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pamela spitzmueller

The Medieval Girdle Binding and Beyond



The Temptation of St. Anthony by Martin Schongauer (1450-91)

Though seen not infrequently in medieval painting and sculpture, few intact girdle bindings survive to our time. A recent census indicates there are about 23 still with us. Structurally, they can be defined as bindings with a long extension, usually at the tail, that ends in a knot, hook or extra material, that can be fastened to a medieval person's girdle (belt). If held by the knot, the book appears to be upside down. When attached to the belt and opened, it is ready for reading.

There are two covering styles. The first I call the Turned-In model and the other the Full Flap with Pockets model. The covering material forming the extension may be the only covering material over the boards (Turned-In) or there may be a complete binding underneath, making the outer cover a kind of overcoat (Full Flap with Pockets).

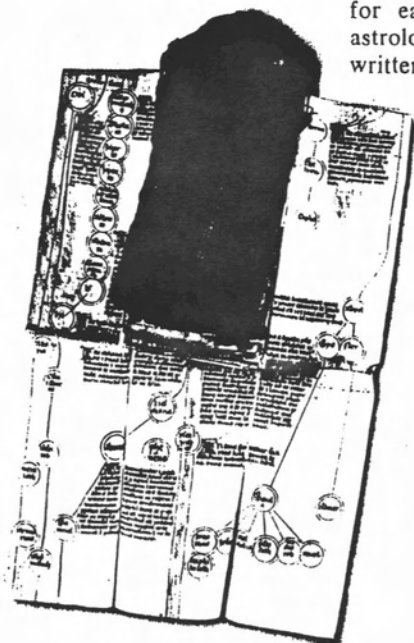


girdle book. A book which has an extra protective covering of soft leather made in such a manner that the book can be hung from the girdle or habit cord of a cleric and swung upward for reading while still attached to the girdle or cord. Doeskin and deerskin were frequently employed for this type of binding, which was used in the middle ages and early Renaissance, especially in Germany. Devotional books or didactic works, or professional reference books, e.g., law books, were most often bound in this manner, and the bindings were almost quite unpretentious. Very elegant bindings, however, were produced in velvet and brocade, to protect illuminated prayer books. Few intact girdle books have survived, as the overlapping leather was usually cut off for reuse when the need for protection had passed. Also called "utilitarian protective bindings."

DEFINITIONS

girdle book: a book which had a leather cover almost like a bag, enabling monks and clergy to carry and protect their breviaries. The leather cover extended beyond the limits of the book itself and could either be fixed to the girdle or gathered into a knot for carrying by hand. (Illustrated under bookbinding.) They were common in the later Middle Ages, particularly in Germany.

girdle calendar. A small medieval folding calendar, so made that it could be suspended from the girdle or habit cord of a cleric, or from the belt. Many had covers of stiff vellum sheathed in velvet, sometimes overcast at the edges with silk thread, and ornamented with balls and tassels. Such calendars generally showed the saints' days and other religious observances for each month, as well as various astrological tables. They were generally written on fold-out leaves of vellum.



VADE MECUM

Notebook with a velvet cover, designed to be worn on a belt. England(?), early 15th century. 15×6.3 cm (5 7/8×2 1/2 in.). BL, Add. Ms. 17358.

VADE MECUM

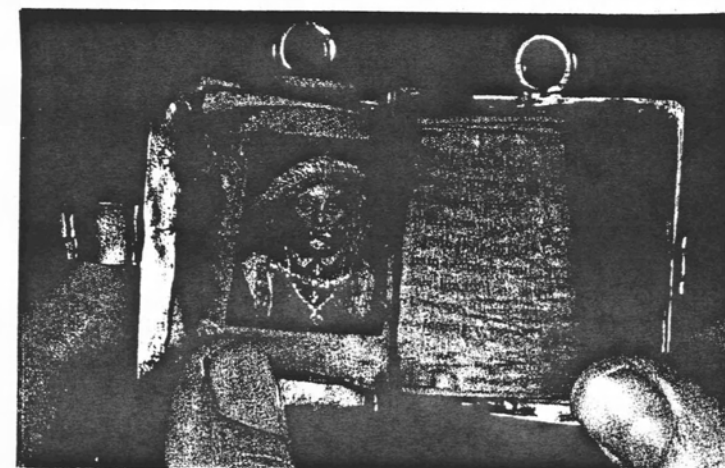
The phrase means "goes with me" in Latin and refers to a portable book (often suspended from a belt), frequently consisting of leaves folded in a concertina or fold-out format. Such books could be consulted easily by physicians, for example, and often contain CALENDARS, almanacs, and medical information.

UTILITARIAN PROTECTIVE BINDINGS

The "pouch" or "wrapper" bindings of soft doeskin used during the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, especially in Germany, were a concession to the man who needed his book at hand when on the road. The purpose of the extra flaps of leather was twofold, to protect the edges of the pages from the weather and to provide a convenient clutch by which the book could be grasped or tucked into belt or saddle. The books thus covered are generally devotional or didactic works, or necessary professional reference volumes, such as law books—invariably unpretentious in quality. A more elegant version in velvet or brocade was current during the same period to protect the finely illuminated prayer books that the devout lady had to have by her during the day (see nos. 117, 118). Bindings of both types have survived relatively infrequently, due to the results of wear and tear, or to cutting off of the flaps when the usage was no longer current.

girdle book A book bound upside down in a wrapper of soft leather which had a knot at one end. The knot could be slipped under a person's belt (hence girdle) for easy carrying. The book could then be swung up and read without being detached. This type of binding was popular in the 14th and 15th centuries, particularly in Germany. Also called a pouch binding. See also *Turk's head knot*.

