

Coptic binding

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This is a non adhesive (no glue required) method of sewing sections of a book together that dates as early as the 2nd century thru to approximately the 11th century. Coptic 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 7th or 8th 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. Some 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°.



By the 4th century wood often becomes the preferred cover boards. The boards may be left blank so you see the natural wood, but can also be covered in leather (vegetable tanned goat was used on coptic bindings in the Christian era). Middleton (1996 pg 10) notes that Mlle van Regemorter made a close study of techniques in early books found that at Herculanum, 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 copic bound books. Sewing on bands did not become commonly adopted in Britain till the 10th century (Middleton).

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 8th century) (Middleton pg 165).



Codex bindings 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).

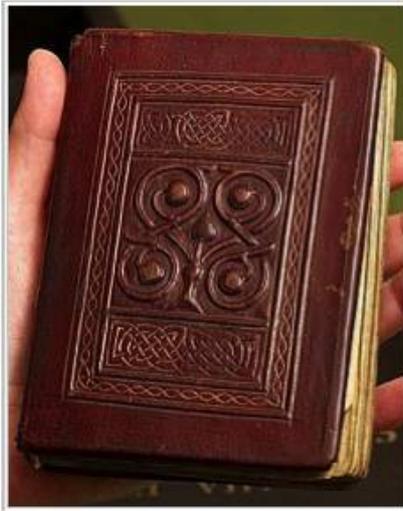
Coptic bindings can be done with one needle or two. The attachment of the quires to the boards can be done in a range of ways from sewing directly to the board thru holes, or pre made holes having lacing stitched thru them and sewing the pages to these links. It is important to note that this style of binding does create wear on the sewing and as such is prone to the sewing thread snapping when the book is in use. Please take this into consideration when choosing what thread you will use to sew you book. It is also very important to keep your stitching tight while you sew or you can have a very floppy book which will be more prone to damage.

Generally coptic binding is done when there is more than one quire (section) 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).

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 7th century pocket size (138mm x 92mm) gospel book written in Latin. It has a finely decorated leather binding with vellum quires

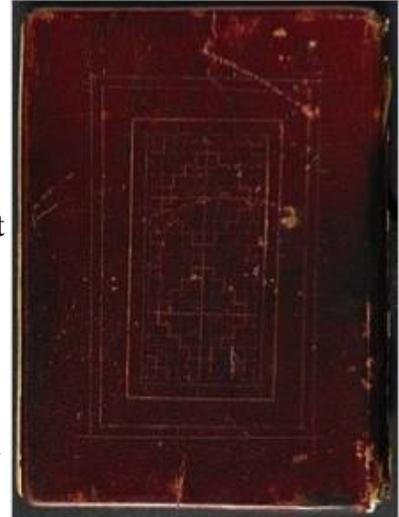
(Example made by Isabell Winter)





Front Cover of the Stonyhurst Gospel. 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/fl/Cuthbert_covercropped.jpg



The back cover of the Stonyhurst Gospel

Things to note about this style of binding:

- ⤴ 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.

References:

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