



The 15cBOOKTRADE is an international project that uses the material evidence from thousands of surviving 15<sup>th</sup>-century printed books to assess the distribution, sale, and reception of books in the Renaissance, and therefore the impact of the introduction of printing on early modern society.<sup>1</sup> We capture ownership inscriptions, stamps, prices, binding and decoration styles, and manuscript annotations and transform them in historical evidence.

The five-year project is funded by the European Research Council (ERC)<sup>2</sup> and led by Cristina Dondi, the Oakeshott Senior Research Fellow in the Humanities at Lincoln College, Oxford.

Books printed between 1450 (Gutenberg's invention) and 1500 (conventional cut-off date) are known as incunabula. Some 28,000 editions survive today, in some 800,000 copies, located in about 4,000 different public libraries, mostly in Europe and North America.

Each of these copies has a different history which can be reconstructed with the help of material evidence and of documentary and bibliographical evidence (historic library catalogues, booksellers and auctions catalogues, etc): this is known as copy specific information, or provenance, or material evidence, or post-production evidence. 500 years of existence can hardly pass unnoticed!

The idea that underpins the project is to use a bottom-up approach to address four fundamental objectives relating to the introduction of printing in the West which have so far eluded scholarship, partly because of lack of evidence, partly because of the lack of effective tools to deal with existing evidence:

(1) The distribution and trade-routes, national and international, of 15<sup>th</sup>-century printed books, along with the identity of the buyers and users (private, institutional, religious, lay, female, male, and by profession) and their reading practices; (2) the books' contemporary market value; (3) the transmission and dissemination of the texts they contain, and (4) the circulation and re-use of the illustrations they contain.

Two international databases have been created to collect and investigate the information. Gathered data are also used to create a scientific visualisation of the movement of 15<sup>th</sup>-century printed books, and of the text they contain, over time and space, and of the creation and dispersal of library collections: <http://15cv.trade>

**MATERIAL EVIDENCE IN INCUNABULA** <http://data.cerl.org/mei/search>

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<sup>1</sup> <http://15cbooktrade.ox.ac.uk/> all areas of investigation are here extensively illustrated.

<sup>2</sup> The European Research Council (ERC) is a European funding initiative, designed to support the best scientists, engineers and scholars in Europe. Its mandate is to encourage the highest quality research in Europe, selected by peer review evaluation, through competitive funding and to support investigator-initiated frontier research across all fields of research, on the basis of scientific excellence.

The book trade differs from other trades operating in the medieval and early modern periods in that the goods traded survive in considerable numbers. Not only do they survive, but many of them bear stratified evidence of their history in the form of marks of ownership, prices, manuscript annotations, binding and decoration styles.

The database Material Evidence in Incunabula (MEI), conceived by Cristina Dondi, developed by Alex Jahnke of Data Conversion Group - the University of Göttingen, hosted and maintained by CERL, gathers together this kind of evidence for thousands of surviving 15th-century printed books. To date, MEI includes over 10,200 editions in over 25,000 copies, from 338 European and American libraries, mostly gathered from book in hand examination, though we are also reversing data from printed catalogues. Over 10,500 former owners are listed in the Index of Owners, and their marginal annotations classified and described (this is unparalleled evidence of the actual use of these books, hence of the spread and penetration of new knowledge in society). An up to date list of contributing libraries, of the editors who created the records, funding received, training provided, papers and articles delivered and published, can be found on the MEI pages of the CERL website.<sup>3</sup>

MEI introduced an innovative approach to the recording of provenance: the application of geographical (GeoNames) and chronological indicators applied to every element of provenance, to track the movement of books over space and time during their 500 years of life. Now we are in the position to visualise the movement of thousands books, and to understand patterns and trends in the use and survival of early printed books.

