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Diocletian and Maximian and the *Agri Decumates*

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Abstract

This article deals with the question of Roman control of the *Agri Decumates* in the age of the Tetrarchy, summing up its history from the 260s and particularly focusing on the campaign of Diocletian and Maximian in 288. The fate of the *Agri Decumates* is compared to the fate of the old Roman *Dacia*, which was abandoned by the Romans in about 271 to become a theatre of operations for Emperor Constantine in the 330s. Although Diocletian and Maximian may have achieved some success in their campaign, it appears to have been short-lived and comparable to what Constantine achieved, or rather failed to achieve, in *Dacia*.

Keywords

Diocletian; *Agri Decumates*; Late Roman Empire; *Dacia*

This article tries to establish the extent of Roman control of the area of so-called *Agri Decumates* in the age of tetrarchy, summing up its history from its abandonment in about 260 until the late 3rd century. This is in no way a settled issue. For example, John Wilkes, referring to the age of tetrarchy, asserts that "no attempt was made to recover territory beyond the upper Rhine and Danube evacuated under Gallienus".[1] But was it really so? Diocletian not only took an interest in the border regions, repeatedly checking incursions and safeguarding the frontiers against the Sarmatians, the Carpi and other barbarian tribes, but he once even campaigned on the barbarian territory – it was in 288, in the *Agri Decumates*. But let us first briefly sum up what is essential to know about that region in question.

The area of *Agri Decumates* came under imperial control during the Flavian dynasty, belonging ever since to the provinces of *Raetia* and *Germania Superior*. It was, broadly speaking, the area between the Upper Rhine and the Upper Danube. Specifically, it comprised the eastern parts of the Upper Rhine Plain (*Oberrheinische Tiefebene*), the whole of the Black Forest (*Schwarzwald*), the Neckar valley, and the Swabian Jura (*Schwäbische Alb*). From north, it was enclosed by the river Main. Tacitus is the only ancient writer to even name this area: "I am not inclined to reckon among the people of Germania those who cultivate the decumate lands, settled though they may be beyond the Rhine and Danube. All the wastrels and penniless adventurers of Gaul seized on what was still no man's land. It was only later, when a frontier road was laid and garrisons brought forward, that they became a sort of projection of the empire and part of a province."[2]

It is a well-established fact that the area of *Agri Decumates* was lost in about 260, abandoned by the Romans and, piece by piece, falling to the Alamanni. The hapless emperor Gallienus (253–268), responsible for this event, was in all probability forced to evacuate this area, following the usurpation of Postumus in 260 and the establishment of the so-called "Gallic Empire".[3] From a strategic point of view, the abandonment of this territory even makes some sense: the Alps now formed the natural border between the empires of Postumus and Gallienus. In any case, the two rulers had to concentrate on defending their most important areas – Gallienus needed to defend Italy at all costs, while for Postumus it was imperative to keep hold of Gaul. Neither Gallienus nor Postumus seemed to have the extra resources necessary to defend the *Agri Decumates*; thus, deemed redundant, this region was severed from the empire.[4]

It is also noteworthy that, with forces scarce everywhere, the fate of Raetia itself and other frontier provinces was also in the balance at this time. Notably, our sources attest that the Roman Dacia was overwhelmed by barbarians and for all practical purposes lost

1 Wilkes (2008: p. 231).

2 Tac. *Germ.* 29 (*Non numeraverim inter Germaniae populos, quamquam trans Rhenum Danuviumque consederint, eos qui decumates agros exercent. Levissimus quisque Gallorum et inopia audax dubiae possessionis solum occupavere; mox limite acto promotisque praesidiis sinus imperii et pars provinciae habentur*). The English translation by H. Mattingly (2009).

