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# The Actions and Reactions of Trajan and Decebalus: A Brief Reconsidering of the Causation of the Dacian Wars

## Abstract

While one camp of historians have followed the words of Cassias Dio, that Trajan began the war to avenge the defeats of his predecessor Domitian and put down the ever growing power of the Dacians and subsequently was forced to fight a second war which was inevitably for conquest, the other camp argues that Trajan aimed for military glory and sought to conquer Dacia from the onset of hostilities. Neither camp has yet to conclusively utilize Decebalus' and Trajan's actions as a way to definitively prove their argument. By analyzing these two military leaders' orders and strategies, it becomes clear that Trajan always intended for a large war of conquest and fabricated or at least distorted the truth to place the blame on the Dacians.

## Keywords

Trajan, Rome, Dacia, Military History, Decebalus

## Disciplines

Ancient History, Greek and Roman through Late Antiquity | Classics | Military History

## Comments

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The Actions and Reactions of Trajan and Decebalus:

A Brief Reconsidering of the Causation of the Dacian Wars

Wesley Cline

In the year AUC 854, known now as 101 CE, the Roman Emperor Trajan launched an invasion of the region known as Dacia (modern Romania and Moldova). Fighting the unifier of Dacian tribes known as Decebalus, Trajan and his legions faced a formidable foe. Battling across forests, rivers, and hills made it an extremely difficult task to subdue the Dacians. Ultimately, Decebalus would offer to surrender in 102 CE after the Dacian capital city of Sarmizegethusa was besieged. It wouldn't be long until the two generals were again at odds. The year 105/6 witnessed more bloodshed as the Roman legions would surge through the Dacian countryside and eviscerate resistance, potentially annihilating the majority of the inhabitants. The Dacian King Decebalus would flee, only to commit suicide when advanced units of Roman cavalry were closing in. After returning to Rome from the Second Dacian War Trajan commissioned a massive column in the forum which visually depicted both his victories on a spiral frieze.

The Dacian Wars have been a fascination of both scholars and laymen since the days of Trajan himself. So important was this episode in classical history that in the Middle Ages a decree was passed by the Roman Senate which forbade any destruction to the Column under penalty of death. While many of the precious metals used to decorate the exterior of the frieze were taken, the body of the Column has remained relatively unharmed. Napoleon himself planned for the Column to be moved to Paris but was ultimately convinced by his advisors that the plan would be too costly. Why the great interest in the Column's preservation? One distinct feature of this monument is its narrative ability. Coupled with the lack of literary sources for the Dacian wars, Trajan's Column is the holder of history for two bloody wars. The panels on the column do have their shortcomings, as the true causation and intent of each war cannot be fully understood from their depictions. The other principal source for the Dacian Wars is the Roman historian Cassius Dio, although he wrote about one hundred years after Trajan's death and is

commonly seen as highly biased towards his own people. This has led to rigorous investigations and thorough debates on the true nature of the Dacian Wars. In 1874 John Hungerford Pollen published *A Description of the Trajan Column*, highlighting the main focus of the military panels while providing his own historical interpretation. Pollen did little however in the way of speculation or investigation on the causation of wars. Picking up where Pollen left off, and filling in some gaps, was Edward Salmon with his 1936 article entitled, *Trajan's Conquest of Dacia*. Salmon focused on the causation of the wars, the methods of transportation and infrastructure, and the composition of each fighting force. While not overly critical of Trajan, Salmon certainly is more skeptical of the reasons justifying war than his predecessor John Pollen. The advances in archeology and technology have finally answered some important questions about the Dacian Wars. Foremost among these is confirmation that the wars did in fact take place, with new data verifying locations of battles and troop movements. This has led to an onslaught of publications attempting to fully encapsulate the bloody conflicts between Rome and the Dacian populace.

