

*#INTELLHISTORY –*  
**INTELLIGENCE AND SECURITY  
COOPERATION IN HISTORY:  
THEORY AND PRACTICE**

**TIBERIUS CLAUDIUS MAXIMUS, THE CAPTOR  
OF THE DACIAN KING DECEBALUS – THE MOST DECORATED  
ROMAN INTELLIGENCE OFFICER**

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**Abstract:**

*The use of an intelligence asset – either civilian or military – in order to ensure the completion of a security task that may have a major political/military/historical consequences it has been the prerogative of modern and contemporary history. The existence and an easy access to written media has ensured the myth of intelligence world and operatives.*

*What if a fluke occurrence were allow us to bring forward long time forgotten similar cases which due to the lack of media were buried in the history oblivion?*

*Based on an extraordinary funerary stone of almost 2,000 year old, the present paper is analysing the career of an intelligence officer in the Roman army, who's intuition/talent led to the capture of one of the most wanted leaders of the barbarian world – the Dac*

**Keywords:** *intelligence officer, Dacian war, Tiberius Claudius Maximus, military career, awards*

**Motto:** *“Quodsi ea mihi maxime inpenderet tamen hoc animo fui semper, ut invidiam virtute partam gloriam, non invidiam putarem”*  
*[I have always been of the opinion that unpopularity earned by doing what is right is not unpopularity at all, but glory]*  
(Marcus Tullius Cicero, In Catilinam I 1.12/1.29 (63 BC))

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## Introduction

Following an avalanche of literature and cinematography products over the last decades, the profile of the intelligence officer has become a popular figure among the open public. From a real Mata Hari to the fictional James Bond, Jason Bourne, Jack Ryan or Ethan Hunt. Through childhood, puberty and adulthood, we have been fascinated by these characters with an aura of almost super-heroes. But, unlike the super-heroes, who took advantage of their magical powers, our above-mentioned heroes used what they knew more effectively, and which, at the end, define the name of their field of training – **Intelligence!**

We are aware of the names mentioned above either because of highly talented authors or due to the vagaries of history. Jan Fleming was himself a naval intelligence officer, and use his knowledge in this field to build a memorable, charismatic and fierce James Bond character. In the case of the famous spy Mata Hari - Margaretha Geertruida MacLeod (née Zelle) – the combination of her nimb of exotism on one side and the nonchalance in gathering intelligence on the other side place her on the wall of famous names in intelligence.

Were all these names the only ones that we had to take to like the field of intelligence studies? Was history so boring as to fill humanity only with the



**Figure 1.** The tombstone of Tiberius Claudius Maximus (<https://www.pinterest.com/pin/703898616732687069/>)

glorious big events and full of data and names of various historical characters?

Certainly, by its specificity, one may expect a discrete shadowy work(s) of those who have paved, on so many occasions, the success of those great leaders.

However, more and more access to information by declassifying secrete archives together with reanalysing old sources and evidence may reveal the existence of other individuals that may have shaped the world history.

### **Aim of paper**

Is to present such a character based on a peculiar source – his own epitaph written by himself for his tombstone while still alive.

At the first sight, it may sound weird, but considering that we are talking here about a person who lived almost 2,000 years ago in the Roman Empire, we should not forget that the funerary stones were, in those times, true curriculum vitae for the VIPs (a *cursus honorum*).

### **The character**

His name was Tiberius Claudius Maximus and his acts in life acknowledge that he was a person who definitely knew how to fulfil his tasks.

In 1965, a large tombstone with a Latin inscription was accidentally discovered in the fields of Grammeni, 'a village to the north-west of the ancient city of Philippi in [Roman] Macedonia' (nowadays, Greece) (Speidel 1970, p. 142).

