

Slaves or Glorious Ones?

The Origin of the Name "Slav"¹

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1.

THE SUBJECT OF MY ADDRESS is not one I have chosen, but one that our Program Committee Chairman, Professor Mamie Meredith, has suggested to me with a view to present to you, Ladies and Gentlemen, the history of the etymological explanation of the name *Slav* and a survey of the English usage of this name in three different forms: *Slav*, *Slavonic*, and *Slavic*.

This, then, is my theme.

Certainly, anything one can say in this respect will not be new, particularly to those who have studied the problem, or to Slavists in general. This paper, however, may be the first synoptic survey of the history of the problem in the English language,² and —since we are still in "swaddling clothes" as far as Slavistics in the Western Hemisphere is concerned³ — I hope to be able to contribute a little to the general knowledge of Slavistics and Onomastics: *Nemo ultra posse obligatur!*

Let me begin with a few words concerning the first information about Slavs as it is found in the ancient Greek and Latin geographers and historiographers.

2.

Since the classical geographers knew very little about the north-eastern regions of Europe, the first historical reports about the

¹ Presidential address delivered at the 8th Annual Meeting of the American Name Society in Chicago, Ill., December 27th, 1959. The author is indebted to the following scholars, who contributed to the final appearance of this paper: Prof. D. J. Georgacas, Editor of *Names*, Prof. R. G. McDawson (Univ. of Manitoba), Prof. P. Smal-Stocki (Marquette University), and L. Manko (Univ. of Manitoba).

² Cf. a similar survey in Polish: Słuszkiewicz, E., "Rzut oka na dzieje etymologii nazwy 'Słowianie'" [The History of the etymology of the name "Slav"], *Przegląd Klasyczny*, No. 9–10 (Lwów, 1936), pp. 731–798; in Ukrainian: Rudnyčkyj, J. B.,

Slavs were insufficient and relatively very late. It was not until the first century A.D. that any more detailed information about north, eastern Europe was revealed. So, e.g., the anonymous cosmographer of Ravenna located the Scythians, from among whom the Slavs came, east of the Normans, Danes, and Finns.

Greek and Roman writers began to take more interest in the northern "barbarians", Germans, Slavs, and other peoples, when invasions of the ancient Roman empire by the Germanic tribes began. It is to them that we owe the first historical records regarding Slavs (Pliny [1st century A.D.], Tacitus [1st century A.D.], Ptolemy [2nd century A.D.]). The Slavs appear in their writings under the name *Veneti-Venedi*.

This name is also known to the later historiographers. For example, the medieval Latin historian Jordan, bishop of Crotona (550–552), in his history of the Goths, calls the Slavs *Veneti* and *Vinidi*. He also notes that this name differs from tribe to tribe and from place to place, but nevertheless they are also known as *Slavs* and *Antae*.

In the Middle Ages the Germans called the Slavs in the neighborhood of the Elbe *Wenden*, and Poland was called by the Anglo-Saxon writer Orosius *Weonodland*. The name *Wenden* is still preserved in the German language with reference to the Lusatians (in Eastern Germany) and *Winden* — to the Slovenes (in Yugoslavia). According to R. Trautmann both forms are derived from the Proto-Germanic **Winidos* or **Winithos*.⁴

Although the *Veneti-Wenden* were undoubtedly Slavs, the name itself was not considered of Slavic origin. Some scholars derived it from the IE root ***uen-* 'to love,' cf. Old Indic *vánati* 'loves', Lat. *Venus*, thus *Veneti* were in general 'friends, allies'.⁵ The Russian

"Perši vistky pro slovjan. Nazva slovjan" [First informations about the Slavs. The name "Slav"], *Vstup do slovjanoznavstva* [Introduction to Slavistics], Ukrainian Free University (Munich, 1948), pp. 52–64, a.o.

³ Cf. Rose, W. J., "Cradle days of Slavic Studies — Some Reflections", *Slavistica*, No. 23, Ukrainian Free Academy of Sciences (Winnipeg, 1955), p. 9.

⁴ Trautmann, R., *Die slavischen Völker und Sprachen. Eine Einführung in die Slavistik* (Göttingen, 1947), p. 22.

