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Bindings, Bags and Boxes: Sewn and Unsewn Manuscript Formats in the Islamic World

Abstract: This paper offers an overview of the most important varieties of the different techniques used in the Islamic world to *keep things together*. The codicology of manuscripts in Arabic script has been studied in depth in recent years,[1] and the archetypal book structure has been described in detail.[2] Certain variants of the predominant manuscript structure, however, are less well known. These specific types are susceptible to loss when they are not sufficiently understood or recognised. This paper, therefore, focuses on structures and practices that are less common, such as the cohesive structure that does not involve sewing which might have had only a temporary function. The paper also addresses repair techniques and codicological characteristics that are not yet explained fully. In addition, it includes manuscript enclosures: slipcases, satchels, bags and other containers, that were used to keep texts together. These appurtenant items are often overlooked in book-historical studies, and indeed, in library collections and catalogues. However, to understand the *codicological unit*, these objects deserve to be included.

1 The protective outer shell

The outpouring of manuscript production in the Islamic world is phenomenal, with the manuscript period spanning more than thirteen centuries and a vast geographic area.[3] The wide range of different text carriers and codex formats in this manuscript culture is, therefore, not surprising. Because of the early adoption of the art of papermaking, the bulk of manuscript production is found in that medium, and the codex format became the predominant form. Paper was of course preceded by epigraphy and papyrus and parchment. Substrates such as

1 Déroche 2000 and 2006.

2 Scheper 2011 and 2018.

3 The term 'Islamic world' refers to countries which are or were Muslim-dominated. The outer borders of the Islamic world have changed significantly over time, and the Islamic world has always included various cultures.

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textile, bark fibres, and wood were also used. The properties and character of such different materials influenced the manuscript formats, and the development and usage of scrolls, codices consisting of folded sheets grouped in gatherings, concertina-shaped manuscripts, and loose-leaf volumes is partly related to the material characteristics. A manuscript tradition is also shaped by neighbouring manuscript cultures through an exchange of goods and travelling craftsmen. In addition, practical matters, such as the availability of materials, the use of region-specific resources, technological developments, economy, fashion, and the social context of production, affected the final product.

The bindings of manuscripts served to protect the contents regardless of the aesthetic appearance, and because of that function, the covers of a codex suffered directly from mechanical damage and unfavourable conditions. The accumulated damage to the binding often led to its replacement. This is part of book history, yet, it hampers our studies of bookmaking traditions across cultures; the older the book, the greater the chance that its original covers have not survived. Historic manufacturers and users of bound books were evidently also aware of the impact of mechanical damage, as they took precautions in the form of additional housing to protect the whole entity: manuscript *and* binding. This indicates that the craftsmen and owners recognised the value of a sound binding, which provided the structure that kept the gatherings in place and, thus, was key to the usability of the manuscript. In certain cases, enclosures have been applied to protect particularly beautiful bindings, but in numerous instances, it is clear that the binding inside an enclosure is nothing special, certainly not spectacular, nor extremely frail. Such evidence shows that people have been protective of their bound manuscript regardless of the level of decoration and aesthetics of the materials chosen for the covers, which implies that the vital function of a sound structure was understood.

Looking at Islamic manuscript and bookbinding practices, several types of protective enclosures can be identified that were used to further protect the bound manuscripts, such as bags, satchels, pouches, and slipcases (see Fig.1). Documentary sources may be scarce, but pictorial evidence in medieval manuscript paintings, and later in historic photographs, also sheds light on the variety of enclosures that were used.[4] This, together with surviving items, suggests a development in form and material over the centuries that will be discussed below. Since these enclosures served to protect the manuscript(s) inside, they

4 Wooden boxes or chests could be used for storage, especially of Qur'ans, see Gacek 2009, 254–255. Representations in manuscript paintings of other enclosures are discussed in more detail below.

were also prone to wear and tear. Damage could be caused by the environment and transportation, while mechanical damage could also occur when the bound volume needed to be retrieved from its container. This explains their scant survival. Despite the fact that enclosures as artefacts in their own right provide additional information to the book historian and manuscript scholar, these objects have received little attention. Not only are they under-studied – they are also under-represented in catalogues, and often not digitised together with their associated manuscript. These circumstances make the study of these items even more difficult. A preliminary overview of what types were made and how they were used follows below. Yet, we first need to consider the physical properties of the items they contain in order to understand the rationale behind the different enclosures.

Fig. 1: A variety of enclosures: UBL, Or. 2275, an indigo blue bag for an Acehnese manuscript, before 1877; UBL, Or. 23.461, a leather satchel, early nineteenth century, with its associated loose-leaf manuscript in a leather wrapper, sub-Saharan Africa; UBL, Or. 25.428, a textile and leather satchel, manuscript dated 1187 AH / 1773 CE; UBL, Or. 1335, a silk pouch, manuscript dated 1226 AH / 1811 CE, Maghreb; UBL, Or. 2551, a slipcase, the manuscript it contains dates to 872 AH / 1468 CE, the slipcase is probably from the nineteenth century.

2 The early development of a predominant structure

The advantage of studying developments in bookbinding techniques and sewing structures from a technical point of view is that we stay close to the reasoning of the craftsmen. Bookbinders had a range of options to choose from, depending on when, where, and from whom they had learned the trade (that is, in which cultural tradition), and choices depended on a combination of economical and practical matters. They included factors such as context, for example, whether a book was destined for a public library or private use. Bookbinders will have consciously opted for a certain structure and materials to go with a specific manuscript, even if the decision was made routinely. Understanding the rationale behind the bookbinder's practice helps to analyse the manuscript as a physical object.

The predominant type in the Islamic world, that probably developed over the tenth or eleventh century, has several characteristic features.[5] The making of the codex starts with a stack of gatherings that is sewn together with an unsupported link-stitch, usually on two stations. The text block spine is then lined with a piece of textile or leather; this spine lining runs the full length of the spine and extends on both sides of the joints. The extending sides (or so-called flanges) are usually pasted onto the inside of the boards at a later stage of the process. The third component, which completes the basic sewing structure, is the endband, sewn at head and tail. The endband tiedowns are sewn over a leather core and through the centre of each gathering.[6] They are, therefore, an important element in the structure, as they provide a connection between the lining material and each gathering, close to the head and tail of the spine where stability and cohesion is crucial. The secondary endband, with a decorative pattern, gives a little further coherence (see Figs 2a–c).

