The Danubian Latinity in the First Christian Millennium

Cosmin CĂPRIOARĂ
Ovidius University of Constanţa

Abstract: *The conquest of the Lower Danube area (Illyria, Moesia and Dacia) by the Romans in the first centuries before and after Christ opened the way to local populations' romanization. In the second half of the first millennium, the Romanian language appears, as do the other Romance languages. The substratum (Thraco-Dacian) and Danubian Latin, a more rustic branch of Vulgar Latin, impregnated with Christian terms, fundamentally contributed to the appearance of the new Romance idiom. Previously and subsequently, many large waves of migrants passed through Dacia and the north of the Balkan peninsula, but, obviously, only the Slavic and Turkic peoples had an important linguistic impact. This article offers a short overview of the history of the Romanian language before the year 1000 AD, including the legacy of the substratum and the most important influences of the peoples with which our language entered into contact during this period.*

Keywords: *History of the Romanian language, Danubian Latinity, Christian Latin, Thracian-Dacian, romanization, common Romanian, influences.*

0. The Romanian language is the Easternmost Romance language, isolated early on from the rest of the other Neo-Latin languages, similarly formed in the 7th and 8th century AD from Vulgar Latin and with specific features that make it very precious to linguists researching Romance languages.

1. The emergence of the Romanian language is generally said to have started at the beginning of the second century AD, with the occupation of Dacia by the Romans, following the two wars of 101-102 and 105-106, which bring face to face Decebalus, the brave and skilful Dacian king, and Trajan, *optimus princeps Romanorum*. The roots are, however, older and are related to the Roman expansion in the Balkans and to the Lower Danube, more precisely to the occupation of Illyria, Thrace, and Moesia, that is to say the right side of the river, including the Pontic area where the Greek colonies Callatis, Tomis, Histria, Olbia, and others, were located.

Intense colonization, the mining of important gold deposits in Dacia, the construction of cities and fortresses favours the intense process of Romanization, which, theoretically, took place to the north of the Danube between 106 and 275 AD, when Emperor Aurelian decides to withdraw the army and the administration to the south of the Danube and the

BDD-A33039 © 2021 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 22:00:27 UTC)

reorganization of a new Dacia province there (s. Eutropius, Vopiscus, Iordanes). The short duration of the actual Roman rule in Dacia caused some scepticism to emerge regarding the north-Danubian origin of Romanians and led to theories such as those included in Gh. Brătianu's 1937 book *Une énigme et un miracle historique: le peuple roumain*.

The process of Romanization had begun much earlier, especially to the south of the Danube, and continued long after the Aurelian withdrawal, and the traveling from and to the south and the north of the river continued freely at least until the fifth century, especially since the Romans kept their bridgeheads in Trajan’s Dacia, and, later, Justinian reoccupied a large part of the territory north of the Danube. Historians, archaeologists, as well as linguists have proved that the Daco-Roman civilization continued (for example, over 3000 Latin stone inscriptions, most of them funerary inscriptions, in 200 cities) and the fact that the Romanian language has developed basically from the Latin spoken in the Lower Danube area, on both sides of the river, popular Latin with a particular evolution, which took over certain elements (vocabulary, in particular, but also the basis of articulation) of the native substratum, Thracian-Dacian. Later, after the 7th and 8th centuries, when the new, Romanian proper, evolution period begins, a strong Slavic influence is felt, the latter becoming the superstratum of our language.

Thus, the Latin stratum overlaps with the Thracian-Dacian substratum, acquiring special features, a process that will continue after the emergence of the Romanian language, because of the Slavic superstratum (and, subsequently, due to other influences: Greek, Hungarian, Turkish, etc.). Basically, the requisites for the emergence of the Romanian language and the first stages of its development as a Neo-Latin language can be found in the first millennium AD. Towards the end of the millennium, the period of communion of the Romanians on both sides of the Danube, reflected in an idiom without major dialectal differences, called *străromână*, *primitive Romanian* or, more frequently, *common Romanian*, begins to fall apart and there are writings attesting the requisites of the emergence of the four Romanian dialects (Dacoromanian, Aromanian, Meglenoromanian, Istroromanian). Byzantine historians (such as Kekaumenos and Kedrenos) attest to the presence of Romanians in the area between northern Macedonia and Albania, that is to the south of the borderline drawn by the Czech scientist K. Jireček between the areas of the Balkans influenced by the Roman and the Greek cultures. Moreover, the ancestors of the Aromanians had already settled in the southern areas of the peninsula (s. ILR 2018, 300-301), as proved by the old Romanian name *Sărună* of the city of Salona (Thessaloniki), with the rhotacism of intervocalic *l*, in Latin words, as in Lat. *angelus* > Rom. *înger*, Lat. *salem* > Rom. *sare*, a phonetic rule that was applied for a short period of time (see also *Băiasa* for *Vavissa*, with betacism,

BDD-A33039 © 2021 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 22:00:27 UTC)

or the use of the Mediterranean word *h'ic* „fig tree" from Lat. *ficus*). Additionally, note must be taken of the Byzantine historians' records of the *Vlachs* [Vlachos, Wallachians] in the Balkans and especially the quasi-autonomous medieval region *Vlahia Mare* [Great Wallachia] in the Pind Mountains and Epirus (s. the G. Murnu's contributions) as well as the rise of the Romanian-Bulgarian Empire of the Peter and Asan brothers.

