

The Age of the Jewish Population in Romania. First Archaeological Testimonies

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Abstract

The issue of determining the time, when the Judaic communities have settled on Romanian land, is one of the most interesting and most delicate details that can be mentioned when talking about this ethnic group. The presence of the first Jewish communities in ancient times on this land was a “taboo” subject during many historical periods until 1989, but even after this year, studies oriented in this direction were more than sketchy. The article does not only bring a surplus of information in this domain, but manages to concentrate – almost didactically – the information and the archaeological proofs known and re-known to the present time. There are depicted material evidences as well as linguistic ones, toponymical and even religious. Also, the author tries to draw a parallel between some layouts of the Dacian state and Dacia Felix, conquered by the Romans, and the presence of some Judaic communities, not very numerous, made out of Judaic population who came together with the Roman conqueror.

Zusammenfassung

Den Zeitraum zu bestimmen, in dem sich jüdische Gemeinschaften im rumänischen Gebiet niedergelassen haben, ist eine der interessantesten und schwierigsten Detailfragen, die angeschnitten werden können, wenn man über diese ethnische Gruppe spricht. Die Präsenz erster jüdischer Gemeinschaften in dieser Gegend in der Antike war in vielen historischen Phasen bis 1989 ein „Tabu“, aber auch nach 1989 blieben Untersuchungen zu dieser Frage mehr als skizzenhaft. Der Artikel leistet nicht nur einen informativen Mehrwert in diesem Forschungsfeld, sondern konzentriert – fast didaktisch – Informationen und archäologische Belege, die heute (wieder) bekannt sind. Er enthält sowohl anschauliche materielle, als auch linguistische, toponymische und sogar religiöse Belege. Der Autor ist weiterhin darum bemüht, eine Parallele zwischen einigen Anlagen des Dakerreiches sowie Dacia Felix aufzuzeigen, die von den Römern erobert wurden. Zudem wird auf die Präsenz einiger jüdischer Gemeinschaften hingewiesen, die nicht sehr zahlreich waren und die aus einer jüdischen Bevölkerung bestanden, die sich im Zuge der römischen Eroberung angesiedelt hatte.

Introduction

Among the most inciting problems, but also among the hardest to contain in a scientific paper, we can mention the ones debating the origin and age of the Jewish population which has established on the actual territory of Romania, including the historical provinces Bessarabia, Bucovina and Cadrilater.

Mostly, the difficulty consists of the lack of exact information connected to ancient historical times. For this reason, the ones involved in this issue, saw themselves in need to call upon information and results of archaeological research taken in time, which have drawn our attention to a series of material testimony belonging to the antiquity. Although, the written sources and the historical sources concerning this period are only a few and very poor. Trying to determine their course we can look at material archaeological proofs like Hebrew coins, nes, funerary stones, epigraphical inscriptions and other tracks of concludent material, together with a series of papers from the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, which concentrate information on various archaeological discoveries, quite old¹, a series of toponymic testimonies², and for the next period journey diaries³, “Rabbinic responses” specific to the Jewish communities⁴, and last but not least, various documents, including fiscal ones, released by principal courts at the beginning of the Middle Ages.

Starting with these sources, we can draw a picture about the beginning of the Jewish presence on Romanian land; beginnings which go out through history until the Getto-Dacian and the Daco-Roman periods.

Of course, the passing of the years and the uproar of history have damaged series of tracks of material and some of the ones which were kept abroad (some being part of personal collections especially in the USA and in Israel). For sure, there exists a range of certain evidence, based on archaeological research about the period in which Jews settled and spread on the today's Romanian land.

Compliant to these tracks of material, the oldest sign of their presence on these lands could be placed before our era (1st century BC), somewhere around the Danube and the Black Sea. It is about Jews who came from Palestine and established in these areas to practice trade with the Dacs, as noted in

1 Belonging to some historians, such as C. Daicoviciu, V. Parvan, C. Giurescu and others.

2 Discoveries made at Porolissum.

3 The well-known case of Rabbi Benjamin of Tudela (12th century).

4 Like those belonging to Joel Sirkes, Josef Kard, Biniamin Slonik or Mordechai Krochmal.

the paper *The Universal Jewish Encyclopedia*, published in 1969, by the prestigious Ktav Publishing House Inc. in New York, in which noted these Jews under the letter "R" (as in Romania).

