

MAREK STACHOWSKI
Jagiellonian University in Krakow
stachowski.marek@gmail.com

MIECHOWITA'S KNOWLEDGE OF EAST EUROPEAN LANGUAGES (MAINLY HUNGARIAN, LITHUANIAN AND TATAR) BASED ON HIS *TRACTATUS DE DUABUS SARMATIIS* (1517)

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Abstract

Very few people know that a possibility of reconstructing protolanguages or protoforms was probably first suggested as early as in the 16th century by Miechowita while discussing the origin of the name of *Hungarians* and that of *Yugra*. Miechowita's "Treatise on the two Sarmatias" was once an extremely important source of knowledge of the geography and history of East Europe. Although much was written on its significance in correcting more or less unlikely information concerning these subjects his linguistic material was actually ignored. The aim of this study is to examine what was known about East European languages in the early sixteenth century.

Miechowita (~ *Miechovita*), a quasi-Latin form, is used as a shortened version of the various names for *Maciej Miechowita* = *Maciej z Miechowa* = *Maciej of Miechów* = *Mathias* (or *Matthias*) *Mechovens* = *Mathias de Miechow* (or *de Miechov* = *de Miechou*) = *Mathias a* (or *à*) *Miechou* (or *Michou*), and so on. As his original surname was actually *Karpiga* (or in the Latinized spelling: *Carpiga*) sometimes the full form, *Maciej Karpiga z Miechowa*, is also found. However, he himself did not put his surname *Karpiga* on the title pages of his books.¹

¹ In Russian the adjective *Mechovskij* is commonly used as his surname. The form **Miechowski* was, however, never used either by Miechowita himself or in other Polish editions – not surprisingly because his surname was *Karpiga*, not **Miechowski*. The addition of *z Miechowa* 'of Miechów' functioned as an onomastic specifier similar to the Arabic *nisba*.

Maciej Miechowita (1457–1523) was a Polish Renaissance scholar whose *Tractatus de duabus Sarmatiis Asiana et Europiana et de contentis in eis* (Cracow 1517) was the first accurate description of East European countries and nations in which certain ancient fabrications (like griffins protecting gold seams in Sweden) and incorrect information (like the existence of Hyperborean and Riphean Mountains) are emended or simply debunked and invalidated. It is no wonder, then, that the treatise was reprinted more than once, both as a separate booklet and as part of the anthology, *Novus orbis regionum et insularum veteribus incognitarum*, compiled by Johann Huttich, Simon Grynaeus, and published several times by Johann Herwagen d. Ä. in Basel, e.g. in 1537 (with “Mathiae a Miechov de Sarmatia Asiana at que [!] Europea lib[ri] II” on pp. 484–531)² and in 1582 (with “Mathiae à Michou de Sarmathia [!] Asiana atque Europea lib[ri] II” on pp. 423–466). Not only did the spelling of Miechowita’s name and the title of his work vary in different editions, but certain information and formulations also lacked consistency.

G. J. Stipa makes an important observation based on the 1555 edition:

[...] [D]er polnische Humanist Matthias de Miechow [...] [kam] ganz unabhängig zu neuen Entdeckungen über die Beziehungen zwischen den Ungarn und den Ugriern. [...] Rasch verband er den Namen der *Jugri* mit den verschiedenen Varianten der slawischen Benennung für die Ungarn, die auf altrussisch *ugre* zurückgehen[,] und rekonstruierte als Namen für die Ungarn die Form **Hugri*, woraus *Hungari* geworden sei. (Stipa 1990: 32)

This is, of course, particularly significant in the context of the history of linguistic thought because this means that, as early as the beginning of the 16th century (first edition: 1517), Miechowita arrived at the idea of comparing two phonetic forms and reconstructing a protoform that was no longer spoken – indeed, this can be considered the beginning of the comparative method and protolinguistic reconstruction.

Admittedly, I am not in a position to locate this formulation in the original 1517 edition of Miechowita’s treatise *exactly*. Nevertheless, the opinions adduced below (sub *Hungarians*) suggest that Stipa’s interpretation was in fact correct, the more so because the forms ⟨*Hugri*⟩ and ⟨*Hugui*⟩ seem not to have been attested elsewhere so they must have been introduced as an explanatory link between *Hungari* and *Yugri*. Thus, it seems that Miechowita did indeed invent the comparative method.

