

Conserving, analysing and studying the 'Hay Cookbook': Revelations from magical ancient leather texts

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Seven late antique leather documents were found to be in a poor state of preservation and so were conserved as part of a small British Museum Research project. Found in the Theban Necropolis (Upper Egypt) and dating to c. 700-800 AD, they are written in Coptic and known as the 'Hay Cookbook' and associated texts.

The manuscripts contain templates for spells with a variety of requests. The leather had clearly further degraded since photography in the 1930s: some had darkened, breaks and cracks had opened up and pieces had detached. Old restoration had placed some texts in the wrong position. Old paper tabs were too large, disfiguring and sometimes damaging.

The conservation process allowed gentle cleaning, reversing old damaging treatments and making new and more subtle joins. The process of dismounting and conservation offered the opportunity for closer examination, multi-spectral imaging and RTI (reflectance transformation imaging). Further scientific analysis was aimed at identifying the animal species, tanning agent and to confirm the type of ink.

Finally, the documents were re-mounted between sheets borosilicate glass to maximise visual clarity. The project demonstrated the benefits of collaboration between specialists: curator, conservator, scientist and mounter.