

The International  
**JOURNAL**  
*Of the* **BOOK**

The Medieval Girdle Book Project

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VOLUME 3, NUMBER 4

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF THE BOOK  
<http://www.Book-Journal.com>

First published in 2005/2006 in Melbourne, Australia by Common Ground Publishing Pty Ltd  
[www.CommonGroundPublishing.com](http://www.CommonGroundPublishing.com).

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ISSN: 1447-9516 (print), 1447-9567 (online)  
Publisher Site: <http://www.Book-Journal.com>

The INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF THE BOOK is a peer refereed journal. Full papers submitted for publication are refereed by Associate Editors through anonymous referee processes.

Typeset in Common Ground Markup Language using CGCreator multichannel typesetting system  
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# The Medieval Girdle Book Project

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*Abstract: The study of girdle books in their historical context will add to our understanding of late medieval social history in some European countries. Since little has been written on the subject, and no comprehensive resource exists with text and illustrations of all surviving girdle books, the results of this project will fill a gap in the documentation of the development of bookbinding styles, their utility, and the variety of materials and techniques used to produce these books. All documented girdle books will be individually analysed and described in bookbinding terms, with photographs and drawings to supplement the text. Although very few girdle books have survived, they are frequently pictured in the visual arts of the times and are referred to in the literature. The outcome of this study, a monograph, will provide future students of the history and archaeology of bookbinding with a handy reference tool. It will also provide historical and bookbinding information to the institutions holding the girdle books; three of these institutions are in the United States, the rest are in Europe. Additionally, raising awareness of the girdle book may lead to discover as yet unrecognized and undocumented examples of this book format.*

Keywords: Girdle books, Medieval bookbinding

## Overview

**I**N THE SUMMER of 2003 Mr. Jim Bloxam, who is Senior Conservator at Cambridge University Library, and I, Margit Smith, Librarian at the University of San Diego, began to consider collaborating on a project to document in text and illustration the still existing medieval girdle books. Impetus for this project derived from the lack of easily available material about girdle books, as well as the fact that no single resource exists which pictures and describes the girdle books known so far. The surviving volumes are housed in libraries, museums and private collections in the United States and in Europe. The desired outcome of this project is a published monograph bringing together comprehensive documentation of these medieval books. The opportunity to present this project at conferences such as this, as well as in several forthcoming articles, will bring the topic to a wider audience, and additional girdle books may come to light that have not yet been identified, cataloged and described.

Scholars have researched the historical background and development of the book for many years. The intellectual contents of the book, as well as its physical form and format combine to provide the object that has withstood innovations, but has also adapted to them over the centuries. The main purpose of girdle books was the protection of the written word, and as such they developed a particular shape and needed specialised construction.

Containers and protective enclosures for books have been in use since long before the Middle Ages; the clay pots housing the Dead Sea Scrolls come to

mind as do the leather cylinders used to store scrolls and clay tablets in the library at Alexandria and others, and the cumbdachs used by Irish monks to carry their precious manuscripts and prayer books from place to place, possibly even to Iceland, which they reached as early as 700 AD.

It is estimated that for every five medieval books still in existence in their original binding, ninety-five have been lost, destroyed, or were worn out and discarded after their function was fulfilled. (Szirmai, 1999, p. ix.) This leaves a very small number of original structures that can be used for research into their history. Most early book structures provide a sense of intrigue as to their origin and provenance; their production, distribution and use are still being studied and documented. Among others a project is currently underway in Germany to document all late medieval bookbindings, through the Arbeitskreis für die Erfassung und Erschliessung historischer Bucheinbände. Among the few medieval books available to us, the girdle book stands out because so few of its kind are known today, though they are often represented in the arts of the mid-15<sup>th</sup> to the mid-17<sup>th</sup> centuries; however, their production does not seem to have extended beyond the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

Why are girdle books so little known even amongst people who work with books and are entrusted with their care? Several answers can be suggested. They are little known in part because of their already mentioned scarcity, and in part because the literature about them is often not easily accessible and relatively little has been written about them, though research into their history and especially their



representation in the arts began early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Additional developments, to be touched upon later in this essay, also contributed to the low number of known survivors.

