
THE UNTOLD STORY OF GIRDLE BOOKS

Learning about Girdle Books' Usage from Contemporary Works of
Art

MA Thesis

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Table of Content

Introduction.....	2
Chapter 1. Origins of girdle books.....	6
Chapter 2. Girdle books and their readers.....	11
2.1. Content	11
2.2. Users of the girdle books	15
2.3. Settings	22
Chapter 3. Practical aspects of the depicted girdle books	26
3.1. Types of girdle books	26
3.2. Format and cover colours of the girdle books	30
Conclusion	34
Bibliography	38
Figures	42
List of extant copies.....	91

Introduction

Throughout history, books, in addition to being an object of practical use and a symbol of diverse values, have been treated with reverence and special care. Books have been people's companions for centuries, and many like to bring books with them when they travel or to have them at hand whenever they need to look something up. This has also been the case in the Middle Ages.

When looking at the Hieronymus Bosch's painting of St. James the Greater (Fig. 3), one may be astonished that in such a desolate environment a book stands out. The book that is attached to his belt is not just a book, but a constant companion that is now known as a 'girdle book'. Girdle books are bound books that could be hung from the girdle or belt. The distinguishing feature of this unique book format is its long extension of the leather cover along the lower edge of the book, held there by a large knob or hook incorporated into the overhanging leather.¹

In the Middle Ages, people were looking for convenient ways of facilitating their reading and carrying their books. The invention of the girdle book was a product of its time, when books needed to be brought from place to place. It was shaped by the need of protecting the written word, and as such it developed a particular form which required a special construction.

One aspect of girdle books usage has remained largely untold until the present time and has inspired the topic of this thesis. The main research question of this study is to what extent can we determine the practical use and function of medieval girdle books by analysing their depictions in the visual arts. Surviving depictions of these books – all in all some 900 examples – will serve as the main source for this research.

Chapter one will provide the reader with an overview of the history of girdle books. Chapter two will be dedicated to girdle books and their readers in relation to the content of girdle books. Since the books cannot be opened, it will be done by analysing the appearance of the girdle books, their readers or carriers, and the settings they are depicted in. In chapter three, the focus will be on the practical use of girdle books: types of binding and formats. The pictorial evidence will be analysed to determine if clues are

¹ M. Smith and J. Bloxam, 'The Medieval Girdle Book Project', *The international journal of the book*, 3:4 (2006), p. 16.

given about physical aspects of girdle books and their use by the owner or carrier. I will explore what we can learn from the type of binding and way of carrying (attached to the girdle or held in hand) of girdle books, and also the environment they are presented in. The conclusion will summarise the research and formulate an answer to the research question.

According to the most recent study, there are only 26 surviving copies of girdle books today.² Due to the very limited number of extant girdle books and contemporary written sources describing girdle books, not much is known about their practical use and function. However, numerous depictions of girdle books still exist in various works of art that can help us to further understand their practical use. Their popularity in art indicates a much wider distribution and adoption of the girdle book than the surviving copies suggest. Most of these artistic representations have not been analysed much in terms of actual use and function of these specific bindings. The girdle book, as a unique book format, is frequently found in representations of religious subjects, which can be taken as an indication of their supposed content. However, it is also now known that girdle books had philosophical and legal content and were not only confined to the clergy.³

There is a lot of confusion about the number of surviving girdle books. This confusion is rooted in the terminology used to describe them in different languages and times. Thus, there still might be girdle books stored in libraries and archives without being recognised as such. They can only be identified through a careful examination of their bindings, reviewing their history, provenance and location. There was a dramatic lack of comprehensive inventory, but identification of girdle books is now gaining more and more scientific interest. One of the first academics to work on the subject was dr. Janos Szirmai. He was a proponent of treating a book as an archaeological object, since his monograph *The Archaeology of Medieval Bookbinding* is an extensive source of knowledge on medieval bookbinding matters, and has become a classic in the realm.⁴ He has contributed much to the renewed interest in the research of the girdle book, starting with a girdle book construction, cover types and who has been most commonly depicted with a girdle book.

Historical bookbinding research traditionally focuses on the relics themselves

² M.J. Smith, *The medieval girdle book* (New Castle, Delaware: Oak Knoll Press, 2017).

³ Ibid.

⁴ J.A. Szirmai, *The archaeology of medieval bookbinding* (England: Ashgate, 1988), p. 34.

and on archival sources. However, in the case of girdle books, this method is insufficient if one desires a comprehensive understanding of this book type and its preservation, because there are so few copies still existing. Especially when the resources are scarce, researching the representations of the subject is a good starting point. A considerable amount of such research has taken place into the pictorial and three-dimensional representations of girdle books in the past three decades. Just to mention a few of the writers who have occupied themselves with tracing and collecting information: M. Smith, who has dedicated many years to finding extant copies of girdle books and now has published a detailed inventory of 26 surviving copies;⁵ Ursula Bruckner, who made a real breakthrough with comparing the information from the iconographic sources and the original items;⁶ J. Tomaszewski, who has researched all the girdle books found in arts on Polish territory;⁷ and others who have provided important details over the past thirty years. All this research now forms the basis of the current state of the study of girdle books.

Since there is a lack of easily available literature on this subject, it has created a gap in the topic of girdle books. The primary focus of this research therefore is to close this gap and gain knowledge about the practical use of girdle books based on what extant depictions allow us to see and analyse. It is fascinating to learn about this unique book technology based on the artistic representations and actually preserved books and discover more about the medieval readership and customs.

In the history of the girdle book, a lot of threads come together that can further refine our image of the late Middle Ages. The Middle Ages are often regarded as the Dark Ages, mainly for the lack of innovations. However, referring to the arts, we can observe how lavishly objects were decorated and how colours were used in profusion; medieval manuscripts were lustrous with bright colours, gilding and rich embellishments. Also, girdle books often had bindings made of expensive materials, a clear indication of their owners' social status in life. Studying the works of art allows a glimpse of what these books looked like and how they were used, treated, and treasured.

Moreover, the girdle book depictions research informs us about the evolution of bookbinding, about the place of the book in the period before and just after the

⁵ Smith, *The medieval girdle book*, p. 9.

⁶ U. Bruckner, 'Beutelbuch – Originale', *Studien zum Buch- und Bibliothekswesen*, 9 (1995), pp. 5-23.

⁷ J. Tomaszewski, *Girdle books and leather overcovers in Polish libraries*, vol. 4 (Warsaw: National Library of Poland, 2016).

discovery of printing. It teaches us something about the nature of religion in those days, the way in which the book and the faith were handled, which paints a picture of itinerant clergymen, judges and doctors, gives us a picture about fashion and clothing usage, and so on. The fact that the study of one specific book form can tell so much about a certain era can be seen as a plea for the upgrading of book history as a discipline. After all, throughout history, the book has always been much more than just a utensil. The book was and is also a symbol, a guide through the history of ideas and a carrier of culture.

Chapter 1. Origins of girdle books

In order to provide some necessary general knowledge on girdle books, this chapter aims to give a brief explanation on what girdle books are and their history.

The girdle book has been known to historians of the medieval book for over a century. In 1926, the book binding historian H. Loubier described a small corpus of just thirteen girdle books, most of them preserved in public institutions and libraries all over the world.⁸ The research was further developed by the German librarian O. Glauning, who was the first to present a list of originally preserved girdle books known at the time, made an inventory of 156 works of art that depict this type of bookbinding.⁹ It is surprising how little has since been written about this type of book. In the same year, O. Glauning expressed the wish that, one day in the future, there would be a comprehensive overview of all extant girdle books and that further research would unveil more information about this rare type of book. That wish was fulfilled by the research of Margit Smith in 2017. Smith published a lavishly illustrated study of 26 girdle books.¹⁰ This long-awaited publication now enables a more comprehensive study of girdle books and their survival. It also provides a solid basis for the research done in this thesis work about the representations of girdle books in the visual arts.

The history of girdle books starts in the fourteenth century. There is no definite date, but according to a Canadian book scholar P. Johnson, girdle books made their first appearance around 1350 in Germany and remained in use for around 150 years.¹¹ According to Smith, girdle book production does not seem to have extended beyond the sixteenth century, although they are often represented in works of art up to the middle of the seventeenth century. In the years 1490–1520, especially plastic art representations were the most popular throughout Europe. After the 1520s they slowly went out of fashion.¹² Based on the surviving copies, the largest part of them is limited in regions from the Netherlands to the valley of the Upper Rhine. However, as Szirmai

⁸ H. Loubier, *Der Bucheinband von seinen Anfängen bis zum Ende des 18. Jahrhunderts* (Leipzig: Klinkhardt & Biermann, 1926), pp. 93-95.

⁹ O. Glauning, 'Der Buchbeutel in der bildenden Kunst', *Archiv für Buchgewerbe und Gebrauchsgraphik*, LXIII, vol. I, (Leipzig: Universitätsbibliothek zu Königsberg, 1926), p. 152.

¹⁰ Smith, *The medieval girdle book*.

¹¹ P. Johnson, *Creative bookbinding* (New York: Courier Corporation, 2012), p. 22.

¹² Tomaszewski, *Girdle books and leather overcovers in Polish libraries*, vol. 4, p. 117.

notes, Germany had the highest percentage, but examples are also seen from France, Spain, Italy, Scandinavia and England.¹³

The girdle book is a small portable book that is distinguished by its unique format of leather binding continuing loose below the cover of the book in a long tapered tail with a big knot at the end which could be tucked into one's girdle or belt.¹⁴ The book would be suspended upside down, ready to be lifted into a reading position while the owner was sitting, walking or riding, protected from thieves and the elements.

What is now called a 'girdle book' appears to have had a different name throughout history. Because of the terminology used to describe girdle books, it is unknown how many girdle books actually still exist since some of them might still have a different name. The term *girdle book* (referring to a leather bound book with a tail) was first used in English in 1939.¹⁵ However, before this date this term was mostly used to describe a precious illuminated miniature book during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. These precious objects were often worn by noble ladies on gold chains (Fig. 12; Figs. 1, 2 Extant copies). The German word *Beutelbuch* (pouch book) has often been used interchangeably with *Buchbeutel* (book pouch) – two concepts which clearly describe two different items. Pouch book is a more accurate description of the girdle book than book pouch, by which one would envision a separate pouch into which the book was dropped, like a chemise cover.¹⁶ Girdle books are also known as *girdle pouches*, *pouch napkins*, *pocket books*, *Hakenbände*, *Posebinde* (bag or a binding bag in Danish). In 1920, the Danish book historian Sofus Larsen coined the Danish term *Bogpunge* or bag tie.¹⁷ Likely, only the English expression of girdle book connects the book with the girdle (in German *Gürtel*), in this case referring to a belt or cincture. In most of the pictorial and sculpture representations, the book is carried by hand, grasping the leather extension of the binding (Figs. 47-50).

Girdle books were mostly religious books and were worn by medieval monks, clergymen and nobles (as a popular accessory to their costume), between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries, according to K. Küp.¹⁸ However, M. Smith suggests that the

¹³ Szirmai, *The archaeology of medieval bookbinding*, p. 249.

¹⁴ G. Campbell, *The Oxford dictionary of the Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 267.

¹⁵ I. Winter, 'Girdle books', WordPress, (2012), pdf
<<https://isabellwinter.files.wordpress.com/2014/01/girdle-books.pdf>> (11 May, 2019).

¹⁶ Smith and Bloxam, 'The medieval girdle book project', p. 21.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ K. Küp, 'A fifteenth-century girdle book', *Bulletin of the New York Public Library*, 43:6 (June, 1939), p. 481.

girdle book was most often a utilitarian book and was not primarily produced, intended, or used as an ornamental accessory.¹⁹ Thanks to the thorough analysis of known extant copies by Smith, we now know that girdle books also contained legal, medical, and philosophical content.

Girdle books were used by various people, but in depictions they are mainly shown in the hands of religious persons who needed to keep their hands-free during work but wanted easy access to their daily prayers. Lay persons, including ladies, knights or individuals connected to law, are mostly depicted carrying girdle books when travelling. Depictions showing symbolic uses are also quite common, particularly with regard to saints and royals, and even the devil. In any use, the girdle book represents an ingenious way of utilizing, storing and protecting books.

According to the numerous representations in the visual arts, we can safely say that girdle books were quite widespread and popular during their heydays in the fifteenth century. Their popularity in art indicates a much wider distribution and adoption as a common binding than surviving copies suggest. A very strong case of the popularity of girdle books is provided by K. Küp. In Joanna da Gama's often reprinted treatise *Dittos diversos feytos por hua freyra da terceyra regra*, published during the first half of the sixteenth century, a woodcut illustration of a monk is present holding a girdle book in his raised hand while conversing with a nun. That the publisher of this text, meant to be read by everybody, included an illustration of a girdle book demonstrates that the object was well-known at that time.²⁰

The earliest mentioned year connected to an existing girdle book is 1479; it is the very well-preserved binding of a manuscript on paper, entitled *Breviarium secundum chorum Bambergensem. Pars aestivalis*, kept in the State Library in Berlin.²¹ However, girdle books appear in the visual arts long before that date. A good example of this is a tombstone of the Parisian woman Jeanne Brichard in Paris with the date of 1312 (Fig. 11). On it she is depicted, carrying 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 a century later.²²

¹⁹ Smith, *The medieval girdle book*, p. 2.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Smith and Bloxam, 'The Medieval Girdle Book Project', p. 16.

²² R. Neumüllers-Klauser, 'Auf den Spuren der Beutelbücher', *Gutenberg Jahrbuch*, 1980, p. 298; U.-D., Oppitz, 'Beutelbuch Darstellungen in der Kunst der Spätgotik', in *Anzeiger des Germanischen Nationalmuseums* 719-783 (1995), pp. 77-92.

