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Constructing the Enemy: Dacian Architecture on the Column of Trajan

One of the most striking aspects of the Column of Trajan frieze is its extensive representation of Dacian architectural structures. Previous scholarship has treated the representations of Dacian architecture as nothing more than curiosities or topographic markers within the purported narrative of the frieze. I argue instead that the depictions of Dacian architecture were a crucial part of the monument. While based broadly on the realities of Dacian architectural practice, the depicted structures were not meant to accurately reflect such architectural practice or Dacian topography. Instead they were intended to stand in contrast to, and thus emphasize, the urban sophistication of Rome and the cities under her protection.

The careful development on the frieze of a defined architectural typology for the Dacian enemy speaks to the importance of such architecture for the monument. The Column of Trajan frieze notably does not employ the simple barbarian huts found on the Great Trajanic Frieze or the Column of Marcus Aurelius. Instead the Dacian architecture on the frieze seems intended to reflect distantly the architectural sophistication of the conquered Dacia, but only in the guise of a limited accomplishment of an inferior enemy, whose glory could be appropriated by Rome. Several lines of evidence, such as a familiarity with specific aspects of Dacian fortifications, including the *murus Dacicus* construction method, demonstrate that those that produced the frieze were aware of distinctive features of the Dacian architectural tradition. Yet what is omitted is as interesting as what is included. The more expressly urban features found in the archaeological record of Dacia, such as monumental sanctuaries and densely populated centers, are not present on the frieze, despite the fact that these probably would have been the most notable features of the newly conquered territory. On the frieze, Dacian fortifications are empty, and other Dacian constructions are typically wooden, strange, illogical, and frequently on fire. This can be contrasted with the anachronistically elaborate buildings depicted for nearby provincial towns friendly to Rome. The Dacian architecture on the frieze thus suggests an awareness in Rome of the complexity and sophistication of indigenous Dacian architecture, as well as an effort to maintain a crucial and unique conceptual connection between urbanism and Roman culture. Not only was Rome urban, but the barbarian world was distinctly non-urban. Urbanism was something critical that must be associated with the Romans, and denied to the Dacians.