

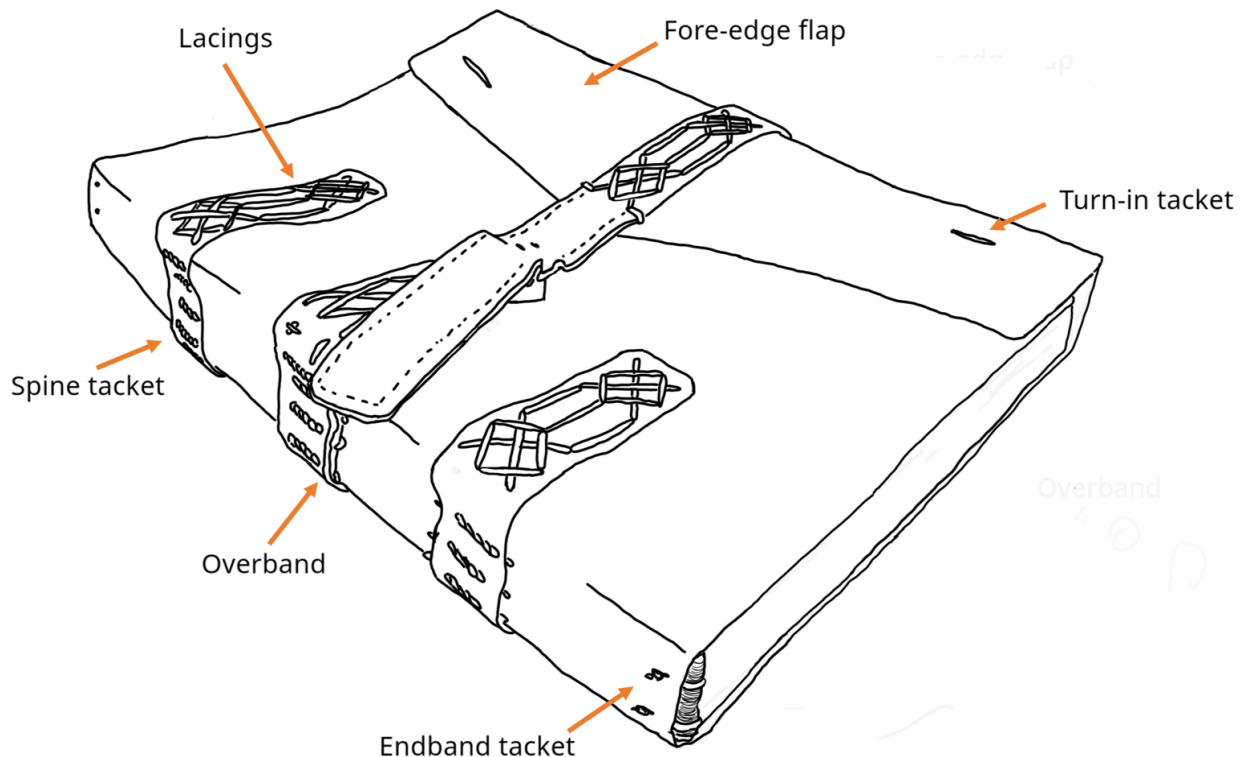
Italian Archival Bindings

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Postcards from Italian Archives: Medieval Stationery Bindings in the Italian Peninsula
Guild of Book Workers Standards of Excellence 2025 Iowa City

Introduction

Stationery binding is a term that refers to hand-bound blank books produced for personal, business, or other record keeping purposes.¹ Stationery bindings are also commonly referred to as archival bindings, ledger books, blank-book bindings, etc.² Some scholars believe that the stationers who produced these bindings were a group of craftspeople distinct from bookbinders who bound printed texts. Stationery bindings are made to withstand heavy daily use and are intended to be written in, and thus must open wide for ease of writing while the book lies flat on a table.



