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<https://oir-ihpan.edu.pl/en/tom-lxvi-2022>

https://oir-ihpan.edu.pl/images/2022TomLXVI/08_Recenzje.pdf
(PDF, Polish)

[NOTE: Translated from Polish into English via OpenAI's GPT-4o model]

Drew B. Thomas, *The Industry of Evangelism. Printing for the Reformation in Martin Luther's Wittenberg, Leiden 2022, Brill (Library of the Written Word – The Handpress World, vol. 96), ss. 360*

The monograph under discussion, authored by Drew B. Thomas, is devoted to the development of printing in Wittenberg from the beginnings of the Reformation until around the mid-16th century and the death of Martin Luther (1546). It can be assumed that the ambiguous noun *industry* in the title was intended to emphasize the impressive scale of transformation in Wittenberg's printing houses during the first half of the 16th century, both in terms of the reorganization and specialization of these local printing firms (the creation of a "book industry") and the labor required by printers to build the publishing power of a small Saxon town that became a widely recognized

brand in contemporary Europe (the "diligence" of Wittenberg's Evangelicals).

A similar goal—understanding the road to success of this printing center in terms of printed communication—was also pursued in *Brand Luther* by Andrew Pettegree, published a few years earlier, and the topic has previously been addressed in various studies. What sets Thomas's book apart is primarily its quantitative approach. The use of digital data analysis methods (especially bibliographical ones) constitutes both a strength and, in some respects, a limitation of the work.

The monograph consists of an introduction (outlining the historical context of the analyzed processes and the author's methodology), five chapters (in effect, separate case studies addressing distinct issues, loosely organized chronologically to show the changes in Wittenberg during the first half of the 16th century), a concise conclusion, and extensive appendices with bibliography and index.

The methodological assumptions laid out at the beginning deserve particular attention, as they help clarify the scope of the project. The author explains that the research began with indexing the entirety of Wittenberg's output during the period of interest, primarily based on two bibliographic databases: VD16 and USTC, and subsequently cross-referenced with less automation-friendly resources such as Josef Benzing's *Lutherbibliographie*. For the output of the main printers active in Wittenberg between 1520 and 1550, Thomas established the format and number of leaves per edition, enabling him to estimate the number of

paper sheets used for a single copy of a book and, consequently, the labor and investment involved.

More than 2,000 editions were analyzed in this way. Thomas emphasizes that such estimates had not previously been made for this material—not out of ignorance but due to a lack of data (p. 21). It is worth noting, as shown by the Polish bibliographic project *Drukarze dawnej Polski*, that analyzing the number of paper sheets used is indeed a fundamental method of defining the scale of a printing house's operations beyond merely counting titles and editions.

Additionally, Thomas examined woodcut frames on title pages in 981 editions and measured the typefaces used by printers, identifying over 100 type designs employed in Wittenberg at the time. Using a modified version of the Proctor method (Thomas uses the height of 20 lines of set text as the core metric, multiplied by 20, and supplemented by other data such as typeface design, pp. 24–25), the author analyzed typographic trends based on over 3,700 measurements (p. 24). Unfortunately, the representativeness of this sample is hard to verify, as the number of editions from which the data was drawn is not provided.

The utility of the data becomes clear in the following five chapters. In the first, Thomas investigates how the provincial town of Wittenberg, which had barely sustained any presses before Luther's theses, became a significant publishing center in the 1520s, capable of competing with larger neighbors like Leipzig. He emphasizes several

overlooked factors: the foundational role of Johannes Rhau-Grunenberg; the significant contribution of Melchior Lotter the Younger (who, though printing in collaboration with Cranach and Döring, was not always credited in bibliographic databases); and the mutual influence between Lotter and Rhau-Grunenberg, particularly in raising production quality.

Chapter two focuses on woodcut title-page frames. Thomas identifies 161 “unique frames,” though it's not entirely clear whether this includes variants from different blocks or compositions. The frames were not only used by first-generation printers but also by second-generation ones such as Schirlentz, Klug, Lufft, and Rhau. Since Thomas worked only from digitized copies, the actual number of decorated editions may be underestimated. Still, he convincingly shows that Wittenberg printers used graphical decoration deliberately to increase the appeal of their publications, including even short polemical pamphlets.

In chapter three, Thomas examines imitations and counterfeits of Wittenberg prints—an original and comprehensive exploration. He classifies them as:

1. **False by Association** – editions suggesting a Wittenberg origin via visual cues or author affiliations but lacking a printed place of publication.
2. **False by Implication** – editions with a false imprint on the title page but a correct colophon.

3. **Simple Counterfeits** – editions with entirely false imprints and no identifying information.
4. **Advanced Counterfeits** – false imprints combined with imitative title-page frames.

He identifies nearly 600 such editions, three-quarters from just five cities: Augsburg, Erfurt, Nuremberg, Strasbourg, and Magdeburg. Though valuable, the catalog (pp. 243–292) is not without questionable entries—for example, a 1523 Wrocław edition by Caspar Lybisch is labeled an “advanced counterfeit,” though its visual and textual markers arguably point to homage rather than deceit.

Chapter four focuses on second-generation printers (Klug, Lufft, Rhau, Schirlentz). Using a quantitative approach, Thomas shows how Lufft, though printing fewer editions than Rhau, consumed far more paper, indicating longer and more resource-intensive books (41 sheets on average per edition compared to Rhau’s 8–11). This differentiation shows the specialization of printers and positions Lufft alongside the likes of Froben of Basel in terms of production volume.

Thomas regrets that the dataset he compiled was not included with the book. It could serve future researchers in exploring additional dimensions such as genres, topics, or authors.

In chapter five, Thomas tests a method of combining quantitative data with qualitative interpretation, contrasting Lufft’s large-scale Bible printing with Rhau’s mass production of broadsheets and official documents.

Notably, he highlights Lufft's evolving Bible formats—e.g., the 1535 edition used 14 fewer sheets than its predecessor, leading to massive cost savings. Rhau, meanwhile, balanced polemical printing with contracts from the Saxon court for proclamations and official lists.

In conclusion, Thomas argues that Wittenberg's print success was shaped not only by Luther but also by political patrons and institutional actors. His monograph is a significant contribution to print history. Despite minor inaccuracies—mainly due to the quantitative method—it offers an inspiring framework for studying early modern publishing centers. The study also underscores the value of bibliographic databases, which remain underdeveloped in the Polish context. For example, due to the search and processing limitations of the *Estreicher* bibliography of old Polish prints, the inclusion of over 10,000 Polish editions in USTC is a promising development for future research.

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