INTERPRETING AND TRANSLATING OLD PRUSSIAN MICRO-TEXTS: THE TRACE OF BASEL

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More than forty years after the publication of its discovery, the Trace of Basel continues to arouse great interest among the international community of Balticists and numerous contributions still appear on the topic. If the first publications generally focused almost exclusively on the linguistic aspects of the Trace of Basel, new insights based on the philological, codicological and palaeographic aspects of the micro-text have recently led to growing interest among scholars. This paper examines the relationship between the Trace of Basel and the historical context in which it appeared since this is essential in forming a plausible linguistic interpretation of the micro-text.

A 'philological' approach is used to explore the subject. Commenting on the interpretation of the Trace of Basel given by Frederik Kortlandt, this paper will show that his assumptions are misleading and that linguistic and philological approaches are not alternative methods of analysis but part of a closely related *continuum*, a line of investigation along which the (correct) interpretation of the micro-text gradually takes shape. Finally, on the basis of these philological and codicological considerations, a new hypothesis on the provenance of the Trace of Basel is presented.

1. INTRODUCTION

Almost 42 years ago Stephen Clement McCluskey, William Riegel Schmalstieg and Valdis Juris Zeps (1975) published the discovery of a new linguistic monument in Old Prussian (OP), a micro-text variously defined as a 'fragment', 'epigram' and (minor) 'text', but now generally referred to as the 'Trace of Basel' (TB) following Dini's terminological proposal (Dini 2004).

The aim of this contribution is to point out that in the study of both the Trace of Basel and any other minor linguistic monument of Old Prussian:

- it is extremely risky (as well as methodologically incorrect) to separate linguistic and philological considerations;

- it is of the utmost importance to take into consideration the context in which a linguistic record appeared and to work with the original documents or from high-quality reproductions of the originals.

A combined linguistic and philological approach is neither alternative nor incongruous since the two fields form a closely related *continuum*, a line of investigation along which the (correct) interpretation of a (micro-) text – in this case the Trace of Basel – gradually takes shape.

This ought to be the *de facto* method when one has to deal with (short) texts written in a poorly recorded and little known language, that is to say when dealing with linguistic monuments belonging to a *Kleinkorpussprache* and/ or to a *Trümmersprache*, *Restsprache*[1], *Mischsprache*[2] etc. I will attempt to prove this by looking at the context in which the Trace of Basel appeared and by commenting on the well-known interpretation of the TB formulated by Frederik Kortlandt[3].

2. WHAT IS THE TRACE OF BASEL?

Kayle rekyſe·   thoneaw labonache thewelyſe ·
Eg · koyte · poyte·   Nykoyte · pēnega doyte ·

The Trace of Basel is a micro-text (consisting of two lines) written in a Baltic dialect (probably a variety of Old Prussian or a language very close to it) which was inserted at the bottom of a commentary on Aristotle's μετεωρολογικά (*Questiones super quattuor libris metheororum*) written by Nicole Oresme (a French mathematician, astronomer and philosopher who lived in the 14th century) in a RECUEIL kept in the *Handschriftenabteilung der Universitätsbibliothek Basel*. More precisely, the TB appeared in the *folium* 63r of the *codex* F.V.2 right after the *colophon* (dated 5/6 January,

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[1] The meaning assigned to these definitions can differ somewhat from author to author. Untermann (1989) provides a detailed description and a rather categorical definition of *Kleinkorpussprache*, *Trümmersprache* and *Restsprache*. Campanile (1983) shows how in reality we are not dealing with discrete categories, but rather with concepts which are nuanced and often intertwined.

[2] On the concept of *Mischsprache* ('mixed language') see both Berruto (2006) and Meakins (2013).

[3] Kortlandt (1998a), (1998b), (1998c).

1369), on either side of the drawing and immediately before the index (*registrum* or *tabula questionum*) of a treatise by Oresme.

The TB is a rather special and fascinating record which, despite (or because of) its brevity, poses a number of problems (especially linguistic) that are not at all easy to solve.

The following are the first and, in my opinion, the most authoritative proposals for the translation of the TB:

> *To your health, sir! You are not a good fellow,*
> *If you want to drink and do not want to pay money*
> (McCluskey, Schmalstieg, Zeps (1975))

> *Sveikas pone! Tu nebe geras dėdelis,*
> *jeigu nori tu gerti, [bet] ne[be]nori tu pinigą duoti*
> (Mažiulis 1975)

3. THE IMPORTANCE OF THE TRACE OF BASEL_

The importance of the TB can be summarized in two points:

1) the language it attests to.
2) the date ascribed to it.

