

# The «New Dacians» and Crypto-Orthodoxy at the Dawn of Rational Historicism (I)

Iulian Mitran

*The Dacian Village of Năeni made the headlines as being an attempt to bring back resurect the long-lost lifestyle of the Dacians, commontly regarded as the ancestors of modern-day Romanians. The so-called village, which hosted no more then five people, intrigued the Romanian audience, which remained somewhat torned between two camps, one that seemed to aplaud it and to regard it as a brave attempt to bring back to life «Romanianism» in its purest form, and another one that ridiculed it and pointed out the logical cracks that can be found in the narrative that stirred up everything. In the following lines we will give a short analysis on the numerous peculiarities that characterize the Dacian Village from the Carpathian foothills of Buzău County, attempting to map a wider social phenomenon that become rooted in the Romania during the era of Ceaușescu’s nationalist communism. Even so, it became even more radicalized from the ‘90s to the present-day, even though it is still to a certain extent it is becoming increasingly more marginalized within the mainstream academia which made in recent years some notable attempts to demystify writings on issues regarding national history. This paper mainly focuses on mapping certain evolutions, and subsequent anomalies, that marked post-1989 Romania, with a strong emphasis on the influence that Orthodox Christianity had on the crystallization of a few peculiar crypto-religious movements that were heavily fueled by pseudo-science and over-the-top claims made on behalf of the unity of the Romanian nation.*

Romanian mass media is no stranger when it comes to extravagant displays of radical nationalism, throughout the twenty-eight years that followed the collapse of communism, several factions made their way to the public scene, their most ardent supporters making their presence know in various TV shows and the written press. A truly peculiar case came into the attention of the general public in the second half of 2017, then a few national newspapers wrote about “The First Baptism that took place in the Dacian Village”. The settlement, which has no more then five inhabitants, is situated in the hilly region of Buzău County, in historical Wallachia, the readers and TV audiences were quickly intrigued by the subject. In fact, everything regarding this subject is intriguing from a multitude of perspectives, and is

nothing more than a peculiar collection of contradictory elements that are lumped together in the attempt to make ground for *Neo-Dacianist agenda*. Romanian nationalism took a weird turn during Ceaușescu's reign when it was strongly infused with numerous exaggerated images of the nation's triumphant past and achievements, it was an era in which Romanian historiography, under the controlled interventions dictated by the newly-installed nationalistic agenda, took numerous historical events out of context, falsified or overexaggerated various facts, and they *airbrushed* the image of numerous historical figures. To a certain extent, it is understandable that each nation has its own set of myths, every nation wants to see its leaders in good light, and to have a feeling of pride, or comfort at least, when discussing the distant and near past.

But what happens when all of this is taken to the next level? This is what actually concerns us, when it gets to the point in which ideologies become so deluded that they break any connections that they used to have with certain commonly acknowledged historical facts. *Dacianism* is the name that we will attribute to a shift in the way in which Romanian national history came to be viewed in the second half of the last century, which highly stressed the role that the Dacians, name attributed to various Thracian tribes which used to inhabit the territory of modern-day Romania, had in birth of the Romanian nation. It also emphasized the unbroken ancestral succession which link modern-day Romanians to the Thracian inhabitants of Dacia. In contrast to *Dacianism* we find another ideological current that presents itself as *Romanism*, or *Latinism*, it basically is an inverted version of the first, in which the Roman element is overexaggerated in the coming into being of the Romanian nation, going as far as claiming that all indigenous Thracian tribes were whipped out by the Romans during their short stay in Dacia. The official narrative that is in place today actually rejects partially the claims of both side, rather following a middle path in which the so-called Daco-Romans are the intermediate link between the Dacians and the Proto-Romanians. There are numerous logical gaps that prevent both of these camps to being taken into the mainstream:

The *Dacianists* undermine the fact that it is almost impossible to talk about a homogenous "Dacian nation" in the case in which those people did not have a standardized written language or institutional system.

*Romanists* undermine the that was never conceived that an invading group would totally wipe off the indigenous peoples, mainly due to economic and strategic reasons, being

more convenient to enslave them thus increasing the labor force that they will benefit from.

*Romanism* is, to a certain extent, more deeply rooted within Romanian nationalism, Grigore Ureche, a XVII century Moldavian chronicler, well-known for his writings concerning the origins of the Romanians, most notably remembered for his now-famous “De la Râm ne tragem” (We are the descendance of Rome) from the Chronicles of Moldovia. This trend will be even more exploited in post-independent XIX century Romania, era marked by an increasing need to develop a sense of national unity.

