

ANGELA MARCANTONIO, *The Uralic Language Family. Facts, Myths and Statistics*, Oxford UK & Boston USA: Blackwell Publishers, 2002, pp. 335. Publications of the Philological Society 35.

Doctor Angela Marcantonio, researcher of Finno-Ugristics from the University of Rome "La Sapienza", has accomplished something that her colleagues usually do not engage themselves in. Namely, she has scrupulously read through all, also the least essential, Finno-Ugric research works through times. As a result of her activity she noticed that a number of works, belonging to the Finno-Ugristic classics had in the course of time become myths, one way or another. It means that instead of understanding the actual contents or nature of the works, certain stereotypical notions about the contents or nature, far from truthful, have been circulating among Finno-Ugristic researchers. In a number of cases a similar observation is extended also over what has taken place in the history of Finno-Ugristics. Eventually, the so-called fundamentals of Finno-Ugristics have also been critically addressed. Observing the picture, unfurled by Marcantonio, one can naturally anticipate that Finno-Ugristics is no exception: to a certain degree a similar fate has struck the sciences researching other language groups. Besides, the phenomenon is of a much wider scope than just linguistics or the humanities – it is probably characteristic of the scientific activity as a whole and through the ages. The more welcome it is when, at some instant, someone steps up saying: it is high time to take an account of the household of our science – there are probably things in the account that have long since disappeared or that are not useable any longer. In place of some things there is only a distant memory, often obscured beyond recognition: just nothing but a myth. And so, Marcantonio has taken an account of the results which may certainly appear as a very bad surprise to numerous traditional Finno-Ugrists. It is hard to foretell how they react. Not that there is much to say against Marcantonio's well-documented factology and strictly logical argumentation, however, a few opponents are definitely going to emerge. I suppose that most of them prefer acknowledging the appearance of Marcantonio's book with silence: what is not talked about, does not exist.

But back to the contents of Marcantonio's book. As examples of such mythicized works Marcantonio mentions the publications of several 19th c. leading Finno-Ugrists that were supposed to have proved the affinity of Finno-Ugric (or Uralic) languages. Re-reading the works now it becomes clear that they contain nothing else but, from today's point of view, more or less reliable comparisons from those languages, followed by an opinion/supposition/assumption (not proof!) about the affinity of the languages. An example of the mythicized events in the history of Finno-Ugrics is a spread fantasy about the victory of the "Ugric camp" over the "Turkish camp" in the Hungarian 19th c. linguistic "Ugric-Turkish war". Based on concrete factual material, Marcantonio indicates that the leading figure of the "winners" Joseph Budenz did actually regard Hungarian and the other Finno-Ugric languages, coupled with Turkic languages, as belonging to a broader Altaic language family; he also considered as correct a number of word etymologies in which Hungarian words were associated with Turkic ones, proposed by the "Turkish camp". Instead of some Turkic equivalents he proposed Ob-Ugric equivalents to Hungarian words but in many cases his Ob-Ugric equivalents, in comparison with respective Turkic ones, undoubtedly were less convincing and partly even clearly erroneous. It is only that for various reasons, including political-ideological ones, the standpoints of the "Ugric camp" began to be preferred and the Hungarian language was deliberately and wilfully declared to belong to Finno-Ugric languages. The "battle" itself has never quite completely ceased to date but it has proceeded as a less noticeable "guerilla warfare". The near future will tell if after the appearance of Marcantonio's book the Finno-Ugric-Turkic discussion about the Hungarian language is going to liven up. (So far I have not observed in print any reaction to the 20-page paper "The "Ugric-Turkic Battle": A Critical Review" on the same subject and direction by Angela Marcantonio, Pirjo Nummenaho and Michela Salvagni, published in the journal "Linguistica Uralica" No 2, 2001. As is also the case, by the way, with the other texts, written in the spirit of her book under observation, and presented by her and by her together with Nummenaho at the Ninth International Congress of Finno-Ugrics in 2000, published in 2001 in Volume V of the collection of the congress papers. What is not talked about, does not exist?!)

Marcantonio emphasises that she does not regard herself as a representative of any tendency in the Uralistics. Her method can be summarised by one notion: evidence. An extensive observation of lexical and grammatical evidence of Uralic and neighbouring languages would not permit her to agree with the views as if those formed a separate

linguistic condensation, entity or intertwinement (Marcantonio uses *node* in English), and she denies the existence of the Uralic language family as a *node*. In a slightly exaggerated manner, the result of Marcantonio's analysis of Uralic languages could be compared to a mental picture in which the Uralists have drawn a circle at the sea surface by a rod and argue that inside that circle there is a kind of particular Uralic water, distinctly different from the surrounding seawater and in which there is only a little "borrowed" water from what encircles it. Such a mental picture would naturally be nonsensical and Marcantonio's book intends to show that as to the origin, the often supposed lexical and grammatical borrowings turn out to be territorially very extensive and unspecified phenomena – I would call them wandering phenomena (cf., e.g., *Wanderwort*, used as a concept in linguistics).

Marcantonio considers the comparative method, implemented in the observation of the history of Uralic languages by traditional Uralists, inept already by its nature (I cannot but agree with it). But she convincingly shows that even the method itself is used in the most inconsistent manner: the result is presented not as a consequence of a strict observation of the rules of the method but as methodologically rickety, based on some general impression or "feeling". The latter procedure clearly manifests itself in the reconstruction of the Proto-Uralic word stock: irregular evidence is indifferently ignored, its irregularity is only admitted; the lack of evidence in a Uralic language is interpreted as a loss in that language. Therefore the larger part of Proto-Uralic words have not been reconstructed in accordance with the established phonetic laws and as based on the immediate actual evidence of concrete Uralic languages. They may have been grounded altogether on reconstructions of intermediate proto-languages, for instance, the reconstructions of the intermediate Proto-Finnish-Permic, on the one hand, and those of the intermediate Proto-Samoyed, on the other, deliberately neglecting the incompatible data of Ugric languages, and this is a speculation of the utmost questionable nature.

I am convinced that anyone who attentively acquaints oneself with the book and thoroughly contemplates on it, sees the Uralic language group and its history in a totally different light. In the light that also opens completely new perspectives in their research. The appearance of the book is an occasion and its impact on the Uralistics is hard to overestimate. Even in case when the first reaction is concealment: Angela Marcantonio's unconventional message penetrates into the reader's thoughts and begins to live its own hidden life there until one day it breaks into the open. The author's analysis involves the problems of both word

stock and grammar of Uralic languages and is exceptionally rich in detail. Although I am convinced that the book deserves a highly detailed presentation, I believe it is more important still to inform my colleagues about its appearance and main direction. No paraphrase replaces the actual reading of the book and I warmly recommend my colleagues not to lose time to do so.

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