Early Bindings on Medieval Manuscripts in New Zealand Libraries

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This essay is concerned with the twenty-four surviving bindings on medieval manuscripts now in New Zealand libraries that are either pre-1600 or incorporate some significant pre-1600 material. Some of these were described by David M. Taylor, Vice-Principal of College House, Christchurch, and the first scholar to take an interest in them, in his pioneering but inaccurate *The Oldest Manuscripts in New Zealand* (1955), while since then most have been described, in more detail and with much greater accuracy, by Christopher de Hamel. They have, however, warranted only occasional mention in the rest of the literature on medieval manuscripts in New Zealand. Indeed, it is ironic that the only medieval manuscript in New Zealand whose binding has aroused any real interest is Auckland Libraries, Sir George Grey Special Collections, Med. MS G.132, largely because of the quite mistaken and long discredited belief that it demonstrated the ownership of King Henry V of England.

1 We should like to thank the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Waikato, for a Visiting Scholar’s award that made possible much of the fieldwork for this study. Our sincere thanks also go to Ruth Lightbourne at the Alexander Turnbull Library, Donald Kerr at Otago University Library, Glynnis Cropp and library staff at Massey University, Kate de Courcy and Georgia Prince at the Auckland Public Libraries, Bronwyn Matthews at Canterbury University Library, and Anthony Tedeschi, formerly of Dunedin Public Libraries, for much help and many kindnesses. Images here are reproduced with the kind permission of the Alexander Turnbull Library; Auckland Public Libraries; and the University of Canterbury.

2 We chose not to treat early printed books in this study for practical reasons: there are more than two hundred in Auckland alone. One of us is dealing with the fragments of medieval manuscripts in the bindings of New Zealand’s early printed books in a separate study. 1600 is the *terminus ante quem* for “medieval” bindings in J. A. Szirmai’s *Archaeology of Medieval Bookbinding* (Farnham: Ashgate, 1999); we adopted the date partly because it enabled us to assemble data that speaks to the manuscript-print transition. We excluded one binding, Auckland Libraries, Sir George Grey Special Collections, Med. MS G.134, in which there are some endleaves from an unidentifiable medieval manuscript, but no positive evidence that these ever formed part of a medieval binding structure. See Margaret M. Manion, Vera F. Vines, and Christopher de Hamel, *Medieval and Renaissance Manuscripts in New Zealand Collections* (Melbourne, London and New York: Thames and Hudson, 1989), no. 14. (Henceforth, we refer to this catalogue as Manion, Vines, and de Hamel).

3 In Manion, Vines, and de Hamel, *passim*.

The neglect of the bindings on these books is typical of scholarship on medieval manuscripts more generally. Many twentieth-century binding historians argue, as does G. D. Hobson, that medieval manuscripts have “left hardly anything of any interest to the student of bindings.” Others are despairing rather than dismissive: “The low importance … attached to binding structures by scholars who use medieval books and by those who have had the care of them,” writes Jennifer M. Sheppard, creates “a devastating spiral.” Medieval books are repaired or rebound without due consideration of those structures; in the process much of what they might contribute to the history of the medieval book is lost. The growth of the field of book history—which has lately encouraged new work in many other areas of bibliography and codicology—has not done much to improve the situation. Mirjam Foot suggests that this is at least partly because of the development of that field out of textual and editorial studies. Binders necessarily form one node of the “communications network” that Robert Darnton described in his 1982 essay “What is the History of Books?” but of all those who trafficked in texts, binders have seemed to scholars the least concerned with texts themselves. So while other topics in book history have become popular, especially within literary studies, research on bindings has been left to conservators and scholarly librarians, or—for stamped or embroidered bindings—to historians interested in the decorative arts. In the latter case Hobson is right: bindings of the Middle Ages do not offer much to art historians. Before techniques of blind stamping and then gold tooling were firmly established in the sixteenth century, medieval bookbindings were usually undecorated; or, more precisely, they had decorative features, such as stained chemises, embroidered endbands, and engraved clasps, that have proved especially susceptible to damage and loss.

The history of book collecting forms another part of this story of neglect. The “bibliomania” that gripped members of the reading public in Europe in the early nineteenth century made it fashionable for aristocratic connoisseurs and would-be gentlemen alike to get their hands on old books. “The bibliomaniac preferred his books rare, savoring select volumes’ scarcity at the very moment when contemporaries were heralding the universal diffusion of reading,” writes Deidre Lynch. Often, he preferred his books to be beautiful as well as rare, and given the

5 English Binding before 1500 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1929), 15.  
8 Daedalus, 111.3 Representations and Realities (Summer, 1982): 65–83.  
state of most medieval bindings by 1800, that meant he preferred medieval books rebound. In Bibliography: A Poem (1812), Thomas Frognall Dibdin, who is given some credit for inaugurating England's book-collecting craze, describes a typical young collector who is at a book auction when he sees

a splendid lot, in coat of Tyrian dye  
(Morocco purple, by the vulgar call'd)  
And burnish'd gold; which, as th' assistant shews  
In order round, throws far its glittering hues  
To tempt the unwary (163–67).

He snaps it up, only to wander the streets of London in unsatisfied “pensive mood.”

His mistake, Dibdin implies, was to choose the new cover over the old book, the glittering prize over the “curious, precious, and rare in the book way.”

It was a common mistake. During Dibdin’s own lifetime, a set of volumes in morocco became the mark of gentleman collectors and conscientious librarians alike and thousands of medieval bindings were discarded.