The earliest date in a girdle book is 1479 in a manuscript on paper, the *Breviarium secundum choram Bambergensem. Pars aestivalis*, which is preserved in its original binding in Berlin. However, girdle

books appear in the visual arts long before the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century. On the tombstone of the French woman Jeanne Brichard in Paris with a date of 1312 (Neumüllers-Klauser, 1980, p. [298]), we see that she carries a book over her arm with a long loop, letting the book hang almost to her knee - certainly a fore-runner of the girdle book developed about 100 years later. (See illus. 1)



Illustration 1: Tombstone of Jeanne Brichard, Paris, 1312

The distinguishing feature of the girdle book is the extension of the leather binding usually at the lower edge, ending in a hook, loop or knot by which it was

secured to the belt; it was also carried by hand by grasping the extended pouch. (See *ills. 2 and 3*)



Illustration 2: Examples of girdle books carried on the belt (third figure from the left) and by hand (third figure from the right). (Alker, 1966, p. [89])



Illustration 3: Painting of St. Anthony by Martin Schöngauer, cc. 1470, showing the girdle book being carried by hand

### **Types and Uses of girdle books**

Two types of girdle books can be distinguished with several variations, but all were developed and fashioned to keep the books ready at hand, and to protect them from deteriorating influences, and exposure to the elements.

1. The single cover girdle book: This type consists of a primary binding only, providing on the bottom edge the long leather extension by which it could be slipped under the belt, or carried by hand. This single cover style may leave the fore-edge and the top open, or may cover them when the book is closed if another variation of the single cover style is used.



Illustration 4: Single cover girdle book constructed by Margit J. Smith

b. *The double cover girdle book*: This type consists of a primary (inner) and secondary (outer) cover, and either encloses the book-block completely when it hangs from the belt, or leaves the fore-edge and the top edge open. In this style the secondary binding provides the extension to be slipped under the belt. The two covers may be attached to each other by

means of an adhesive, or the secondary cover may have pockets sewn on into which the book in its primary cover could be slipped. (*See ill. 5*) When suspended from the belt both types hang with the head downward, and on being picked up the text faces the reader in the correct direction. (*See ill. 6*)

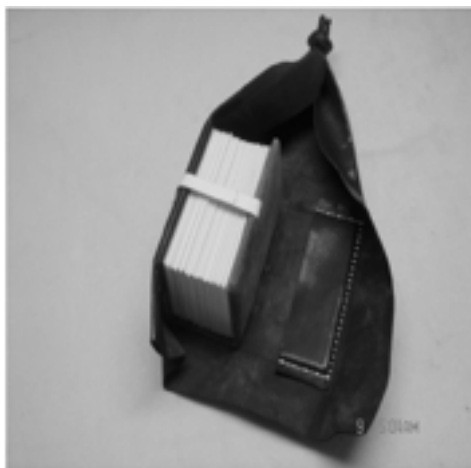


Illustration 5: Double cover girdle book constructed by Margit J. Smith, using two different colors of leather: primary cover of light brown leather (flesh side out) and secondary cover of dark brown leather (flesh side in).



Illustration 6: Closed girdle book, showing protection against outside damage all around.

Most girdle books were small, compact, and fit easily into the reader's hand. Their size varied from approximately 90 mm to 160 mm high, and up to 50 mm thick. Only one of the descriptions of existing girdle books includes the weight, but it must be assumed that because of their small size, they were not heavy. This would also assure that they could be carried comfortably on the belt without unduly dragging it down. The largest, however, is 300 mm tall which raises the question: could this really have been carried tucked into the belt? Including the extension its length would have measured approximately 600 mm – it could have been slung over the shoulder or over a saddle.

Our research to date has identified other types of books that were 'worn' namely long, folded sheets of parchment or paper, held together at one narrow end by a ring or clasp which could also be attached to a belt. These are referred to as folded almanacs and contain mainly calendars, (also referred to as *computus*), astronomical and astrological treatises, reckoners, and medical *vade-me-cums*. Additionally, Elizabethan ladies and gentlemen were fond of carrying on their belts very small, almost miniature-sized books, often enamelled and decorated with

precious stones on gold covers, containing portraits of their lovers, love poetry, or prayers. A comprehensive listing and description of these types of wearable books would be another study well worth undertaking, if none yet exists. This project, however, addresses only the kind of girdle book that conforms to the more common dimensions of the leather covered book, and excludes the folded almanacs, etc.

