

The Art of Bookbinding

An overview of the Evolution of pre-1600 Bindings

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The Art of Bookbinding

Julia Miller, in her book titled “Books Will Speak Plain, A Handbook for Identifying and Describing Historical Bindings,” explains Emily Dickinson's quote “To meet an Antique Book in just the Dress his Century wore.”

She says that “When we ‘meet an Antique Book,’ our response to the book transcends its primary function as a storage depot for specific information. We relate to a historical binding on a cultural and emotional level, as people always have and as Emily Dickinson did so long ago when she penned those lines. We relate to how it looks, how it feels, how it opens, even how it smells. When we meet that book ‘in just the Dress his Century wore,’ we absorb much more than the information contained in the text. We record color, design, condition; we ‘see’ the book as an appealing, or unappealing, object. We might reject an old book because it is worn, dirty, and damaged, or we might we charmed by it. We make all sorts of judgments about the book, but most of all, we notice it.”

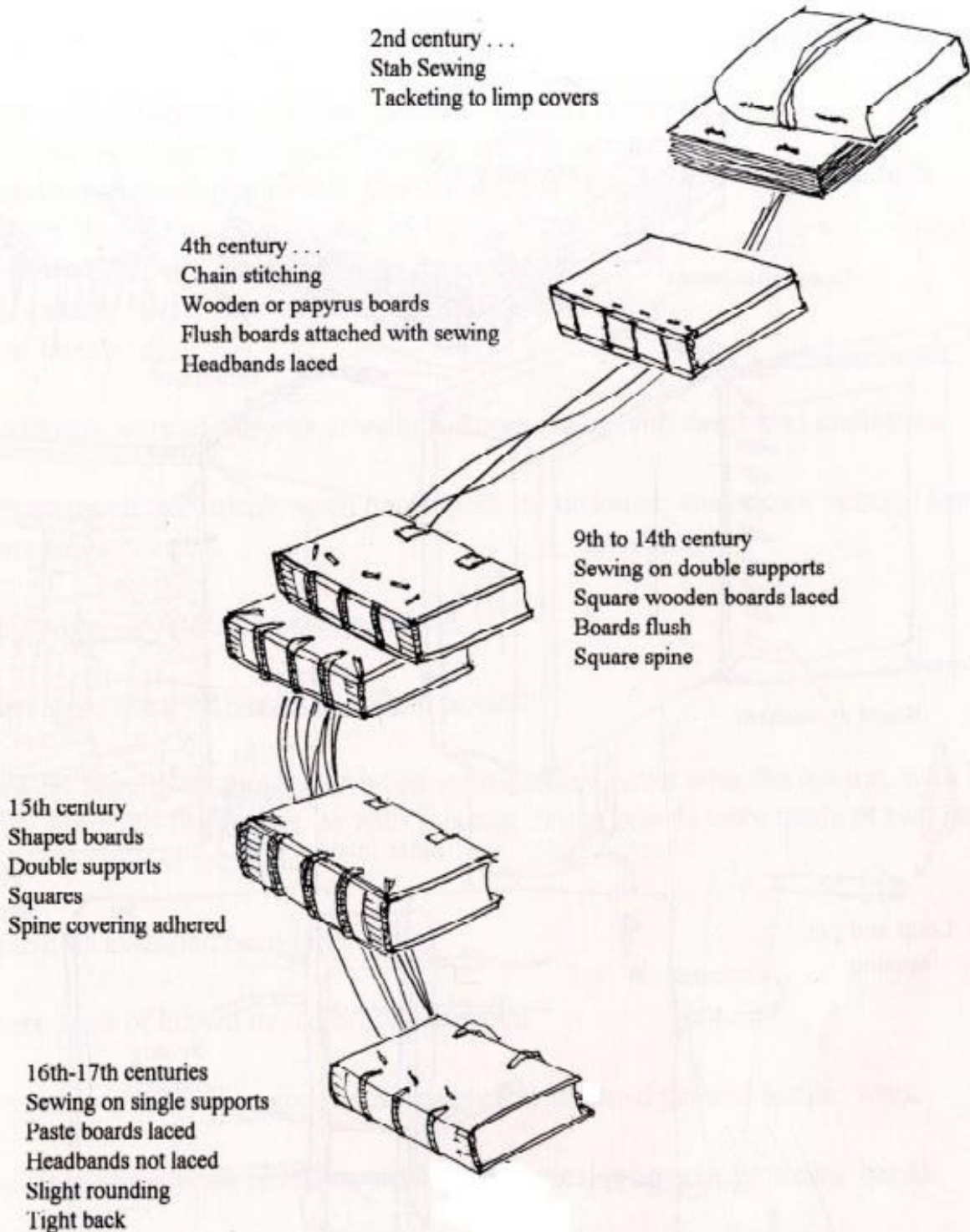
In this class, I hope to give you a bit of an overview of the many types of these books “in the Dress his Century wore”. Of course, there is far more information that could be presented in an hour, so this will be focused on the primary styles of our time frame, that we have extant examples of.

