HOW WE WRITE THE (DACIAN) PAST? LATE IRON AGE ARCHAEOLOGY IN POST-COMMUNIST ROMANIA

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Abstract:
This paper offers a critical historiographical assessment of Romanian late Iron Age archaeology in post-communist Romania, grounded in the understanding that narratives are constructed within their specific social, political, economic, and ideological contexts. Initially, post-1989 Romanian late Iron Age archaeology exhibited significant historiographical continuity, largely characterised by the élite's strategic conversion of political capital into cultural capital rather than a genuine paradigm shift. However, the mid-1990s witnessed the emergence of new historiographical trajectories: an emphasis on material culture analysis, a nascent deconstructivism challenging established national myths, and a powerful 'nationalist counter-offensive' that continues to shape scholarly and public discourse. The study ultimately reveals a present-day Romanian late Iron Age archaeology oscillating between some critical endeavours and ideologically charged narratives, marked by methodological conservatism, theoretical lacunae, and a notable absence from broader European archaeological metanarratives, reflecting the complex historical, sociopolitical, and ideological forces that continue to shape the writing of the Dacian past.

Keywords: historiography, late Iron Age, archaeology, post-communism, context

The posthumously published *The Idea of History* by the British polymath R. G. Collingwood—an archaeologist, historian, and philosopher—contains a significant aphorism concerning the nature of historical understanding: "The historian… is not God, looking at the world from above and outside. He is a man, and a man of his own time and place. He looks at the past from the point of view of the present…"[1]. This assertion highlights the situatedness of historical knowledge, contending that historical narratives are inevitably shaped by the temporal and cultural

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[1] Robin George Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946), 108.

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perspectives of the historian, thus precluding a purely objective or detached reconstruction of the past.

The notion that the past is an active construct, rather than a static, objective entity, has developed from a novel concept—as initially advanced by Collingwood—into a foundational principle within contemporary archaeological discourse. This perspective, championed by scholars such as I. Hodder, D. Miller, M. Shanks, and C. Tilley[2], has critically reoriented the field. It presents a significant challenge to traditional positivist methodologies in archaeology, which historically emphasised empirical observation and scientific reconstruction as the primary means of accessing the past.

Building upon Collingwood's foundational ideas, these prominent contemporary archaeologists have significantly emphasised the influence of subjective perspectives, contextual factors (including social, political, economic, and ideological dimensions), key events, personal experience, and theoretical frameworks in shaping archaeological interpretation. These scholars underscore that our comprehension of the past is invariably mediated by present-day worldviews, rendering interpretations as products of contemporary perspectives rather than objective reflections of (past) reality. This aligns with Professor L. Boia's insightful distinction between *History*—referring to the factual record of the past—and *histories*, which denote the diverse narratives constructed from that record through the lens of present-day understandings[3].

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[2] Ian Hodder, *The Present Past: An Introduction to Anthropology for Archaeologists* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1982); Ian Hodder, *Reading the Past: Current Approaches to Interpretations in Archaeology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Ian Hodder and Scott Hutson, *Reading the Past: Current Approaches to Interpretations in Archaeology*, 3rd edition, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Daniel Miller and Christopher Tilley 1984, eds., *Ideology, Power and Prehistory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press); Daniel Miller et al., *Domination and Resistance* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989); Michael Shanks and Christopher Tilley, *Social Theory and Archaeology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Michael Shanks and Christopher Tilley, *Re-constructing Archaeology: Theory and Practice*, 2nd edition, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Michael Shanks, *The Archaeological Imagination* (Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2012).

[3] Professor L. Boia consistently articulates a nuanced distinction between the singular, objective *History* and the pluralistic *histories* constructed by human interpretation. While this concept permeates many of his influential works, it is concisely summarised in an interview for a Romanian cultural magazine (Lucian Boia, "N-o să-l întrebăm pe Ștefan cel Mare cum ar trebui guvernată România astăzi," *Dilema Veche* 14, no. 279 (2018): IV-V). For Boia, *History*, in its ideal form, denotes the objective and unalterable progression of past events. However, direct access to this singular reality remains elusive. Historians must contend with fragmentary evidence and subjective interpretations to reconstruct the

Considering the above-mentioned, this paper presents a short historiographical assessment of Romanian late Iron Age archaeology during the so-called post-communist era. Through a meticulous analysis that situates individual scholarly contributions within their pertinent social, economic, ideological, and political contexts, and by considering the salient events of the period, this study aims to underscore the critical importance of contextualisation for a more comprehensive understanding of present-day Romanian late Iron Age archaeology. Furthermore, it endeavours to identify not only the main research trajectories but also its inherent vulnerabilities, lacunae, theoretical and methodological pitfalls.

The collapse of the communist political regimes across central and eastern Europe at the end of 1989 stands as arguably the most significant and symbolically charged event in recent European history. This transformative process still continues to surprise various commentators due to the unprecedented speed of its unfolding. Despite the socioeconomic crises that emerged in mid to late 1980s, neither western specialists, nor the populations of these countries, nor even political dissidents, largely anticipated the dissolution of these political and ideological systems within such a short time.

