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**THE DANUBE AS A CULTURAL AND
MYSTICAL CROSS-BORDER**

Dunărea o frontieră trans culturală și mistică

Abstract: *The Danube river can be perceived as a cultural and mythical cross-border in ancient and medieval Balkan history. It has served as a contact point between diverse cultures particularly in the early Middle Ages (IX-XII centuries). The large river splitting the civilized Christian imperial Byzantine world from the “barbarian” and pagan northern cultural area (Scandinavians, Pechenegs, Scythians) is a component of the “water labyrinth” mythologem. The Danube is a mystical space which the real historical hero had to cross in order to achieve his goal. For instance, the Bulgars led by khan Asparuh had to cross it in order to create the state of the Bulgars. In that sense, the Danube river has been considered a border zone between the known space (North for Scandinavians) and the unknown foreign space (the mystical but attractive Byzantine South). This river, the same as the Dnepr for Scandinavians, can be considered a place of trial which the crossing historical hero (Viking chieftain) should overcome to establish in the attractive South (the Byzantine Empire). Hence, this river is a dividing line between the elements of ours and theirs, between us and them. The regions northwards of the Danube were populated by Germanic tribes (and Dacians), whereas the South represented the unknown but the cultural area desired by the Scandinavians who intended to establish in the warmer and richer Byzantine lands. Therefore, the Danube has been deemed by medieval Byzantine chroniclers and modern Bulgarian scholars as a divisive rather than a uniting point. It is simply a border; it does not connect, it divides. So, from a real historical viewpoint the Danube has been considered a dangerous place staying on the path of the migration throughout the axis North-South particularly in the period between IX and XII centuries. And the lower Danube is precisely the part of the river where the abovementioned features most accurately apply.*

Keywords: *Danube River, cultural mythical, Border.*

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INTRODUCTION, ON GENERAL SYMBOLISM OF WATER AREA

Water areas, rivers, seas, lakes have often been perceived as secret spaces of mythological and mystical value in ancient and medieval thought. Water space is one of the fundamental motifs of each mythology, it is complex and polysemantic. Water area is infinite, unlimited. It has got no form; it is unshaped; its elements can penetrate everywhere; water can go to all directions. Water symbolizes fullness, the full set of all potential possibilities of nature¹. Water constitutes *efons et origo*, the source and the beginning of everything². Water is the paramount base for every existence; it is the bosom of each possible state of being. It is also the necessary condition for each growing, development. Water guarantees length of life, it is the creator of power, it is the elixir of immortality. It is the fundament of every cosmic manifestation; Water stands for the real and eternal substance and the sacramental from which all forms of life come up and flourish. It carries out the same function in cosmogony, myth, ritual, iconography and the common structure of all cultural complexes: it precedes every form and lays the foundations of each creation by sustaining it. Water area has played a major role in the ancient Indo-European mythological thought. To point out one example, the Iranians considered the mythical lake Vorukasha a holy water place where the holy three legged and single-horned donkey dwells³. In non-Indo-European mythological beliefs can also be traced the water symbolism as a holy place: for example, the Finns believed that the goddess Ilmatar (Air's Daughter; *ilma=air* in Finnish) walked through the primeval sea where she encountered the primeval duck and created the world.

However, despite this common feature related to all cultures, water zone can divide as well. In ancient and medieval people's mythical and ritual imaginations, water area serves as a border. Crossing that boundary signifies passing into the other (foreign) and even hostile social-cultural area. In that sense, many scholars have interpreted this transition from the own to the strange cultural sphere through the water area as a passage of the hero during the way of his initiation⁴. Water area is a tangled and intricate maze full of dangers that one has to pass to obtain a valuable object (apples of immortality, a source of wisdom, a holy object) from the different world, or the other world. That makes possible the association of water area with the otherworld (the underworld) in different mythological representations. Its significance as a set of secret and complex places

¹ Eliade 2012: 209.

² Eliade 2012: 209-210.

³ Puhvel 1987: 278.

