

Thoughts on the Dacians of the Romanian Historical Imaginary*

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Abstract: *Thoughts on the Dacians of the Romanian Historical Imaginary.* The paper is presenting some of the main issues concerning the “public image” of the Dacians in Romanian common thought and knowledge and is aiming to identify the sources of this vulgate set of representations of ancestors. The collective imaginary of the general public concerning the Dacians is partially fuelled by the scholarly literature and thus reflects some aspects of the archaeological discourse. However, archaeological research today is defined by a methodological approach which has an opposite direction, whereby the reconstruction of the past starts at the level of the micro-communities, of particular facts and regional features instead of levelling generalization. This seems to represent the essence of the divergence between the scientific approach characterized by a critical disposition and moderate scepticism on the one hand, and profoundly subjective traditionalist representations of the collective imaginary on the other.

Keywords: Dacians, dacianism, protochronism, historical imaginary, stereotypes

Rezumat: *Reflecții cu privire la dacii imaginarului istoric românesc.* Acest articol prezintă câteva dintre problemele principale referitoare la imaginea publică a dacilor în cultura de masă și în discursul științific din România, încercând să identifice sursele acestei imagini vulgarizate a strămoșilor. Imaginarul colectiv este alimentat parțial de literatura academică și, ca urmare, el reflectă anumite aspecte ale discursului arheologic. Cu toate acestea, cercetarea arheologică de astăzi este caracterizată de o abordare metodologică de sens contrar, în care reconstruirea trecutului pleacă de la nivelul micro-comunităților, al faptelor particulare și al trăsăturilor regionale, respingând generalizările și interpretările lipsite de nuanțe. Aceasta pare să reprezinte esența

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clivajului dintre abordarea științifică, definită de spirit critic și de un scepticism moderat, pe de o parte, și reprezentările tradiționaliste, profund subiective, ale imaginarului colectiv, de cealaltă parte.

Cuvinte-cheie: daci, dacism, protocronism, imaginar istoric, stereotipuri

The 'scientific historic imaginary', in this case referring to archaeology, encompasses an assemblage of representations, theories and reconstructions that make up the generic perception of historical reality. It is based on the archaeological discoveries and data as well as on the critical appraisal of the literary sources, brought together into a coherent corpus, as far as this can be achieved by historic scholarship. This furthermore contains various degrees of imagination inherent to scientific methodology in general in the shape of theories, alternative hypothesis, generalizations, analogies, with regard to aspects which are yet to be corroborated by factual evidence. The term '(scientific) imaginary' should not be understood in this case as a synonym for fantasy, but instead as the collection of ideas determined by reason and scientific thought, called upon to complete and interpret the empirical data resulted from the archaeological research¹.

The collective imaginary of the general public concerning the Dacians is partially fuelled by the scholarly literature and thus reflects some aspects of the archaeological discourse. The process is however a selective one, involving high levels of subjectivity, and integrating other forms of representation as well, such as artistic expression, i.e. literature and cinema and also the often oversimplifying renderings put forward by the media. Common perception depicts the Dacians as the ancestors of modern Romanians alongside the Romans thus conferring them a privileged status compared to other 'participants' of the Romanian ethnogenesis (e.g. the Slavs) identified as such by the historical and linguistic approaches.

Within this collective imaginary a well-defined component stands out, i.e. that of the 'dacomaniac' discourse².

The concepts of the Dacian people and state (i.e. Dacia) were integrated into the national historical narrative during the 19th century by the Romanian historiography and literature. The image thus constructed comprises the totality of stereotypes depicted by the ancient literary record to the extent that they contributed to the consolidation of

¹ Simbotin, 2015, 22.

² Alexa, 2015, Grancea, 2007.

the newly formed national consciousness and identity. The need for prestigious origins marked by heroism as well as a sense of tragic destiny (see the figure of King Decebalus) meant to individualize the Romanian nation is based on the stereotype of the morally superior warrior 'barbarian' characterized by a firm belief in overcoming death. The Dacians, together with their specific cultural profile, thus join the Romans in the gallery of collective ancestors and protagonists of a national epopee that is gradually taking shape³. The most important historical sources with regard to this reconstruction are provided by a series of classical and post-classical authors.

The ancient nature of these literary texts has accounted for their undeniable legitimacy. Most often they were integrated into the literary discourse devised to assist the structuring of national ideology naturally by means of non-scholarly methods, as the critical reappraisal of the literary sources has only been under way since the mid-20th century. The imaginary of this period encompasses a significant degree of subjectivity and affectivity, traits that will endure over the following periods as well.

The restitution and reconstruction of the Celtic ancestors (the Gauls) as part of the French nation-building process has had a similar course in 19th century France.