Small calendars generally on folded leaves of vellum were also made as girdle books.

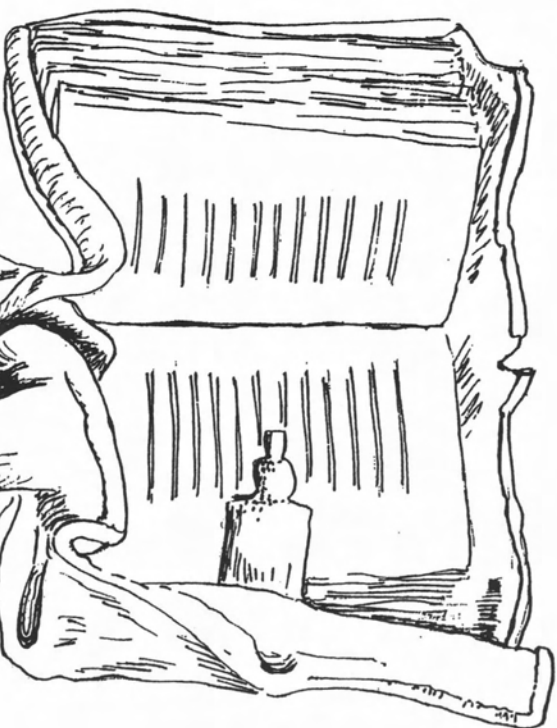
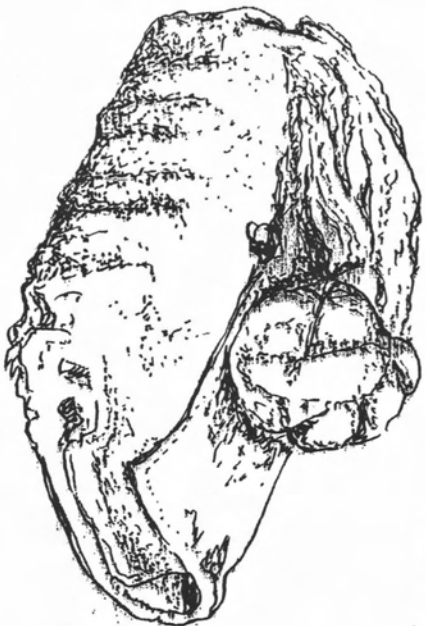


GIRDLE BOOK

King Henry VIII of England.
John Croke. Psalms in
English verse. England
(London), c. 1540. Leaf:
4.8×3.5 cm (1 7/8×1 3/8 in.).
BL. Stowe Ms. 956, fols.
1v–2.

GIRDLE BOOK

A small portable book attached to a girdle or belt. Girdle books were most often BOOKS OF HOURS or PRAYER BOOKS carried for devotional purposes (especially by wealthy women) and frequently had high-quality metalwork BINDINGS. They were particularly popular during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Notebooks and sets of small wax TABLETS were also worn on the belt. See also VADE MECUM.



GIRDLE BOOK

On: Boethius, *De consolations philosophiae*, Germany, 15th cent. About 105 x 75 mm. Back: raised bands.

Wood boards covered with rose doeskin and unstained sheepskin. This example is similar to no. 129 in bulk and general character, except that flaps of the skin have been left at the fore-edges of the boards, as well as at head and tail; the long strap laced to the inside of the five inch overhang on the fore-edge of the upper cover, carries the wrapper over the leaves of the book when it is clasped. This is identical in construction with no. 128.

Provenance: Edward A. Newton: presented by the Yale Library Associates.

THE YALE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

Germany (Kastl), 1459

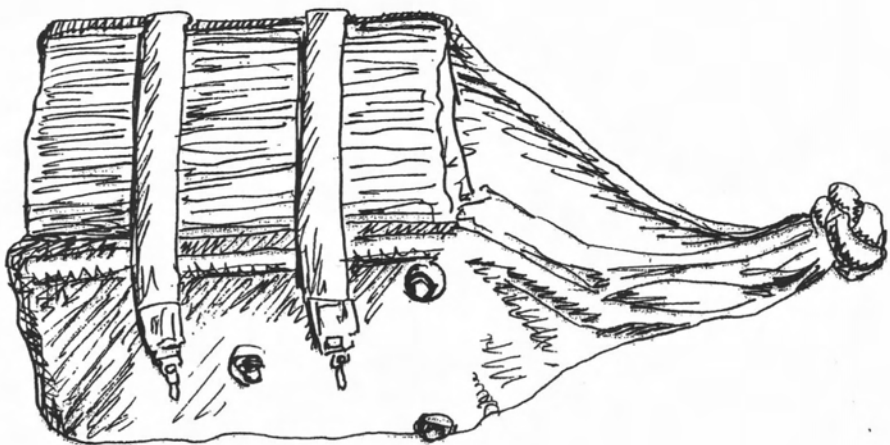
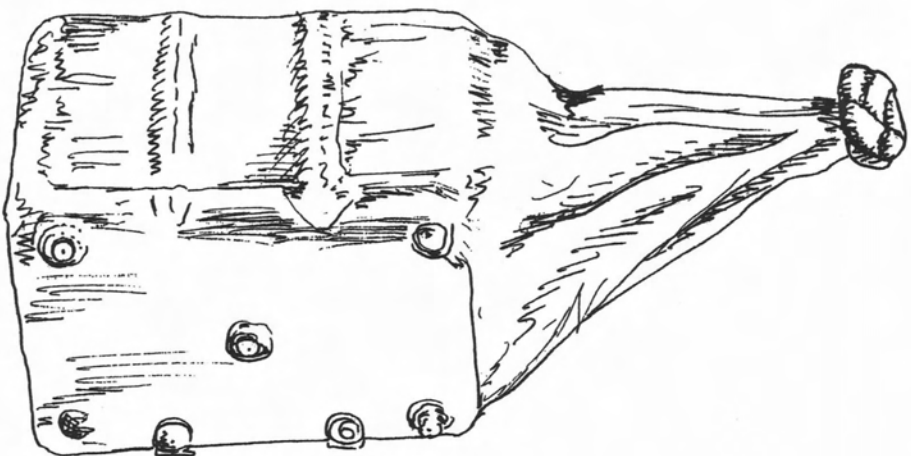
GIRDLE BOOK

