



## Column of Marcus Aurelius (180-192 CE)

### Column of Marcus Aurelius



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**Name of the artist:** Unknown

**Patron/Sponsor:** Commodus

**Original Location/Place:**

Campus Martius, Rome

**Actual Location (Collection/Museum):**

In loco

**Description:**

The Column of Marcus Aurelius was set up in the Campus Martius, besides the Via Flaminia in what appears to have been a large open space, similar to the dimensions of the modern Piazza Colonna that surrounds it today (Beckmann, "The Column of Marcus Aurelius", p. 253). It is possible that one or two triumphal arches, decorated with the reliefs that were later inserted on the Triumphal Arch of Constantine or which are displayed in the Capitoline Museum, also formed part of the space (Coarelli, *La Colonna di Marco Aurelio*, p. 9-32). The column stands on a rectangular pedestal, originally decorated with an inscription that is now lost, along with various reliefs, which did not survive the ravages of time and were largely replaced during Domenico Fontana's restoration of the base in 1588-1589 (Beckmann, "The Column of Marcus Aurelius," p. 255). The column is made up of 30 (originally 31) blocks of Luna marble; the pedestal consists of 10 blocks, the Column itself is formed of 19 and one additional block – originally two – stands at the top of the pedestal to support the bronze statue of Marcus Aurelius that originally surmounted the top (Beckmann, "The Column of Marcus Aurelius," p. 254). Reaching a total of 100 Roman feet high, the Column shaft is decorated with a continuous frieze, following its spiral contour, and in imitation of those of the earlier Column of Trajan. The subject of the frieze is the two Marcomannic Wars, waged by Marcus Aurelius from 167 CE until his death in 180 CE against Germanic and Sarmatian tribes along the Danube frontier. The spiral reliefs progress from bottom to top, with each campaign recorded in almost sixty different reliefs, for a total of one hundred and fifteen scenes. The two campaigns are divided by a relief depicting Victoria, the goddess of victory, writing the achievements of Marcus Aurelius on a shield. The two key episodes of the campaign are the depictions of the Lightning Miracle (scene XI), and of the successive Rain Miracle (scene XVI), of which further discussion follows below.

**Date:** 180 CE to 192 CE



### Material:

Luna Marble

**Commentary:** The Column of Marcus Aurelius was constructed following the end of the emperor's 'Marcomannic Wars' against the Germans and Sarmatians; although the exact date of its decree and completion are unknown, it has been suggested that the omission of Commodus – who took part in the military campaigns of his father only in the late 170s – from the frieze decoration suggests that it was decreed in 176 CE, when Marcus Aurelius returned to Rome (Beckmann, "The Column of Marcus Aurelius," p. 251). It must have been complete by 193 CE, when the 'procurator of the Column', Adrastus, appealed for permission from the emperor – then Septimius Severus – to clear the debris of building materials from around the surrounding area (*CIL* VI, 1585; Beckmann "The Column of Marcus Aurelius," p. 251). The location of the column was also significant, and was related to the bellicose theme that the monument commemorated; it faced the Via Flaminia, the northwards leading road out of the city in the direction of the campaigns, and the one on which Marcus Aurelius was depicted in the frieze decoration in the scene of departure (*profectio*) and return (*adventus*) (Ryberg, *Panel Reliefs*, p. 32-7). The fact that many of the panel's most important reliefs, which shall be discussed below, also face the road, is a further indication that this was the "primary axis of approach and interaction with the monument" (Beckmann, "The Column of Marcus Aurelius," p. 253).

Much has been made of the column's similarities with, and differences from, the Column of Trajan. Both Columns reached 100 Roman feet high and were stood upon pedestals and surmounted by bronze statues of the emperors they celebrated. Both columns too were decorated with spiral frieze that commemorated the campaigns and events that had won their respective emperors such acclaim. However, the differences between the two columns are distinct, and suggest that the Column of Marcus Aurelius was intended to communicate a more aggressive tone of message to its viewers. This is in part due to the heightened visibility of the figures of the frieze; whereas the figures on the Column of Trajan are carved in comparatively low relief, those of the later column are much more deeply carved, increasing their visibility. The Column of Marcus Aurelius had fewer spirals than its predecessors, which combined with the way that the vertical dimension of the scenes is highlighted, as well as the use of a single vantage point, made it possible for the observer to better enjoy the scenes from below. In addition, the proportions of the figures has switched from the Late-Classical – Hellenistic canon, in which the head was just an eighth of the body, to new proportions, characteristic of Late-Antique art, in which the head was much bigger, reaching the proportion of one seventh of the body. A further innovation was the frontal depiction of the emperor (Kovács, *Marcus Aurelius' Rain Miracle*, p. 156).