3.1. It is believed that these two lines are written in Old Prussian, and this is itself a significant fact for at least two reasons:

a) it would increase the small recorded corpus of OP;

b) while nearly all the known OP linguistic monuments are translations of German texts made by Germans, the TB does not seem to be a translation, hence, unlike other OP *Sprachdenkmäler*, the TB could be a direct example written by a native speaker. This means that the language attested to in the TB could be at least partly free of a German filter, although there remain problems related to the orthographic system adopted to transcribe it.

3.2. Hitherto almost all scholars (the sole exceptions appear to be J. Purkart (1983) and D. Ardoino (2012a); (2012b), (2013)) have attributed to the TB the date indicated in the *colophon* which precedes it (5/6 January, 1369).

If this is true, given that it is not currently possible to verify the date attributed to the so-called Elbing Vocabulary, the TB would constitute not only the oldest linguistic record in Old Prussian to date, but also, more generally, the first written example of a Baltic dialect.

Page 63r of the Codex FV2

4. THE MATERIAL CONTEXT

In order to better understand the problem, it would be useful to present a brief description of the *Folium 63rv* and to distinguish the various components identifiable therein[4] :

1) The first column of Oresme's treatise ends with the following words :
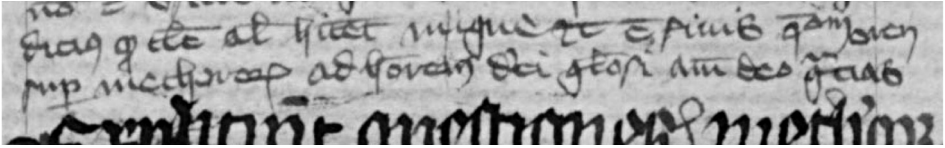
'…*dicimus quod tale animal habitet in igne et sic est finis questionum oren super metheororum ad honorem dei gloriosi amen deo gracias*'

2) The treatise is followed by the *explicit* in a 'display script':
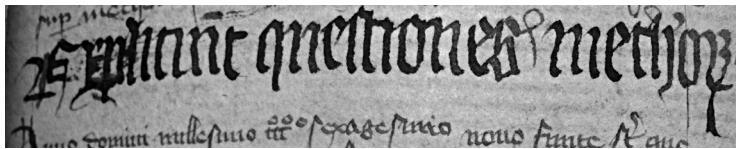
'*Expliciunt questiones metheororum*'

3) One then finds the *colophon* (with a rather conspicuous correction), which is enclosed within a stereotypical hexameter occurring in several colophons :
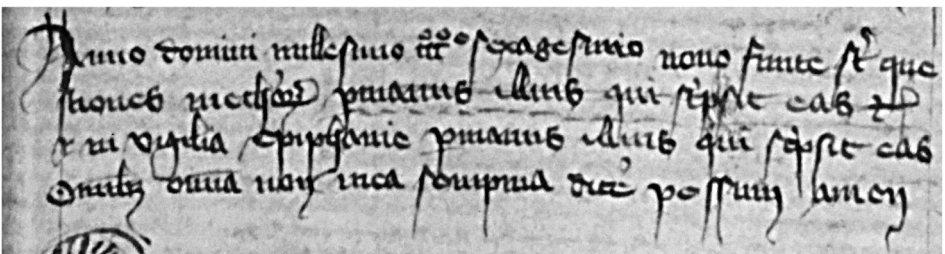
'*Anno domini millesimo cºcºcº ſexagesimo nono finite sunt que
ſtiones metheororum* ~~per manus illius qui scripsit eas et~~
*c in vigilia epiphanie per manus illius qui scripsit eas
Omnibus omnia non mea sompnia dicere possum amen*'

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4   A detailed and circumstantiated description of the *folium* 63 and of the *codex FV2* is provided in Ardoino (2012a), (2012b) and (2013).

