

THE BAMBERG PRINTS OF
“DER ACKERMANN AUS BÖHMEN”

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The immense popularity of “Der Ackermann aus Böhmen” between c. 1450 and c. 1550 in Germany, attested by the number of manuscripts and especially the early printed versions, poses the question as to what practical use justified so much effort put into its reproduction. Such an enquiry leads inevitably to the so-called “Pfister” press in Bamberg, where it was first printed, and then quickly printed again, in the 1460s and 1470s. Research in recent times, which confirmed the origins of the early 36-line Bible at the same printery and further established a reliable date for one of those Ackermann incunables, has cast new light on the question. It seems clear that along with a small group of other German-language texts the Ackermann was printed on a press under episcopal control, specifically for pastoral use by the clerics of the Bamberg bishopric. All early printeries were largely dependent on the needs of the church to remain viable. The rapid subsequent appearance of Ackermann prints elsewhere must result from the success of those two Bamberg prints. Presumably the work served in effect as a German “Ars Moriendi,” a use which can help to explain the apparent corruption of the surviving text.