

CHAPTER 2

Roman Historical Representations

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The traditional view holds that Roman art is strongly characterized by individual and historical realism. Indeed, Roman portraits are the most striking representations of historical individuals prior to the modern age; and the reliefs on Trajan's and Marcus Aurelius' columns are the most extensive pictorial documentations of wars that survive from the ancient world. Such "historical monuments" are undoubtedly essential phenomena of Roman art and culture—but this is a truism that explains very little. On the one hand, the terms "historical" and "history" are ambiguous: crucial is the specific conception of "history" that actually characterizes Roman "historical" monuments. On the other hand, "history" is not an autonomous "cultural" phenomenon, but is conceived and implemented in social, political, and religious practice. In the context of this chapter, it is therefore necessary to investigate the purposes of "historical" monuments and the use of "history" and memory in the public lives of Romans. (For a compendium of Roman historical reliefs from the imperial period, see Koeppel 1983–1992.)

"History" is never purely factual documentation of a past "reality": every society conceives its own history, with a focus on specific themes, persons, and events. Yet, every society also has its own *type* of history that might accentuate great individuals and events, or more general processes, social institutions, or cultural practices. Every society also has multiple types of history that exist in different media: a history of myths, critical historiography, public and private monuments and images, and so on. What histories and what type of historicity did the Romans bring to bear in their political monuments?

In 101 BCE, after the Roman victory over the Cimbri at Vercellae, the Roman general Quintus Lutatius Catulus erected a temple on the Campus Martius to *Fortuna huiusce diei*, the goddess of fortune of the day on which the battle had been fought, July 30. It was a monument to glorious memory, evoked by a regularly repeating state cult—but the building itself contained no specific information about the event that was to be remembered. The temple used the general forms of Greek and Roman architecture; the goddess Fortuna was a very general and timeless concept of military success, her colossal cult statue followed a traditional typology, and only the verbal addendum "*Fortuna of This Day*" linked the goddess to the historical battle. To a large extent, "history" is seen here in a meta-historical way (*LTUR* III, 269–270).

Essentially, the specific (and especially the specific nature of historical persons and events) can only be understood and represented in generalizing categories. As soon as specific events of the past stop being described as “pure facts” and start to be interpreted and presented as phenomena of “history,” as evidence of political power, legitimate success, or self-inflicted defeat, general concepts come into play that increasingly transcend the individual events and persons. Such abstract concepts include “politics” and “religion,” “ideology” and “identity.” These general conditions that affect every concept of “history” are particularly prominent in Rome’s public monuments.

History of Scholarship and Current Perspectives

Bishops of the Middle Ages, artists of the Renaissance, and monarchs and dictators of the modern age have imitated and copied the great monuments of ancient Rome, such as the columns of Trajan and Marcus Aurelius, or the arch of Constantine.

Modern research on Roman “historical reliefs” distinctly reflects the changes in scholarly approaches (Bergmann 1991). From the classicistic perspective that was the legacy of Johann Joachim Winckelmann, art produced by the Roman state was of no interest. During the nineteenth century, monuments erected to emperors were first interpreted within a concept of rigorous historicism as faithful representations of reality. Conrad Cichorius (1896–1900), a student of Theodor Mommsen, therefore used the reliefs on Trajan’s Column (Figure 2.1), including all their details of landscape, architecture, troops, and military action, to reconstruct Trajan’s Dacian Wars. National interests partly informed such historical inquiries: the publication and study of the new Parisian casts of Trajan’s column by Wilhelm Fröhner (1872–1874) stood in the service of Napoleon III’s interests; the deluxe edition of the column of Marcus resulted from an interest in the oldest evidence of the Germans, and was dedicated to the German Emperor Wilhelm II (Petersen, von Domaszewski, and Calderini 1896). In response, a sharp counter-reaction set in around 1900, promoted by Franz Wickhoff and Alois Riegl, the influential leaders of the Viennese School of art history, and based on the experience of formal autonomy in contemporary art. Accordingly, Karl Lehmann-Hartleben (1926) studied the formal conventions that shaped Trajan’s Column and assessed its value as historical evidence as rather inferior.

In the 1960s, a new generation of scholars started to approach the monuments with an interest in their political messages, and understood them as factors in the practice of power (Borg 2005). Already in the prior generation, Andreas Alföldi had interpreted the ceremonial contexts and the garb of the Emperors on public monuments as means of representing dominance (Alföldi 1934 and 1935); at the same time, Gerhard Rodenwaldt (1935) interpreted depictions of generals on sarcophagi not as actual biographical information, but as embodiments of political virtues. Building on their approach, the great imperial monuments were now investigated for their political ideology (Fittschen 1972; Torelli 1982). At first, this ideological interpretation was placed in bristling opposition to the view that they represented historical reality. In response to this antithetical view, a concept of a dialectical relationship between reality and ideology was eventually proposed: on the one hand, historical reality is represented in categories of political ideology; and on the other, state ideology manifests in political reality (Hölscher 1980a; Settis 1985). This new perspective on the political messages initially led to a strong emphasis on iconography over style; soon, however, the formal qualities also came back into view as strategies used to achieve certain visual effects. Likewise, the reliefs were no longer seen as isolated “pictures,” but as parts of larger architectural monuments, and within their broader urban context. As a result, not only the patron but also the viewer is recognized as a significant factor in our understanding of the monuments (Zanker 1994 and 2000; Elsner 1995).



