

22. Soft Leather, Wounded Buttons, and a Silk Ribbon: Clothing a Birgittine Rule Manuscript

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Saint Birgitta of Sweden (circa 1303–1373) founded an order that attracted the attention of several European rulers, who then established Birgittine convents. The new convents required copies of the Rule of Saint Augustine, used in Birgittine convents alongside the Constitutions of Saint Birgitta. This chapter considers one such copy (now Ghent, University Library, MS 607) and, most importantly, its binding: a soft leather envelope binding edged in silk ribbon. I will consider the various skills and crafts required to manufacture such a binding and relate those to their counterparts in producing the Birgittine habit. By applying materials and techniques from the domain of sartorial textiles, nuns fed their creativity in the separate field of manuscript binding. Reflecting on the materials in this binding, one can see how Birgittine nuns forged a relationship between their own bodies and the “body” of their Rule book. In the acts of selecting materials and crafting those materials into a binding, not only did they imitate Mary—to whom all Birgittine convents were dedicated—but they also forged connections between and among the various Birgittine convents, which similarly “clothed” their Rule books with home-spun and hand-crafted materials. By paying close attention to the materials they selected, in both their habits and their bindings, we can see how they asserted their Birgittine group identity.

The Manuscript and Its Contents

Ghent, University Library, MS 607 comprises only 90 parchment folios, each measuring circa 295 x 215 (text block: circa 180 x circa 141–146) millimeters.¹ This is significant because the large size and grand white margins support the book’s ceremonial role in displaying a foundational document for the convent. One can imagine that the manuscript was used for reading aloud in the Chapter House or for new sisters to ceremonially profess their faith by reciting the formulas, copied in Dutch

¹ A basic description of the manuscript and all the images are available at <https://lib.ugent.be/en/catalog/rugo1:000990667>.

and Latin within its folios. The manuscript has not, however, been used extensively. This is because the Reformation came decades after the manuscript was produced, marking its sudden obsolescence. Stylistic considerations set its date of production around 1500.

The manuscript contains the bull issued by Pope Martin confirming the Constitutions of Saint Brigitta, the Rule of Saint Augustine, and a profession of faith. These texts are each given twice, in Latin and Dutch. It also contains two full-page miniatures. The first depicts Saint Birgitta writing her visions as an angel whispers to her, flanked by two Birgittine nuns. This image shows the genesis of the saint's Revelations. The second image depicts Saint Augustine standing before a cloth of honor and holding his attribute, the heart, while two diminutive Birgittine nuns venerate him. The image of Saint Augustine prefaces the Latin version of his Rule. The manuscript was written by one hand in the *bâtarde* script fashionable at Southern Netherlandish courts. Instead of assuming that MS 607 was copied in the convent of Dendermonde, it is more plausible that it was copied by a professional scribe connected to the Burgundian court in Ghent, Bruges, or Mechelen.²

After Napoleon closed the convents in the French-occupied territories, French officials removed the church goods, including the manuscripts. For the next few decades, many were sold, some entered regional secular collections, and some changed hands, singularly or in small groups. In 1850, M. Van Oosthuyzen, the pastor at Zele, donated Ghent, UL MS 607—together with MSS 603, 604, 605, 606, and 608—to the Ghent University Library. This group of manuscripts had come from the convent at Dendermonde, dedicated to Onze-Lieve-Vrouw-ten-Troon (Our Dear Lady of the Throne), also known as Mariëntroon.³ Soon after it

2 The manuscript also has what may be an early use of the parenthesis (MS 607, fol. 5v, col 1). Willem de Vree and Edward Gailliard posit that MS 607 was written by the same scribe as a luxurious Birgittine prayer book (Ghent University, MS 205), also written in decorous Burgundian *bâtarde*, and that both manuscripts were made in the Birgittine Abbey of Maria Troon, Dendermonde (25–26). However, I do not agree that the same hand copied the two manuscripts: the scribe of MS 205 exaggerates the differences between thick and thin, emphasizes the slant of tall letters in comparison with the rather upright spines of the tall letters in MS 607, and the scribe of MS 205 makes the letters float midway between the heavily ruled lines. Furthermore, I do not think that either manuscript was copied in Dendermonde. Connection with the court and its resources, however, can be explained by the fact that the Dendermonde convent had been founded by nobles: Isabella of Portugal, the Duchess of Burgundy, laid the first stone on 30 January 1466. Subsequently, the convent grew with the support of various Burgundian nobles until it had 67 members in 1499. The convent retained strong ties with individuals at courts, who supported the abbey financially, until Napoleon's armies closed it in 1797. Among the people mentioned in the convent's necrology were Charles the Bold; Mary of Burgundy; Isabelle of Portugal; and Margaret of York. See Reynaert and de Vlaminck.

