

THE FRIEZE AS HISTORY

Iactantius, a Christian writer of the early fourth century A.D., tells a revealing story about the sufferings of the Roman emperor Valerian, captured through treachery by the Persian king Sapor in 260. "When King Sapor, who had captured him, wanted to mount a vehicle or a horse, he would order Valerian to kneel on all fours and, placing his foot on his back, he would reproach him, saying with a smile, 'The Romans may paint things on their tablets and walls, but *this* is really the way it is!'"¹ It is doubtful whether Sapor actually said these words, but there must have been enough truth in the idea behind them—that official Roman art often gave a less than accurate account of actual history—to give them convincing bite for Iactantius's readers. The ease with which a painter or sculptor in Rome might misrepresent, deliberately or accidentally, the historical reality of events on a far-flung frontier of the empire is not hard to imagine. Misrepresentation is, however, very difficult to test for. In the poorly documented reign of Marcus Aurelius, this is especially true.

The meager and frequently unreliable sources for the history of the reign of Marcus Aurelius make it almost impossible to reconstruct any more than a superficial account of the main events of his reign. The main literary sources for the period are two: Cassius Dio, a senator and historian who lived in the time of Septimius Severus; and the *Historia Augusta*, a collection of imperial biographies written (it seems) in the fourth century.² The *Historia Augusta* is notoriously unreliable, a situation made worse by the fact that its biographic focus means that historical events are normally mentioned out of order. Dio, who should be an outstanding source for this period, has suffered in transmission: his text is only preserved in fragments cobbled together into an abbreviated history in the eleventh century by a Byzantine monk named Xiphilinus. Xiphilinus was varied in his method of abbreviation: descriptions of some major events seem to have been lifted entire from Dio's text, but other parts are the work of Xiphilinus alone. Perhaps the greatest damage has come from the removal of the quoted sec-

tions from their original context: because Xiphilinus rearranged the selections to suit his own ends, the dates of these events, even their relative order, are sometimes impossible to reconstruct. A third source is the imperial coinage, but by the time of Marcus Aurelius this had become repetitive and generic in its types. It is useful for dating some few major events—Marcus's victories and imperial acclamations, for example—but gives little or no insight into the detailed course of his reign or his wars.

Given this depressing situation, the Column of Marcus Aurelius has offered generations of scholars the tantalizing prospect of an alternative, visual source for the history (at least part of it) of Marcus's reign. The column seems to present a complete record of the entire course of Marcus's Germanic wars, from beginning to end, in impressive detail. The thinking behind this is that if it is possible to correctly interpret the visual language of the frieze and connect our few historical sources to particular scenes within it, we might then be able to use the rest of the images to reconstruct the entire history of Marcus's wars.

That, at least, is the theory. But can this approach work in practice? The purpose of this chapter is to test the historicity of the column's frieze from a number of different perspectives, from broad patterns of behavior down to the details of arms and equipment. It begins, however, with a focus on testing the historicity of individual scenes. Interest in historical themes is one of the most "Roman" characteristics of Roman art—it could in fact be described as the one that separates Roman art most clearly from the art of the Greeks. To understand the basis of the arguments surrounding the historicity of Marcus's Column, its contents have to be seen in the context of the development of this particular line of Roman art. For this reason, the chapter begins with a survey of the history of Roman historical art. Its medium was (up to the second century A.D.) almost exclusively painting, and our knowledge of it is almost entirely restricted to descriptions in literary sources. Strong arguments have been made that the images of Trajan's Column were drawn directly from painted models that had a high degree of historical content. But can the same thing be said about the frieze of the Column of Marcus Aurelius? In the final portion of this chapter, the analysis moves on to consider the historicity of the frieze at two more general levels: that of the details of arms and equipment shown used by Roman soldiers, and that of general patterns of behavior in combat. The historicity of both can be tested by comparison to textual and archaeological sources, offering the opportunity to evaluate the column's historical accuracy from a broad viewpoint.

A Very Brief History of Roman Historical Art

The record of the Romans' use of art to document and advertise their military victories extends as far back as 264 B.C., when, as the elder Pliny relates (*NH* 35.22), Messala displayed on the side of the senate house a "painting of the battle (*tabula proeli*), in which he had beaten the Carthaginians and Hero in Sicily." Lucius Scipio is also reported by Pliny (*ibid.*) to have done much the same thing, setting up a painting of his Asiatic victory (*tabulam victoriarum suae Asiaticae*, over Antiochus III, 190 B.C.) on the Capitol. Not long after, we have the first record of the intersection of historical painting with the greatest of Roman military rituals: the triumph. When Lucius Aemilius Paullus returned to Rome after his victory over the Macedonians at Pydna (168 B.C.), he sent to Athens for a philosopher to educate his children and a painter to beautify his triumph (*pictorem ad triumphum excolendum*). The artist's task would presumably have been to paint images of Paullus's victories that would then be carried in the triumphal procession.³

An incident of 146 B.C. gives an intensely personal flavor to this distinctive genre of Roman art. Lucius Hostilius Mancinus, a Roman legate recently returned from Africa, set up a large and remarkable painting in the Forum. It showed an image of the city of Carthage, and of the event that had made Mancinus famous: the ill-planned but daring capture and night-long occupation of Megara, a suburb of Carthage, by a small band of Roman soldiers and sailors under the legate's command. Just as extraordinary was what happened next: Mancinus positioned himself beside the painting, curious Romans began to gather round, and the commander of this brave action began to explain its details to them. His goal was political: to ride a wave of popularity to the consulship, as the first Roman (at least, the first Roman of high rank) to enter Carthage by force.⁴ Pliny—who tells the story of the display in the Forum—does not tell us exactly what this painting looked like, but if it was improved by explanation then it must have been complex and detailed. Details were undoubtedly tweaked to make Mancinus look as good as possible, but it was certainly historical art.

In the imperial period, triumphal paintings represented the acme of historical art—but we are largely in the dark when it comes to knowing just what sort of images these paintings contained. Most of our records are anecdotal, and there is only one description that offers some enticing (if at the same time somewhat frustrating) detail of the contents of one such set of images. This is Josephus's account of the images, painted on or perhaps

even woven into cloth, carried in the triumph of Vespasian and Titus in A.D. 71:

The war was shown by numerous representations, in separate sections, affording a very vivid picture of its episodes. Here was to be seen a prosperous country devastated, there whole battalions of the enemy slaughtered; here a party in flight, there others led into captivity; walls of surpassing compass demolished by engines, strong fortresses overpowered, cities with well-manned defences completely mastered and an army pouring within the ramparts, an area all deluged with blood, the hands of those incapable of resistance raised in supplication, temples set on fire, houses pulled down over their owners' heads, and, after general desolation and woe, rivers flowing, not over a cultivated land, nor supplying drink to man and beast, but across a country still on every side in flames.⁵

These "numerous representations, in separate sections" sound very much like the individual scenes that make up the contents of the frieze of the columns of Trajan and of Marcus Aurelius. Josephus describes the illustrations in a vivid but imprecise manner, focusing on the overall effect rather than the pictorial or historic details. Nonetheless, there can be little doubt that this art was intensely historical and that it showed events that actually happened in the Jewish War.

Interest in historical themes was not limited to official art: it crossed the entire Roman artistic spectrum, from grand to humble. The famous fresco depicting a riot in an amphitheater that was uncovered in a private house in Pompeii is an excellent example.⁶ The amphitheater is Pompeii's own (clearly identifiable by its surroundings and distinctive architecture, especially the arches supporting its external staircases), and the event is without a doubt the deadly brawl between the Pompeians and the visiting Nucerians in 59 B.C., which caused such "frightful bloodshed" that it resulted in the banning of games in Pompeii for a decade and the recording of the event by Tacitus (*Annals* 14.17). And an event need not have been grand or historically significant for a Roman to render it into art: Juvenal tells the tale of a man down on his luck who "must now content himself with a rag to cover his cold and nakedness, and a poor morsel of food, while he begs for pennies as a shipwrecked mariner, and supports himself with a painted storm (*picta se tempestate tuetur*)."⁷ The "painted storm" is evidently a small image of a ship foundering in the waves: the historical cause

of the unfortunate man's current plight and the exact opposite of Mancinus's proud blustering in the Forum. It suggests that Romans were well accustomed to realistic content in visual art, and to its employment to create specific responses in viewers.

