

INVESTIGANDARUM RERUM PROSPECTUS

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LATIN AS THE LANGUAGE OF THE ELITES

1. The Centre for Studies on the Classical Tradition in Poland and East-Central Europe was established at University of Warsaw in 1991, upon my initiative. The goal was to create an academic community within which the issues of Greek, Roman and Byzantine heritage in this region of Europe would, in a natural way, become part of interdisciplinary studies in the humanities to an extent that is hard to achieve in traditional institutions dealing with studies of antiquity. Describing the role of the ancient heritage in our past, and seeking ways of identifying live components of that heritage in our present, primarily requires us to find partners from outside our own research discipline, and also from beyond our own historical and national tradition.

One of the interdisciplinary research projects carried out at the Centre in recent years, is the program called “Latin as the language of the elites”, which resulted in the publication of an extensive volume (*Łacina jako język elit*, ed. Jerzy AXER, Warsaw, OBTA–Wydawnictwo DiG, 2004). I want to point out here that our aim was not to confirm the banal statement that it was the elites who used Latin in the modern period. The title I have given this book is not meant to recall this simple truth. It implicitly contains the question of how Latin functioned as the language of the elites: in what circumstances was it used?; what relations did it enter with “living” languages?; what was the audience for Latin-language statements?; what community—if any—was created by referring to the language of the Romans? A serious attempt at replying to these questions requires a renewed approach to the sources and research methods.

Researchers’ attitude to Latin-language sources has been anachronistic: ranging between disparagement originating from the Romantic spirit and verbal approval of Latin as a “sign of things Polish.” Meanwhile, innovative research on the role of Latin as a means of social communication organized by the elites first of all requires the right community for such studies. The fundamental condition is that the historian’s method has to include issues of theory of text, and the philologist’s method—skills involving criticism of the source.

This volume is not uniform in style or method, the individual texts have seemingly different addressees: in some cases, experts in the field practiced by the writer, in others—humanities scholars with broader interests who nevertheless look at things from the point

of view of their own discipline; in some cases what we have is an account concerning the problems of communication between disciplines.

What I was aiming for, in fact, was a different kind of uniformity: as mentioned earlier, this volume constitutes an attempt at presenting a “research questionnaire” for discussion, built on the assumption that Latin-language sources to the history of modern culture can document such aspects of this culture’s history which escape the attention of scholars due to disregard of the autonomous issues presented by those sources.

2. At the focus of our interests was the First Republic of Poland: its political system, institutions, society, regional specificity. The papers covering these issues have been grouped into two sections. The first one concerns those parts of the Republic that lie within present-day Poland (Part I: *Respublica Polonorum*); the second one—regions beyond today’s eastern border of Poland (Part II: *Between Slavia Latina and Slavia Orthodoxa*). Such a division is only seemingly anachronistic. In fact, I wanted to propose a radical change from the Polonocentric point of view that traditionally dominates in research on the role of Latin in the historical culture of the Region.

I believed it would be a very important context to present the views of scholars representing the nations that co-formed the Republic, but which today have their own independent states and refer back to their separate cultural traditions and historical memories: this means Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus. Such a division was also the result of an interest in the role of Latin in the territory forming the borderland between Latin Slavdom (*Slavia Latina, Romana*) and eastern Slavdom (*Slavia Orthodoxa, Byzantina, Graeca*).¹ We also managed to obtain a diagnosis concerning the culture of Croatia, which extended our “monitoring” of the border line between the two Slavdoms.

In Part III: *Diplomatic contacts with the non-Latin world*, my aim was not to offer any broader diagnosis of the role of Latin in Polish diplomacy, but only to sound out this least-studied area, and to supplement the reflections concerning the border between the two Slavdoms with information on the role of Latin in contacts with Russia and the Ottoman Empire. I also found encouragement in the fact that historians’ works sporadically present remarks on the differences between the Latin versions of treaties that the Republic concluded with these states and versions in other languages. I have added an *Appendix* on the role of Latin in Polish–Spanish contacts—contacts with the opposite limit of *Respublica Litteraria Europaea*.

I gained another context for the book’s main theme by inviting Françoise Waquet, author of the most weighty studies on the role of Latin in the modern culture of the West to prepare two studies on the socio-cultural aspects of the functioning of Latin—an issue hardly touched in Polish studies. This was a good choice. The author published a book

¹ Cf. the discussion on these concepts, published in the volume *Konteksty: Między Slavia Latina i Slavia Orthodoxa*, ed. J. AXER, Warszawa, OBTA, 1995 (Łacina w Polsce: Zeszyty Naukowe, 1–2). The ideological contexts of selecting different terms to describe the border between the “two Slavdoms” is presented by S. GRACIOTTI, *Le due Slavie: problemi di terminologia e problemi di idee*, *Ricerche Slavistiche*, 45 (1998), 1–79 (abstract in Polish).

on the issue in 1998 that subsequently (2001) gained wide publicity in its English-language version, and inspired a discussion on the role of Latin and its elite-forming role (understood in both a positive and a negative sense) that carried on far beyond the community of specialists.² This is why, after we had finished work on the volume, we attempted a similar discussion within our group, slightly tongue-in-cheek. Remarks on what resulted from this can be found at the end of Part IV: *The role of Latin in the culture of the West*.

