

# The library of the Dukes of Urbino

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## THE LIBRARY OF THE DUKES OF URBINO

In spring 1581 Montaigne reached Urbino on his tour of Italy, and he noted in his *Journal*, of the Dukes of Urbino, "Ils sont de père en fils tous gens de lettres, et ont en ce palais [of Urbino] une belle librairie". He added the cryptic phrase, "La clef ne se trouva pas", thereby indicating that he was unable to visit the Library<sup>1</sup>. Today the situation is not greatly changed, for the room that housed the Library in the Ducal Palace of Urbino is not open to the public<sup>2</sup>. Every year some tens of thousands of tourists visit the Palace, and not one sees what was intended by its founder as its show-piece—the Library, complete with its contents, of course.

The origins of this Library are in the second half of the fifteenth century, the period that has been called the age of the formation of princely libraries. One thinks of the magnificent manuscripts of the Aragon Library of Naples, and those of Corvinus, King of Hungary, whose Queen was Italian<sup>3</sup>. Within a short time of their creation many of these libraries were dispersed, and the very buildings that housed them were destroyed. The Library of the Dukes of Urbino is of particular interest because it was the exception. First, it continued to grow for a century and a half; secondly, most of the material still exists, though not in Urbino, and is readily accessible; thirdly, the actual room built for the Library is *in situ*, with the painted coat-of-arms of Duke Federigo that graces the centre of its ceiling<sup>4</sup>. Moreover, many documents relating to the Library during the various stages of its growth are to be found, so that one can trace the Library's entire history. In view of all this it is remarkable that there has been no scholarly study dealing with the Library as a whole.

The Library originated with Federigo da Montefeltro, Count, and in 1474 Duke, of Urbino. Federigo was able to build his state in the Apennines as a result of his friendship

with Pope Pius II, and in the decade following the Pope's death in 1464, Federigo became one of the wealthiest princes in Italy, mainly as a result of his outstanding ability as a condottiere captain. A large part of this newly acquired wealth was used to build and decorate the Palace at Urbino, where work began about 1466.

The nineteenth century *nouveau riche* purchased a library complete for his country residence, and one may smile at delightful, if fictitious, Jorrocks and his buying the Bohn Library for Gentlemen. There was the parallel in fifteenth century Italy, for Federigo acquired his Library for the social status it brought. In the late 1460's printing had barely begun in Italy, so that anyone building a library depended on manuscripts<sup>5</sup>. In Italy the centre of the trade in these appears to have been Florence, which is not surprising when one recalls that City's leading role in the so-called "Italian Renaissance". The equivalent of the publisher Bohn was the manuscript-seller Vespasiano da Bisticci of Florence. Vespasiano sold second-hand manuscripts (often acquired from monasteries), while he had a stock of newly transcribed manuscripts, the texts being those that were in common demand; he could also arrange for scribes to transcribe to order manuscripts that he had not in stock<sup>6</sup>. Therefore, Federigo turned to Vespasiano for his Library, and Vespasiano compiled for him a list of the "complete" Library, so to speak. From Vespasiano's stock Federigo purchased available material, and he commissioned others. Between about 1468 and 1482, when Federigo died, the Library grew from almost nothing to about 1100 volumes, which Vespasiano estimated as worth 30000 ducats. A small proportion of this number was given to Federigo at various times, but one suspects that at least three-quarters were purchased from Vespasiano<sup>7</sup>.

Federigo employed as his librarian a scholar, Agapito, whose knowledge of Greek was ostentatious, while probably as under-librarian there was Lorenzo Astemio, who was well-versed in Latin<sup>8</sup>. Part of the duty of these two was to arrange the purchase of texts required, and some of these were prepared locally. We know something about one of the copyists who worked in Urbino, named Federigo Veterani, who later became librarian. Veterani claimed, perhaps with some exaggeration, that he had copied sixty or so manuscripts for Federigo's Library between about 1468 and 1482; today about half that number can be identified<sup>9</sup>. Federigo da Montefeltro was a friend of Cardinal Bessarion, who left some of his manuscripts in Urbino in 1472, very likely for transcripts to be made from some of them for the Library<sup>10</sup>. In that same year Federigo's troops captured Volterra, and in the sack Federigo acquired a polyglot Bible<sup>11</sup>.

