ON THE MYTHOLOGICAL BACKGROUND OF THE BYLINA “ILYA MUROMETS AND NIGHTINGALE THE ROBBER”

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ABSTRACT

The bylina “Ilya Muromets and Nightingale the Robber” is one of the most popular Russian epics. Several interpretations of this bylina and of the image of Nightingale the Robber have been proposed: a reflection of the Indo-European storm myth, an Iranian borrowing, the image of a monstrous guard on the border between the two worlds, a reflection of the principal Balto-Slavic myth of Perun and Veles. Each of these points of view is partially grounded but does not exhaust the complicated nature of this narrative. Its mythological background survived three development stages: from the primitive myth based on the zoomorphic image of death to the later dragon-fighting legend and the mixanthropic picture, naturally corresponding to it, which, in its turn, gained its final shape under the influence of the stadially related Iranian epic. The most archaic variant of the plot is represented in a Belarusian fairy tale, in which Ilya Muromets kills Snake the horned Falcon and the tsar Pražor ‘Glutton’, who eats 10 humans (supplying by Falcon) a day. This role of Falcon refers to the mythological notion of a bird that brings the souls of the departed to the god of the underworld. The transition from this original image to the mixanthropic Snake the horned Falcon and Nightingale as well as the echo of the dragon-slaying theme belongs to the later epoch of statehood and the class society. Besides, different versions of this legend consequently correspond to almost all the general plot elements and the basic traits of the demonic characters of the epic of Ferēdūn and Ẓaḥḥāk and of some episodes concerning Karšāsp.

Keywords: Slavic folklore, Slavic mythology, bylina, “Ilya Muromets and Nightingale the Robber”, image of a bird, mixanthropic image, Iranian epic, borrowing.

1. The bylina “Ilya Muromets and Nightingale the Robber” (also called “The First Journey of Ilya Muromets”) is one of the most popular Russian epics, having been recorded 132 times. The monster Solovei ‘Nightingale’ had partial human (e.g., “the yellow curls” – a constant epithet referring exclusively to anthropomorphic figures; sometimes, it takes a cup by his hands, etc.) and bird-like traits, was able to fly (in some variants), and lived in a nest, had a human family, and received drinks with his hands. He was said to live in a forest (through which nobody is able to go) having his nest upon the oaks (the number of which varies from 1 to 30). His only but mighty weapon is the ability to pipe like a nightingale, to roar like

an aurochs, and to hiss like a dragon destroying everyone and everything that is around with his powerful whistle. When Nightingale the Robber whistles, allegedly: "all the grasses and meadows become entangled, the azure flowers lose their petals, all the dark woods bend down to the earth, and all the people there lie dead!" In some records, sparks and flame pour from his mouth and nostrils. Legend states that Ilya Muromets survived the whistle, even though Nightingale leveled half of the surrounding forest. Ilya Muromets shot down Nightingale the Robber with an arrow to the eye and temple (or to the right wing), and then dragged the defeated monster before Vladimir, Prince of Kiev. Vladimir wished to hear Nightingale the Robber whistle, but the creature claimed he was too wounded to whistle. Nightingale the Robber requested wine to drink so that his wounds would disappear, then he would whistle for the prince. When he whistled, all of Vladimir's palaces were destroyed and many lay dead. After this, Ilya Muromets took Nightingale the Robber into an open field and cut off his head (see English translations in Hapgood 1916: 52; Bailey & Ivanova: 1998: 25–36).

Several interpretations of this bylina and of the image of Nightingale the Robber have been proposed.

A.N. Afanas'ev ([1865–1869]: I 97-98) regards it as a reflection of the storm myth.

V.F. Miller (1892: 85-117) tends to see it as an Iranian borrowing: he deduces this plot from several Iranian dragon-slaying legends told by Ferdowsī, especially of that of Esfandīār – Simorḡ and Rostem – Esfandīār. In the first case, however, these episodes are united by a mere fact of the victory over the monstrous bird, while both circumstances and the course of the two battles are quite different. Other proximities to Iranian epic adduced by Miller are also very distant or concern widespread details of minor importance. The most noteworthy of them is shooting to the rival's eye (Rostem and Esfandīār). However, other rapprochements Miller makes in these legends are incorrect. Both heroes's arrows are not made of elm, as he states: Ilya cuts out his one of *rakita* (a folk name for some kinds of willow); the name of the tree from which Simorḡ orders Rostem to make his arrow is translated now as tamarisk (*The Sháhnáma* 1910: 239) now as poplar (*topol'*) (*Šāh-nāma* 2004: 287). Before shooting, Ilya pronounces an incantation to the arrow, which is one of the constant elements in the works of this genre, while Esfandīār prays to Yezdan, i.e. does a quite different action.

