

The Catalyst for Warfare: Dacia's Threat to the Roman Empire

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The Roman Republic and Empire survived for centuries despite imminent threats from the various peoples at the frontiers of their territory. Warfare, plundering, settlements and other diplomatic agreements were common throughout the Roman world. Contemporary scholars have given in-depth analyses of some wars and conflicts. Many, however, remain poorly analyzed given the scarce selection of period documents and subsequent inquiry. The Dacian conflicts are one such example. These emerged under the rule of Domitian¹ and were ended by Trajan².

Several issues require clarification prior to discussing this topic. The few sources available on Domitian's reign describe the emperor in hostile terms.³ They depict him as a negative figure. By contrast, the rule of Trajan, during which the Roman Empire reached its peak, is one of the least documented reigns of a major emperor. The primary sources necessary to analyze the Dacian wars include Cassius Dio's *Roman History*, Jordanes' *Getica* and a few other brief mentions by several ancient authors, including Pliny the Younger and Eutropius.

Pliny is the only author contemporary to the wars. The others inherited an already existing opinion about the battles and emperors.

It is no surprise that scholars continue to disagree on various issues concerning the Dacian conflicts, including the causes behind Domitian's and Trajan's individual decisions to attack Dacia. This study will explore various possible causes behind the Dacian Wars. A variety of reasons lead some to believe that the Romans felt threatened by the Dacians. The Romans attacked Dacia because of the latter's military, political, strategic and economic advantage. Ancient sources, archaeological evidence and scholarly debates demonstrate that the Dacian threat was the prime reason for each emperor's decision to not only attack this people, but to also occupy their territory later on under Trajan. The threat can be seen as twofold: a direct military and economic threat, and an indirect threat conceived by the Romans about a people that in reality presented a lesser threat than imagined.

¹ Born in 51 A.D. Domitian was the last emperor of the Flavian dynasty. He succeeded his father Vespasian and his brother, Titus to the throne, ruling from 81 to 96 A.D.

² His reign was the period in which the territorial size of the Roman Empire reached its peak. Born in Spain, he ruled from 98 to 117 A.D.

³ Suetonius' *Life of Domitian*, Cassius Dio's book 67 of his *Roman History*, Tacitus' *Agricola* and, to a certain extent Pliny the Younger's letters are used for this study.

I HISTORICAL NARRATIVE

Threats preceding Domitian's Reign

Although the analysis of Domitian's and Trajan's various conflicts is the prime subject of this study,⁴ it is nevertheless relevant to mention that there was a history of Roman intention to invade Dacia. According to Strabo, the Romans had contemplated its invasion during Julius Caesar's time, when king Burebistas had unified the scattered Dacian tribes.⁵ Strabo describes Burebistas as a man who raised his troops and "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."⁶ The recently unified Dacian tribes represented a great military threat. Burebistas was, however, deposed and Caesar assassinated before the Romans could campaign against them.

At the time Strabo was writing, the Dacians were also considered an important threat. He states that they were able to raise an army of about forty thousand men, reaching around two hundred thousand soldiers at the peak of their power.⁷ Cassius Dio mentions that Augustus clashed several times with the Dacians, Around 7 A.D., he recalls the Dacian plundering of the Roman province of Moesia.⁸ Suetonius too claims that the Dacians had thrashed Moesia during the reign of Tiberius.⁹ These examples show that the Dacian threat was not a new notion by the time of Domitian's reign. Their relatively large armies and constant incursions into the Roman province of Moesia were the prime threat according to the ancient authors, especially under Burebistas, the last Dacian king to unify the tribes before Decebalus.

The Threat under Domitian

These issues resurfaced in the early stages of Domitian's reign, as the Dacians were reportedly upset because of the emperor's greed and attacked the province of Moesia.¹⁰ This culminated with the killing of the Roman governor Oppius Sabinus in 86 A.D.¹¹ Although Jordanes does not specify the nature of Domitian's greed, scholars have argued that he loathed the annual subsidy that the Romans were supposed to allocate to the Dacians in return for peace.¹² At the same time, many of the peoples who owed

⁴ Domitian's major campaign in Dacia took place in 86 A.D., whereas Trajan led two wars from 101-102 A.D. and 105-106 A.D.

