

The Perpetual Strategic Value of Crimea

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INTRODUCTION

Ukraine is in Eastern Europe on the northern shores of the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov. The country borders Belarus in the north, Poland, Slovakia and Hungary in the west, Moldova and Romania in the south-west, and Russia in the east. Its topography is relatively flat as most of the peninsula consists of semiarid steppe or prairie lands. The Crimean Mountains are along its southeast coast. The climate of Crimea is temperate continental in its interior and summers are hot, while winters are cold. The Crimean port of Chersonesos (Sevastopol) was a major harbor designed to control shipping on the Black Sea. Due to its strategic location and the navigability of the city's ports, Chersonesos has been an important naval base throughout history. The Western Roman Empire referred to Crimea as Taurica, and the Eastern Roman Empire named it Cherson. Control over Crimea is an important step to dominance of the Black Sea and its littorals. The Black Sea was a key part of the Silk Road in antiquity. It linked the Roman Empire to Asia. The sea was also a route for the Byzantine Empire, the Ottoman Empire, and it has been an avenue of trade, migration, and war. It is also a key front line for transatlantic security.

In February and March 2014, Russia invaded the Crimean Peninsula, part of Ukraine, and then annexed it. This took place in the relative power vacuum immediately following the Revolution of Dignity¹ and was the first act of the wider Russo-Ukrainian conflict. Russia supported pro-Russian separatists fighting the Ukrainian military in the Donbas War. The first two years of conflict included naval conflicts, cyberwarfare, and logistical support for Ukraine from the United States and countries of NATO. In February 2022, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine and occupied the eastern part of the country. As of the writing of this article the victor of the conflict was uncertain.

In antiquity another invader, the Roman Empire, also occupied the Crimea. The Romans named the Crimea part of the province of Moesia Inferior. Moesia Inferior included Northern Bulgaria, Romanian Dobruja and parts of Southern Ukraine. Its major cities were: Oescus (Bulgaria), and its capital was Marcianopolis (Bulgaria). During the First Mithridatic War (99-84 BCE), King Mithridates of Pontus embarked on a program of military imperialism and conquered the Crimea and other territories in the region. During the Second Mithridatic War (83-81 BCE) Mithridates maintained control over Crimea. However, after the Third Mithridatic War (75-65 BCE), Mithridates suffered a crushing defeat at the Battle of the River Lycus by Pompey in 66 BCE. Cassius Dio wrote: "The outermost of the enemy were slaughtered, and the center was crushed altogether."ⁱ Mithridates fled to Crimea where he was killed by Bituitus, a Gallic slave.ⁱⁱ Appian wrote that: Pompey later receive a triumph for his victory.ⁱⁱⁱ For nearly five centuries after the defeat of Mithridates by Pompey, Crimea was under the sovereignty of Rome. The main Roman settlement was Charax, a fort built around 60 to 65 BCE. The Romans also built a large naval Roman base at Chersonesos. Thracians and Illyrians inhabited Moesia Inferior before the Roman conquest.^{iv}

¹ The **Revolution of Dignity**, also known as the **Maidan Revolution** or the **Ukrainian Revolution**, took place in Ukraine in February 2014 when deadly clashes between protesters and state forces in the capital Kyiv culminated in the ousting of elected President Viktor Yanukovich and a return to the Constitution of 2004. It also led to the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian War.

ⁱ He was the grandson of Marcus Licinius Crassus (115-53), a member of the First Triumvirate (60 BCE), with Gnaeus Pompey (106-48 BCE), and Gaius Julius Caesar (100-44 BCE).

ROMAN ADVANCES INTO MOESIA INFERIOR

In 29 BCE the Roman Emperor Augustus appointed Marcus Licinius Crassus (1st century B.C.) as proconsul of Macedonia.² He moved against the Dacians and Bastarnae tribes who threatened Roman allies in Thrace. Crassus attacked the Bastarnae drove them back to the Danube, defeated them and killed their King Deldo in single combat. The Bastarnae inhabited areas north of the Roman frontier on the Lower Danube. Theodor Mommsen wrote: “Without offering further resistance the whole Moesian territory submitted to the Romans.”^v According to Cassius Dio: “After these operations by Crassus, he subdued some by persuasion, others he frightened into submission, and the rest he overcame by force.”^{vi} Thracians harassed his march from Moesia. He attacked hostile tribes among the Thracians, defeated them and cut off the hands of the prisoners. Then, some of the Moesians rose in rebellion and his subordinates reconquered them.^{vii}

After the campaigns of Crassus, the coast of conquered land went to the Thracian kingdom. The region was organized as a Roman province in 6 CE by Emperor Augustus.^{viii} The building of a fort at Viminatum (Serbia) discouraged Moesian uprisings. *Viminatum* was a major city, provincial capital, and military camp¹ of the Roman province of Moesia and its capital. Charax was the seat of the Roman military power in the Crimea. The Romans built it on a four-hectare area at the western ridge of Ai-Todor. Chersonesos was located at the southwestern part of the Crimean Peninsula. In 15 BCE Romans conquered the frontier post of Troesmis,³ and the fleet bore the title *Classis Flavia Moesica*.