V.Ya. Propp (1958: 254) underlines the high antiquity of this plot and concludes that genetically Nightingale is connected with the image of a monstrous guard on the border between the two worlds.

This plot is also treated as a reflection of the principal Balto-Slavic myth of the struggle between the gods Perun and Veles (the latter originally appeared in the form of the snake) and the image of Nightingale as a substitution of the earlier Snake (Ivanov & Toporov 1974: 116, 168). Indeed, in many variants of this bylina, we find a snake instead of Nightingale (see Smirnov 2010: 75*ff*); analogically, in one of its Belarusian variants (Brest), we meet a 12-headed dragon instead of Nightingale (Barag 1968: 8) and in the Ukrainian tale "Semilitok (A Seven-years-old

one)” a snake living in the forest nest upon the twelve oaks (Talanchuk 2002: 147). In a Bulgarian epic song, the dragon behaves like Nightingale the Robber blocking ways up: “Izliala ii zmiia zlatokrila, | Zalazila zemia do krainina, | To ne dava pile da prefrăkne, | A nedželi – trgofche da mine” (Putilov 1971: 70) ‘A golden-winged snake came out, | Blocked the earth up to end, | Does not allow a bird to fly past, | Furthermore – merchants to pass through’. Nightingale himself whistles like a snake: “A zasvishchet on da po-zmeinomu” ‘And it will start to whistle like a snake’ (Gil’ferding 1873: 300), “Sam shipit-to on, sobaka, po-zmeinomu” ‘He, dog, hisses like a snake itself’ (Markov 1901: 34), “Vykhodili tut boiara kosobrûkhie | A smotret’, slushat’ revu solov’inogo-zmeinogo” ‘Here slanting-bellied boyars came out to see, | To listen to the nightingale’s-snake’s roar’ (Ibidem: 351). However, these examples testify to a mere fact that the image in discussion survived a hybrid bird-snake stage in its development (as we shall see explicitly below) but say nothing about which member of this compound appearance is primary. Besides, it seems to be incorrect to consider all the dragon-fighting plots in Slavic folklore to be reflexes of the principal Balto-Slavic myth, as Ivanov and Toporov do.[1] Just the opposite, this myth is merely one of the representations of the widely extended myth of the victory of the solar hero over the snake that bared the way to the flowing waters; it only can be distinguished from its other representations based on the fact of the presence of its specific plot elements: kidnapping Perun’s wife and the theft of his herds by Veles, the flight of Veles pursued by Perun, the three consequent transformations of Veles into various natural objects, the reconciliation of the rivals after Perun’s victory. We see none of them in the plot of Ilya and Nightingale.

Among the East Slavic representations of this plot, one seems to be the most important for understanding its origins because of its undoubtedly archaic character.

In a Belarusian epic tale, Ilya Muromets kills the 12-horned Falcon (in some variants it is called Snake the horned Falcon) sitting in its nest upon the twelve oaks and the tsar Pražor ‘Glutton’, who eats 10 humans (supplying by Falcon)[2] a day, with his mace (*Belaruski epas* 1959: 53-54; *Belaruski fal’klor* 1977: 480).

Many facts witness in favour of the hypothesis that this narrative represents a more ancient variant of the plot than the bylina of Nightingale.

2. The origin of these legends is very complicated; one can distinguish several genetic layers in them. The most archaic one is identified by the indication (completely lost in the bylinas) that Falcon carried people to the ogre Pražor. It refers to the mythological notion of a bird that brings the souls of the departed to the god of the underworld. V.Ya. Propp (1986: 208*ff*) states that it is a bird that is a characteristic animal delivering the dead to the underworld, as numerous examples

[1] Cf.: “a common origin of the combat myths is not obvious” (Fontenrose 1980: 7).

