

HOLY LETTERS AMONG BARBARIAN PEOPLES

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The discussion of the problem of the status and fate of the holy alphabets and languages in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania should begin with an example from the second half of the 16th century. Teodoras Jevlašauskis was born in the Lithuanian part of Belarus in 1546. Shortly after he started speaking, barely a year and a half later (in 1561) he already embarked on learning how to write in Belarussian and Polish, and also learned to write in Jewish (this was probably the *Mittelhochdeutsch* used by the Ashkenazi Jews)¹. Few five-year-olds in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania could boast of such broad education. Not a few, however, had even at that age already encountered such a diversity of languages. In the capital of the Duchy, this diversity reached an astonishing degree. For example, in 1555, the Papal nuncio Aloysius Lippoman wrote to Cardinal Carlo Carafa from Vilnius: “This town is a veritable Babel, because people from almost all the nations live here: Armenians, Muscovites, Ruthenians, Tartars, Turks, Lithuanians, Germans, and Italians, but there are very few good Christians”². This somewhat irritable turn of speech per-

mits us to identify, like in a drop of water under the Van Leevenhoek microscope, not only elements of the increasingly more prominent modernity, such as attention to national languages and taste for the exotic, but also an important Christian ideological category: the contraposition of Babel and the celestial Jerusalem. The Catholic Church is the image of the heavenly Jerusalem on earth. The differences that arise out of natural ethnicities are overcome in her. Her members are united by the grace of vocation and faith, whatever language they might speak. The classic Greater Catechism by Cardinal Roberto Bellarmino (1542–1621), also published in Babel-Vilnius, says:

The Church is called Convocation because we, Christians, are not born such – for we are born either Italians, or French, or of some other nation. Thus we are called up by God.³

This community, convoked by God, unlike Babel, has the languages that unite it. All these languages essentially are written rather than spoken. Here, special respect shrouds those languages that were used to write down the accusation of Jesus – *titulus*: Hebrew, Greek, and Latin.

¹ У. М. Свяжински. «Гістарычныя запіскі» Ф. Еўлашоўскага. Мінск: Навука і тэхніка, 1990, 90.

² *Acta nunciaturae Poloniae, III/1: Aloisius Lippomano (1555–1557)*, ed. H. D. Wojtyska, Romae: Institutum Historicum Polonicum, 1993, 77 (Nr. 50).

³ Roberti Bellarmini Politiani, Societate Jesu, S.R.E. Cardinalis *Doctrinae Christianae Copiosa Explicatio... instruendi Idiotas et Simples de rebus Fidei...*, Vilnae: Typis Acad. Soc. Jesu, 1655, 38.

Even the peripheral Muslim Tartar tradition absorbed this trinity of holy languages, adding the fourth one, the language of Quran, to it.

The Hebrew, Greek, and Latin scripts represented three civilisational areas (Near East, Byzance, and the West) and were recognised as the conductors of the philosophical, religious, and magical wisdom.

This sacred trilingualism also interposed itself, in a strange manner, in Jevlašauskis' childhood education. At that time, the boy was taught neither Greek, nor Latin, nor Hebrew, and yet he learned the three alphabets that linked the profane languages to the sacred ones. The Latin letters conveyed Polish and Lithuanian languages (the latter he probably did not know). The Greek script was recognisable in the Belarussian texts, whereas Yiddish was spelt with Hebrew characters.

Out of these three languages and alphabets, Hebrew was the least well known in the Christian Lithuania. Among Christians, it practically did not go beyond the boundaries of an academic discipline. It remained the exclusive property of the Jewish community; therefore, in this text, we are not going to devote our attention to its history. Henceforth, we are going to speak about the functions and fates of only two sacred alphabets and languages: Latin and Greek.

The community of the users of Latin and the results of its activity occupied a distinctive place in the culture of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. In his letter to the king Stephen Batory (1576), Augustine Rotundus described Latin as "one of the three languages which Christ, our God, deemed worthy to adorn the record of his accusation („vna ex tribus, quas Christus

Deus noster dignas suo titulo ornando iudicauit")⁴. Already in the Middle Ages, Latin differed from other languages in that it was nobody's native tongue. It was learned from a teacher. The multifunctionality of the language itself (it was used for liturgy, law, sciences, poetry) created a unified cultural field. Beginning with the Carolingian Renaissance, the Latin was increasingly strictly controlled by the rules of written usage. All the way down to the Enlightenment, Latin grammar was for the Western culture roughly equivalent to the role that the written law exerts over the creation of statehood. Both were leading from the chaotic barbarity towards the life subordinated to spiritual and social harmony.

