Words in Space and Time

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Published by Central European University Press

Kamusella, Tomasz.
Words in Space and Time: A Historical Atlas of Language Politics in Modern Central Europe.
Project MUSE. https://doi.org/10.7829/9789633864180.

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By the mid-eleventh century a political shape of Central Europe had emerged that to this day is largely recognizable in the terms of politics and historical regions, religions, and writing systems. The only exception is the Ottoman Empire that replaced the (East) Roman Empire (Romania) in Anatolia and the Balkans during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. In contrast to the situation a century earlier (Map 2), the technology of writing had already been present across entire Central Europe with the exception of the eastern Baltic littoral, that is, today’s Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Russia’s exclave of Kaliningrad. The area’s ethnic groups practiced their own indigenous forms of (non-scriptural, that is, not connected to some “holy book”) religion and statehood, and for the time being were able to withstand crusading attacks from the Catholic or Orthodox neighboring polities.

Central Europe was split among the three main traditions of religion-underpinned literacies. After the Great Schism of 1054 between Constantinople and Rome, Christian Europe was permanently divided between the Orthodox (Eastern) Church and the (Roman) Catholic (Western) Church. The former was overseen by the Ecumenical Patriarch in Constantinople (Istanbul) and the other by the Pope in Rome (after 1929, in the Vatican City State). Two of these aforementioned literacies were connected to Orthodox Christianity, namely, Greek in Greek letters and (Old Church) Slavonic in Cyrillic. The literacy of Roman Catholicism remained normatively monoscriptal (employing a single script), sticking to Latin in the Latin alphabet. The technology of writing made these three “holy tongues” into immediately recognizable self-contained Einzelsprachen, their distinctiveness defined and maintained by liturgy and book (manuscript) production in these languages. The religiously defined necessity of preserving and transmitting “god’s word” faithfully (both, to pronunciation and meaning) led to the revival of the genres of grammar, language (school) textbook, and dictionary as developed and practiced in the Antiquity. This “philological turn” helped to revive Latin as a “proper” Einzelsprache (especially in the course of the so-called Carolingian Renaissance of the eighth and ninth centuries in the Frankish Kingdom, elevated to an Empire between 800 and 843/924). This effort was also prompted by the steep cultural change posed to Charlemagne’s Frankish Empire by the highly militarily successful western neighbor of the Umayyad Emirate (after 919, Caliphate) in Al-Andalus (Iberia). Importantly for Central Europe, the achievements of the Carolingian Renaissance allowed for Slavonic to be shaped into an immediately recognizable Einzelsprache, first in Greater Moravia, and later in the Bulgarian Empire and Rus’. In the case of Greek there was no need for a similar revival, because the philological tradition of the Antiquity was successfully preserved and developed in Romania until its end in 1453. In addition, all these three traditions of Central European literacy interacted and remained in dialog with the Hebrew script-based Hebrew literacy of Judaism. It appears that literate Jewish specialists were of particular import for developing and propping up the Latin literacy in the non-Roman east, then freshly extended to Poland, Bohemia (together with Moravia), and Hungary.

In the mid-eleventh century Roman Catholic literacy in Latin overlapped with Central Europe's shares of the Germanic and West Romance dialect continua, the Hungarians’ Finno-Ugric dialect continuum, the western half of the North Slavic dialect continuum, and the western half of the South Slavic dialect continuum. Poland, Hungary, and Croatia marked the easternmost extent of this Latin literacy vis-à-vis (1) the non-literate ethnic groups of the Baltic dialect continuum in the eastern Baltic littoral, (2) the Cyrillic-based Slavonic literacy of Rus’ that coincided with the eastern half of the North Slavic dialect continuum, (3) the (overwhelmingly) non-literate pastoralists of the Turkic dialect continuum, and (4) the Greek literacy of Orthodox Romania. This last type of religiously defined literacy overlapped mainly with the eastern half of the South Slavic dialect continuum in the eastern Balkans, including Romania’s ethnically Serbian and confessionally Orthodox vassal state of Doceia (Dioclea, known as Zeta since the twelfth century) that gained independence in 1040. Further east, Greek literacy overlapped with the Albanian and East Romance dialect continua, before coinciding with the Greek dialect continuum in the eastern and southern Balkans, alongside western Anatolia. At the same time, since 1074 a permanent presence of the Turkic dialectal continuum was established in eastern and central Anatolia, following the westward expansion of the Seljuk Empire into this area. Already in the seventh century Romania had lost the Middle East to the Caliphate, meaning the gradual replacement of Greek literacy there with its Arabic counterpart. Obviously, the region was predominantly Semitiphone (Syriac-Aramaic) and remained so after the introduction of the Semitic Einzelsprache of Arabic as the language of everyday communication.

