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Aldo Manuzio and his legacy to the language profession

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Abstract At the turn of the sixteenth century, the recent arrival of the printing press in Venice and the socio-economic conditions in that cosmopolitan city permitted the development of the book publishing industry. One of the early printers, Aldo Manuzio, combined the business of artisanal printing with humanistic knowledge and love of the classics. Considered the first publisher in the modern sense, Manuzio introduced typographical innovations and set editorial standards. This paper reviews the achievements of Manuzio and his Aldine Press to give a historical perspective for many aspects of publishing today.

Keywords Book industry; publishing; printing; history, early modern 1451-1600.

Introduction

The printing press was invented around 1450 in Germany, but it was in Venice that the book publishing industry was born.¹ At the end of the fifteenth century, Venice presented the right combination of economic wealth, entrepreneurial spirit, literacy, multilingualism and—especially—freedom of expression to permit the development of a literary marketplace. Among the hundreds of printers who set up shop in the city, one—Aldo Manuzio—stands out prominently for his editorial innovation and emphasis on quality. This paper reviews the editorial achievements of Manuzio and his Aldine Press in order to give a historical foundation for many aspects of publishing today. It also discusses the symbolism of the Aldine colophon and tells why I proposed it as the logo for METM12, the eighth annual meeting of Mediterranean Editors and Translators (MET).

Venice in Manuzio's time

In the late 1400s and early 1500s, Venice was the cosmopolitan capital city of the Venetian Republic, a maritime state spanning from the northern Adriatic coast, along the Balkans, through the Peloponnesus and Aegean islands, to Cyprus. One of the largest European megalopolises of the time, the *Serenissima* was sovereign (especially from papal censorship) and based on an economy of international commerce and banking. Venice attracted immigrants—both scholars and refugees seeking freedom and opportunities—from places as far as Spain (where the Catholic Monarchs had expelled the Jews) and, to the east, Armenia and continental Greece (under Ottoman control). Venetian society was multiethnic, multilingual and multiconfessional, with a relatively literate population. The setting was ripe for innovation.

The first printing press was brought to Venice in 1469, and soon hundreds of workshops were issuing thousands of volumes.¹ Book shops flourished, but printers were artisans² and quality standards were lacking. In the midst of what was an early information revolution and upheaval of learned communication, Aldo Manuzio arrived in Venice.

Aldus Pius Manutius Romanus

Aldo Manuzio was born ~1449 in Bassiano (Duchy of Sermoneta),¹ in the Papal States. He studied the classics in Rome and Greek in Ferrara, and then worked as tutor to the princes Alberto III and Lionello Pio of Carpi.¹ (The Latinized version of his name invokes both his Roman origins and his dedication to the Pio family.) Around 1490, at the mature age of 40 years, he left Carpi to pursue a second career in Venice: his mission was to print—and therefore preserve—Greek and Latin classics. Here, he established In Aedibus Aldi (literally, in the house of Aldo), today called the Aldine Press or Aldus & Co. In 1495, he printed a first book, *Erotémata*, a Greek grammar. Over the next 20 years until his death, he published 132 books, not only classics but also contemporary works in Latin and vernacular, translations, and scholastic texts.^{1,3} Although the focus was on literary and historical classics, Manuzio's catalogue did include major scientific texts such as the complete extant works of Aristotle and the botanical treatise of Theophrastus.^{3,4} Medicine was approached later, when the Aldine Press produced the *editiones principes* (first printed editions) of the complete works of Galen (1525) and Hippocrates (1526) in the original Greek; the well-edited edition of the latter work became the foundation for further study and new translations of the Hippocratic corpus.⁴

Differently from other printers, Manuzio was an educator and humanist, and had like-minded company.^{1,5} He was sought by Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam for the quality of his work: Erasmus became a friend and colleague, and finished his *Adagiorum chiliades* (thousands of proverbs) in Venice. Another important associate was the humanist Pietro Bembo, who influenced Manuzio's choices regarding punctuation, font design and, as we shall see, the Aldine colophon. Manuzio and colleagues took preliminary steps to establish an academy to promote the study of Greek classics, but the project did not develop beyond an informal group of literary men who discussed the manuscripts to be printed.⁶ Still, we might consider it the earliest editorial board.

Manuzio is accredited with numerous typographical innovations. He popularized a rounded font, distinct from the square Gothic font used earlier (eg in the Gutenberg Bible); his font became known as “roman” and inspired the modern serif type.⁵ In order to mimic, in print, the calligraphy of manuscripts, he commissioned the cutting of a novel, slanted font now called italic. Manuzio also standardized punctuation in Latin alphabets. Most notably, he gave the comma its curved form, replacing the slash (*virgula suspensiva*) which had indicated a pause since the thirteenth century, and, upon Bembo's suggestion, he introduced the semicolon, copied from the Greek interrogation mark, to indicate a stronger pause in text. Other typesetting innovations that facilitated reading include kerning, indentation and type variation (called type hierarchy today).⁵

Manuzio is considered the first publisher in the modern sense. He employed editors, translators and proofreaders to guarantee linguistic accuracy and, for the classics, fidelity to the original manuscripts; in this aspect, he is said to have set standards for in-house editing.⁵ Aldo & Co. commercialized the octavo, a smaller and more manageable book size than the folio used for incunabula (the first printed books). These *libelli portatiles* were classic works stripped of the usual editorial comments; they sold at an affordable price and are considered the precursor of today's pocket book.^{1,2} Through the quality of its product and the titles in its catalogue, the Aldine Press marketed to an emerging class of polyglot Europeans who used writing professionally (eg scribes, librarians, lawyers).⁵ Thus, in only 20 years, Manuzio almost single-handedly transformed the concept of the book from an object for prayer or legal reference to one for pleasurable reading. By bridging the realms of entrepreneurial printing and humanistic thought, he “demonstrated to the printing world that scholarly books could be produced finely as well as profitably; and he convinced the scholarly world of the value of printing.”⁷ And, he served as a model for the new figure of the scholar-printer, which later inspired university presses.²

