

The Forgotten Text of Nikolai Golovin: New Light on the Igor Tale

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Background

Sometime around 1792, a collector of antiquities in the service of Catherine the Great discovered a compendium of ancient texts, including a unique secular tale (*Slovo o polku Igoreve*—*The Tale of Igor's Campaign*, or simply the Igor Tale) that was rooted in events of the twelfth century. It was a splendid epic poem about the defeat of Igor Sviatoslavich, Prince of Novgorod-Seversk, at the hands of the Polovtsy, a steppe people who were later displaced and assimilated by the Mongol hordes. The text of the Igor Tale was published in 1800, twelve years before the manuscript itself was destroyed during the Napoleonic occupation of Moscow.

As decades passed, scholars began to find textual parallels to passages in the Igor Tale—especially in a group of literary tales about Moscow's first great victory over the Mongols on Kulikovo Field in 1380. This group of tales is customarily referred to as the Kulikovo Cycle. It includes two distinct chronical accounts of the Kulikovo Battle, five more or less complete versions of a "poetic" tale about the battle (*Zadonshchina*, or *The Battle Beyond the Don*), and a much longer, more sober tale extolling the Russian Church and the victorious Russian armies (*Skazanie o Mamaevom poboishche*, or *Tale of the Battle against Mamai*). The *Skazanie* has numerous redactions and has survived in over 100 manuscript copies. It is clearly the work of lettered authors who appear to have inserted occasional passages from the more poetic and dynamic *Zadonshchina* into their comparatively dry narrative.¹

Nearly all specialists in early Russian history and literature have viewed the *Zadonshchina* as a literary imitation, or stylization, of the older Igor Tale. The *Zadonshchina* mirrors the Igor Tale in style and structure as well as in its phrasing. Because the Igor Tale is the only work of its kind to reach us from the early Kievan period, the tale must be studied in conjunction with the works of the Kulikovo Cycle—the tales that are most closely connected with it.

¹ The *Skazanie* texts are found in manuscript copies made as early as the first decades of the sixteenth century and as late as the nineteenth century. There is one text from a fifteenth-century manuscript, according to Nikolai Golovin, who published the text in 1835 (see Mann 2010). The oldest *Zadonshchina* manuscript dates from the end of the fifteenth century; the others date from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. For texts of the *Zadonshchina*, see Likhachev and Dmitriev 1960:533-56. For English translations of two of the *Zadonshchina* texts, see Mann 2005:75-90 and 2011:4-81.

For 200 years it has been customary to approach the textological puzzles of the Igor Tale and the Kulikovo Cycle in the context of a manuscript tradition. Variant readings in the five surviving copies of the *Zadonshchina* and in the many texts of the *Skazanie o Mamaevom poboishche* ordinarily have been attributed to copyists and editors who altered texts along the lines of other written sources that they have read. After comparing similarities and differences in phrasing and organization, scholars construct hypotheses about the lost source texts from which the Kulikovo tales derive. This speculation is almost invariably limited to hypothetical prototypes of the written variety. Lev Dmitriev, the leading expert on the *Skazanie* during Soviet times, spoke of “the immense popularity of the *Zadonshchina* among readers in the Middle Ages” (1966:423), while Roman Jakobson and Dean Worth hypothesized that manuscripts of the *Slovo* and the *Zadonshchina* circulated together as a diptych (1963:18). Dmitrii Likhachev argued that the *Slovo* is the work of an ingenious twelfth-century poet whose writing was familiar to the authors of the later *Zadonshchina* and *Skazanie* tales (1967). All these scholars have been united in their belief that the Igor Tale and the *Zadonshchina* were first composed by a writer.

Only a few scholars have contended that the *Slovo* is the text of an oral epic song. I. I. Sreznevskii (1858) asserted that it was an oral tale, but he presented almost no evidence in support of this hypothesis.² A. I. Nikiforov wrote a lengthy dissertation in support of Sreznevskii’s idea, but there was little that was truly new in the voluminous material that he compiled—nothing that would shake traditional assumptions that shaped all discourse and predetermined scholars’ conclusions (Nikiforov 1941). The musicologist L. V. Kulakovskii theorized that the *Slovo* was composed as a song, but his arguments seem to have left no lasting impression on most scholars’ thinking (1977).

