

BALTIC STUDIES IN ITALY DURING THE 20TH CENTURY

Pietro Umberto Dini
pietro.dini@unipi.it
Rosario Napolitano
rosario.napolitano@lma.lv

Keywords: *Baltic studies, Italy, interwar period, Post-Soviet period*

This article provides an overview of the Baltic studies in Italy during the 20th century. In Italy, there have been three important periods of interest in the cultures of the people of the Eastern Baltic, including Estonians and Finns, accompanied by collaborative efforts. The first period dates back to the Renaissance in the 16th and 17th centuries, when humanism was the dominant trend. The second period occurred during the independence of the Baltic states between the two world wars in the first decades of the 20th century. The third period started after the restoration of the Baltic independence in 1991.

This contribution is divided into two parts. The first part deals with the development of Baltic studies in Italy in the inter-war period and the second one — with the situation after the Baltic states regained their independence.

Introduction

To date, in Italy there have been three main periods of interest in eastern Baltic cultures which were accompanied by increased efforts for rapprochement.

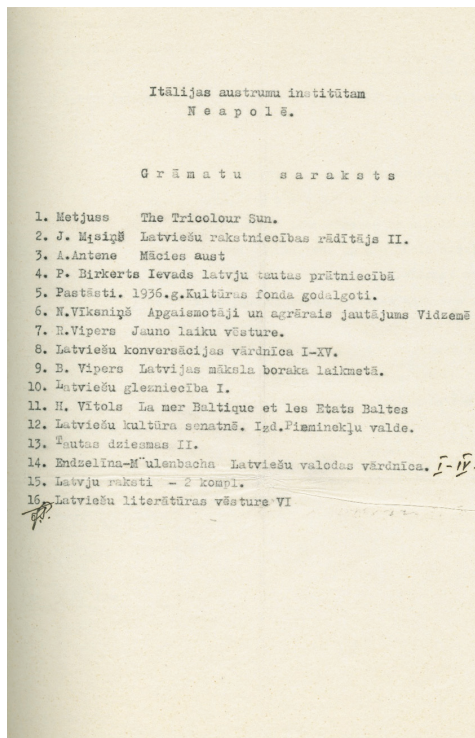
The first occurred during the Renaissance, amid the Humanist movement of the 16th and 17th centuries. The second was the first decades of the 20th century, during the interwar independence of Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian republics. The third followed a two-year period of identity protest in 1989–1990 and the restoration of independence, which corresponded with a resumption of contacts, also at an academic level. Baltic studies in Italy peaked during

the interwar period (1918–1940), especially in 1921, when the Baltic section of *Istituto per l'Europa Orientale* (Institute for Eastern Europe, hereafter IpEO) was established.

This Baltic section was directed by the linguist Giacomo Devoto (1897–1974), who also coordinated the journal *Studi Baltici*. After that, clear interest was expressed within the academic community when a Baltic section was also established at the *Regio Istituto Orientale di Napoli* in 1936, under Luigi Salvini (1911–1956). Salvini also took charge of the Slavic and Finno-Ugric sections at the same university. After the liquidation of the IpEO, in 1944, interest



Edvardas Viskantas, lecturer of Lithuanian language and literature at the Regio Istituto Orientale di Napoli between 1937 and 1939 (picture from Maironio Lietuvių Literatūros Muziejus, 1928)



List of books sent by the Latvian Government to the Latvian language Chair of Regio Istituto Orientale di Napoli, 1937 (Latvijas Valsts Vēstures Arhīvs/Latvian Historical-State Archive, LVVA: 2575 f., 9 apr., 35 l., 60 lp.). Picture made by Rosario Napolitano

in Baltic studies continued in Italy after the Second World War, though they were not pursued so enthusiastically. Only after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Baltic studies spread again in Italy: indeed, in 1998 the only extant Chair of Baltic Philology was established at the University of Pisa.