Girdle books were put to various practical uses, and were used symbolically to denote knowledge, wealth, intellectual curiosity and learning. By the late Middle Ages members of the mendicant orders and other clerics often traveled between monasteries and churches; they worked in the fields, they taught, and were engaged in a variety of physical labor. Jost Amann in his monumental work of woodcuts *Ständ und Orden der Heiligen Römischen Catholischen Kirchen* (1585) pictures members of five religious orders with girdle books. Whether they carried their books by the extension, or tucked them into the belt, they were provided easy access to the required texts, offices and prayers. (*See ill. 7*) Knights, ladies, and noblemen are also frequently shown reading in them; lawyers and their clerks used girdle books when traveling the circuit to dispense justice.



Illustration 7: Detail of 15th century painting “The Last Judgement” by Hieronymus Bosch, showing a monk or pilgrim wearing the girdle book suspended from the belt

Most girdle books are religious texts which is not surprising as it was churches, monasteries and convents that produced the majority of manuscripts and soon put the power of the new invention, that of printing with moveable type, to good use. Four girdle books contain legal texts, one is a philosophical treatise; eleven are parchment manuscripts, seven are paper manuscripts and five are printed works. Nineteen girdle books originate in the fifteenth century, the remainder originate in the sixteenth century.

Symbolic use of the girdle books appears with apostles, saints, popes, royal personages, the Virgin Mary, and most frequently the four evangelists, among many others. In Matthias Grünewald’s painting “Temptation of St. Anthony”, which forms part of the Isenheimer Altar, the devil with suppurating sores, is depicted clutching a girdle book!

A worthwhile study would be to investigate the mention of girdle books in the literature of the times. Two instances suffice in this context to illustrate the varied and contradictory views held of the girdle book as a symbol. Emphasizing the negative connotations of the ownership of girdle books, James Kearney in his article “Enshrining Idolatry in *The Faerie Queene*” points out that the Redcrosse Knight and Una describe Archimago as “An aged sire, in long blacke weedes yclad, /His feete all bare, his beards

all hoarie gray./ And by his belt his booke he hanging had.” (Kearney, p.11.) In this instance the girdle book allies Archimago with the reformed iconography of the faithless papist and paints him as either a “...hypocritical fraud or superstitious idolater”, (Kearney, p. 11). Foxe, however, in *Actes and Monuments* employs the girdle books to denote, among other ideas, protestant faithfulness to the Word of God.

Girdle books in their various styles combine in one ingenious design a handy way to have a book ready for use, to store it and to protect it. To that end the basic concept and development underlying the medieval girdle book are not far removed from 20th century devices such as palm pilots, electronic books and laptops, all of which stress ease of access, handy format and ready availability. Though the girdle book is practically unknown today, the principles that lead to its development are very contemporary; making the books not as alien as they may seem.

### Scholarly Documentation of the Girdle Book

Frequent depictions of girdle books in medieval paintings, drawings, sculptures and prints indicate

that they were numerous and frequently used by literate people of the Middle Ages. But while they are represented in painted altars, in carved church pews, and on tombstones, today only 23 or 24 known examples remain.

In the United States the Newberry Library, the New York Public Library and Yale University each owns one example, the others are in Europe, mainly in Germany where we know of at least 11 examples. Others are in Poland (1), Austria (1), Estonia (1), Sweden (1 or 2), Denmark (2), England (1 or 2), and The Netherlands (1). They form important parts of their host collections.

Despite the counts indicated above, it is difficult to know precisely how many girdle books still exist. In many cases the leather extensions were cut off - maybe to make it easier to store the volume on a shelf. It was only in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century that books began to be shelved upright, with the spine outward; in that case the construction of a girdle book would have made it difficult to slip the volume onto a shelf between other books. Maybe a nice piece of leather was needed for some other use, and the extension on a girdle book was a handy source to get that piece of leather. There is also the difficulty of tracing all previously described books, as some of them have changed hands, or have been displaced during the Second World War. Several volumes mentioned in one or another of the early sources have disappeared, or are considered 'ghosts' if they ever existed, with their current location being unknown.

