Towards the etymology of Russian Topol’ ‘poplar’

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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). 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’. 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). 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. This semantic cor-

1 We are grateful to Dr N. Kazanskiy, Corresponding Member, Russian Academy of Sciences for his comments on the earlier draft of this note.
3 This form was discussed alongside other -of 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.

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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 1958:1:455-456; Lidén 1905-1906:XVIII:486). It is notable that one word is used to denote both alder and poplar in several languages, e.g., Portuguese alamo ‘alder, poplar’; Spanish alamo negro ‘alder’, alamo blanco ‘poplar’. Old Macedonian áláz ‘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 topь meaning ‘swamp’ and topolь meaning ‘poplar’.

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