

Denisa Comanescu - Report

The Senior Consultant of ARTS UK, Steve Chettle, invited me to take part in the Writing on the Wall Project between 13th-26th April 2002. During the time spent in Northumberland and Cumbria, along the Hadrian's Wall, I became familiar and even attached to this area of outstanding beauty and great historical importance. Having prepared the background to the history of Hadrian's Wall, I realized how many points have in common two such distant parts of Europe, long time ago both belonging to that first unified Europe which was the Roman Empire. I would like to give only two examples. Hadrian's Wall is the most grandiose frontier ever built in Europe. Along its over 76 Roman miles, from South Shields to Bowness-on-Solway, the Wall was not a closed frontier, the purpose of the barrier consisting in controlling movement, not preventing it, as the liberal provision of gateways demonstrates. In the Roman Dacia (106AD-271AD), on the western *limes*, in front of Porolissum, a sequence of 4 km. wall – very similar to Hadrian's Wall – was excavated.

The Vindolanda writing tablets (about 2,000) are the first written records of military and every day life in Roman Britain. Similar tablets, cut merely from oak wood, were discovered in Roman Dacia. At Vindolanda, on a tablet, the line 473, Book IX of Virgil's *Aeneid* was deciphered ; in Dacia, another line of *Aeneid* was found on a writing tablet. It demonstrates that either in Britain or in Dacia, auxiliary prefects would take good care to ensure that their children did not neglect their education, and teaching might well have been in the hands of capable household slaves.

For the first week of my staying in the North I was located in Haltwhistle (Center of Britain Hotel), and for the second week in Bush Nook, very close to the Roman fort of Birdoswald (Banna). In the 3rd century AD, the fort was manned by 1,000 Dacians, a strong infantry unit. The Dacian relics are very impressive for a Romanian poet living in the 21st century AD. On Wednesday 16 April I had the opportunity to introduce myself and my poetry to the local community at Haltwhistle Partnership. Steve Chettle and Haltwhistle Partnership Chair delivered the introductory speeches. In my speech I pointed out the importance of Writing on the Wall Project – started on such bright premises, to bring to Hadrian's Wall writers from the countries wherefrom auxiliary troops garrisoned the Wall. A reading of several of my poems – all in English translations, but one also in Romanian, for the flavor of the language followed. Haltwhistle Partnership Board and

Officers, Haltwhistle Tourism Association, Craftwrite, teachers, writers, local people formed the audience. A special mention deserves the poet Hashem Shafiq, born in Iraq and living in exile in London, also an invitee of ARTS UK, who attended my reading. I was very pleased to meet the poet Robert Forsythe, who gave me precious details about W.H. Auden's relationship to Pennines and later, during my stay, sent me a copy of the entire dramatic poem written by Auden for BBC, in 1937, *Hadrian's Wall. A Historical Survey*. A couple of days later, the writer Pamela Grant from Craftwrite sent me a very pleasant letter (about my reading) and an interesting book about the trees of the area.

There were two sessions – about one hour each – with junior pupils on the 24th of April in two schools in Gisland. Each class counted between a dozen to sixteen juniors between 7 and 11 years old.

In the beginning of each session, Steve Chettle and I gave short introductory speeches. Steve Chettle talked about Writing on the Wall Project and introduced me to the pupils. Both of us gave short details about Romania, the Dacians and their connection to the Wall. We used three maps : the map of Europe (which was already displayed in the classrooms), a map of Romania (brought by me) and a map of the Wall (brought by Steve Chettle). Besides, I used postcards representing Bucharest, the Carpathians Mountains, the Danube, the Black Sea, Romanian monasteries, Romanian costumes for children, Dracula Castle, etc.) My poetry reading in English consisted in three pieces with short commentaries. One poem, *A Birdswald Sequence*, dedicated to the Wall, was read in both languages, Romanian and English.

Juniors were very receptive and asked a lot of questions. Their questions can be divided in two categories : about Romania and about the creative act of writing poems. Third questions on Romania touched the following subjects :

- language

There were questions as :

How is my name in Romanian ? (the most frequent question)

How do you say good morning/good bye in Romanian ?

How do you say *a boy/a girl* in Romanian ?

- geography, history, weather

If there are big mountains in Romania ; if there is a big sea (looking on the map of Romania) ; what is the capital of Romania ; if the

Dacians came on foot to Birdoswald ; how is the weather in Romania ; whether is very cold during wintertime ; what is a vampire (looking at Dracula's Castle on the postcard)

- children's life in Romania

If the Romanian children have computers ; what toys do they play with ; where do they play.

- about the creative act of writing

How I find inspiration ; if it is difficult to write poems ; what about I write; if I am a well-known poet.

In the end of each session, children asked me to give them autographs and we made pictures together. I was very pleased to work with the two junior classes in Gisland. Children were very interested in meeting a poet, they were very responsive, asked intelligent questions and seemed fond of developing their creative talents.

During my stay in the North my attention was mainly focussed on the Dacian relics, that is why I spent more time at Birdoswald and in other places where tombstones with Dacian inscriptions could be found : Museum of Antiquities in Newcastle upon Tyne (the Director of the museum gave me details about the Dacian curved sword used at Birdoswald fort, as the preserved inscriptions show it), Lannercost Priory, Tully House Museum. Together with Steve Chettle I visited a great part of the Wall, many forts, milecastles, the Army Museum and Mithras Temple in order to have an overall perspective upon Hadrian's Wall. I had the opportunity to meet and talk with some distinguished poets of the North : Linda Frances, Bill Herbert and Peter Mortimer. We exchanged ideas, books and addresses. Also, it was a pleasure for me to meet and share the joy of visiting Vindolanda, Roman Army Museum and Carvoran with the poet Hashem Shafiq. Places and people were inspiring for me. During my staying I finished a poem in English and I kept a diary. Many drafts are to be transformed in poems in the next future.

The programme was surprisingly rich, very well organized, full of events and with promissory future developments in writers relations and creation. I really found no faults with the planning and implementation of the project. I am most grateful to Steve Chettle who did his best to make the programme flexible, instructive and inspiring. May I take this opportunity to thank Steve

Chettle/ARTS UK for involving me on such an innovative and exciting project. It has been my privilege to participate in Writing on the Wall international programme and I look forward to working with ARTS UK in the future.

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