How To Write a History of the Book

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Everyone knows that books relay text from an author to an imagined reader or audience. The content of this text is important for literary studies, relaying a narrative, information, or a record of events. Yet there is an additional layer to uncover regarding these artefacts. There exists a history of where these artefacts were produced, who produced them, who paid to have the item made, and the journey of the item from one owner to the next. This story is unique for each item, and constitutes what is known as a "History of the Book." This tutorial will walk you through the research necessary to write your own history of a book.

Step one: select your book

There may be an early printed book at your local school or library whose story remains unknown. Once you have made your decision, the researching fun can begin.

For this exercise, I will be using a four-volume set of the Summa theologica as an example of the process for discovering information about your book. The Summa theologica is an incunable, or a book published before 1500.

Step two: identify the book’s printing history

To write a history of the book, you must first understand the book that you are researching. You should take some time to physically examine the book. Take note of basic information first. You should know the author of the text and the content of what is written. Is your book a piece of literature, theology, history, or does it belong to another genre of writing? All of these details provide you with general information about your book. For example, it is important to know that the Summa theologica we use here was written by Antoninus rather than Thomas Aquinas. Knowing the title, author, and content of your book is an
important step to help you place it within the context of other similar books and other editions of the same title.

Printed texts often go through several editions. Our *Summa theologica*, for instance, was printed eighteen times by fourteen unique printers in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.\(^1\) It is incredibly important that you know details about who printed your book, when it was printed, and where it was produced. Depending on when your book was printed, these publication details may be found in a variety of places within the text. Modern printed books generally contain a title page where the publisher and place of publication are noted along with the author and title of the work. Stylistically, books produced shortly after the invention of printing did not contain title pages. Instead, printers often included a "colophon." Colophons provide much of the same information listed on modern title pages. The printer typically listed his name and the place and date of publication, along with the author's name and book's title. Finding the colophon in an incunable may take some time, as many printers included colophons as a direct continuation of the text. To begin your search for the colophon, you should turn to the very end of the text. Colophons are often the last paragraph of the last printed page in incunables. If the colophon is not present at the end, you may want to check the beginning of the book. Your book may contain an introduction or index at the beginning. Sometimes printers placed the colophon at the end of this introduction. On finding the colophon, you should have the name of the printer, along with the date and place of publication. You may also have the author's name or possibly the patron's name, that is, the person who commissioned the printing. Since each volume of our *Summa theologica* was printed at a different time, there is a unique colophon in each volume. In fact, our copy of Antoninus' *Summa theologica* contains five colophons: one at the end of each volume and one at the end of the *Tabula*, a detailed Table of Contents at the beginning of Volume I. If you are working with more than one incunabule, be sure to check all of them for a colophon, as each one

will likely contain specific information about the production of that individual volume.

The colophon offers a great opportunity to uncover information about the production of your book. Yet be cautiously optimistic about the details you find. There were no copyright laws in the early days of printing, and some printers copied the text, layout, and even the colophons of other printers. Before wholly trusting the information found in a colophon, you should look at the quality and the layout of other works produced by your supposed printer. The colophons in our *Summa theologica* suggest that Anton Koberger printed all four of the volumes. To verify this information, I took the time to research some other copies of the *Summa theologica* printed by Koberger in 1486-87. In recent years, many libraries around the world have undertaken projects for digitizing incunables. As a result of these efforts, full images of a number of incunables are available online. A simple Google search may direct you to a library that has digitized another copy of your book. This visual comparison can help you to determine the veracity of your book's colophon.

