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BAKING THE CHRISTMAS BREAD, *POPRTNIK*, IN SVIBNO, SLOVENIA

A Living and an Ambiguous Food Heritage

ABSTRACT

The preparation of unique Christmas dishes is widespread among people and shows the importance of the Christmas holidays in their lives. Among these dishes we can mention a Slovenian Christmas bread made of a rich leavened dough, called *poprtnik*. The baking of *poprtnik* has been preserved for several centuries in the Slovenian hill village of Svibno. Its preparation is more than just a family tradition as it also has an essential social function in the village community. The Christmas bread, *poprtnik*, is becoming increasingly important in promoting Svibno and for the cultural identity of the inhabitants of this small settlement.

INTRODUCTION

The baking and ritual consumption of Christmas bread has been extensively studied and examined within European ethnology, and features in numerous scholarly works across the continent.¹ As a dish traditionally prepared in various European countries to mark the most significant holiday of the year, namely Christmas, and as a central element of associated festive celebrations, it is unsurprising that Christmas bread has attracted considerable academic interest. Examples of such studies include those of ethnologists Nils Keyland and Nils-Arvid Bringeus, for Sweden, and Rastislava Stolična for Slovakia.²

1 Reference to this study: Maja Godina Golija: Baking the Christmas Bread, *Poprtnik*, in Svibno, Slovenia: A Living and an Ambiguous Food Heritage. In Anikó Báti and Patricia Lysaght (eds.): *Living Eating Habits, Revitalized Foodways and the Concepts of Tradition and Food Heritage*. Budapest: ELTE RCH Institute of Ethnology – Museum of Ethnography, 2025. pp. 229–241.
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2 Keyland, Nils: *Julbröd, julbockar och staffanssång dokument rörande den svenska allmogens julfirande* ('Christmas bread, Christmas goats and staff carol document concerning the Swedish common

In Slovenia, this topic has also been partially researched. Ethnologists who have focused on the rituals and the dietary traditions of the Slovenian people, such as Rajko Ložar, Milko Matičetov, and Niko Kuret, have investigated Christmas bread.³ However, previous scholarship has primarily centred on the preparation and production of Christmas bread in the Ljubljana and Notranjska regions. Less attention has been paid to the social significance of *poprtnik*, particularly regarding its role within family and neighbourhood communities and its function in fostering connections among local community members.

THE TRADITION OF BAKING THE CHRISTMAS BREAD, POPRTNIK, IN SVIBNO

In this essay, we examine the tradition of baking Christmas bread, known as *poprtnik*, in the Posavje region of Slovenia. The preparation of this festive bread is recognised as an element of the Register of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Slovenia/*Register nesnovne kulturne dediščine Slovenije*. Our field research was conducted in the village of Svibno, situated in the eastern-central part of Slovenia at an elevation of 539 metres. Svibno is a typical hilltop agricultural settlement in terms of its layout and structure. The village was established beneath the medieval castle of the noble Ostrovrhar family in the 12th century.⁴ The farms in this region are clustered, though dispersed over a relatively wide area.

The baking of *poprtnik* was already described in the 17th century, by the Slovenian polyhistor Janez Valvasor, in his book *Die Ehre des Hertzogthums Crain*. In this text, Valvasor wrote:

For Christmas [...] they knead a large loaf of bread and decorate it with various ornaments. However, for the nobility and citizens, who have more delicate tastes, they add considerable amounts of fat and eggs to the dough. The bread is further adorned with decorative dough elements. This bread is called poprtnig⁵ (Translation by Maja Godina Golija).

people's Christmas celebrations') (Stockholm: Nordiska museet, 1919); Bringéus, Nils-Arvid: 'Christmas Stacks', in Lysaght, Patricia ed.: *Food and Celebration: From Fasting to Feasting. Proceedings of the 13th Conference of the International Commission for Ethnological Food Research, Ljubljana, Preddvor, and Piran, Slovenia, June 5–11, 2000* (Ljubljana: Založba ZRC, 2002), 325–331; Stoličnà, Rastislava: *Jedlá a nápoje našich predkov* ('Food and drinks of our ancestors') (Bratislava: Veda, 1991).

