

## At the borders of Ancient Dacia. The Danube Gorge sector

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**Abstract.** *The construction of the Dacian Kingdom in the Transylvanian area would not have been possible without the favourable combination between the military and political infrastructure and the exceptional military capacities of certain warlords. The Roman Empire managed to install itself on the entire right bank of the Danube, as part of an Imperial policy. Thus, the Danube became, after lengthy efforts, an important natural obstacle between the Roman world and the “Barbarians”. In our view, a special interest zone for understanding the said phenomena is the Danube Gorge as here, for over a century, the armies of Rome and those of the Dacian kings were in direct and permanent contact, separated only by the great European river. A series of four Dacian forts defended this area, the most important being the one from Divici-Grad, where two curved weapons, typical to Dacian professional warriors were found. It is likely that the garrison stationed here, obviously related to the power centre from the Șureanu Mountains, was composed of elite soldiers, as the weapons, type of fortification tower itself, and geographical position converge towards this hypothesis.*

**Rezumat.** *Autorii analizează modul în care au interacționat armatele romane și cele ale regilor daci în sectorul Porților de Fier de la Dunăre. Fortificațiile făceau parte dintr-un sistem defensiv mai amplu, menit să oprească înaintarea romană la Dunărea de Jos.*

**Keywords:** Pre-Roman Dacia, Danube Gorge, Divici-Grad fortress, Dacian kingdom.

### I. Introduction

The construction of the Dacian Kingdom in the Transylvanian area would not have been possible without the favourable combination between the military and political infrastructure that existed on the Middle and Lower Danube during the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC and the exceptional military capacities of certain warlords. The existing social structures during this period were dominated by numerous warrior clans, characterized by a strong identity and ideology but also by a certain degree of martial ferocity. The eventual results of all these evolutions was the apparition of the pan-Dacian religious and political centre of Sarmizegetusa Regia, and also the build-up of a series of impressive forts and fortresses out of which these warlords were securing and projecting their power and authority. Overcoming the internal crisis after the instauration of the Principate, the

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Roman Empire managed to install itself on the shores of the Black Sea<sup>3</sup> and afterwards, on the entire right bank of Danube, as part of an Imperial policy. Thus, the Danube became, after lengthy efforts, an important natural obstacle between the Roman world and the “barbarians”. The dissatisfaction of the later was obvious, and thus the new frontier was attacked with frenzy by various local tribal factions, either alone or in larger coalitions with other “barbarians”, as well as by the Dacian Kingdom. These clashes that took place on both banks of the river are well documented by ancient writers<sup>4</sup>.

The need for an efficient response to the new military and political challenges brought on by ever increasing Roman threat, determined the consolidation of existing fortifications, as well as the creation of a veritable defensive network meant to protect the hitherto fluctuating borders of the Dacian kingdom. Existing forts, previously built by various rival warlords, had come to be integrated into larger systems<sup>5</sup> and supplemented sometimes with linear defences<sup>6</sup>, just like in other areas of “barbarian” Late Iron Age Europe<sup>7</sup>, depending on specific geographical and economic conditions.

In our view, a special interest zone for understanding the said phenomena is the Danube Gorge as here, for over a century, the armies of Rome and those of the Dacian kings were in direct and permanent contact, separated only by the great European river (Figure 1, left). The present paper aims at making a short presentation of the four existing fortresses located on the Gorge (Figure 1, right), presenting also an inroad into the life and weapons of the warriors that defended them.

## **II. Fortifications on the Danube Gorge**

During the entire Late Iron Age, the Danube Gorge represented more or less a contact area between various ethno-cultural entities<sup>8</sup>. During the middle or late 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC, a number of forts and settlements had been erected on the northern bank of the Gorge. It was a period when the power of the Balkan Celts had slowly started to fade into obscurity; only their late offspring, the Scordisci, located on the south-western banks of the Gorge remained somewhat strong, although slowly weakened in their turn by internecine conflict with the Thracian Triballi, located to their east, and with the rising Dacians, located on the north. The rather obscure political and military history of this “dark period” of Ancient Dacia<sup>9</sup>, marked by many others by the appearance of new warriors and elites with new identities, cannot permit us to discern too precisely who were the initial builders of these forts. They must have been, almost for sure, part in the broader phenomenon that happened on both sides of the Danube bringing the emergence of new military

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<sup>3</sup> PETOLESCU 2010, 79–88.

