

Coptic Chain Stitch

A Work In Progress

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Key references:

Keith Smith's **Non-Adhesive Binding: Books without Paste or Glue**. ISBN 0-9637682-6-3

Szirmai, J.A. **The Archaeology of Medieval Bookbinding**. ISBN-13: 978-0859679046

Objectives

1. Learn some of the history of this style of binding.
2. Build a blank notebook using the techniques learned.

Overview

Various forms of this binding style have been dated to the 2nd century, CE. Nearly a dozen sewing styles have been recorded from various exemplars and modern variations on the theme. Multi-quire (multi-section) coptic books date from the 4th century, and that is what we will be making in this class. Approximately 120 complete bindings and 500 fragments exist in museums and libraries today. One of the finest is in NYC at the Morgan Library and Museum. See <http://www.themorgan.org/exhibitions/exhibitionList.asp?exhibition=bindings>.

Coptic Binding, 7th or 8th Century

Detached from: The Gospels, in Coptic
Illuminated manuscript on vellum

Egypt: Monastery of Holy Mary Mother of God, Perkethoout near Hamuli, the Fayum, 7th or 8th century
Goatskin over papyrus boards; decorated with onlaid panels of red leather tracery sewn to a gilded leather ground, with plain edges
MS M.569. Purchased by J. Pierpont Morgan, 1911

This is the finest surviving Coptic bookbinding. Its decorative scheme is both elaborate and complicated. To a background panel of gilded leather was applied a tracery pattern cut from a single piece of red-dyed sheepskin or goatskin; the border bands contain strips of white vellum laced through parallel slits. This openwork pattern was then sewn to the gilded background, shining through the cutouts; to it were added colored circles, along with concentric circles of dark and light brown with a red leather central dot. It is possible that the decorative panels are considerably older than the binding itself, having been transferred from an earlier binding.

This style features an attractive exposed binding stitch which allows the book to lay flat.

Materials

Supplies needed:

- Two cover boards - Davey or chip board (sometimes called bookbinders board) is best; stiff cardboard can be used.
 - *In period these usually would have been wood, paste paper, or papyrus.*
- Covering for the boards. Fabric, decorative paper, and leather are typical.
- Glue or sewing supplies to attach the covering to the boards.
- Text weight paper (80#).
 - *Paper, vellum, parchment or papyrus was used in period bound manuscripts.*
- Bone folder
- Curved needle for stitching the binding (upholstery type).
- Linen (bookbinders) thread and wax (if unwaxed thread is used).
- Awl
- Self-healing mat or scrap wood to punch on
- Heavy duty punch (a rotary leather punch will do, use the smallest hole)
- Clothespins (optional - makes it easier to hold the textblock while you're sewing)

Procedures

1. First, prepare the boards! The boards are attached to the text block from the outside in this type of binding so this step must be done first.
 - a. Trim your selected covering to size and attach to the boards using glue (PVA, or if keeping to period, wheat paste or hide glue). Cover the 'outside' of the boards first, trimming the folded over edges neatly. Cut a second sheet to size for covering the 'inside' of the covers. This 'endsheet' only covers the board, and does not also attach to the textblock.
 - b. Use the template for sewing stations to mark locations for holes in the boards $\frac{1}{4}$ " in from the spine edge. Punch the holes.
2. Prepare your textblock. For this introductory attempt we're keeping it simple and using 8½ x 11" (US Letter) pages folded in half. We'll be folding 20 sheets in half, which will give you a book of 80 pages.
 - a. Gather together 5 bundles of 4 sheets each.
 - b. Fold your pages. Don't worry about the uneven edges - get them as close as you can. Deckled fore edges are period!
 - c. Set the sewing station template into the valley of each gathering. Use the awl on a secure surface to punch the holes through all sheets of each gathering.
3. Compile the book as you wish it to appear when finished - select and orient the boards and gatherings in the way that most pleases you. Once oriented, put the book down, front cover down, spine facing away from you.

4. Select the color sewing thread you wish to use. Cut off 3 yards. Wax the thread. Thread the needle.
5. Begin sewing!
 - a. Take up the back cover and 1 gathering. Begin from the top sewing hole on the inside of the gathering, leaving the last couple of inches of thread inside. Be sure to keep it tacked down with a finger! Go out and around the board. Enter the top hole on the board from the OUTSIDE, taking care not to pierce the paper. Re-enter the same first hole in the gathering and move to the next station; the thread will live in this valley. Go out the next hole. Repeat the process until you get to the end. When you get to the last hole, do all but the very last step - do NOT go back into the same hole in the signature after you've secured the board.
 - b. Take up the next gathering from your stack and align it with the work in progress. Continue sewing by entering the bottom station on this gathering, making sure to go cleanly through to the center of the stack. Tighten up the stitches as you go, being sure to pull parallel to the spine, NOT perpendicular. Tugging parallel will minimize any possibility of tearing.
 - c. Move the needle to the next sewing hole in the valley of the gathering. Go out and slip your needle behind the sewing thread between the board cover and the first gathering, making a chain loop. Go back in the same hole. Always create the chain in the direction you are traveling; e.g. if moving station to station from right to left, enter from the right, exit from the left. Repeat this process in all the stations until you get to the last.
 - d. At the last station, go out, down behind the stitch below and tighten between the board and the first gathering. Slip the needle behind the thread just under the hole in the second gathering you last came out (in this case, left to right - again, go in the direction you are traveling.) Take up your next gathering from the table and align it to the work in progress. Enter the first hole from the outside in this first gathering. The end stitches are called kettle stitches.
 - e. Continue sewing the gatherings together until you have one gathering and the front cover left. Keep your sewing snug! You may find that using clips to hold the already sewn gatherings together is helpful.
 - f. When you have done all but the last gathering and cover, you should have the thread on the outside of the book, having completed the kettle stitch. Take up the remains of the book and align them to your work. At this point we go through the board first, and then into the gathering. Take your needle through the first sewing hole from the outside (front), out towards the spine and then enter the first sewing hole in the last gathering. Snug this up.
 - g. Move to the next sewing station inside the gathering. Come out, go down to create the chain stitch to the one below. Do not go back into the same hole! Instead, go to the top of the board, through towards the textblock, out the spine, and then back into the second hole of the last gathering. Repeat until you get to the end. Snug everything up.
 - h. You will end inside the book after the last hole is stitched. Tie and overhand knot in the thread, getting it as close to the valley as possible. Fray the ends of the thread. Go back to the tail in the opposite gathering, tie and fray the tail you left there.

Congratulations, you have bound your first book!

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