

The 1900th Anniversary of Trajan's Column in Rome The Symbolism of Trajan's Victory in Rome and at Sarmizegetusa Regia

CORIOLAN
HORAȚIU OPREANU



Fig. 1. GIOVANNI BATTISTA PIRANESI, Trajan's Column

Coriolan Horațiu Opreanu

Senior researcher at the Cluj-Napoca Institute of Archaeology and Art History of the Romanian Academy, director of the archaeological site at Porolissum (Sălaj County). Author, among others, of the book **Migration Period and Early Medieval Cemeteries at Fântânele (Bistrița-Năsăud County)** (2012).

TRAJAN'S COLUMN has multiple meanings: it has historical value, illustrating an important moment in history, the Dacian war of Trajan, it also sends a strong ideological and propagandistic message and it is undeniably one of the most valuable monuments of Roman art.¹

Trajan's Column was inaugurated in A.D. 113, on 12 May, one year after the whole monumental ensemble of Trajan's Forum was opened to the citizens of Rome. The third series of Dacian *lusiones*, involving 1,202 pairs of gladiators, took place in early May.² The Column was made of 17 marble drums, having a total height of 29.78 m. It rested on a 5.37 m high base ornamented with carved military trophies which later received the golden urn with Trajan's ashes.³ On top, the bronze statue of the emperor overlooked the Basilica Ulpia and the magnificent courtyard of the Forum, decorated with statues of Dacians⁴ (Fig. 2) and indicating that everything was

paid “*Ex manubiis*,” from the Dacian spoils.⁵ The Column was ornamented with carved scenes of the Dacian war, disposed in the shape of an illustrated *volumen rotulus*, a Roman book.⁶ Trajan’s *Commentarii de bello Dacico* was preserved in the Latin section of the *Bibliotheca Ulpia*. The scenes on the Column could only be seen in succession from the two libraries which surrounded it. Trajan was glorified after death as *vir fortis sapiensque*.⁷ The Forum and the Column represented the peak of the imperial propaganda, glorifying Trajan’s Victory. But another famous monument in Rome, “the Great Trajanic Frieze” illustrates even better the Victory ideology.⁸ Here an *Adventus* scene shows the emperor crowned by the goddess Victoria and goddess Roma is taking him into *Urbs* for the celebration of the triumph.

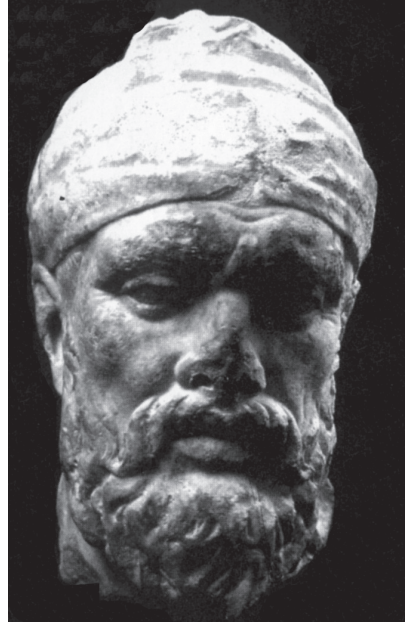


Fig. 2. Head of a noble Dacian

Trajan’s Column is the main information source for Trajan’s Dacian war. It illustrated the lost *Commentaries* of Trajan kept in Antiquity in the nearby Latin library.⁹ Scene number LXXVIII (78) on Trajan’s Column in Rome shows two trophies and a Victory. It was the main argument of Italian historian Santo Mazzarino,¹⁰ who considered that we are dealing with a single *Bellum Dacicum* of Trajan, divided into an *expeditio Dacica prima*, mentioned in the inscription of L. Minucius Natalis and the *secunda expeditio* attested by the inscription at Corinth of C. Caecilius Martialis. *Expeditio Dacica prima* took place during A.D. 101–102, comprising three military campaigns: the first one when the Roman army marched in several columns towards the Dacian royal residence in southwestern Transylvania, the second one in Lower Moesia, where Trajan was obliged to go in order to save the besieged garrisons and towns and finally the third one in the spring of A.D. 102, when Trajan prepared the final attack against the center of the Dacian kingdom.¹¹ The most valuable information on this campaign comes from Cassius Dio’s text.¹² We learn from him that Trajan conquered several hill-forts, approaching Sarmizegetusa. Losing all hope Decebalus agreed to the Romans’ terms in order to secure his throne and started peace negotiations. At the end he personally came to Trajan and, prostrating, laid down his arms and made the gesture of defeat, says Cassius Dio. The Romans’ conditions were harsh and involved handing over the weapons, siege engines and deserters, dismantling the fortifications, withdrawing from the territories con-



