



INSTITUTE OF ARCHEOLOGY
AND ART HISTORY OF ROMANIAN
ACADEMY CLUJ-NAPOCA



UNIVERSITATEA TEHNICĂ
DIN CLUJ-NAPOCA

JAHA
JOURNAL OF ANCIENT HISTORY
AND ARCHAEOLOGY

editura
MEGA

Journal of Ancient History and Archaeology

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.14795/j.v13i1>

ISSN 2360 266x

ISSN-L 2360 266x



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No. 13.1/2026

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Design & layout: Petru Ureche



EDITURA MEGA | www.edituramega.ro
e-mail: mega@edituramega.ro

HISTORIOGRAPHY

THE PERSISTENCE OF THE PAST: A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE OF ROMANIAN LATE IRON AGE ARCHAEOLOGY (AND ITS RELATED FEATURES) IN POST-COMMUNISM AND NEOLIBERALISM

Abstract: This paper interrogates the structural and ideological continuities in Romanian late Iron Age archaeology from the communist period to the present. It argues that the dominant anti-communist discourse following the 1989 Revolution did not lead to a renewal, but rather facilitated a retreat into positivism/objectivism and the preservation of nationalist and culture-historical paradigms. The study further explores how these academic frameworks, combined with post-1989 socioeconomic context, have allowed for the rise of ‘dacopathy’—a pseudohistorical movement—and the recent commodification of the past through historical re-enactment, both of which are increasingly mobilised by present-day national-populist agendas.

Keywords: *anti-communism, post-communism, neoliberalism, national-populism, late Iron Age.*

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The fall of communism and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union, initiated within the countries of the Eastern Bloc, were widely interpreted as a symbolic victory for the Western world. This transition suggested the demonstrable superiority of liberal democracy and free-market capitalism over state-controlled command economies in terms of productivity and overall systematic efficacy—a phenomenon famously articulated by Francis Fukuyama as the “End of History”¹.

For the nations of Central and Eastern Europe, the dissolution of the Soviet Bloc inaugurated a period defined by a profound crisis of sociocultural identity. This era was synonymous with the dismantling of established social structures and a simultaneous, often contentious, endeavour to reconfigure a new ‘national’ identity. These internal processes were inextricably linked to comprehensive political, economic, and social reforms designed explicitly to affect a decisive decoupling from the structural realities and historical legacies of the communist past.

In Romania, these efforts, as is widely recognised, materialised in a wholesale condemnation of the former socialist reality. This repudiation was

¹ FUKUYAMA 1989; FUKUYAMA 1992.

largely predicated on equating the previous regime with the state-sponsored crimes of the authorities—particularly during the early decades—as well as severe censorship and the pervasive systemic shortages characteristic of the final years of the Ceaușescu regime. Consequently, with the exception of a marginalised group of nostalgics, a broad consensus emerged across all social strata—encompassing intellectuals, politicians and, notably, the working class—in denouncing the communist legacy.

ANTI-COMMUNISM

Following 1989, anti-communist discourse emerged as a highly expedient intellectual framework², eventually crystallising into the “dominant ideology of the post-communist transition”³. However, within this prevailing narrative, Romanian communism was often refashioned as a construct rooted more in Orwellian dystopian tropes than in a multifaceted socioeconomic and political reality. As Vladimir Pasti observed in *Noul capitalism românesc*⁴ [The New Romanian Capitalism], this reductionist ideological model originated in Western scholarship and was further reinforced by the often-undifferentiated accounts of former dissidents before being extensively adopted by the post-communist intelligentsia. Under this schematic framework, Romanian society was depicted as an amorphous mass, stultified by state propaganda and subjugated by a pervasive apparatus, epitomised by the political police—the Securitate. Ultimately, these representations offer less insight into the historical reality of the totalitarian period than they do into the mnemonic predispositions of the post-communist era and its selective reconstruction of the past.

The anti-communist discourse permeated diverse social strata and rapidly diffused across all cultural domains. Romanian archaeology was swept up in this shift, yet the field’s transition was deeply shaped by the same mnemonic predispositions—the ingrained ways practitioners remembered and processed the past—which dictated how the communist era was actually treated and interpreted in the post-communist years.

For example, a number of post-communist studies have interrogated the ideological strictures imposed upon Romanian archaeology during the communist period⁵, elucidating a process of systemic instrumentalization. Within this framework, the discipline was co-opted as a central apparatus for the dissemination of state ideology; rather than pursuing an analysis of past material culture, archaeological practice was frequently subordinated to the imperatives of the regime. Such entanglement reached its zenith in the historiography of the late Iron Age, where the Dacian past was assimilated into a teleological construct, effectively weaponizing the period to furnish historical legitimacy for the regime’s political agendas.

Notwithstanding these critiques, a historiographical lacuna remains regarding the agency of those practitioners who actively facilitated these mandates. Far from being merely passive subjects of state coercion, a segment of the academic community functioned as vital conduits for official dogma, parlaying their ideological alignment into significant institutional and social capital. Consequently, as Daniel Barbu aptly observed, while the dominant post-communist discourse has adopted a pervasive tone of lamentation, it has largely avoided a rigorous interrogation of professional opportunism and the internal mechanisms of collaboration that sustained the system⁶.

Few scholars have ventured beyond these initial critiques. Some have interrogated the history of the discipline through a Bourdieusian perspective, employing the interconnected concepts of field, habitus, and capital to elucidate how power dynamics and social reproduction were mediated by the ingrained dispositions and social positions of practitioners within the archaeological arena⁷. Conversely, other scholars have adopted a more radical stance, moving beyond (post) structural analysis to explicitly identify those individuals who actively collaborated with the communist regime and functioned as primary exponents of its official ideology⁸.

In certain instances, the anti-communist discourse was so radical that it attempted to efface the period entirely; thus, it is claimed that “the savage intervention of totalitarianism interrupted the evolution [of the Romanian archaeology] and destroyed the real historical process” established in the interwar period⁹. Despite the widespread condemnation of this period, it is too easily forgotten that the communist regime sustained Romania’s modernisation process; regardless of how hasty, voluntaristic, or distorted this mission may have been, it continued the transformation of Romanian society¹⁰. Archaeology was intrinsically linked to this process of modernisation and structural change. For late Iron Age archaeology, the beginnings of communism are synonymous with the extensive systematic research campaigns in the Orăștie Mountains, as well as at other sites that became benchmarks for the period, such as Popești (Giurgiu County) and Cârloănești (Buzău County). Furthermore, the literacy efforts—equated here with research—alongside the industrialisation and urbanisation of the following decades, led to the discovery of an impressive volume of late Iron Age material and the initiation of excavations at highly significant sites, such as Răcătău and Brad¹¹ (both in Bacău County).

However, the anti-communist discourse did not prevent the recycling of pre-1989 ideas, concepts, and theoretical frameworks, which continued to be mobilised as instruments for acquiring academic prestige. As several studies have underscored, a near-perfect synonymy between certain works published before and immediately after 1989

⁶ BARBU 2004, 111.

⁷ DRAGOMAN/OANȚĂ-MARGHITU 2006; DRAGOMAN/OANȚĂ-MARGHITU 2013a; PALINCAȘ 2006; PALINCAȘ 2024.

⁸ See especially BOIA 1997, 112–114, 268; BOIA 2001, 104–105, 221.

⁹ MIHAILESCU-BÎRLIBA 1996–1997, 164.

¹⁰ BAN 2014, 49–55.

¹¹ See here BĂRBULESCU 2012, 324–327.

² BARBU 2004, 107–121.

³ POENARU 2017, 141–157.

⁴ PASTI 2006, 191.

⁵ For example, MIHĂILESCU-BÎRLIBA 1996–1997; more recently BĂRBULESCU 2022, 281–296.

exist¹². From a Foucauldian perspective¹³, it can be argued that despite the rupture created by the 1989 Revolution, the underlying terms of the discourse remained relatively stable over time, maintaining a structural continuity within the discipline.

Equally important, the anti-communist discourse performed a crucial repressive function by strategically conflating Marxian critical thought with the practice of state communism and, by extension, with totalitarianism. This mechanical association effectively served to systematically delegitimise the inherent intellectual validity of Marxist theory. Nevertheless, this ‘historical delegitimization of Marxism’ must be situated within a broader phenomenon spanning the last three to four decades. Driven by the ascendant popularity of postmodern approaches—a shift that occurred somewhat in tandem with the collapse of communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe—Marxism witnessed a gradual erosion of its ideological appeal and has become increasingly marginalised within contemporary theoretical debate¹⁴. Nowadays, there are few archaeologists who operate under Marxist schema, and fewer who identify as Marxist archaeologists¹⁵.

In the context of the Romanian late Iron Age archaeology, Marxist theory remained intrinsically ‘alien’ to the indigenous research tradition, even throughout the communist period. This was primarily due to the fact that Marxism was imposed by force and ‘from above’, resulting in a ‘distorted Marxist character’ that lacked organic intellectual roots. Consequently, the evolution of historiographical narratives between 1945 and 1989 can be characterised as a trajectory moving from a formal and superficial application of Marxist theories, through a phase of relative liberalisation, before ultimately reverting to an (almost) far-right discourse regarding the Dacian past¹⁶.