Origins of the book:

Early writings were known to be on tablets of wax, clay, or wood, scrolls of parchment, papyrus, or paper, and others. Each had their place, but all were largely replaced by the codex, a process which started almost as soon as the codex was invented. The book as we know it, the Codex is credited to the Romans in the 1st century AD. The Roman poet Martial, praised its convenient use. Besides its compactness, sturdiness, economic use of materials by using both sides (recto and verso), it is also praised for its ease of reference, as a codex accommodates random access, as opposed to a scroll, which uses sequential access. By the 5th century the codex became the primary writing medium for general use.

The Evolution of the Codex:

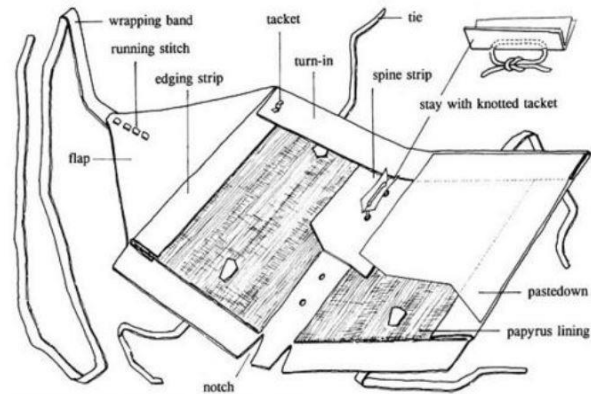
TIMELINE FOR THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK



Excerpt from Greenfield, Jane, 1998. p79

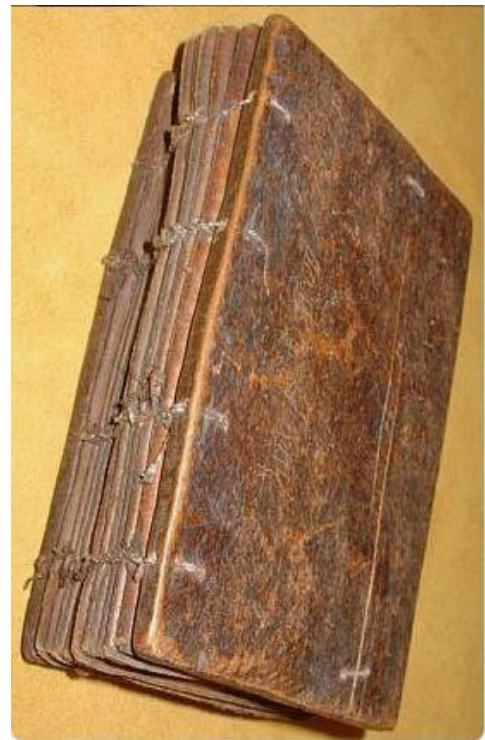
Early Bindings:

Early intact codices were discovered at **Nag Hammadi** in Egypt. Consisting of primarily Gnostic texts in Coptic, the books were mostly written on papyrus, and while many are single-quire, a few are multi-quire. These papyrus quires were simply folded and tacketed onto leather covers that were stiffened with waste sheets of papyrus. Codices were a significant improvement over papyrus or vellum scrolls in that they were easier to handle.