3 For manuscripts from this monastery, see Sander Olsen.

was founded as a double monastery in 1466, the men moved out, turning it into an all-female convent. Whereas most prayerbooks were bound in boards, this group of manuscripts donated to the Ghent UL, MSS 603–608, were all Birgittine administrative manuscripts, each bound in a limp binding.

One of those manuscripts was an English cartulary (MS 604) containing all of the papal bulls, confirmations, and privileges relevant to the Birgittine monastery of Syon outside London. MS 604 also contains a separate charter dated 1471 from Thomas, bishop of Canterbury, as well as two English wax seals that have been attached by cords to the limp vellum binding. This English manuscript, in possession of the nuns at Dendermonde, attests to the network among the various Birgittine houses in England, the Low Countries, Germany, and the motherhouse in Vadstena. They clearly shared manuscripts and knowledge about, among other things, book-binding techniques. The seals on MS 604 reveal an important reason the Birgittines chose limp bindings for their administrative documents.

Binding and Embellishment

Shortly after MS 607 entered the Ghent University Library collection in 1850, it received a brief description in French pasted to the first folio, which describes the binding as “reliure primitive en cuir de Russie” (“original binding in Russian leather”). The manuscript is in a large, soft leather envelope binding, which is similar to a limp vellum binding in that it wraps around the cut edge of the book block with a flap (fig. 1). Whereas limp vellum bindings may have been considered a no-frills, low-cost solution to protecting the leaves, here the soft leather serves as a substrate for rich and symbolically-charged embellishment.



Fig. 1: Binding of the Rule from Mariëntroon. Dendermonde, ca. 1500. Ghent, University Library, MS 607, binding.

Fig. 2. Inner flap of the binding of the Rule from Mariëntroon. Dendermonde, ca. 1500. Ghent, University Library, MS 607, Blue linen paste-down.

The decision to bind the Rule in a limp leather binding stood in opposition to the more expected choice, a binding made of boards covered in tooled leather. In fact, the convent of Dendermonde had its own metal stamps for making stamped leather bindings, at least three of which survived (Verheyden). However, I have no evidence that the Birgittines themselves made the panel-stamped bindings, nor that they had access to the necessary woodworking skills and equipment to do so, such as a saw to size the boards correctly for the book block, a plane, a bore to make the channels in the oak planks. The bespoke stamp may have been used by a non-monastic professional. I believe two important material reasons lay behind the Birgittines' choice to use a limp binding. First, the soft leather could be sliced into, meaning that such a binding could be affixed with cords bearing seals, which would declare its contents authorized, as with the case of MS 604. Second, this type of binding could be made and embellished by the sisters themselves, even if they had not copied the manuscript. It allowed them to work the binding with multiple crafts that would certainly have been within the nuns' skill set. For the first reason, Birgittines in Mariëntroon and elsewhere bound administrative manuscripts in limp leather. However, they only embellished prize manuscripts.

The leather is the wrong texture to be tooled—it is too spongy—and instead has been embellished with various textiles. First, the leather has been lined with blue-dyed linen, made with a plain weave (fig. 2).⁴ The binding required some 63 x 31 centimeters of soft leather and the same amount of linen, which has been glued to the leather. The linen is the same material the nuns wore on their bodies, and the soft leather would have been of the same kind as one would use to make a satchel, such as the one depicted in the miniature as Birgitta's attribute: the pilgrim's scrip. According to their Rule, the "mantle shall not be on the outside gathered nor pleated, nor curiously made, but straight and plain" (108; ch. 3). In lining the book with plain fabric, tightly cropped, they were following aspects of their own prescribed habit: plain, with no excess. Perhaps if they had not had this Rule in mind, they would have given the manuscript a floppy chemise binding that extended far beyond the book block.

The Birgittines have further embellished the book with veils: inside that flap and before the first folio is a guard of very fine brown silk.⁵ This fabric, constructed in plain weave, has a woven-in embellishment consisting of pairs of thicker threads in the warp, to give the fabric a subtle texture stripe along its length. Hemmed on all four sides to prevent fraying, the silk is not attached at the gutter, and it is doubtful that it is currently in its original intended location. Rather, it was probably used as

⁴ I have assessed the fiber content and weave structure of the textiles by visual and auditory inspection and have not confirmed my assessments with a lab analysis.

