

Ion Taloș, *Împăratul Traian și conștiința romanității românilor. Cultura orală și scrisă din secolele XV-XX* [Emperor Trajan and the Consciousness of the Romanity of Romanians: oral and written culture from the 15th-20th centuries], Cluj-Napoca, Editura Școala Ardeleană, 2021, 426 p., ISBN 978-606-797-739-4

With each of his books, Ion Taloș, *Privatdozent* and professor at the University of Cologne (since 1985), former researcher at the Institute of Linguistics in Cluj, then visiting professor of the Faculty of European Studies at Babeș-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca, provokes the joy of the heart and the delight of the spirit of the one who reads him. Born in Prodănești-Sălaj, in 1934, educated at the University of Cluj, folklorist, ethnologist, anthropologist, culturologist, comparatist of international renown, Ion Taloș devotedly served the Romanian culture and science, to whose matrix he remained closely linked, “from youth to old age”, although, now at a venerable age, the professor shows an enviable spiritual youth or, better said, to be admired, despite the blows of life, which have not bypassed him lately (with discretion he notes, on the guard page of the volume we comment on here, “In memory of the day of January 18, 1964, when Ion-Florin was born and «when I asked I believed him on earth»... recalling the birth of the much loved son, who bore as baptismal name the names of his inconsolable parents (Ion and Florica), leaving, too early, “from the world with longing to the one without longing”).

The study of *Emperor Trajan and the Consciousness of the Romanity of the Romanians. Oral and written culture from the XV-XX centuries* (2021) is the shining dome of the scientific edifice elaborated by Ion Taloș in over 60 years of intense research activity in the field of culture (popular, oral first of all), if we take as the debut year the year 1960 (*In the footsteps of the popular poet Veronica Găbudean*, “Revista de folclor” 5/1960), as specified in the “Bibliography”, from *Romania Occidentalis/Romania Orientalis*, homage volume dedicated to univ. prof. Dr. (Festschrift für) Ion Taloș (Publishing House of the Foundation for European Studies, Mega Publishing House, 2009, p. 17-31), in which are recorded, in the section “Monographs/Monographien”, eight titles, at “Studies and articles”, 128 titles, at “Editions and translations”, 10 titles, to which must be added other remarkable achievements of the great scientist, appeared after this date – *Omul și leul. Studii de antropologie culturală* (Editura Academiei Române, 2013) and *Folclor spaniol/sefard în România. File de istorie culturală* (Editura Hasefer, 2017). An *Opera*, as it can be seen, of large sizes and of great depths, which made Ion Mușlea, one of the beginning mentors of the great folklorist/ethnologist and anthropologist/culturologist of later on, to foresee, based on the studies published so far (1965) that “Ion Taloș will soon be a name with weight in Romanian folklore”. Foresight that came true.

As I have said on the many occasions when I have written about the exemplary work of our great contemporary, Ion Taloș is the follower of *the well-done thing*, of

the definitive, as shown by his incomparable monographs about fundamental themes of the Romanian folklore – *The Craftsman (Master) Manole: contribution to the study of a European folklore theme*, I, Minerva Publishing House, 1973 and Idem, *Corpusul variantelor românești*, 1997, *Cununia fraților și Nunta Soarelui. Incestul zădărnicit în folclorul românesc și universal*, 2004, *Omul și leul. Studiu de antropologie culturală*, 2013, anticipated by a communication at the Romanian Academy, *The fight with the lion: myth and initiation in Romanian folklore*, 2007, to which is added a well-documented essay on *Spanish/Sephardic Folklore in Romania: tabs of cultural history*, 2017, mentioned above.

What is at stake is not only to reaffirm such a truth, but also to contradict a point of view reiterated by some of the old ones, but also by historians from newer times, such as Lucian Boia, who “explicitly deny the existence of the Roman conscience of the Romanians”, defending the thesis “on the primacy of some Western intellectuals in establishing our belonging to Romanity” (p. 21-22). Ion Taloș is joined by an authoritative historian, the president of the Romanian Academy, Ioan-Aurel Pop, who rejects the opinion of another great scientist, the historian Constantin Daicoviciu, who claimed that “the Romanian elites learned about our Latin origin from the Italian humanists”, and more recently certain experts (among which, in later years, professor Lucian Boia) “have concluded that our Daco-Roman origin is a cult myth, planned by nationalist historians of the Modern and Contemporary Age” (Ion-Aurel Pop).

Taloș’s thesis, as seductive as it is and difficult to be accepted at first glance, emphasizes the millenary memory of the village and of its inhabitants, who would have kept in its depths the memory of Emperor Trajan, the conqueror of Dacia, which he populated with his countrymen, the Roman colonists, whose mixture, from whose cohabitation with the Dacian women, resulted the Romanian people. Perhaps our “summary” does not faithfully reproduce Taloș’s thesis, perhaps – certainly – it is more subtle in its essence, especially when the millenary memory of the people did not materialize in historical stories, but in memories of the great constructions of the Trajan era: “some of the oral traditions regarding the Trajan constructions force us to see their origins in Roman antiquity and to accept that they crossed the Middle Ages and reached as far as we; other traditions were created over time, around these constructions or, in other words, the constructions constituted the point of departure for literary-folkloric creations throughout the two millennia” (p. 23). And, further, on the same thread of the demonstration: “Oral tradition (...) was formed naturally, based on the existing material evidence: the bridge, the road, the waves, the fortresses, or Trajan’s gate” (p. 24).