This structure is the basis of most text blocks, while the composition of the binding, the materials for the boards and covering, and the level of embellishment may vary. We may notice the effects of the wishes of the commissioner,

5 Parchment was the predominant substrate in the first centuries of Islamic bookmaking, and these text blocks had a slightly different structure, and may have had either loose wooden boards or a so-called box-binding. See Déroche 2006, 261–262; and Di Bella 2011.

6 Not all endband cores consist of a leather core. We see variations including vegetal material and strips of cloth, especially in South-East Asia. See Scheper 2018, 356–359; and Scheper 2019, 370–371.

the function that the book would have, and/or the fashion of the time from these additional binding components. Given the consistency in the Islamic bookmaking tradition, it is important to pay attention when bookbinders deviated from convention and bound manuscripts using divergent techniques. This signifies different circumstances.

Fig. 2a: UBL, Or. 850, an archetypal construction and binding, 1067 AH / 1657 CE.

Fig. 2b: UBL, Or. 849, an archetypal sewing structure with link-stitch sewing thread in the centre, and the endband tiedowns at head and tail, 1068 AH / 1658 CE.

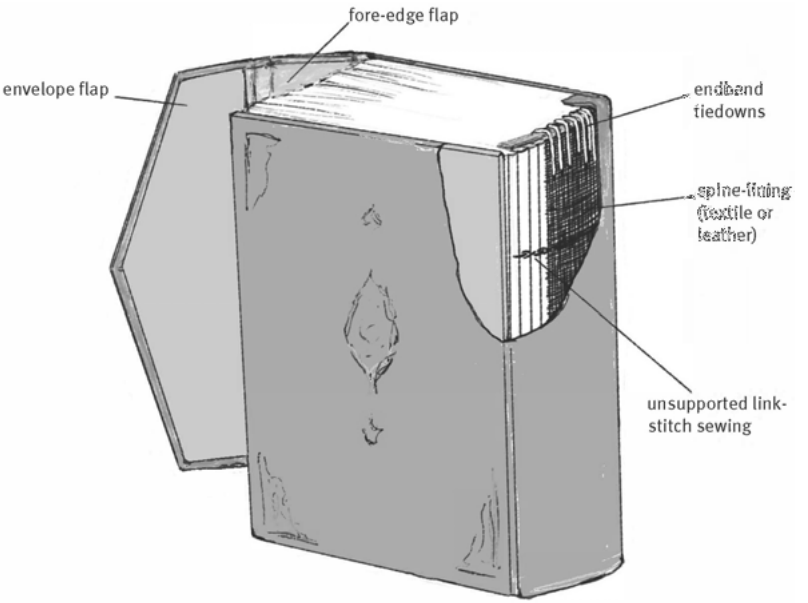

Fig. 2c: Drawing showing the link-stitch on the text block spine, the spine lining, and the tiedowns from the spine side.

3 The repair practice

Though bookbinders bound new books, most of them probably also spent a substantial part of their time on the repair of books. Manuscripts with a worn-out sewing structure or detached boards would have been taken to their workshops with the request to repair or rebind the volume. Depending on the condition of the various materials, bookbinders could repair a text block and reuse a binding, applying new leather to the spine with which the boards were reattached. They could repurpose other boards, but also completely replace a binding with a new one. When edges of the text block were very tattered, for example, a bookbinder may have chosen to trim the edges in order to create smoother ones that would ease leafing through the text block. Consequently, the former boards would no longer be flush with but larger than the trimmed text block, and that would be reason enough to make new boards. The leftover boards may have suited another volume.

Customers may have come to the binder's workshop with other requests as well. All sorts of interventions are conceivable: composite volumes could be

separated and (re-)bound as single volumes, or new composite volumes could be assembled. The bookbinder would have assessed the condition of the paper of previously sewn manuscripts in order to decide whether the paper in the spinefolds was sound enough to be sewn in a specific manner. Paper mends would often have been necessary, and repair patches are frequently found in the spinefolds, over the former sewing stations. Such repairs were made to facilitate the new link-stitch sewing as well as the making of the new endbands, close to the head and tail where the former tiedown was positioned.[7]

Thorough text block repair would have been time-consuming. It is not surprising, therefore, that less labour-intensive methods were also developed. Instead of using elaborate paper repairs, the cohesion of the text block could be achieved by adapting the sewing structure, using two additional sewing stations placed close together between the former two stations, and spacing out the first and fourth station towards head and tail. This arrangement, resulting in a link-stitch sewing over four stations, avoided the weakened parts of the paper around the original stations and allowed for a quick and sound enough method of resewing. The spine lining would add further coherence to this structure (see Figs 3a–b).[8] The exact execution of the structure as found on Islamic manuscripts can be distinguished from unsupported link-stitch sewing structures on four stations from other cultures (e.g. Coptic or Syriac) because the sewing thread between the two middle stations passes across the spine side and not inside the gathering.[9]

Another technique that has frequently been used as a quick means of sewing is a so-called stabbed sewing technique. Spinefolds are not needed for this method because the thread is passed through holes, pierced through the stack of gatherings or folios, a centimetre or so out from the spine edge through the inner margins. A stabbed sewing can, thus, be used for loose leaves or a much-used manuscript with a broken structure and severe paper damage; completely torn spinefolds are no problem when this technique is used. It could also be used as a temporary structure because it offered a swift method of sewing and keeping all leaves together. The gatherings could be freed from the stabbed connection again with a simple cut of the knife should the owner wish or the manuscript's use require that it was sewn *properly*, with the more durable and functional traditional link-stitch sewing. This would remedy the drawback of the stabbed sewing, which often prevents the book from opening well. Whilst the stabbed sewing technique

7 A first overview of typical historical repairs of Islamic manuscripts was provided by Kropf 2013.

8 Though this sewing scheme could have been applied to new books, evidence shows that it is typically used as a repair sewing. See Scheper 2018, 65–66, 281.

