

# Bringing American Collections into MEI

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**Abstract** The project *Material Evidence in Incunabula* was introduced to the United States by Cristina Dondi in her Kristeller Lecture at Columbia University in New York in April 2009, and developed in Europe from 2009 onward. The growth of United States' involvement in MEI is traced, from the first regular contributions by United States institutions in 2012 through the current status, with more than a dozen institutions contributing. There are some 70 US libraries holding 100 or more copies, and nearly 200 collections holding 20 or more copies. Involving many of these institutions in MEI would not only enhance the provenance database, but also stimulate activity in those institutions with a focus on the history of early printing in the 15th century and on the cultural heritage shared with Europe. Various possibilities for moving forward with MEI in the United States are discussed.

**Keywords** Incunabula. American Special Collections Libraries. Bibliography. Digital humanities.

In the US, Cristina Dondi first revealed plans for MEI in her Kristeller Lecture at Columbia in April 2009, *The Venetian Book-Trade in the 15th Century: Material Evidence for the Economic and Social History of the Renaissance*. The years 2009 and 2010 saw the development and testing of MEI, and in 2011 creation of records began in Europe. But it was not until the middle of 2012 that the first regular contributions from the US began – purely by an accident of timing.

In retirement, beginning in 2008, I had been cataloguing the rare book collection at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts, where my late wife Ruth Mortimer had been the curator, and after whom the Mortimer Rare Book Collection is now named. I had never worked with incunabula before, and as I began describing in detail the 70 copies at Smith, including of





Figure 1 Contributors to MEI, 2012-14

course their provenance, I took several opportunities to learn more, including a Rare Book School course with Paul Needham and William Noel, a conference organised by Falk Eisermann in Greifswald, which also enabled a visit to the headquarters of the *Gesamtkatalog der Wiegendrucke*, and the Oxford conference on the secularisation of monasteries in early 2012. It was at that conference that the decisive events took place: I met Cristina, which led directly to the start of entering Smith's incunabula into MEI; and I was recruited by William Stoneman to work on Harvard's collections. At the end of 2014, MEI activity in the US was limited to Smith and Harvard [fig. 1].

MEI activity in the US picked up after a presentation and workshop organised by Cristina at Columbia during Bibliography Week in 2015, a series of bookish events held in New York at the end of January every year. Following those events, the University of Iowa under Greg Prickman and Princeton University began contributing to MEI.

A similar presentation in 2016 saw the start of contributions from two New York libraries and one in California: by John McQuillen at the Morgan Library and Consuelo Dutschke and Alice Laforet at Columbia University, and by David Faulds at the Bancroft Library of the University of California, Berkeley. Progress to date was then presented at a seminar in conjunction with the CERL meeting at Yale in April 2017. By that time, the number of contributing libraries had tripled [fig. 2].

After that, Yale University, the Grolier Club in New York, the University of Chicago, and the Huntington Library in San Marino, Cali-

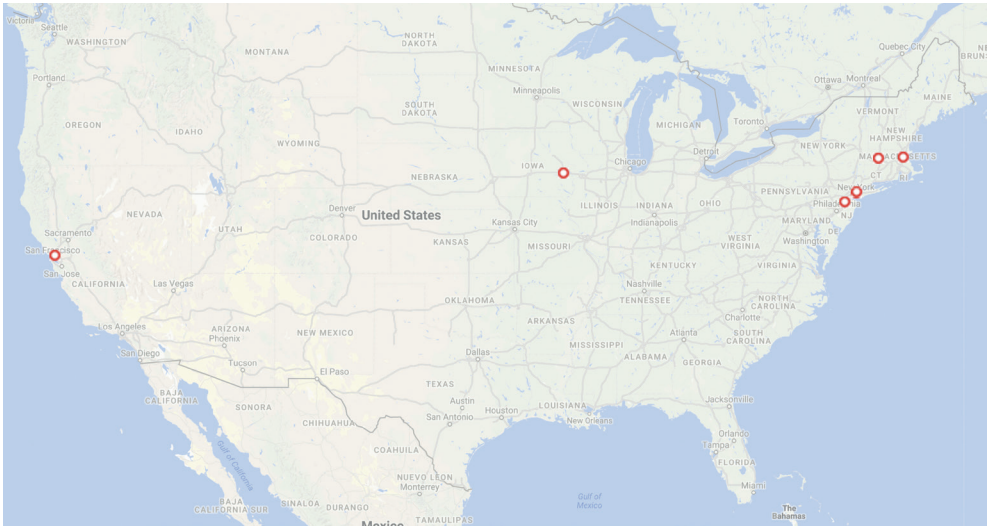


Figure 2 Contributors to MEI, 2012-17

fornia, joined in, and the Folger Shakespeare Library is poised to begin contributing. A further MEI workshop was held in Baltimore in conjunction with the Rare Books and Manuscripts conference in the summer of 2019, supported by the Bibliographical Society of America and CERL. Activity was spreading across the country [fig. 3].

