

## THE MEDIEVAL GIRDLE BOOK PROJECT: COLLECTING THE INFORMATION.

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Hieronymus Bosch. Detail of 15th century Painting: 'Saint James the Greater'. Akademie Der Bildenden Künste, Vienna, Austria.

## THE PROJECT

During the medieval period, before garments had pockets, various small objects such as keys, pomanders, folded almanacs and miniature books were worn suspended from the belt. The girdle book, though not a miniature object, could be worn tucked under the belt, thus putting it always at the wearer's disposal. Monks and nuns had to read their prayers several times during the day as directed by their orders. Since they often worked outdoors, were traveling between monasteries and convents or on pilgrimages, it was important to have the prayer book, breviary or book of personal devotions always handy.

The girdle book differs from other books by the extension of the leather covering from the lower edges of the boards, an extension sometimes measuring more than the height of the book. This extension may end in a knot, or hook by which it could be fastened to the belt where it hung upside down. When picking it up the writing is in the right direction and can be read without detaching it from the belt. Sometimes extensions on the upper- and fore-edges enclosed the book completely for protection against wind, rain, dust and insects.

In the arts of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries girdle books are frequently seen on paintings, sculptures and drawings, however only twenty-three remain in their original bindings. They were mainly produced in what is now Germany and the Netherlands. Twenty are in museums and libraries in Europe, three in the United States.

In 2003 the author was able to take a workshop in the medieval hill town of Montefiascone (Italy) to learn how to construct a girdle book. (This undertaking was generously supported by AMIGOS and others and is described in the Amigos Library Services Fellowship Final Report **The Medieval Girdle Book and Advanced Paper Conservation Workshop**, 2004.) The scarcity of material written about girdle books, and the absence of one resource in which all are pictured and thoroughly described, prompted Jim Bloxam, Senior Conservator at Cambridge University Library (UK), and the author to examine all girdle books with the view to compile a monograph with bookbinding analysis and documentation of each.

This required physical examination of each book to take accurate measurements, make photographs and sketches and do some preliminary

research into the provenance of the books. Between September 2005 and September 2006 the author was able to travel to all institutions that house girdle books in these cities: Berlin, Dessau, Halle, Erlangen, Munich, Isny, Schweinfurt, Düsseldorf, and Kremsmünster in Austria, Copenhagen, Gøteborg, Stockholm, Tallinn, Torun, Nürnberg, and Munich again to revisit the three books there and collect more information, The Hague, and London.

I had examined the girdle book in Chicago on two previous occasions, but visits to the New York Public Library and the Beinecke Library at Yale University were made possible with the AMIGOS Fellowship grant, at the end of the ALA Annual meeting in New Orleans in the summer of 2006. Additionally, The Fellowship Grant provided partial funding towards a trip to Munich to attend, and present a paper at the Conference of the “Arbeitskreis für die Erfassung und Erschließung Historischer Bucheinbände”.

The present report covers my visits to the New York Public Library, the Beinecke Library at Yale University and the second trip to Munich. It centers on the three girdle books in Munich as examples of the kind of initial data gathered for inclusive description and analysis of binding and content.

### **New York Public Library, Spencer Collection MS 39**

Arrangements to view and examine the girdle book have to be made in advance. Access to the Spencer collection of rare books and manuscripts requires a reader's card. I was not permitted to open or take photographs as the girdle book is considered to be in extremely fragile condition.

Spencer Collection MS 39 is a breviary in Latin, written on paper in Gothic cursive script with rubrication throughout. The colophon names Brother Sebaldu at the Benedictine Monastery of Kastl<sup>(1)</sup> near Nürnberg in Bavaria as the scribe, who finished the book in 1454.

It is a small, compact volume, of approximately 110 x 75 x 83 mm with a short extension covering the top edge, and the major extension from the lower end of the boards measuring 120 mm including the knot. The Turk's Head knot measures 17 mm high, 27 mm wide and has a circumference of 76 mm.