Your physical inspection so far should have provided you with the author and title of the printed text, along with its publication details. Before beginning your research into these details, you should make note of things that are unique to your book. Look for any signs or marks of ownership that are recorded in your book. For example, Volume I of our *Summa theologica* contains a few marks of ownership. On fol. 2r, centered over the text block, "Monasterii Engelbergensis" is handwritten in gold ink. Additionally, there are two ownership stamps in the same volume on fol. 1r. One stamp in black ink consists of a circle surrounding the words “Bibliotheka Engelberg.” The second stamp in black ink is ovoid containing the phrase “Bibliotheca Conception” with a cross inside. Such information can be found in almost any location in your book, although the pages near the beginning and end of the book are likely places for ownership stamps. You should also take note of any illustrations, illuminated letters, or handwritten notes contained within your book. The cover, too, is important to examine. Look at the materials used on the cover. Is there an elaborately decorated cover or is it plain? Is it an
original cover or binding? Or, has the book been rebound? Any decorations or stamps on the cover should be noted. I will go through how to find and research these unique details of your book in more detail later. Right now, it is important to have an idea of some of the unique aspects of your book.

Obviously, if you are working with a handwritten book, the issues of production will be far different. You should first look closely at the handwriting in your book. Is the handwriting consistent throughout the text or does it vary? If the script varies, it could indicate that more than one individual wrote the text or that various parts of the book were produced at different times. Some handwritten books contain more than one text. When looking at the handwriting, you should also check to see if the book consists of an individual text or if several shorter ones are gathered to create one book.

Medieval manuscripts were often commissioned by an individual patron who paid for the work of the scribe or author and who could have a say in the content of the book. To remain in the good graces of their patrons, scribes and authors often praised the individual for whom they wrote. Some manuscripts begin with a scribe recounting the commission and the generosity of the patron. You should check first to determine whether your book contains this dedicatory preface or details of patronage. Some books may contain handwritten names on the pages, while others may contain heraldic shields. Such clues may provide information on the production process of a manuscript or provide clues into who owned, or at least handled, your book in the past. Organized by Penn Libraries, the Schoenbourg Database of Manuscripts, http://dla.library.upenn.edu/dla/schoenberg/index.html, is a good place to start when researching the provenance of medieval manuscripts produced prior to 1600 and held in a variety of libraries and institutions around the world. Digital Scriptorium, http://bancroft.berkeley.edu/digitalscriptorium/, begun as a collaborative effort between the University of California, Berkeley and Columbia University additionally provides a database with searchable information on the provenance of manuscripts. These sites can help you determine the ownership records of some manuscripts, and you may be
able to connect your manuscript with one whose history has already been documented.

Step three: researching the book's production

Now that you have some basic information about your book, you can begin to do more research on the printer and the specific edition. If you have an incunabule a great place to begin your research is on the British Library's Incunabula Short Title Catalogue (ISTC), http://www.bl.uk/catalogues/istc/. This website provides a catalogue of books printed using movable type. Each catalogue entry lists a specific edition of a title and provides some identifying details about the work. It also lists libraries or institutions that possess copies of that edition. Other online databases like JSTOR, Project Muse, Early English Books Online, and the International Medieval Bibliography can provide you with academic articles that focus on topics related to your book, like the printer and his workshop. The Rare Book School is also a particularly rich online resource. The School created an extensive set of bibliographies that cover the individual elements of book production including binding, illustration, and typography. These bibliographies accompany courses taught by the Rare Book School, but can provide useful foundational information on the production of your book. You should visit these bibliographies to begin your research, and you can find the lists at: http://www.rarebookschool.org/reading/.

Step four: the book's arrangement

A quick visual examination of your book and some outside research on the printer can provide you with a number of details. The physical makeup of your book, however, can give you even more information if you take the time to look for it. Have you ever thought about how the pages of a book you are reading are placed inside the cover? One individual page is not placed in the binding of the book. In fact, what appears to be an individual page in a book is actually part of a larger structure. Rather than producing paper in every imaginable size
and shape, it is instead made up of large sheets. These large sheets come in standard sizes. In many instances, to prepare these large sheets for printing and to place them inside a book, they are then folded. The number of times that the original sheet is folded determines the size and shape of the resulting pages. When the large sheet of paper is folded one time the result is known as a "bifolio." Books made up of bifolia are called "folio books," and these are usually nestled together in groups of three or more. A bifolio consists of two “leaves” that are connected due to the folding of the original sheet. A leaf has two sides, a front and a back which are referred to as “pages.” For identification purposes, the front of a leaf is referred to as the “recto,” while the back of the leaf is the “verso.” Many incunables and early printed books did not contain page numbers as we know them today. Scholars instead refer to individual pages as "1r" (1 recto) or "1v" (1 verso). Returning to the original large sheet, if it is folded twice, the book is a quarto. If the original sheet is folded again a third time, the book is an octavo. These folded sheets of paper are then placed together with other folded sheets of paper. This results in what is known as a “quire” or “gathering.” Individual books are thus constructed from a number of gatherings bound together.