9 See Scheper 2014, 98–100.

may have been used for damaged manuscripts, it also frequently caused damage to the paper in the inner margins because of the tension it causes (see Fig. 4).

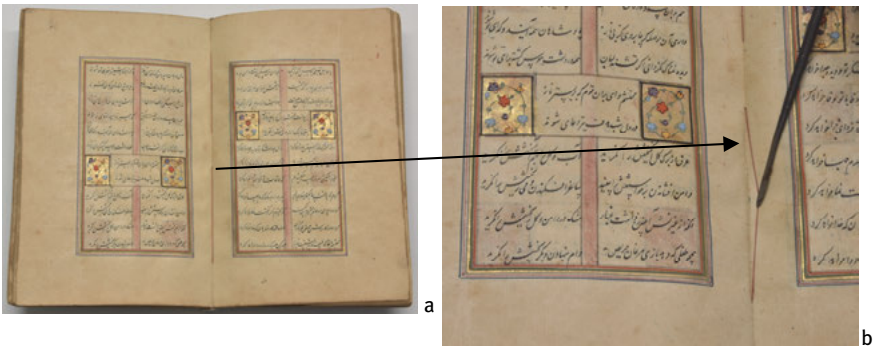

Fig. 3a–b: UBL, Or. 14.369, a Persian manuscript, dated 998 AH / 1589 CE. Link-stitch sewing on four stations, a repair structure. The detail shows the former sewing station that belongs to the original link-stitch structure on two stations in the spinefold underneath the pink sewing thread of the current structure.

Fig. 4: UBL, Or. 22.331, Berber, 1134 AH / 1721 CE. Stabbed sewing. The pressure-sensitive tape on the left side of the sewing thread marks the breakage of the paper due to this sewing structure.

4 Common sense and economy

Bookbinders were usually practical people, who consciously chose techniques and materials that served the functionality of the book and were economically viable. They would adapt standard methods to suit a particular large or slim book. Two Arabic manuscripts in the Universiteitsbibliotheek Leiden (UBL) illustrate this: UBL, Or. 1676a, a fragment of the Qur'an (suras 38–66), and UBL, Or. 1676c, a poetic miscellany (see Fig. 5).[10] They both consist of only one gathering, which does not allow for a functional endband. Given the importance of endbands to the Islamic bookbinding structure, a bookbinder would have been reluctant to refrain from making them, unless he had a suitable alternative. With thin manuscripts, such as these, bookbinders created that alternative by deviating from the traditional link-stitch sewing on two stations. They chose a sewing structure using more stations instead, with the outer stations positioned closer to the head and tail. In this way, they could forgo the endband, because the outer stations took over the function of the tiedowns.

Fig. 5: Unsupported link-stitch structures that are adapted to one-gathering manuscripts, utilising outer sewing stations close to the head and tail instead of tiedowns. UBL, Or. 1676a, fragment of the Qur'an (suras 38–66), not dated, and UBL, Or. 1676c, a poetic miscellany, not dated.

10 For the UBL Oriental manuscript descriptions see the inventories of Witkam 2007–.

5 Tacketing

Tacketing is not a technique normally associated with Islamic manuscripts. Nevertheless, UBL, Or. 25.723, an eighteenth-century composite volume with five texts on astronomy, shows that its use can also occur in the Islamic world. Each gathering in the third, fourth and fifth text of this manuscript has two tackets, in the upper and lower part of the spinefold, in-between the tiedown of the endbands and the link-stitch sewing stations. The text block itself is sewn with a natural-coloured thread; the tackets vary from natural-coloured to blue and brown, and are neatly sewn and knotted on the inside of the spinefolds. The composite volume also displays another interesting feature: the fore-edge of each text has been marked with ink in such a manner that the demarcation allows quick access to the individual texts.

The use of these tackets appears to be related to the fact that the last texts were supposed to be illustrated, as is indicated by the blank spaces in the layout of the pages. The first two texts in this volume, which do not have tackets or traces of tackets, are not illustrated and were not designed to have illustrations either. Therefore, it seems probable that the tacketing has, in this case, supported the work process and division of labour. The tackets would have kept the individual gatherings together when the copyist passed on the gatherings to the artisan who was to make the illustrations, either in the same workshop or at a different location. We do not know why the illustrations were never executed, and why it was then decided to bind the volume without it receiving its intended drawings. However, since the bookbinder did not remove the tackets (which in itself makes sense, because these thin threads were not in his way and did not hamper the sewing process, while their removal would have taken time), we can at least reflect on their presence – and it may also lead us to keep an eye out for more examples (see Figs 6a–d).

Fig. 6a–d: UBL, Or. 25.723; a composite manuscript with tackets, dated between 1172 and 1202 AH / 1759 and 1788 CE.

6 Flexible and portable bindings

A phenomenon in the Islamic tradition that is not often mentioned is the occurrence of limp leather bindings. There is a substantial number of such bindings in the Leiden collections, originating from different places and periods, so my assumption is that they can be found in other collections as well.[11] These bindings have a traditional structure, including a spine lining with extending sides that are used to strengthen the inner joint and endbands, exactly as should be expected, yet there are no paste paper boards. Two subtypes can be established. The oldest seems to be the one that uses thick leather of a firm, good quality, which protects

11 The oldest datable limp leather binding, UBL, Or. 685, is dated 1029 AH / 1620 CE. The type is used at least throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth century: Scheper 2018, 320–325.

the paper text block when used or stored.[12] These covers are not lavishly decorated, although some are blind tooled. They have no turn-ins: the full leather covers are cut flush with the text block. The second type consists of a thinner and suppler quality of leather, that was cut larger than the text block and of which the edges are turn-in, despite the absence of boards. This specific characteristic will have taken careful paring of the leather and precise measuring when folding, otherwise these covers would not align with the text block; we can, therefore, assume that it took experienced craftsmen, and they will have made more than a few such books. Limp bindings may have endleaves or doublures, but it is not always clear whether these belong to the original making or if they are later additions.

