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The significant past and insignificant archaeologists. Who informs the public about their ‘national’ past? The case of Romania

*Cătălin Nicolae Popa**

Abstract

This paper addresses the role of archaeologists in informing the public about a fundamental component of contemporary Romanian identity: the Dacian heritage. I start by exploring how the Dacians and Romanians came to be connected, a process that resulted from a combination of nationalistic zeal on behalf of archaeologists and the nationalist propaganda of the Ceaușescu regime during the 1970s and 1980s. I then move to the present-day situation, where I argue that archaeologists have reduced themselves to having a minor role in the public sphere, while discussions about the Dacians are dominated by two main players: pseudoarchaeologists and re-enactors. This state of affairs delegitimizes Romanian archaeology and places self-declared specialists and enthusiasts in the position of experts. Some of the Dacian narratives produced in this environment are infused with strong nationalist messages and have the potential to fuel extreme right-wing and even xenophobic movements. Consequently, in the final part of the paper, I recommend that Romanian archaeologists should challenge the representations and interpretations of pseudoarchaeologists and re-enactors. Moreover, academics should make it a priority to re-engage with the public and disseminate their work to a broad audience in a convincing manner.

Keywords

Dacians; Late Iron Age; nationalism; pseudoarchaeology; re-enactment; Romania

‘The Getae and the Dacians ... broadly occupied the current territory of our country, which in antiquity was named Dacia. The Geto-Dacians are ancestors of the Romanian people’ (Băluțoiu and Vlad 1999, 77, my translation). With these words from a fifth-form history textbook, the ancestral roots of the Romanians are summarized and fixed deep in time. Together with the Romans, the Dacians are considered to be the forefathers of the modern nation. However, it is the latter that were chosen to provide an ancestral golden age, since the Dacian past alone, dating back to the Late Iron Age, supplied the uniqueness sought by Romanian nationalists and, at the same time, legitimated the 20th-century borders of the country.

Paradoxically, although this Dacian discourse was largely an academic creation, for the last 25 years it has not been archaeologists leading the

*Cătălin Nicolae Popa, Postdoctoral Fellow, Excellence Cluster Topoi, Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin, Germany. Email: pcatalinn@yahoo.com.

discussions on the Late Iron Age in public media. This role has been acquired by individuals outside the academic sector, many of them without archaeological knowledge, while scholars have come to be nearly absent. That is not to say that Romanian archaeologists have stopped working on the Dacians. There are numerous studies on this topic. However, nearly all research has remained strictly confined to the academic sector without any further dissemination. In order to explore this issue, I start by giving a brief outline concerning the development of the Dacian discourse and research from its beginning in the 19th century. Afterwards I return to the present, describing the key players and how archaeologists may attempt to rectify the current situation.

Discovering the Dacians

The Dacians were discovered by historians and archaeologists in the 19th century.¹ They entered academic discourse at a time when a small elite was striving to give shape to Romania as a nation and a country, neither of which existed prior to the 1800s. In the second half of the 19th century, after the first Romanian state was established, the Dacians began to be linked to the Romanians (e.g. Haşdeu 1984). However, at that point, it was mostly Romania's Latin heritage that was emphasized, serving to legitimate the connection of the small eastern nation with its Latin 'sister nations' from western Europe, especially France, which constituted the model for the newly born country. The Dacians were instead only minimally present and often represented as a barbaric people, contrasting with the civilizing Romans (Boia 2001, 89–95).

