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THE COMMUNITIES FROM THE IRON GATES
AREA BEFORE AND AFTER THE ROMAN
CONQUEST
POLITICAL, ECONOMICAL AND CULTURAL INTERACTIONS

PHD THESIS

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The Communities from the Iron Gates Area before and after the Roman Conquest. Political, Economical and Cultural Interactions

-summary-

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Key-words: Iron Gates, Protohistory, Late La Tène, Early Roman, Scordiscans, Dacians, interaction, identitate, archaeological landscape.

The subject of the paper `The Communities from the Iron Gates Area before and after the Roman Conquest. Political, Economical and Cultural Interactions` concerns the archaeological finds from the Iron Gates area between the end of the 2nd century BC and the beginning of the 2nd century AD. Before the middle of the 20th century the Iron Gates characterized the narrow valley of the Danube between Orșova and Drobeta – Turnu Severin (both Mehedinți county, Romania). After the construction of the hydropower plants with the same name, Iron Gates I-II (ro. Porțile de Fier I-II; srb. Đerdap), at Golubac (Golubac district, Serbia) – Prahovo (Negotin district, Serbia) the Iron Gates were ever more understood as the area encompassed by these two structures, downstream from Baziaș (Caraș-Severin county, Romania) until Prahovo. The broad geographical understanding of the Iron Gates area is not only determined by the more recently constructed structures, but also by the existence of a cultural and economical microclimate, which developed on the particular settings of this region. One of its characteristic is the increased cultural interaction that takes place today, as well as it did in the past, between the two banks of the Danube, illustrated in the mixed structure of the archaeological finds already in the Early Iron Age. Given the previously foremost concern with the political and military events connected with the Roman Empire, the paper here discussed aimed at the identification of developments in the area beyond the already shown belligerent or diplomatic encounters. As a contact area between multiple cultural milieus, the Iron Gates offers interesting interpretative perspectives concerning subjects such as acculturation and interaction between the *barbaricum* and the Roman world, as well as those taking place in a newly conquered Roman territory. The paper here discussed wishes to respond to the absence of such approach for the Iron Gates area. The analysis focused on the identified archaeological sites as an illustration of the local developments in the area within its larger historical and cultural context, with special regard towards habitat dynamics and interaction.

The study includes published and unpublished archaeological finds identified in the Iron Gates, as well as from neighbouring areas when relevant. The research is introduced by the aims and motivations of the author, as well as by the establishment of the geographical setting subject to the paper. Following the construction of the hydropower plants on the Danube this was significantly altered, therefore the reconstruction of the previous geographical features was of great importance. The hydropower plants caused the rise of the water level, which flooded approx. 10 hectares of land and changed the aspect of the tributary valleys, broadening their mouths, the permanent destruction of the microclimate and the flooding of the river islands that facilitated the crossing of the Danube. Furthermore, two desiccated river arms were observed near Ostrovul Corbului and Kladovo.

The first chapter sets the methodological basis of the research described by the methods of selection and analysis of the archaeological and historical sources. The secondary importance of the historical sources was pointed out in this chapter, accepting however their contribution to the reconstruction of the historical context. The explicit character of the written sources offers access to information regarding cultural aspects such as linguistic, religious or ethnic identity, political and military relations and absolute chronology. Data was mostly taken from ancient texts written by Greek and Roman authors, supplemented beginning with the 1st century AD by the Latin inscriptions. These contributed to the reconstruction of the ancient geography and of the political and military context. In their interpretation the existence of a geographical, as well as cultural and chronological distance between the ancient authors and the subjects they described was considered, which affected the reliability of their stories. The geographical distance resulted in the generalization of the cultural aspects, which are associated to large groups of population with vaguely defined territories. The increased interaction with the Lower Danube through political, military and commercial encounters, particularly beginning with the 2nd century BC, improved the geographical and cultural understanding of the area. This contributed in a certain measure to the diversification of the political map in the region. The chronological distance between the author and the subjects described is equally significant. Authors such as Caesar, Strabo, Horace and Velleius Paterculus or administrative documents such as *Fasti Triumphales Populi Romani* were relatively contemporaneous to the events. Others wrote about situations happening only decades earlier (Livy, Ptolemy). However, in most of the cases the chronological distance is even larger and the primary sources underwent some modifications in the process of compilation and synthesis, as well as under the influence of recent

