

TOWARDS THE ETYMOLOGY
OF RUSSIAN *TOPOL* 'POPLAR'¹

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The Russian word *topol* 'poplar' presents a philological problem. The word, which was attested in the eleventh century, cf. also the form *topolije*, has been analysed as a cognate of Latin *populus* 'poplar' with a dissimilation $p-p > t-p$ and has been further associated with Gk. *πτελέα* 'elm' (Vasmer 1953:III:121).² An alternative explanation of *topol* was also offered by M. Vasmer, who suggested that this Russian tree-name was a borrowing from a Middle Latin form *papulus* (cf. OHG *papilboum*). Neither of these etymologies has received universal approval. We should like to offer another explanation of the form and associate the Russian tree-name *topol* (masc.) with *top* meaning 'swamp', or 'marsh'. Another Russian word *topol* (fem.) which derives from *top* has the meaning 'swampy place'.³ Apart from the general typological observations on the correlation between the plant- and tree-names on the one hand, and the names for swamps and marshes, on the other, a following dossier of semantic analogies can be compiled to support this theory.

The Modern Welsh forms *gwern*, *gwernen* (cf. Old Cornish *guern* gl. *malus*, *guernen* gl. *alnus*; Middle Breton *guern*, Old Irish *fern*, Gaulish *uerno*-) have a transparent etymology and find their place in Pokorny's entry **uer-(e)nā* (Pokorny 1959:1169).⁴ The word has two meanings: 'alder-trees', and 'alder-grove, alder-marsh, swamp, quagmire, damp meadow' (*Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru* 1950-:1645). It has been more than once noted, that alder is a "hydrophile" tree, and the data point to a relationship between 'swampy place', and the name of this tree.⁵ This semantic cor-

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2 On Lithuanian *túopa* 'Pappel' see Fraenkel 1962:I:572.

3 This form was discussed alongside other *-ol*- derivatives by Pavlova 1994, but see note 41 on p. 125 where the author follows traditional views on the origins of the name of poplar in Russian.

4 For this stem see now Demiraj 1997:414-415 and Hamp 1996:XXXII:89-90.

5 See, e.g., Fleuriot 1964:181 and particularly Vendryes 1929:LXVI:137.

respondence is also attested in several other languages where different IE roots are involved, cf. Ossetic *færv* / *færwæ* ‘alder’ which is a cognate of Skt. *palvalám* ‘pool, pond’, and OHG *felawa* ‘pond’ (Abayev 1958:I:455-456; Lidén 1905-1906:XVIII:486). It is notable that one word is used to denote both alder and poplar in several languages, e.g., Portugese *alamo* ‘alder, poplar’; Spanish *alamo negro* ‘alder’, *alamo blanco* ‘poplar’. Old Macedonian *άλιζα* ‘white poplar’ is sometimes considered as a cognate of Lat. *alnus* ‘alder’ (Ivanov - Gamkrelidze 1995:546). It was noted by P. Friedrich, that “one basis for the shift in reference would have been the light color of the underside of the leaf, a conspicuous feature shared by the white poplar and the white alder“ (Friedrich 1970: 71). Whatever the other reasons for the shift in reference might be, these alternations strengthen the argument for the close association between Russian *top*’ meaning ‘swamp’ and *topol*’ meaning ‘poplar’.

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