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In any event, a comparison of the full text of all the editions would be illuminating, and this is also true for the numerous translations and adaptations of the *Tractatus* (for instance, the first German translation appeared in 1518, i.e. only ten months after the *edicio princeps* [see Barycz 1972: 5]; the first Italian adaptation by Alberto Pigghe Campense in 1523; the first Polish translation in 1535, the first Italian translation in 1561;

² Cited after Pietrzyk 1993: 59.

the first Dutch translation in 1563, and so on).³ As Miechowita's *Tractatus* concerns various lands, peoples and languages it is certainly not enough only to understand Latin if a reliable edition is to be produced. Rather, a group of specialists should edit the text as well as make a comparison of all the editions, translations and adaptations, together with the explanations, commentaries and evaluations.

Miechowita's main aim was to describe the geography and explain the history of East Europe. Linguistic data were solely additional information adduced from time to time with no claim to completeness, and his material is not sensational from the perspective of today's linguistics. Nevertheless, the work shows what was new and what was already known, as far as East European languages were concerned, in the 15th and 16th centuries. While the geographical and historical information was collected by Miechowita mainly from written sources, his linguistic material must have resulted from his contact with informants from Russia or Tatarstan, i.e. Miechowita actually conducted, in a manner of speaking, fieldwork because no linguistic publications on Tatar or the other languages were available to him. His informants were probably more often than not either fugitives or prisoners of war.

The greatest part of his linguistic materials are Tatar words and short phrases. Their phonetics sometimes points to various informants with different linguistic backgrounds. Thus, the pronunciation with *-o-*, in lieu of the expected *-ā-* (= *â* in Modern Turkish spelling), presumably goes back to a Persian or a Tatar source, as is the case, for instance, with *ḏahi illo illoloh* for *lâ 'ilâha 'illâ l-Lâh* 'there is no god but God'. Additionally, Miechowita now and then added his own comments and observations. As previously noted, although his historical and geographical data were quite frequently discussed in the past the linguistic material was not.

Thus, the East European linguistic data that were found in the first edition of the *Tractatus* (1517) will be discussed in this article. The collected material is summarised rather than literally translated, and the interpretation is limited to initial observations that make the understanding of the specific words possible.

As Miechowita's work is divided into two books, with each of the latter subdivided into treatises, and each treatise into chapters, the data below are located according to the following system: 1-2-4 = Book 1 – Treatise 2 – Chapter 4. Those considering the material in relation to the original 1517 edition should remember that the numbers of the treatises precede those of the books in Latin, so that, for instance, *Tractatus Secundus Libri Primi* 'The second treatise of book one' is equivalent to the sequence 1-2 in the system described above.

All remarks, comments and additions in square brackets are mine. The original spelling stands in chevrons *< >*.

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³ For a list of editions and translations see Leszczycki, Modelska-Strzelecka 1967: 13sq., fn. 21.

Bashkir see *Russians*.

Burgundians

Burgundians ⟨Burgundi⟩ live close to the *Suevi* ⟨Sweui⟩ along the Spree ⟨Spre seu Sprewa⟩. The name of the Burgundians comes from the sheds protecting haystacks, called *brogi* in Polish (1-2-3).

Cossack or Kazakh

Kazak ⟨Kazak⟩ is a Tatar destination, *kozak* ⟨kozak⟩ a Russian one. This word means ‘mercenary (hired soldier)’, ‘plunderer’ or ‘robber’ (1-2-3).

Hungarians

The *Hungarians* ⟨hūgari⟩, also called ⟨Hugri⟩ or ⟨Hugui⟩, came from *Ugria* ⟨Juhra⟩ [= *Yugra*], a country in the remotest part of northern Scythia, and occupied land that had previously belonged to the Goths. They were first called *Ugrians* ⟨Juhri⟩ [= *Yugri*], then ⟨Hugui⟩ and later ⟨Hungari⟩ (1-2-1; 1-2-5). – [For ⟨h⟩ = *g* cf. *Voguls* sub “Russians”].

