Price-Codes and Provenance

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• What are price-codes?
• Reasons to care about them
• What to record
What are price-codes?

- used by a buyer (bookseller or private collector), to keep the purchase-price secret

- usually consist of a 10-letter code-word representing the numerals 1–9 and 0 (i.e. if the code-word is “MANUSCRIPT”, then “M”=1, “A”=2, “N”=3, etc.)

- sometimes symbols or a non-Latin alphabet are used
The only detailed study of price-codes

Some collectors, dealers, and their code-words
HEMINGWAY

HERALDICMS
*Joan Corder (1921–2005).

HIERONYMUS

HOVERZACKS
A.S.W. Rosenbach (1876–1952).
  According to Elizabeth Fuller, Rosenbach Librarian, ‘N is used as an alternative zero ... to avoid the obviousness of doubles. In a string of zeros, either S or N may come first, but they always alternate. Repeat of a non-zero digit is indicated by following it with X’. The last two letters indicate cents.

JACKBOWDEN
Robert Harding Evans (1777–1857).
  This was the auctioneer’s code for recording bids. N was ten. It was in use until circa 1821. Identified in Marc Vaulbert de Chantilly: Robert Harding Evans of Pall Mall: auction catalogues 1812–1846: a provisional list (London, The Vanity Press of Bethnal Green, 2002), p.vi (note 27).

JACOBSMITH
John Sicher Van Eizen Kohn (1906–76).

JOHN RUYLE
*John Ruyle (1934–2008) of Berkeley, California.

JOHNUPDIKE

JROSENWALD
  This has never been recorded in print, for even long after Rosenwald’s death, the authorities in Washington remain curiously

Example using symbols

*Sir Hans Sloane (1660–1753).

△ ⊥ leting symbols including Greek letters ... with X for repeated numbers. For example, the following inscription

⊥ 5 4 x 4 x Mostyn R 19

may be interpreted “$2300 Mostyn sale, through Rosenbach, 1919”.

[[<->]]

The characters above the numbers on the top of an old-style typewriter keyboard.
Some 20th-century examples
Reasons to care about price-codes (and related marks)

• they are provenance in themselves

• they may lead the researcher to previous provenance

• they may lead the researcher to a previous catalogue description containing useful information, such as a previous state of the book (e.g. before rebinding), and work done by a previous cataloguer (e.g. identification of heraldic arms)
A mark characteristic of books sold by Quaritch in the 1920s and ‘30s
Quaritch: price-code using symbols, and stock-number
Maggs Bros: price-codes, sometimes with the acquisition-date
H.P. Kraus: dated collations, inventory numbers, and price-codes (usually erased)
The position in the book and on the page or pastedown can be crucial
What to record:

- content (a transcription)
- medium (pencil, pen, crayon)
- position in the book, and position on the page
- estimate of date and country
- photos are highly desirable, preferably including a full-page view
By collecting examples, patterns and identifications emerge:

Adolphe Labitte, 4, rue de Lille, 4e Arr., Paris
Three medieval manuscripts (MSS. Buchanan e. 5, e. 7, and e. 14) appear to have come from a single dealer, since they all share a common form of price-code, inscribed in brown ink on the final flyleaf or lower pastedown; the illuminated printed Book of Hours (Buchanan e.136) bought by Buchanan’s uncle in Paris, has a similar inscription at the front, with a note in French recording the number of large and small miniatures.

9. MS. Buchanan e. 7, top right corner of lower pastedown, detail
10. MS. Buchanan e. 14, top right corner of lower pastedown, detail