
The Parthenon Frieze and The Column of Trajan; Filling the Historical Gaps

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Abstract

Artifacts from the ancient world are essential to help develop the modern day understanding of society. However, not only is the presence of these artifacts an effective way to help develop and further the knowledge, there are also times where the lack of information behind these artifacts can hinder the understanding or add questions. This essay will use the examples of the Parthenon frieze and the Trajan Column to create an understanding of the impact ancient artifacts had on the understanding of the ancient Graeco-Roman world.

Studying ancient artwork requires more than just simply looking at an image or artifact and contextualizing the images, symbols, and inscriptions one may find within the work. One must recognize the influences that have impacted the stylistic developments of the work, and the aspects of other societies that have influenced the creation of the ancient artifacts. In the Graeco-Roman world the Romans were well known for taking inspiration from the Greeks, in particular within their artistic developments. This can be seen in both their original artworks, as well as the fact that they made copies of Greek sculptures. In such recognition, this essay will analyze individually the Parthenon frieze and the Trajan Column to help create an understanding of the ancient Graeco-Roman world as a whole.

In the Graeco-Roman world, temples would often contain artistic friezes that would sit between the columns of the temple filling the space towards the roof. However, these friezes often had stylistic difficulties in the narrative space being properly utilized in the manner of being a long, narrow ribbon typically filled with motifs of battles or assemblies.¹ The Parthenon frieze is considered to be a representation of fifth-century Athenian citizens participating in a Panathenaic procession.² The frieze is dated to 442 to 438 BCE³, and is believed to have been

¹ Susan Woodford, *Greek and Roman Art*, (Thames and Hudson, 2020), 60.

² Joan B. Connelly, "Parthenon and Parthenoi: A Mythological Interpretation of the Parthenon Frieze," *American Journal of Archaeology* 100, no. 1 (1996): 53, <https://doi.org/10.2307/506297>.

³ Jerome J. Pollitt, "The Meaning of the Parthenon Frieze," *Studies in the History of Art* 49 (1997): 51, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42622168>.

done under the direction of Phidias.⁴ Although there are no direct indications that Phidias directed the construction, Plutarch states that a large amount of the work at this time was overseen by Phidias.⁵ The assumption that Phidias was responsible for the Parthenon frieze is influenced by Phidias' work in the Athena Parthenos, and this led Plutarch to the belief that he was responsible for the Parthenon frieze.⁶ What is interesting is the separation between Phidias being the *episkopos*, instead of the *architekton*,⁷ meaning Phidias oversaw the project(s) but was not in fact the artist of the structure.⁸ The sculptures on the pediments of the Parthenon are described by Pausanias in his account of his visit to the Acropolis in the second century CE.⁹ However, it is important to note that Pausanias makes no mention of the frieze in this account, allowing modern scholarship to form its own interpretations about the meaning behind the artwork.¹⁰ This has caused debate within the scholarly academia, since although most believe it is a Panathenaic procession,¹¹ there are both historian accounts¹² and scholarship¹³ that contradict this idea. The frieze itself was initially documented in 1787. Its original indicated was a Panathenaic procession which is part of Athens' birthday festival, thus linking this frieze to being a religious based structure.¹⁴

⁴ Wikimedia Foundation, "Parthenon Frieze," last modified December 10, 2024, 21:15, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parthenon_Frieze.

⁵ Plutarch, *Life of Pericles* 13.4-9.

⁶ Wikimedia, "Parthenon Frieze"; see Ridgway 1981, 17.

⁷ Wikimedia, "Parthenon Frieze"; See Plutarch, *Life of Pericles*, 12.4-9.

⁸ Wikimedia, "Parthenon Frieze"; See Plutarch, *Life of Pericles*, 12.4-9.

⁹ Connelly, "Parthenon and Parthenoi," 53; see Paus 1.24.5.

¹⁰ Connelly "Parthenon and Parthenoi," 53.

¹¹ Connelly "Parthenon and Parthenoi," 53.

¹² Thuc 6.58.

¹³ Pollitt, "The Meaning," 51.

¹⁴ Connelly "Parthenon and Parthenoi," 53.

Fig. 1. *Parthenon: Head of the Pan-Athenaic Procession (“Les Ergastines”)*. c. 438-432 BCE, Marble, h. 109cm, <https://jstor.org/stable/community.18136485>.



