

THE LOWER DANUBE IN PAGES OF HISTORY AND LITERATURE

Elena Teodoreanu

Ecological University of Bucharest, Bd. Lascar Catargiu nr. 24-26, sc.A. ap. 16, Bucuresti, Romania,
Email elena.teodoreanu@gmail.com

Abstract

The paper examines some information on the Danube River in their lower part, from ancient historians, from Romanian chroniclers and Turkish chroniclers who accompanied the troops when attacking Romanian countries. Also we have the data reported by foreign travelers on Romanian territory, of which with the passage of time, are more numerous: Polish, Austrians and Hungarians diplomats, Catholic priests. For example we have interesting data from Syrian traveler Paul of Aleppo or Turkish chronicler Evlia Celebi. The information refers specifically to periods of overflow of the Danube and damaging floods, or droughts when shrinking waters could and river goes on foot. Most data refer to periods when the Danube froze strong, especially in the centuries that constituted the Little Ice Age (approximately Fourteenth century until the mid-nineteenth century) opportunity for the Ottoman armies crossed the Danube on the ice, to plunder the territories of north of the Danube. Finally, it presents some descriptions of Romanian writers who loved Danube swamps, delta, among which Mihail Sadoveanu and George Topârceanu.

Keywords: Lower Danube, ancient historians, foreign travelers, Turkish chroniclers, Romanian writers

*“Wherever you would see it in this country
the Danube is (...) like a human being who has
seen and suffered much and his face showing
all the scars left by his struggles.”
George Vâlsan*

1. INTRODUCTION

A river is a way of communication among closer or remoter regions; on the other hand, it is also a natural boundary-line between two or several countries. And the Danube makes no exception either. It runs through Germany, Austria, Hungary, Slovakia, Romania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Serbia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, crossing no less than four capitals-cities: Vienna, Bratislava, Budapest and Belgrade. From oldest times it was a transport waterway which linked the riparian states, a role be increased today after the Danube-Main Rhine and Danube-Black Sea canals have been commissioned. The Lower Danube has always been a line of delimitation between the peoples living on its left-and-right hand side banks and some of the wars between these peoples used be waged mostly during the heavy winters, when the River was sufficiently frozen to let the troops cross it more easily.

2. METHODS

Informations about the Danube, though quite brief, are due to the historians of Ancient Times, later on to the Romanian and Turkish chroniclers who accompanied the Ottoman armies using to invade the Danubian territories. Their references tell about periods of overflows and disastrous floods on the River, or recall the storms that endangered those travelling by ship. However, most data recount episodes of a severely frozen Danube, mostly during the Little Ice Age (around the 14th to the second half of the 19th cc). (Le Roy Ladurie, 1983). It was only in the 20th century that we have highly poetic pages left by writers in love with the Danubian landscape generally, and with its Delta, in particular.

Information on the Lower Danube coming from the ancient writers in rather scarce.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Herodotus for instance, narrates the expedition (in 514 BC) to the mouths of the Danube led by the Persian king Darius against the Scythians.

The Greek historian *Arrian* recalls the blitzkrieg started in 335 BC by Alexander Macedon against the North Danubian tribes.

In 326, *Zopyrion*, one of Alexander's generals, adventured himself in the steppe area north of the Black Sea, but being caught in terrible storm, he and his Macedonian army, unable to cross the Danube, perished in its flood waters. This incident is known from the account given by the Roman historian *Quintus Curtius Rufus*.

Between Lysimachus, the South Danubian king of Thrace at the time of Alexander the Macedon and Dromichaetes, the ruler of the North-Danubian Geto-Dacians tribes, a conflict broke out in 306 BC and the former was defeated (source: *Diodor of Sicily*).

In 178 BC, a Bastarnae army, together with numerous Geto-Dacians, crossed the Danube and attacked the Thracians, but an unusual storm would prove favourable to the latter, obliging the invaders to turn back north of the River (see historian *Titus Livius*).

