The First Book Printed in Oxford

The short-title description of the first book printed in Oxford is:

Tyrannius Rufinus, *Expositio symboli apostolorum*. Oxford, [Printer of Rufinus], 17 December '1468' [1478]. in-40. [a–d8 e10]. 42 leaves.¹

Its printer did not reveal his name in the three books he printed, nor can he be identified in archival documents. What we know of him is exclusively through the work he produced in Oxford late in 1478 and in 1479. There is only a little of it: his whole known production consists of three quarto books printed in a fount of type that was first used in Cologne by an anonymous jobbing printer working for the enterprising merchant Gerard ten Raem. He was one of several Cologne merchants who in the 1470s financed the publication of small books; in the case of Gerard ten Raem, they were schoolbooks and two editions of the *Modus confitendi*, a popular work of guidance for parish priests, all with dates in 1477 and 1478. When this small venture was nearing its end, someone was apparently sent to Oxford with a small supply of the same type. Perhaps it was an experiment by the Cologne entrepreneur: to bring production to the consumers—in a famous university—instead of shipping printed books overseas and paying import duties when they had reached an English port.

If so, the man who was sent cannot have been the same man who had set the books for the short-lived enterprise in Cologne, for especially the first book he produced, Tyrannius Rufinus, *Expositio symboli apostolorum*, stands out as the work of someone without any significant experience as a compositor but with remarkable confidence in manipulating the text.² The two books printed in 1479 show improved skill in typesetting and equipment, as well as an extension of the fount of type. Better technical support may have been sent from Cologne.


Rufinus’s *Expositio symboli apostolorum* was followed by a scholastic tract, Aegidius de Columna, *De peccato originali*, with the date 14 March 1479. Not until the printing of the third book, Aristoteles, *Ethica ad Nicomachum*, in the Latin translation of Leonardo Bruni Aretino, was a publication by the first Oxford printer related to the curriculum of the university. The printing of the first two books therefore may have been opportunistic, enforcing the impression that a press was set up as an experiment without any clear advance planning.

The Rufinus text as printed in Oxford has spectacular flaws, the most notorious being its colophon date, 17 December 1468, which even as early as 1735 was recognised as doubtful,3 and indeed is almost inexplicable. Since the other two books both have colophons including the date 1479, and are printed in the same fount of type and on related paper stocks, and since the type is not known to have existed before 1477, it is now generally agreed that the year date in the Rufinus must be read as ‘1478’. Another flaw in the Oxford Rufinus edition that meets the eye before further intensive study of the text is its irregular typesetting; pages with wide gaps contrast with pages with very compressed typesetting, sometimes even side by side facing each other (see Fig. 8.2, p. 223).

The *Expositio symboli apostolorum* is a patristic text, often found in the collections of letters of St Jerome (who was his contemporary adversary), to whom it is sometimes erroneously ascribed. By 1478 the text had been printed at least seven times, from c. 1468 in six editions of St Jerome’s letters, and only once, c. 1472, as a separate text, by Ulrich Zell in Cologne.4 It might have been expected that the Zell edition would be the source for the Cologne printer in Oxford, but this is not so.

In 1978, precisely 500 years after the little book was printed, Professor Albinia de la Mare identified the manuscript that had served as printer’s copy for the Oxford book, and with that the first patron of the Oxford printer. She observed that a copy of the printed book had an opening miniature depicting St Jerome in a landscape, which was obviously based on the miniature in a manuscript

---

3 Conyers Middleton, *A dissertation concerning the origin of printing in England, shewing that it was first introduced and practised by our countryman William Caxton, at Westminster: and not, as is commonly believed, by a foreign printer at Oxford* (Cambridge, 1735).

4 Albinia de la Mare listed the early printed editions of Jerome’s works in which the *Expositio* by Rufinus was included in: De la Mare and Hellinga, *The First Book Printed in Oxford*, see n. 1 above, Appendix II (pp. 230–238). To her list should be added the edition of Jerome’s Letters, Mainz, Peter Schoeffer, 7 September 1470 (GW 12424–12425, ISTC ihoo165000) fol. [b]10v, sqq. The edition printed by Ulrich Zell in Cologne, c. 1472 (UK 1057, BMC I, p. 191, ISTC ir0035100, GW m08074) is a different version of the text.