

**The Lithuanian Language: Traditions and Trends**  
by Giedrius Subačius

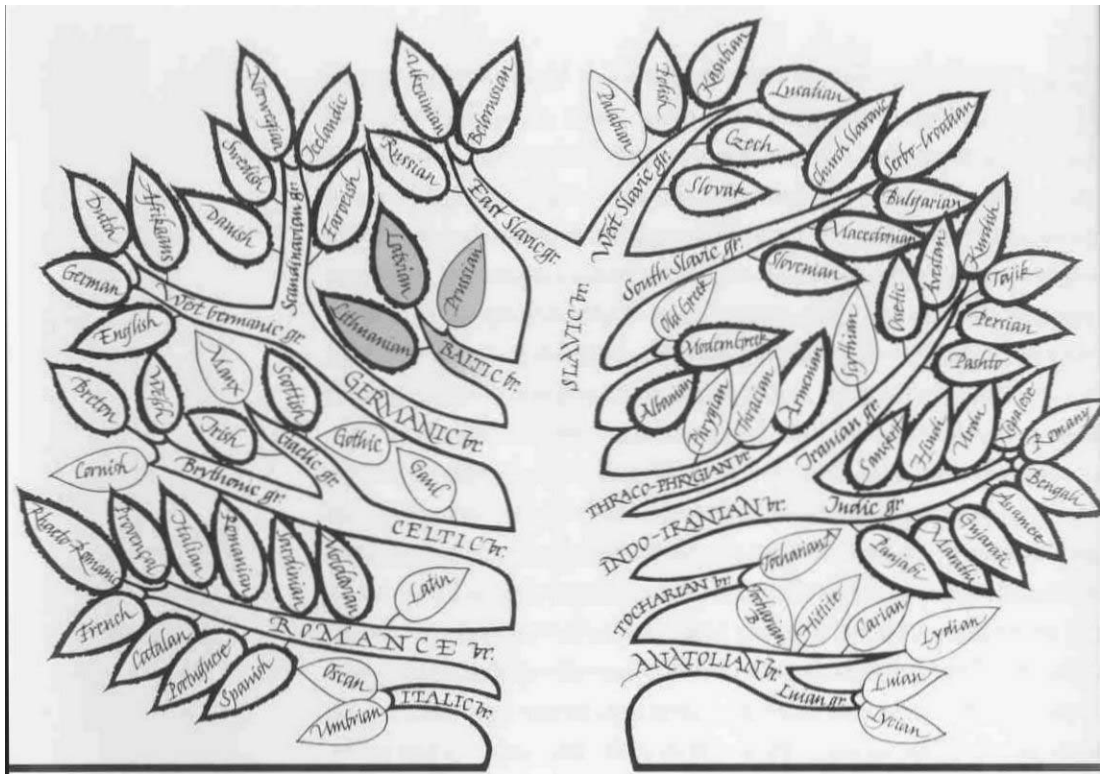
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Drawing by Rimvydas Kepežinskas  
 The Indo-European Languages

Due to their similar political situations and historical development in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the three Baltic states – Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania – are often treated as sisters, and referred to as Baltic countries. This name is even applied to the entire region. But professional linguists have always pointed out that this is not an appropriate designation. The term *Balt* was coined in the 19th century by the German linguist Ferdinand Nesselman to name one of the branches of the Indo-European languages spoken on the eastern shores of the Baltic Sea. Linguists had already known Indo-European groups such as Germanic, Romance and Slavic; now they discovered another group of Indo-European languages, the Baltic languages. Since then, in linguistics, the term has been applied only in reference to the true Baltic languages: the living Lithuanian and Latvian languages, and dead languages such as Curonian, Semigallian, Selonian, Yotvingian and Galindan. Estonian is quite different: not only is it outside the Baltic group, but it is not even an Indo-European language, for it belongs to the Finno-Ugric group. Thus, when we hear the word *Balt*, we should not forget that for a linguist, and even for a Lithuanian, it may not include Estonia.

Lithuanians make up about 80 per cent of the population of Lithuania. This means that more than three million people (perhaps three and a half million) consider Lithuanian to be their mother tongue. It is spoken by the autochthon Lithuanian populations in some border areas of Poland and Belarus, and by numerous Lithuanian émigrés in other countries. The largest émigré groups are to be found in the United States.

People have long been curious to know what makes languages similar, and why people speak different languages in different countries. Linguistic similarity could be evidence of a tribal or national affinity, or even prove the place closest to God. For instance, during the Renaissance one similarity theory held that Lithuanian was simply a debased Latin, and we know that Latin was the most sacred language in the Catholic world. Genealogical studies of languages took on a scientific approach only in the 19th century. Traditionally, it was based on the history of sounds: that is, it was a history of the spoken language, which people learn in some mysterious way in early childhood without any apparent effort, as if the sounds of the language overwhelmed them like a swollen river.

