THE GREEKS AND THE BLACK SEA

from the Bronze Age to the early twentieth century

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The Lower Danube acquired historical dimensions when the first Greek ship headed for one of its mouths and, disturbing the serene nature along the river's banks, sailed up the channel to explore the interior Danubian world as far as the Romanian-Moldavian plain and the Carpathians rich in ores. The 'Argonautica' say that the *Argo* did not pass through the Bosphoros again to return to the Aegean but, instead, went up the Danube and – through a complex network of waterways – reached the great wetlands of Istria at the northern end of the Adriatic Sea; by sailing the Adriatic and the Ionian Sea the ship arrived at the Gulf of Corinth. According to one of the many interpretations of the *Odyssey*, Odysseus reached the island of the Phaiakians, Corfu, in roughly the same way, after voyaging for many years in the Axenos Pontus.

Fig. 71. Fragment of a krater from Smyrna with the revealing inscription ΙΣΤΡΟΚΛΕΟΥΣ, 'of Istrokles'. *C.* 650 BC. Archaeological Museum, Izmir. Would Istrokles have been a merchant or shipowner from Asia Minor who grew rich by supplying Aegean markets with precious Thracian goods and slaves from the Istros? Would he have been absent from Smyrna for years and have performed deeds of valour abroad, or perhaps brought back valuable information about the rich lands in which his countrymen ought to settle?
Whatever this man from Smyrna who honoured or was honoured on the Istros may have been, the inscribed fragment is the oldest – albeit indirect – archaeological testimony of the growth of Ionian activities on the river before any Greek cities were founded, not only along the Istros but also throughout the Euxine.
The earliest finds from Istria and nearby Orgame date to 630-600 BC. Perhaps, however, intrepid merchants ('Odysseuses' and 'Istrokleses') had established riverside bases much earlier. From whom else would the poets have heard of the wonders of the Euxine Sea?

The great period of migration throughout Europe had taken place between the voyage made by 'Jason' (14th-13th century BC) and the voyage made by 'Odysseus' (late 8th century BC). Iron had reached even the most remote communities. Powerful peoples had appeared with new cultures and technologies, such as the Thracians who enriched religious ritual with mystery cults, agriculture with developed crops, and transport with equestrian skills. Maritime communications had been restored to a certain extent and the Greeks of the Aegean, abandoning their previous attachment to kingship, had laid the foundation for the city-states, a political system of great maturity that interwove the spiritual, cultural and political existence of the citizens, in their public and private lives, with the institutions and life of the ancient Greek *polis*.

It was during the turbulent transitional period of social and political developments, of internal strife and Greek civil wars, that colonization of the Hellespont and the Propontis commenced.

A few decades later, Aegean colonists passed through the Bosphoros and the Symplegades to build their new cities in the Euxine Pontus. They already knew of the great potential of the Istros.

In order to control fishing, traffic and trade along the Lower Danube, merchants from Miletos, and possibly from Milesian colonies in the Propontis, founded Istria to the south of the Hieron Stomion, in around 630 BC. From that time until the thirteenth century, when Genoese traders sailed to the Black Sea, the Sulina and Hagios Georgios branches remained under the absolute control of Greek sailors, even during the periods when Byzantium lost the Paristrion *thema*.

Istrians sailed up the delta as far as Aigissos-Tulcea and Galazion-Galatsi, built at the confluence of the Siret and the Prut rivers with the Danube. From Galatsi they could continue in two different directions. If they sailed up the Siret or the Prut, they reached the eastern and northern Carpathian Mountains. This northwest route led to the mineral-rich regions of Transylvania, the vast forests of Moldavia, and the land of the 'bee-keeping and honey-eating peoples', as Herodotos describes those who dwelt on the border of Eastern and Central Europe. The other riverine route went south along the Danube from Galatsi, passing through what is now Braila and down to the present border between Romania and Bulgaria. At various points along much of this route the Istrians built landing stages, where grain from the fertile plains of the River Ialomitsa was gathered and shipped. These storage and loading spots came to be known as *emporia*, places for trade. The most important were Axioupolis, now the Romanian town of Cernavodă, and Procheilia, now none other than Braila, one of the largest centres of Danubian Hellenism from 1880 until World War II. (See more about the port-city in Appendix II 'Braila, an empty shell of a city'.)