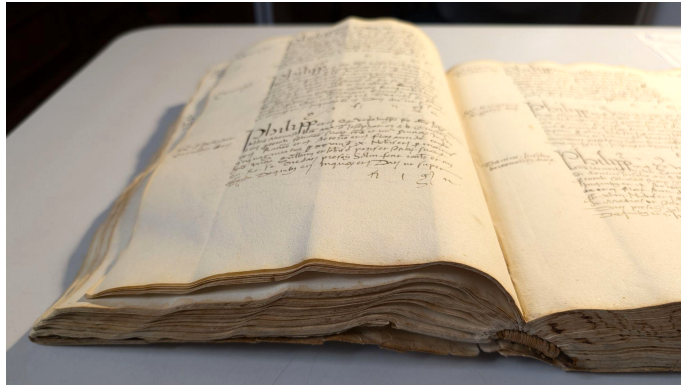
¹ Ligatus Language of Bindings, <http://w3id.org/lob/concept/3045>

² Here I will use the archival bindings, as in Italian these books are called *legatura d'archivio*.

Bookblock

Book blocks of Italian archival binding structures were typically made from medium to heavy weight handmade paper to construct thick sections, 8-12 bifolia per section. Sections were likely cut before binding with the center bifolia jutting out. Evidence of a draw knife being used to trim the bookblock after sewing is rarely observed.

Blank pages were prepared for writing and accounting entries with either metal point ruled lines or vertical folds.



Sewing

Link stitch sewing

Link stitch sewing was utilized on thinner smaller format books, commonly with a single link stitch station in the center with a change over station at the head and tail.



Split thong sewing

Thongs are thick flat supports commonly made of leather, and are often split in the center to create a double sewing support. These robust sewing supports are commonly used on thicker, larger-format archival books.



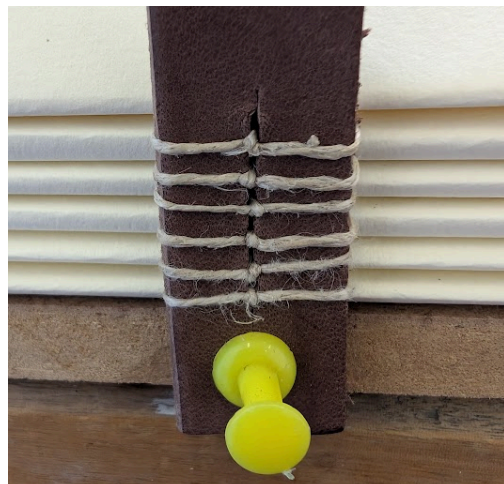
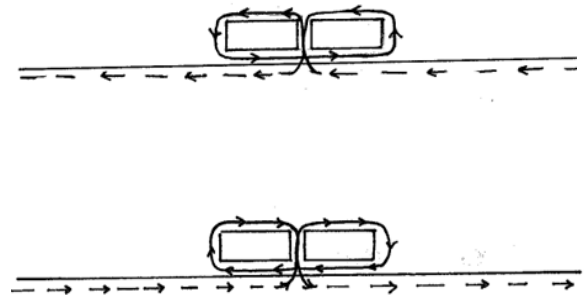
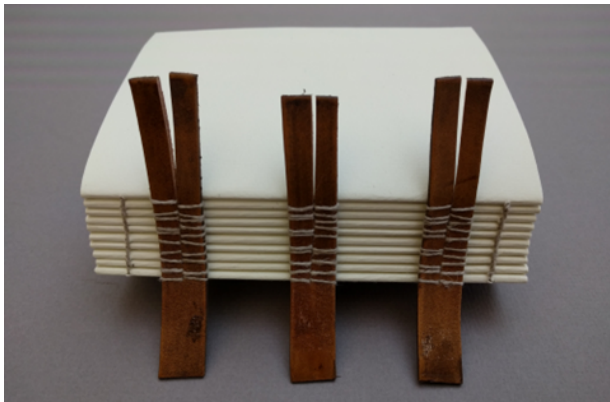
1. From thick, stiff leather or alum-tawed skin, prepare 3 strips, 1.5-2 cm wide and the width of the bookblock plus an extra ~10 cm.