In Küp's 1939 study, the last reference to a girdle book is a woodcut from 1548, showing a caricature of the Augsburg Interim.²³ A much later representation, however, was found in Poland. It is an *Allegory of Salvation and Sin* made by Hans Vredeman de Vries for a Lutheran altar piece in Gdańsk from 1596 (Fig. 42). Based on the latest research the last – and completely isolated – case is the *Temptation of St. Anthony*, part of a series of paintings illustrating the history of the anchorites and first hermits in the Pauline Monastery of Jasna Góra, in Poland, dating from the mid-seventeenth century.²⁴ This painting is modelled after a considerably earlier print from 1586 of the same title from the series *Salitudo sive vitae patrum eremicorum* by Jan and Rafael Sadeler, which in turn was inspired by the works of Maerten de Vos.²⁵

Most of the depictions of girdle books come from the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, a phenomenon which is likely explained by the popularity of this type of binding for breviaries and prayer books among the clergy and lay people, often belonging to Marian confraternities created under the patronage of the orders.²⁶ Most of the breviaries made during the high Middle Ages are based on the *Ordinarium Curiae Romanae* of 1213, codified for pope Innocent III and the Roman basilicas.²⁷ The rise of the new mendicant orders of the Franciscans and Dominicans necessitated a new, abridged version. This new version turned out to be very convenient for recitation prescribed by the strict rules of these evangelizing monks. This text was approved during the Chapter of the Franciscan Order in 1230. Further reedited and abbreviated by the Minister General of the Order, Haymon of Faversham in 1244, it was spread all over Europe alongside with the Order itself.²⁸

It is believed that the girdle books started falling out of fashion in the late sixteenth century. There is hardly any trace of its existence found after this time. What could be the reasons for this? The invention of the printing press made it easier to replicate texts than to spend time on preserving individual manuscripts. The writing studios of the monasteries were replaced by the printing presses that could produce a

²³ Küp, 'A fifteenth-century girdle book', p. 13.

²⁴ T. Rozanow, E. Smulikowska and W. Tomkiewicz, *Skarby kultury na Jasnej Górze* [The Jasna Góra art treasures] (Warsaw: Interpress Publishers, 1974), pp. 83, 87.

²⁵ Tomaszewski, *Girdle books and leather overcovers in Polish libraries*, vol. 4, p. 117.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

²⁷ W. Danielski, 'Brewiarz' [Breviary], in *Encyklopedia Katolicka* [The Catholic encyclopaedia], F. Gryglewicz, R. Łukaszyk, T. Sułowski (eds.), vol. II (Lublin: Tow. Nauk. Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego, 1976), p. 1065.

²⁸ J.M. Pierce, 'Missal, Roman', in *New Catholic Encyclopaedia*, vol. II (San Francisco: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1967), p. 673.

large volume of books much faster and cheaper. They were given new, functional bindings which simply made the intricately constructed girdle bindings impractical. Another possible reason for their decline was the development of fashion. The coats, cloaks and gowns of the late Middle Ages were supplied with pockets, while satchels and carrying bags became more prominent, resulting in fewer items tied to the belt.²⁹ As the number of books was increasing in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, there was a growing need for storing and shelving books. The girdle book's extension made it difficult to shelve. Also, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the trend in libraries was to rebind their books, as a result of which the number of surviving girdle books decreased even more. A significant contribution to the low number of surviving examples with complete, original bindings was further made by the frequent wars and revolts resulting in the destruction of many religious institutions. Events like the Reformation which put an end to many Catholic religious practices severely impacted medieval book collections. The Peasants' Rebellion (1381), the Reformation and the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648) were major causes of the disappearance of prayer books which often were girdled. Finally, the girdle books disappeared simply because they were worn out after many years of heavy daily use.

Little is known about the actual number of girdle books that still exist unrecognized in libraries, museums, monasteries, archives or private collections. The most recent research by Smith discusses 26 surviving copies, which she found during many years of dedicated work, search and correspondence with the libraries across the United States and Europe. Such a small number of extant copies leaves experts with an insufficient amount of material to fully embrace the topic of girdle books. Fortunately, in 1966, in Mainz a sequentially numbered list of depictions of girdle books in art, mostly referencing the 1450-1600 time period, was begun by Lisl and Hugo Alker and today there are some 900 listed depictions of girdle books, including paintings, prints, painted altars, tombstones and sculpture.³⁰ New findings regularly are documented on the Internet, although many without a proper source of information.³¹

²⁹ M.J. Smith, 'The mediaeval girdle book: A constant companion', in M.J. Driscoll (ed.), *Care and conservation of manuscripts 14th. Proceedings of the Fourteenth International Seminar held at the University of Copenhagen 17th-19th October 2014* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2014), pp. 197-198.

³⁰ L. Alker and H. Alker, *Das Beutelbuch in der bildenden Kunst: ein beschreibendes Verzeichnis* (Mainz: Verlag der Gutenberg-Gesellschaft, 1966), p. 89.

³¹ Pinterest, 'Girdle books', <<https://nl.pinterest.com/selkieselk/depictions-of-girdle-books/>> (20 May, 2019).

Chapter 2. Girdle books and their readers

When holding an old girdle book, one is bound to ask questions about its origins and contents. It may be possible to answer these questions after extensive codicological and book historical research. With real girdle books, one can open them up and physically engage with the book. This is not a case with the depictions of them, since these depictions cannot be 'read' or touched. Depictions of girdle books, therefore, require a different approach.

This chapter explores the readership of the depicted girdle books, in order to understand the girdle book's practical usage. It is a challenging undertaking, requiring not only a careful study of the depictions but also iconological and iconographic knowledge. Here the focus will be on three elements in the depictions: 1) the cover of the depicted book; 2) the owner or carrier of the book, and 3) the setting of the depiction. The first part attempts to unveil the content of depicted girdle books. Do the depictions provide us with any ideas of the books' content? This will be done by looking at the depicted covers, tracing symbols, ornaments, letters or titles. In the second part, the attention is drawn to the owner or carrier of the book, in order to provide a better understanding of their roles in relation to the functions of the girdle books. Finally, the third part explores the environment or setting of the depictions, whether or not the scenes provide information about the contents of the books.

2.1. Content

There are a large number of girdle book representations in various art forms and iconographic analysis of them presents new ways of understanding the production and function of girdle books. For this reason, a database of works of art depicting girdle books has been compiled. Unfortunately, so far very few of these works have been analysed, as a result of which we do not know more about how books were stored and what equipment might have been found in the libraries (many of which no longer exist). Since the original bindings are almost depleted, the researchers tend to turn to representative works of art, such as paintings, prints and drawings and sculpture. These

art forms have also been influential in research surrounding the symbolism of books as carriers of intellectual content and ideas.³²

Girdle books appear in representations in different art forms, such as sculpture, paintings, engravings, woodcuts, tombstones, and as miniatures in manuscripts or printed books. A remarkable prevalence of pieces of sculpture with girdle books coincides with the general prevalence of sculpture over other types of arts. This no doubt is caused by the more durable material of sculpture. Paintings, including panel and mural paintings, are less numerous. The Polish art historian J. Tomaszewski compiled a statistical overview of this tendency in European art. The index of types of plastic art indicates the prevalence of sculptures (47%) over panel painting (17%). Even fewer representations can be found in book painting (11%) and in engraving (1%). In the Low Countries and Germany, however, prints (24%) provide many representations, which were often used as models for painting and sculpture in Poland.³³ Most of these representations are found in churches and monasteries.

In this study, the database that was compiled mainly includes depictions found in paintings and manuscripts with a few examples of tombstones and engravings. All examples were found online on the websites of libraries and archives, but also in image repositories.³⁴

When looking at the numerous depictions of girdle bindings and their detailed representation one can recognise a typical late-medieval realism. It is crucial to consider that the arts at that time were largely symbolic and that their message was often more important than the image. While there were attempts to introduce realistic elements (a characteristic of the late Gothic), they usually show a notion of reality and schemas that were deeply rooted in the past. Artists, moreover, still lacked materials (such as oil paint) and techniques (such as perspective) that would be developed during the Renaissance, in the beginning of the sixteenth century. Undoubtedly, the development of introducing everyday objects into artistic composition took time, and lasted more than one generation. Therefore, according to Tomaszewski, it is probable that the actual girdle books had appeared much earlier than their first appearance in

³² E.R. Curtius, *European literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (New York: Harper Row, 1953), pp. 304-310.

³³ Tomaszewski, *Girdle books and leather overcovers in Polish libraries*, vol. 4, p. 114. Note: All statistics are based on the analysis of 822 representations of girdle books in European visual arts by J. Tomaszewski.

³⁴ Pinterest, 'Girdle books', <<https://nl.pinterest.com/selkieselk/depictions-of-girdle-books/>> (20 May, 2019). Wikimedia Commons, 'Girdle books', <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Girdle_books> (20 May, 2019).

works of art, perhaps as early as the mid-thirteenth century, when itinerant apostleship was reintroduced in the spiritual life of Europe by the mendicant orders.³⁵

Having defined the style of the composition, the attention can now go to the covers and to see if any trends can be observed. Most of the depictions are painted in different colours. These colours vary from dark ones like dark green and brown to surprisingly bright colours like yellow, red and light green (see Figures).³⁶ Many of the covers moreover have metal clasps (the books carried by male owners were typically depicted with only one clasp) (Figs. 1-3). Books with golden clasps are generally held by females, particularly aristocratic ladies (Figs. 14, 16-18). Judging from the database, a prevailing number of the girdle books on the paintings are presented in simple covers made from cloth or leather, lacking any trace of decoration.³⁷

There are some exceptions, however. The miniature girdle books worn by noble ladies are highly embellished and have golden covers (Fig. 12; Figs. 1, 2 Extant copies). No depictions of girdle books have been found that show any letters or signs on the covers. There is, of course, the possibility that such girdle books covers did exist and that contemporary artists did not show them in their paintings. It may also result from the very small size of some painted girdle books, too small to have anything significant marked on them. Based on these observations the depictions of the covers do not provide much information for a deeper understanding of physical nature of the girdle books. Luckily, the extant copies can help us to understand more about their content.

Based on the research done by K. Küp, it is known that girdle books contained mostly religious content.³⁸ By looking at the girdle books depictions this appears to be confirmed. For instance, one girdle book contains a manuscript of personal devotions and prayers of a Cistercian nun (Fig. 3 Extant copies). On its fly-leaves the owner, Katharina Röder von Rodeck, a member of an ancient German aristocratic family, included illustrations of her family's crests. She also recalled her entrance into the convent and recorded the dates of her parents' birth and death.³⁹ This manuscript indicates 1540 as the latest date mentioned in the girdle book text, when the earliest

³⁵ Tomaszewski, *Girdle books and leather overcovers in Polish libraries*, vol. 4, p. 112.

³⁶ More on colour schemes in Chapter 3.2.

³⁷ More on covers in Chapter 3.1.

³⁸ Küp, 'A fifteenth-century girdle book', p. 481.

³⁹ M. Smith, 'Anna, Katharina, Dorothea und Margarethe: Das Beutelbuch im Besitz von vier Frauen des Mittelalters. Teil 2', *EinbandForschung*, 24 (2009), pp. 11-22.

recorded date, 1454, is found in a manuscript breviary from the monastery at Kastl in Germany (Fig. 9 Extant copies).

Girdle books are commonly known to have contained Books of Hours among the clergy and aristocracy of late Medieval and Renaissance Europe. However, there are a few exceptions of non-religious girdle books. There are two extant copies with legal and philosophical content. The first is a girdle book in the Royal Library of Denmark, which is a 1540 rebinding of a manuscript work on the Law of Jutland, which functioned as a legal guide used by travelling judges (Fig. 4 Extant copies).⁴⁰

The second example is Boethius' famous sixth-century treatise *On the consolation of philosophy*, one of the more famous non-liturgical manuscripts to be found in this form (Fig. 5 Extant copies). A copy of Boethius' work, most likely written in England in the fifteenth century, was re-bound not long after as a girdle book, possibly on the Continent, to be read while hanging from a belt at the waist. The text discusses topics such as free will, virtue, and justice, not the usual topics to have at hand while walking the streets of a late-medieval city, but someone found the text important enough to have it fitted in a crafty binding.

A curious example of a non-religious girdle book is the so-called Borthwick manuscript in the National Library of Scotland in Edinburgh. It contains astrological and medical texts and presents a calendar that includes a number of saints from the north of England, as well as the feasts of Saint David, Chad and John of Beverley, which were introduced in 1398. It also contains a table of movable feasts;⁴¹ calendar, astrological tables and signs of the zodiac, observations on the planets and eclipses of the sun and moon in the years 1387-1462, including a volvelle, as well as notes and diagrams on bloodletting. The manuscript most likely belonged to a medical doctor and was designed to be hung from the owner's girdle.⁴² Unfortunately, it was not possible to obtain an image of it.

These examples are sound evidence of girdle books of non-religious content; however, we cannot find traces of this on the depictions currently under study.

⁴⁰ E. Petersen (ed.), *Living words & luminous pictures. Medieval book culture in Denmark. Catalogue* (Copenhagen: The Royal Library, 1999), pp. 42-45.

⁴¹ A *movable feast* is an observance in a Christian liturgical calendar that occurs on a different date (relative to the dominant civil or solar calendar) in different years.

⁴² Inventory. Borthwick Manuscript. Edinburgh: National Library of Scotland, 2002, Acc. 12059/3.

2.2. Users of the girdle books

By studying the depictions of girdle books, we can also learn about their owners, users and carriers, and consequently about the practical use of these books. Based on the information in the database, the people depicted will be divided into three categories: religious, legal and aristocratic.

