

The Topography of the First Dacian War of Trajan (a.d. 101-102) a new Approach

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The history of the Dacian wars of Trajan is not as clearly as one might suppose. Historians have been hampered by the paucity of the written sources and the silence of the stone of Trajan's Column.

In this context I have tried to re-examine all the available categories of information, including epigraph and archaeology. A fresh and more realistic appraisal of the early history is proposed.

I have started with the topographical position of the main stages of the first war. It is essential to anyone examining this period that they understand the importance of the political and strategic consequences of this war for the whole Danubian region. But what was the main reason for the war started by Trajan in A.D. 101 against the Dacian king Decebalus? I do not want to exclude the possible economical causes¹, but I think that the most important reasons were political and military. We have to remember that Decebalus was a *rex sociusque et amicus* originating with the peace concluded in A.D. 89 with Domitianus². Between A.D. 89 and A.D. 101 the Dacian kingdom, with Roman support, exceeded the power the Roman Empire permitted for a client kingship. Furthermore, Decebalus was a very dangerous focus for the vast barbarian world from the Middle Danube to the North of the Black Sea. It is my assumption however that Trajan primarily wanted to bring back the Dacian kingdom to a tolerable client kingdom³. The safest solution was to diminish the territory of the kingdom and to take possession of the strongly fortified political center of the Dacian kingdom in the mountains of South-West Transylvania and to control the main routes.

Having these in mind, now we can go back to the chronology of the war of A.D. 101-102. The first campaign started, very probable, in May-June 101⁴. The Roman army led by Trajan himself crossed the Danube from Upper Moesia and advanced into the Banat along the same route as that used by Tettius Iulianus in A.D. 88 (fig. 1). At the same time, the governor of Lower Moesia, Laberius Maximus, with the army of his province crossed the Danube and advanced to the North, following the river Alutus (Olt) valley (fig. 1). His target was the Getic political center of Buridava. The evidence for the presence of the army of Lower Moesia at Buridava in the first campaign of ND. 101 are the tile stamps with the names of *legia I Italica* and *V Macedonica*⁵. The stamps of the *legia XI Claudia* are missing⁶. It is known that this

¹ See ft Strobel, *Untersuchungen zu den Dakerkriegen Trajans. Studien zur Geschichte des mittlere und unteren Donaupraumes in der Hohen Kaiserzeit*, Bonn, 1984.

² V. Lica, *Relațiile Imperiului cu dacii în timpul Flavienilor*, *EphemNap*, 6 (1996), 113-121.

³ The same idea at V. Lica, *The Coming of Rome in the Batten World*, Constantz, forthcoming.

⁴ F. Lepper, S. S. Frere, *Trajan 's Column. A New Edition of the Ciohorius Plates*, Gloucester Wolfboro 1988, 242.

⁵ IDR III 559.

⁶ K. Strobel, *Anmerkungen zur Truppengeschichte des Donaupraumes in der Hohen Kaiserzeit II: die trajanischer Ziegeistempel aus Bundava-Stoicnici*, *ZPE* 68 (1987), 292 - 284.

legion arrived in Lower Moesia at the end of A.D. 101, at the beginning of the second campaign⁷. Inside the fort from Drajna de Sus, in Northern Wallachia (Muntenia), tile stamps of all these three legions were found⁸. But the fort was built, very probably, only in A.D. 102, when the third campaign came to an end. That means that Buridava was occupied by the army of Laberius Maximus during the first campaign, in the summer of A.D. 101, when the province of Lower Moesia had only two legions.

In South-West Transylvania, the emperor, after the Battle of Tapae, entered the Hateg Depression whilst advancing towards the Mureş river. It is unlikely that Trajan planned to start the most difficult part of the campaign, the siege of the Dacian citadels from the “walled mountains”, when the wet and cold season was closely. It is more probable he has preparing the winter quarters and stockpiling supplies, the final effort being postponed for the next spring. It is the only explanation why Decebalus risked leaving his royal residence; Sarmizegetusa Regia was not endangered that moment, so he created the diversion over the mountains and over the Danube in Lower Moesia.

It was the beginning of the second campaign, when Trajan left the mountains of Transylvania hurrying to help the forts and the towns of Lower Moesia. The great victories at Nicopolis ad Istrum and at Tropaeum Traiani (Adamclissi) crushed the barbarian coalition made by Decebalus.