⁴ Campbell 2008: 154.

dividing cultural communities can be perceived as a part of the sophisticated *labyrinth* mythologem⁵. In other words, water area is a part of a challenging road full of dangerous episodes and obstacles the walking hero needs to overcome to achieve his purpose, the common good for his own community and cultural space.

ABOUT THE SYMBOLISM OF DANUBE

1. Danube as a dividing line

In that global sense, the Danube river as every other water pool as well has been from a mythological perspective and semantically deemed as a dangerous and complex zone dividing cultures. It has been reached and crossed by a great number of heroes throughout history. Danube is also a part of the cultural labyrinth where diverse communities clash; some of them collapse, other survive. It has always played a considerable role in people's social, mythical and cultural perceptions about the relationship between the geographical and cultural areas of *periphery* and *imperial (civilized) center*. For southern peoples (Greeks, Romans), Danube is the line splitting into the following cultural areas: "Own and foreign"; "imperial and non-imperial", "center and periphery", "civilized and Barbarian", and finally "South and North". All peripheral zones around the Roman Empire's territory are considered hostile, evil, *barbarian* (**FIG. 2**). Everything beyond that cross border has been considered different, foreign, dark, hostile in Middle Ages, the same as the Rhine river dividing the Roman imperial world from the Germanic tribes, which populated lands eastwards of it, for instance.

Especially during the period between the VIII and XII centuries, Danube used to play the role of a line splitting the hostile "Barbarian" North (Rus, Vikings, Pechenegs, Scythians) from the "civilized" imperial South (Byzantium). For instance, the lower mouth of Danube is the border crossed by the Rus and Varangian people coming from the northern lands of European Russia and the Kievan Rus state and reaching the Black Sea region and hence the Greek. The Scandinavians passing by Danube used to encounter themselves in a strange land possessed by the inhabitants of other cultures (Bulgars, Byzantines). The Byzantine chronicler and emperor Constantine Porphyrogenitus (913 - 959) makes mention of Danube (the same as Dnepr) as a splitting zone where the Varangians find themselves in constant danger (by the attacking Pechenegs for instance) until they do reach the island of Berezan⁶. In order to make peace with the river's divine spirit, the Varangians used to sacrifice animals. This was a necessary ritual in order to successfully cross the Danube river's border. Something more, according to the Romanian archaeologist Stephan Barnia several Viking objects, such as a strap, have been found in the ancient Danube settlement

⁵ Marazov 2010: 14

⁶ Moravcsik 1967, Chapter 9: 57.

of Dinogetia⁷. This shows that before crossing Danube and reaching the Balkans, the Vikings had to pass by the eastern Romanian regions. The whole preparation to cross Danube and enter the Balkans (the Greek lands) was perceived as a long-lasting complex ceremony especially in the Early Middle Ages (**Fig. 5**). This ritual may be estimated as a psychological preparation for the northern warriors to take over the splitting line leading to the more attractive South of Byzantium, “where a brave warrior always acquired honor and riches”⁸.

Danube River is an ethno-cultural dividing line not only for the old Scandinavians but for other peoples centuries before. This river is considered from a mythological and folklore point of view a real barrier for other Germanic tribes as well before the coming of the Vikings⁹. There are both historical and literary evidence that Germanic tribes crossed Danube and traveled to the Balkans. For instance, the Ostro-Gothian historian Jordanes writes in his *Getica. De origine actibusque Getarum ("The Origin and Deeds of the Getae/Goths")* that Goths parting from the mythical island of Scandza used to cross the river Danube and arrive at the Balkans and the Black Sea region even in the period II – III century¹⁰. The Herules (heruli) is another East-Germanic that visited the Balkans and passed by Danube for example. The today's Western Bulgarian village of Erul might remind of this.

In ancient times before Christ, Danube also used to stay on the path of every migration, the axis *north-south*.¹¹ At the end of VI century before Christ the Achaemenid king Darius I experienced problems when building a bridge over Danube in the course of his campaign against the Scythians as Herodotus attests in book 9 of his *History*¹². The same ancient historian affirms that the dividing line of Danube was the place where the Scythian king Octamasades and the Odrysian ruler Sitalkes met¹³. Serving as an intercultural cross-border the river Danube was considered a dangerous place full of challenges for the historical hero.

