

**ETHICS IN THE CONSERVATION OF  
MEDIEVAL CODICES**  
**MINIMAL INTERVENTION IN ORDER TO  
PRESERVE CODICES' ORIGINAL STRUCTURE**

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**ABSTRACT**

The long work with medieval codices directs the conservator towards a more complex approach and understanding of the objects' unique entity as a whole, a synthesis of knowledge and art. The conservation ethics requires respect for the aesthetic and historic significance as well as for the physical integrity of the book.

The conservation treatment has to take into account the complex nature of the codex – information carrier, work of art, but also a utility object – and aim to preserve all these characteristics. The conservation ethics requires the use of reversible materials and techniques that will not damage the original substance, as well as thorough documentation of the undertaken treatments and employed materials to enable adequate future treatment, if such necessity arises. Another part of the conservator's responsibility is to look after the conditions under which the manuscripts are stored and used.

Our observations of several manuscripts' collections from the Balkans revealed the conservation approaches used in the past, and further convinced us of the importance of the minimal intervention in order to preserve the original structure of the medieval codex.

**KEYWORDS**

medieval manuscripts, Byzantine manuscripts, book conservation,  
book restoration

The ethical attitude towards cultural heritage objects includes care to preserve them, store them properly and exhibit them in appropriate conditions. The work of the conservators is of high importance in the preservation of cultural heritage. They work directly with objects and have great responsibility for their fate. Our society frequently discusses the topic of conserving and restoring valuable architectural buildings,

murals, easel paintings and other museum objects. In many countries around the world the associations of conservator-restorers have their own codes of ethics and professional guidelines for work, which concern mainly the respect for the aesthetic and historic significance of the object, its uniqueness and physical integrity. The duties of conservator include preparation of thorough documentation of the undertaken treatments and the applied materials. The conservation treatment should be reversible, enabling future interventions if necessary and, as far as the materials used are concerned, they should be harmless to the artefact and the human health as well as compatible with the cultural and historic characteristics of the object.

Unfortunately, these ethical standards are not always applied to the conservation of rare books and manuscripts. Codices tend to be removed from the cultural heritage context and considered only as information carriers that must be maintained in a condition suitable for use.

As a matter of fact, the creation of a medieval codex was a process, which we would today qualify as a supreme synthesis of arts. In the monastery scriptoria some monks used to prepare the book block – up to the 13<sup>th</sup> century they used chiefly parchment and later on paper as well – these monks also made up the gatherings, some used to copy the texts, some decorated them with illuminations, miniatures, initials and head pieces, some used to sew the manuscript, trim it and cover it with leather, which was additionally decorated by blind tooling, gold tooling or mounting of a metal furniture. That is why during conservation the old books should be approached as highly valuable works of complex nature, which incorporate in one entity different materials, techniques and functions.

Today, each element of the medieval codex is of interest. In the past, the attention was mainly focused on the content and decoration of the books. The miniatures were often cut out and exhibited under protective glass, sometimes even sold separately. Shabby covers were replaced by new ones and rebinding was the main method of preservation and conservation of old books. Many owners of valuable codices, including libraries, rebound them with the aim to preserve their physical integrity as well as for aesthetic reasons. For example, presently, in the collection of Greek manuscripts at the Vatican library, only 2% of the codices have their original bindings preserved.<sup>1</sup>

1 Canart, Paul. *Le Legature Bizantine della Biblioteca Vaticana*. // Federici, Carlo; Konstantinos Houlis. *Legature Bizantine Vaticane*. Roma : Fratelli Palombi Editori, 1988. P. 9.

Most of the preserved Byzantine manuscripts were also rebound later, in the post-Byzantine period. Amendments included securing the torn areas along the edges of the folia by gluing on pieces of paper (Figure 1), sewing the tears in the parchment (Figure 2),

