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Judging a book by its cover: a new project analysing leatherwork from Sur Island, Sudan

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Abstract

A new project at the Institute of Archaeology will build on the work of the Humboldt University Nubian Expedition by bringing together multi-disciplinary approaches in the analysis and cataloguing of leatherwork recovered from a medieval church on Sur Island, Sudan. A particular focus of the Sur Island Leatherwork Project will be the rich corpus of Late Coptic bookbindings. They include fragments of unparalleled variety, ranging from examples of Coptic codices known from Egyptian contexts to more unusual structural components which may reflect Nubian leatherwork traditions. By combining archaeometric analyses with socio-historical research on the assemblage, we hope to shed light on the nuances in the use and cultural value of leather in Makuritan Nubia and Late Coptic bookbinding more broadly. The material reflects a diverse range of influences and will add to the growing body of knowledge about the Fourth Cataract region in Sudan.

Keywords: bookbinding, codicology, Coptic bookbinding, Makuria, leather, Sur Island, Fourth Nile Cataract

Introduction

Between 2004 and 2007, under the aegis of the Merowe Dam Archaeological Salvage Project, the Humboldt University Nubian Expedition (H.U.N.E.) conducted a range of surveys and excavations in the area of the Fourth Nile Cataract in Sudan (Näser 2005; 2008; Näser and Kleinitz 2010). Among these was the 2007 excavation of SR022.A, a medieval church on Sur Island, where a remarkable collection of leather and parchment fragments was unearthed (Billig 2007). SR022.A was first recorded in a reconnaissance survey in 2004 (Näser 2005, 85–86, figs 9–12). It is notable as the largest known church in the area of the Fourth Cataract (Näser and Tsakos 2014, 977) suggesting its contemporary significance, a hypothesis further reinforced by the rich nature of the assemblage found in the area of the sacristy in a secondary context. The finds included a significant number of bookbinding fragments of unparalleled variety, which may have encased the exceptional corpus of Greek manuscripts dated from the ninth or tenth century CE found alongside them (Näser and Tsakos 2014, 981).

To date, the texts have been the subject of intensive study (Tsakos 2018) – a great boon to researchers as preserved texts from this part of Nubia are rare. Extensive work has also gone into the conservation of the leatherwork (Krutzsch et al. 2012), leaving it ready for the next step in the research into this unique corpus of materials. The aim of the Sur Island Leatherwork Project is to conduct thorough material and socio-historical analysis of the assemblage, with particular focus on the bookbindings, and to produce a catalogue that will make it accessible for future research.

The leather assemblage

The leatherwork assemblage consists of over 400 pieces, ranging from nearly complete objects down to fragments of no more than a few millimetres. The complete objects include an amulet (a *higab* or leather casing often containing a religious, magical or apotropaic text) and several small pouches featuring intricate decoration of tooled lines and crosses (Näser and Tsakos 2014, 978–9, pls 3–4). The fragmented

leather is diverse in size, colour and type. It includes large pieces featuring stitching and other diagnostic elements, as well as smaller fragments of straps, braided strands and tassels. Even though much of the assemblage is fragmentary, as one of the largest finds of leatherwork and bookbinding material from the region (see Adams 1979), it holds great potential as a point of departure for exploring literacy and the materiality of writing and text (see Piquette and Whitehouse 2013; Hoogendijk and van Gompel 2018) in Makuria, a Christian kingdom dominant in the Fourth Cataract area for much of the Middle Ages (Godlewski 2014, 2018). In particular, it may illuminate nuances in the use and cultural value of leather in Christian Nubia as opposed to Byzantine/Coptic Egypt, which is where most research has focused (for example, Kotsifou 2007; Veldmeijer 2012).

Bookbinding

One subset of this assemblage requires particular emphasis, due both to its volume and its socio-historical significance. Much of the leatherwork from Sur Island is associated with bookbinding. It includes large sections of book covers with decoration in the Coptic tradition (specifically blind tooling, cut-outs and interlacing; Figure 1) (see also Szirmai 1999, 40–1; Foot 1998, figs 18 and 29), as well as many smaller fragments featuring aspects of decoration and structural components, such as stitching, patching and sewing.

