



**UNIVERSITY  
OF LONDON**

### **Citation**

Savage, Elizabeth and Potten, Ed (2025) The Creation of “Medieval” Woodblocks’. The Antiquary, Supplement: Fakes, Forgeries, & Fallacies: Uncovering the Truths behind the Myths, 2024/5 . p. 16.

### **Link to SAS-Space record**

<https://sas-space.sas.ac.uk/10254/>

### **Version**

Published Version

### **License**

CC BY-NC-ND

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Copyright belongs to the author, unless otherwise indicated.

Downloaded from SAS-Space, the University of London open access repository: <https://sas-space.sas.ac.uk/>

Please note that where the version provided on SAS-Space is the Author Accepted Manuscript this may differ from the final published version.

Please do not remove this coversheet as it contains citation and copyright information.

# THE CREATION OF 'MEDIEVAL' WOODBLOCKS

**Elizabeth Savage FSA and Edward Potten FSA reveal intriguing antiquarian dimensions of purported medieval woodblocks**

The transformation by antiquarians of old books from cheap, outdated texts into expensive, collectible artefacts was, says David McKitterick FSA, '*a conscious process, depending on defined tastes ... and on a willingness to invest financially, intellectually, and even emotionally in some kinds of memory*'. At first, they lacked the tools, resources, and language to describe books, prints, and the technology that underpinned them. But soon they defined the parameters of book history and bibliography—occasionally in unexpectedly direct ways.

We have been analysing woodblocks used for printing which purport to be medieval or early modern artefacts, augmenting the art historical and bibliographical methods that those antiquarians developed with heritage science approaches, such as carbon dating. We can now show that several of these supposedly ancient objects were produced significantly later. Our research is revealing the antiquarian creation of new 'old' woodblocks for printing.

For example, several 'late medieval' woodblocks were instead commissioned by the English antiquarian John Bagford (1650/51–1716) in around 1706–7; a pair of 'early sixteenth-century' woodblocks collected by the German print historian Hans Albrecht von Derschau (1754–1824) were probably designed shortly before c.1810; and Derschau's contemporary, the German print historian Joseph Heller (1798–1849), complemented his collection by commissioning new 'old' woodblocks to illustrate his histories of print. These woodblocks, often remarkably clean and intact, are not fakes, forgeries, or fallacies, but embodiments of the ideals of antiquarian research. They were commissioned as research tools, to understand technique, explore the mechanics of printing, and replicate and celebrate the earliest Western European prints.

These blocks come from a pre-photographic era, some from before the word 'facsimile' existed. Their makers



Anonymous blockcutter (German), woodblock after Hans Sebald Beham or Peter Flötner, *Landsknecht*, first published in 1810, 29.5 x 16.7 x 2.5 cm. Recto/Key face. Staatliche Museen der Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett, Derschau 101. Photo: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett / Markus Hilbich CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

aimed not to deceive, but to illustrate visual objects and explore lost crafts as a book-historical endeavour, for their own use and that of their fellow collectors. We suspect that there are many more such antiquarian blocks lurking in museums and libraries, masquerading as authentic artefacts. Far from devaluing them, we would argue that their identification as antiquarian tools opens a rich new seam of research that enhances both our understanding of the origins of book history and of the historical record itself.



Anonymous blockcutter (German), woodblock after Hans Sebald Beham or Peter Flötner, *Landsknecht*, first published in 1810, 29.5 x 16.7 x 2.5 cm.: Side view. Staatliche Museen der Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett, Derschau 101. Photo: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett / Markus Hilbich CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.