

# TRAJAN'S AND MARCUS' WARS ON THE DANUBE: THE PROPAGANDA OF SIGNIFICANT DAY-DATES

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It is a well-known fact that Roman wars, like all the wars of the ancient world, had a remarkable cult dimension. It combined what might be termed purely religious needs and intentions with aspects of the State propaganda - that included, in the epoch which interests us here, the propaganda of the dynasty and the Emperor himself (Alföldi 1935, 3-158; Wickert 1954, 2100 ff. and *passim*; Fears, 1977 et alii; Millar 1977, 28 ff. and *passim*).

The rôle of significant day-dates in the entire complex of these phenomena has not received, however, the scholarly attention it deserves, despite its importance. A variety of documents shows us that the Romans tended to choose the day-dates of religious festivals and memorable events of the past to synchronize with the salient actions of the moment (cf. e.g. *infra*, text and n. 59).

Naturally, such dates had to bear intrinsic meanings that connected them in a certain way with the happenings of the time which reactualized them. To cite an example which illustrates that practice - the essence of its logic - Diocletian and Galerius began their persecution of the Christians on a carefully selected day. In that context, the aims of the imperial decision have been well explained by Lactantius: '*inquiritur peragenda rei dies aptus et felix ac Terminalia deliguntur, quae sunt a.d. septimum kalendas Martias (i.e. February 23), ut quasi terminus imponeretur huic religioni*' (*De mort. 12.1*)(1). For obvious reasons, the day of the *Terminalia* - implying the notion of an end - was held by the persecutors to be both symbolic ('*aptus*') and magically effective ('*felix*'), if we are allowed to introduce here the concepts of modern social anthropology. And, without going deeper into the problem of the propaganda value of the *Terminalia*, let us note that Terminus' festival was also used to celebrate or announce victories in war(2). Probably in that capacity it was chosen to date the *constitutio* which produced the Upper Dacian diplomata of AD 144 (CIL XVI 90).

Explicit testimonies like Lactantius', just quoted, are unfortunately rare in the field of significant day-dates. But diverse kinds of comparative evidence reveal, behind less explicit testimonies, the Romans' widespread habit of manipulating such dates for official purposes. The imperial history of the second century forms no exception in that respect. For the present occasion I propose to discuss four instructive cases only. Three of them concern the days which saw Trajan and Marcus respectively leaving Rome to fight the Danubian foes. The fourth illustrates the strength of Marcus' personal cult of Mars and Venus as dynastic deities of victorious campaigns; it is best understood in the light of the Danubian events and documents.

Let us begin with the First Dacian War. It is recorded in the *Acta fratrum Arvalium* that Trajan's expedition started on March 25 (AD 101), when he left the Capital (CIL VI 2074). Though the day-date has been duly accepted as trustworthy by modern historians (e.g. Hanslik 1965, 1062; Garzetti 1974, 320; Strobel 1984, 162 note 1; Halfmann 1986, 184, 186) there have been no attempt (to my knowledge) to explain it in terms of a religious or dynastic heortology. However, ancient and medieval parallels(3) make it *a priori* probable that we are dealing here with a meaningful day, not just one whose choice reflected Trajan's considerations of a practical order. Of the ancient analogies, the most useful stems from a later event involving Trajan himself(4) (Herz 1975, 26 f.; Beaujeu 1955, 91 note 1). As a Greek source (*Suda* from Arrian's *Parthika*, fr. 55 Roos; *FGrHist* 156 F 36-37, 575; cf. Lepper 1948, 29-30; Hanslik 1965 note 7, 1094) explicitly tells us, the Emperor left Rome to go to the Parthian War on a day (October 27,

113) that was distinguished by clear dynastic and theological associations. It commemorated Trajan's adoption by Cocceius Nerva in AD 97, an adoption which the ideologists of the Principate saw as an expression of the divine will to make Trajan Jupiter's warrior vice-regent on earth, among other tasks (Fears 145ff, note 1; 227)(5).

