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March, 2020

Review of Smith, Margit J. *The Medieval Girdle Book*, New Castle, DE: Oak Knoll Press, 2017

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Smith, Margit J. *The Medieval Girdle Book*. New Castle, DE: Oak Knoll Press, 2017. 384 pp. \$95. Hardcover, dust jacket (ISBN: 978-1-5845-6368-6).

Reviewed by PETER D. VERHEYEN

Girdle books, i.e. books that were carried and suspended from the bearer's belt by an extension to the book's covering, were in use from the fourteenth and into the sixteenth century. They have long fascinated those interested in the

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history of the book, conservators, and those in “societies for creative anachronism.” They have often been the focus of workshops and presentations: such as the presentation by Pamela Spitzmueller to the Guild of Book Workers in Salt Lake City in 2000; several workshops with Karen Hanmer and Renate Mesmer across the United States; and Montefiascone Library Project in Italy with Nicholas Hadgraft and Jim Bloxam in 2003 among others. What makes them so fascinating, especially given their scarcity? Perhaps it’s because they are designed to be worn by the owner for easy access while traveling. Margit J. Smith, who worked as a cataloging and preservation librarian at the University of San Diego Library, became immersed in girdle books after taking a 2003 workshop on the topic at Montefiasconi, site of regular courses in historic bookbinding and conservation topics. During her subsequent research process, the author visited libraries throughout the United States and Europe to document the twenty-six known surviving girdle books, presenting her research at the 2014 Conference on Care and Conservation of Manuscripts in Copenhagen. The result of these experiences is *The Medieval Girdle Book*.

In her introduction Smith describes research and publication about “girdle book research,” quoting Janos A. Szirmai, author of *The Archaeology of Medieval Bookbinding* (Ashgate, 1999), “not even all the existing girdle books have been studied in sufficient detail or even recorded” (16). Smith lays out her *raison d’être* for the book by quoting Ursula Bruckner, librarian at the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin: “it would certainly be worthwhile, as a first step, to bring together good images of all really existing girdle books. This would of course presuppose a survey to find the yet to be expected, hopefully numerous, girdle books and add them to this first, undoubtedly inadequate, list” (16). She further notes the increase in the study of bookbinding and the “archeology of the book” (presumably including girdle books), in academic programs in the United States and Europe.

Before cataloging the twenty-six bindings comprehensively, Smith’s introduction attempts to define the “girdle book,” taking issue with some of the terms used to describe the structure, including by the Ligatus Research Center led by Nicholas Pickwoad (<https://www.ligatus.org.uk/>). These problems hinged largely on the translation to and from German of *Beutelbuch* (bag book) and *Buchbeutel* (book bag); in the end, Smith uses the term girdle book despite misgivings.

Smith proceeds to define her scope for the book, electing not to include related binding types such as folded almanacs (*vade mecum*s), chemise bindings, and wrapper bindings (*Hüllenbände* and *Traghüllenbände*), among others. She acknowledges that “splitting terminology into too many categories not significantly different from each other, is not helpful,” giving several examples of this before acknowledging again that the terminology in current usage “will have to suffice” (9).

Next, Smith provides background information on the twenty-six girdle books she examined and describes fully in the book. She begins by presenting tables

that sort the books by different categories: first by geographic location (where the book is held now), manuscript or printed, and date of “creation”; second by date, location, and manuscript or printed; and a third table presents the same information for the eight volumes she feels may once have been girdle books. Detailed descriptions of girdle-book construction demonstrating how the elements of the structure work together come next. Again, the data describing the construction is presented in tables organized by the categories of “books with primary covers and additional protective flaps,” and “books with primary and secondary covers and additional protective flaps” with the current geographic location and location of the protective flaps heading the columns (10–15). Further details of construction—i.e. the knots on the end, leather extensions, and brass furniture—and the number of volumes exhibiting those features are then listed. At the end of the introduction, “girdle book uses,” Smith provides a “literature review” that in addition to writings about girdle books, also references their depictions in works of art, noting over 800 in the latter category (16–30).