3 Ložar, Rajko: *Narodopisje Slovencev 1* ('Ethnography of the Slovenians 1') (Ljubljana: Založba Klas, 1944); Matičetov, Milko: 'Poprtnik' ('Poprtnik' bread), *Slovenski etnograf* 6–7 (1953), 223–239; Kuret, Niko: *Praznično leto Slovencev 2* ('The Festive Year of the Slovenians 2') (Ljubljana: Družina, 1989).

4 *Krajevna skupnost Svibno* ('Local community'). <<https://www.radece.si/krajevna-skupnost-svibno/>> accessed 3 September 2024.

5 Valvasor, Johann Weikhard – Vajkard, Janez: *Die Ehre Dess Hertzogthums Crain* ('The Glory of the Duchy of Carniola'), VII/XVI (Nürnberg, 1689), 472.



Fig 1. View of the village of Svibno, 2019. (Photo by Maja Godina Golija)

Written sources attest to the preparation of *poprtnik*, this traditional Christmas bread, over several centuries.⁶ This suggests that knowledge surrounding its preparation was meticulously safeguarded and passed down through generations. In the same way, an understanding of its symbolic and social significance, particularly its ritual and communal roles during the Christmas period, has been transmitted within families. This pattern mirrors the transmission process of other festive culinary traditions in Slovenia, such as the baking of *potica* (a festive cake) or the preparation of the Easter dishes *žegen*, which, like the making of *poprtnik*, have traditionally been the domain of women. Such practices reflect a clear gendered division of labour within the farming family, particularly in relation to festive diets.

This observation is well articulated by the sociologist Stephen Mennell in his research on ritual foods.⁷ According to Mennell, food associated with ritual and religious practices is particularly guarded and often entrusted to younger women within the community. Women, he argues, have played a central role in the preservation of traditions, folk beliefs, and the transmission of ritual knowledge. The teaching of these culinary practices, including the preparation of ritual dishes, typically passes from older to younger women, especially within the family structure. In this context, mothers often instructed their daughters, while mothers-in-law would pass on their culinary knowledge to their sons' wives or partners.

During my fieldwork and visits to the Svibno area in 2019 and 2020, I found that this tradition had persisted there. In partially-directed narrative interviews, it was explained to me that the makers of the Christmas bread, *poprtnik*, today, had learned this skill from the older women in the family, including those women who came to Svibno from urban centres, such as Trbovlje and Radeče, when they married into hill farms. In the past, *poprtnik*, was baked, pre-Christmas, in Slovenia, during the second half of December, while today, the baking period has expanded into early January, to just before the Three Kings Day/Epiphany. This festive and ritual bread was placed on the table to mark the most significant winter holidays: Christmas, New Year, and Epiphany. *Poprtnik* bread was on the table from Christmas until 6 January and it was, and is, supposed to lead to a good harvest, and to health and happiness on the farm during the coming year. In Svibno and in the surroundings of Radeče, the tradition of preparing the Christmas bread, *poprtnik*, is still very much

6 Popit, Ilja: 'Daritvena pogača župnik in Valvasorjev Hausgötze – gospodarček' ('The Offering Bread župnik and Valvasor's Hausgötze – gospodarček'), *Studia mythologica Slavica* 22 (2019), 207– 220.

7 Mennell, Stephen and Murcott, Anne in H. van Otterloo, Anneke ed.: *Prehrana i kultura. Sociologija hrane*. ('The Sociology of Food: Eating, Diet, and Culture') (Zagreb: Jesenski i Turk, 1998), 41.

alive in family circles today, especially as part of the celebration of the Three Kings Day (6 January).

