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Arts

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“Dacia: The Last Frontier of the Roman World” Exhibit in Rome

The region was the easternmost territory conquered by Rome as well as chronologically the last



Italian Hours

Lucy Gordan



Trajan's column, "a pictorial war diary", in his Forum in Rome, courtesy of the City of Rome

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On view until April 21 in the National Roman Museum, housed in the halls of the once Baths of Diocletian, the largest bath complex of the ancient world, is the breath-taking, tour-de-force exhibition “Dacia: The Last Frontier of the Roman World”. This title has a double meaning: the easternmost territory conquered by Rome as well as chronologically the last.

In 101 AD the Roman Emperor Trajan tried to conquer Dacia and failed. Four years later he commissioned the architect Apollodorus of Damascus to build a bridge across the Danube. This allowed Trajan’s troops to cross the river and in 106 AD to conquer Dacia, which became the Empire’s easternmost frontier province.

Since their conquest of Macedonia in the Battle of Pidna in 168 BC the Romans had desired to rule Dacia because of its gold, silver, and salt mines. After Trajan’s victory they held onto the province until the Emperor Aurelian abandoned the territory in c. 273 AD and destroyed “Trajan’s” bridge. This strategic move allowed the Romans to pull back to a more defensible border on the Danube’s south bank. The Roman legacies to Dacia and still today to Romania are weights and measures, laws, the Roman alphabet, and the Latin language.

On display, most for the first-time outside Romania, are about 1,000 artifacts on loan from 47 Romanian museums. They trace the historical and cultural development of present-day Romania from c. 800 BC (the Iron Age) to c. 800 AD (the Byzantine era).

The exhibition is divided into four sections: the first, dedicated to Roman Dacia, is a watershed between pre-Roman Dacia and

post-Roman Dacia. The second, pre-Roman Dacia, recounts the formation of Dacian culture during the Iron Age (7th -6th centuries BC) influenced by the Thracians, Scythians, and Greeks from the Black Sea colonies, for, since the Iron Age until the Middle Ages, Dacia was a crossroads of cultures. In fact, the exhibition's underlying theme is the similarity between Dacia and the Italian peninsula in their successful adaptations to the interweaving of different cultures in their respective territories.

The third section, also pre-Roman, illustrates the comparisons between Mediterranean urban civilizations and continental tribal and nomadic civilizations: the Celts, Geto-Thracians, and the Bastarnae of Germanic origin. It also concerns Dacia's inclusion into Mediterranean Hellenistic cultural networks from the time of Alexander the Great onwards.



The helmet of Cotofenesti. Its apotropaic eyes were meant to ward off the evil eye and harmful magic spells, courtesy of the exhibition's PR



Part of the Pietroasele Treasure on display in Rome, courtesy of the exhibition's PR

The fourth section focuses on the decline of the Roman Empire. Barbarian invasions made it difficult for the Roman garrisons to maintain secure borders, so Rome's power gradually shifted towards the East and Byzantium. This section highlights the role of Christianization and the spread of the Latin language in Dacia. For Romania is the only country in Eastern Europe where a romance language has been spoken since ancient times.

The Romanization of Dacia was tied to the Roman army so appropriately, the exhibition opens with a plaster cast of a section of Trajan's column in his Roman Forum which illustrates his conquest of Dacia; weapons used by the Roman legions and their mercenaries; a soldier's certificate of land ownership in gratitude for his military service; coins dating to Trajan; small statues of gods, both Roman and local, and jewelry. Highlights here are a marble statue of the serpent/God Glykon, the good demon, whose magical powers ended epidemics and helped women to get pregnant; and the bronze tablets of the *Lex Troesmensium* (177-180 AD), the text inscribed in Latin of municipal laws for the city of Troesmis.

Troesmensium (177-180 AD), the text inscribed in Latin of municipal laws for the city of Troesmis.

During the 7th-6th centuries BC horses were first used in warfare. Before then soldiers fought on foot with spears, double-edged axes, daggers and short swords, carrying shields, and wearing leather breastplates and helmets. The highlights of Section Two are weapons and bronze, silver and gold decorations for harnesses.


In Section Three the star artifacts, both dating to c. 400 BC, are a Thracian gold ceremonial helmet from Cotofenesti, embossed with gold studs and mythological animals, and a bronze Celtic helmet with an astonishing eagle-shaped crest from Ciurlesti, which I'd already seen in the first exhibition held in Venice's Palazzo Grassi, "The Celts: The First Europeans" in 1991.


The artifacts in Section Four include the surviving pieces of the 4th-century AD Pietroasele Treasure: a large eagle-headed fibula and three smaller ones encrusted with semi-precious stones; a patera or round sacrificial dish, a 12-sided cup, a ring with a Gothic runic inscription, a large tray, two necklaces, and a pitcher as well as the Biertan Donarium, a 4th-century AD bronze Christian votive in the shape of a Labarum, Constantine the Great's Imperial standard, which bore Christian symbolic imagery with the military symbols of the Roman Empire. Its Latin text, EGO ZENOVIVS VOTUM POSUI, confirms the continued use of Latin in Dacia more than a century after Aurelian's retreat.

This exhibition is the chance of a lifetime. It’s unlikely that, even during a long vacation in Romania, a tourist would be able see all the artifacts on display here.



The Biertan Donarium, Wikipedia

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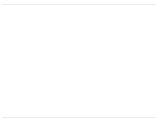
 



Lucy Gordan
Italian Hours

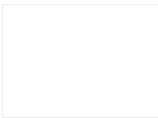
Former editor at the American Academy in Rome and at the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization, with journalistic accreditation in Italy and the Vatican, I'm culture editor of the US monthly Inside the Vatica...

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Exhibit in Rome

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Holy Year

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