Among the fragments there is evidence of multiple types of codex construction. This includes the common codex structures such as single- and double-layer leather wrapped over boards made of papyrus cartonnage, some likely with double-boards in the Late Coptic style (see Szirmai 1999, 35–7). There is also evidence of some more unusual styles, such as what appear to be coverboards constructed of recycled scraps of leather patched together (see Szirmai 1999, 35). A significant set of fragments appears to be part of semi-limp covers constructed of multiple sheets of regular, layered leather finished with an edging strip (Figure 2). To our knowledge, this cover type is not represented in any of the major collections of Coptic bookbindings, such as the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York or the British Library, nor has it been mentioned in the extant literature.



Figure 1 Fragment of an elaborately decorated book cover featuring several techniques in the Coptic tradition, such as cut-outs, blind tooling and interlacing (Source: photograph by Paulina Wandowicz)



Figure 2 Fragment of multi-layered leather bookbinding, with a clear corner and a thin edging strip forming two finished edges (Source: photograph by Paulina Wandowicz)

Although it has long been accepted that the Coptic codex is the origin of the bookbinding traditions of Europe and the Near East (Cockerell 1932; Foot 1998; Hobson 1938), there are inherent difficulties to the study of this subject. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when many important finds were made, such as the Nag Hammadi and Hamuli codices, it was common practice to remove Coptic bindings from the highly valued manuscripts inside without sufficient documentation of their original structure (Szirmai 1999, 3, 32). For this reason, literature on the subject is severely limited (we know of only three syntheses: Marshall 1993, Petersen 1948 and Szirmai 1999). Furthermore, almost no archaeometric analysis of the known material has been carried out, which is the gap that this project hopes to address. The bookbinding represented in the assemblage therefore not only presents an opportunity to add to the research on Coptic bookbinding more broadly, but also to increase our understanding of Coptic-style bookbinding in Nubia during the Middle Ages.

The project to date

Following the 2007 excavation, the leather assemblage was taken to Germany for conservation treatment. Over a period of several years they were cleaned, treated and, in the case of some of the book covers, mounted by a team of three conservators (see Krutzsch et al. 2012). In May 2021 the Sur Island Leatherwork Project commenced. So far, a project database containing detailed object information has been completed, providing a crucial first step towards developing a publishable catalogue. As part of the process, work has been undertaken towards potential archaeometric analyses, as well as further research on the socio-historical context of the assemblage, with a particular focus on Coptic bookbinding, leatherwork in the Nile Valley and Makuritan Nubia.

Future work and objectives

Moving forward, our work will be focused on three primary strands. First, we are in the early stages of arranging archaeometric analyses,

with a particular focus on furthering the understanding of the materials and manufacture of the bookbindings. This will initially consist of species identification using zooarchaeology by mass spectrometry to establish the types of leather being used in manufacture. We also hope that the research will involve chemical analysis of the prominent adhesive residues used in the various codex constructions present in the assemblage. The adhesives used in medieval bookbinding (both Coptic and European) are not well understood; hypotheses range from starch pastes to various gums and resins (Marshall 1993, 82; Szirmai 1999, 38). Several pieces in the assemblage show a dark, glossy substance which we tentatively identified as an adhesive. It will feature as a central part of this line of enquiry, which we hope will ultimately address this major gap.

The second strand of work will consist of continued research on the socio-historical context of the assemblage and manufacture of the bookbindings. Within this, we plan to explore the more unusual types of bookbinding construction represented in the assemblage and what they might tell us about regional practices in Makuria. The differences in patterns of leather use observed between SR022.A assemblage and comparable finds from other regions are intriguing. The increased leather consumption in the Sur book covers may reflect the known Nubian practice of using leather thongs in sewing, in place of flax or sinew, a factor also evident in this corpus (Veldmeijer and Skinner 2019, 498). We hope that this research will further the discussion of 'Coptic bookbindings', which were produced across a wide geographic area incorporating a more diverse range of theologies, and social and cultural influences, than the term 'Coptic' might suggest.

Finally, the third strand of work, and the intended outcome of the Sur Island Leatherwork Project, will be the publication of a monograph that draws together the first two strands and includes a catalogue of the entire assemblage. In parallel, we plan to arrange a seminar at the Institute of Archaeology, UCL, during the 2021/22 academic year to foster interest and increase awareness of this area of study. We hope that our effort will make this significant find of leatherwork and bookbindings accessible to a wider range of researchers and encourage further study of a subject area and region that still hold much to be discovered.

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Conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interest with this work.

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