‘Yf A Woman Travell Wyth Chylde Gyrdes Thys Mesure Abowte Hyr Wombe’: Reconsidering the English Birth Girdle Tradition

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In December of 1502 Elizabeth of York, the heavily pregnant wife of King Henry VII, paid six shillings and eight pence to a monk who had just brought her ‘our Lady gyrdelle’.1 This relic, ‘which weomen with child were wont to gide with’, was just one of many such belts and girdles, often associated with the Virgin Mary, that were owned by English churches and believed to provide protection during childbirth.2 As well as actual girdle relics, medieval women could rely on manuscript birth girdles: parchment rolls that mimicked the relics and served the same purpose. These manuscripts, like the girdles they imitated, would be wrapped around the pregnant woman’s womb either in the weeks leading up to the delivery or during labour itself.

At least eight English manuscript rolls dating from the late fourteenth century to the early sixteenth century, as well as one printed sheet from 1533, are described as ‘birth girdles’ in current scholarship (see Appendix).3 Here, I argue that the term has been too widely applied, creating unfounded assumptions about the gendered nature of the manuscripts in question. While these rolls could have been used for amuletic protection during childbirth, the term ‘birth girdle’ also implies a specific physical interaction between the manuscript and the expectant mother for which there is little evidence. It emphasises only one of the rolls’ possible functions, obscuring their more general protective and devotional role and placing unnecessary emphasis on a single facet of their use.

In making this argument, I do not intend to reject the conceptual category of ‘birth girdle’. There is strong evidence for the existence of manuscripts that were used as girdles for the purpose of protection during childbirth. For example, one early thirteenth-century remedy reads:

> Ad difficultatem partus ista tria nobina ponse. in alicio cingulo et da mulieri ur prencingat se de hoc cingulo. Vrnum. BvrNVM. BlizaNVM.4

There is nothing to suggest, however, that most of the surviving ‘birth girdle’ manuscripts would have been used as girdles, or that those that were would have been used exclusively in this manner.

Eight of the nine artifacts described as birth girdles contain vernacular and Latin prayers to saints Quiricus and Julitta, which Mary Morse and Scott Gwara have called ‘the defining textual features of the English birth girdle tradition’.

The presence of these prayers on a manuscript with a roll or sheet format has been sufficient to identify a ‘birth girdle’. According to Jacobus de Voragine’s immensely popular *Legenda Aurea*, Julitta and her three-year-old son Quiricus were both martyred in the third century after Julitta refused to sacrifice to the Roman gods (fig. 9.3). Despite his young age Quiricus fought against the governor who ordered Julitta’s death, and in some versions of the legend even testified to his own Christian faith.5 This story was declared to be false and heretical in the fifth century, but the *Legenda Aurea* and its subsequent vernacular translations popularised the legend across Europe.6 Nothing in this vita, except perhaps Quiricus’s young age, suggests a particular connection with childbirth. Mary Morse has noted that ‘no legendary account refers to saints Quiricus and Julitta as protectors of women in childbirth’; nor are they associated with childbirth in any of the surviving records from English churches or monasteries dedicated to them.7 Despite this, the presence of prayers to Quiricus and Julitta in so many manuscripts ‘birth girdles’ has led her to identify a medieval English childbirth cult associated with these saints.

The Quiricus and Julitta prayers in the ‘birth girdles’, I argue, are linked not to childbirth, but to the amuletic image of the measured cross with which they appear. The English text referring to Quiricus and Julitta in the ‘birth girdles’ usually appears wrapped around a tau cross, whose length can be multiplied by fifteen to give the height of Christ (fig. 9.4).8 The text describes the cross’s protective virtues, in language which varies somewhat from one manuscript to another.9 In Beinecke MS 410, which contains one of the shorter lists of benefits, it guarantees that on the day that someone looks at the measured cross, blesses him or herself with it, or carries it devoutly, he or she will be protected from wicked spirits, enemies, thunder, lightning, wind, bad weather, weapons, and death without confession. It also promises that:

