

FROM SWAMP TO BLESSED LAND: TRANSFORMING MEDIEVAL LANDSCAPE IN THE BANAT

*Adrian Magina**

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Jókai Mór made some interesting observations on the Banat situation at the beginning of the 18th century, in his novel *A cigánybáró* published in 1885: “The Turks destroyed all the ground walls, all the dams that had longer stopped waters, and the country turned into a marsh. That swampy land used to become in fall and spring seasons an immense water realm, that people traversed by boats... That waste and roadsless empire of marshes, a country of wolfs, of frogs and turtles was covered both for people and beasts by a poisoning mist; various epidemics were lying in wait for pedestrians and decimating the garrisons of the few fortified fortresses; even the sun and the blue sky weren’t coming in sight for weeks there; when the mosquitoes swarms were rising up it seemed that the villages were burning with a dense smoke, and when the gadflies which were able to kill a buffalo pounced upon, people and beasts sought safety in flight. The serpents and other reptiles’ armies increased above measure so that by night they were wandering under beds, were sticking in the dishes on the fireplace, and outside in field their heads rose like never seen plants yet. There were no cultivated fields there and even there was a man to plow such a land, much trust he might have had to harvest when he couldn’t have known if he or the insects and the ground squirrels, or the locusts, or the Turk would reap the benefit of his work. And where the forests had been destroyed, the free wind was delving and breaking down the hills ranges, changing the region into a desert where only some feeble weeds were growing. Plashes, waste marshes, refuge for hunters, fishermen, nomads and bandits so was that country on its entire surface”.¹

* Muzeul Banatului Montan Reșița [The Museum of the Highland Banat], bd. Republicii, no. 10, e-mail: liviamagina@yahoo.com

¹ Mór Jókai, *A cigánybáró* [The baron of the Gypsies] (Budapest, 2001) (Arcanum, CD-ROM

It is a vision on a marginal territory that was situated by the border of the civilized world which was represented by the Austrian Court. Such a way of putting things wasn't a singular one that time. Undoubtedly those lines were drawn upon the historical works of Johann Jacob Ehrler², Francesco Grisellini³ or Szentkláray Jenő⁴, what means writings that tried to underline the differences between the former Turkish (and medieval) reality and the great Hapsburg achievements within the province. The done works in the 18th–19th centuries changed the Banat into a territory within which the geographic environment was “tamed”, where “one can live better than in the Swabian country”, as a colonist of a German origin plastically said.⁵

From the very beginning I may say that we are working with two different geographic realities: one as representing the Plain Banat, another one the Mountainous Banat. The few descriptions on the mountainous region no matter the century they come from, offer quite the same image: a partly wild territory but full of beautiful landscapes, forests and heavily to arrive to zones, and little arable land.⁶ I shall try to analyze the Plain Banat situation for the reason that it was the region that passed through the great transformations of the landscape. Which was however the situation that determined such negative projections on the Plain Banat?

The geographic location of the Banat region extremely influenced the way it was perceived by the contemporaries. As placed among three great streams at the southern Hungarian kingdom frontier, the Banat had a special state on account of its liability to inundation and the frequent Ottoman raids that wasted the territory. Although the old historiography (that was assumed by Jókai too) put the blame for the slipshod face of the Banat geographic frame upon the Ottomans, the respective reality was a much older one. The first testimonies

version), 2–3. Romanian translation, Jókai Mór, *Voievodul țiganilor* (Cluj-Napoca: Editura Dacia, 1976).

² Johann Jacob Ehrler, *Banatul de la origini până acum* (1774) [The Banat from origins until nowadays], Costin Feneșan, Volker Wollman, eds. (Timișoara: Editura de Vest, 2006).

³ Francesco Grisellini, *Încercare de istorie politică și naturală a Banatului Timișoarei* [An attempt of political and natural history of the Banat of Timișoara], Costin Feneșan ed. (Timișoara: Editura Facla, 1984).

⁴ Jenő Szentkláray, *Száz év Délmagyarország újabb történetéből, 1779-től napjainkig* [100 years of the new history of southern part of Hungary] (Temesvár, 1882).

⁵ A copy of this letter was present in the exhibition *Șvabii dunăreni. Colonizarea din secolul al XVIII-lea* [The Danubian Swabians. The colonization of the 18th century] (Timișoara, Reșița, 2012), as part of the project *Migrația înspre spațiul dunărean* [The migration in the Danube area] organized by the Central Museum of the Swabians in Ulm.