2. Danube as a dangerous labyrinth

Danube has been perceived as an *inhospitable edge* somewhere in the unexplored North (**FIG. 1**) leading to a space full of peril and certain death, often in the mouth of a fish¹⁴. The fact that the river is a hazardous place of cultural confrontations is attested in the historical and archaeological evidence of the great number of fortresses and protected

⁷ Barnia 1967: 115.

⁸ Melnikova 2015: 69.

⁹ Ганина 2005: 212-226.

¹⁰ Jordanes & Mierow 1908: 178.

¹¹ Маразов 2010: 5.

¹² Богданов 2010: 227.

¹³ Богданов 2010: 228-229.

¹⁴ Маразов 2010: 5.

outfits built at its shores. Bulgarian historians mention many fortresses built and used in this area by the Bulgars even since the beginning of the VIII century¹⁵, despite the fact that fortresses along the river exist in *limes danubiano* even since the Late Antiquity¹⁶. For instance, the following Bulgarian strategic fortresses located along Danube were used for protection by Romans as well: Durostorum (city of Drastar, today's Silistra); Banonia (city of Vidin); Sexaginta Prista (city of Ruse); Ulpia Escus (close to the village of Gigen), and Almus (close to the city of Lom), among others. A lot of non-Bulgarian Danube castles and fortresses were attested as well: Tricornum (Belgrade, Serbia); Viminacium (close to the city of Pozharevaz, Serbia); Singidunum (Belgrade, Serbia), and Noviodunum (close to the city of Isaccea, Romania), and Axiopolis (city of Cernavoda, Romania) among others (**FIG. 4**).

The above outlined fortresses and fortified structures indicate that the river Danube was really a dangerous place and culturally splitting line. Those who dwelled next to the river needed protection. To cross this place, meant literally provoking intercultural conflict, penetrating the space of the other. In other words, the presence of so many fortifications on *limes danubiano* since the Late Antiquity signifies the tendency to fear each other's penetration into the own social-cultural area. The fortifications consolidate the divisive nature of Danube as a dark place where one can constantly be assaulted from different places. Due to this dark and hazardous nature, the river has been given numerous epithets such as *an enemy, a murderer, immersing and throwing down with the head*¹⁷ as the Greek poet Hesiod writes in his poem *Megala Erga* (Great Works)¹⁸. That poetic reference also confirms that Danube is a dangerous place that overturns the normal state of things, which provokes chaos.

The dangerous nature of the river has been confirmed by ancient geographers such as Claudius Ptolomaeus¹⁹. In his *Geography*, he points out that the hydronymy of Danube delta is full of dangerous places²⁰. The evidence for this are its branches (mouths) (*stoma*). For instance, Danube's first branch is called *Narakon stoma* in the epic poem *Argonautica* about Jason and the Argonauts in quest for the Golden Fleece written by the ancient Greek (III century) poet Apollonius of Rhodes²¹. The denomination *Narakon stoma* means *a narrow place* and is associated with the presence of a dangerous lower place, a hole, where all kinds of risky situations can await the wandering hero.

¹⁵ Tapkova-Zaimova & Vasilka 2004: 226-232.

¹⁶ Werner 2002: 165-171.

¹⁷ Mapa3OB 2010: 5.

¹⁸ Evelyn-White 1936: 57-59.

¹⁹ Mapa3OB 2010: 5.

²⁰ Berggren 2001: 69-70.

²¹ Hunter 1993: 356.

The second branch of Danube river also suggests danger. Its denomination *Pseudo stoma* (*deceitful mouth*) corresponds to a typical feature of a hazardous place; its delusive nature as the ancient Greek historian Pliny the Elder suggests in his *Historia Naturalis*, book IV²². So, Danube is also a fraudulent place, which brings the river close to the global mythological symbolism of water labyrinth with its delusive effects. In that sense, the Greek word *pseudēs* reveals the idea of *fraudulent reality*, composed of *eidola* (*deceiving images*)²³. In that sense, the water labyrinth of Danube can be related to the main type of obstacles on the mythological path, the tangled branches where it is very easy to get lost and never return²⁴. To fall in the river's fraudulent stream with numerous twists and curves is dangerous.

