Petrus de Crescentius, *Ruralia commoda*, 1471

Special Collections featured item for April 2005 by Dr Margaret Smith, Lecturer in the Department of Typography & Graphic Communication

Petrus de Crescentius, *Ruralia commoda* (Augsburg: Johann Schüssler, 1471)
Also sometimes Pietro de Crescenzi, Petrus de Crescentiis, or Pietro De'crescenzi, *Liber ruralium commodorum*

Item held in the Printing Collection , University of Reading Library Special Collections

Petrus de Crescentius (1230-1321) described himself as a citizen of Bologna, who in his youth spent all his time on logic, medicine and natural science, and later sweated away at the noble science of law. Crescentius served as a judge in Bologna. He wrote the *Ruralia* in the first decade of the fourteenth century (some authorities say about 1306, others, between 1304 and 1309), drawing on various Roman authors including Cato, Columella, Varro and Palladius, and supplementing these with his own experience as a country landowner.

The text is said by some to have been the most important original medieval work on agriculture, husbandy and horticulture. In *An illustrated history of the herbals* Frank J. Anderson describes the text thus: 'The contents of Crescenzi's book provided anyone who worked on the land with a well-organized manual of procedure. The [book] is divided into twelve sections, each of which addressed itself to a specific agricultural topic'

Book 1 - the best location and arrangement of a manor, villa or farm
Book 2 - the botanical background needed to raise different crops
Book 3 - building a granary and cultivation of cereal, forage and food
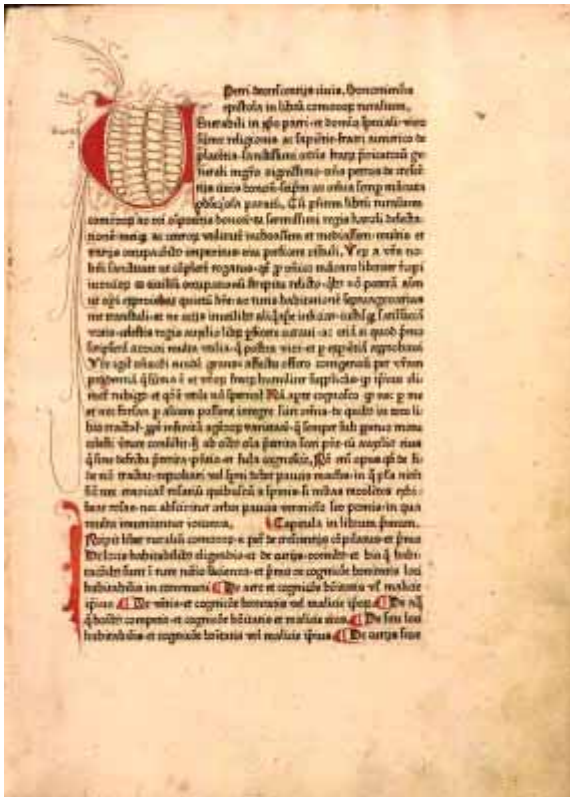Book 4 - on vines and wine-making
Books 5 & 6 - arboriculture and horticulture, including 185 plants useful for medicine and nourishment
Book 7 - meadows and woods
Book 8 - on gardens

Book 9 - animal husbandry and bee-keeping
Book 10 - hawking and hunting
Book 11 - a general summary of the book
Book 12 - a calendar of duties and tasks, month by month.

The edition

Reading's copy is the *editio princeps*, the first printed edition, a folio of 210 leaves printed in 1471. It is among the few texts that were reprinted frequently in the incunable period, reaching a total of 13 incunable editions, six in Latin, three in Italian and two each in French and German.

Although the 1471 Latin edition is unillustrated, a number of the vernacular editions have woodcut illustrations. The German edition printed by Peter Drach of Speyer in 1493 had 234. The text's popularity continued into the sixteenth century, when there were several illustrated editions in Italian, among others. During the fifteenth century, elaborate manuscript copies were also produced; the images from a Flemish manuscript of about 1480, now at the Pierpont Morgan Library, were used in 2003 for a wall calendar. A manuscript possibly written by the scribe Petrus de Traiecto in a semi-humanistic hand, in Rome about 1465, and illuminated by Andrea da Firenze with white-vine pattern initials and borders, was once owned by the famous collector Robert Hoe, and later by Chester Beatty.


