Trajan's Column

By

Giacomo Boni

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In the month of March, 1906, when I first began to give special attention to the problem of the column of Trajan, it was a common belief among students of Roman archaeology and topography that the column had been erected to show the height of a hill which had been cut away in order to level the area for the Forum Ulpium. At the same time it was doubted whether the monument had ever been used as a sepulchre, that is to say, whether it contained a vault, there being no entrance or door leading into it.

Even the magnitude of the hill which it was supposed had been removed was calculated and estimated to be 24,000,000 cubic feet, and search had been made to discover the place in which so enormous a mass could have been unloaded.

Dion Cassius said that the pillar had been erected not only to serve as Trajan's tomb, but also to survey the majestic buildings of the Forum. Of these two statements the first was overlooked or denied, and the meaning of the second has been misconstrued by commentators.

Now, with regard to the original statements, Dion Cassius could, and no doubt did, speak from personal observation, but the commentator must have relied either upon tradition or upon what he learned to be the current reading of the dedicatory inscription of the column, or on his own verbal interpretation.

We must remember that Dion Cassius, an Asiatic Greek, was writing nearly a century after the column had been put up, and that the fragments of the book in which he mentioned Trajan's work

1 In the passage referring to Trajan in Dion Cassius (Lxxvii. 10) the part which seems to me fairly original is: κατασκευάσας δὲ καὶ μεθίκας ἀποθήκας. καὶ θεμέλιον ἐς τῇ ἀγορᾷ καὶ ἵππα μέγιστον, ὅμως μὲν ἐς ταφὴν ἑαυτῷ, ἀκριβῶς δὲ ἐς ἐξηγήσει τοῦ κατὰ τὴν ἀγορᾶν ἐγγον χάριν ἐς τὴν ἀνάγκην κατασκευάσας = 'he built the libraries and also raised in the Forum a large column not only to serve as his tomb but also to show from above the work done in order to build the Forum.'

There is a change of tone in the following paragraph, which reads like a later explanatory note: πανίδο γὰρ τοῦ χώρου ἑκάτων χρυσοῦ ὑδραυλικοῦ ὄρους κατὰ καθαρσύνα τοιαύτης ὅταν δὲ καὶ ἀνάγκης, καὶ τῇ ἀγορᾷ ἐς τούτων περὶ οἰκονόμου κατασκεύασι = 'The whole of that place being mountainous, Trajan excavated it to the same depth as the height of the column, and so he was able to build his forum on level ground.'
were handed down to us by Byzantine compilers who lived at Constantinople nine centuries later.

Further, other ancient writers confirm the statement as to the column having been a sepulchral monument. Thus, Eutropius says that 'Trajan was the only one of the emperors who had been buried within the city. The cremated bones, collected in a golden urn, were deposited under the column in the forum which he had constructed.' Eusebius, in his translation of St. Jerome, repeats this information in almost the same words. Aurelius Victor, in his Epitome, says exactly the same, but in more condensed form. Cassiodorus, the secretary of the Ostrogoth dynasty, and Jordanes its Gothic bishop, later on confirm this view.

The traditional and accepted interpretation of the last two lines of the inscription (AD DECCLARANDVM QUANTAE ALTITUDINIS MOPS ET LOCVS TANTIS OPERIBVS SIT EGESTVS) was as follows: 'In order to indicate how high a mountain and place had been removed by so much labour'. Altitudo meant first height and then extent, egerere meant both excavate and carry away; locvs had really no meaning at all.

As this interpretation of Dion Cassius and of the inscription seemed to me to ignore a point of great importance, I thought it essential in the first place to try to ascertain whether the column did or did not actually contain a sepulchral chamber, such as we find represented in engravings of the sixteenth century.

On the southern side of the pedestal a loophole, like those openings which admit light into the spiral staircase of the column, was still visible, although it had been walled up from the inside. And on the left side of the vestibule, traces were visible of the joints and architrave of a door which had been walled up and plastered over as late as the second half of the eighteenth century.

Mediaeval hands had excavated a grotto in the concrete foundation of the column. This grotto contained eighteen skeletons. I removed...
then and filled up with solid masonry this cavity, which was dangerous to the stability of the monument.

Then I turned my attention to the mysterious door; I removed the plaster, cut away part of the masonry, and found it led into a small atrium turning to the right, where a second door was discovered. This second door led into the funeral chamber. From the inside of this chamber I could remove the bricks closing up the loophole which had first attracted my attention. The chamber is ten feet long, five feet wide, and six feet high. In it could be traced the remains of a funeral table two and a half feet high and four feet wide. This had been cut away in the middle ages in order to widen the available space when the column was used as a belfry for the church of S. Nicola de Columna.

Just above the mark in the north wall of the chamber I noticed that holes had been drilled in such a way as to indicate that not only one but two urns had been kept in place on the table. My conclusion was that the two urns might have contained the ashes of Trajan and his wife Plotina. An important inscription now in the lapidarium of the Vatican confirmed this inference. We know that Hadrian erected a temple in front of the column of Trajan. In 1696, while excavating the foundation for a new church near by, a large fragment of the inscription on Hadrian's temple was discovered. This fragment is the inscription I refer to. It states that Hadrian erected this temple in honour of his parents, i.e. Trajan and Plotina his widow.

This custom of erecting a temple near the sepulchral monument is a well-known one; for instance, when Hadrian himself died near Baiae, a temple was put up by Antoninus Pius pro sepulcro at Pozzuoli.

