

## DEVILS AND ANGELS IN CZECH TOPONYMS

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### Abstract

The article aims to explore spatial distribution and relationships between toponyms in the Czech Republic between place names inspired by the themes of hell and devils on the one hand, and contrasting names derived from God, angels, and heaven on the other.

The key hypothesis verified was that local names derived from hell or the devil frequently indicate interesting geomorphological formations and dynamic relief and are generally more often used for natural objects and local names of land and forest areas, while names derived from God, angels, and heaven are mainly used for smaller man-made structures or buildings. The text is accompanied by examples of notable objects with interesting names closely related to tourism, recreation, or nature conservation.

**Key words:** place name; geomorphological landforms; tourism; hell; heaven

### Introduction

Toponyms reflect a diverse range of landscape forms, from landownership patterns and homesteads to specific topographical contours and local folklore. Such cultural imprints persist within collective memory and cartographic records for centuries (Bijak, 2021; Halas, Kallabová, 2026). This study explores the interrelations between two antithetical thematic categories: on the one hand infernal place names derived from the devil, hell, and the Satan (Kubalíková et al., 2025) and divine or Christian-rooted names such as God, angels, and heaven on the other one (Daníčková, Bajer, 2019; Reeves, Otterstrom, 2019). These contrasting semantic worlds are applied extensively to both anoikonyms (landforms, natural features or agricultural plots) and oikonyms (settlements, buildings, and administrative districts) (Kirchner & Kubalíková, 2015; Kubalíková et al., 2025).

We specifically test the hypothesis that "diabolical" place names often correlate with prominent geomorphological features and rugged topography. Furthermore, we posit that while names associated with hell and the devil are predominantly linked to natural features and rural tracts, names derived from God and angels are more frequently associated with anthropogenic structures and small-scale architecture.

### Materials and methods

The spatial distribution of toponyms within the Czech Republic was evaluated using the Geonames database, provided by the Czech Surveying and Cadastral Office. Geonames<sup>1</sup> serves as the primary geographic authority for the Czech Republic, with a level of detail corresponding to the 1:10,000 Base Map (BM 10). It is managed as a seamless, nationwide dataset and is a core component of the national geodetic infrastructure.

To ensure data integrity, the dataset required methodological refinement. While many features are unique, linear objects (such as watercourses or valleys) often appear as multiple entries. To avoid redundancy, each feature was reduced to a single name and a unique location. This is already handled methodologically by the database itself, as objects of a multiple nature do not have a location field filled in the attribute table, with the exception of one representative point per each feature.

Keywords were extracted using the *Select by Attributes* function in ArcGIS, employing SQL syntax with the "LIKE" operator. The query targeted the "name" attribute, accounting for case sensitivity and various morphological derivations of the selected stems.

The first thematic group comprised Czech toponyms containing the terms (or derivatives of): 'čert', 'čertovský', 'dábel', 'dábelský', 'peklo', 'pekelský', 'rarach', 'lucifer', and 'rohatý'. In contrast, the

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<sup>1</sup> [https://geoportal.cuzk.gov.cz/\(S\(unt3l5ikspaxkgv5culurwz1\)\)/Default.aspx?mode=TextMeta&side=Geonames&metadataID=CZ-CUZK-GEONAMES-V&menu=261](https://geoportal.cuzk.gov.cz/(S(unt3l5ikspaxkgv5culurwz1))/Default.aspx?mode=TextMeta&side=Geonames&metadataID=CZ-CUZK-GEONAMES-V&menu=261)

second category consisted of names stemming from the concepts: *'bůh'*, *'božský'*, *'anděl'*, *'andělský'*, *'nebe'*, and *'nebeský'*. These terms represent standard Czech and don't encompass regional dialects. For cross-linguistic applications, these lexemes would need to be adapted to the specific linguistic corpora of the target language.

## Results

Within the group of toponyms derived from the words *čert* (devil) and *peklo* (hell), the Geonames database identified a total of 953 features across the Czech Republic. Of these, 660 features were classified as anthropogenic. Most of these man-made toponyms referred to local agricultural and forest tracts, parts of municipalities, ponds, paths, and basic settlement units. Conversely, the number of buildings with names derived from the devil or hell was notably low (a total of 16 buildings).

