

*Oprawy gotyckie XIII–XVI wieku ze zbiorów toruńskich. Katalog Wystawy Muzeum Okręgowym w Toruniu (grudzień 2024 - luty 2025): Gothic book bindings from the 13<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> centuries in Torun collections. Catalogue for the exhibition at the District Museum in Torun (December 2024 - February 2025)*, edited by Arkadiusz Wagner, in collaboration with Magdalena Awianowicz, Marta Czyżak, Beata Madajewska, Krzysztof Nierzwicki, Torun, 2024

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Bibliology and the history of book are disciplines with a strong tradition in Poland, cultivated by the libraries in the country that preserve old and rare books and by academia, rich in theoretical approaches as well as experienced in producing high standard reference works and research instruments (bibliographies, catalogues etc.).<sup>1</sup> The mature stage achieved in these fields is also reflected by the acquisitions related to specialized topics, such as tegumentology (the study of bookbinding). This narrow subject became the focal point of a series of interdisciplinary conferences, usually accompanied by exhibitions. The bilingual exhibition catalogue of Gothic book bindings presented now is the output of the most recent event in the series, which took place in December 2024 in Torun.

The fourth international, interdisciplinary scientific conference in the field of bookbinding studies proposed the examination of a rather neglected chapter in the history of this craft, under the title “Gothic in Poland and Europe.” The accompanying exhibition, a joint venture of the main cultural institutions of Torun (the University Library, the Copernican Library, the District Museum, the State Archives and the Diocesan Museum), was also a premiere, as Gothic book bindings and their art, technique and history were for the first time the main focus of such an event. As “a city in Poland where material traces of the Gothic era can be found almost everywhere” (23), Torun offered the inspiration and the proper ambience for the chosen theme.

The principal curator and editor of the catalogue is Arkadiusz Wagner, art historian and habilitated doctor in bibliology and information science of Nicolaus Copernicus University (NCU), whose main research interest concerns the art of the book, with a special focus on bookplates and historical bookbinding. The exhibition was the result of his collaboration with representatives of all the aforementioned institutions, while the catalogue received the contributions of Magdalena Awianowicz, Marta Czyżak, Beata Madajewska, who provided the bibliographic notes and the provenance indications of the presented volumes, and of Krzysztof Nierzwicki, director of the University Library of the NCU, who contributed greatly to the concept of a Gothic-focused exhibition and to the index of bookbinders.

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<sup>1</sup> Irena Socha, “Book studies in Poland between 1945 and 2015: The sources of theoretical inspiration,” *Roczniki Biblioteczne*, Tom 67 (2023): 163-192, <https://doi.org/10.19195/0080-3626.67.9>; Jadwiga Konieczna, “Academic library science and its contribution to the development of bibliology and information science in Poland, 1945–2015,” *Roczniki Biblioteczne*, Tom 67 (2023): 131-161, <https://doi.org/10.19195/0080-3626.67.8>; Anna Gruca, “Book studies in Poland after the Second World War,” *Roczniki Biblioteczne*, Tom 67 (2023): 239-255, <https://doi.org/10.19195/0080-3626.67.12>.

The catalogue comprises a foreword signed by all the specialists that have cooperated for the exhibition, an introductory study signed by Arkadiusz Wagner, the catalogue divided in 12 sections, a bibliography and an index of bookbinders. Each section opens with a short presentation, pointing towards the main focus of that specific part and emphasizing how it is illustrated by the selected exhibits. Across the 298 richly illustrated pages, the catalogue presents 104 exhibits that emphasize various binding techniques, materials, decoration means and tools, or workshops, characteristic for the 13<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> centuries. It reflects both the evolution of the Gothic bookbinding, observing a chronological arrangement, as well as the employment and treatment of this style in different contexts (monasteries, universities) and for different functions (from devotion or social prestige to utilitarian uses).

Each item is thoroughly described, covering dimensions, materials, techniques, decoration, provenance, and offering tentative dating and identification of bookbinders or workshops. Although these notes are quite detailed, mentioning, for instance, the type of wood used for the boards or describing manuscript/incunabula fragments recycled as pastedowns, the decoration section could have been enhanced by adding the dimensions of the used tools (dies, rolls, panel stamps etc.). This supplementary data would have been very much helpful for the peer book-specialists in the precise identification of similar bindings, a highly demanding task that makes great use of such catalogues.

