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Halmyris: Geoarchaeology of a fluvial harbour on the Danube Delta (Dobrogea, Romania)

Matthieu Giaime,1 Gwenaël Magne,2 Alexandra Bivolaru,3 Emmanuel Gandouin,4 Nick Marriner5 and Christophe Morhange3

Abstract
In Northern Dobrogea, north of the Dunavăţ promontory, the Roman fortress of Halmyris was founded in the late 1st century AD on a Getic settlement dating to the middle of the 1st millennium BC, probably associated with a Greek emporium of the Classical and Hellenistic periods. At the time of the foundation of Halmyris, the Danube delta had already prograded several kilometres to the east leading to the progressive retreat of the sea and the formation of a deltaic plain characterised by numerous lakes and river channels. Here, we present the results of a multiproxy study combining sedimentology and palaeoecology to (1) understand the evolution of fluvial landscapes around Halmyris since ca. 8000 years BP and (2) identify the fluvial palaeoenvironments close to the city in Getic/Greek and Roman times, in order to locate and characterise the waterfront and the harbour. Our overriding objective was to improve understanding of human–environment interactions in river delta settings. We demonstrate that Halmyris, protected by the Danubian floods due to its location on a palaeo-cliff top, had direct access to the river. A secondary channel of the Saint George, flowing north of the site, has been elucidated between the 7th century BC and the 7th century AD and could have been used as a natural harbour.

Keywords
Black Sea, Danube delta, fluvial harbour, geoarchaeology, geomorphology, Halmyris

Introduction
In recent decades, deltaic environments have attracted interdisciplinary research interest, looking to understand human–environment interactions in these important waterfront areas (see Anthony et al., 2014). These lowlands at the land–sea interface were particularly attractive, since the stabilisation of sea-level around 6000 yr BP, because they provided fertile lands for agriculture and a permanent freshwater supply, as well as access to the hinterland by fluvial routes. A multi-proxy approach allows to clearly identify the environmental pressures that affected deltaic harbour cities and to highlight the adaptation of populations, including, for instance, Alexandria (Nile delta: Flaux et al., 2017; Goiran et al., 2005), Miletos (Büyükkenderes delta: Brückner et al., 2006, 2014), Ephesos (Küçük Menderes delta: Stock et al., 2013, 2016), Anos (Maritsa delta: Seeliger et al., 2018), Pisa (Arno and Serchio delta: Allinne et al., 2016; Benvenuti et al., 2006; Kaniewski et al., 2018), the Greek colonies of the Taman Peninsula (Kuban delta: Giaime et al., 2016; Kelterbaum et al., 2011); Aigues-Mortes (Rhone delta: Rey et al., 2016), Ostia (Tiber delta: Goiran et al., 2014; Salomon et al., 2017) or Utrecht (Rhine delta: Van Dinter et al., 2017).

The Danube delta is one of the largest fluvial and wave-dominated delta’s in the world and constitutes one of Europe’s major wetland zones. It has been listed on the UNESCO World Heritage List since 1991. Occupied since the Neolithic (Carozza et al., 2012, 2013; Micu et al., 2009), the coast of the Danube delta has a long and rich history of human occupation. It was, at the end of the Archaic Period, coveted by the Black Sea’s first Mediterranean colonists. The area offered favourable environmental conditions for thriving socio-economic activities (Avram et al., 2004). In recent years, geoarchaeological studies looking to understand environmental changes at several ancient sites located on the southern margin of the Danube delta have been undertaken (e.g. Orgame, (Bony et al., 2013, 2015; Histria, (Bivolaru et al., in press; Vespremeanu-Stroe et al., 2013; Enisala and Babadag, (Preoteasa et al., in press; see Figure 1a for location). These different studies have highlighted the interplay between environmental and anthropogenic changes, furnishing new data on the evolution of the ancient sites. In contrast, and despite the

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geoarchaeological importance of the Lower Danube, its ancient and medieval fluvial harbours are poorly known.

River delta sedimentary archives are particularly interesting because they can help to probe the interplay between river course evolution (fluvial geomorphology) and archaeological development. In this article, we present a case study to highlight these human–fluvial landscape interactions during Antiquity. We focus on the archaeological site of Halmyris, located ca. 38 km from the present mouth of the Saint George arm of the Danube, on the northern side of the Dunavăţ promontory (Figure 1a). Several authors have suggested the presence of a harbour connected to the Danube River directly north of the fortress in Roman times (Bounegru and Zahariade, 1996; Suceveanu et al., 2003; Zahariade, 1991). By coring on the delta plain, 100 m from the main northern gate of the fortress, we looked to better understand the evolution of the environment during the last 8000 years. Our investigations are based on multiproxy analyses of fluvial sedimentary archives (sedimentology, molluscs, ostracods and chironomids). The combination of such proxies is particularly useful in palaeohydrology (Petts et al., 1989). Ostracods and chironomids have proven to be helpful proxies in the study of palaeoenvironments in hypohaline river-delta settings (e.g. to reconstruct the past connectivity between alluvial waterbodies and the main channel; to estimate shifts in salinity; Gandourin et al., 2005, 2006). Our aim was to study the stratigraphic sequence in order: (1) to understand the long-term evolution of the sedimentary environments and (2) to elucidate the presence of a harbour sedimentary sequence corresponding to the occupation of the site by the Getic and Greeks (6th to 1st centuries BC) and the Romans (1st to 7th centuries AD).