Addressing this ‘historical delegitimization of Marxism’, Gelu Florea has mentioned that the post-1989 transition precipitated the wholesale abandonment of major theoretical inquiries. Specifically, macro-historical themes such as social structures, property regimes, and the genesis of social formations—which were omnipresent in the preceding period—were systematically discarded from the historiographical narrative¹⁷. To these, one might add the concept of mode of production, which has almost completely disappeared from archaeological theory¹⁸. When Marxist concepts do surface in contemporary discourse¹⁹, they are frequently subjected to a reductive, vulgarised interpretation—specifically, as a form of economic determinism. This bias oversimplifies historical change by exclusively attributing societal shifts to underlying economic factors, failing to account for the complex interplay of social, cultural, and political dynamics.

Even today, long after Romania’s integration into Euro-Atlantic and European structures, anti-communist discourse retains significant potency, often serving to marginalise or outright reject leftist ideologies²⁰. This mirrors the rhetorical question posed by Alex Cistelean regarding the adoption of Western values: “Are they pluralism, tolerance, diversity, and, implicitly, gay parades, relativism and political correctness, or are they the true original values of the West, Greek philosophy and the Christianity of the Holy Fathers, to which we must return and to which, in fact, we must also bring back the corrupt and decayed West?”²¹. Consequently, anti-communist discourse has not only sustained but also catalysed the proliferation of specific paradigms—as will be discussed in the following sections—that have long been entrenched in historiography, namely positivism/objectivism, nationalism, and the culture-historical approach.

Furthermore, contemporary Romanian scholarship on the late Iron Age is characterised by the ubiquitous use of ‘elites’—a term frequently deployed as a conceptual counterpoint to orthodox Marxist class analysis and one highly popular in the current neoliberal era. Despite its pervasiveness, the category remains critically under-theorised, as scholarship rarely delineates the specific sociopolitical parameters that define ‘elite’ status. As J. D. Hill²² underscored in his critique of British (middle and late) Iron Age archaeology, the term is plagued by a problematic conceptual elasticity. It is employed as an undifferentiated umbrella term encompassing a heterogeneous array of social actors: from affluent agrarian producers and feudal suzerains to established aristocracies within complex pre-industrial polities, and even Roman sovereigns. In practice, these disparate ‘elites’ are embedded within fundamentally distinct socio-structural configurations, each characterised by unique power asymmetries, property regimes, and mechanisms of economic exploitation. Consequently, as the same author has further argued, the use of ‘elite’ as a monolithic category fails to illuminate the specific societal frameworks from which these figures emerge; the term serves as an analytically vacuous catch-all that is simultaneously all-encompassing and theoretically indistinct.

In spite of the aforementioned, ideological factions also existed within the anti-communist discourse, becoming apparent early in the post-communist period. The fall of communism in Central and Eastern Europe was, to some extent, synonymous with the end of state-sponsored culture. Publishing houses, journals, and book fairs transitioned from being heavily monitored and funded by the state apparatus to navigating the turbulent waters of capitalism and the free market independently.

Many intellectuals who had championed anti-communism found themselves in a precarious, even unanticipated, situation after the collapse of communism. Although the majority were initially enthusiastic regarding societal transformations, their fervour was quickly tempered

¹² NICULESCU 2004–2005; NICULESCU 2007; HENȚ 2025a, 62–66; HENȚ 2025b, 13–17.

¹³ FOUCAULT 1972.

¹⁴ IACONO 2018.

¹⁵ Among the few recent exceptions, see the papers in MILEVSKI 2023.

¹⁶ HENȚ 2020; HENȚ 2025a, 46–62.

¹⁷ FLOREA 2007, 103; FLOREA 2020, 425–426.

¹⁸ Exceptions in HENȚ 2025a, 89–94; HENȚ 2025c, 145–150.

¹⁹ For example, SÎRBU 2004.

²⁰ See also here DRAGOMAN/OANȚĂ-MARGHITU 2006, 69; DRAGOMAN/OANȚĂ-MARGHITU, 2013a, 33.

²¹ CISTELECAN 2019, 65.

²² HILL 2011, 248.

as they realised that few were willing to support their elitist aspirations or engage with their specific cultural and scientific dilemmas²³. In essence, a segment of the dominant anti-communist discourse evolved into what has been recently defined as “pragmatic anti-capitalism”²⁴ (though it was rarely acknowledged as such). As Teodora Dumitru has noted regarding the literary field, “after 1989, the axiomatic anti-communism under which the Romanian intelligentsia operated... began to be accompanied by an incipient critique of the effects of real capitalism, visible in Romania from the very first year of freedom, when the conditions for the existence of magazines, publishing houses, book fairs, etc., became increasingly uncertain. The fact that freedom and democracy do not necessarily coincide with liberal capitalism, or that freedom does not necessarily imply progress or prosperity, became realities difficult to manage”²⁵.

The case of Romanian archaeology is equally illustrative. Most scientific publications edited by major central research institutions or regional and local museums suffered significant delays in the early post-communist years—a phenomenon not frequently encountered under the previous regime. Furthermore, in certain instances, a lack of budgetary allocations led not only to a decrease in editorial frequency but also to a reduction in page counts, a situation attributed to the new socioeconomic realities of capitalism and the free market²⁶.

These same socioeconomic pressures of the early post-communist years also generated various adaptation and survival mechanisms, including kitsch, mass culture, or the postmodern logic of ‘anything goes’²⁷. Beyond these—and highly significant in the context of the subsequent discussion—was the emergence of some publications and the organisation of events, such as conferences and workshops, initiated by private endeavours. Behind many of these initiatives were various Romanian entrepreneurs who had emigrated to the capitalist West during the Ceaușescu regime—whose pasts are often murky—or individuals whose connections to the former Securitate are patently evident. These publications and events promised to bring to the forefront “the true history of Romanians/Romania”, a history supposedly “intentionally hidden” by mainstream historiography.

DACOPATHY

As is well known within the archaeological community in Romania and beyond, the term ‘dacopathy’—a term closer to the medical spectrum—was coined by the Romanian writer, journalist, filmmaker, and translator, based in Belgium, Dan Alexe. As an ‘outsider’ to everyday life in Romania, Alexe managed through his two books, especially *Dacopathia și alte rătăciri românești*²⁸ [Dacopathy and Other Romanian Aberrations], but also *De-a dacii și romanii. O introducere în*

*istoria limbii și etnogenezei românilor*²⁹ [Playing Dacians and Romans. An Introduction to the History of the Romanian Language and Ethnogenesis], to confront both long-lasting myths and contemporary social media distortions. These works succeed in shaking and dismantling many of these tropes, written in a playful, and often humorous manner.

As Alexe noted³⁰, the roots of present-day dacopathy are extremely old. A primary starting point is *Dacia preistorică* [Prehistoric Dacia], written by Nicolae Densușianu³¹. This massive volume, comprising over 1100 pages, is in fact a pseudo-archaeological narrative, constructed from mythologised facts and a pronounced reliance on speculative etymologies. Far from a rigorous academic work, it functions essentially as a fantasy novel, depicting an expansive array of deities, heroic figures, and civilisations that collectively reconstruct a lost prehistoric world. Furthermore, the text endeavours to portray episodes of mythical events, purportedly reconstructed through selective interpretations of folklore and toponymy, placed within a fictive chronology and anchored to a sacralised geography. The core methodology involves a seamless fusion of valid historical information with purely fictional elements, structured around the fantastical concept of a ‘Pelagian empire’. This mythical entity is presented as the singular, foundational source of global history, language, and civilisation, with its epicentre located in modern-day Romania. A critical analysis reveals a profound absence of a rigorous scholarship; however, this substantive lack of criticality, combined with a misdirected enthusiasm, created an enduring illusion of erudition. Consequently, the book has ascended to the status of the ‘Bible’ both within the latter phase of Ceaușescu regime, but also for contemporary dacopathy³².

Therefore, the second main source of present-day dacopathy is the very strong nationalist movement of late Romanian communism, known as ‘protochronism’. Originally coined to refer to the supposed pioneering character of the Romanian culture, protochronism can be better understood as the tendency to ascribe an idealised past to the country based on questionable data and subjective interpretation.

As articulated by Mihai Iovănel³³, the phenomenon of protochronism has been subjected to three distinct scholarly interpretations. The first, advanced by Katherine Verdery³⁴, views it within the context of the internal struggle for resource distribution in the 1970s and 1980s cultural sphere. The second, by Alexandra Tomiță³⁵, frames it as the official programme of the Ceaușescu regime. The third, representing “the synthesis of these antithetical positions”, is found in the work of Lionel Decebal Roșca³⁶, who identifies it as a structural symptom of a peripheral culture in relation to global modernity. More recently, Ștefan Baghiu proposed a fourth reading: protochronism as a reactionary, yet

²³ BAGHIU 2025a.

²⁴ DUMITRU 2019.

²⁵ DUMITRU 2019, 5.

²⁶ BABEȘ 1999, 9; BABEȘ 2002, 11; BABEȘ 2008–2009, 12–13.

²⁷ CĂRTĂRESCU 2024, 458–480; see also here BAGHIU 2025a.

²⁸ ALEXE 2015; ALEXE 2025.

