

Incunabula in Winchester Cathedral Library

Among the thousands of books in the library of Winchester Cathedral are nine printed in or before the year 1500, within fifty years of the invention of the European printing press. Books from this period are known as 'incunabula', meaning 'swaddling clothes' or 'cradle' in Latin. For centuries, incunabula have held a particular fascination for book historians, and they have been closely studied and avidly collected. The Cathedral's incunabula have recently been catalogued in detail for an online database – Material Evidence in Incunabula (MEI).¹ This database contains information about tens of thousands of early books, recording evidence of their past ownership and use, and their movement around the world.

Johannes Gutenberg established Europe's first printing press in Mainz, Germany. His first major publication – an edition of the Bible – went on sale in 1455. After a tentative start the technology spread rapidly around Europe, first to Italy in 1465, then France (1470), Spain (1472), Belgium and the Netherlands (1473), and England (1476). The number of editions increased exponentially: the standard catalogue of fifteenth-century printing lists 21 editions in the 1450s, 142 in the 1460s, 3923 in the 1470s, 6880 in the 1480s, and 10,804 in the 1490s.² By the end of the century, an estimated 8 to 10 million individual books had been produced by Europe's printing presses, of which approximately half a million survive today.³

The nine incunables at Winchester Cathedral date from 1471 to 1500. Although the group includes some important editions, it is surprisingly small for a library of such size and importance. There are, for example, more than 80 incunabula at Canterbury Cathedral and 117 at Lincoln Cathedral.⁴ Many Oxford and Cambridge colleges have collections of several hundred, and the holdings of major research libraries can run into the thousands. Winchester has a relatively small number of incunabula because any printed books that might have been acquired for the library in the fifteenth century have long since disappeared, and benefactors to the library in later periods had no particular interest in early printed books. The collection is still dominated by the bequest of Bishop Morley (1598–1684), most of whose books were seventeenth-century editions.⁵ His library was for practical scholarly use and there is no indication that he ever purchased books because of their age or rarity. Nonetheless, five of the incunabula now at the Cathedral were among approximately two thousand volumes

bequeathed Morley. Of the other four, two were already in the library before Morley's bequest and two were donated in the twentieth century.

The incunables at Winchester would have been printed in editions of several hundred copies, most of which have been lost over time. The number of surviving copies of an edition varies considerably from one type of book to another. Theological works tend to have been kept securely in institutional libraries and so have a high survival rate: more than 250 copies are recorded of the Cathedral's edition of Ockham's treatise on Peter Lombard's *Sententiae*.⁶ Liturgical books, on the other hand, were often used until they fell apart or were destroyed at the Reformation: a Sarum Missal in the Cathedral's collection is the only complete copy of the edition known to survive.⁷

Decoration and Bindings

Even when many copies of an edition exist, no two incunables are exactly alike. This is most obviously because they were usually sold without bindings and with spaces left blank for decoration by hand. Unbound books were easier to transport, something that was particularly important when a single edition might be on sale in dozens of different cities thousands of miles apart. Selling books as unbound sheets also allowed the purchaser to have them bound and decorated according to their taste and budget.

