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1

The Danube in Late Antiquity

A PEREGRINE falcon circles above limestone crags. We first spot the Danube as a stream winding through deep valleys, sparks of sunshine reflecting through beech and oak trees clothed in the leaves of early summer. A little later, travelers carrying heavy packs cross a wooden bridge, the river now already much wider, and then head north along a road up into the forested hills beyond. Next, a ship, deeply laden with bright red pottery vessels carefully wrapped in straw, shoots out of the milky waters of the river Inn into the brown eddies of the Danube, the helmsman struggling to hold its course. It is headed for busy markets far downstream. The glare of the midday sun lights up shining ribbons of water crossing a great plain, shimmering in the heat. The falcon swoops. Cattle slowly tow barges past cataracts where rocky islands churn the waters, deep in a gorge. Far in the distance, a girl navigates a dugout boat through an overgrown channel of the river delta, looking for the best places to harvest mollusks among the reed beds. On the darkening horizon, the blue expanse of the Black Sea.

The Danube, like all major rivers, joins and divides the people living along its banks. It does so today, it did so in the age of the Habsburgs and the Ottomans, as under Byzantium and the early Slavs, and it was no different during the tumultuous centuries of the later Roman Empire. Throughout this first empire's existence, the river formed much of its northern frontier, the Romans perceiving it as the boundary of their Mediterranean civilization. For an even longer time, extending back to human recolonization after the end of the last glacial maximum, the Danube has played an important part in connecting populations in Europe. Being the only river that crosses the continent from west to east, it has always been an axis of communication, facilitating the movement of people, things, and ideas. The tension between these dual

functions reverberates into the political, cultural, and religious environment of central and eastern Europe to the present day.

The nature of the Roman Danube frontier and the strategy of the empire toward maintaining it has been intensely debated. But the Danube as a living river is curiously absent in historical scholarship. The spates of early summer, when icy meltwater from the Alps swells its banks, languid days of high summer when cormorants fish for perch in silty waters, and the cracking and grinding ice jams of winter are just not there. But the river was there. It powerfully intervened in human lives. It was an agent of history.

Yet, the ancient texts occasionally do reveal the river's watery power. The following is a snippet from the hagiography of the holy man Severinus, who ministered to the population of the province of Noricum in modern-day Austria, in the fifth century CE, the period when centralized Roman control was breaking down:

At the same time, a city named Favianis had been befallen by a cruel famine, and its inhabitants believed that their sole remedy was to invite, with pious solicitations, the man of God from the said town of Comagenis. [...] Not long after, one could see on the shore of the Danube many boats from Raetia, full of goods, which had been held for many days by the heavy ice of the river Inn. Now, by the command of God, the ice had broken and the boats brought lots of food to the people who were suffering from famine. Then they all, with unceasing devotion, praised God who had granted them such unforeseen help, for they had been expecting to fade away by this long famine, and they declared that, beyond a doubt, it was through the prayers of the servant of God that the boats were freed, out of season, from the wintry ice.¹

It offers us an insight into how people experienced life along the banks of the Danube. The Inn is a tributary of the Danube, rising in the Swiss Alps and joining the great river at Passau, Roman Batavis. Even today it causes frequent floods in Passau in the summer, and in winter the town is threatened by ice that renders river traffic impossible and can destroy bridges and landing places with its force. This account by Eugippius, a cleric living in the sixth century CE, shows just how severe the consequences of such an ice jam could be for people living downstream. But while people certainly did experience the dangers of the river as he describes it, Eugippius did not write a natural history of the period. The hero of the day is Severinus, who, through the force of his prayers, was able to control the natural force of the river. Eugippius's narrative ties together the

realities of life by the banks of the Danube with a religious and also political message about the role of Christianity in the uncertain times of the fifth century.²

This book explores the lives of the people living along the banks of the Danube during late antiquity—the centuries leading up to the end of the Roman Empire in the West. Our understanding of this period is dominated by historical accounts of the struggles of Rome against barbarian groups on its frontiers, and the Danube features in these writings as a demarcation line between the empire and barbarian lands beyond.³ Crossings of the Danube take on great narrative significance, none greater than the miserable escape of Gothic refugees from the Huns across the Lower Danube in 376 CE, which has long been considered the first in a series of events that would bring about the end of the Roman Empire.⁴

The fourth-century soldier and historian Ammianus describes the perilous undertaking of the crossing:

Accordingly, having by the emperor's permission obtained the privilege of crossing the Danube and settling in parts of Thrace, they were ferried over for some nights and days embarked by companies in boats, on rafts, and in hollowed tree-trunks; and because the river is by far the most dangerous of all and was then swollen by frequent rains, some who, because of the great crowd, struggled against the force of the waves and tried to swim were drowned; and they were a good many.⁵

Here the river was very much present. The crossing may have taken place at Durostorum, in modern Bulgaria, where the Danube was so wide that the far bank was only visible as a thin line of trees. It was in flood, a common occurrence in the summer months, and difficult to navigate. The Goths needed rafts and boats, and the skills to handle them, and those who had neither drowned in the swollen waters.