[2] The subordinate position of a servant Falcon takes towards Pražor (in some variants of the bylina, Nightingale is a son of the pagan Mamaiššo (see Smirnov 2010: 75) corresponding to Pražor) also does not allow identifying Falcon/Nightingale with the important god Veles.

witness (on Tahiti and Tonga, e.g., the notion of birds carrying away the souls of the dead existed until the end of the 19th c.). Thus, Falcon belongs, by origin, to the same circle of images as the bird Yustritsa and an eagle on a tree as incarnations of death in the Russian puzzles (see Afanas'ev [1865–1869]: I 169); the monstrous bird (usually the eagle) of Slavic tales that carries a hero sewn up to a dead horse's body (or its skin) or on its own back to distant lands (see Ibidem: I 161); the "geese-swans" of a Russian fairy tale kidnapping a little boy and carrying him to Baba-Yaga (the mistress of the world of the dead), etc. These birds are never attacked, much less are captured, injured, or killed, and their characteristics as fiends is not distinct. The notion of dying as being devoured by an afterlife divinity is expressed in the puzzle of Yustritsa: "Ona khvalitsia-vykhvaliaetsia, | Chto vse vidala, | Vsego mnogo edala – | I tsaria v Moskve, | Korolia v Litve, | Startsa v keľe, | Ditia v kolybeli" 'It boasts of-brags about | Seeing everything, | Eating everyone – | Both a tsar in Moscow | And a king in Lithuania, | An elder in his cell, | A baby in its cradle.' The bird carrying the hero needs the permanent feeding on meat during this flight, so towards its end, the hero has to give to it the pieces of his own flesh.

The closest typological parallel appears to be found in Mongolian mythology: according to the *Secret History of the Mongols*, the direct ancestor of Genghis Khan Bodončar, after being excluded from his clan, caught a falcon and nourished himself by wild geese and ducks that his falcon had caught, and what is especially remarkable, the falcon's hunt is associated with wind and snow storm (cf. Falcon's/Nightingale's whistle), which serves as clear evidence of the mythological origin of this legend: "If there be a wind from the northwest, the feathers and down of the ducks and geese that he hath made to be caught by the falcon scatter and blow hither like a whirlwind of snow", I.25-31 (Cleaves 1982: 5-7); cf.: "In Hinduism, a wild goose symbolizes the wandering soul" (Falco Howard 1986: 155).

The notion of a bird of prey as a nourisher (without the connection with the world of death) can be found elsewhere. The most famous fairy bird in Iranian mythology Simorḡ (Persian), Sēnmurv (Pahlavi) deriving from Avestan *mərəγō saēnə* 'the bird Saēna', originally a raptor, either eagle or falcon, as can be deduced from the etymologically identical Sanskrit *śyená-* 'eagle' and 'falcon' (see Schmidt), nourishes, according to various legends, several future Iranian heroes.

As hinted at above, the foregoing conception gives to Falcon's/Nightingale's whistle a more specific sense than to be a mere reflection of the storm myth. The association between wind and death is explicitly expressed in the figure of the Iranian wind god Vāyu, who is similar to Falcon/Nightingale/Snake both by his position between the two worlds and his connection with death: as a feared god of death, he appears in the Avesta, in spite of his basic depiction of a martial deity capable of protecting the creation of Spənta Mainyu; the *Aogəmadaēcā* names the road leading to the afterworld "the way of the pitiless Vāyu" (see Duchesne-Guillemin 1962: 179; Malandra), cf. the road through the forest controlled by Falcon/Nightingale. This is a specific Iranian conception since already the Vedic counterpart of Vāyu does not reveal any relation to the world of death.

3. The transition from the original image of the underworld bird to the mixanthropic Snake the horned Falcon and Nightingale as well as the more or less obscured dragon-fighting theme belongs to a later epoch since both the image of a dragon as a hybrid creature integrating traits of various animals/birds and the motif of dragon slaying appear together with statehood and the class society approximately simultaneously with anthropomorphic gods (Propp 1986: 224, 245, 246). Besides numerous Slavic parallels, (Snake) the horned Falcon has counterparts in various cultures, which allows considering it as universal for mythopoetic consciousness on a certain development stage, cf. a falcon wearing ram's horns within a sun disc in Egyptian iconography (Teissier 1995: 92); the dragon Shen-Yi in Chinese folklore that is described as having the body of a stag, head of a horned bird, tail of a snake, and the wings of a dragon (Bane 2016: 289); the ambivalence world of horned birds and animal-birds of Villanovan times (Piggot 2018: 263), etc.; "horns… can indicate both power and fertility" (Aston 2011: 135). The Egyptian dog or jackal god Anubis could also become a snake or a falcon (Neil 2000: 46). The tripartite structure of this nomination is analogous to Serbian *Zmaj Ogneni Vuk* 'Snake the Fire Wolf', a name of the epic hero.

