

OLD TESTAMENT TRANSLATIONS IN THE GRAND DUCHY OF LITHUANIA AND THEIR CONTEXTS

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Abstract. From the 15th century onwards, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania was a multiconfessional and multicultural state. Apart from Lithuanians, its population comprised Ruthenians (the ancestors of Belarusians and Ukrainians), Poles, and smaller Jewish, Tatar, and Karaim communities. After its Christianization, Lithuania officially fell under the jurisdiction of the Roman Catholic Church, but most of its inhabitants were of the Eastern Christian rite. Reformed Protestantism spread among the nobility at the turn of the 16th and 17th centuries, while Lutheranism flourished in Lithuania Minor. Smaller ethnic groups also had their confessional communities. All confessional groups had their sacred books. This article gives an overview of Christian vernacular translations of the Old Testament that were read in the Grand Duchy between the 15th and the 18th centuries. It briefly discusses the circumstances of the translation of the Old Testament into Ruthenian (the Skaryna Bible), Old Church Slavonic (the Ostrog Bible), Polish (the Brest, Nesvizh and Gdansk Bibles) and Lithuanian (the Bretkūnas, Chylinski and Quandt Bibles) as well as their characteristic features.

Keywords: Old Testament, Grand Duchy of Lithuania, Bretkūnas Bible, Chylinski Bible, Quandt Bible, Skaryna Bible, Ostrog Bible, Brest Bible, Gdansk Bible

In the 15th century, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania was the largest state in Europe. It was a multinational, multicultural, and multiconfessional country. Apart from Lithuanians, its population included Slavs – mainly Ruthenians (the ancestors of Belarusians and Ukrainians) and Poles. There were also Jewish, Tartar, and Karaim communities. When in 1387 Lithuania officially embraced Christianity, Roman Catholicism became politically dominant, but the majority of the population continued its allegiance to the Eastern Church. There were also smaller confessional groups – Jews, Muslims, and Karaims. The 16th century saw the rise of the Uniate or Eastern Catholic Church. In its second half, Russian Old Believers started flowing into the Grand Duchy. As the Reformation set in, Calvinism gained popu-

larity among the Lithuanian gentry. Antitrinitarianism flourished briefly in several centres, but its followers were soon expelled. Lutheranism spread in Lithuania Minor, or Prussian Lithuania, but its influence extended to the Grand Duchy as well.

What follows is a brief overview of who translated the Old Testament, in what circumstances, and into which languages translations were done. Only Christian translations will be discussed and I will focus on the period between the early 16th century, when the first Bible was printed in the Grand Duchy, and the 18th century, when the first Lithuanian Bible was completed. This is also the time when the first hitherto known Bible translation to Karaim emerged.

During the period that interests us, several translations of the Old Testament as part of complete Bible translations were made and published for the use of citizens of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. These were: the Skaryna Bible in a variety of Church Slavonic close to spoken Ruthenian; the Ostrog Bible in Church Slavonic; the Brest, Nyasvizh, and Gdańsk Bibles in Polish; and Bretke's, Chyliński's and Quandt's Bibles in Lithuanian.

Fragments of the Old Testament were also translated for the use in religious writings and the liturgy. As for Lithuanian, we could mention psalters or the occasional Old Testament fragments included in collections of Gospels and Epistles for use during religious services. For instance, Baltramiejus Vilentas' *Gospels and Epistles* contain four quotations from the Old Testament, two from Isaiah, and two from the books of Sirach and Malachi, respectively. Lazarus Sengstock's collection contains one quotation from Isaiah and one from Proverbs. Sometimes fragments of the Old Testament were printed in Postils or at the end of New Testament editions. They were not numerous, and mostly they were taken from the Prophets and the sapiential books.

