THE ITALIAN RENAISSANCE BOOK: CATALOGUES, CENSUSES AND SURVIVAL

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The seeds that flourished in Italian sixteenth-century publishing were mostly sown in the previous century.\(^1\) Printing with moveable type first appeared in Italy in the 1460s. The canonical date is 1465 in the Benedictine monastery of Subiaco some way to the east of Rome. This puzzling location for such an epochal event might be ascribable to German monks among the congregation who might have been acquainted with or offered hospitality to a pair of footloose German typographers, Conrad Sweynheim and Arnold Pannartz. Might remains however the operative word in all the debate about the appearance of printing in Italy. Recently fingers have pointed at evidence suggesting earlier beginnings. A contract drawn up in 1463 between a German craftsman and a parish priest in Bondeno, a small town near Ferrara, sets out a small but intriguing publishing programme. It seems to have come to nothing, but it might on the other hand be related to what is known as the Parsons fragment. These are the remaining leaves of a German devotional work rendered into the Italian vernacular which, on the basis of the type and of the metal-cut illustrations, incunabulists would like to assign to 1462–1463. The language of the

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\(^1\) This paper is original in terms of its organisation and writing, but in its content brings together, for the convenience of a reader interested in the USTC project, a summary of themes and issues discussed in writings spread out over more than a decade. For the general background, see: N. Harris, ‘History of the Book in Italy’, in M. Suarez S.J.-H.R. Woudhuysen (eds.), The Oxford Companion to the Book (Oxford, 2010), vol. I, pp. 257–269. The concise nature of the OCB article meant that an overflow, including the statistics gathered as background material, were published in N. Harris, ‘Ombre della storia del libro italiano’, in L. Pon and C. Kallendorf (eds.), The Books of Venice = Il libro veneziano (Venezia-Lido di Venezia-New Castle, Delaware, 2008), pp. 455–516. For English-language readers, as well as the classic study by H.F. Brown, The Venetian Printing Press 1469–1800. An Historical Study based upon Documents for the Most Part Hitherto Unpublished (London, 1891), an excellent portrait of Renaissance Italian publishing, albeit concentrated primarily on literary matters, is provided in the two monographs by B. Richardson, Print Culture in Renaissance Italy: The Editor and the Vernacular Text, 1470–1600 (Cambridge, 1994); Printing, Writers and Readers in Renaissance Italy (Cambridge, 1999).
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2 For the text of the 1463 document, see: A. Franceschini, *Artisti a Ferrara in età umanistica e rinascimentale. Testimonianze archivistiche. Parte I: dal 1341 al 1471* (Ferrara, 1993), doc. 1004. Excerpts from the same, drawing it to the attention of book historians, appear in A. Nuovo, *Il commercio librario a Ferrara tra XV e XVI secolo. La bottega di Domenico Sivieri*, (Firenze, 1998), p. 9, who however makes no reference to the Parsons fragment (see the review in *The Library*, s. 7, vol. 2 (2001), pp. 73–75). This important example of prototypography was discovered in the 1920s by Rosenbach in Munich. After its purchase by the Louisiana book-collector Edward Alexander Parsons (1878–1962), its whereabouts were unknown until it resurfaced in 1998 to be sold at Christie’s in London and purchased for the Scheide collection in Princeton. The assumption that it was printed in Italy and therefore that it may be the earliest surviving example of typography in the peninsula rests on the fact that the language of the text is Italian, but the hypothesis is entirely reasonable. The date attributed derives from the state of the letter-forms, which have been filed to make them fit together, and on the metal-cut illustrations which were employed in Germany c. 1460. Arguments for seeing the 1463 document and the printed fragment as belonging to the same enterprise are advanced by P. Scapecci, ‘Subiaco 1465 oppure [Bondeno 1463]? Analisi del frammento Parsons-Scheide’, *La Bibliofilia*, vol. 103 (2001), pp. 1–24.

translation places the operation somewhere in the Po valley, more precisely in the triangle formed by the towns of Bologna, Ferrara, and Parma. The coincidence between these two facts might however be no more than a coincidence.

The history of Renaissance printing in Italy went through three phases, which can also be observed in other European countries, albeit in an attenuated fashion. The first of these involved the introduction of the new *ars artificialiter scribendi* in numerous Italian cities in a process that started in the 1460s and petered out in the 1490s. The pattern consisted in a roving, usually German, typographer, who arrived in a small town with a press and the wherewithal to cast type. A bargain was struck with some local businessman, who put up the monies to purchase a large advance supply of paper and work began. Large quantities of these early incunabula have come down to us and we habitually admire them, without realising that the pristine condition of many items proves how only rarely have they been read. The printers quite often seem to have behaved more like door-to-door salesmen than bearers of an imperishable cultural message and thus to have regularly gullied investors into producing large works that no one wanted to buy, so that these early ventures quickly went bankrupt. Time and time again the bibliographical record shows the printer moving on within a twelvemonth or so; sometimes the archive record reveals that matters were even more lively, with the errant typographer hurriedly departing to avoid being imprisoned for debt. The fondness of incunabulists for what is known as ‘Proctor order’, or the arrangement in catalogues of