3 Dietz (2012: p. 58).

4 See for example Unruh (1993: pp. 242–246), who lists all ancient references to the loss of this area.

under Gallienus.[5] Ultimately, Aurelian felt forced to evacuate the province in about 271.[6] Certainly, Aurelian withdrew the two legions stationed in Dacia (*V Macedonica* and *XIII Gemina*) and the Roman provincial administration. Some, but by no means all, of the civilian population left with the soldiers; archaeological finds testify to the continuity of habitation in Roman settlements and farms in Dacia. It is impossible to determine how many civilians followed the army and how those who remained assimilated with the new population (Goths, Vandals, Gepids, Taifali, Carpi and other tribes) that now began to pour into Dacia from all sides. Pat Southern put it succinctly: "The question of how many of the civilian population came out of Dacia in the wake of the army is probably unanswerable. There would be many who would remain in their homes, even though the political intentions and accompanying propaganda may have represented the removal as total".[7]

Now, is it possible to draw parallels between Dacia and the *Agri Decumates* in this regard? In the view of a scholar, "nothing in the recent epigraphic or numismatic evidence indicates other than a complete and sudden withdrawal of the army from the Rhine-Danube re-entrant after A.D. 260; but the extent to which some elements of the civilian population stayed, especially in the countryside, is more debatable. Some areas immediately east of the Rhine are now known to have had Roman coinage still circulating up until the middle of the fourth century, and even the central Neckar valley was receiving fresh coinage after A.D. 260, although only in small quantities. Unlike in Raetia, where both forts and civilian sites were comprehensively destroyed in the 250s, the villas in Upper Germany show few signs of destruction. Some sites may have continued in occupation by 'Roman' settlers for a few years; others were gradually taken over by Germanic peoples who settled in some of the slowly decaying villas and their outbuildings".[8] But there appear dissenting voices, too. Another scholar argues for a massive, albeit incomplete population transfer from the *Agri Decumates* to the area near Vosges mountains between Metz and Strasbourg, under Gallienus, the Gallic emperors, or Aurelian.[9] Even if that was the case, rather than rushing to call the area "Alamannic territory", we should refer to it, at least to begin with, as a no-man's land. It was only later, in the late 3rd century, when this region was known to Roman writers as *Alamannia*.[10] The same logic was applied to the old Roman Dacia, abandoned by Aurelian and only later known as *Gothia*.[11]

To make the matter more complicated, when the Alamanni succeeded in occupying the *Agri Decumates* is perhaps a meaningless question, as they may not have come into this region at all. The Alamanni first appeared in the Roman world in early 213, when the emperor Caracalla left Rome for Raetia, which was threatened by the Germani.

5 Eutr. IX, 8 (*Dacia, quae a Traiano ultra Danubium fuerat adiecta, tum amissa*), Oros. *Hist*. VII, 22 (*Dacia trans Danubium in perpetuum aufertur*), Festus 8 (*sub Gallieno imperatore amissa est*).

6 Watson (1999: pp. 54–55) argues for 271, for other dates see Southern (2004: p. 325, note 54).

7 Southern (2004: p. 121).

8 Wilson (2006: p. 210).

9 Hind (1984: p. 192).

10 In the year 297, an anonymous panegyrist spoke of *Alamannia* (*Pan. Lat.* VIII (4), 2, 1). Cf. Amm. Marc. XX, 4, 1 (*regna Alamanniae*) and Amm. Marc. XXX, 3, 1 (*pagi Alamanniae*).

11 *Gothia*: Amm. Marc. XXX, 2, 8 and Orosius I, 2, 53.

According to Aurelius Victor, Caracalla entered the *Agri Decumates* and defeated the Alamanni by the river Main (*Alamannos, gentem populosam ex equo mirifice pugnantem, prope Moenum amnem devicit*).[12] At the end of 213, the emperor was rewarded for his efforts with the title *Germanicus maximus*.[13] However, the ethnogenesis of the Alamanni appears to be a rather gradual process. As John Drinkwater pointed out, the area of *Agri Decumates* "was taken over gradually by a number of small and scattered groups which slowly became the Alamanni".[14] We can argue that the Alamanni did not enter the *Agri Decumates*, but rather originated there. If that was the case, sources like Aurelius Victor simply projected the present upon the past.