The IpEO and the Baltic Section

The aim of the IpEO was to create a link between the Italian intelligentsia and Russian exiles, as well other eastern European intellectuals, after the First World War. The institute provided a reference point in the new post-First World War reality in Italy

and Western Europe.¹ Several sections were opened within the IpEO: the first one was the Slavic section, followed by the Rumanian section (in 1927), while the Baltic, Finno-Ugric, and Albanian sections were launched in 1931.² Devoto, at that time a professor of the comparative history of classical languages at the University of Padua, was nominated to become responsible for the Baltic section of the IpEO, as well as the editor of the journal *Studi Baltici*, of which one issue was published almost every year from 1931 until 1942.³ During this period, 102 articles by Italian scholars, such as Giuliano Bonfante (1904–2005) and Giuseppe Salvatore (died 1944), and foreign scholars, such

as linguists Max Niedermann (1874–1954), Jānis Endzelīns (1873–1961), and Ernests Blese (1872–1964) were published.⁴ Moreover, Devoto visited the Baltic states and Finland at the end of 1933, giving a course in Kaunas (where he spent most of the time during his visit), but also visited Riga (where he met Endzelīns⁵), Tartu, and Helsinki. Devoto returned to the Baltic states once more, in August 1937, attending the first conference of Baltic historians (*Pirmā Baltijas vēsturnieku konference*) in Riga. Numerous scholars from countries such as Lithuania, Germany, Poland, France, and Finland took part. Devoto gave a presentation titled “*Come comincia la storia baltica*” (How Baltic history begins).⁶ This was the last visit made by Devoto to the Baltic states.

Baltic Studies in Naples and Rome

The destiny of Baltic languages and cultures in Italy was entrusted to the translator and literary critic, Salvini. Salvini's name is not only linked with Baltic studies but also with the Balkans. He was born in Milano, in 1911 and, already during his youth, he showed an interest in eastern Europe. In

1933, he discussed his thesis in Bulgarian literature — the first in Italy — with the slavist, Enrico Damiani (1892–1953). From 1933 till 1935, he was a lecturer of Italian language, first in Helsinki then in Tartu. In 1936, Salvini came back to Italy and was elected responsible for the Slavic, Baltic, and Finno-Ugric sections at the *Regio Istituto Orientale di Napoli*. The Baltic section included the lecturer of Lithuanian language, Edvardas Viskantas (1902–2002), and the lecturer of Latvian language, Marta Rasupe (1900–1982), while Salvini undertook the teaching of the Estonian language.⁷ Most of the archival documents are related to teaching of Latvian language and literature. Indeed, its class at the end of 1937 included six students.⁸ The library of the *Regio Istituto Orientale di Napoli* received a number of important volumes thanks to the help of Arnolds Spekke (1887–1972), who was at that time the Latvian Ambassador in Rome.⁹ Rasupe's experience in Naples was interrupted by a diplomatic incident in December of the same year when, according to the Italian police, she took a picture of “a black man who gave charity to one white man”, an episode that could represent a



The grave of Marta Rasupe in Benevento cemetery, Italy. Photograph by Anna D'Andrea and Sergio Romano

scandal.¹⁰ Rasupe was fired from l'Orientale and, in mid-1938, she was appointed as lecturer of Latvian language and literature at the University of Rome, also with Spekke's help.¹¹ The Baltic section was moved to Rome, but it was never activated because, during summer 1940, the Soviet Union invaded the Baltic states, interrupting the diplomatic and cultural relations between Italy and the eastern Baltic region for almost fifty years. However, after the end of the Second World War, Rasupe stayed in Italy and never came back to Latvia, managing to teach the Latvian language in Rome, where she worked from 1939 until 1966.