Understandably, no Roman triumphal paintings have survived in the original. It has been suggested, however, that copies (or at least adaptations) of them may survive in such monuments as the Column of Trajan. The idea that the column's relief is derived from triumphal painting is not a new one. It was first suggested in the mid-nineteenth century, and by 1945 Hamberg was able to say that this view was the one most widely held.⁸ Koepel has expressed the argument succinctly: "No relief of this type can be found prior to the reign of Trajan. Why not? If we did not have those few literary descriptions of triumphal paintings, we would be hard put to respond to this question. The answer is, of course, that the column frieze represents an ingenious adaptation to the sculptural medium of compositions which, up to that time, had been rendered only in painting."⁹ It is not clear, and obviously cannot be known, how closely the scenes of Trajan's Column might resemble scenes shown on paintings carried in Trajan's triumph. It is possible that the paintings may have originally been executed on strips of fabric, as Josephus's "tapestries", and arranged one above the other as, perhaps, in the Esquiline painting. If this was the case, little adaptation would have been needed before the images could be transferred to the column. But this is only one interpretation of Josephus's evidence; it is also possible that the triumphal paintings were executed on large wooden panels (a format perhaps reflected in the historical reliefs of the Arch of Septimius Severus in the Roman Forum). In this case, the painted battles may have been larger and more complex than the column's depictions and would have required simplification: reduction in number of figures, cropping of certain elements. The fact remains that the compositional schemes seen on the Column of Trajan, and many of the individual figure types, have no parallels in earlier relief sculpture. This strongly suggests that substantial portions of its subject matter were transferred directly from another medium and that painting, perhaps even the genre of triumphal painting, is one of the most likely candidates.

There are two levels at which the historicity of the frieze of the Column of Marcus Aurelius can be evaluated: at a detailed, scene-by-scene level and, more broadly, as a whole. This chapter examines the frieze from both these perspectives, beginning with the individual scenes and moving out to examine the historical accuracy both of realia (details of actual objects such

as weapons and armor) and of human actions from a wider viewpoint. The scenes themselves fall into three main categories: certainly historical scenes (of which there are very few); scenes that have been wrongly connected to known historical events; and finally scenes that offer tantalizing evidence of being historical, but for which we have no written source. The best place to begin is with the very few scenes that can be described with confidence as historical: the miracles.

Certainly Historical Images on the Column of Marcus Aurelius

Sandwiched between a description of Marcus's just nature and an account of the revolt of Avidius Cassius, the unknown author of the *Historia Augusta* makes the following remark about his imperial subject: "He summoned lightning from heaven against a siege-engine of the enemy by means of his prayers, and likewise rain was obtained when they [the soldiers] were suffering with thirst."¹⁰ The former of these two miracles is not known from any other source; the latter (the Rain Miracle), however, is also recorded by Dio and other later authors. Both also appear on the Column of Marcus Aurelius, and as such are the only certainly historical scenes in the entire frieze.

The Lightning Miracle consists of two parts: scenes X (fig. 7.1), containing the threatened Roman fort, and XI (fig. 7.2), showing the destruction of the siege tower (Petersen judged them to be separate scenes, but they seem to have been meant to be viewed together). The first component, crucial to setting the scene, is a stone fortress filled with Roman soldiers. Their gaze is directed inward, reflecting their concern for their plight. To the right stands—though for a short time only—a siege tower constructed of three major vertical beams and two sets of horizontal braces. From the upper left corner of the tower a long, narrow object extends to the left at an angle over the wall of the fortress. Only the lowest relief portion of the extreme end of it is visible, and it has the form of a straight, narrow beam or pole with a small square projection on its surface. This may be a ramp or perhaps even a ladder (the projection being then a broken rung, and the entire forward portion of the ladder being lost) used to make a bridge from the siege tower to the fortress. The tower is clearly in trouble: it has been struck by a large thunderbolt, visible above it. The upper story is already engulfed in flames and two of its vertical supports have broken; below are three barbarians, one lying on the ground, a second falling forward, and a third still upright but slumping away from the tower. The small illustration of a

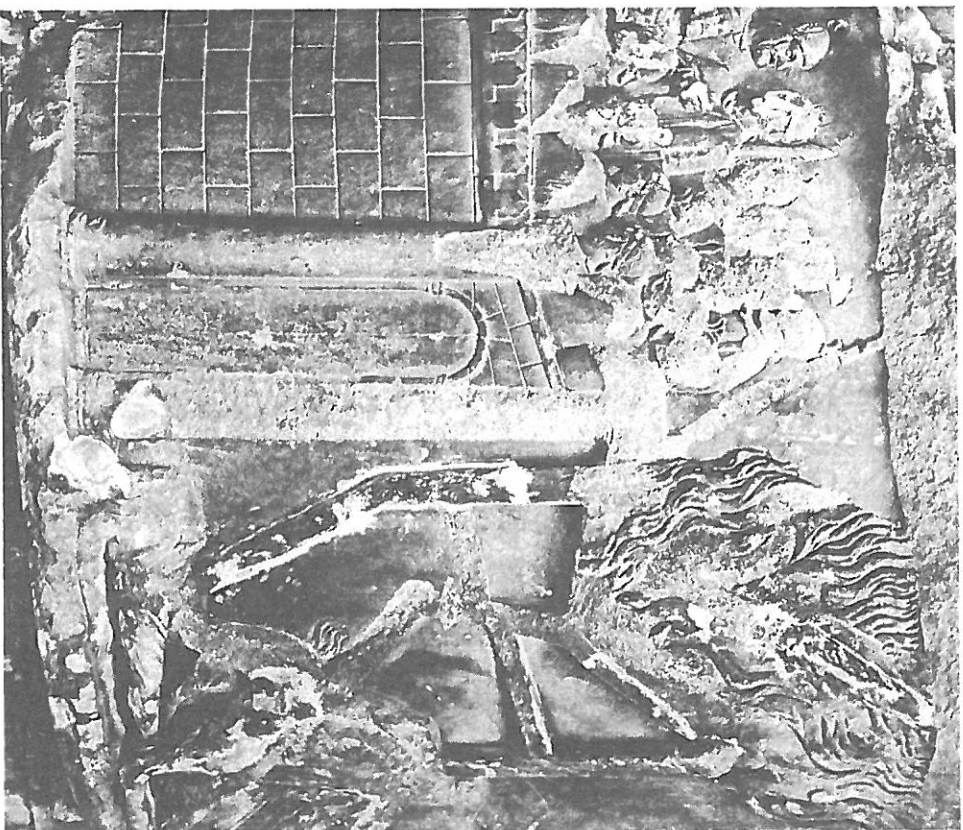


FIGURE 7.1. The Lightning Miracle, left portion. Scenes X (Romans in their fort) and XI (the destruction of a siege tower). From Petersen et al. 1896, pl. 17B.

the second barbarian's trousers suggests that he, and perhaps his comrades, have been struck down from above by the same lightning bolt that has destroyed the tower. This corresponds comfortably with the terse account of the event in the *Historia Augusta*.¹¹

The Rain Miracle is located in the very next winding of the frieze, almost immediately above the Lightning Miracle. As much has been written about this one scene as has been about the column as a whole (it has recently been the subject of an entire book), especially concerning the issue of exactly when the event happened; here I focus exclusively on the actual content of the scene and a comparison with the ancient sources that describe the

