

Lithuanian and Latin

Dr. ANTANAS KLIMAS

Dr. ANTANAS KLIMAS, author of numerous articles, completed his graduate studies at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, where he was an instructor in German. Currently he is an assistant professor of German at the University of Rochester, N. Y.

During the age of Romanticism, many Lithuanian patriots believed that the Lithuanians are descendants of the ancient Romans. A theory was devised that the whole Lithuanian nation was the offshot of a splinter group of Romans who fled internal strife in Rome itself and, around the beginning of the Christian era or even earlier, ended up on the shores of the Baltic Sea and along the Nemunas River. They liked the country and settled there permanently. In time their language changed and became... Lithuanian.

The principal reason for the promulgation of this theory was the national pride of the Lithuanians, who had just (1795) lost their political independence after having been for several centuries (ca. 1200—1795) a great and powerful kingdom. Although politically it was Russia that occupied Lithuania, culturally it was Polish influence that was creeping into all aspects of life, especially in the schools and churches, the newspapers and books. The Lithuanian aristocracy and intelligentsia were rapidly polonized, since Poland was also occupied by Russia and this common fate drew the leading classes of the two formerly independent and powerful nations closer and closer together. The Poles had become Christians about 400 years earlier than the Lithuanians, and by the time the Lithuanians too were Christianized the Poles had already developed their national cultural institutions to a high standard. Most of the Polish aristocrats and intellectuals, and later even the Polish masses, regarded the Lithuanian language as inferior to their own. This was similar to the situation in Germany, where French and Latin were considered much superior to German.¹

After Herder, the German writer, spread the idea that one language is as good as another and that any nation, large or small, deserves to be honored just as much as any other nation, a great patriotic movement sprang up in Europe, and especially in Central, Eastern and Northern Europe. The younger generation of each nation's intellectuals "returned home" — they took up the study of the history, literature, folklore and language of their own people. This was true also in Lithuania.² The glorification of Lithuania's past was an important feature of this patriotic upsurge. Since documented Lithuanian history does not begin until after 1000 A.D., the Lithuanian patriots invented a whole new dynasty of Lithuanian kings purportedly descended directly from the Roman settlers mentioned above. The Lithuanian language thus became a younger "sister" or a "daughter" of Latin. They would quote such a sentence as the Latin **Tres vires iugum trahunt** (Three men are pulling a yoke), and point out — truthfully — that it bears a close resemblance to the modern Lithuanian **Trys vyrai jungą traukia**. The cardinal numbers — **unus, duo, tres, quattuor, quinque** (Latin), **vienas, du, trys, keturi, penki** (Lithuanian) — also bear a very great similarity.

It is true that both Latin and Lithuanian have preserved many archaic features in their phonology, morphology and word formation. Still, such examples as the two given above show no closer a relationship between Latin and Lithuanian than exists between any two Indo-European languages that have preserved such archaic features. Actually, all the relationships and similarities that exist between Latin and Lithuanian date back to the time when the two languages were still merely dialects of the common Indo-European mother tongue. There are hardly any distinctive common features that can be ascribed to Lithuanian and Latin alone, to the exclusion of all the other Indo-European tongues.

In vocabulary, there are certain words that are common to Latin and one group of other Indo-European languages and certain other words that are shared by Latin and another group of related languages.³ The **ignis** (fire) has cognates in the Lithuanian **ugnis** and the Indo-Iranian **agnih**, while the Latin **aqua** (water) has a cognate in the Gothic **ahva** and

practically nowhere else.⁴

As has been mentioned, Latin and Lithuanian are both languages that have preserved many archaic features. It is difficult to judge which is the more archaic and therefore the more important for comparative Indo-European studies. This much is clear, however: Latin is a dead language, known to us only from documents, while Lithuanian is still very much alive,⁵ full of dialectal variety, changing and adapting itself to every requirement of the modern age. Thus where Latin may be more valuable in research on the Greek, Celtic, Germanic and — of course — Italic (Romance) languages, Lithuanian is more valuable for the entire Indo-European field, especially in studies of accentuation, syntax, dialectology, linguistic geography, etc. Lithuanian is also very helpful in studies of the Indo-European future tense,⁶ And where Latin is dead, the data of Lithuanian can be checked and rechecked at will, since it is alive.

NOTES:

- 1 Frederick the Great once said: "German is too diffuse, and among higher society one speaks French. A few schoolmasters and professors are not able to give the German language the fineness and the nuances of meaning that it can acquire only in highly elevated society." (Letter to Voltaire, written in Potsdam on July 24, 1775.)
- 2 See Dr. V. Mačiūnas, *Lituanistinis sąjūdis Lietuvoje XIX a. pradžioje*. Kaunas, 1939.
- 3 This phenomenon can be found in almost all Indo-European languages, not merely in Latin.
- 4 See L. R. Palmer, *The Latin Language*, London, 1954, especially p. 28 ff. This is an excellent work on Latin, but the author seems insufficiently informed on the progress of research in Baltic and Slavic studies. He still uses the expression "Balto-Slavonic," which has been abandoned by Indo-European scholars in Germany, France and the U.S.A. Today the Baltic branch of the Indo-European languages is treated as separate from the Slavic Branch.
- 5 It is very interesting to note that many West European linguists, especially Germans, considered Lithuanian to be a dying language. We read in Meyers' *Konversationslexikon*: "Lithuanian, Latvian and Old Prussian, which is now dead, form the Baltic branch, which is close to the Slavic. Today Lithuanian is still spoken in the northern part of the Prussian province of Gumbinè, as well as in the Russian provinces of Kaunas and Vilnius; *however, it is dying out* [stirbt jedoch aus]" (italics mine — A. K.). Meyers, *Kleines Konversationslexikon*, 7th ed., Leipzig and Vienna, 1908; Vol. IV, p. 448.
- 6 Lithuanian has preserved the so-called sigmatic future tense. The Lithuanian eisiu (I shall go, I will go) is thus much older than any future-tense formation in Latin, which gave up this Indo-European formation and substituted innovations for it. This sigmatic future tense occurs in Indo-Iranian (Sanskrit) and in Greek. In the most recent contribution to this problem, Prof. W. R. Schmalstieg of the University of Kentucky says that the "s" itself is "certainly an Indo-European inheritance." (William R. Schmalstieg, *The Vocalism of the Lithuanian Sigmatic Future*, "Slavic and East European Journal," Vol. XVI (1958), pp. 120 ff.