A relatively high number of names associated with devils or hell were recorded for natural features (293), which were often geomorphologically significant. There is a frequent occurrence of toponyms for hills, peaks, and mountains, as well as names for isolated boulders, rock formations, ravines, valleys, caves, ridges, and slopes (Tab. 1). Furthermore, there is a significant proportion of "diabolical" toponyms associated also with hydrographic features, specifically brooks, small wells, springs, and waterfalls.

The most common names for the first group of toponyms studied included: *Peklo*, *V pekle*, *Čertův potok*, *Čertův kámen*, *Čertova rokle*, *Čertův mlýn*, *Na pekle*, *Pekelský potok*, *Pekla*, *Čertův vrch*, *Čertova skála*, *Nad peklem*, *U pekla*, *Pekelský rybník*, *Čertův důl*, *Čertova hora*, *Čertova díra*, *Čertova hráz*, *Čertova stráň*, *Čertova brázda*, *Čertova pláň*, *Čertova stěna*.

Tab. 1: Categories of natural landforms in both groups of toponyms under study

| Feature category              | Derived from |                    |
|-------------------------------|--------------|--------------------|
|                               | devil, hell  | God, angel, heaven |
| Ridge, crest                  | 7            |                    |
| Cave                          | 9            |                    |
| Lake                          | 1            |                    |
| Hill, peak, mountain          | 84           | 15                 |
| Isolated boulder, rock, rocks | 64           | 3                  |
| Promotory                     | 1            |                    |
| Brook                         | 36           | 5                  |
| Spring                        | 8            | 9                  |
| Peat bog                      | 1            |                    |
| Gorge                         | 26           |                    |
| Mountain pass                 | 1            |                    |
| Rock formation                | 5            |                    |
| Small well                    | 20           | 6                  |
| Slope, hillside, scree        | 6            | 1                  |
| Valley                        | 20           | 1                  |
| Waterfall                     | 4            |                    |
| Total                         | 293          | 40                 |

The second group of toponyms, derived from the words *bůh* (God), *božský* (divine), *anděl* (angel), *andělský* (angelic), *nebe* (heaven), and *nebeský* (heavenly), comprised a total of 1,199 features in the Czech Geonames database. This category was heavily dominated by anthropogenic features, with 1,159 records identified as of 2025. Within this group, buildings and structures accounted for 1,159 entries, consisting primarily of churches, chapels, and small-scale sacral architecture. A significant portion of these anthropogenic toponyms also describes local names for agricultural plots, forest tracts, municipal districts, urban areas, and occasionally ponds.

In contrast to the first group, only 40 natural features were identified among toponyms derived from the terms God, angel, and heaven (Tab. 1). These included specific geomorphological relief features such as hills, peaks, mountains, isolated boulders or rock formations, slopes, and valleys as well as hydrological features, including brooks, springs, and small wells.

The most frequent names within the second group of toponyms included traditional designations of churches and chapels, such as the Assumption of the Virgin Mary (*Nanebevzetí Panny Marie*), Saint Michael the Archangel (*Svatý Michael Archanděl*), and the Holy Sepulchre (*Boží hrob*), which together accounted for approximately 700 records.

A separate assessment was conducted for non-building features. Among these, toponyms for agricultural or forest land such as *U božích muk* (At the Wayside Cross) clearly predominated, including spatial variations utilizing prepositions such as "behind" (*za*), "in front of" (*před*), or "towards" (*k*). Another frequent category of toponyms relates to the practice of feeding ponds solely through atmospheric precipitation (rainwater), leading to the name *Nebeský rybník* (Heavenly Pond). Water-related themes also appear in the names of springs, brooks, and land plots, such as *Boží voda* (God's Water) or *U Boží vody*. Other common names for natural formations or plots of land are derived from the word for "angel," including variations such as *U Anděla*, *U Andílka*, *U Andělíčka*, *Andělka*, or *Andělská hora*.

