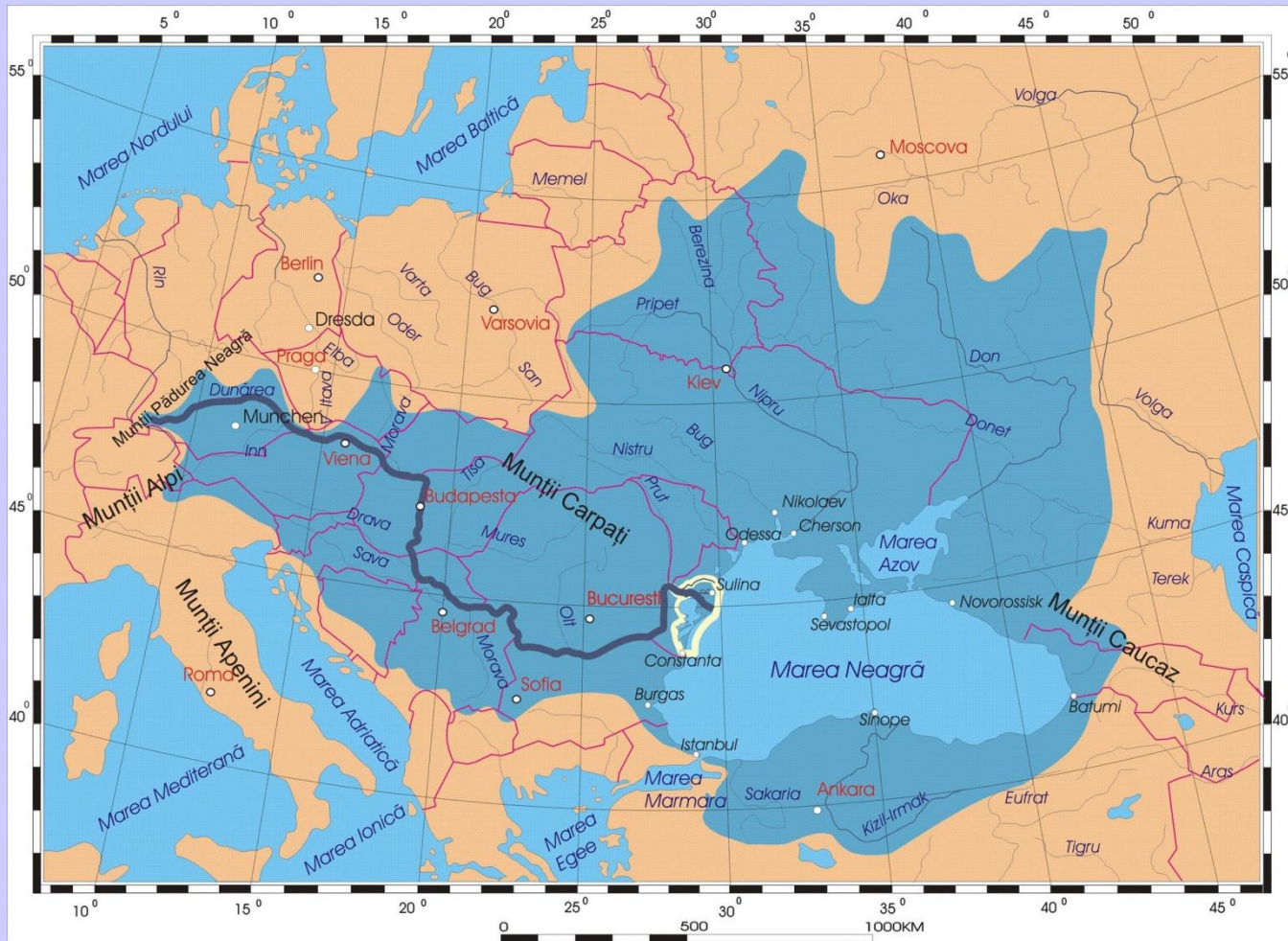


THE BALLADS OF THE DANUBE RIVER





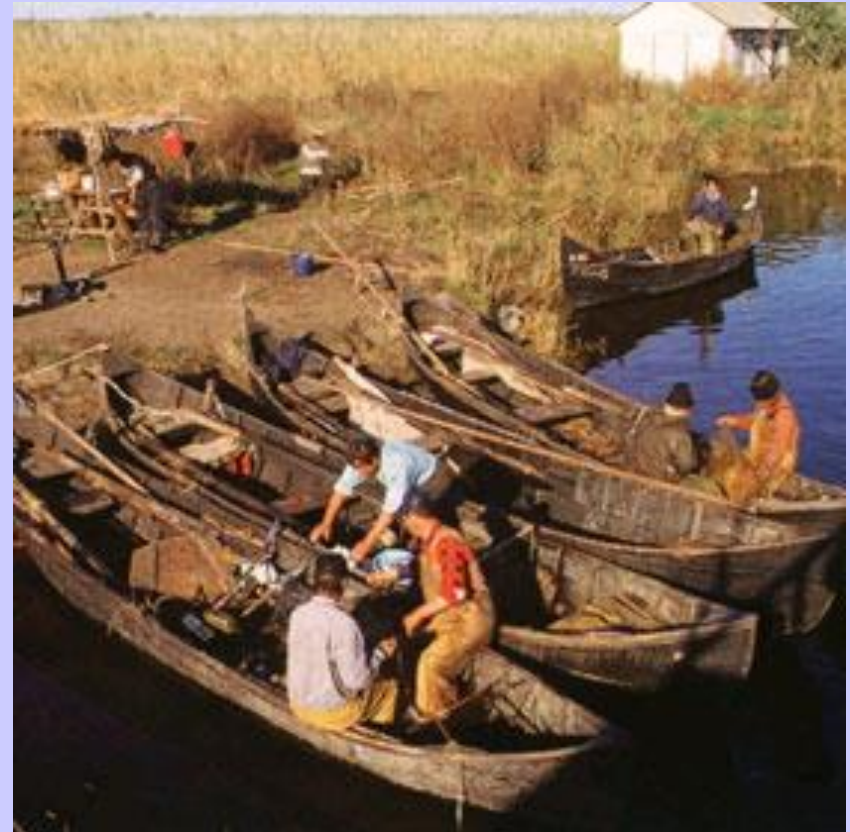
- **For the Romanian culture the phrase „earth and water” has not only a commonplace meaning. It is much more profound, symbolizing that identity is assumed when owning a place, the elements through to be fundamental and very special for identifying the living area. A scholarly legend circulating also in popular milieus, mentions that when invading foreigners came to ask for „earth and water”, as a sign of submission, they were assimilated until they lost their own identity and transformed themselves in water and earth. For traditional culture, water and earth, two of the four fundamental elements, are essential for a community to be placed in certain area; they are identification marks.**

- **For several hundred years, the Romanians have used the navigable portions of certain rivers that stretch across Romania, making some analysts state that ‘all our life has been organized by waters. There exist *olteni, jieni, argeşeni, sireteni, pruteni*’ (Olt, Jiu, Argeş, Siret, Prut , Criş being the names of rivers that flow across Romanian lands.)**
- **The Romanian historian Nicolae Iorga asserted: ”Water created political forms”.**
