

A Medieval Binding

For the devotee of bookbindings, the College Library provides much to regret. While there are important early bindings on some of the Greek books, and indeed on the Arabic, most of the Latin and English manuscripts—which form the great part of the collection—were rebound in the late seventeenth century, when the older bindings were discarded. Regret turns to disappointment in finding that these replacement bindings are, to say the least, indifferently done. Everywhere there is the monotony of reverse calf over pasteboards, and what was very badly done was the decorative red wash carelessly splashed over the edges of the text-block, which has often spilled down between the pages. Amongst the rank and file, there are, however, some true gems. One of them is MS 49, still retained in its medieval binding. It is in most respects a typical fifteenth-century binding of white-tawed leather over bevelled wooden boards. What is very unusual, and which makes the binding very interesting, is the presence on the back board of a substantial piece of metalwork, a long staple arched high at the centre, of a size that has ensured its removal in other college libraries. It is the sign of a common arrangement in a medieval library, by which books would be chained to the desks where they were stored. This staple is 128 mm long and 14 mm broad, placed horizontally across the centre of the back board about 30 mm from the foot, where it is held by four nails. A cushion of stout leather comes between the metal and the cover. The nails show through the pastedown on the inner side of the board, three of them still shod with their metal washers. The middle of the staple is arched to a height of 11 mm to take the first link of the chain, or the ring to which the first link was fastened, and the other end of the chain would have linked to an iron rod running under the desk, ensuring its security in what would have been a communal reference library. The fact that the staple is on the back board shows that the book was originally stored lying flat on a sloping desk with the back board uppermost, the common arrangement for books in a chained library before the sixteenth century.





What is most unusual is to find the staple still remaining in this position. For the book to have been shelved in any way other than lying flat on a desk, this staple would have made for an inconveniently bulky mass of metal. A change occurred in the late sixteenth century in the way books were shelved, which saw them placed upright on shelves with their fore-edges facing outwards, chained from the fore-edge and no longer from the back board. Librarians were naturally intolerant of unneighbourly metalwork such as ours, which projected strongly from the board and therefore wasted space on the shelf and, worse, was so apt to tear the leather of the volume next door when the book was taken down. The presence of metalwork on old bindings has now normally to be inferred from the ghostly marks left on the outer leaves, such as nail holes or rust marks or traces of verdigris. A chain-clip flush to the fore-edge was less likely to attack its neighbours and would have had a better chance of survival than our survivor here, which stands out so proudly and must have been a serious risk to the health of the book next door. There are indeed the signs of a later, secondary chaining, by a brass clip attached to the foot of the fore-edge of the upper board. And yet it is that clip that has gone, detectable only by its nail holes and the familiar verdigris pattern, while it was the primary staple that was here suffered to remain.

The manuscript itself, a copy of the Commentary on Matthew by the Italian Franciscan friar Petrus Iohannes Olivi (1247/8–1298), was prepared for John Whethamstede, the scholarly abbot of St Albans, during the period of his first abbacy from 1420 to 1440. The cost of its production, according to a list that was drawn up at St Albans, was forty shillings, a sum high enough to include the costs of binding as well as scrivenering. Whethamstede later gave the book to Gloucester College, one of the Benedictine colleges at Oxford (the site of Worcester College), and, like so many other books now in college libraries, ours entered the university's second-hand market by being pledged by some indigent monk-scholar. It is not known when the book arrived at the College, but it was certainly in the Library by 1697 when it was reported in the union catalogue, *Catalogi librorum manuscriptorum Angliae et Hiberniae in unum collecti*. The chaining from the back board could belong to arrangements at Gloucester College, although it is demonstrably the case that the method was practised at New College, witnessed by another book, MS 61, which has a contents-label on its back board. It shows that desking arrangements like these were kept up at least into the early sixteenth century, since that book was given in or after 1508 by the Wykehamist archbishop of Canterbury William Warham, 'once fellow of this college' as the label says. Quite why these books should have escaped the wholesale rebindings of the later seventeenth century is a question that probably has no answer.

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