The expansion of the Latin literacy northward into sparsely populated Scandinavia was a long process, especially on ac-
Central Europe’s Writing Systems in 1050

Significant presence of:
- Albanian-speakers
- Baltic ethnic groups
- Finno-Ugric ethnic groups
- Germanic ethnic groups
- Greek-speakers
- Romance ethnic groups
- Slavic ethnic groups
- Turkic ethnic groups

Borders of principalities, semi-autonomous and autonomous regions
Byzantine themes

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count of the Norsemen’s warrior polities with military technologies for which the Christian West had no real match until the turn of the Second Millennium. Christianity from Rome (often earlier mediated through Anglo-Saxon missionaries) was adopted by the ruling elite in Denmark during the 960s, in Norway during the 990s, and in Sweden around 1000. All these adoptions were quite tentative, especially in Sweden and Norway, and it took a century or two before this religion took a hold there. Hence, for some time the initially rudimentary Latin literacy brushed shoulders with the non-Christian Norse tradition of Runic literacy. Afterward, the Scandinavian rulers were only too happy to join their counterparts from the Holy Roman Empire on the prolonged Northern Crusade against “pagans” along the southern and eastern Baltic littoral. For instance, between the mid-twelfth and mid-thirteenth centuries, Sweden conquered the eastern land, which later became Finland and imposed Catholic Christianity (complete with its Latin literacy) on its Finno-Ugric-speaking inhabitants. The Scandinavian and Baltic Finno-Ugric dialect continuum is qualified with the adjective “Finnic” to distinguish it from Hungary’s Finno-Ugric dialect continuum dubbed as “Ugric.”

The eastward expansion of medieval Poland and Hungary at the expense of Orthodox Rus’ (which after 1054 lost political cohesiveness, divided into semi-, but de facto fully independent principalities) led to a certain overlap between the Catholic Latin literacy and its Cyrillic-based Slavonic counterpart. Overlords employed the former, while the literati of the Orthodox subjects the latter. This example of using religion and literacy to emphasize the cultural and political autonomy of one’s group was not wasted on the Vlachs-turned-Walachians and –Moldavians, who with Hungary’s support and protection gradually carved out their eponymous Danubian principalities from the steppe lands under the control of Turkic-speaking pastoralists. In order to deepen and then legitimize their independence from Catholic Hungary, the (East) Romancephone Walachians and Moldavians adopted the Cyrillic-based Slavonic script of Orthodox Christianity, as developed in Bulgaria and adopted in Rus’.

The Turkic-speaking pastoralists of Central Europe’s end of the Great Steppe (though outside Hungary’s eastern frontier) preserved their traditional non-scriptural religions and forms of statehood until the prolonged series of intermittent large-scale attacks by the Mongol Empire on Central Europe between the 1230s and 1290s. As a result, the Mongol Empire permanently extended into Central Europe. Its western part was shaped into a Golden Horde with its capital of Sarai on the Volga River (nowadays in southern Russia, near the village of Selitrennoe, about 130 kilometers north of the Caspian city port of Astrakhan). The central and eastern Rus’ principalities were subjected to the Golden Horde as vassals. Although initially the Golden Horde’s ruling elite was Mongolic-speaking, most of the polity’s population was Turkicphone, hence Kipchak became the preferred lingua franca. Not surprisingly, the official use of Mongolian in its specific script waned, though survived in diplomatic documents until the turn of the fifteenth century. The 1313 adoption of Islam as the Golden Horde’s official religion came with the cultural package of the Arabic language and script of the Quran. Other traditional religions (Buddhism, Shamanism) were banned. In the Central Asian part of the Golden Horde, a local Karluk Turkic was shaped into the written Einzelsprache of Chagatai (Chaghhatay) with the use of the Arabic abjad (consonantry). In the less populated western half of this polity, Anatolian (Ottoman) Turkish (Osmanlıca) of the Seljuk Sultanate of Rûm (in central and eastern Anatolia) served as a rudimentary written language, before it became the fully developed official (administrative) language of the Ottoman Empire in the fifteenth century. Interestingly, most surviving texts in the Golden Horde’s Turkic vernacular of Kipchak were recorded in the Armenian alphabet, as Armenian Christians acted as leading merchants for the realm and provided various specialist skills, like Jews in Central Europe. Romania had seized their ethnic polity of (Bagratid or Caucasian) Armenia in 1045, and any remaining traces of political autonomy were obliterated after the Turkic-speaking Seljuks annexed this area to their coalescing empire in 1064.

