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**TRADE, TRANSPORTATION AND DUTIES  
ON THE DANUBE IN ANCIENT TIME FROM THE PERSPECTIVE  
OF ANCIENT SOURCES<sup>1</sup>**

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*In ancient times, the Danube did not only represent a military border or a barrier of civilizations, but it was also a place of ethnic, cultural and trade meetings. Cruise along the river was able to provide many benefits and after the Romans moved their interests to the entire flow of the river after Augustus' conquests, the Danube became an important transportation artery and thus a trade route as well. Until that time, the ancient, especially the Greek trade focused only on the lower stream. The submitted study provides an overview of transportation on the river, types of ships that used it and suggests the significance of the Danube in the development of trade in individual provinces spread across its stream and in short also states the system of fees introduced on the river.*

*Key words: Ancient Danube; river transportation; trade; fees and duties.*

*У давнину Дунай становив собою не лише військовий кордон чи межу між цивілізаціями, він був ще й місцем етнічних, культурних і торгових зустрічей. Курсування ним надавало багато переваг. Коли римляни після завоювань Августа зацікавилися всією течією річки Дунаю, річка стала важливою транспортною артерією і торговельним шляхом. До того часу торгівля, зокрема грецька, зосереджувалася лише у нижній частині течії річки. Дослідження розглядає транспортування Дунаєм, типи кораблів, що ним курсували, та важливість його впливу на розвиток окремих регіонів, розташованих вздовж русла. Наведено коротку інформацію про систему податків, встановлених на річці.*

*Ключові слова: давній Дунай; річкові перевезення; торгівля; податки і збори.*

In the eyes of ancient Greeks, the Danube divided Europe to two parts. It was the border of oikumene and in its lower stream, the border between the Scythians and the Thracians. While the Greeks knew only the lower stream of the river, the Romans knew Danube's stream throughout its length. With the expansion of the Roman Empire to the north, the river became a border between the Empire and barbarians. It played the role of a dividing line between civilizations. In ancient classical thinking, it was the God-defined line, the crossing of which brought military, religious and moral issues and consequences. Thus, in a broader geographic and military thinking, Danube acted as a border, how ever,

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in real life, its position was different. During the Roman times, the river was an essential link between the Roman provinces of Raetia, Noricum, Pannonia and Moesia. From the Roman perspective, the river was a transportation artery for the supply of Roman legions and space, in which Roman military camps and subsequently cities were established. The military presence of Romans along the river led to the establishment of many trade relationships with area behind the Danube. The importance of the river thus shifted in everyday life from its military-demarcation aspect to a civil-commercial one. Unfortunately, there are only few ancient records on civil trade, because ancient authors focused primarily on barbarian invasions and related Roman campaigns. Notes on the importance of the river in Roman trade are scarce and rare. Therefore, many conclusions on trade on the Danube are based on analogy or assumptions, which creates room for various syntheses. The submitted study is trying to present one of the views on trade on the Danube, issues that accompanied it and conditions, under which it took place.

Despite the fragmentation of sources on Roman trade on the Danube, several papers have been written that present this aspect of life on the river in a significant way. Essentially anyone, who is interested in the Danube in ancient literature starts at the beginning with Brandis' article in *Paulys Realencyclopädie*<sup>2</sup>. Although a lot of time passed since Brandis' paper and knowledge has shifted considerable, Brandis' summary of ancient literature regarding the Danube is remarkable and so complete that it is still an important aid to further research. The studies of Lietta di Salvo<sup>3</sup> and Brian Campbell<sup>4</sup> represent major contributions to this topic.

### Transportation on the river

Various vessels provided transportation on and across the Danube. From the earliest times, inhabitants living along the river used hollowed out trunks of trees. Alexander the Great in his campaign used these across the Danube also. Arrian, who also adds for what the inhabitants used the riverboats, has preserved the report on this event. The report reads: "Thereupon Alexander withdrew his troops and decided to cross the Ister to attack the Getae who were settled on the father side, both because he saw a large force of them gathered on the bank, to repel him, should he cross – there were about four thousand mounted men, and more than ten thousand on foot – and also because he had been seized with a desire to land on the father side. He himself embarked in the fleet; the leather tent covers he had filled with the hay, and gathering all the available boats, cut from single trees, from the countryside (there were plenty, for the river-side dwellers use them for fishing, for up-river expeditions among themselves, and even more for thieving), he ferried across on these as much of his force as was possible. About fifteen

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<sup>2</sup> Brandis K. G. Danuvius. In *Paulys Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft*. – Stuttgart: Metzler, 1901. – Vol. 5/1.