Early Russian sources allude explicitly to singers in the service of Russian princes. Yet it is assumed that the epic songs of this court tradition must have been different from the Igor Tale, which might, however, be a stylization of an oral epic. So the argument goes. The *Zadonshchina*, in turn, is interpreted as an imitative literary adaptation of the *Slovo*—an imitation of a stylization! Extremely little attention has been paid to the likelihood that both the *Slovo* and the *Zadonshchina* arose and evolved on the background of oral tales about the battles they portray.

If the tradition that generated the *Slovo o polku Igoreve* and the *Zadonshchina* tales could be proven to be primarily a written one, then the customary approach would be vindicated. However, evidence that the Igor Tale was first composed in writing is exceedingly slim—far outweighed by the abundant evidence for an oral mode of composition and transmission (Mann 1989 and 2005). Among the evidence is a myriad of formulaic textual links to songs, tales, laments, proverbs, and folk prayers in Slavic oral tradition. The *Slovo* focuses on the same elemental, natural world that is the focus of oral epics. (For example: “It is not a storm that carries the falcons across the broad plains. Flocks of daws flee toward the Don!”) It has the swift-moving dynamism of an oral epic. Its diction is largely folkloric and almost exclusively paratactic—the abstractions and hypotaxis of the written tradition are conspicuously absent. The narrator refers to his work as a “song” and invokes a legendary predecessor, the epic singer

² Viacheslav Rzhiga (1952) maintained in a brief argument that oral transmission is the only feasible explanation for the peculiar relationships of the Kulikovo tales and the *Slovo*. Volodymyr Peretts (1926) voiced a similar view, although with little argumentation.

Boyan. Lines that he attributes to Boyan are stylistically identical to his own. The *Slovo* seems to incorporate an array of elusive rhythmic patterns that make it by far the most rhythmic of all early Russian tales. All these features suggest that the “song” was truly a song intended for oral delivery. Moreover, the tale contains no stylistic lapses or other clues to show that it is a transitional work composed by a literate man who was closely familiar with the tradition of composing epic songs. And it has been proven that the Igor Tale is the product of a *tradition* of composition, not the spontaneous production of a writer who is creating a new literary genre (see Mann 2005:157-67).

The Overlooked Parallels in Golovin’s *Skazanie*

A unique version of the *Skazanie o Mamaevom poboishche* (Mann 2010) now provides new evidence for oral composition in both the Igor Tale and the *Zadonshchina* tales. Actually, the “new” evidence was first published by Nikolai Golovin nearly two centuries ago in 1835, but his 32-page booklet was ignored or overlooked—even though his text of the *Skazanie* appears to be from the tale’s missing first redaction. Golovin identified his manuscript as a fifteenth-century text. This would make it the oldest known text of the *Skazanie*, which has survived in approximately 200 copies dating from the sixteenth century or later.

The redaction represented by Golovin’s text (“redaction G”) shares at least five significant readings with the *Slovo o polku Igoreve* that are not found in other texts of the *Skazanie*. In the *Slovo*, foxes bark at the Russian shields as Igor leads his army toward the Don:

Игорь къ Дону вои ведеть: уже бо бѣды его пасеть птиць; подобію вльци грозу въ срожать, по яругамъ; орли клеткомъ на кости звѣри зовуть, **лисици брешуть на чръленныя щиты**. О руская земле! уже за Шеломянемъ еси.

Igor leads his warriors toward the Don. Already the birds up under the clouds prey on his misfortunes. Wolves in the ravines trumpet the storm. Eagles with their squalling call the beasts to the bones. **Foxes bark at the crimson shields**. O, Russian land, now you are beyond the hill!