The Books *Lettonia*, and *Estonia*, and the unpublished "Lithuania"

Two more important moments that show the cultural links between Italy and the Baltic states are represented by two publications: the volumes *Lettonia* (1939) and *Estonia* (1943). Both volumes were a part of a series of monographs in *Il mondo oggi* (The World Today), published by Edizioni Roma.¹²

The volume *Lettonia* included nine contributions, aiming "to better understand the historical, political and cultural aspects of a country [Latvia] which is linked with Italy through a true friendship".¹³ The volume was promoted by Salvini, and included the results of collaboration of several prestigious Latvian and Italian scholars. Devoto dealt with the fourth chapter, entitled "*Le origini e la lingua dei lettone*" (The origins and language of Latvians), which focused on Baltic linguistics, specifically, on the Latvian language, as well as on historic events concerning the Latvian people. Other notable contributors included Rasupe and the historian and diplomat Spekke, who led the Latvian Embassy in Rome from 1933 until 1940. Spekke wrote the first chapter that was entitled "*Storia sintetica del popolo*

lettone" (A Concise History of the Latvian People).

Salvini contributed also to Estonian studies, first, publishing the "*Sommario della letteratura estone*" (Summary/Recap of Estonian literature), where the young scholar shows the belonging of the Estonian language within the Finno-Ugric family, the fundamental stages of Estonian literature, adding information about folklore, and a section related to cultural relations with Italy.¹⁴ Second, Salvini contributed to the volume *Estonia*, published only in 1943, with a long preparation, as it is reported in the archive documents found at the Archivio Luigi Salvini at the University of Pisa. The volume is considered the first book in the Italian language about Estonia and includes eight contributions, among them Salvini's, who wrote the introduction and the chapter "*La letteratura estone*" (The Estonian literature). Erst Ein (1898–1956), director of the Italian–Estonian Academic Society, dealt with the chapter "*I rapporti italo-estoni*" (Italian–Estonian relations), Manlio Magini (1913–2003), lecturer at the Italian Institute of Culture, which was the only Italian institute in the Baltic states during the interwar period, wrote the chapter "*L'Estonia economica*" (The economy of Estonia), and the musician Riho Päts (1899–1977) contributed "*Lo sviluppo della musica*"¹⁵ (The development of the Estonian music).

Finally, it is worth mentioning that Salvini also planned to publish a book about Lithuania in the same series, though this was not accomplished due to political changes.¹⁶ The papers preserved in the Salvini Archive brought to light clear evidence that Salvini received support from both the Lithuanian Embassy in Rome and the Italian Embassy in Kaunas, and that he was contacting people concerning the realisation of this book.¹⁷

Postwar period, 1990s and 2000s: A real new beginning?

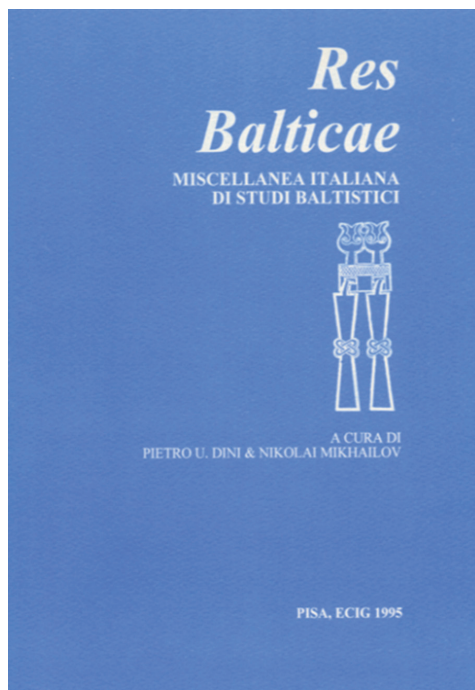
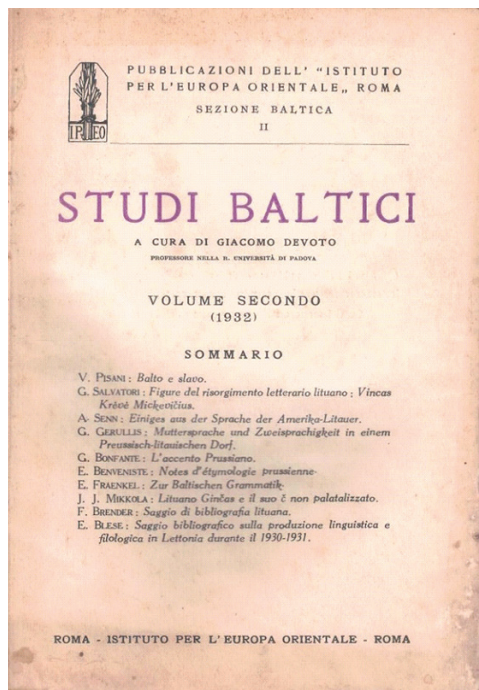
Until around the middle of the 20th century, the basics of the Baltic languages were essentially taught within courses of Glottology, held in all universities in Italy. The founders of the discipline, the glottologists Devoto in Florence, Vittore Pisani (1899–1990) in Milan, and Bonfante in Turin, were active during these years. Towards the 1970s, Guido Michelini (1951–2020) began his career, first in Milan, at the Catholic University (from 1978 to 1987), then in Potenza and Parma (since 1994; Baltic philology since 2005). He graduated from the University of Vilnius, received many Lithuanian honours¹⁸, and has been the *trait d'union* between the discipline's founders and the younger generations.¹⁹ His wife, Birutė Žindžiūtė, led a Lithuanian language lectureship for several years, first in Milan and then in Parma.