During the pre-modern period as well as that of the Revolution, the Gauls were called upon to render legitimacy to a discourse which aimed to change the existing social order (see the famous political pamphlet by Abbé Sieyès entitled 'What is the Third Estate?'). Just as in the case of the Dacians, the Gauls were placed in a territory defined by natural frontiers, and perceived to be the absolute native population of the region⁴. During the reign of Napoleon III the scale of the archaeological research carried out on historical sites linked to pre-Roman Gaul as well as the setting up of certain monuments (e.g. the statue of Vercingetorix at Alesia - bearing the physiognomic features of the emperor), suggests that we are dealing with a national project. "*Nos ancêtres, les Gaulois*" have found their way into the history manuals⁵. The Gauls were also summoned to legitimize and back the resistance during the Franco-Prussian war, the siege of Paris being compared to that of Alesia, later becoming relevant once more in the context of the national trauma caused by the loss of the two eastern provinces of France.

³ Boia, 1997, 95-96; Dana, 2008, 300.

⁴ Buchsenschutz, 2007, 12.

⁵ Collis, 2010, 198-200.

The public image of the Gauls as revealed by modernity from the ancient sources has ingrained a series of clichés into the French public consciousness which require a systematic effort of scholarly deconstruction especially concerning the heroic and violent characteristics or attributed to them and occasionally alternated with idyllic traits⁶.

Scientific imaginary and collective imaginary during the 20th century

The century at hand has been marked by a duality in the approach concerning the Dacian past, the two tendencies which dominated the intellectual and public spheres being laid out already at the beginning of the period. On one hand we are dealing with the phenomenon known as 'dacianism', while on the other hand we have the scientific discourse based on a proper methodology and a critical approach. The two movements which coexisted and evolved in a parallel fashion, the former being marginal, while the latter one essential, can be traced back to two fundamental books, 'Dacia preistorică' (*Prehistoric Dacia*) by N. Densușianu (1913), and 'Getica. O protoistorie a Daciei' (*Getica. A protohistory of Dacia*) written by V. Pârvan (1926).

The former is a pseudo-archaeological narrative comprised of mythologized facts and marked by an excessive and uncritical use of etymologies, being essentially a fantasy novel as described by Pârvan himself, which depicts a wide array of gods, heroes and civilizations that brought to life a lost prehistoric world. Furthermore, the book portrays episodes of mythical events reconstructed from folklore and toponymy. Placed within a fictive chronology and a sacralised geography, the text is a fusion of valid and fictional information structured around the fantastical 'Pelagian empire', the source of the entire history of Europe with its epicentre in the region of modern-day Romania. The lack of a critical approach combined with an overstretched enthusiasm worthy of a better cause have brought to life a massive volume which creates the illusion of erudition and has become the 'holy book' of dacianism and implicitly the main source of legitimation for pseudo-archaeology today. The book of N. Densușianu, criticized right from the start, is essential for a proper comprehension of the Romanian protochronistic discourse started somewhat later as well with regard to today's senseless dacomaniac imaginary. The main issues put forward in *Dacia preistorică*

⁶Buchsenschutz, 2007, 262.

were reiterated by the nationalist movements of the 20th century as well by the dacomaniac exaggerations of today⁷.

'Getica' alongside the entire scholarly activity of V. Pârvan after 1918 has laid the foundation for the archaeological research of the Iron Age civilizations of Romania and has put forward a methodological model rooted in the contemporary European historical discourse. His support was vital for the commencement of archaeological investigations in the Orăştiei Mountains coordinated by the University of Cluj, which has naturally become a fundamental source for a valid scientific data. Archaeology, with its discoveries and researched sites was employed to sketch the collective portrait of the ancestors who were called upon to take part in the reestablishment of Romanian history and civilization within the new geographic setting of Greater Romania. The main characters of the book are the Getae/Dacians reconstructed using the data provided by the written sources (interpreted without a proper critical approach) and that of the archaeological record available in those times. The atmosphere of this reconstruction projected back into Antiquity the spirit of the times depicting the Dacians as a community of peaceful, pious and wise farmers. Dacia and Greater Romania were in the vision of the author superimposed, creating an idealized and almost ahistorical image⁸. This was also prevalent in the French historiography of the 19th century with reference to the natural and cultural frontiers of ancient Gaul⁹. At the same time the Dacians represented in Pârvan's conception a homogeneous community with well-defined social structures, who founded a great kingdom - which was in fact a projection into the past of the realities of his time¹⁰. This attitude persisted for a long time both in Romanian historiography and public consciousness.

All the same, Pârvan can be credited with laying down the scientific framework of Late Iron Age studies, especially considering that the ideas of Densușianu in the respective period were particularly popular, drawing a large number of adherents. All in all the respective archaeological investigations and literature were highly valuable notwithstanding the methodological shortcomings inherent to the period.

⁷ Grancea, 2007, 98.

⁸ Boia, 1997, 59.

⁹ Buchsenschutz, 2007, 12-13.

¹⁰ Boia 1997, 100.