**Geomorphological context**

The Danube river is the most important water and sediment supplier of the Black Sea, with a water discharge of 190 km³/year and a sediment discharge of 25–35 million tonnes per year (4–6 million comprising sands) (Panin et al., 2016; Panin and Jipa, 2002). The delta constitutes a large coastal accumulation of sediments that has evolved continuously during the Holocene, under the combined effects of natural and human-induced pressures. The river started to build its delta in the Danube Bay around 8000–7500 cal. yr BP (6000–5500 cal. yr BC; Vespermeanu-Stroe et al., 2017). The deltaic sediments fill the pre-Dobrogea depression that lies mainly on the Scythian platform (Burchfiel et al., 1974). This important accumulation of sediments (also supplied by important loess formations; Fitzsimons and Hambach, 2014; Marković et al., 2015) has led to subsidence. Estimates for subsidence rates vary between 0.4 and 0.6 mm yr⁻¹ (Vespermeanu-Stroe et al., 2017) and 1.3–2 mm yr⁻¹ (Giosan et al., 1997).

According to Antipa (1914), Panin and Jipa (2002), Stefanescu (1982), and Vespermeanu-Stroe et al. (2017), the delta can be divided into two distinct geomorphological units: (1) the western fluvial delta and (2) the eastern and southern marine delta. In their recent study, Vespermeanu-Stroe et al. (2017) confirm that the limit between the two units is formed by a coastal spit that prograded southwards in the northern part of the delta after ca. 6700–6100 cal. yr BP (4700–4100 cal. yr BC; Figure 1a and b). The formation of the fluvial delta can be divided into two main phases. Initially, north of the Dunavăţ promontory, the old Danube delta (mainly formed by the Saint George arm) started to build its first lobes around 8000–7500 cal. yr BP (6000–5500 cal. yr BC). Reconstruction of the palaeo-delta front position shows that the area, north of ancient Halmyris, was washed by the sea until almost 7500 cal. yr BP (5500 cal. yr BC; Vespermeanu-Stroe et al., 2017; Figure 1b). The important sedimentary input between 7500 and 6500 cal. yr BP (5000–4500 cal. yr BC) gradually led to the progradation of the delta front (1.5–2 m yr⁻¹; Vespermeanu-Stroe et al., 2017). Formed from 6700 to 5800 cal. yr BP (4700–3800 cal. yr BC), the spit did not influence the early stages of
delta formation. In the mid-Holocene, the Danube delta was mainly formed by the Saint George arm, the oldest arm of the Danube and which has been continuously active for more than 8000 years. The second major phase in the evolution of the fluvial delta started around 5500 cal. yr BP (3500 cal. yr BC) and was characterised by fluvial and peat aggradation in the shallow lakes spanning a large part of the amphibic delta plain. This transformation took place in a context of low relative sea-level rise (ca. 1 m between 5500 and 3500 cal. yr BP (3500–1500 cal. yr BC); Vespermeanu-Stroe et al., 2013) and low subsidence (0.4–0.6 mm yr⁻¹; Vespermeanu-Stroe et al., 2017).

The formation of the ‘marine delta’ started eastward and southward of the initial spit/barrier and is composed of five main open coast lobes that have contributed to the present coastal geography of the delta (Giosan et al., 2006; Panin, 2003; Stefanescu, 1982; Vespermeanu-Stroe et al., 2017). The first phase of this ‘marine delta’ was initiated by the first open coast lobe formation (Old Saint George; Figure 1a) between 6500 and 5500 cal. yr BP (4500–3500 cal. yr BC), characterised by increasing wave action on the coast (Vespermeanu-Stroe et al., 2017). The formation of the different deltaic lobes had no direct influence on the site of Halmyris because of its location on the old Danube delta plain (‘fluvial delta’). In fact, the delta front has been situated downstream of Halmyris for around 6000 years. Nonetheless, the harbour environments of other ancient settlements, including those located in the southern part of the delta (Razelm-Sinoe lagoon), were directly impacted by the progradation of the various branches of the river and their erosion/reworking induced by longshore drift (Bony et al., 2015; Preoteasa et al., in press; Vespermeanu-Stroe et al., 2013).

Historical and archaeological contexts of Halmyris

The ancient history of Halmyris is divided into three main occupation phases (Sucveanu et al., 2003; Zahariade et al., 1987; Zahariade and Phelps, 2002).

1. Between the 6th and the 1st centuries BC, the site was occupied by a Getic settlement. During this period, archaeologists have highlighted the presence of a possible Greek emporium associated with this settlement. The emporium was integrated into the chora of Histria, or, more likely into that of Orgame (Sucveanu et al., 2003; Zahariade, 1991; Zahariade and Phelps, 2002). The authors base their hypothesis on the toponymy (Halmyris is possibly a Greek name, related to the ancient homonymic gulf, which could mean salt water) and on the Greek pottery discovered (especially amphorae from Chios, Chersonessos and Thassos). Even though the hypothesis of a Greek foundation, where the Getic mixed with Greek elements is plausible, there is insufficient archaeological data to support this hypothesis.

2. Halmyris played an important strategic role during the Early Roman period (1st to 3rd centuries AD). Initially, an earth-fortification (last quarter of the 1st century AD), Halmyris was rebuilt in stone during the 2nd century AD as a fort by the military groups of the Legio I Italica and the Legio XI Claudia pia fidelis (Zahariade, 1986). Halmyris castrum had the most important role on the last segment of the Danubian limes, controlling the territory between Aegyssus (Tulcea) and the mouth of Saint George or Dunavăţ arm (Sucveanu et al., 2003). Discovery of 2nd–3rd century AD inscriptions on an altar dedicated to Hercules mention the existence of a settlement « vicus classicorum » (classicorum from Classis Flavia Moesia, the fleet organised by Emperor Vespasian). The dating of the epigraphic monuments (136 AD, 163 AD, 171 AD and 200 AD) suggests that during this period, a village founded by mariners from Classis Flavia Moesia was located near the fortress (Zahariade, 2012). This type of settlement is also known epigraphically from other provinces of the Roman Empire: vicus navaliorum (at Mainz, related to classis Germanica) and vicus portensium (at Nantes, related to civitas Namnetum) (Zahariade and Alexandrescu, 2011).

