

# Divine Representation in Documentary Style: Gods on the Columns of Trajan and Marcus Aurelius\*

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## ABSTRACT

*This article examines the important roles played by gods in the friezes of the Columns of Trajan and Marcus Aurelius and argues that they are treated in a distinctive ‘documentary’ style, comparable in certain ways to accounts of divine action in Roman historiography and designed to produce a compelling narrative effect. First, the Columns and the deities they depict are discussed. The article then looks at cognate descriptions of gods in historiographical texts. Finally, other contemporary monuments that portray the gods are briefly examined to bring out further the distinctive character of the gods on the Columns. This analysis will be seen to have wider implications for our understanding of ‘historical narrative reliefs’ and imperial representation.*

**Keywords:** Column of Trajan; Column of Marcus Aurelius; gods; historical narrative reliefs

The Columns of Trajan and Marcus Aurelius are two of the most familiar and intensively researched Roman monuments.<sup>1</sup> Their long spiral friezes represent visual campaign records that are unique among extant imperial reliefs for their scope, historical detail and storytelling sophistication. The style, narrative structure, battle imagery and imperial messages, as well as the historical and architectural contexts of the monuments, have been well studied, but representations of gods on the Columns have received comparatively little dedicated attention. The identifications of the depicted gods have been discussed in general studies of the Columns, but there has been no systematic investigation of the character of the divine representations found on these two distinctive monuments.<sup>2</sup> The goal of this article is to provide a focused assessment of this issue, and to use points of intersection between the imagery of the monuments and Roman

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<sup>1</sup> Some important and recent studies: on the Column of Trajan: Cichorius 1896–1900; Jones 1910; Lehmann-Hartleben 1926; von Blanckenhagen 1957; Gauer 1977; Hölscher 1980: 291–7; Settis 1985; Bode 1992; Coarelli 2000; Faust 2012: 35–91; Claridge 2013; Beckmann 2016: 124–8; Mitthof and Schörner 2017; Fox 2018; Hölscher 2019: 293–310. On the Column of Marcus Aurelius: Petersen *et al.* 1896; Hamberg 1945: 149–58; Becatti 1957; Bergmann 1991; Pirson 1996; Scheid and Huet 2000; Coarelli 2008; Ferris 2009; Beckmann 2011; Faust 2012: 92–120; Griebel 2013; Barrett 2017; Wolfram Thill 2018; Hölscher 2019: 310–20.

<sup>2</sup> Significant discussions of gods on the Columns: on the Column of Trajan: Hamberg 1945: 119; Bode 1992: 142–3; Faust 2012: 38–41, 48–51; Hölscher 2017: 22–3; Scheid 2017. On the Column of Marcus Aurelius: Beckmann 2011: 133–4; Faust 2012: 96, 102; Griebel 2013: 120–30, 240–1, 247–51. On the controversial ‘rain miracle’ scene and the associated deity on the Column of Marcus Aurelius, see below, nn. 40 and 45. Kovács 2017 focuses on depictions of the river god Danube and Jupiter and takes a different approach to that offered in the present article.

historical texts as a starting point from which to suggest a new model for understanding the deities on the Columns — that of ‘documentary’ divine representation. This analysis will be seen to have implications for our understanding of the Columns and of ‘historical narrative reliefs’ more broadly.

Like many other sets of Roman narrative reliefs, the Columns of Trajan and Marcus Aurelius depict imperial action that is both real-looking and ideologically charged. Contemporary figures are set within a lifelike scenography, with iconographical and compositional techniques used to throw emphasis on imperial protagonists and to frame and commemorate their exemplary actions. The elements of this type of representational art (‘historical narrative’) are well known, and the role of the gods, who appear as supporting characters on the Columns and on many other imperial reliefs, has been frequently noted.<sup>3</sup> What has not been widely recognised, however, is the highly unusual manner in which the gods are treated within the Columns’ friezes, and the revealing ways in which this differs from the standard mode of divine representation found on other imperial narrative reliefs. In contrast to monuments such as the Arch of Titus, the Great Trajanic Frieze and the Arch of Constantine, on which fully visible anthropomorphic gods appear as close supporters of the emperor, the Columns of Trajan and Marcus Aurelius depict gods primarily as partially concealed nature-related figures, who do not interact directly with the emperor.<sup>4</sup> This article provides an assessment of the divine representations on the Columns, and argues that their particular character can be better understood when set beside descriptions of divine action in Roman historical texts, in which, as on the Columns, gods do not normally appear as direct or ‘full’ participants in the action. It will be argued that the Columns were involved in documenting imperial conquest in a detailed and sustained manner that called for a specific, qualified style of divine representation: one that could be understood by contemporaries as plausible, convincing and ‘true to life’, and thus complement the documentary and commemorative aims of the monuments.

The four sections of the article discuss the following: (I) the iconography and actions of the gods on the Column of Trajan and (II) on the Column of Marcus Aurelius, in order to determine issues of identification and to provide a coherent basis for discussion in the following sections; (III) the points of contact, and of difference, between the gods on the Columns and accounts of divine action in historical texts, where the literary sources are intended to help enhance our understanding of the deities on the monuments; and, briefly, (IV) the representation of gods on other contemporary sets of imperial reliefs (the Great Trajanic Frieze and the panel reliefs of Marcus Aurelius), in which discussion aims to bring the distinctive character of the gods on the Columns into sharper focus and to set the preceding argument in a wider context.

#### I GODS ON THE COLUMN OF TRAJAN

The Column of Trajan was dedicated on 12 May A.D. 113 and stood towards the west end of Trajan’s new forum complex, where its unprecedented 190 m long spiral frieze provided viewers with an extraordinary visual rendition of the emperor’s signature Dacian

<sup>3</sup> Some key studies of historical narrative reliefs: Ryberg 1955; Fittschen 1972; Strocka 1972; Gauer 1974; Hölscher 1978; 1980; Torelli 1982; Koeppl 1983–1992; Oppermann 1985; Hölscher 1988; Bergmann 1991 (with an outline of the historiography of the subject); Smith 2002: 92; Faust 2012; Hölscher 2019: 230–337. On the role of the gods in these reliefs: Ryberg 1955: 203–10 (ritual scenes); Hölscher 1967 (Victory); Simon 1981; Kuttner 1995: 56–67; Alföldi 1999: 42–82; Pollini 2012: 69–76.

<sup>4</sup> This has been noted in general terms by some previous scholars, but not systematically analysed: Hamberg 1945: 119; Faust 2012: 38–41, 48–51; Hölscher 2017: 22.

conquests.<sup>5</sup> The 155 scenes of the frieze are split roughly equally between the first and second of Trajan's Dacian Wars (A.D. 101–102 and 105–106).<sup>6</sup> Depicted are varied images of campaigning: troop movements, war councils, sacrifice, construction, battles and the emperor's recurring activity as a military leader and administrator.<sup>7</sup> The extent and detail of the frieze provide an authentic-looking texture, and the narrative is given a highly developed staging. The frieze has protagonists (Trajan and his generals), antagonists (the Dacian king Decebalus and his collaborators) and a broad range of supporting characters (Roman allies, local citizens, industrious soldiers and powerful gods). The action is set in a varied 'real-world' environment and ranges from dense and fast-moving scenes of war action to calmer moments of campaign planning and provincial ceremony. The Column's frieze thus represents the most sophisticated visual narrative we have from the Roman world: a documentary masterwork that functioned simultaneously as a highly detailed war report and as an ideologically filtered political monument.<sup>8</sup>

The Column's frieze includes five gods. Three (the river god Danube, Jupiter and Victory) are securely identified by their characteristic appearances and attributes. The remaining two deities are controversial and are without agreed names: both are goddesses with ambiguous iconography that makes their precise interpretation difficult. I look in this section at the deities individually, in order to establish their identities and roles in the narrative. I aim to show that the gods were shaped by a particular set of representational norms.

### *Danube (scene III)*

The first set piece of the frieze shows the Roman army crossing the Danube river on a pontoon bridge (Fig. 1).<sup>9</sup> A figure of superhuman size rises from the water below. The figure is characterised as a primordial nature divinity, with a mantle, a wreath of reeds and a long, shaggy hairstyle and beard.<sup>10</sup> In this aquatic setting and northern frontier context this can only be the personified Danube.<sup>11</sup> The river god extends his right hand towards the bridge in a gesture of encouragement and functions as a topographical anchor for the narrative and as a divine protector of the Roman army (although he does not interact directly with anyone in the scene).<sup>12</sup> In his description of Trajan's campaigns, Pliny writes that the mountains, the rivers and the seas — 'the forces of the land itself' ('*terras ipsas*') — will help to defeat the Dacians.<sup>13</sup> The same author contrasts this divine assistance with the 'rejoicing' ('*gaudebant*') of Danube and other

<sup>5</sup> Dedication: Zanker 1970: 504; Beckmann 2016: 124–6; Weber 2017. Trajan's Forum: Zanker 1970; Strobel 2017a. For the controversial view that the Column's frieze was carved under Hadrian: Claridge 1993; 2007; 2013 (with discussion of the surrounding forum). Response to Claridge: Stevenson 2008. On the unprecedented nature of the frieze: Faust 2012: 35–6. For technical aspects of the Column and its construction: Lancaster 1999; Martines 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Lepper and Frere 1988: 121–2. Trajan's Dacian Wars: Strobel 1984; Bennett 1997: 87–105.

<sup>7</sup> Narrative structure of the frieze: Faust 2012: 35–91; 2017.

<sup>8</sup> Ideological function of the Column: Bode 1992; Hölscher 2017.

<sup>9</sup> The preceding scenes (I–II) show preparations for the river-crossing.

<sup>10</sup> Kovács 2017: 47–50.

