

PROPAGANDA AND IMPERIAL CULT

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Abstract: *The expansion of the Roman Empire by gradually conquering new territories and transforming them into provinces, also required the obedience and submission of their population. The Greek cities from the west-Pontic coast have entered under the Roman influence as far back as the 1st century BC and were included afterwards to the Lower Moesia province. How can one make so many people obey, that could rebel anytime? To maintain the order, the displacement of the military units to the frontiers – which were constantly further and further from Rome - was not enough. Besides the heroism of the ones who “liberated” them, they also had to show to the people kindness and to ensure them a living that looks similar to the one from the Empire’s capital. Therefore, the Empire invested in roads (which were first of all necessary to the displacement of its armies), in urbanistic constructions (especially baths) and temples for various deities.*

The Roman spirit is subtly introduced through a well addressed propaganda. At its turn, the local ruling class took a series of measures in order to acquire the Emperor’s goodwill: dedicating votive monuments to some deities “for the health of the Emperor and his family”, their statues and busts that had to be honored at various holidays. New institutions have appeared especially to take care of these activities and, obviously, temples. The imperial cult imposes oneself and it is accepted.

Rezumat: *Extinderea Imperiului Roman, prin cucerirea treptată de noi teritorii și transformarea lor în provincii, necesita și menținerea în ascultare și supunere a populației acestora. Orașele-cetăți grecești de pe țărmul vest-pontic intră în sfera de influență romană încă din sec. I a.Chr. și apoi sunt incluse provinciei Moesia Inferior. Cum să aduci la ascultare atâtea neamuri care oricând se puteau revolta? Pentru menținerea liniștii nu era suficientă deplasarea unităților militare la frontiere – care erau tot mai departe de Roma. Trebuia să li se arate, pe lângă eroismul „eliberatorilor”, și o atitudine binevoitoare, să li se asigure un nivel de viață cât mai asemănător celui din capitala Imperiului. În acest sens Imperiul investește în drumuri (necesare, în primul rând,*

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deplasării armatelor), în construcții edilitar-gospodărești (în special băi publice) și temple pentru diverse divinități.

Spiritul roman este introdus subtil printr-o propagandă bine direcționată. Pătura conducătoare locală, la rândul ei, va lua o serie de măsuri care să atragă bunăvoința împăratului: închinări de monumente votive unor divinități „pentru sănătatea împăratului și a familiei sale”; amplasarea unor statui sau busturi în locuri publice și onorarea lor la diverse sărbători. Apar instituții și funcționari care se ocupă special de aceste activități și, evident, temple. Cultul imperial se impune și este acceptat.

The expansion of the Roman Empire by gradual conquest of new territories, which were then transformed into provinces, required the obedience and submission of the conquered populations. In order to achieve this, the notion of Romans arriving as liberators and defenders against barbarian attacks had to be induced. It is as liberators that the Romans are regarded by the Greek cities on the western pontic coast which came under the Roman influence beginning with 1st century BC. The first request and wish of the inhabitants of the Greek cities and of those of the Danubian factories (Axiopolis, Aegyssus) was that commercial routes be secured; commerce was one of the main activities of the local population and it took place both on water and on land. The Romans were part of these activities and their coins – by means of the images presented on them: the head of the emperor on one side and various symbols alluding to his feats of bravery on the reverse – subtly sent the political and ideological messages of Rome; these messages reached all corners of the world, conquered or not, and all social strata.

When Moesia became Roman province, the Greek cities on the north-western pontic coast had already been made part of the Roman Empire. With Rome's support on their side, the Greek cities felt it was their duty to pay homage.

The piety of the new vassals towards the founder of the Empire manifested in the form of the erection of temples and altars dedicated to Augustus, either by himself or associated with *dea Roma*.

The fact that, following the relegation of Publius Ovidius Naso to Tomis in the year 9 AD, the Roman poet prided himself in having built a sanctuary dedicated to the imperial family in his humble home (*Epistulae ex Ponto*, IV, 9, 105-112; 115-116) is one such evidence.

A clear indication of the establishment of an imperial cult quite early in the Greek cities on the western pontic side is given by the inscription of Papas, son of Theopompos, from Histria, who erected “at his own expense” a temple dedicated to Augustus (*ISM I 146*).

On a marble stella, dating at the end of 1st century BC – beginning of the 1st century AD, which was reused as a funeral stone, a preserved fragment of a Greek inscription reads “The columns of the portico (are dedicated) to Emperor Caesar Augustus by the people” (*ISM III 58*). The editors¹ remarked that most likely these columns closed the agora, and the inscription, in addition to the one from Histria, is the second document which mentions a temple pledged to the founder of the Empire during his lifetime.

