

INTRODUCTION

Besides satisfying basic biological needs, water is closely bound to culture; we find it in the symbols and rites of religions and also in the beliefs and notions of different communities. Today the suitable use of fresh water represents a great challenge as it is not an unlimited resource. The interest shown by social sciences in questions of water use is directed mainly towards gathering, agricultural and herding communities, especially in regions where distinctive norms and rules are associated with the distribution of this natural element. However we have very little information on the water management of modern societies and their relationship to water, a fact that can be explained in a number of ways.

In recent decades anthropologists, ethnologists, historians and cultural historians have been showing growing interest in the cultural aspects of water as in many cases this natural element was not only a means of spending and organising leisure time, it also created the possibility to express and strengthen borders between different social groups. At the same time to a certain extent water can also serve as a uniting force because it can function as a vehicle of regional and national identities and solidarity.¹

Klaus Roth emphasized the double character of the rivers which involves both dividing and linking role. Different economic, political, military, ethnic and cultural factors could determine which aspect of the rivers become visible.²

In 2005 a publication appeared reporting on the results of investigations carried out within the frame of the project called "Programme Culture 2000". The participants took as their point of departure the recognition that cities are often identified with their rivers, that is, there is a close connection between them. Rivers can simultaneously connect and separate while at the same time a wide range of sometimes opposite meanings may be attached to them. They often form frontiers between different countries and regions, in many places related to political processes and conflicts. Rivers offer the

¹ Anderson, Susan C.: Introduction: The Pleasure of Taking the Waters. In: Andreson, Susan C.–Tabb, Bruce H. (eds.): *Water, Leisure and Culture. European Historical Perspectives*. Berg, Oxford, 2002. 1–8.

² Roth, Klaus: Rivers as Bridges–Rivers as Boundaries. Some Reflections on Intercultural Exchange on the Danube. *Ethnologia Balkanica. Journal of Balkan Ethnology* 1997/1. 20–28.

communities living on their banks favourable possibilities for exploiting water as a versatile resource. While the connection between towns and rivers has existed for centuries, it has become weaker as a result of modernisation, industrialisation and the expansion of settlements. People often used the watercourses as a source of energy or as a place to discharge accumulated effluents; as a result these waters lost their purity and acquired a whole series of negative associations. Nowadays, however, a growing number of European cities are trying to discover the rivers and their environment, trying in different ways to exploit them and incorporate them in urban planning developments.³

The 8th International Student Seminar organised by the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology of the University of Szeged on 21–27 August 2007 chose as its theme the question of water and the urban way of life, requiring the participants to apply special research methods. The site chosen for the fieldwork was a city where both past and present are closely intertwined with this natural element. The salt transported down the Maros and Tisza rivers was a significant factor helping to make Szeged an important trade centre. The timber floated down the river also helped to lay the foundations of the wood processing industries, as well as ship-building. Although water transport gradually declined in importance from the early 20th century, by then the Szeged middle class was discovering the Tisza and various groups created a distinctive bathing culture. Anna water is still consumed not only locally: people from other settlements regularly visit the well. The River Tisza is one of the consciously constructed symbols expressing the city's image that are used for different festivals and in tourism brochures and advertising. The memory of floods, especially the Great Flood of 1879 can also be said to live on; the city organises commemoration ceremonies to mark the anniversaries, in many cases drawing attention to the ambivalent connection between the river and the city. In addition to these events, materialised manifestations of the memory are frequently encountered, among others in the form of monuments and marks showing the level reached by the flood waters.

Students and teachers from the universities of Zagreb, Comenius (Bratislava) and Turku came for the international seminar. On 22nd August, the day after their arrival, together with the Hungarian participants they presented their earlier work on the theme. László Mód

³ Bosi, Giulia-Ronconi, Michele (ed.): *I fiumi come infrastrutture culturali. Rivers as Cultural Infrastructures*. Editrice Compositori, Bologna, 2005.

spoke of the possible ways of approaching water use, of the relationship between Szeged and the River Tisza, and on the summer cottage area along the river banks that offer special opportunities for the use of leisure time. Csaba Tóth spoke about the connection between the major floods and memory, focusing on the great flood of 1879 that played a decisive role in the history of Szeged as that natural catastrophe wiped out a great part of the city. Sándor Gyarmati attempted to interpret the unique world of floating swimming pools, closely linked to the bathing culture created by the bourgeoisie of Szeged. The last Hungarian participant, Ágnes Seres not only outlined the history of the use of Anna water, she also described the customs associated with its use. Juraj Janto, a doctoral student from Slovakia presented a paper on the connection between the Danube and the Slovak capital. The Finnish guests (Timo J. Virtanen: Water as an imago element – Turku Case; Karoliina Autere: Cultural Landscapes Along the River Aura; Anna Leimola: River Aura as an Everyday Life Resource) centred their reports on Turku's river, the Aura. The students from Zagreb, Krešimir Bermanec, Mario Katić and Tomislav Oroz drew attention to the connections between water and Southern Slav beliefs and customs, and to traditional techniques of water use.

After visiting the fieldwork sites (summer cottages, floating swimming pools, flood monuments, Anna well), the work was carried out in four groups with the participation of foreign and Hungarian students and university teachers in the form of interviews and observations. On the last day the participants reported on their findings, then at the farewell supper got to know the special technique for making Szeged fish soup. By applying different viewpoints and methods the seminar examining the connection between water and the urban way of life succeeded in grasping the research theme, an innovative one in the field of ethnological investigations. After working up the material collected we would like to report on our results in this volume of studies that, following the earlier practice, are presented in English and Hungarian.

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