There are some discrepancies between Thucydides' account of a Panathenaic procession and what is depicted on the frieze (see fig. 1). The figures that are holding *hydriai* should be women (not men as the frieze depicts them), there is no evidence of the *kanephoroi* (basket holders), and most importantly there is a lack of Athenian infantry.¹⁵ The lack of primary sources depicting the frieze leads to the use of topography instead of chronology in attempts to resolve the discrepancies in deciphering the artifact.¹⁶ This has led to theories of it potentially depicting the start of the progression, or possibly the progression after having reached the acropolis.¹⁷

The widespread theories of the work alter the objective of the piece depending on how one looks at it. There are two primary questions scholars debate about the frieze: whether the scene being depicted is mythological or evidence of a historical event,¹⁸ and if the importance behind the art lies within its iconography, religious aspects, or simply, artistic choices.¹⁹ The Parthenon frieze was constructed on an exceptional temple; a continuous Ionic style frieze found on a Doric building can be considered remarkable.²⁰ This shows a manipulation of stylistic choices as the separation of Ionic or Doric style chosen for a temple would have an impact on

¹⁵ Pollitt, “The Meaning,” 51; see Thuc 6.58.

¹⁶ Pollitt “The Meaning,” 51.

¹⁷ Pollitt “The Meaning,” 51

¹⁸ Blaise Nagy, “Athenian Officials on the Parthenon Frieze,” *American Journal of Archaeology* 96, no. 1 (1992): 55, <https://doi.org/10.2307/505758>.

¹⁹ Nagy, “Athenian Officials,” 55.

²⁰ Nagy, “Athenian Officials,” 56.

how the narrative could be told within the sculpture.²¹ The doric temple typically has metopes which provide small square forms used to have smaller pieces of art, perhaps three figures, or a repetitive motif throughout the work.²² However, the Parthenon frieze uses the Ionic style allowing the construction of a continuous narrative to fit within the sculpture. The important aspect of the frieze is that it shows Athenians engaged in a religious procession and is unique, exhibiting one of the few ancient Greek temples that have exterior sculpture designs depicting a religious ceremony.²³ It has been argued that the objective of the frieze was to create an idealized, yet metaphorical vision of imperial people celebrating the acquisition of their empire.²⁴ This interpretation allows for the acknowledgement that the frieze may have been simply to create a proud statement of the Parthenon itself, a symbol of a monumental building constructed using imperial funds.²⁵

Although it is considered unique for the Parthenon to be an exterior display of a religious procession, it was not unheard of for the Greeks to have religious architectural sculptures. For example, the Temple of Artemis (c. 580 BCE) has Medusa in the middle, and a variety of characters on the edges of the triangle. In such examples, filling the spaces on the edge of the triangle is a narrative detailing the fall of Troy.²⁶ The importance of this allows for the symbolism of the gorgon, a religiously protective symbol for the Greeks, a method to ward off evil spirits,²⁷ but this also can show how the Parthenon is an example of how they developed the ability to create a continuous narrative. Instead of having several different narrative connections such as the Temple of Artemis such as religion and war, the Parthenon stays with a consistent motif, the religious procession. This is an interesting comparison of the different ways religion can be represented on architectural sculptures. Another example of a frieze depicting a procession is the “Five Seated Gods in Conference,” which is a portion of the frieze from the Siphnian Treasury in Delphi (c. 525 BCE).²⁸ The biggest difference between them is the depiction of a religious rite on the external side of the building, not internal.

²¹ Kelsey Koon, “Architectural Sculpture” (lecture, MacEwan University, Edmonton, October 8, 2024).

²² Koon, “Architectural Sculpture.”

²³ Nagy “Athenian Officials,” 56.

²⁴ Nagy “Athenian Officials,” 58; see Root 1972, 113.

²⁵ Nagy, “Athenian Officials,” 58.

²⁶ Koon, “Architectural Sculpture.”

²⁷ Koon, “Architectural Sculpture.”

²⁸ Woodford, *Greek and Roman Art*, 60.

Greek architectural sculptures are known for their grace and narrative storytelling—this frieze is no exception. The technique used during the carving of the frieze shows the invention of carving in such a way that it allows for the pose of the body to be revealed through the fall of the drapery, a style invented within the fifth century.²⁹ This technique is not only seen in the Parthenon Frieze, but also in works such as Empress Sabina as Venus (c. 130 CE), where the Romans have taken on the techniques found in classical Greek art work.³⁰ The freestanding sculpture is a copy of the Venus Genetrix (fifth century BCE), however one can see the Roman modesty impact the work, which led to the artist to cover the left breast of the statue out of respect for the Empress Sabine.³¹ This artwork was done as an allegory: Sabine is portrayed as Venus who in Roman legend is the mother of Aeneas, and such maternal concepts have also contributed to the increased modesty.³² Comparing these artworks allows one to understand how techniques would be popular, develop, and be adopted and modified for other societies.

