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What Does One Need to Build a Bridge in Slovenia? Research on Slovenian Folk Tales, Games, Dances and Rituals Related to Bridge Construction and the Building Process

Devil's Bridge
People used to tell a story of how the Devil's Bridge was built. They were building it until evening, only to find it torn down in the morning.
Then somebody said: "Let the devil build this bridge for I shall not!"
So the devil started to build the bridge. People asked him what he wanted in return.
The devil said: "The first soul that crosses the bridge, I will have that."
In the evening, people were pondering over who would be so unfortunate. Then a farmer, who had a dog, got an idea.
He said: "I shall take the dog and a juicy calf's bone with me."
He flung the bone across the bridge, and the dog followed it. So the devil got the dog's soul. Outraged, the devil wagged his tail so hard that he demolished the entire railing.

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The legend quoted above, collected by Marija Cvetek in the 1990s in the village of Stara Fužina in Upper Carniola (Cvetek, 1993, p. 178, 1999, p. 35; citation in English after Kropej, 2011, p. 74), is a good example of how literary folklore has preserved traces of ancient beliefs related to important architectural structures. There are many variants of such beliefs, such as those referring to human – or later animal – sacrifices, or alluding to the motifs of mythological supernatural masons. In world heritage, there are also many rites and rituals associated with the act of building, and there are folk dances and games that refer to bridge building in particular. In this paper, I focus on Slovenian folklore related to the building of bridges. For the purposes of this research, I consider bridge-building an example of the construction of a significant structure.[1]

Research on folkloric motifs related to construction and its associated actions have a long tradition dating back to at least the nineteenth century (e.g., the writings of Jacob Grimm[2]). Due to the subject of this paper, I refer primarily to Slovenian publications as they are focused, though not exclusively, on the Slovenian context. Authors whose work gives a broad overview of the field, often through a comparative lens, include Ivan Grafenauer (1957), which contains an analysis of the human sacrifice motif in Slovenian folklore, Božidar Jezernik (2004), where Balkan examples of the human immuration motif are pointed out, Monika Kropej (2011, 2012), especially the first of these papers, which focuses on folktales and songs about building, Niko Kuret (1965), which describes Slovenian spring traditions, France Marolt (1936), with an analysis of Slovenian folk dances, Boris Orel (1936, 1942), both papers concern the children's game "Bridge", mainly in Europe but with a focus on Slovenian material and Ambrož Kvartič (2017), a book about contemporary legends, and Kvartič (2019), a paper on the building sacrifice traditions in Šalek Valley. Folklore material collected by many other researchers (Marija

[1] The text also contains several references to other important structures, such as churches or fortresses, primarily in references to international context. A comprehensive presentation of the bridge motif in Slovenian folklore is not the purpose of this paper, which focuses solely on folk culture texts referring to bridges in the context of the construction process.

[2] Jacob Grimm, enthralled by the ballad *The Building of Skadar* – a text he received from Vuk Karadžić in 1824 –translated it into German and spread the ballad in the West. For more on this theme, please refer, for example, to fragments from *The Functions of Metaphor in Traditional Serbian Narrative*, an unpublished doctoral dissertation by Zora Devrnja [Zimmerman] reprinted in *The Walled-Up Wife* (Dundes, 1996b, pp. 3–12). The ballad itself describes the building of a fortress on the Bojana river at Skadar.

Stanonik, Barbara Ivančič Kutin, Jakob Kelemina, Karel Štrekelj or Marija Cvetek, to name just a few) is also useful in this regard.

In addition, I have taken international research into account; the most iconic of these related to the 'building sacrifice' motif are *The Foundation Sacrifice Motif in Legend, Folksong, Game and Dance* by Paul Brewster (1971/1996), a paper showing different manifestations of the immuration motif, mostly in the European tradition, the development of the motif, and its potential interpretations, *The Ballad of the "Walled-Up Wife"* by Alan Dundes (1995/1996a), an article which shows, inter alia, the presence of the walled-up wife motif in different cultures, and the significance of comparative research for this motif as well as multiple interpretations, or *Master Manole and the Monastery of Argeş* by Mircea Eliade (1972/1996), a paper in which stress is put on the classical and cosmogonic aspects of the human sacrifice motif. All the above are included in a casebook, *The Walled-Up Wife*, edited by Alan Dundes (1996b).[3] The totality of these works establishes the basis for the starting point of my thinking in this research area.