Where medieval bindings have survived, in spite of rodents, bookworm, damp, over-eager bibliophiles, and other enemies of books, the paucity of work upon them still contributes to Sheppard’s “devastating spiral.” Scholars have rarely received the specialized training required to make sense of the few medieval binding structures they encounter; until very recently there was little comprehensive reference material dealing with them; many catalogues, even today, fail to notice bindings in detail or at all. Students not only need to travel to far-flung archives to make a broad study of bindings, they must also have a very persuasive case for access to such fragile and unique objects. Even when manuscripts are available digitally, as increasingly they are, it is difficult to assess their bindings’ three-dimensional forms from photographs alone (and many digitization projects have excluded bookbindings).

12 Consider, for example, the rebinding of all of Cambridge University Library's incunables undertaken at the instruction of Henry Bradshaw, University Librarian from 1867 to 1886: many ended up in morocco covers—see David McKitterick, Cambridge University Library. A History: The Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 317–24.
There is room for hope amid all the gloom. Mirjam Foot and others have argued recently for the integration of binding studies into the broader field of book history and a shift in interest away from decorative features and towards structure on the part of those who do study bindings makes this feasible. This is especially so in the case of medieval bookbinding, for which there is now a brilliant reference tool in J. A. Szirmai’s *Archaeology of Medieval Bookbinding*. Szirmai’s book exhorts medieval scholars to recognize in bindings a “rich source of knowledge and insight” about the medieval past. It is with his injunction and with the history of the treatment of medieval bindings in mind that we have approached those bindings that survive in New Zealand libraries.

In the case of such manuscripts, however, the issue of technical expertise and problems of access (for scholars outside of New Zealand) pose particular problems. The United Kingdom, for example, has about half a dozen specialists in the area of early bookbinding; there are none in New Zealand. It might be argued, moreover, that the medieval bindings, like the medieval manuscripts, in New Zealand are a random selection. They were assembled over a period of several hundred years, at a wide variety of European sites, in very different historical contexts. This essay contains a good deal of supplementary information about individual bindings—our researches have uncovered fragments of newly identified texts and evidence of under-studied methods and styles of binding—but the appearance of randomness may still seem to discourage the treatment of these bindings as a group.

We will therefore preface this study by suggesting some factors that unite the books we describe. None of them was collected randomly, while the specific patterns of purchase and accession and the pressures imposed by distance and isolation have made for collections that have something to tell us about New Zealand’s own history and about the history of books more broadly. It is notable that compared with, for instance, the collections of the British Library, New Zealand’s medieval manuscripts have been conserved in their early bindings at a high rate. There are ninety-three bound medieval manuscripts in New Zealand public institutions at present; for this article we studied twenty-four. Of these, two are only considered because of recuperated and recycled material, leaving twenty-two in early (though not necessarily original) bindings, that is, 26%. In comparison, Szirmai asserts that we have today “no more than one to five per cent of original

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15 *Archaeology of Medieval Bookbinding*, x.
16 Among them, those cited in this essay, Sheppard and Gullick (see above) and Clarkson and Pickwoad (see below).
bindings on the surviving medieval books.” The New Zealand figure, though not strictly comparable, is suggestive.

Why might more New Zealand manuscripts survive in medieval covers? The answer lies, firstly, in the nineteenth-century culture of book collecting to which we have already alluded. The earliest manuscripts purchased in the northern hemisphere specifically to be brought to New Zealand were those of Sir George Grey. Ten—nearly half—of the manuscripts that we discuss below belonged to him. Grey was the sort of book collector of whom Dibdin would have approved: “the great error of ... what are called green, Collectors, is, that, having once inflamed their fancies, and mustered their means, to adorn their shelves with Missals ... they incautiously and indiscriminately purchase every thing in this shape which comes in their way.” Grey was not “green” by the time he arrived in New Zealand: he had been collecting books for many years. He did not set out to adorn his library by buying beautifully illuminated or elegantly bound books. Like the best-informed and best-read nineteenth-century “bibliomaniacs,” Grey discriminated. He selected books that contained texts that he considered representative of the best of Western Christian culture; he was attracted by age or uniqueness. The result is that his acquisitions were “less fine” than those of his successor Henry Shaw (only three out of Shaw’s sixteen purchases are relevant to a study of medieval binding). Sometimes Grey’s books are even “a little rough and workmanlike.” But as we will argue, structures that speak of making-do and of the “workmanlike” aspect of book production—of artisanship rather than fine artistry—make New Zealand’s manuscripts especially useful to the book historian.

The preservation, right to the present day, of some of New Zealand’s manuscripts in their “rough” state is also useful. Medieval manuscripts in modern collections always bear witness to their own transformation, from sacred or useful objects to collectible ones for example. They do so in especially compelling ways when more of the material from which they were made in the Middle Ages—fastenings and furnishing, endbands, covers, and boards as well as ink and parchment—has been reused and reinterpreted over time. In this sense, the very distance that has made study of medieval bindings in New Zealand difficult has done them and their students some good. Once manuscripts had arrived in New Zealand, there were not the skilled artisans in the colony who might be trusted to rebind or even repair precious old books, which was the custom in Europe if an

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20 A Bibliographical, Antiquarian and Picturesque Tour, 117, his emphasis.
owner could afford it right up until the 1950s. “There is no such thing as restoring an old binding without obliterating its entire history,” wrote E. P. Goldschmidt in 1928 and Szirmai was still complaining about “unnecessary” rebinding as late as 1989.\(^{22}\) The only medieval manuscript that we know to have been bound, or more likely rebound, in New Zealand is Dunedin Public Libraries Reed MS 2 (Manion, Vines, and de Hamel, no. 57): in the 1950s A. W. Reed had this done by Coulls, Somerville and Wilkie, Dunedin commercial book binders, and the experiment was not a success.