The medieval girdle book was clearly common among people related to the church. According to visual and written sources, most of the depicted or described owners or carriers of girdle books are biblical figures, most prominent among them the Apostles (33%, John being the most prevalent), saints, clergymen, monks and nuns.⁴³ The girdle books are most frequently depicted as attributes of saints, including the Virgin Mary, the four evangelists, and the Apostles. Relying on this pictorial evidence, one can assume that the girdle books of these religious figures were Bibles, as is exemplified by Hans Holbein the Elder's painting 'The Presentation of the Virgin Mary in the Temple of Jerusalem' (1493) (Fig. 1) or by 'St John the Evangelist in Crucifixion with the Muller family' (1462) by an anonymous painter (Fig. 2).

Throughout Europe, the majority of the depictions of apostles are images of St. John the Evangelist. Far fewer are the images of St. James the Greater, St. James the Less, and St. Philip. In Poland, depictions of St. Matthew and St. Bartholomew abound, while those of St. Peter and St. Paul are hardly ever seen.⁴⁴ Other saints depicted in art with girdle books include St. Catherine, St. Felix, St. Lawrence and St. Mary. Monks, nuns, and other religious figures had to read their prayers several times during the day as directed by their orders, and since they often worked outdoors, and travelled between monasteries and convents or on missions and pilgrimages, it was crucial to have their prayer book, breviary or book of personal devotions easily at hand.⁴⁵ Diehl mentions that monks must have found consolation in the ever presence of their breviaries, made possible by the girdle book.⁴⁶ This can be observed in some of the paintings in the database (Figs. 3, 9). These examples also make it likely that the depicted clergymen, monks and nuns were the actual users of the girdle books, when biblical figures were painted with the girdle books to be associated with them.

⁴³ E. Diehl, *Bookbinding, its background and technique* (New York: Dover Publications, 1980), p. 175.

⁴⁴ Tomaszewski, *Girdle books and leather overcovers in Polish libraries*, vol. 4, p. 118.

⁴⁵ Smith and Bloxam, 'The Medieval Girdle Book Project', p. 19.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

Critical for a good understanding of the content, owners and users of the book are the images of individuals whose identity is known or whom we can place in a specific social or professional group. Such identifiable depictions, however, are the least common. The group for which this is done best are the contemporary clergymen, monks and nuns, who lived in hierarchical structures that reduced the differences between them, contrary to the position of laymen and laywomen.

From the examined works of art, it is clear that the girdle book was a convenient type of binding for the books, often used by priests and members of religious orders, that is breviaries, diurnals, and books of hours. There are numerous examples of girdle books depicted in images of these people dating from the second half of the fifteenth century, and even more so from the first decades of the sixteenth century. All religious ranks are represented in these depictions. In a series of woodcuts portraying clergymen by the German artist H.S. Beham from 1526, girdle books can be seen in the hands of a cardinal, a canon, and of monks of different orders: a Jerusalemite, a Servite, and a Hospitaller.⁴⁷ The same can be seen in a collection of engravings by Jost Amman from 1585 that depicts various monks: a white Carthusian, a black Carthusian, a Franciscan, and again a Hospitaller and a Jerusalemite.⁴⁸ These relatively late depictions support the observation that in the second half of the sixteenth century the girdle book was still in use by members of the religious orders, although its occurrence in the plastic arts disappeared with the late-Gothic style.

Most examples indicate that this type of binding was particularly popular with the mendicant orders. A breviary in a 'portable' binding was often depicted as an attribute of the founders or main representatives of the Franciscans and Dominicans. In several scenes of the fifteenth-century fresco on the walls of S. Maria di Castello Church in Genoa, St. Dominic's life and travels are portrayed.⁴⁹ This type of binding is also found in the scenes of St. Francis and his brethren and in the images of St. Bernard of

⁴⁷ The prints from this series were first published in *Babstum mit seynen glidern gemalet vnd beschryben...* (Brunswick: unknown, 1526); cf. F.W.H. Hollstein, *Hollstein's Dutch and Flemish engravings, etchings and woodcuts ca. 1400-1700*, vol. III (Amsterdam: M. Hertzberger, 1990-1993), pp. 236-237.

⁴⁸ J. Amman, *Cleri totius rom. Ecclesiae habitus artificiosissimus figuris...* (Frankfurt: S. Feyerabend, 1585); these prints were discussed by E. Majkowski, 'Neues zum Buchbeutel in der bildenden Kunst. Beiträge aus Polen, den Niederlanden, Deutschland und der Schweiz', *Gutenberg-Jahrbuch*, 21-24 (1939), pp. 331-339, and Alker, *Das Beutelbuch in der bildenden Kunst. Ein beschreibendes Verzeichnis*, pp. 33-34.

⁴⁹ G. Kaftal, *Iconography of the Saints in the painting of North West Italy* (Florence: Sansoni, 1965), figs. 72 A (2), 72 A (12).

Siena.⁵⁰ The continued popularity of a breviary bound in the form of a girdle book with the members of the church in the early sixteenth century may be explained by the fact that, in addition to their specific habit or a rosary, it had developed into one of their traditional attributes. This had become such a normal feature that during the Reformation in the German countries satirical Protestant prints would depict – often obese – clergymen, monks and nuns holding a girdle book in their hands.⁵¹ In the second half of the sixteenth century, this stereotype was further degraded: on a print by the Dutch artist Harman Muller from 1566, a gaunt mendicant monk with a girdle book is shown to represent an acerbic melancholic.⁵² In the overtly anti-Catholic painting ‘The Allegory of Salvation and Sin’ by Hans Viedeman de Vries from 1596 St. John the Baptist is shown, kneeling at the cross surrounded by several objects, including a habit, a rosary, and an open girdle prayer book (Fig. 18).⁵³

Some of these depictions present dramatic scenes of saints being tormented by demons. On one of Martin Schongauer’s engraving Saint Anthony gazes serenely at the viewer as frenzied demons grab him by his limbs, clothes, and hair and pound him with sticks. Yet, his girdle book remains safely with him (Fig. 9). A breviary bound in the form of a girdle book also appears in a series of paintings from around 1500 that illustrate the life of the Dominican St. Catherine of Siena (Fig. 10). The Polish artist who painted

⁵⁰ Franciscan friars are depicted in two miniatures by Giovanni di Paolo in an Italian antiphonary: *St. Francis before the Sultan* and *St. Francis receiving the Stigmata*. Budapest, Országos Széchényi Könyvtár. Another interesting example is a miniature by Giovanni Petro Birago from the *Sforza Hours* (Milan, ca. 1490), showing St. Bernard with his brothers who have breviaries attached to their belts. London, British Museum.

⁵¹ Such an image of a priest was presented by Albrecht Dürer in one of the engraved scenes of the *Allegory on social injustice*, where we see a teacher and a seminarist succumbing to deceit; see F.W.H. Hollstein, *Hollstein’s German engravings, etchings and woodcuts ca. 1400-1700*, vol. VII (Amsterdam: M. Hertzberger, 1991-1994), p. 196. Similarly, a clergyman is depicted on the woodcut *Soldiers invade a village* in the *Glückbuch* by the Master of Petrarch, published in 1532 in Augsburg. See W. Hütt, *Niemieckie malarstwo i grafika późnego gotyku i renesansu* [German painting and graphics of the late Gothic and Renaissance], transl. S. Błaut (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 1985), pp. 120-121.

⁵² *Siedem grzechów głównych. Ryciny z Gabinetu PAU w Bibliotece Naukowej Polskiej Akademii Umiejętności i Polskiej Akademii Nauk w Krakowie: katalog wystawy* [The seven deadly sins: prints from the Print Room of the Polish Academy of Arts and Sciences, in the Scientific Library of the Polish Academy of Arts and Sciences in Cracow: exhibition catalogue], ed. K. Krużel (Kraków: MCK, 2004), p. 225.

⁵³ *Aurea Porta Rzeczypospolitej. Sztuka gdańska od połowy XV do końca XVIII wieku. Muzeum Narodowe w Gdańsku maj-sierpień 1997* [Aurea Porta of the Commonwealth. Gdańsk art from the mid-fifteenth century to the late eighteenth century. National Museum in Gdańsk May-August 1997], vol. 2: *Exhibition catalogue*, ed. T. Grzybowska (Gdańsk: Agencja Reklamowo-Wydawnicza A. Grzegorzczak, 1997), pp. 111-112.

the panel showing St. Catherine, holding a girdle book in her hands while being besieged by demons may well have used Schongauer's print as his example.⁵⁴

In the Middle Ages girdle breviaries were also used by hermits in their hermitages. There are many depictions of praying hermits in the wilderness, their Bibles being bound in the form of a girdle book. Hieronymus Bosch, for one, depicted St. James the Greater as a pilgrim carrying two objects attached to his belt: a knife in a sheath and a girdle book (1504-08) (Fig. 3). Clearly, the book is of great significance to St. James; he carries it in a conspicuous fashion, in spite of the gloomy and threatening landscape and his being weary and exhausted. Similarly, for pilgrims such a portable book was an indispensable object, with similar powers as the St. James's knife: capable of dealing with evil and danger. In Bosch's painting, the book is well protected with a piece of leather covering the upper edge and barely discernible clasps. In a late fifteenth-century miniature in 'The Breviary of Queen Isabella of Castile' (1497) (Fig. 4), an old monk is shown, holding a girdle book bound in the green cloth in his hand rather than it being attached to his girdle as no belt can be seen on this illustration. For religious travellers in the Middle Ages girdle books provided easy portability as well as protection against the elements, dust and vermin (Figs. 5-7). In a breviary from Bologna (c. 1315-25), on the page with calendar for May, Christ is raising his right hand in blessing while holding a girdle book in his left hand (Fig. 8).

Both St. Francis and St. Anthony the Hermit were portrayed in woodland scenery by the Dutch artist Lucas van Leyden in two graphic representations dating from 1514 and 1509 (Figs. 34, 35).⁵⁵ In a painting by Hans Baldung Grien, St. Jerome is shown in the desert, equally with a girdle book in his hand.⁵⁶ Another example of this type of representation is a woodcut of St. Dorothy of Mały in a book on her life by Joannes de Kwidzyn, printed in Malbork (Poland) in 1492 (Fig. 43).

The girdle books used by the clergy and aristocracy of late Medieval and Renaissance Europe, are commonly considered to have mainly contained Books of Hours. However, it is noticeable that in some paintings that the girdle book may have

⁵⁴ W. Hütt, *Niemieckie malarstwo i grafika późnego gotyku i renesansu* [German painting and graphics of the late Gothic and Renaissance], transl. S. Błaut (Warsaw: Państw. Wydaw. Naukowe, 1985), p. 51, fig. 20.

⁵⁵ F.W.H. Hollstein, *Hollstein's Dutch and Flemish engravings, etchings and woodcuts ca. 1400-1700*, vol. X (Amsterdam: M. Hertzberger, 1990-1993), pp. 139, 142; *Arcydzieła grafiki XV i XVI stulecia ze zbiorów Biblioteki Polskiej Akademii Nauk w Krakowie* [Masterpieces of fifteenth and sixteenth-century printmaking from the collection of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Cracow], ed. M. Podlowska-Rehlewska (Kraków: Kraków Biblioteka Naukowa Polskiej Akademii Umiejętności, 1997), fig. 66.

⁵⁶ Hollstein, *Hollstein's German Engravings*, vol. II, p. 110, no. 120.

served also as a religious status symbol in addition to being of practical use to its owners (Fig. 2). It is likely that the girdle books owned by a religious person were mainly for personal use rather than for preaching or teaching.

Owners connected to law and medicine

Being as it may that religious men and women were depicted mostly in the context of girdle books, there are also works of art in which others are shown. Diehl and K p already noted that magistrates appear with girdle books in these depictions, and one can assume that the books they hold did not contain religious content.⁵⁷

Girdle books appear to have been used by travelling scholars and doctors who preferred taking notes over the course of their travels and perambulations, the more so as the development of the construction of girdle books made it a useful format for legal texts (Fig. 15 Extant copies). It certainly accommodated the needs of travelling lawyers, judges, jurors, and law clerks riding the circuit to dispense the law, often in the open air and in difficult weather conditions. They were typically carried on a belt, with the book hanging upside down. When swung up, the text was in the correct position to be read. After reading, the book could be dropped without detaching it from the belt or be hung from a saddle horn, ready again when needed next. The extended flaps over the top, bottom and sides provided sufficient protection against the elements.

A girdle book preserved in the Royal Library of Denmark is a sixteenth-century rebinding of a text book on the Law of Jutland compiled by a scribe named Jens Nielsen.⁵⁸ It was used as a legal guide by travelling judges and other law professionals. The binding dates from about 1540 whereas the manuscript itself is a little older (Fig. 14 Extant copies).⁵⁹

There also is a contemporary reference to some fifteenth-century judges in Hamburg, who appeared in court with their codices and law books, 'bound according to the fashion of the day into a pouch and carried in the girdle'.⁶⁰ However, according to K p, such evidence is apocryphal.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Diehl, *Bookbinding, its background and technique*, p. 175.

⁵⁸ V. Starcke, 'Posebind og Poseb ger', *Bogvennen*, New series, 4 (1949), pp. 60-89 (in Danish with English summary).

⁵⁹ Petersen (ed.), *Living Words & Luminous Pictures*, pp. 42-45.

⁶⁰ F. Hottenroth, *Handbuch der deutschen Tracht* (Stuttgart: Weise, 1892-96), p. 24.

⁶¹ K p, 'A fifteenth-century girdle book', p. 13.

Evidence of doctors and astrologists using girdle books can be found in the aforementioned Borthwick manuscript, that contains astrological and medical texts. The manuscript probably belonged to a doctor and was bound to be hung from the owner's belt.⁶²

There is one other example of girdle books being used by physicians, called 'bat books.'⁶³ These books were small objects made of much thinner parchment so they could be folded several times; once unfolded, their pages would display a lot of information. A physician's girdle book from the Rosenbach Museum and Library (Fig. 8 Extant copies) contains a calendar, table of eclipses, an anatomical sketch showing the veins for bloodletting, and urine charts, which the physician used as a diagnostic tool. Each flask shows stages of digestion and the likely prognosis. The text for the flasks at the five o'clock position reads, 'these urines signify death'.⁶⁴ In any case, the girdle book clearly was useful to these professionals as well.

