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The Future of the Past: Rewriting as a Cultural Practice from Handwritten Artefacts to the Digital Age

Rewritable media and practices embody a fundamental paradox: they preserve content while simultaneously enabling its destruction or transformation. This duality makes them powerful tools for adaptation, alteration, reinvention, and functional reuse. Across cultures and throughout history, the act of rewriting not only demonstrates the skill and resourcefulness involved in shaping and reinventing the function of writing materials – whether clay, wax, metal, stone, bone, parchment, or a wide array of other more or less common materials – but also raises deeper epistemological questions about the mutability of supports and texts, the mechanisms of cognition, and the evolving boundaries of tradition and authoritative frameworks. To rewrite is to navigate the tension between the urge to fix knowledge and the need to replace or revise it, reflecting how societies have continually redefined memory, intellectual labour, and the delicate balance between continuity and change.

The fifteen contributions gathered in this volume (including the editor's dense and insightful introductory essay) offer multiple original and wide-ranging explorations of the physical and historical dimensions of writing, erasure, rewriting, and textual recycling across cultures, spanning vast geographical areas and many centuries of intellectual activity. The trajectories that the authors trace highlight that these practices were never merely incidental or driven solely by practical or economic necessity; rather, they were – and in some cases still are – deeply embedded in the cultural, political, and intellectual frameworks of the societies and communities that engaged with them. The reuse of manuscript media appears as a widespread phenomenon, encompassing a broad range of material and cultural approaches and strategies. A global perspective on this practice – such as the one proposed in the present collection – allows the reader to trace how different contexts and historical periods engaged with the recycling, repurposing, and adaptation of texts, whether out of material constraints, institutional needs, or evolving conceptualisations of authority and textual transmission.

Throughout history, various cultures have developed rewritable writing media – either independently or in relation to one another – each designed to serve specific functions and supported by distinct techniques of erasure and reuse: the examples provided in this volume are extensive, though inevitably partial. The

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rewritability of clay tablets, widely used in the ancient Near East for administrative, literary, and legal purposes, depended on the clay's condition: when moist, mistakes could be smoothed out; once dried, tablets became resistant to modification but could still be softened with water, though erasure was harder to conceal. Some tablets were left blank, probably for future use, or had additional inscriptions added later. Scribes revised hardened tablets by inscribing over them, crossing out sections, or reworking text; evidence suggests that supplementary clay layers were sometimes added for repeated reuse. In rarer cases, tablets were fired into terracotta, preserving the text but preventing further alterations.

Erasure and replacement might also have affected public inscriptions of a monumental nature (not addressed in this volume) or those found on sacred objects, especially those written on metal plates, as in the context of the political and religious shifts that occurred following the destruction of Babylon by Sennacherib in 689 BCE and the subsequent efforts by his successors, Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal, to restore Babylonian religious traditions.

The Greco-Roman world relied heavily on wax tablets (*tabulae ceratae*), a medium suited for both ephemeral and durable writings. The beeswax layer (enriched with soot or charcoal, resins, oil, and possibly other pigments) could be levelled with the spatula-shaped back end of a stylus and reused multiple times, making these tablets ideal for temporary records such as school exercises, letters, legal drafts, and business transactions. Certain types of texts could be made official or safeguarded against unauthorised access by inscribing them on sealed diptychs or triptychs. In military and commercial settings, where writing materials were scarce, erasing and reinscribing was routine: some tablets reveal multiple layers of overwritten text, as well as traces of scratches on the wooden surface, whose interpretation remains controversial. In certain cases, the wax was removed entirely, and the wooden recesses were reused for ink inscriptions. Stylus cases or sheaths attached to wax tablet sets, known only from iconographic sources, may parallel features of ancient codex bindings: these overlooked details could hypothetically strengthen the continuity between tablet gatherings and the codex, though this engaging hypothesis remains open to question.

The durability and portability of tablets ensured their continued use well into the Medieval Period, with monasteries, courts, and city administrations relying on them for ephemeral records. Frequent references in written sources suggest a broader diffusion than surviving evidence indicates. Until the advent of paper, much cheaper than parchment, tablets made of various woods (but also of ivory, silver, bone, and slate) were widely used for sketches, drafts, and conceptual work – before being transferred to more durable materials – as well as for accounts and registers.

Beyond the Mediterranean and European spheres, wood, sand, and metal tablets were also used in Islamic traditions in northern Nigeria, where their legacy persists among contemporary practitioners, enabling ongoing ethnographic study. Tablets served (and still serve) both educational and ritual purposes – including esotericism, occult sciences, divination, and magical practices – reinforcing writing as both impermanent and transformative. Qur'anic inscriptions, once memorised, are washed away with water that is then consumed, merging literacy with devotion and embedding sacred knowledge into the body. In esoteric contexts, metal tablets bear inscriptions that can be selectively erased or altered based on ritual needs, underscoring the written word's dual role in preservation and controlled disappearance.

