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*Personifications of Rivers
as an Element of Roman Political
Propaganda*

THE DUALISM OF ROMAN ART MANIFESTED ITSELF not only through the merger of a Hellenic component with an Italic one (also denoted as Romanitas), but likewise in the creation of representations in which even in a single object allegorical and symbolical scenes appear with those strictly realistic. A custom deriving from the Greek cultural circle of employing personifications for illustration of certain unimaginable ideas, came to be considerably extended by the Romans and adapted to the ends of both official state and private art. This is why such figures as e.g. Pax, Iustitia, Honor, Virtus, Pietas, Concordia or Fortuna so often appear. They accompany the leaders, emperors and their wives, living and deceased persons and moreover, a deified embodiment of Roman statehood that was Dea Roma¹. Henceforth comes extraordinary popularity of the personifications of the provinces which were meant to emphasize military triumphs of the Romans, economic or cultural achievements and after all exemplify the immenseness of the Imperium Romanum, which united many nations within her limits². This latter objective was also served by the personifications of rivers, much more rarely appearing, which trace back their origin in antique literature to the times of Homer and Hesiod³ and in Greek art to the Classical Age⁴.

The personifications of Greek rivers are primarily associated with illustration of mythological events in which they serve as an element indicating the scene of the action, or are linked with political geography, thus symbolizing the land or *polis* situated on a given river⁵. In Rome the personifications of rivers perform likewise two functions which may be defined as mythological-decorative and realistic-propagandist.

The first group, directly Greek-influenced, includes the personifications of rivers represented in paintings and mosaics adorning the interiors of houses, villas and temples, those depicted on sarcophagi, terracotta reliefs and also sculptures in the round of modest size. For the sake

¹ It is impossible here to quote all the works dealing with particular personifications, yet the study should be mentioned of B. Lichočka, *Iustitia sur les monnaies imperiales romaines*, Warszawa 1974. Considering the role of Rome's personifications, the basic works may be cited which are topical: G. Calza, *La figurazione di Roma nell'arte antica*, *Dédalo* 7 (1926), p. 666 ff; C. C. Vermeule, *The Goddess Roma in the Art of the Roman Empire*, Cambridge (Mass.) 1960; A. Bisi, *Personificazioni di Roma Antica*, EAA VI, 1965, s.v. Roma, pp. 899–901; G. Fayer, *Il culto della Dea Roma*, Roma 1977.

² J. A. Ostrowski, *Personifikacje prowincji w sztuce rzymskiej* (Personifications of the Provinces in Roman Art), Kraków 1985; id., *Les personifications des provinces dans l'art romain* (sous presse).

³ Among other things, the rivers appears in Homer which arrive onto Olympus summoned by Zeus (*Il.* 20,7 ff). Scamander also appears regarded either as a deity having its priest (*Il.* 21,136 ff) or as a personification (*Il.* 5,77 ff), personified Alpheus is represented as well (*Il.* 11,726; *Od.* 15,187). Hesiod (*theog.* 337 ff), introducing, among others, the personification of Achelous, regards the rivers as sons of Oceanus and Tethys.

⁴ Cf. e.g. representation of Alpheus and Cladeos in the eastern pediment of the Temple of Zeus in Olympia (Paus. V,10,7; A. Furtwängler *Jdl* 6 (1891), p. 87; G. Treu, *OlympErg*, III (1897), p. 67 ff; B. Ashmole, N. Yalouris, *Olympia. The Sculpture of the Temple of Zeus*, London 1967; M. Bernhard, *Sztuka grecka V w. p.n.e.* (1^e éd.), Warszawa 1970 [further cited as: Bernhard, V w.], pp. 210–216. However, K. Schefold sees in these figures the servants watching races. Another typical representations of rivers in the art of the 5th century B.C. are Ilissos and Kephisos (or reposing hero) in the western fronton of the Parthenon (A. Rumpf, *Die Datierung der Parthenongiebel*, *Jdl* 40 (1925), pp. 29–38; F. Brommer, *Studien zu den Parthenongiebeln*, *AM* 69–70 (1953–1955); Bernhard, V w., p. 333; R. Gais, *Some Problems of River God Iconography*, *AJA* 82 (1978), pp. 355–370).