Figure 2.1 Rome, Column of Trajan, lower section. Photo: Fototeca Unione, American Academy in Rome.

At the same time, starting with Ranucio Bianchi Bandinelli, the public representational art of other social strata began to be considered: the public self-representation of the local upper classes in Italian cities, ambitious freedmen in Rome, and, ultimately, the magistrates of the city of Rome (Bianchi Bandinelli 1967a; Zanker 1970–1971; Schäfer 1989). In contrast to the Greek-style official art of the emperors and the senate, the documentary pictorial language of these monuments, initially interpreted by G. Rodenwaldt as “popular art,” was now defined by Bianchi Bandinelli as “arte plebea” (Rodenwaldt 1940; Bianchi Bandinelli 1967a). However, it has been argued of late that there was no genuine “freedman art” and that the forms in question were employed across social strata as a “presentational style” with semantic content; that is, as a specific formal repertoire of easily readable pictorial presentation for specific themes of social and religious relevance (Petersen 2006; the term is introduced in Hölscher 2012).

Recently, a better understanding of the practice of erecting public monuments has produced a fundamental change in their interpretation. While the political representation of emperors, officeholders, and dignitaries was previously interpreted as “propaganda” and public “self-representation,” a closer look at their patrons, and the rules and standards of dedicatory practice, resulted in a more nuanced view. Public monuments were not ordinarily commissioned by the actual person depicted, but rather by another party (senate, cities, supporters, and so on) as an honor *for* them, even if in response to the honoree’s expectations

(Mayer 2002; Dally 2008; von den Hoff 2009). In this way, the monuments become indicators of a negotiated consensus between elite and community. Funerary representation is more personal, although it was also determined by general social norms.

These new approaches since the 1960s have also led to a change in terminology. Given that the images are not aiming at factual documentation of events but at glorification of achievements, the term “historical relief” has often been replaced by the term “state relief.” The insights into the practice of monument dedication have discredited as misleading the terms public “self-representation” and “propaganda,” which were coined for the manipulation of popular opinion by modern states. The term “representational art” is more neutral, albeit less concise (Bergmann 2000).

The following paragraphs will address the question of the representation of historical reality and political ideology in public monuments from various perspectives, and examine the respective interference between specific and general tendencies.

Historical Memory and Political Practice

One decisive motivation for the representation of historical reality in public monuments arises from the necessity of transforming one-time political achievements into enduring political power (Hölscher 2006). Successes in battle and administrative measures by Republican statesmen and, above all, emperors were one-time events connected with a particular location, often far removed from the political centers of the Empire. If the glory of such achievements was to support political power, then the greatest possible portion of the population would have to participate in it for the longest time possible: the glory had to be permanently disseminated across space and time. Based on these premises, a complex practice of political representation developed, in which collective rituals and public monuments played a central role (Hölscher 2006).

Monuments with figurative images had already been erected to the glory and memory of rulers, often in the sacred contexts of sanctuaries and tombs, in the Ancient Near East and Egypt. Since 500 BCE, city states and leading statesmen in Greece erected public monuments to the memory of “historical” persons and events, which were meant to stabilize political power. Statues, reliefs, and paintings in political and sacred spaces presented individuals and achievements of the past as models for the present and the future. They were inspired by a concept of “history” that was characterized by glorious singular achievements, such as the Greco-Persian wars, and individuals, such as Themistocles and Alexander the Great (Hölscher 2003). Alongside that, a form of representative art arose in fourth-century BCE Etruria in the tombs of the elite, producing paintings in burial chambers and reliefs on sarcophagi and urns that the leading families used to demonstrate their power. Ritual appearances of high-ranking magistrates are particularly prominent, especially public processions in which the deceased demonstrate their high social and political status in a standardized form (Holliday 2002).

Both traditions were greatly significant for Roman representational art, whose origins lay in the fourth and third centuries BCE. Its main preconditions were Rome’s expansion from a polis into a territorial state, and the rise of a new political elite, the nobility, which bore the new imperial policy.

During the Roman Republic, public monuments were important factors in the distribution of merit and power between the community (*res publica*) and leading statesmen. They were part of an extensive practice of political memory in which the significance of persons and events for the state was codified both for the present and for the future. This led to a tense conflict between individuals and the community that determined the specific political character of these monuments.

Starting with Rome's rise as a significant power, the state needed the conceptual leadership of outstanding personalities who then claimed recognition for their outstanding achievements, especially military victories; on the other hand, the community had to ensure that these men did not break up the collective equality of the ruling class. This balance was pursued through a practice of mutual recognition: the senate and the people honored victorious generals with the ephemeral honor of the triumphal procession, and the permanent honorary statues in the forum and in other public spaces. For their part, the generals could furnish the triumphal procession with spectacular evidence of their military campaigns: models of conquered cities; personifications of subjugated nations, mountains, and rivers; images of defeated opponents; depictions of battles; panels with written commentaries, and so on. This familiarized the population of the city of Rome with the military successes. Moreover, the generals were able to perpetuate their glory in the city by their own initiative: through public display of spoils, such as the prows of the ships captured at Antium (338 BCE) that decorated the speakers' platform on the forum; or through paintings of wars in public places, such as the depiction of a battle against Hieron of Syracuse and the Carthaginians on the exterior wall of the senatorial curia (263 BCE). Finally, the generals were obligated to use a portion of their war spoils (*manubiae*) for the welfare of the community. They primarily fulfilled this obligation by erecting temples to deities that had played a role in the war. In that way, the temples became monuments to historical persons and events, and the city of Rome gained an increasingly religio-historical topography (Hölscher 1978; Hölkeskamp 1987).