The Dacian ancestors gained much ground after 1900 with the rise of the autochthonist movement, which emphasized the unique character of the Romanians rather than their connection with the West. Extreme ideas can already be read in the work of Densuşianu (1913). He argued that the Dacians, the true ancestors of the Romanians, were descendent from the mythical Pelasgian Empire, and thus had given Europe much of its civilization, a line of thinking that in the literature has been called protochronism (Papu 1974; 1976; 1977; Verdery 1991, 167–214). Densuşianu's ideas were further developed in the interwar period by amateur historians motivated by nationalistic zeal (Boia 2001, 98). Yet a national archaeology discourse emphasizing the Dacians was established on an academic level only after the publication of Pârvan's *Getica* (1926), a volume that enjoyed wide distribution and appreciation among both academic and non-academic readers (Lica 2006). This created a situation that characterized much of the period between the two world wars, and especially after the 1960s (Gheorghiu and Schuster 2002, 293–98; Dragoman and Oanţă-Marghitu 2006, 60–62). Extreme forms of this discourse were incorporated by members of the ultra-nationalist Legionary Movement into their propaganda articles at the end of the 1930s and beginning of the 1940s (e.g. Panaitescu 1940; see Boia 2001, 96–100).

The comeback

After the Second World War, during the first two decades of Communism, nationalist interpretations from the interwar period were disguised under a veneer of Marxist–Leninist discourse, which flooded the whole spectrum of

archaeological writing. Officially nationalist ideas were repressed following the installation of Communism in Romania in 1947. Nevertheless, the Dacian tradition initiated by Pârvan was generally maintained by Late Iron Age archaeologists during the following decades, suffering few modifications despite the declared change to a Marxist ideological research framework. The only significant change was the added dimension of the Dacians depicted as proletarian heroes fighting against the imperialist, slave-owning system of the Roman Empire (Matei-Popescu 2007; Pleșa 2006, 171–73). This lasted roughly until Nicolae Ceaușescu took control of Communist Romania, when nationalist writings started to be encouraged in all disciplines. The shift in ideology allowed for nationalist ideas that pre-dated the Second World War to resurface and grow in strength (Matei-Popescu 2007, 284). This is when the Dacians made a spectacular comeback.

It is at this point that the Dacomaniac movement took shape, under the guidance of top Communist Party members. The adepts of these ideas continued the interwar protochronistic discourse and saw the Dacians as the only, or at least the most important, element that led to the ethnogenesis of the Romanians. The emergence of the Dacomaniac movement may be connected to Ceaușescu's visit to Iran in 1971, when he took part in the 2,500-year celebrations of the Persian Empire in Persepolis. Presumably impressed by how the Iranian shah staged the monarchy's history as a success story of two and a half millennia in front of a cheering crowd, Ceaușescu may have become interested in providing a comparably grandiose narrative of the past for Romania; the Dacians offered such an opportunity. A series of historians, such as Mircea Mușat and Ion Ardeleanu (see Constantiniu 2007), as well as an exiled, right-wing collaborator, Iosif Constantin Drăgan, played a role in revealing the potential of the Dacians to the Communist leader. One of the peaks of the Dacomaniac phenomenon was reached in 1980, when, following the Iranian model that Ceaușescu witnessed, celebrations were held for the 2,050th anniversary of the first unitary Romanian state, that of the Geto-Dacian king Burebista (Babeș 2008, 9).

The 'Dacianization' of the public

The heroic image of the Dacians and their link to the Romanians was primarily an academic, archaeological creation. However, with the deliberate intervention of the state, helped by museums, national education and targeted propaganda, the inhabitants of Romania were literally transformed into descendants of the Dacians, a process that I have named the 'Dacianization' of the Romanians (Popa 2015). Such a development was likely aided by the framework of the totalitarian regime, which was able to control all the main sources of information. An important role was also played by a series of films produced between the middle of the 1960s and the 1980s which illustrated the rise to power of the first Dacian kingdom and king (*Burebista*, 1980),² or the struggle of the Dacian ancestors against the Roman invaders (*Dacii*, 1966; *Columna*, 1968).³ By the fall of Communism in 1989, after two decades of Dacomaniac dominant discourse, the 'Dacianization' of the Romanians was more or less complete.

