

THE DANUBE IN SLAVONIC HISTORY

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Having said that the person whose business is philosophy is not able to write with any shrewdness about the river and cannot be compared to a hydrogeologist in this matter, what can one say about Strauss and his Blue Danube and Gogol about Dnepr in his Taras Bulba? Obviously they have addressed a matter of great importance. The topic of this paper is a river in the imaginary world of human beings. We would like to endeavour to discover the system of symbols which are put into "this natural stream of water larger than a creek and emptying into an ocean, a lake, or another river." The modern human is a child of the imagination. Taking the path of the transformation and idealisation of natural reality, millennial history has created the second world. Man has not come to the Earth from nowhere; however, we could take this as an exotic alternative version of occurrence. On the contrary, man has arisen from nature and has found himself standing over it. Nevertheless, the thing which we consider as the inalienable element of our social reality is able to stagger us. We are very accustomed to living in this space. We have become accustomed to watching big liners going up and down the river, observing the swimming children, and not being astonished by large cities built on the Danube banks.

On the contrary, we would have been very vexed with the lack of the fields with a view of the river. This last statement is the first step into the central core of the problem. The standard of beauty becomes stiff only for a short span of time. Many theories explaining the nature of beauty exist. It is a matter of taste to give priority to one of them. If I had asked the question "Why is the Danube so beautiful," I would not have received the same answer from everyone. Nonetheless, bending over this philosophical matter would be very good for understanding our problem. It is an open secret, that man does not only enjoy contemplating the river but also utilises it. The river is a transport artery, a source of cheap energy and a big gutter. The unity of supreme and utility is the fate of our history. Until about 10,000 years ago, humans lived in small communities, wandering from place to place to obtain food by hunting, fishing, and gathering nuts, berries and plants. Our forefathers were still evolving when all the modern rivers were already flowing. In the time of yore, everyone recognised a river only by its deadly indications, as humans were probably very bad swimmers and, of course, were not yet able to build bridges. Russian folklore has saved the images of the bereginia (bereg = bank), who purportedly were the famine goblins living in the river and dragging unlucky passers-by to the bottom.

The Neolithic Revolution brought faster developments in technology as humans began to settle down and discovered agriculture. Prehistoric farmers living in the New Stone Age developed many new tools to make their work easier. These tools included sickles to cut grain, grinding stones to grind grain into flour, and axe-like tools called celts. Sometime before 3000 BC, farmers invented a wooden plough that could be pulled by oxen. It enabled them to turn over more soil than they could by hand ploughs. Irrigation techniques also became established in the valleys of Egypt and Mesopotamia. Irrigation ditches and canals were dug, and in Egypt a crude lift, the shado, consisting of a leather bucket, raised water from the Nile to the valley above. This was used for farm-work and harnesses were invented so that animals could be used to pull sledges.¹

Water transportation also developed in the Old Stone Age, as humans built rafts of logs or reeds. In later times, they learned to fashion dugouts and canoes that were propelled by paddles or poles. By the end of the Neolithic Period, the sail which harnessed wind to power small boats had appeared. It is thought that the Egyptians invented sailboats in about 3200 BC. These early ships were simple vessels, with a small sail rigged in the bow, and could sail only before the prevailing wind. They had fixed sails which were of use only when the wind was blowing in the direction the ship wanted to go. With the invention of the wheel in the New Stone Age, around 3500 BC, most likely in Mesopotamia, the first wheeled vehicles appeared.¹ It must be emphasised that these developments took place over thousands of years, of which we have no written record, and that they occurred first in only small areas in the world.

The Neolithic Revolution began in four great river valleys that exhibited certain characteristics, namely, a warm climate and an annual flood that left fertile soil. These were the river valleys of the Nile in Egypt, the Tigris and Euphrates in Mesopotamia, the Hwang in China, and the Indus in India.² In that time, approximately the fifth millennium BC, the so-called Danubian Neolithic culture was arising. The foregoing technological history has obtained its own mythological interpretations. For instance, in Egypt, where everything depended on the Nile, the coronation of a new pharaoh was often postponed until a new beginning in the cycle of nature provided a proportionate starting-point for this reign. It was made to coincide either with the rising of the river in early summer or with the recession of water in autumn when the fertilised fields were ready to be sown. Osiris represented the life-giving waters and the soil fertilised by the Nile. After the Nile had receded, the land eventually appeared to die, but on the reappearance of the waters it came back to life. The Osiris myth embodied this cycle of birth, death and rebirth and gave the promise of immortality. However, there was always the possibility of droughts or floods. The Nile seldom brought disaster to Egypt. Mesopotamian civilisation developed in a very different environment. The Tigris and Euphrates are far less uniform in their behaviour than the Nile. The inhabitants of ancient Mesopotamia had to contend with climate variations, scorching winds, Oriental rains and

devastating floods over which they had little control. The mood of Mesopotamian civilisation reflected this element of force and violence in nature which gave no ground for believing that the rages of time could be surmounted by a ritual culture."³