A great deal of modern scholarship has seemingly omitted what led the young Emperor to invade as well as what he planned to do once victorious. Many of these more recent additions to the historical conversation illuminate the size and strength of armies, the cultures of each nation, and archeological excavations. Richard Munro's *The Last Great Roman Conqueror*, published in 2002, is excellent for its analysis of the Roman military's overall strategy, however it falls short of providing rational explanations for Decebalus' actions. Munro appears to have written with the assumption that Cassias Dio was entirely factual. The most thorough of these modern publications is the 2009 book *Dacia, Land of Transylvania, Cornerstone of Ancient Eastern Europe*, written by Ion Grumeza. His work encapsulates both the Dacian and Roman cultures of the time, mindfully considering the relationships between the two powers. Even

Grumeza seems reluctant to speculate or deeply analyze the causation and motivations of Trajan. Most recently, Michael Schmitz's *The Danube Frontier*, has begun a long-awaited conversation on how to place the Dacian Wars into the historiographical record. While Schmitz falls grossly short of providing rigorous analysis of the causation of the war, he does provide evidence of military action which could illuminate the true catalyst for these conflicts.

While one camp of historians have followed the words of Cassias Dio, that Trajan began the war to avenge the defeats of his predecessor Domitian and put down the ever growing power of the Dacians and subsequently was forced to fight a second war which was inevitably for conquest, the other camp argues that Trajan aimed for military glory and sought to conquer Dacia from the onset of hostilities. Neither camp has yet to conclusively utilize Decebalus' and Trajan's actions as a way to definitively prove their argument. By analyzing these two military leaders' orders and strategies, it becomes clear that Trajan always intended for a large war of conquest and fabricated or at least distorted the truth to place the blame on the Dacians.

Before being named Emperor, Trajan held governorship in the province of Moesia and later Germania Superior, both located in close proximity to Dacia. Undoubtedly Trajan had substantial knowledge of the Dacian culture and their military capabilities. After being notified of his ascension to the throne he immediately began a tour and review of the legions throughout Germany and Moesia.<sup>1</sup> After a brief war with the Suebi along the Danube, Trajan returned to Rome for his delayed procession through the city.<sup>2</sup> It would be less than a year before things on the Dacian front would intensify. In the year 100 CE it is known that the legions along the

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<sup>1</sup> Schmitz, Michael. *The Danube Frontier*. South Yorkshire, Pen and Sword Military, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Peter V. Jones, Keith C. Sidwell, eds., *The World of Rome: An Introduction to Roman Culture*. Cambridge University Press, 1997, [ISBN 0-521-38421-4](#), page 254 and 231

Danube had very recently been reinforced and that a substantial road was being constructed on the Roman side of the Danube River.<sup>3</sup> The column makes it clear that multiple large forts had been constructed along the Dacian frontier prior to the war, facilitating mass troop movements.<sup>4</sup> It is likely that the newly constructed road played a major part in this as well. The question must now be asked, why did Trajan make these preparations? It is entirely reasonable to suspect that due to Decebalus' increasing control over the various Dacian tribes, Trajan would have been weary of an attack. However, the Dacians had no substantial naval force and the 65 miles of road and fortresses were along an embankment where the river is over 160 feet deep.<sup>5</sup> Why would the Imperial defenses protect a segment of the Danube where it is not only too deep to ford by foot, but also where the cliff embankments would make a crossing exceptionally difficult? The answer is that this was a convenient place to garrison forces. Modern scholarship suggests that the total number of Dacian fighters (including mercenaries) was potentially around 60,000. This pales in comparison to the 415,000 men of the Roman army at this time.<sup>6</sup> Even a limited war could inevitably overwhelm the Dacians numerically. Utilizing this knowledge, it is impractical to believe that Decebalus would attempt any form of permanent invasion into Roman territory. Therefore, the Roman "defenses" were actually staging grounds for the coming conflict.

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<sup>3</sup> Salmon, Edward. "Trajan's Conquest of Dacia." *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1936  
Originally published in *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, vol. 67, 1936.