When printed, the text on leaves in a folio do not sequentially correspond to one another. For example, in a gathering with eight bifolios, the printed text of the first leaf is paired with the text that should be printed on the eighth leaf. The first sheet is printed with page 2 on the verso and page 7 on the recto, with page 1 and page 8 printed on the opposite side. The other sheet is printed as page 3 and page 6 and when sheet two is inserted, page 4 and page 5 are within the bifolio of sheet 1, and the page numbers should all line up. Not every book consists of folios of the same size throughout. Rather, most books contain folios of varying sizes in order to equal the planned number of

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3 Dane, What Is a Book?, 27.

pages. Ordering a book properly is a confusing process: a worker in a printer’s shop has to know the configuration for printing and also the order of the sheets after they are folded. To aid with this task, individual leaves often have a "signature mark" or "quire mark." Signature marks identify the individual leaf and where it should be placed within the gathering. These signature marks typically consist of a combination of letters and numbers, explaining exactly where a leaf belongs in a book. Books printed in the fifteenth century often included handwritten signature marks that were trimmed before the binding was completed. These signature marks may still be visible in some incunables if the bifolia were not trimmed to the correct measurements. Books printed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries largely contain printed signature marks near the bottom of the page that aid in the final construction of the gatherings.

If you turn the book and look at its foot, you can see its gatherings. Counting the gatherings and the number of sheets in each helps define the book’s "collation." Once you understand how large sheets are folded and how they are placed together, you should also plan to count the number of sheets and gatherings in your book. You should begin by finding the center of the first gathering in your book. The easiest way to do this is by looking for the sewing marks used to attach the gathering to the binding. Typically, gatherings in folio books consist of one to five bifolios. Open the book to the first leaf in the gathering and look at the "gutter." The gutter is the center fold. Do you see thread? If the gutter does not contain thread and holes where the needle has penetrated the paper, then you have not found the center of your gathering. Turn the leaves of the gathering one at a time until you see these stitches. Once you have located the center of the gathering, count the previous leaves, including the leaf whose gutter contains the stitching. Remember that each of these leaves should have a corresponding leaf after the stitching or center. Thus if it takes five

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7 Dane, What Is a Book?, 30.
leaves to reach the center of a gathering, then that gathering should have ten total leaves. You will then want to count the five leaves following the center of your gathering. After you know where your first gathering ends, you will find the beginning of your second gathering. Repeat this process and continue counting the leaves and gatherings in your book until you have reached the end.

Once you know the number of gatherings in your book and how many leaves are in each, you will need to write down the formal collation. Your notes at this point should look something like: “Gathering 1: 8 leaves; Gathering 2: 6 leaves.” There is a formula for concisely identifying the entire collation of your book. Rather than stating “Gathering 1, 2” you should instead label each gathering with a lower case letter: a = Gathering 1; b = Gathering 2, and so on until each letter corresponds to a specific gathering in your book. In this formula, there are 23 usable letters. Omit “j,” “u,” and “w,” as these did not exist in Latin and early printers did not use them. If you have more than 23 gatherings, after “z” the next set of gatherings will be capitalized letters. Following “z” then is “A.” Some books have more than 46 gatherings, so after “Z,” you would go back to lowercase letters but double them. As a result “Z” will be followed by “aa.” In looking at the original example where Gathering 1 has 8 leaves and Gathering 2 has 6 leaves, your formula would look like: a\(^8\)b\(^6\). The number of leaves in each gathering are thus presented as superscript numbers. For example, the collation for Volume I of our *Summa theologica* looks like this: a\(^8\)h\(^6\)i\(^8\)k-zA-D\(^6\)E\(^8\). In total, there are 186 leaves in this volume. Gatherings “a-g” have 8 leaves; “h” has 6 leaves; “i” has 8 leaves; “k-z” and “A-D” have 6 leaves; and the final gathering “E” has 8 leaves. The collation formula thus describes all of this information in a clear and concise manner.