In 74 BC, the Roman general Scribonius Curio reached the Danube, somewhere in the mountainous area of Banat, but frightened by the dark woods that opened before his eyes, he stopped on the River banks. (all authors quoted by Daicoviciu, 1968)

In 10 BC, the Dacians crossed the frozen river to attack the recently formed Roman province. According to historian *Xenopol* (1888), the Dacians were bold warriors who used to fall upon the Romans south of the Danube. Such an attack launched in the winter of AD 85/86 defeating the Romans, made the Roman Emperor Domitian invade the North-Danubian territory in the summer of 87. The battle took place at Tapae, in the Bistra Corridor (the Iron Gate of Transylvania), but on their way to Sarmizegetusa the Romans were defeated.

Again at Tapae, but this time in 101, the Roman Emperor Trajan emerged victorious against the Dacian king. The Adamclissi battle that followed tipped the balance in favour of the Dacians who crossed a frozen Danube to attack the Roman garrisons in Dobrogea. Unfortunately, the ice gave way and the Dacian horsemen drowned (see Trajan's Column in Rome - Italy).

The two important Daco-Roman wars waged in AD 101/102 and 105/106 are recounted by Roman historian *Dio Cassius*. In order to reach the Dacian territory, the Romans would have a bridge built across the Danube east of the Iron Gate and close to the present town of Drobeta-Turnu Severin. It is the famous Trajan's Bridge commissioned by the Emperor to architect Apollodor of Damascus, a proof of the importance attached to the River (Daicoviciu, 1968).

What else is known about the Danube from Ancient Times? Archaeological diggings made in various present/day localities adjoining the River show evidence about an active population there between the 4th and the early 13th centuries, when documents keep silent for some 900 years, "the dark millennium" in Neagu Djuvara's words, (1999) about the lands that had existed in today's Romanian. As a result, some foreign historians advance a theory whereby the Romanian people was formed South of the Danube, the whole population having withdrawn there together with Emperor Aurelianus' armies in AD 271. So in their views, the territory north of the Danube being left empty, the migrant barbarian peoples coming the Asian deserts could settle there and, as such, have full rights on the territories around the Carpathian Mountains.

But archaeological discoveries refute these assertions.

The ruins of the Roman city of *Halmirys*, discovered at Murighiol, that is 1.5 km south of the Sfântul Gheorghe Arm, functioned up to the beginning of the 7th century; the ruins of a Getic necropolis held in the crypt of the basilica the relics of the oldest Christian martyrs attested in Dobrogea, namely Epictet and Astion.

Also on the right bank of the Danube, at 2 km from Isaccea, stand the ruins of the Roman castrum *Noviodunum* with numerous funerary mounds from the Roman fortified settlement. The settlement survived invasions and beginning with the latter half of the 13th century became a true Byzantine town.

After the devastating Tartar invasion of 1241-1242, the presence of the Golden Horde is attested here in 1340. The year 1420 marked the Ottoman conquest and it is just from this place that the Turks sent their armies against Moldavia. During the 18th and 19th cc wars against the Ottomans, it was a place of transition for the Russian troops going south.

Somewhere on the Danube bank again (either near Ostrov settlement, but rather in the neighborhood of Isaccea) there stood a Genoese, then Byzantine city, *Vicina*, documented in 1085, but deserted in the 14th century. Its ruins, probably lying under water, have not been found yet, although many Romanian historians and archaeologists looked into this mystery.

Lycostomas ("Two wolf Mouths" in translation) a mediaeval Danubian port founded by the Genoese either close to Chilia, or to Vâlcov, disappeared after Dobrogea had been conquered by the Turks (1418).

In the Danube Valley, one still can see the ruins of the mediaeval city of Giurgiu, 14th- century structure built by Mircea the Old, on the site of an older city, a strategically important point at the Danube against the Ottomans, with a history similar to that of Turnu (Măgurele) city.

Severin City (13th cent.) lies a few meters away from the Roman Castrum of Drobeta, which guarded the northern end of Trajan's Bridge and functioned as a garrison until the 6th century. Destroyed by Barbarians, later rebuilt by the Ioanit Knights, it resisted until 1524 when the Ottomans troops pulled it down. Inside the place are the vestiges of a church.

The city that had existed on the Ada Kaleh Island, a place full of olive trees and wild vine, named *Cyraunis* by Herodotus, had been inhabited since Antiquity. Documented by the Teutonic Knights in 1430, it played a major role in the conflict between the Hapsburg Empire, who built a stronghold there, and the Ottoman Empire. In 1918/1920, the island became Romanian territory. In 1970, when the Iron Gate reservoir was being built, the island was over flown and the city dislodged on Simian Island, but its importance was lost, the residents choosing to move elsewhere.