Latvian is the only living language with sounds and endings similar to those of Lithuanian, but a Latvian and a Lithuanian who do not speak each other's tongue cannot communicate, unlike a Dane who can communicate with a Norwegian, an Italian who can communicate with a Spaniard, or a Ukrainian who can communicate with a Russian. A Lithuanian and a Latvian can only recognise a few words in each other's speech, and this is not enough to hold a conversation. Therefore, we can say that Lithuanian is a language, which cannot be understood by a speaker of any other language who has not learnt it. More than that, even users of different Lithuanian dialects (such as Samogitians and Aukštaitians) cannot understand each other unless they communicate in standard Lithuanian, which they have to learn.

Since the 19th century, when the similarity between Lithuanian and Sanskrit was discovered, Lithuanians have taken a particular pride in their mother tongue as the oldest living Indo-European language. To this day, to some Lithuanians their understanding of their nationality is based on their linguistic identity. It is no surprise then that they proudly quote the French linguist Antoine Meillet, who said that anyone who wanted to hear old Indo-European should go and listen to a Lithuanian farmer. The 19th-century maxim – the older the language the better – is still alive in Lithuania.

The history of sounds explains how the Lithuanian word *sūnus* and the German *Sohn*, English *son*, and Polish *syn* are not loanwords from one language to another, but have the same origin. The same is true of the Lithuanian *duktė*, German *Tochter*, English *daughter*, and Polish *córka*; or the Lithuanian *mėnuo*, English *month*, and German *Monat*. Although the languages are different now, their sounds testify to the fact that many centuries ago the situation was quite different. The history of sounds addresses also loanwords and their passage from one language to another. For example, the German *Rathaus*, Polish  *ratusz*, and Lithuanian *rotušė* mean the same because the Poles borrowed it from the Germans, and later the Lithuanians borrowed it from the Poles.

This genealogical history of sounds is like a biological science: tracing DNA sequences is like tracing and reconstructing sound sequences. Thus, we can say that throughout the centuries, the changes in Lithuanian “DNA sequences” have been less numerous than in other languages, and that is the reason why it is considered to be a very old language.

The cultural and social history of language is different. It is more concerned, for example, with why the languages of the neighbours German and Polish have the letter *w*, while Lithuanian and Latvian do not; or why the letter *y* comes at the end of the German and Polish alphabets, while in the Lithuanian alphabet it is in the first half, alongside the letters *i* and *j*; or why the Italian equivalent of the Latin *littera* is *lettera*, the English is *letter*, and the Polish *litera*; but the Germans use the word *Buchstabe*, the Latvians *burts*, and the Lithuanians *raidė*. We can call this kind of linguistic history the history of letters (in contrast to the history of sounds) or the history of the written language. Writing has always been difficult to learn or teach, it required schools, scriptoria, and grammars; it has never come naturally to a person. In this respect, the sounds may seem to have a more privileged status compared to the letters. But the letters are always more prestigious, they give a certain power and exclusiveness to a person; while the sounds are given to everybody naturally and in equal measure.

The social history of the Lithuanian language can be considered in the context of its relations and contacts with other languages. For a number of centuries, contacts were especially close with two living languages, German and Polish (in addition to Latin and the East Slavic written languages). Lithuanians have come into contact also with Yiddish, Russian and other languages, but these contacts have left fewer traces.

Lithuanian culture in East Prussia was strongly influenced by German culture. From the 16th century until the middle of the 20th century, East Prussia produced a large number of Lithuanian books: translations of the Bible, psalm books, grammars, dictionaries and primers, including the first Lithuanian translation of the Bible (by Jonas Bretkūnas [Bretke] in around 1590–1602) and the first Lithuanian grammar (by Danielius Kleinas in 1653). In all of these activities, Lithuanian was in close contact with German. The first Lithuanian manuscript of the Bible was mostly a translation of Luther's translation; the second Lithuanian grammar was written and published in German (in 1654); a large number of psalms in the 16th century were translated from the German; and all or almost all of the bilingual dictionaries (there were no monolingual Lithuanian dictionaries) known since the 17th century were either German-Lithuanian or Lithuanian-German.

These contacts are evident in the application of German orthographic rules to written Lithuanian in East Prussia, such as the double consonants after a short vowel, as in *stipprey* (modern Lithuanian *stipriai*) and *tikkray* (*tikrai*), the German letter *w*, and the Gothic (not Latin) alphabet.

At the time that Lithuania formed a commonwealth (federation) with Poland (1569 to 1795) and when it was occupied by the Russian Empire (1795 to 1914), the Lithuanian language in Lithuania proper was under the influence of the Polish language. In the Middle Ages, Lithuanian dukes and gentry spoke Lithuanian; but during the Renaissance they switched to Polish. Gradually, Polish became the language of culture. It is for this reason that nowadays Lithuanians sometimes take more pride in their older dukes, who spoke Lithuanian, and cannot fully accept the later ones who could not. The dominance of the Polish language meant the introduction and use of Polish letters: the digraphs *sz* and *cz* for *ś* and *ć* respectively in modern Lithuanian, and the letters *ł*, *ź*, *ż* and *ś*.