Golovin’s *Skazanie* has the same formula, only with the verb placed after *shchity* (“shields”):

По малѣхъ же днѣхъ приступиша къ Дону; мнози же волцы придоша на то мѣсто по вся ноци воють непрестанно: гроза бо велика есть слышати, храбрымъ полкомъ сердца утверждаетъ, и ворони собращеся, необычно, неумолкающе грають, галицы же своею рѣчью говорятъ и орли отъ устъ Дону приспѣша, **лисицы на червленныя щиты брешуть**, ждучи дни грознаго, въ онъ же имать пастися множество трупа челоувѣческаго и кровопролитія, аки морскимъ водамъ; отъ такого страха и отъ великія грозы дерева преклоняются и трава постигается.

After a few days they approached the Don. Many wolves come to that place and howl each night without ceasing: for a great storm can be heard. It fortifies the brave regiments’ hearts.

And ravens gathered in rare fashion, they caw without ceasing, while the daws speak in their own tongue and the eagles arrived from the mouth of the Don. **Foxes bark at the crimson shields**, awaiting the fateful day when many bodies of men are to fall and the bloodshed [will be] like the waters of the sea. From such danger and from the great storm the trees bend down and the grass is flattened.

Other redactions of the *Skazanie* have the foxes barking at armor or bones, not at crimson shields (червленные щиты). Golovin's text is the only one that mirrors the *Slovo* so closely.

Another unique parallel is the formulation подъ кликомъ поганыхъ ("beneath the cries of the heathen"). The *Slovo* alludes to the Dvina as it is muddied "beneath the cries of the heathen":

Уже бо Сула не течеть сребреными струями къ граду Переяславлю, и Двина болотомъ течеть онымъ грознымъ Полочаномъ **подъ кликомъ поганыхъ**.

For the Sula no longer flows in silvery streams toward Pereiaslavl' town, and the Dvina flows as a bog to those fierce men of Polotsk **beneath the cries of the heathen**.

Golovin's text resurrects the same formulation (подъ кликомъ поганыхъ), again in association with the churning of bodies of water:

Вострепеташа озера и рѣки: поле же Куликово перегибающееся **подъ** хоругвями сыновъ Русскихъ и **кликомъ поганыхъ**.

The lakes and rivers grew turbid: Kulikovo Field bends **beneath** the banners of Russian sons and **the cries of the heathen**.

No other known work of the Kulikovo Cycle preserves this feature of Kievan epic tradition.

Like other redactions of the *Skazanie*, Golovin's text alludes to the Russian warriors as буйнии сынове Рустии and буйи сынове Рустии ("fierce Russian sons"). Especially interesting is a negative simile in Golovin's copy: Не турове возрѣвѣша, возрѣвѣша буйи сынове Рустии! ("It was not aurochs that began to bellow; it was the fierce Russian sons!"). The metaphorical link between aurochs and "fierce Russian sons" suggests that this formulation goes back to the "fierce aurochs" (буйи туръ), which is used repeatedly in the *Slovo*. The negative simile, a traditional device in Russian oral epics, suggests that this imagery might have been inspired by an oral tale about the Kulikovo battle. In another passage in Golovin's text, we find the formula буйный туръ ("fierce aurochs") itself. As he contemplates the prospect of doing battle with the Russian armies, Mamai's ally, Iagailo, is depicted as a hungry wolf that eyes a herd of "fierce aurochs" (буйныхъ туровъ):

Ягаило же Литовскій прииде къ Одоеву и увѣда, яко Олгъ убояся ийти противу Великаго Князя, пребысть ту не подвизаяся, аки гладный волкъ видя стадо **буйныхъ туровъ**.

Iagailo of Lithuania came to Odoev and learned that Oleg had grown afraid of marching against the Grand Prince and he stayed there without advancing—like a hungry wolf that sees a herd of **fierce aurochs**.

The fierce aurochs are the Russian warriors. This is the first attested usage of the formula in any Russian work other than the *Slovo*.

