

## **(iii) Trajan's Column - 2016**

### **(a) On which monument does this relief sculpture belong?**

This is from Trajan's column in Rome.

### **(b) What does the monument commemorate?**

Completed in 113 AD, the column depicts the victories of Trajan in the Dacian wars. The wars were fought in modern day Romania against king Decebalus in 101-102 AD and 106-107 AD. The column commemorates Trajan's defeat over the Dacians, as well as the strength and prowess of Rome. It also highlights the greatness of emperor Trajan. It was under Trajan that the empire reached its widest expansion. The column is also part of a bigger scale project, Trajan's forum in Rome. It is also supposedly where Trajan's body was laid to rest.

### **(c) Why is the monument considered to be "the masterpiece of Roman historical art"?**

Trajan's column is a magnificent piece of Roman art sculpted at the time of its namesake, making it a primary source. The column itself is most impressive, measuring a height of 38 meters with a continuous helical frieze spanning all the way up the column. The frieze measures at 215 yards and there are 23 spirals all the way up the column. On this frieze there are a total of 2500 figures all carved in low relief. While this, by itself, is impressive, each figure and detail would have been originally hand painted. The column alone would have been considered marvelous but considering it was just one part of Trajan's forum in Rome, which contained adjacent libraries and Basilica Ulpia, it's clear it was an enormous project for the time.

Physically the column is impressive but there are important details in the frieze worth noting. The column was clearly not meant to focus on artistic, realistic detail. The perspective is not carefully observed but this is to tell the story of the Dacian wars more effectively. Another way in which the column tells us it was not supposed to be realistic is the presence of Danube in his cave. Danube is a river God who, according to the frieze, wished Trajan and his soldiers well. His presence highlights the Romans belief of being 'blessed by the gods.' Trajan's continuous presence can also to be noted as unrealistic. We see him at the camp, fighting alongside his men, giving

speeches, and making battle plans. The frieze tells us of the whole campaign continuously, which means the story continues throughout its way up the column. The events are suggested to be happening exactly one after the other which isn't what happened. Events were left out for better story telling purposes.

Another reason why the column is a masterpiece of Roman historical art is the detailed description of the Roman army's day-to-day activities while on campaign. The column tells us so much about Roman armor, tactics, routines, and weapons. As an example, we know the Romans introduced a cross brace for their helmets to deal with the heavy Dacian swords, from the frieze. Scenes that appear include a spy captured, orders being given, marching, and a camp being built. All these scenes give us so much information about the most famous and effective army in the ancient world. It is believed that no other document "taught more about the Roman army in the field."

Finally, the column demonstrates how the emperors moved away from the idea of "primus inter pares" and more into creating a cult of personality for themselves. Trajan's column is first and foremost a piece of propaganda. Unlike Augustus in the Ara Pacis, Trajan quite visible and is easy to point out as he stands above his men. He is also present numerous times, doing multiple things throughout. He leads us soldiers from the fortified city, holds a council of war, is seen outside the camp, veiled as a priest giving a sacrifice, and gives a speech to his men [or perhaps orders.] The column symbolizes the importance of the Emperor and Rome.