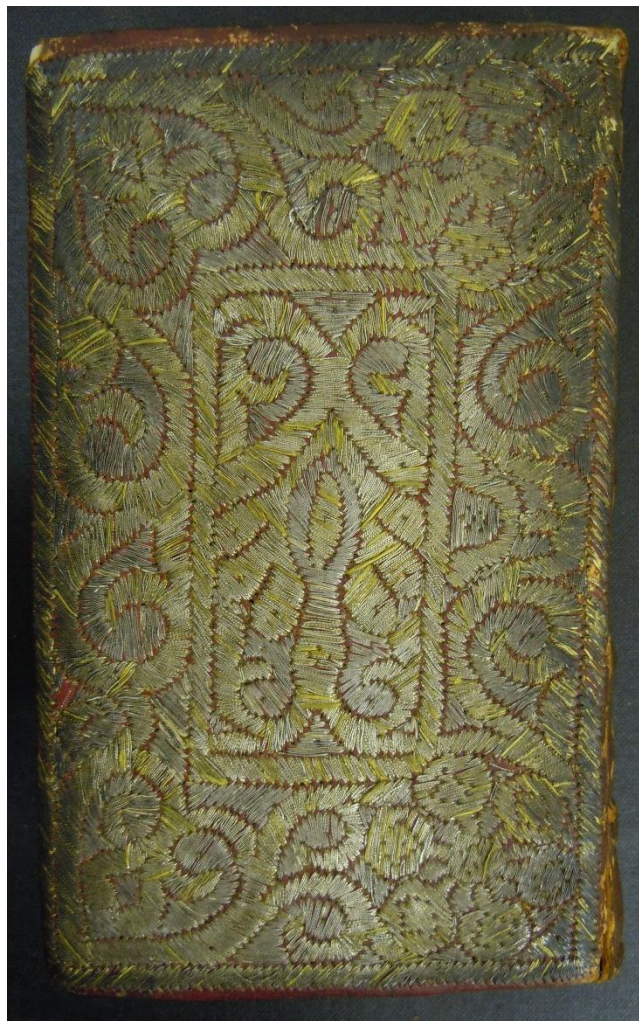


## ‘A very unusual binding’: A Remarkable Julius Caesar in New College Library

New College Library is fortunate to possess many highly notable items among its collections, from spectacular medieval illuminated manuscripts to rare early printed books, from the papers of Sir Isaac Newton to first editions of the novels of Jane Austen. It has been noted elsewhere that some of these have most elaborate bindings—*Einfältiges Bedenken, worauf eine christliche, im Worte Gottes gegründete Reformation . . . anzurichten sei*, for example, intended as a gift for King Henry VIII, has lavish gold-tooled roll, patterning, and lettering.<sup>1</sup>

One item in the collections, however, is most remarkable and unusual. *Commentarii Caesaris* is an edition of Julius Caesar’s commentary on the Gallic wars, *De bello Gallico*, edited by Filippo Beroaldo (1453–1505) and published in Lyon, France, in 1512. As such, the text of the book is, in all honesty, nothing special—versions of it abound and have been studied by students of the classics for, literally, centuries. What sets this copy apart, however, is the extraordinary attention paid to the binding.



New College Library, Oxford, BT1.127.9

The book features tanned red goatskin applied to the boards in a standard form. Into this, however, has been stitched an abundance of gold thread and silver wire, forming a decorative panel design on both the upper and lower boards. Small holes in the design on both boards indicate

---

<sup>1</sup> New College Library, Oxford, MS 136; see James Willoughby, ‘[The King’s Eye](#)’, *New College Notes* 6 (2015), no. 11, and Jason Morgan, ‘[Maria Regina Angliae: A Gift for a Tudor Queen](#)’, *New College Notes* 10 (2018), no. 4.

there may once have been additional elements to the decoration (such as beads or crystals). In addition, the edges of the text block have been both gilded and gaufered, where heated rolls have been used to indent a pattern into the edges. The time and, presumably, expense that the creation of this binding must have incurred mark this book out as a most prestigious item. This undeniably prompts one particular question—why? Why go to all that trouble for a copy of Caesar’s Gallic wars?

One possible avenue to explore is to look at the provenance of the item—by whom has it been owned? Two names are present on the book, with inscriptions. The first is at the head of the title page—‘Ex libris Thomae Harrison empties apud Gibraltar June 25<sup>th</sup> 1750’. The second is on the recto of the first blank endleaf: ‘Donum . . . Georgii Matcham LLD hospitio, oedipus Coll[eg]ii. Novi, festis encaeniorum . . . AD 1849’. No further information is recorded concerning Thomas Harrison of Gibraltar. George Matcham (1789–1877), however, was the nephew of Admiral Horatio Nelson (1758–1805) and studied at St John’s College, Cambridge. His donation of the book to New College is recorded in the Library Benefaction Book for 1849 (on p. 204), possibly as a form of thanks for the hospitality of college.

