

# THE ENIGMAS OF ETHNOGENESIS: THE ALTERNATIVE OF “TRAJANIZATION”\*

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## Rezumat

Cartea recentă a profesorului Ioan Taloș (Universitatea din Cluj și Universitatea din Köln), *Împăratul Traian și conștiința romanității românilor. Cultură orală și scrisă din secolele XV-XX*, publicată în 2021, reprezintă apogeul edificiului științific elaborat de savant în cei peste 60 de ani de activitate de cercetare în domeniul culturii (populare, orale înainte de toate). Lucrarea abordează subiectul fundamental al originii romane a poporului român și al latinității limbii române. Oricât de ademenitoare ar părea, teza lui Taloș este dificil de acceptat în primă instanță, deoarece pune accent pe *memoria milenară a satului* (subl.n.) și a locuitorilor săi, care ar fi păstrat în profunzime memoria Împăratului Traian, cuceritorul Daciei, pe care a populat-o cu compatrioți de ai săi, coloniști romani, din coabitarea acestora cu femeile dace rezultând poporul român. Este posibil ca „rezumatul” de față să nu reproducă teza lui Taloș cu fidelitate, este posibil ca aceasta să fie – de fapt, este cu siguranță – mai subtilă în esența sa, mai ales că memoria milenară a poporului nu s-a materializat în povestiri istorice, ci în amintiri despre marile construcții ale epocii lui Traian: „unele dintre tradițiile orale privind construcțiile lui Traian ne obligă să le vedem originea în Antichitatea romană și să acceptăm că au traversat Evul Mediu și au răzbătut până în zilele noastre; alte tradiții au fost create în timp, în jurul acestor construcții sau, cu alte cuvinte, construcțiile au reprezentat punctul de plecare pentru creații literar-folclorice de-a lungul celor două milenii” (p. 23). În continuare, în aceeași linie demonstrativă: „Tradiția orală (...) s-a format în mod natural, pe baza unor dovezi materiale existente: podul, drumul, valorile, fortăreața, sau poarta lui Traian...” (p. 24). „Traianizarea” (termenul pare să îi aparțină lui Taloș) vechilor daci și conștiința viitorilor locuitori (românii) care sunt cu toții „descendenții lui Traian” (aici au intervenit probabil/cu siguranță și intelectualii din Țările Române, școala, profesorii, în special în contextul pătrunderii lor în „eonul naționalităților”), toate acestea constituie argumente solide care vin în sprijinul tezei privind mitizarea împăratului Traian. „Prin urmare – concluzionează cercetătorul – Împăratul Traian este prezent în conștiința fiecărui român; împăratul este curajos, îngăduitor și blând; foarte rar îi sunt atribuite trăsături negative. El este cu adevărat strămoșul nostru”.

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\* English equivalent for the Romanian term *Traianizare*, used by the author of the book presented in this article to emphasize the importance of Emperor Trajan in the Romanian collective memory, following the pattern: noun (Ro. *Traian*) + suff. (Ro. *-izare*); therefore, En. *Trajanization* < noun *Trajan* + suff. *-ization*, as in *Romanization*.

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**Cuvinte-cheie:** România, români, roman, limba latină, împăratul Traian, „traianizare”, memorie colectivă, mitul etnogenezei.

**Keywords:** Romania, Romanians, Roman, Latin language, Emperor Trajan, “Trajanization”, collective memory, myth of ethnogenesis.

With each of his books, Ion Taloş, *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 within Babeş-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca, is a delight for his readers’ hearts and minds. Born in Prodăneşti – Sălaj, in 1934, educated at the University of Cluj, folklorist, ethnologist, anthropologist, culturologist, comparatist of international renown, Ion Taloş 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, despite the blows of life which have not bypassed him lately (he notes discreetly on the guard page of the volume under discussion: “In memory of the day of January 18, 1964, *when Ion-Florin was born and «when I believed heaven was a place 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 *Împăratul Traian și conștiința romanității românilor. Cultură orală și scrisă din secolele XV-XX* [*Emperor Trajan and the Consciousness of the Romanity of the Romanians. Oral and Written Culture from the 15<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> Centuries*] (2021)<sup>1</sup> is the shining dome of the scientific edifice elaborated by Ion Taloş in over 60 years of intense research activity in the field of culture (popular, oral first of all), if we take 1960 as the debut year (*Pe urmele poetei populare Veronica Găbudean* [*In the footsteps of the folk poet Veronica Găbudean*], “Revista de folclor”, 5, 1960), as specified in the “Bibliography” of *Romania Occidentalis/Romania Orientalis. Volum omagial dedicat prof. univ. dr. Ion Taloş* [*Romania Occidentalis/Romania Orientalis. Homage volume dedicated to*