In seventh- and eighth-century Japan, wooden tablets known as *mokkan* played a crucial role in transmitting bureaucratic knowledge and literacy training. *Mokkan* were inscribed with ink and erased by scraping the surface with a blade, allowing students and officials to repeatedly revise their writing. These tablets functioned as indispensable tools for state administration, particularly for lower-ranking officials who used them for temporary records before committing information to permanent archives. The cognitive dimension of rewriting on *mokkan* underscores a broader relationship between erasable media and structured learning systems, where repetition, modification, and revision were fundamental to mastering complex scripts.

In Egypt, papyrus was the dominant writing surface, widely used for bureaucratic records, literary texts, and religious manuscripts, enabling ink to be washed or scraped off, and thus allowing for easy reuse. Yet economic constraints alone do not fully explain this practice. Scribes strategically repurposed manuscripts, adding notes in empty spaces or erasing sections to incorporate new content. Rewritability was closely linked to the fluidity of administrative and religious traditions, whereby documents were continuously updated, reinterpreted, and reshaped within evolving textual hierarchies. As for parchment (whose reuse is treated only tangentially in this collection and requires its own dedicated attention), its suitability for rewriting is evidenced by the large number of surviving parchment palimpsests, as well as by treatises and recipes detailing methods for ink erasure and renewal of this writing surface.

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The reading of the volume reveals multiple lines of inquiry that intertwine the materiality of writing supports and tools, the mechanics of writing, the practices of erasure and rewriting, and their literary, cultural, administrative, functional,

economic, and religious implications. Across the considered cultures – and beyond them – the tension between permanence and transience shaped how societies recorded, elaborated, transmitted, and preserved knowledge, demonstrating that rewriting was not merely a practical necessity but at once an act imbued with cultural, political, and symbolic significance.

At the core of the authors' reflections lies the relationship between durability and change, stability and transformation. Several contributions highlight how the physical properties of writing supports – whether clay, wax, wood, metal, papyrus, parchment, or another material – shaped both practices of textual modification and strategies of preservation. Cuneiform tablets from ancient Mesopotamia exemplify this dual nature: simultaneously stable and modifiable, they challenge the notion that ancient texts were meant to be immutable. Palimpsests, widely used in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, offer another compelling example. Costly and durable, parchment was often scraped and reused, particularly in monastic contexts, where demand for writing materials frequently outstripped supply. However, the reuse of parchment codices was not solely dictated by scarcity: some texts were erased due to theological, political, or intellectual shifts, underscoring the interplay between material constraints and ideological motives. The layered nature of palimpsests provides modern scholars with a unique window into historical processes of both material recycling and textual revision. The study of Coptic manuscripts, for instance, reveals how different textual strata – whether preserving the same content, combining literary and documentary texts, or integrating fragments from different books – shed light on the intricate history of textual transmission and reuse.

The pragmatics of rewriting emerges with particular clarity in administrative and commercial contexts. The repeated reuse of papyrus, wax, and parchment in bureaucratic settings was driven not only by economic constraints but also by institutional imperatives and practical considerations. Studies on Roman and medieval wax tablets reveal that many documents were intentionally designed to be temporary and rewritable, providing a cost-effective yet functionally necessary alternative to more durable materials. The same applies to Egyptian administrative papyri, which were frequently erased and repurposed to meet evolving needs. These practices highlight both the adaptability of writing supports and the strategic role of textual reconfiguration in bureaucratic efficiency and administrative continuity – underscoring that economic necessity was only one factor among the many involved.

Beyond official inscriptions and administrative texts, scribes also employed erasure techniques in contexts where the ability to update, obscure, or even censor records was essential to institutional governance, as in the striking case re-

counted by Herodotus, in which a writing tablet was manipulated to conceal a critical message. This example demonstrates how erasable media could serve not only as everyday writing tools but also as instruments of subterfuge and 'intelligence strategy'.

Erasure techniques were often not simply practical interventions: they embodied deeper cultural conceptions of memory, authority, and the life cycle of the written word. In the Islamic tradition, the deleting and rewriting of sacred texts carried deep spiritual connotations. In Islamic education for instance, transient writing surfaces such as wooden Qur'anic tablets played a crucial role: students would inscribe their lessons, recite them, and then wash the tablets clean for reuse. Erasure and rewriting was part of the memorisation process, establishing a direct link between textual impermanence and sacred learning. Beyond pedagogy, erasable writing surfaces extended into esoteric traditions, as in northern Nigeria, where sand tablets continue to be used for divination and mystical inscriptions, emphasising the impermanence of the written word and the ephemerality of knowledge itself. In certain esoteric traditions, ink washed from sacred inscriptions was dissolved in water and consumed, transforming writing into an almost magical substance capable of transferring divine knowledge to the body. Similarly, in medieval Christian monasticism, partial or total erasure and rewriting were intimately tied to liturgical adaptation and theological evolution, as codices might be rewritten or repurposed to align with new doctrinal and ritual requirements.

