

Between Roman and Other: Approaches to Provincial Identity in Roman Dacia

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The Roman Empire is a defining example of 'us versus them' mentality: insiders versus outsiders; citizens against barbarians. Within archaeological thought, the idea of Romanization has been used for decades, but its limiting implications have been acknowledged. The term's binary assumptions negate the agency of native populations as being overpowered by Roman authority and this bias is only slowly being corrected. This phenomenon is especially notable when researching the Roman frontier; a space between the Roman citizen and barbarian other. How do we understand the history of this violently charged military zone? How does it differ from understanding it as a vital, transitive area of cultural interaction? Roman mentality regarding the might of Rome can be found in ancient texts, coin imagery, and monumental schemes but these artifacts reflect the Roman bias. This paper highlights the issues of investigating non-Roman material, principally pottery, and so calls forth an often-ignored perspective, the native perspective. Archaeologists must understand the bias of ancient authors and recognize the neglect of modern researchers who fail to acknowledge native agency under the veil of "Romanization." The province of Dacia, in modern Romania, provides a fascinating case study that illuminates the bias of interpretation and its effects on modern mis-interpretations of the region's shifting cultural identity.

Introduction

Archaeological interpretation is based on one's framework of understanding, the theoretical basis in which an archaeologist operates, and if not careful, this basis could easily turn into bias. This paper will highlight the issues that arise when an archaeologist investigates the past under the framework of Romanization, using the case study of the short-lived Roman province Dacia, in modern Romania, as an example. This paper will deliver a critique of Romanization as a concept and then illustrate its issues within a Dacian context, presenting the history of cultural interaction between Rome and Dacia before the Dacian Wars. With this understanding in place, the paper will highlight how governmental influence in archaeology had pressured certain results and how modern archaeologists are correcting this previous damage. After the theoretical debate is presented, it will be highlighted in practice through interpreting archaeological pottery in this region. All of this work is presented with the intention of contributing to the fundamental question: What happened to the Dacian population after Roman invasion?

The history of the Dacian province is one that often gets neglected in the Roman imperial narrative mainly due to the region's modern political environment, which has left Dacia with a confused archaeological past so rife with contention and uncertainty that most (English) writers have simply left Dacia out of the equation, including the Oxford History of Roman Europe.¹ Oftentimes, maps of the Roman Empire disregard Dacia² because the province was continually reorganized throughout its short 130 year occupation, it is only when maps are specifically labelled "Roman Empire at its Greatest Extent" or "c. 117 A.D."³ that the unusual province is portrayed. To our modern perspective, it seems obvious that Dacia would not last as a Roman province due to its odd position, seemingly sticking out into

barbarian territory,⁴ but the Roman frontier was usually determined by geographical barriers such as rivers, deserts, and, in the case of Dacia, mountains.⁵ The Carpathian Mountains protected most of Roman Dacia and passes through the mountains allowed the province to be monitored by forts⁶ just like any other province within the empire. Despite the urge to ignore this complex province, the interactions between Rome and the Dacian kingdom in the period leading up to its conquest under Trajan are of vital importance and Dacia's history is one that shows the extreme of Roman takeover.

In the context of Dacia, archaeological theory in Romania has stemmed around the debate of Dacian survival.⁷ Mostly this argument developed from Eutropius⁸ as the Late Roman writer offhandedly recalled the fate of native Dacians after the Dacian Wars: "Trajan brought from the whole Roman world countless masses of people to live in the fields and in the cities, since Dacia was exhausted of men after the long war with Decebalus."⁹ Some scholars have interpreted this sentence to mean that the native Dacians did not survive the Roman conquest¹⁰ but that is not the only possible outcome for the indigenous population as Romanian archaeologists have segregated into three schools of thought: extermination, relocation, or assimilation.¹¹ For a long time, the reason for one's belief did not rest on factual evidence but was influenced by the government at the time and Romanization was a convenient tool to interpret history to produce a desired result. While this has been much discussed in Romanian literature, the purpose of this paper is to reveal a gap in the English literature as well as highlight the importance of ancient Dacia related to Roman archaeology. The perspective of Eastern Europe within the Roman Empire is one that has been largely forgotten by English scholarship and only slowly being acknowledged.