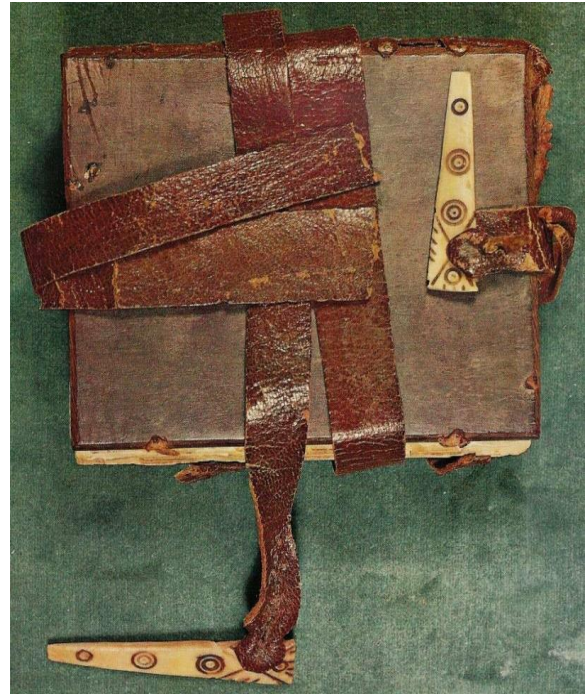


Coptic Bindings:

The methods of bookbinding employed by early Christians in Egypt, the Copts, and used from as early as the 2nd century AD to the 11th century. Coptic bindings, the first true codices, are characterized by one or more sections of parchment, papyrus, or paper sewn through their folds, and attached to each other with chain stitch linkings across the spine. Coptic bindings were being produced with wood or papyrus boards, with the papyrus being pasted together much like modern plywood, until it was ¼" thick, like the wooden boards of the period. Later, this same technique would be used with waste papers to make covers, though not as thick as the wood or papyrus ones.



This was done without any leather on the wooden covers at first. **Codex Glazier**, is a Coptic uncial manuscript of the New Testament on parchment. It is dated paleographically to the 4th or 5th century. This early Coptic binding was not sewn onto its coverboards. It consists of leather spine piece laced into bare wooden covers, completed with wrapping bands and bone pegs, and glued to the spine of a parchment text sewn through folds.



White, colored, or gilded parchment was used for various decorations mastered by the Coptic binders. Their techniques included blind tooling, probably achieved by pressing unheated stamps into the dampened leather (concentric geometrical or animal figures) or drawing parallel lines with a blunt tool.

They also cut out small areas of the covering, underlaid them with colored or gilded material or inlaid them with leathers of different color. The fastenings on these **Late Coptic bindings** were either a peg with a braided strap, or a leather thong rolled into a toggle with a twisted loop.



Western Book Binding

In this section of the class, we will discuss bindings from Western Europe. Evidently, two different construction principles coexisted for centuries in distinct geographical regions. This raises the intriguing question of the interaction between Mediterranean and Western bookbinding traditions. There is hardly any trace of a direct impact from Byzantium or Islam on the craft of bookbinding in those early times, except for some strange parallels in technical details of a Carolingian board attachment.

*The following terms “Carolingian”, “Romanesque” & “Gothic” refer not to an absolute range of dates, but to the style of board attachment and other characteristics. The dates specified are when the styles were most prominent.

The earliest surviving European bookbinding is the **St Cuthbert Gospel** from about 700 AD, a pocket gospel of St. John, that was bound by monks at the Monkwearmouth-Jarrow Abbey, it was enshrined with the owner posthumously.

