

Introduction

The appearance of the codex can be traced to the first centuries of Christianity. Only indirect evidence points to its still earlier existence during the Hittite empire. Reliefs on stelae dating from the eighth century BC, excavated in Marash (south-east Turkey), depict codex-like objects with lines along the spine which resemble the board attachment of Coptic and Byzantine codices. Together with the images of a brush and double inkwell these representations are highly suggestive but still have to remain conjectural until archaeological evidence proves their former existence.¹

Archaeological finds support the assumption that the codex first began to replace the scroll in the eastern part of the Mediterranean basin. The codex seems to have been the preferred book form of the new religion. While 83 per cent of 290 Christian texts dating from the first four centuries were already bound in codex form, 88 per cent of 2435 Greek literary texts from the same period retained the traditional roll form.² However, the evidence from the several hundred early fragments that have come down to us, badly damaged due to the ravages of time and natural deterioration of organic materials, is limited almost exclusively to conclusions about the format and not the physical structure of the codex. But perhaps even more has been lost by the neglect and disinterest of scholars of previous generations, who were principally concerned with the texts. This neglect of the physical aspects of the construction of the codex is reflected in recent studies on the subject. E.G. Turner in *The Typology of the Early Codex* (1977 pp. XXI-XXII) acknowledges that he has 'nothing to say on the subject of bindings, and that is a weakness'; in another eminent work, *The Birth of the Codex* by C.H. Roberts and T.C. Skeat (1983), not a single line is devoted to binding structures.

Much ink has been spilt to little profit over the idea, promulgated for more than a century, that the codex was modelled on the example of writing tablets. Since this idea was first introduced by Wattenbach (1871 p. 111), it has been reiterated by countless authors; authorities continue to assure us that 'there has never been any doubt about the physical origin of the codex, namely that it was developed from the wooden writing tablet' (Roberts and Skeat 1983 p. 1). Tablets of wood or other materials, with or without wax on the writing surface and joined in sets of two, three or more, have been used for recording notes, accounts, school exercises and various ephemera, from the Middle East to Britain and from Egypt to Scandinavia and northern Russia, and from the Bronze Age up to the nineteenth century. Even if there is evidence that whole literary texts have been recorded on wooden polypticha (Sharpe 1996b), the crude methods of connecting the rigid elements of a set of tablets (using hinges, metal rings or lacings) have nothing in common with the structures employed to join leaves of a codex. The derivation of the codex from the writing tablet is a

surmise *e silentio*: for too long its validity has been taken for granted without scrutiny of the exact nature of the relationship (Kretz [1956]; Szirmai 1990b).³

There is another persistent tradition that the codex evolved from the parchment notebook of the ancient Romans (*pugillares membranei*). However, this contention has hardly any archaeological support: the evidence is entirely literary, based on texts of classical authors like Martial (AD 40–104), whose eloquent praise of the advantages of the new book form over the roll provided fertile ground for speculation.⁴

In the following chapters, physical evidence will be the guide to track the evolution and the spread of the early codex throughout the literate world of that age, which was, in fact, the world of Eastern Christianity. The Coptic Church seems to have been the cradle of the single-quire (Chapter 1) and multi-quire codex (Chapters 2 and 3), which were later nurtured in the first coenobitic monasteries; it is the Egyptian sand that preserved the earliest physical evidence. Probably the Coptic Church had brought the new religion to Nubia and Ethiopia, the latter becoming isolated for a millennium and keeping the ancient codex form virtually unchanged (Chapter 4).

With Constantine's inauguration of Constantinople as the new capital of the Roman Empire in AD 330, Christianity gradually established itself as the official religion of a realm comprising the east Balkans and Asia Minor. In the sixth century, under the patriarchs of Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem, when Christianity had become more organized, it was at the same time troubled by theological controversies. These led to dissent and alienation of the Monophysite Churches of Egypt, Syria, Armenia and the Church of the Nestorians. The missionaries of these churches took Christianity, and with it its book form, deep into Asia.⁵ The Manicheans, too, had adopted the codex and likewise, though earlier, carried it with them into Turkestan and Central Asia.⁶ Christianity radiated from Byzantium and also spread to the West and North into the Slavic world: Saints Cyril and Methodius attempted to bring it to Moravia in the ninth century; Russia was christianized in the ninth/tenth century and became the stronghold of the Orthodox Church after the Fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453. This fatal event seems to have been the cause of a general exodus of Byzantine scholarship to the West; oriental craftsmen from Greece and the Near East migrated to Italy and brought with them the Byzantine codex which the Western binder eventually moulded into the 'alla greca' binding. This clearly demonstrates the influence of the Mediterranean heritage on the Western binding tradition.

