

To dust or not to dust? Benefits and losses of dry cleaning on manuscript registers.

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One of the recurrent degradation on archival documents is a concave deformation in the spines of certain manuscript registers. The cause of this degradation is not specifically mentioned or explained in the literature. Often justified by the rigidity of certain ledger binding structures such as the "reliures lyonnaises", or by how the volume was used, such as remaining 360 degrees open on a desk for long periods of time, the problem actually relates to very different types of structures. These are generally bound volumes of blank sheets that may have been supplied by stationers – their text block are stitched and they are then assembled to a separately prepared cover, with parchment ties knotted on the spine cover. But there are also distorted volumes that were probably produced by local bookbinders using techniques similar to those used on printed books (e.g. text blocks sewn on cords passing through the boards and protected with a cover) that were not necessarily rigid – many have a reverse alum skin cover. Another common explanation for this spine distortion is the very nature of the book constitutive materials and especially parchment, which may have a tendency to shrink with time and hygrometric variations.

Observation and condition assessment of many of these volumes, suggest that the primary reason for the marked distortion was a practice employed when writing the document: the use of powders to accelerate the drying process of the ink. This practice, sometimes poorly applied, caused an accumulation of sand – or other powders – in the folds of the quires and considerably increases the thickness of the spine of the volume. The powder differs from dust because it is found between each page. In the most serious cases, it seems that the choice of this drying material was made on the spot, taking the first powder available: sawdust, refined sand but also locally available friable stone (e.g. shale). If the powder is not gradually eliminated, when the volume is closed the strong pressure exerted on the spine, restricted by the covering and the sewing, causes the distortion. It is probable that many sewings have broken instead of being deformed and the bindings that we still find today are generally very solid because their structure has supported high tension without breaking. On some ledger bindings, especially thick volumes, the deformation becomes such that the back completely curls up on itself. The fore edge is then also distorted, exposing the sheets edge to serious degradation, and access to the entire text becomes impossible. All this generally justifies straightening of the spine.

Straightening the spine without disassembling the original binding is a complex process, but it is possible. Removing dust from the folds of the quires is the first step which is an important part of the solution. Then, the materials of the spine are allowed to relax via localised humidification. Finally, depending on the intended use of the document, reinforcement of the structure is necessary to prevent the deformation from returning. The presentation of the treatment carried out on some of these bindings – i.e. manuscripts from public archives in the south of France of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – will raise the question of the impact that a conservation action, as "innocuous" as dry cleaning, will have on the usage and production information of the document processed. When the preservation solution lies in the elimination of some of this information, compromises are necessarily difficult. On the other hand, this operation often saves the original bindings.

A quick research into the history of the use of drying powders suggests that the detrimental effect on bindings was already known in the seventeenth century. Probably linked to the use of paper and certain administrative practices, we will try to delineate the context and the period that concern this practice, which is obviously very common in Europe but not well documented. Archival documents, including ledger bindings, have, for decades, been treated in a somewhat systematic way, leading to the loss of much information on the techniques and practices used in the creation of these documents. Our goal will be to provide both technical and historical elements that will help curators and conservators make treatment decisions for these archival documents in an informed and integrity-conscious manner.