Radna: The Holy Shrine of the Multinational Banat Region (Romania)

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CATHOLIC PILGRIMAGE and the POLITICS and PRAGMATICS of PLACE-MAKING in EASTERN EUROPE

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ERIKA VASS

Radna: The Holy Shrine of the Multinational Banat Region (Romania)

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"Pilgrimage is exodus from the home environment where everything reminds people of manual labour; it is liberation from the ties of human relations, it is surmounting everyday life. This is the peasant quest for spiritual solitude, the transfiguration of the Christian Catholic soul."¹

INTRODUCTION

The depopulated areas of the Kingdom of Hungary were settled with people of different nationalities in the 18th century after the Ottoman rule. New inhabitants frequently brought new cults with themselves. In the spirit of a strong Mary-cult these soon exceeded the borders of the nationalities and united Catholics of regions near and far regardless of language or nationality. The spiritual radiance of shrines unites visiting nationalities concerning the essence of the cult. Devoutness in public or private, songs and prayers were also transmitted to each other. Shrines—irrespective of the nationality of the territory—soon united the population of a region in this common cult. The protective cloak of the Blessed Virgin has held together the pilgrims of the Carpathian Basin ever since.

A saint card from the shrine at Radna. Early 20th century, from Szeged.

Radna, located on the banks of the river Mureș, is the sacral heart of the Banat region.² The shrine has united the region's Catholics for centuries in veneration of Virgin Mary regardless of their nationality and native language. All nationalities living in the region take part in the pilgrimage of Radna (part of Romania since 1920, before that belonging to Hungary): Roman Catholic Bulgarians, Croatians (called Krashovani), Hungarians, Germans, Roma, Romanians, and Slovaks venerate the Blessed Virgin Mary together. Additionally, believers of the Orthodox and Greek Catholic Church also visit the pilgrimage site. Until the borders changed after the First World War, a great number of pilgrims visited Radna every

² Sándor Bálint, *A hagyomány szolgálatában. Összegyűjtött dolgozatok* (Budapest: Magvető, 1981), 121.

Shrine at Radna, 2018.
Photo by Erika Vass.

year from the region of the Great Hungarian Plain (Kecskemét, Szeged—Hungary, and Senta—present-day Serbia). These pilgrims from different regions often prayed together (or simply saw one another doing so) and thus learned the prayers, devotions, and songs of others and often adapted them to their own religious routine.

I visited Radna for the first time in 1996. I participated in a research project organized at the Department of Ethnography of the University of Szeged from 1996 to 2000 to inventory the gallery of votive pictures in the aisle of the church. We then visited votive donors with the aim to find out the history of these images and devotional objects.³ One focus of my thesis research between 2001 and 2005 was the pilgrimage event commemorating the birth of Virgin Mary. Additionally, in 2018, I conducted research on the motivations of pilgrims to Radna who belong to different ethnic groups.

3 Gábor Barna, ed., *"Mária megsegített" Fogadalmi tárgyak Máriaradnán*, 1–2. *Devotio Hungarorum* 9. (Szeged: Néprajzi Tanszék, 2002). Erika Vass, "Bánsági portyázások. A szegedi néprajzi tanszék máriaradnai kutatása," in *"Szent ez a föld..." Néprajzi írások az Alföldről*, eds. Gábor Barna, László Mód, and András Simon (Szeged: Néprajzi Tanszék, 2005), 222–230.

THE PILGRIMAGE AS A RITUAL DRAMA

Pilgrimage—as pointed out by Arnold van Gennep⁴—may be considered a rite of passage connecting the profane and sacred space, when earthly time is suspended for believers. The believer encounters God at the sacred place that connects the earthly and heavenly worlds, and s/he is reborn having been both purged and purified. This encounter with the Sacred provides strength and grace for the believer to deal with the problems of everyday life. But pilgrimage is not only a penitential journey; it can also be an opportunity for participants for exceeding themselves. A transformation takes place, pilgrims gradually empty. Through this spiritual journey, pilgrims may also confront their own personal strengths and weaknesses.

Victor Turner further developed the rites of passage notion, creating an even more thorough interpretation of being outside of temporary time and space. He introduced the concepts of liminality and *communitas* (community, equal individuals who participates in the rites together). Concerning pilgrimages his work, co-authored by Edith Turner with the title *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*, has to be mentioned. In this, the authors emphasize that pilgrimages have an initiation quality: the pilgrims enter a new, higher level of existence, previously unknown to them. At the same time, the Turners differentiate pilgrimages from rites of passage and label them liminoid phenomena. While christening, confirmation, and ordination are irreversible rites of passage, the most significant sacraments of voluntary pilgrimage such as penitence and communion cannot be repeated.⁵ Another basic point of Victor Turner's research is to use drama as a basic metaphor. One type of social drama is a ritual process, just like the pilgrimage.⁶

In my thesis, I considered pilgrimage to be a ritual drama.⁷ Pilgrimage may be compared to a drama, except that the believers are not simple onlookers to events,

4 Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (Chicago: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960), 185. <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226027180.001.0001>

5 Victor Turner and Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), 32-33.

6 Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors. Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1974), 166-228.

