

OF ROMANS, DACIANS AND ROMANIANS

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Abstract: *The Romans and Dacians both played an important role in Romanian nationalism and in the construction of the modern Romanian identity. Their relationship is complex and frequently in conflict, as the political climate determined which mythical ancestor was seen as advantageous at the time. We suggest that the Roman ancestry was fundamental for the initial stages of Romanian nation and state-building, providing Romanians with a noble origin and a connection to Western Europe. As the Romanian state grew more mature throughout the 20th century, emphasis shifted to the Dacians, giving the nation even deeper, prehistoric roots which doubled as a claim to territory. In this article we explore the historical process of how the Romans and Dacians have endured together in Romanian popular imagination.*

Keywords: *Romans, Dacians, Romanians, Iron Age, antiquity, archaeology.*

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O RIMLJANIMA, DAČANIMA I RUMUNIMA

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Apstrakt: *I Rimljani i Dačani su igrali značajnu ulogu u rumunskom nacionalizmu i konstruisanju modernog rumunskog identiteta. Njihov odnos je kompleksan i često u sukobu, pošto je politička klima odredila koji mitski predak se video kao pogodan u određeno vreme. Pretpostavljamo da su rimski preci bili od suštinskog značaja u inicijalnim fazama formiranja rumunske nacije i države, obezbeđujući Rumunima plemenito poreklo i vezu sa zapadnom Evropom. Kako je rumunska država sazrevala tokom XX veka, naglasak je promenjen i prebačen na Dačane, dajući naciji dublje, praistorijske korene, što je poslužilo kao zahtev za teritorijom. U ovom radu istražujemo istorijski proces u kom su i na koji način Rimljani i Dačani opstajali zajedno u rumunskoj narodnoj imagaciji.*

Ključne reči: *Rimljani, Dačani, Rumuni, gvozdeno doba, antika, arheologija.*

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The Dacians, Romans and Romanians appear as unlikely bedfellows — how have these two peoples from the past ended up together in the popular imagination with the population of a modern nation-state? On the one hand, we have the Dacians, an Iron Age population with an uncertain territory, organization or even name. On the other hand, we have the Romans, a generic term linked with the biggest empire of the ancient world, who fought two wars against and eventually swallowed the Dacians. Last, we have the Romanians, a population that is neither ancient, nor ruling a mighty empire. Rather the Romanians are a modern-day nation which, just like many others, sought to root itself in the deep past through an imagined sense of ancestry: this is where the Dacians and Romans come in. In this paper we explore how the Dacians and Romans entered the hearts of Romanians from the 17th to 20th centuries as an enduring legacy of the need for a common ‘Romanian’ ethnic identity.

THE ROMANS OR HOW ROMANIANS WALK IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF GIANTS

The name ‘Romania’ is derived from an imagined relationship with the Roman Empire¹, rather than from the Roma people – a common misconception. Despite the fact that the Romanians are the last living people outside of Italy to bear the Roman name (alongside the Romansch of Switzerland), there is no consensus about whether and how vestiges of Latin culture survived the centuries of migrations and movement that took place during Late Antiquity and the Early Medieval period. This Latin culture comes from a relatively brief period of time in the history of this region, a period of less than 200 years in the 2nd and 3rd centuries CE, when the Romans colonised the Dacian heartland in Transylvania as the Roman province of Dacia. Dacia has the dubious honour

1 We appreciate that the Byzantine and later Ottoman etymological traditions also played an important role for the name of the country, but given the very limited scope of this paper we were unable to expand the discussion beyond our focus on the Latin and Iron Age heritage.

of being the last province the Romans would found and the first to fall. Despite the fact that the Roman, and then Byzantine presence, continued for centuries south of the Danube in the provinces of Moesia and Scythia Minor (modern Dobrogea), the Romanian national narrative primarily concentrates on Roman Dacia as the source of 'Romanian' Latin culture.