In 277 and 278, the emperor Probus sought to secure Gaul from the Germani, probably the Franks and the Alamanni, who, taking advantage of the situation after Aurelian's death, "roamed untroubled not only on our bank [the Rhine], but throughout Gaul".[15] Probus expelled them, re-secured the Rhine frontier, ordered the fortification of Gallic towns,[16] and created a system of coastal protection in northern Gaul that would later be known as the Saxon Shore (*litus Saxonicum*).[17] The author of the *HA* even says that Probus mounted a counter-offensive, slaying 400,000 (!) of the barbarians who had occupied the Roman soil and driving the rest "beyond the river Niger and beyond the Alba" (*caesis quadringentis milibus, qui Romanum occupaverant solum, reliquos ultra Nigrum fluvium et Albam removit*).[18] If we take this to mean the river Neckar and the Swabian Jura mountain range,[19] Probus' army would have been deep in the *Agri Decumates*, which had been abandoned less than two decades before. What was Probus doing in this region? Did he mean to recapture it? Or was he merely making a pre-emptive strike? According to the *HA*, Probus intended to make "all of Germania a province";[20] this is obviously an absurd notion, but the emperor could well have had more modest territorial gains in mind, especially in the wake of his highly successful campaign in Gaul.[21] It is perhaps also possible that Probus and his army were simply traversing the *Agri Decumates*. On the one hand, this was an opportunity to intimidate the barbarian tribes there and discourage them from further attacks; on the other, such a route was a short-cut to Raetia, which

12 Aur. Vict. 21, 2; cf. Dio LXXVII, 13, 4–5.

13 Kienast & Eck & Heil (2017: p. 157).

14 Drinkwater (2007: p. 45).

15 *HA*, *Prob.* 13, 7 (*in nostra ripa, immo per omnes Gallias securi vagarentur*); *cf. HA*, *Tac.* 3, 4.

16 According to the *HA* (*Prob.* 13, 6), Probus reconquered 60 cities in Gaul from the barbarians; elsewhere (15, 3), it is claimed that Probus reconquered 70 cities. Cf. Julian, *Caesares* 314 B, who claimed that Probus "restored seventy cities".

17 Drinkwater (2008: p. 55).

18 *HA*, *Prob.* 13, 7.

19 These sites are identified by Crees (1911: p. 100); see also Magie (1932: pp. 364–365).

20 *HA*, *Prob.* 14, 5 (*si* [...] *fieret Germania tota provincia*).

21 The author of the *HA* (*Prob*. 13, 8) even says that Probus built camps on barbarian soil, assigning troops to them, presumably intending them as permanent military posts (*contra urbes Romanas castra in solo barbarico posuit atque illic milites collocavit*).

was being threatened by the Vandals and Burgundians.[22] The chronology here is uncertain, but it looks like Probus killed some of these barbarians and took the rest captive in 278 at a battle on the Ligys (presumably present-day Lech, Bavaria) and in another subsequent clash; the captives were sent to Britain, where they were probably assigned to auxiliary troops.[23] The emperor then wintered in the Middle Danube region, before waging war elsewhere.

Ten years later, in 288, the emperors Diocletian and Maximian carried out a joint strike against the Alamanni in the area of *Agri Decumates*. Maximian advanced from the Rhine, probably from Mainz, towards the south-east, while Diocletian moved in from Raetia, probably from Augsburg (*Augusta Vindelicorum*), in the east and headed towards the north-west (*ingressus est nuper illam quae Raetiae est obiecta Germaniam*).[24] The panegyric of 297 tells us that "the king of the most savage of tribes was taken captive thanks to the snares he himself had set, and from the Rhine bridge to the Danube crossing at Guntia, Alamannia was entirely torched and razed to the ground".[25] Guntia is present-day Günzburg (Bavaria), and if the bridge at Mainz is meant here, the theatre of the joint campaign of Diocletian and Maximian covered almost the whole of the former *Agri Decumates*, lost in about 260.[26] During this campaign, Diocletian and Maximian convened[27] and apparently consulted each other on what course of action to take against the Germani. What did they originally intend to achieve? Again, it is difficult both to guess their intentions and assess the impact of their operation, but for the foreseeable future, at least, they secured the Roman frontier on the Rhine and Upper Danube. In any event, in 289 the author of a panegyric recited in Maximian's honour declared that, even were the Rhine to dry up, there was no need to fear danger from there, since all that he saw beyond it belonged to Rome.[28] And there are other indications. Referring to this campaign, in 291, a panegyrist briefly mentioned victories over the Germani "in the middle of their territory" and asserted that the boundary of Raetia was extended "by a sudden slaughter of the enemy".[29] More to the point, in 297, another panegyrist reminded his

22 Dietz (2012: p. 59) who rightly observed that "nach dem Ende des Gallischen Sonderreichs (274) mag dann die dauerhafte Wiederaufrüstung des sog. Dekumatlands und des Limesgebiets als nicht mehr lohnend betrachtet worden sein". Nuber (1993: p. 104) expressed the same opinion. Cf. Stribrny (1989: pp. 425–437), who asserts that Probus intended to turn the *Agri Decumates* into some sort of buffer zone, protected by militia formed from local settlers and funded by Rome. Needless to say, this must remain a hypothesis.