The notes compiled by the (unfortunately anonymous) cataloguer, who created the electronic catalogue record for New College’s copy at some point in the last twenty years, are worth quoting at this point:

There is evidence of 2 phases of work: some 16th century sewing, and a later 18th century phase, including the cover; sewn onto 4 raised sewing supports (part of the 18th century phase, 2 of the supports are false, consisting of leather cord laced onto the boards, and 2 sewing supports, also laced onto the boards); evidence of a linen spine lining from the 18th century phase, not continuing onto the boards . . . end bands worked in blue and white (18th century, laced onto the boards, suggesting that they are not English); gaufered gilt text block edges, dating from the 16th century.<sup>2</sup>

The notes say that ‘the cover’ is from the eighteenth-century phase but, with evidence of a spine lining, sewing supports and end bands from this phase, it suggests that the work done at this point included repairing and rebinding—there is clear evidence of the former on the spine, where part of the leather has been replaced. This later date and the possibly foreign nature of the end bands may tie in with the ownership of Thomas Harrison—might the book have been rebound in Gibraltar or Spain?

While there is nothing to indicate that the stitched decoration is contemporary with the actual publication of the book (1512), there are clues to help suggest an approximate dating. While it is tempting to call this binding ‘unique’, there is evidence of other examples—or, at least, one other. Antiquarian bookseller Maggs Bros. of London published their catalogue 1075 in 1987.<sup>3</sup> On p. 51 appears a copy of ‘The whole booke of Davids Psalmes, both in prose and meeter’. This book was published in London, ‘T.C. for the Company of Stationers’ in 1635, and has a binding worked in a remarkably similar fashion. The description reads: ‘A very rare contemporary binding of black goatskin with design of flowers, leaves, etc. worked all over the covers and spine in silver wire stitched through the leather, gilt edges, silver clasps’. Maggs’s own notes describe it as ‘a very unusual binding, we know of no other worked in this way’. Furthermore, ‘The late Howard Nixon also said he did not know of any binding of stitched wire, but recalled similar decoration applied to chair-backs, usually on fabric, at this period’.<sup>4</sup>

There is, indeed, evidence of metal wire being used in fabric decoration in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In her article ‘English Secular Embroidery of the Sixteenth and

---

<sup>2</sup> <<https://solo.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/permalink/f/89vilt/oxfaleph016149513>> (Accessed: 12 December 2021).

<sup>3</sup> *Bookbinding in the British Isles: Sixteenth to the Twentieth Century* (London: Maggs Bros, 1987).

<sup>4</sup> Howard Nixon (1909–1983) was a historian of bookbinding and a former librarian at the British Museum and Librarian of Westminster Abbey.

Seventeenth Centuries', 'Mrs Head' relates that examples of embroidery work of the period used 'Lace, brocade, satin, beads, bits of glass and talc, silver and silver-gilt threads, wire and spangles, pearls, corals and crystals' in the designs. In one example, an embroidered panel, 'silver and silver-gilt threads and wire of several degrees of thickness . . . Within the round frames of silver wire at the corners are four female heads . . . The date of the actual working of the panel . . . is . . . likely to be between 1630 and 1640'.<sup>5</sup> This dating places the embroidery work directly contemporary with the book of psalms in Maggs Bros. catalogue (1635). Such details in these separate items may suggest a late sixteenth- or early seventeenth-century date for the wire decoration of our book.

Professional embroidery for both valuable clothing and household furnishings of the latter part of the sixteenth century (contemporary with the reign of Elizabeth I) and into the seventeenth century, made much use of linen, silk, and materials such as gold and silver thread, and was a visible mark of wealth, status, and luxury—the latter materials, for example, can clearly be seen in portraits of Elizabeth herself.

The use of such materials and construction in the binding of a book, however, is most unexpected and unusual, and marks the item out as an important possession. If the date of the stitch work is presumed to be sixteenth- or seventeenth-century, it is unknown who may have commissioned it—the two provenance names we have are of too late a date. However, it is possible Thomas Harrison of Gibraltar may have had some repair work carried out on it in the eighteenth century.

The question posed earlier in this article—why was such elaborate work done on an essentially unremarkable book?—remains, sadly, unanswered. A little imagination, however, can allow us to view it, maybe, as a favourite and treasured item, perhaps a gift to or from someone important or special. Whatever the truth, it has now taken its place among the many notable and unique items in the collections of New College Library.

Jason Morgan  
Assistant Librarian  
New College, Oxford

---

<sup>5</sup> Mrs Head, 'English Secular Embroidery of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries', *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 4 (11) (1904), pp. 168–9 and 172–5, at pp. 173, 173–4.