

Neris. Expedition of 2007

Volume 4

By Vykintas Vaitkevičius

In the summer of 1857 count Konstantinas Tiškevičius (*Konstanty Tyszkiewicz*, 1806–1868) organized a scientific expedition along the Neris River. The book *Wilija i jej brzegi pod względem hydrograficznym, historycznym, archeologicznym i etnograficznym* (published in Dresden in 1871) records the work of the expedition and paints the picture of Neris River and the multinational Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Enriched by illustrations by Marcelinas Januševičius (*Marcelin Januszewicz*), K. Tiškevičius's story is full of admiration for his country and people.

In the summer of 2007, after 150 years, Lithuanian and Belarusian travellers, invited by the Council of non-governmental organizations, repeated Tiškevičius' expedition, while a dozen of Lithuanian and Belarusian researchers who took part in this colourful journey focused on the nature, culture and history of Neris River. The expedition lasted 28 days, the upper Neris was investigated by walking and the remainder of the total 463 km was travelled on inflatable raft, fitting 8-9 people. The rowing crew carried the raft at an average speed of 3.5–4.5 km/h.

In the first book (published in 2010) the author presented a detailed history of explorations of the Neris and acquainted readers with the expedition of 2007 – its participants, progress and key results, starting from the upper reaches of the Neris: from the Dokshytsy district, Vitebsk region to the village of Danyushava in Smarhon' district, Grodno region. The second book (published in 2012) tells about the exploration of the river and its coast from Danyushava to Vilnius. In Danyushava, the Neris, from slow and quiet, turns into a fast-flowing, rocky, upland river. Coming closer to Vilnius region, members of expedition witnessed not only these natural changes, but also cultural ones: on the eastern outskirts of Astravyets district their attention was attracted by Gervėčiai, an island of Lithuanian villages, while from Bistryčia village (located 245 km from the river mouth) Polish language starts to dominate, the local people associate themselves with Poland and the Polish nation. From the confluence with Žeimena (213 km) the number of old homesteads and local inhabitants significantly decreased and more country houses and collective gardens appeared. When approaching Vilnius (about 187–174 km) an increased tension between the rural and urban population can be felt, the difference in their worldviews and values becomes evident. The third book (published in 2013) turns the attention to Vilnius, the history of trade in Grand Duchy of Lithuania, the city's fishermen, merchants, historical fleet of Neris and Lukiškės pier. On the way to Kernavė (93 km) dozens of Stone and Iron Age settlements, hill-forts, burial mounds, trees, springs were researched. All of them are witnesses of history of Lithuanian culture, economy, religion and statehood. The depths, shoals and rocks of Neris, all with their own names and legends, have enriched the sources of Baltic religion and mythology. All the way from Vilnius to Kernavė the scientists of expedition were accompanied by a motif of 1920-1939 demarcation line between the Polish-occupied Vilnius and the rest of Lithuania. Many kilometres of this line went through the middle of Neris, leaving a mark in the history and culture of the region.

This is the fourth book of the expedition. It presents the work carried out by a binational group of scientists, headed by PhD Vykintas Vaitkevičius, in the stretch from Kernavė (93 km) to Kaunas. It combines a collection of texts and photographs created by members of the expedition, as well as scientific observations and essential empirical data (geographical location of objects, measurements, examinations and other) collected by scientists.

Like the first three, the book maintains the spirit of Tyszkiewicz's monograph: the Neris is explored consecutively, by travelling down the river, with scientific subjects being discussed in the course of the

narrative. Transcriptions of interviews with local residents are provided at the end of the book. The content of these interviews is an inseparable part of the results of expedition.

Folklore texts have been transcribed by Inga Butrimaitė, Ugnė Kabelkaitė and Laura Valauskaitė (Lithuanian language), PhD Jurasis Unukovičius (Belarusian language) and PhD Krystyna Rutkowska (Polish language). Texts have been selected and grouped by Vykintas Vaitkevičius. The author of abstract and scientific editor – Vykintas Vaitkevičius.

