Cataloguing Incunabula

Introduction

Incunabula or incunables are Western books printed before 1501, in the first half-century of the history of printing with movable type. They have been an area of special interest to scholars and collectors since at least the late eighteenth century, and a considerable literature has been produced over the last two hundred years discussing, listing and describing them. Dating from a period when the majority of books were written by hand, incunabula have as much in common in terms of design and content with medieval manuscripts as with later printed books. In particular, they often lack those conventions of presentation on which library cataloguers tend to rely: title pages, imprints, and numbered pages. This makes cataloguing rules largely designed for post-1500 printed books difficult to apply, and scholarly catalogues of incunabula generally follow their own descriptive conventions, using normalised forms of titles and imprints, and relying greatly on reference to pre-existing bibliographic descriptions.

Unless your library is planning a dedicated catalogue of incunabula, you will be cataloguing your fifteenth-century holdings on the same system as your more recent books. Some degree of compromise between scholarly standards for incunabula and those for post-1500 printed books will therefore be necessary. A useful exercise before beginning might be to look at what information is already available about your incunabula and to ask yourself what gaps you can fill with your catalogue. In all but a very few cases there is little point in making detailed bibliographic descriptions which duplicate information already available elsewhere. Information about the specific copies in your library may however be lacking, and scholarly interest in material evidence relating to a book's early owners and how they used their books has greatly increased in recent years. In most cases, this will be the area on which you should concentrate.

Preliminary steps

Your first port of call should be the *Incunabula Short Title Catalogue* (ISTC), available online at http://data.cerl.org/istc/_search. This gives brief details of every known incunable, together with a comprehensive list of copies, references to published descriptions and, where available, links to digitized versions. Your library's incunables should be listed too; if they are not, you should contact the ISTC with details when you have finished your cataloguing project.

Although there is little descriptive detail in ISTC, it will point you to other catalogues and bibliographies with fuller descriptions. Sadly, only a few of these are available online; of these the most important is the *Gesamtkatalog der Wiegendrucke* (often abbreviated to GW; English version at http://www.gesamtkatalogderwiegendrucke.de/GWEN.xhtml), a bibliographical catalogue covering the same ground as the ISTC in much more detail. Begun in 1925, it has to date only reached the letter H. The Bodleian Library's *Catalogue of books printed in the fifteenth century* (Bod-Inc) can be searched at http://incunables.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/; its emphasis is on the textual contents of the books rather than their physical make-up. The online resource TEXT-inc

(http://textinc.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/, in progress) uses similar descriptive standards to Bod-Inc, applied to the complete corpus of fifteenth-century printed texts.

Larger libraries may have a few of the early incunabula bibliographies and catalogues on their shelves. Ludwig Hain's pioneering *Repertorium bibliographicum* (1826-1838, reprinted 1948 and 1966) is still useful, and combined with W.A. Copinger's *Supplement* (1895-1902, reprinted 1926) and Dietrich Reichling's *Appendices* (1905-1914, reprinted 1953) covers most of the field. You may also find at least the earlier volumes of the British Museum's *Catalogue of books printed in the XVth century* (1908-2007; later volumes issued by the British Library), and of the print version of the *Gesamtkatalog der Wiegendrucke* (1925-). Both of these latter works provide comprehensive and authoritative descriptions of the incunabula they cover, and many editions found in your library are likely to appear in one or other of them.

A useful supplement to these are the many digital facsimiles of individual copies which libraries have put online. Many of these can now be accessed via ISTC. If you can't find a detailed description of the edition you are cataloguing you may at least be able to compare it with digital images of another copy.

Having identified your incunable in ISTC and, let us hope, found fuller descriptions in one or more of the reference sources above, your next task will be to check that your copy matches that described in the source, and is complete. Bibliographic descriptions of incunabula tend to be divided into three parts. The first part will be a normalized statement of author, title and imprint; the second a more elaborate description of the physical make-up, and the third a transcription in quasi-facsimile of selected passages from the book, including but not necessarily limited to the title (if given), the incipit (opening of text), the explicit (end of text), incipits and explicits of any supplementary texts, and the colophon (if given). The location of these passages will generally be given in terms of leaf number and the appropriate designation of recto or verso. (Anyone used to working with early manuscripts will recognise that these conventions have much more in common with those used in manuscript catalogues than those found in catalogues of later printed books.) Note any discrepancies or imperfections you find.

In view of the marked differences between scholarly conventions of incunabula cataloguing described above, and those applied to later printed books on which library standards such as DCRM(B) are generally based, you would be well advised to make a preliminary decision as to which you are going to follow in your catalogue as far as possible. The scholarly conventions of incunabula description have the virtue of being widely used and understood by researchers and of proven efficacy in dealing with this kind of material. Library standards derived from ISBD are widely applied in library catalogues and have the virtue of consistency. From here on we shall call the specialist incunabula conventions option A, and the general library conventions option B.