More recently, the institutions that have collected up private libraries of books like Grey’s have had few extra resources, if any, for rebinding. Only the Alexander Turnbull Library and the Dunedin Public Libraries still actively acquire medieval manuscripts at all and most of those in New Zealand are in public libraries, which tend not to prioritize their Special Collections. (A. W. Reed established a trust fund for the purchase of new material for the Dunedin Public Libraries, but this is exceptional.) Other manuscripts, and they are few, belong to the publically-funded universities of Otago, Canterbury and Massey or to church institutions, none of which has lavish financial resources.

Our overarching point here is that because of some localized and historically-specific factors—themselves worthy of attention—medieval manuscripts in New Zealand are more likely than those in larger European collections to be preserved in early and unique structures. As a group, the books described below thus introduce considerable new material into the story of the medieval book, and the story of the transformation of New Zealand’s medieval books, materially and conceptually, over time.

We begin our more detailed discussion of medieval bindings on New Zealand manuscripts by listing all twenty-four of the manuscripts that we included in our study. The list includes key details about each book and its binding; much of this information—especially that respecting the content, date, and location of the manuscript text—is derived from de Hamel’s catalogue entries. We also give the catalogue number from Manion, Vines, and de Hamel, Medieval and Renaissance Manuscripts in New Zealand, in each case. Readers who wish to can refer to www.medievalbookbindings.com, where we have published longer, illustrated descriptions of the bindings of eighteen of the books on our list. Our discussion here draws on these descriptions, but is organized around the six manuscripts we have not described in detail online. These are books in bindings that we found especially interesting; in some cases because they contain medieval material that has been overlooked by other commentators; in some cases, because they introduce important topics in medieval book history, from the spread of literacy and

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of affordable books in the medieval West before and after printing, to the routes by which and the reasons why books came to New Zealand, half a world away.

We hope that our work here will suggest that it is worth going back to the medieval manuscripts in New Zealand collections, even ones that have already been carefully catalogued and studied.

List of Pre-1600 Bindings (and Bindings that Incorporate Pre-1600 Material) on New Zealand Manuscripts

5. Auckland Libraries, Sir George Grey Special Collections, Med. MS G.135 (Manion, Vines and de Hamel, no. 15): Cicero, *De Divinatione* and *De Natura Deorum*.
14. Auckland, St John’s College MS 1 (Manion, Vines, and de Hamel, no. 49): Bible.
22. Dunedin, Selwyn College on deposit in University of Otago Library (Manion, Vines, and de Hamel, no. 128): Gallus, Malogranatum.
23. Dunedin, Selwyn College on deposit in University of Otago Library (Manion, Vines, and de Hamel No. 130): Conrad of Brundelsheim, Sermones.
24. Palmerston North, Massey University MS 1 (Manion, Vines, and de Hamel, no. 132), Boethius, Le livre de Boèce.

In Praise of Parchment

The first of the books just listed that warrants more detailed discussion is Wellington, Alexander Turnbull Library MSR-03 (Manion, Vines, and de Hamel, no. 137). The book is an Antiphonal; it was copied in the Netherlands in the second half of the fifteenth century. It was one of the manuscripts acquired by the British and Foreign Bible Society in 1932 from Masterton printer Albert Clemas (who had purchased it a few years earlier in London) and on loan to the Alexander Turnbull Library. It is a paper manuscript bound in limp parchment. As Manion, Vines, and de Hamel note, the book has been extensively repaired since the

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23 See also Hollis and Barratt, “Introduction,” in Migrations, edited by Hollis and Barratt, 17. The manuscript has recently been digitized by the Alexander Turnbull Library and is available via TAPUHI (http://tapuhi.natlib.govt.nz/cgi-bin/spydus/MSG/ARCHIVESNR/index.html) on the National Library of New Zealand web site (in Manuscript and Archives Collections, locator “MSR-03”).
Middle Ages: an earlier set or sets of stitching holes are visible in each fold. It has been sewn onto leather supports (now broken) which were laced into the cover; a modern woven tie was added that wraps around to close the book; small pieces of parchment were inserted at the tops and bottoms of the centre fold of each quire to reinforce the stitching. The parchment cover itself has been repaired, and the spine lined with paper.

This cover, however, was probably contemporary with the manuscript. It is a folder or envelope binding: the lower cover extends well beyond the textblock so that it can wrap over the upper cover, enveloping or enfolding the edge of the manuscript (see Figure 1). Where the parchment covers the spine there are two sets of now unused holes, near the head and tail of the book (see Figure 2). These were most likely for “archival” stitches: the quires were originally sewn, one by one, directly to the parchment cover. Szirmai describes and illustrates a pattern of sewing of a limp parchment binding of a paper manuscript, c. 1600, that would have left holes very much like these. The binder of Alexander Turnbull Library MSR–28 used a similar system of long stitches.

Figure 1: Wellington, Alexander Turnbull Library MSR–03 (Manion, Vines, and de Hamel, no. 137)—parchment cover.

25 As noted by Manion, Vines, and de Hamel, 121.
We use the word parchment rather than “vellum” to describe the cover of this book deliberately. Vellum was used in the Middle Ages to describe calfskin (Latin vitulus, calf), which was prized for its thinness and strength. It has since come to mean any especially fine, strong skin. The term thus presents problems: over time and in poor conditions even the finest parchment may swell, buckle, or become discoloured. Since the Middle Ages parchment has meant any animal skin dehaired, limed, and dried under tension,27 and is the term preferred by many medieval codicologists.28

Limp parchment covers are sometimes associated with inexpensive and rather slap-dash binding techniques, because “limp structures were used as temporary bindings or for cheap retail bindings from the sixteenth century onwards.”29 Parchment covers could be quickly and therefore “cheaply” attached to the textblock by loops of cord, parchment, or leather called “tackets.” They could be sewn using stitches that passed directly through quire folds and the cover, without the additional complication of sewing supports. Parchment covers, unlike wooden ones, could also be stab-stitched: sewn by anyone with a sturdy needle and some thread from the upper to lower cover, straight through the textblock at a point close to the spine. Even where parchment has been used to cover boards that have been attached using sewing supports, those boards are often of paste rather

28 Including Szirmai, Archaeology of Medieval Bookbinding, chapter 10.
than of wood, and scholars tend to assume that pasteboards were less expensive than wooden boards. (Local examples of the medieval use of pasteboard include Auckland Public Libraries, Sir George Grey Special Collections, Med. MSS G.144, G.145, and G.185.)