Additionally, much of the confusion about the number of girdle books that have survived is rooted in the terminology used to describe them. The German word *Beutelbuch*, literally translated as "pouch book" is sometimes used interchangeably with *Buchbeutel*, which literally translated means "book pouch" and invokes the image of a bag or pouch into which the book is placed when not used, and from which it would be removed to be read - concepts that clearly describe two different types of object. Only the English designation of girdle book connects the

book with the girdle, or *Guertel* in German, in this case referring to a belt or cincture at the waist to which it was attached, or simply slipped under. Girdle books stored in libraries without being recognized as such can only be identified clearly through a thorough examination of their bindings, by careful review of their history, provenance, location of manufacture and other tell-tale information.

Close relatives of the girdle book were the chemise books, and other types of separate covers, often beautifully embroidered and worked with gold and silver threads, with tassels and gems, on which books rested, or were held while being read. Several variations of these protective covers are found in many paintings of the late Middle Ages, and their use extended well into the Renaissance.

Great developments in agriculture, architecture and construction, education, trade and commerce, in the establishment of monasteries and convents and universities contradict the often held view of the Middle Ages as the Dark Ages, a term that invokes a feeling of dread, dreariness, but mainly a lack of innovation. Referring to the arts, we know the truth is quite different - colors were used in profusion, such as in church windows, in tapestries and clothing of the nobility; medieval manuscripts are radiant with brilliant reds, blues, oranges, yellows, and greens. Lustrous gold was used to embellish the images, and rubrication and illumination of books heightened their appeal. Many girdle book bindings were multi-colored, some bound with the secondary cover made of chamois leather providing a soft, velvety texture, which was pleasing to the hand. Hand forged and hammered brass bosses to prevent the cover from being rubbed while shelved on their sides, floriated corner and center pieces, often pierced and with colored leather or vellum underlays, braided closing straps and other fittings completed the bindings. (*See ill. 8*) Books were prized for their contents and by their sumptuousness provided a ready indication of their owners' status in life.



Illustration 8: 15th century single cover girdle book held at the Düsseldorf Stiftung museum kunst palast, showing hammered corner pieces and a closure over the fore-edge. (Reproduced with permission by the Museum.)

Scholarly articles have been written about girdle books, and the need for a comprehensive inventory with descriptions and illustrations has been commented on by writers on the subject. (Szirmai, 1988, p. 34.) In 1890 only four girdle books were documented (Adam, 1890), 13 and 14 are mentioned respectively in 1926 (Loubier, 1926, and Glauning, 1926), and by 1995 the now documented 23 examples are described in some detail in a list by Ursula Bruckner. To our knowledge, still no publication exists today that contains past research, documentation and illustrations of all existing girdle books. Unfortunately Ms. Bruckner died some time ago - she would have been an invaluable source of information for this current project.

A considerable amount of research into, and documentation of, the pictorial and three-dimensional representations of girdle books has taken place. Just to mention a few of the writers who have traced and collected this kind of information: Hugo and Lisl Alker who concentrated their studies on Austria; Jan Storm von Leeuwen who explains the terminology used to describe the girdle book and its relatives (Van Leeuwen, 1989); Renate Neumüllers-Klauser (1999) traces the depictions of girdle books and their importance in the arts of the high gothic era; others have provided important details over the past thirty years. Details, analyses and discussions which form the basis of the current state of the study of girdle books.

Over the past few decades the use of bookbindings as archaeological artifacts to provide information about social, economic, religious, and educational conditions; about trade, agriculture, and the arts and crafts of other times, has been promoted. One of the

prime proponents of this is Dr. Janos Szirmai, whose monograph *The Archaeology of Medieval Bookbinding* has become a classic in the field and is a rich source of information on medieval bookbinding matters. Among others, he has described the Meermanno-Westreenianum volume at The Hague in great detail, has produced a replica of the same, and has contributed much to the renewed interest in the research of the girdle book.

