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POSTSCRIPT

Further considerations on the carving of the frieze on the Column of Marcus Aurelius

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M. Beckmann has performed a valuable service by tracking the nature and occurrence of variations in the treatment of the rocky border of the frieze of the Column, and by drawing attention to their possible implications for the carving process and organisation of the work. I should like to pursue the themes of his discussion by addressing three questions raised by the evidence he presents.

The order of carving between the border and the frieze

Beckmann assumes that both were carved at the same time and by the same carvers (with serious consequences for the number of hands involved, if each variant border pattern possibly represents a different carver). That looks to be the case on Trajan's Column, where the border is of a fairly uniform character and interacts closely with the irregularities in the frieze. But the border on the Column of Marcus is visibly independent of the frieze it contains: it is consistently the highest relief element on the shaft (whereas on Trajan's its relief height varies), is sharply defined on top and bottom, and has a strongly-marked median line. The changes in its patterning do not relate to divisions in the frieze (i.e., between one scene and another): a given pattern may continue across multiple scenes, while different types of pattern cluster vertically, confined to one or other of the two halves of the Column, the divisions between different patterns almost always coinciding with the windows on the E face, probably also on the W face, but not so often on the N or S. This is at odds with the frieze itself, whose scenes tend to divide according to all *four* quarters, often coinciding with the windows but not in the same way that the border divisions do. Moreover, there are some curious patches in the border patterns, where, for a brief stretch between two distinct patterns, a different, sometimes very uncertain hand has intervened. The positions of these interventions seem, again, generally to coincide with the axes of the windows.

This would suggest to me that, although both parties shared a common point of reference in the windows, there was no particular connection between the carving of the frieze and the carving of the border. Indeed, one should expect the border to have been laid out first, since it defines the frieze panels; and it looks as if it was carved in advance of the frieze because the carving of the figures in the scenes above and below has left very sharp edges (even undercutting the border on the underside) — which could only have been achieved in that order, not the other way around.

How and when was the helix forming the border laid out?

To take the above matter further, the helix is far more regular and precisely geometrical than that of Trajan's Column (where it seems to have been drawn freehand). Its geometry is not the same as that of the internal staircase, to which the windows relate, nor is it related dimensionally to the column drums; thus, its spiral line would be extremely difficult to mark out accurately on the drums while they were still on the ground, or during the process of erecting the Column.¹ After the Column was erected, however, the laying out of the helix could well be combined with the fine dressing of the shaft and its entasis (slight and straight though that is) — both being necessary preliminaries to the layout and carving of the frieze. The simplest method will have been to mark vertical guidelines down the shaft on the same four axes marked by the win-

1 The commonly held idea that the assembly of Trajan's Column (and by analogy that of Marcus) and the carving of the helical frieze could have been a combined operation, the sculptors moving in to start to carve the frieze from the bottom as soon as the first one or two drums forming the shaft were in place, is untenable for this and other reasons: the relief carvers could hardly work from the scaffolding while it was being used for the heavy lifting operations; and if the lifting were to be interrupted to give them time to carve the relevant section of frieze, the lifting gangs would have to be re-deployed for months and re-trained each time they came back, the scaffolding (far too massive for the sculptors' purposes anyway) would weather and weaken, and the ropes (specially made for the project) would rot. It makes better sense that the Column would be erected, partly-dressed, in a single concerted operation, while ropes and lifting scaffolding were in prime condition and when the huge teams of men and animals required for the capstans and the other specialised craftsmen were assembled, schooled, and improving their skills with constant application. The fine dressing of the architecture and the carving of the reliefs would then take their turns.