But the authors of our written sources, the literate elite of the late empire, commonly wrote of the Danube frontier and its surrounding lands at best obliquely, from the safe distance of their urban homes. Ammianus wrote his *Res gestae*, a multivolume history of the Roman Empire, in Rome. It was a work constrained by literary convention and drew heavily on the scholars who preceded him.⁶ Though he includes some of his own observations from his time as a soldier in Gaul and Persia in his narrative, including an account of crossing two rivers in Assyria, he was not a witness to the Gothic crossing, nor was his aim to provide an eyewitness account.⁷

To understand how the Danube shaped the lives of people along its banks, we must turn to their material world. Unlike literary works written far away by writers with only distant experiences of their subject matter, archaeological evidence can give a voice to people who have only been written about and who have not passed their own narratives down to us. In the later Roman Empire, the Danube was the frontier, militarily and administratively, but on the ground this frontier was not always or everywhere a boundary. The ancient river flowed through varied landscapes, much more so than in its modern channelized form. Sandbanks shifted in wide meanders, dangerous rapids threatened travelers, and fording places appeared during low water levels. We only know of a few Roman bridges, so most crossings had to be made by boat. Material remains reveal not just the military infrastructure—forts, harbors, and roads—but also glimpses of the lives of the people dwelling on both banks. We can trace the extent to which ideas about Roman life and culture traveled beyond the immediate frontier, and, in reverse, how the populations from beyond the frontiers became more and more a part of life in the Danube provinces.

Like the river itself, this book braids together themes that sometimes come together and sometimes follow separate courses: how humans and the river Danube interacted with each other over the course of four momentous centuries, and how people on both sides of the Danube created a frontier and then broke it down again. Ultimately, this book is about how the people who lived along the banks of the Danube fragmented an empire.

Rivers as Hybrid Entities

Rivers may at first glance appear to be wholly natural features of the landscape like the sea or mountains, but most are in fact ancient social landscapes. They provide food, and water to drink and irrigate fields, as well as transport and energy, but they can also be dangerous. They can flood or dry up, they can sink boats and drown people and livestock, and they can form obstacles that are difficult to navigate. In their desire to make use of what rivers can provide, humans also manipulate rivers, often with unintended consequences.

In early June 2013, vast areas of the floodplains along the rivers Elbe and Danube flooded after an unseasonably wet May ended with four days of continuous rainfall in southern and central Germany. The river Inn carried so much water into the Danube that it reversed the Danube's current, causing immense pressure on the flood defenses. On June 4, a dike of the river Isar,

another tributary of the Danube, broke, inundating the Bavarian village of Fischerdorf to a level of eight meters. While these floods were the result of an extreme weather event, their devastating impact was also a consequence of historic river management strategies. Since the eighteenth century, the rivers of Europe had been subject to extensive modifications, aimed at “taming” nature to create new agricultural land, improve navigability, and reduce floods.⁸ This began with the drainage of the Oder marshes by Frederick the Great and continued spectacularly with the Rhine and Danube in the nineteenth century.⁹ Since the 1950s, flood defenses were increasingly built in the form of extensive dikes with the aim of total risk management. This gave riparian populations an exaggerated sense of security and frequently led to building developments on floodplains.¹⁰ Once the dikes were breached, as at Fischerdorf, the outcome could be catastrophic. But in a twist of fortune, the flooding of Fischerdorf also relieved pressure on flood defenses further downstream and delayed the advance of the peak discharge, thereby warding off more extensive flooding of settlements there.

The floodplains of rivers are places where important developments in the human past happened, and archaeologists and environmental historians therefore have long been interested in them. Early research focused on the socio-cultural trajectories of early riverine societies while largely overlooking the rivers themselves.¹¹ In his expansive *Danube in Prehistory*, Gordon Childe traced connections between the prehistoric societies of the eastern Mediterranean with those of northwestern Europe along the Danube. Though he recognized the river valley as a corridor of communication, he engaged less with its physical realities.¹² This changed in the late 1950s when researchers began studying the environmental conditions of life in river valleys. Karl Wittfogel’s influential work on “hydraulic civilizations” linked the emergence of hierarchical societies in ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, and other parts of the world to the managerial control and distribution of river water.¹³ A number of later studies focused on how agricultural and economic aspects of people living in river valleys were connected to the riparian ecology.¹⁴ With the growth of environmental archaeology, researchers pursued social and economic questions through detailed studies of the geomorphology and climatic histories of rivers, such as, for example, in Tony Brown’s seminal *Alluvial Geoarchaeology*.¹⁵ Still, many studies of river valleys and wetlands continued to treat them simply as repositories of information about long-term climate change or the past environment without really considering the dynamic relationships between people and these remarkable environments.