Fig. 72. Sulina. Traditional fishing technique photographed in 1970, when the annual catch of Romania exceeded 40,000 tons of fish. In 1996, the catch fell to 24,781 tons (including that from fish farms, but not that of the 200,000 or so amateur fishermen who have licences to fish in the river). The rich wildlife along the river banks and sea shores includes not only the innumerable species of birds that nest in these wetlands either seasonally or permanently, but also the shoals of fish that come from the far reaches of the Black Sea and the Mediterranean to spawn in the Danube Delta – even today when the polluted Black Sea is endangered.

We still do not know when these riverside landing stages were established and whether they were inhabited throughout the year, or only seasonally, just long enough for the goods to be loaded. What were the relations between the citizens of Istria and their suppliers and customers, the Getae from the plains and the Dacians from the mountains? How did these relations develop over the centuries? The considerable archaeological collection of fifth- and sixth-century BC pottery from Getic settlements and Dacian territory – up to 600 kilometres away from the sea – confirms the existence of commercial transactions. But the general framework is missing, as well as an impression of what everyday life was like.

Hopefully, excavations in neighbouring Orgame, 40 kilometres north of Istria, may shed light on this city too, as well as on the relations between these two city-states sharing the Bay of Halmyris and controlling the Hieron Stomion.

Istria, Istros and Istriopolis, the three names of the colony built here by Milesian merchants and seafarers to control the entrance to the River Istros. The Hieron Stomion or Sfintu Gheorghe (Saint George) branch of the Danube Delta is 90 kilometres further north.

The colonists' chief activities were fishing, preparing and exporting salted fish,* purchasing grain and hides from the Getae (a north Thracian tribe of the Danubian plain), and buying and selling slaves. Using riverboats, they penetrated deep into the Romanian heartland where they bought excellent honey and beeswax. The Greek products exchanged were pottery, silverwork, olive oil, wine and textiles.

The local peoples, especially the Getae, but also the Dacians of the Carpathians, were impressed by the use of the potter's wheel and the fine fabric of Greek vases. Less than two centuries later, around 400 BC, they too began using the wheel to produce vases of 'Megarian' and 'Delian' type.

The Istrians did not cultivate their *chora*, the territory around the walled city. Inside their walls – within the alien and barbarian, though hospitable land – they clung to the traditional mores and political institutions that distinguished them from the people who dominated the plain.

Fig. 73. Coin of ancient Istria. On one side are the Dioskouroi, the twins Kastor and Polydeukes (Pollux), members of the expedition of the Argonauts, founders of the ancient city of Dioskourias in the Caucasus, and patron deities of the marine world. On the other side is a sea eagle preying on a dolphin. Private collection.

* Salt fish from the Euxine Pontus was much in demand in ancient Athens. 'My, how tasty sea tunny is, and if it's served with garlic sauce, forget all other fish', wrote Ananios in his *Iamboi*.

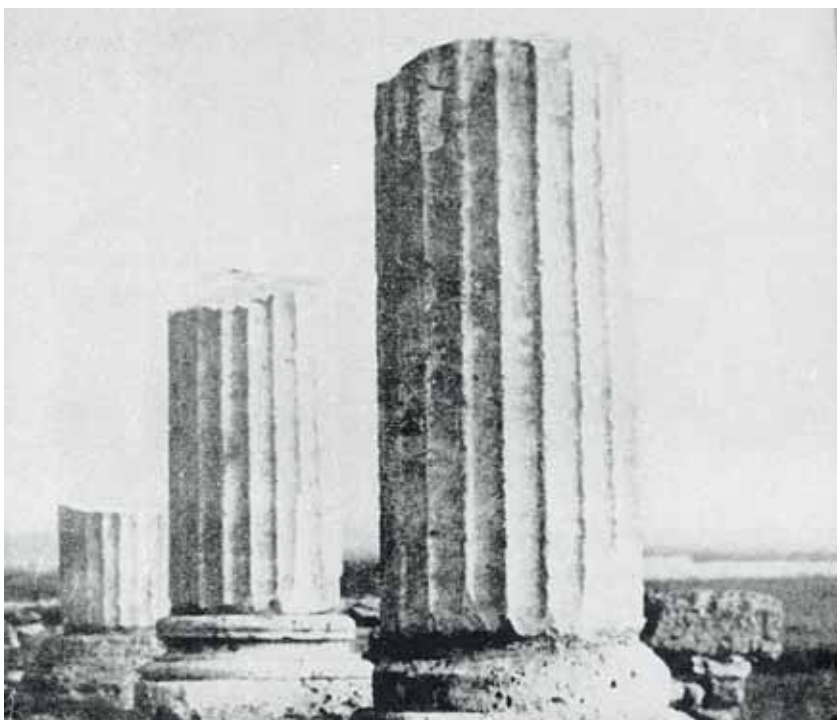


Fig. 74. The Sanctuary of Zeus Polieus. The 6th-c. BC Archaic temple was rebuilt in the 5th c. BC. It measures 19.5 m. long and 14.1 m. wide.