3. In the group of texts on the language of values and the political language of the First Polish Republic (Urszula Augustyniak, Marek A. Janicki, Ewa J. Głębińska), Latin-language expressions and writings have been treated on equal terms with Polish-language ones. This is great progress compared to the general practice in which they were usually passed over. The database created by the writer of the first of these papers could also be a starting point for a future researcher: “from the point of view of the usefulness of semantic studies for historians, the most interesting thing is to observe the changes in the relations between political terms used the most frequently to describe the state, as they occur in political writings.”

Separate examination of Latin-language sources could, it appears, help with studies on the distinctness of the individual provinces of the historical Republic of Poland representing different traditions. Jolanta Choińska-Mika considers the elites of the once autonomous Mazovia from this point of view; Witold Szczuczko has gathered documentation on areas dominated by a German-speaking population (Royal Prussia and Gdańsk).

It also seems sensible to study separately the role of Latin in Polish-language sources where Latin elements constitute just a fraction of the text. Such interesting types of sources, never before studied from this point of view, are considered by Anna Skolimowska and Marek Kunicki-Goldfinger (travel journals) and Joanna Partyka (so-called *silvae rerum*). Anna Axer presents a methodological project, proposing a classification system for Latin interjections in mixed-language texts.

An attempted exemplification of the effectiveness of such reading of sources which assumes that Latin interjections in a Polish text are an important component of the persuasive strategy, can be found in the analysis of Hieronim Radziejowski’s oration (Jerzy and Anna Axer). A different experiment is carried out by Anna Skolimowska—based on the material of Ioannes Dantiscus’ Latin letters from a single year (1537), she examines whether Erasmus of Rotterdam’s *Adagia* can help uncover a layer of meaning that has become illegible to today’s reader. This part of the book also contains my own hypothesis that Latin (or its mixture with Polish) comprised the second language of the Republic’s political nation, next to the ethnic tongue. If this hypothesis is accepted as being true, it opens up prospects for a different reading of and commenting on orations and letters as well as occasional literature from the 16th to 18th centuries.

² F. WAQUET, *Le latin ou l’empire du signe*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1998; *Latin or the Empire of a Sign*, transl. J. HOWE, London–New York, Verso, 2001.

Within the stereotype in which researchers of the historical Republic's culture are educated, there is the view that the second half of the 18th century reduced the role of Latin in social communication to a minimum. My hypothesis on the role of Latin as a component of the "technical language" of the nobility's identity, as mentioned earlier, assumes that the language of the Romans continued to be very important for defining the new Polish identity during the decline of the Polish state. This seems to be confirmed by the observations on Latin translations of poetry from King Stanisław's times (Ewa J. Głębińska) and on the function of Latin inscriptions in the program of Stanisław August's political reforms (Barbara Milewska-Ważbińska, Jerzy Axer). These can be a premise for further research.

4. Part II of the book proves that to Lithuanian, Ukrainian and Belarusian researchers, Latin-language sources provide confirmation of their own separate political and cultural traditions (Jūratė Kiaupienė, Natalia Yakovenko, Zhanna Karotkaya and Uladzimir Karotki). Excellent material for reflections on the role of texts written in Latin in creating a new canon of national literature of the post-Soviet countries (and on the attitude of Polish researchers to this trend) can be found in the career of Nicolaus Hussovianus' *Song about the Bison*. That is why I have devoted a separate study, prepared in association with our Belarusian colleagues, to a discussion of this work.

The texts of Mikhail W. Dmitrev and Hieronim Grala comprise an interesting dialogue on the role of Latin in Russian culture. One can see that a very limited set of the same sources can lead to different conclusions, and the issue of the role of Latin turns out to be an interesting gloss to the history of the Russian imperial tradition.

Writing on the situation in Croatia, Joanna Rapacka emphasizes that (similarly to Poland) Latin played the role of a culture code there, contributed to the development of a true cultural community and became a constitutive factor for the modern Croatian nation.

Both the first and the second parts of the book open with my studies on methodology. First, I consider the methodology situation in studies on Latin-language sources of the modern period, conducted within various disciplines, and I present my views on the chances for creating an interdisciplinary community that is essential for the development of such studies. In the introduction to Part II, I expand on the status of neo-Latin studies within the existing organization of research and teaching. I also consider the relations between neo-Latin studies and disciplines dealing with national culture.

