

THE HÍDIVÁSÁR: A CHANGING FESTIVAL IN HUNGARY

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Abstract: One of the most important festivals in Hungary is held on 18, 19, and 20 August each year, marking the national holiday of Szent István's Day (St. Stephen in English). In the village of Hortobágy in eastern Hungary, the festival traditionally has been observed with a market held near the Kilenclükú Híd, the "Nine-Hole Bridge." The festival is therefore called the Hídivásár, or "bridge festival." It features the herders of the area who maintain older breeds of horses, cattle, sheep, pigs, and herding dogs and who wear traditional costumes.

Historically, the festival focused on the buying, selling, and trading of domestic animals. Artisans and craftspeople also offered products for the farm and home. Most of today's vendors sell inexpensive plastic household goods, woven baskets, and metal ware, although a few still sell traditional herders' clothing and hats, leather goods, and feltwork. Herders bring animals to the bridge, not to be bought or sold but as picturesque subjects for thousands of photo-snapping tourists. The market has become a major tourist draw. From the perspective of the anthropology of tourism, festival, and ritual, the market festival has become a site of consumption rather than a dynamic, interpersonal process, yet it still acts to maintain traditional practices.

Keywords: festival, Hungary, Szent István's Day, market, animals, herders, tourism

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During the five months I spent in Hungary in 2007 and 2009, I conducted research in the area of Hortobágy National Park in the eastern part of the country, in the midst of the extensive plains called the *puszta*. Most of my research was with the herders of the area who, with support of the state, maintain traditional breeds of horses, cattle, sheep, pigs, water buffalo, and herding dogs. The herders wear traditional costumes when at work and present festivals, demonstrations, and other events throughout the year. Most of these events take place within or close by the Hortobágy National Park, so the park not only works to encourage tourism and to protect migratory birds and other wildlife of the region, but also preserves the traditional ways of life of the herding and stock-raising people—their costumes, equipment, dwelling places, herding and farming practices, and traditional architecture, crafts, home decoration, foodways, and other ways of life.

One of the most important of the annual festivals is held on the 18th, 19th, and 20th of August each year, marking, on 20 August, the national holiday of Szent

István's Day (St. Stephen in English). István is generally recognized as the true founder of the Hungarian nation after his coronation as the first Christian king in the year 1000. Celebrated throughout the country, Szent István's Day has been observed for hundreds of years in the village of Hortobágy, where a livestock market is held. Originally located on an open pasture near the village, the festival and market are now held near the *Kilenchlyukú Híd*, the "Nine-Hole Bridge," the longest stone bridge in Hungary, dating from about 1830. The festival is therefore called the *Hídívásár*, the "Bridge Festival."

No one knows when the first market in this area was held, but it certainly dates from a much earlier time when a wooden bridge—frequently destroyed by floods—spanned the river. This bridge served the highway that connected the important trade center of Debrecen with Budapest and cities farther west. The fair was originally called the *gulyásszél*, the "cow-outskirts," or in other words, the edge of the town where cattle wandered. It was here that domestic animals were bought, sold, and traded, with artisans and craftspeople offering products for farmers, herdsman, and their wives and families. In fact, these fairs were often called *futóvásár* or *betyárvásár*, "outlaw fairs," because they were not originally authorized by the regional government—and because there were rumors that stolen animals were often bought and sold at the market. An old folk song goes:

Nyargalva hajt hét lovat a két betyár
Most esik a debreceni nagyvásár.
Two outlaws are herding seven horses;
Now is the big fair in Debrecen.¹

One recent publication says:

