DEKINAIS THE "WIZARD". COMMENTS ON STRABO VII. 3. 11 (C. 303)

Aurel Rustoiu[1]

Abstract: *Numerous modern authors wrote about Dekinais, the great priest of the times of Burebista and a close adviser of the king, despite the obvious scarcity of ancient evidence regarding him. Among the latter are some paragraphs from the works of Strabo which are discussed in this article starting from the way in which ancient authors viewed the witchcraft (goetea) and its practitioners in the context of the wider perception of Barbarian alterity in ancient Mediterranean societies. The conclusion is that the supposed biography of Dekinais and his image of goes who travelled to Egypt before becoming the great priest of the Getae (Dacians) was largely an ethnographic and rhetorical invention of Posidonius and Strabo. Accordingly, the respective ancient authors, or the later ones who copied their stories, are not providing any direct information regarding the magic and witchcraft practised to the north of the Danube, but only subjective interpretations filtered through the Mediterranean perspective.*

Keywords: *Dekinais, Burebista, Dacians, witchcraft, Transylvania, Sarmizegetusa Regia.*

Numerous modern authors wrote about Dekinais, the great priest of the times of Burebista and a close adviser of the king, sometimes from a historical perspective and other times in relation to the god Zalmoxis, occasionally including nationalist nuances[2], despite the obvious scarcity of ancient evidence regarding him[3]. Among the latter are some paragraphs from the works of Strabo which will be discussed below. Regarding his name, the version *Deceneu* is predominant in Romanian specialist literature. However, D. Dana has recently argued convincingly that the indigenous spelling of his name was *Dekinais* (*Dekineos, Dekaineos* in Strabo's text)[4]. One aspect which was frequently debated concerns the meaning of the so-called magical abilities of Dekinais, which were mentioned by Strabo; he is designated with the term "man wizard" (*andra góeta*), one who previously travelled to Egypt. This aspect will be discussed in this article starting from the way in which ancient authors in general, and Strabo in particular, viewed the witchcraft (*goetea*) and its practitioners in the context of the wider perception of Barbarian alterity in ancient Mediterranean societies[5].

First, here is the paragraph from Strabo's *Geography* providing the base of the following comments:

[1] Academia Română, filiala Cluj-Napoca. Institutul de Arheologie și Istoria Artei. Str. M. Kogălniceanu 12–14, 400084 Cluj-Napoca, Romania. E-mail: aurelrustoiu@yahoo.com

[2] VULPE 1976; DAICOVICIU 1972, 57, 90; CRIȘAN 1977, 78–79, 152, 159, 164 etc.; GOSTAR/ LICA 1984, 69–102; PREDA 1996, 33, s.v. Deceneu; RUSTOIU 2002, 135–137 etc. See also the bibliography cited in DANA 2008, 74, note 3.

[3] A century after Strabo, Dio Chrysostom also mentioned the deeds of Dekinais, and his story was then cited in the 6th century AD by Jordanes (V. 39–41; XI. 67–72).

[4] DANA 2003, 175; 2008, 74–76.

[5] These aspects have also been discussed briefly in RUSTOIU 2019.

> "To help him [Burebista] secure the complete obedience of his tribe he had as his coadjutor Decaeneus (*Dekaineos*), a wizard, a man who not only had wandered through Egypt, but also had thoroughly learned certain prognostics through which he would pretend to tell the divine will; and within a short time he was set up as god (as I said when relating the story of Zamolxis)"[6].

This paragraph was interpreted in many ways over time. Various aspects were taken into consideration, like the function of "great priest", his relation with King Burebista, his role in the "moral cleansing" of the Dacian society, the "sacerdotal-religious" reform etc[7]. On the other hand, very few scholars discussed the term *goes*, which was used to describe Dekinais in the ancient text, or the manner in which Strabo constructed the biography of the great priest of Burebista[8].

