



The Tropaeum Traiani at Adamklissi (109 CE)

Reconstruction of the trophy



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[Metope VI: Trajan's equestrian statue crushing the enemy under the legs of the horse \(Gramatopol\).](#) [2]



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[The Suicide of Decebalus](#) [4]



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[Legionary and Dacian Warrior](#) [6]



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[Legionary and Dacian Warrior \(Metope XXIV\)](#) [8]



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[Metope XXIV: the bodies of the Dacians thrown off the cliffs](#) [10]



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[Metope IX - Barbarian family in a four-wheel cart](#) [12]



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[Dacian Prisoners](#) [14]



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[Vexilliferi \(Standard Beareres\)](#) [16]



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[Marching off duty soldiers \[18\]](#)



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[Fighting between Legionary and Dacian Archer \[20\]](#)



[21]

Name of the artist: Unknown

Patron/Sponsor: Trajan

Original Location/Place:

Civitas Tropaensium, Dacia.

Actual Location (Collection/Museum):

Fragments of the metopes and relief detail are on display in the Muzeul Adamclisi (Adamklissi, Romania) and the Istanbul Archaeology Museum. A hypothetical reconstruction of the monument was set up on the site of the original in 1977.

Description:

The 'Trophy of Trajan' was discovered in the first decade of the 1800s, and excavated in the 1880s. The monument comprised a large drum, placed on top of a flight of nine steps. Made of concrete, the circular drum was faced with local limestone and decorated with a band of 54 metopes (decorative architectural elements), with ornamental friezes above and below. The drum served as a base for a conical roof, on which was placed a monumental 'trophy', resembling a tree trunk, to which sculpted figures of captives were bound. The 'trophy' was supported by two hexagonal pedestals, which bore dedicatory inscriptions. The parapet was decorated with 26 crenellation reliefs, also in the forms of captives, between the spaces of which were sculpted geometric shapes and water spouts in the forms of lions. The monument was reconstructed on the site in 1977, with 48 of the original metopes on display in the nearby museum.

Date: 109 CE



Material:

Concrete and local limestone.

Measurements: Total height: 37.02 m

Diameter of base: 43.14m

Commentary: The *Tropaeum Traiani* – or ‘Trophy of Trajan’ – was discovered in the early 1800s in Adamklissi in the former Roman province of Lower Moesia (modern Romania). It is one of three monumental Roman structures at the site, and is believed to have been dedicated by the emperor Trajan following his campaigns against the Dacians. It is an important commemorative monument that advertised the strength of Roman vengeance, and communicated, in uncompromising terms, the presence of Roman *imperium* in the region.

Constructed from local stone and concrete, the *Tropaeum* took the form of a large cylindrical drum on a platform of steps, which supported a conical roof; the ‘trophy’ was originally placed on top of a hexagonal [inscribed base](#) [22], and represented, in stone, a tree trunk adorned with the various accoutrements – weapons, standards and prisoners – of war. Florea Florescu measured the existing fragments of the trophy to be 10.15m tall, to which may have been added javelins or spears and a headpiece at its peak (Florescu, *Das Siegesdenkmal von Adamklissi*, p. 320-355; Richmond, “Adamklissi”, p. 31). At the base of the tree trunk were four statues of chained barbarians. As Iain Richmond has noted, there is no mistaking the intention of the trophy; it was designed as a permanent version of the temporary trophies set up on ancient battlefields from the time of Marathon, which were erected by attaching the captured weapons of the enemy to a lopped tree in the aftermath of a battle (Richmond, “Adamklissi”, p. 31. For the history of trophies, see Ricard, *Les trophées romains*). The particular battle commemorated here cannot be specifically identified, but the inscription dates the monument to 109 CE, with reference to Trajan’s thirteenth year of *tribunicia potestas* (10th December 107 CE – 9th December 108 CE), and so the *Tropaeum* must have been designed to celebrate Trajan’s successes in the Dacian campaigns of 101-102 and 105-106 CE. This is confirmed by the iconography of the metopes, which appear to narrate scenes of war between the Romans and Dacian tribes; 48 metopes survive, and “enshrine a kaleidoscopic series of vistas, each complete in itself but each related to its neighbour” (Richmond, “Adamklissi”, p. 33). These ‘vistas’ started from the northern front of the monument, leading westwards around the circular drum and represented different scenes and phases of the war. Due to the conditions in which the metopes were excavated it is not possible to identify the exact order of their placement on the monument, although Florea Florescu’s meticulous 1965 study of their findspots does offer a convincing reconstruction; his description and numbering system is used in the following discussion (see *Das Siegesdenkmal von Adamklissi* for a full discussion of the individual scenes. Iain Richmond offers a brief summary of the arrangement of the metopes in “Adamklissi”, p. 33-38; see Turner, “War losses and worldview” for a recent re-evaluation of the metopes’ order).