As yet, we have no historic reference to this practice, but it is obvious that the tactile quality of these bindings is very different from the much more common books bound in boards. The latter are more robust, which surely would be the choice of binding for volumes that would be kept in libraries with regular visitors and users. The limp bindings would have had a different use. Their content indeed points to a more personal use,[13] and the lightweight and flexible bindings would certainly have added to the portability of these manuscripts (see Figs 7a–b and 8).

Fig. 7a: UBL, Or. 894. Limp leather binding; a work on Ottoman history, ranging between 1048 and 1070 AH.

12 It should be kept in mind that Islamic manuscripts were traditionally stored horizontally, therefore, the limpness of the binding was not a cause of worry for the librarian or collector in terms of shelving.

13 Examples are volumes with assembled recipes and medical notes, and *safina* containing collected poems.

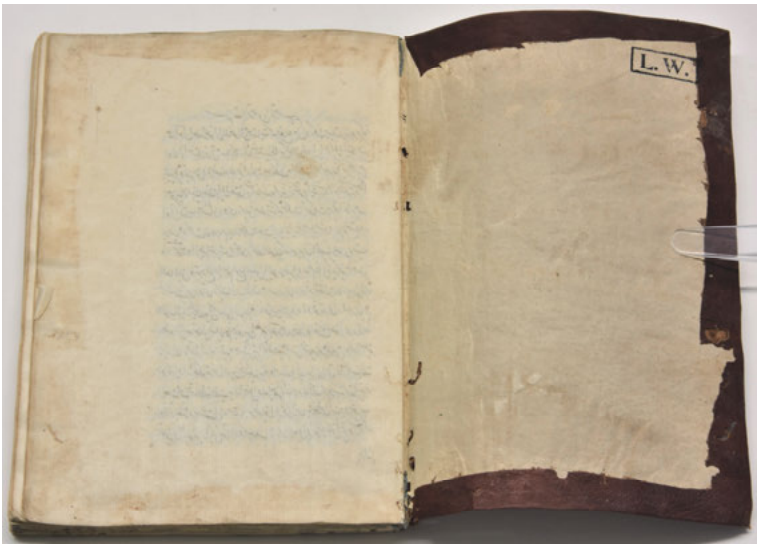

Fig. 7b: UBL, Or. 894. Inside of the limp leather binding with endleaves, pastedowns which are part of the outer gathering; the endband tiedown can be seen in the joint.

Fig. 8: UBL, Or. 465, the biography of Shaykh Safi al-Din, dated 890 AH / 1485 CE. Limp leather binding with blind tooling, impression visible on the inside.

7 Anomalies

A single occurrence of a structure that does not seem to be a direct development from the traditionally used techniques can be considered an anomaly, although we need to keep in mind that the physical assessment of innumerable Islamic manuscript collections remains to be done. We generally expect bookbinders to have executed several – if not many – books with similar structures, even when they were experimenting. A surprising structure in the UBL collection is a manuscript sewn on one single leather support. It decidedly falls into the category of anomalies. Because of the use of a sewing support, it seems to have been inspired by European sewing techniques. However, although the Western tradition indeed influenced Oriental bookbinding, its tradition of supported sewing always uses multiple supports.[14]

Hypothesizing, the structure could be based on the Islamic repair sewing technique using four stations discussed above. When we imagine the unsupported link-stich sewing structure on four stations to include a leather support, it would actually match the appearance of this particular manuscript (see Figs 9a–c). The catalogue description of UBL, Or. 14.449 mentions 'of Russian manufacture', although the source of this information is not provided; the manuscript is dated 1784. Perhaps more examples of this sewing structure will turn up and it is possible that this method was used at a specific time and place.[15] Until then, we may consider this specimen to be an experiment which was not widely embraced.

14 The occurrence of manuscripts sewn on leather supports in the Islamic world, using two supports, is found on Indo-Persian manuscripts and in South-East Asia. Kristine Rose-Beers studied this specific type of manuscript from India in the Chester Beatty Library; see Rose-Beers forthcoming. Their presence in Indonesian manuscripts in the Arabic and Malay collections in Leiden was noticed in Scheper 2018, 78.

15 After submitting this paper, the author identified a second exemplar of this specific binding structure using only one sewing support in the Royal Collection at Windsor Castle. This manuscript, RCIN 1005011, *Ilahinamah*, a book of Islamic prayers written in embossed script, was made for Amir Abd al-Rahman Khan, king of Afghanistan and dates to 1896–1897.

Fig. 9a–b: UBL, Or. 14.449, not dated. Manuscript with a supported sewing structure, using only one sewing support, the leather strap in the centre.

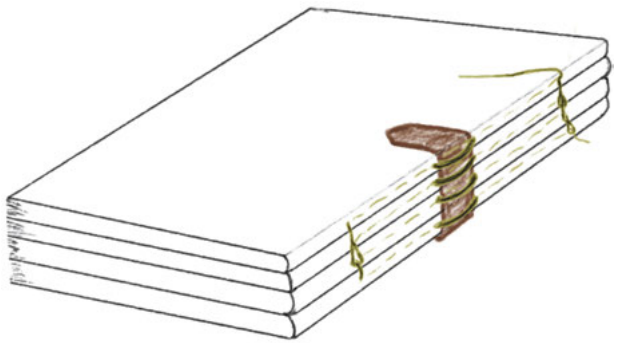

Fig. 9c: Schematic drawing of the structure using one sewing support.

Fig. 10a–d: UBL, Or. 25.573. Manuscript with individually sewn gatherings. The photographs show the manuscript in its wrapper binding (a); the stack of gatherings seen from the spine (b); a close-up of the sewing threads (c); the inner bifolios of two gatherings with the attachment of the sewing threads (d). Not dated.