This first, technical part is complemented by a commentary that defines the significance of each exhibit for the section in which it was included and for the general topic. Read continuously, all these explanatory texts make up the story of Gothic bookbinding, providing an accessible, instructive introduction to an otherwise sophisticated issue.

The first segment of the exhibition and, therefore, of the catalogue provides an introduction to medieval bookbinding, by explaining the genesis of the codex book form and presenting the frequently used materials, the inner structure and some of the special features, characteristic for books bound during this period (the use of recycled parchment or paper waste, the provision of chains for books to be attached to shelves or desks). A second section explores the expressions of 'Early and Middle Gothic' in over a dozen book bindings, from the 13<sup>th</sup> to the early 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, including chemise bindings, boards covered in dyed leather, decorated with seal dies or with woodcut block printing, and spectacular carved bindings. The next part illustrates the maturing of the style through examples created exclusively in Prussian workshops, while the following sections deal with forms of Late Gothic. They highlight specific features (IV: the extensive use of the pomegranate pattern in decoration, V: the lack of ornamentation, envelope flaps and chainstitch sewing in utilitarian bindings, IX: the partial cover of the boards in 'monastic' or rather 'academic' bindings), innovations (VII-VIII: the roll tool and the panel stamp) and the great diversity created by the dynamic book market after the emergence of printing, resulting in various techniques and degrees of decoration, from minimalistic to luxury items (VI, XI). Subsequently, the eleventh chapter outlines the emergence of Renaissance-style features in 16<sup>th</sup> century bookbinding.

However, bound books were not the only items presented in the exhibition. They were "complemented and enriched with works of Gothic visual art" (26). Wooden statues or painted panels of altarpieces depicting books, liturgical vestments and vessels, locksmithing or leathercraft objects allow for medieval codices and their Gothic bindings to be placed and understood in the cultural atmosphere in which they were created and used. The same goal was pursued through the organizing

of the exhibition in the Old Town Hall of Toruń, itself a Gothic monument. However, such artifacts offer stylistic, iconographic and even technical analogies, providing interesting insights into medieval crafts and fine arts, showing how Gothic elements were transmitted across them and emphasizing the multiple skills involved in the making of book bindings. Although in the exhibition these items were distributed across various sections, to better illustrate the parallels between different decorative arts, in the catalogue they were all grouped in a final part, in order to maintain the story of the development of Gothic bookbinding as simple, clear and coherent as possible.

The illustration of the volume deserves a special mention. Each item described in the catalogue is also visually presented to the public through high-quality photographs: a large one depicts the element of the bookbinding that is primarily brought to attention, usually one of the covers, while smaller-sized images of the spine, edges and second cover provide complete pictures of the volumes. In some cases, additional photos of particular details (decorative motifs or distinctive furnishings and fastenings) are provided. All these images function as visual aids, instrumental for book-professionals and art historians in identifying or analysing analogous bindings. Moreover, the various parts of the catalogue are separated by full-page images that focus on eye-catching elements, captured in a more artistic manner. This feature together with a carefully designed *mise-en-page*, fine glossy paper and hardcover offer a very elegant appearance to the volume.

To sum up, *Gothic book bindings from the 13<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> centuries in Toruń collections* stands as a valuable resource mainly for a specialized public of book-professionals (librarians, bibliographers, book historians), fragmentologists, art historians or medievalists, but also for the amateur book collectors, antiquarians and bibliophiles in general. The catalogue's accurate and rigorous descriptions, informative bibliography, as well as its examination of this often-overlooked area of medieval bookbinding make it an essential reference work. On a different note, as an album presenting the treasures of Toruń libraries, archives and museums it can be appealing for both researchers and visitors of these institutions. However, the audience that might find the catalogue helpful and exciting is much broader than the local public or those interested in local or Polish history. While the displayed and described bindings show the richness of the libraries of Toruń and testify for the taste and cultural concerns of Polish book owners and bibliophiles, they are also representative for most parts of Western and Central Europe, from where they originate. As a bilingual publication in Polish and English, the catalogue addresses a wide international audience.

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