The academic retreat

Despite the Communist regime's pressure during the 1970s and 1980s, many archaeologists refused or were reluctant to abide. In order to avoid introducing Dacomaniac ideas into their scholarly work, they opted to refrain from interpretation and instead retreated into a highly positivistic discourse. This consisted of lengthy artefact and stratigraphy descriptions, accompanied by typological and chronological discussions. However, even in such works, the underlying ideological framework was still nationalist, primarily due to the Late Iron Age research tradition established by Pârvan and propagated by leading Romanian scholarly figures such as Ion Horațiu Crișan (e.g. 1968; 1977a; 1977b), Constantin and Hadrian Daicoviciu (e.g. C. Daicoviciu 1938; 1941; C. Daicoviciu and H. Daicoviciu 1960; H. Daicoviciu 1968; 1972), Ioan Glodariu (e.g. Glodariu and Iaroslavschi 1979; Glodariu 1983), Dumitru Berciu (e.g. 1966; 1981), and Radu and Alexandru Vulpe (e.g. R. Vulpe 1976; A. Vulpe 1976).

Although the Communist regime fell in 1989, the retreat to the nationalistically coloured 'ivory tower of science' was not cast aside and continues to characterize a large spectrum of today's archaeological practice in Romania. Indeed, while Dacomaniac ideas are rarely found in post-Communist academic publications, many Late Iron Age scholars continue to work within the same nationalist framework as in the two previous decades (see Popa 2015 for an extensive discussion on this topic). This phenomenon appears largely because Romanian archaeology today is highly dependent on the research produced during the Communist period and is still rather impervious to other academic traditions (see Anghelinu 2001; 2003).

Dacians for the people

Contemporary Romanians have strongly incorporated ideas of Dacian ancestorhood into their identity. Many people are at this point keen to hear and read about their Iron Age forefathers. This interest stems from the heroic image of the Dacians, still lingering from the Ceaușescu era, which citizens internalize by going through the Romanian education system and by coming in contact with cultural institutions, especially museums. The current positivist archaeology, despite operating within an intrinsically nationalist framework, cannot provide them with the knowledge they want. The 'scientific' archaeological papers and books, with their descriptive style, are naturally unappealing to the public. Consequently, re-enactment groups and pseudoarchaeology magazines, books, websites and documentaries have appeared to satisfy the Romanians' thirst for the past, stirred up, but unquenched, by scholars.⁴

Pseudoarchaeology

Self-proclaimed archaeology experts have produced a plethora of books (e.g. Crainicu 2009; Oltean 2002; 2007; Pănculescu 2008; Săvescu 2002), magazines (e.g. *Dacia magazin*), websites and documentaries about the mighty ancestors, invading the libraries and the Internet. Most of these authors continue the protochronistic or Dacomaniac discourse from the 1980s and propagate the ideas of the Ceaușescu era, leading to the creation

of a mythical aura around the Dacians. Their publications are often backed up by organizations, such as Dacia Revival International Society or Dacia Nemuritoare, that have wealthy financial contributors. Some of these organizations also hold symposia, like the yearly International Dacology Congress, where Dacian enthusiasts present their ideas.

Even the Romanian Orthodox Church has integrated these supposed Late Iron Age ancestors into some theological books (e.g. Vlăducă 2012). In such volumes and various Christian Orthodox websites, authors have often gone as far as proposing a monotheistic-like religion for the Dacians, for which reason the Romanians' forefathers are said to have adopted Christianity easily. Of course such opinions disregard the numerous debates on the character of Late Iron Age religious practices in the Eastern Carpathian basin and the Lower Danube (Petre 2004; Florea 2007; Dana 2008; Taufer 2013) and refer instead, if at all, to the old work of Pârvan (1926, 155–57). The idea of the rapidly Christianized Dacians plays into the widespread myth that the Romanians, as an ethnos, were born Christian, a point that academics have rarely challenged in articles aimed at the larger public (as a rare exception see Theodorescu n.d.). Moreover, sometimes the myth was indirectly sustained in history textbooks (e.g. Bărbulescu *et al.* 2002, 90–91, 103–5). Nevertheless, with some corrections, Romanians can be considered to have incorporated Christianity, or more exactly Orthodox Christianity, as a fundamental element of their identity from the very beginning. However, this only applies when talking about Romanians as a nation, which came into being in the 19th century. It does not apply to the ethnogenesis of the Romanians, generally placed, with some controversies, sometime in the second half the first millennium A.D. (Pascu and Theodorescu 2001).

