



THE TALE OF THE CAMPAIGN OF IHOR, SON OF SVIATOSLAV,  
GRANDSON OF OLEH

Now might it not be meet, my brethren,  
To enter on the tale of Ihor's foray,  
Which Sviatoslav's heroic son conducted,  
In ancient accents of a martial lay?  
Then let this Song begin in the current fashion,  
And not in the manner that Boyan<sup>1</sup> once favoured.

For when Boyan felt an inspiration  
To summon forth a song in someone's honour,  
He scurried over treetops in his fancy,  
Like a grey wolf he dashed about the prairie,  
Or soared, cloud-piercing, like a blue-grey eagle,  
For, as he vowed, he called to mind the broils of ancient times.

Then his ten falcons he would loose upon a flock of swans,  
And each, when overtaken, raised a song,  
Praising the venerable Yaroslav,<sup>2</sup>  
Mstislav,<sup>3</sup> the Brave, who in sight of Kassoh cohorts  
Slew their Prince, Rededia;  
Likewise Roman Sviatoslavich,<sup>4</sup> the Fair, was lauded.  
Boyan, however, loosed no falcons on a swan-flock,  
But let inspired fingers fall upon the living lute-strings  
And they themselves rang out the praise of Princes!

So let us then, my brethren, launch this epic  
Out of the times of ancient Volodimir,<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup>A poet-minstrel who glorified the martial deeds of the early Kievan princes. Nothing is known of his personal life, except that he was an inspired bard who possessed great, almost miraculous gifts of imagination and fantasy and, in comparative manner, was able to present the contemporary exploits of the princes against the background of ancient times. *The Tale of Ihor's Campaign* is one of the few testimonies to his existence. So affluent was his poetry in artistic resources that he was praised as the son of Veles, the Slavic god of cattle, hence of wealth.

<sup>2</sup>Yaroslav the Wise, son of Volodimir the Great, was a Prince of the Kievan Rus (1019-54), under whose reign Ukrainian laws were codified.

<sup>3</sup>Mstislav, Prince of Tmutorokan, son of Volodimir the Great by Rohnida. At first he fought against Yaroslav to gain more Rus territory for himself, but later became reconciled with him, satisfied with his own conquests on the left bank of the Dnieper.

<sup>4</sup>Roman Sviatoslavich, Prince of Tmutorokan, grandson of Yaroslav the Wise, slain by the Polovtsians in 1079.

<sup>5</sup>Volodimir the Great (in Old Slavic—Vladimir), son of Sviatoslav and Prince of the Kievan Rus (978-1015), who united the ancient Rus tribes into a powerful state. During his reign, Christianity was officially established in his domains (988 or 989).

And bring it to the present and to Ihor<sup>6</sup>  
 Whose soul was rendered taut by earnest purpose  
 And keen-edged with the courage of his heart.  
 Filling his spirit thus with martial vigour,  
 He led his valorous troops  
 Against the hostile land of the Polovtsians<sup>7</sup>  
 In the defence of the land of Rus.<sup>8</sup>

Then Ihor glanced up at the shining sun  
 And saw a darkness cover all his warriors.  
 And thus spake Ihor to his train: "Brothers, retainers,  
 Much better were it to be hewn down than to be captured!  
 Let us then, brothers-in-arms, mount our swift steeds,  
 Win to the Don and visit its blue flood."  
 That ardent passion dulled the Prince's prudence,  
 And eagerness to taste the mighty Don  
 Eclipsed for him the sense of evil omen.  
 "It is my will," he said, "to try my spear  
 On the far limits of Polovtsian plains,  
 And with you, Sons of Rus, from out our helmets  
 Either to drink the Don or else to perish!"

Boyan, thou nightingale of days of yore,  
 Would thou couldst trill of this campaign,  
 Warbling, O songster, in the tree of fancy's branches,  
 With thine invention soaring beneath the clouds,  
 Weaving, sweet melodist, the songs of glory around these times  
 And, rushing down the pathway of Troyan,<sup>9</sup>  
 Across fields to the hills should be the song for Ihor:  
 "It was no storm that swept the falcons over the vast plains.  
 It was the daws that dashed in flocks toward the Mighty Don."  
 Or shouldst thou have sung, Boyan, grandson of Veles:<sup>10</sup>

"Beyond the Sula neigh the steeds;  
 Resoundingly in Kiev glory reigns  
 And trumpets blare in Novhorod.

