

Nikolaus von Kues and the Inspiration of Johannes Gutenberg

RALPH STANTON transports us back to medieval Europe to unearth the legacy of a powerful cardinal who likely informed the Gutenberg project.

IN THE FALL OF 2012 my wife and I travelled to western Germany searching for traces of an obscure figure who may be one of the most important influences in the transition from the manuscript book to the typographic book in Europe, Nikolaus von Kues. This article recounts our journey and the discoveries we made about this extraordinary 15th-century figure.

Before Johannes Gutenberg (1400–1468) became the great inventor of printing using movable type, he was a young man looking for opportunities. During the 1430s, while living in Strasbourg, he developed a method for manufacturing convex mirrors set in decorated metal frames.

These devices were sold to pilgrims travelling to Aachen for the once-in-seven-years display of the venerated treasures belonging to the city's great cathedral—the first domed cathedral north of the Alps. Aachen was considered the most important shrine in medieval Germany: the resting place of Charlemagne, whose remains are held in a magnificent gold casket displayed in the building, as well as the swaddling clothes of the baby Jesus, a robe of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the loin-cloth Jesus wore at his crucifixion, and the cloth wrapped around John the Baptist's severed head.

Tens of thousands of pilgrims would come for the veneration of the relics. The mirrors Gutenberg produced served the pilgrims as a sort of virtual eye to capture the rays that medieval people understood all objects to emit, allowing them to be seen. By capturing the sight of the holy relics, the mirrors themselves became sanctified objects, in turn blessing and healing those who looked into them.

When the Aachen pilgrimage was postponed a year, from 1439 to 1440 (likely due to the plague), Gutenberg and his first partners became frustrated at the loss of their sales opportunity. Then disputes arose among the partners that landed everyone in court. Gutenberg won the

dispute, but he turned his attention to another means of making money from the faithful.

For those of us who live in a post-Enlightenment world, the combination of deep piety and technological innovation may seem strange and even jarring. Yet this was the background for one of the fundamental developments that ushered in our own era.

TRACING THE LIFE OF A RELIGIOUS LEADER

What then, or who, inspired Gutenberg to undertake what he called “the work of the book”? How could he think that the extraordinary difficulties he would have to overcome were worth the effort? Where would he find inspiration and intellectual support for his project? Where would he find a market for the books he proposed to produce? There is no certain resolution of these questions, but a little speculation and some logical conjecture suggest some answers.

Our trip to Europe took us 120 kilometres west from Gutenberg's birthplace in Mainz to a small city on the Moselle River called Bernkastel-Kues. Here we visited the birthplace of a canon lawyer, philosopher, scientist, church



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Bernkastel-Kues. (Ralph Stanton photo)

diplomat and later cardinal named Nikolaus von Kues (1401–1464), a close contemporary of Johannes Gutenberg. Close by the riverbank in a picturesque town surrounded by vineyards, we located the house of von Kues’s father, a ship owner. This house where von Kues was born is now a small museum devoted to his work. In the same city we visited the old people’s home von Kues established with the wealth he accumulated as a cardinal; the building hosts a fine library of his manuscript and printed books.

Von Kues was by all accounts an extraordinary man. He had an exceptional career in the Roman Church developed from his power base in western Germany, and he travelled extensively on ecclesiastical business throughout Germany and Italy. He wrote on practical and theoretical topics. He is credited with proposing the timing of the pulse as a medical tool, and he held advanced notions of cosmology. He proposed a correction to the calendar and wrote philosophical treatises, some of which are still studied today.

Von Kues also sought significant reforms in church practices. He was obsessed with the idea of Christian unity as a necessity within the Western Church and the possibility of the Church’s reunification with the Eastern Orthodox. The idea that Christian priests could read from the same Bible, use the same missal at Mass, sing from the same hymnbook and repeat the same prayers was of immense importance to him. Von Kues knew that Germany had thousands of churches, monasteries and church-based schools and universities, and undoubtedly saw the potential of creating books to support common teaching.

My suggestion is that von Kues, as a powerful figure in the Roman Church, was likely to have inspired and influenced the development of Gutenberg’s work.

POSSIBLE LINKS BETWEEN TWO GREAT MEN

The evidence of a connection between von Kues and Gutenberg is largely circumstantial. The two men could have met as early as 1424, when von Kues took up work as a doctor of canon law in Mainz. In a city of roughly 6,000 people, the two young, well-

educated men were very likely to meet.

In 1437 von Kues headed a mission to Constantinople to escort a delegation from the Greek Orthodox Church to what became the Council of Florence. In Constantinople he met and became friends with a great scholar and book collector, Archbishop Bessarion. If anybody in the West knew of the invention of metal type in Asia, Bessarion would likely have been that person. The knowledge of this invention would have been a great spur to Gutenberg.

Gutenberg spent some of his working life in Strasbourg, a city frequented by von Kues. It is here, rather than in Mainz, that he printed, before 1444, what is probably his first book, a Latin grammar for schoolchildren, the *Ars Minor* of the Roman grammarian Aelius Donatus. The multiple editions of this work would fit with the interests of von Kues in the context of Christian education.

Von Kues would also have viewed Gutenberg’s productions of anti-Turkish propaganda following the Turks’ capture of Constantinople in 1453 as urgent necessities. He repeatedly proposed a revised and standardized missal. But religious disputes prevented its production, although Gutenberg’s former partners Fust and Schöffer printed the one portion over which there was no dispute, the *Canon Missae*, in 1458.

A substantial Latin dictionary and grammar would be a vital tool for von Kues and other Church scholars—Gutenberg’s *Catholicon* (1460) is that book, and it is present in von Kues’ library at the old folks’ home in Bernkastel-Kues. Finally, von Kues would find the idea of a printed Bible irresistible—another book that Gutenberg’s invention delivered, and the one for which he remains best known.

✂ For more on this topic, see Albert Kapr, *Johann Gutenberg the Man and His Invention* (1996) and John Man, *The Gutenberg Revolution* (2003).

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