

# STRATEGY AND NAVAL WARFARE IN THE DANUBE AREA DURING TRAJAN'S DACIAN WARS

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*Several high-rank members from Trajan's general staff were granted with *coronae classicae* in the context of 101 to 106 AD Dacian Wars. These decorations were given only to members of the senatorial order with consular rank for naval military victories over enemy navies. In this regard, how and where could naval battles take place in a conflict like Trajan Dacian Wars?*

*If we carefully analyze the conflict scenario, crossed by the Danube and its huge tributary rivers, and flanked by the Black Sea Western Coast, we soon notice the vital importance that taking control of fluvial and sea spaces would have for any army who intended to launch an offensive to or from Roman territory in the early 2nd Century AD. The Roman Empire properly understood this circumstance and, consequently, raised the *classis Flavia Moesica* and the *classis Flavia Pannonica*, among other provincial squadrons of its navy deployed in the area.*

*Furthermore, we should keep in mind the climatic, logistic and purely practical contingencies that prevented barbarians and Romans from crossing a river like the Danube with a big army in the crudest part of winter to take advantage that its surface could be frozen. The unavoidable struggle between Dacians, Romans and their allies for the strategic control of the Danube, its tributary rivers and the Black Sea Western Shore made naval battles between enemy navies inevitable.*

*Keywords: Dacia, Decebalus, Dacian Wars, Domitian, Trajan, Naval Warfare, Danube, Black Sea, Cimmerian Bosphorus, Olbia*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

During the Dacian Wars fought by Trajan multiple Roman commanders were decorated with one or more *coronae classicae*<sup>1</sup>, a question frequently

solved by alleging that they were awarded for the excellent logistical work carried out in the Danube Region thanks to the use of the Danubian *classes*<sup>2</sup>. However, the amount of *coronae* granted and the special nature of the use of this decoration lead us

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<sup>1</sup> CIL VI, 1444 = AE 2000, 135; CIL XII, 3169 = AE 1982, 678; CIL XI, 1833 = IDRE 1, 128 = AE 1926, 123 = AE 1987, 392; CIL V, 6977 = ILS 1021.

<sup>2</sup> Starr 1960: 133–135; Bounegru & Zahariade 1996: 100–101; Stefan 2005: 559–568; Zerbini 2015: 43.

to question this hypothesis: granting so many *coronae classicae* seems too high a reward for the simple performance of logistical work. The answer to this question can be found through the study of the nature and the use of this decoration in the Roman world as well as through the careful study of the geostrategic context of Trajan's Dacian Wars.

A *corona classica*, *naualis* or *rostrata* was awarded as a result of important victories in naval battles and skirmishes between a Roman fleet and a rival one.<sup>3</sup> The rarity with which this reward was awarded gave it an exclusive nature and, since the beginning of the reign of Augustus, only officers with the rank of consul were potential recipients. The nature of the *corona classica* is such that it, necessarily, could only be granted for military action against enemy naval forces. At first sight, however, the Dacian Wars fought by Trajan do not look like the type of conflict in which any kind of naval battles with enemy powers would have been generated. Only after a careful study of the available sources coupled with the study of the geographic space in which said Wars took place allow us to confirm and prove that waterways and the naval scenario were indeed of crucial importance and forced the warring parties to fight against enemy navies for their control as an essential means to obtain victory (Soria Molina 2016: 151–157, 192–193 and 234–247).

## 2. THE DACIAN ENTENTE'S NAVY

Much of the current historiography generally considers that the usual way used by European Barbarian peoples to cross rivers like the Danube was to wait for the rivers to freeze and then to walk across them without difficulty.<sup>4</sup> When the sources available don't mention any specific means used for the crossing, it is assumed simply that the crossing "took place" without trying to assess what this implies. These assumptions are made without evaluating properly, on the one hand, the inherent difficulties involved in a winter military campaign (for rivers such as the Danube to freeze enough so one can walk across them, it is necessary to wait for the dead of winter) and, on the other hand that the Danube is a river of immense proportions, a natural barrier where the Romans had deployed a naval force in or-

der to complete the dominion they exercised over its course.<sup>5</sup>

An army, or even a large raiding force, had no chance of crossing the Danube without being detected by Roman surveillance forces in a matter of a few days. It would have taken an army several days and possibly even more time, depending on its size and its technical means, to cross the river. The problem would undoubtedly be greater when it had to face a surveillance force, such as those the Romans usually deployed, which could give an early warning. This system of defense included, as we have already pointed out, a naval force, whose presence at the point of the enemy's crossing could be enough to cause the invading force to suffer a disastrous defeat by launching a forceful attack. So: How did a large and duly equipped armed force composed of Dacians, Sarmatians and Germans manage to cross the Danube at the dawn of the second century AD?<sup>6</sup>