Whether used by a scholar, clerk or physician, one can imagine that the original owners would carry their girdle books or calendars on their travels, bringing it out whenever it was needed.

Aristocratic owners of girdle books

In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, apart from being practical, girdle books were also fashionable. They were used as an indication of the wealth, taste and status of their owners. As books of prayers and devotions were also written by, and for, lay persons, the girdle book served as a social symbol in addition to its religious purposes. Some of the girdle books used by lay persons were very plain, but there are examples of highly decorated copies with brass or silver corner pieces, fastenings and clasps, engraving, tooling, and even a coat of arms or other adornment in the centre of the cover (Fig. 12).

There is much evidence, both in works of arts and in the secondary literature, that in the sixteenth century girdle books were worn and admired by noble women. They were in fact quite fashionable among the aristocracy on the Continent and in England, where they may have been introduced from Spain by Catherine of Aragon

⁶² Inventory. Borthwick Manuscript. Edinburgh: National Library of Scotland, 2002, Acc. 12059/3.

⁶³ More about 'bat books' in Chapter 3.

⁶⁴ *Tabula festorum mobilium cum canone*. English manuscript (York?), made between 1406 and 1424. Rosenbach Museum and Library, MS 1004/29.

(1485-1536), the first wife of king Henry VIII, and her retinue.⁶⁵ In fact, according to H. Newman, a girdle book was first and foremost a small devotional book, often bound within elaborately decorated gold covers, carried in the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries by women of rank or wealth.⁶⁶

Many historical sources indicate that Elizabethan ladies and gentlemen were fond of carrying very small, almost miniature-sized books on their belts, which were often bound in gold and enamelled bindings, decorated with precious stones. The texts could be both religious, in the form of prayers, or literary, in the form of love poetry, in which case the book might also contain portraits of lovers.⁶⁷ Queen Elizabeth I is said to have owned a number of such miniature books (Fig. 13)⁶⁸ and it may well be that she, or her mother, Anne Boleyn, had introduced this fashion. Richly decorated little objects hanging from ladies' necks or waists were part of the Henrician fashion during Elizabeth's formative years.⁶⁹ These small ornaments may well have had religious connotations, but they also point to the owner's taste and style.

One of these precious artefacts is a booklet with the 'Psalms in English verse' (c. 1540), one the smallest manuscripts in the British Library (Fig. 1 Extant copies). It has a portrait illustration of King Henry VIII as its main decoration and is believed to have been owned by Anne Boleyn.⁷⁰ This miniature book, which is only slightly larger than a modern postage stamp, was perhaps meant to be worn like a holstered modern gadget, or on a necklace or girdle.

Another example of these highly decorative miniature girdle books dating from the middle of the sixteenth century, is a printed prayer book believed to have been made by Hans van Antwerpen, which was presented to the future Queen Elizabeth I by Elizabeth Tyrwhit (Fig. 2 Extant copies).⁷¹ It is bound with enamelled gold covers and has suspension loops at the top for use as a girdle book. The front cover depicts the

⁶⁵ H. Newman, *An illustrated dictionary of jewelry: 2,530 Entries, including definitions of jewels, gemstones, materials, processes, and styles, and entries on principal designers and makers, from Antiquity to the present day* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1981), p. 78.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Smith and Bloxam, 'The Medieval Girdle Book Project', p. 19.

⁶⁸ Some sources claim the portrait depicts Queen Elizabeth I with one of her girdle books; others say she is just holding it.

⁶⁹ P. Collinson, *Elizabethans* (London: Continuum International Publishing, 2003²), pp. 92-93.

⁷⁰ E. Ives, *The life and death of Anne Boleyn* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2004), p. 406.

⁷¹ H. Ostovich and E. Sauer (eds.), *Reading early-modern women: An anthology of texts in manuscript and print, 1550-1700* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), p. 471.

biblical scene of 'The brazen serpent' and the back 'The judgement of Solomon', while the spine and two clasps are enamelled with moresques. It is stored in a leather case.

Modern research has shown that all Tudor queens owned books of devotion, many of which are described as 'little' and thus may have been girdle books, which seem to have been popular mostly because of their elaborate bindings.⁷²

In other countries, too, girdle books were a symbol of fashion and status as is shown by the luxuriously bound copy of a manuscript from Nuremberg, dated 1471 with furnishings that carry the coat of arms of the local patrician family of Kress (Fig. 11 Extant copies). In several other depictions we find girdle books as attributes of ladies of rank, in most if not all cases to demonstrate their religious devotion (Figs. 15, 16). And we come across girdle books in the hands of female saints, who are presented in the outfit of aristocratic women to denote their high status (Figs. 25-29). However, the surviving works of art provide almost no representations of 'common' people with girdle books. Some of them have unknown sources and are therefore not mentioned in this study.

2.3. Settings

When we observe a work of art, our first impressions are normally guided by its most striking features, as well as by the depicted settings. For the contemporary viewer, the presence of a girdle book would be just a small detail of the larger picture and would not carry much significance. There are many examples of paintings in which the girdle book is just a minor detail (Figs. 22, 25, 36, 46). In various other pictures, however, it is a significant element which carries meaning with regard to religious devotion, fashion or literacy. It is therefore important to look at the environment or setting the girdle book is placed in as this will give a better understanding of its content, role and practical use.

Religious content and context are the most common among the depictions in which girdle books figure. The majority consist of biblical scenes and images of travelling monks reciting the offices of prayer or performing religious rituals. Remarkably, St. Anthony serves as a good example of this as he is a common character to be depicted with a girdle book. In the fifteenth-century 'Da Costa Hours' we see

⁷² R.M. Warnicke, *Elizabeth of York and her six daughters-in-law: Fashioning Tudor queenship, 1485-1547* (New York: Springer, 2017), p. 100.

Anthony of Padua (1195-1231) nimbed, tonsured and wearing his Franciscan monk's habit with a pouch, preaching next to the water (Fig. 27). He raises a crucifix in both hands, while saying prayers to the birds on land and fishes in the water. In the left background, he is again depicted in a village, kneeling before a mule with a load of oats while a crowd is gathering around him.⁷³

On an altarpiece by Joos van Cleve from a church in Agaete (Gran Canaria), St. Anthony the Great (c. 1530-37) is depicted as an old man in his monastic habit with a swine at his feet (Fig. 7). He has a long beard and is walking barefoot with a serene expression on his face, which symbolizes the saint's humility. In the background we see St. Christopher carrying Christ across the water. Anthony has a girdle book hanging from his belt.

Some examples of girdle books with a pious content are illustrated in rather grim scenes. St. Anthony is depicted with a girdle book being tormented or tempted by demons in hell. The saint practised an arduous asceticism and from an early age was engaged in a fierce spiritual combat with the devils and demons, who detesting such holiness, tormented and tried to seduce him. In the 1470s, Martin Schongauer produced an engraving of this battle (Fig. 9), which clearly served as the model for the earliest known masterpiece of Michelangelo dated around 1487-88 (Fig. 9.1). Even more gruesome and realistic is Matthias Grünewald's 1515 depiction of St. Anthony's torment on a wing of the famous Isenheim Altar in Colmar (Fig. 44). The subject was also painted by Hieronymus Bosch, more or less at the same time (Fig. 5). Only one example has been found where a female saint is depicted in a similar situation. In an anonymous painting from Poland dated around 1500 we see St. Catherine of Siena attacked by devils, while maintaining a serene facial expression (Fig. 10).

The girdle book is a much more telling attribute in these works of art than one might think. Books appear in the images of a great many saints, signifying their devotion to the Holy Scriptures or the fact that they had written religious works themselves. But the girdle book's appearance may also lead to other functions. Again St. Anthony provides examples. After taking up the eremitic life he eschewed books, from which it can be taken that the girdle book bears several significations here. First, we are reminded of saint's continual recitations, and the prayers learned from books seen in

⁷³ Saint Anthony of Padua, 'Miracle of the fish', <<https://www.santantonio.org/en/content/miracle-fish>> (9 November, 2019).

his early life. Second, the girdle book in Anthony's hand recalls the portraiture of the ancient philosophers and shows him as their Christian counterpart. And finally, without actual books in his cell, Anthony was better able to contemplate the 'book of God's creation' in the world around him.

Another example of the religious context is an anonymous painting of the assassination of St. Peter of Verona (1205-1252) (Fig. 28). A Dominican friar, he was one of the finest preachers of his age, who was killed by a Cathar assassin. We see Peter on his knees, slain by two swords. Offering his blood as a sacrifice to God, he dips his fingers in it and writes on the ground these words: 'Credo in Deum' (I believe in God), the first line of the Apostles' Creed. While doing so, he holds on to his girdle book bound in purple leather with a gold clasp.

All these depictions show that when faced with the need to depict a book in connection to a religious person or context, artists around 1500 often choose a girdle book, which clearly was considered a normal object in those days.

There are only a few examples of the girdle book being depicted in tombstones, and even rarer is it to find such an image that can be connected to a person whose name is known. This is the image on the stone epitaph of an Augustinian abbot, Marcin Rinkenberk (d. 1489), in the wall of the cloister of the former Augustinian monastery in Żagań (Poland) (Fig. 39).⁷⁴ The book depicted there may refer to the Augustinian funeral rite which requires that the monks followed the cross in a procession with a book in their hands.⁷⁵ Such a medieval procession of monks carrying books with girdle binding can be seen in the 1517 fresco by Jörg Ratgeb, 'The Carmelites and St. Louis, King of France in 1248' (Fig. 40) in the Carmelite monastery in Frankfurt.⁷⁶ The custom of medieval monks walking in funeral processions with their books is also visible in the statues of mourners around the sarcophagus of Philip the Bold, Duke of Burgundy, sculpted by Claus Sluter about 1443-1457 (Fig. 37).⁷⁷ It shows two mourning monks, one holding a small girdle book.

⁷⁴ B. Czechowicz, *Nagrobki późnogotyckie na Śląsku* [Late-Gothic Tombstones in Silesia] (Wrocław: Wydaw. Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 2003), p. 223, fig. 52.

⁷⁵ A. Pobóg-Lenartowicz, *Kanonicy regularni na Śląsku. Życie konwentów w śląskich klasztorach kanoników regularnych w średniowieczu* [Canons regular in Silesia. The life in Canon regular monasteries in the Middle Ages] (Opole: Wydawn. Uniwersytetu Opolskiego, 1999), pp. 138-141.

⁷⁶ E. Hils-Brockhoff, *Das Karmeliterkloster in Frankfurt am Main. Geschichte und Kunstdenkmäler* (Frankfurt am Main: Dezernat für Kultur und Freizeit, 1999).

⁷⁷ J. Huizinga, *The waning of the Middle Ages* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1954), p. 40, fig. 19.

Interestingly, in a few depictions, the girdle books are not hand-held or tucked behind the belt, but solemnly placed on tables or shelves as part of a room's interior. There is one lying on a shelf behind the prophet Jeremiah in an anonymous mid-fifteenth-century painting (Fig. 32), another lying on the shelves of St. Jerome's study in Antonello da Messina's wonderful portrait (Fig. 33), and one in a similar painting by Niccolo Colantonio (Fig. 45). In a remarkable piece of sculpture from an altar piece from Vall Church (Gotland, Sweden) several girdle books are depicted. We see St. John reading in one, while a second is hanging from his belt and a third one hangs in an open cupboard on his left side (Fig. 38).

In conclusion, all these works of art depicting various owners, diverse scenes and environments provide us with a better understanding of how girdle books were used and what they stand for. Based on the analysis, girdle books were mainly of a practical use including religious, legal and medical content. Most of the environments strengthen the argument that the vast majority of girdle books were religious and devotional in content. Clerics, monks and nuns would wear their prayer book on their belt, ready to be read and studied at any time. Regarding more noble users, books in general were expensive and girdle books even more so. Wearing such a book would show off wealth – and hint at being well educated (or at least being able to read). Of course, most of those girdle books had religious content as well, like prayer books or Books of Hours. Since it was en vogue for women to wear a girdle belt above the waistline, such a book also was a demonstration of fashion.

The above analysis explored the girdle book as a portable practical commodity and shows how significant this book format was during the given time frame. The research demonstrates that knowledge about iconology and the religious history is desirable in order to properly interpret the depictions.

Chapter 3. Practical aspects of the depicted girdle books

The written word has needed protection since the beginning of writing, long before the Middle Ages. From clay tablets to leather cylinders to protect precious scrolls, text preservation has evolved throughout the centuries. Protective binding for the girdle book was not only derived from the need to protect the text it contained, but also as a carrying mechanism for it. Original bindings that have survived centuries of innovations and changes are truly intriguing artefacts that demand good documentation and careful study. According to the bookbinding specialist Janos Szirmai, it is estimated that for every five medieval books still in existence in their original binding, 95 have been lost, destroyed, or worn out and discarded after their function was fulfilled.⁷⁸ As a result, scholars have only a limited number of original bindings to work with. These few bindings offer a unique opportunity to delve deeper into the origin, provenance and use of surviving copies.

In the previous chapter we learnt more about the contents of girdle books, specifically about the users of these books and the environment in which they were depicted. It is now crucial to understand the format and types of girdle books in artworks, in order to contribute to the knowledge of the girdle book's practical use. In this chapter, the physical aspects of girdle books are examined by utilizing a combination of knowledge gleaned from previous studies on girdle books and historical depictions of these books in medieval artworks. Firstly, we will look at types of girdle books, their bindings and covers. Secondly, the focus will be on the format and cover colours of girdle books.