In the last couple of years Dacomaniac ideas have received a new impetus thanks to the activity of blogger Daniel Roxin, whose rise to fame began with the production of two documentaries in which 'unsettling truths' about the Dacians were 'revealed'. The first of these documentaries, entitled *Dacii. Adevăruri tulburătoare* (The Dacians. Unsettling truths) enjoyed a very large audience over the Internet.⁵ Its viewer count on YouTube reaches close to 1.5 million, which, as far as I am aware, is much larger than any other Romanian-language documentary. The film starts by accusing archaeologists of ignoring evidence and of deliberately producing a false history of the Dacians and the Romanian people. Roxin and his guests then argue that the Dacians are not only the true and only ancestors of the Romanians, but that they also represent the forefathers of the ancient Romans. Practically, the Dacians are depicted as the cradle of ancient civilization just as Densusăianu portrayed them at the beginning of the 20th century (Densusăianu 1913). Similar ideas are introduced in a following documentary titled *Dacii. Noi dezvăluri* (The Dacians. New revelations).⁶ None of the people expressing their opinions in the two films are archaeologists; most of them are retired military officers or journalists. While a small number are academics, of only two historians who make an appearance, one is known for expressing highly nationalistic ideas. Through the two films Roxin became famous overnight, receiving media coverage and even a temporary show on a national television station. He thus established himself as an expert in the field, earning much public attention and personal

gain. Since then he has produced several other documentaries on similar or related topics, one of which had its official launch at the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant. Roxin has also authored an illustrated children's book on the history of the Geto-Dacians and leads the production of a comic book series entitled *Legendele Dacilor* (The Dacian legends). To top it all off, recently he has taken over the administration of part of the site of Brad, an important Late Iron Age settlement in the east of Romania.

Re-enactment groups

In the last few years, re-enactment groups have appeared, re-creating Dacian dress, crafts and religious practices, and especially fighting techniques. In no way can the ideas of such groups be equalled to the fantasies of pseudoarchaeologists, since, unlike Dacomaniacs, they attempt to follow the archaeological evidence as closely as possible. Nevertheless, while the wish to inform people about the past may be genuine, the way the information is presented and the facets of society that are primarily depicted serve to further glorify the Dacian ancestors. Images of warriors in heroic stances are generally chosen by groups to advertise themselves and to illustrate the events in which they participate. Unsurprisingly, re-enacted activities in the main relate to the warrior aspect of the Late Iron Age people, although at certain events there are commendable attempts to provide a broader understanding and representation of Dacian society.

A particular feature relating to re-enactment groups is that some of them have come to enjoy a great deal of legitimacy. This is especially the case with Terra Dacica Aeterna, a large Dacian, Roman and Sarmatian re-enactment group from Romania. Its legitimacy stems from the fact that many of its members, especially its founding members, have an archaeology degree. Some of them even have a Ph.D. and occupy positions in local museums. Their Dacian vision is thus perceived as authentic, as being a fully accurate representation of the past. For this reason they are often invited to schools or museums around the country, so that children or museum visitors can see how the Dacians looked. During such visits they speak from the position of expert on the Dacian way of life and such events regularly attract positive media coverage.

The presence of Dacian re-enactment groups is most visible at so-called 'historical re-enactment' festivals where the main public attraction is to see the Dacians fighting against the Romans. One scholar has described the atmosphere during such battles as similar to that in a football stadium, with people booing when the Dacians lose (Aurel Rustoiu, personal communication). Re-enactment festivals often bring in a significant crowd and media reports on these events are full of praise, often stressing the professionalism and seriousness of the re-enactors.

