

Sikh codices with Islamicate bindings: The development of a conservation approach

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This paper is focused on the conservation of Sikh manuscripts with Islamicate bindings. It will begin by exploring the concept of Islamicate bindings, as an umbrella term, to describe books with specific shared structural features regardless of their script, language or subject area. Whereas the term “Islamic” bookbinding has a specifically religious connotation, “Islamicate” implies a looser affinity with the technological and socio-economic developments which spread from regions with Muslim political power. In codicology and book history, the phrase Islamic binding has been the preferred term in recent scholarship; however, the subtle semantic difference between the two terms is significant. The adoption of the term “Islamicate”, is intended to allow for a more thorough examination of a trans-religious and trans-regional tradition of book production. It is hoped that this will lead to a more in-depth analysis of the Islamicate binding structure and an exploration of its relationship with other traditions of book production including papyrus and parchment rolls in the near east and palm leaf, birchbark and bark cloth manuscripts in Southern and Eastern Asia.

Centred in the Panjab region of the Indian subcontinent, the Sikh religion was able to draw on indic and Islamicate methods of manuscript production. The use of the Islamicate bookbinding structure in the Sikh manuscript tradition will be explored in particular detail. The specific features of Sikh codices will be outlined and defined including aspects such as paper type, the formation and ruling of quires, as well as structural and decorative binding features. This will provide the basis for the case study of the Baba Vadhava Singh Pothi, a composite manuscript from a private collection which underwent significant conservation treatment from August 2016 to April 2017. The ascribed name of the manuscript derives from its association with a 19th century Sikh monastic scholar from the Panjab region. On many levels, it provides a good example of how the Sikh manuscript tradition blended an Islamicate binding structure with indic traditions to produce a new style of manuscript.

The conservation treatment carried out from 2016-2017 will be shared in detail along with important codicological features of the manuscript uncovered during the process. The project was completed in the context of Pothi Seva, a voluntary organisation established for the conservation and preservation of Sikh religious books and manuscripts. The involvement of a trained volunteer during the stages of paper repair and codicological documentation was a key element of the project. Particular attention will be paid to the ways in which historical bookbinding methods were adapted incorporated into the treatment. The new binding utilised a number of materials and methods whose application was developed specifically for Sikh or Islamicate binding structures. The strengths and benefits of these methods will be assessed in relation to the structural and material challenges of Sikh and Islamicate manuscripts.