The most striking difference between the two columns is found, however, in their iconography. Unlike the Column of Trajan, which emphasises the productive construction brought by the presence of the Roman army, scenes of violent battles and cruelty prevail in the relief decoration of ??? Marcus Aurelius' monument (Boschung, "The Reliefs," p. 308). The Marcomannic Wars, the first of which broke out in 167 CE, were a devastating feature of Marcus Aurelius' reign, and which led to the invasion and siege of Aquileia in Italy. Unlike the Dacian Wars of Trajan's Column, which celebrated the conquest and organisation of a new province, the reliefs of the later column are aimed at demonstrating punishment and retribution towards an enemy of Rome. It is difficult to identify precise historical moments in the reliefs, although the two campaigns are roughly hinted at through the division implied by the insertion of Victoria figures (Kovács, *Marcus Aurelius' Rain Miracle*, p. 157). Scenes I to LVI cover the First Marcomannic War. The reliefs open with the depiction of the crossing of the Danube at Carnutum (I). Then, the army marches in enemy territory, stops for the imperial *adlocutio* (speech or address to the soldiers by the emperor) (IV), followed by the *lustatio exercitus*, or the sacrifices, which marked the start of the military season (VI). This is followed by various scenes depicting the destruction of enemy villages, embassies sent by the cunning enemy (VIII), and the siege of a Roman fort (for detailed analysis of all these and later scenes, see the plates in Coarelli, *La Colonna Traiana*, p. 106-353).

In the first reliefs, Marcus Aurelius is clearly the main protagonist, depicted wearing a tunic with the *paludamentum*, the cloak which serves to indicate his position as commander in chief of the Roman army, addressing his army in *adlocutio* (*scene IV*). Other figures, members of his general staff identified by scholars, are Pompeianus and Pertinax, the future emperor (*scenes XV and XVI*). As on the Column of Trajan, the Roman army is depicted in all its variety. Thus, legionaries are presented sporting the *lorica segmentata*, or the segmented armor, *auxilia* dressed in the *lorica hamata*, or chain mail armor, and there are flank cavalrymen and other units, such as the Praetorian Guard. The barbarians are depicted as valiant warriors, but also as victims of a war; one which they caused (Coarelli, p. 37-42). The brutality with which the barbarians are treated is again instructive that these wars were not ones of conquest, but rather the relation of a ruler compelled to punish his enemy. As Peter Kovacs has noted, no Roman soldiers fall in the battles depicted, their victory is implied through the escape and begging of the barbarians, whose situation is clearly without hope (Kovács, *Marcus Aurelius' rain miracle*, p. 158). However, the final victory was only achieved through the intervention of the Roman gods, whose role is shown to have been of crucial importance. Unlike the self-confidence of the Column of Trajan, the Roman army, possibly as a



consequence of plague, is forced to rely on miracles. Indeed, contrary to the Column of Trajan, where the emperor is portrayed as offering sacrifices of thanksgiving to the gods after the conclusion of the campaign, here Marcus Aurelius implores the gods before the opening of the campaign (Kleiner, *Roman Sculpture*, p. 300-301). The two scenes depicting miracles, the Lightning Miracle (XI) and the Miracle of the Rain (XVI), are central to our perception of the imperial ideology which stood behind the erection of this monument. Scene XI describes the Lightning Miracle, in which the siege machines of the German tribes are struck by a thunderbolt whilst trying to storm a Roman camp. In scene XVI, the Miracle of the Rain is depicted. This miracle was also related by various ancient authors; Cassius Dio (*Roman History* LXXII.8.2-4) and the *Historia Augusta* (*Life of Marcus Aurelius* 24), recorded that the god Hermes successfully assisted a *vexillatio*, a detachment of the Legio XII Fulminata, during the First Marcomannic War (167-175 CE), when the Romans were fighting the Quadi in Germania. The weather was very dry, possibly it was summer, and the right season to wage war, and the Roman soldiers were terribly thirsty and at risk of death from dehydration. Then, a miraculous rain put an end to their thirst, and brought devastation to the barbarians whose drowned corpses are shown alongside those of their horses in a scene almost identical with that described by Cassius Dio (Kovács, *Marcus Aurelius' Rain Miracle*, p. 166).

