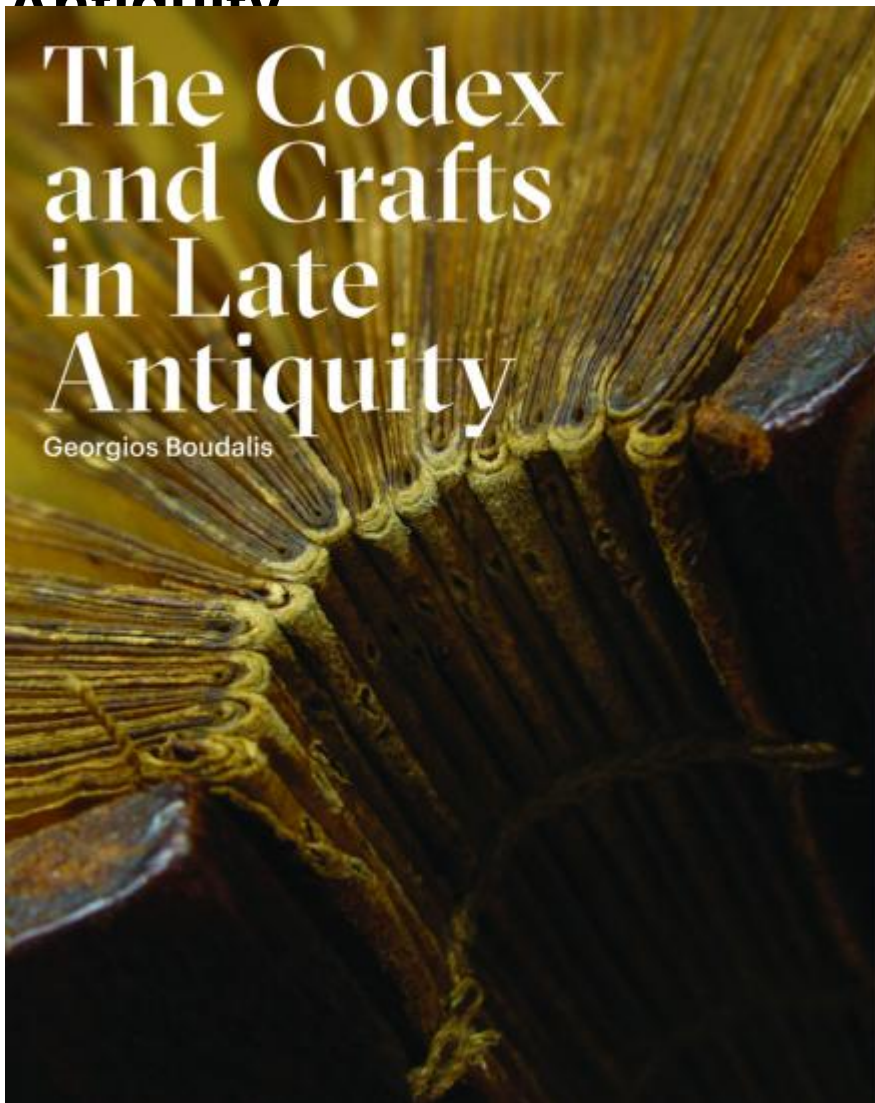


# Book Review: The Codex and Crafts in Late Antiquity



Review by Jane Eagan

The Codex and Crafts in Late Antiquity

By Georgios Boudalis

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Paperback USD \$30.00

200 pages / 32 colour plates, 80 halftones, 45 line drawings

In his book *The Codex and Crafts in Late Antiquity* Georgios Boudalis sets himself the ambitious task of examining the transition from roll to codex in Late Antiquity, describing the major types and features of surviving codices and placing the codex into the cultural, religious and technological contexts of the period. Boudalis' central argument is that the codex is not an ingenious invention *sui generis*, but an innovation or step change in written culture, influenced by the skills and technology of the times. In this ground-breaking study, Boudalis makes connections between the codex and a wide variety of objects and practices, showing that the codex had practical roots in a culture of making that transcended borders, cultures and time.

Georgios Boudalis is head of the Book and Paper Conservation Laboratory of the Museum of Byzantine Culture, Thessaloniki. He completed a PhD on the evolution of Byzantine binding in 2005 and in 2015 was research fellow at the Bard Graduate Center, New York, returning in 2016 as adjunct visiting professor. The publication *Codex and Crafts* is the result of his period of study at the Bard Graduate Center (BGC), and his research of the past ten or more years. This new publication brings together the results of Boudalis' research and will interest book conservators, book historians and those interested in the study of material culture and, in particular, the borrowing and adaptation of techniques in the production of commonplace objects.

The author states his main ideas clearly in the introduction, that "the codex should be understood not as an invention but as an innovation" and a "synthesis of different techniques, borrowed or transferred from such different crafts as shoe and sock making, woodworking, and fabric making" (p 6). These ideas are fully explored for the period from the fourth to tenth centuries. Boudalis works through the precursors of the codex (roll, tablet, single-gathering codex) in the first two chapters (Part I), with the following eight chapters (Part II) focussing on the multigathering codex, which he discusses element-by-element (sewing, boards and attachment, spine lining, endbands, cover and decoration, patterns, fastenings, book marks) in the order of the binding operation and in comparison with other commonplace objects. *Codex and Crafts* closes with a 'Checklist of Objects in the Exhibition' (pp 159-166); as a Bard Focus Project, this work included curation of an exhibition (as well as this publication) by Boudalis in collaboration with MA and PhD students at the Center (the exhibition at the Bard Center Gallery took place from 23 February 2018 to 8 July 2018).