The bread is kneaded by housewives from a richer kind of dough on 5 January. This dough is made from white flour, milk, eggs, sugar, and butter, and it is baked like a cake; some actually bake it in a cake mould. In the past, the bread was far less decorated than it is today, and then it often had only a cross cut on top. Today, however, Christmas bread is richly decorated with dough ornaments, such as a cross, whales, birds, or flowers. According to my informants, the decoration of the bread depends primarily on the knowledge and skill of the women. Bread is baked in a wood-fired oven or in the oven of a stove. When baked, it is cooled and placed on the table and covered with a tablecloth – this is the source of the name or the etymology of the word '*poprtnik*', as it refers to something that is under the tablecloth.

The handling and use of bread in rituals and festive practices has changed profoundly over the past two decades. If it was typical in former times that festive bread was enjoyed and used for ritual acts mainly in the home and in the neighbourhood community, *poprtnik* bread from Svibno, and its veneration and exhibition, has been, since 2017, an essential part of public life in the village.⁸ *Poprtnik* bread is a source of neighbourly relations, friendships and family ties. Like some other holiday dishes, the Christmas bread, *poprtnik*, and Svibno, significantly influence the lives of families, especially women, and communities.⁹

As the homemakers from Svibno remind us, they ritually consumed *poprtnik* in the family for the Three Kings Day/Epiphany. According to informant M. D. from Svibno, it was said that a man, for health and strength, must eat nine different pieces of Christmas bread and drink seven buckets of wine on Three Kings Day. As this belief is still active, neighbours and relatives exchange pieces of Christmas bread, *poprtnik*, on Three Kings Day. These acts strongly connect the community of people in Svibno to each other, and, in addition to their ritual significance, they also have a vital social function. At a time when many do not have much time in their daily lives to socialise with neighbours, exchanging pieces of bread with them and with relatives, also means socialising and stimulating social ties in the village. Alternatively, as Buchli pointed out, it is the thing that binds the members of a community together

8 Ivanišević, Jelena: 'Čuvari marende: muški kulinarski kružoci u Starome gradu' ('The Keepers of Marenda [Mid-morning Snack]: Male Culinary Groups in Stari Grad, Croatia'), *Narodna umjetnost* 2 (2021), 185–203.

9 Godina Golija, Maja: 'Contemporary Appropriations of Culinary Tradition in Slovenia', *Traditiones* 41/2 (2012), 91–104.



Fig. 2. Richly decorated Christmas bread, poprtnik, Svibno, 2019. (Photo by Maja Godina Golijs)

in space and time and is, like many other material cultural components, the reference point for the self-identification of the group that it represents to others.¹⁰

Today, unlike in past times, the baking and use of Christmas bread, *poprtnik*, in Svibno, is associated with some customs formerly unknown or practised in the community. Christmas bread is now blessed in the local church on the eve of Three Kings Day/Epiphany (5 January), an occasion on which housewives also display their beautiful bakery products. It is an evening when members of the community of different generations gather in the church, even those who do not usually attend worship. This event is primarily social and is often associated with singing performances by male and female choirs, and with the viewing and informal evaluation of Christmas bread. However, it is also combined with the celebration of Mass and the blessing of the loaves – liturgical acts, which otherwise would be unlikely to have been attended in such large numbers by the inhabitants of Svibno. This development neatly illustrates the findings of heritage researcher Kirshenblatt-Gimblett – that heritage, which is alive and an integral part of community life, significantly influences the community, and that the community influences heritage.¹¹

On the following day (6 January) the bread is consumed, and some traditional customs are performed at that time. Similar to what had happened in past times, a mother who cuts the Christmas bread, *poprtnik*, raises a piece of it into the air, and the child has to jump up to reach it. The more the child jumps, the more the child will grow over the coming year. All household members consume *poprtnik* bread; a piece of this bread is still, today, distributed to pigs and cattle, and crumbs are thrown to the hens and chickens. The people believe that all of these acts should ensure a good harvest and the health of living beings on the farm. In order to provide strength and health, people in Svibno consume pieces of Christmas bread from neighbours and relatives because they believe that the more pieces of different bread they eat, the more powerful and healthy they will be.