<sup>4</sup> *Res Gestae Divi Augusti* (V, 30); Florus (II, 26–29); D.C. LI, 23–27); Suet. *Augustus*, XXI; Tacitus, *Historia*, III, 46, 2–3); J. AJ. 4,3, 90–95).

<sup>5</sup> BORANGIC, BERZOVAN 2014, 133.

<sup>6</sup> BORANGIC, BERZOVAN 2014, 90–95; BERZOVAN 2013, 161–183.

<sup>7</sup> BORANGIC, BERZOVAN 2014, 90–91.

<sup>8</sup> See EGRI 2011, 178–180.

<sup>9</sup> SÎRBU, FLOREA 1997, 91; PUPEZĂ 2012.

elites with a distinct ideology<sup>10</sup>. Later, in the middle of the 1<sup>st</sup> cent. BC, during the reign of Burebista, these fortresses, whatever their state and owners, were incorporated into the Dacian Kingdom.

From west to east, the first fortress to be found is that of Socol–*Palanački Breg*. It is located on one of the last western peaks of the Almăjului Mountains, thus having a good strategic position that offered it a good viewshed to the west and south allowing it to control the approach into the Danube Gorge. Its closeness to the Banat Plain, as well as the lower course of the Nera provides abundant farmlands—the lack of major excavations do not allow us to say to what extent the point was ascribed to trade routes of the time—but the presence of stone architecture and monetary findings inside its control zone as well as the surrounding areas constitute evidence of the strength and prosperity of the inhabitants of this fortress during the Dacian Kingdoms period. The chronology of the finds suggests that the fortress was active until the later parts of the 1<sup>st</sup> cent. AD<sup>11</sup>.

The Divici–*Grad* fort is situated on the Danube Gorge, between kilometres 1065 and 1066 of the river, on the last peaks of the Almăjului Mountains, occupying a triangular plateau, with an area of 7000 square meters, that dominates with around 100 m the river's flow. Surrounded on three sides by steep slopes, it is only accessible from a narrow path on the northern side, which in ancient times was barred by two defence ditches, with an opening of 6 and 10 m respectively, separated by what seems to have been an earth wall. In the immediate vicinity of the fort, on a series of anthropic terraces located on the eastern slopes of the promontory, numerous signs of habitation have been observed — at the base, on the banks of the Danube a contemporary civilian settlement existed, currently submerged due to the building of the Iron Gates dam<sup>12</sup>. A series of fortification works, consisting of three successive earth walls, were observed on the peak north-west of the site<sup>13</sup>. Late archaeologist Liviu Măruia pointed out the existence of linear fortifications meant to bar access to the west of the Almăjului Mountains<sup>14</sup> believed to be from the Dacian period due to similarities existing to those found in the Șureanu Mountains<sup>15</sup>.

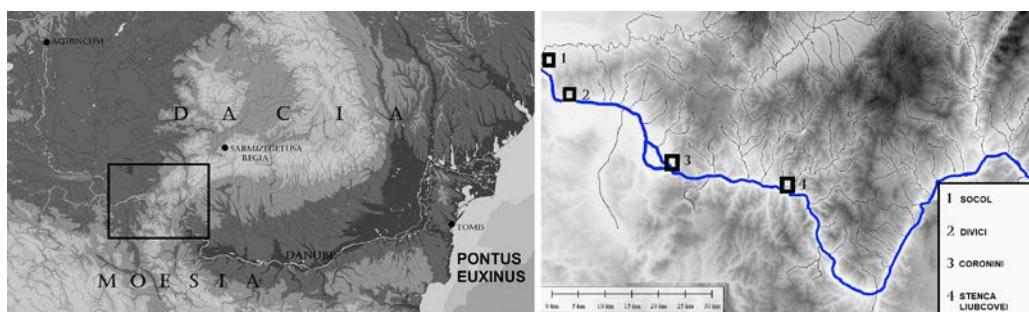


Figure 1. Ancient Dacia in the 1<sup>st</sup> cent. BC–1<sup>st</sup> cent. AD (left), and the Dacian forts of the Danube Gorge area (right).

<sup>10</sup> RUSTOIU 2002, 33–40; RUSTOIU 2008, 142–153.

<sup>11</sup> RUSTOIU 2006–2007, 22–23.

<sup>12</sup> GUMĂ *et al.* 1987, 201; GUMĂ *et al.* 1995, 402.

<sup>13</sup> GUMĂ *et al.* 1995, 402.

<sup>14</sup> SĂCĂRIN *et al.* 2013, 59.

<sup>15</sup> TEODOR *et al.* 2013, 1–98.

