

The Idealized Rome in the Romanian Historical Imaginary before 1918*

Mariana Egri

Institute of Archaeology and Art History, Cluj-Napoca

Email: marianaegri@yahoo.com

Abstract: *The Idealized Rome in the Romanian Historical Imaginary before 1918.* By the time when Transylvania became part of Romania in 1918, the idealized image of ancient Rome became a defining element of the Romanian historical imaginary. An important factor in this evolution was the gradual emergence of the modern national identity constructs in the context of several internal and external social-political and cultural transformations which shaped the ways in which various social groups integrated the past into their collective memory. As a consequence, the idealized ancient Rome was gradually transformed from an intellectual ideal to an ideal ancestor to a driving force in the nation's quest for modernization.

Keywords: heritage of the Classical world, founding myths, national identity, ideal ancestor, modernization

Rezumat: *Roma ideală în imaginarul istoric românesc înainte de 1918.* La data la care Transilvania a ajuns să facă parte din România, în 1918, imaginea idealizată a Romei antice a devenit un element definitoriu al imaginarului istoric românesc. Un factor important al acestei evoluții a constat în emergența graduală a constructelor identității naționale moderne, în contextul transformărilor social-politice și culturale interne și externe, care au conturat modalitățile în care diferite grupuri sociale au integrat trecutul în memoria lor colectivă. Ca urmare, imaginea Romei antice a fost transformată treptat, dintr-un ideal intelectual al strămoșului exemplar într-o forță conducătoare a procesului de modernizare națională.

Cuvinte-cheie: moștenirea antichității clasice, mituri fondatoare, identitate națională, strămoș exemplar, modernizare

* This work was supported by a grant of the Romanian National Authority for Scientific Research, CNCS-UEFISCDI, project number PN-III-P1-1.2-PCCDI-2017-0326, project title: *Enciclopedia imaginariilor din România. Patrimoniu istoric și identități cultural-lingvistice*, project acronym: ROMIMAG, project manager: Corin Braga.

Classical heritage and the European identity constructs

The heritage of the Classical world has always played an important role in the European society and culture, contributing to the construction of different individual and collective identities, and also to the appearance of a range of political, ideological or cultural movements. Throughout history, elements of this heritage have been deliberately selected and often transformed to suit the interests of various social-political or cultural actors. An idealized image of ancient Rome has gradually become a defining element of the modern European identity, and even more so in the case of nations speaking Latin-derived languages. At the same time, the presumed superiority of the Roman culture and civilization has fuelled, at conceptual level, ideologies like the imperialism or the colonialism, or cultural movements like the Renaissance or the Neoclassicism.

In this context, an important issue has been the longstanding perception of ancient Rome as a rather monolithic social-political entity, whose overwhelming military, economic and cultural superiority had supposedly allowed it to civilize a large part of the known ancient world. This perception has only been challenged from the second half of the 20th century onward, mainly in the academic environment, due to an increasing interest in the history of indigenous populations and other social groups which were previously neglected by a historiography focused mainly on political and military events. In archaeology, first significant theoretical changes only appeared in the 1970s following the critique of previous culture-historical approaches, which aimed to identify past societies by classifying their material culture according to distinct ethnic and historical criteria which were often the result of projecting modern social-political concerns into the past¹. Subsequent processual and post-processual approaches have been influenced by a series of post-modern concepts borrowed from sociology and cultural anthropology, and also by the process of decolonization and social emancipation that have contributed to a rising interest in the networks of interaction between individuals, groups and communities having very different origins, interests and means of actions as a way of understanding the evolution of any society. From this point of view, many recent studies of Roman imperialism and its effects have abandoned the concept of Romanization as a unidirectional process of acculturation, focusing instead on the ethnic, social, economic and cultural complexity and diversity of the Roman Empire, and on the

¹ Renfrew, Bahn 2012, 21-48.

influence of the conquered populations and the “Barbarian” periphery on its development through time².

