



.....

ABOVE This late seventh-century red goatskin binding over beech boards, decorated with coloured paint, is the earliest surviving Western binding in Europe, and possibly a unique example of decorated Insular (i.e. post-Roman, British-style) leatherwork. It covers a pocket-sized manuscript of the Gospel of St John, once owned by Saint Cuthbert of Lindisfarne (d.687), and was buried with him, protected by a satchel, which accounts for its remarkable condition. It was rediscovered in 1104, when the tomb was opened to move St Cuthbert's remains to a new shrine behind the altar in Durham Cathedral. The interlace and raised double-vine scroll design on the upper (front) cover differs from the pattern of the lower (back) cover, which is based on step motifs within a panel. Both designs draw inspiration from geometry. The sections of the parchment pages are linked by chain stitch (as with Coptic sewing) and the boards are also sewn on. As this may be a sole survival one cannot draw reliable conclusions about binding structure and decoration in this period, but Anglo-Saxon and Coptic influences are discernible.

England, late seventh century
137 x 95 x 35 mm (5.4 x 3.7 x 1.4 inches)
Loan 74

.....

OPPOSITE 'The most beautiful ivory covers in the British Library', adorned with garnets and turquoise, enclose a sumptuous twelfth-century illuminated Latin Psalter. Ivory was a luxury material and particularly difficult to obtain during the Middle Ages. The skill of the workman and the rarity of the materials would have made it one of the most expensive possessions of its owner, possibly Melisende (1105–1161), Queen of Jerusalem. The binding serves as an indication of her wealth, status and piety, as well as depicting the sophistication of court taste. The design shows influences from Islamic, Byzantine and Western art.

Eastern Mediterranean (Jerusalem),
mid-twelfth century.
Lower cover 142 x 220 mm (5.6 x 8.7 inches)
Egerton 1139





Paper scrolls which were folded into a concertina format are known as sutra bindings and are found exclusively on Buddhist scriptures. This manuscript, the *Garland Sutra*, was written in Korea c.1390–1400. Korean bindings were much influenced by Chinese and Japanese practices but characteristic differences emerged after side-stitched books began to predominate after the thirteenth century. The thick

paper covers shown here are decorated in gold, silver and indigo with large floral medallions and a title panel with gold ink on black.

Korea, late fourteenth century
325 x 110 mm (12.8 x 4.3 inches)
Or.7377



The Indian *pothi* was an early form of bookbinding. It consisted of religious texts written on split leaves that were stacked together, landscape-style, and secured by a thread (or threads) passing through each leaf; it was then sandwiched between two wooden boards, around which any excess thread was wrapped. The style spread, relayed by Buddhist monks, through Persia, Afghanistan and Iran, reaching China in the first century BC. Thenceforth, the format changed little. The structure of the binding, illustrated here, follows the same tradition but covers an anonymous Sanskrit commentary, which was probably produced

in Bihar, eastern India, in 1491–92. The holes in the centre of the boards accommodated the threads. The upper board depicts the ten incarnations of the Hindu god Vishnu, and the lower board is painted with scenes of Krishna and his followers. J P Losty describes the boards as being ‘securely anchored within the developing tradition of Indian miniature painting’.

India, late fifteenth century
 37 x 53 x 18 mm (1.4 x 2.1 x 0.7 inches)
 Or.13133



ABOVE Early North African bindings, of which this is a tooled goatskin example, were produced in the Islamic tradition. Our knowledge of them owes much to works including the *Book on the Staff of the Scribes and Implements of Discerning*, which was written by the Zirid King al-Mu'izz ibn Badis of Tunisia in the eleventh century. The binding of this Qur'an was probably made during the Marinid dynasty (which ruled the Berber tribe in the thirteenth century). The Marinids lived in present-day Morocco and Spain, and their considerable leather-working skills and traditions spread to mainland Europe, influencing the native craftsmen. The Mudéjar bindings in Spain are an example of this influence, and were characterized by the geometrical patterns with interlacing ribbons that are clearly evident here. Gold tooling was an Islamic invention and this thirteenth-century example is one of the earliest known.

Morocco (?), thirteenth century
 280 x 220 (250 with flap extended) x 288 mm
 (11 x 8.7 [9.8 with flap extended] x 11.3 inches)
 Or.13192

OPPOSITE This late fourteenth-century Egyptian binding from the Mamluk period, with its characteristic pentagonal flap (not shown), displays one of several designs that were common in the Islamic world. It covers part seven of a Qur'an written for Amir-Aitmish al-Bajasi (executed in 1400), and is decorated in gold and blind 'in the elegant and restrained style which is typical of the best in Islamic art'. Its quality reflects the status of the holy book and the rank of its owner, who was a commander under Sultan Barquq. The other parts of the manuscript that survive are bound in a similar style and may originate from the same workshop, which continued to bind Qur'ans for the top echelons of Mamluk society. The elegant centre and corner-piece pattern used on the covers was found on many decorative items, including carpets, and became influential in Europe, probably travelling along the trade routes from the East to Italy, and thence to France and England.

Egypt, late fourteenth century
 374 x 278 x 15 mm (14.7 x 10.9 x 0.6 inches)
 Or.9671