<sup>3</sup> De Salvo L. *Circolazione e commercio per via d'acqua nelle province Danubiane // Zerbini L.* (ed.). Roma e le Province del Danubio. – Ferrara: Rubbettino, 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Campbell B. *Rivers and the Power of Ancient Rome*. – Chapel hill: University of North Carolina, 2012. Especially the eighth chapter dealing with Danube.

hundred cavalry and four thousand foot-soldiers crossed with him”<sup>5</sup>. Cassius Dio describes hollowed out tree trunks used by local tribes, as well as the large number of boats and ships on the river, in the description of Augustus’ campaign against the Pannonians. Cassius Dio writes: “It was against this people, then, that Caesar at that time conducted a campaign. At first he did not devastate or plunder at all, although they abandoned their villages in the plain; for he hoped to make them his subjects of their own will. But when they harassed him as he advanced to Siscia, he became angry, burned their country, and took all the booty he could. When he drew near the city, the natives for the moment listened to their leaders and made terms with him and gave hostages, but afterwards they shut their gates and underwent a siege. For while they possessed strong walls also, yet they placed their whole confidence in two navigable rivers. The one named the Colops flows the very circuit of the wall and empties into the Savus not far distant; it has now encircled the entire city, for Tiberius gave it this shape by constructing a great canal through which it comes back to its original channel. But at that time between the Colops on the one hand, which flowed past the very walls, and the Savus on the other, which flowed at a little distance, a gap had been left which had been fortified with palisades and ditches. Caesar secured boats made by the allies in that vicinity, and after towing them through the Ister into the Savus, and through that stream into the Colops, he assailed the enemy with his infantry and ships together, and had some naval battles on the river. For the barbarians prepared in turn some boats made of single logs, with which they risked a conflict”<sup>6</sup>.

However, this simple type of boats was not the only one used on the Danube. Ever since the arrival of Greeks to the delta of the Danube and subsequently to Dobruzha in the sixth century BC, more complex ships, including cargo vessels, have been used in the lower stream<sup>7</sup>. During the Ovidius’ times, actual boats (*rates*) and ships (*naves*) were used on the river that were used not only by the Romans, but surrounding tribes as well<sup>8</sup>. We have an illustrative report on ships used by surrounding tribes for example from the times of Marcus Aurelius, who has forbidden the Iazyges to own ships<sup>9</sup>.

As far as sailing ships go, these are not mentioned in the ancient literature in connection to the Danube, only ships powered by rowers are mentioned<sup>10</sup>. But in winter, when the river froze, any ships were unusable and merchants depended on moving across the frozen level.

When we talk about transportation on the river, we cannot leave out the crews of boats and people working in ports and trade station. In Roman cities or military camps, enterprising individuals gathered in guilds and these carried out important services in ports or directly on the river. In sources they appear under different names like *nautae*,

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<sup>5</sup> Arr. 1. 3. 6. Text translation Robson E. (LOEB. – 1967. – Vol. I).

<sup>6</sup> Cass. Dio 49. 37. Text translation Cary E. (LOEB. – 1955. – Vol. V).

<sup>7</sup> Apoll. Rhod. 4. 283.

<sup>8</sup> Ovid. Trist. 3. 31; Amm. Marc. 31. 4. 5.

<sup>9</sup> Cass. Dio 71. 19.

<sup>10</sup> Brandis K. G. Danuvius... – P. 2123.

*navicularii* or *utricularii*<sup>11</sup>. Since from the transportation perspective the lower Danube was important, while the upper and the middle streams were used to a lesser extent<sup>12</sup>, there are only rare reports these areas of the river. Inscriptions speaking of sailors from these provinces are not only rare, but in several cases it is not clear whether these are sailors from Aquileia or sailors sailing on the Danube.

*Nauclerus* of Brigetio is undoubtedly important<sup>13</sup>, in Moesia Superior, specifically in Viminacium, we have a documented man working as *nauclerus* in an epigraph dedicated to Mithra<sup>14</sup>. Near Oberstimme, not far from Manching, a boat was found that proves transportation on the upper stream<sup>15</sup>.

Thus, the lower Danube played a more important role in transportation on the Danube. There are several important ports from Moesia to the Black Sea. Let's mention Halmyris, Salsovia or the extremely busy Noviodunum, where the Roman fleet known as *Classis Flavia Moesica* was located on the lower Danube. Axiopolis was probably the most important port in the Danube transportation. There was an association known as *nautae universi Danuvii*<sup>16</sup>, which was active throughout the lower stream and on the confluence of the Drava or Sava and the Danube, where it played a significant part in the transportation of goods between Northern Italy and the Black Sea<sup>17</sup>.