Several hypotheses have been put forward in the relevant literature to account for this pivotal event in recent European history. For instance, J. F. Brown, formerly the director of *Radio Free Europe*, identified six closely interrelated causes for the failure of European communist regimes. The first cause was the increasing incompatibility between Soviet interests and the national aspirations of central and eastern European states, a tension that became progressively evident throughout approximately 45 years of Soviet hegemony. The second cause pertained to the systemic failure of economic programs, which underscored the inherent limitations of communist regimes in delivering promised economic and social prosperity. This economic deficiency, in turn, stimulated and solidified a form of societal opposition, thereby uniting the populace against the regimes, which constitutes a third causal factor. The fourth cause was the demonstrable inability of the ruling élites, who were challenged and ultimately intimidated by their own systemic failures, to effectively guide the political trajectories of these nations. Brown's final two causes relate

past, inevitably leading to a multiplicity of *histories*. These diverse narratives, shaped by present-day perspectives, contextual factors, and available (re)sources, provide invaluable insights but are inherently pluralistic. Furthermore, Boia emphasises that, unlike the singular past, these constructed *histories* are open to ongoing reinterpretation and debate, thereby reflecting the boundless and dynamic nature of historical inquiry.

to the realm of international relations: specifically, the 'liberal' reforms initiated by Soviet leader Gorbachev, and the growing influence of western powers, particularly the United States, in global affairs[4].

It is well-known that the 1989 European revolutions largely unfolded with relative peacefulness, with the notable exception of Romania, where, nearly three decades after the violent events of late December, especially the families of the deceased and segments of civil society continue to await definitive answers from judicial authorities.

Specifically in Romania's case, the abrupt transition from both centralised political regime and economic system to democracy and free market economy was fraught with turbulence. At the outbreak of the revolution, Romania was already mired in an economic recession that had started in the mid-1980s. The change in the political system, rather than mitigating this decline, exacerbated it. The causes of this deterioration were numerous, encompassing: the legacy of the communist regime, which included economic enterprises incapable of competition in the global market; the profound shock of market and trade liberalisation; the perceived inertia of key western European political institutions; and the inability of domestic political actors to adapt to emergent economic demands. Consequently, it is unsurprising that Romania became entrapped in a "lost decade"[5] bookended by major economic crises, which significantly widened socioeconomic disparities.

Within this prevailing climate of economic and social insecurity, there was an expectation that history, now ostensibly 'liberated' from overt political and ideological control, would yield novel insights and present the 'true history' of Romania/Romanians, with a particular emphasis on the twentieth century. Notwithstanding significant institutional changes, including the proliferation of university centres, the emergence of new

[4] J. F. Brown, *Surge to Freedom: The End of Communist Rule in Eastern Europe* (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 1991).

[5] Tom Gallagher, *Romania and the European Union: How the Weak Vanquished the Strong* (Manchester, New York, 2009); the British political scientist T. Gallagher, an expert in the modern and contemporary history of the Balkans, has shown that the process of Romania's integration into the European Union during the 1990s faced significant structural impediments. Gallagher argued that decision-makers in Brussels were unable to formulate viable strategies for incorporating Romania, given its totalitarian institutional heritage, a dysfunctional economy, and a deficient administrative system. Furthermore, the accession process was managed by a skilful political élite that engaged in the formal, rather than substantive, adherence to European directives. Consequently, Gallagher characterised the 1990s (and extending into the early 2000s) as a "lost decade" for Romanian society, a period where substantive post-communist transformation was curtailed by the confluence of deep-seated systemic problems and political expediency.

history (and archaeology) departments, an increase in history (and archaeology) student enrolment, and the re-establishment of international academic contacts[6], the initial post-Communist years largely failed to introduce substantial innovations within the historiographical landscape.

In fact, the analysis of later communist and early post-communist historiographies regarding the late Iron Age shows a notable continuity. This actually means that despite the political shift, archaeological narratives and methodologies remained similar. This observation, also highlighted by other scholars[7], indicates that the initial post-communist period didn't immediately create a new, distinct historical and archaeological paradigm. Historiographical continuity is evident in the work of I. H. Crișan. For instance, in a manuscript submitted before 1989 but published only in 1993[8], he reiterated hypotheses previously advanced in his 1977 book, *Burebista și epoca sa*[9], translated in English in the following year[10]. Continuity with the past can be also observed in the first post-communist attempt of *Istoria României* (*The History of Romania*) from 1995. While this work did abandon the communist-era periodisation—based on stages of evolution—its content remained largely unchanged. A key example is the chapter on the formation of the so-called 'Geto-Dacian state', posthumously attributed to H. Daicoviciu[11]. This section simply reiterated the long-standing theses previously put forth by both him and his father, C. Daicoviciu, in the 1960s and 1970s, showing clearly that the intellectual framework of the previous era persisted despite the major political shift.

Moreover, the 2001 Romanian Academy treatise, *Istoria Românilor* (*The History of the Romanians*), failed to deliver on its promise of a new post-communist historiography. Although presented as a "totalising" and unbiased work, it was in fact little more than a compilation

[6] An analysis of the 1990s historical field in Bogdan Murgescu, *A fi istoric în anul 2000* (București: ALL Educațional, 2000).

[7] For example, C. N. Popa, "Late Iron Age Archaeology in Romania and the Politics of the Past," *Dacia. Revue d'archéologie et d'histoire ancienne* 59 (2015), 342.

[8] Ion Horațiu Crișan, *Civilizația geto-dacilor*, volume I-II (București: Editura Meridiane, 1993).

[9] Ion Horațiu Crișan, *Burebista și epoca sa*, 2nd edition (București: Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică, 1977).