On: Ms. Breviary, written in May 1459 by Friar Sebaldus in the Benedictine monastery of Kastl near Nuremberg, diocese of Eichstadt. 104 x 75 mm. Back: 2 heavy double bands.

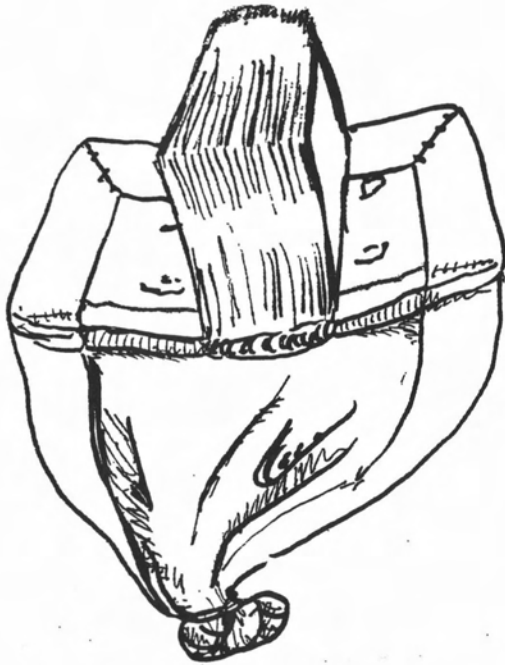
The covering of this chunky little book is constructed very much like its larger counterpart, no. 128, except that there is no overlapping flap at the fore-edge. Again doeskin is stretched closely over the bevelled wood boards, and then covered again by a larger skin, stained green. The skin, extending about 11 inches from the tail, is knotted so that, when hanging from a belt, the book was upside down, ready to be lifted into reading position while still attached. Five brass bosses (several missing) studded each side, and two brass clasps on long straps fastened over pins in the upper cover.

Bibliography: Karl Kup in *Bulletin of the New York Public Library*, XLIII (1939), pp. 471-84; cf. O. Glauning, "Der Buchbeutel in der Bildenden Kunst" in *Archiv für Buchgewerbe und Gebrauchsgraphik*, LXIII (1926).

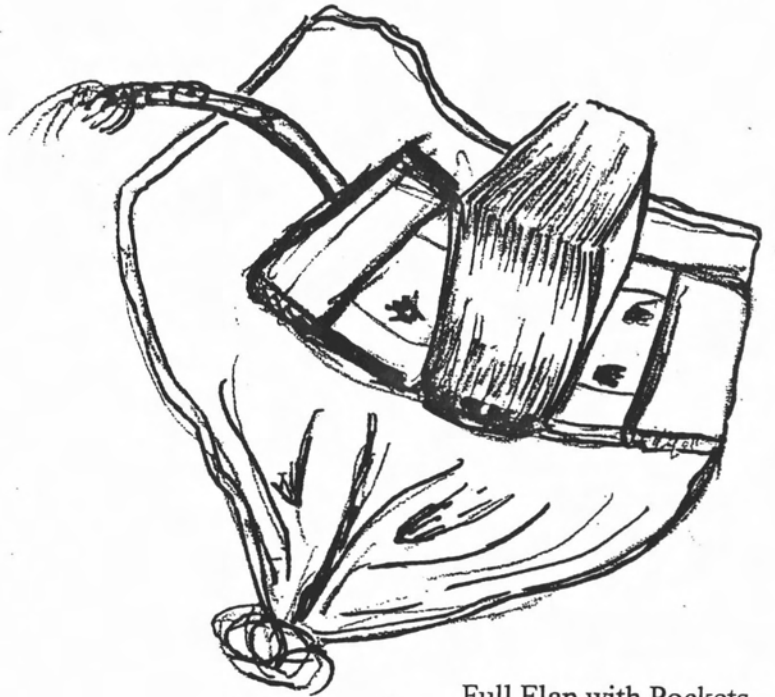
THE NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY, SPENCER COLLECTION