7 Erika Vass, *A búcsú és búcsújárás mint rituális dráma* (Szeged: Private publication, 2010).

but instead have an active role in them. Believers become involved in the event that serves as the basis of the ceremony, namely Jesus Christ's Stations of the Cross, and are participants in and through a specific collectivity where *communitas* can be experienced. The ritual drama begins at home with the preparations and includes the channeling process after the celebrations. The center of the ritual drama is a sacred place, where the believer—full of problems and frustrations—leaves all of their concerns behind and experiences a catharsis through the communal rite during the encounter with the saint.

The visual and musical effects during the pilgrimage intensify the dramatic impact of the event, and the believers express their love and adoration for the Blessed Virgin Mary by singing. The setting includes not only the sacred objects, but also the natural environment. Music, silence, movement and the visual experience help the process of self-transformation.

The ritual drama provides a possibility for reflecting deep and hidden emotions: the believers express their inner feelings either by singing, motion, or prayer. During the Vigil, they confess their sins to the priest—and through him to God—and also to the Blessed Virgin Mary. On these occasions, their catharsis manifests itself in crying, hysterical sobs, exclamations, kneeling, and crawling on knees as close as possible to the icons. These acts are seen to contribute to the healing of the soul. During the pilgrimage, believers feel the presence of God with all of their senses. As for the visual effect, the major issue is the aesthetical aspect of the shrine, enhancing religious devotion. Entering the church, believers may feel as if heaven has opened up for them and they become part of a supernatural space, where they can worship and find the source of and final destination of their life.

Alongside visions, physical contact has a very important role too, as this way the participants of the rite participate in the reality of the saint. The saint is “received” by touching the altars and crosses. The kiss has a similar importance: in Radna the believers kiss the high altar, or the statue of Jesus Christ on the cross held in the hands of the priest standing at the high altar. When entering the church, the use of holy water is associated with purgation of sin, while at home, it enhances the feeling of the presence and protection of God.

The emotional impact of the pilgrimage may be different for the participants, depending on the strength of their faith, age, social background and the motivations that inform their participation in the rite. The power and depth of their faith, the capability of facing the challenges of life and the reality of death also depends on one's age.

THE HISTORY OF THE SHRINE

Charles I, also known as Charles Robert (Hungarian: Károly Róbert) settled the Franciscan Order in Lipova (present-day Romania, formerly Lippa in Hungarian) in 1324. In 1551, after the Turkish army occupied the town, the monks evacuated to the other bank of the river Mureş to Radna.⁸ The Franciscan monks did much to preserve Catholicism against the dominance of Islam during the period of the Ottoman rule.⁹

The monks came from the Bosnian province as the number of Hungarian Catholic believers diminished due to the impact of Ottoman rule and the Reformation. At the same time many Krashovani escaped to this region from the southern territories taken by the Turkish army, and this is the reason why the Masses were held in their language too.¹⁰

At the shrine, a print from an Italian press portraying the image of the Scapular of Our Lady of Mount Carmel (also known as the Brown Scapular) is the focus of believers' attention. In the lower edge of the simple paper picture there are the souls suffering in the Purgatory.¹¹ The icon also demonstrates the fact that the aesthetic value of a picture or a sculpture is a secondary factor in the process of becoming a devotional object.¹² The picture was donated by an unknown person to the chapel of Radna after the building had been ransacked by Turkish soldiers. In 1695, the Turkish soldiers set fire to all the pictures heaped in the middle of the chapel, but

8 Gábor Barna, "A kunszentmártoniak radnai búcsújárása," *Magyar Egyháztörténeti Vázlatok* 3 (1991): 210.

9 András Dugonics, *Radnai történetek* (Szeged: Grün Orbán, 1810), 18-44.

10 Dugonics, *Radnai történetek*, 11-14.

11 Zoltán Szilárdfy, "A magyarországi kegyképek és -szobrok tipológiája és jelentése," in Sándor Bálint and Gábor Barna, eds., *Búcsújáró magyarok. A magyarországi búcsújárás története és néprajza* (Budapest: Szent István Társulat, 1994), 337.

12 Barna, "A kunszentmártoniak radnai búcsújárása," 211.

the image of the Blessed Virgin Mary did not burn.¹³ The picture soon gained a reputation for being miraculous and became the symbol of Roman Catholicism on the border between Islam and the Orthodox Christianity.¹⁴

Hungary regained authority over the town as a result of the Treaty of Karlowitz in 1699.¹⁵ During the 18th century, a great number of Roman Catholic Germans, Hungarians and Bulgarians were settled in the Banat in addition to Romanian and Serbian colonists.

The shrine became increasingly famous at the beginning of the 18th century after devastating epidemics of plague had come to an end. The inhabitants of Arad were the first to make a pilgrimage to Radna to pray for the end of the epidemic in 1709.¹⁶ Later more and more pilgrims began to arrive to the shrine from other towns of the Great Hungarian Plain to express their gratitude for the dissipating of the plague epidemic. In the course of time, Radna developed into an important place of worship.¹⁷

The church, which is still extant, was consecrated by the archbishop of Esztergom in 1820.¹⁸ The church and its environment were renewed at the turn of the 19th and 20th century. The Stations of the Cross, the statues of the saints and the chapels were also built during these years.¹⁹ Locating the donating settlements on the map, the catchment area of the shrine from before the First World War can be clearly established. In this respect, pilgrims to Radna came from the towns of Szeged, Kecskemét, Makó, Kiskunfélegyháza, Gyula, Szentes (present-day Hungary), Senta and Kikinda (present-day Serbia), Oradea, Deva, Timisoara, Caransebes (present-day Romania).²⁰ This means that the pilgrimage constituted the way by

13 *Világos Berkes-hegy avagy Máriának az isteni malaszt Anyjának kegyelmes képe* (Vác: Máramarosi Gottlieb Antal, 1796), 12–13.

