

## Coptic binding

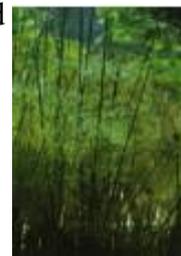
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Coptic binding dates from as early as the 2<sup>nd</sup> century thru to approximately the 11<sup>th</sup> century. This style of binding derives its name from being developed by early native christians in Egypt (the Copts), although later its style is also found in use among Armenians, Parisians and Greeks; and in England by the late 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> century (Middleton, pg 17). Originally the pages would have been papyrus but paper and parchment are both found in some of the latter examples, with the boards often being waste papyrus glued together to make a stiffened cover. Papyrus is an interesting material to work with, it rolls beautifully due in part to the way it is made, but does not fold as nicely. When you fold papyrus it will often crack – again due in part to the way it is made. It is this reason that I think that rolls of papyrus are more commonly found than bound books.

Generally coptic binding is completed when there is more than one quire (section of pages) but I believe there have been single quire finds. Szrimai (1999) believes there are approximately 120 extant coptic bindings surviving in collections of museums and libraries, although fragments from many more survive (as many as 500).

### Papyrus

Papyrus is made by thinly slicing or peeling the triangular stalk of specially cultivated papyrus reeds. The high quality papyrus was often grown on plantations, this is in contrast to modern papyrus which is often made from wild plants which are of a lower quality than ancient papyrus. The outer tough layer of the stalk was then removed and may have been used for weaving baskets or similar and the inner stalk of the reed is used for making papyrus writing material. This inner reed is then cut into thin strips and soaked, this soaking for a few days is suggested by the University of Michigan to be essential as it activates the plants natural juices which act as a glue.



The strips are then laid out and slightly beaten or rolled out which removes a lot of the extra water out of the strips and flattens the strips. The strips are then laid out side by side horizontally and then a second layer running vertically (perpendicular) the first laid reeds. Each strip overlaps the previous strip by a small amount to reduce the chance of gaps. This is then pressed and left to dry for a few days which forms a sheet of papyrus. Modern technique is to put the papyrus sheet between linen or felt to draw out the moisture while it dries, changing the material each day until the sheet has dried completely. Once dried the sheet will be quite rough as is the nature of plant materials, so a burnishing stone was used to smooth the surface in preparation before writing (University of Michigan how to make Papyrus collection).

In this manner you could make a sheet as long as you wanted by laying down more reeds or by joining sheets that were already made together. From this you can see how a long sheet of papyrus easily made a roll and if you needed more length to write on you could add more sheets relatively easily.

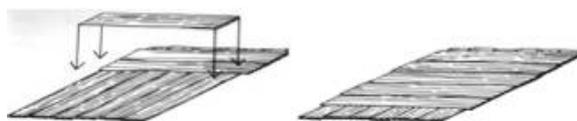


Image from: <http://www.lib.umich.edu/papyrus-collection/how-ancient-papyrus-was-made>

A lot of modern book artists use this style of binding to create journals etc, in particular due to this bindings ability to have the book open 360°.

Papyrus as a writing material prefers dry climates which is why it has stored well and there are many examples of extant pieces still in existence, but it does not survive as well in humid, wet and

unfavorable climates like those in Europe. Parchment can be documented as early as the Ptolemaic era and was often preferred over papyrus in northern regions and near eastern regions outside of Egypt. After about the third century AD, papyrus began to be used less as a writing material and parchment more, around this same time the roll was being replaced by the codex which was often bound in Coptic style. This was the beginning of the rise of the book as we know it today.

Parchment became more popular and had the advantage that it could be produced anywhere in comparison to the papyrus rolls only being produced in the parts of Egypt where the papyrus plant grows. Parchment was more easily obtainable in Europe which saw its use as a writing material dominate until paper made its debut in Europe. This is not to say paper was not being made early in ancient times as the invention of paper is traditionally attributed to the Chinese in the early part of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. From China paper moved west during the 8<sup>th</sup> century to the Arabs, who then spread the use of paper through their conquests into Europe. Paper was being manufactured in Europe by 1450.

The codex then developed and with Coptic binding originally starting with papyrus and using scrap papyrus pasted together to create stiffened covers, by the 4<sup>th</sup> century wooden boards became the preferred covers. The wooden boards may be left blank so you see the natural wood, but can also be covered in leather (vegetable tanned goat was used regularly on Coptic bindings in the Christian era). As a side an interesting note in regards to comparing early Coptic bound books and early wax tablets, Mlle van Regemorter noted during a study of early books found at Herculaneum, wax tablets were also held together by thread rather than rings or thongs and often had the same number of holes (sewing stations) as that of Coptic bound books (Middleton, 1996 pg 10).

As bookbinding developed and evolved it has been noted by Middleton that sewing on bands did not become commonly adopted in Britain till the 10<sup>th</sup> century which gives us an understanding of just how long Coptic binding was seen as functional and serving its purpose to hold a codex together.

### **Decoration and function**

Blind tooling (known as finishing) can be found on Coptic bindings before AD 700 as seen on the Victor Codex at Fulda (dated to the first half of the 8<sup>th</sup> century) (Middleton pg 165).

