

UNIVERSITATEA „BABEȘ – BOLYAI”

Facultatea de Istorie și Filosofie

Ph-thesis

***WARRIORS AND WEAPONS IN DACIA IN THE 2nd BC- 1st
AD CENTURIES***

(abstract)

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Contents

Introduction	1
Chapter I. Research history	5
Chapter II. The status of the warrior in the Dacian-Getic society	12
Chapter III. Dacic armament in artistic presentations	68
Chapter IV.	
A. Offensive armament	81
1. Swords	81
2. Double-edged swords	88
3. Fighting knives	100
4. Daggers	112
5. Spears	114
6. Javelins	122
7. Catapult arrowheads	127
8. Arrows	128
B. Defensive armament	136
1. Helmets	136
2. Shields	140
3. Armors	148
Chapter V. Conclusions	157
Chapter VI. Catalogue of weapons from Dacian area	176
Bibliography	
Annexes	

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Introduction

The purpose of this thesis was to study the military equipment of the Dacians, but, at the same time, we tried to cover broader aspects, such as the organization of the military power, the permanent or temporary character of the army, its structure, military hierarchy, and the status of the warrior in the Dacian society.

The Dacian civilization had a great economic and demographic development between the 2nd and 1st century BC, as well as a restructuring of the social, political, and religious life, which led to the overcoming of the tribal traits and the imposing of a single authority.

During the kingdom period, the Dacian army was under the supreme authority of the king, and, most likely, had a core of professionals, completed by a big mass of warriors coming from the commoners. The current archeological studies, focused more on the fortresses, and the few material marks left by the rural people, cannot allow us to comment on the military duties of the common people.

These “weapon specialists” belonged socially to the aristocracy (or nobility), therefore, to discuss their status, means in fact to analyze the whole Dacian social structure. There is a great debate on this topic in the Romanian literature of specialty, starting with V. Pârvan, Constantin and Hadrian Daicoviciu, or, more recently, Zoe Petre, to mention just a few of the authors interested in the Dacian social aspects, their research being based mainly on the antique written sources. In the last years there is a special interest in the material culture, customs and believes, imaginary transposed into artistic forms, to try to get a more complete picture of the Dacian aristocracy.

The Dacian war equipment was quite complex, encompassing, as expected, the main two groups: offensive and defensive.

The Dacian weapons, although of interest to the specialists even since Pârvan, were never the main topic of Romanian archeological research, being just mentioned as

part of other synthesis work. For this reason I thought it was necessary to review the subject with the purpose to present a complete picture of the whole Dacian panoply.

The pieces of armament (published until 2008) are listed alphabetically in a catalogue at the end of this thesis. It also contains information on the place of origin, the complex (with a short description), dimensions, shape, conditions of preservation, dating (of artifacts or complex). There is also a general bibliography, as well as a piece-specific one.

II. The status of the warrior in the Dacian society

The image of the Dacian warriors (the people preoccupied mainly by the war) is closely connected with the image of the aristocracy, as part of the Dacian society. There is a great debate in the Romanian literature of specialty with regards to the structural analysis of this society. Based on the antique sources, there are two classifications: a bipartite one, nobles (*tarabostes / pilleati*) and commoners, and a tripartite one, nobles, commoners, and middle class (*comati*, intermediate status between nobles and commoners). The latter classification is by comparison with the Celtic society, or by translating the Indo-European functions into Dacian hierarchy.

With regards to the functions of the social elite, most authors agree with the double competency: military and sacerdotal. However, some authors like H. Daicoviciu, A. Bodor, N. Goștar and V. Lica think different members of the society have different functions, whereas I. Glodariu is of opinion that, at this stage of research, we cannot say that there was a secular and a religious nobility. The reforms made by Burebista and Deceneu, as per Zoe Petre, have increased the sacerdotal role of the nobility as opposed to the military one.