'In the year 1369 of the Lord the copy of the disputes on weather were finished during the day before Epiphany by the hands of the one who wrote these (scil. *questiones*). I cannot tell everyone all of my dreams'

4) The *colophon* is followed by a drawing of a man waving a banner with a lamentation written in German.
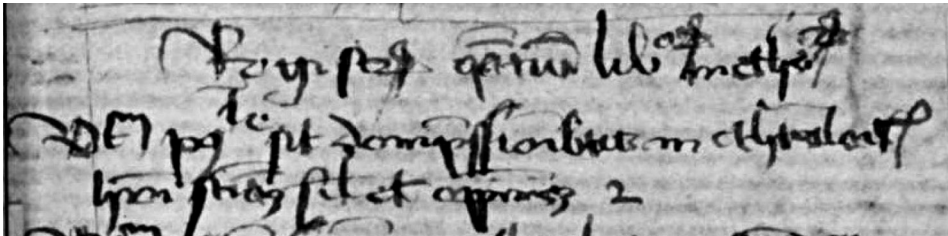

'*ihs ich leid*' 'Jesus I suffer'

5) The Trace of Basel appears on both the left and the right side of the drawing:
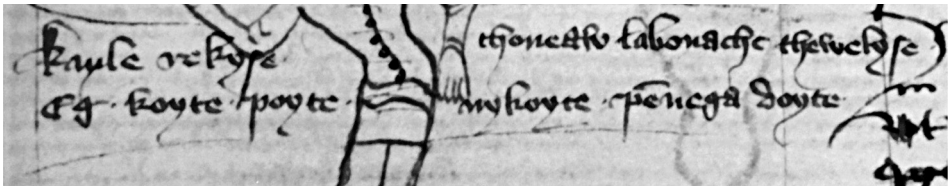

'*Kayle rekyſe·*　　　　　　　*thoneaw labonache thewelyſe ·*
Eg · koyte · poyte　　　　　　*· nykoyte · pēnega doyte*'

6) Right below the TB appears the *Registrum* or *Tabula questionum*, a sort of index of topics covered in the treatise which was added later.


'*Registrum quatuor librorum metheororum*
Vtrum possibile sit de impressionibus metheoroloycis
habere scientiam simul et oppinionem'

The *Registrum* ends in the second column of the *folium* 63v with the following words:
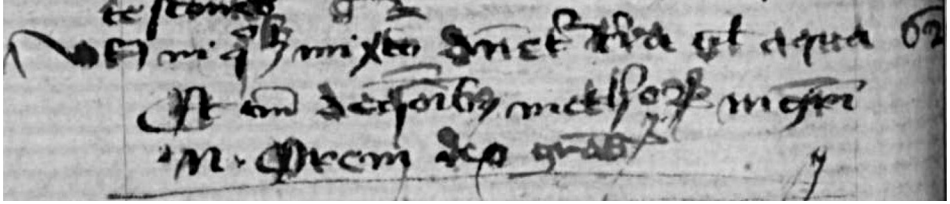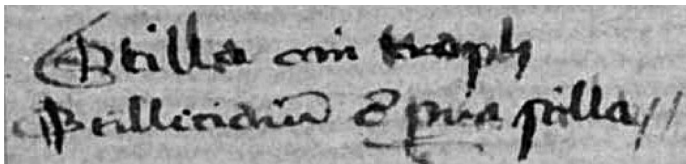

'*Vtrum in quolibet mixto dominetur terra vel aqua 62*
Et tantum de questionibus methororum magistri
N·Orem deo gracias'

7) At the bottom of the *folium* 63r there are two glosses which explain two Latin words in German:
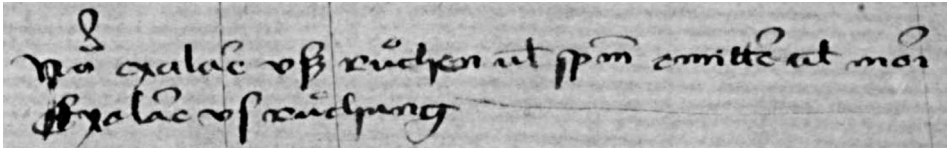
'*Nota exalare vß rŭchen uel spiritum emittere uel mori.*
Exalare vſ rŭchung'

8) At the bottom of 63v one finds two glosses: one in German and one in Latin:

'*Stilla ein troph.*
Stillicidium est parua stilla'

5. THE TRACE OF BASEL

One can find a reasonably close parallel in the Old Prussian linguistic corpus for 10 of the 11 words that constitute the micro-text. Only *'thoneaw'*, in spite of the numerous interpretative hypotheses surrounding it, has remained rather obscure. A preliminary (and rather rough) translation of the ten words which seem to have a fairly close parallel in Old Prussian provides a clear and consistent message of irony and mockery (fea-

tures recognized by most translators). Opinions begin to diverge when the underlying cause of this irony comes into question.