Describing the edition

As with any cataloguing, a brief description which is accurate in every respect is greatly preferable to a long and detailed one which contains errors. The following guidelines cover the most likely areas of the description which you are likely to use.

Headings

Incunabula catalogues generally use Latinate forms of name for authors, as used in the earliest library catalogues and in catalogues of medieval manuscripts to this day. Thus we might find headings such as Publius Terentius Afer, Aurelius Augustinus or Hieronymus for authors we would generally now designate as Terence, Saint Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, or Saint Jerome. In almost all cases you will want to use the same forms of name, whether formulated according to AACR2, RDA or another code, to index the authors of your incunables as for the authors of your later books. Since medievalists tend to use the earlier forms, however, it would be worth retaining them somewhere in your record, perhaps in a contents note, so that they can still be found in keyword searching.

> *Heading:* Pliny, the Elder.
> *Contents note:* Contents: Gaius Plinius Secundus. Historia naturalis

Title and statement of responsibility

Option A. Take the title from a standard source on incunabula such as ISTC. If there are supplementary titles they are probably best relegated to a contents note. There is no need to enclose the title in square brackets.

> Historia naturalis

> Antidotarius animae

Option B. Follow the instructions in DCRM(B) chapter 1 or a similar code. Note that in the absence of a title page you can use any formal statement such as a 'titulus' (the heading of the main text generally beginning with a phrase such as "Here beginneth" or "Incipit") or the explicit or colophon (cf DCRM(B) section 0C3). In such a case make a note to give the source of the title. (Given the rarity of title pages at this date, you may think it best to give such a note even if the title is taken from a title page in the usual way). Generally enclose the title in square brackets only if it is taken from a source outside the publication.

> *Title:* Caii Plynii Secundi naturalis historiae liber I
> *Note:* Title from incipit.

> Liber meditationum ac orationum deuota[rum] qui anthidotarius anime dicitur.

Give any additional information relating to titles, authors or editors in a note if necessary.

> Edited by Johannes Andreas de Bussis.

<u>Imprint</u>

Option A. Take the imprint from a standard source on incunabula such as ISTC. Note that the use of square brackets in these sources varies from that used in library cataloguing of later books. In incunable catalogues square brackets are only used for information taken from outside the publication, so if, for example, the printer is only identified by his device, his name is still given in the imprint in a normalized form without square brackets.

> Venice : Nicolaus Jenson, 1472.

Option B. Follow the instructions in DCRM(B) chapter 4 or a similar code. If it is given in the publication at all, imprint information for an incunable is most likely to be found in the colophon; if transcribing it from here you are not required to use square brackets. Incunable colophons can be very discursive, however, and it may be better to give the imprint in a normalized form here in square brackets, transcribing the colophon in fuller form in a note. Give the source of a transcribed imprint in a note if not taken from a title page.

> *Imprint:* Impressus in oppido Delfensi : per me Christianu[m] Snellaert, [14 Apr. 1495].
> *Note:* Imprint from colophon; date reads in full: Anno d[omi]ni millesi[m]o q[ua]dringe[n]tesimo xcv[mo] xiiij. die mensis Aprilis.

> *Imprint:* [Venice : Nicolaus Jenson, 1472].
> *Note:* Colophon: Caii Plynii Secundi naturalis historiae libri tricesimiseptimi et ultimi finis impressi Venetiis per Nicolaum Ienson Gallicum .M.CCCC.LXXII. Nicolao Trono inclyto Venetiarum Duce.

<u>Physical description</u>

Option A. Give the total number of leaves (not pages) in a perfect copy (without square brackets), irrespective of whether they are all present in your copy. If there is printed foliation or pagination in your copy you can mention this in a note.

> 358 leaves

> *Description:* 168 leaves
> *Note:* Leaves c2-t6 numbered 1-133, with errors.

Option B. Follow the instructions in DCRM(B) chapter 5 or a similar code. Note that giving extent in terms of leaves rather than pages is preferred for incunabula (but if there is printed pagination, you would obviously give the extent in terms of pages).

> [358] leaves
> [33], 133, [2] leaves

Details of illustrations, format and size can be given in the same terms as they would be for later books irrespective of which option you have chosen. Give the illustrative

technique (usually, but not always, "woodcut"), if possible. It is probably preferable to give the height in terms of page size and in millimetres rather than binding size and centimetres.

430 mm (fol.)

A signature statement is generally expected in incunabula descriptions. You will usually find one in one of the resources listed above, in which case it is simply a matter of checking it against your copy and then putting it into a note. If none is available you can construct one yourself, but this is something that is probably best not attempted unless you are confident of getting it right. (The same can be said for notes on such matters as types used and numbers of lines to a page, which you will see in many incunable descriptions). Many incunabula lack printed signatures, in which case the statement is enclosed in square brackets.