⁵ Cf. Much, R. in Hoops, *Reallexikon der germanischen Altertumskunde*, IV, 508–509; Schrader and Nehring, *Reallexikon der indogermanischen Altertumskunde*, II, 590; Kosinna, G., *Manus*, IV, 183–287.

linguist A. Šachmatov identified Slavic *Veneti* with the Celtic tribe in Western Brittany and derived it from Celtic.⁶ In a special article *O nazwie Wenedów* [On the name Wenedi],⁷ J. Rozwadowski presented a linguistic analysis of all names connected with the root **gen-*. A similar survey was given by M. Rudnicki.⁸ T. Lehr-Splawiński held the name to be Slavic and derived it from the root **vet-* 'bigger, greater'.⁹

The problem of the origin and meaning of *Veneti-Venedi* still awaits its final solution. The same can be said of the name *Slavs*.

3.

The name *Slavs* first appears at the beginning of the sixth century A.D. in writings of the so-called Pseudo-Kaisarios of Nazianzus and later, more frequently, in the sixth century in Procopius and Jordan. In Ptolemy, also, the name Σουοβηγοί is found which, according to L. Niederle, is an exact transliteration of the Slavic word *Slověne*—the first and the oldest form of this name (Sg.: *Slověnins*).¹⁰ Niederle puts forward an important question as to whether this name was applied to one Slavic tribe only, or to all Slavs.¹¹ He states that F. Miklosich was convinced that originally the Southern Slavs (excluding Serbs) were called Σκλαβηγοί - *Sclaveni*. A. Brückner and J. Perwolf also accepted this view. Opposing were J. P. Šafařík and G. Krek; they were convinced that originally this name was applied to all the Slavs and was later preserved only among some Slavic tribes: *Slovaks*, *Slovenes*, *Novgorod Slovines*, and others.¹² In Niederle's opinion the name *Slavs* was used to designate all the Slavic tribes in the period of their migrations, but it is doubtful whether this was the case before. On the contrary, Niederle is convinced that this name originally had a much narrower application.¹³

⁶ *Archiv für slavische Philologie*, XXXIII, 51 ff. Šachmatov's hypothesis was refuted by K. Buga, *Revue Slavistique*, VI, 1 ff. and M. Vasmer, *ibidem*, 172 ff.

⁷ *Bulletin International de l'Académie Polonaise des sciences et des lettres*. Classe de philologie, de l'histoire et de philosophie, Année 1925 (Cracow, 1927), pp. 134 to 136.

⁸ *Slavia Occidentalis*, IX, 383–384.

⁹ Cf. *O pochodzeniu i praojczyźnie Słowian* [On the origin and homeland of Slavs] (Poznań, 1946), pp. 15, 20, 89, 100, 147, 159, 166, 177.

¹⁰ Cf. *Slovanské starožitnosti* [Slavic antiquities] (Prague, 1910), II, 2, p. 469 ff.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 470.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 471.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 471 ff.

As far as the etymological explanation of this name is concerned, up until the time of J. P. Šafařík¹⁴ the name was referred to the root **slav-* which is found in such words as *slava* 'glory', *slaviti* 'to glorify,' *slavně* 'glorious,' etc. Thus *slověne* were 'glorious ones,' 'glorious tribe,' 'gloriosi, αἰνετοί', which, especially during the period of Romanticism, very well corresponded with the national pride of the Slavs and with their aspirations to Pan-Slavic unity.

Following this explanation, which flourished until the 19th century and could be found even today in the popular etymology, another one appears deriving the name from the root **slov-* found in *slovo* 'word.' According to this issue the Slavs were 'a tribe which spoke a comprehensive, understandable language' in contrast to other tribes, particularly the Germans, whose language was originally not understood by Slavs. This explanation was very popular in German Slavistic literature.¹⁴

Formally with the root **slov-* but not in the meaning 'word' was the name *Slověnině* connected by J. Dobrovský, "father of Czech Slavistics." In his study *Untersuchungen, woher die Slawen ihren Namen erhalten*¹⁵ and in other papers Dobrovský defended the so-called "topographic" explanation of the name. Analyzing the suffix *-ěnině* / *-janině* which forms names of peoples from topographic terms and names, he derived the Slavic name from a supposed toponymic **Slovy*.

Dobrovský's etymology found many followers. It was J. P. Šafařík who compared Dobrovský's **Slovy* with Lithuanian *salava*, Latvian *sala* and Polish *żulawa*.¹⁶ J. Perwolf in the article *Slawische Völkernamen*¹⁷ referred to the ancient Slavic capital *Slauna* (*Slawena*, *Zlawe*, *Zlowe*), German *Schlawe*, Kaschubian *Słowno* from the original **Slovy*. The meaning of this name, however, was not explained by Perwolf. This was attempted later by J. Hošek. According to his etymology the root **slov-ъ* meant 'hill, mountain'.¹⁸ As

¹⁴ Schrader & Nehring, *op. cit.* 417; Diels, P., *Die Slawen* (Berlin-Leipzig, 1920), pp. 5–6; Solmsen, F., *Indogermanische Eigennamen als Spiegel der Kulturgeschichte* (Heidelberg, 1922), p. 98.