23 Zos. I, 68. The Ligys is identified as the present-day Lech by Drinkwater (2007: p. 108).

24 *Pan. Lat.* X (2), 9, 1. Regarding the dating, see Williams (2000: p. 50); Barnes (1982: pp. 51 and 57); and Southern (2004: p. 143).

25 *Pan. Lat.* VIII (4), 2, 1 (*captus scilicet rex ferocissimae nationis inter ipsas quas moliebatur insidias et a ponte Rheni usque ad Danubii transitum Guntiensem deusta atque exhausta penitus Alamannia*).

26 Drinkwater (2007: p. 181). Cf. Roberto (2014: pp. 74–75).

27 *Pan. Lat.* X (2), 9, 1 (*ex diversa orbis parte coeuntes invictas dexteras contulistis, adeo fidum illud fuit fraternumque colloquium*). See Kuhoff (2001: pp. 80–81) for the possible place of their meeting.

28 *Pan. Lat.* X (2), 7, 7 (*licet Rhenus arescat tenuique lapsu vix leves calculos perspicuo vado pellat, nullus inde metus est: quidquid ultra Rhenum prospicio, Romanum est*).

29 *Pan. Lat.* XI (3), 5, 3 (*taceo trophaea Germanica in media defixa barbaria, transeo limitem Raetiae repentina hostium clade promotum*).

audience that the frontiers of *Germania Superior* and *Raetia* were "extended right to the headwaters of the Danube"[30] (the rivers Brigach and Breg are presumably meant here at whose confluence the Danube originates). It seems that in 288, Diocletian and Maximian deeply penetrated the territory of *Agri Decumates*, moving at will and temporarily controlling at least its southern part. However, did they intend to hold it permanently? Stephen Williams argued that "the aim was to create as much terror and destruction as possible..." and that the result was that "the remaining population had fled deep into the forests, leaving large tracts of territory on the east bank of the Rhine entirely in Roman hands".[31] This must remain a mere conjecture but it is, indeed, tempting to think of this particular operation not as a preemptive attack or a show of strength but a real attempt of Diocletian to reconquer this region. However, if that was the case, we must ask ourselves why Diocletian or his colleagues failed to build on this success at some later point.

An obvious answer to that question is that they were busy elsewhere: Diocletian's priorities lay in the east, while his co-ruler Maximian soon turned his attention to Gaul, Spain, Italy, even Africa. Diocletian was last seen in the west in 290 or 291, when he conferred with Maximian in Milan. But apart from that, and a visit of Italy in 303, he never ventured west of Sirmium.[32] The situation did not even change after 293, when two junior emperors were invested with the purple. But it appears that there always was a lot of more urgent tasks for the western one, Constantius, effectively preventing him from building on Diocletian's campaign in the *Agri Decumates*. His first assignment was to wrestle Britain away from Carausius and, after his murder, Allectus. Having completed this campaign successfully (296), he fought the Franks (300 or 301) and finally, the Picts (305–306).[33] It seems that the closest he ever approached the *Agri Decumates* was his strange victory at Vindonissa, about which we know little.

Sometime around 300 (for the year, see below), Constantius triumphed over the Alamanni at Lingones (the name of both a Gallic tribe and a city – present-day Langres in north-eastern France) and Vindonissa (modern-day Windisch in northern Switzerland). Our sources took an interest in the battle at Lingones, almost disregarding the other one.[34] In fact, there is only one source that tells us about the victory at Vindonissa, and only in passing at that. The Panegyric VI (7) was written in about 310 by an anonymous rhetorician who, at one point, briefly sums up the successes of Constantius, mentioning "the fields of Vindonissa, strewn with the corpses of the enemy and still covered with

30 *Pan. Lat.* VIII (4), 3, 3 (*porrectis usque ad Danubii caput Germaniae Raetiaeque limitibus*).

