

Books for Travelers: Girdle Books, 1400–1600

Fall Coronation, A.S. XLII

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Note: The information in this handout draws heavily from J. A. Szirmai's *The Archaeology of Medieval Bookbinding*, pp. 236–239. I encourage you to consult that source for more information.

What Are Girdle Books?

Girdle books are medieval books that are designed to be carried in the fist or tucked into a belt (girdle). The covering extended past the lower edge of the book and usually ended in a knot or a hook. This covering could be either an extension of the leather used for the binding of the book, or it could be an overcover with a pouch for the book. The tail protruded off the lower edge of the book, which enable a person to open the book and read it while it was still attached to the girdle.

The British Museum also describes another type of girdle book, small prayer books made with gold covers that were hung from girdle chains.

When Were They Used?

The earliest datable book still existing today was written in 1454 in Bavaria (Germany). By 1600, this style of book appears to have died out.

Who Used Them?

European travelers used girdle books: clergy, missionaries, pilgrims, or traveling merchants. Pilgrimages were very popular in Europe prior to the Reformation; for example, John Man states that the German city of Aachen received 10,000 pilgrims a *day* during the 1432 pilgrimage to its cathedral, where a collection of religious relics was displayed outside on a wooden stage for 2 weeks every 7 years. At the 1432 pilgrimage, more than 130,000 pilgrims visited.

Based on existing books and representations in art, girdle books were primarily used in Germany, and to a lesser extent in France, Spain, Italy, England, and Scandanavia.

The style of metal girdle book described by The British Museum was fashionable for women in English courts around 1530–1560.

Do Any Still Exist?

Today, there are only 23 medieval girdle books in existence, not counting any surviving metal girdle books intended as fashion accessories. Of these utilitarian girdle books:

- 11 contain parchment manuscripts
- 7 contain paper manuscripts
- 5 contain printed texts (Szirmai does not specify whether these were printed on paper or on parchment—both were used in the early days of printing)
- The majority have a Turk's Head knot
- 3 have hinged brass hooks
- 2 have a pouch with loose ends
- The majority are small religious texts (such as Books of Hours or a cleric's Daily Office)
- 4 are legal texts and are quite large (one was designed to be carried as a shoulder bag instead of on the girdle)

- 14 have only a primary covering (these were all originally bound as girdle books)
- 9 have a secondary covering (these may have had their girdle book overcovers added after the original binding)
- 14 are bound in plain leather
- 7 are bound in leather with simple blind-tooled decoration
- 2 are bound in luxurious velvet

Here are some photographs of existent girdle books:



Breviary, Bavaria, 1454, http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/features/karlins/karlins1-13-06_detail.asp?picnum=2



London, England, c. 1540 (The British Museum, M&ME 1894,7-29,1)

Is There Other Evidence of Them?

There are hundreds of representations of girdle books in art. Most figures shown carrying girdle books are religious figures or clergymen (the apostles, saints, monks, and nuns). Here are some examples:



Hieronymus Bosch, c. 1500



Altarpiece from Tranbjerg Kirke in Tranbjerg Sogn, Århus Kommune, Denmark



Jost Amman and Hans Sachs /Frankfurt am Main / 1568



Hans Eworth, c. 1550

Bibliography / Resources

Berkeley Digital Scriptorium Manuscript Images Database: <http://web.archive.org/web/20040828200204/dpg.lib.berkeley.edu/webdb/ds/search?Image=300178>.

The British Museum: http://www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk/explore/highlights/highlight_objects/pe_mla/g/girdle_prayer_book.aspx

Det Kongelige Bibliotek: http://www2.kb.dk/elib/mss/treasures/bogbind/rostgaard_6.htm

May, John. 2002. *Gutenberg: How One Man Remade the World with Words*. New York: Wiley.

Miniature Book Society: <http://www.mbs.org/girdle.htm>

Princeton University Library: http://libweb5.princeton.edu/visual_materials/hb/cases/largeandsmall/index.html

Szirmai, J. A. 1999. *The Archaeology of Medieval Bookbinding*. Aldershot, U.K.: Ashgate.

Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Girdle_book