Counting the gatherings and leaves in your book, or finding its collation, can be a time consuming project, especially if you are examining a large book. The process, however, can help you understand both the construction of your book and for other printed books. It will also often tell you if one or more leaves is missing. If you have a gathering with nine leaves, look to see if a leaf has been cut out or if an
extra single leaf has been inserted. You will soon recognize the gatherings in every book you open!

**Step five: the book’s typography**

The paper and binding are two important elements related to the physical construction of the book. Various books may share these characteristics, having the same number of gatherings or a similar binding. Yet the text printed on the pages is what separates one title or edition from another. Immediately visible to a reader is the style of type used in placing text on the page. There exist an incredibly large number of styles of type, but identifying the major characteristics of the type used in your book is a worthwhile venture.

The invention of the printing press enabled bookmakers to produce books more quickly. Prior to this invention, handwriting the text of a manuscript was a lengthy process. A scribe had to physically write the text on each page. Depending on the length of the text, a manuscript could take months and even years to copy, and at the end of this process you had only one book. Movable type in particular improved the efficiency of book production, allowing the maker to arrange individual letters that could be placed within a frame and locked together. Once the text was arranged the type was inked and vellum or paper was pressed against it. Subsequent blank sheets could quickly and easily be pressed against the re-inked woodblock, so a number of copies could be created. The time commitment to produce multiple copies of one page of printed text was significantly reduced.

Still, getting to the point of printing was time consuming. In this process, letters had to be individually carved or cast, and printers developed distinct styles for the fonts used in the books they printed. There exist a plethora of typefaces with individual qualities. Many of these typefaces contain similar qualities, and it can be difficult to distinguish one from another. You should carefully examine the shape of
the individual letters used in your book. In many ways, incunables looked and felt like the handwritten manuscripts produced by scribes before the introduction of the printing press. This is especially noticeable in the type used in incunables. Early type was modeled after the handwriting styles of medieval scribes. Textura was particularly popular in the earliest printed books. Like the majority of type used in the fifteenth century, textura was based on a formal book hand.\(^8\) Even under the textura heading, there are a number of variations. Be aware that not all early printers used textura; they developed many different types. You should plan on examining a number of typefaces and styles to help you identify the one used in the printing of your book. Gothic, Roman, and Italic types are just a few of the styles that you may encounter. Once you know the basic shape of your letters, you should compare it with a catalogue of type faces. Philip Gaskell’s *A New Introduction to Bibliography: The Classic Manual of Bibliography*, contains a good overview of the various styles of type faces used by printers. Online, the Dawn of Western Printing, http://www.ndl.go.jp/incunabula/e/chapter2/index.html, additionally provides illustrations of the many styles of font used in incunables. You may not be able to determine the exact font used in the printing of your book, but you should be able to learn the general style.

Another element to consider is the size of type used in your book. To determine the size, you will need to count out twenty vertical lines of text. Choose your starting point, and then measure up or down to the corresponding point of text on the twenty-first line.\(^9\) For example, begin at the top of a capital letter on your starting line, and then measure to the top of a capital letter on the twenty-first line. The size of twenty lines of text should be given to the closest millimeter.\(^10\) When measuring, make sure that you choose twenty complete lines of text, without chapter headings or variations in type size. If twenty lines are not


available, then measure a smaller number, say ten lines, and convert it to the twenty line standard. Both of these details on the style of type and its size should be documented and included in the history of the book on your chosen document.

