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The Column of Trajan: Building a Collective Memory

THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements  
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in Art History

by

Daisy Arevalo Mendoza

Thesis Committee:  
Professor Matthew P. Canepa, Chair  
Professor Roland Betancourt  
Associate Professor Lyle Massey

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## **ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS**

The Column of Trajan: Building a Collective Memory

by

Daisy Arevalo Mendoza

Master of Arts in Art History

University of California, Irvine, 2020

Professor Matthew P. Canepa, Chair

This paper surveys various scholars who have interpreted Trajan's Column as a mechanism of imperial and military propaganda. Focusing on studies that highlight the Column's topography, helicoidal reliefs, and interior staircase allows us to determine how the Column of Trajan promoted collective memories rooted in imperial power, military success and national honor for the Roman people. In addition, this paper highlights the building tactics and stylistic components utilized to promote positive notions of war. The last section of this work offers a small critique of the extent of current scholarship while offering suggestions for future study/works.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The Column of Trajan has come to be studied as a monument of architectural ingenuity from ancient Rome. Built from twenty-nine blocks of sculpted Luna (modern day Carrara) marble, the Column of Trajan stands at 38.4 meters and chronicles the two Dacian Wars (A.D. 102-103, 105) on a helical frieze that runs from the Column's base to its capital.<sup>1</sup> An "entrance on the south side of the pedestal"<sup>2</sup> reveals Trajan's burial chamber and a spiral staircase leading up to a viewing station at the top of the Column.<sup>3</sup> Today, the Column is the only surviving structure from the Forum of Trajan. Remnants of nearby structures – like the Greek and Latin Libraries (to the east and west) and the Basilica Ulpia (to the south) – have given scholars the opportunity to hypothesize the functions of the Column within the context of its immediate surroundings.<sup>4</sup> Having this surviving structure nearly intact gives scholars the opportunity to examine the intrinsic meanings of the work, while offering suggestions to how this work may have intended to function for the Roman people.

Trajan's conquests of Dacia (modern day Romania) inspired new productions of triumphal monuments that expanded across the empire. Structures in Rome truly began to implement new styles which were unlike anything Rome had ever seen before. Apollodorus of Damascus, serving as Trajan's chief architect and engineer, designed Trajan's Column and the Forum of Trajan where the Column was positioned. Apollodorus' design featured a "figural

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<sup>1</sup> James E. Packer, *The Forum of Trajan in Rome: A Study of the Monuments in Brief* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), 74-75; On page 74, Packer states 'eight [marble blocks] make up the pedestal and plinth of the base; nineteen blocks are used for the rest of the Column (including the torus of the base and the capital); two, the post-antique finial.'

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Penelope J.E. Davies, "The Politics of Perpetuation: Trajan's Column and the Art of Commemoration" in *American Journal of Archaeology* 101 no. 1 (Archaeological Institute of America, 1997): 41

<sup>4</sup> Tom Stevenson, "On Dating the Frieze of Trajan's Column" in *Mediterranean Archaeology* 21 (2008); On page 47, Stevenson writes 'the orientation of the Forum is north-west to south-east rather than north to south, but it is common to describe "northern" and "southern" ends.'

frieze” that encircled the Column from its base to its capital – a concept that had not been seen before in imperial Rome.<sup>5</sup> The entire Forum stood larger than any of the previous structures in the imperial fora, showcasing just how ambitious Trajan and Apollodorus’ building plans were. Ammianus Marcellinus, perhaps most famously, describes Constantius II’s impression of Trajan’s Forum when visiting Rome in 357 AD:

But when he [Constantius II] came to the Forum of Trajan, a construction unique under the heavens, as we believe, and admirable even in the unanimous opinion of the gods, he stood fast in amazement, turning his attention to the gigantic complex about him, begging description and never again to be imitated by immortal men. Therefore abandoning all hope of attempting anything like it, he said that he would and could copy Trajan’s steed alone, which stands in the centre of the vestibule, carrying the emperor himself. (*Rerum Gestarum* XVI.10.15)<sup>6</sup>

Beyond a millennium later, Italian art historian Giovanni Becatti would end up describing the Column as “the most original monument of Roman art,” thus showcasing just how innovative Apollodorus’ designs must have been to be able to transcend time.<sup>7</sup>

The Roman Empire had witnessed its greatest territorial expansion under Trajan. Trajan’s successful wars against the Dacians awarded him the title *Dacicus* while also bringing prosperous wealth and authority into the hands of Romans. There is no agreement for what Trajan’s motives may have been to impose two military campaigns against the Dacians, but scholars have used the Column of Trajan to offer suggestions. For one, Trajan may have been trying to prove himself a worthy emperor and skillful military commander after being adopted by his predecessor, Nerva, in 97 AD.<sup>8</sup> Another suggestion is that Trajan may have been attracted to Dacia’s wealth – it was the *spolia* from these wars that financed his architectural projects in

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<sup>5</sup> Roger B. Ulrich, “Introduction to the Spiral Frieze of Trajan’s Column” (2020).