As far as Europe is concerned their locating in these accessible areas with much contact between civilizations was, for sure, connected with the trade on the Black Sea and with the importance represented by the fluvial access way – the Danube river. The fact that in order to conduct the trade activity the Dacian Kingdom was chosen, in the same time demonstrates, once again, that these areas were very attractive and the trade in this part of Europe had an enormous productive potential in those days. More than this, the fact that on these pitches we can now talk about commercial activity, can be interpreted, once more, as a proof of permanence and continuity of Dacs on their land and it can be seen as a proof of the fact that the first representatives of Judaism, who reached here, had a stable presence, justified economically speaking, but also from the point of view of the inter-human relations with the aboriginals. Only a stable population with strong foundations could lead to such great productivity that allowed them to trade with populations arriving from far away. This trend was followed by the basis of extremely complex relations.

During Roman Dacia (Dacia Felix), once the transformations were made after being conquered, the population diversification was logically a natural process but of a great meaning through its consequences, as well as through the tracks left in time. Together with the Roman troops brought here from the Orient – Legion XIII Gemina – many traders and Jew colonists arrived in Dacia, who practiced trade in this rich country. The signs of their activities – and especially of their presence in the area – are diverse and very important: mortuary inscriptions on praying altars, votive plates, Judaic coins with specific symbols (including some symbols which have made it to the present), tomb stones, tracks of day-to-day life, together with toponyms transformed and re-found in later names of settlements. Interesting is the fact that, referring to that time and later times, some historians⁵ noticed the presence of two types of Jews: the *indumeeni* and the *itureeni*, the difference being made on tomb stones and inscriptions discovered at the beginning of the 20th century.

5 Nicolae Iorga: *The history of the Jews on our land*, 1924, p. 24.

The first archaeological attestations

The main archaeological attestations and primary information about the Jews' presence in Roman Dacia appear, ordered in a chronological manner, in volume I of *Izvoare și mărturii referitoare la evreii din România (Sources and testimonies on the Jews in Romania)*, published in 1986, under the JCF of S.R. of Romania, a volume put together by Dr. Victor Eskenasy, under the direct observation of the former Rabbi chief of the mosaic cult and former president of JCF from S.R. of Romania, Dr. Moses Rosen.

These are:

- 133 – 134 AD, close to the Roman village of Pojejena, a Judaic bronze coin, released by Simon Bar-Kochba (IIA, p.141);
- The year 157 AD, 13th of December, in Dacia Superior, a military diploma awarded to the veteran Barsimsus Calisthensis of Caesarea, a former soldier in the Roman troop in Dacia (II.B. p.141);
- 2nd century AD, at Sarmisegetuza, a ring stone with a Jewish inscription and an altar with a votive inscription, dedicated to THEOS HYPISITOR, the god, by Arlia Cassia, a female Judaic character (II.C. and II.D. p.142);
- 2nd century AD, a slate with Jewish symbols on it and some inscriptions (II.F. p.143);
- 2nd century AD, at Zalău (Porolissum) – inscriptions of cognomen type of Judaic origin (II.E. p.143);
- Second half of the 3rd century AD, at Dierna (Orșova), gold plate with bilingual inscription on it, conjuring the Hebrew deity IAO-IAHWE (II.G. p.143);
- 3rd – 4th century, at Dierna (Orșova), gold plates with signs and letters on it, on a rolled piece, with symbols connected to the Hebrew Judaic-gnostic deities (II.H.p.144);
- 4th century AD, at Tomis (Constanța), fragment of Judaic inscription in the memory of a tradesman of Alexandria (II.I. p.144).

All these material tracks indicate the presence of Jews at the time when Dacia was conquered by the Romans. But these materials can also be hints to a much more former presence, connected maybe even to a spiritual, religious exchange. As I mentioned at the beginning of this text, the connections between the Dacs and the new Jewish colonists were not only based on trade, but much more complex, reaching into branches of human existence in very

extended and profound manner, and with major implications, even in the forming of the Romanian people.