Fig. 3. Scene LXXV on Trajan's Column representing the surrender of Decebalus in A.D. 102

quered by the Romans, considering friends and enemies the same peoples as the Romans did and no longer receiving deserters or using soldiers coming from the empire. The artists of the Column did their best to stress the importance of the ceremony.¹³ They had to highlight the symbolism of the scene and to emphasize the presence of the great vanquished foe, Decebalus, king of the Dacians (Fig. 3). The same scene shows the peace terms, illustrating the dismantling of the fortifications (Fig. 4), the only demand that could be rendered in plastic art. Then Trajan returned to Italy after leaving behind a "*stratopedon*" at Sarmizegetusa and several "*frourai*" in the rest of the country. It is much easier to establish that the "*frourai*" were *praesidia*, or *castella* of the auxiliary garrisons. There may have been discussions concerning the meaning of "*stratopedon*" and the Sarmizegetusa¹⁴ mentioned by Cassius Dio: was it the Dacian royal residence, or the future Roman veteran colony? The difficulty comes from the fact that in Cassius Dio's work "*stratopedon*" is used with several meanings: legion, army, or fort. At the same time, the Roman military presence is attested in the first years of the 2nd century on both sites mentioned above. I shall try to focus now only on the situation of royal Sarmizegetusa, in the mountains of southwestern Transylvania.

Older Romanian archaeologists and historians continued to believe that royal Sarmizegetusa was conquered by the Romans only in A.D. 106, after the second expedition. For them, that was the only reason behind the second expedi-



Fig. 4. Scene LXXV–LXXVI on Trajan's Column showing the dismantling of the Dacian fortifications in A.D. 102

tion of Trajan. But archaeology is not able to make difference between artifacts from A.D. 102 and 106. An intensive archaeological research program started at Sarmizegetusa Regia in 1950,¹⁵ continuing, with several interruptions, until nowadays. A brief historiographical insight is necessary in order to rightly understand the results. Excavations were focused on two main areas already identified in the past: the citadel and the sacred area. An accurate mapping of all the uncovered structures is still to be completed, and the same holds true for the monographic publication of the results. So, at the moment we are dealing with limited archaeological records and with many claims of the authors of the excavations, unsupported by scientific evidence. In 2012 a BBC documentary used for the first time a last generation prospection technique (LiDAR) based on airborne laser scanning, very efficient in forested areas such as Grădiște Hill. The resulting aerial image is accurate, identifying new fortification elements.

The so-called “great citadel” was considered the central point, protected by a whole defense system consisting of several citadels and strongholds covering a vast area of more than 200 square kilometers.¹⁶ C. Daicoviciu defined the citadel at Grădiște Muncelului as a refugee type fortification,¹⁷ a shelter in case of danger for the civilians living in the vicinity. Later, I. H. Crișan argued that, given the paucity of Dacian archaeological traces inside the walled area, the citadel

was neither permanently inhabited, nor a “princely residence.”¹⁸ So, what type of citadel was it? Obviously, the absence of any imposing Dacian building inside indicates from the beginning that the precinct could not possibly have been the Dacian royal residence, called by Ptolemy “*to basileion*,” or “*regia*” in Latin. C. Daicoviciu mentions in his excavation reports that the only constructions found inside the citadel were a stone and mortar one of Roman origin and some wooden barracks also belonging to the Roman habitation period. Much research work was dedicated to the precinct wall, as trenches were cut across the wall and some sectors of the wall were unearthed (the last action is not a valid research method). Unfortunately very little documentation is available from that period. The conclusion of C. Daicoviciu and of his followers¹⁹ was that the wall had five archaeological sequences: the 1st—the original one; the 2nd—the partial demolition, as a consequence of the terms of the peace of A.D. 102; the 3rd—a reconstruction made by the Dacians during A.D. 103–104; the 4th—a second Roman destruction at the end of the war in A.D. 106; and finally the 5th—the Roman reconstruction which was uncovered by the archaeologists. So, C. Daicoviciu²⁰ established that this was the Dacian royal Sarmizegetusa so much hunted for by emperor Trajan, but at the same time he accepted that he had discovered a Roman fortification erected by the 4th legion Flavia Felix, as proved by an inscription recovered from the structure of the wall. He also said the legion garrisoned the fortification against a possible uprising of the native population. He even mentioned the discovery of many Roman objects and coins, but none of these were published, nor were the plans of the Roman buildings. Inside the wall, not done in the Dacian technique according to Daicoviciu, researchers found many fragments of columns and other carved pieces taken from the destroyed shrines. In 1963 another limestone block with the same inscription, mentioning the 4th legion, was found in the wall.

