

Adam and Heinrich Petri: the publishers of the Reformation and of the world

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The Petri family formed another dynasty of Basel printers. Johann Petri, Amerbach's partner, was succeeded by his nephew Adam Petri, who became one of the principal printers of the early Reformation. In the early 1520s, Adam Petri reprinted the writings of Martin Luther in large numbers, including Luther's German translation of the New Testament, which he reprinted in Basel within months of its first publication in Wittenberg in 1522, with woodcuts and a glossary that explained Luther's Saxon words to readers in the Upper German-speaking region.¹

The reprinting of Luther by Basel printers shows the commercial logic of the early Reformation. Because Luther's writings were in enormous demand, printers throughout the Empire reprinted them without his permission and without paying him. For the printers, the Reformation was a market opportunity before it was a religious conviction. Basel printers supplied the Upper German and Swiss markets with Luther's texts, helping to spread the ideas that would lead to the Reformation in Basel itself in 1529.

Adam's son Heinrich Petri continued the house and became one of the great publishers of the mid-sixteenth century. His most famous publication was the *Cosmographia* of Sebastian Münster, a Hebrew scholar and geographer who taught at the University of Basel. The *Cosmographia*, first published in 1544, was a description of the world in German, with maps and hundreds of woodcuts, which went through dozens of editions and translations and became one of the most widely read books of the sixteenth century.² It was a large, expensive book that required a considerable investment. Its success made the fortune of the Petri house. It also shows the ambition of the Basel printers, who no longer limited themselves to theology and the classics but produced books that described the whole known world for a lay audience.

1 Notes

1. On Adam Petri (1454–1527) and his reprints of Luther's writings, including the reprint of the September Testament in December 1522 with a glossary of Luther's vocabulary, see HLS, article "Petri"; the literature on the Reformation press. To be verified. ↩
2. Sebastian Münster, *Cosmographia*, Basel: Heinrich Petri, 1544, and numerous later editions and translations. See HLS, articles "Münster, Sebastian" and "Petri". To be verified. ↩

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