

The introduction of printing in Italy: Rome, Naples and Venice

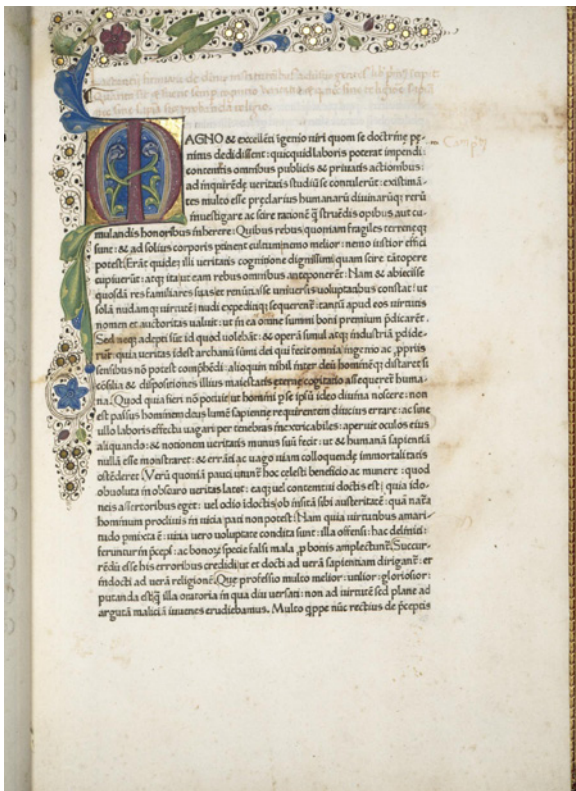
Venice was by far the most productive centre for printing in the fifteenth century. Roughly fourteen to fifteen percent of all printing of the fifteenth century came from Venice alone. But it is not one of the towns where printing took place at an early date. It reached Venice in 1469 after trial and error in several other places. Once the first printers were established there, they and their many successors came to dominate the production of Latin books for the world of learning, especially producing editions of the classics, and the works of theology and law that had constantly to be consulted by churchmen and lawyers alike. Such books printed in Venice found their way to far corners of Western Europe, for the Venetian printers worked deliberately for export outside the Italian peninsula. Since they became highly regarded as expert printers, they were on a few occasions commissioned to produce important works in Italian.

As a consequence, the influence of Venetian printing through the booktrade is felt all over the parts of the world where books were used and read in the fifteenth century. Beginning in Mainz we can take a few giant steps to follow the route which knowledge of the new technique took to reach Venice, at that time the most important commercial city in the world.

From the late 1450s printers began to leave Mainz and settle elsewhere. This began even before a cruelly-fought dispute between authorities in the city in the early 1460s brought the business of Fust and Schoeffer temporarily to a virtual standstill. We have already seen that two short-lived printing enterprises were active in Bamberg from about 1460. At almost the same time the first printer in Strasbourg, Johann Mentelin, set up a printing house, and printing was to stay in that city. The earliest Mentelin edition in the John Rylands Library is his Latin Bible [JRL 18131, [ISTC ib00528000](#)]. In all there are 148 incunabula printed in Strasbourg in the John Rylands Library. Unlike Bamberg, Strasbourg was an important commercial centre. With the introduction of printing, books

had become a mass-product, and had to be traded accordingly in order to get a return on the considerable costs of production. Great cities commanding well-established trade connections would become centres for the rapidly developing printing industry, since from there printed books could be sent over large distances to reach many places in Europe. Strasbourg was followed by other commercial centres, Cologne (1465), Basel (1468) and Nuremberg (1469), but nowhere can the interaction of general commerce with the printing trade be better seen than in Venice.