<sup>4</sup> "Trajan's Column Reliefs." *Trajan's Column in Rome*, [www.trajans-column.org/?page\\_id=107](http://www.trajans-column.org/?page_id=107).

<sup>5</sup> Salmon, Edward. "Trajan's Conquest of Dacia." *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1936  
Originally published in *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, vol. 67, 1936. p86

<sup>6</sup> Grumeza, Ion. *Dacia*. Lanham, Hamilton Books, 2009.

One point which must be noted is that a group of historians believe the Dacian fighting force to be approximately 200,000-250,000 strong before Trajan's first Dacian War.<sup>7</sup> This can surely be disproven when examining that not only had the Dacian military recently fought in multiple costly wars with the Romans under Domitian, but also that Decebalus' forces appear to have been subdued by a Roman force of approximately 100,000. While this is not an attempt to diminish the impressive feat of conquering Dacia, the column and surviving primary sources do not point to a Dacian force that was over double the Roman expedition. Furthering this point, there is no evidence to suggest that Decebalus' army was a horde of fur clad barbarians with limited weaponry attacking well armored legionnaires. Had this been the case, an outnumbered Roman force would make sense. Quite the contrary, the Dacian army fought well armored with curved swords which inflicted heavy casualties on the Roman regulars.<sup>8</sup> Armed with this knowledge, it seems absurd to believe that the Roman forces could've defeated a Dacian force twice their size. If the original estimates were true, why wouldn't Decebalus simply fight a pitched battle against the Romans on open ground? His men were well supplied and could certainly fight the Roman expedition force instead of retreating to the hills. More likely these population estimates haven't taken the prior wars with Rome into account. It is said that in the last major Roman victory of Domitian's Dacian War (86CE) so many Dacians were killed that Decebalus' second in command had to hide himself among the Dacian dead or else be caught by legionnaires.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Schmitz, Michael. *The Danube Frontier*. South Yorkshire, Pen and Sword Military, 2019.

<sup>8</sup> Pollen, John. *A Description of the Trajan Column*. London, George E Eyre and William Spottiswoode, 1874.

<sup>9</sup> Dio, Cassias. Book LXVII, *Roman History*



Decebalus was by all accounts an extremely intelligent military commander and statesmen. Cassias Dio holds that he was able to recruit many Roman soldiers prior to the war with Trajan, some who had deserted and some presently enlisted, in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of Roman tactics.<sup>10</sup> This seems to indicate that the Dacian chieftain was well aware of a coming conflict with Rome and intended to gain a tactical advantage. Some scholars, Dio among them, seem to suggest that these Roman recruits aided the Dacian aggression. This is ludicrous as there is virtually no evidence to support such a statement. Both the column and Dio suggest that the Dacian capital was Sarmizegethusa at the time of the first war.<sup>11</sup> This means that Decebalus had recently moved the hub of his operations to a more defensible position. It is then an absolute certainty that Decebalus planned on fighting a defensive war, not an offensive invasion.

In 101CE Trajan crossed the Danube at the head of approximately 100,000 men.<sup>12</sup> The First Dacian War had begun. The initial advance went smoothly for the main Roman column, advancing far into Dacian territory.<sup>13</sup> The first major engagement was fought at the same site of a major Roman defeat under Domitian less than fifteen years before at a location known as the Iron Gates Pass, near the ancient city of Tapae. This location is easily more than two thirds of the way to Sarimezgethusa. The advance of the Roman column appears to have been well known to

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<sup>10</sup> Dio, Cassias. Book LXVIII. *Roman History*.

<sup>11</sup> Salmon, Edward. "Trajan's Conquest of Dacia." *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1936  
Originally published in *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, vol. 67, 1936.

<sup>12</sup> Salmon, Edward. "Trajan's Conquest of Dacia." *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1936  
Originally published in *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, vol. 67, 1936.

<sup>13</sup> Pollen, John. *A Description of the Trajan Column*. London, George E Eyre and William Spottiswoode, 1874.