⁵ Strab. 7.3.5. Burebistas is one of the few Dacian leaders mentioned by name by Roman authors. The Dacian tribes mentioned by Strabo are located in modern-day central and western Romania.

⁶ Strab. 7.3.11.

⁷ Strab. 7.3.13. Although these numbers may be exaggerated, Strabo does seem to show that they must not be underestimated.

⁸ Cass. Dio. 55.30. The author mentions the governor of Moesia, Caecina Severus, returning to his province to face the Dacians and Samartians ravaging it.

⁹ Suet. Tib. 41. Although the date is not specified, this would be after 14 A.D., therefore the plundering of Moesia appears as a common theme at an early stage.

¹⁰ Shortly afterwards the province was divided into two entities: Moesia Superior (modern day Serbia and northern Macedonia) and Moesia Inferior (modern-day Northern Bulgaria and Romanian Dobruja).

¹¹ Jordanes, 13.76.

¹² Gabor Vekony, *Dacians, Romans, Romanians*, (Budapest: Matthias Corvinus Publishing, 1989), 57.

tribute to the Romans “revolted when contributions of money were extorted from them,” explains Cassius Dio.¹³ The Romans, being at war with several tribes, could not take their chances with a potential Dacian revolt. This would have added to an already great number of frontier conflicts. Ancient sources gesture to the Moesian invasion and the defeat of Sabinus as catalysts for the attack on Dacia.

Jordanes reports that Decebalus, who was the last king of Dacia—ascending in 87 A.D. and ruling until the capitulation in 106 A.D.—asked Domitian for peace on several occasions, eventually infuriating the latter with his demands.¹⁴ Domitian thus sent “troops from all the empire”¹⁵ and appointed Cornelius Fuscus the head of the army that would face the Dacians.¹⁶ Fuscus met the same fate as Sabinus at Tapae, near the Dacian capital Sarmisegethusa.

It would not be until 88 A.D. that the Romans would finally defeat the Dacians near Tapae, under the command of Tettius Julianus.¹⁷ Prior to Julianus’ victory, it may be argued that the situation was as tense in Rome as it had been following the Teutoberg Forest debacle in 9 A.D. during Augustus’ reign.¹⁸ At that time, three legion standards had been lost to various Germanic tribes. The defeats of Sabinus and Fuscus were two of the few major defeats in recent history, and were made even worse by the loss of a standard. Dacian presence was now more threatening than ever. Their raids were no longer brief incursions into Roman territory with an ensuing peace signed by a weak king. Decebalus proved himself to be a capable military commander, delivering a devastating defeat to the Romans at Tapae in 86 A.D, where they lost an entire legion. The Romans, however, did not continue past Tapae. Cassius Dio hints at the reasons behind this. Domitian, upset at the Quadi and Marcomanni tribes for not joining his campaign against Dacia, entered Pannonia with the intention to wage war against them, but lost.¹⁹ Defeated by the Marcomanni, he was forced to flee and establish an impromptu peace with the Dacians that favoured them at first. Eventually, however, this came back to haunt them.

The peace obtained by Decebalus may have solidified his power over other Dacian kingdoms, placing him in a position that seemed threatening from a Roman perspective, especially considering the origins of Trajan’s early rule.²⁰ After Domitian's assassination, the subsequent senatorial debate led to Nerva’s short appointment to power. His rule would not last and he would choose Trajan as his successor. The latter

¹³ Cass. Dio. 67.5.6.

¹⁴ Cass. Dio. 67.6.5. It is said that Decebalus was at first open to negotiating peace with Domitian. However, upon learning of Domitian’s intention to send troops against him, Decebalus sent an envoy to demand that each Roman pay two obols per year in exchange for peace.

¹⁵ Jord. Get. 13.77.

¹⁶ Suet. Dom. 6. Fuscus was the prefect of the praetorian cohorts and was thus entrusted the commands of the campaigns against the Dacians.

¹⁷ Vekony, *Dacians, Romans, Romanians*, 59.

¹⁸ E. L. Wheeler, “Rome’s Dacian Wars: Domitian, Trajan and the Strategy on the Danube, Part I,” *Journal of Military History* 74.4 (2010): 1206.

¹⁹ Cass. Dio. 67.7.1.