<sup>11</sup> Danube's identity is unanimously agreed: Hamberg 1945: 108; Hölscher 1980: 292; Lepper and Frere 1988: 50; Coarelli 2000: 48; Kovács 2017: 47. For the iconography of the god: BMC III 84–5, 395–9 (Trajanic coins depicting Danube); Kovács 2017: 47–50.

<sup>12</sup> Gesture: Lepper and Frere 1988: 50; Bode 1992: 134; Kovács 2017: 49–50. An open-handed gesture of divine encouragement is also exhibited in imperial reliefs by deities such as Honos, on the Arch of Titus (Pfanner 1983: 69–70: hand missing but arm extended); and Mars, on the Cancelleria Reliefs, Frieze A (Langer and Pfanner 2018: 43, pls 6 and 7).

<sup>13</sup> Plin., *Pan.* 16.5. See also Strack 1931: 126, no. 383 (Trajanic coin showing Danube fighting a personification of Dacia).

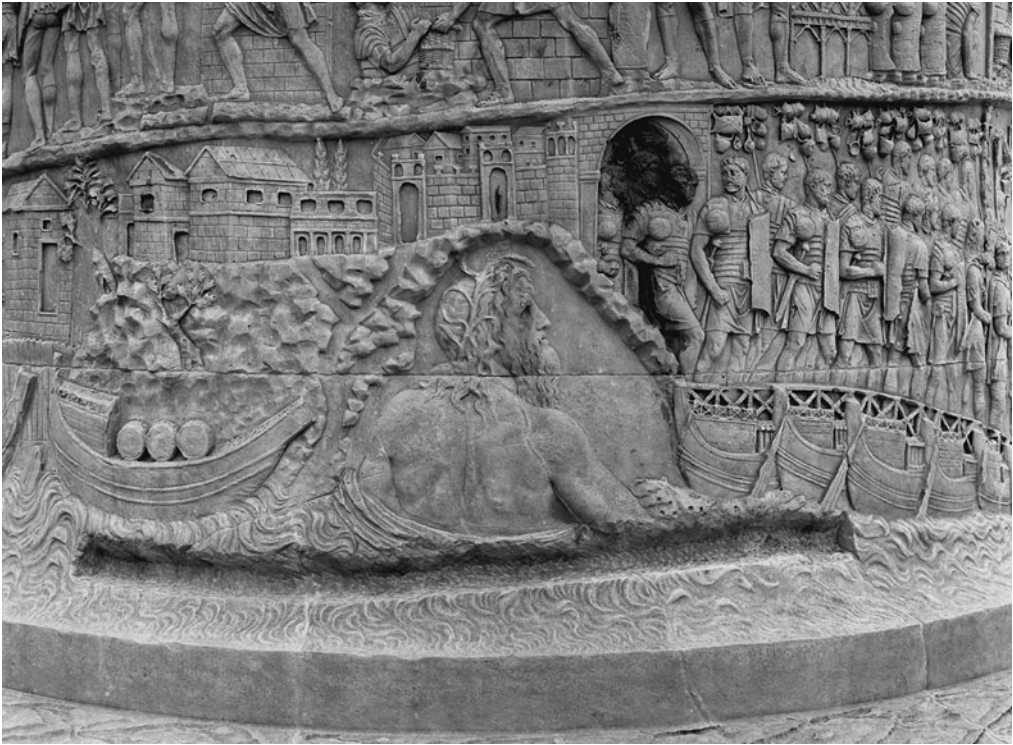


FIG 1. Scene XXXVIII from the frieze on the Column of Trajan in Rome. Marble. A.D. 113. Arachne ID: 984006. D-DAI-ROM-91.147\_0003001403.jpg. (Photo: K. Anger)

ivers at the sight of Domitian's failures.<sup>14</sup> So, too, on the Column, while Trajan's army is protected, a later scene (XXXI) sees Rome's Dacian opponents founder in their attempted crossing of the same, now turbulent, river.<sup>15</sup> The opening scene and the inclusion of the river god thus serve to highlight key narrative themes: the effective action of the Roman army in foreign lands, their mastery of nature (the bridge) and the enabling support of local deities (Danube).<sup>16</sup>

#### *Jupiter (scene XXIV)*

Following the march over the Danube, the opening campaign proceeds through a series of key scenes, culminating in a decisive battle in which Jupiter takes part (Fig. 2). These scenes of strategic planning (VI), sacrifice and omen (VIII, IX), imperial address (X), construction and forest clearing (XI–XII, XV) and the organisation of troops (XXI–XXII) provide a foundation for the war, demonstrating among other things the careful planning of the generals, the piety of the emperor, the good relations between Trajan and his soldiers and the hard-working preparation of the army.<sup>17</sup> Through these actions, the Romans

<sup>14</sup> Plin., *Pan.* 82.4.

<sup>15</sup> Scene XXXI: Faust 2012: 42–4; Kovács 2017: 47.

<sup>16</sup> Hölscher 1980: 292. Post-Trajanic cult for Danube is attested in the northern provinces: Kovács 2017: 49–50 (with a range of media describing Danube as a god).

<sup>17</sup> Hölscher 1980: 295–6; Faust 2012: 37; Hölscher 2017: 18–23, 29–30. Omen: Cass. Dio 68.8.1; Hölscher 1980: 294.



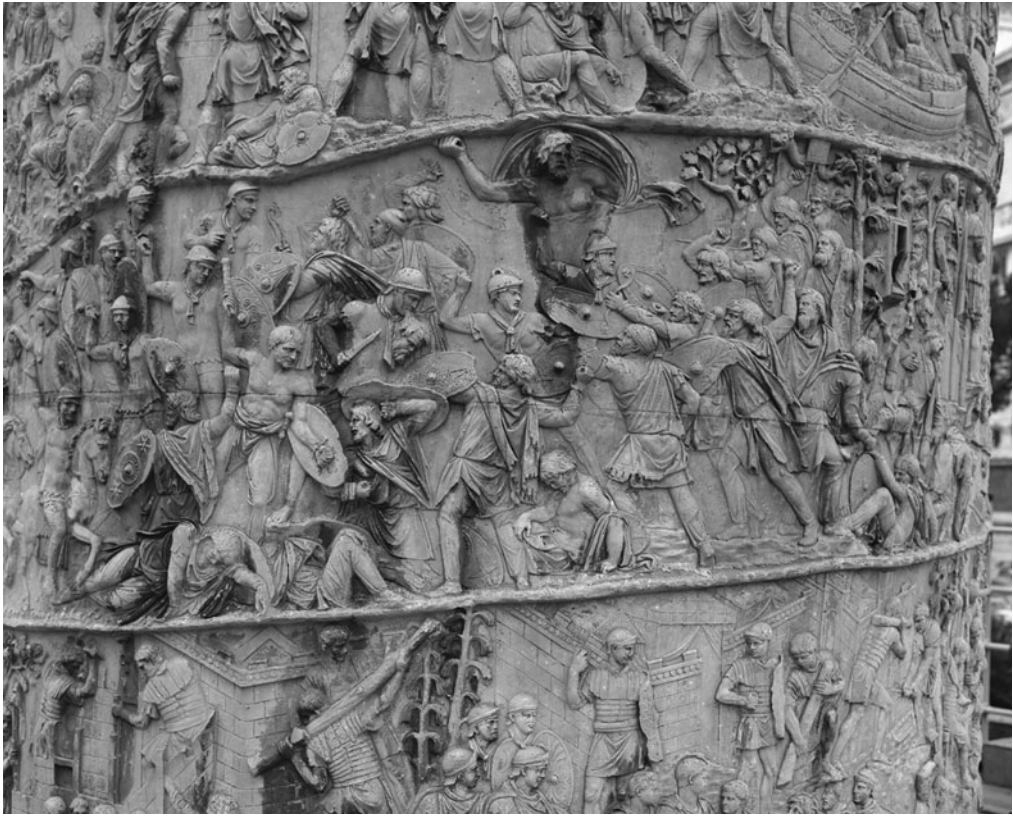


FIG 2. Scene XXIV from the frieze on the Column of Trajan in Rome. Marble. A.D. 113. Arachne ID: 983986. D-DAI-ROM-91.101\_00030014024,03.jpg. (Photo: K. Anger)

‘earn’ the intervention of Jupiter, who appears in the most significant episode of the narrative so far: an extended infantry and cavalry battle (XXIV), the first of the frieze, that is watched on one side by Trajan, on the other by the Dacian king Decebalus and at the centre by Jupiter.<sup>18</sup>

Jupiter is shown as a half-figure, as if emerging from or above a cloud.<sup>19</sup> The god is framed by dramatic, billowing drapery that had long been used in this configuration to represent swift-moving divine epiphany and flight, particularly for celestial, aquatic and elemental deities.<sup>20</sup> Jupiter is thus depicted above the battle in aerial movement over the landscape. He appears, like Danube, as a divine force that is closely connected with the environment. A forward-flaring section of the drapery is balanced behind by the god’s outstretched arm, which probably held a thunderbolt (now lost). Jupiter is thus not merely observing but participating in the battle — though it may be noted that none of the participants on either side react to his presence. Jupiter is positioned over the Romans’ front line and wields his lightning in the direction of their Dacian opponents.

<sup>18</sup> Gauer 1977: 25; Lepper and Frere 1988: 68–9; Faust 2012: 37–41. The scene perhaps depicts the historical Battle of Tapae (A.D. 101): Cass. Dio 68.8.

<sup>19</sup> Iconography: Faust 2012: 38–9; Kovács 2017: 50.

<sup>20</sup> e.g. Boardman 1995: figs 218.4–218.5 (Nereid sculptures from Xanthos); Smith 2013: figs 40–41 (Hemera and Okeanos from the Sebasteion at Aphrodisias).

