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**To see or to be seen.  
The Dacian fortresses from the Orăștie Mountains**

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**Abstract:** *To see or to be seen. The Dacian fortresses from the Orăștie Mountains.* The Dacian fortresses from Orăștie Mountains were considered to be military constructions with the main function to see in a territory, to control it and protect it. But only through the military function we cannot outline the whole picture of fortresses significance. Apart from this functionalist point of view, from an abstract angle, the Dacian fortresses were symbols of power, a direct result of an elite ideology. Materialized in different forms (walls, temples, roads) this ideology should be visible in order to transmit a distinctive message. So the fortresses have to see a territory but also to be seen from a territory.

**Key words:** Dacians, fortress, symbol, power, ideology.

**Résumé:** *Voir ou être vu. Les fortifications daces des Montagnes Orastie.* Les forteresses daces des Monts d'Orastie étaient considérés comme des constructions militaires avec la fonction principale de voir dans un territoire, de le contrôler et de le protéger. Mais seulement avec la fonction militaire nous ne pouvons pas décrire le tableau d'ensemble de l'importance des forteresses. En dehors de ce point de vue fonctionnaliste, les forteresses daces étaient des symboles du pouvoir, conséquence directe d'une idéologie élitiste. Matérialisée sous différentes formes (murs, temples, routes) cette idéologie doit être visible afin de transmettre un message particulier. Ainsi, les forteresses devez voir un territoire, mais aussi d'être vu dans un territoire.

**Mots clés:** Daces, forteresse, symbole, pouvoir, l'idéologie.

Dacian fortresses are a type of fortification, permanently inhabited by a military and a political leader with a garrison, which may have a civil settlement nearby (I. Glodariu, 1983). The Dacian name of such a complex was probably *dava*, among the most notable examples of fortresses being Grădiștea de Munte - Sarmizegetusa Regia, the kingdom's capital, Bănița - Piatra Cetății, Costești - Blidaru, Costești - Cetățuie, Luncani - Piatra Roșie or Căpâlna - Dealul Cetății, all in the Orăștie Mountains.

The Orăștie Mountains fortresses were built especially on peaks and cliffs, rarely on the

dominant point, but in areas lower than surrounding landforms, maintaining a good visibility to a large valley or to a plain. The fortification elements, especially in *murus dacicus* technique, follow the terrain; some fortifications have a geometric plan, others have a less regular plan, because of the terrain on which they were built. Within the fortified area spaces for living, roads and temples were organized (I. Glodariu, 1983. G. Gheorghiu 2005). The settlement near the fortification had a civilian aspect, but on some terraces were built wooden and clay walls, limestone block walls or

isolated towers, some of them in *murus dacicus* technique.

The extent of the fortification elements highlights the military function of the fortresses. From this perspective the Dacian fortresses from the Orăștie Mountains made part of a complex defensive system with the capital Sarmizegetusa in the center; the main function of the fortresses was to block access to the capital. The political importance of the fortresses was directly linked to the military function; other functions, such as economical or religious, were also connected with the military and political function (I. Glodariu, 1983; G. Gheorghiu, 2005). In other words, the fortifications main function was to see in a territory, to control it and protect it.

One fortress - one main function is a construct of the functionalist archeology, focused on material or social aspects of the discoveries. But, from this perspective, the military function limits the duration of use at times of conflict, as is not the case of Dacian fortresses inhabited for a long period (H. Daicoviciu et al, 1989). Moreover, none of these fortresses appeared as a result of an external threat or an internal conflict. Burebista internal political activity during the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC (I. Glodariu, 2001, p. 64) can not be invoked in this case but partially because many fortifications were built before his period. However, Burebista actions might have generalized of if not the instantiated the phenomenon because numerous fortifications were built during his time (I. Glodariu, 1982). Regarding an external military danger, the perception of the Roman threat did not materialized in the Dacian territories until late 1<sup>st</sup> century AD (C. Petolescu, 2000), or most of the fortresses were built long before that.

Dacian fortifications have solid elements, such as walls in *murus dacicus* technique, but the area inside is small, thus reduced the number of defenders. Obviously, in this small space there is no place for the inhabitants of the civil settlement nearby. Also, inside the fortified area water storage facilities are missing, so the ability to fight was limited in time (I. Glodariu, 1983). Despite high positioning, surrounding landforms dominate the fortresses; this situation gives the enemy a tactical advantage, by observing and attacking from a dominant position. Perhaps for these reasons, the Dacians preferred to fight the important battles outside of the fortresses. During the first war, in the beginning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century

AD, the Dacians tried to stop the Romans at *Tape*, far from the capital, and then they made a surprise military campaign into Moesia, trying to move the conflict in the territory of the Empire (C. Petolescu, 2000; I. Glodariu, 2001). Regarding the towers from the civilian areas of the settlements, their capacity of resistance is reduced due to isolation. The towers walls in *murus dacicus* technique don't exceed three or four block rows, rising to a height of 1.50 - 2 m, which is too little for withstanding a siege. Moreover, just a few of these towers had a layer of fire destruction that could be associated with a battle.

From this functionalist point of view, the picture of the Dacian fortresses as a military construction is incomplete. Beyond these functionalist issues, Dacian fortresses must be seen from a different angle than the one focused on material or social. Cognitive archaeology puts at the center the human ability to construct and use symbols (C. Renfrew, 1985; C. Renfrew, E. B. W. Zubrow, 1994). From this angle, the Dacian fortresses are symbols of power, a case of putting into practice an ideology of elites.