geographical and cultural knowledge (Iordanes, Eutropius, Festus). Not the least, the Mediterranean concept of civilization, as opposed to *barbaricum*, has influenced the cultural perception regarding the populations from temperate Europe. The people of the Lower Danube have been described as culturally inferior, which reflected in their cruel nature and irrational judgment. Positive traits were connected to primitive intelligence or to the mimetic copying of the Mediterranean civilization model.

The archaeological finds are not as useful in the description of ethnic identities, but rather describe a *modus vivendi*. As a result of social action they are important to the understanding of communities as complex and flexible social groups through changing similarities and differences. By their character, archaeological discoveries allow a more accurate image over the complexity and diversity of cultural identities compared to the large cultural groups described by ancient authors that give the impression of uniformity. An important part of the paper is the analysis of the mobile artefacts, with respect to their geographical context and chronological horizon. The aim of the analysis was the identification of aspects of social life illustrated in the selection and use of artefacts from relevant contexts. More stress was placed on the unpublished pottery finds from the fortified settlement at Divici-Grad that allowed a direct contact with the archaeological discoveries. The pottery was selected from relevant closed contexts such as houses and pits. The analysis focused on the identification of pottery production traditions illustrated by the shape and technological features of individuals, in order to establish the origin of the finds. Furthermore, the functionality of pottery individuals was taken into consideration as a marker for food and beverage preparation and consumption style.

The second chapter, concerning the chronological, political and military contexts, adds to the introduction of the paper. Three chronological horizons have been established, generally related with the already developed chronologies for South-Eastern Europe. They were organized around the Roman presence in the area, beginning with the conquest of the Macedonian Kingdom in 168 BC, followed by its organisation into a Roman province in 148 BC. As a result, the Romans inherited the instability of the Balkans, where the Macedonian Kingdom was the main attraction for the Northern populations. The ancient authors suggest the Scordiscan political strength at the time of the Roman setting into the Balkans. The first direct conflict with the Romans is registered already in 141 BC when the Scordiscans successfully attack Macedonia. Afterwards, direct conflicts continue until the end of the 2nd century BC. During the 1st century BC the Roman progress towards the Danube is illustrated

by intensified military actions against the populations living in the Northern Balkans. Describing the triumph of M. Minucius Rufus in 106 BC, the ancient sources mention the first conflict with the Dacians as a distinct population. While the Scordiscan attacks towards the South are no longer mentioned after 84 BC, the year 74 BC marks increased Roman military actions towards Lower Danube, including the Dacians. Around this time both ancient sources and archaeological finds reflect changes in the political and social configuration North of the Lower Danube. Increasing news over conflicts between the Dacians and the Romans, where the actions of Burebista stand out, is contemporaneous with the construction of fortified structures and burials with warrior gear. The political and military strength of the Dacians is confirmed by their first mention in an ancient source (Caesar). Equally significant, the conquest of Segestica (35 BC) by Augustus opens a new stage in the communication of the Romans with the Lower Danube from the west, on the river Sava. After 15 BC, the future emperor Tiberius includes the Scordiscan territory in the Roman Empire. The Iron Gates were integrated to the province of Moesia, and respectively Moesia Superior.