The Interwar period and the rise of the far-right movement in Romania resulted in the escalation of the dacianist ideas against the backdrop of the sombre political atmosphere sweeping across Europe and promoting aggressive ideologies. In the process, themes such as native 'racial identity' were activated and derived from protohistory alongside the reinterpretation of a Zalmoxian mysticism which advocated the triumph over death through heroism and thus offered a justification to the violent mythology of the Romanian legionary movement¹¹. The autochthonic rhetoric tinted with dacianist overtones has taken over the public discourses, the press, as well as the literary and philosophical scene, including the works by some of the most remarkable representatives of Romanian culture at the time such as L. Blaga, M. Eliade, P. P. Panaitescu etc. This episode was relatively short-lived, however its aftershocks did not disappear, resurfacing in attenuated forms and specific nuances during the post-war decades. This is illustrated by the lengthy career of Ioan G. Coman, professor at the Faculty of Theology, and later at the Orthodox Theology Institute¹². His conception was partly based on the forced synthesis between the cult of Zalmoxis and orthodox Christianity. This association, clearly irrational in historical terms can still be found in different shapes within the contemporary dacianist discourse.

Following World War II the systematic investigation of a number of Dacian archaeological sites as well as the publication of the results laid the framework of the subsequent scientific approach. The main cultural-historical argument of the approach that has dominated Romanian historiography over the last century is centred on the association of the archaeological data with the Dacians known from the historical sources. During this period archaeology was called upon to provide new evidence that underpins the historical analysis and synthesis, thus archaeological interpretation is integrated in the historical narrative reconstructed from the ancient texts.

The impact of Mircea Eliade¹³ is essential in drawing up both the Romanian scientific imaginary as well as the popular reception of the historical discourse concerning the Dacians. His interwar works and especially his highly influential books published after the last world

¹¹ Boia, 1997, 106-107; Grancea 2007, 99; Dana, 2008, 310-316.

¹² Dana, 2008, 315-319.

¹³ Dana, 2008, 265-287.

war¹⁴ were embraced not only by the scientific community, but also by the general public, especially after the Romanian editions were also published. The weight of his international authority provided an uncontested legitimacy to his theories regarding the religion of the Getae/Dacians, perceived as a defining feature of their civilization in Herodotus' account as well as in its lengthy historiographical afterlife.

The evaluation of Dan Dana (see above) shows the extent to which the work of Eliade (today criticized mostly in the foreign literature) influenced the Romanian scholarly literature during the 1980s, giving rise to a dominant school of thought in the local historiography. A simplified expression of this concept can be found in the 'public' image of the Dacians represented in the collective consciousness. Some important historical and archaeological works (e.g. the studies published by H. Daicoviciu and I. H. Crişan during the 1970s and 80s) also enjoyed a relatively large circulation. They were in fact mediums for the dissemination of the abovementioned ideas in the public consciousness, while the history schoolbooks consolidated them at other levels of public perception. The aforementioned authors have also published popularising works that enjoyed high levels of approval within the general public. As shown above, the mechanism whereby the subjective public imaginary concerning the Dacians is created involves the selective and vulgarized adoption of certain aspects of the scientific literature that are viewed as typical and spectacular and thus rapidly transformed into stereotypes.

Protochronism and its posterity

Avant la letter protochronist tendencies have made their presence felt as early as the 19th century, rooted in the same inferiority complexes compensated through an exceptionality and autochthonic notion. This line of thought, marked by an obsession with an idealized and fictive Dacian past was consolidated by the work of N. Densuşianu (*Dacia preistorică*) who effectively created a mythology that is still enduring today.

The debate concerning protochronism has drawn attention and began exerting influence following the famous theoretical paper by Edgar Papu published in 1974¹⁵. The contention has polarized the views

¹⁴ *A History of Religious Ideas*, I, The University of Chicago Press, 1978, II, 1982, III, 1985 and especially *Zalmoxis, the Vanishing God*, The University of Chicago Press, 1972.

¹⁵ Verdery, 1994, 152-204.

of many Romanian intellectuals concerning the issue of the origin of the national civilization. The protochronistic exaggerations have surfaced in most areas of the cultural sphere, the nearly-official dacianism representing its most obvious historical manifestation¹⁶.

The national-communist propaganda through one of its main hubs, the History Institute of the Romanian Communist Party has reactivated more or less officially the dacianist and protochronistic ideas with the intent of transferring them into the mainstream historical research while also infusing the cultural atmosphere already prone to the effects of ideology¹⁷. Protochronism was promoted especially by non-specialists and served to justify the tendencies of isolation from external influence both western and eastern, as well to uphold the illusion of 2000 years of national independence. Historical characters and events, most notably Burebista and Decebal were frequently called upon to legitimize the political regime. Among others the absurd theory arguing for the Dacian origin of the Latin and thus the Romanian language was also resuscitated. Highly relevant here are the activities and publications carried out and promoted by I. C. Drăgan who notwithstanding his murky past, was drafted more or less officially into the service of the regime.

