

The Place Where the Roman Poet Ovid Was Exiled was not on the Black Sea, but Much Further North

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Abstract

Until now, it was always believed that the Roman poet Ovid was exiled by the Emperor Augustus to Tomis, which at that time was a thriving port on the Black Sea where the city of Constanta stands today, near the Danube Delta. However, in his writings from exile, Ovid consistently describes a completely different scenario: a desolate place, located “beneath the snowy pole”, surrounded by countryside where neither vines nor fruit trees grew, where there were no ports, where no Latin was spoken, with freezing winters during which the river delta, which he usually called the Hister (mentioned in Greek literature as the Istros, of which the Greek historian Herodotus emphasizes a very distinctive feature) was covered with a thick sheet of ice. All of this is completely incompatible with the area of Constanța, which enjoys a very different climate. Furthermore, according to Ovid, among the peoples of that region were the Sarmatians, of whom no archaeological traces have been found in the Tomis area. But if we now turn our gaze to northern Europe, at the eastern end of the Gulf of Finland we find the delta of a large river, the Neva, which is the only one to correspond both to all the characteristics indicated by Ovid and to the particularity of the Istros underlined by Herodotus. Furthermore, there are reasons to think that Augustus purposely wanted to send Ovid to a place as isolated and distant from Rome as possible. This unexpected location of Ovid’s exile on the delta of the Neva River could open up new research perspectives, for example on the actual extent of the Roman world’s sphere of influence beyond the borders of the Empire during that period.

Keywords: Ovid; Hister; Istros; Constanța; Tomis; Neva; Sarmatians; Ovid’s exile

Introduction

The aim of this article is to propose a completely new identification of the location where the Roman poet Ovid (43 BC - 18 AD) was sent into exile by the Emperor Augustus in 8 AD. Until now, it has always been believed that this location, which Ovid calls Tomis, was located on the Black Sea and corresponded to the current city of Constanța, situated near the Danube Delta in Romania. Here, however, we will first try to demonstrate that this deeply rooted belief is incorrect. In fact, Ovid, in his copious correspondence sent to Rome during the almost ten years he spent in exile before his death, describes in detail the characteristics of this place, which however, as we will see, appear completely incompatible with the Black Sea environment [1].

Therefore, here we will first examine the reasons that make this location unreliable, and then verify that the numerous indications

(primarily climatic and geographical, but not only) that the poet provided regarding the place of his exile correspond remarkably to a very specific but totally unexpected territory, far from the Black Sea and much further north.

The article is structured as follows. In the next section, we will examine the reasons why the characteristics of the place where Ovid was exiled are completely incompatible with the region of Constanța. In the following section, we will verify that there is a location, far from the Black Sea, that perfectly matches the descriptions the poet left us: the delta of the Neva River. Moreover, incontrovertible proof that this delta is indeed the place of his exile is offered by a singular passage from Herodotus, which has thus far escaped the attention of scholars. The final section offers some concluding remarks.

The Problems of Locating Ovid's Exile on the Black Sea

Let us read a passage from the first of the works (*Tristia*, *Ibis*, *Epistulae ex Ponto*) that Ovid wrote during his exile, in which he shows what that place, as well as its inhabitants, looked like during the winter:

"When sad winter shows its gloomy face and the earth whitens with marble frost, while Boreas and the snow prepare to dwell under the Bear, then these people appear oppressed by the pole that makes them shiver. The snow settles, and so that the sun and rain do not melt it after its fall, Boreas hardens it and makes it perpetual (...) The violence of the North Wind when it is unleashed is such that it can knock down high towers and carry away shattered roofs. With skins and sewn trousers, they protect themselves from a damn cold, and of all their bodies only the face remains uncovered. Often their tossed hair tinkles with hanging icicles and their beards shine white with the frozen ice; the wine remains solid outside the vessel, retaining its shape, and is not drunk in sips, but in pieces. And what about streams that freeze, blocked by the cold, and waters drawn up in pieces from a lake? The Hister itself, which is no narrower than the river where the papyrus grows and which mixes with the vast sea through many mouths, freezes when the winds solidify its blue waves and meanders towards the sea with its waters imprisoned by ice; and where once ships passed, now people go on foot and the horse's hoof beats on the waves solidified by the frost; and across new bridges, under which the waves flow, the Sarmatian oxen draw the chariots of the barbarians (...) I saw the vast sea made solid by the frost, while a slippery slab compressed

still waters. But seeing was not enough for me: I walked above the waves on the frozen sea, and my feet remained dry (...) Then not even the dolphins, imprisoned by the ice, they can leap into the air; however much the north wind roars and flaps its wings, not even a wave will move in the still whirlpool; the ships blocked by the frost remain as if petrified, and the oar will not be able to split the frozen waters. I have seen fish trapped in the ice, and some of them were still alive" [2].