Whereas the sewing of the St Cuthbert Gospel is evidently rooted in the Coptic/Ethiopian/Byzantine tradition, the decoration of its red-brown goatskin covering undoubtedly reflects Islamic influence.

Admittedly, these features make it difficult, if not impossible, to place the St Cuthbert Gospel in a wider context, but there is certainly no good reason to ascribe to it any prominent role in the evolution of the Western codex. This book is unique in its combination of structural and decorative elements, which is unknown in any other contemporary Western binding.



Carolingian bindings - 8th - 12th century

The chain or link stitch was the primary way of stitching multi-quire codices until the Carolingian era. By the 8th century the parchment text blocks were generally sewn on supports of leather, plant fiber cord, or vellum, and were laced into wooden boards (unlike Near Eastern bindings that were sewn unsupported with some type of chain stitch often with boards bridled on with loops of sewing thread).

TEXT BLOCK - Parchment - Flush with boards

SUPPORTS - Thin, double cords of vegetable fiber (flax, hemp) Raised

SEWING - Herringbone pattern

LACING - Through edge of boards - Upper board laced before sewing - Flat spine (not convex)

BOARDS - Thick - Predominantly oak (also beech, poplar) - Little to no shaping - Same size as text block



Romanesque bindings -11th - 14th century

TEXT BLOCK - Parchment (thin, sheep) - Flush with boards

SUPPORTS - Thick alum-tawed slit straps

SEWING - Sewn straight or “packed” (wrapped multiple times)

BOARDS - Thick - Oak, beech, or poplar - Minimal or no shaping - Same size as text block

LACING - Through edge of boards - Flat spine (not convex) - Straight lacing path



Gothic bindings - 14th - 17th century

TEXT BLOCK - Parchment, parchment & paper, or (later) all paper - Smaller than boards

SUPPORTS - Alum-tawed skin (early) - vegetable-fiber cords (later)

SEWING - Straight or packed sewing - (often "packed" due to thicker sections)

BOARDS - Thick - Oak (beech, poplar) - Lots of shaping - Larger than text block (has squares)

LACING - Over edge and through top of boards
- Rounded spine - Laced after sewing



Other Classes of Bindings:

Girdle books were small portable books worn by medieval European monks, clergymen, and aristocratic nobles as a popular accessory to medieval costume, between the 13th and 16th centuries. They consisted of a book whose leather binding continued loose below the cover of the book in a long-tapered tail with a large knot at the end which could be tucked into one's girdle or belt. The knot was usually strips of leather woven together for durability. The book hung upside down and backwards so that when swung upwards it was ready for reading. The books were normally religious: a cleric's daily Office, or for lay persons (especially women) a Book of Hours.



Limp Bindings:

Whereas the majority of medieval bindings used stiff wooden boards, there was also a variety that used leather, parchment, or paper in which to support and protect the book block. Though they have been known to exist from early on, the frequency of limp bindings seems to have increased in the sixteenth century. The fact is that there are too few surviving from earlier centuries to give an accurate description of their history.



Stationery binding is that branch of bookbinding which deals with books meant to be written in, such as ledger, record, and account books, and the like.

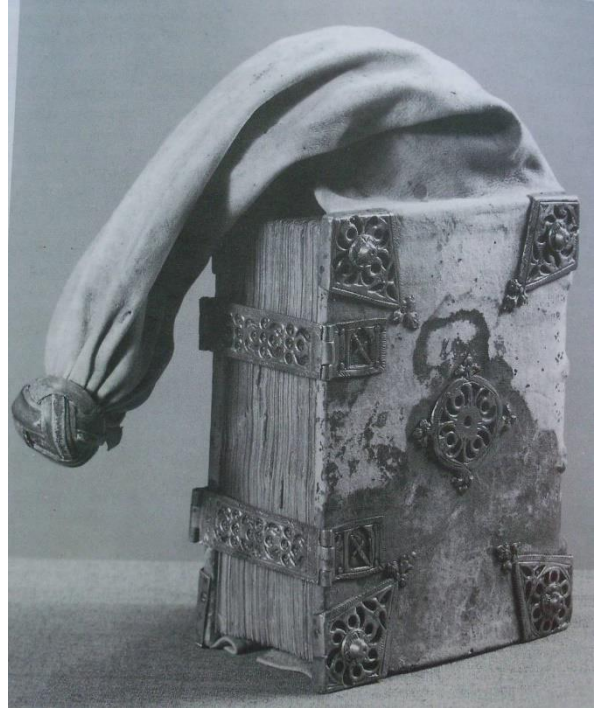
Ledger Bindings are in this category.

