Summary
This notice describes seven typefaces in use at Robert I Estienne’s press from its start in 1526 up to 1530, when it systematically began to introduce types in the new, so-called, Aldine fashion. All but one of the seven typefaces came from Colines’s press, the sole exception being a Hebrew that Estienne himself may have engraved.


The Printing Types of the Young Robert I Estienne; 1526–1530

The Paris printer Robert I Estienne is certainly one of the most fascinating characters of sixteenth-century book history, a distinction he shares with Aldus and Plantin. Estienne was a prolific author, a first-class editor, a successful printer, and a conscientious publisher. His life and work have been well described by Armstrong. It would be redundant to try to present a summary here.

In the field of type design, he is mainly remembered for his role as the initiator of the Grecs du Roy (1543–1550), which he had engraved by Claude Garamont, and the introduction in the autumn of 1530 of three splendid Romans in a new style, leading European typography into a new epoch, fittingly labelled the ‘Aldine revolution’ by Barker.

This short notice attempts to find out what typographic trails Estienne followed before that momentous date of September 1530, when he introduced those three new Romans. There are several paths leading to some understanding of this question. First, one can explore the books he printed in this early stage of his career, say from September 1526 to September 1530. Second, one can follow the indications, however scarce, that Estienne himself gives in the introductions of his publications and in his autobiographical apology of 1552.

Finally, there are the notes of one of his apprentices, the punchcutter and type-founder Guillaume I Le Bé. Let us first consider this last source.

Robert I Estienne’s interest and role in type design is recorded in a general way in a passage in the c.1643 Le Bé Memorandum. This handwritten notice is an historical commentary on the inventory of the Le Bé typefoundry mentioned below. It contains biographical notes about French punchcutters, typefounders and printers active in the sixteenth and the early seventeenth centuries. It was compiled about 1643 by one of Guillaume’s I Le Bé’s children, probably Guillaume II, but Guillaume I clearly provided the bulk of the information on the sixteenth century.

Guillaume I Le Bé (1524/5–98), born into a family of paper merchants, was himself trained in the craft of punchcutting by several masters, including Estienne and Garamont. During the years 1545–50 he worked in Venice. On returning to Paris, he went back into the paper trade, and also into the craft of cutting type, mainly music and Hebrew. In the field of typefounding, he was instrumental in building a core collection of punches and matrices by Garamont, Granjon, Haultin, Villiers and other contemporary masters. It became a basis for the leading Paris typefoundry which lasted through four generations of Le Bés and two of Fourniers until the beginning of the nineteenth century. In the history of typefounding, its role was at least as important as that of the Egenolff-Berner-Luther typefoundry in Frankfurt. The latter has become more renowned mainly as a result of its frequently issued type-specimens.

Le Bé is also the source of two other documents which are of prime importance for the historiography of sixteenth-century typography. The first is an inventory of the early typefoundry, preserved in an eighteenth-century copy in the hand of the elder Fournier. The lost original must have been written (or

5. Preserved in a private archive, it has been published by Carter, 1967.
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updated) by Guillaume II around 1618, as the inventory includes punches and matrices from the Du Chemin music heritage. But the inventory evidently refers to a collection originally built up by Guillaume I.

The second source is contained in two scrapbooks with autographical annotations and smoke proofs or printed specimens mainly of Le Bé’s own type production, broadly arranged in chronological order. They are preserved in the Bibliothèque nationale in Paris. Guillaume I Le Bé clearly was a well informed witness and the documents deriving directly or indirectly from him merit full attention.

The passage about Estienne in the c.1643 Le Bé Memorandum runs as follows:

Robert Estienne filz dudit henry cy dessus, c’estant instruit avec son pere, et encor plus en la fonderye, avec son ayeul Simon de Colines, homme expert aux caracteres, se seruit des caracteres du dit Colines, et y en augmenta quelques, en autres d’une sorte de lettre de la grosseur de St. Augustin qu’il nomma Sylvius, et autres sortes de lettres qu’il faisoit, et aprit tellement les particularitez de la fonderye de caracteres, tant chez son ayeul de Colines que chez son pere, qu’il se mit à faire et faire des caracteres hebreuix dont il imprimia la bible in 4vo... .

The main information in this passage is clear: the earliest types of Robert Estienne were provided by Colines; Estienne was knowledgeable in the art of type-making and introduced a new Roman and some Hebrews.

Checking this information in the pre-1530 imprints of Robert Estienne, one finds that Estienne did then not possess any of the types that later brought him celebrity but that his type cases contained founts for seven typefaces, all but one in use at the press of Colines (who was his stepfather and predecessor as tenant of the Estienne family house at the sign of St. John Baptist). Estienne had founts, in some cases probably matrices, of four Romans, one Greek, one Gothic, and one Hebrew, the latter being the only one not owned by Colines.

As far as I have been able to reconstruct, the chronology of the use of these seven founts is as follows: in 1526, the first year of activity of his press, Estienne seems to have had access to two Colines founts: first, a Roman of Small Pica size (73 mm for 20 lines) and a Greek on the same size. The following year, in his first large publication venture, the Latin folio Bible of 1527–28, Estienne began using three more Romans plus a Gothic and a Hebrew, bringing the total number of his founts to seven. They constituted the stock of Estienne’s type cases, until the autumn of 1530, when, as said above, he introduced, three newly designed and indeed outstanding Romans (which many tend to ascribe to Garamont). Estienne owned no Italic before 1532, though the Basle Italic on Pica (80 mm) and the Colines Italic on English (90 mm) were present in Paris from 1523 and 1528 onwards.

The earliest type in use at Estienne’s press was a Small Pica Roman (73 mm) borrowed from Colines [fig. 1–2]. It was Colines’s second of that size; used from 1525 onwards, it is the much heralded text type of the Horae which Colines and Geoffroy Tory issued in that year. It was one of first Romans North of Alps to shed the influence the then popular Basle-style Romans. Colines put it to use as his workhorse for compositions in the octavo format. He used it over his whole career, albeit more sparingly from 1536 onwards, when his new Cicero (80 mm) became available.

Robert I Estienne used this second Colines Small Pica Roman as a standard text type from the very beginning of his independent activity as a printer in

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1. See below, p. 110 and 167.


8. Res. X 1665 and ms. NAF 4528; published by Omont, 1887.

9. i.e. Henri I Estienne.

10. Robert Estienne, son of the foregoing Henry, was taught by his father, and even more, when typefounding was concerned, by his grandfather, Simon de Colines, who was an expert in types. The younger Estienne used the types of De Colines and added other to them, among these a face on English [St. Augustin] which he named ‘Sylvius’ and types of other kinds that he made. He learned typefounding so particularly, under Colines and under his father, that he set him himself to make or to get made a type for Hebrew. With this he printed the 4vo Bible... (Translation Carter, 1967, 19).


13. at the press of Conrad Resch and Pierre Vidoue (Moreau, 3: no. 31).