[10] Ion Horațiu Crișan, *Burebista and his Time* (București: Editura Academiei Republicii Socialiste România, 1978).

[11] Hadrian Daicoviciu, "Procesul de organizare a statului geto-dac – expresie a dezvoltării economico-sociale și politice a societății." in *Istoria României: de la începuturi până în secolul al VIII-lea*, ed. M. Petrescu-Dîmbovița et al. (București: Editura Didactică și Pedagogică, 1995), 159-191.

of pre-1989 studies, notes, and articles[12]. This is also exemplified by the section on the late Iron Age sociopolitical organisation, authored by I. Glodariu[13], which merely reiterated ideas from his late 1980s research[14].

Drawing on the framework of G. Eyal, I. Szelényi, and Eleanor Townsley's seminal work, *Making Capitalism without Capitalists*[15], this analysis posits that the primary producers of discourse within Romanian late Iron Age archaeology in the early post-communist period did not undergo a fundamental paradigm shift. Instead, they "adjusted their trajectory"[16] strategically converting the political capital accumulated during the communist period into cultural capital, a form of social currency that proved highly profitable within the nascent social order. This process allowed key figures to maintain their influence and intellectual dominance by repurposing their established positions for the new cultural and academic milieu.

Starting in the mid-1990s, a notable shift emerged in the historiography of the late Iron Age. A new generation of scholars, despite being educated under "national communism", began to prioritise the archaeological record over pre-existing metanarratives. This new wave of research is characterised by a focus on specific material culture, which served as a foundation for broader interpretations. Key works from this period include: A. Rustoiu's *Metalurgia bronzului la daci*[17] (*Bronze metallurgy among the Dacians*) and *Fibulele din Dacia preromană*[18]

[12] Gh. Al. Niculescu, "Archaeology, Nationalism and *The History of the Romanians,*" *Dacia. Revue d'archéologie et d'histoire ancienne* 48-49 (2005): 99-124; Gh. Al. Niculescu, "Archaeology and Nationalism in *The History of the Romanians*." in *Selective Remembrances: Archaeology in the Construction, Commemoration, and Consecration of National Pasts*, ed. Philip L. Kohl et al. (Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 127-159.

[13] Ioan Glodariu, "Structura socială." in *Istoria Românilor*, volume I, ed. Mircea Petrescu-Dîmbovița and Alexandru Vulpe (București: Editura Enciclopedică, 2001), 776-778.

[14] I. Glodariu, "Opinii privitoare la stratificarea societății dacice (sec. I. î.e.n. – I e.n.)," *Acta Musei Napocensis* 24-25 (1992): 537-544.

[15] Gil Eyal et al., *Making Capitalism Without Capitalists: Class Formation and Elite Struggle in Post-Communist Central Europe* (London, New York: Verso, 1998).

[16] This expression belongs to R. Al. Dragoman and S. Oanță-Marghitu, "Archaeology in Communist and Post-Communist Romania," *Dacia. Revue d'archéologie et d'histoire ancienne* 50 (2006): 69; R. Al. Dragoman and Sorin Oanță-Marghitu "Arheologia din România comunistă și postcomunistă." in *Arheologie și politică în România*, ed. R. Al. Dragoman and Sorin Oanță-Marghitu (Baia Mare: Editura EUROTIP, 2013), 17.

[17] Aurel Rustoiu, *Metalurgia bronzului la daci 9sec. II î. Chr. – sec. I d. Chr.): Tehnici, ateliere și produse de bronz* (București: Bibliotheca Thracologica XV, 1996).

[18] Aurel Rustoiu, *Fibulele din Dacia preromană (sec II î.e.n. – I e.n.)* (București: Bibliotheca Thracologica XXII, 1997).

(*Fibulae from pre-Roman Dacia*), G. Florea's *Ceramica dacică pictată*[19] (*Dacian Painted Pottery*), or the collaboration between V. Sîrbu and G. Florea from *Imaginar şi imagine în Dacia preromană*[20] (*Imagery and Image in pre-Roman Dacia*). Also, *Die Poieneşti-Lukaševka-Kultur*[21], masterfully sketched by M. Babeş, can be mentioned among the first major post-communist historiographical contributions. These contributions, while sometimes touching on social perspectives of the late Iron Age, fundamentally advanced the study of the period by focusing on a rigorous analysis of artefact categories and material manifestations. This fact represents a significant break from the earlier historiographical tradition, which often treated artefacts from a functionalist point of view or as mere illustrations of textual sources.

Starting in the same period, mid to late 1990s, the first attempts at deconstructing national historiographical myths emerged in Romanian scholarship. This new historiographical approach, often associated with the work of Lucian Boia and his students, gained prominence through works like his influential *Istorie şi mit în conştiinţa românească*[22] *(History and Myth in Romanian Consciousness*), reprinted several times, and with and English version[23]. Boia's central thesis posits that Romanian cultural and political elites from the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries constructed a romanticised national history. This narrative, characterised by a focus on "noble origins and a glorious past", was a strategic effort to secure modern Romania a "respectable place in the concert of European nations" thereby compensating for a perceived lack of prestige in the present[24].