In summary, according to Ovid, the place of his exile was located near the delta – which in another passage he defines as "septemplicis", "with seven branches" [3] – of a large river, called the Hister, of a width comparable even to the river where the papyrus grows (i.e. the Nile) and which freezes in winter, just as the surrounding sea freezes, to the point that the thickness of the ice allows the passage of carts drawn by oxen. The phenomenon was recurring over the years: "Since I have been in Pontus, three times the Hister has frozen, three times the waves of the Euxine Sea have solidified" [4]. In this regard, it is important to underline that in the works Ovid wrote during his exile, the theme of winter frost continually returns, with an almost obsessive insistence, as one of the main reasons for his affliction. It should also be underlined that the poet often dwells on details that are realistic to the point of excluding the possibility that they are the product of his imagination.

As for the Hister River, Ovid sometimes also calls it "Danuvius" (Danube), whose delta is on the Black Sea, near the city of Constanța, which corresponds to the ancient city of Tomis and, consequently, has always been associated with the place of his exile (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Statue of Ovid in Constanța.

In the Greek world, the Hister was called the Istros, mentioned by Herodotus (c. 484 – c. 425 BC) in his histories. Incidentally, the name Istros-Hister is believed to derive from a root that is perhaps also found in the ancient name of the Dnestr ("Danaster" in Latin) and is related to the Sanskrit *iśiras* 'swift', from the Proto-Indo-European **isro-*, **sreu* "to flow" [5].

At this point, however, it must be said that the freezing winter landscape so often evoked by Ovid is absolutely incompatible with the climate of the Black Sea, and in particular of the region around Constanța, which "has a humid subtropical climate (...) Winter arrives much later than inland and December weather is often mild with high temperatures reaching 8 °C (46 °F) – 12 °C (54 °F). The average January temperature is 1 °C (34 °F)" [6].

Added to this enormous incongruity is the fact that Ovid often repeats that he is in a place far to the north, beneath the pole and the constellation of the Bear. We saw this at the beginning of the passage cited above, but elsewhere he is no less explicit: "It is now the sixth winter that sees me relegated beneath the snowy pole" [7]. And shortly after he states that he fears, as indeed will happen, that "cruel fate will make me die beneath the icy pole" [8].

Furthermore, consistently with what has already emerged, the poet complains about the fact of finding himself in a remote land, "beyond which there is nothing" [9], and often speaks of a surrounding countryside that is terribly squalid and desolate, where neither vines nor fruit trees grow: "Here the sweet grapes do not hide in the shade of the vine leaves nor do the boiling musts fill the vats (...) You see the fields without leaves and without a single tree" [10]. In fact, "the trees grow far from the lands of the Getae" [11], and "autumn does not offer grapes from the vines, but it is always excessively cold, the straits are blocked by ice and often in the sea a fish swims enclosed under the frozen water" [12].

To all this we must add a statement by the poet which fits well into the context outlined so far: "It is rare for a sailor from Italy to cross such a vast sea, it is rare for him to reach these shores without ports" [13]. But this is in total contradiction with the situation on the Black Sea coast at the time of Augustus, as scholars say: "It was in Rome's interest for the coastal cities—such as Apollonia, Mesembria, Odessos, Callatis, Tomis, and Istros—to continue serving as the ports for the granary that was their hinterland. Tomis, the metropolis on the left bank of the Black Sea, was to be treated by Rome with the greatest consideration" [14].

Ovid, however, goes so far as to say that "among these people there is not even one who can by chance say even one of the most common Latin words" [15], to the point that "having not used them for such a long time, I myself have difficulty remembering Latin words (...) And in order not to lose familiarity with the Latin language and so that my voice does not become mute in the idiom of my homeland, I speak to myself" [16].

In short, everything that Ovid tells us about the place of his exile seems to have nothing to do with the region of Constanța! This is also confirmed by archaeology, because Ovid "speaks of Sarmatians and Scythians, as uncivilized as they are ferocious. Yet archaeology can only attest to the presence of the latter" [17]. This means that, in the area of Tomis (i.e. the name of the place where Ovid claims to have been relegated, corresponding to the city on the Black Sea which now has the name of Constanța), according to archaeologists there are no traces of the Sarmatians! This is consistent with the fact that "The territory inhabited by the Sarmatians, which was known as Sarmatia to Greco-Roman ethnographers, covered the western part of greater Scythia, and corresponded to today's Central Ukraine, South-Eastern Ukraine, Southern Russia, Russian Volga, and South-Ural regions" [18].