The lightning, along with the god's embedded, 'elemental' habitus, suggests that Jupiter appears here in his aspect as the thunderer (*tonans*) and that his intervention was perhaps understood as a 'weather miracle', akin to the well-known lightning and rain episodes on the later Column of Marcus Aurelius.<sup>21</sup> Given the nature-related character of the other gods that participate in the frieze, such as Danube (others are discussed below), a connection between Jupiter's appearance and a beneficent storm is attractive. We will see that gods could function in a broadly similar elemental manner in historical texts.<sup>22</sup> Jupiter's intervention thus realises in dynamic form the victory-bringing divine protection that Trajan and his army were imagined to have received.<sup>23</sup> The participation of the supreme god provides an unassailable divine justification for the unfolding war.<sup>24</sup>

### *Nox (scene XXXVIII)*

Following the appearance of Jupiter and the Romans' first victory (XXIV), the Dacians carry out retaliatory raids on Roman fortifications (XXXII). These attacks precipitate a Roman counter-offensive (XXXVI), in the course of which the gods intervene for a second time to help the Romans in battle (XXXVIII: Fig. 3).<sup>25</sup> In this scene, Romans and Dacians fight before a rock face. In the background are loaded wagons, which are marked as Dacian by the dragon-headed object on the central cart. The barbarians defend themselves and their cargo by forming a semi-circular line through the middle of the scene. The Romans move in from all sides in a corresponding semi-circular attack ring, of which the participating goddess is compositionally and conceptually a part.<sup>26</sup> The deity emerges from behind the rock face on the left edge of the scene as a half-figure. She wears a classical-style peplos and holds a mantle with both hands above her head. There has been some debate over her identity, but the figure is most often and probably best taken as Nox, the goddess of night.<sup>27</sup> The figure's integration with the landscape suggests a nature divinity (in line with many of the other gods in the frieze), and the way the goddess holds her mantle evokes a protective or celestial canopy. The fact that the Dacians are backed into a corner may indicate a surprise attack, and the most logical reading of the scene is that the Romans are executing a stealthy, night-time assault, aided by the darkness of Nox.<sup>28</sup> As with the Danube crossing, this episode shows the Romans to be protected by divine forces of nature.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Jupiter *tonans*: Hamberg 1945: 117–18; Gauer 1977: 25; Lepper and Frere 1988: 68–9; Baumer *et al.* 1991: 291; Bode 1992: 141–2; Coarelli 2000: 68; Hölscher 2017: 22–3; Kovács 2017: 50; Fox 2018: 12–13. Against: Lehmann-Hartleben 1926: 94 n. 11; Faust 2012: 39–40, n. 249 ('Jupiter *propugnator*', because of the god's aggressive action; *contra*, Hölscher 2017: 22–3). For the (Augustan) cult image of Jupiter *tonans*: RIC I 64 (the figure shares the lightning bolt and nude upper body of the god on the frieze).

<sup>22</sup> e.g. Sall., *Iug.* 75.9 (divine rain); Tac., *Ann.* 1.28 (divine eclipse); Cass. Dio 68.31.1–4 (divine lightning).

<sup>23</sup> Hamberg 1945: 117–18; Gauer 1977: 25; Baumer *et al.* 1991: 267–71.

<sup>24</sup> Becatti 1982: 555; Hölscher 2017: 23. The importance of Jupiter's appearance may have been subtly emphasised by the designers of the frieze: the conclusion of the first war (LXXVIII) and the suicide of the Dacian king (CXLV) are positioned on the same vertical axis: Baumer *et al.* 1991: 291; Bode 1992: 168–72; Faust 2012: 48–51.

<sup>25</sup> Faust 2012: 50.

<sup>26</sup> Faust 2012: 47–8.

<sup>27</sup> Nox: Becatti 1982: 557; Lepper and Frere 1988: 85; Koeppl 1991: 165; Bode 1992: 142; Coarelli 2000: 83; Faust 2012: 47–8; Kovács 2017: 47. Other suggestions: Pollen 1874: 63 (Diana); Petersen 1899–1903: 45 (Luna); Rossi 1971: 150 (Selene). Compare LIMC Nyx 1 (Nox with billowing veil 'emerging' from the landscape, as on the Column).

<sup>28</sup> Faust 2012: 47–8.

<sup>29</sup> Attack by night would also express with dramatic effect the tireless, round-the-clock efforts of the conquering army: Faust 2012: 47–8. Dramatic night attacks were part of the repertoire of ancient battle representations: Hölscher 2004: 38.



FIG 3. Scene XXXVIII from the frieze on the Column of Trajan in Rome. Marble. A.D. 113. Arachne ID: 983941. D-DAI-ROM-89.758\_00030014038,02.jpg. (Photo: K. Anger)

### *Victory (scene LXXVIII)*

After an extended sequence of battles and advances, the narrative reaches its half-way point at the end of the first war (LXXVIII), where Victory appears flanked by trophies in an emblematic scene that proclaims Roman success and connects the two (chronologically distinct) halves of the frieze (Fig. 4).<sup>30</sup> The goddess is depicted in a modified Capuan Aphrodite figure type and is writing on a shield which she supports on a pillar.<sup>31</sup> Trajanic conquest is validated by the gods. Strikingly, the goddess fills the full height of the frieze (in all the other scenes the figures are smaller, allowing for landscape). Victory's superhuman scale suggests her action takes place in a separate or higher zone. Together, Danube, Jupiter and Victory articulate the opening, high point and conclusion of the first war.

<sup>30</sup> Hamberg 1945: 116; Becatti 1982: 59–60; Baumer *et al.* 1991: 271 n. 39; Koeppel 1991: 197; Coarelli 2000: 136; Faust 2012: 36. Trophies: Lepper and Frere 1988: 121–2.

<sup>31</sup> Becatti 1982: 59–60. Figure type: Hölscher 1970; Kousser 2006: 224–5; 2008: 58–74. Shield motif: Hölscher 1967: 99–102.





FIG 4. Scene LXXVIII from the frieze on the Column of Trajan in Rome. Marble. A.D. 113. Arachne ID: 3873198. D-DAI-ROM-41.1480\_00030014078.jpg. (Photo: Fr W. Deichmann)

*'Final' goddess (scene CLI)*

The final deity in the frieze is an enigmatic goddess who highlights the end of the narrative. The scene (CLI) takes place at the close of the second war after the decisive action of Decebalus' suicide (CXLV) and depicts the extinguishing of remaining Dacian resistance in a wild, mountainous setting that was probably intended to represent the extreme edge of the Roman world (Fig. 5). The goddess emerges from behind a mountain ridge surrounded by an impressive circular veil and turns sharply to look at the action below, where captured Dacians are being seized by Roman soldiers and led towards a small building or forest hut. The exact meaning of the scene is not certain — the Romans are



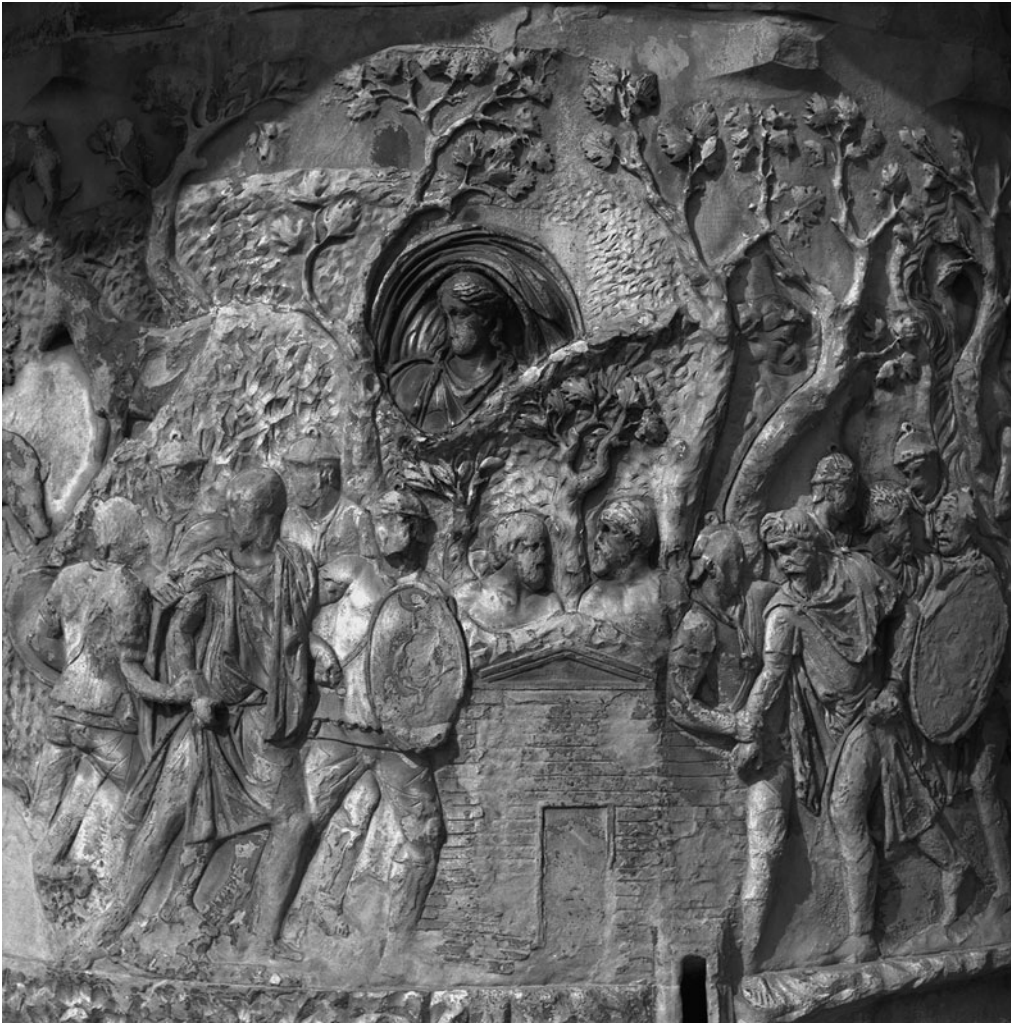


FIG 5. Scene CLI from the frieze on the Column of Trajan in Rome. Marble. A.D. 113. Arachne ID: 983654. D-DAI-ROM-89.28\_000300140150,01.jpg. (Photo: F. Schlechter)

perhaps taking captives to a prison or clearing the woods of an enemy outpost — and the precise role and identity of the goddess are also unknown.<sup>32</sup> The deity's veil and her connection with the landscape suggest, respectively, a celestial and a natural or geographical character, and Nox, Dacia, a forest goddess, the personified far north and various combinations of these deities have been suggested by scholars with equal confidence.<sup>33</sup> The goddess' open-ended iconography makes a firm identification difficult,

<sup>32</sup> Faust 2012: 86–8. Strobel 2017b: 323, in a recent assessment of the second half of the frieze, suggests the goddess (taken as Nox) may be protecting hiding Dacians (with her darkness). This is perhaps difficult to accept: the Column has shown consistently that the gods support the Romans.