Excavations at “Grad” in 1985–1998 unearthed three separate phases of said fortifications, which seem to be linked to three phases of habitation. During the first of these phases, less known (dated between the late 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC–the first half of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC), the plateau was defended by a simple rampart with palisade. The second phase, much better substantiated by findings, is dated in general during the 1<sup>st</sup> BC to early 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, when the fort suffers significant damage. During this period, the slopes of the early earth wall were removed by the addition of large amounts of compacted clay, thus achieving a terracing that had a stone wall built on top. This has partly shaped facings made of stone, bound with clay, the wall filling being made of crushed stone and clay, apparently also having, on the outside, a series of support beams stuck down, with perhaps a supporting role. This phase corresponds, apparently, to the T2 keep, that has a stone base and a story probably made of brick<sup>16</sup> (Figure 2). The last phase lasts throughout the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD and marks the peak of the fortification’s development<sup>17</sup>. During this time, time the T1 keep was built in the northwest plateau, which, considering its position, acted as a curtain wall tower.

Divici-Grad has the most extensive visibility range of all analysed fortifications, controlling access to the Danube for a distance of approx. 25 km. It has a good view of plains that climb the slopes of the Almăjului Mountains, but also of the right bank of the river. The area where it was located is an area of expansion of the canyon, where the Danube waters could be crossed in relative safety – more than that, in wintertime there is a tendency for ice bridges to appear in this area. Merchant caravans and roaming bands of warriors, once on the south bank, could head to the wide valley of the river Pek, from where they could easily reach one of the most important trade and military routes of its time – the Morava Valley. To the east, wide valleys offered sufficient farm land, the proximity of the mountains also offered plentiful wood and stone, which have actually been used to build the fortification in its second and third phase of existence, and fishing or hunting could become at any time additional sources of food<sup>18</sup>.

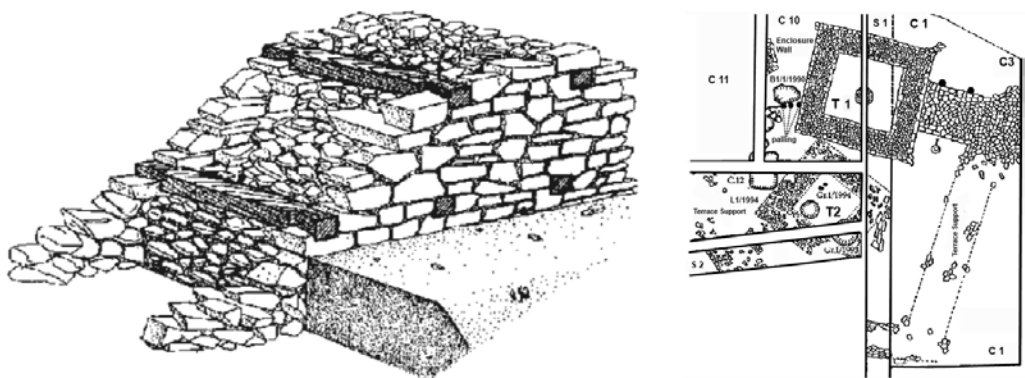


Figure 2. The archaeological situation at Divici-Grad. Plan of the towers (right) and manner of construction (left).

<sup>16</sup> GUMĂ *et al.* 1995, 403, 406.

<sup>17</sup> GUMĂ *et al.* 1995, 403; RUSTOIU 2006–2007, 18.

<sup>18</sup> SĂCĂRIN *et al.* 2013, 67–69.

Monumental stone architecture, keeps with stories made of plastered brick, present in two overlapping chronological phases of fortification, corresponding to 1<sup>st</sup> century BC–1<sup>st</sup> century AD, the hierarchy of habitat in a “fortified acropolis” and a number of adjacent civilian settlements and not least, the ability to change the natural environment by massive terracing, is evidence of an ideology of design and expression of power that is found in the same shapes in the area of Dacian fortresses in Transylvania. The analogies do not stop there: the presence of painted pottery<sup>19</sup>, imported parts (acquired by robbery or trade), some true luxury items<sup>20</sup> attest undoubtedly a level and a way of living comparable to that of the area of the capital of Dacian kingdom. The myriad of hoards and stray finds from the area Divici– Moldova Noua–Coronini, is further evidence of the prosperity of the area. Besides the warrior nobles, with their related bands, the fortress, permanently inhabited, certainly housed skilled craftsmen<sup>21</sup>, judging by specific items discovered: cast pewter spoon, file, jeweller chisel and anvil, pattern for cast rings, etc.<sup>22</sup>. Other findings, such as clay spindle whorls, bronze mirrors and various household objects reveal an interesting fresco on the lives of those who were the wives, the daughters or the mothers of the settlements residents.