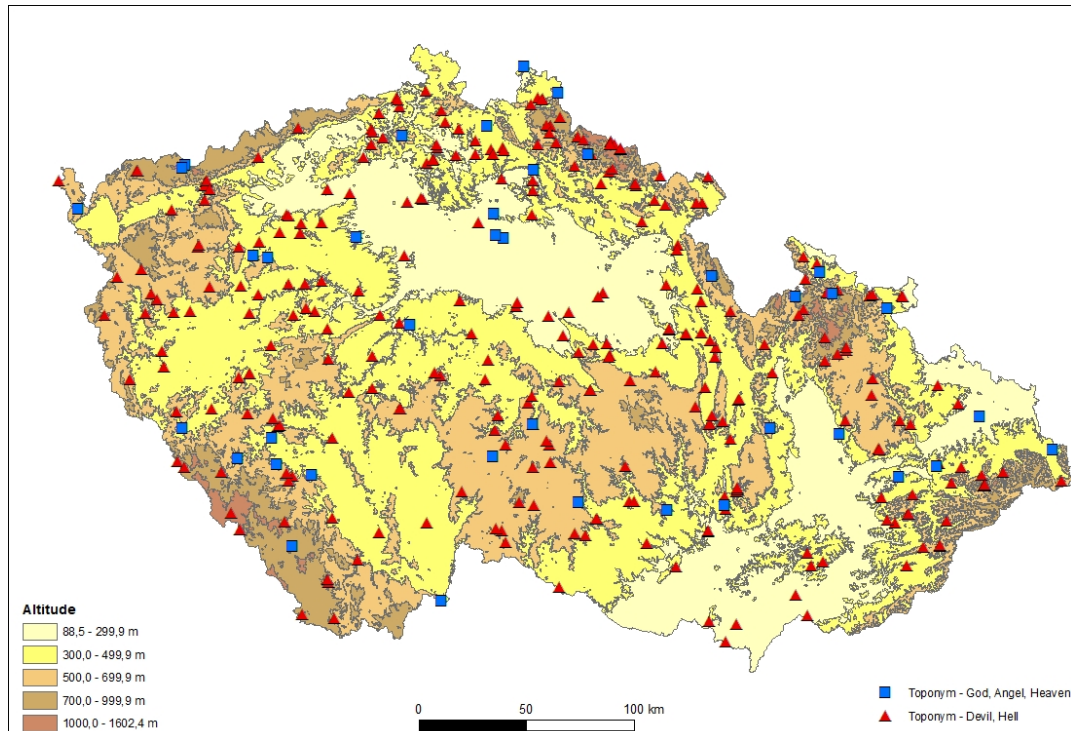


Fig. 1: Toponyms of a natural features derived from the devil and hell, and from God, angels, and heaven

The distribution map of natural toponyms derived from "devil" or "hell" reveals a relatively uniform dispersal across the Czech Republic, with the notable exception of the major lowlands and fertile agricultural regions (Fig. 1). The highest concentration of these features occurs at elevations between 300.0 and 499.9 m a.s.l. - corresponding to rugged hilly terrain and highlands - followed by the 500.0 to 699.9 m elevation band (Tab. 2). A non-negligible presence of both "diabolical" and "angelic" toponyms is also recorded in the highest mountainous regions of the Czech Republic.

In contrast, natural features derived from God, Angel, and Heaven exhibit an uneven distribution, which is partly due to their low overall frequency (40 features). Nevertheless, they are represented across all elevational categories, with their peak occurrence also falling within the 300.0–499.9 m and 500.0–699.9 m ranges (Tab. 2).

Tab. 2: The distribution of natural toponyms by elevation

| Altitude above sea level | Devil, Hell | Share % | God, Angel, Heaven | Share % |
|--------------------------|-------------|---------|--------------------|---------|
| 88.5 - 299.9 m           | 36          | 12,29   | 6                  | 15,00   |
| 300.0 - 499.9 m          | 127         | 43,34   | 15                 | 37,50   |
| 500.0 - 699.9 m          | 85          | 29,01   | 12                 | 30,00   |
| 700.0 - 999.9 m          | 27          | 9,22    | 6                  | 15,00   |
| 1,000.0 – 1,602.0 m      | 18          | 6,14    | 1                  | 2,50    |
| Total                    | 293         | 100,00  | 40                 | 100,00  |

### Discussion

Preliminary analyses addressing the primary hypotheses confirm a high proportion of natural features among toponyms associated with "hell" and "the devil" in the Czech Republic. These features often possess significant geomorphological value and indicate rugged or dynamic relief (Fig. 2). Furthermore, these sites are frequently attractive for recreation and nature conservation, with several formations integrated into small-scale protected areas (Daníčková & Bajer, 2019). Natural landforms with "diabolical" names are often interpreted through local folklore and legends (Fig. 3AB), which attribute their origin or the naming of the site to the intervention of the devil or infernal forces (Halas & Kallabová, 2026; Kubalíková et al., 2025).



