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NEWS IN CONSERVATION

INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR CONSERVATION OF HISTORIC AND ARTISTIC WORKS



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THE MEDIEVAL GIRDLE BOOK

Reviewed by Leah Humenuck

The Medieval Girdle Book

By Margit J. Smith

New Castle, Delaware: Oak Knoll Press, 2017

384 pages / \$95.00 / Hardcover

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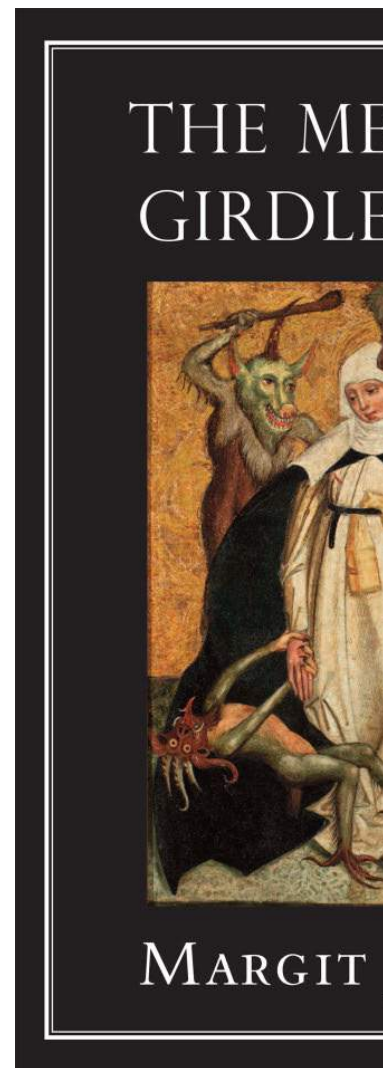
The Medieval Girdle Book by Margit J. Smith is an exploration of a rare type of book construction. With 26 remaining known examples, the girdle book is an item worthy of a comprehensive look. A girdle book is an unusual form with an extension which is tucked into a girdle (the medieval word for belt) and worn as an accessory. Its form has been the intrigue of those studying book structures as well as scholars of medieval times. In our modern world filled with various e-readers and new reading tech, from the curious neophyte to the seasoned bibliophile, it is worth a venture into the first format that brought literary mobility to the forefront. Smith immerses the reader in the context and keen details of the girdle book.

The book begins with an encompassing introduction, defining precisely what a girdle book is and what it is not; there are related items that may seem like girdle books, but are not, and Smith briefly discusses why the latter are not considered. This particular aspect of her book provides appreciation for those other items with their differences and associations. Smith goes on to describe the historical and social uses of the girdle book, including its extensive use in medieval art. Some of the most useful pages are those containing tables that summarize key information such as primary and secondary covers, date, location, printed versus manuscript variations, etc. These tables make the information easy to access for future reference.

The author organized the subsequent chapters by grouping the girdle books by topic and by including an extra section for suspected girdle books. Every chapter then has a section focused on each girdle book individually. Each book's description is broken into four subsections which discuss the background, material biography, and any oddities. For the suspected girdle books, there are also shorter versions of these subsections. The meticulous level of detail provides an accessibility to the books for those who cannot see them in person. Throughout the publication there are a plethora of color photographs enhancing the text, which is perhaps one of the best attributes of the book.

Margit J. Smith is a well-established bookbinder with over forty years of experience. She has written multiple articles, including several on girdle books, and she now provides her followers with this, her first book. Smith's direct knowledge of and interest in this book form is displayed in her use of the girdle book models she made during a [Montefiascone Conservation Project](#) short course on book history. She uses these models to assist in introducing main aspects of the girdle book structure. This craft knowledge adds a nuanced tone to the text throughout the book.

The book is approachable for the casual bibliophile and well suited for researchers and experienced conservators. It fills a much-needed gap in publications on the subject, especially in English. Smith's extensive research is evident in her reference list, which is itself a highlight of the book, especially for anyone looking to further their own knowledge.





Above: Book cover. Image courtesy of Oak Knoll Press. Left: Leah's reproduction of a girdle book, thanks in part to Ms. Smith's publication.

One of the weaker points of the book is the lack of consistency between the photographs. I would have found it more helpful to see the same shots taken of each book in order to better perform comparisons. However, I realize this may not have been possible, and the number of photographs included is already greatly appreciated.

I would also have appreciated a more predictable structure within the text when presenting some of the information. For example, object dimensions could have always been presented first within a section; organizational changes such as this would have made the publication easier to use as a reference book. This is a preference likely due to my background in reading conservation reports in which this consistency is common. Smith has meticulously included dimensions for the books—and for many other aspects of these objects—which makes this a minor suggestion compared to all that Smith has already provided.

My personal experience with this book came from my time as a conservation student while earning my MA at West Dean College of Arts and Conservation. As part of my course study, I was required to reproduce a historic binding. I chose the girdle book, though I had never seen one in person, neither historic nor newly made. I was fortunate enough to be conducting my project research post-publication of Smith's book, which became my main source of information. I highly recommend this book for its wealth of information; a single read-through will not be enough. It is a favorite upon my bookshelves, well-referenced and well-loved.



Leah Humenuck is book conservator currently based in Pennsylvania, USA. She has a BS in chemistry and attended West Dean College of Arts and Conservation, England, for her MA in conservation. Her interests include verdigris treatments, album structures, and practical applications of photographic techniques such as false-color infrared.