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PROFESSOR WOLFGANG P. SCHMID AND HIS TROJAN HORSE

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For the last two centuries1 many linguists throughout the world have been toiling in the field of historical-comparative Indo-European linguistics.2 In this particular area, the attention was primarily directed to, and most of the work has been done in three "classical" language groups of this family: Indo-lranian (Sanskrit is one of the languages in this group), Greek, and Latin. Literally thousands of books and many thousands of dissertations, monographs, articles and reviews have been written dealing with the various questions of Sanskrit, Greek, and Latin.

The first attempts at reconstruction of the proto-language, known as Proto-Indo-European (abbr. PIE) were predominantly based on these three language groups.3 Therefore, at that time — roughly speaking around the middle of the 19th century — the reconstructed PIE "looked" and "sounded" very much like somewhat modified archaic Sanskrit.4

Later on, the most famous school of linguistics, the so-called Neogrammarians5 reversed this trend and started treating all (Indo-European) languages alike, including the modern dialects of living languages. Furthermore, they considered the posited6 language structure no longer to be some ideal language, but like any natural language — with all kinds of "non-ideal" and "uneven" systems in its structure. More and more attention was being paid to all the other Indo-European language groups, such as Tokharian, Armenian, Hittite, Celtic, Germanic, Illyrian, Slavic, Baltic, etc.

Nevertheless, in the classical standard works on Indo-European linguistics, as well as in the main etymological dictionaries, the linguistic data from the old triumvirate (Sanskrit, Greek, Latin) still predominates until this very day.7

But even in this very conservative discipline, there appear, from time to time, some young Turks, or revolutionary iconoclasts who try to break the old mold and propose new approaches and ideas which usually run counter to the main line of the old guard defense. Since the old guard feel threatened in their concepts and their methods, there is almost always a clash. No matter what happens, there is never a loss to the progress in the discipline because only courageous new ideas call for progress, rather than the dull regurgitating of their masters voices

One such bolt of lightning struck in 1976. We chose to call it the Trojan Horse because we are inclined to believe in its ultimate acceptance, quite possibly only in generations of linguists (primarily Indo-Europeanists) to come. In other words, this Trojan Horse is already standing in the city of Troy (= the old-line Indo-European linguistics), only it is not yet clear when its "soldiers" will make the conquest.

Well, what did really happen in 1976?

At the first glance, not very much: an article (written in German) appeared in the journal Baltistica. This journal is published semi-annually in Vilnius, Lithuania. The author of the article is one of the leading Indo-Europeanists in Europe, Professor Wolfgang P. Schmid. Schmid is Professor of Indo-European linguistics at the University of Göttingen, author of several books and many articles, and also the editor-in-chief of the venerable old journal, Indogermanische Forschungen. He gave this important article a very simple name: "Baltisch und Indogermanisch" (= "Baltic and Indo-European").

In the article itself, several important points are made. In the first place, Schmid rejects the idea of the so-called "Balto-Slavic unity" theory.8 Furthermore," he considers the Baltic language group as a satemized kentum-language.9 And then he proceeds to outline his "Trojan Horse," a proposal so daring that nobody, apparently, had thought of it before.

Namely, W.P. Schmid proposes to put the Baltic languages into the center of Indo-European linguistics. Since this is such a revolutionary proposal, we will give it, first, in the original German, then we'll give our own translation of the entire passage in English.

