

## PRINTING IN SUBIACO

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The birth of printing with mobile type – the *nova ars* - in Italy took place at the two monasteries in Subiaco, helped by the local cultural and economic context.

The recruitment of monks from north of the Alps followed by the radical reorganisation of the monasteries in the second half of the fourteenth century had led to the emergence of the *scriptoria* which then became a natural point of reference for Arnold Pannartz and Konrad Sweynheym, the two Germans who started printing in Subiaco. From the mid-fourteenth century, working on behalf of Fust and Schoffer, both men had undertaken itinerant commercial ventures in northern Italy and in 1462 they were part of the exodus from Mainz after the city was sacked. They arrived in Subiaco, via Rome, round about 1464; it is probable that they had been invited to go there in order to undertake a printing project which would follow a programme which had been planned within humanist circles in Rome, as the choice of texts for the first books they printed shows: Cicero, Lactantius, St Augustine.

In order to set up their printing shop in the ‘Sacro Speco’ they had to start by bringing together the equipment they needed as well as qualified people to carry out the shop’s various activities: a printing press and a supply of paper; designing type and making punches and matrices to produce it; composing formes of type and printing them. Specific technical skills in the working of metal were needed – skills which were closely connected with the goldsmith’s craft which had developed in the area round Subiaco and bordering Aquilano. Between the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the local area was also known for its ‘gualchiere’ or fulling mills, pre-industrial machines used in the production of woollen cloth and paper, and also for iron mines.

From the early 1460s the production of printed books in Subiaco had all the characteristics of a proper printing industry which was capable of devising and carrying out publishing projects rather than simply trials and experiments.

In this context, the 1471 letter written by Benedetto Zwink is also significant. In it Zwink writes about the possibility of printing in Subiaco the common breviary shared by the three German Observances of Kastl, Melk and Bursfeld, which had formed a union it had been proposed Montecassino and Subiaco should join.

During the same period certain leading humanists and promoters of the introduction of printing into Italy were particularly active in the Subiaco monasteries, such as Enea Silvio Piccolomini, later Pius II, Nicolaus von Kues (Nicola Cusano), whose coat-of-arms has been identified at various spots within the two monasteries, placed there like a signature, Cardinal Bessarion and Juan de Torquemada, the first commendatory abbot of Subiaco between 1456 and 1467.

During Torquemada's time as commendatory abbot, the monasteries in Subiaco became not only centres for the reflections then in progress on the Rule of St Benedict but also for the humanist culture of the time and the profound artistic and cultural renewal which was taking place. The historians of Subiaco during the Renaissance and early modern period were always hostile to the idea of the 'Commenda', seeing it as an external instrument of coercion and exploitation which paid little attention to the actual life of the two monasteries; nevertheless, under the 'Commenda' of Torquemada, the monasteries were opened up to the culture of Renaissance humanism thanks to their nearness to the city of Rome, undergoing its great fourteenth century revival, and to their strategic position along the Apennine routes in the transmission of artistic production into the Marche, Umbria and the Abruzzo. Subiaco together with Montecassino, which belonged to the cultural ambience of Naples, were among the most important abbeys in Renaissance Italy.

Signs of Subiaco's artistic and cultural importance can be found among its architecture and its art. The splendid arched portal which opens onto the Gothic atrium of Santa Scolastica is a symbol of the remarkable cultural role played by the two monasteries, as are the frescoes, dating from the 1460s, in Santa Scolastica, the 'Sacro Speco' and in the chapel of the Holy Cross. These were painted by *Magister Petrus* who was either a German or a local painter who had come into contact with the work of northern European masters. He followed Sweynheym and Pannartz when they left for Rome in 1467, together with other deacons who had worked in the printing shop in Subiaco, including Ulrich Han, a member of the Pope's household from 1466, and Sixtus Riessinger who went on to introduce printing in Naples.

Despite the various losses which have occurred in modern times, the present-day incunabula collection in Subiaco comprises 191 editions in 206 copies (one more is at Sacro Speco). They were studied and listed by scholarly monks between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries and catalogued between the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century by Leone Allodi and Vincenzo Federici.