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'Typography' and production of manuscripts and incunabula

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ABSTRACT. This paper describes how the modern type of books slowly came into existence during the middle ages. The first printers modeled their products on these handwritten books but needed – in time – some adjustments because of the differences in production between a manuscript and a printed book and because of the differences between producing for a patron or for an anonymous mass market.

KEYWORDS: Typography, manuscript, incunabulum

WHEN we try to produce well-structured books that are also pleasing to the eye, we stand in a tradition of more than twenty centuries. The appearance of modern western books, however, slowly developed during the middle ages and got its definitive form in the decades round 1500, the first phase of book printing in Europe. Most classical books had the form of scrolls but 'our' type of books, the *codex* form, came into existence before the beginning of the fifth century. The typographical conventions we follow, however, developed during the middle ages.

The Romans had two types of script: a 'capital' font used for inscriptions and formal writing, and a 'cursive' font for personal use. The second type became the book script of the early middle ages. In the seventh century, probably first on the British Isles, these two were combined. One used single capital letters in the 'cursive' script to mark the beginning of sentences. This is the beginning of the use of capitals and lower case in texts. Somewhat later the usage came into existence to distinguish words by placing blanks in between. (In classical books all letters form one big mass.) At the same time also the first punctuation signs were developed.

Capitals are used to distinguish sentences from each other. But most texts need also 'higher' structures. To mark these 'sections' initials were developed, again in the seventh century. Initials are larger letters (two, three, sometimes even more lines high) which have often a different color and some decoration. Because these initials could not be placed in the middle of normal text, they always came at the beginning of a text line or in the margin. Thus also the idea of paragraphs developed.

This principle was gradually expanded. One got used to a hierarchy of initials and other signs to mark specific elements of texts (e.g. paragraph signs: ¶)

When the need arose to add information to the main text which was related to it but not part of it (e.g. explanatory notes) this happened in smaller script, sometimes

between the lines of the main text but often in the margins. These 'notes' are called *glosses*. This is the beginning of our system of (foot)notes. The links between main text and glosses was indicated by signs or by repeating some words from the main text (the *lemma*) in the gloss.

In the early middle ages most books had pages with only one column of text on each page (as in most of our books) but in the later middle ages most books had two columns. This was caused by a wish to fill the pages as much as possible. The most easily produced format of parchment was so wide that if one filled its width wholly with only one line, this made reading difficult. Hence the system with the two smaller columns was developed. This combined an optimum of text on a page with a good readability.

The first printed books, normally called *incunabula*, were produced to look like hand written books. After all everyone was used to that type of book. Because printing could only be done in one color, this implied that the printed pages needed to be completed manually afterwards. Initials, paragraph signs, chapter headings in red, etc. were separately added in most copies.

This last part of the production of printed books was the most expensive part, so printers sought ways to reduce the costs. Woodcuts were introduced als illustrations instead of miniatures and also woodcut initials were developed that could be used during the printing process instead of being added afterwards. Within a hunderd years the manually completion of printed books disappeared.

A major difference between a manuscript and a printed book is that the first is always a unique object and the second must be produced in large numbers to be economically successful. The owner of a manuscript knows what he possesses, so he does not need an indication of the contents. The potential buyer of a printed book does not have this information but has need of it. To fill this need first colophons were printed which gave some information about content and printer, but soon a title page was developed which offered information about the book and which functioned also as advertising.

During the conference these changes in lay out and production will be illustrated by means of a series of images, from a fifth century Virgil manuscript to sixteenth century fable collections. Special attention will be given to Gutenberg, the first printer in European history.