Svjatogor – the Name of the Hero of *bylina*[1]

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UNLIKE THE LITERARY AND HISTORICAL RESEARCH WORK on the Eastern Slavic *bylina* about *Svjatogor* the linguistic and onomatological investigation of the subject is not quite satisfactory. The latest word in this respect comes from Max Vasmer who in his etymological dictionary offers the following explanation:

"*Svjatogor* — 'hero of the Russian folk-poetry with a supernatural strength.' He was regarded as *svjatъ Jegorъ = Greek ἅγιος Γεόργιος 'Saint George.' On the other hand some etymologists derive it from *Svjataja Gora* 'Holy Mountain,' cf. Mazon, *Revue des Etudes Slaves* 12. 196 and following pages. According to Sobolevskij *Živaja Starina* 1, 2, 103 there is no name *Svjatogor* in the Old Russian anthroponymy, yet several place-names of that kind can be found, e.g., *Svjatogory* (Vologda), *Svjatogor* (Perm) ,*Svjatogorki* (Orel), *Svjatogory* (Kostroma) a.o."[2]

Obviously the name *Svjatogor*, which is doubtlessly a compound, has not yet been satisfactorily explained. Both views quoted by Vasmer belong to the sphere of folk etymology. Since the *bylina* about *Svjatogor* is older than the Christianity in Rus' (Vladimir the Great, 988) the name of its hero cannot possibly be connected with Greek ἅγιος Γεόργιος. Equally uncertain is the explanation deriving the name from *Svjatyje Gory* 'Holy Mountains' which was put forward by V. Miller in 1881. Slavic topographic names of persons usually have suffixes *-ъskъ, -ъcъ, -ěninъ/-janinъ, -akъ, -itjь*, etc. Thus, if the name of the *bylina* hero were derived from *Svjatyje Gory*, he would be called:

> *Svjatogorъskъ* or *Svjatogorskij*
> *Svjatogorěninъ* or *Svjatogorjaninъ*,
> *Svjatogorec*, etc.

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[1] Paper read at the Annual Meeting of the American Name Society in Chicago, December 30th, 1961.

[2] Max Vasmer, *Russisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*. Heidelberg 1952–1958, 2. 297.

Even such names as *Svjatogor* in Russian toponymy go back to suffixal formations *Svętogor* + *jь* being possessive types of place-names like *Jaroslavl'*, *Peremyšl'*, *Dobromil'*, etc.

The first scholar to doubt *Svjatyje Gory* as the explanation was Myxajlo Hruševśkyj in his *Istorija ukrajinśkoji literatury* (History of Ukrainian literature), 4. 223.[3] Many scholars — he says — wondered where, in effect, these *Holy Mountains* were, and nobody had proved their existence. Thus — Hruševśkyj concludes — perhaps there were no mountains under this name, and it is quite possible that they were entirely a literary creation. Unfortunately, however, Hruševśkyj does not offer any theory regarding the origin of the name *Svjatogor*.

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The *bylina* about *Svjatogor* contains no mention of the *Holy Mountains*; on the contrary, it emphasizes the *open field* as the place of the action. Let us first of all examine the contents:[4]

Svjatogor prepared himself to take a ride into the open field,
He harnesses his good horse
And rides into the open field.
There is no one with whom Svjatogor can measure his
    strength,
And his strength in his veins is overflowing.
The strength is adding to his weight like a heavy load.
And so Svjatogor says:
"If I could find the point of departure of the earth, I would
    lift the whole world up."
Svjatogor finds a saddle bag in the field.
He takes the whip, hits the bag — it does not move.
He pokes it with his finger — it does not move again.
Pulling with his hand from the horse, it cannot be lifted.
"For many years I rode around the world,
But I have not come upon such a wonder.
I have not seen such a wonder!
A little saddle bag that does not move, cannot be lifted."

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[3] Hruševśkyj's deliberations are apparently unknown to Vasmer, l.c.

[4] The translation was made by Mrs. Audrey Sojonky of the University of Manitoba.

Svjatogor gets off the good horse.
He tries to lift the little bag with both his hands.
He lifted the little bag above his knees,
And Svjatogor sank into the ground up to his knees.
And on his white face, no tears, but blood is flowing.
Where Svjatogor falls, from here he could not get up.
Here was his end.[5]

From the above text we see that Svjatogor's main characteristic is his unusual strength. However, he never applies it for a useful purpose. He likes to boast and waste his strength carelessly. Little wonder, therefore, that he has to die. As such Svjatogor has absolutely no saintly qualities and in the *bylina* he is presented as a negative hero.

