

THE DACIANS, THE WOLF WARRIORS

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Abstract: *The Dacians, a very important Indo-European people of the ancient world, were, like all Indo-European peoples, highly trained in the art of war. The legends of the ancient world placed the worship of Ares/Mars, the god of war, in the world of the Thracians, the Dacians being the most important of the Thracians, by the creation of a state and by their remarkable civilization, where war generated rank. The Dacian leaders, military aristocrats, **Tarabostes** are similar to the **Bharathi** of the Aryans, therefore the accounts of Herodotus, the father of history, who called the Thracians (including the Dacians, the northern Thracians), “the most important of the Indo-Europeans, after the race of the Indians” (i.e. the Persians and the Aryans, their relatives), also have a military meaning. The totemic symbol of the wolf was much present in Europe, especially with Indo-European peoples, like the Spartans, the aristocrats of war, but mostly with the Romans, the gendarmes of the ancient world. But the Dacians honoured this majestic animal above all, not only as a symbol of the state, but also, apparently, as their eponym.*

*As warriors, the Dacians lay under the sign of the wolf, their battle flag, and acted like real wolves against their enemies, whether they were Celts, during the reign of Burebista, or Romans, during the reign of Decebalus. The Dacians made history in the military art, being perfectly integrated, after the Roman conquest, in the largest and best trained army of the ancient world, the Roman army. Moreover, the wolf warriors, mastering the equestrian art, were a success in the special, though auxiliary troops of the famous **equites singulares** in the Roman army. If the Romans were the eagles of war, the Dacians were its wolves, these two symbols best illustrating the military art of all times.*

Keywords: Dacians, art of war, symbol, Indo-Europeans, wolf.

1. Introduction

The title of our study was inspired by the work of Ovid, the great banished Latin poet, whose death, 2000 years ago, we commemorate this year. Therefore we dedicate this study to the memory of the great Roman poet. The Dacians, in Ovid's view, after a direct contact with them and their way of life and action, while he was in exile in Tomis “... have a wild voice and face, like Mars ...”[1]. A son of the Roman people of Mars, like Ovid, compares the Dacians to the god of war himself. The “sad” Latin poet sees the Dacians as embodiments not only of the god of war,

but also of the official state symbol of the Dacians, the wolf: “And if I look at the people, they are crueller than wolves.”[2]

Ovid also describes the main weapons of the wolf warriors. The Dacians are obsessively described in Ovid's lyrics as masters of the art of war, regularly initiating lightning attacks with two basic weapons: the cavalry and the mounted archery, all Indo-Europeans making history in the military art in these branches, be they the Persians, or their relatives, the Aryans, but also others, like the Romans. The Dacians, as described by the poet of the *Metamorphoses*, transformed trivial

weapons, e.g. arrows, into lethal weapons, since the Dacians, organized in genuine assault detachments, similar to packs of wolves, used venom to give arrows high odds of eliminating the enemy. Each Dacian had three basic weapons: the horse, a platform of fighting, the bow and poisoned arrows, and the knife, therefore he was a versatile warrior: “But the fighting Getae .../On horseback, swarming,.../Keep teeming on the roads:.../ They all have a bow and quiver/ And their arrows are smeared with snake venom./.../ And their hands just stab you,/ For every barbarian has a knife strapped to his thigh.”[3] The Dacians, the wolf warriors made a distinct impression on Ovid, who described them in detail, with a strong sense of reality. Their assault expeditions, described by the poet as veritable commando troops, were exactly repeated just as described by the poet, before the Dacian wars, when the Dacians crossed the frozen Danube and attacked the Roman garrisons in Moesia, causing damage to the Romans, while they suffered minimal losses. Actually, these raids for plunder were also a pretext for the Dacian wars.

2. The Dacians, an Indo-European people with warrior traditions

The father of history, Herodotus, said about the Dacians that they “are the bravest and most righteous of the Thracians” [4], actually the northern branch of the Thracians, a very important Indo-European people in the Carpathian-Danubian-Pontic space. In the view of the same father of history, “the Thracian people is the largest in the world after that of the Indians”[5] (i.e. the Persians and the Aryans, their relatives – our emphasis), and “if they had one ruler or if the Thracians got along well, they would be invincible and much more powerful than all the nations...”[6] Having a single state, quite early, the northern Thracians, the Dacians were a political and military force north of the Danube, as Herodotus intuited.

The military traditions of the Thracians were dominant for all, be they to the south or north of the Danube. Thus, Thrace was considered in the Greek tradition, but also in the Roman one, the homeland of the god of war (it is not accidentally that Ovid describes them as replicas of Mars). The Thracians, an Indo-European people, loved war, like all the nations in this group. As all had warlike traditions relying on cavalry, the Thracians also had a fundamental weapon, the cavalry. The Thracians are mentioned in the *Iliad* in relation to cavalry and other weapons: “*I saw the horses, no horse is stouter or greater,.../ His chariot is covered with gold and silver, and he has/ Great, wonderful golden weapons....*”[7] The gold was actually bronze, the Thracians being the creators of bronze metallurgy, as later the Celts were the builders of iron metallurgy.