The term *goes* (plural *goetes*) designates a wizard in Greek; even before the Hellenistic times, it was also having a pejorative meaning, indicating a trickster or impostor who took advantage of the public's ignorance[9]. In order to understand why Strabo identified Dekinais as a wizard, and even more, as one who travelled to Egypt to learn the craft practised by the *goetes*, it is necessary first to briefly examine the sources used by the Greek author to reconstruct the recent history of the Getae in the respective paragraph from his *Geography*.

For example, Zoe Petre has considered that the main source used by Strabo to present the Getae, including the information regarding King Burebista and Dekinais, was one of the lost works of Posidonius, the Stoic philosopher from Apamea[10]. A supplementary argument could be provided by the *gestae* of King Burebista, described by Strabo in Geography VII. 3. 11, before mentioning Dekinais:

> "Boerebistas a Getan, on setting himself in authority over the tribe, restored the people, who had been reduced to an evil plight by numerous wars, and raised them to such a height through training, sobriety, and obedience to his commands that within only a few years he had established a great empire and subordinated to the Getae most of the neighbouring peoples. And he began to be formidable even to the Romans, because he would cross the Ister with impunity and plunder Thrace as far as Macedonia and the Illyrian country; and he not only laid waste the country of the Celti who were intermingled with the Thracians and the Illyrians, but actually caused the complete disappearance of the Boii who were under the rule of Critasirus, and also of the Taurisci."

This description indicates that Strabo only knew about the military campaigns of Burebista to the west, which more likely started from the 60 BC onward[11]. There are no mentions about the campaigns against the Greek cities on the western Black Sea coast, which happened around the middle of the 1st century BC, according to the honorary decree for Akornion from Dionysopolis, which was dated to the 48 BC[12]. This absence can only be explained by

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[6] The English translation in JONES 1924.

[7] DAICOVICIU 1972, 57, 90; CRIŞAN 1977, 78–79, 152, 159, 164 etc.; LICA 1980; GOSTAR/ LICA 1984, 69–102; RUSTOIU 2002, 135–137 etc.

[8] PETRE 2004, 234–240; DANA 2008, 77–80, 155.

[9] BREMMER 1999, 2–6; GRAF 2002, 93–100; COLLINS 2008, 54–58; SCHWEMER 2011, 419; 2015, 17 etc.

[10] PETRE 2004, 208–248. *Contra* DANA 2008, 83.

[11] Some scholars dated these events to around 60 BC or shortly afterwards (MACREA 1956; CRIŞAN 1977; RUSTOIU 2002, 38–40; see also RUSTOIU/FERENCZ 2018, 126–127, with additional arguments; etc.), while others opted for a later dating towards the end of Burebista's reign (ALFÖLDI 1942; DOBESCH 1995, 15–19; URBAN 1994, 21 etc.).

[12] For Burebista's relations with the western Pontic Greek cities, see RUSCU 2002; RUSTOIU/FERENCZ 2018, 124–126.

the copying of the entire information regarding Burebista and Dekinais (both the king's *gestae* and his collaboration with the great priest) from a work of Posidonius, who probably died in 51 BC, before the beginning of the Getic campaigns against the Greek cities on the western Black Sea coast. Many decades later, Dio Chrysostom, who also used Posidonius' works as a source when writing about Zamolxis and Dekinais, mentioned the destructions caused by the Getae, but on the basis of a personal enquiry at Olbia[13]. It is therefore more likely that the information about King Burebista's actions and Dekinais were taken over from Posidonius. Regarding the paragraph about the fate of Burebista, who was overthrown before the Romans were able to send an army against him, only this information could have been taken over from the comments of Asinius Pollio, who was writing about the military deeds of Julius Caesar[14].

Returning to the biography of Dekinais, this was built in relation with the one of Zamolxis. Posidonius, and Strabo afterwards, elaborated the legend of Zamolxis, first mentioned by Herodotus, by reformulating it from the Stoic perspective[15]. In his narrative, there was a succession of great priests, all wise and reformist, from Zamolxis to Dekinais; all functioned as royal advisers, travelled to Egypt and gained the knowledge to make predictions and deceive the ignorant public, established a connection with the divine powers and, lastly, were deified.