The Skaryna Bible

Probably the most versatile among Bible translators in the Grand Duchy, Francysk Skaryna was a physician, a book printer, and even a gardener in the service of Emperor Ferdinand I. He matriculated in Cracow as *Lithuanus* and in Padua as *Ruthenus*. His creed cannot be established. As a disseminator of the Bible, he was sometimes considered to be a Protestant, but, in fact, he cultivated good relations with all Churches. Depending on the circumstances, he introduced himself as a Catholic or an Orthodox believer.

Between 1517 and 1519, he printed two-thirds of the Old Testament in Prague. Though printed abroad, his Bible was intended for the reader in the Grand Duchy, and the printing was partly financed by the mayor of Vilnius. Why the remaining parts of the Old Testament were never printed is not clear. Skaryna printed part of the New Testament in Vilnius in 1625.

Skaryna's Bible was meant to be an encyclopedic work, a manual offering diverse forms of learning. It abounds in comments, marginal notes and illustrations, including even Skaryna's portrait. His language is Church Slavonic, but with a strong admixture of the popular Ruthenian language. According to Francis Thompson, "his aim was not to publish an edition of the Slavonic text as it was to be found in MSS but to adapt it so that it would be comprehensible to, as he put in his preface to the Bible, *every simple common man*." (Thompson 1998: 667).

Copies of Skaryna's Bible can be found in Prague, Moscow, and Belarus. One Book of the Old Testament is held by the Wróblewski Library in Vilnius. As for Lithuania, Skaryna's significance rests not only on his Bible but also on his role as the author and publisher the first book to be printed in the Grand Duchy, the *Small Travel Book*, the 500th anniversary of which has been celebrated recently (for more recent work on Skaryna, see Lemeškinas 2022).

The Ostrog Bible 1580/81

Unlike the Skaryna Bible, which sprang from the mind of an inspired humanist, the Ostrog Bible must be viewed in the context of interconfessional strife. Prince Constantin Ostrogsky, voivode of Kiev, was a devout Orthodox who sought to counteract the increasing influence of the Catholic Church. He revived earlier attempts to compile an Orthodox Bible translation in reaction to the appearance of the Catholic Leopolita Bible in Poland (1561). His professed aim was to collect as many Slavonic Bible manuscripts as possible and to have them collated as well as checked against the Greek Septuagint. The Ostrog Bible was sumptuously printed by the famous Lviv printer Ivan Fyodorov. This Bible became the authorized version of the Eastern Orthodox Church. Its language was intended to be comprehensible to all Orthodox believers and was therefore purged of vernacular elements to be as close as possible to Old Church Slavonic.

A careful study of the Ostrog Bible text carried out by Francis Thompson reveals, however, that the text is basically taken over from the so-called

Gennadian Bible manuscript, which Ostrogsky obtained from Czar Ivan IV the Terrible. The title page claims that the translation was made from the Septuagint, but in fact the Gennadian Manuscript text, based on the Vulgate, was merely checked against the Septuagint, and even that was not done consistently. No influence of the Skaryna Bible has been detected; correspondences are few and most likely coincidental (Thompson 1998: 671–686). Subsequent researchers, however, claim that before the Gennadian manuscript was brought from Moscow, the old Slavonic manuscripts were redacted taking into account Skaryna's Bible version. Yet the editor did not adopt Skaryna's vernacular constructions, preferring those of Church Slavonic (Kalugin 2021: 80–92). The antitrinitarian Szymon Budny was in the habit of discussing translation problems with the printers Fyodorov and Mstislavets, and Budny's translation was likely among the Slavonic Old Testament translations collected by Prince Ostrogsky (Pietkiewicz 2023: 384).

Even now, the Ostrog Bible is one of the most authoritative Bible texts in the Russian Orthodox Church.

The Brest Bible

The year 1563 saw the printing, in Brest, of the first Protestant Bible edition in the Grand Duchy and the first Protestant translation of the whole Holy Scripture into Polish. It is also called the Radziwill Bible because it was the Radziwills' financial support that enabled its printing. The title page of the Brest Bible claims that it was translated from Hebrew, Greek and Latin for the first time. Actually, different sources were used, even a French Bible. As in the case of the Ostrog Bible, the claims concerning translation sources on the title page are misleading.