There are examples of Coptic bindings that also have the earliest form of a clasp, being that of a strap fitted to the fore-edge of the upper cover, wound around the book two or three times then tucked in between the strap and lower cover – the end of which often had an ornamental piece of bone or similar. Sometimes a second strap was wound around the head and tail (Middleton, pg 127).

### **Sewing**

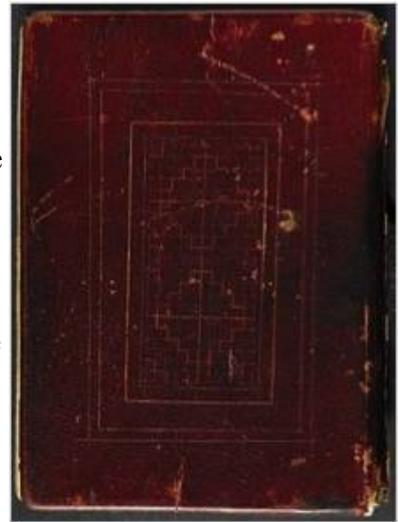
Coptic bindings can be sewn with one needle or two, either way does not appear to be any better than the other, but you can often tell which style has been used if you open up to the middle quire (gathering of pages). The attachment of the quires to the boards can be done in a range of ways also, from sewing directly to the board through holes and using this same thread to also sew all your quires together, or pre-made holes having lacing stitched through them and sewing the pages to these links. It is important to note that this style of binding does create wear on the sewing between the board and the pages where it acts as a hinge, and as such is prone to the sewing thread snapping when the book is in use for a while. It is very important to keep your stitching tight while you sew a Coptic binding or you can have a very floppy book which will be more prone to damage. I have found that while you can bind a large volume with a large (over 20) number of quires, this does give you a flexible spine which can move convex and concave and even twist.

## St Cuthbert Gospel

One of the most notable extant examples of Coptic binding is the St Cuthbert Gospel (also known as the Stonyhurst Gospel or St Cuthbert Gospel of St John) in the British Library (c. 698). A 7<sup>th</sup> century pocket size (138mm x 92mm) gospel book written in Latin. It has a finely decorated leather binding with vellum quires



Front Cover of the Stonyhurst Gospel. It has a lovely leather cover with tooling with the central motif being made by tooling the leather over cord that has been glued to the board. It has been noted that there are holes in the board in which the cut off ends can be now seen from behind. There is still speculation that gesso has also been used to build up the cord and maybe leather scraps in addition to this before applying the leather cover. The lines are thought to be made by running a tool along the leather – but not using heated tools as is done in modern times (Middleton).

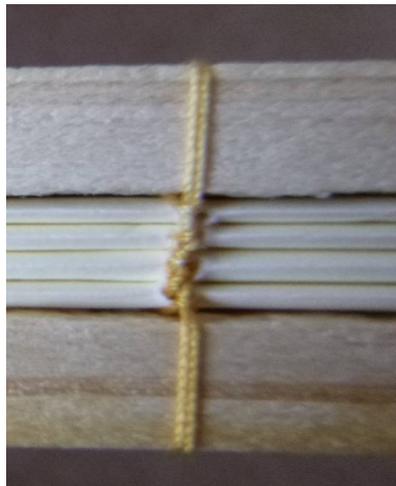


[http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/f/f1/Cuthbert\\_covercropped.jpg](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/f/f1/Cuthbert_covercropped.jpg)

The back cover of the Stonyhurst Gospel

### Things to note about the coptic binding style:

- ⤴ The book will open flat.
- ⤴ Due to the sewing style the book can twist, so this does put more pressure on the sewing, so important to use strong thread. This twist can be seen in the photo above of the stonyhurst gospel. This makes it fine for small books but be conscious of this if you are looking at binding a large book (thick) in this manner.
- ⤴ Boards can be covered or left uncovered.
- ⤴ Headbands started showing up with Byzantine bindings which assist the structure of the book and prevent the twisting that occurs in the coptic bound book.



First and second image, coptic bound book made by Lady Isabell Winter January 2013, third image of coptic bound book found on line [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coptic\\_binding](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coptic_binding), showing different styles and attachment techniques

**References:**

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Szirmai, J. A. (1999). *The Archaeology of Medieval Bookbinding*. Brookfield, VT: Ashgate

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viewed 13 January 2013

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<http://www.nobigdill.com/2010/09/sewing-paper-coptic-bound-book.html>

How to sew a coptic bound book – 2 needle style, viewed 13 January 2013

<http://www.booklyn.org/education/coptic.pdf>

How to sew a coptic bound book – different style single needle Viewed 13 January 2013

<http://www.whirlwind-design.com/binding/coptic/instructions.html>

How to sew a coptic book – some different ways to attach to the boards. Viewed 13 January 2013

[http://www.andrew.cmu.edu/user/mborhani/coptic\\_binding.pdf](http://www.andrew.cmu.edu/user/mborhani/coptic_binding.pdf)

Detailed instructions on sewing. Viewed 13 January 2013

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How ancient papyrus was made viewed 8 March 2013

<http://www.lib.umich.edu/papyrology-collection>

Papyrology collection, University of Michigan viewed 8 March 2013