THE LEGEND OF DECEBALUS*

By
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1. Introduction

King Decebalus of the Dacians has his given place in the series of great enemies of Rome, a series including names such as Hannibal, Viriathus, Iugurtha, Mithridates, and Boudicca. Classicists working in many different fields are today very much aware of the king: epigraphers, art historians who admire Trajan's Column in Rome, students of Roman military history, scholars who write about the emperor Trajan, and – why not – those with an interest in anthropology who study the ancient practice of beheading enemies or collecting their heads.¹ Decebalus is also of obvious interest to those who focus on the province of Dacia, and – true to the topic of this volume – the relations between the imperial centre and one of the last provinces to be acquired by Rome will be explored in this paper by means of an investigation of what I call “the legend of Decebalus”. In other words, this study concerns how the memory of King Decebalus lived on in a somewhat different form in Dacia than it did elsewhere.

The interest of modern anthropologists in the fate of the Dacian king was of course spurred by the sensational presentation by Professor Michael P. Speidel of the “autobiography” of the “Captor of Decebalus” in 1970. The funerary inscription commemorating the career of the Roman cavalry officer Ti. Claudius Maximus contains a dramatic description of how Decebalus ended his life: *quod cepisset Decebalu(m) et caput eius pertulisset ei Ra-*

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¹ J.-L. Voisin, ‘Les romains, chasseurs de têtes’, in *Du châtime nt dans la cité. Supplices corporels et peine de mort dans le monde antique* (Collection École Française de Rome 79, Rome 1984), 241-93, esp. 251 for Decebalus. On decapitation, though not on Decebalus, see also R. Ash, ‘Severed heads. Individual portraits and irrational forces in Plutarch’s *Galba* and *Otho*’, in J. Mossman, ed., *Plutarch and his Intellectual World. Essays on Plutarch* (London 1997), 189-214, esp. 196-201.

nisstoro(m) – “because he had captured Decebalus and had brought his head to him (the emperor Trajan) to *Ranisstorum*”.²

As far as I know there are no monographs dealing exclusively with king Decabalus in any of the major languages of classical scholarship,³ while an enemy such as Hannibal continues to generate books today, as do some other major Roman foes. This situation is largely explained by the paucity of literary sources on Decebalus (as will become clear below), yet regardless of the lack of narrative sources and anecdotal material the scholarly world is today well aware of the resistance of the Dacians and their cunning king. The question I want to explore concerns what people in the Roman world knew.⁴ Was there a general awareness of Decebalus, did his memory live on? And in what form?⁵ Is one in fact justified in talking about a “legend of Decebalus”? I shall proceed in a conventional fashion, looking at different groups of sources in turn.

2. Literary sources

There are about half a dozen mentions of Decebalus within the existing Latin literature.⁶ The earliest reference, in a letter by Pliny, dates to only a few years after the king's death: an envoy had been *a Decibalo muneri missum Pacoro Parthiae regi* (Plinius Minor, *Epistulae* 10.74.1). Probably towards the end of the second century the name of the king was added to the list of famous historical characters in the compendium of stenographical abbreviations known as the *Notae Tironianae*.⁷ The next surviving mention already

² M.P. Speidel, ‘The captor of Decebalus, a new inscription from Philippi’, *Journal of Roman Studies* 60 (1970) 142–53, esp. 142 f. for the text (= id., *Roman Army Studies* I (Amsterdam 1984), 173–87, 408 f.).

³ But see, in Roumanian, C. Petolescu, *Decebal, regele Dacilor* (Bucuresti 1991).

⁴ The topic has not been studied before as far as I know. For some rather remote similarities, see C.S. Lightfoot, ‘Trajan's Parthian war and the fourth-century perspective’, *Journal of Roman Studies* 80 (1990) 115–26.

⁵ There are perhaps some affinities between this investigation and the one I presented in ‘Roman emperors in popular jargon: searching for contemporary nicknames (I)’, in L. de Blois et al., eds., *The Representation and Perception of Roman Imperial Power* (Amsterdam 2004), 69–98, as both attempt to evaluate evidence for popular feelings on the grassroots level.

⁶ The basis for my search was the Latin CD-ROM disc # 5.3 from the Packard Humanities Institute (1991), to which material found elsewhere was added.

⁷ See W. Schmitz, ed., *Commentarii notarum Tironianarum* (Lipsiae 1893), Tab. 116.7, in the form *Decibalis*, but this may be due to later scribal errors; the text was copied and worked on until the Carolingian age (ninth–tenth centuries). Schmitz, op. cit., 11 notes that

takes us to late antiquity, to c. 370 AD, when Decebalus appears in Eutropius' *Breviarium* in the shortest of comments: *Daciam Decebalo victo subegit* (scil. *Traianus*).⁸ The Dacian king is mentioned also in the late fourth century by Aurelius Victor (*Liber de Caesaribus* 13.3) – a neutral *Decibalo rege*; by the *Historia Augusta* (*tyranni triginta* 10.8): *vir ... gentis Daciae, Decibali ipsius ut fertur adfinis* (an expression which implies fame); and in the sixth century by Jordanes (*Romana* 217: *Decebalo eorum* (scil. *Dacorum*) *rege devicto*).⁹

This result is not all that impressive and the existence of a “legend” would at first sight seem in doubt.¹⁰ A mere handful of Latin passages mentioning Decebalus is certainly not much in comparison with, for instance, how Hannibal scores. He overworked my search machine and yielded some 1,300 mentions in Latin literature alone, and in a number of works besides Livy's Third Decade where his presence of course is overwhelming. Even Petronius' Trimalchio, that great intellectual, remembered Hannibal, *homo vafer et magnus stelio* “a cunning and treacherous person”, because – as Trimalchio puts it – Hannibal destroyed Troy and burned all its statues of gold and silver in a great pyre (Petronius, *Satyrice* 50.5). That was the “legend of Hannibal” known to Trimalchio.

Yet before drawing the conclusion that Decebalus made no impact on Roman public opinion we ought to consider the composition of our literary sources. For the war against Hannibal we have Livy's Third Decade, while we have no comparable surviving historical work for the Dacian wars. In general, as is well-known, we have very little in the way of historical works after the first century AD. Everything that happened before c. AD 100 stands a fair chance of at least some mention in our surviving sources, and events from the heroic “Good Old Days” of the Republic were likely to be referred to also in non-historical works during the periods of Golden and Silver Latin, besides appearing in the many prose narratives and collections of *exempla*.

the list, which originated in the late Republic, received additions in the late second century AD. One may note, among the many (miss-spelled) names of famous characters, Tab. 115.86 Cingetorix, 116.9 Domnorix, 116.54 Hanibal, 116.79 Iugusta.

⁸ Eutropius, *Breviarium ab urbe condita* 8.2.2.

⁹ Decebalus is absent from Jordanes' *Getica*, in which other Dacian kings appear.

¹⁰ One should point out that even in the surviving Latin texts there are occasions when he might have been mentioned, although he is not. Dacia appears in, for instance, late antique Latin poetry, when the focus of the Empire was on the Danube once more. Paulinus of Nola refers to Dacia and the Dacians in his *Carmen* 17.17, 143, 213-16, 249-52 (AD 400); so does Claudianus, *De VI Consulatu Honorii* 335-38; cf. notes 8-9.