The Brest Bible was intended to be widely read and even used at schools. The translators' concern, like that of Martin Luther, was that the language should be idiomatic and elegant. Preference was given not to accuracy, but to vividness of expression; in the more difficult passages, the translators rendered the meaning rather freely. Many extant copies of the Brest Bible are defective, with the title pages torn out to escape burning during the Counter-Reformation (Frick 1989; Kwilecka 2001).

Even today, Lithuanian and Polish Protestants still take pride in this Bible because of its magnificent typesetting and the grandeur of its language.

The Nyasvizh Bible

Before the Brest Bible had even come out of the press, the Antitrinitarian, humanist, and Hebrew scholar Szymon Budny criticized it for departing too much from the original text. Budny was aware of St Jerome's dictum in his letter to Pamachius¹ to the effect that while secular writings could be translated freely (rendering thoughts rather than words), the Holy Scripture had to be translated literally. But he also pointed out that in some Biblical passages, it was stated that not a word of the Bible text should be altered. This led him to the view that in Bible translation the texts in the original languages are foremost and should be followed closely. Therefore, he undertook a new translation, which was printed in 1574 in Nyasvizh. For the purposes of his translation, Budny coined many neologisms (such as *offiarnik*, *offiarownik* instead of *kapłan* 'priest', *calopalenie* 'burnt offering', *rozdział* 'chapter'), and he was careful to use forms of Biblical names as close as possible to the Hebrew original. Budny's translation method was to render everything as literally as the Polish language allowed. In modern times, the translation theorist Eugene Nida would describe this as the method of the nearest natural equivalent. According to Rajmund Pietkiewicz, Warsaw University Library holds a copy of the Nyasvizh Bible with Turkish inscriptions in Arabic script and with sundry Quran quotations. The Karaim exegete Isaac of Troki and the Tatars of the Grand Duchy often referred to Budny's Old Testament translation in their polemical writings (Merczyng 1913; Frick 1989: 81–115; Pietkiewicz 2023: 373–385).

The Danzig Bible

The history of the translating and printing of the Danzig Bible abounds in intriguing details. Called after the Polish city where it was printed, it was intended to meet the needs of Lutherans, Calvinists and Czech Brethren living in the Crown Lands and the Grand Duchy. According to the canons of successive Synods, it was to be a second edition of the Brest Bible, with corrections in those places where they differed from the Hebrew and Greek origi-

1 „Ego enim non solum fateor, sed libera voce profiteor, me in interpretatione Graecorum, absque Scripturis sanctis, ubi et verborum ordo mysterium est, non verbum e verbo, sed sensum exprimere de sensu“. In: <http://www.tertullian.org/fathers2/NPNF2-06/Npnf2-06-03.htm> ir <http://www.bible-researcher.com/jerome.pammachus.html>.

nals. In its preface, it is stressed that the Danzig Bible is simply a reprint, not a corrected version of the Brest Bible. Daniel Mikołajewski, the translator and supervisor of the editorial process, managed to get the approval of the Synod to start the printing without having shown them its manuscript.

In fact, what Mikołajewski produced was not a second edition of the Brest Bible but a completely new translation, based on a different translating method. Mikołajewski aimed to adhere to the Hebrew original as closely as possible; this was not a free translation but one based on the philological method. The Lithuanian Protestants were displeased with the fact that the translation diverged from the Brest Bible, and they even called for a new edition. Despite the hostile reception, this translation came to be gradually accepted as an Authorized Version for all Polish Protestants (Frick 1989; Kossowska 1968; Sipańkówna 1934).