3. The Late Roman period of Halmyris spans an interval between the last quarter of the 3rd century AD and the 3rd or 4th decade of the 7th century AD (Sucveanu et al., 2003). At that time, the original rectangular shape of the fort was abandoned in favour of a triangular morphology (Zahariade and Phelps, 2002). The fort was composed of thick walls adjoined by numerous towers and three gates (Supplementary Material 1, available online; Mărgineanu-Cărtoiu and Apostol, 2015). The northern and the north-eastern gates were built towards the Danube. Civil constructions, such as thermae, suggest a change from primarily military to mixed civilian and military usage of the settlement in the 4th-century AD. Roman provincial pottery intermixed with Slavic coarse wares mark the presence of a non-Roman population in the fort during the second quarter of the 7th century AD and support the abandonment of the fortress by the Romans (Zahariade and Phelps, 2002).

Possible harbour location

Access to the city was possible from the sea by sailing back up the course of the Danube, which is believed to have flowed close to the Dunavăţ promontory in Late Antiquity (Zahariade and Phelps, 2002). Discovery of an inscription mentioning a « vicus classicorum » dated to the 2nd century AD suggests that during this period, close to the castrum, a civil settlement related to naval activities was founded by the discharged mariners of Classis Flavia Moesia (Zahariade and Alexandrescu, 2011). From the 4th-century AD, the harbour may have been a disembarkation point for military material, from large maritime vessels to fluvial ones as indicated by the ancient writer Zosimos (first half of the 5th century AD; Historia Nova, IV, 10). In the context of successive barbarian’s invasions during the 5th century AD archaeologists consider the fact that the military importance of Halmyris increased at that time (Sucveanu et al., 2003).

The presence of two natural decantation basins to the north of the site (Cruhic Mic and Cruhic Mare) are the relic of fluvial activity on this part of the floodplain (Figure 2). These palaeo-meanders are located at the southern limit of the inundation plain, at the foot of the Dunavăţ promontory in front of the major northern gate of the fort. According to Zahariade and Phelps (2002), this gate was mainly associated with harbour activities, and it was probably blocked due to the abandonment of the harbour during the second half of the 6th century AD.

Methods

Our work is based on the study of two sedimentary cores drilled on the Danube delta plain (HAI (335 cm in length): 45°1’32”N; 29°11’48”E; ca. + 1 m a.s.l.; and HAIL (577 cm in length): 45°1’34”N; 29°11’56”E; ca. + 0 m a.s.l.) immediately near Halmyris (Figure 2 and Supplementary Material 1, available online). The cores, drilled using a percussion corer (Cobra TT), were attitudinally benchmarked relative to present mean sea level using a GPS. Core descriptions (texture, macrofauana content, organic remains) and sampling were undertaken during fieldwork.

Chironomid analyses of core HAI

Laboratory methods for the extraction and identification of subfossil remains are described in Gandouin et al. (2005) and consisted
The general sediment texture, including the gravel (> 2 mm), sand riner (2009) on 90 samples taken from core HAIII (577 cm depth). A minimum of 50 head capsules per sample was chosen to provide statistically significant estimates of environmental conditions (Heiri and Lotter, 2001). The identification of head capsules was based on Brooks et al. (2007) and Klink and Moller Pillot (1999). Head capsules were identified under a stereomicroscope at 400X magnification. Chironomid diagrams were drawn using C2 version 1.7.2 (Juggins, 2007).

Statistical analyses have been performed with R Studio version 3.1.1: ade4, vegan and factoExtra were used for multivariate analyses (Chessel et al., 2004); rioja package for the constrained sum-of-squares cluster analysis (CONISS: in Juggins, 2015). Principal component analysis (PCA) was performed on the n (number of samples) by p (number of taxa) chironomid matrix of percentages. Data were square-root transformed to stabilise the variance. Rare taxa, that is, those present in only one sample or in less than 5% of all samples, were removed from the analysis.

Subfossil samples have been project as passive objects for comparison between fossil and modern assemblages from Gandouin et al. (2006), in order to characterise the type of contemporary habitats. This allowed us to obtain an ordination of subfossil samples along a gradient of connectivity (materialised by scores on an axis of a between-class correspondence analysis) between the main channel and other floodplain habitats such as secondary channels, oxbow lakes, ponds and marshy environments.

**Ostracods analyses and sedimentary texture of core HAIII**

Bio-sedimentological analyses were performed following the methodology detailed in Marriner and Morhange (2007) and Marriner (2009) on 90 samples taken from core HAIII (577 cm depth). The general sediment texture, including the gravel (> 2 mm), sand (50 μm–2 mm) and silty-clay fractions (< 50 μm), was determined by wet sieving. Ostracods were picked from the fraction >160 μm and identified to species level using reference manuals and papers for Ponto-Caspian species (Boomer et al., 2010; Frenzel et al., 2010; Meisch, 2000; Opreanu, 2008; Tunoglu and Gökçen, 1997). To obtain reliable statistical estimates, we have picked around 300 valves per samples when the amount of sediments was sufficient.

Statistical analyses have been performed on the percentage matrix using the paleontological statistics software PAST (Version 2.14, Hammer et al., 2001). Rare species that represent less than 2% of the total individuals identified in this study were removed from the PCA. Ostracods were grouped according to three main assemblages; defined as shallow-marine, lagoonal and fresh/mesohaline inland waters. In order to test the ordination of samples by assessing major changes in palaeoenvironmental proxies, PCA was undertaken on the ostracods matrix.

**Malacology of cores HAI and HAIII**

Molluscs have been observed in both HAI and HAIII samples. Their identification was undertaken using Pfleger (1993). Due to the low number of individuals encountered in our study, the molluscan assemblage only permits to strengthen the information provided by the other biological proxies.