In Belarus, where the sea was only a stone's throw away, people seldom used the river as a transport artery. The sea was reflected here as a very abstract object. For example, in ancient Greek mythology, death was related to the image of the river of Hades; its name was Styx. The analysis of this version of mythological reflection merits extended consideration. Humans have always been interested in the interpretation of the after-life, and have been fond of devising ways to get to the other world. At the same time, this river artery must also have been a border. In Greek mythology the Styx was seen as a mysterious river, where the other bank, though visible, was not available. Only a boat could bring us there. Once on the boat, our native bank would become visible, but unattainable. The same element is known in Slavonic mythology as the reka smorodinoava - the Stinking River - the image of the earliest Russian epic poetry.

The Bible, in Genesis I, mentions that the Lord God planted a garden eastward in Eden; and there he put the man whom he had formed. And out of the ground made the Lord God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil. And a river went out of Eden to water the garden; and from thence it was parted, and became into four heads. The name of the first is Pison: that is it which compasseth the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold; And the gold of that land is good: there is bdellium and the onyx stone. And the name of the second river is Gihon: the same is it that compasseth the whole land of Ethiopia. And the name of the third river is Hiddekel: that is it which goeth toward the east of Assyria. And the fourth river is Euphrates.⁴

Evidently, the Lord created a configuration of space similar to that of the aforementioned result of the Neolithic revolution. Earth and Water are the two opposed elements. For the later mythological consciousness, these approaches give the possibility of orientation in the enlarging social reality. It is very interesting that the same concepts are found in The Russian Primary Chronicle, that uses river images to configure the space occupied by the Slavs. Although, a new aspect should be added here. The orientation of the areas which were colonised by the Slavs had a more concrete character, for the river had already served them as a transport road, as a vehicle for their migrations: "After many years, the Slavs settled near the Danube, in the region that is today Hungary and Bulgaria, and gave the region their name. They also spread to the lowlands and the March river, and the people known today as Serbs and Croats are of Slav origin. The Slavs also settled between the Dna and Pripet rivers and developed into the Polish people, as the Dna in Polish is called Polota. The Slavs settled all over the region and developed the Slav written language."⁵ This narration and the description of Russian history produced a new system of orientation in which this area had already been considered as a fixed point of reference. Again the river was a main axis around which rotated the world.

The Russian Primary Chronicle continues: "As a result, one can travel down the Volga from Russia to Bulgaria and then to Chvalisen and east to Anteil Sems. One can travel down the Dna from Vargern to Rome and from Rome to Dtamme Hams. The Dnepr empties into the Black Sea and forms three deltas; this sea is Russian."⁵ The place of rivers in the history of Russian civilisation is very weighty. Many of us remember the context of primary Russian history on the road from the Varangians to the Greeks, which has represented milestones in our cultural and social development: "When the Polish lived in isolation, the road from Vargern to the Greek Dnepr was through Lovat and a large lake. From this lake springs the Volchov river which flows to the Vargisch Sea."²

Civilisation and new feudal and Christian structures had come to these lands by ways of a river. A few words should be added specifically about Russian feudalism. In old times feuds were absent. The Russian nobility limited themselves only to tributes. Every winter after the Dnepr froze, the Russian princes rode on the ice to give tribute to tribes living in the nearest forests and marshes. It is no doubt that the Danube in Slavonic history has kept up its part. The above-cited fragment from The Russian Primary Chronicle, had already discovered the image of the Danube formed within Eastern Slavonic culture. Our forefathers considered these lands as their own pre-mother country. Please note all the names of the present Slavonic nation mentioned in this fragment.

In conclusion, I would like to cite the words that the Great Duke Sviatoslav is said to have addressed to his mother Olga: "In the year 1477, Sviatoslav spoke to his mother and his boyar and told them he no longer wanted to live in Kiev. 'I want to live in Perejaslavec on the Danube, the heart of my land. That is where all the goods come; gold from Greece, wine and exquisite fruit from Bohemia, silver from Hungary, horses from Russia, and furs, wax, honey and slaves'. "² This conclusion does not need any improvement.

References

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2. Ibid, pp. 4, 10 and 45
3. Whitrow G.J. (1986) Time in history, Oxford Univ. Press, pp. 25
4. The Bible. Genesis 1-25, in Concise encyclopaedia, Power CD Text 114 ZCI Publishing
5. The Russian primary chronicle, Leipzig, pp. 34 (1931)

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