Trajan's wars against Decebalus occurred so late that not even Frontinus, who was composing his *Stratagemata* in the tradition of Valerius Maximus and presented just the kind of stuff that legends are made of, could include them in his work. Frontinus mentions four episodes from Domitian's war against the Chatti, but he seems to have been less well informed about that emperor's war against Decebalus.¹¹

The situation is different, however, when we look at the surviving Greek literature and other written sources included in the two Greek CD-ROMs that I searched.¹²

Decebalus naturally plays a considerable role in Cassius Dio's Roman history, to some extent already under Domitian, but very much more so under Trajan, as we can see in the various Byzantine summaries which is all we have of Cassius Dio for this period. All in all, there are 74 instances of "Dekebalos", of which 58 come from the Cassius Dio tradition.¹³ Then there are eight passages from Zonaras, who wrote in the early twelfth century, and five from the Suda, another Byzantine source. Other occurrences in the Greek corpus are a comment by a scholiast of Lukianos, who gives us a fragment from the historian and court physician Criton, an oration by Themistius, and a passage by Johannes Lydus, who again quotes Criton.¹⁴

In any case, when we combine Latin and Greek sources, there is enough material from Late Antiquity to assure us that the memory of the king had not disappeared. Anyone interested in the *res gestae* of the Roman

¹¹ K. Strobel, 'Der Chattenkrieg Domitians. Historische und politische Aspekte', *Germania* 65 (1987), 423-52, esp. 424 n. 6 lists the four passages; new facts on the context in W. Eck - A. Pangerl, 'Sex. Iulius Frontinus als Legat des niedergermanischen Heeres', *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 143 (2003), 205-19, esp. 209 f. We also have Frontinus, *Stratagemata* 1.10.4 mentioning *Scorylo dux Dacorum*, the predecessor of Decebalus. But Cassius Dio contains some good material from Domitian's war that one would think Frontinus might have included, had he been aware of them, such as Decebalus dressing up tree stumps in armour to trick the Romans into believing he had a large army lined up (Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 67.10.3).

¹² I used the Packard Humanities Institute's CD-ROM # 7 *Greek Documentary Texts* (1991-96) (containing inscriptions and papyri), and the University of California at Irvine's *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* disc for the literary texts, paying attention also to different ways of spelling the king's name.

¹³ There is also a mention in Paionios' Greek translation of Eutropius, composed while the Latin author still lived, which uses the form "Dekiballos" (8.2.2), see *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Auctores Antiquissimi* II (Berolini 1879), 137.

¹⁴ For Johannes Lydus, *De magistratibus* 2.28, and the Lukianos scholiast, see F. Jacoby, *Fragmenta Graecorum Historicorum* II B (Berlin 1929), 931 nos. 1-2; Themistius, *Or.* 8. *Peri fyseos basilikes* 110 B.

empire would encounter stories about him. The role he plays in these accounts is of course not very flattering; he was an obstacle to Rome's greatness and deserved to be annihilated.

When assessing Decebalus' fame, one must not forget that much literature written in the second and third centuries has disappeared, and in particular many works dealing with Trajan's war are lost.¹⁵ Trajan's physician Criton wrote an influential work about the war, which was quoted by several later authors,¹⁶ and Trajan himself wrote *commentarii* on the campaigns. In addition, Hadrian, who took part in the war as commander of the *legio I Minervia*, wrote an autobiography, and one must not forget the imperial biographies by Marius Maximus.¹⁷ Appian's now almost completely lost *Dakike* was another source, as was Dio Chrysostom's lost *Getika*, and it is probable that also Arrian's *Parthika* treated the subject to some extent.¹⁸

Some works by less famous authors may also have circulated. There is a letter by Pliny in which he encourages a certain Caninius Rufus, "a local bard at Comum" as Sir Ronald Syme called him,¹⁹ to write about the Dacian war: *optime facis, quod bellum Dacicum scribere paras* (Plinius Minor, *Epistulae* 8.4.1). It was apparently going to be an epic poem in Greek (*ibid.* 8.4.3). He briefly hints at the topics to deal with, among which is also the fate of the Dacian king: *pulsum regia pulsum etiam vita regem nihil desperantem* ("you will tell of a king driven from his capital and also from his life = to his death, but never giving up/courageous to the end"; Plinius Minor, *Epistulae* 8.4.2). This last passage can be interpreted as admiration,

¹⁵ For a general overview, see K. Strobel, *Untersuchungen zu den Dakerkriegen Trajans* (Bonn 1984), 19-22, including Trajan, Criton, Caninius Rufus, Appian, and the Cassius Dio-tradition.

¹⁶ See Jacoby 1929, op. cit. (n. 14), 931 f. no. 200 Kriton; eight fragments of the work survive.

¹⁷ See A.R. Birley, *Hadrian, the Restless Emperor* (London - New York 1997), 3, 50-52; id., 'Marius Maximus: the consular biographer', *ANRW* II 34.3 (1997), 2678-2757, esp. 2725-27.

¹⁸ G. Zecchini, 'La storia romana nella *Suda*', in G. Zucchini, ed., *Il lessico Suda e la memoria del passato a Bisanzio* (Bari 1999), 75-88, esp. 86 n. 55 argues that one of four mentions (there are actually five) of Decebalus in the *Suda* comes from Arrian (namely at E 1864; the others are from Cassius Dio).

¹⁹ R. Syme, 'Pliny and the Dacian Wars', *Latomus* 23 (1964) 750-59, esp. 750 = *Roman Papers VI* (Oxford 1991), 142-49, esp. 142.

at least to some degree, for the dead Dacian king – rare but not unique in our ancient sources²⁰ – as he seems to have shown fortitude until the end.

The passage describing Decebalus as *nihil desperantem* prompts another question. In a recent investigation of suicide in the classical world it was argued that *desperata salus* (a hopeless situation) was an acceptable reason for committing suicide.²¹ Pliny must have known that Decebalus had committed suicide (indicated by *pulsum vita*), as is indeed expressly said in some of our surviving sources and not contradicted by any ancient evidence.²² The explanation for the expression *Decebalus nihil desperans* must be that the king was reputed to have been undaunted until the end, and thus he took his own life rather than surrendered to the Romans.²³

Nevertheless, the king's name is not mentioned anywhere in this part of Pliny's correspondence, which does (and did) nothing to keep Decebalus' name alive. In fact it seems that there are some awkward gaps regarding Decebalus especially in Latin literature. I refer here to accounts where one would have thought that the name of the enemy king could have been mentioned, but it is not. The Dacians are, after all, mentioned not infrequently, already during the Flavian times, and then later during the second century. Statius, in his *Silvae* 3.3.117 f., writes *cum prima truces amentia Dacos / impulit et magno gens est damnata triumpho*; Suetonius, who knew Decebalus' later importance, mentions two Dacian wars under Domitian (Suetonius, *Vita Domitiani* 6.1), Martial refers to the Dacian wars three times,²⁴ but although he does mention the king's brother D(i)egis in the following lines, Decebalus is not named:

²⁰ Cf. below section 8, and see S. Settis, 'La Colonna', in id., ed., *La Colonna Traiana* (Torino 1988), 45–255, esp. 143, 229 f.

²¹ A.J.L. Van Hooff, *From Autothanasia to Suicide. Self-killing in Classical Antiquity* (London-New York 1990), 87, 174; Pliny's passage is not discussed.

²² Suicide is expressly stated in Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 68.14.3 (Xiphilinus): "Decebalus, when his capital and all his territory had been occupied and he was himself in danger of being captured, committed suicide; and his head was brought to Rome" (translation by E. Cary, LCL edition).

²³ On the two ways to interpret suicide in Rome – "suicide before dishonour", and "cowardly and characterless escape" – see recently Coulston, 'Overcoming the barbarian. Depictions of Rome's enemies in Trajanic monumental art', in L. de Blois et al., eds., *The Representation and Perception of Roman Imperial Power* (Amsterdam 2004), 389–424, esp. 404 and 409.