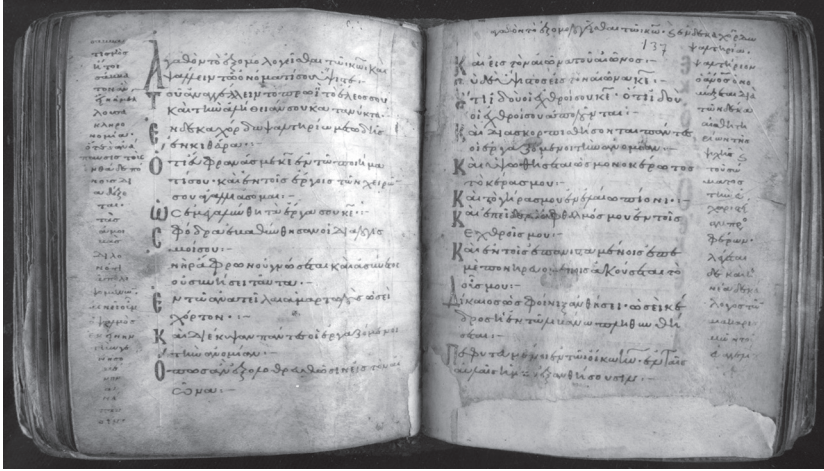


FIGURE 1.  
Post-Byzantine binding and amendments

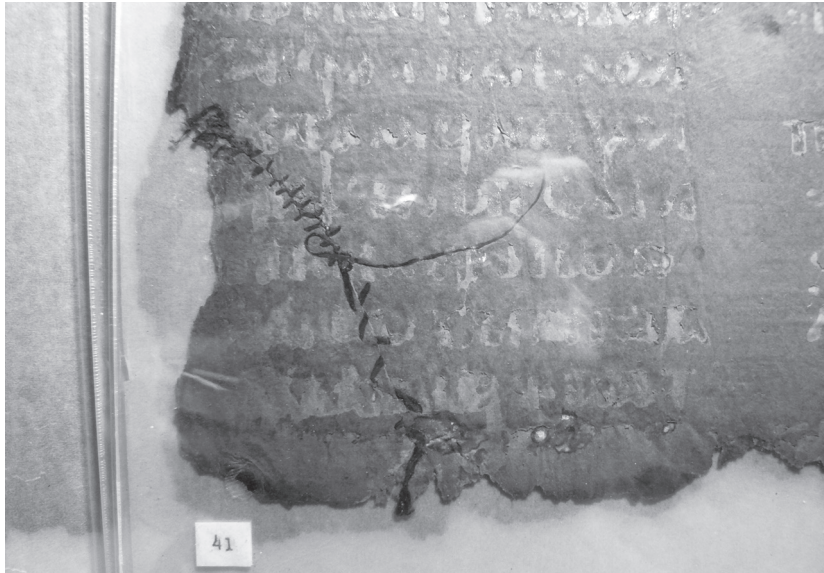


FIGURE 2.  
Sewing the tears in the parchment

new trimming and rebinding. From a time distance this “restoration treatment” serves as a source of information and should be preserved during the next intervention. Even the wax drops on the pages provide information about the conditions under which the book was used. In D. Gr. 282<sup>2</sup> the wax drops are deliberately placed at the beginning of certain sections of the text and are outlined, so that they can be found more easily by a mere finger touch. This is a clear example of how the wax drops that could be defined as soiling matter, become page markers and should be preserved during the process of cleaning the manuscript (Figure 3). The nonconserved codices often contain dry leaves or beard hairs, which the monks used to use instead of bookmarks. Today they also provide interesting information about the centuries-old life of the codex. These remains should be preserved and stored in an envelope especially designated to the particular manuscript. Elements of clasps have been collected by the librarians throughout the years and