<sup>6</sup> John C. Rolfe, “Ammianus Marcellinus, *Rerum Gestarum* (With An English Translation)” Book XVI, 10.15.; “The Forum of Trajan”

<sup>7</sup> Ulrich, “Introduction to the Spiral Frieze of Trajan’s Column;” Giovanni Becatti “La Colonna coelide istoriata. Problemi storici, iconografici, stilistici (Studi e Materiali del Museo del”Impero Romano, 1960): 11.

<sup>8</sup> Diana E.E. Kleiner, “Chapter V: Art Under Trajan and Hadrian,” *Roman Sculpture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992). <https://www.aaeportal.com/?id=-19176>.



Rome, after all.<sup>9</sup> A different idea suggests these military campaigns were enacted as a means to fulfill Trajan's "vengeance against Dacian aggression," which had developed as a result of Domitian's feeble rule.<sup>10</sup> Though there is no surviving evidence to conclude what the definitive cause for Trajan's Dacian Wars might have been, we can still turn to the Column of Trajan to assess how it resulted as a mechanism of imperial and military propaganda from the Dacian Wars.

## II. COLUMN OF TRAJAN: FUNCTIONS OF SPACE

Defeating the Dacians improved Rome's economy substantially, allowing the empire to carry out architectural developments that actively glorified Trajan's military achievements against their enemies in the northeast.<sup>11</sup> The Forum of Trajan, thus, was constructed as an "expression of imperial propaganda,"<sup>12</sup> reflecting the emperor's strength and grandeur directly through the Forum's architectural brilliance. Trajan's Column was placed on the northernmost end of the Forum, framed by a small, rectangular peristyle.<sup>13</sup> In this section, we will discuss how Trajan's Column utilized its locale – in relation to the Forum – to influence perceptions of memory.

Trajan's Column played a direct role in producing recollections of the Dacian Wars. The Column's immediate surroundings suggest meticulous planning and precision, showcasing how the arrangement took the viewers' experience into consideration to produce sentiments of victory. This commemoration of triumph would have been recalled for visitors as they walked past depictions of Dacians throughout the Forum, especially because Apollodorus had designed

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<sup>9</sup> Edward Togo Salmon, "Trajan's Conquest of Dacia" in *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 67 (1936): 84.

<sup>10</sup> Tom Stevenson, "On Dating the Frieze of Trajan's Column" in *Mediterranean Archaeology* 21 (2008): 53.

<sup>11</sup> Packer, *The Forum of Trajan in Rome: A Study of the Monuments in Brief*, 4.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

the Forum's outermost colonnades as *atlantes* portraying Dacians.<sup>14</sup> Ian C. Dahl writes, "the posture and the use of Dacians as *atlantes* sends a message of Dacian subservience to Rome," as they appeared to hold up the structure while bowing their heads in reverence.<sup>15</sup> Scholars' opinions about the meaning of these Dacian columns have seemed to vary. On one side, the columns presenting Dacians could have been attempting to present a look at foreign enemies who were now under direct control of the Roman Empire. Under this presumption, Romans would have looked at these columns and been able to associate Dacian submission in contrast to the strength of Trajan and the empire. Alternatively, there are other scholars who imply that the *atlantes* were incorporated on the Forum to depict Dacians who were intentionally glorifying the Romans. There is a detail that scholars agree on despite their different perspectives; on all accounts, Dacians are presented from the imperial, "Romano-centric perspective."<sup>16</sup> A deliberate reflection of the Dacian Wars was inevitable for visitors, as they would have been able to identify who the enemies bearing Trajan's Forum were. While only fragments of these Dacian statues have survived, they still provide scholars with insight to the empire's persuasive objectives.

While the Column's surroundings called for memories of the Dacian Wars, the Column itself did possess elements of remembrance on its own. The Column's height, for example, was utilized to produce memories of military triumph for visitors from the moment they entered the Forum. Because the Forum served as "a law court and a meeting place and a marketplace," it is likely that people frequently circulated in and out of the building.<sup>17</sup> Visitors coming in from the

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<sup>14</sup> Ian C. Dahl "Barbarians as Romans: A Survey of the Presentation of Western Barbarians in Trajanic Literature and Art," (Arizona: University of Arizona, 2017): 5-13.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 14

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 5-13.