Dacian re-enactment groups blend fact and fiction similarly to Indiana Jones films (Arnold 2006, 158–59). Due to the need to give an entertaining performance and because of the lack of accurate archaeological information on many aspects of Dacian life, gross liberties are often taken. Thus it is hard for viewers to judge when the one ends and the other begins, particularly when some re-enactment groups claim to provide an accurate representation

of the past. To what degree are re-enactment groups giving material form to the information that we have about Late Iron Age people? To what degree are their re-enactments primarily the artistic representation of Dacian enthusiasts? It is undoubtedly hard to balance the two and the line is blurry, although I would be inclined to view them more as archaeologically based artistic representations (for a broader discussion on re-enactment see Samida 2012; 2014).

Why is this situation problematic?

There is no problem with the existence of ‘alternative archaeologists’ (*sensu* Holtorf 2005a) and re-enactors. It is not uncommon for people to be interested in the past and sometimes to become very enthusiastic about it, sharing their views with other community members. This has occurred in the past, and still occurs today, both in connection with the past of a specific nation, as in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Džino 2014), Albania (Gori 2012), Greece (Bakas 2012) or India (Witzel 2006), and in relation to particular ancient societies, such as ancient Egypt (Jordan 2006) or the Maya (Webster 2006). As an extreme example, there are individuals like Graham Hancock looking for Atlantis, or like Erich von Däniken, who argues for ancient aliens civilizing humanity. Such fringe ideas enjoy a great deal of popularity in several parts of the world, and even, one may argue, on a global scale (Feder 2011), for which reason some scholars have called for action from the archaeological community as a whole (Anderson, Card and Feder 2013; Holly 2015). Therefore the fact that unconventional interpretations of the past are produced in Romania is by no means unique or even unusual.

The issue is that, on a topic of considerable interest for the Romanian people, the ideas of pseudoarchaeologists and re-enactors have greater visibility and circulation in the public sphere than those of archaeologists. As of late, there have been efforts to make archaeological excavations more accessible to the public, through the annual organization of the so-called ‘day of open doors’, when visitors can partake in the full range of activities conducted during fieldwork. Moreover, in a project currently under way, some Late Iron Age buildings and a large number of artefacts are being laser-scanned. The project will result in a public online database and a permanent exhibition at the National Museum of Transylvanian History, where visitors will experience full 3D reconstruction of Late Iron Age sites and objects.⁷ In spite of these recent developments, it happens often that Romanians who are interested in the Late Iron Age past primarily come across the works of pseudoarchaeologists and re-enactors since many of these are far easier to access. Such books, magazines, websites, documentaries and events also offer the most unequivocal discourse; their language and the opinions expressed are easy to digest for non-academic readers. Therefore it can be difficult for people interested in the Dacians today to find something other than the ideas produced by enthusiasts. While the visions of re-enactors are partly based on archaeological knowledge, the fantasies of Dacomaniacs are no more a justifiable alternative to rational archaeology than so-called intelligent design is to evolutionary biology (Fagan and Feder 2006, 720–21).

The dominance of self-declared specialists and re-enactors in the Romanian public sphere contributes to a legitimization of their discourse and a delegitimation of archaeologists. Since mass media today are filled with the ideas, images and documentaries of enthusiasts, they gain legitimacy through public exposure. The consumers of such information media conclude that these are the experts and authorities on the Dacians; these are the people that give a true account of the past. On the other hand, because archaeologists rarely make an appearance in the public media they have lost their authority in the eyes of the country's citizens. For this reason, the few appearances of archaeologists in popular magazines, such as *Historia*, or on public television, where they express more critical and less nationalistically infused ideas about the Late Iron Age past, often provoke a negative or even aggressive reaction from the public. It is not uncommon for online comments to accuse archaeologists of deliberately misinforming the public, of hiding the truth, as it is repeatedly sustained by pseudoarchaeologists such as Roxin, or even of being agents in the pay of foreign powers that seek to undermine Romanian society by denying it its true past and thus future.