The time has therefore come to verify whether there is a place, evidently to be found "beneath the snowy pole", much further

north of the Black Sea, which corresponds to all the characteristics indicated by the poet.

The True Location of Ovid's Exile

Let's start from one of the passages in which – in addition to the two usual recurring themes, the frozen sea and the proximity to the pole – Ovid mentions the Sarmatian Sea: "You must not ignore the reason why the horrid winter freezes the Sarmatian Sea. Here we are close to the Constellation of the Wain which brings the most intense cold. From here comes the north wind, which is at home on these coasts and draws strength from the place closest to it. The south wind, however, whose warm breath comes from the opposite pole, is far away and arrives here rarely and weakened" [19]. This is consistent with the fact that the poet often mentions the Sarmatians, as we have just seen, as well as their land, called Sarmatia.

Now, if on the one hand this adds to the reasons that lead us to exclude the traditional location of the place of exile, on the other it tells us that the "Sarmatian Sea" where Ovid claims to be located is identifiable with the "Sarmatian Ocean" mentioned by the ancient geographer Ptolemy: "Sarmatia in Europe is bounded on the north by the Sarmatian Ocean" [20], that is, by the Baltic Sea.

At this point, from the set of these data, all consistent with each other, it emerges that the poet was presumably exiled to a place in the Baltic area located at a high latitude (but certainly below the Polar Circle, since Ovid, who also tends to be very verbose, never mentions the midnight sun), where the Sarmatians were settled and where there is a delta "with many mouths" of a river that freezes in winter together with the surrounding sea, and is so large as to be comparable to the Nile.

In this context, there is a river in the Baltic world that, at first glance, perfectly matches the "identikit" drawn from the information Ovid provides: it is the Neva, the large river of European Russia that rises from Lake Ladoga and flows into Neva Bay, at the eastern end of the Gulf of Finland, with a delta located at a latitude of approximately 60° (on which Tsar Peter the Great built the city of Saint Petersburg in the early 18th century).

Let us examine in detail the characteristics of the Neva and its delta. Given its high latitude, the Neva freezes every year from early December to early April. The ice thickness ranges from 0.3 to 0.4 meters in Saint Petersburg (and between 0.5 and 0.6 meters in other areas). Furthermore, the Neva is the fourth largest river in Europe in terms of flow (after the Volga, the Danube and the Rhine, which however flow into the sea at much more southern latitudes) and, although there are other European rivers that flow further north, none have a discharge comparable to its own [21] (in this regard, we have just seen that Ovid compares the width of the river of his exile to the Nile).

However, what gives us the certainty that this is precisely the delta where Ovid was exiled is a very particular characteristic, which is specific to the Neva and to very few other rivers: thanks to the natural regulation by the large lake from which the Neva

originates, its flow remains stable over time, and therefore its level is always almost constant, with the flow being distributed uniformly throughout the year [22]. But this is also the characteristic that Herodotus attributes to the Istros (Ἰστρος) River, the correspondent of the Ovidian Hister in Greek literature, which “flows with ever the same volume in summer and winter” [23].

This is a concept that Herodotus is keen to reiterate shortly afterwards [24], evidently to underline its exceptional nature. However, the Herodotean Istros has been identified with the Danube because, according to Herodotus, it “crosses the whole of Europe” [25], just as Ovid’s Hister has been identified with the Danube up to now. But attributing to the Danube, as Herodotus does, such a particular characteristic as the invariability of its flow is completely absurd, since in reality the exact opposite is true! Its flow over the course of the year is subject to variations that are even very significant (for example, in the month of May the flow of the Danube at its mouth is on average double that recorded in October) [26]. In fact, it is no coincidence that from time to time it overflows, producing large floods.

But how can all this be explained? Such an absurdity can only be explained by the fact that at the time of Herodotus there were two rivers called by the same name [27], the “Istros” (one flowing into the Black Sea and the other into the Gulf of Finland, at the eastern end of the Baltic Sea), and that the Greek historian, deceived by

the homonymy, mistakenly identified them, believing that they were the same watercourse. Moreover, Ovid also fell into this same misunderstanding with his Hister (which on three occasions he calls the “Danuvius”, Danube, the mouth of which on the Black Sea has in fact been associated with the place of his exile until now).