²⁴ Valerius Martialis, *Epigrammata* 5.3, 6.10.7, and 6.76.

*Accola iam nostrae Degis, Germanice, ripae
a famulis Histri qui tibi venit aquis*

“Degis, a dweller, Germanicus, on the bank that is now ours, who came to you from Hister’s subject waters” (*Epig.* 5.3, lines 1-2, translation by D.R. Shackleton-Bailey, LCL)

Pliny’s *Panegyricus* (16-17) mentions the Dacians, but is silent about the king’s name (*Quodsi quis barbarus rex* is how Pliny refers to Decebalus in 16.5). A few decades later, Gellius walks on Trajan’s Forum, admiring the decoration and discussing the *ex manubiis* inscription, but there is no word about Dacians or Decebalus (Aulus Gellius, *Noctes Atticae* 13.25.1), and Fronto, in his *De bello Parthico* 2 (van den Hout p. 220 = Haines vol. II (LCL), p. 20) and in the *Principia historiae* 10-11 (van den Hout p. 207-209 = Haines vol. II (LCL), p. 204-206) refers to the experiences of the Dacian wars without naming names.²⁵

Should one attribute any importance to this silence during the late first and second centuries? Were there conscious attempts to bury the memory of the king who created so many problems for Rome’s armies? Perhaps not; these omissions probably are purely fortuitous and may in some cases simply be due to metrical reasons, as Pliny hints in his letter to Caninius Rufus: *non nullus et in illo labor, ut barbara et fera nomina, in primis regis ipsius, Graecis versibus non resultent* (Plinius Minor, *Epistulae* 8.4.3).²⁶

3. Inscriptions

Unlike literature written on scrolls for the elite, inscriptions were documents accessible to the public at no cost and were therefore important, too, in creating and perpetuating a legend, as they could reach a wider audience.²⁷

There are less than ten surviving inscriptions mentioning the king, most of them public and some even monumental.²⁸ Three inscriptions on

²⁵ Note that Fronto, *Ad Verum imperatorem* 2.1 (van den Hout. 131 = Haines vol. II (LCL), p. 147) and *Principia historiae* 20 (van den Hout, p. 213 = Haines vol. II (LCL), p. 216) names Viriathus and Spartacus.

²⁶ “Another problem arises out of the barbaric names, especially that of the king himself where the uncouth sounds will not fit into Greek verse” (translation by B. Radice, LCL).

²⁷ I am leaving aside the question of literacy here, but in general I think that, in one way or another, monumental public inscriptions would have been accessible to a fair number of passers-by.

²⁸ Though the texts are few in number, I have not found them all collected anywhere. There are obviously many other inscriptions that refer to the Dacian *expeditiones*, see V.

Gallic pottery will be discussed at the end of this paper, the others are presented here.

(1) A large jar from Sarmizegethusa Regia in Dacia contains the two stamps *Decebalus* and *per Scorilo*. While there is little doubt that the king is being referred to (one may note the Latinized form of his name), it is debated whether *per Scorilo* refers to the potter who made the vessel, or gives the filiation of the king (cf. the Latin *puer*). As Petolescu has shown, the former suggestion must be right.²⁹

(2) Outside Dacia the earliest piece of evidence comes from Heliopolis (Baalbek) in Syria. The text lists among the accomplishments of a veteran officer an expedition under Domitian: *bello Marcomannorum Quadorum Sarmatarum adversus quos expeditionem fecit per regnum Decebali regis Dacorum* (ILS 9200).³⁰

(3) A dedication to Apollo and Diana from Cyrene dated to AD 107, only a year after Decebalus' death, already celebrates Trajan's capture of the king.³¹

(4) The tombstone of Claudius Maximus the "captor of Decebalus" was found near Philippi in Northern Greece, and dates to after the Parthian war or to at least a decade after Decebalus' death.³²

Rosenberger, *Bella et expeditiones. Die antike Terminologie der Kriege Roms* (Stuttgart 1992), 92-94; C.C. Petolescu, 'La victoire de Trajan en Mésie inférieure', *Thraco-Dacica* 16 (1995) 223-26, esp. 224; Petolescu 1991, op. cit. (n. 3), 93 and 96 (coins), but those that do not mention Decebalus by name will not be cited here. There has been a debate about of the exact identity of King Decebalus: N. Gostar argued, in a posthumously published paper, that the Dacian king Diurpaneus who fought against Domitian is the same man who later acquired the honorary "Siegername" Decebalus. This view, also found in earlier scholarship, is convincingly refuted by Petolescu 1991, op. cit. (n. 3), 14-16.

²⁹ For the stamps, see now IDR 3.3, no. 272 (with a question mark regarding whether Decebalus is the king himself); also AE 1977, 672. P. MacKendrick, *The Dacian Stones Speak* (Chapel Hill, NC 1975), 64-66 shows the vessel and the stamp, but still offers the interpretation of the discoverer C. Daicoviciu, that the text means "Decebalus, son of Scorilo", the latter being the *Scorylus dux Dacorum* mentioned in Frontinus, *Stratagemata* 1.10.4. This view is however convincingly refuted by Petolescu 1991, op. cit. (n. 3), 35 f. (as well as in the commentary in IDR 3.3).

³⁰ On the events referred to here briefly in Strobel 1984, op. cit. (n. 15), 126 f.

³¹ See SEG 9, 101: ὁ κύριος Νέρβας Τ[ραϊανὸς ...]χον Δεκίβαλλον ἔλαβε. Speidel 1970, op. cit. (n. 2), 142 n. 1 remarks that this text shows the same "official imperial propaganda" as Claudius Maximus' text (no. 4 below): Decebalus is alleged to have been "caught", but in reality he took his own life.

³² See above n. 2.

(5) In Dacia itself the defeated king may have been mentioned in two monumental inscriptions erected at Adamklissi in modern Roumania (ancient Moesia Inferior), the place where the Romans built a major victory monument. The letter “D” is however all that remains of the crucial word, and although no proposed restoration is quite satisfactory, it seems that the expression on the stone was *[exerc]itu D[acorum]*.³³

(6) One of several inscriptions of great men of the Trajanic age that were erected in Rome, accompanying their statues, also mentions the campaign in which Trajan *gentem Dacor(um) et regem Decebalum bello superavit* (CIL 6, 1444 = ILS 1022). It lists the achievements of Q. Sosius Senecio, cos. 99, cos. II 107.³⁴

(7) The *Fasti Ostienses*, which for the citizens in Rome’s harbour gave an account of the major events in the Capital and in Ostia on a yearly basis. This chronicle famously describes the last stage in Decebalus’ life: *caput] Décibali [- in sca]lis Gémóni[is -]*.³⁵

The emperor Trajan was in fact never able to parade the fettered king through Rome’s centre (the fate that befell for instance Iugurtha and Vercingetorix), but instead the government in Rome made the most of this symbolic end of Trajan’s war against the Dacians.

Was that scene on the Gemonian Steps the beginning of the “legend of Decebalus”? And what kind of a legend should we imagine? A priori, there are two more or less plausible versions: (1) the legend of Decebalus the great Dacian king who fought for his people’s freedom and opposed Rome for so

³³ In favour of *D[ecebali]*: N. Gostar, ‘Les inscriptions votives du monument triomphal d’Adamclisi’, *Latomus* 28 (1969), 118-25 (= AE 1972, 521); Strobel 1984, op. cit. (n. 15), 34 f.; Petolescu 1991, op. cit. (n. 3), 64 with some doubts. L. Bianchi, ‘Adamclisi: il programma storico e iconografico del Trofeo di Traiano’, *Scienze dell’Antichità* 2 (1988), 427-73, esp. 432 considers it utterly impossible that the inscriptions would have deigned the conquered king with a mention and he may have a point. For the epigraphical counter-argument see E. Dorotiu-Boila, ‘Despre inscriptia votiva a monumentului triumfal de la Adamclisi’, *Studii Clasice* 25 (1987), 45-56, esp. 52; see also AE 1996, 1355.