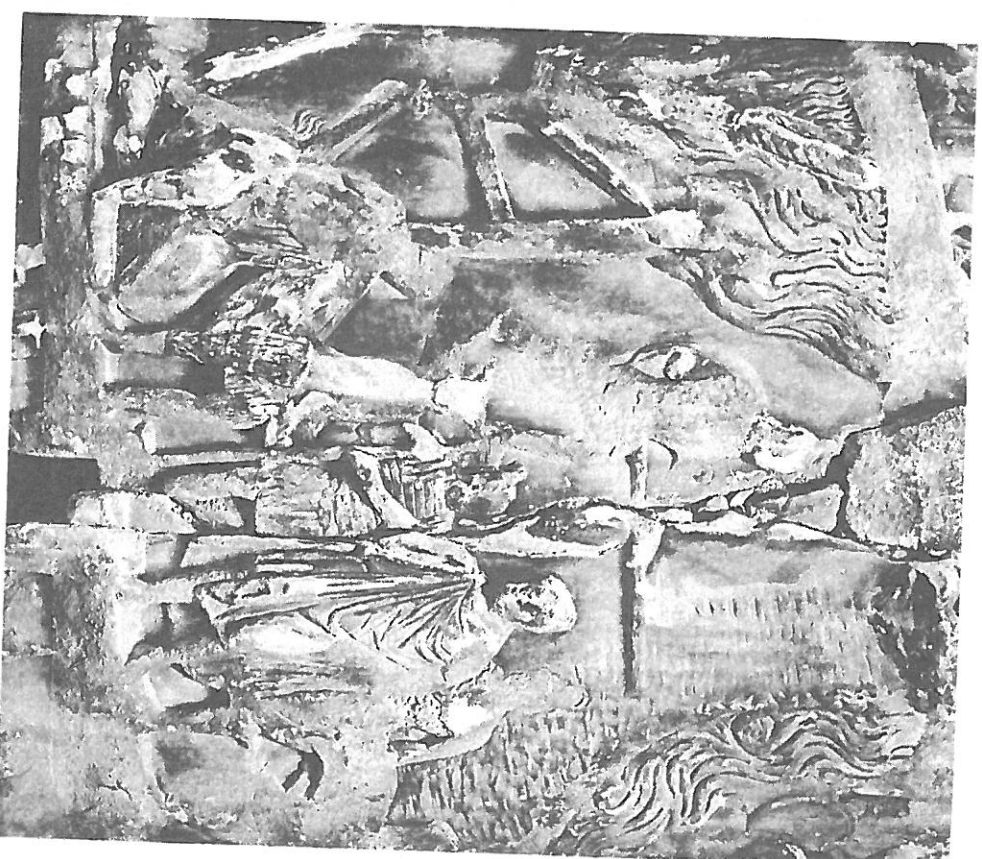


FIGURE 7.2. Scene XI, the right portion of the Lightning Miracle. From Petersen et al. 1896, pl. 18A.

event.¹² The scene (XVI, figs. 7.3 and 7.4; the entire scene is clearly visible in fig. 1.3 as it would appear to a viewer on the ground) does not show any actual fighting; instead, the Roman forces stand in the center and to the left, fallen barbarians and their mounts are scattered at the right. The Rain God himself dominates the scene from his position in the upper right-hand corner. The Romans appear merely to observe the carnage while shielding themselves, literally, against the deluge. The barbarians, represented by only three corpses and two horses, are washed away in a stream of water. This representation differs in a number of ways from Dio's description of the same event:

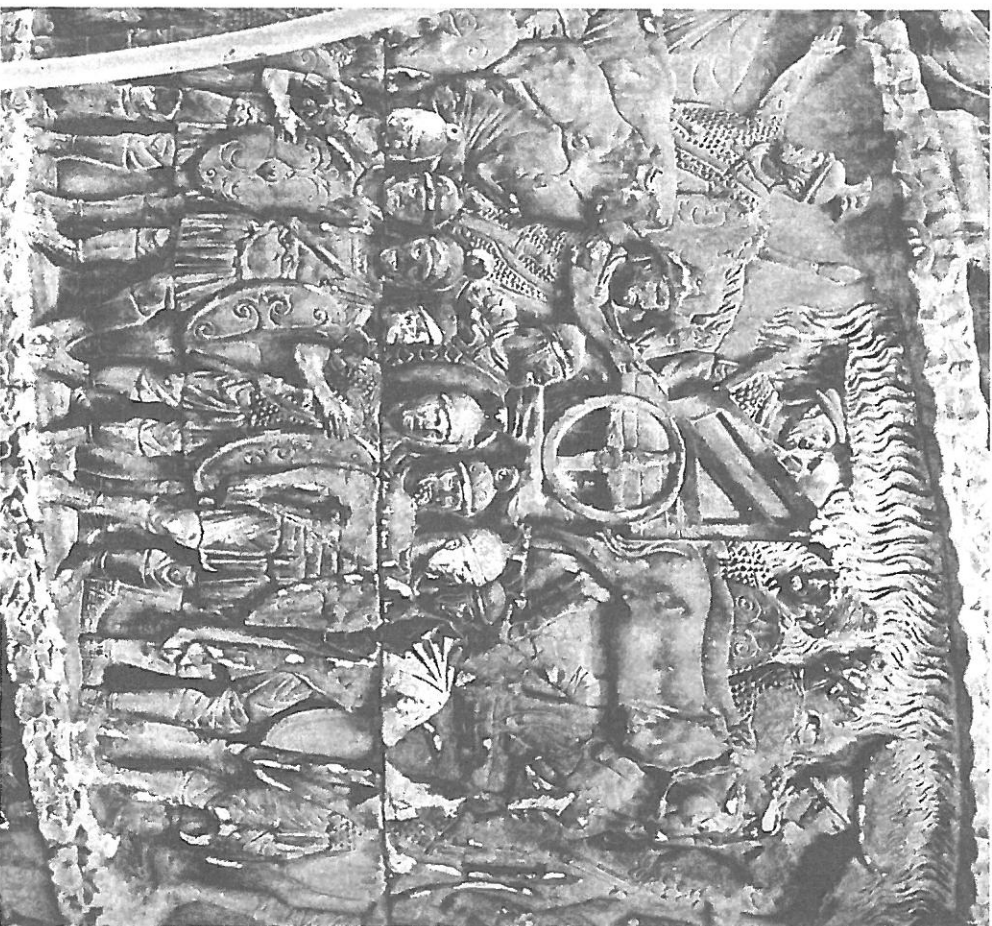


FIGURE 7.3. Scene XVI, the Rain Miracle, beginning of the scene showing rain and a soldier watering his horse (upper left). From Petersen et al. 1896, pl. 22A.