Less known, stirred up by building a medieval stone fortress, the fortification of Coronini/Pescari–*La Cula*<sup>23</sup> has a special strategic position, being located right at the beginning of one of the narrow areas of the Danube Gorge. It provides excellent visibility to the north-east, with the fortification of Divici–*Grad* in its line of sight, but does not have a good angle of view to the east. Its role seems to have been similar to that of Divici – one of the fords used for crossing the Danube was located in this area during the Middle Ages, probably used and known in Antiquity as well<sup>24</sup>. Lacking, as far as we know, elements of stone architecture<sup>25</sup>, it is likely to have played a secondary role to the much more powerful fortress of Divici. In regard to its chronology, the last phase seems to be probably in the late 1<sup>st</sup> century AD.

Located in an area of widening on a small hillock, the fortress of the Stenca Liubcova has an area of restricted visibility, which is reduced to only the areas immediately adjacent, having no other fortified point in its line of sight. Very likely, the main role of this fortress was to control access from the south bank of the river, in an area predisposed to the formation of ice bridges. The findings inside the fortress<sup>26</sup> revealed a fairly prosperous centre, defended, during the second Dacian Phase, by a wall with a stone and earth filling; the fort seems to be destroyed and abandoned somewhere in the beginning of the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD<sup>27</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> Of La Tène type (DRĂGAN 2013, 111–112).

<sup>20</sup> GUMĂ *et al.* 1995, 403–404; RUSTOIU 2006–2007, 19–20.

<sup>21</sup> MEDELEȚ 1995, 95–101.

<sup>22</sup> GUMĂ *et al.* 1995, 410.

<sup>23</sup> MEDELEȚ *et al.* 1971, 465–475.

<sup>24</sup> RUSTOIU 2006–2007, 20.

<sup>25</sup> RUSTOIU, 2006–2007, 20.

<sup>26</sup> GUMĂ 1977, 69–104.

<sup>27</sup> RUSTOIU 2006–2007, 20–21.

Downstream along the Danube, despite monetary discoveries and signs of cave dwelling, Dacian fortresses are missing so far; it is likely that this lack indicates merely a stage of research, but the analysis of geomorphological features can provide other explanations: here, the valley narrows very much, with very large height differences – before the construction of the dam, navigation in this area, as is well known, was highly problematic, crossing the river with large armies being out of the question.

Living on the border had multiple advantages and disadvantages for the warrior nobles that resided in such places. Indeed there was always prospect for good trade, but there was also place for war and plunder and in case of a large scale military conflict, these nobles residing here on the Gorge where among the first to receive the brunt of the enemy attack. Professional core soldiers supplemented probably by mercenaries and contingents of semi-professional warriors must have been present in significant numbers in these forts.

Two archaeological finds coming from the fortress of Divici-Grad<sup>28</sup> offer us an interesting glimpse into the tactics and weapons used by the ancient Dacian warriors. Situated in a turbulent and quite bellicose relationship with Rome, the warrior tribes of the northern Balkans developed specific weapons and tactics meant to counter the superiority of the otherwise impenetrable Roman Legion; among them, the most feared ones were the curved weapons, as the Roman writers attest. For example, P. Papinius Statius, Latin poet and protégée of Emperor Domitian (therefore we assume that he knew the Dacians well) remarks the sinister fame of these curved weapons: *Quo Paeones arma rotatu, quo Macetae sua gaessa citent, quo turbine contum Sauromates falcemque Getes arcumque Gelonus tenderet et flexae Balearicus actor habenae [...]* (Statius, *Achilleis*, II, verses 131–134 of the II part). M. Cornelius Fronto, important rhetor and Roman lawyer, also speaks of this terrible sword, which the Dacians used to oppose Roman expansion: *[...] in bellum profectus est cum cognitis militibus hostem Parthum contemnentibus, saggitarum ictus post ingentia Dacorum falcibus inlata volnera despiciatui habentibus* (Fronto, *Principia Historiae*).