NY Public Library Girdle Book

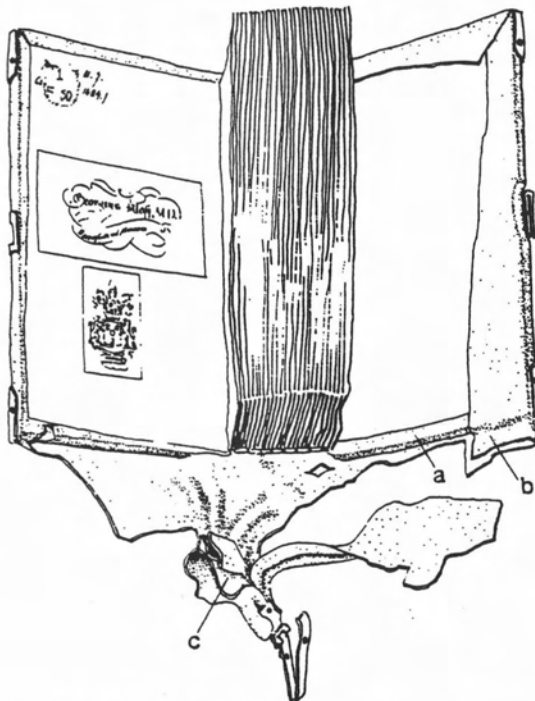


Turned-In – the book has turn-ins at the Head and foreedges of the outer material. The tail edge of the book is covered with a separate piece of material.