If we accept the bipartite classification, the army was made of professionals (the nobility), and a mass of soldiers, which were free people (mostly land workers). In the tripartite classification, there is a new category, of professionals warriors, other than the big nobility, and subordinated to it. The image is that of a complex army, where the king commands directly the *pilleati*, which, on their turn, command the *comati* (the true

warriors by definition). We can assume there were military units organized as mentioned, in addition to the units of free people.

The image of the warrior in the Dacian society, the way we can imagine it today, is that of an aristocrat with a strong military profile. Even if we accept a preponderant sacerdotal role of the aristocracy, the military role is at least as important, according to the war-dedicated iconography. He has an important role in the social hierarchy, and owns some economical goods that allow him to sustain his status. His role is not only to participate directly in different conflicts, but also to defend the fortifications, for personal interests, as a local leader, or as part of the king's military apparatus. Therefore, he is very important for the military stability of a territory, and its administration.

The archeological sources lead us to similar conclusions. We can talk about a tribal aristocracy with a strong military profile by the second half of the second century to the middle of the first century BC. We can see this at the level of religious beliefs and funeral practices done in a time when the common people seem to have abandoned them. By analyzing the tumular and flat graves from different parts of Dacia we can get a picture of the Dacian warriors, specifically by looking at the weapons laid in the grave with the body at the time of burial.

The barrow graves represent important members of the community. The funeral rituals, organized by the family, address not only the deceased (to help him transcend to the other world), but also the community, to the participants who understand the message of these rituals. Some tombs had rich military inventories but lacked other prestigious pieces, and were meant to emphasize the military attributes of the deceased (Radovanu, Călan, Cugir- T. IV, Popești – T. II), whereas other tombs (Cugir – T. II and Popești – T. IV) showed excellent military attributes (by laying a complete panoply) in addition to a significant wealth.

The barrow necropolises from Cugir and Popești are the only one offering data on social hierarchy, by the selection of weapons (and not only) laid in the graves.

For example, the barrow number II from Cugir is the richest; barrow number III had an chainmail, silver pieces and melted harness pieces; barrow number IV had only a *sica* and a spear head; barrow I had only some clothing accessories and ceramic pieces. The

same applies to the smaller, local graves, some showing a complete panoply, whereas others only a few weapons, or only defensive equipment, or none.

The Popești cemetery is similar (pl LXIII): barrow no. IV had complete panoply (the spear head is uncertain, but the arrows are present), lesser in barrow no. II and III (only defensive equipment), and zero in barrow no. I.

The above mentioned differences can be interpreted either as social hierarchisation or, from a more complex perspective, hard to decipher based on current knowledge.

We could say that the people from Cugir and Popești necropolises, buried with just defensive equipment, had an inferior status than those buried with complete panoply. However, we do not know if their social position was equivalent with, for example, those from Piscul Crăsani or Poiana (Gorj), important members of their community, and buried with similar panoply.

The people from barrow number IV and II from Cugir and Popești, respectively, likely had an inferior position as well, as they were buried with only incomplete equipment, and lacked the harness pieces. But, at the same time, it may be that they had a military status with less responsibilities, or a different fight technique, or maybe they were too young to have complete panoply.

Contemporary to the tumular graves mentioned above, and approximately in the some regions, the Dacians had flat funerary sites of cremation.

Transylvania, this time, is very well represented by six graves, which are certain, from Hunedoara, Blandiana and Tărtaria, plus three uncertain graves from Teleac and Piatra Craivii. Also, at South of Carpathians, there are mentioned three certain graves at Zimnicea, Cepari and Histria (the last belonged to a Greek mercenary), and some uncertain, attested based on inventory, at Davidesti and Izvoru.

The people buried in these funerary complexes have much poorer equipment, such as a single weapon (*sica*, spear, or a fragment of bronze helmet). They are not much different from the above-mentioned graves.