Fig. 2: The *Ďáblova prdel* (Devil's Ass) rock outcrop serves as an educational site for hands-on instruction on the weathering processes of granite rocks in the Central Moldanubian Pluton.



Fig. 3: The migmatite rock formations known as A/ *Andělka* (Angel's rock) and B/ *Čertovka* (Devil's rock) are located near the town of Humpolec, just a few dozen meters apart. The names of these rock formations are linked to a legend about a local devil and an angel.

Regarding toponyms derived from "God," "Angel," and "Heaven," the results confirm the expected predominance of buildings, structures, and small-scale sacral architecture (e.g., churches, chapels, wayside crosses, and crucifixes). However, a high frequency of "celestial" toponyms was also observed for agricultural plots, forest tracts, and municipal districts; a pattern that, notably, also applies to "diabolical" names. In contrast, the occurrence of natural features associated with God, angels, or heaven is very low in the Czech Republic. This scarcity reflects the minimal role attributed to divine forces in traditional folk explanations for the formation of dynamic or dramatic relief features.

### Conclusion

The article aims to explore the spatial distribution and relationships between toponyms in the Czech Republic, namely between place names inspired by the themes of hell and the devil on the one hand and contrasting names derived from God, angels and heaven on the other. Preliminary analyses confirm a high proportion of natural elements among toponyms associated with "hell" and "devil" in the Czech Republic. These elements often have significant geomorphological value and indicate a rugged or dynamic relief. Moreover, these places are often attractive for recreation and nature conservation. In contrast, the occurrence of natural elements associated with God, angels or heaven is very low in the Czech Republic. Toponyms derived from "God", "Angel" and "Heaven" are predominantly in the form of buildings, structures and small sacral architecture in the Czech Republic. However, a high frequency of "heavenly" toponyms was also observed for agricultural land, forest land and urban areas; this pattern also applies to "devil" names.

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## Souhrn

Článek si klade za cíl prozkoumat prostorové rozložení a vztahy mezi toponymy v České republice, a to mezi místními názvy inspirovanými tématy pekla a čerta na jedné straně a kontrastními názvy odvozenými od Boha, andělů a nebe na straně druhé. Klíčovou hypotézou bylo ověření, jestli místní názvy odvozené od pekla nebo ďábla často označují zajímavé geomorfologické útvary a dynamický reliéf a obecně se častěji používají pro přírodní objekty, případně místní názvy zemědělských nebo lesních pozemků, zatímco názvy odvozené od Boha, andělů a nebe se používají především pro menší sakrální stavby nebo větší církevní budovy (kostely, kaple). Rozložení přírodně zajímavých objektů vybraných toponym v rámci České republiky je poměrně rovnoměrné, větší podíl objektů odvozených od čerta nebo pekla je evidován ve vyšších nadmořských výškách nebo v členitém reliéfu pahorkatin a vrchovin. Text byl doplněn několika konkrétními příklady přírodních objektů se zajímavými názvy úzce souvisejícími s cestovním ruchem, rekreací nebo ochranou přírody. Předběžné analýzy zabývající se primárními hypotézami potvrzují vysoký podíl přírodních prvků mezi toponymy spojenými s „peklem“ a „ďáblem“ v České republice. Tyto prvky mají často významnou geomorfologickou hodnotu a naznačují členitý nebo dynamický reliéf. Tato místa jsou navíc často atraktivní pro rekreaci a ochranu přírody, přičemž několik útvarů je součástí maloplošných zvláště chráněných území. Přírodní útvary s „ďábelskými“ názvy jsou často interpretovány prostřednictvím místních lidových pověstí a legend, které připisují jejich původ nebo pojmenování místa zásahu ďábla či pekelných sil. Pokud jde o toponymy odvozené od „Bůh“, „Anděl“ a „Nebe“, výsledky potvrzují očekávanou převahu budov, staveb a drobné sakrální architektury (např. kostely, kaple, kříže u boží muky). Vysoká frekvence „nebeských“ toponym však byla pozorována i u zemědělských pozemků, lesních pozemků a městských částí; tento vzorec platí ale také pro „ďábelská“ názvy. Naproti tomu výskyt přírodních prvků spojených s Bohem, anděly nebo nebem je v České republice velmi nízký. Tato vzácnost odráží minimální roli připisovanou božským silám v tradičních lidových vysvětleních formování dynamických nebo dramatických reliéfních prvků.

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