The Quadi had surrounded them at a spot favourable for their purpose and the Romans were fighting valiantly with their shields locked together; then the barbarians ceased fighting, expecting to capture them easily as the result of the heat and their thirst. So they posted guards all about and hemmed them in to prevent their getting water anywhere; for the barbarians were far superior in numbers. The Romans, accordingly, were in a terrible plight from fatigue, wounds, the heat of the sun, and thirst, and so could neither fight nor retreat, but were standing in the line and at their several posts, scorched by

the heat, when suddenly many clouds gathered and a mighty rain, not without divine interposition, burst upon them. Indeed, there is a story to the effect that Arnuphis, an Egyptian magician, who was a companion of Marcus, had invoked by means of enchantments various deities and in particular Mercury, the god of the air, and by this means attracted the rain. . . . When the rain poured down, at first all turned their faces upwards and received the water in their mouths; then some held out their shields and some their helmets to catch it, and they not only took deep draughts themselves but also gave their horses to drink. And when the barbarians now charged upon them, they drank and fought at the same time; and some, becoming wounded, actually gulped down the blood that flowed into their helmets, along with the water. So intent, indeed, were most of them on drinking that they would have suffered severely from the enemy's onset, had not a violent hail-storm and numerous thunderbolts fallen upon the ranks of the foe. Thus in one and the same place one might have beheld water and fire descending from the sky simultaneously; so that while those on the one side were being drenched and drinking, the others were being consumed by fire and dying; and while the fire, on the one hand, did not touch the Romans, but, if it fell anywhere among them, was immediately extinguished, the rain however, on the other hand, did the barbarians no good, but, like so much oil, actually fed the flames that were consuming them, and they had to search for water even while being drenched with rain. Some wounded themselves in order to quench the fire with their blood, and others rushed over to the side of the Romans, convinced that they alone had the saving water; in any case Marcus took pity on them. He was now saluted *imperator* by the soldiers, for the seventh time; and although he was not wont to accept any such honour before the senate voted it, nevertheless this time he took it as a gift from Heaven, and he sent a despatch to the senate. (Dio 72.8.1-3 and 72.10.1-5, trans. E. Cary)

In Dio's description, the Roman troops are saved from thirst by a rain that falls upon them. The barbarians are at the same time destroyed by thunderbolts and a hailstorm. None of the details of this fantastic description can be found on the column. The Romans do not seem thirsty; in fact, they use their shields to shelter themselves from the rain, not to catch it for drinking. Only one soldier, at the far left of the scene, makes use of the water: he catches it in his shield and offers it to his horse (Figure 7.3).



FIGURE 7.4. Scene XVI, the Rain Miracle, final portion of the scene showing the Rain God. From Petersen et al. 1896, pl. 23A.

ately left of the cart). There is no actual fighting taking place, nor is there any sign of hail or of the fire and thunderbolts that in Dio's description play such an important role. No barbarians are shown turning themselves over to the Romans. The barbarians are washed away in the resulting torrent, instead of being consumed by fire. And where is the emperor?

Dio's account of this battle is not the only one we have: there are two other brief descriptions of the same event in later authors. The first is found in the fourth century *Chronicon*, or calendar, of Eusebius. There, he writes that during Marcus's wars, "Pertinax and the army were afflicted with thirst

while fighting in the land of the Quadi, when a rain was sent from God, while at the same time lightning-bolts deluged the Germans and Sarmatians and killed many of them." This description is simpler than Dio's and closer to what we see on the column in that it does not include Marcus, but only his general Pertinax. It does however add the detail of lightning bolts killing the enemy, where the column shows only drowning. The second description of this battle, preserved in a speech of the fourth-century rhetorician Themistius, is claimed by its author to be based on a picture that he has seen. This picture showed the emperor standing in the battle line, with hands extended to heaven, and soldiers filling their helmets with the rain. Themistius does not mention the barbarians at all.¹³

How do we determine who—if anyone—is right? Each author agrees on a few details: thirst afflicting the Romans, and their dire position in general. Things are more difficult when it comes to Marcus: Themistius and the *Historia Augusta* mention the emperor's presence specifically; Dio implies it; Eusebius does not refer to him at all. It is possible that by Eusebius's time the event had become associated with a Christian miracle: Christian Roman soldiers were said to have prayed for help, which came in the form of a rainstorm. Xiphilinus also tells this story after he relates Dio's version of events. Themistius and the *Historia Augusta* credit Marcus, Dio a priest working at Marcus's behest, with praying for the miracle. By removing Marcus from his relation of the events and replacing him with the general Pertinax, Eusebius could distance his story from its major pagan connotation and attribute the miracle to the Christian god. But why, when Dio, Themistius, and the *Historia Augusta* place him in the midst of the battle, does Marcus not appear in the Rain Miracle scene on the column? Is this evidence of historical error on the column?

Most likely it is not. To begin with, Themistius's account must be approached very carefully. The speech belongs to a literary genre, very popular in the later Roman period, of *ekphrasis*: descriptions of works of art undertaken as rhetorical exercises. When Themistius says he is discussing a picture he is merely setting up the generic literary *topos*. His information probably came not from an actual painting but from current stories or historical accounts that may have been altered for rhetorical effect. Thus we cannot speak of two sources, but only one, Dio, stacked against the version on the column. What then of Dio? Is his history to be relied on?

Dio's battle descriptions are, unfortunately, regularly embellished with made-up details and elaborated by use of rhetorical *topoi*, derived especially from Thucydides.¹⁴ Some of these tendencies are immediately clear



FIGURE 7.6.
Detail of heavily damaged
scene XIII, heads of two
animals(?) swimming in a
river. From Petersen et al.
1896, pl. 20A.

that "he was praised publicly by the emperor Marcus Aurelius, and given a horse, decorations and arms, because he killed Valao, leader of the Narsitae, with this own hand."¹⁶ Can this beardless young man, fleeing from his attacker, be the barbarian leader killed by Maximus, a deed for which the emperor personally praised him? Although Birley finds this plausible, only the lack of a full beard differentiates this barbarian from most others on the column. Instead of looking for a historical connection for these two figures, it is much better to try to understand them in their context: a Roman attack on a barbarian village. The young barbarian merely serves, along with the woman shown later in the scene, to give the impression that the village is populated by barbarian noncombatants. There is no good reason to connect Maximus's endeavors with these figures.

The second supposedly historical scene is the so-called Lion Oracle. Its interpretation rests on a textual source, but the link with the column is even more tenuous. The scene in question is a sacrifice scene, XIII, set on the bank of a wide river. Marcus, immediately to the right of the window that intrudes into the lower portion of the scene, stands in a toga and makes an offering over a tripod, the legs of which are visible in outline. The occasion of the sacrifice is the crossing of the river in boats, visible to the right, and accompanying the boats it seems that there are a number of animals swimming (fig. 7.6). The scene is heavily damaged but Petersen (who was able to inspect the column firsthand) believed that he could see two "lion-like" creatures with horns and cleft hooves in the river, in the upper part of the scene and just below the uppermost boat, in the process of hauling themselves out of the water onto the bank at the right.¹⁷ He identified them as the "maned bison" mentioned by Pliny (*NH* 8.38) in his discussion of un-

usual animals. Dobias took Petersen's interpretation one step further, by seizing on the supposedly "lion-like" nature of the creatures and proposing a connection to a story in Lucian's fictional work *Alexander Pseudomantis*, "Alexander the False Prophet."¹⁸ Lucian tells a story of how the False Prophet produced an oracle saying that two lions should be thrown into the Danube as part of a sacrifice, and that the Romans would then win a great victory. The lions were thrown into the river, but swam across to the other side where the Germans, mistaking them for a strange type of dog, clubbed them to death. The Romans then suffered a great defeat, losing 20,000 men.¹⁹

There appears to be nothing to support this interpretation of scene XIII. Besides the fact that the story seems to be a pure invention of Lucian, the very idea that the Romans would place a depiction of an embarrassing defeat on one of their monuments is not backed up by any parallel. The Romans simply did not portray such events in their art. The damage to the frieze in this area is so heavy that it is extremely difficult to interpret, and certainly Petersen's autopsy is to be trusted above Dobias's attempts to interpret the scene from photos. If Petersen detected horns and hooves, these creatures are likely cattle.

Tantalizing Images: Possibly Historical Scenes

The false historical interpretations discussed above were the result of attempts to connect known historical events to scenes on the column. These attempts have not been particularly successful. But some interesting observations can be made by turning the problem on its head, ignoring the fragmentary historical sources and focusing instead on the column. This is because there are some scenes that, for various reasons, possess specific iconographic characteristics that suggest that they may be historical. These are scenes that do not fit into the generic categories such as battle, march, and *adlocutio*, and that seem to show elements that are otherwise unique. Usually these unique elements are less striking than the supernatural wonders depicted in the miracle scenes, but often they are very noteworthy in their own right, so much so that they suggest that either the artist has been uncharacteristically inventive, or that he is depicting a genuine historical event.

