators when medieval manuscripts were discovered lining the hems of dresses at the Cistercian convent of Wienhausen in northern Germany. The dresses were made by the nuns in the late fifteenth century – not for themselves, but for placing over and thus preserving the modesty of the convent's statues. Though the idea of this brutal reprocessing of manuscripts is horrifying, as the manuscript historian Erik Kwakkel argues, there is at least some benefit to be found in it. There are numerous medieval works we never would have known about were it not for the discoveries of their remnants lining book bindings and mitres, and occasionally the clothing of bashful sculptures.[3]

Fragments of a medieval love text from c.*1270, repurposed to form a stiff support for an Icelandic bishop's mitre.*

The German blacksmith Johannes Gutenberg introduced his famed printing press *c.*1454; but it might be surprising for many in the West to learn that in China movable metal-type printing (which allowed the changing of letter blocks) of the kind pioneered in Europe by Gutenberg had existed at least 200 years earlier. The oldest surviving printed work by this process, a Buddhist document known as *Jikji*, was printed in Korea in 1377. (There is no evidence to suggest that Gutenberg knew about these machines, however, and it's believed that the ideas were independently invented.) Before that, in around 1040, the first known movable type system was created in China by the artisan Bì Shēng out of ceramic, which had a tendency to shatter. The use of woodblock printing dates back remarkably further: the earliest known examples are fragments of silk printed with flowers in three colours from the Han Dynasty (before AD 220).

One of the Hyakumantō Darani, 'One Million Pagoda Dharani', the earliest recorded use of woodblock printing in Japan, created on the orders of Empress Shōtoku, seven centuries before Gutenberg. Many still survive at Hōryūji temple, Nara.

Worlds away, from the early thirteenth century the Incan Empire grew to be the largest of pre-Columbian America until 1572, when the capture by the Spanish of its last stronghold in Vilcabamba signalled the end of the Incan state. The conquistadors investigating the entirely new culture were struck by the dissimilarity of the Incas to Old World civilizations. The Incas hadn't developed the use of wheeled vehicles, for they had no draft animals to pull them, nor indeed to ride. They knew nothing of iron and steel, and most unusually had no written form of language; to this day our principal sources for Incan life are the chronicles written by Spanish authors. But then the colonists discovered the *quipu*.

The Incan chief accountant and treasurer holding the quipu *of the kingdom. From the Peruvian chronicle* El primer nueva corónica y buen gobierno *(1615).*

The *quipu* is a complex writing system using knots in broad arrays of strings. Sometimes referred to as 'talking knots', it's a form of record-keeping used in several early civilizations, including several other South American cultures, plus the ancient Chinese, Tibetans, Siberians and the Polynesians. As far as we can tell, the primary function of these knotted strings, which could consist of anything from four cords to more than 2000, was storing and communicating numerical information in a decimal system used for documenting census and calendrical data, tax obligations, and managing accounts and trades. In fact, in the early period of the Conquest, the

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'The man who publishes a book without an index ought to be damned 10 miles beyond Hell, where the Devil himself cannot get for stinging nettles.'

John Baynes (1758–87)

Page numbers in *italics* refer to illustrations