> yf a woman haeve this crosse on hyr when she traelith of chylde [(s)he] chylde and she shall be departyed without peryll of dethe be the grace of god.10

The text claims that the Quiricus and Julitta asked God to provide these protective benefits, explaining that:

> Saynt Cyryace and saynt Julite hys modyr desyreyd thys petrycon of god and he graunted it them. As it is regestred in Rome at saynt John larynes.11
All eight ‘birth girdles’ that include the Quiricus and Julitta prayer similarly state that the saints asked God to grant the virtues attached to the measured cross. In all of the supposed birth girdles in which it appears, this English text introduces the Latin prayers to Quiricus and Julitta. In most cases, the Latin prayers also refer specifically to the power of the cross and its measure, asking God to grant the speaker the virtue of Christ’s glorious measure and venerable cross. Both of the texts shared by the ‘birth girdles’, therefore, are linked specifically to the many protective qualities of this particular image. This is most evident in Wellcome MS 632 (figs 9.1 and 9.11). In the other examples, the image and the English text appear together. In the Wellcome manuscript, however, the English text that refers to the image appears first, followed by the Latin prayer to Quiricus and Julitta, and finally by the cross itself surrounded by the instruments of the Passion (fig. 9.5). The separation of the English text explaining the virtues of the cross from the image to which it refers implies that the English, the Latin, and the image of the cross could all be seen as part of a single apotropaic unit carrying a wide range of protective benefits. Prayers to Quiricus and Julitta occur elsewhere without reference to the measured cross, but here as well the saints are invoked for general protection rather than protection during childbirth.

The manuscript that most closely links Quiricus and Julitta with childbirth is the Neville manuscript, however. This manuscript, owned by Isabel de Neville of Hornby manor in North Lancashire, was probably copied in London around the years 1335 to 1340. On folios 24r–25r there is a prayer to the Virgin, introduced by an Anglo-Norman rubric that instructs the reader to use the prayer if milk leaks from her breasts during pregnancy (figs 9.6 and 9.7). The prayer to Quiricus and Julitta appears shortly afterwards, on folio 26r. Its rubric reads:


If you are in any distress or in labour, say this prayer following or the antiphon and the versicle in the honour of God and of St Mary and of St Quiricus and Julitta and you will soon be helped.

While this rubric certainly emphasises childbirth, it also promises aid in any distress. The presence of the earlier specifically pregnancy-related prayer might also suggest that the focus on childbirth here is more a reflection of the interests of the manuscript compiler than of the saints themselves.

In both rolls and codices, therefore, Quiricus and Julitta are primarily invoked for general protection, not as part of a specific childbirth cult. Their prayers and suffrages appear in manuscripts ‘birth girdles’ only in connection with the measured cross and its wide range of protective benefits. The scholarly identification both of the childbirth cult of Quiricus and Julitta and of the ‘birth girdles’ themselves is, therefore, circular. Quiricus and Julitta have been identified as childbirth saints primarily because they are frequently invoked in ‘birth girdle’ prayers, while the rolls themselves are identified as birth girdles because they contain prayers invoking Quiricus and Julitta. There appears to be no reason to believe that a childbirth cult of Quiricus and Julitta existed. Consequently, there is no reason that rolls referring to Quiricus and Julitta should necessarily be associated with childbirth. We must look elsewhere for support for the ‘birth girdle’ identification.