Drawing on cartographic evidence, illustrations, and written accounts, environmental historians have been able to explore the effects of sometimes very rapid changes in the fluvial landscape and the complex ways in which humans and rivers affect each other. Much of their work challenges distinctions between nature and culture which see nature as pristine until humans act upon it and alter it. Instead, scholars have attempted to find new ways of making sense of the relationship between humans and nature. They have developed a range of useful concepts that allow us to understand how people and rivers shape each other. In his study of the Columbia River in western North America, Richard White analyzed the relationships between humans, salmon, and the river, the work that happens on or alongside it, the energy that the river creates. He described the river as a hybrid, shaped by “the ways humans and nature act together to create new, intermingled forms and processes”—an organic machine. Along the same lines, a group of environmental historians of the Danube at Vienna have written of the river as a “socio-natural site,” meaning that it was both a natural feature in the landscape and a place of human activities and imaginations.¹⁶ Joining archaeological and environmental-historical approaches, Matthew Edgeworth has advocated for an archaeology of “flow” which recognizes that humans and rivers act upon each other in dynamic ways.¹⁷ These studies have a common foundation in social theories that emphasize networks and hybridity, and they tie in with anthropological concerns with water and water management.¹⁸ They describe a highly interconnected relationship between humans and rivers in which all components have agency. Central to this relationship and to the agency of the river itself is its energy. A river provides kinetic energy that can be harvested for transport or technology such as milling, fulling, or, since industrialization, hydroelectric power. The river also provides metabolic energy: fauna that can be fished and hunted, silt that fertilizes floodplains after floods, and water for irrigation and countless other human activities. But a river’s energy and attempts to harness it can have unintended consequences, as the following examples illustrate.

Since the late seventeenth century, the landscape of the northeastern United States was profoundly altered by thousands of water mills.¹⁹ Before the mill dams were built, the landscape consisted of extensive wetlands and forested meadows. The dams created a buildup of several meters of silt sediment, changing the riverine landscape to meandering streams. In the twentieth century, people abandoned these mills because they were small and unproductive, so the streams often breached the mill dams because they were not maintained, causing extensive soil erosion. Present-day rivers flow in large single

channels with distinctive, deeply incised banks. The contemporary landscape now looks very different from what it was like before European contact. In Europe, too, people built thousands of water mills and weirs which altered riverine landscapes on a vast scale.²⁰

The almost total extirpation of beavers in many parts of Europe in the nineteenth century also dramatically changed river landscapes. As a keystone species, beavers have a disproportionate effect on their ecosystem. These industrious rodents live along watercourses where they build dams and lodges by cutting down trees and shrubs. Their infrastructure can create wetlands and ponds, which increases water storage and slows runoff. Cut wood and branches also add to dense undergrowth along river banks, which protects against soil erosion. These landscape alterations dramatically influence biodiversity. Before humans drastically altered river landscapes, rivers would have carried large amounts of wood. A combination of deforestation and beaver hunting increased the dynamics of river flow and soil erosion.²¹

Efforts to make rivers navigable for transport could likewise lead to multiple iterations of channeling and damming, each intervention responding to the new course and changed sediment patterns created by previous work. The history of the Danube around Vienna is dominated by such struggles. Before channelization, long stretches of the river meandered through wide alluvial floodplains. Upstream of Vienna, in the Machland, floods caused the navigable channel to change frequently. Over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, people made repeated attempts to regulate these channels. In the 1820s, the main river channel was moving too far south, making river traffic difficult. Engineers therefore blocked this arm, rechanneling the water into the northern arm. The resulting bank erosion then forced them to dig a new channel through the central island. While this straightened the shipping channel, the increased water flow deposited more sediment further downstream, creating new problems there. The navigable channel was only stabilized after further channelization in 1925.²²

Even the present shape of the Danube delta, like the deltas of other major European rivers—the Ebro, Rhône, and Po—was created as an unintended consequence of widespread deforestation.²³ The delta began to form during the Holocene, following an increase in the sea level of the Black Sea. But, because of a chain of events that started with the territorial expansion of the Roman Empire, the delta grew to its present size and shape only during the last two millennia.²⁴ Between the first and third centuries CE, population density in the Roman Empire increased, peaking in about 250 CE. This growth

drove significant forest clearances which caused widespread soil erosion. In turn, this resulted in rivers carrying an increased sediment load which they deposited in the sea, and so the deltas grew. During the first centuries CE, seaward erosion of one of the lobes of the Danube delta, the Sinoe lobe, moved sediment southward, creating a lagoon. By the seventh century, this lagoon had closed off the harbor of the Greco-Roman coastal town of Histria, which had relied on clear access to the sea, ultimately causing its demise.²⁵ Population growth and land-use practices thousands of kilometers from the Danube delta affected people's abilities to trade in the Black Sea.

It is this energy of rivers—their flow—that sets riverine landscapes apart from other types of wetland.²⁶ Humans use the energy, the water, and the resources that rivers can provide, but rivers respond to human activities in often unexpected and uncontrollable ways.²⁷ Humans and rivers are entangled. While rivers are changed and exploited by humans, they also have the capacity to alter human societies. The Danube of the late Roman period was far more than a line on a map that simply marked a political boundary. It was an active participant in the lives of those who lived along its banks.