<sup>33</sup> Nox: Hamberg 1945: 118–19 (Luna-Nox); Becatti 1982: 573 (northern Nox); Faust 2012: 86–8 (Nox or Dacia); Kovács 2017: 47; Strobel 2017b: 323. Dacia: Lehmann-Hartleben 1926: 54 n. 1, 112. Forest goddess: Rossi 1971: 210; Coarelli 2000: 219 (Diana). Personified north: Bode 1992: 142–3, 168–72 (North/Nox). 'Space-filler': Lepper and Frere 1988: 132.

but her range of meaning can probably be narrowed down. The point of the final scenes is not just battle and victory, but military action in the depths of the new province. Even the emperor is not depicted travelling this far (his final appearance occurred at scene CXLI). The goddess, then, perhaps served to highlight this aspect of the narrative, and may have been intended as an unnamed(?) geographical deity inhabiting the limits of the empire, balanced by the topographical figure of Danube at the start of the frieze.<sup>34</sup> The goddess may show that the pioneering efforts of the legions in new lands continue to operate under a horizon of divine protection. The gods would then mark the auspicious beginning, the victorious mid-point and the far-reaching end of the narrative.

Apart from Victory, whose appearance takes place on a different level to the rest of the narrative, the gods on the Column of Trajan were all portrayed in a distinctive representational style. Danube, Jupiter, Nox and the final goddess each emerge from the landscape and intervene in the narrative without interacting directly with the mortal participants.

## II GODS ON THE COLUMN OF MARCUS AURELIUS

An examination of the gods on the Column of Marcus Aurelius will sharpen our understanding of the Columns' unusual style of divine representation. The Column stood in the northern Campus Martius and was dedicated at some point between the emperor's northern triumph of A.D. 176 and A.D. 193, when an inscription referring to a *curator* of the Column was set up, providing a *terminus ante quem* for its construction.<sup>35</sup> The frieze displays a detailed and dramatic representation of Marcus Aurelius' German campaigns (A.D. 168–175).<sup>36</sup> Marches, speeches, battles, barbarian submissions and wartime executions and destruction are depicted.<sup>37</sup> The systematic organisation and thematic variety found on Trajan's Column are subordinated to a heightened message of Roman superiority: the proportion of the frieze dedicated to battle scenes has doubled, and the emperor's visibility and bold images of barbarian punishment and defeat are privileged over historical-looking detail and narrative structure.<sup>38</sup> That the designers of the frieze were willing to reformulate their Trajanic model in these ways makes the similarity of the gods on the two monuments striking.<sup>39</sup> The role of the gods in extended campaign narratives seems to have been governed by a firm set of expectations.

The frieze contains four scenes of divine action: (1) the crossing of the Danube under the protection of the river god (scene III); (2) the destruction of a barbarian siege engine by a miraculous thunderbolt, sent by an (unseen, assumed) Jupiter (XI: the 'lightning miracle'); (3) the defeat of a barbarian army by a divine storm, represented in the form of a much-disputed winged rain god (XVI: the 'rain miracle'); and (4) the appearance of the goddess Victory at the end of the first half of the frieze (unnumbered, between LV and LVI).<sup>40</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Bode 1992: 142–3, 168–72.

<sup>35</sup> Date and dedication: Hamberg 1945: 149–50 (A.D. 176–193); Ferris 2009: 90 (A.D. 180–193); Löhr 2009: 123–32 (A.D. 180–193); Beckmann 2011: 19–36 (A.D. 176); Faust 2012: 92 (A.D. 176 or 180); Griebel 2013: 23–6 (A.D. 176–193).

<sup>36</sup> Marcus Aurelius' northern wars: Birley 1987: 159–83, 249–55; Kerr 1995. The exact chronological scope of the frieze is uncertain.

<sup>37</sup> Narrative and iconography of the frieze: Pirson 1996; Faust 2012: 92–120; Griebel 2013.

<sup>38</sup> Pirson 1996: 140, 149; Hölscher 2000: 95, 97–8; Coarelli 2008: 47; Ferris 2009: 81; Beckmann 2011: 155; Faust 2012: 116–20; Griebel 2013: 196–200; Hölscher 2019: 310–20. These changes correspond in certain ways with historical differences between the Trajanic and Aurelian campaigns: Birley 1987: 176.

<sup>39</sup> Some recent studies, for example, have argued that the Column of Marcus Aurelius 'differed significantly' from its Trajanic predecessor in its conception of war: Wolfram Thill 2018: 298.

<sup>40</sup> Danube: Coarelli 2008: 114; Beckmann 2011: 89–98; Faust 2012: 100; Griebel 2013: 224–6; Kovács 2017: 47–50. Thunderbolt scene: Hamberg 1945: 152; Coarelli 2008: 50–1, 132; Ferris 2009: 81–3; Beckmann



FIG 6. Scene III from the frieze on the Column of Marcus Aurelius in Rome. Marble. A.D. 176–193. Arachne ID: 463275. D-DAl-ROM-43.93\_0002930703,01.jpg. (Photo: J. Felbermeyer)

The gods follow the same logic as those on the Trajanic Column. The scene with the river god Danube (Fig. 6) is essentially a re-staging of the same episode on the Column of Trajan. There are minor adjustments, such as the placement of the deity's left hand, but overall the two scenes are remarkably alike. The river god is again situated beneath a pontoon bridge and once more gestures for the Roman army to enter barbarian territory. The representation of Victory is likewise almost a reproduction of its Trajanic antecedent.<sup>41</sup> The goddess' pose, action and position half-way along the frieze all recall her depiction on the Column of Trajan.

The other scenes of divine action, the so-called lightning and rain miracles, have their own iconography, but their basic narratives follow the pattern set by the Trajanic Column.<sup>42</sup> On both monuments, elemental deities assist the Romans in two important early battles. The lightning miracle (Fig. 7) does not include a deity as such, but a divine interpretation of the scene is suggested by a passage in the *Historia Augusta*, which reports that Marcus Aurelius 'by his prayers summoned a thunderbolt from heaven against a war engine of the enemy' ('fulmen de caelo precibus suis contra hostium machinamentum extorsit').<sup>43</sup> The shared defining features of this passage and the scene on the frieze (the dramatic lightning strike and the presence of a barbarian siege engine)

2011: 133–4, 140; Faust 2012: 96, 102; Griebel 2013: 240–2; Kovács 2017: 52. Rain god scene: Hamberg 1945: 152–3; Coarelli 2008: 140–2; Ferris 2009: 83–93; Kovács 2009: 155–80; Beckmann 2011: 133–4; Griebel 2013: 247–51; Kovács 2017: 52–6; below, n. 45. Victory: Beckmann 2011: 98–102; Griebel 2013: 321–2.

<sup>41</sup> Becatti 1957: fig. 29. On the similarities and differences between the depictions of Victory on the Columns: Kousser 2006: 225–9; 2008: 84–91.

<sup>42</sup> Analysis of these scenes: Griebel 2013: 120–30.

<sup>43</sup> *HA Marc.* 24.4.





FIG 7. Scene XI from the frieze on the Column of Marcus Aurelius in Rome. Marble. A.D. 176–193. Arachne ID: 463507. D-DAI-ROM-89.196\_00029307011,02.jpg. (Photo: F. Schlechter)

indicate that the episode was a known event in which the (unseen) gods were held to have delivered a miraculous weather-related victory.<sup>44</sup>

The rain miracle develops these themes and provides a striking vision of divine assistance in battle. The scene (Fig. 8) is at a basic level a typical juxtaposition of the well-ordered Roman army with defeated barbarians. The cause of this defeat, however, is a colossal, primeval, winged rain god, who flies across the scene unleashing a storm that drowns the German forces. The identification of the deity is controversial,<sup>45</sup> but the iconography suggests that the figure in question is a rain or weather god, and the closest parallel is perhaps found in Ovid's description of the wind god Notus (*Met.* 1.264–269):

<sup>44</sup> The episode is perhaps also reflected on coins (depicting the emperor holding a thunderbolt while being crowned by Victory) that were produced in commemoration of Marcus' German conquests in A.D. 172: *RIC* III 264–6. There is also a contemporary and perhaps related medallion that depicts Jupiter attacking a giant with lightning: Gnechi 1912: 28, no. 11. On the scene on the Column and the related images: Coarelli 2008: 50–1; Kovács 2009: 107–11; Faust 2012: 96; Griebel 2013: 121–2.