Both the Ugrians in Hungary and those in Scythian Ugia have the same “sharp” language (1-2-5).

The Hungarians retained their “precipitously disrupted” pronunciation but borrowed some words from Slavic to name what was missing in Scythia and Ugia (2-2-2).

Karelian see *Russians*.

Kazakh see *Cossack*.

Lithuanian [See *Samogitia*]

Ancient authors were of the opinion that certain Italians left their country due to disagreements amongst the Romans. These people arrived in their new homeland and called it *Italy* ⟨Italia⟩ and themselves *Italians* ⟨itali⟩. Their descendants added one letter and began to call the country *Litalia* ⟨Litalia⟩ and the people *Litalians* ⟨litali⟩. The Poles and Russians, who were their neighbours, changed these names and called the country *Litwa* ‘Lithuania’ and the people *Litwini* ‘Lithuanians’. Authors who were unaware of this thought that the name of the country came from *lituus* ‘a hunting horn’ because there was much hunting in this country but in fact hunting was a result, rather than a starting point of the history of the land (2-1-2).

The Lithuanian language can be divided into four dialects. One is that of the *Yotvingians* ⟨Iaczuingi⟩ [= Old Pol. *Jaćwingi*] who live near the castle of *Drohiczyn* ⟨Drohićin⟩. The second dialect is that of the Lithuanians and *Samogitians* ⟨Samagittae⟩ [! with ⟨ma⟩], and the third is that of the [Old] *Prussians* ⟨Prutenici⟩. The fourth dialect is used in *Latvia* ⟨Lothwa⟩ [= Pol. *Łotwa*] or *Lothinola* ⟨Lothinola⟩, that is in *Livonia* ⟨Liunia⟩, near the River *Dvina* ⟨Dzuina⟩ [= Pol. *Dźwina*] and the city

of *Riga* ⟨Riga⟩. Although all the people in these countries have, as a matter of fact, only one language they can only partially understand each other unless they have travelled a lot in these regions. This language boasts with its Italian origin and, indeed, it contains a few words from Italian (2-1-3).

There are only a few people who can still speak [Old] Prussian because this language was replaced by Polish and German. Similarly, only a few villagers in *Latvia* ⟨Lothua⟩ [= Pol. *Łotwa*] still speak their own language because German is now the predominate tongue. In both Samogitia and Lithuania, Lithuanian is used in villages, although the majority speak Polish (2-1-3).

Perm see *Russians*.

Polovtsi [See *Russians*]

The name *Polovtsi* ⟨Polowci⟩ designates 'hunters' or 'robbers' in Russian (1-1-2; 1-2-1).

Russians [See *Polovtsi*]

Their coins are made of pure silver and called ⟨dzingis⟩ [= Russ. *d'en'gi*] (2-2-1).

Only one language is spoken throughout Moscovia, namely Ruthenian, that is Slavic. This means that the *Voguls* ⟨Ohulici⟩ and the inhabitants of the Vyatka region are also Ruthenians and speak Ruthenian. Only the Kazan Tatars have their own Tatar language (2-2-1). – [For ⟨h⟩ used for *g* cf. *Hungarians*, *Ugria*, *su(ha)*].

The people who live in the *Perm* ⟨Perm⟩ region have their own language and the same is true for the *Bashkir* ⟨Baskird⟩ country, for the *Ugria* ⟨Iuhra⟩ [= *Yugra*] and the *Karelia* ⟨Corela⟩ (2-2-2).

Samogitia [See *Lithuanian*]

The land of *Samogitia* ⟨Samagithia [!⟩ acquired this name because the word means 'lower land' [lit.: terra inferior] in their language (2-1-2).

Tatar (~ **Turkish**)

Ahmet ⟨Achmet⟩ means 'inclined, prone to reconciliation' in Tatar (1-1-8). – [See *Şia*, *Zahmet*].