The period of the Enlightenment marks the first claims to a Roman heritage coming from the regions of Wallachia, Moldavia and Transylvania, regions which were trapped between the Ottomans and the Habsburgs, the Hungarians and the Russians, and, broadly, the West and the East. It was this acute territorial instability which made the Roman myth of origin so valuable – by claiming a connection to the common ancestors of the West, this region on the borders of Europe could make a strong case for belonging. The original claim to a unique Romanian heritage began in the principality of Moldavia in the early 17th century, when it, like Transylvania and Wallachia, was a vassal of the Ottoman Empire. Grigore Ureche and Miron Costin, two Moldavian chroniclers, argued that the Polish ought to ally with the Moldavians, since „as the self-styled 'last bastion of defence for Roman Christendom', they might be expected to sympathize with the sons of Rome" (Verdery 1991, 324). Such ideas proliferated throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, taken to varying extremes, with scholars like Dimitrie Cantemir arguing for a Romanian descent from Aeneas (Duțu 1967, 468). Inocențiu Micu-Klein, Bishop of the Romanian Greek Catholic Church from 1729–1751, used the idea of 'Latinism' instead to claim that the Romanians were the direct descendants of the colonists sent by Trajan to Dacia (Oldson 1983, 33). Heralding the nation building to come, Micu-Klein employed this idea to argue for the political rights of the Wallachian people.

The loudest voices for the Romanian Latin heritage came from the Transylvanian School, formed by a group of Greek Catholic intellectuals at the turn of the 19th century. Samuil Micu-Klein, Gheorghe Șincai and Petru Maior used the concept of Roman origins, drawing on evidence like Trajan's Column in Rome, to argue for the autonomy of Transylvania from Hungary on the basis that the Romanians formed a unique ethnic community as the heirs to the Roman Empire (Niculescu 2002, 92). By the 1830s and 1840s, the theory of a Roman origin for the Romanians was universally accepted by academics, although the popularity of Romantic nationalism meant a newfound focus on the study of the material remains of the past (Hitchins 1996, 192). The theory of a pure Roman inheritance (rather than acknowledging any indigenous or 'Dacian' elements) lost legitimacy as scholars began to study the material that was actually available, but it would remain politically powerful through the founding of the Romanian nation-state in the mid-late 19th century.

The myth of Roman origins peaked in the decades around 1859, the date of the formal union of Wallachia and Moldavia in the 'United Principalities of Romania'. Politicians and intellectuals like Mihail Kogălniceanu and Nicolae Bălcescu used the idea of Roman origins to focus international attention on the

potential of the Romanians rather than the inferior conditions of the present – this idea gave those identifying as ‘Romanian’ an argument that not only did they belong within Europe, they could stand on equal footing with more developed Western nations as the direct descendants of the Romans (Boia 2001, 87). Having used the Romans to help achieve Romanian independence, alternative interpretations of the Romanian ‘ethnic identity’ began to increase, with one particular text signaling the shift from a purely Latin inheritance to one that recognized the contribution of the Dacians. In 1853, August Treboniu Laurian published his *History of the Romanians* which began with the foundation of Rome in 753 BC. This idea of equating Romanian history with Roman grew criticism (Trencsényi 2011), particularly after Laurian tried to purge the Romanian language of all non-Latin elements (Boia 2001, 87). The Romans would fade into the background for Romanian nationalism, as the Dacians ascended in the late 19th and 20th centuries, but the name ‘Romania’ remained a powerful reminder of an idea inspired by the Enlightenment. Eventually, the two would join in the myth of Daco-Roman continuity which allowed for both Roman and Dacian to contribute to the Romanian ethnic identity, a myth that still endures today.

THE DACIANS OR HOW ROMANIANS PROJECT THEMSELVES IN PREHISTORY

As the utility of Romans for national emancipation faded towards the end of the 19th century, another ancient people, the Dacians, rose in public consciousness. There was a progressive conceptualization of the Dacians by scholars and the general public, stretching over more than 150 years. Four broad stages can be defined: the discovery of the Dacians; the elite acceptance of the Dacians; the popular acceptance of the Dacians; and the Dacian blossoming period. These stages closely correspond with important political developments.