**Dating of HAI and HAIII**

The chronology is based on 15 AMS radiocarbon determinations performed at the Poznan Radiocarbon Laboratory (Poland) on plant remains, charcoal remains, bulk sediment, and articulated mollusc shells (Table 1). The dates obtained from articulated mollusc shells (Oreissa polymorpha and Cerastoderma sp.), have been corrected using a marine reservoir age. A marine reservoir age of 498 ± 41 (in Bony et al., 2015) has been subtracted from the radiocarbon age before calibration using the calibration curve IntCal13 (Reimer et al., 2013) in Clam (R Studio).

With the retained radiocarbon determinations, we constructed an age–depth model for each core using the dedicated R-code Clam (Blaauw, 2010), which uses repeated random sampling of the calibrated distributions to derive a robust age–depth model. Thanks to these age–depth models, we obtained reliable ages for each unit and level analysed (figure presented in section 6.3).

### Results

**Faunal record and sedimentary texture of core HAI III**

The ostracods identified are common in present-day ponds and lagoons of the Danube (Opreanu, 2003; Figure 3a). According to the ecology of the species, we differentiated three groups.

1. The first group includes endemic species of the Ponto-Caspian region (e.g. T. Amnicola, A. Bendovanica) associated with euryhaline marine environments (Boomer et al., 1996, 2010). Due to the stratification of Black Sea waters.

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**Figure 2.** Location of Halmýris (ca. 2 km south of the Saint-Georges channel) and delimitation of the fluvial landforms observed north of the fortress. The paleogeography of the possible ancient channel surrounding the seasonal lake (Cruhlic Mare) is based on the observation of comparable landforms in other parts of the delta (e.g. Taranova lake). Image Landsat/Copernicus (slanting view).
samples, four stratigraphic levels were pooled (cf., 157–163, 180–190, 260–270 and 280–290 cm) in order to yield a significant number of hc. The cluster analysis allowed us to identify six chironomid zones: Hach-1 to Hach-6 (Figure 4a). Based on the typology of Gandouin et al. (2006), we differentiated three ecological groups: lentic, ubiquitous and lotic taxa. The main chironomid taxa and their dynamics are summarised in Table 2.

The macrofauna assemblage is composed of brackish or lagoonal waters (Dreissena polymorpha) and freshwater species common to the Danube such as, Lithoglyphus naticoides, Theodoxus danubialis, Viviparus sp (Supplementary Material 2, available online) performed by Gandouin et al. (2006), we differentiated three ecological groups: lentic, ubiquitous and lotic taxa. The main chironomid taxa and their dynamics are summarised in Table 2.

The passive projection of subfossil samples into the ordination space of the between-class Correspondence Analysis (Supplementary Material 3, available online) performed by Gandouin et al. (2006) shows that the fossil data set are close to lotic stations such as connected side arms (SA1 et SA2) and the main channel (MCRh). Two groups of samples can be identified. The more organic samples (sand, silt and clay) are close to a permanently connected side arm (Garcia and Laville, 2001), while minerogenic samples (particularly samples 273 and 285 cm), while the negative scores constitute sandy sediments (155 cm in particular). Clayey (73, 78 and 83 cm) and silty sediments (323, 328 and 333 cm) comprise positive PCA axis 2 scores. PCA analysis demonstrates a strong opposition between lotic or ubiquitous assemblages such as (e.g., Cricotopus, Cladotanytarsus, Neozavrelia and lentic ones (e.g., Dicrotendipes notatus, Glyptotendipes, Limnophyes and Phaenopsis), which is probably induced by the transversal connectivity gradient between the main fluvial channel and other floodplain waterbodies.

The passive projection of subfossil samples into the ordination of the between-class Correspondence Analysis (Supplementary Material 3, available online) performed by Gandouin et al. (2006) shows that the fossil data set are close to lotic stations such as connected side arms (SA1 et SA2) and the main channel (MCRh). Two groups of samples can be identified. The more organic samples (sand, silt and clay) are close to a permanently connected side arm (SA1) and the MCRh. Two hundred and thirty-five mollusc shells have been identified in core HAI (Supplementary Material 2B, available online). In silty dominated samples, between 280 and 320 cm, a large number of freshwater and stagnant gastropods (such as, Planorbis corneus) were found. Sandy silts from 95 to 145 cm deep, a majority of 157–163, 180–190, 260–270 and 280–290 cm) in order to yield a significant number of hc. The cluster analysis allowed us to identify six chironomid zones: Hach-1 to Hach-6 (Figure 4a). Based on the typology of Gandouin et al. (2006), we differentiated three ecological groups: lentic, ubiquitous and lotic taxa. The main chironomid taxa and their dynamics are summarised in Table 2.

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Drissena polymorpha was found. Finally, the more clayey samples (between 70 and 95 cm) were marked by the presence of Lithoglyphus naticoides, a taxon inhabiting slow-flowing and muddy environments.

Cores chronology

Fifteen radiocarbon-dated samples were taken from various depths, providing a chronological framework from 7170 to 110 uncalibrated years BP (Table 1). Among them, we identified some age reversals. In core HAI, we removed the date, Poz-79629 (900 ± 30 BP; 1039–1210 cal. yr AD) from the age–depth model because of the presence of roots in the plant remains observed during the sampling preparation. In core HAIII, at the bottom of the core (470–480 cm depth), the date Poz-79659 (5125 ± 35 BP; 3990–3800 cal. yr BC) was rejected due to possible reworking. This date was obtained from organic material collected in the unit identified as the channel/river mouth deposits and was possibly eroded from upstream and transported by the river. Above the first peat layer, we chose to reject the date Poz-81694 (1930 ± 30 BP;...
4–130 cal. yr AD; 245–250 cm depth) because we dated the bulk sediment. We have chosen to use the dates performed on organic remains taken from the same unit. At the top of the core (60–63), the bottom of the second peat layer (Poz-81693) seems to be too old (1230 ± 30 BP; 689–802 cal. yr AD) compared to the dating of the peat layer of core HAI, dated to 110 ± 30 BP (1681–1938 cal. yr AD; Poz-79628; 55–60 cm depth).

