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Vitalie BÂRCĂ

Alin Henț, Rethinking the Late Iron Age Dacians. A Historiographical and Archaeological Perspective on Status Identities, Cluj-Napoca, Mega Publishing House, 2025, 259 p. ISBN 978-606-020-997-3 256

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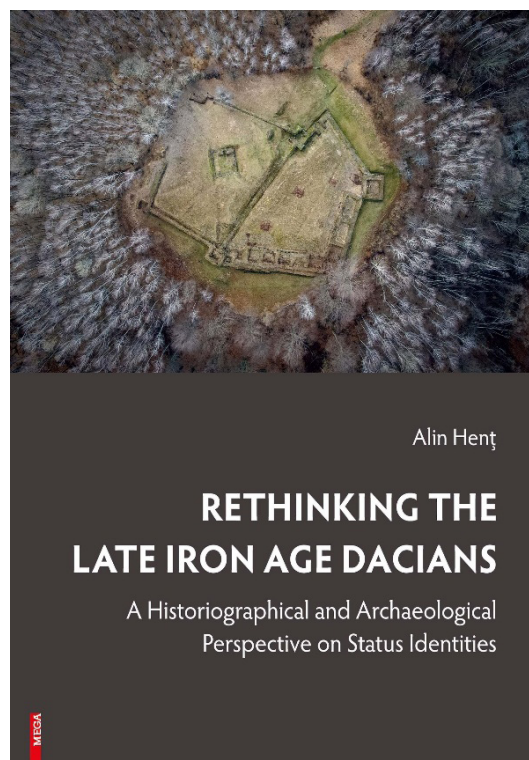
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Reviews

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Alin Henț, *Rethinking the Late Iron Age Dacians. A Historiographical and Archaeological Perspective on Status Identities*, Cluj-Napoca, Mega Publishing House, 2025, 259 p. ISBN 978-606-020-997-3.

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In recent decades, the study of Dacian communities of the Late Iron Age has undergone considerable development, both through the multiplication of archaeological investigations and through the diversification of the theoretical perspectives employed in the interpretation of the available evidence. Nevertheless, despite the methodological progress achieved at the international level in the fields of identity archaeology, ethnicity studies, and the investigation of power structures in pre-state societies, a significant part of the literature devoted to the Dacian world has continued to operate within paradigms formulated during the second half of the twentieth century. Thus, concepts such as the “Dacian state,” the “Dacian aristocracy,” “Geto-Dacian unity,” or “Dacian civilisation” have often been employed as self-evident realities, without their theoretical premises being subjected to systematic critical examination.

It is within this intellectual context that Alin Henț’s volume, *Rethinking the Late Iron Age Dacians. A Historiographical and Archaeological Perspective on Status Identities*, published in the “Doctoral Theses” series of Mega Publishing House and based on the revised and adapted version of the doctoral dissertation defended by the author at Babeș-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca, should be situated. The work represents one of the most important methodological contributions to Dacian studies in recent years. The book does not seek to provide a new synthesis of Dacian political history, nor does

it aim to reformulate the traditional narrative concerning the kingdoms of Burebista and Decebalus. The author's objective is far more profound and, in a certain sense, more demanding: a critical reassessment of the conceptual tools through which the image of the Dacians has been constructed in modern historiography and archaeology. The doctoral character of the research is evident both in the breadth of the documentation and the consistency of its critical apparatus, as well as in the constant concern for clarifying the theoretical and methodological premises underlying the interpretation of the archaeological record. Equally important, the 57 figures included in the volume contribute to supporting the argumentation and facilitate the understanding of the issues discussed, usefully complementing the author's analytical approach.

From this perspective, the work stands at the intersection of the history of historiography, archaeological theory, and the analysis of material evidence. It is closely aligned with the directions developed in recent decades by scholars such as Ian Hodder, John Barrett, Timothy Earle, Stephen Shennan, and Siân Jones, among others, who have emphasised the constructed character of identities and the necessity of avoiding the automatic identification of material culture with ethnicity and political organisation. At the same time, the volume implicitly engages with Romanian scholarship devoted to the Dacian world, proposing a critical reassessment of interpretations that have become almost canonical within the specialised literature.