In the late Republic, the leading generals, Gaius Marius and Sulla, Pompey and Julius Caesar, instrumentalized this practice in an increasingly aggressive war of monuments: they demanded monuments from the senate and erected their own, which supported their claims to unique positions of state leadership; they destroyed the monuments of their rivals and restored destroyed monuments of their own political faction (Hölscher 1980b and 2004).

Augustus ended these provocative actions and ushered in a consensus. The senate offered the emperor a number of high honors, he declined some of them, and an agreement was reached on forms that appeared acceptable to all (von den Hoff 2009). In the imperial era, explicit honors, especially honorific monuments, were not ordinarily initiated by the emperor himself but by other institutions, primarily by the senate and the people. Thus, for example, Augustus and Trajan erected large forum complexes, but the central monuments to the emperors, a quadriga in the Forum of Augustus, and an equestrian statue and an honorary column in Trajan's Forum, were dedicated by the senate and the people. These monuments primarily served to ensure the glorious memory of the imperial donor of the forum and his achievements, and it is in this spirit that Trajan's Column supported a portrait statue of the emperor, and an extraordinarily detailed pictorial report of his military campaigns against the Dacians decorates its shaft. All imperial Roman "state reliefs," the best-known pictorial monuments of Roman history, are celebratory decorations of large public buildings and monuments, erected by other entities in honor of the emperor. Thus, with Augustus a new period of historical commemoration was inaugurated (Simon 1986; Zanker 1987/1988; Pollini 2012).

The history presented by public monuments is fundamentally shaped by the present circumstances. Individuals and events of the present are usually glorified and inscribed into collective memory as "history" to be preserved for the future. From the past, it is primarily heroes such as Aeneas and Romulus, and events from the beginnings of Rome, that were celebrated as the founding myths of the state. The interim period between Rome's foundation and the present was primarily commemorated in monumental galleries of "great men" and ancestors who lead from the remote past to the leading men of the present; the most famous example is the Forum of Augustus (Zanker 1987/1988; Spannagel 1999).

Public monuments have great political impetus. They occupy public spaces with the memory of and claims to power. Monuments embody the presence of this power and demand its recognition. The destruction of a monument means the obliteration of this power. Monuments are weapons.

Historical Reality versus Political Ideology

The political memory of public monuments is simultaneously historical and ideological. Scholars have often seen history and ideology as diametrical antitheses, and the monuments have been interpreted in one sense or the other. In reality, however, these two aspects cannot be separated: on the one hand, the “reality” of history is never merely a documentation of facts, but always selected, configured, and interpreted by people; on the other hand, ideology obtains its persuasive power only through historical realization. Roman “historical” monuments show this dialectic between historical reality and ideological concepts in many facets (Hölscher 1980a and 2003).

Trajan’s Column is antiquity’s most detailed example of a pictorial chronicle of events (Figures 2.1–2.2; cf. Settis 1988; Coarelli 1999; Hölscher 2002). The spiral relief strip that envelops its shaft portrays in exceptional detail both of Trajan’s Dacian Wars (101–102 and 105–106 CE) in more than 100 scenes. They depict the crossing of the Danube, the construction of fortresses and roads, advances and battles, Dacian counter-attacks, the destruction of villages, voluntary and forced subjugation of the enemy, discovery and removal of royal Dacian treasures, pursuit and death of the enemy King Decebalus, and punishment and resettlement of the enemy population. The scenes flow into one another without separation; the emperor repeatedly reappears as the protagonist of the events. The narrative principle is the chronological and spatial sequence from the initial attack to the Romans’ final victory. (These principles of narrative depiction are resumed, in a selection of four panels, in the arch of Septimius Severus in Rome; Brilliant 1967).

However, none of this amounts to a purely factual chronicle of events. The entire war is intentionally organized on the basis of conceptual models. The three offensive campaigns depicted on the column unfold in the following sequence of events: the army crosses the Danube (*profectio*), a war council is held (*consilium*), the army is ritually purified (*lustratio*), the emperor gives an encouraging address to his soldiers (*adlocutio*), strongholds are built, the army advances into enemy territory, the battle takes place, the enemies are subjugated (*submissio*), a laudatory speech is given by the emperor, and the consequences for the local population are shown. Two defensive campaigns are conceived in a similar scheme: attack of the Dacians on Roman territory, the emperor hurries to the defense, battle, siege and conquest, and consequences of war. The sequence of the scenes varies, but the basic structures remain clear, revealing a standardized concept of an “ideal” Roman war.

The individual scenes convey ideological messages with various degrees of clarity. This is particularly obvious in that many of the pictorial themes represented have little military significance for a war report. All offensive campaigns begin with a *profectio*, which testifies to the Romans’ readiness for battle (*virtus*). This is followed by the war council as an example of good planning (*consilium*), the sacrifice as indication of fulfillment of religious obligation (*pietas*) and foresight (*providentia*), and the *adlocutio* as evidence of the trust (*fides*) and unity (*concordia*) shared by emperor and army. The ensuing construction of fortresses and roads shows the virtue of work (*labor*); the advance and the (unwaveringly victorious) battle are proof of courage (*virtus*) and victory (*victoria*). The emperor demonstrates leniency (*clementia*) or justice (*iustitia*) in the subsequent subjugation, and severity (*severitas*) in punishment.