³⁴ As shown by C.P. Jones, ‘Sura and Senecio’, *Journal of Roman Studies* 60 (1970), 98-104, the Roman general in this fragmentary inscription is Sosius Senecio, not Licinius Sura; thus already briefly R. Syme, *Tacitus* (Oxford 1958), 641. Cf. also id., ‘Hadrian’s Autobiography’, *Roman Papers* VI (Oxford 1991), 398-408, esp. 403.

³⁵ The text is conveniently found in B. Bargagli - C. Grosso, *I Fasti Ostienses documento della storia di Ostia*, *Itinerari Ostiensi* 8 (Roma 1997), 35. The missing verb is perhaps *iacuit*, as suggested by Speidel 1970, op. cit. (n. 2), 151.

many decades,³⁶ or (2) that of Decebalus the treacherous Barbarian king who was forced to take his own life hunted down by the valiant Roman cavalry.

There is no doubt that the Roman authorities in Rome did their best to promote the second alternative,³⁷ and we can be certain, not least from a comparison with the gravestone from Philippi (Fig. 1), that in Rome scene 145 on Trajan's Column indeed does show the moment when the king is found by the pursuing Romans.³⁸

4. Archaeological evidence

The Dacian gold made it possible to rework part of Rome's centre in a stunning way. Trajan's Forum, with its very explicit symbolism in the form of numerous marble statues of Dacian prisoners,³⁹ was the centre piece, and an important part of this urbanistic project was Trajan's Column.⁴⁰

³⁶ This idea is not completely unwarranted; cf. that Dio Chrysostomos, who visited the battlegrounds in Dacia, spoke of the Dacians "fighting for freedom and their native land" in his "Olympian speech" (Dio Chrysostomos, *Oratio* 12.16-20), as pointed out in the admirable study by Settis 1988, op. cit. (n. 20), 229 f. In Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, 68.11.1-2 Decebalus encourages his neighbours to fight for freedom against slavery under the Romans. See further below.

³⁷ On the question of a legend promoted by the government, see Speidel 1970, op. cit. (n. 2), 150 notes 97-98, "an inscription sponsored by Trajan himself" (on Sosius Senecio's inscription); and the "wide publicity given to the 'capture' ...". In general on propaganda (in visual media) under Trajan relating to the Dacian victory see R. Scheiper, *Bildpropaganda der römischen Kaiserzeit unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Trajanssäule in Rom und korrespondierender Münzen* (Bonn 1982), 123-259.

³⁸ As was already argued by A. Stein in *PIR*² D 19 (1943). For a representation of the scene on the column see, e.g., Speidel 1970, op. cit. (n. 2), pl. XIV; Settis 1988, op. cit. (n. 20), 526.

³⁹ See P. Zanker, 'Das Trajansforum in Rom', *Archäologischer Anzeiger* 85 (1970), 499-544, esp. 507-12; some examples also in J.E. Packer, 'Trajan's forum again: the column and the temple of Trajan in the master plan attributed to Apollodorus (?)', *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 7 (1994), 163-82, esp. 173 f.

⁴⁰ The column was inaugurated in 113 AD, see J. Packer, 'Forum Traiani', *Lexicon Topographicum Urbis Romae* II (Roma 1995), 348-56, esp. 348. The attempt of A. Claridge, 'Hadrian's column of Trajan', *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 6 (1993), 5-22, esp. 13-22, to date the frieze to the first part of Hadrian's reign has not found favour with other scholars; see Packer 1994, op. cit. (n. 39), 167-71; S. Maffei, 'Forum Traiani: Columna', *Lexicon Topographicum Urbis Romae* II (Roma 1995), 356-59, esp. 358; Coulston 2004, op. cit. (n. 23), 393. Part of the area surrounding the column is however from the late 120s, see now R. Meneghini, 'Nuovi dati sulla funzione e le fasi costruttive delle "biblioteche" del Foro di Traiano', *Mélanges de l'École Française de Rome. Antiquité* 114 (2002), 655-92, esp. 689-92.

Yet, to complicate matters somewhat, we have to ask what the marvelous carved frieze on the Column really did for Decebalus' fame. Few classicists or members of the general public have ever enjoyed the details in scene 145, "The Capture of Decebalus", without the help of binoculars – or, for that matter, scene 147, "The Showing of Decebalus' head to the army",⁴¹ – except for those who had the chance to climb up the scaffolding during the recent restaurations. Decebalus features in some earlier scenes as well, but his identification is no easier there.⁴² The fact the Column was surrounded by the basilica and the two "library" halls did not make it more accessible in antiquity.⁴³

The spiral frieze is there for us to admire, and one can well imagine that it must have had an effect on its Roman viewers as well. And even though a Roman visitor may not have been able to discern its details, there must have been bystanders or street peddlers or other people living off the ancient tourist trade who would relate (their version of) the column's message to the curious visitor.

However, in Roman times there was so much more in and around Trajan's Forum that might have made a greater impression on an observer. It is remarkable that in all of antiquity we never find anyone commenting on the column's decoration, which we today might well call one of Rome's seven architectural or artistic wonders. Of course observers and visitors did comment on the column in antiquity, and it is evident that they admired it. But the monument is referred to as the *columna coc(h)lis* (or something similar), that is "the column with a spiral staircase", as was recently shown by Martin Beckmann. There is never a word about the exterior decorations, about the frieze and what it shows.⁴⁴ The obvious case is Ammianus Marcellinus' visit to Trajan's Forum in AD 357. We hear nothing about the

⁴¹ These scenes are shown by, e.g., Speidel 1970, op. cit. (n. 2), pl. XIV and XV.2; Settis 1988, op. cit. (n. 20), 526, 530.

⁴² Speidel 1970, op. cit. (n. 2), 149 n. 88 indicates the earlier scenes nos. 75, 93, and 135 on the column; Settis 1988, op. cit. (n. 20), 289, 389, 425, 508, agrees and adds scene 24.

⁴³ Packer 1970, op. cit. (n. 39), 177 f.

⁴⁴ M. Beckmann, 'The *Columnae Coc(h)lides* of Trajan and Marcus Aurelius', *Phoenix* 56 (2002), 348–57, esp. 349–53, for the terminology. Beckmann, *ibid.* 352, uses the Teubner edition of Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* 16.10.14: *elatosque vertices scansili suggestu concharum, priorum principum imitamenta portantes*, translated as "and the exalted heights with raising platforms of conch-like quality bearing likenesses of previous emperors" (the LCL edition, transl. J.C. Rolfe, here has *elatosque vertices qui scansili suggestu consurgunt*, "the exalted heights which rise with platforms to which one may mount").

Dacians, not to mention Decebalus, although the Forum made by far the deepest impression on him and the emperor Constantius: *cum ad Traiani forum venisset, singularem sub omni caelo structuram* (Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* 16.10.15).

