THE DACIAN SOCIETY - FIERCE WARRIORS AND THEIR WOMEN SOURCES AND REPRESENTATIONS

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Abstract: There is not much information about the Dacian society and especially the role of women within it. There are few ancient sources who deal more with the Thracians and a few about the Getae and Dacians, but the majority speak about the men and their wars. It is not very difficult, however, to understand the role of women in a warrior society, although parallels must be drawn to other ancient civilizations in the area. From what we know from sources, representations on Trajan's Column and archaeology, Dacian common women were in charge with the most domestic activities, while the noble women wore gold and jewels. However, it is possible that, in the final days of the independent Dacian Kingdom, they all fought for their lives and children, while many of their husbands had already been killed.

Keywords: Dacian women, warriors, Transylvania, ancient society, Trajan's Column.

The Dacians. The sources

One of the most developed and important civilizations in ancient Europe was the one that flourished north of the Danube and is known today as the Dacian civilization, or, as it appears mainly in the historical works of the communist times, the Daco-Getic civilization. Together with the Celts and Germanics/Germans, the Dacians were one of the main Barbarian peoples in Europe, and one of the main arch-enemies of the Roman Empire, even after 106 AD, as the so-called Free Dacians to the north and east of the Dacian province continued to raid the province and even south of the Danube, together or with other Barbarian tribes.

Unfortunately, the Dacians, like other Barbarians, did not write, so all the information we have about them comes from the Greeks and the Romans. Even these wrote

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† There is still a debate about the identity of Dacians and Getae. Some authors tend to believe they were the same, also because ancient authors mention they spoke the same language, although the Dacians inhabited the Transylvanian mountains and the Getae lived in the Romanian Plain towards

more about the Thracians and the Getae (especially the Greeks in mainland Greece, based on information coming from Greek settlers on the western banks of the Black Sea, or information from various merchants, mercenaries or other ancient sources) which they knew better. Relations between Greeks and the Getae were usually peaceful, based on trade and hiring mercenaries, but not always – the Getae used to attack from time to time Greek settlements, also allied with Scythians and other raiding Barbarians.

There are a few ancient sources talking about these mounted Barbarians, the Getae, although the information differs, perhaps because of the source, the aim of the writer, the period and area described. The image thus created is a very strange one, with different customs, giving the researcher a hard time in interpreting them.

The first clear mentioning of the Dacians in a written source by Julius Caesar, and very briefly, just the ethnonym, without any other reference. As Roman territory began to expand and close on the Danube and its mouths, information about the Dacians and the Getae begin to appear in Roman sources also, from official chroniclers and poets alike. Worthy of noticing are Ovidius’ information about the Getae, their equipment and tactics, although without any information on society and women. They were very violent, together with their allies, the Bastarnae, Bessi and Sarmatians – ”A barbarous coast to port”, used to savage rapine, always full of bloodshed, murder, war”. As soon as the Danube freezes, “the barbarian host attack on swift horses:/ strong in horses and strong in far-flung arrows/laying waste the neighbouring lands far and wide.”. The attacks are swift: ”The enemy, with his bow, his arrows dipped in venom,
circles the walls fiercely on his snorting steed:
and as a ravening wolf carries off a sheep, outside
the fold, and drags it through the woods and fields,
so with anyone the barbarians find in the fields,
who hasn’t reached the protection of the gates:
he either follows them, a captive, and accepts the chain
round his neck, or dies by a venomous shaft.”

The Getae actually control all the territory beyond the walls - ”Though there’s a mix of Greeks and Getae on this coast,
it’s characterised more by the barely civilised Getae.
Great hordes of Sarmatians and Getae pass
to and fro, along the trails, on horseback.
There’s not one among them who doesn’t carry
bow, quiver, and arrows pale yellow with viper’s gall:
Harsh voices, grim faces, the true image of Mars,
neither beard or hair trimmed, hands not slow
to deal wounds with the ever-present knife
that every barbarian carries, strapped to his side.”
Indeed, an enemy worthy of fighting the Roman legions.