*Romanism* was greatly favored due to its ability to create a strong bound between newly independent Romania, which was striving to rinse itself of the century-old judicial and social practices that were inherited from the Ottoman and Byzantines and to adopt reforms that were meant to Westernize the Romanian society, which was still marked by a late for a feudalism.

*Școala Ardeleană* (Transylvanian School) was the best known proponent of *Romanism*, having its roots in XVIII century Transylvania, its history is strogly linked to Greek-Catholic Church, being overwhlemingly made up of Romanian believers. The movement was keen on proving that Transylvanian Romanians were the direct descendance of the Romans that colonized the region in the II centry, the province staying under Roman administration for 165 years. In its core, the Romanism promoted by *Școala Ardeleană* had an integrationalist dimension attached to it, seeking to create a aces between the new emerging post-independence cultural elite and the Western World.

Even though *Dacianism* was not initially the product of nationalist-communism, the Romanian Communist Part, through its ideological mechanism, the new path the Romanian national history will follow until the fall of the regime was decided during the Eleventh Congress of the Romanian Communist Part that took place in 1974. An interesting fact concerning Dacianism is that it also was well-present in some academic circles in the between-war period, but is peak was reached during the 70s and 80s.

*Dacianism* is deeply indigenous-oriented, reliant on protochronism, isolationist and intellectually dishonest.

Dacianism is still alive and well even in post-communist Romania, its present-day proponents usually adhere to two distinct not entirely homogenized ideological circles that marked the nationalist public discourse in the last twenty-eight years. On one hand we have those that more *Puritanical* in their approach, usually this group is made up of people that are part, or have certain sympathies, toward extreme right nationalist movements.

*Dacian Nationalism* in a very in-your-face, or rather incognito, mode can be seen very well in political parties such as PRM (Partidul România Mare/Greater Romania Party), known for its aggressive nationalism and hatespeech toward minority groups, or far-right groups such as Noua Dreaptă (The New Right), commonly regarded as a hate group. One interesting fact is that Dacianism seems to take on two forms when it comes to its connection with religion in modern Romania, almost exclusively to Orthodox Christianity. Some proponents, such as Daniel Roxin, known for his off the top interpretations of the Dacian contribution to the formation of the Romanian nation, does not mix Orthodoxy in discussions related to discussions on this topic, being more inclined toward integrating the Dacians in the wider landscape of indigenous esoterism. Even so, we cannot talk about the existence of a new ethnic-based reconstructionist religion, as it is the case with Celtic and Slavic neopaganism. More peculiarities are to be seen in the other camp which has a strange way of mixing Dacian heritage with Eastern Orthodoxy, the product being a sort of new standard of *Romanian Purity*.

The latter tendency in the field of Neo-Dacianism, a term that we can use to describe those nationalist tendencies that are heavily reliant on Dacian irredentism that started to become popular within certain circles.

*Daco-Orthodoxy*, or what we can usually define as what is happening at Năeni's Dacian Village is truly interesting when put into the cultural landscape of cultural reconstructionism that is still present within Romanian culture to this very day. In contrast to other movements that attempt to resurrect the mannerism or the heritage of a certain age, reconstructionists do not attempt only to bring things back in order for them to be viewed as mere exhibits in a museum, or in an outdoor exposition, they try to integrate into the mundane various elements of long-extinct cultures in order to be reused according to their original purpose. Usually, such movements are quite purist in their attempts to bring the past back into the present, meaning that they are extremely unlikely to mix elements from two different eras, or cultures together. This is why the Dacian Village of Năeni is a bag full of peculiarities, attempting to resurrect the supposed lifestyle of the Dacians while adhering to Christian cultural and spiritual values.

The most obvious contradiction that we can spot is the presence of Orthodoxy while claiming to live the life of your supposed ancestors. The Dacians had a henotheistic religion, opposing Christianity which is momotheistic. Such religions, most of the ones from Europe, did not hold on to key-elements that Christianity holds today as central, such as Salvation, the sinful nature of men and the original sin, worship within the confines of a temple, and later church etc.