In any case, Herodotus’ testimony is invaluable for us, because, in addition to confirming that the poet did not invent anything, it allows us to unequivocally identify his Istros, that is, Ovid’s Hister (whose entirely Northern and certainly not Mediterranean dimension we have already verified a little while ago), with the Neva. In that area of the Baltic, in fact, there is only one other river with a stable flow, the Narva (which also originates from a lake, the Peipus, and like the Neva is of modest length). However, the Narva cannot possibly be identified with Ovid’s Hister; not only is its flow far lower than that of the Neva, but it also empties into the sea via a simple estuary rather than branching out into multiple arms.

In summary, the Neva is the only river that embodies all the characteristics of the Hister-Istros described by Ovid; and it is thanks to Herodotus and his providential error that we have confirmation that it cannot be any other river [28]. Therefore, at this point we consider it extremely probable that, subject to future verification by other scholars, the real place where Ovid was exiled was located in the Neva delta area (Figure 2).



Figure 2: The Neva Delta in 1834.

This very northern location, which has nothing to do with the Danube, is consistent with the fact, noted by scholars [29], that our very talkative poet never mentions the victorious war that Marcus Licinius Crassus had led against the populations of the lower Danube, crowned with triumph in 27 BC (with that expedition

Augustus subdued those peoples and two years later received their embassies).

Furthermore, completely consistent with the desolate picture that the poet paints of his condition as an exile in a freezing place of relegation where there wasn’t even a port and no one spoke

Latin, is the fact that an exchange of correspondence between him and his family took as much as a year: "While your letter reaches me, while mine returns to you, crossing so many seas and so many lands, a year passes" [30]. It is no coincidence that he returns to this subject, which understandably distressed him not a little, elsewhere too [31]. A year! This timeframe is entirely incompatible with the efficiency of the postal services of the Empire (which Augustus himself had strengthened) at that time [32]. Given the importance of Black Sea ports to the Romans, this surprising lack of an efficient postal service reinforces the other reasons leading us to rule out the traditional location of Ovid's exile, while appearing entirely consistent with the idea of an isolated place, extremely far from Rome.

Finally, one might wonder whether this situation of extreme isolation was dictated by a specific reason. In other words, it's legitimate to ask why such a remote and isolated place was chosen for the poet's exile. The obvious answer is that Augustus, knowing the poet's loquacity and fearing that sooner or later he would reveal the true reason for his condemnation (which had been strictly forbidden to him and has remained a mystery until now), absolutely wanted to prevent Ovid from having any verbal contact with anyone. Confirming this idea is a passage from the *Tristia* in which Ovid, addressing Augustus directly, states that "no other exile is confined further from his homeland. I alone have been sent to the delta of the seven-mouthed Hister and am oppressed by the frozen pole of virgin Parrhasia (...) and, although others have been confined for a more serious crime towards you, no one has been assigned a land more remote than the one assigned to me" [33].

This is perfectly consistent with our hypothesis, illustrated in a previous article [34], that the crime committed by Ovid had been to mention the close relationship between the goddess Maia, the seven Pleiades and the foundation of Rome in a passage of "The *Fasti*" (the unfinished work he was working on at the time of his condemnation) [35], which was absolutely forbidden to reveal (in fact there is no other trace of this relationship in all the rest of Greek-Roman literature).

Indeed, according to this hypothesis, the name of Rome's secret patron goddess (i.e. Maia) could easily have been deduced from that passage, but this, according to the concepts of the time, could have jeopardized the security of the State (to the point that the Romans punished with capital punishment those who were guilty of transgressing the prohibition of revealing the name of this patron deity [36]). In short, it was probably for this reason that Augustus, commuting the imprudent poet's death sentence to exile, decided to relegate him to an isolated place, as far away as possible from Rome, where no one spoke Latin.

Conclusion

In this article we believe we have provided valid reasons to support the hypothesis that Ovid was sent into exile not to a location on the Black Sea, but rather to the Neva delta region, in an

isolated, inhospitable place, extremely distant from Rome, whose direct connection to the Roman world had never been hypothesized until now.

As we have seen, this identification is based on the precise information the poet, in his works from exile, provides regarding the characteristics of that place, which we now briefly summarize. It was the seven-branched delta of a large river, which he calls the Hister, comparable in size to the Nile. During the winter, it froze over with the surrounding sea, forming a sheet of ice thick enough to allow the passage of ox-drawn carts. Consistent with this picture, it was located far north ("beneath the snowy pole"), in a barren, desolate region devoid of ports and where no one spoke Latin, so far from Rome that an exchange of letters took a year. All this corresponds very well with the delta of the Neva River, but what allowed for its unequivocal identification with the latter was a precise indication by Herodotus, repeated twice, regarding the Istros River, corresponding to Ovidian Hister, which has the very rare characteristic for a river of flowing "with ever the same volume in summer and winter".