31 Williams (2000: p. 50).

32 For movements of the courts of both *augusti*, see Barnes (1982: pp. 49–56 /Diocletian/ and pp. 56–60 / Maximian/).

33 Years: Barnes (1982: pp. 60–61).

34 Eutr. IX, 23 (*Per idem tempus a Constantio Caesare in Gallia bene pugnatum est. Circa Lingonas die una adversam et secundam fortunam expertus est. Nam cum repente barbaris ingruentibus intra civitatem esset coactus tam praecipiti necessitate ut clausis portis in murum funibus tolleretur, vix quinque horis mediis adventante exercitu sexaginta fere milia Alamannorum cecidit.*). Cf. Hieron. *Chron.* s. a. 300 (*Iuxta Lingonas a Constantio Caesare LX milia Alamannorum caesa*), Jord. *Rom.* 300 (*Constantius iuxta Lingonas una die LX milia Alamannorum cecidit*) and Theoph. p. 8, 4–13 or Zon. XII, 31.

bones".[35] Interestingly, Vindonissa lay just at the southern tip of the *Agri Decumates*; in fact, it even lay some 20 kilometers south of the Roman border on the Rhine. That is virtually all we know about this battle. We know neither whether the battles of Vindonissa and Lingones were part of a single campaign (they could have been, but the sites are nearly 300 km apart), nor the year in which they were fought.[36] If the anonymous rhetorician witnessed (or was told about) the bones of the fallen Germani at Vindonissa, can we pinpoint the time of the battle based on that observation? Depending on soil and climate conditions, it takes about 20 years for the unburied bones to disappear from the face of the earth. On the other hand, it usually takes weeks or months for a body to skeletonize, although "the timeline for skeletonization is highly variable, being significantly influenced by temperature and access to the body by insects and scavenging animals. A body outside in the heat of the summer may become completely skeletonized in as little as 10 days".[37] In other words, the battle of Vindonissa may have been fought in early 290s but it also could have been a relatively recent event in 310 (that is, it must have happened before Constantius crossed the English Channel to Britain in 305, never to return). However, it seems clear that at Vindonissa, Constantius tried to defend the Roman soil, not pursue any objective deep inside the barbaricum. And it also seems safe to conclude that whatever Diocletian and Maximian had achieved in 288 in the *Agri Decumates* was lost by the time of this battle. And in the following decades, no one tried to remedy that.

The same can be said of the old Roman Dacia. After Aurelian had evacuated this province, no one until Constantine tried to reconquer at least some of its territory. The Danube now formed the border, and the eastern tetrarchs frequently waged war here against the Sarmatians or the Carpi (for example, by the time of his death, Galerius was *Sarmaticus maximus* five times, and *Carpicus maximus* six times!).[38] Following Constantine's spectacular victories over the Goths and the Sarmatians beyond the Danube, in 332 and 334, respectively,[39] it is conceivable that some modest territory might have been gained beyond the river. Many scholars therefore assumed at least the partial and temporary Roman annexation of the former Roman Dacia (but few ventured to state when these conquests were again abandoned).[40] However, such claim is not supported by our sources,

35 *Pan. Lat.* VI (7), 6, 3 (*Quid commemorem Lingonicam victoriam etiam imperatoris ipsius vulnere gloriosam? Quid Vindonissae campos hostium strage completos et adhuc ossibus opertos?*). Translation: Nixon & Rodgers (2015: p. 225). Cf. 4, 2, where there may be another allusion to the battle of Vindonissa, but the message is not quite clear (*bella plurima, praecipue campi videre Vindonii*).

36 Kuhoff (2001: p. 214) opts for the year 298; Barnes (1982: p. 61) separates the two battles and is quite precise in placing them in 302 and 303. Drinkwater (2007: p. 188), on the other hand, is vaguer, pondering the 301–305 range in general. For further discussion, see Nixon & Rodgers (2015: pp. 225–226, note 25).