The Chyliński Bible

For Lithuanian Reformed Protestants, a Lithuanian Bible translation was made by Samuel Bogusław Chyliński in London. Most of his Old Testament translation was printed in London in 1660. It was a personal initiative of the translator, who was sent by the Lithuanian Reformed Synod to the Franeker Academy in the Netherlands. Chyliński was prevented from returning home by the outbreak of the wars with the Swedes and the Muscovites in the mid-17th century. The translator managed to find influential supporters for his initiative. They included John Wallis, professor of Oxford University, the scientist Robert Boyle, the polymath Samuel Hartlib, and several Puritan clergy representatives. Finally, he gained the support of Charles the Second, King of England. Adverse circumstances – discord and strife within the Lithuanian Reformed community, shifts in the political situation of England, and finally the Plague that ravaged London between 1662 and 1664 – prevented the printing of the Chylinski Bible from being completed. The printed texts of the Old Testament break off at Job 6.

The principal source for Chyliński's translation into Lithuanian was the Dutch *Statenbijbel* (1637), famous for its accurate philological translation method and its wealth of exegetical and philological comments. Chylinski's translation method was close to that of the Danzig Bible, though he did not use it as a translation source. The Chyliński Bible is the first (partly) printed Bible in the Lithuanian language. The printing was never completed, so the translation did not reach the Lithuanian readership at that time.

Only one copy of the printed part of the Old Testament is extant. It is held by the British Library (Kavaliūnaitė 2008, 2016; Kot 1958).

The Bretke Bible

We must now go back in history and discuss the first Bible translation into Lithuanian, which was Lutheran. Though not made in the Grand Duchy but rather in Prussian Lithuania, it was known and occasionally used by Calvinists in the Grand Duchy. The translator, Jonas Bretkūnas, was a pastor, trained at the University of Königsberg and also at Wittenberg, where he attended Melancthon's lectures. Bretke's translation source was the Luther Bible.

Although Duke Albert of Prussia encouraged the printing of religious literature in other vernaculars like Polish, German, and Lithuanian, Bretke's Bible translation seems to have sprung from his own initiative. He started on his translation in 1579 and completed it in 1590. The conference of Lutheran pastors recommended it for publication, but as editorial work lingered on, the translation ultimately remained in the manuscript. Only Bretke's Psalter appeared in print, edited by Johannes Rhesa in 1625. It was reprinted many times and was widely used.

The Bretke Bible has not yet been published except in facsimile. Despite this, it has been studied by linguists, and many are those who have praised its rich and expressive language. For philologists, the many editorial notes and variants in the manuscript are of considerable value. The manuscript of the Bretke Bible is now held in the Prussian Heritage Archive in Berlin (Falkenhahn 1941; Range 1992; Scholz 2002).

The Quandt Bible

Finally, we come to the first complete printed Bible in Lithuanian, known as the Quandt Bible, which was printed in 1735 in Königsberg. The Bible was translated from Luther's version by a team of pastors in East Prussia. The team was headed by Bishop Jacob Quandt. Quandt was not proficient in Lithuanian, but he wrote a valuable introduction with an overview of all previous Lithuanian Bible translations. Bretke's manuscript, which was also Lutheran, was not used.

In successive editions, mistranslations from Luther's German were corrected, the translation was improved after the comparison with Bret-

ke's manuscript, and it was also checked against the Hebrew text (Rhesa 1816/2011).

Reprinted countless times, also in comparatively cheap editions published by the British Bible Society, the Quandt Bible remained, for almost 200 years, the only widely accessible Lithuanian Bible. In some churches, this translation is read even now. Since it was read only by Protestants, the Quandt Bible had no noticeable influence on the formation of the standard Lithuanian Language.

In conclusion

Bible translation projects in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania seem to have been motivated by two main factors. First, there was the conviction, inspired by the Reformation, that the Holy Scripture should be disseminated among the common people; and secondly, there was the wish, on the part of churchmen of different denominations, to strengthen their religious communities in the face of interconfessional competition and increasing Catholic domination.