<sup>6</sup>Ihor, son of Sviatoslav II (Olhovich), was born in 1151, began to reign in Novhorod Siverskiy in 1179, and died in 1202. He is the hero of this epic.

<sup>7</sup>A nomadic tribe, ranging south of the Kievan Rus, along the Black Sea coast, and eastward to the Volga.

<sup>8</sup>Rus, a conglomerate name of all the tribes that comprised the Principality of Kiev and the surrounding territories.

<sup>9</sup>Probably a legendary prince of Rus.

<sup>10</sup>In Ukrainian mythology, a sun-god, protector of cattle, hence a supplier of wealth.

At Putivl the standards flutter in the wind,  
 Ihor awaits his dear brother Vsevolod.  
 And the Aurochs, Vsevolod, says to him:  
 "One brother, one bright light art thou, O Ihor,  
 We are both the sons of Sviatoslav.  
 Saddle thy fleet steeds, my brother.  
 In Kursk are my own already saddled.  
 My men of Kursk are dauntless warriors,  
 Swaddled under the blare of trumpets,  
 Cradled under helmets,  
 Nursed at the point of a spear . . .  
 With every trail they are familiar  
 And no ravine to them is secret . . .  
 Taut are their bows, their quivers open,  
 Their sabres have keen edges.  
 Like grey wolves they themselves rush through the plains  
 In search of honour for themselves  
 And for their Prince renown and glory."  
 Prince Ihor in the golden stirrup set his foot  
 And rode across the vast expanse.  
 The sun obscured the way for him with darkness;  
 The storm-loud night aroused the strident birds,  
 The howling of the beasts massed them in clamorous flocks. . . .  
 Sinister Div<sup>11</sup> down from the treetops calls to warn the alien lands;  
 Regions of Volga and Sula and Surozh and Korsun and Coastal Slopes,  
 And thou, O idol of Tmutorokan,<sup>12</sup>  
 Take heed!

At random down unbeaten roads Polovtsians flee  
 To the Great Don;  
 Carts screech at midnight like awakened swans.  
 Ihor leads his forces to the Don.  
 Sensing his coming fate, the birds of rapine  
 Perch in the oak-trees to await their time;  
 The wolves, foreboding tempests, grimly howl;  
 The eagles, shrieking harshly, summon all the beasts  
 To the carrion bones;  
 The foxes bark at scarlet bucklers.  
 O land of Rus, already beyond the hills art thou.

<sup>11</sup>A mythical forest demon in the guise of a ravenous bird, favourable to the Polovtsians, inimical to the people of Rus; here, personification of evil.

<sup>12</sup>A town on the northeastern coast of the Sea of Oziv (Azov), where princes driven out of their territories usually found temporary refuge.

The darkness of the night-time long prevailed  
 Until at last the dawn burst forth  
 While yet the mists were covering the fields . . .  
 Hushed are the trillings of the nightingales;  
 But roused the clamour of the daws . . .  
 With scarlet shields the sons of Rus have barred the vasty Plain,  
 In search of honour for themselves  
 And glory for their Prince.

On Friday's early morn they trampled down the infidels  
 And scattering like arrows o'er the Plain,  
 They carried fair Polovtsian maidens off,  
 And with them seized the gold and silken stuff and precious samite,  
 And many costly mantles, cloaks and furs.  
 With these and every fashion of Polovtsian luxuries  
 They bridged the marshes and the quagmires.  
 A scarlet standard, a white banner, a silver lance,  
 The red bunchuk<sup>13</sup>—all fell to the booty  
 Of Sviatoslav's intrepid son.

In the Plain now slumbers Oleh's valiant brood:  
 Far into hostile regions have they flown!  
 Born were they not to be abused by hawk or falcon,  
 Neither by thee, black raven, infidel Polovtsian!  
 Like a grey wolf speeds Hza;<sup>14</sup>  
 In headlong rush Konchak<sup>15</sup> guides him to the Don . . .

Early, most early on the morrow, blood-red gleams of dawn  
 Announce the approaching day . . .  
 Out of the sea, black clouds draw nigh,  
 Keen to eclipse the four suns,<sup>16</sup>  
 And in them bluish lightnings flicker eerily.  
 There is to be great thunder!  
 Rain is to come in arrows from the mighty Don!  
 Here shall the spears be shattered,  
 Blunted the sabres on Polovtsian helmets

<sup>13</sup>Bunchuk, an item of military regalia: a rod usually six or seven feet in length, topped by a ball or an arrow point below which was fastened a horse's (sometimes aurochs') mane or tail.