In terms of archaeological evidence for the “legend of Decebalus”, the major Roman victory monument in Roumania, in Dacian territory, the *tropaeum* at Adamklissi, carved under Trajan by less skilled artists than the monuments in Rome and less well preserved, should also be considered.⁴⁵ The message is very similar: the Roman army conquers the Dacians; the heroes are Romans and the enemies are Dacians. What is most relevant for us is that Decebalus cannot be identified in any of the preserved panels (and very little is missing). Some scholars think they have detected the death of the Dacian king among the decorations of the Adamklissi monument, especially after the scene from Claudius Maximus’ tombstone was discovered and inspired the search for something similar at Adamklissi, but it seems that we are just dealing with generic pictures of Dacian fighters being killed by Romans.⁴⁶ Thus, at Adamklissi in Dacia the memory of Decabalus was not kept alive in any major archaeological monument, as far as we know, not even as the memory of a desperate and defeated enemy.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ See F. Bobu Florescu, *Das Siegesdenkmal von Adamklissi: Tropaeum Traiani* (Bukarest-Bonn 1965³); L. Bianchi, ‘Tropaeum Traiani’, *Enciclopedia dell’Arte Antica* 2. Suppl. V (Roma 1997), 862-64. Bianchi 1988, op. cit. (n. 33) also contains many good observations. On which victory was celebrated at Adamklissi there are many conflicting views; C. Petolescu, ‘La victoire de Trajan en Mésie Inférieure’, *Thraco-Dacica* 16 (1995), 223-26, relates the monument to Roman victories in the winter of 101/02 (based on the new inscription SEG 39, 358 = AE 1991, 1450, but the chronological argument is not convincing). The monument was also recently discussed by M. Alexandrescu Vianu, ‘Tropaeum Traiani. L’ensemble commémoratif d’Adamclisi’, *Il Mar Nero* 2 (1995/96) 145-88 (without any mention of Decebalus).

⁴⁶ Bianchi 1988, op. cit. (n. 33), 439-41 convincingly discussed the matter, but M. Griffin, ‘Nerva to Hadrian’, *The Cambridge Ancient History*, 2nd ed., vol. XI (Cambridge 2000), 84-131, esp. 110 still claims that Decebalus is represented on the Adamklissi monument, based on Speidel 1970, op. cit. (n. 2). M.P. Speidel, ‘The suicide of Decebalus on the Tropaeum of Adamklissi’, *Revue Archéologique* 1971, 74-78 is more detailed. L. Rossi, ‘Evidenza storico-epigrafica della decapitazione di Decabalo in monete e monumenti traiane con proposta di riordino delle metope del Tropaeum Traiani di Adamklissi’, *Rivista Italiana di Numismatica* 73 (1971) 77-90, esp. 81-83 also advocated Decebalus’ presence in a different metope (no. 7). Bianchi 1988, op. cit. (33), 440 f. argues that if Decebalus is shown, he appears escaping on horseback in metope no. 30.

⁴⁷ Cf. above at n. 33 on the possibility that his name was mentioned in the inscriptions on the monument.

The question of generic pictures, raised by the monument at Adamklissi, prompts us to consider whether we may also be dealing with generic pictures in the two representations of King Decebalus' death. "Roman cavalryman attacks prostrate enemy" is not a very original scene; it demonstrates Roman superiority in a particularly effective way. Scholars have often taken every aspect of the tombstone from Philippi as strictly autobiographical,⁴⁸ and I would not contradict them as far as the text is concerned. The expression *caput eius pertulisset ei Ranisstor(m)* follows no common formula in military tombstones (although, as one can easily ascertain, the Latin phrase *caput referre* (or similar) of dead enemy heads is almost a *terminus technicus*⁴⁹). Cassius Dio knows the same story: proof of the dead king was brought to Trajan and onwards to Rome (Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 67.14.3). Yet what really matters for us is what kind of story originated from the event: was it the stuff of which legends are made?

We have Trajan's column and the tombstone that indicate the existence of a uniform story. Is there more? In particular, is there more to Decebalus's head?

5. Coins

The Italian scholar Lino Rossi has argued that certain coins minted in connection with the Dacian wars do *not* show a generic picture of Trajan, Pax, or Dea Roma trampling the head or bust of a conquered Barbarian symbolizing Dacia (this is how previous scholarship has interpreted the coins),⁵⁰ but that for several reasons we can tie these motives precisely to the decapitation of Decebalus (see Figs. 2-3). Chronology is important here. The coins

⁴⁸ Cf. that Speidel 1970, op. cit. (n. 2), 149 acknowledges that Trajan's column may not show a true portrait of the king, "yet Decebalus must have looked at least similar to this truly impressive image". The relief from Philippi adheres suspiciously close to standard patterns in Roman art; Speidel 1984, op. cit. (n. 2), 408 gives references to several scholars who have pointed out iconographical *topoi* that probably influenced the relief on the tombstone.

⁴⁹ Tacitus, *Annales* 14.57: *relatum caput eius inludit Nero*; ibid. 14.59: *caput interfecti relatum*; ibid. 14.64: *caput amputatum latumque in urbem*; Tacitus, *Historiae* 2.16: *capita ut hostium ipsi interfectores ... tulere*; Florus, *Epitome* 1.45.8: *relatumque regis caput*; Historia Augusta, *Maximini duo* 11.4: *caput eius ad imp(eratorem) detulit*; Anon., *Liber de viris illustribus* 81.6: *caput (scil. Ciceronis) ad Antonium relatum*.

⁵⁰ Rossi 1971, op. cit. (n. 46), 84 f. (*RIC* II, nos. 190a, 210, 489-90, 503-6, 547). For these motives, see P.L. Strack, *Untersuchungen zur römischen Reichsprägung des zweiten Jahrhunderts I. Die Reichsprägung zur Zeit des Traian* (Stuttgart 1931), 113 f., dating some of them to the first Dacian war.

cannot be dated with any precision from the imperial titulature: Trajan is *consul V*, and this places the coins in the period AD 103-111, after Trajan had entered his third consulate (January 103), but before his sixth in 112. The work of P.V. Hill on the undated coins from AD 98-148 paved the way for Rossi, but Hill's largely iconographical analysis of the various coins led him to date some of the "trampling of the head" coins to 104 and after.⁵¹ Rossi on the other hand argues that none of the coins in question is earlier than AD 106.⁵² This later date is clearly crucial, so that what looks like a head or a bust from the shoulders up should be identifiable as the Dacian king, whose head lying on the Gemonian Stairs symbolized his utter defeat.

It seems difficult to reach certainty in this matter, but surely if sophisticated modern scholars find it difficult to determine if the head under the foot of various figures representing Roman power belongs to Decebalus, nothing will have prevented ancient users of the coins from frequently drawing that very conclusion. This is what matters as far as the "legend of Decabalus" is concerned.

The motif of trampling a Dacian bust/head enjoyed a short life in the numismatic medium but the coins themselves will have been around for a number of years, circulating and perhaps making an impression on people until they were worn or hoarded.

6. The onomastic material

Onomastics can also shed light on the question of whether Decebalus was present in people's minds. If the king had become legendary, people will have known his name. But will they also have used it? And if we find the name *Decebalus* used with some frequency, can we be sure that this happened as a result of the fame of the Dacian king? I believe we can provide affirmative answers to both these questions.

To begin with, *Decebalus* (or *Decibalus*) is registered in Detschew's *Die thrakischen Sprachreste* and can therefore be regarded as a name indigenous to the Danubian region. The etymology is not quite clear, but

⁵¹ P.V. Hill, *The Dating and Arrangement of the Undated Coins of Rome AD 98-148* (London 1970), 11-13, 29-36, 135-39. Hill based much of his work on the theory of cyclical activity at the Roman mint proposed by R.A.G. Carson. The limitations of Hill's stylistic approach were pointed out in a review by J.-B. Giard, *Revue Numismatique* 6. ser. 13 (1971), 168.

⁵² Rossi 1971, op. cit. (n. 46), 84-90. It is in fact somewhat surprising that in Hill's chronology the "trampling of a Dacian head" motive first appears in 104, well after the victory celebrations relating to the first Dacian war, but before the outbreak of the second.

