CHAPTER 1

Materiality Matters
A Detailed Sketch of the Current State of Knowledge and Outline of the Research

The Information Value of Binding Structures

General Observations
Although in general a binding mainly serves to protect the manuscript pages from handling, bad storage and intensive use, its design and manufacture can provide important information about ownership, historic circumstances or use.1 In several fields of scholarship the relation between the content and the binding may be an issue, and the materiality of the book offers directions that help us understand that relationship. For example, collectors who choose to have their books re-bound according to fashionable standards or had their coat of arms gold-tooled on the covers of an existing binding, left a distinct mark on the book that may prove valuable for provenance research. Even in the case of a rebinding often traces can be found that will hint at the former—original—binding. In the fold of the gatherings tiny holes may reveal the former sewing stations, and the amount, shape or position of such holes can provide clues as to what sort of sewing structure was applied originally and whether sewing supports were used or not. Other traces can be found in the outer textblock leaves. Even when the former covers are gone, indentations and sometimes discolouration of the outer pages caused by the relatively bulky mass of once existent fastenings also point at the materials of the original covers. Where Western bindings are concerned such fastenings would have

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1 At least until the eighteenth century it was customary in the Western world that, apart from categories such as almanacs and specific publications such as large atlases, textblocks were traded unbound. The gatherings were sold either unsewn or a sewing structure was provided to prevent the book from becoming disarrayed during the retail process. A cover was provided once the book was sold, when the buyer commissioned a binding according to his taste and budget. See N. Pickwoad, ‘Onward and downward’ (1994), pp. 61–68. Thus bindings reflect the intention of these first owners, either to impress with their assets and to display their wealth or status, or to provide protection for the content. The sewing structure may provide further clues as to the trade and dissemination of texts.
been metallic clasps—usually on wooden boards—or leather or cloth straps, more often found on pasteboard. In the case of Islamic bindings the traditional ‘fastening’ is a pentagonal shaped envelope flap which is attached to a fore-edge flap, made as an extension of the back board. When the book is closed the envelope flap lays underneath the front cover, leaving some empty space along the edges of its front edge where the paper is left vulnerable to ingress by dust and insects, causing very specific deterioration. Such hints, together with slight discoloration caused by the leather turn-ins along the flap’s edges, may make it possible to retrace the shape of a flap that is no longer there.

To understand how a book was bound and what materials were used may be important for several reasons. Apart from craftsmanship, tradition, personal preferences and aesthetics, economics will always have been an important factor of influence in book production. Thus the choice for more expensive materials or cheaper or more readily available alternatives can provide clues to the circumstances or wishes of either the owner or the craftsman. Even when the binder was a moderately skilled craftsman who did not aspire to produce highly elaborate bindings with costly materials, or rather precisely because of that, many bindings carry a significant amount of information visible to those who know how to look for certain characteristics and details. Thus the history of a specific item may be deduced or information retrieved about former ownership. On a larger scale, insight into the development of bookbinding in a certain tradition or region may shed light on the dissemination and transition of techniques and the mobility of peoples.

Paradoxically, the very function of the binding renders it susceptible to poor handling, unfavourable storage conditions and improper use. Extensive damage or deterioration of the binding materials may have inclined someone at a certain point in time to repair or even replace the original binding, and possibly also the sewing structure. Of course, through such action the new binding becomes part of the manuscript’s history, but at the same time possibly important information contained within the former binding is lost forever. Without written documentation it may remain unknown if such a particular item was rebound because of severe damages that would reflect intensive use or a calamity caused by water or fire, or if, indeed, a new binding was provided due to the esthetical wishes or whims of a certain owner in a particular time. Thus, for the sake of the information a heavily repaired binding may carry, even a shaggy, damaged book can be much preferred to a clean rebinding. Any textblock and its binding are always somehow related, even when they seem mismatched or from different worlds. The crux is to comprehend the connection between a bookbinding and the manuscript it covers.