In the spring of A.D. 102 the third campaign of the war was opened (fig. 2). While Trajan was returning in South-West Transylvania for the final attack against the center of the Dacian kingdom, the army of Lower Moesia advanced deep into Barbaricum against the Eastern allies of Decebalus. An interesting insight to this campaign is provided by Cassius Dio⁹ noted that Laberius Maximus captured Decebalus' sister and at the same time occupied a strong citadel. The despair of Decebalus when he found out, as Cassius Dio describes, can be explained only by the loss of an important friend, probably from Moldavia whose friendship has been confirmed by a political marriage with his sister¹⁰. The same army of Lower Moesia occupied the Wallachian plain and crossed the mountains in South-West Transylvania (fig. 2). The main aim was to keep control of the main routes to the Danube. At the most important passes, strong stone forts were built, as at Hoghiz and Bretcu on the Alutus (Olt) valley in Transylvania and Drajna de Sus, Rucar and Tirgsor on the Southern part of the mountains, in Wallachia (Muntenia), as the tile stamps of the army of Lower Moesia attests.¹¹

All the territory situated East of the river Alutus, Wallachia, Southern Moldavia and Eastern part of Little Wallachia (Oltenia) as well as the South-East corner of Transylvania became lands *intra provinciam* in A.D. 102, as the Hunt Pridianum attests¹² at means they were under the authority of the governor of Lower Moesia¹³.

⁷ T. Sarnowski, Zur Truppengeschichte der Dakerkriege Trajans. Die Bonner Legio I Minervia und das Legionslager Novac. *Germania* 65.1 (1987), 107; 111-112; 117-122.

⁸ G. Stefan, Le camp romaine de Drajna de Sus. *Dacia* 11-12 (1945-1947), 123-124.

⁹ Cass. D., *Rom.*, LXVIII, 9, 4.

¹⁰ Marriages between Dacian women and neighbour kings from the Eastern Barbaricum are known from inscription CIL VI 1801=ILS 854, where *Pieporus rex Coisstobocensis* was married with *Ziais, dacia*.

¹¹ C. Opreanu, Die Folgen der ersten Dakerkrieges Trajans. für die politische Lage der Gebiete nördlich der Donau. *Acta Musei Napocensis* 35/1 (1998), 188-189.

¹² F. Lepper, S. S. Frere, *Trajan's column...*, 244-258.

¹³ I. Piso, *Fasti, Provinciae Daciae. I Die senatorischen Amsträger*, Bonn 1993, 3.

Meanwhile, on the main battle-front in South-West Transylvania, the Roman army led by the emperor conquered the fortified hills approaching Sarmizegetusa Regia. The written source does not offer too many topographical details. The final act of the war against Decebalus took place in the center of the mountains which shielded the royal Sarmizegetusa.

The knowledge of these events is of great importance because their effects were decisive for the historical evolution of this area. The main historical source is the text of Cassius Dio. It is not very rich in details, but we must agree the information it offers. It is not fair to try to amend the written evidence based on the modern historical interpretation of Trajan's Column, or of the archaeological excavations. Both can be useful as supplements of the written information. Cassius Dio tells us that after Decebalus had lost all hope of stopping Trajan, he agreed to accept the Romans terms to secure his throne and started peace negotiations. At the end, Decebalus himself came to Trajan and prostrating throwing off his arms and making the gesture of defeat. This ceremony was identified on Trajan's Column too¹⁴. There, Trajan was depicted together with his staff sitting on a platform situated inside or in front of a Roman fort. At his feet, a large group of Dacians with their weapons laying down were asking for mercy with their hands reaching towards the emperor. Behind them, standing, was Decebalus in the same attitude as his subjects.

Romanian historiography insisted on the idea that this scene refutes the text of Cassius Dio, proving that, in fact, Decebalus didn't prostrate himself in front of the victorious Trajan, keeping his royal pride¹⁵. It is a groundless interpretation. Besides the distinctness of the ancient written source, the scene on Trajan's Column is one of a great complexity. The artists had to stress the importance of the ceremony. They had to show the symbolism of the scene and to emphasize the presence of the great vanquished, king of the Dacians, Decebalus. The same scene includes the conditions of peace, illustrating the dismantling of fortifications, the only one suitable for transposing in plastic art.

