Words in Space and Time

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Central Europe's Writing Systems, 1570

Significant presence of:

1. Arabic
2. Armenian
3. Geogrian

Writing systems:

- Arabic
- Cyrillic (Church Cyrillic)
- Greek
- Gothic type (Franz, Black Letter)
- Latin (Antiqua)
- Armenian
- Greek
- Hebrew
- Magyar runic script (Rovia)

Holy Roman Empire

Habsburg hereditary lands

State borders

Borders of principalities, duchies and vassal states

Boundaries of the polities in the Holy Roman Empire

Provincial boundaries in the Ottoman Empire

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Central Europe’s Writing Systems, 1570

The religion-based presence of different writing systems established at the turn of the Second Millennium (see Map 4) continued in Central Europe largely unchanged until the sixteenth century. However, the founding of the Ottoman Empire in Anatolia and the Balkans added the Arabic abjad (consonantry) to this region. The traditional Greek and Cyrillic alphabets remained in the service of the non-territorial autonomous Rum (Roman) millet of Orthodox Christians. However, the empire’s Muslim elite employed the Arabic language of the Quran for religious and legal purposes, alongside Osmanlica (Ottoman or Old Turkish) and Persian for administration and cultural (literary) pursuits, respectively. Osmanlica was produced as an Einzelsprache (language) by the application of Arabic letters for writing the speech of Anatolia’s Turkic-speakers. In this process, Osmanlica was infused with a lot of high-prestige Semitic Arabisms (especially connected to Islam and religious practices) and Indo-European Persianisms (connected to court culture), making this language sufficiently elitist for the use at the Ottoman Sultan’s court. In 1517, the Ottomans conquered the Mamluk Sultanate of Cairo (Egypt), which had claimed to be a continuation of the Abbasid Caliphate. As a result, the Ottoman Sultan became Caliph. His claim to the title was fortified by the Sharifate (Emirate) of Mecca’s recognition of this declaration in return for the Ottomans’ promise to respect the Sharifate’s autonomy. Subsequently, the Ottoman Sultan-Caliph was able to credibly adopt Islam’s most sought-for title of the Defender of the Holy Cities of Mecca and Medina. These developments, in turn, elevated the overall prestige of Turkic Osmanlica as an Einzelsprache.

The rise of New (Classical) Persian as an Einzelsprache is related to the Islamic (Abbasid) Caliphate’s conquest of Persia (or the Sasanian Empire) in the mid-seventh century. Zoroastrianism was replaced with Islam and for a time Arabic was preferred to the defeated empire’s (Middle or Sassanian) Persian written in Pahlavi letters (derived from the Aramaic script). It was difficult for Persia’s Indo-European-speaking population to acquire Semitic Arabic as their speech of everyday communication. Furthermore, the cultural tradition and prestige of Persian was considerable, so eventually Arabic letters were applied for writing this language, gradually making it into an accepted Islamic Einzelsprache. In the ninth century such Arabic script-based Persian was accepted as the official language of administration and court life in Central Asia’s Samanid Empire (with its center in today’s eastern Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, western Tajikistan, and northern Afghanistan). Afterward, in the west, the Seljuks adopted Persian as their official language, alongside a string of further Muslim polities extending from today’s Iran to India and Bangladesh. In addition, Persian became a preferred language of expression in Sufism, as symbolized by the teachings and writings of the thirteenth-century mystic, Rumi. That is why, despite never ending conflicts between the Ottoman Empire of Sunnism and the Safavid Empire (founded in 1501) of Iran allied with Shiism, Persian remained the language of cultural achievement among the Ottomans.

Importantly, whatever ethno-linguistic differences might exist in the ummah (Islamic community of the faithful), the Arabic of the Quran and its Arabic script endowed it with religious and scriptal unity. An Ottoman speaking and writing Arabic, Osmanlica and Persian, to a degree saw these three as different varieties of the same unitary Islamic literacy expressed in “holy” Arabic letters. This Arabic abjad-based monoscriptalism nullified any language difference that otherwise could be seen as categorical and thus uncrossable, and facilitated the relatively free flow of linguistic loans between these three, melding them into one unified literacy (if not a single language).