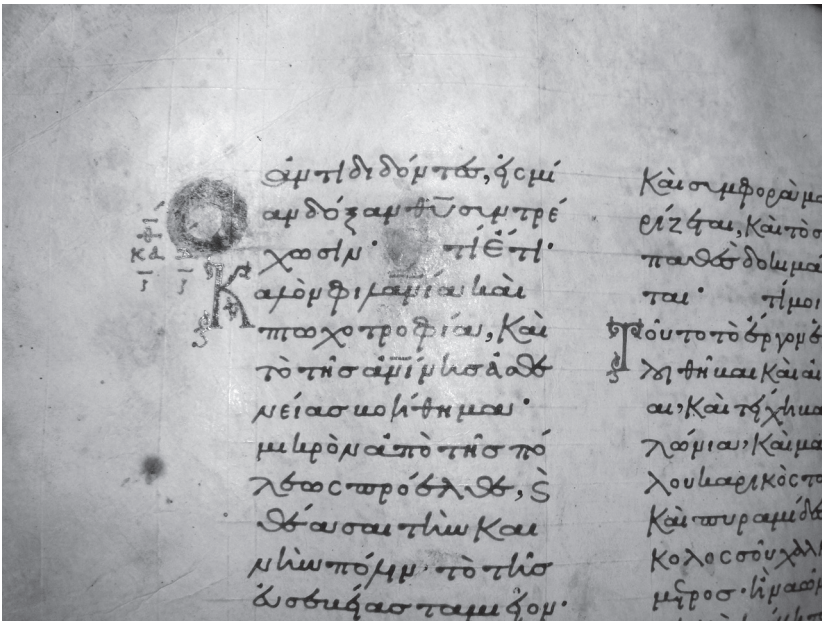


FIGURE 3.  
Wax drops as page markers

2 “D. Gr.” and “D. Sl.” stands for the Greek and Slavic manuscripts from the collection of the Ivan Duichev Center for Slavic-Byzantine Studies.

in case there is data as to which manuscript they belong, the items can be used in future conservation treatment. And while somewhere the preservation of each element of a codex is considered highly important, there are other places where serious and often unjustifiable restoration interventions are carried out. Rebinding of the codices is still common today. The mass rebinding of books began when the leaf casting technique entered the restoration practice in the 70s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Due to its efficiency, this method was applied to the treatment of manuscripts as well. To avoid bleeding of the inks the folia were sized using low percentage solutions of various synthetic resins usually in organic solvents, which penetrated deeply into the structure of the paper. Due to the aging of the materials applied, today these consolidating agents have induced fragility of the paper. Synthetic resin (polyvinyl acetate) was often added to paper pulp in order to achieve greater strength, but nowadays this has led to the separation of the casted paper. When the folia were pressed afterwards, loss of the original relief of the handmade paper was observed. The codex was then sewed and the text-block was trimmed larger than its original format. In these cases, even if the old cover was preserved, it did not fit the manuscript and only some separate fragments could be glued on the new cover. That is how some specific elements and features of the original binding as turn-ins etc. are lost forever. During a binding executed three centuries ago the previous precious red textile cover, embroidered with metallic thread, was preserved by being glued to the inner side of the board (Figure 4). This was done with a full awareness of the value and sacredness of each element of the liturgical book. And only 40 years ago during the conservation of many manuscripts the preserved original leather was removed, cut in pieces and glued onto the new cover. Another case of inadequate ethical approach was the common practice in the past: to sew the text-block of Byzantine codices on support after the conservation, while according to the Byzantine tradition link-stitch sewing was used, the thread was accommodated in the V-shaped sewing holes and the spine was smooth. If the binding is missing, but the codex has a specially designed box, which appropriately closes and covers it, no rebinding should be performed. In the case of a partially lost wooden board we suggest to insert a removable negative form made of acid-free corrugated cardboard, whose task is to prevent the deformation of the parchment folia. A reconstruction of the board is also possible, especially if the leather cover is preserved. Depending on the size of



FIGURE 4.  
Remains of the previous cover

the lost fragment we usually reconstruct the wood by creating an insert made of the extremely light Balsa wood or acid-free corrugated cardboard, covered with veneer. Thus we avoid the use of new wood, which is stronger than the original one and would create tension in the junction areas (Figure 5). If the original wood has been heavily destroyed by insects, we execute a preliminary consolidation by impregnating it with synthetic resins dissolved in organic solvent. This treatment ena-



FIGURE 5.  
Balsa wood board insert

bles the preservation of the original binding and the original wooden board, which sometimes bears important texts and inscriptions. After the process of reconstructing the wood is finished with lying of filling putty and retouching the insert, a piece of new leather could be glued on it to complement the preserved original leather.