When preparing the extracts of folklore texts for media publication, it was regarded that these texts constitute, in all aspects, an authentic source of language and culture of our epoch. Sometimes at first glance insignificant fragments of stories told by the surveyed and questions given to them by researchers help to fully and accurately keep track of the interview's and, most importantly, the surveyed person's chain of thought.

The indicated river mileage is based on Prof. Česlovas Kudaba's book *Along the Neris* (published in Vilnius in 1985). Geographical coordinates of areas and objects are indicated in WGS84 format. They were measured on the sites using a receiver Garmin *Legend* (average margin of error 3–5 m).

The encouragement to organize the 2007 Neris expedition was the wish to experience what Konstanty Tyszkiewicz (1806–1868) wrote about in a very sincere, beautiful and attractive manner. To relive what Tyszkiewicz had experienced, to repeat his journey is a great honour, a noble ritual. In life we redo what we are afraid to lose or forget, what we wish to *preserve*. The aim of Neris expedition is the same – to remember Tyszkiewicz's work, his personality, scientific and literary heritage. Of course, there were other reasons as well. Firstly, Lithuanian archaeologists as well as historians, linguists and folklorists have long forgotten aquatic expeditions. In addition, unlike the late 19th century expeditions, many modern expeditions are narrowed to a single field of research. Although the two Neris expeditions are separated by 150 years, they are united by a complex approach to the subject.

When travelling along the whole Neris at once, it is easy to embrace its true size and diversity. It becomes evident that boundaries between territorial and administrative sections of the river are artificial. The scheme of cultural similarities and distinctions is different, more complex. The source of Neris in Begoml forest is surrounded by peculiar mythological images, then follows the upper stretch of Neris to the confluence with Narach (366 km, from right) and the transition to middle reaches at Danyushava (330 km, from right). According to natural and cultural environment, middle reaches stretching from Danyushava to the confluence with Šventoji (44 km, from right), should be divided into smaller sections: to the confluence with Žeimena (213 km, from right.), Vilnius (165 km, from left), Kernavė (93 km, from right), Gegužinė (60 km, from left). The lower reaches begin at the confluence with Šventoji.

The repeated study of Neris is a challenge and a great opportunity to connect its sections and parts separated by state border between Lithuania and Belarus. It is important to emphasize that travelling by boat provides a kind of perspective which gives a sense of identification with the subject of the research. It is almost a re-encounter of one's self! While sailing and swinging with the current of the river, as opposed to watching from the shore, one is keeping pace with the flow of time. The culture of the river, and the river within the culture is viewed from the perspective of the river itself.

From the source to the mouth, Neris gathers and protects holiness. Especially in those places where the current changes speed, direction, at the major confluences. From the place names, legends and beliefs, Neris dashes out like a mythical horse (mare), or a cow of plenty. The source of Neris has a myth about a standing stone and flowing water; about gods – a man and a woman, whose union is the condition for the river to occur. Gods of the old religion have been replaced by St. Stephen, the patron of horses (his day is celebrated on 26 December), and martyr Akilina, the patron of cows (commemorated on 26 June).

The dual naming of the river comes from the confluence of rivers Violla and Narach (*Violla* before, and *Neris* – after the confluence). However, these two names alter under influence of Belarusian, Lithuanian, Polish languages. The initial meaning of *Violla* (*Вяльля, Вялля, Вяльля*) and *Neris* match – the one that knits. And it is true – from the beginning to the end Neris is winding in loops of different size and density. At Danyushava, the river reaches the first of many highlands and starts looking for the path

around obstacles. Often these sites have shoals – shallow, rocky sections. Twelve major shoals of Neris constitute a symbolic number associated with the boatmen's worldview and images of ancient religion.