The bulk of the manuscripts of the Library was in Latin, but almost 200 were in Greek, and some were in Hebrew and a few in Coptic<sup>12</sup>. Federigo was not a scholar, though he could read Latin well enough<sup>13</sup>. He certainly was not concerned with the purity of texts (as judged in his day), and it has been shown that the manuscripts prepared by Veterani, while they look attractive, are full of errors. Politian commented in over-all terms on the poor transcripts after a visit to the Library, perhaps a little unjustly, for most of the manuscripts acquired from Vespasiano were standard. Undoubtedly Federigo was in haste to complete his Library, and one can suspect that he was gullible, purchasing stock that Vespasiano was anxious to sell—in which case, small wonder that Vespasiano extolled the Duke's virtues and the merit of the Library. Some of the illumination for the manuscripts that was done in Urbino was poor, though that of Franco de' Rossi was superb; even the illumination in the manuscripts purchased from Vespasiano was not all of first quality<sup>14</sup>. In terms of copying-accuracy and beauty of

illumination the Library of Federigo was not in the same class as that of the Kings of Naples and Hungary. Obviously in such a quantity as Federigo's Library numbered, there were some remarkable manuscripts. The pride of Palla Strozzi's Library had been Ptolemy's *Geography*, and this had passed to Federigo, and was preserved carefully in his Library in a cedar-wood box. This manuscript had been brought from Greece about a century before Federigo obtained it, and it was the source for all the texts in Italy in this period<sup>15</sup>.

In 1482, at the time of Federigo's death, the Library in Urbino must have looked splendid as an *ensemble*. The main door (now sealed) to the Library was from the Courtyard, and on entering one saw to the right works of Sacred Writing, Law, Philosophy and Mathematics, while on the left were works of Geography, Poetry and History. Above the shelves against the walls were paintings of the Seven Liberal Arts, which corresponded to the general classification of the volumes on the shelves. Today two of these Arts, painted by Melozzo da Forlì, are in the National Gallery, London<sup>16</sup>. On the floor were carpets, and in the centre of the room a table and benches for scholars; to one end there was another table, probably for the staff<sup>17</sup>. The manuscripts were bound either in coloured velvet or in leather, and some of the bindings were decorated with filagree silver-work<sup>18</sup>, so it is unlikely that these latter were shelved with their spines only exposed—instead the ornamental fronts would have been on view, with their backs resting on sloping supports, perhaps. The lighting from the high windows is subdued, and one can imagine how colourful, and at the same time how mysterious and yet restful the room looked when furnished.

Federigo died before his Palace was finished, and before he had all the works for his "complete" Library. His death resulted in financial retrenchments, since his only son and heir, Guidobaldo, was aged ten, and so could not command any stipend as a

captain. Guidobaldo was trained in Latin and Greek, and he was devoted to his Library. Vespasiano tells us that Federigo did not consider printed books worthy of a place in his Library. This may be a manuscript-dealer's special pleading, though by 1482 printed books were not common in Italy. In the inventories of the Library made in the time of Federigo's son, some thirty printed books are indicated<sup>19</sup>. In the fifteenth century printed books were made to look like manuscripts, and by and large they were regarded as interchangeable with them (see illustrations on p. 105); but one can appreciate that the bibliophile would prefer the personal touch of the manuscript, and the endurance associated with vellum<sup>20</sup>.