14 Sándor Bálint, *Boldogszony vendégségében* (Budapest: Veritas, 1944), 49–50.

15 Dugonics, *Radnai történetek*, 67.

16 *Világos Berkes-hegy avagy Máriának az isteni malaszt Anyjának kegyelmes képe*, 48.

17 Bálint, *Boldogszony vendégségében*, 50.

18 Pál Magyary, *Mária-Radna és a Boldogságos Szt. Szűz kegyelmes képének története némi kegyelmek és csodák felsorolásával. Függelékül teljes imádságos könyv a ker. kath. hívek használatára* (Temesvár: Private publication, 1902), 50–51.

19 Magyary, *Mária-Radna és a Boldogságos Szt. Szűz kegyelmes képének története némi kegyelmek és csodák felsorolásával. Függelékül teljes imádságos könyv a ker. kath. hívek használatára*, 58–83.

20 Barna, "A kunszentmártoniak radnai búcsújárása," 235.

which the religious communities of these settlements tied themselves to the sacred space, and became part of it.

In 1949 the communist regime disbanded Catholic religious orders and prohibited their activity. In spite of the communist suppression, groups of pilgrims continued to flow to the shrine. It was in 1991 that the activity of the Franciscan Order was authorized again in Romania. However, in 2003, the order abandoned the shrine and entrusted its maintenance to the diocese of Timișoara.

The composition of nationalities of the region has changed in recent decades and the number of Hungarians and Germans has decreased markedly. Most of the Germans in Banat moved to Germany in the 1970s. However, they maintain their connection to the sacred center of their homeland in various ways. As long as their age and health permit, they regularly return to their birthplace, Radna. Besides their religious motivations, these pilgrimages focus on visualizing or temporarily recreating these now extinct communities. The Germans who had moved to Germany from Sântana (Romania) in the 1970s symbolically rebuilt the pilgrimage site of Radna in their new home. They go for a pilgrimage to the holy place of Maria Lindenberg near Freiburg every year as if they continued the pilgrimage of Radna, preserving the old rituals (e.g. Mary-girls, songs sung in Radna, etc.).²¹

THE PILGRIMAGE PERFORMANCE OF SZEGED'S INHABITANTS

I intend to present the course of pilgrimage on foot at the turn of the 19th-20th centuries with the help of the example of the inhabitants of Szeged, a town located 130 km from Radna.

According to the sources available, a group of people from Szeged visited the shrine of Radna for the first time in 1711 or 1717.²² In the 18th and the 19th centuries, the cost of orchestral escort of the pilgrims departing to Radna and arriving from

21 Erzsébet Arnold, "Das virtuelle Dorf im Banat," in *Ortsbezüge Deutsche in und aus dem mittleren Donauraum*, ed. Hans-Werner Retterath (Freiburg: Johannes-Künzig-Institut für ostdeutsche Volkskunde, 2001), 91-93.

22 Martin Roos and Maria Radna, *Ein Wallfahrtsort im Südosten Europas II* (Regensburg: Schnell & Steiner, 2004), 479, 603.

there was a regular item in the ledger of the city council.²³ Demonstrating the popularity of the site, in the 19th century 4-5,000 people from Szeged participated in the pilgrimage to Radna on the birthday of the Blessed Virgin Mary on September 2 while their number was only about 1,000 before the years of the First World War.²⁴

Specific rites led the individual out of the earthly world and helped him to be purged of his sins. For example, before setting off to Radna, the believers offered an apology to everyone whom they had problems with, because they wished to go to Radna with clear conscience.

The pilgrims departed to Radna on September 2. They set out accompanied by the sound of bells, escorted by a priest and their loved ones as far as the borders of the town. In this rite the notion of the border itself represents a kind of transition, a distancing of the participants from their mundane life.

On the way, the men walked in front with the cross, and they were followed by the women and the girls. The aged, the sick and invalids traveled in a horse carriage. Clothing and food for the journey for the whole group were also kept on the carriage. On their way to Radna, the pilgrims were accommodated in Mako, Csanádpalota (Hungary), Pecica and Arad (present-day Romania). Their hosts did not accept any money, because it was understood that Jesus Christ was effectively visiting their houses with the arrival of the pilgrims. Instead, the pilgrims' hosts asked the travelers to say a prayer for them too in Radna. The voluntary pilgrimage also involved self-denial. Some of the believers made a resolution not to eat any cooked food during the pilgrimage to intensify the impact of the penance.

The pilgrims sang, prayed or just walked silently on their way to prepare for their encounter with the heavenly world. During the journey, pilgrims entered all the churches on their way and made a stop at all the sacred places, like roadside crucifixes and cemeteries, making sure to say a prayer at each site. At such times

23 János Reizner, *Szeged története* (Szeged: Szeged Szab. Kir. Város Községe, 1900), 131-132.

24 Sándor Bálint, *A szögedi nemzet. A szögedi nagytáj népelete* (Szeged: Móra Ferenc Múzeum, 1980), 387.

the bells tolled, and the pilgrims were blessed by the priest of the local church.²⁵ During the pilgrimage these activities were repeated day by day. The believers slowly passed through the limits of the earthly world as they moved closer and closer to the sacred place of pilgrimage.²⁶

When the pilgrims from Szeged caught sight of the spires of the church of Radna they got down on their knees, and greeted the Blessed Virgin Mary of Radna.²⁷ They were then welcomed by a priest.²⁸ The pilgrims had now reached the borders of the sacred world where they were accepted.