S		O		N		W		S	
← 149-150 ROUNDING UP CAPTIVES		151 PURSUIT BEYOND BORDERING RIVER		152-155 ROMAN TROOPS AND DACIAN POPULATION ENTERING THE PROVINCE		147 PRESENTATION OF DECEBALOS' HEAD		148 CAPTURE OF DACIANS IN MOUNTAINS	
142-143 PURSUIT OF DACIANS		144-145 PURSUIT AND SUICIDE OF DECEBALOS		146 CAPTURE OF PRINCES		140 SUICIDE OF DACIANS		141 SUBMISSION	
← ATTACK ON ROMAN CAMP		136 RETREAT OF DACIANS		137 ADLOCUTIO		138 TRANSPORT OF ROYAL TREASURY		139 ADLOCUTIO OF DECEBALOS	
← ADLOCUTIO		127-129 CONSTRUCTION OF FORTIFICATION		130 SUBMISSION		131 ROMANS CROSSING A RIVER		132-135 DACIANS MARCHING OFF FOR COUNTER-ATTACK	
119 DACIANS SETTING FIRE ON THEIR CITY		120-122 DACIANS IN FORTIFICATION TAKING POISON		123 SUBMISSION		124-126 ADLOCUTIO		→	
← ASSAULT ON DACIAN FORTIFICATION SYSTEM									
← ADVANCE		110 HARVEST OF CORN		111 ARRIVAL AT DACIAN FORTIFICATIONS		112 ATTACK ON DACIANS		113-116 ASSAULT ON DACIAN FORTIFICATION SYSTEM	
← PROPECTIO		103 LUSTRATIO		104 ADLOCUTIO		105 COUNCIL		106-109 ADVANCE	
←		95-97 DACIANS ASSAULTING ROMAN FORTIFICATION / ARRIVAL OF TRAIAN		98-99 SACRIFICE NEAR DANUBE BRIDGE		100 WELCOME TO EMBASSIES		101-102 PROPECTIO	
89-90 FORCED MARCH / WELCOME IN MOESIA		91 SACRIFICE		92 CONSTRUCTION OF ROAD		93 DACIANS IN BARRAGE FORTIFICATION		94 DACIANS ATTACKING ROMAN CAMP	
← TRAIAN IN HARBOUR TOWN WITH SANCTUARY		83-85 DEPARTURE / SACRIFICE / WELCOME NEAR CAMP		86 SACRIFICE IN HARBOUR TOWN		87-88 ADVANCE		→	
← SUBMISSION		76 AFTERMATH OF WAR		77 ADLOCUTIO		78 VICTORIA / TROPAEA		79-80 PASSAGE ON SEA	
← ASSAULT ON FORTIFICATION / SUBMISSION		71 TESTUDO		72 BATTLE		73 ADLOCUTIO		74-75 FOUNTAIN / SUBMISSION	
65 CONSTRUCTION OF FORTIFICATION		66-67 BATTLE / SUBMISSION		68-69 PRESENTATION OF CAPTIVE / CONSTRUCTION OF CAMP / WORK IN WOOD		70-71 BATTLE		→	
← ADVANCE THROUGH MOUNTAINS		60 CONSTRUCTION OF CAMP		61 MESSENGER AND TRAIAN		62 CAMP IN MOUNTAINS		63-64 ADVANCE / ATTACK ON CAVALRY OF MOORS	
← PROPECTIO		51 UNIFICATION OF ARMIES		52 WORK IN WOOD / EMBASSY AND TRAIAN		53 LUSTRATIO		54 ADLOCUTIO	
← BATTLE OF ADAMKLISSI		42 ADLOCUTIO		43 CAPTIVES IN CAMP		44 DISTRIBUTION OF REWARDS		45 TORMENTATION	
36 ADVANCE		37 PURSUIT OF SAMARTIANS		38 ATTACK ON DACIAN WAGON BARRICADE		39 MOESIANS BEGGING PROTECTION		40-41 BATTLE OF ADAMKLISSI	
29-30 AFTERMATH OF WAR		31 DACIANS CROSSING DANUBE		32 DACIANS ATTACKING ROMAN CAMP		33 BREAK-UP OF TRAIAN ON SHIP		34 PASSAGE OF TRAIAN ON DANUBE	
23 CONSTRUCTION OF ROAD		24 BATTLE OF TAPAE		25 TRAIAN AT BARRAGE WALL		26 CROSSING A RIVER		27 ADLOCUTIO / FIRST EMBASSY	
13-14 MOUNTAIN FORTIFICATION / CAMP AT RIVERSIDE		15 CLEARING WOODLAND		16-17 CONSTRUCTION OF FORTIFICATION		18 PRESENTATION OF CAPTIVE		19-20 CONSTRUCTION OF CAMP	
← PROPECTIO COUNCIL		8 LUSTRATIO		9 OMEN (?): MESSENGER AND TRAIAN		10 ADLOCUTIO		11-12 CONSTRUCTION OF FORTIFICATION	
←		1-2 BANK OF DANUBE		3-7 PROPECTIO		→		→	
S		O		N		W		S	

Figure 2.2 Rome, Column of Trajan, distribution of subjects. Chart: Tonio Hölischer.