2. Danubian Latin, a term established by the homonymous work of the linguist I. Fischer (*Latina dunăreană. Introducere în istoria limbii române* [Danubian Latin. Introduction to the history of Romanian], 1985), is a variety of the late Vulgar Latin (see also Bârlea, *Christian Latin*, 2000), more rustic than those in the Western Roman empire and quite heterogeneous due to the mosaic of peoples that spoke it, nevertheless having the characteristics of a *lingua franca*. Its endurance was tested by the repeated attacks on the North-Danube area by the free Dacians and by the migrant peoples (Goths, Gepids, Huns, Avars, etc.). Its early isolation due to the Slavs settling in the old Dacia and to the fall of the Roman limes along the Danube in 601 AD and their massive migration into the Balkan Peninsula determined the appearance of specific features. Among the most important ones are the following (cf. Niculescu 1965, 1978, 1999):

- many particular phonetic changes, some probably due to the pronunciation being adapted the to the native basis of articulation: for example, the frequent use of the sounds *ă* and *ş*;
- many morphosyntactic phenomena, different from those in the rest of Romania, some probably related to the substratum: the postposition of the article, word order, the Balkan sprachbund;
- approximately 160 words of Thracian-Dacian origin;
- around 100 Latin words only preserved only in this area: *acutitus*, *antaneus*, *avunculus*, *bubalus*, *imperator*, *paludem*, *tataneus*, etc .;
- the loss of some important Latin words such as *bellus*, *domus*, *silva*, *villa*, etc.;
- different meanings of some Latin words developing here: *anima* 'soul' > 'heart', *emmergere* 'to sink' > 'to go', *gula* 'throat' > 'mouth', *tenerus* 'tender' > 'young', etc.;
- the early entry and survival of relatively numerous words, mostly of Greek or Hebrew origin, belonging to the basic Christian lexicon: Lat. *christianus* > Rom. *creştin* (christian), Lat. *crucem* > Rom. *cruce* (cross), Lat. *angelus* > Rom. *înger* (angel), Lat. *basilica* > Rom. *biserică* (church), Lat. *communicare* > Rom. *cuminecare* (communion), Lat. *baptizare* > Rom. *botezare* (baptism), etc.;

BDD-A33039 © 2021 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 22:00:27 UTC)

- the name of the Holy Apostle Andrew, the First called, has, in Romanian, old and widespread variants (*Îndrea*, *Indrea*, *Andrea*, *Îndrei*), which have been preserved from the first centuries AD and have changed according to the phonetic rules applying to the Latin words inherited. The fact that St. Andrew's name is old and very common can also be proved by turning to folk etymology (*Andrea*, *Undrea* lit. 'knitting needle'), which also appears in the folk name of the month of December (*luna lui Andrea/Undrea* [the month of Andrea/Undrea], s. Petrișor 2012, 2017).

3. The substratum words entering Danubian Latin, inherited, as Latin terms, by Romanian, attest the continuity of the Dacian-Roman population to the north of the Danube and belong to most fields of life, as can be seen in the works of I. I. Russu, C. Poghirc, Gr. Brâncuș times in the first volume of the recent treatise on *Istoria limbii române* [The History of the Romanian Language] (2018). Among them: *abur* (steam), *baci* (head of the sheepfold), *brad* (fir tree), *brânză* (cheese), *bucura* (to enjoy), *buză* (lip), *căciulă* (fur cap), *cătun* (hamlet), *ceafă* (nape), *cioară* (crow), *copac* (tree), *gard* (fence), *gata* (ready), *leurdă* (wild garlic), *mal* (shore, bank), *mazăre* (peas), *mânz* (foal), *moş* (forefather), *năpârcă* (viper), *pârâu* (brook) *raţă* (duck), *strugure* (grape), *strungă* (gorge), *şopârlă* (lizard), *ţap* (he-goat), *ţeapă* (pale, spike), *vatră* (hearth) and others (s. Brâncuş 1983, ILR 2018, 314 sqq.). These words speak of a rustic civilization, of agricultural-pastoral nature, and sometimes they enter relations of synonymy with some Latin words, the relation between them being specific - general (e.g., *brânză-caş*, *baltă-lac*, *moş-bătrân*, *mânz-cal/iapă*, *strepede-vierme* 'salted cheese-unsalted cheese, puddle-lake, forefather-old man, foal-horse/mare, strainer-worm, etc.).

