

Introduction: Tracing the bicentennial history of Oriental studies in Lithuania

Audrius Beinorius

Vilnius University

Historiam nescire hoc est semper puerum esse

CICERO

This special issue of *Acta Orientalia Vilnensia* is dedicated to the bicentenary of the commencement of Asian studies in Lithuania and particularly at Vilnius University, which was founded in 1579 and is the oldest academic institution in Lithuania. Two hundred years is a comparatively short period, but these years have a wealthy history, especially keeping in mind that Asian or Oriental studies, as it was called at the beginning of this period, was a newly emerging academic field that has grown from a purely comparative and philological approach to recently discovered non-European cultures due to of the increasing implications of colonial aims and the imperative to manage properly those subjugated Asian counties and nations. Certainly, an integral part of this interest in Asian learning was European romantic fascination with the cultural and intellectual otherness of that area.

Lithuania was not excepted from this kind of intellectual involvement. The beginning of the 19th century was a politically complicated and turbulent period in Lithuanian history. After the third and last division of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, between Tsarist Russia and Prussia in 1795, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania became an eastern province of the Russian Empire and formally disappeared from the world map for a more than a century. Notwithstanding, some academic institutions, including the main one, Vilnius University, continued their activities, even though under the strict control and supervision of Russian officials.

The intellectuals of Vilnius University clearly understood in those days the importance and future prospects of developing Asian studies. And due to the activities of non-formal student societies (the Filarets, Filomats, and Shubravy) and members of freemasonic lodges, especially of the Zealous Lithuanian (*Gorliwy litvin*) lodge, the romantic fascination with the East developed into serious academic preoccupations.

The Department of Eastern Languages at Vilnius University was formally founded on 1 June 1810. There was no one, however, who was qualified to take the position of head of the department. In 1822 Kazimierz Kontrym, a famous Vilnius intellectual and university adjunct, handed a memorandum to Prince Adam Jerzy Czartoryski, the educational curator (governor) of Vilnius District, concerning the establishment of an institute of Oriental languages at the University of Vilnius. The goal of the institute was teaching Mongolian, Armenian, Turkish, Arabic, and Persian. Moreover, to promote the learning of Bengalese, Sinhalese, Sanskrit, and other languages, Kontrym sought to send students to India and Ceylon for training.

It was a particularly notable endeavour, because departments of Oriental studies at other European universities of that period were still at the stage of inception. At the turn of the 19th century, the scientific study of the Orient had started in various Western European countries. To promote a more authentic understanding of the East in the West, translations of seminal works in religion, philosophy, and poetry by Arabic, Persian, Indian, and other Oriental writers were published.

Had Kontrym's idea of an institute of Oriental languages been accepted, Vilnius University would have been among the first European institutions to study the Orient and would currently have a notably rich research tradition. For unknown reasons however, the project was not accepted and the university's talented students were forced to scatter around the world.

Only in 1822 was the Arabic language incorporated into the curricula, to be followed by Persian 4 years later. This short-lived achievement was however interrupted by the closure of Vilnius University due to the participation of its members in the rebellion of 1830–1. Nevertheless, several of the university's alumni became specialists of world significance: Józef Kowalewski pioneered Mongol studies at Kazan University, Russia, and later became its rector and Józef Sękowski, famous specialist in Arabic studies, headed the Department of Arabic and Turkish at St Petersburg University.

This volume consists of eleven papers contributed by Lithuanian, Polish, Russian and British scholars and providing not a sustained historical description but a mosaic depiction of Asian studies in Lithuania. Its aim is the analysis of the most significant academic personalities and their works. An attempt is made by all contributors to reveal some kind of relationship of those personalities to Vilnius: some of them worked for some time at Vilnius University, some were just born in this city, and others received an education here. The complicated question of the national identity of those personalities is not emphasised, because Vilnius was always a multicultural and multilingual city and the boundaries of the multiethnic Great Duchy of Lithuania were much wider than those of present Lithuania. Polish became the main language

of higher education in the 17th century, and it was superseded by Russian during Tsarist times. Even a single, unified transcription of names and cities is a delicate problem, and Lithuanian, Polish and Russian versions exist side by side, e.g., Juozapas Kovalevskis, Józef Kowalewski and Osip Kovalevski or Vilnius, Wilno, and Vilna. Thus, one of the objectives of the present volume is namely to expose the cultural and ethnic diversity of the history of the city of Vilnius.