However, the longstanding glorifying reception of the Classical heritage has contributed to the perpetuation of an idealized image of Republican and Imperial Rome as the source of many structures, practices and concepts defining the European culture and civilization in the modern collective imaginary. Nevertheless, this heritage has not been “rediscovered” by modern scholars, and not even by those of the Renaissance, as it is often postulated in coursebooks, since several centres from medieval Europe and the Near East have contributed to the preservation and transmission of certain texts, structures, practices and ideas originating from ancient Greek or Roman civilization. Accordingly, the Renaissance can be considered more as a period in which the interest in the philosophical, literary or aesthetical concepts of ancient Athens and Rome has intensified within a wider array of major social-political, cultural and economic transformations experienced by many European societies. This has contributed to the appearance of a diversity of new cultural and ideological models inspired by the Classical world, each of them serving particular individual or collective interests³.

Still, the European Enlightenment of the 18th century is the intellectual movement which contributed greatly to the much wider circulation of many models and ideas inspired by the Classical antiquity, and especially by Pericles’ Athens or the Republican and Augustan Rome. During this period, the interest in ancient literature, philosophy and aesthetics started to spread beyond the social and political elites, even if many concepts were still interpreted from the dominant ideological perspective of the period⁴. This gradual process of “democratization” of the access to Classical culture, which continued in the 19th century, took advantage of the establishing of many public museums and academic societies, public schools, universities and libraries, as well as the development of the press and printing houses, and the wider circulation of educative literature. At the same time, many European educational systems continued to glorify the ancient heritage, emphasizing the supposed moral, cultural and civic superiority of Classical Athens or Imperial Rome.

For example, the British society of the second half of the 19th century – first decades of the 20th century has considered the Roman

² Mattingly 2011, 3-42; Egri 2017, with further bibliography on this subject.

³ See a detailed discussion in Kallendorf 2007.

⁴ Kaminski 2007.

Empire as a perfect example of governance aiming to bring the progress and civilization among the Barbarians of temperate Europe temperate, though without diminishing their presumed native qualities. This model of Romanization, which was initially proposed by certain historians and then taken over by the archaeologists, became relevant for the construction of modern British identity due to an educational system which incorporated the study of Classical literature, major metropolitan art and political history in the education of British Empire's elites. In this way, Tacitus' extolling work describing the deeds of Agricola became the standard textbook used in schools and universities to teach about the beneficial effects of Romanization in Britain⁵.

In France, the Gallo-Roman identity construct, which is still dominating the contemporary collective imaginary, was also an ideological creation of the last decades of the 19th century. This identity construct took shape in the context of the first major archaeological programs targeting, on one hand, the Celtic sites considered to be representative for the nation's individuality, and on the other hand, ancient Rome and Athens as predecessors and models of the French culture which was dominating the European intellectual life of the time⁶. Just like in England, the interest in Classical antiquity as the origin of modern European culture and civilization has been interlinked with an imperialist policy, though the Latin origin of the French language has also provided a presumed organic connection between ancient Rome and modern France.

Still, from the late 18th century, ancient Rome has gradually ceased to be used as a means of legitimizing rulers and dynasties⁷, even if a series of modern European empires still aimed to be considered legitimate heirs of the Roman Empire by incorporating various symbols of ancient origin into their own ideology of authority. Instead, an idealized Rome became an important element in the founding myths of some modern European nations, offering a connection with a prestigious past and, in the case of those speaking Latin-derived languages, the justification of an organic evolution in an ancestral space. These myths of origin gained an increasing social and political relevance, while the feudal structures of social affiliation and the associated identity constructs became obsolete. Their wider acceptance contributed

⁵ Hingley 2000; Bradley 2010.

⁶ Dietler 1998; Demoule 1999.

⁷ See, for example, the use of the so-called Trojan myth of origins by different medieval rulers in Kivilcim 2018.

significantly to the consolidation of new forms of social cohesion and to the appearance of new collective identity constructs that tended to transcend rigid social barriers. From the conceptual perspective, these myths of origin tended to use selectively certain linguistic, historical, ethnographic or archaeological information, which were frequently combined with real or invented traditions; the resulting narrative was then validated by a system of values mainly governed by social-political factors. At the same time, from the structural perspective, these myths are characterized by a series of distinctive features, real or imaginary, which are widely recognized and accepted in the collective mindset. Among them are mythical genealogies starting with real or legendary founding heroes, or an ancestral space defined by clear historical, ethnographic and linguistic features, which allowed an uninterrupted evolution of the nation, including a presumed “golden age” located deep into the national past and used as a motivation for the necessary “rebirth” of the national consciousness⁸.

