

Trail #5 - Danube trade: the exchange of goods and stories

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Apart from military and religious movements, eventually followed by tourism, the Danube region has always attracted – and been dynamised by – trade. Trade has inspired the cultural and regional exchange of goods and people in the Danube region: raw materials have been exploited or processed there, markets developed, businesses founded, and people brought together ... The Danube is one of Europe's oldest trade routes, providing ample material for cross-border stories, encounters and experiences. Merchant families have expanded across countries through marriage and business relations; trading practices, currencies, payment systems, and even culinary specialities have spread in the region through trade. But the Danube has also seen the darker sides of trade – namely in the form of human trafficking, drugs, prostitution, and organised crime. The Danube writes countless stories. These include the shrewdness, rapacity, smuggling, and of course the honourable trade in the Alemannic source area of the river; a “live-and-let-live” philosophy in the Catholic/Baroque Bavarian-Austrian region of the Danube; and the bazaar mentality that still characterises trade in the Balkans and fascinates tourists.

Merchants have brought cultures together and have had a formative influence on them. Families – many Jewish families, too – have acted as patrons of arts and culture and have built impressive private and commercial buildings for many generations. Along the Danube, you will come across stories about merchant dynasties of the Buddenbrooks type. However, some of the most fascinating and most dramatic family stories were written not by trade, but by love, separation, success and failure.

Today, the first steps of business are increasingly made in digital form. In the old days, on the other hand, business relations were primarily established through charm, esprit, cultural and ethnic exchange, or simply through the magic of wealth. Trade also took the shape of meetings and gatherings at markets, celebrations of culinary and cultural traditions, and political conventions like the Perpetual Diet of Regensburg or the Vienna Congress. Businessmen were always present at such events to establish relationships or fathom their options for new markets.