Between the Thracians, and consequently between the Dacians and the main peoples in the Indo-European group, there are by far more similarities in terms of obvious military traditions, and fewer differences, therefore the words of Herodotus also have an important and real military content. The Thracians, like almost all Indo-European peoples, worshipped the god of war as their supreme god, also considered the god of storm[8]. All Indo-Europeans have a strong tradition regarding the god of war and storm, found in almost all mythologies, especially in the Greek and Roman ones, where the attributes of war were associated with lightning, the symbol of Zeus in the Greek mythology and Iuppiter in the Roman one. Moreover, the Romans stylized lightning on the Roman military shield and symbols. The main god of the Dacians was Zamolxis, also considered the god of “the lightning worshiped in the caves of high mountains”[9]. The god of storm was also the most important god for the Hittites[10], a very important Indo-European people, notable in the military art. The Hittites, like the Dacians, relied on cavalry troops (especially war chariots), on horsemen and

archers. The chariot was a battle platform that functioned like a combination of weapons between cavalry, archers and defensive weapons[11]. All Indo-European peoples recognized the role of the military in state leadership. The first Thracian formations, including the Dacian ones, were organized according to the model of some “military democracies”[12]. If the Thracian and Dacian military nobility was called *tarabostes* or *pileati* (from Lat. *pileus* = small cap, signifying the nobility rank), the Aryan nobility was known as *Bharati* initially, and later on, after the colonization of India they formed a special cast called *Kshatriya*. Darius relied on a royal guard made up of Persian aristocrats, a highly educated elite troop consisting of *10,000 immortals*, whereas the Spartans, the most famous soldiers of the ancient world, had a purely military aristocracy, they were called *Homoioi=peers*, the Roman military aristocracy formed the Roman government, called *ordo equester*, the Celtic tribes were led by military chiefs, and the Hittites had *pankus*[13] = professional army and ruling class, a real institutional body.

The Dacians, the war wolves, have the most in common with the Persians in as far as the art of war is concerned, primarily due to the military aristocracy, but also to weapons and ranks. Thus the *pileus* of the Dacians is of Persian origin, being similar to the *mithra*, a sign of nobility for the Persians. Apparently this *pileus* was made of animal skin, possibly of totemic value[14]. The weapons of the Dacians are similar to those of the Persians, the Dacians having a sword called *sica*, which was a sword for cutting and not for piercing, “a kind of yatagan, like that of the Persians, the sword-scythe”[15]. Like those *10,000 immortals* who were armed to the teeth, the Dacians also had spears, bows and arrows, hatchets, shields and defensive helmets, battle flags, the loftiest being the wolf flag[16], meant to be a howling wolf because in the rush of the battle the wind caused it to make a noise, thus calling the members to form a pack.

The Persians, like all other Indo-Europeans, had warrior gods precisely because of the military leaders. Likewise, due to the Thracian, as well as Dacian military leaders, there appears the cult of the *Thracian knight* (actually an elite military man, the cavalry being the branch of aristocracy in almost all ancient armies) like a heroizing institution[17]. Moreover, the Thracian knight is defined by Mircea Eliade as the “hero” [18] who, as defined by the Greeks, had the role to replicate super-people whose military skills were intended to constitute the salvation of their communities and to provide models for them. The military art of the Dacians therefore resided not only in the physical force of its fighters, specific weapons, or the spirit of cohesion, like a pack of wolves with a very precise hierarchy, but also in various rituals and actions of psychological nature. We believe that the *messengers of Zamolxis* is such an example of warrior ritual, which actually involved human, military sacrifices. The young people who were sent to Zamolxis were a kind of kamikaze, through which encoded messages were actually sent, both to their god and for the Dacians themselves[19], to support the morale of the army. They were held every four years in the presence of a priest, Deceneus, very similar to the Grand Druid of the Celts, both in terms of education and influence. However, the *messengers of Zamolxis* as a warrior ritual exceeds in dramatism the hardest warrior ritual of the Indo-Europeans, namely the Spartan *kripteya*, which was actually a test of survival, while for the Dacians it was more than survival, it was a human sacrifice. The Dacians also had other initiation rituals, of course of warrior character, such as the use of fire and smoke, as they were also called “walkers through the smoke”[20]. It appears that they used the tattoo with a military role, and if we consider the Dacian bracelets, we think that they were a powerful military symbol, most likely emphasizing the military rank, but being meant for a limited number of