Without the support of the prayers to Quiricus and Julitta just two rolls, Wellcome MS 632 and Takamiya MS 56 (figs 9.2 and 9.12), are persuasive examples of birth girdles. In five of the other supposed ‘birth girdles’ the text associated with the measured cross is the only reference to childbirth that appears. None of these ‘girdles’ makes any specific reference to girdling the woman with the roll. Beinecke MS 410 and the printed sheet state only that the woman should have the measured cross on her, while the remaining three manuscripts instruct the reader to lay the cross on the woman’s womb or body. The same instructions are given when the image appears in codices. For example, the measured cross in the Bodleian Library’s Bodley MS 177 (a codex) instructs the reader that ‘off a woman trauayle on chyldre ley thyss a poun hyt’. This demonstrates that the roll format is unrelated to the power of the image. The two remaining manuscripts, Harley Roll T.11 and the roll held at the Redemptorist Archives of the Baltimore Province, contain other references to childbirth, but neither gives explicit instruction to use the roll as a girdle. Harley T.11 includes a charm for a quick and painless delivery, which is a combination of two very common charms: the palindromic ‘sator arepo tenet opera rotas’, used in English childbirth charms since at least the eleventh century, and the peperit charm, which lists a series of miraculous Biblical births. Its instructions tell the reader to place the text of the charm on the woman’s hand, without suggesting that the roll should be wrapped around her. It also includes a life-size image of the wound in Christ’s side, accompanied by a text which promises a series of benefits much like those attached to the measured cross. The measured side wound is common both in rolls and in codices, and most of its benefits could be received by carrying the image (fig. 9.8). For a woman to be protected during labour, however, she need only ‘haue sayme [seen] the sayd mesur’ on that day. Although Harley T.11 contains three promises of safety in childbirth, none asks for the roll to be used as a girdle. The numerous other texts and images in this manuscript, promising protection against dangers or inconveniences including thuder, insomnia, false witnesses, pestilence, and poverty, demonstrate that it could have been
used in a wide variety of situations.

The Baltimore roll, like Harley T.11, contains more than one reference to protection in childbirth, but no evidence that a woman would have interacted with it in the manner implied by the term ‘birth girdle’. Its main text is the Middle English devotional poem ‘O Vernicle’. This poem was frequently copied in roll format, and sometimes circulated with an indulgence offering a range of amuletic benefits to those who looked devoutly at its illustrations of the instruments of the Passion. The version of the indulgence which appears in the Baltimore roll, and in another six of the twenty manuscripts of the poem, states that ‘to women it is meke and mylde / When [th]ai trauailen of her childe’. In the Baltimore roll this indulgence is immediately followed by a version of the measured cross text, including a promise of safety in childbirth. In this version, which differs from the text in the other ‘birth girdle’ rolls, protection of various kinds is granted ‘what day [th]at [th]ou blessest [th] e thyres [th]er with in [th]e name of god and of his lenght’. There is no mention of girdling the woman with the roll, and both references to childbirth appear as standard elements within longer lists of possible benefits. Although the manuscript may have been made with a female owner in mind—unusually, its Latin uses feminine forms—it seems to have been intended for general protective use. This manuscript, like the other ‘birth girdles’ already discussed, might be more fruitfully explored in the context of indulged images and protective prayers than purely in the context of childbirth.

Ownership evidence also suggests that these rolls were not primarily intended as birth girdles. Four of the manuscripts contain references to medieval owners or makers: all of these were men. Harley 43,A.14, a small roll that contains only the measured cross and related prayers to Quiricus and Julitta, was written for the use of a man named William, whose name is inserted into its prayers. Beinecke MS 410 was written for a man called Thomas, who is named as the beneficiary of the prayer to Quiricus and Julitta, and perhaps depicted in a donor portrait at the head of the roll (fig. 9.9). British Library Additional MS 88929 was owned by the young Henry VIII. His royal badges are included at the head of the roll, and at some point before his accession to the throne he inscribed it to one of the Gentlemen of his Privy Chamber, William Thomas (fig. 9.10). This ownership evidence, particularly where it is included in the body text of the roll, indicates that the rolls were made with particular male users in mind. Despite its promise of safety in childbirth, the image of the measured cross clearly appealed to men as well as women.

The evidence of MS Glazier 39 is slightly more complicated. It was copied by a man named Percival, a canon of the Premonstratensian Abbey of Coverham, though he was not necessarily its owner. The Latin prayer to the Virgin in this roll does use the female forms ‘ego misera pecatrix’ (I, a miserable (female) sinner) and ‘michi indigne famule tuo’ (to me, your unworthy (female) servant). However, other prayers use plural or masculine forms, leading Don C. Skemer to suggest that the roll ‘could have been used devotionally and amuletically for the benefit of family and household’. The prayer to Quiricus and Julitta, which Mary Morse identifies as ‘the most telling evidence of women’s usage, uses the masculine form ‘tribue michi famulo tuo’ [grant me, your (male) servant]. This troubles such a gendered attribution.

