A FEW OPINIONS REGARDING THE HISTORICAL INTERPRETATION OF TRAJAN'S COLUMN

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The value of the Column as a historical document has been an object of controversy among modern scholars who have wished and are still wishing to reconstruct, in a more and more verisimilar way, the detailed unfolding of the two wars waged to conquer Dacia. At the same time, some of the scenes are rightfully evoked in the studies regarding the continuity of the Dacians under Roman rule. Doing a certain thematic selection, we envisage to take a look, in what follows, at some historical and artistic problems which have been the object of much controversy in the works written in the field, with a view to demonstrating if and to what extent the Column is considered an acceptable historic source to specialists.

Some scholars (C. Cichorius, S. Reinach, G.A.T. Davies, T. Antonescu, V. Christescu, I.I. Russu) see in the reliefs on the impressive monument a faithful chronicle of the wars for conquering Dacia (topographic details, the faithfulness to the historical truth), even looking for positive evidence in antique texts or in the places where the military operations had taken place. To other scholars (K. Lehmann-Hartleben, Eugenia Strong, I.A. Richmond, R. Paribenii, etc), the Column only represents an artistic synthesis, fraught with exaggerations and deformations of historical facts and events, which should be discerningly set apart from what is artistic convention. In their conception, the reliefs on the Column have a minor documentary and historical value and cannot be used in establishing the chronology and place of the events, since the various scene are nothing but idealized images of the facts.

The two extreme sets of opinions are more moderately considered by C. Patsch. Admitting of the high artistic value of the sculptures, the Viennese historian admits that they generally depict the real unfolding of the Dacian-Roman wars, providing good general geographical and military clues. Broadly speaking, the Column depicts facts that actually happened and can be used as a historical source.

Some contemporary Romanian historians have also subscribed to

Patsch's opinion which is visibly bent towards the more skeptical conceptions of the scholars in the second group, not without adding some new, interesting information. These historians dealt with the Column, or referred to its value as a direct source of historical information. Thus, C. Daicoviciu, followed by his son, H. Daicoviciu underlines the limited documentary value of the impressive monument, giving to it an official, court character, with the purpose to bring homage to the Empire and Trajan and to be an illustration to the emperor's (nowadays lost) Comments on the wars with the Dacians. On the Column – the authors hold – events cannot be accurately located in space and time, the facts being depicted only in a general, highly approximate manner. This is due to the fact that the artist worked according to given models and templates, without taking direct contact with the real events. There exist, therefore, a series of omissions and contradictions between the content of certain scenes and the antique texts or the real facts considered and proved by archaeological discoveries. A work of art with a primarily strong propagandistic outline, the Column stays – in the vision of these authors, as well – an important historical document, which should, nevertheless, be interpreted with much critical spirit and certain reservations, since the facts illustrated must at all times be set against what we find in antique texts and the data supplied by other historic disciplines.

In the most thoroughly documented Romanian work on the Column, by the late historian Radu Vulpe and published posthumously in 1988, we have to do with the same general orientation and interpretation, but with ongoing new observations and ideas regarding a series of facts and details which took place during and after the two fiery wars for the conquest of Decebal's Dacia.

Taking into account the statements of the historian-commentators mentioned above, regarding the documentary value of the Column as a whole, let us take a look at the scenes depicting the permanence of the Dacians in the country conquered by the Romans and to how exactly they have been interpreted by specialists in the course of time.

One of the representations which gave rise to contradictory interpretations was Scene LXXVI, at the end of the first Dacian war (in the year 102). It is a beautiful field scene, depicting a group of Dacians who are heading for a Dacian stronghold. One can see in the group old people, women and children, followed by domestic animals (oxen, cows,

sheep and goats), some of the latter on the move, others lying in the grass. One can distinguish in the centre an old man holding the hand of a child, another one who carries a child on his shoulders, a mother with two children at her side and a third in her arms; also two other women with their children close by their sides: one carrying it in her arms, the second on her head, swaddled up and set in a sort of a cradle-crib. In the left plan, some Dacian men are depicted, as they put a stone wall to the ground, symbolizing the demolishment of the Dacian strongholds, as required by the peace conditions.

The scene was interpreted by C. Cichorius as the migration of the Dacian population after the war ended, as a sequel of the conditions imposed by Trajan, while E. Petersen also believed that the scene represented the departure of some Dacian families from their Roman-invaded homeland. S. Reinach, followed by Eugenia Strong and C. Patsch interpret the same scene as the return of the Dacians, along with their cattle, to the lands from where they had fled because of the war. This opinion was entirely taken up by the Romanian historians, who see in this scene the comeback home of the Dacian population, their resuming the normal course of life in the rural-pastoral environment, after the fights came to an end and peace was set with the Romans.

Scenes CLIV and CLV from the end of the second Dacian war (106), which conclude the sculptured chronicle of the two terrible wars between Trajan and Decebal, also formed the object of prolonged controversy regarding their significance. What was the clue?

Although the state of conservation of the reliefs is poor, one can distinguish fairly well most of the figures. Thus, on the left one can see a group of Roman soldiers marching to the right and leaving behind a stronghold in flames. Dacian women, children and men are in front of them, grazing their cattle in peace. One of the Dacians is looking back, others carry weapons.

The interpretations of these scenes vary as well. W. Froehner considers that the Dacians are leaving their country occupied by enemies, taking along their women, children, cattle and more important belongings. Reinach, too, says that the two scenes symbolize an exile, while Cichorius – who thinks the Dacian group should not be considered in connection with the Romans – sees, here too, the mass migration of the native population, a migration permitted and favoured by the Romans, who wished to have as little hostile Dacian population

as possible in the occupied territories. Still, Petersen speaks of the Dacians who submitted and were pardoned, or of those who did not fight against the Romans. These people, along with their wives and children, cattle and goods, are heading elsewhere, to find new homes, being therefore allowed to carry weapons. They are probably leaving places where other Dacian tribes were to be colonised and are therefore escorted by Roman soldiers. R.P. Longden considered that, in this case, we have to do with a real exodus of the defeated Dacian population.