⁵ This function was performed, among others, by the rivers quoted in note 4 from the pediments of the Parthenon and the Temple of Zeus in Olympia. Probably also the non-extant, yet known from the sources statue of Eurotas made by Eutykles (Plin. *nat.* 34,78) must have played an identical role, like this sculptor's figure of Orontes at the foot of Tyche of Antioch. Cf. T. Dohrn, *Die Tyche von Antiochia*, Berlin 1960.

of exemplification such rivers can be mentioned here as Eridanus where Phaethon was drowned⁶, Eurotas on which banks the romance of Zeus and Leda took place⁷, and Nile placed beside Io arriving in Egypt⁸.

The personifications of rivers of propaganda character appear primarily on coins and architectural reliefs. The genesis of this group is to be sought in Roman triumphal ritual, yet at the same time its Greek inspiration should be borne in mind, the latter having played, however, a considerably lesser role than in the case of representations numbered among the mythological division. During triumphal processions not only were captives led as a living token of the conquering or suppressing of a given nation, but also paintings and sculptures were displayed representing and personifying the lands conquered by the army and the rivers crossed by it. This is testified to, apart from literary sources containing many a time the mentions of *simulacra oppidorum, montium, fluminum* or *gentium*⁹, also by a relief on the eastern façade of the Arch of Titus with a unique representation of the river Jordan carried on a *ferculum*¹⁰.

Representing of such rivers as Danube, Rhine, Euphrates and Tigris, i.e. these situated on the borders of Imperium Romanum, has beyond doubt an association with triumphal art, thus pertaining to the domain of official art. However, the two rivers exist whose personifications comply with both aforesaid functions. They are the Tiber and the Nile.

It may seem that the personification of a river on which the *Urbs* lay should have played an exclusively propaganda role. Meanwhile, however, the figure of Tiber is predominantly shown

⁶ Eridanus (Po) appears first of all on sarcophagi decorated with the scenes of the Phaethon myth, who already in Hesiod (*theog.* 333) was thought to get drowned in this river. Several sarcophagi with this figure are mentioned here: in Galleria degli Uffizi in Florence from c. A.D. 170 (ASR III, 3, no. 342; EAA III, 1960, fig. 775; H. Sichtermann, G. Koch, *Griechische Mythen auf römischen Sarkophagen*, Tübingen 1975, no. 64, [further cited as Sichtermann-Koch]; G. Koch, H. Sichtermann, *Die römische Sarkophage*, *IbArch.*, München 1982, p. 181, n. 8 [further cited as Koch-Sichtermann]), in the cathedral at Nepi from the first half of the 3rd century A.D. (ASR III, 3, no. 342; Sichtermann-Koch, no. 65, Taf. 163,1; Koch-Sichtermann, p. 183, n. 24), in Villa Borghese in Rome from c. A.D. 300 (ASR III, 3, no. 338; Sichtermann-Koch, no. 66, Taf. 159–161; Koch-Sichtermann, p. 182, Taf. 213).

Perhaps Eridanus as the Italy's greatest river is represented on a panel (controversial with regard to interpretation) in the Ara Pacis, showing Italia or Tellus. For the confrontation of views and bibliography cf. E. Simon, in: Helbig⁴, no. 1937.

⁷ Apart from the statue of Eurotas made by Eutychides, cited in note 5, the river's personification and that of the land of Lacedaemon (inscriptions) appears on a mosaic from the *thermae* in Antioch from the early 4th century A.D. (D. Levi, *Antioch Mosaic Pavements*, Princeton 1947, p. 272, pl. 63 d) and on a mosaic from the House of Aion in Nea Paphos from the second quarter of the 4th century A.D. (W. A. Daszewski, *Fouilles Polonaises a Kato Paphos*, *RDAC*, 1984; id., *Dionysos der Erlöser. Griechische Mythen in spätantiken Zypern*, *Trier Beiträge zur Altertumskunde*, Bd. 2, 1985; id., *Researches at Nea Paphos 1965–1984*, in: *Archeology in Cyprus*, Nicosia 1985, p. 286, fig. 2, pl. 30,2). Eurotas also accompanies Leda and Dioscuri on a sarcophagus in Aix-en-Provence dated to the 2nd century A.D. (E. Espérandieu, *Recueil général des bas-reliefs de la Gaule Romaine*, I, Paris 1907, p. 96; ASR II, no. 2, Taf. II, 2; Koch-Sichtermann, p. 156, n. 1). Perhaps a Vatican torso also represents this river (Amelung, I, *Gal.Lapid.*, no. 101, p. 239, Taf. 23; Helbig⁴, IV, p. 438, no. 54 – Torso eines Flussgottes).

