
**Digging for details**

After some 2,000 years, the history of bookbindings – at any rate bookbindings as objects for use – has run its course. If, as might perhaps be expected, sufficient surveys, catalogues and historical monographs had been published on the subject by authors having witnessed this ‘final battle’, it might possibly be considered futile to offer in 2007 a review of a book which was first published in 1999 and subsequently reprinted in 2003. However, this is not the case, certainly not where a study of the calibre of Szirmai’s *Archeology* is concerned.

Because bookbindings are objects for use, there is relatively little (scholarly) interest in the subject. When the stylistic features of that same object furthermore offer little or no opportunity for art-historical reflections, interest becomes even less. The alleged simplicity of the art and the existence of a relatively large body of (older) literature perhaps feed the assumption that everything is already known or at any rate easy to trace. That in the past decades mainly technical manuals with some historical background have been published for the craft and hobby market indicates that professional interest is declining. In the past century especially professional binders have shown serious interest in the history of their profession.

On the other hand there is a growing awareness, for instance amongst codicologists, that technical information about the way a book(binding) has been produced can contribute substantially to their research. Another group interested in information of a historical-technical nature consists of book restorers, who regularly require technical information about book constructions. The book restoration profession in the Netherlands has witnessed a strong growth since the early 1970s. It is a paradox of the profession that the restorer, by carrying out necessary operations, sometimes obscures or even destroys historical information, a fact noted by Szirmai on several occasions in his book. Curiously, as the book restoration profession began expanding in the 1970s, the art of bookbinding was increasingly neglected. It is true that when restorations were still performed by bookbinders, the object was all too often ‘repaired’ in accordance with current standards in the bookbinding trade. That is to say, a book had to be sturdily bound, and ought to be easily consulted and neatly presented. As a result, much historical information has either vanished forever, or else historical bindings were reshaped into newly bound books with a historical appearance. By neglecting the art, however, the restorer risks losing the ‘feel’ of the mechanism of the bookbinding. It is important to know what may be demanded of a book in terms of the way it must function to assess which parts of the book or which bookbinding operations are essential for historians of bookbindings. Naturally restorers are instrumental in the process, or at any rate ought to be.
To return to the subject of this review: each page of Prof. Szirmai’s book demonstrates that in addition to a scholarly approach and an ability to argue and analyze, his broad experience, sound knowledge as a bookbinder and excellent manual skills were so many *conditions sine qua non* to accomplish this work.

The book is divided into two parts: (1) ‘The Mediterranean Heritage’ and (2) ‘The medieval codex in the Western world’. The first part is largely based on a thorough literature search. The second part is considerably more elaborate and contains many more illustrations and figures than the first. Szirmai evaluates in the first part the findings of other researchers, adding his own observations and experiences. The outcome is a clear survey of the technical details belonging to the codices of a number of cultures on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean. The chapters are arranged according to the several countries and cultures that produced these oldest codices. As a result, groups of bookbindings are distinguished by their geographical origin in the one case – for instance Ethiopia –, in another case by a more general classification like the ‘Byzantine bookbinding’. Szirmai himself explains that a term like ‘Byzantine’ is too vague to be able to place the books geographically and suggests linking the term to the structural qualities of these books.

The principal part of the descriptions in the first part concerns the technique of sewing and the attachment of the boards. The bookbinding historian Szirmai displays his strongest points in this first part. For one thing, analyzing the sewing structures of these old books, which have ‘cluttered together’ through wear, contamination and later repairs, must have been a tremendous chore. He meticulously examines the way the books were sewn and presents his findings by means of unambiguous texts and clear illustrations. The so-called link stitch sewing found in these books is characteristic for virtually all books discussed in ‘The Mediterranean heritage’ part. Although it is true that Armenian books from the thirteenth century onwards feature sewing supports (a characteristic element of many Western books), this technical innovation in bookbinding may have been introduced there through contact with the Western world.

The sewings are of course not the only technical element of the codices discussed in this part. Szirmai divided each chapter into paragraphs which roughly follow the production process. Each chapter features paragraphs on boards, endbands and fastenings. The number of elements varies according to the type of bookbinding or the available knowledge on the subject. It is thus possible to trace the technical differences and advances in the various parts of these historical books. As a result, Szirmai’s book is also something of a reference work. In addition it contains a comprehensive bibliography and an excellent index.

Naturally the author of a book addressing a history as long as that of the bookbinding considers the question of the origin of the written book form, the codex. Szirmai rejects the thesis, often proposed, that the codex was derived from the use of writing tablets. He suggests that its origin lies in the early Christian communities of North Africa. The earliest examples he presents are Coptic codices containing one or more