The narrative begins with cavalry action and heavy fighting, including five scenes of hand-to-hand engagement between Roman legionaries and their Dacian opponents. As the battle progresses, the metopes become more complex; four panels (xvi, xvii, xx and xxii) depict scenes of three figures, in which one is always a dying barbarian. The height of battle is then introduced by scenes of four figures, some of which include Roman soldiers under barbarian attack (such as xxxiv), in a deliberate reminder of the losses suffered by Rome’s military. Following the scenes of battle comes a sequence that represents the pursuit of fugitives, and the narrative ends with a review of the prisoners seized during the campaign; in this final act Iain Richmond noted that the Roman soldiers were presented in ‘field service kit’ rather than full armour, and that they balance the triumphal parade of captives presented to both the audience within the scenes, and the external viewer who saw the monument as a whole (Richmond, “Adamklissi”, p 36). Missing from this final act, although almost certainly originally included, is a depiction of the *suovetaurilia* sacrifice, which traditionally brought a victorious Roman campaign to an end. The leader of the campaigns, Trajan, is included twice in this narrative; once at the beginning, where he is represented receiving offers of surrender (x), and again later during the pursuit of fugitives, where he is shown capturing the wagons of nomad groups (xxxvi-xxxviii). In both scenes Trajan is presented as the active *Imperator* engaged in the action of the campaigns, and the uncompromising judge to whom the captives and fugitives must beg for clemency.

The style of the metopes has generated much debate amongst archaeologists and art historians; the figures stand out not for their classical features or fine technique, but due to the roughness with which they have been sculpted. Both Roman soldiers and barbarians alike lack realism, and have been criticised for their “crude” nature, which reveals “typical traits of the contemporary Roman provincial art” (Rossi, “A synoptic outlook,” p. 474). Iain Richmond even stated that “the sculptors of the metopes were often barely equal to the task which they were set” (“Adamklissi,” p. 38). The monument is, however, a military commemoration rather than a public monument; the graphic scenes of battle may lack realism, but their message is instantly recognisable and intended to convey the horror of war with Rome, as well as the brutal nature of Roman victory. The simplified nature of the reliefs may



have been designed to clarify imperial iconography for a provincial or foreign audience, for whom the complexity of complicated figure-scenes made ineffective their ability to carry particular messages. By clarifying the scenes of the metopes, the message of Roman power was underscored and emphasised to the monument's viewers. As Jas Elsner has noted, the reliefs are presented with all the "vitality, vigour and non-classicism of barbarian art," which would have been immediately recognisable to the conquered audience (Elsner, *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph*, p. 125-126). Although the *Tropaeum Traiani* unquestionably promotes the message of Roman victory in Dacia, its un-Roman style permits the conquered Dacians a "visual voice," and gave them a place in the narrative that was "familiar, even natural" (Elsner, *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph*, p. 126). The *Tropaeum* therefore served a double purpose; it both commemorated and acclaimed Trajan's victory in Dacia, whilst also assimilating to local traditions. Although the scenes of battle and the capture of the Dacians depicted here are brutal and relentless, "the trophy's propagation of an imperial theme to the provinces shows a marked sensitivity to local conditions and needs" (Elsner, *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph*, p. 126). Rome's needs, however, superseded those of the native Dacians; Trajan established a colony close to the site of the monument and named it after the colossal structure: *Municipium Tropaeum Traiani* (for the history of the *municipium*, see Panaite, "Tropaeum Traiani, from *civitas* to *municipium*, a hypothesis," p. 162-173). Colonists arriving at the new town would have had to walk past the monument, and have been reassured by the definitive presence of Rome's victory in what had previously been a troubled and combative region. The *Tropaeum* represented the final word in the conflict between Rome and Dacia, and indicated the security brought by the emperor's military achievements.

Thematic keywords:

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- [trophy](#) [31]

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Relief / Sculpture

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Numismatic item

[Denarius depicting the head of Trajan and the personification of Dacia mourning \(103-111 CE\)](#) [50]

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