

# Chapter 1 The first single-quire Coptic codices

## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

Although leaves or fragments of leaves of the earliest codices can be traced back to the second century AD, the first surviving binding structures seem to date only from the third/fourth century AD. The best-known examples are the Gnostic manuscripts found in 1945, buried in a jar near the Egyptian village of Nag Hammadi, close to the ancient monastery of Chenoboskion, and comprising 13 papyrus codices (all but one of the single-quire type) still in their original leather binding. The important find was announced by Jean Doresse and Togo Mina in 1949 but despite the considerable attention they have received since then, a whole decade passed before they were made accessible to scholars, and another two before the results were finally published: a true odyssey inflicting more damage to the objects than had the ravages of time. For the history of the find see Robinson (1984 pp. 3-14; 1991).

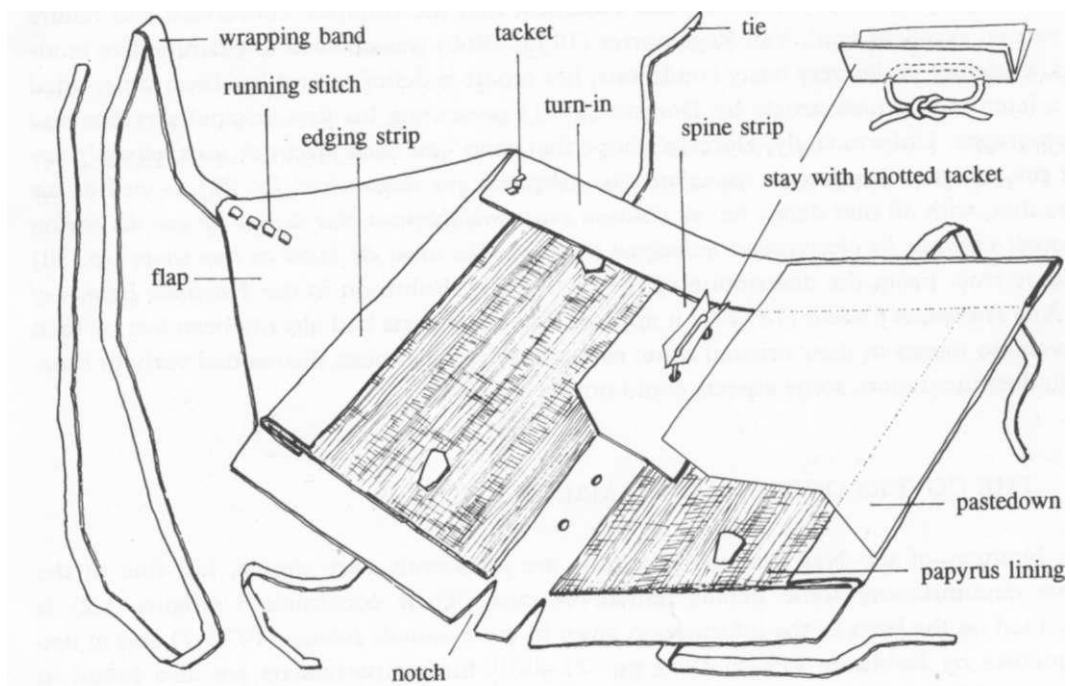
The first publication by Doresse and Mina (1949) contained only a photograph of the bindings (Figure 1.1) and the plain statement that the volumes 'conservent leur reliure de cuir en excellent état'. Van Regemorter (1955; 1960) was allowed to examine five bindings, evidently under very hasty conditions; her report is deficient and has been superseded by a later and concise article by Doresse (1961) presenting his first original sketches and photographs. Unfortunately, Doresse's hope that soon '*une étude précise de leurs reliures pourrait être entreprise par quelque spécialiste plus compétent que nous-même*' (p. 27) as well as his fears that, with all that delay, he '*we trouvera vraisemblablement plus devant lui que des codices restaurés sans que les observations techniques indispensables aient été faites en leur temps*' (p. 30) became true. From the description of the bindings by Robinson in the *Facsimile Edition of the Nag Hammadi Codices* (1972-7) it appears that some parts had already been lost by then or were no longer in their original state; as the bindings had been dismantled without thorough documentation, some aspects could not be clarified.