<sup>45</sup> The historical event that inspired the scene is discussed in thirty-nine ancient literary sources: Kovács 2009: 23–93. The most significant in the present context are *HA Marc.* 24.4; Cass. Dio 72.8–10. This complicated literary tradition attributes the rain miracle to a number of deities (including Jupiter, Mercury and the Christian God) and has been used as a basis for an open-ended interpretation of the god on the frieze, with some arguing that the figure is intentionally vague: Rubin 1979: 367, 379; Coarelli 2008: 56; Israelowich 2008: 87, 102; Ferris 2009: 84. The literary sources are confused, and we may doubt the idea that conflicting rumours about the divine authorship of the event found expression in imperial art. The deity is probably best taken as it appears: as a carefully rendered rain god who helps the Romans in battle.





FIG 8. Scene XVI from the frieze on the Column of Marcus Aurelius in Rome. Marble. A.D. 176–193. Arachne ID: 463516. D-DAI-ROM-89.206\_00029307016.jpg. (Photo: F. Schlechter)

madidis Notus evolat alis,  
 (265) terribilem picea tectus caligine vultum;  
 barba gravis nimbis, canis fluit unda capillis;  
 fronte sedent nebulae, rorant pennaque sinusque.  
 utque manu lata pendentia nubila pressit,  
 fit fragor: hinc densi funduntur ab aethere nimbi.

Forth flies Notus with dripping wings, his awful face shrouded in pitchy darkness. His beard is heavy with rain; water flows in streams down his hoary locks; dark clouds rest upon his brow; while his wings and garments drip with dew. And, when he presses the low-hanging clouds with his broad hands, a crashing sound goes forth; and next the dense clouds pour forth their rain. (trans. Miller 1916)

Ovid's Notus and the Aurelian divinity share several features.<sup>46</sup> Both possess streaming wings, a thick beard, wild saturated hair and severe meteorological power — and the

<sup>46</sup> Visual representations of Notus: *LIMC Venti* 3, 12, 128–9. Notus on the Column: Hamberg 1945: 153; Kovács 2009: 166; Faust 2012: 96–7, n. 536; Griebel 2013: 122–30 (discussion), n. 315 ('Personifikation des Regens'). Other suggestions: Birley 1987: 173 (Hermes Aërios); Grant 1988: 1 (Hermes); Hölscher 2000: 99–100 (uncertain); Beckmann 2011: 135 (uncertain); Scheid 2017: 147–8 (rain god); and see n. 45.

frieze clearly represents a carefully characterised punishing god of rain. The deity is merged with the downpour he generates and appears like other gods on the Columns as a ‘half-figure’ nature divinity.

The friezes of both Columns, then, open with a divinely sanctioned crossing of the Danube, proceed through a series of key battles in which elemental deities intervene at two decisive points, and conclude their opening sections with emblematic depictions of Victory.<sup>47</sup> The behaviour of the gods throughout is remarkably consistent: all the deities that participate appear as ‘emerging’ weather- or nature-related figures that are often only covertly involved in the action.<sup>48</sup> Their interventions are never directly or physically associated with the emperor, and in many cases Trajan and Marcus are not involved in the scenes at all. This conception of divine action, in which nature divinities influence events independently of (that is, without being physically close to) imperial protagonists, differs from that found on the majority of imperial narrative reliefs (as we will see in Section IV). The distinctive character of the gods on the Columns suggests we are dealing with a specific strand of imperial visual narrative that had its own expressive concerns. Literary evidence can help us to interpret this phenomenon.

### III DIVINE ACTION AND HISTORICAL TEXTS

The Columns of Trajan and Marcus Aurelius are shaped by documentary concerns to a greater degree than any other imperial monument.<sup>49</sup> The friezes provide detailed *commentarii*-style representations of the emperors’ northern wars and, as has been noted by many scholars, their campaigning themes and continuous narrative structures recall historiography.<sup>50</sup> This was a new narrative conception designed for an imposing new monument category — the relief-decorated imperial column — and the extraordinary scale and painstaking elaboration of the friezes aimed to convey the concrete significance and reality of the emperors’ unprecedented but otherwise distant military achievements.<sup>51</sup> The kinds of cognate literary expression require attention. For example, Amanda Claridge suggested that ‘both the narrative style and the artistic vocabulary used on the Column [sc. of Trajan] can be matched to the rhetorical language of contemporary *panegyric*’ (my emphasis), and the gods have sometimes been seen by other scholars as elevating deviations from the real-looking texture that otherwise marks the friezes.<sup>52</sup> In this section, I would like to argue that the representations of gods on the Columns were in fact carefully designed, not to match the elevated language of panegyric, but to enhance the documentary aims of the monuments; I will use the evidence provided by historiographical texts as a contemporary reference point for the discussion. I begin by briefly outlining the character of the gods as presented in Roman historical texts, before turning to explore the relationship between descriptions of gods in these texts and the deities on the Columns.

<sup>47</sup> Hölscher 2000: 99–100; Faust 2012: 98. Some gods on the Column of Marcus Aurelius manifest more direct material effects (lightning and rain) than the deities on Trajan’s Column. This was probably a part of the enhanced dramatic style of the later frieze: Griebel 2013: 122–30; Scheid 2017: 148–9.

<sup>48</sup> The scenes depicting Victory, which take place outside the main narratives, are the only exceptions.

<sup>49</sup> Bode 1992: 123 (Trajan’s Column).

<sup>50</sup> Jones 1910: 435–40; Zanker 1970: 525–8; Gauer 1977: 53–4 (suggesting the Trajanic frieze may have drawn on the emperor’s *commentarii*); Hölscher 1980: 291; Torelli 1982: ch. 5; Smith 1989: 217; Baumer *et al.* 1991: 262; Bode 1992: 123; Kuhoff 1993: 293; Coarelli 2000: 176; Stewart 2004: 47; Faust 2012: 39; Hölscher 2017: 15–18, 29 (arguing that, while Trajan’s Column has ‘historical’ aspects, the idea that the frieze directly reflects the emperor’s *commentarii* is ‘ein philologischer Wunschtraum’). Roman *commentarii*: Bömer 1953: 236–50.

<sup>51</sup> The narrative style of the Columns was perhaps prefigured in now-lost triumphal paintings: von Blanckenhagen 1957: 81–2; Lusnia 2006.

<sup>52</sup> Claridge 2013: 11; Toynbee 1934: 13–14; Hamberg 1945: 116.

Gods in Roman historiography are defined by three main features: (1) they are always invisible, imperfectly perceived, or referred to as a divine collective; (2) they become manifest primarily through natural events, such as storms and eclipses; and (3) they intervene only occasionally, without interacting physically with mortals, but usually appear in significant episodes.<sup>53</sup> These characteristics are well known, and they were rarely deviated from by Roman authors. The historians of course had a range of aims, styles and reference points, but describing the gods in anonymous, 'natural' terms was on one level an ingrained component of historical writing designed to reinforce its authenticity. Personalised description of the gods was the responsibility of poets, not recorders of historical truth.<sup>54</sup>

The impersonal nature of historiographical divine action becomes clearer when compared with descriptions of the gods in other types of writing. Panegyric texts, for example, described divine influence on events in greater detail, and the close, collaborative relationship between the emperor and the gods was a key concern of the genre.<sup>55</sup> The emperor, for instance, was said to be chosen 'by Jupiter himself' ('ab Iove ipso'), and had the privilege of interceding and acting with the gods ('apud deos adesse consuesti') on behalf of the empire.<sup>56</sup> In panegyric terms, the gods were 'companions' ('comites') and 'guardians' ('conservatores') of the emperor.<sup>57</sup> We will see (in Section IV) that imperial reliefs frequently deployed the gods in an analogous 'panegyric' manner, to celebrate the emperor's actions within a higher, legitimising system of divine protection. The portrayal of the gods in epic texts also differed significantly from historiography.<sup>58</sup> Epic gods — revealed in their full richness and intensity only to inspired poets — had highly specialised appearances, continually involved themselves in human affairs (and were seen to do so) and were capable of powerful, kinetic interventions.<sup>59</sup> We may say broadly then that, among many other shades of representation, gods could act at the level of unseen 'naturalistic' historical involvement, have an elevating 'panegyric' relationship with leading individuals, or influence events in a vivid and direct 'epic' manner.

Among these modes of divine behaviour, the gods on the Columns are closest to what could be called a realist or indirect manner of representation.<sup>60</sup> We have seen, for example, that the deities all have naturalistic elemental effects. Danube's aquatic sanction, Jupiter's

<sup>53</sup> Gods in ancient historiography: Walbank 1960: 222; Parker 1987: 190; Woodman 1988: 87; Feeney 1991: 180–4, 256–60; Levene 1993: 243; Feeney 1998: 80–91; Harrison 2002: 64–101; Feeney 2007; J. Davies 2009.

<sup>54</sup> A primary context for historiographical divine action was miraculous weather events: Sall., *Iug.* 75.1–10 (heaven-sent downpour); Livy 1.31, 2.7; Tac., *Ann.* 1.28 (eclipse), 13.17 (storm), 13.41 (miraculous clouds and lightning support the Romans' capture of Artaxata); Cass. Dio 68.31.1–4 (divine lightning), 72.8.2–4 (the 'rain miracle' of Marcus Aurelius' German campaigns: 'suddenly many clouds gathered and a mighty rain, not without divine interposition (οὐκ ἄθεεϊ), burst upon them ...'), 72.8–10 (more details of the rain miracle). The Aurelian rain and lightning miracles are briefly recorded in *HA Marc.* 24.4. Invocations of the gods are found in Caesar's *Gallic War*, but not descriptions of deities in action: Caes., *BGall.* 2.31, 4.24, 5.52, 8.43.