The military danger posed by the Dacians in the Danube and Balkan region was noticed by the Romans, hence the many mentions of Dacians and their actions. Of course, the stress in these ancient writings is put on the political and military aspects, and mainly events are noted and described.

Among the ancient sources dealing with this civilization there are those of Herodotus, Plato, Cicero, Caesar, Diodorus Siculus, Horatius, Strabo, Titus Livius, Ovidius, Plinius the Elder, Dio Chrysostomos, Plutarch,Tacitus and many others.

We know from various sources that many writings on the Getae and Dacians were lost in time, including writings especially written about them – such as Dio Chrysostomos’ History of the Getae, lost – here valuable information about the society and way of life must have been in abundance, perhaps even from eye witnesses, merchants, travelers, slaves. From all the ancient pieces, we have to make an incomplete puzzle about Dacian society, while trying to fill in the blanks with information from other sources, analogies with other ancient Barbarian peoples and archaeological pieces, which usually raise more questions than give answers.

Luckily, two unwritten ancient “documents” survived until today – the monument at Adamclisi, in Dobrudja, Romania, with its metopae representing Roman soldiers, Dacian warriors and their Germanic allies and Dacian civilians, including women and children, and the world-known Trajan’s Column in Rome, a chronicle in stone of the Roman-Dacian wars of emperor Trajan in 101-102 and 105-106, where not only soldiers of both sides, but also civilians are carved in stone. Also, from Trajan’s times, and perhaps not only, a large number of statues representing Dacians has survived, but only men, perhaps noble prisoners.

Representations of Dacian women also appear on the above mentioned monuments and on other pieces, representing the province. Also, Dacian women, or goddesses, appear on phalerae, like the ones from the Lupu hoard. The hoard was found by accident in 1978, and consists of 11 pieces – a bronze mug, two silver fibulae, a silver jar and seven phalerae. Two

to the Empire, who controlled only the Greek ports, so it is possible that the Barbarians roamed freely in the hinterland.

7 Ovid, V, VII, 11-20.
phalerae have zoomorphic symbols, two have two mounted warriors, and three depict women/goddesses. The style of the representations is rather poor.

On all the phalerae, the dress and hairstyle of the characters are identical, and some might say the representations might look very similar to the Romanian traditional dress. "Over" the clothes, the characters seem to be wearing phalerae or necklaces. One of them holds in her hands what seem to be vessels, with a strange snake-like animal under the right arm; the other one holds only one vessel in her right hand, with the same snake-like animal under, while under her left arm and hand lies another fantastic animal, with what seems to be a very long tongue touching the woman’s neck. The third character has her hands oriented towards her skirt and two fantastic animals on her sides (felines?, gryphons?!). The interesting element is that this third character has wings. All three of them are clearly representations of religious characters, from the Dacian pantheon or beliefs, about which, unfortunately, we don’t know much. We also don’t have any hint towards the existence of Dacian priestesses. Perhaps the whole deposit was meant as a religious ritual. It has been dated to the first decades of the 1st century BC.

Archaeological evidence for Dacian burials is very scarce. Only few burials have been found, and research results are rather inconclusive. There is a huge gap of burials in the Dacian society, and those found also more recently, in the years 2014 and 2015, by “amateur archaeologists” with metal detectors, are still being dug by archaeologists and studied, but the first findings of weapons indicate the deceased are men.

Since the Dacians used to burn their dead and then bury only the ash and cremated pieces of bones, it is almost impossible to determine the gender of the deceased. A possibility would be to interpret the offerings accompanying the remains, but some of these are also poor. Only in the case of warrior burials it is clear that the deceased was a man, being accompanied by the weapons he had used during his life. For other of the rest of the few burials discovered, the inventory of the graves such as pendants, beads or ceramics point that the deceased was a female.