The most significant new parallels that are provided by Golovin's text come at the end of the tale. In the *Slovo*, maidens sing on the Danube, and their voices drift across the sea to Kiev. Towns and nations rejoice as they sing praise:

Дѣвици поють на Дунаи. Вьются голоси чрезъ море до **Кіева**. Игорь ѣдетъ по Боричеву къ Святѣй Богородици Пирогощей. **Страны ради, гради весели**, пѣвше пѣснь старымъ Княземъ, а по томъ молодымъ. Пѣти слава Игорю Святѣславлича. Буй туру Всеволодѣ, Владимиру Игоревичу. Здрави Князи и дружина, побарая за христѣяны на поганѣя плѣки. Княземъ слава, а дружинѣ Аминь.³

Maidens sing on the Danube. Their voices weave across the sea **to Kiev**. Igor rides up the Borichev Way to the Holy Mother of the Tower. **The lands are happy, the towns are merry**, having sung a song to the old princes and then to the young. Let us sing: Praise to Igor Sviatoslavich, to fierce aurochs Vsevolod, to Vladimir Igorevich! May the princes and their retinue be healthy, fighting for Christians against the heathen regiments. Praise to the princes and to their retinue—amen!

Compare the ending of Golovin's *Skazanie* (G):

И возвеселишеся удалцы Русскіе въ Татарскихъ узорочьяхъ, везучи въ землю свою уюсы и насачи, бугай, кони, и волы и верблюды, меды и вина!—И превознесеся слава земли Русской: ревуть рози Великаго Князя по всѣмъ **странамъ**. Пойде вѣсть по всѣмъ **градомъ: къ Кіеву**, ко Львову, къ Судаку, къ Кафѣ, къ Желѣзнымъ вратамъ и Царю-граду: *Русь поганѣи одолѣша на полѣ Куликовѣ, на рѣцѣ Непрядвѣ*.—Воздадимъ хвалу Русской земли!—**Все страны и гради возносятъ имя Господне**. Прославимъ милость Его во вѣки вѣковъ! Аминь.

And the Russian heroes made merry among the Tatar brocades, carrying jewelry, chain mail armor, bulls, steeds and oxen and camels, meads and wines away to their land! And praise for the Russian land rose up high: the horns of the Grand Prince bellow throughout all the lands. The news went out through all the cities: **to Kiev**, to Lvov, to Sudak, to Kafa, to the Iron Gates and Constantinople: the Rus' have overcome the heathen on the Kulikovo Field, on the River Nepriadva. Let us give praise to the Russian land! **All the lands and towns** praise the name of the Lord. Let us praise His mercy forever and ever! Amen.

³ The *Slovo* is cited here precisely as it reads in the 1800 edition.

The Russians rejoice and songs of praise resound throughout the lands. Превознесется слава (“praise rose up high”) and ревуть рози (“horns bellow”) imply that the praise throughout this passage is musical. The praise crosses ethnic boundaries, as in the *Slovo*, where it weaves its way across the sea. “Lands and towns praise the Lord’s name” (страны и гради возносят имя Господне), echoing the *Slovo*, where “the lands are happy, the towns are merry, having sung to the old princes and then to the young” (Страны ради, гради весели, пѣвшие пѣснь старымъ княземъ, а по томъ молодымъ). In both the *Slovo* and G, lands and towns sing praise. In both texts, the praise reaches Kiev. Golovin’s text is the only version of the *Skazanie* that alludes to Kiev at this point. In the *Slovo* the praise is for the warriors, while in G it is addressed to God. In each case, the singing of praise is followed by an invocation to the audience: Пѣти: слава Игорю Святославлича (“Let us sing: glory to Igor Sviatoslavich”) and Прославимъ милость Его во вѣки вѣковъ! (“Let us praise His mercy for ever and ever!”) In the *Slovo* the warriors are praised for fighting the *heathen* (побарая за христѣяны на поганѣя плѣки! [“fighting for Christians against the heathen regiments!”]); in G the substance of the praise songs that resound in many lands is that “the Russians have defeated the *heathen*” (Русь поганѣи одолѣша). The coalescence of motifs in the two texts might all be dismissed as fortuitous if it were not for the lexical parallel страны / гради (“lands / cities”), which makes it clear that the two texts are genetically related, and the allusion to Kiev, which surely echoes Kievan epic convention.

