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### **The Play of Islands: Emerging Borders and Danube Dynamics in Modern Southeast Europe (1830-1900)**

This paper explores the history of two Danubian islands during the nineteenth century and examines the crucial role they played in the region's political affairs during the nineteenth century. They revealed to be to be players of an importance equal to that of political and diplomatic actors. In an attempt to understand the way in which nonhuman entities have agency in human affairs, we show that the emergence of two new nation-states, Bulgaria and Romania, created the necessity of establishing firm borders along the thalweg of the Danube, thus turning the river and its islands into powerful actors. The hydrodynamics of the Danube and the changeable architecture of its islands – sometimes with the assistance of man-made artefacts such as shipwrecks – significantly influenced the two nation-states' diplomatic and military actions. Based on rich historical evidence we document the mutual entanglements of the Danube's hydrological processes and diplomatic and political developments.

On February 21<sup>st</sup> 1900 a small Bulgarian military troop tried to re-take their outpost on Eshek-ada Island, on the River Danube that they had left in a hurry a few months earlier. They were chased away by severe floods, which that year almost submerged the island. The troop movement was met with gunfire from Romanian soldiers located on Eshek-ada's twin island, called Bujorescu. These two Danube islands, which mirrored each other – two of many scattered along the river – belonged to Bulgaria (Eshek-ada) and Romania (Bujorescu). This incident was one of a long series involving the border guards of the two countries between 1896 and 1902. The conflicts between the border guards that had almost brought the two countries to the brink of war were accompanied by diplomatic disputes and letters of protest issued at the highest level.<sup>2</sup> This incident was triggered by a territorial dispute over the two islands but more was at stake: namely the thalweg of the Danube, the imaginary line drawn along the river's bed that corresponded to the deepest level of the water, which serves as a

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<sup>2</sup> Archives of the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (hereafter AMRAE), Problem 52, File *Border incidents with Bulgaria*, p. 54. Eshek-ada means 'Donkey's Island' in Turkish. Bujorescu is a Romanian family name. The island bears the name of the local entrepreneur who in the mid 1860s was the first to receive the right to exploit the forest on the island. See the newspaper *Adevărul*, 24<sup>th</sup> March, 1900, p. 1.

navigational path. The thalweg also served as a border between the two young nation-states.<sup>3</sup> The Danubian islands and the navigation path were considered essential elements of the state-building process that was taking place at the end of the nineteenth century. The islands were not simply mounds of land in the middle of the river but potential national territories with rich natural resources – wood and pastures of high quality – as well as strategic outposts from which to supervise navigation along the Danube.

One could say that the sole actors in this dispute were the two states and their armies; but one would be wrong. The Danube with its dynamics, rhythms and whims was another strategic actor – one that in fact triggered political border disputes between the two states. River islands are of a ‘nomadic nature’ as Lahri-Dutt and Samanta put it; they tend to appear and disappear, to move upstream and downstream according to the hydrological laws of the river.<sup>4</sup> Like any other large river in the world, the Danube carries not only water but silt and debris as well, brought down from the mountains by its approximately 300 tributaries. The Danube thus produced a great number of bars and islands along its flow. For instance, in the tortuous Austrian stretch of the River Danube there were 2000 islands covered in vegetation before the construction of the large hydropower plants in the twentieth century.<sup>5</sup> Scattered along the river these islands were not only navigational obstacles but also mutable areas of national territory that provoked political tensions.

This essay tells the story of two islands located in the Lower Danube. Their story allows us to reflect on a common theme in environmental history: the agency of nature in a particular time and space. We show the process through which the Danube with its hydrological dynamics became a historical actor that provoked military actions, shifted political borders and was the source of intense diplomatic debates between Romania and Bulgaria at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. As newly established nation-states, Romania and Bulgaria tried to establish and secure the border between them, which before their emergence as independent states on the political map of Europe was historically a fluid frontier freely crossed by the riparian populations. In recounting the story of the two islands we look at their erratic movement on the river and the politico-diplomatic consequences its movement triggered. We show that natural elements are

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<sup>3</sup> The river’s thalweg principle separating the territory of two states was established in the nineteenth century. See Charles Cheney Hyde, ‘Notes on Rivers as Boundaries’, *American Society of International Law* 6(4) (1912): 901.

<sup>4</sup> Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt and Gopa Samanta, *Dancing with the River. People and Life on the Chars of South Asia* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013), 32.

<sup>5</sup> For the silt deposits and their effects see James R. Penn, *Rivers of the World. A Social, Geographical and Environmental Sourcebook* (Santa Barbara, Denver, Oxford: ABC Clio, 2001), 58; Gregory H. Sambrook et al. (eds.), *Braided Rivers. Process, Deposits and Management* (Malden, Oxford, Carlton: Blackwell, 2006), 353.

not static – they have agency – but we also show that this is a process that is brought about by particular historical circumstances. The river *became* an actor when the border between the two modern states was constituted in a technical, economic and geopolitical sense.

Besides contributing to a theoretical debate in which the agency of rivers is highly disputed, denied or at least minimized, we intend to contribute to an area of scholarship that is still relatively unexplored: the environmental history of Southeast Europe. As John McNeill pointed out more than a decade ago, the environmental history of Southeast Europe is yet to be discovered.<sup>6</sup>

### **Nature's agency**

Throughout modern history rivers have been employed as important political tools in the process of state building. This observation, made by Mark Cioc, refers specifically to the way in which the Rhine was engineered hydraulically by different nation-states in the nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup> Other rivers were also engineered, their beds dredged, their banks reinforced and their flow controlled by large hydraulic works.<sup>8</sup> Despite the deep disruptions all rivers of the world have been subjected to in the modern period, they still retain their ‘natural’ qualities; they constantly adjust and compensate for events that affect them over time, as Richard White has shown brilliantly in the case of the Columbia River.<sup>9</sup> Rivers move and build new beds, run, shrink and transform over time. They impose rules of existence on humans living on their banks. River movements – floods or their absence – created wealth or brought famine and death for riparian people as Alan Mikhail has shown in the case of Ottoman Egypt.<sup>10</sup> The Danube and its hydrological dynamics also influenced the riparian population's everyday life for centuries, shaped the local economy and was part of regional politics. The riparian population, knowing the Danube's pulse – its yearly floods, their duration and intensity –

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<sup>6</sup> John R. McNeill, ‘Observations on the Nature and Culture of Environmental History’, *History and Theory* 42, (2003): 5-43. Southeast Europe as a specific region with a specific history is also regularly missing from environmental history handbooks. See for instance John R. McNeill and Erin Stewart Mauldin (eds.), *A Companion to Global Environmental History* (Malden, Oxford, Chichester: Wiley, 2012) or Andrew C. Isenberg (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental History* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>7</sup> Mark Cioc, *The Rhine. An Eco-biography, 1815-2000* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002), 38.

<sup>8</sup> Richard White, *The Organic Machine. The Remaking of the Columbia River* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995). See also Dorothy Zeisler-Vralsted, *Rivers, Memory, and Nation-Building. A History of the Volga and Mississippi Rivers* (New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2015); David A. Pietz, *The Yellow River. The Problem of Water in Modern China* (Cambridge, Mass., London, UK: Harvard University Press, 2015); Daniel McCool, *River Republic. The Fall and Rise of America's Rivers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); Sara B. Pritchard, *The Nature of Technology and the Remaking of the Rhône* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011); Donald Worster, *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

<sup>9</sup> White, *op. cit.*

<sup>10</sup> Alan Mikhail, ‘Unleashing the Beast: Animals, Energy, and the Economy of Labor in Ottoman Egypt’, *American Historical Review* 118(2), (2013): 317-348.

cultivated cereals on natural land mounds after the waters had receded. They responded to the Danube's activity by adapting their agricultural practices to the river's movements. This means that the Danube was an active agent with an autonomous role in history, not just a backdrop for human actors.<sup>11</sup> In other words, the river acted according to its natural laws and imposed its own rules on humans.

Non-human agency over humans has become the core of a heated theoretical debate in social sciences in recent decades. This debate polarises two almost irreconcilable sides. One side – the advocates of what has been termed 'posthumanism' – does not discriminate between human and nonhuman actors when explaining social processes. Exploring the relationships between humans and nonhumans, Bruno Latour calls for equality when examining the influence of one type of actor over another. This does not mean that humans are denied agency, it simply means that nonhumans are promoted from being simply inanimate or 'mere nature', to active agents able to influence humans in different ways.<sup>12</sup>

The opponents of this theoretical approach strongly contest the idea that nonhuman entities have the power to shape human culture or behaviour. Or at least, they argue that this theoretical approach misinterprets ethnographic and scientific facts, ignores the true sources of power and fails to address properly the question of social and political inequality. Chris Gregory considers Latour 'a theological thinker who had devoted his life to attacking humanist thought'.<sup>13</sup> Tim Ingold disguises his critique of this stream of theory behind a dialogue between two arthropods, an ANT (Actor Network Theory) and a SPIDER (Skilled Practice Involves Developmentally Embodied Responsiveness). The disagreement between the arthropods revolves around concepts such as agency, network and actor. Obviously, the

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<sup>11</sup> For nature as a historical actor see Carolyn Merchant, *Ecological Revolutions. Nature, Gender & Science in New England* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010 [1989]); for nature having an autonomous role in history see William Cronon, 'Modes of Prophecy and Production: Placing Nature and History', *The Journal of American History* 76(4) (1990): 1122-1131.

<sup>12</sup> There is already an impressive amount of literature dealing with these theories referred to as 'the new ontological turn of the century', which will not be reviewed here. For more see John D. Kelly, Introduction The Ontological Turn in French Philosophical Anthropology, *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 4(1) 2014: 259-269, Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993); Dona Haraway, 'A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialism Feminism in the 1980s', *Socialist Review* 15(2) (1985): 65-108; for posthumanism see Eduardo Kohn, 'Anthropology of Ontologies', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 44(2015); Andrew B. Kipnis, 'Agency Between Humanism and Posthumanism', *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 5(2) (2015) : 43-58. For how agency is perceived in historical studies see Ted Steinberg, 'Down to Earth: Nature, Agency and Power in History', *American Historical Review* 107(3): 798-820.