In the following decades, little new information was added to this background. I. Glodariu, the director of the site after 1984, wrote in 1993 that the initial Dacian fortification had been smaller, including only the highest area of Grădiște Hill, with a surface averaging 1 hectare.²¹ His assertion was never demonstrated by any relevant photographs or drawings of the presumed demolished Dacian wall. The key to the problem were the intersection points between the presumed Dacian wall and its Roman prolongation. But they were never checked. This small fortification, even we accept its real existence, is even harder to consider as being the “royal residence.” The only conclusion we can draw is that inside the 3 hectares-large area surrounded by the defense wall there are no Dacian-type habitation structures, while the only buildings—stone and timber ones—are of Roman type. The same I. Glodariu²² wrote in 1992 about a Dacian mint imitating Roman 1st century B.C.–1st century A.D. *denarii*. The workshop

was situated exactly under the defense wall. Another important stratigraphic observation was made at that time: the Dacian limestone-paved road going to the Sacred Area was 1.10–1.20 m lower than the wall, so they were not contemporary. The walls were erected when the road was no longer in use, which means after the Roman conquest. On Grădiște Hill we have nothing but a Roman fort adapted to the natural conditions of the area.²³ As stone wall defenses and even baths were necessary, is obvious that it was meant to be occupied by a garrison for a longer period of time. The question is, when did this happen, in A.D. 102 or only in A.D. 106? As I have already said, archaeology is not able to make this difference. Cassius Dio's brief account, epigraphic data and logical thinking are the only sources. Maybe this is not enough, but we can nevertheless try. From Cassius Dio we have to bear in mind that after the first expedition, in A.D. 102, Trajan left garrisons in the conquered territories (from where Decebalus was obliged to withdraw). We cannot be sure if the text is referring to Dacian Sarmizegetusa or to Roman Sarmizegetusa. If the Roman garrison was brought to Grădiște only in A.D. 106, after the province of Dacia was created, it most likely consisted of an auxiliary unit assigned to guard an empty, ruined former residential site. But no epigraphic trace of any *auxilia* is known. Instead we have more building inscriptions attesting the legions which built the fort.

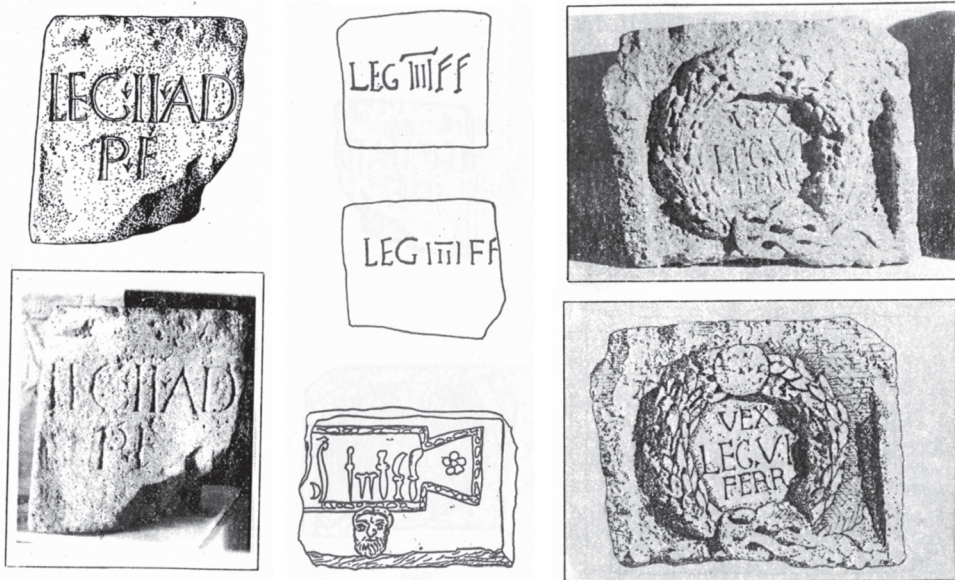


Fig. 5. Construction blocks with inscriptions of the three legions found in the defense wall of the Roman fort at Sarmizegetusa Regia



Fig. 6. Stone blocks with the image of paired Capricorns found in the defense wall of the Roman fort at Sarmizegetusa Regia