⁶ See aforementioned studies of Grisellini or Ehrler (footnotes 2 and 3) or numerous remarks of Catholic missionaries in Banat published by István György Tóth, *Litterae Missionariorum de Hungaria et Transilvania*, vol. I–IV (Budapest-Roma, 2005).

from the 14th century offer some interesting data on the Banat. The valleys of the Mures, Timiș and Caraș Rivers in the province north-western side, were the most inhabited zones while the south-western corner, corresponding to Torontal county, was among the most insufficient inhabited zone within the entire kingdom.⁷

It was not accidentally as that zone corresponded in a great measure to the easily flooded area that came after into Hapsburg authorities' care. All the reference mentions on the swampy zones, inundations or piscicultural arrangements come from the plain area. Frequently enough the denomination of *isle/insulae* issued within medieval charters. The word had not necessarily the present meaning (a surrounded by water territory). I consider that it rather named the arable places or grazing grounds, more or less surrounded by marshes but to which waters didn't come near. On such isles the fortresses of Timișoara (Timiș County) and Becicherec (Nagy Becskerek, Zrenjanin), county of Torontal, were built up.⁸ In 1421 within the same region of Torontal County, the isle from Beodra was mentioned, where Chep family's riding horses were bred (*equus equatiales in insula Beldure conservaret*).⁹

Beginning with Lazarus' map (1528) the cartographic products catch till late a real lake with a considerable surface in the area of Becicherec (the locality of Becicherec is represented as placed on an isle of that lake). András Vadas, after analyzing the lake situation, came to the conclusion that it had its maximum expansion at the end of the Middle Ages, the 16th century, and it progressively receded till the end of the 17th century.¹⁰

Not only was the county of Torontal liable to inundation. The 15th–16th century's documents indicate a complex net of rivers, drains, lakes and rivulets in the plain part of Timiș County. Sometimes the abundant rains increased the rivers flow producing floods and, of course, important damages. It happens in 1443 when the small fortress of Cheri (*castellum Chery*) was totally destroyed by *torrens et habundantia aquarum*.¹¹ When speaking about Timiș zone, Nicolaus Olahus mentioned it as being rich in products, especially fish (*locus*

⁷ See the map *Hungary in the Late Middle Ages*, coord. Pál Engel (CD-ROM variant) (Budapest: Arcanum, 2001) or the map published as annex by Gyula Káldy-Nagy, *A csanádi szandzsák 1567. és 1579. évi összeírása* [The inventories of Cenad sandjak from 1567 and 1579] (Szeged, 2000).

⁸ András Vadas, *Weather anomalies and climatic change in late medieval Hungary: Identifying environmental impact*, M.A thesis (Budapest: CEU, 2010), 75, fig. 45–48.

⁹ Adrian Magina, "Câteva documente privind comitatul Torontal în prima jumătate a secolului al XV-lea," [Some documents on the County of Torontal in the first half of the 15th century] *Banatica* 22 (2012): 59, 63.

¹⁰ Vadas, *Weather*, 77–83.

¹¹ Kiss Andrea, *Floods and long-term water-level changes in medieval Hungary*, Doctoral dissertation (Budapest: CEU, 2011), 307–308.

hic populosus, et omni genere comeatuum maxime piscium, copiosus), just for its location within a zone with many aquatic resources.¹² There are mentioned, in 1539, at the border of the city of Timișoara with Nemethi estate, nothing less than five water courses (the Bega River with its two branches, the Fook and the Ispotalfook, and two minor streams, the Rohoncza and the Pehela), and a lake (Kerekto – the Round Lake).¹³ The Italian engineers, who were brought to fortify Timișoara in 1551, spoke about the fortress as being more facile to be defended because of its location in a swampy area (*in loco palustri, facilis munitu propter paludem*).¹⁴ The recent archaeological diggings from Timișoara have proved that the fortress was built by taking the swampy shape of the terrain into consideration: oak tree trunks inside the slit were used for pillars, and over them the foundations were built up. The former mentioned Italian engineers' impressions harmonize with those of the Ottoman cartographer Bartinli Ibrahim Hamdi, who considers Timișoara fortress as being an impugnable one given its location "on an isle, in the middle of a deep river", but also the density and great surface of the reeds around it, "large water areas with red and green flowers as well as with countless and various species of birds". He also mentions a kayaks way that utilized the countless drains and branches of the Bega River.¹⁵ All these testimonies show that part of the Banat landscape was really affected by waters in the Middle Ages and the Turkish epoch.

But, is this area much more different than other zones of the medieval Hungary? I do not believe so, as the medieval human being was generally submitted to the nature caprices and the climatic changes.¹⁶ The historic sources give us to understand that the Banat, even a partly affected by waters region, was well enough inhabited. In spite of the fact that Timișoara coterminous zone was swampy and liable to inundation, it was very well inhabited. Looking on Engel Pal's map of medieval Hungary, we may note that many enough settlements

¹² Nicolaus Olahus, *Ungaria*. Atila, Antal Gyöngyvér ed. (Iași: Institutul European, 1999), 108–111 (Latin and Romanian text).