3.1. Types of girdle books

When studying the various types of girdle books and general phenomena connected to their use and function, iconography and works of art are augmenting and deepening sources that can add to our knowledge. These sources can help us learn how girdle books were stored and protected. Given the fact that girdle books with their original bindings are quite scarce, representative works of art can be very beneficial in this

⁷⁸ Szirmai, *The archaeology of medieval bookbinding*, p. 9.

research. Jean Loubier (1905-?) was the first scholar to highlight how important medieval artworks were in providing an understanding of girdle books.⁷⁹ Otto Glauning (1876-1941) was the first to compile an inventory of 156 works of art depicting girdle books in 1926, and was also responsible for preparing a list of all preserved girdle books known at that time.⁸⁰ As was mentioned in Chapter 1, Glauning's pioneering list of the girdle book representations in works of art has since grown to nearly 900.

During the investigation of the function and typology of girdle book bindings, historians of the medieval book managed to distinguish two similar types of bindings: the girdle book and the overcover.⁸¹ The latter was made in a different way, and was commonly used for larger books. The real breakthrough in comparing the information from the iconographic sources and the original items was made by Ursula Bruckner.⁸² She combined her own collected data from surviving copies and iconographic sources with the work of her predecessors and discovered significant differences in the structure of these books.⁸³ Many of the covers showed clear differences, being either a chemise binding, a book pouch or a girdle book with a possibility to be worn on the belt or having a hook or chain. The term *camisia* or *chemise* was introduced in 1871 by Wilhelm Wattenbach as an additional cover of a book. However, he did not specify the type of the material used for the cover.⁸⁴ Similarly, Jean Loubier coined the term *Hülleneinband* when describing relics in Dutch art without mentioning the types of materials used.⁸⁵ These terminological issues even today create a real challenge in clearly identifying the binding type. Is the binding intended as a protective cover or was it adapted as a carrying mechanism?

Despite the problems with interpretation and terminology, four categories of bindings with an additional overcover have been identified: 1) with a wrap of cloth (chemise); 2) with a protective soft leather overcover or *Hülleneinbände*; 3) with a

⁷⁹ J. Loubier, *Der Bucheinband in alter und neuer Zeit* (Berlin-Leipzig: Klinkhardt & Biermann, 1905), pp. 77-79, figs. 18-21.

⁸⁰ Glauning, 'Der Buchbeutel in der bildenden Kunst', vol. I, p. 126.

⁸¹ H. Schreiber, 'Buchbeutel und Hüllenband, Funde und Betrachtungen', *Archiv für Buchgewerbe und Gebrauchsgraphik*, 76 (1939), pp. 492-496. The author lists other examples of works of art depicting girdle books; cf. H. Schreiber, 'Vom Buchbeutel und seinem Verwandten', *Sankt Wiborada. Ein Jahrbuch für Bücherfreunde*, 7 (1940), pp. 13-28.

⁸² U. Bruckner, 'Beutelbuch – Originale', *Studien zum Buch- und Bibliothekswesen*, 9 (1995), pp. 5-23.

⁸³ U. Bruckner, 'Das Beutelbuch und seine Verwandten – der Hülleneinband, das Faltbuch und der Buchbeutel', *Gutenberg-Jahrbuch*, 72 (1997), pp. 307-324 (nos. 814-822).

⁸⁴ W. Wattenbach, *Das Schriftwesen im Mittelalter* (Leipzig: Hirzel, 1871), pp. 230-231.

⁸⁵ Loubier, *Der Bucheinband in alter und neuer Zeit*, p. 45; idem, 'Hülleneinbände des ausgehenden Mittelalters', in *Bibliografiska studier tillägnade Friherre Johannes Rudbeck på hans femtioårsdag den 7 mars 1917*, ed. G. Rudbeck (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksells Boktryckeri-A.B., 1917), pp. 39-51.

primary or supplementary wrap that facilitates carrying the book by hand or is attached to the belt (girdle book); 4) with an additional protective wrap fixed to the book spine and partly to its covers.⁸⁶ All these binding types are found depicted in the art works. The girdle books appear most frequently among all nontypical book bindings. However, this does not correlate with the number of preserved bindings. According to M. Smith only 26 original girdle books are preserved.⁸⁷ It is known that the majority (eighteen) of them are produced with only one layer of leather; the rest have a cover of additional material on the original book binding. Smith divided her corpus of preserved girdle books into two simple categories: 1) the single-cover girdle book; 2) the double-cover girdle book.⁸⁸ The single-cover girdle book has a primary binding with a long leather extension on the bottom edge that could be tucked under the belt or carried by hand (Figs. 1, 2, 17). This type of cover usually leaves the fore-edge and the top of the book open. The double-cover girdle book consists of an inner and outer cover and either wraps the book block completely or leaves the fore-edge and the top open. The outer (secondary) binding serves as an extension which can be slipped under the belt (Figs. 21, 30, 41). The two covers can also be attached to each other. Some girdle books were completely closed for protection from outside damage (Figs. 8, 31, 41). Both types were always designed in such a way that the top of the book hangs downwards; when the reader picks it up, the text is in the right position to be read.

Even with the help of archival sources, it is still very difficult to determine what sort of bindings portable books had. Old inventories and library catalogues often state the type of the material used, but rarely say anything about the details of their structure.

All books that were referred to as portable were fashioned to keep the books ready at hand. The texts they contain may also have been abridged and produced in a small format in order to be more convenient during travel and to be protected from deteriorating influences, such as exposure to the elements.

The preserved girdle book bindings mostly date from the second half of the fifteenth century and the early decades of the sixteenth century. In general, the structure is defined by the technique of the period and the aesthetics of their owners. It is not too difficult to date the binding, as the materials, methods and workmanship are typical of a specific epoch. The materials used for the girdle books were the same as for

⁸⁶ Szirmai, *The archaeology of medieval bookbinding*, p. 234.

⁸⁷ Smith, *The medieval girdle book*, p. 10.

⁸⁸ Smith and Bloxam, 'The Medieval Girdle Book Project', p. 17.

regular bindings: leather from different animals, such as calf, goat and sheep, chamois, velvet, wooden boards (two out of 26 extant copies have thick paper boards). Briefly, based on the surviving copies, it can be said that the majority have a Turk's head knot (a special kind of intricate knot designed to keep books bound around a belt or hand)⁸⁹; some extensions are fitted with brass hooks; sewn on two to four supports of cord, which are connected to the book block over the boards; furniture entails one or two leather-straps or hinged metal clasps; tooling is usually restrained, with a few exceptions. Extensions may also cover the top and/or fore edge to enclose the book completely.⁹⁰

Considering the bindings of the extant copies, it is clear that the majority had a purely utilitarian function and were likely not objects of interest for visual artists in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Thus, most of the examples we see in iconographic sources are the more sophisticated and distinctive *chemise* bindings. To illustrate this, we will look at one of the more interesting cloth-bound books in detail. It is a small printed psalter dating from 1525-1527, that once belonged to the Duchess Dorothea of Prussia, the first wife of Albrecht Hohenzollern, Duke of Prussia, and is now kept in the collection of the Library of the University in Torun (Poland) (cat. no.: Ob. II. 4498-4500) (Fig. 10 Extant copies).⁹¹ The binding has overcovers made of dark green velvet with two textile straps. The first strap (65 mm wide) is stitched at the back of the cover in order to support the outer wrap, while a loose fragment of fabric (107 mm wide) is added to protect the fore edge of the book. The book's height is 160 mm, however, the extension of the fabric at the tail of the cover is longer and amounts to 223 mm. A (now missing) draw-string was used to close the extension. The velvet is attached to the covers by ornamental silver furnishings and fastenings. Duchess Dorothea's psalter is a rare example of a luxurious girdle book which resembles a chemise-type binding rather than a binding with a protective cover. Similar examples can be found depicted on two altar pieces in Augustine Monastery in St. Florian, Upper Austria and in the church of St.

⁸⁹ Turk's head knots resemble a Turkish turban. After the knots are braided, usually separately from the binding, then slipped on and attached.

⁹⁰ M.J. Smith, 'The mediaeval girdle book: A constant companion', in M.J. Driscoll (ed.), *Care and Conservation of Manuscripts 14. Proceedings of the Fourteenth International Seminar Held at the University of Copenhagen 17th-19th October 2014* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2014), pp. 197-198.

⁹¹ For an exhaustive description of the binding structure, see J. Tomaszewski, *Oprawy haftowane i tekstylne z XVI-XIX w. w zbiorach polskich* [Embroidered and textile book bindings from the 16th-19th centuries in Polish collections] (Warszawa: Akademia Sztuk Pięknych w Warszawie, 2013), vol. 1: *Kontekst historyczny* [Historical context], p. 67; vol. 2: *Katalog opraw haftowanych* [Catalogue of embroidered bindings], pp. 226-227.

Martin in Treviglio (Figs. 17, 18). In both depictions, women hold richly-bound girdle books, created with a material reminiscent of the dark velvet of Princess Dorothea's book.

The copy of Boethius' *De consolazione philosophiae* from Yale's Beinecke library is another girdle book that has preserved its original binding (Fig. 5 Extant copies). The text of Boethius (likely copied in England in the fifteenth century) was re-bound soon after as a girdle book (possibly in Germany or the Low Countries), which could be hung from a belt at the waist. The size of the girdle book is 100 x 80 (68 x 41) mm. The volume is resown on three narrow, tawed double thongs. The wrapper extends about 130 mm to a Turk's head knot at the tail, about 25 mm at the head, and has an overlap of about 50 mm on the upper board.⁹² The knot was slipped under the owner's belt, from which the book would dangle until needed. It has a brass clasp for fastening attached on a brown leather strap which closes the book with a pin. It is a delightful piece that looks very attractive in spite of the plain material – undecorated leather – that was used.

3.2. Format and cover colours of the girdle books

Generally speaking, a girdle book in most cases were small format books which fit easily into the reader's hand. This is evidenced by the preserved copies and by the representations in works of art. Their size, at least when looking at the extant copies, varies from approximately 90 mm to 160 mm high, and can be up to 50 mm thick.⁹³ However, when it comes to the representations in works of art, we need to be more careful. Distorted proportions of persons or objects are quite common in works of art, especially when we take into consideration that the collected examples hail from different origins and provenances. This means that it is best to estimate the proportions of the books only on the basis of the works of art of high quality, avoiding the ones from second-rate workshops that lack precision. In addition, more intricate binding details visible on the work of art may indicate that the girdle books were actually reproduced after existing examples. Some late-Gothic works of art demonstrate a meticulous observation of girdle books and their surroundings with proportions that were true to the originals (Figs. 7, 17).

⁹² J. Greenfield, 'De consolazione philosophiae', in *The Yale University Library gazette*, 77:12, 1/2 (2002), pp. 91-93.

⁹³ Smith and Bloxam, 'The Medieval Girdle Book Project', p. 19.

According to Smith, only one of the descriptions of existing girdle books gives information on the weight of the book, but it can be assumed that because of their small size, they were not heavy.¹⁶ A light weight also assured that the book could be carried comfortably from the belt. The largest existing girdle book, however, is 300 mm tall. If we include the extension by which it will have been carried, its length would easily have measured some 600 mm, which makes it much taller and bulkier than the other extant copies. The girdle book depicted on 'The Visitation' (Fig. 14) also seems rather massive, which raises the question if the book was really carried tucked into the belt.

Only some of the preserved girdle books are so large that they were probably intended to be looped over the saddle horn, or carried as a shoulder-bag. Two examples are a manuscript dealing with city laws (Tallinn C.m.9 groß-8^o⁹⁴) and another with tax and donation records (Isny Evangelisches Kirchenarchiv⁹⁵). Another example is the so-called *Meissner Rechtsbuch*⁹⁶, a law text written around 1500, now in the State Library in Munich (CGM8950), which, including the extension, measures circa 74 cm by 22 cm and is 6.5 cm thick, weighing almost three pounds (Fig. 6 Extant copies). Because of the book's heavy weight and intense intended use, it was constructed with a sturdy double binding. Another rather large girdle book is the Danish manuscript of the Law of Jutland, which was used by itinerant judges. The size of the book is 13 x 9.6 cm, while the binding is circa 30 cm long (Fig. 4 Extant copies).⁹⁷

In order to determine the size of the depicted girdle books, we can use the hand of the person who is shown with a girdle book as the actual point of reference, unless, of course, it is clear that the whole composition is disproportional. Still, it should be emphasized that this method only provides a rough estimation. The analysis of the girdle books in works of art also allows us to examine the variations of the leather extension at the tail of the book. In the majority of the artistic depictions, the extension with or without a knot has almost the same length as that of the book. However, there are a few examples where the length of the extension is not clear (Figs. 2, 6). In cases where the leather extension is clearly visible, one can clearly see that the length of the extension would enable effortless transport of the book in hand or at the belt in the form of a pouch (Figs. 1, 4, 17-20). It can also be noted that in manuscript drawings, the

⁹⁴ Tallinn City Archives (C.m.9 groß-8^o, Law).

⁹⁵ Isny at the Evangelische Kirchenarchiv (Urbar, Law, Taxes, Gifts).

⁹⁶ The large *Meissner Rechtsbuch* was carried over the shoulder or tied to the saddle (Staatsbibliothek München, Cgm 8950).

⁹⁷ Petersen, *Living words & luminous pictures ... Catalogue*, pp. 42-45.

girdle books or their extensions do not present reliable proportions and are mostly completely wrapped (Figs. 4, 8, 19, 23, 24).

Looking at all the depictions, it can be said that the sizes of both the girdle books and their extensions seem realistic. However, artistic representations of larger format books (for example, the one illustrated in Matthias Grunewald's *The Temptation of St Anthony*, 1515; Fig. 44) call into question whether some books depicted as girdle books could indeed be classified as such in the real world. In this work, a large damaged book in a slightly torn leather cover is held by a condemned monk. Illustrations such as these make it clear that these books would have been uncomfortable to hold or impossible to knot. While these depictions contain all the elements of a girdle book (leather binding, knotted extension), their sheer size makes it less realistic for them to have been used as a girdle book.