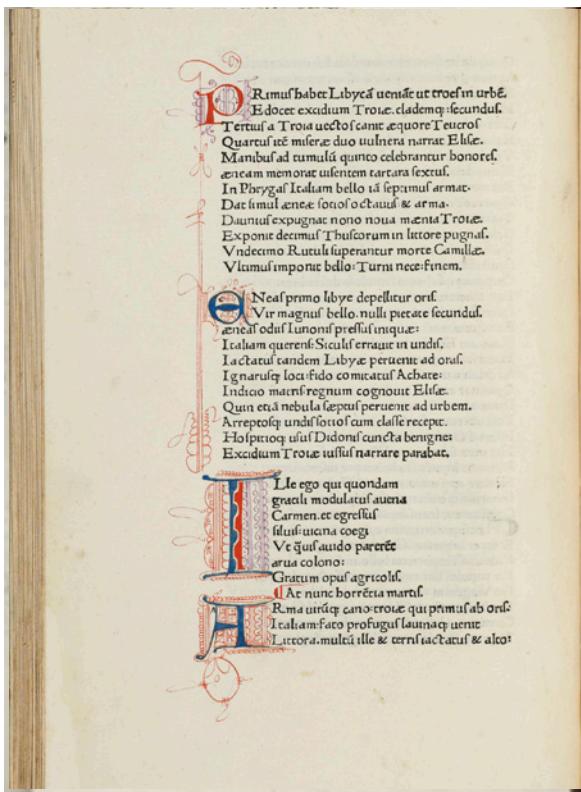
The first printers to cross the Alps went to Rome. They were two clerics from the Rhine area, Konrad Sweynheim from Mainz and Arnold Pannartz from Cologne, who travelled on to set up a press in the ancient Benedictine monastery at Subiaco, in the mountains east of Rome. At about the same time, two of their compatriots, Ulrich Han and Sixtus Riessinger, established the first printing house in Rome. Sweynheim and Pannartz produced from 1465 three fine books in Subiaco, and taught some of the monks to print before they moved to Rome in 1467, to premises provided by a merchant.



Lactantius, Opera (Subiaco: Sweynheim and Pannartz, 1465), f.13r. JRL 3090.

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The three still extant Subiaco books are all represented in the John Rylands Library. The earliest is Cicero's *De oratore* of 1465 [JRL 3148, [ISTC ic00654000](#)], followed in the same year by diverse *Opera* of Lactantius [JRL 3090, [ISTC il00001000](#)]; and in 1467 Augustinus, *De civitate Dei* [JRL 3217, [ISTC ia01230000](#)]. There is nothing to show that the monks made use of the printing skill they had learned and of the materials left by the two printers, but there is a letter written in 1471 in which a monk of Subiaco offered to print a breviary.



Vergilius Maro, *Opera*, ed. Johannes Andreas de Aleria (Rome: Sweynheym and Pannartz, [1469]), f.55v. JRL 9116.

[▶ View in Luna](#)

In Rome Sweynheym and Pannartz produced in rapid succession a long list of editions of the classics, the Church fathers and an enormous Bible commentary; more books than they knew how to sell. We may single out as a very rare item in the John Rylands Library, the first edition of the works of Vergil [JRL 9116, [ISTC iv00149000](#)].



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Johannes de Turrecremata, *Mediationes vitae Christi* (Rome: Han and Riessinger), 31 December 1466, f.1v. JRL 17251.

[▶ View in Luna](#)

Meanwhile, Han and Riessinger worked for a few years together. Their first book was the *Meditationes vitae Christi* by Johannes de Turrecremata, dated 31 December 1466, printed in a very beautiful large type and illustrated with 34 woodcuts [JRL 17251, [ISTC it00534800](#)]. It could hardly be more different from the rather plain style of the Sweynheym and Pannartz books; we may see here stylistic influences of Bamberg or southwest Germany in general, whereas Riessinger came from Strasbourg where he had probably worked with Mentelin. The Turrecremata was followed by an edition of the *Epistolae* of St Jerome, the date of which remains disputed [JRL 14877, [ISTC ih00160800](#)]. After this collaboration, Riessinger departed for Naples (the precise year is uncertain) where he established a business that flourished until 1478, when he returned to Germany, reputedly homesick. Ulrich Han continued also until 1478, when he is thought to have died. He concentrated on editions of the classics, followed later, when the market for the classics seemed satiated, by theological works.

A successor to Han and Riessinger in Rome, Georg Lauer, has to be credited with a new

development of the printing press. It appears that he invented a moving carriage that allowed full sheets to be printed with two pulls of the press, instead of a press that allowed only one folio page, or two quarto pages (i.e. a half-sheet) to be printed together. The use of the improved press spread from 1472 slowly northward from Rome.