Between 1502–1504 and 1516–1520 the Library suffered because of warfare. In the first instance the Library fell into the hands of Cesare Borgia, and his soldiers stripped the precious bindings, pilfering some manuscripts. When Duke Guidobaldo recovered the remnants of his Library, stored in Forlì in fifty-nine cases, he found about fifty manuscripts of the collection entirely missing, though in the following years a few individual manuscripts were recovered. Those lost were replaced, for the most part, with printed texts<sup>21</sup>. About 1516 Duke Francesco Maria, Guidobaldo's successor, was attacked and forced to flee from Urbino, taking the Library with him. With peace, probably in 1520, the collection was returned again to the room built for it<sup>22</sup>. Cesare Borgia had despoiled the Palace of its treasures, and it is not unlikely that the paintings of the Seven Liberal Arts were no longer in the Library after 1502<sup>23</sup>.

After the initial foundation by Federigo, the Library increased by notable acquisitions from two other contemporary libraries. In 1498 Federigo's half-brother, Ottaviano Ubaldini, died, and a portion of his private Library eventually was absorbed into the Urbino Library. While Federigo was well-read and curious, Ottaviano was a genuine scholar, and had the leisure to cultivate his

interest. Some of the manuscripts in his Library are exceptional, particularly the present-day MS Urb. lat. 548, in the Vatican Library<sup>24</sup>. In 1512 the Duke of Urbino was granted the fief of Pesaro, and a small part of the Library of Giovanni Sforza, a previous lord, was obtained<sup>25</sup>. All the Dukes of Urbino, within their means, tried to increase the Library, but it was the first and last who really moulded it. The last Duke was Francesco Maria II della Rovere, who died in 1631, and was also a scholar. He devoted himself to increasing the Library that he had inherited, and at the time of his death the Library consisted of some 1800 manuscripts, and tens of thousands of printed books. Among the notable acquisitions were the autograph draft of Polydore Vergil's *Anglica Historia*, which he received in 1613, and the now unique manuscript copy of Da Vinci's *Paragone*<sup>26</sup>. The Duke of Urbino preferred Castel Durante (present-day Urbania) to Urbino, and had built between 1607–1609 an annex to the Ducal Palace there, in order to house the Library, which he brought to Castel Durante from Urbino. This annex was demolished as recently as 1955. The Duke died without a son, and hence the fief reverted to the Pope. The Library, as personal property, was left by the Duke in his last will to be divided: the City of Urbino was to have the manuscripts, while Castel Durante was to retain the printed books. The administration of the two parts was placed in the hands of an ecclesiastical Order. In 1658 Pope Alexander VII, ignoring the wishes of the Duke, had the manuscripts taken to Rome and added them to the Vatican Library. In 1666 the same Pope brought to Rome the printed books from Urbania, and these were placed in the Biblioteca Alessandrina<sup>27</sup>. Both parts exist in these libraries today, and perhaps the transference was fortunate, for one fears that, left in Urbino and Urbania, much material would have been spoilt, lost and dispersed. It is a pity, however, that now, just five hundred years since the Library was founded, there is



no trace of it at all in Urbino. It ought to be possible to restore the decorations of the rooms that housed the Library, and to place dummy volumes on shelves. This would give the best of all possible worlds, for the scholar could continue to use the preserved material of the Library in Rome, while the merely curious could appreciate better Urbino as a centre of Renaissance culture.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Montaigne, *Journal de voyage en Italie . . .*, ed. P. Faure (Paris 1957), p. 183.

<sup>2</sup> For the room, see P. Rotondi, *Il Palazzo Ducale di Urbino* (2 vols., Urbino 1950), I, plan, No. 93.

<sup>3</sup> For the libraries of Italy see D. Robathan, *Libraries of the Italian Renaissance*, in *The Medieval Library*, ed. James Westfall Thompson (2nd ed., New York 1957), pp. 509–588, 699, which has an ample bibliography; see also I. Berkovits, *Illuminated Manuscripts from the Library of Mathias Corvinus* (Budapest 1964), and C. H. Clough, *Pietro Bembo's Library . . .* (London 1965).

<sup>4</sup> Rotondi, II, plate p. 338.