The publication of Boia's work provoked significant backlash, both from the intellectual community and from parts of the general populace. This reaction, which has been described as a "counter-offensive of the old

[19] Gelu Florea, *Ceramica pictată: Artă, meşteşug şi societate în Dacia preromană (sec I.a.Chr. – I.p. Chr.)* (Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 1998).
[20] Valeriu Sîrbu and Gelu Florea, *Imaginar şi imagine în Dacia preromană* (Brăila: Editura Istros, 1997); Valeriu Sîrbu and Gelu Florea, *Les Géto-Daces. Iconographie et imaginaire* (Cluj-Napoca: Centre d'Études Transylvaines – Fondation Culturelle Roumaine, 2000).
[21] Mircea Babeş, *Die Poieneşti-Lukaševka-Kultur: Ein Beitrag zur Kulturgeschichte im Raum östlich der Karpaten in de letzen Jahrhunderten vor Christi Geburt* (Bonn: Habelt, 1993).
[22] Lucian Boia, *Istorie şi mit în conţiinţa românească* (Bucureşti: Humanitas, 1997).
[23] Lucian Boia, *History and Myth in Romanian Consciousness*, trans. James Christian Brown (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2001).
[24] Boia, *Istorie şi mit*, 32; Boia, *History and Myth*, 46.

nationalist historiography"[25], had profound implications for Romanian historiography and society at large. It highlighted the continued appeal of a "glorious past" as a means of addressing contemporary feelings of mediocrity.

The first deconstructivist efforts in Romanian late Iron Age archaeology are attributed to D. Dana[26], who meticulously dismantled Mircea Eliade's thesis regarding the late Iron Age Dacian connection to wolves and the formation of a secret warrior brotherhood[27]. Dana's analysis concluded that Eliade's theory "lacks relevant arguments to be accepted, as do all of his subsequent reformulations"[28]. Furthermore, Dana demonstrated that in his argumentation, Eliade[29] conflated "his personal destiny (exile) and the collective destiny of his people (Soviet/Communist domination)" with historical events[30]. This suggests Eliade's interpretation was not a neutral academic analysis but rather a reflection of his own personal and political experiences.

As a partial conclusion, the December 1989 Revolution, which dismantled Ceaușescu's regime, initiated Romania's prolonged transition toward a democratic system and a market economy. This process inadvertently generated widespread economic and social insecurity. Consequently, it is unsurprising that the early 1990s, and even the 2001 Treatise of the Romanian Academy—here serving as a symbolic reference point—witnessed the resurgence of long-standing, previously expressed hypotheses by various researchers. Based on a Foucauldian perspective[31], it might be said that despite dramatic events—such as the 1989

[25] Bogdan Murgescu, "The Romanian Historiography in the 1990's," *Romanian Journal of Political Science* 3, no.1 (2003): 48-49.
[26] Dan Dana, "Dacii și lupii. Pe marginea teoriei lui Mircea Eliade," *Studii și Cercetări de Istorie Veche și Arheologie* 51, nos.3-4 (2000): 153-174.
[27] Mircea Eliade, "Les Daces et les loups," *Numen* 6, no. 1 (1959): 15-31.
[28] Dana, "Dacii și lupii,", 173.
[29] Eliade, "Daces et loups,", 31: "II est significatif que le seul peuple qui a réussi à vaincre définitivement les Daces, qui a occupé et colonisé leur pays et leur a imposé la langue, ait été le peuple romain; un peuple dont le mythe généalogique s'était constitué autour de Romulus et Rémus, les enfants du Dieu-Loup, Mars, allaités et élevés par la Louve du Capitole. Le résultat de cette conquête et de cette assimilation fut la naissance du peuple roumain. Dans la perspective mythologique de l'histoire, on pourrait dire que ce peuple fut engendré *sous le signe du Loup*, c'est-à-dire prédestiné aux guerres, aux invasions et aux émigrations."
[30] Dan Dana, *Zalmoxis de la Herodot la Mircea Eliade: Istorii despre un zeu al pretextului* (Iași: Polirom, 2008).
[31] Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse of Language*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972).

revolution—the terms of discourse remained relatively stable over time. Moreover, the lack of immediate innovative reaction within Late Iron Age archaeology can be attributed to several factors: the pervasive economic and social insecurity that delayed archaeological publications; the "adjustment of trajectory" of certain cultural actors, who prioritised converting political capital into cultural capital through the establishment of new universities and history (and archaeology) departments; the cautious re-establishment of contact with European archaeologies; and significant bibliographic lacunae, particularly a scarcity of relevant western archaeological works published during much of the early post-communist period.

A discernible shift emerged in the second half of the 1990s with the advent of a new generation of researchers, primarily focused on the analysis of archaeological material and less constrained by previous historiographical paradigms. This period also coincided with the rise of two major historiographical approaches: 'deconstructivism' and the 'nationalist counter-offensive'. While the former garnered limited support, the latter has exerted, and continues to exert, substantial influence not only within history and archaeology but also across a significant segment of society.

Perhaps the most notable achievement of this period was the 1999 inscription of the Dacian fortresses from the Orăștiei Mountains—Grădiştea de Munte–Sarmizegetusa Regia, Costeşti–Cetăţuie, Costeşti–Blidaru, Luncani–Piatra Roşie, Băniţa (Hunedoara County), and Căpâlna (Alba County)—on the UNESCO World Heritage List. Regrettably, this international recognition was overshadowed by the emergence of one of the most severe challenges confronting Romanian archaeology: the phenomenon of illicit metal detection and the concomitant plunder of precious metal artefacts.