Altogether, the detailed pictorial report is an almost systematic presentation of both ideological models and the virtues of Roman policy.

The ideological character is even clearer in other monuments. A series of large relief panels, probably from a triumphal arch for the emperor Marcus Aurelius (176 CE), portrays individual scenes from the wars against the Germans (Figure 2.3; cf. Ryberg 1967). Here, actual acts of war are largely moved to the background in lieu of ideologically significant ritual scenes. In addition to *profectio*, *lustratio*, *adlocutio*, and *submissio*, which we recognize from Trajan's Column, we find the appointment of a client king (*providentia*), glorious return to Rome (*adventus*), triumph (*virtus*), concluding sacrifice on the Capitoline Hill (*pietas*), and distribution of money to the population (*liberalitas*). No battle scene is preserved, and there may never have been one. It is particularly instructive that each scene only occurs once: the reliefs must therefore have been organized according to a standardized sequence of war scenes.

It is clear from imperial coinage, where corresponding images are commented on by written legends, that these scenes can be read as models of political and ethical behavior. However, they must not be "read" as mere codes signifying verbal political slogans. The images have their own power of visual realization that interacts with the abstract concepts of language in a complex process of mutual influence (see the later discussion).

In the monuments of Trajan and Marcus Aurelius, historical reality and ideology were related to each other in very different ways, and emphasized in very different proportions. However, they always refer to each other dialectically: history is the realization of ideological concepts.



Figure 2.3 Panel relief from an honorary arch of Marcus Aurelius. Rome, Arch of Constantine. Photo: Alinari Archives, Florence. Foto Anderson 2539.

The key term that links them together is *exemplum* (Settis 1985). The prominent individuals, achievements, and events of history are models of political and social ideals that are meant to take effect in the present and the future.

History and Ritual

This interpretation entails that, in monuments, “historical” memory is primarily created in scenes of more or less ritualized character. The pictorial decoration of the large Altar of Augustan Peace (*Ara Pacis Augustae*), which was built in 13–9 BCE on the occasion of the emperor’s return from the wars in Gaul and Spain, does not recall his successes and achievements in the provinces, but his celebratory return to Rome (Simon 1967; Billows 1993): two large friezes appear to portray the procession on the occasion of the foundation of the *Ara Pacis*, with the emperor, the highest priestly colleges, and the imperial family participating (Figure 2.4, 10.4–10.5). It is highly instructive that all important persons are included, even those who cannot really have participated: the religious community of Rome had to be displayed by its highest representatives. Alongside this one-time appearance of the historical protagonists, the annual sacrificial procession during the festival of the *Ara Pacis* is depicted in anonymous form on a small frieze around the altar proper. Both friezes preserve the memory of rituals that perpetuate the virtue of *pietas* as the foundation of Augustus’ peaceful rule—one in a general, the other in a specific way.

During the late Republic and early imperial period, traditional religious scenes, sacrifices, and triumphal processions predominate in public representational art as demonstrations of *pietas* and *virtus* (Ryberg 1955). Over the course of the imperial period, the increasing glorification of the emperor resulted in additional ceremonies with a strong panegyric character. Embarking on a military campaign (*profectio*) and especially returning after military victories, and, later, the emperor’s entry into the capital at the start of his reign (*adventus*), were celebrated with a parade that included the senate, the priesthoods, and the Roman people; starting with the Flavian Dynasty, these scenes featured in state art such as the Cancelleria Reliefs (Figure 10.10; Magi 1945), the Arch of Trajan in Benevento (Figure 2.6; Rotili 1972),



Figure 2.4 Rome, *Ara Pacis Augustae*, part of south frieze. Photo: Roma, Museo dell’*Ara Pacis Augustae*.

and Trajan's Column (see earlier; Koepfel 1969). The apotheosis of the rulers is glorified allegorically on posthumous monuments, such as the Arch of Titus in Rome (Pfanner 1983) or the Column of Antoninus Pius (Vogel 1973).

The mid-imperial period also witnessed the documentation of those provisions and actions of the emperor that testify to his affinity with the lower social classes. Alongside addresses (*adlocutio*) to the soldiers, which demonstrate his good relations (*fides, concordia*) with the army, there are, above all, distributions of money (*congiarium*) to needy segments of the population, families with many children, and so on. On two Trajanic relief friezes from the Forum Romanum, known as the *Anaglypha Traiani*, such a scene is linked to a depiction of public debt cancellation through the burning of tablets recording tax debts (Rüdiger 1973).

This development attests to a general change in the emperor's role: from protagonist of the traditional virtues of the ruling class to an all-encompassing father figure of the entire populace. However, these changes did not cause the old themes of victory and religion to be abandoned, but rather expanded on them. As a whole, the concept of rulership remained unchanged in many respects.

Accordingly, the monuments present all these models in a strongly ritualized format. Even the war chronicle of Trajan's Column is, to a large degree, interspersed with ritual scenes. The emperor and his entourage play a public role in which he represents, through various rituals and ceremonies, a largely traditional ideological concept of rulership. This concept is reinforced by the monuments.