## 1.2 THE COVERS OF THE NAG HAMMADI CODICES

The bindings of the Nag Hammadi codices are apparently very simple, but due to the above circumstances some details remain obscure. Their construction (Figure 1.2) is described on the basis of the information given in the *Facsimile Edition* (1972-7) and in two summaries by Robinson (1975; 1984 pp. 71-86);<sup>1</sup> further particulars are also found in Krause and Lahib (1962), Krause (1975), Ogden (1989) and Marshall (1993).<sup>2</sup>



**Figure 1.1** The Nag Hammadi codices in their original state shortly after their discovery in 1945 (from Doresse and Mina 1949).



**Figure 1.2** Diagram of the construction of the Nag Hammadi codices.

The basic principle of the Nag Hammadi bindings is that of a limp leather covering, stiffened to a varying degree by a lining of reused papyrus, joined with the quire by two knotted tackets passing through the centrefold. In most cases the front edge of the upper cover extends to a flap,<sup>3</sup> to which a wrapping band of leather is attached; additionally, pairs of leather ties at the head and tail of either cover are applied to keep the book closed. A whole hide (goat- or sheepskin)<sup>4</sup> was required to cover the codices (height 240 to 290 mm, width 120 to 180 mm), the neck portion often being utilized for the envelope flap. In some cases (Codices V, VII, IX and XI)<sup>5</sup> the covering is composed of several pieces, their slightly overlapping edges joined together by a running stitch with lacing. The skin has been cut large enough to allow for turn-ins of 20 to 40 mm; on bindings with an envelope flap an extra edging strip of leather is provided.

The envelope flap is of triangular (Codices II, III, V, VII and XI) or rectangular (Codices VI, IX and X) shape; Codices IV and VIII have no such flap and the front edge of the upper cover is turned in as usual. The edges of the leather are neatly cut; the turn-ins are fully overlapping at the corners, the head and tail turn-ins being on the top in Codices IV, VII and VIII, the front turn-in on the top in Codices II, III, V, VI, IX and X. However, these data should be treated with reservations: since the papyrus lining was removed from all the covers, the original position of the turn-ins has become uncertain. The head and tail turn-ins of Codices IV, V and VIII extend over the spine area; in the others, notches have been cut into the turn-ins at the spine area, hence allowing for freer movement of the covers (see Figure 1.2). The turn-ins seem to have been pasted down; in some cases (Codices II, IV, IX and X) they are further secured with tiny tackets of leather, with single knots on the inner face of the covers.

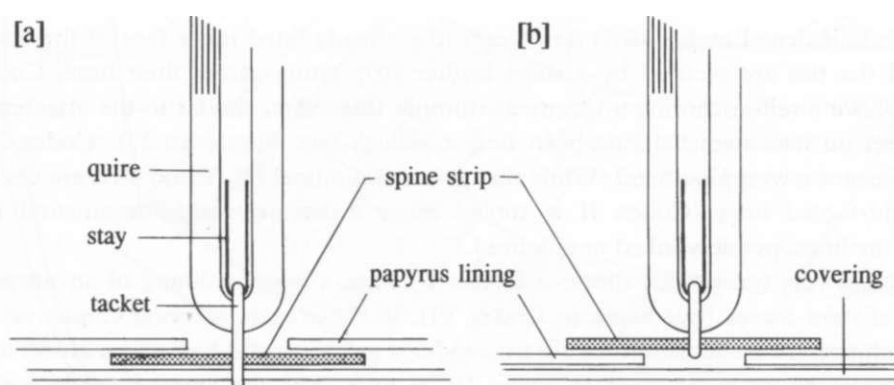
A wrapping band of leather is fastened to the envelope flap with a tacket or a running stitch, sometimes employing decorative reinforcement with patches of leather (Codices III and VII). Most of the wrapping bands are broken or incomplete, but those which could be reconstructed measured 540, 580, 715 and 1030 mm (Codices IX, VI, VII and IV respectively, the latter consisting of two pieces). Leather ties are affixed to the head and tail of both covers; in most cases the ties are threaded through a slit in the cover and their slightly widened ends pasted down onto the already lined inner face of the cover. In Codex II the ties are secured by a short leather strip going across their base; Codex III seems to have a self-anchoring attachment through three slits, similar to the attachment of leather ties on late medieval European limp bindings (see Figure 10.27). Codex XI has neither ties nor a wrapping band. While the covers of Codices IV, V and VIII are decorated with blind-tooled lines, Codex II is tooled more elaborately with ornamental figures between the lines, possibly inked or coloured.

