BALTIC PALAEOCOMPARATIVISM
AND THE IDEA THAT LITHUANIAN IS
A NEO-LATIN LANGUAGE

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Introduction

Among the humanists active at the Vilnius court in the second half of the sixteenth century Venceslaus Agrippa (1525–1597) is worthy of mention, because of his peculiar linguistic ideas. Agrippa's intellectual activity belonged to the same humanistic movement which was current in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and which favored a general 'Latinization' of public and cultural life (cf. Dini 1999a). These humanists, the so-called Latinizers, preferred to emphasize the affinity of Latin and Lithuanian and to demonstrate the similarity between the two languages. The most well known of them were Michalo Lituanus (ca. 1490 – ca. 1560), the father of V. Agrippa, and Augustinus Rotundus (ca. 1520–1582). In this paper I shall discuss V. Agrippa's conception of the linguistic relationships between Latin and Lithuanian.

1. Agrippa's Ideas

Venceslaus Agrippa, who studied at various universities, including Lipsia, Cracow and Wittenberg, surpassed his companions and thought that the Lithuanian language tout court derived from Latin, just like Spanish, Italian, French and the other Neo-Latin languages. This new and more radical formulation of the relationship between Latin and Lithuanian was contemporary but independent of the other ideas circulating at the same time.

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time. Agrippa’s linguistic ideas may certainly be considered as a further development of the so-called Latin Theory of the Baltic languages firstly initiated by Jan Długosz (1415/19–1480).³

Agrippa expressed his ideas in some passages of the *Oratio funebris de illvstrissimi principis ...* (Wittenberg 1553),⁴ a text composed in Latin on the occasion of Jonas Radvila’s death, and published in Germany. This work is considered the best example of the glorification of Lithuania as a multiethnic state, and of the Lithuanians as a people rich in positive qualities, defending their independence from the aggression of neighbors.

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³ Cf. Dini 1999b with further literature.
⁴ I am indebted to Giedrius Subačius for a copy of this book.