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Whitsun Mummers in Hungary

by *Tekla Dömötör*, Budapest

Should someone in Hungary make mention of a Whitsun-King or an allusion to Whitsun-reign, he would be mostly using the term in a figurative sense. For about 500 years its meaning has not changed, it signifies a person who has come into power, yet it is a matter of common knowledge that he will not stay long in it and his reign will end in disgrace. The proverb was quoted in a letter¹ written in 1528, and has survived in the original sense, although the custom which gave rise to its origin is gradually disappearing. A 16th century record tells us that Whitsun-reign is usually brought to an ignominious end; and in a printed record from the same year, i. e. 1565, mention is made of someone "who will come a cropper like a Whitsun-King".²

Throughout the period from the 16th to the 19th century, the short-lived reign of the Whitsun Kings had been a turn of speech frequently used in common parlance. In 1809 L. Bartholomaeides alluding to it, writes thus: "According to popular tradition, on Whitsunday a youth is chosen by the villagers; for a short time he is conferred a king's title and is vested with the principal authority of the village magistrate and the full powers due to the village aldermen".³

Records from the 19th century inform us that the election of the Whitsun King took place usually on the basis of a contest, involving—in most cases—a horse-race, or a wild bull chase; while the younger contestants had to show their dexterity by throwing at cocks or by trying their strength in tug of war.⁴

The first detailed description telling about the custom of electing also a Whitsun *queen* dates from the 19th century. The chosen king and queen (a lad and a girl, or a little boy and a little girl) went from house to house collecting gifts. This custom had been still alive in the first decades of the 20th century.

Today only one form of Whitsun mummary is practised in Hungary and that foremostly in the Transdanubian Counties. A little girl is chosen as queen by her companions, but there is no need for her to

¹ Quoted in detail by Tekla Dömötör, *Naptári ünnepek – népi színjátszás*. (Calendar Customs—Folk Acting). Budapest 1964, 111.

² Péter Melius, *Az két Samuel könyvei*. (The two books by Samuel). Debrecen 1565.

³ László Bartholomaeides, *Inclyti Superioris Ungariae Comitatus Gömöriensis Notitia Historico-Geographico Statistica*. Lőcse 1806–1808.

⁴ Described by T. Dömötör (see note 1 above) 116–118.

participate in a contest, nor is she endowed with any power. The little girl must neither speak nor laugh or smile while she is lead by her friends under the "canopy" of a shawl spanned over her head. Her companions sing songs and scatter flowers before her as they proceed, and raising her high up, they express their wish that the hemp should grow as high as they lift their queen.

Before the second world-war, another form of Whitsun mummary had been practised in some Transdanubian counties of Hungary, foremostly in the villages of County Győr-Sopron. In course of the ceremonies a young lad was chosen as King by his companions. The selection did not involve any contests. The king was sometimes called the Elder King, sometimes the Turkish Pasha. He was decked with green branches or encased in a framework made of green twigs. Occasionally a big wheel was drawn in the procession with two revolving figures on it, representing a man and a woman.⁵

As may be seen from the above, Whitsun mummary has taken four chief forms in Hungary. The four types are characterized by the following features:

1) A youth is selected as a temporary king to exercise power for a short time. (At the turn of the 17th century the custom was occasionally practised in the army as well: a May King was chosen to act for a short time as a mock ruler of the platoon.⁶)

2) A couple goes from house to house, singing quète-songs. Sometimes they are called the "bride and bridegroom". They are adorned with wreaths and posies. A romantic drawing from the last century displays such a pageant, showing the procession accompanied by musicians. The Queen is a grown up girl, wearing a high conical head-dress adorned with flowers⁷. (See fig. 1.)

3) A little girl, called the Whitsun-Queen, is lead about the village. The songs of the girls consist partly of religious stanzas, partly of luck-wishing stanzas with a variety of mythical and epic elements⁸. (It seems most likely that the present survival of this custom finds its explanation in the fact that parents find pleasure in dressing up their little girls, adorning them with flowers and veils, while the relatives and neighbours are looking forward to and enjoy the visits of the group of girls.) (See fig. 2.)