Capidava, between Hârșova and Cernavoda, was a fortified Geto-Dacian centre, then a Roman garrison founded by Emperor Trajan on the Danube defense line. Destroyed by the Goths in the 3rd century and remade in the next one, it was subsequently turned into an Episcopal See. Rebuilt by the Byzantines in the 10th century, it was abandoned in 1036 after being set ablaze by the Petchenegs.

Let's recall the fortifications of the Roman-Byzantine city of *Carsium* near Hârșova, presumably destroyed during the battles between the Ottoman and the Tsarist empires; also in the vicinity of Hârșova stood the Roman city of *Cius* (Hisarlâc), destroyed most likely by barbarian invasions in the 6th century; *Troesmis*, a Getae city in the north-west of Dobrogea, on the bank of the Danube, near Balta, existed until the 7th century; the Getae city of *Aegyssus*, close Tulcea Town, conquered by the Romans (1st century) is known until the 13th century. (Fig.1)

Information on the state of the Danube in the Middle Ages is found in the writings of Turkish chroniclers, (Guboglu et al., 1966-1967) and later on in the accounts of some foreign travelers. Thus, we know that during the Little Ice Age (1300 or 1350-1850) this part of Europe experienced very cold winters, a thick ice layer covering the Danube, which enabled the Turkish troops south of the River to cross it more easily.

Here is what *Sa'adeddin Mehmed Hodja Effendi*, a Turkish chronicler, wrote about the incursion in winter 1461-1462:

"The Danube was frozen... Making a halt in that place while the Islamic army passed very carefully (on the frozen Danube) and after fall of night, Tepeș Voivode attacked the Islamic army, emerged victorious... and killed ...the Islamic fighters worth being pitied by Allah, His Name be praised." *Constantin Mihailovitch*, a Serb janissary from Ostrovitza, makes mention of that incursion: "And setting out, Voivode Dracul the Young gathered an army, it was winter time and the Voivode with all his men went across the Danube".



Figure 1. Old fortress on the lower Danube

No milder was the next winter (1463) either: “the crocodile of frost swallowed up the warmth of the air and the Danube froze, the snow on the roads would reach up to the horses’ waist”. (a Turkish chronicler cited by Zolnay, cf. Cernovodeanu, Binder, 1993).

Two decades later, in 1482, the landscape had not changed and our South Danubian neighbours would again take advantage of it as the Turkish chronicler *Mehmed Neşri* tells us: “By will of Allah that winter was a very harsh one, indeed. And that expedition took place just in such a winter, horses were stuck could not leave the track, snow on the roads would reach as high as the horses’ saddle. Also, much thick ice on the Danube. The troops went on and sat down on ice. Immediately, the Padishah called out: ”Cities be plundered”. That day the battle continued until time of night.

Our information on the next centuries comes from Turkish and Romanian chroniclers, as well as from foreign travelers.

The Moldavian chronicler *Grigore Ureche* (Ghermanschi, 1987) woefully writes about the 1539 events: “On the other hand, the Tartars filled the country, slavery and fires, the Turks crossed the Danube... what will people do to live with so many hardships that befell the countries, that a lot of wickedness and wastefulness gathered upon the countries”.

Foreigners, courageous enough to embark upon a voyage on the Danube, give us a description of the storms met on the way (Holban et al. 1966-2000)

John Newberie, an English merchant, narrates his adventures during such a voyage: “On the 6th of April, 1582 we left the gulf near Terapsio, on board a ship...that was to sail up the Danube River. In the morning of the seventh day, a east north/east wind started to blow, entailing a big storm, so we returned to Sozopolis Town (Bulgaria) which is a good harbour...In that lousy weather, some in our group would cry, others would shout; also the foresail was tattered by that violent wind and we were in great danger because for a long time no one could bring down the mainsail”.

