

The beginnings of printing

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The years following the foundation of the university saw the arrival in Basel of the art of printing with movable type, invented by Johannes Gutenberg in Mainz around 1450. The first printer known to have worked in Basel was Berthold Ruppel, a former assistant of Gutenberg, who printed books in Basel from the late 1460s.¹ Others followed, so that by the end of the fifteenth century Basel had become one of the leading printing centres of the Empire, alongside Strasbourg, Nuremberg, Augsburg and Cologne.

The conditions for the rise of printing in Basel were favourable. The city had paper mills, established during the Council. It had a university that provided authors, editors, correctors and a market for books. It had capital, accumulated by its merchants, that could be invested in the expensive business of printing. It lay on the trade routes that allowed books to be shipped to the book fairs of Frankfurt and Lyon and to the markets of Italy, France and the Low Countries. And it had a tradition of craftsmanship in metalworking, which was necessary for the casting of type.

Printing was, from the outset, a capital-intensive industry. A printer had to invest in presses, type, paper and ink, pay workers and correctors, and wait months or years before the books were sold and the investment recovered. While many early printers went bankrupt, those who succeeded relied on partnerships with merchants who provided capital. Johann Amerbach, who settled in Basel in 1478, and Johann Froben, who joined him in the 1490s, built the most successful printing houses of the city. Their partnership with Erasmus in the early sixteenth century made Basel the capital of humanist publishing. Part B examines the printing industry as an enterprise and as one of the first industries in which capital and knowledge combined.

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1 Notes

1. On Berthold Ruppel, the first printer in Basel (active from c. 1468), see HLS, article "Buchdruck", section on Basel; the literature on Basel incunabula. Date to be verified. ↩

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