...the origins of the 'Hídi' market has become obscured over time, but it was surely held in the nearby grazing field, not in the present marketplace. The Wednesday after Pentecost was market time, to which an end-of-summer market was also held next to the bridge.... At the end of the twenties, beside the animal market the stall market was growing, where everything from sweets to carts was sold. This is its only feature that has survived to this day, although it is good that the number of craftsmen and industrious folk artists that try to sell part of their prized goods here keeps growing. Thus pocket-knives [and] jugs have appeared again; moreover, embroidered felt cloaks (*szűr*) and sheepskin coats (*suba*) are also available. The Hídi market is held on 19 and 20 August since 1965, and on these days Hungarian *racka* sheep and grey cattle also graze by the bridge to better recall the old atmosphere.²

This excerpt points to the fact that the Bridge Fair has become ever more focused on the tourist trade, to the extent that the cattle graze by the bridge not so much to eat but to "better recall the old atmosphere."

1 PAPP 2008. 281.

2 PAPP 2008. 35.

During the nineteenth century, the fair moved closer to the bridge—first the horses, in 1825, then the cattle in 1846. Soon after, the Debrecen council decided to have the livestock fair twice a year at that location. Another parallel fair of the period, occurring in the same area, was the *kirakodó* fair. It was described by József Papp as offering goods of all descriptions, complementary to the livestock market:

Mainly the Debrecen masters, hat-makers, *szűr*-makers, boot-makers, the coopers and wheel-smiths from Miskolc, the potters and pipe-makers from Debrecen, Füred, Mezőcsát, saddle-makers of Tiszafüred, fur-bag makers from Szarvas, bell and ring makers from Upper-Hungary sold their famous products, honey-cake and barbecue could be bought. But the covered wagon of Debrecen could also be bought here. The pole of the wagon to be sold was raised and a bundle of straw was tied onto it.³

It is not known exactly when the market began to be held on Szent István's Day, but photographs from the early twentieth century show a lively market full of animals and people (Fig. 1). Many handcrafted products associated with the herdsman's life were also sold, including elaborately decorated pig-, sheep-, and cow-herding sticks, horsemen's whips, shaving mirrors, drinking horns, razor cases, match boxes, salt cellars, and water dippers.⁴

Today, the market still exists. A majority of the vendors sell inexpensive plastic household goods, woven baskets, and metal ware, most of it manufactured outside Hungary in places like China and Romania. During our visit in 2007, for example, a few craftspeople from the nearby area sold traditional herdsmen's clothing such as herdsmen's hats, felt coats, sheepskin coats, and leather goods such as *készségek* (traditional knife sheaths and small leather containers for personal goods). At the fair, a lonely hurdy-gurdy player was drowned out by a nearby rock band. Sheep and cattle were brought to the area of the bridge, not to be bought or sold but as a picturesque backdrop and photograph opportunity. Herdsmen, dressed in traditional clothing of loosely fitted dark blue shirt and pants with high black leather boots and black hats decorated with a crane's feather, watched over them (Fig. 2). Among the activities at the fair in 2007 were the following: "comedy performances," "folk dance performances," a "magician performance," live music by a group called Magyarock ("Hungarian rock"), a puppet show, a "wind band and majorette group from Italy," a show from the "flower festival group," a choir from China, an accordionist, a blues band, a band called Groovehouse, and a finale of fireworks.⁵

Thus the market has now become a major tourist attraction, combining traditional crafts with inexpensive souvenirs, housewares, and plastic toys, and offering a variety of entertainment appealing to people of all ages. From the

3 PAPP nd. 40.

4 MANGA 1972.

5 HORTOBÁGY BRIDGE FAIR 2007. www.hortobagy.hu

perspective of the anthropology of tourism, festival, and ritual, the market festival has become a site of consumption rather than a dynamic process of exchange, trade, and barter.

A second festival, held about the middle of October, is called the "Grey Cattle Fair." This weekend event features the magnificent grey cattle of Hungarian tradition: large, gentle beasts with enormous horns shaped like the outline of a lyre (Fig. 3). This cattle breed dates back to the Middle Ages, and the cattle at one time were driven from Hungary to cities as far away as Munich, Amsterdam, Basel, Venice, perhaps even Madrid. Nowadays, the grey cattle are herded past the village, put into pens, and driven out for inspection by potential buyers. The national government has for many years encouraged the breeding and sale of these cattle, along with traditional breeds of horses, sheep, pigs, and dogs, both as a stimulus to national pride and as a way to combine tradition with the development of tourism.