Mean sedimentation rates calculated for the cores HAI and HAIII are summarised in Table 3. The age–depth models (Supplementary Material 4, available online) reveal a possible sedimentary hiatus at the top of the peat layer (between units Hach-2 and Hach-3 in HAI and units D and E in HAIII).

Discussion

In the previous section, the results of the two cores were presented using a metric scale. Here, in order to compare the results of the two cores, we have chosen to represent the main bio-sedimentological units on a chronological scale in order to place the two cores in a broader palaeoenvironmental context (Figure 5). Because core HAIII represents a more complete sedimentary sequence than HAI, we decided to discuss the palaeoenvironmental evolution of Halmyris based on the main bio-sedimentological units identified in HAIII. The chironomid data from core HAI are used to reinforce our interpretations.

Palaeoenvironmental phases recorded in cores HAI and HAIII

Unit A: Marine bay before ca. 7550 cal. yr BP (ca. 5600 cal. yr BC). The top of this unit, in HAIII, is dated to ca. 7550 cal. yr BP (ca. 5600 cal. yr BC). It is composed of medium to fine yellow/orange sands. Macrofauna is represented by the species Dreissena polymorpha and Theodoxus danubialis, which are fluvial species endemic to the Pontic region and very frequently encountered in the Danube riverbed. The samples are dominated by lagoonal and...
The presence of Cryptochironomus, indicate a sandy substrate mixed with fine organic matter (Vallenduuk and Morozova, 2005). These data are in agreement with the stratigraphy. Some species of Cryptochironomus are strictly predatory (Armitage et al., 1995), which is also the case for Procladius. This latter is also an oxy-regulator taxa, and it is tolerant to daily water-oxygen fluctuations, due to intense photosynthetic activities (Brodersen et al., 2004). The passive projection of Halmynys fossil data on the modern dataset ordination (Gandouin et al., 2006) suggests a permanently connected side arm. Freshwater molluscs (e.g. Anisus vortex, Planorbis planorbus and Lymnae) from core HAI are in agreement with chironomids and ostracods (Supplementary Material 3, available online) and the prevalence of slow flowing freshwater conditions. The decrease in the grain size in comparison to the previous unit could be explained by the displacement of the channel from the palaeo-cliff, possibly translating a fluvial avulsion. Channel avulsions are common on fluvial-dominated deltas and play an important role in their morphogenesis (Jones and Schumm, 1999; Stouthamer et al., 2011).

**Unit D: Peat layer between 5210 ± 40 BP (4225–3954 cal yr BC) and 3920 ± 35 BP (2547–2293 cal yr BC).** In HAIll, this organic-rich peat layer formed between 5210 ± 40 BP (4225–3954 cal yr BC) and 3920 ± 35 BP (2547–2293 cal yr BC). Vespermeanu-Stroe et al. (2017) have demonstrated that the formation of peat is common in this area (between the Saint George arm and the Razelm-Sinoe lagoon). Formation of such peat layers reflects the very low sedimentary inputs into the inner delta at this time, due to the important progradation of the Saint-George lobe and the export of the sediment to the eastern delta and the Black Sea shoreline.

This unit corresponds to the second chironomid zone Hach-2 from 4660 ± 30 BP (3620–3363 cal yr BC) and 2545 ± 30 BP (800–550 cal yr BC), with the sporadic presence of chironomids and mollusc subfossils that reveal a probable disconnection of the site from the fluvial system, possibly leading to conservation problems. Projection of these results on the modern data set (Gandouin et al., 2006) evokes a temporarily connected side channel with vegetated and eutrophic waters as suggested by Chironomus, Dicrotendipes notatus, D. nervosus and Glyptotonides (probably G. pallens). Dicrotendipes notatus is presently associated with a very slow flowing channel from the Danube River with numerous dead-leaves on the river bottom (Moller Pilott and Buskens, 1990). Nowadays, G. pallens larva thrive in submerged woods and plants or build transportable cases on solid substrates. Occasionally, they are found in slightly brackish waters (Vallenduuk, 1999). Throughout the zone, both PCA axis 1 and between-class CA scores show an increasing trend towards higher connectivity of the site with the main channel. Particularly from ca. 2800 cal yr BP (180 cm), which is contemporaneous with the foundation of Halmynys (about 650 cal yr BC).