Moreover, the most consequential policy decision during the 'lost decade' was the broad political consensus—the Snagov Declaration—to pursue a national strategy for Romania's accession to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU), achieved in 2004 and 2007, respectively. Following more than two centuries of geopolitical vacillation between east and west, Romania was characterised in the late 1990s and early 2000s by a clear strategic alignment: an imperative for closer integration with western nations.

On the international level, the early 2000s were symbolically marked by the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, which prompted immediate geopolitical responses, notably the subsequent interventions in

Afghanistan and the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Despite these conflicts, the beginning of the new millennium witnessed relative economic prosperity, which was abruptly curtailed by the Great Recession starting in 2007, the effects of which persisted until the early 2010s. Just as the global economy appeared to stabilise, a novel crisis—the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic—paralysed international activity for roughly two years, immediately followed by the outbreak of a major war in Europe—the Russian invasion of Ukraine—an event few had anticipated. The long-term impact of these two recent crises on global, and specifically Romanian, archaeological practice remains an open question.

Within the context of these past more than two decades, Romanian late Iron Age archaeology has gained significant public attention, not primarily for its research outputs, but rather for associated legal and restorative actions. Specifically, this attention stems from the successful recovery by Romanian state institutions of national cultural heritage assets that were illegally removed from the Orăștiei Mountains area during the late 1990s and early 2000s and subsequently trafficked on the international market. These recovered items include high-profile artefacts such as the famous spiral gold bracelets, Koson-type gold and silver coins, and numerous other precious metal objects[32].

Indeed, the field of archaeology itself has struggled to assert its prominence. The severe underfunding of archaeological research by central and local public administration authorities has pushed the discipline to the brink of survival, not as an academic pursuit but as a practical endeavour. While exceptions exist—for instance, the *archaeological site of the Dacian Fortresses from the Orăştiei Mountains* has recently received substantial funding from the Hunedoara County Council, a level of support unimaginable for other sites—the broader field simultaneously faces a decline in specialist numbers. A preliminary survey identified only approximately 30–40 people, not all practitioners, specialising in this period across various academic, research, museum, and administrative institutions. Furthermore, the discipline is marked by the overall decline of the educational system—a widely discussed, yet under-reformed, issue in

[32] More recently, three of the spiral gold bracelets and the golden helmet from Poiana-Coțofenești (dated in the first half of the fourth century BCE) were stolen in the early 2025 during a robbery at the Drents Museum in Assen, the Netherlands, where it were being displayed as a part of cultural and diplomatic exchanges.

Romania—and a pervasive lack of career opportunities for promising young graduates[33].

Given these briefly outlined vulnerabilities, it is unsurprising that Late Iron Age archaeology has demonstrated, and continues to demonstrate, historiographical oscillations. Despite these challenges, several prominent research directions within the discipline can nonetheless be discerned.

The first direction of research is actually a continuation of a historiographic approach that started in the mid-1990s, namely deconstructivism. The most eloquent example for the Romanian (late Iron Age) archeology is represented by Zoe Petre's *Practica nemuririi. O lectură critică a izvoarelor greceşti privitoare la geţi*[34] (*The practice of immortality. A critical history of Greek sources concerning the Getae*). In this seminal work, the former Professor and presidential adviser meticulously investigated ancient (and early medieval) written sources, systematically "demolishing"[35] numerous prevailing Romanian historiographical myths concerning the (middle and) the late Iron Age. Concomitantly, Petre elucidates that within the classical world "the Thracian lands signify the imaginary boundary between the Greek world of culture, in its exemplary centrality, and the foreign world of beings with human appearance but different customs, closer to the natural behaviours of beasts (or gods)"[36].

However, Petre's subsequent analysis regarding the social structures and warrior character of Dacian society is highly problematic, as it aligns with a Dumézil–Eliade theoretical paradigm, thereby perpetuating a mythologising perspective on the past[37]. More precisely, Petre equated the *kometai*/*capillati* mentioned in ancient or early medieval textual sources with the *galli comati* or berserkers, warrior figures from

[33] See also here two analyses of Romanian archaeology conducted at two decades from each other: Nona Palincaș, "On Power, Organisation and Paradigm in Romanian Archaeology Before and After 1989, *Dacia. Revue d'archéologie et d'histoire ancienne* 50 (2006): 7-56"; N. Palincaș, "Power and Production of Knowledge in Romanian Archaeology (and a Few Comments on Ribeiro and Giamakis," *CAS Working Paper Series* 14, no. 5 (2024): 98-132.

[34] Zoe Petre, *Practica nemuririi: O lectură critică a izvoarelor greceşti referitoare la geţi* (Iași: Polirom, 2004).

[35] Sorin Nemeti, „O carte deconspiratoare", *Tribuna* S. N. 3, no. 40 (2004): 5.

[36] Petre, *Practica nemuririi*, 37.

[37] Dan Dana, *Fontes ad Zalmoxin pertinentes accedunt fontes alii religionum Thracum Getarum Dacorumque spectantes / Izvoare privitoare la Zalmoxis și alte pasaje referitoare la religiile tracilor, geților și dacilor* (Iași: Editura Universității "Alexandru Ioan Cuza", 2011), 43–44, note 3.

Irish and Norse mythology, respectively[38]. This analogical argument consequently posited that the *kometai*/*capillati* embody the second function, the martial one, according to the trifunctional hypothesis of the Proto-Indo-European societies.