Understanding the Danube in the Past

Along the Danube, extensive channelization projects since the mid-nineteenth century and the construction of the Iron Gates hydroelectric dams in the twentieth century have fundamentally changed the riverine landscape, so that most stretches today would have been unrecognizable in late antiquity. Between 1870 and 1875, the Danube in Lower Austria, and specifically in Vienna, was aggressively regulated. The engineering program included the construction of a new river channel and flood defenses. A similar project began in Hungary in 1882 and included the entire stretch of the river to the Iron Gates, a dramatic gorge that separates the middle from the Lower Danube.²⁸ Regulation continued throughout the twentieth century, culminating in the construction of the large hydroelectric power station at the Iron Gates in 1977.

To gain an understanding of the riverine landscape prior to these alterations, we have to make use of the tools of historical geography: archaeological evidence, old maps, and historical accounts. Archaeological evidence for the geomorphology of the Danube highlights changes over time. It makes use of sediment cores and remote sensing techniques such as the analysis of LIDAR (light detection and ranging) and satellite imagery to track changes in river channels, flooding events, and riparian vegetation, and how these relate to

human occupation.²⁹ Pollen cores and archaeobotanical evidence can inform us about the riverine ecology in particular areas.

Historical maps, on the other hand, provide a snapshot of the river course at a particular point in time as well as often showing an idealized landscape. While the Danube has been shown on maps since antiquity, its topography has only been represented in some detail since the advent of modern cartography. For the Upper Danube, the earliest maps with some degree of spatial accuracy date from the seventeenth century.³⁰ They were commissioned to determine land ownership and also to plan early channelizations. These maps are often schematic, but they provide a good general picture of the riverine landscape prior to extensive alterations. Nevertheless, the already large number of small alterations—mills, bridges, weirs—that are shown serve as an important reminder that the Danube has not existed in a pristinely natural state for a long time. Over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Middle Danube was comprehensively mapped by several military surveys of the Habsburg Empire. While the maps of the First Survey, completed between 1763 and 1787, were still somewhat impressionistic, the Second and Third surveys (completed between 1806 and 1887) provide exceptional detail.³¹ The lower and middle sections of the Danube, in particular those that lay within the Ottoman empire, became a focus of exploration in the early eighteenth century. Luigi Fernando Marsigli, an Italian aristocrat, had been a military engineer in the service of the Habsburg empire. Following his dismissal, he turned his efforts to scientific exploration. In 1726 he published the *Danubius Pannonico-Mysicus*, an expansive work in six volumes on the history, geography, and natural history of the Danube.³² This provides some of the earliest maps and illustrations of the riverine landscapes, as well as documenting archaeological sites.

By comparing maps from different time periods, as well as modern satellite imagery, we can trace areas of the riverine landscape where the river course changed frequently, indicating reaches that were particularly dynamic. We cannot know the exact course of the river in antiquity from these maps, but we can deduce its long-term behavior and how it might have intersected with the populations living along its banks.

The Riverscape Before Channelization

The Danube is commonly divided into three parts: the Upper Danube from its source to the Devín Gate (near modern Bratislava in Slovakia); the Middle Danube from there round the Danube bend where the river turns southward

toward the Iron Gates gorges; and the Lower Danube from the Iron Gates to the delta in Romania. On its course of almost 3,000 kilometers the river flows through constantly changing landscapes.

The headwaters of the Danube are in the Black Forest of southwest Germany, a region of jagged karst limestone. Curiously, the underlying geology is so porous here that some of the water of the as yet small stream drains underground toward the nearby Rhine. For about 150 days each year, the riverbed is completely dry.³³ The river then winds its way northeast, through narrow valleys interspersed with floodplains on its right bank, along the foothills of the Suabian Jura, until modern-day Regensburg, the Roman legionary fort of *Castra Regina*. The modern river becomes navigable from the confluence of the river Iller at Ulm, and this was probably the same in the past.

From Regensburg onward, the Danube turns southeast, continuing in this direction until the great Danube bend. It meanders through an area of fertile loess soils, intensively cultivated since the Neolithic (fig. 1.1).³⁴ The Upper Danube is fed by swift rivers carrying Alpine meltwater. The longest is the Inn, whose icy, milky-green waters rise in the Swiss Alps. The Inn is strongly affected by seasonal meltwater and often floods where it discharges into the Danube in modern Passau, the Roman fort of *Boiotro*. When in flood, its waters sometimes back up the waters of the Danube and cause the stream of the latter to reverse. Due to its steep gradient and fast current, the Inn was used for timber rafting from the Middle Ages onward, if not earlier.

