

Cartographies of Lost Places: An Oriental Oasis on the Danube River

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Abstract

Situated at the crossroads of East and West, there once existed a small and enchanting island on the Danube River, which separated the Ottoman Empire from the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Throughout its lengthy and intricate history, the island had various names and was ruled by diverse forces. Ada-Kaleh now only exists in the memories of those who once inhabited it, many of whom have long since passed away. Submerged in 1970 to make way for the construction of the Iron Gates hydroelectric power plant, Ada-Kaleh continues to pique curiosity and bewitch the imagination of people who have heard of it but have never had the chance to set foot on it. Its disappearance from the map does not mean it has fallen into complete oblivion. Rather, it endures in multiple forms of artistic expression, including exhibitions, documentaries, novels, poetry, and movies. The present endeavour aims to explore the tumultuous history of this long-lost Oriental haven and to examine the various ways in which it has been recreated and reimaged in popular culture.

Keywords: *Ada-Kaleh, Danube, island, islanders, Turks*

“Phantom islands exist now as cartographic ghosts, imagined outposts that served as colonial placeholders, border markers, or wayward mythologies.” (Armstrong 2022: 51)

Islands have often been envisioned as remote places, possessing unique ecological and cultural characteristics that set them apart from the mainland. They have been seen either as idyllic, inhabited paradises or as utopian empty places where one can start anew because “[b]oundedness makes islands graspable, able to be held in the mind’s eye and imagined as places of possibility and promise” (Edmond and Smith 2003: 2). Despite their confinement within a specific geographical area, islands remain an elusive and unpredictable subject – “the most slippery of subjects”, according to Edmond and Smith (2003: 5). Fragmented and isolated, islands are vulnerable to natural

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disasters which could make them disappear in the twinkling of an eye. On islands, time elapses differently and events unfold on a different scale: “On continents, economic and political changes evolve over decades; on islands, a ship appears on the horizon, a seaplane lands in a harbour, a European explorer arrives, and a single day changes everything forever” (Clarke 2001: 46).

Such, too, was the story of Ada-Kaleh, the sunken island paradise on the Danube River, a miniature Atlantis that vanished underwater as if it were only a figment of the imagination. Its history is both fascinating and tragic. Blessed and condemned at the same time by its geographical position, it drew the attention of various conquerors throughout its tumultuous past. Nevertheless, history came to a sharp end for the island when the Communist authorities decided to sacrifice it on the altar of progress and civilization. Forever lost for more than half a century now, Ada-Kaleh is still remembered and researched by historians, anthropologists, ethnologists, etc., and is still reimagined and reinvented through works of literature. This article endeavours to provide a concise overview of the historical events that the island endured throughout its long existence. Additionally, it aims to look at its timely demise and how it has continued to capture the public’s interest despite its disappearance from the map.

History interrupted

Ada-Kaleh was a small island situated 3 kilometres downstream from Orşova, between present-day Romania and Serbia. Despite its diminutive size, measuring only 1750m in length and 400-500 m² in width, Ada-Kaleh exuded a grandeur unparalleled by its physical geography. Enjoying a warm Mediterranean climate, its winters were mild, and its summers were cool. This enabled the growth of a lavish vegetation, comprising fig trees, chestnut trees, almond trees, medlar trees, cypress trees, lilac shrubs, roses, oleanders, thick wild vines, apple and pear trees and mulberry trees. The island’s fauna was abundant, notably rich in scorpions.

The island’s toponymy reflects its rich history. Herodotus called it *Chyraunis* and described it as abundant in olive trees and wild vines (Bărbulescu 2002). In Homer’s *Odyssey*, it is mentioned as the dwelling place of Calypso. The island was called *Nymphaia* by the Argonauts, who were impressed by the milk produced by Geryon’s famous herds of cattle. The Turks called it *Ada Kale*, meaning “the house of the strong-armed father” and, by extension, “the island fortress” or “the island gate”. The Austrians referred to it as *Carolina* or the *Fortress of New Orşova*. At the peak of its fame, the island was known as Ada-Kaleh, a return to its original name according to Bărbulescu

(2002), and it remained so until its submersion by the Communist authorities in 1970.