- **For Romanians, Danube is the axis according to which the two branches of Oriental Roman world are identified: the Romanians north and south of the river.**

**For the centre and south-eastern Europe ,
the Danube is personalized to such a large extent that it may even be considered an ‘archetypal form’. During its course, which spans ca 2800 km from its source to the river mouth in the Black Sea through one of the most spectacular and important European triangles of fertility – the Danube Delta – cultures meet, people interact and exchange values, manifest their creativity or clash in dramatic circumstances on the two banks. This second longest European river, exceeded only by river Volga, flows from the west towards the east, crosses 10 countries (after the recent modifications of the map of Europe, there exist a few other countries that, however, are only touched by it) among which Germany, Slovakia, Croatia, Austria, Hungary, Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria, and the Republic of Moldova.**



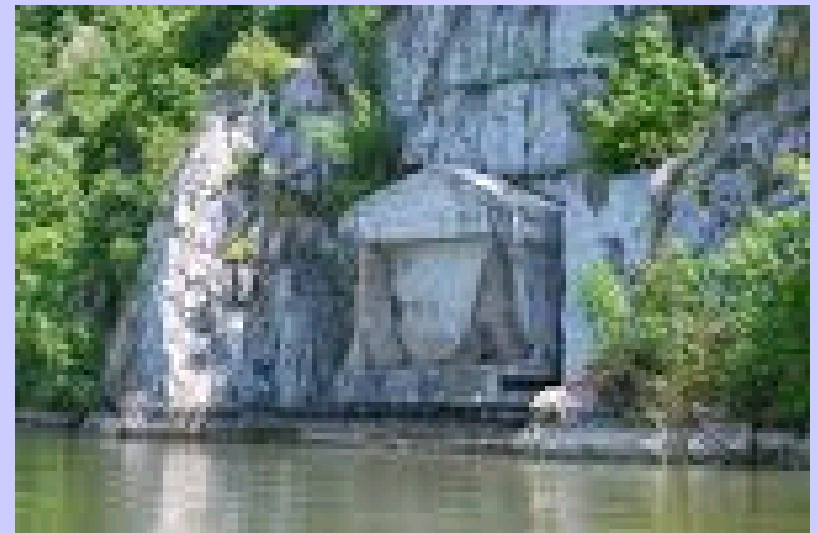
Boats loaded with merchandise or...prisoners travel on the waters of the Danube , valiant heroes head towards it, eager to deal with their enemies, more often than not interested in conquering new lands, gaining political authority and economic supremacy. The Danube is a route, a bridge and a border.