These valuable epigraphic texts (Fig. 5) were found in the most unfortunate moment for Sarmizegetusa Regia: the year 1980, when the political authorities ordered the Romanian army to carry out massive “restoration” work. Many original stones had to be replaced with modern stone substitutes. Fortunately they never finished, but unfortunately their activity is still visible. One of their actions was the dismantling of the defense wall, under the supervision of archaeologists. These were the circumstances in which several inscriptions and carved reliefs were taken out from the structure of the wall. It was not an archaeological excavation and no photographs with their *in situ* position exist. That is the reason why in several publications their exact place of discovery is differently indicated. I prefer to credit the first “dry” archaeological report signed by the director of the site, H. Daicoviciu, and not one of the later interpretations.²⁴

The first inscription is on a limestone block taken from a former wall worked in the Dacian technique. On one side there is the inscription *leg(io) II Ad(in)trix) P(ia) F(idelis)*. The second one is on a limestone block having carved on one side a victory garland around the inscription *Vex(illatio) leg(ionis) VI Ferr(atae)*. The inscriptions mentioning the three legions are building inscriptions indicating who erected the defense wall. It is impossible to know which unit manned the fort.²⁵

Supplementary information is provided by three stone reliefs with the image of paired Capricorns found in the same wall of the Roman fort (Fig. 6). It seems they come from the vicinity of the gates. I will discuss in the following pages the



Fig. 7. Scene XLVI–XLIX on Trajan's Column representing the arrival at the beginning of the third campaign of the first expedition of *legio I Minervia*

symbolism and significance of this image.²⁶ A first hypothesis trying to explain the meaning of the reliefs was advanced in 1965 by I. Glodariu, who considered it the symbol of the 1st Legion Adiutrix, not mentioned in any inscription. In 1997 A. Diaconescu²⁷ agreed, adding as corroborating evidence the relief from Carnuntum featuring the same image and the inscription *leg(io) I Ad(iutrix) P(ia) F(idelis)*. There are five legions having the Capricorn as a *signum*. But the *signa* were always bronze statuettes placed on top of a long rod, such as the ram of the 1st Legion Minerva shown on Trajan's Column (Fig. 7), for example.²⁸ They were the original models for the stone reliefs. In the case of the Capricorn it is obvious that alone or as a pair it was not enough to let the viewer know which of the five legions is represented. An inscription was always necessary, mainly on the construction blocks. This is the case of the relief from Carnuntum. Another example is the limestone relief from Benwell²⁹ in Britain, but between them there is a *vexillum* with the inscription *leg(io) II* and on the lower part of the plaque again *Leg(io) II Aug(usta)*. So even if the Capricorn was the symbol

of *legio II Augusta* the inscription was necessary to establish the identity of the unit. That means we have to look for another explanation for the image of the paired Capricorns.

The zodiacal sign of the Capricorn³⁰ was closely connected to Augustus. The story of Suetonius and also the didactic poem by Manilius, *Astronomica*, give us some idea of the meaning of this sign for Augustus. Manilius was writing when Augustus was already in full power. He portrays the imperial rule as cosmically ordained by the same fate that rules the motions of the stars in the heavens and governs every aspect of human life on earth. In his never-ending ideological campaign to insert a monarchical principle into the still intact political structure of the Roman Republic, Augustus used the symbolism of images on coins and public monuments. He struck a coin with a Capricorn holding the globe of the world and with the inscription of his name, Augustus. Augustus is the Capricorn and, as the Cosmocrator, he has the whole world in his hands. We must also bear in mind that the Capricorn was associated with the planet Saturn. According to Roman mythology, Saturn had to come to live in Italy after his son Jupiter cast him out of heaven, and the age in which Saturn ruled as king over Italy was a “golden age” of paradise on earth. Augustus’ reign was portrayed in the poetry of Virgil and Horace as well as in Augustus’ propaganda as a return to that Saturnian golden age (“*redeunt Saturnia regna*”).

The image of paired Capricorns emerged at the beginning of the 1st century A.D. on antefixes, Victoria standing between the Capricorns, sometimes on a globe and holding a trophy in her hand. This is a heraldic style which can be connected with the trophy statue erected by Augustus in the new *curia*, after Actium, as T. Hölscher³¹ demonstrated. As these antefixes are coming from private houses in central Italy and the motif exists also on a *lararium* from Menander’s house at Pompeii, they suggest the adoption by the owners of the new propaganda of Augustus’ time recalling the peace that came after Actium. It is obvious that the heraldic motif of the paired Capricorns has no relation with the *signum* of the First Legion Adiutrix, probably founded only in Galba’s time. The period of peace after the year of the four emperors and the connection with Augustus was probably part of the propaganda of the Flavians, as the paired Capricorns holding a globe between them appeared on a coin from A.D. 80–81, after Vespasian’s death, with the legend *Divus Augustus Vespasianus*. Stressed here is the dynastic continuity of the Flavians with the old Julio-Claudian family. The message also makes an analogy between Actium and the battle of Cremona, and the conquest of Rome and the killing of Vitellius. Thus, the heraldic paired Capricorns can also be related with the House of the emperor, but also with army and military divinities such as Victory.³²