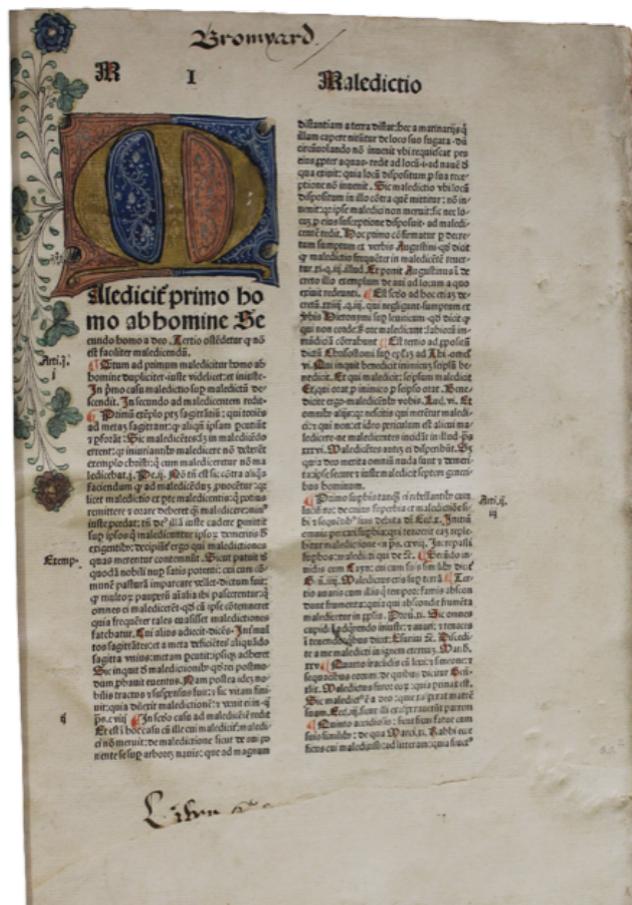


Figure 1: Decoration by the Incunables Limner in Johannes de Bromyard, *Summa Praedicatorum* (Basel, 1484).

For book historians, variations in decoration and binding provide valuable evidence of the movement and ownership of early books. Sadly, none of the nine incunabula at Winchester are still in their fifteenth-century bindings, but this is compensated for by some extremely interesting examples of early hand-decoration. Perhaps the most intriguing of all is found at the beginning of a manual for

preachers, printed in Switzerland around 1483.⁸ On the first page is a large initial 'M' coloured in red, blue and gold, with silver highlighting and a border of leaves and flowers (Figure 1). The style of the decoration is undoubtedly English, and it is distinctive enough to be recognised as the work of a specific artist known as 'the Incunables Limner'. Nine other books decorated by this artist have so far been identified in libraries across the world, from Washington DC to Hereford Cathedral, five of which are copies of a single edition from the press of William Caxton, who introduced printing to England.⁹ It is very likely therefore that the Incunables Limner was based in Westminster, where Caxton had his press, and that he was regularly employed by Caxton to decorate special copies of his own books and those that he imported for sale.

Altogether seven of the Cathedral's nine incunables have some kind of hand decoration, ranging from simple initial letters in red ink to much more elaborate penwork with patterns and flourishing in various colours. One of the two undecorated books is the earliest of the Cathedral's incunables, an edition of Cyprian printed in Venice in 1471.¹⁰ Although spaces have been left for large initials to be added by hand, the original purchaser of the book must have felt that it was not worth the trouble and expense to have this done. The other book without hand decoration is the latest incunable in the collection, a service book printed in Paris in 1500.¹¹ As was often the case by this date, the publisher did not leave spaces for the larger initials to be painted in, but printed them from woodcuts together with the text.

The most richly decorated of the Cathedral's incunables is an edition of the early Christian writer Lactantius, printed in Venice in 1472.¹² The opening page has an elaborate border of vine stems, with rabbits, putti, and long-necked birds (Figure 2). At the base is a blank shield where the owner could add their coat

