Danubian Provinces: History of a Notion

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The Danubian provinces, as a notion in Roman studies and in the historiography of Roman provincial archaeology represents one of the major administrative, cultural and economic units of the Roman Empire. The notion however has no ancient roots and it is considered as a modern construction used since the 18th century. The article is focusing on the historiographic evolution of the notion, presenting the ancient denominations, the major sources from the 18th and 19th century and will analyze the historical authenticity and various socio-historical, cultural and political layers of this modern concept.

Keywords: Danubian provinces, Roman history, historiography, Danube, classical studies.

William Beattie in his classical book on the Danube from 1844 describes the second longest river of Europe as a "dark rolling Danube of the poet, which rivets the attention and conjures up a thousand associations. The Danube, the second river of Europe receives the tribute of sixty others in its course and rolls its majestic tide through empires, kingdoms and principalities. Its banks monumented with the glorious deeds of old and rich in magnificent scenery have been hitherto reserved as a free and open field for the pencil of the illustrator"[1]. In his beautifully illustrated book from the age of Western intellectual travelers discovering Central-East Europe,[2] Beattie created the ultimate version of the Danube and the Danubian region described by him as mystical, exotic, old and historicized region of the continent. This vision on the Danube and its region became highly influential not only in the 19th century cultural tourism, but also in various intellectual and even academic works. The longevity of Beattie's romanticized view and cultural "unity" of the Danubian region persists even today, creating numerous books, essays and travel guides with the same romantic and Victorian view on the Danube. The best case is the book of Andrew Beattie's book, which was described as a "potpourri" of geographical, historical, political and economic facts about the Danubian region.[3] How this romantic picture of the Danube and its region became the standard literary and scholarly view on this region and how this idea entered Roman studies and Roman provincial archaeology in the 19th century? In this short study, I will present a cultural history of the notion on Danube and Danubian provinces, focusing not only on the historical evolution of this concept, but also on the authenticity of this as an operational notion in the analysis of a macro-region of the Roman Empire.

The Danube and its region in the ancient Latin sources

The Danube (Danubius, Danuvius, Δανούβιος, Δανούιος, Δάνουβις)[4] was well known by ancient Greek and Latin authors long before the age of the Principate (14 BC -285

AD).[5] Most of the Latin texts mentioned very shortly the name of the river in their ethnographic descriptions of the Barbaricum and the "northern people" (North from the Alps): the laconic passages mentions the river and their hinterland in connection with historical – mostly military – events, populations and ethnic groups (Dacians, Germans, Sarmatians) and the monumentality of the river.[6] The Monumentum Ancyranum (*Res Gaestae Divi Augusti* 5.47) mentions "[...] protulique fines Illyrici ad ripam fluminis Danuvi (μέχρι Ἴστρου)," which is probably the first mention of the Danube in an administrative context of the empire and the Roman world.[7] The Danube in the age of Augustus became a symbol of the edges, represented more and more often in Roman imperial propaganda as a bearded, old river-god. Pliny the Elder in his Natural History mentions 60 tributaries of the Danube (*Plin. Nat. Hist.* 4.79) and considered the Danube as a cultural and administrative division between the Roman and Barbaric worlds (4.80). The military-strategic importance of the Danube and its commercial role was also mentioned in numerous literary sources, most famously by Procopius (Procopius, Buildings 4.5.2.). The name of the river appeared also in iconographic and epigraphic sources: Danuvius appears on the column of Trajan (**Fig.1**), on a relief from Carnuntum and on votive inscriptions from Aquincum, where a possible shrine dedicated to the river was identified[8]. With the exception of the Monumentum Ancyranum inscription, none of the ancient authors associated the Danube with an administrative unit of the Roman Empire, however its important role as fines and limes (the northern end of the empire) can be interpreted as a cultural and administrative boundary, which united these provinces (**Fig.2**).[9] The notion, which was used much more often as an administrative, fiscal and economic unit for this region was Illyricum or the *Publicum Portorium Illyrici*, the customs system of the North-Eastern provinces of Rome.[10] The entire region was united in the divine form of the *genius publici portorii illyirici*, known from votive inscriptions from Poetovio or Porolissum (AE 1988, 977, AE 1988, 978). Although the inscriptions from the *Cursus publicus* (*stationes*) and customs centers suggest a strong economic macro-unit within the Roman Empire, there are no traces in literary or epigraphic inscriptions on a common, macro-regional identity. The intense mobility of the legions along the Danube was mentioned numerous times by Roman historians, especially in the context of 192-193 AD, when Septimius Severus became an emperor helped by the "legions of Illyricum" (HA, Vita Sept. Sev.5.3-4).[11]