<sup>17</sup> Kleiner, "Chapter V: Art Under Trajan and Hadrian," 18.

entrance on the south end would have been able to see the peak of the Column at once, where a gilded statue of Trajan was situated. This visual representation of the emperor at the top of the Column would have presumably produced a remembrance of the emperor leading to the generalized conception of Roman success.<sup>18</sup> From the very entrance of the Column, visitors were set up to witness Trajan's success and glory. The extent to which builders went to arrange these details into place shows how intentional the Column's positioning was for creating meanings for viewers.

Additionally, by considering Lynne Lancaster's proposal for a "hypothetical reconstruction" of the pulley device used to erect the Column's marble blocks into place, we are able to determine further examples that showcase the consciousness of locality for producing the collective memory that celebrated Roman power. The hypothetical lifting device, developed from Lancaster's comparisons of on-site archaeological evidence and from previous archaeological and literary sources, suggests how the Column's marble blocks may have been lifted before being placed specifically between the Greek and Latin libraries.<sup>19</sup> The size of the lifting device suggests the need for an open space to work with, meaning the builders must have closed the northern end of the Forum to transport the large marble slabs into the Forum.<sup>20</sup> Thinking chronologically about the building process lets us gather that the marble drums were first carried into the Forum and carved before being carried again to be placed atop one another.<sup>21</sup> The meticulous – and rigorous – building plan that workers endured to situate the

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<sup>18</sup> Important to note that Trajan's Forum had been built as far as the peristyle where the Column of Trajan was located during his reign. Trajan did not see the project through to completion; It was Hadrian who set out to finish the Temple of Deified Trajan to the north of the Column.

<sup>19</sup> Lynne Lancaster, "Building Trajan's Column" in *American Journal of Archaeology* 103 no. 3 (July, 1999): 419.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* 439.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 426; Lancaster additionally notes that Roman builders were not working directly beside the courtyard --they were sculpting the Column's marble blocks about thirteen meters away from its proposed location.

Column into place shows how its space intended to function as a tool for commemorating Roman success.

Deciding to build the Column of Trajan was a task that required digging up land prior to construction. The base of the monument contains an inscription with details about the Column – such as the date the “Senate and Roman people dedicated this monument to Trajan” and a declaration of purpose that – until recently – scholars believed provided additional details about the Column’s building process.<sup>22</sup> The inscription on the base of the Column reads:

The Senate and People of Rome (dedicate this) to Emperor Caesar Nerva Trajan, son of Deified Nerva, Augustus, Germanicus, Dacicus, Pontifex Maximus, holder of Tribunician Power 17 times, acclaimed Emperor 6 times, Consul 6 times, Father of the Fatherland, to show how high a mountain—and the site for such great works—had been cleared away.<sup>23</sup>

The most disputed element from the inscription comes from the last line that states the mountain had been cleared away to make room for the architectural visions of both the emperor and his architect. It was not until 1906, that excavations were able to find layers – from as far back as the Roman Republic – directly under the Column.<sup>24</sup> Scholars now seem to agree that the Quirinal Hill was not cut back to make space for the Column, but was in fact cut back “to prepare the ground for the Forum and Markets.”<sup>25</sup> The question that remains, however, is what height the inscription is referring to. More recent scholarship suggests the Column could be serving as an “excavation marker” whose height coincided with the height of the Quirinal Hill.<sup>26</sup> This does not appear to be a definitive conclusion however, as scholars continue to consider other spaces the Forum could have utilized to serve as an “excavation marker.” Still, the inscription on the

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<sup>22</sup> Stevenson, “On Dating the Frieze of Trajan’s Column,” 48.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. (Translated by Stevenson).

<sup>24</sup> Penelope J.E. Davies, “The Politics of Perpetuation: Trajan’s Column and the Art of Commemoration,” 60.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Stevenson, “On Dating the Frieze of Trajan’s Column,” 49.

Column points to the notion of commemoration. While we are not clear on what is being described specifically, there is an indication of Rome's intention to cultivate memory.

Architectural innovations and careful planning were essential for producing a monument that would remind Romans of their imperial strength. We have seen the lengths that builders went to in order to achieve a cohesive theme that evoked feelings of honor and pride throughout the Forum. Subtle depictions of Dacians all throughout the Forum was intentional for producing collective nationalism rooted in the annexation of Dacia. The Forum seemed to set the stage with subtle reminders of Roman victory. By the time Romans reached the Column, they had already experienced memories of the Dacian Wars all throughout. It was in the presence of the Column that the citizens would have culminated the interconnection of memories, feeling proud of the empire's military victory.