<sup>14</sup>The chief of the Don Polovtsian horde, and an ally of Konchak.

<sup>15</sup>The Polovtsian Khan.

<sup>16</sup>The four princes taking part in the campaign: Ihor, Vsevolod, Sviatoslav (son of Oleh), and Volodimir (son of Ihor).

Beside Kayala stream,  
 And by the Great Don's mighty surge.  
 O land of Rus, far beyond the hills art thou!

The blustering winds now blow, offsprings of Striboh,<sup>17</sup>  
 Showering with arrows the brave hosts of Ihor.  
 The earth rumbles,  
 Streams flow turbidly,  
 Dust covers the plains . . .  
 The banners flutter,  
 The Polovtsians  
 Advance from the Don and from the sea.  
 From all sides they beset the warriors of Rus.  
 With fearsome cries the Devil's children barred the plains,  
 While the brave men of Rus barred them with their scarlet shields.

"Vsevolod, fierce Aurochs! You stand in battle  
 Spurting at the foe with arrows,  
 With swords of steel you strike clangorous blows  
 Against the helmets of the enemy!  
 Where'er you spring into the battle, Aurochs,  
 Your golden casque ablaze,  
 There lie the paynim heads of the Polovtsians,  
 And Avar helms are cleft with tempered sabres  
 By you, Vsevolod, impetuous Bull!"  
 For what are wounds to him, dear brethren,  
 Who has forgotten wealth and honours,  
 And Chernihiv town, his Sire's golden throne,  
 And the affection and caresses of his beloved,  
 Hlib's lovely daughter?

The age of Troyan is no more,  
 The times of Yaroslav have passed away,  
 Only a memory now are the campaigns of Oleh,<sup>18</sup>  
 Oleh, son of Sviatoslav,  
 Who with his sword once forged dissensions  
 And sowed arrows over the land.

<sup>17</sup>Slavic god of the winds, a destructive power.

<sup>18</sup>Oleh, son of Sviatoslav II (son of Yaroslav) and Prince of Kiev (1073-76), grandfather of the present Ihor. This not being a historical presentation, it has been thought best not to burden the reader with too much historical data, lest we confuse him. Suffice it to say that the princes mentioned here were related to each other by blood and, being warlike in spirit, were only too eager to create dissensions among themselves in order to gain more territories at each other's expense.

In the town of Tmutorokan  
 Into the golden stirrup, lo! he sets his foot.  
 That ringing sound was heard in olden days by ancient Yaroslav;  
 And Vsevolod's son, Volodimir,  
 In Chernihiv each morn would stop his ears,  
 While vainglory brought God's judgement  
 On Boris, son of Viacheslav,  
 And on the bank of Kanin spread a green pall for him  
 For the offence he did to Oleh, young intrepid Prince.  
 And from a like river of tears,  
 Cradling his father between Magyar pacers,  
 Sviatopolk had him conveyed to Kiev  
 To rest in Saint Sophia's vaults.

'Twas in the days of Oleh, offspring of distress and woe,  
 That dissensions grew and spread,  
 The wealth and substance of Dazhboh's<sup>19</sup> descendant dwindled,  
 And in the feuds between the Princes  
 The span of human life was shortened.  
 Rarely in those times the ploughmen called to one another  
 Throughout the land of Rus,  
 But often did the ravens croak  
 As among themselves they shared the corpses,  
 And the jackdaws, in their jargon jabbering,  
 Were always craving to take wing to that repast.

Thus was it in those frays and expeditions,  
 But such a battle as this was yet unheard of.  
 From early morn till eve, from eve till dawn,  
 The tempered arrows fly,  
 The sabres harshly clang against the helmets,  
 The spears of steel meet with the sound of rending  
 In the far-off plains unknown, amid the Polovtsian land.  
 Black earth beneath the hooves  
 Was sown with bones and soaked with blood,  
 Both sprouting sorrow through the land of Rus.

What is the din, the ringing sound I hear  
 So distantly, before the break of dawn?  
 It is from Ihor, turning back upon the foemen,

<sup>19</sup>A pre-Christian Slavic sun-god, the giver of life. Rus princes were often called "Dazhboh's offspring" (descendants).