<sup>5</sup> V. Scholderer, *Printers and Readers in Italy in the fifteenth century*, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, XXXV (London 1949), offprint pp. 1 to 23.

<sup>6</sup> A. de la Mare, Messer Piero Strozzi, a Florentine Priest and Scribe, in *Calligraphy and Palaeography: Essays presented to Alfred Fairbank*, ed. A. S. Osley (London 1965), pp. 55–68; see p. 68, No. 35 for an Urbino MS copied by this scribe.

<sup>7</sup> For early inventories see L. Michelini Tocci, Agapito . . ., in *Collectanea Vaticana in honorem Anselmi M. Card. Albareda . . .* (2 vols., Vatican City 1962), II, p. 255. See also the printed catalogues of the manuscripts (excluding Hebrew and Coptic) as the Library now exists, in C. Stornajolo, *Codices Urbinales Latini* (3 vols., Vatican City 1902–1921); C. Stornajolo, *Codices Urbinales Graeci* (Vatican City 1895). G. Franceschini, *Per la storia della Biblioteca di Federico . . .*, in his *Figure del Rinascimento Urbinate* (Urbino 1959), pp. 109–147, is fundamental; for the Library's origins see also C. H. Clough, *A note of purchase of 1467 . . .*, in *Studia Oliveriana*, XIII (Pesaro 1966), pp. 67–78. For Vespasiano see V. da Bisticci, *Vite . . .*, ed. P. D'Ancona and E. Aeschlimann (Milan 1951), pp. 210–214.

<sup>8</sup> Michelini Tocci, Agapito, pp. 245–280.

<sup>9</sup> C. H. Clough, *Federigo Veterani . . .*, forthcoming in *Studia Oliveriana*, XIV. For other copyists see Franceschini, p. 143.

<sup>10</sup> C. H. Clough, *Cardinal Bessarion and Greek at the Court of Urbino*, *Manuscripta*, VIII (1964), p. 167.

<sup>11</sup> Rotondi, I, p. 385.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. the inventories cited in note 7.

<sup>13</sup> There is a charming contemporary portrait of the Duke reading in his Library, see Rotondi, II, plate p. 358.

<sup>14</sup> Franceschini, pp. 140–141, 143.

<sup>15</sup> G. Fiocco, *La Biblioteca di Palla Strozzi*, in *Studi . . . in onore di Tammaro De Marinis* (4 vols., Verona 1964), II, p. 305.

<sup>16</sup> Rotondi, II, plates pp. 339–340. Two other paintings of the series were destroyed in Berlin in 1944.

<sup>17</sup> Michelini Tocci, Agapito, p. 261 n.1.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 264; when the Duke recovered his Library in 1504, one of his servants wrote in a chronicle that the Library was “privata però di alchuni pezzi, et spogliata in tutta delli belli et ricchi suoi ornamenti d'argento”, MS Urb. lat. 490, c. 110<sup>v</sup>, Bibl. Vaticana.

<sup>19</sup> Michelini Tocci, Agapito, p. 259; E. P. Goldschmidt, *The Printed Book of the Renaissance* (2nd ed., Amsterdam 1966), p. 3 note.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. C. F. Bühler, *The fifteenth century Book* (Philadelphia 1960), pp. 15–19, 62; S. Samek Ludovici, *Gutenberg e l'Italia*, in *Accademie e Biblioteche d'Italia*, XXXIII (n. s., XVI) (1965), pp. 429–453.

<sup>21</sup> Michelini Tocci, Agapito, pp. 267–268; C. H. Clough, *Gasparo Sanseverino . . .*, *Philological Quarterly*, XLIII (1964), p. 277. For those recovered and the printed texts see the inventories cited in note 7. T. De Marinis, *La Legatura Artistica in Italia nei secoli XV e XVI* (Florence 1960), I, pp. 79–88 and plates.