There are just two necropolises, at Teleac and Hunedoara. This last location has the richest military equipment, belonging to a man buried in a flat grave. There were offensive weapons, like a *sica* and a spearhead, as well as a chainmail and some metallic fragments suggesting a shield and a helmet. The other graves had just one weapon or two,

if we take into account the spearhead or the curved knife of only 13.5 cm. Other four funerary sites, of inhumation this time, have no weapons at all. It makes us wonder if these differences do not suggest a possible social and/or military hierarchy. In the same context, by comparison to the barrow graves, the man's grave from Hunedoara is close to ones from Radovanu or Călan.

We are aware that, at the current level of knowledge, these comparisons may be considered rather speculations. The only certainty is that these kinds of weapons were used at the time, that not all the warriors had complete military equipment, and that there was a desire to emphasize the men's special social status or military skills at the time of burial.

The same is valid for the funerary complexes from Oltenia. Most weapons come from flat graves of cremation which are mostly uncertain because of their poor condition at the time of discovery. The best military equipment have the graves from Cornesti (uncertain): spade, spear, *sica*, shield (pl. LXVII/1-4); Dobrosloveni: sword, spear, shield (pl. LXVI/7-9); Cetate; Corcova; Orodol: sword, *sica*, spear (pl. LXVII/5-8); Dubova: *sica*, spear, shield; also the certain graves from Spahii (M.11: sword, spear) and Corlate (sword and shield). The necropolises also offer little information on social or military hierarchy of the individuals.

We would like also to mention the presence of the horse harness pieces along with military equipment. In a statistics from the beginning of 2000s of 155 graves from the lower area of Danube, these pieces are present in more than one third of the inventories. The same ratio applies if the research area is extended to the North of Southern Carpathians. There were especially bits of Tracian or Tracian-Getic type, or, more rarely, spurs or ornamental pieces. The horses were either following their owners to the other life, as showed by the cremated bones from Cugir and Hunedoara, or had a special treatment, as attested at Șeusa.

To summarize, in this period of Dacian civilization, from the middle of the second century BC to the middle of the first, arises an elite of warriors that does not want to follow the new funeral customs, but prefers special funeral settings (they, or the community they belong to). There are some local characteristics of funeral rites or rituals, by laying the dead bodies in a barrow (generally) or flat grave (in the North-West of

Bulgaria, Muntenia or South-West of Transylvania, especially where close to the Celtic civilization). In this context, there no graves found in Moldavia.

The unification of the Dacians tribes under one king, and the political and religious reforms instituted by Burebista and his priest Deceneu change the Dacian society with important consequences in our field of interest. Some of the tribal aristocracy participated in the tribal unification, later on being part of the new state.

From the religious perspective, we noticed that the aristocracy adopted the almost one century-old funeral custom of common people of not building graves or necropolises, even after the fall of Burebista's kingdom. Moldavia is again an exception, since here we can find the most tombs from this period. Their inventory is poorer, likely because they gave up laying prestigious pieces along with their dead.

The king takes the place of the local leader. He is the utmost political, military and even religious authority (e.g. Deceneu or other followers), economically capable of building and maintaining a huge system of fortresses, therefore allowing him to control a fairly big territory.

The nobility starts to be more involved in war matters, as they have more military and administrative functions, such as defending and organizing a certain territory in the name of the king; or being members or leaders of a military garrison inside a fortress, hence occupying their towers or inside huts; or making war decision as part of the royal council.

Based on their social status, they could build their houses inside the fortress, on the acropolis or higher grounds, had the right to wear weapons, had a certain wealth that they would hide in dangerous times, and could afford luxurious things, of local or imported origin.

Some of the Dacian Gods, especially the God of War, were present on pieces of precious metal or ceramic, as part of imaginary scenes, incorporating myth and reality.

The values of society are war related, praising the courage and violence, as in choosing symbols of prey animals like the vulture or feline. The decorations on the dagger handles suggest a magical protective power of the weapons, reflecting the Solar Gods, or the opposing forces of good and bad, celestial and telluric.

There are also regional characteristics of the social status manifestations. At East of Carpathians the funeral customs are those long gone in other regions, like barrow graves, but unpretentious (barrow graves with poor inventory). At the Northern border of Dacian civilization, under Germanic influence, the funeral rituals of 2nd-1st century BC are still maintained, including the way of showing the affiliation to a certain social or “professional” category.