Anxious in pity to relieve the plight  
 Of his beloved brother, Vsevolod.  
 One day they fought, and yet another,  
 And toward midday on the third  
 Fell Ihor's standards.  
 Here on the swift Kayala's bank  
 The brothers parted,  
 For the wine of blood ran dry . . .  
 The wedding feast was there brought to an end  
 By the dauntless sons of Rus  
 Who with their blood did sate the guests  
 And for the land of Rus laid down their lives.  
 The grass droops in sorrow,  
 The trees in grief are bending to the ground.

A tide of woe already has set in, my brothers,  
 The wilderness has spread its pall over the fallen warriors.  
 Among the troops of Dazhboh's offspring reigns adversity.  
 Like a maiden it had entered into Troyan's land,  
 Fluttering its swanlike pinions on the blue sea by the Don  
 And, plashing in its waters, frightened away prosperous times.

Forgotten was the Princes' warfare with the infidel;  
 For brother said to brother now:  
 "This belongs to me, and that is mine!"  
 And the Princes ventured to think petty matters great  
 And to forge dissension, each against the other,  
 While the pagans came with conquests  
 Into the land of Rus.

For far into the field, down to the very sea,  
 The falcon had roamed to smite the ugly birds!  
 But Ihor's valiant hosts will never rise again.  
 Karna<sup>20</sup> upon their traces shrieks her wailings,  
 And Zhla<sup>20</sup> in lamentations leaped about the land of Rus,  
 Scattering upon the multitudes the embers  
 From a flaming horn.

Ruthenian wives burst forth in lamentation:  
 "No longer can we even in our thoughts imagine,  
 Nor fashion in our minds,  
 Nor with our eyes behold

<sup>20</sup>Lamenting personifications of sorrow.



Our precious husbands;  
 And never more shall we adorn ourselves  
 With gold and silver pendants.

Kiev, my brothers, groaned with sorrow,  
 And Chernihiv in deep adversity.  
 A flood of sadness swept the land of Rus,  
 Distress in mighty spate flowed everywhere . . .  
 And while the Princes forged their mutual quarrels,  
 The infidels made raids into the land of Rus  
 And wrung from every stricken home a squirrel-fur tribute.

Thus those two fearless sons of Sviatoslav,  
 Ihor and Vsevolod, had roused again that hostile spirit  
 Which their forebear, dread Sviatoslav the Great of Kiev,  
 Had suppressed with terror,  
 With his mighty cohorts and tempered swords  
 He set his foot upon the Polovtsian land,  
 Trod hard upon its hills and steep ravines,  
 Churned to turbidity its lakes and rivers,  
 Drained off its streams and bogs,  
 And like a whirlwind snatched away the heathen Kobiak  
 From off the sea-gulf's arc,  
 Out of the mighty, steel-armed hosts of the Polovtsians.  
 And Kobiak<sup>21</sup> fell  
 In the city of Kiev  
 In Sviatoslav's Hall of the Guards.

Now the Germans and the Venetians,  
 Now the Greeks and the Moravians  
 Extol the glory of Sviatoslav,<sup>22</sup>  
 And reproach Prince Ihor  
 Who let his wealth sink down to the Kayala's bottom  
 And gluttoned with the gold of Rus  
 The Polovtsian streams.  
 And Ihor, the Prince, dismounted from his golden saddle  
 To mount the saddle of a captive.  
 And the bastions of the cities mourned  
 And joy faded.

<sup>21</sup>The Polovtsian Khan, defeated by the princes of Rus in 1184, the year before Ihor's Campaign took place. Ihor did not participate in that battle.

<sup>22</sup>Sviatoslav III (son of Vsevolod), Prince of Kiev (1176-94), called father here, but in reality Ihor's cousin.

And Sviatoslav dreamed a disquieting dream  
 In Kiev upon the hills.  
 "All night since evening," he said,  
 "As I lay on a couch of yew,  
 I was being clothed in a black shroud,  
 Blue wine with venom mixed was poured for me;  
 Out of the empty quivers of the pagan nomads  
 They spilled large pearls upon my chest,  
 Caressed and fondled me . . .  
 The gold-decked roof of my abode  
 Was left without a rafter."<sup>23</sup>  
 All night since evening have hell's ravens croaked,  
 And in the lowlands of Plisnesk  
 In the thickets there were vipers crawling  
 And moving towards the blue sea."

