



## **Tied and Bound: A Comparative View on Manuscript Binding**

# **Studies in Manuscript Cultures**



Edited by  
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# **Tied and Bound: A Comparative View on Manuscript Binding**



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Alessandro Bausi and Michael Friedrich

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Alessandro Bausi

## Tied and Bound: A Tight Preface

If we stay with the concept of book as a definite physical unit – and do not concede to literary metaphors or metaphysical speculations conceiving of the universe as a book – we can safely state that there is hardly any book without a device to secure its physical borders and inner consistency.<sup>1</sup> Assuming that ‘codicological units’ exist in whatever manuscript cultures and that they, in turn, are often composed of discrete elements, the issue of the cohesion of these elements and codicological units is a general and even universal one. The aim of the present volume is that of presenting a series of case studies on devices and strategies adopted by different manuscript cultures to put this cohesion in place in order to provide a comparative frame for the understanding of a phenomenon that appears to be of essential importance in the study of manuscripts.<sup>2</sup> The topic of ‘binding’, as is well-known, provides outstanding examples of refined technological devices to keep quires and covers together in codex-centred binding types, which have been the subject of comprehensive

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**1** The metaphor, also evoked in Dante’s quotation put in exergue in the contribution by Giovanni Ciotti in this volume (*Divina Commedia*, Paradiso, XXXIII, 85–87), has a long history and fortune; see, for example, the ‘Lettera alla Serenissima madama la Granduchessa Madre, Cristina di Lorena’ by Galileo Galilei (1635): ‘Il proibir tutta la scienza, che altro sarebbe che un reprovar cento luoghi delle Sacre Lettere, i quali ci insegnano come la gloria e la grandezza del sommo Iddio mirabilmente si scorge in tutte le sue fatture, e divinamente si legge nell’aperto libro del cielo?’ (Favaro 1895, 329); English translation available at <https://inters.org/Galilei-book-of-nature> (accessed on 15 March 2023): ‘And to prohibit the whole science would be but to censure a hundred passages of holy Scripture which teach us that the glory and greatness of Almighty God are marvelously discerned in all his works and divinely read in the open book of heaven’; the same concept already in *Il Saggiatore* (1632): ‘La filosofia è scritta in questo grandissimo libro che continuamente ci sta aperto innanzi a gli occhi (io dico l’universo), ma non si può intendere se prima non s’impara a intender la lingua, e conoscer i caratteri, ne’ quali è scritto’ (Favaro 1896, 234); English translation (Galilei et al. 1960, 183–184): ‘Philosophy is written in this grand book – I mean the universe – which stands continually open to our gaze, but it cannot be understood unless one first learns to comprehend the language and interpret the characters in which it is written’. For the motif, see the classic study by Blumenberg 2011.

**2** For the definition of ‘manuscript’, we refer to Lorusso et al. 2015, 1: ‘A MS is an artefact planned and realised to provide surfaces on which visible signs are applied by hand; it is portable, self-contained, and unique’. One might think to what extent this is also applicable to written artefacts in general, for the definition of which we stay with the proposal elaborated by the TNT research unit (for which, see below) at the Centre for the Study of Manuscript Culture: a ‘written artefact is any artificial or natural object with visual signs applied by humans’.



classical contributions,<sup>3</sup> but the issue is obviously not limited to codices. Regardless of the way in which the cohesion is actually achieved, we opt for subsuming all strategies under the common term of ‘binding’. It may serve as a general category term, although we are well aware that every manuscript culture has developed physical and technical methods of its own to keep writing surfaces, covers and other book components together.