Beginning in the academic year 1985/1986, Devoto's tradition at the University of Florence was taken over by Maria Teresa Ademollo Gagliano who taught Baltic Philology there almost until her departure from the role. Still in Florence, the journal *Ponto-Baltica* (1981–2005, 11 vols.), founded and edited by Carlo Alberto Mastrelli (1923–2018), was published and obviously attentive to Baltic themes. As a result of a fruitful friendship and scientific collaboration between Nikolai Mikhailov (1967–2010) and Pietro Umberto Dini, the journal *Res Balticae. Miscellanea italiana di studi baltistici* (13 vols. to date) was founded, in which Latvian and Lithuanian scholars also collaborated.²⁰ Since 2014, the journal has been joined by a series publishing both monographs and miscellaneous volumes, *Studia Baltica Pisana* (7 vols. to date).²¹ The journal and the series are organs of the Chair of Baltic Philology at the Department of Philology, Literature, and Linguistics of the University of Pisa.

On the other hand, however, post-war European geopolitics has been anything but favourable to the development of Baltic studies in Italy. In the context of the Cold War, the eastern Baltic, as seen from Italy, became such a marginal and peripheral area that direct contacts with Latvia and Lithuania were almost completely closed. This led to the stagnation of Italian Baltic studies, and at the same time, the absence, for many years, of specific teaching in universities capable of guaranteeing the development of an Italian Baltology with constant investigative activity over time. It was only after the restoration of independent Baltic republics on the political map of Europe (i.e. in the 1990s) that the question of a continuous and lasting cultural exchange with Italy came up again. First at the University of Basilicata and the University of Florence, and later also at those of Parma and Pisa, Baltic languages and Baltic philology were taught in Italy.

The Baltic disciplines, like quite a few other “minor disciplines” — in German so-called *Orchideenfächer* — have undergone a major downsizing. As early as in 2000, a reform of the Scientific Disciplinary Sectors (SSD) in Italian universities stipulated that only those sectors officially chosen by at least three professors in the academy would remain, and the others would be absorbed into new, more generalist SSDs; at the time, only two professors — Ademollo Gagliano (University of Florence) and Dini (University of Pisa) — chose to join the specific SSD L09F/Baltic Philology, which therefore ceased to exist. As a result of subsequent reforms and retirements, since the 1998/1999 academic year, the unique place where the teaching of Baltic Philology has been kept alive in Italy is at the University of Pisa.