Before delving deeper into a linguistic interpretation of the TB, at least four preliminary questions should be answered:

1) Is the date given in the *colophon* (5/6 January, 1369) also applicable to the TB?
2) Why was the TB inserted in its precise position?
3) Why does it appear to be ironic and what is the real message behind the literal meaning of the TB?
4) Who could have written the micro-text and where?

Providing an answer to these questions could help to better understand the morphosyntactic meaning of each individual word of the TB, but it is also necessary to carefully observe the context in which the TB was created, to determine the correct 'stratigraphy' of the *folium* 63rv and to investigate the document from a codicological and palaeographic perspective.

An accurate philological, codicological and palaeographical study of the *folium* 63rv and a thorough examination of the relationship between the TB and the other elements of the page will allow us to provide a near certain and definitive answer to the first three questions and to suggest a plausible hypothesis for the fourth. Summing up the results of the research presented in Ardoino (2012a; 2012b, 2013), the following can be stated:

1) the date mentioned in the *colophon* (5/6 January, 1369) cannot be attributed *tout court* to the TB. Indeed, the handwriting of the TB certainly differs from that introducing the *colophon*, and is undoubtedly from a posterior date. The TB can still not be precisely dated: the micro-text was irrefutably written after 5/6 January, 1369, and before the period 1460-1480 (this is the dating attributable to the watermark of the guard-leaf of the *codex* F.V.2). In relative terms, the TB was inserted at a later date to the *colophon* and the 'talking' drawing which precedes it, but prior to the first draft of the *registrum*. The demonstration of the fact that the TB is certainly more recent than the date generally attributed to it (5/6 January, 1369) calls into question the status of the TB as the oldest recorded example of Old Prussian, and more generally its place within the Baltic linguistic corpus.

2) & 3) It is not a coincidence that the TB has been inserted in close proximity to the 'talking' drawing (which constitutes a sort of iconic appendix to the *colophon*). The reason for the insertion of the TB on the page is, in fact, identifiable in the drawing itself and particularly in what it 'says' ('*iħs ich leid*', 'Jesus, I am

suffering'). The TB is almost certainly a proverb, saying or idiomatic expression (it is hard to conceive of it being an extemporaneous expression) which is mockingly addressed to whomever drew the sad and afflicted hunchbacked man saying 'Jesus I suffer' in the banner written in German. It is plausible to imagine a scenario whereby a (probably young) lecturer discovers a page, sees the drawing, reads the message in the banner and, out of an uncontrollable urge and without thinking, responds to the drawing by writing the TB around it. He would probably not have been able to express his thoughts in a synthetic and efficient manner without recourse to a pre-conceived and ready-to-use structure. Moreover, the structure of proverbs and sayings is often characterized by a well-defined rhythmic texture, and is rich in symmetries and sound; these characteristics confer a certain 'artistry' to an adage while at the same time facilitating the rapid recovery of a particular phrase from memory. This instinctive and unconscious immediacy suggests that the mother tongue of the person who inserted the TB might be the same as the language the micro-text was written in. The ironic and mocking aspect of the text is surely linked to the excessive pathos conveyed by the 'talking' drawing. Instead of arousing compassion and, by extension, the reader's participation in dismay, the creator of the drawing overloaded his message to the point of grotesquery, thus achieving the opposite effect of arousing irony and sarcasm in the reader. The person who inserted the TB appears to be responding to the person who drew the talking figure along the following lines: 'My dear sir, you choose a comfortable vocation and now have the temerity to complain about its supposed drawbacks? Keep quiet, or at least try to express your dissatisfaction with a little more decency!'. The person behind the talking figure does not only provoke irony and sarcasm from the author of the TB. Careful scrutiny of the page allows us to identify other reactions to the message conveyed through the drawing. Over the course of time various other hands intervened in the illustration.

- The sides of the drawing (as well as some buttons) were re-traced by the person who wrote the TB and perhaps by an altogether different individual;
- some buttons were actually inserted later;
- the touches of red on the forehead, the head and the hand of the figure were traced after the insertion of the TB and could refer in a jocular, mocking way to the color of blood and, therefore, to the overcharged message of pain expressed in the drawing.