The volume also explores erasure and rewriting techniques as analysed through the study of textual sources alongside archaeological reconstruction and laboratory analysis. A significant example can be found in the Arab world, where these techniques – applied across various writing materials – reached a high level of sophistication, as evidenced by medieval treatises and collections of recipes on ink-erasing procedures, including sources from Iraq, Tunisia, Yemen, and al-Andalus. These texts can be examined through both philological analysis and material reconstruction, allowing, albeit with some uncertainties, for the replication of substances and procedures and the assessment of their effectiveness. Ink removal varied according to the writing medium – papyrus, parchment, and paper each required distinct methods, which also depended on the composition of the ink. Techniques included chemical washes (using plant extracts or acidic or alkaline substances), mechanical scraping or rubbing, and ink-masking methods employing white lead or plaster-like coatings.

Classifying the wide array of phenomena associated with erasure and rewriting is an inherently complex and often fraught endeavour. The sheer heterogeneity of materials – ranging from organic to inorganic, ephemeral to durable – complicates any attempt to impose clear taxonomies. Each writing support brings with

it not only specific physical properties but also culturally, traditionally, and functionally embedded modes of use, along with associated practices of modification and distinct symbolic values. Moreover, some supports may be repurposed in ways that blur conventional distinctions between object categories: a wax tablet might function simultaneously as a pedagogical tool, a legal document, and a memory aid; a parchment folio could transition from sacred scripture to part of a palimpsested liturgical codex, or even to binding waste. Beyond materials, the modes of writing and rewriting further resist standard classification; the purposes and functions of rewriting vary dramatically – from ephemeral use and practical correction to economic reuse, ideological revision, censorship, mnemonic training, and esoteric transmission. These functions often overlap or shift over time, making it difficult to assign a single interpretive framework to a given object or practice. This fluidity challenges scholars to rethink classification not as a rigid system of typologies but as a dynamic and context-sensitive process. Attempts to categorise must remain attuned to the stratified nature of writing objects, the layered intentions behind their reuse, and the evolving semantic fields in which they operated. Fixed taxonomies risk obscuring the very phenomena they seek to elucidate, flattening the intricate interplay between materiality, agency, and textuality. Instead, what is needed is a methodological pluralism that acknowledges ambiguity, embraces hybridity, and foregrounds the situatedness of each act of rewriting. Only by doing so can we begin to map the complex epistemologies that underlie the cultural practice of textual transformation.

Finally, the volume also offers valuable theoretical and linguistic insights into textual erasure. The study of the literary and documentary lexicon of rewriting from Antiquity to the Middle Ages reveals how different cultures developed specific vocabularies to describe textual modification – terms that not only reflect the material processes involved but also carry metaphorical significance and ideological implications. These linguistic choices – whose documentation should be further deepened and expanded to reflect and parallel the diverse manuscript cultures – illustrate broader attitudes towards textual authority and alteration. The recurring metaphors of smoothing, scraping, and removal in Latin and medieval texts suggest that writing, erasure, and rewriting formed a dynamic process extending beyond mere deletion to encompass cognitive, interpretative, and mnemonic dimensions.

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The volume traces the evolution of rewritable media and practices across diverse historical and cultural contexts, highlighting both striking similarities and signifi-

cant differences in how societies have approached erasure, modification, and textual recycling. The wide range of methodological approaches that the authors adopt reflects the complexity of the subject, integrating archaeological evidence, codicological and palaeographical expertise, technical literature, laboratory-based analytical techniques and experimental replication, iconographic sources, literary and linguistic analysis, and conservation and restoration practices. This interdisciplinary perspective is crucial for reconstructing the material aspects of writing supports, understanding techniques of erasure and reuse, and shedding light on practices that may remain elusive if approached from a single disciplinary perspective. Thanks to interdisciplinarity, the study of erasure and rewriting has gained depth and robustness, and is poised to evolve even further – bridging historical inquiry, material science, and cutting-edge technology.