Opposing these theories on migration of the chasing away of the Dacians from their native land, C. Patsch comes to the conclusion that the Roman soldiers in the scenes under discussion represent troops who returned to their garrisons, after their mission was accomplished, while the Dacians in the same picture are nothing but friends of the Romans who had taken refuge in the mountains, whence, after Decebal's death and the final Roman victory, they return to their homes. Patsch's correct explanation in the sense of the return of the population from the mountains was also adopted by the Romanian historians, who plead for the Dacian-Roman continuity.

Regarding Scenes CLIV and CLV a new hypothesis was formulated, according to which we neither have to do with a plastical depiction of the Dacian population departing from the Province, nor with their return from the mountains, but with an evacuation of the natives from the region of the Orastie Mountains to other areas of Roman Dacia which were easier to police, so as to prevent any future re-groupings or revolts of the Dacians. The hypothesis is also supported by the results of archaeological research in the last 70 years, which show that the highly populated area of the Orastie Mountains, the centre of the Dacians' power, went neither on being populated by natives nor colonized after the setting up of the Province (106).

It ensues that the incriminated scenes on Trajan's Column – should we give them the historical value in discussion – cannot be interpreted unilaterally as a piece of evidence of the Dacians' migration from their country submitted by the Romans. A more verisimilar interpretation is that of the population returning home after the disaster of the war had passed or their evacuation from the mountainous region of Orastie and their settling in the lowlands, in the space of the new Roman province. These are, in fact, also the opinions held by almost all Romanian historians who studied the significance of the respective scenes on the

Column.

Opposing the scenes discussed above, the Column also holds numerous representations which, besides allocutions and sacrifices, marches, military works, fiery fights etc., also show in a relevant way the submission and bending of the Dacian population to the emperor and the victorious Roman army.

During the first war (101-102), for instance, after the famous fight at *Tapae* (the Iron Gate of Transylvania), Trajan, in the company of his commanders, receives a Dacian delegation consisting of ordinary people, *comati*, who come to ask peace and mercy (scenes XXVII-XXVIII). After another terrible fight which was again won by the Romans (scene XXXVII), a great group of Dacians, simple and noble men (*tarabostes, comati*), men women, children and old people submits to the emperor, who grants them good-will and mercy. In another scene (XLVI), two *comati* ask Trajan for mercy and a delegation of Dacians are having negotiations with the Romans (Scene LII). During a fight a Dacian nobleman is depicted as he throws his shield aside and kneels in front of the emperor (Scene LXI), while two other *pileati* are asking pardon, one of them kissing the emperor's hand (Scene LXVI). The Dacians' capitulation at the end of the war is shown in Scene LXXV: the noblemen, great crowds of Dacians and king Decebal himself put their weapons down and worship the winner, probably under the very walls of Sarmizegetusa. The population is returning to their homes laid bare during and because of the war (Scene LXXVI), while the goddess Victory, one foot on a helmet between two Dacian weapon-trophies is writing on her laurel-framed shield the name of the defeated Dacian people.

In the illustrations regarding the second war (105-106), the submission scenes of the Dacians are also frequent. For instance, in Scenes XC-XCI, a numerous group of *comati*, women and children, probably at the South of the Danube, bend to the emperor, who then appears to be negotiating with a Dacian-Bastarnian delegation (Scene C), or receiving the plea of a *pileatus* (Scene CXVIII). After the reliefs depicting the siege of Sarmizegetusa, giving out the last supplies of water or seizing the rich loot, a peaceful group of *comati* appear or noblemen and women together ordinary people kneel and ask for mercy in front of the emperor (Scene CXLI). After the last desperate act of resistence, followed by Decebal's fleeing and suicide, the return home or the

evacuation of the Dacians from the highlands to the lowlands is shown, the narrative in images ending in an idyllic-pastoral scene, similar to that at the end of the first Dacian war.

Consequently, there are neither scenes of expulsion or deportation of the Dacians from their conquered lands, nor are there any depictions of the extermination of the civilians who surrendered on the Column. On the contraty, this marvellous illustrated chronicle of the Dacian-Roman wars shows the bulk of the Dacian population – noblemen and simple folks, men and women, old people and children – in countless acts of submission to the emperor, to the victorious Roman army and obtaining from the winners their pardon, peace and right to existence.

Regardless how we might look at things and accept or reject the various opinions of scholars regarding this magnificent monument of the antiquity, Trajan's Column represents for the neo-Latin people at the Danube and Carpathians the crucial event, beautifully carved in Carrara marble, that stands at the foundation of its ethnical being. As some historians say, using a plastical and daring figure of speech, the Column is the birth certificate of the Romanian people[*].

[*] With a view to the project of erecting in Cluj-Napoca a copy of Trajan's Column in natural size, we consider it might be of interest to mention here the copies already existing of the famous monument: 1). In 1861-1863, under Napoleon III a complete copy of the Column was made in galvanic copper, which can be found in the Natural Antiquities' Museum in Saint-Germain-en Laye. 2). Another complete copy of the column was made in the second half of the XIXth century, ordered by Queen Victoria. It stands in the Albert and Victoria Museum in London. 3). The Museum of Civilisation in Rome also harbours a copy of the Column. 4). Finally, at the National Museum of History in Bucharest the moulds after the reliefs of the Column are to be found. They were cast in a special cement and brought to the country in 1967.

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