Keeping in mind that primitive names originally were consistent with the character of the individuals concerned, we come to the conclusion that the first part of the name **sveto-* has nothing to do with 'saintly, holiness,' but with the primary meaning of the term — 'strong, mighty.' Such a meaning was ascribed to this root by the "patriarch of Slavic onomastics," Franz Miklosich. In his work on the formation of Slavic personaɪ names he states the following:

Daß bei dem Thema *svetu* in Personennamen nicht an den christlichen Begriff heilig zu denken ist, beweist das hohe, in das Heidenthum zurückreichende Alter der damit zusammenhängenden Namen: so wie heilig auf den Begriff heil, so muß svetu auf den Begriff stark zurückgeführt werden ... Vgl. goth. svinths δυνατός, ἰσχύων, ἰσχυρός Ztschr. 8. 58. ἱερός Ztschr. 2. 274. Vgl. ahd. suind violentus Förstem. 1135; ἱερός, ἱερόθεος..."[6]

This view was accepted by other Slavists, such as A. Brückner,[7] V. Machek,[8] a.o.; and such names as Eastern Slavic *Svjatoslav, Svjatopolk,* Czech *Svatobor, Svatopluk,* Polish *Świętobor, Świętomir,* etc., were connected with **sveto-* 'strong, powerful.'[9]

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[5] Translation made from the text contained in *Readings in Russian Folklore.* The University of Manitoba Press, Winnipeg, 1952, p. 20.

[6] Franz Miklosich, *Die Bildung der slavischen Personen- und Ortsnamen.* Heidelberg, 1927, p. 95.

[7] A. Brückner, *Słownik etymologiczny języka polskiego.* Kraków, 1927, p. 537.

[8] V. Machek, *Etymologický slovník jazyka českého a slovenského.* Praha, 1957, p. 487.

[9] Machek, l.c.

As far as the second part of the name is concerned we refer the reader to the root **gor-* 'incendium' (Miklosich), *gorjǫ — gořeti* 'to burn' (Berneker). It is known from such names as Polish *Gorzysław, Cieszygor, Dalegor, Dziwigor*;[10] Czech *Hořivoj*; Bulgarian *Gorislava*; Eastern Slavic *Gorislav(ić), Horyslav*, etc., and the simple suffixed names *Gorin, Gorun, Goreta, Gorzesz*, etc.[11] The name **Svetogor* would correspond exactly to the name **Bolъjegor* (Polish *Bolegor*)[12] having an adjectival root in the first and a verbal one in the second part of the compound. Furthermore **Sventogor* is motivated in the Slavic anthroponymic system by such names as *Bolebud*,[13] *Hrdebor*,[14] *Dobrovit*,[15] *Dragokup, Dragoljub*,[16] *Radsul* (from **Radosulъ*),[17] etc. In this connection the name *Svjatogor* would mean 'one burning with power, one who is superfluously strong.' This semantic explanation is wholly supported by the contents of the *bylina*.

In conclusion it might be stated that the name *Svjatogor* is an onomastic *hapax legomenon* — and a "meaningful" name illustrating the contents of the *bylina* itself. Hruševśkyj's assumption that it is a poetical creation is supported by the above etymology of the name. It might be considered a folk-poetical interpretation of the name *Svjatogor* on one side, and an onomastic neologism in the field of namelore on the other.[18]

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[10] Witold Taszycki, *Rozprawy i studia polonistyczne. I: Onomastyka.* Kraków, 1958, p. 68.

[11] Miklosich, op. cit. 50.

[12] Taszycki, l. c.   [13] Miklosich, op. cit. 35.   [14] Miklosich, op. cit. 52.

[15] Miklosich, op. cit. 56.   [16] Miklosich, op. cit. 58.   [17] Taszycki, op. cit. 66.

[18] A lively and interesting discussion developed after the reading of this paper. The author is indebted to M. Semchyszen, J. Pauls, and especially to A. Senn for their criticism and advice, which enabled him to refine his etymology. Thanks are also due to V. Kiparsky for his remarks and particularly for his contribution of a Russian dialectism *zimogor* 'a winter-dweller in Northern Russian bushes' which structurally supports the author's explanation of the name *Svjatogor*.