These two central scenes, which emphasize the support given by the gods to the Roman army, are followed by scenes depicting the submission of the enemies (XVII), a display of imperial clemency (XXIV), and various sacrifices. A relief depicting Victoria, writing on a shield the military triumph so hardly achieved, closes the narration of the First Marcomannic War (LVI). The reliefs depicting the Second Marcomannic War (LVII-CXVI) are quite different in their character from the depiction of the previous campaign. Long gone is the imperial clemency. As the barbarians did not respect the treaty, but rebelled against the might of Rome, they no longer deserve any pity. Thus, the scenes of war depicted on the reliefs are marked by brutality. Rough justice now takes the place of clemency. One of the central scenes depicts the decapitation of prisoners (LXI). Other scenes show cattle and sheep taken away by Romans soldiers, deportation of civilians (LXIX), and the pillage of villages. Another scene focuses on a Barbarian woman led away by Roman soldiers (LXXXV). Then, Marcus Aurelius addresses the army. Once more, the imperial *adlocutio*, delivered from a pedestal, is the main topic (LXXXVI). This time the emperor is not only depicted in a frontal position, but slightly bigger than the other figures. The emperor's speech is followed by scenes depicting the army on the march (XCIII), followed once more by a scene depicting the emperor addressing his army in a speech. The final scenes focus on the one hand on the defeat of the barbarians, who are captured and executed (XCVII), and on the other hand on the emperor, who is portrayed while consulting with two members of his staff when a messenger accosts him. The background is a well-built circular military castle. The closing reliefs depict the barbarians deported from their own lands, now under the aegis of Rome, to new territories (CXV), and the capture of barbarians running away with their cattle (CXVI). The military campaign is achieved with violence and plunder of civilians (Coarelli, *La Colonna di Marco Aurelio*, p. 42-57).

Sonia Maffei has noted that both 'miracle' scenes are surrounded on all sides by scenes that describe the virtues of the emperor, which emphasise the outstanding significance of his particular rule (Maffei, "La Felicitas Imperatoris," p. 352-367). Indeed, in Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations*, the focus on virtues such as piety, justice, courage, moderation and wisdom can be seen depicted on the reliefs in answer to the imperial ideal set by the emperor himself (Noreña, *Imperial Ideals in the Roman West*, p. 54). For example, the *lustatio exercitus* of scene VI, as well as other successive reliefs depicting scenes of sacrifices (e.g. scenes XXIX and LXXV), emphasise the emperor's *pietas*. The emperor's clemency displayed towards the defeated barbarians is the topic of various reliefs, such as scenes XL and XLI which are concerned with his acceptance of their surrender, in the main concentrated in the narration of the First Marcomannic War. *Clementia*, meaning "humanity" or "forbearance," was seen as an ideal trait in a leader; as Carlos Noreña points out, for the Latin panegyrists the key imperial virtues which characterised a good emperor were *clementia*, coupled with *virtus*, *iustitia*, and *pietas*, with the purpose of softening the apparent hard edges of military autocracy and opposed to *saevitia*, or cruelty (Noreña, *Imperial Ideals in the Roman West*, p. 54). This might seem at odds with the savage treatment of the barbarians in the reliefs depicting the later stages of the Second Marcomannic War, in which *iustitia*, or justice, takes the place of clemency. The scenes depicting the effects of justice are brutal, and filled with pathos; by now, the enemies of Rome do not deserve any pity. It is clear that on these reliefs, the idea of *iustitia* assumed a very important dimension in the definition of the imperial taxonomy, as the emperor took on the task of supreme judge, the head of Roman law, whose justice was swift and stern. Last but not least, bravery, or *virtus*, is addressed in various reliefs demonstrating the bravery and courage of the emperor in warfare. The various reliefs depicting the *adlocutio*, the emperor's addressing of the army, probably refers to courage, at least at a collective level. Indeed, the main topic of the *adlocutio* was often the bravery that the soldiers had to display, with the purpose of defeating the enemy.

It has been suggested that the brutal nature of the images carved in the frieze of the Column of Marcus Aurelius is reflective of the historical reality of the brutal nature of the wars he fought; the iconographic content of the reliefs is certainly more violent than those depicted on earlier honorific and commemorative monuments. However, the shocking nature of many of the scenes may have been intended to send a message of superiority and reassurance to Rome, and the rest of Italy, in a time of danger and foreign invasion (Beckmann, "The Column of Marcus



Aurelius,” p. 260). The Marcomannic Wars were wars of retribution against a foreign enemy that became a war of punishment as Rome’s destruction of the Germanic and Sarmatian tribes succeeded. The addition of scenes of imperial virtues showed the exemplary character of the emperor and demonstrated the “common values of the imperial ideology...which were not related to one person only” (Boschung, “The Reliefs,” p. 313). The good and successful emperor is characterised by his virtues, which – in the case of Marcus Aurelius – were further attested by the additional depiction of the ‘miracles’ that were awarded to him by the gods.

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