

THE COLUMN OF TRAJAN

The Details

Trajan's Column is a Roman **triumphal column** in Rome, Italy, that commemorates Roman emperor Trajan's victory in the Dacian Wars. It was probably constructed under the supervision of the architect Apollodorus of Damascus at the order of the Roman Senate. Completed in AD 113, the

*To create a sculpture in relief an artist cuts into a flat surface of stone or wood carving away the negative space until the positive space looks like it is "raising" out of the background. **BAS-RELIEF** refers to a low-relief sculpture where much of the negative space is still in tact.*

freestanding column is most famous for its spiral **bas relief**, which artistically describes the epic territorial wars between the Romans and Dacians that took place between AD 101 and 106. Its design has inspired numerous **victory columns**, both ancient and modern.



Who is Trajan?

Marcus Ulpius Traianus, now commonly referred to as Trajan, reigned as Rome's emperor from 98 until 117 AD. A military man, Trajan enjoyed a career that catapulted him to the heights of popularity, earning him an enduring reputation as a "good emperor."

Trajan was the first in a line of six **adoptive emperors**. These emperors were chosen for the "job" based not on bloodlines, but on their suitability for rule; most of them were raised with this role in mind from their youth. The period under the adoptive emperors is often regarded as the height of the Roman empire's prosperity and stability. The ancient Romans were so fond of Trajan that they officially bestowed upon him the title, *optimus princeps* or "the best first-citizen." It is safe to say that the Romans felt Trajan was well worth celebrating—and celebrate him they did. A massive architectural complex—referred to as the Forum of Trajan was devoted to Trajan's career and, in particular, his great military successes in his wars against Dacia.

The structure is about 98 ft in height, (125 ft including the pedestal). The shaft is made from a series of 20 colossal Carrara marble drums, each weighing about 32 tons, with a diameter of 11 ft. The 625 ft narrative winds around the shaft 23 times. Inside the shaft, a spiral staircase of 185 steps provides access to a viewing platform at the top.

Trajan's Forum

The main structure at the center of the forum complex is the massive Basilica Ulpia, and beside that stood two libraries that flanked the Column of Trajan, an honorific monument bearing an elaborate program of sculpted relief.

The main square of the forum was once a vast space, screened by architecture on all sides and paved in white marble. Several rows of trees, and perhaps rows of statues, ran parallel to the **porticoes**. Entry to the forum square was from the south, by way of a triumphal arch surmounted by a

statue of Trajan riding in a triumphal chariot.

Although the arch itself is no longer in existence, it is depicted on a coin (see inset).

The forum has an overriding martial theme, reminding viewers and visitors that the forum

was constructed from the proceeds of Trajan's successful military

campaigns. The porticoes were decorated with statuary and

military standards (*official emblems of the legions*). Captured

Dacian prisoners and notable Roman generals and statesmen were also subjects of the numerous

statues that graced the forum. At the center of the Forum square stood a bronze equestrian statue of Trajan, the *Equus Traiani*.



Ancient Roman coin depicting the southern entrance to Trajan's forum.

A **PORTICO** is a roofed porch or walkway leading to the entrance of a building.



Markets of Trajan

Adjacent to the Forum of Trajan is a separate architectural complex that is commonly referred to as the **Markets of Trajan**. The ruins of the markets today contain 170 rooms and the complex covers a space of approximately 361 by 492 feet; its walls stood to 115 feet above the pavement of the Forum of Trajan.

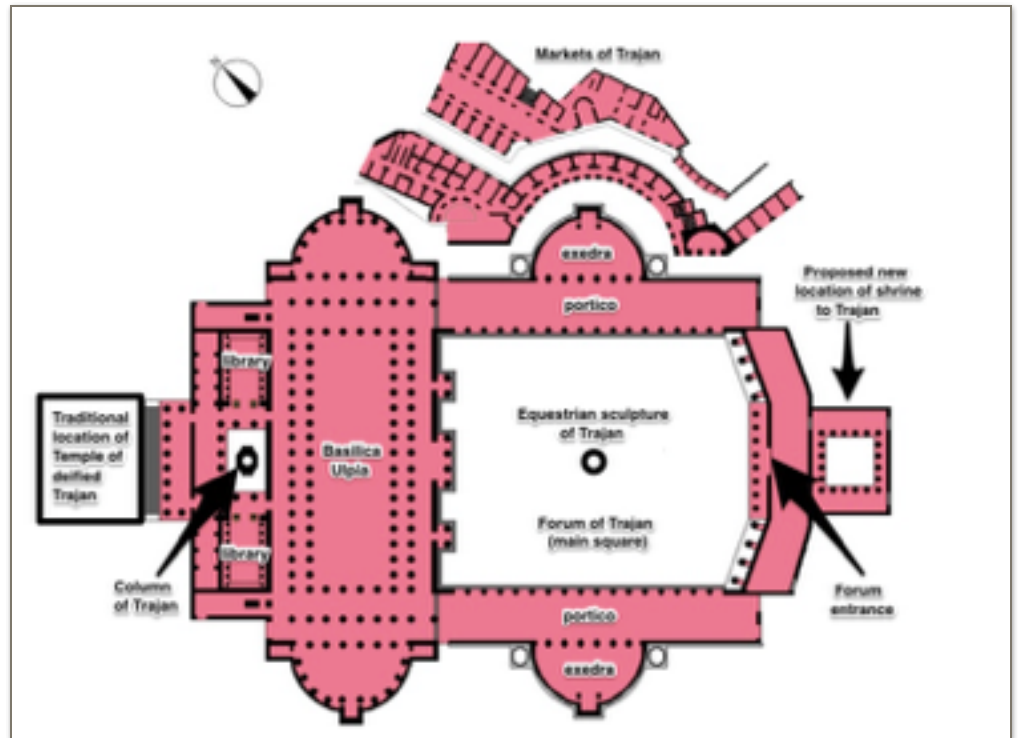
Why is it important?

The Forum of Trajan earned a great deal of praise in antiquity—and it has been the focus of scholarly study perhaps since 1536 when Pope Paul III ordered the first clearing of the area around the base of the Column of Trajan. Paul III would then protect the column itself in 1546 by appointing a caretaker

to look after it. The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries saw various artists and architects produce renderings and plans of the forum and its monuments.

In terms of public architecture in Imperial Rome, the Forum of Trajan complex is a crowning achievement in its vast monumentality. The execution of its sophisticated and elegant design surpassed all of its predecessors. The value of vast public spaces in the city of Rome cannot be underestimated. For the average city dwellers accustomed to narrow, dim, crowded streets the

soaring, the gleaming open space of the forum, bounded by elaborate architecture and sculpture, would have had a powerful psychological effect. The fact that the monuments glorified a revered leader also served to create and reinforce important ideological messages among the Romans. Overall, the role of public architecture in the Roman city, and the Roman consciousness, is an important reminder of the ways in which Romans used



built space to establish and perpetuate messages about identity and ideology. The enduring ruins, stand as strong, stark reminders of these Roman realities. Modern viewers still extract and reinforce ideas about identity based on looking at and visiting the ruins. We still come away with an idea about Trajan's greatness and his martial accomplishments. We might, then, judge the architectural program to be a great success—so successful that a great many of our own public monuments still operate on the basis of conventions established in antiquity.