⁵ Ibid., 111 ff.—The data concerning the "elder-king" are partly unpublished, results of my own field-work.

⁶ Sándor Takáts, *A régi Magyarország jókedve*. (Humorous Anecdotes from Hungarian History). Budapest (s. a.).

⁷ See: *A magyarság néprajza* 3 (1935) plate 59.

⁸ *Corpus Musicae Popularis Hungaricae* 2. Budapest 1953, nos. 152–203.

4) The appearance of the Elder King, decked with green branches, undoubtedly reflects a reminiscence of rainmaking rites. It should be noted, that wherever, this custom was practised it generally coincided with the well-cleaning, done by the villagers at Whitsuntide.

The election of Whitsun Kings had attracted general attention in Hungary long before ethnographical investigations began. In the early years of the 19th century e.g. Bartholomaeides sought for an explanation:

“To give an explanation for all this would be difficult. However I think that with this custom, the rural population wanted to imitate their noble ancestors, who elected the leaders of the people and the kings.”⁹

Arnold Ipolyi, a Hungarian pioneer in scientific investigations concerned with Hungarian mythology, had already known about the European parallels of Hungarian Whitsuntide mummeries.¹⁰ In his *Hungarian Mythology*, published in 1854, he had, in fact, anticipated the theories of Mannhardt and Frazer. In the procession of the flower-adorned King and Queen, Ipolyi saw the personification of Summer, and the celebration of Summer’s victory over Winter. In the short and ignominiously ending reign of the Whitsun King, he detected reminiscences of the election of a substitute king, and of his execution instead of the divine king when his reign came to end.

In 1925, Géza Róheim made a further step, pointing out (chiefly under the influence of Frazer) possible connections of Hungarian Whitsun-customs with ceremonies associated with “sacred marriage” and puberty rites.¹¹ He gives four main points:

- 1) The divine king. A substitute king is elected for a short time in place of the “divine” king and to be offered in sacrifice instead of the real king.
- 2) The regeneration of fertility in Spring.
- 3) The sacred marriage of the divine king.
- 4) The survivals of ceremonies associated with initiatory rites.

Róheim, however, as well as other scholars, considered all forms of Hungarian (and European) Whitsun-personifications as variants of

⁹ Bartholomaeides (see note 3 above) 443–444.

¹⁰ Arnold Ipolyi, *Magyar mythologia*. (Hungarian Mythology), 3rd ed. Budapest 1929; Wilhelm Mannhardt, *Wald- und Feldkulte der Germanen und ihrer Nachbarstämme*. vol. I. Berlin 1904; J. G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*. London 1925. Abridged ed., chapters 11–12 and 28.

¹¹ Géza Róheim, *Magyar néphit és népszokások*. (Hungarian folk-beliefs and customs). Budapest 1925, 295 ff.

the same custom. In my book—published in 1964¹²—I have already expressed my opinion that the four Hungarian types of Whitsun mummeries could not have evolved from one another. I have pointed out, that the chief characteristic feature of the first type, i.e. the short and ignominiously ending reign of the Whitsun king is not present in the other three forms, nor are contests mentioned.

There are still many intriguing problems in respect of these customs, the more so, since the historical-geographical relationships of the European Whitsun- and May-customs have not been elucidated either.

So far, Mannhardt and Frazer have provided the most complete descriptions of these personifications. However, in recent research, we find more reliable and detailed descriptions (e.g. in the articles by I. Weber-Kellermann) – N. Kuret and Sauermann deal mainly with the role of the “first” and “last” in Whitsun-customs.¹³ Croatian and Slovenian folklorists try to find a historical background for one of their own interesting customs: the “kings” are impersonated by girls, displaying the military splendour and bearing due to their role.¹⁴

R. Nelli investigated the procession of May-Queens in Provence and attempted to reconstruct an ancient spring-festival of women.¹⁵ This again shows that investigations are still concerned with looking for origins of Whitsun and May mummeries in ancient Greek, Roman, Oriental, Celtic, etc. rituals. The Floralia, Ambarvalia, Maïoumas festivals were often mentioned in these investigations¹⁶; James pointed at common features with the Kybele and Attis cults.¹⁷

The results outlined in the foregoing may be summed up in the following conclusions:

Hungarian Whitsun mummeries are local variants of the European customs.—Since the Middle Ages, the custom has persisted in many European countries to choose a male or a female “ruler”, or a pair of mummers, at Whitsuntide or on the first of May. The couple are

¹² Dömötör (see note 1, above).