A further danger of having such an uncritical, supra-heroic discourse about the past dominate the public sphere is its potential for fuelling right-wing, nationalist or even xenophobic movements. This has happened numerous times in the past, with Nazi Germany and the activity of the SS-Ahnenerbe being the most shocking example (Arnold 1990; 1998; 2002; Härke 2014), and still occurs today (e.g. the Golden Dawn in Greece: see Vasilopoulou and Halikiopoulou 2015). The Dacians were employed without scruple by the ultra-nationalist Legionary Movement at the start of the Second World War to argue for the superior character of the Dacian, and thus Romanian, race:

We are Dacians. In our physical being, in the being of our souls, we feel ourselves to be the descendants of the great and ancient people who were settled in the Carpathian Mountains centuries before Trajan . . . we form part of a great race, a race which is perpetuated in us, the Dacian race (Panaitescu 1940, 1, my translation).

Today, the Dacians continue to be a part of nationalist discourse in Romania (e.g. the magazine *Noi Dacii*). Ideas about the Dacians serve to support the argument for the ancient character of the Romanian nation and its millennial existence in the same land (i.e. the territory of Romania). They are particularly employed to legitimate the ancestral right of the Romanians to the country's land, fostering ethnic tensions with minority groups. This is especially the case in Transylvania, Banat and Crişana, regions that hold an important Hungarian minority, and which were part of the Hungarian Kingdom and the Habsburg Empire from medieval times until 1918. There is considerable potential for similar ideas to be used by nationalists in the current political context, when a significant number of refugees from war-torn countries are arriving in the European Union. Fortunately, the Late Iron Age ancestors have yet to make their appearance in this matter, primarily because Romania has received barely any refugees to this point.

The need for action

In light of the situation outlined here, there is a dire need for the Romanian archaeological community to come down from its ivory tower. Undoubtedly the comfortable option would be for archaeologists to simply ignore everything that is said about the Dacians in the public sphere and concentrate only on their academic work. However, given the dangers that I have enumerated above, scholars should not allow for the current state of affairs to continue and they cannot expect conditions to change on their own. As Arnold (2006, 179) has argued, in such situations it is necessary for academics to engage rather than withdraw. Consequently, echoing the call of Anderson, Card and Feder (2013, 28), I suggest that Romanian archaeologists should take simultaneous dual action.

First, archaeologists should start to engage on a large scale with the arguments of self-declared archaeology experts and the visions of re-enactors to point out their inaccuracies or fallacies. This action should take place both in the academic and especially the public discourse. Until now, few Romanian archaeologists (e.g. Babeş 2003; Petre 2012) have expressed their professional opinion on the phantasmagorical assertions sustained by individuals like Roxin and even fewer, if any, have commented on the artistic representations propagated by re-enactment groups. While it could be argued that engaging with the opinions of such individuals can serve to further legitimize their discourse, just ignoring them altogether produces the same effect (Anderson, Card and Feder 2013, 25). In the face of a near-total apathy from archaeologists, non-specialist volumes are appearing which deconstruct the arguments of the Dacomaniacs and expose what Alexe calls their ‘lunacy’ (Alexe 2015, 49–123; see also Marcu 2015).

It is true that a large majority of the claims made by pseudoarchaeologists appear so far-fetched that it hardly seems necessary to counter them. Furthermore, in many instances, contesting the opinions of Dacomaniacs may prove highly challenging because of the ludicrous nature of the arguments they employ (Fagan and Feder 2006, 721–22). How can one contradict someone who cites ancient written sources or text passages that do not exist?⁸ Nevertheless, it is necessary to do this by referring to verifiable archaeological or historical sources. The absurdity of some claims is clearly not a large enough impediment, since the ideas of Roxin, Drăgan (1976) or Săvescu (2002) are accepted by many members of the public. Archaeologists have to make obvious the falsehood expressed by such individuals and put a stop to academics being ridiculed as ignorant.