It is evident that the image of Nightingale, semantically equivalent to that of Falcon (both falcon and nightingale figure as symbols of masculinity and matrimony in traditional culture, see (Tolstoy 2012: 98, 106) but less archetypical, is secondary and replaced Falcon exclusively because of his main feature – the ability of the (devastating) whistle (already attributed to Falcon) that is more characteristic for nightingales than for falcons. The later character of Nightingale in comparison with Falcon is also seen from the fact that Falcon lacks human traits (as known, the capacity for speech is easily attributed to animals and even subjects in fairy tales) that are distinct in the image of Nightingale (see above).

In the Belarusian tale, unlike the prevailing variant of the bylina, Ilya faces two rivals – Falcon and its lord the tsar Pražor; the latter corresponds to the character of another bylina – "Ilya Muromets and Idolišče". Idolišče is a grotesque anthropomorphic figure (he "is three fathoms, well measured, in height, and three in breadth; his head is like a beer-kettle, his eyes like drinking cups. His nose is an ell long from its root, and he cheweth the cud like an aurochs" (Hapgood 1936: 136), an invader, who comes to Jerusalem (Constantin polis, Kiev) and defiles God's temples; he is especially characterized by voracity. Invited to the Idolišče's table, where he boasts of this quality, Ilya inspires the monster's rage comparing him with his father's cow that burst because of eating too much. After Idolišče throws his knife at Ilya, the latter kills him with his hat, which weighs 12 poods (in the Belarusian tale, Ilya murders Pražor in the same way without any provocation from his side). The obviously organic character of the connection between both episodes of Falcon and of Pražor in the Belarusian text (they are connected by certain social relations, Pražor wonders why Falcon let Ilya pass and asks where is his Falcon) allows considering the two bylinas to be split fragments of an originally united text more completely represented in the Belarusian tale.

According to Propp (1958: 228-229), Idolišče is a development stage of the earlier bylina image of Snake Tugarin. In Russian fairy tales, Idolišče is one of the names for Snake (Novikov 1974: 189). In this regard, it is not surprising to discover that a number of common details connects the plot in discussion with the Russian fairy tales of the battle on the bridge (Aarne–Thompson 300A) (Aarne & Thompson 1961: 90). Like Falcon/Nightingale, the snake also has its dwelling on the river Smorodina (that is the border of the two worlds) and guards the bridge, across which nobody could move (Propp 1986: 219) (like through Nightingale’s forest). Here we meet the East Slavic image of a chief of fiends (also known as Gogol’s Viy), the father of the murdered dragons,[3] whose eyes are covered with brows and eyelashes so heavy that they can only be lifted by pitchforks; this feature is inherent in Pražor as well. These correspondences make it clear that the comparing groups of legends represent two variants of the same dragon-slaying plot.

4. These two diachronic mythological motifs do not exhaust the context of this narrative. In our mind, there are convincing evidences of that the whole its plot was strongly influenced by Iranian epic legends. More concrete, it consequently corresponds to the main plot-constructing elements of the story of the struggle of Ferēdūn (Pahlavi Frēdōn, Avestan Θraētaona) against the dragon king Ẓaḥḥāk, told in the *Shāh-nāma*, which dates back to the Avestan myth of Θraētaona’s victory over the three-headed, six-eyed dragon Dahāka (*Yašt* 5.33-35, 15.23-24; *Yasna* 9.7-8; *Vidēvdād* 1.18), and some episodes concerning the hero Karšāsp (Avestan Kərəsāspa) and known from other Zoroastrian sources. Some of these coincidences are common both for the Belarusian tales and the bylinas, and some of them occur in the bylinas only; this determines the relative chronology of these borrowings.