The Romans established The Flavian fleet of Moesia at Noviodunum between 20 BCE and 10 CE. **Noviodunum**, known also as *Noviodunum ad Istrum*, was a fort and a port in the province of Moesia located on the lower Danube. The fleet controlled the Lower Danube to the northwestern Black Sea and the Crimea. The ships of the fleet were primarily *liburnae*.⁴ A league of six Greek cities formed the settlements of Lower Moesia: Istros, Tomis, Callatis, Dionysopolis, Odessus and Marcianopolis.^{ix} In 67 CE Emperor Nero put (Crimea) Taurica under direct Roman rule and strengthened the fort at Charax. Charax was a strong strategic point. It allowed the Romans to establish control over the navigation along the Crimean coast. Vespasian further developed Charax to protect Chersonesos from the Scythians. Nomadic Scythians rode across the Eurasian steppe in the first millennium BCE. They were renowned for their horsemanship and savagery⁵

Vespasian also extended the province of Lower Moesia to Tyrus, Olbia, and Taurica. The Emperor Domitian in 85-86 CE divided Moesia into western and eastern provinces: Moesia Superior and Moesia Inferior, separated by the Ciabrus (modern Tsibritsa) River. Under the emperor Trajan, parts of present Romania were added to Moesia Inferior. A consular legate and a procurator governed each of the provinces. Three legions stationed at Novae, Oescus and Viminatum worked in concert with naval operations to expel raiders or block the imperialistic designs of other nations. This plan worked from the middle of the 1st century BCE until the 370s CE.^x Taurica enjoyed a prosperous period under Roman leadership during the 2nd century CE through commerce in wheat, clothing, wine, and slaves. Taurica needed military protection from barbarian tribes. To meet this need Rome stationed a division of the Pontic fleet, and a detachment of the Moesian army, and other garrisons stationed at Pantikapaion⁶ and Chersonesos. During the reign of Emperor Antonius Pius, the Romans constructed highways throughout Lower Moesia.^{xi}

² Dio, Cassius, 1914. *Roman History*, Trans. Earnest Cary. Cambridge: Harvard University Press: 51.25, 27.

³ Troesmis was a Roman legionary fortress on the Danube.

⁴ *Liburnae* were small, light craft. They measured 109 ft (33 m) long and 5 m (16 ft) wide with a 1 m (3 ft 3 in) draft. Two rows of oarsmen pulled 18 oars per side. The ship could make up to 14 knots under sail and more than 7 under oars.

⁵ Herodotus wrote: “When a Scythian has slain his first man, he drinks some of his blood.” Herodotus, 2004. Trans. G.C. Macaulay. New York: Barnes & Noble: 4.64.

⁶ Pantikapaion was an ancient, Greek city on the eastern shore of Crimea.

In 250 CE during the First Gothic War, (250-252) Cniva, king of the Goths crossed the Danube at the head of three columns of German tribes and defeated a Roman army at the Battle of Philippopolis. Cniva continued, penetrating as far as northern Greece, plundered the provinces of Dacia and Moesia, including Novae. With the loss of Crimea in 254 to the Goths and Sarmatians, the Roman navy no longer patrolled the Black Sea. Instead, the barbarians used the Bosporean navy to raid Roman coasts. However, the Goths failed to successfully siege Marcianopolis or Philippopolis. There was still Roman control of Lower Moesia. The client king Tiberius Julius Rhescuporis VI⁷ minted coins in the former province as late as 341.^{xii}

THE EASTERN ROMAN EMPIRE

The invasion of Roman territories by Attila and his Hunnish army of 100,000-500,000 warriors in 451, devastated the provinces of Gaul and Italia. Marcellinus wrote: "Glued to their horses the Huns can scatter and gallop about at random, inflicting tremendous slaughter. They shoot from a distance an arrow tipped with sharp splinters of bone."^{xiii} However, Attila failed to capture Chersonesos. After Attila's death in 453, Vandals, Visigoths and other Germanic tribes ravaged the Roman Empire. Rome maintained its military outpost in Crimea to continue as much trade as possible, observe the movement of steppe nomads and repulse attacks from hostile tribes, such as the Scythians.⁸ There was only a detachment of 500 soldiers from the legio 1 italica stationed in the Novae fortress. On September 4, 476 Odoacer deposed the last Western Roman Emperor, Romulus Augustulus. In 330 CE Constantine I, founded the Eastern Roman Empire with its capital at Constantinople.