Some major toponyms have also been preserved from the language of the Dacians, such as: *Carpaţi*, *Bucura*, *Parâng*, or hydronyms, such as: *Dunăre*, *Argeş*, *Criş*, *Mureş*, *Olt*, *Prut*, *Siret*, *Someş*, *Timiş*, and some Dacian names of cities were borrowed by the Romans: *Apulum*, *Drubeta*, *Napoca*, *Potaissa*, *Sarmisegetuza*, but, being names of cities, they were not passed on to Romanian due to migrations.

The influence of the substratum is also found in the *basis of articulation* (s. Gafton, 2018, 7-110), in the development of certain Romanian sounds and, from an ethnographic point of view, in *forma mentis*, traditions, clothing, etc.

4. The Daco-Romanians and, later, after the 7th - 8th centuries, the Romanians had to face several waves of migrants. During the first millennium the Visigoths (4th century), the Huns (4th-5th centuries), the Avars (6th-7th centuries), the Slavs (6th-7th centuries), the Bulgarians (680

BDD-A33039 © 2021 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 22:00:27 UTC)

AD), the Hungarians (9th century in Bessarabia, 10th-11th centuries, in Transylvania) and others passed through the north-Danube area.

Many of these peoples had no influence on the Romanian language, primarily because they did not bond with the natives and because they were "on the move". For example, there are practically no old Germanic words in Romanian (s. ILR 2018, 68-72, cf. MDA s.v. *bumb*, *nasture* 'button'), which led to the theory of the South-Danube origin of the Romanians. Other migrant peoples stayed longer or settled on the territory of old Dacia and to the south of the Danube. This is the case of the Slavs, the Bulgarians, and, later, the Pechenegs, the Cumans and the Hungarians (who go beyond the end of the first millennium).

The folk Slavic influence, most likely occurring in successive waves after the eighth century (s. ILR 2018, 341 sqq.) and giving rise to phenomena of major interest for slavists, impacts all aspects of Romanian. There are numerous old loans, many of which belong to the main vocabulary (*trup*, *leac*, *babă*, *nevastă*, *cinste*, *glas*, *milă*, *nevoie*, *coasă*, *plug*, *hrană*, *bivol*, *lobodă*, *crap*, *deal*, *vreme*, *zori*, *gol*, *slab*, *bogat*, *vesel*, *a iubi*, *a plăti* 'body, cure, old woman, wife, honour, voice, pity, need, sew, plough, food, buffalo, [a plant] *lobodă*, carp, hill, weather, dawn, empty, weak, rich, cheerful, to love, to pay'), being testimony to a true symbiosis, which led to common bilingualism among the Slavs north of the Danube and caused their assimilation (s. ILR 2018, 340). Slavic loans also appear in toponymy (*Camena*, *Glâmboca*, *Grădişte*, *Târgovişte*), hydronymy (*Bistriţa*, *Dâmboviţa*, *Sohodol*), mythology (*iasmă* 'ghost', *pricolici* 'werewolf'), but not in the Christian lexicon of the first millennium, common words such as *popă* 'priest, *rai* 'heaven', *iad* 'hell' being attested later, in the fourteenth century (*ibidem*, 658).

5. The endurance of the Danubian Romanity must also be linked to the vicinity of the Eastern Roman Empire, which is gradually influenced by the Greek language. *Torna, torna, fratre!* [Come back, come back, brother!], from the 5th century, is considered by some linguists to be the first attested sample of Romanian language. In the tenth century, Dobrudja becomes a Byzantine province again (s. Petrişor 2018, 27-40), but there is no "direct influence of the Greek language on the idiom spoken by the Latinophones in the Danube regions" (ILR 2018, 658). The dependence of the Romanian church on the Byzantine and Slavic episcopacies south of the Danube will fuel Greek loans through Slavonic (*busuioc* 'basil', *corabie* 'ship', *crin* 'lily', *drum* 'road', *frânghie* 'rope', *humă* 'clay, *strachină* 'bowl', *ibidem*). It is no earlier than the twelfth century that the Christian terminology of Byzantine origin, which also entered Romanian through Slavonic: *evanghelie* 'gospel', *liturghie* 'liturgy', *episcop* 'bishop', *călugăr* 'monk' etc. (about 142 terms

BDD-A33039 © 2021 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 22:00:27 UTC)

after H. Mihăescu, in ILR 2018, 658, s. also Dumitrescu coord. 1978, 106) is attested.

6. In conclusion, the first millennium AD is the timeframe of the birth of Romanian, when its individualizing features arose and the basic Christian vocabulary was formed.