Inescapably the autochthonic ideas based on a Dacian past reconstructed in an irrational manner have left deep marks in the collective imaginary especially given the effects of the narrative aggressively promoted by the media centred on a heroic past and the association of Dacians with Romanians. These ideas are today resurfaced by the pseudo-archaeological and dacianist literature which in the general atmosphere marked by the 'post-truth' phenomenon has embarked on meeting the needs of a public hungry for the sensational, while also structuring the collective imaginary.

In spite of all this the mainstream historical and archaeological discourse has remained untouched by these concepts and remains to this day embedded in the framework defined by scientific methodology.

A certain ethnological literature

A part of the ethnographic/ethnologic literature of the 1980s became a channel for the dissemination of more or less scientifically valid facts which were transformed into clichés of the so-called 'common knowledge'. The media, especially the television channels reiterate today

¹⁶ Dana, 2008, 337-340.

¹⁷ Boia, 1997, 109-114.

such theories especially in the context of certain celebrations rooted in popular culture, such as Christmas, New Year's Day, as well as specifically Romanian holidays like Mărțișor, Dragobete and Sânziene. Thus ethnography, ethnology and anthropology sometimes contribute to the consolidation of an artificially created bridge between Dacian antiquity and the present.

Fascinated by the past unravelled but insufficiently explained by archaeology, some authors have employed and re-contextualized certain historical and archaeological facts and hypothesis thus putting forward a contentious phylogenesis for popular customs. Most often religion and mythology are highlighted here. The Dacians, who along with the Romans represent the foundation of Romanian civilization, are seen as the ideal candidates to account for some ethnographic facts devoid of historical verifiability. The fragile premise underlying this approach is represented by the supposed perennial nature of rural culture, perceived as a simplified and homogenous stratigraphy stretching between the distant past and our times. In part the ethnological discourse is based on the reproduction of some false theories ('theocratic state') or arguable concepts, to say the least ('the aniconism of Dacian mythology', the 'ritual geometrism', totemism, etc¹⁸). In other instances ethnology has tried to fill the gaps in the Dacian pantheon (in reality almost completely unknown) by invoking certain characters of popular mythology (e.g. Dochia) fictively projected back into antiquity¹⁹. Occasionally the failed mythologizing discourse has relied on ethnological, archaeological, and linguistic arguments, conveying the illusion of erudition²⁰. This approach clearly falls short of the standards imposed by scientific methodology engaged in the reconstruction of any ancient spiritual world.

Unfortunately, such enterprises, situated at the boundary of pseudo-science continue to fascinate the public and feed the collective imaginary with fiction.

Cinema and the Dacians

The highly accessible nature of cinema in the period between the 1960s and 80s has had a decisive role in shaping the collective imaginary regarding the historical past. During the Romanian communist period, a main focus of the regime's cultural politics was its obsession with a

¹⁸ E.g. Vulcănescu, 1987, 108-121.

¹⁹ E.g. Ghinoiu, 1988, 200-203.

²⁰ E.g. Mușu 1982.

cinematic epopee that would convey a national historical narrative aligned with the party's propaganda discourse. The result was a series of motion pictures unique in the world at the time and watched by millions of spectators. The films brought to life the essential moments in Romanian history²¹. Naturally, the Dacians found their place in this series, being the protagonists of two massive and extremely popular productions which appeal to the public even today: *Dacii (The Dacians)* 1966, director: S. Nicolaescu and *Columna (The Column)*, 1968, director: M. Drăgan. The storylines proved to be quite appealing to the general public, employing romantic stories, complex scenography, extravagant costumes, battle scenes and spectacular rituals reflecting a heroic historical narrative in an oversimplified and stylized fashion. Emphasis was placed on the conquest of the Dacian kingdom and the beginning of Romanian ethnogenesis – both important subjects for the state propaganda. *Dacii (The Dacians)* was a Romanian-French project bearing the hallmarks of an international super production typical for the 1960s. This of course only served to increase its public appeal...

The motion picture entitled *Burebista* (1980, directed by Gh. Vitanidis) was the creation of a later stage of the regime. Accordingly, the result was a visibly more rigid and propagandistic production, as shown by the rhetorical nature of the dialogues. This is understandable as the main character was the focus of attention during the celebrations of '2050 years from the foundation of the centralized and independent Dacian state'. The film was based on overplaying the political and military successes of the protagonist, as well as his diplomatic skills, which contributed decisively to the rise of Dacia as a regional power, the analogy with the ambitions of the Romanian communist regime being evident. Due to the somewhat lower standards of production, resulting in a less spectacular scenography and costumes compared to the examples cited above, its impact with the public was clearly inferior. Furthermore, it is evident that the script lacked or distorted any professional counsel from a competent specialist as it was required to fully meet the demands of the propaganda machine.

The films display a wide array of visual clichés such as the Dacian costume centred on the *pileus* (a specific hat) and the specific weapons, coupled with other, more complex stereotypes (a rather rudimentary rendering of the Dacian martial ethos, the schematic reinterpretation of the Dacian religion based on the literary record, anachronistic concessions regarding certain famous artefacts highlighted

²¹ Saulea 2011.

in the film), that found their way into the collective consciousness. The moral emphasis is placed on the heroic nature of the anti-Roman struggle for independence portraying an obsessive and idealized image of a mythical past populated by schematic characters, which also legitimized the present.