III The Dacian armament in the artistic presentations

The research of the Dacian armament benefits of the iconographic sources, even if few, which, along with the archeological and literary ones, can give a quite realistic picture of the panoply of Dacian warrior from the 2nd-1st century BC to the Roman conquest.

There are two types of artistic presentations. The first one originates inside the Dacian society and is addressed to the local elite, being very interesting as an image that they want to present to the contemporary people. The weapons can be seen on silver, bronze or ceramic items from Surcea, Polovragi, Lupu, Răcatau or Iakimovo. One of the images most encountered and perpetuated in time is that of the knight, which is usually armed with a straight sword and wears an oval shield.

The second artistic source comes from a totally different environment and belongs to the Roman figurative art, minor or monumental. The pieces from the Column of Trajan’s pedestal, as well as the monument from Adamclisi are considered to be the most representative for the Dacian weapons. There are other images of Dacian weapons on the funeral monument of T. Claudius Maximus, on a bronze fragment plate from Gârla Mare, on some Roman coins that commemorate the victory on Dacia, on a marble block from Sarmizegetusa Regia, or on two inscriptions belonging to some soldiers from the I Aelia Dacorum Miliaria Equitata cohort from Britannia.

IV. Analysis of the material

IV A The offensive armament

A. 1. Swords

The only known type of Dacian sword is the well-known *falx*, with a curved blade, the cutting edge on the interior, and a handle rectangular in section. There were published four items from Grădiștea de Munte and one from Viscri. They measure 64-87 cm in length, with the blade of 64-46 cm. Some have a double cutting edge at the tip. They all can be dated from the beginning of the 2nd century going to the end of the 1st century BC.

A. 2. Two-edged swords

Type1 – the Celtic-type swords are coming into Dacian life from contacts with Celtic people. They have a straight blade, with two parallel cutting edges, a round or sharp tip, and measure 85-102 cm in length. The blade has a lenticular, angular or fluted profile. Their scabbard was decorated on the upper part, had a fitting piece for the belt, and a short and rounded *bouterolla* characteristic to the later La Tène culture. There were 28 artifacts found in 24 different areas, mainly in Oltenia, South-West of Transylvania and Muntenia.

Type II – swords with the ringed handle. The all four swords published come from Grădiștea de Munte and have a long handle (for two hands) finished with a ring, and a straight blade with two cutting edges. They are dated the end of 1st century AD and the beginning of the 2nd. The closest analogy, taking into account the ring at the end, is in the Sarmatian model, where the handle was for a single hand. The Roman swords of this type are only used from the half of 2nd century AD.

Type III – *Gladii*

Whole Roman swords or fragments come from different areas of Dacia. For example there was one at Ocnîța, one at Poiana, where there were also found some

handles and hand guards, and a *gladius* tip at Căpâlna. Likely the two swords from Zemplin are still of Roman origin, one carrying the stamp of the workshop or master. The sword from Ocița is one of the earliest Roman military artifacts in Dacia (likely 1st decade of first century AD), as a result of the military contacts from the two civilizations, like the well-known pillage campaigns, or the wars from the end of the 1st and beginning of 2nd century AD.

A. 3. Fighting knives

Type I (*Sica*)

The about 47 pieces of *Sica* can be classified morphologically in two, by considering the shape of the tang rectangular shape, with three holes for the rivets, and conic shape, with a shorter tang. The blade, curved and with a longitudinal “blood channel”, was sometimes decorated with a series of geometric and zoomorphic motifs, interpreted as solar symbols or prey birds. Because of a single cutting edge, on the concave side of the blade, we preferred the term of fighting knives instead of daggers, the latter being defined, in archeological as well as literary dictionaries, as having a two cutting edge blade.

Chronologically, the *sica* can be encountered from IV-III century BC to the Roman conquest. The average dimensions were 32 cm in total length and 23 cm in blade’s length; the maximum 50 cm and 35.5 cm respectively for the blade; the minimum 24 cm and 18.2 cm respectively.

