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A NOTE ON THE OLD PRUSSIAN EPIGRAM

Abstract. The Old Prussian epigram was probably written by a Bavarian scribe to whom the text was dictated by a native speaker of Prussian.

Keywords: Old Prussian; Basel epigram.

Diego Ardoino has recently (2016) discussed the Old Prussian epigram, rejecting my interpretation (Kortlandt 1998a; 1998b; 1998c; also 2009, 215–222). His article appears to be based entirely on Jos Schaecken’s meticulous philological analysis (2006), which he does not even mention. He claims that my interpretation is based on three assumptions:

- “1) Since the language attested to by the [epigram] (especially from a morphosyntactic point of view) is rather different from the one attested to by other Old Prussian linguistic monuments, the [epigram] was probably not written by a native speaker but by a foreigner to whom the micro-text was dictated by a native speaker.
- 2) The [epigram] was written by the same hand that wrote both the ‘talking’ drawing and the message in the banner, ‘*ihs ich leid*’ (namely, by a German speaker).
- 3) The copy of Oresme’s *questiones* at the end of which the [epigram] was inserted originates from the University of Prague.”

Ardoino calls the second premise “certainly spurious” and the first assumption “an attractive one, albeit rather superfluous and somewhat pretentious”, while the third premise “remains unproven” (2016, 18). He maintains that the language of the text “might indeed represent a peripheric variety of Old Prussian otherwise unknown to us or even a form of mixed language” (ibidem).

In fact, I have argued that the language of the Old Prussian epigram is not very different from the language of the Catechisms and that the differences point to a scribe who was not a native speaker of the language:

1. case forms seem to be mixed up in **Kayle rekyse** for **Kayles rekye*,
2. the paragogic **-e** in **rekyse**, **labonache**, **thewelyse**,
3. the spelling **-ch-** for *-s in **labonache**,
4. the umlaut in **poyte** and **doyte**,
5. the vowel reduction in the endings of **koyte**, **nykoyte**, **poyte**, **doyte**,
6. the interpunction of the second line suggests that it was dictated to the scribe.

Ardoino does not offer an explanation for any of these highly peculiar features. Instead, he claims without adducing any evidence that the text is “almost certainly a proverb, saying or idiomatic expression” that the scribe “out of an uncontrollable urge and without thinking” wrote down (2016, 15). In his view, this “instinctive and unconscious immediacy” suggests that the language of the text was the scribe’s mother tongue.

After a careful and detailed examination of the manuscript and a thorough discussion of earlier views, Jos Schaeken concludes that the Prussian epigram and the German text **ich leid** in the accompanying drawing were probably written by the same hand (2006, 338). Without any discussion or argumentation, Ardoino calls this view “certainly spurious”, claiming that the handwriting “undoubtedly differs” and that the epigram “was inscribed at a later date” (2016, 18). Even if Schaeken’s view is not correct, this does not affect my argumentation for the fact that the scribe of the epigram was not a native speaker of the Prussian language, see above. I have suggested that the scribe was Bavarian because this is the area where the apocope in *ich leid* was early and which probably supplied the variety of German that was dominant in the University of Prague. Without adducing any evidence, Ardoino claims that dialectal traits in the German text (which remain unspecified) point to a place of origin in southern Baden, which the apocope reached toward the end of the 14th century. He also calls into question the fact that the original manuscript came from Prague, for which there is conclusive evidence (cf. Schaeken 2006, 339f.).

PASTABA DĖL PRŪSŲ EPIGRAMOS

Santrauka

Prūsų epigramą greičiausiai parašė bavarų raštininkas, kuriam tekstą diktavo gimtakalbis prūsas.

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