Some of the few Dacian skeletons come from a necropolis found in Hunedoara county, in the backyard of the famous Hunyadi Castle. The buried are children, and they have not been cremated, so specialists could easily determine the gender of the deceased by studying their bones.

In Hunedoara, from over 52 individuals found at the site, the 10 identified females buried here are aged between 6 months – 45 years old. Eight are children, one is an adolescent and only one is an adult. The poor inventory consists in small metal pendants, glass beads, animal bones (perhaps meat offerings), fibulae, bracelet fragments, earrings, bronze chain links. Bucket pendants were found only at females. Usually there is only a glass bead/fibula/earring/etc per grave,

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8 Besides the skeletons, the archaeologists found parts of skeletons, from disturbed burials, strange placements of single human and animal bones, several deposits with various objects, not directly linked to the burials.
Also almost all the 12 males have only very poor inventory, sometimes only a coloured glass bead.
It is interesting that the males are deposited in the center, females on the margins of the complex.
For 30 skeletons or parts of skeletons it was impossible to determine the gender, as the site has suffered over time from of human activity.
The other necropolis is near the Getic settlement Zargidava, in Brad Commune, east of the Carpathians, in Moldavia, close to the river Siret.
One of the graves here may be that of a woman, since, besides the skeleton, the inventory consists of two iron bucket pendants and three bronze earrings. A second grave, with the skeleton of a child, had two iron bucket pendants, identical to the ones form the first grave. A third grave, under the second, also had two iron bucket pendants, identical to the others, and an iron fibula.\footnote{Ursachi, 1995, 259.}
In another dig, two children graves appeared, one having two iron bucket pendants, identical to the others, and two small crucibles with traces of bronze. The second skeleton had two earrings identical to the ones from the other graves and a bronze fibula.\footnote{Ursachi, 1995, 260.}
Another grave of a child had two glass beads and two iron bucket pendants. Another skeleton of an adult had two bronze earrings on its chest.
Unfortunately, no anthropological studies have been made on these skeletons, so nobody knows their gender. More than 50 years ago, when the research took place, the specialists were more interested in chronology, ethnicity and typology of material funds...
So, taking into account the more recent results by the team who worked in Hunedoara, and especially the link between the bucket pendants and the female burials, we believe that, in Zargidava, around the same time as burials took place in Hunedoara, the Dacians in this region may have used the same rituals and bury the bucket pendants only with females. Earrings might have been put also in graves of men. Until further studies on these human remains, if they still exist somewhere and somebody will analyze them, this theory remains subject to critic.

The woman in the Dacian society

As far as we know, the Dacians were a patriarchal society, dominated by a ruling class made of warriors and priests (the nobles were called 'tarabostes', only they were allowed, it seems, to cover their head and wear the famous Dacian-type pileus). Of course, the lower class was involved in agriculture, animal husbandry, handicraft, serving the elite.
There are no hints that Dacian women could be priestesses or be involved in any way in the religious rituals, however, it could be a possibility, but without supporting evidence.
The women of the aristocracy were for sure privileged, living in fortifications, the famous Dacian dwelling-towers, having servants and maybe slaves. They were the "masters"
of the household, dealing with domestic issues while their husbands were away on hunting, training or campaigning. They wore the best clothes and jewels, some of them brought by their husbands from raids in the Roman Empire, took perhaps care of the education of their children – especially daughters, since their sons would join their fathers at an early age. In an endemically violent society, they could have learnt how to use weapons, shoot arrows and defend themselves, but, again, there is no solid argument for this, except for the vicinity with the Scythian and Sarmatian territories, and a possible influence from these peoples. Perhaps rich merchants were also part of the ruling class, so their wives enjoyed a privileged status also.