The frequent conflicts between the Dacians and the Romans continue during the 1st century AD. The actions of C. Cornelius Lentulus, which according to sources is the first to enter the left bank of the Danube and install Roman fortifications, stand out. The transfer of population, the organisation of the province Moesia, the development of the auxiliary forts system and of the infrastructure in the Iron Gates will contribute to the strengthening of the Lower Danube *limes* during the entire century. The treaty signed in 89 AD between the Roman Empire lead by Domitianus and Decebalus, as leader of the Dacian Kingdom from Transylvania, ends the series of confrontations between the two sides. A decade later, after two campaigns led in the years 101-102 AD, and respectively 106 AD, by the emperor Trajan himself, the Roman army brings the Dacian Kingdom under Roman rule. A new province, Dacia, is organized leaving aside part of the territory inhabited by the Dacian populations.

The analysis of the archaeological finds is described in the 3th-5th chapters. The discussion around the habitation and interaction dynamics in the Iron Gates area was framed by the political and military relations above described in three horizons. For each of them a separate chapter was given. A first horizon is defined for the late La Tène period. This chapter (III) describes the evolution of the local communities before the Romans established in the area. The proofs of an intensified inhabitation of land in the Iron Gates area begin in the second half of the 2nd century BC. At this time there is a significant increase in the number of settlements and funerary finds on both sides of the Danube. Important social changes also

took place on the left bank of the Danube, as it is suggested by the emergence of fortified settlements and isolated burials. Habitation was focused in certain sectors. Fortified settlements were built only on the left side of the river on the edges of the Locva Mountains that follow the Danube until the narrow valley between Berzasca and Greben. Its hilltops offered a good visual perspective towards the Danube and also towards the tributary valleys, as well as making them visible. Also, the existence of islands eased the crossing between the banks of the Danube in the proximity of these settlements. Although only the hilltops were researched, the existence of secondary settlements on the Danube bank was proven at Divici, and they probably existed on other sites also. The strategic importance of the fortified settlements has been often stressed. However, their part in the larger political and military systems of the kingdoms that rise beginning with the middle of the 1st century AD North of the Lower Danube cannot explain the emergence and the early history of the settlements in the Iron Gates area. On the other hand, the beginnings of the fortified structures are contemporaneous with the increasing news on the Dacians given by the ancient authors. Furthermore, the archaeological phenomenon Padea - Panagjuski-*Kolonii*, characterised by burials with warrior gear, begins to manifest at this time. The new situation expressed archaeologically and historically illustrates a social development within the communities in the Iron Gates, lead by a hierarchy based on the social prestige of an elite that describes itself in burials through martial identity. Within settlements the inner structure having well-defined sectors, visually dominated by a restricted and architecturally distinct area, confirms the hierarchical concept. The characteristics of the fortified settlements from the Iron Gates area are analogous to the political and social model known North of the Lower Danube. Open settlements are grouped downstream from Drobeta - Turnu Severin in the lowlands cut by the Danube. They were placed directly on the right bank of the Danube, next to river islands. The settlements at Ostrovul Şimian was set directly on such an island. Generally the settlements are associated with necropolises. Here, the funerary expression appears different from individual burials. The focus in the funerary inventory is now set on the consumption of food and beverages, all these suggesting the social status of the deceased through his participation into convivial activities, while the warrior identity is only marginal. By their restricted access, an important role was played by the presence or absence of Roman Bronze vessels associated with beverages.

Pottery is mainly designed for cooking, especially in handmade pots. The geographical distribution of the identified shapes illustrates the connection with two areas.

Most of the shapes were developed North of the Lower Danube. Although very few, a number of pots that copy the graphite-clay *situlae* belongs to the pottery traditions associated with La Tène from Central Europe and the Scordiscan milieu. The ‘Dacian cups’ also relate to the same area North of the Danube. The pottery for consumption is much more diverse. While most of it is locally produced in wheel-thrown grey clay, a more reduced number could be identified as imports. The “S” profiled bowl was developed on the La Tène material culture. Under Roman influence a hybrid of this type of bowls begins to be produced in Srem area and in the Iron Gates, during the 1st century BC. On the other hand, the bowl on a tall foot (‘fructieră’) belongs to the consumption pottery known North of the Danube. Other items coming from the Roman provincial territory and from the Late Iron Age fortifications east and south of Romania, which imitate Hellenistic bowls and *kantharoi*, were imported. The consumption of foreign wine produced in the islands of Kos or Rhodes is also documented. The interactions with the Middle Danube, most probably Budapest area, is also attested by the presence of Eastern La Tène painted pottery.