The east end of the city, together with the harbour and the eastern section of the fortification walls of the third-sixth centuries AD, are submerged. A large part of this side, containing the sanctuaries of Zeus Polieus, Aphrodite Pontia, patron deity of sailors, and Apollo Ietros, has been covered by mud and sand (IIb on Map 18, p. 106). Ionic columns and the foundations for the Classical temple are all that

Fig. 75. Section of the inscribed epistyle from the elegant temple of Apollo (late 4th c. BC), which was rebuilt by Peisistratos, son of Mnesistratos from Thasos, with marble brought from the famous quarries of that island. Archaeological Museum, Istria.

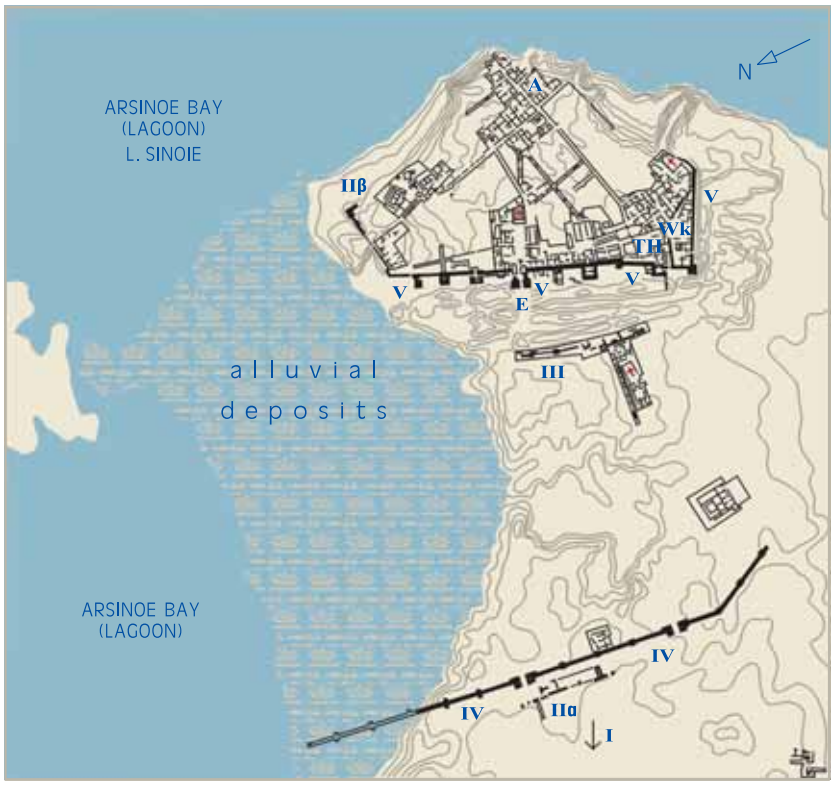
remain of the sanctuary of Zeus to remind us of the time of democracy, when the body of the citizens of Istria, the *ekklesia* and the *boule*, governed the city.

The richness of Istria (and neighbouring Orgame) and the prosperity of the Geto-Thracians who controlled the countryside, agricultural production, and all the sources of wealth, naturally aroused the interest of the Scythians, who lived beyond the Danube. Their infiltration was at times peaceable, at times predatory. Organized attacks began in the sixth century BC and continued sporadically until the Roman occupation. The Istrians were obliged to build and maintain strong fortification walls with towers, throughout the Classical period and again during the Hellenistic age (IIa and III on Map 18, p. 106). In the same period, Peisistratos, son of Mnesistratos from the island of Thasos in the North Aegean, rebuilt the temple of Apollo: the epistyle, some of the metopes from the Doric temple, and the foundations have survived.

Fig. 76. The Baths (*Thermae*). The large complex of public baths at the southwest edge of the shrunken Roman and Early Byzantine city (TH on Map 18, p. 106).

* The *Ripa Thraciae* (Danubian Thrace) was described thus by Ovid, who was exiled in the coastal city of Tomoi-Tomis (Constantza) from AD 9 until his death in AD 17 or 18. His *Epistulae ex Ponto* and his poems *Tristia* III-V are full of his despair about the prevailing of barbarism in the cities, where 'Getae, Sarmatians, and innumerable other tribes are overwhelming'.