Two different types of red ink are recognizable on the page. The brighter of the two appears in the text by Oresme and in the 'talking' drawing, which seems to suggest that the first rubric was made before the insertion of the *registrum* on the page. The darker rubric, on the other hand, appears only in the *tabula questionum* and around the TB. While the brighter red is conspicuous in the drawing, the darker red is only found in the rubric of '*Kayle*' and in the two mild red lines which 'frame' the TB. These additions should be credited to two different rubricators who, alongside the rubric, are likely to have inserted other textual 'devices' upon the page: the *registrum*, its re-tracing, the *explicit* in 'display script', the glosses and perhaps even the TB itself. It is highly likely that almost all the interventions on the page were made by professional scribes. Such a hypothesis would suggest that the person who inserted the TB could have introduced other textual 'devices' on the page. The rubrics in dark red could very likely be attributed to the hand that re-traced the *registrum* and the glosses at the bottom of the page can be identified with whoever wrote the first version of the *Registrum*. In any case, in order to clarify the questions arising from the different inks it would be necessary to perform a targeted chemical analysis of the inks found on page 63.

In my opinion, it is well worth considering the possibility that the author of the TB was a young professional copyist or librarian who was responsible for completing the *opus scriptorium* with headings, indexes, rubric, 'display scripts' etc. A student would most likely have had less access to the codex than a copyist or a library worker. In any case, whoever inserted the TB certainly had knowledge of the German language (he understood the lamentation '*iħs ich leid*') while Old Prussian (or a Baltic dialect close to it) was probably his mother tongue.

6. THE INTERPRETATION OF FREDERIK KORTLANDT

In 1998, Kortlandt published three short papers on the Trace of Basel in which he proposed a cogent interpretation of the micro-text. It quickly gained favour with the academic community and was extremely influential among specialists. In the first paper (Kortlandt 1998a), Kortland argues against some interpretations proposed by W. P. Schmid and A. Bammesberger. In the second, he provides a morphosyntactic interpretation of certain words and remarks in the TB:

> '*There are a number of points which remain bothersome* [...]
> 1. *Case forms seem to be mixed up in* **Kayle rekyse**, *where we should expect †Kayles rekye vel sim., cf. Kayles and rickie in other fragments* [...].

2. *The final -e of* **rekyse**, **labonache**, **thewelyse** *suggests that the scribe was not a native Speaker of Prussian and perhaps had an optional -e (shwa) in his own speech* (*Cf. the text* **Jesus ich leid** *for leide in the accompanuing drawing.*).

3. *The spelling -ch- in* **labonache** *also points to a scribe who was not a native Speaker of Prussian and may have perceived the Prussian *-s as very different from his own because it was not opposed to a velar fricative.*

4. *The vocalism of* **poyte** *and* **doyte** *seems to reflect a form of umlaut which is alien to the Prussian language.*

5. *The vowel reduction in the final syllables of* **koyte**, **nykoyte**, **poyte**, **doyte** *is also unexpected for a native speaker of the language.*

6. *The interpunction of the second line is highly remarkable and suggests that it was dictated to the scribe.'*

(Kortlandt 1998b, 117).

He then concludes:

'*It therefore seems probable to me that the text was written by a German scribe who noted down the words of a Prussian colleague*' (Kortlandt 1998b, 117).

In the third paper Kortlandt goes into more detail and writes:

'*Here I want to pursue the second argument (= The final -e of* **rekyse**, **labonache**, **thewelyse** *suggests that the scribe was not a native Speaker and may have had an optional -e in his own speech*), *which may be supported by the text* **Jesus ich leid** *for leide in the accompanying drawing*' (Kortlandt 1998c, 39).

Kortland continues:

'*Since the Old Prussian epigram is part of a text which "can be placed in a group of Codices that emanated from the University of Prague in the last third of the 14thc." (S c h m a l s t i e g, 1976, 90), it must have originated in an environment where some (Bavarian) Speakers of German apocopated consistently and other (East Middle German) Speakers did not apocopate at all. One can easily imagine that the absence of apocope served as a shibboleth to distinguish northern from southern speakers here…*' (Kortlandt 1998c, 40).

He then concludes:

'*I therefore think that the Old Prussian epigram was written by a Bavarian scribe who aimed at characterizing the northern speech of his Prussian Informant in a jocular way.*' (Kortlandt 1998c, 40).

To sum up, Kortlandt essentially bases his interpretation on three assumptions:

1) Since the language attested to by the TB (especially from a morphosyntactic point of view) is rather different from the one attested to by other Old

Prussian linguistic monuments, the TB was probably not written by a native speaker but by a foreigner to whom the micro-text was dictated by a native speaker.

2) The TB was written by the same hand that wrote both the 'talking' drawing and the message in the banner, *'iħs ich leid'* (namely, by a German speaker).