The second horizon describes the time between the end of Augustus’s reign and the reign of Domitianus, and respectively the developments determined by the Roman control over the right bank of the Danube. The general structure of habitation was not significantly disturbed by the Roman Empire. Opened and fortified settlements maintain their traits, in the same areas, although their number increases. The Roman conquest could have influence the abandonment of the settlement at Stenca Liubcovei, given its position across the river from the first Roman military structures. At the beginning of the 1st century AD the ancient sources also mention important Roman military successes on the Danube leading to the establishment of the earliest military forts, yet unidentified archaeologically. At the same time, the same sources suggest an intensification of the political competition North of the Lower Danube, sometimes assisted by the Roman Empire. It is probably in this direction that the amplification of the architectural features on the upper part of the settlement at Divici-*Grad* should be understood. The Roman auxiliary forts were built in close connection to the infrastructure and the access offered by the valleys that cut across the mountains behind the right Danube bank. Furthermore, they were built next to river islands and in fluvial sectors that facilitated crossing. The inhabited areas on the right bank were in general untouched by the Roman forts and only in the second half of the 1st century AD, when the Roman presence was intensified, a supply base was built in Mala Vrbica, next to the auxiliary fort and the bridge across the Danube from Kostol - *Pontes*. Other two forts were established at Brza

Palanka - *Egeta* and Mora Vagei, relatively close to the local settlements. The fort from Brza Palanka - *Egeta* connected across the mountains the lower sector of the Danube gorge with the upper sector at the mouth of the river Porečka. The warrior burials left from the Danube disappeared. At the same time, burial types in the conquered area became more diversified, thus illustrating the heterogeneity of population determined by the Roman military presence and by the developments that took place in the neighbouring provincial milieu, under the influence of the Roman conquest.

The pottery shapes found in the local settlements are mainly the same known a century earlier, but a higher Roman influence can also be observed. The number of wheel-thrown fine pottery now surpasses handmade pottery. The handmade pots maintain their characteristics and only a few new shapes arrive from the Roman provinces. Change mostly influenced pottery for consumption. From the shapes known a century earlier, only S-profiled bowl and the bowl on a tall foot continue to be significantly used. New Roman shapes are adopted from the provincial context and by imitation of Italic *terra sigillata*. The number of jugs also increased. They are both locally produced and imported. Nonetheless, the shape is Roman, North Italic or provincial. The largest amount of archaeological finds in this horizon at Divici-*Grad* was found in the tower-house. Also, Eastern La Tène painted pottery was documented only in this structure, in a considerably higher quantity than in the 1st century BC. The production technology, shape and decoration relate to the Middle Danube area. Furthermore, the impact that the Roman presence had on taste, particularly concerning the elite, is reflected in the high amount of new shapes that were found in the tower-house, counting half of the pottery individuals. On the right bank of the Danube the same process occurs in the settlement from Korbovo. Beginning with the Flavian emperors the settlement was in direct contact with the Roman military structures. The situation in the auxiliary fort from Tekija - *Transdierna* is very different. Here, the Roman pottery dominates, while pre-Roman pottery tradition is poorly represented. An important number of finds has been produced in North Italic and South Gallic workshops, some of these being copied in provincial pottery production centres. The local production is represented by handmade pots, only two 'Dacian cups' and provincial bowls that combine the S profiled bowls with Roman shapes. Unlike in local settlements new types are introduced in Tekija, such as plates and *mortaria*, illustrating the Roman cooking and consumption style. This is further supported by the reduced volume of consumption recipients and the importance of cups that take the shape of *terra sigillata* in the pottery assemblage.