MEI was of course designed with the aim of providing a broad picture of the movement of books in the early years of printing, and of the wider consequences of the spread of the printed word in many fields, and that aim is well on its way to realisation, for which this conference provides tangible evidence.

But for the repositories of incunabula – and especially those with smaller collections – an immediate return on their investment in MEI is the making of new discoveries. Because creating a record in MEI entails close examination of each copy, in ways not usually undertaken during the cataloguing process in the past, such discoveries are almost inevitable. They range from identifying previously unrecognised provenance evidence, to making connections with other collections, to identifying new incunable editions and suggestions for further research.

Even the Smith College collection, numbering just 70 copies, contains one unicum: not an unknown edition, but a previously unidentified variant, perhaps documenting a separate issue. The Smith copy of Antonius de Raymundia, *Libellus contra beneficiorum reservationes*, printed in Paris by Guy Marchant about 1498, has what appears to be a

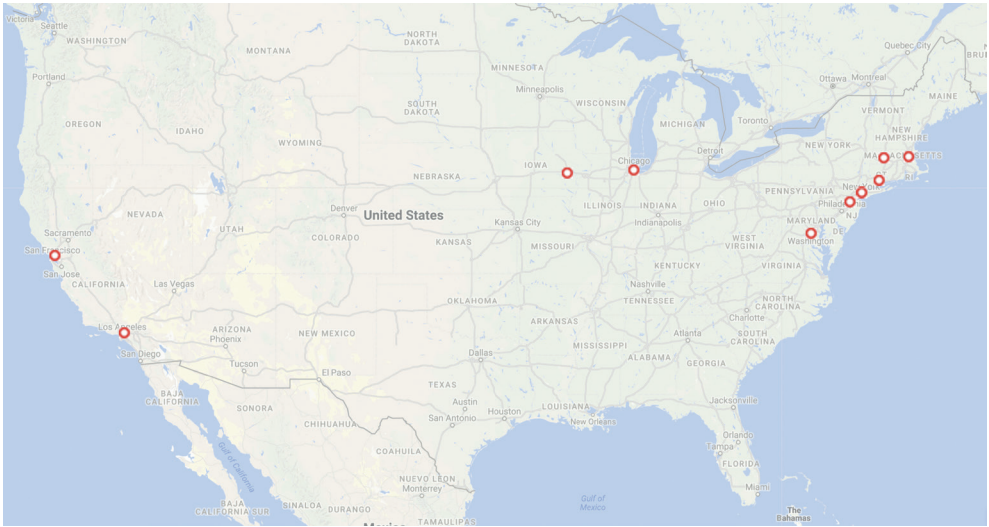


Figure 3 Contributors to MEI, 2012-18

cancel title leaf with the device of Jean Petit, while all other copies – 15 are listed in GW and ISTC – have Marchant’s device.<sup>1</sup>

The verso of the title leaf has been previously recorded either as blank, or as having a woodcut illustration. But in the Smith copy, there is a blind impression of the illustration, with a faint inking of the right border. And thanks to the growing number of digital facsimiles available on the internet, it was easy to ascertain that the copy at the Bibliothèque Mazarine,<sup>2</sup> with the Marchant device, also has a similar blind impression.

I had trained as a cataloguer under James Walsh, whose monumental catalogue of the Harvard fifteenth-century books is well known, but I had never worked with incunabula, because James Walsh reserved those books to himself. When William Stoneman recruited me for the Harvard MEI project, his initial thought was that I could enter information into MEI directly from Walsh’s catalogue, but of course I wanted to look at the books themselves. And as it turned out, there was good reason to do so, because, in spite of the extent and detail of James Walsh’s catalogue, I have been able to augment or revise

<sup>1</sup> Antonius de Raymundia, *Libellus contra beneficiorum reservationes*. Add: Petrus de Ceffons, *Epistola Luciferi*. [Paris]: Guy Marchant, in part for Jean Petit, [about 1498]. 4°. GW 2255; ISTC ia00916000; MEI 02004043.