Both closure straps of the same leather as the cover are still attached and are held in place on the lower cover by round anchor plates with a diameter of approx. 11 mm. They reach across the foreedge and fasten into the round catch plates on the upper cover. Their brass closure assembly is hinged and ends in a pleasing zoomorphic shape.

The book has been described in a number of articles; most notably by Karl Küp<sup>(2)</sup> who also speaks about the four colored woodcuts probably made in Nürnberg around the year 1450. Two woodcuts are pasted into the inside upper and lower boards, the others are interspersed throughout the text. As Nürnberg was a center of printmaking during the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, and judging by the style of the woodcuts, it is plausible that they were made in a workshop in that city.

My examination differs from the already existing descriptions in one important detail namely that this is not a double cover, as the wide turn-ins along the edges of both board are clearly seen and felt. <sup>(3)</sup>

The headbands are sewn and covered with thin leather. Since the book could not be opened it was impossible to determine the presence or absence of tie-downs in the section centers. Thin strips of leather were folded to produce markers attached on the top and foreedge to help locate specific sections of the text; most of them are still attached. The boards are beveled to a width of about 5 mm all around. Although the book is considered fragile and its extension has completely stiffened, it is still a handsome volume that is pleasant to handle and to look at. (See illus. 1)

The Breviary was acquired by the New York Public Library in 1938 from the book dealer Albi Rosenthal.



Illus. 1 New York Public Library Spencer Collection MS 39. Note the zoomorphic clasps and heavy bosses on the upper cover.

**Yale University Beinecke Library (Ms 84)**  
**De consolacione philosophiae (Boethius)**

At least 400 versions and copies are known of this book, however, only one is bound as a girdle book. This volume (MS 84) is housed at the Beinecke Library at Yale University, a library dedicated solely to rare books.

It is a manuscript on parchment, approximately 245 mm high, including the extension, 80 mm wide, with about 170 irregularly trimmed leaves. Lines, usually 12 to the page, are ruled in pale reddish-brown in with prickings in the margins to guide the ruling.

A historiated initial, with what purports to be a likeness of Boethius, opens the text. Several scribes worked on the text, as shown by the differing writing styles. The text is embellished with colored initials, including 2 – 4 line Lombards and letters and catchwords often underlined in red. Marginal and interlinear glosses show that it was a much used book. At least one of its owners seems to have been an Englishman, as leaves 170v – 171r contain medical recipes in English, including notes on “Medicyn for the Colyk”.

The binding is of the double-cover style, sewn on three double thongs, laced into beech boards in reverse fashion on the upper and lower boards. The book is attached to the secondary cover by sewn-in pockets, still showing the original pink hue of the leather and careful skiving of the edges. Headbands are plaited of narrow strips of leather. Leather extends beyond all edges, with the bottom extension carefully gathered and attached with a strip of leather to a Turk's head knot. A strap of brown leather with a zoomorphic shaped clasp holds the book closed and catches on the pin on the lower board. (See illus. 2)



Illus. 2 Ms 84, *De consolatione philosophiae* by Boethius. Note the secondary cover, hemmed all around and extending over all edges, the beautiful knot, and zoomorphic shape of the clasp. (Reproduced with kind permission by Beinecke Library, Yale University.)

The book shows some damage to the secondary cover, tears have been mended and sewn up, but some losses to the leather remain.

Nevertheless, it is in excellent condition and the now much abraded formerly brown leather is pleasant to handle. Because it is a very handy size and in the girdle book format, one can easily imagine its frequent use by 15<sup>th</sup> century readers.