Beyond Passau in Germany, stretches of branching and braided channels were interspersed with breakthrough sections where the Danube carved its way through steeply incised valleys.³⁵ In the wider floodplains, the river channels moved frequently, creating islands. Shifting gravel banks, especially during periods of low water, could make navigation difficult.³⁶ The topography of the breakthrough sections, on the other hand, has changed little since antiquity. The treacherous passage past the aptly named village of Struden (“rapids”) was known to be dangerous for shipping even in Roman times (plate 1.1).³⁷

The Morava is a major tributary to the north that rises in the Śnieżnik Mountains, on the modern border of the Czech Republic and Poland. Brown and slow-moving, it meanders gently through a large floodplain before meeting the Danube at the Devín Gate. The course of the Morava was one of the amber trade routes that connected the Mediterranean with the Baltic, in this case via the river Oder, which also has its source in the mountains of Moravia but from there flows north.

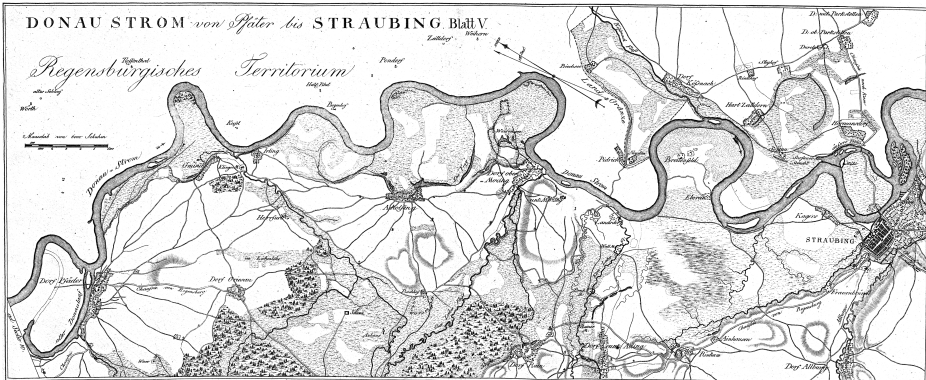


FIGURE 1.1. A historical map of a section of the Upper Danube near the town of Straubing (1806–08). Loess terraces can be seen to the south of the river.

The Middle Danube begins downstream of the breakthrough section of the Devín Gate. Here its waters once dispersed into a large inland delta. At Bratislava the Danube split into numerous arms which created large islands.³⁸ The Great Danube, the Malý (Lesser) Danube to its north, and the Moson Danube to the south were major branches, and their meanders and braids, interspersed with stagnant backwaters and oxbow lakes created an unsettling environment (fig. 1.2):

The Greater and Lesser Schitt Islands, as they are commonly called, are like islands of Deception or a kind of Labyrinth. Because they are completely flooded like marshes, those making a path through them are easily prone to lose their way. And then when they seek to return to the path, they are surrounded by water on all sides. And they do not know a way out except at great risk to their life.

If the inhabitants, especially those who live on low ground, foresee that the rising Danube will cover almost everything with its waves, they are accustomed to moving to higher lands to protect themselves from the damage [caused by] the waters. Nature divided the island with an almost infinite [number of] canals.³⁹

Prior to regulation, the reedy shallow Lake Neusiedl/Fertő, to the south of the Moson Danube, was also part of an extensive area of marshland, the Wasen/Hanság still visible on the Habsburg survey maps. Even today it is one of the largest floodplain forests of central Europe.⁴⁰

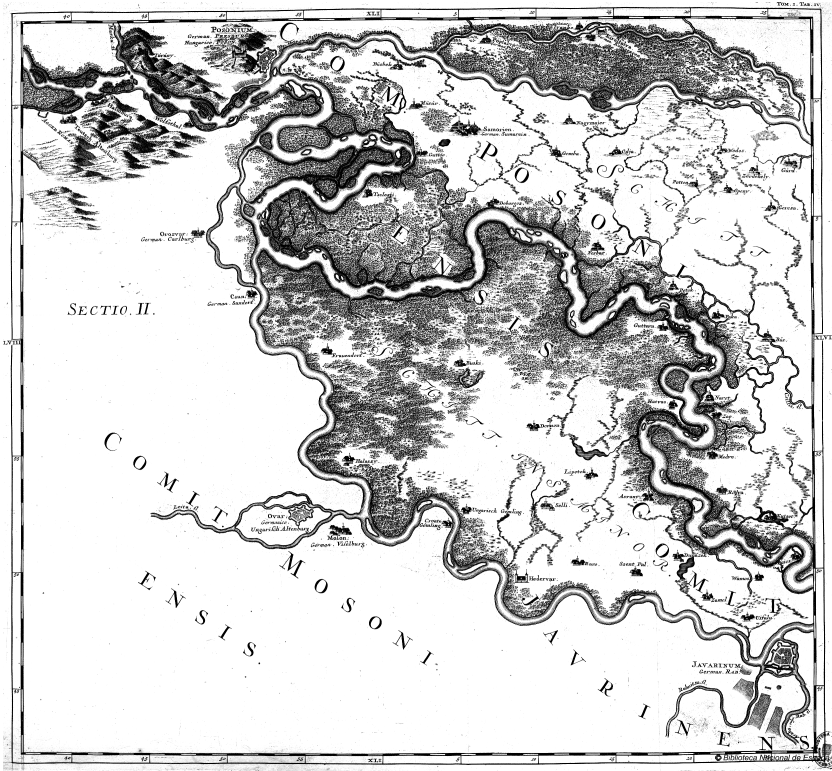


FIGURE 1.2. Marsigli's map of the Schitt (or Rye) Islands from 1726.

