

Samo – the Name of the First Ruler of the Slavs*

J. B. RUDNYČKYJ

IN 623 A.D., under the leadership of Samo, the Slavic tribes in central-eastern Europe successfully revolted against the Avars. Following the victory, the Slavs elected Samo their ruler. Because the Avars were not in a position to immediately organize a campaign of revenge the first historically known state of the Slavs thus came into being. Encouraged by the victory over the Avars Samo led his Slavs against the Teutonic Franks. He was successful again: under him the Slavs defeated the Franks under Dagobert near the Vogaste Castle in 631 A.D. Yet, Samo's empire, which comprised the area known today as southern Moravia, western Slovakia, and lower Austria, did not last very long. It disintegrated soon after his death in 658 A.D.

Nevertheless, considerable literature exists about the Empire of Samo.¹ The most recent critical survey of this body of material was written by F. Tiso in *Slovak Studies I: Historica* 1, published in 1961 by the Slovak Institute in Rome. In his article, "The Empire of Samo (623–658)" (pp. 1–21), the author deals with several aspects of the problem, including the etymology of the name of Samo. He explains it as being of Celtic origin, following A. Holder who in his work, *Alt-keltischer Sprachschatz* (Leipzig 1904), lists a large number of Celtic personal names containing a compound-forming element *Sam-*, *Samn-*, *Samo-*, etc. Tiso concludes, "Today the Celtic origin of the name Samo is beyond any doubt" (op. cit., p. 16). Yet, in my opinion, there are serious doubts as to the Celtic origin of this name.

* Paper read at the Annual Meeting of the *ANS* in Chicago, Dec. 30, 1963.

¹ To quote only a few works: J. Goll, "Samo und die karantanischen Slawen," *Mitteilungen des Instituts für die österreichische Geschichte* 11, Wien 1890; M. Korduba, "Perša deržava slovjanská," *Zapysky NTŠ*, 13, Lviv 1896; G. Vernadsky, "The Beginnings of the Czech State," *Byzantion* 17 (1944–1945), 315–328; G. Łabuda, *Pierwsze państwo słowiańskie. Państwo Samona*. Poznań 1949; K. Oettinger, *Das Werden Wiens*. Wien 1951, a.o.

First of all, there is no historical reference to Samo as having been a Celt. Some medieval chroniclers designate him as a Slav, cf. *Samo nomine quidam Sclavus*,² or *Samo dux Sclavorum*;³ the others refer to him as to a Frank, cf. *Homo nomen Samo natione Francus de pago Senonago*.⁴ Thus, there are only two ethno-lingual kinships of Samo historically proven – *Slavic* and *Teutonic* (Frankish).

IE root ***sōm-*: ***som-* ‘the same; alone, etc.’ is evidenced in both Slavic and Teutonic languages by the same radical vowel -a-; cf. OCS *samъ, sama, samo* ‘alone,’ and the Slavic personal names *Sam, Samo, Sambor, Samobor, Samotulius*,⁵ all reflecting the long ō-vowel (IE ***sōm-*) and meaning ‘alone.’ The Teutonic correspondences are based on the short o-vowel (IE ***som-*), cf. OIc. *samr, inn sami* ‘the same,’ OHG *der samo* ‘the same,’ Got. *sama-kuns* ‘of the same kin,’ E. *the same*, etc.⁶ As far as the meaning is concerned the Slavic forms are more convincing with reference to a ruler: while Teutonic material testifies the meaning ‘the same,’ the Slavic correspondances have support in Greek compounds as, e.g., *autómaxos* = Sl. *Sam|o|bor*,⁶ or *autokratos* = Sl. **samodьrъцьь*, Russ. *samoderžec*, etc.⁷

There are, however, some arguments for the Slavic character of the name Samo which so far have been disregarded, and which the present writer would like to bring to the attention of scholars. This argument is based on the historical fact that Samo was actually

² Cf. “*Conversio Bogoariorum et Carantanorum*,” *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, 9, Ch. 4.

³ Cf. *Monumenta Germaniae* 13,7, quoted after F. Miklosich, *Die Bildung der slavischen Personen- und Ortsnamen*, Heidelberg 1927, 94.

⁴ Cf. “*Chronicarum quae dicuntur Fredegarii Scholastici libri IV*,” *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, *Scriptores Rerum Merovingicarum*, 2, Ch. 48.

⁵ Cf. Miklosich, l. c.

⁶ Cf. J. Pokorný, *Indogermanisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, 1 (Bern-München 1959), 902–905.

^{6a} Cf. J. B. Rudnýčkyj, *Onomastica* 15, 29–31.

⁷ The explanation of Samo as an abbreviation of *samoderžec* is suggested, among others, by G. Vernadsky: “While the name Samo may be derived from the Celtic, it also may be explained as a Jewish name (an abridgement of Samuel) or derived from the Slavic pronoun *sam* (of such composite Slavic words as *samoderžec* *autocrat*); cf. his “The Beginnings of the Czech State,” *Byzantion* 17, 323–335; Tiso, op. cit., 14 calls it a “fantastic speculation with respect to the name of *Samo*” forgetting that his own speculation seems to be more “fantastic” than that of Vernadsky!

the ruler of Slavs from 623–658, and, consequently, his name was used by the Slavic speakers of that time in association with the genuine Slavic words based on the pronoun *samъ, sama, samo* 'alone.' Even admitting the Teutonic (or very doubtful Jewish or Celtic) origin of the name nobody can deny that the Slavic subjects of this ruler pronounced and associated this name only with their own onomastic and appellative material which, in its ultimate instance, led to this pronoun.