Although the Trajan Column is another example of architectural sculpture, it is a very different type. The column is a Roman triumphal column and is located in Rome, built by Trajan (c. 106–113 CE).³³ The inscription on its pedestal³⁴ states that the column was dedicated in CE 113.³⁵ The column is known for its sculptured spiral frieze that celebrated Trajan's victory in the Dacian wars, but in the sense of artistic development is a stunning example of a complex architectural monument.³⁶ The structure of the column shows the use of unusual techniques connecting the style to that of the Coliseum (70–72 CE).³⁷ The technique used in the construction of the Column is called brick vaulting ribs.³⁸ This technique used for the Coliseum was used in the early Flavian period as they developed ways for loads to be supported by the walls; however, it is not indicated what the Trajan Column was supporting.³⁹

²⁹ Woodford, *Greek and Roman Art*, 116.

³⁰ Woodford, *Greek and Roman Art*, 116.

³¹ Woodford, *Greek and Roman Art*, 116.

³² Woodford, *Greek and Roman Art*, 116-17.

³³ Lynne Lancaster, "Building Trajan's Column," *American Journal of Archaeology* 103, no. 3 (1999): 419,

<https://doi.org/10.2307/506969>.

³⁴ Lancaster, "Building Trajan's," 420; see *CIL* VI, 960.

³⁵ Lancaster, "Building Trajan's," 419.

³⁶ Lancaster, "Building Trajan's," 419.

³⁷ Lancaster, "Building Trajan's," 423

³⁸ Lancaster, "Building Trajan's," 423

³⁹ Lancaster, "Building Trajan's," 423

Fig 2. attributed to Apollodoros of Damascus. Column of Trajan View of the Lower Five Spirals, dedicated 113 CE. Marble, Scala Archives, Artstor, <https://jstor.org/stable/community.15999443>.



The Trajan Column was mentioned in the *Fasti Ostenses*, a calendar that lists magistrates and significant events that occurred from 49 BCE to 175 CE.⁴⁰ Although this is not an ancient primary source by a historian, the ancient source allows scholars to build a chronological timeline regarding not only the Trajan Column, but other monumental constructions. Cassius Dio also mentions the construction of the Trajan Column, and how Trajan “set up the Forum an enormous column, to serve at once as a monument to himself and as a memorial of the work in the forum.”⁴¹ The Trajan Column serves as a vital method of understanding the Dacian wars. Scholars agree that the column must have relied at least in part on the words from Trajan’s personal account of the war, known as the *Dacia*; however, in

⁴⁰ Lancaster, “Building Trajan’s,” 419

⁴¹ Dio. Cass. 68.16.13.

modern times there are only a mere four existing words from this source remaining.⁴² This means that the Trajan Column is a vital source to be used for both military and topographical information.⁴³

The column is considered one of the best illustrations of the army in the Roman empire, depicting the series of expeditions that led up to the great battle, the successful conquest (see fig. 2).⁴⁴ Similar to the Parthenon frieze, this is a continuous narrative that is seen throughout the entire sculpture.⁴⁵ According to Richmond, the column had multiple purposes: to be a surviving war memorial, and a place to contain the ashes of the emperor and his consorts at the foot in a chamber of the column.⁴⁶ In accordance with Richmond's argument, this would turn the Trajan Column not only into an example of Roman architectural sculpture, but a funerary art example as well.⁴⁷ Richmond explains that the Trajan Column is an example of artwork being used to display devotion to every day duty, which would inspire the noble ideal.⁴⁸ This argument would indicate that the true Roman identity is heavily influenced by what it meant to be an ideal Roman army and commanders.⁴⁹ Thus the column does not just tell the history of battle, but the labour in which history takes to be created.⁵⁰ However, one thing discussed by scholars in regards to the Trajan Column is the difficulty in seeing the entirety of the creation.

The Trajan Column serves as a vital method of understanding the Dacian wars, a war on which we have little remaining evidence. Scholars agree that the column must have relied at least in part on the words from Trajan's personal account of the war, known as the *Dacia*; reminding that only four words remain from this source.⁵¹ Although the column is often acknowledged as a historical narrative requiring scholars to fill the gaps left by lack of textual evidence, scholars recently have been moving towards the emphasis on the artistic and

⁴² Penelope J. E. Davies, "The Politics of Perpetuation: Trajan's Column and the Art of Commemoration," *American Journal of Archaeology* 101, no. 1 (1997): 43, <https://doi.org/10.2307/506249>.