At the end of the 19th century, however, neither of the two written traditions (Prussian or Polish) would form the foundations of modern standard Lithuanian. The national movement wanted to standardise the language in such a way that it would be different from other languages in the area. The Lithuanians rejected the Polish letter *ł* (why should it be used in Lithuanian when it is not used in any other languages? they thought), refused to accept the German and Polish *w* (the Latin *v* seemed quite sufficient), and replaced *cz* and *sz* with the Czech *č* and *š* (the argument was that they were shorter). In the end, standard Lithuanian became established in Lithuania; while in East Prussia the language has disappeared, together with German, to give way to Russian in the newly emerged Kaliningrad Region. Still, some elements of the writing from East Prussia were transferred into standard Lithuanian, such as the letter *é*, the use of the letters *i* and *y*, and the majority of the case endings.

It is interesting that these letters became an integral part of the spelling at the same time as the Lithuanian (or Latin) letters were prohibited by the Russian authorities. The late development of standard Lithuanian has been responsible for

some of its modern features. For instance, *ą*, *ę*, *į*, *ų*, *ė*, *č*, *š*, *ž*, *ū* are relatively new additions to the Latin alphabet. Each has a different story: *ą* and *ę* (nasal vowels) were taken from Polish spelling by the first Lithuanian writers during the Renaissance period; while *į* and *ų* were introduced by the Lithuanians themselves by analogy. The coining of the grapheme *ė* can be attributed to Danielius Kleinas, the author of the first Lithuanian grammar, printed in 1653; *č*, *š*, and *ž* (with a diacritical mark) were borrowed from Czech in the 19th century; while *ū*, the youngest, which marked its little-noted centenary just a short while ago, was introduced by the linguist Jonas Jablonskis (whose portrait used to be printed on the five-litas note).

Modern though they are, all these additions to the Latin alphabet are a nuisance to foreigners. These diacritical marks, or accents, to them are like background noise in a recording of music, or a spot of fat on a clean tablecloth: an unavoidable nuisance, to be ignored in order to avoid irritation. Foreigners have to study long and hard to understand why in Lithuanian dictionaries the word *cinikas* (a cynic) comes before *čekistas* (a Chekist).

Another problem is that with the advent of the Internet the old Latin alphabet, which has been preserved and used in almost its original form by the English language, is seen as the most modern alphabet. The Internet is not always friendly to the German *ü*, the Latvian *ģ*, the Polish *ł* or the already mentioned Lithuanian graphemes, which look odd to the English-speaking world. It is true that, in the last few years, the developers of universal fonts, Internet browsers and e-mail programs have made great efforts to show more respect to these letters, to make them convenient to use and safe against discrimination in any way.

Lithuanians are always pleasantly surprised and glad to meet a foreigner who has learnt some of their language and is familiar with their special letters. It is gratifying to hear a foreigner speaking Lithuanian, because that is not a skill commonly found beyond the country's borders, and Lithuanian has never been widely taught as a foreign language.

To a person who is familiar with old Indo-European languages such as Latin or Ancient Greek, Lithuanian grammar will come more easily than to a person who can speak modern English, Spanish, Italian, French or German. Due to the old features of Lithuanian grammar, most foreign students find it a very difficult language to learn. It is frustrating to have to learn five declensions, each with seven cases, both in the singular and the plural. The very concept of an ending is difficult to grasp if a person speaks only English. Some learners are frustrated by the mobile stress in different forms of the same word, which sometimes outwits even the native speakers. All this is the heritage of Proto-Indo-European, traps set for a student of Lithuanian by the history of sounds.

On the other hand, the late development of standard Lithuanian offers certain advantages to learners of it. Even native speakers believe that the pronunciation is almost entirely consistent with the spelling: that is, that the words are pronounced exactly as they are spelt. One letter usually corresponds to one sound.

In this respect, Lithuanian is more modern than French or English, where the same letters do not always represent the same sound. The last English writer to enjoy a close correlation between letters and sounds was Geoffrey Chaucer in the 14th century; but William Shakespeare was deprived of this advantage, for in his time English spelling was already losing its phonetic nature. That is why it is easier for a German, an Italian or a Pole to learn to read (or pronounce) Lithuanian than to read English, because it is easier to pronounce a Lithuanian word by reading its letters. It is also easier to find a Lithuanian word in a dictionary when you hear it pronounced than it is to find an English one. So, we might say that, although Lithuanian grammar is complicated, to read it is easy.

Due to the structural peculiarities of their language, Lithuanians themselves experience various difficulties in learning other ones. For example, they find it difficult to master the use of articles in English, German, Italian, and French, because in Lithuanian (as in many other languages, such as Latin, Latvian, Russian or Polish) there are none. The concept is rendered by other means, such as definite or indefinite adjectives: *The White House* is *Baltieji Rūmai*. The word order in a Lithuanian sentence is quite free, and is a convenient means to express a variety of nuances. Therefore, when learning English or German, Lithuanians are inclined to 'improve' the syntactic constructions of these languages by 'liberating' the word order.