²⁹ ALEXE 2023.

³⁰ ALEXE 2015, 5–6; ALEXE 2025, 7–8.

³¹ DENSUȘIANU 1913.

³² See here GRANCEA 2007; GRANCEA 2009, 197–222; FLOREA 2019.

³³ IOVĂNEL 2021, 70; Initially, IOVĂNEL 2017, 63 operated with only two scholarly interpretations of protochronism.

³⁴ VERDERY 1991; VERDERY 1994.

³⁵ TOMIȚĂ 2007.

³⁶ ROȘCA 2013.

decolonising project. As Baghiu stated “under Ceaușescu, protochronism emerged from political isolation and desires of economic independence due to Romania’s rift with the Soviet Union and the impossible love affair with the West”³⁷.

Following the collapse of the communist regime, state-sponsored protochronism metastasized into dacopathy—a movement that is financially more profitable, decentralised, and fundamentally anti-academic. ‘Released’ from the official censorship, the narrative advocating for the supremacy of the late Iron Age Dacians rapidly devolved from state dogma into a populist conspiracy theory, offering a compensatory ‘glorious past’ to a society struggling with post-communist identity³⁸.

The narrative revolves around several recurring pseudohistorical claims. The central tenet relies on a ‘historical reversal’. Basically, the traditional linguistic model is being inverted: proponents claim that modern Romanian language does not stem from Latin, but rather that Latin is a ‘dialect’ of the Dacian (in some cases, pre-Dacian) language. Consequently, the Romans did not conquer the Dacians, therefore, the military confrontations from the late-first and early-second centuries CE were only ‘brotherly’ wars. According to another claim, the Dacians (pre-Dacians, in some instances) were the original civilisers of Europe, predating and influencing the Greek and Roman cultures. Furthermore, monotheism began within the Dacians and Christianity is merely a ‘copy’ of the Dacian religion. The proponents also claim that the Tărtăria Tablets—Neolithic clay tablets set—represent the first writing system in human history, predating Sumer. In order to insulate these claims from archaeological and historical evidence, the movement relies heavily on ‘Vatican Secrets’ trope. This conspiracy theory acts as a universal defence mechanism: it posits that the Vatican Library holds secret or stolen Dacian manuscripts proving their supremacy, but the Catholic Church hides them to maintain the false authority of Western civilisation.

In the 1990s and the early 2000s, the ‘architects’ of the ‘new’ narrative, in my opinion, were a quartet comprising: the financier—Iosif Constantin Drăgan; the populariser—Pavel Coruț; the pseudo-academic—G. D. Iscru; and the ‘international’ spokesman—Napoleon Săvescu³⁹.

A wealthy expatriate with historical ties to the far-right Iron Guard and sympathy for national communism, Iosif Constantin Drăgan provided the financial infrastructure. Drăgan, already a key figure in the protochronist movement of the late Ceaușescu’s regime⁴⁰—already published several books, the most important being *Noi, traciai*⁴¹ [We, the Thracians], and the associated periodical with the same title—significantly expanded his platform after 1989. This expansion included continuing the publication of pseudohistorical syntheses⁴², founding the Drăgan European University in Lugoj (Timiș County), and establishing a multi-

platform media apparatus (publishing house, TV/radio, and various newspapers), bankrolling the idea that Romania was the true cradle of European civilisation, and the Romanian people the oldest in Europe⁴³. The intelligence officer Pavel Coruț was instrumental in commodifying dacopathy. In his best-selling fiction series *Octogonul* [The Octagon], Coruț blended espionage thrillers with esoteric Dacian mythology⁴⁴. Basically, he moved the discourse from dry academic debates to mass-market consumption. G. D. Iscru operated as the fringe historian, providing a crucial but ultimately false veneer of scholarly legitimacy. Unlike the authors focused on mass-market fiction, Iscru⁴⁵ directly targeted mainstream historical education. He aggressively promoted the thesis that the Romanization of Dacia was a biological and historical impossibility, seeking to systematically dismantle the traditional, academically accepted Roman foundation of Romanian ethnogenesis and identity. Napoleon Săvescu, a physician based in the United States, made the most concerted effort to project dacopathy onto the ‘international’ stage and furnished it with a fabricated institutional façade. Through the establishment of the Dacia Revival International Society, Săvescu initiated a sustained series of so-called ‘Congresses of Dacology’ beginning in the early 2000s. Critically, these events mimicked the formal structure of academic conferences⁴⁶ while systematically omitting the necessary mechanisms of peer review and epistemological rigour, thereby manufacturing an illusion of scholarly consensus⁴⁷. Săvescu’s core text, *Noi nu suntem urmașii Romei*⁴⁸ [We Are Not Descendants of Rome] (1999), serves as the ideological manifesto, constituting an aggressive rejection of the dominant model of ethnogenesis and advocating for an unsupported thesis of Dacian civilisational and linguistic primacy. This narrative was continuously amplified and disseminated via the periodical *Dacia Magazin* [Dacia Magazine], which functioned as the movement dedicated communication channel, ensuring ideological coherence among its readership.

The post-1989 dacopathy also saw a shift by its principal proponents, moving beyond mere textual dissemination and fringe meetings, toward—what can be called—the materialisation and institutionalisation of their pseudohistorical tenets within the public domain. This process was frequently facilitated by the tacit consent or, in some cases, active collaboration of both central and local public administrations. The core strategy involved the investment of substantial financial capital to establish a tangible presence for this revisionist ideology. For example, Iosif Constantin Drăgan funded the construction of the colossal rock sculpture of Decebalus in the Danube Gorges, between the modern localities of Dubova and Eșelnița (both in Mehedinți County)—now a major tourist landmark. Napoleon Săvescu, through the Dacia Revival

³⁷ BAGHIU 2025a.

³⁸ See also here PETRE 2001.

³⁹ However, the list is far more extensive, see GRANCEA 2007; GRANCEA 2009, 197–222; DANA 2008, 378–387.

⁴⁰ See BOIA 1997, 113–114; BOIA 2001, 105.

⁴¹ DRĂGAN 1976.

⁴² DRĂGAN 1994; DRĂGAN 2000.

⁴³ DANA 2008, 381.

⁴⁴ IOVĂNEL 2017, 197; IOVĂNEL 2021, 481–482; FELSEGHI 2023a; FELSEGHI 2023b.

⁴⁵ ISCRU 1998.

⁴⁶ In certain instances, these proceedings also saw the participation of some members of the Romanian archaeological community.

⁴⁷ DANA 2008, 386.

⁴⁸ SĂVESCU 1999.

International Society, directed a concerted public statutory campaign aimed at integrating this false narrative into the collective memory and local topography. Key examples of this material intervention include: the erection of the Byrebastas monument in Orăștie (Hunedoara County) in 2001; the unveiling of a commemorative statue for Nicolae Densușianu, the ideology's progenitor, in his homeland, locality of Densuș (Hunedoara County), alongside the installation of a monument dedicated to the Tărtăria Tablets in Tărtăria (Alba County), both in 2002; the placement of a huge sculptural representation of the Dacian curved sword at the main entrance point in Orăștie from Deva in 2007⁴⁹. These concerted initiatives successfully translated, in my opinion, this fringe narrative into tangible, spatially embedded cultural artefacts, effectively achieving a degree of *de facto* officialization for this pseudohistory.

Concurrent with the rising prominence of television and, subsequently, the internet during the 2000s and 2010s, dacopathy proliferated to such an extent that even Dan Alexe, in the aforementioned work *Dacopatia și alte rătăciri românești*, was able to identify a vast documentary corpus online. For sure, this trend can be entropically correlated with the waning influence of centralised educational system⁵⁰—nowadays, a significant portion of the populace appears either to lack the critical skills or the motivation to distinguish between credible and unsubstantiated information.

A paradigmatic example of the aforementioned is provided by the two documentaries *Dacii. Adevăruri tulburătoare* [The Dacians: Unsettling Truths] and *Dacii. Noi dezvăluiri* [The Dacians: New Revelations], still available on YouTube. Produced and narrated by the roguish 'polymath' Daniel Roxin, these documentaries perpetuate the aforementioned ideas: the Dacians represent the sole ancestral line of the modern Romanians; their societal achievements underpin much of the European—in some instance, global—civilisation. The inclusion of various non-specialists, including journalists, university professors from disparate disciplines, and even former Romanian Army officers, lends the narrative a veneer of academic rigour, thereby manufacturing a convincing illusion of scientific legitimacy.

It is interesting to note that only a few specialists have formally challenged the tenets of dacopathy. The most conspicuous exceptions include historians and archaeologists such as Professors Zoe Petre⁵¹, Mircea Babeș⁵², Ioan Piso⁵³, Sorin Nemeti⁵⁴, and the Romanian-French scholar, Dan Dana⁵⁵ who responded either in scientific articles and books, or in interviews given to the Romanian newspapers or cultural magazines. Crucially, the decisions of these academics to publicly counter this narrative have frequently resulted in their characterisation as 'national traitors' by adherents of the ideology⁵⁶.

⁴⁹ Many of this information are still available on the Dacia Revival International Society official website: <https://dacia.org>.

⁵⁰ See also here IOVĂNEL 2017, 197.