Betrachtet man sich daraufhin einmal die bisher vorgeschlagenen Verwandtschaftsmodelle von Schleicher, Joh. Schmidt, Meillet, J. Schrijnen, V. Pisani u.a., dann haben sie alle das eine gemeinsam, daß sie die relative Lage der historisch bezeugten Einzelsprachen zueinandern im Wesentlichen unverandert lassen und auf die idg. Grundsprache übertragen. Eine Übertragung dieser abstrakten Relationen auf die geographische Situation würde bedeuten, daß das Baltikum und das westliche Rußland zum geographischen Mittelpunkt der Indogermania avancieren würden. Man könnte dem hinzufügen, daß die Hethiter von Norden in ihre historisch bekannten Wohnsitze eindrigen, ebenso kommen die Griechen von Norden in den Mittelmeerraum, die Inder von Nordwesten in ihre späteren Wohnsitze etc., so daß man nur die jeweiligen Einwanderungsrichtungen ruckwarts verlangern muß, um den gemeinsamen Schnittpunkt in Osteuropa zu finden. Aber all dies ware kaum eine Stütze fur unsere Annahme und bliebe recht vage, würde uns nicht die alteuropäische Hydronymie handfestes Material in die Hand geben. Wo immer diese alte Gewässernamenschicht anzutreffen ist, ob in Skandinavien, in Frankreich, Deutschland, auf dem Balkan oder an der nordlichen Schwarzmeerküste, immer finden sich Namen, die eine genaue Entsprechung im Baltikum haben1, so daß man dieses Gebiet als ein Ausstrahlungszentrum ansehen und mil unserer obigen noch willkurlichen Annahme zu einer Arbeitshypothese verbinden darf. Vielleicht dürfte man sich auch noch eines inhaltlichen Argumentes bedienen: wenn die idg. Namengeber ein solch reiches Vokabular für Wasserlaufe aller Art, Seen, Sümpfe und Moore gehabt haben, wie es die alteuropäische Hydronymie voraussetzt, dann können ihre Vorväter unmoglich aus einer Steppengegend stammen. Nun, auch dies kvnnte noch durch Zufalligkeiten der Überlieferung weg erklärt werden. Man muß einfach daran gehen, zu fragen, was es denn bedeuten soll, das Baltische als Zentrum der Indogermania auszuwählen, und zu prüfen, vvelche Konsequenzen sich daraus ergeben.10

"If one, in this connection, now takes a careful look at the genetic relationship models proposed until now by Schleicher, Joh. Schmidt, Meillet, J. Schrijnen, V. Pisani and others, then we notice that all of them have one common feature, namely, that they leave the relative position to each other of the individual languages known historically unchanged and directed upon the IE proto-language. A transference of these abstract relationships upon the geographical situation would mean that the Baltic area and western Russia would move into the geographical center of the Indo-European area. One could add to this that the Hittites penetrate into their historically known habitat from the north, just like the Greeks come into the Mediterranean area from the north, the Indic-speaking peoples from the north-west into their later habitats, etc., so that one only has to extend, in each case, the direction of penetration backwards, in order to find the common point of departure in Eastern Europe. But all of this would hardly be in support for our assumption, and would remain really vague, if the old European hydronymy would not give us real proven material in this direction. Wherever one runs into these old names of water bodies, whether in Scandinavia, or in France, in Germany, in the Balkans, or on the northern coast of the Black Sea, there are always names to be found which have exact equivalents in the Baltic area.1 (117-118), so that one may regard this area as the central area from which these names had originated, and one can then connect this fact with our random assumption, and turn it into a hypothesis for further research. One could, perhaps, use another argument with the same reference point: if the Indo-European name givers had such a rich vocabulary for water bodies of all kinds: lakes, swamps and moors, as it is clearly seen in the old European hydronymy, then their ancestors could not have come from the steppes. Well, this too could be explained (away) as the various accidents in inherited tradition. One simply has to go ahead and ask what it will then mean if one chooses Baltic as the center of Indo-European, and to test what kind of consequences would result from this."

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In order to give the reader a better idea, we shall illustrate this with a schematic drawing which W.P. Schmid published later.11

If we do assume — optimistically, in our case — that Schmid's Trojan Horse attain victory, as it were, in traditional Indo-European linguistics, would this entail rewriting such great classics as Brugmann's Grundriss, Hirt's Grammar, Schwyzer's Griechische Grammatik, Buck, the OED, Fraenkel's LEW, etc.?12 Not necessarily at all. One could still fully use the data and the implications of these (and of many others) standard reference works: they have withstood the tempering of time, and the various new schools and approaches. But, in future work, some slight realignment would begin right away, and through several generations of scholars, perhaps, the Baltic data would, indeed, take the central position.