2. Split each strip down the center, leaving approximately 4 cm uncut at one end. Sometimes the thongs are sometimes split all the way to the end, and other times the last ~1 cm is left connected.

3. Arrange the sewing stations so that the thongs divide the bookblock roughly into thirds. Position the kettle stitch or change-over stations ~2 cm in from the head/tail.

4. Secure the uncut ends of the thongs to the edge of the sewing frame or table. Historically, this was done with a nail or tack, but tape also works well. These stiff sewing supports usually support themselves vertically, no need for a sewing frame.

5. Cut a comfortable length of thread and apply wax before beginning. The leather thongs will destroy the thread quickly. Sewing direction is a standard pathway for sewing over double support. The resulting sewing creates a “B” pattern.



Knot-tack sewing

Knot-tack sewing is a method of sewing typically used with split thong sewing supports, which creates a knot on the spine. This method of sewing was observed on archival bindings in several regions in Northern Italy, including Tuscany, Veneto, and Piedmonte.

Refer to Claudia Benvestito's article on knot-tack sewing for detailed instructions. See bibliography.

Endbands

The endband sewing is a simple wound structure with a figure-8 pathway of the thread with no backbead. Endbands are typically sewn over rolled leather or alum-tawed skin, though cord is not uncommon. The resulting endband is strong and rigid, which will later be used to attach the cover with a tacket.



1. Create the endband core: Lightly dampen a strip of leather or alum-tawed skin (~3 cm wide by thickness of bookblock+ ~1 cm), apply adhesive, and roll tightly, and allow to dry. The finished core should be longer than the thickness of the bookblock, but will be trimmed after sewing.

2. Place the textblock in a press. Thread a needle with a comfortable length of waxed thread.
3. Enter through the spine of the first gathering at the kettle. Bring the thread out at the head (or tail) edge of the textblock and pass under the endband core.
4. Loop twice around the core, then tie off on the spine, forming a figure-eight pattern to lock the core into position.



5. Continue wrapping the core until reaching the center of the next gathering. Tie down, then proceed. Keep the thread packed tightly together along the core.

6. When exiting the final gathering, pass the needle behind the last tie-down and behind the sewing support to the first wrapping. Tension, then tie off at the starting point.

7. To trim the core: Place the textblock spine-down on a cutting mat. With a sharp knife, cut the endband cores flush with the textblock thickness. Pinch the textblock slightly to determine the correct length before trimming.

Optional: Over the wrapped endband with a decorative secondary sewing, usually with multiple strands of colored silk or linen thread with a front bead.

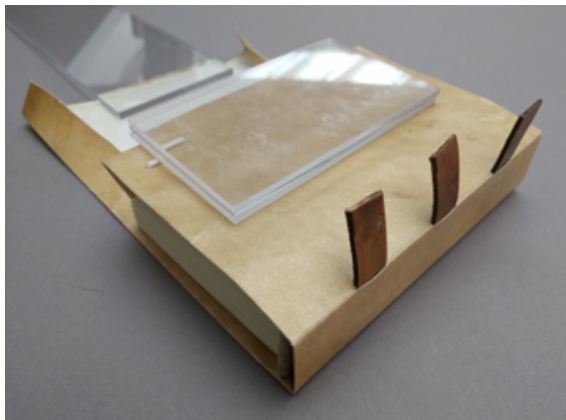
Cover

The limp parchment covers are commonly made from a sheep or goat skin with the whiter flesh side out, and the darker hair side facing in. For larger books, the whole skin might be used with the natural edges of the parchment visible along the turn-ins. The spine of the animal often runs perpendicular to the spine of the cover, with the neck of the animal positioned at the flap.



1. Begin by folding the turn-ins at the head and tail. The cover height equals the height of the textblock plus the endbands. Allow at least 3-4 cm for the turn-ins, but more is preferred, consider using the natural parchment edge.