The first stage covers the late 19th and early 20th century, corresponding with the establishment of an emerging Romanian state. Throughout the Medieval and Early Modern periods, the territory of Romania was divided into three principalities: Moldavia, Wallachia and Transylvania. It was not until 1866 that an entity named Romania appears, covering Moldavia and Wallachia. The 50 years that follow describe a time of rapid economic and cultural development. This is also the time when the Dacians make their way into academic circles. The first publications mentioning a link between Dacians and Romanians appear (Haşdeu 1873), and Tocilescu (1877) publishes a major monograph about Iron Age archaeological material. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the Dacians had begun to capture the imagination of people outside of archaeology and had been included in a highly nationalistic account of Romanian history through the work of Densuşianu (Densuşianu 2005 [1913]).

During the second stage, which spans between the two world wars, the Dacians become popular among the higher educated segments of the population. After the First World War the territory of Romania nearly tripled in size and barely retained a Romanian majority (Boia 2001, 182). This wide-spanning Romania, or Greater Romania, had large issues in terms of legitimization, containing territories that were also claimed by Bulgaria, Hungary and the USSR. This is when that Dacian past found especially fertile ground. While the Medieval Period had seen the area fragmented into small principalities, during the Iron Age there was a state that supposedly covered the entire territory of Greater Romania: the first century BC kingdom of the Dacian king Burebista (Glodariu, 2001). Since this kingdom offered the precedent which the modern state needed, it is no surprise that Iron Age archaeology got a large boost. The main archaeology journal of Romania to this day launched in 1924, with the name *Dacia*. Even more significantly, 1926 sees the publication of *Getica*, by Vasile Pârvan (1926). This fundamental monograph recounts the history of Dacia and was long considered the bible of Romanian archaeology. The book left a lasting legacy, since it was widely circulated in academic and non-academic circles alike (Lica 2006, 1023–1024).

The omnipresent Dacian ancestors become a ‘reality’ for nearly all Romanians during the third stage, which covers the 1960s, 70s and 80s. Following the Second World War a brutal Soviet regime was installed in Romania. Needing to stress the strong ties with the USSR, which supported the regime politically, ideologically, and militarily, the Slavs took the front stage of archaeological research (Dragoman and Oanță-Marghitu 2013, 20–23; Matei-Popescu 2007, 272–276). This changed with the arrival of Ceaușescu, who took the leadership of communist Romania in the 1960s. Installing a regime that nourished nationalistic feelings, interwar ideas resurfaced and the Dacians came into the spotlight like never before (Dragoman and Oanță-Marghitu 2013, 62–64; Matei-Popescu 2007, 284). In this environment we witness the Dacianisation of Romanians — with the deliberate intervention of the state, through the use of national education, museums, the press and other media, the inhabitants of Romania were literally transformed into descendants of the Dacians. This process goes beyond having the Dacians elevated to the rank of ‘official’ ancestors. Rather, there is a deep identity transformation of the population itself, as people start to define themselves as descendants of a 2000 year-old population. Unlike before the Second World War, this process took national proportions and reached all corners of the country, given the rapid urbanization that Romania had gone through and the quasi-total penetration of national education, the written press and television. The presence of the Dacians became inescapable.

During the fourth and final stage, stretching from the 1990s until today, the Dacian seeds blossom in the fertile garden of the Romanian national imagination. After December 1989, government incentive for producing glorious accounts of the Dacians faded away and academic publications carrying this message

were slowly phased out. Given this withdrawal, a void of information appeared in the public sphere with regards to, what were by now, the uncontested Iron Age ancestors of the Romanians. This void was no longer filled by academics, but rather by Dacian enthusiasts, whose message was understandably appealing to members of a post-communist society that were hopeful in embracing capitalism and western democracy, but ended up disillusioned. And this is how the Dacians came to stay, for good.

