

Lost and Bound: The Rebinding of Codex Sinaiticus at the British Museum in 1935

This thesis investigates the rebinding of Codex Sinaiticus by bookbinder Douglas Cockerell for the British Museum in 1935. It thus shifts the conventional scholarly focus on the manuscript from the ancient production of an essential early Christian manuscript and its text-critical significance to its modern production and the people who reconstructed the codex into a British Bible.

Modern institutions rarely document their rebinding of old books, which prevents a critical reading of the letters and minutes that document the binding process. Contrary to that practice, the rebinding of Codex Sinaiticus is documented in the archival records of the British Library through letters, pictures, and a binding dummy produced by Cockerell. As a result, the archival sources provide an unusually rich record, detailing the choices and discussions of the modern production stakeholders, allowing for a critical reading and discussion of the 20th-century rebinding of an ancient manuscript as a political, ideological, and commodifying act. By combining research on a concrete modern binding intervention with a close reading of the unusually rich institutional documentation, this thesis addresses and integrates several under-researched aspects in the fields of book history, bibliography, and manuscript studies, aiming to transcend an uncritical aestheticization of books and their bindings. It asks the following research question:

Why was the Codex Sinaiticus rebound in this specific way, and how does its rebinding reflect the ideals, values, and aspirations of the individuals and institutions involved in the process, as well as the discourses of its 1930s context?

This dissertation argues that the rebinding of Codex Sinaiticus constructed an elite, British, Arts and Crafts bible, encapsulating the Interwar discourses of nationalism and loss that affected the definition of Englishness. Through a combined analysis of the codicological history and practice, as well as a close reading of the institutional binding documentation, this dissertation establishes that:

- (1) The rebinding of Codex Sinaiticus at the British Museum dissolved all Eastern Greek earlier binding structures in line with standard museum practice. Instead, it covered the codex with an ahistorical and anachronistic medieval English binding. An intentional choice that made the codex appear less “Eastern,” less “ancient,” and more “English” and “medieval.”
- (2) The rebinding was rooted in the traditional Arts and Crafts ideas of intrinsic value and the medieval workshop, as reflected in the binder’s use of materials, the way he bound the manuscript, and his approach to involve his extensive pan-British network of suppliers.
- (3) In the 1930s, Arts and Crafts values experienced a resurgence in popularity as the movement’s nostalgic medievalism and anti-industrial stance resonated well with the rise of nationalist ideas of Englishness and an attempt to define English identity as Protestant, rural, and intrinsically connected with the medieval period. This made Cockerell a sought-after choice for binding valuable manuscripts that were supposed to look typically English.
- (4) The British Museum officials directly controlled the outcome of the rebinding, transforming a complex and messy manuscript history into a neat, modern museum Bible that conveyed a

sense of wholeness and order, aligning well with the methods of biblical textual criticism and philology that the museum's scholars trusted.

- (5) Both codex acquisition and codex binding were clearly motivated by the desire to maintain the influence of Protestant Christianity in Great Britain in response to perceived moral and religious decline at home, attributed to socialist influences and the rise of fascism abroad in Italy and Germany.
- (6) The binding was a result of retrospective elite aesthetics and elite practice, expressed by aristocratic notions of decorum and propriety. The binding became a means to negotiate class structures and counter the elites' insecurity, as they feared losing the interpretative high ground over taste and aesthetics.

This dissertation presents substantial evidence that the modern rebinding of Codex Sinaiticus illustrates how a Western 20th-century production context altered ancient manuscripts. Under the guise of saving and protecting the codex, the binding stakeholders created an elite, British Arts and Crafts bible, attempting to overcome notions of loss with a nostalgic turn to medieval tradition and elite aesthetics