<sup>13</sup> Chris Gregory, 'On Religiosity and Commercial Life. Toward a Critique of Cultural Economy and Posthumanist Value Theory', *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 4(3), 49. See also Andrew B. Kipnis, *op. cit.* For other strong contestations of Latour's theoretical position see David Berreby, 'And Now, Overcoming All Binary Oppositions, It's that Damned Elusive Bruno Latour', *Linguafranca* 4(6) (1994) <http://linguafranca.mirror.theinfo.org/9410/latour.html> Accessed October 9, 2017.

term *agency* seems to be the sensitive issue in question.<sup>14</sup> For Ingold – the voice behind the SPIDER – agency cannot be attributed to nonhuman entities that do not grow and whose movement does not require awareness of their environment. By contrast, Knappett and Malafuris encourage social scientists to think of agency non-anthropocentrically ‘as a situated process in which material culture is entangled’.<sup>15</sup> In other words, elements of material culture may in fact construct or, at least, challenge social reality and are not simply a reflection of human actions and intentions.<sup>16</sup> An animal, a tree or a river are not just nonhuman entities that are subject to human intervention; they have their own particularities and agency that are independent of humans. The advocates of nonhuman agency have already produced a rich literature that explores entanglements between the nonhuman and human worlds. They speak about viruses, which disrupt economic, political and institutional arrangements, about the culture of bees, or urge us to look into how forests think.<sup>17</sup> Scallop larvae or trees transcend the passive role that humans attribute to them; they refuse to obey human directives by following their own ecology or by growing in unexpected or (for humans) undesirable places.<sup>18</sup> Animals were key actors in different societies as much as bureaucrats, peasants or the prices of commodities were, and taking them out of the picture would mislead and misguide the historical analysis, says Mikhail.<sup>19</sup>

Nonhuman agents can be – no matter how hard this is to grasp – simultaneously active and passive. This paradox is discussed by John Law and Annemarie Mol in their analysis of the 2001 outbreak of epizootic disease in Cumbria, when sheep were subjected to various practices. As the potential host for foot-and-mouth virus the flock was quarantined; as members of a flock suspected of disease, sheep were sacrificed; as an economic entity sheep

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<sup>14</sup> Tim Ingold, ‘When ANT Meets SPIDER: Social Theory for Arthropods’, in C. Knappett and L. Malafuris (eds.), *Material Agency. Towards a Non-Anthropocentric Approach*, (New York: Springer, 2008), 209-215.

<sup>15</sup> Carl Knappett and Lambros Malafuris, ‘Material and Non-Human Agency: An Introduction’, in C. Knappett and L. Malafuris (eds.), *Material Agency. Towards a Non-Anthropocentric Approach* (New York: Springer, 2008), xii.

<sup>16</sup> *Idem*, xiii.

<sup>17</sup> Lowe Celia, ‘Viral Clouds: Becoming H5N1 in Indonesia’, *Cultural Anthropology* 25(4): 625-649; Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, ‘Empowering Nature, or: Some Gleanings in Bee Culture’, in S. Yanagisako and C. Delaney (eds.), *Naturalizing Power. Essays in Feminist Cultural Analysis* (New York, London: Routledge, 1995), 113-143; Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think. Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2013).

<sup>18</sup> Michel Callon, ‘Some Elements of a Sociology of Translation: Domestication of the Scallops and the Fishermen of St Brieuc Bay’, in J. Law (ed.), *Power, Action and Belief: A New Sociology of Knowledge?* (London: Routledge, 1986), 196-223; Owain Jones and Paul Cloke, ‘Non-Human Agencies: Trees in Place and Time’, in C. Knappett and L. Malafuris (eds.), *Material Agency. Towards a Non-Anthropocentric Approach*, 79-96.

<sup>19</sup> Alan Mikhail, *Nature and Empire in Ottoman Egypt. An Environmental History* (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011); see also *idem*, *The Animal in Ottoman Egypt* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

carried a market price. The sheep was acted upon in different ways by different agents involved in this story. Slaughtering animals suspected of carrying the virus was a primary strategy for fighting foot-and-mouth disease. However, the sheep itself was an actor; for instance, its grazing habits created a certain type of landscape. Without sheep grazing on it, this landscape would change physically in a radical way. This transformation of land use would affect, in turn, the romantic image of the local landscape – an important issue for many locals and non-locals alike.<sup>20</sup> This example illustrates at least two points. One is that the action of an actor should not be considered in isolation but in relation to other actors. This means that the ability of an actor to act depends pretty much on the network in which she/he/it is embedded.<sup>21</sup> The second point is that action is different from control.<sup>22</sup> This is a vital point since the concept of nonhuman agency has been harshly criticized by those social scientists who disagree with the idea of crediting nonhuman entities with the power of action. As Callon and Law show, Western civilization considers that only those actors who are able to demonstrate intentionality and are able to use language can be invested with the power of agency.<sup>23</sup> However as anthropologists show, animals, forests, fish or even viruses have agency and act by virtue of their biological habits. In the process, they influence, change or at least interact intimately with humans.<sup>24</sup> This interaction is not unidirectional and engages humans and nonhumans alike.<sup>25</sup>

If we agree that animals, plants or even objects can exert agency over humans, rivers should be credited even more with this kind of action. Not only do rivers have a biography and a political life, as environmental historians have pointed out, but a river's pulse has determined the emergence of civilizations, ancient as well as modern.<sup>26</sup> It is difficult to

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<sup>20</sup> John Law and Annemarie Mol, 'The Actor Enacted: Cumbrian Sheep in 2001', in C. Knappett and L. Malafuris (eds.), *Material Agency. Towards a Non-Anthropocentric Approach* (New York: Springer, 2008), 57-77.

<sup>21</sup> Annemarie Mol, 'Actor-Network Theory: Sensitive Terms and Enduring Tensions', *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie* 50 (2010), 257 ff.

<sup>22</sup> J. Law and A. Mol, *op. cit.*, 70; A. Mol, *op. cit.*, 260.

<sup>23</sup> Michel Callon and John Law, 'Agency and the Hybrid Collectif', *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 94(2) (1995), 481-507 apud Owain Jones and Paul Cloke, 'Non-Human Agencies: Trees in Place and Time', in C. Knappett and L. Malafuris (eds.), *Material Agency. Towards a Non-Anthropocentric Approach* (New York: Springer, 2008), 82; B. Latour, *op. cit.*, 138.

<sup>24</sup> Stefan Dorondel, *Disrupted Landscapes. State, Peasants and the Politics of Land in Postsocialist Romania* (Oxford, New York: Berghahn Books, 2016); Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People and Significant Otherness* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm, 2003); Eduardo Kohn, *op. cit.*; Marianne Elisabeth Lien and John Law, "'Emergent Aliens': On Salmon, Nature, and their Enactment", *Ethnos: Journal of Anthropology* 76(1) (2011), 65-87; Celia Lowe, *op. cit.*

<sup>25</sup> B. Latour, *op. cit.*; A. Mikhail, *The Animal in Ottoman Egypt*, p. 12.

<sup>26</sup> Mark Cioc, *The Rhine. An Eco-biography, 1815-2000*; Christof Mauch and Thomas Zeller (eds.), *Rivers in History. Perspectives on Waterways in Europe and North America* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press,

separate the history of humans from the history of rivers – so difficult that at certain points the boundaries that separate these two domains become blurred. Moreover, rivers flow, they embed energy that is derived from the sun and the moon that, together with the gravitational force of the Earth, creates hydrological cycles.<sup>27</sup> Rivers thus embed forces well beyond human power and control. The physical properties of rivers and their dynamics help them to carry objects (such as small particles of silt, wood or vegetation) and constantly change the shape of those other elements associated with a river: its banks and islands.

If we have to take sides in the theoretical debate hinted at above, we place ourselves among those who do not discriminate between human and nonhuman entities when explaining historical processes. The reader will judge if the historical accounts referred to in this paper support this position.

### **The choreography of two islands**

This section pinpoints the way in which islands are formed in a river and then documents the movement of two Danubian islands during the nineteenth century.

A river island is defined as an area ‘of woodland vegetation surrounded by either water-filled channels or exposed gravel’, which exhibits a certain degree of stability and remains above water even during floods.<sup>28</sup> Islands are formed through the interaction between riparian vegetation and wood debris together with waterborne sediments and a gravel bar. The burial of wood debris in the sediments enables vegetation to grow from seeds carried by the river.<sup>29</sup> This process is influenced by the rivers’ speed and flow as well as the quantity of silt and vegetation. As a result, a new island grows steadily which, in turn, influences the two channels that flank it. The channel narrows, deepens and influences the angle of flow towards the bank.<sup>30</sup> This means that the bank, the islands, the river’s flow quantity and force, the vegetation growing on the island are all part of a hydrological and morphological cycle. In the case of rivers that are highly regulated, the quantity of both bedload and suspended sediment continues to be transported at a much-decreased rate.

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2008); Ellen Wohl, *A World of Rivers. Environmental Change on Ten of the World’s Great Rivers* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2011).

<sup>27</sup> Richard White, *op. cit.*, 6; Matt Edgeworth, ‘On the Agency of Rivers’, *Archaeological Dialogues* 21, 157.

<sup>28</sup> Lorenzo Pico et al., ‘Medium-Term Fluvial Island Evolution in a Disturbed Gravel-Bed River (Piave River, Northeastern Italian Alps)’, *Geografiska Annaler: Series A, Physical Geography* 96 (2013), 83.

