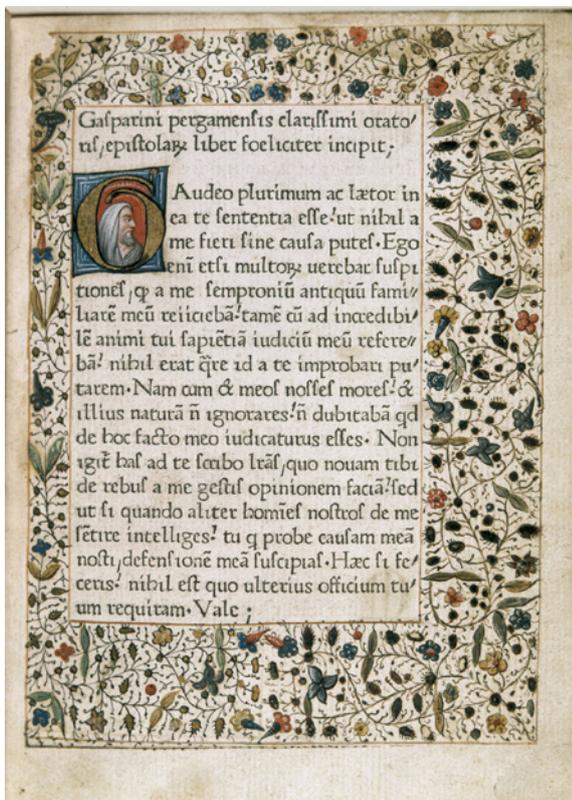
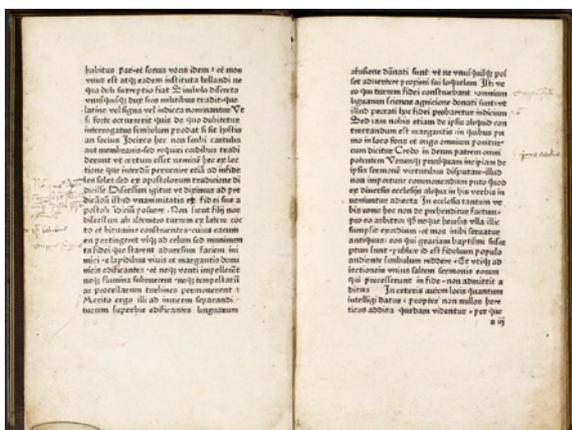


Printing in universities: the Sorbonne Press and Oxford



Gasparinus Barzizius, *Epistolae* (Paris: Ulrich Gering, Martin Crantz and Michael Friburger, [1470]), f.2r. JRL R4452.

[▶ View in Luna](#)



Tyrannius Rufinus, *Expositio in symbolum apostolorum* (Oxford: Printer of the 'Expositio in symbolum apostolorum', 17 December '1468' [1478]), a2v-a3r. JRL 17320.

[▶ View in Luna](#)

Universities were not slow to appreciate the value of the medium of print for teaching, the multiplication of uniform texts useful for teacher and student alike. And yet, printers who set up in university towns seldom achieved the prominence of the great printing houses in commercial cities. Occasionally there was fortunate interaction. The printers in Venice surely benefited from the proximity of the ancient university of Padua, where experts were on hand to provide texts as well as the expertise to see learned works through the

press. In Cologne, another important university, scholarly theologians were actively engaged in the publication of their works.

It is easier, however, to come up with examples of presses in university towns that were set up with the enthusiastic support of professors but turned out to be short-lived. One of those is the press that two professors of the university of Paris, Guillaume Fichet and Jean Heynlin de Lapide, established in 1470 at the ancient college of the Sorbonne. Both had travelled, Fichet to Italy and Heynlin to Basel, and both were keen to share their experience of modern learning and introduce it in the ancient university, and to do so by distributing selected texts in print. Heynlin engaged printers, either in Basel or in nearby Beromünster where he also obtained a printing type. It was 'roman' in style, previously used in Basel, and well suited to the presentation of modern humanist texts. Fichet became responsible for providing and editing texts. The first book he chose to edit was the *Epistolae* of Gasparinus Barzizius, an Italian scholar whose work could serve as a model for letter writing and in general the proper use of Latin [JRL R4452, [ISTC ib00260500](#)]. Fichet dedicated his work to his friend Heynlin, and in a preliminary letter lavished praise on its three printers who had been brought over from Basel: Ulrich Gering, Michael Friburger and Martin Cranz.