The Latin language, as it gave up its place to the new literary languages, simultaneously became the prototype of all written languages. Its grammar came to be considered a universal model where "the spirit of language" (*sermonis genius*) finds a refuge, and the grammar makes it shine out, having made the language to conform to itself (*sibi conformem posse nitere facit*)⁵. Printed grammars presented the user with the "ideal" form of language, which is antecedent to the separation of its oral and written forms. Even before the appearance of the first systematic grammars of the Slavic language by Laurynas Zizanjija (Vilnius, 1596) and Melety Smotritsky (Vievis, 1619), the Orthodox believers of Vilnius wrote to their brethren from Lvov

⁴ *Pomniki prawa litewskiego z XVI wieku*, wyd. F. Piekosiński, Kraków (*Archiwum Komisji Prawniczej VII*), xv.

⁵ From Introduction of Simon Dach to the first printed grammar of the Lithuanian language (Daniel Klein, 1653), in: R. Koženiuskienė, *XVI–XVIII amžiaus prkalbos ir dedikacijos*, 351.

in 1588: “Send us the archetype of the holy Scriptures – the grammatical elements of the Greek and Slavic languages”⁶. Grammatical rules created the written language *par excellence*, which brought together the community of “intelligentes”. It was clearly perceived that the knowledge of Latin is acquired in no other way except from that community. Thus, if a person can speak Latin and Greek “accurately and for a length of time” without having studied it, it was considered a serious symptom of the diabolical possession⁷. The remarks of Teodoras Jevlašauskis to the effect that the Turks are increasingly inclined to learn Latin indicate the anxiety of that ethnic community and its desire to retain its identity⁸.

From the academical point of view, the situation was little different from that in Western Europe. Nevertheless, the status of Latin in Lithuania had its peculiarities. In the 16th century, writers of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, arguing on the similarity of the two languages, maintained that Lithuanian is merely a deformed Latin. The fact that nobility no longer knew its “native” Lithuanian, in fact Latin, language, was explained by external influences and the fact of having a joint state with Poles and Russians.

Lithuanian, which initially was the language of pagan identity, distinctly from the

Christian Polish language, soon started to aspire to the equal status in Christian instruction. Even the Papal nuncio admitted the individuality of the Lithuanian language and its connection to Latin: “The Lithuanian language is entirely different from Polish and German and has many phrases that sound like Latin”⁹.

The project of Michal Lietuvis to introduce the universal use of Latin did not succeed, but the number of Latin-speakers was actually quite big. The majority of the 16th–17th century Latin books belonged to the genres situated on the boundary between speaking and writing – not only occasional literature, but also academic literature (lectures, theses for defence, etc).

As the strictly controlled written Latin crossed the boundary into the spoken language, the *lingua vulgaris* that reigned supreme there could not retain its phonetic identity. Professor Liauksminas of Vilnius Academy, bearing in mind the variegated audience of Vilnius Academy (it comprised Lithuanians, Ruthenians, Poles, Germans, Swedes, etc.), stated: “As regards the pronunciation and rendering of sounds, [...] we do not have a firm rule. The Latin language has its own pronunciation, but it is differently pronounced by different nations. Thus, let each nation adhere to the tradition of their country”¹⁰.

Nonetheless, the increase of the “third estate” compelled to take into account the reader who was ignorant of Latin. Venceslaus Agripa Lithuanus, a Lutheran, trans-

⁶ *Akty, otmosiashchiesia k istorii Zapadnoi Rossii*, T. IV, Sankt–Peterburg, Nr. 4, 1851, 5.

⁷ *Recepta z nieba na choroby dwoiakiego ięzyka, wyjęta z S. Ewangelięy ...* przez w.x. Michała Ginkiewicza..., Vilnae: Typis Academiae Soc. Iesu, 1646, fol. [B1 verso]. Cf. *Rituale Romanum Pauli V Pon. Max. ivssv editvm*, Romae: Ex Typographia Reuerendae Camerae Apostolicae, 1614, 198.

⁸ On the use of Latin in Muslim diplomacy cf. D. Kołodziejczyk, „Łacina w dyplomacji islamskiej: Imperium osmańskie”, in: *Łacina jako język elit*, red. J. Axer, Warszawa: Obta/Wydawnictwo DiG, 2004, 395–398.