Beyond Esztergom in Hungary, at the great Danube bend, the river turns southward. It then passes through the Great Hungarian Plain, branching, meandering, and frequently creating large islands.⁴¹ The main tributaries here are the Tisza, Drava, and Sava. During the last Ice Age, the Danube drained further to the east, into the valley of what would later become the Tisza. The characteristic bisection of the Pannonian Basin by two parallel rivers, the Danube and the Tisza, only developed at the end of that period.⁴² The Danube-Tisza interfluvium in the heart of the Great Hungarian Plain is a landscape of shifting sand dunes beneath big skies. In the later Middle Ages there were sandy grasslands and open forests here.⁴³ Archaeobotanical evidence from the third- to fourth-century settlement site of Kiskundorozsma-Nagyszék, on the banks of the Tisza in Csongrád County, suggests that the environment close to the river was a diverse mosaic of waterlogged meadows, pastures, and open woodland.⁴⁴ Indeed, extensive areas of the floodplains of the river Tisza

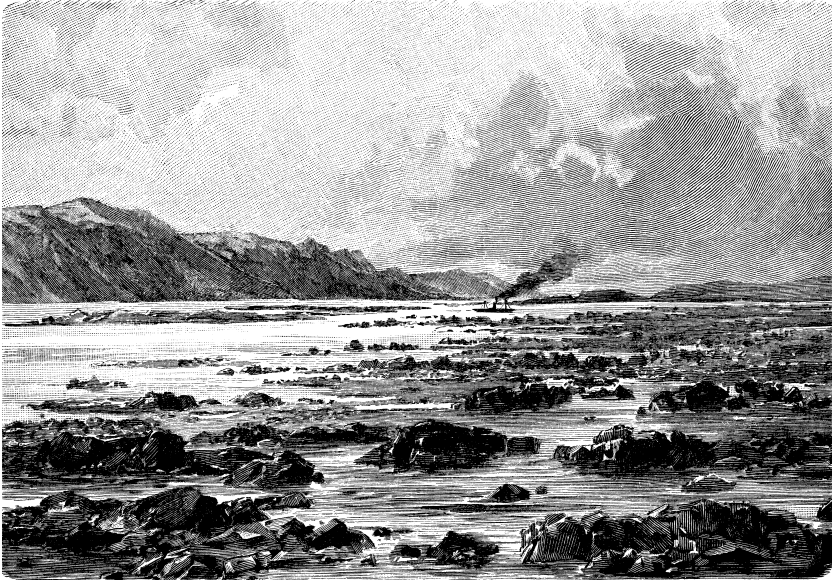


FIGURE 1.3. An engraving of the Iron Gates from 1909, before the dam was built. Treacherous rocks abounded.

were permanently or periodically inundated, and much of the Danube floodplain was also fenland.⁴⁵ Both the Drava and Sava rise in the eastern Alps and extended from there many hundreds of kilometers through Roman territory toward the Middle Danube. They provided important routes toward Aquileia and other cities on the Adriatic Sea. The Drava joins the Danube south of modern Szekszárd, while the Sava meets it at Belgrade. At the confluence of Drava and Danube, the marshy plain is vast.

The Danube finds a way between the southern Carpathians and the northern Balkan mountains at the Iron Gates gorges, a series of dramatic canyons and cataracts. Since the 1970s, the Iron Gate I hydroelectric dam has raised the water in the gorges by 35 meters and caused elevated water tables as far as 150 kilometers upstream. The past land surface in the gorges is now completely flooded, but engravings show the numerous rocky outcrops and small islands that made passage through the Iron Gates so dangerous (fig. 1.3).

Downstream of the Iron Gates, the Lower Danube opens out to a great floodplain, now on average eight kilometers wide.⁴⁶ Here there have been almost no channelization measures. The river channel is braided with numerous islands and the riverbanks are covered in marshes, deciduous forest, and open

grassland. Along its last stretch, the Danube swings north again, forming a huge wetland with the two large islands of Balta Ialomiței and Balta Braila. By this point, the main channel is vast, often over a kilometer wide.⁴⁷ On its southern and eastern bank, a great terrace overlooks the river and the plain of Wallachia beyond. Here the Danube is joined by tributaries winding their way south from the far distant Carpathians. Large reedy marshlands flooded seasonally, expanding dramatically in times of severe flooding. Arid grasslands on both sides of the Danube connected with the great steppe corridor along the Black Sea.⁴⁸ Where the Danube turns east again, toward the delta, it is met by the Prut, its longest tributary on its left bank which rises on the eastern side of the Carpathian Mountains.