Sometimes “cheap” and simple parchment bindings were intended to be temporary; they were applied by wholesalers or retailers so that buyers of books could choose their own bindings. However, neither parchment nor parchment and pasteboard structures were necessarily any cheaper than other bindings. Nicholas Pickwoad observes that pasteboards were often preferred because they were lightweight (in some places, for example early America, wooden boards were the cheaper option, because paper was a rare commodity). Limp parchment bindings could be elaborate—with cord, leather, or parchment supports and endbands and a variety of decorative features including gilding. Parchment was sometimes valued less as a cheap material than as a lasting one. Book conservationists, especially Christopher Clarkson, have shown that parchment bindings are more durable, portable, and easier to store and handle than structures based on wooden boards. R. Reed argues that medieval artisans perfected parchment by experimenting for centuries with ways to make it resistant to decay and damage. To this day, carefully-executed parchment bindings cope better with water damage and are less prone to bacteria and mould. It should be no surprise, then, to find from catalogue evidence that limp parchment bindings were extremely popular in the medieval period, even in institutions with ample resources for rebinding. Their popularity might have had as much to do with their convenience and durability as their cost.

This Antiphonal, Alexander Turnbull Library MSR-03, was made for a community of sisters of the Common Life in the Netherlands. It may be evidence of the relative poverty of this community that an important choirbook should have been written on paper, rather than parchment, and bound without any concern for aesthetics. However the book’s survival, much repaired, vindicates the nuns’

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30 As one of us argues in Gillespie, “Bookbinding and Early Printing in England,” in A Companion to the Early Printed Book in Britain, 1476–1558, edited by Vincent Gillespie and Susan Powell (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, forthcoming). See also Pickwoad, “Onward and Downward,” 61–106. Temporary bindings are especially evident where the textblock of a book has been sewn onto supports, but the supports have never been laced into the cover.


32 For examples of both abbreviated and elaborate limp binding techniques, see Szirmai, Archaeology of Medieval Bookbinding, chapter 10.


choice. It is evidence for the case we have just made that parchment bindings were preferred to more elaborate structures not because they were cheaper but because they were hardwearing and easy to handle. A binding of this sort would have been portable and supple: it could be carried about by the nuns but still opened out flat for their use in choir.

Waste Matters
As our descriptions online show, our survey of medieval bindings in New Zealand turned up a lot of waste. We found one example of the medieval and early modern practice of using straw or reeds for book marking: we recorded a fragment of a reed deep in the quire folds of Auckland Libraries, Sir George Grey Special Collections, Med. MS G.144. Most often, we found previously unnoticed or unidentified fragments of medieval manuscripts and documents and early printed books.

Of all the fragments we found, the most interesting is a leaf used in the construction of the binding of Auckland Libraries, Sir George Grey Special Collections, Med. MS G.127 (Manion, Vines, and de Hamel, no. 10). This copy of Lactantius, *Divinarum Institutionum Libri VII* from Italy was made in the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century.³⁵ Auckland MS G. 127 is bound in a limp parchment cover, “post-medieval (probably sixteenth or early seventeenth century).”³⁶ It is very difficult, however, to date a limp binding even within a century or two unless it has dated inscriptions or notes in a dateable hand. We included this one as “medieval” bearing in mind Szirmai’s definition of medieval binding as practice predating 1600. Auckland MS G. 127 may be in a medieval binding by this definition, but this is not the book’s original binding: some unused stitching holes in the quires suggested an earlier binding.

Auckland MS G. 127 is another example of a parchment binding that, while undecorated, was constructed with considerable care. Three single, twisted, parchment thongs that supported the sewing have been laced into slits in the parchment cover, as have the parchment cores for the sewing of the book’s endbands. These endbands are integral to the structure of the book: they have been tied down into the quires through a lining of paper that has been glued to the spine. The remains of two simple parchment ties appear at the edge of both the upper and covers; there is a spine title in a highly formal, black textualis script (though for some reason much of this has been cut away along with the back of the cover).

It is the lining of this spine that warrants our attention here. Szirmai comments that, of thirty limp parchment bindings that he examined of the late fifteenth to late sixteenth century, twenty had “their outer quires protected with a flange or a

³⁵ See also Christopher de Hamel, “Medieval Manuscripts and New Zealand,” in *Migrations*, edited by Hollis and Barratt, 35.
hooked-around single leaf of used parchment.” A flange of this sort is visible in this manuscript (which was completely disbound for conservation in preparation for digitization when we examined it—see Figure 3). In this case the flange is not a piece of parchment, but a strip of paper 100 mm wide, cut from a sheet from an early printed book. We were able to identify the text as from Duns Scotus, *Quaestiones in Praedicamenta Aristotelis*, and further to establish that it constitutes the bottom eighteen lines, plus the lower margin, of fols 30r and 31v of the edition of Scotus’s *Quaestiones in Universalia Porphyrii, Quaestiones in Aristotelis Praedicamenta, Quaestiones in Aristotelis libros De interpretatione* published by Reynaldus de Novimagio and Theodorus de Reynsburch, Venice, 1477 or 1478 (ISTC No. id00387000). Its presence in the book also demonstrates that the current binding must have been done after that date, but perhaps not as much as a hundred years later.