The impact of the historical films, very popular with the general public, was significant and their influence on the collective consciousness, including the structure of the historical imaginary, was substantial. The motion pictures convey the distorted image of a spectacle-like historical past which is highly schematic and thus easily assimilated. They contributed to the creation of a simplistic and very resilient vulgate that proves to be especially hard to dismiss.

Dacianism today

This phenomenon, highly visible today, is rooted in the realities of the 19th century and especially the Interwar period. For the most part, the main ensemble of dacomaniac ideas and theories has its origins in the abovementioned work of N. Densușianu, *Dacia preistorică*. Subsequently it was boosted by the protochronistic theory and also by the direct intervention of the state propaganda machine (see the papers published in the periodical *Anale de istorie*). Following its timid resurgence during the early 1990s, this movement currently displays an aggressive surge in the favourable climate of the 'post truth' period. Dacianism is mostly promoted by the amateurs who abusively appropriate a scientific expertise and while doing so, challenge the competency of the specialists. Their activity is based in various associations and NGO's both home and in the heterogeneous environment of the Diaspora. Very few professional archaeologists and historians have adhered to the dacianist movement²².

The fundamental 'theories' of N. Densușianu were resuscitated and nuanced. The main concepts involve the prevalence of the Dacian language in lexical terms over the influence of Latin (in fact Latin itself is derived from the Dacian language as are many other European languages!), the dismissal of Romanization, the singularity of Dacian civilization – clearly rooted in protochronism, etc. A wide array of data and theories from multiple disciplines such as archaeology, linguistics (etymology), ethnography/ethnology, are mustered in and reinterpreted, alongside evident forgeries ('the Sinaia lead plates' – together with their entire contemporary mythology). These ideas and

²² Grancea, 2007, 105-106.

concepts are combined without the understanding of elementary scientific methodology. The result is the promotion of a fictive, counterfactual narrative that claims to '(re)discover' arguments and sources in its quest to uncover the 'real history'. Often conspiracy theories are invoked which claim the deliberate cover up of past realities²³.

A current tendency belonging to the same phenomenon is represented by the pseudo-scientific approaches that simulate the methodology and appearance of scholarly publications, putting forward footnotes with complicated bibliographical references. They overwhelmingly take inspiration from the scientific literature adopting data from the archaeological reports, studies, monographs and synthesis works, and deliberately rearrange the main information in accordance with their own thesis, thereby ignoring the elementary principles and methodological standards of scientific research. Published by amateurs (usually specialised in other domains), these works deal with spectacular subjects such as religion, the language and culture of the Dacians, alongside other aspects regularly studied by archaeology. Usually the result is a seemingly convincing alternative discourse which in reality is simplistic and devoid of nuances and thus totally incompatible with scientific enterprises.

Their relatively active presence in the public sphere (through foundations and associations sometimes with considerable founding) creates confusion within the general public sensible to the identitarian explorations inherent to globalization and highly vulnerable in the 'post truth' atmosphere.

The dacomaniac discourse, proliferated especially online, contributes to the formation of a malign historical imaginary generating along the way toxic effects within the collective consciousness. It is the expression of an autochthonic ideology that touches on fundamental aspects of identity promoted as an alternative to European values.

Ancient stereotypes and the modern imaginary of origins

The last decades of the 20th century saw the emergence of a new approach in the interpretation of ancient literary texts based on critical analysis and the contextualization of the information that they convey. This shift in method resulted in the reappraisal of numerous facts previously considered unquestionable and generally lead to a more circumspect attitude towards the ancient literary record. The work by Fr.

²³ Nemeti, 2019, cap. IV.

Hartog on the texts of Herodotus²⁴ was a cornerstone with regard to the lucid approach to ancient texts, especially those belonging to the Halicarnasian author.

The face value of the ancient texts was questioned following the identification of recurring stereotypes, subjective assessments, agendas on behalf of the author, or just simply the lack of knowledge. Oftentimes these sources reveal more about their authors than they do about the subjects they deal with.

The dominant collective portrait of peoples was inscribed into the ancient imaginary based on the accounts of certain Greek and Latin authors shaped by specific cultural models as well as by the limitations of information gathering inherent to the period (see the accounts of Herodotus concerning the Scythians and Thracians). Frequently these texts were packed with subjectivism and preconceptions. The works of the ancient authors are marked by a high degree of pragmatism and are subjected to ideology of the respective times. Accordingly, the 'invention' of Gaul by Caesar in his famous book depicts an image envisaged by the soldier and politician driven by his personal agenda²⁵.

A part of these informations were transformed into stereotypes and integrated into the historiographical traditions²⁶. They were subsequently perpetuated through the often selective and altering post-classical transcriptions, influencing our perception in a considerable manner. On occasion the intermediaries would interpolate or omit information, as shown by the high-profile tradition of identifying the Getae and Goths, with all its implications (see the post-classical reception of Zalmoxis).