The Pictorial Language: Realism versus Allegory and Symbol

The scenes of political representation are depicted in a distinctive combination of realism, symbolism, and allegory. All forms of representation serve the politico-ideological message.

In the images, the reality of the political scenes, with their numerous participants, is always concentrated on a few significant figures. Typically, a protagonist, usually the emperor, features in the center; the action scenes are arranged around him almost as attributes of his role. Depending on the context, the emperor is surrounded by cult personnel or military advisers who demonstrate his qualities as Rome's highest representative in cult and war. The other participants are usually represented by only one or few figures: senators, priests, knights, and other social groups, soldiers of various military ranks, and also "barbaric" enemies.

Under Augustus, and increasingly in the Flavian era, figures of deities and personifications appear among the real participants. They do not indicate religious veneration of the emperor or other protagonists, but glorify them in a panegyric that uses allegorical pictorial language. As the highest god of the state, Jupiter installs Trajan as ruler of the world (Rotili 1972); Minerva escorts Domitian into Rome as his personal protective goddess (Figure 10.10; Magi 1945). Other ideal figures straddle the borderline between divinity and allegory. During his triumphal procession, the emperor Titus is accompanied by Virtus and Honos, and crowned by Victoria. All of these figures were venerated in temples in Rome, but in images they primarily serve as visual expressions of the military courage, honor, and victory of the triumphant emperor (Pfanner 1983). In addition, ideal figures can embody specific groups of real participants. On his departure for war, the emperor Marcus Aurelius is accompanied through the city gate by the Genius of the senate and (probably) the Genius of the people, just as the senate and the people actually gave him a celebratory farewell in the *profectio*. On his victorious entrance into Rome, the war god Mars follows him as representative of the army, while the goddess Roma precedes him as representative of the capital's population, in full correspondence with the actual ritual of the *adventus* (Ryberg 1955 and 1967).

The depiction of topographical spaces is, to a large degree, selective. The political rituals can be shown against a background of state architecture if it is meaningful to the event (Sobocinski 2009). The Porta Triumphalis appears in the victorious *adventus* and the emperor's triumph, and indicates the ritual separation between the "outside" of military activity and the "inside" of the city's community. Similarly, we find the nearby temple of the goddess Fortuna Redux, to whom Rome owed the safe return of the emperor and the army. The sacrifice celebrating their victory is shown in front of the façade of the Capitoline temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus, who thus is symbolically present at the event. In images, architecture always bears religio-political meaning.

The representative selection of figures unites with a synthetic depiction of actions. Victorious battles are portrayed in a typology of heroic and impassioned fighting; the triumph is concentrated on the group around the triumphator in his quadriga and the presentation of spoils; sacrifices are reduced to the dignified representation of the protagonist pouring a libation, and the dramatic killing of the sacrificial bull. These scenes frequently use fixed representational typologies that correspond to the repetitive character of the rituals. Deities and allegories do not contradict the basic realism of the scenes; they express the ideological aspects that shaped reality.

Great value is placed on the realistic depiction of such details that are significant for the political and ideological message. This applies, on the one hand, to the symbols of political and social rank of the individuals portrayed: the toga indicated the Roman citizen; senators, knights, and plebeians were differentiated through the color of their garments and different footwear. Magistrates were distinguished by lictors; the presence or absence of axes in their *fasces* marked their office as either military or civic. On the other hand, it was crucial that the religious rituals were depicted realistically and in their prescribed forms. The person offering the sacrifice had a fold of the toga drawn over his head (*capite velato*) in Roman ritual, but was bare-headed in Greek cults. The priests and cult servants appear in specific garb, they are equipped with special implements and vessels for the cult, play music with the prescribed instruments, and perform the rituals in traditional ways. In addition, gestures that communicate political significance are precisely depicted: a raised arm, for instance, for a public speech (*adlocutio*), an outstretched arm for the granting of mercy on the subjugation of enemies, or the handshake between two political partners (*dextrarum iunctio*) for confirmation of a contract or mutual trust (Brilliant 1963).

Apart from the large state reliefs, these trends are particularly prominent in the smaller reliefs that primarily decorated the monuments and tombs of the Roman middle classes and the Italian municipal elites. They visualize social status and achievements in simple, paratactic compositions ranging from the religious rituals of lesser officials to the bakery of the freedman Marcus Vergilius Eurysaces. Scholars have interpreted such images either in "national" terms as evidence of "*romanitas*," or in social terms as "plebeian art" (Bianchi Bandinelli 1967a and b). In fact, however, we are dealing with the "presentational style" mentioned above, which served in various contexts to visualize themes that required a certain degree of factual detail (Petersen 2006; Hölscher 2012).

Yet, the realism of the details only ever extends as far as it serves the political message; irrelevant aspects of reality are never depicted for their own sake, but are instead largely ignored. We are therefore dealing with a selective realism that serves to communicate significant semantic content.

Rome and the Empire

The emergence of the Roman Empire out of a city state had the consequence that the monuments of political identity and collective memory, most of which were erected by the power elite—that is, the senate and the emperor—were mainly concentrated in Rome itself. Over time,

however, the practice of erecting monuments was extended in two directions: horizontally from the capital into the expanse of the empire, and vertically from the political elite into other social classes.

