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# The Frontispiece Woodcut in the *Fasciculus temporum* in Portland State University's Codex

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The Frontispiece Woodcut in the *Fasciculus temporum* in Portland State University's Codex

The word frontispiece comes from the Latin *frontispicium*, roughly translating to 'looking at the forehead,' and it essentially functions as a face for a book. By definition, it is an introductory illustration that precedes the title page, usually printed on the *verso* side, or the left-facing side for the reader.<sup>1</sup> A full-page woodcut is printed on the frontispiece of Portland State University's (PSU) copy of the *Fasciculus temporum omnes antiquorum cronicas complectens*, a historical chronicle written by Werner Rolewinck and printed by Johann Prüss in Strasbourg between 1490 and 1494.<sup>2</sup> The highly popular *Fasciculus* was first published in 1474 and may be "...one of the most widely read books of its century."<sup>3</sup> The *Fasciculus* and other history *incunabula*, or early printed books, would often be produced with beautiful woodcut illustrations. The print revolution that followed the innovations of Johannes Gutenberg in the 1440s marks the first time large-scale woodcuts were used on the introductory pages of books.<sup>4</sup> The frontispiece image in the edition in the PSU codex is in the tradition of 'the education of the prince,' which was a popular choice for frontispieces and title pages in early printed works, particularly in historical chronicles and other books related to ancient times.

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<sup>1</sup>University of Otago Special Collections, *Moving to the Left: the Art and Development of the Frontispiece*, (Dunedin: University of Otago, 2017), accessed April, 2020.  
<https://www.otago.ac.nz/library/exhibitions/movingtotheleft/LIB-SC%20Frontispiece%20Exhibition%20Handlist%2017.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> The title translates to: *Little Bundle containing all the chronicles of ancient times*.

<sup>3</sup> Margaret Bingham Stillwell, "The Fasciculus Temporum: A Genealogical Survey of Editions Before 1480," in *Bibliographical Essays: A Tribute to Wilberforce Eames* (New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1967), 409.

<sup>4</sup> "Johannes de Sacrobosco, Sphaera Mundi" Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed May, 2020.  
<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/356589>.

In this illustration, a crowned and enthroned monarch wielding a long scepter receives a scholar and his companion. The scholar hands him an encased book as he crosses the threshold from ‘outside’ to ‘inside’. Narrow arched windows in the background reveal a simplified landscape beyond the figures. The king’s extravagant Gothic throne, complete with *baldaquin*, or overhanging, is authentic to late fifteenth-century Europe. The same can be said of the tall, rounded hats worn by the scholars, referred to as ‘acorn caps.’<sup>5</sup> The long, pointed shoes worn by all the figures were called ‘*crakows*’ or ‘*poulaines*,’ and were popular for men and women across Europe in the late medieval period.<sup>6</sup> The use of space is worth noting in this piece, as realistic representations of space are perhaps the main way in which Renaissance and medieval art are differentiated. Though the depth created by the angles of the walls and ceiling is somewhat convincing, the king’s throne is seemingly a few inches inside the room. This demonstrates a transitional time in terms of spatial representation, which is typical of this late part of the medieval period.

Some of the most eye-catching elements of this illustration are the architectural details which frame it and highlight the action of the figures. Particularly of note are the columns that symmetrically frame the men, the articulation of the ceiling and roof beams, and the cathedral-like arches and spires on the throne. In general, “architecture haunted the medieval imagination,”<sup>7</sup> and such details were used with relish across all art forms in this period. In this context, however, the use of architecture likely held a specific symbolic message. A portal or threshold, defined with columns, was meant to provide an entrance for the reader into the book,

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<sup>5</sup>Acorn hats were popular for men across Europe in the fifteenth century and do not communicate anything about the wearer’s profession. See: Hans Memling, *Portrait of Anthony of Burgundy*, painting, 1467-70 (Gemäldegalerie, Dresden). <https://www.wga.hu/frames-e.html?/html/m/memling/6copies/0149burg.html>