37 Simmons (2013: p. 48).

38 Barnes (1982: p. 256).

39 Doležal (2019).

40 Barnes (1981: p. 250) contends that there was "at least a partial reconquest of the Dacia". Cf. Barnes (1982: p. 80); Barnes (2014: pp. 165–166); Cameron (2008: p. 105) ("some renewal of Roman control in Dacia"); Pohlsander (2004: p. 78) ("the partial and temporary recovery of Dacia"). Similar conclusions are reached by Potter (2013: p. 285), Elliott (1996: p. 255), and Odahl (2013: p. 261). Kulikowski (2007: p. 102) and Lenski (2002: p. 122) are more cautious, suggesting that, at most, fortresses were built and camps were set up on the barbarian side of the Danube; Wilkes (2005: p. 161) speculates that a Roman

and they would surely not have been silent on such a major achievement. But if we leave aside Eusebius,[41] there are only two indications allowing such hypothesis. The emperor Julian noted that Constantine had regained possession of those areas conquered by Trajan – an obvious exaggeration – and Festus mentioned Constantine's "recent victory over the Goths" (*recenti de Gothis victoria*), presumably meaning a campaign in about 336.[42] On the other hand, the more reliable *Origo Constantini imperatoris* tells us that the *caesar* Dalmatius was charged by Constantine (presumably in about 336) with protecting the banks of the Danube – apparently both the Roman and the barbarian ones.[43] And we can add that in around 338, Roman commanders appear to have found themselves fighting the barbarians on the Danube border again, specifically in the province of *Scythia Minor*.[44] In the following decades, literary sources have little to say about the Danube frontier, but that was precisely because the prevailing peace, at least with the Goths, meant that there was nothing to report. Ammianus Marcellinus noted that, in 362, the emperor Julian refused to heed his friends' calls "to attack the nearby Goths, who had often shown themselves to be treacherous and full of guile". Julian, who was then preparing for his Persian campaign, jokingly replied that slave traders were all that was needed to deal with the Goths (presumably in reference to the internal wars in Gothia, which yielded prisoners of war that the Romans were interested in buying). Nevertheless, there were sporadic clashes on the Danube frontier, which Julian took care to secure firmly.[45] But whatever Constantine had gained across the Danube in the 330s was evidently lost long before 362.[46]

The fate of the *Agri Decumates* in the late 3rd and early 4th century thus appears to be no different from what was going on in *Dacia* during that period. Although Diocletian and Maximian may have had designs on that lost territory, their success seems to have been short-lived. Their campaign of 288 was perhaps meant as a stepping stone to some bigger operations in the future; if they were serious about reconquering this region, it had to be mopped up thoroughly and the Roman population and military garrisons had to be reintroduced. But this does not seem to have ever happened. And it may be argued that the victory at Vindonissa in about 300 – if, indeed, it was a victory at all – marked the end of all hopes for the Romans to bring the *Agri Decumates* back under the Empire's control.

protectorate was established in Dacia to prevent other barbarian groups from infiltrating the territory of Roman allies.

41 As can only be expected, Eusebius (*VC* I, 8, 2) says that Constantine annexed the whole of Scythia (meaning here the barbarian territory in general beyond the Danube) – an obvious nonsense.

42 Julian, *Caesares* 329c; Festus 26.

43 *Origo* 6, 35 (*ripam Gothicam tuebatur*). See Chrysos (2001: pp. 69–72).

44 Sappo, *dux limitis Scythiae*, is known by name, as he is recorded on an inscription near Troesmis (*ILS* I, 724 = *CIL* III, 12483); Barnes (2001: pp. 224–225); cf. *PLRE I*, 803.

45 Amm. Marc. XXII, 7, 8 (*suadentibus proximis, ut adgrederetur propinquos Gothos saepe fallaces et perfidos, hostes quaerere se meliores aiebat: illis enim sufficere mercatores Galatas, per quos ubique sine condicionis discrimine venundantur*); XXII, 7, 7 (*quos per supercilia Histri dispersos, excursibusque barbarorum oppositos agere vigilanter audiebat et fortiter*).

46 For a general overview of Gothic-Roman relations during the Constantinian dynasty, see Heather (1991: pp. 107–121); Kulikowski (2007: pp. 100–106). For an outline of events on the Danube frontier at this time, see Wilkes (2008: pp. 231–233).

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