⁴³ Davies, "The Politics," 43.

⁴⁴ I.A. Richmond, "Trajan's Army on Trajan's Column," *Papers of the British School at Rome* 13 (1935): 1, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40310440>.

⁴⁵ Richmond, "Trajan's Army," 1.

⁴⁶ Richmond, "Trajan's Army," 2.

⁴⁷ Richmond, "Trajan's Army," 2.

⁴⁸ Richmond, "Trajan's Army," 2.

⁴⁹ Richmond, "Trajan's Army," 2.

⁵⁰ Richmond, "Trajan's Army," 2.

⁵¹ Davies, "The Politics," 43.

thematic choices made in the column.⁵² For example, studying the architectural choices made on the column have shown that it can be assumed that the walls in the frieze are depicted in the same manner that walls and interior building of the civilian settlements were constructed creating an accurate representation of the real example of military fortifications.⁵³ This theory would mean that the Trajan Column would not only allow for us to have a historical narrative of the Dacian war, but also a visual representation of the military architectural practice.⁵⁴

To understand the importance of idealistic characteristics in Roman terms and how Trajan himself embodied them allows for a deeper understanding of the column itself. In Roman identity, having the virtues of *securitas* and *pudor* are important, and having them simultaneously is better.⁵⁵ Pliny emphasizes the importance of a good general to engage with his troops hardships and lead from the front, behaving in a way that combines both his superiority and equality which he claims Trajan demonstrated.⁵⁶ Roman artwork demonstrating the ideal virtues is common, seen in a variety of ancient artifacts. For example, the Augustus from Prima Porta (c. 20-17 BCE), takes the classical poise from the Greek artwork and modifies it in order to add a dignified and commanding sculpture, thus displaying Augustus as worthy of his position of Roman authority.⁵⁷ Augustus modified the sculpture in order to demonstrate grace and control shown through the Greek techniques, while including the desired Roman additions to demonstrate that he is also a figure of authority and admiration.⁵⁸

The Trajan Column is a very different approach than the usual low reliefs.⁵⁹ The column does use realism, but not in the same visually vivid sense that the Arch of Titus (c. 81 CE) uses.⁶⁰ The Column uses a more documentary realism, the image drawn in a manner of how it would be written versus how it had been seen occurring.⁶¹ Perhaps this is another indication of why Trajan's *Dacia* is assumed to have been an influence on the construction of the monument.

⁵² Elizabeth W. Thill, "Civilization under Construction: Depictions of Architecture on the Column of Trajan," *American Journal of Archaeology* 114, no. 1 (2010): 27, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20627642>.

⁵³ Thill, "Civilization under Construction," 29.

⁵⁴ Thill, "Civilization under Construction," 27.

⁵⁵ Roger Rees, "To Be and Not to Be: Pliny's Paradoxical Trajan," *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* 45 (2001): 154, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43646658>.

⁵⁶ Rees, "To Be," 154.

⁵⁷ Woodford, *Greek and Roman Art*, 114.

⁵⁸ Woodford, *Greek and Roman Art*, 114.

⁵⁹ Woodford, *Greek and Roman Art*, 121.

⁶⁰ Woodford, *Greek and Roman Art*, 121.

⁶¹ Woodford, *Greek and Roman Art*, 121.

The artistic approach of the sculpture allows for complex action to be shown contrasting the visual logic and consistency seen within Greek Art.⁶² Even with this contrast in Greek and Roman artistic styles, we still see Greek influence within the ancient Roman art work as there is a depiction of Aphrodite on the column—Victory writing on a shield.⁶³

It is not uncommon for Roman architecture to contain a heavier political meaning in contrast to the Greek mythical or religious motifs.⁶⁴ The Romans were a military focused society: it was the vital part of their ideal citizen, in contrast to the Greeks more religious components. This can be seen in a variety of Roman structures such as the Ara Pacis, which uses Greek models to influence dignity and grace into the Roman style.⁶⁵ This can also be seen in how there are multiple different victory columns found within the ancient Roman artifacts. However, comparing some of the other columns with the Trajan Column not only demonstrates how artistic styles developed over time, but also how the time of society impacted the quality of the work. For example, the Column of Marcus Aurelius (c.180-93 CE) has a deeper cut in its sculpture that is highly expressive.⁶⁶ However, the carving is more clumsy, perhaps due to the increased stress on those working on the column from the empire.⁶⁷ The comparison of the Column of Marcus Aurelius and the Trajan Column is an example of the decline of style and skill that occurred in the third century CE to most forms of sculpture.⁶⁸