Detschew, following Kretschmer, suggests a meaning for *Decebalus* related to the Latin *decet*, “es ziemt sich”, *decus*, “Zierde”, or in any case a name with a positive meaning, having to do with “propriety, honour”.⁵³ The ending *-bal* is probably connected to the meaning “shining, gleaming”.⁵⁴ *Decebalus* is therefore a name with a positive meaning that may be expected to have been given to people of Thracian language and culture.

In fact *Decebalus* occurs as a personal name in various places in the Roman world. Interestingly, all known examples belong to the period after King Decebalus’ death. I know of the following instances:⁵⁵

1. CIL 6, 25572 (Rome): *Sex. Rufius Decibalus* (he commemorates his son Sex. Rufius Achilleus – are father and son both named after heroes?)
2. CIL 15, 2797 (Rome): *Deceb[alus]* (an amphora stamp)
3. *Epigraphica* 13, 1951, 138 no. 118 (Rome): *Silvin(ius) Decibal(us)* (an *eques singularis*)
4. IGUR I, 160 face II col. C 33 = *American Journal of Archaeology* 37 (1933) Pl. II col. vii no. 85 (Rome): DEKIBALOS (member of a Bacchic cult association)
5. AE 1989, 299 (Assisi): *D(is) M(anibus) T. Vibatio Decibalo ... liberto*
6. RIB 1920 = CIL 7, 539 = 7, 866 (Birdoswald): *D. M. Deciba[li]*
7. *Die Römischen Inschriften Ungarns* 22 I.9 = CIL 3, 4150 (Savaria = Szombathely): *Iul(ius) Decibalus* (member of a large *collegium* in AD 188)
8. CIL 3, 7437 line 52 (= B. Gerov, *Inscriptiones Latinae in Bulgaria repertae* 438 = ILS 4060, but without name lists) (near Nicopolis ad Istrum): *Cresce(n)s Deceb(ali)* (a name list of a cult association of AD 227, “*album sodalicii cuiusdam Bacchi*”)
9. IGBulg 709 (near Nicopolis ad Istrum): Δικέβαλος Δικέδ[ου]
10. *Inscriptiones Latinae de Novae* 54 (Novae): *Fl(avio) Decebalo vet(erano) leg. I Ital(icae) Severianae*
11. “*Bulletin of the Varna Archaeological Society*” 14 (1963) 51 f. no. 8 (Varna): Εἰθία Δικεβάλι (sic)

⁵³ D. Detschew, *Die thrakischen Sprachreste* (Wien 1976²), 124.

⁵⁴ Detschew 1976, op. cit. (n. 52), 41, writes on the name “Balas”: “idg *bhel-* ‘glänzen’ in ai. *bhala-m* ‘Glanz’”, and gives further references to Celtic and Greek corresponding words.

⁵⁵ The list has been compiled with the help of the *AE*; *SEG*; *PIR*² D 19; Detschew 1976, op. cit. (n. 53); B. Lörincz et al., *Onomasticon provinciarum Europae latinarum* II (Wien 1999) (who quotes only five instances); M. Burbulescu, ‘Numele Δεκέβαλος pe o inscriptie descoperita in Dobrogea’, *Thraco-Dacica* 11 (1990), 5-9; and above all Petolescu 1991, op. cit. (n. 3), 15.

12. CIL 3, 7477 (Durostorum): *Valerius Decibal[u]s* (son of Valerius Marcus *miles leg. XI Claudiae* and Aurelia Faustina)
13. AE 1998, 1141 (Sucidava): *Diurdano Decebali (filio) veteran(o)*
14. AE 1992, 1495 (= SEG 40, 605) (Constanza): Ναϊέτων Δεκεβά[λ]ου
15. E. Popescu, *Inscriptile grecesti si latine din secolele IV-XIII descoperite in Romania* (Bucuresti 1976) 272 (Salsovia): *Dicebalus exarchus*

Decebalus is not a very common name, though. It is not nearly as common as some other Thracian names, such as the many names beginning with *Muca-*: *Mucaboris*, *Mucatralis*, *Mucaporis*, and *Mucianus* even,⁵⁶ or the names *Bithus* (*Bithys*), *Dizas*, and so on.⁵⁷ Still, with fifteen entries in our list, it is worth carrying out an investigation into the occurrence of the name *Decebalus*.

To put the frequency of *Decebalus* in another context, namely that of names referring to legendary enemies, it may be noted that in Rome *Hannibal* is equally common in inscriptions, with four known cases.⁵⁸ In addition we have literary references for the use of the name *Hannibal*, but perhaps significantly we are dealing with a slave name when Suetonius (*Life of Domitian* 10.3) reports that the senator Mettius Pompusianus in the reign of Domitian gave his slaves the names *Mago* and *Hannibal* (he had an “imperial nativity”, *vulgo ferebatur habere imperatoriam genesim*, which made him a possible rival, and he was an avid reader of Livy, thus perhaps also a republican; cf. Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 67.12.2-4). Then in the late second/early third century we come across the striking cognomen *Hannibalianus*, born by a man of consular rank, who is considered to have been an ancestor of the Praetorian Prefect under Diocletian, Afranius Hannibalianus.⁵⁹ Moreover, during the reign of Constantine I it briefly entered the

⁵⁶ Detschew 1976, op. cit. (n. 53), 312-20: “Same, Art, Geschlecht, Nachkommenschaft”; cf. V. Besevliev, *Untersuchungen über die Personennamen bei den Thrakern* (Amsterdam 1970), 38 f. on Mucianus.

⁵⁷ On *Bithus*, see Detschew 1976, op. cit. (n. 53), 66-68 “strong, powerful” p. 65; on *Dizas*, see ibid., 132-34: related to “wall, castle”. There are numerous attestations for each name.

⁵⁸ L. Vidman, CIL 6, 6.2. *Index cognominum* (Berolini-Novii Eboraci 1980) gives CIL 6, 6461, 23782, 38429. H. Solin, *Die stadtrömischen Sklavennamen I-III* (Stuttgart 1996), 22 adds NSA 1915, 47 no. 32 (M. Furius M.l. Annibalus).

⁵⁹ G. Barbieri, *L'Albo senatorio da Settimio Severo a Carino (193-285)*, Roma 1952, 354 no. 2039; *PIR*² H 14. The man was of Eastern origin and the name may have a local flavour.

imperial family, as a half-brother of his was called Hannibalianus, as was his nephew.⁶⁰ Perhaps an eastern onomastic tradition is the explanation.

As for the men called *Decebalus*, it is important to identify their social status. Are they slaves and freedmen, or are they freeborn? A master giving his slave the name *Decebalus* perhaps does so as a practical joke, as Mettius Pompusianus must have done with his slaves Mago and Hannibal, or for some other particular reason that we cannot know, but hardly in order to honour the king.⁶¹ If a free person gives the name to a child, more respect is likely to be involved.

Among the “*Decebali*”, slaves or probable slaves appear in very few cases.⁶² On the contrary, the largest group is made up of men who undoubtedly were freeborn (nos. 2, 3, 10, 12, 13, and 15), and then there is an almost equal amount of so-called “*incerti*”, i.e. men who might be either freed slaves or freeborn: nos. 6, 7, 8, 11, and 14. Most of these *incerti* come from Dacia and Moesia, and since it has been established by György that among the slave names used in Roman Dacia only a very small portion were not Greek or Latin,⁶³ it is not likely that many of these *incerti* from Dacia and Moesia were former slaves.