Romanization as a Previous Framework

When researching the role of the native in Roman provincial archaeology, a major debate emerges as theoretical concepts struggle to explain the cultural transition from indigenous to Roman lifestyles. Many archaeologists are inclined to follow the Romanization theory that Roman culture overpowered barbarian societies in the empire, as evident by the fact that Roman culture is quite distinctive archaeologically and is abundant within the archaeological record. However, in recent scholarship archaeologists have admitted that this line of thinking is not constructive so more nuanced theories of cultural interaction have been suggested. Within the past twenty years, Romanization as a concept has come under fire for its biased implications.¹² Romanization suggests a binary understanding of cultural interaction with no sense of equality between the groups: it is either Roman or native, this or that. Scholars who use the term give the sense that Roman culture was superior and overpowered all others, which is not objective academia. Perspective is essential and in Roman archaeology, the focus is on Roman power, Roman command, and Roman strength, which essentially ignores the agency of the native populations in the expanding Roman empire. Since Millet's elite-driven conception of cultural change,¹³ Romanization has been greatly contested because of the term's implications that denies the agency of the native people¹⁴ by assuming that when two different cultures encounter one another, one becomes dominated by the other: in this case, Roman culture overpowering the provincial native cultures. However, the reality was not so simply defined as cultural interactions are "more complex [because] native and Roman interacted together to produce unique forms."¹⁵

Although Romanization is the dominant term, "the exact anthropological or historical meaning is unclear"¹⁶ and so theorists

have suggested other interpretations like creolization,¹⁷ discrepant experience,¹⁸ and agency.¹⁹ However, the application of such modern political conceptions onto ancient situations does not entirely work, as creolization "implies the existence of originally 'pure' ethnic groups [which is not] appropriate to a world like the ancient Mediterranean [and continental Europe as well], where intense cultural interaction has been going on at least since the Neolithic."²⁰ Instead of Roman preference, there are various other ways to explain Roman culture encountering others which do not imply overpowering or superiority, such as a blending or mixing behaviors to form the new cultures found throughout the empire. However, none of these possibilities come to mind when one uses Romanization as the only description for cultural interaction. Roman identity was not a static being that remained the same from Republic to Empire to Late Antiquity,²¹ especially as the military, the main proponents of the spread of Roman culture, were "recruited from across the Empire, [who were] all individually influenced by their own relationships with and interpretations of Rome."²² Migrations and interactions for centuries were shaping this region and thus complicate the idea of ancient identity.

Romanian Historiography

The political history of Romania must be considered because "nationalistic agenda have dominated most previous scholarships on Dacia."²³ During the development of statehood in Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, most governments manipulated their past to promote long-lasting independence from other nations, while simultaneously unifying the populace. However, Romania at this time was the only Balkan nation "not to have had an historically attested mediaeval empire to look back upon."²⁴ Instead Transylvania, and surrounding sections, has been the site of conquer and political unrest for centuries while control over the area has

passed through many hands (Dacians, Romans, Goths, Huns, Saxons and Slavs) and each change of power further confused its history.²⁵ So what was the history of the people of Romania? If the Dacians survived the Roman invasion and continued to thrive around or among the Romans, the modern Romanians can argue their ancestry to a fierce and resistant people that have endured for over two thousand years.²⁶ If the Dacians were annihilated during the Wars, then outsiders have continually won the right to the land over the locals and so began the millennium of shifting powers.

In such an instance, archaeology would be appropriate as an objective solution to understand the past but as the European counties were being organized, archaeologists were not employed to be objective but to validate the government in power,²⁷ as was the case during the time of the German Habsburg empire²⁸ (who claimed that Saxons conquered the region in the 1300s) and the Austro-Hungarian Empire²⁹ (who believed that medieval Hungarians came to this area in the 1100s). This manipulation of evidence is even more apparent with the introduction of the Soviet Union in Eastern Europe as communist officials “kept the sovereignty of Transylvania as an open issue as a tool to unbalance Hungary and Romania.”³⁰ With the implementation of the Communist regime, no archaeological excavations took place in Roman Dacia because “Soviet ideologists regarded the classical world as a typical expression of the ‘decadent West’.”³¹ Instead of archaeology, the political regime in the Stalin era of the 1950s was concerned with changing the identity of Romania by “documenting and emphasizing the presence of the Slavic populations in Romania,” changing the name of the country so it no longer reflected an association with Rome, and forced university linguists “to confirm that Romanian was a Slavic language and not a member of the Romance family.”³² These corrupted pieces of evidence illuminate the fact that any documents

recorded from this time would most likely be degraded by the government’s interference. This thread of determinism continued to the opposite extreme during the Ceausescu³³ era in which evidence for the Dacians survival was promoted³⁴ “by the stereotypes of the ‘70s and ‘80s, submitted to the Romanian Communist Party’s official propaganda [acknowledging that] the funding of research is always connected to some ‘priorities’ drawn by the political authority.”³⁵

