

Treatment Techniques for Persian and Arabic Bindings at the Library of Congress

ABSTRACT

The “Islamic” binding has been typified by codicologists and conservators in the last fifty years: a simple link-stitch sewing attaches the gatherings of the text blocks together; endbands are woven in the chevron pattern, and cover boards come up to the edge of the flat spine. Often a flap covers the front edge of the book and comes up over at least a quarter of the cover board. Books are generally bound in goatskin leather with the spine adhered directly to the text block; minimal additional cover-to-text attachment is provided by the flanges of a linen spine lining. Thus, for book conservators interested in strong text block-to-cover attachments, Islamic books have weak constructions. Attempts to mend or strengthen these items in the past by binders trained in the European tradition have resulted in damaging, inharmonious repairs. Common rebinding methods involved the excessive use of adhesive on the spine of a sewn text block or rebinding the text block in classic nineteenth-century style with a rounded-and-backed spine. Both types of repair resulted in bindings with restricted openings that exacerbated the damage to a delicate paper often decorated with verdigris and gold text-panel outlines.

The presentation discussed the treatment techniques recently used on a number of manuscripts from the Persian and Arabic collections at the Library of Congress. While surveying these collections it became clear that often the binders working within the originating tradition made stylistic changes and modified the “classic” structure so that the text and book would function well. Library of Congress treatment solutions are adapted from within the tradition of bookbinding from the “Islamic” world and also include a variety of book conservation techniques used for

treating European manuscripts. Treatment choices are based on systematic evaluation of all the elements of the book to be treated, that is, the specifics of paper and binding condition, and evaluating them in relation to each other. In addition, an understanding of the aesthetic relationship of the cover to the text block and the hierarchy implicit in that relationship in the Islamic tradition is also explored.

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