Depicting barbarism on fire: architectural destruction on the Columns of Trajan and Marcus Aurelius

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This article explores the depictions of architecture on the Columns of Trajan and Marcus Aurelius. Trajan's Column alone features depictions of over 300 architectural structures, the vast majority of which can be clearly associated with either Roman or Dacian culture, and which project a clear disparity between those cultures.[1] On both columns, destruction plays a crucial rôle in the contrast between Roman and indigenous architecture and cultures. On Trajan's, fully one-fourth of Dacian architectural structures are either on fire or threatened by fire. Both Roman soldiers and Dacian warriors participate in this destruction, filling 7 separate sequences that illustrate the annihilation and erasure of Dacian culture in the face of the Roman advance. The theme of architectural destruction as a metaphor for cultural erasure is echoed on the Column of Marcus Aurelius, but with important modifications that speak to differences in how the two monuments portray war, victory, and aggressive imperialism.[2]

I begin with a brief review of previous scholarship on the architectural depictions of both columns. The second part establishes the symbolic importance of depictions of architectural destruction on Trajan's Column. The third section explores the use of architectural destruction on the Column of Marcus Aurelius and compares it to that on Trajan's. The differences in architectural destruction between the two columns are outlined and related to the monuments' broader themes.

1. Architectural depictions on the columns: previous scholarship and a new approach

Despite a vast general bibliography for both monuments,[3] the architectural depictions of Trajan's Column and its successor, the Column of Marcus Aurelius, have been largely

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1   I use "culture" here in a broad sense that incorporates: (a) the customary practices, activities and beliefs that can be associated with a particular society; and (b) the material consequences and symbols generated by participation in those practices, activities, and beliefs.

2   For Trajan's Column I follow the traditional scene divisions and numbering system established by Cichorius (1896-1900). For the Column of Marcus Aurelius, I follow the scene divisions and numbering system of Petersen, Domaszewski and Calderini 1896, as cited in Coarelli 2008.

3   For a summary and discussion of the debate over the patronage and artistic forces behind Trajan's Column, see Galinier 2007, 8-30; also, e.g., Coulston 1988, passim; id. 1990b, 300 and 302-3; Lepper and Frere 1988, passim; Settis 1988, 100-2; Coarelli 2000, 30-31; Hölscher 2002, 127-28; Claridge 2007a, 467; Packer 2008, 471-72. For specific discussion of the artistic forces behind the architectural depictions, see Rockwell 1985, 101-5; cf. Coulston 1988, 57. For discussion of the setting of Trajan's Column and its possible relationship to the Temple of Divine Trajan, see, e.g., Packer 1997, 2003 and 2008; Lancaster 1999; Meneghini 2001, 2007 and 2009; La Rocca 2004; Gros 2005; Claridge 2007b; Galinier 2007.
    For an examination of the patronage and artistic forces behind the Column of Marcus Aurelius, see, e.g., Coulston 1988, 387-88; Jordan-Ruwe 1990, 67-69; Pirson 1996, 140-41; Beckmann 2003; id. 2005, especially 308-12; id. 2006; id. 2011, 68-127; Clarke 2003, 45-46; Claridge 2005. For discussion of the setting of the Column of Marcus Aurelius, see, e.g., Coulston 1988, 18 and 390; Hanoune 2000, 207; Beckmann 2003, 1-2 and 23; id. 2011, 37-54; Clarke 2003, 45-47; Coarelli 2008, 12-32. For the problem of the date of the Column of Marcus Aurelius, see Jordan-Ruwe 1990, 67-69; Wolff 1990; Hölscher 2000, 94; Beckmann 2003, passim; id. 2011, 19-36; Coarelli 2008, 32-36; Kovács 2009, 159-68 and 181-275.