

Johannes Oporinus: the risks of the trade

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Not all Basel printers were as successful as Froben and Petri. Johannes Oporinus, a scholar who had been secretary to Paracelsus and professor of Greek at the university, became a printer in the 1540s and published some of the most important books of the century. In 1543, he printed Andreas Vesalius's *De humani corporis fabrica*, the foundational work of modern anatomy, with magnificent woodcut illustrations. In the same year, he printed the first edition of the Qur'an in Latin translation, edited by the Zurich theologian Theodor Bibliander.¹

The printing of the Qur'an led to a conflict with the Basel council, which feared that the publication of the sacred book of Islam would scandalise Christian readers and damage the reputation of the city. The council prohibited the edition and had Oporinus imprisoned for a short time. The edition was eventually allowed to appear after the intervention of several reformers, among them Martin Luther, who argued that knowledge of the Qur'an would help Christians to refute it.² The episode illustrates the regulatory risk of the printing business: the council controlled what could be printed in the city, and a printer who published a controversial book risked confiscation of his stock, fines and imprisonment.

Oporinus was a brilliant publisher but a poor businessman. He invested in ambitious projects, extended credit generously and accumulated debts. When he died heavily indebted in 1568, his house did not survive him. His career shows that intellectual ambition and commercial success do not always go together, and that the printing business required a financial discipline that not all scholars possessed.

1 Notes

1. Andreas Vesalius, *De humani corporis fabrica libri septem*, Basel: Johannes Oporinus, 1543; Machumetis Saracenorum principis ...

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Alcoran, ed. Theodor Bibliander, Basel: Oporinus, 1543. See HLS, article "Oporinus, Johannes". To be verified. ↩

2. On the conflict over the Latin Qur'an edition of 1542/43, the temporary imprisonment of Oporinus and the intervention of Luther and other reformers, see HLS, article "Oporinus, Johannes"; the literature on the Bibliander edition. To be verified. ↩

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