All covers (except for those of Codex II) have a papyrus lining of an unspecified number of used leaves (but blank in Codex VI), in most cases carrying Coptic or Greek texts which provide evidence for dating the bindings to the second half of the fourth century AD (Barns 1975). In some cases (Codices IV, V and VIII) the lining extends over both covers and the back; in Codices VI, IX and X the upper and lower covers are lined individually, thus leaving the back unstiffened. In most cases (except for Codices II and XI) there is usually a protruding strip of leather on the spine (for a definition of the terms 'back' and

'spine' see Chapter 2, note 3). The height of these leather spine strips equals the height of the covers, their overall width ranging from 40 to 110 mm. Their extensions are pasted down either directly on the inner face of the leather covering or on the papyrus lining, occasionally sandwiched in-between papyrus layers; on the inner face of the covering the turn-ins are folded over the extensions of the spine strips. Codices IX and X have, in addition, leather strips taken across the spine strip and covered by the turn-ins at the head and tail. Usually blank papyrus leaves are pasted down on the inner face of the covers and over the turn-ins. In some cases the first and last leaves of the quire remain un-inscribed, possibly meant as flyleaves.

### 1.3 COVER ATTACHMENT

Quire and cover were connected by means of two leather tackets: rolled leather thongs, traversing the quire in the centrefold through a pair of holes c. 20 to 45 mm apart.<sup>6</sup> In Codex II 'vestiges of flax string survive' (Robinson 1975 p. 180). Stays (short inner guards) of pieces of leather were placed inside the centrefold to prevent the leaves from tearing (found still *in situ* in Codices IV, V, VI and IX). The tackets passed through the back covering and were knotted either on the back, as in Codices II, VI, IX, and X, or inside the centrefold as in Codices IV, V and VIII (Figure 1.3 [a]). Since in Codices III and VII there are no holes visible in the back of the covering, it is evident that the spine strip was first tacketed to the quire and then pasted down onto the inner face of the covering. Obviously this method was used on Codex III, as the knotted ends of the tackets have been found to lie between the spine strip and the covering (Figure 1.3 [b]). This method of attachment is more sophisticated: it is perhaps less strong, but aesthetically more pleasing, as the tackets are not visible on the back. For Codex VII this cannot be verified likewise, since the spine strip has not survived and no details of the attachment been recorded.



**Figure 1.3** Two methods of cover attachment observed on the Nag Hammadi codices: [a], direct attachment with the tacket passing through the whole of the cover; [b], attachment mediated through the spine strip, the tacket passing through the spine strip only and remaining hidden under the covering.

#### 1.4 TYPOLOGY OF THE NAG HAMMADI CODICES

On the basis of different traits in the technical details of the bindings Doresse (1961 p. 49), Krause (1975) and Robinson (1975 pp. 184-90; 1984 pp. 79-86) have attempted to classify the codices into groups. The codices of one group (Codices IV, V and VIII) have a one-piece papyrus lining and no notches in the turn-ins of the back, with a resulting marked stiffness of the binding. The tackets attaching the quire to the cover are knotted in the centrefold. The wrapping band consists of two pieces of thong (in Codex VIII the second part is lost); the leather ties at the head and tail are threaded through the covers and their widened ends pasted down on their inner face. The covering is of a dark brown-grey colour tooled with simple blind lines; only Codex V has an envelope flap. These three codices are the shortest (heights 237, 243 and 242 mm) and the papyrus of the text is relatively coarse.

The second group comprises Codices VI, IX, X and possibly II. Their main features are: a rectangular envelope flap, no papyrus lining on the back and the presence of two horizontal strips of leather between the covering and spine strip in the area of tacketing; the turn-ins are held down by minute tackets with the knots on the inner face of the covers. The tackets connecting the quire to the cover are tied on the back in the case of Codices VI, IX and X. The covering is of a golden tan colour and has no decoration (except for Codex II which is the most ornate one). The papyrus is much finer than that of the previous group.

According to the above authors the remaining Nag Hammadi codices do not share enough common traits to establish another group. Yet Codices III and VII could be grouped together on account of their distinct cover attachment, which, as described above and shown in Figure 1.3 [b], depends solely on adhesive, for the tackets are not passed through the covering. Here, the spine strip plays the role of the flanges, encountered on many types of multi-quire bindings (see Chapter 5, note 9). The two covers with the back are comparable to a separately made 'case', fixed to the bookblock with adhesive.

