

Thirteenth-Century German Limp Binding

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Limp binding refers to a manuscript bound without boards (Brown, p. 80; Marks, p. 36; Szirmai, p. 285). This type of binding is frequently overlooked by scholars—for example, Edith Diehl, in her landmark survey first published in 1946, only mentions limp bindings in a very brief discussion of a Spanish binding (text, vol. 1, p. 93, and vol. 2, Plate 28); Michelle Brown relegates them to the late Middle Ages and early modern period; and J. A. Szirmai goes so far as to say that these bindings have received little attention “because they lack decoration which was usually the exclusive interest of students of bookbinding in the past” (p. 285).

However, perhaps because Szirmai is more interested in the structures of medieval bindings than their decoration, he devotes an entire chapter to their history and structure (chapt. 10, pp. 285–319), and it is his work that forms the basis for my reproduction.

Materials

Leather cover: vegetable-tanned goatskin

Leather edging: chrome-tanned pigskin

Lining: Linen

Sewing thread: Waxed linen

Embroidery thread: Commercial embroidery thread (because I used so little, I could not justify the expense of buying silk embroidery thread)

Button: Antler

Quires: Commercial calligraphic paper

Historic Models

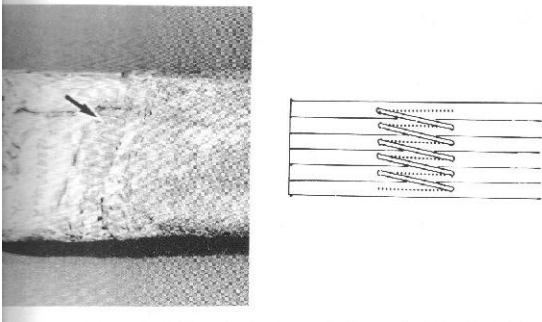
Szirmai outlines several different styles of limp bindings that cover several centuries, beginning with eighth century and ending with the sixteenth. I chose to emulate a twelfth- to thirteenth-century binding style in which the text block is attached directly to the cover by means of *long-stitch sewing*, as opposed to *all-along* sewing. The difference is this: in all-along sewing, quires (gatherings of pages) are sewn to exterior supports one at a time. One quire is sewn to all supports before the next quire is sewn. In long-stitch sewing, all quires are sewn directly to the leather at one location, before sewing all the quires at the next location is undertaken. (See the diagram, below, for a visual representation of long-stitch sewing.)

I loosely modeled my book on two manuscripts Szirmai discusses: Basle UB MS O II 18 and The Hague KB 73 J 7. Both of these are from circa the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, both are covered in leather as opposed to parchment or vellum, both have a lining on the inside of the leather (one of parchment and one of linen), and both use long-stitch sewing to attach the text block (pp. 291–97). Basle UB MS O II 18 is a German binding; the geographic origin of the other is unidentified (Table 10.1, p. 292) but is most likely German or French (pp. 295–96).

Of the 13 limp bindings Szirmai surveys in Table 10.1, half the leather covers are lined. I chose to use blue linen for my lining, because I had some on hand. Szirmai states that the edges are often covered with a leather edging and that the covering often overhangs the edges of the text block (p. 294); I reproduced both these features.

The first step, of course, was folding the quires. I then measured and cut the leather and an identical linen lining, after which I cut and sewed the leather edging. All sewing holes were punched using an awl prior to sewing. The pronounced texture of the goatskin cover made it difficult to punch the holes in a perfectly straight pattern through all three layers of leather. After the cover was sewn, I created a template for the sewing stations on the spine and used that template to punch holes in the quires and through the leather/linen cover. Precise measurement was crucial.

You can see from looking at the spine of my book that there are four sections on the spine where the sewing thread emerged onto the outside of the cover. Figure 10.7 (p. 295) from Szirmai illustrates the sewing pattern:



After the quires were sewn to the cover, I wrapped embroidery thread around the sewing thread, as was done on the Basle manuscript. Unfortunately, I cannot determine the embroidery pattern from the photograph in Figure 10.8 (p. 295):

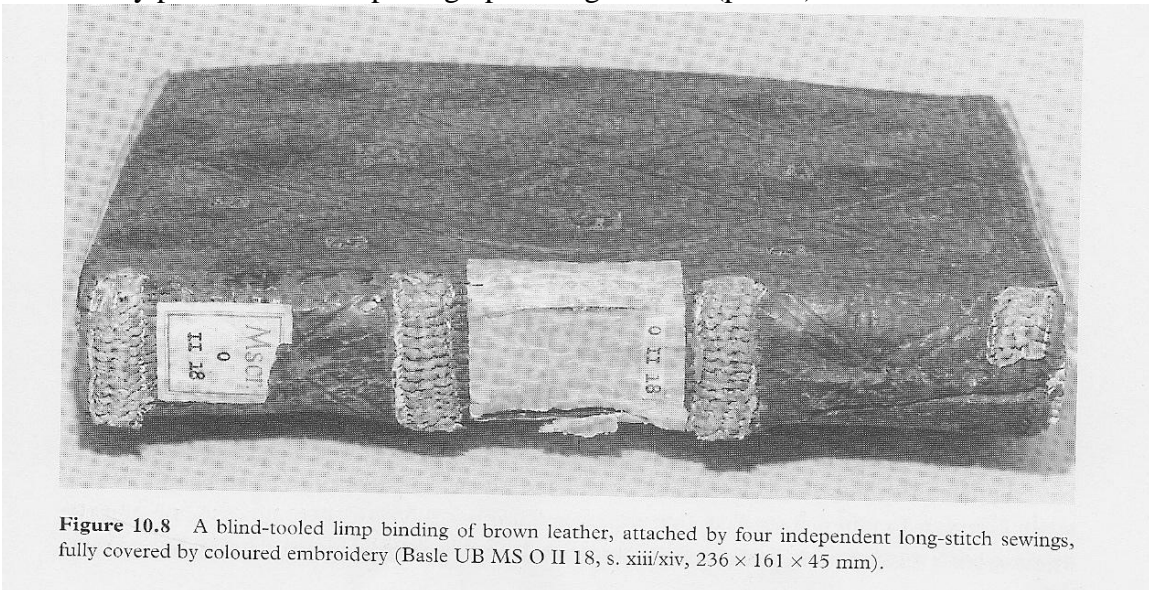


Figure 10.8 A blind-tooled limp binding of brown leather, attached by four independent long-stitch sewings, fully covered by coloured embroidery (Basle UB MS O II 18, s. xiii/xiv, 236 × 161 × 45 mm).

The triangular flap and button closure were also common—9 of the 13 bindings Szirmai discusses had flaps (see again Table 10.1), which were secured with either cords or buttons and loops. I used a button made of antler that I purchased and a leather loop, both of which I attached after the leather was lined and the quires attached to the cover.

I chose not to blind-tool the leather cover because Basle UB MS O II 18 is an exception to the rule: in the manuscripts Szirmai surveyed, very few had blind-tooled covers. In addition, the texture of the goatskin I used for the covering is a less than ideal surface for tooling and likely would not produce pleasing results.

Bibliography

Brown, Michelle P. *Understanding Illuminated Manuscripts: A Guide to Technical Terms* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 1994).

Diehl, Edith. *Bookbinding: Its Background and Technique* (New York: Dover, 1980); two volumes bound as one.

Marks, P. J. M. *The British Library Guide to Bookbinding: History and Techniques* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998).

Szirmai, J. A. *Archaeology of Medieval Bookbinding* (Aldershot, U.K.: Ashgate, 1999).