In the sixteenth century the main impact on the use and creation of Einzelsprachen (languages) in Central Europe had, on the one hand, the invention (or introduction from the East?) of the movable type printing press in the mid-fifteenth century, while on the other hand, the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation in the following century. Mechanical printing, which was considered an abhorrence by Muslims and Orthodox Christians, was limited to Catholic and Protestant Europe during the early modern period. At the same time, the prolonged religious, cultural, ideological, and military conflict between these two strains of Western Christianity (not settled until the end of the Thirty Years’ war in 1648) tremendously fueled book production for the sake of propaganda.

Catholics and Protestants (overwhelmingly Lutherans) brushed shoulders across Scandinavia, the entire Holy Roman Empire, the partitioned Kingdom of Hungary, and in many regions of Poland-Lithuania. Following yet another failed war with Poland-Lithuania, in 1521 the monastic State of the Teutonic Order paid homage to the Polish-Lithuanian monarch, was made into a Polish fief, and overhauled into a secular and Lutheran Duchy of Prussia. A similar result of the secularization of statehood and the adoption of Lutheranism in Terra Mariana (or the east Baltic littoral controlled by the
Livonian branch of the Teutonic Order) was brought about by the Livonian War (1558–1583) between Sweden, Muscovy, Poland-Lithuania, and Denmark-Norway. Terra Mariana was divided into Courland, Livonia, and Estland. In 1561 the two former regions were made into secular duchies, fiefs of Poland-Lithuania, while the third area became a Swedish province. At the same time, all the three territories' nobility and burghers adopted Lutheranism. The Kingdom of Poland’s Germanic-speaking province of Prussia followed suit by giving up Catholicism in favor of Lutheranism. In Poland-Lithuania and the lands of partitioned Hungary, nobles who converted to Protestantism usually selected Calvinism in preference to Lutheranism. The latter strain of Protestantism was appreciated more by (often Germanic-speaking) burghers.

In Scandinavia, Lutheranism replaced Catholicism in Denmark-Norway in 1536. The same process was more prolonged in Sweden where both strains of Western Christianity brushed sides, like in Poland-Lithuania. At that time the Swedish House of Vasa ruled both polities. The Polish-Lithuanian monarch of this dynasty, Sigismund III, was crowned King of Sweden in 1592, creating a short-lived dynastic union between these two states. Attempts at fortifying Catholicism in Sweden in the spirit of the Counter-Reformation were immediately met with much opposition, leading to war that in 1599 deposed the monarch from the Swedish throne. Meanwhile, in 1593 Lutheranism had been announced as the kingdom’s official religion. In the wake of the Thirty Years’ War, in 1648 the Peace of Westphalia reorganized the Holy Roman Empire, largely putting an end to the Catholic-Protestant religious strife in Western and Central Europe. The southern half of the Empire, overlapping with the Habsburgs’ hereditary lands, was fully regained for Catholicism, while the northern half’s multiple principalities became predominantly Lutheran. What is more, the independence of confessionally mixed Switzerland and the Protestant (Calvinist) Netherlands was recognized. In line with Poland-Lithuania’s tradition of tolerance for different ethnoreligious groups, in 1573 the Sejm (the Commonwealth’s Diet of Nobles) promulgated a Warsaw Confederation, which guaranteed the freedom of religion for all the nobles. A similar function was played by the 1438 Union Trium Nationum (Union of the Three Estate Nations), guaranteeing equality for Transylvania’s Hungarian-speaking nobles and Szeklers (free border militiamen) and Germanicophone Saxon burghers. In the course of the Reformation, the first group sided either with Catholicism or Calvinism, the second stuck to Catholicism, while the last group adopted Lutheranism. The Union prevented any religious strife between these three ethnically and religiously differentiated groups.

In the wake of the fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans (1453), an idea budded that Moscow would become a “Third Rome” of the Christian world. Around 1510 this concept was made into the core of Muscovy’s leading political ideology, employed for legitimizing the polity’s westward expansion at the expense of the Rus’ half of Poland-Lithuania, and toward the Black Sea and the Balkans at the expense of the post-Golden Horde khanates and the Ottoman Empire. Muscovy’s successful expansion made this polity into Europe’s sole Orthodox power, while the rest of the Orthodox Christian (Rum) world found itself under Ottoman or Catholic political domination. The Orthodox population in Catholic Poland-Lithuania and in the Catholic Habsburgs’ share of Hungary were pressed to adopt Catholicism, while in Transylvania the duchy’s plurality of Romancephone Orthodox Christians were disadvantaged by their exclusion from the Unio Trium Nationum.