**Table 2. Main chironomid taxa and their dynamics over the HAI record.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Faunal zones</th>
<th>Main assemblage dynamics</th>
<th>Lithology</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hach-6 (50–35 cm)</td>
<td>Increasing percentages of Glyptotonides and Dicrotendipes nervosus.</td>
<td>Peaty sediments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hach-5 (95–50 cm)</td>
<td>Dominance of Polyedrum.</td>
<td>Clayey sediment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hach-4 (145–95 cm)</td>
<td>First appearance of Eukiefferielloi/Tvetoenia, Rheotanytarsus, Microspectra and Neozavrelia.</td>
<td>Sandy silt sediment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hach-3 (163–145 cm)</td>
<td>First appearance of Pectrocladus, Halocladus, Microchironus and Acricotopus.</td>
<td>Peaty sediments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hach-2 (300–163 cm)</td>
<td>Dominance of Dicrotendipes nervosus and Polyedrum.</td>
<td>Sandy silt sediments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hach-1 (335–300 cm)</td>
<td>Highest abundance over the record of Procladius, Cryptochironomus and Harnischia.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 3. Mean sedimentation rates calculated for cores HAI and HAIll.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Core</th>
<th>Cores section in cm from core top</th>
<th>Calculated mean sedimentation rates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HAI</td>
<td>57.5–160</td>
<td>0.61 mm yr⁻¹</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HAI</td>
<td>160–172.5</td>
<td>0.12 mm yr⁻¹</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HAI</td>
<td>172.5–297.5</td>
<td>0.43 mm yr⁻¹</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HAIll</td>
<td>122.5–272.5</td>
<td>0.34 mm yr⁻¹</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HAIll</td>
<td>272.5–277.5</td>
<td>0.18 mm yr⁻¹</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HAIll</td>
<td>277.5–302.5</td>
<td>0.09 mm yr⁻¹</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HAIll</td>
<td>302.5–357.5</td>
<td>0.63 mm yr⁻¹</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HAIll</td>
<td>357.5–407.5</td>
<td>0.43 mm yr⁻¹</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HAIll</td>
<td>407.5–535</td>
<td>0.78 mm yr⁻¹</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Euryhaline marine ostracods and reflect negatives values of the PCA Axis-1 (Figure 3). The combination of marine ostracods endemic to the Black Sea (e.g. Tyrenocythere anniccola) with the opportunistic species Cyprideis torosa mark the presence of the sea after the reconnection of the Black Sea to the global ocean ca. 9400 cal yr BP (Soulet et al., 2011). This unit presents a marine (coastal) sedimentation in a context of high freshwater supply, in front of the mouth of the Danube.

**Unit C: Lower delta plain environment between ca. 6680 cal yr BP (ca. 4730 cal yr BC) and ca. 6040 cal yr BP (4225–3954 cal yr BC).** We observe a decrease in the grain-size probably linked to a decrease in river flow energy. Ostracod fauna is present in two samples and comprises a mixture of fresh to euryhaline species commonly found in deltaic environments (e.g. Candonia neglecta, Heterocypris salina). The end of this unit corresponds to the first chironomid zone Hach-1, from ca. 6200 cal yr BP to ca. 5390 cal yr BP. The abundance of Dicrotendipes nervous suggests a developed macrophytic vegetation (Brodersen et al., 2001). Abundances of Polyedrum indicate eutrophic waters (Klink, 2002). The presence of Harnischia, which is nowadays associated with large waterbodies with stagnant or slow-flowing water on a mineral bottom (Moller Pilott and Buskens, 1990), coupled with the...
**Unit E: Distributary channel in Getic and Roman times (ca. 6th century BC to ca. 7th century AD).** In the two cores, this unit is located above the peat layer, and it is composed of silty-sand that incorporate significant freshwater shell debris. In HAI, this unit is dated after 3920 ± 35 BP (2547–2293 cal. yr BC; date obtained on the top of the peat layer). The three ages obtained in this unit highlight an important chronological gap (Table 1 and Supplementary Material 4, available online). This chronological gap may be due to the erosion of the peat layer as a result of fluvial activity (or anthropogenic dredging).

The macrofauna is composed of *Dreissena polymorpha* living in rivers and *Lithoglyphus naticoides* and *Viviparus* sp., living on the riverbanks of low-energy rivers (Pfleger, 1993). The ostracods are composed of a mixture of species that have a wide ecological range including lagoons, springs, ponds and lakes (Frenzel et al., 2010; Opreanu, 2003; Salel et al., 2016). The presence of *Darwinula stevensoni*, which does not tolerate drying up of the water body, testifies to permanent submerged conditions. Furthermore, this species is a lotic ostracod associated with fluvial interstitial sands (Dole-Olivier et al., 2000). At the base of the unit, samples are dominated by *Darwinula stevensoni* and reflect negatives values of the PCA Axis-2, consistent with ostracods living in permanent waters (Figure 3b). This facies could be identified as a secondary channel dating from the Getic/Greek (2585 ± 35 BP; 820–566 cal. yr BC; 275–280 cm depth) and the Roman periods (1775 ± 30 BP; 138–339 cal. yr AD; 270–275 cm depth), with moderate flowing waters, allowing the development of a large population of ostracods (ca. 500 valves for 20 g of sediment). This channel may have formed after an avulsion of the main course of the Danube, which can occur rapidly in deltaic environments (Jones and Schumm, 1999). Progressively, the connection with the main fluvial channel decreases and the samples are dominated by the ostracod *Candona neglecta* that is characteristic of stagnant water bodies (positive PCA Axis-2 scores; Fuhrmann, 2012). Furthermore, the proportion of *Darwinula stevensoni* is still >5% up to 220 cm depth and shows that the secondary channel remains connected to the main channel (Figure 3a).

Chironomids confirm this hypothesis, with high scores of both PCA axis 1 and between-class CA, characteristic of a permanently connected side-arm (during Hach-3 and 4). In the sandy zone Hach-3 (163–145 cm depth) dated between ca. 210 cal. yr BC and ca. 202 cal. yr AD, we found high percentages of *Chironomus* and *Glyptotendipes* suggesting the persistence of eutrophic waters. These taxa, in association with halotolerant species, such as *Halocladius* and *Psectrocladius sordidellus* (Klink and Moller Pillot, 1999), as well as the presence of numerous shells of halotolerant (*Dreissena polymorpha*) and lagoonal (*Cerastoderma glaucum*) bivalves, point to increasing salinity at the site.

In zone Hach-4 (145–95 cm), the dominance of *Cricotopus* and the appearance of several lotic taxa such as *Eukiefferiella/TVetenia, Rheotanytarsus* and *Micropsectra*, suggest that the site was always connected to the main channel. *Neo-zavrelia* has always been found in association with *Nuphar luteola*.
The presence of lotic ostracods and chironomid species (Figures 3–5). We have demonstrated that it was active during the occupation of Halmyris (6th century BC–7th century AD), highlighting a probable temporary disconnection towards the end of the Roman occupation of Halmyris, which is contemporaneous with the disconnection recorded in core HAI (Figure 5).