The third and the fourth mouth are the only exceptions of something positive in the Danube's toponymy. They are denominated *Kalon stoma* (*beautiful mouth*) and *Hieron stoma* (*holy mouth*), also called Peuka by the Greek geographers Claudius Ptolemaeus in his *Tetrabiblos* (Four books), book 3, chapter 10 and Strabo in his *Geography*, book VII, chapter 3, respectively²⁵.

The other remaining mouths still contain a negative connotation in their toponymy. Another chronicler who gives us a detailed geographical information on the Danube's mouths is the Roman soldier and historian Ammianus Marcellinus in his *Rerum gestarum* (*Achievements*)²⁶. He mentions three smaller lateral ramifications of the river (Am Marc. 22.8.46-47)²⁷. These are called *Borion stoma* (*Northern mouth*), the etymology probably derives from the northern cold wind Boreas. Here we also encounter an allusion about Danube as a dangerous dividing place, creating the intercultural conflict on the axis North/South²⁸.

The sixth mouth is called *Stenostoma* or *narrow mouth* and the significance of this denomination is similar to one of the first mouth (*Narakon stoma*), which was considered here. It also has a mythological dimension as a narrow dangerous place²⁹. Narrow paths usually lead to dark areas full of risks.

The seventh mouth's name alludes to another feature of a dangerous mystical place, its dark and desert nature. According to Ptolemaeus it is

²² Rackham & Eichholtz, 1954 (book IV). (also available online - http://www.masseiana.org/pliny.htm#BOOK_IV)

²³ Маразов 2010: 6.

²⁴ Detienne 2005: 179-180.

²⁵ The materials of ancient Greek and Roman authors are available both in English and Greek or Latin in this good online source:

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0239%3Abook%3D7%3Achapter%3D3%3Asection%3D15>.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Маразов 2010: 6-7.

²⁸ Маразов 2010: 6-7.

²⁹ Маразов 2010: 7.

called *Tiagola* and an alternative denomination is *Psilon* as in Book 3, chapter 10 in his work *Tetrabiblos*³⁰. As a matter of fact, the seventh mouth is dark as a marsh, and it is a vast dark, uninhabited place, nineteen miles long according to the Roman historian and soldier Ammianus Marcellinus in his *Rerum gestarum (Achievements)*. In that sense, the mouth can be associated with epithets such as *dark, obscure, night, black, misty, stagnant, marsh*, which are typical for characterizing the primal chaos, hell and the death itself³¹. All these terms can be associated to the categories of *isolated/deserted*, and *unknown*, which express the menacing nature of the other place as a space connected to evil. Analogically, the sea in which Danube pours into exactly in this final very dark mouth, is called *Black (Axeinos in Greek)*³². It is very probable that the description about the seventh Danube mouth given by Ammianus Marcellinus as a place where a great variety of rivers flow (let us, for instance, remember Selinas and Dnepr where the Varangians pass by to get into Danube) and some foggy environment can be felt and there are abundant mud-banks mixed with sweet water³³.

Therefore, the river Danube reveals the unclearness “the morphological and semantic features” of the global mythologem of the labyrinth³⁴. This complex architectural and mythical artificial structure is compound of narrow and interweaving deceiving moves, from which only one leads out³⁵. That is why, it is not strange to perceive the mythical ethnically dividing border (*limes danubius*) Danube as a type of labyrinth³⁶. So abundantly marked with historical and cultural signs, Danube delta turns in a cultural and mythological code: a sort of water maze where the entrance to the river and the exit to the sea are difficult to find. Besides, one of its places, the Iron Gate (the largest European river gorge) makes Danube as dangerous place as Dniepr due to its ledges and underwater rocks.