Addressing the same subject, D. Dana has more recently emphasised that the *capillati*, mentioned exclusively by Jordanes (*Getica* 11.72), "appear to have constituted a category within the Ostrogothic kingdom" of northern Italy[39]. These conclusions are corroborated by other studies, which further demonstrate that Jordanes artificially conflated the *capillati* with the Getae/Dacian aristocracy, a linkage attributed to his well-documented confusion between Goths and Getae[40].

D. Dana's scholarly contributions, including *Zalmoxis de la Herodot la Mircea Eliade: istorii despre un zeu al pretextului*[41] (*Zalmoxis from Herodotus to Mircea Eliade: Histories about a God of Pretext*), *Métamorphoses de Mircea Eliade: à partir du motif de Zalmoxis*[42], and *Onomasticon Thracicum. Répertoire des noms indigènes de Thrace, Macédoine Orientale, Mésies, Dacie et Bithynie*[43], can likewise be situated within the deconstructivism tradition. Particularly in the first work, Dana, a former student of Zoe Petre, meticulously demonstrated that Herodotus (*Histories* 4.94–96) constitutes the singular pertinent ancient source regarding Zalmoxis. Consequently, all subsequent ancient, medieval, modern, and/or contemporary interpretations of this figure's identity can be rigorously analysed by contextualising various authors and tracing their primary sources of inspiration.

A second, distinct research trajectory is characterised by a number of scholars who have undertaken a critical meta-historiographical and ideological analysis of Romanian late Iron Age archaeology[44]. The work

[38] Petre, *Practica nemuririi*, 249–260; Zoe Petre, "*Pilophoroi* et *kometai* : points de vue sur les structures de la société gétique." in *Orbis antiquus: Studia in honorem Ioannis Pisonis*, ed. Ligia Ruscu et al. (Cluj-Napoca: Nereamia Napocae, 2004), 667-675.
[39] Dana, *Fontes ad Zalmoxin / Izvoare privitoare la Zalmoxis*, 293, note 4.
[40] P. J. Heather, *Goths and Romans 332-489* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 36; Patrick Amory, *People and Identity in Ostrogothic Italy, 489-554* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 344-346.
[41] Dana, *Zalmoxis*.
[42] Dan Dana, *Métamorphoses de Mircea Eliade : à partir du motif de Zalmoxis* (Paris : Vrin-EHESS, 2012).
[43] Dan Dana, *Onomasticon Thracicum: Répertoire des noms indigènes de Thrace, Macédoine Orientale, Mésies, Dacie et Bithynie* (Athens: KERA – National Hellenic Research Foundation; Paris : De Boccard, 2014).
[44] Mircea Babeș, "Arheologie și societate: o privire retrospectivă," *Revista 22* 13 no. 654 (2002): 10-11; Mircea Babeș, "Arheologie, societate și politică în România, înainte și

of this cohort sought to illuminate how the confluence of nationalism—the most prominent modern ideology—with the historically dominant culture-history archaeological paradigm has profoundly influenced and continues to circumscribe scholarly interpretations of the period. These contributions aimed to foster a more reflexive understanding of the discipline's inherent biases and contextual formation. Despite the significance of these critical works in identifying the ideological underpinnings of the sub-discipline, their impact on scholarly discourse has remained demonstrably modest. This suggests a persistent structural resistance to methodological and ideological self-critique, resulting in the continued marginalisation of dissenting, reflexive perspectives.

Related to the above-mentioned, a third research trajectory is characterised by a more retrospective and self-reflexive critique of the established theses within Romanian late Iron Age archaeology[45]. A key impetus for this movement was G. Florea's mid-2000s study focusing on

după 1989," *Studii de Istorie Veche și Arheologie* 59-60 (2010): 5-15; Dragoș Gheorghiu and Christian F. Schuster, "The Avatars of a Paradigm: A Short History of Romanian Archaeology." in *Archäologien Europas: Geschichte, Methoden und Theorien / Archaeologies of Europe : History, Methods and Theories*, ed. P. F Biehl et al. (Münster: Waxmann, 2002), 289–301; Gheorghe Alexandru Niculescu, "Nationalism and the Representation of Society in Romanian Archaeology." in *Nations and National Ideology: Past, Present and Prospects. Proceedings of the International Symposium held at the New Europe College, Bucharest, April 6-7, 2001* (Bucharest: The Centre for the History of the Imaginary and New Europe College, 2002), 209-234; Niculescu, "Archaeology, Nationalism."; Niculescu, "Archaeology and Nationalism."; [44] Radu Alexandru Dragoman and Sorin Oanță-Marghitu, "Archaeology in Communist and Post-Communist Romania,"; Radu Alexandru Dragoman and Sorin Oanță-Marghitu, "Arheologia din România"; Cătălin Nicolae Popa, "The Trowel as Chisel. Shaping Modern Romanian Identity through the Iron Age." In *Exploring Prehistoric Identity: Our Construct or Theirs?*, ed. Victoria Ginn et al. (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2013), 164-174; Cătălin Nicolae Popa, "Late Iron Age Archaeology"; Gelu Florea, "The Tyranny of History": Some Thoughts Regarding the Late Iron Age Archaeology in Romania." in *Istoria ca interogație: Mariei Crăciun, la o aniversare* (Cluj-Napoca: Argonaut, Mega, 2020): 423-432; Alin Henț, "Forging the Trowel, Hammering the Dacians: Marxism and the Late Iron Age Archaeology in Romania (1948-1989)," *Acta Musei Napocensis* 57, no. 1 (2020): 23-62.