Type II is the Celtic knife, known by the three items from Costești, Lozna and Cozia sites.

Type III - is characterized by a massif blade, straight or slightly curved, and a socket tang for the handle. They come from Costești and Grădiștea de Munte are dated along the 1st century BC – 1st century AD and end of 1st – beginning of 2nd century AD.

A. 4. Daggers

Type I - is represented by a single fragmented artifact from Luncani – Piatra Roşie, with a straight blade and lenticular section.

Type II – *pugio*, is the well-known Roman dagger, seen in the Dacian world at Racoş, Grădiştea de Munte and Poiana, plus a dagger scabbard found at Oeniţa. Their origin is similar to the roman swords.

A. 5. Spears

Likely the most encountered weapons after arrows, the spears used by Dacians have a similar shape to the ones from barbaric or Roman Europe, being classified based on the blade profile. Remarkably, they are very long during the II – I century BC, under the Celtic influence, where they were the main stabbing weapons. With regards to their function, they were used for close combat (the massive ones), thrusting (smaller ones), or both. All types or largely spread and long used.

Type I has a long head, with a median nervure of different shapes or widths. There were two variants: one with a rounded and flat median nervure (variant “a”), and the other with an angular nervure (variant “b”).

Type II - are spear heads with a lenticular profile of their blades, as there is no median nervure.

Type III are artifacts from Augustin, Craiva, Grădiştea de Munte and Racoşul de Jos, characterized by a round, incomplete tang, and a simple blade with lenticular or rectangular profile.

Type IV - is characterized by the blade being fixed in a crack of the tang. There was only one artifact found at Grădiştea de Munte.

A. 6. Javelins

Type I - are javelin heads with 3 or 4 angles, being divided in two variants based on that.

Type II is different from I by a narrowing of the blade from tip to tang. Variant "b" is a massive item found at Grădiștea de Munte. Most of the pieces, with the exception of the very early ones, have very close analogies in the Roman life.

Type III In this type were included the javelin heads similar in shape to the spear ones, but smaller and used mainly for thrusting.

The javelin dimensions were 12-16 cm, and a weighed from 12 g. to 112 g.

A. 7. Catapult arrowheads

Type I has a conic head and a four angled peduncle. The two pieces come from Grădiștea de Munte and Costești.

Type II has a massive, lenticular and short head with a long tang. They come from Răcățău, Costești and Grădiștea de Munte.

A. 8. Arrows

There are about 300 arrows found in the Dacian sites. Based on the diversity of their shapes, they were classified in several types, each with few variants.

Type I - comprises the arrowheads with a flat blade, almost triangular, sometimes with a median nervure and an attaching tang. The variants of this type differ by the inferior end of the blade: rounded (variant "a.1."), with a spike/spur (variant "b"), or with two spikes (variant "c"). From Poiana and Hunedoara come some arrows similar in shape, but with a prominent round median nervure (variant "a.2."). These pieces are broadly spread especially during the period of the 1st BC to 1st AD centuries. They weigh 2-10 g., and the closest analogies are in the Roman world, or, more rarely, the late Celtic one.

Type II - is represented by the arrows with three angles (or faces). From iron or bronze, they come from previous eras, some of them continuing into the Dacian era. The most known ones are the arrowheads with peduncle, made in iron, with numerous analogies in the Roman world.

Type III – The arrows of this type have a four-angled head, a long body, and a peduncle or tang for attaching to the shaft. They measure 4.4 -18 cm. Chronologically they are dated, in the Dacian life, from 2nd – 1st century BC to the 1st century AD. Analogies are Roman.

Type IV consists of conic-shaped arrows, with a tubular, long and sharp head, round in section. The difference from the tang to the actual head is less. The dating of these pieces is the interval from 1st century BC to 1st/2nd AD, and the dimensions are 3.6 – 10 cm.

