

## Trail #6 - Danube for the soul

*Coordinated and written by Dominik Heher*

This Danube trail stretches from Hungary to Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Bulgaria and Romania. It presents us with impressive, shocking, sometimes heartbreaking witnesses of a past ranging from the Stone Age to the 20<sup>th</sup>-century Holocaust; witnesses reflecting the people's pursuit for dominance and exclusiveness, and their tolerance or intolerance in the realm of faith. Religions and their adherents have no doubt done a lot of good, but their striving for supremacy and their claim to exclusivity of faith has also caused a lot of grief. All of these can be found in the Danube region. The pre-Christian era was characterised by the quest for divinity and the desire to comprehend spiritual and supernatural phenomena. With the Christian faith came socio-cultural claims to power, exclusiveness and authority of interpretation. These went hand in hand with monuments, rituals, narratives, and historic figures such as saints, martyrs, and dynasties like the Habsburgs or Ottomans, who – invoking Catholic or Muslim creation myths – regarded themselves as divinely gifted powers. They could be very tolerant, or discriminatory against other ideologies. In any case, the synergy between secular rulers and religious structures yielded magnificent periods of art, and buildings such as domes, abbeys, and monuments. Art and public spaces in the Danube region reflect the fact that faith has been a source of meaning and a means of hegemony. Contemplation on the one hand and demonstration of power, pomp and representation on the other developed in the context of something higher, something supernatural that impressed people and gave them pride and orientation, or in fact frightened and humiliated them.

Catholicism, Protestantism, Orthodoxy, Islam, and of course Judaism – all these religions solidified in the Danube region in such a way that not only individuals, ethnic groups and nations identified with them, but that entire states and territories split up and repeatedly reunited because of them. Rome and Byzantium met here as rivals in proxy wars. The 20<sup>th</sup> century saw unprecedented atrocities sparked off by atheist or alternative religious movements oscillating between National Socialism and Communism. The Danube region and its inhabitants have always been at the heart of these developments. Faith brought exchange and relations, whether through pilgrimage, crusades, expulsion or resettlement. Which begs the question: Will capitalist and neoliberal Europe bring about a sense of togetherness and a new heyday, or will it cause alienation and hardship in the Danube region?

Make no mistake: The Danube for the soul is still out there! It takes the shape of impressive churches and monasteries, where spiritual life is characterised by retreat and contemplation; also the shape of historic buildings; the shape of the customs and rituals of numerous religious and ethnic groups; the shape of people who defy secularisation and adhere to their faith, and will continue to do so for generations to come ...