*Codex and Crafts* starts by introducing the papyrus roll, wooden wax tablet and single-gathering codices of Antiquity. The author describes the surviving objects with respect to appearance, construction and use, giving a careful analysis of their physical structure and condition and noting patterns of wear that indicate use and original construction. He also draws upon contemporary illustrations of early writing supports found in mosaics, frescoes, icons and sculpture, noting that while this rich source of information has been the least studied, it can be the most difficult to interpret (p 16). He follows his own counsel to avoid over-interpretation of the objects depicted and the desire to fill in gaps to complete the fragmentary story (p 8). Instead, Boudalis carries out a careful and insightful analysis of the iconographic evidence, pulling out important features which he then illustrates in the artefacts themselves (or as vestigial features), such as board corner straps, board strap markers (pp 148-150) and paired sewing stations (p 65 fig 42) depicted in the sixth-century mosaics of the Basilica of San Vitale, Ravenna.

Some of the techniques Boudalis identifies as being derived from precursors of the multigathering codex—or borrowed from other crafts and adapted to the multigathering codex—are looping, knotting, twining and sewing found in textiles such as socks and objects such as baskets, nets and mats. For example, he makes a direct comparison between the unsupported sewing structure of the multigathering codex (which binds the leaves together) and the cross-knit looping method of making socks (p 52), a technique of such widespread chronological and geographical existence as to be almost universal (p 54) and still in use today in Iran and Northern Europe. Regarding the thread-hinging attachment of wooden boards to the sewn textblock, he notes its similarity to edge-finishing techniques used in textiles or garments, describing the board attachment as a variation of blanket stitch with the thread passing through the board and looping around the sewing of the gatherings in various ways (p 75 fig 49). In the discussion of the decoration of book covers, Boudalis looks at the range of patterns shared by diverse objects—medallion interlaced patterns being the most common—and finds parallels with mosaic floors, clothing, architecture, shoes and textiles (p 118). In a section on interlaced leather straps, he shows the similarity of techniques in the book-fastening straps of Byzantine, Georgian and Syriac bindings, Roman and Late Antique sandals of the 2nd century AD and a sixth-century leather apron from Thebes (p 141). It is a fascinating and novel approach which takes the reader (and certainly the book conservator) into new territories.

Boudalis shows his depth of knowledge, referring to work by scholars and collectors such as Gottlieb, Petersen, Sharpe, Morgan, Frost, etc. and notes that others have alluded to, but not pursued the relationship between, early codices and other artisanal objects (p 13). Throughout *Codex and Crafts*, Boudalis comments on the published literature about surviving early codices, many of which he has re-examined and about which he makes important new observations. For example, regarding Theodore C. Petersen's observation of 'lifting tabs' (to open the boards) in the Morgan Coptic codices, Boudalis is able to identify these as place markers through manuscripts he has seen at St Catherine's Monastery Library, Sinai, (and elsewhere) and through iconographic evidence (p 149). Petersen's 1948 work *Coptic Bookbindings in the Pierpont Morgan Library* is unpublished (although Legacy Press will be publishing an edition in 2019), and Boudalis' reading of this work and re-examination of the codices add new practically based information, opening up new avenues of investigation. Boudalis' major achievement in *Codex and Crafts* has been to place at the centre of his study the role of the adaptation of existing technology in the development of the multigathering codex and to make it the focus of consistent and rigorous research.

The author's repeated use of the triad of looking, observing and drawing as a method of understanding objects deserves special mention in this review. His beautiful drawings go much further than any photograph in conveying complex information, and readers are given many opportunities to appreciate this in *Codex and Crafts*, particularly in double-page openings which show a photograph and a drawing together (for example p 126-7, figs 98, 99); it is fascinating to see how different and complementary the two are. Drawing as a tool for understanding, in combination with model-making, can be extremely illuminating as *Codex and Crafts* shows. Boudalis' participation in the St Catherine's Library survey project, with its focus on observation and drawing, has stood him in good stead, and I would recommend that book conservators (and others) look closely at *Codex and Crafts* and the accompanying exhibition website <http://exhibitions.bgc.bard.edu/craftandcodex/>.

The Codex and Crafts in Late Antiquity is an innovative, interdisciplinary study of the development of the multigathering codex, set firmly within the context of the objects, technologies and craftsmanship of the Late Antique period. This book is important for book conservators and for those interested in the evolution of the early codex but has wider relevance as a model for future studies of the materiality of the book and the interconnectedness of materials and making. The Bard Graduate Center has produced a beautifully designed, well-illustrated book which is a credit to author and publisher.

#### AUTHOR BYLINE

Jane Eagan is head conservator of the Oxford Conservation Consortium which provides collection care and conservation within the special collections of 17 colleges of the University of Oxford. She is an Accredited Member of Icon and a Fellow of IIC. Jane was the editor of The Paper Conservator from 2002 to 2007, a member of the editorial board for The Journal of the Institute of Conservation from 2008 to 2016 and is currently the programme advisor for West Dean College's graduate/post-graduate programmes in book conservation.