

Ligatus Summer School 2022: Histories of Bookbinding

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Guest post by [Yvette Campbell](#), Collections and Content Librarian at Maynooth University Library. Yvette's professional interests include the history of the book, codicology, descriptive bibliography, and digital preservation.



(Fig 1) - Week 1 Ligatus School 2022 participants at the Edward Worth Library. Photo courtesy of Elizabethann Boran

I was very fortunate to undertake a terrific professional development opportunity this year to attend the 2022 [Ligatus Summer School](#) for two consecutive weeks in September. The Summer School took place in Dublin and was hosted by the [Edward Worth Library](#) and included scheduled visits to both [Marsh's Library](#) and the [Chester Beatty](#).

The Ligatus Summer School is world-renowned amongst librarians, cataloguers, conservators, historians, and scholars who work with early books. It offers courses on bookbinding history and Linked Data - in particular, the development of historic bindings with a particular emphasis on description and recording of their various structures and materials.

Ligatus is organised in collaboration with many institutions including the [University of the Arts, London](#) and the [Saint Catherine Foundation](#) which supports conservation work at Saint Catherine's Monastery in Sinai, Egypt. The Summer School takes place in a different city each year worldwide and 2022 was the first year it has been held in Ireland.

Call for applications

I noticed the call for applications to attend the school on social media and didn't hesitate twice about applying. Anyone who works with unique and distinctive collections in Ireland will know what little opportunities are afforded to us in recent years to upskill in the areas of

special collections curatorship. I also felt it was a great opportunity to visit some of the most important historical collections in other local institutions and to re-connect with colleagues in this area. I previously had knowledge of European bookbinding which for several years has been beneficial in my role as a rare materials cataloguer. In recent times, I have been drawn to the traditions of bookbinding that developed in the East (in particular, the Islamic manuscript tradition) and was very keen to expand my knowledge in this area. For me it was important to understand that bindings can be read as a text with a language of their own, and to describe them accurately is to learn their language.

The Application Process

The course fee (as of 2022) was €400 per week and candidates could choose to attend one or both weeks. Maynooth University Library kindly supported my application to attend both weeks. The application process was much the same as applying for a regular job. The school required an up-to-date CV and a supporting cover letter outlining who we are, our occupation and why we were interested in applying.

Successful candidates would be contacted in August, and I was delighted when I received the acceptance email. Shortly afterwards, I received the summer programme including a reading list for week 1 which focused on *European Bookbinding 1450-1830*. I was also provided with a list of software to download in advance of week 2 which was concerned with *Identifying and Recording Bookbinding Structures of the Eastern Mediterranean*

Week 1 - European Bookbinding 1450-1830



(Fig 2) - Prof. Nicholas Pickwood teaching *European Bookbinding* at the Edward Worth Library. Photo courtesy of Elizabethann Boran

[Professor Nicholas Pickwood](#)'s course on *European Bookbinding, 1450-1830* was every bit as meticulous but rewarding as I had hoped it would be. It consisted of rich lectures every

morning and hands-on sessions in the afternoons looking at specimens from the Edward Worth Library. Two afternoons included excursions to Marsh's Library and the Chester Beatty for classes examining their collections in greater detail.

Participants came from a variety of diverse backgrounds, travelling from Estonia, France, England, Germany and Sweden. Eight students were book and paper conservators, while three were Irish librarians (including a digital librarian and two special collections librarians). It was fascinating to see the mix of backgrounds and I was heartened that there was representation within my own profession. Without the know-how to catalogue and describe binding structures as accurately as possible, we are losing great opportunities to provide researchers and scholars with enough material evidence to support important historical research including questions of who bound a book, where and for what purpose?

As a rare materials cataloguer, I have always tried to include at least a brief description of each book's decorative binding. This course has now given me the knowledge and vocabulary to describe other important elements and how they were made. For example, recording the presence of [uncut edges](#) is vital for understanding the status of the book and to be cautious when recording the prices on title-pages to understand exactly what they mean - as without other supporting historical annotation, it can be meaningless - is it the price of the [textblock](#), the print, or the binding?



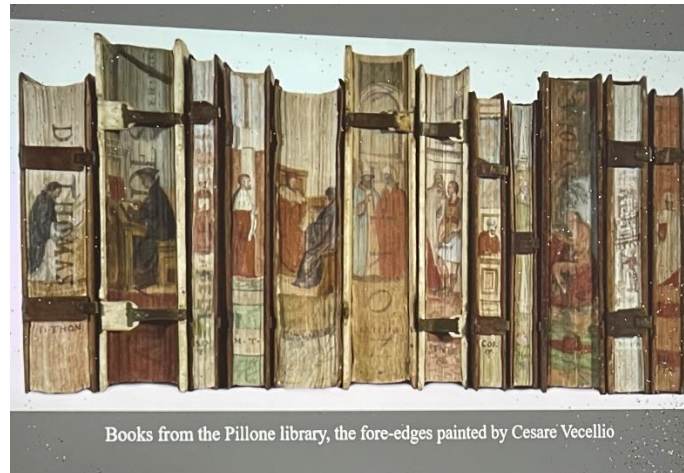
(Fig 3) - Selection of bindings to examine from the Edward Worth Library

