Tropaeum Alpium – Trophy of the Alps (7/6 BCE)

Reconstruction of the Tropaeum Alpium

The Tropaeum Alpium

Patron/Sponsor: Augustus
Original Location/Place: La Turbie (Alpes-Maritimes)
Actual Location (Collection/Museum): In loco.

Original Inscription/Graffito: Diplomatic Inscription:

IMPERATORI · CAESARI · DIVI · FILIO · AVGSTO
PONT · MAX · IMP · XIV · TRIB · POT · XVII

SENATVS · POPVLVSQVE · ROMANVS
QVOD EIVS DVCTV AVSPICISQVE GENTES ALPINÆ OMNES QVAE A MARI SVPERO AD INFERVM
PERTINEBANT SVB IMPERIVM P R SVNT REDACTÆ
GENTES ALPINÆ DEVICTÆ TRIUMPILINI CAMVNNI VENOSTES VENNONETES ISARCHI BREVNI
GENAVNES FOCVNATES
VINDELICORVM GENTES QVATTUOR COSVANETES RVCINATES LICATES CATENATES AMBISONTES
RUGUSCI SUANETES CALVÇONES
BRIXENTES LEPONITI VBERI NANTVATES SEDVNI VARAGRI SALASSI ACITAVONES MEDVLLI VCENNI
CATVRIGES BRIGIANI
SOBIONTI BRODIONTI NEMALONI EDENATES VESVBIANV VEAMINI GALLITAE TRIVLLATI ECDINI
VERGVNNI EGVITURI NEMATVRI ORATELLI NERVSI VELAVNI SVETRI

Edition
Imperator Caesari divi filio Augusto
Pont(ifici) Max(imo) Imp(erator) XIV tr(ibunicia) pot(estate) XVII
senatus populusque R(omanus)
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quod eius ductu auspiciisque gentes alpinae omnes quae a mari supero ad inferum pertinbaneant sub imperium p(opuli) R(omani) sunt redactae

Translation:
The translation is my own:

To the Emperor Caesar Augustus, son of a god, Pontifex Maximus, Imperator 14 times, with tribunician power 17 times, the Senate and the People of Rome (set this up), because of his orders and with his auspices, all the peoples of the Alps who stretch from the Upper Sea (Adriatic) to the Lower (Mediterranean) were brought under the dominion of the people of Rome. Alpine tribes conquered: the Triumpilini, Camunni, Venostes, Vennonetes, Isarchi, Breuni, Genaunes, Focunates. The four tribes of the Vindelici, the Cosuanetes, Rucinates, Licates, Catenates, Ambisontes, Rugusci, Suanetes, Calucones, Brixentes, Leponiti, Uberi, Nantuates, Seduni, Varagri, Salassi, Acitavones, Medulli, Ucenni, Caturiges, Brigiani, Sobionti, Brodicienti, Nemaloni, Edenates, Vesubiani, Veamini, Gallitae, Triullati, Ecdini, Vergunni, Eguituri, Nematuri, Oratelli, Nerusi, Felauni, Suetri.

Date: 7 BCE to 6 BCE
Material: Local limestone

Measurements:
Total height including the statue of Augustus: 61 m; length: 35 m

Literary reference:
Pliny the Elder, Natural History III.20.136-138.

Building Typology:
Public Building

Description:
The trophy, built using local limestone, consisted in three superimposed elements: a cubic basis or platform, a circular tholos, and a stepped conic shaped roof, topped by a statue of Augustus (Formigé, Trophée des Alpes, p. 74). The platform, 35 m long and 12 m high, stands on two steps, which run around all the building. A gateway, topped by a triangular pediment, allowed an entryway to the building. The platform was topped by a decorative cornice. The tholos stood on a much smaller square base, composed of two steps. It was surrounded by 24 columns in the old Tuscanic Order, which conveyed a calm majesty. The tholos itself was decorated with aediculae, in which stood various statues (Bromwich, Roman Remains, p. 274). On the top of the tholos stood a circular drum, the purpose of which was to lengthen the structure, and it was covered by a conical stepped roof. The total height of the structure was 49 m.