⁵ In my estimation, the silk threads are about 2/120-weight, i.e., 60 km/kg. For a full discussion of veiling images, see Sciacca.

a veil above one of the miniatures. That would explain the needle holes at the upper corners of miniatures as well as the frayed holes at the corresponding upper corners of the veil. By sewing in veils, the nuns dressed both the book itself and the images within it. Of course, they also veiled themselves: to “take the veil” was synonymous with taking a vow of religious profession, the very ceremony whose instructions are enshrined in the book. The book authenticates the veiling of the nun, while the nun, in a reciprocal action, veils the book.



Fig. 3: The Virgin weaving at a band loom. Paris, ca. 1410. The Hague, Royal Library, MS 76 F 21, fol. 14r.

The other textile embellishments are also charged with meaning. The entire periphery of the cut leather has been edged with a narrow, woven band of green, red,

and gold silk passementerie.⁶ While it is possible that the Birgittines purchased the woven ribbon from an outside source, it is more likely that they produced it themselves. Firstly, a Birgittine nun could imitate Mary, who is sometimes depicted as a young virgin weaving in the temple, as in an early fifteenth-century manuscript illumination (fig. 3). In this image, Mary is weaving a band loom, the same type of loom used to create the silk ribbons embellishing the binding.

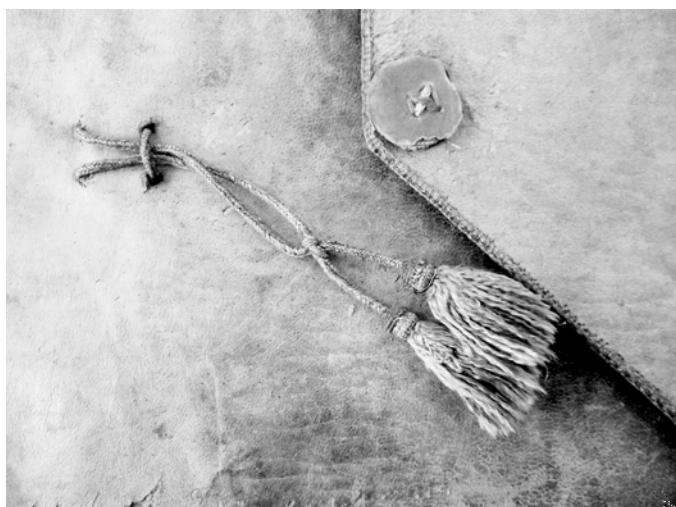


Fig. 4: Detail of the binding showing the types of passementerie. Ghent, University Library, MS 607.

Further evidence that the Birgittines received the raw material—green, red, and gold silk thread—is that they worked it into several different products, including the woven ribbon just discussed and the braided cord. If this hypothesis is correct, then they used long strands of the green silk thread, plus thrums, to produce radially braided cord terminating in textile knobs with tassels (fig. 4). The two kinds of passementerie have been made for different roles in the book. The flat ribbon, which bends best along one axis, has been applied to stay flush with the planar edge of the leather, while the braided cord, which bends in every direction and is thick rather

6 Robin Fleming demonstrates that medieval England was awash with silk. For example, silk bands woven with tablets (or with band looms) appeared in England in the eleventh century. Other silk textiles were recycled from larger garments, such as ecclesiastical robes.

than flat, has been used as a lace to secure the button. Further testimony to their access to raw materials, and further support for my hypothesis that the nuns crafted the binding themselves, they used the same green and red silk thread to sew the head and tail end bands to the book block.

The flat woven silk ribbon reappears for another function: as bookmarks, fastened at the head of the spine (fig. 5). Although the bookmarks are similar to the bands embellishing the book's cover, the bookmarks have no gold thread, and the warp of the bookmarks consists only of ten green and one red thread. The red edge is created by passing an opposing pair of red silk threads through the shed as a weft. These twist at the edge in a rhythmic way to create a pattern. The subtle differences between the various bits of ribbon throughout the book suggest that they were homemade and constructed with thrums by the nuns rather than made by some larger commercial enterprise that would have had large supplies of silk thread at hand and not depended on thrums.



Fig. 5: Detail with bookmark made of woven silk band. Ghent, University Library, MS 607, fol. 9r.