In Poland-Lithuania this Catholicizing pressure on the Orthodox Church and its faithful was partly resolved by the 1569 ecclesiastical Union of Breslau (Bresl). In line with the terms of this Union, Orthodox Christians retained their Slavonic liturgy but switched their ecclesiastical loyalty from the Ecumenical Patriarch in Constantinople to the Pope in Rome. Orthodox Christians who adopted this Union became known as “Uniates.” In the wake of the lifting of the Ottoman siege of Vienna in 1683, the Habsburgs began reconquering the lands of historical Hungary. As part of the process, they imposed similar church unions on the Orthodox population in the Carpathian Ruthenia (including Maramureș; today the region is split between Slovakia, Romania and Ukraine) (1646, 1664, 1715) and Transylvania (1700). In the late eighteenth century, following the partition of Poland-Lithuania, the majority of Uniates found themselves under Maria Theresa’s Habsburg rule in Hungary and Galicia. By then the word “Uniates” had become a term of abuse levelled against Uniates both by Catholics and Orthodox Christians (especially those who rejected the ecclesiastical unions in Poland-Lithuania and Hungary), so she replaced it with the now widely accepted neologism “Greek Catholics.” Obviously, none of these Greek Catholics had anything to do with ethnic Greeks or the Greek language and alphabet. The Habsburg’s support for Uniates-converted Greek Catholics ensured their loyalty to this Catholic dynasty. In contrast, in Russia’s partition zone of Poland-Lithuania, the Romanovs suppressed Uniates as they were seen as potentially disloyal to the Tsar and sought to make sure that they rejoined the Orthodox Church. In Russia, or the world’s sole Orthodox empire, there was no place for such a confessionally ambiguous population that from Saint Petersburg’s perspective was “half-Orthodox” and “half-Catholic.”

The invention and spread of printing, widely disseminated by the propaganda needs of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, led to the rapid construction of new Einzelsprachen. The Latin language commonality of Western and Central Europe’s literacy, underpinned by the Vulgate and the unity of Latin liturgy, was decisively over. A new Protestant norm prevailed that the Bible should be made available to the faithful in their own vernaculars. The sixteenth century was marked by a flurry of grassroots and state-sponsored translation projects, both Protestant and Catholic, which resulted in vernacular translations of the entire Bible, the New Testament, or the Catechism. The more successful and widely used a given translation became, the better chance a vernacular standardized with this translation had for becoming a recognized Einzelsprache in its own right. Afterward, such an Einzelsprache would be taught at schools as a subject, used as a medium of education, employed in administration, and increasingly more secular books would be produced in it. In the
end this Einzelsprache in question would become something, which nowadays is recognized as a language. Luther’s German translation of the Bible was published in 1534. The publication of similar (official) translations of the Bible followed (or even preceded), into Italian (Florentine, 1471 in Venice), French (1487 in Paris), Low German (1494 in Lübeck), Ruthenian (Belarussian/Ukrainian in Cyrillic, Old Testament only) (1517–1519 in Prague), Swedish (1541 in Upsala), Danish (1550 in Copenhagen), Ladino (in Latin characters, 1553 in Ferrara), Croatian (New Testament only, 1562 in Glagolitic, 1565 in Cyrillic, both in Tübingen), Polish (1563 in Brześć, today’s Breś in Belarus), Czech (1579–1593 in Kralice nad Oslavou), Slovenian (1583 in Wittenberg), Hungarian (1590 in Vizsoly), Dutch (Netherlands, 1617 in Leiden), Finnish (1642 in Stockholm), Yiddish (in Hebrew characters, 1678 in Amsterdam), Romanian (Walachian in Cyrillic) (1680 in Bucharest), Latvian (1694 in Riga), Lithuanian (1735 in Königsberg, today’s Kaunas in Lithuania, or Estonian (1739 in Reval, today’s Tallinn in Estonia).

