

Athens and the Open Library

Post by “Joshua” of October 20, 2019 at 6:18 PM

I recently learned of a remote location in New Mexico called Trementina Base. In that high barren desert east of the Colorado Plateau, the scriptures of L. Ron Hubbard have been for several decades carefully engraved on steel plates and filed away in titanium vaults for preservation, "to create and maintain an archive of Scientology scripture for future generations."

Setting aside for a moment how undeniably *cool* that is, the story touches on two issues relevant to the school of Epicurus. The first point is a trifle self-congratulatory, but I don't mind stating the case anyway:

It occurred to me when I realized that these texts were not *really* being preserved for future generations in the sense we commonly mean. The National Parks are "preserved for future generations", and this means that anyone is free to use and enjoy them at any time; they're open to the public, not generally on the basis of membership and an aggressively litigated initiation fee.

Exorbitantly expensive secret texts are not new to the world. The Vatican ruthlessly stomped out early efforts to translate the bible into the vulgar tongue of the people. Muslims generally believe even today that the only Quran is the Arabic Quran; "a translation can never be the Quran". Joseph Smith threatened with death anyone who tried to glimpse his mythical gold plates. Abraham, too, had tablets from God until he shattered them.

How different the intellectual life of the Greeks! Books were piled high not in vaults, or in an inner Sanctum, but in the warm light of day. They changed hands in the agora, and circulated through the gymnasia. They were read over meals and debated in the streets.

And how different still the Epicureans, for whom sex or class or condition were no obstacle to the fraternity of the scholars! It is a marvel in the annals of the world.

The second point is one of permanence. Everyone here knows how lucky we are to have even fragments. What are we going to do to ensure that future generations will be able to read them?

In a Buddhist temple in South Korea there are 81,258 wooden blocks from the 13th century painstakingly carved with the entire corpus of Buddhist scripture. When I began to think of myself as a Buddhist this pleased me immensely. Frankly, it still does. Buddhists, like Epicureans, know that all composite things are impermanent. Civilizations rise and fall, temples crumble, and libraries burn. How do we plant a seed that grows through the ages?

Happy twentieth 😊

Joshua

Post by “Cassius” of October 20, 2019 at 8:00 PM

Great post Joshua! You are a poet even when writing in prose!

Post by “Elayne” of October 20, 2019 at 8:17 PM

Beautiful, and an important question. IMO, a critical key is person to person handing down of the philosophy-- we must have an unbroken chain of humans who understand it. In addition, preserving it in as many different archive forms as possible-- but perhaps we should go back to memorization, for important sections, as a back-up.

Post by “Joshua” of October 20, 2019 at 8:28 PM

Thank you. And you strike on the same observation as Stephen Greenblatt, Elayne;

Quote

Some protective measures, such as sprinkling cedar oil on the pages, were discovered to be effective in warding off damage, but it was widely recognized that the best way to preserve books from being eaten into oblivion was simply to use them and, when they finally wore out, to make more copies. *The Swerve: "The Teeth of Time"*

It is the "unbroken chain" of tradition and study that most reliably saves books.

Post by “Joshua” of March 24, 2020 at 12:35 PM

I was thinking on these things again today, after recalling to mind the destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan by the Taliban in 2001.

Monumentation has become an important word in my new line of work. Just yesterday, in the sprawling pine woods north of Choctawhatchee Bay, our survey party came upon a concrete post 4 feet high and 4 inches square, circled all round with greenery; an enduring emblem of proprietorship set down a century ago by the paper company that owned this forest.

The shell-middens of the Muscogee Creek Indians are much older still—and still in evidence all along these waters. More recently than the Indians, the settlers have left their own evidence: Hurdy pots (used for collecting turpentine), tumbledown fences, logging roads from nowhere to nowhere; by these and other devices they have left their mark.

There are some among the older surveyors who can detect a section line by the way the trees grow. By such scant evidence they can sniff out a section corner. And how much greater is the evidence for the goodness of pleasure! It must occur to all—it is self-evident. Let the priests of fable shout until they are hoarse; it will not stop *all* sensible folk from coming to their senses. There, then, is our chance and hope: that the school of Epicurus will never be forsaken, so long as there are men and women who are prepared to *come to their senses*.

Post by “Cassius” of March 24, 2020 at 12:44 PM

In this context you really have to admire Diogenes of Oinoanda for inscribing it in stone. More of that needs to be planned for the future.

Post by “Joshua” of March 24, 2020 at 1:02 PM

Quote

In this context you really have to admire Diogenes of Oinoanda for inscribing it in stone. More of that needs to be planned for the future.

My thinking exactly. Chiseled stone, heirloom manuscripts, carved wood, pressed into molded plastic, and so on. We could be less than 200 years away from the printing of the last mass-market paper book, and never know it. Or the shuttering of the last brick-and-mortar University. I do not say that I think it is so; I only say that we should be thinking of it.

Post by “Cassius” of March 24, 2020 at 1:48 PM

Yes, and when we get to that point it will be oh-so-easy for the antiEpicureans to simply push a button and all but erase Epicurean history from human consciousness.

Post by “Don” of March 24, 2020 at 2:06 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Yes, and when we get to that point it will be oh-so-easy for the antiEpicureans to simply push a button and all but erase Epicurean history from human consciousness.

Well, *that* certainly sent a chill down my spine!