The Roman fleet moved also on the middle stream, this was so-called *Classis Pannonica*<sup>18</sup>. The fleet was established 35 BC by Augustus and reformed during the Flavian period, when it was known as *Classis Flavia Pannonica*. It patrolled in the area between Castra Regina and Taurunum.

Transportation on several places was not easy. Passages in the area of Iron Gates caused known difficulties. The Romans intervened here at least once; when in 101, Trajan had built channels before his campaign against the Dacians that should have facilitated transportation. Difficulties with transportation in the delta oftentimes equaled those at sea. Aelian documents this fact in a known passage and adds the information that during winter months, boats of the merchants remained frozen on the river and transportation continued on the frozen level only on wagons. Aelian's report reads as follows: "There is also in the Ister a bay of immense depth and like the sea in its wide compass. Moreover that this bay attains a considerable depth is sufficiently proved by the following fact: Merchant vessels which cross the sea put into this bay and, when the bay is angered by the winds that blow and lash it into waves and drive it mad, are just as afraid of it as they are of the sea. And there are also islands in it, and even creeks along the shore into which

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<sup>11</sup> *De Salvo L.* Circolazione e commercio... – P. 87.

<sup>12</sup> *Schlippschuh O.* Die Händler im römischen Kaiserreich in Gallien, Germanien und der Donauprovinzen Rätien, Noricum und Pannonien. – Amsterdam: Hakkert, 1987. – P. 86.

<sup>13</sup> *Inscr. Pann. Sup.* 39; *De Salvo L.* Circolazione e commercio... – P. 87–88.

<sup>14</sup> *CIL III* 13804.

<sup>15</sup> *Campbell B.* Rivers and the Power... – P. 293.

<sup>16</sup> *CIL II* 7485.

<sup>17</sup> *De Salvo L.* Circolazione e commercio... – P. 91.

<sup>18</sup> *Starr C. G.* The Roman Imperial Navy 31 BC – AD 324. – Cambridge: Heffer and Sons, 1960; *Fitz J.* Le province Danubiane. In *Storia dei Greci e Romani*. – 2008. – Vol. 16.

one can run for safety. There are besides, promontories and capes running out, on which the waves in the fury dash and burst whenever the river at its very fullest is, as it were, forced into a narrow space as it presses on to the sea. This commonly occurs when the third autumnal season is past and the winter season is setting in and the river is running in the full flood. And as it rises the north wind urges it forward and causes it to descend in fury. (...) Well, the ice on the Ister freezes hard even round a merchant vessel on its way downstream and imprisons it: it is no use to spread the sails; the man at the prow looks no more ahead; the ship's captain cannot move the rudders to and fro; they are fixed fast, for the whole vessel is caught in the surrounding fetters and looks, I declare, not like any ship, for it is no longer beaten by the waves, but like some hill rising from a wide expanse of plain or for all the world like some lofty watch-tower. Thereupon the passengers and the sailors jump out and hurry down the river and fetch wagons and transfer the cargo on to what was lately the water”<sup>19</sup>.

Despite difficulties, transportation on the river was considered faster than on the land, especially if large volumes or supplies for the army were transported. In 361, for example, Emperor Julian preferred boat transportation to land transportation for his journey to Sirmium especially because of the speed<sup>20</sup>.

### Trade

At the beginning, the Roman world engaged in trade on the Danube especially on its lower stream, which was determined by the historical development. The lower Danube has been known to the Greeks for centuries. They traded with surrounding tribes, but they did not go beyond the junction of Sava and Danube. Good heading further west were from here on transported through the valleys of the Sava and other inflows due to natural conditions<sup>21</sup>. Various goods were transported from the east to the west along the Danube and the connected river networks. For example, Theopompus, whose words were not preserved, but his report has been preserved by Strabo said that goods from Chios and Thasos were being transported to the Adriatic along the Danube<sup>22</sup>. The Romans must have known about these trade connections since the second century BC. Areas of the northwestern Balkan came under the influence of the Roman trade after the founding of Aquileia on the Adriatic coast and Roman interests have expanded further with the subsequent taking of Istria. A century later, in the middle of the first century BC, the Romans have romanized Istria and undoubtedly knew the essential parts of its inland<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> Ael. De Nat. An. 14. 26. Text translation Scholfield A. F. // LOEB. – 1959. – Vol. III.

<sup>20</sup> Amm 21. 9. 2.