While searching for a national and unifying identity, governments turned to antiquity to enhance their perceived proto-historical longevity. The modern countries of Roman Europe are guilty of manipulating the past to promote their own agendas, using museums³⁶ and statues³⁷ as visible symbols of fabricated ancient national identities, especially considering that these areas were mostly composed of various tribes with no forced sense of loyalty to a higher ethnic identity. This was especially common during the period of statehood establishment, of which examples³⁸ include Germany who adopted Arminius as a symbol of resistance, freedom and unification due to his victory over Varus and three Roman legions, France who used Vercingetorix of the Arverni tribe to represent Gaulish resistance to Caesar,³⁹ and Belgium who recognized Ambiorix of the Eburones as a national hero. The obvious issue with using these tribal figures to represent a unified, millenniums old national identity is the fact that these figures did not think in terms of modern statehood and so cannot be used to symbolize an identity that was not within their context. However, this rationale did not stop these governments from using history as a justification of their actions. The difference between these Western Europe nations and Romania is the fact that Decebalus, the fierce and last Dacian king, did in fact unify various tribes under his rule, and so could be used to represent modern identity.⁴⁰ Pressure from other countries was prevalent as the 2050th

anniversary of Romania in 1980 could have been a response to the imminent Bulgarian celebrations of the 1300th anniversary of the First Bulgarian Empire in 1981.⁴¹

The most influential studies dedicated to cultural change have occurred in the western provinces, in the choice areas of Britain, Germany, France, and Spain, which is not a coincidence but is due to the “national points of view of modern scholars, the advancement of archaeological fieldwork, and the overall balance of power in the modern western world.”⁴² The reason that Romanization is so prevalent is due to its political consequence during the establishment of modern European countries, as it justified colonization which was a popular ideology throughout Europe at this time.⁴³ This modern bias has hindered the study of the empire as a whole in the often neglected area of Eastern Europe. The context of this region is necessary, both its ancient context and modern historical relevance.

The Debate through Pottery

The research devoted to “native” pottery in the area has reflected the constantly shifting views of academia. The blatant bias of past research “has had a harmful effect on medium- and long-term scientific research.”⁴⁴ The effect of research bias on pottery over the centuries has been noted by Mircea Negru. Regarding pottery, archaeologists in Romania only gradually took notice of native pottery and its implications beginning in the 1850s. Important early archaeologists began to question the continuity of Dacian habitations during the Roman period, such as Carl Goos and Friedrich Müller, both of whom were Transylvanian Saxons which influenced their archaeological ideologies. An example of early Dacian discovery is from central Romania at the Roman camp of Sighișoara (German name: Schässburg) where “Dacian dishes [were] discovered in the Roman settlement” which might

have belonged to “the colonists that were, perhaps, mixed among the inhabitants of the Dacian province.”⁴⁵ Aside from merely acknowledging Dacian material, there were many other issues that contended research at this time. The first bibliography of Dacia was not completed until 1872 by Alexandru Odobescu who frustratingly struggled with a lack of collaboration between archaeologists and inadequate excavation reports that still neglected a great deal of Dacian artifacts, often by simply labelling the finds as “many bricks and pottery fragments.”⁴⁶ Another major issue for research in this period is the discrepancy between excavations in the Transylvania region and the area outside of the Carpathian Mountains. Lastly, it was during this era that archaeology was often rushed and chaotic, as proven by Cezar Bolliac’s “sensational” work ‘The Carpathians Trumpet’ which was part of the movement that “set Romanian archaeology off on the wrong track.”⁴⁷

