

Johann Amerbach: the scholar-printer

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The first great printer of Basel was Johann Amerbach, born around 1440 in Amorbach in Franconia, from which his name derives. Amerbach studied in Paris, where he obtained a master's degree, before learning the art of printing, probably in Venice or Nuremberg. He settled in Basel in the 1470s, acquired citizenship and opened a printing shop that became the most important in the city by the end of the century.¹

Amerbach combined scholarship and business. He specialised in large, carefully edited editions of theological and patristic works: Latin Bibles, the works of the Church Fathers Ambrose and Augustine, and later Jerome. These editions required the collection of manuscripts from monastic libraries across Europe, the collation of variant readings and the correction of the text by learned editors. They were aimed at a market of clergy, monasteries and universities that valued accuracy. Investing heavily in them, Amerbach took the risk of long production cycles and high costs in the expectation of a stable demand from institutional buyers.

Amerbach also invested in his family. He sent his three sons, Bruno, Basilius and Bonifacius, to study in Paris and elsewhere, with the intention that they would become the scholarly editors of his editions. While Bruno and Basilius worked on the Jerome edition, Bonifacius became professor of Roman law at the University of Basel, friend and heir of Erasmus, and one of the leading figures of the city in the mid-sixteenth century. The Amerbach family thus illustrates a pattern that recurs in the history of Basel: the conversion of commercial wealth into education, learning and public office over two generations.

The correspondence of the Amerbach family, preserved in the university library of Basel and edited in a monumental edition, is one of the richest sources for the history of printing and humanism.² It documents the negotiations with authors and editors, the purchase of paper, the dispatch of books to the fairs, the collection of debts and the family's financial affairs.

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It thus allows a detailed reconstruction of the business of a Basel printer around 1500.

1 Notes

1. On Johann Amerbach (c. 1440–1513), his studies in Paris, his settlement in Basel and his printing house, see HLS, article "Amerbach, Johann"; the edition of the Amerbach correspondence (Die Amerbachkorrespondenz, ed. Hartmann/Jenny). To be verified. ↩
2. Die Amerbachkorrespondenz, ed. Alfred Hartmann and Beat Rudolf Jenny, Basel 1942 ff., multiple volumes. To be verified. ↩

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