¹⁵ *Abhandlungen einer Privatgesellschaftin Böhmen* (Prague 1874), VI, 268–298.

¹⁶ Cf. his *Slovanské starožitnosti* [Slavic antiquities] (Prague, 1936–1937), I, 1, 46ff.

¹⁷ *Archiv für slavische Philologie*, VIII, 24.

¹⁸ Cf. his article "O významě jmen Čechové, Moravané, Slované" [On the meaning of the names Czechs, Moravians, and Slavs], *Časopis Matice Moravské* 1891.

an opposite opinion Prof. R. Smal-Stocki; quotes a Polish anonymous publication deriving the name *Slav* from *Slovo*, *Sal*, *Szal* meaning 'lowlands'.¹⁹

In a scholarly symposium dedicated to the Serbian linguist A. Belić²⁰ the "topographic" explanation found a persuasive argumentation by two scholars, M. Budimir²¹ and J. Rozwadowski.²² Having collected several names with the roots **slov-*/**slav-* (*Słowno*, *Słowin*, *Słowino*, *Sławno*, etc.) they derived it from ***kļu-*/*klow-* with the primary meaning 'to flow', cf. Latin *cluere*, *cloaca*, *Cluentus*, Old Icelandic *hlér* 'sea,' 'lake', Lithuanian *šlūoju*, *šlaviaū*, etc. According to Budimir *slověne/slovjane* meant 'people living on the shores of lakes, rivers, etc.'

The authority of Budimir and Rozwadowski, with their convincing argumentation and documentation, influenced Slavic scholarship for the last several decades. Thus, T. Lehr-Spławiński, discussing such names as *Slawa*, *Sławka*, *Sławica*, *Sławiec*, *Sławut(a)*, *Sławutycia*, *Sławoczna*, *Słowna*, *Słownia*, *Słoważ*, *Niestówka*, and many others, considers the "topographic" explanation of the Slavic name one of the most convincing.²³

Finally, M. Vasmer, the German Slavist, in his Russian etymological dictionary wholeheartedly supports the "topographic" etymology of the name of the Slavs.²⁴

The history of the explanation of this name shows several other theories put forward by scholars of high caliber.

One of such explanations belongs to the famous Polish linguist J. Baudouin de Courtenay. In an article on this topic²⁵ he presented an interesting idea of the generalization of parts of such names as *Jarošlav*, *Mirošlav*, *Stanislav*, etc. on the whole tribe. In his opinion, the name *slověne/slovjane* originally appeared among the Slavs in places where they came into contact with foreign tribes, and where the slave markets were held, e.g., on the shores of the Adriatic

¹⁹ In a letter of Feb. 2nd, 1960 to the author; the title of the book is as follows: *Rodowody Słowian. Polska i Ruś* [Genealogy of the Slavs. Poland and Ruś] (Paris, 1861), pp. 11–13.

²⁰ *Zbornik filoloških i lingvistikih studija* (Belgrade, 1921).

²¹ *Op.cit.*, pp. 97–112. ²² *Op.cit.*, pp. 129–131. ²³ *Op.cit.*, 79–80 and 190.

²⁴ *Russisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* (Heidelberg, 1949–1955), II, 656–657.

²⁵ *Język Polski* [Polish language] (Cracow, 1916), III, 62–64.

sea. Whoever bought slaves of Slavic origin and asked for their names always heard the afore-mentioned names. The second, often and clearly repeated part of the names, remained in the memory of the foreign trader. Thus, the meaning *slave* was transferred to the name *Slav*. Here Baudouin de Courtenay compares the term Latin *sclavus*, German *Sklave*, French *esclave*, etc.²⁶ with such transfers of the meaning as *Schweizer* 'doorman,' *Węgiel* 'travelling merchant,' etc. This theory is still living in encyclopaedias and general works of reference about *Slavs* as well as in the poetry.²⁷ So, e.g., one reads in the *Slavonic Encyclopaedia* (New York 1947, p. 1169) the following: "The term *Slav* (from *slava* 'glory,' *slavit'* 'to glorify') applied to these people, originated probably from the frequent usage in personal names *-slav*, as in *Jugoslav* 'glorifying the spring,' *Mstislav* 'extolling revenge,' *Boguslav* 'praising God,' etc., which at that time was common to the whole people."