It was only during the inter-war period of the twentieth century that a systematic approach to the study of Roman Dacian indigenous pottery was established. While the persistence of the native population had been hinted at throughout the nineteenth century, research in full finally went into this issue and evidence for Dacian pottery was found at Roman camps, civilian sites, and funerary contexts and has only increased over the decades. First in 1925 at the Lechința de Mureș settlement near Cluj-Napoca in central Romania, the excavator commented that “Late Iron Age shapes keep repeating during the Roman period” and “Late Iron Age shapes are being transposed in Roman clay,”⁴⁸ the implications of which were staggering. Many excavators of Roman camps noted that “the pottery retained – in both technique and ornamentation – its old, local elements” or the pottery “might be a local tradition” or that the pottery was similar in style to those found in pre-Roman settlements.⁴⁹ Even though these reports were important to the study of Dacian pottery, rather quickly they morphed and

were used to support the propaganda notion of Romanian continuity. Few scientists were willing to explain that these reports were exaggerations of archaeological material that was “incompletely studied and then locked away in Museum stores, or still buried.”⁵⁰

After the Second World War, with Romania ruled by a Communist government, even more examples of Dacian pottery were discovered, with archaeologists even claiming that Dacian pottery comprised 25% of the total pottery found on one site. Research also expanded into rural areas, although still not to the degree necessary for modern research standards today. Prominent archaeologists arose during this period such as Dumitru Protase, Nicolae Gudea, and Mihail Macrea.⁵¹ Protase published pottery drawings that began the typological study of Roman period Dacian pottery. Macrea calculated that hand-made Dacian pottery represented roughly 5% of the total pottery found at his Roman site, which is a more realistic statistic than the 25% suggested a few decades earlier for another site. Lastly, Gudea initiated systematic and minute research into native pottery, allowing for observations that illustrated the evolution of native pottery during the Roman period compared to the Dacian Late Iron Age period. Decades later, Gudea published a criticism of previous research into this subject concerning the scientists’ lax study methods and lack of publications, additionally Gudea provides “criteria for scientific analysis, and [offers] a possible model for future research.”⁵²

Despite the advances outlined above, there is still much that needs to be done in this area of study and it is no small task. While Protase started a typology of Roman period Dacian pottery, there is no complete or definitive set which is “a fact that still makes it difficult to differentiate [Roman period Dacian pottery] from the Geto-Dacian classical Late Iron Age pottery.”⁵³ When reading through pottery publications,

it must be remembered that researchers often defined Dacian pottery purely on the basis of the piece being a hand-made or local production, even though the piece could just as easily be Celtic or Roman or belonging to earlier or later periods instead of conveniently being Dacian. As of now, there are certain aspects of Dacian pottery that have been understood. Firstly, the Dacians had a myriad of pottery production centers all over the region including rural settlements.⁵⁴ Once the Roman period began, indigenous hand-made pottery became more abundant than indigenous wheel-made pottery, understood on the theory that Roman wheel-made production took over indigenous practice due to Roman production producing cheaper and better-quality pottery.⁵⁵ The frequency of these types is first within cemeteries and rural settlements, then Roman camps and civilian settlements, next in villas, and lastly, seldomly in cities but not limited geographically, instead in a uniform distribution throughout Roman Dacia.⁵⁶

Archaeology in Romania Today

The case of Dacia is complex and violent but not to be simply discounted as a political nuisance better left ignored, instead the case of surviving Dacian identity must be searched for in new ways with objective scientific intrigue, not political influence or ingrained bias. Thus far, pottery seems to be the most substantial material to suggest Dacian continuity, even though there are still a multitude of considerations regarding this evidence. Although this paper highlights that more unbiased research is necessary for this subject, it is a fact that indigenous pottery illustrates continued native presence throughout the Roman period and it must be based on two causes: first, there was a preference for this type of pottery as well as a demand for it, and second, there were potters with the knowledge and skill to produce this specific type of pottery.