The geographical spread is also interesting. Rome is well represented, but with a few exceptions it is the area covered by modern Roumania and Bulgaria that provides most of the instances.

How, though, can we determine whether in these inscriptions the names of our epigraphical *Decebali* were inspired by the Dacian king? We

⁶⁰ *PLRE* I, Hannibalianus nos. 1-2 for Constantine's relatives; no. 3 for Afranius Hannibalianus, *cos.* 292, *PVR* 297-98.

⁶¹ J. Baumgart, *Die römischen Sklavennamen* (Breslau 1936), 57-59, recorded instances where the names of foreign rulers, some of them hostile to Rome, were used during the imperial period; Antiochos was by far the most common name, while also Pharnaces was well represented. The investigation is now superseded by Solin 1996, op. cit. (n. 58), 239-55, esp. 244-47 for Antiochos (189 instances) and 254 f. for Pharnaces (30 references). Cf. H. Solin, ‘Appunti sulla presenza di Africani a Roma’, *Africa Romana* XIV (Roma 2002), 1381-86, esp. 1382 on one *Primus qui et Iugurtha* (H. Solin - M. Itkonen-Kaila, *Graffiti del Palatino I. Paedagogium* (Helsinki 1966), no 177). According to Solin the original name of the man must have been Iugurtha, as his master would not have bestowed such a name on him.

⁶² As far as I can make out, only no. 5 belongs in this category without any doubt (he is a freedman, and thus was once a slave), while no. 2 perhaps is a slave, and no. 4 perhaps a freedman. No. 9 seems to be the property of one Dikedos.

⁶³ E. György, “Die Namengebung der Sklaven und Freigelassenen im römischen Dakien”, *Acta Musei Napocensis* 36 (1999), 109-28.

can approach this question by way of a comparison. In Cassius Dio's account of the Dacian wars a few other Dacian leaders are mentioned by name: for instance Diegis, the king's brother, whom we encountered in Martial's text (cf. above, p. 159; see also Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 67.7.2), Ouezinias (or Vezinas), a close ally (Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 67.10.2), and Bikilis, a companion of his (ibid. 68.14.5).

According to Detschew, the meaning of these names, in so far as their etymology can be established with reasonable certainty, is quite positive. *Ouezinias* seems related to "strength", "hero", "courageous",⁶⁴ while *Diegis* can be linked to a word meaning "bright", "shining";⁶⁵ *Bikilis* remains unexplained. In any case, there should be nothing to prevent parents from calling their children by such names. If they desired a Thracian name but wanted to fit into the Roman context, they might be expected to have preferred *Ouezinias*, *Diegis* or *Bikilis* to the one name which might really offend any Roman with a sense of history, namely *Decebalus*.⁶⁶ Yet to the best of my knowledge these inoffensive Thracian names do not appear in any inscription.⁶⁷

Two possible explanations come to mind. The first is that those people who chose the name *Decebalus* were completely unaware of the existence of the great king and chose his name by chance – the legend was completely dead, then – while avoiding for some reason names with a positive ring such as *Ouezinias* or *Diegis*. The other is that some memory of King Decebalus

⁶⁴ Detschew 1976, op. cit. (n. 53), 347.

⁶⁵ See Detschew 1976, op. cit. (n. 53), 126, for the etymology.

⁶⁶ Regarding the frequency of *Decebalus*, I do not think that we are dealing with a parallel to the contemporary onomastic practice of the U.S. armed forces, which use helicopters with type names such as OH-58 Kiowa Warrior or AH-64 Apache. These names, referring to native peoples that once were much maligned "savages" and enemies, are gestures at least partly originating in an intellectual milieu of imperialistic guilt, surely unknown in Roman times.

⁶⁷ For the occurrence of these names see Detschew 1976, op. cit. (n. 53), 68, 135, 347; in each case only the example from Cassius Dio is cited. One looks in vain for *Diegis*, *Degis* or any similar name in Lörincz *et al.* 1999, op. cit. (n. 55). But cf. H. Solin, 'Thrakische Sklavennamen und Namen thrakischer Sklaven in Rom', *Studia in honorem G. Mihailov* (Sofia 1995 [1997]), 433-47, esp. 439 on *Diagiza M. Fulvi s(ervus)* (CIL 15, 2445): "Mutet thrakisch an", with further references. A new Thracian female name *Degou* was presented by T. Corsten, 'Einige neue thrakische Namen', *Beiträge zur Namenforschung* 25 (1990), 261-66, esp. 262 f.

still lingered and exerted a small but perceptible influence over naming practices.⁶⁸ The former explanation seems unlikely, to say the least.

7. Pottery

Finally, there is the decorated Gallic terra sigillata of La Graufesenque in Southern France. The production of this type of pottery began in the second half of the first century AD.⁶⁹ Figs. 4-5 show scenes from La Graufesenque pottery. The first item has been known for a long time (it appears in CIL 13, 10013.39) and was found in western France. It features someone called Decibale; his name is repeated twice. The word *dumenus* has been interpreted as *dominus*, and the most coherent reading that has been given is [*Sarmizege*]dusa ubi Decibale dumenus [---].⁷⁰ But the text is fragmentary and the only certainty is that it refers to the Dacian king's suicide.

A more recent discovery, from La Graufesenque itself, shows that the local potters also produced other scenes featuring Decebalus (Fig. 5).⁷¹ These are interesting manifestations of the "legend of Decebalus", but obviously the evidence must be seen in perspective; we are not dealing with objects as common as Coca-Cola bottles. Déchelette's standard work shows that there was an enormous richness and variety in the decorations used for La Graufesenque pottery; above all, representations of gods, gladiators, and animals.⁷² In contrast, all we have at the moment is one large and one small fragment showing one scene, one vessel showing another, and a third type of decorated terra sigillata with the text *DECIBALE N[-] / ATEVANE* and a fragmentary reclining figure.⁷³ Certainly such scenes could not be found in

⁶⁸ For the reason indicated in the main text I do not agree with the comment of V. Bozilova, to *Inscr. Lat. de Novae*, no. 54 (no. 10 in the list above), that by the early third century the name Decebalus was possibly "un nome indigène tout à fait banal".

⁶⁹ See J. Déchelette, *Les vases céramiques ornées de la Gaule romaine I-II* (Paris 1904); A. Oxé, 'La Graufesenque', *Bonner Jahrbücher* 140/141 (1936), 325-94; and A. Bourgeois, 'L'empreinte de Rome dans le Gaules: l'apport de La Graufesenque (Millau, Aveyron)', *Cahiers du Centre Gustave Glotz* 6 (1995), 103-38, esp. 103 for recent scholarship.

⁷⁰ M. Labrousse, 'Les potiers de la Graufesenque et la gloire de Trajan', *Apulum* 19 (1981), 57-63, esp. 58. He also reads *rex* after *dumenus*.

⁷¹ Presented by Labrousse 1981, op. cit. (n. 70), 59 f. with figs. 4-6. The scene is reproduced also in van Hooff 1990, op. cit. (n. 21), 180; Settis 1988, op. cit. (n. 20), 227.

⁷² See Déchelette 1904, op. cit. (n. 69).

⁷³ In addition to CIL 13, 10013.39, the first type was discovered at La Graufesenque in 1934, see Labrousse 1981, op. cit. (n. 70), 59 and fig. 3; for the second type, see above n. 70; for the third, also found at La Graufesenque, see Labrousse 1981, op. cit. (n. 70), 61 and fig. 7.

every village *caupona* in Gaul or in those places to which decorated Gallic terra sigillata was exported.