The text of this inscription can be completed in Latin as:

*Ti(berius) Claudius / Maximus, vet(eranus) / [s(e)] v(ivo) f(aciendum) c(uravit). Militavit / eque(s) in leg(ione) VII C(laudia) p(ia) f(fideli), fac(tus) qu(a)estor equit(um),/ singularis legati le(gionis) eiusdem, vexil(larius) equitum, item / bello Dacico ob virtu(te)m donis donatus ab im(p(eratore) Domitiano. Factus dupli(carius) / a divo Troiano in ala secu(n)d(a) / Pannoniorum, a quo et fa(c)tus explorator in bello Da/cico et ob virtute(m) bis donis / donatus bello Dacico et / Parthico, et ab eode(m) factus / decurio ala eade(m), quod / cepisset Decebalu(m) et caput/ eius pertulisset ei Ranisstro/ro. Missus voluntarius ho/nesta missione a Terentfio*

*Scau]/riano, consulare [exerci]/tus provinciae nov[ae ?Mes/opotamiae .....  
.....].* (Speidel 1970, p. 142)

Translation:

‘Tiberius Claudius Maximus, veteran, undertook the construction of this monument while he was still alive. He served as a cavalryman in Legion VII Claudia Loyal and Faithful, was appointed treasurer of the cavalry, guard of the commander of the same legion, standard-bearer of the cavalry, and in the Dacian war was awarded military decorations for bravery by Emperor Domitian. He was promoted to ‘double pay’ soldier (*duplicarius*) in the second ala of Pannonians by the divine Trajan, by whom he was also appointed to the position of scout in the Dacian war, and twice awarded military decorations for bravery in the Dacian and Parthian wars, and was promoted decurion in the same cavalry ala by the same emperor because he had captured Decebalus and brought his head back to him at Ranisstorum. After voluntarily serving beyond his time, he was honourably discharged by Terentius Scaurianus, commander with consular rank of the army in the new (?) province of [Mesopotamia (?) \_\_].’ (Campbell 1994, no. 42).

At the first sight, one will say it is a tombstone of a military that mentions his career. All true! But, at a closer look, it reveals that this Tiberius Claudius Maximus was more than a military who was just looking after his career.

Our character was born around AD 65 – based on his reward during Domitian’s war on the Dacians that ended in AD 89, and the fact that at the beginning of the Parthic War of Trajan in AD 114 ‘he was still physically in fighting condition’ (Speidel 1970, p. 143).

He started his career as military legionnaire – proving his Roman citizenship – but he does not mention his first position as a private (*miles*), he was enlisted directly as a cavalryman meaning either extraordinary high requirements<sup>1</sup> or the influence of his military family

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<sup>1</sup> Herodian mention the case of the future emperor Maximinus I Thrax (AD 235-238): ‘...he was drafted into the cavalry because of his size and strength. After a short time, favored by Fortune, he advanced through all the military ranks, rising eventually to the command of armies and the governing of provinces.’ (Herodian, 6.8.1).

tradition (Speidel 1970, p. 143). The rest of the text may be considered as an argument for the first hypothesis.

The very next position he achieved – *factus quaestor equitum* (treasurer of the legionary cavalry) – already draws our attention to this character. Normally, the military payment funds were kept by *signiferi* who were also in charge of savings. M. Speidel has already forwarded the hypothesis that the mentioning of a *factus quaestor equitum* indicate that this military unit may have been something special having their own fund (Speidel 1970, p. 143).

The following rank of Tiberius Claudius Maximus is already one of a highly prestigious stature in the army. Being a *singularis legati legionis* – mounted guard of the legionary commander - reveals another promotion in a special unit of the Roman army.<sup>2</sup>

Besides guarding the commander, these *singulares legati legionis* were charged with special tasks, such as carrying letters for the province governors, as well as to Rome (Rankov 1990, p. 167).

In battle, the *singulares* ‘stood around the commander’ (‘ἀμφ’ αὐτὸν Ξενοφώντα’) (Arrian, Ektaxis 22) and served more like a ‘personal guard, a genuine bodyguard’ (Pavkovič 1994, 227). A papyrus from a hospital doctor records the death of 15 *singulares* ‘besides the legionaries and evocati’, ‘possibly to emphasize the severity of the action in which they fought’ (Speidel 1978, p. 48-50; P. Ross Georg. III, 1).

Tiberius’ combined abilities – both military and intelligence ones – have helped him to be promoted as a *vexillarium equitum legionis* (the standard-bearer of the legion cavalry). A position which is very scarcely known in the sources, possibly indicating another role with dual tasks. So far, only two or three such *vexillarii equitum* were assigned in a legion (Speidel 1970, 145). According to S. Zehetner, they were assigned to combined fighting forces in the fortress and they were placed under a special command (Zehetner 2018).

