Incunabula leaves in Brunswick Library storage compactus

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Five printed manuscript leaves attributed to printers from the late 1400s were found in the Brunswick Library compactus in late May 2014.

I was working on a project to index monographs in storage there, and amongst many thin, spiral bound, non-descript volumes was a green plastic document folder labelled ‘Fifteenth century printing.’

Figure 1. Label: Fifteenth century printing

The only sources of information about the leaves were an Alma record (below), a label on the cover of the document folder in which they were found, and a card with each leaf.

001 9911371370001341
005 20130613161620.0
008 130502m14721498xx 000 0 lat d
035 __ |a (VIT)534885
245 00 |a [Fifteenth century printing examples].
260 __ |a [S.l.] : |b [s.n.], |c 1472-1498.
300 __ |a 5 leaves ; |c 27-40cm.
500 __ |a Cataloguer assigned title.
650 _0 |a Printing |x History |y To 1500.
LDR 00578cam a22001457a 4500
Mary Mavroudis provided white gloves and archival pockets and watched as I nervously replaced the worn out plastic sleeves covering each one.

Marcello DiCamillo and I scanned them at the Design School and we took up an offer to have the scans looked at by an expert at the National Gallery of Victoria.

Then we waited. Once we had more information we’d know how to proceed.

After what seemed a long two months there was a burst of email activity from the National Gallery of Victoria.
Hi Vivian,

Some of the sheets here [Leaf 4] are from a work by the really important and influential 15thC philosopher and scholar Pico della Mirandola. Very interesting Humanist scholar. They would most likely be from an edition of his collected works which was printed in Strasburg in 1504. These are the sheets which include some text in the margins. Very rare.

However, the sheets with the circles and some red letters are a bit elusive. [Leaf 3]

I shall keep digging.

I’ll be in touch. (Benson 2014a)

Armed with this clue about the origin of Leaf 4, I hit LibrarySearch looking for more. The Encyclopedia of World Biography describes Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494) this way:

At Florence, Pico joined Lorenzo de' Medici's Platonic Academy in its effort to formulate a doctrine of the soul that would reconcile Platonic and Christian beliefs. Pico's ambition, which many critics attribute to youthful confusion, can be measured by his plan to harmonize Plato and Aristotle and to link their philosophies with revelations proclaimed by the major religions. Preparatory treatises included the Heptaplus of 1489, a commentary on
Genesis stressing its correspondence with sacred Jewish texts, and the work De ente et uno of 1492, on the nature of God and creation. (Pico della Mirandola, Conte Giovanni (1463-1494) 1998)

At the top of one side of Leaf 4 is printed IOAN.PICI MIRANDVLAE and the other HEPTAPLVS.

Leaf 4 was attributed to the printer Bernardinus Venetus de Vitalibus of Venice in the Library’s Alma record, and on the cover label of the document folder in which it was found. Bernardinus Venetus de Vitalibus is listed in the Glasgow Incunabula Project’s Printers Index which has links to images of other works attributed to him.

My limited research did not turn up evidence that he produced an edition of Pico della Mirandola’s Heptaplus or collected works.
These ones [Leaf 2] could be from Voragine’s Golden Legend or Legenda Aurea printed by Georg Husner in Strasbourg 1483.

The sheets should be around 270 x 193.

Again, pretty rare. (Benson 2014b)

I was working at the Carlton Library the day I received this email, and was straight on the phone to Linda Jenkins at Brunswick, who measured each of our mystery items. Leaf 2 measured 27cm (h) x 19.5cm (w).

At the time of writing, a complete edition of Voragine’s Golden Legend or Legenda Aurea printed by Georg Husner in Strasbourg 1483 was held in the Senate House Library, University of London. It appears very similar to Leaf 2 found at Brunswick.

Leaf 2 was attributed to the printer Georg Husner of Strasburg in the Library’s Alma record, and on the cover label of the document folder in which it was found. Georg Husner is listed in the Glasgow Incunabula Project’s Printers Index.

The last email I received from the National Gallery of Victoria did not disappoint.

This one (leaf 3) is definitely from FASCICULUS TEMPORUM, by Werner Rolewinck. I've found a few editions of this, but none with bits of red printing on some letters. However, there are 32 different printings.

I'll keep digging, but this is at least a lead. (Benson 2014c)

Leaf three is illustrated with circles containing text and some text appears to be upside down near the centre of the page. Why is it upside down? Is it a very early typo?!

A complete edition of Fasciculus Temporum by Werner Rolewinck, printed by Erhard Ratdolt in Venice in 1480 is held in the University of Rochester's rare book collection. It contains more pages with circles containing text, particularly near the centre of some pages.