Unit G: Upper delta plain between 1230 cal. yr BP (ca. 720 cal. yr AD) and 110 ± 30 BP (1681–1938 cal. yr AD). This unit, located between 63 and 200 cm depth, started to accrete after 1230 cal. yr BP (ca. 720 cal. yr AD) in core HAI and is dated at its centre to 830 ± 30 BP (1160–1260 cal. yr AD). In core HAI, this unit corresponds to the chironomid zone Hach-5 dated between ca. 1300 cal. yr AD and 110 ± 30 BP (1681–1938 cal. yr AD). It is mostly composed of silts and clay (85%–98%) and the sedimentation is very homogeneous. The absence of aquatic fauna on HAI could demonstrate the transformation of the area into a dried-out floodplain because of the migration of the river. The sediment deposition may translate a succession of overbank flooding. The chironomid data in HAI show a trend towards a fluvial-disconnection as suggested by a progressive decrease in PCA axis-1 values and between-class CA scores over Hach-5, which is due to the increase of lentic taxa such as Chironomus, Dicrotendipes and Glyptotendipes (Gandouin et al., 2006). The presence of LithoglYPHus natocoiDes, indicative of stagnant or slow-flowing freshwater, meshes with this hypothesis.

Unit H: Organic-rich peat layer. The development of a second organic-rich peat layer attests to the presence of freshwater inputs that favoured peat growth during the 19th century. These inputs of freshwater could be linked to a rise in the water table because of the migration of the river. The sediment deposition may translate a succession of overbank flooding. The chironomid data in HAI show a trend towards a fluvial-disconnection as suggested by a progressive decrease in PCA axis-1 values and between-class CA scores over Hach-5, which is due to the increase of lentic taxa such as Chironomus, Dicrotendipes and Glyptotendipes (Gandouin et al., 2006). The presence of LithoglYPHus natocoiDes, indicative of stagnant or slow-flowing freshwater, meshes with this hypothesis.

Geoarchaeological implications and characterisation of the anchorage

The comparison of cores HAI and HAIII reveals the presence of a fluvial channel north of the settlement of Halmyris, attested by the presence of lotic ostracods and chironomid species (Figures 3–5). We have demonstrated that it was active during the occupation of Halmyris (6th century BC–7th century AD). The presence of the channel from the middle of the second millennium BC could in part explain the choice of this emplacement for the location of the Getic settlement and the possible Greek emporium in place for the later fortress in the 6th century BC.

Navigation in the channel – Water depth. To ascertain if this channel was navigable, we need to know its nautical dimensions. In particular, the depth of the channel will help us to elucidate the maximum draught of the ships (Boetto, 2010; Salomon et al., 2016). For this purpose, we based the reconstruction on the core HAI because the core HAI was drilled close to the palaeo-bank of the channel and, as a result, the water depth in this area was much lower. Because the ancient harbour of Halmyris was situated on the deltaic plain of the Danube, ca. 38 km from the present shoreline (but closer to the river mouth during Antiquity), the water level of the channel is linked to the elevation of the sea level. It is largely assumed that the post-glacial sea-level rise in the Black Sea is comparable to that of the Mediterranean, comprising a rapid glacio-eustatic rise until 6000 BP, followed by an important deceleration in sea-level rise that reached its present position around 2000 years ago (Brückner et al., 2010; Giosan et al., 2006). Nevertheless, we have no data precisely constraining the level of the Black Sea around 2000 years ago for the Danube delta. Using the ICE-5G (VM2) GIA model (Peltier, 2004), we have constrained the RSL position of the Black Sea for the two periods of human occupation at Halmyris. We propose the related water depth of the channel (Table 4 and Figure 6). In the 6th century BC (Getic/Greek occupation of Halmyris), the level of the Black Sea was between 76 and 44 cm below the present mean sea level and the water column of the channel was at least 163 ± 9 cm deep (mean 244 ± 9 cm). At the end of the occupation of Halmyris, the level of the Black Sea was between 29 and 22 cm below the present mean sea level and the water column of the channel was at least 155 ± 9 cm deep (mean 236 ± 9 cm).