Aksak Kutlu ⟨Aksak Kutlu⟩ is the name of one of the Tatar rulers and means 'lame iron' because he was both lame and dangerous (1-1-8). – [The word *aksak* does indeed mean 'lame.' However, Miechowita misunderstood the word *kutlu* in the name *Temir Kutlu* (see below) and translated it as 'iron.' The explanation that the ruler was both lame and dangerous is folk-etymology, presumably invented by Miechowita or by somebody who did not understand Tatar. *Kutlu* is an old title, already attested in Old Turkic; indeed, its appellative meaning can be rendered as 'happy' in English but the word, if used as a title, should be translated approximately as 'prince.' Thus, *Aksak Kutlu* means in fact 'Prince *Aksak*' or 'The Lame Prince'].

**altın baş* ['golden head']. – The ruins of St. Michael's Church and those of Our Lady's Church in Kyiv have even today the remnants of gold paint in their

vaults and that is why these churches are called *altın başına* ‹Altım [!] bassina› in Tatar which means ‘those that have a golden head’ [lit.: aureū caput habentes] (1-1-3). – [The syntagm *altın başına* is, in reality, a possessive dative-directive (-na) of the 3rd person singular (-ı), i.e. ≈ ‘to its golden head’, with *altın* ‘gold’ and *baş* ‘head’. – The spelling ‹Altım› is used in error for *‹Altın›, cf. in this context *Ulu han* below].

arak ‹araka› [!] is a milk drink that quickly results in an unusual drunkenness (1-1-6). – [The form *araka* is a dative or, maybe, Polonized: with the -a added in order to make the word-final syllable of the correct *arak* more similar to the Polish *wódka* ‘vodka’].

ayır ‹air› is a ‘calamus, sweet flag’ (1-1-7). – [The phonetic guise of this word points to Ukrainian as its direct source: < Ukr. *ayir* id. < Ott. *ager* (- **eger* > Modern Turkish *eyir* id.) < Pers. *aker* < Greek *ἄκρον* id. Further etymology remains unknown. For other East Slavic forms as well as possible conduits of transmission, see Waniakowa 2012: 150].

baş see *altın*.

bayram ‹Bairam› ‘a kind of paste, spread made of millet’ (1-1-6). – [The word must have been misunderstood by Miechowita since such a meaning does not exist. It probably is Ott. *bayram* (= Tat. *bäyräm*) ‘feast, holiday’. – See *kurban bayram*(t)].

Çini ravent [lit. ‘Chinese rhubarb’] ‹cinireuent› [= *Çini revent*], a designation of a radix (1-1-7). – [The form *revent*, suggested by Miechowita’s spelling, is perfectly possible as the result of the regressive vowel-harmonical assimilation in Turkic].

dinsiz [lit. ‘irreligious, atheistic’] ‹dzincis› ‘pagan’ (1-1-5).

Edel ‹Edel› ‘Volga’ (1-1-7). – [The form reflects Tat. *İdel*, rather than Ott. *İdil* id.].

eyir see *ayir*.

gâvur ‹gaur› ‘unbelieving, unfaithful’ (1-1-5).

han see *ulu han*.

İsa [‘Jesus’, attested in:] *İsa Rûhullâh* ‹Eissa Rocholla›, that is ‘Jesus is the Spirit of God’ (1-1-5). – [This is a correct translation].

kan see *Ulu han*.

kurban bayram(t) [lit. ‘Feast of the Sacrifice’, i.e. an Islamic religious holiday, attested in a rather corrupted form as:] *kuyram* ‹kuiram› id. (1-1-5). – [See *bayram*].

kutlu see *Aksak Kutlu*, *Temir Kutlu*.

Lâ ’ilâha ’illâ l-Lâh ‹lahi illo illoloh› ‘there is no god but God’ (1-1-5).

oğlan see *ulan*.

orda [Ott. *orda* = Tat. *urda* ‘Horde; army’, here attested in:] the word *horda* ‹Hor-da› means ‘a great number of people’ in Tatar (1-1-8).

ravent see *Çini ravent*.

Resûlullâh [lit. ‘God’s Messenger’, attested in:] *Rosolla* ‹Rossolla› which means that Muhammad is the Justice of God (1-1-5).

revent see *Çini ravent*.

Rûhullâh see *İsa*.