As the homemakers from Svibno pointed out during my fieldwork, they care about this rich Christmas-bread tradition and keep it alive among the young people. The exchange of squirrels and the sharing of them among family members, neighbours,

10 Buchli, Victor: 'Introduction', in Buchli, Victor ed.: *The Material Culture Reader* (Oxford, New York: Berg, 2002), 1–23.

11 Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara: 'Intangible Heritage as Metacultural Production', *Museum International* 1–2 (2004), 52–65.

and other living beings on the farm, symbolically expresses the unity of living, and the importance of connection for survival on mountain farms in the coming year. These actions associated with Christmas bread have retained their social significance despite globalisation and the modernisation of life on mountain farms, and they have also become an essential part of local identity. As ethnologists note in their studies, food is much more than being just a source of satisfying basic biological needs,¹² as it plays a vital role in the self-representation of individuals, social groups, regions, and nations. In particular, it emphasises the age, originality, and difference and uniqueness of particular foods, dishes, and food-related practices.¹³

Today, *poprtnik* bread from Svibno is a recognisable element of the cultural heritage of that place – which distinguishes it from other areas in the Posavje region. The women of the Farmers' Association Arnika, proudly present it as a local speciality at events both at home and abroad, whether these be occasions related to culinary cultural heritage or to tourism. The Svibno members of the Farmers' Association Arnika promote the traditional baking of Christmas bread without modern ingredients and additives and they assist in the transfer of this knowledge to the younger generations through workshops. For young women, they organise baking courses on the premises of the Arnika Svibno Peasant Women's Association. Even more essential and extensive are the classes on how to make and use *poprtnik* bread, which takes place at the Svibno Primary School. Every year, at the beginning of December, usually for St. Nicholas Day (6 December), lessons on the baking of *poprtnik* bread are prepared for elementary school children in the first and second grades at the school. Children listen with interest to the explanations about how the bread is made and try their hand at preparing Christmas bread and dough decorations. According to the informants, the children's interest in the baking of *poprtnik* is high, and also in the exchange and the tasting of the bread, that occurs later, because, already at the beginning of December, many children can hardly wait for this festive event to take place.

12 Wiegmann, Günter: *Alltags und Festspeisen in Mitteleuropa. Innovationen, Strukturen und Regionen vom späten Mittelalter bis zum 20. Jahrhundert* (Münster: Waxmann, 2006); Köstlin, Konrad: 'Kitchen Stories', in Bartsch, Silke and Lysaght, Patricia eds.: *Places of Food Production. Origin, Identity, Imagination* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2017), 15–29.

13 Rittig-Beljak, Nives and Belaj, Melanija eds.: *Turist kao gost – prilozi kulinarskom turizmu* ('Tourist as guest – contribution to culinary tourism') (Zagreb: Institut za etnologiju i folkloristiku, 2009); Brulotte, Ronda L. and Di Giovine, Michael A.: *Edible Identities: Food as Cultural Heritage* (London, New York: Ashgate, 2014).

In the area of Svibno in the Sava Hills, in contrast to other Slovene territories, the tradition of baking the Christmas bread, *poprtnik*, has remained uninterrupted, and is thus a living tradition still today. Currently, about 35 farms are involved in the baking of this Christmas bread and in the carrying out of routine rituals associated with its preparation. The baking of Christmas bread in Svibno has a vital social and cultural function as it connects people and encourages them to work together in their community. This tradition has become part of the local identity of the inhabitants of the place Svibno, a tradition which they present to visitors and also include in their events for, and gatherings of, the locals. Today, *poprtnik* bread also features as a gift that is presented to the most important visitors to Svibno.