The first example is found in scene X (fig. 7.7).²⁰ Located between a scene (IX) showing Marcus speaking to the troops and the Lightning Miracle, it is centered on the main east axis of the column (fig. 7.1). The scene depicts

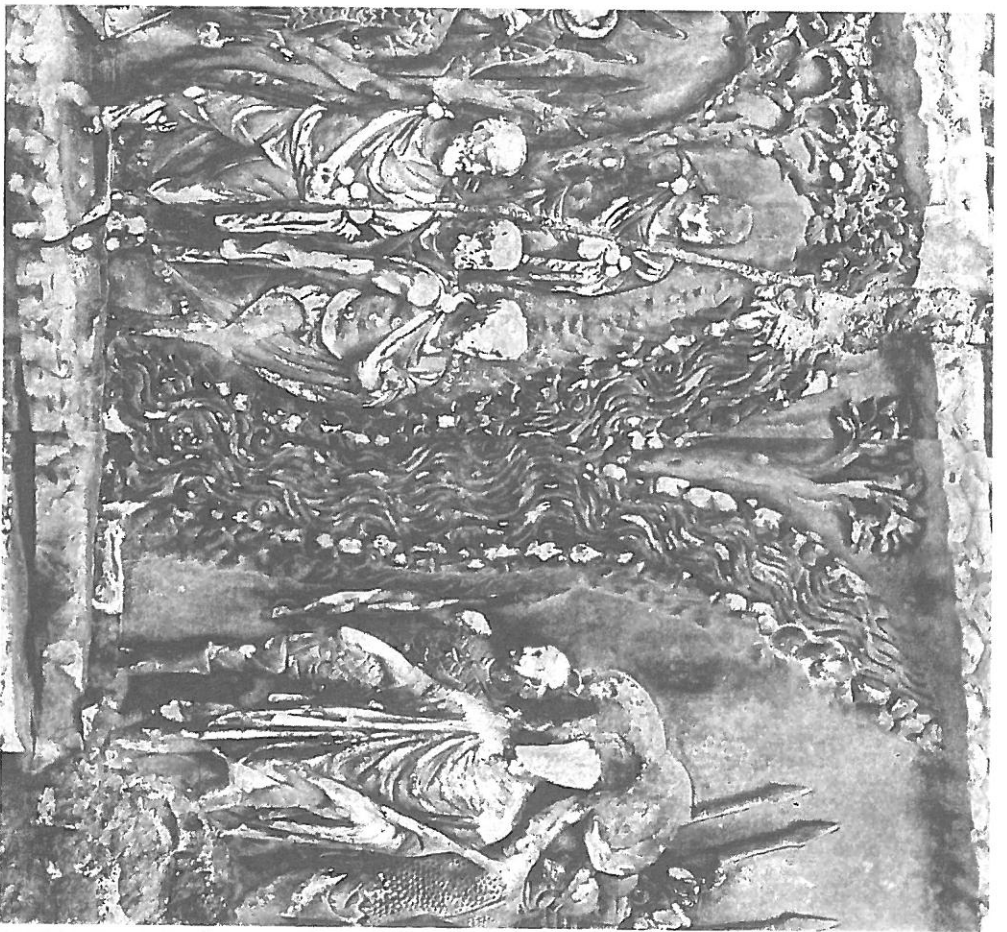


FIGURE 7.7. Scene X, showing Marcus Aurelius being shielded by attendant soldiers while barbarians across the river wield slings. From Petersen et al., 1896, pls. 16B and 17A.

interesting encounter at a fork in a stream. To the left of the stream stand four barbarians holding slings; to the right, the emperor surrounded by soldiers, some of whom hold up shields above his head to protect him from the stones of the enemy slingers. It is not clear whether Marcus is speaking to the barbarians, but the absence of any clear leader figure among the four partly clad slingers makes this unlikely. Scene X does not fit any of the standard genre scenes on the column. This alone does not mean that it is historical (it may simply be a liberal invention), but its location just before another more or less historical scene (the Lightning Miracle) combined

with its iconographic uniqueness suggests that it might represent a genuine event. Unfortunately there is no mention of anything similar in our few and fragmentary sources, but perhaps it shows a treacherous surprise attack on the emperor's person, skillfully fended off by his bodyguard, or a daring attempt by the emperor to parlay with a group of aggressive barbarians.

The next potentially historical scene is the right half of XI (fig. 7.2), just after the Lightning Miracle. To the right of the collapsing siege tower (which has just been struck by the lightning bolt), we see a landscape dominated by a curving river. On the far side is a barbarian shield wall (due to damage to the frieze the figures themselves are visible only in outline, but the rounded tops of their heads make it clear that they are not Romans). To the left of the river are two ground lines; on the lower stands the emperor surrounded by soldiers. The leftmost Roman soldier faces away from the Lightning scene, creating a division between it and the river scene. The figures at the right edge of the group are engaged in interesting but enigmatic activities, unconnected to the destruction of the siege tower. Behind and to the right of Marcus stands a soldier; in front and to the right of the soldier is a bent-over figure visible only in outline, near other partial figure outlines. All are Romans—the sheathed sword of the bent figure is visible (barbarians on the column never wear scabbards), and the outlines of helmet crests on the other two figures can be made out.

On the upper ground line is a single Roman soldier who holds an object in a horizontal position. This object—a staff, perhaps—is marked with small holes that Petersen identified as measurement markers, indicating that this soldier is about to measure the depth of the river. The measuring soldier clearly belongs to the river scene and has no connection to the Lightning Miracle—indeed, he does not appear to even notice it. The role of Marcus, however, is less clear. Petersen associated him with the Lightning Miracle; Zwiłker and Caprino, on the other hand, included the imperial group with the river scene.²¹ Judging from the composition of the two scenes, it seems more likely that the emperor is supervising the operation at the river. Exactly what sort of operation is it? Petersen proposed an interesting reading of the two figures on the far right of the lower ground line: one man holding a staff topped with a helmet and adorned with two shields.²² He interpreted this as, essentially, a scarecrow whose purpose was to distract the barbarians lined up on the other bank so that the Romans could cross at another, unwatched, location. However, it is just as possible, and perhaps more logical, to interpret all of these figures as living soldiers engaged in activities related to what the soldier with the measuring staff

is doing: that is, further preparation for a river crossing. The bent figure may be digging (he appears to hold an object, perhaps a pick or hoe, horizontally), the two to the right carrying material toward the river. Even the figure at the left of the group may be carrying something, for he is shown bent slightly forward with his arms extended below and in front of him. If this is the case, then this scene depicts the initial preparation for the construction of a bridge under the supervision of the emperor, who directs the work with a gesture. This scene has no parallels on the column, nor elsewhere in Roman historical relief, suggesting that it is an attempt to show a particular event from the wars.

Also in the category of possibly historical is scene XXVII (fig. 7.8), a clumsily executed battle scene, but the only one on the column that includes the emperor in person. The emperor, in armor and on horseback, rides to the left up an inclined ground line in the company of Roman cavalry. Marcus Aurelius's head is missing, but his distinctive breastplate, his gesture, and the fact that his companions both turn their heads in his direction make it clear that it is him. In front of his party a Roman soldier stands with sword raised, as if having struck down the barbarian who falls below him; beneath the emperor another Roman attacks a seated barbarian. Petersen sees Marcus and his comrades as clearing the way in advance of the infantry, but this scene may in fact be intended to show the emperor riding to the aid of a group of Roman soldiers.²³ Nowhere else is Marcus shown in the midst of a scene of combat, and it is tempting to think that this scene (positioned exactly on the main east axis of the column and just two windings above the Rain Miracle) depicts a unique event when the emperor faced great danger in combat.