The structure of the work reflects this intellectual ambition particularly well. Following a brief introduction (pp. 7–9) and acknowledgements (pp. 10–11), the author organises his argument into two major sections. The first part, devoted to historiography, comprises preliminary remarks (pp. 15–16), the chapter *Setting the Agenda* (pp. 17–28), and the chapter *The Historiography of the Problem, or the Problem of the Historiography* (pp. 29–74). The second part is dedicated to the archaeological evidence and includes preliminary remarks (pp. 77–78), the chapters *The Landscape of Settlements* (pp. 79–132), *The Landscape of Burials* (pp. 133–187), and *The Landscape of Iconography* (pp. 188–209), followed by conclusions (pp. 210–214) and an extensive bibliography (pp. 215–259). This organisation is significant because it clearly indicates the author's intention to demonstrate that the analysis of archaeological data cannot be separated from the analysis of the interpretative traditions that have shaped their reading.

From the very introduction, Alin Henț defines his methodological position through reference to two observations that have become fundamental to contemporary scholarship. The first is that the available information concerning Dacian communities is fragmentary and often indirect. The second is that the past is accessible only through interpretations produced by scholars, interpretations that inevitably reflect the concerns and intellectual context of their own age. From this perspective, the volume seeks not only to speak about the Dacians, but also about the ways in which different generations of historians and archaeologists have constructed their image.

The first chapter, *Setting the Agenda* (pp. 17–28), functions as a genuine methodological manifesto. Here, the principal

research questions are formulated and the concepts that structure the entire argument are introduced. The author begins by discussing the problem of the ethnonyms “Getae” and “Dacians,” one of the most debated topics in Romanian historiography. Far from considering this issue resolved, Alin Henț demonstrates that the relationship between the two designations is far more complex than has been presented in numerous synthetic works.

The analysis of the ancient sources highlights the fluid and contextual character of the terminology employed by Greek and Roman authors. Consequently, the complete identification of the Getae with the Dacians and their transformation into a single historical and ethnic entity represent, rather, the result of modern historiographical constructions than a conclusion imposed by the ancient evidence. This observation has important implications because it compels the researcher to distinguish between the categories employed by the sources and those subsequently produced by specialised scholarship.

The author then turns to one of the most sensitive issues in European archaeology: the relationship between material culture and identity. Traditionally, many studies devoted to the Dacian world have proceeded from the assumption that certain types of artefacts, funerary practices, or forms of habitation reflect the existence of distinct ethnic groups. Alin Henț explicitly challenges this approach and argues that such a relationship cannot be demonstrated automatically.

Perhaps the most important theoretical contribution of the chapter is the introduction of the concept of *status identity*. Drawing upon recent scholarship on identity and social representation, the author proposes a shift in emphasis from ethnicity to status. Archaeological objects are no longer interpreted primarily as ethnic markers, but rather as instruments through which individuals and groups expressed their social position, prestige, and membership in particular networks of relationships.

This change of perspective is fundamental to the entire work. Instead of searching for “Dacians” within material culture, the author seeks to identify the mechanisms through which communities constructed and represented social differences. From this point of view, the volume clearly distances itself from the culture-historical tradition and aligns itself with directions developed within post-processual archaeology.

If the first chapter establishes the conceptual framework of the research, the second, *The Historiography of the Problem, or the Problem of the Historiography* (pp. 29–74), represents perhaps one of the most valuable contributions of the entire volume. Rather than providing a simple history of research, the author offers a critical analysis of the ways in which the principal interpretations concerning the socio-political organisation of Dacian communities have been produced and legitimised.

A particular merit of this section lies in the constant contextualisation of scholarly production. Alin Henț demonstrates that interpretations of Dacian society cannot be separated from the intellectual and political environments in which they were formulated. Thus, the various models concerning political organisation, social structure, and the identity of Dacian communities are analysed in relation to

the evolution of European historiography, the influence of Marxism, the transformations brought about by the communist regime, and the reconfigurations that followed 1989.

The author carefully traces the manner in which concepts such as “aristocracy,” “state,” “tribe,” “social class,” and “centralised power” were introduced and employed in the interpretation of archaeological evidence. The result is a convincing demonstration that many of these concepts were borrowed from external theoretical models and applied to the Dacian world without sufficient verification of their compatibility with archaeologically documented realities.