Decebalus, as the column depicts Dacian spies observing the advance of the legions through the countryside and hills.<sup>14</sup> Tapae was a perfectly defensible position in which the Dacian army would have the high ground and could force the Romans to fight out of their traditional closed rank, open field tactics. This is exactly the strategic plan Decebalus used as he realized his forces were unable to defeat the Romans in an open, traditional battle.

Trajan realized and seems to have planned for the unconventional, borderline guerilla tactics which Decebalus intended to use. Evidence from the column suggests that at the Battle of Tapae Trajan deployed his auxiliary forces, not his legionaries, to fight the uphill battle against the Dacians.<sup>15</sup> This is important to consider for two reasons. First, while customary, travelling with auxiliary troops and deploying them ahead of his regulars shows Trajan's understanding that Decebalus would not sally out of his fortifications for a pitched battle. This reinforces that the Dacian army did not have the numbers to overwhelm the Romans on open terrain. Secondly, it shows Trajan's understanding of his own army's strengths and weaknesses. He understood that conventional Roman infantry tactics would be useless when combating a mobile, unconventional Dacian enemy.

The Battle at Taepe would ultimately be a hard fought victory for Trajan, however it appears that it was not so much a victory as an orderly retreat by the Dacians.<sup>16</sup> The column shows a remarkably intense battle, after which Trajan is said to have torn off pieces of his toga to be used as extra bandages.<sup>17</sup> On the column the Dacians are shown as fighting the Romans from

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<sup>14</sup> Schmitz, Michael. *The Danube Frontier*. South Yorkshire, Pen and Sword Military, 2019. p95

<sup>15</sup> Pollen, John. *A Description of the Trajan Column*. London, George E Eyre and William Spottiswoode, 1874.

<sup>16</sup> Pollen, John. *A Description of the Trajan Column*. London, George E Eyre and William Spottiswoode, 1874.

<sup>17</sup> Dio, Cassias. Book LXVIII. *Roman History*.

their elevated position through mud and rough terrain, inevitably leaving the battlefield in orderly close rank formation. Perhaps this means that their "retreat" was merely a withdrawal after inflicting heavy casualties on the Romans.

The winter season set in after this battle, forcing Trajan and his army to end their campaigning. As spring of the following year began, it is clear that Decebalus formally submitted to Trajan (probably as a client kingdom) outside the walls of Sarmizegethusa.<sup>18</sup> It is unfortunately impossible to say what transpired between the onset of the spring campaign and Decebalus' surrender, however it is clear that the Roman forces were able to reach the Dacian capital. Cassias Dio states that the peace terms first and foremost forced the Dacians to give up the Roman deserters who were in their aid. This is incredibly important because it shows that Trajan's primary concern was of the skill of the Dacian fighting force in the future, revealing his true intentions of conquest.

One may argue that because Trajan returned to Rome after accepting a surrender, and even that he offered a surrender, justifies the conclusion that he was not intent on conquest. This is a much more complex assertion than one might think, namely, because no reliable primary sources exist which tell of the latter days of the First Dacian War. From the onset of hostilities Decebalus had practiced a scorched earth policy, perhaps Trajan's troops were running out of food and therefore he decided to withdrawal. It is noteworthy that the Column shows the walls of Sarmizegethusa undamaged as Decebalus formally surrenders. This is crucial information as the Dacian capital's walls held against either a siege or an assault. Perhaps Trajan's forces were too

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<sup>18</sup> "Trajan's Column Reliefs." *Trajan's Column in Rome*, [www.trajans-column.org/?page\\_id=107](http://www.trajans-column.org/?page_id=107).

depleted for him to make the final push into the Dacian hilltop city. Regardless, Trajan left Dacia after Decebalus' surrender.