And to the Prince the boyars spoke out thus:  
 "Grief, O my Prince, has firmly gripped thy mind,  
 For hence already have two falcons<sup>24</sup> flown  
 From their paternal throne of gold,  
 Seeking to win to Tmutorokan town  
 Or with their helmets at least drink the Don . . .  
 Already have their wings been clipped  
 By the sabres of the infidel,  
 And they themselves made fast in iron fetters.  
 For on that third day, darkness fell;  
 Two suns<sup>24</sup> became eclipsed,  
 Two scarlet pillars<sup>24</sup> lost their sheen,  
 And with them, Oleh and Sviatoslav, two young moons,  
 With obscurity were veiled  
 And sank into the sea.  
 "On the banks of the Kayala palls the light:  
 Over the land of Rus the Polovtsians have scattered  
 Like a brood of leopards,  
 Inspiring with audacity the Hunnish tribes.  
 Now infamy has risen over glory,  
 Freedom is smitten by disaster,  
 And Div already has swooped down upon the land . . .

<sup>23</sup>Omens of death of someone closely related. Other omens mentioned here also forebode disaster.

<sup>24</sup>Ihor and Vsevolod.

Lo! comely Gothic maidens  
 On the shore of the blue sea have raised their voices in a song  
 And, jingling the gold of Rus,  
 They glorify the evil times of Bous<sup>25</sup>  
 And extol the vengeance for Sharokan.<sup>26</sup>  
 While we, thy followers, are downcast  
 And yearn for gladness."

Then the great Sviatoslav let fall a golden word,  
 Mingled with tears, and said:  
 "Alas, my nephews, Ihor and Vsevolod!  
 Too early you began to lash with swords  
 The land of the Polovtsians  
 In quest of your own glory.  
 Without honour have you slain your adversaries  
 For dishonourably have you shed their pagan blood!  
 Your stalwart hearts had been well steeled  
 And tempered hard with daring.  
 Why have you done this to my silvery hair?  
 No longer do I see the puissance of brother Yaroslav,  
 Opulent and mighty, rich in cohorts,  
 With the nobility of Chernihov in attendance,  
 With the Mohuts, Tatrans and Shelbirs,  
 Topchaks, Revuhs and Olbers,<sup>27</sup>  
 Those who without bucklers,  
 Merely with daggers in the leggings of their boots,  
 With war-cries quell the hostile troops,  
 Spreading resoundingly the glory of their forebears.  
 But you said: Let us be brave on our own,  
 And we will grasp the glory that lies before us,  
 And that which is past—we will share among ourselves."  
 Would it not be a wonder, brothers, that an ancient should seek  
 to act like a youth?  
 When a falcon has moulted, he soars high to smite the birds,  
 And will let no harm befall his aerie.  
 But here's the rub: no aid from the princes do I receive.  
 The times are turned awry.  
 At Rim<sup>28</sup> the people's cries are heard

<sup>25</sup>Prince of the ancient Slav tribes called Antes.

<sup>26</sup>Dynastic name of the Polovtsian khans who waged wars with Rus.

<sup>27</sup>Slavic tribes in alliance with the Kievan Rus.

<sup>28</sup>A town near Pereyaslav, plundered by the Polovtsians.

Under the Polovtsian sabres,  
 And Volodimir is covered with wounds.  
 Grief and sorrow are the portion of the sons of Hlib!<sup>29</sup>

“O Vsevolod, great Prince, thou hast no thought  
 To come flying here from afar to lend protection  
 To the throne of thy ancestors!  
 For with thy oars thou art able to sprinkle the Volga out  
 And drain the Don with helmets.  
 If thou wert present here,  
 A female slave would for a mite be sold  
 And a bondsman for a farthing.  
 For over the dry land thou canst launch thy living missiles—  
 The dauntless sons of Hlib.

“And you, O fierce Rurik<sup>30</sup> and David!<sup>31</sup>  
 Was it not your warriors' gilded helmets that floated in blood?  
 Were not your valiant retainers bellowing like bulls  
 Wounded by tempered steel on fields unknown?  
 Set your feet in the golden stirrups, my lords,  
 To take your vengeance for the injuries done in our time,  
 For the land of Rus,  
 For the wounds of Ihor,  
 The intrepid son of Sviatoslav!

