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# THE BIRTH OF THE ROMANIAN PEOPLE

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## 1. *A Little Geography*

**T**ake a look at a map of Europe! Modern-day Romania has an almost circular shape and can be found in the middle of Europe, precisely halfway between the Atlantic Ocean and the Ural Mountains of Russia (which are nowadays seen as the boundary between the “European peninsula” and the Asian continent). I use the word “peninsula” since, as you know, Europe is not an isolated continent, that is to say, it’s not an enormous island; on the world map, it appears merely as an extension of Asia.

Then, in the centre of Romania, we find the hills and forests of the Transylvanian Plateau. On a physical map of our country, you can trace the arc of the Carpathian Mountains: like the shape of a seated man, perhaps a little hunched, facing westwards to the Apuseni Mountains which almost close the circle. The Transylvanian Plateau then slopes gently down into three large regions: Crişana and Banat to the west; Muntenia to the south; and Moldova to the east. Such is the natural backdrop against which this slow genesis unfolded: the birth of the Romanian people.

## 2. *A Little Prehistory*

**W**e know today that people have lived on this land ever since the early dawn of their arrival and expansion into the Eurasian continent. Archaeologists and palaeontologists (scientists who study the past through objects and remains found in the earth) speak of a possible human presence in the area dating back to 600,000 years ago! Then, a little closer to the present day, we find traces in Europe of the two great branches of the human species, whose names may already be familiar to you: the Neanderthal and the Cro-Magnon, named after the German and French sites, respectively, where the skeletons of these European forebears were first discovered.

600,000 BC:  
First human traces  
on our territory.

70,000 BC:  
Earliest proof of the  
Neanderthal's  
existence.

35,000 BC:  
Earliest proof of the  
Cro-Magnon's  
existence.

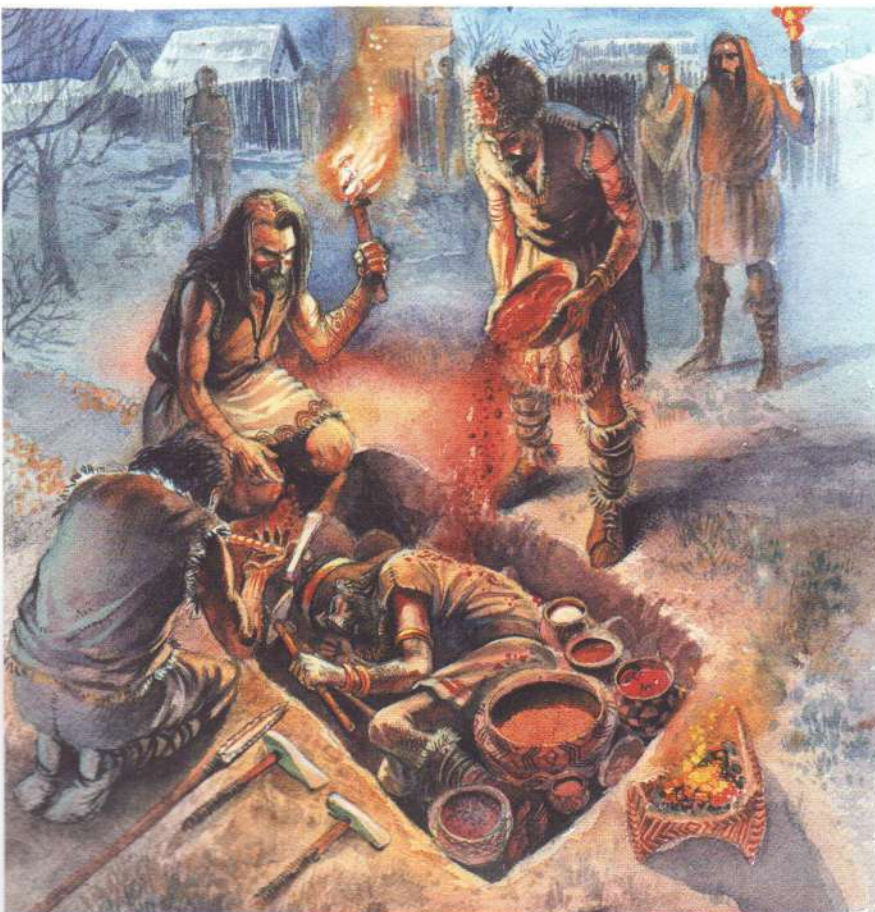
As we draw nearer to our time, the traces left by these ancient inhabitants grow more numerous. Nonetheless, we don't as yet have any means to identify the race or races of these inhabitants, nor to make out their dispositions, their beliefs, and least of all the languages they spoke. The only certainty, judging by the many archaeological traces left across the country's territory, is that waves upon waves of migration, from the south, the west, and the east, swept over it. It is impossible to conclude, merely from the structure of their houses or tombs, or from the style of their tools or pottery, what races they were, how they mingled, or how they decimated one another. Let us then focus on the people whom 19th-century scholars called "Indo-European", since they flocked across Europe to its westernmost borders, while reaching as far as India to the east and south.

About four or five thousand years ago, tribes who shared the same language set off from the vast expanses that lie north of the Black Sea. They advanced slowly, but were full of irrepressible spirit, and with time they came to be the masters of our entire continent. They were not of the same race (meaning that, in anthropological terms, they did not belong to the same physical type). Indeed, when we speak of Indo-Europeans, we shouldn't picture a singular race or culture: Indo-European was merely a language. Archaeology has proved that this original cradle held all sorts

of people who, through living together or in proximity to each other, ended up speaking the same language. And it is from these speakers of Indo-European, who descended upon Europe in successive and sometimes distant waves, and who uprooted, decimated or intermingled with older ethnicities, that almost all current inhabitants of Europe are descended.

