

The Ljubljana — *a River and its Past*

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The Ljubljanica – a River and its Past

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The Ljubljanica in ancient sources

Marjeta Šašel Kos

Figure 90. An altar was found in the Sava near Vernek (in the Kresnice district near Ljubljana) that had been erected to the god Savus by Publius Rufius Verus, probably a merchant, after a successful journey.⁹

Rivers have always had great influence on the lives of people, as river transport in prehistory and antiquity (and also later, up to the building of the railroads) was both very brisk and less expensive than transporting freight along roads.¹ Cults of rivers and other waters have been well documented from the Bronze Age onwards, and flourished far into the period of late Antiquity when the church was repeatedly forced to persecute pagans who prayed to trees, rivers, and stone idols. At the Council in Toledo in AD 693, the church dignitaries in addition to spells and black magic forbade the worship of stones, trees, and springs, and the kindling of torches. River cults are mentioned on inscriptions, and archaeological material can also offer evidence when it is possible to classify it as votive gifts to a river deity, which is often highly unclear. Undoubtedly the cult of a river god existed along all important rivers, and in the northern Adriatic, eastern Alpine, and Pannonian regions in antiquity these gods were mainly worshipped as a male deity, such as *Pater Padus* (the Father of the Po), *Timavus* (Timava/Timavo), *Aesontius* (Soča/Isonzo), *Dravus* (Drava), *Savus* (Sava; Fig. 90) and *Danubius* (Danube);² a cult of the Ljubljanica has not yet been attested on inscriptions.



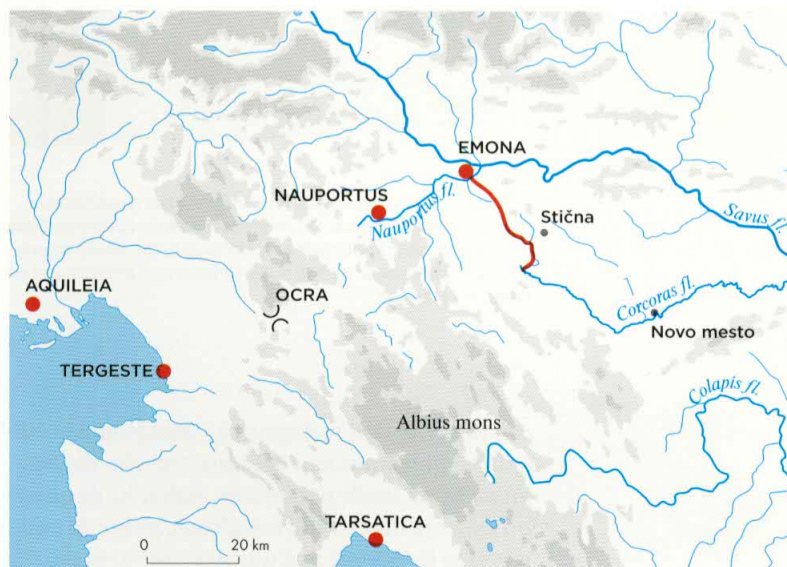
The Roman name of the river is known: it seems that it was called after both important settlements that evolved along it, the *Nauportus* in Pliny – after *Nauportus* (present Vrhnika), a settlement of the Taurisci and later an important fortified Roman trading center – and the *Emona* after

CEMAES • LICCAV
F AMANTINVS • HO
SEF AMNORVM • DEC
M • GENTE • VNDIVS
5 CENTVRIA SECVN
DA • INFLVMEN • PER
IT HEMONA • POSV
ERE • LICCAVS • PATE
R • LORIQVS • ET LICA
10 IOS • COGNATI

Figure 91. The lost cenotaph for the ten year old boy Scemaes (perhaps [S]cenas?), from a prominent family of the Amantini tribe, was found in the village of Putinci in eastern Syrmia (present-day Srem in Serbia).¹⁰ He drowned in the Ljubljana as a hostage in Emona in the period of the conquest of Illyricum under the emperor Augustus.

the indigenous and Roman Ljubljana. The river seems to have been mentioned as the Emona on the tombstone of a boy from the tribe of the Amantini (settled between the rivers Sava and Drava in present-day Serbia). The unfortunate Scemaes drowned as a hostage in the Ljubljana, probably in the period of the conquest of the Balkans in the first decades BC under the emperor Augustus, when a military tactic of the commanders of the Roman army was to take the children of tribal leaders and distinguished families as hostages. The inscription is unfortunately preserved only in manuscript form⁹ (Fig. 91), as the stone itself is lost. Perhaps it was incorrectly copied and the mentioned name of Emona in fact referred to the town and not the river (*in flumen perit Hemonā*: “he died in the river Emona”; perhaps more logically “in the river in Emona”, since the river is known to have been named Nauportus). The encyclopedist Pliny the Elder (1st century AD) mentioned the

Figure 92. The map shows the Ljubljana and Krka Rivers, and the conjectured road that would have connected them already in antiquity.