In this situation, the Chair of Baltic Philology is in fact the catalyst for many scientific activities related to the Baltic studies and the Baltic world in a broader sense. The Chair collaborates with many other



Second issue of *Studi Baltici* (1932), and first issue of *Res Balticae* (1995). Picture made by Pietro U. Dini

researchers, such as Alessandro Parenti (glottologist of the University of Trento), Alessandro Vitale (politologist of the University of Milano), Piero Bugiani (translator of old Baltic chronicles at the SISMEL, Florence), and Claudio Carpini (historian, Florence). In around 20 years of activity, courses in Baltic Philology and Lithuanian Language and Culture (since the 2020/2021 academic year) have been held regularly, with an average of about five students each year. In the 2005/2006 academic year, a Lithuanian language lectureship by Rasa Kliostoraitytė was also held.²²

Over time, conferences and meetings with guests from various universities were organised. The largest international conference on Baltic studies in Italy took place in May 2019 in Pisa, attended by scholars from Lithuania, Germany, the Czech Republic, Switzerland, and six Italian universities.

In the 2019/2020 academic year, Julija Šabasevičiūtė graduated with a joint degree between the universities of Pisa and Vilnius (one of her supervisors was Diego Ardoino, also a graduate of University of Pisa and, at present, Director of the Department of Italian Linguistics and Literature at Vilnius University).²³ The Chair successfully cooperates with Latvian higher education institutions, such as the Art Academy of Latvia, Riga Technical University, and the University of Latvia, as well as with Vilnius University, Vytautas Magnus University, the Lithuanian Language Institute, the Italian Cultural Institute in Vilnius, and the Lithuanian Embassy in Rome. But everything falls on the shoulders of just two faculty members, a lecturer and Adriano Cerri, Baltist and translator.²⁴ Beyond that, funding is constantly reduced.



Back row (from left to the right): Adriano Cerri (University of Pisa); Diego Ardoino (University of Vilnius/University of Berne); and Pietro Umberto Dini (University of Pisa). Front row: Julija Šabaševičiūtė (University of Pisa). From: Gabrielė Galinytė (2021) *Isola di Baltistica in Toscana dove l'Università di Pisa coltiva un'attenzione particolare per la lingua lituana*. <https://www.itlietuviai.it/isola-di-baltistica-in-toscana-dove-luniversita-di-pisa-coltiva-unattenzione-particolare-per-la-lingua-lituana/>

Concluding remarks

Thus, despite activity and scientific productivity, the situation causes also great concern for the future fate of the Chair. On the one hand, it poses a serious problem of endurance in life for the Chair itself and, on the other hand, it testifies to the fact that

specialised knowledge is nowadays perceived and treated as an “unsustainable” luxury, perhaps even useless, thus flagrantly betraying the principle of *Universitas studiorum*.

*The article is peer-reviewed.
Raksts ir recenzēts.*

About the Authors

Pietro Umberto Dini, Prof., *Dr. habil.* University of Pisa, Chair of Baltic Philology. Field of research: Baltic historical linguistics, historiography of Baltic linguistics, Italian–Baltic cultural relations.

Rosario Napolitano. Ph.D. in International Studies at the University of Naples “l’Orientale” (2018), Art Academy of Latvia/Riga Technical University, lecturer of Italian language and culture. Field of research: fascist cultural diplomacy in the Baltic states during the interwar period, policies of Sovietisation in Soviet Latvia, Italian–Soviet Baltic relations.

Par autoriem

Pietro Umberto Dini, prof., *Dr. habil.*, Pizas Universitātes Baltu filoloģijas katedra. Pētījumu virziens: baltu vēsturiskā valodniecība, baltu valodniecības historiogrāfija, itāļu un baltu kultūras attiecības.

Rosario Napolitano, Dr. starptautiskajās studijās Neapoles Universitātē “*l’Orientale*” (2018), Latvijas Mākslas akadēmijas/Rīgas Tehniskās universitātes pasniedzējs: itāļu valoda un kultūra. Pētījumu joma: fašistu kultūras diplomātija Baltijas valstīs starpkaru periodā, sovjetizācijas politika padomju Latvijā, Itālijas un Baltijas padomju republiku attiecības.