<sup>55</sup> Levene 1997; Rees 2001; Roche 2011; Rodgers 2012; Ware 2018.

<sup>56</sup> Plin., *Pan.* 1.5, 78.5.

<sup>57</sup> e.g. Nazarius, *Panegyricus*, 7.13 (gods assist in victory); *Pan. Lat.* VI.2.2 ('deorum comes'), XII.18.1–2 (the river-god Tiber as 'conservator').

<sup>58</sup> It could be said that it was the personalised representation of the divine that defined epic as a genre distinct from history: Feeney 1991: 261. Gods, divine action, Roman epic: Hardie 1986; Feeney 1991; Hardie 1992; Heinze [1915] 1993: 259; Bessone 2013; Dufallo 2013: 108–36, 206–43; Fucecchi 2013; Chaudhuri 2014; Walter 2014; Rebggiani 2018; Baier 2020.

<sup>59</sup> Some examples: Verg., *Aen.* 1.1–43 (Juno), 2.601–18 (Gods at Troy), 5.239–43 (Portunus), 5.685–99 (Jupiter), 8.31–65 (Tiber); Sil., *Pun.* 1.535–47 (Jupiter in battle), 1.548–49 (Juno), 4.675–89 (Scipio saved by Vulcan's fire), 9.438–50 (Mars in battle), 12.403 (Apollo and Hostus), 17.236–240 (Neptune); Stat., *Theb.* 9.492–526 (Hippomedon and Mars; Juno and Jupiter), 10.632–77 (Menoceus and Virtus). Gods in other forms of poetry also had a wide range of roles, e.g. Prop. 4.6 (Apollo at Actium), 4.10.37–8 (the gods aid Cossus); Verg., *Ecl.* 4.15–16 (great men will see, and be seen with, divinities).

<sup>60</sup> The emblematic scenes depicting Victory are the only exceptions.

thundering assistance, Nox's protective darkness, the rain god's devastating storm and the forest goddess' beneficent presence could each be compared loosely with miraculous weather events reported in Tacitus or Cassius Dio.<sup>61</sup> In addition, the participating deities are all depicted as half-figures who emanate from the natural environment — from rivers, trees, mountains and the sky. These qualified epiphanies can be thought of as a visual interpretation of the kind of meditated divine invisibility that is also found in historical texts: the gods appear to be conceived across the Columns as an unseen presence. They are not witnessed or interacted with by any of the mortal participants, and they often appear in the background or at the edge of the scenes in which they act.

To a degree, the Columns are also reminiscent of historical conceptions of the gods in the density of their divine representations. Of the hundreds of scenes on the Columns, only nine have a divine element.<sup>62</sup> The gods nevertheless help to structure the narratives (as they do in historiography) and are concentrated around significant episodes — campaign beginnings, decisive battles and the closing sections of the wars.<sup>63</sup> Some other sets of imperial narrative reliefs, by contrast, insert gods into the majority of their scenes.<sup>64</sup> The economical divine deployment of the Columns aligns with other 'realistic' aspects of the friezes, such as Trajan's and Marcus' mundane military roles. As in real life, neither emperor physically leads troops in battle.<sup>65</sup> Apart from Jupiter on the Column of Trajan, the absence of a significant Olympian presence is also notable. The frequent intervention of major gods would shift the tone of the narratives into a different register and was perhaps thought inappropriate for the realist campaigning vision of the Columns.

Alongside these points of similarity, the divine representations of the Columns and historical texts also had many important differences, primarily in terms of their cultural situation and audience, their relationship with the regime and their animating ideas and intentions. For example, the Column narratives are different from those of the historians in that their divine interventions are overwhelmingly positive for the Romans. Historians, on the other hand, often recorded dramatic details and other aspects of events which would be out of place on an official monument. Cassius Dio, for instance, writes that, when the Romans were attacking the city of Hatra during Trajan's Mesopotamian campaigns: 'There were [sc. divinely inspired] peals of thunder, rainbow tints showed, and lightning, rain-storms, hail and thunderbolts descended upon the Romans as often as they made assaults' (ἐγίνοντο δὲ βρονταί, καὶ ἴριδες ὑπεφαίνοντο, ἀστραπαὶ τε καὶ ζάλη χάλαζά τε καὶ κεραυνοὶ τοῖς Ῥωμαίοις ἐνέπιπτον, ὅποτε προσβάλοιεν).<sup>66</sup> This idea of countervailing divine forces is not allowed to intrude on the monuments' shared agenda of positive imperial commemoration.<sup>67</sup>

The historians also often frame the intervention of the gods in terms of belief, perception or rumour.<sup>68</sup> The monuments, on the other hand, assert unequivocally the reality of the emperors' divine support. The gods are revealed clearly to viewers, even if they are conceived as unseen from the perspective of the mortals within the friezes. This contrast is related to the different models of divine understanding at play within textual historical

<sup>61</sup> Above, n. 54.

<sup>62</sup> Scheid 2017 has suggested that the 'restricted' depiction of gods on Trajan's Column (in comparison, in his view, with the Column of Marcus Aurelius) may be related to the fact that some state votive rites were not carried out in the years A.D. 101–105.

<sup>63</sup> Levene 1993.

<sup>64</sup> The Arch of Trajan at Beneventum (with more than forty divine figures across fourteen narrative scenes) and the Arch of Septimius Severus at Leptis Magna (with more than thirty divine figures across eleven extant narratives) are two prominent examples: below, n. 96.

<sup>65</sup> Lehmann-Hartleben 1926: 89.

<sup>66</sup> Cass. Dio 68.31.4; also 68.24–5 (a miraculous earthquake during Trajan's stay in Antioch).

<sup>67</sup> No dead Roman soldiers are shown on either Column: Pirson 1996: 158.

<sup>68</sup> e.g. Livy 1.31, 2.7; Tac., *Ann.* 13.17, 13.41.



and visual imperial narratives. For historical actors, historians, and their readers, the will of the gods was part of a complex discourse of interpretation. Historical portents, omens and consultations of the gods through practices such as augury were filtered into the often equivocal reportage of the historian and then received by (critical) readers.<sup>69</sup> At every stage there was room for debate and evaluation, with a picture of the gods' actions built out of multiple incomplete impressions of their historical behaviour.<sup>70</sup>

The gods on the Columns worked within a different system of attribution. Texts gave writers the ability to present different views about the same subjects and to explore religious ambiguities.<sup>71</sup> Image-making, on the other hand, was to a large extent a selective mode of signification. A narrative relief must make a concrete choice about which version of a deity it represents, and the visual medium and ideological priorities of the Columns called for more directly intelligible depictions of divine presences. The unseen deity behind the lightning miracle is perhaps the closest the friezes come to the indirect style of the historians. But even here the representation of the divine is adapted to suit the agenda of the monument. In contrast to the other scenes we have discussed, no divine figure is represented. The thunderbolt simply appears from the sky ('de caelo'). Although the lightning would naturally be associated with Jupiter, the visual anonymisation of the event allows the emperor to assume greater prominence in the scene and, as in the passage from the *Historia Augusta* ('precibus suis ... extorsit'), to appear as the primary visible protagonist.<sup>72</sup> The significance of the emperor here matches the increased visibility of the emperor generally on the Aurelian Column when compared with its Trajanic predecessor, and complements contemporary coins showing Marcus holding a thunderbolt while being crowned by Victory, which perhaps also celebrated this event.<sup>73</sup> The frieze maintains a close positive connection between the emperor and the lightning miracle, but naturalises the event to fit the real-looking narrative programme of the monument. The scene thus represents a thoughtful combination of imperial praise and mediated documentary-style divine assistance.

Finally, the scenes of the goddess Victory constitute particularly visual narrative manipulations not found in historical texts. The goddess has both a structuring role within the narratives as a marker of their central points and, through her larger scale, stands outside the narratives as an emblematic legitimising divinity visible to viewers on the ground.<sup>74</sup> The gods on the Columns thus embody a more accessible and explicitly positive view of divine action than do the texts, while still drawing on certain shared ideas about the proper relation of the gods to historical action.

We may say, then, that the Columns aimed to project, in Roman thinking, a relatively 'realistic' conception of divine action. The gods do not appear as elevating or panegyric figures, but as potent elemental forces, whose unseen interventions were tailored to and expressive of a compelling documentary narrative fabric. This 'true-to-life' treatment of the gods helps to anchor the action of the friezes in the here-and-now and will have enhanced the credibility and effectiveness of the monuments as visual memorials. The Columns use a specific conception of divine action to articulate persuasively the 'historically real' aspects of imperial war.<sup>75</sup> Other welcome yet potentially conflicting

<sup>69</sup> Roman augury: Driediger-Murphy 2018.

<sup>70</sup> I thank an anonymous reviewer for this point and for their particularly valuable comments on this section of the article.

<sup>71</sup> e.g. Plin., *HN* 2.14–27 (an iconoclastic enquiry into the nature of the gods); Tac., *Ann.* 6.22 (a sceptical interlude on the role of the divine in world affairs).

<sup>72</sup> Motschmann 2002: 134 n. 404; Griebel 2013: 127.

<sup>73</sup> For the coins and other sources, see above, n. 44.

<sup>74</sup> Baumer *et al.* 1991: 271 n. 39 (on the Trajanic Victory).

<sup>75</sup> Scenes of battle and war emerged with greater prominence in the Flavian and Trajanic–Antonine periods as a result of new imperial victories and an increasing barbarian threat: Hölscher 1984; 2002; Faust 2012; Willers 2021: 91.

ideas about the emperor and the divine, such as the emperor's special personal relationship with the gods, were visualised on other monuments, and we turn now to look at how deities were depicted on two very different sets of imperial reliefs.