Had the case been, in the context of Trajan's Dacian Wars, that the Dacians and their allies did not have a naval force capable of ensuring the safety of their land forces when crossing a river like the Danube, then, the crossing would not have been feasible. Even in the case of a successful crossing and invasion, we know that the Dacian and allied armies subsequently withdrew from Roman territory. This means that they had to cross the river back again. Furthermore, we should not forget that leaving the river behind without having control over it while operating inside enemy territory would have posed serious logistical and strategic problems that could not be solved simply by living exclusively from the resources available from the land. Maintaining a supply line across the Danube implies that the Dacians and their allies had to have a naval force capable of protecting them in the river. At first glance, the easiest way to solve this dilemma is to assume that the Dacian army carried out the crossings in the dead of winter, taking advantage of the frozen Danube.

As we suggested earlier, such a hypothesis is not sustainable: a winter campaign could prove suicidal for any army in Roman times. In the first place, it should be noted that the Roman armies usually ceased large-scale operations during win-

<sup>3</sup> Liv. *Perioch.*, 129; Sen. *De Benef.*, 3. 32; Cass. Dio 49. 14. 3; Maxfield 1981: 74–76 and 149.

<sup>4</sup> Daicoviciu 1984: 133–134 and 171–172; Blázquez Martínez 2005: 31–32; Stefan 2005: 559–568; Opreanu 2006: 116; Depeyrot 2008: 52–54; Wheeler 2010: 1224; Oltean 2015: 97–117.

<sup>5</sup> Starr 1960: 129–14; Reddé 1986: 102–133 and 298–306; Bounegru & Zahariade 1996; Pitassi 2010; Pitassi 2011: 134–173; Soria Molina 2016: 158–162.

<sup>6</sup> Ovid. *Pont.* 1. 8. 1–20 and 4. 7. 19–28; Plin. *Min. Epist.*, 10. 74. 1; Tac. *Agric.* 41. 2; Suet. *Domit.* 6; Eutr. 7. 23. 3–4; Oros. *Hist. ad. Pag.* 7. 10. 4; Jord. *Get.* 13. 76; scene XXXII of Trajan's Column; Stefan 2005: 390; Soria Molina 2016: 192–195 and 234–240.

ter months.<sup>7</sup> Then, we can safely assume that the logistic limitations faced by the Dacians and their allied armies during winter time would have been as great or equal to those faced by the Romans. We can conclude that no major army of the period could have taken advantage of frozen rivers to cross them without paying a very high price for it. In this context, it then becomes obvious that the Dacians and their allies had the necessary means to carry out the crossing during the spring or the summer with a reasonable degree of safety, while keeping their supply lines along the river and into enemy territory protected during the whole time that the operations lasted. This inevitably implies that the Dacian State and its allies had their own naval forces (Soria Molina 2016: 56–59, 106–110 and 136–138).

The participation of two Greek city-states, Tyras and Olbia, in the Dacian Entente during this period<sup>8</sup> forces us to include in our considerations the naval forces of these states among the navies of the coalition. Having a navy able to protect their trade routes against pirates and hostile parties was vital for both cities. With the naval technology inherited from the Hellenistic period, Tyras and Olbia had the technical means that allowed them to deploy warships and transport ships similar in their quality to those used by the Roman navy (Soria Molina 2016: 105–110). The combined navies of Tyras and Olbia could represent a serious threat to the *classis Flavia Moesica*, especially if it was either deployed upstream or it was already busy engaging other hostile naval elements in the Lower Danube. The participation of both city-states in Trajan's two Dacian Wars must have been important since their ambassadors were represented in Trajan's Column together with other enemies of Rome (scene C of Trajan's Column; Soria Molina 2016: 66–67, 86–87 and 105–106).