Nauportus River in connection with the mythical return of the Argonauts,⁴ as the final river between the Black Sea, from which they returned, and the Adriatic, where the river route allegedly took them (*N. h.* 3. 128). In fact, there is no direct river connection between both seas, although this incorrect opinion was deeply rooted in antiquity; this is emphasized in particular by Pliny, who was also well versed in geography.

The Ljubljana is also mentioned by the Greek historian and geographer Strabo, although not by name (4. 6. 10 C 207). He stated that “*Odra is the lowest part of the Alps in the region where they extend to the Carni. Over Odra [Razdrto below Nanos] goods are brought on freight wagons to Nauportus along a road that is not much longer than 400 stadia [74km]. From there, the goods are transported by rivers all the way to the Ister [Danube] and the lands there. By Nauportus runs a navigable river coming from Illyria that joins the Sava, so that goods*



Figure 93. Iulius Fortunatus was active in the leadership of the association of boatmen in Emona, which was undoubtedly among the most important associations in the town; its role was later taken over by the guild of boatmen of large and small boats in Ljubljana.¹¹



Figure 94. A fragment of the tombstone of Lucius Aelius Nigrinus, a soldier of the Pannonian navy.¹²

can easily be sent to Segestica [Sisak] and the lands of the Pannonians and Taurisci.” Strabo did not know these lands personally, rather he depended on sources that he did not always properly understand in full detail and was not able to make them compatible with data in his other books. This is visible from the note that the river that flows by Nauportus “comes from Illyria”, as in fact the Ljubljanica has its source near Nauportus. This is further clear from data in book seven of his *Geography* (7. 5. 2 C 314). There he wrote as follows: “Similarly [as from Aquileia] runs the road across Odra from the Carnian village of Tergeste [Trieste] into the marsh called Lugeon [perhaps Cerknjško jezero (Cerknica Lake)]. Near Nauportus flows the Corcoras River [Krka], which transports goods. It flows into the Sava, the Sava into the Drava, and the latter into the Noarus [the lower course of the Sava] near Segestica.” This does not mean – as some think⁵ – that Strabo incorrectly noted the Ljubljanica was named the *Corcoras*, rather that he confused the Ljubljanica with the Krka, probably because road connection existed in prehistory between these two rivers (Fig. 92), along both of which boats transported various cargoes.

The Ljubljanica is part of an important karst river system: connected to the Pivka and Unica

Rivers, it emerges as the Ljubljanica near Vrhnika, of which the full 44.7km to the confluence with the Sava at Zalog is navigable. The several meters difference in the water level at the rapids in Fužine was probably lower in the Roman period, as the erosion of the riverbed was not so extensive at that time; the unsafe section may have been regulated by the Romans. It is known that in the Roman period the protector of this dangerous segment of the river, the god Laburus, was worshipped at this spot.⁶ The name Laburus is pre-Roman; the god undoubtedly protected river travellers on their route through the rapids long before the Roman occupation.

An association of boatmen existed at Emona (Fig. 93),⁷ which indicates the great importance of the Ljubljanica as a transportation artery. It was an important river trade route, as was described as early as Strabo, and its significance was not reduced at all throughout the entire Roman period. In times of peace merchants and various artisans sailed the river, in times of military activity it was used by the army, as is proven by the tombstone found in Ljubljana of a soldier of the Pannonian navy (Fig. 94), which probably had its own military dock in Emona in the war times.⁸

Notes

- 1 Šašel Kos 1994; Šašel Kos 1999b.
- 2 Šašel Kos 1999b, 23.
- 3 *CIL* III 3224.
- 4 See Šašel Kos in this volume, pp. 122–123, where Pliny's text is translated.
- 5 *E.g.* Saria 1933; Saria 1935, 2013.
- 6 *CIL* III 3840 + p. 2328, 188 = *ILS* 4877.
- 7 Šašel Kos 1997a, no. 46.
- 8 Šašel Kos 1997a, no. 44; *cf.* Šašel 1968, 565 (= 1992, 573).
- 9 Kept in the National Museum of Slovenia, Inv. No. L 18; Šašel Kos 1997a, no. 95.
- 10 *CIL* III 3224.
- 11 Kept in the National Museum of Slovenia, Inv. No. L 31; Šašel Kos 1997a, no. 46.
- 12 Kept in the National Museum of Slovenia, Inv. No. L 58; Šašel Kos 1997a, no. 44.