Another unique structure is noticed on a relatively late (nineteenth century?) copy of Vol. 1 of *Futūḥ al-Šām*, the 'Conquest of Syria', by pseudo-al-Wāqidī, UBL, Or. 25.723. All the gatherings of this substantial manuscript are individually sewn. A black thread was used for the bulk of the gatherings, a few are sewn with natural coloured thread, and the last part is sewn with pink thread. The knots are found in the spinefolds in a rather remarkable manner: it seems that an effort was made to use the smallest length of thread required because the

ends are not tied together. Instead, each piece of thread is secured with a knot immediately behind the sewing station. Keeping each individual gathering secured but not binding them into a manuscript suggests a copying practice, because several copyists could work on the reproduction of this text simultaneously without the folios getting into disarray. In other words, this manuscript may have been the *exemplar* in a *pecia* system (see Figs 10a–d).

8 Unsewn yet connected

An overview of less common structures in the Islamic world needs to include the unsewn manuscript that is kept together with connective strips.[16] Surviving examples of this specific type mostly stem from the late eighteenth or nineteenth century. The text blocks consist of normal gatherings, yet, a sewing structure is absent, and there are no traces of former sewing. The gatherings are solely connected with leather strips, and sometimes strips of cloth or even paper, that are pasted onto the text block spine, with the small extending sides folded over and pasted onto the inner margins of the outer leaves. Strictly speaking, these connective strips only keep together the outer bifolios of the gatherings; the inner bifolios are not secured. Nevertheless, model-making has demonstrated that this method is actually more stable than one would think. The text block is further protected by a wrapper binding with a fore-edge and envelope flap; a manuscript with connective strips is hard to distinguish from a traditionally bound one when it is on a shelf. Once off the shelf and opened, it appears that the binding has no connection with the text block, and that, in fact, the binding is finished differently. Since the spine is not attached, the interior of the spine of the wrapper binding is lined, usually with leather or fabric, at least over the inner joints, for strength, sometimes combined with (decorated) paper, presumably as a more economic option (see Figs 11 and 12).

16 The sub-Saharan loose-leaf manuscript does not fall into this category.

Fig. 11: UBL, Or. 14.204a. Unsewn manuscript with connective strips made of leather, the full-leather wrapper binding has strips of leather lining the inner joints and a separate piece of paper lining the spine; with a slipcase. Dated 1275 AH / 1859 CE (part b has similar structure and slipcase).

Fig. 12: UBL, Or. 14.209. Unsewn manuscript, connective strips missing but traces of textile strips, the wrapper binding has decorated cloth lining the fore-edge flap and spine, 1273 AH / 1856 CE.

Unfortunately, we currently lack a historic reference to this method of bookmaking and, therefore, can only speculate about the rationale for its use. It is noteworthy that this method of keeping texts together is found in manuscripts and printed books alike. From a practical point of view, it is clear that the pasting of the two strips sped up the process enormously. It may be no coincidence that most specimens with this structure originate from the period in which the implementation of printing in the Middle East contributed to the ever-increasing demand that bookbinders were facing. It seems plausible that this specific type was developed to serve the publishing and bookselling trade.

In addition to the wrapper binding, these books are often provided with a slipcase that keeps the whole entity together. This is a sensible protective measure for books with connective strips and a loose binding. We will return to these slipcases below.

9 Demarcation of the spinefold

When one examines physical characteristics of books from a culture that extended over numerous centuries and such a vast geographic area, it is not surprising we sometimes encounter features that are not yet fully understood. An example in the category of 'Tied and Bound' is UBL, Or. 14.210, Cairo 1846 (four volumes, copied by Ḥasan al-Farrāʿ, in the al-Azhar Mosque in Cairo). Each of these volumes consists of a thick stack of gatherings previously held together with connective strips (which are now missing) and a wrapper binding. Though the connective strips are gone, we can see that they probably consisted of leather, judging by the discoloration on the spine.

Upon closer examination, it appears that the text block spine is marked by a row of tiny holes running from front to back, more or less located in the centre of the gatherings. These holes are not visible in every bifolio, only in the spinefold of the outer bifolios. They, therefore, do not belong to a former sewing structure; a sewing structure that employs only one sewing station would not be a very functional, or common, structure either. When the holes are not related to a sewing structure, it follows that they have an external cause. It could possibly be damage, caused by a thread that was once wrapped around the stack of gatherings. However, in that case, one would surely expect to see a similar sort of mechanical damage at the fore-edge of the text block, which is not the case (see Fig. 13).

Fig. 13: UBL, Or. 14.210b. Part two of four volumes, dated 1262 AH / 1846 CE, copied by Hasan al-Farra', in the al-Azhar Mosque in Cairo. Unsewn manuscript, the connective strips missing but discolouration suggests leather strips. A tiny hole is visible in the centre of the spinefolds.

Further examination of the paper shows that there appears to be a small fold in the centre of each gathering, perpendicular to the spine, as if the paper has been nipped tightly in that area – not completely folded altogether, but pressed briefly so as to demarcate the foldline. The nipping and subsequent unfolding would have left a slight distortion in the spinefolds, and the tension caused by this distortion in the outer bifolios, combined with use and age, may have led to abrasion; this damage seems to present itself as a small hole.

The function of such nipping or squeezing does not seem to have a historic reference, so, again, we need the artefacts as witnesses to the bookbinding practices. Therefore, more manuscripts were surveyed, looking for further evidence of these subtle folds. The phenomenon may be better visible in unsewn volumes – possibly because the gatherings were never pressed or used under the same tension as bound volumes – yet, it can also be seen in sewn and bound manuscripts. In contrast to the unsewn manuscripts, bound volumes could only be examined inside; possible similar damage to the outer bifolios could not be observed because of the binding attached (see Figs 14a–c and 15).

Fig. 14a: UBL, Or. 12.86. Unsewn manuscript, the loose gatherings in their wrapper binding as seen from the back, also showing the ruling lines in the last page. Dated 1269 AH / 1853 CE.

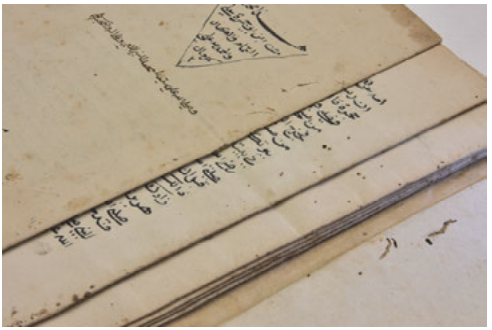

Fig. 14b: UBL, Or. 12.861. Detail of the nipping or subtle fold-marks in the centre of the inner margins.