The conclusion is that Trajan could depose or put into prison Decebalus if he would like to abolish the Dacian kingdom in A.D. 102. Another interesting aspect belonging to the end of the war is determining the place where the above-mentioned ceremony took place. We can see on the Column that the submission of Decebalus had been carried out around a Roman fort, probably where, at the moment, the headquarters of the emperor was located. It is obvious that when Decebalus asked for peace he was desperate and everything seemed lost for the Dacians. We have to accept that the Romans had reached the very neighbourhood of the royal residence at Sarmizegetusa. It is easy to imagine that Decebalus carried on negotiations to keep his throne and only after this was assured did he accept the Romans conditions. His other choice was to leave Sarmizegetusa, to escape, hoping to organize an opposition movement. In other words he would have tried to continue the war, as he will do in A.D. 106, at the end of the second war. Without these supposed negotiations and without an unconditional surrender, probably promised by Decebalus during the negotiations, Decebalus risked becoming marginalised, his throne given by Trajan to some noble Dacian, sympathetic to the Roman cause.

Trying to establish the most important political consequences of the peace of A.D. 102 we must come back to the text of Cassius Dio. The ancient writer tells that among the peace conditions Trajan obliged Decebalus and his staff to leave the

¹⁴ C. Cichorius, *Die Reliefs der Trajanssäule*, Berlin, 1900, LXXV

¹⁵ R. Vulpe, *colonna lui traian, monument al etnogenezei românilor*, București 1988, 147-148

conquered territories. A few lines below, Cassius Dio adds that after he left at Sarmizegetusa a "stratopedon" and garrisons in the other conquered land, the emperor returned to Italy.

The territories of the Dacian kingdom conquered by the Romans in A.D. 102, were the Banat, South-West Transylvania, including the fortified region around Sarmizegetusa Regia and Western part of Little Wallachia to the South of the Carpathians. As I have already shown, the Eastern part of Little Wallachia (Oltenia), Wallachia, South-East corner of Transylvania and the Southern part of Moldavia were already under the authority of the governor of Lower Moesia. The land conquered by the emperor himself, situated between the Danube and the Middle Mureş river remained under the Roman military occupation. It is not known the precise form of organization between A.D. 102-106, several hypothesis being expressed. But we know for sure that Trajan left in these regions an army having at least two legions and many auxiliary units, having the size of a provincial army. This army was put under the command of a *vir consularis*, Longinus mentioned by Cassius Dio. He was identified with Cn. Pinarius Aemilius Cicatricula Pompeius Longinus¹⁶ known in the prosopography of the Empire. Even so it is not possible to prove that Trajan created in A.D. 102 a new province to the North of the Danube, it was very probable a province in process of forming. This region, including the greatest part of the Southern range of the Carpathians was marked to the North by a "natural frontier", a natural axis of communication, composed of the Mureş river and of the Transylvanian sector of the Aituz (Olt) river (fig. 3). These natural boundaries were the Southern limits of the new client kingdom of Decebalus¹⁷ In this way, the main purpose of the war has been reached by Trajan. From now on, he had at his discretion the Dacian client kingship, which ruled over an area severely diminished,

The new Dacian kingdom covered central and North-West Transylvania. It was no more a great military power. The new strategic situation from North of the Danube and the positions of the Roman army did not allow Decebalus to focus other barbarian forces and to threaten the Roman rule from the South bank of the Danube, as happened before. Keeping the Dacian kingdom under Roman control was a preventive act. The main foreign policy idea of the Roman Empire towards the barbarians was to maintain the political and the military stability of the barbarian world and to create some structures, which were possible to use as a force against other barbarians in case they became dangerous for the Empire. That is the explanation of keeping Decebalus as a king. He was an experienced military commander and he had a huge prestige inside the barbarian world. Having all these qualities he seemed to be very useful to the foreign Roman policy.

Returning to the peace of A.D. 102, it is also obvious that Decebalus could no longer remain in the conquered territories. We can not believe that he would remain because it was illogical and impossible for him. The kingdom he had to rule was far away from the old royal residence at Sarmizegetusa. I have already mentioned that Cassius Dio tells that in A.D. 102 Trajan left at Sarmizegetusa a "stratopedon". In Romanian historiography there was been a long and fruitless debate upon the meaning of the information of Cassius Dio.