⁵¹ PETRE 2001; PETRE 2012.

⁵² BABEȘ 2003.

⁵³ PISO 2012.

⁵⁴ NEMETI 2019.

⁵⁵ DANA 2008, 378–387.

⁵⁶ POPA 2015, 353; POPA 2016, 36.

Whether surprising or not, contemporary proponents and key figures promoting dacopathy have demonstrated a notable convergence with modern anti-establishments movements. Specific proponents—such as Daniel Roxin—ranked among the most vociferous and prominent critics of the governmental response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent global vaccination campaign, while also actively engaging in recent elections⁵⁷.

Nowadays, mainly because the rate of functional illiteracy in Romania approaches 50%, this fringe historical narrative is primarily disseminated through rapidly expanding social media channels, including video platforms like YouTube and short-form content on TikTok. These digital platforms facilitate the widespread distribution of dacopathy, effectively bypassing traditional gatekeepers—academia and some well-intentioned journalists. The resulting online communities and information silos exerted significant, measurable influence, particularly during the turbulent political climate surrounding the annulled presidential elections of the late 2024. This active political role, where fringe narrative shape real-world electoral dynamics, exemplifies a broader, transnational phenomenon recently characterised by observers as "loony platform politics"⁵⁸—a term referring to the impact of ideologically extreme content that finds mainstream traction via social media algorithms.

The ease with which dacopathy—this myth-centric historical claim—merged with anti-vaccine, anti-lockdown, and political activism, coupled with the present-day context, dominated by post-truth politics, fake news, and AI-generated content, illustrates the growing trend where historical revisionism acts as a foundational component of modern (national-)populist mobilisation against perceived global elites and scientific consensus. As Jason Stanley has shown in a recent book, these are the specific mechanisms through which fascism works: "fascist politicians justify their ideas by breaking down a common sense of history in creating a mythic past to support their vision for the present. They rewrite the population's shared understanding of reality by twisting the language of ideals through propaganda and promoting anti-intellectualism, attacking universities and educational systems that might challenge their ideas. Eventually, with these techniques, fascist politics creates a state of unreality, in which conspiracy theories and fake news replace reasoned debate"⁵⁹.

Moreover, the post-1989 proliferation of dacopathy can also be correlated with the following convergent phenomena: a systemic crisis of intellectual credibility and the disciplinary passivity of specialists. While the communist-era intelligentsia traditionally commanded moral authority and societal respect, the post-communist period saw this authority erode, resulting in the public marginalisation of the majority of the scholars⁶⁰. This vacuum was compounded by the professional archaeological community, which largely failed to engage publicly, opting instead for a

⁵⁷ See here BĂRGĂOANU *et alii* 2020; COȚOFANĂ 2023.

⁵⁸ BAGHIU 2025b.

⁵⁹ STANLEY 2018.

⁶⁰ TĂNĂSOIU 2008 offers a comprehensive analysis of this phenomenon within the context of the early post-communist era.

deliberate retreat into the ‘ivory tower’ of positivism and/or objectivism, thereby ceding the public narrative space to pseudohistorical discourse.

POSITIVISM/OBJECTIVISM

In recent years, several scholars have observed that positivism emerged as the dominant paradigm in Romanian archaeology following the events of 1989⁶¹. However, as the same authors demonstrate, this framework has historically exerted a decisive influence over the discipline, consistently coexisting with nationalism and the culture-historical approach—themes that will be explored in greater depth below. With deep-seated origins intertwined with the very genesis of the field and, by extension, with national ideology, the positivist character of Romanian archaeology was forged by both the prestige of the interwar German school—which held immense continental influence at the time—and the institutional evolution of the discipline throughout the communist era.

It is readily observable that numerous archaeologists adopted this methodological stance for primarily pragmatic reasons. During the early years of the communist regime, positivism provided a convenient shroud for a lack of familiarity with Marxist theory; subsequently, it facilitated rapid professional advancement. Aligning with Daniel Barbu’s pertinent critiques of the “resistance through culture” narrative⁶², I contend that the embrace of positivism cannot be viewed merely as a reactive shield against the pressures of official ideology.

Consequently, the adherence to positivist principles led many authors to focus almost exclusively on chronologies, seriations, and typologies of archaeological material. This resulted in an increasingly technical discourse for a science that should be, at its heart, humanistic. Within this framework, the human dimension of the past was largely neglected, with insufficient reflection devoted to the individuals who created, utilised, and eventually discarded the material record we study today.

Furthermore, even these ‘foundational’ chronologies and typologies were occasionally built on fragile ground. As Gelu Florea⁶³ has noted regarding late Iron Age archaeology, historical data from written sources were often prioritised over material evidence when dating specific sites. For example, the majority of late Iron Age hillforts from intra-Carpathian region of present-day Romania (historical province of Transylvania) were attributed to a narrow window between the first century BCE and the late-first/early-second centuries CE based on historical narratives. In many instances, as the same author further argued, the actual archaeological record consists only of a few pottery shards recovered during surface surveys, which

merely suggest a general late Iron Age presence rather than confirming the specific, restrictive date ranges frequently cited in the literature. In contrast, the chronology of some extra-Carpathian settlements from present-day Romania has generally relied more heavily on primary archaeological data⁶⁴.

The proliferation of positivist discourse in post-1989 Romanian archaeology indicates that this approach remains a ‘fast track’ for academic promotion. In the sense described by Pierre Bourdieu⁶⁵, the deployment of this technical language allows scholars to swiftly accumulate various forms of capital within the post-communist system. This ‘stylistic’ dominance was also driven by the precarious conditions of the early 1990s—a period marked by socioeconomic instability⁶⁶ that delayed the dissemination of new research. Simultaneously, certain influential figures underwent an “adjustment of trajectory”⁶⁷, parlaying their former political influence into new cultural authority by establishing new universities and archaeology departments⁶⁸. This milieu stifled the introduction of new ideas. Contact with European archaeology was restored only cautiously, and there was a major lack of updated books and resources. For much of the early post-communist era, the scarcity of western theoretical literature meant that many researchers stayed within the ‘safe’ confines of empirical descriptions rather than venturing into complex interpretations.

In this respect, Romanian archaeology lagged behind other Soviet Bloc countries. In 1991, immediately following the collapse of the communist regimes, Ian Hodder—the pioneer of post-processual archaeology—published the influential volume *Archaeology Theory in Europe*⁶⁹. Some studies included in that work featured analyses of the theoretical landscape in Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia, all of which critically examined also the impact of Marxism and communism in those respective countries⁷⁰. Furthermore, the following year, Hodder was invited to Prague (then the capital of Czechoslovakia) to deliver a lecture on post-processual archaeology⁷¹.

The enduring nature of positivism in early post-communist Romanian archaeology can also be explained by the survival of a centralised, bureaucratic institutional system—a direct legacy of the communist era. In this milieu, the discipline remained under the aegis of the *magistri* (authoritative senior scholars), whose influence ensured the continuity of traditional methods. This rigid hierarchy effectively suppressed critical perspectives at their inception. Alternative viewpoints were frequently perceived not as legitimate academic challenges but as personal affronts to

⁶⁴ BABEȘ 1975; VULPE 1997; VULPE 2004–2005.

⁶⁵ BOURDIEU 1986; BOURDIEU 1991.

⁶⁶ For a more practical approach, see PASTI 1995; PASTI 2006; BAN 2014, 109–212; the socioeconomic realities of the early post-communist years regarding the Romanian archaeology were also highlighted in BABEȘ 1999; BABEȘ 2002; BABEȘ 2008–2009.

⁶⁷ This expression belongs to DRAGOMAN/OANȚĂ-MARGHITU 2006, 69; DRAGOMAN/OANȚĂ-MARGHITU 2013a, 17.

⁶⁸ MURGESCU 2000 offered an analysis of the historical field during the 1990s, including the structural changes.

⁶⁹ HODDER 1991.

⁷⁰ KOBYLŃSKI 1991; LASZLOVSKY/SIKÓLDI 1991; NEUSTUPNÝ 1991.

⁷¹ NEUSTUPNÝ/KUNA 1993; HODDER 1993.

⁶¹ ANGHELINU 2003; ANGHELINU 2003b; ANGHELINU 2007; DRAGOMAN/OANȚĂ-MARGHITU 2006; DRAGOMAN/OANȚĂ-MARGHITU 2013a; DRAGOMAN/OANȚĂ-MARGHITU 2013b; DRAGOMAN/OANȚĂ-MARGHITU 2014; DRAGOMAN 2009; DRAGOMAN 2013; POPA 2015; POPA 2016.

⁶² BARBU 2004, especially 56–58.

⁶³ FLOREA 2020, 426–427.

established authority, reflecting the elitism that has long characterised the discipline. Such resistance represented a defensive reflex from an authoritarian academic system seeking to safeguard its own power and institutional position⁷². Therefore, it is surprising for me that one of these *magistri* has recently complained that, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, respect for senior scholars is tending to disappear⁷³.