The believers crossed themselves with holy water on entering the church, which constituted a symbol for them that they had reached the limit of the earthly and the heavenly worlds. To show their veneration towards the shrine, the pilgrims from Szeged kissed the floor of the church, then, with burning candles in their hands, walked up to the devotional picture on the high altar to salute the Blessed Virgin Mary.²⁹ Touching of the floor and the obeisance to the picture expressed their reunion with the heavenly world.³⁰ Many of the pilgrims wept with joy—a sign of the catharsis. After the welcome salutation, the pilgrims had a rest, some of them confessed their sins, and went through the Stations of the Cross. A number of them also took on extra penance, such as crawling down to the banks of the Mureş on their knees, and washing themselves in the water of the river. This ritual washing symbolized the purgation of the soul.³¹

A pilgrimage had a connection to some age related transitions. For instance it was an unspoken rule in Szeged that young people were allowed to get married only after they had made their first pilgrimage to Radna.³²

According to an initiatory rite (also known in other regions of Hungary³³) those

25 Bálint, *A szögedi nemzet. A szegedi nagytáj népélete*, 389-390.

26 Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, 185.

27 Bálint, *A szögedi nemzet. A szegedi nagytáj népélete*, 395.

28 Bálint, *A szögedi nemzet. A szegedi nagytáj népélete*, 391.

29 Bálint, *A szögedi nemzet. A szegedi nagytáj népélete*, 395.

30 Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, 185.

31 Bálint, *A szögedi nemzet. A szegedi nagytáj népélete*, 395.

32 Bálint, *A szögedi nemzet. A szegedi nagytáj népélete*, 387.

33 Gábor Barna, *Búcsújárók* (Budapest: Lucidus, 2001), 267-278.

who were on their first visit to Radna asked someone with more experience in the pilgrimage to the holy shrine to provide them the so-called pilgrimage baptism, or Radna baptism. The pilgrim's godmother or godfather would baptize his or her godchild with the holy water taken from the font of the church. The godchild received a new name, which was generally the name of his or her baptizer. This was the so-called "Radna name." Some sorts of archaic notions tied to the magical power of names are also apparent in this tradition: the young pilgrim got rid of his or her sins, since the power of evil knew only their former name. The godparents of Radna were also invited for the wedding of these young people, and testified that the pair had participated in the pilgrimage and thus had become worthy of the sacred bond of marriage.³⁴

People of Szeged thought that young people who visited the castle of Solymos (present-day Soimos, Romania) during their stay in Radna could not be blessed, and their pilgrimage was useless.³⁵ Purgation and rebirth were possible only in the sacred space, and leaving that place for the sake of any kind of profane entertainment was forbidden.

At the end of the pilgrimage separation from the saint took place before returning to Szeged. The believers bade farewell to the saint: bowing before the sacred picture, filling their jugs with water from Radna, and bringing presents connected to the shrine. In general, this present was a small paper icon to be kept in their prayer book, which had been blessed by the priest. Some tapped their icon to the high altar, where the sacred image of the Blessed Virgin Mary was exposed.³⁶ Through these acts, they became parts of the saint, and believed that in times of trouble they could count on the help of the Virgin Mary. Before setting off, they broke off a green branch of a tree.³⁷ The green leaves of the tree symbolized the rebirth of the soul.

34 Bálint, *A szögedi nemzet. A szegedi nagytáj népélete*, 395-396.

35 Bálint, *A szögedi nemzet. A szegedi nagytáj népélete*, 394.

36 Bálint, *A szögedi nemzet. A szegedi nagytáj népélete*, 395-396.

37 Sándor Bálint, "A szegediek búcsújárása Radnára," *Ethnographia* 47 (1936): 318.

During the eight days of the pilgrimage many of the believers left behind in Szeged assembled in the evenings for a procession and were praying with burning candles in their hands.³⁸ Although eight days were too long for them to be away from their homes, they made their own pilgrimage in the sacred place of the town. They waited for their loved ones arriving from Radna in the border of the town. The pilgrims greeted them with the words: "Be part of our prayer and pilgrimage everyone who was not there!" The girls were dressed in wedding gowns, and were told: "You have been in Radna; you may get married!" The young men had a bridegroom flower pinned to their chest. After this, the believers went first to St. Demetrius church, then to their own church, while the bells of the church were tolling. After a short thanksgiving, they returned to their home.³⁹ They returned to the profane world with a state of mind quite different from the one before the pilgrimage, because they had gained strength from the encounter with God. If they had gone through a critical period in their life before the pilgrimage they had time to get over it.

In everyday life, the pictures of Virgin Mary of Radna hanging on the wall reminded the believers of the experience of their encounter with the heavenly world. These pictures became representative pieces in the house's formal living room, spreading in this way the cult of the sacred shrine in time and space.