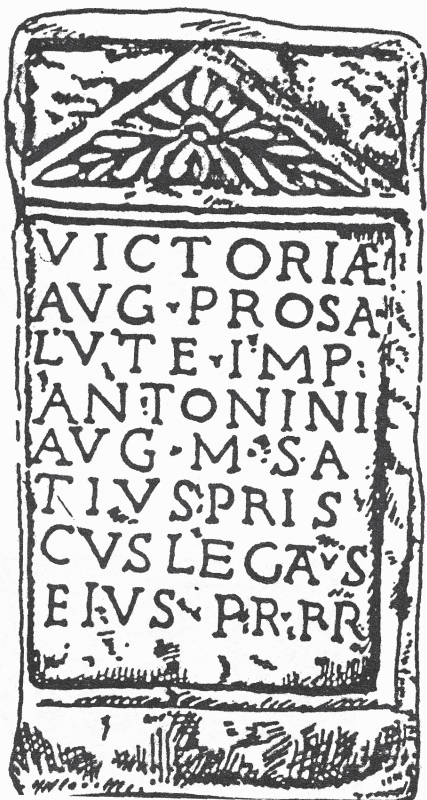


Fig. 8. Inscription for *Victoria Augusta* found at "Sub Cunune"

where in the neighborhood of Grădiște Hill is very likely. Not very far, at the place called "Sub Cunune," some 19th century finds include a Roman silver coin hoard of 500 pieces, Roman tiles and bricks. Of great interest are two votive inscriptions found there. The governor of Upper Dacia, M. Staius Priscus, dedicated the first one to *Victoria Augusta* (Fig. 8) in A.D. 156/157,³⁴ during Antoninus Pius' time. Later the governor of the three provinces of Dacia, L. Aemilius Carus, erected in A.D. 175³⁵ an inscription to *Apollo Augustus*. That time, the Dacian capital no longer existed and Decebalus had been dead for more than 50 years. The only valid explanation for the presence of the two inscriptions of the two governors and of the other Roman traces is the existence of a shrine or of an altar built by Trajan after the defeat and the surrender of Decebalus in A.D. 102.³⁶

Victory monuments in Rome are grand and of high artistic refinement. At Sarmizegetusa Regia, in the theatre of war, the Victory monuments were made by military artisans and are of modest artistic value, but of great documentary

Coming back to the three reliefs with paired Capricorns recovered from the defense wall of the Roman fort at Sarmizegetusa Regia, despite the clumsiness of the military artisans and the deterioration of the stone we think that the two Capricorns are holding between their forepaws a globe on which rests an elongated object which could be the statue of Victory, or a trophy. Recently, I. Piso³³ proposed that the globe may have initially featured four vertical carved lines for the Latin numeral four, obviously from the Fourth Legion, already epigraphically attested there. If true, this is strong additional evidence for rejecting the connection of the motif with the 1st Legion *Adiutrix*. Victory was a dynastic goddess. The celebration of the emperor's victory meant sending a strong political message. This propagandistic pattern was materialized in the building of characteristic monuments, such as altars, arches, trophies, inscriptions, figurative representations, and in ceremonies. The existence of a *Victoria* monument some-

significance. The message they sent to the citizens of Rome or to the soldiers of Trajan's army in Dacia was one and the same, and it was truly effective: the eternal glory of Trajan, of the Empire and of the Roman army. Today we can only say that it succeeded.



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Abstract

The 1900th Anniversary of Trajan’s Column in Rome:

The Symbolism of Trajan’s Victory in Rome and at Sarmizegetusa Regia

The author briefly presents the characteristics of Trajan’s Column, inaugurated 1900 years ago, highlighting its great importance for the reconstruction of the history of Trajan’s Dacian war, as well as its ideological and propagandistic message. It is a monument to the Victory of the Emperor which links the imperial power with the army and the glory of the Empire. In the theatre of war, in the mountains at Sarmizegetusa Regia, the army expressed the same ideas, but in a totally different manner. Their monuments are the work of modest military artisans, inferior in artistic value to the monuments of Trajan’s Forum in Rome, of which only the Column is still in existence.

Keywords

Trajan’s Column, Victory, Capricorns, Sarmizegetusa Regia, epigraphy