²⁰ Wheeler, “Rome’s Dacian Wars,” 1220.

was not related by blood to either Nerva or Domitian, and therefore had to ensure the legitimacy of his rule. Another defeat against the Dacians would have seriously endangered this. Additionally, the economic pressure from the treaty signed with Domitian would have been another dent in Trajan's early policies. Cassius Dio claims that Trajan, upset with the annual amount of money the Roman's had received following Domitian's treat, and with their increasing power, attacked the Dacians. This further evidences the ever-present, and perhaps ever increasing, threat.²¹

In accepting the peace treaty, Domitian agreed to pay the Dacians large sums of money right then, as well as in the future. He also promised that the Romans would send "artisans of every trade" into Dacia.²² This peace would have numerous ramifications and was shameful for various reasons. Not only did the emperor pay a tribe outside the empire, but he also promised payment for years to come. Even the artisans could be seen as a potential threat since they would have helped develop various Dacian skills and trades, thus increasing their potential economic and political threat. As mentioned above, this would all be taken into consideration by Trajan in his final decision to mount a full-scale assault on Decebalus.

The final element worth mentioning regarding Domitian's campaign comes after the Dacian defeat at Tapae in 88 A.D. Decebalus, fearing that the Romans would pursue him to his royal residence, cut down trees that were on the battlefield and placed armours on the trunks to trick the Romans into thinking they are soldiers. This led them to withdraw.²³ It is interesting to note that although the Romans had just won a major victory, they were still afraid of the Dacians and the threat that their armies inspired.²⁴ Although this was not an actual menace, the event shows that the Romans feared Dacian soldiers.

According to Jordanes, the Dacians were known for being fierce warriors. Even poets, such as Virgil, wrote that Mars himself was born amongst them.²⁵ In the Aeneid, the Thracian fields are referred to as Mars's homeland.²⁶ Tacitus' *Agricola* further supports this argument. The author states that Roman casualties were so great in Moesia and Dacia that it endangered the frontier and "the permanent fortresses of the legions and Roman territory"²⁷. These events demonstrate the Dacian threat as a reality in the early stages of Domitian's reign. Some scholars have gone as far as to state that the Dacian attacks on the Roman province of Moesia did more than threaten the borders of the empire: they also endangered the very survival of Moesia.²⁸

²¹ Cass. Dio. 68.6.1.

²² Cass. Dio. 67.7.4.

²³ Cass. Dio. 67.10.3.

²⁴ Cass. Dio. 67.10.3. Dio mentions that the Romans were "frightened and withdrew" when they saw the make-believe soldiers.

²⁵ Jord. Get. 5.40.

²⁶ Verg. A. 3.16-17.

²⁷ Tac. Ag. 41.

²⁸ Vekony, *Dacians, Romans, Romanians*, 57.

The Inter-war Period

The inter-war period is just as important in the causal analysis of the wars as the conflicts themselves. Following Domitian's treaty, Dacia's territory could be used to march into Pannonia and fight the Quadi, Marcomanni and Sarmatians (a Thracian people).²⁹ This made Dacia a strategic location, since Domitian had marched across the Danube, beyond Augustan frontiers. These were considered ideal since waterways would serve as borders (i.e. Danube, Rhine).³⁰ Whoever controlled this area could have used it to launch attacks into the Roman Empire and forge alliances with the various tribes surrounding it, mounting an even greater expedition. By 100 A.D., Sarmisegethusa, the Dacian capital, was arguably "the largest European center for iron working outside the Roman Empire."³¹ Decebalus's rise to power could have inspired a greater Dacian threat than at the time of Augustus. Had they allied themselves with their neighbours, or established trading routes, and supplied iron for their weapons and other materials, the Roman frontiers could have been in grave danger.³²

Trajan's Campaigns

As mentioned earlier, Cassius Dio writes that Trajan attacked the Dacians to reduce their rising power. Some historians, such as Vlad Georgescu, think that Dacia's emerging threat rose from its cultural and economic prosperity, which originated in Domitian's treaty.³³ Let us establish a brief chronology of the events of the two wars led by Trajan: the first one from 101 to 102 A.D. and the second from 105 to 106 A.D. The narrative resembles that of Domitian's campaign, with the sole difference being that Trajan would be successful in all encounters.