<sup>29</sup> For a more detailed hydrological account of island formation see J. V. Ward et al., ‘A Reference River System for the Alps: The “Fiume Tagliamento,”’ *Regulated Rivers Research & Management* 15, 1-3 (1999), 73 ff.

<sup>30</sup> Yasser Raslan and Radwa Salama, ‘Development of Nile River Islands between Old Aswan Dam and New Esna Barages’, *Water Science* 29(2015), 79.

At the end of the nineteenth century the Upper Danube was only partially regulated and had not yet suffered the deep changes produced by the twentieth century.<sup>31</sup> The Lower Danube's geomorphological and hydrological characteristics meant this section of the river had a tendency to generate islands. For almost the entire length of the Danube on Romanian territory, not counting the Delta – a distance of 761km - there are 194 islands.<sup>32</sup>

The hydrological processes of the Danube brought about constant changes to the thalweg. These changes have strained political relations between the states of Southeast Europe since the first part of the nineteenth century. Establishing a border on a river is not an easy task or devoid of conflict. Thus, this action required a fathom of the Danubian islands movements. In 1830 an international commission was formed, including representatives of the Russian Empire (victor in the 1828-9 war against the Ottomans), the Ottoman Empire and Walachia. With the support of appointed Western experts, the commission was charged with drawing the border along the Danube between the Ottoman Empire and the Principality of Walachia.<sup>33</sup> After a thorough inspection of the Lower Danube islands, the commission decided that the thalweg and ownership of the islands should be reviewed every 50 years because 'the Danube radically changes the shape and size of its islands (*ostroave*, in Romanian). The Danube shifts its course sometimes more than 1000 *stânjeni* per year and constantly makes new islands while engulfing others.'<sup>34</sup> Knowing the movements of the Danube and its islands, the Walachian government sent a petition to the chief of the international commission, a retired colonel from the Russian army, requesting that the

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<sup>31</sup> The constructions of embankments and, subsequently, of hydropower plants have drastically altered the Danube's hydrodynamics. For the reduced quantity of sediments carried by the Danube after the construction of hydropower plants see László Rákóczi, 'Sediment Regime of the River Danube (1956-1985)', in M. Brilly (ed.), *Hydrological Processes of the Danube River Basin. Perspective from the Danubian River Basin* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2010), 296-297. For general data concerning the morphology and hydrology of regulated rivers see Yasser Raslan and Radwa Salama, *op. cit.*, 77-92.

<sup>32</sup> László Goda sr., 'The Fords of the Danube', in M. Brilly (ed.), *Hydrological Processes of the Danube River Basin. Perspective from the Danubian River Basin*, p. 351 (Dordrecht: Springer, 2010).

<sup>33</sup> *Protocoale redactate în 1830 în vederea Demarcațiunei frontierei formată de Dunăre între Imperiul Otoman, Rusia și Principatele Dunărene precedat de Tratatul separat de la Adrianopole relativ la Principatele Moldovei și Valahiei și urmate de Actele Comisiei de Cercetare a Drepturilor asupra pământurilor întoarse Țerei Românești de la Turci* [The reports written in 1830 for tracing the Danube frontier between the Ottoman Empire, Russia, and the Danube Principalities, preceded by the Adrianople Treaty regarding Moldavia and Walachia and followed by the documents of the Commission for the Review of the rights on the lands returned from the Ottoman Empire to Walachia] (Bucuresci : Imprimeria Statului, 1903), 57.

<sup>34</sup> *Protocoale*, 57. One *stânjen* measured 1,96 meters. Thus the documents point out that the Danube moved its course sometimes by around 2000 meters in a year, in this way forming new islands. For archaic measurement units see Elena Dugheanu, 'Echivalența dintre unitățile de măsură arhaice și unitățile și ale lungimii și ariei utilizate în România,' [Equation of Archaic Measurements Units with the Length and the Seize Measurements in Romania] *Metrologie* LIII, 1-4, 2006. <http://www.inm.ro/pdf/2006-12-unitatile-de-masura-arhaice.pdf> Accessed October 9, 2017.

commission measure the islands and re-assign them to either of the two countries every 30 years rather than every 50.

The 1830 commission established that all islands situated on the left side of the thalweg would become part of the Walachian Principality whereas those on the right side would belong to the Ottoman Empire. The thalweg along the Danube was considered the border between the two states.<sup>35</sup> Thus, eighty-seven of the Lower Danubian islands remained in Ottoman possession whereas seventy-nine became part of the principality of Walachia. After the 1878 Berlin Congress a new ‘European technical commission’ was appointed to establish the border along the Danube between Romania and, this time, the newly established Bulgarian state.<sup>36</sup> The commission included representatives of Austria-Hungary, France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Russia, Turkey and the two riparian countries (Romania and Bulgaria). This international body of experts maintained the principle of the thalweg as the border between the two countries, which had to be inspected regularly as foreseen in 1829 through the Adrianopole Treaty; however the allocation of the islands was the measure by which the border was effectively established. The two riparian countries were eager to maintain their island possessions although the number of islands at this point was much smaller than in 1830: whereas each country had owned around eighty islands in 1830, now only forty-five were assigned to each country. This suggests that the number of islands on the Lower Danube had almost halved in only fifty years. The Danube had already claimed its place as a major regional geopolitical player. The river’s capacity for making new islands and ‘swallowing’ others opened the way for international political and territorial negotiations.

Recounting the microhistory of two particular islands, as we will do in the remaining part of the section, observing their sinuous trajectories and their constantly changing architecture will help us understand the process of their transformation into political actors.

In 1829 two small islands located next to the Bulgarian city of Shishtov mirrored each other: one, quite large, was called the Island of Shishtov and the other, just a small mound of

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<sup>35</sup> This principle was established in 1829 through the Treaty of Adrianopole. After the Russian Empire won the war against the Ottoman Empire (1828-1829) a treaty was signed at Adrianopole, today’s Edirne city. Empowered by the West European states, Russia negotiated, among other issues, a new political status of the Walachia and Moldova principalities. *Acte și documente relative la istoria renascerei României* [Papers and Documents Concerning the History of Revival of Romania], vol. I, Document no. 63 (București 1888). See also G. F. v. Martens and F. Saalfeld (ed.), *Nouveau recueil de traités*, tome VIII, 1825-1830, (Göttingen, 1831), 152-155.

<sup>36</sup> Gheorghe Bibescu, *Istoria unei fruntarii. România pe malul drept al Dunării* [The History of a Frontier. Romania on the Right Bank of the Danube] (Bucuresci: Tipografia Curții Regale, 1883). In January 1859 Walachia and Moldavia were united under the name of The United Principalities of Walachia and Moldavia. The name of the new state – Romania – was consecrated in 1866. Bulgaria was established as a state in 1878.

land, Tchengene. They were located closer to the right bank of the Danube so the 1830 commission considered them part of the Ottoman Empire. On the opposite side, situated around four kilometres from the Ottoman shore, closer to the Walachian side, was another small island called Deli Moustafa. Around 1840, an Ottoman *kayak* – a wooden transport boat – had sunk close to the place where a few decades later a new island called Bujorescu had formed. The shipwreck had caused a gradual change in the river's flow towards the left bank. The strong stream of water started to erode Shishtov Island. At the same time the channel that separated the island from the right bank started to deepen. When the island existed, the port of Shishtov city was basically unusable except for small boats. Once the island started to erode and the channel to deepen the port once again became approachable by larger boats. This situation was an economic advantage for the Ottoman Empire but had disadvantages as well. As the flow headed towards the right bank the sands of the left bank advanced into the river – thus enlarging the Wallachian territory. The left bank advanced so much that at a certain point the Deli Moustafa mound of land and the left bank merged into a new piece of land projecting into the Danube, called Bujorescu.<sup>37</sup> Finally, in 1860 Shishtov Island disappeared completely, washed away by the river's waters. A small mound of sand of four to five metres bore witness to the once large island.<sup>38</sup> Instead, a new large island closer to the left bank of the Danube is marked on contemporary maps as Bujorescu Island. This island grew due to the massive silt deposits brought by the river both around and downstream from the Ottoman shipwreck. At the same time, a new island appeared on the other side of the thalweg, closer to the Ottoman shore: Eshek-ada. In 1878, when a new European commission reassigned the islands to Romania and the newly emerging Bulgarian state, Eshek-ada was given to Bulgaria. The international commission considered the new island to be a remnant of the vanished Shishtov Island. The fact that in 1878 Eshek-ada was on the right side of the thalweg and closer to the Bulgarian bank represents a strong argument in favour of the hypothesis that Shishtov Island was transformed into Eshek-ada. Or, at least, one can argue that Eshek-ada formed in close proximity to the place once occupied by Shishtov Island (see figure no. 1).

**Here comes the figure no. 1: A map showing Eshek-ada and Bujorescu on different sides of the thalweg**

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<sup>37</sup> AMRAE, *File concerning the incidents at the Romanian-Bulgarian border 1896-1902*, No. 52, vol. 2, file 86.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, file 81.