[45] Gelu Florea, "The Public Image of Dacian Aristocracy," *Studia Universitatis Babeș-Bolyai. Historia* 51, no. 1 (2006), 1-11; Gelu Florea, "O religie sau religii dacice? Reflecții metodologice." in *Dacia felix: Studia Michaeli Bărbulescu oblata*, ed. Sorin Nemeti et al. (Cluj-Napoca, Editura Tribuna, 2007), 99-105; Gelu Florea, "L'archéologie d'une religion anonyme." in *Sguardi interdisciplinari sulla religiosità dei Geto-Daci*, ed. Matteo Tauffer (Freiburg im Breisgau, Berlin, Wien: Rombach, 2013), 123-135; Florea, "Tyranny of History".

the "public image" of the Dacian aristocracy[46]. Florea initially highlighted the limitations of traditional approaches rooted in the interpretation of ancient and early medieval textual sources. He subsequently urged scholars to prioritise archaeological data and incorporate research models derived from anthropology, sociology, and political science[47]. Influenced by western scholarship—particularly French archaeology's treatment of the status identities[48]—Florea proposed specific regional or thematic lines of inquiry, including the analysis of: convivial practices (banquets/feasts, consumption of alcoholic beverages, especially wine); ideology and socio-economic indicators (hunting, trade, and access to prestige goods).

On several occasions, Florea has also critically addressed the "historical compromise of Marxism", arguing that the post-1989 political transition led to the wholesale abandonment of major theoretical themes, such as social structures, property regimes, and the genesis of social formations[49]. This abandonment is part of a broader process of anti-communist discourse, characteristic of the post-1989 ideological context. In my opinion, the anti-communist discourse, served a repressive function by mechanically associating Marxian critical thought with communism and, by extension, with totalitarianism, thereby systematically delegitimising its intellectual validity.

However, when Marxist concepts, ideas, and theories do appear, they are often reduced to a simplistic, vulgar interpretation in the form of economic determinism[50]. This approach oversimplifies historical change by attributing all major developments solely to economic factors. Basically, it reduces complex social, cultural, and political phenomena to a single, underlying economic causality.

Furthermore, as noted by other researchers[51], the adoption of other critical methods and theories from the social sciences remains sporadic, indicating a persistent methodological conservatism within the field. A

[46] Florea, "Public Image".
[47] Florea, "Public Image", 1-5.
[48] Vincent Guichard and Frank Perrin, eds., *L'aristocratie celte à la fin de l'âge du Fer (IIe siècle avant J.–C. au Ier siècle après J.–C). Actes de la table ronde organisée par le Centre archéologique européen du Mont Beuvray et l'UMR 5594 du CNRS* (Glux-en-Glenne: Collection Bibracte – 5, BIBRACTE – Centre archéologique européen, 2002).
[49] Florea, "Religie sau religii", 103: Florea „Tyranny of History", 425-426.
[50] Valeriu Sîrbu, *Les Thraces entre les Carpates, les Balkans et la Mer Noire et leurs relations avec les populations voisines (Ve siècle avant J.-C. – Ier siècle après J.-C.). Quatre conférences données à la Sorbonne* (Brăila: Editura Istros, 2004), 24-25.
[51] For example, Radu Alexandru Dragoman and Sorin Oanță-Marghitu, "Archaeology in Communist and Post-Communist Romania,"; Radu Alexandru Dragoman and Sorin Oanță-Marghitu, "Arheologia din România".

recent analysis offers a compelling explanation for the persistent methodological and theoretical lacunae observed in Romanian (late Iron Age) archaeology. Nona Palincaș posits that the avoidance of critical theory is not merely an academic oversight, but a strategic professional choice, asserting that "not advantageous for career promotion and power acquisition within the profession"[52].

A fourth, dominant research trajectory is defined by the archaeological perspective, encompassing the majority of scholarly output over the past more than two decades. This category primarily involves the positivist description and publication of material culture resulting from both older and contemporary archaeological research. This includes artefacts previously inventoried or stored in institutional deposits, as well as materials recovered illicitly (from treasure hunters). Characteristically, these studies prioritise the detailed analysis and classification of artefacts over interpretive synthesis. Consequently, this dominant trend tends to marginalise critical engagement with the social structures of the late Iron Age, dedicating minimal attention to theoretical or sociological dimensions of the archaeological record.

Within this archaeologically focused research trajectory, A. Rustoiu's interpretive framework concerning the structure of northern Balkan communities represents a notable exception to the positivist trend. Beginning with his work, *Războinici şi artizani de prestigiu în Dacia preromană*[53] (*Warriors and prestigious artisans in pre-Roman Dacia*), ides slightly modified[54], Rustoiu advanced the argument that the genesis of the polity known in the archaeological literature as the 'Dacian kingdom' was driven by a warrior aristocracy/military élite. Basically, Rustoiu posited that the origins of this warrior aristocracy/military élite lay in the lower Danube region (encompassing parts of present-day northwestern Bulgaria, southwestern Romania, and eastern Serbia). This group was characterised as an ethnically heterogeneous conglomerate—

[52] Palincaș, "Power and Knowledge", 98.

