16.11: Conclusion

Until recently the presence of writing on an object has been given priority over other features when making conservation decisions, even if it may mean sacrifice of other material evidence. The advent of digital imaging means that both the general public and researchers may now interact with a virtual object rather than the original, and it has led to the widespread availability of virtual texts, as well as to the concept of digital preservation. However digital texts are primarily useful in deciphering written words, thus it is normally the text that is the focus of the imaging rather than other features such as margins and page edges, or bindings. Furthermore, imaging is not yet able to transmit satisfactory information about the materiality of the writing itself and of the substrate (clay, papyrus, parchment, paper, etc.). Thus digital imaging largely provides an immaterial and relatively flat view of the book or document. 3D and 2D+ imaging, such as Reflectance Transformation Imaging (RTI; e.g. Graeme et al. 2011; Piquette forthcoming;) and virtual handling of objects are rapidly developing, but even these cannot yet provide the subtle sensory information about materiality provided when we touch the real thing with our own hands (for example appreciation of surface texture, apparent temperature, weight, and so on; Prytherch and Jefsioutine 2007).

Moreover, the widespread use of digital images brings a new conservation dilemma — how to conserve the storage devices (e.g. CDs and DVDs) and the hardware and software needed to run them (e.g. Keene 2002). These are already presenting major conservation problems since the technology is developing so fast that earlier versions become rapidly obsolete and unusable, also because plastics are involved in the manufacture of hardware and disks, and many plastics are unstable. Even virtual objects and texts are vulnerable, thus the materiality of both writing and substrate continues to be of primary importance (particularly when interpreting meaning) and remains the focus of conservation practice.