The Fall of Constantinople was the end of the Byzantine Empire, but its decline began much earlier: in the seventh century Alexandria and Antioch fell into Moslem hands, and in the next hundred years Islam conquered North Africa and Spain and gradually occupied Asia Minor and the Balkans. Islam, the second largest religion emanating from the Mediterranean cultural basin, naturally adopted the codex as its book form (Chapter 5); the Arabic bookbinder introduced pasteboard, replacing the heavy wooden board, the principle of case binding and perfected decoration techniques like gold tooling. These innovations eventually reached the Western world, most probably through Spain and Italy, and significantly influenced Western binding techniques.

But what about the codex form in another significant – and even more ancient –

religious realm, that of the Jewish world, centred in the birthplace of the first codex? As no early codices of Hebrew manuscripts seem to have survived, it remains unclear when this book form was adopted. The earliest papyrus fragments, which might have come from codices, date from the fourth century; the earliest Hebrew biblical codices are ascribed to the eighth or ninth century (Diringer 1953 pp. 321–26), but have lost their original bindings. This scarcity has different causes: although the scroll was the obligatory form for many Jewish religious texts (as it still is today), there is no doubt that the codex played its role in its own right. Obviously, two millennia of zealotry and continuing efforts to annihilate Jewish literature have resulted in irretrievable losses. Yet, Jewish communities themselves had the practice of withdrawing defective manuscripts from circulation by depositing them in the ‘Geniza’ in the synagogue, to have them buried later in a religious ceremony (Diringer 1953 p. 326; Deuel 1966 pp. 351–81). These storehouses turned out to be real treasure troves of early manuscripts and binding fragments, as in the case of the famous Cairo Geniza. It is highly regrettable that virtually no effort has been made so far to explore this rich source of early binding structures.

Literary sources appear to provide evidence for the use of the codex by the ancient Jewish sect of the Samaritans, possibly as early as the third or fourth century AD. The fact that some of their scripts have their roots in Egypt would lend itself to explaining the link-stitch sewing, described by Crown (1987), on a series of extant Samaritan codices, dating from the thirteenth century at the earliest. They show signs of intensive use and of many old and new repairs, yet allow us to establish that, since they present features of Coptic and Byzantine codices, they conformed to the Mediterranean binding tradition.⁷ However, they represent such a small and perhaps hardly representative sample that the chapter on the early Jewish codex cannot yet be written.

NOTES

1. The suggestion that these objects represent ancient codex structures was first made by van Regemorter (1958b); see also Szirmai (1990b). Others, like Skeat (1969 p. 66) and Roberts and Skeat (1983 p. 11), interpret them as wooden or ivory tablets.
2. Calculated from the data of Roberts and Skeat (1983 pp. 37–44). In their chapter 9 possible reasons for the Christians’ preference for the codex are discussed in detail; see also Turner (1968), Skeat (1969), McCormick (1985) and van Haelst (1989).
3. For recent data on writing tablets see Lalou (1989; 1992), Sharpe (1992; 1996b) and Brown (1994); a review of the material aspects is given by Büll (1968).
4. Relevant sources of the classical authors are given by Kenyon (1932). For a reappraisal see Roberts and Skeat (1983) and van Haelst (1989).
5. In its heyday between AD 700 and 1000 the Nestorian Church stretched from Syria to China and must have had millions of adherents. With the persecution and subsequent annihilation of their communities the vast majority of their scripts was destroyed. A unique Nestorian codex dated AD 892 is documented and illustrated by Diringer (1953 pp. 296–301); it was written by a missionary returning from China and found after his death in his cave in the Hakkari Mountains (Kurdistan), where a few small communities of Nestorians still live in isolation (Chevalier 1985).
6. The Manicheans are credited with great care in writing and illuminating manuscripts and lavishly embellishing their bindings (Diringer 1953 pp. 341–43). Subject to persecution by the Christian Church and Islam, little is left of what once had been a high standard of bookmaking. A few of their manuscripts with fragments of

decorated book covers have been found near Turfān (Turkistan) early this century; they are ascribed to the eighth or ninth century (Le Coq 1923 pl. 17e; Loubier 1926 fig. 106; Klimkeit 1982 fig. 56).

7. The earliest report on Samaritan codices appeared in an article by the Near East traveller, Mary Eliza Rogers, in 1868; her illustrations were reproduced in an anonymous review in *The British Bookmaker* in 1890. Paul Adam had planned to include this drawing in his unfinished manuscript of his *Geschichte der Einbandkunst* (c. 1930, kept in the Düsseldorf Kunstmuseum); he interpreted the thin wooden plates, which were sewn onto the head and tail of the spine, as evidence of repair to straighten the deformed bookblock and consolidate its flat shape. The suggestions that the wooden plates are parts of the bookblock sewing (Génévois 1974) or of the endband structure (Crown 1987) are unlikely. I owe thanks to Fred Shihadeh, who examined for me the Samaritan manuscript Philadelphia Haverford College MS 22 and confirmed that vestiges of an endband of coloured thread are independent of the wooden plate, and to Bernard C. Middleton for tracking down the reference of Rogers' article.