In the 1880s Eshek-ada ‘crossed’ the thalweg through successive movements that brought it closer to the Romanian shore. Since the Danube’s current was stronger towards the Bulgarian shore the small island was pushed into the left side of the river. The Danube continued to complicate the geopolitical arrangements along its course and in 1888 Eshek-ada united for the first time with Bujorescu Island. The two islands merged due to the movement of the thalweg towards the right bank while the channel between the two islands silted up.<sup>39</sup> The union and separation of the two islands unfolded periodically after 1888. Ten years later, the Danube’s hydrodynamics pushed Bujorescu Island very close to the Romanian bank. Only a tiny water channel separated the island from the mainland. When the Danube’s waters were high, the island was separated from the bank by a 150-metre channel whereas during the summer, when the river was low, the island became part of the bank. This was not surprising as in the summer the entire Danube channel was only 600 metres wide. In order to understand the dynamics of island formation it is important to show that until 1888 Bujorescu was bisected by a water channel wide and deep enough to be navigable. This channel was, according to contemporary observers, proof that the island was formed when two smaller islands merged (see figure no. 2).<sup>40</sup>

It seemed that the Turkish ship, wrecked around 1840, played a certain role in the movement of the two islands as it changed the water currents and the deposition of silt. Besides, the catastrophic floods of 1897 seemed to play a significant role in this hydrogeological process. In that year the Danube covered the floodplain and transformed it ‘into a sea, with powerful tides, crossed by all kind of large ships which were able to navigate into the deep interior of the country, over the plains transformed into the bed of the river’.<sup>41</sup> The waters were so high that the Danube was considered to have reached its maximum level in modern times. To this day, the level of the Danube is measured against this maximum.<sup>42</sup> The flood brought so much silt, gravel and sand that it covered the channel separating the two islands.

### **Here comes the figure no. 2: A map showing the two islands almost merged**

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<sup>39</sup> AMRAE, Problem 52, Vol. 2, *File concerning border incidents*, file 174 with a map of Bujorescu Island.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, file 84.

<sup>41</sup> Grigore Antipa, *Regiunea inundabilă a Dunării. Starea ei naturală și mijloacele de a o pune în valoare* [The Danube Floodplain, Its Natural Status and the Means to Valorize it] (București: Carol Göble, 1910), 2.

<sup>42</sup> Botzan M. et al., *Valorificarea Hidroameliorativă a Luncii Dunării românești și a Deltei* [The Valorisation of the Danube Floodplain and of the Delta’s] (Giurgiu: Institutul de Cercetare și Inginerie Tehnologică pentru Irigații și Drenaj Băneasa, 1990), 23-24.

In 1898 only a narrow water channel separated Eshek-ada from Bujorescu. A map drawn in April 1898 shows (see figure no. 3) the probable movement of the three islands – Bujorescu, Eshek-ada and Deli Mustafa – that finally caused them to merge into one single body of land. At the same time, the waters covered the Southwest part of Eshek-ada which caused the island to merge with Bujorescu in August 1899.<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, the formation of Bujorescu was not yet complete in 1898 as the main current of the Danube headed towards the Bulgarian bank, causing river deposits to increase continuously downstream of the island. Thus, the island steadily continued to grow.<sup>44</sup>

**Here comes the figure no. 3: A map explaining the movement of Bujorescu, Shistov and Eshek-ada Islands.**

During the decade between 1888 and 1899 further small islands were completely submerged by the river while several others formed.<sup>45</sup> The appearance and disappearance of Danubian islands was quite a common phenomenon along the Lower Danube. As a report written by the Romanian authorities states, a comparison of any Lower Danube map from 1829 with one from 1898 reveals significant change: the shape, size and location of many islands had altered in only seventy years. The islands that had disappeared were replaced with new ones. The report mentions that the thalweg along the Lower Danube had also changed as some adjacent water channels – also part of the Danube – silted up while the river created new avenues.<sup>46</sup> Late nineteenth century observers had noticed that other wrecks scattered along the Lower Danube created islands, or at least sandbars. For instance, a Turkish ship that had sunk in 1878 closer to the Romanian bank created a sandbar and caused the thalweg to deviate to the right.<sup>47</sup> In only a few years the sandbar turned into a small island as vegetation grew at a fast pace.

Shipwrecks causing fords that then turn into islands represent a well-known phenomenon in scientific literature.<sup>48</sup> A wreck or even dead wood can influence a river's features. The formation of fords and islands is a hydrodynamic process connected with the movement of the river's flow, the natural elevation of the bed, annual floods carrying

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<sup>43</sup> C. Șerbescu, *Bulgaria și Rumelia de Est. Studiu politic și militar* [Bulgaria and Eastern Rumelia. A Political and Military Study] (București: Albert Baer, 1901), 93.

<sup>44</sup> AMRAE, Problem 52, Vol. 2, *File concerning border incidents*, file 86.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, file 80.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, file 87-88.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, file 87.

<sup>48</sup> László Goda sr., 'The Fords of the Danube', 353.

sediment, vegetation and wood debris and the alternation of periods of drought and flood. The sediment or organic matter deposited behind the dead wood or other object accumulates and becomes the perfect location for vegetation to grow.<sup>49</sup> Steadily an island will be formed. Thus, human activity and products (such as shipwrecks or, later, used tyres), aside from the natural fluvial processes, contribute to the formation of sandbars and fluvial islands and influence the movement, appearance and disappearance of river islands.<sup>50</sup> Besides human activity, credit for the choreography of the islands should go to the Danube's hydrodynamics. The geographers have noted that the law of physics tend to push the Danube towards the Bulgarian shore. Like a gigantic sledgehammer the river 'bites' into the bank and rips the soil away, causing landslides. The hydrological movement also contributes to the erosion of the islands near the Bulgarian bank and moves the thalweg towards the right side.<sup>51</sup>

The erratic movements of the islands disregard political and territorial boundaries.<sup>52</sup> Islands move, change shape, cross national borders and trigger, as we shall see in the following chapter, serious conflict between neighbouring countries. They do not do so consciously, they have no agenda, nor do they intend to complicate Romanian-Bulgarian diplomatic relations. They move around, appear and disappear by virtue of the Danube's hydrodynamics. Thus they are actors that cannot be disregarded when establishing a border along a river. The movement of islands constitutes their agency; they create particular situations and make establishing the thalweg more complex.<sup>53</sup> This positions the islands as historical actors. Bruno Latour describes microbes as participating agents and actors in late nineteenth century French society; in the same way islands contribute to the history of the border along the Lower Danube.<sup>54</sup>

Islands are *at the same time* passive actors. They are steadily formed by human artefacts, such as shipwrecks or natural objects, such as fallen trees together with silt, branches and other debris borne by the river. These objects and the hydrodynamics of the

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<sup>49</sup> A. M. Gurnell et al., 'Riparian Vegetation and Island Formation along the Gravel-Bed Fiume Tagliamento, Italy', *Earth Surface Processes and Landforms* 26 (2001), 31-62.

<sup>50</sup> Idem; J. R. Wyrick and P. C. Klingeman, 'Proposed Fluvial Island Classification Scheme and Its Use for River Restoration', *River Research and Applications* 27 (2011), 815; W. R. Osterkamp, 'Processes of Fluvial Island Formation, with Examples from Plum Creek, Colorado and Snake River, Idaho', *Wetlands* 18(4) (1998), 530-545.

<sup>51</sup> M. Devedzhiev, 'Dunavska geopolika na Bŭlgarija' [The Geopolitics of the Bulgarian Danube], *Geopolitika* 6 (2007), 35-50.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. A. Mikhail, *Nature and Empire in Ottoman Egypt*, 20.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. A. Mikhail, *Unleashing the Beast*, p. 333 who pointed to the same phenomena but referring to the animals of the Ottoman Egypt.

<sup>54</sup> B. Latour, *The Pasteurization of France*, translated by A. Sheridan and J. Law (Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 10.

river act upon islands, forming and transforming them.<sup>55</sup> In order to acknowledge the role played by the nonhuman in human history one needs to transform the nonhuman ‘into a coherent *subject* of history’.<sup>56</sup> We reflect on this in the next section.

### **The Danube, its islands and geopolitical conflicts**

The riparian population has been exploiting the resources of these constantly shifting lands since the sixteenth century at least.<sup>57</sup> Villagers traditionally released their pigs, horses and cows onto the islands for the entire summer. Sometimes the Wallachian shepherds brought their sheep on to the islands for the winter, exchanging one to three sheep for 100 ungulates. Animals grazed on the islands in a state of semi-wildness. The animals’ owners were therefore not obliged to invest labour and food to support their livestock for around five to six months per year. Besides, the luxuriant vegetation of the islands, due to the annual floods and the nutrient-rich silt deposited by the waters of the Danube, combined with pastures of high quality, represented an ideal place for grazing animals. The names of some islands, such as Islaz (‘communal pasture’ in Romanian), Eshek-ada (Donkey’s Island), Ericum (Pig’s Island) or Goose Island, to name only a few, illustrate their main functions.<sup>58</sup> The trees growing on the islands had constituted an important source of timber for the riparian population for centuries. Willow, poplar and alder were the trees regularly to be found on the islands. These trees had a wide variety of uses: from building materials for houses and fences, poles for the vineyards, to fence posts for lakes and backwaters and heating fuel. From their branches baskets and wooden dishware were fashioned. These trees were economically viable as they grew fast – they were harvested every eight to ten years.<sup>59</sup> Small ponds and water channels that remained after the Danube waters had receded in late May were an important source of fish that remained trapped there.<sup>60</sup>

The islands of Eshek-ada and Bujorescu were used in a similar way; the riparian populations from both countries exploited the islands’ timber freely and without incident.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Cf. J. Law and A. Mol, ‘The Actor Enacted: Cumbrian Sheep in 2001’, 57-77.

<sup>56</sup> A. Wick, ‘Self-Portrait of the Ottoman Red Sea, 20th of July 1777,’ *Osmanlı Araştırmaları / The Journal of Ottoman Studies* XL (2012), 400.

<sup>57</sup> A. Kayapınar, ‘Les îles ottomans du Danube au XVIIe siècle,’ in Nicolas Vatin et Gilles Veinstein (eds.), *Insularité Ottomane* (Istanbul: Maisonneuve & Larose, Institut français d’études anatoliennes, 2004), 185.

<sup>58</sup> C. Șerbescu, *Bulgaria și Rumelia de Est* [Bulgaria and Eastern Rumelia], 91-93.

<sup>59</sup> Grigore Antipa, *Dunărea și problemele ei științifice, economice și politice* [The Danube and Its Scientific, Economic and Political Problems] (București: Cartea Românească, 1921), 93.