Şîa [short for *Şî'atu 'Alî 'the Followers of Ali'*, used also as a general denomination for Islam; here attested in:] *Şîa Ahmet* <Sziachmet> which means 'Pious Ahmet' (1-1-8). – [See *Zahmet*].

su <su> or sometimes *suha* <suha> 'water' (1-1-6). – [The nominative form is *su* whereas <suha> that can actually be read as both *suha* and *suga* (cf. *Vogulcy* sub "Russians") is in any case a dative form].

Temir Kutlu <Temir Kutlu> whose name means 'happy iron' (*temir* 'happy', *kutlu* 'iron') was Batu Khan's son (1-1-8). – [In reality, *temir* is 'iron' and *kutlu* is 'happy'; besides, 'happy iron' would have been **kutlu temir*. For the use of *kutlu* as a title see *Aksak Kutlu* above. The syntagm *Temir Kutlu* should be translated as 'Prince *Temir*' or 'The Iron Prince'].

ulan <Vlan> means 'girl' and 'virgin', whereas a son of an unmarried girl is called *ulanus* <Vlanus> (1-3-2). – [The word *ulan*, in actual fact a colloquially corrupted variant of *oglan* ~ *ōlan* 'young man, boy', was often used as an interjection or appeal, cf. also Modern Turkish *ulan!* 'hey, fellow!'. The form *ulanus* is simply a Latinised form of *ulan*. There never was a pair *ulan* : *ulanus* in the Turkic languages, and the word *ulan* whose English reflex is *uhlan* (< Pol. *ułan* 'light cavalry soldier' < Tatar or Turkish) never concerned girls or virgins].

Ulu han [lit. 'Great Khan'; regularly attested with *-m* in Miechowita's Treatise:] *Uluham* <Vlucham>, that is a 'great lord' or a 'great ruler' was what the ruler of the Great Horde was called. *Ulu* <vlu> is 'great', *ham* <Cham> [pro: *han*] is 'lord' and 'ruler'. Some translated this name incorrectly as 'great dog' but *ham* <Cham> with word-initial aspiration only means 'lord' and 'ruler' whereas *kam* <cam> [pro: *kan*] without any aspiration means 'blood' in Tatar, never 'dog' (1-1-8). – [The explanation is correct].

yapınca ~ *yapanca* [attested as:] *yoponçe* <iopończe> 'a sort of long cloak' (1-1-6). – [Here, both vowels *-o-* in lieu of *-a-* result from the influence of the pronunciation of the Polish reflex (*opończa*) of this Turkic word].

zahmet [lit. 'trouble, bother'; it is not certain if this word was misinterpreted by Miechowita as:] *Zahmet* ~ *Sahmet* <Sachmet> ~ *Siyahmet* <Siachmet> which means 'Ahmet, the Tortured to Death' (1-1-8).

Turkish [See *Tatar*]

The Turkish language originates from Tatar. The differences between Tatar and Turkish are as few as those between Italian and Spanish or Polish and Czech (1-3-1).

Ugrian see *Hungarian*.

Ukrainian see *Tatar* [sub *ayir*].

Voguls see *Russians*.

A few glosses remain unclear. These are:

1. Tat. <kućilabuka> or <kilcabuha> is the name of a plant and can be translated as ‘raven’s eye’ (1-1-7). – [Although some associations can be suggested (cf., for instance, Tat. *küzle* ‘having eye(s)’, Turkish *puhu* ‘eagle owl’) there is no obvious answer].
2. The Horde calls itself <Tak Xi>, that is ‘the chief horde’ or ‘the chief and free people’ [lit.: *capitalē hordā vel homines principales et liberos sese nominat*] and their ruler is called <Ir Tli Xi>, that is ‘a free man’ [lit.: *liber homo*] (1-1-8). – [It is unclear how the letter <X> should be read, as well as how <Tak> and <Tli> compare. Only <Ir> can probably be identified with Tat. *ir* ‘man’, but even then this word would be expected at the end of the syntagm because of the determiner-determined word order in Turkic. – The interpretation of <Tak Xi> as *Tatar kişi* ‘a Tatar man/person’ is graphematically less certain].

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