Regarding the possible sites of construction, anchorage and the bases of operations of these navies, we can suppose that they would have been located mainly along the important tributaries, the Olt, Ialomița, Siret and Prut rivers, which are on the left side of the Danube. They were all navigable for the boats of the time. These rivers, and the Dacian

fortresses near to them, were on the way from the Carpathian mountain range and the closest Dacian and Roxolan domains to the main access routes to the Lower Danube and Lower Moesia, making them logical candidates to serve as starting bases for all type of expeditions into Roman soil and to support said expeditions.<sup>9</sup>

Tyras and Olbia used their ports as shipyards and dockyards. Being located next to the mouth of navigable rivers gave them added strategic value. For example, Tyras exerted control over the mouth of the Dniester, which flows through Roxolan territory, allowing for troop and supply transports to flow down to its port. From there, a naval fleet could then sail, along the Black Sea coast, until it reached the mouth of the Danube and other crossing points that Roxolani, Dacians and their allies commonly used along said river. Finally, the Peucini, a branch of the Bastarnae,<sup>10</sup> proven members of the Dacian Entente, still had settlements on the islands of the mouth of the Danube that also served as starting points for river expeditions.

### 3. THE ROMAN NAVY IN THE DACIAN WARS

As we have seen, the Dacian State and its allies had their own navies. Thus, taking into account that, first, as we have already mentioned, the *coronae classicae, nauales o rostratae* could only be awarded to consular ranking commanders for victories in battles against enemy naval forces, second, that such navies did exist in the area of the conflict where the awards were granted, and third, that we know that military operations of enough importance to result in battles between the Roman *classes* and enemy fleets did take place, then, the answer to the question we posed at the beginning is simple: they were awarded to high ranking officers serving in Trajan's armies during the Dacian Wars for the different types of victories they obtained against the naval squadrons of the Dacian State and its allies, at least along the Danube and its mouth.

In this regards, the role played by the *classis Flavia Moesica*, the *classis Flavia Pannonica* and detach-

<sup>7</sup> For example: Caes. *Bell. Gall.* 1. 54; 2. 1 and 35; 3. 3, 6 and 29; 4. 38; 5. 2, 24–31, 37, 39, 41–42, 46–47, 53; 6. 3 and 44; 7. 10 and 90; 8. 1–2, 4, 6, 24, 46–48, 50, 52, 54.

<sup>8</sup> Dio Chrys. *Or.* 36. 1–28; Belin de Ballu 1972: 143–182; Karyshkovskij & Klejman 1994: 196–211, 218–228 and 271–273; Nawotka 1997: 56–64; Batty 2007: 192–200, 359–360 and 431; Krapivina 2007: 161–172; Zubar 2007: 173–178; Podossinov 2009: 147–168; Valiente García 2015: 395–407; Soria Molina 2016: 66–67.

<sup>9</sup> Amm. Mar. 31. 5. 16; Jord. *Get.* 13. 76; 18. 10; Daicovicu 1984: 133–134 and 171–178; Jones 1992: 138–139; Opreanu 2000: 391; Stefan 2005: 399–406 and 559–568; Opreanu 2006: 116; Ardevan & Zerbini 2007: 25–26; Soria Molina 2016: 192–194 and 234–238.

<sup>10</sup> Strab. 7. 3. 15 and 17; Ovid. *Trist.*, 2. 189–204; Plin. *Mai. Nat. Hist.*, 4. 81; Tac. *Germ.*, 46. 1; Cla. Ptol. *Geogr.* 3. 5. 7–10; Jord. *Get.* 12. 74.

ments belonging to the *classis Rauennatis*<sup>11</sup>, whose presence has been documented within the context of Trajan's Wars, involved not only combat but also logistical and technical operations. As far as combat was concerned, the main objective of these naval forces was to maintain the control over the whole course of the Danube. Said control was supposed to be exercised over, as much as possible, the Danube and its large tributaries.<sup>12</sup> The involvement of Tyras and Olbia in the conflict, as allies of the Dacian Entente, resulted in extending the area in which the active presence of the Roman navy was necessary until the western shore of the Black Sea. The deployment of the allied Bosporan fleet<sup>13</sup> must not have sufficed the Roman admirals, who therefore requested the *classis Rauennatis'* presence. Within the control exercised over the area, special importance had to be given to the defense of the sites where the Roman armies crossed the Danube in the many forays they undertook directly into Dacian territory. In the same measure that the Dacian, Sarmatian and Germanic warriors were vulnerable when crossing the Danube, the Roman army needed protection for its troops and the structures they erected to cross rivers. This meant deploying a navy capable of fending off any attack aimed at cutting the crossing points (Reddé 1986: 356–363; Bounegru & Zahariade 1996: 98–99). When the moment came, control of the Danube implied (as did in fact happen), to make an effort to foil enemy forces' crossing it, to cut off the supply lines of the enemy warriors who had already crossed onto the Roman margin of the river, engage active enemy naval forces and lend support to ground troops.<sup>14</sup> These operations evolved into naval battles of varying intensity.