<sup>60</sup> *Protocoale*, 84. For catching fish trapped in small ponds after the Danube waters had receded see Tudose Tatu, *Tradiția, promotoare a pescuitului gălățean* [Tradition as a Stimulus of the Fishing Activity in the Galați City] (Galați, 2015), 245.

<sup>61</sup> *Jos Reacțiunea* (daily newspaper), 5th of March, 1900, Year XII, No. 6, pp. 5-6.

Despite their hydrological ballet the two islands had not changed ownership. Until 1893, Eshek-ada and Bujorescu were not fully merged but were still separated by a narrow water channel. Bujorescu was at that time an island with vegetation, predominantly willow, poplar and boxthorn. It was 5.5km long and 700m wide. The island also had a lake.<sup>62</sup> As for Eshek-ada, we do not have an approximation of its dimensions but from the historical maps it looks as though it was approximately one third of the size of Bujorescu.

Everything changed in 1893 when the Romanian government decided to lease Bujorescu's dense forest to two local businessmen. The island's natural resources belonged to the Romanian state, which often leased it to local entrepreneurs. This entitled leaseholders to exploit grass, reeds and rushes but not forest.<sup>63</sup> To exploit timber the two businessmen had to enter into a different contract with the Romanian state, which gave them a special permit. They exploited the forest of Bujorescu until December 1897 when the two complained to the Romanian authorities that they were coming under continual pressure from Bulgarian soldiers. The Bulgarian soldiers accused them of extending their exploitation rights to include Eshek-ada. Faced with this accusation and impeded from collecting the fallen trees, the businessmen requested the protection of the army.<sup>64</sup> A military incident occurred when two Bulgarian foresters asked Bulgarian troops to stop the illegal exploitation on Eshek-ada.<sup>65</sup> Romanian troops intervened, the two Bulgarian foresters were arrested and the forest exploitation continued. The Bulgarian government retaliated rapidly and sent a small, armed troop on 15<sup>th</sup> March 1898 to prevent the Romanian entrepreneurs from collecting the fallen timber. Three days after this incident, a clash between the Romanian border guards and Bulgarian troops broke out. According to local media fourteen Bulgarian soldiers and several Romanians were wounded. A Romanian garrison stationed on the banks of the Danube, in the immediate vicinity of the islands, supplied military troops. The order from the Minister of War was clear: Romanian soldiers had to defend the island at any cost. A commission was

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<sup>62</sup> AMRAE, Problem 52, Vol. 2, *File concerning border incidents with Bulgaria*, file 85; George I. Lahovari, C. I. Brătianu and Grigore G. Tocilescu, *Marele dicționar geografic al României* [The Great Dictionary of Romania] Vol. 2. (București: J. V. Socecu, 1898), 62. C. Șerbescu, *op. cit.*, 93 gives slightly different dimensions for the island of Bujorescu: four kilometers in length and one kilometer in width.

<sup>63</sup> *Regulament de licitațiuni pentru arendarea bunurilor statului* [The Rules concerning the auctioning of leasing state goods] published in *Monitorul Oficial*, 43, nr. 016, 22 of January 1875, 310-316.

<sup>64</sup> AMRAE, Problem 52, Vol. 2, *File concerning border incidents with Bulgaria*, file 5.

<sup>65</sup> Each country installed pickets on the two islands in 1898, after a bilateral political commission failed to find a solution for the two almost merged islands. This political decision was not easily accepted by the Bulgarian border troops. Spending autumn and winter on Eshek-ada was 'very unpleasant' as in bad weather the troops were unable to get help and were cut off from the Bulgarian bank. See The Central Archive of the Bulgarian State (hereafter CABS), Fund 176к, opis 1, a.e. 1348, file 4, 9.

rapidly appointed by the central government to investigate the armed incident.<sup>66</sup> National media inflated the incident, asking for a clear and courageous response from central government.<sup>67</sup> In April a joint Bulgarian-Romanian commission was appointed to investigate the incident. The conclusion of the commission was that the two entrepreneurs had not exploited the willow woods on Eshek-ada since the trees grew in an area of the island that tended to merge with Bujorescu and the willow wood was very young and unsuitable for exploitation. The Romanian entrepreneurs exploited only the Western part of the island where forests of old, thick willow trees grew.<sup>68</sup>

The local military presence was meant not only to ensure the protection of the local entrepreneurs and their wood exploitation but also to protect the Romanian state's new investments on the banks of the Danube. The newly created Hydraulic Service (*Serviciul Hidraulic*) planned to move the port of Zimnicea city to Bujorescu Island.<sup>69</sup> A modern road would be needed to link the new port with the city. The Hydraulic Service also planned to build a railway to link the city and the island but because of the island's tortuous relief a loop of the railway track had to be built on Eshek-ada – in 1899 still a Bulgarian possession despite the fact that it had almost merged with Bujorescu.<sup>70</sup> The Hydraulic Service asks, in a memo to the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, for details concerning the ownership of Eshek-ada. The investment – a significant one – had to be made on Romanian soil, not on disputed territory. The Service memo notes that they are ready to clear the forest and prepare the ground for the construction of the railway, but that both Bulgarian and Romanian troops were impeding the work. The head of the Hydraulic Service mentioned that the conflict had already dragged on for too long and the Service did not know how to proceed.<sup>71</sup> Owning islands was potentially an immense strategic advantage, enabling movement of troops and weaponry across the Danube. Bridges could be built to link the bank with the islands and these outposts

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<sup>66</sup> *Lumea Nouă* (a local newspaper), 18<sup>th</sup> March, 1898.

<sup>67</sup> *Timpul* (daily newspaper), 20<sup>th</sup> March, 1898.

<sup>68</sup> AMRAE, Problem 52, Vol. 2, *File concerning border incidents with Bulgaria*, file 85.

<sup>69</sup> The Hydraulic Service was created in 1879s with the clear aim of improving the navigability of the Danube, through dragging and bank consolidations. See for details Alexandre Kostov, 'Trade and navigation on the Lower Danube: Romania and Bulgaria, 1880-1912', in Andreas Kunz and John Armstrong (eds.), *Inland Navigation and Economic Development in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, p. 108 (Mainz: Verlag Philipp von Zabern, 1995), 105-120; C. Băicoianu, *Dunărea. Privire istorică, economică și politică* [The Danube. A Historical, Economic and Political View] (București: Tipografia Eminescu, 1915), p. 148-9. The service also had to start building embankments and new ports along the Danube. The Danubian ports were seen as a key element for the grain export of Romania. A booming agriculture and the export of cereals was a major economic feature of Romania at the end of the nineteenth century. There was no similar agency at that time in Bulgaria. See Grigore Antipa, *Însemnătatea politică și economică a Dunării în viața poporului român* [The Political and Economic Importance of the Danube River for Romanian People] (București: Cartea Românească, 1940).

<sup>70</sup> AMRAE, Problem 52, Vol. 2, *File concerning border incidents with Bulgaria*, file 175.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, file 157.

were a convenient place to install artillery.<sup>72</sup> The two governments therefore repeatedly sought a solution to the dilemma created by changes in the location and topography of the islands.

In 1888 the Bulgarian diplomatic agent was instructed by his government to negotiate a solution to the problem of merging islands. Regarding Eshek-ada and Bujorescu, his Romanian counterpart reasserted that Eshek-ada was a newly formed island that did not appear on the map drawn in 1830. However, for the two governments the economic consideration had become secondary; what mattered most was who owned the islands. In May 1898 a joint commission was formed and tasked with finding a solution. After only four meetings a solution seemed unattainable and the commission was dissolved.<sup>73</sup>

In the summer of 1900, the Danube dealt the final blow to political attempts to resolve the tensions between the two countries and merged Eshek-ada completely with Bujorescu. Due to the high level of the Danube in December 1899 both the Romanian and the Bulgarian pickets were pulled off the islands. The Bulgarian government considered the Romanian withdrawal to be a tacit yet compelling acknowledgement of Bulgaria's legal rights over Eshek-ada. Thus, in early December 1899 Bulgarian local authorities from Svishtov city were encouraged to collect wood from Eshek-ada and sell it at auction. From the Bulgarian government's point of view the wood was state property. The government in Sofia decided to establish a military garrison on the island before the Romanian border military re-occupied their positions on Bujorescu. This was considered a 'favourable moment' to claim ownership of the island once and for all.<sup>74</sup> However, the Romanian border guards were faster and got there first. On the morning of February 21<sup>st</sup> 1900 the Bulgarian soldiers arriving on Eshek-ada to build new barracks were met with gunshots from Romanian soldiers.<sup>75</sup> This is the episode referred to at the beginning of this paper. The incident re-launched diplomatic disputes between the two countries over ownership of the Danubian islands and where the border lay. The Bulgarian government protested to the Great Powers and urgently requested the intervention of The Hague's international Court of Arbitration. While the Court reached a decision the Bulgarian government suggested a status quo ante – that military pickets be installed on the two islands.<sup>76</sup> The Great Powers intervened and pushed the two states into re-opening diplomatic negotiations to resolve their territorial disputes – the islands being the

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<sup>72</sup> The State Political and Military Archive of Bulgaria, Fund 22, opis 3, a.e. 120, file 4.

<sup>73</sup> CABS, Fund 176к, opis 1, a.e. 1348, file 16-18.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., file 4, 9.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., Fund 327к, opis 1, a.e. 51, file 28-29.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., Fund 176к, opis 1, a.e. 1348, file 43-44.

main source of conflict. In April 1904 a Romanian-Bulgarian commission met in Bucharest to negotiate the establishment of the border along the Lower Danube.<sup>77</sup> However, the two parties presented different and contradictory data concerning the thalweg and the evolution of the islands, mostly due to a total lack of common measurements. The Bulgarian party disliked the idea of drawing up a map in 1904 based on the thalweg principle as this way, newly-formed islands comprising an additional 125 hectares would be declared Romanian territory. For their part, the Romanians considered that Bulgaria would gain from upholding the thalweg principle, as 250 hectares would be added to their existing territory.<sup>78</sup> The diplomatic disputes continued until the end of 1907 when a joint commission of experts measured the thalweg along the Lower Danube. On January 1<sup>st</sup> 1908 the convention establishing the fluvial border between the two countries was signed in Sofia; both parties upheld the thalweg principle.