The early printers in Rome had many successors, their trade reliably ensured by the presence of the papal court, but Rome's monopoly in the peninsula came soon to an end. In Naples successive printers were actively encouraged by the royal court to produce beautiful books, and were supported by a lively circle of scholars. Rome and Naples remained important centres of printing, just as at slightly later dates the court of the Medicis was a favourable influence on printing in Florence, and that of the Sforzas on printing in Milan.

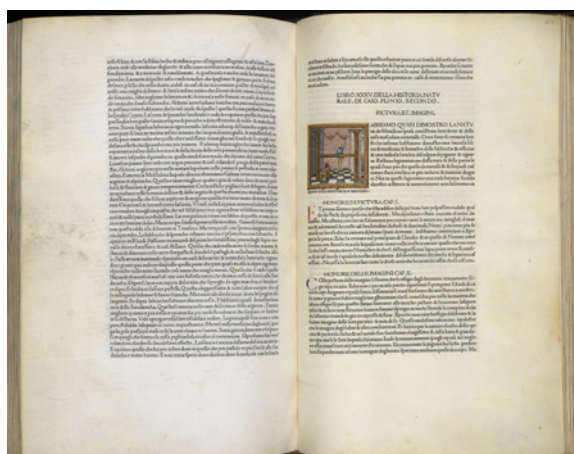
But no stimulus by a courtly environment can equal the power of a commercial metropolis. In 1469 yet another German from the Rhine area who had crossed the Alps, Johannes de Spira (or Speyer), started in Venice a publishing programme of the classics with two editions of Cicero's *Epistolae ad familiares* [JRL 3390, [ISTC ic00504000](#)] and Pliny's *Historia naturalis* [JRL 3221, [ISTC ip00786000](#)]. He even obtained a monopoly from the Venetian Signoria, but he died suddenly at the end of 1469, and the monopoly lapsed. His brother Wendelin (Vindelinius) took over at once, having taken part in the enterprise from its beginning, but he may not have been the only follower of Johannes de Spira. Invisible, as he had been to date, Nicolas Jenson's presence may be surmised. The books of Johann and Wendelin de Spira were printed with a new fount, a roman type; this was a style of type that is familiar to the present day, but was at the time a radical innovation. A year later, in 1470, a new, slightly lighter and more elegant version appeared in books with a new imprint, that of Nicolas Jenson. In the colophons of books printed from 1470 his name appears along with praise for his typographical skills. It is here that we see for the first time statements that leave no room for doubt. Jenson has rightly become famous as the designer and cutter of the punches for the new roman

typefaces as well as other founts that for a long time were the standard for legal and theological works. Confirmation of his status as typographer is found in his last will and testament, written in 1480, where he made careful dispositions for what should be done with his punches, the tangible results of a life's experience and work that he wished to be protected. All these circumstances together lead to the notion that it was Jenson who improved the production of movable type by cutting excellent punches, a skill that he had brought from the traditions of the Mint in Paris, and that he may first have applied in Mainz to the long-lasting types used by Fust and Schoeffer.



Gaius Plinius Secundus, *Historia naturalis*, ed. Johannes Andreas de Aleria (Venice: Nicolas Jenson, 1472), f.21r. JRL 3223.

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Gaius Plinius Secundus, *Historia naturalis*, translated into Italian by Cristophoro Landino (Venice: Nicolas Jenson, 1476), on vellum, f.378v/379r. JRL 3380.

[▶ View in Luna](#)

It is only in the last ten years of his life that Nicolas Jenson abandoned his anonymity, and became prominent as a printer of magnificent books. Executed in sober, almost sculptural layouts they became models for centuries of printing. A famous example is the monumental edition of Pliny's classical encyclopaedic work, his *Historia naturalis*, published by Jenson in 1472 [JRL 3223, [ISTC ip00788000](#)]. An Italian translation, also published by Jenson, appeared in 1476 [JRL 3380, [ISTC ip00801000](#)]. The translation and printing were commissioned by the Florentine merchant Girolamo Strozzi, who also took care of the marketing. The John Rylands Library has spectacularly illuminated copies of both editions.