Everybody knows that Lithuanian has a variety of colourful swearwords: for example, *rupūžė!* (toad), *rupūs miltai!* (coarse flour), *kad tave sutrauktų!* (I wish you were contracted). But when a Lithuanian is truly angry, a foreigner may be surprised to hear Russian or English swearwords escaping his lips. The development of graffiti shows that the previously favoured Russian swearwords are gradually being replaced by English ones, which are acquiring a similar effectiveness. In the speech of town dwellers, probably the most popular Lithuanian swearword is *velnias!* (devil), but in a Catholic country the reasons for its being a swearword should be evident.

In contrast to Soviet times, the Lithuanian Constitution stipulates that "the Lithuanian language is the official language of the Republic of Lithuania." This means that it must be used in all areas of public life. The country has a National Commission for the Lithuanian Language, responsible for monitoring and correcting the use of it. It even has the right to impose fines for certain mistakes in public advertisements. On the other hand, efforts are still being made to preserve the languages of minorities, Russian, Polish, Belarusian, etc.

What do Lithuanians think is the future of their language? Some believe that with the disappearance of Soviet unifying policies, the area of use of the language has expanded and they are happy about this. They are also aware of the dangers posed to the survival of the language by the country's integration into Europe. On the other hand, the number of Lithuanians learning foreign languages is constantly increasing, because everybody understands that Lithuanian alone is not sufficient for effective communication in the world.

The foreign universities where Lithuanian is taught:

Tartu Ülikool, Estonia

Helsingin Yliopisto, Finland

Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales, Paris, France

Ernst-Moritz-Universität-Greifswald, Germany

Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Germany

Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität, Münster, Germany

Central European University, Budapest, Hungary

Università degli Studi di Firenze, Italy

Università degli Studi di Milano, Italy

Università degli Studi di Pisa, Italy

Latvijas universitāte, Rīga, Latvia

Universitetet i Oslo, Norway

Uniwersytet Warszawski, Poland

Uniwersytet Adama Mickiewicza w Poznaniu, Poland

Uniwersytet Jagielloński, Kraków, Poland

Moscow Lomonosov State University, Russia

St Petersburg State University, Russia

Univerzita Komenského v Bratislave, Slovakia

Lunds Universitet, Sweden

Universitet i Stockholm, Sweden

Universität Bern, Switzerland

University of Illinois at Chicago, USA

University of Washington, USA

Pennsylvania State University, USA





### Lithuanian Dialects

Lowland and Highland (West, East and South) Lithuanian. Traditional Lithuanian dialects can be divided into two main groups: Lowland (Samogitian) and Highland. The wider line on the map separates the two dialects. These two dialects are so different that a Lowlander cannot communicate with an east or south Highlander unless they speak standard Lithuanian. This demonstrates how settled the way of life used to be. Dialects develop when people remain in one place for many centuries. Inhabitants of Lithuania escaped most of the great migrations of the fourth to the sixth centuries that took place in Europe and that modified certain features of languages and dialects.



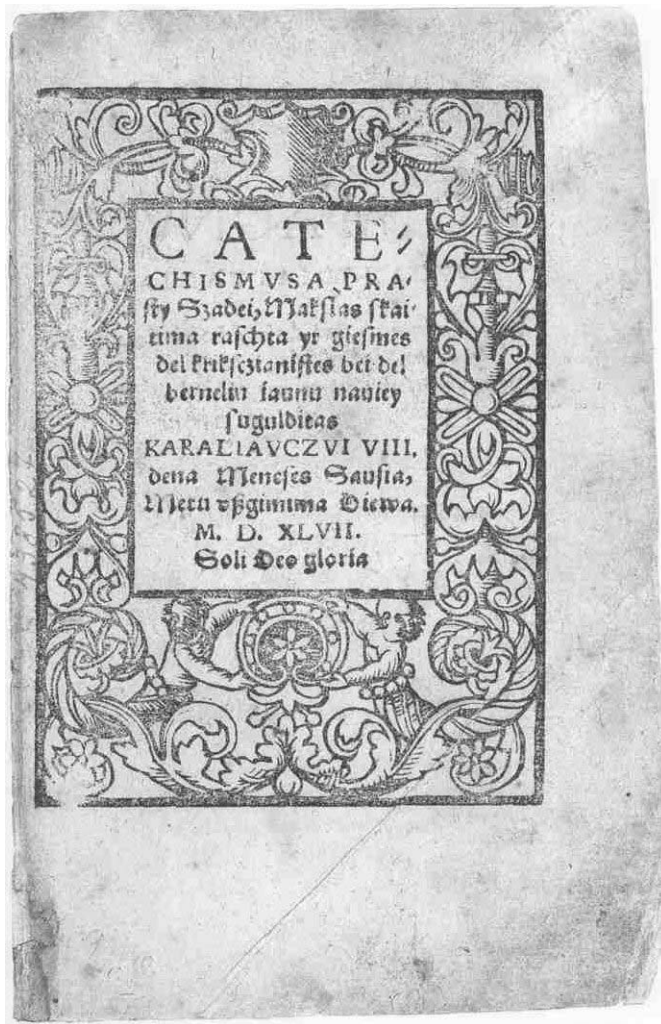
### The Balts at the Beginning of the 13th Century