3. Danube as an entrance to the Underworld

However, Danube is not only a splitting maze. The misty and dark picture of Danube given by the ancient geographers sheds light on an additional element of the river's semantics. Besides coinciding exactly with the geographical and atmospheric data about the place around the river, this dark geographical description also contains a specific mythological assessment. It brings forth the *mistiness, roughness, mixed-ness*, which are all negative features related to the idea of hell. In comparative mythology,

³⁰ <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:2007.01.0082>.

³¹ Топорова 2005: 148-170.

³² Маразов 2010: 6-7.

³³ <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:2007.01.0082>.

³⁴ Маразов 2010: 7.

³⁵ Dumezil 1985: 51.

³⁶ Mesnil & Popova 1997: 61-85.

hell is a dark place full of dangerous things, it is not only a dark labyrinth, it is also a mass tomb.

The same as in the case of Black sea, Danube is hospitable *euxeinos* to the death, it welcomes the souls of the perished³⁷. So, both water areas can be perceived as kingdoms of the death. Analogically, in many European cultures the sea goddess is seen as the personification is this *hospitality*, taking the death. We have already mentioned about the Scandinavian goddess Ran who captures her victims (drown sailors) in her net and takes them down to her palace underwater. Besides, we have already become aware that at least two of the Danube mouths are denominated with the Greek words for *narrow* (*narakon* and *stenos*) according to the ancient Greco-Roman geographical and historical (Ptolomaeus, Strabo, Plinius and Ammianus Marcellinus) we reference to. These two terms allude to the narrow nature of the river, which is typically associated with holes and dark and curved roads leading to the underworld. Analogies in the representations of the curved and dark paths bringing to the world of the death can be found in many mythologies, not only in the classical European, but in non-Indo-European as well. For instance, the Maya folk Kitché believed that the entrance to their underworld Xibalba is reachable solely through narrow, dark, hidden, inaccessible and twisted roads³⁸.

These roads lead the hero to death. Yet, they are not the only hazard awaiting him. If one dies in the belly of fish (or whichever sea monster), it means unworthy and even torturing death; this is the opposite of the honorable warrior's death in battle. The death man killed by a fish goes deeper and deeper, down to the womb of the river (or the sea) forgotten by everything and everybody. The same occurs with those whose death bodies are carried to the underworld in many Indo-European mythological beliefs (see the contrast between the non-heroic death of sailors captured in the sea goddess Ran's net or *going down* and the heroic death of warriors *going up* in Scandinavian mythology). Nothing is remembered about this man.

Therefore, based on the dangers caused by the dark depths and the sea monsters or fish, passing Danube as well as every water area is a risky adventure. The dangerous nature of the river is confirmed with the following suggestion, which was already made: among the seven (including the two smaller) mouths of Danube only two can be associated with positive features (*hieron stoma* and *Kalon stoma*)³⁹. The first word means *holy*, whereas the second *beautiful*. That means that throughout history the reputation of the place was not good in most of the cases⁴⁰. It used to

³⁷ Топоров 1995: 575-622.

³⁸ More about the symbolism of *the twisted and the curved* can be read in prof. Ivan Marazov's and Borgeaud's research on the labyrinth in medieval ancient culture outlined in the Literature section.

³⁹ Маразов 2010: 6-7.

⁴⁰ Маразов 2010: 7.

provoke difficulties and set traps for sailors. That is why, it can be considered a *topos* related to the transition to the world beyond. Furthermore, other geographical and historical features supplement the picture of the area around the lower part of Danube as a map to the underworld. For instance, beyond the delta of Danube are located the Getic steps, which indicates the features of wilderness: plain, dry, waterless as Strabo writes in his *Geography* (book VII, chapter 3): *Between [the Getæ and] the Black Sea, from the Danube to the Dniester, lies the desert of the Getæ. It is entirely a plain and destitute of water*⁴¹. According to Strabo, in the Danube delta the island of Peuke is located. This island probably coincides with the mythical isle of the blessed⁴². Furthermore, Leuka (the White Island) is situated versus Peuke. Leuke (**FIG. 3**) is the island of Achilles Pontarches, one of the emblematic places beyond of the eternal dwelling of the chosen heroes⁴³. *Leuke* means *the White Island*. The colour code *white* is semantically associated with death according to Bulgarian researchers⁴⁴. That also confirms Danube as an entrance to the Underworld in ancient cultures. We could support that allusion with a vision from an old Romanian folk song: a white monastery on a white island with nine⁴⁵ priests⁴⁶: *prehistoric temple called "The great church with 9 altars" or "The holy White (alba) Monastery"*⁴⁷. So, the inclusion of the colour *white*, giving the denomination *Silent, white Danube*, as the river is called in Bulgarian folklore as well, attests the nature of Danube as a transitional point to the Underworld.

