

Peter Fields

Archaeotek Roman Villa Excavation

This past June, I flew from New York City to Bucharest, Romania, from where I then boarded a charter bus to Hunedoara County in rural Transylvania. There I stayed with a group of four staff and seven other students for the next four weeks. Every weekday morning we left our hotel at 6:40 a.m. for the dig site about fifteen minutes away. Before beginning our archaeological work, we stopped at a nearby house, where a local, Uta, would make us breakfast (and later in the day, lunch). The dig site was at the top of a very big hill, flanked by corn fields on either side. The view from the top was incredible, looking out onto vast fields of farm land. There were also cows at the foot of the hill, and we stored our tools in the same barn they lived in. Our team excavated a Roman villa believed to have been occupied by Roman legionaries during the second and third centuries. But there is also ample evidence that the area had been occupied by pre-Roman Dacians, as well as post-Roman occupation. We discovered many pieces of ceramic, Roman nails, and glass in various contexts and phases as we came down upon the walls and floor of the villa. The site has been in progress since 2014, but there is still much more to uncover in the area. GPR has revealed multiple other structures around the villa which have yet to be excavated.

During the weekends, we took a break from digging and visited local historic sites, both Daco-Roman and Medieval. The first weekend we visited Deva Fortress, the Museum of Dacian and Roman Civilization, and Alba Iulia, the historical capital of Transylvania. The second weekend we saw both Sarmizegetusa Regia (the Dacian capital of Dacia) and Sarmizegetusa Ulpia (the Roman capital of Dacia, named after Trajan, aka Marcus Ulpius Traianus), as well as the medieval Corvin Castle (where the 2024 film *Nosferatu* was filmed). The third weekend was

left open for the students to decide how to spend their time. We decided to tour Bran Castle, marketed as “Dracula’s Castle” despite Vlad the Impaler never living there. Bran was about a five-hour train ride from our home base, and Romanian trains, though clean and nice, are perpetually late and slow. Nevertheless, our trip was a great success, largely thanks to the wonderful excavation team who are now my wonderful friends. Bran Castle was on the outskirts of the city of Braşov, but we also explored the center of the city where we saw the Black Church and stumbled into some kind of summer festival where there was live traditional music.

Transylvania was full of character, history, and natural beauty. Everywhere we visited we were surrounded by the beautiful Transylvanian Alps (and one weekend, IN the Transylvanian Alps). The last day I was in Romania, I spent the day in Bucharest with a few remaining friends before my flight the next morning. We walked around downtown and went to the National Museum of Romanian History, where they exhibit a life-size replica of Trajan’s Column, of which its reliefs depict Trajan’s Dacian Wars.

I chose this archaeological dig program because I was interested in Dacian and Romanian history and its intersection. Romania is a fascinating place for me as a Classicist: the Dacian province was at one of the furthest points of Rome’s territory, and one of (if not, the) hardest to keep pacified. The Roman presence is felt strongly in Romania’s archaeological oeuvre, with museums full of statues and tablets that look like they could have been excavated from the Roman Forum itself. The legions stationed in Dacia left behind structures and artistry typical for the Roman military: at Sarmizegetusa Ulpia there were temples of Nemesis and of Mithras. The Roman ruins in Romania are fascinating, but what I find fascinating as well is the way Dacians and Romans have influenced modern Romanian identity. For centuries after Roman withdrawal from Dacia, most people living in Transylvania were unaware of their Roman past. It was largely

through advancement in archaeological techniques in the 19th century that allowed Romanians to draw from ancient history to form their modern, national identity. During the communist era in Romania, the ancient Dacians were idealistically ascribed egalitarian and anti-imperialist qualities aligned with contemporary communist values to aggrandize and legitimize modern Romania and its people. This appropriation of ancient history fascinates me, and I intend to research “Dacomania” for my senior thesis I will be beginning next fall. Having the opportunity to live and dig in Romania for four weeks was incredible and will amply inform my thesis. Participating in archaeological excavation has also granted me perspective in a facet of academic research I had long been interested in learning about, but would not have been able to afford without this award! I will be forever grateful for this life-changing experience, everything I learned about archaeology and Romania, and the friends I made in my dig team!



One of the cows who lived at our site.



Bird's-eye view of the city of Deva.



The ruins of Sarmizegetusa Regia, the pre-Roman, Dacian capital of Dacia.



Archaeological finds housed at the Museum of Dacian and Roman Civilization (the central Mercury was discovered at our site!)



Lots of kitties in Transylvania! These two lived outside of Densuş Church.



Awesome replica of a relief from Trajan's Column, from the National Museum of Romanian History in Bucharest.