

Russian Svjatogor and Serbian Mark of the Holy Mountain (*Marko Svetogorac*)

Inherently probable, the existence of an oral poetry among the Slavs in their proto-home before the Migration Age is inferred from a number of etymological matches of whole poetic formulas between South Slavic and Russian epic traditions, which suggests that the similarities of their figures and plots may be explained, too, as a common inheritance rather than due to independent or later developments, and where both form and content are comparable, the research results in reconstructing fragments of Common Slavic heroic and mythological poetry. The present paper aims at recovering such a fragment.

The most popular hero of South Slavic epics, Prince Mark, late 14th century Serbian ruler in what is today Macedonia, has been compared so far to epic heroes of different epochs and nations, such as Greek Achilles and Heracles, Byzantine Digenis Akritas, Spanish Cid, Frankish Roland, German Wolfdietrich, Old Norse Starkad, Persian Rostam, but genetically most relevant are the parallels found to him in Russian *biliny*. Among the “elder heroes” (*staršie bogatyri*) it is Svjatogor and in the second generation Il’ja of Murom, who are connected together by the motif of the latter inheriting the former’s strength (*sila*). In the poem confronting two heroes Svjatogor is characterized by the same behavior as Mark’s adversary Musa: both of them while riding throw a mace nearly into the clouds and than catch it with their “white hands”; there is a striking similarity between the two descriptions, with some formulaic and even etymological correspondences undoubtedly rooted in common poetic heritage. Whereas Svjatogor, a giant with suprahuman strength, conserves his mythological substance reflected especially in him being intimately tied, even by his name, with the fabulous ‘Holy Mountains’ (*Svjatye Gory*) whose craggy soil only can support his weight, Musa is strongly euhemerized (an Albanian rebelling against the sultan!), but still keeping traces of a demonic nature, for he is three-hearted with a talking snake inside his chest, and his size must have been enormous, because Mark having slain him only narrowly saved himself from under his dead body. Musa’s three hearts mean that he was thrice stronger than a normal man, which provokes Mark’s famous lament over having killed a better hero than himself; similarly, the dying Svjatogor transmits to Il’ja only one half or one third of his superfluous power. A *tertium comparationis* is provided by Old Norse Hrungni, a giant with a three-cornered heart of stone, who, slain in a duel by Thor, falls prone across his killer with one leg over his neck, and subsequently all the other Ases prove themselves unable to move it and unblock their champion. Hrungni’s stony nature (he was also stone-headed and armed with a hone and a large shield of stone) resembles that of Svjatogor, who is in a sense identical with his rocky abode. Musa having been born on a rock and confronting Marko in a mountain gorge, his brother and alter ego *Djemo* being surnamed ‘Highlander’ (*Brdjanin*) may reflect a similar association. The poem about Svjatogor and Il’ja ends with the former being buried alive in a large tomb carved out of rock in the “Holy Mountains” and thus mystically assimilated to them. There is another version of Svjatogor’s death, where he after blasphemously boasting about his strength loses it while attempting in vain to lift a small sack containing miraculously the weight of the entire earth (*tjaga zemnaja*), sinks to his knees into the ground and dies, obviously petrified into a mountain. The same story is known to Macedonian and Bulgarian epics, where it is connected with Prince Mark, only he survives the lesson; and there is again a poetic formula of a good Indo-European pedigree used by both traditions in this context, Russ. *mat’ (syra) zemlja*, Mac. *majka (černa)*

zemja, to assure us of its Common Slavic provenience. The historical Mark fell 1395 in a battle fought in the Wallachian plain and was buried probably in a monastery built by him near Skopje, whereas in the epic tradition his end is variously narrated but consistently associated with a mountain; either he is transported alive into a hidden cave (the motif of sleeping hero), or he dies on the top of a mythical mountain and his body is subsequently translated by monks to the 'Holy Mountain' (*Sveta Gora*), whereby Mount Athos is meant, just as in an early recorded variant of the poem about Mark recapturing his wife, where he disguises himself as a 'monk from the Holy Mountain' (*Svetogorac*). However, in the same variant, Mark's adversary features a stone body down to the waist. In another poem, the same feature is attributed to a giant Jew, who attempts to plunder the Holy Mountain and to burn its monasteries but ends by being slain by Marko. In variants the plunderer of the Holy Mountain has three hearts and the abductor of Mark's wife is designated as a Jew, which proves the original identity of Mark's various conflicts considered here, so that we are entitled to assume underlying fragments of a Common Slavic epicized myth concentrated around the notion of a 'Holy (or 'Mighty') mountain', **svęta gora*, a Pre-Christian one, older than the sacralization of Mt Athos which started only in 7th century A.D. Consequently, the unhistorical association of Prince Mark with it must be due to a later reinterpretation.

A 'Holy mountain', Greek *Hágion óros*, in Scythia is mentioned by 6th century A.D. lexicographer Stephan of Byzantium in connection with a hill called *Pseudartákē*, which is convincingly interpreted as Middle-Iranian (Sarmatian) **Psänd-art-aka-* '(Hill) of Holy Fire', with the adjective **psänd-* matching Avestan *spanta-*, Slavic *svętъ*. Pre-Christian sacredness of a mountain in this part of Europe may be a hint of Iranian fire-cult as practiced on the mountain tops, with the holy fire kept burning perpetually. On the other hand, the legends of gigantic heroes bound to or buried under or sleeping inside a mountain may have arisen from a naturalistic mythological substrate. Mount Elbrus, the highest peak in Caucasus, where fire-givers Georgian Amirani (i.e. Iranian Ahriman) and Greek Prometheus got their punishment, was an active volcano in the historical time, as well as its namesake Elburz in South Caspian (both names continue Avestan *Harā Bərəzaitī*), where, in a cave underneath Mount Demavend, the monstrous Zahhak, Avestan *Ažiš Dahako*, is believed to lie imprisoned until at the end of the world he breaks loose and burns a third of the earth. A latent volcano, with fumaroles, hot springs and memories of its former eruptions, may have provoked such beliefs. Also the motifs of giants throwing far stone blocks, leaving their footprints in rocks and being transformed into mountains seem to originate in the volcanic phenomena such as eruptions, outbursts of lava and its subsequent hardening. Parallels are provided by the mythologies of peoples inhabiting volcanic areas of the world, such as Pacific Ring of Fire or Trans-Mexican volcanic belt. Since the proto-home of the Slavs did not belong to the areas of historical volcanic activity, their concept of the "holy mountain" and its heroic personification was probably due to the spread of myths and legends arisen in Caucasian and Caspian area through the East-European Iranians, i.e. Scythians and Sarmatians. The same might be true of comparable figures of other traditions, such as Ossetian Mukara, Armenian Mher (< Mithra), Estonian Kalevipoeg, etc., and even of Old Norse Loki, despite the volcanic nature of Iceland.