For the commoners, the situation of the woman must have been like in any other society in the world from the early times until the modern age. The woman would have children and take care of them, would cook and clean the house, care for the animals and work in the fields and garden, gather forest fruits and help their husbands at fishing and hunting. Also, they would weave and sew, make clothes and decorate them with embroideries. Maybe a few of them would engage in occult practices, such as various sets of objects with clear magical purpose attest. Many of them must have known the curative properties of plants, as Dacian medicine was famous in the ancient world, and Dacian names of medicinal plants were kept in ancient writings, in the works of Dioscoride Pedanios (1st century AD) and Pseudo-Apuleius (4th century AD). Of course, Dacian women from the lower stratum of society would also know how to handle weapons or any objects that could be used as weapons, in order to defend their settlements and children when the enemy attacked. Although not represented on the Column or anywhere else, it is obvious that many Dacian women fought and died in battle in the last days of the independent Dacian Kingdom, in 106. With their world forever gone, their husbands dead in combat, prisoners or about to die in the Colosseum, it is perhaps possible that, in time, many Dacian women, and especially their daughters, took Roman soldiers and colonists as husbands and became Roman subjects. Others left beyond the borders of the newly established province, with their families, goods and livestock, as the last images of the Column show (another version of the last scene is that it represents Dacian population being moved by the Romans from the mountains to lower areas of the province.)

Very short anthropology of the Dacian women

Galen (AD 129 – c. 216) writes that the physical traits of the peoples north of the Danube are as following: blonde-red hair, light skin, blue eyes, such as the other Barbarian tribes, Germanics, Celts etc.

On the Column, Dacian women are represented in a beautiful manner and with beautiful faces. It is not clear from these representations if their draped dress is made out of one single piece, or is divided into a shirt and skirt. Some wear a sort of shawl or cloak, usually

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11 Plato, in Charmides, describes a very interesting discussion he had with a Thracian medic.
have their heads covered, and walk barefoot. Of course, women also had shoes made of leather.

For the rich women, jewels would accompany a woman every day, while the poorer ones had to wear simpler outfits and jewels – many necklaces, chains, armbands, torques, phalerae and rings were found by archaeologists on sites, but not in funerary contexts. It is not clear whether these were also worn by men, and how regularly.

**Written sources about women and customs**

As mentioned above, a few ancient authors have written about customs of the Thracians and Getae, customs which could also be met perhaps in the Dacian society.

A few speak about the tattoos of the Getae women. Clearchus of Soli (4th-3rd centuries BC) writes that Scythian women tattooed Getae women as punishment, so these added more drawings on the skin, in order to erase the earlier shame. Dio Chrysostomos also writes that free Thracian women are covered in tattoos/brandings, made with a burning iron. Plutarch mentions that Thracians “tattoo their women, in order to avenge Orpheus”.

With or without tattoos, women had to marry eventually. About the marriage at the Thracian tribes, information from the ancients reveals that these barbarians practiced polygamy. Herodotus writes that the Thracians have more wives, which they guard thoroughly (*Histories*, V, 5-8), although, until marriage, women are allowed to have relations with as many men they want (*Histories*, V, 6). Heraclidus Ponticus also writes that Thracians have three or four wives, and some even have 30! He also writes that women do a lot of house work, like the servants.

Strabo, cites Menander when writing that the Getae have ten, eleven or even more wives. When a man with only five wives dies, everybody mourns him, saying that he was not married, he has never known love (*Geography*, VII, 3, 4). They are also very religious. About Getae women writes very briefly Ovidius – “they know how to endure hunger and thirst” (*Pontica*, I, 2, 87) and carry heavy water jugs on their heads (*Pontica*, II, 8, 10-12).

Pomponius Mela, in the first century AD, writes that the girls to be married are sold publicly, but not by their parents (*Description of the World*, II, 21). He also writes about the funerary ritual of women being sacrificed on their husbands’ dead bodies, and even fight among themselves for this privilege. Surviving widows would marry the other men in the tribe (*Description of the World*, II, 18-20). The same custom of selling the bride appears in “The wonders of the world” (10, 4) of Solinus, who is perhaps only copying Mela, who could have copied this passage from Herodotus (V, 5).