Both of the weapons were discovered inside the T1 keep and were probably lost during the final moments of the siege. The first is a *falx dacica*, type III, registered as A2B3 (Figure 3, left) – sword with medium sized blade, with only a bent<sup>29</sup>. The weapon belonged, most likely, to an infantryman, the relatively average length being an impediment to a rider, therefore it was used in close combat, the pronounced curvature and tip shape giving it the advantage of high penetration power, very likely, able to penetrate light armour. Due to the specific shape, the whole force of penetration is concentrated in the tip, thus not suitable to stabbing, the maximum effectiveness achieved just in the case by slashing and shearing. This makes it especially dangerous, even if the enemy was protected by armour, shield and helmet. Potential injuries (penetrating blows, cuts, splits) depended largely on striking power, the experience of the weapon wielder, the angle of incidence as well as the portion of the body affected. In the case high amplitude hits, also involved

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<sup>28</sup> For an extensive discussion, see SĂCĂRIN *et al.* 2013.

<sup>29</sup> BORANGIC 2013, 125–128 (with the bibliography of the subject).

was the inertia force conferred by the weight of the weapon and arm<sup>30</sup>, aggravated by the action of tearing.

The other curved weapon is represented by a solid pruning knife (Figure 4, right), found in the same context. The piece is made of iron, hot forged, strongly curved at the tip, like a beak, with the edge on the inside. Presents gloving tube and rivet hole. It was mounted on quite massive a wooden tail, judging by sleeve size. Given the specific shape it can be assumed that those who wielded them acted as support troops in other units.

No less effective than actual swords, these pruning knives were a tactical solution resorted to by both professional warriors, and especially ordinary fighters. Attached to a tail made of strong wood (see Figure 5, left), whose optimal length is between 1 and 1.5 m, these weapons could produce disarmament, serious head injuries, by direct hits or fatal cuts to the legs or neck area. The long tail allowed a fight at a safe distance from the short swords of legionnaires and applying two-handed strikes with the sickle turned this ordinary tool in a terrible, extremely efficient weapon. No less effective were shorter tailed war hooks handled in tandem with a shield. Relatively inexpensive, the cost of performing such a war hook estimated at approx. three hours of work, pruning knives must have been highly prized and their number high enough for them to become visible in Roman art

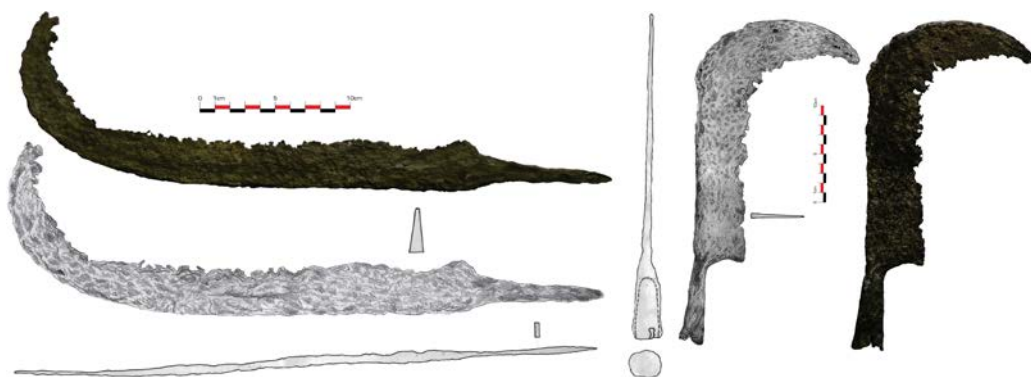


Figure 4. Falx Dacica (left) and pruning knife from Divici (right) (photos and drawings).



Figure 5. Reenactor with a pruning knife (left) and detail from scene XXIV of Trajan's Column (right).

<sup>30</sup> BORANGIC 2007-2008, 55-57.

and now in archaeological finds. The spread and frequent findings of pruning knives, dated especially in the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC–1<sup>st</sup> century AD across the entire area of Dacian influence and their use, even occasionally, as weapons, allows the inclusion of this category of artefacts among those *Dacorum falcibus* mentioned by Cornelius Fronto<sup>31</sup>.

Most likely part of a single system, termed “Limes dacicus” by A. Rustoiu<sup>32</sup>, the fortifications around the Danube Gorge know relatively similar chronological phases, linked to, in our opinion, a number of well-documented historical events. As stated in the introductory part of the study, the turn of the 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C. and 1<sup>st</sup> A.D. is characterized by a series of violent confrontations between Dacians and Romans throughout the Danube region, becoming more pronounced. Historical sources of the period mention the armies of the Dacian king Cotiso that come down from the mountains, crossing the frozen Danube raiding south of the river – the only area where the mountain borders on the great river is the one we are talking about. Faced with these challenges, Augustus responds promptly, sending Lentulus in the area, which brought peace to the region, driving out the Dacians and placing several Roman garrisons on the southern bank of the river. We tie the destruction that happened at the beginning of the 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D. to all fortifications on the Gorge, to this historical event.