2. Fold the fore-edge of the front cover and position the textblock. If preferred, insert turn-in tackets to hold the front cover turn-ins (see instructions on turn-in tackets below). Position the book along the edge of the front cover. turn-in. No square is required on this edge. Mark and crease position of the shoulder/spine.

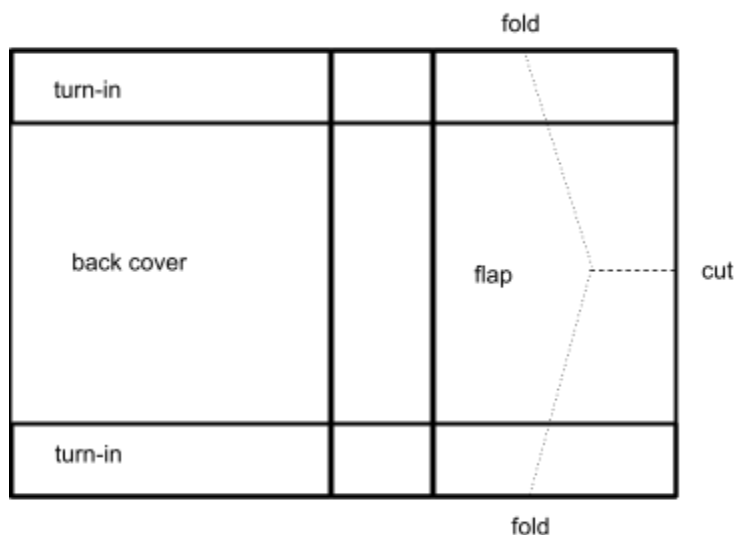


3. Lace the front sewing supports through the cover. Mark the position by piercing small holes along each side of the thong along the fold line with an awl.

4. Then cut between the holes. Lace the thongs through. Historically, a single slit was cut, which would tear slightly when the thick thong was inserted, but this extra material helps hold the thong in place.

4. With the bookblock laced in, mark and fold the back cover while accounting for thong thickness inside the back cover.
5. Mark and fold the fore-edge of the back cover. No square is required.
6. Fold the flap fore-edge to accommodate the thickness of the front cover, allowing the flap to sit comfortably on the outside.

Envelope flap



With the excess parchment on the back cover, locate the end point of the flap. The flap width is approximately half the cover's width or should end at the center overband. Make a small mark. Find the center point along the fore-edge, and cut horizontally out from this point. Fold the top and bottom parts at a diagonal.

Turn-in Tackets



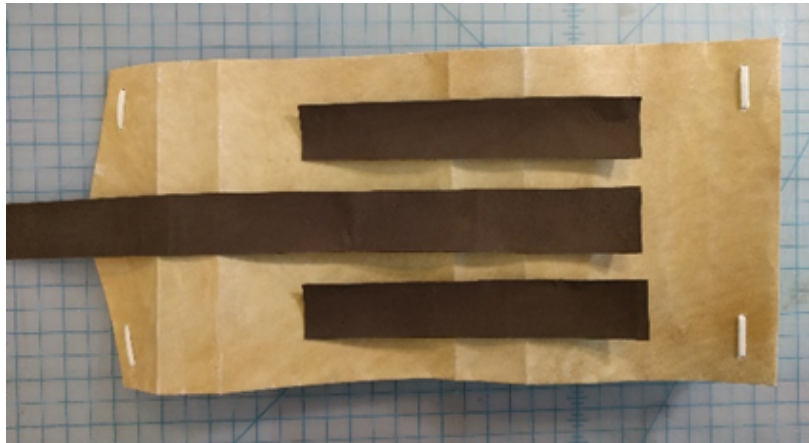
Turn-in tackets secure the turn-ins at the fore-edge of the front cover and the envelope flap. Depending on the size of the turn-in, the turn-in tackets are placed where needed, which could be near the edge or near the center of the cover. Typically, small strips of alum-tawed skin are used, but twisted parchment or thread has also been observed. (Top: outside cover, Bottom: inside cover).



