

**Kite, M. & R. Thomson. 2006. Conservation of leather and related materials. – Amsterdam, Elsevier**

Book review by A.J. Veldmeijer



An archaeologist not only excavates. After the recovery of artefacts the material needs to be studied. This is often done by archaeologists who have specialised in certain topics or artefact groups. The responsibility of an archaeologist does not stop with careful and conscientious digging, but extends to the material's well being afterwards. They are the ones that have disrupted them from the environment the objects survived in all this time. Trying to maintain the circumstances of its depositional environment (or enhance these) is often not possible due to all kinds of factors and thus, ideally, the conservators are brought in (often however, they have already been called in, because their expertise is needed if delicate and fragile objects need to be recovered). But conserving wall plaster for instance is, in some respects, something entirely different than leather. Fortunately, for the latter there is now an up to date, exhaustive, excellent handbook available. Do not, however, think that with this book in hand, everyone can conserve leather, as leather is a complicated product and the expertise needed is extremely specialistic. Furthermore, often special and large equipment is needed, which usually is not at hand in the field. But nevertheless 'Conservation of leather and related materials' serves the archaeologist well as a basis of understanding leather, its deterioration and conservation.

Though written by leading conservators and leather specialists (who are shortly introduced in the beginning of the book) and edited by Marion Kite and Roy Thompson, it is not only about conservation. To know how to conserve, one should now what to conserve and thus much space is devoted, besides the explanation what leather is, to manufacturing techniques, history of leather making, social position of leather workers etc. Thus the book provides much information on aspects not immediately related to conservation. It is this completeness that makes the book even more valuable and also useful for a group of people beyond conservators.

The contents of the book seem rather randomly organised. For example, it starts with three chapters to explain what leather is and what its properties are. A chapter on the tanning chemistry of leather follows next, whereas chapter five tells all about the deterioration of leather. It seems that these would have been better changed in sequence, also because chapter six is about the testing of leathers (*i.e.* how the skin has been treated to make it durable). Another example is that various chapters on technology (chapters seven and eight and chapter 11) are interrupted by chapters with a specific kind of leather as subject (chapters nine and 10), which perhaps would have fit more conveniently with the other chapters with a comparable, specific content (*e.g.* chapters 15 on fur and 19 on parchment). A final example is that the chapter on storage is somewhere halfway rather than at the end which I would have expected as storage is, ideally, done after conservation (also before as conservation is expensive and takes a lot of time and much material is stored, awaiting restoration and/or conservation). Fortunately, this organisation is neither confusing nor annoying as the table of contents is detailed and clear. At the end of the book, case histories of treatments (which is also the title of the chapter) are presented and of course there is an index.

A minor thing is the sometimes bad quality of illustrations (figure 7.8–7.11, 16.1) but the greater majority is of excellent quality. Another thing is the lack of information in the figure text on the origin of the illustration (7.2 for example, although it is mentioned in the text that it came from the tomb of Rekhmire). Finally, and

perhaps a slightly more serious critique is that in chapter 11 'The tools and techniques of leatherworking: correct tools + skills = quality' I seriously missed images of the tools and especially (technical) drawings of the many different stitching, even though I understand that this is not the main focus of the book. I think very few people, among which even specialists, know the (English) terminology of the various stitches.

All in all, I would have been very proud if I was editor of such a book. Not one mistake in the typesetting was discovered: congratulations! Despite the technical language and terminology of few chapters, the book is very well written and the amount of information is overwhelming. I already use it a lot in my work on ancient and pre-modern leatherwork from Egypt and I am sure I will continue to use it in the future.

Kite, M. & R. Thomson. 2006. Conservation of leather and related materials. – Amsterdam, Elsevier. 340 pp. ISBN 0-7506-4881-3. Price: € 72.95/£ 49.99/\$ 79.95 (hardback).