Enthusiastic following this successful military action, the poet Horace speaks of the destruction of Cotiso's army; more realistic, the Roman historian Aeneas L. Florus says that the Dacians “have not been defeated, but repulsed and scattered”<sup>33</sup> which is fully confirmed by archaeological findings showing a restoration of fortifications in the area. The very rugged topography, clearly favouring defenders, and the closeness to the powerful Transylvanian nucleus of the Dacian kingdom—it is less than a three day trip on the mountain trail roads that start at the mouths of the Cerna river across the Țarcu-Godeanu massif—would have caused serious logistical and military problems for the Romans if they had wanted to start pacification and resettlement operations like those conducted against the tribal factions of the Wallachian Plain. Thus we think that this might explain why this area has fared distinctly from other areas along the Danube, the decisive confrontation between the Dacians and Romans in the sector being postponed until the time of the great wars during the reigns of emperors Domitian and Trajan.

Whether these fortifications were neutralized during the wars in the time of Domitian or during the first Dacian war, they seem to have ended in a violent way, being stormed by the Roman legions. Archaeological evidence for the fortification of Divici-Grad are quite eloquent, fully illustrating the dramatic confrontations. The northwest side of the fortification wall was destroyed, and arrowheads and roman catapult projectiles were discovered in the debris and burned layer behind the defence. Fragments of *lorica squamata* were discovered in the same place<sup>34</sup>. Regarding

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<sup>31</sup> BORANGIC 2010, 20.

<sup>32</sup> RUSTOIU 2006-2007, 24; ȘTEFAN 2005, 262-263.

<sup>33</sup> DAICOVICIU 1965, 107-110.

<sup>34</sup> RUSTOIU, 2006-2007, 20.



the weapons we discussed, it seems natural to believe that they were lost by defenders who took refuge in the tower, trying, perhaps, a last resistance.

The coin from Trajan's time, dated between AD 112–117 and a crossbow-type brooch discovered in the topsoil during archaeological excavations<sup>35</sup>, are no longer bound to the existence of the fort; their presence may indicate, however, a discreet surveillance of this point by the Romans, during a time when the kingdom and the old centres of authority were still alive in the consciousness of the locals.

### III. Final considerations

Located at the meeting point of two worlds, the warriors on the Danube Gorge built solid fortifications, integrated into a coherent system, which aimed at controlling access to key crossing points across the Danube. Consolidating its power through trade, but also through plunder, they found themselves at the forefront of the advance of Roman armies towards the Danube, managing to successfully resist until the era of the large Dacian-Roman confrontation.

In this picture, curved weapons discovered in the ruins of the Dacian fortress Divici, an important border fort, throws a bright light on the importance of this border strongholds. It is likely that the garrison stationed here during the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, obviously related to the power centre from Şureanu Mountains, was composed of elite soldiers, as weapons, type of fortification tower itself, the geographical position converge towards this hypothesis.

The hypothesis that among the residents of these forts where professional soldiers is strengthened by the presence on the reliefs of Trajan's Column, in scenes depicting the first Dacian-Roman clashes that took place, obviously in the Danubian area, of Dacian warriors armed with Roman weapons. Thus, in the scene XXIV (Figure 5, right) appear two Dacian *comati* that attack the Roman soldiers with characteristic Roman short swords. These *gladii* where effective only in compact units that acted in a disciplined manner, thus confirming the sayings of Dio Cassius regarding the significant presence of specialized military personnel in the army of Decebal<sup>36</sup>. It is logical to suppose that the first Dacian groups that opposed the Roman forces where the ones of the warriors residing in the fortresses of the Danube Gorge, whose experience in the lengthy conflicts and clashes against Rome could not have been ignored.<sup>37</sup> The presence in the first line of these professional warriors, hardened in battles fought throughout the Balkans and their presence in these border forts helped to slow down the Roman advance towards the interior of the Dacian Kingdom, thus giving time to further fortify its central part.

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<sup>35</sup> RUSTOIU, EGRI 2011, 256–265.

<sup>36</sup> Dio Cassius LXVII, 7, 4; LXVIII, 8, 5–6.

<sup>37</sup> Criton, *Getica*, 4,2.

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