The second part of the volume opens with the chapter *The Landscape of Settlements* (pp. 79–132), one of the most substantial empirical sections of the work. If the previous chapters were devoted primarily to the critical examination of historiographical traditions and theoretical concepts, the author now turns his attention to the archaeological evidence itself, seeking to determine to what extent it supports the existence of the social and political structures commonly attributed to the Dacian world. The chapter represents a direct attempt to test the explanatory models discussed earlier and to evaluate the degree to which they correspond to the available archaeological data.

A central place in the analysis is occupied by the problem of fortified settlements and their role in the organisation of Late Iron Age communities. In the specialised literature, such sites have frequently been interpreted as centres of political power, residences of elites, or even as proto-urban formations. Alin Henț subjects these interpretations to careful critical examination and demonstrates that many of them rely on analogies and assumptions that are not always sufficiently supported by the archaeological evidence. Rather than accepting traditional explanations, the author reconsiders the available data and evaluates the extent to which they actually justify the conclusions that have been drawn from them.

An important component of the chapter is represented by the discussion of the relationship between the fortified settlements of the Carpathian-Danubian region and the *oppida* of Central and Western Europe. The author notes that similarities between these categories of sites have often been overemphasised, whereas significant differences concerning size, internal organisation, and archaeological context have frequently been overlooked. From this perspective, the automatic transfer of concepts developed for the interpretation of the Celtic *oppida* to the Dacian world becomes problematic and requires a more nuanced assessment.

Particularly significant are the case studies devoted to sites such as Poiana, Răcățau, and Brad. Through a detailed examination of settlement layouts, architectural remains, and artefact distributions, the author demonstrates that social differentiation is often more difficult to identify than has traditionally been assumed. Objects commonly regarded as indicators of prestige do not appear to be concentrated exclusively within clearly delimited areas, while the distinction between fortified and unfortified spaces does not necessarily correspond to rigid social divisions. Such observations lead the author to question interpretations

that associate particular sectors of settlements automatically with elite groups.

A particularly interesting example is provided by the reinterpretation of the monumental structure discovered at Brad. Long regarded as a princely residence or aristocratic palace, the building is reassessed in light of its archaeological context and available comparisons. The author argues that alternative interpretations should also be considered and suggests that the structure may have fulfilled communal, ceremonial, or public functions. This reassessment is significant because it illustrates the extent to which archaeological interpretations may be influenced by pre-existing assumptions concerning political hierarchy and elite authority.

The importance of the chapter extends beyond the reinterpretation of individual sites. More fundamentally, the author proposes an alternative model for understanding social organisation. The archaeological evidence, in his view, points to communities characterised by a relatively broad distribution of prestige and authority, in which social differences certainly existed but did not necessarily lead to the emergence of highly centralised political structures. Power appears less as the expression of a rigid hierarchy and more as the result of negotiation, interaction, and social relationships. This interpretation constitutes one of the most important contributions of the volume and directly challenges a number of deeply rooted assumptions within Dacian studies.

If the chapter on settlements seeks to reassess the concept of political centres, the following chapter, *The Landscape of Burials* (pp. 133–187), focuses on the relationship between funerary practices and social identity. This section constitutes one of the central components of the entire volume and contains some of the author’s most original observations. Here, the author explores the ways in which burial practices have been employed in the reconstruction of ethnic, social, and political identities and evaluates the validity of these interpretations in light of the available evidence.

The discussion begins with the Padea–Panagyurski Kolonii group, traditionally interpreted as the expression of a warrior aristocracy that played an important role in the formation of the political structures associated with Burebista. The author subjects this interpretation to critical scrutiny and demonstrates that the relationship between funerary discoveries and broader political reconstructions is far from straightforward. Many of the conclusions advanced in earlier scholarship, he argues, rely upon assumptions that deserve closer examination.

One of the most important observations concerns the remarkable diversity of funerary practices. Tumulus burials, pit cremations, and urn cremations coexist across a vast geographical area and cannot automatically be associated with distinct ethnic groups. This conclusion is particularly important because funerary ritual has frequently been employed as one of the principal criteria for reconstructing the ethnic landscape of the Late Iron Age. Alin Henț demonstrates that such an approach risks oversimplifying a much more complex reality.