Also *Franco Sivoni*, the Italian secretary of Voivode Petru Cercel experienced a storm on the bank of the Danube. On the 15th of August, 1583: “When I crossed the river (Danube) the weather was calm, so almost all of us crossed on the other side lest His Highness (Petru Cercel) together with the Sultan’s Great shield-bearer, when all of a sudden a storm, from the north-east (Greco et *levanter*) broke out shedding sky-high water, looking as if the whole world wishes to sink. But, towards the evening there were signs of storm lull... he decided to go aboard”.

The Wallachian chronicler *Radu Popescu* (Gregorian, 1988) recalls the battle of winter 1595: “The Turks entered the country at Giurgiov ...and Michael Voivode ... struck them unexpectedly and very badly ... they crossed the ice-covered Danube at Maroten and started falling upon them, the Pasha and many Turks perished.”

Turkish chroniclers themselves would write about the battles of the time:

Ibrahim Pecevi: “... that winter (1594/95), the rebels from the unruly Wallachia, crossing the frozen Danube together with that madman of Michael, wrought havoc in the small towns of Ruschuk.”

Kiatip Celebi, the 16th of February, 1595: “the Wallachian rebels, together with the sinful Michael, crossing the Danube, set the town of Ruschuk and Turtukaia on fire.”

Joris van der Does, the ambassador of Queen Elisabeth to the Sublime Porte, lived through the harsh winter of 1517-1598: ”That day which was the 12th of December, the Boreal started blowing so stormy and violently, now and then mixed with rain, that the Turks, our companions, were obliged to return to town, unless they would have chosen rather to die, as they said. And that storm brought about so much frost that all of us, with carts and horses, would be turned to ice, or rather ice statues ... Thence, we came through very flat fields, named “Tatarskie polea” by the locals, to Babadag, formerly a very large town as suggested by its ruins ... farther on we reached the village of Mănăstirea (probably of Celtic origin) which lies a mile away from the Danube ...we entered the village of Oblochitza or Isaccea as the Turks call it. As soon as the Danube was covered with a layer of ice, we crossed the frozen surface on the very Sunday of January 1...

Aloisio Radibrat, a Ragusan diplomatic courier, ambassador in the service of the Hapsburg Empire, was caught in dramatic events on the 8th of February 1603: After the Danube had frozen, it was decided to cross it over to the other bank to plunder the enemy, but because of difficulties to bring soldiers from afar, and of too much snowfall and lack of provisions that hampered feeding also the horses, action delayed so long that no sooner had we crossed the River that the ice began thawing ...our troops launched such a fierce attack on the city (Silistra) that its inmates, Turks and Tartars, failing to resist ran away through another gate that opened to the Danube. But, as the ice was pretty thin, most of them drowned.

Paul of Aleppo, Archdeacon of Damascus, secretary and companion to Patriarch Macarius (the 3rd) of Syria, travelled to the Romanian Countries for seven long years (1652-1659), noting down many interesting data in his diary:

1656-1657 – “we reached Târgoviște (town) in the evening. The winter of that year was awful and hard for peasants and cattle. The snow would fall until the first day of Lent and many cattle died from lack of fodder; the Danube River itself froze three times, the first time the ice was about three-hand thick (ca. 75 cm, o. n.). Then, some of it began thawing, but it would freeze again for the second time and then, snow falling, it froze for the third time, until ice was nine-hand thick (2.25 m, o.n.). In order to get water from the River the inhabitants had to dig kind of wells through the ice layer. They say that a like event had not happened for the past thirty years.” (Cioran, 1900)

It was in the same period that an Ottoman traveler, *Evlia Celebi*, historian, geographer and writer, found himself close to the Danube, and the narratives he left us are extremely picturesque: Winter 1659-1660 - “and when the Danube, dragging with it ice packs from as far as Germany, and piling them up near the city walls, despite their being eighty arms high, many a time these ice packs would destroy lots of houses... Pitching tents on the frozen Danube, many thousands of worthy people from Silistra used to have a good time therein, eating and drinking. Singing *meterhanelele* (Turkish tunes) all young people were skating at the sound of music, offering an amazing show ...If, by chance, it is the time of the Bairam Feast, then big swings are mounted in which all those in love would move back and forth and enjoy themselves, the Danube being six-seven-hands high (1.50 – 1.75 m, a.n.). We also know that in the years when a terrible frost was raging, the River froze also ten-hands high (2.5 m, a.n.), turning into a kind of wall. A wonder of Allah’s wisdom. Many fishermen, making a hole in the ice, catch beluga and sturgeons weighing up to one hundred oca (traditional Romanian measure about 120 kg., o.n.) ... The people of Silistra preserve parts of these ice packs and use them in July by plunging them into a Murano mirror-clear sour cherry stewed dish and drink its content to cool themselves. Many others would gather together in large groups, bring earth, place it on ice and make fires on which whole sheep and cows are roasted, then they eat and have a good time. The inhabitants of this town are they grown-ups or children, are not afraid of winter cold.