The Golden Horde began to wane in the late fourteenth century and in the mid-fifteenth century it disintegrated into several successor khanates, including the Crimean Khanate, founded in 1449. As a result, the eastern Rus’ principalities under Muscovy’s control regained independence from the Golden Horde around 1480. Two years earlier, in 1478, the Crimean Khanate became a vassal of the Ottoman Empire. The decline of the Golden Horde allowed the officially non-Christian polity of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, led by the Baltic-speaking ruling elite, to expand their polity from the Baltic to the Black Sea between the 1310s and 1350s. As a result, the majority of central and western Rus’ principalities were incorporated into this Grand Duchy. Meanwhile, Poland and Hungary annexed the westernmost Rus’ lands. In the course of these vast geopolitical changes, groups of Turkic-speaking Tatars mainly from Crimea joined the Lithuanian Grand Duke’s forces between the 1390s and 1410s, giving rise to small indigenous Slavophone (Tatar) Muslim population that survives to this day in Lithuania, Belarus, and Poland. Until the mid-twentieth century they used their Arabic script for writing in Slavic (Belarusian, Polish, or Ukrainian).

Beginning in the mid-fourteenth century the majority of the population in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania were Slavophone Orthodox Christians. The polity’s Baltic-speaking ruling elite, who stuck to their traditional religion, had no use for Orthodoxy’s liturgical language of Slavonic. Because of its South Slavic (Macedonian) origin, Slavonic was quite removed from the everyday speech of the Grand Duchy’s Slavophone population. The grand dukes wanted their orders to be clearly understood by the polity’s Slavic-speakers, hence Cyrillic was employed for writing local North Slavic, which produced the Einzelsprache of Ruthenian (Ruski), not connected to any specific religious tradition. The centers of this new secular Ruthenian literacy were the ducal chanceries at Vil’nius (Vilnius) and Kyiv.

In 1386, faced with the persistent menace of crusaders in its original Baltic homeland, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania signed a dynastic union with the Kingdom of Poland, whose access to
the Baltic was blocked by the very same crusaders. In this manner, Lithuania and Poland joined their forces to stop the crusaders. As a precondition, the Grand Duchy’s ruling elite had to accept Roman Catholicism, complete with the Latin language and script. (However, Cyrillic-based Ruthenian was retained as the Grand Duchy’s main official language until 1697.) In return, the ethnically Lithuanian Baltic-speaking dynasty of Jagiellonians ascended to the Polish throne. Before the Habsburgs, the Jagiellonians were Central Europe’s most successful dynasty. They ruled Poland-Lithuania until 1572, and from the mid-fifteenth century to 1526 also Hungary and Bohemia.

Following the success of the crusades against the Slavic Obodrites and against Finland’s Finno-Ugric population in the twelfth century, Denmark, the Holy Roman Empire, and Sweden set their sights on southeastern Baltic littoral inhabited by Baltic- and Finno-Ugric-speaking ethnic groups, who cultivated their traditional non-scriptural religions and forms of statehood. During numerous military expeditions, jointly referred to as the Northern Crusade, the territories of today’s Estonia and Latvia were conquered during the thirteenth century and made into the monastic polity of Terra Mariana (or ‘Holy Virgin Mary’s Land’). In 1226 a monastic order Livonian Brothers of the Sword was founded to secure and expand the crusading polity’s boundaries. The centuries-long wars, conflicts, and skirmishes between Western Christian literate polities’ armies and warlords on the one hand, and the non-literate ethnic groups of a variety of customs and religions on the other, led to the development of military, administrative, and cultural techniques. Later, the West would employ these techniques in its colonial conquests and expansion across the Atlantic and Caribbean islands into the Americas, and farther, across the East Indies. This process unfolded at the expense of similarly non-literate ethnic groups who practiced their own local customs and religions. Obviously, when Western conquestists encountered literate societies organized into extensive polities (empires), they fell back on techniques and approaches developed while fighting against the Caliphate (Muslim polities), that is, in the course of the Reconquista of Iberia and during the crusades in the Middle East.

The Order of Brothers of the Teutonic House of Saint Mary in Jerusalem, founded in 1190 in the crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem, began to look for a territory where it could establish its own autonomous crusading state when it became apparent that the crusaders would eventually lose their Middle Eastern polities to the Muslims. The County of Edessa fell in 1144, the Principality of Antioch in 1268, the County of Tripoli in 1289, and finally the Kingdom of Jerusalem in 1291. In 1226 the Teutonic Order established its monastic polity in Mazovia’s northern borderland, or the Chelmno Land (Culmerland). The Mazovian Duke’s intention was to secure his polity’s frontier against “pagan” Baltic-speaking Prutenians (“Prussians”). The task was largely completed by the mid-thirteenth century. Meanwhile, the Baltic-speaking Samogitians defeated the Livonian Brothers of Terra Mariana in 1236. A year later the Teutonic Order adopted the remains of their Livonian Order as an autonomous branch. After joining forces, they attacked “pagan” Lithuania, effectively blocking its access to the Baltic Sea by 1309. In the same year the Teutonic Order seized Pomerelia (with its city port of Gdańsk/Danzig), which intervened between their monastic state and the Holy Roman Empire’s Pomerania. In turn, this annexation also blocked Poland’s access to the Baltic Sea. The low point for the Grand Duchy of Lithuania came after 1398 when the Teutonic Knights seized almost all of Samogitia. In the inevitable standoff the Teutonic Order lost to Poland-Lithuania in 1410. The following year, Lithuania regained Samogitia, and after half a century of further wars, in 1466, Poland regained Pomerelia and annexed some parts of the Teutonic monastic state proper, made into the Kingdom’s province of Royal Prussia.

