

## WAS HERDER UNABLE TO DISTINGUISH BETWEEN LITHUANIAN AND LATVIAN SONGS?

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### Summary

**Keywords:** Herder's reception perspectives in Latvia, the early history of the collection of Lithuanian folksongs, the *quasi*-substitution of the terms 'Lithuanian – Latvian' by Herder, the 18<sup>th</sup> century ethnic terminology of the Baltic region

The Latvian Herder discourse represents a continuation and development of the Baltic German Herder discourse. For well-known reasons, the thematic field of 'Herder and the Latvian folk song' has been extensively elaborated. However, this does not mean that there is a lack of contradictions and shortcomings. In this study, the misconception that Herder allegedly was not able to differentiate between Lithuanians and Latvians, or between the Latvian and Lithuanian language and folksongs, is investigated. In 1767 (actually, 1766), Herder published the second collection of his "Fragments on Recent German Literature" (*Ueber die neuere Deutsche Litteratur. Zwote Sammlung von Fragmenten*). There, among other matters, one finds an early call to collect the ancient songs of the people. As an example of what can be achieved when collecting, Herder points at two Lithuanian songs republished in the "Letters Concerning the Latest Literature" (*Die Briefe, die neueste Litteratur betreffend, or Literaturbriefe*) by Lessing in 1759, from the East Prussian pastor Philipp Ruhig's "Consideration of Lithuanian Language" (*Betrachtung der litauischen Sprache*, 1745). What is surprising is that Herder calls both of those undoubtedly Lithuanian songs Latvian (*lettische Dainos*). In his "Extract from a Correspondence on Ossian and the Songs of Ancient Peoples" (*Auszug aus einem Briefwechsel über Ossian und die Lieder alter Völker*, 1773), the same situation repeats. Generations of Herder scholars have ascribed this to Herder's ignorance, confusion, etc. An investigation of the 18<sup>th</sup>-century history of the term 'Latvian' (*lettisch*), however, shows that this is not the case: Herder's usage of that term follows a little-known 18<sup>th</sup>-century academic habit of putting both Lithuanians and Latvians (in the narrower sense) under one terminological umbrella: *Lettorum/Letten* ('Latvians'), an early predecessor of the term 'Baltic' (as in the 'Baltic languages', and, through nominalization, as in 'the Balts': Latvians, Lithuanians, Old Prussians). Hans Adler and Wulf Koepke, in the *Introduction to A Companion to the Works of Johann Gottfried Herder* (2009), wrote when referring to the recent shift away from longstanding misinterpretations of Herder's work and style: "[...] a more precise reading of Herder's texts reveals that Herder's allegedly obscure terminology is indeed clear and consistent" (Adler and Koepke 2009: 2). The case considered in this article provides conclusive proof of that.