

Decision-making process in the case of restoration/conservation of a parchment-bound codex at St. Florian Monastery library, Austria

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The contribution describes the case of restoration/conservation of a parchment binding which was strongly degraded through exposure to sunlight.

St. Florian Baroque Library is designed in such a way that a considerable number of books are positioned on both sides of the windows, in niches, at a 90 degree angle to the window panes. This means that the books which stood and still stand there had been exposed to sunlight over centuries and the impact cannot actually be measured any more. While the windows are and were equipped with blinds, it is unclear how often they were used in the past. Old pictures show that some of the books have stood there for some 100 years now at least.

The library room was restored in 2016/17. As the final step the books should be preserved and restored. To realize this, a book partnership was arranged. The librarian asked the author of this contribution to assist him as a conservator and help determine the needs at an interdisciplinary basis.

This book conservation partnership requires conservators to be found to do the actual conservation work. Finding conservators interested in the work turned out to be the first challenge. The author, being conservator herself, left this task to the librarian, as one of the results of the work should be to identify the way a librarian would find conservators without any assistance by a professional. It should be possible for archivists and librarians to find conservators themselves. This would be an important aspect of the overall task of maintaining and preserving written heritage.

The librarian identified a number of professionals' names and asked them for bids. The bids should be made for several books among which the book with the parchment binding was the most challenging. The book was selected for the bid according to its content, which would be interesting for a potential book partner, and according to its condition. As there were many such damaged bindings and virtually no information on suitable methods of treating them, the author of this contribution was interested to understand the general approach to such problems practised in the country.

The second step, the subsequent evaluation of the bids revealed the very limited availability of skilled conservators in the field of book conservation in Austria, which led to a policy discussion about the significance of education for the preservation of the written heritage and the start of two research projects, one concerning the conservation of the parchment binding, the other one dealing with the evaluation of conservation bids and the decision-making by archivists and librarians.

The project involving the conservation of parchment binding first brought to light certain problems in parchment conservation which are still unsolved. They were described from the conservator's perspective. One of the core problems is the physical properties of parchment with low glass transition temperature.

Thanks to proper understanding of the nature of parchment by an interdisciplinary team , suggestions on how to overcome such critical moments of shrinking of parchment during a conservation treatment had been developed based on the information on the behaviour of the material.

One substantial part of the project was a survey of old, partly outdated methods of repairing parchment bindings and an analysis of the ways these conservation materials and methods modify the original parchment, which can only be seen with modern analytical methods. To achieve this, a selected number of treatments was performed on standard samples and the condition of the parchment before and after the treatments was surveyed.

For the evaluation of the bids, criteria were collected which can serve an archivist or librarian to independently decide whether a bid for conservation fulfils at least the minimal requirements. These criteria were drawn from papers on conservation ethics. As a second stage, measures for improving the situation in terms of the well-being of the heritage in a socially agreeable way were designed.

The contribution reflects on everyday situations arising in practical work of preserving our written heritage and the ways of resolving the associated problems on the basis of interdisciplinary co-operation. The contribution will also provide the available research results on the two topics: (1) evaluation of bids by archivists and librarians, and (2) parchment conservation.