Another novel scene, XLII (fig. 7.9), shows objects not known in any other work of Roman historical relief sculpture. Three structures are shown lined up on the ground (each stands on the ground, as can be seen by the ground line underneath the feet of the second structure). They seem to be wooden frames covered with cloth or leather; ornamental feet are at each bottom corner. They are generally interpreted as litters, although there is no sign of carrying handles. In each sits a person, their heads visible through small windows on the side. Only the face of one, a bearded man in the lowest litter, is preserved; the head of the middle figure has been destroyed, and that of the upper figure is a Renaissance restoration. As far as can be seen from the original portion of the relief, the bottom two figures wear togas; thus Coarelli's reconstruction of the trio as the child Commodus at top, his mother Faustina in the middle, and Commodus's tutor Galen at the

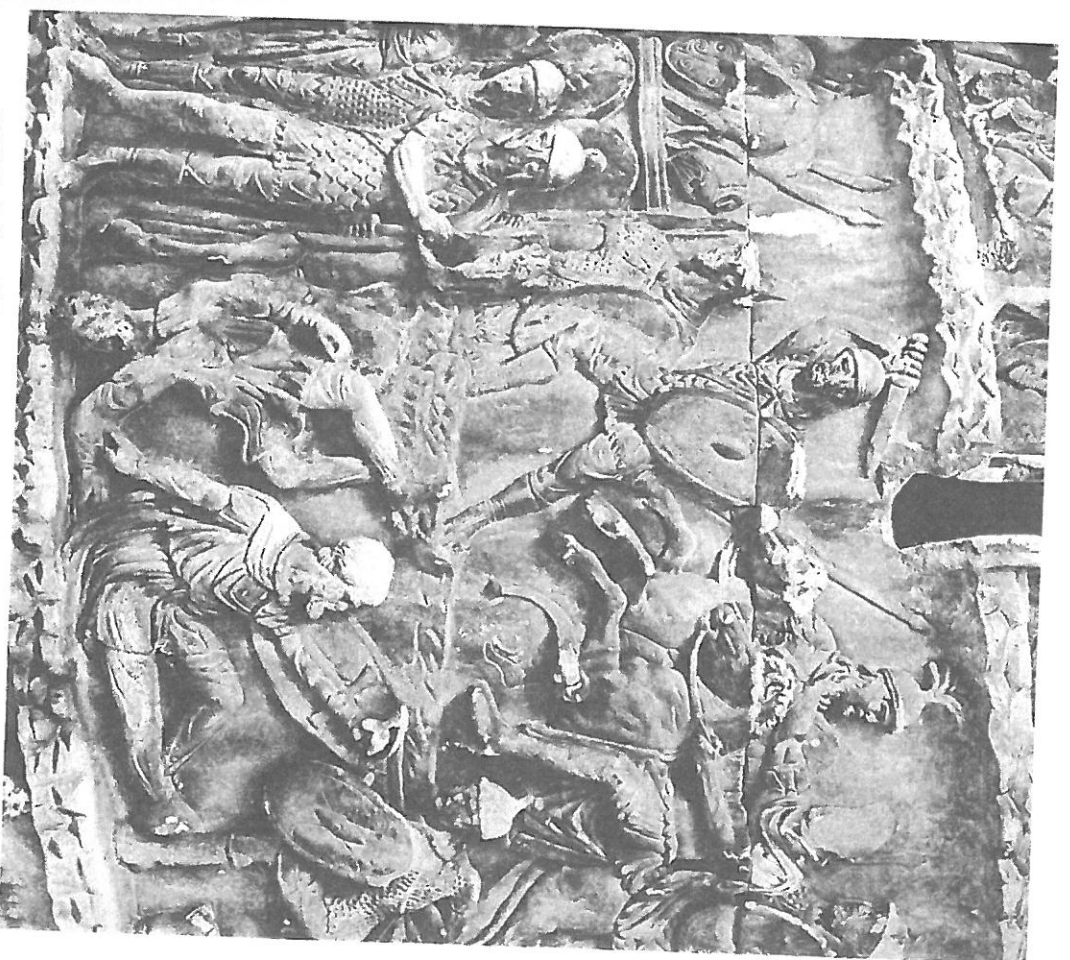


FIGURE 7.8. Scene XXVII, the only battle on the column that involves Marcus Aurelius directly. From Petersen et al. 1896, pl. 34B.

bottom is likely not correct.²⁴ Traveling in a litter is unmilitary; perhaps, as Petersen suggested, the figures are ambassadors of the senate.²⁵ The identity of the figure bending down toward the only senator with a preserved face is more of a problem. His dress suggests (but does not guarantee)—the stone is worn and damaged) that he is a barbarian. What he is doing is likewise unclear: if he is indeed a barbarian, the scene may represent an attack on senatorial emissaries.

Similarly without parallel are two remarkable scenes of atrociv im-

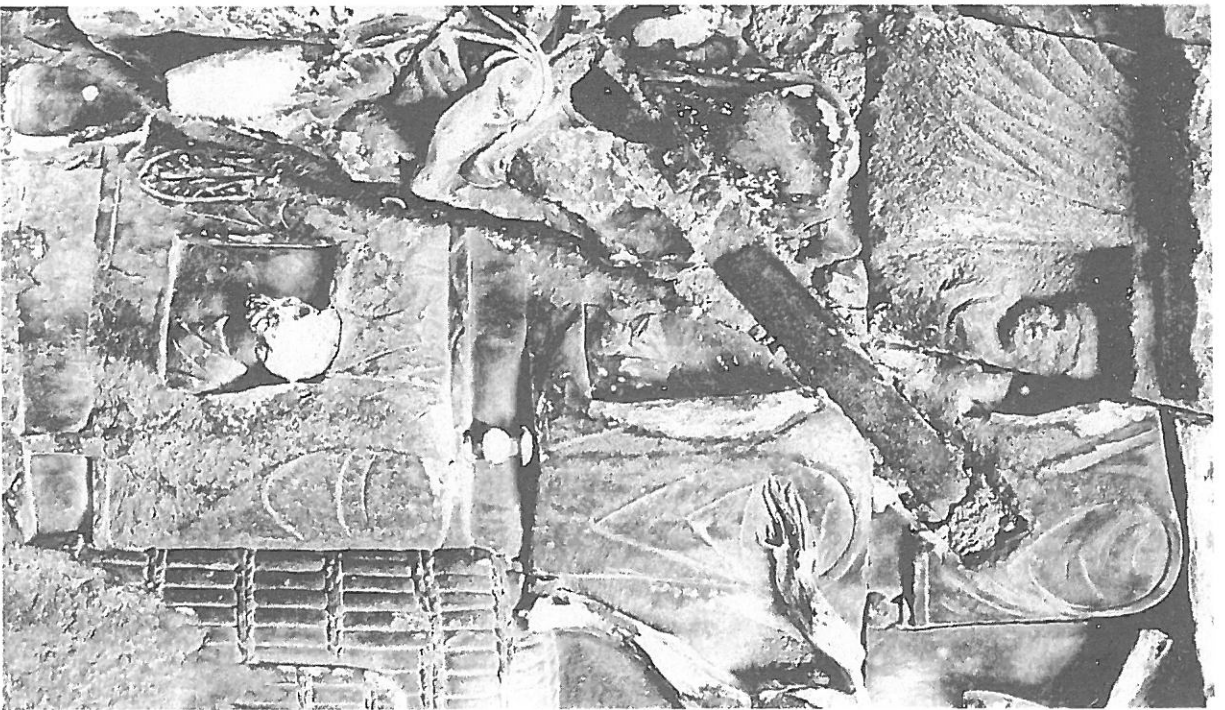


FIGURE 7.9.
Scene XLII. Three
litters are lined up
on the ground. From
Petersen et al. 1896,
pl. 49B.