### **III. THE COLUMN OF TRAJAN'S HELICAL FRIEZE**

Trajan's Column has remained nearly intact since its dedication in 113AD, making it a frequent subject of study for art historians. Scholars mostly interpret the Column's reliefs, conceiving who the enemies portrayed on the relief actually are, how these enemies are presented in contrast to the Romans, and what kinds of artistic mistakes are depicted on the relief. The Column offers various perspectives, but mostly comes to be identified as a persuasive tool meant to honor Trajan and his legions, and to encourage subsequent wars. Examining the sculpted scenes reveals how the Column intended to fabricate positive notions of war and present Trajan as a strong, capable, and generous leader.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Amanda Claridge and Mark Wilson Jones both proposed the frieze on the Column was Hadrianic rather than belonging to the period of Trajan's reign (1993). This view was been met with criticism from authors like Tom Stevenson, Diane E.E. Kleiner, and Penelope J.E. Davies; Claridge has addressed the critiques of her work (2007 and 2013) but maintains her original claim.

Trajan was the only Roman emperor born “in a province of the empire rather than Italy,” holding military commands in areas like Danube, the Rhine, and Spain.<sup>28</sup> His military skills made him popular among the Roman army and Senate, thus validating his succession to the throne in 98. Trajan’s tactical decisions were crucial for Rome’s success – a detail that the Column’s spiral frieze spared no opportunity to highlight. For example, when Trajan and his legions first set off to seize Dacia’s capital in Sarmizegetusa, the emperor was faced with deciding what direction to ambush the Dacians from. Edward Togo Salmon utilizes topographical observations to reconstruct possible routes the Romans may have taken to capture Sarmizegetusa with the greatest advantage, proving how meticulous the decision process was for Roman legions crossing the Danube river.<sup>29</sup> The Column of Trajan depicts two different pontoon bridges from the First War, ultimately suggesting the emperor must have divided his legions to cross the Danube from different access points. Salmon claims, “It is incredible that the sculpture would have bothered to depict two bridges, if both of them had been at the same point.”<sup>30</sup> Sculpting these two bridges onto the Column was a careful detail that intended to display how contributive Trajan’s military strategies were for Rome’s conquest, thus inspiring a sense of trust in his tactical expertise.

The reliefs also intended to differentiate Roman and Dacian cultures by contrasting the style of architectural structures that were sculpted onto the Column. Elizabeth Wolfram Thill analyzes buildings presented on the Column to show the underlying implications associated with these two cultures.<sup>31</sup> Roman structures look like they are made from marble, while Dacian

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<sup>28</sup> Kleiner, “Chapter V: Art Under Trajan and Hadrian,” 1.

<sup>29</sup> Salmon, “Trajan’s Conquest of Dacia,” 88-90.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>31</sup> Elizabeth Wolfram Thill, “Depicting Barbarism on Fire: Architectural Destruction on the Columns of Trajan and Marcus Aurelius” *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 24 (2011).

settlements appear to be small, wooden cabins. The material alone suggests the difference in strength, or power, which would have placed the emperor and his legions at higher stature. Thill additionally describes one more important detail from the frieze, stating “one-fourth of Dacian architectural structures are either on fire or threatened to be on fire.”<sup>32</sup> Viewers associating the flames in relation to the architectural structures on the relief would have determined the malleability of Dacian property and the permanence of Roman structures – and therefore the Roman empire.

Another architectural element presented on the Column are Roman and Dacian fortifications. Lino Rossi and Thill both describe the inaccuracies of the Dacian fortifications, stressing how they were sculpted into the relief without any real knowledge of what Dacian territory may have looked like.<sup>33</sup> Integrating Dacia’s architectural properties may have been a challenge for artists relying on simple sketches or word-of-mouth, but the distinction between Dacian and Roman styles is very deliberate. The contrasts suggested “a superior Roman culture” and promoted a sense of nationalism and pride for Romans who inspected the frieze.

Michael B. Charles additionally points to the stylistic discrepancies on the frieze. Differently than Thill and Rossi however, Charles turns to examine the Roman army’s *lorica segmentata* and helmets to emphasize the differences in appearance between Roman soldiers. The inconsistencies in soldier attire allowed Romans viewing the Column to tell elite Roman soldiers (the Praetorians) apart from the foreign soldiers (the Auxilia) who fought alongside them in battle.<sup>34</sup> Still, these soldiers mark unification within the empire; The frieze unites soldiers of different ranks into battle, proving how valuable each of them was during the

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 283.