Both emperors advanced towards Tapae, where a decisive victory emerged. Jordanes describes the territorial advantages of Dacia as having a shield of surrounding mountains and only two access ways (one through Boutae and one through Tapae). This assured a strong Dacian defense and made it inevitable that the Romans would constantly attack through Tapae.³⁴ Ancient sources mention that Decebalus repeatedly proclaimed peace as Trajan's troops approached Tapae.³⁵ He was ignored, and Trajan even recaptured Fuscus' lost standard, avenging the past humiliation.³⁶ Accumulated defeats

²⁹ Vekony, *Dacians, Romans, Romanians*, 59.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 57.

³¹ Wheeler, "Rome's Dacian Wars," 1215.

³² Susan P. Mattern, *Rome and the Enemy: Imperial Strategy in the Principate*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 155. It is difficult to establish whether the Romans knew about the riches inside the Dacian kingdom. The scarcity of sources from that period prevents any certain conclusion on this matter. Historians have argued that Trajan's desire to conquer Dacia was not motivated by gold and other riches. His seizing of Decebalus' treasure and the sending of miners from Dalmatia into Dacia only occurred after Trajan's second war (105-106 A.D.)

³³ Vlad Georgescu, *Istoria Romanilor: De La Origini Pina in Zilele Noastre*, (Bucharest : Humanitas, 1992), 17.

³⁴ Jord. Get. 12.75.

³⁵ Cass. Dio. 68.9.1-2.

³⁶ Cass. Dio. 68.9.3.

and the capture of Decebalus' sister led the Dacian leader to capitulate and give in to terms, evidencing a Roman desire to eliminate the increased level of threat from Dacia. They surrendered their arms and engines, demolished forts, withdrew from occupied territory and accepted the same allies and enemies as the Romans. Additionally, Decebalus would not be allowed to use deserters or Roman soldiers whom he had persuaded to join him. These, according to Cassius Dio, constituted "the largest and best part of his force."³⁷ This only reinforced the perceived threat that the Dacians, or at least their current leader, inspired.

Three years after the peace treaty, Decebalus began gathering arms, repairing his forts and seeking new allies. He also annexed a portion of the territory of the Iazyges, a Sarmatian tribe, which Trajan had refused to return to him.³⁸ The reason behind this second war is perhaps the most clear of all previous conflicts: a breach of the peace treaty. Some scholars have argued that Dacians faced the peace treaty with humiliation, so they chose to "fight the occupying power to the death."³⁹ Trajan assembled what some scholars call one of "the greatest concentration of military force in the imperial period."⁴⁰ He raised two new legions, either wanting to replace those lost by Domitian or seeking to increase his number of soldiers to ensure the conquest of Dacia; perhaps both.⁴¹ It was no longer enough to simply shift troops, as Domitian had attempted after Sabinus' defeat. The economy was still suffering from Domitian's extreme spending,⁴² provinces were mismanaged, and threats were increasing.⁴³

II CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES AND GRAND STRATEGY

Geography and Natural Boundaries

Having established the chronology of events and discussed the primary sources, let us turn to historians' debates on the motives behind the Dacian Wars. One of the leading discussions deals with the geographic location of Dacia. This debate is located within a much larger discussion on Roman grand strategy. In *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire*, Edward Luttwak argues that the conquest of Dacia established "perhaps the most scientific of all scientific frontiers."⁴⁴ It resulted in the consolidation of the Danube armies into about ten legions. Luttwak argues that the elimination of Dacian independence allowed for the "restoration of Roman diplomatic control over the Germans and Sarmatians of [this] region."⁴⁵ He also believes that the Romans needed "deterrence

³⁷ Cass. Dio. 68.9.5-6.

³⁸ Cass. Dio. 68.10.3.

³⁹ Vekony, *Dacians, Romans, Romanians*, 96.

⁴⁰ Mattern, *Rome and the Enemy*, 93.

⁴¹ Kimberly Kagan, "Redefining Roman Grand Strategy," *The Journal of Military History* 70.2 (2006): 358.

⁴² Suet. Dom.12. There are several mentions of Domitian "having exhausted his funds through expenditure on public works and games."

⁴³ Kagan, "Redefining Roman Grand Strategy," 361.