The history of most islands is one of imperialism and postcolonial narratives. Islands have been the sites of conquest, exploitation, and resistance. Isolated in the middle of the Danube, separating the East from the West and guarded on both sides by mountains that descended abruptly into the water, Ada-Kaleh was destined to play, just like Gibraltar – hence the frequent comparison with the famous strait which links the Atlantic to the Mediterranean Sea –, a strategic role, by controlling and preventing, if necessary, the circulation on the Danube waters. The Romans were the first to set eyes on this small patch of land, so they made it an important trading post. It was home to a significant number of people. On the Serbian shore, the cart road that leads from Techia to Sip is the former path of Trajan’s legions, a path that, carved in stone, extends beyond Cazane.

The geostrategic position of the island made it, later on, the bone of contention between two important empires, but not before John Hunyadi had it fortified in 1440, as part of his campaigns against the Ottoman troops which were plundering the southern part of the country. The Hungarians, who occupied the island for a few hundreds of years, strengthened the left bank of the river to ensure navigation on the Danube (Mosneagu 2017). Following the Battle of Mohács (1526), Hungary was defeated by the Ottomans led by Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent, and Ada-Kaleh became an Ottoman Island. Until 1689, the island remained a Turkish Pashalik, together with most of Hungary. The Turks colonised the island at that time. Yet, almost two hundred years later, in 1718, the Treaty of Passarowitz gave to the Habsburg Empire the Banat together with the island of Ada-Kaleh. General Frederico Veterani spoke about the strategic importance of the island in a report to the Imperial Court in Vienna calling it the key to Transylvania, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria (Mosneagu 2017).

The Austrians fortified the island so that the Turks might never advance on the Danube. The Fortress of New Orşova was constructed under the supervision of Nicolaus Doxat de Démoret, an Austrian colonel of Swiss origin. At that time, the fortress was one of the most important in Europe and occupied the greatest part of the island. The fortress consisted of triangular bastions and casemates that were linked by vaulted brick galleries, forming a larger inner yard at the centre. The entrance was through Baroque-style Eastern and Western stone-framed gates. According to records, there were two underwater tunnels connecting the island to the fort on the Serbian shore. There were also barracks for troops and ammunition depots.

The Austrian rule was short-lived and, in 1739, the Ottoman Empire regained control of the island following the Treaty of Belgrade which ended

the hostilities of the two-year Austro-Turkish war. From 1739 onward, Turks came to settle on the island from the right bank of the river. As a result, the commandant's headquarters was converted into a mosque which led to a decline in the island's previous military significance. Although the Austrians took control of Ada-Kaleh once again in 1789, it was later returned to the Turks after the signing of the Treaty of Sistova in 1791.

One century later, after the Russo-Turkish war (1877-1878), the United Romanian Principalities, Bulgaria and Serbia were liberated from Turkish rule and the fortified places which had belonged to the Turks, including Ada-Kaleh, were evacuated. Yet, the political status of the island was not explicitly addressed: "The island belonged to Turkey, but the peacemakers forgot about it at the Berlin Congress in 1878" (Lengyel 1939: 303). Therefore, the island remained the property of the Sultan of Constantinople but "its future was interpreted in the light of the articles of the Berlin Treaty, which provided for the neutrality of the Danube, its demilitarization, and the management, by Austria-Hungary, of unobstructed navigation." (Grigore, Vainovki-Mihai 2019: 243). The Sultan intervened personally with the Austrian imperial court to take over the protectorate of the island and to detach a garrison there to maintain order and safety. That is why the island – a Turkish fortress – was guarded by 40 Austrian soldiers (Mosneagu 2017). The islanders enjoyed tax and customs exemptions as citizens of the Ottoman Empire and were exempt from conscription.