**Step six: the book's materials**

The collation is one very technical element that you can uncover about your book. Yet there are additional elements that can help you learn more, although you need to know where to look to discover them. The paper used in some books and manuscripts contain watermarks on pages scattered throughout the text. Watermarks are images, symbols, or letters placed in a wire paper mold when making individual sheets of paper. Papemakers often created specific watermarks for their workshop which helps to identify the maker. Different papemakers produced paper of varying quality and a watermark could be an easy way for a buyer to recognize the work of their preferred workshop. Since the watermark is a part of the paper made by an impression of a metal form in the wire mesh paperholder, they are often difficult to see unless you know what you are looking for. To find a watermark, you need a source of light that can be placed behind individual sheets of paper. A tablet or smart phone can work for this as they are portable and accessible, although you may want to invest in a light sheet or cold light source if you are going to look for watermarks in books regularly. Light sheets are much lighter in weight and can illuminate the surface of large sheets of paper. You will want to place the light source behind each folio. Not every folio will have a watermark but you will need to check them all, listing the watermarks and images on each page. Some scholars have undertaken efforts to connect watermarks in books to specific papemakers. This is a difficult process, however, and few watermarks have been concretely connected to specific workshops. In spite of this difficulty, you should consult the catalogues compiled by scholars to see if you can match any that you discovered with a previously identified watermark. The standard reference is Charles-Moise Briquet, *Les filigranes: Dictionnaire historique des marques du papier dès leur apparition vers 1282 jusqu’en 1600: aven 39 figures dans le texte et 16*,
112 *fac-similés de filigranes*. Briquet provided a foundation on which later scholars have built. A recent trend in the scholarship has been the creation of online catalogues that serve as repositories of watermarks. These online databases offer a searchable catalogue of watermarks, allowing for customized searches, such as by keyword or date of paper production. Two particularly helpful databases are the Piccard Watermark Collection, http://www.piccard-online.de/struktur.php?sprache=en; and, Bernstein's The Memory of Paper, http://www.memoryofpaper.eu:8080/BernsteinPortal/appl_start.disp. You should consult a number of these catalogues to help in your efforts to identify the watermarks in your book. It is important to remember, too, that none of these catalogues are complete. There are hundreds of watermarks that have not been identified or catalogued. Through your research on watermarks, you can add to the scholarship by finding a previously unknown mark.

Beyond the construction of the interior of the book, you should also look at the book’s binding and cover to determine how it connects to the pieces inside. The cover is an integral part of a book, protecting the pages inside. You should look at two important elements when looking at the cover of your book. You should take note of any decorations on the cover and also examine the material. Is the cover made from wooden or paper boards? Are the boards covered with leather, cloth, parchment, or another material? All of these details are a result of the finishing of the binding. Identifying the type of binding will often help determine the age of a book, provided it is an original binding. If the binding is not original, this might be a clue that the book itself has been altered. Signatures might be in the wrong order or pages might be missing, and pages may have been inserted. The other item that you

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should examine is what is known as the forwarding of the binding.\textsuperscript{13} Forwarding involves the more technical aspects of building a binding that works, including the construction of the boards and spines to create a book that opens and closes. There exist a number of binding styles that were used in the construction of incunables and early printed books. To understand the differences in these bindings in early books, you should consult a good reference text, like J. A. Szirmai’s \textit{The Archaeology of Medieval Bookbinding}.\textsuperscript{14} Such reference works contain drawings and images to help you determine what type of binding was used to construct your book. It may also be helpful for you to examine the covers of other copies of your text or books printed around the same time as your book. A great place to start to do this is at the British Library’s Database of Bookbindings, www.bl.uk/catalogues/bookbindings/. This catalogue includes images and descriptions of the bindings of books printed in Western Europe from the fifteenth century to the present. There are a wide range of binding styles and it can be enlightening to see the similarities or differences in the bindings of multiple copies of your book.

The finishing elements of the binding of your book in particular can be useful to your research. The stamps or images chosen for the cover can demonstrate the wealth or status of the patron or buyer. These details can also help you to determine if your cover is unique or if it was mass produced. The Berlin State Library, www.hist-einband.de/, has created an extensive online catalogue of stamps, rollers, and plates that are found on bookbindings in the fifteenth and sixteenth century. Images of these details were made through rubbings where a piece of paper is placed over the decoration and a pencil is then moved across the paper, transferring the image to the page. Details, like the date and place of production, along with the size of the stamp, are included when known. Few libraries will allow you to make rubbings today, so do ask for permission first. The printed text and the binding of your book may or may not have been completed by the same individual or workshop.