In approximately 106 CE, Trajan again set out for Dacia. Unsurprisingly this time, three more legions had been added to his ranks.<sup>19</sup> The catalyst for the renewal of hostilities was supposedly that Decebalus had started conducting raids into Moesia and had begun to prepare for war. These facts are of course from Roman sources. Why would Decebalus, a seemingly wise general who just lost an exceptionally hard fought war just 4 years earlier, prepare for coming conflict with the Romans and begin raids against an opponent who he knew had substantially more manpower and supplies? The answer is that these claims were fabricated. Perhaps a now unknown incident with one of the Roman garrisons left to keep the peace started a revolt or a minor insurrection and this was used for justification. Perhaps whatever happened led to Decebalus preparing for war as it appeared the Romans would soon be back, and this was utilized by Trajan as an excuse for his second expedition. Whatever actually happened may never be known, but in 106 CE Trajan again crossed the Danube and marched through the Dacian countryside with ruthless efficiency. The column shows a quick campaign in which Decebalus' strongholds are neutralized quickly and efficiently.<sup>20</sup> Eventually Sarimezegethsa would fall, leading to the flight of Decebalus and many of his close supporters. Doomed to be captured by advanced elements of Roman cavalry, he would commit suicide somewhere in the Dacian countryside.

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<sup>19</sup> Salmon, Edward. "Trajan's Conquest of Dacia." *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1936  
Originally published in *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, vol. 67, 1936. p102

<sup>20</sup> "Trajan's Column Reliefs." *Trajan's Column in Rome*, [www.trajans-column.org/?page\\_id=107](http://www.trajans-column.org/?page_id=107).

Trajan's actions after the conclusion of hostilities reveals much of his original intent. He quickly seized the horde of Dacian wealth, immediately populated the countryside with settlers from other parts of the empire, and installed garrisons throughout the province.<sup>21</sup> Not long after the games he threw to honor his victory, Trajan was again campaigning. This time against the old Roman enemy of Parthia. Was the Dacian campaign meant to finance this war? Perhaps the conquest of Dacia was simply an attempt to subdue a potential threat in the future? Could this have merely been a war to solidify Trajan's legitimacy as Roman Emperor? One particularly interesting detail is that for the Dacian wars conscription was exercised heavily.<sup>22</sup> Were the wars so clearly unprovoked that many Romans would not willingly enlist in the military? Regardless of the answer, the province of Dacia was swiftly and entirely brought under Roman control following the wars.

Investigating the motives of Trajan through his and his enemy's actions is important as it brings new light to the Dacian perspective. Arguing that Decebalus, a wise general and political leader by all accounts, would somehow begin multiple wars with Rome despite his firsthand knowledge of their military might seems preposterous when examining the situation more deeply than Cassias Dio or other contemporary Roman historians. Even modern historians have long ignored the prospect of analyzing both leaders' actions as a way of uncovering the true causation and events which transpired during the Dacian Wars. The understanding of Trajan's motives are of the utmost importance, as they have implications for the war itself, his reputation as emperor, and also the war against Parthia. The intent of Trajan before setting out on campaign in 101CE

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<sup>21</sup> Munro, Richard. "The Last Great Roman Conquer." *Military History*, 2002.  
Originally published in *Military History*, 2002.

<sup>22</sup> Munro, Richard. "The Last Great Roman Conquer." *Military History*, 2002.  
Originally published in *Military History*, 2002. p2

also has dramatic implications for the present day. A question only now beginning to be asked is whether or not Trajan committed genocide of the Dacian tribes. Perhaps this was accidental, perhaps deliberate. What is clear is that Trajan ultimately set out with the initial intent of conquest, despite what Roman sources biased towards the emperor may claim. Why else would Decebalus fight so uncharacteristically of someone provoking Rome? Why do Trajan's preparations for the First Dacian War include massive permanent infrastructure improvements to move troops to and from Dacia quickly and en masse? The simple answer is that Trajan always planned on the conquest of Dacia. His motives were likely political. This conclusion opens up the opportunity for more questions to be asked, perhaps bringing to light the true nature of the conquest and defense of Dacia.

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