As Quiricus and Julitta appear to have been invoked for general protection, not for childbirth specifically, these rolls can largely be associated with childbirth only on the basis of a standard set of promises accompanying the image of the measured cross. Their roll format plays no part in the protective power of that image or any others they carry, and their identifiable owners were male. In considering these manuscripts as amuletic rolls rather than ‘birth girdles’, we undo false assumptions about how they were used and open ourselves to new and broader understandings of their possible functions. Importantly, this is also true for the two persuasive examples of birth girdles, Wellcome MS 632 and Takamiya MS 56.

Wellcome MS 632, which has been described as functioning ‘exclusively as a birth girdle’, is a heavily worn parchment roll 330 cm long (even with some material missing at the head of the roll) and only 10 cm wide. An inscription on the back of the roll associates the length of the manuscript with the heights of Christ and the Virgin Mary, claiming first that it is ‘a mesu[re] of the length off ou[re Lord J]esu’, and then reading ‘Thus moche more ys oure lady seynt mary lenger’ (fig. 9.13). The inscription also confirms that the roll was used, or was intended to be used, as a birth girdle. Running along the length of the roll is a text that guarantees benefits such as safety in battle and protection from devils, fire, wrongful judgment, and pestilence. It ends:

And yf a woman travell with chylde gyrdes thyhs mesure abowte hyr wombe and she shall be safe deleyyrd wythowe parelle and the chylde shall have crystendome and the mother puryfycatyon.

Fig. 9.5 Measured cross and instruments of the Passion (England, c. 1500). Ink and pigment on parchment. Wellcome Library, London, Wellcome MS 632. Source: © Wellcome Library, London.

Fig. 9.6 (left) Prayer for use in pregnancy (S.E. England, possibly London, c. 1325–50). Ink, pigment, and gold on parchment. 17 x 11 cm. British Library, London, Egerton MS 2781, fol. 24v. Photo: © By permission of the British Library.

These instructions specify that the woman should gird herself with the manuscript. Clearly, this physical interaction goes beyond simply reading the texts or observing and touching the images.

Takamiya MS 56 is similarly narrow at just 8 cm wide and 173 cm long, despite now missing at least one membrane. This format is relatively unusual. All of the ‘birth girdles’ are narrow compared to other English manuscript rolls, but most are either significantly wider than these two, or significantly shorter.

The long, narrow shape of these rolls mimics the actual girdle relics held by medieval churches, for instance the Sacra Cintola in Prato. Takamiya MS 56 takes this identification further: the single line of text on the dorse is contained within a brown ink border decorated with white circles, perhaps mimicking the design of a belt, emphasising the manuscript’s metaphorical transformation into the girdle relic (fig. 9.14). As in Wellcome MS 632, the inscription on the dorse of Takamiya MS 56 links the length of the roll with the Virgin’s height, and offers protection from peril, tribulation, and disease. It states that ‘a woman that ys quyck wythe chylde gerde hyr wythe thys mesure and she shall be safe fro all maner of perilles’ (fig. 9.15).

The orientation of the dorse text of both rolls also aligns the manuscripts with the relic. While the texts on the front of Wellcome MS 632 and Takamiya MS 56 run down the roll as is typical in the Middle Ages, the texts on the back run lengthways along it. In order to read the instructions explaining how to use the girdle, therefore, the user must change the orientation of the manuscript so that it is fully unrolled and held horizontally, like a belt or girdle (fig. 9.16). From this position, the manuscript is ready to be wrapped around the woman. As well as aligning the manuscripts with the Virgin conceptually the dorse inscriptions use the reader’s interaction with the text to physically align the rolls with the relic they imitate.