From the intellectual ideal to the ideal ancestor

An idealized ancient Rome is also present in the Romanian historical imaginary, but the way in which it is perceived nowadays by the general public differs significantly from its perception in the 18th and 19th century, or even at the beginning of the 20th century. These differences are a result of the gradual emergence of national identity constructs – a process which was shaped by a variety of internal and external social-political and cultural factors – though the ways in which various social groups integrated the past into their collective memory were also relevant. From this point of view, the Romans nearly always played an important symbolic role, starting from the Renaissance, while the Dacians were only discovered during the 19th century Romanticism, in the quest for individuality in the construction of modern Romanian identity, and also for the much needed “golden age” of the nation, populated by exemplary heroes⁹.

The emergence of modern Romanian identity constructs has been based on many intellectual accumulations combined with an increasing collective social consciousness which tended to transcend traditional social boundaries. While the intellectuals have provided the necessary historical, linguistic or ethnographic arguments and framework, the regular people have offered the psychological points of reference, and

⁸ Smith 1999, 59-71.

⁹ See a synthesis of this subject in Popa 2013.

the collective self-awareness and experience in relationship with other ethnic entities. The arguments of the former display an apparent objectivity, being considered the results of scientific enquiry, while the collective self-awareness is subjective and situational, being informed by a diversity of social-political and cultural interactions that are continuously happening at all levels of the society.

In pursuit of the ancestors, the Romans first captured the scholars' attention during the Renaissance due to the similarities between the Romanian and Latin languages. One of the most influential opinions belonged to Enea Silvio Piccolomini who, while discussing these linguistic similarities, also deplored the apparent cultural decline of the descendants of Roman legionaries, a perception which could be related to the stereotypical view of the Romanians' alterity¹⁰. In the 15th century, Antonio Bonfini identified the Transylvanian Romanians as descendants of the Roman colonists brought in Dacia by Trajan, using not only linguistic arguments, but also the presence of Roman ruins and inscriptions. Still, the main scope of his work was to demonstrate the noble Roman origin of King Matthias Corvinus, his protector, by inventing a prestigious genealogy¹¹, a common practice among the European political elites during the Renaissance.

The humanist culture continued to evolve in the intellectual environment from the Principality of Transylvania until the beginning of the 18th century. However, the majority of the models and ideas inspired by Classical antiquity which were adopted by the Transylvanian political and intellectual elite came mostly through some major Central European centres, like Krakow, Vienna or Prague, and less through direct contacts with Italy or France. These Central European stylistic and conceptual filters can be observed, for example, in the laic and ecclesiastic architecture of the larger urban centres, like Cluj, Alba Iulia, Oradea or Sibiu, and also in the layout of many aristocratic residences built in the countryside during the same period. In many cases, these residences were also embellished with collections of Roman inscriptions, statues, reliefs and other artefacts, which were meant to underline the intellectual interests of the owners and their familiarization with Classical antiquity¹².

¹⁰ Almási 2010, 108; see also Mitu, Mitu 1998, 12-14, for the perpetuation of this perception until the 19th century.

¹¹ Armbruster 1993, 18-19; Almási 2010, 121-123.

¹² For the main features of the Transylvanian Renaissance, see Kovács 2003.

Aside from enabling erudite demonstrations, which allowed them to connect with their European peers, the interest of the Transylvanian humanists for the Roman heritage also gained a political dimension starting from the second half of the 16th century, in the context of increasing political and military conflicts with the Habsburg Empire. As a consequence, their writings sought to define a distinct identity of the Principality, based on a longstanding, noble history originating from Classical antiquity. These attempts to reconstruct the local Roman past usually combined information extracted from ancient texts with some ethno-linguistic references and compilations of locally-discovered inscriptions; the resulting works were often influenced by the writing style of Latin authors like Titus Livius and Tacitus¹³.