Taking the two of these ancient architectural sculptures allows for scholars to study the different values and techniques that were used in both Greek and Roman sculptures. The Romans had a high respect for Greek art, and allowed it to influence their own stylistic developments.⁶⁹ There are a variety of existing copies made by Romans of Greek art, copies made in marble instead of the bronze material used by Greeks.⁷⁰ The usage of marble in these recreations allows for surviving copies that allows us to have insight into works that are celebrated in ancient writing, that we may not have been able to fully understand without them.⁷¹

⁶² Woodford, *Greek and Roman Art*, 123.

⁶³ Woodford, *Greek and Roman Art*, 123.

⁶⁴ Koon, "Architectural Sculptures."

⁶⁵ Woodford, *Greek and Roman Art*, 119.

⁶⁶ Woodford, *Greek and Roman Art*, 123.

⁶⁷ Woodford, *Greek and Roman Art*, 123.

⁶⁸ Woodford, *Greek and Roman Art*, 123.

⁶⁹ Cornelius C. Vermeule, "Roman Art," *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies* 20, no. 1 (1994): 63, <https://doi.org/10.2307/4112952>.

⁷⁰ Vermeule, "Roman Art," 63.

⁷¹ Vermeule, "Roman Art," 63.

This allows for us to have a fuller understanding of the fifth- and fourth-century artists such as Phidias, Lysippos, Skopas and Praxiteles.⁷² The Parthenon frieze itself may not be a direct copy of Greek art, but its structure influenced other Roman art, allowing us to see the influences that directly impacted the stylistic choices made within the Trajan Column.

However in contrast to the Greeks, Roman portraits and reliefs tend to have an emphasis on specificity.⁷³ This is seen prominently in their historical reliefs that are made to commemorate specific events, whereas Greeks emphasized timeless myth.⁷⁴ This is further similar to how coins in ancient Rome would contain very specific and precise depictions of the leaders and emperors on one side, whereas the reverse would show historical events.⁷⁵ The Parthenon frieze, although it can be considered to be a commemorative event, does not have any specific people who were displayed in the same manner that Romans would.⁷⁶ The Romans' individual identities were heavily emphasized within their artwork. Not only is the Trajan Column a good example of Roman art demonstrating the Roman style of modifying classical Greek style in order to suit Roman taste, so is the Altar of Peace, which was erected in 13 BCE by Augustus.⁷⁷ The Roman artwork very clearly takes on the Greek techniques but modifies it to show their own values.⁷⁸ This is important when studying ancient artwork because it allows us to understand the values of society and the ideal characteristics put forward.

As a whole both Greek and Roman art can be used to explain societal values and ideals. Even though the Romans would often copy artwork techniques from the Greeks, the variations between Greek and Roman art can show how their own worldviews caused variations in their art. The Romans often focused on the ideals that would be desired in a military concept, such as how Augustus portrayed himself as an authoritative figure. Their ideals would be focused on a specific person, a historically accurate portrayal of a person.⁷⁹ The Romans were not above amplifying someone to seem more powerful, but while the Greeks did not mind if the portraits could be considered any hero, the Romans consider the specificity of their artwork as a crucial aspect.⁸⁰ Whereas in Greek art grace was further emphasized and the artwork was still an ideal

⁷² Vermeule, "Roman Art," 63.

⁷³ Woodford, *Greek and Roman Art*, 119.

⁷⁴ Woodford, *Greek and Roman Art*, 119.

⁷⁵ Vermeule, "Roman Art," 63.

⁷⁶ Woodford, *Greek and Roman Art*, 119.

⁷⁷ Woodford, *Greek and Roman Art*, 119.

⁷⁸ Woodford, *Greek and Roman Art*, 119.

⁷⁹ Woodford, *Greek and Roman Art*, 113.

⁸⁰ Woodford, *Greek and Roman Art*, 113.

image of grace and heroics, it was still more suggestive.⁸¹ Although the Greeks would definitely have had outer-influence on their works, the way Greeks influenced the Romans' artwork is very important to see how it impacts the developments over time. Art and architecture can be just as important as literary sources when understanding the historical context, however they can clearly cause some discourse. These two architectural sculptures can be used to understand both how the absence of artistic artifacts in literature and the absence of artwork depictions within literature can have their own consequences.

⁸¹ Woodford, *Greek and Roman Art*, 113.

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