Donauländer, Donauprovinzen, and the invention of a notion: the 18th-19th centuries

Europe was reshaped after 1648 and the Central-East European area was dominated by the Habsburg Empire often named also as a Donaumonarchie, a Monarchy of the Danubian area.[12] The new political formation established in Central-East Europe created not only a systematic unification of industrialism, German speaking culture but influenced also the evolution of classical studies and early cases of Roman archaeological research in the 18th century. This new type of political, administrative and cultural "unity" of the region created the notion of "Donauländer", the Danubian countries: the Danube in this case became not only a geographical cable, uniting the territories of the modern Bavaria, Austria, Slovenia, Croatia, Hungary, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria but also an important commercial channel, especially after the major political and infrastructural competition for the control of navigation on the Danube between the Habsburg, Ottoman and Russian Empire. The more than two hundred years long military and political conflict between the Habsburg Empire and the Ottomans gave a cultural legitimacy for the Upper and Lower Danubian areas, divided also by geographical specificities (especially at the Iron Gate). This geographic and cultural duality of the Danubian areas entered also in the 18th century travelers' literature and the first papers on the Roman Danubian provinces too. The notion of the Danubian provinces – at least for the modern 18th century realities – appeared in German historical works. The works of Johann Hübner, Johann Baptist Schels, Eduard Duller or Ferdinand Stiefelhagen are among the first cases, where this modern notion (Danubian provinces, Danube-countries) was used.[13]

Following an early 19th century encyclopedic tradition,[14] Johann Jakob Herzog used already in 1861 the notion of *Donauländer* in the context of the Augustan-Tiberian expansion of the Roman Empire in this region.[15] The notion appears also in the title of the first book of Eduard Robert Rösler in 1864, although not exclusively for Roman context.[16] Friedrich Kenner was among the firsts who dedicated an entire book for two provinces from the Danubian area, using this geographic denomination also in the title of his important work on Noricum and Pannonia[17]. Followed by the paradigmatic work of Theodor Mommsen on epigraphic studies in Central-East Europe[18], Julius Jung, the famous professor of classics from Prague published an important synthesis in 1877, in which he presented for the first time the importance and longue durée impact of Roman provincial administration in the Danubian area[19]. The Danubian provinces as an administrative, political, cultural and military macro-unit of the Roman Empire was "canonized" by the work of Theodor Mommsen, who in 1885 in his volume focusing on the provinces of the Roman Empire dedicated an entire chapter for the Danubian provinces, presenting it as "*das Werk des Augustus*"[20]. The chapter of Mommsen on the Danubian provinces (Raetia, Noricum, Pannoniae, Dalmatia, Moesiae, Daciae[21]) highlights some of the directives

which will characterize the Danubian provinces in the following century of research: these are the edges of Empire, highly militarized provinces (the beginnings of *Limesgorschung*) and a intermediary region between the Western provinces and the Near East, uniting Latin and Greek, Celtic and local cultures too. Mommsen in his 1885 chapter on the Danubian provinces established the major methodological frames and facets which will be used as operational tools in the following century too. Wilhelm Drexler used for the first time this notion in the title of a monograph focusing on Roman religion in this region[22]. Although the intense military mobility between the Lower and Upper Danubian provinces was well known from literary sources, the emerging discipline of epigraphy and prosopographic studies and art historical approaches in the end of the 19th century stressed the regional networks between the Danubian provinces. In this period the common denomination of the region appeared also in the Anglo-Saxon literature, especially in historical, epigraphic and military studies.[23]