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<sup>2</sup> Flavius Josephus, De bello Judaico 3.VI.2: “*De singulis enim turmis proprios centum et viginti equites deputatos habebat. hos sequebantur, qui expugnandis civitatibus machinas et caetera tormenta portarent, deinde rectores, itemque praefecti cohortibus tribuni, stipati lectis militibus.*” [After these came the peculiar cavalry of his own legion, for there were a hundred and twenty horsemen that peculiarly belonged to every legion.]

While holding this position, Tiberius intelligence and military abilities are now officially recognized. During the Dacian war of Domitian (AD 86-87), Tiberius Claudius Maximus was decorated (*dona militaria*) *ob virtutem*, possible by the emperor himself, as all the wars were fought under imperial auspices (Speidel 1970, 145-146).

Then, a new episode in the life of Tiberius Claudius Maximus, points towards the selection of this character to become one of the best intelligence officers of the Roman army.

Under the reign of the emperor Trajan (AD 98-117), Tiberius Claudius Maximus was promoted as a *duplicarius* (double-pay man), a junior officer in the elite cavalry unit of *Ala II Pannoniorum*. As demonstrated by M. Speidel: 'It confirms the preference given to men of the guard or on the staff of the commanders. Such men were *the pick of the soldiers, and moreover went through a special training so that they would be able to impart high and uniform standards of combat efficiency to the troop.*' (Speidel 1970, 146). Normally, such a promotion was conferred by the commanders of the provincial armies. However, in the case of Tiberius Maximus this process was sanctioned by the emperor Trajan himself, probably during the first (AD 101-102) or the second (AD 105-106) Dacian war (Speidel 1970, 146).

It was in this elite cavalry unit where Tiberius Claudius Maximus proved his worth. He was assigned to the special mounted unit of *exploratores*, who were, officially in charge with reconnoitring tasks and they have their own commander (Speidel 1970, 148). All the ancient written sources available mentioned that this special unit moved ahead of the army (Arrian, Ektaxis 1,1), and, while camping they were located near the gate (Hyginus, *De munitioibus castrorum* 24).

According to the military historian Publius Flavius Vegetius Renatus, an *explorator* detachment of 'trusty and experienced soldiers well mounted, to reconnoitre the places through which he is to march, in front, in rear, and on the right and left, lest he should fall into ambushes. The night is safer and more advantageous for your *spies* to do their business in than day, for if they are taken prisoners, you have, as it were, betrayed yourself.' (Vegetius, *Epitoma rei militaris* 3.6) and adding that these scouts may 'sometimes either suspect or discover the decampment, or traitors or deserters give *intelligence*' (Vegetius, *Epitoma rei militaris* 3.6).

The Roman army was an excellent machinery that knew how to gather as much intelligence as possible from all possible aspects (Gichon 1989, p. 154-170; Ferill 1992, p. 17-29).

The use of military scouts has a long tradition in the Roman history. During the Roman republic the *speculators/exploratores* are widely reported for collecting military intelligence on enemy's movements, spreading misinformation behind enemy lines and obtained information in preparations for future field operations (Austin & Rankov 1998, p. 97-99; Del Hoyo 2014, p. 403-404).

As demonstrated by I. Syväne, it is a well-known fact that the Romans 'obtained intelligence from foreign lands through a variety of means: 1) military expeditions; 2) by sending spies (included diplomats etc.) and scouts and patrols (***Exploratores***) over the border; 3) by interrogating prisoners; 4) by questioning foreign embassies and traders and travellers; 5) by interrogating their own traders and merchants; 6) from intelligence reports sent by their foreign allies; 7) from Greek geographical works or narrative histories (Syväne 2016, p. 111).



**Figure 2.** The capture of king Decebalus on Tiberius Claudius Maximus' tombstone (<http://lupa.at/19572/photos/3>)

while in his right he wields a sword, drawn and ready for action." (Speidel 1970, p. 149) (Figure 2). One may say, just another heroic

It was in this cavalry unit that moment in Tiberius Claudius Maximus life when he proved worthy of being one of the best intelligence officers of the Roman army.