In my opinion, other historians out of question that Cassius Dio, as a historian, wrote his work using information transmit it who wrote before. It is very probable that he used for the chapter concerning the Dacian wars, Trajans

¹⁶ N. Gostar, *Longinus Dio Cassius LXVIII*, 12. 1-5, *Anuar Inst Ist Iasi*. 13 (1976), 53-69

¹⁷ C. Opreanu, *Die Folgen...*

Commentaries, as a main source. That means it is out of question that Cassius Dio is referring to Sarmizegetusa Regia of the Dacian kings, the only one that existed during the Dacian wars. It is not possible to believe that it was about the future Colonia Ulpia Traiana Sarmizegetusa, the veteran colony founded in the flat land of the Hăţeg Depression at A.D. 108, after the establishment of the Roman province of Dacia.¹⁸

Moreover, the information of Cassius Dio got recently a brilliant epigraphical confirmation. In the '80-s when the precinct walls at Sarmizegetusa Regia were taken down for restoration several blocks with inscribed names of the legions were found. They were construction blocks mentioning the legions which built the fort: IIII Flavia Felix, II Adiutrix, VI Ferrata¹⁹. Therefore, this fort can be identified with that "stratopedon" from Cassius Dio. It was built with construction materials taken from the Dacian sanctuaries from the neighbourhood. This was the end of Sarmizegetusa Regia. It was no longer a political and religious centre. This region did not belong to the new client kingdom of Decebalus, but it remained under Roman military occupation. Thus, Decebalus had to choose another residence in the free territories from central Transylvania. The confirmation of this new situation can be found in a letter of Pliny the Younger who, talking about Decebalus, said: *pulum regia*, alluding to a first moment of the relations of Trajan with Decebalus and to continue with a second, the final one: *pulum etiam vita*.

To the North of the Mureş river the only known Dacian citadel having stone walls and placed in an exceptional strategic position was uncovered at Piatra Craivii (fig.3) The citadel has also a remarkable economic life. The great German historian C. Cichorius noticed that the last great siege on Trajan's Column at the end of the second war (A.D. 106) can not be the siege of Sarmizegetusa Regia because in the scene was depicted a citadel placed on a high, rocky hill which did not fit topographically with Sarmizegetusa. He advanced the idea of the existence of a second royal residence, where Decebalus ruled after A.D. 102, after Sarmizegetusa was occupied by the Roman army. I think this new royal residence was at Piatra Craivii and the scenes called "the siege of Sarmizegetusa" have to be studied again and renamed.

Therefore, the first Dacian war and the peace of A.D. 102 had decisive consequences upon the history of the North Danubian land. The greatest part of the Dacian kingdom, the most important politically, military, and economically was occupied by the Romans. The main communication routes were also under the control of the Roman army.

A king with the personal qualities of Decebalus who had had great power could not easily accept his new position. That was why the peace ended so quickly. After the second war when *universa Dacia devicta act*, as the inscription from Corinth informs us, the Roman province of Dacia was created. A new historical period began in the former Dacian kingdom.

¹⁸ This hypothesis was defended hardly by H. Daicovicu.

¹⁹ IDR III/3, 268, 269, 269a, 269b, 269c, 270

LIST OF FIGURES

- Fig. 1 Map of the first campaign (summer 101) of the first Dacian war of Trajan
- Fig. 2 Map of the third campaign (spring 102) of the first Dacian war of Trajan
- Fig. 3 Map of the territories occupied and kept under control by the Roman army in A. D. 102 and the new Dacian client kingdom