<sup>33</sup> Lino Rossi, “Dacian Fortifications on Trajan’s Column” *The Antiquaries Journal* 51, no. 1 (1971): 30.

<sup>34</sup> Michael B. Charles, “The Flavio-Trajanic miles: The Appearance of Citizen Infantry on Trajan’s Column” *Latomus* 61 no. 3 (2002): 668.

wars. Carving Rome's citizen infantry and their "auxiliary comrades" provides not only a sense of unity, but respect as well.<sup>35</sup> In presenting Roman soldiers of different status fighting directly alongside each other, the Column highlights Trajan's leadership skill. In addition, this detail would have allowed more Romans to feel a connection to the Column, as it presented Romans of different ranks and economic status all experiencing the glory of victory. The strength of Roman soldiers – and therefore Roman identity – is presented throughout the spiral frieze, suggesting that Romans were meant to see the Column and recognize strength they could relate to.

The sculptural reliefs additionally showcased Trajan's generosity and consideration for his foes. Penelope J.E. Davies in fact notes that the Column's frieze did not actually depict many battle scenes. Instead, the Column presented moments where Roman soldiers appeared to be traveling across their military routes and building fortifications to protect themselves against their enemies. These illustrations do in fact reflect specific moments related to the military campaigns, but they do not portray the horrible realities of war.<sup>36</sup> The themes of the Column do not incite thoughts of violence or aggression, showing then that Trajan was a generous – rather than violent – leader. The Dacians were also presented in such a way where they seemed to possess Roman-like qualities. Dacians resembled Romans as they were also shown building fortresses and caring for their injured and dying comrades rather than engaging in combat against the Roman soldiers.<sup>37</sup> These peaceful depictions of the Dacian Wars intended to paint battle scenes in a more positive light to help promote future military campaigns.

## **A. PERSUADING THE PUBLIC**

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Penelope J.E. Davies, "The Politics of Perpetuation: Trajan's Column and the Art of Commemoration"

<sup>37</sup> Dahl "Barbarians as Romans: A Survey of the Presentation of Western Barbarians in Trajanic Literature and Art," 23.



The Column's frieze depicted scenes of victory in order to promote new military campaigns against Rome's other enemies.<sup>38</sup> Cassius Dio recounts that Trajan had plans to annex Parthia and Armenia shortly after the completion of his Forum, but there was no real reason to have to seek out another battle.<sup>39</sup> Sentiments about war had been unoptimistic in the minds of Roman citizens since Domitian's defeat, and many remained unconvinced to embark on a new military campaign. Though Trajan had already won both campaigns against the Dacians and restored Rome's honor, it is likely that Romans may have still been apprehensive at the idea of an additional war. Trajan therefore intended to captivate positive sentiments of war by highlighting the Roman army's strength on the spiral frieze. This persuasive method meant to encourage viewers to honor the emperor and his legions, as well as promote new wars. Showing Rome's military strength would ultimately help convince citizens that they were equipped to engage in a new military campaign. By analyzing the Column's frieze, we can conclusively gather how – and why – Trajan's reliefs meant to develop memories of military success.

The Roman empire had experienced severe financial challenges before Trajan came to power, resulting from "Domitian's 'rapacious devices,'" and Nerva's decision to remove gold from coins, which consequently devaluated the economy.<sup>40</sup> Another war meant additional expenses for the empire. Roman's would have likely been more hesitant to embark on a new war so quickly because of concern for greater financial hardship. Trajan thus ensured that his Column would remind skeptics of the wealth Rome had received from their last military campaign. Trajan intended to persuade Roman citizens for the need to go war, and as a result decided to incorporate scenes that highlighted Rome's victories but not Rome engaging in battle (as

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<sup>38</sup> Davies, "The Politics of Perpetuation: Trajan's Column and the Art of Commemoration," 62.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

previously mentioned in the last section). Trajan did attempt to show his generosity as a military commander, but he also wanted Romans viewing the Column to recognize the wealth that would come from other wars. Davies argues this claim, writing “Trajan was anxious to prove the competence of his soldiers to dispel the city dweller’s resentment of the financial drain caused by war, and to display the wealth brought to Rome from foreign wars.”<sup>41</sup> In this manner, Trajan intended to induce public support by presenting the Roman army’s goodwill rather than aggression. Scholars like Davies, Thill, and Martin Beckmann seem to mutually agree that presenting scenes of military achievement was propagandic in promoting military feats. Analyzing the scenes on Trajan’s Column allows us to recognize how they functioned in producing a collective memory of military success to encourage new military campaigns.