As described by M. Speidel, the upper part of Maximus' tombstone is depicting him 'galloping towards an enemy, holding in his left hand two spears and a round or oval shield,

scene on a funerary stone, nothing unusual! Except that the fallen enemy with a hexagonal shield, sickle-sword, and pointed Dacian cap is none other than the Dacian king – Decebalus! The iconographic scene from this tombstone is confirmed by the similar one on the famous Trajan’s column in Rome (Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** The suicide of Decebalus on Trajan's Column ([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Trajan%27s\\_Column\\_-\\_Cichorius\\_Plates#/media/File:106\\_Conrad\\_Cichorius,\\_Die\\_Reliefs\\_der\\_Traianss%C3%A4ule,\\_Tafel\\_CVI.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Trajan%27s_Column_-_Cichorius_Plates#/media/File:106_Conrad_Cichorius,_Die_Reliefs_der_Traianss%C3%A4ule,_Tafel_CVI.jpg))

How Maximus has collected intelligence to find out about the escape and the route of the Dacian king we will probably never find out. But, for certain, the intelligence was good as Maximus was seconds from preventing Decebalus to commit suicide (Figure 4).



**Figure 4.** The attempt to capture king Decebalus by Tiberius Claudius Maximus. (Connolly 1989)

a victory well, but also how to manage well a defeat. Hence, he showed himself a worthy antagonist of the Romans for a long time.' (Dio Cassius, Ῥωμαϊκὴ Ἱστορία, 67,6,1).

It was Maximus who brought Decebalus' head to present to Trajan at the place *Rannistorum* (still, yet to be specifically identified in Romania) as mentioned on the tombstone '*lines quod cepisset Decebalu(m) et caput eius pertulisset ei Ranisstoru*'. Another important military fact, as it also appears on Trajan's column (Figure 5) and mentioned in the literary sources (Dio Cassius, Ῥωμαϊκὴ Ἱστορία, 68,14,3), symbolizing the total defeat of the enemy and the end of war.

The rewards for this extraordinary achievement followed rapidly, Tiberius Claudius Maximus was twice decorated in the Dacian war. From his tombstone, the decorations must have been silver *torques* (necklaces) and *armillae* (arm-rings) (Linderski 2001, p. 4-6).

It was probably now, that Maximus was promoted to the rank of *decurio*, commander of a cavalry unit.

And, we are not discussing here about any local chieftain but the Dacian king Decebalus, who had the admiration and respect even of his enemies: 'This man [Decebalus] was shrewd in his understanding of warfare and cunning also in the waging of war; he judged well when to attack and chose the right moment to retreat; he was an expert in ambushes and a master in pitched battles; and he knew not only how to follow up a

Maximus' military career did not stop here. He remained with the army in the Parthian war of Trajan where he was again decorated.

His tombstone mentions that he was honourable discharged – *missus voluntarius honesta missione* – meaning that he has served more than thirty years in the army. At the same time, the term *voluntarius* indicates that he continued to serve after the completion of his term, 'willing to put off his discharge' (Speidel 1970, p. 151).



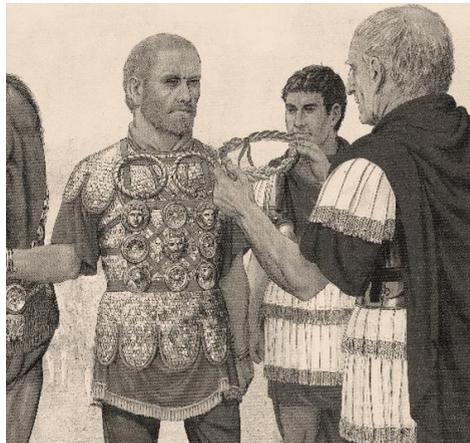
**Figure 5.** Trajan shows Decebalus' head to the army. Trajan's Column, scene cxlvii. (Speidel 1970, plate XV. 2)

## Conclusions

Tiberius Claudius Maximus was clearly a man of arms and intelligence born under the sign of the goddess Fortuna. One of the most highly decorated Roman soldiers ever known, he made his way into history by being brave, intelligent and (...) lucky!

He is one of those rare cases in history when brave humble characters – with no political or military major role ever played – are fortunate by history to have their facts somehow surviving over time.

What a strange game does history play!



**Figure 6.** The decoration of Tiberius Claudius Maximus by the emperor Trajan. (Connolly 1989)

To have precisely the tombstone of Tiberius Claudius Maximus discovered by a farmer while ploughing his field and, thus, to fill in a gap on the Roman history episode – the capturing of the last Dacian king by a brilliant intelligent officer of the Roman army, otherwise unknown.

And so, one local episode of the duty of an intelligence officer has become a worldwide image on ending a war – the Dacian war!

### **Acknowledgements**

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