⁸ A painting from the Isis Temple at Pompeii, now in Museo Nazionale in Naples, dated to A.D. 40–62 (G.E. Rizzo, *La pittura ellenistico-romana*, Milano 1929, Tav. 79; M. Borda, *La pittura romana*, Milano 1958, fig. on p. 231).

⁹ Among others Plin. *nat.* 5, 36–37, on triumph of Cornelius Balbus; Quint. *inst.* VI, 3, 61, on Caesar's triumph; Tacitus, *ann.*, II, 41, on triumph of Germanicus. Cf. also Florus II, 13, 88 relating that in the Caesar's triumph the images of the Nile, Arsinoe and Pharos were borne.

¹⁰ E. Strong, *Scultura Romana*, I, Firenze 1926, p. 102 ff; K. Lehmann-Hartleben, *L'Arco di Tito*, *BullCom* 62 (1934), pp. 89–122; A. Sadurska, *Archeologia starożytnego Rzymu*, vol. 2, Warszawa 1980, p. 141; M. Pfanner, *Der Titusbogen*, Bd. 2, Mainz 1983; M. Opperman, *Römische Kaiserreliefs*, Leipzig 1985, p. 43, fig. on p. 40.

in the context of the myth about the beginnings of Rome. To such images belong, among others, a painting from the tomb in Esquiline dated to 40–30 B.C.¹¹, further relatively modest group of sarcophagi from 2nd–4th century A.D., illustrating the myth of Mars and Rhea Sylvia¹², and finally altar reliefs¹³ and coins¹⁴. Indeed, Romulus and Remus and their mother and divine father (to say nothing of their ancestors Venus and Aeneas) were associated with ideological programme of Roman emperors, particularly under Augustus who even put the personification of Tiber on the fronton of the temple dedicated to Mars Ultor¹⁵, but the greater part of known representations have rather purely decorative or cult function¹⁶. Among rare representations of strictly propaganda character ranks the personification of Tiber with Dea Roma on a sestertius of Vespasian¹⁷, Tiber shaking the Nile's hand on a coin from Alexandrian mint¹⁸, or controversial personification of a river (Tiber or Danube) throwing down Dacia on a sestertius of Traian¹⁹. Propaganda function is also performed by the image

¹¹ Rome, Museo Nazionale delle Terme, inv. nos. 1453 and 1454. The personifications of the Tiber are placed on the eastern (no. 1453) and northern wall (no. 1454). Borda, op. cit., p. 172 ff; Nash, I, p. 359 ff; Th. Kraus, *Römische Weltreich*, Berlin 1967, fig. 116, Taf. IV; A. Sadurska, *Archeologia starożytnego Rzymu*, vol. 1, Warszawa 1975, pp. 94–95; B. Andreae, in: Helbig⁴, no. 2489 (C and D).

¹² A sarcophagus in the Vatican from the 2nd century A.D. (Amelung, II, p. 92, no. 37 B, Taf. 9; ASR III, 2, p. 228, no. 188; Helbig⁴, no. 237). A sarcophagus in the Vatican from the mid-3rd century A.D. (ASR III, 1, p. 108, no. 88; ASR III, 2, p. 191; Helbig⁴, no. 1005; Koch-Sichtermann, p. 185, n. 6). A sarcophagus in the Palazzo Mattei in Rome dated to the end of 2nd/beginning of the 3rd century A.D. (ASR III, 2, p. 188; Sichtermann-Koch, p. 66–67, no. 71; Koch-Sichtermann, p. 184, no. 152). A sarcophagus in the Palazzo Mattei in Rome from the end of the 2nd century A.D. (ASR III, 2, 190; Koch-Sichtermann, p. 184, n. 1).