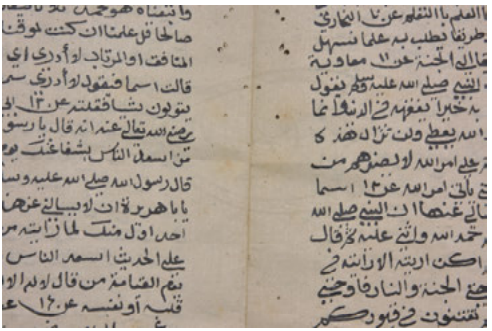

Fig. 14c: UBL, Or. 12.861. Detail of one of the gathering's centres, with the nipping or subtle fold-mark showing in the centre, where the watermark (double-edged shield with crescent, or *Abū Shubbāk*) can be seen.

Fig. 15: UBL, Or. 14.366. Sewn manuscript, detail of spinefold showing the nipping or fold-mark, opposite the central line of the ruled lines. Undated.

Although this topic may warrant a full project that includes the survey of the whole collection, only a selection of manuscripts was surveyed for the current paper. A lot of examples were found without utilising any particular method of selection. The subtle folds do not occur exactly in the centre of the spine, with equal measurements from the fold to the head and the tail. Instead, the folds appear to exactly match the central ruling line.

A plausible explanation, therefore, is that the nipping, primarily intended to mark a specific point in the length of the spinefold, is related to the positioning of the *mistarah*, the ruling board. Since the number of lines is often uneven, the central thread on the *mistarah* would then be positioned next to the mark. This would be an easy way of controlling the similarity of the page layout throughout a manuscript. The nipping of the centre of the spinefolds allowed the positioning of the ruling board, without taking any measurements of the margins and doing maths to calculate its central position. Moreover, the practice of aligning the ruling board in this way – and not, for example, using a

given distance from the upper and fore-edge margins – would allow a particular *mistarah* to be used for manuscripts with slightly different sizes. Consequently, the copyist would be able to prepare the layout of the page without having to calculate the position of the text panel, regardless of the exact size of the paper. In turn, it would explain the sometimes slightly unbalanced width of the top, bottom and fore-edge margins in comparison with the inner margin. When the hypothesized procedure was indeed used, the inner margin then had a set distance: the one that the *mistarah* dictated. Even when the paper format of a particular book allowed for wider spacing, towards the fore-edge margin, the alignment of the ruling board to the squeezed paper prohibited the ruling lines, and therefore the text area, to be spaced out further to the centre of the folio.

10 Into the printing era

In terms of the sewing technique and structure, the bookbinding tradition in the Islamic world is remarkably consistent, and we still find traditionally bound books in the nineteenth century, when more books than ever needed to be bound because of the output of the printing presses, even though Western bookbinding techniques had become more widely established by that time. Regarding these printed books, we see that the stab-stitched construction, which was formerly used mainly as a repair technique, is now applied as the initial structure. Although this is not a technique to be favoured when one has the longevity of a book in mind, it does speed up the production process.

The construction using connective strips and a wrapper binding is also frequently found in printed books. The appearance of these books is similar to the manuscripts of that type; the only noteworthy change is a slightly different use of materials. Though a lot of these bindings are covered with full leather, paper appears to be the predominant choice for the connective strips to keep the printed gatherings together, and the lining of the fore-edge flap is often a piece of fabric. This textile is usually coloured, or patterned. Bookbinders continued to make slipcases for these printed volumes as well. Though we cannot always be certain that a slipcase is contemporary with the book it contains, there is sometimes material evidence that a book and its associated slipcase were made at the same time, possibly in the same workshop.[17] An example of such evidence

17 These items were very common in the Ottoman world, thus, it is feasible that these containers were produced in separate slipcase ateliers, but they may also have been made in a book-

is the slipcase for a volume that was printed in Cairo in 1876, since the block-printed textile used for the lining of the spine of the wrapper binding and its fore-edge flap is similar to the lining of the closing flap of the slipcase (UBL, 865 C 24) (see Fig. 16). It is interesting to reflect on the costs of labour and materials that would have gone into the making of the slipcase, which seems to contrast with the fact that the associated book was not sewn but has a seemingly low-budget construction. This reminds us we have to be careful with drawing conclusions too quickly from structures whose contextual use we, as yet, do not fully understand.

Fig. 16: UBL, 865 C 24, Cairo, 1293 AH / 1876 CE; printed volume, unsewn, connective strips of paper, wrapper binding lined with decorative textile on the spine, the closing flap of the slipcase lined with the same fabric.

binder's workshop; how this craft and trade was organised is currently unknown. See Plummer, Hepworth and Scheper forthcoming.

11 Enclosures

The slipcase shown above has a specific form of mechanical damage. The hole in the front board of the case is an indication of where the manuscript release strap would have been laced through the board (see Fig. 17).[18] The manuscript release strap, usually a ribbon, is a long strap that goes down to the bottom of the enclosure, across the bottom and back up to protrude a few centimetres from the mouth of the slipcase. Pulling this strap would open the closing flap and lift the book from the bottom, so that it can be retrieved.