- In ancient times, the Greek name of the river had many forms – *Istros, Istru, Hister, Danaistru*; in Latin it was known under the name of *Danubiu*. Ovid, decrying the unfortunate fate that had thrown him into the cold and unfriendly lands of Getia, mentions it as the Istru with the two names – *binominis Ister*. Nowadays, the Germans call it *Donau*, the Slovenians, *Dunaj*, the Serbs, Croats and Bulgarians, *Dunav*, the Hungarians, *Duna*, the Ukrainians, *Dunaj*, and the Turks, *Tuna*.
- The name of Danube in Romanian, *Dunăre(a)*, is said to have originated in *Donaris.

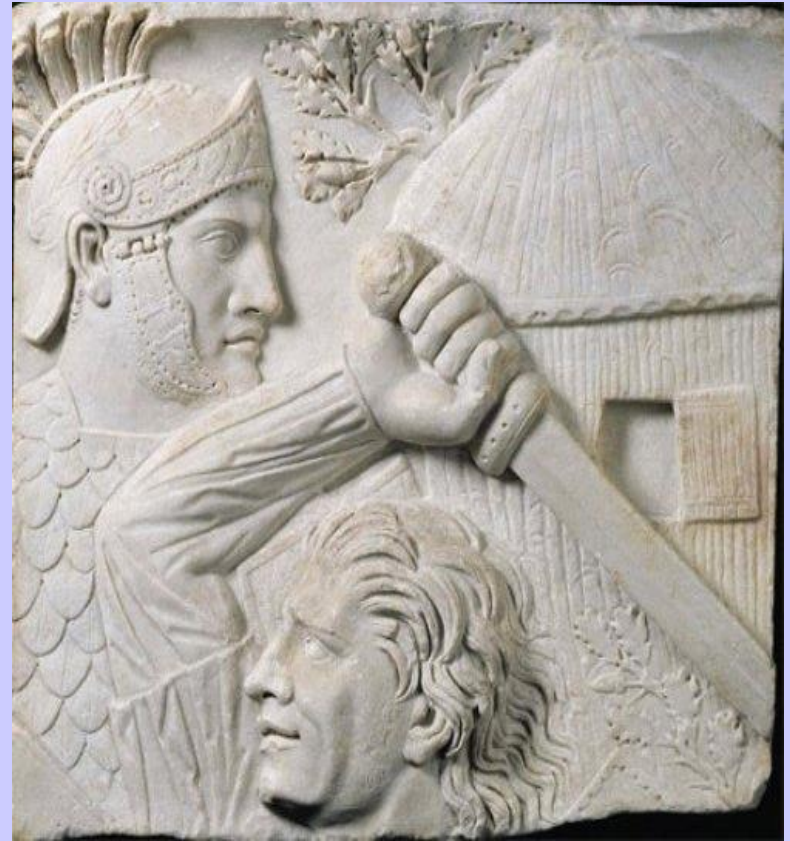
- . In *Theogonia*, Hesiod presents the genealogy of the waters of the earth and the Istros, the river *with beautiful waters* is also mentioned among the sons of Okeanos, born of goddess Thetis. Jordanes tells us that in the language of the Bessians, water was known under the name of *Hister*. Around 80 AD, Strabo wrote that the Romans called the upper part of the water course, from its source to the gorge in the Danube between Orșova and Turnu-Severin, *Danubius*, and the lower part, from the Danube gorges to the river mouth, on Getan land, *Istros*. Moisi Khorev, an Armenian historian who lived in the 4th century AD, reminds us of a (water) *course* called *Tanup*.

- **The archaic histories and medieval legends, as well as one of the main thematic classifications of musical epic works belonging to the so-called *Danubian cycle* focus upon the role that the Danube played as a frontier, a liquid defense ‘wall,’ even as a battle field in times when the objectives of the states existing at that time were different from those that we have grown accustomed to due to the pacifist and brotherly messages in the political speeches nowadays.**



- ***Crossing the Danube*** in order to conquer the lands on the left bank was considered a heroic duty by many of the great warriors of the world.
- The Persian king Darius started the expedition against the Scythes in 509 BC and crossed the Danube in a vantage portion of the river, where he was met by the local inhabitants with gifts: a sparrow, a mouse, a frog, and five arrows whose intended message was the following: if you will not fly like a bird, hide underground like a mouse, swim like a frog, then you shall be killed by our arrows.

- After he crossed the river and defeated the Getae, Alexander the Great brought sacrifices to Zeus, Heracles and to river Istros itself, which thus allowed him to cross it.
- Lysimachus, a Thracian king and a close friend of Alexander's, crossed the river and then fought the Getan king Dromihaetes, who forced him to make peace, with the marriage of the Thracian king's daughter to his son as a warrant of the peace.