In a scholarly symposium dedicated to J. Baudouin de Courtenay²⁸ L. Masing gave three etymological articles, amongst them one devoted to the explanation of the name of the Slavs. According to Masing *Slověninz*/*Slovjaninz* means 'a man who speaks not understandably.' This name is analogous to the Slavic designation of the Germans — *Němьць* 'mute person' and is derived from Gothic *slavan* 'to be silent, to be mute.'

Masing's explanation opposes the "topographic" theories about the name *Slav*. Another opponent was A. Brückner, the Berlin Slavist (1856—1939), who in several articles and books defended the etymology from ***sleu-/slei-* 'slow' referring to less attractive features of the character of the Slavs: their slowness, sluggishness, laziness, and to such words as Polish *slowieć*, *slownia* 'flax (slowly ripening)' and English *slow*, Dutch *sleeuw*, Swedish *slö*, etc.²⁹ As a

²⁶ Here also Greek *σκληρός*, cf. D. J. Georgacas, "Beiträge zur Deutung als slavisch erklärter Ortsnamen," *Byzant. Zeitschr.* 41 (1942), 374—376.

²⁷ Cf. the poem *Slavus — sclavus* by Lesja Ukrajinka, *Works*, I, (New York, 1953), pp. 97—98.

²⁸ *Prace lingwistyczne ofiarowane Janowi Baudouinowi de Courtenay* [Linguistic papers offered to J. Baudouin de Courtenay], (Cracow, 1921), pp. 84—99.

²⁹ In his Polish etymological dictionary: *Słownik etymologiczny języka polskiego* (Cracow, 1927), p. 501; in *Slavia*, III, 199—203; *Zeitschrift für Ortsnamenforschung*, II, 147—154; *Dzieje kultury polskiej* [History of the Polish culture], I, 8, etc.

result of various historical factors the name Slav spread to all the Slavic tribes, and — though it first was disregarded — in time it was accepted by the Slavs themselves and was put into general use.

Brückner's etymology does not exhaust the list of the attempts in this respect. For the sake of bibliographical completeness the following explanations should be mentioned:

G. Iljinskij's hypothesis: from **slověti* 'to speak comprehensively'.³⁰

M. Rudnicki's etymology from ***sleu-*/*slo-*/*slu-* corresponding with ***sreu-*/*srou-*/*sru-* 'to flow'.³¹

A. Stender-Pedersen's explanation is similar to that of L. Masing.³²

J. Zubatý's complicated view about the original *Slověno* — form that later was extended with the suffix *-ěninъ*.³⁰

J. Mikkola's connection with Greek *λαός* (< **σλαφός*) meaning 'members of the same tribe'.³⁰

J. Suttnar's hypothesis connecting this name with Slavic *slouga* 'servant'.³⁰

Other explanations based on such words as *čelověk* 'man,' *skala* 'rock,' **golva* 'head,' **solvii* 'nightingale,' *Slavuty -Dnipro* 'river name,' etc., were rather folk-etymologies than scholarly interpretations of the name.

4.

If someone were to ask me for "langer Rede kurzer Sinn," i.e., for my own opinion, I would be in an awkward situation.

As a young adept in Onomastics, originally I was highly impressed and attracted by the "topographic" explanation of the Slavic name. (The etymology of Budimir-Rozwadowski was an official *credo* at the University of Lviv, Western Ukraine). Professor W. Taszycki, my unforgettable teacher and master in Onomastics, greatly influenced my opinion at that time. I expressed my views on the

³⁰ Cf. the author's *Vstup do slovjanoznavstva* [Introduction to Slavistics], Ukrainian Free University (Munich, 1948), p. 62ff.

³¹ Cf. *Slavia Occidentalis*, VII, 486.

³² Cf. his *Slavisch-germanische Lehnwortkunde* (Göteborg, 1927), p. 4.

problem in an article, published by the late Ukrainian linguist, Professor V. Simovyč, an onomatologist of high rank.³³

After the second World War, I myself started work on the etymology of the name and gathered some examples illustrating the non-“topographic” function of the suffix *-ěnině/-janině*, e.g.,

- Ukr. *virjanyn* ‘parishioner’ : *vira* ‘faith’
 „ *pročanyn* ‘pilgrim’ : *prošča* ‘pilgrimage’
 „ *krylošanyn* ‘high church official’ : *krylos* ‘part of the church’
 „ *movljanyn* ‘speaker’ : *mova* ‘speech.’