The "initiating" travel to Egypt should be connected to the common belief from the Hellenistic times that the country in question was the land of magic and witchcraft. In Greek Magical Papyri, the practitioners of magic and witchcraft are identified with the innovative Egyptian priests of the 4th – 3rd centuries BC, a period of decline in the organization of major temples[16]. Facing a diminishing ritual and social role, due to the social and cultural transformations from the Ptolemaic Egypt, the priests chose new practices which were meant to maintain their authority based on their knowledge and specialization. Thus, starting from the regular religious rituals which were performed during the temples' festivals, they selected a series of practices which were meant to respond to the daily life crises: blessings and curses, birth-protecting rituals, love and healing spells, manufacturing of amulets and domestic altars etc[17]. For the educated Greeks, these practices could only be associated with wizardry, deceiving or cheating. Even Strabo, who travelled frequently to Egypt, mention a certain Chairemon, a priest from Heliopolis, who pretended to have the priests' knowledge but used to deride it, like a charlatan and ignorant person (Strabo XVII. 1. 29).

Another aspect that should be taken into consideration in order to understand the manner in which the identity of Dekinais was invented concerns the view of Greek authors about the "other". The Getae and the Dacians returned to the attention of Greek and Latin authors only during Caesar's reign due to their increasing military power under Burebista (Rubobostes)[18]. As a matter of fact, the Dacians were first mentioned by Caesar (*B.G.* VI. 25), who localized them near the Hercynian Forest. Inhabiting an exotic land at the borders of civilization, these "Barbarians" were, according to the Stoic principles, the bearers of the moral virtues which were lost to the Greeks. However, their religion was so alien that the Greeks were compelled to ascribe their rituals to the domain of wizardry, trickery or deceit. This is a common

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[13] SHEPPARD 1984.

[14] PETRE 2004, 236.

[15] See a wider discussion in PETRE 2004, 234–240; DANA 2008, 64–84.

[16] FRANKFURTER 1998, 198–237; 2002, 159–160.

[17] FRANKFURTER 1998, 203.

[18] King Rubobostes mentioned by Trogus Pompeius (*Prol.* XXXII) very probably was Burebista (ILIESCU 1968; LICA 1997, 12–17; DANA 2006, 103, 107; RUSTOIU 2008, 135–136 etc), despite the fact that some scholars have considered that he could be another Dacian dynast from the end of the 3rd century or the 2nd century BC (DAICOVICIU 1955, 50–51; CRIŞAN 1977, 30; GLODARIU 1970 etc). For different spellings of the name Burebista, see DANA 2006, 103.

mechanism of casting a pejorative shadow over the religion and priests of the "other", which was already observed in the case of the 5th century BC rituals practised by the Persian magi[19]. At the beginning of the 2nd century AD, during the Dacian wars of Trajan, Criton the Greek physician of the emperor and a participant in the campaigns mentions that the Getae kings imposed a fear of the gods and gained the obedience of their subjects through deceit and magic (*goeteia*), being then able to reach their greater goals (FGrHist IIB. 932. F7).

Regarding the material traces of Dacian religion, archaeological excavations at Grădiștea de Munte (Hunedoara County), the site where the residence of the Dacian kings (*to basileion* according to Cassius Dio) was identified[20], unearthed a series of temples which were built from the middle of the 1st century BC, the period corresponding to the activity of King Burebista and the great priest Dekinais[21]. The latter cumulated the function of great priest with that of king after the overthrowing of Burebista, and this feature was maintained apparently until the reign of Decebalus[22]. The complex structure of Dacian fortresses and other civilian and religious constructions from the Orăștie Mountains were mostly built by Greek masons brought over after the Pontic campaign of Burebista[23]. Various specialised artisans worked in the same region and also in other areas of Dacia until the Roman conquest[24]. Among other things, their mobility allowed the spreading into the Mediterranean area of information regarding the events and stories happening to the north of the Danube during the more peaceful times. For example, this was the period when the information about the Dacians living on the mountain tops first appeared, before becoming a literary topos[25]. Among the stories shared by the craftsmen and