Similar to other features of manuscript culture, the cohesion of these elements is placed along a continuum, within which various degrees of cohesion, coherence and stability are discernible – loose leaves, *codices disligati* (‘unbound codices’), and ‘limp’ or ‘soft bindings’ (bindings with soft material for modest and ephemeral manuscripts or, as also happened for printed books, as a stage before a durable binding was applied), as opposed to regularly bound codices in codex cultures. Parallel cases, such as bamboo slips, palm-leaf manuscripts, rolls or peculiar arrangements of tree-bark manuscripts, confirm this observation. ‘Keeping things together’ – or not, that is, to be able to disarray and single out quickly and easily one or more discrete elements when needed, as is easily done by splitting one manuscript into two or more or extracting single subunits, which, in turn, will become units. This is a central concern in archiving, ordering and storing, and has actual implications in all related practices of manuscripts use, such as collecting materials, filing cards, making boxes and cases, and retrieving.

Binding deeply impacts the materiality of manuscripts. Determining borders between the issue of keeping together subunits of codicological units and that of assuring cohesion of codicological units themselves is not an easy task. Papyrus sheets, bamboo slips, palm-leaves and parchment folios, for example, are material subunits or even sub-subunits of a codicological production unit: parchment leaves as components of multi-leaf quires, papyrus sheets as components of a roll or as leaves of a quire of a codex, palm leaves as parts of a discrete section of the stack of leaves of a pothi manuscript, or single bamboo slips, are all cases in point. Yet, there are differences: a distinction between subunits and sub-subunits is not possible in bamboo slips, clay tablets and palm leaves, because the smallest material units also coincide with the possible

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<sup>3</sup> See Szirmai 1999; Maniaci 2002, 145–151; Agati 2009, 345–381; Bausi et al. 2015, see index; Boudalis 2018. Moreover, see Boudalis, Dal Sasso, Sarris, and Scheper in this volume. The project ‘Ligatus’ has developed an extensive reference terminology for the description of bindings: see <https://www.ligatus.org.uk/> (accessed on 15 March 2023). Book conservators have also played an essential role in providing details on how codex bindings should be described. A particularly detailed protocol, still unpublished, has been developed by Karin Scheper.

minimal codicological units.<sup>4</sup> Therefore the function of the binding device that fixes a limit and determines a physical coherent unit, on the one hand, largely overlaps with the production of a minimal codicological unit, and, on the other hand, also implies the phenomenon of the emergence of composite manuscripts,<sup>5</sup> not to say that elements of a manuscript can often be reused and recycled in the bindings.<sup>6</sup> However, a provisional binding can also be an intermediate stage in the production of a codicological unit, as keenly investigated in the case of ‘tacketing for binding’ by Johan Peter Gumbert.<sup>7</sup>

Conversely, the physical determination of a codicological unit also has consequences regarding the perception and arrangement of texts. Extensive works and texts that require being accommodated in more than one codicological unit (thus, forming ‘codicological super units’, provided we want to stress their codicological character, which, in the end, is one among the possible methodological choices at our disposal) can be arranged in a set of related codicological units kept together by an additional device, for example, a box. Yet, cases of ‘box binding’, similar to those used in the Islamic culture,<sup>8</sup> may not be dictated by necessity, but aim at a more comfortable use of the Qur’an, which is, thus, physically subdivided into small codices according to its textual sections, or due to the fact, as happens in West-African manuscripts, that the leaves are unsewn.<sup>9</sup> They can also be arranged in multi-volume manuscripts, so frequent in the Indian and Tibetan world,<sup>10</sup> as also seems to have been the case for Mesopotamian clay tablets, where the number of tablets within the series or the catch line reported in the colophon facilitated the ordering of the units.<sup>11</sup> Most interestingly, in these cases, the same devices used *within one codicological unit* for paracontents, such as caption words for ordering quires, are used *among related codicological units*, which come to form a super unit. Similarly, physical binding devices (such as threads) can work as bookmarks and answer the same navigating needs as marginal notes, running titles and paracontents.<sup>12</sup>

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**4** See Maltomini and Staack in this volume.