The Dacian population did survive the

Roman conquest, and the suggestion that they were all annihilated is merely historical propaganda. The real archaeological questions are how many survived, in what capacities, how did Dacian culture change with the influx of Roman migrants, and how did Dacian culture affect the Roman culture that invaded the region? These questions have only begun to be investigated in earnest without governmental incentive.⁵⁷ Linguistic studies from inscriptions within the province reveals that most of the names are Roman⁵⁸ while few have Thracian/Dacian roots,⁵⁹ which is to be expected as the Dacians did not have their own written language. Additionally, “evidence for the indigenous population of Dacia following the conquest is poor” except for those conscripted into the army.⁶⁰ On the other hand, research for the Dacian population after Roman conquest within the province is a minority and difficult to find in the archaeological record, as the natives were more likely to have survived in rural settings⁶¹ with difficult-to-detect archaeological evidence. With the introduction of Roman opposition during Trajan’s Dacian Wars, the Dacian presence becomes disorganized, lost in the chaos of takeover,⁶² but this does not mean that they should be neglected, especially as the survival of the group still has political affects being felt today in its modern relation of Romania.⁶³

Endnotes:

- 1 Bispham 2008: Dacia is not even listed in the Index.
- 2 Bispham 2008, Fig. 1, 360-361.
- 3 As Trajan was the last expansionist emperor.
- 4 Luttwak 1975, 100.
- 5 Breeze 2011, 4.
- 6 Berzovan 2016.
- 7 Lockyear 2004, 33.
- 8 Oxford Classical Dictionary 2016, Eutropius: “a fourth century CE historian known for his impartiality and good judgement.”
- 9 Eutropius *Breviary*, 8.6.2.
- 10 Ruscu 2004, 75.
- 11 Ruscu 2004, 75; Ellis 1998, 221.
- 12 Millet 1990, 212. In arguing for an elite-based top-down societal change, Millet caused outrage with his social evolution theory.
- 13 Millet 1990, 212.
- 14 Revell 2010, 7.
- 15 Hope 1997, 248.
- 16 Woolf 1998, 119.
- 17 Webster 2001.
- 18 Mattingly 2006.
- 19 Barrett 1997; Gardner 2003.
- 20 Terrenato 2008, 236.
- 21 Revell 2010, 8.
- 22 Hope 1997, 248.
- 23 Chappell 2010, 92.
- 24 Lockyear 2004, 34: Which made the Dacians a popular historical group to utilize for political gain.
- 25 Ellis 1998, 221.
- 26 Oltean 2007, 6; Chappell 2010, 93; Ellis 1998, 223: Based on linguistic and territorial heritage.
- 27 Chappell 2010, 90; Ellis 1998, 225; Oltean 2007, 6.
- 28 Hodgkin 1887, 101.
- 29 Ehrhardt 1970, 223; Wade 1970, 114.
- 30 Chappell 2010, 92.
- 31 Diaconescu 2004, 87: Except for Sarmizegetusa, Romula, and some rescue excavations, but this research was tainted with bias.
- 32 Ellis 1998, 224.
- 33 Nicolae Ceausescu was the second and last “president” of Romania during the Soviet period. This government at this time was totalitarian and Ceausescu acted as a dictator.
- 34 Ellis 1998, 225.
- 35 Teodor 2015, 125.
- 36 Breeze 2011, 10.
- 37 Maureen 2001, 12.
- 38 Maureen 2001, 12-13.
- 39 Although as the German government is quick to note, Arminius succeeded in his goal while Vercingetorix did not.
- 40 The Dacian king symbolized strength against outside rule, which was of vital importance during the time of Romania’s independence from the Hungarian Empire.
- 41 Lockyear 2004, 34.

- 42 Terrenato 2008, 236.
43 Terrenato 2008, 234.
44 Negru 2003, 1.
45 Negru 2003, 2.
46 Negru 2003, 3.
47 Negru 2003, 2.
48 Negru 2003, 3.
49 Negru 2003, 3.
50 Negru 2003, 4.
51 Negru 2003, 5-6.
52 Negru 2003, 8.
53 Negru 2003, 9.
54 Negru 2003, 35.
55 Negru 2003, 35.
56 Negru 2003, 28.
57 Institute of Cultural Memory Romania, various excavation reports.
58 Ruscu 2004, 78; Varga 2016, 77.
59 Haynes and Hanson 2004, 22: "As Thraco-Dacian names were also used extensively beyond Dacia's Roman boundaries, their presence on an inscription from the province may not automatically be assumed to refer to a native Dacian rather than an immigrant from south of the Danube."
60 Haynes and Hanson 2004, 22. Example of inscriptions with *dacia* flax weapons inscribed at Hadrian's Wall Birdoswald fort.
61 Oltean 2007; Teodor 2015, 91.
62 Ellis 1998; Ruscu 2004; Oltean 2007.
63 Ellis 1998; Oltean 2007; Chappell 2010.

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