Still, these works, as well as those of the Moldavian chroniclers of the 17th century, had a quite limited influence on the Romanian historical imaginary due to their restricted circulation and the underdevelopment of the educational system. Far more influential were the representatives of the Transylvanian School who promoted the so-called "Latinist movement" during the 18th and early 19th century¹⁴. Their perception of ancient Rome as an ideal ancestor of the Romanian nation was largely shaped by their education, first in Greek-Catholic schools from Transylvania and then in universities at Rome or Vienna, where they got familiar with the writings of ancient authors and were able to participate in the intellectual debates of the Enlightenment. The core idea of their approach was the Latin origin of the Romanian language and, by extension, of the Romanian nation, which allowed them to reclaim a noble origin, on the par with that of the greatest European nations. They took advantage of the Habsburgs' cultural and educational policies in Transylvania, which allowed the publication of dictionaries, grammars, translations, coursebooks, as well as literary and historical works, and numerous journal articles, all of them having a profound impact on the modern collective identity constructs of the Romanians from Transylvania.

This process continued well into the 19th century, being supported by the confessional schooling system, the Greek-Catholic Church, the cultural associations and the Romanian press and publishing houses, whose activities have produced an idealized image of Roman Dacia. On one hand, this has led to the longstanding perception of Transylvania as the cradle of the nation. On the other hand, the same

¹³ Russu 1975, 37-47; Bodor 1995; Almási 2010, 115-120.

¹⁴ Hitchins 2013a, 259-263; Verdery 2011, 32-34.

image has contributed to the appearance of a range of specific social and cultural features attesting the widespread adoption of the Romans as exemplary ancestors, whose presumably exceptional moral and martial qualities served as models for generations of Romanian descendants. One example is the systematic use of various names, mottoes and symbols of Roman origin by the Romanian civic and cultural associations from Transylvania. Another example is provided by the manner in which the Romanian military forces were organized during the Revolution of 1848-49, resembling the structure of the Roman legions and even using Latinised names and emblems for various units¹⁵. Moreover, the Roman origin was frequently used as a political argument by the Romanian revolutionary elites, contributing to the consolidation of a collective political and historical imaginary which was specific to the Transylvanian Romanians of this period.

The ideal ancestor as a modernizing driving force

The idea of using Roman ancestry to educate the masses, stemming from the intellectual debates of the Enlightenment, gained new dimensions during the Romanticism within the process of increasing instrumentalization of the historical writing as way of achieving social progress¹⁶. From this point of view, the journalistic and literary activity of the Transylvanian intellectuals continued to have an ethno-pedagogical connotation, aiming to stimulate the presumed latent energies of the nation by providing a wider access to literary writings inspired by historical events, popularization articles, translations of ancient authors, or ethnographic studies offering presumed parallels between Roman and Romanian customs and traditions.

It is worth underlining that their educative efforts also had a significant impact across the mountains. Aside from the widespread circulation of Transylvanian publications, some reformers and authors of coursebooks, like Florian Aaron and August Treboniu Laurian, contributed significantly to the modernization of public education systems in Moldavia and Wallachia in the early 19th century¹⁷. Their influence can be observed in the structure and contents of the history coursebooks, which were based on a succession of exemplary biographies and heroic events aiming to educate the young generations to emulate the virtues of their ancestors. All of these coursebooks started

¹⁵ Neamțu 2013.

¹⁶ Mitu 1997, 261-267 and 273-279.

¹⁷ Murgescu 1999, 112-115 and 124-139.

with a brief history of Rome up to the conquest of Dacia, while the list of national heroes always started with Trajan as the founding father of the nation; Decebalus was merely presented as an augmentative character of the emperor's actions, a brave but inevitable victim of the Roman superiority. The Dacian king's status in this narrative only changed during the late 19th century, as a consequence of an increasing interest in the pre-Roman element of the national identity.

This simplistic but glorifying approach cemented in the collective mindset the idea that the superiority of Roman origin is an intrinsic component of the Romanian nation's exceptional identity, demonstrating its inherent capacity to progress in spite of adverse external factors. This idea persisted even later, in the late 19th – early 20th century, when the Dacian-Roman model of ethnogenesis was embraced by the large majority of the Romanian intellectuals. This interpretative model emerged initially from the earlier linguistic and historiographic debates regarding the nation's origins, but it was later turned into an ideological and historiographic axiom not only in the academic environment, but also in the historical imaginary of the general population, in spite of the appearance of other models, like the protochronism, which gained popularity in the interwar period and then during the national-communism¹⁸. In the late 19th century social-political context, the cultural and ideological heritage of ancient Rome became part of the wider debate concerning the need to modernize the Romanian society and the means to achieve this. From this point of view, the Liberals were promoting the idea of reconnecting with modern Europe on the basis of a shared Roman heritage as a way towards a meaningful social and economic progress.