The main achievements in Bible translation in the Grand Duchy belong to Protestants and Orthodox believers. Roman Catholics mainly read the Vulgate: 70 percent of the Bible collections from the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries in the National Mažvydas Library in Vilnius consist of various editions of the Vulgate. The collections of Protestant Bibles comprise translations into various languages, including Latin (Misiūnienė 2011, p. 55–81).

The need for a Catholic Bible in Lithuanian was so great that sometimes Protestant Bibles were disguised as Catholic. The National Mažvydas Library holds a copy of the so-called Bythner New Testament, a Calvinist translation printed in Königsberg, from which the title page, the preface and all references to its Protestant origin have been removed, and the Jesuit monogram drawn on the title page instead. [Illustration 1]. Curiosity often seems to have been stronger than doctrinal obedience, as can be seen from the considerable number of Protestant Bibles in the Library of the Vilnius Jesuit Academy. Bible reading could be fraught with risks, as can be seen from the inscription in a copy of the second edition of the Quand Bible held by Vilnius University Library: “Prohibita Biblia. Czytać niewolno” [Illustration 2].

Throughout the existence of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania as a Christian State, the Bible was an important book for all communities of Christian believers, and all of them, except the Roman Catholics, possessed and

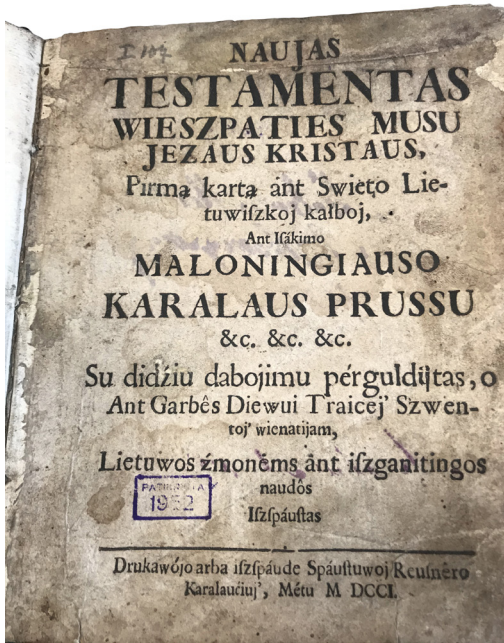


Illustration 1. Title page of the Bythner New Testament bearing the statement that it has been printed at the behest of the King of Prussia. Reproduced from a copy held by the Lithuanian National Library, shelfmark LDA1/70

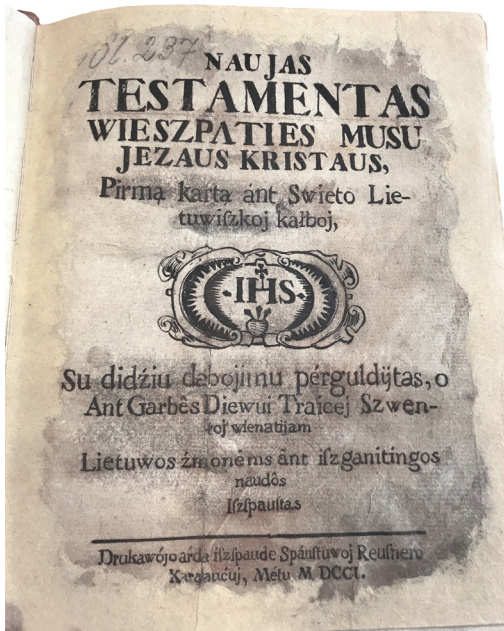


Illustration 2. The title page of Bythner's New Testament, with the dedication to the Prussian King erased and overpainted with the monogram of the Jesuit order. Reproduced from a copy held by the Lithuanian National Library, shelfmark GC407

read translations of both the Old and the New Testament in the vernaculars: Slavonic (Ruthenian), Polish, and Lithuanian. The need for a Catholic Lithuanian Bible transpires from inscriptions in Protestant Lithuanian Bibles. Interestingly, some vernacular translations, like Budny's, were read even by non-Christians such as Karaim and Tatars.

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