¹³ Adrian Magina, "Hotarele și domeniul orașului Timișoara în 1539," [Boundaries and urban area of Timișoara in 1539], *Banatica* 19 (2009): 69.

¹⁴ Adrian Magina, "Fortificațiile Lipovei și Timișoarei în preajma cuceririi otomane (1551)," [Fortifications of Lipova and Timișoara on the Eve of Ottoman Conquest] *Analele Banatului*, Serie Nouă, Arheologie-Istorie XXI (2013): 303.

¹⁵ Cristina Feneșan, "Bartinli Ibrahim Hamdi a Geographer of the Timișoara Vilayet," *Transylvanian Review* XXII, suppl. no. 4 (2013): 195, 198.

¹⁶ Lajos Rácz, *Magyarország környezettörténete az újkorig* [Environmental History of Hungary Until the End of Modern Times] (Budapest, 2008); Rácz, "The price of survival: transformations in environmental conditions and subsistence systems in Hungary in the age of Ottoman occupation," *Hungarian Studies* 24/1 (2010): 21–39; Paul Cernovodeau, Paul Binder, *Cavalerii apocalipsului: calamitățile naturale din trecutul României (până la 1800)* [Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse: natural calamities in Romanian past until 1800] (București: Silex, 1993).

concentrate around Timisoara comparatively with other regions of the Banat. It is true that around the town there was a micro-zone of about 3 km, which we may suppose for having been swampy or liable to inundation.¹⁷ The Italian engineers' reports mention however that there were lots of people there (*regio ista abundant hominibus*) and so, the fortress proposed work was easy enough to be made.¹⁸ The Turkish defterleri as well as Evlia Celebi's relation from the middle of the 17th century lead to the same conclusion.¹⁹ Although there are certain historiographic stereotypies on the evil made by the Turkish presence, the Ottoman authorities tried to the utmost extent to "civilize" the area. They tried, as the places were swampy, to cultivate rice and vegetables, issued some laws on fruit growing, and insisted on grain cultivation but without trying any landed arrangements of the territory.²⁰

However, the Banat has remained inhospitable for the most of contemporaries. 18th century historians lamented in their works over those zones state, for having been devoured by waters and marshes²¹. The permanent wars at the end of the 17th century and the beginning of the next one lead to a drastic depopulation of the Banat, the uncultivated lands increasing being one of that time result. I do believe that owing to those appearances (waste villages, uncultivated terrains, and the swampy areas persistency) the historiographic opinion on a saddening province had issued and was after amplified by Jókai fictional works.

Having taken the province from the Ottomans, the Hapsburg authorities began a large territorial arrangement, which modified the landscape that had been inherited from the medieval epoch. First of all, the cause of the geographic changing was an economic one, because the local resources couldn't have been efficiently exploited without lines of communication and under the waters threatening. The natural frame deterioration wasn't a rapid process; it was proceeding for two centuries. Firstly they had to take action for water

¹⁷ Hungary in the Late Middle Ages.

¹⁸ A. Magina, "Fortificațiile," 69.

¹⁹ Integrally published are only the defterleri of Cenad (Csanád) sanjak. See aforementioned work of Gyula Káldy-Nagy, *A csanádi*. For Evlia's Celebi work see *Călători străini despre Țările Române* [Foreign travelers on the Romanian territories], vol. VI, ed. M. M. Alexandrescu-Dersca Bulgaru, Mustafa Ali Mehmet (București: Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică, 1976).

²⁰ Cristina Feneșan, *Cultura otomană a vilayetului Timișoara (1552-1716)* [The Ottoman culture of Timișoara vilayet] (Timișoara: Editura de Vest, 2006).

²¹ Quoted by Szentkláray, *Száz év*, 34-35. For example Matthias Bel, *Compendium Hungariae geographicum*, (Posonii et Casoviae: Joannis Michaelis Landerer, 1779), 254-255, speaking about Banat says: *multa antea deserta, aderant, quae, ob soli sterilitatem, vel frequentes fluminum eluviones et paludes incolae non poterant... Aer olim aliquibus incolis, ob paludum ac lacunarum copia insalubris erat.*