A Book from the East
Another binding that attracted our particular attention is found on a manuscript that Sir George Grey purchased, now Auckland Libraries, Sir George Grey Special Collections, Med. MS G.123 (Manion, Vines, and de Hamel, no. 6). The
book is in Greek lectionary; Aland classifies it as a lectionary, with daily readings between Easter and Pentecost and readings for Saturdays and Sundays for the rest of the year, and lists it as l 474 (though with the wrong call number). Manion, Vines, and de Hamel suggest that it may have been produced in southern Italy or elsewhere in the central or eastern Mediterranean. Our own, preliminary research suggests that the manuscript was bound in an eastern Mediterranean or Slavic setting under strong byzantine influence. This is of interest because it supports the spirit if not the specific details of Grey’s own belief that the book came from one of the Greek Orthodox monasteries of Mount Athos.

The book is the oldest manuscript in the Auckland Libraries and, according to Kerr, the second manuscript that Grey bought for New Zealand. The binding is late fifteenth or sixteenth-century, though as Manion, Vines, and de Hamel speculate, it may reuse older “medieval wooden boards” and, they observe, may be alla greca. We agree that this might be so, but have developed an alternative explanation for some of its features.

Alla greca binding was preferred by some humanists for binding Greek texts. The binders who adopted the style in the second half of the fifteenth century imitated features of byzantine bookbindings of the same and earlier periods. The style developed in Western Europe, especially Italy, and it can be distinguished quickly by endbands that protrude from the head and tail edge of a book’s textblock and extend onto the grooved board edges. Whereas true byzantine bindings usually have plain endbands in this style, or endbands with Islamic styles of embroidery, the endbands in alla greca bindings are Western European in style.

Until recently, the binder’s work was partly disguised by a later, probably nineteenth-century, protective calfskin overcover. Staff at Auckland Public Libraries kindly removed this for us. The boards beneath are slightly strange. They appear to have been misaligned—the textblock set unevenly between them—but this may be the result of damage over time. Both the upper and lower boards measure approximately 165 mm across the top edge but only 160 mm across the lower edge; both are badly damaged at the outermost, lower corner. Some of this damage has been cut away, leaving a rounded edge where the rest of each board is squared and bevelled. The result of all this is that a significant portion of the textblock is exposed at the outside lower corner, where it too has suffered damage. The boards are made from two different kinds of wood: the lower has a fine (vertical)
grain; the upper has an open (also vertical) grain but is the lighter coloured of the woods—perhaps white oak.\textsuperscript{44}

As the treatment of the damaged boards suggests, the binding has been repaired: the spine has been rebacked and, we think, the boards reattached. The sewing is concealed beneath the red leather rebacking material, but as far as we could discern, the binder used byzantine-style recessed link stitching. That is, he or she did not use any supports, but instead deployed link stitches to sew the quires together, and set the resulting row of stitches into a groove cut in the back of the textblock.\textsuperscript{45}

Our ideas about the board attachment are also tentative. We think the boards were attached on two different occasions in the Middle Ages, following typically byzantine systems. The lower board was attached with a “zig-zag” hinge. (This hinge still holds the board on, though may have been subject to repair.) A set of five holes that presumably match the position of the sewing was drilled in the board in parallel with the spine edge; another set of holes was drilled closer to the edge at a slightly oblique angle. The sewing thread was then threaded in channels dug into the outer face of the board between the holes in a zig-zag pattern. The pattern formed is closest to Szirmai, \textit{Archaeology of Medieval Bookbinding}, figure 6.6 [b]. The entry of the sewing thread into the upper board has been entirely obscured by a lining, pastedown, and backing leather, but we assume it. too, is typical of byzantine linkstitched bindings: that is, that five holes were drilled in the boards and the sewing was attached to these boards by simple hinging loops. The methods of attachment for the two boards are therefore different. This difference is one of the features that distinguishes byzantine (and Islamic) bookbinding from Carolingian and Gothic European bookbinding, where the pattern of the attachment of the upper and the lower boards is identical.

However, another set of unused holes appears in the very centre of the lower board (see Figure 4). These holes match the position of the supports again, but this time they are connected by a long, straight channel that runs in parallel to the spine edge. Szirmai and others describe byzantine bindings from Greece, Egypt, the Slavic region, and Constantinople where the sewing thread is attached by way of holes and a straight channel of this kind, though these holes usually appear closer to the spine edge.\textsuperscript{46}

We cannot rule out the possibility that the zig-zagged and channels for sewing thread that we could see on the outer face of the lower board of this book are part of a single style of attachment that has not been recorded in the literature on

\textsuperscript{44} For woods commonly used in byzantine bindings, see Carlo Federici and Francesca Hollis, \textit{Legature Bizantine Vaticane} (Rome: Fratelli Palombi Editori, 1988), 79–81 (poplar most common; oak not infrequently used); no study of the wooden boards in \textit{alla greca} bindings has been undertaken.

\textsuperscript{45} Szirmai, \textit{Archaeology of Medieval Bookbinding}, 67–9, 84.

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 70–71.
byzantine bindings that we have read. However, we think it possible that the two sets of holes and channels on the lower board represent two different attachment methods. Considered alongside the strangely mismatched boards, this may make sense. One set of holes belongs to one early binding of the book (possibly the original); the other to an rebinding, during which the upper board was replaced and it and the lower board attached using a new hinging method.