The current state of the field has not undergone a significant transformation. Despite certain refinements in archaeological discourse—particularly within Romanian late Iron Age studies, where themes such as deconstruction⁷⁴, self-reflection⁷⁵, the history of the discipline⁷⁶, and certain theoretical perspectives⁷⁷ have gained some traction—the majority of practitioners remain committed to the positivist description and publication of material record. This body of work continues to prioritise classification over interpretative synthesis. Consequently, this dominant trend tends to marginalise critical engagement with the social structures of the late Iron Age, dedicating minimal attention to the theoretical or sociological dimensions of the archaeological record.

Therefore, more than thirty-five years after the 1989 Revolution, the question of why critical thinking remains absent from Romanian archaeology persists. The answer appears relatively straightforward: as Nona Palincaş has more recently argued, the avoidance of critical theory (thinking) is a strategic professional choice, as such engagement is “not advantageous for career promotion and power acquisition within the profession”⁷⁸. In archaeology, critical thinking necessitates a discursive shift from descriptive cataloguing to analytical interpretation. It requires an engagement with the liminality of the archaeological record, acknowledging that archaeological practice is inextricably linked to broader ethical and political dimensions.

This observation leads naturally to the concept of objectivism, which must be understood in its close relation to positivism. Reflecting on my training in Cluj over fifteen years ago, we were taught, as future archaeologists, to strive for objective, evidence-based reconstructions, through empirical rigour, in some cases, even actualism—essentially attempting to “penetrate the minds” of prehistoric and/or ancient communities through scientific methods. Today, however, the understanding that the past is actively constructed in the present is no longer a novelty. Scholars such as Ian Hodder, Daniel Miller, Michael Shanks, and Christopher Tilley, have challenged the traditional positivist approaches that sought to reconstruct the past solely

through empirical observation and scientific methodology. These figures emphasised the decisive role of subjective perspectives, contextual factors (social, political, economic, and ideological), personal experience, and theoretical frameworks in shaping archaeological interpretation. Our interpretations are, therefore, not objective reflections of a distant reality but rather products of our present-day perspectives⁷⁹.

Understanding these dimensions requires a rigorous process of disciplinary self-reflection. Only through such an approach can we critically re-examine the field’s foundational pillars—most notably, the pervasive influence of nationalism on late Iron Age scholarship.

NATIONALISM

In 1984, Bruce G. Trigger established a fundamental classification of the archaeological practice, distinguishing between three primary categories: nationalist, colonialist, and imperialist archaeologies⁸⁰. Within this theoretical framework, the Romanian archaeological tradition is quintessentially nationalist. It emerged as a political exigency of the nascent Romanian state—founded in 1859—and as a direct consequence of the broader modernisation efforts inherent to that era. The discipline evolved through the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—an intellectual milieu dominated by discourses on nationhood, ethnicity, and race—reaching its ‘maturity’ only after the territorial consolidation of Greater Romania following the First World War.

Furthermore, nationalist archaeology maintained a near-perfect symbiosis with the communist regime; notably, this same ideology has endured as a constant into the present day, persisting more than two decades after Euro-Atlantic integration and approximately twenty years after accession to the European Union. The contemporary global climate provides fertile ground for such discourse; the (national-) populism that currently dominates the international stage frequently makes rhetorical appeals to a more or less distant past as a means of mobilising the masses.

To be sure, the aforementioned observations are by no means novel, having been extensively discussed within post-1989 scholarship. Indeed, a significant body of research has analysed the impact of nationalism on Romanian archaeology⁸¹. Interest in this subject may be viewed as a reaction both to the communist rhetoric characteristic of the regime’s final years and to the instrumentalization of nationalism in the post-1989 era⁸². Concurrently,

⁷² See also here PALINCAŞ 2006; PALINCAŞ 2024; NICULESCU 2023.

⁷³ BĂRBULESCU 2022, 296.

⁷⁴ PETRE 2004; DANA 2008; DANA 2012.

⁷⁵ FLOREA 2006; FLOREA 2007; FLOREA 2013; FLOREA 2020.

⁷⁶ BABEŞ 2002; BABEŞ 2008–2009; GHEORGHIU/SCHUSTER 2002; NICULESCU 2004–2005; NICULESCU 2007; DRAGOMAN/OANȚĂ-MARGHITU 2006; DRAGOMAN/OANȚĂ-MARGHITU 2013a; POPA 2014; POPA 2015; FLOREA 2019; HENȚ 2020; HENȚ 2025a, 35–74; HENȚ 2025b.

⁷⁷ See especially POPA 2018 and some papers in BERECKI 2010; BERECKI 2012; BERECKI 2014; BERECKI 2016; BERECKI/RUSTOIU/EGRI 2018.

⁷⁸ PALINCAŞ 2024, 98.

⁷⁹ HODDER 1982; HODDER/HUTSON 2004; MILLER/TILLEY 1984; MILLER/ROWLANDS/TILLEY 1995; SHANKS/TILLEY 1987; SHANKS/TILLEY 1992; SHANKS 2012.

⁸⁰ TRIGGER 1984; see also TRIGGER 2008.

⁸¹ BABEŞ 2002; BABEŞ 2008–2009; GHEORGHIU/SCHUSTER 2002; NICULESCU 2002; NICULESCU 2004–2005; NICULESCU 2007; NICULESCU 2023; DRAGOMAN/OANȚĂ-MARGHITU 2006; DRAGOMAN/OANȚĂ-MARGHITU 2013a; MATEI-POESCU 2007; POPA 2013; POPA 2015; FLOREA 2019; HENȚ 2020; HENȚ 2025a, 35–74; HENȚ 2025b; SZABÓ 2022;

⁸² One of the first perspectives on Romanian post-communist nationalism in VERDERY 1993; VERDERY 1996, 83–103.

engagement with this theme reflects an endeavour to align with western archaeological discourse. Over the past three decades, a vast body of literature has emerged highlighting how archaeology has been employed to legitimate modern collective identities and specific political regimes⁸³.

Nevertheless, more recent scholarship has levelled critiques regarding the treatment of nationalism within Romanian archaeology. For instance, Radu-Alexandru Dragoman and Sorin Oanță-Marghitu⁸⁴ have rightly argued that this ideology has—with some exceptions—been examined, primarily through its impact on academic discourse, where it is frequently perceived as ‘unchanging and monolithic’.

In light of these critiques, the following pages provide a short contextual analysis of nationalism within Romanian late Iron Age archaeology, specifically during the post-1989 era. This analysis is pursued despite the fact that such an archaeology of discourses does not strictly “blend with the interpretation of political rituals (processions, commemorations, national gatherings, working visits) and of the materiality of these nationalist approaches”⁸⁵.

Throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century and extending into the early twentieth century, discourses surrounding the Dacian past—as it would be anachronistic to refer to a formalised archaeology of the late Iron Age at this stage—must be situated within the prevailing climate of Romanticism, national awakening, revolutionary fervour, and, naturally, resistance to imperial hegemony. At this juncture, Romania occupied a geopolitical nexus between three dominant powers: the Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman, and Tsarist empires. This intellectual ‘rebellion’ simultaneously served as a counter-discourse to the then-hegemonic narrative of purely Latin origins of the Romanian people⁸⁶.

While many of these foundational tenets were subsequently adopted or refined during the interwar period, it was during this era that the Dacian past was systematically imbued with a ‘scientific’ veneer. Yet, despite the implementation of more rigorous and critical methodologies, this nascent scientific image remained inextricably tethered to nationalist ideology, instrumentalised to legitimise the modern state through a disciplined reconstruction of late Iron Age.

In contrast to a teleological interpretation that frames the First World War as the culmination of the “centuries-old dream of national unification”, this conflict—following the perspective of Florin Constantiniu⁸⁷—may be more accurately understood as a rupture that exposed the profound identity crises and political fragilities of the *ancien*

régime. Rather than a mere fulfilment of national aspirations, the war and its aftermath acted as a catalyst for a radical re-evaluation of national identity. This shift is particularly discernible in subsequent historiography, where the Dacian past was fully recuperated and integrated as a foundational pillar within the reconstructed narrative of the Romanian state and its history.

The late Iron Age was selected as a focal point because, in the intellectual consciousness, this period represented the only historical instance in which a polity encompassed a spatial extent largely congruent with the territories of the state established in late 1918. To exemplify this, attention must be directed towards Vasile Pârvan, widely regarded as the founding father of Romanian (late Iron Age) archaeology. In his seminal work, *Getica. O protoistorie a Daciei* [Getica: A Protohistory of Dacia], Pârvan posited that “Byrebistas the Getae united within a single kingdom all the tribes of his nation, extending to the northern Carpathians and to the Black Sea”⁸⁸. This passage—alongside other narratives crafted by Pârvan—functions as a retrospective projection of the Romanian Kingdom during the reign of Ferdinand I.

The emergence of the far right movement during the interwar years resulted in an escalation of nationalist discourse regarding the Dacian past, mirroring the bellicose atmosphere prevalent across the continent. Concepts of native ‘racial identity’ were exhumed from the late Iron Age, while a reconstructed Dacian spirituality—emphasising heroic sacrifice—was instrumentalised to legitimise the cult of violence central to Romanian far-right ideology. Although this episode was relatively short-lived, its ideological aftershocks persisted throughout the post-war decades⁸⁹.