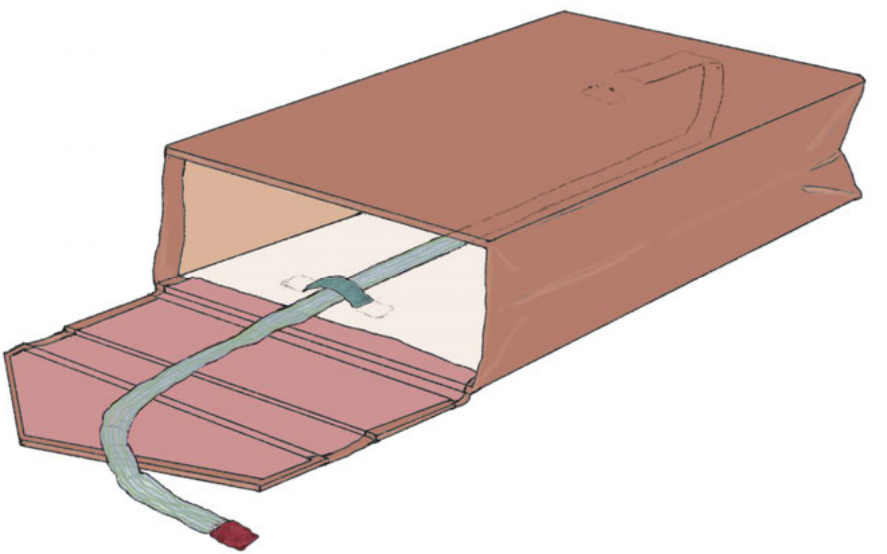

Fig. 17: Drawing showing the position of the manuscript release strap, its attachment explaining the particular damage in the front board of the slipcase belonging to UBL, 865 C 24, in Fig. 16.

18 Together with David Plummer and Paul Hepworth, I developed a terminology to describe all the different components of a slipcase, in order to facilitate communication about these items. In contrast to a 'insert flap release strap' (a short leather strap attached to the flap with which the slipcase is closed), we denoted the strap or ribbon that helps to retrieve the manuscript from the slipcase the 'manuscript release strap'. See Plummer, Hepworth and Scheper forthcoming.

Such a slipcase may almost seem essential for a book that is not sewn but is only held together with strips adhered to the spine, which is not too securely protected by a loose cover wrapped around the text block and has no *proper* fastening. Edward William Lane, the nineteenth-century pioneering Egyptologist, notes (in his account of the manners and customs of the modern Egyptians) that *many* books are unsewn, though he does not explain exactly where he saw such books or how they were used. However, he does note that because of this 'the gatherings are kept together with an outer case of pasteboard and leather'. He also provides a sketch that actually illustrates a slipcase.[19]

It is interesting to see in his drawing that the slipcase does not have a manuscript release strap, but something that we (David Plummer, Paul Hepworth and I) have called an insert flap release strap. This smaller strap, nearly always made of leather, does not help to retrieve the book from the case, though it does give access to the book by opening the flap. This type is found frequently on nineteenth-century slipcases.

Slipcases, however, were also made for numerous manuscripts that were sewn in the traditional manner, and a lot of those date from before the nineteenth century. It seems that the manuscript release strap was used more frequently for these older items. This can also be observed in the wonderful engravings in d'Ohsson's book *Tableau Général de l'Empire Othoman*. Plate 39 of the first volume represents at least ten slipcases, the majority of which appear to have a manuscript release strap.[20]

The slipcase, however, is by no means the earliest type of protective enclosure that was used in the Islamic world. Before slipcases appeared on the scene, we find bags, pouches, and satchels (see above, Fig. 1). Unfortunately, it is difficult to date these protective enclosures. Unlike books, they have no colophons, and we lack sufficient information about these items in the known historic treatises. What complicates their study is the fact that they are not necessarily made at the same time as their associated manuscript. What makes matters more complex is that even if the slipcase is contemporary with the binding, as in this example – which we know because similar materials and ornamentation were used – we still may be wrong-footed because the binding may not be original to the manuscript. This is actually the case here, as the repairs in the text block indicate; this manuscript was resewn and rebound. Careful examination is, therefore, crucial.

19 Lane 1836, 265.
20 d'Ohsson 1790.

There is no evidence of slipcases dating to the seventeenth century. Textile bags and satchels precede the use of slipcases. Unfortunately, only a few textile bags seem to have survived. These items must have been fragile, and a large number of them were likely replaced at a certain point in time. Others may have been repurposed, pretty and useful as they were. For these reasons it is impossible to deduce how common they were. Some of the surviving bags are not so old, though the bag made of the striped silk that was used to protect this large, two volume Qur'an seems to date from the seventeenth century (see Fig. 18).

Fig. 18: UBL, Or. 1217, part one of a Qur'an in two large volumes. A silk bag with its associated manuscript 55 × 36.5 cm, the bag measures 57 × 97 cm from the bottom to the pointed end of the flap.

We do, however, have earlier iconographic evidence of such bags. In two miniatures in a manuscript dated 1501, a few items do not look like bound manuscripts but appear to be a bag.[21] The ornamentation of these items does not correspond with the tooling of bindings, nor does their shape – with the envelope flap along the long side – correspond with the format of manuscripts from that period (see Figs 19 and 20).

21 Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Elliott 192, *Nizami*, fol. 111b and fol. 319a; more examples from around 1500 can be found, see for example https://wayback.archive-it.org/6780/20210227212741/https://www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/whatson/whats-on/online/love-and-devotion/sufi-poets (accessed on 23 March 2022), displaying several manuscripts in which bags are represented in paintings.

Fig. 19: Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Elliott 192, fol. 111^{v} (detail), with three bags in the lower part of the painting. Courtesy of the Bodleian Library.

Fig. 20: Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Elliott 192, fol. 319^{r} (detail), with three bags in the lower part of the painting. Courtesy of the Bodleian Library.

How exactly the making and use of enclosures developed in the following centuries is hard to say, based on our current knowledge. More enclosures have survived from the nineteenth century. Among those are a lot of slipcases, such as those discussed above, and a fairly large number of manuscripts have retained their satchel. Satchels are often made of tooled and dyed or painted leather, and decorated with leather or thread embroidery. A lot of satchels were made for loose-leaf manuscripts from sub-Saharan Africa, that received a primary cover which was wrapped around the stack of leaves, with an envelope-shaped flap that closed over the front cover, held together with a strap. This entity then could be slipped into the satchel; numerous of which have a shoulder strap, or remnants of such a strap. Another type of enclosure is a pouch, that is softer and perhaps more suitable for smaller items, such as this popular North-African prayerbook, *Dala'il al-Khayrat wa-Shawariq al-Anwar*, UBL, Or. 1335, dating from 1226 AH / 1811 CE and measuring 8 × 7.8 cm (see Figs 21 and 22).