### **Meeting of the Arbeitskreis für die Erfassung und Erschließung mittelalterlicher Bucheinbände in Munich, October 2006**

The **Arbeitskreis für die Erfassung und Erschließung mittelalterlicher Bucheinbände** (a working group for the documentation and analysis of medieval bookbindings) meets annually at a significant library in Germany. The October 2006 meeting was held in Munich at the Bavaria State Library. Jim Bloxam and I were invited to give a presentation about the three girdle books held by that library: the Meissner Law Book written around 1400 – 1450 by the scribe Nicolaus Grymmerus; a Breviary from the Benedictine monastery of Tegernsee, written in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, and a Diurnale printed in 1495 by Caspar Hochfeder in Nürnberg.

#### **The Meissner Law Book (Cgm 8950)**

Its large size, 738 mm x 217 mm x 65 mm, and its weight of over 1600 g, made the Meissner Law Book more suited to be carried over a saddle, or the shoulder than to be hanging from the belt. It also explains the unusual shape of the extension which is cut along the spine and is held together with a rather untidy knot.

This manuscript on paper was written by Nicolaus Grymmer de Moegelin in middle high German during the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Notes on the inside of the upper and lower boards show that the book was used by judges and jury-men who probably rode the circuit. The pages are divided into two columns and ruled writing lines guided the scribe. The gothic script in black-brown ink is set off by 2- and 3-line Lombard initials in red, decorated with stylized vines and lines in black ink. (See illus. 3)



Illus. 3. Cgm 8950 Meissner Law Book. Showing inside upper board and first text page. (Reproduced with kind permission by the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Munich)

Drawn hand symbols in the margins point to significant areas of the text and various notes in later hands (16<sup>th</sup> century) in the margins indicate that political changes necessitated re-wording the oaths of city councilors and merchant-citizens.

The book has 137 text leaves in seven sections and covers among other topics the following:

- I. Introduction, and birth-rights
- II. The purchase and sale of houses, fields, and gardens; interest to pay; shepherds and cattle
- III. Persons suitable to be judges, and their number
- IV. Fighting and bloodshed
- V. Office of the Bürgermeister (mayor)
- VI. Man's rule over birds and all wild animals
- VII. Reading and learning from law books and what constitutes a man of probity.

A rhyming afterword found in this and other editions of the Meissner Rechtsbuch helps to date and determine its geographic distribution. The text is based on the city laws of Magdeburg, Zwickau and Goslar, and on the rural laws of the Sachsenspiegel, written in the 13<sup>th</sup> century by Eike von Repgow (or Repchow) upon request by Graf Hoyer von Falkenstein. Originally written in Latin it was later

translated into German. It was further translated into Eastern European languages which attests to the interconnectedness of laws throughout this region. <sup>(5)</sup> Although analysis of the text was begun early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century a definitive text edition is still outstanding.

To discourage mistreatment of the book and the scribe, the following curse is added: “Wer dyz buch schende der blibe eyn hurnson an syn ende. und wer dem schriber ubil spricht. der habe mit dem tufel phlicht.”<sup>(4)</sup>

The book shows very heavy use with ink splotches and smears on many pages, but although the first and last signatures are almost detached, it is still overall in good condition. A rather large tear in the double-cover binding exposes the plaited headband, a style that was most commonly used during this period and recalls other Romanesque bindings. One of two straps coming from the lower cover to a catch on the upper cover still exists. The leather has acquired a dark brown patina but in areas that were less exposed to light, one can still see the original blue stain.

