

Carsten Savage

Professor Lieberman

Ancient Mediterranean Disasters

2 April 2018

Trajan's Forum

The Roman architect Appollodorus's massive bridge across the Danube proved to the ancient world that Rome could conquer both civilization and nature (Sullivan). Trajan's Bridge enabled the flood of Roman legions into Dacia, culminating in the region's virtual obliteration. Thus, Trajan inevitably chose Appollodorus to design his Forum, a work which left Emperor Constantius II "transfixed with astonishment" ("The Forum of Trajan") upon first sight. Much more than a simple celebratory monument, Trajan's Forum reveals imperial motivations and cultural attitudes towards authority and social rank. The features of the Forum exude Rome's fascination with power and domination, demonstrating an evolving Roman attitude towards appeasement as Trajan exemplifies the ferocity of Rome's new dynasty. Yet, the Forum also indirectly serves to redeem Emperor Domitian and his military failures.

The Dacian treasures adorning the Forum's façade convinced the people that Rome's wealth had been recovered. While Emperor Domitian believed his only choice was to accept a peace treaty with Dacia's King Decebalus, the Roman people interpreted the treaty as imperial weakness (Martalogu). The Roman artisans and significant amount of money that Domitian agreed to give Decebalus were "shameful" (Martalogu), and the people vied for an aggressive, militarily-adept leader to redeem Rome. Once Emperor Trajan had decimated the Dacians at Sarmizegetusa, the ancient scholar Crito states, he paraded through Rome with "five million pounds of gold, and twice as much of silver" (Martalogu). The Forum of Trajan's extensive

bronze gilding seeks to immortalize the effects of the parade, assuring the Romans that their state had finally retrieved the riches the Dacians had extorted from them.

Trajan's Forum fortifies Trajan's role as 'avenger' and redeems Domitian. Trajan's quest to restore the economic and military order that had fallen apart under Domitian, according to Cassius Dio, was an integral component of his "avenger" persona (Martalogu). Trajan's Column, which depicts Rome's invasion of Dacia, provides evidence: The Column was dedicated on May 12th and coincides with the Temple of Mars Ultor's anniversary (Beckmann). Emperor Trajan believed that it was his duty to ensure that Domitian was afforded glorification and respect to ensure the long-term lasting power of Rome's imperial machine. Through a final Roman victory and the restoration of the treasury—symbolized by the Forum's ornate decorations—Trajan was therefore able to partially restore Domitian's reputation. At the same time, the timing of the dedication bolstered his own cult of personality. In a sense, the two emperors share the glory of the Forums.

Yet, the Forums also celebrate a Rome whose new line of emperors no longer tolerated appeasement and extortion. While Domitian disgraced Rome by allowing the Dacians to raid Roman citizens on the Empire's fringes, Trajan delighted in his merciless annihilation of the barbarians, as suggested by the inscription underneath the statues of the Forum stating "ex manubiis" ("Basilica Ulpia"). Trajan was understandably proud of his bold military campaign against such an adept enemy. The underlying connotation, however, is that Trajan was able to achieve through war what would have been impossible through Domitian's peace: Rome's assertion of absolute economic and military supremacy. This inscription emphasizes the overwhelmingly lavish, triumphant nature of this section of the Forum—decorated by bronze-gilded statues of horses (Platner and Ashby)—and celebrates the end of the ineffective Flavians

and the rise of the Nerva-Antonine dynasty, which had so far provided Rome with considerable success. To those that may have been against the war in Dacia, the inscription acts as a clear example of the new imperial order's prowess in decision-making, warfare, and willingness to give back to the people in the shape of the Forum. Emperor Trajan's strategy worked, the Forums boast, and Rome has reaped the rewards.

The extreme difference in social stature between the Forum's statues accentuates Rome's uncompromising quest for ultimate authority over others. To illustrate the superiority of the Romans over the Dacians, Trajan's Forum contained statues of Dacian prisoners—sheathed in armor and carrying weapons—which affirm Rome's considerable bravery against such a formidable enemy. A statue of Emperor Trajan crowned by Victoria stood upon the Forum's celebratory arch in stark contrast to the prisoners (Platner and Ashby), demonstrating the triumph of civilization over barbarianism. In the center of the Forum was a statue of Trajan on horseback, signifying the emperor's audacity in times of war (Platner and Ashby). Scattered between the Forum's columns, too, were statues of high-ranking officials and generals. Yet, conspicuously absent were statues of Roman legionaries. While the Forum created a social comparison between the Roman elite and the Dacian prisoners, it also created one between these officials and the Roman soldiers. The Forum suggests that Rome regarded its legionaries as expendable tools instead of people worth recognizing; not even statues of notable centurions were present. Only military standards "ex manubiis" were included, rectifying the loss of military standards under Domitian in Dacia. The social exclusivity of the Roman statues posits Rome's obsession with absolutes; those who had significant wealth and authority were worthy of recognition, while subordinates expending themselves in distant, savage lands were meant to be forgotten.

The Forum was a reflection of both Trajan's commitment to upholding the reputation of the Roman Empire and the social dynamics and ideology of the period. Emperor Trajan was more inclined to ensure the reputation of Emperor Nerva's predecessor—who was perceived as a relative failure—than he was to immortalize the Roman legions who fought for him in the remote Dacian forests. Constructing figures of politicians and Dacian prisoners also outweighed his desire to recognize anyone who didn't help portray the overwhelming authority of the state. In other words, Trajan was quintessentially Roman.

Works Cited

- “Basilica Ulpia.” *Roma*, The University of Chicago,
penelope.uchicago.edu/~grout/encyclopaedia_romana/imperialfora/trajan/basilica.html.
- Beckmann, M. “Trajan's Column and Mars Ultor.” *Journal of Roman Studies*, 106, 124-146.
www.cambridge.org/core/journals/journal-of-roman-studies/article/trajans-column-and-mars-ultor/6C5D83957653C4D73B8810660308DB69/core-reader
- Martalogu, Alexandru. “The Catalyst for Warfare: Dacia’s Threat to the Roman Empire.” *McGill Classics*, www.mcgill.ca/classics/files/classics/2014-15-04.pdf.
- Platner, Samuel Ball, and Thomas Ashby. “Forum Traiani.” *A Topographical Dictionary of Ancient Rome*, The National Endowment for the Humanities,
www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.04.0054:id=forum-traiani.
- Sullivan, John. “Modern Expertise Builds Bridge to Ancient Marvel.” Princeton University, The Trustees of Princeton University, 4 June 2013,
www.princeton.edu/news/2014/06/04/modern-expertise-builds-bridge-ancient-marvel.
- “The Forum of Trajan.” *Roma*, The University of Chicago,
penelope.uchicago.edu/~grout/encyclopaedia_romana/imperialfora/trajan/forumtrajani.html.