5. Studies on Latin as the language of diplomacy (Part III of the volume) form a kind of addendum to the book's main theme. The usefulness of looking into the linguistic shape of a document and the role of Latin in this context is shown on the basis of very special material—the relations between the Republic and non-Latin countries. Islamic diplomacy and Polish–Turkish treaties are considered by Dariusz Kołodziejczyk, Polish–

Moldovan contacts—by Rafał Jaworski, the diplomacy of early-modern Moscow—by Hieronim Grala. These authors did not aim to prove that Latin was used particularly intensively in the diplomacy of non-Latin countries, but to show its place in the multilingual “diplomatic diction” of these countries, variable over time, and also to show the nature of the “non-symmetry” of texts of treaties written in Latin and in other languages.

Ryszard Skowron’s search to determine the role of Latin in documentation of Polish–Spanish relations from the death of Sigismund Augustus to the abdication of John Casimir, has been included in this part of the book due to my own perversity: neither Polish nor Spanish researchers of these relations have ever attached any importance to the Latin part of the sources when studying this period. Jan Kieniewicz’s note on *Corpus Diplomaticum*, currently being prepared for publication and containing the most important documents illustrating Polish–Spanish relations, shows how the role of Latin-language testimonies in this group of sources varied over time.

6. The studies of Françoise Waquet show a different view on the role of Latin as the language of the elites in Europe from that which we suggest when reading sources related to the culture of the Polish Republic and the nations that are its heirs. It seems that in the special political, ethnic and social circumstances of our region of Europe, this role really was different. However, even more clearly than the difference in the real social function of Latin, what we see here is the researcher’s attitude towards the subject of her studies—different from what we have been used to in our part of Europe. There is a different thinking here on the role of the elites and on the value of traditional education, a different attitude to the relation between national identity and membership in the Catholic Church; in other words—this is the difference between the historical experience and political practice of Poland, Ukraine, Belarus and Lithuania in the 19th and 20th centuries on one hand, and post-revolution France on the other. Perhaps to explain these differences, it would be worth reaching even deeper: to the Medieval competition between French as the international language of the knighthood and Latin as the language of the clergy.

From the author’s viewpoint, the main accusation against Latin is its power to exclude various social groups and communities from sharing in culture, whereas in Poland, present-day defenders of Latin are more inclined to point out its role as the language of the historical noblemen’s democracy (and subsequently the language of faithfulness to one’s own tradition, used by the persecuted and disinherited).

7. To summarize: The proposal that Latin-language sources and Latin fragments of multilingual sources should be studied as a separate category of testimony has resulted in a rich volume of studies, though most of the writers did not assume this point of view as the basis for their own observations. Paradoxically, my thesis as to the “ownerless” character of these issues has been substantiated; yet again, the difficulties of interdisciplinary dialogue have been confirmed as well.

Collaboration between philologists and historians will be of decisive importance for further progress in these studies. The volume is in fact the result of such collaboration,

but it is primarily a call for its intensification. Constant collaboration leading to negotiated joint positions, and not just presentations of one's own field and interests, is the condition of successful continuation of this type of studies. Europe's uniting, which creates a new border that is nearly exactly the same as the border separating *Slavia Latina* from *Slavia Orthodoxa*, the border of the Latin tradition, encourages such studies. Studying and understanding the role that Latin played in the formation of modern societies in the eastern part of the European cultural community, in developing its unity and strengthening its diversity, is an ambitious task.

As for me, carrying out the research program and subsequent work on the book have strengthened my belief that there is sense in demanding that greater attention be paid to the Latin part of sources pertaining to the history of the Republic, and that separate studies should be conducted in this field.

I think it could be cognitively promising to assume that within the statements of individual representatives of the noblemen's nation, and within the whole set of sources documenting their views (together with the reaction of their contemporaries to those views), all writings in Latin should be treated as a separate "text". The Latin fragments at different levels of reading—reading of a single document as well as whole sequences of documents—can create a separate semantic layer that highlights, summarizes and uncovers the punch line of the testimony. This layer often hides the heart of the matter.

The focus of our interest, as I have mentioned, was the First Polish Republic. We did, however, search for the proper context for our studies, and it soon became obvious that the most important comparative material came from analyses of the Hungarian situation. Comparing the situation of nations that were part of the Crown of St. Stephen with the situation of the nations making up the First Republic of Poland by means of studying the scope and way in which Latin was used, could be justifiable. Latin is shown to have had a special function in the multiple-nation and multiple-denomination community created by the Hungarians. In the program text about Latin as the language of the noblemen's nation, I suggested that this community was the most interesting analogy to the role of Latin in the Commonwealth dominated by Poles. A more in-depth study of the scope of similarities right up to the 19th century is an ambitious task for the future.