- Perhaps the most resounding crossing of the inferior Danube , with a notable effect on the history of south-eastern Europe, was the one organized by Trajan the Emperor in order to conquer Dacia.
- Present-day Romanians are descendants of the inhabitants of that Eastern Roman Empire, within whose borders existed, for a while, the Trajan Dacia.
- Not far from the Danube Gorges lie the ruins of the bridge specially designed by the architect Apolodor of Damascus to enable the Romans to cross the Danube.



- **A scene carved in stone on Trajan's Column, which was erected in Rome in order to celebrate and immortalize this event depicts the river god himself as he benevolently watches the conquering Roman armies. Two lions were thrown into the waters of the Danube, as a sacrifice brought to this water deity (the lion was the very emblem of the Roman legions that conquered Dacia).**



- **The Ottoman conquest, after the fall of the Byzantium and of the capital of the empire, Constantinople, in 1453, leads to changes in the status of the Danube, which becomes the frontier of the Empire with the countries that despite being vassal countries retained their autonomy in exchange for a substantial tribute. The Romanian principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia were in this situation.**



- **The Ottoman troops crossed the Danube only during looting raids or wars caused by the rebellion of a Romanian ruler or when they brought messengers on behalf of the sovereign power who were not always benevolent. In this context, a category of the small-scale heroic epic epos is developed, in which the overriding theme is the confrontation between the Ottoman troops that cross the Danube and the heroes – valiant Romanian fighters.**
- **Taking into consideration the landmarks of specificity, this grouping from the Danube cycle may be likened to the well-known *The Song of Roland* or to certain chapters from *The Cid*.**

- **A cycle of heroic epic songs is dedicated to the family called Novac (Novăcești), consisting of father and son – Baba Novac and Gruia – to whom uncle Balaban is also added sometimes. Several identities of heroes who fought, led a life of outlaws and meted out justice in the medieval period blend together under the name of the main character, who gives the title of the whole narrative cycle, while their actions and character traits generated the appearance of a type of anti-Ottoman fighter.**
- **In the 16th century there also lived a real hero, who enriched and brought up to date the features of the person lauded by the authors of the epic texts dating from the last two centuries of the previous millennium:**

- **Baba Novac, born in the first half of the aforementioned century (ca 1530) in Porec, Serbia, whose mother was a Romanian woman belonging to the ruling family of Basarab, and his father, a Serb, was a pretender to the throne of the Czars from the neighboring country.**



Statuia lui Baba Novac
Baba Novac Statue

- **He lived as an outlaw in Serbia and Oltenia (Romania) and was a subject of the Romanian voivode Michael the Brave and captain of his army. He attacked the Ottoman garrison from the isle called Ada Kaleh and in 1595 he crossed the Danube with 700 outlaws and advanced towards the Balkans, where he defeated Hasan Paşa in an armed conflict. He fought in Transylvania , Moldavia , and Wallachia together with the vojvode, and was arrested by the Hungarian nobility and burnt on the stake in Cluj, on the 5th of February 1601, with the Orthodox priest who was accompanying him**

- With the passage of time, the Ottoman authority over the inferior course of the Danube (and not only that) increases, and some of the towns situated on the two banks became *rayahs* (fortresses occupied and administered by the Ottoman authority on the Romanian territory): Brăila, Turnu Măgurele, Giurgiu, Vidin, etc. All along the waterway there were fords crossed by merchants with goods, traveling minstrels, shepherds who moved while tending their flocks from the Carpathian mountains to sub-Carpathian hills (during summer) and the bank of the Danube, where the climate is milder and the pastures, richer (during winter).



- **The Novac heroes (the term *novac* also has the sense of ‘giant’ in Romanian) are also present in heroic songs in our neighbors’ folklore. Fighters, warriors, at times endowed with a mythical genealogy that explains and justifies their special status in the Romanian community – they are married to fairies or are descendants of a link between an earthling and a fairy (type 8, *Novac and the Fairy*; type 9 – *Gruia’s Marriage to the Savage Girl*) – and are depicted in the epic texts as moving from the Danube’s left bank, where they reside, to Țarigrad (the name under which the city of Istanbul, the ‘emperor’s city’ appears in poetic texts and in Romanian historic literature).**

- They cross the river in order to go and fight the conquering Ottomans in their own space of authority, an event providing the father with the opportunity to train his son, a young and thoughtless boy, in the field of war techniques and strategic abilities.