a) Ẓaḥḥāk has two snakes springing from his shoulders, which are fed on human flesh (*Šāh-nāma* 1957: 1163-1182); the tsar Pražor eats people as well, while Idolišče already lost this archaic property. However, all the three are notable for voracity as their most characteristic feature (accented already by the name of Pražor). “I can put a loaf in one cheek, and the same in the other, and a white swan is but a mouthful for me. I eat seven poods of bread and three oxen at a meal <etc.>” – Idolišče brags to Ilya (Hapgood 1916: 138-139). Ahriman’s power over Ẓaḥḥāk is based on the latter’s desire for meat food to which this evil spirit accustomed the king (*Šāh-nāma* 1957: 1101-1186). The storm myth basis of both Iranian and Slavic images (as well as that of the image of a bird, as said above) is traced with a significant degree of reliability. Ẓaḥḥāk comes “like wind” (see Carnoy 1917: 315); this characteristics is confirmed by the later Bashkir legend of the dragon *aždacha* appeared from the lake in whirlwind and fire, howling, whistling, and hissing (Moszyński 1934: 481-482). The name of *Viy* (mentioned above as corresponding to Pražor), according to the most convincing etymology,

[3] In one contaminated variant, Nightingale is the son of the pagan Mamaiššo corresponding to Pražor and Idolišče (see Smirnov 2010: 46).

comes from Common Slavic **viti*, 1.sg. **vĭjǫ* 'to twist', which reveals the original association of this fiend with whirlwind; the snake of the Russian fairy tales often appears as whirlwind.

b) Both heroes have to get over natural obstacles on the way to their rivals: Ferēdūn forces a river (*Šāh-nāma* 1957: 1905-1918); Ilya builds bridges and roads through forests and swamps (Propp 1958: 254-255).

c) The head of the Arabic guard refuses to give to Ferēdūn boats to take his army across the river referring to his king's order (*Šāh-nāma* 1957: 1891-1904); in a bylina from Archangelsk, Nightingale also orders his daughter to refuse to Ilya in a boat (Gil'ferding 1873: 112).

d) Expeditions of both heroes against their monstrous rivals include two meetings. Before the battle with Ẓaḥḥāk, Ferēdūn firstly meets Kandarv, the major-domo of Ẓaḥḥāk, who learns his plans and then makes a report to his lord (*Šāh-nāma* 1957: 2043-2142). The identity of Kandrav's and Falcon's social functions as the king's servants is evident. However, their similarity is much deeper. In Ferdowsī, Kandrav does not display any non-anthropomorphic traits. Nevertheless, his name refers to the identical *Gaṇdarəβa-* (variants *gaṇdərəβa-* or *gaṇdaraβa-*; Middle Persian *Gandarw*/*Gandarb*), a term attested in the Avesta as the name of a monster living in the lake Vourukaša and killed by Kərəsāspa (Middle Persian Kirsāsp; New Persian Karšāsp) after a furious fight (*Yašt* 5.38). Moreover, the evident comparison with Vedic *gandharvá-* (also *gandharvī-*, later *gandharba-*) (see Panaino) allows groping for more archaic ties of *Gaṇdarəβa-* with Falcon/Nightingale: the Gandharvas are imagined now as anthropomorphic creatures now as animals or birds, cf. especially the Ṛgvedic hymn where Soma is compared with a falcon and is called Gandharva at the same time: *śyenáḥ* | *ná* | *váṁsu* | *kaláśeṣu* | *sīdasi* || *apā́m* | *gandharvám* | *divyám* | 'Like a falcon in the woods, you sit in the tubs, | the heavenly Gandharva of the waters', 9.86.35-36 (Jamison & Brereton 2014: 3 1324). Besides, the hypothesis treating the Gandharvas as wind gods and deducing their name from Old Indic *gandhas-*/*gandhar-* 'scent' (wind as a scent carrier) (see EWA 1986-2001: I 462) (in the Ṛgveda, the Gandharvas are called *vāyú-keśā-* 'wind-haired', 3.38.6) gives to us another point of coincidence of this Indo-Iranian image and Falcon/Nightingale in the context of its whistle (see above). The close connection of the Gandharvas with the underworld is postulated in *Ṛgveda* 10.10.4 on behalf of Yama, the lord of the dead: "The Gandharva in the waters and the watery maiden – that is our umbilical tie; therefore our kinship is of the highest" (Jamison & Brereton 2014: 3 1382). The clear reflection of the variant of this plot, in which the first rival, as in the Slavic legend, yet appears as a bird, is represented in the Chechen variant of the Nart epic: in order to make Goržay raise the alarm, one of the clan Orxustoy, named Oruzbi, shoots Goržay's favorite bird, perched on his tower, and then the principal Orxustoy hero Soskan Solsa captures Goržay and binds him to a horse (as well as Ilya do with Nightingale!) facing its tail to make a mockery of the defeated rival (Dumézil 1986: I 482).