Other features of the binding show clear byzantine influence. Adhered to the boards are the remains of a blue, textile lining. Blue cloth linings used in this way are one of the most distinctive aspects of byzantine bindings, though the linings themselves are usually coarse cloth. This one appears to be silk damask or jacquard (see Figure 5).47 There are also endbands at head and tail, which once extended along the edge of the board in rather roughly dug grooves, though we could not detect the method by which these were attached to the boards. As far as we can discern (for the tail endband especially is badly damaged) the primary sewing of the endbands is wound around a main core; this has then been decorated by secondary cross-stitched embroidery on the main and a smaller auxiliary core in blue and red thread (see Figure 6). The embroidery is not typical of byzantine bookbindings; it is closest to Szirmai, *Archaeology of Medieval Bookbinding*, figure 6.18, who groups it with other characteristics of *alla greca* bindings and notes five examples on Italian books in the Vatican. He bases his own account, however, on

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studies by Berthe van Regemorter and Karl Jäckel, who also observed this sort of embroidery on books in Athens libraries and manuscripts from Serbian monasteries. It is of note, furthermore, that other features of alla greca bindings are lacking. There is no evidence that the book ever had a decorated leather cover; it does not appear that the edges of the textblock were ever “gilt and gauffered” as they are “as a rule” in alla greca bindings.


49 Szirmai, *Archaeology of Medieval Bookbinding*, 86.
In sum, the binding of this book seems to be a sometimes clumsy, late medieval—perhaps sixteenth-century—rebinding. As a liturgical book in regular use it would have had plenty of wear. The binding this manuscript was given has byzantine features for which there could be two explanations. They may have been favoured by a binder in Italy or elsewhere with an affinity for, if little skill in, humanist alla greca fashions. Alternatively, these features may imitate (and in the case of one board, perhaps use part of) an earlier, byzantine binding, because the book was bound in a region where byzantine techniques and fashions persisted. We think that the latter possibility is more likely. It allows us to locate the book with more certainty in the eastern parts of the Mediterranean or central Europe, rather than in Italy.

This account of the book’s history might also make sense of some nineteenth-century narratives that have not usually been taken seriously. Grey thought that his book came from one of the famous monasteries on Mount Athos in Greece.\(^{50}\) If a location as precise as Mount Athos is a bit of a stretch, the binding at least gives us some reason to reconsider the description of the book in Bernard Quaritch’s 1862 catalogue. There it is said to be “from a Monastery in the East. It was selected by an English officer, as the most precious book in the library there, and obtained under very peculiar circumstances.”\(^{51}\) The book is no less peculiar than the events surrounding its acquisition. We believe it would reward further study, in particular, comparison with other books bound in the centuries after the fall of Constantinople but still under the influence of Byzantium’s rich tradition of manuscript book production.

**Frugality and False Finery**

Many of the bindings on New Zealand manuscripts are scrappy rather than fine objects. They are made up of recycled parts of other books and they show signs of frugality and the make-do-and-mend aspects of the binder’s craft. The roughest and most workmanlike of medieval bindings are a riposte to prevailing ideas about the “luxury” status of medieval books or about the “booklessness” of medieval society in general.\(^{52}\) The copying of vernacular texts, wider use of cursive scripts, the

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\(^{50}\) On Mt Athos bindings, see Giorgios Boudalis, “Islamic Bookbinding and its Influence in Greek Post-Byzantine Bindings,” *Vivlioamphiastis* 2 (2004): 55–118.

\(^{51}\) Cited from Manion, Vines, and de Hamel, no. 6. George Bowen, who succeeded Grey as Governor of New Zealand, published a book on his own time at the monasteries in Mount Athos; he describes dark book closets and the monks’ suspicion of his motives; many of their books had been carried off by unnamed English travellers who preceded him: *Mount Athos, Thesaly and Epirus* (London: J. Murray, 1852), *passim*; Bowen probably refers to Robert Curzon, whose acquisition of volumes during his visit to Mount Athos was especially infamous: see *Visits to Monasteries in the Levant* (London: J. Murray, 1849).

\(^{52}\) For the case for medieval books as luxury items, see H. E. Bell, “The Price of Books in Medieval England,” *The Library* 4th ser., 17 (1936–37): 312–32; on booklessness, most recently de Hamel,
introduction of paper, and evidence of lay ownership are often cited as evidence of increased book production and broadened access to text at the end of the Middle Ages. The bindings on some manuscripts in New Zealand collections remind us to add binding processes to that list. They also prove that cheaper materials and abbreviated processes were characteristic of the period before as well as after the advent of printing, which is more typically associated with the production of more accessible and inexpensive books. The earliest printers capitalized upon and accelerated change that was already affecting the manufacture of books.

Two of the bindings we examined, both from fifteenth-century Italy, illustrate this point in complementary ways. The first is Auckland Libraries, Sir George Grey Special Collections, Med. MS G.143 (Manion, Vines, and de Hamel, no. 22), an Italian copy of Boccaccio’s *Genealogia Deorum Gentilium* from the mid-fifteenth century. The binding of this manuscript is an excellent example of the common medieval practice of recycling materials from other books in bindings (see Figure 7). The quires of this manuscript have been stitched onto four, double, tawed leather supports, originally dyed crimson, which are channeled directly into the spine edge of the board. The boards themselves have been recycled from an earlier binding. They are flat, rather than cushioned; when attaching them, the fifteenth-century binder did not bother to remove the remains of the three single, tawed supports that were originally laced into these boards. They are clearly visible because the newer supports have broken; the binding is currently held together only by its cover (see Figure 8). The inner face of each of the boards has a pastedown: blank paper in the case of the upper board; another paper leaf in the case of the lower, but this time with some accounts written in Italian in a fifteenth-century cursive hand.