Virginia Moscrip wrote an essay about Fasciculus Temporum for the University of Rochester Library Bulletin in 1954:

In the printing itself, the printer has shown considerable skill in contriving a method of reporting contemporary events. A strip across the center of each page is separated from the rest of the text above and below by two sets of heavy lines. Within this strip are placed one or two, sometimes three, circles in which appear the names of Hebrew worthies, beginning
with Adam. Beside each circle is a brief statement of each man’s length of life and number of children. Above the circles is given the date, anno mundi, reckoned from the creation of the world in 5199 B.C.; below them and printed upside down, the number of years before the birth of Christ. (Moscrip 1954)

So it turns out the upside down text and circles containing text are strong evidence for the identification of the leaf’s origin.

Leaf 3 was attributed to the printer Erhard Ratdolt of Venice in the Library’s Alma record, and on the cover label of the document folder in which it was found. Erhard Ratdolt is listed in the Glasgow Incunabula Project’s Printers Index which links to images of other works attributed to him.

The Australian National Library has a microform copy of Fasciculus temporum by Rolevinck, printed by Erhard Ratdolt in 1484 and now owned by the University of Uppsala.

I was just pleased the words facsimile and copy hadn’t been mentioned at all.
No further information about Leaf 5 was provided by our expert contact. At 40 cm (h) x 28.5 cm (w), it is larger than the other leaves, and was folded in half when found in the Brunswick compactus.

The Alma record for the leaves describes the creator of leaf 5 as Me??tehn, which I believe is an attempt to transcribe a note written in pencil on the leaf itself (see Figure 10). Each leaf has a note of this kind, which was probably written by the bookseller or previous owner. The cataloguer couldn’t make out the name with certainty.

After coming across the leaves, one of the first things I did was search Libraries Australia, desperate to find anything at all that might provide background information or verification. I searched for the printers’ names, which were about the only keywords that I could try, and came across another set of printed leaves attributed to the same five individuals held by the University of New South Wales. The [UNSW catalogue record](#) includes the name Johann Mentelin, instead of Me??tehn, which made me curious about the name and led me to Google.
I learned that there was indeed an early printer by the name of Johann Mentelin and my eye was caught by similarities between Leaf 5 and other works attributed to him. It is plausible that the handwritten name on Leaf 5 is Mentelin.

According to Stephan Füssel (2005) in *Gutenberg and the impact of printing*, the first Bible printed in German in 1466 is attributed to Johann Mentelin. (See Figure 11)

I find the similarities with Leaf 5 striking, although the Bible has a smaller font. Füssel states that:

Mentelin (c.1410-78) used his own typefaces, a Gothic-roman and further purely roman founts. In general he dispensed with fitted initials or woodcuts and concentrated on textually accurate editions of the fathers of the Church... (Füssel 2005, p. 59)

The University of Glasgow holds a complete edition of another book attributed to Mentelin. It is *Alphonsus de Spina: Fortalitium fidei* which is decorated with “... rubric titles supplied in red throughout; book numbers in red and/or blue roman numerals as running headings throughout” (Baldwin, Gardham & Maclean 2014). Leaf 5 is the same size and also matches this description.

![Figure 11. The first German Bible (Füssel 2005)](image)
No more information about leaf 1 was provided by our expert contact at the National Gallery of Victoria.

Leaf 1 is attributed to the printer Martin Schott of Strassburg in the Library’s Alma record, and on the cover label of the document folder in which it was found.

The Gilbert and Ursula Farfel Collection of Incunable and Manuscript Leaves holds a complete book attributed to Martin Schott, and it is the closest visual match I have found. It is *Sermones aurei de sanctis* by Leonardus de Utino, printed in Strassburg in 1483.

The State Library of Victoria holds one leaf of *Sermones aurei de sanctis* by Leonardus de Utino, printed by Martin Schott in Strasbourg not after 1481.
Conclusion

RMIT Library’s five printed leaves were part of the Melbourne College of Printing and Graphic Arts (MCPG) rare book collection. When MCPG amalgamated with RMIT in 1995 its entire library collection became part of RMIT Library’s collection. There is no specific provenance recorded for the 15th century leaves, which are now in the process of being moved to our rare book room.

The MCPG rare book collection was part of long-standing professional relationships between MCPG and Australian and international printing industry bodies and research institutions. The relationships would range from personal friendships between the MCPG chief librarian and Australian as well as international book collectors, through to the Australian Print Council and printing industry associations. There was also liaison with major research institutions such as Kodak in Rochester, New York. Many MCPG teaching staff were Council and industry association members.

A search of Libraries Australia for incunab* and leaf reveals several institutions in this country which own one or more leaves from a book printed before 1500. The State Library of Victoria owns several.

References


Benson, L 2014a, Curator opinion on the 15thC print samples to V Luker, 11 August 2014.

---- 2014b, 15thC printing to V Luker, 11 August 2014.

---- 2014c, More to V Luker, 11 August 2014.


Leonardus de Utino 2014, 'Sermones aurei de sanctis', in Gilbert and Ursula Farfel collection of incunable and manuscript leaves.
