

Sacrifice and narrative on the Arch of the Argentarii at Rome

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The study of visual narratives in ancient art has tended to focus on the pictorial recitation of mythological and pseudo-historical narratives (such as the doings of Trajan and Marcus on their respective columns).¹ My interest here is not in the visual presentation of a specific and distinctive story of this type, but rather in the visual construction of a particular kind of ritual or social narrative in Roman art — namely, the narrative of sacrifice, from the herding of cattle through a ceremonial procession to the act of killing — and the relation of this kind of story in a particular monument at Rome. The kind of narrative articulated in the Roman representation of the sacrificial process² is very different in kind from the sorts of narrativity implied by the exceptional and heroic pictorial versions of unique historical events, such as the specific imperial triumphs of Trajan over the Dacians in the Great Trajanic frieze (of which portions were later incorporated into the Arch of Constantine) or the great helix of his Column.³ Sacrifice, on the other hand, is a recurring ritual process whose narrativity is represented in numerous Roman images and whose actuality must ultimately be deduced by the historian from those images and from such documentary sources as survive.⁴ As recent scholarship has shown (and I am thinking of the work of R. Gordon and V. Huet⁵ (the latter largely unpublished), the narrative implicit in any given image of Roman sacrifice (let alone the corpus as a whole) is by no means transparent or straightforward.

Against any assumption that sacrificial scenes on major public monuments from the Ara Pacis to the Diocletianic column-base in Rome are to be interpreted as representing real events in a realistic manner, we have to set the undeniable selectivity and symbolic simplifications in the visual rendering of any given example. From the point of view of narrative, this involved isolating a specific set of scenes (such as the procession, pouring of the libation, act of killing the animal) from a dynamic and flowing process of liturgical action. It also entailed centering the visual dynamic of the image on a series of key actors (especially the presiding priest and sacrificer [often the emperor] and the animal to be slaughtered) and removing some of the necessary *mêlée* of supporting cast that is likely to have characterised actual sacrifice. All this constitutes a symbolic patterning in which a particular narrative of a regularly performed ritual has been designed to be read out of the imagery.

1 Among the principal contributions are: C. Robert, *Bild und Lied* (Berlin 1881); F. Wickhoff, *Die Wiener Genesis* (Vienna 1895) = *Roman art* (London 1900); K. Weitzmann, *Illustrations in roll and codex* (Princeton 1947); R. Brilliant, *Visual narratives. Storytelling in Etruscan and Roman art* (Ithaca, NY 1984); M. Stansbury-O'Donnell, *Pictorial narrative in ancient Greek art* (Cambridge 1999). Also pertinent are the narratological reflections of M. Bal, *Reading Rembrandt: beyond the word-image opposition* (Cambridge 1991) esp. 94-215.

2 For an introduction to Roman sacrifice, its stages, sources, and transgressive variants (with bibliography), see M. Beard, J. North and S. Price, *Religions of Rome* vol. 2 (Cambridge 1998) 148-65. See also J. Scheid, *La religion des Romains* (Paris 1998) 72-93.

3 On the Trajanic frieze, see A. M. Leander Touati, *The Great Trajanic Frieze* (Stockholm 1987); on the column see, e.g., S. Settis, A. La Regina, G. Agosti and V. Farinella, *La Colonna Traiana* (Turin 1988) and F. Coarelli, *The Column of Trajan* (Rome 2000).

4 The classic discussion of the images remains I. Scott Ryberg, *Rites of the state religion in Roman art* (MAAR 22, 1955).

5 See R. Gordon, "The veil of power," in M. Beard and J. North (edd.), *Roman priests* (London 1990) esp. 202-7; V. Huet, "Stories one might tell of Roman art: reading Trajan's Column and the Tiberius Cup," in J. Elsner (ed.), *Art and text in Roman culture* (Cambridge 1996) esp. 26-28. For some pertinent comments about reconstructing ritual from Roman writing, see D. Feeney, *Literature and religion at Rome* (Cambridge 1998) 117-19 and 135-36.