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Lost art: the possibly forged but tantalising Sinaia lead plates

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Noah Charney shares the stories behind some of art history's most important works—and others that pose potential problems

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There are quite a few objects that have a place in my two recent books for Phaidon on the histories of forgery and lost art. Among them are the surprisingly little-known and under-studied Sinaia lead plates, which are supposedly cast from lost solid gold originals and bear inscriptions using the ancient Greek alphabet while sounding out a lost language. But today, only 35 of the original 200 lead plates are still extant, while none of the reported gold originals can be found. And there remains a question as to whether the whole lot was fabricated by a linguistic genius from Romania.

Bogdan Petriceicu-Hasdeu (1836-1907), born Tadeu Hasdeu, was a scholar, philologist and noted linguist, conversant in an astonishing 26 languages. He was born to a family of minor Moldovan nobility

in what is now Ukraine. He moved to Romania in 1863 and began writing *Arhiva historica a Romaniei* (Archival History of Romania), which was described as the first published history book to use sources in both Slavonic and Romanian. He went on to publish a respected book on Trajan's Column in Rome and numerous other scholarly volumes, including histories of Romania and an encyclopaedic dictionary of the Romanian language (though he only got through the letter B).

Hasdeu was interested in the history of language and became involved in a debate over whether Romanian was Latinate (as it is considered today). His conclusion was that Romanian was in fact of Slavic origin, but that Slavic words were displaced by the frequent use of Latin ones in what linguists call the "theory of words' circulation". In 1876 Hasdeu was appointed head of the State Archives in Bucharest, and in 1878 he became a professor of philology at the University of Bucharest.

At an unknown date after 1875, approximately 200 lead plates were discovered in a warehouse of the Museum of Antiquities in Bucharest. Thanks to familiarity with the Greek alphabet, scholars could discern in the text on the plates the names of ancient Dacian kings as well as ancient place names in the territory that is now Romania. It seemed to all concerned that a lost language had been discovered, though written out in Greek—the language of the Dacian tribe that first settled in Romania and was colonised by the Romans under Trajan in AD106.

Much has been learned of the original Dacian language since the discovery of these lead plates. It seems to have been in the Indo-European family of languages and it probably reached the region of the Carpathian Mountains around 2500BC. But while scholars have found writings *about* the Dacians, largely Roman and Greek histories, no lengthy texts have been discovered *in* Dacian—all that remains of the language are a handful of person and place names, and very short phrases copied down by Latin and Greek scholars. The language survived in spoken form until as late as AD600, but little more is known about it. It was only in 1977 that Romanian scholars used comparative linguistic methods to try to decipher

some Dacian, using ancient people and place names as their only point of departure. Back in the 19th century, the Sinaia, or Dacian, lead plates as they were called, looked to be a major anthropological discovery.

The lead plates were roughly rectangular, aside from one round plate, and their dimensions ranged from 9.3 by 9.8cm to 35.4 sq. cm. They were written in scriptio continua Greek with several additional letters, including the Latin V and a C and G resembling Cyrillic. They also contained numerous illustrations in a traditional antique style. One set of images on a plate showed an alliance made between Dacians and Scythians, while another showed a genealogy of the Dacian royal family. The images and text were largely convincing as ancient work, but the story behind them was not.

While the idea behind the plates was fascinating, few believed that they were authentic, even in the 1870s. They had no provenance, having conveniently been “discovered” in a museum warehouse, and they also looked new. A story emerged after their discovery by Hasdeu that they had been made as copies in 1875 from gold originals that had gone missing. That explained their discovery and new appearance, but there was no sign of the gold originals, nor any historical reference to them.

It then came to light that the lead in the plates had been made from recycled nails at a factory in Sinaia, Romania, which did not help the argument for authenticity. The 19th-century origin of the lead plates was confirmed by a recent study of the 35 surviving plates (the others have since gone missing), which are made of printing lead used in the second half of the 19th century. But they still could conceivably have been cast from lost ancient gold originals.

A single word in the text of the plates renders them suspect. The plates include the Greek name for Comidava, a town in Dacia that was described by the ancient author Ptolemy. However, in 1942 it was discovered that Ptolemy had miswritten the name of the town, which was actually called Cumidava.

Hasdeu is credited with the discovery of the plates, and most skeptical scholars now believe that he also designed them. It would have required extraordinary knowledge and patience to prepare the remarkably consistent and detailed text and the perhaps still more impressive images. Hasdeu was one of the few scholars in Romania with both the knowledge and interest to pull it off.

Some aspects of the text in the plates also seem to support Hasdeu's theories about language, and this may have provided a motivation for him to orchestrate this forgery, if indeed it is a forgery. For example, the language on the plates does not look like what modern linguists would expect of Dacian. The plates contain many words that are similar to modern Romanian, many that are close to Slavic words and very few that adhere to what contemporary scholars believe is the ancient Dacian substratum. These eccentricities support Hasdeu's theory that Romanian is not a Latinate language but one that evolved from ancient Dacian.

The plates contain several anachronisms that might indicate that they are forgeries. One plate shows a battle scene involving a cannon. Cannons were developed in China in the 12th century and first appeared in primitive form in Europe and the Islamic world in the 13th century, long after the Dacian tribe was no more. That would seem to give away the game, but for a few clues that argue for their authenticity. In one plate, the city of Sarmizegetusa is shown with an incredible degree of accuracy that was only confirmed by archaeological excavations long after 1875. Before that excavation, no one knew the outline of this buried city, so how could Hasdeu have depicted it so accurately before the ruins of the city had been unearthed?

Likewise, an authentic Dacian medallion that was found in the tomb of the Dacian King Burebista, who died in 44BC, was inscribed in a language very similar to that of the plates, but was only excavated after the Dacian plates were discovered. Similarly inscribed gold plates have since been discovered in Bulgaria. Unless these too are forgeries (and there is no suggestion of that to date), this would tend to support the authenticity of the plates. Finally, the fact that the plates were written in the Greek alphabet actually contradicts a

point made by Hasdeu, who thought that the ancient Dacian alphabet was similar to the Hungarian one. The plates suggest that the Dacians, at least for official historical material, relied on the Greek alphabet.

There was no clear beneficiary from the discovery of the plates. Hasdeu himself considered them to be modern copies of authentic originals. He wrote in 1901 of his theory that a branch of the Dacian language lived on and morphed into Albanian, and referenced the plates in doing so. But the plates were never considered to be authentic by enough scholars to permit their entry into the proper study of Dacian. That only 35 of the original 200 remain extant reflects how they were quickly disregarded, and as of 2003 they were deteriorating and not considered worth conservation.

The one thing that all scholars agree on is that the lead plates, if they are indeed inauthentic, represent a truly brilliant forgery by a scholar of the highest order, with a vast knowledge of archaeology, linguistics, history and ancient art. Circa 1875, Hasdeu fits the profile.