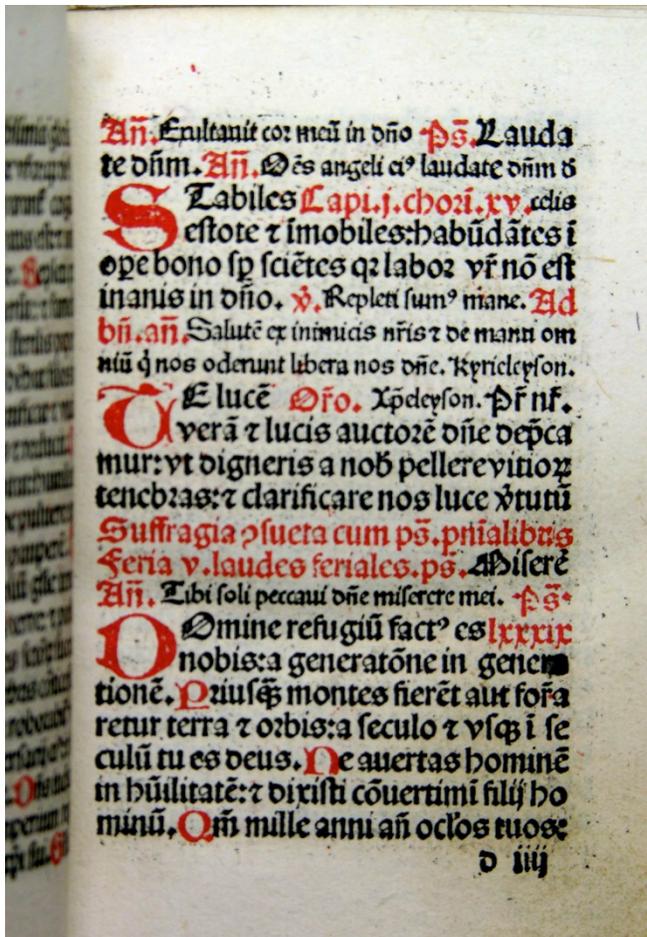
Despite its great age the binding and the book in general exhibit excellent workmanship with the best materials at the time, and still retains a certain formal dignity.

The other two books in the Staatsbibliothek are of a religious nature, a *Diurnale* printed in Nürnberg (for use in the Diocese of Regensburg), and a *Breviary* from the Benedictine monastery in Tegernsee in Southern Bavaria.

### **Diurnale Ratisponense (8 Inc. c.a. 220a)**

Printing of the *Diurnale Ratisponense* was finished in Nürnberg on September 29, 1495 by Kaspar Hochfeder<sup>(6)</sup> as commissioned by the book dealer Friedrich Pfister in Regensburg. <sup>(7)</sup>

The insides of the upper and lower boards are lined with manuscripts of Latin fragments of 14<sup>th</sup> century scholarly tracts on the subject of the sacraments. Red two-line Lombards and rubrication embellish the text, which contains numerous changes in font style and size, and uses many contractions and abbreviations of words. (See illus. 4)



Illus. 4. 8 Inc. s.a. 220a. Diurnale Ratisponense. Note changes of font style and size and abbreviations and contractions of words. (Reproduced with kind permission by the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek in Munich).

The overall size of the book with the extension along the lower edges is 322 mm high, 106 mm wide and 53 mm thick, with 461 leaves.

It is sewn on two double thongs, each 7 mm wide; the endbands consist of the extension leather folded over a core, and shows traces of repairs. The last signature was removed during a repair and replaced later – this shifted the endsheet so that the primary binding can be seen underneath. Bruckner lists this book as having a single cover binding, however, during a thorough examination last year I determined that it is actually a double cover binding. Examination of the front edges of both boards clearly indicates that a primary binding covers the boards completely as no turn-ins can be seen or felt. (See note 3)

In 1958 the book was repaired and part of the lower extension was replaced – the new part being sewn on with cross-stitches. Use and handling have made the old leather soft and pliable, whereas the newly attached part is relatively stiff. A brass ring is attached to the braided Turk's head knot, making it easy to slip the book on and off the belt. Both covers are embellished with blind tooled lines and plant motifs, and the brass clasp is still intact. (See illus.4)



Illus. 4 8 Inc. s.a.220a. Diurnale Ratisponense. View of the lower cover showing blind tooling, extension of newer leather, and turk's head knot with brass ring. (Reproduced with kind permission of the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek Munich.)

During the 15<sup>th</sup> century books were still marketed and sold in sheets, that is to say unsewn and without a cover. The new owner then had the book bound at his convenience. Although printed in Nürnberg one assumes that the Diurnale was bound in Regensburg, but there is no indication of who the binder was.