Samo appears on the historical scene as the first ruler of Slavs. This fact suggests another argument which supports the above statement. Whatever was his ethno-lingual background (i.e., Slavic, or Teutonic) his first historical appearance is connected with the Slavic element of the 7th century of our era. Accordingly, his name must have been used by historiographers of that time in its Slavic form, setting aside the problem whether it was of Proto-Slavic or of Teutonic origin.

Hitherto there has been a basic error in the investigation of both the origin and name of Samo; namely, the identification of the ethno-lingual affiliation of the ruler himself with the origin of his name. Meanwhile, it is a well-known fact that personal names not necessarily must be identical with the ethnic origin of their holders. Thus, e.g., *George*, the name of kings of Great Britain, does not necessarily mean that their national origin was Greek; neither does the name of *Ivan* the Terrible indicate that he comes from Israel! In our case, similarly, the name of Samo must be kept separately from all possible ethnic affiliations of him as a personality. In other words, the above-quoted data of Fredegar (*homo nomen Samo*) must be kept separately from *natione Francus* on the one hand, and the statement of other chronicles (*Samo nomine, from quidam Sclavus*) on the other. Most historians, including Tiso, identified both aspects of the investigation; and this error naturally led to their conclusions, biased in one, the Teutonic,⁸ or another, the Slavic,⁹ direction. Very

⁸ E.g. V. Novotný, *České dějiny* I, 1, Praha 1912, 211; G. Sappok, "Grundzüge der österreichischen Herrschaftsbildungen im frühen Mittelalter." *Deutschland und der Osten*, Leipzig 1942, 20.220–21, a. o.

⁹ E.g. F. Palacký, *Dějiny národu českého v Čechach a na Moravě*, Praha 1930, 64.65; G. Krek, *Einleitung in die slavische Literaturgeschichte*, Graz 1887, 321; F. Fasching, "König Samo." *Zweiter Jahresbericht der k.k. Staatsoberrrealschule in Marburg*, 1872, 5–8; V. Pogodin, *Iz istorii slavjanskix pperedvizhenij*, St. Petersburg 1901, 157, a. o.

few scholars considered the name exclusively as a name without the ethnic kinship of its holder. Among this latter group, F. Miklosich compared this name with Slavic anthropo- and toponymic material as well as with Teutonic *selb* and Greek *autós* and, quoting only *Samo dux Sclavorum*, did not emphasize his national background.¹⁰

It is clear that the fundamental assumption underlying Miklosich's etymology of the name is the supposition that Samo, being *dux Sclavorum*, was actually called that name by the Slavs; and, consequently, even if the name was not of a PS origin, it was adopted by them in association with the pronoun *samъ, sama, samo*. In the latter instance we would have a kind of "onomastic folk etymology" based on the native material.

In quoting Teutonic correspondance of Slavic *samъ, sama, samo* Miklosich draws our attention to another possibility; namely, that the name Samo could have been a calque, a translation of OHG *selb* which was the basis of such names as *Selbo, Selbstherr*, etc.¹¹ Some scholars saw the origin of the name Samo in the first part of the **samodъrъць*, i. e., self-governor, autocrat, monarch (Vernadsky, l. c.). Bachmann and Oettinger go so far as to deny the onomastic character of Samo and consider it as an appellative, a Slavic term designating the ruler in general. According to Bachmann, Samo was derived from the word **samovladъca* 'self-governor, autocrat' and was given to a new ruler only after his election to this post by the Slavs.¹² This hypothesis, however, must be rejected on account of the historical evidence. Samo is explicitly quoted by the chronicler as *homo nomen Samo*, i. e., as a man named Samo.¹³

The main weakness of Miklosich's etymology of the name under discussion is its final -o which hitherto has not been satisfactorily explained. Besides Samo, Miklosich quotes a Czech name *Sam* which, according to structural development of Slavic, is not only clear as far as its gender (m.) and form are concerned but can be successfully compared to such names as *Mal* 'little,' *Mil* 'misericors,' *Pak*

¹⁰ Op. cit., 94.

¹¹ Cf. A. F. Pott, *Die Personennamen, insbesondere die Familiennamen, und ihre Entstehungsarten*. Leipzig 1859, 154, 227.

¹² Cf. A. Bachmann, *Geschichte Böhmens*, vol. 1, Gotha 1899, 86; Oettinger, op. cit., 55.

¹³ Cf. Tiso, op. cit., 14.

‘validus,’ a. o.¹⁴ Masculine names in *-o* are not so frequent in Slavic onomastics. Moreover, they are considered as a kind of innovation in the Slavic onomatology.¹⁵ A closer analysis of such names, however, like,

Old Polish *Żyro* 1198,
Old Polish *Wroto* 12th c.
Old Polish *Boglo* 1290
Old Polish *Sędo* 13th c.
Old Polish *Falo* 1289
Old Polish *Niego* 13th c.¹⁶

and other names of that kind indicates that *Samo* is well motivated by the Slavic anthroponymic system, particularly in its early historical development.¹⁷

¹⁴ Miklosich, op. cit. 72, 74, 84.

¹⁵ W. Taszycki, *Najdawniejsze polskie imiona osobowe*, Kraków 1925, 52.

¹⁶ Taszycki, op. cit., appendix, sub vocibus.

¹⁷ A lively discussion developed after the reading of this paper, A. Salys, J. Pauls, a. o., supporting the above explanation of the name of *Samo*.