

**Johannes GRIEBEL, Der Kaiser im Krieg. Die Bilder der Säule des Marc Aurel. Image & Context Bd. 11. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter 2013, X + 501 S.**

The Column of Marcus Aurelius has been until recently relatively neglected by scholars who have tended to view the monument as at best more difficult to interpret than the Column of Trajan. Johannes Griebel's book is a refreshing and important addition to the increasing scholarship on Marcus' monument. Griebel sets out to study the Column of Marcus Aurelius "as a monument in its own right" (211), by which he means independent of traditional approaches to the Column and especially of direct comparison with the Column of Trajan. He deliberately distances himself from the recent trend to identify scenes with specific imperial virtues; although he accepts this approach as generally valid, Griebel believes the process masks deeper meanings of the iconography (14-15). Instead he chooses to focus on the emperor and how his person and behavior is depicted in various scenes. The bulk of the main text comprises a discussion of five scene types, three ceremonial in nature (setting out and marching, speeches to the troops, sacrifice) and two focused on interaction with the enemy (prisoners/supplicants before the emperor, discussions with barbarians). The text ends with a series of conclusions regarding the function of the emperor in the frieze, the depiction of the emperor, the narrative, the master plan of the frieze, and later monuments.

The main role of the emperor in the frieze, argues Griebel (189), is that of a supreme military commander. This function is represented in a number of different ways, highlighting different qualities of the emperor and clarifying the relationships between emperor and army, emperor and enemy, and emperor and friendly non-Romans. The emperor is shown marching with the army, often carrying a spear, demonstrating his leadership. Scenes of speeches to the soldiers have a similar message, though in contrast to the march scenes there is much more emphasis on displaying hierarchy and stressing the emperor's role as holder of *imperium*. Sacrifice scenes complement this image by stressing the emperor's role as *pontifex maximus*; these scenes however are rare on the Column (three in all). Scenes showing the submission, both voluntary and forced, of the enemy to the emperor demonstrate military success. Griebel (152-153) draws attention to the unique depiction of barbarians in scene 49 who approach the emperor with their hands covered by their cloaks, a behavior more suited to an approach to a god than to a man. There are also scenes that show the emperor interacting with barbarians on a more equal level, a motif that when considered together with scenes of barbarian submission indicates a conscious differentiation between "bad" and "good" barbarians, the former group that

Marcus destroys, the latter that he uses for his own ends (191-193). Griebel also points out ways in which compositional techniques are used in all of these scenes to highlight the presence of the emperor.

Griebel then considers the narrative structure of the frieze, arguing against the prevalent interpretation of it as irregular, relatively unsystematic and incomplete (particularly in comparison to the Column of Trajan). Griebel emphasizes (199) the heavy concentration of scenes showcasing the emperor in the lower part of the frieze: in the first thirty-one scenes nine show Marcus marching with his troops, two making a speech to the soldiers, one sacrificing, five receiving captured enemies, four being approached by submissive barbarians, and one conversing with a barbarian who appears to be shown on a similar level as the emperor (scene 31); the miracles are also included in this portion of the frieze. "Im Vordergrund steht somit nicht die Vermittlung narrativer Handlungsbögen, sondern vielmehr die gute Zugänglichkeit des Bildmaterials und eine dadurch garantierte Rezeption der dargestellten Inhalte." (199) Griebel further argues (200) that on the Column of Marcus Aurelius "die narrative Stringenz zugunsten einer gesteigerten Inszenierung des Kaisers aufgegeben wird" and calls this "eine konstruktive Stragetie"; the Column of Trajan on the other hand, in Griebel's view, sacrificed imperial prominence in order to maintain a coherent narrative.

Griebel uses his conclusions to make a nuanced judgment of the message of the frieze (201-203). He follows current opinion (especially stemming from the work of T. Hölscher) that the frieze was intended to project a message that rebellious enemies of Rome would be suitably punished, but Griebel also stresses that scenes showing Marcus Aurelius interacting with barbarians on an equal level should not be ignored. These show planning for the future security of the empire by means of skillful diplomacy, perhaps even the integration of former enemies, all acts carried out by the emperor.