Now, March 25 marked the crucial point (the *Hilaria*) of the March festival of Cybele-Magna Mater-Bellona (Herz 1975, 166-167 note 9).

That complex deity enjoyed wide popularity among the Oriental and Orientalizing subjects of the Empire after Augustus. As regards the traditional Romans, they were inclined to take an aspect of Magna Mater for the patroness of the Julians, and the nation in general, owing to her connection with the myth of Troy (Verg. *Aen.* IX 77 ff; Beaujeu 312 f. note 9).

The mythographic theme will have been elaborated by the authors of the State propaganda under Trajan, too, who was an admirer of Julius Caesar(6); the indications concerning his use of Trojan lore aside, Trajan with his Gaditane background may have had personal reasons to support the progress of the Oriental cult of Cybele-Magna Mater(7). On the other hand, as is well known, Bellona was originally a Roman goddess, whose martial nature contributed to the process of her assimilation with Cybele-Magna Mater (Aust 1899, 254-257)(8). Even the *hastiferi*, the priests of the Orientalized Bellona, appear to have been associated with the Antonine attempts at reviving the old ritual of the Fetialis' spear-throwing, a ritual which, in the regal and early Republican periods, followed the declaration of war against Rome's foreign enemies. In a more abstract sphere, certain facets of the public cult of Cybele connoted i.e. victory and salvation - of the Ruler, the State and the People (Beaujeu 312-320 note 9; CIL II 5521, Cordoba, Baetica; March 25, AD 238)(9). These politico-religious issues must have had special relevance on March 25, AD 101, when the Arval Brethren invoked [*pro salute et reditu et victoria* of Trajan, among other gods and goddesses, *Iovis Victor, Salus Rei publicae populi Romani Quiritium, Mars Victor, Victoria and Hercules Victor*. The list of the twelve(10) theonyms probably included Cybele-Magna Mater-Bellona under the name of Salus; she was called Salutaris in some other official contexts as well(11). The genitives *Rei publicae populi Romani Quiritium* underline, in accordance with both the traditional vows and the particular features of the moment, *Salus'* Roman character(12) and her care for the safety of the warring *res publica* (Thulin 1914, 2057 f.). It should be noted that the Salus of the Brethren's dedication of AD 101 - in our opinion, one of her aspects derived from the essentially Oriental goddess Cybele-Magna Mater-Bellona - figures, as expected, in a high place on the list, immediately after the unit constituted by the Capitoline Triad and *Iovis Victor* and before Mars(13) himself. This indirectly sustains our proposal to see in Trajan's decision to leave Rome on March 25 - the day of the *Hilaria* - a symbolical gesture, concordant with the much-praised *pietas* of the *Optimus Princeps* (Plin. *Pan.* 76.7; 81. 1)(14) and the complex political theology of his régime, insisting upon the theme of the *renovatio imperii* (supra, note 14. BMC III 195 no. 920: *ROMA REST*).

In the light of the foregoing comments on the religious colour of March 25 and the symbolic opening of the First Dacian War, the day chosen for the inception of the Second Dacian War deserves a close analysis. Trajan's solemn departure from the Capital fell on June 4 (AD 105) this time, as recorded in the *Fasti Ostienses* (Inscr. Ital. XIII 1, p. 197 (XIX 5-6); Vidman 1957, 18; cf. CIL XVI 2075: the *Acta fratrum Arvalium*, for June 2-5, AD 105). Again, modern historians have failed to notice and explain the festival and politico-religious facet of the occasion (Hanslik 1965, 1075 ; Garzetti 1974 325; Strobel 1984, 206; Halfmann 1986, 186).

The omission seems all the more surprising as June 4 - far from being a random day-date - was celebrated for a very long time as the *dies festus* of Hercules Magnus Custos(15). The popular protector of soldiers and their leaders(16), Hercules presented a natural candidate for the deity whose task was to send an Emperor off to a dangerous front. More to the point, Trajan's own propagandists insisted upon Hercules in a variety of ways and with a special

emphasis; one might even speak of the Trajanic programme of *imitatio Herculis* (Alföldi 1935, 241; Beaujeu 1955, 80-87).

