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The Lower Danube Region in Ovid's Reflections

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Abstract: The author studies Ovid's reflection on the Lower Danube region as a marginal space based on his collections of poems *Tristia* and *Epistulae ex Ponto*, written during his exile in Tomis between 9 and 17 AD. The research tasks include a description of the landscape of the Danube lowlands, ethnographic sketches of the everyday life, clothing, and customs of the inhabitants, and the geographical advantages of the Lower Danube region during military operations.

Keywords: Ovid; Lower Danube; margins; decline; barbarian

1. Problem Statement and Relevance of the Article

The depiction of borderlands (or margins) in literature is increasingly attracting the attention of researchers, as these are precisely the places where different cultures intersect, forming a unique, hybrid worldview, and literary works become invaluable historical sources. Such regions are often located at the edges of civilizational influence, where unique processes take place. The relevance of this article is due to the limited number of historical and literary sources describing the Lower Danube region in antiquity. Therefore, turning to the works of Ovid, who was exiled to these territories, gains particular scholarly significance.

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In 8 AD, the poet Publius Ovidius Naso was exiled by emperor of the Roman Empire, Octavian Augustus. The place exile became the territory of the former province of Scythia Minor, which bordered the city of Tomis (now Constanta, Romania). These events marked the beginning of works such as *Tristia* (“Sad things” or “Sorrows”) and *Epistulae ex Ponto* (“Letters from the Black Sea”). The second collection differs from the first mainly in that it is addressed to specific individuals – the poet’s friends and relatives. These works reflect not only the emotional state of the poet in exile, but also contain extremely valuable information about the Lower Danube region – the appearance and everyday life of the population, geographical data, and the political situation in the border provinces.

2. Degree of Research on the Problem

A significant contribution to this topic was made by J. G. F. Hind in his work “Ovid and the Barbarians beyond the Lower Danube” (2007). He thoroughly analysed Ovid’s accounts of the local population, comparing them with other ancient sources. It should be noted that the author examined various versions of ethnonyms and proved that some of them might have been distorted or replaced in the texts. R. M. Batty, in her publication “On Getic and Sarmatian Shores: Ovid’s Account of the Danube lands” (1994), studies Ovid’s collections to analyse the Getae and Sarmatian peoples in the Lower Danube lowlands. The researcher emphasized that the poet was not constrained by previous literary traditions, which allowed him to portray a realistic picture of the region’s ethnic composition and the way of life of its inhabitants. T. Shevchuk, in her work “The Lands of the Lower Danube as a Marginal Space in Christoph Ransmayr’s Postmodern Novel ‘The Last World’” (2024), explored how Ovid perceived the landscape of the Lower Danube and its inhabitants, and how these descriptions are reinterpreted in the modern novel “The Last World”. Certain obstacles to researching this topic are created by the lack of translations of Ovid’s works – this limits the possibilities for a deeper study of the history of the Lower Danube region. This article uses the translations by A. S. Kline “Ovid: The Poems of Exile (*Tristia*, *Ex Ponto*, *Ibis*)” (2003).

The aim of the article is to explore the depiction of the Lower Danube in Ovid’s poetics during his exile, particularly in the works *Tristia* and *Epistulae ex Ponto*, with a focus on the geographical, cultural, and social features of the region.

To achieve this aim, the following **tasks** have been set:

- to describe the natural features of the Lower Danube lowland landscape;

- to examine the ethnographic aspects of everyday life, clothing, and customs of the local inhabitants;
- to analyse the geographical advantages of the Lower Danube lowland during military conflicts;
- to explore the comparison with the image of Rome in Ovid's poetic works.

The object of the research is the Lower Danube region in antiquity, particularly its geographical, cultural, and social characteristics.

The subject of the research is the poetic depiction of the natural, ethnographic, and geographical features of the Lower Danube in Ovid's collections *Tristia* and *Epistulae ex Ponto*.

3. Presentation of the Main Material

In *Tristia*, Ovid largely exaggerates his descriptions – the city of Tomis appears to him as a foreign land, portrayed in his works as bloody, cold, and filled with savagery and cruelty. The poet should not be judged for such a depiction, as having spent half of his life in the prosperous and cultured centre of Rome, he was suddenly exiled for life to an unfamiliar “edge of the world”.