⁹ *Relacye nuncyuszów apostolskich i innych osób o Polsce od roku 1548 do 1690*, t. 1, Berlin – Poznań: Księgarnia B. Behra, 1864, 171 (nuncio Ruggieri to Pius V, 1586).

¹⁰ *Praxis oratoria*, in: Ž. Liauksminas, *Rinktiniai raštai* = S. Lauxmin, *Opera selecta*, Vilnius: Mintis, 2004, 116.

lated the Latin sermons by Johannes Brennius, a Württemberg theologian, into Polish in 1588. In the title-page of his translation he emphasises that he translated them for those “who do not know Latin”¹¹. Jesuit Marcin Smiglecki had to write his treatise in moral theology “Concerning Usury” in Polish, because those who signed usurious contracts were mostly ignorant of Latin. The audience also clearly defined the length of the book: in order to make it more useful, it was left short (70 pages), because “short writings are more willingly perused”¹².

Reformation laid theological foundations for the desacralisation of Latin and prophesied its death. Aldas from Memel (Klaipėda), a Prussian Lithuanian (*Lithvo-Borussus*), asserted in the dedication of one of his hymn-books (1612) that the language of each nation is dear to it, whereas the heavenly Father is the creator of all languages; thus, all languages are also equally dear to Him. Thus, the Lithuanian language is no less dear to the Lord than Latin¹³.

The publication in Cyrillic started in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania 38 years earlier than it did in Muscovy and 57 years before it did in Ukraine (Lvov). In the 16th century, the number of publications in Cyrillic

was five times greater than in Muscovy and three times greater than in Ukraine¹⁴. The Ruthenian writings of the Chancery of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and its courts was not directly linked to the confessional identity; therefore, Leonas Sapiega, the Chancellor of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, a converted Catholic, could still say that the Ruthenian text of the Statute was written in “his own” tongue whereas the future Jesuit Jokūbas Laviškis attended the school of “Ruthenian” language in Vilnius around 1572, and his only scruples concerned the continuous swearing in Ruthenian of the fellow pupils¹⁵.

With the acceptance of the Latin baptism, the prestige of the Ruthenian alphabet started to decline. Thus, in 1494, Jonas, the parish priest of Oža, asked the Grand Duke of Lithuania Aleksandras to renew the privileges of his church issued by Kazimieras Jogailaitis “for the sake of greater reliability and soundness”, because “those letters are written down in Ruthenian and on paper”. On the 3rd of June, this request was granted¹⁶.

On the other hand, Ruthenians of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania soon incorporated the Cyrillic characters into the Renaissance framework of values. Their exceptional status started to be based on the

¹¹ *Ewanielia od Jana świętego Apostola i Ewanielisty napisana pultorustu Kazaniem przez Jana Brencyusa [...] przez Wacława Agryppę [...]* Dla tych którzy Łacińskiego języka nie umieją iest przelożona. W Wilnie: W Drukarni Jana Karcana, 1588, title.

¹² *O Lichwie y trzech przednieyszych kontraktach: wyderkowym, czyńszowym, y Towarzystwa Kupieckiego, nauka krótka*. Pisana przez Marcina Smigleckiego S. I. [...], Wilno: druk. Akad. Wileńskiej S. I., 1596, f. 2 verso.

¹³ „Lithuana grata aequae est atque Latina Deo”; in Regina Kożeniauskienė, *XVI–XVIII amžiaus prakalbos*, 230.

¹⁴ Георгий Голенченко, „Белорусская и восточнославянская печатная книга (некоторые аспекты компаративной типологии)“, in: *Kultura książki ziem wschodniego i południowego pogranicza Polski (XVI–XX wiek)*, 32.

¹⁵ *Vocationum liber: Unicus Universae Societatis Iesu vocationum liber autobiographicus Poloniae provinciae proprius, 1574–1580*, ed. Józef Warszawski, Romae: Isola del Liri, 1966, 146 ([33] Lavinus).