Second, in order to counter the ideas of pseudoarchaeologists and balance out the views of re-enactors, Romanian archaeologists should offer alternatives that the public can digest. In the words of Holly, ‘it’s time we talk to the guy sitting next to us on the airplane’ (Holly 2015, 616). The public has to be made aware that there are other views on the Late Iron Age that make more sense and correspond better with the archaeological record and written sources. I am not advocating a return to the nationalistic interpretations from Pârvan’s time or from the Ceauşescu period. Rather, I am suggesting that Romanian scholars should put their current research results and views in a form that is easy for non-academics to read and understand. Additionally,

this dissemination of archaeological ideas should take place on a large scale, using all existing types of media (e.g. books, popular magazines, written press, television, public lectures, documentaries, websites, blogs), and such works need to be clearly distinguished from ‘alternative’ sources. By offering easily accessible, empirically grounded perspectives on the past, archaeologists can give the opportunity to Romanians to make a judgement on the different views that they are exposed to. Naturally, the interpretations proposed by scholars are far less heroic and entertaining than those of Dacomaniacs or re-enactors, but they can be put in a form that is attractive to a broad audience (e.g. the activity of Bradley Lepper 2005). However, it is not the task of archaeologists either to produce a heroic past or to entertain.

When addressing the general public, archaeologists should aim to convince rather than rely on authority. This represents an important element of winning back people’s trust and regaining legitimacy. Rejecting multivocality and claiming that archaeologists alone have the authority and capacity to produce narratives of the past would certainly only serve to aggravate the current situation. Some voices have called for a near-complete equalizing of positions between archaeologists and non-archaeologists (Hamilakis 2009) or even for archaeology to become an integral part of popular culture (Holtorf 2005a; 2005b; 2007). I do not share such an extreme view, and particularly disagree with the ideas of Holtorf that have been rightfully and extensively criticized (Fagan and Feder 2006; Kristiansen 2008). Nevertheless, the relationship between archaeologists and citizens has to be strengthened in a manner adapted to each context (see Dalgligh 2013). It may be useful not only to write for the public, but also to listen to what they have to say and address their interests and questions (Holly 2015, 616). In the case of Romania, engaging with a broad audience in an open and persuasive manner can foster a critical way of thinking among the public, empowering people to reflect on their ideas of the past. Furthermore, it can help to generate wider support for archaeologists and dissipate the idea that they are hiding the true past and that they are supporting the interests of some occult anti-Romanian global conspiracy, as claimed by Dacomaniacs.

Dropping the old baggage

Parallel to regaining public presence, Romanian archaeologists also need to continue the process of escaping from the shadows of Ceauşescu-era scholarship. Several authors have signalled that much of Romanian archaeology, particularly Late Iron Age scholarship, is still stuck in a ‘theory-less’ culture-historical research tradition (e.g. Niculescu 2002; Palincaş 2006; Popa and Ó Ríagáin 2012; Popa 2013; 2015). This has created a situation where, despite an obsession with producing ‘scientific’ and ‘objective’ work, much Late Iron Age research remains caught in a nationalist frame of reference, producing ideologically coloured interpretations. Scholars do not directly or overtly politicize their research. Instead the situation has reached a point where the nationalistic discourse is so subtle, so embedded in everyday archaeological practice and writing, that it is invisible to the authors and academic readers of that environment. Nonetheless, this does not make the phenomenon any less real.

My suggestion has been for archaeologists to be more introspective about their work (Popa 2013; 2015). Romanian scholars should explore the diversity of archaeological approaches in order to understand how knowledge is created and thus situate themselves and their research. This does not mean simply importing concepts from Anglo-Saxon archaeology, but rather finding and enunciating working theories after obtaining an understanding of the various existing options (see Bintliff 2011; Thomas 2015). This requires also an awareness of the role played by the social context of our research, and the complex relationship between us and the subject of our work (Jenkins 2003; Shanks and Tilley 1987, 29–60).

Conclusion

For many the Geto-Dacian 'heritage' has become equal to the pride of being Romanian. The deliberate exaggerations from the Golden Age [i.e. the Ceaușescu period] and other times have become deeply rooted in the collective memory and have made it so that in the common perception Romanian nationalism is tied tightly with a population whose heritage we 'preserve', significantly diluted, in our DNA.