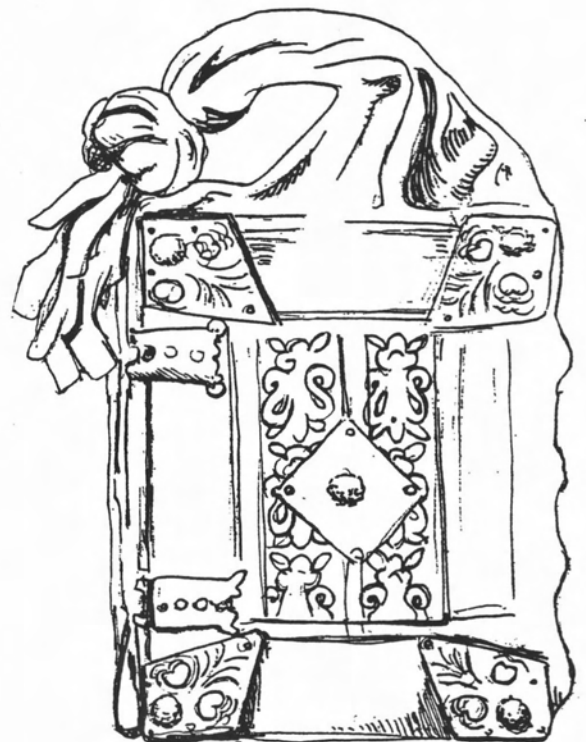


Full Flap with Pockets

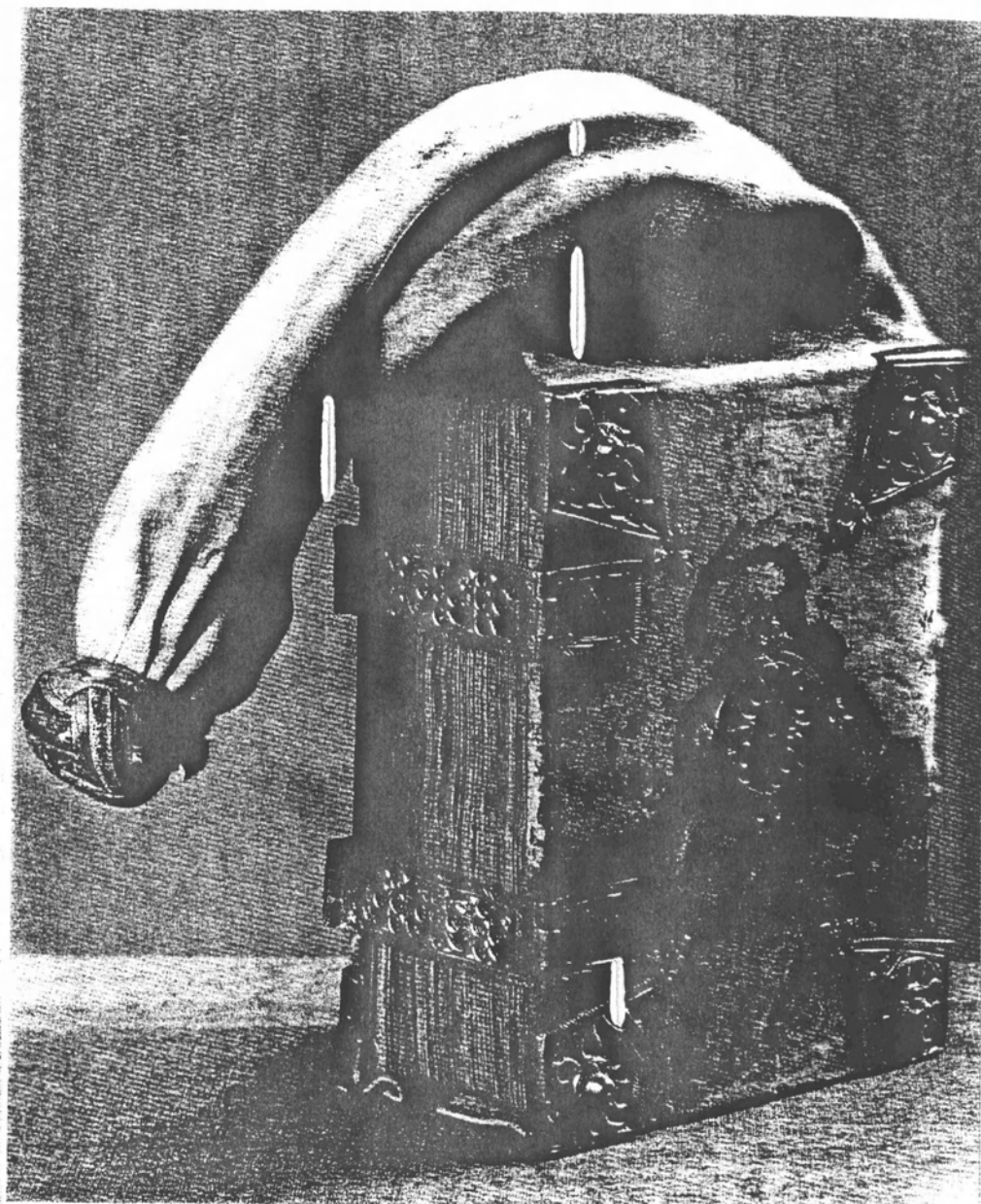
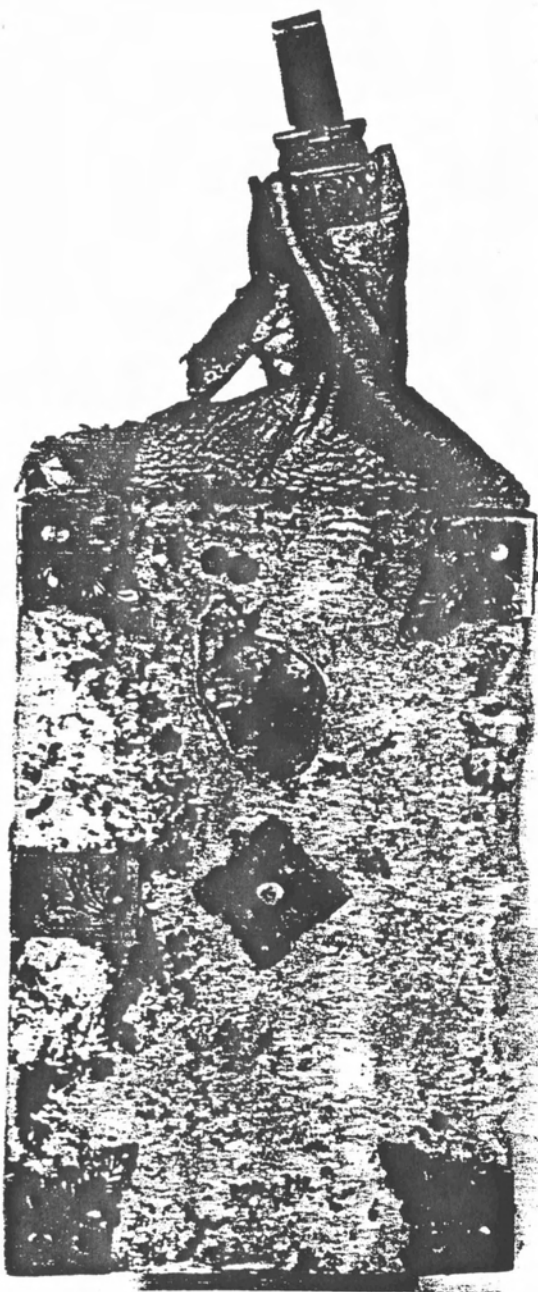
J. A. SZIRMAI



3. Opening of the girdle book showing the inside of the covers and the pouch. The paste-down of the back cover has been omitted to show the turn-ins and the extra leather strip at the tail edge of the board (a); the turned-in leather of the pouch is torn away and lost (b); the end of the pouch has been folded back (c) and probably shortened