#### 1.5 OTHER SINGLE-QUIRE CODICES

The Nag Hammadi codices have received considerable attention, although they constitute only a comparatively small proportion of all extant single-quire codices: Turner (1977 pp. 58-60) lists about 45 further examples, 60 per cent of them belonging to the fourth century, 30 per cent to the third century. They all originate from finds in Middle and Upper Egypt and contain literary or other Greek texts and Christian texts in Coptic or Greek. Unfortunately there is little information about their binding structures; the first owners had the codices taken apart and their leaves mounted between glass plates. Seldom has any attention been paid to a binding unless it was decorated, and only rarely have structural details been recorded.

An example of the lack of interest in binding structures is the fate of the Gnostic manuscript P. Berol. 8502, unearthed in pristine condition: *'Das Manuskript lag noch in dem Originaldeckel aus Leder und Papyrus, wie überhaupt das Ganze in einem unversehrten Zustande*

*gefunden sein musste'* (Schmidt 1896 p. 839). The codex was dismantled and the binding forgotten (illustrated without identification by Adam 1923-4 p. 98). A search initiated by James M. Robinson led to its rediscovery and publication by Krutzsch and Poethke (1984). According to the latter, the detached covers are from an earlier blind-tooled leather codex; their description and notably their photographs indicate that the quire was attached to the covers by means of method [b] in Figure 1.3.

A similar single-quire Coptic codex (Berlin SBB MS or. oct. 987) was dismantled and its contents mounted between glass by Ibscher in the late 1910s. Again no details of the binding structure were recorded, except for mentioning a parchment stay and vestiges of a hempen [?] cord, the lining of the covering with six to eight leaves of reused papyrus, four pairs of leather ties (two at the front edge, one each at the head and tail) and simple blind tooling with triple lines (Ibscher 1920).<sup>7</sup> With reference to one of the codices of the Dublin Chester Beatty Library (unspecified), Ibscher (1937 p. 13) suggested an alternative method of forming a stiff cover by pasting together a number of the unscribed outer leaves of either side of the quire; this pasteboard formed *in situ* would then be covered with leather.

The Crosby-Schoyen Codex (Schoyen Collection, Oslo and London; see Willis 1961; Goehring 1990), one of the smallest single-quire codices (146 x 152 mm), originally consisted of 68 leaves. When it surfaced in 1955, it still contained a 'narrow back-strip of leather [...] which anchored the thick cord with which the quire was sewn'; the cord, still present then, secured the leaves 'with a single vertical loop' (Willis 1961 p. 387).

## 1.6 THE BOOKBLOCK

All single-quire codices are written on papyrus and can consist of a considerable number of sheets: Turner (1977 pp. 58-60) cites Milan BA MS P. Vogliano V of 70 sheets (140 leaves) as one of the most bulky examples; the Nag Hammadi Codices II, III, VII and VIII with 148, 152, 132 and 140 pages respectively are of medium size, while the Leiden RMO Papyri X and W with 40 and 32 pages respectively being examples of smaller ones. In the case of Berlin SBB MS or. oct. 987 Ibscher showed that its 40 sheets had been serially cut from two papyrus rolls of 3140 and 2920 mm; this has been confirmed in many other cases and seems to have been an established practice in a period when papyrus rolls were in general use (Ibscher 1920 p. 38; see also Turner 1977 p. 44).

When a large number of sheets is folded the inner leaves will markedly protrude at the fore-edge. Actual evidence shows that the fore-edge must have been trimmed, since the central leaves are considerably narrower. For the Nag Hammadi codices, Marshall (1993) noted differences in width between the outer and inner leaves of c. 20 mm (ranging from 6 to 30 mm). The outer leaves of the PML Iliad have a width of 140 mm, the inner leaves only of 125 mm; the corresponding values of Berlin P. Berol. 8502 are 135 and 100 mm, the difference in the case of the Dublin Chester Beatty Library Bibl. Pap. II is about 30 mm (Turner 1977 p. 23).