Having been successful in neutralizing the enemy offensive and securing the mobility of the Roman army along both margins of the river, the Roman navy's combat objective then changed: it had to attack. The *classes* had to back the army's ground

operations by using as access routes the waterways, the same ones used by their enemies to reach the Danube. This meant having to neutralize any opposition enemy ships could generate.<sup>15</sup> In this same way, the *classes* must have played a key role in facilitating access to the cities of Tyras and Olbia.<sup>16</sup> The logistical and technical aspect of the Roman navy's role during Trajan's Dacian Wars is well known, so we are not going to deal with it here.<sup>17</sup>

Although numerous existing indications allow us to affirm that in the course of Trajan's Dacian Wars naval battles and operations did take place, there remains one last question to answer: why don't any of the available sources, either written or graphic, make any reference to these battles? Before we answer this question, we must remember that this silence is not total: the evidence in the epigraphy of the fact that *coronae classicae* were granted is in itself an explicit testimony. Why, then, did the rest of the sources that have been documented omit mentioning them? The lack of information in literary and graphical sources is due to ideological, political and practical reasons.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, the above mentioned information is sufficient to highlight the importance that dominion over the Danube, its tributaries and the sea area had in Trajan's Dacian Wars.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

As we have seen, during the Dacian Wars, Rome's enemies made ample use of waterways, mostly of rivers but also of the sea. This allowed them to operate freely in the Roman Empire's provinces to the point that, on several occasions, Rome was forced to wage war defensively. The imperative of guaranteeing the safety of the territory under its control against enemy invasions, incursions or larger campaigns together with the need to control the

<sup>11</sup> CIL III, 14215, 5; Vegetius 4. 31. 6; Reddé 1986: 253, 256–257, 263 and 379; Bounegru & Zahariade 1996: 12, 19 and 96; Sarnowski 2006: 256–260; Pitassi 2010: 260; Soria Molina 2016: 159.

<sup>12</sup> Reddé 1986: 256, 362–363 and 263; Bounegru & Zahariade 1996: 16–17; Menéndez Argüín 2011: 66–67; Le Bohec 2014: 268–269; Soria Molina 2016: 153–156.

<sup>13</sup> *JOSPE* II, 25 and 27; Tac. *Ann.* 12. 17; Mielczarek 1999: 25 and 85–86; Soria Molina 2016: 183–185.

<sup>14</sup> Scenes XXXIV–XLVIII of Trajan's Column; *Tropaeum Traiani*; Daicovicu 1984: 171–173; Bounegru & Zahariade 1996: 100–101; Opreanu 2000: 391; Blázquez Martínez 2005: 31–32; Matyszak 2005: 172; Stefan 2005: 559–568; Opreanu 2006: 116; Ardevan & Zerbini 2007: 25–26; Oltean 2015: 103–115; Zerbini 2015: 49–51; Soria Molina 2016: 241–247.

<sup>15</sup> Cass. Dio 68. 9. 4; Daicovicu 1984: 181; Reddé 1986: 349–350 and 356–363; Opreanu 2000: 390–391; Stefan 2005: 280, 572 and 623; Opreanu 2006: 116–117; Pitassi 2010: 261; Zerbini 2015: 51–52; Soria Molina 2016: 252–254.