¹³ Ingeborg Weber-Kellermann, *Laubkönig und Schössmeier*. Deutsches Jahrbuch für Volkskunde 4 (1958) 366 ff.; Niko Kuret, *Erster und Letzter in den Frühlingsbräuchen der Slowenen*, in: *Letopis, Reihe C* (1968/69) 11–12 (Bautzen); Dietmar Sauermann, *Der letzte im Pfingstbrauch*. Zeitschrift für Volkskunde 64 (1969) 228–247.

¹⁴ e. g. Narodni Običaj, Ljelje-Kraljice. Kao historijski spomenik. Zagreb 1967.

¹⁵ René Nelli, *L'érotique des troubadours*. Toulouse 1963.

¹⁶ Waldemar Liungman, *Traditionswanderungen Euphrat–Rhein*. vols. 1–2. FFC 118–119. Helsinki 1937–1938. vol. 2, 1042 ff.

¹⁷ E.O. James, *Seasonal Feasts and Festivals*. London 1961, 157–158; 309 ff.

generally called king and queen, bride and bridegroom, but the single male or female mummers might be called by other names too. (Jack-in-the-Green, Pfingstlümme, Turkish Pasha, May-Flower, etc.).—The custom is often interwoven with rain-making ceremonies and the erection of a Maypole.—The chosen Mock-King's reign is often short-lived and ends in disgrace, or even "ritual death".—If there is only a female mummer, without escort, she has to sit stock still or is led by her companions under a canopy.

There are further elements, which may locally influence these mummeries: May is observed by Catholics as a month devoted to the Holy Virgin Mary.—According to Western tradition, witches are especially dangerous in this period.—In the East, the Rusalia-week falls into this period, with connections with the ancestor cult.¹⁸

In the nineteenth century, Whitsun mummary was practised primarily in the villages, but there is rich evidence to show that earlier, similar customs were popular in cities and courts, too.—Associated with Whitsun customs we also find folk-acting.¹⁹

Let us now see, what features Hungarian Whitsun customs have added to the general European pattern.

1) Choosing a Whitsun-king by contests, whose reign ends in ignominy, seems to be the most interesting of the Hungarian variants of the custom.

Generally, our calendar customs have not been studied for their associations with ancient Hungarian traditions and beliefs, for in most cases it is clear, that they had developed, after the Magyars had settled down in their present home and had become Christians.

Very little is known about the Hungarian calendar of old times; in the eleventh century the Magyars had already adopted the calendar used by Christian people.²⁰

However, there are a few exceptions in regard to these customs and one of them is the custom of choosing a Whitsun king.

¹⁸ The most detailed description of the custom is still to be found in the works of Mannhardt, Frazer, Liungman (see notes 10 and 16 above). Further: Richard Weiss, *Volkskunde der Schweiz*. Erlenbach-Zürich 1946, 168–169; Martin P. Nilsson, *Das Rosenfest*. *Beiträge zur Religionswissenschaft* 2 (1918) 133 ff.

¹⁹ e. g. Leopold Schmidt, ed. *Le théâtre populaire européen*. Paris 1965; Paolo Toschi, *Le origini del teatro italiano*. Torino 1955; S. Fontana, *Il maggio*. Firenze 1964; Violet Alford, *Sword Dance and Drama*. London 1962; etc.

²⁰ I wrote about this question in details, in my book *Naptári ünnepek – népi színjátszás* (see note 1 above); see further: Martin P. Nilsson, *Primitive Time-Reckoning*. Lund 1920, 282, where he writes: "only the Hungarian months are entirely named after ecclesiastical festivals".

As we have seen, Ipolyi had already associated the idea of the short-lived reign of the Whitsun King with the custom known from the Ancient Near East according to which a substitute king was elected and sometimes sacrificed instead of the real “divine” king. Frazer wrote in extenso about the ritual execution of Whitsun-kings in Saxony, Thüringen, Bohemia.