CONCLUSION

Therefore, the symbolism of Danube can be summarized in three dimensions: an ethno-cultural splitting line, a dangerous labyrinth, and an entrance to the Underworld. It should be pointed out that in mythopoetic thought these three are not just related to each other; they are mutually interweaving. The fact that a dividing line exists does not exclude the labyrinth, and viceversa. In a mythical labyrinth, there is usually a particular place (*locus*) leading to the underworld (such as in Mediterranean mytho-cultural tradition). At the same time, a labyrinth divides cultures; it is accepted to be situated between the known (the own

⁴¹ <http://perseus.uchicago.edu/perseus/cgi/citequery3.pl?dbname=GreekFeb2011&query=Str.%207.3.14&getid=1>

⁴² Маразов 2010: 7.

⁴³ Толстой 1966: 19-23; Маразов 2010: 7.

⁴⁴ Маразов 2010: 7.

⁴⁵ As it has been suggested, the number nine has the mythological meaning of something fatal, turbulent, and hazardous. For instance, in Scandinavian mythology the sea god Aegir and the mentioned goddess Ran has nine daughters. This number symbolizes fatality, darkness, given that the nine daughters personify the mighty dark waves drowning a lot of sailors.

⁴⁶ Densusianu & Furdui 1913 (2005), VI: 63.

⁴⁷ Densusianu & Furdui 1913 (2005), VI: 64.

cultural area) and the unknown (the foreign hostile and other ethnical community) world. Hence, the three dimensions are mutually inclusive. A labyrinth can be a dividing line and an entrance *far beyond*, a dividing line can entail the features of the other two locations, etc. Each one of the three comprises the mythical and functional characteristics of the remaining two.

Such is the case of Danube in mythical thought. In Antiquity and Middle Ages, Danube (particularly its lower part) played a triple social-cultural and myth-functional role: it was considered a splitting line, a dangerous labyrinth and an entrance to the Underworld at the same time. An analytical overview from a mytho-poetic perspective on this complex mythological concept reflected on the lower delta of Danube might shed more light in the cultural-historical research in this area.

Even today, Danube is a cultural border. It does not divide today, but it goes on serving as a cultural border within the complex geographical phenomenon of *the Danube Road*, which is a waterway cultural corridor splitting the different European cultural regions of Bulgaria, Serbia, Romania, Hungary, Slovakia, Austria, and Germany (namely 3 at least partially Slavic; 2 Germanic, 1 Romance and 1 Finno-Ugric⁴⁸ linguistic-cultural areas). To clarify, the dividing role of today's Danube should not be perceived in the same way as in Antiquity and Middle Ages, since it does not create hostility but only cultural diversity. Despite the current EU-unification tendencies, Danube is still a crossborder of cultures, which can be deemed in the light of today EU's mixture of cultures.

⁴⁸ Uralic language family without counting in the Samoyedic languages.