The coverage of the life in the Dacian village that appeared in the written press covered three key life events that took place within the community since its founding: a wedding, a baptism, and a funeral. The wedding took place in the spring of 2017. The bride, Nicoleta, and the groom, Ionuț, both coming from poor families, tied the knot in a ceremony conducted in the Dacian village where they received housing in the village as help from father Mihai Milea, the founder and administrator of the settlement. The settlement was built with the help of the Saint Sava foundation, which is an Orthodox charity that helps vulnerable groups. The photo and video material that were taken at the wedding, and made their way into the press, show us an image that is not really extremely surprising. Besides the fact that the bride and groom did not wear Western-style wedding gowns and rather opted for traditional Wallachian dresses. From the information that we received via the mass media, our theories were pretty much proven. The wedding itself did not contain anything Dacian, that would have been truly hard because we cannot claim that we know exactly how a wedding ceremony took place within an indigenous tribe in the 1st century before the incorporation of the region into the Roman Empire. In fact, the wedding was built more on the rural tradition of Wallachia, reflecting to a certain extent the village weddings that followed a certain ancestral pattern that were still practiced to a certain extent even at the beginning of the 21st century.

Most of the event lacked the modern Western-inspired amenities that rural weddings have today. If we were to judge every element from its supposed origin, the dresses themselves are more of a reflection of the Slavic and Byzantine heritage that was inherited by Romanians, having no known common elements with the traditional dresses of the Dacians, regarding which we don't have a great deal of information. The rest of the rituals present in the wedding are not that different, the *hora* – a chain dance, is also present among other cultures, as well as some of the religious rituals which hold no significant variations from other Eastern Orthodox nations.

The same pattern is followed in the case of the baptism and funeral that also took place within the community, they are rather a reflection of a pre-modern Romanian rural culture, lacking the fancy ornamentations and menaties that westernization brought in the last few decades. This leads us to further our understanding on what is actually happening in the hills of Buzău:

First of all, “Dacian” is rather used as a synonym for pre-modern rural costumes and life. In this specific context, the word rather seeks to exist as an ethnonym and is filled it with a new meaning – follower of a back-to-nature movement which has a strong rural-ethnocentric core.

The Dacian and Orthodox elements are mixed as a result of their stance of symbols of Romanian-ness, even though they do not have any common historical roots and did not ever coexisted in a common historical era.

The attempt itself rather characterizes an attempt to reconstruct and idealized world of the XVIII-XIX century than a truly authentic attempt to reconstruct into the present the lifestyle of a peoples from Antiquity. More precisely, “Dacian” has its original ethnonymic sense taken away and it is filled with a sense that makes reference to a pan-generational pseudo-identity that tries to create a communality between the Thracian tribes, Proto-Romanians and Romanians.

The Dacian ethos is viewed as virtuous and generally benevolent in nature, making a sort of connection with the moral values that are put in place by Christianity. But it is partly an illusion that what the Dacians and their indigenous religion held strongly as values would have a clear symmetric representation in Christianity, as some are general human moral values that are valued by most societies.

It is important to acknowledge the fact that the Romanian Orthodox Church never officially endorsed any of the *Dacianist groups, and their overstretched claims; the Church's take on Romanian national history is pretty much tune with the official position that is commonly shared by historians and social scientiest that carry out their work in various state-funded reseach centers.* Another aspect that needs to be discussed is the manner in which other Orthodox Christian churches that are present in Romania take part in shaping the manner in which national culture is viewed from a historical perspective, as well as the way in which its future evolution is desired. Besides the Romanian Orthodox Church (*Biserica*

*Ortodoxă Română*) there are few other churches that share mostly the same dogmatic core, but due to certain historical circumstances, they split from the mainstream church – thus forming what some call *biserici paraortodoxe* (para-Orthodox churches). *The Old Rite Orthodox Church from Romania* (Biserica Ortodoxă de Stil Vechi din România), also referred to as *The Eastern Orthodox Church from Romania* (Biserica Răsăriteană din România) emerged from the schism that took in the years following WWI, when the Romanian Orthodox Church officially switched calendars, replacing the Julian Calendar with the Gregorian Calendar. The changes was motivated by several ecclesiastic and social aspects. Newly-incorporated Transylvania was using the Gregorian Calendar in both Church and administration; the Julian Calendar was still in use in Wallachia, Moldavia, Bessarbia and Dobrudja.

In 1923 the Romanian Orthodox Church officially took out of use the *Old Calendar* (calendarul vechi), as it is referred to nowadays, opting for the Gregorian. Believers that use the New Calendar (calendarul nou) celebrate the majority of religious holidays thirteen days ahead of those that still use the Old Calendar. The Old Rite Orthodox Church from Romania was born as a reaction to the *papalist innovations* that the ROC was in favor of, the head of the OROCR is to be found at the Monastery of Slătioara, located in Suceava County.