The existing literature describes and analyses the Slovenian variant of this phenomenon by placing it in an international context. The question that has yet to be answered in the research performed so far is why only a subset of the motifs related to bridge building are represented in Slovenian folklore, while others are hardly present or completely absent, despite being represented in neighbouring cultures such as those of other post-Yugoslav countries, or Hungary.

To be specific, Slovenian folklore is sorely lacking in the motif of human immuration for the sake of building a significant structure, with very few examples extant in the Slovenian context; however, the handful that do exist are dwarfed by the myriad examples found in other Southern Slav cultures, Hungarian culture (just to take the closest neighbours from the South and East), not to mention other Balkan Peninsula and Eastern European cultures. On the few occasions when the motif of human immuration does appear in Slovenian folklore, in the majority of cases the idea of a building sacrifice is non-existent. Why then – as in the legend quoted above – did Slovenes specifically prefer to trick the devil than sacrifice human life to build a bridge? Why does this motif – so popular all the way from Japan through India, Asia,

[3] These three – as with the others in *The Walled-Up Wife* – were reprinted from previous publications.

Turkey and the Caucasus, Balkans and Eastern Europe – not significantly affect Slovenian folklore? The potential reason that first comes to mind is that Slovenian building-related folklore was influenced more by Western culture (mostly German and Italian) than by that of Slovenia's neighbours from the South and East.

To prove the point, below I present examples of Slovenian literary folklore, rites and rituals, folk dances, and games that refer to the act of (mostly but not exclusively) bridge-building using largely well-known material collected and published in Slovenian research. The gathered material shows the act of building as presented in Slovenian folklore is closer to Western traditions than to those of the Balkans.

In order to better understand this context and the figure of a bridge as a significant structure, it seems worth focusing on its symbolic meaning. In the book, *A Dictionary of Symbols* (Cirlot, 2001, p. 33), J. E. Cirlot stresses the meaning of the bridge as a connection between two separate worlds and/or God and man, stating that there are "many cultures where the bridge symbolizes the link between what can be perceived and what is beyond perception". As per Cirlot, even without its mystical sense the bridge is always a symbol of "a transition from one state to another – of change or the desire for change". Władysław Kopaliński in his *Dictionary of Symbols* (Kopaliński, 1990, pp. 235–236) indicates, inter alia, that bridges symbolize "connecting what is disconnected in time and space; the connection of two worlds, the visible and invisible […] the transition between two internal states, between conflicting desires, or getting out of a conflict situation". To sum up, we can say that bridges symbolically connect the known with the unknown, conveying a sacred meaning.[4]

Due to the topography in Slovenia and the region more broadly, countless bridges have been built over the centuries. More concretely, when it comes to prominent bridges in Slovenia, the most celebrated ones in Ljubljana (and probably in the whole of Slovenia) are the Triple Bridge and Dragon Bridge; the latter is particularly notable since, as the legend goes, when a virgin crosses the bridge, the dragon statues which adorn it wag their tails. Looking more broadly, one of the most renowned bridges in the region is the one in Višegrad, Bosnia-Herzegovina, described by Nobel prize-winning author Ivo Andrić, which, incidentally, is associated with a human immuration motif.