The last horizon describes the archaeological finds beginning with the end of Domitianus' reign until that of Hadrian. The Roman military control now strengthens on the right bank of the Danube and under Trajan the Dacian Kingdom is conquered. The latter will lead to the demilitarisation of the right bank, as the *limes* is reset. A small number of forts remain in use on the right bank and few are built across the river. It is unclear particularly how the Roman conquest has influenced the local communities in Dacia. At this stage it can be only observed that a deep rift occurred inside the social configuration that was previously represented by the fortified settlements, leading to the disappearance of pre-Roman habitats. The new settlements were grouped in the lowlands from the lower sector of the Iron Gates. The establishment of the Roman *villae* further stresses the social changes that took place in the first years of the 2nd century AD, including those related to the use of land.

The archaeological finds are poorly published, except for those from Gârla Mare. However, the few finds that are known in military and civil Roman sites point to the same process that was already taking place on the right side of the Danube in the 1st century AD. The local pottery traditions are still represented by handmade pots and 'Dacian cups', but the rest of the pottery is highly transformed under the impact of the Roman presence.

The results were summed in a final chapter (Conclusions). This part was structured around the dynamics of interaction in the Iron Gates area in the chronological sequence above defined, as far as they could be reflected by the habitation structure and archaeological finds.

The appendixes include archaeological and historical sources used in the paper, such as a catalogue of the unpublished pottery finds from Divici-*Grad* and the ancient written texts. Additionally the classification of shapes used was illustrated. Finally the bibliographical abbreviation, an index of places, the list of illustrations and plates were added.

The aim of the paper here discussed is both to synthesize the historical and archaeological information known for the Iron Gates area between the end of the Late Iron Age and the Early Roman time, as well as to offer an interpretation of these in order to reconstruct the dynamics of social life under the impact of the political and military context. Given the limitations of previous research in the area, new perspectives of interpretation were needed. A particular interest was given in earlier and more recent archaeological papers to the ethnic configuration in the area, as part of larger groups of population. The importance of historical sources in the reconstruction of ethnicity was never doubted by scholars, who tried to find archaeological proofs that would support and refine the historical data. Certain artefacts were described as indicators for a population or other. For the Scordicans the La

Tène artefacts were considered proofs of their Celtic component, while their Thracian and Illyric substratum was associated with the *pseudo-kantharoi* beakers, the *sica* type knives and the feminine jewellery. The Dacians were linked to different pottery shapes, mostly handmade. At the same time, the connection with the political and social organization of the Dacians was based on the analogous architecture of the fortified settlements. However, the territory associated with the Dacians rarely went beyond the borders of the Romanian state at its largest expansion. A vast territory was defined as culturally and politically uniform and regional differences were minimized. In the Iron Gates area this approach is easily argued with. On the Şimian Island the first excavations unearthed a mixed material of both what was considered as Celtic and Dacian character. The fortified settlement from Židovar, contemporaneous with the settlement from Divici-Grad, was initially associated with the Celtic *oppida*. In its last chronological horizons, beginning with the 1st century BC, the large amount of ‘Dacian pottery’ required a new interpretation. Although the new situation was connected to the control installed by Burebista, a political dominance cannot explain the use of certain pottery on a site, moreover in such a short amount of time. The Iron Gates area resembles the situation known in Židovar (Vršac district, Serbia), combining pottery developments from Srem area and also from North of the Danube. The historical-cultural approach lacks the means to properly explain the mixture of artefacts. Taken separately artefacts can’t define culturally, but their use can. The identification of the communities from the Iron Gates area with one ethnic group or another is difficult, if not impossible, given the almost exclusive archaeological nature of the information. While landscape elements illustrated certain differences in the social and political system, the style of food and beverage preparation, as well as consumption, defined by pottery structure, proved a shared life style. This was shaped not only by collective preference, but also by personal taste, and not only based on availability, but also on choice, as the diversity that characterizes each functional category suggests. It seems that handmade pottery was more restricted by the requests of its functionality, maintaining its shape and technological characteristics during the entire time span studied, in contrast with finer pottery, which was more prone to changes and, why not, taste.