Unfortunately, not all the personalities that have been involved in Asian studies over the past 200 years are presented in this volume, only the most significant past contributors. A considerable amount of precise historical research remains to be done by an international team of researchers in archives and libraries in order to get the full picture of the historical development and achievements of the scholars preceding us.

The volume opens with a paper entitled ‘Early history of Oriental studies at Vilnius University’, written by the present-day Oriental centre’s close friend and collaborator, Marek Mejor from Warsaw University. His research on the early beginnings of Oriental studies at Vilnius University is based on scrupulous work in the Vilnius University Library and in the Czartoryski Library in Kraków, as well as on multiple visits to the Lithuanian National Archives. Professor Mejor succeeded in finding significant historical documents proving that the exact date the Department of Eastern Languages was established at Vilnius University was in 1810. It is no exaggeration to say that his discovery has immense value and importance for the reconstruction of the early stage of Asian studies in this part of Europe. This paper also reveals the tense historical circumstances and intellectual climate in Lithuania at the beginning of the 19th century, when the idea to establish a chair of Eastern languages materialised.

‘Professor O.M. Kowalewski—Mongolian studies scholar, traveller and enlightener: His biographical landmarks’, a paper written jointly by three scholars (Ramil M. Valeev, Irina V. Kulganek, and Jerzy Tulisow) from Kazan (Russia) and Poland, examines the basic stages of the life and activity of Professor Józef (Osip) Kowalewski (1801–1878), a graduate of Vilnius University. Based on numerous historical sources, the paper demonstrates how Kowalewski managed to become the first chair of Mongolian literature in Russia and Europe and later a dean and the rector of Kazan University. It also reveals his academic travels to Siberia, Buryatia, Mongolia and China (1828–1833) and his collection of unique books, manuscripts, and ethnographic materials of the people of Central Asia. This paper tells us the fascinating story of how Kowalewski became a world-renowned scholar of classical works in Mongolian research and Buddhism and discusses his investigation of the history, languages, literature, religions, folklore, and ethnography of the Mongolian people.

Research on Kowalewski is continued in the paper of Oksana N. Polyanskaya from Buryat State University (Russia) named 'History and ethnography of Mongolian-speaking peoples in materials of O.M. Kowalewski in library holdings of Vilnius University'. The article is devoted to a famous diary that was written by Josef Kowalewski and is stored in the Manuscript department of the Vilnius University Library. This article is one of the first attempts to introduce the diary to academia. The document, entitled 'Diary of Pursuits in 1832', is an important source of history and ethnography of Mongolian-speaking peoples and is an essential supplement to well-known materials about these peoples.

The paper of Alfred F. Majewicz from Poznan (Poland) aims at introducing the results of research on the cultures and languages of the aboriginal peoples of the island of Sakhalin, the lower Amur region, and northern Japan (the Ainu, Nivhgu, Uilta, Ulcha, and Nanai) conducted at the turn of the 19th and 20th century by scholar Bronisław Piłsudski (1866–1918) and at presenting his ties with Lithuania. In the period between the world wars, Vilnius University, which at that time was called Stefan Batory University, resumed Oriental studies and shared its facilities with famous Japonologist Bronisław Piłsudski. His seemingly long-forgotten legacy is now brought back to the attention of specialists with the appearance of the consecutive volumes of his *Collected Works*. The argumentation and conclusion of this richly documented article is that Piłsudski belongs to the same degree to the history of Oriental studies in both Lithuania and Poland and that both countries involved can only be proud of such a figure in the annals of their intellectual heritage.

The article written by Jerzy Tulisow of the University of Warsaw, entitled 'At the source of Vilnius Altaic studies', presents the lives and achievements of three scholars connected with Vilnius: Mongolist Józef Kowalewski (1801–1878), Turkologist Antoni Muchliński (1808–1877), and Altaist and Mongolist Władysław Kotwicz (1872–1944). By emphasising the significance of Vilnius in their lives, the author concludes his paper with a rhetorical and gripping question: Is there something in the atmosphere of Vilnius which compels one to take interest in the East?