[4] For more about the sacred meaning of brides, see Urška Jernejc's paper (Jernejc, 2006)

The Old Bridge in Mostar gained its symbolic meaning for the West when it was destroyed during the Croatian–Bosnian war in 1994. On the Latin Bridge in Sarajevo, Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated, sparking World War I. In Venice, there are more than 400 bridges and some of them, such as Ponte dei Sospiri (guaranteeing eternal love) or Ponte di Rialto, are world-famous. Many legends and stories are also associated with the construction of some of these bridges, like the one repeated by Venetian tour guides that Ponte di Rialto stands at the point where Estrella, daughter of Doge Angelo Partecipazio, drowned when her gondola was struck by a stone thrown by mistake from a catapult.[5]

Human sacrifice in Slovenian folklore related to (bridge) construction is a rather rare phenomenon. Such a motif appears in a song which accompanies variants of a dance in the White Carniola region [6], where one (or more) of the dancers usually plays the role of the victim to be sacrificed. It also exists in children's games all around Slovenia where, again, some of players are the "victims".[7] The game goes as follows (translated by the author after Ramovš, 1991, p. 139):

> The two strongest children hold each other with both hands, thus forming the arch of the 'bridge', and agree on who will be apples or pears, heaven or hell, etc. The other children line up, one after another, in a column, perpendicularly to the first two, and hold each other at the waist or shoulder. The children in the column ask questions (A), and the two children holding the bridge answer (B). After the dialogue is over, the column – the 'army' – runs under the bridge, and the last one is grabbed by those holding the bridge and asked what he or she prefers: apples or pears. Based on what he or she decides, the child stays behind. Meanwhile, the convoy returns to the bridge, at which point the game starts again and repeats as many times as there are children in the column. Two new columns form behind the two children holding the bridge. When all the children are lined up, the two children holding the bridge draw a line between the columns on the ground, and then the columns, with these two at the head, hold each other and try to pull each other over the line. In the end, the column that crosses the line is defeated. In some variants, the last one left in the column has to run under the bridge three times, or as many times as there are days in the week, and only then is captured. The manner in which the final match is played may also be different.

[5] For an example, see *Le leggende del ponte di Rialto* (2020); *The Rialto bridge in Venice and the Doge's daughter* (n.d.).

[6] Analysed by France Marolt (1936) and Zmaga Kumer (1963).

[7] An analysis of this phenomenon may by found, for example, in Boris Orel's works (i.e., Orel, 1936, 1942), an article by Mirko Ramovš (1991), and an article by Marija Šuštar & Valens Vodušek (Šuštar & Vodušek, 1963).

The game is accompanied by dialogue which can take many forms, but the core stays the same: group (A) asks whether the bridge is hard enough, and group (B) answers that it is as hard as a rock; then group (A) asks whether its army can go through it, and group (B) answers that yes, but only if they sacrifice the last one in the row. "Victims" are described in games and dances in multiple ways: usually as the last ones in the row, but also frequently as "black-eyed maidens".[8]

These two types of folklore dances and games are the only ones on Slovenian soil that contain the human sacrifice motif in a "non-episodic" way, if indeed they should be treated as connected to this motif. While the majority of researchers agree that human sacrifice may be the source of this motif, some believe that multiple-source motifs, such as the rebirth motif or the transition between the worlds of the dead and the living, may also have contributed to the formation of these games and dances (Ramovš, Kumer and partly Brewster). It is worth noting the transformation in the conceptualisation of this phenomenon over time in the work of Boris Orel, who in 1936 opined that these games and dances should be explained as either an emanation of human sacrifice or transition-between-two-worlds motifs. Surprisingly, five years later, he rejected both theories and claimed that the rebirth theory is the only appropriate way to interpret them. The widespread topicality of this phenomenon is evident in these children's games being found all over Europe and, in some cases, other continents, and this informed the above-mentioned comparative research.

In other types of folklore, there are only singular manifestations referring to human sacrifice in the building process. There is a story archived by Števan Kuhar about a boy immured on the bank of the river Mura to stop a flood (Kuhar, 1914, p. 23); a story about human blood used in the mor-

[8] Brewster (1971/1996, p. 53) describes a Slovenian variant of the dance in this way: "The dancers form a line, men and women holding hands. The line winds into "snails" and out again, alternating with a closed circle. Finally, the serpentine line runs through the "door" or the "bridge". In the "door" form, the whole line of dancers runs under the clasped and upraised hands of the end couple. In the "bridge" form, the dancers break into two groups, one of which stands with linked and lifted hands, creating the "bridge". Those of the other group ask permission to cross the "bridge". Permission is granted on condition that "a black-eyed maiden" be sacrificed. A little girl fitting the description is sent first under the "bridge", then the rest of the dancers follow. When they have crossed the bridge three times, the dancers disperse". The theme of the black-eyed girl that appears, for example, in similar Slovak games is described more comprehensively by Boris Orel (1936, 1942) in both his works.

