3. A Compendium of Philosophy and Theology in Japanese (Magdalen MS. 228)

This remarkable manuscript is the first translation into the Japanese language of a substantial part of Aristotle’s treatise ‘On the Soul’ and of a compendium of Thomistic theology based on the ‘Roman Catechism’ (1596). The Spanish Jesuit, Pedro Gómez (1535–1600), compiled the original version in 1594 in Latin for the benefit of European and Japanese students studying at the Jesuit College at Fusanai (present-day Ōita City). Pedro Ramón (1570–1612), another Spanish missionary, working with several Japanese Jesuits, prepared an amended Japanese version of the compendium in 1595. The latter differs from the Latin original in that it includes detailed explanations of problems faced by Japanese Christians such as the observance of non-Christian customs and rituals.

MS. 228 (lent by kind permission of the President and Trustees of Magdalen College)


This book, printed in Roman type, is among the earliest works published by the Jesuits in Japan. It was printed at the Jesuit College in Amakusa, a small island near Nagasaki, in 1596. It is an adaptation of a classic devotional treatise, the ‘Imitatio Christi’ (1427), attributed to the German monk, Thomas à Kempis (1379–1471). The translation bears witness to creative attempts by the missionaries to explain Christian asceticism to the Japanese by adopting a series of terms comprehensible to new converts. It is considered one of the masterpieces of Japanese Christian literature in the sixteenth century. The Jesuits produced a completely revised and substantially re-translated version of this text in 1602. Arch. B. c. 42

5. The First Japanese Dictionary (1603–1604)

According to the title page, this dictionary was produced by a number of Fathers and Brothers of the Society of Jesus and printed at the Jesuit College in Nagasaki in 1603. It has been attributed by different sources both to João Rodrigues (1561–1633) and to Francisco Rodrigues (1557–1606). The ‘Vocabulário da língua de Japam’ is a Japanese–Portuguese dictionary containing over 10,000 words on a wide variety of topics, including technical terms taken from Buddhism and Japanese literature in general. It pays particular attention to polite forms of speech and writing, carefully distinguishes between the dialects of central and western Japan (Kyoto and Kyushu), and lists many examples together with their sources. Arch. B. d. 13


This is the first complete Japanese grammar composed in the early seventeenth century by the famous Portuguese Jesuit linguist, João Rodrigues (1567–1603), who served for a number of years as personal interpreter to the Japanese Regent, Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537–98). The first section explains the rudiments of the Japanese language and the conjugation of its verbs; the second section, its syntax; and the third section, the different ways of composing letters and other documents in the literary style. While the author intended it primarily as a linguistic aid for his fellow missionaries, he also attempted to provide a theoretical analysis of the complex structures of the Japanese language. Arch. B. d. 24

7. The First Liturgical Manual for the Japanese Church (1605)

This volume, printed at the Jesuit College in Nagasaki in 1605, is the only imprint of the Jesuit Mission Press in Japan that was produced in two colours, black and red. The ‘Manuale ad sacramenta ecclesiae ministrandae’ was edited by the Portuguese Jesuit, Luis Cerqueira, Bishop of Japan from 1592 to 1604, for use by his clergy. It includes prayers and rituals for all the sacraments, with the exception of Holy Orders, as well as formulas for a variety of blessings for different occasions. While it is clearly based on the revised Roman Missal of 1570, published after the Council of Trent, the arrangement of the texts indicates that the Bishop adapted the Manual to the needs of recent Japanese converts. He placed greater emphasis on certain rituals, such as funeral rites and prayers for the sick, which he translated into Portuguese and Japanese. Arch. B. e. 22

Gutenberg comes to Japan: The Jesuit Mission Press, 1590–1620
16 January to 11 March 2006
Bodleian Library Exhibition Room
Case 8, Old Schools Quadrangle
Open Monday to Friday 9.00–5.00
Saturday 9.00–4.30
ADMISSION FREE

A display in the Bodleian Library University of Oxford in conjunction with Magdalen College, Campion Hall, and the Jesuit Historical Institute in Rome (IHS).
This display exhibits rare bibliographical treasures from the Jesuit Mission Press in Japan, the first press to employ moveable metal type in the sixteenth century in the printing of books in the Japanese language.

The story of how Gutenberg’s ingenious handpress first came to Japan begins with the famous embassy of four Japanese youth to Europe between 1582 and 1590 – an event that marks a high point in Europe’s early encounters with East Asia. The embassy returned to Japan in 1590 with a printing press and type matrices that they had acquired four years earlier in Lisbon during their official visit to Portugal.

In view of the difficulty of travel throughout Japan during the “Warring States” period (1467–1603) and the lack of manpower, the Jesuit missionaries decided to employ the printing press, the most advanced technology of the day, in the hope of reaching a large number of local Christians through the publication of books and pamphlets. As the Portuguese missionary, Diogo de Mesquita (1533–1614) succinctly put it in a report to his superiors in Rome, ‘where there is persecution, books will serve as preachers’.

The Jesuits were convinced that, in order for Christianity to take root in Japan, it had to have its own literature. They thus began to translate into Japanese prayers and classical devotional works by authors such as Jacobus de Voragine (1230–98), Thomas à Kempis (1379–1471), and Luís de Granada (1504–88). Moreover, in order to train a local clergy, the missionaries also deemed it necessary to recast texts such as Aristotle’s On the Soul and various compendia of Christian doctrine, including the Roman Catechism (1566), into intelligible Japanese. In order to accomplish these goals, a thorough knowledge of the language was a key requisite.

João Rodrigues (1561–1613), together with other European and Japanese missionaries, compiled the first Western-language dictionaries and grammars of Japanese, several of which were printed between 1595 and 1620.

The Bodleian Library has in its collections six volumes printed in Japan on the Jesuit Mission Press between 1590 and 1605. These extremely rare books bear witness to a unique moment in the history of printing in East Asia. Very few of these imprints survived the systematic destruction of Christian books in Japan during the 17th and 18th centuries, when Japan closed its doors to the West and banned Christianity from its shores.

This exhibition is co-sponsored by the Bodleian Library, Magdalen College, Cam- pion Hall, and the Jesuit Historical Institute in Rome (IHSI).

1. The First Japanese Book Printed with Moveable Type (1590)

This small volume, produced in 1590 at Katsusa near Arima, was the first complete work to be printed on the Jesuit Mission Press in Japan as well as the first book ever printed with moveable metal type in the Japanese language. It contains the lives of the twelve apostles, of a number of popular saints and martyrs, as well as a treatise on martyrdom. It makes use of a variety of sources, including the Acts of the Apostles, the writings of Eusebius, Luis de Granada (1504–88), and the Golden Legend (Legenda aurea) by Jacobus de Voragine (1230–98). Translated into Japanese by Paulo Yehó Ken (1508–93) and his son, Vicente Htin (d. 1609), who had been Buddhist scholars before their conversion to Christianity, the book was printed using Romanized script. Arch. B. f. 69

2. The First Trilingual Dictionary in Japan (1595)

This trilingual dictionary, printed in Roman type, represents a remarkable feat of linguistic scholarship. Based on the Latin dictionary by Ambrosio Calepino (1440–1523), it is a compendium of Latin, Portuguese, and Japanese vocabulary. It also includes explanations on the use of the literary style. It was compiled for the benefit of both Japanese youth who were studying Latin at the Jesuit College and European missionaries who were studying the Japanese language. The lexicon represents the efforts of a team of European and Japanese Jesuits, who worked together on the dictionary for over a decade before completing the final version for publication. Arch. B e. q7