[53] Aurel Rustoiu, *Războinici și artizani de prestigiu în Dacia preromană* (Cluj-Napoca: Nereamia Napocae, 2002), 11-40.

[54] Aurel Rustoiu, "The Padea-Panagjurski Kolonii Group in south-western Transylvania (Romania)." in *Celts on the Margin. Studies in European Cultural Interaction 7th century BC – 1st century AD. Dedicated to Zenon Woźniak*, ed. Halina Dobrzańska et al. (Kraków: Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology of the Polish Academy of Science ,2005), 109–119. Aurel Rustoiu, *Războinici și societate în aria celtică transilvăneană: Studii pe marginea mormântului cu coif de la Ciumești* (Cluj-Napoca: Editura Mega, 2008), 135-152; Aurel Rustoiu, "Commentaria Archaeologica et Historica (I)," *Ephemeris Napocensis* 22 (2012): 171-178.

including Triballi, Scordisci, and Dacians, and other 'minor' identities—distinguished archaeologically by a consistent funerary inventory dated to the second half of the second and the first half of the first century BCE. This inventory is defined by specific martial categories: middle and late La Tène-type swords; *sica*-type knives; shield-bosses; and Werner 16-type horse-bits—the so-called 'Thracian' horse-bits. Moreover, Rustoiu argued that this mobile warrior aristocracy/military élite subsequently migrated from the lower Danube area into intra-Carpathian present-day Romania (historical province of Transylvania). This migratory action resulted in the displacement of Celtic dominance and ultimately catalysed the formation of the political entity traditionally designated as the 'Dacian kingdom'.

The last research trajectory represents a continuation of established, conservative Romanian archaeological practices, characterised by a synthesis of cultural-historical methodology and simplified (vulgar) Marxist concepts, frequently coloured by nationalism and positivism[55]. Studies within this category often emphasise the pervasive warlike nature of northern Balkan communities (i.e., Dacians). Any recovered weapon—whether from archaeological research, museum deposits or from treasure hunting—is immediately treated as "undeniable" evidence supporting this fundamental thesis. However, this approach is methodologically compromised by a marked deficiency in scholarly engagement. There is a near-total absence of relevant archaeological, anthropological, or sociological literature and the primary mechanism for argumentation is self-citation, which is used to reinforce the core premise: the inherently martial character of Dacian communities, viewed anachronistically as a unified whole across both time and space.

A recent inquiry into the genesis of this later historiographical turn—conducted by me and my colleague D. Cioată[56]—identified two primary sources fuelling this persistent emphasis on militarism: The first one is the above-mentioned Zoe Petre's thesis—the interpretation and demonstration of the martial nature of the *kometai/capillati* derived from ancient and medieval textual sources[57]. The second one is the phenomenon

[55] Valeriu Sîrbu and Cătălin Borangic, *Pumnalul sica în nordul Dunării (~200 a. Chr. – 106 p. Chr.). Semiotica marţială a puterii / Le poignard sica au nord du Danube. (~200 av. J.-C. – 106 ap. J.-C.). Sémiotique martiale du pouvoir* (Brăila: Editura Istros, 2016); Cătălin Borangic, *Seniorii războiului în lumea dacică: Elitele militare din secolele II a. Chr. – II p. Chr. în spaţiul carpato-dunărean* (Brăila, Alba Iulia: Editura Istros, 2017).

[56] Alin Henț and Daniel Cioată, "Debunking a Myth: The Dacian Curved Sword between Historiographical Discourse and Archaeological Realities," *Journal of Ancient History and Archaeology* 8, no. 1 (2021): 5-18.

[57] Petre, "Practica nemuririi", 249-260; Petre, "*Pilophoroi* et *kometai*".

of historical re-enactment, which operates both outside and inside the formal boundaries of academic archaeology but contributes significantly to the popular and professional image of the Dacian past[58].

Most probably, due to these above-mentioned pitfalls, briefly outlined, the Romanian late Iron Age archaeology is almost absent from the major metanarratives of archaeological discourse. The only notable exception is the recent contribution of A. Rustoiu[59] in a collective volume focused on Iron Age Europe, initially disseminated online and subsequently in print. However, Rustoiu's inclusion primarily reflects the author's personal academic network and relationships within central and western European archaeological circles.

It will be interesting to observe how Romanian Late Iron Age archaeology navigates the contemporary landscape, which is increasingly characterised by post-truth politics, the proliferation of fake news, and AI-generated content. Consequently, nationalist, exceptionalism, and racist ideologies have experienced a resurgence. Moreover, the uncritical assimilation of dominant discourses, coupled with the global hegemonic ideology of neoliberalism—a system demonstrably exacerbating socioeconomic disparities—can be posited as significant contributing factors to the rise of right-wing discourses. Finally, social media platforms have furnished a virtually unrestricted public sphere for the most vocal proponents of these movements to disseminate extremist interpretations of archaeological and historical narratives.

[58] See especially Cătălin Nicolae Popa, "The Significant Past and Insignificant Archaeologists: Who Inform the Public about their 'National' Past? The Case of Romania," *Archaeological Dialogues* 23, no. 1 (2016): 28-39.

[59] Aurel Rustoiu, "The Carpathian and Danubian Area." in *The Oxford Handbook of the European Iron Age*, ed. Colin Haselgrove et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 477-523.