As a result of wetting, drying and ageing, the spine area of the manuscript often shrinks and sometimes the leather is torn. In the first case it is possible to perform soaking with polyethylene glycol and gradually stretch the spine back to its original width. Thus the text-block would finally fit again in the original binding (Figure 6). For the filling of the losses we usually use thinned leather or Japanese paper, which is then coloured. In the case of a severely torn spine, we practice lining with fine but strong synthetic tissue which is glued under the cover of the boards. If the boards are detached, it is not difficult to reattach them to the text-block without rebinding the codex. That is how we manage to preserve the original endband as well. If it is torn, we fix it to the text-block with a transparent polyamide thread. Often only an



FIGURE 6.  
Soaking and stretching of the spine

additional loop or a ring in the endband proves that the manuscript had a string marker, which was lost later. We avoid reconstruction of the fastenings, especially when none of them has been preserved. In the Byzantine tradition the boards of the manuscript are flush with the text-block, so the shrinkage in the spine area often induces bulging of the fore-edge. Thus even if the fastenings were present it would not be possible to close them. The preserved holes and remains of the straps present more authentic information rather than if reconstruction was performed. Boxes produced to match the size of the manuscripts or removable boards can replace the missing boards and fastenings and prevent the deformation of the text-block.

When treating the text-block, the conservator has to find the right approach which combines the application of modern methods and materials with the respect for the original. Sometimes the torn areas and the lost fragments of the paper, as well as the volume of the text-block, require the use of leaf casting machine, provided that the inks are stable enough. The wet treatment is followed by sizing, in which the glue used is similar to the original one; the folia are left to air-dry before

being pressed – in order to avoid losing the original relief of the hand-made paper. When making the gatherings, we try to preserve the original format of the bifolia by hand trimming them up to 1-2 mm above their original size. This makes possible the leaf casted manuscript to be mounted back in its original binding.

The binding of a manuscript from the 11<sup>th</sup> century was missing, but there were still some remains of the old sewing and endbands of the text-block present. This motivated us to restore the folia *in situ*, reconstructing only the format size of those folia, which were badly damaged by rodents and mold, and consolidating the areas where the corroded iron-gall inks have perforated the parchment. Part of the responsibility of the conservator is to convince the decision-makers in the institution owning the rare book that the approach chosen is the correct one. This, however, is not always that easy. For example, we were expected to unbind this particular manuscript, to humidify and press its bifolia and then rebind it. We decided that removing the deformation was extremely risky for parchment in such a condition, and besides that, the remains of the original sewing would be lost.

The torn sewing of D. Gr. 339 was restored by extending the original thread with a new one. Thread with a lighter colour was chosen to help identify the intervention. By sewing of the separated gatherings the manuscript regained its function to be opened and closed. There was no need to restore the missing spine of the leather cover that we had no information about.

From a modern point of view we would consider as unethical the conservation of two unique codices stored at Tirana, Albania. Beratinus I from the 6<sup>th</sup> and Beratinus II from the 9<sup>th</sup> century were restored in 1971 in China. The manuscripts were found in a very poor condition after being hidden for a long time in a damp environment. Due to the lack of conservation documentation today we cannot say what exactly has imposed the cutting of the bifolia. Each folio is fixed between two Plexiglass sheets with the aid of adhesive net. Concerning the manuscript from the 6<sup>th</sup> century, the lining of the parchment with a piece of paper which does not even cover the whole folio arouses serious bewilderment (Figure 7). Letters are painted on the lining paper and these resemble the original ones but make no sense. From the preserved original side of the folio the text is written with kalamos. Under high magnification some granular substance on the surface of the original letters is observed, which looks like the ink used to write the new text.