The exotic area of the empire: between centre and periphery in the 20th century

The Danubian provinces, as a macro-unit of the Roman Empire was shortly mentioned in the first half of the 20th century, mostly in the paradigmatic works of Andreas Alföldi and Michael Rostovtzeff. The school of Alföldi – leading figure of Hungarian classical archaeology in the interwar period[24] – was the first which analyzed the Central-East European classical antiquity and its material evidence in a holistic, supra-national view, focusing on global aspects and macro-units within the Roman Empire. As a result of this new vision on archaeological evidences several important doctoral theses were born in this period. An important one was written by Árpád Dobó, who published a book on the Publicum Portorium Illyrici, one of the first comprehensive analysis on the customs system of this region[25]. The book was well received by the Anglo-Saxon academic community, especially because the major works on the economic history of the Roman Empire ignored completely the Danubian provinces in this period[26]. The same topic was presented in French in a much more cited and appreciated work of Sigfried De Laet[27]. The Danubian provinces, as macro-unit within the Roman Empire became a legitime unit in Roman studies after these two major works, followed later by several others too, especially the important monograph of Peter Ørsted[28]. The so called *Limesforschung*, the study of the military history and dislocations of the Roman army in this region contributed enormously to the inclusion of the Danubian provinces in the global contextualization of the Roman Empire. The works of N. Gudea and Zs. Visy are paradigmatic in this sense. From the Anglo-Saxon literature, the most relevant papers on prosopography, military and political history were collected the volume of Ronald Syme in 1971.[29] His influential Danubian papers represented not only the rich connections of the local elite with the rest of the Empire, but opened also an academic network between Western and East-European scholars.[30] Considered widely as the "second founder of Roman History,"[31] R. Syme's Danubian papers influenced the work of Géza Alföldy and John Wilkes too, both contributed to the study of the Danubian provinces in a global context.[32] Géza Alföldy, András Mócsy and John Wilkes wrote individual monographs on some of the provinces from this region, widely considered as major references for the provinces of Noricum, Pannonia and Dalmatia.[33] The studies of Géza Alföldy from 1988 and 2004 contextualized the Danubian provinces within the social history of the Roman Empire,[34] while John Wilkes contributed with three major works on this topic, focusing especially on the major archaeological sources of the region[35]. The influential work of Alföldy in the second wave of the *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* in Central-East Europe (mostly Austria, Hungary, Romania and Serbia) established numerous epigraphic schools, where the study of the Danubian provinces or Großillyricum (Lower and Upper Danubian provinces – as it is divided usually in the literature) follows his holistic and inclusive view on this area of the Empire. Several international projects and institutions are focusing especially on this area of the Empire.[36]

The Danubian provinces, as macro-unit of the Roman Empire: further perspectives

Central-East Europe was often ignored by the Western academia in numerous important studies and companions. In the last 2-3 decades the region became a new focus point for historians, space theorists, archaeologists and political analysts. Prehistoric studies (mostly for the Neolithic and Bronze Age period) argued the importance of this region in the evolution of human and material mobilities during the Neolithic period in Europe[37]. Historians, who used a global view of European history interpreted the area known as Central-East Europe (Intermarium[38] or Mitteleuropa)[39] as the edges of the Western civilization, connecting with the East European Steppe culture in a broader, Eurasian context. The hydrologic catchment of the Danubian area was recently used also a macro-hydrological and geographic unit, which contributes also to the understanding of the evolution of settlements and the major communication routes of Europe (**Fig.3**).[40]

This new space taxonomy, where the Danubian provinces are interpreted as an economic, cultural and socio-historical macro-unit within the Roman Empire represents a fertile opportunity for new researches (**Fig.4**).[41] Contemporary approaches in Roman archaeology go beyond the provincial limits

and are focusing on locality (urbanism) or macro-units within the Empire[42]. This new space taxonomy helps us to understand the large scale mobilities (human and material) and interconnectivities of groups and individuals too.[43] The combination of local and global connectivity in the Danubian provinces can be analyzed with the recently developing methods of glocalisation.[44]

The Danubian provinces – often used as synonyms for Lower and Upper Danubian provinces, Illyricum, Publicum Portorium Illyrici or the Roman Balkans – today represents one of the major macro-units in Roman studies and Roman archaeology and in the context of the recently emerging glocalisation and network studies, this area need a much more intense focus in the future.