- Throughout Romanian history, these knights bore the names of “brave men” (*viteaz*) or “valiant men”(*voinic*). *Crossing the Danube* represents the foremost sign of audacity, the challenge that the Ottoman guard troops who kept watch over this border faced.
- Baba Novac (elderly Novac) ‘crosses the Danube with his cane’, quickly passes over the natural border and looks for his son, who had reached Țarigrad (Istanbul) and stopped in a tavern to have a good time with other young rebellious fighters, an easy prey for the sultan’s troops, who arrest him.
- The freeing of the hostages in the imperial city, who had been taken into custody by the Ottoman patrols, is one of the heroic acts constantly presented in the epic text, while the backwards crossing of the river is a new challenge for the border guards, browbeaten after the clear victory that the two Novacs had achieved in the capital of the empire

- **A few years after the Romanian Principalities ‘bowed’ to the Ottoman power, navigation on the river was controlled mostly by the imperial power. Gruia, inebriated after drinking wine, falls asleep on his ship on the Danube; he is betrayed, captured by the Ottomans and sentenced to be hanged in the town of Calafat, situated on the left bank of the river, which was under Romanian authority. A valiant and astute man, his father frees him and together the two defeat their enemies**

- *Foaie verde peliniță, / Pe-al mijloc de Dunăriță / Tristă vine-o șeiculiță; / Vine tristă și smolită, / De toate maluritrântită, / Foaie verde și-o lalea, / Cu șaizeci de turci în ea; / Căta loc, unde căta? / Foaie verde păr uscat, / La o ceșmea în Calafat / Acolo că turcii trag, / Vin cu Gruiță legat / Și legat și-nverigat.*
- **A-sailing I will go, / In the middle of the Danube flow / A-sailing comes a Turk; / His face sad and sullen, / O' the river banks darken, / A-sailing a boat comes near, / With sixty Turks bringin' fear, / And lookin' for a dock where there's no dock here, / A-sailing in the boat sat, / The Turks in Calafat, / T'was there that the Turks docked in, / With Gruiță bound in, / And he's tied up thru and thru, / With nowhere to go to. (type 27 II – Novac. *Gruia as a Prisoner*).**

- **The port towns on the banks of the Danube were important commercial and toll centers. Many of the armed conflicts between the valiant men and the imperial troops take place here.**

- **Dressed as a woman, young Gruia lures the Ottomans to the water bank, where he weeps like a young widow whose husband she claims had drowned in the waters of the Danube, trying to snare the invaders wishing to meet young girls and take them to the harems in their country**

- *Dunărice, Dunărice, / Săce-mi-ți vadurile, / Zău, și mândră, fundurile, / Bărbățelul m-ai necat, / Văduviță m-ai lăsat.*
- **O' my sweet Danube where you lie, / hope your waters will run dry, / hope the river-bed gets dry, / my ol' man why did you drown, / left me wearin' a black gown**
- **Lured by the presumptive beauty of the person they thought was a woman the soldiers are attacked and killed by Gruia and by old Novac.**

- **Among the towns most widely mentioned in the heroic epic text we cite: the rayah of Vidin (the Dii) on the right bank, and Brăila, the Turkish rayah on the Romanian territory. The personality of the Pasha from Vidin, who lived in the 19th century, a tough man, a fighter and an invader, who made several incursions into Romanian territory, is still imprinted on the collective memory.**



- *Foaie verde-a briilui, / Strigă pașea-l Diiului / Din vârful mecetului: / - Turcește-te, Iancule, / Turcește-te beiule, /.../ Lasă-ți legea românească / Și dă-te-n legea turcească.*
- **All the while the town thru, / the Dii pasha's screaming too / from a top his little mosque: / be like Turks, you wild ones, / be like Turks, Romanians, / gotta leave Romanian law / and uphold the Turkish law.**
- **Forcing them to forsake the restrictions imposed by the ritual food code, during the presumptive ceremony, it is the Ottomans that adopt the 'Romanian law' (type 39 – *Iancu Mare*).**

- **The outlaw called Stan of Stăvrui, who during winter had hidden in the woods, crosses the Danube in spring, disguises himself and enters the court of the pasha from Vidin (Dii), kills all his guards and the pasha himself, afterwards heads for Rusciuc in order to settle accounts with another pasha and with a bey (type 53 – *Stan al lui Stăvrui*, Stan of Stăvrui).**
- **The motif of the child who is abandoned floating on the water and adopted by a princess is familiar especially due to the association with the history of the life of Moses, revealed in the book called *Exodus*. The episode offers the hero, in the case of this ballad, who is to become the husband of the sultan's daughter, an aura of mystery and a status that is different from that of other people.**