The braided cord slips around (horn?) buttons, the crowning achievement of the binding. According to their Rule, the nuns were to fasten their mantles with buttons. Here they have transferred the technology of veiling to their binding rather than using, say, a brass fastener. Each button has been affixed to the envelope flap with red

and white silk threads in a specific pattern that exploits the buttons' four holes. Revealing the thought process of the maker, the red and white crossed threads draw upon the pattern on a Birgittine nun's headwear, as specified in the Rule:

Upon the veil must be set a crown of white linen cloth, to which must be sewed five small particles of red cloth, as five drops, the first particle on the forehead, another behind, the third and fourth about the ears, and the fifth in the middle of the head, in the manner of a cross; this crown shall be made fast in the middle of the head with one pin, and this crown shall both widows and virgins wear in token of continence and chastity. (109; ch. 3)

Whereas the buttons could have stayed perfectly secure with two holes, the Birgittines used buttons with four. (Whether they made these buttons themselves or commissioned them is uncertain.) They then chose thread colors and stitching patterns that would introduce the motif from their distinctive headgear to the elaborate binding of their most important foundational documents. In effect, they have crowned the manuscript with the same strategy with which they were crowned themselves: with red and white textiles that symbolized Christ's sacrifice. In this process, woman and book have been reciprocally crowned.⁷

A Broader Context

That books, people, and ideas flowed between the houses is apparent when one compares the binding of Ghent MS 607 with Birgittine bindings made elsewhere.⁸ Clearly, it shares a basic form with the cartulary from the English Birgittine house called Syon (Ghent UL, MS 604), mentioned above. It even more closely resembles Stockholm, Royal Library, MS A 24, which contains the Rule for the monastery of Vadstena.⁹ Written in Swedish, dated 1451 and attested by the Bishop of Vadstena on 6 May 1452, it was made for, and presumably bound by, the sisters at the original

7 Bynum shows that the crown itself was more important than the formal vows for nuns to feel themselves as professed and recognize each other as professed (97–128).

8 In addition to the soft vellum and leather bindings in the Ghent University Library, mentioned above, one should also consider a copy of the Rule now in the Society of Antiquaries of London. As a small quarto of only thirty-one folios, this manuscript is smaller than Ghent MS 607; however, it is also bound in a limp leather brown "chemise." For the Society of Antiquaries of London, inv. SAL/MS/339, see <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/bcf06f97-c9b9-4b3f-a94e-88688f19ffb9>.

9 For a description and basic bibliography, see <https://www.manuscripta.se/ms/100214>. For highly crafted photos of the binding, see the National Library of Sweden's Flickr feed: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/25300312@N08/5061907761/in/set-72157625120216684/>

Birgittine monastery in Vadstena (fig. 6). The binding is an inversion of that around Ghent MS 607. The Vadstena binding consists of dyed linen over soft leather, padded with parchment waste. Whereas the sisters in Dendermonde used the materials and techniques they had at hand—red and white silk thread, and a stitching technique—the sisters in Vadstena, using linen, have exploited a radially looped thread technique to cover their buttons, resulting in red and white wound-like designs to imbue their binding with Christological meaning.



Fig. 6: Binding of the Rule of Saint Birgitta from Vadstena, with wax seals. Vadstena, 1451/52. Stockholm, Royal Library, MS A 24.

It is unlikely that the mother house in Vadstena would have sent this manuscript to the house in Dendermonde, for the sisters there would not have been able to read the Swedish text. More likely is that the motherhouse sent instructions to the daughter house to order a cartulary from the best scribe they could find and then bind it as if the book itself were taking a profession of faith and needed to be dressed appropriately. It is as if Vadstena exported the general idea of clothing the book but left it up to the daughter houses to interpret the instructions with the materials and techniques at hand.

In conclusion, some of the prescriptions for dressing sisters have been transferred to dressing the manuscript. It is possible that the Birgittine nuns bound Ghent MS 607, Stockholm A24, and other manuscripts themselves, and that they chose a soft leather binding because it exploited skills and crafts they already possessed, those they could transfer from sewing their own habits. Rather than

outsource this work to male professionals, they used materials at hand, including recycled silk fabric, dying, weaving, sewing, and stitching techniques, and other skills necessary to make their habits, possibly including button making. They also used several passementerie techniques, including using a band loom to make a warp-faced woven ribbon. They would have possessed sufficient tools and skills to make soft leather bindings to protect, embellish, and display their most important manuscripts, which were dressed as a reflexive reference to the instructions they contained.

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