[19] The term "magic" was initially used in ancient Greece. *Mágus* or *mágos* (plural *magoi*), which was taken over from the Persian language (*maguš*), designated a priest of the royal court in the 5th century BC. The Ionians were the first Greeks who got in contact with these experts of the sacred at the end of the 6th century – beginning of the 5th century BC. They noted that, besides the regular religious practices, these *magoi* were specialists in interpreting the dreams and eclipses, and were involved in rituals invoking the spirits and in offering sacrifices etc. However, the Greeks had difficulties in understanding their role, since they belonged to the foreign, unusual cults practised by the "others". As a consequence, a negative perception occurred in the second half of the 5th century BC in tragedies, rhetoric, philosophy and medical texts, stating that *mageia* practised by *magoi* represented an illicit and irrational activity happening away from the accepted ritual domain, and the respective practitioners took advantage of public ignorance for personal gains. See BREMMER 1999, 2–6; GRAF 2002, 93–100; COLLINS 2008, 54–58; SCHWEMER 2011, 419; 2015, 17 etc for further comments.

[20] It was mentioned either as *Sarmizegetusa Regia*, when describing the civilian capital of pre-Roman Dacia, or as *Kogaionon*, the sacred mountain, when ancient literary sources and modern historians wrote about the Dacians' religious centre.

[21] MATEESCU 2012; for other temples from pre-Roman Dacia, see GLODARIU/COSTEA 1991. The temples from Grădiștea de Munte have recently been considered a kind of giant granaries, see OPREANU 2015. This hypothesis was comprehensively dismissed with solid arguments in FLOREA 2016. However, Opreanu's interpretation reignited the necessary debate regarding the function of several structures from Sarmizegetusa Regia, whose identification often remains tributary to the stereotypes of the nationalist historiography of the last century. On the other hand, even if the distribution / redistribution of foodstuffs to the inhabitants of the area of the "capital" was ritually controlled by a "central" authority within a sacred context, Opreanu fails to explain why these giant "granaries" are not resembling those from the Mediterranean area, since other stone structures (enclosure walls, terrace retaining walls, towers etc) were built by Greek masons using Greek models and techniques. Along the same lines, the architects who recently proposed a project of restoring this area of the archaeological site at Grădiștea de Munte have managed to reconstruct completely one column with its capital, belonging to the large rectangular structure built of andesite on the terrace no. X, which is a further argument for its identification as a temple.

[22] See also the pertinent comments in PETRE 2004, 261–264.

[23] GLODARIU 1983; FLOREA 2011, 107–159; EGRI 2014a; 2014b; RUSTOIU/FERENCZ 2018, 125–126 etc.

[24] RUSTOIU 2002, 77–82; EGRI 2014a; 2014b.

[25] *…et attoniti vidit domus ardua Daci*: Statius, *Silvae* I. 1. 7; *…tu tardum in foedera montem longo Marte domas*: Statius, *Silvae* I. 1. 80; *Dacii montibus inhaerent*: Florus, *B.D.* II. 28. 18; etc.

merchants who travelled in Dacia in larger numbers[26] were more likely some about the religion and mostly about the exotic and difficult to comprehend (by the Greeks and Romans) rituals of the indigenous people[27]. Consequently, the ancient authors' identification of the rituals practised by the Dacian priests, including the king who was also the great priest, as wizardry (*goeteia*) was mostly a result of the conceptual mechanisms through which the Greeks and the Romans used to perceive the Barbarian alterity.

It can be therefore concluded that the supposed biography of Dekinais and his image of *goes* who travelled to Egypt before becoming the great priest of the Getae (Dacians) was largely an ethnographic and rhetorical invention of Posidonius and Strabo. Accordingly, the respective ancient authors, or the later ones who copied their stories, are not providing any direct information regarding the magic and witchcraft practised to the north of the Danube, but only subjective interpretations filtered through the Mediterranean perspective.

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[26] GLODARIU 1976; RUSTOIU 2005.

[27] For example, see the use of curved daggers of the *sica* type in sacrificial rituals and the manner in which they became an ethnic symbol associated with the Dacians during the Roman provincial times in RUSTOIU 2018.

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