In 1913, Austria-Hungary declared the annexation of the island and renamed it Újorsova (or Orşova) in the Krassó-Szörény County. Although initially the Ottoman government did not recognize the annexation, Turkey officially relinquished Ada-Kaleh to Romania under Articles 25 and 26 of the Treaty of Lausanne, on July 24, 1923, after Romania declared its sovereignty. When the Communists took power following World War II, Ada-Kaleh was subjected to the same repressive measures as the rest of the country, including the seizing of the islanders' assets. The most devastating blow came in the summer of 1952, when around 60 people were deported to the Bărăgan plain and were placed in penal colonies. The deportations were part of a campaign to rid the Yugoslav border region of ethnic minorities (Christie-Miller 2016). The deportations were overturned four years later, and the islanders returned. Concerned that the islanders would migrate to the less oppressive Yugoslav side of the river, the Romanian authorities limited the access to the island. Tourists were not permitted to stay overnight while the island residents were prohibited from crossing to or from the mainland after 8 PM (Jacobs 2015).

In the mid-20th century, the Communist ruling party began a campaign to modernize the country. As part of this campaign, the government decided to build a hydroelectric dam on the Danube. The inhabitants were offered the

possibility to relocate to Simian, a nearby island, but most of them decided to leave either for the Dobruja region or for Turkey. Some structures, such as parts of the mosque, the bazaar, and the graveyard, were moved to Simian. By 1968, the island was abandoned, and the remaining buildings were destroyed by dynamite to avoid obstructing shipping lanes. Ada-Kaleh was completely swallowed by the waters of the Danube River in 1970. The words of a former inhabitant reflect best the complete uprootedness islanders felt even long afterwards: "Everyone in this world has a homeland. Even if they live far away, they can still visit their place when they want. We don't have that chance." (Tutui 2010: 175).

À la recherche du temps perdu

According to census records from 1930, the population of Ada-Kaleh consisted solely of Turks, totalling 455 individuals. Due to the island's small size, this population count remained relatively stable over time. According to *Anuarul Statistic al Județului Mehedinți*, in the 1966 census, the population had increased slightly to 499, with 239 men and 260 women residing in 166 households.

Life was simple and peaceful on the island and time seemed to elapse at a much slower speed than elsewhere. A visitor on the island recounts his experience:

After getting off the boat that brought you from Orsova to the middle of the island, in this heaven of permanent tranquillity, in the kingdom of leaves, herbs, and snakes, you walked on a crooked, cobbled path shaded by chestnut trees, under two large gates carved into the walls of the fortifications, gates on which you can still see the enormous hinges that used to close the city every night. Beautiful, always damp grass grows wild everywhere. High fences hide small houses and, behind them, hidden from the indiscreet eyes of the travellers, Turkish women and girls. (Mosneagu 2017, my translation)

The streets were narrow and crooked, with clean and simple houses, almost completely devoid of furniture except for sofas and couches. The floors were covered with Oriental carpets. Each house had two apartments: a *selamlâc* where men would sit, and a *haremlâc*, where women and girls would sit. The islanders lived mainly on agriculture. The fertile soil allowed them to grow a variety of crops, including tobacco, grapes, figs and olives. Fishing was also important as the Danube provided a bountiful supply of fish. Fishermen would set out early in the morning in their small boats and would return later in the day with their catch. Women would prepare the fish for the evening meal, which was often shared with family and friends. Other traditional dishes included *pilaf*, *imambaialdi ani* (a type of lamb roast), *baklava*, *katayif*, *halva*, and

Turkish delight. The locals also survived on tourism and, sometimes, smuggling.