⁴⁴ Edward Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire from the First Century A.D. to the Third*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 86.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 101.

and positive inducements” in order to keep the Marcomanni, Iazyges and Roxolani from raiding the Danubian lands.⁴⁶ Dacia was a strategic territorial shield. While Decebalus would be running free, however, deterrence would no longer be possible since he had shown that he was not afraid of Roman retaliation; this threat had to be removed.⁴⁷

The conquest brought a higher level of security to Dobruja and other Danubian lands, up to modern-day Vienna. Agricultural improvement and urbanization of the area ensued.⁴⁸ The strategic importance discussed by Luttwak builds upon the initial argument about eliminating the Dacian threat. Had Decebalus not died, the Romans could have been forced to deal with an even greater number of tribes. Dacian power and prestige was increasing. The Romans were already managing conflict with various neighbouring people. In short, an alliance between Dacia and its neighbours may have proven fatal for the empire.

Luttwak’s work received a mixture of criticism and support. One of the strongest critiques of the idea of using natural frontiers states that the Romans did not have the necessary geographical resources and knowledge for such a strategy; this can be seen in the geographical positions of Dacia and Britannia. They stand out beyond traditional “natural” frontiers and are difficult to defend.⁴⁹ Romanian historian Neagu Djuvara has described the two provinces as standing out like “hernias” in an empire that was heavily focused around the Mediterranean.⁵⁰ Britannia was not even on the continent, whereas Dacia was in the middle of it, surrounded by Germanic or Thracian tribes; both were remote from the Mediterranean Sea, where the bulk of the empire was situated. Some scholars, including Susan Mattern, explain that Trajan’s end goal might have actually been the ocean itself, which Agrippa had placed 396 miles away from the Danube on his map.⁵¹ This would clarify in part why the emperor would have ventured across the Danube, an ideal frontier since the time of Augustus.⁵² The Romans’ issue was that they had little or no idea of geographical environs beyond their borders. Their maps were limited. Considering this, Luttwak’s claim that the Romans were seeking Dacia to use as a protective shield against the Balkans is invalid; they were unaware of this advantage.⁵³

Yet some scholars reject the Danube and other rivers as “definitive frontiers of the empire.”⁵⁴ Many emperors before and after Trajan attempted excursions beyond their borders. Germanicus operated across the Rhine in Tiberius’ early reign; Claudius invaded Britannia; Vespasian and Domitian went into modern-day Britain and Germany respectively; Antoninus Pius mounted a campaign in Britannia, and Marcus Aurelius and

⁴⁶ Ibid., 101.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 101.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 101.

⁴⁹ Mattern, *Rome and the Enemy*, 115.

⁵⁰ Djuvara, Neagu. *O Scurta Istorie a Romanilor Povestita Celor Tineri*. Bucharest : Humanitas, 2002., p. 13.

⁵¹ Mattern, Susan, *P. Rome and the Enemy: Imperial Strategy in the Principate.*, p. 61.

⁵² Vekony, Gabor. *Dacians, Romans, Romanians.*, p. 57.

⁵³ Kagan, Kimberly. “Redefining Roman Grand Strategy.”, p. 343.

⁵⁴ Whittaker, C. R. *Rome and its Frontiers: The Dynamics of Empire*. London: Routledge, 2004., p. 8.

Verus fought in modern-day Slovakia and the East, notably against the Parthians.⁵⁵ One issue with Luttwak's argument is that it depends more or less on assumptions since there is no mention in any of the surviving sources that the conquest of Dacia was meant as a strategic defense of the Balkans.⁵⁶

At the same time, it is difficult to argue for the idea of geographical ignorance, since many ancient sources do in fact outline as best they can foreign territories. Additionally, it is known that "roads and communications [...] were keys to Roman strategy."⁵⁷ These would require a basic knowledge of the surroundings. Scholars defending this view have therefore argued that "a geographical excursus became a historiographical convention before the description of a major campaign."⁵⁸ An example of this can be seen at the beginning of Caesar's Gallic Wars, as the author begins with a topographic discussion of Gaul: "All Gaul is divided into three parts".⁵⁹ Furthermore, Polybius describes in his *Histories* the geographical consequences of Carthaginian control of Sicily,⁶⁰ whereas Strabo describes the strategic importance of Italy as a base for the Roman conquest of the Mediterranean world.⁶¹ Additionally, Pliny the Younger refers to Dacia's "precipitous mountains overhanging the camps," suggesting good knowledge and interest regarding the geography and terrain.⁶² These debates reveal that due to the scarcity of historic documents, many assumptions about Domitian's and Trajan's intentions rest on educated guesses and precedents. The previous arguments suggest that the two emperors most likely knew the location and surroundings of Dacia. This alone would have sufficed to expose to them the magnitude of the Dacian threat.

