

Russian Language Gets 'Import Substitution'

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Богатырь: bogatyr, mythic hero, strongman, warrior

Just when you think you've seen it all, you come across a video of a Russian schoolteacher telling her students that there was a great civilization in Russia 3,000 years ago called Святая Русь (Holy Rus) inhabited by godlike men called богатыри (bogatyr, mythic warriors and heroes). We know they are godlike, she explains, because of their name, богатырь. And then she deciphers it: с Богом на ты (on a first-name basis with God).

OK, you think, there's my daily dose of nuts. No biggie; every nation has its crazies. But ... just in case, let's check out what other people are saying about богатырь. And you discover: It's a Thing. All kinds of armchair folk etymologists are insisting that godlike creatures called богатыри once lived in what is now Russia.

What's an armchair folk etymologist? It's someone with no specialized knowledge of the language or its history, who looks at a word and makes up stories about its meaning. Sometimes this is charming. I know someone who grew up in the Urals and thought, when he was little, that faraway Moscow was the place where the 100 most important people in the country lived — because he parsed the word столица (capital) as сто лиц (100 people).

But he was 8 years old. Here's what someone identified as a member of the Russian Academy of Sciences writes about the word богатырь: Бога ты то есть, Богу ты принадлежишь. (You are of God, that is, you belong to God.) Завершающее Р — это звук грозы и гнева, но гнева праведного, львиного. (The "r" at the end is the sound of threat and anger, but it is righteous anger, the anger of a lion.) Впрочем, поскольку Бог благ, и гнев Его направлен лишь на грех, этот звук смягчён: РЬ. (And besides, because God is good and His anger is only directed at sin, the sound is lightened with a soft sign at the end of it.)

And then there's this: Богатырь значит тот, кто крадёт ("тырит") образ Бога. (A bogatyr is someone who steals — the verb тырить — the image of God.) Sitting in his armchair, this guy doesn't need to explain how the slang word тырить, which seems to have been coined in the second half of the 19th century, was used 3,000 years ago.

These modern faux etymologists dismiss the work of brilliant, erudite, obsessive, experienced Russian and foreign etymologists with an airy: Есть мнение ... (There is an opinion ...). This would be like me rewriting the periodic table with a dismissive wave of the hand: У Менделеева есть свое мнение ... (Mendeleev has his opinion ...).

But real etymologists trace the word from an ancient Turkic language, although they can't say which exact language and place lent the word. But the Turkic word bagatur meant a knight and hero, and the ending probably shifted from –урь to –ырь under the influence of other words like поводырь (guide). The word might have migrated from a Persian language, but that seems less likely. In any case, it's not a "native" Russian word.

So what's the problem? Why are so many people obsessed with proving that богатырь is not a borrowed word?

And then I realized what it is. Some people don't want mythic ancient Russian heroes to have a name borrowed from another language. So they are manufacturing a "native Russian" etymology.

It's импортозамещение (import substitution)!

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