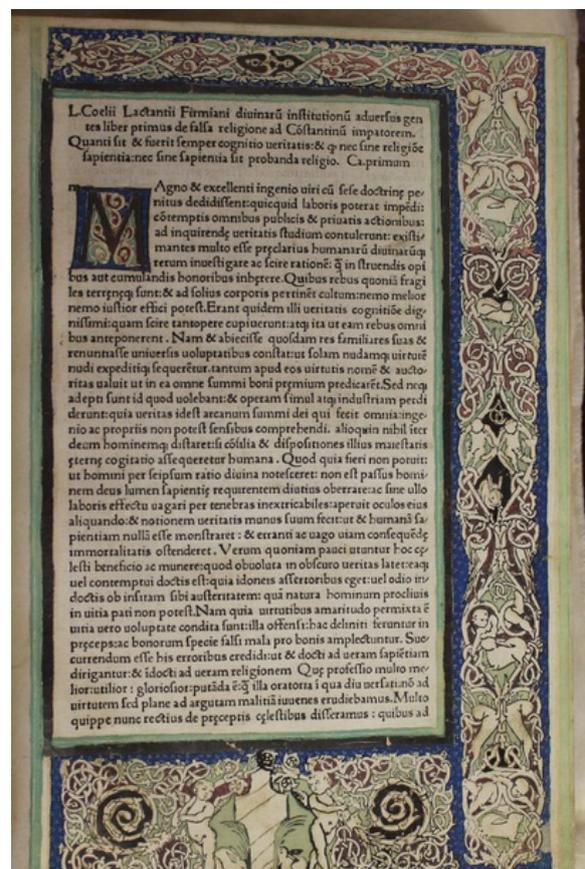


Figure 2: Venetian hand-stamped illuminated borders in Lactantius, *Opera* (Venice, 1472)

of arms. Each chapter begins with a painted initial letter surrounded by vines. The style of decoration is characteristic of many books illuminated in Venice in the fifteenth century, but this particular example makes use of an unusual technique. The outlines of the borders and initial letters have not been painted, but stamped onto the page (after the text was printed) using hand-held wooden blocks. This approach was intended to speed up the process of decoration, since the illuminator had simply to colour in the outlines, but it was perhaps not very effective as only a few hundred books decorated in this way are known today, nearly all of them printed in Venice in the early 1470s.¹³

While hand decoration was usually added soon after publication,¹⁴ bindings might date from any period of a book's history. The original bindings of the Cathedral's incunabula have all been replaced, either because they became damaged or because their owners wanted to have them rebound in a different style.

Sometimes bindings can indicate the value placed on incunabula by later owners. The earliest of the Cathedral's books – the 1471 Cyprian – has an eighteenth-century English binding of red-dyed goatskin with gold tooling (Figure 3). These expensive materials and fine workmanship are evidence that its owner



Figure 3: Eighteenth-century binding of Cyprianus, Opera (Venice, 1471).

recognised the quality and rarity of the edition.¹⁵ The incunables from Morley's library (four works in three volumes) have less extravagant bindings of polished brown calf with minimal decoration. Many such bindings were made for Morley during his time as Bishop of Winchester, as he assembled his library at Farnham Castle.¹⁶ They are almost identical in design and workmanship, revealing a concern with visual uniformity that is typical of private libraries in the late seventeenth century.¹⁷ The gilt bands on the spines of Morley's books indicate that they were shelved in the modern way, with their spines outwards. This was contrary to the practice in most institutional libraries of the period where books were usually still chained and with the text-block outwards.

Marks of Ownership

Unlike many book collectors, Morley did not write his name in the volumes that he owned or use bookplates. His books can be identified because they are listed in series of library

catalogues and because they have distinctive bindings.¹⁸ In most cases, however, it is through inscriptions that past owners can be identified, and two of the Cathedral's incunabula can in this way be linked with significant historical figures. A treatise by the medieval philosopher William of Ockham once belonged to the important Dutch theologian Franciscus Gomarus (1563–1641).¹⁹ His signature appears at the bottom of the title page and the book is listed in a published catalogue of his library when it was sold following his death.²⁰ In the early 1600s, Gomarus was a central figure in the debates between Calvinists and Arminians. Their discussion of predestination frequently drew on medieval scholastic philosophers like Ockham. Another treatise by Ockham²¹ has an inscription recording that the book was purchased in London from the library of Godfried van Winghen, a Calvinist minister from Flanders best known for his translation of the Bible into Dutch (1562). He lived in England from 1563 until his death in 1598, ministering to Protestant exiles from the Low Countries in Sandwich and London.²² Various marginal annotations and marks of reading are perhaps in his hand.