Type V – the arrows have a long socketed tang, compared to the tip, followed by a long body and a flat blade, sharp, and finished inferiorly with two protuberant wings. They are very seldom in the Dacian world, represented by only two samples found at Popești, and an uncertain one at Vladiceasca.

Type VI – the bone or ceramic arrows.

IV. B. The deffensive armament

B.1. Helmets

Coming from the incineration graves, there a just a few Dacian helmets, found in fragmented state. The artifacts found at Popești, Chirnogi, Piscul Crăsani, Zimnicea, Poiana (Gorj county) and Cugir, were classified by A. Rustoiu in two variants, depending on their material and shape. Hence, the helmets from the first five above-mentioned locations belong to variant “a”, being made in bronze and having as a prototype the Attic helmet. The sample from Cugir, made in iron, has a prototype from Port or Novo Mesto, sometime during the 1st century BC (variant “b”).

B. 2. Shields

The shields used by Dacians had an oval shape and were similar to the ones of the Roman auxiliary troops. The only preserved elements were the metal pieces, the *umbo*, and the iron edging used to strengthen the rims. The *umbo* was the round central part of the shield, with a hemispheric or conic surface. The earliest artifacts were dated along the 2nd to the 1st century BC and belong to a North Balkan type of Celtic influence. From the 1st century AD we see Roman *umbones* too, most likely made by Dacian masters too. Generally we can talk of about 49 pieces belonging to the shields, from which 24 are *umbones*. There are also the nails used to fix these to the wooden plank, or a fragment of an handle found at Capâlna.

B.3. Armors

Originating in Balkans or Central Europe, the *chainmail* is the most utilized type of armour, due to its highly protective quality and as an item of status. In the Dacian area, they were found in a series of funeral complexes from South of Danube, as well as the items from Cugir, Hunedoara, Poiana (Gorj), Popești and Radovanu. For the end of the 1st century BC they were attested at Moigrad, Malaja Kopanja, Zemplin or Răcătău. In a grave from Răcătău, along with fragments of chainmail, there were found three bronze scales belonging to *lorica squamata*, by Sarmatian analogy. Most likely there was a mixed armor, under the influence of these people. Other *lorica* scales of same type were found in the dwellings from Răcătău and Șimleul Silvaniei, and in addition two items of Roman origin from Divici. The lock from *lorica segmentata*, found at Cetateni, is related to the Dacian-Roman wars. The attestation of a lesser number of chainmail during 1st – 2nd centuries AD can be explained by the gradual abandon of this means of protections, or by the disappearance of the context (graves, more exactly) of their origin.

V. Conclusions

The ideal model of Dacian warrior is represented by the local tribe leader, or, later on, by the king, who have the entire local military power under their authority. The aristocrats, tribal or as part of the new political structure, are the army's core of professionals, being preoccupied mainly by military activities, as proven by fortress systems or the inventory deposited in the graves. At the same time, they participated in the political and economical life of the community, were part of the king's council, administered and defended certain territories from around a fortified centre, where they had their residence and military garrison. Their houses were located in the best residential areas, on the upper terraces, or they were living in the majestic tower residences. As a result of pillage campaigns, or through commercial exchanges, the warrior-aristocrats were the main consumers of goods and luxury items. The call of the supernatural forces for protection, and a change in the funeral behavior can also be seen from the archeological studies. There are also regional characteristics on a common cultural background.

The Dacian military equipment can be best described during the 2nd to 1st century BC based on the funeral inventory. We can talk about "complete" panoply, reserved to the elites and made of sword, *sica*, lance, helmet, shield and chainmail; "standard" panoply, which lacks the helmet, chainmail and shield, is less attested; "minimal" panoply made of at least two offensive weapons.

For the classical period of the Dacian civilization, the reproduction of the military equipment is hard to make. The weapons attested now are the *sica*, the ringed-handle swords, *falces*, spears (which are smaller than the previous ones), and different types of spearheads and arrowheads. Regarding the defensive equipment, the best represented is the shield, with rare chainmail and no helmets. There is also a strong influence of the Roman armament.

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