Yet these discoveries are significant. Clearly the events across the Danube had made enough of an impression on the imagination of these Gallic potters to stimulate them to create these images. And once production began, the legend spread further. The potter responsible for these “historical decorations”, L. Cosius, did not produce solely for the local market, for his products have been discovered in Italy, Gaul, Britain, the Germanic provinces and Raetia.⁷⁴

These iconographic sources may also have further implications. We are probably not just seeing some scenes from distant Dacia being recreated for the buyers of these pots. The picture shown in Fig. 5 seems to fit an amphitheatrical context rather well. It was recently stressed by Kathleen Coleman how the Romans used to re-enact mythological, but also historical events in their amphitheatres,⁷⁵ and perhaps something similar took place after the Dacian victory. Whether the spectators were shown merely a tableau (vivant?) of Decebalus’ suicide, or a condemned criminal was given the role of Decebalus to perform, is difficult to say.⁷⁶ Since the inscriptions in Fig. 5 also refer to the Parthian campaign of Trajan, we can date these performances to after AD 117, and the activities of the La Graufesenque potters to sometime after that.

⁷⁴ On the potter L. Cosius and the distribution of his products see Labrousse 1981, op. cit. (n. 70), 62.

⁷⁵ K.M. Coleman, ‘Fatal charades: Roman executions staged as mythological enactments’, *Journal of Roman Studies* 80 (1990), 44–73, esp. 64 f., 71 f.; K.M. Coleman, ‘Launching into history: aquatic displays in the early Empire’, *Journal of Roman Studies* 83 (1993), 48–74, esp. 60–62, 677 f. for historical scenes. When Cassius Dio 67.8.2 mentions battles between infantry formations and between cavalry units in the circus games after Domitian’s Danubian campaign, it sounds as if these were also inspired by historical events, probably by the recent war.

⁷⁶ The connection with the amphitheatre was already made by Labrousse 1981, op. cit. (n. 70), 62, who suggested painted tablets as the inspiration; similarly J.-J. Hatt, ‘Armée romaine et dieux celtiques’, *Bulletin de la Société Nationale des Antiquaires de France* 1983, 24–30, esp. 25 “spectacle de cirque”, and Coulston 2004, op. cit. (n. 23), n. 140; doubted by Settis 1988, op. cit. (n. 20), 226–28, who suggested the potter had combined real historical events with the large *venationes* staged in Rome after the second Dacian victory. One may note that Plinius Minor, *Panegyricus* 17.2 mentions painted scenes in the triumph after Trajan’s first Dacian war.

We can thus infer another ingredient in the shaping of the “legend of Decebalus”, namely performances in Roman amphitheatres, probably in Southern France (but perhaps elsewhere too), showing his defeat.

8. Conclusion: Dacians as Trojans?

Trajan’s campaigns against the Dacians was a major war which saw one of the largest concentrations of Roman forces ever. But the Dacian wars were not merely large and bloody.

The wars against the Dacians were important for many reasons. It was the first military enterprise conducted by the new emperor. Trajan was a military man, but he needed to prove his qualities as emperor. Domitian had achieved a mixed success in his northern wars, a fact which had damaged his rule and reputation (cf. Tacitus, *Agricola* 41.2-3; Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 67.7.2-4).⁷⁷

Warfare ended in AD 106 and Trajan made the most of the victory when he celebrated his second Dacian triumph. This also meant that after twenty years of trouble the Romans had finally settled the Dacian question. For good, as it turned out.

Did the Romans know whom they had been fighting? This question is less straightforward than it sounds. Of course, tens of thousands of Roman soldiers knew that they faced the Dacian forces of King Decebalus. But what about the people living far away from the front line, in the days before mass communication? Even though there is no way of really finding out, one would assume that news about this major event had travelled far, and that the name of King Decebalus had become known. We do not find much support for this view in surviving literature, though. Dacians are mentioned, not infrequently, but Decebalus appears much more rarely. Of course this may be a coincidence.

Once the king was dead, the Roman authorities made the most of the capture of Decebalus in their shaping of public opinion. The king could not be lead in a triumph and on to his execution. But the next best thing occurred: his head was shown to the army and to the people of Rome.

We should realize that not every venue chosen by Trajan and his advisers was equally efficient in shaping the memory of the defeat of Decebalus – there are doubts about the impact which the column in Rome had. In

⁷⁷ K. Strobel, *Die Donaukriege Domitians* (Bonn 1989), 111 f.; id., review in *Klio* 85 (2003), 530-32, esp. 532.

any case, only a small minority of the inhabitants of the Roman world ever had the opportunity to visit Trajan's Forum.

Did news of Decebalus' suicide and decapitation travel everywhere (a question which is of relevance in the larger context of the effects of Roman rule on the provinces)? My feeling is that it did, even if the process of dissemination must have been haphazard. First of all, the returning soldiers, of whom there were many, must have brought with them scores of anecdotes about the war, which surely also involved Decebalus. And when receiving the *honesta missio*, veterans may eventually have taken the stories even further, to non-military areas. Therefore I do not think that it is a coincidence that Decebalus is mentioned not only in Rome and Ostia but in inscriptions originating from five or six different provinces. To these epigraphic references the evidence provided by the Gallic terra sigillata must be added. In itself the number of texts is of course ludicrously low, but as always the surviving inscriptions are only a fraction of those that once existed.

The defeat of Decebalus was also picked up by Greek and Latin writers. Enough survives for us to see that he had indeed become legendary. Decebalus never acquired the same status as Hannibal, but one of the reasons why he did not may lie in the general conditions prevailing in the centuries following his death. Intellectuals had other concerns than the wars of the late first and early second centuries, and Roman history and culture did not, after Decebalus' death, develop in the same way as after the Second Punic war.

As far as the official picture is concerned, the content of the "legend" is clear: the wicked Barbarian was forced to take his own life. But was there another and different legend? The onomastic sources point in this direction. Are there perhaps even grounds for assuming the existence of an "anti-Roman legend", a legend of "Decebalus the great freedom fighter"? As we have seen, there are in fact some literary references stressing that the freedom of the Dacian people was at stake. Cassius Dio narrates how, in the lull between the first and second war, Decebalus sent emissaries to his neighbours with the message, that "it was safer and easier for them, by fighting on his side before suffering any harm, to preserve their freedom, than if they should ... later be subjugated themselves".⁷⁸ The Greek intellectual Dio Chrysostomus apparently visited the two opposing armies at about the same time, and in his *Olympic Discourse* described them as follows: "strong men

⁷⁸ Cassius Dio, *Roman history* 68.11.2 (Xiphilinus), transl. by E. Cary, LCL.

contending for empire and power [obviously the Romans], and their opponents for freedom and native land”.⁷⁹

Even in the Graeco-Roman world, then, there was some understanding for the cause of Decebalus and his people. Perhaps, especially with the passing of time, the wars of Decebalus and the Dacians took on something of a legendary character, with the old foes beginning to appear like contenders of the “Homeric kind”, a pair of noble antagonists such as Achilles and Hector. The Trojans were heroes too, after all. Thus to some people, evidently for the most part in the Danubian region, precisely in the area where one would expect it, Decebalus remained one of the heroes of the past, even several centuries after his death, yet without any pointed anti-Roman connotation.⁸⁰

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⁷⁹ Dio Chrysostomus, *Oratio* 12.20: τοὺς δὲ ὑπὲρ ἐλευθερίας τε καὶ πατρίδος, transl. by J.W. Cohoon, LCL; the relevance of this passage was underlined by Settis 1988, op. cit. (n. 20), 229.

⁸⁰ To follow up on the onomastic parallel used above: one may note that the name Hannibal (or rather Annibale) has been quite accepted (even, or perhaps mostly) in noble and literary circles in Italy since the Renaissance.