Unlike the ROC, the Old Rite Church kept a very low profile, having little to no significant contribution to post-1989 mainstream culture within Romania. The OROCR put a great emphasis on Christian morality, and preserving an unbroken tradition that was passed on to modern believers by Church's forefathers. Unlike the ROC, the OROCR is more isolationist, disregarding any attempt to put Orthodoxy in a global context, there is a particular dislike for ecumenism. The OROCR frequent calls towards overcoming sin and temptation are not directed towards Romania, but rather towards those Christians that remained faith towards the Orthodox faith. Even so, the Old Rite Church preserved a distinct Romanian flavor, which is mainly given by the fact that it is made up of Romanian believers that has Romanian as its liturgical language. But its view of the world, and of modern Romanian history, cannot be labeled as being Romanian-centric. This claim is mainly backed up by the fact that most of the written content that is made available by the OROCR through its publications, the most popular being *Catacombele Ortodoxiei* (Orthodoxy's Catacombs) mainly stress the unity of all Old Rite Christians in front of the followers of the Orthodox churches that were in favor of the so-called Western-style innovations.

*Catacombele Ortodoxiei* is abundant of articles that are highly critical of the Romanian Orthodox Church, of ecumenism, the Patriarchy of Constantinople is also scrutinized within issues that are available online.

As a result, the Old Rite Church doesn't take too much interest in framing or reframing Romanianism, it is rather interested in forming a trans-national unity among Old Rite Christians, regardless of their ethnic affiliation. On one hand the OROCR tries to create a thick wall between itself and the doomed (other Christians), but on the other hand it tries to strengthen its ties with the other Old Rite churches from across Eastern Europe and the Balkans. One interesting aspect is the fact that through promoting unity among Old Rite Christians, the OROCR puts itself in a common place with the Slavic-speaking world, a territory that modern Romania loosens its ties to over the last few decades. This being mainly correlated with the fact that *Slavic* became almost entirely synonymous to *Russian*, and there is no denial in the fact that there is a substantial degree of Russophobia that still is present within the Romanian society. The influence of the Old Rite Church within contemporary Romania is very low profile and insignificant, but it has the potential to open up a certain gate that was sealed for quite some time – Slavic-Romanian relations.

Going back to the more peculiar forms in which crypto-religious and pseudo-scientific movements present themselves in front of the world, it is hard to overlook two ways in which the whole Dacian-mania manifested itself. There is a rather obscure segment that actually militates for the revival of the indigenous religion of the Dacians, erasing Orthodox Christianity from Romania's cultural landscape would facilitate strengthening the connection between modern-day Romanians and their supposed ancestors. There are other channels that forward other interpretations of cultural history that gravitate more towards syncretism – even claiming that Jesus was the successor of Zamolxis. Other claims that follow try to put emphasis on the supposed similarities that ancient Dacian religious practices have with some Christian ones that are in use today, neglecting the fact that certain key-aspects that can be found in almost any form of religious practices found among humans – ritual objects, zoomorphic gods, death rituals, the existence of an afterlife, season-based rituals/holidays.

Apart from these obscure manifestations of the Dacian craze, we find a more rather refined form which has some backing even from academia. The groups that fit this description usually heavily rely on phony historical evidence to sustain the claims, they usually stress the unity among Dacian tribes, a continuity between the Dacian and modern-day Romanians, there is a strong belief in the superiority of a supposed *Dacian culture*, the virtues of these peoples, their bravery, their superiority by comparison to the invading Romans. Not so outrageous at first sight, many of the claims that are forwarded by the members of this movement are sometimes mixed in with true historical facts, or they rely on connections that are hard to validate as being trustworthy. The mix of true and false facts, along with the numerous channels that

make possible the popularization of numerous distorted claims, gave them a certain degree of legitimacy in the eyes of the general public. Another highly efficient tactic that they use is that of claiming that there is a certain “foreign power”, or sometime more bluntly said – a conspiracy, that seeks to keep the truth about the Dacians and their civilization far away from the general public.

### **A final thought**

The Dacian village, and the Neo-Dacianism is no more of an expression of general blurred sense of national identity which characterizes many post-communist nations of Eastern Europe, it also held certain elements that date back to the age of nationalism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century which left a long-lasting mark on the whole of Europe. Due to the rapid succession in which the Romanian society switched cultural models from the XIX century to the present there is still a certain shallowness that characterizes the nation-building policies from the past and present. *Dacianism*, in its past and present forms, can be seen as an attempt to repair a deeply fragmented history in a context in which the irredentist of the neighboring nation which posed a true danger for the integrity, and subsequent survival of an undivided ethnic Romanian state.

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