Abbreviations:
AE - L'Année épigraphique. Paris, 1888 -
CIL - Corpus inscriptionum latinarum. Consilio et auctoritate Academiae Litterarum Regiae Borussicae editum
HA - Scriptores historiae Augustae
TLL - Thesaurus linguae Latinae 1894 -

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Notes:

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2. Olga Katsiardi-Hering, Maria A. Stassinopoulou (eds.), *Across the Danube: Southeastern Europeans and Their Travelling Identities (17th–19th C.)* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 1-24. See also (although with few analogies from Central-East Europe) Margarita Díaz-Andreu, *A History of Archaeological Tourism. Pursuing leisure and knowledge from the eighteenth century to World War II* (New York: Springer, 2020), 31-57. More detailed analysis on this topic: Olivia Spiridon (ed.), *Die Donau und ihre Grenzen Literarische und filmische Einblicke in den Donauraum* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2019); Tanja Zimmermann, "Die Donau: Identitäten im Strom," in Spiridon, *Die Donau*, 217-231.
3. Andrew Beattie, *The Danube: A Cultural History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). For a review see: Madalina Valeria Veres, "Review: Andrew Beattie, The Danube: A Cultural History. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010," *Austrian History Yearbook*, no. 43 (2012): 191-192.
4. See Danubius in TLL Online. O.3.36.20-3.37.25.
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11. The wars during the age of Marcus Aurelius (bellum Germanicum) or Septimius Severus are often named by the German literature as „Donaukriege": Mitthof et al. 2019, 309-316.
12. Herbert Knittler, "Die Donaumonarchie 1648–1848," in *Handbuch der Europäischen Wirtschafts und Sozialgeschichte*, vol. 4, ed. I. Mieck, (Stuttgart, 1993), 880-915; Martyn Rady, *The Habsburg Empire: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).
13. Johann Hübner, *Kurtze Fragen aus der Neuen und Alten Geographie* (Regensburg: Emerich Baders Verlag, 1746); Johann Baptist Schels, *Geschichte der Lander des ostreichischen Kaiserstaates* (Wien: J. B. Heubner Verlag, 1820); Eduard Duller, *Die Donauländer: Nebst Wanderungen in Das Baierische Hochland Und Das Salzburgische Hochgebirge* (Leipzig: G. Haendel Verlag, 1849); Ferdinand Stiefelhagen, *Geschichte des Volkes Israel, zugleich mit den Umrissen der Geschichte des klassischen Alterthums*, vol. 3 (Köln, 1854).
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15. Johann Jakob Herzog, *Real-encyklopädie für protestantische theologie und kirche*, vol. XIV (Gotha: Verlag von Rudolf Hesser, 1861), 304.
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19. Julius Jung, *Römer und Romanen in den Donauländern: historisch-ethnographische Studien*, (Innsbruck: Wagnerischen Verlag, 1877), i-viii.
20. Theodor Mommsen, *Römische Geschichte. Fünfter Band. Die Provinzen von Caesar bis Diocletian,* (Berlin: Weidmann, 1885), 125.
21. The contemporary list of Danubian provinces often includes also Thracia. Other lists are focusing only on Raetia, Noricum, Pannoniae, Moesiae and Dacia.
22. Wilhelm Drexler, *Der Cultus der Aegyptischen Gottheiten in den Donauländern* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1890).
23. Francis Haverfield, *The Romanisation of Roman Britain* (London: Papers on Roman Britain, Volume 11, 1889). On page 99 use the word of Danubian provinces.
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26. Friedrich Heichelheim, "Review: Árpád Dobó: Publicum Portorium Illyrici. (Dissertationes Pannonicae, Ser. II, Fasc. 16.) Pp. 52, Budapest: Institut für Münzkunde u. Archaeologie der P. Pázmány Universität, 1940. Cloth, P. 4.," *Classical Review* 56, no. 2 (1942): 93-94.
27. Laet, *Portorium*.
28. Peter Ørsted, *Roman Imperial economy and Romanization: A Study in Roman Imperial Administration and the Public Lease System in the Danubian Provinces from the First to the Third Century A.D.* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 1985).
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31. JRS 1990, XI.
32. García Vivas and Gustavo Alberto, "Géza Alföldy and Ronald Syme: a Case Study," *Studia Europaea Gnesnensia*, 16 (2017): 529-551.
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41. Szabó Csaba, *Sanctuaries*, 1-10.
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Fig. 1. Relief of the Danube on Trajan's column (open source: Wikicommons)



