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ROMA and SINTI → ‘Gypsies’

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ROMANIANS

[See also: *Balkans*]

The Romanian image was a bland one until the late nineteenth century, largely limited to recognition by travellers that the Romanian language was derived from Latin (Armbruster 1977). The idea that the Romanians represent the descendents of the Roman colonists of the province of Dacia was first advanced in 1451 in Poggio Bracciolini’s *Disceptationes convivales*. Bracciolini based his remarks on the accounts of fellow Italians who had visited the area and noted the similarity of Romanian with their own native tongue. Greater currency to this observation was given by Enea Silvio Piccolomini (Pope Pius II) in *Historia rerum ubique gestarum locorumque descriptio*, which first appeared in 1489 and went through several editions.

During the next century a cultural renaissance amongst the Poles produced a number of chronicles which also contained detailed references to the Romanians of neighbouring Moldavia. One such work is held by Romanian scholars to be responsible for spreading a slur on their ethnic origins: the repeatedly-issued sixteenth-century *Kronika wszystkiego swiata* linked to the names of Martin Bielski and his son Ioachim. It asserted that the Romanians originated from a colony of Roman malefactors exiled to the desolate Dacian province on the Black Sea. This ‘slander’ in Bielski’s chronicle, reproduced repeatedly, found its way into the surviving manuscripts of the first native chronicle of Moldavian history in Romanian, compiled by Grigore Ureche (c. 1590-1647), much to the irritation of Ureche’s self-confessed successor, Miron Costin (1633-91).

Costin's condemnation of Bielski's 'calumnies' offered the template for an enduring theme amongst Romanian historians and the wider public: that of the 'impartial' foreigner whose 'objectivity' in addressing the origins of the Romanians is assessed according to the degree to which he accepts Romanian arguments of an uninterrupted Romanian presence in their present homeland which pre-dated the arrival of the Hungarians in Transylvania at the end of the first millenium (Mitu 2001). The historical 'right' to Transylvania claimed by Romanian proponents of this 'continuity theory' was challenged by Hungarian historians who argued that no evidence was available to support the Romanians' presence on this territory before the eleventh century, and who argued that the Romanians were immigrants from the Balkan peninsula. Linked to this dispute about historical precedence in Transylvania is the cultural argument voiced by some Hungarians that while they produced a refined culture and were influenced by the hallmarks of European civilization – the Renaissance, Gothic and Baroque art – the Romanians were a *Bauernvolk*, attached to a conservative type of folklore and belonging to a non-Western form of civilization – 'Byzantinism' (Duțu 1995).

Native and foreign observers were agreed on the Romanians' 'indolence', a view perpetuated as a cliché by foreign observers in the early nineteenth century (Mitu 2001). A more positive image, one of the Romanians as 'good savages', is to be found among foreign admirers of the Romanians' latinity (Marton 2000). Not atypical is the Frenchman Hippolyte Desprez, who in his *La révolution dans l'Europe Orientale* (1848) claimed that "the Romanian peasant is the living proof of the precious alliance of enthusiasm with irony, and he has preserved this amiable and simple gravity intact, which used to be the mark of ancient peoples, and is today only to be found in the savages."

Apathy and resignation are traits singled out in early nineteenth century accounts by foreign travellers of their contacts with the Romanians (Deleant 1998) while several twentieth-century Romanian philosophers identify fatalism as a further characteristic (Vulcănescu 1991). Self-denigration is an essential component of the Romanian self-image and is deeply rooted in the matrix of the national culture (Mitu, 2001). This tendency is theorized by Emil Cioran in his 1936 essay *The transfiguration of Romania*. In Cioran's view, Romanian qualities are negative ones: their wisdom is an indulgence, their tolerance comes from their good-natured lack of the spirit of contradiction, while their celebrated *dor* (like the Portuguese *saudade*, it expresses a longing leavened by a mixture of nostalgia, sadness, pain, happiness and love) is merely laziness. They are, in a word, passive.

Without the benefit of translation, these self-representations made no mark on the Western mind. By contrast, two works of popular fiction in French and English from the close of the nineteenth centuries came to