These bindings were used for trade journals, accounts, and archival records throughout Europe since at least the early fourteenth century and until the mid-nineteenth century.



Fastenings and Furniture

Because of the thickness of these books, clasps with hooks or pins were needed to keep the vellum pages from springing apart when closed. Some of these clasps became quite elegant. Also, corner bosses came into play starting in the Byzantine era and continued up into the Renaissance.



A **Treasure Binding** is a luxurious book cover using metalwork in gold or silver, often studded with gems and incorporating ivory relief panels or enamel elements. Very few of these have survived intact, as they have been broken up for their precious materials, but a fair number of the ivory panels have survived, jewels and ivory, perhaps in addition to more usual bookbinding material for book-covers such as leather, velvet, or other cloth.



The End of an Age:

With the arrival of rag paper manufacturing in Europe in the late Middle Ages and the use of the printing press beginning in the mid-15th century, the mass production of books gained momentum, and the need for faster binding methods grew. The bookbinding practices of the post-medieval period of printing era and the Renaissance are sometimes interpreted as the beginning of the decline in bookbinding standards. The increasing demand for books was a reason for many shortcuts in bench practice. Some of the shortcuts resulted in weakened book structure, and the trend would be considered to have continued through the rest of the hand-bookbinding period. The materials used by bookbinders were also declining in quality, especially upon entering the machine age.

Omitted from this overview was Islamic, Byzantine, and Eastern Bindings, as it is not within my field of study, and I lack the information to provide you with any insight into that world. I hope you have gained an interest in the study of the bindings of medieval books, and feel free to contact me with any questions at:

antoniodenavarra@yahoo.com

References:

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Glossary

Bands - the support cords or thongs on which the quires of a book are sewn. If the cords are laid into grooves so that they lie flush with or slightly below the surface of the back, they are referred to as recessed cords. If the cords or thongs are not recessed, they form ridges across the spine of the book and are referred to as raised bands.

Boards – stiff front and back covers.

Codex - is a collection of single leaves or folded sections of writing support material (papyrus, parchment, paper) bound together in some sort of a cover.

Endbands – structural and decorative elements consisting of colored threads entwined tightly round a core of vellum, leather or cord that are sewn through the sections, filling the gap at the spine between the top or bottom of the section and the edges of the boards.

Endpapers – blank or decorated leaves preceding and following the text.

Folio – A sheet of paper or parchment folded once to create two pages. The size of a folio determines the overall size of the book.

Foreedge - the front edge of a book, opposite the spine.

Furniture - anything attached to the boards, e.g. clasps, metal corner pieces, bosses.

Head – top edge of the text block.

Pastedown – a leaf conjoint with another, sewn with the text block and pasted to the inside of the board, or a separate piece of paper pasted to the inside of a board

Quire (also known as a gathering) – A group of folios of varying quantities group together where their center folds are lined with each other.

Sewing stations – the position of sewing supports or chain stitching on the spine.

Spine – the edge of book that is sewn or adhered.