<sup>22</sup> Michelini Tocci, Agapito, p. 268; Stornajolo, *Codices Urb. Graeci*, pp. XIII, CXLVI.

<sup>23</sup> Rotondi, I, pp. 383–384.

<sup>24</sup> L. Michelini Tocci, Ottaviano Ubaldini . . ., in *Mélanges Eugène Tisserant* (7 vols., Vatican City 1964), VII, p. 111.

<sup>25</sup> Clough, *A note of purchase . . .*

<sup>26</sup> MSS Urb. lat. 497 and 498, in the Vatican Library, see Stornajolo, *Codices Urb. Latini*, I, pp. 500–510; L. da Vinci, *Paragone . . .*, ed. I. A. Richter (London 1949), pp. 1–2.

<sup>27</sup> T. Valenti, *Le vicende della libreria impressa dei duchi di Urbino . . .*, in *Accademie e Biblioteche d'Italia*, IV (1931), pp. 337–342. There is no catalogue in print of the printed books of the Urbino-Castel Durante Library.

#### THE TWO PICTURES ON THE RIGHT

*The title-page of an early-printed book (1: Appian, Historia romana, Venice, Ratdolt and Loslein, 1477), compared with that of an Urbino manuscript (2: Isidore, De ortu atque obitu patrum et alia, Ms. Vat. Urb. lat. 392, copied before 1475).*

Ad diuum Alifonfum Atagonum & utriusq; Sicilię  
regem in libros ciuiliu belloru ex Appiano Alexan-  
drino in latinu traductos Prefatio incipit feliciffime.

**R**

Arthoru regem ut ab Anneo accepti-  
mus sine munere falutare nemo po-  
teft. Ego uero gloriofiffime rex cum  
tuam uirtute humanitateq; cõsidero  
tum ceteras nature dotes: quibus in-  
ter etatis noftre principes uel in pri-  
mis illuftris es: lublime ingenium;  
summã caritate: summã continentia  
nulla ratione adduci poffum ut non  
pluris apud te fidem meã esse exiftimẽ q̃ uillas opes. Quip-  
pe cõ te indigentibus & ueluti e naufragio emetis q̃ ignotis  
offerre uideam piã manus. Ceterę nec sine munere ad te ueni  
nec uacuis ( ut aunt ) manibus tuã maieltatẽ fum adoraturus.  
Nam cũ priores Appiani libros: Libycum: Syriũ: Parthicu  
& Mithridaticu Nicolao quinto fumo pontifici dum i huma-  
nis ageret e greco tranfufiffime: Reliquos ciuiliũ bellorum  
cõmentarios: que Senatus: populũq; romanus inuicem gellit  
nundu editos aut perfectos a me ad quem potius mittere q̃  
ad te inuictiffime princeps: Hispanię pariter & Italię noftre de-  
cus: & qui noñ minus optimarum artium ftudij: & litteris q̃  
armis indyctus es: atq; memorandus. Accipies igit nouũ opus:  
nec indignũ regio animo: regioq; cõceptu tuo. Sed quod cum  
priefcis illis uoluminibus ab his: qui hiftorias feripere pofteri-  
tati traditis: facile conferri queat. Q. fi in contrarium nõ nulli  
refragentur ( ut gmulorum mos eft ) quem uelint ex latinis in  
mediũ adducant: fiue Crifpũ: fiue Cefarem: fiue Curtium:  
fiue alia uulgata doctorũ nomina: eorũ: qui hiftorias feripfer-  
unt: nullos ex his: qui cum ciuilibus Appiani libris conferri

Anneus Seneca de  
rege parthorum.

Nicolaus papa quin-  
Libycus. (tus.  
Syrius.  
Parthicus.  
Mithridaticus.

