

Case Study 3.4: An Early Modern Coptic Slipcase from Cairo, Egypt

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The slipcase, characterised by its rectangular shape and open edge, has been a conventional book container since ancient times. It can be manufactured using various materials, ranging from simple cardboard to precious metals adorned with gems. Additionally, depending on the material and the size of the book it holds, the slipcase is highly portable. It offers additional protection for the book, but its function goes beyond mere practicality. Slipcases, through their materiality, can convey specific messages. The materials used to make them reflect the preciousness of the contents, the owner's social status and the production context. Furthermore, slipcases may be adorned with inscriptions which offer additional information, such as the date of production, the name of the craftsman or the institution to which it belonged.

The slipcase being presented here (340 × 240 mm) is composed of a sturdy wooden frame, covered with iron plates, which have been nailed to the surface to hold them in place. Despite the oxidised state of the iron plates, one can discern that they are embellished with a design printed on both sides, depicting a cross and a Coptic inscription bearing the verses of a widely used hymn, the Trisagion. The hymn has been used continuously in Eastern and Western Christianity since the beginning of the fifth century and, thus, represents a monument to faith and spirituality. Furthermore, the vertical orientation of the casket, with the opening at the top, would have allowed the decoration on both sides to be visible and facilitate the identification of the book. Unfortunately, despite the protection provided by the case, nothing remains of the book that was contained within. It may have been a Gospel, as they were among the books most commonly used, often preceded in the Egyptian liturgy by the recitation of the Trisagion.

The slipcase is from a Coptic Christian monastery in Cairo, Egypt, and dates back to the fifteenth–sixteenth century, during the Mamluk sultanate era. The period was characterised by the decline of the Coptic Christian minority in the face of the Muslim majority. Copts were often viewed with suspicion, and, despite their presence in the administration, their status was often ambivalent. Executions and church burnings were common, thus, many Copts converted to Islam to limit discrimination and retain their jobs. The historical context reflects in the modest yet robust materials used in the construction of the case, which draw a fitting parallel to the defensive position of the Coptic community at that time.



Figs 1a–b: Iron-covered wooden slipcase for a book, London, British Museum, 1867,0709.10; © The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) licence.