Signatures: [a^{12} b^8 c-h^{10} i^{12} k-p^{10} q^8 r-z^{10} A-D^{10} E^6 F-G^{10} H-M^8 N^{10} O^{12}] ([a1] and [O11-12] blank).

Signatures: a-f^8 g^8+^{1} h-z^8 A-M^8 (a1 blank)

Contents

A contents note will often be necessary to list works found in the edition which are not accounted for elsewhere in the description, to give the author and title of the main work in a form in which it may be more commonly cited and searched for, or to add information about editors, dedicatees or translators.

Option A. Detailed contents notes in scholarly catalogues usually give page references in terms of leaf number, recto or verso, and at least the incipit of each text. The format used in Bod-inc and TEXT-inc seems likely to become standard for this kind of cataloguing in the future. As TEXT-inc progresses, the need for individual catalogues to provide this information is however going to be much reduced, and in most cases a reference to a description in one or other of these sources is all that will be required.

Contents: Gaius Plinius Secundus, [Letter addressed to] "Marcus" [i.e. Baebius Macer], [a2]r-v; Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus. De viris illustribus, extract, [a2]v; Gaius Plinius Secundus, [Letter addressed to] "Tacitus", [a2]v-[a3]r; Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus. Apologeticum, extract (cap. 2.6-7), [a3]r; Eusebius Caesariensis. Chronicon, extract, [a3]r; Gaius Plinius Secundus. Historia naturalis, Books 1-37, edited by Johannes Andreas de Bussis, [a4]r-[O9]v, including table of contents, [a5]r-[b8]v; colophon, O9r; Johannes Andreas de Bussis, "Epistola" [addressed to Paul II, dated in the sixth year of his pontificate, i.e. between 31 Aug. 1469 and 30 Aug. 1470], [O9]r-[O10]r.

Option B. Follow the instructions in DCRM(B) 7B16 or a similar code as far as possible, but prefer forms of name and title as given in ISTC or TEXT-inc.

Contents: Gaius Plinius Secundus. [Letter to Baebius Macer] -- Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus. De viris illustribus [extract] -- Gaius Plinius Secundus. [Letter to Tacitus] -- Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus. Apologeticum [extract]-- Eusebius Caesariensis. Chronicon [extract] -- Gaius Plinius Secundus. Historia naturalis / [edited by Johannes Andreas de Bussis] -- Johannes Andreas de Bussis. Epistola [addressed to Paul II].

References

References to authoritative published descriptions of incunables are arguably the most important part of any incunable description. Ideally, you should have checked all the references you give against your copy. In practice of course this won't always be possible, and if a reference is given in ISTC it is fairly safe to assume that it will be applicable to all the copies of that particular edition. References should be given according to a standard format, either (*option A)* the *Reference works used in ISTC* (available at https://www.cerl.org/help/istc/editing/referenceworks) or (*option B)* the RBMS *Standard Citation Forms for Rare Materials Cataloging* (https://rbms.info/scf/) or its printed predecessor.

> BMC V, 172
> Bod-inc P-360
> Goff P788
> Hain-Copinger 13089*
> ISTC ip00788000
> Oates 1632

Describing the copy

As mentioned above, the particular features of your copy are likely to be of at least as much interest to researchers as the bibliographic description of the edition, and it would be unwise to skimp on, still less ignore, this area. Although there are no codified rules for description, a consensus has emerged over the past twenty years or so as to the minimum amount of information desirable. Useful pointers and examples for the description of provenance and bindings can be found in the pamphlet *Guidelines for the cataloguing of rare books* (1997 and subsequent revisions) produced by the Rare Books and Special Collections Group of CILIP, and available as a pdf from https://www.cilip.org.uk/rare-books-and-special-collections-group/bibliographic-standards/advice-and-guidance.

Provenance

Early book scholars will be interested in the ownership history of the copy, and any evidence as to how it was used. Give at least the names of former owners (as far as you can identify them) and the type of provenance evidence (inscription, bookplate, armorial stamp etc.) in a note. If time and skills permit, transcribe and date inscriptions (including mottoes, which can link a book to a particular owner) and bookplates, and note any sales in which the book appeared. If you cannot decipher an early inscription, at least note its presence, perhaps including as much as you can make out. Note at least the presence and amount of any annotations, and, if you

can, the date, location (marginal or interlinear, or on the end papers) and type of hand.

> Provenance: Inscribed "This booke standys in ordyr Mastyr Langton" on leaf [a1] recto, England, late 15th century (Thomas Langton, bishop of Winchester, royal chaplain, and archbishop-elect of Canterbury)

> Provenance: Inscribed on verso of first blank: "Magistro martino lyndesay attinet hic Codex."