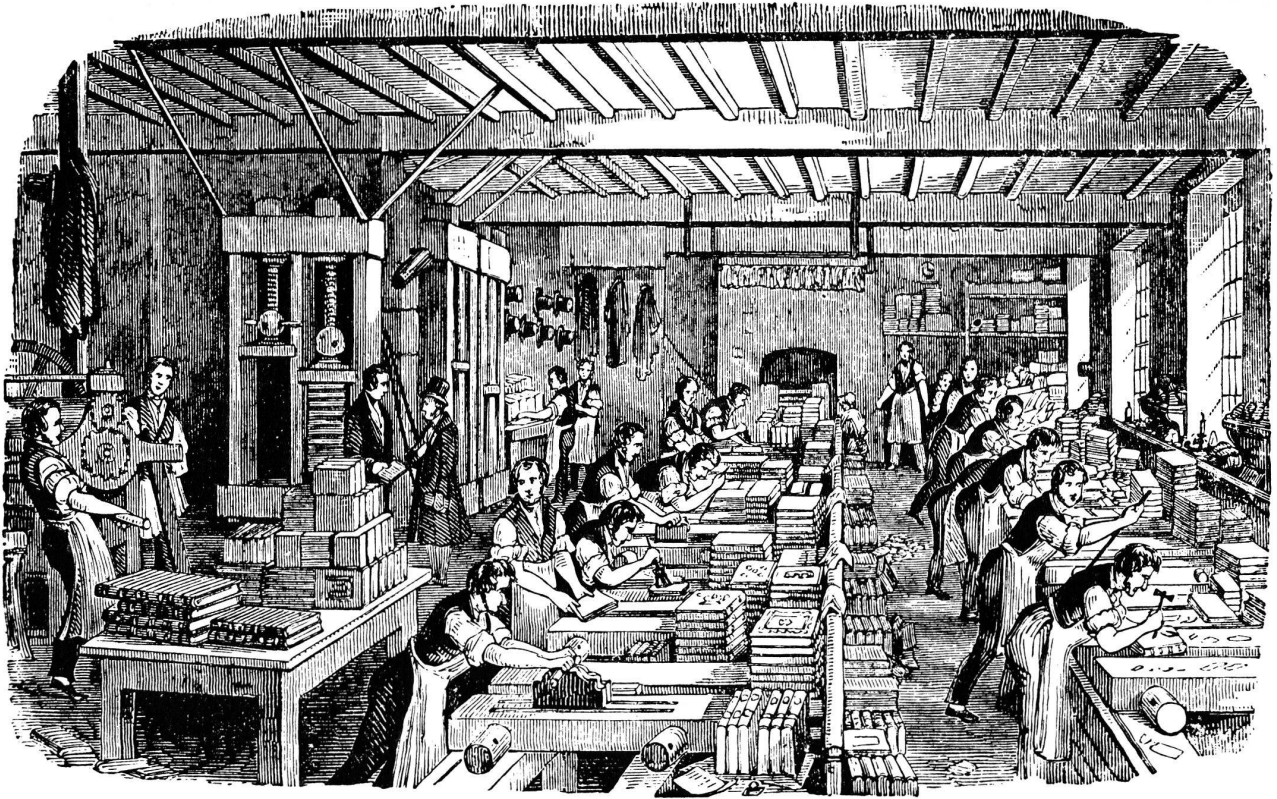
Crifpus.  
Cefar.  
Curtius.