The technological-cum-intellectual grounds for the above translations into newly minted Einzelsprachen had been prepared by Johann Gutenberg’s publication of the Latin Bible (Vulgate) in 1455 in Mainz, and the then high-tech Polyglot Bible, published in 1517 in Madrid. On the single page it pairs the holy book’s canonical texts in Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek and Latin, each in its own specific script. At that time, following the defeat of Muslim Granada 1492 and the opening of the conquest of the Americas in the same year, Spain was at the forefront of using Christianity to legitimize imperial expansion. In 1671 the first Arabic translation of the Bible was published in Rome for the sake of militarized missionary efforts against Arabic-speaking Muslims in Morocco and the Ottoman Empire. (Interestingly, the Latin translation of the Quran was for the first time published in 1543 in Basel.) The Ottomans’ Orthodox vassal Principality of Walachia also allowed for cross-cultural dialogue, as evidenced by the publication of a Greek-Arabic Orthodox missal in 1701 and a Greek-Arabic Orthodox Horologion a year later. Furthermore, the aforementioned translations of the Bible into new vernaculars was facilitated by the publication of the old medieval canonical translations of the Holy Scripture into (Old Church) Slavonic in 1571 (in Ostrów in Poland-Lithuania, today’s Ostrowiec in Ukraine), Grabar (Old Armenian in the Armenian alphabet) in 1666 (in Amsterdam), or (Old or Classical) Georgian (in the Georgian alphabet) in 1743 (in Moscow).

Sephardic Jews opened the first printing press in the Ottoman Empire (in Istanbul), already in 1494, but they published only in Hebrew letters and for Jewish consumption. The first Ottoman printing house publishing for the state’s needs with the use of the Arabic script was founded in the Ottoman capital in 1726 and began production (mostly in Osmanlıca) three years later, in 1729. However, religious books, let alone the Quran, were off limits. This ban on the mechanical reproduction of Arabic-language religious material remained in place until 1803. The Orthodox world’s attitude to printing was marked by similar suspicion. However, under Catholicism’s ideological pressure emanating from Poland-Lithuania (as evidenced by the printing of an early Slavonic-language liturgical book in Cyrillic in Cracow in 1491), Muscovy had no choice but to adopt this technology. The first printing house opened in Moscow in 1553. Earlier, the Slavonic printing house publishing in Cyrillic was briefly active, between 1493 and 1496, in Cetinje, the capital of Zeta/Montenegro, which was soon dominated and then annexed by the Ottoman Empire in 1514. The Hebrew-language Mikraot Gedolot (literally “Great Scriptures,” popularly known as Rabbinical Bible) was published in Venice in 1517–1519. Central Europe’s first Jewish printing press publishing in Hebrew for religious needs of Judaism was founded in Prague in 1522. Four years later, in 1526, it published the Haggadah (this text sets the order of Seder, a Jewish ritual feast that marks the beginning of the Passover).

In the second half of the fourteenth century, incunables (or the earliest printed books published before 1501) were printed the “Gothic” (Black Letter) type that emulated manuscript hands, usually the Carolingian minuscule. In the first half of the fifteenth century, a tradition developed for using the Roman Empire’s classical Latin hand of the first and second centuries for producing books in Latin. This type of the Latin alphabet became known as Antiqua (”Old” or “Antique” letters) and was preferred by humanist authors of the Renaissance. On the other hand, the Gothic type was preferred for books in vernaculars-turned-Einzelsprachen. Among this type’s numerous varieties, Fraktur (“broken letters”) became dominant from the 1510s, because it was Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I who commissioned and supported it. The Reformation and Counter-Reformation further politicized this typeface dichotomy between Antiqua and Fraktur (Gothic type). Protestants, especially Lutherans, sided with Fraktur, while Catholics with Antiqua. In the chaos of the subsequent religious wars, a tradition developed for using Antiqua for publishing in the “Catholic” languages of French, Hungarian, Tuscan (Florentine, Italian), Polish, or Spanish, while Fraktur (Gothic type) was employed for printing books in the “Lutheran” (Protestant) languages of Common German (of the imperial court at Vienna), Danish, Dutch, Estonian, Finnish, High (today’s standard) German, Latvian, Low German (of the Hanseatic League), or Swedish. However, in scholarly and scientific books in vernaculars, Antiqua was preferred to Fraktur. As a result, both Antiqua and Fraktur were employed side by side across the Holy Roman Empire and Hungary, in Scandinavia and around the Baltic.