The island had all the necessary facilities: a town hall, a small hospital, a cinema, a cultural centre, a library, a school, a nursery, a post office, two shops, a bread factory, a Turkish delight factory and a cigarette factory formerly owned by Ali Khadri, the last governor of the island. His factory, “Musulmana”, processed tobacco manually into 17 varieties of cigarettes which were also exported. Brands such as *RMS*, *Regale*, *National*, *Pasha*, *Harem*, *Smyrna*, and *Sultan* became famous and, soon, Ali Khadri’s “Musulmana” became the supplier of fine cigarettes to the Royal House of Romania (Surcel 2018). In its glory days, the company employed 103 islanders. However, following the nationalization that took place in 1948, the number of employees plummeted to 69. In 1967, the impending submersion of the island led to the closure of the factory.

The island – “a slice of the Muslim Orient marooned deep in Christian Europe” (Jacobs 2015) – was primarily inhabited by Turks and their way of life was influenced by the Islamic culture. The call to prayer could be heard echoing across the island five times a day. The mosque was the centre of the community. It was built on a 4-metre-high casemate – a former monastery constructed in the Middle Ages by the Franciscan monks. In 1789, Sultan Mahmud transformed it into a mosque, adding a minaret. An enormous Persian red carpet – the colour of royalty – measuring 14 meters by 8 meters and weighing almost half a ton was gifted to the island by Sultan Abdul Hamid II and completely covered the floors of the prayer hall. The carpet can now be found in Carol I Mosque in Constanta.

Ada-Kaleh in literature

Ada Kaleh’s beauty and exoticism have been depicted in a multitude of literary works by Romanian and international authors.

The Man with the Golden Touch (1872) is a much-acclaimed novel by the Hungarian writer Jókai Mór. Part of the action takes place on Ada-Kaleh, which is called “no man’s island” because, through a document issued by two major powers – the Ottomans and the Austro-Hungarians – it was allowed to exist outside any borders. The novel is built on an antithesis: on the one hand, there is the profit-oriented capitalist society which promotes competition but corrupts and destroys people’s happiness; on the other hand, the pure society on the “no man’s island” has eliminated money (influenced by the socialist utopia) and promotes honesty and cooperation among people. Whereasthe first type of society includes most of the characters in their struggle to increase their wealth, the utopian society on “no man’s island” is initially formed by

two people only. From this point of view, the novel is a true Robinsonade, featuring most of the elements of this genre: solitary protagonists, a deserted island and themes of self-sufficiency and resilience. The novel was so influential that, as early as 1919, it was turned into a silent movie under the direction of Alexander Korda, a pioneer of Austro-Hungarian cinema.

Nopti la Ada Kaleh (Nights at Ada Kaleh) is a novel by Romulus Dianu written in 1931. Against the backdrop of an exotic natural setting, where the inhabitants struggle to make a living by exploiting natural resources and trying to evade increasingly restrictive laws, the figures of some maladjusted personalities are projected – people with ideals who have come from elsewhere and are not integrated into the self-sufficient life of the community. People from all walks of life populate the novel: the old-fashioned Turkish mayor Huzun, his younger partner Yllen, an angelic woman with a troubled past, the tax agent Dobrescu sent by the king himself to tax the tobacco trade, a young engineer, and a smuggler are all present. The desires of the people, exacerbated by the exotic nature of the place, become burning passions, and the apparent isolation of the island turns dark thoughts into unimaginable actions that end dramatically and even tragically.

The beauty of Ada-Kaleh inspired poetry, too. Without naming it but giving the reader numerous clues as to its identity, George Topârceanu describes the island at dusk:

Down there, above the forest, soon,/ Where shrubberies are dark and wet,/ Rises the handsome crescent moon/ And sparkles from a minaret.// And, as if painted with this goal,/ The island casts its shadow long,/ Cut from the world, playing the role/ Of a mediaeval castle, strong.// Looks like a ship charmed near the shore/ Which anchored at the mountains' feet,/ A wonder dreamed and waited for/ By the old Danube's water sheet! [...]// A floating garden, purest one,/ With trees and birds that sing in tune,/ With flowers laughing at the sun,/ But trembling scared under the moon. [1]