1. With your awl, pierce two sets of holes ~3 cm apart at each corner, parallel with the fore-edge of the front cover and with the angles of the envelope flap.
2. Point the alum-tawed strip and insert through the holes from the outside of the cover.
3. Lightly dampening the alum-tawed strands on the inside of the cover. Tie the two ends together and then lace the ends under to create a twist.

Overbands

Overbands are thick tanned or alum-tawed skin straps that are attached to the cover with lacing. The overbands reinforce the cover for tacketing and can affect the opening. The overbands usually extend half way across the width of the front cover, spine and onto the back cover. The number of overbands correlates directly to the size of the book, smaller format books will have 2 and the largest ledgers up to 5, and are evenly spaced across the height of the cover.



1. Cut strips of leather or alum-tawed skin 3 cm wide. Thinner leathers were reinforced with a parchment or paper lining.

2. The overbands will extend one-third to one-half across the width of the covers, plus the width of the spine. Evenly spaced across the height of the

cover, the overbands should cover the laced thongs on the front cover. For a buckle closure, the central overband will extend across the back cover and fore-edge flap, to create the strap.

3. Though not a historic practice, apply a little paste or PVA to tack the overbands in place. This will help during lacing. Consider applying the overbands while the case is folded around the bookblock.

4. Optional: clip the corners of the overband or add blind lines around the perimeter.

Lacings

Lacings serve both decorative and structural purposes. They attach the overbands to the cover, but also secure the sewing supports to the cover beneath the overbands. Lacings are commonly executed in ~3 mm wide alum-tawed strips, but are also found in parchment, leather, cord, as well as woven textile. Patterns often differ between front and back covers: the front tends to have a more intricate pattern (e.g., double X's with straight lines), while the back often uses simpler more economic designs (e.g., large double X's with a looped center).



1. Use an awl or screw punch to create holes. Ensure the holes are just large enough for the lacing material. According to the pattern, some holes may need to accommodate more than one strand, and will need to be enlarged with the awl.
2. Trim the end of the alum-tawed lacing to a fine point. Lightly dampen and twist to create a tip and let dry. Use the pointed end to insert the strand through the hole. Pointed tweezers, hemostats, leather lacing needles, and sewing needle eyes, can all assist with the lacing process.
3. When finished, tie off the lacing on the inside of the cover with either a knot or a twist. Add more lacing material as needed.

Spine and Endband Tackets

The spine and endband tackets are the primary means of cover attachment. The earliest examples use alum-tawed strands for the spine and endband tackets. By the 17th century, twisted parchment was more commonly used for the spine and endband tackets. Natural fiber cord can also be found on spine and endband tackets.

Saltire tacket



Saltire tacket creates an “X” on the spine, and is most commonly used in conjunction with link stitch sewing. The saltire is usually executed on the overband, but can be found directly on the parchment spine.

1. In the first section, pierce two holes through the fold and cover approximately 2 cm apart, insert a strand of alum-tawed skin. The position of the tacket should coincide with the overband, and often correlates with one of the link stitch stations.

2. Pierce two corresponding holes in the last

section. On the spine of the cover, the two strands will cross, creating an “X”, and re-enter through the cover inside the center of the last section.

Loop Tacket



Archival bindings sewn over split thongs are connected to the cover with loop spine tackets.

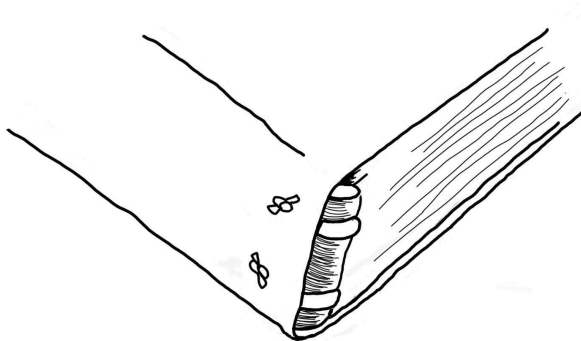
1. Prepare the case by piercing/punching holes in the overbands along the spine, equally spaced across the thickness. The number will depend on the thickness.