As in Terra Mariana, the Teutonic Knights imposed Roman Catholic Christianity across their crusader polity, complete with the Latin language and script literacy. The majority of the Livonian and Teutonic crusaders were Germanic-speaking. Later, in 1358, their ethnocultural commonality was reinforced by the founding of the Hanseatic League with its center in Lübeck. This league of port cities from the southern North Sea littoral and the southern and eastern Baltic littoral created an economic backbone that sustained the Livonian and Teutonic monastic states. The Hanseatic League’s lingua franca was Saxon (Low German). The necessity to use it in writing contracts and accounting soon made it into an Einzelsprache in its own right. With time, Germanic-speakers became the majority of the population in Prussia (Teutonic State), effectively extending the Germanic dialect continuum along the south Baltic littoral into this region. In contrast, Terra Mariana remained predominantly Baltic- and Finno-Ugric-speaking, while Low German-speakers remained the region’s (noble) elite until World War One.

A different kind of a monastic polity was established in the easternmost promontory of the Chalkidiki Peninsula in Romania’s region of Macedonia. During the 860s the first monks and hermits appeared in this area, which became known as Mount Athos. In 885 the first monastery was built and two years later in 887 the Roman emperor declared Mount Athos a place of monks, off limits to non-monastic population. In the mid-tenth century the borders and territory were formalized, making Mount Athos into a monastic republic. Contemplation proved a better method for ensuring survival than crusading. This Monastic Republic of Mount Athos exists to this day, included as an autonomous region in the nation-state of Greece. All other states extant in Central Europe at the turn of the Second Millennium were either destroyed or changed beyond recognition. This was not the case for Mount Athos, which retains its territory, governance, and guiding values to this day. This monastic republic is Europe’s sole polity which has a credible claim to the (over) millennium-long unbroken tradition of continuous statehood. Even when the Third Reich occupied Greece in 1941, Mount Athos retained its autonomy under its “High Protector of the Holy Mountain,” who was none other than Adolf Hitler. Interestingly, Mount Athos is the only territory in today’s Europe where the Julian (old style) calendar remains in official use. Another peculiarity, which is acutely at odds with Europe’s modern values, is the strictly enforced ban on any female visitors, or female domestic and farm animals.
Because the Monastic Republic of Mount Athos was established and patronized by Romanian emperors, its monasteries predominantly cultivated the Orthodox literacy in the Greek language and script. Yet from the Middle Ages through the modern period, Orthodox Slavophones and Greek-speakers lived in the Chalkidiki, while at times the Bulgarian and Serbian empires included the region within their boundaries. Not surprisingly, a Bulgarian monastery (Zograf) was founded in Mount Athos at the turn of the tenth century, and its Serbian counterpart (Hilandar) in 1198. They were “Bulgarian” and “Serbian” in an ecclesiastical sense, the former a foundation of the Bulgarian Patriarchate, and the latter of the Serbian Orthodox Church, which gained autocephaly in 1219. Since the moment of their establishment these two monasteries have employed and cultivated the Cyrillic-based Slavonic literacy. In addition, in 980 a Georgian monastery (Iviron) was founded. The Christian polity of Georgia in the southern Caucasus was destroyed in the course of the seventh-century northward expansion of the Caliphate. It was re-established in the late ninth century, flourished, and survived until the Seljuk attack on Romania between the 1060s and 1080s. Iviron marked the presence of resurgent Georgia in the monastic heart of the Orthodox world, that is, in Mount Athos. This presence came in the form of literacy steeped in the Georgian language and script of the late fifth-century Georgian translation of the Bible.

The acceptance of Einzelsprachen other than Greek as liturgical languages across Romania meant that there were a handful of monasteries where Armenian, Georgian, and Syriac literacy was preserved and cultivated (especially in Cyprus) after the takeover of the Middle East, Caucasus, and eastern Anatolia by the Muslim power of the Caliphate and the Seljuk Empire. As in the case of Georgian ecclesiastical literacy, its Armenian and Syriac counterparts, complete with their specific scripts, were also tied to the Armenian and Syriac canonical translations of the Bible. The Syriac Bible (Peshitta) was available already in the second century, while its Armenian counterpart was translated in the early fifth century, most probably from the Peshitta. As much as the Georgian script emulated the Armenian alphabet, the translation of the Georgian Bible was modeled on the Armenian Bible.