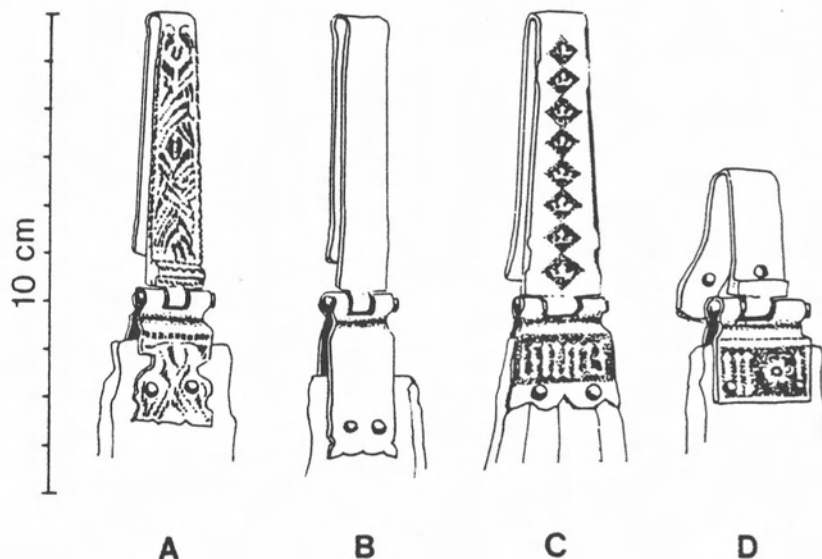
Full Metal Jacket



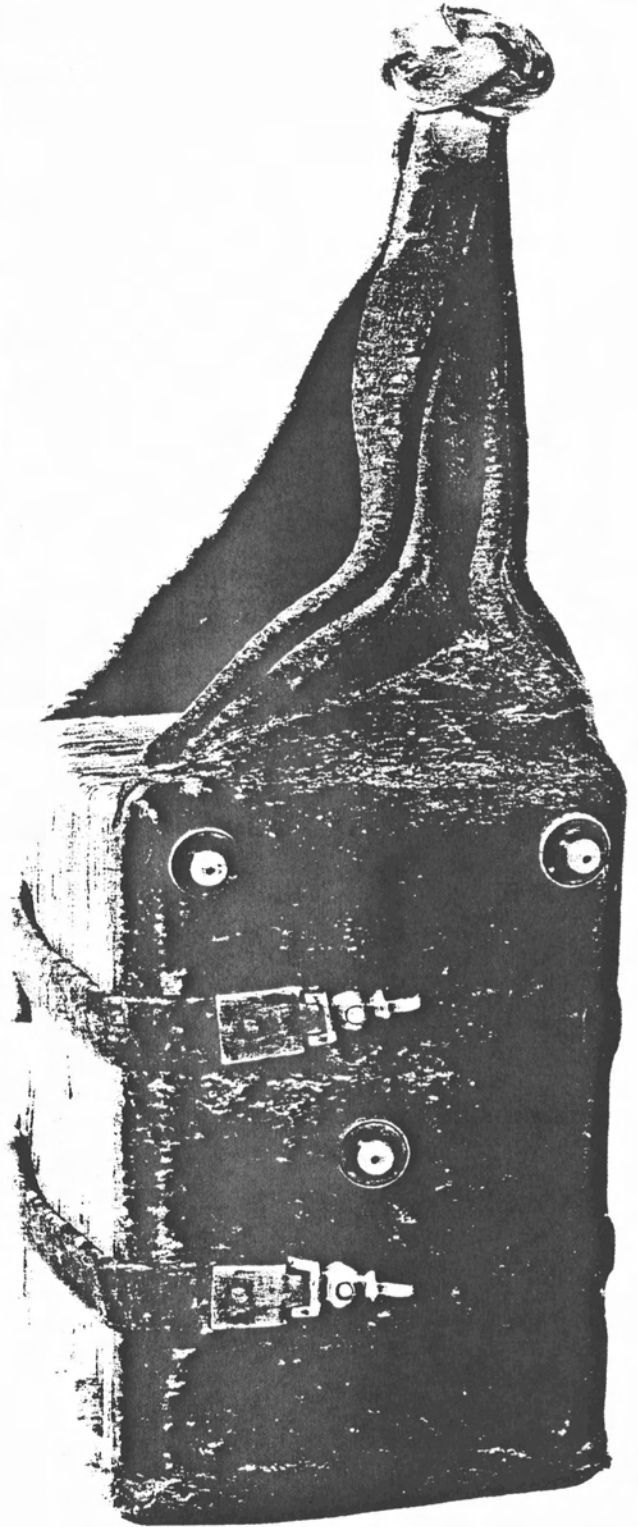
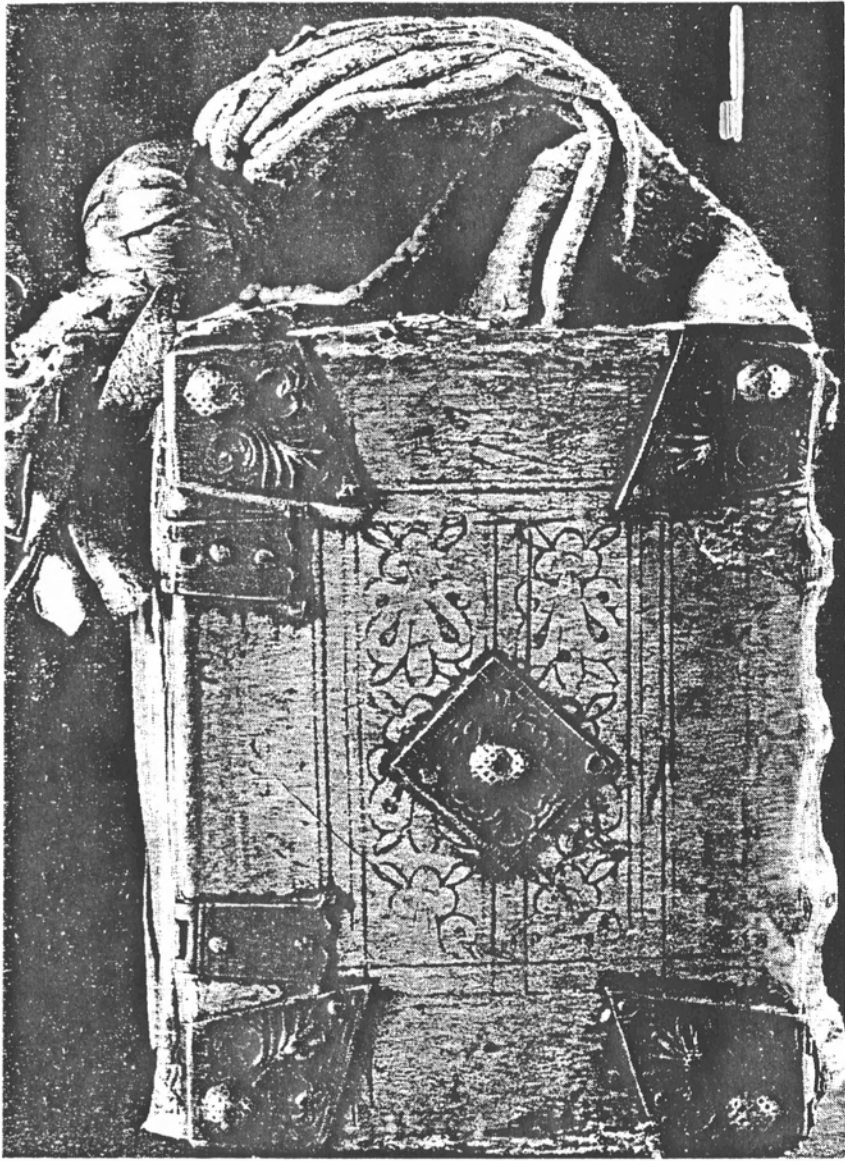
The skirt extension may end in a turk's head knot, a hook, a knot in the skirt itself, or no knot at all. Often in paintings and sculptures, the book owner is holding the book by the extension and not attached to his girdle.