After the First World War the new border between Hungary and Romania put an end to the two centuries' old custom of Hungarian pilgrimages to Radna. As the believers did not want to pass up the pilgrimage on the birthday of Virgin Mary, between 1924 and 1942 they organized a "pilgrimage of Radna" in the Franciscan church of Szeged⁴⁰ symbolically reconstituting the sacred place in their hometown.⁴¹

38 Bálint, *A szögedi nemzet. A szegedi nagytáj népélete*, 387.

39 Bálint, *A szögedi nemzet. A szegedi nagytáj népélete*, 396-399.

40 Vass, *A búcsú és a búcsújárás mint rituális dráma*, 68-73.

41 Jan Assmann, *A kulturális emlékezet. Írás, emlékezés és politikai identitás a korai magaskultúrákban* (Budapest: Atlantisz, 1999), 40.

PILGRIMAGE TO RADNA AT THE TURN OF THE 21ST CENTURY

Scenario

As for its appearance, the contemporary form of the pilgrimage has changed a great deal compared to the beginning of the 1900s: the former diversity of symbols and the rites have simplified. Instead of several days of walking, now the pilgrimage is made by train, bus or car and takes only one or two days. Although the length of time of the pilgrimage is shortened, the encounter with the saint remains in the focus. The liminal part of the rite of passage is also completely preserved.

Some communities prepare for the pilgrimage by praying in the days before setting out for the journey. Some pray the nine days' prayer of Lourdes.

The pilgrimage on the birthday of Virgin Mary takes place September 6-8. The organizers create timeslots for the believers of different nationalities so that all of them had an opportunity to access the holy site and glorify God and Virgin Mary in their native languages. The believers from the Bulgarian settlements (Vinga, Dudestii Vechi) arrive on September 6 in the afternoon, so the evening vigil and the Holy Masses on the following morning are conducted in their language. The Holy Mass beginning at 11 a.m. on September 7 is dedicated to Romanian Greek Catholics. Krashovani arrive at the shrine around noon on September 7 from Lupac, Carasova and Clocotici. In the afternoon Roman Catholic Masses are held in Hungarian, Croatian and Romanian, respectively.

The Calvary hill with the Stations of the Cross behind the shrine provides a good opportunity for believers of different ethnic groups to pray in parallel at the same time. On September 7, the Bulgarian believers leave the church to let the Croatians in, and walk up to pass the Stations of the Cross and then listen to the their priests' homilies. At this time the Croatians begin to pass their Stations of the Cross. The Greek Catholics assemble on the hill at another chapel to continue their prayer in the afternoon. They hold their liturgy at a chapel outside the church on September 8 as well.

The pilgrims heading to Radna, irrespective of their nationality, depart from the cross at the Arad-Deva highway with flags in their hands and singing religious songs. First, they greet the Virgin Mary at the grotto of Lourdes with songs and prayers. From there they walk into the church, continue the greeting ceremony at the high altar in front of the picture of the Virgin Mary of Radna, then go around the high altar. After that they go to the Calvary to go through the Stations of the Cross. Afterwards, they participate in the Holy Mass.

The stations of the cross performed by a group of Bulgarian pilgrims, 2018. Photo by Erika Vass.

At 8 p.m. the believers pray the Holy Rosary in five languages (Hungarian, German, Romanian, Croatian and Bulgarian), followed by the adoration and then a short procession passing the chapel of Lourdes. Beginning at midnight a Holy Mass in Romanian is held. Romanian is the interlingua that everybody understands. After this the believers sing and pray until dawn. Most of the pilgrims spend the evening at houses, or in the bus; fewer remain in the church for an overnight vigil.

The church becomes crowded again for the Holy Mass in Croatian by 7 a.m. on September 8. At the end of the ceremony the Krashovani bid farewell to the Virgin Mary; they do not wait for the festive Holy Mass. To pray in their native language is more important for them, since they can wholeheartedly connect to it.

Many pilgrims arrive at dawn and in the early morning hours. On this day, Masses are held in Hungarian, German and Romanian. The festive Holy Mass is held every year by a bishop or an archbishop from Hungary or Romania in Hungarian, Romanian and German. After the Mass many of the pilgrims have to go and reach their train, but those who came by bus remain and participate in another Mass. Before leaving Radna, they bid farewell to the Virgin Mary at the grotto of Lourdes. The pilgrims are waited by their relatives and friends at home. In their local church they participate in a thanksgiving Mass and leave for their houses.

The believers take time to buy devotional objects during the pilgrimage. Most of them eat the food that they had brought from home, or something like grilled steaks sold in the fair.

The Use of Space

Now I will present certain scenes of the shrine in a chronological order parallel with the activities connected to them. This may give a glimpse into the dynamics and spiritual impact of the ritual drama.

On arriving to Radna, pilgrims walk to the chapel of Lourdes located on the place in front of the church to greet the Virgin Mary. This place is the scene of communal and personal awe at the same time. The walls of the chapel are covered with marble plates donated by the believers as a sign of their thanks. During the pilgrimage many of the participants come here alone, or in smaller groups, to light a candle or pray kneeling at the railing of the chapel.

One of the indispensable elements of the pilgrimage is passing the Stations of the Cross. The Bulgarians and the Krashovani go through the stations in an organized way, in larger groups, led by their priests. The other small communities walk one after the other keeping a distance of one station; this way more groups can take part in the ceremony simultaneously.