Manuzio died in 1515. The business continued after his death, passing first to his business partner, then to his son Paolo, and finally to his grandson Aldo the Younger at whose death in 1597 Aldus & Co. closed. In the 1800s, the building where Manuzio kept his home and workshop in Campo San Paterniàn, and the San Paterniàn church, were demolished. No tomb is known and all that remains for visitors to the now-called Campo Manin is a plaque on one of the rare modern buildings in Venice. Although all physical traces of the Aldine Press are lost, the books have survived and, through them, Manuzio's indelible mark on publishing persists.

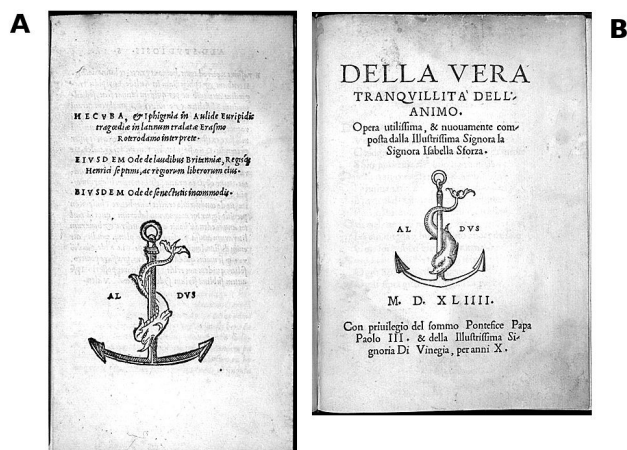


Figure 1. The Aldine colophon. A Original version, here in Erasmus' 1507 Latin translation of Euripides. The title page also shows Manuzio's original italic type. **B** Later version used by Aldo's son Paolo, from 1540. (Images courtesy of the L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Lee Library, Brigham Young University.)

Festina lente

Aldine editions today are prized antique books, extensive collections of which are held in libraries at the University of Manchester and Brigham Young University. A distinguishing feature of these volumes is the colophon (printer's mark) that adorns the title page. Branding a book with a colophon is another aspect of publishing attributed to Manuzio, who made this usage fashionable. The Aldine mark, first used in 1501, portrays an anchor entwined by a diving dolphin (Figure 1).

The anchor-dolphin symbol was adapted from a Roman coin given to Manuzio by his friend Bembo (Figure 2A).^{2,8} As Erasmus explains in *Adagiorum chiliades*, the Roman emperor Augustus disapproved of urgency and rashness among his officers and so encouraged them with the Greek saying *σπευδε βραδέως*, meaning hasten slowly (*festina lente* in Latin). According to Erasmus, the “anchor refers to the slowness of deliberation, and the dolphin to the speed of performance.”⁸ The motto encourages one to work quickly but carefully; through Manuzio, it came to symbolize elegance and quality.⁷ Manuzio first reproduced the symbol and the motto in 1499 in an illustration (Figure 2B) in *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, considered one of the most beautiful Renaissance books. The motto has also been illustrated as a turtle with sails (by the Medici in Florence) and a hare in a snail shell.



Da l'altra parte tale elegate sculptura mirai. Vno circolo. Vna anchora
Sopra la stangula della quale se rouoluea uno Delphino. Et q̄sti optimamēti
cusiō li interpretai. ΑΕΙ ΣΠΕΥΔΕ ΒΡΑΔΕΩΣ. Semp festina tarde.

Figure 2. Festina lente. A Original dolphin-anchor symbol, on an 80 A.D. Roman coin. (Image courtesy of Beast Coins.) **B** First appearance of the symbol and its associated motto (in Greek and Latin) in an Aldine edition, as an illustration in *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, a cryptic tale of love in a dream. (Image courtesy of the Gallica digital collection of the National Library of France.)

I discovered the dolphin-anchor symbol while searching, in my role as chair of the METM12 organizing committee, for a conference logo. Our meeting was to be held in Venice in a fifteenth century complex which had been used over time as a monastery, an orphanage and a school teaching the use of the printing press. Our keynote speakers were to

talk about diving beneath the surface of the written word (Tom Jefferson) and the relationship between translation and travel literature (Loredana Polezzi). Printing, diving and travel were all represented in the Aldine colophon. As I learned about Manuzio's work, I found further semblances to MET and METM12. Like Aldus & Co., MET attracts a multifaceted group of scholars, educators, linguists, translators and editors. Like Manuzio, MET members attain to high standards and are concerned with trends in publishing. And, in keeping with the motto, the planning of METM12 was characterized by perseverance, aiming for excellence and style while keeping to schedule; this was my personal interpretation of *festina lente*.

It was with great pleasure, therefore, that MET hosted its annual meeting in the city that fostered such a creative, scholarly publisher. Moreover, it is my honour to bring to the attention of other language professionals the legacy that Manuzio left us, from fonts to punctuation, and from editorial board review to careful copy-editing.

Note: This paper was presented in poster format at METM12 (Venice, 9-10 November 2012).

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