A woodcut of vines from the Speyer edition of 1495 in the Austrian National Library

The Reading University Library copy: its rubrication and binding

About 60 copies of this edition are extant, at least one-third of them still in Germany. Reading's is not one of the copies with the very highest quality illuminations; several copies, including those at Chatsworth, at Cambridge University Library, and one of the British Library copies contain illuminated initials done in the Augsburg style (possibly all three by the same man) with enlarged initials on gilded backgrounds, and with colourful foliate and floral decorative extensions into the margins. The Reading copy has its initials in red, with relatively simple Maiblumen (stylised lily of the valley) flourishing in brown ink, a combination that is found in at least one other copy of the Crescentius (at Oxford, in the Radcliffe Science Library), and also in a few copies of other editions printed by Johann Schüssler.
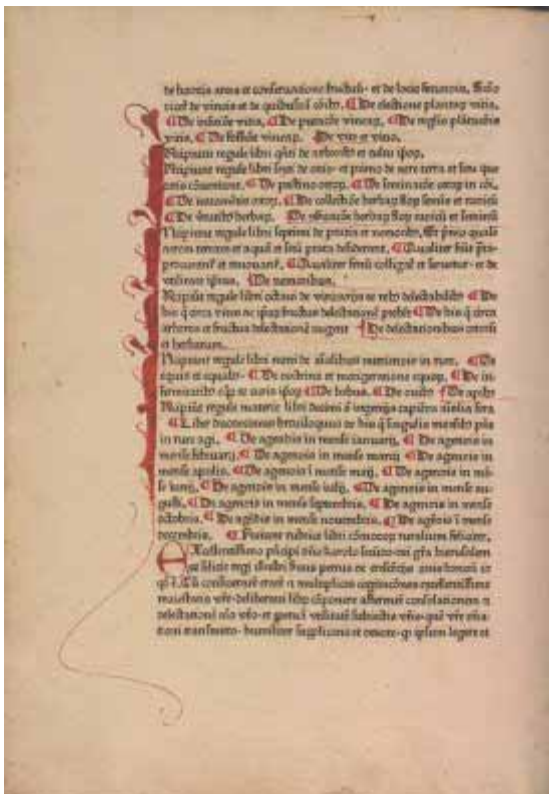
As well as enlarged initials, the Reading copy has red paragraph marks, red underlinings at the headings, and red initial strokes on most capitals in the copy. This rubricator seems to have taken especial delight in the initial I, which was usually placed in the margin. (See examples, *left* and *in detail right*, of capital I in Incipiunt)
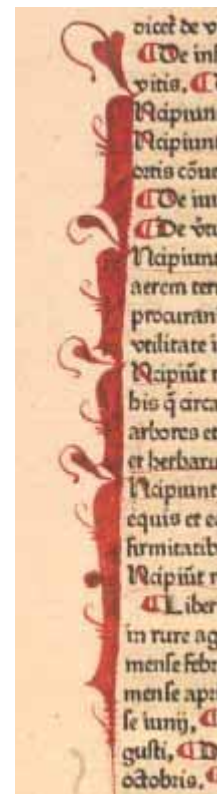
One of the most important facts about the Reading copy is that its binding is contemporary, although now in a rubbed and somewhat deteriorated condition. The boards are wooden, and the covering probably sheepskin. The clasp that was at the centre of the fore edges of the boards is now missing. Blind-stamped designs are found on both boards, and between the overall decorative pattern and some of the specific tools, the designs link the binding to a number of other copies of editions printed by Schüssler. It is possible that the surviving copies of Schüssler's books have a higher proportion in bindings that can be linked like this than most other incunable printers. Unfortunately testing this hypothesis would require the sort of notes on every copy that may some day become available, but are not yet part of the normal bibliographical record.
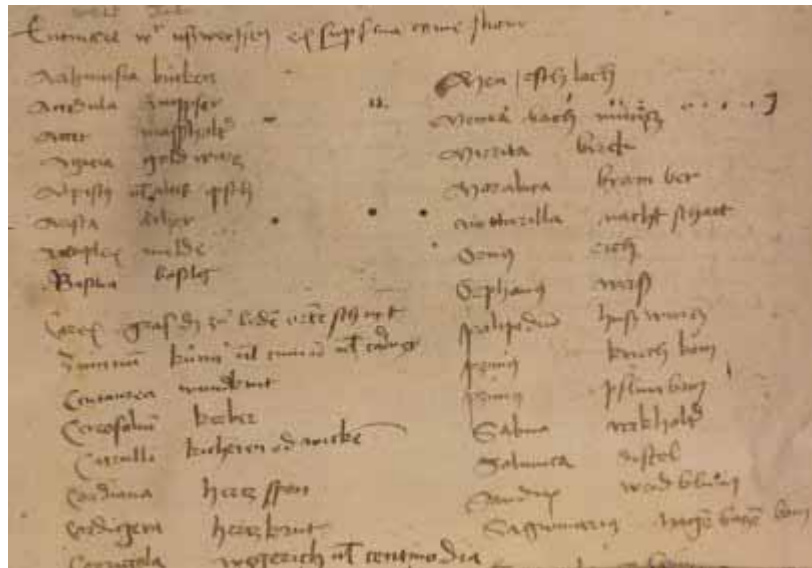