military men, perhaps the best of the best. We know that almost all Indo-Europeans had numerous military rituals such as the Celts' blood brotherhood, the Vikings' *beserkeri*, soldiers who ate some mushrooms to get into a *furor bellicus*. If the Hittites took a military oath[21], the Dacians made a military promise by the fact that they drank water from the Danube which they considered sacred, swearing that they would come back as conquerors[22]. It seems that all these rituals were intended to strengthen the spirit of the Dacian fighters, who had the attitude of real wolves as Ovid called them, as demonstrated above, and Pomponius Mela described the Dacians as "wild and utterly ready to face death"[23]. So in the light of all historical sources, the Dacians, the wolves of war, were highly trained and rivalled other Indo-European warriors. They are most similar to the Persians and the Aryans both through arms, training, and through religion. If the Persians believed in Zoroastrianism, a kind of monotheism, the Dacians believed in the cult of Zamolxis, actually a monotheistic cult. Both Indo-European peoples believed in immortality, the Dacians believing themselves to be "immortal".

3. The wolf, one of the Dacians' military and state totem/symbol

The wolf was a very important military symbol in the ancient world, much honoured in the Balkan Peninsula. If it was the state itself for the Spartans, it symbolized the people for the Dacians, whereas in Rome it was the symbol which protected the state[24].

Mircea Eliade makes a very thorough historical description of this symbol, searching the history of the Indo-Europeans. First, the great scientist examines the zoonym from ancient sources. Thus, Strabo uses the term *daci*, *daoi* = *wolves*, for the Scythians, and in the Phrygian language *daos* = *wolf*, the Illyrian has a similar term *dhaunos* = *wolf*, the *dave* signifying in the scientist's opinion relating to the wolf, the

villages of the wolves[25]. The Dacians would be the translation of a phrase = *those who are like the wolves*. In some Latin sources there occurs the term *dahae* = *Dacians* and the Greek term *daai* = *Dacians*, words which in Old Persian have the equivalent *dahae* = *wolf*.

Mircea Eliade believes that many ethnonyms of the Dacian tribes come from wolves. Moreover, he clearly demonstrates that the ethnonym of the Dacians comes from the wolf, also considering the wolf from its totemic perspective. Thus, the Dacians were those who were under the protection of the *Wolf God*, they were actually immigrants from the Asian region in the Carpathian-Danubian-Pontic area. The Hittites had a *Wolf God* which protected runaways or outlaws[26]. Another hypothesis of the Dacians' name from Mircea Eliade's perspective is of warlike ritual origin, a kind of initiating or "warrior brotherhood". This imitated the behaviour of wolves, military brotherhoods existing with important Indo-European peoples such as the Persians, Aryans, Celts, Spartans, etc. What was essential in these brotherhoods was the transformation of the young man into a wolf, namely a skilled warrior, a beast, supernaturally assimilating the behaviour of the wolf. Moreover, the scientist brings to our attention the Persian texts which assimilate the outlaws, or lonely fighters with the wolves, most ancient Persian military symbols being related to the wolves, as happens with the Dacians. The Parthians, Persians as a nation, had flags with wolf symbols in some elite corps of their army, the wolf head with the body of a dragon [27], the Dacians' flag being the wolf head with the body of a snake. So the name of the Dacian tribes is related to the wolf, as the great scholar Mircea Eliade believes. He has at least three hypotheses for this animal name of the Dacians: 1. Military heroism of the young Dacians, called wolves, which gave the name to the entire tribe, 2. The name of the first Dacians who colonized the Carpathian-Danubian-

Pontic territory, the great Indo-European migration spreading worldwide, 3. The wolf was for the Dacians a mythical ancestor which gave its name to its people, the Dacians being “a people born under the sign of the Wolf” in Mircea Eliade’s view[28].

We support all the assumptions relating to the names of the Dacians undertaken by Mircea Eliade, especially the third. We believe that the wolf was honoured by the Dacians and considered a deity which protected, inspired them and was worshiped because of its powerful military, but also social nature, given that wolves have a strict hierarchy, the pack. The use of the wolf head flag was not coincidental, it had a psychological and utilitarian role, as the wolf, in the pursuit of the riders and because of the wind, called the pack to gather, which gave the Dacians a landmark both to recognize their armies, and to communicate around the theatre of operations, since the howling of the wolf was specific only to the Dacians, being very easy to recognize and interpret by the Dacians and hard to imitate by their enemies. The sacred value of the wolf was present in the battle, if we take as a comparison the Spartan civilization. The Spartans’ wolf represented the homeland, therefore all its soldiers fought for it, the alpha wolf leading the pack. The Dacians’ wolf, we believe, was a god, and each Dacian who was able to fight answered the call of the sacred wolf, symbolized by the battle flag. If the Spartans’ wolf was actually a she-wolf, the country, we consider that the Dacians’ wolf was a god connected with war, worshiped and served by the military aristocracy, *tarabostes*, who became the wolves of war. They were the subjects of the wolf and entered its pack in order to defend the community where it was worshiped. It is certain that the Dacians’ wolf was the most honoured, the Spartans killed it in the *kripteya*, but the Dacians had no such sacrifice, because they could not kill a god, it could only be worshiped, and the flag was a direct form of worship.