**5** On this topic, see, at least, Gumbert 2004; Friedrich and Schwarke 2016; Bausi, Friedrich and Maniaci 2019.

**6** See Ammirati and Galambos in this volume.

**7** See Gumbert 2011; see also Boudalis in this volume.

**8** See Di Bella 2011.

**9** See Bondarev and Scheper in this volume.

**10** See Ciotti in this volume.

**11** See Michel in this volume.

**12** See Ciotti et al. 2018; Andrist 2022.

Along this continuum, we border on the issue of shelving and, generally, on archiving,<sup>13</sup> which is not the topic of the present volume, yet, a related one, to the extent that we can also look at each single volume binding as an archiving device. Aside from what is physically connected to the codicological units, the picture is further enriched by the use of other devices, which might be completely separable from it: not only boxes, as remarked above, but also satchels<sup>14</sup> or separating wooden tablets, as well as clothes and textiles are all possible cases in point.<sup>15</sup> Other devices which are not specifically focused on in this volume at large, but belong to the same phenomenon and have the same function as threads, are, for example, clasps and buckles, which are used to add cohesion and tighten the manuscript.<sup>16</sup>

We are well aware that this – to the best of our knowledge, first – attempt at an overview of binding across several manuscript cultures does not yet draw any firm conclusion, poses more doubts than it solves, suggests the necessity of a comparative reflection, and only opens up further questions that shall be addressed on another occasion. Among these, let us mention at least the fundamental one of the relationship between the material cohesion and its limits in capacity, and the consequences of the definitions of ‘text’ and ‘work’. These, ultimately, textual, literary and philological consequences are rooted in the materiality of the manuscripts and the syntactic function that – in addition to the purely codicological level – the segmentation carried out by binding devices in the broader sense – similar to other purely textual segmentations and markings – determines. Whether it makes sense to understand a written artefact planned and devised to be composed of several ‘books’ (either in a roll, codex, pothi or whatever book form), each one provided with its own binding, and all of them contained, for example, in a dedicated box, or even provided with shelf marks and ordering devices, on shelves, as a single ‘manuscript’ is a question that has to be posed. It is also apparent that we have to deal with quite different degrees of cohesion.

The twelve contributions in this volume are distributed in sections as follows. Section 1, ‘Overviews of traditions’, hosts surveys and overviews, in some cases the first systematic analysis ever attempted, of binding in the relevant

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<sup>13</sup> See Bausi et al. 2018.

<sup>14</sup> See Hanscom 2016 for a thorough analysis of the mechanics of Ethiopian leather satchels.

<sup>15</sup> See Ciotti in this volume. See also Fee et al. 2022 for the use of textiles in and around Ethiopian manuscripts.

<sup>16</sup> For clasps and buckles in Ethiopian manuscripts, see Di Bella and Sarris 2014; Nosnitsin 2016. See also Scheper in this volume.

manuscript culture. Cécile Michel elaborates on binding devices in clay tablets, establishing a parallelism with connecting and ordering devices used in the codex book form, with a special focus on tablets containing letters. Thies Staack provides a thorough and full-fledged analysis of the Chinese slips scrolls and the modes of their making, including statistical and advanced codicological notions that substantially upgrade the research on slips scroll book form, one of the classical book forms of antiquity, putting it on the same level as other much more studied book forms. The structural interrelations of material units, binding and layout (margins and overlapping of bindings) make this book form one of the most interesting analysed in recent years. Georgios Boudalis gives an updated state of the art, with new terminological proposals, of the technicalities of the sewing used in the unsupported bookbinding traditions of the Eastern Mediterranean, which are directly related to the earliest codex structures. Karin Scheper offers, from the vantage point of the conservator's perspective, a description of the most important varieties of the different techniques used in the Islamic world 'to keep things together', beyond binding in the narrow sense, focusing on structures and practices that are less common, thus including a wide typology of manuscript enclosures. Giovanni Ciotti offers a rich and so-far unattempted overview of binding in the pothi book form, in palm leaf and other manuscript cultures across Central, South and Southeast Asia, not without considering the philological and codicological implications of the 'loose' nature of pothi binding. Amélie Couvrat explores the *guṭakās* pocket manuscripts from North-Western India, providing an introduction to the characteristics of their binding as well as their materials and decorative elements.