Among other things, this has led to an increasing interest in uncovering and documenting the material remains of Roman Dacia, which in turn contributed to the professionalization of historical and archaeological research¹⁹. First professional archaeological investigations targeted major sites from Dobrogea and Oltenia which were considered relevant for the Roman origins of the nation. An illustrative example is provided by the research history of the Roman triumphal monument at Adamclisi. The perceived ideological value of its reliefs depicting scenes from the Roman military campaigns against Dacia made the authorities of the time to propose their integration, together with a copy of Trajan's Column, into a planned monumental Neoclassical assemblage which

¹⁸ Verdery 1991, 34-36; Hitchins 2013b, 69-74.

¹⁹ Babeş 2005.

was meant to also host a new National Museum of Antiquities, the National Library and the Academy²⁰, much like the famous *Forum Traiani* built at Rome on the order of the nation's founding father. These plans failed to take shape though they are illustrative for the importance of the Roman origins in the national identity construct, and the perceived role of Classical history and culture in the process of modernization.

This programmatic appeal to the Classical tradition can also be observed in the architecture of many public buildings having administrative, educational or cultural functions, which appeared in Bucharest and other major Romanian cities during the same period. Their highly visual message was powerful enough to convince many representatives of the political and economic elites to order the construction of new residences which followed the same architectural principles²¹. The incorporation of Classical elements – porticoes with Doric or composite columns, caryatids and atlantes, frontons decorated with mythological scenes, and allegorical statues – became a visual indicator of modernity, function and authority, while also aiming to illustrate an organic intellectual connection with the culture of Western Europe. One consequence was the appearance of several buildings in the province which incorporated similar architectural details with more or less success, from the beautiful National Theatre in Iași or the former Prefecture of Argeș County, now the County Museum, to the stereotypical stucco medallions, masks, frontons or atlantes decorating nearly every middle-class urban house of the late 19th – early 20th century.

Concluding remarks

By the time when Transylvania became part of Romania in 1918, the idealized image of ancient Rome already became a defining element of the Romanian historical imaginary. However, the perception of Roman heritage has changed significantly from the late Renaissance to the Enlightenment and then in 19th century, and even at the beginning of the 20th century. An important factor in this evolution was the gradual emergence of the modern national identity constructs in the context of several internal and external social-political and cultural transformations which shaped the ways in which various social groups integrated the past into their collective memory.

As a consequence, the idealized ancient Rome was gradually transformed from an intellectual ideal to an ideal ancestor to a driving

²⁰ Țeposu-Marinescu 2002, 109.

²¹ Ionescu 1965, 422-449.

force in the nation's quest for modernization. This transformative process was significantly influenced by the activity of many intellectuals from Transylvania starting with the Enlightenment and throughout the 19th and early 20th century.

One specific product of these efforts was the emergence of an idealized image of Roman Dacia, which persisted almost unchanged throughout most of the 20th century, having a longstanding impact not only on the Romanian historical imaginary, but also on the Romanian historical and archaeological research, becoming today a stumbling block in the much needed process of theoretical and methodological self-reflection.

Bibliography

Almási 2010: G. Almási, Constructing the Wallach "other" in the late Renaissance. In: B. Trencsényi, M. Zászkaliczky (ed.), *Whose Love of Which Country? Composite States, National Histories and Patriotic Discourses in Early Modern East Central Europe*. Brill, Leiden – Boston 2010, 91-129.

Armbruster 1993: A. Armbruster, *Romanitatea românilor. Istoria unei idei*. Editura Enciclopedică, București 1993.

Babeș 2005: M. Babeș, 170 de ani de arheologie românească. *Studii și Cercetări de Istorie Veche și Arheologie* 54-56, 2005, 9-20.

Bodor 1995: A. Bodor, Erdély ókori történetének kutatása a XIX. század közepéig. *Erdélyi Múzeum* 3-4, 1995, 56-81.