A moment that further illustrates the emperor’s strategic motive to wage other wars comes from the very day the Column of Trajan was dedicated. Beckmann argues that Trajan had his Column deliberately dedicated on 12 May 112 to coincide with the dedication of Augustus’ Temple of Mars Ultor from the same day in 2 B.C.<sup>42</sup> While the rest of the monuments from Trajan’s Forum were dedicated on 1 January 112, the Column itself was not dedicated until four months later. Senatorial members and citizens alike were familiar with this day in particular, as it commemorated a powerful victory under August and insinuated Roman nationalism and pride. Erecting his monument on this date allowed Trajan to recall previous imperial success and suggest that his outcome could be the same. The Temple of Mars Ultor was associated with military triumph and vengeance. According to Beckmann, Trajan utilized this connection to argue that a war against Parthia would also serve as a means in this manner – to show conquest

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 63

<sup>42</sup> Martin Beckmann, “Trajan’s Column and Mars Ultor” *Journal of Roman Studies* 106 (2016): 125

and vengeance.<sup>43</sup> Trajan ultimately produced a connection between himself and Augustus, dedicating his Column on the same day Augustus dedicated his temple, to persuasively defend his future war against the Parthians.

Trajan referenced Augustus when dedicating his Column on the same day the Temple of Mars Ultor had been dedicated, but this was not the only moment where Trajan attempted to associate himself with Rome's first great emperor. Trajan also used details throughout his Forum to convince the Roman people that he was capable of the same success that Augustus had exhibited. The Forum of Trajan was the last – and largest – structure built in the imperial fora. Trajan had his Forum erected directly beside the Forum of Augustus. It is no coincidence that Trajan's Forum contained decorative aspects that closely resembled neo-Augustan classicism more closely than the ornamented Flavian architectural style.<sup>44</sup> James Packer analyzes how these small components of the Forum, like the "architraves, cornices, and fillets between the dentals" showcased minimal decorations to more closely resemble the designs on the Forum of Augustus.<sup>45</sup> Eric Thienes explains how Romans had already grown accustomed to public displays of memory, as "inscriptions, monuments and honorific dedications" were frequently integrated into public spaces in such a way that aimed to recall the past and remind Romans of their "ancestry and cultural heritage."<sup>46</sup> Apollodorus' conscious decision to omit the elaborate details associated with Flavian architecture shows how Trajan wanted to be positioned among the ranks of Augustus, even insisting he only be called by the title *princeps* as Augustus had.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.,187.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Eric M. Thienes "Remembering Trajan in Fourth-Century Rome: Memory and Identity in Spatial, Artistic, and Textual Narratives" (Missouri: University of Missouri, 2015): 2.

<sup>47</sup> Kleiner, "Chapter V: Art Under Trajan and Hadrian," 2.

Trajan entrusted Apollodorus to recall previous military success in an attempt to encourage positive outlooks for future wars.<sup>48</sup>

#### IV. THE COLUMN OF TRAJAN'S SPIRAL STAIRCASE

We have spent the majority of this paper discussing how Trajan's Column evoked memories of war and encouraged the Roman people to acknowledge the positive effects of military conquest. While the idea of fighting in new wars may have made the Romans feel uneasy, the Column of Trajan intended to elicit the beneficial components associated with succeeding other empires. Details such as the Column's helical frieze, and the positioning of the Column in relation to the rest of the Forum intended to encourage Romans to support Trajan, his legions, and the need to fight more wars. While the Column's external ornamentation illustrated the strength of the empire and encouraged acclaiming Trajan as a capable, and tactical ruler, the inner part of the Column also intended to produce memories of power, success, and honor.

The spiral staircase within Trajan's Column was just as splendid as the designs throughout his Forum. Builders were able to design spiral stairs that had never existed before in Rome; while traditional stairways ensured twelve or sixteen step-per-turn, the Column of Trajan presented fourteen.<sup>49</sup> Including twelve or sixteen steps-per-turn was a much simpler design as both these numbers were easily divisible by quarter circles.<sup>50</sup> Unlike traditional stairways, the fourteen steps-per-turn seen on the Column's stairs were not divisible in the same way. This ingenuity is useful for showcasing the precision and careful planning that went into positioning

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.,124

<sup>49</sup> Martin Beckmann, "The 'Columnae Coc(h)lides' of Trajan and Marcus Aurelius," *Phoenix* 56, no. 3/4 (2002): 353; The Column's staircase is most often described as spiral, but we must not fail to mention that the first three flights were actually designed as straight stairs that rotated by ninety-degree angles, but as you continued your way up the stairs, the design transformed into a spiral staircase; Mark Wilson Jones (1993) argues the staircase was not originally intended to have fourteen steps-per-turn but the design needed to be modified after a defect was discovered in one of the marble drums.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.; 'Wilson Jones 1993: 30-31. Twelve or sixteen steps can be easily planned by further dividing a quartered circle; fourteen steps cannot,' (cited in article by Beckmann (2002), p. 353, note 25).

these marble drums into place. Visitors walking up the staircase would have noted a difference in this stairway's design, which would have induced positive sentiments about the emperor's new, architectural innovation and cleverness, and feelings of honor as he was for whom the structure was made for.