Medieval charms make use of similar conceptual strategies of alignment to create healing power. Historioloae, short stories which provide a mythological narrative echoing the desired magical result, function in part by collapsing the perceived distance between Biblical figures and the present crisis. Similarly, the combination of the roll format and the visual identification between manuscript and relic serves to collapse the distance between the secular and sacred worlds. In the common ‘super Petram’ charm, for example, the historiola narrates a meeting between Christ and St Peter in which St Peter tells Christ that he has a toothache, and Christ commands the worm causing the toothache to leave. In Christ’s words, however, the name of the medieval patient is substituted for the name of St Peter. The practitioner ventriloquises the words of Christ and, as Edina Bozóky argues, ‘the sick person enters the mythic world of the narrative incantation’.

The same effect can be achieved in written, as well as spoken, charms. One blood-stanching charm, used in England at least from the Anglo-Saxon period until the end of the fifteenth century, consists in part of writing the name ‘Beronia’ (for a man) or ‘Beronixa’ (for a woman) on the patient’s forehead in his or her own blood. Berenice, or Veronica, is the name that medieval Christians associated with the woman healed of bleeding in the Gospels. The charm’s text identifies the patient with the Biblical figure, blurring the boundaries between contemporary and Biblical narratives in an effort to cure the patient. In all of these examples, the charms draw power from a shifting of identification: between the practitioner and Christ, between the patient and the Biblical figures, and between the ordinary parchment and the girdle relic. The birth girdles function both because of their physical format and because of their ability to create associations...
between Biblical and contemporary time.

Wellcome MS 632 and Takamiya MS 56 share a number of texts and images that do not appear in the other so-called ‘birth girdles’. Above the image of the nails in both rolls is a prayer beginning ‘Omnipotens sempiterne deus qui humanum genus quinquae vulneribus filij tui’ [All-powerful, eternal God, who [redeemed] mankind through the five wounds of your son]. Although the text in Wellcome MS 632 is almost illegible, by comparing the two texts it is clear that the prayer is the same. Both contain a prayer beginning ‘Ave domina sancta maria’ [Hail holy lady Mary] and a rubric, apparently unique to these two manuscripts, connecting it with Tewkesbury (fig. 9.17). As this text has not previously been considered legible in Wellcome MS 632, I transcribe the English rubric here in full:

Oracio beate marie [W]ho so devoutly say[th] thys prayer here folowyng shall [have] xj thousand yerys off pardon and he shall se oure blessyd lady as many tymys as he hath used the sayd prayer whych was brought to an holy hermyte by saynt mychael the arkaungel wryttyn in letters off gold as here folowyth whych the fynde for envy bare hyt away ther as yt was in a table by ff[ore] oure bl[e]sayd lady at tewkesbury the vjth yere off the rengne of kyng henry the vjth.42

Both rolls also contain a diamond-shaped image of the side wound of Christ, with his wounded hands and feet at each corner and the monogram ‘IHS’ in the centre (fig. 9.18). In Takamiya MS 56 the first lines of the prayer ‘Aue uuln us lateris n ostri redemptoris’ [Hail wound in our redeemer’s side] are written around the image of the wound; in Wellcome MS 632 this prayer appears directly below the wound (fig. 9.19). Directly above the wound in Wellcome MS 632 there is a short text on the number of drops of blood shed by Christ, which in Takamiya MS 56 appears directly after the wound image. Finally, both manuscripts include prayers beginning ‘Tibi lau vera misericordia’ [Praise to you, true mercy] and ‘Tibi laus tibi gloria’ [Praise to you; glory to you].43 Although some of these prayers are common in other contexts, this number of shared texts may suggest some relationship between the two manuscripts.

