

Vade Mecum – the Medieval Filofax

If you needed to carry around a compendium of useful knowledge – tables for calculating moveable feasts or a chart indicating what various colours of urine meant – one handy way to do so was to use the vade mecum (lit “goes with me”). This was a small booklet of folded pages, generally made of parchment, which could be tucked into the belt or hang from it in a slipcase for quick reference.

They were particularly popular with physicians or other learned persons, as the format was excellent for storing medical information, such as charts of the Zodiacal Man; calendrical data, such as saints’ days; astronomical information, such as eclipse tables, and the like.

Carey argues that it would be more accurate to refer to these as “folding almanacs”, the term most commonly used by the British Library catalogue (2003, pg 484) for their collection of 10 such works; she prefers the term “folded book”. She considers vade mecum as a “generic term for any small portable notebook or manuscript” such as service books or small format bibles. As a book-binder, I prefer to follow the lead of others in using vade mecum more specifically for the folded notebook format with its original and unusual approach to the binding issue that makes it significantly different to the usual Western-style book per se.

Jones notes that vade mecums were typically carried at the belt, fastened by a tassel (pg 52). One marginalia from the Smithfield Decretals depicts Reynard the Fox consulting a vade mecum while his patient, the injured Isengrim, looks on (Jones, pg 48-49; BL Royal MS10 EIV f 54). Reynard has a number of vade mecums tucked into his belt.

Some vade mecum were beautiful works of art, with illuminated gold capitals and delicate coloured miniatures (eg BL Sloane MS 2250); others were more utilitarian. The earlier versions from the late 1400s on tended to be manuscript, allowing their owners to add their own information to material that appears to have been professionally penned. Most of them have been written in Latin, although there is one survivor in English and also printed examples.

Vade mecums varied in size and page count. Sloane MS 2250, from England in the first half of the 15th century, was 345 x 145 mm when unfolded and contained 16 parchment pages bound at the edges. An Italian example (BL Additional 30034), was considerably smaller, measuring 65 mm x 35 mm when folded – as Carey notes, smaller than a business card – and 125x120 mm when unfolded. Its 15 folios were held together with a small triangular metal plate which had a hole through which a cord apparently passed for fastening to the belt. The largest vade mecum in the British Library collection (Egerton 2572) consists of a long parchment strip measuring 2140 x 180mm, making up 100 panels when folded concertina-style to 120 x 90 mm (Carey, 2003, pg 487).

...despite their generally utilitarian form and function, no two examples of the folded almanac are entirely alike; they demonstrate the individual characters, missions and slips typical of well-used objects produced prior to the mechanical age...

Carey, 2004, pg 358

An analysis of a range of vade mecums (Carey, 2003, pg 486) indicates the following general characteristics: 5-19 folios which, when folded produce a format ranging 120 mm to 170 mm in length with a typical width of 30 mm to 70 mm.

The folding systems were just as varied, with single folds, multiple crossing folds, accordion folds – this is what makes it very different to the more conventional form of book binding used in girdle books and other miniature productions. The folios were cut to produce a tab through which the individual pages could be bound, or folded in such a manner to produce two sections with a joining tab. It is this latter approach, demonstrated to me by Lady Teffania, that I have used to produce an event vade mecum for November Crown Tourney ASXXIV, complete with a range of useful information.

Vade mecums could be elaborately housed in leather, metal or fabric covers for protection, embellished with braided cords and tassels. An early “girdle book calendar” from northeastern Spain or southwestern France, had a silver holder decorated with six carnelian beads (Boston College). However, plain limp vellum covers appear to be the most typical form of binding, with the outer covers used as title pages. The range of decoration and production standards suggest a fairly broad market for the items and the information they contained.

Carey describes one case as comparable to a modern slip-in spectacle case (2003, pg 489), which suggests a new project....

References

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