CHAPTER THREE
LUTHERAN HUMANISTS ON GREEK: THE HISTORY OF GREEK AND GREEK IN HISTORY

Introduction

Lutheran engagement with antiquity, Greek or other, was predominantly textual. Though the sixteenth century bore witness to various antiquarian pursuits, both in Italy and north of the Alps, the scholars studied here betray no such interest. It is true, of course, that in Germany, in comparison to Italy, physical remnants of Greco-Roman antiquity were not as readily available; and yet relative scarcity cannot sufficiently explain this indifference. Even humanists like Hieronymus Wolf (1516–1580) and David Hoeschel (1556–1617) active in Augsburg, where Roman relics were at hand, and where Konrad Peutinger’s (1465–1547) precedent might have pointed the way to antiquarianism, show no such proclivity. While an explanation of this ‘bookish’ character of Lutheran humanists lies beyond the aim and scope of the present inquiry, their purely textual orientation must be taken into account if we are to understand their opinions on Greek antiquity. Their understanding of antiquity, Greek or other, was an understanding of texts. Therefore, after exploring the role and contours of Greek antiquity in Lutheran historical consciousness, the present chapter examines Lutheran opinions concerning the Greek language itself. While the previous two chapters relied mostly on historiographical writings and related sources to probe the nature and

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1 Revealingly, the late-humanist biographer Melchior Adam (d. 1622) in his short biography on Peutinger praises his achievements as jurist, and celebrates his meritorious rise from humble origins to nobility, but does not so much as mention Peutinger’s antiquarianism. See Vitae Germanorum iureconsulorum et politicorum, qui superiori seculo et quod excurrit floruerunt (Frankfurt, 1620), pp. 76–8.

role of Greek antiquity in Lutheran thought, the present attempts the same through examining texts which are not directly concerned with past events. These may offer some insight into Lutheran opinions concerning Greek civilisation and the conviction that Greek itself was an active force in universal history. In other words, this chapter attempts at reconstructing Melanchthonian views on the history of Greek and Greek in history.

The literary corpus of Greek antiquity, practically unknown to the Latin West for roughly a millennium, was famously introduced into Italy as of the late fourteenth century. Here the role played by Byzantine immigrants and Italians studying in Constantinople, and later in the centres of Renaissance Italy under the tutelage of Byzantine émigrés, is well known. For some time a sojourn in Italy remained a prerequisite for Northerners wishing to master Greek. As late as the last quarter of the fifteenth century, when instruction in Greek was available in the North, scholars such as Erasmus and Reuchlin, who had acquired their basic grounding in the language north of the Alps, still travelled to Italy for the finishing touch. The fact that the next generation of humanists, educated in Germany during the first decades of the sixteenth century, could acquire a command of the language without ever venturing outside the Empire is a testimony to the successful introduction of Greek into many German Latin schools and universities. While the fate of Greek as a university subject had its ups and downs, and at no point during the sixteenth century succeeded in attracting as many students as devoted Greek scholars would have wished, its establishment within sixteenth century education to a degree that mastery thereof was no longer dependent on immediate Italian sources is no mean achievement. Melanchthon himself, who continued lecturing on Greek authors throughout his life, acquired his mastery of the language wholly within a German pedagogical framework. Likewise, his friend and fellow Greek scholar Joachim Camera-

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3 For the difficulties and at times real crisis of Greek studies in Germany see: J. L. Flood, “The Crisis in Greek Teaching at the University of Heidelberg around 1530” Renaissance Studies 2003 17(1), pp. 84–95. For Melanchthon’s occasional difficulty in finding an audience for his lectures on Greek authors see: S. Rhein, “Melanchthon and Greek Literature” in T. J. Wengert and M. P. Graham (eds.) Philip Melanchthon (1497–1560) and the Commentary (Sheffield, 1997), pp. 149–70, esp. p. 156.

4 W. Maurer, Der junge Melanchthon zwischen Humanismus und Reformation. vol. 1: Der Humanist (Göttingen, 1967), ch. 1.