- **Șoimănel (type 57 – *A lui Șoimănel*, Șoimănel’s story) is abandoned on the waters of the Danube, in a small crate, after his mother is taken to Vidin as a slave. He is brought up by the emperor’s daughter, who found him floating in the crate and the two get married when they reach the appropriate age. He finds out the exact place where his mother serves as a slave in Vidin, goes and frees her.**
- *Mâna pi paluș pune, / Șâ-n Dunâri sî trânte, / Pin țări străini merge / Pân-la Vidin agiunge. / Turci multî înnăinti-i ișă; / Ciar cari-cum turc ișă, / Capu răpidi-i tăie, / Tăt Vidinu mni-l taie.*
- **Hand on sword he then did put, / on the Danube he laid soot, / across borders he did go / to Vidin arrived he so. / loads of Turks then did appear; / every Turk that he saw near, / cut his head off in a flash, / all of Vidin he did thrash.**

- **Accompanied by a pack of outlaws, elderly Novac, disguised as a monk, prowls and attacks the merchants who go to Dii, taking their riches (type 36 – *Novac and the Merchants*)**
- *Scoborau la apa rece, / Unde numai cucu trece. / Cu Corbiță și Gruită / O pornea pe Dunăriță, / Colo-n deal, la Stari deal, / La cășile lui Novac, / Lui Novac, Baba Novac, / C-are barba ca de țap, / Sărea Dunărea-n ciumag / Dincolo de Calafat.*
- **Goin' down to cold waters, / where the cuckoo never falters, / with Corbiță and Gruită / he started on the little Danube stream, / to the Stari hills upstream / to where Novac dwells, / Novac, Baba Novac, / whose beard hairs bristle like a thistle, / Jumped the river with his staff / and beyond Calafat sat tough.**
- **Two other men from Brăila – inhabitants of the rayah of Brăila – also use the Danube waterway, they rob and attack merchants, and one of these men dies at the same time with the Turkish merchant he had mugged. (type 51 – *Brăilenii, Inhabitants of Brăila*).**



- **Tănislav** too, the hirsute fighter who sleeps in his boat, secluded on a small tributary of the Danube – a *rill*, a *rivulet* – is betrayed by an unfaithful servant and handed over, tied, to the Spahi soldiers and servants of the sultan.
- *Caicu că-l îndrepta / Pe Ostrovu Corbului, / Pe săninu cerului, / Unde Dunărea cotește / Și, frate, cam azvârlește.../La o gărlă, ciorogârlă / Unde fete nălbesc pânză.*
- **His raft he was rowin' / to the Raven's Islet headin' / under clear blue skies goin' / where the Danube 's turnin' / and white waters are swirlin' / on a rill, a rivulet / where girls bleachin' cloth sat.**
- **Considering the description of the place, one may assume that the event takes place in the vicinity of the *gorges* or the *rapids* of the Danube. Thrown in the waters of the Danube with a millstone tied to his neck, Tănislav sobers up, reaches the surface level and is saved by the father of one of the girls who were bleaching cloth on the bank. He then goes and punishes the people who betrayed and attacked him (type 41 – *Tănislav*).**

- **The bank of river Danube is a place where the most diverse personalities meet, where plans of contacting the ‘other,’ of luring or trapping enemies are conceived and put into practice. Here is where young girls who bleach the cloth they have sown using a technique that is well-known in traditional household industry have the opportunity to meet various heroes, either fighters whom they greet and make friends with or even love, or pursuers well-versed in art of espionage, who betray their trust and learn from them the places on the river bank where the fighters are hiding:**



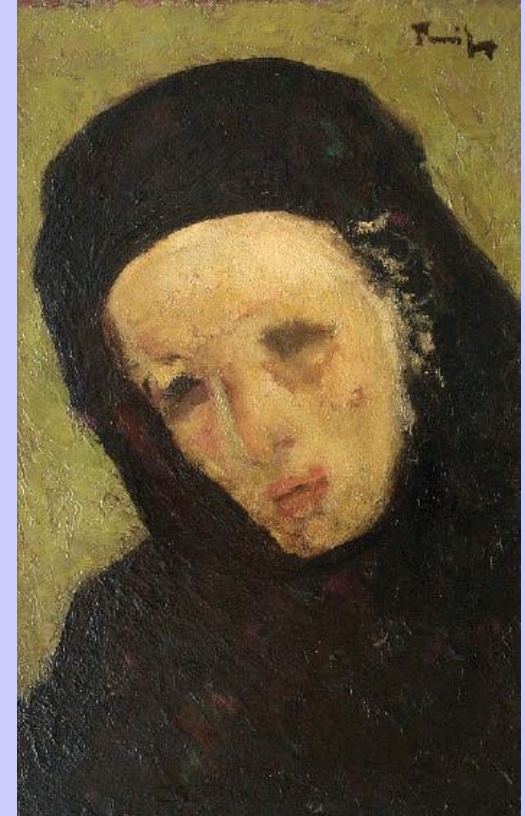
- *Pe dicolo, pe dincoala / Umblau turcii d-aiurea /.../ De câte-o para vin band / Și de Tanislav-ntrebând/.../ - Bună ziua, fetelor, / Fetelor, velencelor, / Iar de-oa spune-ntr-o dreptate, / Pânzele să să nălbească / Știi, ca coala de hârtie / Când o iei din prăvălie / Și-o dai la notar s-o scrie.../ De n-oa spune-ntr-o dreptate, / Pânzăle să să cernească, / Cu cătran să cătrănească, / Știi, ca inimioara noastră, / Că nu-ntrebăm de strâmbătate, / Și-ntrebăm că n-e bun frate*
- **There 'n here, everywhere / Turks of all sorts roaming wild /.../ drinking themselves blind / all the while about Tanislav asking /.../ 'morning, girls, you bleaching girls, / are you gonna tell us true / that your cloth may bleach thru / like a simple sheet of paper / you get from the stationer / and send one in your family / to give to the notary / if his writing is no good / may your cloths turn black / and the color not come back / like our heart is true / our question's not undue / he's a brother for us too), say the soldiers who were sent to find valiant Tănislav and kill him.**