However, such an innovative topic requires further scholarly investigation. In particular, this unexpected identification of the place where the poet was exiled, located in such a northern region, raises several questions at first glance. For example, Ovid frequently mentions wine (which, as we have seen, froze in vessels in winter), which obviously had to be imported from the Mediterranean area. In this regard, it seems reasonable to assume that what the local population might have offered in exchange were animal furs.

But, more generally, we believe that further investigation by specialists in the relevant fields (especially archaeologists and ethnologists, as well as historians) into Ovid's description of the world in which he lived during his exile, and whose contact with the Roman world was previously unknown, could add new elements to what is currently known about those peoples, about whom the poet left us his extraordinary reportage.

In conclusion, we hope that, thanks to Ovid and his writings from exile, new lines of research on those ancient peoples and their relations with the Roman world can be opened, which, perhaps, could hold new surprises – for example, regarding the actual extent of the Empire's sphere of influence at the time of Augustus.

References

1. I thank Cinzia Mele, an independent Italian researcher, for drawing attention to the discrepancies between Ovid's descriptions and the traditional location of his exile on the Black Sea. But this is also an opportunity for me to remember the late Giuseppe Di Giovanni, my Latin teacher at the Torquato Tasso High School in Rome, who many years ago, speaking about Ovid, mentioned these discrepancies.
2. Ovid, *Trist.* 3, 10, 9-50.
3. Ovid, *Trist.* 2, 189.
4. Ovid, *Trist.* 5, 10, 1-2.
5. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Danube>

6. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Constans>
7. Ovid, *Ex Pont.* 4, 13, 39-40.
8. Ovid, *Ex Pont.* 4, 15, 35-36.
9. Ovid, *Trist.* 2, 195.
10. Ovid, *Trist.* 3, 10, 71-75.
11. Ovid, *Trist.* 3, 12, 16.
12. Ovid, *Ex Pont.* 3, 1, 13-16.
13. Ovid, *Trist.* 3, 12, 37-38.
14. Della Corte F, Fasce S (Eds.) (1986) *Opere di Publio Ovidio Nasone* (Works of Publius Ovidius Naso), Vol. 2, UTET, Turin, p. 38.
15. Ovid, *Trist.* 3, 10, 71-75.
16. Ovid, *Trist.* 5, 8, 57-63.
17. Della Corte, op. cit., p. 29.
18. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sarmatians>
19. Ovid, *Ex Pont.* 4, 10, 37-44.
20. Ptolemy, *Geogr.* 3, 5.
21. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neva>
22. <https://bigenc.ru/c/neva-73c64a>
23. Herodotus, *Hist.* 4.48.
24. Herodotus, *Hist.* 4.50.
25. Herodotus, *Hist.* 4.49.
26. <https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Danubio>
27. A current example is the name of the Rhine, the large river that crosses Central Europe from Switzerland to the Netherlands. In Italian, the Rhine is called Reno, a name identical to that of a river in central-northern Italy that flows between Tuscany and Emilia and empties into the Adriatic Sea (the root of its name is presumably comparable to the Greek verb “*rheō*”, meaning “to run, to flow”).
28. Considering that the Neva Delta is located at the edge of the Gulf of Finland, that is, at the eastern edge of the Baltic world, one might at this point wonder whether the Greek name Istros is not traceable to the Proto-Indo-European **h₂éwstros* (“east”; cf. <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/east>). This is a question we turn to the glottologists for the necessary verification.
29. Della Corte, op. cit., p. 38.
30. Ovid, *Ex Pont.* 4, 11, 15-16.
31. Cf. Ovid, *Ex Pont.* 3, 4, 58-60.
32. Cf. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cursus_publicus
33. Ovid, *Trist.* 2, 188-194 (“Virgin Parrhasia” is a learned metaphor to indicate the constellation of the Bear).
34. Cf Vinci F, Maiuri M (2017) Mai dire Maia. Un’ipotesi sulla causa dell’esilio di Ovidio e sul nome segreto di Roma (Never Say Maia. A Hypothesis on the Cause of Ovid’s Exile and the Secret Name of Rome), in *Appunti Romani di Filologia* No 19, pp. 19-30; Vinci F, Maiuri M (2019) Le Pleiadi e la fondazione di Roma (The Pleiades and the Foundation of Rome), in *Appunti Romani di Filologia* No 21, pp. 17-23 (an English version is found in: www.editorpress.it/en/ovid-the-pleiades-the-secret-name-of-rome-and-other-cities-with-seven-hills).
35. Cf. Ovid, *Fast.* 5, 81-106.
36. Cf. Pliny, *Nat. Hist.* 3, 65, 61.