Domitian fought the Marcomanni and Quadi in retaliation for not joining him against Dacia. Suetonius mentions that he was also forced to undertake a war against the Sarmatians after a legion had been destroyed.⁶³ These were all close to Dacia. An alliance would have brought an even larger coup on the Roman legions, thus they needed to be eliminated. Some have argued that the emperors expanded "primarily to stabilize borders and to prevent foreign threats."⁶⁴ This remains debatable, but it does seem that Domitian's first attack was a response to a foreign threat, much like his subsequent peace treaty. The idea of preventing these groups from forming a greater, local alliance was important from a geographical perspective.

The Image of Rome

⁵⁵ *Idem.*

⁵⁶ Whitaker, C. R. *Rome and its Frontiers: The Dynamics of Empire*. London: Routledge, 2004., p. 34.

⁵⁷ Wheeler, "Methodological Limits and the Mirage of Roman Strategy: Part II," *Journal of Military History* 57.2 (1993): 236.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 239.

⁵⁹ *Caes. Gal.* 1.1.

⁶⁰ *Polyb.* 1.10.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 240. For the Strabo reference see *Strab.* 6.4.1-2.

⁶² *Plin. Ep.* 8.4.2.

⁶³ *Suet. Dom.* 6.

⁶⁴ Kagan, "Redefining Roman Grand Strategy," 338.

The Dacian geographic advantage leads us to discuss the preservation of Rome's image. Dacia's insubordination and rise to power threatened it. Susan Mattern argues that the Romans' triumph rested on their success in frightening the "barbarians".⁶⁵ Their army was relatively small for the size of the empire, which required them to keep up an appearance. When a tribe disobeyed them, they made them see the wrath of the Roman legions to preserve the image of Rome. Peace could only be ensured by aggression since the barbarians maintained it out of fear of the Romans.

There was an alternative to this, which was to obtain the peace from the barbarians for money; Domitian had done this with Decebalus.⁶⁶ We may argue Rome's reputation had been ruined through this treaty, and the defeats under Domitian's reign. The barbarians might have seen this as a sign of weakness and thus attacked the frontiers. This display of power—and reminder to the barbarians that Rome was still dominant—may have been the reason behind Trajan's decision to gather two new legions and annex Dacia.

The idea of scaring the barbarians to maintain peace can also be seen in Luttwak's work. He argues that Eastern client states and their relationships with Rome were more developed and therefore security was ensured through only a small number of troops; for instance, Armenia would have provided a certain shield against the Parthians. In Europe, on the other hand, peace and security were maintained through "immediate and visible legionary presence."⁶⁷ Luttwak claims that Trajan had no choice but to annex Dacia. Its independence as a client state was no longer an option for the empire. Even if Decebalus had agreed to cooperate with the Romans, the Dacians would have wanted a more independent policy than that offered to client states.⁶⁸

Once again, it is difficult to confirm or deny these statements in the absence of sources, especially the description of events from the Dacian perspective. The actions of Decebalus following the war of 101-102 A.D. suggest, however, that there may be some truth to Luttwak's statements. He gathered arms and sought allies elsewhere. It is difficult to believe that he made this decision of his own accord. He would have consulted the opinion of his advisors and other noblemen. The Dacian threat would have therefore lived on after Decebalus had Trajan attempted to solely reduce them to the condition of a client state.

The eventual one hundred and twenty-three days of festivities thrown by Trajan following his conquest were designed to save the emperor's image.⁶⁹ These worked to rise above Domitian's fake triumph, in which he used items "from the store of imperial furniture" instead of loot from the war.⁷⁰ By contrast, according to Crito's account in *Getica*, Trajan brought back "[five million] pounds of gold, and twice as much of silver,

⁶⁵ Mattern, *Rome and the Enemy*, 108.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 119-121.

⁶⁷ Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire*, 47.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁶⁹ Cass. Dio. 68.15.1.