Upon his arrival, Ovid describes the climate as extremely cold. In *Tristia*, the poet writes: “*I’m tossed by winter gales the storms, the sea*”, “*There’s nothing further than this, except frost and foes, / and the sea closed by the binding cold*”, “*... and the earth is white with marbled frost, / when Boreas and the snow constrain life under the Bears, / those tribes must be hard-pressed by the shivering sky*” (Ovid: *Tristia* 1.1; 2.1; 3.10). It is unknown whether Ovid truly experienced the harsh winters of our region (which are not so frequent), or whether such a significant blend of mythological and real elements is noticeable: in his works, the poet frequently refers to Greek mythology, comparing the gods to his own images. Even the name of the city is associated with the myth of the murder of Medea's brother, Absyrtus, whose burial site was supposedly called Tomis.

Already in the first book of *Tristia*, Ovid begins to describe the nature of the Lower Danube region:

*“I’m forced to touch the wild left shore of Pontus:
I complain my flight from my native land’s too slow.*

*I pray for the journey to be shorter,
to see the people of Tomis in their unknown world.”*

(Ovid: Tristia 1.2)

Since the territory is mostly a lowland plain, these lines were likely inspired by the low hills and uplands of the Dobrobuja region. Later, in the second and third books, the Danube River itself mentioned – its lower course was then known as Hister:

*“I’m the only one sent to seven-mouthed Hister’s delta,
I’m crushed beneath virgin Callisto’s icy pole –
the Ciziges, the Colchi, the hordes of Teretei and Getae,
are barely held back by the deep flood of the Danube –
and while others have been banished with greater cause,
no one’s assigned a remoter place than mine.”*

(Ovid: Tristia 2.1)

The poet draws attention to the number of the Danube’s branches, even comparing it to the Nile: *“The Danube itself, no narrower than lotus-bearing Nile, / mingling with deep water through many mouths”* (Ovid: Tristia 3.10).

The Lower Danube lowland was an ethnically diverse territory, with the Scythians (Fig. 1) being the predominant population. However, Ovid also mentions the “lazyges, fearsome Getae, Metereans and Colchians”, the “Sarmatian people”, and Greeks who settled “among the homes of the Getae”. Given this composition, it is reasonable to assume that the poet mostly heard languages of the Iranian branch of the Indo-European family – Scythian, Sarmatian and Geto-Dacian. For Ovid, who wrote in Latin, these languages sounded distinctly “barbaric”:

*“A few still retain vestiges of the Greek language,
though even this the Getic pronunciation barbarises.
There’s not a single one of the population who might
chance to utter a few words of Latin while speaking.
I, the Roman poet – forgive me, Muses! –
am forced to speak Sarmatian for the most part.*

*See, I'm ashamed to admit it, from long disuse,
now, the Latin words scarcely even occur to me.
I don't doubt there are more than a few barbarisms
in this book: it's not the man's fault but this place"*
(Ovid: Tristia 5.7)

Since during antiquity, the Lower Danube territories were part of the empire's borderlands, the city of Tomis was constantly under threat attacks from various tribes. The causes of these attacks could have been land resources, access to rivers and generally the wealth accumulated in the settlements. The geographical location was the main defence against these invasions: on one side, hills that required great effort to cross; in the other, the territorially branched flows of the Danube, which were almost impossible to cross.

However, there were periods when the river froze, and the whole area became vulnerable, as Ovid writes in a letter to Fabius Maximus¹: "...or the other tribes that when Danube's frozen with ice / ride over the solid spine of the river on their swift horses", or "... and horses' hooves beat on waters hard with cold: / and across this new bridge over the sliding flood / barbarous wagons are pulled by Sarmatian oxen" (Ovid: Epistulae ex Ponto 1.2; Tristia 3.10).

The poet portrayed the inhabitants themselves as wild and cruel, dressed in animal skins and with dishevelled hair:

*"Men keep out the dreadful cold with sewn trousers
and furs: the face alone appears of the whole body.
Often their hair tinkles with hanging icicles,
and their beards gleam white with a coat of frost.
Wine stands exposed, holding the shape of the jar,
and they don't drink draughts of mead, but frozen lumps"*
(Ovid: Tristia 3.10)

¹ Quintus Fabius Maximus Eburnus (162-104 BC) was a political and military figure of the Roman Republic to whom Ovid wrote letters from Pontus.

