

Violence Against Women on the Column of Marcus Aurelius

The Column of Marcus Aurelius is an imperial Roman monument of uncertain date, likely either 176 or 180 CE. Its elements (pedestal, spiral frieze, and statue) and its content (a military narrative) are largely modeled on the earlier Column of Trajan. One major difference between the columns is that the Column of Marcus Aurelius shows physical violence much more often and more explicitly than the Column of Trajan. This pattern of increased violence on the Column of Marcus Aurelius extends into non-military contexts that involve women. On the Column of Trajan, women never appear alone: they are unthreatened and accompanied by other women and by husbands and/or children. Meanwhile on the Column of Marcus Aurelius, women are more often isolated and sometimes victims of rape and murder. Only one scene on the Column of Marcus Aurelius appears to represent intact unthreatened families.

In this scene, XVII, emperor Marcus Aurelius stands on an upper register, while a group of non-Romans gathers on the lower register. The group is composed of families, many with young children. Eugen Petersen, a German scholar, documented the column's frieze, publishing a series of photographs and descriptions in 1896. In his companion to the frieze, Petersen suggests that "perhaps" scene XVII may represent families being separated, though he gives no evidence for this claim (Petersen vol. 1, 59). More recently, Paul Zanker has analyzed the scene as part of his work on women and children on the Column of Marcus Aurelius. He asserts that "obviously" separation is imminent because of details in this scene that suggest agitation and fear (Zanker 168). Like Petersen, however, Zanker does not draw on evidence from elsewhere on the frieze to support his interpretation.

In 2005, Jeannine Uzzi published an analysis of this scene in her book on representations of children in imperial Roman art. She argues, based on certain repeated structural and gestural motifs, that scene XVII represents a scene of submission: she sees the parents pushing the children toward Marcus Aurelius, offering them to him. These gestures, combined with the presence of the non-Roman man kneeling in the upper register, suggest to Uzzi that XVII is a type scene of submission (Uzzi 96-98).

In this paper, I will argue that Uzzi's evidence for interpreting scene XVII as a scene of submission is not entirely convincing, because the iconography is not fully consistent, and some of the gestures could be interpreted as either submissive or protective. Furthermore, I will provide evidence that will support Petersen's and Zanker's claims that the scene depicts the apprehension of non-Roman families who anticipate that their children will be taken from them. I will argue that though the threat of violence is not explicit in this scene, the iconography, context, and composition of the scene suggest that violence is imminent. Some of the figures' poses appear in later scenes on the column, where the context is more explicitly violent (LXXXV, LVI). In support of this argument, I will use Felix Pirson's analysis of compressed chronologies in battle scenes on the Column of Marcus Aurelius. Pirson argues that some sequential events in battle scenes are depicted as though occurring simultaneously. I will extend this argument to the non-military context of scene XVII.

Bibliography:

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