The 'public image' of the Dacians, constructed by modernity and based exclusively on the ancient literary record is distorted by the successive changes in perspective. As remarked by a French historian with regard to the traditional historic discourse on the Gauls (the ancestors of the French), modernity consecrated a corpus of texts which is very difficult to disentangle without the assistance of an incisive critical spirit, moreover historians have traditionally tended to overstate the accounts of the ancient authors²⁷.

The critique of ancient literary texts does not fit the scope of reshaping the collective imaginary, which is characterized by a

²⁴ Hartog, 1980.

²⁵ Thollard, 2005, 19.

²⁶ Petre, 2004, Dana, 2008, 426-7.

²⁷ Lewuillon, 2005, 176.

considerable degree of inertia. Commonly, this type of imaginary is sustained by the corpus of scientific data, however it does not take into account the periodic shifts of paradigms.

Stereotypes in the contemporary imaginary

Book IV of Herodotus' *Histories* is the oldest consistent account of the Getae, written in the context of the expedition lead by king Darius I against the north-pontic Scythians. During its march, the Persian army came across the Getae, who 'driven by recklessness were readily subdued, though they were the bravest and most just among the Thracians'. It is important to note that the episode involving the Getae has a marginal significance on the whole. In the absence of more consistent accounts, the excerpt at hand has become a suitable founding document for the history of the Getae. The abovementioned phrase referring to the qualities of the aforementioned ethnic group was repeatedly isolated and reproduced in the context of state propaganda during the 1970s and 80s, inundating the history schoolbooks as well as the press and media, becoming a sort of glorious label automatically attached to the said community²⁸. Furthermore, it introduced into the collective imaginary the stereotype of bravery and warrior nature also attributed to the Getae. A few decades ago the Iron Age exhibitions within the Romanian museums obsessively displayed the quote as a sort of an inaugural line of 'history'. In 1986 the communist regime, in a perpetual quest for historical legitimacy celebrated with great pomp 'the first struggles of the Geto-Dacian people in the defence of liberty and independence'²⁹. The phrase gradually infiltrated the collective consciousness and came to define the identity of the national ancestors.

The same text of Herodotus also mentions Zalmoxis. In both the scientific and popularising literature referring to the 'Geto-Dacians' and their religion, the story of Zalmoxis is omnipresent, accounting for the most visible component of their spirituality. This aspect was continuously analysed and reinterpreted over time with various methodological approaches, and implicitly with different results. The myth conveyed by Herodotus is one of the most well-known elements referring to the Dacians within the general public, dominating the collective imaginary with regard to the ancestors.

The Halicarnasian historian recorded the story considering it as an exotic fact that best characterizes the Getae from the perspective of the

²⁸ Petre, 2004, 69-72.

²⁹ Grancea, 2007, 99-100.

contemporary Greeks. The account is only loosely upheld by the author, Herodotus mentioning that the information comes from the Greeks living on the Black Sea coast and along the straits, and can be viewed as an instance of 'colonial folklore', as Zoe Petre put it. This led to the emergence of a long reception history of Zalmoxis that can be traced throughout the centuries up until the Middle Ages. Recent research has proven that this considerable record is solely based on the account of Herodotus, supplemented by later interpolations³⁰.

In Romania perhaps the most influential view on this matter is the one expressed by Mircea Eliade, translated and widely accessible to historians and archaeologists since 1980. Perceived as a valid methodological model and legitimised by the international notoriety of the author, his texts have inspired (and continue to do so) a large number of specialists who have studied the difficult subject that is Dacian religion³¹. The mystical and spiritualist nuances of this discourse were absorbed by the collective imaginary contributing along the way to the dacianist neo-mythology.

The stereotype of the 'warrior Dacians' is based on an alleged martial ethos attributed to them. It is closely related to the phrase recorded by Herodotus ('...the bravest and most just among the Thracians'). The sources of this cliché can be identified in a historiographical reality: many of the ancient sources refer to their involvement in military conflicts (Herodotus, Strabo, Dio Chrysostomus, Cassius Dio), however this does not mean that they were permanently engaged in acts of war, but rather that the attention of the ancient authors was drawn exactly by the instances of armed conflict. The reliefs of Trajan's Column, as well as those of the Adamclisi monument, both considered to be emblematic for the Romanian ethnogenesis seem to enforce this superficial impression, however one must bear in mind that their creation was directly linked to military events, i.e. the conquest of the Dacian kingdom (101-102, 105-106 AD). Some recent scientific works fascinated by heroic history are still receptive to these stereotypes and continue to provide the collective imaginary with theories concerning the warrior aristocracy considered to be highly representative for the Dacian civilization.

It is evident that the Dacians and Getae were involved in armed conflicts both internal and external just as many other peoples of the time, however a closer look at their civilisation reveals many other

³⁰ Dana, 2008, chapt. III and 436.