mediately above the figure of Victoria: LXI, with barbarians beheading barbarians, and LXVIII, where Roman soldiers massacre what seem to be unarmed prisoners. The story appears to begin with scene LX (fig. 7.10), where Marcus is shown surrounded entirely by barbarians, some of them armed. Certainly he has not been captured. Rather, the emperor is engaged

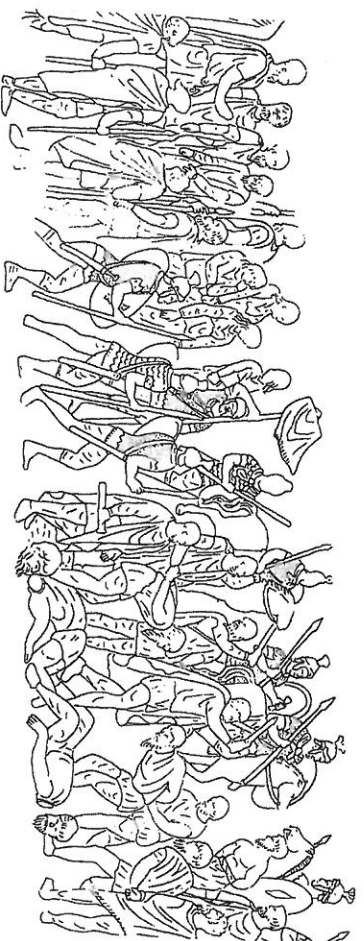


FIGURE 7.10. Scenes LX-LXII, the first execution scene on the column. Drawing by author.

in conversation with one barbarian in particular (third to the right of him) who makes a weak gesture with his arms in return. Perhaps the man is acquiescing submissively to the expulsions and executions that follow. These begin immediately to the right in scene LXI, where a group of barbarian women is escorted away by Roman soldiers. The next scene, LXII, shows a mass execution where, surprisingly, barbarians behead other barbarians under the watchful eye of the Romans. The center of action is focused on two barbarians, swords raised in the air, who are about to strike the heads from two other barbarians held bent over before them. On the ground, two barbarians already lie headless. Roman soldiers can be seen in the background, apparently keeping watch. The placement of this scene between two others showing Marcus speaking to barbarians suggests that it may be intended to represent a dramatic event connected to the surrender of a barbarian nation. Perhaps the execution scene shows the dispatch of former barbarian leaders.

The rare appearance of such unique scenes suggests that the column's frieze contained more direct historical content than the Rain and Lightning Miracles. It is tempting to think that the very few historical scenes we can be sure of were adapted from a medium such as triumphal painting, and that the empty spaces around them were simply filled in with generic mappings were carried in Marcus's triumphal procession. We do know that pictures of events from a nearly contemporary war existed: Lucius Verus's war against the Parthians. In a letter to Fronto, philosopher tutor to both Verus and Marcus Aurelius and later *amphiprotos*, Lucius Verus wrote:

Venus offers Fronto "*picturas*" of events in the Parthian wars, in addition to copies of dispatches and letters, for use as raw source material for his history. These pictures were apparently not displayed in public but were kept in Venus's possession; this suggests that they were made at his command, perhaps during the campaign itself.²⁶ Marcus, too, may have been in possession of images made during his own campaign, and if so they might have formed the basis of triumphal paintings. They may even possibly have been used for some of the scenes on the column—but not for many. Most of the scenes in the frieze are generic and not historically specific. But it is also possible to analyze their historical accuracy in another way: by examining their details.

History in the Details: Realism in Troop Behavior and Equipment

Two further standards can be used to evaluate, at a more detailed level, the realism of the scenes carved on the Column of Marcus Aurelius. These are the degree of realism in the actions of figures and the accuracy of the real objects shown in daily use. An ideal test case for both these criteria can be found in depictions of the Roman army, and especially in its most commonly depicted employment, battle. Lehmann-Hartleben suggested that the relatively small size (compared to Trajan's Column) of the battles on Marcus's Column may reflect the reality of a war conducted in small skirmishes.²⁷ However, as argued in chapter 5, the small size of most battles (there are exceptions) was determined by the same factor that resulted in most scenes being small: the division of the frieze into small segments for the purposes of planning. Still, regardless of the size of the encounters, it is possible to evaluate the realism of what soldiers are shown doing in battle by comparing the scenes on the column to what we know of the reality of combat in the second century A.D. It is also possible to objectively judge the accuracy of what the soldiers wear and carry—their arms and equipment—by comparing them to actual archaeological finds from the period. Although Roman soldiers built roads, bridges, and forts, their fundamental purpose was to fight battles. Roman battles were not free-for-all mobile engagements but rather took place according to established tactics. The core of the Roman armies was the legion, heavily armed infantry regiments with a strength of about 5,000. These were supported by lightly armed infantry and cavalry soldiers drawn from the provinces, called the auxiliaries. We have many ancient descriptions of how these Roman troops were organized and how they fought in battles, and much of it from good

sources—Caesar, himself a soldier, wrote detailed descriptions of many of the battles he was involved in personally. Goldsworthy has attempted to reconstruct the usual conduct of Roman battles from these written sources and his conclusions provide a useful "standard of behavior" against which artistic representations of battle can be measured. Goldsworthy shows that in most battles the decisive fighting usually occurred between groups of infantry. It was much rarer for infantry to meet cavalry in battle, especially away from the eastern frontiers of the empire.²⁸ Encounters between two opposing groups of cavalry, on the other hand, were more common, since these forces often occupied the same positions in opposing armies—usually on the flanks of the main infantry bodies. These patterns—infantry tends to fight infantry, cavalry most often engages cavalry—give us a starting point in evaluating the battle scenes on the column.

These "normal" events of Roman warfare are well reflected in the battle scenes on the Column of Trajan. There, the most common battle scene is one where Roman and Dacian infantry clash face to face in massed groups, well organized in solid bodies and ranks. Cavalry encounters, on the other hand, are much less common and most often show one group of horsemen (always the enemy) fleeing while another mounted force pursues. Only once (scene LXIV) is a body of cavalry shown attacking a body of infantry—a remarkable scene in which Moorish cavalry, identifiable by their ringlet hairstyles and evidently allied to the Romans, drive a group of Dacian infantry to flight. And only in one single scene on Trajan's Column are Roman cavalry shown mixed with Roman infantry. This is scene XXXVIII, and the mixing of troop types seems to have been done with the express purpose of accentuating the confusion of a chaotic nighttime battle in which Night is shown personified, peering down onto a scene of fighting centered around a Dacian supply train, a battle that has degenerated into a melee.²⁹

The contrast visible in the battle scenes on the Column of Marcus Aurelius could hardly be more striking. Cavalry and infantry are very often freely mixed within single scenes (e.g., XXVII, XLIII, L, LXIII, etc.), where they are shown performing essentially the same duties in battle. The contrast in troop behavior on the two columns is even stronger when cavalry encounters alone are examined. Ancient sources consistently state that in cavalry battles it was usual for one body of horsemen to lose courage and break off before engaging the opposing horsemen, or to do so after only a brief skirmish. There is a remarkable observation on this point by a British veteran of the early nineteenth-century Peninsular War, in which the cavalry, armed with sword and lance, did not differ much from the infantry, armed

alry seldom meet each other in a charge executed at speed; the one party generally turns before joining issue with the enemy, and this often happens when the line is still unbroken and no obstacles of any sort intervene. The fact is, every cavalry soldier approaching another at speed must feel that if they come in contact at that pace they both go down, and probably break every limb in their bodies."³⁰ The fleeing force would then be exposed to attack from its pursuers and could incur heavy losses thus. This is exactly what we see in scenes XXXVII and CXLIV of Trajan's Column: one body of cavalry fleeing from the other, its rearmost members falling to the swords and spears of the pursuers.