While Dacia was being dominated and controlled by the Romans, the Jewish population groups which came along with the conquering legions, settled here with the locals, continuing their day-to-day life, in their manner, including religious concerns, by practicing it and so keeping the Judaic traditions. The presence of evidence such as commercial coins, altars and inscriptions (which seem to have been part of stable and permanent places of worship), attest the fitting in of the Jewish population in the social and economic gear of Roman Dacia, but as well as in the religious life of these lands.

This framing and especially the presence of Jews in Roman Dacia and Moesia Inferior must be understood as a part of the history belonging to the ethnic groups, which were part of the Roman Empire, as well as an influential element in the religious and spiritual domain. The bond with the Christianizing process of that time in Dobrogea underlines the importance of this spiritual presence.

It's not a surprise that the only mention of the spiritual Dacic world before the Roman conqueror appears in a Jewish historian's⁶ book *Antiquitates Judaicae*, starting from the geographical position of Dobrogea, of the Danube and the Carpathian Mountains, and of its importance in the mystical-religious world back then.

The diversity of the archaeological testimonies, the proof of Judaic life's complexity on these territories

The root of the Judaic presence, before the Romans conquered Dacia, must be seen as a consequence of the fact that Rome, even before 165 BC, had become an important sustaining point for the Jewish Diaspora. The strong Judaic community of Rome, back then, would influence politics and military actions of the Roman rulers which were to happen and, furthermore, the ethnic structure of the troops that were to come over Dacia's provinces (the large number

6 Flavius Josephus, referring to the resemblance between the essenians' sect and the polistai (cústai), present at the Dacs. This information regarding the Flavius' notice on Dacs spiritual life first appeared in *Izvoare privind Istoria României. vol.I. De la Hesiod la itinerariul lui Antonius*, Ed.Academiei Române, Bucharest, 1964, p. 413-414, also quoted in *Izvoare și mărturii referitoare la evreii din România*, II/2, Ed.Hasefer, Bucharest, 1990, p. 515 and in Neumann, V. *Istoria evreilor din România*, Ed.Amarcord, Timișoara, 1996, p. 57-58.

of Jews in the XIIIth Legion – Gemina, and especially in the auxiliaries which have joined the legion⁷).

Among the tracks left behind by the auxiliary troops, the ones are very interesting which refer to usage of semitic letters. There are noted series of inscriptions discovered at Romula⁸, funeral or fragments of inscriptions using semitic letters (which appear at Apullum, Tibiscum and Porolissum⁹), along with different archaeological proofs on which various Judaic symbols can be found (David's Star). Evidence and concludent tracks of the Dacian period and the Roman-Dacian afterwards exist in the form of coins. A fact that attests the high level of economical and commercial trades of the populations in contact with the Judaic world in Dobrogea and the Orient. The coin was discovered in 1971, in Caraş-Severin county, in the Western part of the Roman village of Pojejena. It has on one side carved a vine with the following inscription: "In the second year of Israel's freedom" (it is about Israel's people, not the state...), and on the other side there is a palm leaf with Simon Bar-Kochba's name¹⁰.

Together with this one, there are series of Hebrew coins dating from the 1st century of our era, discovered in South-Western Transylvania (at Ulpia Traiana Sarmisegetuza), at Ilişua (in Bistriţa-Năsăud district) and in Banat, coins released in Judea with its own Jewish symbols.

Some authors also extend the presence of Jews in Roman Dacia to toponymic fields. Although in many cases the examples seem to be a little far-fetched, in the present time there exist discussions about this subject. In this direction, the former great Rabbi Moshe Carmilly-Weinberger reminds us in his paper from 1994, *The history of Jews in Transylvania*, on that there are some old toponyms which have the word "Jew" (zsidó, sidó) at their foundation, exemplifying with *zsidó*, *zsidóvár* (Jdioara), *zsidovin* (Berzovia) or *kozárvár*, *kozárd* (Cuzdrioara) on the Şieu Valley.

