Fust and Schoeffer: Guillelmus Duranti, Rationale divinorum officiorum

[Mainz]: Johann Fust and Peter Schoeffer, 6 October 1459. JRL 3074, ISTC id00403000.

Vellum copy of the Mainz Psalter. Psalterium (Mainz: 14 August 1457), 1r. JRL 9784.

View in Luna

Vellum copy of Guillelmus Duranti, Rationale divinorum officiorum ([Mainz]: Johann Fust and Peter Schoeffer, 6 October 1459), 1r. JRL 3074.

View in Luna
The printing of the great Latin Bible, the first substantial book to appear in print, had been a sustained effort. To accomplish it Johann Gutenberg had associated himself with a number of others who participated in the enterprise, either financially, or with technical help. Others were simply hired as manpower. Once the Bible was accomplished, the partnership was dissolved and the former associates each went their own way, sometimes to emerge as printers in other places.

The most enduring of the new enterprises that sprang from Gutenberg's venture was the partnership of Gutenberg's former companion Johann Fust, a merchant of Mainz, and Peter Schoeffer of Gernsheim. Schoeffer was the younger of the two; he had worked as a scribe and turned his writing skills into technical expertise as a printer. He became later Fust's son in law and continued the business after Fust died in 1467, established a flourishing trade in books and was succeeded by a dynasty of printers. The combination of Schoeffer's skills and Fust's entrepreneurial energy are first seen in two large editions of the Latin Psalter, both printed in new, very large types that designate them as altar books. Large printed initials in red and blue are their outstanding feature, delicate deco-
ration surrounding the letters. Both Psalters are dated, 14 August 1457 [JRL 9784, ISTC ip01036000] and 29 August 1459 [JRL 3075, ISTC ip01062000] respectively. Impressive as these two books may be, a development that had even greater impact was the next book signed by Fust and Schoeffer, the Rationale divinorum officiorum by the twelfth-century prelate Guillelmus Duranti (or Durandus), a handbook for priests in which all the prescriptions for services throughout the liturgical year are systematically set out [JRL 3074, ISTC id00403000].

The Rationale, dated 6 October 1459, is set in a new typeface, much smaller than the types of Gutenberg’s Bible and their own Psalters, and therefore more economical for reproducing a large text in print. The size of the type (the ‘body’) is close to that of the 30-line indulgence, but the style is different: not related to the script of chanceries, but designed for books. The crucial distinction from previous types is that Fust and Schoeffer’s first small type was to have a long lifespan: it was intensively used for almost twenty years, for the last time in 1478. It served as main text type as well as commentary type to accompany a main text in larger type, as can be seen in the example of Bonifacius VIII’s Liber VI Decretales of 1473 [JRL R209161, ISTC ib00981000]. As a text type it was used for about 2,400 leaves, and as a commentary in an additional 965 leaves. If those leaves are multiplied with a conservative estimate of the size of the print-run of each edition at 300 copies, we arrive at the total number of impressions that is over a million. It is clear that the quality of the type must have allowed very heavy use. Such high quality must have been achieved by new developments in the manufacture of type. It may indicate that now for the first time type was produced by the process that became familiar in later periods, by punches, cut in steel, from which matrices were struck which in their turn served for casting type.
Right at the end of the book is a colophon with the names of the printers and the date 6 October 1459 printed in festive red in a distinctive typeface not seen before. It is the debut of a typeface that became even more important for the Fust and Schoeffer printing house. It was used until 1478 for some thirty books (of varying sizes), yielding a rough estimate of its use in a figure similar to that of the smaller type. This edition of Duranti’s Rationale marks therefore a further step in the development of typography, probably to be sought in the skills required to cut high-quality punches, which in turn determined the quality of matrices struck with them. Peter Schoeffer probably acquired this skill. There are, however, grounds for speculating that a punchcutter with experience in a different kind of metalwork had a leading role here. This is Nicolas Jenson, who had been employed by the Mint in Paris, where fine medals adorned with extensive inscriptions were cast in the early 1450s. Early in October 1458 Jenson was sent to Mainz at the request of the French king Charles VII to find out what truth there was in the rumours that had reached Paris about printing books with metal types. This was exactly a year before the date of the Duranti, and the coincidence is suggestive. Jenson continued in the 1470s as one of the finest and most influential typographers and printers in Venice, but before that
time he may have had a no less influential role in the development of early type in Mainz. The Rationale may stand as a monument of innovation, but many copies of this edition have retained a feature of Fust and Schoeffer’s earlier books: they include the spectacular two-colour printed initials of the two Psalter editions. The copy in the John Rylands Library, however, does not include such initials. The spaces are left blank, and three are filled in with painted initials in Italian style.

Vellum copy of Clemens V, Constitutiones (Mainz: Peter Schoeffer, 1467), a1r. JRL 12278.

› View in Luna

Thomas Aquinas, Summa secunda secundae (Mainz: Peter Schoeffer, 1467), a1r. JRL 10401.2.

› View in Luna
In books published in Mainz after the Rationale, spaces were routinely left open for initials. They could be filled in according to the taste of future owners, but a substantial number of copies were decorated as directed by the printing house before they were sold. This could be at various degrees of luxury, in colourful painting, as in Clemens V, Constitutiones (Mainz: Peter Schoeffer, 1467) [JRL 12278, ISTC ic00711000], or with penwork in red and blue with one or two additional colours, as in Thomas Aquinas, Summa secunda secundae (Mainz: Peter Schoeffer, 1467) [JRL 10401.2, ISTC it00209000]. The house-style of the decoration by or for the printing house in Mainz can be recognized at every level.

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