Superimposed upon these existing predispositions at the end of the Second World War was a new political regime—installed with the support of the Soviet Army—and armed with the ideology of Marxism(-Leninism). This transition did not imply the disappearance of nationalism; rather, its tone was merely tempered. It remained clandestinely embedded within a formulaic ‘wooden language’, composed of orthodox terms such as ‘mode of production’, ‘social organisation’, ‘class struggle’, ‘military democracy’, the ‘state’, ‘forces of production’, ‘relations of production’, ‘base’, and ‘superstructure’. In this context, nationalism was frequently repurposed as a discursive instrument of resistance against Soviet/communist hegemony. For instance, Constantin Daicoviciu posited that: “The subjugation of Free Dacia and the dissolution of the Dacian state brought an end to the flourishing culture of the Geto-Dacian people. A standardised, superior Roman civilisation and way of life supplanted it, albeit without achieving its total extirpation. For decades, the Dacian people would revolt against the conqueror to secure their liberty and preserve their language and cultural traditions. Both the Dacian language and culture persisted for several centuries, particularly in rural and mountainous regions, until complete Romanisation [read Sovietisation/communisation] occurred”⁹⁰.

⁸³ For example, ARNOLD 1990; DIETLER 1994; KOHL/FAWCETT 1995; KOHL/KOZELSKY/BEN-YEHUDA 2007; DÍAZ-ANDREU/CHAMPION 1996; MESKELL 1998.

⁸⁴ DRAGOMAN/OANȚĂ-MARGHITU 2013b; DRAGOMAN/OANȚĂ-MARGHITU 2014.

⁸⁵ DRAGOMAN/OANȚĂ-MARGHITU 2013b, 277; DRAGOMAN/OANȚĂ-MARGHITU 2014, 335.

⁸⁶ BABU-BUZNEA 1979; even if this work appeared in the period of the climax of the nationalism promoted by Ceaușescu’s regime, it still offers some interesting perspectives to analyse.

⁸⁷ CONSTANTINIU 2011, 266–306

⁸⁸ PÂRVAN 1926, 653.

⁸⁹ GRANCEA 2007; GRANCEA 2009, 197–222; DANA 2008, 306–311; RUBEL 2023.

⁹⁰ DAICOVICIU 1960, 338.

Moreover, in a study concerning the settlement of Grădiştea de Munte (Hunedoara County) during the early years of Roman administration, Ioan Glodariu stated that emperor Trajan ordered the evacuation of the Dacian population from the area of the fortresses in the Orăştiei Mountains, describing it as an “action to cleanse the former nest of Dacian resistance”⁹¹. This imagery bears a striking resemblance to the contemporary armed resistance against the communist regime in the Romanian mountains, thereby providing a sophisticated historiographical camouflage for anti-communist sentiment.

In certain instances, scholars went further, providing direct legitimisation for the new regime and its policies. As I have argued elsewhere⁹², the entire historiographical debate of the 1950s and 1960s regarding the communal nature of property during the late Iron Age demonstrates a perfect congruence with the extensive collectivisation process carried out in Romania between 1949 and 1962⁹³. Even if archaeologists and historians were not directly involved in policy-making, they contributed—at least in terms of symbolic capital—to the construction of this new sociopolitical reality. By projecting a form of communal ownership onto the Dacian past, they sought to legitimise the contemporary collectivisation of land, framing it as a return to a historical precedent within the Romanian ‘national’ past.

In a subsequent phase, nationalism was unreservedly embraced by late Iron Age archaeology and adopted as formal state policy. Within this framework, certain scholarly works increasingly depicted the late Iron Age as a mirror image of Ceauşescu’s Romania, ostensibly engaged in a struggle against both American and Soviet imperialism. Consequently, for Hadrian Daicoviciu, pre-Roman Dacia was presented as the primary threat to ‘Roman imperialism’—a transparent proxy for contemporary Soviet and/or American influence. This was framed through Dacia’s capacity (by extension, that of the Socialist Republic of Romania) to mobilise “all the *barbarian* forces in a grandiose offensive against the Empire”⁹⁴. As has been observed⁹⁵, Romania had by this time assumed the mantle of a dominant local and regional power in comparison to its Balkan neighbours, while simultaneously asserting the status of a global power.

In the latter phase of the communist regime, nationalist discourse intensified, reaching its paroxysm. The state commemoration of 1980—marking precisely 2050 years since the creation of the ‘first centralised, unitary, and independent Dacian state’—served to accentuate a striking parallel between Nicolae Ceauşescu and Byrebistas. For instance, established professional archaeologists such as Ion Horaţiu Crişan did not hesitate to compose panegyrics to the late Iron Age king that mirrored the homages addressed to the communist dictator. Accordingly, Byrebistas was described as being “animated by a fervent desire for the elevation of his people, to which he dedicated his entire

life and all his activities, both domestic and foreign”⁹⁶. This rhetoric precisely mirrored the language employed by Party activists when addressing the ‘Great Leader’ during congresses and plenaries⁹⁷.

During the nascent post-1989 era, it is observable that nationalist discourse inherited substantial elements from preceding epochs. However, in this particular phase, the rhetoric ceased to be reactionary against external adversaries—such as neighbouring states, or global powers—and instead pivoted towards identitarian and emotional resonances, closely echoing the interwar period: “The conquest of Sarmizegetusa and the demise of the hero-king [Decebalus] consecrated the Roman victory at the conclusion of two wars as protracted as they were arduous, which brutally truncated the indigenous ascent of a brilliant civilisation. Viewed from the perspective of the intervening millennia, the triumph of the Roman legions signified the end of one people’s history and the genesis of another: a people conceived from the fusion of the vanquished and the victors, who today speak the Romanian language within this territory”⁹⁸.

With the advent of the new millennium, nationalism arguably experienced a reduction in overt intensity. However, as Cătălin Nicolae Popa has emphasised, “nationalistic discourse is so subtle, so embedded in everyday archaeological practice and writing, that it becomes invisible to the authors and academic readers of that environment”⁹⁹. Notwithstanding this subtlety, instances of ethnocentric bias persist. For example, the presence of artefacts originating from distinct cultural identities is frequently interpreted solely through the prism of “commercial exchanges, the bestowal of gifts, abductions, or matrimonial alliances”¹⁰⁰ thereby characterising the late Iron Age as a hermetically sealed cultural space.

Moreover, a significant constant throughout the entire history of the Romanian late Iron Age archaeology has been a unitary perspective regarding the Dacian past. Within a vast corpus of archaeological literature, the ‘Dacian state’—as preferred in older scholarship—or the ‘Dacian kingdom’—in more recent literature—is frequently treated as a proto-modern nation-state. This entity is often depicted with fixed borders, occupying a territory geographical remit synonymous with that of modern Romania.

Nevertheless, it must be noted that no ancient or early medieval text explicitly employs the terminology of a ‘Dacian state’ or ‘Dacian kingdom’. Classical sources suggest that these polities were understood more as forms of ‘personal possession’ than ‘ethnic’ polities. For instance, Strabo (*Geography* 7.3.5 and 7.3.11) records that around the mid-first century BCE, Byrebistas established a *megale archē* through a combination of military campaigns and a series of social, political, or religious “reforms”¹⁰¹. Furthermore,

⁹¹ GLODARIU 1965, 120.

⁹² HENȚ 2020; HENȚ 2025a, 47–53.

⁹³ KLIGMAN/VERDERY 1991; KLIGMAN/VERDERY 2015.

⁹⁴ DAICOVICIU 1965, 201.

⁹⁵ COPILAȘ 2015, 186

⁹⁶ CRIȘAN 1977, 495; CRIȘAN 1978, 247.

⁹⁷ See also here BOIA 1997, 268; BOIA 2001, 221.

⁹⁸ GLODARIU *et alii* 1996, 43–44.

⁹⁹ POPA 2015, 348.

¹⁰⁰ SÎRBU/BORANGIC 2016, 138.

¹⁰¹ ZIMMERMANN 2019 offered a new perspective of the Byrebistas’ “reforms”.

the decree from Dionysuopolis (in present-day Bulgaria) suggests the sophisticated use of strategic diplomacy (*IGB I*² 13). Conversely, in the wake of the military confrontations with Roman emperor Domitian, Decebalus is characterised by Cassius Dio (*Roman History* 67.7.3) as a “king” (Greek: *basileus*). The renowned inscription discovered at Heliopolis (modern Baalbek, Lebanon), detailing the career of C. Velius Rufus (*IDRE II* 406), explicitly refers to the *regnum Decibali regis Dacorum*¹⁰² (“the kingdom of Decebalus, king of the Dacians”).

It remains a matter of scholarly debate whether the power and authority of leaders such as Byrebistas and Decebalus were primarily sustained through complex political network, maintained internally via clientelism or kinship groups, and externally through diplomatic manoeuvres. Therefore, I would argue that it is more historically rigorous to refer specifically to the ‘kingdom of Byrebistas’ and the ‘kingdom of Decebalus’, respectively. Given the current state of archaeological discourse¹⁰³, it would be naïve to assume the continuous existence of a monolithic ‘Dacian state’ or ‘Dacian kingdom’ spanning the period from the mid-first century BCE to the early second century CE.