The way that cavalry are employed on the Column of Marcus Aurelius is, in most cases, very different: they engage enemy cavalry and infantry seemingly at random, and in doing so are often indistinguishable in their role from the infantry. The only scene on Marcus's Column that shows a realistic cavalry pursuit is XCII; but the two following scenes (XCIV and CV) depict unbelievable pursuits involving barbarian cavalry being pursued and cut down by Roman infantry. Thus the battle scene compositions on Trajan's Column reflect, in general at least, much of what we know about the reality of Roman battle. The battle scenes on the Column of Marcus Aurelius, on the other hand, do not. This suggests that the oddities in troop behavior in battle seen on Marcus's Column may reflect a difference in knowledge of military reality between the designers of the monuments or a difference in the source material they relied on in creating their compositions.

One of the simplest tests for historicity is to evaluate the realism of details of arms and equipment of the individual soldiers; this is simple (relatively speaking) because these details can be compared to actual archaeological evidence. On the Column of Marcus Aurelius, soldiers are shown wearing either segmented plate armor (made of horizontal strips of metal, articulated like a lobster tail), scale armor (consisting of small iron or bronze scales sewn to a leather backing), or ring mail (individual metal rings joined together to form a complete covering for the body). These differences in armor type have traditionally been interpreted as indicators of the units to which the troops belonged: a soldier in scale armor is identified as a praetorian (a member of the imperial guard), one in segmented armor as a legionary (the citizen-soldier backbone of the army), and one in ring mail as an auxiliary, a member of one of the many noncitizen units of the Roman army.³¹ The roots of this approach lie in studies of the frieze of the Column of Trajan. There, the regular Roman troops wear two distinct "uni-

forms." One type of soldier wears segmented armor, carries a curved rectangular shield, and spends most of his time marching and building things. The other main class of Roman soldier on Trajan's Column wears ring mail, carries a flat oval shield, and does most of the fighting (both on foot and on horseback). The general assumption, based to some extent on textual evidence, is that the former represent legionaries and praetorians, the latter auxiliaries. It is not easy to explain why soldiers wearing segmented armor spend so little time fighting on Trajan's Column. One theory is that this was a deliberately engineered effect designed to reflect positively on Trajan as a general who achieved victory while shedding a minimum of Roman blood (the soldiers in segmented armor, supposedly legionaries and praetorians, being the citizens). This interpretation is supported by reference to Tacitus's description of the battle of Mons Graupius (in northern Britain in A.D. 83), in which the auxiliaries did the bulk of the fighting—and the bleeding, which is remarked upon by Tacitus as the sign of a particularly great victory.³²

Thus, at first glance it appears sensible to use armor as a key to identifying different troop types on the Column of Trajan. Unfortunately, however, when the details of the representation of the Roman army on Trajan's Column are scrutinized from the perspective of historical accuracy, many of them turn out to be doubtful. The Tropaeum Traiani, on the borders of Dacia itself, provides a stark contrast. The Tropaeum, located in modern Romania about twenty-two kilometers south of the Danube and fifty kilometers west of the Black Sea, was a massive cylindrical monument (thirty meters diameter, eleven meters tall) made up of a rubble and concrete core faced in stone and surmounted by a stone trophy.³³ Dated by its inscription to A.D. 108/109 and dedicated to Mars Victor, the Tropaeum served as a victory monument to one or both of Trajan's Dacian wars.³⁴ The main figural decoration of the monument was a series of fifty-four figural metopes, each measuring about 1.5 by 1.2 meters, which were found separated from the core of the structure. They are thought to have ringed the middle part of the cylinder, separated by decorative relief slabs. An immediate, striking difference seen on the Tropaeum is that the Dacians are commonly shown wielding a huge, two-handed curved sword. This is the *falx*, a famously feared Dacian weapon, but one which only rarely appears on Trajan's Column and then in a diminutive, one-handed form (Decebalus famously commits suicide with one in scene CXLV). The Romans on the Tropaeum wear ring or scale armor, the latter never seen worn by regular Roman troops on the Column of Trajan. Segmented body armor on the other hand is

on the column, never appears worn by soldiers on the Tropaeum. But Roman soldiers on the Tropaeum are commonly shown equipped with an arm guard of segmented metal and also wear a helmet reinforced with metal strips running vertically up its front, back, and sides. These refinements to standard Roman equipment were apparently designed especially to protect against blows from the fearsome two-handed Dacian *falx*. Because the Tropaeum metopes show Roman soldiers equipped with special innovations designed to counter specific dangers of the Dacian campaigns, they can be interpreted as realistic in detail.

Why this striking difference in detail on two official, chronologically equivalent monuments that record the very same military campaigns? Robinson suggested that two main divisions ought to be made in the realm of military-themed sculpture: the work, on the one hand, of "military sculptors" who carved soldiers' tombstones near military stations (particularly in the provinces), and on the other hand, the work of the artists in the capital.³⁵ Jon Coulston took this analysis a step further by noting a disproportionate presence of praetorian standards on Trajan's Column—which suggests that the artists of the column simply copied what was at hand, and when it came to representing the details of the army, they likely relied heavily for inspiration on the most prominent troops at Rome: the praetorians.³⁶ Coulston also noted the substantial influence of the buildings of Rome (or at least their building technique) on the column's depictions of military architecture.³⁷ This suggests that the Roman sculptors drew heavily on what they saw in the capital when carving the frieze of Trajan's Column.

How do the Roman soldiers on the Column of Marcus Aurelius compare? They generally resemble the soldiers on Trajan's Column, but add scale armor to the repertoire of protection for both infantry and cavalry (these have generally been interpreted as praetorians). Ring mail is more common than scale armor, but here ease of execution may be a factor, as the former was rendered by simple drill holes, while scales had to be carefully and individually carved, often with elaborated edges. The wearers of ring or scale armor are never formed into distinct units and are generally indistinguishable in their duties; they are often mixed together on the column indiscriminately. There seems to be no basis for singling either of them out as a specific and cohesive group; neither armor type can be interpreted as a "uniform." Soldiers in segmented armor on the other hand *are* commonly shown in homogeneous, distinct formations. Also, soldiers in segmented armor seem to be assigned special duties at times, particu-

single units marching in the upper half of the column (LXVII, LXXVIII, XCIII, CII, and CXI), and are the only troop type shown engaged in construction activities (LXXXII [fig. 8.3], XCIV—although this type of scene is much rarer on Marcus's Column than on Trajan's). But were troops in segmented armor genuinely intended to represent a special class of soldier on the Column of Marcus Aurelius? Their concentration in the upper (and overall more generic, less historical) part of the frieze, along with their dominance of the opening march scene (III), suggests that their presence is best explained by artistic influence from other monuments—especially Trajan's Column—used by the Marcus column's designers for inspiration in creating their scenes.

Conclusions

Is the frieze of the Column of Marcus Aurelius historical? The answer to this question is a qualified no. Army equipment and troop behavior as depicted on the Column of Marcus Aurelius does not correspond well to what we know of the historical reality of the period. And while both Marcus's and Trajan's columns suffer from a lack of realism when it comes to equipment, Marcus's Column falls well short of Trajan's when depictions of troop behavior in combat are considered. In this regard, the contrast with the Column of Trajan is often stark: whereas Trajan's soldiers are shown on his column behaving in a more or less realistic manner, Marcus's simply are not. When it comes to the individual scenes, only one of the scenes on the Column of Marcus Aurelius (the Rain Miracle) was clearly inspired by a well-known historical event. In one case, the Lightning Miracle, it is even possible that a historical event of Marcus's wars has made its way into literature via the column itself. But the vast majority of scenes belong to generic categories. Analysis of one of these (battle scenes—see chapter 8) strongly suggests that they were invented as needed by the column's artists with no regard for (or access to) historical source material. But the conclusions are not all negative—there are a number of scenes whose unique nature suggests that they do indeed have some connection to actual history, even if we cannot connect them to any known event.