Commentary: The Tropaeum Alpium, or the Trophy of the Alps, is located at the highest point of the Via Julia Augusta in the commune of La Turbie (Alpes Maritimes, France). The huge structure was erected between 7 and 6 BCE. Its purpose was to commemorate the Roman conquest of the Western Alps, and the definitive submission of no less than forty five Celtic and Ligurian tribes between the years 23 and 7 BCE. These campaigns began in 25 BCE, when Augustus appointed Aulus Terentius Varro Murena, whose sister was married to Maecenas, as the leader of a military expedition against the Salassi, the tribe that controlled the Great Saint Bernard Pass. Military operations against the rest of the tribes continued till 7 BCE. By this date, Augustus was able to boast in the inscription that no fewer than forty-five tribes had been subjugated and now submitted to his authority. The inscription was placed on the first podium of the monument, on the west face which faced the new Roman road connecting the Roman colony of Placentia, located in the plain of the Po, to the Var area, across the the western Alps. The inscription was republished in 1949 by Jules Formigé, who used a description of the monument – including what appeared to be a record of the inscription’s text – given by Pliny the Elder in his Natural History...
reconstruct the 145 fragments that had survived (Formigé, Trophée des Alpes, p. 54-64). Pliny’s text is almost exactly the same as Jules Formigé’s reconstruction, excluding some minor differences of abbreviation (for these, see Formigé, “La dédicace du Trophée des Alpes”, p. 102). Pliny’s also included his own personal addendum to the text after the list of conquered tribes, which states: “The twelve states of the Cottiani were not included in the list, as they had shown no hostility, nor yet those which had been placed by the Pompeian law under the jurisdiction of the municipal towns” (Pliny, Natural History, III.20.138, eds. J. Bostock & H.T. Riley (London: Taylor and Francis, 1855). The similarities of the texts would suggest that Pliny himself had seen the inscription first hand, but Sophie Binninger has argued convincingly against this, proposing that he obtained the text from the monument through consultation of the official documents in the imperial archive at Rome (Binninger, Trophée d’Auguste, p. 50).

On either side of the inscription on the first podium are fragmentary reliefs that depict winged victories offering crowns to Augustus. Representatives of the Alpine tribes are also represented in relief form here, on either side of the inscription, with male prisoners depicted with their hands bound behind their backs, knelt down under a tree from which hangs their armour and clothing (for an image, see Binninger, Trophée d’Auguste, p. 50). Should Formigé’s reconstruction of the entirety of the monument be correct, statues of Augustus and generals were placed on the podium level above these reliefs, effectively ‘dominating’ the space above the barbarian captives and emphasising the symbolism of Augustus’s victories (Harrison, Urban Portraits, p. 298-99).

When the inscription is read in the context of this kind of iconography, it is clear that these were meaningful victories to Augustus. Not only does the size of the monument communicate the importance of the conquest of the tribes, but the kind of conquest that is presented is also telling. The inscription states that the campaigns were made under the orders of Augustus (eius ductu) and under his auspices (auspicis). ‘His orders’ implies a measured and considered approach to the campaigns, and as Pontifex Maximus he had the right to consult the gods through the performance of augury, thus elevating his efforts against the Alpine people from that of mere subjugation to divinely ordained expansion. As James R. Harrison has noted, the campaigns against the Alpine tribes are presented as a ‘just war’, (see Res Gestae 26.3) through which they are brought under the providential ordering of the Roman gods and the command of the Roman people; ‘the iconography of the monument…powerfully substantiates the message of the inscription’ (Harrison, Urban Portraits, p. 301).

However, the inscription also omits a crucial point; there is no mention here of the Alpine tribes who accepted peaceful annexation of their territory through establishing a ‘friendship’ (amicitia) with Rome (Guerra, Cohortes Alpinorum, p. 85). There were certain tribes, such as those of the twelve Cottian cities, upon whom Augustus did not declare war, because they had become his ‘friends’ (amic), and were therefore not considered hostile to Rome. They accommodated themselves to Roman rule and accepted Augustus as their ‘patron’, and in return received privileged treatment from the emperor and the imperial administration (see Arch of Susa). Pliny’s addendum to the text of the inscription therefore records the more diplomatic approach to conquest and expansion and demonstrates the somewhat conciliatory nature of the treatment of certain tribes (Harrison, Urban Portraits, p. 301). This was, however, at odds with the deliberately bellicose and domineering tone of the iconography of the Tropaeum Alpium, which sought to humiliate the conquered tribes.

The Tropaeum Alpium was one of several enormous, multipurpose vertical structures in the Greco-Roman world, which dominated the landscape around them. The earliest and primary example is the Mausoleum of Halicarnassus, which provided an early source of inspiration for later structures, such as the Mausoleum of Augustus in Rome. In La Turbie, the victory monument was tasked with recording the impressive nature and scale of Augustus’s victory here, and to carry the message of the maiestas, or power, of Rome, strengthening the public image of Augustus as its ruler through the visual domination of the surrounding countryside.

Thematic keywords:

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- Gallia [5]
- province [6]
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• senate [18]
• Roman people [19]
• emperor [20]

Casimir, Philippe, *Le Trophée d'Auguste à la Turbie* [23] (Marseille: Tacussel, 1932)
Formigé, Jules, “La dédicace du Trophée des Alpes (La Turbie)” [26], Gallia 13.1 (1055) : p. 105-106

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