Griebel's detailed observations on the prominence and especially the activities of the emperor on the Column of Marcus Aurelius are an important contribution to the study of the monument. His analysis of the many roles of the emperor is particularly helpful in throwing light on how the Romans viewed and understood the various functions of their ruler. But there are some difficulties with Griebel's extrapolations from these observations. Griebel's explanation for the rarity of sacrifice scenes (only three on the Column) is problematic: He proposes (191, 212) that these scenes are rare because they did not accord with the main theme of the narrative, that of the relationship between the emperor and the army, and (194, 214) that they did not allow the emperor to be de-

picted as hierarchically superior to the other figures in the scene, and therefore they were deliberately reduced in number (in comparison to the Column of Trajan). The latter argument is doubtful: the central foreground placement of the emperor in these scenes, and his distinctive action of pouring a libation, are compositional tools that help single him out more clearly than in many of the much more common marching scenes. Marcus Aurelius is prominently elevated while sacrificing in scene 30 and is expertly framed in another libation-pouring scene, 75, and is in the heavily damaged scene 13 still easy to recognize by his size and position, as Griebel notes (107). Similarly it is difficult to understand how these scenes minimize the interaction of the emperor and the army. Sacrifice was an indispensable part of a Roman military campaign, for all participants, and it is difficult to imagine such a crucial element being deliberately minimalized simply so that more room could be made for scenes of marching or speeches. The explanation should be sought elsewhere, perhaps in the training and understanding of the artists responsible for the work, or in the materials and resources they had to work with.

Griebel also connects the low prominence of sacrifice scenes to the two miracles shown on the Column, the Lightning Miracle (scene 11) and the Rain Miracle (scene 16). He argues (124) that the fact that the first of these appears in the frieze before the first sacrifice scene (scene 13) shows that the gods did not support the Romans simply because of their “pflichtgemäße Einhaltung religiöser Riten” but rather that their support was a “Grundvoraussetzung”. Griebel does not offer an analysis of the religious implications of this idea, but it would appear to presuppose a substantial departure from the normally conservative Roman relationship with their deities. He also does not discuss why, in a narrative focused on the emperor, his image was not included in the largest and most prominent of these two scenes, the Rain Miracle.

Finally, it is difficult to accept Griebel’s conclusion (196-200) that on the Column of Marcus Aurelius narrative rigor was purposefully abandoned in favor of increasing the prominence of the emperor. The weakness and in some cases absence of narrative structure on the Column of Marcus Aurelius has long been recognized. Griebel (200) sees this as a deliberate choice by designer(s) who were aware of the techniques used on Trajan’s Column but who saw in that earlier monument “etwaige Schwachstellen” that they wished to avoid. The main weakness of the frieze of Trajan’s Column, Griebel argues, was the low visibility of the emperor. Griebel uses this argument to support his theory that the designers of the Marcus Column frieze were fully aware of the structure and design of the frieze of Trajan’s Column. But he only presents (200, n. 437) one damaged scene on Trajan’s Column (scene 5) where scholars have

disagreed over the identification of the emperor. This does not constitute evidence of an obvious and persistent shortcoming of Trajan's Column, let alone a conscious decision to "correct" this on the Column of Marcus Aurelius. It is not difficult to think of ways in which the designers of the frieze of the Column of Marcus Aurelius could have increased the prominence of the emperor while at the same time maintaining a coherent narrative. This could have been achieved by increasing the number of scenes in which the emperor appeared and by using compositional techniques to highlight his presence in these scenes. The use of these techniques, of which Griebel identifies many examples on the Column, does not preclude the creation of a coherent narrative structure.

These criticisms should not detract from the overall success of the work. Johannes Griebel's book is an important, novel and thought-provoking contribution to the scholarship on the Column of Marcus Aurelius and to Roman imperial art as a whole. While some of the conclusions he derives are debatable, his analysis of the role of the emperor on the Column is clear, nuanced, and significantly deepens our understanding of this crucial aspect of the monument. Whatever the goals of the artists who created the Column, whether to improve on perceived shortcomings they saw in the Column of Trajan (in Griebel's opinion), or to complete the task of creating the new frieze with limited resources and without a thorough understanding of its predecessor (as this reviewer believes), Griebel's work makes it clear that the foremost concern in their minds was the presentation of the image of the emperor.

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