Outstanding Orientalist Józef Julian Sękowski, or in Russian Osip Ivanovich Senkovskii (1800–1858), was a most distinguished Vilnius University alumnus and had a solid, albeit academic, knowledge of several Asian languages: Hebrew and especially Persian, Turkish and Arabic. In his paper 'Thinking in a different language: the Orientalist Senkovskii and "Orientalism"', Nikolaj Serikoff, a scholar of Arabic studies from the Wellcome Trust for the History of Medicine, London, provides us with a vivid historical description of the life and scholarly activities of Senkovskii, who managed later to ingeniously plant his profound knowledge in Russian academic soil. In his richly documented paper, Serikoff demonstrates how profoundly learned

Senkovskii was in various subjects, including music and medicine, and reveals his solid scholarly knowledge in the Russian and broad European intellectual context of those days. Serikoff argues that Senkovskii's ability to 'think in a different language' did not find many followers during his lifetime and only over a hundred years later what Senkovskii was fighting in the mid 19th century was termed 'Orientalism' by Edward Said.

Another Polish scholar, Jan Konior from Krakow, in the article 'Andrzej Rudomina—unforgettable Lithuanian Jesuit missionary and scholar: from Vilnius University to China' explores one of the great Lithuanian Jesuit missionaries to China, Andrzej Rudomina (Lith. Andrius Rudamina, 1595–1631), also providing a look at the cultural and spiritual background of Lithuania and Poland in which he was brought up. Andrzej Rudomina was the first Lithuanian Jesuit to set foot behind the Great Wall of China in the 17th century. Being the first Jesuit sinologist, he enriched the European Christian perspective. The author attempts to understand this man of holiness and mobility by asking this question: What does he have to tell us today in the 21st century? In addition, the role, significance and influence of Jesuits in the cultural, scientific and educational development of Lithuania and Poland are exposed.

Dalia Švambarytė, a scholar at the Centre of Oriental Studies of Vilnius University, in her paper 'Georg Forster in Vilnius: Reverberations of the great age of ocean navigation', discusses the contribution made by naturalist, travel writer and ethnologist George Forster (1754–1794) to studies of the 'Eastern' and 'Southern' lands in the 18th century. The paper presents the background of European long-distance navigation, examines Forster's contribution to Captain Cook's second voyage, and reconsiders his work completed at the Vilnian Academy against the broader perspective of European notions of travel literature and the ethnography of the Pacific region, as well as the prospect of gradually emerging Oriental studies. The conclusion is made that, although Forster's stay in Lithuania gave him little emotional satisfaction, he fulfilled his promise to be a valuable contributor to the academic life of Vilnius University, and the legacy of his prolific work done in Vilnius is of considerable importance to European scholarship and to Polish–Lithuanian knowledge as a part of it.

The paper entitled 'Waldemar Jochelson—a prominent ethnographer of north-eastern Siberia' by Donatas Brandišauskas surveys the biography and ethnographic research of prominent Litvak anthropologist Waldemar Jochelson (1855–1937). Jochelson was born in Vilnius, where he received a gymnasium education in a *hedera* (Jewish school) and was accepted into a rabbinical seminary in Vilnius. The paper discusses his extensive and influential ethnographic fieldwork among indigenous people in eastern Siberia and explains why Jochelson is considered the founder of the discipline of anthropology in Russia and why he is called the 'founding father

of Siberian studies'. The author of the article argues that Jochelson's methodology, comparative research, theoretical approaches, and scientific results have a distinctive value in history and continue to be a part of Yakut, Yukaghir, and Koriak cultural inheritance, as well as an important ethnographical source for many generations of anthropologists.

During the period of independence between WWI and WWII, Oriental studies in Lithuania did not get due attention and support and survived thanks to a few devoted scholars. One of them, Egyptologist Marija Rudzinskaitė-Arcimavičienė (1885–1941), taught at the Faculty of Humanities at Lithuanian University and accumulated a rich collection of Egyptian art at Kaunas Museum. The scholarly activity and heritage of Rudzinskaitė-Arcimavičienė is discussed by Aldona Snitkuvienė in her paper entitled 'Marija Rudzinskaitė-Arcimavičienė's contribution to Egyptology (in commemoration of the 125th anniversary of the scholar's birth)'. Her discussion provides fresh insights into the formation of Rudzinskaitė-Arcimavičienė's interest in Oriental studies, academic activities at the University of Lithuania (since 1930 Vytautas Magnus University), scholarly publications, scientific and organisational activities, and collection of Egyptian antiquities.