The cover is another example of reused materials. The book is “half” bound by it, which in this case means that it covers the spine and about a third of each of the boards only. It comprises several stitched-together pieces of a single, damaged piece of white tawed leather that has been decorated in the *cuir-ciselé* style, its edges held down by a few iron nails like those of the most “modest bindings” Szirmai describes (see Figure 9). The *cuir-ciselé* or cut-leather technique involved cutting


Figure 7: Auckland Libraries, Sir George Grey Special Collections, Med. MS G.143 (Manion, Vines, and de Hamel, no. 22)—upper cover.

Figure 8: Auckland Libraries, Sir George Grey Special Collections, Med. MS G.143 (Manion, Vines, and de Hamel, no. 22)—sewing supports from current and earlier binding.

Figure 9: Auckland Libraries, Sir George Grey Special Collections, Med. MS G.143 (Manion, Vines, and de Hamel, no. 22)—inner face of upper board, nailed down cuir-ciselé cover.
Early Bindings on Medieval Manuscripts in NZ Libraries

outlines of objects into the surface of tanned skins and texturing the background using a matting punch. Leather treated this way was used on all sorts of medieval and post-medieval objects until the nineteenth century, but for bookbindings it was a development mainly of the German-speaking regions and Bohemia and is found almost exclusively on fifteenth-century books, only a few of these from Italy. In the case of Auckland MS G. 143 the design is one of “elaborate foliate stems with multi-petalled flowers and cross-hatched fruit.” The decorating leather in this way is an “extremely laborious” technique, demanding “high artistic dexterity” and so is usually associated with high-quality craftsmanship and more costly books. This is not the case in Auckland MS G. 143, obviously. There, the text itself, which is written on paper, is unfinished and has not been decorated. What we have is a cheap, rather make-shift binding for an incomplete and therefore inexpensive book. Its boards and its leather cover were recuperated and reused from different manuscripts altogether. It had just one fastening, a strap attached directly by four more iron nails to the fore-edge of the upper board (rather than anchored by a plate); a single hole in the centre of the lower board (presumably for a pin of some sort) is all that remains of the rest of this fastening mechanism. The manuscript was still cheap when Grey paid £1 11s 6d for it. At first glance, the binding on the manuscript of Sallust’s *De Bello Jugurthino* now in Christchurch, University of Canterbury MS 2 (Manion, Vines, and de Hamel, no. 52) is the antithesis of the slap-dash structure on Auckland MS G.143. The manuscript is from north-east Italy and was made and bound in the third quarter of the fifteenth century. It arrived in New Zealand as recently as 1966. As observed by Manion, Vines, and de Hamel (to whose description we add only minor details here), the book is a beautiful example of *alla fiorentina* binding practice of the fifteenth century. It has been sewn on four bands, which have been laced over the outer edge of the two gently beveled and rounded boards. The boards bear the remains of two fastenings: linen straps attached by foliate brass pins, and foliate catchplates (the latter now missing). The binding has a dark brown tanned leather cover which has been tooled *alla fiorentina* with some traces of gold in the tooling (see Figure 10). It is the only example in New Zealand of gold tooling on a medieval binding. The use of gold on leather covers was an Islamic technique, introduced to Western Europe through Spain but popularized by Italian including Florentine book makers, whose books were so popular in other parts of Europe. The gilt and gauffered edges of the textblock

58 Manion, Vines, and de Hamel, 60.
60 Kerr, ‘Sir George Grey,’ in *Migrations*, edited by Hollis and Barratt, 57.
61 See also Rebecca Hayward, “Prestige and Pedagogy: The Ownership of Medieval and Renaissance Manuscripts by New Zealand Universities,” in *Migrations*, edited by Hollis and Barratt, 89–107.
62 Mirjam Foot, “The Earliest-Known European Gold-Tooled Bookbindings,” *The New Bookbinder*
are also typical of the *alla fiorentina* binding style. (The binding resembles that on Auckland Libraries, Sir George Grey Special Collections, Med. MS G.135, another mid to late fifteenth-century *de luxe* Italian manuscript.)

But even as he designed this book to resemble other lavish products of Florence’s famous manuscript workshops, and decorated the cover and the fore-edges of the textblock with gold, the binder of Canterbury MS 2 took a shortcut. The endbands have not been laced into the boards, but cut at the joints of the book. Endbands provide a binder with space to demonstrate his decorative skill: the main and an auxiliary core of each of these bands have been sewn in blue and white silk. Laced-in endbands strengthen a binding considerably, by attaching the textblock firmly at vulnerable points in the manuscript’s structure. In this case, the endbands are more for show than for such structural reinforcement. Canterbury MS 2 shows that narratives about the manuscript-print transition need to be carefully nuanced to take account of the evidence of individual books. This book was made some time after 1475, as the technology of print and the products of the press were beginning to spread across Europe. The “short cut endband” became more common after the advent of printing. They have been described as evidence of the decline in craft standards that followed mass production, harbingers of the degraded and flimsy machine-made bindings of the modern era.63 When Canterbury MS 2 is placed next to Auckland MS G. 143, however, the story it tells is a more complex. Binders knew how to cut corners before as well as after printing.


The makers of late medieval manuscripts served an already-widening readership, and met demand for cheap as well as beautifully-crafted books. These were some of the conditions for printing’s invention and success. Conversely, the Canterbury Sallust manuscript shows that some books bound in the early printed era had conservative “medieval” features. The endbands on Canterbury MS 2 may not be laced in, but the tooling of the cover was painstakingly. Elaborate binding traditions persisted even as new technologies were developed in response to the pressures exerted by mass production.