The front cover of the book

At the end of the copy the blank leaves hold a manuscript copy of Aeneas Sylvius (Pope Pius II)'s *De remedio amoris*, as well as various pen trials and the names of herbs in Latin and German.
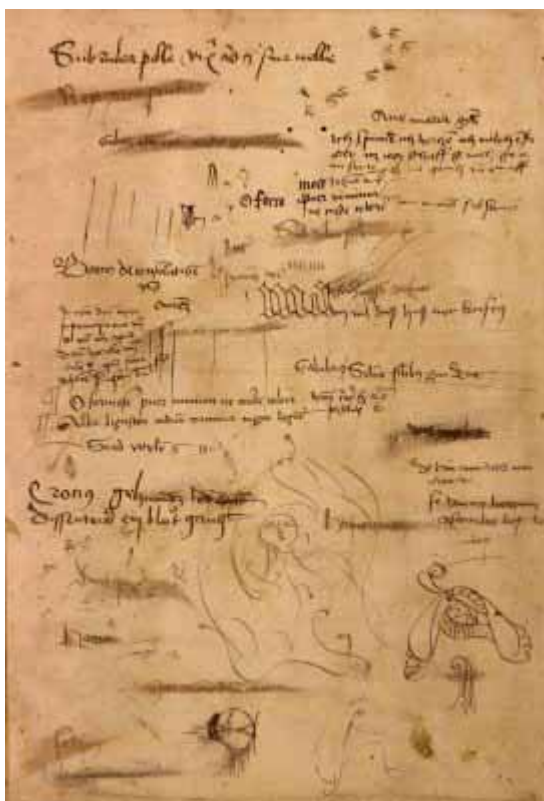
Pen trials from the back of the book

*Names of herbs in Latin and German written on a half page at the back of the book*

The printer

Johann Schüssler (d. 1474) was the second man to take up printing in Augsburg, after Gunther Zainer. Between 1470 and 1474 he printed only nine editions, all in Latin, including two editions of Turrecremata's *Expositio*. Although none of his books are illustrated, he is often mentioned as having been involved, along with Zainer, in a dispute with the local organization of woodcutters, who were unhappy about the competition. Some speculate that he may have been a bookbinder, but there is too little evidence about his biography to verify this.

The type

Johann Schüssler only owned and used one type, which fits into type classification schemes as a gotico-antiqua (alternatively fere-humanistica, or occasionally, semi-gothic) type, a sub-category within the gothic family. As a group the gotico-antiquas were rather short-lived and not much in use after the late 1470s, when the rotunda sub-category of gothic became not just dominant among the gothics, but dominant among incunables altogether. Schüssler's type passed from him to Gunther Zainer.
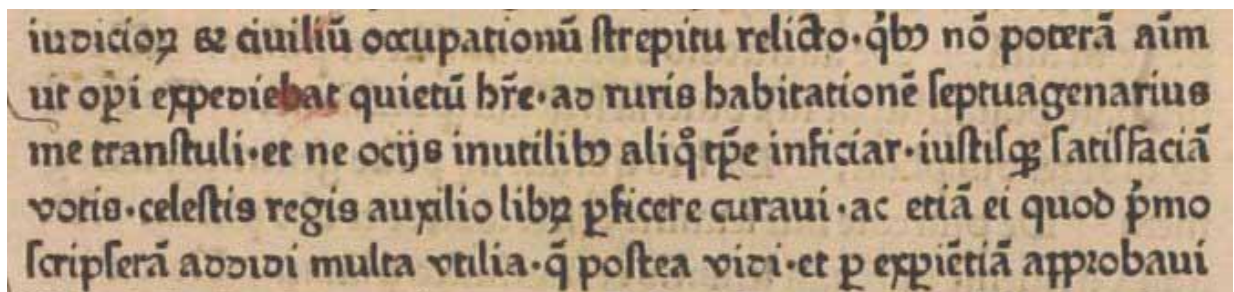
It was from studying Zainer's books that William Morris chose the type to serve as one of the models for his own gothic type design, which he named Troy. The type is characterized by many ligatures, including round letters such as de, bo, be and the more common ct, st (long-s plus t), and many abbreviations. It is made somewhat lighter than rotundas in its overall density, by means of relatively long ascenders and descenders.

References

- Anderson, Frank J. *An illustrated history of the herbals.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1977