For the Balts, the early 13th century was when they emerged from oblivion to enter European history and become permanent participants in it. This was the time when the two German orders, the Teutonic and the Livonian Order, first appeared on the territories inhabited by the Balts and slowly settled in the areas of the old Prussian and Latvian tribes. It was the time when the pre-Christian Lithuanian state emerged, capable of defending itself against the militant neighbouring orders. Old Prussian tribes lived in Pamedé, Pagudé, Varmé, Nontanga, Barta, Semba, Narduva and Skalva. From the 13th century, these lands were gradually conquered by the Teutonic Order.

The present-day Latvian nation was formed from the Latvian and Latgalian tribes, and included some Selians, Semigallians and Curonians. It also assimilated some non-Indo-European tribes, for example the Livs, who were related to the Finns. From the 13th century onwards, these territories were long dominated by the Livonian Order and its successors.

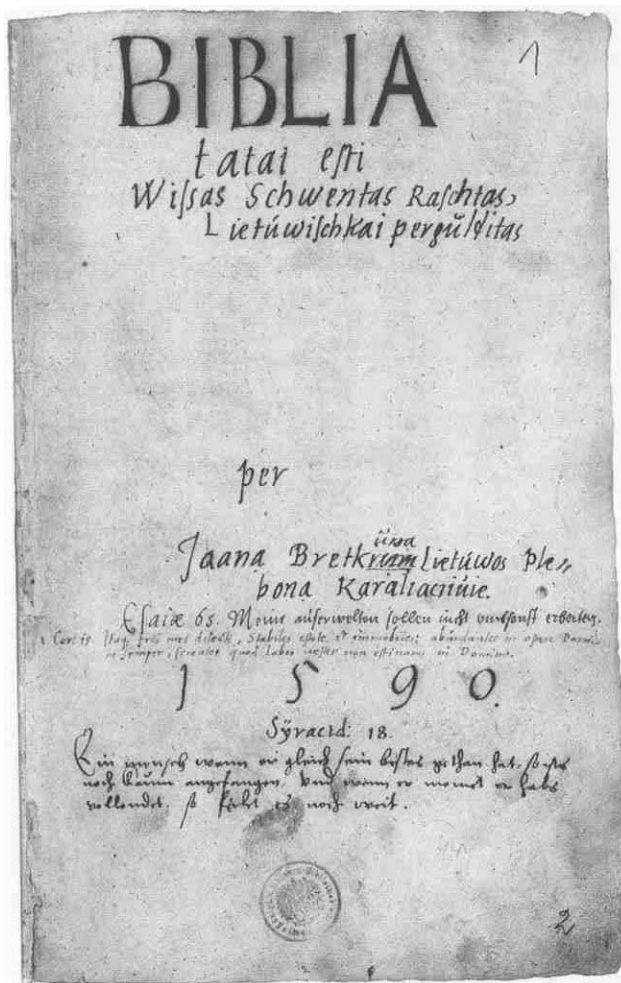
The present-day Lithuanian nation was formed mainly from the Lithuanian and Samogitian tribes, but included Semigallians, Curonians, Sudovians and Yotvingians. The Lithuanian state, which emerged in the middle of the 13th century, has retained to this day these lands as the core of its territory, although the his-

tory of Lithuanian statehood has been very volatile. In the 13th to the 16th centuries it stretched over large areas inhabited not only by Balts but also by Slavs. From the mid-16th century to the end of the 18th century it was in a union with Poland. From the end of the 18th century to the early 20th century it was occupied by the Russian Empire. From 1944 to 1990 it was occupied by the Soviet Union. Since 1990, Lithuania has again been a democratic independent republic, like Latvia and Estonia.