CONCLUSION

Poprtnik from Svibno is an example of living intangible cultural heritage. According to the UNESCO Convention on Intangible Cultural Heritage, food is defined as an area that contains much of human creativity, knowledge, beliefs, norms, and values, and plays a significant role in the lives of individuals, families, and communities. This definition of food as part of intangible cultural heritage focuses on the practices and knowledge related to the preparation of food and its consumption, as well as on the incorporation of food in rituals, customs, and social events of the community, and its role in spiritual life.¹⁴

Because *poprtnik* bread from Svibno meets all of the established criteria, it was entered in the Slovenian Register of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, in 2013. Currently, there are fifteen units in the field of cuisine and food in the Slovenian Register of Intangible Cultural Heritage.¹⁵ The promotion and protection of this heritage is mainly managed by the Farmers' Association Arnika and the Parnas Institute – the latter organises training for heritage holders, as well as meetings,

14 Židov, Nena: 'Certificiranje kulinarike in Unescova Konvencija o varovanju nesnovne kulturne dediščine' ('Culinary Certification and the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage'), in Brence, Andrej ed.: *6. srečanje kulturne dediščine Slovenije 2017: Prehrana v Registru nesnovne kulturne dediščine in njeno certificiranje* ('6th Meeting of the Cultural Heritage of Slovenia 2017: Food in the Register of Intangible Cultural Heritage and its Certification') (Ptuj: Pokrajinski muzej Ptuj – Ormož, 2017), 10–12.

15 Židov, Nena: 'Prehrana med nesnovno kulturno dediščino in certificiranjem' ('Food between intangible cultural heritage and certification'), in Jerin, Anja – Pukl, Adela and Nena Židov, Nena eds.: *Dobra jed se sama ponuja. Prehrana kot nesnovna kulturna dediščina Slovenije* ('Good food offers itself. Food as intangible cultural heritage of Slovenia') (Ljubljana: Slovenski etnografski muzej, 2021), 14–17.



*Fig. 3. Learning to bake Christmas bread, poprtnik, at Svibno elementary school, 2019.
(Photo by the Farmers' Association Arnika)*

exhibitions, and so on. However, cooperation with the Parnas Institute, which operates as a private institution that also seeks profit from promoting heritage, has become challenging for the peasant women from Svibno, who, in recent years, make *poprtnik* bread. In order to participate in joint events, exhibitions of the bread *poprtnik*, and similar activities, the Parnas Institute requires payment or registration fees, which can be too much of a financial burden for many farm homemakers. Consequently, even the initially successful cooperation between the Farmers' Association Arnika and the Parnas Institute in protecting and promoting Svibno *poprtnik* bread, is regressing, and the situation raises some fundamental questions, such as: Who can dispose of, and promote, Food Heritage, who owns it, and who can generate income from it, and in what way?

This situation is also connected to the question of the role of experts and ethnological institutions in the process of the commercialisation and the marketing of food heritage. These experts and institutions have researched and promoted the intangible cultural heritage aspects without such commercial purposes in mind; in the Slovenian case this was done by the associates of the *Register of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Slovenia* project. As Regina Bendix has noted, activity in the field of heritage research and protection, as well as participation in bureaucratic procedures in the field of cultural heritage phenomena, carriers and registers, provide a direct insight into multifaceted metacultural operational interventions – into the procedures, actors and institutions involved. Together, these elements transform landscapes, things and practices into a certified cultural heritage.¹⁶ For this reason, we must be aware that as food heritage researchers, we are not only observers but also experts, and that we are also co-creators of the authorised heritage discourse.¹⁷ Because of this our role in this process carries significant professional, personal and social responsibility.

16 Bendix, Regina F.: 'Introduction', in Bendix, Regina F. – Eggert, Aditya and Arnika Peselmann eds.: *Heritage Regimes and the State* (Göttingen Studies in Cultural Property 6), (Göttingen: Universitätsverlag Göttingen, 2012), 11–20.

17 Godina Golija, Maja and Ledinek Lozej, Špela: 'Pomen in cilji projektov ohranjanja dediščine prehrane: Register nesnovne kulturne dediščine, Etnofolk in AlpFoodway' ('The Importance and Objectives of Projects Aimed at Safeguarding Food Heritage: Register of Intangible Cultural Heritage, Etnofolk and AlpFoodway'), *Etnolog* 28 (2018), 85–103.

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