The formula **лисицы на червленныя щиты брещуть** (“foxes bark at the crimson shields”) in G is almost identical in form and context with the corresponding formula in the *Slovo*. The close similarity can be reasonably attributed to direct borrowing from the Igor Tale or to borrowing from an epic tale about the Kulikovo Battle, such as the oral epic tales that served as the primary sources for the written *Zadonshchina* texts. The formula буйный туръ (“fierce aurochs”) might conceivably have come directly from the Igor Tale, but in this case it would likely be used in specific reference to Peresvet, Dmitrii Ivanovich, or Vladimir Andreevich, following the *Slovo*, where it is used to portray an individual hero as a fierce and powerful warrior. The authors of G refer instead to the Russian army as a whole herd of fierce aurochs. These contextual differences suggest that the formula might have come from tales about the Kulikovo Battle or from a familiarity with the formulaic lore of many oral epics. The formula подъ кликомъ поганыхъ (“beneath the cries of the heathen”) in G pertains directly to the quaking ground, although it comes immediately after churning bodies of water are mentioned. The context is close to that of the same formula in the Igor Tale, but the contextual differences are great enough to suggest that it more likely goes back to oral tales about the Kulikovo Battle. The ending of G echoes that of the Igor Tale, but the differences that separate them—combined with close similarities to the portrayal of post-victory jubilation in the *Zadonshchina*—suggest once again that the immediate model for the conclusion of G is the ending of an oral tale about the Kulikovo battle.

Thus, direct borrowing from the Igor Tale is conceivable for the formula with foxes barking at crimson shields, but this sort of direct relationship of texts appears unlikely for the other unique parallels presented by G. Significantly, none of the five “new” parallels in G is found in any of the *Zadonshchina* texts. It follows that *oral tales* differing from the extant *Zadonshchina* texts and containing these unique parallels must have circulated at the time G was written. This was surely the same body of oral tales about the Kulikovo battle that served as the

basis for the written texts that we know as the *Zadonshchina*. The formula with crimson shields most likely entered G by the same route that produced the other four unique parallels. That is, in all likelihood, the foxes' barking at crimson shields came not from the Igor Tale but from oral tales about the Kulikovo victory.

One might insist that another redaction of a written *Zadonshchina*, now lost, could have contained all five parallels—and that the authors of G drew upon this written redaction. A corollary of this argument would have to be that the lost *Zadonshchina* redaction incorporated an ending that was like the conclusion of the *Slovo* and that in all likelihood it contained no account of Mamai's final demise. Such a hypothesis may someday prove to be correct, but the variation that we find between “foxes bark at crimson shields” in G and “foxes bark at gilded armor” in later redactions appears to be the type of variation that is typical of oral epics. The replacement of one formulation by the other in the different redactions of the *Skazanie* likely reflects variations that were found in oral tales about Dmitrii Donskoi's victory.

Golovin's overlooked version of the *Skazanie* adds to the evidence for a body of formulaic text underlying the written Kulikovo tales—text that closely resembled the *Slovo* but also differed from it. The best hypothesis to account for all the haphazard coalescences between the *Slovo*, the *Zadonshchina*, and the *Skazanie* is that oral tales about the Kulikovo battle served as the primary source for the *Zadonshchina* and that these oral tales were direct descendants of the Kievan tradition that generated the Igor Tale. The evidence points to an oral epic tradition that continued through the period of Tatar domination at least until the era of Dmitrii Donskoi. Studies of the Kulikovo tales have generally failed to acknowledge this likelihood. After all, the reasoning goes, if the *Slovo* is only a stylization of a Kievan epic song—not the actual text of an oral epic—then it follows that the *Zadonshchina*, too, is a mere stylization, not anything close to an actual oral song. One mistaken assumption has led to another, and the notion of oral transmission has been largely eclipsed from scholars' view.⁴

Oral Composition in the Igor Tale

Much of the Igor Tale can be shown to be composed of traditional formulaic lexical units.⁵ Close to thirty percent of the *Slovo* consists of formulae in the broad sense: word combinations that are repeated within the tale and combinations that are used in traditional Russian folklore.