<sup>2</sup> URL <https://mazarinum.bibliotheque-mazarine.fr/records/item/2367-Libellus-contra-beneficiorum-reservationes>.

more than half of the entries I have worked on so far. Two discoveries stand out among the many.

In a binding at the Harvard Law School, an endleaf is a half-sheet of an octavo diurnal, printed by Johann Snel at Lübeck circa 1480-1482 [fig. 4]. It may relate to other fragments at Rostock and Lübeck, but the text does not overlap; it may also represent an otherwise unrecorded edition. GW has provisionally entered it with the other fragments.<sup>3</sup>

And the Houghton Library copy of a volume of the *Summa theologiae* of Thomas Aquinas, printed by Michael Wenssler at Basel in 1485, containing volume 1 and part 1 of volume 2, was found to be the mate of a volume at Würzburg containing part 2 of volume 2 along with volume 3.<sup>4</sup>

My discoveries at Princeton have not been quite as exciting, though those of Eric White have been much more so. One discovery made a connection with work on the binding by Scott Husby and provenance by Eric White. My contribution was the identification of the edition of a fragment of the *Doctrinale* of Alexander de Villa Dei in the binding; it is the one printed by Johann Schäffler in Ulm in 1500, of which otherwise only a single incomplete copy at the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek is known.<sup>5</sup> Scott Husby's data base of bindings on incunabula in a number of American collections is now available in its entirety on the Princeton website.<sup>6</sup>

At the Huntington, elaborate arms occupying the entire front pastedown of the 1488 *Reformation der Stadt Nürnberg* [fig. 5] turned out to be a complete fake, as is the putative owner, Christian Heinrich Parfües.<sup>7</sup> The entire hoax was created about a century after the purported date of the inscription, which we learned as the result of a query to the *Provenienz* discussion list.

Exploring the interest of individual copies is great fun, and not irrelevant to consideration of the future of MEI in the United States, but

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**3** *Diurnale*. [Lübeck: Johann Snel, about 1480-82]. 8°. GW 8565; ISTC id00287850. The Harvard copy in which it is found as the rear free endleaf is: *Modus legendi abbreviataras*. Strasbourg: [Printer of the 1483 Jordanus de Quedlinburg (Georg Husner)], 1487; 26 Feb. 1488. fo. GW M47346; ISTC im00756000; MEI 02008741.

**4** Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae (I-III)*. Basel: [Michael Wenssler], 1485. Folio. GW M46436; ISTC it00194000. The Harvard copy is at MEI 02128524. Cf. <http://blogs.harvard.edu/houghton/2016/08/17/13410/> for more details and images.

**5** Alexander de Villa Dei, *Doctrinale (Partes I-II)*. [Ulm: Johann Schäffler], 15 Feb. 1500. 4°. GW 975; ISTC ia00422800. It is the front pastedown in the Princeton copy of Otto von Passau, *Die vierundzwanzig Alten, oder Der goldne Thron*. Strasbourg: Johann Schott, 28 Mar. 1500. Folio. GW M28512; ISTC io00123000; MEI 02128525. Cf. <https://blogs.princeton.edu/notabilia/2016/11/18/three-discoveries-in-one-new-evidence-for-a-book-bound-and-owned-in-ulm-ca-1500-1531/> for more details and images.

**6** URL <https://husby.princeton.edu>.

**7** *Reformation der Stadt Nürnberg*. [Augsburg: Johann Schönsperger], 1488. Folio. GW M27327; ISTC ir00038000; MEI 02123027.



Figure 4 *Modus legendi abbreviaturas*. 1487; 26 Feb. 1488. Strasbourg; [Printer of the 1483 Jordanus de Quedlinburg (Georg Husner)]; Harvard Law School Library, Historical & Special Collections, Ac M692 488 H11484, back endleaf recto



Figure 5 Reformation der Stadt Nürnberg. 1488. [Augsburg: Johann Schönsperger].  
The Huntington Library, San Marino, California, 95569, front pastedown