'The dreadful valley of the Istros' * experienced indescribable difficulties during the Hellenistic period, from the time the Celts established themselves in Southeastern Europe (280 BC) until the appearance of the Roman army and fleet (72/1 BC).
Istria and the other Greek cities were at times allied with the Getae, at other times with the Scythians and the Germanic Bastarnians, until 61 BC, when the Getic leader Burebista defeated the Romans 'near the city of the Istrians' (Dio Cassius, *History* XXXVIII.10.3) and went on soon afterwards to destroy his faithful ally, Istria. The city was rebuilt after its final conquest by the Romans (in AD 46), but the wars and invasions never ceased.



Map 18. Istria, plan of the archaeological site:

I = 7th-6th c. BC
IIa = walls, 5th-4th c. BC
IIb = area of ancient sanctuaries
III = Hellenistic walls, 3rd-1st c. BC
IV = Roman walls, 2nd-3rd c. AD
V = Late Roman-Byzantine walls, 3rd-6th c. AD

Istria: Late seventh century BC – late seventh century AD

One thousand three hundred years of existence. Four successive phases of settlement. Continual extensions, additions, new public buildings, repairs to old ones, hasty reinforcements to the walls. Sand and mud have covered sections of the ancient city. The shallow waters of the lagoon have encroached upon the peninsula, distancing it from the sea. Where was the harbour?

Incursions and pillages by diverse Thracian and Scythian tribes throughout Antiquity. The city was rebuilt repeatedly in the Classical, Hellenistic and Roman periods (IIa, IIb, III, IV, TH). In AD 46, the riparian areas of Thrace (*Ripa Thraciae*) and all the city-states of the area were included in the Roman province of Scythia Minor, the northernmost province of the Roman Diocese of Thrace. In the early third century, the Romans permitted the Istrians to keep their fishing concession in the delta, to fell pine trees, and to guard their territory. In AD 238, Istria was sacked and laid waste by the Goths, who returned in 242, 245, 253, and 267. A few decades later, Istria was rebuilt yet again (V), and all the ancient building material was incorporated into the new city walls.

V = Late Roman, Early Byzantine walls (300-550).

For defensive reasons the size of the city was reduced. Only the seaward, east side was girt with a strong wall (4 m. thick). Late Roman-Early Byzantine Istria covers the Roman and ancient Greek levels. Many of the second-century AD buildings, such as the baths, were repaired and continued to function. Part of the ancient sanctuary area (IIb) remained outside the Late Roman walls.

Fig. 77. A few columns survive from the Early Byzantine episcopal complex (see also Fig. 70, p.101), while only the foundations and scattered remains bear witness to the city's five basilicas. The ecclesiastical and administrative see was transfered to Tomoi-Constantza (see Map 24 showing Scythia Minor, p.162).

Fig. 78. Arsinoe-Sinoie, the shallow lagoon separating the coastal city from the sea, freezes over in winter.
Istria, February 1987.
'So whether Boreas with bitter blast Has gripped the sea or bound the river fast / When dry North Winds have smoothed the Danube's back Swiftly the mounted savages attack. … / Often within the bolted gates' retreat / We pick up poisoned arrows in the street', wrote Ovid from nearby Tomoi at the beginning of the 1st c. AD (*Tristia* III.10 [tr. L.P. Wilkinson]).

E = Central entrance. Protected by four towers.

TH = *Thermae*. Large Roman baths at the southwest eadge of the Late Roman city, in use until the seventh century. Behind the baths, bronze-smithies and other workshops (Wk), a bakery and granaries were found.

A = Aristocratic neighbourhood. A villa with a large porticoed atrium and a building with several rooms and a chapel (most likely the episcopal complex-Episkopeion). The east edge of the city and the walls have been submerged.

Within the Early Byzantine walled city the ruins of four basilicas have been revealed. The largest of these churches is 25 metres long and 12.50 metres wide. A fifth basilica was founded outside the walls.

The defences were reinforced and large Christian complexes erected during the reign of Emperor Anastasios (491-518) and again during that of Justinian (527-565). However, from the early sixth century onwards so great was the frequency with which the barbarians violated the Danubian frontier and the scale of their expansion into the heartland of Byzantine Thrace that neither the defensive measures nor the diplomatic manoeuverings of Byzantine politics were adequate.

As the water-level rose and sediment cut off contact with the sea, Istria sank into the swamps and her inhabitants abandoned the city. In 596, and finally in 602, the Danube frontier was breached and the land over-run by Slavs and Avars – a nomadic people of Turkic-Mongolian origin. When the proto-Bulgars, the Onogurs, first appeared on the plain in 670, life at Istria was over.