- **The song about the elderly mother looking for her son who left home to join the battle and whom she later discovers wounded on the battlefield, is attested, in several variants, in the north and south of the Danube. A river that spans so many countries, crosses mountains and valleys, receives tributaries from all over the European continent, is shrouded in piercing mist, clashes with the winds and refreshes its waves with the torrential rains, the Danube is the most rightful harbinger of news about the people it met, entitled to mediate communication with the other atmospheric elements that man usually encounters. The mother stops on the river bank to ask the water**

- *La Dunăre-ajungea, / Baba jos se da, / Din gură-mi striga: / -
Dunăre, Dunăre, / Drum fără pulbere / Și fără-de făgaș, / Mult
m-iej drăgălaș, / Cum iești curgătoare, / Vii din deal în vale, /
Fii și vorbitoare: / Tu mereu curgând, / Uor tu mi-ai văzut /
Un tânăr voinic, / Pe-aicea trecând? /.../*
- **To the Danube bank she got, / the old woman, on the spot, /
cryin' her heart out, said: / oh, Danube, dear river, / all the
secrets you deliver / you're always dust-free / and endless
for me / 'tis you I love so much / and your waters that flow
such / on the hills and valley that you touch / talk to me
and say this much: / did you happen once to see / a mighty
man for me / my son ever did you see? /.../**

- The portrait that the mother draws for her disappeared son constitutes an emblematic motif of Romanian folk literature, where it is known as a ‘portrait of the early Romanian shepherd’ from the ballad entitled *Miorița* or as the ‘face of Jesus’ from the *carol of the crucifixion* or from *the Tale of God*:

- His face / milk-white / his hair / black as ink / his moustache / dense like crop wheat / his eyes / like blackberries. / The Danube was telling her: / Hey, you, old hag / your legs you barely drag / and your woolen gown / made from camel hairs / your son I did not see / nor ever did he come by me; / but Thurs’ morn’ you go / to my sister, oh, my Lo’ / her name is mist, you know / and maybe she did see, / and met him for you and me / to tell you where he might be.



- **In the ports that were well-equipped for trade, it was customary in those times for young girls to be tempted by the special goods the ships carried and be attracted to the ships, where they were sequestered and forced to get married, against their will, or to be taken to Țarigrad and sold as assets whose outstanding beauty enriched the harems of the sultans and pashas.**
- **The ballads about the girls deceived or kidnapped by Ottomans make up a thematic category with several attestations in the typology of the heroic song and of the family ballad. Certain types were quite widespread: (type 46) *Chira-Chiralina*, (type 47) *Ilincuța Șandrului*, (type 52) *Niculca*.**

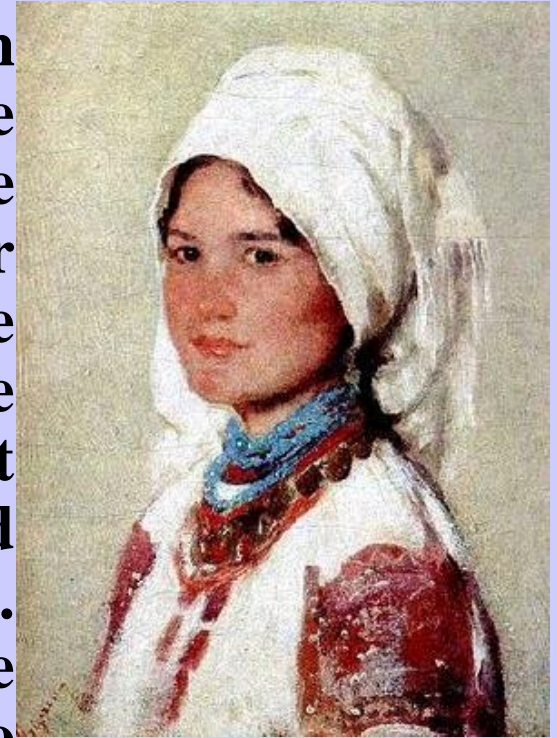
- **An entire world is linked to the Danube, with customs, habits and specific techniques for action that are revealed in these epic texts, some of which are remarkably long.**
- **The ballad entitled *Chira Chiralina* (type 46) has a wide circulation in all the regions in the south of Romania, some of them situated even at a considerable distance from the water bank (Dolj, Olt, Vâlcea, Teleorman, Ilfov, Dâmbovița, Buzău, Brăila, Galați, Constanța). It served as the source of inspiration for the subject of a well-known novel written by a French writer of Romanian origin, Panait Istrati.**