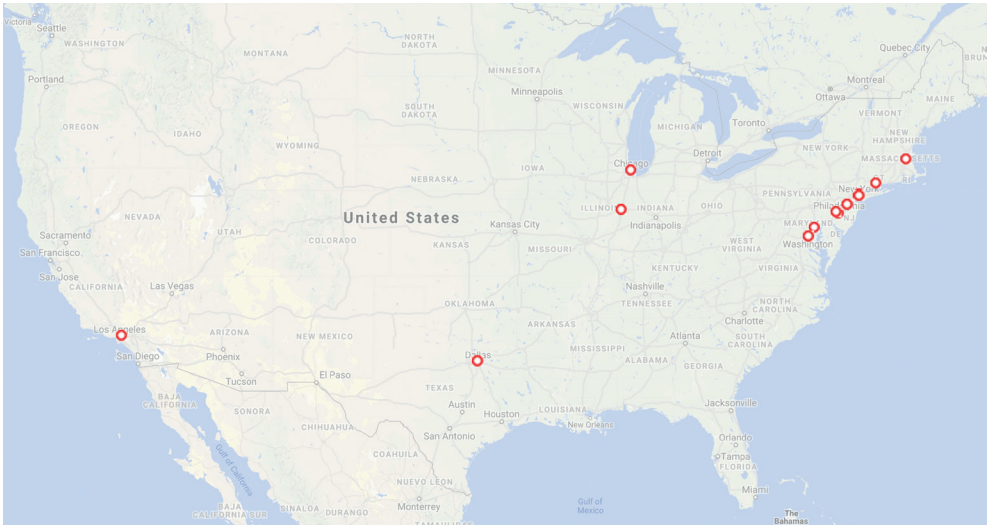


Figure 6 15 libraries hold approximately 60% of the copies of incunabula in the US

I now return to the broader focus of MEI, and how we might encourage and facilitate further contributions to MEI from a wide range of US libraries. The comments that follow owe much to conversations with curators and administrators, notably Stephen Ferguson at Princeton University, Claudia Funke and Stephen Tabor at the Huntington Library, Gregory Prickman at the Folger Shakespeare Library, and William Stoneman at the Houghton Library, Harvard University.

Quickly, an overview of the incunabula holdings in the US. There is a total of at least 53,000 incunabula copies in US libraries. About 60% of them are held by just 15 libraries [fig. 6].<sup>8</sup> Expanding that to about 85 locations covers 90% of US holdings [fig. 7]. Viewing the situation from another angle, there are about half a million copies recorded by the *Gesamtkatalog* and ISTC; a little less than 10% of those are already in MEI; and of those, only about 2,000 copies – about half of 1% – are in US libraries, which hold a little more than 10% of the total number of incunabula copies [fig. 8].

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<sup>8</sup> Huntington Library, Southern Methodist University, University of Illinois, Newberry Library, Library of Congress, Walters Art Museum Library, Free Library of Philadelphia, Bryn Mawr College, Columbia University, New York Public Library, Morgan Library, Princeton University, Yale University, Brown University, Harvard University.



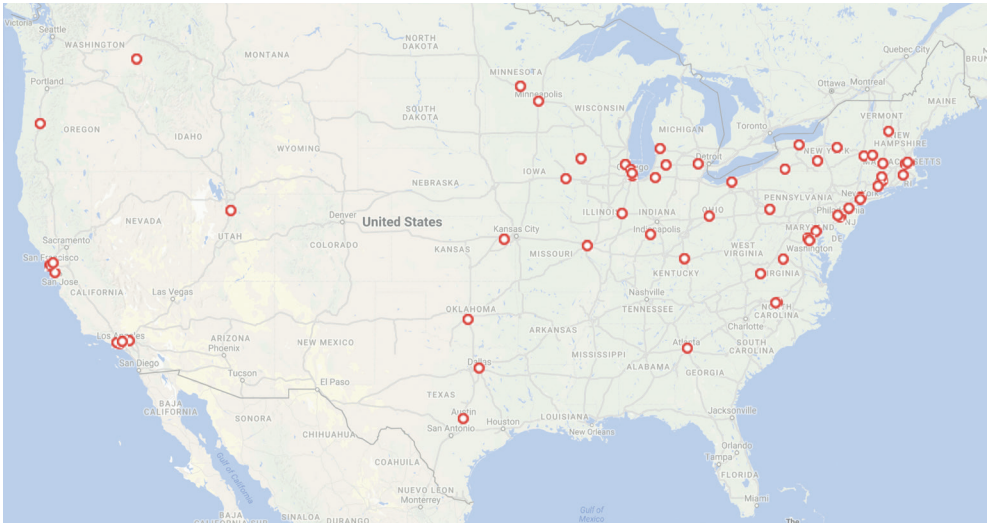


Figure 7 85 libraries hold approximately 90% of the copies of incunabula in the US

