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Images Manipulation in the Ancient Books: the case of Sacrobosco's De sphaera mundi

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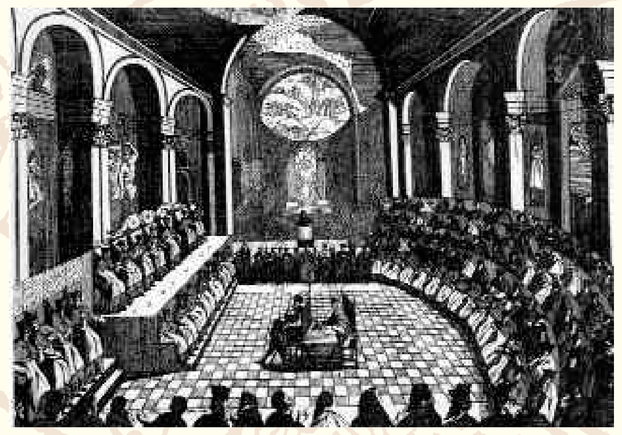
Since the discovery of the printing, the books were the subject of close inspections of their content and distribution. As long as a limited number of texts were produced in scriptoria and the manuscripts were mainly circulating among religious orders, the "problem" was marginal because the system was subjected to a sort of self control.



However, in the second half of the fifteenth century, the invention of the printing and the translation of some works into vernacular, particularly the Bible, boosted the circulation of books among people.



This fact, for example, helped the fast spread of Protestantism through Europe. Therefore to stem the spread of heretical theories, the Catholic Church decided, during the Council of Trent, to control the books productions and their contents. The first Index of forbidden books was drew up by Pope Paul IV in 1559. The books of this list were censored not only in the text but also in the pictures. All illustrations that were considered "licentious" were covered or at least manipulated.





An example of scientific text's censorship can be found in the volume *Ioannis de Sacro Busto Libellus de sphaera. Accessit eiusdem autoris Computus ecclesiasticus, et alia quaedam in studiosorum gratiam*, published in 1553: the pages of the preface written by Philipp Melanchthon, the German theologian and humanist friend of Luther, were eliminated or deleted, because written by a leading author belonging to the Protestant Reformation.



Another type of censorship concerns the illustrations. In this case the nudities were covered with brown ink, and in some cases deleted. These actions were often carried out by the publisher himself. Famous examples are the editions of Ovid's Metamorphoses and Boccaccio's Decameron, respectively published in Venice in 1497 and in Florence in 1516.

Other famous examples can be found in the editions of *Cosmographiae uniuersalis lib. 6,* written by Sebastian Münster and published in 1550 and 1552 at Basel by the printer H. Petri. The censor, erased parts of the text and some images, particularly he insisted on pictures of Erasmus of Rotterdam and Sebastian Münster, humanist, cosmographer, geographer and theologian, one of the most censored authors of the period.





Sacrobosco's *De spaera mundi*, published in Venice in 1488 and conserved in the library of the Astronomical Observatory of Capodimonte, shows an interesting case. The picture, reported on the back of the first page, shows the mutilated image of Urania, the Muse of Astronomy and Geometry. While her head is crowned with laurel, the Urania's body that is only covered by a skimpy cloth, lacks of some anatomical details. The abraded breasts is a typical example of image manipulation likely due to one of the book's owners. This censor action has not been found (to date) in other existing copies of this book.

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