(Petre 2012, my translation)

The Geto-Dacians are cemented in the identity of contemporary Romanians, a phenomenon that owes as much to archaeology as to nationalist–Communist state propaganda. Nowadays, this feeling of identification is brought to new heights, as the Dacian draco, the assumed emblem of the Dacians (Florea 2001), is finding its way onto the Romanian flag at public manifestations. Moreover, the Dacian forefathers, or supposed forefathers, are attributed increasingly grandiose achievements, from the invention of writing to the founding of Rome. Sadly, Romanian archaeologists are watching indifferently how the subject of their work is manipulated and infused with nationalistic zeal.

In this paper I have argued that the Romanian archaeological community needs to realize that their excavations and interpretations are not purely an academic exercise. Not only do the Romanian public care about the results of archaeological research, but many are also genuinely interested in the narratives of the past. I have suggested that Romanian archaeologists should make it a priority to disseminate their interpretations to a broad audience in a convincing manner. Yet this does not entail readopting the nationalist ideas of the 1970s and 1980s; rather the Ceaușescu-era ideas should be increasingly phased out. Last but not least, I have advocated for archaeologists to challenge the representations and interpretations of re-enactors and Dacomaniacs. The artistic or imaginary character of their views and 'evidence' should be laid bare, and the fallacies in their argumentations made obvious.

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Notes

- ¹ The name ‘Dacians’ was employed in ancient Latin texts to refer broadly to the population occupying the northern part of the lower Danube and the river mouth, while in the Greek ancient sources the term Getae was generally used. Starting primarily from a passage belonging to Strabo (*Geography* VII, 3.13), scholars assumed that the two labels referred to the same population and thus coined the widely used modern umbrella term Geto-Dacians.
- ² *Burebista* (1980), director Gh. Vitanidis, producer M. Opreș.
- ³ *Dacii* (1966), director S. Nicolaescu, producer H. Deutschmeister; *Columna* (1968), director M. Drăgan, producers A. Brauner and C. Toma.
- ⁴ I follow the ideas of Fagan (2006) in defining what pseudoarchaeology is and how it differs from archaeology, although there are authors who prefer a different terminology (Rupnow *et al.* 2008).
- ⁵ *Dacii. Adevăruri Tulburătoare* (2012), director D. Roxi, producers D. Roxin and D. Vasilescu, available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=duj_84hnc58.
- ⁶ *Dacii. Noi Dezvăluiri* (2012), director D. Roxi, producers D. Roxin and Box Office Film & Events, available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=3yBrbMrAppw.
- ⁷ The project is entitled Când viața cotidiană antică devine patrimoniu UNESCO. Scanarea, restaurarea digitală și contextualizarea artefactelor dacice din Munții Orăștiei. It is run by the Technical University of Cluj-Napoca and is financed through the Norwegian-funded EEA Grants.
- ⁸ For example, in one of his documentaries Roxin cites the following from Cassius Dio: ‘Let us not forget that Trajan was a true-born Thracian. The wars between Trajan and Decebal were fraternal wars and the Thracians were Dacians’ (*Dacii. Noi Dezvăluiri* 2012, 7:46–48:10, my translation). This ‘quote’ has since been repeated on numerous Dacomaniac websites, without anyone referencing the passage from Cassius Dio where this can be read. Needless to say, I was unable to find any such statement in the ancient author’s writings (Cassius Dio, *Roman history*).

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To renegotiate heritage and citizenship beyond essentialism

Anders Högberg*

Abstract

The heritage sector all through Europe and beyond is historically linked to the task of providing nations with glorious myths of origin within a metaphysical framework of essentialism. This is now shifting. With ambitions to pluralize the past, archaeology

*Anders Högberg, Archaeology, School of Cultural Studies, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Linnaeus University, Kalmar, Sweden. Email: anders.hogberg@lnu.se.