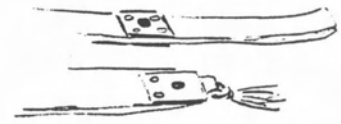
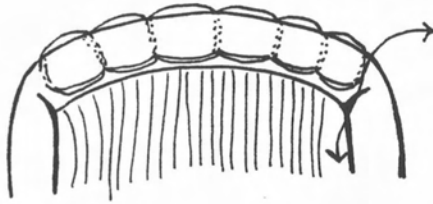
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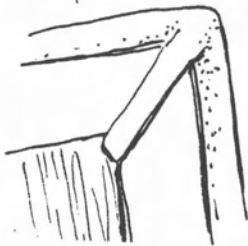
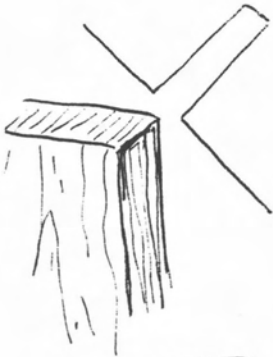
9. Comparison of brass hooks of four girdle books. A: Halle, Universitäts- und Landesbibliothek Sachsen-Anhalt (cf. n. 23). B: Erlangen, Universitätsbibliothek (cf. n. 24). C: The vanished girdle book of Von Hefner-Alteneck, based on his drawing of 1883 (cf. n. 26). D: The Hague, Museum Meermanno-Westreenianum