The latter formation is very closely related to:

- Ukr. *slovjanyn* : *slovo* ‘word’.³⁰

Thus, my present opinion, the derivation of this name from *slovo* and the explanation of the Slavic name as ‘those who speak the same understandable language,’ is at least as convincing as its “topographic” explanation.

* * *

My conclusions about the problem are as follows:

- a) up to the present time there is no unanimous consent in Slavic Onomastics regarding the etymology of the name *Slav*;
- b) the most attractive and convincing seems to be the “topographic” explanation of the name;
- c) the derivation, however, from *slovo* ‘word’ is not excluded since the suffix *-ěnině/-janině* is used to form words not only from the “topographic” roots, but also from occasional words, even with an abstract meaning (*vira*).

5.

A special problem arises when the name *Slav* and its various derivatives in English are considered.

According to the Oxford Dictionary,³⁴ the oldest form is *Slav* or (with Latin inserted *c*) *Sclav(e)* recorded as early as in 1387 in the nominal and as late as in 1887 in its adjectival function.

³³ “Pro nazvu slovjany” [About the name *Slavs*], *Žyttja i znannja* (Lviv, 1936), pp. 167–168.

³⁴ *A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles* by Sir James A. H. Murray et alii, (Oxford 1919), vol. 9, pp. 182ff.

In 1555 the form *Slavon* (*Sclavon*) appears; its meaning is 'a Slav' (noun).

Chronologically and structurally very close to this is the adjectival formation *Slavonish* evidenced in records of 1560.

Another adjective is *Slavonian* from records of 1577.

Compared with the above terms, the adjective *Slavonic* appears relatively late; the first records go back to 1614 ("Slavonique tongue"). It is worthy of mention that one of the founders of the Oxford Slavistics, Professor W. R. Morfill, used this term consistently.

Relatively late is also the form *Slavic*. Its first use goes back to 1813. The same date refers to the adjective *Slavian*.

From all the above terms: *Slav*, *Slavon*, *Slavonish*, *Slavonian*, *Slavonic*, *Slavic* three are competing in present-day English: *Slav*, *Slavonic*, and *Slavic*. The first one is used in the whole English speaking world. The British Isles, Australia, and New Zealand employ *Slavonic*. The United States of America uses *Slavic*, but sometimes *Slavonic* also.³⁵ As far as Canada is concerned both terms are employed: *Slavonic* Studies at the University of British Columbia, and *Slavic* Studies at the University of Manitoba. Alberta and Toronto had *Slavic* for the last decade or so, but are now switching to *Slavonic Studies*.

So far, very little has been written on this topic in the scholarly literature. To my knowledge only Professor Roman Smal-Stock; of Marquette University, discussing *Terminological problems of Eastern European History*,³⁶ came to the following conclusions in this matter:

"These terms are in the present literature still competing terms. In American Universities are 'Slavic' departments, but in public libraries and in the Library of Congress are 'Slavonic' departments. In some publications all three terms are used simultaneously."

"I propose to eliminate the term *Slavonic* because it is derived from *Slavonia*, respectively from med. Latin: *sclavonius* (since 1555); and is therefore misleading. It is rather a monument of Anglo-Saxon ignorance in Slavic matters."

³⁵ Cf. *Old Church Slavonic Grammar* by Lunt, *Slavonic Encyclopaedia* by Rouček.

³⁶ *Svoboda* No. 109, Jersey City 1957.

“Also the term *Slav* has already lost the race and the term *Slavic* proved its usefulness and accuracy.”

With these words, Ladies and Gentlemen, coming from one of the best authorities in this field in America, I am closing in the firm conviction that, in line with the development of Slavistics and Onomastics in our Hemisphere also, the terminological problems will be positively solved and one of the mentioned names, preferably *Slavic*, will win the race.

Discussion. — An interesting and lively discussion developed after the reading of the presidential address. Two sides were taken: one for the author's point of view by Professors Alfred Senn, Roman Smal-Stocki; Demetrius Georgacas, and others, the opposite by Professor B. O. Unbegaun and one or two more. It is unquestionable that the American English usage tends to be *Slavic*, *Slavistic*, etc., while *Slavonic* is British English; there are no terms **Slavonist*, **Slavonistics* parallel to the existing *Slavicist*, *Slavistics*. [D. J. Georgacas, Editor].