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<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:2007.01.0082>

Културни коридори на Югоизточна Европа. Дунавски път

http://seecorridors.eu/?w_p=23&w_l=1&w_c=5

APPENDIX

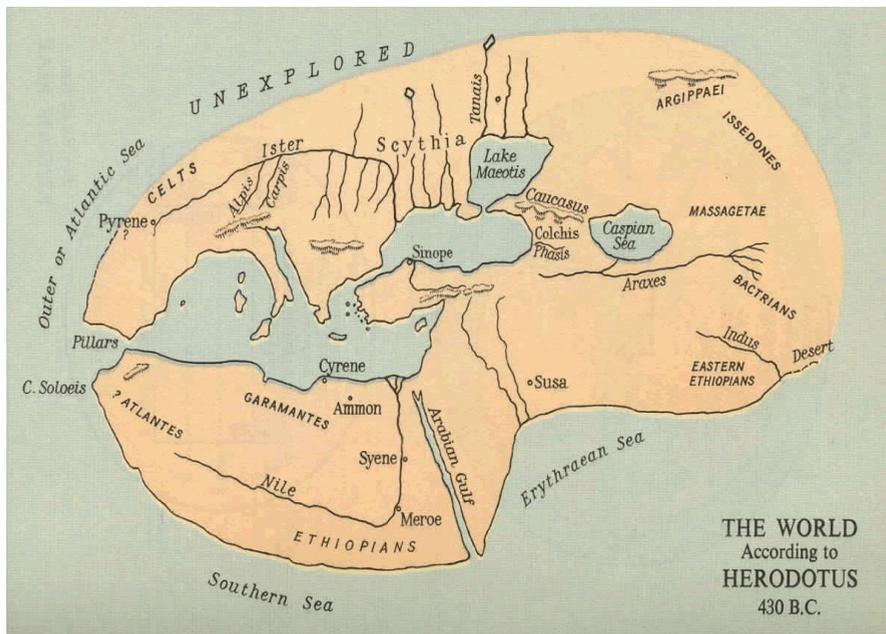


Fig. 1 The world according to Herodotus *Historia*, book II. Ister (Danube) is in the upper left corner. It is very close to the unexplored gray area of the Unknown in the Northern periphery, hence as a boundary between the known *civilized* world and the unknown *barbarian* world. In <http://www.age-of-the-sage.org/history/historian/herodotus.html>



Fig. 2 Eastern Roman provinces, on the Danube. Eastern from Rome Barbarian tribes are mentioned.

In <http://www.athenapub.com/abcbarbi.htm> (Athena Review Vol.2, no.3: Romans on the Danube). The webpage is based on a great deal of ancient history sources: Pliny the Elder, Natural History (AD 77); Tacitus, Germania (AD 98) and Annals (AD 115); Claudius Ptolemaeus, Geographical Outline (2c AD); Sextus Aurelius Victor, Epitome de Caesaribus (AD 360); Ammianus Marcellinus, Rerum gestarum libri (AD 390); Claudius Claudianus, Carmina (AD 404); Eusebius Hieronimus, Epistolae (AD 410); Priscus, History (AD 474); Procopius, History (AD 542); Cassiodorus, Getica (AD 560); Gregory of Tours, History of the Franks (AD 575); Jordanes Getica and Romana (AD 580); RGA: Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde (1973). Most of these are referenced in the current text. In fact, the map shows that the Danube and the regions around it constitute a vast intercultural and interethnic cultural crossborder area since Roman period.



FIG. 3. The White Island (in old-Greek *Leucos*; in Latin *Alba*) is the mystical island where the Achilles' tomb is probably located. Nowadays, however it is called *Snake island* (in Ukrainian *Ostriv Zmiinyi*; in Romanian *Insula Serpilor*). The island is located in the Black sea but very near to the Danube Delta. A picture by the Italian painter Carlo Bossoli, 1896.



FIG. 4 Some ancient fortification systems along lower Danube nowadays, from left to the right:

Upper line: Durostorum (Silistra) and Babonia (Vidin) - Bulgaria

Central line: Viminacium (Pozharevaz) and Singidunum (Belgrade) – Serbia

Lower line: Noviodonum (Isaccea) and Axiopolis (Cernavoda) – Romania

From http://seecorridors.eu/?w_p=23&w_l=1&w_c=5



FIG. 5. Bulgaria and Danube during Early Middle Ages and Tsar Simeon I rule (893-927).

The presence of many fortified Bulgarian and Serbian cities indicate that it was difficult to penetrate the lands south of Danube in the early Middle Ages as well.

From: http://archive.worldhistoria.com/historical-maps-of-bulgaria_topic6615_page2.html