⁴ For a more detailed discussion of the relationship among the Igor tales, the *Zadonshchina*, and the *Skazanie*, see Mann 1989, 2005, and 2010.

⁵ Milman Parry's concept of a “formula” is of limited relevance here because it pertains to a combination of words appearing in a single rhythmic environment, while the Igor Tale narrative does not appear to follow a regular meter. Instead, it appears to incorporate imagery and motifs from traditional songs and incantations with various different rhythmic patterns. On the other hand, even though early Russian written texts are often highly formulaic, their formulaic density rarely approaches that of the Igor Tale. More importantly, the formulae of the written tradition nearly always differ qualitatively (stylistically) from those of folklore and the Igor Tale. Their textual origins are usually plain to see.

The interlaced metaphors of the *Slovo* provide further evidence of formulaic composition. Throughout the tale, battles and death are portrayed in colorful imagery inspired by the Slavic wedding ritual. When Prince Iziaslav Vasil'kovich dies at the hands of the Lithuanians, “voices grow weary and merriment wanes, while the trumpets sound in Goroden” (lines 476-94):

Единъ же Изяславъ сынъ Васильковъ позвони своими острыми мечи о шеломи Литовскія;
притрепа славу дѣду своему Всеславу, а самъ подъ чръленими щиты на кровавѣ травѣ
притрепанъ Литовскими мечи. И схоти ю на кровать, и рекъ: дружину твою, Княже, птицъ
крылы приодѣ, а звѣри кровь полизаша. Не бысь ту брата Брючяслава, ни другаго Всеволода;
единъ же изрони жемчюжну душу изъ храбра тѣла, чресъ злато ожереліе. **Унылы голоса,
понице веселіе.** Трубы трубятъ Городеньскіи.

Alone Izyaslav, son of Vasilko, rang his sharp swords against the Lithuanian helmets, caressed the glory of his grandfather Vseslav, and under crimson shields on the bloody grass was himself caressed by Lithuanian swords. And with his beloved on a bed . . . and said: “Your retinue, Prince, birds have covered with their wings, and beasts have licked their blood.” His brother Bryachislav was not there, nor the other, Vsevolod. Alone he spilled his pearly soul from his valiant body through his golden necklace. *Voices grow weary, merriment wanes.* Trumpets trumpet in Goroden.

The “voices” in this imagery are those of the maiden singers at a wedding celebration. A variation on the same metaphor concludes an earlier motif in which foreign nations, following the praise-reproach ritual of wedding celebrations, sing praise to Grand Prince Sviatoslav and sing reproach to Igor (lines 308-14):

рѣкы Половецкія, Рускаго злата насыпаша. Ту Игорьъ Князь высѣдѣ изъ сѣдла злата, а въ сѣдло Кошціево; **уныша бо градомъ забралы, а веселіе понице.**

The Polovtsian rivers they filled with Russian gold. Now Igor the Prince gets down from his golden saddle and into the saddle of a slave. **The city walls grow weary and merriment wanes.**

Here the words “city ramparts” have simply been substituted for “voices” to create this metaphor. In the two variants (“city ramparts grow weary” and, later, “voices grow weary”), the referent that appears to have inspired them—voices—is explicitly mentioned only in the variant that comes later in the tale. The first variant (“city ramparts grow weary”) is more highly metaphorical. It departs from the logical norms of everyday language. It is a further adaptation of the second, less metaphorical variant (“voices grow weary”). This correspondence means that the composer of the tale already knew the second variant when he included the first variant in his narrative. In other words, certainly the second variant and probably both variants are part of a repertoire of ready-made poetic formulae that the composer already knew. This formulaic method of spinning a tale is typical of oral traditions and helps to show that the Igor Tale was first composed as an oral narrative before it was later committed to writing.

As Igor enters Kiev at the end of the tale, maidens sing and nations rejoice once again (lines 664-71):

Дѣвици поють на Дунаи. Вьются голоси чрезь море до Кіева. Игорь ѣдетъ по Боричеву къ
Святѣй Богородици Пирогощей. Страны ради, гради весели, пѣвше пѣснь старымъ Княземъ,
а по томъ молодымъ.

