The border of the frieze of the Column of Marcus Aurelius and its implications

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The frieze of the Column of Marcus Aurelius, cut into the marble of the shaft to a depth of about 10 cm, winds up the Column in the form of a helix. A raised border with a width of *c.*7-8 cm serves to separate the upper and lower edges of the frieze. Its outer face is more or less at the same level as the original surface of the un-carved column. The border was created by being reserved from the stone of the shaft as the carving of the frieze progressed. It was not left flat but was carved with a decorative pattern — or rather, with a variety of patterns. Easy to overlook when attention is focussed on the frieze, these patterns are often quite distinctive: in some cases there are parallel lines of small lumps, in others erratic, jagged, and random patterns, in others brick-like schemes. The intent of this patterning was apparently to reproduce the effect of the rocky border which separates the windings of the frieze of Trajan's Column, but the result is much less unified, giving the impression that there was no established standard for the appearance of the carving of this part of the Column.

The varied patterns exhibit clear and abrupt breaks between them, and both the patterns and breaks often have clear relationships to the frieze itself. I will present an analysis of the border patterns and then make some suggestions as to what they might imply for our understanding of the frieze and the process of its creation.

The border patterns and their divisions

As the highest point of relief and often not deeply carved, the whole of the border is not available for detailed study since it is often heavily damaged. In particular, the W side of the Column (facing away from the Via Flaminia/Via del Corso) is so poorly preserved that the border can be seen clearly in only a few places. Elsewhere, damage, wear, and Renaissance restorations have left large gaps. Consequently, it has been possible to analyze in detail only about 410 of the original 720 feet, that is, just over half of the length of the border (in fig. 2, the missing sections of border indicate the damaged areas). Nonetheless, this is enough to reveal significant patterns, particularly over the E face of the Column.

My first goal was to identify as many divisions in the border as possible — that is, breaks between two different border patterns. In most cases, the divisions are sharp and clear, representing the point where one carver left off and another carried on in his own distinctive style. Consider, for example, the borders above and below scenes CIII and CIV (fig. 1). The lower border on the left consists of two rows of regular block-like shapes; immediately below the window, this pattern disintegrates and is replaced by a random-looking naturalistic pattern resembling stone, at least to some extent. The upper border is similarly divided at about the same place on the Column, between a regular pattern of rows of rounded lumps on the left and a jagged, angular and random pattern on the right. This one small section of frieze thus preserves examples of 4 border patterns and 2 divisions.

It has proved possible to identify 43 such divisions in the border of the frieze; their distribution is plotted on fig. 2. The diagram reveals a pattern in the places where divisions occur: 25 of the 43 divisions fall along one of the 4 axes defined by the vertical lines of windows; 15 divisions fall along the E axis alone; fewer again fall along the N and S axes. Heavy damage to the Column's W face (the windows which mark the centre of the W face are at the far right edge of the diagram) makes the count of divisions along it unrepresentative, but when the divisions in the better-preserved upper windings are counted, it appears that they are as common here as on the E axis.

It has proved more difficult to differentiate between the border patterns. Despite their usually simple repetitive patterns, even small amounts of wear or damage can cause problems for a