Of several characteristics which distinguished Trajan's cult of Hercules, those reflecting the Dacian Wars should be particularly noted here. Numismatic evidence shows that remarkable issues from the Roman mint, in AD 107 and 108, expressed Trajan's gratitude to Hercules Invictus for Roman victories in the two Danubian wars (Beaujeu 1955, 85). At the same time approximately, and with analogous intentions, the *Ludi Herculei triumphales* were instituted - probably in the Capital itself (IGRR I 446, cf. Beaujeu 1955, 85).

The topical prominence of Hercules Invictus after Decebalus' death reminds us of the famous *constitutio* and diploma(ta) of AD 106/110, issued to the soldiers of coh. I Brittonum for their distinction in the Second Dacian War (*pie et fideliter expeditione Dacica functi*) (CIL XVI 160).

The day-date of the *constitutio*/diploma(ta), August 11, was on the eve of Hercules Invictus' festival(17) which *may* be taken as another case of intentional synchronization inspired by propaganda purposes(18). Other documents, notably the reliefs of the Arch of Trajan at Beneventum(19), complete the picture of the Emperor's gratitude to Hercules for his help in both series of Roman campaigns against Dacia. The choice of June 4, AD 105, for what we should term the symbolic beginning of the Second War will be naturally attributed to the same complex of Trajanic propaganda of a political, military and religious nature, propaganda that was centred on Hercules' impressive figure.

As announced at the beginning of the present report, the next day-date to be dealt with here belongs, roughly, to the same category as the three Trajanic dates (March 25, 101; June 4, 105; October 27, 113) just examined. It bears upon the history of the middle Danube late in Marcus' reign(20). On his way to the North-East in 178, determined to gain a decisive victory over the barbarian enemies, the Emperor (together with his son Commodus) left Rome - for the last time - on August 3; the day-date has been recorded by the Scriptor Historiae Augustae(21). At some time before the departure, Marcus had performed the *Fetialis'* traditional ceremony of spear-throwing, and that revival of the ancient ritual of the declaration of war was duly noted by the contemporaries (Cass. Dio LXXI 33, 3; cf. Samter 1907, 2264).

There are *a priori* reasons to assume, though the moderns have avoided making that assumption, that the two decisions - concerning the Fetialis' ritual and the choice of the day-date respectively - were interconnected in the sphere of political, military and religious propaganda. August 3 will have been recommended by Marcus' propagandists with regard to the martial nature of Cybele-Magna Mater-Bellona, whose importance for the imperial heortology has already been pointed out here, à propos of March 25 and the opening of the First Dacian War. As can be inferred from an early third-century Ostian inscription, August 3 occupied an important place in the calendar of the local *hastiferi*, the worshippers of Cybele-Magna Mater-Bellona (AE 1948, 31; Herz 1975, 251) obviously, in that respect, the calendars of the *hastiferi* in Rome and elsewhere must have been the same case. This supports our hypothesis that August 3 conveyed to Marcus' subjects, in 178, an implicit message which was inspired by the imperial *profectio* and certain aspects of the cult of Bellona and her Oriental counterparts. Our second point, postulating the interconnection between August 3 and the Fetialis' ceremony, is sustained by what is known of the sacerdotal rôle of the *hastiferi* themselves (Haug 1910, 251ff.). With time, they became rather similar to the Fetiales, thanks to two outstanding features which their priesthoods shared: the service to Bellona(22) and the ceremonial use of the spear (*hasta*, in both cases) (Liv. I 32, 14; Varro *Ap; Serv. Aen.* XI 52; Amm. Marc. XIX 2, 6).