Abbreviations:
cf. – *confer*
Lat. – Latin
Rom. – Romanian
s. – see
s.v. – *sub verbo*

References:

Bârlea, Gheorghe. *Introducere în studiul latinei creştine*. Bucureşti: Editura *Grai şi suflet – Cultura naţională*, 2000.

Brâncuş, Grigore. *Vocabularul autohton al limbii române*. Bucureşti: Editura Ştiinţifică şi Enciclopedică, 1983.

Brâncuş, Grigore. *Studii de istorie a limbii române*. Bucureşti: EAR, 2007.

Căprioară, Cosmin. "*Evoluţia limbii între conflict şi negociere*". A. Todi (coord.), *Filologie şi didactică.* Bucureşti: Editura Universitară, 2011.

Gafton, Alexandru. "Le lieu d'articulation et les habiletés articulatoires dans une perspective évolutive". *Diversité et Identité Culturelle en Europe/Diversitate şi Identitate Culturală în Europa* (DICE), XV, 2, Bucureşti : Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române.

DELL = Alfred Ernout & Antoine Meillet. *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue latine. Histoire des mots*. Ed. a IV-a, Paris: Klincksieck, 2011.

Fischer, Iancu. *Latina dunăreană. Introducere în istoria limbii române,* Bucureşti: Editura Ştiinţifică şi Enciclopedică, 1985.

Gafton, Alexandru. "*Consecinţele profunde ale contactelor lingvistice*". *Studii de limbă română. Omagiu profesorului Grigore Brâncuş*. Bucureşti: Editura Universităţii din Bucureşti. 2010.

ILR = Marius Sala, Liliana Ionescu-Ruxăndoiu (coord.). *Istoria limbii române*, vol. I. Bucureşti: Editura Univers Enciclopedic Gold.

MDA – Academia Română, Institutul de Lingvistică „Iorgu Iordan – Al. Rosetti". *Micul dicţionar academic*. Ediţia a II-a. Bucureşti: Editura Univers Enciclopedic, 2010.

Niculescu, Alexandru. *Individualitatea limbii române între limbile romanice*. Vol. I. *Contribuţii gramaticale*. Vol. II. *Contribuţii socio-culturale,*

BDD-A33039 © 2021 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 22:00:27 UTC)

Bucureşti: Editura Ştiinţifică şi Enciclopedică. Vol. III. *Noi contribuţii*, vol. IV. *Elemente de istorie culturală*. Cluj-Napoca: Editura Clusium, 1965, 1978, 1999, 2004.

Petrişor, Marin. ”*Dovezi lingvistice ale apostolatului Sfântului Andrei (Ândrea, Undrea) în spaţiul românesc de etnogeneză”*. Simpozionul Internaţional *Sfintele Taine şi familia creştină*. Sibiu-Iaşi: Editura Vasiliana ’98, 2012.

Petrişor, Marin. *Sfântul Apostol Andrei în conştiinţa poporului român. Mărturiile hărţilor Atlasului Lingvistic Român* [St. Andrew the Apostle in the consciousness of the Romanian people. The testimonies of the Romanian Linguistic Atlas’ maps], communication of the Romanian Academy of Scientist. Constanţa Branch, 2017.

Petrişor, Marin. ”*Dobrudja in the Mesopotamia of the West*”. Charles W. Finkl, Christopher Makowski (eds.). *Diversity in Coastal Marine Sciences*. New York: Springer International Publishing, 2018.

Poghirc, Cicerone. „Influenţa autohtonă”. *Istoria limbii române*. Vol. II. Bucureşti: EAR, 1969

Puşcariu, Sextil. *Limba română*. Vol. I. *Privire generală*. Bucureşti: Fundaţia pentru literatură şi artă, 1940.

Puşcariu, Sextil. *Cercetări şi studii*. Bucureşti: Editura Minerva, 1974.

Rosetti, Alexandru. *Istoria limbii române de la origini până în secolul al XVII-lea*. Bucureşti: Editura pentru Literatură, 1968.

Russu, I. I. *Limba traco-dacilor*, Bucureşti: Editura Ştiinţifică, 1967.

Sala, Marius. *De la latină la română*, Bucureşti: Editura Univers Enciclopedic, 1998.

Sala, Marius. (coord.). *Vocabularul reprezentativ al limbilor romanice*. Bucureşti: Editura Ştiinţifică şi Enciclopedică, 1988.

Sala, Marius (coord.). *Enciclopedia limbilor romanice*. Bucureşti: Editura Ştiinţifică şi Enciclopedică, 1989.

Şiadbei, I. „Le Latin dans l’Empire d’Orient”. *Arhiva,* XXXIX, 1932.

Vasiliu, Emanuel. *Fonologia istorică a dialectelor dacoromâne*. Bucureşti: EAR, 1968.

BDD-A33039 © 2021 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 22:00:27 UTC)