³¹ Dana, 2008, 265-287.

relevant aspects which are less violent and thus less appealing to our contemporaries³². The peaceful components are often obscured in the collective consciousness by a vulgate that has gradually built up during the last century. The overstatement of the heroic warrior side of Dacian culture is more in tune with a flattering image of the ancestors. Today's standard representations which have become defining visual elements associates the figure of the Dacians with the *draco* standard and the curved sword, both based on the representations of Trajan's Column. This martial imagery is present in the motion pictures of the 1960s, 70s and 80s, but it is also conveyed by urban monuments (see the public statues erected in the towns of Deva and Orăștie) alongside the performances of the self-proclaimed 're-enactment' groups featuring imaginary skirmishes between the Dacians and their Roman enemies.

The 'Dacian gold' or 'Decebalus's treasure' is also a notable component of the Dacian neo-mythology present in the collective historical imaginary and is connected to the idea of their tragic destiny. The account of the riches stolen by the victorious Romans following the treason that lead to the Dacians' downfall (Cassius Dio), seems to be included by our contemporaries into the long line of historical injustices suffered by Romanians. The subject of the legendary 'Dacian gold' was brought back into public attention during the 1990s and 2000s when the looting of archaeological artefacts and the repatriation of certain spectacular pieces (e.g. the *Koson* type coins and spiral bracelets discovered in the Orăștiei Mountains) have ignited the public's fantasy. The collective imaginary (together with its inherent moral component) has interpreted the conquest of Dacia (seen as the archetype of today's Romania) as a result of Roman greed, even though it is highly likely that the main argument was indeed of political and military nature.

Sarmizegetusa Regia (Grădiștea de Munte, Hunedoara County) alongside the Dacian forts have a distinct place within the public imaginary concerning the Dacians. They are closely associated with the history of the ancestors and have become places of memory with a high symbolical value.

The representative monuments of Sarmizegetusa Regia are viewed as tangible results of the elevated nature of Dacian civilization. The exceptionalist dimension of the imaginary centred on the Dacians is further based on their technological achievements. The 'solar calendar' (i.e. the great circular temple/the andesitic altar) are classical examples

³² See the similar debate on the traditional stereotypes concerning the Celts from Gaul, Buchsensschutz, 2007, 262.

of the assimilation of outdated interpretations and pseudo-scientific theories by the collective consciousness. These are often preferred over the current interpretations which are less spectacular. Scores of impressive but phantasmagorical virtual reconstructions are propagated on the internet, which totally ignore the archaeological realities.

At a general level the aforementioned archaeological site represents the prestigious and palpable materialization of the founding myth of Romanian ethnogenesis and also the scenography of certain historical events which have entered into the contemporary mythology.

Iconographical stereotype - the Dacian costume, the bearded Dacian and the Dacian *draco*

Such clichés have already emerged during Antiquity in the collective consciousness of the old Greeks and Romans and thus are known to us through certain iconographic and literary works that have survived.

Generally, the cultural mechanism of the identity/alterity phenomenon has led to the emergence of certain typical images of the barbarians, which associates particular character traits, traditions, depictions, costumes, specific weapons, fighting styles, etc., with groups of peoples with whom they came into contact at one point in history. Thus, in the eyes of the ancient Greeks the Scythians were always on horseback, wore a specific bonnet, trousers, and the ever-present quiver which contained both the bow and the arrows (see the images depicted on the red-figured Attican pottery vessels). In the Greco-Roman world the image of the Celt/Gaul was often modelled on the statues of the famous triumphal monument from Pergamon ('the dying Gaul', etc.): hirsute, with a prominent moustache, and wearing nothing else than a torque on the neck (heroic nudity)³³. The characteristic weapons (the large oval shield with a median spine and the long sword with two edges) were viewed as visual 'ethnic indicators' for the Gauls present on all sorts of figural representations. Evidently there are significant discrepancies between the iconographical stereotypes formed on the outside of these cultures and the way these communities actually viewed and represented themselves.

The Dacians seem to have met the same faith: the fall of Decebalus's kingdom brought into the visual consciousness of the Mediterranean world the typical image of the Dacian based especially on the public monuments erected by the victors (e.g. the triumphal statuary from Rome). The *pileus* (a bonnet specific to other ancient peoples as

³³ Thollard, 2006, 20-21.

well), the beard and the characteristic costumes, alongside the military equipment abundantly depicted on Trajan's Column are still perceived as being the 'national costume' of the Dacians. In reality we are dealing with an ancient iconographic stereotype with both symbolical and practical implications, one of the obvious roles of the costumes illustrated on the reliefs of the column is the need to distinguish the combatant factions.

In similar fashion the critical appraisal of the images depicted on various indigenous archaeological finds dated to late-Iron Age contexts, shows a much more diverse situation, as not all male figures wear beards and the well-known bonnet is almost absent.