Most shoals have names, they suggest that Neris is composed of hundreds of smaller places. They are, on the one hand, an ancient map, an important part of travelers' knowledge base, on the other hand, show how strongly the river is tied to the land, villages and their inhabitants. This way, Neris expands to include not only its riverbed, shores, but also stretches of land around it, including villages. This area is called *panerys* (literally – “a place by Neris”), and is closely related to people and their habitat. Starting from Vilnius, valleys on both sides of the river start drawing distinct boundaries of *panerys*. By the way, one of the ancient Lithuanian lands is being researched in this section – Duke Parbus of Neris is mentioned as one of King Mindaugas' (who ruled around 1236–1263) council members.

Most accurately *panerys* is defined by its topographic features – it is the populated, cultivated, hayed lowland area around the river. In other words, it is the bottom step on the way to the world beyond limits of the water. It should be noted that going further to the west, Neris also goes *down* – this is evident from the slope of the river.

The underwater world is also abundant with life. Fish, same as honey, apples, berries and mushrooms in the traditional culture, is considered to be a gift, and by accepting it, one commits to share it and this way ensure food sufficiency for everyone. Perhaps the most valuable plant of Neris is water-crowfoot (lat. *Ranunculus aquatilis*), which attracts cows to the riverside. Stories and legends about drowned people and objects uncover the mysterious side of Neris. Looking onto the surface of the water... one sees a reflection. Dreams sometimes tell of what is *under* the water. However, the ones who get closest to the depths are fishermen. They use skiffs, unique to this region, which due to their instability are called soul takers (*dushegubka*). On dark nights of late autumn, fishermen light up torches and sail to look for salmon, burbot, barbel swimming at the bottom. Thus, fishermen's main concern is fishing. Even the Razdory village resident, for his love of water nicknamed “Beaver” by his neighbours, gets by with only the fish and black oak pulled out from the bottom of the river. Rafters, boatmen also know Neris only to the extent necessary to ensure safe sailing.

In winter, the shore gets covered in ice, with scrapes from ice skates and treaded paths on its surface. The paths are marked with spruce branches, as at the funeral, where they mark the path to the afterlife. Since the old times, the deceased who went down the water path and deities that took them have been prayed for by sacrificing bread: a loaf of bread with a candle inserted into it is released downstream. Bread had also been sacrificed to the stone called Stepan, located near the source of the river, when sailing through the first shoal, named the Shoal of Welcoming; before the monetary taxes, boatmen used to pay with bread at customs houses.

Neris holds immense power, which it accumulates throughout the year, and unleashes during the spring floods. There is a belief that the river may heal or strengthen horses and cows pasturing nearby. The water gushing from springs on the shores of Neris supports human life, refreshes and beautifies; residents of Kaunas can confirm that, as they still drink water from Neris. The river becomes the reflection of people's life, a reflection of the time. A man begins to relate age to the changes happening to Neris – once young and beautiful, today she allegedly became old, unattractive, even repellent. This partly answers the question of why our parents' generation turned away from the river.

Neris also has other powers related to beliefs, views and their *change*. There were times when residents of Grand Duchy of Lithuania were massively baptized here, Old Believers' newborns were baptized and accepted to community by immersing into the water, Lithuanian Jews went by Neris to celebrate *Tashlich*. The stones of Neris have been a traditional place for wedding rituals, which also shows how significantly the river contributes to changes in people's lives.

Neris has always been and will never cease to be of interest to the researchers: its depth, chemical composition, pollution and, equally important, historical and cultural value.

The expeditions of 1857 and 2007 have laid firm ground for the research of Neris. Descriptions, measurements of the region, many texts and videos with explanations and observations that were gathered and published, determine future research guidelines and prove the importance and advantages of interdisciplinary approach.

Neris is astonishing by its' capacity, coverage, how much it remembers, how much it can tell and show, how viable it is! Moreover, Neris joins our countries' capitals, it entwines with Lithuania providing people with inspiration, drive and power.

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