### **Tegernsee Breviary (CIm 19309)**

Tegernsee is a lovely lake and city in the South of Bavaria where the Benedictines founded a monastery in the 8<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>(8)</sup> During the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries the monastery suffered much damage due to the constant war between the southern German princes. As an Abbey it became the center of the reformation movement under Caspar Ayndorffer, who only accepted men of the nobility to become monks. Early in the 19<sup>th</sup> century secularization of monasteries and convents also reached the Benediktinerkloster in Tegernsee. At this time approximately 1500 manuscripts were removed from the monastery and transported to the Court Library, now the Bavarian

State Library in Munich. The Breviary was probably one of these manuscripts.

The Breviary is a manuscript of the 15<sup>th</sup> century on very fine and thin parchment; including the extension it measures 313 mm high, 100 mm wide and 67 mm thick, with 283 leaves. The parchment quality of the first and last signatures does not match the main section; these signatures were probably added at a later date.

The writing style is gothic fracture with many beautiful line decorations in the margins in red and blue, but the pages have been cropped as seen on the lower margin. (See illus. 5).



Illus. 5. Clm 19309. Tegernsee Breviary. Note the Lombards, line decorations in the margins and cropped lower edge. (Reproduced with kind permission by the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Munich.)

The book opens with prayers to the Virgin, to Christ as the Maker of Heaven and Earth, and as Redeemer, followed by church calendars and other lists. On page 479 the short exclamation: Gratia questo dei – memor esto mei. Following on the next ten pages are the Office of the Dead and suitable prayers.

The Breviary contains two beautifully executed colored ink drawings on paper in red, green, blue and gray with gilt halos. Pasted to the inside of the upper board a crucifixion scene shows Christ in the center, a woman on the left with hands folded in prayer, looking at the ground, while the woman

on the right side lifts her hands in supplication to Christ. The scene is set in a landscape reminiscent of the location of Tegernsee in the pre-alpine region, with castle, church, rocks, trees, and mountains.

A second drawing of which the lower two thirds is missing is pasted into the inside of the lower board. It shows a man with Aramaic features with beard and golden halo, holding a long knife, or sword in his left hand. He may be identified as St. Bartholomy, or St. Quirin who died a martyr's death between 268 and 270. St. Quirin is the patron saint of the monastery church in Tegernsee, and his reliquaries are interred there. Did the scribe of the breviary honor him with this special drawing?

The bookblock is sewn in 3 thongs of 4 mm width. Blue and white (9) threads are wound around a simple core without any tie-downs, but they are pegged into the covers. During the 15<sup>th</sup> century this kind of fast, simplified headband construction had become rather common and indicated changes in bookbinding technique.

Forty-seven markers are attached to the leaves on the foreedge. They have a metallic appearance, may, however, be made of leather with a special finish.

As already seen on the *Diurnale Ratisponense*, the Turk's head knot at the end of the extension is accompanied by a brass ring. What was originally dark brown leather is now almost completely worn away on the spine, and the extension – this renders the book pliable and very pleasant to handle. The covers lack any ornamentation but retain the eight shaped corner pieces and the two center pieces of brass. Unfortunately the leather straps are missing, only the anchor plates with small decorative elements, remain. (See illus. 6)



Illus. 6. Cm 19309. Tegernsee Breviary. Note brass corner and center pieces, clasps, the extension with knot and ring, and markers on the foreedge. (Reproduced with kind permission of the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek in Munich.)

As a researcher into this very small number of medieval girdle books I felt it was a great privilege to see, handle and interact with them. They reminded me gently of the labor necessary to make them, of the many hands that have held them, and of the myriad thoughts that were engendered by them.

I would like to express my gratefulness to AMIGOS Library Services, as well as to all libraries, museums and their curators, librarians and keepers of rare books for giving me the opportunity to conduct my research.