¹³ Altar of Mars from A.D. 124 in Museo Nazionale delle Terme in Rome (J.M.C. Toynbee, *Hadrianic School*, Cambridge 1934, p. 231, pl. 57; Helbig⁴, no. 2306). Ara Casali in Vatican. Time of Septimus Severus (Amelung, II, p. 236 ff, no. 87 a; Toynbee, op. cit., p. 235, pl. 48 — dates it to the period of Hadrian; Helbig⁴, no. 268).

¹⁴ Tesserae with a legend S.C. dated to the period between the reign of Domitian and Antoninus Pius (RIC II, p. 214–219; Toynbee, op. cit., pp. 114–115, pl. 16,7).

¹⁵ A relief from Ara Pietatis Augustae in the Villa Medici in Rome, showing the temple of Mars Ultor. In the left corner of the pediment reposes a half-naked Tiber, in that right Palatinus. (R. Bloch, *L'Ara Pietatis Augustae*, *MEFR* 56 (1939), pp. 81–120; id., in: Cagianode Azevedo, *Le Antichità della Villa Medici*, Roma 1951, pp. 9–23; *EAA* I, 1957, p. 528 ff; Nash, I, p. 74 ff; N. Hannestad, *Roman Art and Imperial Policy*, Aarhus 1986, p. 86, fig. 59 and 54 — plan of Forum Augustum, after P. Zanker, *Forum Augustum. Das Bildprogramm*, Tübingen 1968, Taf. A.).

¹⁶ Among such representations ranks, among others, a colossal statue of Tiber in the Louvre (BrBr, Taf. 197; J. Charbonneaux, *La sculpture Grecque et Romaine du Louvre*, Paris 1963, p. 592–594; Toynbee, op. cit., p. 114, pl. 27,3) erected under the Flavians (Domitian) in the temple of Isis on Campus Martius together with the statue of the Nile, presently in the Vatican, Braccio Nuovo (BrBr, Taf. 196; Amelung, I, p. 124–134, no. 109; Helbig⁴, no. 440; *EAA* V, 1963, fig. 628). Both these statues have been found near the church of Sta Maria Sopra Minerva. With cult images go as well the personifications associated with cult of Aesculapius on Insula Tiberina, as e.g. a relief in Palazzo Rondanini (Strong, op. cit., fig. 148; Toynbee, op. cit., p. 114, pl. 27,2) dated to the period of the Antonines, or a bronze medallion of Antoninus Pius from the years A.D. 140–144 with a legend AESCVLAPIS (Toynbee, op. cit., pp. 113–114, pl. 16,5).

¹⁷ RIC II, p. 69, no. 442, pl. II, 30; BMCEmp II, pl. 34,5; Toynbee, op. cit., p. 115, pl. 16,8.

¹⁸ Bronze. Antoninus Pius, emission of the year A.D. 155 with a legend TIBEPIC and OMONOIA (BMCAlexandria, p. 138, no. 1167, pl. 21; Toynbee, op. cit., p. 114, pl. 16,6).

¹⁹ Emission from the years A.D. 106–111. A legend SPQR OPTIMO PRINCIPI S.C. (RIC II, p. 283, nos. 556–559, pl. X,180; Toynbee, op. cit., p. 13, 14; Ostrowski, op. cit., p. 134, DACIA 51; C.M. Petolescu, s.v. DACIA, LIMC III, 1, 1986, pp. 310–312, no. 8). In this scene Cohen and Mattingly (RIC) saw Tiber, whereas Toynbee and Ostrowski regard it to be Danube.

of Tiber on a relief depicting the battle at Pons Mulvius in the Arch of Constantine in Rome, since it indicates that Constantine's rival suffered death in the waters of the river (which anyway are represented on the relief)²⁰.

The personifications of the Nile, adopted from Hellenistic art, have a similarly dualistic character, this river having been one of the most frequently depicted in Roman art and also fascinating numerous ancient writers from Herodotus onwards. Its images display mainly religious character, having been associated with cult of Isis and Sarapis. In those gods' temples the statues were placed or paintings made which represented this river, having often been accompanied by the figure of Tiber²¹. The personifications of the Nile, however, brought out the fertility of land lying on it, consequently pointing at their economic role, through which they acquired propaganda character. On the other hand, the personifications of the Nile appearing now and again on the mosaics and paintings of Nilotic subject area form a topographical rather than propaganda element²².