Fig. 21: UBL, Or. 25.427, Qur'an, *maghribi* script, not dated. Leather satchel, tooled and painted, with its associated loose-leaf manuscript kept in a leather wrapper binding with matching decoration.

Fig. 22: UBL, Or. 1335, *Dala'il al-Khayrat wa-Shawariq al-Anwar*, dated 1226 AH / 1811 CE. Silk pouch and full leather binding of a North-African manuscript.

12 The codicological value of enclosures

It is clear with the present hiatuses in our knowledge that in order to understand the practice of slipcase and satchel making within the manuscript world, we first need to further study their occurrence and usage, the different varieties of enclosures, and the variations in composition of the different types. Ironically, the study of enclosures is hampered because the value of these items does not seem be recognised: many bags, slipcases, and other enclosures are not included in the description of their associated manuscripts in institutional catalogues.[22] This worries me as a conservator, because uncatalogued items will not easily surface and receive the care that they may need in terms of preservation policies and priorities. While it may be argued that many of the surviving enclosures cannot indisputably be linked to the books they contain, and, therefore, the historic context is uncertain, it should be unquestionable that enclosures are far more common in the Islamic world than in many other book cultures. That fact alone warrants a better understanding of the historic development of these enclosures.

At present, it seems that the addition of a slipcase to manuscripts was almost standard practice in certain institutional libraries in the later Ottoman period, and these slipcases may consist of simple materials and lack individual characteristic decoration. However, even non-distinct slipcases, produced in bulk in workshops specialised in producing series or large numbers economically, may eventually be informative and helpful to pinpoint a certain location in the history of a manuscript that is contained within it. These mass-produced items share materials and display similar workshop-specific methods; however, we have yet to learn how to recognise and use the information that such items contain in their material composition. In order to do so, it is essential to preserve them and make them accessible. Other slipcases are more luxurious, ornamental, and made especially for an individual valued manuscript, quite possibly in a private collection. The nature of these protective items is such that they could easily be transferred to other manuscripts. The codicological item-

22 This conclusion follows the catalogue search in several institutions (Leiden, Berlin, Sarajevo, Manchester), combined with a physical survey of the stacks. See Plummer, Hepworth and Scheper forthcoming. A notable exception is an inventory of the al-Jazzar Pasha library, a copy of which was recently discovered in the Ankara Endowment Ministry. Numerous manuscripts listed are described as having a ظرف *ẓarf* (slipcase). The history of this library, including the materiality of its collection, is currently being studied within the 'al-Jazzar Library Project' at the Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures, Hamburg.

specific information may, therefore, not necessarily be valuable, but the fact that a manuscript received the enclosure *is*. For that reason alone, its existence should be noted in the catalogue description.

In order to further the study of historic enclosures – in all their different physical appearances, substances, and designs – they need to be identifiable. In addition, we need to learn how to ascertain whether a manuscript under study is contemporary with its associated enclosure. When the correlation can be established, the conservation of both items is all the more important. Cataloguing, preservation, and digitisation are intricately linked in the field of manuscript studies, and in the field of Islamic manuscripts, this includes the protective enclosures made for the books.

13 A common vocabulary as a tool for book historians

Some concluding thoughts concern our means of communication. A common vocabulary is essential in any exchange or study in the field of manuscripts and books. Catalogue descriptions, conservation reports, articles or essays addressing new finds or insights, and papers and presentations in conferences are useful only when terms to describe phenomena are used that mean the same thing to everybody. We need to be precise and consistent. This is certainly not easy as the field has developed over time and gradually included increasingly diverse traditions. The numerous languages in which the primary vocabularies associated with the different traditions have been developed add to the complexity. A consistent vocabulary for different types of enclosures is lacking altogether.[23] Examples can be found on social media and some collections' websites of how a variety of terms is used to denote these items, mixing up the different types, which illustrates how confusing it is when a common vocabulary is lacking. It certainly hampers the study of these artefacts that are part of the item's codicological entity and of the manuscript tradition at large.

Therefore, terminology is vitally needed and should be used consistently. The illustrated online 'Terminology', that was developed for the conservation

23 Besides the Islamic world, it concerns other book traditions as well, in Asia, Africa, and Europe. An exemplary study was conducted recently into Ethiopic manuscript bags; see Hanscom 2016.

and description of Islamic manuscripts, includes a page for 'Enclosures'.[24] These suggested terms and definitions can be a useful start. Regarding a more detailed description of item-specific features, there is a need for an extended, refined terminology that zooms in on different components. Such an in-depth terminology has recently been developed for slipcases.[25] We hope that the availability of terms and definitions may stimulate further study that will help to identify and make accessible a lot more of these codicological units that are still hidden in collections and remain unknown up to this day.

14 Concluding thoughts

This overview of how books are kept together in the Islamic world is bound to become outdated in due course. Examples of additional methods and practices will surface, and new studies will explain the techniques that, as yet, still puzzle us. This is something to look forward to, because it will further contextualize the making and use of manuscripts and printed books. However, it is good to point out that such progression is possible only when all of us who work with these collections do so collaboratively. We should try to improve ourselves by keeping up to date with the latest insights, using each other's knowledge, and sharing what we know ourselves, even though it is not always evident what the best platform would be for sharing the information and expertise that we have. It will also require a continued effort: accessibility to and preservation of collections is essential, as is the correct description of items so that objects can be searched for and found. The study of the materiality can also be supported by making more manuscripts available in a digital format, although digitisation practices may often (need to) be improved by including item-specific features. Not every scholar may need the physical characteristics of a book for his or her studies, but in order to study the material and technical developments and increase our understanding of bookmaking traditions, we need to be able to study a book as an object.

24 Hepworth and Scheper, launched in 2014, with continued updates. The terminology is not a static list and we welcome suggestions; see: https://www.islamicmanuscriptconservation.org/terminology.html (accessed on 23 March 2022).

25 Plummer, Hepworth and Scheper forthcoming.

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Abbreviations

UBL = Universiteitsbibliotheek Leiden

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