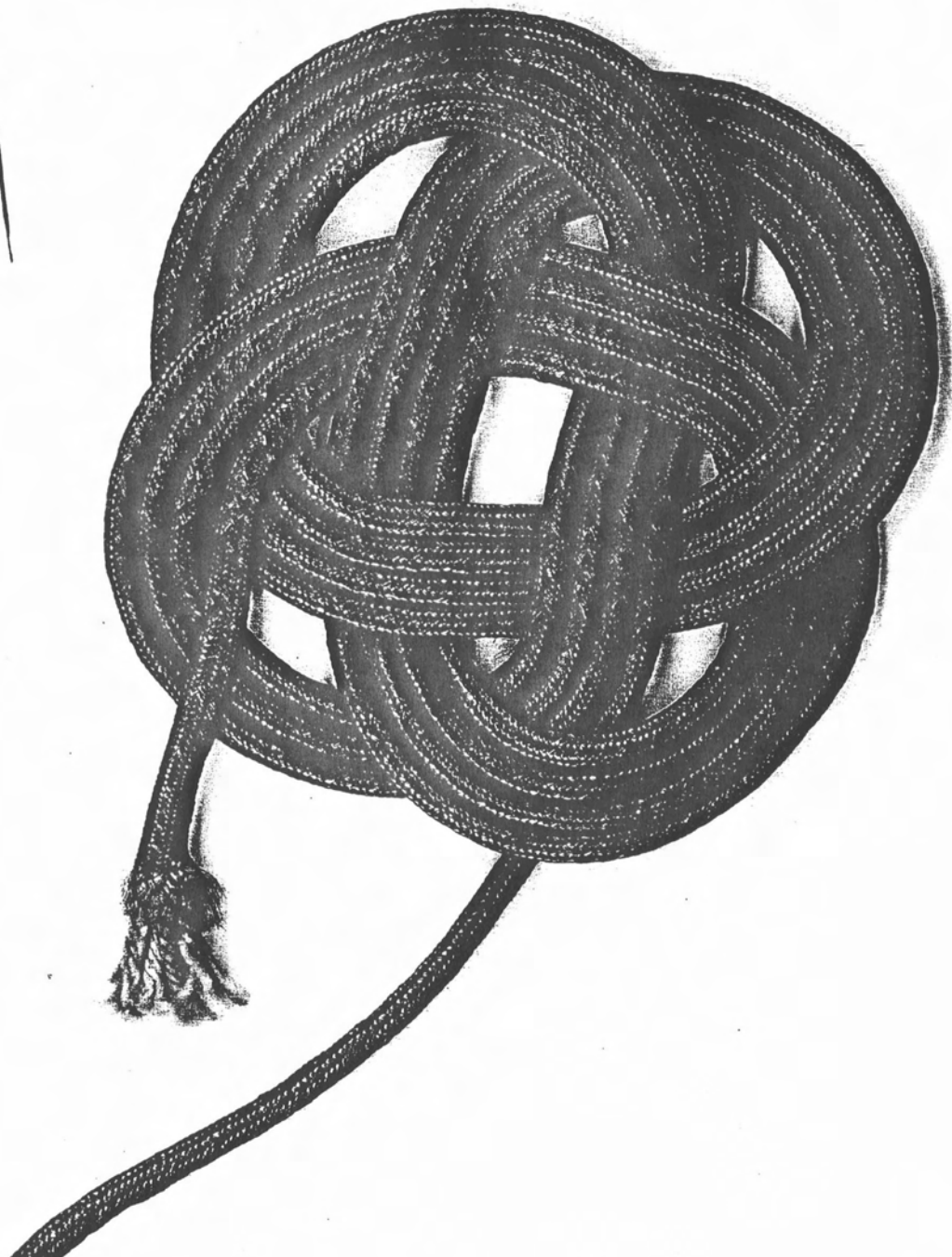


Hooded Endcap with saddle stitch

Tongue Corner



Turks Head Knot is begun flat and then shaped around a center core.



GIRDLES, WAISTBANDS, BELTS AND SWORD HANGERS

THE girdle no doubt originated with the use of clothing and the belt followed with the invention of the buckle. They both served to confine the skirt of the robe or were used to tuck it up, and they also kept the lower garments in place. In addition to these purposes, the girdle was used to contain personal articles, while the belt was more associated with those of a military character. They are both frequently mentioned in the Bible and the references indicate that the girdle was a binding of fine texture, often richly embroidered; we also read that many of warriors' belts were of a most costly character. It was customary to present them to soldiers as a reward for valiant deeds and victorious services.

As early as the 8th century, we find the girdle has developed into a narrow band which was fastened in front by a clasp or a tied cord which fell gracefully to the ankles with a fine tassel, knot, or jewelled ball; sometimes, it had two or three knots at equal intervals, or was divided into two lengths about half-way down, each part knotted at the end.

The girdle was used by both women and men up to the end of the Middle Ages, and formed part of the clerical vestment. It was also one of the distinctive marks of knighthood. A narrow variety called a "half-girdle" was in use, and a special girdle was sometimes used for dancing, hung with little bells similar to those described under "Garters". Funeral belts were large black bands emblazoned with the arms of any important person who died.

The girdle was accompanied by the "aumônière", and these two accessories enable us to form an idea of most of the articles borne by the various classes. The man with the long robe had his writing materials, his knife for his food, and the keys of his house and papers; the watchman, his sword and his purse; the scholar, a horn with three dice; the shepherd his bag of bread, and a box of ointment for his beasts, etc...

A curious French custom connected with our subject was that, on the renunciation by a widow of any inheritance from her husband, she was obliged to place on his tomb her keys, her bag, and her girdle.

The girdle-makers' patron saint was St. John the Baptist, because it is stated in the Gospel that he had a leather girdle around his loins.

The old proverb which was in use until the end of the 18th century, "A good reputation is better than a golden girdle", has its origin in the fact that women of bad reputation began wearing golden girdles to the great scandal of the middle classes who only wore silver ones, and consequently this decree was issued and was renewed in 1446. "It is forbidden to all women of pleasure and all lecherous persons to wear a robe with reversed collar, or train, or girdle of gold, upon fine, prison, or confiscation to the benefice of the King"; this decree was however never strictly enforced.

In the first quarter of the 15th century, women's girdles were made in plaited silk or netted silver thread.

Girdles of rich embroidery, cords of shimmering gold and jewelled leather, or velvet belts, were worn by ladies up to the middle of the 16th century, and the belts and sword hangers of the gentlemen were decorated with the finest needlework, as may be seen in our illustrations. From about 1620 to 1690 the term "baldric" was given to the sword-belt, which hung over the right shoulder, and these with their extravagant proportions, became a gorgeous addition to costume until embroidered military belts died out of fashion about the end of the century. Large scarves of elaborate needlework were also used during the same time, worn over the left shoulder or round the waist; some fine specimens of these can be seen in the Victoria and Albert Museum.

At the beginning of the 17th century, the "half-girdle" was put aside by the upper classes and was used only by the common people until they also gave it up later in this century. The discontinuance of this practice is alluded to in a statement of the 17th century which says: "In past times when we had served eight or nine years and saved as much as a silver half-girdle, we could find an officer or a good merchant for a husband, but now we can only secure a coachman or an ostler".

Stiff corsets, very full skirts, and sacque back dresses were unsuited to girdles or waistbands, though they were occasionally worn with certain costumes in the last quarter of the 17th century, but the use of sashes came into fashion and these were made of the finest silks, gauze, and silver net embroidered in the richest manner with silver fringes or lace.

Waistbands appear again towards the end of the 18th century and onwards, with rosettes, bows, and sashes, being decorated with needlework in the prevailing fashion.