“O eight-sensed Yaroslav of Halich,<sup>32</sup>  
 High thou sittest on thy gold-wrought throne,  
 Bracing the Magyar mountains with thy steely hosts,  
 Barring the road before the King's advance,  
 Locking tight the Danube's gates,  
 Flinging thy ponderous shafts above the clouds,  
 Making thy judgements prevail as far as the Danube.  
 Across the land thy dread streams like a flood;

<sup>29</sup>Hlib, son of Rostislav, grandson of Yaroslav the Wise, and Prince of Riazan. In the Ukrainian Chronicle under the year 1187, in connection with Volodimir, one of his five sons, the name “Ukraine” comes into history for the first time—“Ukraine groaned greatly after him.”

<sup>30</sup>Rurik, son of Rostislav, ruled in Bilhorod. A great adventurer of his time, he conquered and lost Kiev seven times between 1172 and 1210.

<sup>31</sup>David, brother of Rurik. Apparently the allusion is to the campaign against the Polovtsians in 1177 which was unsuccessful on account of the dissensions between the two brothers.

<sup>32</sup>Yaroslav of Halich (1153-87) of the Rostislav dynasty. He was called the Eight-Sensed on account of his excellent statesmanship and organizational talent, as a result of which the Halich Principality attained great power. His domains extended from the Carpathians to the mouth of the Danube, comprising more or less the present Western Ukraine, with Lviv as its later centre. He was greatly dreaded by the Polovtsians and the Hunnish tribes.

Thou openest the gates of Kiev;  
 From the golden throne of thy forebears  
 Thou shootest at sultans beyond thy territories.  
 Shoot, then, O lord, at Konchak, the infidel slave,  
 For the land of Rus,  
 For the wounds of Ihor,  
 The intrepid son of Sviatoslav!

“And thou, Roman, and thou, Mstislav, ye turbulent ones!  
 Your resolute thought inspires your mind to action.  
 High do ye sail in courage,  
 Like falcons soaring in the winds,  
 Eager to outdo the birds in impetuosity.  
 Both those steel breastplates, below your Latin helmets,  
 Have made the earth quake, causing many realms to tremble:  
 The Huns, the Lithuanians, the Yatvingians, the Deremels and the  
 Polovtsians,  
 Have all dropped their spears and bowed their heads  
 Under those hard, tempered blades . . .  
 But, O Princes, the sun has already dimmed for Ihor,  
 And the tree, not from well-being, has shed its leaves.  
 Along the Ros and the Sula our foes now share the cities,  
 But Ihor's hosts will never rise again!  
 The Don calls out to you, O Princes,  
 And summons you to victory!  
 “The valiant princes are ripe for battle,  
 Ingvar and Vsevolod, the sons of Oleh, and, of no mean brood,  
 The three sons of Mstislav, six-winged all.  
 Was it not by fortunate chance that you seized your principedoms?  
 Where now are your golden casques,  
 Your Polish spears, your bucklers?  
 Block up the gates to the plain with your keen arrows  
 To avenge the land of Rus,  
 The wounds of Ihor,  
 The intrepid son of Sviatoslav!”  
 No longer for the weal of Pereyaslav  
 Does the Sula flow in silvery streams,  
 While the Dvina, to the harsh cries of the pagans,  
 Flows turbidly to reach the redoubtable townsmen of Polotsk.  
 Iz'yaslav alone, the son of Vasilko,  
 With ringing sounds struck his sharp blades

On Lithuanian helmets,  
Shattered the glory of Vseslav, his sire,  
And himself was cut down by Lithuanian sabres  
And, under scarlet bucklers, fell upon the bloody sward  
As if upon a couch where his beloved lay.  
And Boyan said: "O Prince,  
Birds of prey have covered thy retinue with their wings  
And ravenous beasts have licked their blood."  
Thy brother Briacheslav was absent,  
As was thy other brother, Vsevolod;  
And thou wert all alone when from thy valiant body  
Thou didst drop thy soul, a precious pearl,  
Through thy golden neckpiece.  
The voices sound despondently,  
All revelry has ceased,  
The trumpets of Horodno blare.  
Yaroslav, and all ye grandsons of Vseslav,  
Lower your banners,  
Sheathe your dented swords,  
Because you have already swerved  
From the glory of your ancestors.  
For by your intrigues you began to draw  
The infidel upon the land of Rus,  
Upon Vseslav's possessions.  
For it was through your dissensions  
That from the land of the Polovtsians violence came.