⁷⁰ Cass. Dio. 67.7.4.

apart from drinking cups and equipment surpassing all limits, plus herds and weapons.”⁷¹ These are exaggerated numbers even if overestimated by ninety percent, as was customary for ancient authors.⁷²

Their purpose was to show that there was a great amount of loot brought back from Dacia to pay for these festivities, at a time when Rome was still recovering from the supposed economic crash under Domitian.⁷³ This helped Trajan’s image and reminded his adversaries of Rome’s greatness. The issue with this lies in the fact that scholars are uncertain whether or not Trajan was aware of the riches lying in Dacia prior to his campaign. It is therefore difficult to associate this with the causes for the wars. Until further evidence is found, the immediate threat of the Dacians remains a more plausible argument than the desire to capture riches.

The idea of saving the image of Rome and of the empire as motivation for the war raises issues of its own. There is only one specific reference to the war in Pliny the Younger’s letters, in letter 8.4., written to his friend Caninius, whom he encourages to write about the Dacian wars. He describes these as “so recent, so wide, so sublime, and finally so poetic, and though centred on most truthful events, so legendary.”⁷⁴ If this was so, why are they only mentioned once throughout Pliny’s letters? Sir Ronald Syme—one of the leading Roman historians of the twentieth century—has argued that this is not evidence of the wars being less important than what they are described as elsewhere, but rather Pliny’s own decision to leave them out.⁷⁵ Syme argues that Pliny consciously omits most notions of war and bloodshed. He does not include any correspondence with three leading generals from the First Dacian War (Cilnius Proculus, Laberius Maximus and Glitius Agricola). Also, he does not begin his letter to Caninius with war and bloodshed, but rather with engineering and siege-works.⁷⁶ This is so because Syme does not consider the war to fit the overall style and theme of Pliny’s work; the lack of references to it does not necessarily diminish its magnitude.⁷⁷

The Aftermath of Trajan’s Wars

The final scholarly debate of our discussion explores war, vengeance, and the aftermath of Trajan’s campaigns. Some historians have completely separated the wars of Domitian’s time from those of Trajan’s. They argued that the events surrounding the former’s defeat follow a pattern of “legendary military defeats [...] with emphasis on the slaughter of high-ranking commanders and the loss of a legion.”⁷⁸ The Teutoberg forest

⁷¹ Mircea Musat ed., *Foreign Sources and Testimonies about the Forebears of the Romanian People* (Bucharest: Editura Academiei Republicii Socialiste Romania, 1980), 57.

⁷² Vekony, *Dacians, Romans, Romanians*, 93.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ Plin. Ep. 8.4.1-2.

⁷⁵ Pliny, one of our most important, and one of the few surviving, sources on Trajan, does not talk about the wars; this does not mean that they were not great or that the Dacians were not a threat. He chooses to leave bloodshed out of the letters. His correspondence would have also been edited and selected before publication.

⁷⁶ Ronald Syme, “Pliny and the Dacian Wars,” *Latomus* 23.4 (1964): 751.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ Mattern, *Rome and the Enemy*, 190.

incident is an example. This event seems to be closely related to the notion of rescuing Rome's status. Susan Mattern claims that Trajan's incursions into Dacia were caused by a desire to punish and avenge. It was "mainly for this and for no other reason, [that] the emperor was willing to commit military and financial resources of immense proportions."⁷⁹

There was a monument built at Adamklissi in 108-109 A.D. by Trajan which supports this argument. It was the site of a major Roman defeat in one of the Dacian incursions from the first wars of Domitian, in late 84 A.D. The monument is dedicated to Mars the Avenger. This suggests that Trajan had avenged a previous defeat, which could evidence Trajan's desire to redeem Domitian. But it could also serve as a warning and a reminder to others of what would happen if they attempted to attack the Romans.

The idea of Trajan behaving like an avenger or a seeker of glory can be seen in Cassius Dio's *Roman History*. Dio claims that the emperor would declare "that he himself had advanced farther than Alexander"⁸⁰ and describes him as someone who "delight[s] in war."⁸¹ This description resembles Suetonius's description of Domitian, who argues that the emperor went to war in Gaul and Germany in order to "merely [...] emulate his brother in wealth and status," although it was unnecessary and he had been counselled against it.⁸² Even Trajan's successor, Hadrian, is described as envying the former's glory and thus relinquishing some of the provinces he had gained and withdrawing his armies (e.g. in Mesopotamia, Assyria).⁸³ Based on this, some scholars believe that there was no Dacian threat. They think that the invasion was caused by "Trajan's expansionist policies."⁸⁴