With the ability and consistency of a true scientist, Ion Taloș gathers and combines historical, linguistic, widely cultural information to configure the context that could have conceived Trajan the emperor and conqueror of Dacia, bearing the mythical insignia of a founder, crossing the centuries, miraculously preserved in the memory of his great-great-great-grandchildren from the Danube and the Carpathians, that, confirms the archival documents, “it is spoken about Traian in any peasant hut”, as it results from the answers to the four questionnaires put into circulation by A.I. Odobescu (1871), B.P. Hasdeu (1884-1885), Nicolae Densușianu (1893, 1895), Ion Mușlea (1934). “Even if the four questionnaires pursued specific purposes and, with the exception of the Densușianu’s

Questionnaire, they referred only indirectly to Trajan, they brought a very valuable folkloric material regarding the oral tradition of the great emperor, material that has not yet been sufficiently valued” (p. 54).

Factual history does not ignore (nor would it have any way) Trajan’s loser, King Decebalus, also areolated with legendary features, the two forming a couple inalienable to historical stories stuffed with mythological motifs. Despite the relatively limited presence, in time, of Trajan, as a natural person, on the land of the old Dacia, the material sources leave room for an ample process of “Traianization of the Dacian land”: “The collective memory kept memories regarding Trajan’s bridge over the Danube, at the Pratul, where the victory over Decebalus was celebrated, at the Romans’ Gate, at Trajan’s Table, to Trajan’s Fortresses, roads and earth slopes and other less important places” (p. 109). If for Trajan’s bridge there is concrete, archaeological proof of the legs of the bridge from Turnu Severin, for Trajan’s Prat the researcher makes a historical and linguistic investigation of great amplitude, inventorying the word in different contexts and subduing opinions about the origin and circulation.

With the same thoroughness are recorded and commented on other material and linguistic vestiges, let’s call them, such as “Trajan’s roads on the ground” or “Roman roads”, but also “Trajan’s road on the celestial vault”, this as proof of the fact that “The Romanians from all regions of the country have projected parts of the Traianized landscape in the sky, giving the stars, along with biblical and astronomical meanings, new meanings of historical coloratura” (p. 147), so that, according to the Answers to Hasdeu’s *Linguistic Questionnaire*, the Milky Way becomes the Way of the Slaves, in over 300 localities, the Trojan’s Way or Road in 47 localities (and here we must emphasize the linguistic debate regarding “Traian” and the doublet “Trojan” that circulates unhindered in the oral/written formulations of the name), and “The Way of the Blinds” in 40 of the localities investigated on the basis of the linguistic questionnaire (Idem).

In the monumental construction that Professor Ion Taloş raises in support of the thesis on the myth of the ethnogenesis of the Romanians, which has Emperor Trajan in its center, the scientist brings to support arguments from all areas of culture, oral and written, taking into consideration aspects less or not at all retained from the real or imaginary biography of the Roman Emperor, among which his “eroticism”, which he identifies with the “dew lord”, from a Romanian folk story, studied in detail by Petre Florea (collaborator at the monograph about Traian, 2021). “Therefore, in the folklore of the south-west of Romania takes place the overlapping of the legends of the mythical emperor, the Lord of Dew, with those of the real one, emperor Trajan” (p. 174).

In the same context, this time challenging its quality as a myth of ethnogenesis, the opinion of G. Călinescu (*History of Romanian Literature from its origins to the present*, 1941) regarding the four “fundamental” myths that “were and are still nourished with increasing fervor, constituting the mythological starting points of any national writer” is brought into question, among which “the first myth is Traian and Dochia symbolizing the very constitution of the Romanian people”. “Asachi – writes the eminent literary critic and historian – spread the story of Dochia, Decebal’s daughter, pursued by Traian and pretended by Zamolxe, at her request, in the rock, to get rid of the pursuer.” The paragraph dedicated to the analysis of Asachi’s poem ends with a disconcerting

phrase, from a terminological point of view, but not meaningless: “If this form of the *fairy tale* were not only a resounding of the *legend* of Asachi and yet the *myth* has taken consistency and rules the consciences (Călinescu, op. cit.)”

“Traianization” (the term seems to belong to Taloş) to the old Dacians and the consciousness of its later inhabitants (the Romanians) that all are “the descendants of Trajan” (perhaps/surely here intervened and the cult strata, from the Romanian countries, the school, the teachers, especially in the context of their entry into the “aeon of nationalities”) are solid arguments in support of the thesis regarding the mythization of the emperor. “Therefore – concludes the researcher – Emperor Trajan is present in the consciousness of any Romanian; he is valiant, merciful, and kind; only very rarely are negative attributes of him revealed. He’s our true ancestor.”

I would have been tempted to end this summary commentary on the latest writing of the humanist scholar Ion Taloş with the maxim/sentence of Ovidiu of *Heroides*, *Finis coronat opus*, with the meaning “The end crowns the work”, my thought going towards a coronation, through this study, of a brilliant work, unparalleled in the Romanian culture of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century.*

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