\textsuperscript{13} Dane, \textit{What Is a Book?}, 143.

\textsuperscript{14} J. A. Szirmai, \textit{The Archaeology of Medieval Bookbinding} (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 1999).
Incunables in particular were often printed and then bound after they were sold and produced according to the taste and budget of the purchaser. Connecting stamps on your book to those on other books can be incredibly important to uncovering details about the production of your bookbinding.

**Step seven: the book’s provenance**

The journey to discovering the provenance of your book thus involves both the physical examination of the book and secondary research into the details that you have uncovered. You should remember that most books do not sit idly on a shelf. Instead, they are items that are used and read, bought and sold, borrowed and returned. Readers often leave behind physical details of their reading habits in the books they use. This can be manifested through notes, annotations, signatures, or drawings done in the margins of the book, which are called marginalia. Such notes often relate to the text, highlighting information that a reader wants to remember or that they considered important. Underlining is an additional example of reader graffiti or annotation. You should make note of the marginalia present in your book, as it can indicate ownership of your book. For example, on the first page of the Tabula in our *Summa theologica*, one reader wrote "Monasterii Engelbergensis" at the top of the page. Underlining and notes in the margin are spread throughout each of the four volumes of this *Summa theologica*, illustrating the information that readers found important. Today we are taught to not write or underline in books, especially in rare or new library books, in order to keep them pristine for future readers. Such elements in historical texts, however, can illuminate the ways that books were used and digested by readers in the past.

Handwritten notes are one informal element to use to help you uncover details about the past owners of your book. In addition to such elements, you should also look at the formal records associated with your book. If you found your book in a library or special collections department, contact the librarian or archivist to see if there exist any records that detail the book’s origins. If your book was donated to the
library, there should be a record of who donated the item and when. Similarly, there should be documents related to your book if it was purchased by the library. Sale catalogues in particular can be a valuable resource in determining the past ownership of a book. As a regular seller of manuscript books and incunables, Christie’s auction house, www.christies.com, can be a great place to start. Begin by searching for the title or printer of your book. Items that are for sale or have been sold through Christie’s typically have a short description written about them. This description for manuscripts and incunables should include a collation along with some basic printing and production details, though you should check these for accuracy. Other sales catalogues, both printed and online, should also be consulted to help you trace the ownership of your book from today back to its production.

Congratulations! You now have enough information to begin writing down all of the details that you discovered about your book. There are a variety of styles for organizing your information, but you should group like information together. For example, place general information about the book, like details about the author and printer, together. Then you can proceed to specific details about your book. The goal of your completed research is to document the unique history of your book and place it within the historical context of when the text was written and printed. Each individual book has a story, and through your efforts, the journey of your chosen book is revealed.
Bibliography


Online Resources


Bernstein’s The Memory of Paper,  

British Library’s Database of Bookbindings,  
[www.bl.uk/catalogues/bookbindings](http://www.bl.uk/catalogues/bookbindings).

British Library’s Incunabula Short Title Catalogue (ISTC),  
[http://www.bl.uk/catalogues/istc/](http://www.bl.uk/catalogues/istc/).

Christie’s, [www.christies.com](http://www.christies.com).

Dawn of Western Printing,  

Digital Scriptorium, [http://bancroft.berkeley.edu/digitalscriptorium](http://bancroft.berkeley.edu/digitalscriptorium).


International Medieval Bibliography,  
[http://apps.brepolis.net/bmb/search.cfm](http://apps.brepolis.net/bmb/search.cfm).
JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/](http://www.jstor.org/).


Rare Book School Bibliographies, [http://rarebookschool.org/course-descriptions/reading/](http://rarebookschool.org/course-descriptions/reading/).

Schoenburg Database of Manuscripts, [http://dla.library.upenn.edu/dla/schoenberg/index.html](http://dla.library.upenn.edu/dla/schoenberg/index.html).