The identification of their own individual fate with the history of Jesus Christ and Virgin Mary has a deep impact on the emotions of the pilgrims and eases their tensions. Most of them burst into tears, and express their troubles at the Cross

of Christ. The songs and the prayers said at the Stations of the Cross contribute to this catharsis. By the end of the songs, the faces of the pilgrims become visibly relaxed, because through the religious songs they can tell their woes to the heavens, beg for the help of God and face the fact that compared to Jesus they are only tiny creatures who will gain the grace after death at the cost of the punishment inflicted on them. The songs make them understand that they are not alone with their pains as their Heavenly Mother, the Virgin Mary, also experienced great sufferings at the death of her son. There are songs telling the suffering of Jesus Christ in present tense, thus making the believers able to experience the torments of Good Friday while at the same time announcing forgiveness and redemption. Passing through the Stations of Cross, the posture of the pilgrims changes, reflecting their internal state of mind. Sometimes they silently pray to God, immersed deep in their thoughts, with their heads turned down, and their hands folded, and at other times they burst into tears.

The high altar is one of the most important places of communal and individual piety. On their arrival the believers walk to the high altar either individually or in groups to greet the Virgin Mary at the sacred devotional picture. While circling the high altar they touch or kiss the altar or the coverlet. Additionally, the Krashovani kiss Jesus Christ on the cross in the hands of the priest. The explanation for circling and kissing the altar is the devotional picture itself, and the relic in it. This is the reason why the priest kisses the altar at the beginning and at the end of the Holy Mass. Although the pilgrims do not know the origin of the habit of kissing the altar, this rite obviously for them involves the veneration of the Sacrament and a desire to touch it. The pilgrims continue praying in front of the image of the Virgin Mary and the circling around the altar in between the Masses and even at night too.

At the shrines, many believers confess their sins publicly, and announce their repentance to all the people present. Others, however, stand aside and find a more intimate place for the sacred communication. The habit of circling the high altar, or the whole church crawling on their knees even several times, is a widespread ritual mainly among the Roma people. Some of them say a prayer holding a rosary in

The parish priest's shrine, 2018. Photo by Erika Vass.

their hands. Some of the Roma complying with the sacrament of penance go up the several stairs leading to the church crawling on their knees.

Besides the high altar the other major center of the church is the cross right from the entrance. While the high altar ties the believer to Mother Mary, the cross represents a link to Jesus Christ. The cross is relatively far from the high altar, and appears to be a more intimate place. People praying here generally prostrate in front of Jesus Christ. The paint on the knees of the statue of Jesus on the Cross is entirely worn off, which shows that believers constantly touch the statue wishing to be as close to Jesus as possible.

One of the peaks of the pilgrimage is the night vigil in the church. During the vigil the attitude of the believers are self-possessed and humble, they give themselves up to the will of God, and they accept it. The participants of the ceremony are endowed with a great power, which enables them to cope with the problems of their life. While singing repetitively and praying the rosary, people forget about their

difficulties, express their pains, and feel relief from the burden of sin. Repeating the refrains of the song allows them to feel that they are in the protective hands of their Heavenly Mother. Many of them cannot even sleep because the inspiring effect of the sacred place. The groups of different nationalities either wait for the others to stop their song before beginning their own, or they sing or pray in a parallel manner. However, all can join the prayers in Romanian.

The leader of the group from Cermei expressed his feelings like this: “You carry all of your burdens during the whole year. When you come here, you feel you can release them and leave all here. You can go home with a more eased soul. Not that the troubles and problems disappear, since everybody has struggles. But the struggles can be left behind here, you feel, you can share them with someone. You know, all of us run here, and there, and nobody cares for the others. If we go home the strength remains there for a year.” A woman from Palota said: “I feel I am filled with grace for a whole year. Life is so hard. I feel so fine when I am here. I would be strengthless if I were not able to come. I would be strengthless...”

In the aisle of the monastery the believers pour holy water into plastic bottles to take them home. In the aisle they have the opportunity to confess and there is an exit from here to the court where they may order a Mass. Close to the entrance of the vestry there is a Cross, where the bystanders stop to say a prayer. I saw a woman who was hugging and kissing Jesus Christ on the Cross, and was speaking about her pains in tears. In the aisle and on the two other upper floors there are the galleries of the votive pictures, which are the proofs of the healings due to the Virgin Mary of Radna.

The aim of the pilgrimage is not only spiritual healing but also physical recovery. People often consider an illness or a mishap as the manifestation of a divine punishment inflicted on them for some kind of a sin they themselves committed. The prayer for healing or relief from troubles is in fact a quest for grace and pardon, which requires whole-hearted repentance.⁴² The confession and the Holy

42 Gábor Klaniczay, “A rontás- és gyógyításselbeszélések struktúrája: maleficum és csoda,” in *Démonikus és szakrális világok határán. Mentalitástörténeti tanulmányok Pócs Éva 60. születésnapjára*, eds. Katalin Benedek and Eszter Csonka-Takács (Budapest: MTA Néprajzi Kutatóintézet, 1999), 118.

Pilgrims to the shrine of Radna: (left) a Roma girl, 2005; (right) Csángó Hungarian from the Moldavia region, 2018. Photos by Erika Vass.

Communion have a key function from the point of view of healing. The penitent confesses their sins committed against God to God himself through the priest. The verbalization of the sins results in relief and satisfaction. The confession may be regarded as a symbolic death and rebirth. However, the Holy Communion is a cultic act with the intent of initiation in which the Christians receive the body and blood of Christ. On the one hand, the rite sanctifies the believer, triggering a change in their existence. On the other hand, the rite relieves them from the multitude of the mundane crowd and takes them into the community of the chosen ones.⁴³ The healing process involves the abovementioned: prayers, singing, going through the Stations of the Cross, attending Holy Masses and vigils. These activities lead to the experience of the catharsis.