Section 2, 'Features of binding', provides specific, fresh perspectives on particular binding issues. Francesca Maltomini deals with the special filing practice used in Graeco-Roman Egypt, where composite papyrus rolls composed of successively pasted documents written on single sheets served the function of 'keeping things together'. Eliana Dal Sasso assesses the terminological problem of the Ethiopian sewing technique, currently, but wrongly, styled as 'Coptic', and analyses its origins in the history of research, and the causes of this misuse and misunderstanding. Dmitry Bondarev discusses the possible origins of loose-leaf manuscripts in West Africa, considering the opposite hypotheses of retention of past practices or innovations dictated by West African socio-cultural uses.

Section 3, 'Legacy of binding', explores phenomena of changes dynamically taking place in some book forms' bindings. Serena Ammirati provides examples of a new research direction that investigates the reuse of Latin papyrus and parchment manuscripts in codex bindings between Late Antiquity and the Early

Middle Ages in the broader Mediterranean area. Imre Galambos shows in his study on a manuscript from the Dunhuang library cave how codicological features are an essential element to single out joins and how disbound manuscripts may have an independent life, use and function in the course of time. Nikolas Sarris gives an overview of the binding and rebinding activity in the library of St Catherine's monastery based on a conservator's perspective and discusses the relationship between manuscript production, bookbinding, and the renovation of manuscripts by binders.

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<sup>17</sup> Suggested by an intuition initially developed in William G. Boltz's contributions (see, for example, Boltz 2005).

<sup>18</sup> On that occasion, sixteen speakers presented fifteen papers, namely: Nicholas Pickwood ('Ligatus' project), 'Concepts of permanence and ephemerality in bookbinding'; Thies Staack (UHH), 'Viewing the whole from its parts: bindings of early Chinese bamboo and wood manuscripts'; Francesca Maltomini (Università degli Studi di Firenze), 'Papyrus rolls as archives: the *tomoi sunkollesimoi*'; Georgios Boudalis (Thessaloniki, Museum of Byzantine Culture), 'The origin and evolution of the multi-gathering codex sewing in Late Antiquity'; Serena Ammirati (Università degli Studi Roma Tre), 'Bound to be bound: the fate of Latin manuscripts in Late Antiquity'; Imre Galambos (Cambridge University), 'Concertina booklets from ninth-tenth century Dunhuang'; Karin Scheper (Universiteit Leiden), 'Binding arguments – sewn and unsewn manuscript formats in the Islamic world'; Giovanni Ciotti (UHH), 'Some Observations on binding pothi manuscripts in South Asia'; Patrick Andrist (LMU München/Université de Fribourg) and Marilena Maniaci (Università degli Studi di Cassino e del Lazio Meridionale/Rome, ANVUR), 'Methodological questions about the analysis of the bindings in a "syntactical" perspective'; Cécile Michel (Paris, CNRS), 'Binding cuneiform tablets in one unit'; Dmitry Bondarev (UHH), 'Loose-leaf Islamic manuscripts of West Africa: retention, adaptation or invention?'; Jasdip Singh Dhillon (Oxford University), 'The Codex in South Asia: A brief

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study of materials and structures'; Alexandra Gillespie (Toronto University), 'Book knots'; Agnieszka Helman-Ważny (UHH), 'Stab-stitched binding in Lao and Thai manuscripts: history, technique and function'; and Nikolas Sarris (National Library of Athens), 'Binding or rebinding at the St Catherine's Monastery of Sinai'. Sessions were chaired by Alessandro Bausi, Eliana Dal Sasso, Ondřej Škrabal, Michael Kohs, Michael Friedrich and Antonella Brita (all UHH); Konrad Hirschler (at the time Freie Universität Berlin) co-ordinated the final discussion.

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