

Johann Froben and the business of humanism

*Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP
Attorney-at-Law (Switzerland), Solicitor (Hong Kong),
Solicitor (England & Wales)*

Johann Froben was a printer of exceptional skill and a publisher of vision. After Amerbach's death, he became the leading printer of Basel. His collaboration with Erasmus, who lived in Basel from 1521 to 1529 and returned there in 1535, made his house the principal publisher of the humanist movement. Froben printed the works of Erasmus, the classical authors in Latin and Greek, the Church Fathers, and the works of other humanists. His editions were known for the quality of their texts, the elegance of their typography and the beauty of their decoration, for which he engaged artists such as Hans Holbein the Younger and his brother Ambrosius, Urs Graf and others who designed title borders, initials and printer's marks.¹

Froben's printer's mark, a caduceus, the staff of Mercury, held by two hands and surmounted by a dove, with serpents entwined around it, symbolised the union of prudence and simplicity, according to the gospel saying "be wise as serpents and harmless as doves". It is significant that a printer chose the staff of Mercury, the god of commerce and communication, as his emblem. Froben saw himself as a merchant of knowledge who combined the humanist ideal of the diffusion of learning with the commercial logic of the market.

The business of Froben depended on Erasmus in a way that anticipates the modern relationship between a publisher and a bestselling author. Erasmus's works were in demand throughout Europe, and each new edition of his *Adagia*, his *Colloquia* or his *Praise of Folly* sold in large numbers. Froben paid Erasmus in various forms: lodging, meals, copies of his books, cash payments and, above all, the service of printing his works with care and speed. The relationship was not free of tension, but it was mutually profitable and made both men famous.

Froben also faced the problem of pirated editions. Printers in other cities reprinted successful Basel books without permission and sold them at

lower prices, because they did not bear the costs of editing and correction. There was no copyright law in the modern sense. Printers sought protection through privileges granted by the Emperor, the Pope, kings or cities, which prohibited the reprinting of a book in their territories for a certain number of years. The protection was limited to the territory of the grantor and was difficult to enforce. Erasmus himself complained bitterly about pirated and corrupted editions of his works.²

1 Notes

1. On Johann Froben (c. 1460–1527), his printing house, his collaboration with Erasmus and with the artists Hans and Ambrosius Holbein and Urs Graf, see HLS, article "Froben, Johann"; Hieronymus, Basler Buchillustration 1500–1545, 1984. To be verified. ↩
2. On printing privileges in the sixteenth century and the problem of pirated editions, including Erasmus's complaints, see the literature on the history of copyright and privileges. To be verified. ↩

For general information only. This article does not constitute legal or tax advice, does not replace advice on an individual case and creates no lawyer-client relationship. It reflects the legal position as of September 2026.

Online version: helveticaregister.com/basel-johann-froben-and-the-business-of-humanism