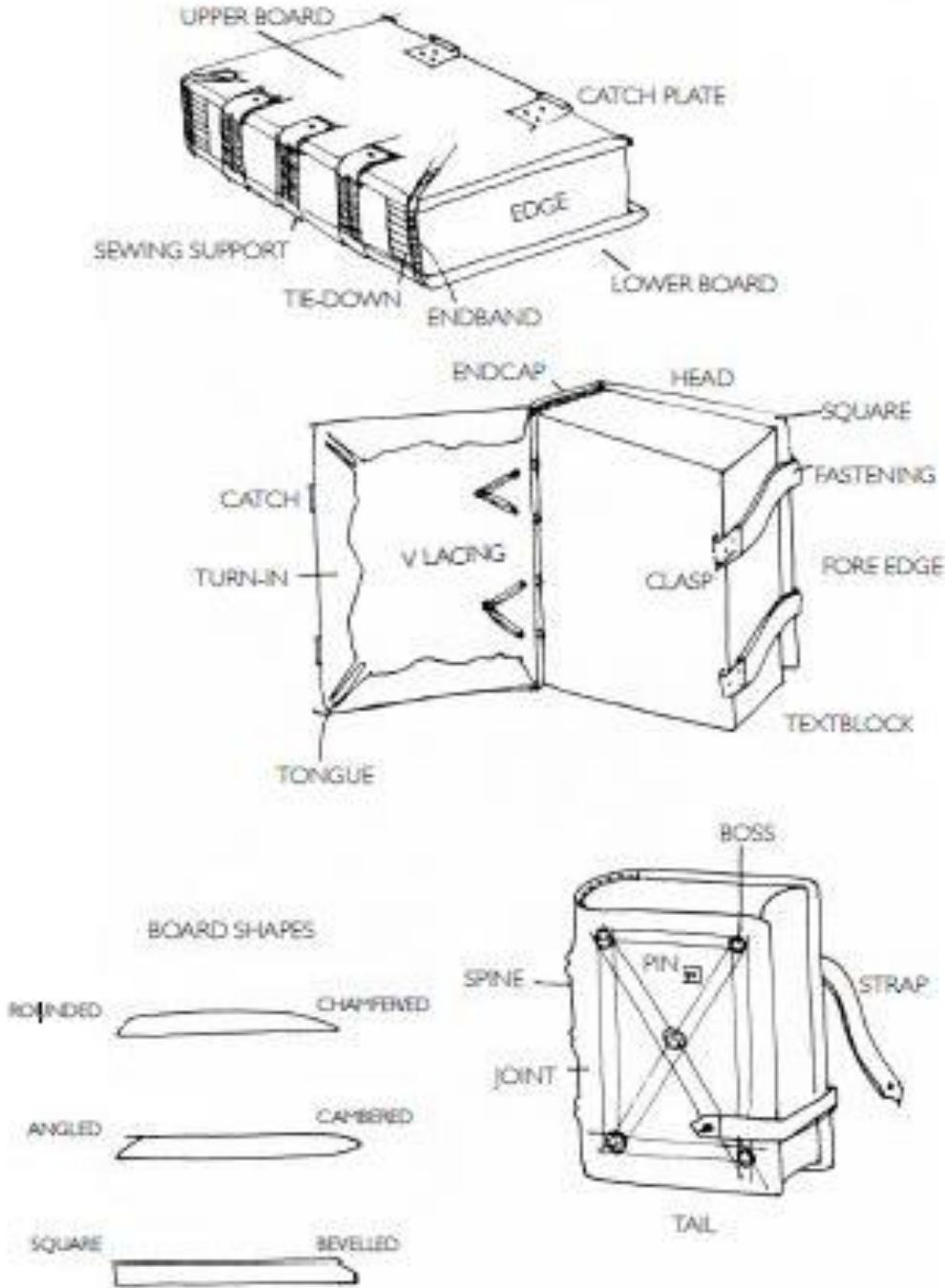
Squares – parts of the boards extending beyond the text block. (Late 16th C and up)

Tail – bottom edge of the text block.

Text block – a collection of quires sewn or glued together.

Turn-in – the portion of the covering material folded into the turn-ins inside of the cover.

Parts of a Medieval Book



Drawings by Jane Greenfield from *Catalogue of Medieval and Renaissance Manuscripts in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, Volume I: MSS 1-290*, by Barbara Shailor.