Situated in the middle of the fifth climate zone, winters here are awful, yet, all the inhabitants are healthy.”

The 25th of November, 1659 – “By the Will of Allah, frost got harsher. The Danube got stuck frozen in one night alone. Then, the troops, numberless as the sea, who were on the other side of the Danube used the occasion ... the Muslims crossed the Danube on ice at Giurgiu....wrought havoc in all the villages, leaving nowhere ...either grass, or living being.”

In 1701, *Friar Simperto* started on a voyage on the Danube, from Augsburg to the East, and mooring on the right bank, noted in his diary:

(23) December, 1699 – “On the 23rd, such a high wind began blowing at night and lasted as violently through the night, pushing the vessels one onto the other and the waves inside, and raging so furiously that roundabout one o’clock in the morning we thought that everything would be destroyed. And indeed, 12 vessels sank, the others being in great danger, so no one could remain therein any longer, this day and the following night, biting frost and snowfall, we spent the night laying or sitting on hard ground under the open sky. And still could not leave because of our ill-luck.

On the 25th, it was Christmas Night... at around three hours and a half the oars were lowered into water. Although we would have gladly celebrated this so very holy day, yet cold and very bad weather and the ice on the Danube pushed us on lest we be caught in the ice. All day long we sailed steadily among ice packs, yet not free of danger, until part of the vessels arrived at Nicopolis ... As the weather was unfavorable, this night again much snow fell and frost set on, ice packs were frequently forming and our vessel had been fully caught at the bank ... so the Danube being frozen through by the hard frost ... we had to leave the ship and find lodgings at Shishtow, a large Turkish settlement.

On the 30th, after mass was offered in a lousy room and breakfast given at 10 o’clock, we started on land through deep snow and without a visible road in sight...”

The Polish envoy, *Rafael Laszezynski*, had experienced unusual events in the spring of 1700: - “March the 5th: I suffered from bad weather, frost and storm, March the 7th, seeing that the Danube starts overflowing, right next day, March the 8th, after mass we were obliged to prepare crossing the river ... it proved a very good decision, because that very day the ice at bank was braking up.

The Austrian lieutenant, *Franz Mihailovics*, by order of the Emperor, embarked upon a voyage on the Danube (Orșova-Galați) to make a military report: the 16th of May, 1783 – Around eight o’clock, a high wind obliged us to anchor for an hour. At three o’clock in the afternoon, we dared start again, but the storm looming ahead made us onboard again ... May the 19th ... - at two in the afternoon at Nicopolis we had to moor somewhere even farther down this town. After the hour of five we intended to sail off-shore, but again storm made us anchor on the flooded left bank; the storm lasted the whole night

May the 21st – Ruschuk. That day, stormy weather prevented us from undertaking anything.....

May the 24th -...Turtukaia, at two in the afternoon we had to onboard because of the storm.

May the 25th -...a violent wind made us anchor at eight o'clock at Rasova ...a horrible storm raged between the hours of three and half past four....

May the 29th -...we left Brăila unde a cool wind, which eventually turned into a storm, so that six hours later we were compelled to anchor on the left bank up the Siret.... at the hour of three, an extremely violent storm came upon us....”

Count Alexandre d'Hauterive, private secretary to Ruler Alexandre Ipsilanti, notes:

February 2/13, 1755, leaving Constantinople – “The Danube is the most beautiful river in Europe. Its waters, now swollen and covered with ice packs, look like the sea waters in the Dardanelle Strait in stormy weather.”

In November 1786, traveler *Jenne Lebrecht* makes a voyage on the Danube and to the Romanian Countries: “The wind continued to blow violently from the NE... growing stronger overnight.