Turkish was among the Eastern languages that were expected to be taught at the newly established Department of Asian Languages in 1810. Galina Miškinienė, in her paper 'The development of Turkic studies at Vilnius University', provides an overview of the development of Turkic studies and research in Lithuania from the beginning of the 19th century to the present. Two Turkic ethnic groups, Tartars and Karaims, settled in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in the 14th century. In her article, specific fields of Oriental studies, kitabistik and the Karaim language, are discussed and the origin, development and prospects of Turkic research are examined. Miškinienė shows that Vilnius University was the cradle of many famous Orientalists who maintained Turkic research with their activities.

The current activities of the Centre of Oriental Studies at Vilnius University and Asian studies at other institutions in Lithuania are out of the scope of the present volume. Meanwhile, we would like just briefly to mention the most recent circumstances and activities regarding Asian studies in independent Lithuania.

While under the control of authorities in Moscow during Soviet times, Lithuanian schools of higher education were not able to set up academic institutions of Oriental studies. The only way out for the committed in those days was to go for studies at Russian universities. The single exception was a Sanskrit class given by Ričardas Mironas at the Department of Classical Philology of Vilnius University. It was not until after Lithuania regained its independence in 1990 that a new wave of interest in the revival of Oriental studies spread over the country. The Centre of Oriental

Studies was re-established at Vilnius University in 1993, setting as its major goal the promotion and learning of Oriental languages, culture and history. Nowadays the centre receives generous support from social partners and state institutions such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of National Defence, State Department of Migration, State Department of National Minorities and Cultural Communities, State Department of Tourism, and others. As a result of this support, a bachelor of arts programme in Asian studies was commenced in the 2000–1 academic year. Since then bachelor's degree programmes in Arabic/Islamic, Chinese, Iranian, Japanese, Indian and Turkish studies have been actualised. All these programmes, according to the new classification of study fields made by the Lithuanian Ministry of Science and Education, are called regional culture studies and represent a multi- and inter-disciplinary approach to Asian cultural studies and research. Since 2006 a contemporary Asian studies graduate programme has also been implemented.

Among the main educational objectives of present day activities are analysis, research and education about cultural development in the major geographical regions of Asia, intercultural communication, and prospects of multiform collaboration with Asian countries. The scholars and students of the Centre of Oriental Studies enjoy great opportunities to promote collaboration between Lithuania and Asian countries in all spheres of life and to adequately assess swift changes in the life of Asian regions in the perspective of global transformations. The Asian studies programme in the humanities subdivision aims at providing its students with fundamental knowledge of the selected region and its characteristic features, teaching its spoken language, investigating the peculiarity of the region's problems, and developing an analytical approach to the subject. To help students improve their knowledge and have an opportunity to get training in the region of their selected language, the Oriental Centre is actively involved in international programmes of studies abroad. The centre is also working toward incorporating Tibetan, Korean, and Mongolian studies into its curriculum.

Nowadays the centre actively pursues research on an international level, organises international scientific conferences, and conducts translations of classical Asian texts. Supported by foreign libraries and the representation offices of Asian countries, the centre possesses the richest collection of Oriental sources in Lithuania and the other two Baltic states; provides consultation to state institutions; fosters academic relations with European, American, and Asian colleagues; and actively participates in international research projects.

As already noted however, present-day Asian studies and research at Vilnius University and in Lithuania in general are still too immature to be summarised and presented in this collection of papers. As familiarity with the bygone history of Asian

studies in Lithuania helps us to reflect better on our present work, likewise this kind of analysis can be deposited for future generations for whom our dynamic present will be like a mysterious past. *Maneat nostros ea cura nepotes!*

Audrius BEINORIUS, Dr. Habil. (audrius.beinorius@oc.vu.lt), professor of Indian and Buddhist Studies and director of the Centre of Oriental Studies, Vilnius University

✉: Centre of Oriental Studies, Vilnius University, Universiteto 5, LT-01513 Vilnius, Lithuania