One of the main features of power is control, so the power is closely connected with space. The power makes the difference between a place, well defined, easy to control, and a space, diffuse, not well defined, hard to control. Therefore the power imposes limits and makes them visible (K. M. Ames, 2009). The wall is a symbol of such a limitation, highlighting the difference between what is inside and what is outside, between civilian-military, public-private or religious-secular places. The Dacian walls made a visible difference between the military spaces (the fortresses), the religious spaces (the terraces with temples) and the civilian spaces (the settlement) (G. Florea, 2006; G. Florea, P. Pupeză, 2008).

An analysis of power starts with its sources; the most important sources are military power, social power, economical power and ideological power (T. K. Earle, 1997; G. J. Stein, 1998). More or less, all these sources act simultaneously. Military power is based on both the possibility and the effective action to impose by force (M. Mann, 1986). It is probably the best example of organizing power. The Dacian fortresses from the Orăștie Mountains seem to symbolize rather the possibility of imposing force than the effective military action; an intern military conflict is not archaeologically

**To see or to be seen.  
The Dacian fortresses from the Orăștie Mountains<sup>1</sup>**

documented. The fortresses are rather an expression of peace and prosperity than the consequence of a conflict or war. The constructive effort mobilization, the work organization and development can not be made in wartime or in conflict periods of any kind. The resources concentration for such large projects like the Dacian fortresses can take place only in the absence of immediate military pressure (G. Florea, 2011). The war, real or possible, could be used by a group of leaders as a tool in political centralization of a territory, based on the principle that an organized community can give a more effective response to exterior threat (R. L. Carniero 1970; M. Mann 1986). From this perspective, the Roman threat, real or possible, could give a stimulus to the internal organization of the Dacian kingdom, starting from the Orăștie Mountains fortifications.

Social power is the ability to control and organize the activities of a group in order to gain benefits (M. Mann, 1986). The social power is rooted in the stratification of a society; in most cases is about elites that seek to impose (G. J. Stein, 1998). Where there is no stratification and no hierarchy, there are no well defined social categories that could accumulate differences and gain benefits. The social power is a direct manifestation of those differences (J. L. Dornan, 2002). Such stratification is obvious in the Dacian society. In the center of the Orăștie Mountains settlements was the fortress; a proximity to the fortified center presumes a higher status. The differentiation is noticed not only horizontally but also vertically: the fortified center is the dominant position of the settlement, terraces in close proximity being the most important. The arrangement of the terraces according to a Hellenistic scenographical plan (R. Martin, 1956) played an important role in this differentiation; the discrepancy between the ones living down, closer to the valley, and those living up, closer to the peak, was amplified in this way. Based on the horizontal and vertical stratification of the settlement, it is presumed that the most important resident stayed in the fortified center or nearby (I. Glodariu, 1983). In the same context, on a much larger scale, a close proximity to Sarmizegetusa could mean a higher importance for a fortified center that was in competition with others (K. Lockyear, 2004; G. Florea, 2006).

Economic power means the control over resources, roads, production and market centers (T. K. Earle, 1997). The Dacian fortresses seem to be located for these purposes too. The fortifications were located close to the most important rivers, some of them operating as major commercial arteries. The presence of imported products in the fortifications is evidence of strength economic activity (I. Glodariu, 1974). But, one other way of analyzing the economic power is through the cost, the amount of energy, time and resources invested in making a good (R. B. Bird, E. A. Smith, 2005; K. M. Ames, 2009). Bigger the cost is, bigger the power that made the good it is. The practical usefulness of many products does not always justify the high cost involved; the difference is completed by their symbolic value. The entire process of elevating a wall in *murus dacicus* technique involved massive costs. The Dacian limestone career was outside the Orăștie Mountains, at Călan –Măgura Călanului, 20 kilometers from Costești – Cetățuie and 40 kilometers from Grădiștea de Munte – Sarmizegetusa Regia. A minimal account gave some 20,000 m<sup>3</sup> of processed stone used in the settlements from the Orăștie Mountains, most of which was for walls. If shaping stone or cart transportation were made by the Dacians, the actual construction involved most likely Greek craftsmen (I. Glodariu, 1986), which increased the costs. In the end, the cost of a wall in *murus dacicus* technique should have been very high. Just the military use of the *murus dacicus* could not justify such a cost, when other types of fortification, made of cheaper materials, were easier to build and offer almost the same protection.

Ideological power is a source of power with a special character. In a simplified definition, ideology is a system of ideas that give meaning to the world. To serve as a source of power the ideology must be controlled, as any of the other sources above mentioned. The materialization of ideology in tangible and visible monuments, objects or ceremonies, can provide such a control (L. J. C. Butters et al, 1996). Public monuments are the best examples of a materialized ideology because they transmit to a large number of individuals a simple message: power, security, wealth (B. Trigger, 1990). The Dacian fortresses walls in *murus dacicus* technique seem to transmit exactly this symbolic message, being a

materialized ideology of an elite group. The fact that there was not a uniform system of building Dacian fortifications only general similarities suggest the existence of different ideologies behind them (G. Florea, 2006). This differences that mark the individuality of one elite group or another should be visible. The fortifications location in visible places from nearby height, close to an access road, amplifies this message. The case of Sarmizegetusa is eloquent: the fortress is dominated by all the surrounding heights; the purpose of this placement was probably not to see the landscape nearby but to be seen from the landscape nearby.

In one way or another, this dual meaning could be applied to all Dacian fortresses from the Orăștiei Mountains and beyond. The fortresses function was not only to see in a territory, to control it and protect it, but also to be seen from a territory, as symbols of power and material manifestations of an elite ideology.

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**To see or to be seen.  
The Dacian fortresses from the Orăștie Mountains<sup>1</sup>**

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