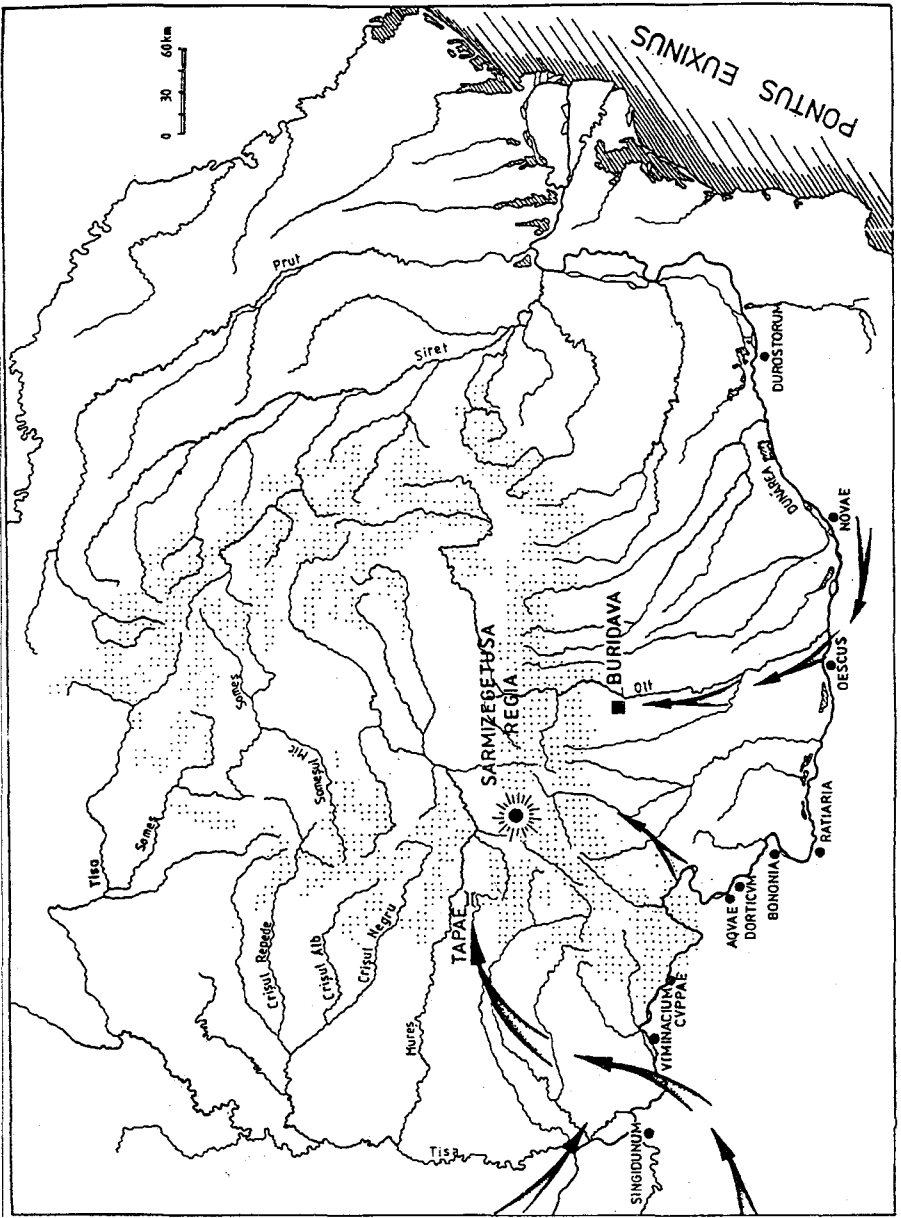


Fig. 1

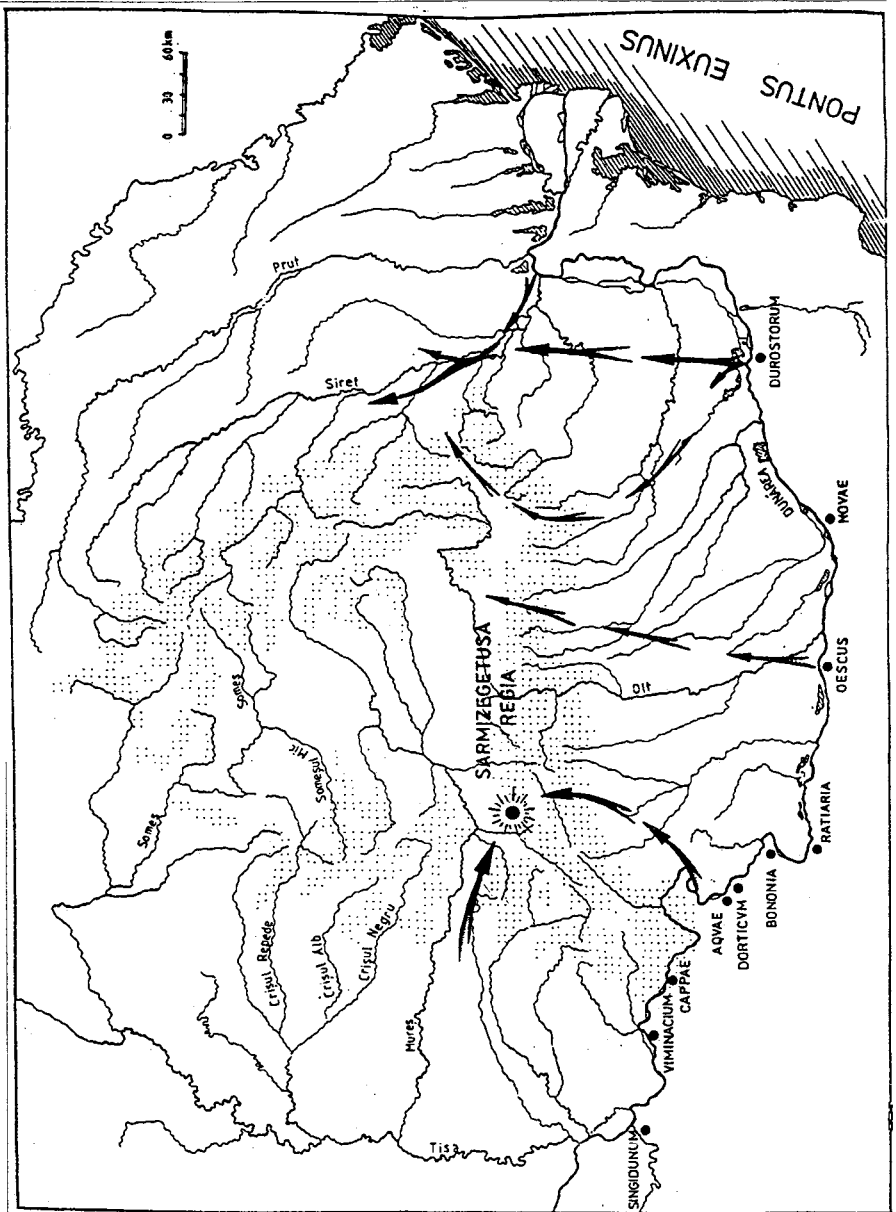