CONCLUSIONS

Today the Romans and Dacians are married in the imagination of the Romanian people. Each partner served its own purpose. The Romans gave Romania legitimacy through their noble, Latin roots, and a link to Western Europe; the Dacians provided the nation with a unique origin, which doubled as a claim to territory. But this unusual relationship is sometimes difficult to hide. Perhaps this situation is best illustrated by the controversial statue unveiled in 2012 in front of the National History Museum of Romania in Bucharest. It depicts the nude Roman emperor Trajan, awkwardly holding the Capitoline wolf, which doubles as a Dacian draco, a war banner of the Dacians. The statue thus exemplifies the awkward nature of the Roman-Dacian ancestral duo, a relationship that has persisted into the 21st century.

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OF ROMANS, DACIANS AND ROMANIANS

Summary

The Romans and Dacians both played an important role in Romanian nationalism and in the construction of modern Romanian identity. Their relationship is complex and frequently in conflict, as the contemporary political climate determined which mythical ancestor was seen as advantageous at the time.

The period of the Enlightenment marks the first claims to a Roman heritage, coming from the regions of Wallachia, Moldavia and Transylvania, through the writings of people such as Grigore Ureche, Dimitrie Cantemir or Inocențiu Micu-Klein. This movement was intensified in the 19th century through the work of the Transylvanian School formed by Greek Catholic intellectuals. Samuil Micu-Klein, Gheorghe Șincai and Petru Maior used the concept of Roman origins, drawing on evidence like Trajan's Column in Rome, to argue for the autonomy of Transylvania from Hungary on the basis that the Romanians formed a unique ethnic community as the heirs to the Roman Empire. By the 1830s and 1840s, the theory of a Roman origin for the Romanians was universally accepted by academics. The myth of Roman origins peaked in the decades around 1859, the

date of the formal union of Wallachia and Moldavia in the 'United Principalities of Romania'. Politicians and intellectuals like Mihail Kogălniceanu and Nicolae Bălcescu used the idea of Roman origins to focus international attention on the potential of the Romanians rather than the inferior conditions of the present. Having used the Romans to help achieve Romanian independence, alternative interpretations of the Romanian 'ethnic identity' began to increase, with the criticism following the publication of Laurian's *History of the Romanians* in 1853 signalling the shift from a purely Latin inheritance to one that recognized the contribution of the Dacians.

The Iron Age Dacians, unlike the Romans, was a population perceived as being indigenous to Romanian lands. A progressive conceptualization of the Dacians by scholars and the general public took place over the 19th and 20th century. Four broad stages can be defined. The first stage covers the late 19th and early 20th century, corresponding with the establishment of the Romanian state and the emergence of publications mentioning a link between Dacians and Romanians, as in the works of Bogdan Petriceicu Hașdeu and Grigore Tocilescu. During the second stage, which spans between the two world wars, the Dacians become popular among the higher educated segments of the population. This period saw the establishment of *Dacia*, the main archaeology journal of Romania to this day, and, more significantly, the publication of Vasile Pârvan's *Getica*, a book that left a lasting legacy in academic and non-academic circles alike. The omnipresent Dacian ancestors become a 'reality' for nearly all Romanians during the third stage, which covers the 1960s, 70s and 80s. Through the use of state-controlled institutions, under the totalitarian rule of Nicolae Ceaușescu, the Dacians were elevated to the rank of official ancestors and Romanians suffered a deep identity transformation, becoming de facto descendants of the Dacians. Finally, during the fourth stage, stretching from the 1990s until today, the Dacian seeds blossomed in the fertile garden of the Romanian national imagination. Numerous publications by Dacian enthusiasts replaced the state propaganda and academic literature, revealing that the Iron Age ancestors were by that point well entrenched in Romanian identity.

Today the Romans and Dacians are married in the imaginary of the Romanian people. Each partner served its own purpose. The Romans gave Romania legitimacy through their noble, Latin roots, and a link to Western Europe, while the Dacians provided the nation with a unique origin, which doubled as a claim to territory.

We suggest that the Roman ancestry was fundamental for the initial stages of Romanian nation and state-building, providing Romanians with a noble origin and a connection to Western Europe. As the Romanian state grew more mature throughout the 20th century, emphasis shifted to the Dacians, giving the nation even deeper, prehistoric roots which doubled as a claim to territory. In this article we explore the historical process of how the Romans and Dacians have endured together in the Romanian popular imagination.