tar of an old tower close to Smlednik (Podgorelec, 1905); legends about boundary stones[9] (Grafenauer, 1957), or legends related to accidents at church construction sites i.e. (Kuhar, 1910, p. 110; Premrl, 2011, pp. 45–46). However, even if Slovenian stories or legends somehow refer to versions of the motif, for example, to the epic song *The Building of Skadar*, first collected by Vuk Stefanović Karađić in 1804 and published in 1814, they are only distant echoes of it. For instance, there is a story archived by Davorin Nemanič (1884, p. 166) which contains multiple transpositions: instead of a girl immured in the original song, a father is immured; instead of a child nursed by an immured mother, an immured father is nursed by a daughter; and, as is most vital for this paper, the act of immuration is not linked to any sort of building sacrifice – it is simply a form of punishment. Furthermore, as a punishment unrelated to the building of any new construction, immuration is much more popular in Slovenian folklore. To mention but a few, there are legends about Veronika of Desenice immured by her father-in-law (*Legenda o Veroniki Deseniški*, n.d.); songs about saint Barbara immured in a tower by her father (Kumer at al., 1981, pp. 526–541, 590); a legend about the immured monk, Walther, punished for his love of a beautiful vineyard worker (Puff, 1999, p. 95), or the tale of a nun immured in the castle of Turn (Poles, 2012). In this last case, why the nun was immured in a castle pantry is not clearly revealed. In the present day, there are even contemporary Slovenian urban legends collected by Ambrož Kvartič (2017) in which the human building sacrifice motif appears, but they are few in number and it is not even certain if they are of Slovenian origin. When compared with material from, say, Bulgaria[10] or Greece,[11] the number of instances of the motif in the sources above is negligible.[12] So, how were the bridges built according to folkloristic material?

[9] Grafenauer shows evidence for the possible Swiss roots of this story.

[10] 180 Bulgarian variants of the song about being walled-up are analysed in Lyubomira Parpulova-Gribble work (Parpulova-Gribble, 1984/1996, p. 170).

[11] As cited by Monika Kropej (2011, p. 65), in 1976 Georgios Megas collected 333 Greek variants of the song about a walled-up woman.

[12] There are different calculations of the number of existing variants of songs about walled-up women, such as that of Ion Taloş (*Meşterul Manole*, 1973, as cited in Jernejc, 2006, p. 41), there are 311 Greek variants, 165 Romanian, 87 Bulgarian, 28 Hungarian, 37 Serbo-Croatian, 19 Albanian, 5 Aromanian, and 4 Romany. As presented in notes 8, 9 and 10, the number of variants related to one culture may vary significantly, depending on the research carried out. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that no variant of this song exists in Slovenia.

In a previously mentioned article, Monika Kropej (2011) helps us to answer this question: it seems that in order to build a bridge (or other pre-eminent buildings), what is needed is the support of supernatural masons. This she confirms by quoting multiple stories (in multiple variants) from all over Slovenia, as gathered throughout the ages. Dating back to 1688, Slovenian natural historian and polymath Janez Vajkard Valvasor included a tale about a Devil's bridge near Ljubelj, while the most recent tales were collected in the second half of twentieth century. In the view of Kropej, the stories may be divided into three basic groups: **Mythological masons**, **Sacrifice on the Bridge** and **The Legend of St. Wolfgang**. In all of these, supernatural masons are involved in the building process, but the scenarios are slightly different (the first group stresses the supernatural nature of the builder; in the second category, the motif of the deceived supernatural mason is at the centre of the story; the third refers to a scenario in which the saint and the devil make a contract whereby the devil is promised the soul of the first pilgrim who enters the newly built church). Importantly for this paper, all three types of story are widespread, not only in Slovenia but also in Western Europe, especially in its German- and French-speaking parts (legends about bridges in Frankfurt, Regensburg and Bamberg, the bridge on Pont d'Yeau; legends about the cathedral in Aachen or related to churches associated with St. Wolfgang), but not so much in cultures where the human immuration motif is alive. Still, even in cultures where references to immuration are almost non-existent nowadays, some indicators recalling the motif remain, such as rumours related to the potential immuration of one (or even eight) of Lord Leigh's servants in the foundations of the bridge in Stoneleigh. In addition, in Scotland the story is told of Saint Columba, who founded a church literally on one of his fellow monks, Oran. There is even a legend concerning a bridge in Austria that could not be built until a witch was *not* walled-up in it.[13] Nevertheless, in Slovenian folklore, motifs connecting building work with supernatural masons (rather than human immuration) – as in Western cultures[14] – have survived to the present day.