The book is daintily printed, a quarto format of quite modest dimensions, suggesting that the printing press was indeed an under-sized installation, capable of printing only a small surface at a time. It was probably placed in one of the rooms at the Sorbonne which had been made available to Fichet who was then the college's librarian. It was followed by several books, all produced with Fichet's active participation, culminating in his own *Rhetorica*, a handbook for writing Latin [JRL 18142, [ISTC if00147000](#)]. His vivid interest in the printing process has left visible traces in the copies of this book which include many handwritten corrections and substitutes of parts of sheets; apparently Fichet had constantly been in and out of the printing house, interfering with the text as it emerged from the press.

The Sorbonne press operated for two and a half years and produced in that time 22 works. At the end of that period, Fichet and Heynlin had to move on as their positions in the academic world changed, and they could no longer occupy the premises at the Sorbonne. In 1472 the three printers set up an independent printing house in the rue Saint-Jacques and continued in Paris until 1477, now capable of printing major books. Only Ulrich Gering stayed there longer to remain a printer for the next quarter of a century. He was an expert typographer, working often in association with others including a printer named Guillaume Maynyal, with whom he published the *Postilla of Guillelmus*, in 1479/80 [JRL 17623, [ISTC ig00672000](#)]. Thus there is a tenuous association with Caxton, for he commissioned Maynyal in 1487 to print a *Missal* and a *Legenda Sarum*, and obtained from him a new fount of type.

The first press in Oxford produced only three books; like the first books printed at the Sorbonne, they are the products of a very small press that must have been installed in some convenient corner. But unlike the small books of the Sorbonne press, they were the work of a very inexperienced printer whose name we do not know. The press operated for a year at most, its books dated in December 1478 and in 1479. Its sole fount of type is closely related to types used to print in 1477-8 a few small books in Cologne for the merchant Gerard ten Raem. The press may have been an experiment, Ten Raem sending his printer to Oxford to print what was locally demanded, instead of supplying printed books on speculation to stock a shop; this would also have offered the advantage of avoiding the import duties levied in the ports on books printed abroad.

The local demand proved in the first instance not to be connected with the university. The earliest book of this press, with the date 17 December 1478 (famously misprinted as ‘Mcccclxviii’), was a text on the Apostolic Creed, written at the end of the fourth century by Tyrannius Rufinus Aquileiensis, best remembered for his disputes with St Jerome [JRL 17320, [ISTC ir00352000](#)]. The small manuscript that had served as printer’s copy in the printing house still survives. It bears the arms of James Goldwell, Bishop of Norwich, who

had bought it in Florence. It was therefore probably he who commissioned the printing of the little book, but we do not know how his connection with the printer at Oxford came about. In March 1479 this was followed by a similar tract, Aegidius Columna, *De peccati originali* [JRL 22928, [ISTC ia00082500](#)]. Only the third and most substantial book was of a text taught at the university, a modern Latin translation of Aristotle's *Ethica ad Nicomachum* [JRL 15969, [ISTC ia00987000](#)].

If this was indeed a commercial experiment, it was rapidly brought to an end. Two years later another printer from Cologne arrived in Oxford. This time we know his name, Theodericus Rood, and his founts of type, which are related to those of the Cologne printer Arnold ther Hoernen, suggest that it was his intention to open a branch of this major printing house. He produced a greater variety of titles than his predecessor, for the university and for the recently established school at Magdalen College. In all, thirteen books are ascribed to him, all printed in the years 1481 to 1483. The first was a large commentary on Aristotle, *De anima* [JRL 19944, [ISTC ia00382000](#)], the publication of which was supported by fellows of several colleges and by Thomas Hunt, the university 'stationarius' or official bookseller. Hunt also shared with Rood the imprint of a pseudo-classical text that was popular as a text-book in schools, the *Epistolae* of Phalaris [JRL 15835, [ISTC ip00560700](#)]. But Rood returned to Cologne after only two years. The conclusion has to be that the import trade of printed books proved to be more efficient than the printing press in providing universities with what they needed.

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