The need for systematically collected manuscript corpora that provide structured information on erasure and rewriting practices represents one of the main challenges in this field. While isolated case studies offer valuable insights, they often lead to overgeneralisations if not contextualised within a broader dataset. Resources like the 'Tabulae Ceratae' (TabCer) project or the *Tracking Papyrus and Parchment Paths* (PAThs) database of Coptic literary manuscripts and other structured collections provide an essential foundation for tracing patterns of manuscript reuse and reinscription across different cultures and periods. Nevertheless, the very nature of erasure and rewriting implies that much of this evidence has either vanished or remains difficult to quantify. Working with systematically gathered corpora allows scholars to move beyond anecdotal examples, making it possible to identify trends, assess the frequency and contexts of reuse, and ensure that single cases are not examined in isolation but understood as part of a larger network of textual and material transformations over time.

Just as codicology has developed methods for analysing the layered transformations of manuscript codices from a 'syntactic' perspective, other categories of rewritable writing supports could – and should – also be approached as stratified objects. Each act of modification – whether partial erasure, over-inscription, or complete reconfiguration – adds a new layer to the history of a written object. This 'syntactic' approach is essential for tracing successive interventions on a given writing support. Instead of treating reused materials as static carriers of information, this perspective allows scholars to reconstruct their 'biographies' as evolving artefacts that bear witness to the dynamic relationship between permanence and alteration, preservation and adaptation.

To fully account for these layers of transformation, targeted descriptive protocols need to be developed for documenting the phenomenon of erasure and rewriting in its various manifestations, enabling comparisons across different

traditions and writing supports and facilitating cross-cultural studies of textual modification. Such protocols should account not only for visible traces of erasure and rewriting but also for indirect evidence, such as structural modifications, chemical alterations, and even contextual clues from literary or archival sources.

Laboratory techniques are having a growing impact on the study of erasure and rewriting in manuscripts by providing objective, non-invasive, and increasingly precise methods for detecting and analysing textual modifications. Material analyses enable researchers to uncover erased or overwritten layers that are invisible to the naked eye, offering insights into scribal practices and material composition, but also the decision-making processes behind textual alterations. Beyond facilitating the recovery of lost texts, scientific analyses help clarify the physical and chemical interactions between inks, pigments, and writing supports, contributing to both historical research and conservation efforts. The integration of laboratory-based approaches with digital imaging, AI-driven pattern recognition, and multispectral analysis is fostering more systematic and large-scale studies, moving beyond isolated or anecdotal findings. Looking ahead, the combination of high-resolution imaging, chemical mapping, and machine-learning algorithms holds great potential for the dynamic reconstruction of palimpsests and rewritten texts, allowing scholars to visualise and interpret manuscript transformations across time.

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The themes explored in the volume remain strikingly relevant in the contemporary age, when erasure and rewriting have taken on new forms and complexities due to the rise of digital writing practices and tools. Unlike physical media, digital texts can be altered invisibly, creating the illusion of permanent erasure when, in reality, deleted content often persists. Social media posts, emails, and records remain accessible in backup servers, cached versions, or hidden traces – akin to medieval palimpsests. Even intentional deletions leave recoverable fragments, raising ethical and legal concerns about transparency, privacy, and the right to be forgotten. The advent of artificial intelligence further complicates matters, blurring the boundaries between human authorship and automated modification, and challenging the integrity of textual transmission. The political stakes of erasure also remain high, from state-controlled internet censorship to debates over ‘cancel culture’, echoing historical practices like *damnatio memoriae*. Yet, while material scarcity once drove textual reuse, the digital era faces the opposite challenge: data overproduction. The limitless replication and storage of information contrasts

sharply with past cultures that valued reusability, prompting urgent discussions on digital waste and sustainability.

Through a wealth and variety of concrete examples – combining both new evidence and a fresh juxtaposition of known sources – this volume reminds us that erasure, rewriting, and textual recycling are not merely technical practices but cultural and intellectual acts that shape how societies construct, modify, and preserve knowledge. Although the papers primarily focus on erasure and rewriting, it is important to recognise that text obliteration and manuscript reuse extend across a remarkably broad spectrum, sometimes leading to extreme cases of repurposing that go beyond textual modification. One notable example is the reuse of papyri for non-textual purposes in ancient Egypt, whereby discarded or surplus documents were cut into strips and incorporated into cartonnage for mummification, reinforcing burial masks and coffins, thus transforming writing supports into ritual and funerary objects. Similarly, in the Medieval and Early Modern Periods, manuscripts were recycled as binding elements – book covers, endpapers, and structural reinforcements – a practice that unintentionally preserved fragments of older texts, leading to the rediscovery of works that otherwise might have been lost. Writing materials were not only rewritten but also physically reconfigured for entirely new purposes, sometimes obliterating their original function while paradoxically ensuring their survival in unexpected ways.

Situating the processes of erasure, rewriting, and repurposing within different historical frameworks allows us to gain new critical perspectives on the evolving relationship between writing technologies, textual transmission, and human memory. As we have entered an era of 'digital palimpsests' and AI-driven text production, understanding the material past of textual transformation remains essential for navigating its future.