(Fig 4) - Selection of European bindings from the Chester Beatty

We concentrated on the structural analysis of [bindings](#) particularly regional techniques and materials present rather than decorative finishing. We also examined how to date bindings in the medieval period, how to identify the raw materials used (with caution), how to check leather that has been tooled by hand through symmetry, sewing and stitching techniques, [recessed supports](#), [spine linings](#), edge treatments, board types and [endleaves](#) – all of which can tell us the where, why and hows of the history of the book as an object.

As books regularly travelled from the bindery to private collections across Europe during this time-period, they were often rebound to suit the taste of their wealthy owners. Patrons could choose their books to be bound in various uniform colours or stripped back to the plain old basics. Thus, Professor Pickwoad emphasised the importance of intact historic collections as one of the most important for studying original bindings - since they were often

commissioned for one or perhaps two collectors and unlikely to have moved around. Some Irish examples in this context include the [St. Canice's Cathedral Library Collection](#) on long term loan from the Church of Ireland held at Maynooth University, [the Bolton Library at University Limerick](#) and indeed the Edward Worth Library itself.



(Fig 5) - Example of customised fore-edge painting by Cesare Vecellio from the Pillone Library

Week 2 – Identifying and Recording Bookbinding Structures of the Eastern Mediterranean

For week 2, the course was divided into two inter-related sessions delivered by [Dr Georgios Boudalis](#) and Dr [Athanasios Velios](#), both conservators respectively working on the St. Catherine's Monastery Project in Egypt. In the first session, Dr Boudalis focused on the major structural and decorative features of different bookbinding traditions that developed in the Eastern Mediterranean, including Coptic bindings, Arabic, Armenian, Georgian, Syriac and Ethiopic books– with a special focus on Byzantine and post-Byzantine bookbindings. We examined various precursors to the multi-gathering codices such as wooden, legal and wax tablets and papyrus rolls.



(Fig 6) - Week 2 Ligatus School 2022 participants at the Chester Beatty. Photo courtesy of Kristine-Rose Beers

While showcasing bookbindings from various museums and libraries (including St. Catherine's Monastery), we were guided through the development of these closely related binding structures and their influences from the West. Dr. Boudalis emphasised that by examining representations of the codex in iconography, we can ascertain evidence of decorative and functional characteristics that may no longer survive and how they may have been utilised once upon a time. We concluded this session by visiting the Chester Beatty again to view and study examples of these various traditions with an impromptu visit to the [Conservation lab](#) hosted by Kristine Rose-Beers, Julia Poirier and Hoa Perriguy.



(Fig 7) – Coptic binding fragments from the CBL dating to 600 AD

(Fig 8) - Bone ties decorated with characteristic concentric circles used to keep leather ties in place

In the second session, Dr Athanasios Velios introduced participants to the semantic web, Linked Data and the [CIDOC Conceptual Reference Model \(CRM\)](#) for cultural heritage objects. We were also introduced to the consolidation potential currently being explored in a [Linked Conservation Data Pilot](#).

The session consisted of a combination of presentations and hands-on group-oriented workshops. We explored the importance of standardised vocabularies for book descriptions and the significance of using Uniform Resource Identifier's (URI) to assist systems in linking to a global thesaurus for maximum discovery impact. The afternoons were spent writing xml schema for various book components and mapping these to CIDOC-CRM using 3MEditor, a web application to view xml mapping files and publishing the Linked Data in [ResearchSpace](#), an open-source platform that supports knowledge preservation.

At the end of the course, I received a certificate of completion for my continuing professional development (CPD) records.

Reflections on the course

I am looking forward to applying new knowledge of concise binding descriptions to my role in [Maynooth University Library](#) and perusing our holdings again as we enter an exciting and challenging new phase of the Russell Library Cataloguing Project to enrich records from the collections of [St. Patrick's College Maynooth](#) with copy-specific features related to bindings. If contemplating how to describe bindings, I would highly recommend consulting the [Language of Bindings thesaurus](#) as a reference. The course has given me a deeper appreciation for the study of bindings as artefacts and how materiality impacts history. As Prof. Pickwood declared during one tea break when I revealed that I need to go back and amend a few entries in our catalogue - "I want you to go away from this course feeling worried" ... And I do, but in an optimistic way!

Categories: bookbinding, special collections, rare books, CPD

The logo for 'libfocus' features the word 'libfocus' in a serif font. The 'lib' is in a dark blue color, while 'focus' is in a grey color. The entire text is enclosed within a large, thin, grey curly brace that spans the width of the text.