#### IV DIVINE REPRESENTATION ON CONTEMPORARY RELIEFS

The Great Trajanic Frieze and the panel reliefs of Marcus Aurelius depict scenes of northern campaigning in which the emperor is assisted by the gods, but do so in a way that diverges from the manner of divine representation we have observed on the Columns. They exemplify a separate mode of divine representation in imperial war narratives.

##### *The Great Trajanic Frieze*

The Great Trajanic Frieze (A.D. 106–117) survives in eight main consecutive slabs, which were re-used on the Arch of Constantine, and a number of fragments.<sup>76</sup> We have around 20 m of a minimum original total of at least 40 m, but there was perhaps much more.<sup>77</sup> This length, combined with an impressive height of nearly 3 m and an explosive artistic style, makes the Frieze one of the largest and most powerful sets of imperial reliefs to have survived. Like the emperor's Column, its main subject was Trajan's Dacian Wars, but, as many scholars have noted, this theme is presented in a strikingly different way. Trajan leads his army in the style of a dynamic warrior-king, mixes freely with the gods and is inserted into a thundering sculptural narrative: the bird's-eye perspective of the Column is replaced by over-life-size figures that dominate the visual field in the manner of a Hellenistic gigantomachy.<sup>78</sup> The Frieze can thus be thought of as a vivid, heroic counterpart to the detailed and down-to-earth narrative of Trajan's Column.<sup>79</sup>

The main surviving section of the Frieze shows two overlapping scenes: on the left, an imperial arrival or *adventus*, and a long battle.<sup>80</sup> The rapid shift between urban arrival and frontier warfare suggests the Frieze employed an elevated technique of narrative elision. The methodical unfolding of the Column is replaced by a seamless vision of decisive scenes. Comprehensive historical-looking documentation becomes selective panegyric-style celebration.

The gods appear in the *adventus* scene (Fig. 9) and surround the emperor in a constellation that by the Trajanic period had become well established for imperial reliefs, that of *Virtus*, *Honos* and *Victory*.<sup>81</sup> The scene is not complete — the shoulders

<sup>76</sup> Key studies: Hamberg 1945: 56–63, 168–72; Gauer 1973; Leander Touati 1987; Smith 1989: 216–17; Phillip 1991; Faust 2012: 9–28; Hölscher 2019: 320–3. Fragments, including scenes of battle ('Berlin fragment'), battle or pursuit ('Medici fragment') and barbarian submission ('Borghese fragment'): Gauer 1973: 328–37; Koeppel 1985: 182–95; Leander Touati 1987: 96–110.

<sup>77</sup> Gauer 1973: 318–19 (over 36 m); Leander Touati 1987: 111 (over 41 m).

<sup>78</sup> Hamberg 1945: 61–2; Leander Touati 1987: 27, 29–31; Smith 1989: 216–17; Phillip 1991: 14; Kuhoff 1993: 297–8; Faust 2012: 11–16, 27–9; Strobel 2017b: 323–9. The contrast between the Frieze and the Column prompted Werner Gauer to argue that the Frieze was produced under Domitian: Gauer 1973: 321–5, 344; cf. Hamberg 1945: 168–70; Faust 2012: 10 (discussion of the issue); Claridge 2013: 11 n. 71 (Domitianic). The Frieze is most probably Trajanic, but its precise date does not significantly affect the points made here about the gods: Leander Touati 1987: 91–5 (the (re-carved) portraits suggest Trajan was the original protagonist), 112–21.

<sup>79</sup> Zanker 1970: 513–16 (suggesting both monuments may have been connected with, and so potentially viewed together in, the emperor's forum). Original display context of the Frieze: Leander Touati 1987: 34, 90–1.

<sup>80</sup> Battle: Hamberg 1945: 168–72; Leander Touati 1987: 17–26; Faust 2012: 11–16.

<sup>81</sup> Many have seen the figures as *Roma* and the *Genius* of the Roman People: Hamberg 1945: 56–63; Hölscher 1967: 52 n. 314; Gauer 1973: 327 (*Roma* and ideal youth); Koeppel 1985: 173 (*Roma* or *Virtus* and *licitor*



FIG 9. A section of the Great Trajanic Frieze on the Arch of Constantine in Rome. Marble. A.D. 106–117. Arachne ID: 2405963. D-DAI-ROM-37.329A\_29209,05.jpg. (Photo: C. Faraglia)

of figures who continued onto the next, now lost section can be seen at the left edge of the slab — and we are left with the right half of the scene.<sup>82</sup> The emperor is framed by gods and soldiers and is shown arriving at an urban location, probably Rome, indicated by an arch carved across the background. Virtus and Honos stand to the left of the emperor to lead him into the city. Victory hovers behind to crown the emperor.<sup>83</sup> Trajan's military success is thus directly authenticated by the gods.<sup>84</sup> The pragmatic campaigning actions that were illustrated on the Column have been re-imagined. The emperor is visualised here as a direct collaborator of the gods, who are presented as prominent, guiding participants in the narrative. This approach is greatly developed on the panel reliefs of Marcus Aurelius.

proximus). Virtus and Honos are to be preferred: Leander Touati 1987: 15–16; Hölscher 2002: 141; Faust 2012: 16–17. The male figure is represented as an armoured lictor, and should therefore have a military character, like Honos, rather than a civic character, like the Genius of the Roman People. The goddess standing beside Trajan is not, as would be appropriate for Roma, a representative of the city coming to meet the emperor, but a part of his entourage. Her bent leg and the torsion between her body and head show that she is with Trajan about to move in, towards Rome. Virtus and Honos in Roman art: Pfanner 1983: 67–71; Milhous 1992.

<sup>82</sup> Leander Touati 1987: 16. Reconstructions of the lost section: Koeppl 1969: 189–90 (restoring deities); Gauer 1973: 328 (restoring the Capitoline triad); Faust 2012: 17 (restoring civic Genii or the Capitoline triad).

<sup>83</sup> Hölscher 1967: 64; Leander Touati 1987: 15; Faust 2012: 16–17.

<sup>84</sup> The intervention of the gods in the adventus scene was not an exception: a fragment of the Frieze features another divinity, perhaps the Genius of a military camp: Gauer 1973: 329.

### *The panel reliefs of Marcus Aurelius*

A group of eleven panel reliefs (A.D. 176–180) survive from a lost monument of Marcus Aurelius (most probably an arch).<sup>85</sup> These reliefs translate the emperor's northern campaigns and the celebratory activities that followed his victories into a series of focused ceremonial scenes. In place of the unfolding, matter-of-fact presentation on Marcus' Column, we see a selection of key events excerpted from a larger story for special emphasis: imperial departure, sacrifice, campaign address, barbarian submissions, arrival back in Rome, triumphal procession, sacrifice on the Capitol and a cash handout to the Roman people.<sup>86</sup>

Gods participate in four of the scenes (the departure, arrival, triumph and Capitoline sacrifice) and, as on the Great Trajanic Frieze, are depicted as prominent supporting characters, always near the emperor. For example, the arrival panel (Fig. 10) shows the emperor returning to Rome escorted by a protective entourage of five gods: Victory, Mars, Virtus, Felicitas and (probably) Aeternitas.<sup>87</sup> The emperor is presented as an impassive, divinely guided figure. Marcus Aurelius stands at the centre of the relief and wears travelling dress. He has just returned from the front. Flanking the emperor are two military gods (Mars<sup>88</sup> and Virtus<sup>89</sup>), who have accompanied him home, and in the background stand a pair of female deities (probably Aeternitas, on the left, and Felicitas, with her characteristic caduceus and cornucopia, on the right), who act as welcoming divine companions.<sup>90</sup> Victory flies above the main group and carries a garland, showing that the emperor's actions on the frontier have been successfully completed.<sup>91</sup> Together, the surrounding gods set the emperor in a legitimising framework of explicit divine

<sup>85</sup> Eight of the reliefs were re-used on the Arch of Constantine; three were found built into a church of Santa Martina and are now in the Conservatori Museum in Rome: Ryberg 1967: 1–8. Key studies: Petersen 1889; Wegner 1938; Kähler 1939; Hamberg 1945: 78–99; Ryberg 1967; Blanck 1969; Angelicoussis 1984; Koeppl 1986: 47–75; La Rocca 1986: 38–52; Demandt 2019: 253–9; Hölscher 2019: 287–93. The themes, format and number of the reliefs suggest they originally decorated a single structure, usually proposed to be an arch: Blanck 1969: 487–8; Angelicoussis 1984: 159–74; Koeppl 1986: 10; Hölscher 2019: 287–93. Two separate original monuments have sometimes been proposed: Frothingham 1915: 2–6; Wegner 1938: 188–95; Kähler 1939: 269; Ryberg 1967: 2–7, 77–83, 84–9; Rose 2021: 29 (undecided). Fragment of a possible twelfth relief in Copenhagen: Koeppl 1986: 75–6 (head of Marcus Aurelius from a relief in the style of the panels, allegedly found near the Castel Sant'Angelo).

<sup>86</sup> The subjects of the reliefs are widely agreed: Wegner 1938: 160–91; Kähler 1939: 265–9; Hamberg 1945: 78–99; Ryberg 1967: 9–76; Angelicoussis 1984: 145–59; Koeppl 1986: 47–75.

<sup>87</sup> Full description of the panel: Ryberg 1967: 66–71.

<sup>88</sup> For the figure type of Mars (identified on Antonine coins as Mars Ultor): Ryberg 1967: 69; Thomas 2017: 154–74.