Fig. 2

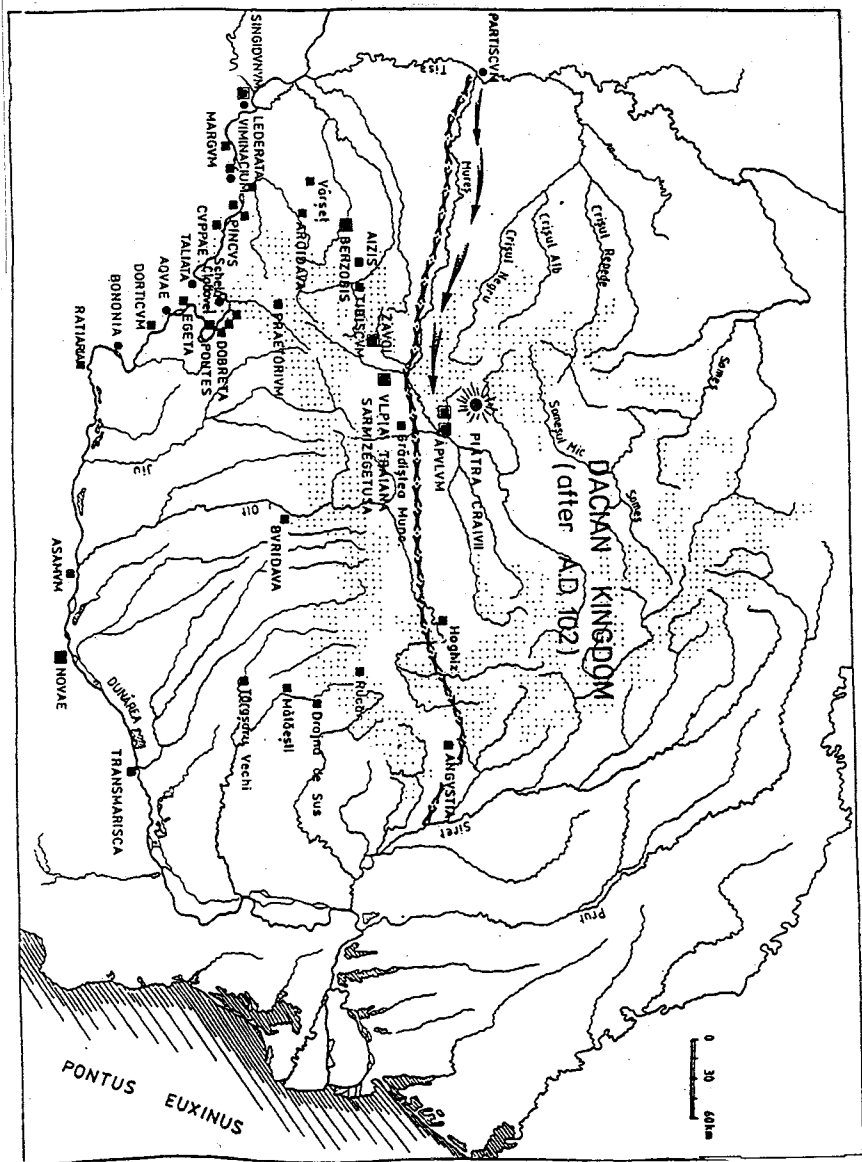


Fig. 3