In the context of festival, it seems that the original Hídivásár, where local farmers and stockmen came to hire herders, exchange gossip, buy and sell clothing and working gear, and buy and sell livestock, has been transformed. The buying of cattle now takes place as a formal auction managed by the state, rather than the one-to-one bargaining that previously took place. Most of the cattle in Hungary are now breeds imported from Western Europe or the United States, and the grey cattle of tradition are primarily used in Hortobágy to draw tourists (Fig. 4). It is interesting to note that the traditional breeds of cattle, and also of pigs and sheep, have been shown to be leaner and healthier than the newer, faster-growing and more cost-efficient breeds raised today. Pork from the old breed of *Mangalica* pigs, for example, is sold in high-quality butcher shops in Budapest, touted as low-fat, low-cholesterol, tasty meat.

In summary, it seems that the traditional Hídivásár has been split in two. First there is the Szent István Festival in August, a national celebration of patriotism and historical remembrance, marking the end of summer and the beginning of autumn activities, as hay is harvested and stored, animals are brought back from faraway pastures, and citizens purchase the goods they need for the winter. Two months later, the Cattle Fair refocuses the attention of the people on livestock, the true, year-round basis of the economy. Here the audience is smaller, and the focus is on the cattle, on food, and on tradition.

Given this division, it seems likely that local communities like Hortobágy maintain festivals both for themselves and for outsiders. In this case, the first festival appeals to European and other international tourists who are visiting Hungary during the summer months and are intrigued by traditional herding ways of life. They can tour farms to observe traditional breeds of animals, visit the local animal park, or ride a wagon across the *puszta* to see the animals and the herdsman who watch over them. They can sample *gulyás* (goulash soup) and *pörkölt* (stew) at the local *csárda* (inn), buy a basket or cooking pot from a vendor, tour the museums, and perhaps listen to the local musicians. They will probably not buy a horse or a cow.

The second festival, the Grey Cattle Fair, still references the Hídivásár by penning, herding, and showing off the cattle. But these activities are now performed before a variety of onlookers—local community members, regional residents, and tourists, too. The festival is enlivened by a cooking competition among the herders—*gulyás*, of course, but also *slambuc*, the traditional herdsman's dish, a combination of potatoes, pasta, onions, and pork, cooked in a round-bottomed pot over an open fire. To watch the herdsman flip the pot forward and back to produce the perfectly round, large ball of *slambuc*—as large as a basketball—is a treat, especially if you're given a sample! (Fig. 5)

It is difficult to maintain such traditions, particularly those of herding peoples. Forces ranging from quick-growth animals to transport by large trucks combine to diminish the old ways of life. In this case, however, it seems that a combination of government action at the federal level—through the national park—and local enthusiasm for preserving traditions while encouraging tourism are combining to turn herding practices into demonstrations and performances. There are both gains and losses in these festival traditions as the participants grapple with modern realities. A festival of community and interpersonal interaction has become commodified, with a consequent distance being maintained between the producer—the craftsman or herdsman—and the consumer, the tourist or urban dweller. Yet the festival also encourages the raising of traditional breeds of animals, the maintenance of craft traditions, the pride of heritage among the herdsman, the marketing of healthful, locally produced agricultural products, and a certain amount of publicity for a lesser-known region of Hungary.

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Fig. 1. The bridge fair in 1930



Fig. 2. Cow herders at the bridge fair, 2007



Fig. 3. Grey cattle, a native breed of Hungary



Fig. 4. Herding cows at the Grey Cattle Fair



Fig. 5. *Slambuc* cooking contest at Hortobágy, 2007