The author also emphasises that identical archaeological evidence may generate very different interpretations

depending on the historiographical traditions and theoretical frameworks adopted by researchers. Discoveries interpreted in one context as evidence for the presence of Dacian communities may be understood elsewhere as reflecting Scordiscan, tribal, or south-Danubian influences. Such observations reinforce one of the fundamental arguments of the volume, namely that archaeological interpretation is never entirely independent of the intellectual context within which it is produced.

Particularly important is the analysis of funerary inventories. Although burial practices vary considerably, the objects deposited in graves often display a striking degree of similarity. Weapons, horse gear, and various categories of personal ornaments occur across extensive regions and transcend presumed ethnic boundaries. On this basis, Alin Henț argues that these artefacts should be interpreted primarily as expressions of status identities rather than ethnic identities. This conclusion provides one of the strongest empirical foundations for the theoretical model proposed throughout the volume.

Equally noteworthy are the discussions concerning the reuse of older funerary landscapes, the possible existence of cenotaphs, and practices involving the ritual destruction of weapons. By integrating perspectives derived from funerary anthropology and memory studies, the author offers a more nuanced understanding of the symbolic dimensions of burial practices and demonstrates that funerary evidence cannot be reduced solely to questions of ethnicity or political organisation.

The final empirical chapter, *The Landscape of Iconography* (pp. 188–209), provides a natural continuation of the argument developed in the preceding sections. Here the author examines visual representations and their role in the construction and communication of social identities. The chapter proceeds from the premise that images do not simply reflect social realities but actively participate in the production of meaning and in the negotiation of status and prestige.

Through the analysis of various categories of representations, the author demonstrates that iconography offers valuable insights into the mechanisms through which social differences were expressed and recognised. Rather than seeking ethnic symbols or coherent ideological programmes, the author focuses on the ways in which images contributed to the construction of status identities and social distinctions. In doing so, he complements the conclusions reached in the previous chapters and further strengthens the interpretative framework proposed throughout the volume.

The chapter is particularly valuable because it expands the range of evidence considered in the reconstruction of social identities. While settlement patterns and funerary practices have long occupied a central place in discussions of the Dacian world, iconographic evidence has often received less systematic attention. By incorporating this category of material into his analysis, the author demonstrates the potential of a broader and more diversified approach to the study of Late Iron Age communities.

The volume concludes with the chapter *Conclusions and Directions for Further Research* (pp. 210–214), in which the author synthesises the principal results of his investigation

and returns to the fundamental issues discussed throughout the work. Rather than offering definitive answers, Alin Henț emphasises the complexity of the phenomena under examination and the necessity of maintaining a critical perspective on the concepts and interpretative frameworks employed in the study of Dacian communities of the Late Iron Age. In his view, many of the questions traditionally considered settled remain open to discussion and require renewed methodological reflection.

One of the most important conclusions of the volume is that a number of categories frequently employed in the interpretation of the Dacian world, such as ethnicity, aristocracy, political centralisation, and statehood, are considerably more problematic than is generally assumed. The archaeological evidence does not always support the existence of sharply defined social hierarchies or highly centralised political structures, while many of the prevailing interpretations owe as much to historiographical traditions as to the archaeological record itself.

From this perspective, the concept of *status identity* emerges as one of the most significant contributions of the work. By shifting the focus from ethnicity to status, the author proposes an interpretative framework capable of accommodating the diversity and complexity of the available evidence without reducing it to rigid ethnic or political categories. Such an approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of the mechanisms through which individuals and groups expressed prestige, authority, and social distinction within the Dacian world.

The conclusions also emphasise the importance of interdisciplinary dialogue and the necessity of integrating theoretical advances from archaeology, anthropology, sociology, and identity studies into future research. According to the author, only such an approach can overcome the limitations imposed by traditional explanatory models and open new avenues for the investigation of Late Iron Age communities in the Carpathian-Danubian region.

One of the principal strengths of the volume lies in its capacity to combine historiographical critique with the systematic analysis of archaeological evidence. Rather than treating these domains separately, Alin Henț demonstrates that archaeological interpretations are inseparable from the intellectual traditions within which they are produced. This observation is particularly valuable in the case of Dacian studies, where a number of concepts and explanatory models have become deeply rooted over the course of several decades.