While most of the Cathedral's incunables were in private ownership before making their way to Winchester, a few belonged to other institutions at some time in the past. A volume of writings by the French scholar Jean Gerson, printed in Basel in 1489,²³ was once in the library of the convent of St Agnes in Lochem, near Deventer in the Netherlands (Figure 4).²⁴

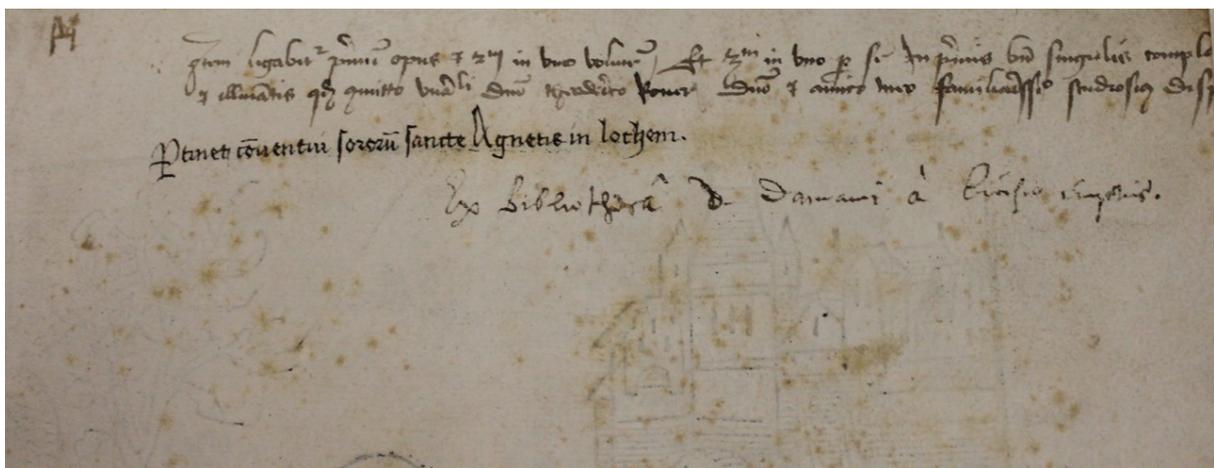


Figure 4: Ownership and purchase inscriptions in Johannes Gerson, *Opera* (Basel, 1489).

The convent was dissolved after 1576, when the town fell to Protestant forces in the Dutch Revolt. Its library must have been dispersed soon afterwards and the volume later belonged to Morley. Interestingly, most of the incunabula from Morley's collection have Dutch

provenances, suggesting that they may have been acquired in the 1650s, during the period of his exile in Antwerp and The Hague.²⁵

Another book that has moved between institutions, albeit over a shorter timescale, is the edition of Bromyard whose decoration by the Incunables Limner has already been discussed.²⁶ Having arrived in England soon after publication, it later belonged to John Ebdon, a Cathedral prebendary, and was given to the library following his death in 1611. However, in the turmoil that followed the Civil Wars, and the abolition of the Dean and Chapter in 1649, the Cathedral's books were removed from the Close and in 1652 transferred to Winchester College by order of the Council of State.²⁷ About two hundred volumes remained at the College until 1669, when they were returned to the Cathedral.²⁸ Most of the books involved in this exchange bear marks of their travels. On the fore edge (the front of the text block) of the two Bromyard volumes are numbers that correspond to those entered in the seventeenth-century catalogue of the College library.²⁹ John Ebdon's gift inscription has been torn from the bottom of the first page (see figure 1), perhaps when the College acquired the book, but enough remains to match it with the inscriptions in other volumes given by him to the Cathedral.³⁰

Reading and Annotating

Many incunabula contain evidence of the ways in which past readers used and responded to them. Almost all of those in the Cathedral library have parts of the text underlined, manicules (pointing hands), and words written in the margin. These annotations are not always easy to interpret, but they can show which sections of a book were most closely studied by their readers, and which passages particularly interested them. Detailed references to other texts may indicate that they were being read side-by-side. Occasionally, readers comment on the contents of a book in ways that give an insight into their own ideas and beliefs.