Fig. 2. The Danubian provinces (source: www.univie.ac.at/limes)

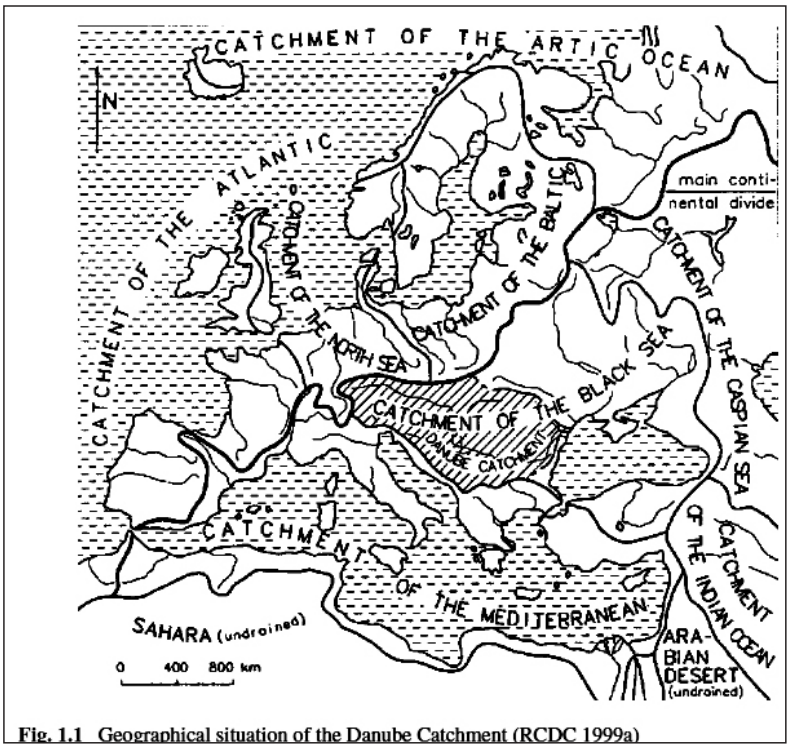


Fig. 3. The catchment of the Danubian area in the Eurasian context (source: Miklós 2010, fig.1.1)

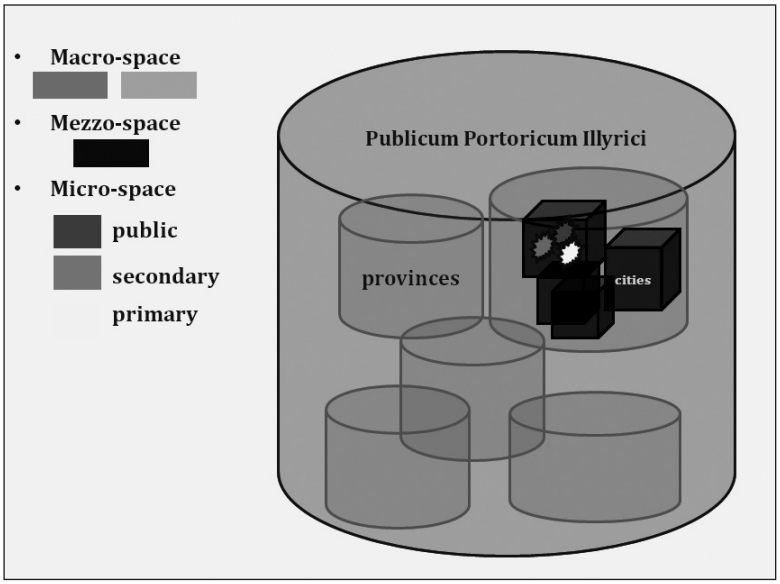


Fig. 4. Macro – and micro-units of the Roman Empire as a spatial analysis (source: after Szabó 2018, fig.3.)