References

- ¹ Concerning the IpEO, see Santoro, Stefano (1999). *Cultura e propaganda nell'Italia fascista: l'Istituto per l'Europa Orientale, Passato e Presente*, No. 17 (48), p. 55; and Mazzitelli, Gabriele (2016). *Le pubblicazioni dell'Istituto per l'Europa orientale, catalogo storico (1921–1944)*. Firenze: Firenze University Press.
- ² The Finno-Ugric section, which was to be directed by Carlo Emilio Pavolini (1864–1942) from the University of Florence (so called since 1924) was never activated because of disagreements between IpEO and Pavolini. See, Santoro, 1999, op. cit., p. 63.
- ³ Cf. Dini, P. U. (2024). *L'Italia in Lituania. Breve dizionario biografico degli italiani in Lituania* (Studia Baltica Pisana No. 7), Novi Ligure; Joker Edizioni, pp. 112–113; Dini, P. U.; Stundžia, Bonifacas (ed.). (2004). *Giuseppe Devoto. Scritti baltistici/ Baltistikos raštai*, Vilnius: Tyto alba. This same book provides information about all Devoto's works related to Baltic studies in the Italian and Lithuanian languages.
- ⁴ Cf. Dini, 2024, op. cit., (about Giuliano Bonfante), pp. 52–54; see also Dini, P. U.; Stundžia, B. (ed.). (2008). *Giuliano Bonfante. Scritti baltistici/ Baltistikos raštai*, Vilnius: VUL; this book provides information about all Bonfante's works related to Baltic studies in the Italian and Lithuanian languages. About Salvatori see also Dini, 2024, op. cit., pp. 269–274.
- ⁵ Cf. Kļaviņa, S.; Dini, P. U. (2003). Corrispondenza devotiana a Riga, *Res Balticae*, No. 9, pp. 217–220.
- ⁶ A copy of the book that collected the contributions of the conference is at the Latvian National Library; however, Devoto's article was not included.
- ⁷ Eesti Rahvusrarhiiv (Estonian National Archive, ERA), 957, 14, 227–221.
- ⁸ [Jaunākās Ziņas] (1938). Latviju raksti Neapoles institutam, *Jaunākās Ziņas*, 08.01.
- ⁹ Latvijas Valsts Vēstures arhīvs (Latvian Historical-State Archive, LVVA), 2575 f., 9 apr., 35 l., 60 lp.
- ¹⁰ LVVA, 2574 f., 4 apr., 7362 l., 2 lp.
- ¹¹ On the cultural activities of Arnolds Spekke in Italy, see Napolitano, Rosario (2024). A diplomat between two countries: Arnolds Spekke as a cultural link between Italy and Latvia. *Baltic Worlds*, Vol. 17 (3), pp. 17–22.
- ¹² Dini, P. U. Sul contributo baltistico di Luigi Salvini: un'indagine preliminare, a cura di G. Dell'Agata. *Luigi Salvini (1910–1957). Studioso ed interprete di letterature e culture d'Europa* [Studi Slavi e Baltici, vol. 2], Pisa: TEP, pp. 95–103. The same article mentions other initiatives by *Il mondo oggi*, which published also monographs about Suez, Turkey, Egypt, Denmark, Bulgaria, Ireland and Hungary, Denmark, and Iceland.
- ¹³ LVVA, 2575 f., 9 apr., 139 l., 1 lp.
- ¹⁴ Dini, P. U. (1995). Sul contributo estonico di Luigi Salvini fra le due guerre. *Ponto Baltica*, No. 6, pp. 17–21.

