

from our archives: the origin of the Italian language

THE FOLLOWING EXTRACT IS DRAWN FROM THE ITALIAN HISTORICAL SOCIETY'S COLLECTION OF NEWSPAPER CUTTINGS. THE ARTICLE WE HAVE CHOSEN DESCRIBES A LECTURE ON THE ORIGIN OF THE ITALIAN LANGUAGE DELIVERED IN MELBOURNE BY FERNANDO GAGLIARDI AT THE ATHENAEUM THEATRE, MELBOURNE IN 1881. FERNANDO GAGLIARDI IS MOSTLY REMEMBERED FOR TWO ACHIEVEMENTS: HE PIONEERED SILK GROWING IN VICTORIA AND WAS LIBRARIAN OF THE STATE LIBRARY OF VICTORIA. IT IS INTERESTING TO NOTE THAT THE LECTURE WAS PRESENTED IN ITALIAN.

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A lecture on the origin of the Italian language was delivered in Italian yesterday afternoon, in the hall of the Athenaeum, by Dr. Ferdinand Gagliardi, to an invited audience, composed of his compatriots, and of other persons interested in the study of the literature of what Lord Byron calls erroneously, it would seem, "that soft bastard Latin." Dr. Brownlow, the vice chancellor of the University, occupied the chair, and the Consuls General for Italy and the United States were present on the platform. The number of persons present was only moderate, but they followed the lecturer notwithstanding his rapid delivery, with marked attention. The discourse was an exceedingly erudite one, and denoted the breadth and thoroughness of the learned lecturer's grasp of his subject.

Of the various theories which prevail most widely respecting the origin of the Italian language, there are two which demand more particular attention. One, which was espoused by Muratori, Zeno, Fontanini and other distinguished writers, assumes that the language was formed by the corruption of the Latin admired words borrowed from the idioms of the barbarians by whom the country was overrun after the downfall of the Roman empire. The other asserts that the Italian language is as old as the Latin, and that both were simultaneously used in Rome; the former by the common people and in ordinary conversation, and the latter by the literate classes, in writing and in public speaking; each language having its roots in the Japygian or aboriginal language of the peninsula, the Etruscan and the Italic. This theory was peremptorily rejected by the late Sir G.C. Lewis, who espoused the ideas of M. Raynard, which Dr. Gagliardi just as peremptorily discards.

Before Rome had emerged from the narrow boundaries of Latium, the lecturer says, there were four languages principally spoken in Italy—the Greek, the Etruscan, the Celtic, and the Latin; all of them belonging to the IndoGermanic group of tongues. Of these four, the last was the language of the populace nor was it until about the Augustan age, when its structure had been refined and perfected, that it ceased to be so; but the elder form—the real Italian—existed side by side with it, and continued to be the vernacular tongues. Nay, the Etruscan, Umbrian, and Oscan dialects of it were in use long after the era of Augustus, nor did Italian at any time cease to be spoken by the masses. Of this, the

lecturer adduced many interesting proofs. Again, he remarked, if the language had been a corruption of the Latin it would resemble it in its grammatical structure, whereas it has no cases and no neuter gender. It has articles, which the Latin has not; it has no distinction of active and passive verbs; the tenses differ, and so do the adverbs; there are no interrogative particles corresponding with the Latin *nun, an, and ne*; the two negatives, instead of making an affirmative, strengthen the negation; and the construction of the two languages is altogether diverse.

As to the alleged influences of the barbaric invasions upon the Latin language which is assumed to have been spoken by the common people, the lecturer asked, by what new phonetic law or by what new miracle of nature, could these tongues which abounded and usually ended in consonants, so transform the organs of the conquered people, and their methods of accentuation, as to cause them to adopt a language abounding [with] constantly terminating vowels? Moreover, the very portions of Italy which were the centres of barbaric power, namely, Lombardy and Rome, were not and are not those in which the Italian language is now spoken most correctly and with the greatest purity; whereas it is so in Tuscany, and it was so in Sicily and Venice, where the barbaric influence was the weakest. Hence, argued the lecturer, Italian is the natural development of purely local elements. Out of them arose the rustic Latin, and out of them also sprang the noble language of Cicero and Tacitus, of Virgil and Horace; so that the Italian is not the offspring of a Latin mother, but both derived their parentage from a common stock, and grew together side by side; the one surviving the wreck of the empire, and the other disappearing, as a spoken language, with the disappearance of the governing and literate classes, among whom it had been in use. Nevertheless, Italian is not to be considered as the survival of a provincial dialect spoken by a minority of the people of the Peninsula, but as the creation of the various languages current in Italy even before the foundation of Rome; all of them belonging to the same family, each closely resembling the other, and the whole of them cooperating with the rustic Latin in the formation of the classic Latin, and when this ceased to be cultivated, these primitive languages reappeared in the literature of the country, as they had been always maintained in conversation, and as they are still conserved in their fundamental elements by the various dialects which were spoken in the days of Dante, and continue to be so to this day, in different parts of Italy, while they assume their noblest garb in Tuscany, the centre of ancient Etruria, the most powerful and cultivated people of their epoch, as they were also the most numerous during the domination of the Mistress of the World.

The lecture was an exceedingly able one, and its philological illustrations were such as to interest alike the classical scholar and the student of Italian, denoting, as they did, a magistral knowledge as well of the Latin language and literature as of that tongue which Leigh Hunt has pronounced to be the most beautiful of all those that are now spoken in Europe. A vote of thanks to the lecturer was moved by Mr. James Smith, and carried by acclamation.