Spiral staircases in Rome were a rare phenomenon during this time; the Column of Trajan was in fact the first column to feature a spiral staircase, and was also the only one to exist during Trajan's reign. Trajan's Column continues to be a useful source of architectural analysis, remaining one of the more well-preserved structures from imperial Rome. Amanda Claridge and Beckmann both analyze the spiral staircase within Trajan's Column to hypothesize the functions it may have served for visitors who interacted directly with it in Trajanic Rome. Claridge explores the intricacy of the staircase suggesting that details, such as the calculated steps-per-turn that were previously mentioned, would have left a lasting impression on *cognoscenti* and more casual visitors too.<sup>51</sup> The Column's only source of natural light within the staircase came from the rectangular windows that had been incorporated into the Column as part of Apollodorus' original design. These windows were positioned above eye level for visitors who would have been walking up the staircase, but were built at a downwards angle so that the natural light coming in from the outside would have only ended up illuminating the steps on which they were walking through.<sup>52</sup> Romans making their way up the steps would not have been able to discern how close they were to the top of the Column, as they would have been disoriented by the dimmed path and spiral stairs that had not been seen before in Rome. Viewers stepping out into the open terrace would have felt a sense of clarity after making their way through the dark. The stairs functioned as a precursor to the panoramic view that awaited viewers at the top of the

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<sup>51</sup> Claridge, "Hadrian's Column of Trajan," 10.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 9-10.

Column. Audiences would have marveled at the views of the city from its “historic centre” to the “wider view of the imperial city.”<sup>53</sup>

The Column’s inscription does provide additional insight for how the space intended to function, as previously noted. Claridge writes, “the staircase was specifically designed to bring the ancient visitor to see the site of Trajan’s Forum, laid out to the south.”<sup>54</sup> Beckmann echoes this point, stating that visitors “would have been able to inspect” the top of the Column “from an unparalleled vantage point” thus being able to appreciate the emperor’s military and imperial accomplishments.<sup>55</sup> As we now know, scholars do mutually agree that a segment of the Quirinal Hill was cut back to make room for Trajan’s Forum and Markets. Allowing visitors to enter the Column and make their way up the spiral staircase to observe the Forum’s stature was a persuasive tactic used to encourage Romans to marvel at the Forum’s grandiosity. Grasping the tremendous building efforts would not have been possible from the ground level, so putting them in this higher space would have provided them newfound perspective and appreciation.<sup>56</sup> Viewing the Forum’s grand stature and architectural achievement would have also evoked positive notions of Trajan’s imperial success, thus encouraging positive memories of his role within the empire.

The spiral staircase within the Column of Trajan played a significant role for Rome beyond just citizens’ direct engagement with it. Beckmann brings attention to two lists – the *Curiosum Urbis Romae* and the *Notita Urbis Rome* – that kept written records of “buildings and monuments in the imperial capital.”<sup>57</sup> On these lists, the Column of Trajan is referred to as

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid. 10

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Martin Beckmann, “The ‘Columnae Coc(h)lides’ of Trajan and Marcus Aurelius,” 349.

<sup>56</sup> Claridge, “Hadrian’s Column of Trajan,” 10.

<sup>57</sup> Martin Beckmann, “The ‘Columnae Coc(h)lides’ of Trajan and Marcus Aurelius,” 349.

*columnae coc(h)lides*, meaning snail-like or snail-shell column.<sup>58</sup> While it may be possible that *coc(h)lides* intends to refer to the helical frieze on the Column's exterior, it is more likely to be describing the spiral stairway on the inner part of the Column. Beckmann argues this point by drawing his attention towards ancient sources that applied variations of the word *coc(h)lides*.<sup>59</sup> Beckmann offers various suggestions when inquiring why the *Curiosum Urbis Romae* and *Notitia Urbis Rome* chose to catalog Trajan's Column by its spiral stairs feature. It has become clear by now that the spiral stairs were an architectural innovation and technical achievement. In fact, Marcus Aurelius' deliberate choice to incorporate spiral stairs into his Column shows the influence and admiration that Marcus Aurelius had for the original monument. Other architects were also influenced by the spiral stairs, as more structures emerged with the same features shortly after.<sup>60</sup> In essence, the Roman lists did not only serve to archive the Column for its pristine design. It also served to memorialize the emperor. The Roman catalogs recalled memories of Trajan by describing the Column through its spiral stairway. This provides further insight to the impact the spiral stairs had in generating memories of the groundbreaking emperor.