### **THE PRICE OF PRINTED BOOKS IN THE 15<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY**

For the study of the economic dimension of the impact of printing on early modern society the project relies on unique documentary evidence — the unpublished ledger of a Venetian bookseller which, between 1484 and 1488, registers the sale of 25,000 printed books with their prices. Scholars working on any area of classical through to early modern texts (from school and devotional books to legal, medical, theological, classical publications, etc.) will find here evidence of the sales records, hence the reception and market value, of works they are studying, which comes from a source both authoritative and representative, a major bookselling outlet in the heart of the most important printing city of the 15th century. Cristina Dondi is preparing a commented edition of the ledger with Prof. Neil Harris.

**TEXT-INC** <http://textinc.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/>

This is an international database to research the corpus of texts printed in the 15th century, that is the multiple works and texts, including dedication letters, verses, etc., contained in the c.28,000 editions which survive from the 15th century. The purpose is to understand which texts from the classical and medieval period were deemed worth publishing with the new medium along with contemporary texts, and to highlight the social context of the production

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.cerl.org/resources/mei/main>. MEI is linked to the [Incunabula Short Title Catalogue \(ISTC\)](#), created by the British Library and powered by CERL, from which it derives the bibliographical records, and it uniquely allows the user to combine searches of bibliographical records (extracted from ISTC) with copy specific records. Its first creation, in 2010, was funded by the British Academy, and further development is funded by the ERC. MEI is hosted by CERL, and freely available on its website.

of books: editors, often University characters, assisted by their students, and supported by the dedicatees of their prefaces and verses, worked closely with printers.

## **ILLUSTRATION**

The project is experimenting the application, to 15<sup>th</sup>-century printed images, of instance-based (i.e. image) and class-based (i.e. text) retrieval. This work, done in co-operation with the Visual Geometry Group (Oxford Engineering Faculty), aims to provide scholars with a tool to systematically track and explore the production, re-use, circulation, exchange, and copy of the same woodblock, iconographic subject, artistic style, etc. in 15<sup>th</sup>-century printed editions, enabling them to tackle long-standing historical questions.

The work necessary to reach our objectives is huge. It requires the specialist skills of book cataloguers with the palaeographical knowledge to be able to read ownership inscriptions in Latin, Greek, and any European vernacular language, who can date and locate a binding or a decoration style to 15<sup>th</sup>-century Italy, or 16<sup>th</sup>-century Germany or 17<sup>th</sup>-century England, who can identify a coat of arms, who can distinguish different types of marginal annotations, from corrections, comments, to censorship, who know how to trace back the history of a book using booksellers and auctioneers catalogues and library acquisition registers.

Further, it required the development of appropriate database systems to not only record but retrieve intelligently the valuable data.

Finally, it necessarily relies on extensive collaboration. The 15cBOOKTRADE Project coordinates the work of very many people, in different countries, over several years. It is the largest project to date totally centred on incunabula and it builds on and brings together decades of specialist cataloguing and research on incunabula, as well as making available completely new data and an innovative way to use these data for historical research. The role of Cristina Dondi as Secretary of CERL has been, of course, essential. Just as important, we work very closely with the other developers of digital tools for the incunabula period, ISTC, GW, and the Atlas of Early Printing, and make extensive use of freely available digitisations.

But this is the only sensible way. If we want to understand, and communicate, how newly printed books impacted the lives of different segments of 15<sup>th</sup>-century population, spreading knowledge, information, increasing literacy levels, supporting the growth of universities, creating a new business, contributing to the international trade, we better have a good look at the books themselves and find effective way to communicate our findings.

## **TEAM**

The team consists of the Principal Investigator Cristina Dondi, four researchers specialised in Palaeography, Bibliography, History of Libraries and the transmission of texts, and one project coordinator (Birgit Mikus). They are based in Venice (Sabrina Minuzzi), the British Library (Alessandra Panzanelli), and Oxford (Geri Della Rocca De Candal, Matilde Malaspina). We work closely with two IT units (at the Bodleian Library and at the University of Göttingen) and two Oxford Engineering departments: Prof. Andrew Zisserman and his team (Dr Abhishek Dutta, Yujie Zhong, Ankush Gupta) of the Department of Visual Geometry, and Prof. Min Chen and Dr Simon Walton, of the Oxford e-Research Centre, who created the visualisation suite.  
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