One of the Cathedral's incunables – a Sarum Missal printed in 1500 – preserves particularly interesting evidence of the ways in which owners responded to a book at different points in its history. Missals contain the text and music for church services, in this case for the 'Sarum Rite', which was the standard version of the liturgy in medieval England. Although the book was printed in Paris, it was intended for the English market. It is clear, however, that this French edition did not entirely satisfy the requirements of an early English owner, who has

added extra pages to the volume. These are taken from an edition of the Sarum Missal printed in London in 1504 and contain the prayers of votive masses for St Roch, St Anthony, and the Archangel Gabriel, not included in the Paris edition.³¹ Further changes to the book were made in the middle decades of sixteenth century, when the text for the mass of Thomas of Canterbury (Thomas Becket) was censored with rough crossings out in ink (Figure 5).

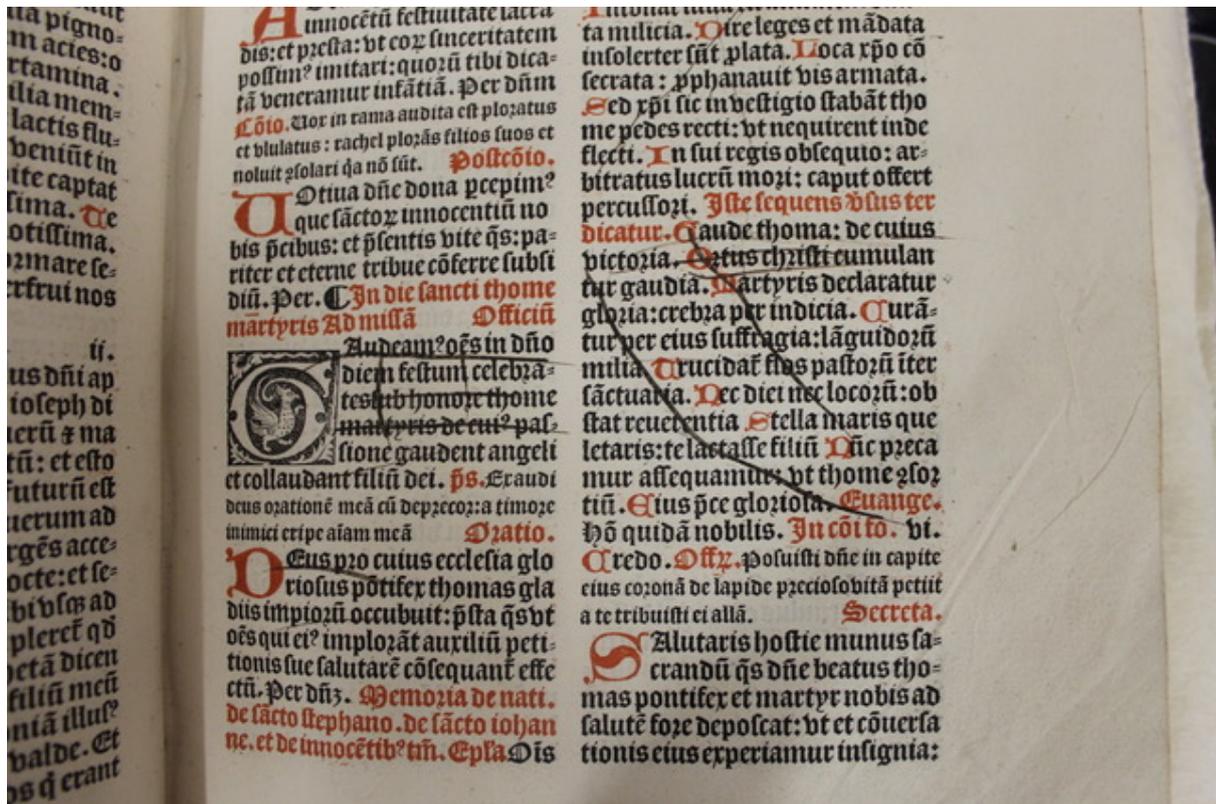


Figure 5: Deleted text from the Feast of Thomas of Canterbury in *Missale Saresberienese, sive Missale secundum Sarum* (Paris, 1500).

