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A history of East Baltic through language contact

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Conclusion

One of the first goals set out in this dissertation was to scrutinize the stereotype of the Baltic languages as ‘pure’ Indo-European languages which have experienced minimal external influences. Through a detailed study of all possible contact events, both with attested and unattested languages, I have attempted to demonstrate that a significant part of the Baltic lexicon cannot be explained on internal grounds. However, most interactions which have contributed to the Baltic lexicon appear to have been with unknown languages, by contrast, for instance, to Finnic, which is known to have been in contact with several Indo-European languages throughout its history.

No Indo-European loanword layers can be identified with certainty in Baltic prior to those with Gothic at the start of the Common Era. Contacts with Slavic, as far as we can make out, only started after the northern migration of (pre-)North Russian speakers. In addition, a notable layer of Baltic loanwords can be identified in Finnic, suggesting a significant contact event. However, even though the source of these loans seems to be more closely affiliated to East Baltic than West Baltic, and there is evidence that the source language has undergone some specifically East Baltic semantic and formal developments, it remains improbable that this was the direct ancestor of the attested East Baltic languages. There does not appear to be any old Finnic contribution to the Baltic lexicon, and the evidence seems to support the notion of an East Baltic substrate, most probably spoken to the east of the current Baltic territories, which was absorbed by Finnic some time before the Common Era. In addition, we see small layers of

loanwords in both Sámi and Mordvin, suggesting some peripheral contact with this or a closely related Baltic language.

We have approached the question of non-Indo-European components in the Baltic lexicon from multiple angles. First, we have attempted to find words common to both Baltic and Finnic which are unlikely on phonological grounds to have been adopted directly from one to the other. Although there are few relatively clear cases, there are a number of convincing examples which allow for a hypothesis that Baltic and Finnic were independently in contact with similar, and probably also distinct, 'autochthonous' populations upon their arrival in the Baltic Sea region.

As we are able to operate in the context of regular sound correspondences (or more specifically, their absence), it is somewhat easier to make a case for a non-Indo-European element in Baltic lexical items with Indo-European comparanda. Almost fifty relatively clear cases were identified. Some initial efforts can be made to stratify this material, and at least one relatively coherent and distinct stratum can be identified, consisting primarily of bird names with a second syllable of the shape **V(N)D*. In addition to this, we can distinguish a number of widespread *Wanderwörter*, most significantly in the domain of cultivated plants, whose proximate source in the Baltic languages cannot be identified in any known language, and which may be reasoned at least partly to have originated among Neolithic farming populations.

Contact with unattested languages is an area of study which has long been marginalized, partly for the reason that it is considered impossible to study, *a priori* unscientific, or inevitably circular. As a result of these prejudices, this subfield remains in its infancy. One of the goals of this dissertation has been to demonstrate the feasibility of

constraining the study of such contacts within scientific principles. It is important that a 'substrate' hypothesis is treated as strictly and objectively as a hypothesis of cognancy, and built on the basis of positive evidence. In this context, a suggestion of non-Indo-European origin can be viewed as a reasoned scientific solution to the problem of irregular sound correspondence, and not as a last resort or throwaway suggestion.

It is certainly not true that the Baltic languages have developed in a vacuum, void of contact with other languages. Instead, most of the language contact has taken place in a preliterate context, with languages which never came to be written down, or of which no written trace has yet been uncovered. This is actually precisely what we should expect, since the area where the Balts have come to reside has been populated since the end of the last Ice Age by numerous genetically distinct populations, undoubtedly bringing with them different languages, while writing has only reached the region in the Middle Ages. In this context, traces of foreign languages preserved in the modern Baltic languages can be seen as a valuable resource and a potential key to unlocking the population history of the region.