2. Position the alum-tawed or twisted parchment tacket material between each section, to loop behind each support, starting between the first and second section and ending with the penultimate and final section.

3. Insert that tackets through the corresponding holes in the cover.

4. On the outside of the cover, knot the ends of the tackets, then pass the ends under the tacket one additional time on each side.

5. The ends of the tackets are laced back through the overband only. Trim the ends.

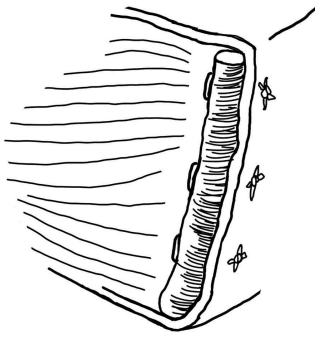


loop endband tacket

Endband tackets

The endband tacket is another method to attach the cover to the bookblock. The two main types are loop and transverse.

Loop endband tackets are tackets that loops around the endband core and exits the cover on the spine at two holes close together. The ends of the tacket are knotted and trimmed.



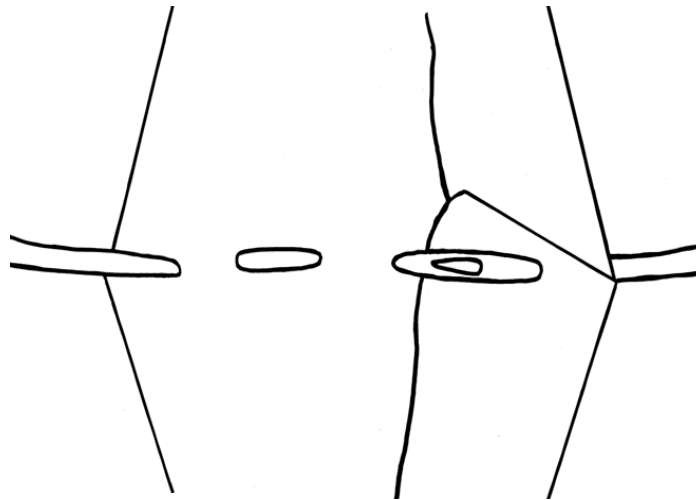
transverse endband tacket

Transverse endband tacket are positioned at the front of and parallel to the endband core material. The tacket catches only the tie down threads, and is similarly knotted on the spine. Transverse endband tackets are commonly found on endbands with secondary sewing and with laminated leather/alum-tawed bindings.

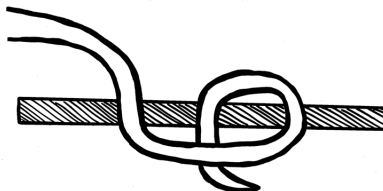
Fastenings

Ties

Constructed from two tapered strips of alum tawed skin, ties are a simple method to attach the fore-edge flap and the front cover.



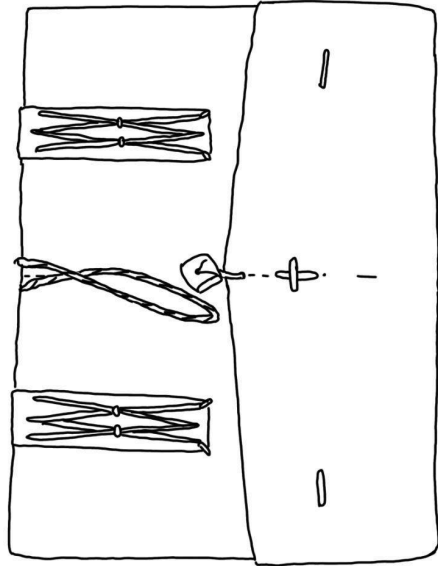
1. Cut a strip of alum-tawed skin~2 cm wide and ~20 cm long. Starting ~3 cm from the end, cut diagonally along the length to the opposite corresponding edge.
2. Create three evenly spaced holes along the center point of the flap.