<sup>89</sup> This figure has been identified by some as Virtus, but by more as Roma. Virtus: Frothingham 1915: 8; Hannestad 1986: 232–3; Boschung 2012: 310. Roma: Wegner 1938: 180; Kähler 1939: 266; Hamberg 1945: 80–1; Ryberg 1967: 66–70; Koeppl 1986: 72 (Virtus-Roma); Hölscher 2018: 79; Demandt 2019: 257; Hölscher 2019: 292. The posture of the figure indicates that she is Virtus. The goddess is not waiting to receive the emperor but guiding him back to the city from campaign, as confirmed by the deity's look over her shoulder. This motif, of implied motion in one direction with the head turned in another, was a common posture of Virtus. Comparable depictions are found on the Arch of Titus (Pfanter 1983: 67–71) and the Great Trajanic Frieze (Fig. 9). The idea of transitory movement is alien to Roma, who was characterised in art as a static embodiment of the city and usually shown seated: Vermeule 1959: pls 1–4, 10; Ağtürk 2021: fig. 3.11 (new example of a seated Roma on an imperial relief from Nicomedia).

<sup>90</sup> The figure on the right matches named images of Felicitas in adventus scenes on contemporary coins: BMC IV 660–3 (referring to the same event as the relief, Marcus' return in A.D. 176). The veiled figure labelled here as Aeternitas has been identified with several divinities who wore veils: Frothingham 1915: 8 (Fortuna); Hamberg 1945: 80–1 (Aeternitas); Ryberg 1967: 67–8 (Aeternitas-Faustina); Hannestad 1986: 232–3 (Aeternitas or Pietas or Faustina); Hölscher 2019: 292 (Aeternitas). Pietas has relatively little relevance to the victorious arrival narrative, and Faustina, as a female member of the imperial family, would perhaps be unlikely to be represented in a narrative relief such as this. The figure also has none of Faustina's portrait features or hairstyle elements.

<sup>91</sup> Ryberg 1967: 69.





FIG 10. The adventus relief from the panel reliefs of Marcus Aurelius. Marble. Now on the Arch of Constantine, Rome. A.D. 176–180. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Marcus\\_Aurelius\\_relief,\\_Adventus,\\_Profectio.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Marcus_Aurelius_relief,_Adventus,_Profectio.jpg). (Photo: D. Castor: Public Domain Creative Commons: Creative Commons CC0 1.0 Universal Public Domain Dedication)

support. The divinities in the departure, triumph and Capitoline sacrifice panels are presented in a similar way.

Where the partially concealed deities on the Columns appeared natural and ‘realistic’, the prominent, emperor-supporting gods on these reliefs and on the Great Trajanic Frieze echo the more elevated portrayal of imperial-divine relations found in panegyric texts, such as Pliny the Younger’s *Panegyricus*, where the emperor is cast as a partner of the Roman pantheon.<sup>92</sup> Early in Pliny’s speech, for example, the emperor is hailed as a ‘gift of the gods’ (*munus deorum*) and is said to have been chosen to rule ‘by Jupiter himself’ (*ab Iove ipso*).<sup>93</sup> Pliny further declares that the emperor has a ‘pact with the gods’ (*pacisceris cum dis*), that he rules according to ‘divine consensus’ (*consensu*

<sup>92</sup> The *Panegyricus* and the Great Trajanic Frieze have been connected by many scholars: Hamberg 1945: 56–63; Gauer 1973: 319–25; Leander Touati 1987: 27, 29–31; Kuhoff 1993: 297–8; Faust 2012: 27–9; Strobel 2017b: 323–9.

<sup>93</sup> Plin., *Pan.* 1.3–4, 1.5. On the *Panegyricus*: Rees 2001; Roche 2011.

deorum') and that the emperor's achievements are grand occasions witnessed by 'assemblies of both men and gods' ('contione hominum deorumque').<sup>94</sup> This framework of direct divine protection is absent from the Columns, but finds parallels in the images of god-supported emperors on the Great Trajanic Frieze and the panel reliefs of Marcus Aurelius. The types of divine figure that participate in the two categories of relief are also different: in place of the primarily nature-related or 'elemental' gods on the Columns, the deities on the other sets of reliefs (Virtus, Honos, Victory, Mars, Felicitas and Aeternitas, among others) have powers that relate mainly to protection in war or to the blessings of imperial peace.<sup>95</sup>

The gods are treated in a comparably direct, emperor-supporting manner on a range of other imperial monuments, including the Arch of Titus, the Flavian Cancellaria Reliefs, the Arch of Trajan at Beneventum, the Arch of Septimius Severus in Leptis Magna, the recently discovered tetrarchic reliefs from Nicomedia and the Arch of Constantine.<sup>96</sup> Among surviving imperial monuments, then, the Columns of Trajan and Marcus Aurelius stand out. They offer their own unusual interpretation of divine intervention in imperial action, one that avoids the standard panegyric style of divine representation in favour of a true-seeming, documentary portrayal of the gods as they could be imagined to act in the historical world.<sup>97</sup> Where the panegyric mode was impressive and explicit, but on some level 'un-real', the documentary style enabled the presentation of a compelling and verifiable campaigning account of the emperor's achievements that drew narrative authority from the 'realism' of its naturalistic divine representations. Both categories of relief thus provided imperial events with an enduring aesthetic existence while emphasising different aspects of political legitimacy. The style of the Great Trajanic Frieze and the panel reliefs of Marcus Aurelius was much preferred and may have been attractive to commissioning groups as a highly charged manner of visual praise that focused on the person and deeds of the emperor. The advantage of this approach was that it enabled the clear communication of important conceptual content, such as the emperor's unique relationship with protective deities. The relatively prosaic style of the Columns, on the other hand, lacked some of this symbolic potential. But its authentic visual character, with its careful, 'lifelike' handling of the gods, helped to increase the commemorative power of the monuments and persuasively to bring achievements won outside Rome into view for a metropolitan audience, whose relative unfamiliarity with

<sup>94</sup> Plin., *Pan.* 8.3; cf. 67.7 ('pacisceris cum dis'), 68.1 ('consensu deorum'). Similar ideas: Plin., *Pan.* 5.3–5, 10.4 ('providentia deorum'), 52.6–7, 56.3, 80.5, 94.1 ('praesides custodesque imperi divos'). Additional sources and literature are given above, nn. 55–9.

<sup>95</sup> Throughout this article, non-mortal figures have been taken as legitimate gods, rather than as allegorical figures. Non-Olympian divinities such as Danube and Virtus have at times been interpreted as symbolic figures in previous scholarship, e.g. Pfanner 1983: 68 (seeing Virtus on the Arch of Titus as a 'Verkörperung einer Tugend'). Ancient evidence tends against such allegorical interpretations. Figures such as Victory, Virtus and Honos had their own temples and cult-based identities (even figures such as Danube received cult: above, n. 16), which we see developed in visual media such as imperial reliefs, where these figures are carefully presented as independent narrative actors. The non-mortal figures discussed here are thus considered as they appear within the logic of the reliefs, as visual representations of active gods. Virtus and Honos' cults: Richardson 1978: 242–6; P. Davies 2017: 49–50, 60, 74, 80–2, 153, 156, 165, 219. Victory's importance in cult and thought: Hölscher 1967; Fears 1981: 804–24; Claridge 2010: 126. On the definition of Roman gods: Kunckel 1974: 8–13 (Genii); Spannagel 2000; Rüpke 2007: 65–83; Clark 2007; Levene 2012: 53–73.

<sup>96</sup> Arch of Titus: Pfanner 1983. Cancellaria Reliefs: Langer and Pfanner 2018. Arch of Trajan at Beneventum: Fittschen 1972; Simon 1981; Torelli 1997. Arch of Septimius Severus at Leptis Magna: Strocka 1972; Faust 2011b; Lichtenberger 2011: 75–8; Faust 2012: 168–75. Nicomedia reliefs: Ağtürk 2021. Arch of Constantine: L'Orange 1939; Elsner 2000; Faust 2011a; Koortbojian 2020: 123–67; Rose 2021.

<sup>97</sup> A comparable style of divine representation is found on a few later monuments, such as the Arch of Septimius Severus in Rome (A.D. 203), which like the Columns depicts detailed campaigning action in which the gods have a 'reduced' role (on the Severan Arch the gods are in fact left out of the campaigning scenes entirely). Severus' Arch: Brilliant 1967; Koeppel 1990: 9–32; Lichtenberger 2011: 74–5; Faust 2012: 121–41.

the events may have encouraged the use of an informative and seductively realist narrative style.<sup>98</sup>

## V CONCLUSION

There were, it has been argued, multiple discrete ways of depicting the gods on imperial monuments. The Columns of Trajan and Marcus Aurelius deploy a category-specific documentary style of divine representation, which has some similarities with descriptions of divine action in contemporary history writing, where gods could also be presented ‘realistically’ as unseen natural forces. On the Great Trajanic Frieze and the panel reliefs of Marcus Aurelius, on the other hand, we saw that the gods operated under a different set of norms — as active imperial companions — in a way that is broadly comparable to the elevated relationships between rulers and gods presented in contemporary panegyric.<sup>99</sup> These differences, it has been suggested, can be understood by thinking about the diverse roles of the gods in imperial reliefs as part of a multi-layered system of dramatic representation, in which distinct ideas about the gods, their relationship with the emperor, and how these themes should be realised artistically were in play in different contexts.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> On the amalgamation of realism and symbolism on imperial monuments: Hölscher 2015: 43–4.

<sup>99</sup> Other images, such as the elevated compositions of imperial court cameos, worked in an additional, higher system, equivalent in certain ways to encomiastic poetry: Smith 2021: 98–106.

<sup>100</sup> The ideas presented here form part of a wider project on the role of the gods in imperial narrative art.

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