The large fairs are popular attractions, but most of the visitors are non-churchgoers, who buy clothing, toys and household goods there.

Actors

The number of participants depends on whether the day of the feast happens to be on weekdays or weekend. If it is on a weekend, more people can attend, they do not

43 Mircea Eliade, *Misztikus születések* (Budapest: Európa, 1999), 233-234.

have to apply for a leave of absence. Many pilgrims set out only in the morning on September 8. They can stay in Radna only for one day, but they would not miss the one and a half our long process of going through the Stations of the Cross.

There are visitors of several ethnicities in the pilgrimage of Radna and all of them apply for the help of the Heavenly world in their native language. Their nationalities can be apparent through the language they speak or perhaps through their behavior. Generally, however, habits during the pilgrimage are similar. The interviews made with pilgrims of different nationalities show a similar emotionalism. The difficulties stemming from multilingualism becomes problematic only at night on September 7, when all of the participants want to say their prayers and sing simultaneously in the church.

The number of pilgrims from Hungary has decreased substantially in recent years. The mediatory language for the different ethnic groups has become Romanian instead of Hungarian. The Roman Catholic Krashovani, the Bulgarians and the Greek Catholic Romanians are accompanied by some priests, who provide the believers with guidance to their prayers at the sacred site, promoting this way their feeling of community. The collective passing through the Stations of the Cross, and the large ritual ceremonies held on the hillside involve hundreds of participants, which has an effect on these larger groups concerning appearance. They represent faith, and the strength inherent in the faith more convincingly than the Hungarians, who arrive in smaller groups with 20 or 30 persons each.

The leaders of each group are generally women. Now that the pilgrims often come to Radna by bus, the group leader's role has decreased, because the journey is much shorter than it was decades ago. The lay clerks of the different groups sometimes keep close contact and share their prayers and songs.

There are a relatively large number of children and teenagers among the pilgrims since the school year begins only in mid-September in Romania. The children often have their special duties, for example they carry the cross or the flags in turns. It is important, because through this activity they feel themselves involved in the pilgrimage and may remain a dedicated member of the community after they have grown.

Pilgrims dig in the earth for special roots called "Tears of Mary," believed to have healing power. Photo by Erika Vass, 2005.

Accessories

All the pilgrim groups have their own cross and flags which are generally carried by children, and at night they keep them in the church at the altar close to the group. The Krashovani kiss the statue of Christ held in their priest's hands after they have circled the high altar. I passed through the Station of the Cross together with the Hungarian believers from Cermei in 2005. The Hungarian pilgrims kissed the body of Jesus Christ on the cross at the chapel on the top of the hill of Calvary after they had passed through the Stations of the Cross.⁴⁴

For singing their songs they often used handwritten booklets with religious songs collected for several years and containing the program, but they had printed hymnals too.

During both days of my stay I saw people digging the earth on the hill of the Calvary. They searched for a special root called "Tears of Mary" or "Tears of Jesus."⁴⁵

44 Well-known examples of the healing power of the physical contact and proximity are the pilgrimages in the Middle Ages. According to the rule in those times, the goal of the pilgrimage was achieved only after the pilgrim had touched the holy shrine or the reliquary. By this the guilty were relieved of their punishments and the penance was over. (Pierre André Sigal and Isten vándorai, *Középkori zarándoklatok és zarándokok* (Budapest: Gondolat, 1989), 85.) Besides touching the relics, further archaic types of healing are the circling of the relics or lying on them. (Klaniczay, "A rontás- és gyógyításbeszélések struktúrája: maleficum és csoda," 115.)

45 These are the roots of the lesser celandine or pilewort (*Ficaria verna*) blossoming in spring.

According to local belief, the roots are the hardened teardrops of Virgin Mary, who was weeping constantly during the suffering of Jesus. It is believed that the roots have a healing power partially because they grow on a sacred site and they are collected in a sacred time. Consuming them makes people part of the sufferings of Mother Mary and Jesus Christ. This results in recovery from illness and the experience of grace. The pieces of the roots can be cooked like tea at home when someone gets sick in the family. Some of its users, like a woman from Denta, believe that recovery comes not only from the healing power of the plant, but also from God himself: “We say God cures us,” she said.

People tear off branches from the trees on the hillside and take them home, trying to spread the grace to others who had to stay at home. The woman from Denta mentioned above generally takes the branch taken from Radna to the representative room of her house. During the times of a thunderstorm she drops some leaves in the fire for the storm to cease soon. The green branch is the symbol of passing through the Station of the Cross and a reminder of the catharsis she experienced.

Pilgrims from Palota mix the holy water brought from Radna with the holy water taken from the local church at Epiphany. An elderly woman told me that before going to bed, after the collective prayer of the family, she sprinkles all family members with holy water, draws a cross on their foreheads and their beds. In the morning she sprinkles the children with holy water before they go to school.

On the holy sites one feels the direct impact of God in their life. One of the characteristics of the Shrine of Radna is that people in trouble or those who want to express their gratitude place a votive picture on the wall of the church. Some of them are simple paintings, showing the crisis situation the donor is in; the others are simple mimeographed colored prints with a short written or typed story about the person involved. The donation of pictures is the objectification and collectivization of the individual memory. At the same time the picture gallery ties the donor to a larger community. In 1996-97, we inventoried 1,711 pictures, but the habit of donation is still alive.⁴⁶ The oldest two paintings are from 1858. The habit

46 Barna, “Mária megsegített.”

Gallery of votive pictures in the aisle of the church. Photo by Erika Vass, 2017.

of donating pictures to the church originally comes from the Germans, but later other ethnic groups also made it a practice. Among the donors there are Greek Catholics as well.