In many cases, the monuments in the empire were shaped by local expectations, and thus differ from the traditions of the capital. In the expansive phase of the Republic, Roman generals already marked their conquests with spectacular monuments in the provinces. One early example is the pillar monument of Lucius Aemilius Paullus Macedonicus at Delphi (168 BCE), which carried an equestrian statue of the victor, and was converted from a monument to his defeated opponent, the Macedonian King Perseus. A Greek-style frieze all around its upper part portrays the victorious battle as the basis of his fame (Kähler 1965).

In the imperial period, emperors were not only worshipped in public sanctuaries, but also honored by monuments of various kinds. Among the largest and most lavishly decorated examples is the Sebasteion of Aphrodisias (Asia Minor), which consisted of a three-storied passageway that led to the temple of the deified and ruling Roman emperors and Aphrodite/Venus, the ancestral goddess of the Julio-Claudian dynasty. Its porticoes were decorated with 180 relief panels depicting Roman rule from an eastern perspective (Figures 24.2 and 28.5). The emperors appear in traditional Hellenistic allegorical scenes, and personifications represent the provinces of the Roman Empire, all surrounded by the gods of the Greco-Roman world. Another gigantic work of this kind is a monumental relief frieze from Ephesus, whose architectural context remains unclear (Figure 2.5; cf. Oberleitner 2006). It celebrates the rule of the emperor Antoninus Pius (138–161 CE) with pictorial themes that concern the whole Empire, but seen from the perspective of the capital of the province of Asia: the dynasty of the present-day emperors with a sacrifice according to Greek ritual; a battle against a range of different, but primarily eastern barbarians, in which the emperor appears as a Greek god in a quadriga; personifications of cities of the Empire, including Ephesus, which appear on par with the Roman capital.

The equal value of province and capital is even more strongly accentuated in the Arch of Septimius Severus in Leptis Magna (203 CE), the emperor's native town. In monumental relief friezes, it depicts the triumphant entries of the emperor into Leptis Magna and Rome as



Figure 2.5 Relief frieze with battle scene from a monument of Antoninus Pius. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, inv. I 865. Photo: Kunsthistorisches Museum, Wien.

well as the emperor's celebratory sacrifices to the gods of both cities (Strocka 1972). Barely a century later, the full decentralization of the Empire is demonstrated by the arch in front of Galerius' imperial palace in Thessaloniki (Mayer 2002).

Systems of Ideology

On richly decorated monuments, images from "history" are configured into a complex ideological arrangement.

The actual body of the Ara Pacis Augustae (13–9 BCE) was decorated with multiple friezes in which Rome's global dominance was linked to state religion (Figures 10.4–10.5; Simon 1967). Personifications of subdued provinces were depicted in the lower tiers, while the traditional annual sacrificial procession at the festival of the Ara Pacis (*anniversarium sacrificium*) was shown in the uppermost frieze, expressing the Roman idea that peace is only possible on the basis of victory (*victoriis parva pax*). The full concept of eternal Augustan peace is presented on the perimeter wall of the sacred precinct. Ornamental plants that symbolize the fecundity of the era of peace and are populated by the swans of Apollo, the emperor's protective god, feature in the bottom tier. Above, the long sides depict the one-time procession to establish the altar, including Augustus as the protagonist of *pietas* (Figure 2.4), the most prominent priestly colleges, and the imperial family as the current pillars of the state. They are supplemented by the mythical founders of Rome flanking the entrance: Aeneas as an *exemplum* of *pietas*, and the Roman she-wolf with Romulus and Remus as future models of Roman *virtus*. On the rear side, they are juxtaposed with personifications of Rome's global empire: the warlike goddess of the city, Roma, enthroned on a pile of weapons, and the peaceful earth goddess Tellus with her flourishing children in an abundant landscape of domestic animals and vegetation. The altar and its perimeter wall complement each other: on the altar, the traditional, general concepts of imperial rule and religion; on the enclosure, the vision of the era of peace that was brought about by Augustus, had been prefigured by the heroes of mythical prehistory, and gains eternity in the allegories of Rome and Empire.

Similarly, the pictorial decoration of the Arch of Trajan in Benevento (109–114 CE) is systematically formed into a conception of imperial dominance (Figure 2.6; cf. Fittschen 1972; Rotili 1972; Hölscher 2002). Both fronts of the arch are decorated with relief panels in three tiers that differ according to their direction, inward toward Rome or outward toward the Empire. The lower tier depicts the beginnings of Trajan's rule: on the exterior, he is shown securing the borders through treaties with foreign peoples; on the interior, his arrival in Rome and his recognition by the senate and the people are depicted. The second tier visualizes general administrative measures: the conscription of soldiers, care for veterans, and so on. The upper tier shows the emperor's triumphant successes: on the exterior, the pacification of the conquered province of Dacia, and the integration of various deities into the Roman Empire; on the interior, his recognition by Jupiter, the foremost god of the state, who presents his thunderbolt to Trajan and thereby installs him as ruler of the Earth. This general concept of government is supplemented by two reliefs in the passageway of the arch that praise the emperor's achievements in the area of Beneventum: the inauguration of the road to Brundisium, which was paid for by the emperor, and financial support for families with many children in the Italian cities. Through its image decoration, the architecture of the arch is turned into a cosmos of imperial rule.