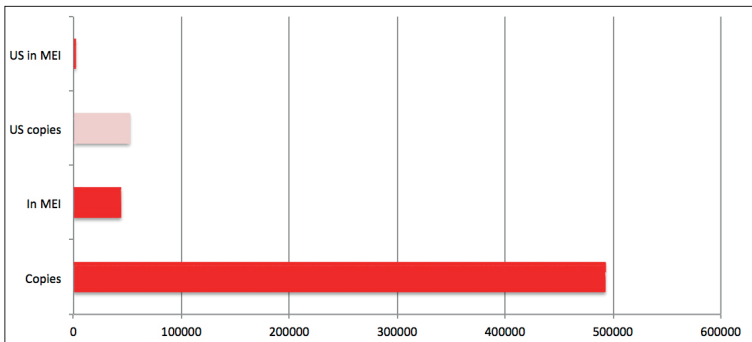


Figure 8 US holdings, and US records in MEI compared with total copies of incunabula and total records in MEI (as of summer 2018)

I believe the way forward will have to be through collaboration. It might be possible for some collections to proceed independently, as the current contributors have already been doing, since there was no other option up to now, but they would certainly benefit from connection to a broader enterprise. Motivation will be of key importance. Not for the librarians and scholars working with the books, but for the administrators, even if in some cases they are also librarians and scholars. It is true that an institution's standing will be enhanced as their holdings become better known to the international scholarly

community, but that's probably not sufficient to convince many funding sources, whether for large or small collections of incunabula.

We will need to demonstrate that the process of contributing to MEI will also pay local dividends. There is a body of evidence already, from the findings at Harvard and Princeton, as well as in the smaller collections at Smith College and at the University of Iowa, that such dividends can be substantial. And the pilot project at the Huntington Library earlier this year was of particular interest, because it was conducted in close collaboration with the rare book cataloguers.

It is possible that one of the larger collections might find it worthwhile to create a local entity of some sort, perhaps with a focus on 15th-century studies, in which the incunable collection would play a major role. But more likely, US-MEI, my name for an organisation created to stimulate further contributions to MEI, will be the product of collaboration among several institutions, who can band together to secure grant funding.

Whatever form US-MEI might take, it will have to take the initiative to reach out to other, mostly smaller, collections, as well as supporting the work of the founding institutions. It will have to provide various forms of assistance, including documentation, some level of training and on-site visits, in some cases working alongside the local editors to create records, offering assistance via the internet and by e-mail in the mechanics of record creation as well as identification of provenance from photographs. The cost to other institutions must be modest at most. And there need not be a single location for US-MEI. It could, and perhaps *should*, be a distributed enterprise, with regional centres. A large permanent staff would not be needed, but rather a network of consulting editors. In my wildest fantasies, I envision flying squads of editors, roaming the country to visit any institution with incunabula.

I am happy to report that the first steps toward US-MEI are already being taken. There are plans for developing a core project, a collaboration among the 15cBOOKTRADE project at Oxford, CERL, and a group of American libraries, that will support contribution to MEI throughout the US. We can all look forward to building on the foundation laid over the past several years, and welcoming many more libraries, large and small, into MEI.

## List of Cited Incunabula

- Alexander de Villa Dei, *Doctrinale (Partes I-II)*. [Ulm: Johann Schöffler], 15 Feb. 1500. 4°. GW 975; ISTC ia00422800
- Antonius de Raymundia, *Libellus contra beneficiorum reservationes*. Add: Petrus de Ceffons, *Epistola Luciferi*, [Paris]: Guy Marchant, in part for Jean Petit, [about 1498]. 4°. GW 2255; ISTC ia00916000
- Diurnale*. [Lübeck: Johann Snel, about 1480-82]. 8°. GW 8565; ISTC id00287850
- Modus legendi abbreviaturas*. Strasbourg: [Printer of the 1483 Jordanus de Quedlinburg (Georg Husner)], 1487; 26 Feb. 1488). Folio. GW M47346; ISTC im00756000
- Otto von Passau, *Die vierundzwanzig Alten, oder Der goldne Thron*. Strasbourg: Johann Schott, 28 Mar. 1500. Folio. GW M28512; ISTC io00123000
- Reformation der Stadt Nürnberg*. [Augsburg: Johann Schönsperger], 1488. Folio. GW M27327; ISTC ir00038000
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