Gaius Sallustius Crispus, *Opera* (Venice: Johannes de Colonia and Johannes Manthen, 23 March 1474), f.1r. JRL 10547.

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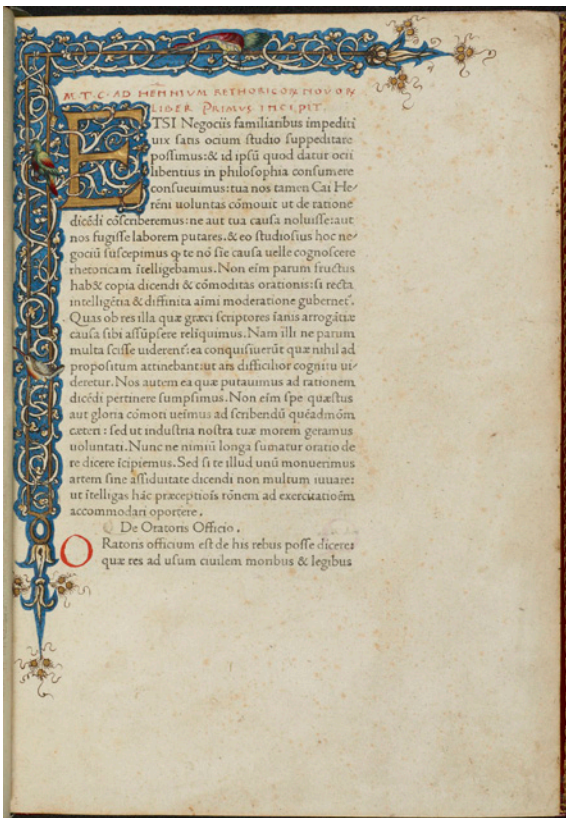
The arrangement with the Strozzi was apparently incidental, and Jenson was capable of establishing more permanent partnerships. In 1475 he became formally associated with several prominent German merchants who must have been instrumental in selling his books north of the Alps. In the year of his death, 1480, he formed a company with the printers Johannes de Colonia (who had married the widow of Johannes de Spira) and

Johannes Manthen who from 1473/4 had already published together as a continuation of the printing house of the brothers de Spira. One of their first publications was an edition of Opera by Sallustius; the copy in the John Rylands Library has the spectacular painting that is characteristic of the most luxurious copies produced by the early printers in Venice [JRL 10547, [ISTC is00056000](#)].



Gaius Plinius Secundus, *Historia naturalis*, translated into Italian by Cristophoro Landino (Venice: Nicolas Jenson, 1476), on vellum, detail of initial H, f.379r. JRL 3380.

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Marcus Tullius Cicero, *Rhetorica ad C. Herennium* (Venice: Nicolas Jenson, 1470), f.1r. JRL 3136.

[▶ View in Luna](#)



Eusebius Caesariensis, *De evangelica praeparatione* (Venice: Nicolas Jenson, 1470), f.1r. JRL 15109.

[► View in Luna](#)

Nicolas Jenson, and the printers associated with him excelled not only in typography, but they also organized several outstanding artists to paint illustrations and decorations in selected copies of their books. This often takes the form of 'historiated initials', as in the Italian Pliny [JRL 3380], or elaborate borders, as in Cicero, *Rhetorica ad C. Herennium*, 1470 [JRL 3136, [ISTC ic00672000](#)]. Less precious copies had sometimes a printed border that is lacking in other copies, as in Jenson's Eusebius, *De evangelica praeparatione*, of 1470 [JRL 15109, [ISTC ie00118000](#)]. The John Rylands copy has a printed border, whereas two copies in the British Library have painted borders by the artist known as the Pico Master and by Girolamo de Cremona.]

The John Rylands Library includes 339 incunabula printed in Rome (out of a total of some 2,100 recorded editions), and 552 printed in Venice (out of a total of almost 3,800 on record). The few examples shown here can no more than give an impression of the outstanding quality and modernity of the earliest books printed in Italy. With the massive production in later years the quality of the typography went down, but its influence kept

growing until the early years of the sixteenth century.

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