The Danube finally flows into the Black Sea at its delta, through three major distributaries, the Chilia, Sulina, and Sfântu Gheorghe, which each create their own highly dynamic deltaic environment (fig. 1.4). The three channels have changed over time, with Sfântu Gheorghe being the main branch in antiquity, whereas Chilia and Sulina are used for shipping now. The watery landscape of the delta changes constantly. The river deposits silts from far upstream while the Black Sea currents simultaneously erode the delta's edges. This erosion and the transportation of sediments by coastal currents created lagoons that eventually became cut off from the coast.⁴⁹ Today, more than half of the delta is covered in water and there are numerous channels, lakes, and islands (plate 1.3).⁵⁰ The vegetation consists largely of wetland plants, but there are also areas of alluvial forests and grasslands. The delta is a haven for migratory birds, including the Dalmatian pelican, which once ranged as far as Britain.

North of the Danube delta, along the coast, several other great rivers discharge into the Black Sea, having traversed the plains of eastern Europe: the Dniester, Southern Bug (or Buh), and Dnieper (or Dnipro). Together, the Danube, its tributaries, and these neighboring rivers formed an enormous network of routes. Travelers navigated this system by boat, or on foot or horseback along roads or trackways near the riverbanks, as well as on other routes that formed portages and low passes across intervening land.

Life on the River

As should by now be apparent, along many stretches of the Danube the landscape was unstable. Channels changed frequently and navigation could not always be relied upon. This was compounded by floods and ice. The extent of flooding in antiquity is very difficult to determine since we do not have annual

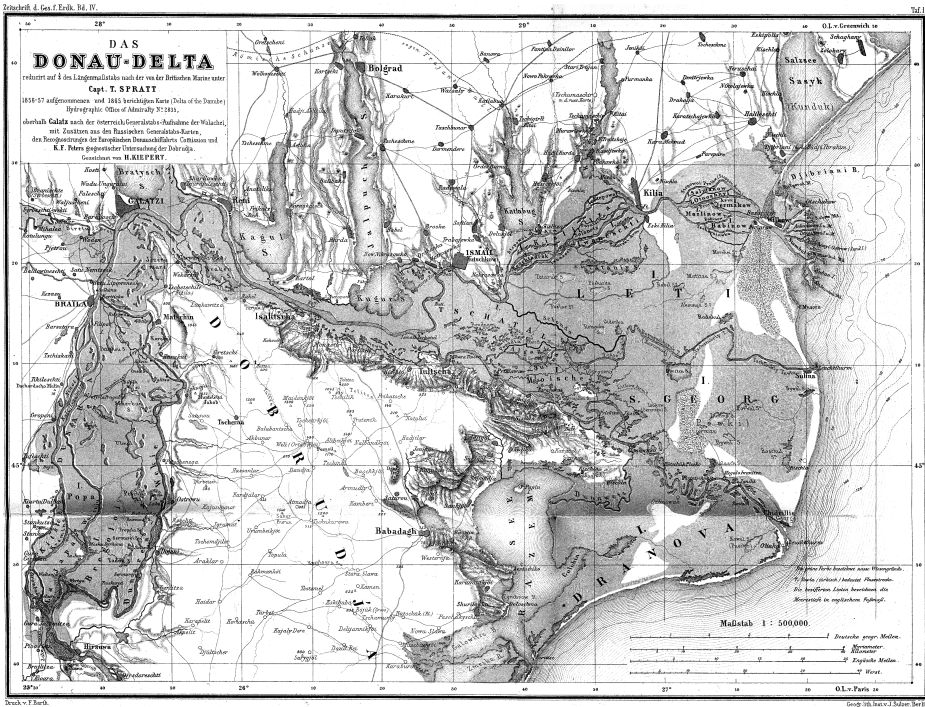


FIGURE 1.4. A map of the Danube delta from 1867 showing numerous lakes and channels.

records, such as those that were kept in the later Middle Ages.⁵¹ But tree-ring data and other proxy evidence indicate that summer hydroclimate in central and eastern Europe changed considerably during the first to fifth centuries CE. Summer rainfall increased significantly throughout the late second century, while temperatures dropped. Temperatures then cooled over the fourth and fifth centuries, while precipitation also decreased. The decades from the 260s to the 290s CE and again from the 430s to the 450s were particularly dry.⁵²