¹⁶ *Codex diplomaticus Ecclesiae Cathedralis necnon Dioeceseos Vilnensis*, vol. 1: 1387–1507, ed. Jan Fijałek and Władysław Semkowicz, Kraków: Nakładem Polskiej Akademii Umiejętności, 1948, Nr. 415.

link with the Greek classical world rather than traced down to St. Cyril, the Apostle of the Slavs, as in the Orthodox countries. Nicolaus Husovianus in his “Song on the Bison’s Appearance” wrote in 1521/22:

I learned many ancient things from
Ruthenian books,
Their language is expressed through the
characters of the Greek alphabet.
A long time ago, this nation used them for its
needs
And perfectly joined its native sounds in it.¹⁷

The difference between languages was for a long time perceived as the difference between different letters. The Grand Duke Aleksandras himself, when he transmits urgent information on how Trans-Volga Tartars invaded the Lithuanian lands, hopes that there is somebody at court who knows these letters (*characteres Ruthenicis cognosceret*), because the news would be late if one had to translate them into Latin¹⁸. The old Chancery of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania easily transposed the Polish text into Belarussian. However, beginning with the 17th century, many important old texts (testaments, privileges vel sim.) were actualised in the opposite way – by transcribing them in Latin characters.

The art of reading Russian characters could come useful in what might ap-

pear an unusual way. In 1515, Vaclovas Čirka, a Lithuanian student, had to bring the king Sigismund the Old a secret letter from Rome, which was written “partim ruthenicis, partim ciffratis literis” – partly in Cyrillic, partly in cipher. The Ruthenian script was supposed to be an easier version of the cipher. Čirka, when he brought the letter, had to read the Cyrillic part of the letter to the King who did not know Ruthenian¹⁹.

That the Cyrillic alphabet, akin to the Greek language, no longer satisfies the new religious, political, and cultural realities of the country became abundantly clear after the Jagiellonian dynasty became extinguished. Then the Cyrillic interposed between the legal system of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Grand Duke. In 1576, Augustine Rotundus expressed his compassion to the fact that Stephen Batory could not read the laws of Lithuania in the way he could those of Poland, because the former were written “in the Ruthenian letters and language”²⁰. Moreover, in the second half of the 17th century, even the Greek Catholic (Uniate) liturgical texts written in the Church Slavonic were sometimes transcribed in the Latin alphabet. Finally, in the second half of the 18th century, the old books of the Lithuanian State Archive were transliterated in the Latin alphabet. This was the result of the conviction of the universal character of the Latin alphabet, as well as of the increasing consciousness of the European identity of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, and the

¹⁷ Nicolai Husoviani *De statura feritate ac venatione bisonis carmen*, [Cracovia, 1523] v. 73–76: *Multa ego Roxanis legi antiquissima libris, / Quorum sermonem graeca elementa notant, / Quae sibi gens quondam proprios ascivit in usus / Et patrios apte miscuit ipsa sonos*; in Mikalojus Husovianas, *Raštai*, Vilnius: LLTI, 2007, 19.

¹⁸ *Acta Alexandri Regis Poloniae, magni ducis Lithuaniae, etc. (1501–1506)*, = *Akta Aleksandra króla polskiego, wielkiego księcia litewskiego i t. d. (1501–1506)*, ed. Fryderik Papée, (*Monumenta Medii aevi res gestas Poloniae illustrantia*, XIX), Cracoviae, 1927, Nr. 62, 67.

¹⁹ *Acta Tomiciana*, vol. III, Nr. cdLxxx, 352.

²⁰ Augustinas Rotundas, „Laiškas Lenkijos karaliui ir Lietuvos didžiajam kunigaikščiui Steponui“, in: *Šešioliktojo amžiaus raštija*, sud. A. Samulionis, R. Jurgelėnaitė, D. Kuolys, Vilnius: Pradai (*Senoji Lietuvos literatūra* 5), 2000, 280.

Latin characters constituted a symbol of this conviction. This fact was attested by the Jan Protasovič who lived in a remote Belarussian province and who, at the beginning of the 17th century, wrote:

Nikostrata invented Latin words,
But these letters are used to write down different languages;
Therefore, we all who live in Europe
Mark our things in that script.²¹

²¹ J. Protasowicz, *Inventores Rerum*, Wrocław, 1973, 73.

These are just a few features of the status and fate of the holy alphabets and languages in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Nevertheless, they attest that the sacred languages were intertwined with the everyday ones, and the everyday languages drew their dignity from their real or supposed links with the sacred ones. Finally, the alphabets that conveyed the former and the latter changed places, ultimately attesting to the dominance of the Latin alphabet as the symbol of the European identity of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.

ŠVENTOSIOS RAIDĖS BARBARIŠKOSE TAUTOSE

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S a n t r a u k a

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