<sup>1</sup> Ion Taloş, *Împăratul Traian și conștiința romanității românilor. Cultura orală și scrisă din secolele XV-XX*. Preface by Ioan-Aurel Pop. With an annex by Ion Taloş and Petre Florea, Cluj-Napoca, Școala Ardeleană Publishing House, 2021, 426 p + Illustrations.

Ph.D. Ion Taloş, Professor] (The Foundation for European Studies Publishing House, Mega Publishing House, 2009, p. 17-31), which records, in the section “Monographs”, eight titles, in “Studies and articles”, 128 titles, in “Editions and translations”, ten titles, to which must be added other remarkable achievements of the great scientist published afterwards – *Omul și leul. Studiu de antropologie culturală* [*The man and the lion. Study of cultural anthropology*], Romanian Academy Publishing House, 2013, and *Folclor spaniol/sefard în România. File de istorie culturală* [*Spanish/Sephardic folklore in Romania. Pages of cultural history*], Hasefer Publishing House, 2017. An *Opera*, as it can be seen, of large sizes and of great depths, which made Ion Muşlea, one of the first mentors of the great folklorist/ ethnologist/ anthropologist/ culturologist of later, to foresee, based on the studies published until then (1965) that “Ion Taloş will soon be an important name in the Romanian folklore”. A prediction that indeed came true!

As I have said on the many occasions when I wrote about the exemplary work of our great contemporary, Ion Taloş is the follower of *the well-done thing*, of *the definitive*, as shown by his incomparable monographs about fundamental themes of the Romanian folklore – *Meşterul Manole. Contribuție la studiul unei teme de folclor european* [*Manole the Craftsman. Contribution to the study of an European folklore theme*], I, Minerva Publishing House, 1973; *Corpusul variantelor românești* [*Corpora of Romanian variants*], 1997; *Cununia fraților și Nunta Soarelui. Incestul zădărnicit în folclorul românesc și universal* [*The Wedding of siblings and the Wedding of the Sun. The thwarted incest in worldwide and Romanian folklore*], 2004; *The man and the lion. Study of cultural anthropology*, 2013<sup>2</sup>, anticipated by a

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<sup>2</sup> See my notes for each of these: Nicolae Constantinescu, *Ion Taloş*, „*Meşterul Manole*”, in „*Scânteia*”, year XLIII, no. 9766, 1974, republished in *Citite de mine... Folclor, Etnologie, Antropologie*, Repere ale cercetării (1967-2007), volume edited by C. N. C. P. C. T., Collection „*Anotimpuri culturale*” 5, 2008, p. 173-174; Idem, *Un alt „Meşterul Manole*”, in „*Adevărul literar și artistic*”, no. 458, March 2, 1999, republished in *Citite de mine...*, p. 175-180; Idem, *Ion Taloş*, „*Meşterul Manole*”. *Contribuție la studiul unei teme de folclor european*, II. *Corpusul variantelor românești*, 1997, in „*Limbă și literatură*”. Philological Sciences Society of Romania, vol. III-IV, 1998, p. 132-135; Idem, *Ion Taloş*, *Omul și Leul. Studiu de antropologie culturală*, in „*Limbă și literatură*”. Philological Sciences Society of Romania, vol. I-II, 2017, p. 111-114.

communication at the Romanian Academy, *Lupta voinicului cu leul. Mit și inițiere în folclorul românesc* [*The fight of the brave man with the lion. Myth and initiation in Romanian folklore*], 2007, to which is added a well-documented essay on *Spanish/Sephardic Folklore in Romania. Pages of Cultural History*, 2017, mentioned above.

