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Victory as Self-Representation

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From the time Rome was founded, victory was incredibly important to its citizens. In the Roman militaristic and expansionist society, conquest was a rallying force for all of society, and celebrating victory was a strong morale builder. The main act associated with honoring military accomplishments was the triumphal procession, an elaborate parade of plunder and prisoners through the city streets. These triumphs were often accompanied by the erection of monumental architecture in commemoration of the celebration. Some of these monuments still exist today. The argument could be made that because of the fleeting nature of the actual triumphal ceremony as opposed to the lasting nature of architecture, triumphal monuments had more impact on Roman society than did the triumphal procession. Contrary to this, Roman Triumphal art harkens back to and derives meaning from triumphal ceremonies; therefore the triumphal procession more aptly conveyed political and social messages to the people of Rome.

The Roman preoccupation with military success made celebrating triumphs an important part of a prominent citizen's political life throughout every stage of Roman government, though they were heavily regulated by the emperors during the principate and later restricted to imperial use only (McCormick, 12). A military victory implied approval from both the senate and the gods, and symbolized a leader who was both wise enough and strong enough to serve the nation. The people of the city were likely to trust and accept a man celebrating a spectacular victory, as this showed his ability to lead (McCormick, 12). At times the triumphal ceremony was more important than the victory itself, and occasionally for political reasons even mediocre victories were used to justify a triumph (McCormick, 12). The importance placed on victory was not merely contained in the arena of war, it was also important in sports and games (McCormick, 12) and by the time of the late republic and empire, games were associated into the triumphal ceremony itself (McCormick, 17).

The triumphal procession was not only vital to Roman politicians wishing to increase their social status, it also played a prominent role in shaping Roman Society, especially during the mid to late republic. As J.J. Pollit states in chapter seven of *Art in the Hellenistic Age*, it is likely that triumphs were most Romans' first

exposure to Greek art (Pollit, 153). A triumphal procession acted as a sort of museum, parading works of art through the streets of the city for all to see (Pollit, 155). These processions opened the doors for an art market to develop in the city as the popularity of Greek art skyrocketed. Romans who had once considered Greece a den of luxury and decadence were now clamoring to pay enormous sums of money for works of Greek art. This change in opinion towards the Greek east was especially evident in the years between 211 BCE and 146 BCE, as several large victories over Greek city-states resulted in a massive influx of Greek art into Rome (Pollit, 153). Though some of the more traditional members of society, such as Cato the Elder, believed this art would destroy traditional Roman values, Greek art soon became visible in everyday Roman life. This influx of styles made it unavoidable that Roman tastes would come to be influenced by Greek art (Pollit, 153).

The influence of Greek art was important in the course of Roman development, but the Romans themselves saw the main purpose of triumph to be political. The Jewish author Josephus gives a detailed account of the Judean Triumph celebrated by Vespasian and Titus in June of 71 CE (McCormick, 14). He informs us that the triumph was broken down into three parts, each of these parts with a specific audience and intended purpose. The first stage focuses on the militaristic aspects of victory, the second on the public and their acknowledgement of victory, and the third on the gods and on the religious ceremonies necessary when granted a victory (McCormick, 16).

The first stage of the Judean triumph, the military stage, took place in the Campus Martius (McCormick, 14). It is necessary to note the symbolic meaning behind the location of this section of the triumph, not only does it happen in the military center of the city, the "fields of Mars" but it is also outside the sacred boundary to the city, the *pomerium.* Legendarily, this boundary was set up by Romulus, and all acts of war were to be kept outside of it. Of course, by this point enemies had broken through the *pomerium,* but it's traditional meaning still remained. In this sacred and militaristic place the emperors, clad in the customary purple *Toga Victa,* made prayers and addressed the army. The soldiers were then sent to a banquet furnished by the emperors (McCormick, 15). Thus the first to celebrate the victory were the ones directly involved in bringing the victory into existence.

The next stage of the triumph was the procession itself. The parade wound

throughout the city, allowing as many people as possible to see the spoils of war. Plunder was the main feature of triumphs, but prisoners of war, floats depicting various scenes from battle, and exotic animals taken from conquered nations were also popular displays (McCormick, 15). Plutarch reports that the procession to honor Aemilius Paullus's victory of Macedonia in 167 BCE lasted for three days, the first day was dedicated to statues, the second to armor, as well as bowls and goblets that were extraordinary in density and engraving. On the third day metalwork was displayed, including King Perseus' personal set of table wear (Pollit, 155). The main feature of any procession was the victorious general himself. According to Josephus, Vespasian and Titus rode through the parade route in a triumphal chariot, while Domitian rode alongside them on horseback. The triumphators were introduced by statues of the goddess Victoria (McCormick, 15). In all, these parades were outstanding spectacles, they increased the status of the victor, and also gave the people a grand notion of victory and warfare, an important idea to instill in the minds of such a militaristic society.

