

Mikael Agricola, Finnish Reformer

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Mikael Olavinpoika Agricola wrote a letter to Kustaa Vaasa (Gustav Vasa, also Gustav I) from his place of study in Wittenberg on Palm Sunday, 1538. The future reformer, sent on a trip by the Turku Cathedral Chapter, appealed to the king to obtain relief from his financial plight. Agricola related that his translation of the New Testament into Finnish had begun and he hoped for funds from the Crown to complete this work and his studies.

His request was not answered, but his translation work based on the original Greek text and Martin Luther's German translation continued all the same and was completed ten years later, in 1548. His studies also advanced despite his lack of money, and Agricola was granted a Master's degree in 1539.

In the Reformers' Doctrine

A key objective of the Reformation, the Bible in the vernacular, began to take a foothold in Sweden at the beginning of the 1520s. The translation of the New Testament into Swedish, which Gustav Vasa implemented, was completed in 1526, and the entire Swedish translation of the Bible in 1541.

The Reformation and its resulting undertaking to use the vernacular were also the background for Mikael Agricola's three-year study tour. In Wittenberg he could deepen his understanding of Greek and Hebrew, as well as draw upon the doctrine of the important reformers, such as Luther and Philip Melancthon. Agricola wrote to the king that he needed, "genuine understanding of the Holy Book and of Christian doctrine," in his future work in "the Province of Finland."

Around the year 1510, Agricola was born in Pernaja, and he moved to Turku in the late 1520s to be a clerk for the bishop. It was already at that time, in all likelihood, that he adopted the ideas of the Reformation. Before his study trip he was ordained to be a priest in Turku, and later advanced to be the bishop's chancellor.

Agricola worked in the ecclesiastical environment, where there were both priests satisfied with the status of the Catholic Church as well as priests promoting reformation. These mutually opposing schools of thought were united by Bible humanism, which emphasized the importance of understanding the original Bible languages.

Young Agricola was, in fact, very interested in these, and before his time in Wittenberg he had become especially familiar with Greek. Also, his continued practice of the Hebrew language relates of his interest in the original languages. Above all, his apparent linguistic talent perhaps was the reason why Agricola was, in fact, sent to Wittenberg to learn these languages in preparation for his Bible translation work.

Influence on the Development of Language and Culture

During the time Agricola was studying, the Reformation, strongly personalized in Luther who held the professorship, caused unrest in the 1500s throughout Europe. However, in Sweden, it came about quite calmly without generating popular movements or other greater unrest, as happened in, for instance, the present-day areas of Germany and France. In Sweden, the Reformation occurred as a state-directed "royal reformation."

The first reformed Finnish language worship services were held in Stockholm, in 1533. It has been suggested that the practice of the vernacular worship service forced the Swedish state government to examine Finnishness in a new light, with its own cultural features and nationality, and not only as a geographical part of Sweden.

In this sense, Agricola's time of study in Wittenberg and his later work in developing the Finnish language occurred at a time when the Finnish national self-concept began gradually to emerge.

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Considered the father of the Finnish written language, Mikael Agricola later became a diligent clergyman and diplomat as well as a productive translator and writer, which was already foreshadowed when he wrote, "Where my duty of obedience and service is needed according to my calling, no neglect will be found in me."

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