

Laura Lisy-Wagner. *Islam, Christianity and the Making of Czech Identity, 1453–1683*.

Transculturalisms, 1400–1700. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2013. x + 196 pp. \$104.95. ISBN: 978-1-4094-3165-7.

In this stimulating and innovative study, Laura Lisy-Wagner examines the “link between [Czech] attitudes toward the Ottoman Empire, ideas about Europe [especially, but not only, the Holy Roman Empire], religious and political orientation, and constructs of the Czech self” (140). Her focus is on the period between the Fall of Constantinople and the lifting of the final Ottoman siege of Vienna; she is particularly successful in showing that issues touching language, religion, rule, and periodization were reflected in complex ways in the sources she examines, and that this complexity provided rhetorical space for a multivalent articulation of Czech identity.

Following a brief introduction, Lisy-Wagner devotes her first chapter to four travel texts about journeys into the Ottoman world and to the Holy Land written by Czechs in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Though each is, in its own way, distinctive, she suggests that each gave “Czechs the opportunity to locate themselves at the center of their own world, rather than at the periphery of someone else’s” (15). These same texts, plus one other, are revisited in the second chapter and their authors analyzed as ethnographers. This allows Lisy-Wagner to see them both accepting and modifying ways of writing about Turks and Muslims and, at the same time, identifying similarities and differences between Czechs, Ottomans, and other Europeans.

Chapter 3 turns to an examination of religious issues in the aforementioned travel works and in other texts from this period. The Czech lands in this period reflected a richly diverse range of opinions and polemics between Catholics and Protestants, including the various branches of the followers of Jan Hus. Apart from what they had to say about one another, they engaged Islam and the Ottoman world. Each articulation contributed to the process by which a range of Czech identities were

being defined. In this religious mix, the figure of Jan Amos Komenský (Comenius) stood out, and Lisy-Wagner concentrates on him in chapter 4. In exile after 1628, Comenius expressed in his general pansophical ideas and his multipart *Consultatio* a respectful and tolerant view of the Ottomans. For Lisy-Wagner, it was his experience as an exile that enabled him to “transcend cultural boundaries” (117), while at the same time he “never ceased to identify as a Czech and a Moravian” (116).

One of the most interesting — and successful — parts of this book is the impressively original fifth chapter, which examines examples of the ceramics of Habaner (i.e., Anabaptist, from the Czech *habani* or *novokřtění*) workshops in Moravia and Slovakia in this period. These attractive products, decorated with Ottoman motifs from Iznik and Kütahya, were very popular in Czech and Moravian markets. Several examples of this work are beautifully illustrated in the book. A four-flower motif, along with the double-tailed rampant Czech lion drawn from the armorial crest of the Bohemian monarchy, suggests to Lisy-Wagner the ways in which the potters and the taste of their customers “were able to see enough similarity in the face of seeming diversity to draw on both east and west to create something distinctly their own” (137).

Against the backdrop of political rebellion, the final chapter of the book returns to travel literature. One travelogue by Kryštof Harant z Polžic a Bedružic (d. 1621) reveals little about his confessional sympathies, but does reflect, according to Lisy-Wagner, “support for controlled, intellectual religious engagement, for religious expression with restraint” (156). The travel diary of Heřmann Černín z Chudenic (d. 1651) reflects a very different picture of religion and of a Czech identity at a time when tolerant plurality had ceased to be the order of Czech society.

Subtle and well argued, Lisy-Wagner’s book reveals a range of Czech identities in this period that makes simple and definitive conclusions about these matters more difficult than previously thought. Therein lies one of the important contributions of this book. In addition, however, the author presents a fresh picture of the position the Czech lands were thought to occupy: in her interpretation, they lay between the rest of Europe and the Ottoman world and their identity was shaped as much by response to the Muslim world as it was defined by relations with Christendom. This insight is sure to stimulate further analysis and discussion.

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