Horatius writes in eulogistic terms about the Dacian women – they take care also of their step children, know their place in society, never superior to their men, and never have lovers except for their husbands. Sin is paid with death, and her virtue is her most valuable asset. (*Odes*, I, 211). Divorce was easy – parents could get their daughter back, after paying what they had received for her.
Representations

A very peculiar representation is on an **architectonic piece – keystone** of a triumphal arch!? – in Rome, dated in the 1st-2nd centuries AD, 1.20 m in height and made of white marble.

![Image](http://www.nms.ac.uk/ImageGen.ashx?image=/media/298802/carynxslideshow-trajan-forum-keystone.jpg&width=700&height=525&pad=True&bgcolor=000000)

The original location of the piece is not known; it is believed it was either from a building in Trajan’s forum, either from the Temple of Hadrian in Rome. It was also placed in the time of Domitian, but there are actually no solid arguments for any of the chronologies. Today it is located in the courtyard of the Palazzo dei Conservatori in Rome, on the base of an ancient statue, together with other pieces from perhaps the same buildings. Some see in it the personification of Dacia, because it could actually belong to a series of personifications of the Roman provinces. Some believe it is the personification of Germania. The image itself is of a grieving crouching woman, dressed like a Barbarian woman, with a long draped dress and a head cover, having behind her a carnyx, identical to the carnyxes on the base of Trajan’s Column, an axe and a shield, also identical to the shields on the Column. It was perhaps installed there after the middle of the 18th century. An argument for this would be that it appears in the famous painting **Ancient Rome**, from 1757, of Italian artist Giovanni Paolo Panini - ([https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/e6/Giovanni_Paolo_Panini_%E2%80%93_Ancient_Rome.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/e6/Giovanni_Paolo_Panini_%E2%80%93_Ancient_Rome.jpg)).

The piece is romantically placed under the more famous statue **Dying Gaul**, to the bottom left of the painting.
Other representations of the province as a Dacian woman appear on various Roman coins. The woman, whose details are hard to see, sometimes holds a staff with a wolf’s head, a curved weapon reminding of the Dacian falx, or is surrounded by (Dacian) weapons. While in the times of Emperor Trajan, the Dacian symbol on the coins was a defeated warrior sitting on a pile of weapons and shields, or a chained woman, the coins minted in Dacia in the third century AD have the personification of the province as a woman.

In AD 246, Emperor Philip I allowed the Dacian province to mint its own bronze coins – sestertius, dupondius and as, to be used for the same province. On the obverse is the emperor’s portrait, or the portrait of a member of the imperial family. On the reverse there is the legend PROVINCIA DACIA, and the personification of the province, standing or sitting between the animal symbols of the legions from Dacia: the eagle and the lion. The woman is dressed in a long dress and holds either an olive branch and a standard with the letters DF – Dacia Felix –, or two legion standards – with the numbers V and XIII, or a sica or falx, a clear indication of the province. It is hard to see if the dress is typically Dacian or Roman, but chances are it’s the latter.

Finally, a few coins from the time of emperor Trajanus Decius (reigned 249-251) figure the province as a woman, standing, with a staff in her hand. The staff has either a wolf or a donkey’s head on its extremity.

Such is the case of an aureus –

Source: [http://www.wildwinds.com/coins/sear5/s9368.html#RIC_0012b](http://www.wildwinds.com/coins/sear5/s9368.html#RIC_0012b)

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12 They were minted until 257. All coins have the number of their issue year on them, from I to XI.
An antoninianus –

Source: - http://www.wildwinds.com/coins/ric/trajan_decius/RIC_0002b.jpg

And a sestertius –

Source: - http://www.wildwinds.com/coins/sear5/s9398.html#RIC_0101b

On two other types of coins, the province is standing and holding a standard in her right hand – an antoninianus –


And a sestertius, with the legend DACIA FELIX –

Source: - http://www.wildwinds.com/coins/sear5/s9401.html#RIC_0114a
Again, the dresses appear to be Roman, perhaps the same type the women of the province, Roman or Romanized Dacians would have worn in the period\textsuperscript{14}.