Yet the two are also strikingly different. The recto of Wellcome MS 632 contains numerous amuletic texts and images. It opens with an image of the three nails with which Christ was crucified (fig. 9.20). Although this image carries no specific promises here, it is associated in other manuscripts with numerous protections from physical harm.44 Given Wellcome MS 632’s habit of recording amuletic benefits in red, then prayers in black, followed by the amuletic image itself, the fact that the end of a rubric is visible where the head of the roll has been lost may indicate that promises of protection appeared here too. After the nails come the many practical benefits of the measured cross and their associated image, then a very worn text in red ink which appears to be a version of the heavenly letter. It begins ‘This ys the trewe copy of the letter the whyche a[nn] a)ungell [brou]ght frome hevyn to kyng [Cha]rls in the tyme […] to the batell of ronncesvalle’ and promises protection to anyone who carries it upon them. Further down the roll, after several illegible texts, is the prayer to the Virgin Mary with the Tewkesbury rubric claiming that whoever uses it will have thousands of years of pardon and will see the Virgin. These texts are comparable with those in the other manuscript rolls: texts and images that promise protection and material or spiritual benefit in a range of situations.

The prayers on the recto of Takamiya MS 56, by contrast, make no promises of physical protection. This manuscript does not include the measured cross or the amuletic texts associated with it. For praying while looking at the image of the nails with contrition and devotion, it promises that the reader ‘shall haue grete grace of allmyghty god and for to putt a waye from hym
all dedely synys’ (fig. 9.21). This is significantly different from the promises attached to the nails in other manuscripts: in Henry VIII’s prayer roll and in Glazier MS 39, for example, the nails are said to provide protection against dangers including sudden death, death by sword, poison, enemies, poverty, fevers, and evil spirits (fig. 9.22).45 Other prayers in Takamiya MS 56 guarantee thousands of years of pardon and indulgence, and the sight of the Virgin Mary. One rubric says that one of the roll’s prayers will increase the virtue of another tenfold. Unlike the prayers in the other manuscripts identified as ‘birth girdles’, all of these benefits are spiritual, not physical. Furthermore, the contrast between the promises attached to the image of the nails here and elsewhere suggests that the omission of physical benefits was deliberate.

Both Wellcome MS 632 and Takamiya MS 56 can justifiably be described as birth girdles based on the text on their dorse. Their physical format, the positioning of their texts, and their user’s interactions with them all combine to assimilate them into the girdle relic itself. However, their recto texts suggest that when not being used in childbirth they functioned in quite different ways. Despite the similarity between their texts and their mutual birth girdle function, one of these manuscripts was designed to be used for spiritual benefit, while the other could be used largely for physical protection.

I have argued above that the term ‘birth girdle’ has been misapplied to many rolls, obscuring their alternative possible uses as devotional objects or amulets for general protection. Since no evidence remains to suggest that the majority of these rolls were used for girdling women during childbirth, we must reconsider them in the light of other devotional and amuletic rolls: any explanation for the use of the roll format must take into account their alternative uses as devotional objects or amulets.
the existence of rolls containing exclusively non-amuletic prayers. Furthermore, the differences between Takamiya MS 56 and Wellcome MS 632, despite their many shared texts, indicate that even persuasive ‘birth girdles’ could be used in divergent ways. Even where the ‘birth girdle’ designation is correct, therefore, it is not complete: in order to understand how rolls were used, we must remain sensitive to their full diversity.

Appendix: Known English ‘Birth Girdles’

London, British Library, Additional MS 88929

London, British Library, Harley 5919, items 143 and 144 (STC 14547.5)

London, British Library, Harley Charter 43.A.14
glorious measure and your tenderable cross.

15. In conclusion, the Latin prayer does occasionally occur without the image of the cross. See, for example, London, Briti-
sh Library, Additional MS 37795, fol. 92r.

16. The printed broadsheet STC 14077c.64, held at Harvard's Houghton Library, associates Quiricus and Julitta
with a wide range of protections including safety in childbirth, but not with the measured cross. See Grau and Morse, Birth
Girdles, pp. 61–62 and fig. 4. London, British Library, Manus
cript MS 7438, fol. 23v, omits the verse for protection against
terrorious dangers, with no mention of childbirth. An English
prayer to the same with no mention of childbirth appears on
fol. 24 of Cambridge, Furnham Hall Museum, MS 48. See Morse,
"St Margaret", p. 191.

A. Smith, Art, Identity and Devotion in Fourteenth-Century
England: Three Women and Their Books of Hours (London,
Culture: With a Critical Edition of 'O Vernicle' (Farnham and
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