The Emperor Justinian annexed the Crimea as a province in 529.^{xiv} At the end of the reign of Justinian (527-565) the status of Roman Crimea (Cherson) changed. Under the Eastern Roman Empire (Byzantine Empire) Taurica became the Province of Chersonesos, which included Bosporus and the southern coast of Crimea. This enlargement of Taurica (Cherson) resulted in the elevation of the ranks of its governors. In 584, the military and civil authorities in the region were entrusted a military deputy known as "doux Chersonos." Local soldiers chose Marinus, and in 589 Aemilianus as dux.⁹ Aemilianus and his men caught a raiding party of Scythians and killed most of them to obtain much booty by overrunning their territory. Dalmatian became dux in 613. Most of Roman Crimea was under Khazar overlordship in the late 7th century.^{xv} In 710 Cherson rebelled against the Romans with the help of the Khazars. Justinian sent a sizable fleet under Stephen the Patrician to reclaim it. He easily conquered Cherson and executed the rebellious.^{xvi}

In the mid-8th century, the Khazars put down a rebellion by Crimean Goths and occupied their city of Doros. A Khazar tuden (ruler) presided over Chersonesos in 690, even though the town was nominally subject to the Eastern Roman Empire. Emperor Theophilus (829-842) desired a base in the northern littoral of the Black Sea. He appointed Petronas Kamateros as the theme's¹⁰ first governor. Cherson was a center for Byzantine diplomacy rather than military activity and consisted of a locally raised militia. Cherson prospered during the 9th-11th centuries as a center of Black Sea commerce. In 1016, the theme extended over the Eastern Crimea as well. Control then passed to the Trebizond Empire,^{xvii} one of the successor states of the Byzantine Empire.¹¹ Another offshoot, the Crimea-based Principality of Theodoro endured from the 14th century until 1475. Roman control lasted until

⁷ King of the Bosporean Kingdom, a client state of Rome.

⁸ Analysis of leather preserved at 14 sites near the Black Sea indicates that the Scythians made leather for quivers from human skin. Jarrett A. Lobell Editor, "Ukraine." Archaeology. Vol. 77, no. 2, March/April 2024: 21.

⁹ *dux* could refer to anyone who commanded troops

¹⁰ A theme was a body of troops and the area in which they were recruited.

¹¹ The Empire of Trebizond, or Trapezuntine Empire, founded in 1204, was a monarchy and one of three successor rump states of the Byzantine Empire that flourished during the 13th through to the 15th century alongside the Despotate of the Morea and the Principality of Theodoro.

1461 with the fall of the Trebizond empire in northeastern Anatolia. Southern Crimea, the last outpost of the Eastern Roman empire, was taken over by the Ottoman Empire.^{xviii} Many countries have been interested in Crimea because of its strategic location. The Crimean War (1853-1856) between the Russian Empire and a victorious alliance of The Ottoman Empire, France the United Kingdom and Sardinia-Piedmont is an example. This conflict was caused by the European powers desire to project power against each other.^{xix}

CONCLUSION

One of the reasons nations embark on military, economic and cultural imperialism is the acquisition of valuable land and sea territories and their resources and their strategic importance. Control over Crimea is an important step to dominance of the Black Sea and its littorals. The Romans and Russians conquered it for this reason.

Russia had additional motives. In 1922 Ukraine, including Crimea became a constituent republic of the U.S.S.R. Ukrainian independence was restored in 1991. Russian President Vladimir Putin desired to restore Russian control over Ukraine. He feared that Ukraine would become part of the Atlantic Alliance (NATO) which would then extend to the Russian border. Russia annexed Crimea in March 2014. On February 20, 2024, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The war has passed the two-year mark and continues. The total casualty rate is estimated at circa 500,000.

ⁱ Dio, Cassius, 1914. Roman History, Trans. Earnest Cary. Cambridge: Harvard University Press: 36.49.

ⁱⁱ Appian, 1912. Roman History, Trans. Horace White. Cambridge: Harvard University Press: 12.111.

ⁱⁱⁱ Appian, 1912. Roman History, Trans. Horace White. Cambridge: Harvard University Press: 12.103.

^{iv} Dio, Cassius, 1914. Roman History, Trans. Earnest Cary. Cambridge: Harvard University Press: 36.49.

^v Mommsen, Theodor, 1996. The Provinces of the Roman Empire, Trans. William P. Dickson. New York: Barnes & Noble: 1.8.

^{vi} Dio, Cassius, 1914. Roman History, Trans. Earnest Cary. Cambridge: Harvard University Press: 51.25.

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