courses regularization to allow consignments and stop the inundations. Claude Florimund Mercy, the first governor of the Banat, began the regularization of the Bega course, the river that traversed Timisoara. The intense work for the river channeling took part in 1722–1723, and the result was a straight shipping canal without the former meanders and branches. After some new works in 1753–1754 the channel was prolonged with 30km and a series of dykes were raised up. On the Timiș River at Costei a dam and a hydro-technical junction were built in order to connect the Timiș and the Bega, and settle the question of the two rivers flow; it is still functionally today.²² The results were visible on the landscape as those arrangements lead to the two rivers holms draining as well as to the branches draining so that they would not supply the marshes and cause inundations. From what we can see, during the first half of the 18th century the imperial authorities had particularly in view the regularization of those rivers that caused the main damages in the rains season. The numerous lakes and marshes posed on problems when rich rainfall came. That was the case of the lakes from Beregsău and Dudeștii Vechi (*Ó Besenyő*), nearby Timisoara, of the marsh from Ečka, of the liable to inundation low zones near the Tisza River (which were called *palustres et lacunosi*, by Mathias Bel), or those ones from areas of Kikinda, Itebej, Novo Selo, and Jankaid (in today Vojvodina-Serbia).²³ The Marsh or the White Lake from Ečka was drained not even at the end of the 18th century although that the Bega channel crossed by. The lake surface and depth were great enough to cause certain navigation problems as it happened in 1799 when shipping on the channel a boat with grains sank there.²⁴ The great number of paludous places affected in a large measure the colonists who had been brought in the province and died from malaria and unhealthy air. More than this, the fly called *similium colombaschense* was a frequent presence and it played havoc within the cattle that died off by thousands. The Austrians had limited by different methods (larvae destroying, fumigation utilization, etc.) the effects of that fly presence, but they hadn't succeeded to eradicate it²⁵ (only in the 60's–70's of the last century it was eradicated after the Iron Gates dam building, which destroyed the places they used to deposit their eggs).

The offensive against the swampy terrains in the second half of the 18th century was partly successful. The terrains around Timisoara were drained

²² Marlen Negrescu, Dan Pura, *Navigația pe Bega. Secvențe istorice* [Navigation on Bega. Historical sequences] (Timișoara, 2006), 9–16.

²³ Matthias Bel, *Descriptio comitatus Temesiensis* mss. I use the informations of Bel from a copy of the document which is preserved in the Library of Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Manuscript and Rare Books departament, Pesty Frigyes collection.

²⁴ Szentkláray, *Száz év*, 34–35.

²⁵ Grisellini, *Încercare*, 317–321.

and returned to the agriculture, but the great surfaces of water from Torontal County still remained a threatening. As the enormous marshes couldn't have been drained the damming works continued in the first half of the 19th century that finally limited the effects of waters presence there. During the 19th century the only serious threat came from the downpours, the water amount causing the dykes breaking and the cultivate grounds flooding. Only at the beginning of the 20th century the works in order to modify the Banat landscape could be taken for finalized by dams re-sizing, by new dykes building on the rivers courses, and by modern locks installing on the Bega channel (still functionally nowadays).²⁶

In conclusion, the medieval landscape changing proved to be a beneficial one for the Banat. The rivers regularization, the draining and damming works from the 18th century returned a large part of the swampy terrain to agriculture. I think it is not wrong to say that the great hydro-technical works from the modern epoch turned the Banat into the land of promise. The former medieval landscape survived only as an isolate one, but sometimes it succeeds to come to light, the most recent situation having been registered in the spring of 2005 with the moment great inundations. I have not been especially concerned myself with the question, but I believe that studying the recent inundations we could have some clues on how the Mures-Danube and the Tisza habitat looked during the medieval and the early modern epochs.

DE LA MLAȘTINĂ LA PĂMÂNTUL FĂGĂDUINȚEI. TRANSFORMAREA PEISAJULUI MEDIEVAL AL BANATULUI

Rezumat

În evul mediu, Banatul, în special partea de câmpie, a fost văzut ca o lume a apelor, a mlaștinilor și zonelor inundate. Percepția aceasta s-a perpetuat vreme îndelungată, fiind cel mai bine zugrăvită în opera lui Jókai Mór, *Voievodul Țiganilor*. Pe bună dreptate, contemporanii au considerat Banatul medieval drept un teritoriu predispus asaltului apelor, fiind menționate des insule, amenajări piscicole și inundații. De abia în epoca modernă, începând cu secolul al XVIII-lea, s-a trecut la sitematizarea teritoriului amenințat de ape. Grație eforturilor autorităților austriece, spre finalul secolului al XIX-lea a dispărut aproape în totalitate peisajul medieval al Banatului, provincia transformându-se într-un „ținut binecuvântat”. Cu toate acestea, ocazional, cu prilejul unor inundații ca cea din 2005, vechiul Banat iese la iveală, oferind imaginea unei zone aflată sub spectrul amenințării apelor.

²⁶ Negrescu, Pura, *Navigația*, 27–41.