4. The Dacians in military confrontations

The Dacians had numerous military confrontations. Since the dawn of Antiquity they had faced Alexander the Great, equally as the Persians, the cavalry being their most important branch, for they had about 4,000 riders, according to what Arrian said, also using boats for piracy, both on the Danube and the sea[29]. The Dacian state built by Burebista was a regional power and therefore a military power. Burebista rightly was “the first and greatest king of Thrace”, who created not only a political force, but also a military one[30]. Burebista’s monarchy was military, the first king building a fortified nucleus, as the Dacians lived in a sort of blockhouse “having mountains with strong walls”[31]. In his expansion for the establishment of the Dacian state, Burebista “destroyed” the Celts and, according to Strabo, he was able to send an army of “up to 200,000 people” [32]. The fact is that in establishing their state borders, the Dacians came across obstacles. The Celts were defeated because the Dacian state was a military monarchy, had institutions and the institutions of the state had always defeated the institutions of the tribe in military terms.

The wars with the Romans had a very important pretext, namely the frequent looting expeditions of the Dacians across the Danube in Moesia, a Roman province. Since the time of Ovid, the Dacians went on such expeditions, so they certainly existed. They were also very effective, due to the Dacian cavalry and their efficient weapons. Tacitus tells us how the Dacian troops of assault caused much damage to the representatives of the Roman power, so “the fortified camps of the legions were balanced”[33]. It is certain that in the first war with the Dacians, Rome sent troops under the command of the Praetorian Prefect, Cornelius Fuscus, who was the first in the hierarchy of Roman officers, a sort of chief of the general staff of the Roman army. The Praetorian Prefect was in the top three Roman military chiefs, he was

actually the first in this ranking, which shows how serious the Dacian military attacks were. The Dacians killed the leader of the Roman army in the first war, acting like real wolves that kill the head of the pack, which of course sealed, even if temporarily, the fate of war. The first Dacian-Roman war ended with a truce in which Rome reassessed its opponent and prepared its response in the second Dacian-Roman war by directly sending in the campaign the supreme commander of the Roman army, the emperor. The second war ended with the Romans' victory, Decebalus, the great king of Dacia, losing the battle because of water, not because of the lack of military skills, for he was very skilful in the art of war as Cassius Dio tells us, describing Decebalus as follows: "... he was very good at war plans and diligent in carrying them out, knowing how to choose the occasion to attack the enemy and to retreat in time. Clever at setting traps, he was a good fighter...."[34] So Decebalus, the king, was the first of *tarabostes*, and also the alpha wolf of war wolves. He fought like a king and died like a king and a free wolf, refusing to come to Rome in chains. He was the best example of a Dacian soldier, a genuine wolf king of war.

5. The Dacians, soldiers of Rome

After the conquest of Dacia, the wolves of war, the Dacians found in the Roman army a way to get integrated and thus Romanized. They made a career in the Roman army, even if initially in the auxiliary troops, because of their provincial status. But it is obvious that the Dacians had military skills and talent, and the Romans thus gained a military elite with special weapons and battle tactics. It is not coincidentally that we find many Dacians in the auxiliary cavalry

troops. There were about 12 units of auxiliary troops of Dacians, having an auxiliary unit of cavalry, such as *ala I Ulpia Dacorum*. [35] Moreover, the Dacians did not serve only in the auxiliary troops, but even in the Praetorian troops and in particular in the special troops of the Roman army, in the famous squadrons of *equites singulares Augusti*. We have several Dacian names preserved on Roman inscriptions, we chose a good example due to the name to illustrate *Silvinus Decibalus*, who was part of *Collegium Equitum Singularium Curatorum* [36]. *Equites singulares*, in translation *unique (special) horsemen*, were actually Roman special troops, the best of the best, with unique military skills and qualities. The Romans even had a strict selection of soldiers for these troops based primarily on ethnicity, for only those of the Italic tribes were allowed to be part of the praetorian troops and *equites singulares*. The Dacian presence in the elite troops of the Roman army, not only in the auxiliary ones, are exceptions which once again demonstrate the exceptional military skills and qualities of the Dacians.

6. Conclusion

The Dacians, these *lupi singulares* of military art, therefore its masters, remained in history not only as some of the most special Thracians, but also as one of the most important Indo-European peoples that built the quality of a nation out of war and the craft of weapons. This quality was recognized by the Romans, the gendarmes of the ancient world, who successfully integrated them in the Roman army, a world army.

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