Antiqua predominated, with no prominent presence of any other script, in the Catholic politics of the Apennine Peninsula, in the west of the Kingdom of Poland and in central Hungary directly incorporated into the Ottoman Empire. However, in the latter case, a relative absence of other scripts was a function of the post-conquest devastation of this militarized borderland. Until the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation all of Central Europe’s population was overwhelmingly illiterate, writing and reading being the preserve of clergy and state chancelleries. The religious strife and the printed book gave a boost to literacy across Protestant and Catholic Europe in line with the new principle that the Bible should be made available in people’s languages (vernaculars). As a rule of
thumb, the inhabitants of Protestant countries were more literate than their counterparts in Catholic polities. In the Roman Catholic Church liturgy was retained in the “holy language” of Latin, while vernaculars were employed for this function across Protestant states. The Catholic Church ensured Latin-medium elementary and secondary education for noble boys, with only a limited use of vernaculars. On the other hand, the Protestant churches established wider school systems that targeted some segments of the population beyond the nobility and, more importantly, gradually provided education in vernaculars. Both in Catholic and Protestant countries schooling and vernacular literacy spread in urbanized areas. The business of commerce grew increasingly intensive and financially complicated, necessitating good functional literacy and numeracy. The traditional (“medieval”) approach of leaving literacy and education to the highest echelons of clergy remained the norm across the Ottoman Empire and Muscovy.

The Greek alphabet for the Rum millet brushed sides with the Arabic script across the Ottoman Empire. In the northern Ottoman Balkans, they were joined by Cyrillic associated with the Slavophone variety of Orthodox Christianity. Practically, north of the line of the Danube, Greek letters were not in use and Cyrillic predominated. It was the sole official alphabet of the Danubian Principalities of Walachia and Moldavia. The presence of the Greek writing system in the Apennine Peninsula was reinforced in the wake of the fall of Constantinople (1453) as many officials and intellectuals migrated there from the now definitively defunct Romania (Roman Empire). The Ottoman millet system, alongside the tradition of ethnoreligious (ethnocultural) autonomies in Poland-Lithuania and Hungary, facilitated the rise and preservation of diasporas of numerous peoples. As a result, the diasporic use of the Armenian script for Armenian Monophysites, the Hebrew abjad for Judaists (Jews), or of the Arabic script for Muslims (Tatars) spread across this area.

After the turn of the seventeenth century, Uniates (later known as Greek Catholics) constituted a plurality of Poland-Lithuania’s population. Their education employed both Cyrillic and the Latin alphabet. Effectively, this meant an increasing spread of the latter to the Commonwealth’s easternmost frontiers, due to the ideologically Catholic character of Poland-Lithuania. A similar phenomenon was observed in the strongly Catholic Kingdom of Hungary’s Uniate territories of Carpathian Ruthenia and Transylvania. Afterward a steep decline in the use of Cyrillic was observed in Poland-Lithuania, when in 1697 it was decided to stop using Cyrillic for official written purposes, meaning the de facto replacement of Ruthenian with Polish as the official language of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. For a time being Muscovy remained monoscriptal in its use of “Orthodox” Cyrillic. However, wars with Poland-Lithuania and Sweden brought about the need for progressive employment of Latin alphabet-based (Low) German, Latin, Swedish, or Polish for international relations, trade, and education. Likewise, Muscovy’s expansion at the expense of the post-Golden Horde khanates brought considerable territories with Muslim majorities or pluralities among their inhabitants. Obviously, they stuck to their holy alphabet of Arabic.

Although the spread and firm establishment of Christianity in Scandinavia meant that the use of the “pagan” Runes ceased, some rudimentary employment of the “Hungarian Runes” (Rovásírás, today known as the “Old Hungarian alphabet”) continued in Transylvania through the seventeenth century. It appears that from the perspective of writing systems, Transylvania used to be one of Central Europe’s most multiscriptural areas in the early modern period, with the parallel use of, at least, Antiqua, the Armenian Alphabet, Cyrillic, Fraktur, the Hebrew abjad, or Rovásírás. Bosnia-Herzegovina was similarly multiscriptal, as the Arabic script, Antiqua, and Cyrillic were there in common use, alongside some Glagolitic in the Adriatic littoral. This last script was employed by Slavophone Catholics who wished to emphasize their difference vis-à-vis Dalmatia’s Romancephone Catholics, without opening themselves to any accusation that they might be supportive of the Orthodox Church, associated in this area with Cyrillic. Thanks to a variety of monasteries in Mount Athos and on Cyprus (not subdued by the Ottomans until 1570), the Georgian and Syriac scripts also left their traces in Central Europe. Unlike on the previous map of the dialect continua (Map 5), the presence of the region’s growing population of Roma was not reflected in terms of a script because, as in the case of religion, they also accepted the script of their socio-political environs. Furthermore, the traditional Roma culture does not have a place for writing as the transmission of customs, and social rules are passed on orally through face-to-face contact.