This seems to have been one of the cumbersome aspects of the single-quire codex: the scribe had to adjust the width of the written column according to the available space as

he proceeded through the consecutive pages - it is probable that the codex had to be written after the leaves had been joined. Another problem must have been to calculate accurately in advance the number of pages required: once this was set and the writing had started, there was no simple means to add further leaves, except to insert stubbed leaves (leaves 6, 26 and 37 in Berlin SBB MS or. oct. 987 are examples of such stubbed leaves [Ibscher 1920 p. 38]).

It is not feasible to gain insight into the functioning of the single-quire codex from those brittle and damaged remains which came down to us. But it may be assumed that considerable strain in the folds was inherent to this construction: the use of stays and reinforcing strips on the spine indicates that this weakness had obviously been recognized and this perhaps induced the exploration of other methods of construction, such as the multi-quire codex.

It has been suggested, notably by Ibscher (1920; 1937), that the single-quire codex was the predecessor of the multi-quire codex. This contention is not verified by actual evidence: in fact, already in Ibscher's day enough multi-quire codices were known that their simultaneous occurrence should have been evident to him. Turner (1977 p. 99) concluded rightly that 'Ibscher's sweeping claim must be regarded as not substantiated'.

Although the described construction of the single-quire codex seems to be the prevailing one, other ways of connecting a number of folded sheets are conceivable. Sideways stitching (or stabbing) is one of the possibilities, documented in several instances, such as two copies of Homer's Iliad in single papyrus quires from the fourth century (PML M 202 and BL Pap. CXXXVI; see Kenyon 1891 pp. 81-92) and a fragmentary Hebrew single-quire codex of 24 sheets of papyrus originating from the Cairo Geniza and dated to the fourth or fifth century (Cambridge UL T.S. 6 H9-21; Diringer 1953 fig. IV 17; Sirat 1985 pp. 70-80).<sup>8</sup> The evidence is the lack of sewing holes in the centrefold, but the presence of holes along the inner margin, c. 5 to 10 mm from the fold itself. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that stabbing may also be evidence of later repair, like in the case of Bodmer P. XXV-XXVI (Kasser 1971).

## NOTES

1. Robinson's terminology for the description of bindings differs from the seemingly conventional bookbinding terminology and is sometimes confusing: for example, the term 'thong' is used for three different structures and turn-ins are termed 'strips of leather, folded'. The term 'cartonnage' - current with Egyptologists - seems to be inappropriate to differentiate between pasteboard or one or several layers of pastedowns.
2. Contents and covers (except for the covers of Codex II, see Chapter 2, note 9) are kept separately at the Coptic Museum in Cairo. The covers were sealed in Plexiglass boxes in 1975 (Marshall 1993 pp. 135 ff.).
3. The flap which is an extension of the lower cover going over the front edge and halfway across the upper cover is referred to as envelope flap.
4. According to Robinson (1975 p. 172) the leathers of the Nag Hammadi covers were initially designated as goatskin but, in most cases, later found to be sheepskin. This sharp distinction of either goat or sheep seems to be an oversimplification when applied to skins of these two species, which had been domesticated and cross-bred in the Middle and Near East since prehistoric times, as documented in the monumental work of Ryder (1983). Many of the ancient species are in fact sheep hair, with a hair follicle pattern between that of modern goat and wool sheep (Reed 1972 p. 287).

5. The roman numerals refer to the final official numbering as given in the *Facsimile Edition of the Nag Hammadi Codices* (1972-7); it replaces earlier ones, including those used by Van Regemorter (1960) and Doresse (1961).
6. Although all authors describe tackets as made of leather, I have doubts about the rightness of their identification of the material: the so much greater strength and durability of parchment or rawhide, materials that were likewise available (Lucas and Harris 1989 p. 37), appear to be far more suitable for tackets and also for stays.
7. This codex underwent surgery for a second time in the late 1950s: its separated leaves were joined again and laminated with silk gauze, the single-quire structure was reconstructed and mounted in a new calfskin replica of the leather cover (Auster et al. 1959) - one wonders to what good purpose?
8. I am grateful to Dr Jennifer M. Sheppard for examining for me the dismantled fragments of Cambridge UL T.S. 6 H9-21 and confirming that there are no sewing holes in the centre-folds. Several other examples of stabbing single-quire codices are given in the unpublished typescript of Father Theodore C. Petersen's *Coptic Bookbindings in the Pierpont Morgan Library* (Petersen 1948), which contains a wealth of information on early binding structures. An updated edition is being prepared by John L. Sharpe III (Depuydt 1993 p. XI).