Culture, identity and power in the Roman Empire

Roman Emperor and Empire 2

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Winged Victories were a common motif on triumphal arches and are also found on the triple arch at the edge of the forum. This honoured the emperor Septimius Severus and his sons. The arch was set up in AD 203 to celebrate victories in Parthia. Again, the sculpture depicts scenes from the campaign, showing Roman soldiers and Parthian prisoners. Similar scenes of victory and conquest are found on the fourth century arch of Constantine. Another form of commemoration was the monumental column. The most famous of these was set up to record Trajan's successes against the Dacians. The base on which the column stands depicts heaps of Dacian arms and armour. An inscription records how the column was dedicated to Trajan and marks height of the hill that had to be removed to build Trajan's forum.

The column, with its spiral reliefs, stands more than 38 metres high. A statue of Trajan would have originally stood on the top, where the figure of St Peter now stands. On the spiral reliefs are images and scenes from the wars. The emperor addressing his troops; battle scenes; Dacian prisoners; and of course more winged victories. This later column of Marcus Aurelius is similar in design. It celebrates his campaigns north of the Danube. But whether on column or arch, the purpose of such displays was the same - to stress the might and power of the emperor, to present him as an all conquering ruler of the world. The depictions of barbarians and other Roman enemies might have been formulaic but their similarity must have helped to define and unify those who saw the monuments as Romans. And, whatever the origins, it was as Romans that those who lived in the city shared in the success and the fruits of empire. Triumphal arches, columns, maps, objects or materials appropriated from the provinces all brought the empire to Rome, celebrating the extent and diversity of that empire. And symbolising the power and control of the emperor who brought peace, stability and glory to Rome.

Expansion of the empire might bring glory to individual emperors but maintaining the existing territories and established provinces was just as

important. The Emperor's presence and influence had to be felt beyond Rome but clearly he couldn't be everywhere at once. Some emperors did visit parts of their kingdom but often in connection with military campaigns. The Emperor Hadrian travelled extensively across the empire, but more for diplomatic reasons and because of his own curiosity. In Athens, he was impressed by the ancient city and became a major benefactor. In Britain, to mark the northern limit of the province, he decreed the building of the huge wall. The coins minted in Rome and elsewhere celebrated his travels, recording where he'd been and what he'd done. Personifications of the provinces, like Africa and Judaea, are shown greeting the emperor. Coins could also celebrate military conquests. This one issued, under the emperor Vespasian, shows two Jews, in mourning beneath a palm tree. It celebrates the capture of Judaea. This coin marks the Emperor Claudius' invasion of Britain. It shows the triumphal arch erected in Rome to celebrate this victory. Coins could also be used to commemorate the completion and dedication of important buildings in Rome, like the Colosseum, which was built and dedicated under the Flavian emperors. But above all coins carried personal likenesses of the emperor and members of his family, throughout the empire. Encircling each emperor were his titles and offices, legitimating his power. The images and text on coins combined to represent virtues and powers which the emperor wished to stress: Justice, Discipline, Patience and Victory. Of course it's quite reasonable to ask just how far people were aware of these images. Coins once in the pocket may be little studied and the miniature pictures little noted. But even if it only operated on a subliminal level the image and texts on coins must have been a constant reminder of just who was in control.