[13] The first two examples are indicated by Brewster (see Brewster, 1971/1996); all three quoted from Ion Taloș by Urška Jernejc (2006, pp. 27, 34–35).

[14] Researchers unanimously agree that the presence of the human sacrifice motive in Western cultures is scarce when compared to that of Southeastern Europe (e.g., Dundes, 1995/1996a, pp. 187, 191; Eliade, 1972/1996, p. 81).

Maybe the idea of immuration was not sufficiently compelling for Slovenes; perhaps it was too horrifying to countenance or so perilously close to their predecessors' experiences that a defensive denial engendered itself. Maybe it once existed historically in Slovenian culture but became shrouded in the veils of time (for example, under the influence of Christianity, as Brewster suggested (Brewster, 1971/1996, p. 39); however, the immuration motif is alive in other Christian countries from the region, such as Hungary and Serbia). Accurately assessing the processes that led to the current situation, in which supernatural masons' motifs are much more popular than ones related to immuration, is fraught with difficulty since the majority of folkloristic material has only been collected during the last two centuries, and even then the material existing in this period has itself only partially been archived. Thus, a mere fragment of what existed in Slovenian folklore for many centuries now endures. Nevertheless, these are natural limitations related to folklore research. However, taking into consideration all the building-related folklore material that has been gathered, it is noticeable that Slovenian heritage seems to be much closer to its so-called Western neighbours' cultures than to Balkan ones. The reasons for this can be analysed in the future from many angles: psychological, historical, ethnographical or linguistic. A comprehensive root-cause analysis of the factors that led to the current state of affairs is still before us. This paper and the presented material may be treated as a starting point for such research that in the future may lead to more complete conclusions.

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Czego potrzeba, by zbudować most w Słowenii? Badania nad słoweńskimi tekstami ludowymi, grami, tańcami i rytuałami związanymi z budowaniem mostów i procesem budowy

Ofiary zakładzinowe i istoty nadprzyrodzone to dwa motywy najczęściej pojawiające się w tekstach kultury ludowej dotyczących budowania mostów. Artykuł stanowi próbę omówienia słoweńskiego materiału folklorystycznego związanego z budową mostów i pokazania, który z tych motywów wydaje się bliższy słoweńskiej tradycji. W tym celu przedstawiam przykłady zaczerpnięte z zachowanych podań ludowych, gier, tańców i innych tekstów kultury ludowej. Zwracam również uwagę na przyczyny mogące powodować przewagę w częstotliwości występowania jednego z motywów.

Słowa kluczowe: ofiara zakładzinowa; Słowenia; folklor; gry dziecięce; zamurowanie; most

What does one need to build a bridge in Slovenia? Research on Slovenian folk tales, games, dances and rituals related to bridge construction and the building process

Human sacrifices and supernatural beings are the two most common motifs in folklore material related to bridge-building projects. This article is an attempt to deal with Slovenian folklore material that refers to the act of bridge building and to show which of these motifs seem to be closer to the Slovenian tradition. To achieve this goal, I present examples of Slovenian folktales, dances, games and other folk culture texts. I also highlight the root causes that potentially resulted in the prevalence of one of these motifs.

Keywords: building sacrifice; Slovenia; folklore; children's games; human immuration; bridge

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