In these lines, Ovid emphasizes that the inhabitants were forced to wear warm clothing made of animal skins, leaving only their faces uncovered. A particular exaggeration is the description of wine frozen by the cold – they did not drink it in sips but literally took it into their mouths in pieces, like ice.

It is important to note that both of Ovid's collections contain detailed depictions of the weapons used by barbarians of the Lower Danube lowland. This may be because, in the poet's native city, the prevailing focus was not on the art of war but on cultural refinement, whereas he having arrived in Pontus – encountered a completely different way of life: war, barbarians and constant attacks.

Based on his descriptions, it can be concluded that the barbarians primarily favoured projectile weapons – bows:

*“Some, hands tied, are driven off as captives,
looking back in vain at their farms and homes.
Some die wretchedly pierced by barbed arrows,
since there's a touch of venom on the flying steel”*

(Ovid: Tristia 3.10)

Such lines acquire a dramatic character: *“The enemy, with his bow, his arrows dipped in venom, / circles the walls fiercely on his snorting steed”, “he either follows them, a captive, and accepts the chain / round his neck, or dies by a venomous shaft”* (Ovid: Tristia 4.1).

The chain around the neck symbolizes a slave, complete submission and punishment in captivity; imprisoned people were used either as human resources or led to death. The poet depicts the inhabitants' dwellings as “poor humble huts”, “unsuitable shelter, food unfit for the sick”, “a wall for watch and gate”, “a weak fence”, “modest peasant property, livestock, creaking cart”. Such a portrayal fully corresponds to the realities of Scythian settlements of that time – small settlements with simple clay or wooden houses. Some fortified settlements were surrounded either by earthen ramparts or wooden palisades for protection. The life of the tribes was also closely connected with nomadic and semi-settled ways of life – livestock, breeding and agriculture.

*“The earth lies idle, abandoned to harsh neglect.
No sweet grapes are hidden in leafy shade,*

*no frothing must fill the deep wine-vats.
This land's denied fruit, nor would Acontius have
an apple to write words on for Cydippe to read.
You can see naked fields without crops or trees:
a region, ah, that no happy man should enter"*
(Ovid: Tristia 3.10)

In the second letter to Fabius Maximus, the poet notes:

*"The flocks produce coarse wool, and the women
of Tomis have not yet learned the arts of Pallas.
Instead of spinning they grind Ceres's gift,
and carry water in pots on their heads.
Here no clustering vines clothe the elms,
no apples bend the branches with their load"*
(Ovid: Epistulae ex Ponto 3.8)

Ovid contrasts the everyday life of the Scythian people sharply, emphasizing that the lands were "wastelands", crops did not bear fruit, and the number of livestock was minimal. Historically, this could have been influenced by constant raids that halted field cultivation, as well as the climate impacting agriculture. Nevertheless, such a description by the poet might also have been shaped by the noticeable difference between the civilization of Rome and that of the Lower Danube region. The element of carrying water pots on the head is more common in Eastern and Southern countries (Africa, India, and parts of the Middle East), where this method of water transport corresponds well with local customs and natural conditions. For the Scythians, who led a nomadic or semi-settled way of life, it would have been more typical to carry liquids in their hands or in special containers, especially during harsh winters: "*Shall I speak of solid rivers, frozen by cold, / and water dug out brittle from the pools?*" (Ovid: Tristia 3.10). Ovid's statement cannot be denied, as there is no direct evidence, but one should take into account the emotional state of the exile, which influenced his tendency to exaggerate.

The exile was a shock for the poet, likely caused by his work *The Ars amatorial* (“The Art of Love”)¹, which Emperor Octavian Augustus perceived as an attempt to ridicule the unfaithfulness of his daughter. Therefore, unjustly banished from Rome, Ovid repeatedly compares Tomis to Rome. Almost every aspect of life falls under this comparison – daily life, nature, traditions – as the poet writes: *“For the most part, glorious Rome, these people neither care / about you, nor fear the weapons of Italian soldiers”, “a Roman will wander among Sarmatian shades, / a stranger forever among the savage dead”* (Ovid: *Epistulae ex Ponto* 1.2; *Tristia* 3.3).