At \textbf{Adamclisi}, three metopes feature Dacian women.


Source: [http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/10/AdamclisiMetope20.jpg](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/10/AdamclisiMetope20.jpg)
In metope 19, a Dacian (?) family drives in a cart. The image is not very clear, but there might be a woman near a child inside the cart.

In metope 20 there are two women, dressed the same, one of them holding a baby in her arms, an image seen so many times on Trajan’s Column.

In metope 21, a man holds a woman by the hand. The woman is dressed in a long draped dress with short sleeves and holds a knife or sica in her other hand.

Finally, the Column has many representations of Dacian women, in various circumstances. In opposition to Marcus Aurelius’ column, there are no signs of violence against women on Trajan’s column, they are usually shown in maternal circumstances, holding children in their arms, and always in peaceful situations, accompanied by men and children.
The first scene to feature women is scene XXX, where the emperor, with a gentle sign, shows a Dacian woman a boat, perhaps telling her to get into the boat. The scene was interpreted as the leading into a noble captivity of King Decebalus' sister, captured by the Romans in 101, as Dio Cassius writes. The woman is followed by other four or five women, some carrying small children. They are all guarded, so they could be wives of King Decebalus or of Dacian high noblemen.

Next is scene XXXIX, representing Romans demolishing Dacian fortifications, on the left, two adult women and a small girl watch the soldiers at work. One, with her hair tied by a ribbon, is holding a small child in her arms, while the other has her hair completely covered, like the young girl in front of her. Also, on the top left corner of the scene, another woman’s profile can be seen, maybe a noble one, judging by the earrings and necklace.

A very interesting scene is the next featuring women, the famous Scene XLV, where five women are torturing three naked prisoners with torches near a stone tower. The scene
has been interpreted almost unanimously as Dacian women torturing Roman prisoners. However, there is no actual clue for their ethnicity as Dacians, they could also be Roman women torturing prisoners of war, perhaps widows of the attack of the Dacians south of the Danube. The scene is between two others representing Roman activities in the war, the Danube and a Roman ship are touching and overlapping the tower, and the prisoners have rather long hair and have beards! This could be a clue that they are actually Dacians, also for the reason that the Romans could not have portrayed their victorious soldiers in such a decadent circumstance on an official monument of absolute victory.

The next scene featuring (also) women is LXXVI, representing Dacians demolishing a fortification and civilians gathering or leaving a certain place. Again, two women are carrying babies at their breasts, a third one is carrying a parcel on her head, and two girls are waiting patiently. They all have their heads covered.

Scenes LXXXII-LXXXIII feature again women, but they seem to be Roman. The scenes feature youngsters, boys and girls alike, which could lead to the idea that they might be royal hostages in Rome, a logical argument, but not enough to make a valid theory. Only
their presence among Roman adults and the attitude of these towards the youngsters could provide a hint, but only as a wildcard.

A few women and children appear in scene LXXXVI, also in full Roman context, and they also seem to be Romans.

Scene XCI, representing the arrival in Dacia of Emperor Trajan at the start of the second war, features four women – each seems to be with her husband, the first is carrying a baby in her arms, the other two have children near them, a boy and a girl. They all wear the same type of dress and have their heads covered.
The last scene on the Column, badly damaged by elements, shows Dacians, men, women and children, departing (perhaps) with their animals and few belongings the newly established province, or resettling in the province.

Conclusion

From all the records we have, the woman in the Dacian world played an important role in the household and agricultural activities, as well as in handicrafts. Represented on Roman monuments as a good mother, she might also have taken part in conflicts, taking up arms and defending her life and belongings. Also, Dacian women remaining in the province and marrying Roman soldiers and colonists became integrated in the system of values represented by the destroyer of their known world, the Roman Empire.
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Bibliography


Trajan’s Column, see Cichorius’ plates https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Trajan%27s_Column_-_Cichorius_Plates