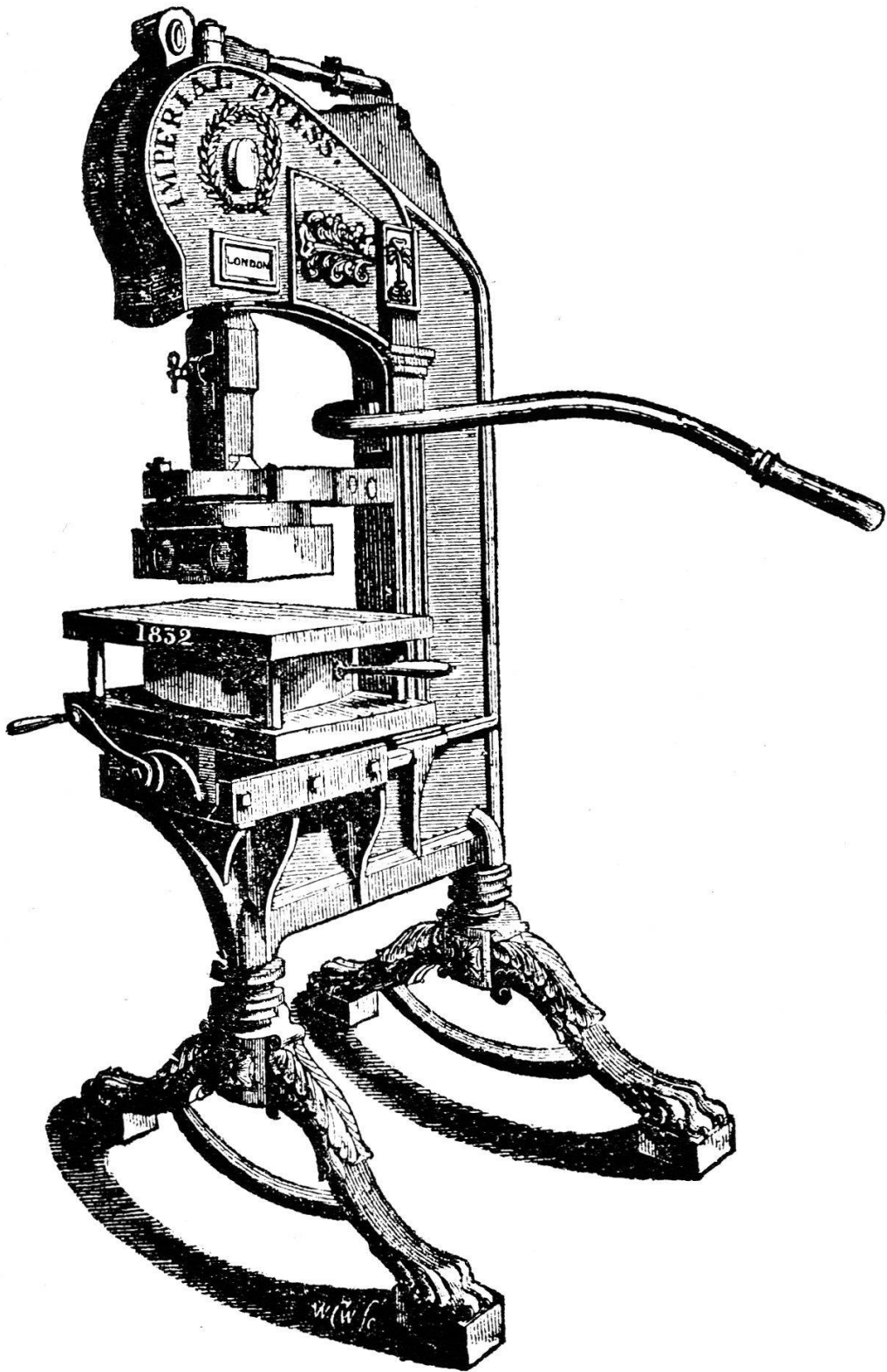
INCIPIT LIBER CRONICOR  
ISIDORI HISPALENSIS EPII  
AB EXORDIO MVNDI VSQVE  
AD ERADII AVGVSTI IMPERI  
VM ET SISEBVTI REGIS. PRIN  
CIPATVM. PRAEFATIO.

**B**

REVEM TEM-  
PORVM EX  
SITIONEM RE-  
generationes & re-  
gna primus ex no-  
stris Iulius africa-

nus sub imperatore marco aurelio a-  
tonino simplici hiftorie ftulo elicit  
Deinde eusebius cesariensis epifto-  
pus. atq; sancte romane memoria  
hieronymus croniconum canonum  
multiplicem ediderunt hiftoriam  
simul regni ac temporibus ordina-





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