The islands of the Danube occupy the centre of politico-diplomatic attention and help us conceptualize better the idea of territoriality, economic disputes and conflicts in modern Southeast Europe.<sup>79</sup> Islands and their variable architecture are part of the new territorial relations between the nation-states. Depending on their movement, islands become allies or enemies in a conflict over establishing national borders. Non-human agency – be it Danube hydrodynamics or floods – is involved in the process of establishing the border between the new nation states. As long as it was only local villagers exploiting the natural resources of the islands, their erratic movements did not trigger politico-diplomatic attention. The political complications along the Lower Danube – in 1718 the Danube as far as Belgrade was placed under the control of the Habsburgs, despite the fact that it was still considered ‘a Turkish river’ and the keen interest shown in this waterway by Great European Powers<sup>80</sup> – did not prevent riparian villagers from continuing to exploit the islands. Until the early nineteenth century the prevailing Ottoman concept of a border was quite loose. Turkish vessels patrolled the Danube on a mission to protect commercial trade against criminals rather than keeping the Wallach population out of the southern territory.<sup>81</sup> However, once major capitalist exploitation of the islands’ natural resources had started, nation-states became aware of the islands’ potential. They ceased being merely a land mass surrounded by water and became a

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., Fund 176κ, opis 1, a.e. 1997, file 1-3.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 70.

<sup>79</sup> Cf. R. Deb Roy, ‘Nonhuman Empires,’ *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 35(1) (2015), 66-75.

<sup>80</sup> Virzinija Paskaleva, ‘Le rôle de la navigation à vapeur sur le Bas Danube dans l’établissement de liens entre l’Europe Centrale et Constantinople jusqu’à la guerre du Crimée’, *Association internationale d’études du Sud-Est européen. Bulletin XII* (1974), 41-60.

<sup>81</sup> Stelu Serban, ‘State, Technology, and Environment on the Lower Danube: Bulgaria and Romania Before the Balkan Wars,’ *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* (accepted for publication).

moving national territory. Furthermore, in 1889 the Romanian government established an agency to deal with the exploitation and regulation of the Danube and expanded the Danubian fleet by importing five tugboats and forty-five barges from Austria. The Romanian state maintained an assertive policy along the Lower Danube, with economic and political consequences. Hence the attempts to improve the port of Zimnicea had a significant role in escalating Romania's bellicose policies towards Bulgaria. By contrast, the newly created Bulgarian state was slower off the mark. The Bulgarian Danubian fleet was non-existent until 1879 when the Russian Empire donated four ships. The first two fleet commanders were not Bulgarians but Russian and French; in 1880 out of 227 members of the fleet only seven were officers and four were mechanics.<sup>82</sup> The first Bulgarian ports on the Danube, namely Vidin, Ruse and Svishetov, were not established until 1908-1913. At that point however the Bulgarian government seems to have recognized the economic importance of the Danube since the amount of money invested in the works to equip the port facilities is estimated to have been over 2.5 million leva.<sup>83</sup> Comparing this sum to the entire budget of the Bulgarian Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Work for 1912, which was 5.7 million leva, it is clear that the investment in these Danubian ports represented a fortune for the Bulgarian state.<sup>84</sup> In this race the Danubian islands became visible and desirable for the nation-states only when they emerged as a territory that might be used for gaining control over one of the most important economic avenues to and from Western Europe.<sup>85</sup>

### **The emergence of two nations and their fluid border**

In addition to their economic role, the islands became a high stake in the process of national territorial consolidation. Islands were divided between the Ottoman Empire and Wallachia in the 1830 census and continually contested, claimed and appropriated in the process of establishing the border between Bulgaria and Romania. The two nation-states share a border of 471 km along the Lower Danube – almost the entire border between the two states<sup>86</sup> – that was established in July 1878 as a consequence of the drastic geopolitical changes taking place

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<sup>82</sup> Dozhkov Vasil, *Bŭlgarsko dunavsko koraboplavane. Poyava, razvitije, problemi i perspektivi* [Bulgarian Danube Navigation. Appearance, Development, and Perspectives] (Veliko Tŭrnovo: Faber, 2002), 21-22.

<sup>83</sup> Ministerski Sŭvet, *Doklad do Negovo Velichestvo Ferdinand I, Tsar na bŭlgarite, po slutchai 25-godishnata ot vŭzshestviето mu na bŭlgarskija prestol. 1887-1912* [The Council of Ministries, Report to His Majesty Ferdinand the 1<sup>st</sup>, the King of Bulgarians, at His 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Since He Occupied the Bulgarian Throne. 1887-1912] (Sofia, 1912), 714.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid. 415.

<sup>85</sup> Cf. R. Deb Roy, 'Quinine, mosquitoes and empire: reassembling malaria in British India, 1890–1910', *South Asian History and Culture* 4(1) (2013), 73.

<sup>86</sup> Irene Lyons Murphy, *Protecting Danube River Basin Resources. Ensuring Access to Water Quality Data and Information* (Dordrecht: Springer, 1997), 202.

within the Balkan Peninsula during the nineteenth century. These geopolitical changes reflected a shift in the balance of power from the Ottomans to their Western rivals, a process that started in the late sixteenth century with a sharp decline in Ottoman power during the eighteenth century.<sup>87</sup> In previous centuries the borders of the Ottoman Empire were not clearly defined, nor were they clearly drawn on the political maps as an undisputed line. Borders were rather a contested space, in permanent motion due to military battles and political negotiations.<sup>88</sup> Despite the fact that the Danube was considered to be the northern border of the Ottomans in Europe<sup>89</sup> and the Danube was regarded as an ‘Ottoman river’,<sup>90</sup> the Wallach riparian villagers crossed the border with their animals unimpeded, paying a tax to the Turkish authorities. People crossed the river to settle on the Ottoman side whenever the Principality of Wallachia raised taxes. Conversely, the Bulgarian population from the Ottoman territories fled into Walachia during the Russian-Ottoman wars.<sup>91</sup> This situation had changed by the summer of 1878 when the Great Powers redrew the European map and new nation-states emerged: Romania, Serbia and Montenegro became independent states while a small Bulgarian state was created between the Balkan Mountains and the Danube.

Of these new states Romania was the largest in terms of population and size of national territory. Its borders secured after a secret alliance with Austria-Hungary and Germany in October 1883, the state focussed on the modernization of its institutions and on issuing new legislation. The political elite obsessively pursued a Western model of society, the only model considered historically viable.<sup>92</sup> Within this process, the ‘economic modernization’ of the Danube and its transformation through technology was a key political issue. It is little wonder that there was such keen interest in the Danube and its islands.

The Bulgarian state experienced more hardship during the process of modernizing its institutions: after 500 years of Ottoman rule the new state lacked national elites and institutional traditions. Thus, the newly emerged Bulgarian elite had to confront unresolved national issues – and none were considered more important than the union of all Ottoman

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<sup>87</sup> Palmira Brumett, ‘Mapping Trans-Imperial Ottoman Space: Alterity and Attraction,’ in Barbara Fuchs and Emily Weissbourd (eds.), *Representing Imperial Rivalry in the Early Modern Mediterranean* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press in association with UCLA) (2015), 37; Alan Mikhail and Christine M. Philliou, ‘The Ottoman Empire and the Imperial Turn,’ *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 54(4) (2012), 723.

<sup>88</sup> Palmira Brumett, loc. cit., 40, 47-48.

<sup>89</sup> Idem, 48.

<sup>90</sup> V. Paskaleva, loc. cit., 48.

<sup>91</sup> Constantin Velichi, ‘Emigrarea bulgarilor în Țara Românească în timpul războiului ruso-turc din 1806–1810’ [The Bulgarian Migration in Wallachia during Russian-Ottoman War 1806–1810], *Romanoslavica* 8(1963), 27-57; Constantin Velichi, ‘Emigrări la nord și la sud de Dunăre în perioada 1828–1834’ [Migrations at the North and South of the Danube Between 1828–1834], *Romanoslavica* 11(1965), 67-116.

<sup>92</sup> Vlad Georgescu, *Istoria României. De la origini până în zilele noastre* [The History of Romania from the Origins to Nowadays] (București: Humanitas, 1992), 151.

territories inhabited by Bulgarian ethnic minorities, with Bulgaria. All efforts were directed into achieving this union and into acquiring full independence from the Ottoman Empire. One-third of the annual budget of the new state was allocated to the Ministry of War, which had to form a competitive, professional army.<sup>93</sup> In 1885 the unification of Eastern Rumelia – inhabited mostly by Bulgarian ethnics – with Bulgaria created a political crisis within the Balkan Peninsula, which seemed unlikely to be resolved without going to war. It took a decade for the new Bulgarian Prince Ferdinand of Saxe Coburg-Gotha to be officially recognized by the European powers. Under his rule the Bulgarian state achieved important economic and institutional changes, including the establishment of a national professional army.<sup>94</sup> Exploiting the tensions between Austria-Hungary and Russia, the two large empires with powerful interests along the Danube, the Bulgarian state declared its full independence in the autumn of 1908.