The Magyars however did not have to borrow these notions from European peoples. The Khazar Empire—to which the Magyars also belonged—“had the institution of the divine king whom they would kill at set times, or when the situation was critical” (Róheim). It is probable that the Hungarians knew the institution of dual kingdom and the ritual killing of the divine king. Recent investigations carried out by Hungarian historians have done much to verify Ipolyi’s and Róheim’s hypotheses, according to which the Magyars still knew these customs at the time of the Conquest of Hungary.²¹ One of the two leaders was the “divine” king and sometimes he might have been sacrificed for ritual reasons, at least the medieval chronicles seem to point to this fact.

It is indeed possible, that the Magyars, having established themselves in Europe, met here with Spring customs which revived reminiscences from their past history and thus it is possible that these two factors have been instrumental in establishing the Hungarian form of choosing a Whitsun King.

There are also further elements which recall ancient practices: e. g. the custom of choosing the Whitsun King on the basis of contests. Sporting events of the youth, which took place at the festivities of pagan Magyars—e. g. shooting arrows and horse-races—are frequently mentioned in our medieval Latin chronicles. So far I have not been able to find direct references that these games were held in the month of May.²² Ethnological analogies may lead, however, to helpful inferences. There are many records to show that horse-breeding Altaic peoples celebrated an important feast in late spring. These ceremonies included the rites of horse sacrifices and mare’s milk sacrifices and were followed by races and games. Horse races of young lads are held to this day in late spring in Mongolia.²³

²¹ Géza Róheim, *Hungarian and Vogul Mythology*. New York 1954, 7 ff.; György Györffy, *Tanulmányok a magyar állam eredetéről*. (The Origins of the Hungarian State). Budapest 1959.

²² For details see Dömötör, *op. cit.* 56–57.

²³ e. g. Uno Harva, *Die religiösen Vorstellungen der altaischen Völker*. FFC 125. Helsinki 1938, 571 ff.

Thus, if Spring festivities of this kind had been celebrated by the youth in the days of pagan Magyars, these could have been easily "christianized" later and, the horse sacrifice omitted, supplemented by the European motives of Whitsuntide, the more so, since similar festivities could be observed in the neighbouring areas.

The organization of spring-time horse-races in Hungary has not been limited to the villages. Horse-races were regularly held at Buda until the victory of the Turks in 1526. In 1525, several races were held between May 1-10; besides the horses of the Hungarian king and the nobility, the horses of the Cracovian voivode were taking part in the races as well.²⁴ (Looking for the origins of the medieval horse-races in May, Liungman thinks that they may be traced back to the horse-races of Byzantium.²⁵)

As an item of interest, perhaps it should be mentioned here that the most spectacular European war-dance of our days, the Roumanian healing-dance, is also performed at Whitsuntide; horses play no part in it, however, the appellation of this group: *Calușarii* is a broad hint at horses.

Of our Western neighbours the Czechs and some of the German speaking people have combined the election of Whitsun (May) King with horse-races. However, more differentiated research would be needed to explore their relationship with similar customs in Hungary. L. Röhrich called attention to the fact that the riding of the Whitsun King is called a "race" also in the case of there being no other contestants.²⁶ — Interesting parallels may be found in the Czech Whitsun customs. R. Jeřábek points out, that in the aetiological explanations of the Czech customs frequent allusions are made to historical events relating to Hungary.²⁷ Of course, such pseudo-historical legends do not provide dependable explanations as to the development of these practices, however, they may contain hints at the interaction of similar customs practised by neighbouring peoples.

Another parallel to be investigated are the Thüringian customs which frequently combine the election of the Whitsun King with horse-races.²⁸ Historical relations are even more indistinct in this case.

²⁴ Béla Radvánszky, *Foglalkozás, időtöltés, játék a XVI és XVII. században*. (Games in the 16th and 17th centuries). Századok 21 (1887).

²⁵ Liungman (see note 16 above) 2, 1042.

²⁶ Lutz Röhrich, *Sage und Brauch. Forschungen und Fortschritte* 25 (Berlin 1949) 253.