The channel was more than deep enough for the circulation of flat-bottomed vessels typically used on rivers during Antiquity. In Roman times, the harbour of Halmyris was mainly used for military purposes. Bounegru and Zahariade (1996) present different types of fluvial boats used between the 1st and the 6th centuries AD on the Lower Danube. Although they provide little information regarding the draught of boats used between the 1st and the 3rd centuries AD, they do state that they were flat-bottomed boats adapted to fluvial navigation such as liburnae (a liburna has been identified in a text from the 2nd century AD in Noviodunum, another fortress of the Danubian limes, situated ca. 60 km upriver from Halmyris; Bounegru and Zahariade, 1996). The fleet of the Lower Danube was particularly important at the beginning of the 5th century AD and comprised, according to the Theodosian code (7.17.1. January 412), 225 lusoriae (Syvanne, 2015). Navis lusoriae were war-ships intended for fluvial navigation on the Frontier Rivers of the Roman Empire (Pitassi, 2011; Torr, 1894). The use of these ships is attested by a 4th-century Roman author, Vegetius (Epitoma Rei Militaris, 4.34, 4.46) that mentions small vessels, including navis lusoriae, that were used on the Danube River (Syvanne, 2015). Such boats, intended to protect the borders of the Empire, were also used on the Rhine River. Archaeological excavations undertaken in Mainz (Mogontiacum) have provided important information about river vessels used in the Late Roman period. In the ancient harbour basin of Mogontiacum, archaeologists have discovered several shipwrecks dated to the 3rd and the 4th centuries AD (Höckmann, 1993). Two different types of boats have been identified, navis lusoriae (Mainz 1 and 5) and a smaller vessel used as a patrol ship for the surveillance of the Rhine border during the 4th century (NAVIS Project, Römisch-Germanisches Zentralmuseum, Mainz). According to reconstructions of the boats by archaeologists at the ‘Museum of
Table 4. Estimate of the water depth of the channel at different times. The modern tidal range is from Medvedev et al. (2016). Mean water depth at Sulina mouth (1840–2011); D = Minimum level Sulina mouth 1921.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dating of the channel (cal. BC/AD)</th>
<th>Depth of the sample (cm b.s.l.)</th>
<th>Minimum water depth of the channel (cm)</th>
<th>Average level Sulina mouth (1840–2011)</th>
<th>Mean water depth of the channel (cm)</th>
<th>Maximum water depth of the channel (cm)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>C = (A + B) + (C + D)</td>
<td>Minimum water depth of the channel (cm)</td>
<td>600–650 AD 220 −29 cm −22 cm 18</td>
<td>1775 30 140–340 AD 270–275 −44 cm −27 cm 18</td>
<td>271 45 cm −36 cm 244 ± 9 190 ± 9 163 ± 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>C = (A + B + C) + D</td>
<td>Minimum water depth of the channel (cm)</td>
<td>35 820–565 BC 275–280 −76 cm −44 cm 18</td>
<td>35 820–565 BC 275–280 −76 cm −44 cm 18</td>
<td>271 45 cm −36 cm 244 ± 9 190 ± 9 163 ± 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>C = (A + B + C) + D</td>
<td>Minimum water depth of the channel (cm)</td>
<td>15 175 200–220 −6 cm −2 cm 18</td>
<td>15 175 200–220 −6 cm −2 cm 18</td>
<td>15 175 200–220 −6 cm −2 cm 18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Relationship between settlements and rivers in ancient times. Our study shows that Halmyris’ inhabitants exploited a natural fluvial channel to host their harbour in Getic/Greek and Roman times. In Antiquity, settlements located along river channels used riverine flow which explains why several of them have densely artificialized riverbanks, particularly in urban areas (Allinne, 2007). Numerous rural settlements were founded along the palaeo-channels of the Rhone delta (France), particularly between the 3rd century BC and the 7th century AD. Arnaud-Fassetta and Landuré (2014) have demonstrated that these settlements were mostly located along the main channels of the river and that human occupation was coeval with the period of activity of the channels. This link is also visible on the Nile delta, where the ancient city of Pelusium, originally located at the mouth of the Pelusiac branch of the Nile, seems to have been abandoned following the shift of the river channel to the east and the infilling of the initial river-mouth due to the progradation of the coastline (Goodfriend and Stanley, 1999; Stanley et al., 2008). The same phenomenon occurred in the Rhine delta, where van Dinter et al. (2017) have highlighted a strong relationship between settlement history and river activity, furthering addition to other socio-economic and political factors. Halmyris was an important Roman fortress installed along the times of the Lower Danube. The identification of a natural harbour on the banks of a secondary channel leads us to draw comparisons with other fluvial harbours present in the region. Upstream, on the southern bank of the Danube, the fortress of Capidava has furnished interesting information regarding harbour infrastructure (Munteanu, 2012). Archaeological investigations have unearthed an artificial quay 2.5 m wide and 64 m long to the northwest of the fortress (Dobrinescu and Bodolici, 2016; Supplementary Material 6, available online). This harbour was used between the 2nd and the 4th centuries AD. The structure, in a perfectly upright position, is fixed on the rocky substratum. At Halmyris, no archaeological surveys in the supposed harbour area have been undertaken. The ancient harbour could have been managed as the harbour of Capidava because the channel, in front of the main gate, is conducive harbour activity.

Conclusion

The Roman limes of the lower Danube was protected by a series of fortresses and harbours. Our study demonstrates the presence of a channel to the north of the fortress of Halmyris which confirms the previous archaeological hypotheses regarding harbour activities in this area. Furthermore, it provides useful information to understand the interplay between the natural environment and the organisation of ancient harbours in deltaic contexts. The harbour of Halmyris was probably located in the reconstructed channel that flowed in close proximity to the site until the 7th century AD. The fortress enjoyed an easy access to the river while being protected from the floods of the Danube due to its position on the promontory (palaeo-cliff). We have demonstrated that this channel was navigable throughout the period when the site was occupied (Getic/Greek and Roman Periods). At the time of the abandonment of Halmyris in the 7th century AD, the depth of the channel was > 155 cm, allowing the circulation of fluvial-military boats. Zahariade and Phelps (2002) have arbitrarily attributed the complete obstruction of the northern gateway to the fortress during the second half of the 6th century to the navigation difficulties encountered to reach Halmyris. Our core reveals that the disconnection of the channel of Halmyris from the main channel...
was contemporaneous with the abandonment of the site. However, we cannot determine whether the abandonment of the site resulted in a natural disconnection between the secondary channel of Halmyris and the main channel. A fall in population, associated with the general geopolitical situation of the Late Roman Empire, could also have resulted in poor maintenance of the connection between the main channel and the secondary channel.

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References

**Figure 6.** Reconstruction of the channel depth and sea-level position for the Roman period (600 AD) in core HAIII associated with the main stratigraphic units, the sedimentation rate and an example of the boat used in Late Roman times on the Rhine river.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main units</th>
<th>Stratigraphy of the core</th>
<th>Age-depth model</th>
<th>Example of boat</th>
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**Table 1.** Context of the underwater archaeological site Halmyris (Roman period 600 AD) and the sedimentation rate. The reduction in the sedimentation rate was caused by a major geomorphological change.