With the volume *Emperor Trajan...*, Ion Taloș emerges, somewhat, from the comfort sphere of the Romanian folklore comparative studies, in the traditional line, on the paths masterfully illustrated, for example, by Petru Caraman with *Colindatul la români, slavi și la alte popoare* [*Carolling at Romanians, Slavs and other people*] (1933 in Polish, 1983 in Romanian), or by Adrian Fochi with *Femeia lui Potiphar (K2111). Cercetare comparată de folclor și literatură* [*Potiphar's Woman (K2111). Comparative research of folklore and literature*] (1982), engaging in a close field, that of cultural studies, associating more hastily to historians, linguists and Romanians who wanted for centuries to put an end to the issue, which is otherwise clear to most of us, of the Roman origin of the Romanian people and of the Latinity of the language spoken by them. For many historians, culturologists, linguists, the problem has been solved, the evidence is obvious, the words of the chronicler having the merits of an undeniable truth: "... they all descend from Rome".

However, 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, but also recent historians, 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). The one who joins Ion Taloș, in fact he precedes and supports him, is 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" [my quotation marks] (among which, in the latter years, Professor Lucian Boia) have concluded that our Dacian-Roman origin is a literate myth, planned by nationalist historians of the Modern and Contemporary Age" (Ion-Aurel Pop).

Taloş' thesis, as seductive as it is, is difficult to accept, at first glance, because it emphasizes *the millenary memory of the village* [my italics] 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, cohabitation with the Dacian women led to the Romanian people. Perhaps our "summary" does not faithfully reproduce Taloş' 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 about the great constructions of the Trajan era: "some of the oral traditions regarding the Trajan constructions force us to see their origins in the Roman Antiquity and to accept that they crossed the Middle Ages and reached to this day; 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: "The oral tradition (...) was formed naturally, based on the existing material evidence: the bridge, the road, the *valla*, the fortresses, or Trajan's gate..." (p. 24).

With the ability and consistency of a true scientist, Ion Taloş gathers and combines historical, linguistic, widely cultural information to configure the context that could have attributed Trajan the Emperor and conqueror of Dacia, 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; the archival documents confirm that "it is spoken about Trajan in any peasant hut", as it results from the answers to the four questionnaires put into circulation by Al. I. Odobescu (1871), B. P. Hasdeu (1884-1885), Nicolae Densuşianu (1893, 1895), Ion Muşlea (1934). "Even if the four questionnaires pursued specific purposes and, with the exception of the Densuşianu's *Questionnaire*, they referred only indirectly to Trajan, they brought a very valuable folkloric material regarding the oral tradition on the great emperor, material that has not yet been sufficiently valued" (p. 54).

Factual history does not ignore (nor would it have anyway) Trajan's opponent, King Decebalus, also endowed with legendary features, the two forming an inseparable couple in the historical stories filled with mythological motifs. Despite the relatively limited presence, in time, of Trajan, as a natural person, on the old Dacia's land, the material sources leave room for an ample process of "Trajanization of the Dacian land": "The collective memory kept memories regarding Trajan's *bridge* over the Danube, the *Pratum* where the victory over Decebalus was celebrated, the *Romans' Gate*, Trajan's *Table*, Trajan's *fortresses, roads and valla* and other less important places" (p. 109). If for Trajan's bridge in Turnu Severin there is concrete, archaeological proof of its piers, for Trajan's *Pratum* the researcher makes a historical and linguistic investigation of great amplitude, inventorying the word in different contexts and subduing opinions about the origin and instances when used.

The same thoroughness is used to record and comment on other material and linguistic vestiges, 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 Trajanized landscape in the sky, giving the star new meanings of historical coloratura, along with the biblical and astronomical ones" (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 Romanians' ethnogenesis, which has Emperor Trajan in its centre, the scientist brings 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 for the monograph about Trajan, 2021). “Therefore, in the folklore of south-west 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 an ethnogenesis myth, the opinion of G. Călinescu (*Istoria literaturii române de la origini până în prezent* [History of Romanian Literature from its origins to the present], 1941) regarding the four “fundamental” myths that “were and are still nourished with increasing fervour, constituting the mythological starting points of any national writer” is brought into question, among which “the first myth is Trajan and Dochia symbolizing the very constitution of the Romanian people”. “Asachi – writes the eminent literary critic and historian – spread the story of Dochia, Decebalus’ daughter, pursued by Trajan and transformed into a rock by Zamolxes, at her request, 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.*)”

“Trajanization” (the term seems to belong to Taloş) of the old Dacians and the consciousness of the later inhabitants (the Romanians) that all are “the descendants of Trajan” (perhaps/surely here intervened also the scholarly strata of the Romanian Principalities, 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 am tempted to end this brief commentary on the latest writing of the humanist scholar Ion Taloş with the maxim/sentence of Ovid's *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 20<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.