Maidens sing on the Danube. Their voices weave across the sea to Kiev. Igor rides up the Borichev
Way to the Blessed Virgin of the Tower. The lands are happy, the towns are gay, having sung a
song to the old princes and then to the young.

The “weaving” of the maidens’ voices across the water appears to have been inspired by ancient folk rituals such as that of Trinity Sunday, when each maiden would weave a wreath and toss it onto the water. According to popular belief, the boy or man who found her wreath was destined to be her husband. The first two lines in this passage (*Devitsi poiut na Dunai. V’iutsia golosi*) correspond to the beginning of Yaroslavna’s lament (lines 547-48):

копіа поють на Дунаи. Ярославнинъ гласъ слышитъ.
Lances sing on the Danube. Yaroslavna’s voice is heard.

“Maidens sing on the Danube” follows the ordinary contextual patterns of prosaic language. However, “Lances sing on the Danube” is more highly metaphorical. It was formed by taking the contextually “neutral” statement “Maidens sing on the Danube” and substituting the subject “lances” for the contextually normal subject “maidens.” The resulting imagery—“lances sing”—violates the ordinary contextual patterns of the language and, therefore, immediately attracts the listener’s attention. “Lances sing on the Danube” is a metaphorical adaptation of the formula “Maidens sing on the Danube.” The composer of the tale already knew the second formula by heart (with “maidens”) when he included the first variant (with “lances”) earlier in his narrative. These formulae are not the handiwork of an ingenious poet who sat down and spontaneously wrote a tale. An entire tradition lies behind them. They must certainly be the customary formulae of an oral narrative tradition.

And, as if all these indicators were not enough to convince open-minded scholars that the Igor Tale was most likely an oral epic, the narrator tells us at the outset that he has begun his tale “in the old words of the heroic tales about the campaign of Igor.”⁶

Не лѣполи ны бяшетъ, братіе, начяти старыми словесы трудныхъ повѣстій о пълку
Игоревѣ, Игоря Святъславлича!⁷

Was it not fitting, brothers, to begin in the old words of the heroic tales about the
campaign of Igor, Igor Sviatoslavich?

⁶ The original Old Russian text reads: *starymi slovesy trudnykh’ povestii o p’lku Igoreve*. It is uncertain whether *trudnykh’ povestii* means “sad tales” or “heroic tales” in this passage.

⁷ The Igor Tale is cited here as it reads in the first edition of 1800. An introductory passage appears to be missing at the start of the text, as indicated by the words “*Ne lepo li ny biashet*” (“Was it not fitting brothers, to begin...”). See further Mann 2005:96-97.

He states quite explicitly that tales about Igor's defeat already exist—and their words are already old. The logical conclusion we should draw is that the *Slovo* is the text of an oral tale that follows other familiar oral tales about Igor's defeat. Because the words of those tales are already “old,” it follows that they have been circulating for several decades by the time the singer commences his narration. This interpretation is in accord with a half-dozen details in the *Slovo* suggesting that the surviving text of the tale was not written down before the early 1200s—probably not before around 1220 (Mann 2005:98-112). However, assuming from the outset that we are dealing with a poem that was first composed in writing, scholars have misinterpreted and obfuscated this simple, straightforward passage. “How could it possibly mean what it seems to mean?” they reason. After all, the poet is *writing* the Igor Tale himself. The tale is flowing from beneath his pen. How could he possibly be alluding to other tales about Igor's campaign when he is the one who is writing it? With this mindset, they proceed to argue that the narrator means he is beginning “in old words the tales about the campaign of Igor.” Then they are left with two puzzling anomalies. Why is *povestii* (“tales”) in the genitive case if it is simply a direct object (and not a modifier of “old words”) and why does the narrator refer to the tale about Igor with the plural form *povestii* (“tales”)—when, after all, it is only one tale, and he himself refers to his tale with the singular (*povest'*) a few lines later? (*Pochnem zhe, bratie, povest' siiu*. [“Let us, brothers, begin this tale.”]) The leading specialists on the Igor Tale have resorted to all sorts of contortionist gymnastics to explain away these difficulties, and they have been successful in weaving their spell over the entire field of Old Russian studies, tiny as it is.⁸