This must have been done soon after Henry VIII's decree of 1538, which declared Becket: 'a rebel ... who shall no longer be named a saint' and ordered that 'the services in his name shall be razed out of all books.'³² By the early seventeenth century, when the volume entered the Cathedral library,³³ its reception was entirely shaped by the Protestant Reformation. A series of comments on the title page condemned the 'blasphemous' contents of the volume, and declared: 'The library takes this Babylonian book, hostile to heaven, only so you may study it.'³⁴ Catholic devotional books were quite often to be found in seventeenth-century English libraries, where they might serve as evidence for the history of the Church and as source material for Protestant polemics.³⁵

The individual histories of the Cathedral’s incunables are fascinating to reconstruct and show how even a small group of early printed books may contain the potential for significant discoveries. Moreover, the information gathered from these nine items has now become part of a much larger dataset that is transforming our understanding of the movement and ownership of early books. There remain many possible areas for further research, for example by comparing the Cathedral’s incunabula to other copies of the same editions elsewhere, or by deciphering some of the more obscure ownership inscriptions.

Detailed entries for all nine of the Cathedral’s incunabula may be found by searching for “Winchester Cathedral” at <https://data.cerl.org/mei/search>.

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¹ [MEI \(cerl.org\)](https://data.cerl.org). I am very grateful to Jo Bartholomew and Eleanor Swire (former and current Curator and Librarian of Winchester Cathedral) for providing access to the Cathedral Library on several occasions. Holly James-Maddocks and Henk Jan de Jonge advised on several of the books discussed in this article.

² [ISTC \(Incunabula Short Title Catalogue\) \(cerl.org\)](https://data.cerl.org).

³ Christina Dondi (ed.), *Printing Revolution 1450-1500* (Venice, 2018), p. 70.

⁴ [ISTC \(Incunabula Short Title Catalogue\) \(cerl.org\)](https://data.cerl.org).

⁵ Andrew Thomson, ‘Bishop Morley and his Library’, *Friends of Winchester Cathedral Record Extra*, October 2022, p. 3, www.wincathrecord.org.

⁶ Guilielmus Ockham, *Quaestiones et Decisiones in Quattuor Libros Sententiarum Petri Lombardi* (Lyons: Johannes Treschel, 9-10 November 1495). ISTC io00015000. Cupboard 41.

⁷ *Missale Saresberienense, sive Missale secundum Sarum* (Paris: Johannes Higman and Wolfgang Hopyl, 22 June 1500). ISTC im00721600. Cupboard 41. A single page apparently from the same edition is in the Bodleian Library: Vet.A1 b. 12 (11).

⁸ Johannes de Bromyard, *Summa Praedicatorum* (Basel: Johann Amberbach, not after 1484). ISTC ij00260000. Cupboard 41.

⁹ Holly James-Maddocks, ‘Illuminated Caxtons and the Trade in Printed Books’, *The Library: The Transactions of the Bibliographical Society*, vol 22 (2021), pp. 291-315.

¹⁰ Cyprrianus, *Opera* (Venice: Vindelinius de Spira, 1471). ISTC ic01011000. Cupboard 41.

¹¹ *Missale Saresberienense, sive Missale secundum Sarum* (Paris: Johannes Higman and Wolfgang Hopyl, 22 June 1500). ISTC im00721600. Cupboard 41.

¹² Lactantius, *Opera* (Venice: Vindelinius de Spira, 1472). ISTC il00005000. Cupboard 41.