<sup>21</sup> Dan A. Between the Euxine and Adriatic Seas: ancient representations of the Ister (Danube) and the Haemus (Balkan mountains) as frames of modern South-Eastern Europe // The Danubian Lands between the Black Aegean and Adriatic Seas / Ed. by G. Tsetschladze, A. Avram, J. Hargrave. – Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. – P. 134.

<sup>22</sup> Strab. 7. 5. 9.

<sup>23</sup> Liv. 6. 40–41; Plin. NH. 3. 19. For Roman policy in Istria see: Matijašić R. L'Istria tra Epulone e Augusto // Atti della XXI Settimana di Studi Aquilanesi, 1990. – P. 235–251.

After the Augustus conquests, the Sava up to the Danube gets in the center of attention of Roman merchants from Aquileia. A new trade station Nauportus was established in the valley of the river, where goods from Northern Italy have been brought and from here or from Emona were transported on the Sava and subsequently the lower Danube<sup>24</sup>. This route became the easiest connection to the Black sea for merchants from northern Italy and many merchants from Aquileia were active on it as well<sup>25</sup>.

The Augustus' conquests moved Roman interests to the Danube along its entire length, so traces of Roman trade on the river began to appear not only on the lower end, but in other gradually established provinces as well. The inscriptions from Raetia mention ten merchants, who participated on trade with the Danube areas. Fabrics, clothing, wine, ceramics or animals were the subjects of the trade. Eight inscriptions talking about these *negotiares* comes from Augusta Vindelicorum (Augsburg) and two others come from Castra Regina (now Regensburg). From Castra Batava (Passau) there is an inscription capturing a wine merchant. He apparently mediated contacts between the Romans and the tribes behind the Danube. In the second century trade in the central Danube grew significantly. It was made up of many commodities, especially iron, cheese and fabrics, whereby Romans paid for these commodities in wine, oil, glass products or lamps<sup>26</sup>.

In Pannonia and Upper Moesia, trade was booming in the period between Domitian and Hadrian<sup>27</sup>. The merchants were directly linked to numerous legionnaires deployed along the limes. Carnuntum and Aquincum are well known<sup>28</sup>. The expansion of the trade between the Romans and the Barbarians was also aided by the fact that a substantial part of the Roman army was grouped at the time at the Danube.

### Duties

Merchants had to pay a fee for their goods known as *portorium*. All Danube provinces were included in the system of fees known as *publicum portorii Illyrici et ripae Thraciae*. These fees were collected in stations that could have been in cities, ports or trade junctions. In any case, these stations were established at strategic places, where a large collection of duties was expected. The city of Siscia is a good example, where Kolapis (now Kupa) flows into the Sava. Customs officers were able to collect here fees from boats sailing with goods on the Sava to the Danube, or from those, who were sailing on the Kolapis. Another good example is the station that existed at the confluence of the Cserna and the Danube. This position allowed it to collect duties not only from merchants, who continued on the Danube, but also from those, who continued in the opposite direction on or alongside its confluence. Another type of profitable stations was on bridges; an example of this would be *pons Aeni* in Raetia<sup>29</sup>. The collection of fees represented

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<sup>24</sup> *Schlippschuh O.* Die Händler im römischen Kaiserreich... – P. 101.

<sup>25</sup> *De Salvo L.* Circolazione e commercio... – P. 82.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* – P. 83.

<sup>27</sup> *Mócsy A.* Pannonia and upper Moesia. A History of the Middle Danube Provinces of the Roman Empire. – London, Boston: Routledge, 1974. – P. 122.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* – P. 126–127.

<sup>29</sup> *Campbell B.* Rivers and the Power... – P. 297–298.



significant income for cities and ports, through which trade routes passed. Let's mention, for example, the city of Capidava, which was important in the customs system on the lower Danube<sup>30</sup>. Originally a small Capidava settlement that transformed into an important military camp after Dacia was taken over by the Romans, alongside which a civil city grew. There was a technical device for unloading and loading of goods and piers in its port. Thus, it was an ideal place to move goods from the inland to river transportation leading west and east.

### List of abbreviations

Ael. De Nat. An. = Aelian, De natura animalium  
Amm. = Ammianus Marcellinus  
Apoll. Rhod. = Apollonius of Rhodes  
Arr. = Arrianus  
Cass. Dio = Cassius Dio  
CIL = Corpus Inscriptorum Latinorum  
Inscr. Pann. Sup. = Inscriptiones Pannoniae Superioris  
Liv. = Titus Livius  
LOEB = LOEB classical library  
Ovid. Trist. = Ovidius, Tristia  
Strab. = Strabon

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<sup>30</sup> *De Salvo L.* Circolazione e commercio... – P. 90.