The wolf *draco*, the standard represented on the reliefs of the Column is today intensely used by the nationalist ideology, and is frequently associated with a particular type of identitarian expression (e.g. the bronze monument in Orăștie, the element on the crest of the city of Cluj, or even the logo conceived for Romania's presidency of the Council of the European Union). This standard is very rarely featured in the archaeological reality referring to the Dacians, appearing on Trajan's Column and incised (in my opinion in a doubtful manner) on a ceramic vessel discovered in a late-Iron Age settlement (?). Even if a fantastic beast with a similar morphology had populated the ancient imaginary³⁴, the respective standard has practically no history prior to the Dacian Wars. Conversely, it gained notoriety with regard to certain ethnic groups with whom the Romans clashed at a later date. Moreover, the Roman army adopted certain variants of this *draco* (see the find with a dragon head from the Roman fort at Niederbieber in Germany), either from the Dacians or the Sarmatians and used it until the late-Antiquity³⁵.

Trajan's Column with its reliefs full of iconographical conventions, often misinterpreted by historians as a factual war account has consecrated the respective standard in public consciousness as being genuinely Dacian. A further contributor to this conception was Mircea Eliade's paper entitled 'The Dacians and the wolves'. This emblematic semantic association, which is more literary than historical and tainted by mystical nuances is highly appreciated by the general public. In fact it acquired surprisingly high degrees of popularity and was integrated into the collective imaginary populated by Dacians. The online environment is packed with visual and written content suitable to the genre of *heroic*

³⁴ Florea, 2001.

³⁵ Feugère, 1993, 57-58, Fischer, 2012, 23.

fantasy rather than to historic reality and often tainted with mystical and occult nuances.

The Dacian neo-mythology

Such stereotypes are structured into a new mythology, which has very little to do with historical reality as far as this can be reconstructed by scholarship. They promote a highly idealized image of the Dacian ancestors characterised by courage, richness, and mystical religiousness, but who tragically succumbed to an unavoidable destiny. We are dealing in fact with nostalgic adulation of the atemporal utopia centred on a prosperous and glorious Dacia... This is the nucleus of the reinvented founding myth.

A certain imaginary 'Dacian' past is visible in different shapes and forms throughout the Romanian quotidian. Many such representations convey an autochthonic, ancient idea, which is by itself is regarded as valuable. Persons named Dacian, Daciana or Meda are quite frequent, and the national car of Romania is still called *Dacia* even though it is produced by an international company. Furthermore, there are countless logos and publicity slogans which make use of such references, probably relying on the popularity of the autochthonic ethos.

Situated on the state frontier at the Iron Gates of the Danube, a monumental portrait of the last Dacian king was sculpted on a prominent rock. The work was initiated and financed by I. C. Drăgan, promoter of the movement 'We, the Thracians' and active in Romania both before and after the regime change of 1989. This 'megalithic' monument of a questionable taste can be viewed as a materialization of a hyperbolized Dacian past similar to the scenography of a Hollywood film.

The 'Dacians', absolute ancestors...

The Dacians have acquired a distinct place within the Romanian historical imaginary as they are considered to be the ancestors of modern Romanians and alongside the Romans, protagonists of a national founding myth. In historical and archaeological terms there are discrepancies between the scientific data and their representation within the collective imaginary which has selectively put together a schematised and simplified collection of stereotypes.

The 'public image' associated with the 'Dacians' is composed exclusively of positive considerations being also marked by a high degree of affectivity which replaces the critical and otherwise necessary attitude of detachment towards a community from the distant and

confuse past of the Iron Age. Apparently the attitudes towards the other ancestors, the 'Romans' seem to be more neutral, in contrast with the privileged position in which they were placed during the 19th century.

We observe an affinity towards the image of the true ancestor characterised by a series of traits (courage, resoluteness, heroism, faith, endurance, etc.) which are found on the opposite spectrum of today's realities. Ancient idealized Dacia, is in fact nothing less than the ideological substraction of modern-day Romania and the ancient past is perceived as being way more glorious than the present. From this point of view not much has changed since the specific representations put forward during the 19th century.

We witness today a growing presence in the public sphere of certain symbols associated in the collective imaginary with the Dacians. The wolf-headed *draco* standard sometimes associated with the Romanian national colours has lately achieved prevalence suggesting the identification of Dacians and modern Romanians. This contemporary construct indicates autochthonic identitarian sentiments. This phenomenon is explicable in the context of globalisation which exerts its effects even at the level of micro-communities and individuals. The dominant cultural and ideological atmosphere today encourages the rediscovery of different forms of nationalism. The distant past, i.e. prehistory, protohistory and Antiquity has once again become appealing and expressive. Apparently in a world exposed to rapid cultural change perceived in real time, the general public seeks stabile landmarks embedded in an archaic, archetypical chronology.

Archaeological research today is defined by a methodological approach which has an opposite direction, whereby the reconstruction of the past starts at the level of the micro-communities, of particular facts and regional features instead of levelling generalization. This seems to represent the essence of the divergence between the scientific approach characterized by a critical disposition and moderate scepticism on the one hand, and profoundly subjective traditionalist representations of the collective imaginary on the other.

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