This cosmos possessed a surprising diachronic stability. The arch of Constantine (312–315 CE) was only partially decorated with newly carved reliefs that depict Constantine's rise to power. The majority of the decoration consists of reused reliefs from monuments to Trajan, Hadrian, and Marcus Aurelius, in which only the heads of the emperors were replaced with portraits of Constantine (in part, also of his co-emperor Licinius; cf. Figure 2.3). It is disputed



Figure 2.6 Benevento, honorary arch of Trajan. Photo: Alinari Archives, Florence. Foto Alinari 11495.

whether the selection of these reliefs demonstrates that Constantine considered these specific emperors his role models. In any case, the reuse clearly shows that the pictorial themes employed by previous rulers (*adventus* and *profectio*, sacrifices, *adlocutio*, triumph, and so on) were so topical that they could be adopted for the current emperor simply by exchanging the heads. These heterogeneous series form a comprehensive concept of imperial rule, which is framed by Constantinian medallions of Sol and Luna on the sides of the arch, and thereby obtains a late antique cosmic character (L'Orange and von Gerkan 1939).

Visibility and Cultural Practice

The complex “historical” decoration of the large state monuments strongly contrasts with the conditions of its visibility. Trajan’s Column stood in a narrow courtyard surrounded by porticos, so that its relief band, the end of which was 35 meters above ground level, could only be seen from an extremely steep angle. The many details of the scenes and, above all, the ideological aspects of the narrative structure cannot have been discernible. However, monuments like the Ara Pacis, whose reliefs were easily visible at eye level, will also hardly have been perceived as a complex “program,” because that would have required the viewer to walk repeatedly around the exterior wall and the interior altar in order to understand the iconographic references. In general, state monuments stood in spaces of public life where people did not usually spend their time thoroughly studying pictorial programs.

Discussions of this issue have been controversial. Occasionally scholars have concluded from the poor visibility that sophisticated analyses of the monuments' imagery are misguided (Veyne 1988). Others have posited that the ancient viewers were, in fact, able to gain a good view, for example from the roofs of the buildings around Trajan's Column. The most appropriate position is probably one that acknowledges the complex meanings as well as the restricted visibility (Settis 1992; Galinier 2007), and assumes various levels of perception. Initially, viewers perceived the entire monument in its material size, shape, and function, and realized the existence of its rich decoration; in doing so, and based on their general experience, they could assume that the themes and motifs were appropriate to the monument and explained its significance. From the context, for instance the Forum of Trajan, or from general knowledge of the urban landscape, for instance the area around the Ara Pacis, they will usually have known to which emperor the monument was dedicated. These basic steps of appreciation will surely have been taken, more or less consciously, even by those who stopped there for reasons other than studying the monuments. Anyone who wanted to see more could glance at the lower turns of the column, or the individual reliefs of the Ara Pacis, and would have recognized the general theme of war against the Dacians, or the religious procession; depending on the level of interest, he or she could also penetrate further into the details, for which a general familiarity with the political iconography, state monuments, or coins could have been helpful; the original coloring of the reliefs would also have made some details stand out more clearly. He or she could associate the ideological concepts of *virtus* and *pietas*, and could even comprehend the meaning behind the constellation of individual pictorial themes on a given monument. These are all *potential* steps of perception that are not absolutely necessary for a basic understanding—and could be supplemented with imagination wherever a closer view was not possible. For this potential meaning to be unfolded, however, it is imperative that the observer be convinced that the decoration does in fact have a complex meaning even on the level of its minor details. This conviction allows the viewer to participate in the meaning of the monument even if he or she only captures it in a very general and partial way. The meaning of the monument thus obtains a certain autonomy that is nonetheless essential for its effect.

Image, Reality, and Meaning

Images are not merely reflections of reality, but constructs of visual meaning. Political monuments visualize ideological concepts. However, they are much more than translations of key political terms such as *virtus* and *pietas* into an image. Unlike language, images lend a visual presence and visibility to the messages. Beyond the decoding of the iconography, understanding images therefore requires a visual empathy with the meanings of the images' physical realities, postures, and actions.

The imagery of "historical" monuments depicts real scenes of political life in their ideologically charged historical significance. This does not imply, as constructivists often assume, an opposition between a given and meaningless reality on the one hand, and a construction of meaning in the medium of the image on the other. The real scenes of political life also have a specific format in which meaning is conveyed and perceived: rituals and ceremonies, gatherings of communities, and actions by individuals on the "political stage" are inconceivable without meanings. Visual strategies are adopted in real life as well as in art. Reality, too, is an "image." The world of images, on the one hand, and the world of real people and objects, on the other, are two "media" through which visual meaning is conveyed.

The visual strategies of images and the world of real life are, however, subject to different conditions. There are analogies, in some respects: the semantics of bodies and postures, gestures, clothing, and equipment; the central position of protagonists and their facing, frontal

or otherwise; the hierarchy of front and back, above and below, and so on. Yet art can do more than that: by selecting, configuring, and stylizing, it creates semantic emphases and nuances that are not possible in the real world. This is where the real significance of political monuments lies for our understanding of the Roman world.

GUIDE TO FURTHER READING

The majority of scholarship in this field has been published in German and Italian. Important contributions in English are the pioneering work of Scott Ryberg (1955), and Torelli (1982). For recent work on single monuments see, for instance, Smith (1987 and 2013) and Kuttner (1995). Among general historical interpretations of public and private art under individual emperors, see the classical monograph of Zanker (1987/1988) and, more recently, Pollini (2012). For the language of images in public art, see Hölscher (2004).

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