If the *Slovo* is the text of an oral epic, then it probably assumed different forms and variations as it was performed down through the generations. This would explain why the various accounts of the 1185 campaign—those in the Laurentian and Hypatian chronicles, Tatishchev's version (compiled in the 1700's from a chronicle that is now lost), and the version we find in the *Slovo* itself—differ in focus and detail. If the Igor Tale circulated in oral form for two centuries until 1380, then the connections between tales about the Kulikovo battle and our single transcript of the Igor Tale could be expected to be piecemeal and incomplete. There might be some extensive word-for-word parallels, but the fluid, malleable quality of an oral text would lead us to expect very few. Instead of long, sustained parallels that could be expected from author-compilers and copyists who are prone to copy an extended passage verbatim, we should anticipate only short, partial parallels replete with discrepancies. The differences would come

⁸ See Jakobson 1948:64-66. The only scholar who has interpreted the opening lines as they read at face value is Lidiia Sokolova, who, however, proceeds to argue that the “tales about Igor's campaign” are the two accounts of the 1185 battle found in the Hypatian and Laurentian chronicles. With this interpretation once again, we remain inside the box of the written literary tradition, not venturing into the lesser known realm of the oral epic—the realm that really produced the Igor Tale. See further Sokolova 1987:210-15.

from the oral models used by fourteenth-century weavers of tales—versions of the Igor Tale that were different from the one that reached us.⁹

Moreover, if oral Igor tales—and oral tales about the Kulikovo battle that were patterned in part after the Igor tales—lie behind the written, literary works of the Kulikovo Cycle, then one would expect parallel readings to occur in a somewhat chaotic, haphazard fashion. Familiar oral tales are forever looming in the background as potential sources upon which writers and copyists might draw. Each scribe and editor needs no library or manuscript to introduce additional imagery from the oral tales. For this reason one might expect each redaction—and even individual copies within a single redaction—to present additional, unique parallels to the formulations of the *Slovo* in a seemingly random fashion.

Indeed, these are precisely the kinds of parallels to the *Slovo* that we find in the works of the Kulikovo Cycle. Few are extensive word-for-word parallels stretching over more than a few words. Some of the passages that seem to derive from the Igor Tale are contaminated with folkloric formulations that depart from the phrasing of the *Slovo*. Both the brevity of the word-for-word parallels and the admixture of additional folkloric features can best be ascribed to the variation that is typical of an oral tradition—to the constant state of flux and formulaic variation that characterized the Igor tales and the oral Kulikovo tales upon which writers and copyists drew. The sum total of the evidence suggests that the *Zadonshchina* texts present a transcription or paraphrasing of an oral epic about the Kulikovo Battle with some additional information added from written sources. The *Skazanie o Mamaevom poboishche*, on the other hand, is the work of writers who embellished their more “literary” tale with a comparatively small amount of imagery from the oral tales that celebrated the Russian victory of 1380. To what extent the authors of the *Skazanie* drew from the written *Zadonshchina* tale or directly from the oral tales remains an open question. However, the “new” evidence provided by the overlooked Golovin redaction of the *Skazanie* helps to show that an oral epic tradition rooted in Kievan times continued to be productive until at least the fifteenth century.

Independent Scholar

⁹ Identical passages consisting of more than three consecutive words in the Igor Tale and *Zadonshchina* are extremely few in number. Consider, for example, these parallel passages, which contain one of the most extensive sequences of word parallels:

Igor Tale: Oleg’s brave nest slumbers in the field. Far has it flown! It was born to be disgraced by neither falcon nor hawk, nor by you, black raven, pagan Polovtsian!

Zadonshchina: ‘Brothers and Russian princes! We have been the nest of Grand Prince Vladimir of Kiev. By birth we were in disgrace before neither the falcon nor the hawk, nor the black raven, nor this pagan Mamai!’ (from Copy U: Likhachev and Dmitriev 1960:536).

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