In the seventh age of Troyan,  
Vseslav cast lots for a maiden dear to him.  
Summoning his wiles, he sprang upon a horse,  
Galloped to the city of Kiev,  
And with his spear-shaft touched  
The Kievan throne of gold.  
Like a wild beast he rushed from Bilhorod  
At midnight from his foes,  
And vanished into the bluish mist.  
And on the morrow with his battering rams  
He opened the gates of Novhorod,  
Shattered the glory of Yaroslav,  
And like a wolf dashed from the town of Dudutki to the Nemiha  
stream.

On the Nemiha they strew heads like sheaves,  
 Thresh them with steely flails,  
 On the barn floor set down lives  
 And winnow soul from body.  
 No good was sown on the Nemiha's bloody banks,  
 For with the bones of the sons of Rus  
 Were they sown.

Vseslav, the Prince, to all his people meted justice,  
 And rules the cities with a princely sway;  
 But as a wolf he leaped at night  
 From Kiev, till cock-crow, he would run  
 All the way to Tmutorokan,  
 And as a wolf he crossed the path of the great Khors.<sup>33</sup>  
 Early in the morning, in Polotsk,  
 The bells in Saint Sophia pealed for him;  
 And in Kiev he heard those matin bells.  
 Though in his other body he harboured a foreseeing soul  
 Yet often did he suffer grievously.  
 For of him was it that the prophetic Boyan  
 In times gone by said sagely in a lay:  
 "Neither a cunning nor a nimble-witted man  
 Nor a bird of ever so fleet a wing  
 Can escape the judgement of the Lord God."

Ah, fated is the land of Rus to moan  
 As it recalls the olden times  
 And the princes of the days gone by!  
 The ancient Volodimir could not be nailed fast  
 To the hills of Kiev.  
 His standards have now passed to Rurik,  
 Some of them also to David;  
 But the horse-hair on their maces  
 Flutters contrarily, in strife,  
 And the spears sing as they clash.

On the Danube early in the morning, like a cuckoo,  
 Yaroslavna's voice is heard,  
 As in her solitude she wails:  
 "Far down the Danube will I like a cuckoo fly;  
 I will dip my beaver sleeve in the Kayala stream

<sup>33</sup>One of the Ukrainian pagan sun-gods.

And will wipe the Prince's bleeding wounds  
That rankle on his lusty body."

Early in the morning Yaroslavna weeps  
On the ramparts of Putivl, lamenting:  
"Wind, O sweeping wind,  
Why dost thou Sire, so adversely blow?  
Why dost thou carry hostile arrows on thy steady wings  
At the warriors of my beloved?  
Art thou not content enough to blow on high,  
Under the clouds, and to rock ships on the blue sea?  
Why, lord, hast thou dispersed my joy  
Upon the feather-grasses?"

Early in the morning Yaroslavna weeps  
On the ramparts of Putivl, lamenting:  
"O Dnieper, Slovuta's son,  
Thou hast pierced rocky mountains  
Through the land of the Polovtsians;  
Upon thee thou hast borne the barks of Sviatoslav  
Down to Kobiak's encampment,  
Let thy waters lightly bear to me my loved one  
That I may not so early in the morning send to him  
My tears down to the sea."

Early in the morning Yaroslavna weeps  
On the ramparts of Putivl, lamenting:  
"O bright, yea thrice-bright Sun,  
To all art thou warm and splendid.  
Why, lord, hast thou spread thy searing rays  
Upon the warriors of my beloved  
Who lie upon the waterless plain?  
Why hast thou contracted their bows with thirst  
And locked their quivers with grief?"

At midnight the sea was roused into a splashing turbulence . . .  
The water-spouts, enveloped in mist, advance . . .  
God points to Ihor the way out of the Polovtsian land  
To the land of Rus, to the golden throne of his forebears.  
The sunset's glow has dimmed . . .  
Does Ihor sleep? Nay, Ihor keeps vigil . . .  
Ihor in his thought is measuring the steppe  
From the Great Don to the Little Donets . . .