Even before the emergence of the nation-states the Danube required the presence of border military personnel, as it was a boundary that could easily be crossed by different nationalities. The border military proved to be of great importance, especially when quarantine was declared.<sup>95</sup> In 1837, for instance, in the context of an outbreak of the plague in the southern territories of the Danube, the border military, spread in pickets along the Danube, checked the islands every three days. Their mission was to prevent any attempts to cross the Danube from south to north. They also maintained tight control over the daily movement of people and goods across the river or the swamps, lakes and islands scattered along the river's banks, whose luxuriant vegetation could hide outlaws and smugglers.<sup>96</sup> Thus, the river and its islands, the lakes and swamps next to the riverbanks, animal and human populations represented a complex intertwined environment that was important in different ways to locals and the national government. For the nation-state, establishing a firm borderline between the

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<sup>93</sup> Stoycho Gruncharov, *Bŭlgarija na praga na dvadesetoto stoletie. Politicheski aspekti* [Stoicio Grančarov, Bulgaria at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century – Political Aspects] (Sofia: Patriotic Front, 1986), 24.

<sup>94</sup> For more on this see Ministerski Sŭvet, *Doklad do Negovo Velichestvo Ferdinand I, Tsar na bŭlgarite, po slutchai 25-godishnata ot vŭzshestviето mu na bŭlgarskija prestol. 1887-1912* [The Council of Ministries, Report to His Majesty Ferdinand the 1<sup>st</sup>, the King of Bulgarians, at His 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Since He Occupied the Bulgarian Throne 1887-1912] (Sofia, 1912).

<sup>95</sup> Quarantine was declared at the outbreak of epizootic diseases or epidemics. Some authors consider that the Russian and Walachian authorities imposed quarantine for political purposes, to control the movement of populations and goods. The control of the Walachian and Russian authorities was eased by the sluggishness of the Ottoman bureaucracy, which did not establish a military border regiment until 1860. See for more details Tudor Mateescu, *Păstoritul transhumant al românilor pe teritoriul dintre Dunăre și Marea Neagră* [The Romanians' Transhumant Shepherding on the Territory Between the Danube and the Black Sea] (București : Editura Academiei RSR, 1986).

<sup>96</sup> Dimitrie Papazoglu, *Organisația strejuirii pe frontiera Dunării din anii 1837-1838 pe când epidemia morbului ciurma secera partea dreaptă a Dunării, eară Romania n'au fost bătuită de acest flagel* [The Organization of Border Control on the Danube in 1837-1838 When the Plague Swept Off the Right Side of the Danube whereas Romania was Not Hit by It] (Bucuresci: Tipografia Stephan Micailescu, 1879).

two countries was seen as an essential feature of the modern state. The border had to be clearly marked on contemporary maps – a clearly delineated territory is one of the attributes of the modern state. It was symbolic of the authority of the state, its sovereignty and its control of human and natural resources.<sup>97</sup> Riparian villagers were less interested in the political establishment of borders and the restrictions imposed on these new settlements and continued their economic activities. ‘Business as usual’ for them meant fishing in the Danube without territorial restrictions – as they had done before the emergence of nation-states – and grazing animals on the richly vegetated islands. The border guards of both countries took drastic measures to impose their own nation-state rules every time the population of the neighbouring country trespassed. In 1904 the Bulgarian government suggested to its Romanian counterpart that they establish a bilateral commission to re-measure the thalweg and settle the border question again. However, the fishing activities of the riparian populations on both sides of the river, the practices of forest exploitation and animal grazing on the islands continued to test the diplomatic relationship between the two countries.<sup>98</sup>

In addition to resolving the numerous clashes between the riparian population and the military border guards, the two states also sought to avoid the intervention of other European states in this matter.<sup>99</sup> The two countries attempted to establish new economic treaties, especially for settling the issue of fishing rights along the Danube. In 1907 the thalweg was established by a joint commission of experts.<sup>100</sup> In contrast with 1830 and 1878, when Western European engineers were involved in tracing the thalweg, by 1907 the two young states had developed the technical expertise to carry out such measurements themselves. In 1908 the treaty that established the border along the Danube between the states was signed – a treaty that is still in use today.

Throughout modern history there are numerous examples of states that shared a river as a common border. These states were well aware of the natural movements of the rivers and

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<sup>97</sup> Thomas M. Wilson and Hastings Donnan, ‘Nation, State and Identity at International Borders’, in T. M. Wilson and H. Donnan (eds.), *Border Identities. Nation and State at International Frontiers* (Cambridge, New York, Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 9. Henk van Houtum, ‘Remapping Borders’, in T. M. Wilson and H. Donnan (eds.), *Border Identities. Nation and State at International Frontiers* (Cambridge, New York, Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 405-418. Malcom Anderson, *Frontiers. Territory and State Formation in the Modern World* (Cambridge, Oxford: Polity Press, 1996). Inga Brandell (ed.), ‘Introduction’, in I. Brandell, *State Frontiers. Borders and Boundaries in the Middle East* (London, New York: I. B. Tauris, 2006), 1-29.

<sup>98</sup> Daniel Cain, *Diplomați și diplomație în Sud-Estul european. Relațiile româno-bulgare la 1900* [Diplomats and Diplomacy in Southeast Europe. The Romanian-Bulgarian Relationship Throughout the Year 1900] (București: The Romanian Academy, 2012), 191.

<sup>99</sup> Hristofor Hesaptchiev, *Sluzhba na Bŭlgarija v tchuzhbina. Voennopoliticheski spomeni (1890-1914)* [Serving Bulgaria Overseas. Political and Military Memoirs (1890-1914)] (Sofia, 1993), 327-329.

<sup>100</sup> Idem, 330-337.

their islands and tried to prevent future disputes and conflicts by predicting these movements and establishing rules for defining borders. Diplomats have codified the movement of the rivers and taken account of this issue during geopolitical negotiations. For instance, the Uruguay River, whose thalweg separates Argentina from Uruguay, had multiple islands. The treaty signed by both countries on 19<sup>th</sup> November 1973 foresaw the movement of the islands and stipulated that ‘should the Martin Garcia Island in future unite with another island, the corresponding boundary shall be determined pursuant to the outline of the Martin Garcia Island resulting from the application of Chart H-118 covered in article 41’.<sup>101</sup> F. Schroeter gives countless examples of international treaties between countries that share a river as a common border and the negotiations that unfold due to the constant movement of rivers and islands.<sup>102</sup>

By taking account of the natural movements of rivers, states tacitly acknowledge that rivers are political actors. As other authors have acknowledged, borders are not stable, but in perpetual motion and subject to contestation and negotiation.<sup>103</sup> Borders, at least when established along a river, are not just moving but are a *moving space* continuously changing shape, direction and meaning. Moreover, borders emerge in certain political and economic conditions – the same border that was previously neglected by political actors. Danube hydrodynamics made an essential thing: transformed an invisible space – invisible for the riparian states – into a visible, contested and up to negotiation space. The Danube and its islands were affected by the geopolitical situation, the emergence of the nation-states and their need for firm national, impenetrable borders as a token of their sovereignty.<sup>104</sup>

## Conclusion

This essay attempts to contribute to a theoretical discussion that has torn social sciences apart for the last two decades: do nonhuman entities have agency or not? The answer, we suggest, is not at all simple or straightforward. In this essay we have examined the hydrodynamics of the Danube and the movement of its islands, and have demonstrated the importance of the natural elements in establishing the border between Bulgaria and Romania around 1900. We offer compelling evidence that the Danube and its islands represent not only the landscape against which human history unfolds but are also influential participating actors. Rivers

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<sup>101</sup> François Schroeter, ‘Le système de delimitation dans les fleuves internationaux,’ *Annuaire français de droit international* 38 (1992), 974.

<sup>102</sup> Idem, 948-982.

<sup>103</sup> Thomas Nail, *Theory of the Border* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 5-6.

<sup>104</sup> See for instance Thomas M. Wilson and Hastings Donnan (eds.), *A Companion to Border Studies* (Malden and Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).

constantly move political borders, obliging humans to react to their movements. What we have shown in this essay is that the river *becomes* an actor in certain historical contexts. The whimsical character of the Danube plays an important role but only where a certain conjunction of events occurs: the birth of nation-states and their need for firm borders, the establishment of technical, international and national commissions, and the emergence of a technical-political-diplomatic language – the *thalweg* as a separation principle for instance – to satisfy the aspirations of the nation-state. The emergence of the modern state with its array of economic, political and military characteristics transformed the river into a powerful political actor. Thus a theory of nonhuman agency should take into account the history of nonhuman becoming, its evolution and the external factors that contribute to the transformation of nonhuman into an active actor. Nonhuman is not just an actor it becomes one in certain circumstances.

Hydrodynamics are an invisible force that participates in human history. It is as powerful and important as military force or the force of historical and diplomatic arguments. While hydrodynamics are natural, the islands they create are not entirely natural and the river is assisted in its actions by man-made objects such as shipwrecks, embankments or other man-made improvements. Human artefacts that end up in the river and the river's hydrodynamics interact up to a point, giving birth to new territories. These new territories are therefore both natural and human artefacts.

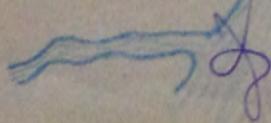
These new hybrid spaces comprised of water, land, vegetation and animals, are *par excellence* borders in motion. The shifting border along the Lower Danube highlights the particular role played by the islands of the Danube in the history of political relations between Southeast European states. A historical approach to borders would not be complete without taking these hybrid spaces seriously, together with their complicated natural dynamics and their volatile history. An environmental history of river islands may offer new theoretical avenues in which hydrodynamics, limnology and history may enter into a fruitful conversation.