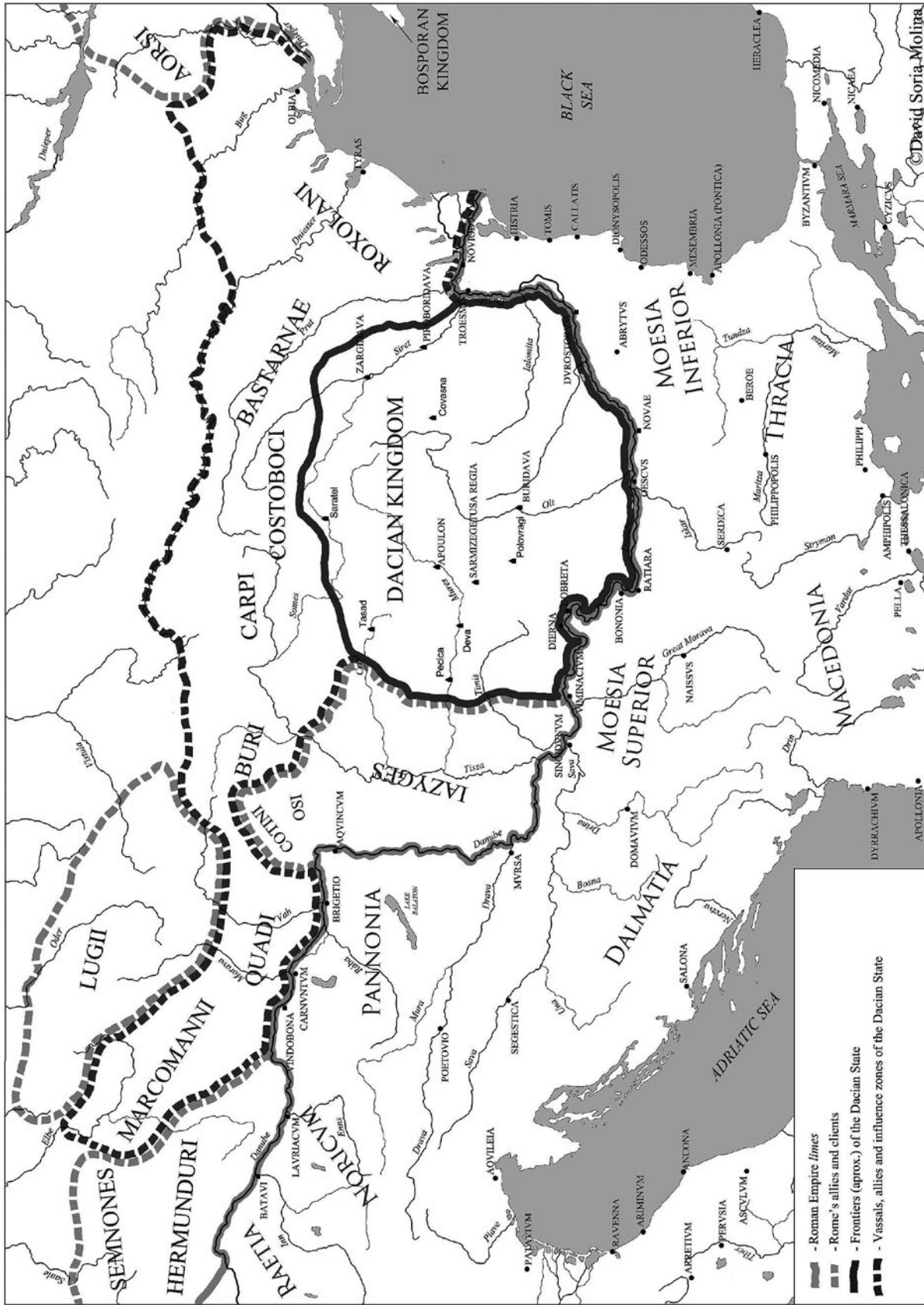
<sup>16</sup> Belin de Ballu 1972: 167–173; Karyshkovskij & Klejman 1994: 225 and 271–273; Bounegru & Zahariade 1996: 11–12 and 15; Batty 2007: 359–360 and 431; Zubar 2007: 174–175; Soria Molina 2016: 85 and 283.

<sup>17</sup> Scenes XXXIII–XXXV of Trajan's Column; Starr 1960: 134; Bounegru & Zahariade 1996: 101; Stefan 2005: 545 and 559–568; Zerbini 2015: 50; Soria Molina 2016: 156.

<sup>18</sup> Rossi 1971: 121; Richmond 1982: 1–6, 10, 17 and 43–54; Coulston 1988: 33–44 and 357–362; Lepper & Frere 1988: 19–43, 272–274 and 295–304; Koeppl 2002: 245–257; Ferris 2003: 53–68; Stefan 2005: 437–484, 508–509 and 673–693; Alexandrescu–Vianu, 2006: 212–234; Mandruzzato, 2010: 164–171.

Danube, its tributaries and the western shores of the Black Sea in order to be able to plot its own invasion routes and occupation zones, and keep them protected and supplied, led the Roman Empire to place special emphasis on the use of its naval power. The final success obtained by the Roman *classes* and its allies' fleets was decisive in helping it to re-establish the safety of Roman territory. The Roman Navy took away from the enemy its offensive capacity and, consequently, a large part of its strategic

initiative. It also turned against the Dacian Entente the advantages offered by the use of waterways, by either backing the land operations or spearheading them in operations launched by the navy itself. Throughout the period of hostilities, the naval confrontations that took place played an essential role as attested to by the granting of *coronae classicae* to the most important commanders of the Roman army during Trajan's Dacian Wars.



Map 1. The Roman Empire, the Dacian State and its partners, clients, vassals and allies during Trajan's (101–106 AD) Dacian Wars (Map developed by the author).

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