A horse! At midnight Ovlur<sup>34</sup> whistled  
 From the stream's other bank,  
 Signalling the Prince to understand  
 That no longer was Prince Ihor to remain enslaved.  
 He shouted . . . the earth rumbled . . . the grasses rustled . . .  
 The Polovtsian tents began to stir . . .

Like an ermine did Prince Ihor spring towards the reeds,  
 And like a white duck leaped upon the stream . . .  
 Upon a swift steed then he sprang  
 And bounded down to dash like a white-footed wolf  
 Towards the meadows of the Donets,  
 And like a falcon flew beneath the mists,  
 Killing swans and geese  
 For his morning, midday and evening meals.  
 And when Ihor flew like a falcon,  
 Ovlur like a wolf pressed headlong,  
 Shaking off the chilly dew . . .  
 For their speedy horses were way-worn.

Says the Donets: "O Prince Ihor,  
 Not mean shall be thy glory,  
 To Konchak mighty the vexation,  
 And to the land of Rus—exceeding joy!  
 Ihor rejoined: "O Donets,  
 Not mean shall be thy glory,  
 For thou hast borne the Prince upon thy waters,  
 Hast spread green grass upon thy silvery banks,  
 Mantled him with tepid mists  
 In the shades of thy verdant forest.  
 Thy wild ducks on the waters watched him,  
 Thy seagulls on the waves, thy crested drakes high in the winds!  
 Such was not, he says, the river Stuhna:  
 Shallow in its current, it devoured its brooks and streams,  
 And, widening at thy mouth, it overflowed the bushes on its banks,  
 Drew the young prince Rostislav to them  
 And locked him at the bottom of the spate.  
 On its darkful bank his mother weeps,  
 Bewailing the fate of the youth, Prince Rostislav.  
 The flowers have drooped in sorrow  
 And the trees are bowed down to the earth in grief."

<sup>34</sup>A Polovtsian who helped Ihor to escape. His mother was a Christian.

It was not magpies that raised the chattering . . .  
 Konchak and Hza are in pursuit,  
 Hot on the trail of Ihor.  
 The crows then did not croak, the daws were silent,  
 The magpies ceased their clamour.  
 Only the woodpeckers, climbing in the willows,  
 With their tappings point the course towards the river,  
 While nightingales with gladsome songs  
 Announce the dawning day.

To Konchak says Hza:  
 "Since the falcon<sup>36</sup> to his nest is flying,  
 We will smite the young falcon  
 With our gilded arrows."

To Hza answers Konchak:  
 "Since the falcon to his nest is flying,  
 With the snares of a fair maiden  
 We will enmesh the young falcon."

And Hza in reply to Konchak speaks:  
 "If we enmesh him with a lovely maiden,  
 We shall have neither the fair maid nor the young falcon;  
 And all the falcon's brood will rise to smite us  
 On our own Polovtsian Plain."

Said Boyan, the song-creator of Sviatoslav's campaigns,  
 The bard of the times of Yaroslav, of Oleh, and of the early princes:  
 "If hard it is for thee, O head, to be without the shoulders,  
 It is likewise bad for thee, O body to be without the head."  
 Thus is it for the land of Rus—bereft of Ihor.

The sun shines in the heavens,  
 Ihor, the Prince, is in the land of Rus.  
 The maidens sing along the Danube,<sup>36</sup>  
 Their voices weave themselves across the sea to Kiev,  
 Ihor rides along the slope of Borichiv  
 To the Blessed Mother of God of Pirhotissa<sup>37</sup> . . .  
 The realms are happy, the cities rejoice!

<sup>35</sup>Ihor.

<sup>36</sup>Danube does not necessarily apply to the river of that name. It may, as here or elsewhere, particularly in folk-poetry, denote any flowing body of water.

<sup>37</sup>Church of the Lady of the Tower, Protectress of the city, established between 1131 and 1135 by Mstislav I, son of Monomakh, in Borichiv, one of the suburbs of Kiev.

As formerly we have extolled in song  
The glory of the ancient princes,  
The time now comes to celebrate the young,  
And sing their praises:  
Glory to Ihor, son of Sviatoslav!  
To Vsevolod, the fierce Aurochs!  
To Volodimir, son of Ihor!  
Hail to the princes and their suites  
Who fight for Christendom against the pagan hosts!  
Glory to the princes, honour to their retinues! Amen!

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1189-1962



Selected and Translated into English Verse

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