The downside of these arguments is that they are based solely on the lack of evidence of Decebalus' hostile behaviour (unlike his predecessor who had invaded Moesia).⁸⁵ There had been a long history of Dacian incursions into Roman territory that emphasized the notion of the Dacian threat in Roman minds. The most recent one had occurred less than a generation earlier; additionally, the terms of Domitian's peace treaty had been favourable to them. The treaty would have prevented the Dacians from their usual raids, but they would have nevertheless continued to threaten the Romans even if only indirectly (e.g. by their presence alone, by their stability under Decebalus, by the potential threat of a greater alliance, etc.). As for the idea of a war of vengeance, this too can be tied to the notion of the Dacian threat for similar reasons. The image of the empire had to be saved in order to prevent other threats from manifesting

Upon the conquest of Dacia, Eutropius claims that the land had been exhausted of its inhabitants (namely male inhabitants). This led Trajan to send "an infinite number

⁷⁹ Ibid., 210.

⁸⁰ Cass. Dio. 68.29.1.

⁸¹ Cass. Dio. 68.7.5.

⁸² Suet. Dom. 2.

⁸³ Eutr. Brev. 8.6.1.

⁸⁴ Vekony, *Dacians, Romans, Romanians*, 60.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

of men from the whole Roman world.”⁸⁶ Eutropius claims that Hadrian had thought of abandoning Dacia but was counseled otherwise by his advisors. They feared leaving “Roman citizens at the mercy of the barbarians.”⁸⁷ This statement shows the continuous terror of “barbarians,” whether referring to the Dacians or other surrounding tribes. For the Dacians’ case, the reality of the Dacian threat remained even after their defeat. If it refers to other tribes, this can be seen as evidence of an acknowledgement of the strategic (and precarious) position of the Dacian province, which proves Luttwak’s theories.

The resettlement of Dacia is noteworthy because it “[did] not frequently happen in new [Roman] provinces.”⁸⁸ Scholars disagree on this issue as well. Some have argued that Eutropius’ statement cannot be true since the population increased too rapidly, hovering around 500 000 by the time of Commodus.⁸⁹ Yet other scholars tend to acknowledge that Eutropius may be right in some ways, considering the number of deaths by war, prisoners of war taken, suicides and potential migrations. The latter are depicted on several frames on Trajan’s column (LXXVI following the first war and the last two CLIV-CLV following the second and final war).

One ought to be careful with the column’s frames, however. It is unclear whether or not they depict the actual war or images from Trajan’s triumph.⁹⁰ Both theories can be linked to the Dacian threat since the annihilation of the majority of the male population may signify a desire to wipe out a serious threat. A similar event in earlier Roman history was the destruction of Carthage. If the Dacians had not been wiped out, then the rapid mass-resettlement of the province could be a sign of a desire to assimilate the Dacians and remove the threat of an uprising. However, this is a weak argument based solely on assumptions.

III CONCLUSION

Partly due to the scarcity of sources and partly due to the later dating of the surviving sources, scholars can only vaguely identify the causes of the Dacian Wars. Some have attempted to show a chronological development between Domitian’s and Trajan’s motives. Some attribute them to a grand strategy. Others have completely separated the two. In some cases they argue that the wars were started mainly for defensive purposes. Their opponents claim that they were offensive in nature, and attempted to either avenge past humiliations, to conquer for the purpose of acquiring glory, or both.

All of these reasons converge in one point as to confirm the presence of a Dacian threat, which could have escalated to an even greater level, had Trajan not put an end to it. At first, through their incursions into Roman territory and then through the

⁸⁶ Eutr. Brev. 8.6.2.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Vekony, *Dacians, Romans, Romanians*, 101.

⁸⁹ Georgescu, *Istoria Romanilor*, 18.

⁹⁰ Vekony, *Dacians, Romans, Romanians*, 97 and 106.

peace treaty signed with Domitian, the Dacians were in a position to inflict a serious blow to the Roman Empire and to threaten its foundations. Some scholarly debates rely on calculated assumptions and precedents. It remains difficult to discern the true motives of Roman emperors and generals. Based on the archaeological and literary evidence available, the existence of the Dacian threat is highly plausible. The emperors dealt with it the best they could, through defensive campaigns or peace treaties, or by mounting an enormous campaign to annihilate or occupy the entire region.

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