At this juncture, the focus of the investigation must necessarily shift towards the dominant archaeological approach—specifically the culture-historical historical approach—in order to evaluate the extent to which its conceptual framework facilitated the ossification of nationalist discourses under previous discussion and, more significantly, its persistent resilience within contemporary Romanian archaeological discourse.

CULTURE-HISTORICAL APPROACH

More than a century after the advent of culture-historical archaeology¹⁰⁴, the landscape of European Iron Age studies remains remarkably tethered to its foundational tenets. While ‘mainstream’ archaeological discourse has, to some extent, moved beyond the rigid equation of ‘pots and people’, ‘minority’ archaeologies¹⁰⁵ often continue to adhere to these traditional principles. As has been noted, a substantial contingent of Iron Age scholars still “seem to be mainly focused on characterising past identities substantially in terms of ethnicity, and for this reason there are numerous publications concerned with the Celts, Thracians, Dacians, Germans, Scythians, etc.”¹⁰⁶.

In the South-Eastern Europe¹⁰⁷, specifically, the archaeological discourse is frequently dominated by labels such as the ‘Celtic sword’, ‘Germanic brooch’, ‘Thracian horse bit’, ‘Scythian arrowhead’, or ‘Dacian cup’. Occasionally, the suffix ‘type’ is appended in a superficial attempt at scientific

neutrality. However, this terminology arguably reveals more about our contemporary imagination and our subjective relationship with the perceived ethnic identity of late Iron Age groups than it does about historical reality. Despite a burgeoning academic recognition of the complexities and inherent limitations of ethnic nomenclature¹⁰⁸, a pervasive preoccupation with these constructs persists.

This persistence is rooted in several critical factors. Firstly, the identification of Iron Age communities in temperate Europe has relied almost exclusively on ethnonyms and descriptions provided by Greek and Roman observers who interacted with these groups via trade, cultural exchange, or conflict. These accounts were often accepted at face value, without sufficient regard for their imperial and colonial contexts, their intended audiences, or the frequent use of anachronistic literary motifs¹⁰⁹. Secondly, the emergence of Iron Age archaeology across Europe as a formal academic discipline coincided with the nineteenth-century rise of modern nation-states. This temporal alignment ensured that archaeology and state-building shared the same cultural and historical underpinnings; as nation-states were defined by shared ethnicity, language, and territory, the scope of Iron Age archaeology remained—and largely continues to be—restricted by modern national boundaries. Consequently, certain types of pottery, implements, weapons, adornments, or dress accessories were equated with specific ethnic past identities¹¹⁰.

In the post-1989 context, a paradigmatic example of this approach can be found in the work of Alexandru Vulpe¹¹¹, who, approximately two decades ago, identified six ‘ethnic’ markers of Dacian (‘Geto-Dacian’ in his own words) material culture:

- (1) Specific ceramic forms, notably the ‘fruit bowl’ and the ‘Dacian cup’ (Romanian: (*fructiera* and *ceașca-opaiț*);
- (2) Silverware, including brooches, phalerae, and vessels;
- (3) Figurative art featuring specific representations on certain objects made of silver, bronze, or terracotta;
- (4) Certain coins, specifically the highly stylised coins of the so-called second phase of ‘Geto-Dacian’ coinage;
- (5) Sacred architecture, comprising constructions with one apse room and rectangular constructions in the form of the alignment of column bases;
- (6) Specific funerary practices, or rather, the archaeological invisibility of burials.

Viewed through contemporary analytical frameworks, Vulpe’s criteria are highly contentious. The famous cup (‘Dacian cup’), for instance, is paradoxically less frequent in the area of the Orăștiei Mountains than in other contemporaneous settlements. Moreover, this artefact demonstrates remarkable longevity, appearing in contexts from the second century BCE through to the Roman provincial periods of Dacia and Moesia. Its broad geographical distribution across neighbouring territories

¹⁰² See here MATEI-POPESCU 2006–2007, 32, note 16; MATEI-POPESCU/ȚENȚEA 2018, 10–11, note 56.

¹⁰³ The most recent discussion on politics and power in the European (late) Iron Age in COLLIS/KARL 2023.

¹⁰⁴ TRIGGER 2006, 211–313.

¹⁰⁵ For ‘mainstream’ and ‘minority’ archaeologies see RUIZ ZAPATERO 2011.

¹⁰⁶ POPA/STODDART 2014a, 328; POPA 2018, 189.

¹⁰⁷ See also MIHAJLOVIĆ 2019 for the former Yugoslavian and present-day Serbian late Iron Age archaeology.

¹⁰⁸ For example, POPA/STODDART 2014b.

¹⁰⁹ DUNHAM 1995; OSBORNE MARTIN 2002; WILKES 2007.

¹¹⁰ BABEȘ 2002; BABEȘ 2008–2009.

¹¹¹ VULPE 2005, 571–572.

suggests regional popularity rather than an exclusive ethnic affiliation¹¹².

Similarly, silver phalerae were not confined to the Dacian milieu but were common throughout the Graeco-Roman world and the North Pontic 'barbarian' regions¹¹³. Much of the associated silver tableware consists of objects originated in the Mediterranean world, such as mastós-type cups and kantharos-type vessels. While 'spoon-brooches' might represent a local adaptation—a form of glocalization of broader European late Iron Age styles¹¹⁴—other forms, such as brooches with a rhombic plate, are not found in other cultural milieus¹¹⁵.

Furthermore, the majority of the objects with figurative representations made of silver, and especially bronze and burnt clay, are in fact small finds—therefore, restricted to a small group of people—while some types of coins seem to be more Celtic than local¹¹⁶. The origins of the constructions with an apse room and constructions in the form of the alignments of column bases, the latter found especially in the Orăștiei Mountains area, should still be sought in the classical, Graeco-Roman world¹¹⁷. More recently, constructions with an apse room have also been documented in northwestern Bulgaria¹¹⁸, for example, at Montana-Kaleto and Staliyska mahala-Bagachina (both in Montana Province). Finally, the dearth of documented burials is not a local idiosyncrasy but a widespread phenomenon across temperate Europe during the late Iron Age¹¹⁹.

In the present, it will be more interesting to see how Vulpe's six—or at least, some of them—characteristics were employed by late Iron Age communities in the northern Balkan region to construct, transform, and express their identities—be it ethnic, or other types of identities¹²⁰—both individual and collective. As often highlighted in the recent archaeological literature, material culture is neither an ethnic marker, nor a simple means by which past peoples interacted with the natural and social environments "to produce food, build shelters, make clothing and conflict with neighbours"¹²¹. On the contrary, material culture is a fundamental constituent of the complex social web that both differentiates and binds communities. Artefacts played a pivotal role in fostering social ties, shaping cultural practices, and constructing the multifaceted identities that defined the late Iron Age.

Despite these developments, such analytical perspectives remain largely absent from contemporary Romanian archaeological discourse concerning the late Iron Age¹²². This omission persists notwithstanding a significant improvement in the accessibility of scholarly resources.

¹¹² STROBEL 2020, 172–174.

¹¹³ MORDVINCEVA 2001; BÂRCĂ 2006a, 220–225; BÂRCĂ 2006b, 141–146; SÂRBU/BÂRCĂ 2016; BÂRCĂ/SYMONENKO 2009, 85–90.

¹¹⁴ See especially SPÂNU 2019, 86, Fig. 2.

¹¹⁵ RUSTOIU 1997, 44; SPÂNU 2012, 46.

¹¹⁶ TOMA 2020.

¹¹⁷ MATEESCU 2012; APOSTOL/MATEESCU 2020.

¹¹⁸ ZHIVKOV 2020.

¹¹⁹ WELLS 2001, 90–91; HARDING 2016, 2–4.

¹²⁰ DÍAZ-ANDREU *et alii* 2005.

¹²¹ WELLS 2001, 21–22.

¹²² However, see the papers of Romanian scholars in POPA/STODDART 2014b.

In recent years, the emergence of commercial platforms and social networking sites for researchers—most notably Academia.edu and ResearchGate—has revolutionised the field. Furthermore, a vast corpus of studies, articles, and books is now readily available, either through open-access digital repositories or shadow-library projects, facilitating the immediate dissemination and consumption of academic knowledge.

HISTORICAL RE-ENACTMENT¹²³

Once the process of "internal colonisation"¹²⁴—namely the internalisation of neoliberal ideology and the perception of capitalism as the solitary alternative to totalitarianism—reached its conclusion, Romanian society, and the archaeological milieu in particular, witnessed a highly compelling phenomenon: the proliferation of various historical re-enactment associations and non-governmental organisations¹²⁵. These groups have largely concentrated their efforts on the late Iron Age and the Roman period, illustrating aspects of everyday life but primarily focusing on bellicose themes. Initially, these historical re-enactment groups emerged in close proximity to cultural institutions, such as museums; or rather, they were led by specialists seeking a ludic escape from the quotidian, allowing them to employ their expertise outside the formal constraints of their institutional positions. Furthermore, this served, why not, as a means to supplement salaries that were—and continue to be—precarious in comparison to other 'liberal' professions.