e) Both Falcon and Idolišče foresee the appearance of Ilya and expect him with fear (*Belaruski epas* 1959: 53; Propp 1958: 229); analogically, Ẓaḥḥāk does

towards Ferēdūn after he saw him in dream and archimages predicted Ẓaḥḥāk his future defeat from him (*Šāh-nāma* 1957: 1329-1468).

f) In the offensive comparison of Idolišče with the burst cow, made by Ilya, one may hear the hollow echo of the story of the cow Barmāya, which nursed Ferēdūn and was killed by order of Ẓaḥḥāk (*Šāh-nāma* 1957: 1481-1553). Ferēdūn considers his attack against Ẓaḥḥāk as vengeance for this crime.

g) Ẓaḥḥāk's residence is situated on a high place, rises "up to the sky and stars", and has the form of a bird (*Šāh-nāma* 1957: 1927-32); Falcon's/Nightingale's nest is on the oaks, and Nightingale's yard in the bylina is "on the seven versts and on the seven poles" (Putilov 1971: 65).

h) Idolišče throws his knife at Ilya in anger over his mockery; Ẓaḥḥāk, in a jealous rage towards Jamšid's sisters, flashes his dagger intending to kill them (*Šāh-nāma* 1957: 2181-2200).

i) Nightingale (but not Falcon) is called "the Robber", although the bylina does not adduce any his deed that could justify this nickname. According to *Dādestān īdēnīg* 71, Aži Srūwar 'Horned Snake', killed by Karšāsp, was also a highway robber (*rāhdārī ud rāhbīmēnīdārīh... kard*); cf. the dragon guarding a road which is described in *Aogəmadaēcā* 78, where it is compared with Vāyu (cf. our observations on the parallels between Falcon/Nightingale and Vāyu made above): "the road which a dragon guards, horse-crushing (*aspaŋhāδō*), man-crushing (*vīraŋhāδō*), man-slaying (*vīraja*), without compassion", and note *Pahlavi Rivayat* 69.16, where Kirsāsp tells Ohrmazd that he has killed seven gigantic *rāhdārs*) (see Skjærvø *et al.*). Thus, here we find the whole complex of motifs (the characteristics of monstrous fiends as robbers, the dragon guarding a road, its connection with wind) that are represented in the image of Falcon (partially)/Nightingale as well.

j) The part of the East Slavic legend that is distinguished by the highest degree of inconstancy is that concerning the way in which Ilya defeats Falcon/Nightingale and the further fate of the latter. A. Skaftymov (1958: 23-24) notices that this proves that the murder of Nightingale is not an organic part of the plot. As said above, in the Belarusian narrative, Ilya kills both Nightingale and Pražor on the spot. This variant, from which emanates a primordial simplicity, surely should be considered to be the oldest one: the battle with the dragon almost always ends in its death. In the bylina, however, Ilya usually shoots down Nightingale with an arrow to the eye and temple. The closest parallel to this episode is the story of the bird Kamak in *Ṣad dar-e Bondahesh* 20.37-43. Kamak spread its wings over the whole world, overshadowed the earth, all the rain which poured down fell on its wings and the whole was again poured by it into the sea through its breath provoked drought on the earth; Kamak devoured men and animals as a bird pecked grain. Karshāsp showered arrows on it day and night like rain until pierced both its wings and made it fall down, and besides, many men fell down beneath and were killed, after which Karshāsp bruised all its beak with his mace (Dhabhar 1932: 518). This myth has too many common features with the episode of Ilya's fight against Nightingale (including the central one of the latter, which is, at the same time, the most unique of all, – the malicious effect of the bird's breath) for their similarity to turn out to be random happenstance.