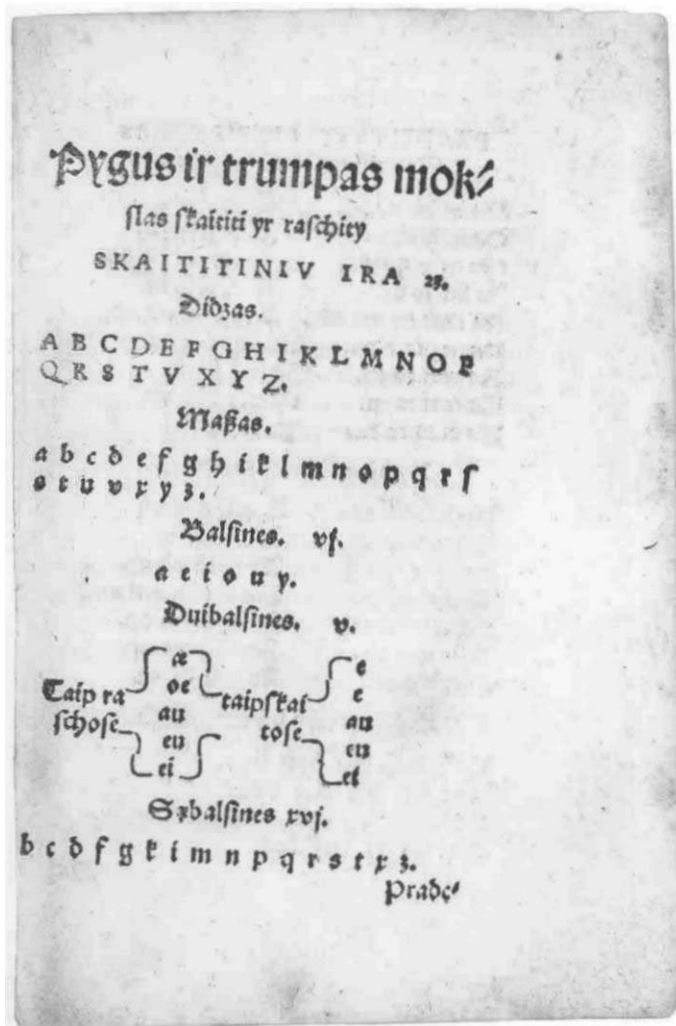
### The First Lithuanian Printed Book

The title page of the first Lithuanian book, by Martynas Mažvydas, published in Karaliaučius (Königsberg) in 1547. It includes a Lutheran catechism, the psalms, verse in Lithuanian, and a primer. This image is very popular in Lithuania: it can be seen on the sign of a library or a bookshop, in shop windows and in Vilnius University.



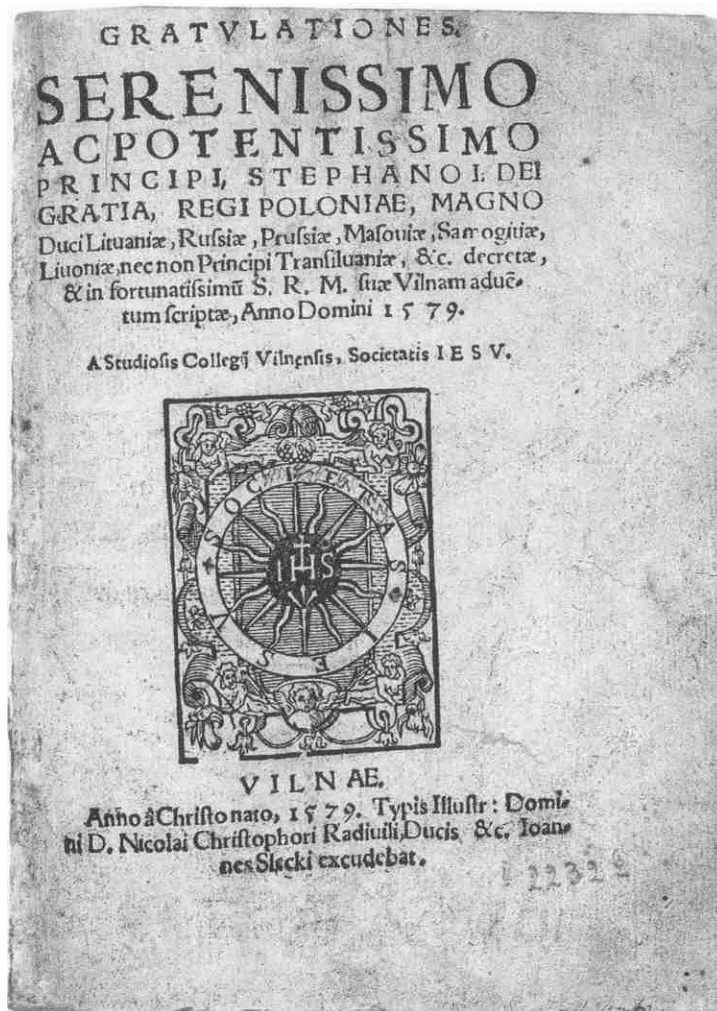
### The First Lithuanian Bible

The title page of the first Lithuanian translation of the Bible (from the end of the 16th century). This is a Lutheran Bible. Its translator, Jonas Bretkūnas (1536–1602), was a Lutheran minister in Königsberg (East Prussia). He is one of the most important personalities in the foundation of written Lithuanian. This manuscript had never been published before the end of the 20th century, when two German professors, Jochen D. Range and Friedrich Scholz, started publishing a facsimile of it. The eight volumes of the original manuscript are held in the Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz in Berlin, Germany (XX HA, StUB Kgbg. 44–51).



### The First Lithuanian Primer

The first Lithuanian primer, included in Martynas Mažvydas' book (1547), 354 years before the 1901 Lithuanian grammar that laid the foundations of standard Lithuanian. Mažvydas' primer used only the original Roman alphabet: the diacritics (*i, u, é, š, č, ž* etc), so typical of contemporary Lithuanian orthography, were introduced later.



