Bibles and Books: Bohemia and Hungary

Pál Ács and Howard Louthan

Introduction

Though the connection between religious reform and the printing press remains a topic of considerable debate, few question the significance and impact of print on the growth and spread of the Reformation across Central Europe. Indeed, the region has an especially rich literary heritage for this period. Elites eagerly followed developments in the west and were avid consumers of religious literature. In some parts of Central Europe there was a near mania for a figure such as Desiderius Erasmus. The first translation of The Praise of Folly into a vernacular was Czech. The first printed book in Hungarian was a translation of the Epistles of Paul, following an Erasmian model. In Poland there was a veritable cult of Erasmus and a concerted if ultimately ineffectual campaign to bring him to Cracow. The literary history of Central Europe, though, is often encased in interpretive frameworks that are primarily nationalist. The Poles, the Czechs, and the Hungarians all have their own histories closely connected to the evolution of their respective languages. Against this backdrop it is important to remember the trans-national character of this region’s literary cultures. It was a Franconian printer in Cracow who produced the first book with Cyrillic characters. The first extant book in Hungarian appeared in Cracow. Prague was not only a critical centre for the production of Czech Bibles but also home to the first translations of Scripture into both Sorbian and Belarusian. There was no single print culture for Bohemia. Printers busily produced books in Czech, Latin, German, and Hebrew.

There is much to explore were we to present a general survey and broad overview of this region’s literary cultures. There are the efforts of the Slovenian reformer Primus Truber (Truber’s career is discussed in Chapter 6) who collaborated with a Carinthian nobleman in a Swabian village to produce Bibles, hymnals, catechisms, and even a translation of the Augsburg Confession in Slovenian and Croatian using Latin, Cyrillic, and Glagolitic scripts.1 In Austria there is the often forgotten contribution made by the Lutheran David Chytraeus. Habsburg Emperor Maximilian II (1564–1576) commissioned this north German

reformer to compose the influential *Kirchenordnungen* for both Upper and Lower Austria. Then there is the tradition of Polish biblical literature. The Commonwealth's Protestant, Catholic, and Anittrinitarian communities produced a remarkable series of Polish translations of Scripture.\(^2\) The philological work of Lithuania's “most famous heretic” Szymon Budny is intriguing. Budny was the first scholar of this era to use material known both in the west and the east (Church Slavonic sources) in his humanist critique of Scripture.\(^3\) This chapter will proceed, however, with a more focused examination. We offer two case studies. We begin with the Czech lands and track the development of religious literature from the era of Charles IV into the 17th century. Then we turn to Hungary. Despite the disaster that overtook the kingdom with the Ottoman victory at Mohács in 1526, vernacular literature flourished in the 16th century as humanist impulses combined with newer confessional influences.

**Howard Louthan, The Czech lands**

Though this article will focus primarily on book production in the Czech lands during the 16th century, it is important to begin with a series of more general observations that help set the religious literature of this period in a broader chronological and thematic context. Most significantly, the religious developments of the 16th century were only a part of a longer era of reform. A fuller examination of “Bibles and books” in the Czech lands should properly begin in the middle of the 14th century with an assessment of Emperor Charles IV (1355–1378). Charles is particularly important in terms of religion, for with him we see late medieval piety and spirituality with all its richness, complexity, and diversity reaching a high point in the Bohemian lands. Through his energy and enterprise he assembled one of the greatest collections of relics in all of Christendom. He founded Central Europe’s first university, began work on one of the Continent’s great Gothic cathedrals, and with the assistance of his allies persuaded the Pope to elevate Prague to an archbishopric.\(^4\) Not surprisingly, the first translations of biblical literature into Czech also date from this period. Charles initiated a trend that continued through the beginning of the 15th

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\(^2\) Especially important here is the ambitious *Biblia Slavica* series.