Determined to revive the Fetialis' rite in 178 (Octavian's example of 32 BC [Dio L 4,5] may have instigated him), Marcus naturally chose Bellona to be the divine witness of his departure to war, in her double capacity of a martial goddess and the mistress of *hastiferi*,

equivalent to the Fetiales. This symbolic choice may have been facilitated or even indicated by the fact that a festival of *hastiferi* was close to the date which purely military considerations recommended for Marcus' departure from Rome in 178. Under Marcus as well as in other reigns, the attraction of specific, significant day-dates could not have been so great as to postpone important activities for long periods of time, the less so as the Roman *ferialia* must have provided rather numerous candidates for that purpose -- in the warm season, especially (Herz 1975, 86).

It has been pointed out above that some *constitutiones* preserved through military diplomata were published on carefully selected days. Indeed, an analysis of our evidence as a whole reveals that the quasi-totality of the diploma day-dates were symbolic, if in diverse ways (Dusanic 1986, 236-240; 1985; 1998, 226 note 60). That feature of the *dies constitutionum datarum* reflects the propaganda aspects of the production and distribution of military privileges. A set of such significant day-dates forms the final chapter of the present report.

The set is centred on the remarkable *constitutio* issued by Marcus Aurelius, in AD 178 rather than 179, for the auxiliaries of Dacia Superior(23). An individual copy of the document, found in Drobeta, has been edited in a learned article (Piso, Benea 1984, 263-295; cf. RMD 123). The Drobeta bronze and the corresponding *constitutio* originated in a period during which the auxiliary diplomata tend to be rare as well as demonstrably connected with the beneficiaries' participation in recent campaigns; the law of the Drobeta diploma seems to have rewarded the participants in the last of Marcus' wars on the Danube (Dušanić, forthcoming in Starinar). The day-date of the diploma and the law, April 1, coincided with the festival of the Veneralia (Herz 1975, 173f; 483; SEG XVIII 275; CIL VI 225), and - to judge e.g. from the testimony of the *Fasti triumphales*, whose day-dates implicitly illustrate the importance of the war aspects of the festival - the coincidence cannot have been fortuitous. Under Marcus, like many earlier Emperors, the Veneralia constituted a dynastic feast of great popularity, with indubitable military connotations. In contemporary propaganda, Faustina the Younger - who was the first Empress to bear the title of *mater castrorum* among other attributes(24)- was identified with Venus, and Marcus with Mars. This trait of the Antonine political theology, attested through a variety of sources, notably fine medallions of Marcus and Faustina II (Gnecchi 1912, 39 f. nos. 10-11; cf. 39 no. 8) became specially pronounced after AD 176 (Cassius Dio LXXII 31, 1)(25). Three diplomata of AD 178-179, based on three constitutions (CIL XVI 128; RMD 184 and 185), are similar. All of them bear the same day-date, March 23, when the *Tubilustrium* was celebrated as the closing of the *Quinquatrus* (Hentschel 1963, 1149-1160; Ehlers 1939, 755-759). Like the *Veneralia*, the *Tubilustrium* was not only a war festival but also one uniting the cults of Mars and Venus (Ehlers 1939, 755-759). It hardly needs to be said that the choice of the eloquent *dies constitutionum* for a number of diplomata of the late 170's harmonized, on the one hand, with the eventful military history of the period and, on the other, with the respect Marcus had for Roman traditional values in general (Dušanić, forthcoming in Starinar).

All this can help us in establishing certain facts and interpreting certain documents. To conclude with a comment on two interrelated points of wider relevance. First, the use of symbolic day-dates reflected, in a very limited sphere, the influence of the irrational which was so strongly felt in the life of the ancients. Modern scholars are too often inclined to simplify things in describing and explaining Roman wars, exclusively or predominantly, in terms of such 'material' factors as strategy, demography, building activities or economic interests. Those factors which can be put under the heading of a (primitive) psychology also deserve our attention. Second, I have spoken here of 'propaganda'; indeed, there is no doubt that the choice of significant day-dates had something to do with the propagandists' intentions that concerned simple individuals and the lower classes alike. But it would be wrong to exclude the possibility that the Emperors themselves - especially pious princes of Trajan's and Marcus' type - sincerely believed in the success of actions whose beginnings were marked by the *dies apti et felices*, to use Lactantius' words(26). Even Roman intellectuals of the highest stature were not free from such beliefs, as one of Cicero's letters shows us explicitly enough (*Ad Att.* IV 1, 4).

