CHAPTER 4

The Many Roles of the Dynamic Danube in Early Modern Europe: Representations in Contemporary Sources

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Abstract

Based on the Burney collection of 17th and 18th century English newspapers, the chapter discusses how the Danube featured in the news. It was represented as a theatre of war, providing environmental historians with an opportunity to reconstruct the influence of natural dynamics on human affairs. Among these are ice and ice floods, other floods, low water and storms. The Little Ice Age exacerbated the dynamic that military strategies had to take into account. The Danube served as a battle site, and human interventions into the river were undertaken for strategic purposes. Navigators and other experts came from all over Europe to aid the Habsburg war effort. An environmental history perspective contributes to a more inclusive and complex understanding by accounting for the role of the ever-changing Danube in changing socio-natural sites that were decisive for the making of modern Europe.

In 2015, the Danube is Europe’s most international, and, second to the Volga, longest river. It has inspired numerous works, from literary (Magris) to popular (Lessner). For contemporary historians, a wide range of conflicts and interacting actors offers possibilities to elucidate the role of the dynamic river in society. From the difficult re-creation of a floodplain area in Neuburg in the German province of Bavaria (Schmid, “The Environmental History”), down to competing interests with regard to the vast Biosphere Reserve in the Romanian Delta area, the Danube River Basin exhibits a plethora of potentially conflictual issues. Environmental problems comprise hydromorphological change, pollution, flooding, loss of biodiversity and the almost total demise of fisheries. Many of these problems will be exacerbated by global climate change. Environmental legacies abound and current conflicts of use are particularly intense in the riverine landscapes. A humanities’ perspective on the effects and adaptability of societies and cultures to global climate change is urgently needed (ICPDR; Winiwarter; Winiwarter and Haidvogl).
Most contemporary histories do not take into account how persistent legacies from earlier interventions can be, and are ill informed of the dramatic history of the river and its surroundings. This paper offers a long-term perspective.

Studies of the effects of changing climate on river dynamics, on the changes the Danube underwent as it or parts of its ecosystems were transformed into different resources, histories of their use and abuse and the resulting environmental effects benefit from a conceptual approach. The interdisciplinary team of environmental historians at Vienna suggests using the narrative of changing practices and arrangements and telling the story of the Danube as an ever-changing and ever changed socio-natural site.

Because rivers are naturally dynamic at timescales within human experience, they are the source of protracted conflict. Unregulated rivers are fast changing landscape elements, and hence, a source of disturbance for societies based on territorial rights. They are multi-functional elements of productive landscapes. Many of these potential functions are in conflict with one another. Flax production and fish do not go together, as the decaying organic matter from flax left in the river to prepare for fibre extraction poisons fish habitat; likewise, milling or shipping are often mutually exclusive, as boat-mills can take up much of a river’s navigable part. Sources abound with examples of such conflicts (Pollack et al.).

To understand the role of rivers in human history, it is important to ponder their nature for a moment. Rivers connect ecosystems along their course, allowing for the movement of fauna and flora, and transporting nutrients and sediment—which can become fertile soil downstream. Rivers provide habitat for fish, including migratory fish species that travel long distances. Rivers and their adjacent floodplains also supply the niches for a multitude of waterfowl, for specialized rodents such as beavers, nature’s dam-builders, which need the flowing water, as do many other species. Rivers are connected to groundwater, they influence groundwater levels and hence, agricultural potential and the entire hydrological cycle in their vicinity. River ecologists speak of lateral and longitudinal connectivity to describe these characteristics. All rivers are sensitive to weather and climate—in fact, they are among the first features of terrestrial ecosystems to react to changes in the atmosphere (Knox). Natural river dynamics include floods. Almost all rivers exhibit seasonal changes as well as irregular larger variations, depending on weather histories such as combinations of above-average precipitation with snowmelt. Flood events can lead to dramatic changes in the river course, but small movements of its course happen on a day-to-day basis. The location of rivers in the surrounding landscape, called floodplain for good reasons, is generally unstable: Rivers naturally change their course, driven by the physics of water and sediment, and hence,