7 The legion gathered some unities named *Numeri* (auxiliary troops of Jews recruited from the Orient, especially from Syria as well as Jews used in administration, as craftsmen or even as combative legionnaires. See: Kuller, H. *Eight studies about the Jews' history in Romania*, Ed.Hasefer, Bucharest, 1997, p. 46.

8 Sanie, S. *A syrian inscription at Romula*, The Moldavian Archives, IV, 1966, p. 355-359.

9 Sanie, S., Vitcu, D. (coord.) (1996): *Studia et acta historiae iudaeorum Romaniae*, vol.I, Ed.Hasefer, Bucharest, p. 4.

10 Jewish leader who had disagreed with the Roman occupation in Palestine, leading the mutiny between 132-135 AD, brutally defeated by the Romans.

The most interesting evidences, but also the most controversial ones, are connected to the mosaic inscriptions in the religious life in this territory. In this context, the most debated of them is the name “THEOS HYPISITOR”. Dozens of archaeologists and historians were in doubt about giving it the attribute of being pure Judaic in its dedication to Theos Hypsistor. Constantin Daicoviciu considered that identifying it with the Judaic Yahweh is relatively forced but nevertheless possible. On the other hand, some historians considered that the Hypsistor god could be Zalmoxis, the supreme Getic god, worshiped on the heights of Carpathian Mountains¹¹. Their belonging to deity names, Judaic or not, is a very much discussed subject, especially by historians, but its oriental origin as Syrian, and finally Judaic, for gods such as DEUS AETERNUS or SABAZIOS is hard enough to dispute. Such inscriptions are present on altars (at Potaissa), on votive plates (at Apulum), on steppingstones (in Găvojdea, Caraș-Severin county) or on marble plates (in Fântânele, Constanța county¹²). Also in this context, the inscription on the altar from the Roman village wall of Porolissum can be cited, where the following text is carved AELIUS JACUBUS; *Jacob, Jacobos* or *Jacubus* having a clear Judaic basis.

Starting from these ideas, a series of opinions are formed, which state the fact that, from a religious point of view, “primary Christianity spread throughout the Roman Empire [including Roman Dacia, n.n.], as a Judaic sect and, firstly, through the Jewish communities found in the entire empire”¹³. The same author connects the ethnic belonging of the apostles [Saint Andrew n.n.] to the Jewish ethnicity and, in the same time, talks about the “syris”, some kind of spiritual leaders without any doubt of Judaic origin who founded the first Paleo-Christians communities of Dacia, as being the first promoters of Christianity in this area.

Even if these statements at some time seem exaggerated, the bonds between the religious notes and the presence of Jews is more than visible, discovering inscriptions which hold information on oriental deities, including Judaic – underlining once more, the stable presence of a Judaic population categories on this territory, categories which will later become the Judaic communities of Romania.

11 Extraordinary idea launched by V.Parvan: *Une nouvelle inscription de Tomi*, in *Dacia* magazine, nr.I, 1924, p. 273-279.

12 Sanic, S., Vitcu, D.. op. cit, p. 9.

13 A. Rizea forwards this idea in an article in the *Timpu* magazine, 11-17th July 2001.

Despite this fact, because of their very restrained number, these population groups of Judaic origin either have probably experienced processes of *mass melting* with the Dacians, or have stunted once the Roman troops and administration pulled out. Certain is the fact that they have existed here, on this territory, even if they were quite limited in order to influence majorly the process of forming the Romanian people.

Conclusion

For the entire Dacian and Roman-Dacian period, the presence of Jews on the actual territory of Romania, is a certainty (through the existing evidence), but at the same time, the debates on these aspects are very complex and interesting, just because of the different ways of interpreting the proof – a problem specific to archaeologists and historians. This period can be considered as a special phase of the Jews' presence here, a forerunner period of their forming¹⁴, because their number and composition will be diminished once with the Roman pull-out of 271-273 AD. Though, it is important because of the fact that it set a starting point in asserting the first Judaic communities here that formed a stable and quiet community together with the Dacian majority. It is a starting point which marks a history of over 2,000 years of their presence on Romania's land. Jews were one of the oldest ethnic groups to settle here and to live peacefully with the Dacs and later with the Romanians.

14 Communities which are to evolve during the Middle Ages in all the Romanian provinces.