## NOTES:

(1) Kastl Monastery was founded early in the 12<sup>th</sup> century and dedicated to its patron St. Peter. During the Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century it was dissolved but re-established as a Catholic monastery in the 17<sup>th</sup> century to be used by the Jesuits and later by the Knights Hospitallers. It was dissolved again in 1803, and since 1958 houses a

Hungarian secondary school. The fact that it was re-established after the Reformation points to its importance in the religious sphere.

(2) Kùp, Karl. A fifteenth century girdle book. Bulletin of the New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations. V. 43, No. 6, June 1939.

(3) To understand the significance of this detail one needs know about the construction of the the single and double cover binding. In the single cover style some of the board edges have to be covered separately before covering the volume; the leather cannot be turned in over the boards because it forms the extension/s. If a secondary binding is adhered, the edge strips are not necessary because the primary binding covers the boards as well as the edges. In the case of MS 39 one sees and feels clearly the edges of the wide strips of leather that cover the board edges before the single binding was put on.

(4) Translation of the curse by Smith: Whosoever damages this book remains a whore's son to his end. And whosoever speaks ill of the writer is beholden to the devil.

(5)Ulrich-Dieter Oppitz ("Zum Meissner Rechtsbuch". In: Wirkungen europäischer Rechtskultur. Festschrift für Karl Kroeschell zum 70. Geburtstag, hg. V. Gerhard Köbler und Hermann Nhhelsen. München, Beck, 1997, p. 907.) explains the importance of the Meissen Law Book beyond its immediate region in his article "Zum Meissner Rechtsbuch": "Die weite handschriftliche Verbreitung und die Übersetzung des Textes ins Tschechische erweisen die Bedeutung des Textes für den sächsisch-böhmisch-schlesischen Rechtsraum. Die Übernahme von zahlreichen Rechtssätzen des Meissner Rechtsbuch in Rechtsbücher, die im nordwestlichen Polen verbreitet waren, dehnte seinen Wirkungsbereich aus. Wie kaum ein anderer Rechtstext ist das Meissner Rechtsbuch geeignet, die enge Verflechtung des Rechts im östlichen Mitteleuropa bewußt zu machen.

(Translation by Smith: The wide distribution of the manuscript and its translation into the Czech language prove the importance of the text for the law in the Saxon-Bohemian-Silesian area. The adoption of numerous legal decisions of the Meissner Rechtsbuch into legal books that were used in the north-western area of Poland extended its sphere of influence even more. As no other legal text the Meissner Rechtsbuch is able to demonstrate the inter-connectivity of the law within Eastern Central Europe.)

6. Among Hochfeder's printed output is the first roadmap for pilgrims from Germany to Rome, which clearly shows distances in miles between towns.

7. This publication provides an interesting sidelight and insight into local and church politics: although Pfister had permission from the local bishop, Heinrich IV, to print and sell this partial breviary, the bishop's successor, Rupert, prohibited Pfister from doing so. Rupert had apparently already negotiated for the publication with his own favorite printer in Bamberg, as an authorized edition with an impressive woodcut was issued

within a month. Lengthy correspondence ensued between city councilors of Regensburg and the bishop, to regain permission for the sale of the book, however to no avail.

8. Germany's most renowned Minnesänger (singer of courtly love), Walther von der Vogelweide, spent some time at the monastery in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, but did not especially enjoy his stay and said so in one of his songs.

9. On close examination of the upper heaband, I found that the white thread was originally red but has faded to just off-white.

Illustrations:

1. New York Public Library Spencer Collection MS 39. (New York)
2. Ms 84, De consolatione philosophiae by Boethius. (New Haven)
3. 8 Inc. s.a.220a. Diurnale Ratisponense. (München)
4. 8 Inc. s.a.220a. Diurnale Ratisponense. (München)
5. Clm 19309. Tegernsee Breviary. (München)
6. Clm 19309. Tegernsee Breviary. (München)