This epigraphical evidence makes it almost sure that Plotina also was buried near Trajan; and it was, indeed, quite to be expected that this would have been done, because we know also from contemporary evidence, that of Pliny, that Plotina was specially held up as a model of affection and fidelity to her husband.

Having thus ascertained that the main object of the column was a sepulchral monument, I turned my attention to some other facts. The height of the shaft of the column, from the plinth of the base to the abacus of the column, measures exactly one hundred Roman feet. It was a columna centenaria. Indeed, owing to the perfection of the joints, which are only one-tenth of a millimetre, I was able by precise trigonometrical measurements to ascertain from the column...
the length of the Roman foot, with a precision that had never been attained before.

The spiral staircase inside the column was laboriously cut from monolithic drums, and was evidently made to enable people to get a view from the top, just as outside the Pantheon of Alexandria there was a spiral staircase or slope, for the purpose of obtaining a panoramic view of the new city.

Now, in the second place, historians older than Trajan state implicitly that the ground between the Capitol and the Quirinal was a valley wide enough for besieging forces to occupy as a camp: for instance, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, who spent twenty-two years of his life in Rome during the reign of Augustus, states that the Sabine army led by king Tatius encamped there, and Livy informs us that Fabius Dorso, while the Capitolium was being besieged by the Gauls, desiring to perform certain funeral rites on the Quirinal, had to pass across the besieging army.

Further, the formation of the ground there is such as to have led geologists as early as the last century to the conclusion that not a narrow gorge blocked by hills but a wide and deep valley must have stretched right across it. Furthermore, the so-called walls of the kings on the summit of the Quirinal overlooking the valley stand on rocks which are only about half the height of the column of Trajan.

Now, if there had been between the Capitol and the Quirinal a hill higher than either, that hill must certainly have been mentioned, and would have had a name.

As these facts seemed to be contradictory to the conclusions of other archaeologists that there had been a hill there, I considered the question whether it would not be possible by excavations to find such traces of the hill or of the absence of the hill as would settle the matter. If a hill had been cut away, the pavements of the Forum Ulpium ought to have been laid over geological strata. Such strata on this spot must have been either volcanic tufa or pliocene sands or marine clays. I therefore sank pits in various places, beyond and around the tomb of Bibulus, within the area of the Greek and Latin library (Bibliotheca Ulpia)—near the base of the sepulchral column of Trajan, across the width of the Basilica, in the atrium, and under the pavement of the eastern hemicycle; and in every case I met not with geological strata containing those fossil remains which are characteristic of that district, but with the remains of early imperial and republican activity, such as roads, foundations and pavements of houses, drains, and remains of a wall made of blocks of tufa, exactly like those used in the fortifications still extant on
the Quirinal. This wall I take to be part of the fortifications which, as we know from Livy, were built in the fourth century B.C., after the retreat of the Gauls.

Having thus ascertained that there had never been a hill there, I turned back to the inscription in order to consider whether any other interpretation than the current one, not in such flagrant contradiction with the facts, and more in keeping with the dignity of the Roman Senate and of the column itself, would not be possible.

Let us, therefore, call to mind once more what the words of the inscription actually are:

**AD DECLARANDVM QVANTAE ALTITVVDINIS**  
**MONS ET LOCUS TANTIS OPERIBVS SIT EGERETVS.**

We have here two verbs, *declarare* and *egerere*. The first has the preposition *de* and the second the preposition *ex*. Thus, prepositions are often found in examples of Latin verbs such as *destruo* and *cstruo*—to take down and to put up. The connotation of direction implied in these prepositions would be better illustrated by the difference between *declamare* and *exclamare*. These two verbs do not mean declare and exclaim, but have reference to the direction of sound, *Declamare* was used originally only of an orator speaking down from the tribune, while *exclamare* was used of the people below shouting up from the lower level. So Cicero says: 'Contiones saepe exclamare vidi, cum apte verba cecidissent' (Orat. 50).

*Ad declarandum* seemed to me, therefore, to mean: 'for the purpose of making clear from above.'

*Egeretus*, at the other end, must mean built up on high, just as Georges, the German lexicographer, a long time ago rendered it as *emporgefiiirt*; in a secondary sense, because the verb was used in connexion of such a work as digging a well and sinking a pit, in each case an empty space was left, and the word acquired, therefore, the connotation of emptying, scooping out, carrying away.

We have therefore to choose; and in the case before us, the meaning of the verb is determined by the two nouns *mons* et *locus*.

*Mons*, a hill, may be easily ascertained to be the slope of the Quirinal artificially raised to nearly twice its original height by the galleries and terraces erected upon it to enable the people to see what was going on in the Forum. As the hill was built upon, the meaning of *egerere* with respect to the *mons* could not have been 'to cut away'.

*Locus* I define as that part of space which has been set aside by destiny for a determined purpose. Such a *locus* cannot be cut to
pieces and carted away, for in the opinion of the early Romans *locus*, or its *Terminus* which makes evident to human eyes its boundaries, was a materialized form of *Necessity* existing before the gods and beyond their power.

Finally, *tantis operibus* I took to refer not to the manual labour of slaves, but to the architectural works by which Apollodorus or his predecessors of the Flavian epoch had ennobled and beautified both the *mons* and the *locus*.

So my interpretation of the controverted part of the inscription is as follows:—

'In order to make visible (that is from the summit of the column, one hundred feet above the sepulchre of Trajan) how much in elevation the hill (slope of Quirinal) and the site (of the Forum Ulpium) had been raised up by such noble works of art.'