November the 26th – The biting frost froze not only the water in the ship, but also the glass-windows of the cabins.

December the 4th – Fog made us stay on the spot not only that day, but in the next one, too... roundabout eleven hours, fog was so thick that nothing on the bank could be seen....Before a quarter to five we left, but at daybreak, fog became so thick that we were ready to anchor again, but just then two of my vessels came one over the other, putting us in great danger.

At a quarter past five we anchored in the Siret Gulf.... overnight, after ten o'clock, the evening's quiet turned into an awful storm that came from the SE After midnight, the storm changed into heavy rain and at daybreak the wind, blowing from the NE, became ever stronger so that at noon I witnessed again one of the heaviest storms I can remember of, always mixed with rain and hail.... At the hour of three, rain turned into snow and foot-high layer set on, frost was so heavy that all the cabin water would freeze. The north-east wind continued to blow during snowfall as well.

Tuesday, September the 19th, awful storm and blizzard, my sailors refused to haul the vessels into the gulf.”

In the 19th century, the region was plagued with dramatic hydro-climatic events. Here are some of them.

Ștefan Hepites (1898) notes that in the winter of 1820, “ frost was so heavy that, when the Danube waters thawed, Vienna suffered great damage (and further he writes), wolves had entered Bucharest”.

In 1829, winter is harsh, navigation on the Danube was stopped by ice packs, heavy snowfalls, spring was late in coming, winter began in October and lasted until April.

In 1858, again a long and very heavy winter, in January the Danube and the Russian ports at the Black Sea were frozen, violent snowstorms in the Bosphorus and on the Black Sea (*idem*).

Winters are harsh on the banks of the Danube and those who travelled in these parts fully felt them. Obviously, warm blizzard-free winters do exist, embellishing the landscape, but usually travelers do not remember them, just as summers with pleasant temperatures are forgotten.

And lest one should get the impression that the Danube River flows through arctic and inhospitable regions, we would remind you that the warm period of the year, just like the cold one, allows lovers of Nature to have a very agreeable pastime in the Danube Floodplain or in its Delta, engaging in tourism, water sports, fishing or hunting.

From the multitude of pages devoted by Romania writers to describing the beauty of Nature in the proximity of the Danube, we wish to offer the reader a few images:

“The Sun has set; somewhere above the east its reddish glow still lingered on. Vapors from the lake began steaming above the lustrous waves. And the Danube, with its mysterious depths, would stretch out far away around us from that corner of old Danube. The shade would take hold of the willow vaults and of the pathways that cut through the reeds. Those endless waters governing the whole realm meant the rule of the unknown and of mystery....It was a bit of mud; today, it is a floating isle driven by the wind. A night water-bird set on a stalk of reed. And, thus, it slowly steals by like a ghost of the past and of the future. It is kind of symbol of the lake, a life boat...” (*Mihai Sadoveanu*, novelist, 1957).

“Through walls of tall reed, we silently float along water paths with scabby bent, broad lily leaves, a film of ice here and there, loosing ourselves into a maze of lagoons cutting through reed stalks.... Sometimes, unexpectedly, big puddles are seen in the midst of the reeds, mysterious looking-glasses, silent and sheen in the bluish light which begins growing from the east” (*George Topârceanu*, writer and poet, 1971).

4. CONCLUSIONS

The Lower Danube represents one of the largest wetlands in the world, unfortunately much of it destroyed by man's work, e.g. electric waterpower stations, dykes that drained the Danube Floodplain lakes of Greaca, Potelu and Suhaia, which used to retain the flood waters, and were a rich source of fish; the Danube channel-bed deepened in the Iron Gate Sector; drainage systems impairing the ecological functions of wetlands (the Bystroe Canal planned to run through the Ukrainian Danube Delta Biosphere).

In response to these actions on the 5th of June, 2000 the "Lower Danube Green Corridor" Declaration was signed by the Ministries of the Environment from Romania, Bulgaria, the Republic of Moldova, and Ukraine, acknowledging the necessity and responsibility for the conservation and sustainable management of one of the region boasting the greatest biodiversity worldwide. And, we would add, a picturesque regions with a special economic and tourism potential.

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