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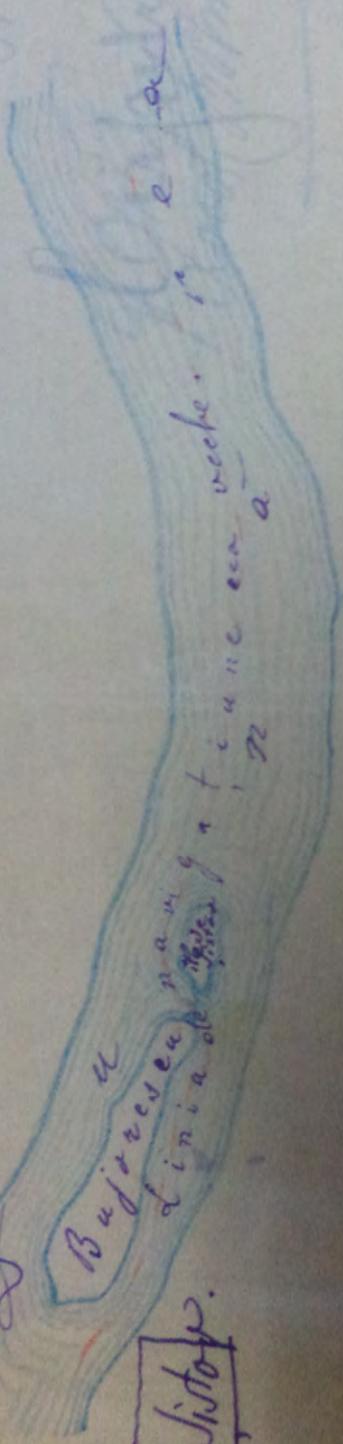
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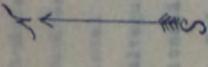
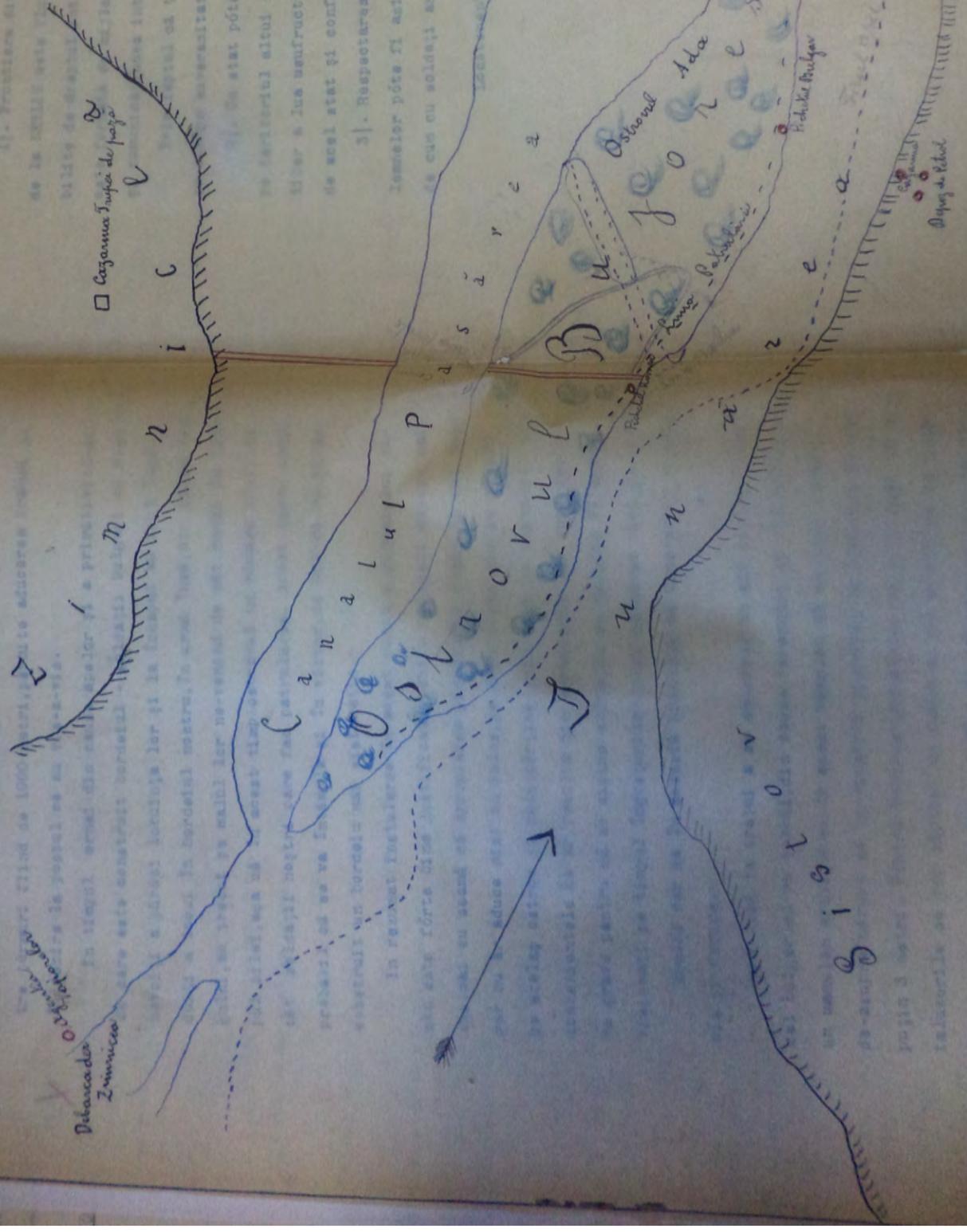
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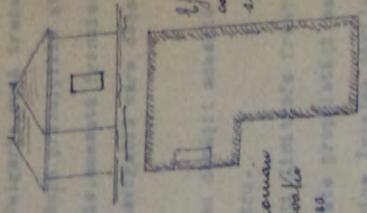
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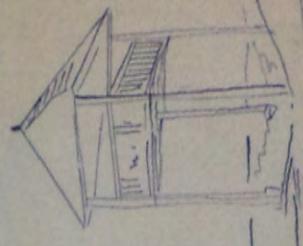
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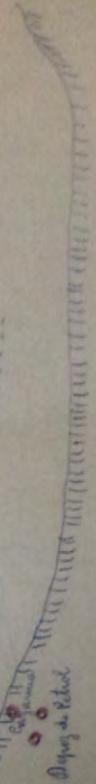
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Prapost de Rădăcinii



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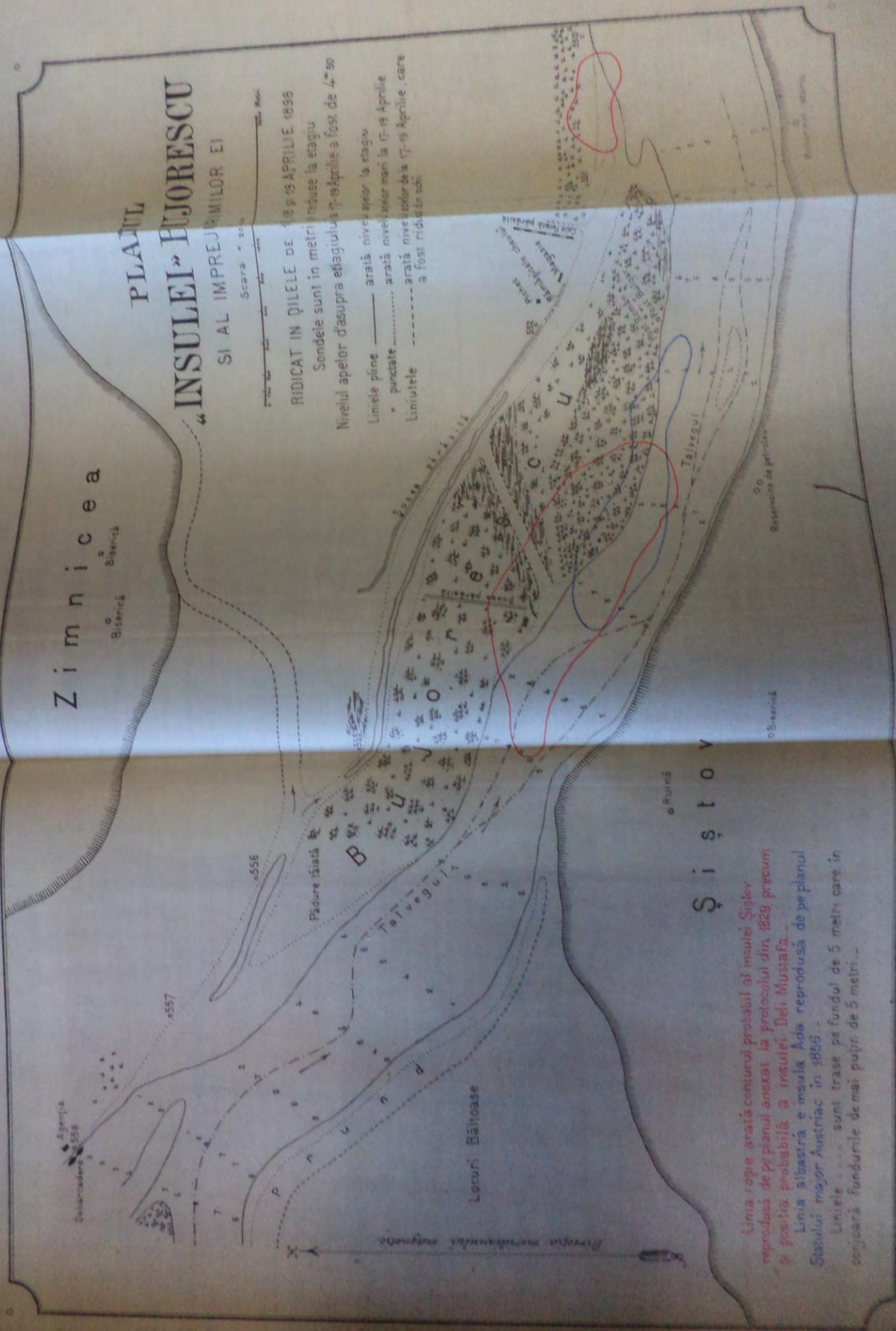
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