Ileana Roman, a contemporary writer from Drobeta Turnu-Severin, dedicated a poem to the island in her book *The Life and Work of the Ada-Kaleh Island* (2001):

Underwater lies the island of amber with its paradise:/ Tokai wines, Smyrna tobacco/fig trees and walnuts, festivities, acrobats/anointed with olive oil, sultry women/and muezzins in the minaret for the evening prayer/myths, reductions, a style/Ada-Kaleh /- a land of birds without propellers/ Eugene of Savoy, Bayezid the Thunderbolt/ Maria Theresa/in the eggs of this bird. The flowers and boats/are ivory tears over which we simulate relics. /Nothing remains of Ada-Kaleh/but an "eh" on the banks of the river with butterflies around the world. (*Turbulent Shadows*, quoted in Ungureanu 2020: 2, my translation).

Another work of literature, Claudio Magris's *Danubio* (1986) – an Italian travelogue – reflects, among other things, Ada-Kaleh's unique culture. A type of river book in the vein of Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the novel presents the author's journey down the Danube River which he sees as a symbol of Europe's multilingual identity. By the time the book was written, the island had long been gone, its inhabitants scattered to the four winds: "myths, lost voices, history and hearsay have all been put to rout, leaving nothing but this valley of the shadow" (Magris 1989: 242). Magris nostalgically reflects on the loss of the island: "Ada Kaleh has vanished, submerged by the river, and dwells in the slow, enchanted times of underwater things like the mythical Vineta in the Baltic" (Magris 1989: 333).

George Arion, a contemporary Romanian writer, sets one of his novels on Ada-Kaleh. *Umbrele din Ada Kaleh (The Shadows of Ada Kaleh)* (2019) tells the story of the love between the beautiful Aiseh and the fisherman Dragomir in an atmosphere which is both grim and magical. Against this background, a criminal investigation unfolds regarding the fate of some young prisoners thrown into a pit on the island.

Mircea Cărtărescu opens his short story *Ada-Kaleh, Ada-Kaleh...* with the memory of a painting of the island decorating the wall of his room: "I still remember the smell of the Ada-Kaleh painting when I jumped out of my bed. The green island with its pale-yellow minaret [...] and the Turkish woman painted in the foreground levitating on the deep green Nile depths of the Danube" (Cărtărescu 2012: 10-11, my translation). His childhood friends had never heard of Ada-Kaleh and they believed that the island was a product of his vivid imagination. One day, he heard on the radio that a large hydroelectric plant would be constructed by the Socialist Republic of Romania together with the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Yet, not a word from the authorities about the fate of the island which had haunted his imagination long before he got to know about it: "It had to first disappear to turn, from a childish myth, into a tangible place that was once inhabited by people" (Cărtărescu 2012: 19, my translation). Towards the end of his story, he evokes a boat trip with an old Turk on the Danube, right where the island was once, and muses:

We all have an island in the depths of our thoughts, an island that we desperately search for, like the molten diamond of our being. We and our world are deeply submerged in the waters of time and universal memory, like an Ada-Kaleh that will never be real again. (Cărtărescu 2012: 31, my translation)

Conclusion

The search for lost places has enthralled the minds of specialists (be they archaeology enthusiasts, historians, sociologists, etc.) and common people alike. A sunken island is the stuff of imagination and exoticism. Although long vanished, Ada-Kaleh still looms large on the mental map of those few who have ever been connected to it one way or another. The words of a former inhabitant best capture the essence of what Ada-Kaleh once was:

“My entire childhood was spent in the Ada Kaleh community and there was almost nothing outside of it,” he told me. “When you listen to stories about a place that no longer exists, it fuels your imagination. You’re able to see it in your mind’s eye and you can place all the stories into a kind of theatre set.” When first I asked him how he imagined the island, without missing a beat he answered: “Paradise” (Christie-Mille 2016).

Note

[1] Translation available from <https://poetii-nostri.ro/george-toparceanu-pastel-poem-pastel-translation-1024/>

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