## NOTES

1. A suitable and auspicious day was sought for carrying the business out and the festival of the *Terminalia* on 23 February was chosen as best, so that a *termination* so to speak would be imposed on this religion' (transl. J. L. Creed, Oxford *Early Christian Texts*). In the sequel, quoting the *Aeneid* IV 169 f. ('That day was the first which was the cause of death, the *first* which was the cause of ills...'), Lactantius underlines the tragic irony of the persecutors' choice.
2. Thence the '*Terminalibus*' figures in the *Fasti triumphales Capitolini* as the day-date of the triumph in 175 BC. I shall examine the significant day-dates of these *Fasti* elsewhere.
3. They are united, so to say, by the example of the Emperor Heraclius in AD 622, who left Constantinople to go to Asia Minor (where he prepared his Persian campaign) on the second day of Easter (April 5), after attending the solemn liturgy at St. Sophia. The choice of the day was certainly intentional. It harmonized with the religious fervency which, in the Capital, characterized the atmosphere of the moment and was obviously inspired by the triumphal symbolism of Easter. Note, on the one hand, the Easter-like nature of the *Hilaria*; on the other, iconographic and other links between Roman concepts of triumph, *restitutio*, *liberatio* et sim. and the Byzantine images and ideas of the resurrection ( Grabar 1936, 246-9).
4. Who had a general tendency to use eloquent day-dates for diverse outstanding actions of his principate.
5. In AD 97, Nerva was but an instrument in Jove's hands: Plin. *Pan.* 6. 4-5, 7.1, et al.
6. cf. Beaujeu 90 f. with nn. 1 and 3 on 91 (Trajan and Julius Caesar's memory; Trajan and *Venus Genetrix*; Trajan and Aeneas, etc.). The Emperor's restoration coins illustrate his interest in both the *renovatio* themes and the early history of Rome.
7. For a sceptical attitude, Beaujeu (n. 9) 103 f.
8. Cf. the war aspects of CIL VIII 9047 (Mauretania Caesariensis, AD 260), erected on March, 25! An inscription from Trajan's reign deserves to be quoted in full (ILS 3807, 'ad Forum Appii'): *Geminia Myrtis et Anicia Prisca pro salute imp. Caesaris Nervae Traiani Aug. Ger. Dac. ex imperio acdem Bellonae s. p. f.*
9. It displays a characteristic mixture of political and religious elements of the cult.
10. Or ten, if we unite the names of *Iuppiter Optimus Maximus* and *Iovis Victor*, and of *Mars Pater* and *Mars Victor* respectively, into single items - which is better avoided.
11. On the sestertii of Faustina II with the reverse legend *Matri Deum Salutari* and the corresponding type (Beaujeu 313 note 9 with note 2). cf. Herodian, I 10; Whittaker's comments *ad loc.* (the Loeb Herodian, I, pp. 66 f.).
12. Trajan's general attitude to deities of complex origins was similar to that of the Roman traditionalists. Cf. his treatment of Zeus Cassios, whom he assimilated with 'Jupiter-Zeus classique', neglecting the god's Oriental core (Beaujeu, 101 f.).
13. *Mars Pater* followed by *Mars Victor*.
14. *Pietas* figures among the personifications represented on the reverses of Trajan's restoration coins.
15. Attested by the *Fasti Venusini* and Ovid, F. VI 211. Haug 1912, 571-4; Herz 220 and II 506; Bömer's comm. 349 on Ovid's *Fasti* VI 209-212.
16. Whatever the original meaning of the *custos* (i.e. whatever the nature of the dangers *Hercules Magnus* had to avert from early Rome), it seems probable that *Hercules Magnus'* worshippers of the imperial period extended the meaning of the attribute to the politico-military sphere (cf. the related epithets of the same god: *conservator*, *defensor*, *protector*, etc.).
17. Recorded by ILLRP 9 (the *Fasti Antiates*). August 11 recurs as the day-date of CIL XVI 132 (c. AD 189?), an interesting fact in view of similarities linking the Commodan diploma to CIL XVI 160. Cf. S. Dušanic, in W. Eck and H. Wolff eds., *Heer und Integrationspolitik. Die römischen Militärdiplome als historische Quelle*, Köln - Wien 1986, 240 n. 243.
18. One day - or, less commonly, several days - coming before a festival, so to speak, formed part of the festival itself (cf. the custom of celebrating the *feriae praedanae* et sim.) and consequently may have been considered appropriate to provide a symbolic date for a military law. This was especially the case when there was a need to unite, through the choice of one day, two or more significant days that were separated, in the calendar, by short intervals. In such a situation, (a) the day announcing a festival may have been more convenient to choose than (b) the *dies festus*