It is worth mentioning that there were other types of books that could be 'worn.' There were, for instance, 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. Most often these are referred to as folded almanacs and indeed mainly contain calendars (also referred to as *computus*), astronomical and astrological treatises, reckoners, and medical vade-me-cums.⁹⁸ It is debatable whether these portable books should be viewed in the same category as girdle books, however, here two examples will be briefly described as they facilitate the discussion around the practicality of girdle books.

The Latin phrase 'Vade mecum' (the literal meaning is: 'Come with me') refers to a portable book, often suspended from the belt, and frequently consisting of leaves folded in a concertina or fold-out format.⁹⁹ Such 'books' could be consulted easily by physicians, and often contained calendars, almanacs, and medical information (Fig. 7 Extant copies).

The term 'bat books' was coined by the Dutch codicologist J.P. Gumbert in 2016 to describe books which when opened look like they were 'unfolding their wings like bats'.¹⁰⁰ According to Gumbert's research of 63 extant catalogued copies, bat books were a solution to the problem of storing lots of information in a small portable object.

⁹⁸ Smith, *The medieval girdle book and advanced paper conservation workshops, Amigo Fellowship Final Report December 2004*, p. 19.

⁹⁹ M. Brown, *Understanding illuminated manuscripts: A guide to technical terms* (London: Getty Publications, 1994), p. 124.

¹⁰⁰ J.P. Gumbert, *Bat books: A catalogue of folded manuscripts containing almanacs or other texts* (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2016), p. 41.

These almanacs and calendars were smaller and thinner than the typical girdle book, as they were made of a much thinner parchment and could be folded several times. A perfect example is a physician's belt book from the Rosenbach Museum and Library (Fig. 8 Extant copies).

These two types of books served their users in a very similar practical way as a typical girdle book. Both were compact, worn on a waist, suitable for travelling and immediately 'available'.

Colours

Another fascinating detail of the girdle books' covers is their colour scheme. We can observe from the depictions that the materials that cover the girdle books are different and so are the colours. This, however, should be treated with caution as one cannot be sure if the colour scheme presented is genuine. In paintings, the colour scheme was often dependent on the entirety of the work, and it would be used to accentuate certain attributes or important details of the work. Thus, the real colours were often disregarded, the more so since the girdle book was not the main object in the work.

In spite of these reservations, J. Tomaszewski did distinguish basic groups of the prevalent tendencies in binding colours. Based on his generalisation in dividing basic colours and their shades into categories, the following observations can be made: the most frequent colours of the girdle books depicted in paintings are red (30%), green (22%), brown (16%), followed by smaller percentages of lighter colours, which seems to be a tendency in western European art.¹⁰¹ In central and eastern Europe, however, the lighter colours prevail (28%), suggesting that artists preferred light, natural-coloured and undyed leather.

The spectrum of colours we encounter in iconography is, however, much richer than the colours of the bindings of the preserved copies. Most of the surviving girdle books are wrapped in undecorated, light-coloured chamois, some in different shades of brown and a few rare examples in green (Fig. 10 Extant copies) and blue velvet.¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ Tomaszewski, *Girdle books and leather overcovers in Polish libraries*, vol. 4, p. 146.

¹⁰² Szirmai, *The archaeology of Medieval bookbinding*, p. 237.

Conclusion

A girdle book was an innovative device to fulfil the needs of the medieval reader, whether it was to be carried around, or for protection from the elements or just to symbolise their piety or status. Girdle books are heralded for their portability, durability and practical use in numerous scholarly and religious endeavours. Many depictions of girdle books still exist, furthering our understanding of their practical uses and function.

The two first chapters shed light on the history of girdle books and discovered the details of the girdle books' depictions. The majority of the studied depictions provided us with more information about the content of girdle books, their users and the settings they were depicted in. This allowed us to explore a girdle book as a mobile commodity, revealing its practical uses and functions. A thorough analysis of the owners and environments strengthen the argument that girdle books had mostly religious and devotional content. Consequently, girdle books are most often depicted as being used for religious purposes. This 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. A number of preserved girdle books enables the determination of the manuscripts' content, and, in consequence, the circle of their readers. Earlier researchers believed that girdle books were restricted to use by clergy; however, now we know that there are four girdle books containing legal texts, one of them is a philosophical treatise, also some with medical content. There is evidence that the books containing legal or administrative texts were given primary and secondary covers, emphasizing the need for especially sturdy bindings provided by the secondary covering, to withstand heavy use and exposure to outdoor dangers such as rain, dust, or bright sunshine, insects and vermin.¹⁰³

During the fourteenth century diverse forms of portable book bindings reached expanding groups of users. Clerics, monks and nuns would wear their prayer book on their belt, ready to be read and studied at any time. Monks performing their evangelization mission, as well as clergymen serving within their dioceses had their girdle books as constant companions. By the late Middle Ages, members of the

¹⁰³ Smith, *The medieval girdle book*, p. 23.

mendicant orders and other clerics often travelled between monasteries and churches; they worked in the fields, they taught, and were engaged in a variety of physical labour. Whether they carried their books by the long extension, or had them tucked into the belt, they were provided easy access to the required texts, offices and prayers. The custom of carrying a book fastened to a belt by an extension of the binding leather became popular outside of the mendicant orders. Prayer books or breviaries in this form were owned by members of various orders, church dignitaries, and ordinary clergymen, as well as by laypeople.

Girdle books were put to various practical uses, as they were used symbolically to denote knowledge, wealth, intellectual curiosity and learning. Knights, ladies, and noblemen are frequently shown reading them; lawyers and their clerks employed girdle books when traveling the circuit to dispense justice. Additionally, the girdle book was a demonstration of fashion for Elizabethan ladies and gentlemen that were fond of carrying very small, almost miniature-sized girdle books on their belts.

The usefulness of girdle books to real people in everyday life is supported by concrete examples as described above. However, the girdle book is most frequently used as a symbol of learning, intellectual inquiry, faith, and standing in the Church and one's community – as becomes evident when examining more than 800 representations of the girdle book in hands of, and shown with devils and demons, persons real and imaginary – foremost the Virgin Mary, saints both male and female, angels, royal personages, popes, apostles and evangelists, especially Saints John, Peter, James and Paul, and Saint Jerome, both as hermit and cardinal. There are also some examples of a divergent interpretation of the possession of the girdle book being depicted in hell or with the devil.

Further research was aimed at discovering more about the physical aspects of girdle books and their use by the owner or carrier, which showed that all of the preserved girdle books did serve a useful purpose. Given their purely utilitarian function, they were not attractive objects of interest for visual artists in the fifteenth and sixteenth century. In consequence, most of the examples encountered in iconographic sources are the more sophisticated and eye-catching chemise bindings. There are several girdle book 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. We can conjecture that the protection of a book with

additional material covering its outer edges, which was relatively common in the late Middle Ages, was strictly related to it being used in travel. The most important feature of a girdle book cover was the covering material protruding over one or more of the board edges that served to cover the edges of the book block and which protected the whole manuscript against mechanical damage and the influence of external conditions such as dust or humidity.

The popularity of this type of bookbinding was arguably due to the emergence of mendicant orders in the late thirteenth century, especially the Dominicans, but later also Franciscans, Carmelites and Augustinians. These orders promoted religious renewal and wanted to revive the itinerant apostolate rejected by the preceding monastic tradition. To that end they had to come up with a system and regulations that were later included in the monastic rule, so as to efficiently perform the difficult apostolic mission in travel. These books, necessary for the evangelization mission, travelled the wilderness alongside the monks. Girdle book cover, together with the considerable thickness and durability, made it a perfect material that guaranteed effective protection of the manuscript against damaging conditions.

It can be noted that the girdle books were one of the innovations of medieval book use. From the analysed artworks, it is easy to see that there were no difficulties for the wearers or users to just flip the book up and read it. Many of the girdle books were also detached from the belt to be read or just carried in hand. It was a practical solution to the portability of a book.

I hope that the exploration of the girdle book as a mobile commodity of various types, with different owners and in diverse environments, has helped to develop some knowledge of the girdle books' functionality. It also demonstrated how significant this book format was during the given time frame. Girdle books in their different versions combine in one ingenious design a handy way to have a book ready to be used and being well protected.

Both the girdle books representation and extant copies have helped to discover more about practical and symbolic use of this book format, but also about the medieval readership and customs.

The representation of the girdle book is part of a complexity of artistic genres and languages and should not always be taken literally. Most commonly, girdle books were used as symbols and were depicted as having been alive during the lifetime of the

artists. In the settings representative of the same time periods, all people appear in garments and scenes suitable to the contemporary era, or how angels, the Virgin and other figures, real and imaginary, were clothed in the artist's imagination. The frequency with which the books are represented emphasizes that they were not obscure objects but real-life items familiar to painters, print-makers and sculptors, with which the population could identify and therefore accept without question, whether in the hands of the Virgin, the then-ruling monarch, or even the devil.

A wider application of girdle book research can set prospects of discovering more not only about girdle books but also about book history in general. The materials used for the girdle book binding can tell us that the place of manufacture had favourable economic conditions to produce a book in leather double cover. The metal embellishments of the binding, such brass or silver ornaments are likely to indicate that smiths were available close by, also many ornaments might have been available in wide circles. This gives an opportunity to learn more about the economy of girdle book production by the artisans as those corner or centre ornaments likely were distributed by the travelling peddlers. Ultimately, the girdle book plays a small but important role in the Western book world and by studying girdle book-bindings, we can contribute to the evolution of books in general.

Bringing girdle books to the attention of a wider audience may increase interest in rare book formats and uncover still undocumented examples. Additional girdle books may come to light that have not yet been identified, catalogued and described. I hope that this thesis will provide an additional window into the cultural history of the era through enriching our knowledge of girdle books use. The principles of the girdle books usage are very contemporary and have a strong resemblance with the modern devices of easy access, portability and ready availability.

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Figures



Figure 1: Hans Holbein the Elder, The Presentation of the Virgin Mary in the Temple of Jerusalem (1493). Painting in Augsburg Cathedral.

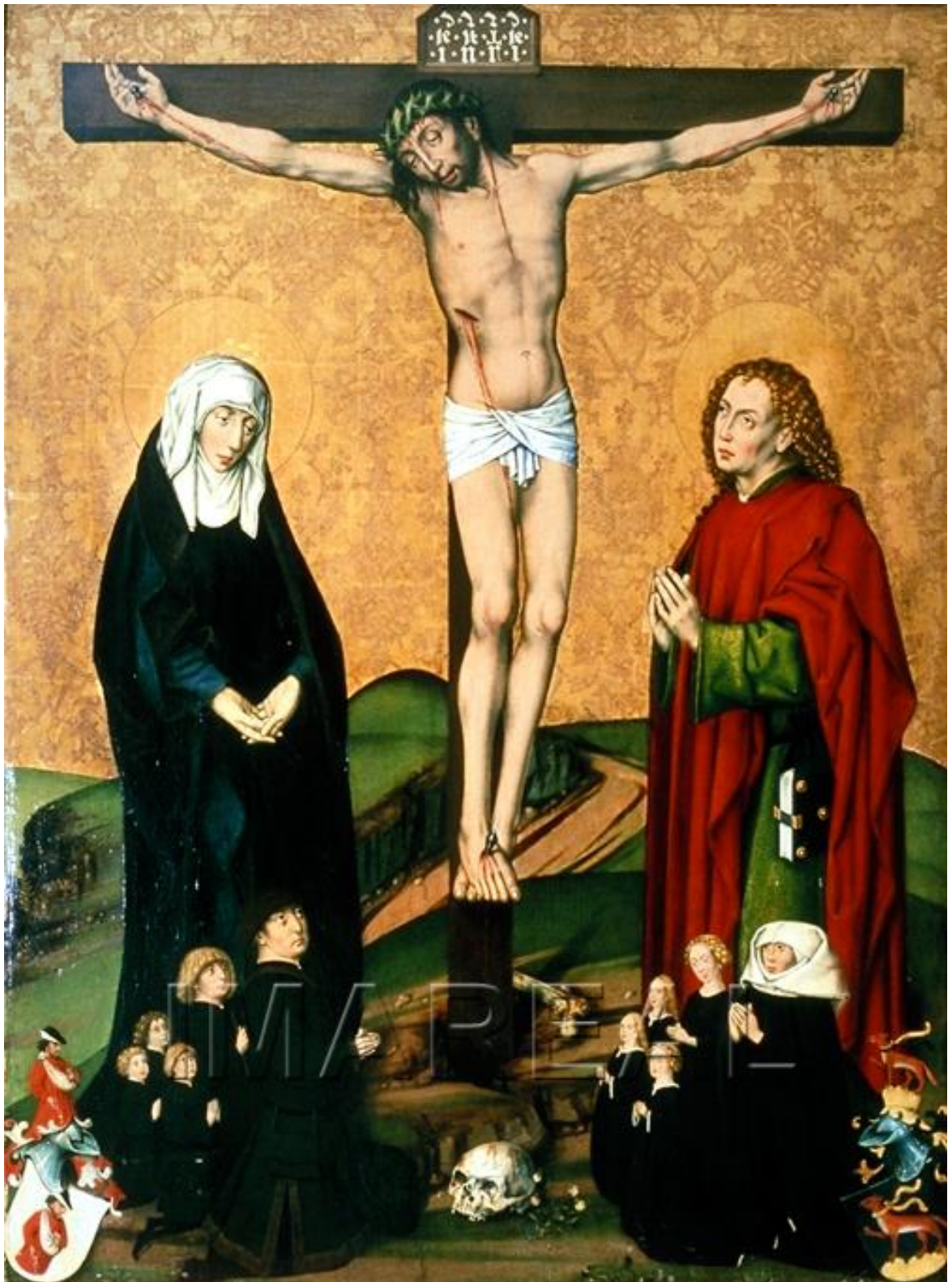


Figure 2: Anonymous, St John the Evangelist and St. Clare of Assisi at the Crucifixion with the Muller family (1462).