The importance of the gallery of the votive pictures lies not in their aesthetic value, but in the deep faith of the believers. The donation of a picture is a sort of sacrifice, which includes a part of the personality of the donor.⁴⁷ Through these pictures the donor becomes the part of the sacred space. The pictures are the means of strengthening the faith of the pilgrims, since they show how God helped those who appealed to him for aid.⁴⁸ During my stay in Radna, I saw people browsing the scripts under the pictures, trying to find out the personal drama behind the donations. These people tried to draw a lesson for themselves for enduring their own sufferings.

Individual Motivations

In 2018 I contacted believers of different nationality in Sânnicolau Mare and its neighborhood, with whom I made films for an exhibition, about the motivation for

47 Gerardus van der Leeuw, *A vallás fenomenológiája* (Budapest: Osiris, 2001), 306.

48 Van der Leeuw, *A vallás fenomenológiája*, 307.

pilgrimage, the encounter with the sacred and the devotional objects treasured at home (e.g. vase, rosary, devotional pictures). Among individual motivations, recovery from illnesses, childbirth, and penitence for the salvation of a deceased beloved or their own sins can be found frequently. In the following part I illustrate this with a few examples.

All interviewees visited the shrine several times, and all of them emphasized its extraordinary quality, markedly differing from the everyday life. A Romanian girl expressed it as such: “It is a very special, isolated place among the mountains and forests, where I felt peace and tranquility. I prayed for my parents and myself and asked for health and peace from God. I bought a small icon, which helps to remember the place at home.”

Most of my informants emphasized the motherly role of the Blessed Virgin Mary. A German lady’s words were the following: “Whatever we ask for from our Blessed Virgin Mary, just like our own mother, she will give it. My daughter could not have a baby for a long time, we asked for the intervention of the Blessed Virgin Mary. After my grandchild was born I lulled her to sleep with Mary songs.” A Bulgarian woman thanked the Blessed Virgin Mary for the birth of her own child: “I did not have a child immediately (after the wedding). I kindly asked the Blessed Virgin to have one. So she helped.” Besides, she had a Mass said for the salvation of her ancestors every year in Radna. About the grace acquired in the shrine she told me that “One feels so good when arriving at home after this journey. And one never tires, never tires.” A Slovakian woman drew attention to continuity between generations: “I visited Radna with my grandmother for the first time. Now I primarily go there because of my two children. I bought the rosary I carry in my car there. When I look at it, I always remember Radna, and I say thank you for the Blessed Virgin Mary for being there for me, for us being healthy and for listening to our prayers.”

Several people mentioned their health or the health of their relatives. A Hungarian woman turned to the Blessed Virgin Mary of Radna because of her cancer. “Last year I was ill, but God saved me from chemotherapy. After my recovery I went to Radna to express my thanks. When I arrived, peace and tranquility fulfilled me. From Radna I have brought a rosary-holder with the Sacred Heart of Jesus and a

Pilgrims climb the Calvary hill. Photo by Erika Vass, 2018.

statue of Saint Anthony. If God helps because of Saint Anthony's prayer, then you receive good news on Tuesdays, and it worked for us."

A Krashovani monk thanked the Blessed Virgin Mary for his vocation: "I do not buy anything in Radna. What I take in my heart is what counts. There I asked the Blessed Virgin to help me on my way of becoming a monk, to choose me for Jesus. In Radna we pray in many different languages, however we do it with the same heart, the spirit is the same. The Blessed Virgin Mary is like my mother for me. We have got her as a present from God."

From Hungary, primarily believers who visit the shrine come from settlements close to the border, traveling by buses, organized by the parish. Ethnographer Gábor Barna, born in Kunszentmárton, undertook the journey from his hometown to Radna on foot, in memory of his ancestors: "During Pentecost of 2006 we went on a pilgrimage from Kunszentmárton to Radna on foot with my two siblings, offering up a sacrifice for the memory of our ancestors, who went there in 1726 for the

first time. Everybody should try this once, so that at the end of the journey they can feel what matters in their life, as things are revalued at such times.”

As a conclusion we can state that the shrine means the same for believers, irrespective of their nationality: resulting from the encounter with the sacred, it is spiritual charging, cleansing and rebirth.

SUMMARY

In my study, I emphasize the experience of the ritual drama. All the ethnic groups of the region feel Radna to be their own sacred site. Beside differences in language and clothing, there are many similarities in the habits of the pilgrims. Evidently, all groups have their favorite songs, but these are often identical; they just sing them in their own native language. The sequence of the elements of the scenario is the same, and there are moving examples of the catharsis experienced by the pilgrimage in every ethnic group.

I described in detail the connection of physical and spiritual healing, and the practices tied to the shrine: Going through the Stations of the Cross eases the pains through the pilgrims' identifying themselves with the sufferings of Jesus Christ and Virgin Mary. During the night vigil the participants can give voice to their pains hidden deep in their soul through their songs. By the confession they admit their sins to God and can carry on with their everyday life with a relieved soul. The kissing of the high altar or the cross, or touching the statue of Jesus on the cross, represents physical contact with the saint.

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