precise, as (a) may have coincided with the second or third day of a preceding feast (if it belonged to the category of *bidua* or *tridua*). It is to be remarked that, at the end of the Second Dacian War, more than one event can be taken to have given victorious connotations to the first decade of August (e.g. Decebalus' death, the fall of Sarmizegetusa, and Trajan's *imp.* V).

19. On the Arch see Beaujeu 1955, 431-7; Fears 1977, 228-34; Strobel 1984, 34 (all three authors give bibliographical information, too). The reliefs, notoriously difficult to interpret and date, have been the subject of endless controversy. I take the two panels (nos. 1 and 2 in Domaszewski's numbering, cf. Beaujeu 1955, 432 with the drawings) flanking the dedicatory inscription on the city side of the monument to portray a scene of the imperial *profectio* (to the Second Dacian War?), in which Hercules plays a conspicuous role.
20. I have not seen the book Friesinger, H., Tejral, J., Stuppner, A. (eds) 1994 *Markomannenkriegen. Ursachen und Wirkungen*, Brno.
21. *Vita Comm.* 12, 6: '*iterum* (cf. 12, 2: '*profectus in Germaniam*', of the expedition of AD 175) *profectus III nonas Commodias Orfito et Rufo consulibus.*; Halfmann 1986, 213, 216.
22. The goddess figures explicitly or implicitly in the *hastiferi*'s dedications from Germania Superior (CIL XIII 7281 and 7317, Castellum Mattiacorum, cf. Herz 1975, 166. *Bellona* and the *Fetiales*: Aust 1899, 255; note Dio LXXI 33, 3.
23. For the year-date of the *constitutio* see my paper in the forthcoming issue of *Starinar*.
24. *Sub annis* 588, 281, 253, and 234 BC. cf. note 4.
25. PIR (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) A 716, pp. 132 f. Characteristically, the title was given to Faustina in AD 174 or 175, after and because of Marcus' victory over the Quadi; Foss 1990, 141 nos. 63, 66 a; 144 no. 12. For the victorious colour of Julia Domna's title *mater castrorum* and its connection with the *Veneralia* (connoting the union of Venus with Mars !) see e.g. CIL VI 225 (of April 1, AD 200). It was dedicated *pro salute, itu, reditu et Victoriae* of the entire *domus divina*, on the occasion of the *expeditio Parthica*.
26. "I set out from Dyrrhachium on August 4 - the very day of the year on which the law (sc. necessitating the exile) had been passed about me. I reached Brundisium on August 5; my beloved daughter Tullia was there to meet me, and it was actually her birthday, which happened also to be the birthday of the colony of Brundisium, and also of the temple of Salus near your home; a coincidence which was noticed by the Brundisian populace and celebrated by warm congratulations from them". Translated by Grant 1954, 179 f. who has pointed out the interest of these lines.

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