

Conquest strategy and political discourse: new evidence for the conquest of Dacia from LiDAR analysis at Sarmizegetusa Regia

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By the end of the 1st c. A.D., Dacia had been an intermittent thorn in Rome's side for almost two centuries. The ambitions of Burebista and the actions of his various successors continued to threaten Roman hegemony along the lower Danube, culminating in the rise of the powerful kingdom of Decebalus and a substantial Roman defeat in Moesia. Domitian sent troops against the Dacians to restore the dignity of Rome (85-86 and 88-88/89), but with mixed success, finally having to settle for buying peace at a substantial price in order to free himself to deal with threats to security in both Germany and Pannonia.¹ No doubt both the costs involved and the perceived lack of success further contributed to the hostility of Roman authors towards Domitian and left unfinished business on the Danube frontier. It is no great surprise, therefore, that Dacia was the first area to which Trajan — to whom the attitude of contemporary sources (e.g., Pliny's *Panegyricus*) could not have been in greater contrast — turned his attention within three years of his accession.

The events of Trajan's two highly-publicized wars in Dacia, possibly the greatest Roman military operation since the Civil Wars,² have been reconstructed largely on the basis of fragmentary historical accounts, provided chiefly by surviving compilations from Cassius Dio written a century later.³ To summarise briefly the events according to that source, the key objectives for Trajan, as a new emperor seeking to establish his credentials with both the Senate and the army, were to ensure that peace on the frontier was maintained and to bring to an end the debilitating financial subsidies established by Domitian over a decade earlier (Dio 68.6.1). The first campaign against king Decebalus in 101-2 saw the Romans advancing steadily into Dacia. Once they had secured success in the first major battle at Tapae on the edge of Transylvania and in Lower Moesia (probably in the area of modern Adamclisi⁴), they headed towards the political and religious centre of the kingdom at Sarmizegetusa Regia in the Orăștie mountains. The campaign concluded at the request of Decebalus on very favourable terms for Trajan, who returned to Rome leaving behind garrison posts across the country, including at Sarmizegetusa Regia itself (Dio 68.8.1-3; 68.9.1-7). In the second campaign (105-6), prompted by the failure of Decebalus to respect the peace agreement, Trajan led his troops again into Dacia to deal with Decebalus once and for all (Dio 68.10.3-4, 68.11.3, 68.14.1). The dramatic suicide of the Dacian king marked the end of hostilities and of the process of conquest (Dio 68.14.3).

Apart from the battle site at Tapae, Sarmizegetusa Regia is the only Dacian site specifically named in Dio's account. It was clearly an important focus both for the kingdom of

1 A. S. Ștefan, *Les guerres daciques de Domitien et de Trajan. Architecture militaire, topographie, images et histoire* (CollEFR 353, 2005) 399-437; I. A. Oltean, *Dacia: landscape, colonisation, Romanisation* (London 2007) 50-54.

2 K. Strobel, *Untersuchungen zu den Dakerkriegen Trajans* (Bonn 1984) 13.

3 There has been considerable debate and discussion concerning the integration of the different surviving sources for the text of Dio's *Roman History*. The references here are to the Loeb edition and the translation by E. Cary. For the most detailed reconstruction of the probable course of campaigning during the two wars, see Strobel *ibid.* 162-202 and 205-19.

4 Strobel *ibid.* 34-40.