The third stage of the procession was dedicated to the bringers of victory, the gods (McCormick, 14). Romans treated the gods as a part of the community, and in order to keep the gods happy it was necessary to treat them in the proper manner. Just as an ignored neighbor would shun a person, so would an ignored god. The only difference is that the god could ruin a harvest, or possibly kill a loved one. Because of this, it was imperative to treat the gods well by properly thanking them for a victory. This was often done through dedications of temples and booty, but sacrifices were also a necessary part of thanksgiving. It is a common belief that triumphs were once mainly religious in nature, but by the late republic the religious significance had been outweighed by the political implications (McCormick, 12). Some religious forms however, such as purification, prayer, and sacrifice, remained a part of the triumphal process through the imperial period (McCormick, 12).

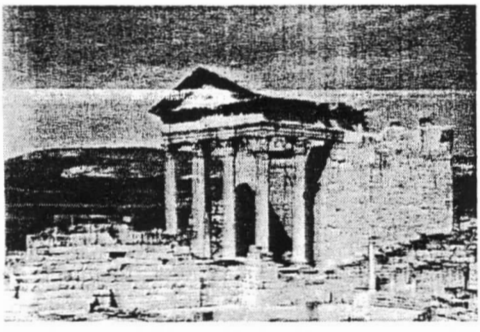
All of these parts of the triumphal process created a magnificent celebration, but a triumphal ceremony happened once and was over: they had no permanence. Victors wished to make triumphs more solid and lasting, and they found the means to do this in Triumphal art. Monuments not only served as publicity for various victories, they also eternalized triumphs (McCormick, 24). The widespread popularity of erecting monumental architecture is well

illustrated by the several hundred arches erected within the city of Rome during the imperial period. Triumphal columns also became common during the late principate, the most notable of these being the columns of Marcus Aurelius and of Trajan (McCormick, 24). A focal point on these monuments, both arches and columns, were often friezes narrating triumphal processions. These friezes presented the triumphal ceremony as a fixed part of victory (McCormick, 25).

An important message presented by *trophea* and other material culture was not only the commemoration of a victory, but also the anticipation of a triumph. This message is especially evident in household items used in the daily lives of Romans. Gems and glass pastes for ringstones were often decorated with imperial victory ideology, bronze perfume pans have been found bearing the same themes. Trophies were also featured lamp decorations. Some pieces display detailed triumphal processions, such as a silver cup from Boscoreale (McCormick, 32). Archaeologists have discovered clay relief plaques and baker's molds for cakes that bear images and words of victory. A popular Roman game involving a board with six groups of spaces or letters has often proved to display cheerful messages of victory (McCormick, 33). These everyday items display the permeation of triumphal ideology into Roman society. The visibility of victory in all aspects of life would have caused the people to anticipate any victory, making a triumph all the more spectacular to experience.

The most common example of imperial triumphal ideology in everyday life available today is Roman coinage (McCormick, 26). Coins were an important part of the political regime, especially during the imperial period. They could easily send news of what was happening in the capital to the most backwater province through the images minted on them. These same images continue to send information to historians today. Some common themes on coins are the goddess Victoria, trophies, triumphal processions, and portrayals of imperial violence or clemency to the vanquished (McCormick, 26). The "Iudaea capta" coins minted by Vespasian provide an important insight into these images, as it has been discovered that the coins were actually distributed before his triumph, anticipating and publicizing the event (McCormick, 27). These coins sent the message of victory, but perhaps more importantly, the message of a coming triumph. They advertised the upcoming celebration, building up anticipation for the event, as well as giving provincial Romans notification to come into the city to see the spoils of war.

Triumphal material culture was important to the Roman political regime for several reasons. It increased the status of the victor, rallied the morale of the people, and glorified the Roman state. The triumphal ceremony did much the same thing, though in a more noteworthy manner. The elaborate ceremony addressed all of Roman society, the army, the people, and the gods, and did so in a breathtaking manner. Although there was no permanence to the ceremony, long-lasting monuments could not so aptly fulfill political goals. Monuments gained meaning from the triumphal ceremonies they alluded to, as well as subsequent and previous triumphs. Therefore though monuments are lasting, without the ceremonies they lose a great deal of their meaning. Both the ceremony and the architecture support and glorify each other, but monumental architecture would mean a great deal less to the Roman public without a memorable ceremony accompanying it.



Temple at Dougga, Tunisia