The personifications of rivers (and also those of provinces) started to acquire strictly propaganda character not before the times of the Flavians and became more and more common under the subsequent dynasties. Apart from the aforementioned personification of the Jordan in the Arch of Titus, or that of Tiber on a sestertius of Vespasian, a unique personification of the Rhine came into being in that epoch on a sestertius emitted by Domitian on the occasion of war with the Chatti²³.

A period of wars waged by Trajan brought new personifications of rivers, after all that of Danube. The best known embodiment of this river is the relief in one of the initial scenes (no. IV) of Trajan's Column, serving at the same time as an element denoting the scene. Moreover, this river occurs on a denarius emitted by the emperor (Fig. 1)²⁴, and on the aforesaid sestertius bearing the scene of the overthrowing of Dacia by Danube or Tiber. Extremely controversial is the identification of river personification next to the kneeling Dacia (?) on the attic of the Arch of Trajan in Beneventum, yet its propaganda character is indisputable considering its appearance beside the emperor²⁵.

²⁰ H.P. L'Orange, *A. v. Gerkan, Der spätantike Bildschmuck des Konstantinsbogen*, Berlin 1939, pp. 65–71, Taf. 4 b, 10, 11, 19 c, 23 d.

²¹ Cf. the above mentioned in note 18 Alexandrian coin, the statues of Nile and Tiber in the temple of Isis mentioned in note 16. For the sake of exemplification, the statues may be added here of Nile and Tiber from Hadrian's Villa in Tivoli (B. Andreae, *AA* 1957, p. 329; Helbig⁴, no. 3197).

²² E.g. a terracotta Campana relief in Museo Nazionale delle Terme in Rome from the first half of the 1st century A.D. (H.v. Rhoden, H. Winnefeld, *Architektonische römische Tonreliefs der Kaiserzeit. Die Antiken Terrakotten*, IV, 1, Berlin 1911; Helbig⁴, no. 2164). I make here no mention of Nilotic landscapes in which the figure of Nile does not appear, as e.g. in the case of mosaic Barberini from Praeneste.

²³ Emission from the years A.D. 85–87. On the coin a standing emperor is represented, holding a spear and placing his right foot on the lying Rhine (RIC II, p. 187, no. 286; Toynbee, *op.cit.*, pl. 14,12).

²⁴ A legend COS V PP SPQR OPTIMO PRINCIPI DANUVIUS (RIC II, p. 251, no. 100, pl.VIII, 142; L. Breglia, R. Bianchi-Bandinelli, *Roman Imperial Coins*, London 1968, no. 46, [further cited as Breglia]).

²⁵ A figure kneeling before Trajan was suggested to be Dacia (E. Petersen, K. Fittschen, A. Sadurska, *op. cit.*, vol. 2, p. 170), also Mesopotamia (A. v. Domaszewski, J.M.C. Toynbee, F.J. Hassel) and Armenia (G. Hamberg). A conception has been also forwarded that it makes the personification of Orient situated between Dacia and Mesopotamia (W. Gauer). According to the interpretation accepted, the rivers on the sides of the kneeling province were regarded as Danube, Euphrates and Tigris, or the Balkan rivers. Recently E. Simon, *Die Götter am Trajansbogen zu Benevent, Trierer Winckelmannsprogramm* 1/2, 1979/1980, Mainz 1981, p. 8 and n. 96–102, sees in this figure the personification of Italia, on whose one side reposes a horned Triton – embodiment of sea waters, while on the other an adolescent making the inland waters' personification. A bridge visible in the background is not one over the Danube, but makes an allusion to Trajan's activity as him being a builder of roads, bridges and aqueducts. Cf. Ostrowski, *op. cit.*, mp. 129, ARMENIA ? 10, p. 137, DACIA ? 37, p. 151, ITALIA ? 15, p. 155, MESOPOTAMIA ? 5.