Equally noteworthy is the methodological consistency of the work. The concepts introduced in the opening chapters are not merely discussed at a theoretical level but are applied throughout the empirical analysis. As a result, the volume achieves a remarkable degree of coherence between theoretical reflection and archaeological interpretation, a quality that is not always encountered in studies of this kind.

The work is also distinguished by the breadth of its documentation and by its critical engagement with both Romanian and international scholarship. The bibliography reflects a thorough familiarity with the relevant literature, while the discussion of theoretical approaches demonstrates the author's ability to situate Dacian studies within broader

debates concerning identity, power, and social organisation in prehistoric and protohistoric societies.

Despite the undeniable merits of the volume, several observations may nevertheless be made. One of the principal difficulties concerns the relationship between material culture and social identity. Although the author convincingly demonstrates the limitations of traditional ethnic interpretations, the alternative framework centred on status identities is not always easier to verify archaeologically. In certain cases, the distinction between ethnic and status-related expressions remains difficult to establish with certainty, and some of the proposed interpretations inevitably retain a hypothetical character.

A second issue concerns the interpretation of political organisation. Alin Henț rightly questions many of the assumptions underlying traditional models of the Dacian kingdom and the existence of a highly centralised political structure. Nevertheless, the rejection of such models does not automatically resolve the problem of how large-scale political coordination functioned during the periods associated with Burebista and Decebalus. Consequently, a number of questions concerning the nature and scale of political authority remain open.

Certain reservations may also be expressed regarding the applicability of some theoretical models borrowed from contemporary archaeological discourse. Although these approaches provide valuable analytical tools, their transfer to the specific realities of the Dacian world inevitably raises questions concerning context, comparability, and scale. Such observations, however, do not diminish the value of the volume; rather, they reflect the complexity of the issues under discussion and the ambitious nature of the research undertaken by the author.

These observations should not be understood as fundamental limitations of the work. On the contrary, they highlight one of its principal strengths: the willingness to question long-established assumptions and to propose alternative perspectives on problems that have often been treated as resolved. Many of the criticisms that may be formulated are, in reality, a direct consequence of the intellectual ambition that characterises the entire project.

In conclusion, *Rethinking the Late Iron Age Dacians. A Historiographical and Archaeological Perspective on Status Identities* represents one of the most important methodological contributions to Dacian studies published in

recent years. Through the originality of its interpretations, the breadth of its documentation, and the consistency of its argumentation, the volume goes beyond the limits of a conventional synthesis and offers a substantial reassessment of some of the most influential paradigms in the archaeology and historiography of the Dacian world.

One of the fundamental merits of the book lies in the author's ability to integrate historiographical critique, archaeological analysis, and theoretical reflection into a coherent interpretative framework. Linguistic categories, archaeological evidence, and historiographical constructions are not treated as separate fields of inquiry, but as interconnected dimensions of the same research problem. This approach makes it possible to formulate new questions and to offer original perspectives on issues that have often been regarded as settled.

The volume is further distinguished by the author's considerable erudition and his capacity to place Dacian studies in dialogue with broader international debates. The extensive bibliography, the attention devoted to methodological issues, and the critical use of sources make the work an indispensable tool for researchers interested in the archaeology of the Late Iron Age, identity studies, and the social organisation of prehistoric and protohistoric communities.

Even if many of the conclusions advanced in the volume will continue to be debated and reassessed, this should not be regarded as a weakness. On the contrary, one of the principal merits of the work lies precisely in its capacity to reopen discussions often considered closed and to encourage the critical re-evaluation of deeply rooted assumptions. Major syntheses derive their value not only from the answers they provide, but also from the questions they formulate and from their ability to stimulate new directions of research.

Through the originality of its interpretations, its interdisciplinary approach, and the rigour of its argumentation, *Rethinking the Late Iron Age Dacians* establishes itself as an essential contribution to contemporary Dacian studies. Regardless of the position scholars may ultimately adopt with respect to its conclusions, the volume will undoubtedly remain an important point of reference in future debates concerning identity, power, and social organisation in the Dacian world and the Carpathian-Danubian region.