3) The copy of Oresme's *questiones* at the end of which the TB was inserted originates from the University of Prague.

Going by these assumptions, Kortlandt elaborates on his interpretation by using the words in the banner to explain:

- the origins of the person who inserted the TB;
- the numerous and sometimes problematic final *-e in the micro-text.

Without going into further detail, it is sufficient to say that the second premise to which Kortlandt refers is certainly spurious: the handwriting behind the TB undoubtedly differs to that behind *'iħs ich leid'* and was inscribed at a later date. This means that Kortlandt's interpretation collapses along with his explanation of the final -e's in the TB. I concede that his first assumption is an attractive one, albeit rather superfluous and somewhat pretentious. If we have not managed to fully understand the morphological features of the words constituting the TB by the 21st century, this does not necessarily mean that the words are distorted or incorrect. Our knowledge of Old Prussian is so poor and limited that we cannot afford to overestimate our competence and to trivialize a word we do not understand by reducing it to an 'error'. The language of the TB might indeed represent a peripheric variety of Old Prussian otherwise unknown to us or even a form of mixed language. We must also keep in mind another significant fact: there is a significant chronological distance between the language of the TB and the language of the Catechisms, which are the most important linguistic monuments of Old Prussian. In short, I think that it would be appropriate to adopt a more cautious approach towards any linguistic analysis of the forms recorded in the TB. Last but not least, Kortlandt's third premise (that the copy of Oresme's *questiones* at the end of which the TB was inserted came from the University of Prague) remains unproven. It is by no means clear whether the copy of the *questiones* really originated in Prague. Furthermore, the question is somewhat irrelelevant to the study of the TB considering that the TB was inserted after the *colophon* and by a different hand.

7. ON WHERE THE TRACE OF BASEL WAS INSERTED UPON THE PAGE

At this point we might ask ourselves whether it is possible to identify the exact place or region where the TB was inserted. The answer to this question is extremely complex and would require separate consideration. For present purposes, hopefully the following overview will suffice:

- The treatise of Oresme was written in 1369 but we do not know where;
- The TB was certainly inserted later to that but prior to the *Registrum*;
- On the basis of the Guard-leaf we can say that Codex FV2 was binded between 1460 and 1480 in an area between southwest Germany and northwest Switzerland;
- The codex was purchased by the *Academia Basiliensis* between 1460-80 and since then has been kept in Basel;
- The former owner of the codex came from Ulm.
- The dialectal traits manifested by the inscriptions in German on the page (in the banner and the glosses at the bottom of page 63rv) seem to refer to a geographical triangle formed between Strasbourg, Basel and Constance.

On the basis of these facts it would seem reasonable to suggest that the TB originated in an area located between southwestern Germany and northwestern Switzerland. However, *habent sua fata libelli* – for the time being we cannot say much more than that.

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SENŲJŲ PRŪSŲ KALBOS MIKROTEKSTŲ INTERPRETAVIMAS IR VERTIMAS: BAZELIO TEKSTELIS

Diego Ardoino

Santrauka

Straipsnyje siekiama parodyti, kokie svarbūs tarpdisciplininių tyrimų ir integruotasis metodai, nagrinėjant senosios prūsų kalbos tekstyno paveldą: lingvistinė ir filologinė analizė ne tik kad nėra viena kitai alternatyvios ar priešiškos, bet puikiai viena kitą papildo. Autoriaus išvados grindžiamos vieno svarbiausių, problemiškiausių ir kartu įdomiausių prūsų kalbos mikrotekstų analize, o būtent Bazelio prūsiškojo tekstelio pavadinimu žinomo originalaus rankraščio tyrimu taikant kodikologijos, palaeografijos ir filologijos metodus. Šis tekstelis laikomas „mažuoju prūsų kalbos paminklu". Atlikęs puslapio, kuriame įrašytas nagrinėjamas tekstelis, analizę, autorius parodo, kad Frederiko Kortlandto paskelbta tekstelio interpretacija yra klaidinga. Kartu atkreipiamas dėmesys į tai, kaip rizikinga ir metodiškai neteisinga supriešinti lingvistinį ir filologinį požiūrį į nagrinėjamus faktus. Naudojantis kodikologiniais ir filologiniais metodais iškeliama nauja hipotezė, kur galėjo būti padarytas Bazelio kodekso (FV2) 63 puslapyje randamas įrašas prūsų kalba.