k) Ilya of the bylina does not kill Nightingale immediately; he drives him, bound to his stirrup, to Vladimir, Prince of Kiev, where decapitates him after Nightingale disturbs Vladimir and his court by his anxious whistle (Hapgood 1916: 53; Propp 1958: 252). Analogically, Surōsh (Avestan Sraosha) orders Ferēdūn not to kill Ẓaḥḥāk but to convey him ("bound shamefully and flung in wretched plight upon a camel's back") to Mount Damāvand, where he fettered him in a narrow gorge and studded him with heavy nails, leaving him to hang, bound by his hands, to a crag, so that his anguish might endure (*Šāh-nāma* 1957: 2205-2290). This episode was borrowed after the split of this plot into two bylinas: Nightingale, who has remained the only hero's rival, gained the lot of the second Iranian fiend (cf.: "Deeds and traits may be transferred from one character to another" (Fontenrose 1980: 8); the bylina of Idolišče preserved its archaic look.

l) The final of the bylina recorded on very old East Slavic territories (Smolensk and Kiev) preserves features of an etiological myth: pieces to which Ilya cuts Nightingale' body turn into nightingales (Dobrovol'sky 1891: 40; Smirnov 2010: 69). The *Dēnkard* (9.21.8-10) relates how Frēdōn first struck Dahāg with his club upon the shoulder, the heart, and the skull, without killing him, and that he then hewed him with a sword three times, which caused the body of Dahāg to turn into various noxious creatures.

5. In this paper, we have left without attention the part of the tale/bylina telling about the life of Ilya before he hit the road (his illness and cure, land and river clearing (a kind of repetition of clearing the road through Nightingale's forest), gaining a horse and arms) as well as his meeting with Nightingale's family. The first one reproduces traditional fairy tale motifs (the original miserable position of a character contrasting with his future majesty, recovering by means of the "water of life", a miracle horse and super powerful weapons provided to a character by certain tutelary forces) and deeds of a cultural hero (cf. the similar activity of the Estonian hero Kalevipoeg). The bylina image of Nightingale's big incestuous family (absent in the Belarusian tale) may be considered as another indication to the Iranian influence on this plot since the encouragement of consanguine marriage (Avestan *x^{v}aētuuadaθa*, Persian *khwēdōdah*) as the lord's work is characteristic for Zoroastrianism (e.g., the goddess Spənta Ārmaiti is seen as the wife or companion of major deity Ahura Mazda, who, in some accounts, is described as her creator or father (Skjærvø 2007). The unique variant where Nightingale's sons turn into ravens with iron beaks (Propp 1958: 254) appears, because of its isolated character, to be secondary, loaned from the fairy tales.

6. Thus, the mythological background of the East Slavic narrative of Ilya' fight against the monstrous hybrid bird-like creature survived three development stages: from the primitive myth based on the zoomorphic image of death to the later dragon-fighting legend and the mixanthropic picture, naturally corresponding to it, which, in its turn, gained its final shape under the influence of the stadially related Iranian epic.

The last conclusion is confirmed by the fact that, as follows from the present research, the East Slavic tale/bylina in discussion reveals a systematic proximity to the Iranian mythological epic of Ferēdūn and Ẓaḥḥāk matching it in almost all the general plot elements and the basic traits of the demonic characters. The most noticeable Russian innovations (which the most archaic Belarusian version lacks) include the ‘recasting’ of Falcon as Nightingale, his characteristics as a robber, the course of the battle and the further lot of Nightingale, three of which finding parallels in the myths of Karšāsp (the last one, however, much more meets the story of Ẓaḥḥāk). It is clear that they form the latest layer of the plot. It is noteworthy that despite what Miller and other scholars believed, the East Slavic legend reflects not the epics of Rostem and Esfandīār (or, at least, their traces are faint and isolated here) which have no Avestan predecessors but that of Ferēdūn and Karshāsp originating from the myths of the Avesta and Zoroastrian treatises. Thus, the bylina under discussion provides another example of the complex interlacing of original Slavic and borrowed Iranian mythological motifs analogous to what we have seen earlier in the bylina “Dobrynya and Nastas’ya” (see Yuyukin 2000).

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