- A theme that is familiar to the epic song exhibiting motifs which are both erotic and heroic is the theme that tells us about the passionate love nurtured by a merchant come from the Orient – *Arab, black and thick-lipped* – for a beautiful lass living in the port town on the Danube, the rayah of Brăila.
- Tempted by the beautiful merchandise that the ship carried, the girl is lured onto the ship - *Picking the best cloth / this one, no, that / like women always do / glued to the looking glass, while the infatuated Arab went out on the deck / cut my gown off / and started his ship / on a water trip / down the Danube he took me / a beautiful islet to see / he steers the ship for me / sings plenty of beautiful tunes / with his wondrous lute / and a bone to pick the strings / like his bait for fish I am / melts my heart into submission / with the lute strings that he plays / breaks my heart / heart of a married girl / married against my will* – because of the typical woman's weakness.

- And the girl is later freed by her brothers, *șerpii Dunării*, *hoții Brăilii* (serpents of the Danube, thieves from Brăila), who are very adroit fighters and navigators and will later find her a bridegroom of their choice to whom she gets married.



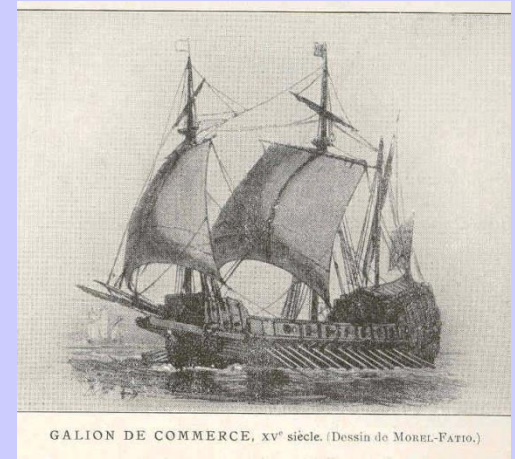
- The ballad called *Ilincuța Șandrului* (type 47), widely circulated among traditional repertoires, even more widespread geographically and well represented in most folk areas of Romania, belongs to the same thematic category of abusive love that the Ottoman invaders or their servants showed to or imposed on the young girls living on the banks of the Danube. Most of the time, the girls did not share this feeling or were kidnapped and taken across the river, on the right bank. But the unforeseen fact is that the beautiful girl taken as a slave in order to be handed over to the sultans' harem prefers to commit suicide, jumping into the waters of the Danube.



- **Examining the poetic text of the narrative songs whose story takes place on the luster of the Danube waters, in the port towns on the two banks or in the reed thicket of the Delta, we identify certain information linked to the specific nature of this multi-faceted environment.**



- Such are the types of boats or ships that were used for crossing the river or doing trade – *șaică*, *caic*, *galion* (flat-bottom boat, two-mast boat, galley) and this information tells us about the *black boat covered in silk*, known as an imperial ship, on which traveled the sons of the emperor (the sultan in Țarigrad (Constantinople, Istanbul) or of pashas; *the flat-bottom boat*, a light craft that was used not solely for fishing, but also for short amorous rendezvous on one or the other river bank



- **Without generating epic narratives of the aforementioned types, the Danube was the space where dramatic events took place during the two world wars and during the communist totalitarian period, events that left in the Romanian folklore a few legends and several personal accounts about the people who were trying to swim across the river in order to reach the Serbian bank where, if they eluded the groups of frontier guards, they could hide and afterwards flee to the West via Trieste. Many people paid with their life or were sentenced to many years of imprisonment for this act of courage.**

- **The real history and the memory of the events that happened here, expressed in categories and folk species, prove the steadfastness with which the Danube was and still is a space of confluence from the place it enters Romania to where it flows into the Black Sea, a protective border and a link, a place of refuge and a field of bloody confrontations, a commercial route marked by points where boats and ships dock, enabling the exchange of merchandise and cultural information, a route for lovers and a refuge, the last road for the unfortunate people. The Romanian cultural identity cannot be complete in the absence of the generous image of the Danube**