<sup>6</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica, s.v. “Crakow.” Both of these names refer to Poland, as the style was said to originate in the kingdom of Bohemia.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Bartlett, ed., *Medieval Panorama* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2001), 144.

and also to enclose and protect its contents. This shape also echoes the triumphal arches of classical antiquity, which would become one of the most popular motifs in Renaissance publishing.<sup>8</sup> This composition, along with the king's leaf-shaped crown worn on top of a turban-like head wrap, suggests a connection to classical antiquity.<sup>9</sup>

It is possible that this woodcut demonstrates how medieval artists used contemporary settings when portraying the past. The king is not recognizable as any specific medieval figure, and there is no accompanying text indicating identity, as seen in contemporary examples which depict actual monarchs.<sup>10</sup> Though we do not know exactly why medieval artists used contemporary settings for the past, it was likely to have been simply to connect the viewer more readily with the image. The *Fasciculus* is a book which spans ancient times to recent ones, acting as "...both encyclopedia and newspaper,"<sup>11</sup> and this temporal 'flexibility' is demonstrative of the medieval understanding of history. Rolewinck derives much of his ancient history from the Bible, and chronicles like the *Fasciculus* were meant to instruct the contemporary reader in Christian morals and guide their behavior. The monks who were the original consumers of the *Fasciculus* would not have separated history from studies in scripture, theology, and ethics.

Along with their views on the uses of history, medieval Europeans held a very different idea of art and artistry than we do today. Throughout the medieval period, the role of the artist was indistinguishable from that of a craftsman.<sup>12</sup> Artists were expected to learn through imitation of a 'master,' and to work in a limited number of subjects and themes, which were mainly

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<sup>8</sup> Dennis Duncan and Adam Smyth, eds. *Book Parts*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 27.

<sup>9</sup> A turban paired with a crown is traditionally associated with Ancient Mesopotamia. For a fifteenth-century comparator, see *The Crown of Margaret of York*, 1468 (Aachen Cathedral, Aachen).

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Aachen\\_Germany\\_Domschatz\\_Crown-Margaret-of-York-01.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Aachen_Germany_Domschatz_Crown-Margaret-of-York-01.jpg).

<sup>10</sup> See Pope Pius II, *Traicte trescreatif et plaisant de lamour indicible de Eurialus et de Lucesse*, trans. Octavien Saint-Gelais (France: Antoine Vérard, 1490-1493), Bodleian Library, Oxford.

<https://digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/inquire/p/9c21517a-f899-4ad6-9adc-493343324662>.

<sup>11</sup> Stillwell, "Fasciculus," 409.

<sup>12</sup> Bartlett, ed., *Medieval Panorama*, 154.

religious in nature. Carved woodblocks and the images made from them were widely copied, shared, sold, and otherwise passed around between print shops well into the Renaissance, and most images did not credit their creator in any way. This copy of the *Fasciculus*' woodcut appears as a frontispiece in books from at least three other publishers of *incunabula* in the late fifteenth century.<sup>13</sup> Apart from the 'education of the prince,' some of the other most commonly used archetypes for illustrated frontispieces and title pages were images of saints or legendary sages and prophets, embodiments of concepts or places, and heraldic imagery. Certain publishers, particularly in France, based designs around their initials, developing an early idea of a personal logo.<sup>14</sup>

Unfortunately, due to a lack of written evidence, the techniques used to create medieval woodcuts are poorly understood. Researchers have been able to glean some information by examining surviving carved woodblocks with x-rays and other forensic science methodologies. Such studies reveal "...the fundamental process of cutting a block changed little during the fifteenth century."<sup>15</sup> The preparatory drawing and the carving of the woodblock were likely executed by separate people. The carver likely began with a master drawing or tracing on a flat piece of pear or apple wood and cut the design away with just one tool: a small knife. Even an image of average quality such as this frontispiece would have required fine artistic skills. The lines were formed with tiny, wedge-shaped incisions, which 'scooped' out forms and shapes. Carved surfaces needed to be sturdy enough to withstand the repetitive force of the press, yet retain some delicacy and dynamism. Any areas that were not meant to take up ink would have to be painstakingly carved away, or they could smudge the print. Within fifty years of the

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<sup>13</sup> See Appendix for my compilation of these books.

