

An unusual primary tacketed binding with a "woven effect" sewing

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During this research, a Greek eighteenth century printed book (1744), with a late limp vellum binding made with recycled parchment, was studied. The research led to the discovery of what could be a primary tacketed binding (the cover directly sewn to the textblock) employing, at first sight, a complex, yet fascinating sewing. It is a rare example of this European binding style, never found (or described) in Greek milieu before.

The book was donated in 2010 to the Hellenic Parliament Library by Mrs. Rita Frei-Trikoupi, widow of the Greek politician Konstantinos Sp. Trikoupi (1926 - 2002), and it is now held in the Special Collection, with the catalogue number TPI 102. It consists of a volume printed in Moschopolis (present Albania), which was an important center of the Modern Greek Enlightenment during the eighteenth century. The volume is of a small size (in quarto) and it is composed of 23 bifolios, containing three texts from two authors. The two texts are the works of Theophilos Korydalleus of Athens (1570 – 1645), a Neo-Aristotelian philosopher, and the third is a work of Aphthonius of Antioch (3rd – 4th cent. A.C.).

However, the extraordinary feature of the book is the cover, which is made from two folded parchment bifolios, recycled from an eleventh century religious Greek manuscript (Acts of the Apostles) sewn to the printed textblock, without the use of any adhesives or sewing supports.

Along the spine of the cover, two similar pieces of fabric approximately of the same dimension (3,5 X 1,7 cm) and made of the same blue and cream threads), appeared to be somehow attached to the parchment. The upper extremity of the fabric of the head side had a more complex finish (made of cream and red colour silk threads), perhaps as a special indication of the direction of the spine (head vs. tail).

Luckily, the front cover was rather flexible and allowed, without damaging the structure, for a careful examination of the area between the spine of the textblock and the inner side of the parchment cover, thus enabling us to distinguish thin cream coloured silk threads coming out from the textblock and going into the parchment cover.

At first it was a mystery as to where those threads were tied to, since they seemed to “disappear” inside the cover. In order to understand how the sewing structure works, mock-ups were created to reproduce all the visible layers of the volume (fabrics on the spine, parchment cover, textblock) and, most importantly, to attempt to imitate what might be the course of the threads.

After a few trials, it was established that the “fabric” on the spine of the parchment was actually the external part of the sewing that ties the quires to the cover, thus creating this unusual “woven” effect.

During the eighteenth century, Moschopolis had a large ecclesiastical community with several churches and a Monastery. They were renowned for their craftsmanship in the creation of weaving, textiles and carpets. The employment of the recycled parchment from an ecclesiastical manuscript and the unusual sewing of the spine decoration by people who knew well weaving techniques led to the hypothesis that this original bookbinding was made in a monastic environment of Moschopolis.

Initially, a mock-up sewing with a single thread, based on a technique described by J. Szirmai, was created. This method was soon abandoned in favour of a sewing technique employing simultaneously two separate threads, each with a different needle. This sewing would go throughout the entire textblock creating parallel thread dot-lines on the outside that would function as the warp for the final "fabric" effect on the cover spine, which was achieved with the use of another thread of blue (indigo) colour that acts as the weft.

The main damage of the textblock, besides the occasional breakages of the sewing threads, consisted of the water stains across the spine of the pages, which could not be removed easily due to the fragility of the sewing. Several tests were carried out in situ (washing by using blotting papers, spraying with a Melinex barrier, washing with the use of soft brushes of variable sizes between blotting papers) with no satisfactory results. Similarly, an attempt on the low pressure table, did not produce the desired results, but instead would create tensions on the sewing, despite the careful handling of the object.

Since all attempts at washing the pages were apparently more harmful than beneficial to the general condition of the volume, because of the weakening of the sewing structure, it was decided to not proceed with any further attempts at this point.

The loose or broken original sewing threads were secured once more to the textblock, tying them to a new silk thread (attached to the two sturdiest quires before and after the weak one) by a loop.

The parchment cover was treated, employing Gore-tex for a gentle and gradual flattening of the front side, with excellent results.

All conservation treatments were non-invasive focusing on not damaging the binding in any way.