

The role of the Reformation in shaping multilingual church spaces in Estonia and Livonia: multilingual epigraphs in Lutheran churches

Summary

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The study of the stages of creation of the Lutheran vernacular Word of God in the territory of Estonia has to date focused on texts in Estonian and been based on a premise taken from written sources, whereby a hierarchical segregation of linguistic communities in the territory of Estonia can be observed from the 16th century onwards. Such written sources include printed texts, primarily early ecclesiastical literature, hymnals, translations of parts of the Bible, as well as manuscripts, e.g. petitions and correspondence; and unsystematically and on rare occasions, visitation protocols as well. These can be used to draw conclusions on the use of language in services and other auditive religious proceedings. However, thus far there has been no systematic study of whether, when and what kind of changes the Reformation entailed for language written on objects and architectural elements within the church, i.e. in epigraphs.

The aim of this article is to analyse how the linguistic needs of churchgoers with different mother tongues were met in the interior space of churches used by different congregations in Estonia and Livonia following the Reformation. The main question looks at when, if at all, the Reformation gave rise to a multi-lingual church space similar to multilingual ecclesiastical literature. The article includes an introduction on the place of multilingualism in mediaeval epigraphs. Subsequent analysis examines what role, if any, Latin as the earlier ecclesiastical language retained in the epigraphs of Lutheran churches. Thirdly, the article also considers how Estonian came to be used in epigraphs: whether it manifested in monolingual epigraphs or within multilingual ones, and when and where this took place. In order to determine the start and regularity of linguistic changes triggered by the Reformation, these research questions should help to analyse whether the Lutheran focus on language was realised simultaneously at both the auditive level and the level of visual representation, or whether language was treated differently depending on the medium.

The materials of the article comprise all Latin epigraphs and multilingual epigraphs with Latin segments (81 multilingual epigraphs from a total of 440) collected between 2014 and 2018. This is a systematic collection of mostly un-published epigraphs found today in Lutheran churches and museums in Estonia, or which have been preserved as earlier recordings.

The multilingual epigraphs that were analysed revealed that even though there are some examples in Estonian churches of primarily multilingual epigraphs predating the Reformation when Latin dominated in epigraphs, the Reformation brought about the development of the tradition of multilingual epigraphs in addition to the direct vernacularisation of Estonian and Livonian church spaces. This was to be expected, since Lutheran congregations comprised multiple ethnicities, but it was nevertheless an extremely slow process: the Reformation movement swept through Estonian and Livonian cities as early as the 1520s, but it was not until the last decade of the 16th century that a shift towards multilingualism became noticeable in epigraphs, which coincides with the time Lutheranism took hold in rural congregations in northern Estonia. The fact that the established German gentry – being the principal funders of church furnishings – converted to Lutheranism was decisive in the proliferation of multilingual epigraphs. Therefore, it is understandable why in the 17th century multilingualism in this region primarily took the form of bilingualism involving High German and Latin, making local Germans the only group in the population able to experience their mother tongue visualised on objects and architectural elements inside the church. As Gustav Suits notes: “The implementation of Lutheran theology under the Livonian Order and Hanseatic League resulted in a gentefolk church and not a folk church.” This certainly applies to local epigraphs, at least until the mid-18th century.

Despite Swedish dominion, which lasted for nearly 150 years, and the fact that many necessary items used in churches and services (especially church bells) were in fact manufactured in Stockholm, the Swedish officials and people living and working in this provincial region had little interest in self-representation in the form of epigraphs fully or partially in the Swedish language. This may have been one of the reasons why Lutheran ministers of Swedish descent, in turn, failed to focus on the creation of multilingual epigraphs featuring parts in Estonian or even monolingual Estonian epigraphs. Swedish rule had more of an indirect role to play in introducing the Estonian language into ecclesiastical epigraphs: it was not until the establishment of a network of schools in the 1680s that a small group of Estonians began to form that could actually read and understand such epigraphs.

As demonstrated by the first German and Estonian epigraph (created after 1739) preserved today on the pulpit of Pilistvere church, it was not just the ideal of a monolingual vernacular church that ensured the visualisation of Estonian texts inside the church, but more precisely, it was the tradition of multilingual epigraphs. The predating and simultaneous Latin-German bilingualism most likely served as an example. On the other hand, neither Swedish nor Latin (nor any other languages) were ever used as a main language alongside the first Estonian parts of multilingual ecclesiastical epigraphs.

The ideal of spreading the Lutheran Gospel in Estonian was not put into practice in the church spaces of Estonia and Livonia on the level of visual representation in

the 16th and 17th centuries, unlike the tradition of multilingual printed ecclesiastical literature and vernacular sermons. It was only in the 18th century, many decades or even a century after the golden age of multilingual ecclesiastical literature, that a multilingual church space was established on the basis of a gospel spread via manuscripts or printed publications.

Latin as the language of the old Catholic church did not suddenly dis-appear from Lutheran church buildings: it fully retained its visibility in local church spaces in both monolingual epigraphs and Latin parts of multilingual epi-graphs until the early 20th century, combining with all local languages used for verbal communication, including services, in the region. The fact that the spread of humanist Latin culture coincided with the Reformation movement in Estonia and Livonia is likely to have also had an impact on the extended monolingual use of Latin in the 16th and 17th century.

The epigraph practice – on the one hand monolingual (a) in Latin as a continuation of the earlier medieval tradition, (b) in High German as of the 1590s and (c) Estonian as of the 18th century, and on the other hand in multi-lingual forms in different combinations – which had developed by the end of the 17th century – shaped ecclesiastical epitaphs in this region to a greater or lesser extent until the early 20th century. The parallel use of these two traditions indicates that multilingual epigraphs were more than a mere step in transitioning from monolingual Latin epigraph practice to monolingual vernacular practice: multilingual epigraphs were a continuous practice in their own right.

Even though multilingualism itself did not make inscriptions more poetic, there was some interaction between the texts in different languages on multilingual epigraphs in terms of the selection of poetic and prosodic form. This continuous tendency can be observed in all areas of Estonia from as early as the 1590s, and the publishing of the Estonian versified hymnal in 1656 brought no significant changes to this.