Over time, however, these groups have transcended their initial cultural boundaries, with their numbers increasing considerably in recent years. This expansion has been facilitated by a favourable sociopolitical climate in which numerous central and, crucially, local public authorities have organised events, festivals, and municipal celebrations—some dedicated exclusively to historical re-enactment—to which these associations or non-governmental organisations are invited. Nevertheless, this evolution raises a critical issue for contemporary society and politics: the accountability and strategic allocation of public funds. More often than not, the justification provided by authorities is that, alongside ubiquitous musical programmes designed to satisfy various demographics, the commissioning of re-enactment groups serves a pedagogical and educational function. Similarly, the practitioners themselves maintain that their primary objective is educational, 'bringing history to life'. However, a substantial body of scholarship suggests the contrary, demonstrating that historical re-enactment prioritises spectacle, nostalgia, and subjective experience at the expense of scientific rigour and historical accuracy¹²⁶.

A similar situation prevails regarding Romanian historical re-enactment groups focused on the late Iron Age.

¹²³ During my undergraduate studies, I was a member of a historical re-enactment group called *Virtus Antiqua*.

¹²⁴ ȚICHINDELEANU 2006.

¹²⁵ A singular (critical) perspective of Romanian historical re-enactment in POPA 2015; POPA 2016.

¹²⁶ COOK 2004; AGNEW 2007; MIKULA 2015; see also the papers in McCALMAN/PICKERING 2010a.

Many of these groups attempt to recreate Dacian dress, crafts, religious practices, and especially military techniques; indeed, the majority of such festivals culminate in the ‘classic’ confrontation between Dacians and Romans. Although re-enactors claim to adhere to historical data derived from both classical sources and archaeological finds, the results are frequently absurd or even grotesque. In certain instances, re-enactors portraying Dacians resemble characters from famous Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* more than historical figures, with appearances evocative of Hobbits, Elves, Gandalf(s), Saruman(s), or even Dwarves. Furthermore, numerous archaeological artefacts are stripped of their discovery context and applied during re-enactments in an unfortunate manner. Due to the lack of precise archaeological data, and primarily to provide an entertaining spectacle, gross liberties are often taken.

An illustrative example is the use of helmets. The number of recorded finds for this category of defensive equipment is extremely limited—for instance, the finds at Popești¹²⁷ (Giurgiu County) or Cugir¹²⁸ (Alba County). As these were discovered in funerary contexts, they necessitate a specialised, separate analytical approach; yet re-enactors have filled this void with helmets modelled after the reliefs on Trajan’s Column, especially its base, disregarding the monument’s primary artistic and, significantly, propagandistic functions¹²⁹. There are also instances of gross anachronism, where re-enactors portraying Dacians fighting with the Romans wear helmets imitating the find from Poiana-Coțofenești (Prahova County)—now tragically lost, most probably forever, following its theft from the Drents Museum in the Netherlands. This find dates to the first half of the fourth century BCE¹³⁰ and belongs to another cultural sphere, and thus bears no relation to both the late Iron Age Dacians and the conflicts with the Romans from the late-first and early-second centuries CE.

Another illustrative example is provided by offensive equipment. Numerous Dacian reenactors are equipped with curved weapons—again, seemingly informed primarily by Trajan’s Column—whether *sica*-type curved knives or *falx*-type curved swords. In the former case, chronological layers and discovery contexts¹³¹—such as burials and deposits of weapons of the Padea-Panagyurski kolonii-type—are overlooked. In the latter, the sparse archaeological evidence¹³² is ignored in favour of broad generalisations.

To be clear, I hold no fundamental objection to historical re-enactment. However, it should not disregard the deeper, more nuanced, or ‘hidden’ aspects of historical, social, and political processes. Yet, more often than not, the manner in which information is presented and the specific facets of society predominantly depicted by these groups serves primarily to further glorify the Dacian past—a process with deep roots in modern Romanian historiography. Naturally,

the majority of the participating public is unaware of the inaccuracies and fallacies that are being served. On the contrary, paraphrasing Iain McCalman and Paul Pickering, nowadays, in Romania, historical re-enactment has become the “most widely consumed form of popular history”¹³³. This appetite should be attributed to a contemporary societal desire for immediacy and personal experience¹³⁴. Moreover, as Cătălin Nicolae Popa observed¹³⁵, re-enactors have become primary ‘vectors of opinion’ regarding the late Iron Age. The causes are manifold, and were addressed by the same author, yet it is noteworthy that some re-enactors have pursued university programmes and authored studies—sometimes endorsed by senior scholars—which nevertheless perpetuate the same discourse of Dacian glorification.

Today, many Romanians identify with the Dacians, and historical re-enactment groups undoubtedly share a portion of the responsibility for this. It remains unclear whether the exponential growth of these groups—in recent years—is a result of a favourable sociopolitical and economic context, or whether it reflects the current state of a society in search of a ‘new’ identity. What is certain is that, especially in the last two years, re-enactors—or better said, people dressed as Dacians—and symbols of the late Iron Age have appeared among football hooligans, at anti-government protests supported by far-right parties, and behind presidential candidates who, paradoxically, pepper their rhetoric with misplaced quotes from *The Lord of the Rings*¹³⁶. This indicates that the Dacian past and its symbols are being mobilised within a new context dominated by (national-)populism or the ‘logic of political action’ as defined by Ernesto Laclau¹³⁷.

In the present, the presumed moral virtues of the late Iron Age Dacians are used as a counterpoint to: elites—most often portrayed as a corrupt, self-serving, ‘politically correct’, and alienated class indifferent to the concerns of the ordinary populace; excluded individuals—those who, despite holding state citizenship, are excluded from the national collective (such as ethnic minorities); impersonal forces—institutions perceived as jeopardising collective security or the national/traditional way of life, such as globalisation, unregulated trade, and supranational bodies like the European Union¹³⁸.

CONCLUSIONS

The transition following 1989 was initially framed through the optimistic lens of Francis Fukuyama’s ‘End of History’ which posited the final, irreversible triumph of liberal democracy and free-market capitalism. In the context of Romanian archaeology, this ‘victory’ was interpreted as a liberation from the ideological strictures of the communist regime. However, as this study tried to demonstrate, this transition did not precipitate a genuine renewal. Instead, the ‘End of History’ in the academic sphere manifested as a strategic retreat into a supposedly objective positivism—a

¹²⁷ VULPE 1976.

¹²⁸ CRIȘAN 1980.

¹²⁹ For example, FERRIS 2003.

¹³⁰ MÂNDESCU 2010, 377–418, Fig 84.

¹³¹ RUSTOIU 2016 offered an interesting perspective regarding the possible functionality of the *sica*-type curved knives.

¹³² HENȚ/CIOATĂ 2021.

¹³³ McCALMAN/PICKERING 2010b, 3.

¹³⁴ MIKULA 2015.

¹³⁵ POPA 2015; POPA 2016.

¹³⁶ BAGHIU 2025b, 237–238.

¹³⁷ LACLAU 2005.

¹³⁸ Theoretical perspectives on present-day national-populism and its ‘enemies’ in BRUBAKER 2017.

move designed to safeguard entrenched institutional power and protect the traditional hierarchies presided over by authoritative *magistri*. Moreover, by abandoning macro-historical inquiries and favouring the narrow technical descriptions, the discipline effectively depoliticised the past, creating a ‘managerial’ form of archaeology that operates within the structural realities of capitalism and neoliberalism while retaining the paradigms of the previous era.

In stark opposition to Fukuyama’s teleological optimism, Slavoj Žižek¹³⁹ argues that liberal democratic capitalism is far from the optimal or final form of human governance. Žižek posits that capitalism is increasingly decoupling from democracy—thriving instead under authoritarian frameworks (see, for example, China and, most recently Trump’s technocapitalism)—and warns that we are heading toward a “new apartheid” society defined by extreme wealth gaps, digital surveillance, and ecological collapse. In the case of Romanian late Iron Age archaeology, this ‘New End of History’ is palpable in the erosion of intellectual authority and the resulting vacuum, which has been filled by the ‘loony platform’ politics of the digital age. Within these information silos, dacopathy and to some extent the historical re-enactment are no longer fringe curiosities; they are foundational components of a mythic past (re) constructed to compensate for the precariousness of the neoliberal present.

The proliferation of these pseudohistorical narratives is intrinsically linked to the current global context dominated by post-truth politics, fake news, and AI-generated content, where social media algorithms and functional illiteracy facilitate the widespread dissemination of ideologically extreme content. In this (new) context, the Dacian past and its symbols are actively weaponized to provide counterpoint to perceived ‘corruption’ of the elites, ethnic minorities, and supranational entities.

Ultimately, the tendency of specialists to retreat into empirical isolation has effectively surrendered the public discourse to pseudohistorical and populist rhetoric. Drawing on Žižek’s critique of modern existential crises—such as systemic inequality and burgeoning authoritarianism—it becomes clear that Romanian Late Iron Age archaeology cannot remain a purely ‘managerial’ or descriptive endeavour. To prevent the discipline from lapsing into irrelevance, a shift toward a critical, reflexive framework is essential. Archaeology must move beyond the constraints of rigid positivism to confront the current political instrumentalization of the past, ensuring that it functions as a space for rigorous critique rather than a catalyst for (national-)populist mobilisation.

¹³⁹ For example, ŽIŽEK 2009; ŽIŽEK 2019; ŽIŽEK 2020; ŽIŽEK 2023.

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