A Latin Book from 1579

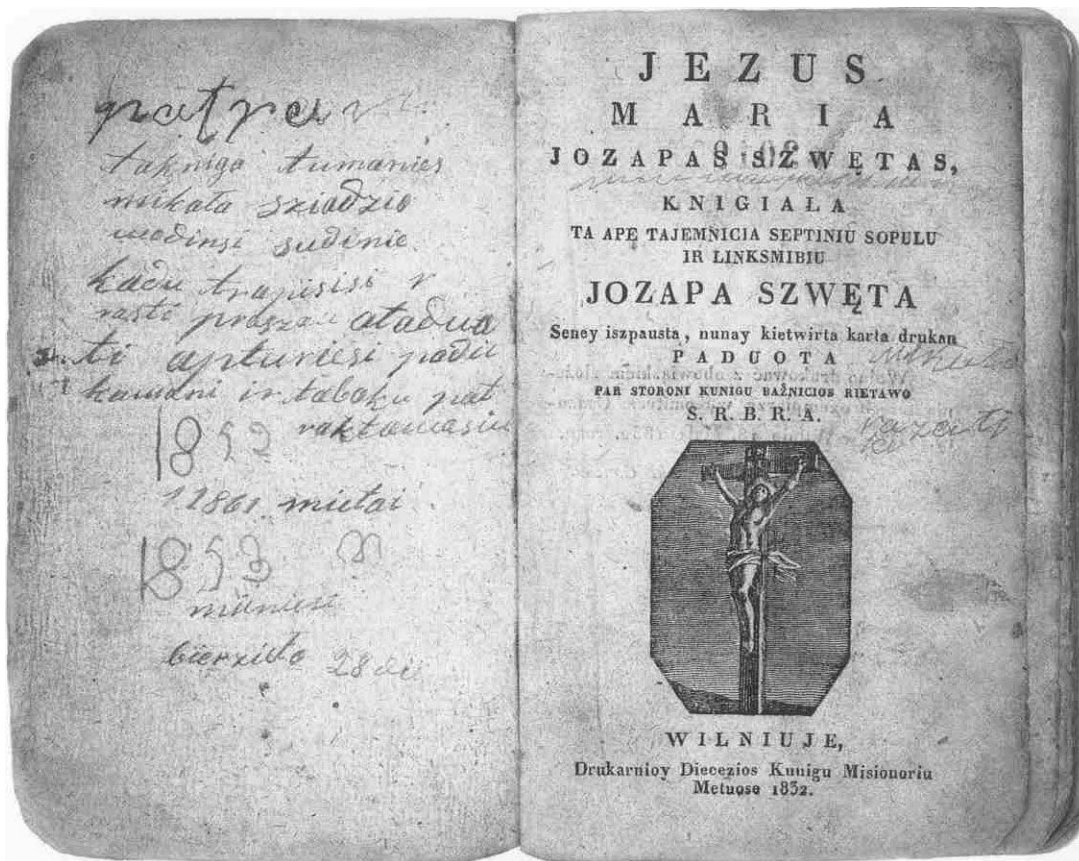
Throughout the centuries, books were published in various languages in Lithuania. Naturally, Latin was one of the main languages. This is an example of a Latin publication from 1579 (the year of the foundation of Vilnius University) *Laudations to His Excellency His Majesty King Stephen I*



#### A Lithuanian Text in a Jewish Script

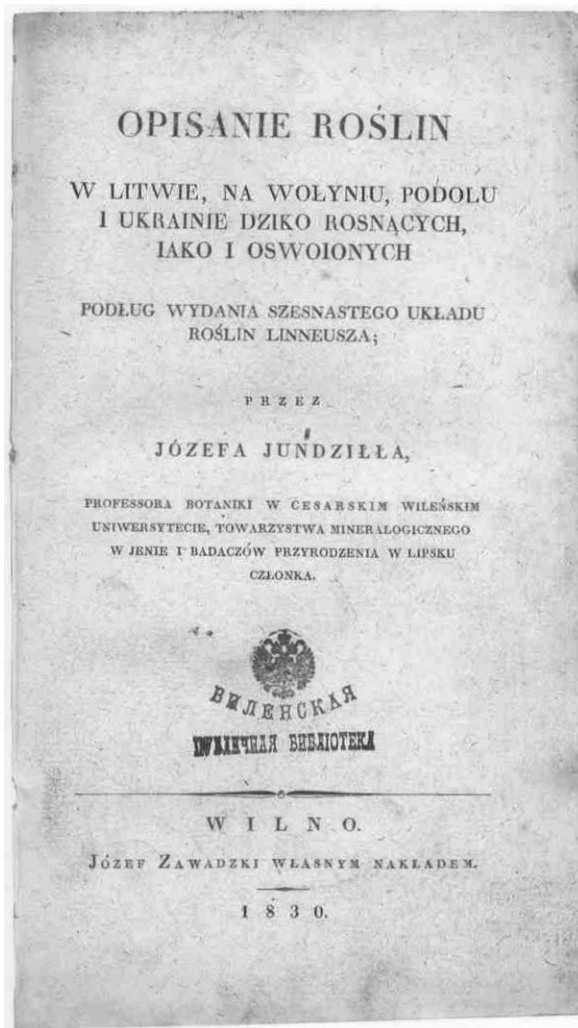
Jonas Krizostomas Gintila (1788–1857) was a Hebrew scholar, professor at Vilnius University, and Catholic Bishop of Samogitia (western Lithuania). His legacy includes a great number of Hebrew and Yiddish manuscripts, and a Lithuanian manuscript in Yiddish letters. This is a Catholic catechism, which he intended to publish in Vilnius in 1855. The extract from the manuscript says: “Act and Prayers that we must say every day”. Yiddish lettering was probably chosen to help in the baptism of Jews (to convert them to Catholicism).