- ¹⁵ Salvini, Luigi (ed.) (1943). *Estonia*. Roma: Edizioni Roma.
- ¹⁶ On the relations between Italy and Lithuania during the interwar period see Napolitano, Rosario, Vitale, Alessandro (2022). Le relazioni diplomatiche tra Italia e Lituania durante il periodo interbellico: dal riconoscimento de jure (1922). al patto Molotov-Ribbentrop (1939). *Nuova Storia Contemporanea*, No. 15-6, (2), pp. 171–196.
- ¹⁷ Dini, P. U. (2007). *L'anello lituano. La Lituania vista dagli italiani: viaggi, studi, parole*. Vilnius — Livorno: Lietuvių kalbos institutas — Books & Company, pp. 194–198.
- ¹⁸ Dini, 2024, op. cit., pp. 188–190.
- ¹⁹ Cfr. *Res Balticae, miscellanea di studi baltici*, <https://resbalticae.fileli.unipi.it/> (viewed 14.11.2024).
- ²⁰ See also Parenti, Alessandro (2007). Dieci anni di Res Balticae. *Porta d'Oriente*, No. 2, pp. 165–166.
- ²¹ For further information, consult the page Edizioni Joker, Collana di Studia Baltica Pisana, <https://www.edizionijoker.com/collana-studia-baltica-pisana/> (viewed 10.10.2024).
- ²² Klioštoraitytė, Rasa (2005). Pizos universitete studentams dėstoma lietuvių kalba. *Universitas Vilnensis*, No. 8 (1664), p. 11.
- ²³ Università di Pisa (2021). Dottoranda in co-tutela delle Università di Pisa e Vilnius premiata dal Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche della Repubblica di Lituania. Julija Šabasevičiūtė ha svolto una tesi sulla cronomimia contrastiva lituano-italiana, Unipinews, 11.03. <https://www.unipi.it/index.php/news/item/20388-dottoranda-in-co-tutela-delle-universita-di-pisa-e-vilnius-premiata-dal-consiglio-nazionale-delle-ricerche-della-repubblica-di-lituania> (viewed 10.10.2024). See also Agenzia, Ansa (2023). Lituania: Diego Ardoino insignito della Stella d'Italia. Ansa, 27.10. https://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/mondo/news_dagli_istituti_di_cultura/2023/10/27/lituania-diego-ardoino-insignito-della-stella-ditalia_f06310e9-30bc-4057-b4ed-d3ab90bc1db2.html (viewed 10.10.2024).
- ²⁴ Gudelytė, Toma (2024). Baltistas ir vertėjas Adriano Cerri: tai lietuvių kalba pasirinko mane. Itlietuviai.it, 04.04. <https://www.itlietuviai.it/baltistas-ir-vertejas-adriano-cerri-tai-lietuviu-kalba-pasirinko-mane/> (viewed 10.10.2024).

BALTU STUDIJU IZPLATĪBA ITĀLIJĀ 20. GADSIMTĀ

Pjetro Umberto Dini

pietro.dini@unipi.it

Rosario Napolitano

rosario.napolitano@lma.lv

Kopsavilkums

Atslēgas vārdi: *Baltu studijas, Itālija, starpkaru periods, pēcpadomju periods.*

Raksts veltīts baltu valodu, folkloras un kultūras studijām Itālijā. Apskatīti trīs nozīmīgi periodi pētījumos par Baltijas jūras austrumdaļas iedzīvotāju, arī igauņu un somu, kultūru, ko raksturojuši sadarbības centieni. Pirmais periods datējams ar renesanses laikmetu, 16. un 17. gadsimtu, kad valdošais virziens bija humānisms. Otrais periods ietver Baltijas valstu neatkarības periodu starp diviem pasaules kariem 20. gadsimta pirmajās desmitgadēs. Trešais periods sakās pēc Baltijas valstu neatkarības atjaunošanas 1990. gadā, kad atsākās kontakti akadēmiskajā līmenī.

Baltu studijas kulmināciju sasniedza starpkaru periodā no 1918. gada līdz 1940. gadam, īpaši 1930. gadā, kad tika izveidota *Istituto per l'Europa Orientale* (Austrumeiropas institūta) Baltijas filiāle. Pēc institūta slēgšanas interese par baltu studijām Itālijā saglabājās un, kaut arī mazākā apmērā, turpinājās arī pēc Otrā pasaules kara. Pēc Padomju Savienības sabrukuma sadarbība atkal paplašinājās, un 1998. gadā Pizas Universitātē tika izveidota līdz šim vienīgā Baltu filoloģijas katedra. Rakstam ir divas daļas: pirmā daļa apskata baltu studiju attīstību Itālija starpkaru periodā un otrā — situāciju pēc Baltijas valstu neatkarības atgūšanas.