Saving the Book

When the binding on a 12th century manuscript threatens to crumble into dust, what does the one do? This is not an easy question for even the most experienced rare book librarian to answer. Regardless, an answer had to be found when the earliest manuscript in the rare Cistercian Collection, located in the vault of the Rare Book area in Waldo Library, began to disintegrate. The irreplaceable vellum leaves were beginning to separate from the binding, and the support boards for the binding were now showing through the covers.

Anyone involved in the preservation of rare books knows that repairing any medieval manuscript is difficult, but an added concern developed when the experts approached the rebinding of this particular work. The volume in question is a Cistercian antiphonary, a book containing the choral parts of the breviary. The early medieval musical notation found in the disintegrating volume had been created by medieval monks; it is a special collection of antiphona, the scriptural or hagiographical verses sung before and after the psalms which the monks chant seven times a day.

The early musical notation in this Cistercian antiphonary is valuable in and of itself. Instead of the modern five-line musical staff, or even the usual four-line medieval staff, this early manuscript has a one-line notation. Rebinding would have to be done with unusual caution and attention to detail so that none of the musical markings on the single line would be lost. From a practical point of view, two barriers had to be overcome. First, an expert handbinder would have to be identified and commissioned, and, second, funds would have to be found to pay for something not typically allocated in a modern university library budget. Fortunately, the Bentley Historical Library of The University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, has one of the best preservation centers in the country. The conservator, James Craven, was willing to take on the challenge. The second problem, monies to pay for the detailed repair, was overcome when the Abbot of Gethsemani, a Cistercian monastery located near Louisville, Kentucky, stepped forward and offered to underwrite the expenses. Needless to say, the manuscript volume was hand delivered to the Ann Arbor center. Conservator Craven did a careful study of the manuscript scrupulously noting the construction of the previous binding; only then did he take it apart—with great care. His next step was to repair, meticulously, the spines of the damaged folios (folded vellum leaves). Craven then reassembled the quires (four folios), and, using his invaluable personal expertise, rebound the book in a beautiful but austere brown leather. Finally, in order to provide additional protection, he built a box inscribed with the name Antiphonarium Cisterciense to protect the entire manuscript volume. A special compartment in the box contains a few scraps of paper inserts and the strip of a medieval manuscript which had been used in the previous binding. A second compartment protects the replaced, probably early 19th century, binding. Also included for future historians and medievalists is a dated description of what had been done to restore the 12th century manuscript.

This was not, as one would guess from the description, a quick and easy task to complete. Indeed, the entire rebinding process took place over a period of two years. However, such time and care were well worth the effort and cost. While working on the manuscript, Mr. Craven was able to examine the various pin pricks that could still be seen on the folios of the manuscript pages. From these pricks, he concluded that his work constituted the fourth binding in the centuries-long existence of the antiphonary. As one might thoughtfully say, “not bad for a manuscript whose marginal notes reveal that it was copied out sometime before 1174.”

B.B.

Author Salman Rushdie recalls a treasured family tradition:

“In our house, whenever anyone dropped a book, it was required to be not only picked up but also kissed, by way of apology for the act of clumsy disrespect. I was as careless and butterfingered as any child, and accordingly I kissed a large number of books.

“Devout households in India still contain persons in the habit of kissing holy books. But we kissed everything. We kissed dictionaries and atlases. We kissed novels and Superman comics. If I’d ever dropped a telephone directory, I’d probably have kissed that too.

“All this happened before I had ever kissed a girl. In fact, once I started kissing girls, my activities with regard to books lost some of their special excitement. But no one ever forgets one’s first kisses.”

—Salman Rushdie
Imaginary Homelands

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