### Wider Applications of Girdle Book Research

At a minimum five facets of medieval history and bookbinding, beyond the specific history of girdle books may be illuminated by studying them:

**First:** the use of materials used to make books: the variety of leather for the binding, (which in the case of double covers needed more than twice the amount required for a traditional binding), points to the availability and affordability of various types like sheep, goat, pig, calf, and deer, and speaks to the economic conditions of the place of manufacture. Much of the same information may be determined by examining the other materials used in making books: parchment, paper, thread, adhesives, etc.

**Second:** the embellishments of the binding, such as brass and silver ornaments more than likely indicate that a silversmith or goldsmith was close by, although many ornaments made by the same smith were available in wide circles. As a matter of fact several girdle books seem to have very similarly crafted, if not identical, corner and center ornaments - possibly produced by the same smith whose work

was sold by well-traveled peddlers. We may thus learn more about the economy of girdle book production by the artisans, as well as how their products were distributed,

**Third:** Until recently the history of bookbinding was based on tracing the development of bindings through their cover design and exterior decoration, while little attention was paid to the physics of the bindings. With the concept of an archaeology of bookbinding scholars began to look at characteristic features of book construction, the progression of sewing styles and how covers were attached to the book block, the improved functionality of new techniques, their frequency, and their rate of survival. Therefore, we can contextualize the position of the girdle book in the evolution of Western books in general.

**Fourth:** Awareness of the girdle book in a community of interested readers may also lead to identifying additional visual representations of them. In 1966 a list begun by Hugo and Lisl Alker identifies 447 such instances; in 1997 Ulrich Merkl brings the number to 813. Continuation of this listing would provide an interesting additional component to the study of girdle books, their distribution and use.

**Fifth:** Finally, there is the real possibility, and hope, that additional girdle books will be discovered during this project, especially in countries where, as of now, we have no record of surviving examples. Those new finds could possibly answer some of the questions that remain: Where, by whom, and for whom were the books made; who ordered them to be made; were they owned by individuals or by organizations such as monasteries and convents and lawyers' guilds? Was the same secondary cover ever used for more than one book? More questions remain, which means that much more research is needed than can be covered in this one project.

## Summary of the Significance of Girdle Book Research

Girdle books are frequently found in representations of religious subjects and most frequently contain religious texts; they connect the history of the late Middle Ages with our own times by allowing a glimpse into a specific niche of how books were made, used, treated, and treasured. This is a fitting subject to be studied and placed into its historical context, particularly because the future of the book, in the format we know today, is debated. It is fruitful to understand girdle book history if we are to appreciate the long and colorful evolution of today's book.

Ultimately, the girdle book plays a small but distinct role in the evolution of the Western book from clay tablet to codex and beyond. Like other book forms in this evolution, the girdle book is inextricably connected with all other book formats, and the Medieval Girdle Book Project will enhance our understanding of book production and trade during a crucial period of leading from the Middle Ages into the Renaissance. It will thereby provide an additional window into the cultural history of the era. The Medieval Girdle Book Project and the resulting monograph will provide additional material to the institutions that own these rare objects and provide future students with one comprehensive source of information about the girdle book.

We hope that bringing the girdle book to the attention of professionals working with books as librarians, curators, teachers, book dealers and collectors, and hand bookbinders, may increase appreciation of a book format, which, though small in size, has some importance, but is now almost forgotten. If, as mentioned above, it helps uncover as yet undocumented examples, thereby adding to our knowledge and answering some remaining questions, the purpose of this project will have been fulfilled.

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### List of illustrations

1. Tombstone of Jeanne Brichard, Paris, 1312. (Renate Neumüllers-Klauser, 1980)
2. Examples of girdle books carried on the belt and by hand (Alker, 1966)
3. St. Anthony by Martin Schongauer, approx. 1470.
4. Single cover girdle book constructed by Margit J. Smith
5. Double cover girdle book constructed by Margit J. Smith
6. The closed girdle book
7. Detail of 15th century painting by Hieronymus Bosch "The Last Judgment"
8. 15th century single cover girdle book in the Düsseldorf Stiftung museum kunst palast. (Reproduced with permission)

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Margit J Smith holds the position as Head of Cataloging and Preservation Programs at Copley Library of the University of San Diego. In addition to her work at the Copley Library, Prof. Smith is a hand bookbinder and has over the past several years begun to research early and medieval book formats. She lives and works in San Diego, and maintains a bookbinding studio at her home.

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