²⁷ Richard Jeřábek, *Masken und Maskenbrauchtum in den tschechischen Ländern*, in: *Masken und Maskenbrauchtum aus Ost- und Südosteuropa*, ed. Robert Wildhaber. Basel 1968, 132-133.

²⁸ e. g. Leopold Schmidt, *Das deutsche Volksschauspiel*. Berlin 1962, 148ff.

Already in 1906, Gy. Sebestyén called attention to the fact that the name of St. Elizabeth of Hungary (1207—31) who was married in Thuringia, is frequently included in the songs sung at the Whitsun mummary in Hungary.²⁹ It is possible that in the songs sung at these festivities, epic fragments of some ancient song about St. Elizabeth were preserved, but it is just as likely that her name got into these songs on account of her connection with roses.

In Hungary, as in all Catholic countries, roses played an important role in Whitsun ceremonies; and St. Elizabeth's name, in her legend has been primarily connected with roses.—On the other hand it is also possible that there actually had been some historical points of contact between the May horse-races held in Hungary and Thuringia during the Middle-Ages, and the name of the Hungarian Saint was also involved in this custom.

2) The Whitsun customs of little girls, practised today in the Transdanubian area, have two characteristic features: the Queen is led under a canopy, and she has to remain still. In some of the villages a dressed up dummy is carried around in the procession instead of a living girl.³⁰ Similar features have been found in the May Queen ceremonies of several Mediterranean peoples: the Queen walks in silence under a canopy, or she is sitting still during the ceremony. Cirese describes a Sardinian May-custom, in course of which the girls are seated under a canopy.³¹ In Provence, the May Queen expects donations sitting—covered with a veil—on the street.³²

According to James, these forms of the custom might be survivals of the Magna Mater cult:

“As Kybele was responsible for the flowering of the fields, so the May Queen sat in an arbour wreathed in flowers, or in the porch of the church, similarly adorned like her Romano-Phrygian counterpart seated in her mountain abode and receiving floral offerings from her votaries.”³³

A further trait which deserves attention is that in the Hungarian ceremonial songs, the little queen is identified with a rose. Parallels

²⁹ Gyula Sebestyén, A pünkösdi király és királynő (Whitsun King and Queen), *Ethnographia* 17 (1906) 32 ff.

³⁰ Ipolyi (see note 10 above) 2, 55.

³¹ Alberto M. Cirese, Essai d'analyse d'un jeu cérémoniel du premier mai en Sardaigne: «cantare su maju», in: *Extrait des Actes du VI Congrès Intern. des Sciences Anthropologiques et Ethnologiques*. Paris 1960, 170–174.

³² Claude Seignolle, *Le folklore de la Provence*. Paris 1963, 190 ff.

³³ James (see note 17 above) 311.

may be found in Flanders and Alsace, where the little queen was called a May flower or rose.³⁴

According to van Gennep, in Gières (Dauphiné) the May Queen is known as the Hungarian queen (*la reine d'Hongrie*).³⁵

*

To end this short survey, let me sum up the conclusions.

1) Of the forms of Whitsun mummeries, known in Hungary, the oldest and most important had been the choosing of a King (generally by contests), a custom which probably grew out of earlier institutions of the Hungarians. The importance of this custom is proven by the 500 years old proverb. Even in the 19th century, the Whitsun King used to be the leader of the village youth for a year. Magical traits are not mentioned in the descriptions.

2) The door-to-door singing of little girls is a magical rite, its chief aim being to make the hemp grow. The ceremonial songs of this custom show Church influence and refer to the cult of St. Elizabeth.

Choosing an "elder-king" was restricted to one County in Western Hungary and seemed to be a rain-making custom.

Whitsun kings and queens in Hungary wore no masks, but were adorned with chaplets, green boughs. The "elder-king" was sometimes hidden in a green framework; the little queen's face could be hidden by a veil. —

It is hoped that this short description of Whitsun-mummeries in Hungary will help international research in this field.

³⁴ Mannhardt (see note 10 above), I, 318.

³⁵ Arnold van Gennep, *Manuel de folklore français contemporain*. 1/4/2. Paris 1949, 1460.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2