



Ilustr. 1. The Silent Highway Man,  
National Maritime Museum, London, UK

## ***Monstrous Rivers: Investigating the Environmental History of Modern European Floods through Literary Sources***

*What stories do rivers tell when they flood and what stories do humans believe in they tell?*

The research project *Monstrous Rivers: Investigating the Environmental History of Modern European Floods through Literary Sources* aims to explore the shifting role of hydroengineering in modern European history, specifically its correlation with river flood events between the 18th and 20th centuries. It investigates the ecological limitations of hydraulic transformations in flood control and mitigation history and their impact on river ecosystems, as well as the growing emphasis on environmentally-conscious approaches to hydroengineering. By asking a thought-provoking question ‘What stories do rivers tell when they flood and what stories do humans believe in they tell?’ it seeks to reestablish the significance of elemental rivers in environmental history by analysing literary sources on historical flood events.

The research questions focus on interpreting the environmental history as a story of spatial negotiation between humans and flooding rivers, uncovering overlooked historical information and warning signs through literature, and reconstructing a comprehensive historiography that includes rivers as powerful, monstrous and enchanted entities. The project justifies its importance by highlighting the rising occurrence of always surprising ‘millennium’ or ‘unprecedented’ floods and the need for looking at the historical data to learn how in the past cultural adaptation to environmental hazards was expressed and what would historical rivers communicate to us for safer future.

During four years of study, the team consisting of a literary scholar, historian and geographer will focus on three iconic rivers for understanding modern Europe: the Danube, Thames, and Rhine. In contrast to many rivers in Poland, these rivers are among the most transformed and obstructed rivers in Europe and prone to disastrous flooding, including the floods of the Danube in 1838/1926, Thames in 1928, and Rhine in 1995. While the very recent years show the exponential growth of flood events in Europe because of climate change, interrelated is also the problem of rivers’ restoration. Do we really know why rivers need to be revitalise or restore today?

By analysing literature and comparing varied mythological remains in cultural roots of adaptation to floods, the project aims to understand how people perceived and expressed the elemental nature of rivers. To examine better the environmental shift in the history of rivers and declining model of fighting with rivers through hydroengineering projects, the project reconsiders how water bodies have shaped histories and cultures of adaptation to their flood risks. Not only theories will be used to map the interplay between humans, hydroengineering practices, and river systems, but also in a series of critical maps, we aim to show what kind of warning signs flooding rivers transmit to us.

The research results will be disseminated predominantly in English in a form of international conference papers and publications. At the website of Tadeusz Manteuffel’s Institute of History we will publish all open access materials and selected bibliography for future studies on flood histories. By this study, we aim to contribute to a deeper understanding of the historical context and perspectives regarding the management of rivers and the ecological impact of hydroengineering projects in modern Europe.