<sup>14</sup> See *La Mer des Hystores, Le martirologue des saints*, (Paris: Pierre Le Rouge pour Vincent Commin, 1488-1489). National Library, Paris, <https://www.bnf.fr/fr/mediatheque/la-mer-des-hystoires>.

<sup>15</sup> Peter Parshall, ed., *Origins of European Printmaking*, (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 2005), 72.

publication of this book, the finer and more precise art of engraving would replace woodcutting as the preferred medium for frontispieces.

Though better-quality examples of ‘the education of the prince’ illustrations exist in the other editions of the *Fasciculus*, the fact that it survives intact does render it exceptional. Most incunabula from the late fifteenth century available to researchers do not contain woodcuts, and even fewer have frontispieces with full page woodcuts remaining.<sup>16</sup> There are multiple reasons for this, one being that frontispieces were possibly intended to be a ‘transient’ page that one could remove.<sup>17</sup> As part of the new flourishing of print media in this period, people were developing new ways of consuming and collecting image plates. One way of doing this was to stick sheets of paper—presumably with images printed on them—to a wall with wax seals.<sup>18</sup> Over time, separating full-page woodcuts from *incunabula*, whether for museums or private collections, became common. The location of a frontispiece also makes it highly vulnerable to theft, and undoubtedly, countless books have been subject to such illicit separations. It naturally follows that our existing record does not necessarily reflect the actual prevalence and use of frontispieces in the late fifteenth century.

All of the uses of the ‘the education of the prince’ woodcut discovered in this research were either in the *Fasciculus temporum* or a book called the *Directorium humanae vitae alias Parabolae antiquorum sapientum*, which was translated into Latin from Hebrew by Johannes de Capua in the twelfth century.<sup>19</sup> Another highly popular book in the fifteenth century, the

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<sup>16</sup> In my research, only approximately 10-15% of the early printed books from continental Europe available as digital facsimiles were illustrated, and within that, about half had illustrated frontispieces and/or some combination of illustrated title page.

<sup>17</sup> Duncan and Smyth, eds., *Book Parts*, 28.

<sup>18</sup> David Areford, “Multiplying the Sacred: The Fifteenth-Century Woodcut as Reproduction, Surrogate, Simulation,” in *The Woodcut in Fifteenth-Century Europe*, ed. Peter Parshall (National Gallery of Art: Washington, 2009), 119; See Petrus Christus, *Portrait of a Female Donor*, painting, 1455 (National Gallery of Art, Washington).

<sup>19</sup> The title translates to *Guide for Human Life or other Proverbs of the Ancient Sages*.

*Directorium* is a collection of fables from ancient India, originally written in Sanskrit, which were meant for educating monarchs. Similar in structure to *A Thousand and One Nights*, the *Directorium* is a story within a story, in which ‘contemporary’ princes are schooled in wise leadership through allegorical tales.<sup>20</sup> Johann Prüss used this frontispiece woodblock in his 1489 edition of the *Directorium*, and other publishers of the work used it from 1489-1494. In the adaptation seen in a Spanish translation of the *Directorium*, which was published in Zaragoza by the German transplant Paul Hurus around 1494, we see what appears to be a somewhat clumsy ink tracing of the version of the woodblock design utilized for the PSU copy of the *Fasciculus*.<sup>21</sup> Printed text indicates the names of the characters, King Disles and Sendebur, the Latinized forms of the sage and prince characters from the original Sanskrit text. This evidence and the earlier date of its use in the *Directorium* suggests it is possible that this woodcut was originally designed to portray the *Directorium*, and later reused for the *Fasciculus*. Interestingly, there exist other codices in which the *Directorium* is bound with western historical chronicles.<sup>22</sup> It is clear that there were thematic ties between ancient eastern parables and western history texts that would render them worthy of the same visual representation in the minds of publishers at this time.