¹ RĂDULESCU, MUNTEANU 1977, p. 83-84.

One other evidence which supports the idea that an *imperial cult* was established here is the creation of an "association of the elders" (*gerousia*) at Callatis, sometime during the middle of the 1st century AD as well as the festivities *Caesareia* celebrated in honour of the emperors (*ISM* III 31).

The installation of the *imperial cult* underwent a special development at Tomis, especially after the city was given the title of "Metropolis of the Left Pont"; it is here that we find the first mention of the deification of a member of the imperial family referring to Agrippina as mother of Emperor Nero (*ISM* II 37).

The statues and portraits of the emperors can be attributed to the manifestation of the imperial cult, as these represent proof of loyalty on behalf of the locals, of the inhabitants of the pontic cities.

In the pledges addressing various deities, the first thing mentioned is that these are for the health of the emperor and his family, and only towards the end is the real reason of the dedication mentioned. The dedications made to the emperors – from Traian to Valentinian – are numerous and varied: statues (of which only the bases were generally found), altars, stellas, architraves of edifices.

The sculptural dedications to emperors represented not only homage paid to these but they also constituted propaganda elements. As such are two fragments from an *imperial loricate statue* discovered at Tomis² with proportions bigger than reality, which is deplorably preserved: the torso, without its head, from shoulders to knees. The *lorica* has a square neckline and tight *institia* with completely flat ornaments. The decoration of the armour consists of a Medusa head with wings – the Hellenistic type – in its superior part, a scarf tied around the waist with a symmetrical knot in the centre and, at scarf level, two gryphons facing each other; lower, on the axis of the head, there is an aquila framed by *cornucopia*. The armour ends in a row of *pteriges* rounded at the ends, decorated with a simple rosette. For the decoration of the armour both motifs of old Hellenistic inspiration were used as well as Roman themes with the value of programme and symbol, in a subtle allusion to *virtus* – aquila – and *felicitas imperii*, *abundantia* – the two *cornucopia* – invoking the virtue of the emperor itself.

An inscription on a fragmentary base mentions that the statue which was above it was "for Nerva Traian" (*ISM* II 38). In 1837, in the southern part of the Tomitan peninsula a statue was found (it is lost today) whose inscriptions revealed that the monument had been erected for "Imperator Caesar Augustus Traianus Hadrianus", in 129 AD (*ISM* II 50). Approximately in the same period, before 1850, a cylindrically-shaped base of a statue was found, together with a statue (lost today) whose inscription in Greek mentions that the statue was made for "Caesar M. Aurelius Verus" (the year 139 AD or 145 AD, 161 AD at the latest: *ISM* II 60).

The epigraphical references to the erection of statues or busts of the emperors – which were borne during solemn processions – confirm that, especially in the larger cities (such as Tomis), there were statues (or busts) of all emperors, even though not all of these creations survived.

Architectural fragments unearthed in Tomis³ (as well as the homage paid by

² BORDENACHE 1962, p. 494; BORDENACHE 1965, p. 217.

³ BORDENACHE 1960, p. 255-272.

T. Cominius Claudianus Hermaphilos, as priest of the two emperors (ISM II 69) are clear evidence of the existence of a temple in which the imperial cult was observed.

L. Robert highlighted the close connection between the expansion in the empire of gladiator fights and the establishment of the imperial cult⁴. The organisers of gladiator fights were rich *philotimoi*, who often cumulated military or civil functions with those of priests of the imperial cult. Thus, we learn that, "by the decision of the illustrious Council of the most glorious People of the most resplendent Metropolis of Tomis", pontarch Aurelius Priscus Isidorus⁵, who was first magistrate and archiereus, together with his wife, grand priestess Ulpia Matrona, are honoured with statues (ISM II 96); so is "pontarch Aurelius Priscus Annianus, who held the first magistrate office of the Hellenic community and of the metropolis, as well as the office of archiereus"⁶, together with his wife, grand priestess Iulia Apolauste (ISM II 97), for the fact that they, without neglecting their duties", offered "brilliantly" gladiator and animal fights.

From Histria, two, irregular, marble fragments (ISM I 177) retain on their superior side several cavities which had been used to anchor statues; the inscriptions carved on the two sides mention the recipient of the dedication; on one side the inscription reads "to Caesar emperor Domitian the (histrion) people", and the other one "The (histrion) people honours the Caesar emperor Nerva". The two inscriptions highlight another aspect of the manner in which emperors were honoured through statues: the use of a generic statue whose head could be changed – as it was carved separately – upon the ascension of a new emperor. If we take into account the material out of which these statues were made, most frequently marble (which was acquired rather difficultly in some areas such as Dobrogea), or even bronze, we may realise that this practice was really economical.