### A Religious Book from 1832

In the first half of the 19th century, Lithuanian was the language of the peasants and the lower gentry. Most of the books printed in Lithuanian were religious. This is one example of such a book. In the absence of Lithuanian schools and textbooks in the first half of the 19th century, religious books (the catechism, prayer books and psalm books) were often used to teach children to read Lithuanian.



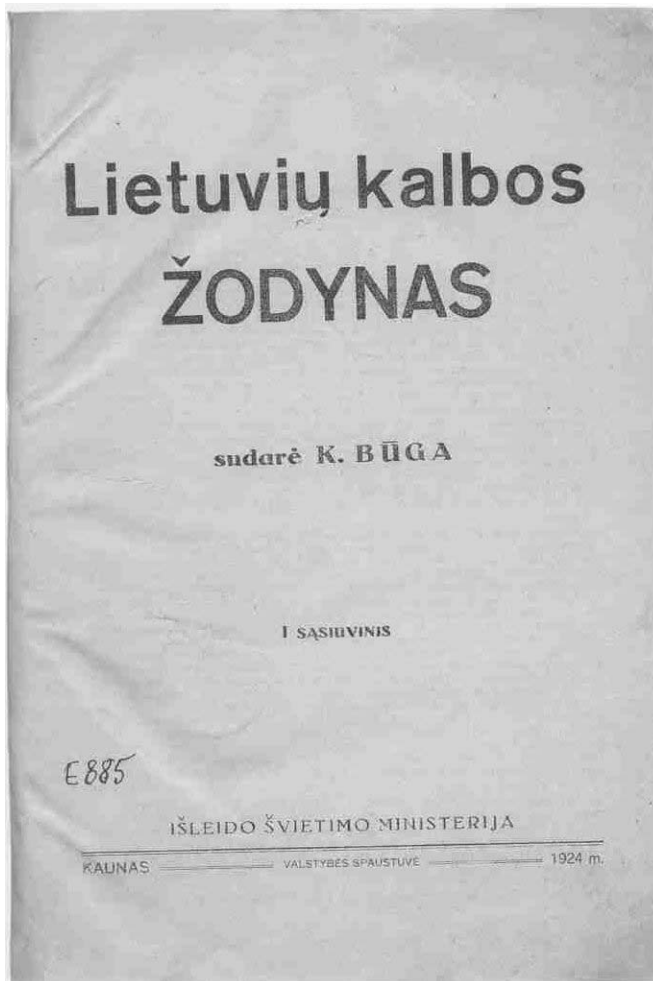
### An Academic Book in Polish from 1830

In the first half of the 19th century, academic works in Lithuania were written in Polish, which was the main language for general Lithuanian culture used by the upper classes. This well-known Polish treatise by the botanist Juozapas Jundzilas on plants found in Lithuania and Ukraine (printed in Vilnius in 1830) is a typical example.



### A Lithuanian Primer in Cyrillic

When Lithuania was incorporated into the Russian Empire, the Russian authorities prohibited the use of the Latin alphabet for Lithuanian. The prohibition lasted for 40 years (1864 to 1904). The idea was to draw the Lithuanians away from Polish and towards Russian culture. Cyrillic was adapted for the Lithuanian language. This is a Lithuanian primer printed in Cyrillic. In the 40 years of the prohibition, the Russian authorities managed to publish only 60 books in Lithuanian in this way (1.5 books per year). Resistance to the official use of Cyrillic for Lithuanian was very strong. A great number of books and periodicals were printed in the Latin script in neighbouring Prussia, and then smuggled across the border. Many of the book carriers were caught, convicted and exiled to Siberia. The linguistic and cultural resistance was so strong that during the prohibition the foundations for standard Lithuanian based on the Latin script were laid. Another factor that stimulated the emergence of standard Lithuanian was the development of a civil society (serfdom was abolished in 1861 and all the population became free citizens).



### A Comprehensive Dictionary

A dictionary of Lithuanian, which took a hundred years to complete. In the summer of 2002, the Lithuanian Language Institute published the last, the 20th volume. This is the largest ever dictionary of the Lithuanian language, comprising around 20,000 pages and about 500,000 entries, compiled on the basis of a file containing five million quotations, drawn not only from old and contemporary texts, but also from all the dialects of Lithuanian. In short, this is the largest ever reference book of Lithuanian words.

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