Smith speaks to the importance of books in general, and more specifically regarding girdle books. Who were they used by beyond the clergy as was previously thought? How far did their use spread geographically? She shares the earliest representation on the tombstone of a woman, ca. 1312. In art, Smith notes that most depictions seem to have been used as symbols for learning, intellectual inquiry, and standing in the Church and community. However, she also provides examples of where girdle books were used in protestant iconography to represent “faithless papists” who were seen as “hypocritical frauds” and/or “superstitious idolaters” (26). Girdle books were also depicted as being carried by demons, and Smith found one instance of a murderer with a book. She also discusses representations of girdle books as decorative elements and “furniture,” also mentioning a contemporary artists’ book by Miriam Schaer that is in the form of a girdle book.

Finally, Smith reflects again on why so few girdle books have survived, suggesting changes in shelving practice, fashion, the introduction of pockets and purses, and the introduction of printing. She connects them to the present and our own omnipresent digital devices that offer portability and immediate access to information, all in a small portable package. Endnotes provide information on Smith’s sources.

The bulk of *The Medieval Girdle Book* provides highly detailed and richly illustrated descriptions of the twenty-six known bindings, dividing them into four chapters according to the subject matter of the book: religious (19); legal (5); philosophical (2); and possible girdle books (8). In these sections, Smith describes each book’s provenance (“historical context”); the “interior,” including materials used, the means of production for the text, and a full, detailed collation of the book; “construction” describes the materials and techniques used in the binding of the textblock such as sewing, endpapers, endbands, forwarding, and board attachment; “the exterior” provides the details of the covering material, how this was attached to the text block, going more fully into how this became

the protective wrapper for the book, any “furniture” such as bosses and clasps, and how it would have been worn. This sequence is repeated for each book.

Richly illustrated with color photographs for each of the twenty-six books, *The Medieval Girdle Book* provides many details of the processes of production for the text, materials, bindings, and other aspects relating to the construction of each book. In some cases there is enough information for a skilled binder to construct exact historical facsimiles. While interesting, repeated twenty-six times the essence and intrinsic beauty of the objects becomes overwhelmed by the minutiae and how it is presented. This can make it difficult to work one’s way through the text in a sustained way. In the chapter describing the eight “possibles,” books that might have been girdle books, Smith provides abbreviated descriptions of the books in list form with a “discussion” of why she believes it was once a girdle book. As with the confirmed girdle books, she provides images of the bindings and details in support of her argument.

The Medieval Girdle Book would have benefited greatly with perhaps less of the minutiae and rather the addition of clear structural diagrams such as those in Szirmai, or the recent catalog to the exhibit *The Codex and the Crafts in Late Antiquity* (2018) that was curated by Georgios Boudalis and was on display at the Bard Graduate Center. This would have provided valuable instruction in the details of construction to bookbinders and conservators, including those teaching the structure. The elements of “forwarding” these girdle books exemplify are consistent with those of other wooden board bindings of the period, with the variations in how the book was covered described by Smith as primary and secondary covering styles.

Overall, the book can be divided into two parts, the introduction that provides the bulk of the background information about the girdle book, its history, structure, and usage, and the “catalog” of the twenty-six bindings. *The Medieval Girdle Book* concludes with a glossary of terminology, an extensive bibliography, and an index. To this reviewer, the greatest general value of the book lies in the introduction, which provides the context for this distinctive book structure. The “catalog” of bindings then provides substantiation for the points made and questions raised in the introduction. Both of these parts are complex and could have used tighter editing to reduce ambiguities and confusion. This was particularly evident in the introduction, where arriving at a definition for the girdle book was unnecessarily confusing, especially when repeated. Clearer section and chapter headings would have made the organization of the book clearer and easier to follow. This was especially evident in the “catalog” of bindings, where it becomes hard to remember where one is in the book due to the repetition created when book follows book.

Production values for *The Medieval Girdle Book* are high in terms of design, typography, and printing, with the glossy paper letting the more than 290 photographs stand out. In places the book could have done with fewer, but larger images.

Despite these challenges, *The Medieval Girdle Book* provides rich information about this iconic binding structure and inspiration to those binders (teachers and students alike) who are seeking to replicate the structure and keep alive this branch of book history. Those doing so would be wise to acquire Szirmai's *The Archaeology of Medieval Bookbinding* and Boudalis's *The Codex and the Crafts in Late Antiquity* to provide detailed background information on the underlying structure, as well.