One other aspect can be brought to light from the text of the historian *Gerusia* (ISM I 193); here we find the mention that the "bust of Artemidoros" must be wreathed once a year together with the "statues of gods and emperors". The allusion to the *wreathing of the statues of emperors* is interesting since it proves the loyalty towards the emperor by means of regular celebrations of the official anniversaries – *dies imperii*⁷ – when the busts of emperors were carried in solemn processions; on the other hand this indication certifies the existence of such monuments.

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After the 2nd century AD, following the conquest of Dacia by the Romans, a new symbol emerges: the *trophy*; triumphal sculpture, the historical narrative type, with propagandistic significance.

The ever so famous triumphal monument from Adamclisi (Fig. 1.a; 1.b), *Tropaeum Traiani* erected by the Romans in order to glorify the bravery in arms

⁴ ROBERT 1940, p. 240; BOULEY 2001, p. 131.

⁵ BOULEY 2001, p. 135.

⁶ BOULEY 2001, p. 135.

⁷ ISM I, p. 339-340.

and the politics of the Empire, has attracted the attention of researchers⁸ both for its architectural-sculptural concept and for the multiple meanings it incorporates. The monument is unique, especially due to its ideologically laden message⁹ pertaining to *imperialistic propaganda*¹⁰, a message which glorifies the military virtues of the Emperor and of the Romans¹¹.

Artistically, the monument Tropaeum Traiani represents an authentic manifestation of the provincial Roman art from the beginning of the 2nd century AD, its statues and bas-reliefs succeeding in expressing both a realistic and dynamic narrative of the Daco-Roman conflict which had taken place in the south-danubian territories, and in capturing a succession of individualised portraits of the Emperor and of the enemies of Rome¹².

The entire historical bas-relief must be associated with a marble plaque unearthed at Capidava¹³ (Fig. 2), decorated with a bas-relief of which the following are preserved: at the centre a *trophy* with an armour, helmet and two shields, and at the basis, in front of the trophy, the image of a *young prisoner*, an adolescent whose long hair comes out from under the *pileus* a characteristic element of the local population; of his clothes we can distinguish a tunic with sleeves above which a mantle is pinned with a round fibula.

The allegory of the conquest of Dacia - *the trophy* - is also represented on a bas-relief carved in a block of limestone discovered at Tomis¹⁴ (Fig. 3). The relief contains the trophy with the Roman weaponry: helmet, breastplate with *pteryges*, rounded shield, sword with *cingulum* and *cnemides*. The block was, evidently, part of a monument erected in the 2nd century AD.

Two feminine statues (Fig. 4.a; 4.b), discovered also at Tomis, belong to the same period; these represent personifications of *Dacia capta*, each statue with its hands tied behind its back¹⁵. The statues representing female captives had become de rigueur in the 2nd century AD. The creation of these two monuments is influenced by the Greek urban trends, a normal occurrence in the ancient Greek culture area Tomis was.

The trophy from Tomis, the statues of "captives" also from Tomis, as well as the trophy from Capidava most likely decorated public edifices, since the monuments had - as well as *Tropaeum Traiani* - the same propagandistic function meant to illustrate the invincibility of the Romans and the subjection of the local population¹⁶.

⁸ For over a hundred years, the research of the triumphal monument Tropaeum Traiani has generated a rich bibliography, from which we select: TOCILESCU, BENNDORF, NIEMANN 1895; CIHORUS 1904; ANTONESCU 1905; PICARD 1957; FLORESCU 1965; FLORESCU 1973; SÂMPETRU 1984.

⁹ PICARD 1957, p. 391-406.

¹⁰ BORDENACHE 1965, p. 215-223.

¹¹ FLORESCU 1973, p. 11-12.

¹² COVACEF 2002, p. 130.

¹³ FLORESCU *et alii*, 1958, p. 124-127, no. 1, fig. 53.

¹⁴ TOCILESCU 1906, p. 19, no. 26; BORDENACHE 1970, p. 258, G 153, pl. 45.

¹⁵ BORDENACHE 1969, nos. 274, 275.

¹⁶ COVACEF 2002, p. 54.

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a.



b.

Fig. 1 a,b - Tropaeum Traiani monument.



Fig. 2 - Fragment of the triumphal relief from Capidava.



Fig. 3 - Triumphal relief from Tomis.



a.



b.

Fig. 4 a,b - „*Dacia capta*” – two statues from Tomis.