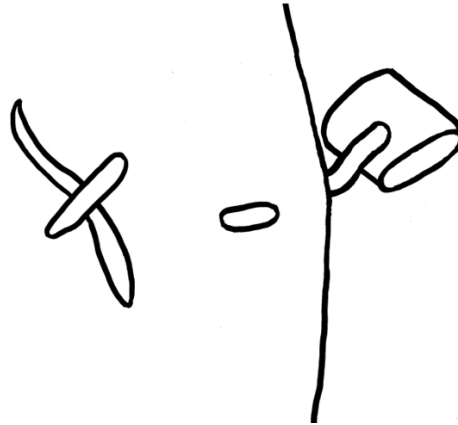
3. Starting from the outer surface, insert the tapered end of the tie. On the inner surface, pass over the center hole and exit through the third hole. On the outer surface, travel to the center hold. Re-pierce the center hole through the tie material, and insert the end through inner passage.

Loop and Toggle

The loop and toggle closure was commonly found on smaller format books, such as memorandum in the 15th century Tuscany.



The toggle or button was created by wrapping alum-tawed skin around a core of thick tanned leather, leaving a tail which was attached to the tip of the flap through 5 holes in a cross pattern.



The loop was created by dampening and rolling an alum-tawed lacing, which will hold that shape upon drying. The loop is attached to the cover at the shoulder through two holes. It is either twisted off inside the cover or inside the first section.

Buckle, Strap, and Keep

Buckles and straps were a very common closure method from the 14th through 17th centuries. The buckle would attach to the center overband, which would extend across the back cover and off the flap to create the strap. Iron hexagonal buckles were the most common, but brass and fleur di lis variants were also observed. The keep or keeper, a small loop to hold the end of the strap, was attached to the overband close to the shoulder.



1. Cut a longer overband for the buckle and strap, remember to leave enough material for the strap and to wrap around the heel bar of the buckle.
2. Fold the buckle tang back, and wrap the leather around the heel bar. Estimate the



amount of material needed to wrap around the heel bar and mark with an awl through both layers of leather. With a punch, make a hole the width of the tang through both layers of leather. Open up the leather and cut a slit between the two holes.

3. Rewrap the leather strap around the buckle and insert lacing to secure the strap around the buckle. This lacing will only go through the overband.

Keep



1. Position the overband on the cover, and determine the position of the buckle and the position of the shoulder.
2. At the shoulder, make two holes along one edge of the overband, and insert both ends of the lacing strand from the outer surface of the overband, and pull through to the other side.
3. Lightly dampen and twist the two alum tawed strands together. Once enough length is created to double back to the other side of the overbands.
4. Through 4 holes, lace the ends of the strands through the holes creating an "X" pattern. The keep attachment is only through the overband.



Aglet/Eyelet

In medieval times, laces were a common method of closure on clothing. The tips were reinforced with brass aglets, metal tips applied to the lacing. Starting in the late 16th through the 17th century, aglets and brass eyelets were used as an attachment on leather laminated bindings. Two eyelets were placed on the tip of the flap, and two corresponding holes were made on the front cover. Through the front cover holes, a woven strap affixed with brass aglets was used to tie the flap shut.

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Materials and Supplies List

Buckles

BuckleGuy.com

armourandcastings.com

Various artisans on Etsy, etc.

Paper

Hahnemuhle Ingres

Colophon Book Arts

<https://www.colophonbookarts.com>

Skins

Parchment and Leather

Pergamena

<https://www.pergamena.net>

Alum-tawed deer skin and thick veg-tanned leather

Tandy Leather

tandy-leather.com

Faux alum-tawed lacings

Various suppliers found on Etsy, Ebay, etc.

Thread

Bocken Lingarn

12/2 Line Linen, unbleached

Vävstuga Weaving School

<https://vavstuga.com>

Tools

Lacing needles, leatherworking tools, etc.

Tandy Leather

tandy-leather.com