In the 12th poem of the third book of *Tristia*, Ovid contrasts the atmosphere of Rome and Tomis:

*“Now laughing boys and girls gather the violets
that grow, un-sown, born of the countryside:
and the meadows bloom with many flowers,
and the song-birds welcome spring, untaught:
and the swallow, denying the name of wicked Procne,
builds her nest with its little roof under the eaves:
and the shoots that lay hid, buried in the wheat furrows,
show through, unfurl their tender tips from the earth.
Wherever the vine grows, buds break from the stem:
but vines grow far away from these Getic shores:
wherever there’s a tree, the tree’s twigs are bursting,
but trees grow far away from these Getic lands.
It’s a time of ease there, and a string of festive days
succeed the noisy battles of the wordy forum.
Now they ride horses, practise with light weapons,
play ball games, or with the swiftly circling hoops:
now young men, when they’re slick with slippery oil,*

¹ The Art of Love (*The Ars amatorial*) (c. 1 AD) is a didactic poem by Ovid in which the poet humorously teaches men and women to find a lover, win them over and keep them.

*soak their weary limbs in the flow of the Aqua Virgo,
The stage is alive, faction flares among separate parties,
and the three theatres resound not the three forums.
O four times, O endlessly blessed that man
who's not forbidden, and can enjoy, the city!"*
(Ovid: Tristia 3.12)

In this context, the poet's city of exile significantly differs from the developed capital. While in Rome much attention is given to cultural heritage – theatres, competitions, forums – in Tomis, on the contrary, the cultural situation was in decline. The inhabitants spent much time defending their territories and holding such mass events was inappropriate due to the constant threat of barbarian raids. Ovid himself wrote that he took up a sword without knowing how to use it: "*When the lookout gives the signal for a raid / from his tower, I quickly arm myself, my hands trembling*" (Ovid: Tristia 4.1). The poet also had to live without the valuable Roman libraries: "*Nor did Liberty allow me in her temple, / the first that was open to learned books*" (Ovid: Tristia 3.1). Moreover, Roman administrative and military structures were not firmly established in the Danube provinces, so "wild" lawlessness prevailed in these territories: "*This is the furthest land subject to Italian law, / barely clinging to the edges of your Empire*" (Ovid: Tristia 3.14) and the sword was the main "judge."

The author also points the contrast in nature – in Rome, there are "blooming meadows", while in the Lower Danube region, for him: "*You can see naked fields without crops or trees*" (Ovid: Tristia 3.10). It is no surprise that the appearance of the locals confused the poet; he, accustomed to tailored Roman clothing such as tunics, pallia and togas, could not ignore the rough, leather garments foreign to him. The barbarian attire seemed wild to him, just like its wearers.

Loyal to his wife, who remained in Rome, the poet writes her letters, in which he portrays his place of exile quite tragically.

*"No birds sing, unless they're ones from far forests,
drinking sea-water here, making raucous cries.
The empty plains bristle with acrid wormwood,
a harvest appropriate to this bitter place"*

4. Conclusions

The works *Tristia* and *Epistulae ex Ponto*, written by Publius Ovidius Naso during his exile in the city of Tomis, serve as a source presenting a unique literary image of the Lower Danube region in antiquity. Through the lens of his painful stay in a foreign land, the poet conveys not only his own emotions but also provides valuable testimony about the climatic conditions, landscape features, the ethnic composition of the population, their daily life, and the political situation in the border provinces of the Roman Empire. The conducted research has allowed us to “see through the poet’s eyes” the life in territories adjacent to our own today. It is evident that despite dramatic emotional exaggeration, Ovid created a realistic picture of life in the Lower Danube area. His descriptions skilfully combine mythological allusions with factual material, enabling modern scholars not only to reconstruct the aforementioned details but also to more deeply analyse the processes of cultural exchange and the clash of two civilizations in this marginal territory. The city of Tomis at that time emerges as a “crossroads” of Roman civilization and the local environment, with its own traditions, languages, and customs.

Thus, both collections by Ovid in exile open a window into how a “foreign” person saw the Lower Danube region. Some of his observations, despite their subjectivity, become indispensable material for studying the cultural and historical processes of this land. Studying Ovid’s works is not only a journey into the past but also a kind of “bridge” that allows us to understand how our region was shaped and its specifics in antiquity, even under the influence of such vivid poetic testimony...

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