Institut für Realienkunde, Salzburg.



Figure 3: Hieronymus Bosch, St. James the Greater as pilgrim. Left outer wing of a triptych depicting the Last Judgement (1504-08).
Akademie der Bildenden Künste, Vienna.



Figure 4: Anonymous, Coloured initial from the Breviary of Queen Isabella of Castile (second half of the fifteenth century).
British Library, London, Add MS 18851, f. 320v.



Figure 5: Hieronymus Bosch, The Temptation of St Anthony (c. 1500-25).

F. van Lanschot Collection, 's-Hertogenbosch.



Figure 6: Anonymous, The Apostles' farewell (c. 1500).
Painting in the Franciscan Church, Bolzano.

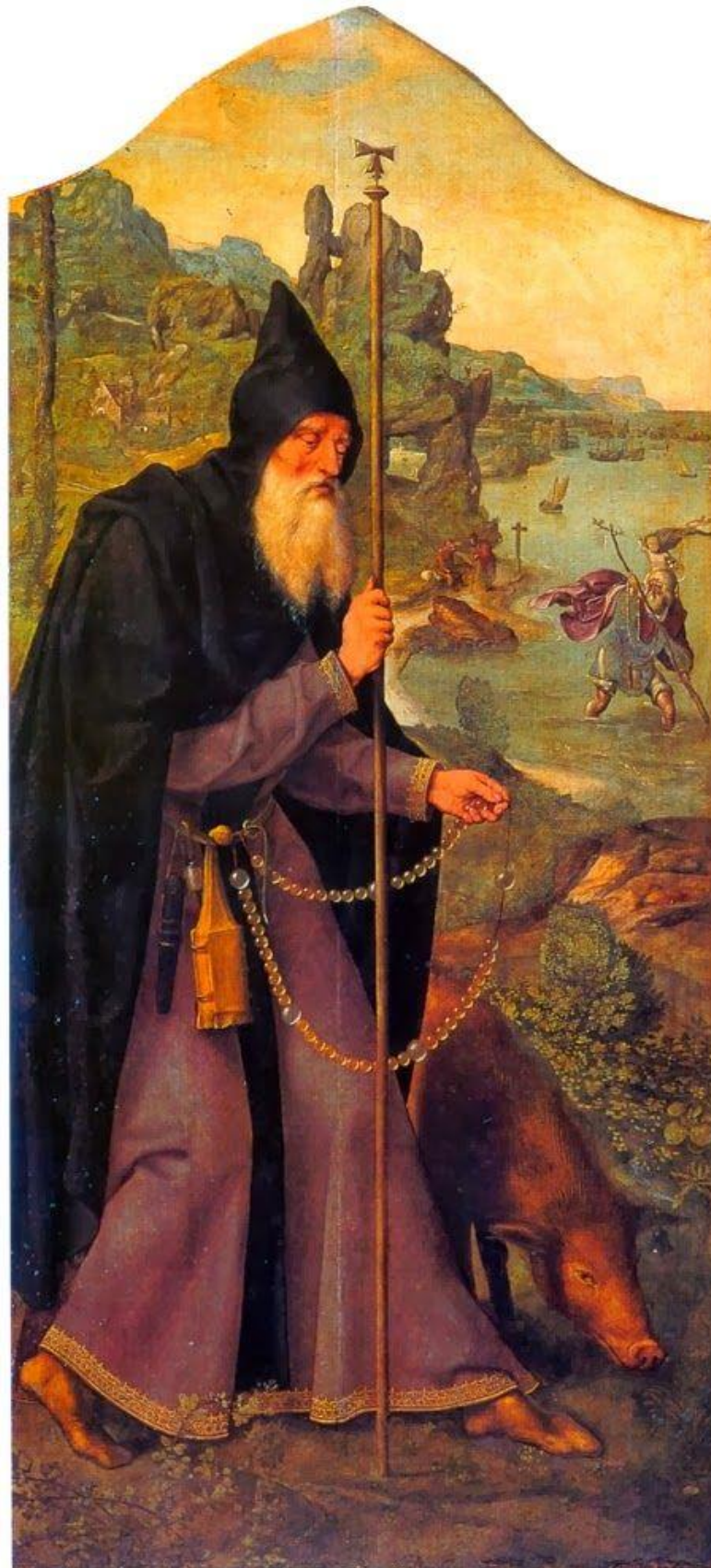


Figure 7: Joos van Cleve, St. Anthony (c. 1530-37).
Painting from the Church of Our Lady of the Conception, Agaete (Gran Canaria).



Figure 8: Anonymous, Illumination from a breviary from Bologna (c. 1315-25).
The Morgan Library and Museum, New York, MS M.0373, f. 3r.



Figure 9: Martin Schongauer, St. Anthony (c. 1470-75). Engraving.
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Figure 9.1: Michelangelo, The torment of St. Anthony (c. 1487-88).

Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth.



Figure 10: Anonymous, St. Catherine of Siena besieged by demons (c. 1500).

National Museum, Warsaw.



Figure 12: Anonymous, Philippa Rosewell with a girdle book (1592).

Victoria and Albert Museum, London.



Figure 13: William Scrots, Elizabeth I as a Princess (c. 1546-47).

Royal Collection, Windsor Castle.



Figure 14: Anonymous, The visitation of Mary (c. 1480-90).
Department of Medieval and Early-Modern History, University of Salzburg.



Figure 15: Jacques Daret, Portrait of Louise of Savoy as Sibylla Agrippa (fourteenth century).

Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Washington D.C.



Figure 16: Anonymous, Illuminated initial P cut from an unidentified medieval manuscript.

Newberry Library, Chicago, Medieval Manuscript Fragment 65.



Figure 17: Anonymous, St. Martin, St. Elizabeth of Thuringia and St. Katherine
(c. 1505-10).

Altarpiece at the Augustine Monastery of St. Florian, Upper Austria, Art
Collections Gallery.



Figure 18: Butinone and Zenale, St. Lucy is holding a girdle book (c. 1485).
Altarpiece in the church of St. Martin, Treviglio.



Figure 19: Boucicaut Master and his workshop, The Visitation. Illumination in a Parisian Book of Hours (c. 1415-20).

The J. Paul Getty Museum, Malibu (Ca.), Folio. Ms. 22, f. 48.



Figure 20: Anonymous, Virgin and child with St. Katherine, St. Dorothy, St. Barbara, and St. Mary Magdalene (1505).

Location unknown.

Source: <http://www.larsdatter.com/girdlebooks.htm>.



Figure 21: Detail of one of the wings of a Marian altar from Franken (c. 1490).

Location unknown.

Source: <https://nl.pinterest.com/pin/576249714815925534/>



Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

Figure 22: 'The Book of Faiz Monseigneur Saint Loys', composed at the request of 'Cardinal Bourbon' and the 'Duchess of Bourbonnois' (1401-1500).
Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris, French Manuscripts Department 2829,
f. 75v.

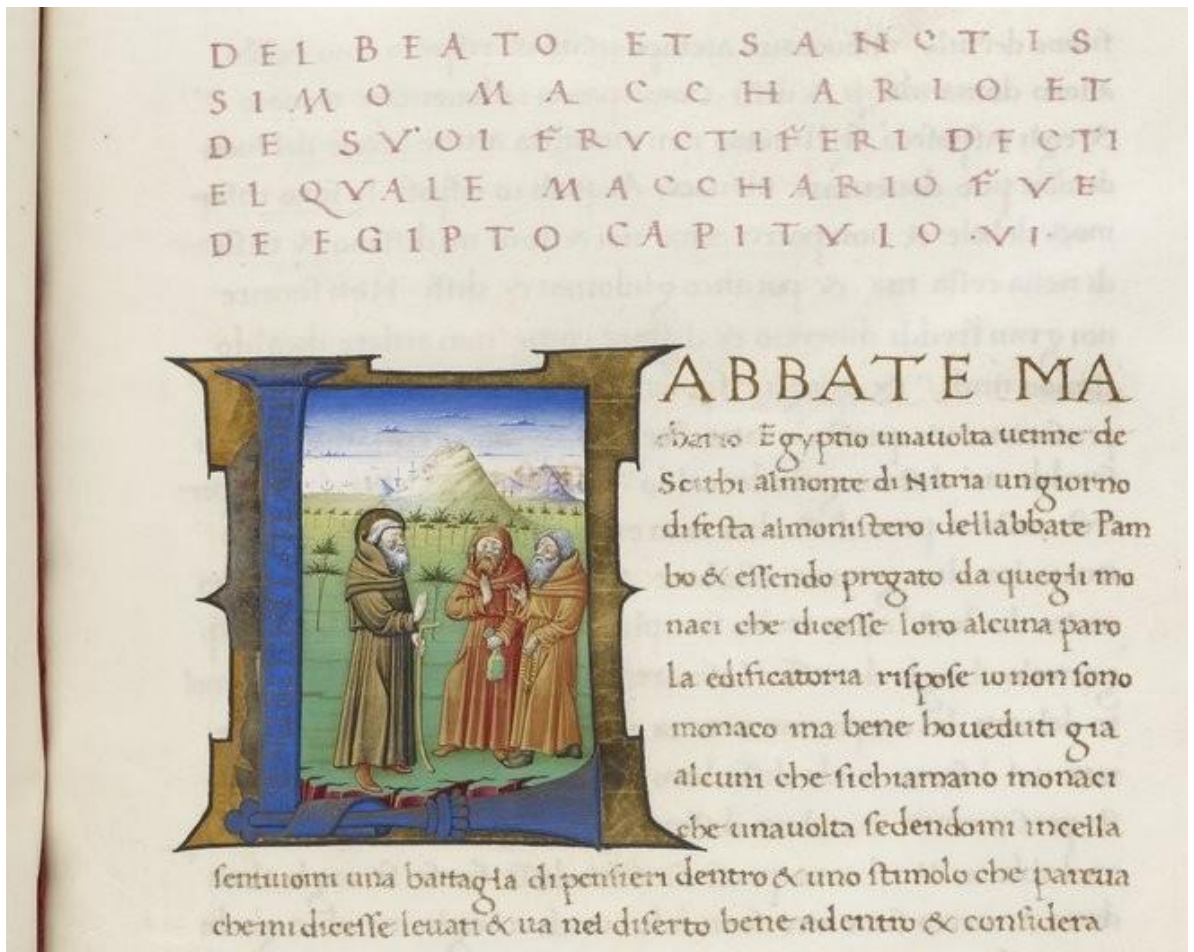


Figure 23: Domenico Cavalca, Vite di Santi Padri (1401-1500).

Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris, Italian 1712 / ms. II. C. 76, f. 142r.



Figure 24: Regensburger Raum, 15./16, Ottheinrich-Bibel, Vol. 6: Col 3,22 – Acts 10,4.

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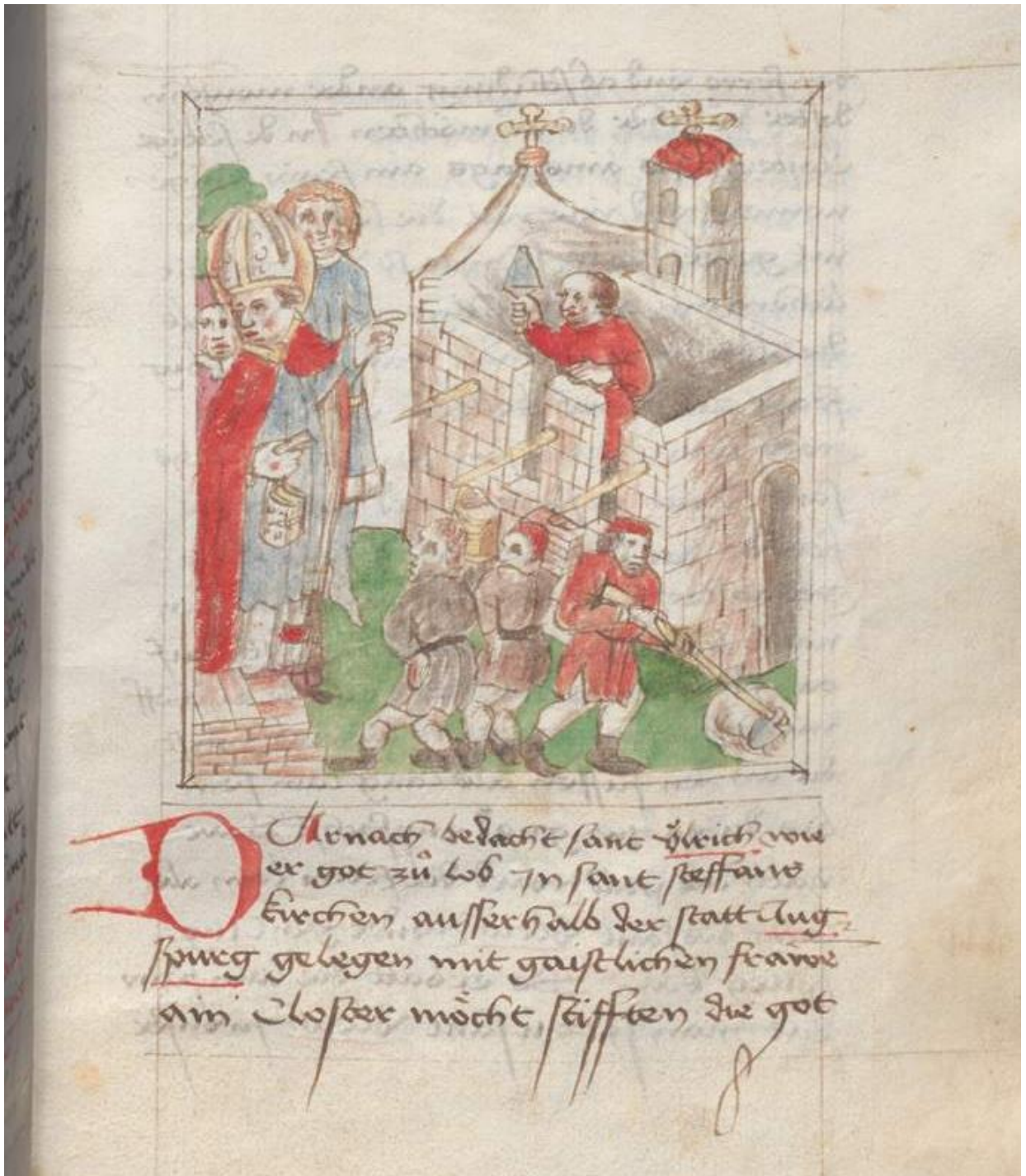


Figure 25: Johannes von Indersdorf Augsburg, Legends of Augsburg St. Ulrich,
Sintpert, Afra, Eustace (1454).

Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Munich, Cgm 751, f. 77.



Figure 26: Anonymous, Detail from The Death of Mary from the altarpiece in Landesmuseum Kärnten, Klagenfurt (c. 1445-1455).

Source: <<http://www.larsdatter.com/girdlebooks.htm>>.



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Figure 27: Anonymous, Anthony of Padua, Da Costa hours (c.1515).
The Morgan Library and Museum, New York, MS M.399 fol. 308v.



Figure 28: Anonymous, Saint Peter of Verona O.P. (1205–1252).

Location unknown.

Source: <<https://nl.pinterest.com/pin/338966309437209403/>>.



Figure 29: Anonymous, Detail from 'Marienleben', Cologne (c. 1485), oil on oak board.

Cathedral Treasury, Aachen.



Figure 30: Jorge English. Detail of the 'Retablo de los Gozos de Santa María' (1455).

Museo del Prado, Madrid.



Figure 31: Anonymous, Breviary. Images from Medieval and Renaissance Manuscripts.

The Morgan Library & Museum, New York, MS M.0373 fol. 103r.



Figure 32: Anonymous, Prophet Jeremiah and Christ (1443-45).
Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts, Brussels.



Figure 33: Antonello da Messina, St Jerome in his Study (c. 1460).

National Gallery, London.



Figure 34: Lucas van Leyden, *The Temptation of St. Anthony* (Leiden, 1509).
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, H. X.117; D.117; NH 117, (b).



Figure 35: Lucas van Leyden, St Francis of Assisi receiving the Stigmata (c.1514).
Engraving.

The British Museum, London, Kk,6.124.



Figure 36: Anonymous, 'Vineyard of the Lord' (1569).
Epitaph for Paul Eber in the town church of Wittenberg.



Figure 37: Claus Sluter, The Mourners. Tomb Sculpture from the Court of Burgundy (1443-1457). Musée des Beaux-Arts, Dijon.

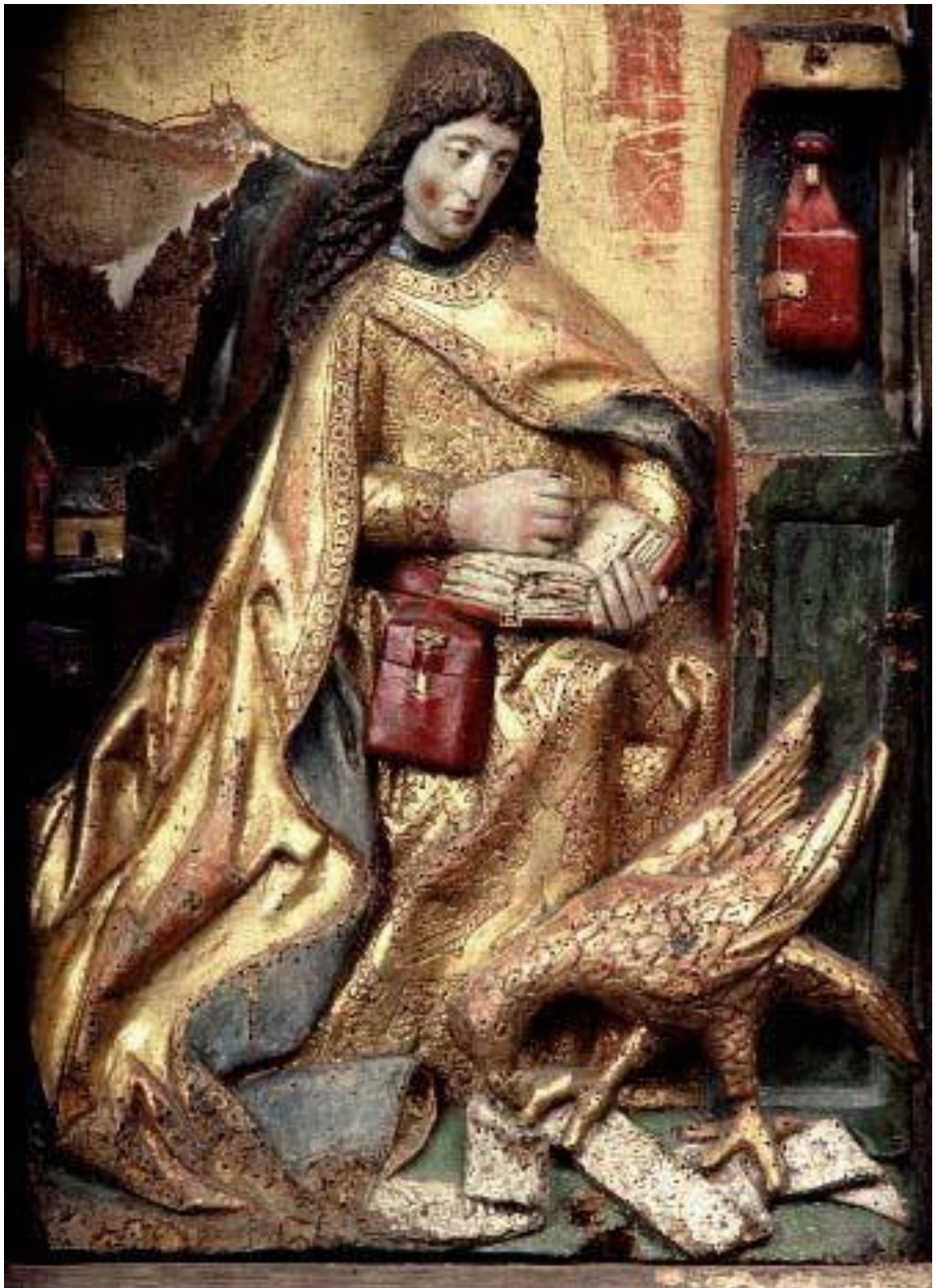


Figure 38: Anonymous, St. John reading, with a girdle book hanging in a nice stand by his side, and possibly a third one in his belt. Detail from an altarpiece in Vall Church, Gotland.



Figure 39: Anonymous, Epitaph of the Augustinian Abbot Marcin Rinckenberg,
after April 28th, 1489.

Cloister of the former Augustinian monastery in Żagań.

Photo: NID Archive in Warsaw.



Figure 40: Jerg Ratgeb, The Carmelites and King St. Louis in 1248 (1517).
Wall painting in the Carmelite monastery, Frankfurt.



Figure 41: Anonymous, Detail of Santa at the altar dedicated to San Martín de Tours by the Master of the Anaemic Figures (first half of the fifteenth century).
Episcopal Museum of Vic, Barcelona.



Figure 42: Hans Vredeman de Vries, A detail of girdle book in the painting Allegory of Salvation and Sin (1596).
National Museum, Gdańsk. Photo: J. Tomaszewski.



Figure 43: St. Dorothea of Montau. Woodcut from Joannes de Kwidzyn, *Das leben der seligen frawen Dorothee* (Malbork: s.n., 1492).

Source: J. Tondel, *Książka dawnym Królewcu Pruskim* [The Book in the Old Prussian Königsberg] (Toruń: Wydawnictwo UMK, 2001), p. 242.



Figure 44: Matthias Grünewald, Visit of St. Anthony to St. Paul and Temptation of St. Anthony (1515).

Unterlinden Museum, Colmar.



Figure 45: Colantonio, Saint Hieronim in his studio (c. 1445).
Gallerie Nazionale di Capodimonte, Naples.



Figure 46: Vittore Carpaccio, Saint Hieronymus with lion (fragment) (1502).
Scuola di San Giorgio degli Schiavoni, Venice.



Figure 47: Dunois Master, The Coëtivy Hours (1443-1445).
Chester Beatty Library, Dublin. CBL W 082, f. 34r.



Figure 48: Anonymous, Prayer book.

The Morgan Library & Museum, New York, MS H.3, f. 181v.



Figure 49: St. Jan the Evangelist, sculpture (c. 1500).
Church of St. Mark, Krakow.



Figure 50: Silesian studio, Christ appearing to the apostles (early sixteenth century).

From the porch of the church at Gnojna (Strzelinski district).

National Museum, Wroclaw.

List of extant copies



Figure 1: Portrait of Henry VIII, from Psalms in English Verse. Metal girdle book from South East England (c. 1540).

The British Library, London, Stowe MS 956, ff. 1v-2r.

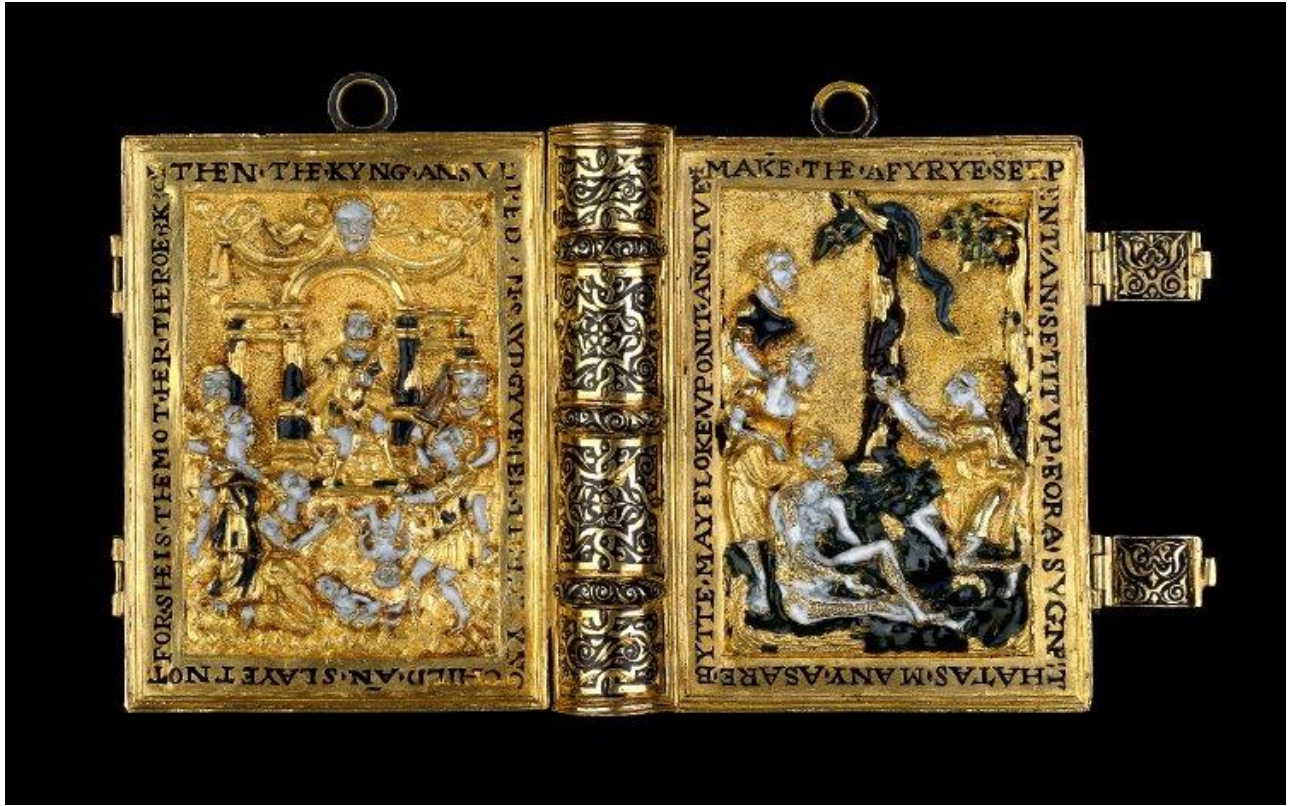


Figure 2: Girdle book (c. 1540–1545), made by Hans van Antwerpen. The text is printed by Christopher Barker.

The British Museum, London, 1894,0729.1.



Figure 3: Katharine Röder, Family crests and illustrated fly-leaves.
Otto Schäfer Bibliothek, Schweinfurt, OS1233.



Figure 4: Jens Nielsen, The Law of Jutland (c. 1490).
Royal Library, Copenhagen, Rostgaard 6 8°.



Figure 5: Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, England (ca. fifteenth century).

Beinecke Library, Yale University Library, MS 84.



Figure 6: The 'Meissner Rechtsbuch'.
Staatsbibliothek, Munich, Cgm 8950.
Photo: Courtesy of the Library.



Figure 7: Folding Calendar, Paris (c. 1290–1300).
Beinecke Library, Yale University Library, MS 923.



Figure 8: Physician's girdle book, England (c. 1406–1425).
Rosenbach Museum & Library, Philadelphia, MS 1004/29.



Figure 9: A girdle book breviary (1454).
New York Public Library, Spencer Collection, MS 39.



Figure 10: Duchess Dorothea's prayer book, bound in green velvet (1527).

University Library, Torun, OB6.11 14498-4500.



Figure 11: Anonymous, girdle book (1471).
German National Museum, Nuremberg, GNM MS 17231.