## V. CRITIQUES AND FUTURE STUDY

The Column of Trajan survives as a nearly intact monument from ancient Rome. Early scholarship analyzed the frieze for historical accuracy, while also utilizing the monument as a “substitute for textual accounts of the Dacian Wars.”<sup>61</sup> Recent work has shifted away from these traditional analyses and has begun to consider how the scenes can be interpreted through

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.; The Column of Marcus Aurelius also appears to be described this same way, though we will only be addressing the Column of Trajan here.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 348-351; The different variations of *coc(h)lides* that Beckman surveys are: *cochlea*, *coclea*, *coc(h)lis*, and *chc(h)lea*. He concludes that for nearly every reference, Romans appear to be describing ‘an internal spiral passageway or cavity, not of any sort of external banding’

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 355.

<sup>61</sup> Elizabeth Wolfram Thill, “Civilization Under Construction: Depictions of Architecture on the Column of Trajan,” *American Journal of Archaeology* 114 no. 1 (2010): 27.

political, artistic, or other thematic scopes. Many studies have analyzed the distinctions exhibited between Roman and Dacian cultures on the frieze, pointing to attire, weaponry and even facial expressions for evidence. Though there are many works written on the comparisons of Roman and Dacian infantry, Thill declares that there are other aspects of the frieze that have yet to be discussed. Architectural depictions, for example, is another perspective that showcases how the frieze separates the two cultures. Thill's analysis of architectural structures on the frieze is a new conception that encourages more research.

A mutual agreement to the meaning of the frieze has never been reached, but new scholarship has begun to shift away from disputes all together to begin to shed light on more specific components of the frieze that have not yet been discussed. Andrew Fox, for example, focuses his research on the number of trees found throughout the relief. Fox's work follows the thematic notion of conquest, but his argument is concentrated on "an examination of the numerous tree-falling scenes on the Column."<sup>62</sup> Adding a new perspective is more useful for producing new scholarship that branches beyond the traditional claims that have already been disputed for more than twenty years.

Scholarship has only begun to take a significant turn in a new direction within the last ten years. Researchers like Thienes, for example, have begun to see the Column of Trajan beyond just an "artifact of history," and are now studying how the Column produces a "social memory in the context of space, art, and text."<sup>63</sup> Thienes adds an interdisciplinary perspective by

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<sup>62</sup> Andrew Fox, "Trajanic Trees: The Dacian Forest on Trajan's Column," *Papers of the British School at Rome* 87 (2019): 47.

<sup>63</sup> Eric M. Thienes, "Remembering Trajan in Fourth-Century Rome: Memory and Identity in Spatial, Artistic, and Textual Narratives," x.



incorporating “theories of social and public memory” in order to “examine fourth-century Roman society.”<sup>64</sup>

Modern scholars have now begun to transform how the Column of Trajan is studied. The bulk of existing research still prioritizes the Column’s sculptural frieze, but there are other perspectives to consider addressing all together. More researchers must begin to consider how architectural depictions on the frieze emphasize the erasure of cultural identity. Additionally, scholars may discover how the Column’s surroundings influence social and public memory. Scholarship addressing how Romanians have come to read the Column of Trajan is scarce and may be important to consider examining. Finally, new analyses must attempt to examine how the Column intended to function in relation to its space within the Forum, as briefly attempted in this paper.

## **VI. CONCLUSION**

The Column of Trajan was an architectural phenomenon that utilized its spiral staircase, sculptural frieze, and locale to produce positive sentiments about the emperor and his legions after his conquests of Dacia. Features on Trajan’s Column – and throughout Trajan’s Forum – utilized methods of persuasion by highlighting Roman achievements for visitors who interacted within the space. Producing a collective memory rooted in nationalism, military achievement, and imperial power encouraged subservience and produced positive sentiments for a new war that Trajan sought against the Parthians. Analyzing Trajan’s Column allows us to recognize how the emperor evoked positive memories that endorsed his personal agenda. The Column continues to leave a lasting impression on art historians who study the triumphal monument’s stylistic

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

components. Now, modern scholars must work to develop new concepts about the Column of Trajan rather than just position themselves beside existing scholarship.

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