1. Danube, denarius of Trajan (after: Breglia, op. cit., no. 46)



2. Euphrates and Tigris, sestertius of Trajan (after: Breglia, op. cit., no. 51)



3. Ctesiphon. Seleuceia and Tigris, relief from the Parthian Monument of Lucius Verus, Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum. *Ver: Funde aus Ephesos und Samothrake, Wien 1978, fig. 65)*

The Roman expansion in the East under Trajan resulted in a large number of personifications of the Euphrates and Tigris. Both these rivers occur on a sestertius with a legend ARMENIA ET MESOPOTAMIA IN POTESTATEM P.R. REDACTAE S.C. (Fig. 2)²⁶, on a bronze medallion of Lucius Verus representing Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus crowned by Victoria with the personifications of both these rivers lying at their feet²⁷, on the "Parthian Monument" of Lucius Verus erected in Ephesus (Fig. 3)²⁸, or on reliefs decorating the Arch of Septimus Severus in Forum Romanum²⁹, as well as on the north-east pillar of the Arch of Galerius in Salonica³⁰. All the above personifications are associated with military actions, yet many mosaics and statues exist which represent both these rivers, having rather a decorative character, as can be inferred on the basis of the context in which these images appear³¹. It is proper to mention also the adoption by Christian art of the personifications or entirely symbolical representations of both rivers as two of four encircling the biblical Eden³².

Naturally, it is by no means possible in such a short paper to characterize more precisely all the problems connected with this theme, or to mention other, less frequently portrayed rivers. The present paper only touches upon this relatively hardly investigated problem, which as yet (putting aside encyclopaedic references) lacks a separate monograph surveying river personifications in their various aspects, of which the most interesting and important is their propaganda function.

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²⁶ RIC II, p. 289, no. 642, pl. XI, 191; Toynbee, op. cit., p. 9, 12–14; EAA I, 1957, fig. 851; EAA V, 1963, fig. 231; Breglia, no. 51; Ostrowski, op. cit., p. 129 ARMENIA ? 9, p. 155 MESOPOTAMIA ? 4.

²⁷ Toynbee, op. cit., pl. 9, 16.

²⁸ From among numerous personifications of oriental cities and rivers on this monument (yet difficult to be identified due to their state of preservation) a panel stands out with the personification of Tigris and situated on its both banks Ctesiphon and Seleuceia. Cf. F. Eichler, Zum Partherdenkmal von Ephesos, *ÖJh* 49 (1971), Beiheft, p. 121 ff, fig. 19; Funde aus Ephesos und Samothrake. Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien, Katalog der Antikensammlung, II, Wien 1978, pp 85–86, Cat. no. 73, fig. 65.

²⁹ Eastern façade, reliefs in the arcades of side passageways. Cf. R. Brilliant, The Arch of Septimus Severus in Roman Forum, *MAAR* 29 (1967); A. Sadurska, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 284; N. Hannestad, op. cit., pp. 262–267.

³⁰ K. F. Kinch, L'arch de triomphe de Salonique, Paris 1890, p. 24 ff; H.P. Laubscher, Der Reliefsschmuck des Galeriusbogens in Thessaloniki, Berlin 1975; M.S. Pond Rothmann, The Thematic Organization of the Panel Reliefs of the Arch of Galerius, *AJA* 81 (1977), pp. 427–454.

³¹ Here belong, among others, the mosaics from Seleuceia at Antioch (Levi, op. cit., pp. 57–58, pl. IX b), from Mas 'Udije near Aleppo (Levi, op. cit., p. 394, fig. 154 and 203), or those from Qasr el-Lebia in Cyrenaica, coming from a Christian basilica from A.D. 539 (EAA, s.v. Euftrate, and s.v. Tigris, Suppl. 1973, pp. 324–325 and 847).

³² Such a representation appears on the late antique mosaics from Die and Reims (C. Lafaye, A. Blanchet, Inventaire des mosaïques de la Gaule, Paris 1909, nos. 131 and 1090). Moreover in the catacombs at Vigna Massimo in Rome there is a wall painting with the representation of fishing Tobias and a personification of Tigris (Tb. 6,1–9). Cf. G. Wilpert, Die Malerei der Katakomben Roms, Freiburg 1903, pl. 212.