Speaking generally, there is much work to be done in terms of researching the illustrations in incunabula. The ways artists and publishers developed and executed these images are still a mystery, but it is probable they worked in a highly collaborative environment. By looking at the way in which just this one image was repeated, it is clear that ideas were shared between different publishers and adapted to the skill levels of different artists. While the basic ideas for frontispiece illustrations like this came from a limited number of archetypes, the

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<sup>20</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica, s.v. “Patachantra.”

<sup>21</sup> See Appendix.

<sup>22</sup> See Appendix.

individual interpretation of the artist would make them unique. Styles and tastes were constantly being shaped by the international visual dialogue brought forth by the development of printing. One clear take-away from looking at late fifteenth-century frontispieces is that there was no one established way to begin an early printed book.



## Appendix:

Works confirmed to contain some form of the same frontispiece woodcut as PSU's codex

Johannes de Capua. *Directorium humane vitae alias Parabolae antiquorum sapientium*.

Strasbourg: Johann Prüss, 1489. Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<https://www.loc.gov/resource/rbc0001.2015rosen0132/?sp=9>.

This image is identical to PSU's copy, but is printed on the verso side *after* the title page.

Johannes de Capua. *Buch der Weisheit der alten Weisen*. Translated by Antonius von Pforr.

Urach: Konrad Fyner, ca. 1482. Universitäts-und Landesbibliothek, Darmstadt.

<http://tudigit.ulb.tu-darmstadt.de/show/inc-iii-32/0003/image>.

This is a German translation of the *Directorium*. The image is identical to PSU's copy, but this version lacks a title page. This is bound with early sixteenth-century chronicles on Turkey and Swabia, among other printed and manuscript texts.

Johannes de Capua. *Das buoch der weyßheyt der altten weysen*. [sic] Translated by Antonius von Pforr. Augsburg: Johann Schönsperger, 1484.

[https://daten.digital-](https://daten.digital-sammlungen.de/0002/bsb00029301/images/index.html?id=00029301&seite=00009&fip=193.174.98.30&nativeno=&groesser=150%25)

[sammlungen.de/0002/bsb00029301/images/index.html?id=00029301&seite=00009&fip=193.174.98.30&nativeno=&groesser=150%25](https://daten.digital-sammlungen.de/0002/bsb00029301/images/index.html?id=00029301&seite=00009&fip=193.174.98.30&nativeno=&groesser=150%25).

The woodblock looks slightly different, cruder in style, and this frontispiece is full color; probably hand-painted.

Johannes de Capua. *Exemplario Contra los enganos y peligros del mundo*. Zaragoza: Paul (Pablo) Hurus, 1493.

<http://bdh-rd.bne.es/viewer.vm?lang=en&id=0000174126&page=1>.

This appears to be hand-drawn and done in ink, probably via tracing or some other form of copying. Printed text readers read "Disles Rey" and "Sendebär," or King Disles and Sinbad, the Latinized versions of the Hebrew versions of the characters' names in the original *Pantachantra*.

Werner Rolewinck. *Fasciculus temporum omnes antiquorum cronicas complectens*. Strasbourg: Johann Prüss, 1490-1494. Herzogin Anna Amalia Bibliothek, Weimar.

<https://haab-digital.klassik-stiftung.de/viewer!/image/910277443/2/>.

This version is in full color and likely hand-painted.

Werner Rolewinck. *Fasciculus temporum omnes antiquorum cronicas complectens*. Strasbourg: Johann Prüss, 1490-1494. Universitäts-und Landesbibliothek, Darmstadt.

<http://tudigit.ulb.tu-darmstadt.de/show/inc-iii-39/0002/image>.

This is identical to PSU's copy.

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