¹³ Lamberto Donati, ‘I fregi xilografici stampati a mano negl’ incunabuli italiani’, *La Bibliofilia*, vol 74 (1972), pp. 157-164, 303-327; vol 75 (1973), pp. 125-174.

¹⁴ Incunables were occasionally decorated in the 18th and 19th centuries, usually in imitation of 15th century styles.

¹⁵ The status of this volume as a ‘collector’s item’ was confirmed later in the eighteenth century when it entered the library of Gaspar-Joseph de Servais (1735–1807), a wealthy Belgian lawyer who owned more than six thousand books, including many incunabula and medieval manuscripts. See: *Catalogue des Livres de la Bibliothèque de feu Monsieur Gaspar-Joseph de Servais* (Mechelen: P.J. Hanicq, 1808).

¹⁶ John Vaughan, ‘Bishop Morley’s Library’, *The Fortnightly Review*, August 1913, p. 341.

¹⁷ Eric Garbeson, ‘Libraries, Memory and the Space of Knowledge’, *Journal of the History of Collections*, vol 18 (2006), pp. 105-106.

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- ¹⁸ Hampshire Record Office DC/F5/1/1; DC/F5/1/2.
- ¹⁹ Guilielmus Ockham, *Quaestiones et Decisiones in Quattuor Libros Sententiarum Petri Lombardi* (Lyons: Johannes Treschel, 9-10 November 1495). ISTC io00015000. Cupboard 41. The identification of Gomarus as a former owner was confirmed by Professor Henk Jan de Jonge (private communication, 2016).
- ²⁰ *Catalogus librorum Reverendi atque eximii Theologi D. Francisci Gomari* (Leiden: Ex officina Elzeviriorum, 1641).
- ²¹ Guilielmus Ockham, *Dialogorum libri septem adversos haereticos* (Lyons: Johannes Treschel, not before 12 September 1494). ISTC io00009000. Cupboard 41. The identification of van Winghen as a former owner was made by Professor Henk Jan de Jonge (private communication, 2016).
- ²² Silke Muylaert, *Shaping the Stranger Churches: Migrants in England and the Troubles in the Netherlands* (Leiden, 2021).
- ²³ Johannes Gerson, *Opera* (Basel: Nicolaus Kesler, 1489). ISTC ig00187000. Cupboard 41.
- ²⁴ [Monasteries in the Netherlands until 1800 \(vu.nl\)](#).
- ²⁵ Andrew Thomson, *Bishop Morley of Winchester 1598-1684: Politician, Benefactor, Pragmatist* (Winchester, 2019), pp. 22-28.
- ²⁶ Johannes de Bromyard, *Summa Praedicatorum* (Basel: Johann Amberbach, not after 1484). ISTC ij00260000. Cupboard 41.
- ²⁷ John Vaughan, 'Winchester Cathedral Library from the Reformation to the Commonwealth', *Church Quarterly*, October 1911, pp. 107-24.
- ²⁸ Winchester College Fellows' Library MS 202, f. 43r.
- ²⁹ MS 202, f. 12r.
- ³⁰ For example, John Brenz, *In Exodum Mosi Commentarii* (Frankfurt: Peter Braubach, 1558). 9D6(1).
- ³¹ *Missale ad Usum Insignis et Preclare Ecclesie Sarum* (London: Richard Pynson, 1504).
- ³² Paul Hughes and James Larkin (eds.), *Tudor Royal Proclamations* (New Haven, Connecticut, 1964), vol 1, p. 275.
- ³³ The donor was John Bridges, Prebend of Winchester Cathedral from 1565 to 1611.
- ³⁴ *Bibliotheca capit Bibliothecam hanc Babilonis coelesti hostilem non nisi ut inspicias.*
- ³⁵ Richard Foster, 'Placing and Disposing: Subject Classification in English Institutional Libraries, c.1600–1670', in Robyn Adams and Jacqueline Glomski (eds.), *Seventeenth-Century Libraries: Problems and Perspectives* (Leiden, 2023), p. 57.