On practical grounds, even the technical presentation of the linguistic data would have to change: for example, in most traditional comparative-historical grammars, and in most etymological dictionaries.13

The greatest rearrangement would occur, naturally, in the reconstruction of the phonological systems, as well as in the verbal system. For example, in reconstructing the phonological system for (late) Proto-Indo-European, there would no longer be a real need to posit at least two complex classes of consonants, i.e., the so-called labiovelars (kw, gw, ghw) and the aspirated voced stops (bh, dh, gh. . .) would not be necessary.

This "reversal", as it were, would not touch the canonical vocalic system at all since the Baltic (particularly Lithuanian) vocalic system is very archaic, except for some minor changes. In the vocalic system having the Baltic data as the center for research, most probably would do at least two things: in the first place, there would be no need to posit any laryngeals and, in the second place, the ablaut, or apophony14 could be reconstructed a little easier since Baltic languages have preserved, apparently, the inherited Proto-Indo-European ablaut system more faithfully than any other language group in this family.

There is no way of predicting how this revolutionary proposal will fare in the rather conservative academic community of Indo-Europeanists. It will take time. The originator of this proposal, Professor Wolfgang P. Schmid is not dismayed: he cheerfully pushes his hypothesis in his recent publications, and elsewhere.

1 Many linguists consider the year 1786 as the starting point of modern linguistics. This refers to the famous speech by the British judge in Calcutta, Sir William Jones, in which he categorically stated that Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, Germanic, and Celtic languages are so similar that they must be descended from a "common source".

2 Cf. William R. Schmalstieg, "The Lithuanian Language — Past and Present", Lituanus, Vol. (1982), No. 1, pp. 3-100.

3 One of the practical reasons may have been the fact that in all three groups the extant language/literary documents are huge. I.e., all three have a rich and varied literary tradition.

4 August Schleicher, for example, used Sanskrit vocalism almost entirely in his early reconstructions. In other words, his reconstructed Proto-Indo-European looked very much like some modified Sanskrit.

5 In German, they were called (die) Junggrammatiker. This group was primarily concentrated at the University of Leipzig. Their influence is felt even today.

6 Posited, or reconstructed, or imagined, even made-up could be used here. It simply means that this posited Proto-Indo-European has not left us a shred of any linguistic data, and everything has to be done by deduction from the data of recorded languages.

7 When, in 1972, the present writer, at the 11th International Congress of Linguists (Bologna/Florence, August, 1972) proposed the reduction of the PIE labiovelars, the old-timers could not believe their ears. Cf. Antanas Klimas, "Roots \*WELK-, \*WOLK- and \*WLK-. A Case Study of Naming Wild Animals in Indo-European Languages", Proceedings of the Eleventh International Congress of Linguists, Vol. II, Bologna, pp. 543-547.

8 Wolfgang P. Schmid, "Baltisch und Indogermanisch", Baltistica XII (2), 1976, pp. 115-122.

9 Wolfgang P. Schmid, op. cit., p. 118-120.

10 Wolfgang P. Schmid, op. cit. pp. 117-118.

11 For a more detailed discussion, cf. Wolfgang P. Schmid, "Indogermanistische Modelle und osteuropaische Fruhgeschichte", Abh. d. Akad. d. Wiss, u.d. Lit. zu Mainz, Geistes-und sozialwiss. Kl. 7977.

12 There are, of course, many more of these standard reference works in Indo-European linguistics. We've listed only a few. OED — Oxford English Dictionary; Buck — Carl Darling Buck, A Dictionary of Selected Synonyms in the Principal Indo-European Languages; LEW — Litauisches etymologisches Worterbuch, etc.

13 On the other hand, the data in the etymological dictionaries could be left as it is because the arrangement here is, in most cases, according to the language (s) in question.

14 On Ablaut (apophony) cf., Antanas Klimas, "Some Questions Concerning the Relationship of Baltic and Slavic," Actes du Xe Congres International des Linguistes, Vol. IV, Bucharest, 1970, pp. 689-715.