A Hybrid Book
Our final example is another of Sir George Grey’s books, Auckland Libraries, Sir George Grey Special Collections, Med. MS G.120 (Manion, Vines, and de Hamel, no. 4). It is a copy of Peter Comestor’s Historia Scholastica, probably from England (or possibly northern France), copied in the late thirteenth century. This book was purchased by Grey at an unknown date. It was bound in the early nineteenth century, before 1831, for the English diplomat Percy Clinton Sydney Smythe, 6th Viscount Strangford (1780–1855), whose arms are on the binding (see front cover). Smythe owned the manuscript by 1817, when he was posted to Stockholm, as is evident from the second, mutilated, fly leaf, and he sold his manuscripts in 1831 although he “retained a taste for literature throughout his life” and engaged in some scholarly publishing.64

Of special interest to us are the two fifteenth-century brass hook-clasp fastenings that, as noted by Manion, Vines, and de Hamel, have either been preserved or recycled for use on this book. The catch plates on the edge of the upper board are fixed with three nails; plates anchor the short tanned leather straps and hook clasp to the edge of the lower board. The straps are post-medieval and presumably date to the rebinding. The style of the whole fastening mechanism is similar to the example in Szirmai, Archaeology of Medieval Bookbinding, figure 9.47 [a], and is typical of German books from the late fifteenth century. There is other evidence for a Northern European origin for the clasps: from the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries Germanic and Netherlandish fastenings typically closed to the upper board of a binding, as do these clasps; English, most Italian, and French books fastened to the lower.65

The word “maria” appears embossed in a gothic, textualis script against a finely cross-hatched, engraved background on the catch plates and the shaft of the clasps (see Figure 12). The anchor plates bear in one case a small, embossed floral

decoration and in both more embossed lettering, though the words are no longer legible. The plates and shaft were probably cut by a binder from Ornamentblechen, embossed and engraved brass sheets or bands that were sold for this purpose (see Szirmai, Archaeology of Medieval Bookbinding, figure 9.52[e]). Hook-clasp fastenings fashioned in this way are common on German and Austrian bindings from the period 1470–1513. In this case the binder was a little clumsy or perhaps he was not literate in Latin, because he sliced off part of the terminal “a” from the metal strip that forms one of the catch plates.

All this evidence of Germanic influence on the fastenings of this book does not preclude their having been part of an early English or French binding of the manuscript, reused in the rebinding. As Szirmai notes, clasps and Ornamentblechen were routinely imported from the German-speaking regions—which were famous for metalwork—into other European centres. However, the clasps may well have come from a completely different book rather than the older or original binding of this manuscript. Possibly Smythe had this book rebound in Sweden; one would expect Swedish book binding to be influenced by Germanic practices. The plates on the upper board are set upside down, which suggests that the reference to the Virgin was no longer considered important when the manuscript was rebound (unsurprisingly if the binding is from Lutheran Sweden).

Auckland MS G.120 is thus a truly hybrid artifact: a late-thirteenth century English or French manuscript copy of a twelfth-century Latin text based on the Bible, that in 1800 was bought by an English diplomat and aristocrat, who claimed possession of this medieval bestseller by having it rebound with his family coat-of-arms incorporated into the new cover. The binder also re-used medieval,

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Figure 12: Auckland Libraries, Sir George Grey Special Collections, Med. MS G.120 (Manion, Vines, and de Hamel, no. 4)—upper board, lower catch-plate.

66 Szirmai, Archaeology of Medieval Bookbinding, 260; see also A. Mark Pollard and Carl Heron, Archaeological Chemistry (London: Royal Society for Chemistry, 2008), 201.
perhaps German or Austrian, fastenings that declared the Catholic devotion to
the Virgin Mary, though the owner at the time of this binding was an Anglican,
living in Sweden. Presumably the clasps were thought to add a romantic air of
medievalism to an up-to-date binding, though they sorted oddly with the marbled
fore-edge which was probably added at the same time. Some years later the new
owner sold all his manuscripts and eventually this one was bought by Grey and
conveyed to New Zealand. He stuck it in a drawer, and there it remained until
1918.

**Conclusion**

Auckland MS G.120 has been displaced—chronologically, culturally, and geo-
graphically. But a detailed study of the binding of this book demonstrates
something that is true of all New Zealand’s manuscripts: the process of their
displacement began long before the nineteenth or twentieth century, and else-
where than this antipodean part of the world. Bindings, rebindings, and the reuse
of earlier material, sometimes taken from other books entirely, mark stages of
these displacements. In the course of its life a manuscript can move from being a
marker of religious devotion, to an antiquarian curiosity, a cultural status symbol,
an investment, or an object of scientific study, to name but a few possibilities.
Take, for instance, the copy of Lactantius’s *Divine Institutes* that we discuss above.
Lactantius’s text was a standard school textbook and much admired for its literary
style in the Renaissance. The Auckland copy is beautifully written in a hand that
resembles that of the early humanist Coluccio Salutati. We do not know how it
was originally bound, but maybe a hundred years into its career it was rebound
simply, though not inelegantly, in limp parchment. To protect the text block the
Florentine binder used paper from a discarded Venetian printed edition of Duns
Scotus, a medieval scholastic who was out of favour in humanist Italy. Later, the
book was mutilated, its back cut away for some reason; later still, Grey purchased
the book and it came to New Zealand to represent Western Civilisation. It is cur-
rently disbound—not because of our interest in the binding, but so that it can be
digitised for the use of a North American scholar interested in the late antique
Christian writer Lactantius (who was, incidentally, from North Africa).

This book, and all the books here, show that no medieval manuscript is an
object frozen in time. All are constantly in a state of becoming, and their bind-
ings, because they are an aspect of a codex that can be easily changed or altered,
are prime markers of that condition. And for all of them the journey to New
Zealand has been just one more displacement, one more step in the journey, and
not necessarily the last.

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