In addition to archaeological and cartographic evidence, numerous accounts of travel, shipping, and trade, and of floods and ice from periods prior to channelization offer us snapshots of life alongside and on this fast-flowing, changeable river. In his expansive work on the history of shipping and rafting on the Upper Danube, Ernst Neweklowsky provides an account of the complexities of river navigation in almost ethnographic detail.⁵³ The most commonly used vessel was a *zille*, a local boat type first documented in the fifteenth

century (plate 1.2). It was unique to the Upper and Middle Danube, with a flat bottom and steering rudders shipped at bow and stern.⁵⁴ These boats came in various sizes and were used for all transport requirements: to take people to church, for fishing, to transport salt and livestock. They could also be used as ship mills or joined together to form a temporary bridge.⁵⁵ We know of boats in the Roman period that had very similar functions, but they were built differently. Rafts primarily transported timber. They were dismantled at their destination, and the timber was sold, requiring the raftspeople to return home on foot. In addition to long-distance river travel, Neweklowsky also describes numerous small craft that served the population living on the riverbanks. Remains of dugout boats dating to the Bronze Age have been discovered in a number of Bavarian and Austrian lakes, and they are documented on the Danube as late as the mid-seventeenth century.⁵⁶

River pilots had to be sharply observant and skilled at handling their craft. Travel downstream was a very different experience from traveling upstream, requiring good boat handling skills and knowledge of the shifting topography of the river. Mark Twain writes of the skills required of the river pilots of the Mississippi:

First of all, there is one faculty which a pilot must incessantly cultivate until he has brought it to absolute perfection. Nothing short of perfection will do. That faculty is memory. He cannot stop with merely thinking a thing is so and so; he must know it; for this is eminently one of the “exact” sciences.⁵⁷

Like their counterparts on the Mississippi, Danube pilots had to know the locations of shoals and sandbanks and the behavior of the river at different water levels. Travel upstream on the other hand involved the slow and laborious process of towing craft against the current, using animals or people.

The route through the gorge of “Strudel” and “Wirbel” (literally: rapids and whirlpool) on the Austrian Danube illustrates the high levels of skill required to navigate the river.⁵⁸ Here the river valley narrowed into a gorge that was split by an island (plate 1.1). The main arm—the Struden—was impeded by numerous rocks and required local knowledge to steer through safely. The side arm was safer, but only small craft could use it. Past the Struden, a bend in the river created a dangerous eddy, the Wirbel. Since the seventeenth century, every vessel traveling downstream through Strudel and Wirbel was required to take on a local pilot in the village of Grein who knew how to navigate the passage safely, and craft were only allowed to travel either upstream or downstream at

any given time.⁵⁹ A passage in Adalbert Stifter's historical novel *Witiko* from 1867 describes this perilous journey:

The ship entered a dark gorge similar to what they had traversed below Passau. The river's water flowed more rapidly, pressed by the walls of the gorge. After some time in the gorge, three men from a little wooden house on the bank came out in a wooden boat. They secured the boat to the ship, were given control, and steered the ship past the village of Grein. Downstream of this village the gorge became even wilder with fortified towers on top of mighty crags, even one in the river itself. Over the prow they could see a very treacherous stretch of water as white as snow, rapids and even a whirlpool. Everyone assembled on the ship's roof, and when they reached the white stretch they began to pray loudly. The three pilots kept careful watch, working constantly, guiding the ship into the rapidly flowing deep current between the island tower and the white stretch, foaming and raging water over rocks. The ship went quickly down the deep channel, was guided around a crag behind which they could see the whirlpool extending out in great rings. The pilots guided the ship past the periphery of the whirlpool, then relaxed, keeping watch forward and letting the ship glide into the broader calmer water. Everyone's prayer of supplication changed into a prayer of thanksgiving. The pilots received their pay, got back into their boat, and rowed to shore. Another little boat came up with people holding out a wooden bucket on a pole begging for alms for the poor and a gift to a church dedicated to the protection of ships.⁶⁰

In the following chapters, I will explore shipping on the Danube during the Roman period, but the more recent evidence presented here should serve as a reminder that shipbuilding and shipping are both specific to their time and embedded in long-term environmental contexts. The course of the river was changeable, but the difficulties of navigating rapids and shoals and the immense effort of upstream transportation were experiences that endured.

A Changing River

The Danube is a dynamic river, part natural, part social. This is starkly visible in the modern, extensively modified river course. During the last 150 years, engineers have fixed the course of the river into one predictable channel to enable shipping and to keep the populations living on floodplains safe from

flooding. The riverine environment too has changed considerably. The extensive marshlands and meadows along the riverbanks have been drained, and the construction of embankments has allowed agricultural land to extend into the floodplains that had been covered in forests and wetlands in earlier times. But the devastating floods of 2013 showed that engineering cannot guarantee safety, and that any alteration upstream can have unintended effects downstream.

Before its channelization, the landscape of the Danube was far less stable. Along many reaches, the floodplain was wider than today, and the river frequently changed course within it. Here too humans affected the river in ways that caused unforeseen consequences. The river provided a means of transportation, food, and even energy, but it was also an enduring source of disturbance for the societies living along its banks.⁶¹

The affordances of the river, both predictable—the nature of the stream, the changing course, the consequent difficulties of navigation—and unforeseen—floods, ice, erosion—affected people in ways that were both specific to a time and place and part of an enduring experience shared by populations living by the river. In the following chapter, I will explore more specifically the place of the Danube in the political geography of the Roman Empire and in the Roman worldview. Was the Danube where the empire ended?

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