> Marginal notes in a late 15th-century English hand.

Bindings

Though the detailed description of bindings can seem daunting, notes giving a general indication of what is there will provide a useful pointer to researchers. Any incunable that has survived in its original binding will be of particular interest, and bindings from this period, generally bulky affairs of wood, leather and metal, are easily recognised. Aim to give at least the materials, the type of decoration (blind stamps, gold tooling etc.) and the presence of any "furniture" (metal bosses, chains) or evidence that it was once there (holes for staples). You should also record the presence of fragments of other printed or manuscript books used as fly-leaves in the binding (generally referred to as printed / manuscript waste). More detailed and precise description of these aspects will always be welcome, but (as ever) only if you are confident of doing it accurately.

> Binding: Fifteenth-century blind tooled calf over wooden boards (tools include scrolls reading 'ihesus' and 'maria' and a panel with five pairs of animals and birds in roundels); sewn on four supports; traces of clasps.

> Binding: Limp parchment on four supports; remains of ties; fore edge lettering

Variations and imperfections

If your copy of a book is imperfect, you will obviously need to note it here. You may also find you have a copy of an edition which exists in two or more recorded variants, and if that is so you will need to give details here. You may more rarely find your copy is an unrecorded variant, differing from the published description in some minor but noticeable way. Your copy may contain leaves from other editions, be "made up" from several copies (generally betrayed by different leaf sizes or differing styles of decoration), or have had significant repair involving loss of text. All these situations are worth recording.

> Imperfect: Wants leaves a1-3 of part 1, and B6 (blank) and f10 of part 2. Some leaves defective.

> Variant: Colophon dated "die .xxi. Aprilis"; cf. Hain-Copinger-Reichling.

Decoration and manuscript additions

Many incunabula contain manuscript additions, added by professional scribes or illuminators to complete the book or personalise it for a wealthy early owner. The provision of more-or-less decorated initials at the beginning of sessions, often combined with highlighting of capital letters in the text, is much the most common. More elaborate decoration may be supplied, including hand-painted illustrations, floral or foliage decoration and illumination (decoration in gold leaf). Printed illustrations may be hand coloured (with varying degrees of sophistication) and supplied with manuscript captions. Noble owners may have had their coats of arms painted onto the foot of the opening page, and later owners may have removed them. All of this will convey information as to the early ownership and history of the book, and at least the more elaborate decoration should be recorded.

> Decoration: Headings, chapter numbers, initials and paragraph marks supplied in red; red capital strokes and underlining.

> Decoration: Illuminated miniatures and decorated initials at the beginnings of books on leaves [a2] recto, [i9] verso, [r7]v and [r8]r, [A6]v, and [D2]v. Initials in blue, pink or green with white tracery decoration, Germany, late 1470s or 1480s.

> Old shelfmark: C-1-5.

Access points

Given the wide variation in medieval names, the provision of adequate access points for your records is of particular importance. In addition to authors and editors, you should provide added headings for printers, former owners and any other identifiable figure associated with the book such as binders or illuminators. The form of headings will obviously need to be consistent with the other headings in your catalogue, but you will find many in the Library of Congress Authority File at http://authorities.loc.gov/. The CERL Thesaurus (https://thesaurus.cerl.org/) and the indexes to the Bodleian Library's catalogue of incunabula (http://incunables.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/) will provide many of the rest. Paul Needham's *Index possessorum incunabulorum* (IPI), available online at https://ipi.cerl.org/, is an essential resource for identifying owners of early books.

Bibliography

A catalogue of books printed in the fifteenth century now in the Bodleian Library (Oxford: University Press, 2005)
Catalogue of Books Printed in the XVth Century now in the British Museum [Library] (London, 1908-)
Copinger, W.A. *Supplement to Hain's Repertorium bibliographicum* (London: Sotheran, 1895-1902)
Davies, Martin. *The Gutenberg Bible* (London, 1996)
Gesamtkatalog der Wiegendrucke (Leipzig: Hiersemann, 1925-)
Guidelines for the cataloguing of rare books Rev. ed. (London : CILIP Rare Books and Special Collections Group, 2007)

Haebler, Konrad. *The Study of Incunabula* (New York, 1933)
Hain, Ludwig. *Repertorium bibliographicum* (Stuttgart: Cotta, 1826-1838)
McKitterick, David. *Print, Manuscript and the Search for Order, 1450-1830* (Cambridge: University Press, 2003)
Needham, Paul. "Copy Description in Incunable Catalogues", *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*, 95 (2001), 173-239.
Reichling, Dietrich. *Appendices ad Hainii-Copingeri Repertorium bibliographicum* (Munich: Rosenthal, 1905-1911)

William Hale
December 2017.