Bradley 2010: M. Bradley, Tacitus' Agricola and the conquest of Britain. Representations of empire in Victorian and Edwardian England. In: M. Bradley (ed.), *Classics and imperialism in the British Empire*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2010, 124-157.

Demoule 1999: J. P. Demoule, Ethnicity, culture and identity: French archaeologists and historians. *Antiquity* 73, 1999, 190-198.

Dietler 1998: M. Dietler, A tale of three sites: the monumentalization of Celtic oppida and the politics of collective memory and identity. *World Archaeology* 30 (1), 1998, 72-89.

Egri 2017: M. Egri, Connectivity and social change. Roman goods outside the Empire (100 BCE – 400 CE). In: T. Hodos (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Archaeology and Globalization*. Routledge, Oxford 2017, 537-552.

Hingley 2000: R. Hingley, *Roman officers and English gentlemen. The imperial origins of Roman archaeology*. Routledge, London 2000.

Hitchins 2013a: K. Hitchins, *Români 1774 – 1866*, Ed. 3. Humanitas, București 2013a.

Hitchins 2013b: K. Hitchins, *România 1866 – 1947*, Ed. 3. Humanitas, București 2013b.

Ionescu 1965: G. Ionescu, *Istoria arhitecturii în România*, vol. II. Editura Academiei RSR, București 1965.

Kallendorf 2007: C. W. Kallendorf, Renaissance. In: C. W. Kallendorf (ed.), *A Companion to the Classical Tradition*. Blackwell, Oxford 2007, 30-43.

Kaminski 2007: T. Kaminski, Neoclassicism. In: C. W. Kallendorf (ed.), *A Companion to the Classical Tradition*. Blackwell, Oxford 2007, 57-71.

Kivilcim 2018: Y. N. Kivilcim, From Caesar to Charlemagne: the tradition of Trojan origins. *Medieval History Journal* 21 (2), 2018, 251-290.

Kovács 2003: A. Kovács, *Késő reneszánsz építészet Erdélyben 1541-1720*. Polis, Budapest-Kolozsvár 2003.

Mattingly 2011: D. J. Mattingly, *Imperialism, power, and identity. Experiencing the Roman Empire*. Princeton University Press, Princeton – Oxford 2011.

Mitu 1998: S. Mitu, *Geneza identității naționale la românii ardeleni*. Humanitas, București 1997.

Mitu, Mitu 1998: M. Mitu, S. Mitu, *Românii văzuți de maghiari. Imagini și clișee culturale din secolul al XIX-lea*. Editura Fundației pentru Studii Europene, Cluj-Napoca 1998.

Murgescu 1999: M. L. Murgescu, *Între "bunul creștin" și "bravul român"*. Rolul școlii primare în construirea identității naționale românești (1831-1878). Polirom, Iași 1999.

Neamțu 2013: G. Neamțu, Organizarea armatei populare românești și conducătorii ei în Transilvania la 1848-1849. In: E. Cosma (ed.), *Armies, Commanders, Leaders in Transylvania (1848-1849) / Armate, comandanți, conducători în Transilvania (1848-1849)*. Editura Argonaut – Symphologic Publishing, Cluj-Napoca – Gatineau 2013, 224-239.

Popa 2013: C. N. Popa 2013, The trowel as chisel. Shaping modern Romanian identity through the Iron Age. In: V. Ginn, R. Enlander, R. Crozier (eds.), *Exploring Prehistoric Identity. Our construct or theirs?* Oxbow, Oxford 2013, 164-174.

Renfrew, Bahn 2012: C. Renfrew, P. Bahn, *Archaeology. Theories, methods, and practice*. Thames & Hudson, 6th edition, London 2012.

Russu 1975: I. I. Russu, *Inscripțiile Daciei Romane*, vol. I. Editura Academiei RSR, București 1975.

Smith 1999: A. D. Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation*. Oxford University Press, Oxford 1999.

Țeposu-Marinescu 2002: L. Țeposu-Marinescu, Postfață. In: R. Vulpe, *Columna lui Traian*, ed. II, CIMEC, București 2002, 107-112.

Verdery 2011: K. Verdery, *National ideology under Socialism. Identity and cultural politics in Ceaușescu's Romania*. University of California Press, Berkeley – Los Angeles – Oxford 2011.