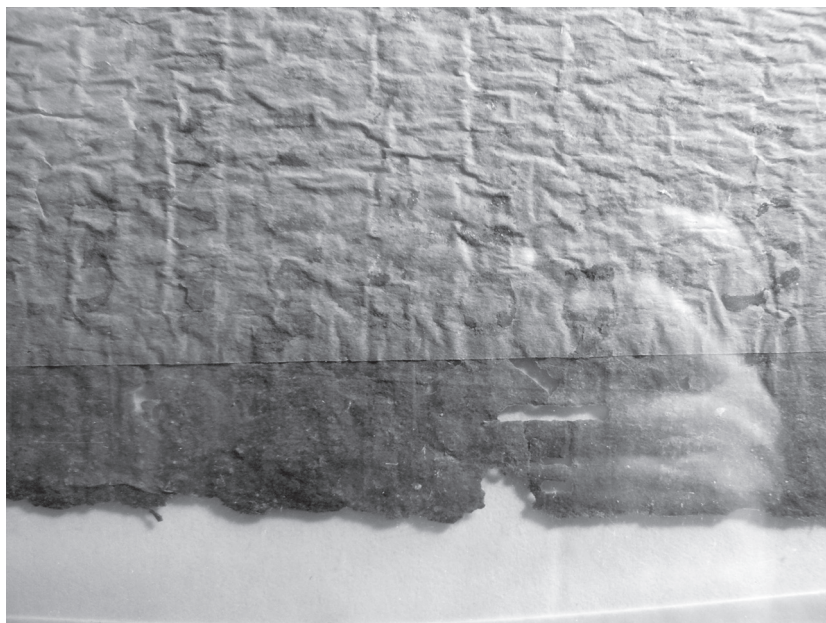


FIGURE 7.  
New letters on the paper lined parchment

This could mean that the original text has been retouched – and this is altogether unacceptable in the present professional practice. This is still just an assumption, which could be verified only through laboratory analyses. The folia of the other manuscript, dating from the 9<sup>th</sup> century, are similarly mounted between Plexiglass sheets. The Plexiglass ‘sandwiches’ were inserted in Mylar envelopes, tied with a cord, thus several folders came out of each manuscript. The physical integrity and many of the codicological characteristics of these two manuscripts were destroyed beyond repair. Today they are part of the UNESCO cultural heritage and if any future conservation treatments are planned, these should be undertaken only after leading experts are consulted.

The conservation treatment of manuscripts in our laboratory in the 90s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century showed comparative increase of the professional ethics. In the case of D. Sl. 48 the manuscript has completely new boards and cover – an imitation of the old ones, only fragments of which were preserved. Other manuscripts (D. Gr. 282, D. Gr. 413, D. Gr. 304) were fully rebound during the conservation. Some elements of



FIGURE 8.  
Imitation of the original endband

the new bindings do not match completely the original remains (Figure 8). Twenty years later even this intervention generates reflections about the ethics in preserving the original. But at least in this case all the elements, that are informative of the initial appearance of the codex, are separately preserved.

Conservators, librarians and all the specialists engaged in preservation and research of manuscripts and rare books should be trained from the very beginning in ethical attitude towards these objects. The conservation treatment should restore the physical features of the codex to be opened, leafed and closed, and to prevent any future damage without destroying its codicological characteristics and inflicting loss of information and original substance. Nowadays the codices with preserved structure and binding attract the attention of the scholars with the information they carry about the long tradition of creating manuscripts. We hope that this will help with the acceptance of the tendency to minimize intervention during conservation.

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### **Biographical sketch**

Rumyana Decheva has been working at the Ivan Duichev Centre for Slavic-Byzantine Studies at the Sofia University since 2004. She worked as a conservator for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Diplomatic Archive. She holds an MA from the National Academy of Arts, Sofia, Conservation Department. She also attended the Institute of Library Science, Sofia. She gained experience in work in Germany and Austria. Decheva contributed to summer schools and conferences, and published on conservation of prints and drawings, parchment books and digitisation.

## **ETIKA U ZAŠTITI SREDNJEVJEKOVNIH KODEKSA MINIMALNI ZAHVATI RADI OČUVANJA IZVORNE STRUKTURE KODEKSA**

### **Sažetak**

Dugotrajno bavljenje srednjevjekovnim kodeksima usmjerava konzervatora prema složenijim pristupima i razumijevanju jedinstvene jedinice predmeta kao cjeline, sintezi znanja i umjetnosti. Konzervacijska etika traži poštivanje estetske i povijesne važnosti te fizičkog integriteta knjige.

Konzervatorski postupak mora uzeti u obzir složenu prirodu kodeksa – nositelj informacija, umjetničko djelo i uporabni predmet – i nastojati očuvati sve te značajke. Konzervacijska etika zahtijeva korištenje reverzibilnih materijala i tehnika koji neće oštetiti izvorni sadržaj, ali i detaljnu dokumentaciju o provedenim postupcima i korištenim materijalima što će omogućiti odgovarajuće buduće postupke, ako se za to pokaže potreba. Konzervator mora brinuti i o uvjetima u kojima se rukopisi čuvaju i koriste.

Pregled nekoliko zbirki rukopisa na Balkanu otkriva koji su se konzervatorski zahvati koristili u prošlosti i dodatno potvrđuje važnost minimalne intervencije radi očuvanja izvorne strukture srednjevjekovnih kodeksa.

**Ključne riječi:** srednjevjekovni rukopisi, bizantinski rukopisi, konzervacija knjiga, restauracija knjiga