But, no matter how captivating these studies of events lost in the mists of time, they are not enough for us to understand the many concurrences that gave birth to the Romanian people.

***Burial ritual in the Neolithic Era, somewhere in the Danube area, 6,000 years ago. The deceased (here, a warrior chieftain) was buried on his side in the foetal position, together with his weapons and food supplies for the afterlife. Sometimes, red earth (red ochre) was scattered over him, symbolising blood and eternal life.***



### 3. The Greeks and the Geto-Dacians

Let us then begin much nearer to our own time, around the year 500 BC. Greek documents of that era bear witness to the inhabitants of our regions. Why Greek? Because in Antiquity the Greeks were the first Europeans to reach the highest degree of civilisation. The wonderful temples, palaces and monuments they built back then still serve as inspiration for modern architects. (If you take a stroll through Bucharest, you can notice two great monuments in the city centre: the Romanian Athenaeum and the former Royal Palace; both facades are supported by colonnades like those of the ancient Greek temples!)

The Greeks, who were bold navigators and shrewd merchants, gradually established small colonial ports by the Black Sea, in the region we

*Greek merchants, who were skilled navigators, founded several cities along the coast of the Black Sea. Perhaps the oldest of these is Histria (after the Greek name for the Danube River, Istru), dating back to approximately 2,500 years ago. The city of Histria would soon flourish, filling up with stone houses and temples. Later, after the Romans conquered modern-day Dobruja, the city waned in importance, and the gulf where ships used to dock was closed over time by a sand barrier, turning into what today we call Lake Sinoe.*

6th century BC:  
First evidence of the  
Geto-Dacians' existence.



now call Dobruja, using them to trade with the people in the hinterlands. This was the case, for instance, with Histria and Tomis (Tomis was located where the large city of Constanța is now). Sailboats and rowboats would dock here after weeks of braving the perils of the sea, always at great risk of foundering in stormy weather.

You should know that these ships were not as big as our modern vessels. Rather, they were large, decked boats, with cargo stored under the deck. On the deck, there was room for no more than 50 people, who handled the rudder, sails or oars. Since the compass had not yet been invented, there was no way to find your bearings if you were out at sea and had lost sight of the shore. Ancient navigators, then, strove to keep their ships as near to the coast as possible. Do you know when the

**Scythian warriors.** Numerous warring tribes of Iranian origin, nomadic or semi-nomadic, dominated the Eurasian steppes from Central Asia to Transylvania and Dobruja. They were peerless horsemen and archers, as well as lovers of expensive gold ornaments, which they bought from the Greeks. Indeed, the Greeks often enlisted them as mercenaries in their wars. Until the arrival of the Thracians, the Scythian civilisation influenced the life and culture of the inhabitants of our lands.



compass was invented? Not until the Middle Ages! And it was only after the navigators grew accustomed to it that they dared to venture into the ocean, leaving the shore behind. This is how Christopher Columbus was able to discover America.

Because we have been able to locate the wreckage (the sunken remains) of a few ancient ships, we know what they used to carry on these routes: they brought olive oil and strong wines in large pots called *amphorae*. Perhaps you have seen the elegant outlines of amphorae in a museum or a picture album – they look like the vessel in the hands of the Getic captain in the image.

They also transported vessels made of clay, bronze and silver, beautifully shaped and embellished, as well as finely crafted weapons. All this, they traded in exchange for products that they couldn't find in dry, arid Greece or the islands of the Aegean Sea: grains, precious fur and, sadly, slaves – defeated enemies who were enslaved and sold as commodities in Greece or further afield. You've heard of the existence of these slaves and the lifelong forced labour imposed on defeated enemies, then later on their children and their children's children. You ought to know that this regime, which horrifies us today, continued to exist beyond the Antiquity. Although the Christian faith condemns slavery, it survived under different guises throughout the European world until the middle of the 19th century, so fairly recently. We should not forget this!

My reason for going into such detail about these Greek colonies on the coast of the Black Sea is to help you understand why it is through Greek writings that we first learn of the "barbarians" who lived in the



***Dromihete and Lisimah.*** You've probably heard the legend of the Getic king Dromihete who, around the year 300 BC, won the battle against Lisimah, a descendent of Alexander the Great. Alongside the moral of the story, this episode is also proof of the close bonds between the Getae and the Hellenistic world, with regards to their military, commerce and civilisation.



**Histria.** Reimagining of the marble temple dedicated to the Great God (in Greek, *Theos Megas*), whose identity is not clearly known to us. It was erected by Greek colonists in the 3rd century BC, in the sacred region of Histria, home to three other temples, including one dedicated to Aphrodite.

region back then. (The Greeks called anyone who was not of *Hellenic* descent a *barbarian*, and the Hellens called themselves Greeks.)

These peoples who lived on our territory have sometimes been called *Getae*, especially those who lived in present-day Dobruja and Muntenia, and sometimes *Dacians*, especially those who settled north of the Carpathian Mountains – but they shared the same lineage and language. As such, we will call them *Geto-Dacians*. Although their civilisation was less evolved than the Hellens, they too had a differentiated social structure, consisting of the peasantry and the nobility (some of the latter could even be appointed as kings). They had artisans and pottery workshops, which produced vessels of a distinctive shape and ornamentation.

On the whole, they had their own form of civilisation, as well as a culture that was admittedly less refined than the Hellenic one. Their cities were further apart, and not as well built and organised as those of the Greeks.