

THE BARBARIAN IN ROMAN ART: A COUNTERMODEL OF ROMAN IDENTITY

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This paper on the barbarian in Rome begins with a brief review of the barbarian in Greece. Originally, for the Greeks, βάρβαρος was a stranger who talked “bar-bar”. The word ‘barbaros’ expressed ethical demarcation not cultural discrimination. No derogatory tendency is found in the earliest representations of non-Greeks in Greek art, such as Scythians, Thracians and Blacks on the vases of the Archaic period. A radical change was brought about by the experience of the Persian wars in the early decades of the fifth century BC. For the first time images of Persians appear in Attic vase painting and become proof of the first active discrimination of non-Greeks. For example, several vases show the Persian enemy as a mythical transgressor, brutally smashed, even sexually abused. In general, however, the image of the Persian on Attic vases was set up as a countermodel of Greek culture (Fig. 1). The Greek victor is young, fit, beautiful and desirable; therefore he can be shown naked. The Persian loser is bearded and always dressed in Oriental garb, which belonged to him as much as the beautiful body did to the Greek. The image of the civilized Greek represents the ethical model of democracy; the image of the strange Persian typifies the barbaric pattern of despotism.

In contrast, classical authors show no trace of a defaming attitude towards the Persian. They try to explain either on a highly ethical or historical level why the Greeks defeated the Persians. Aeschylus justifies the victory because it was achieved in accordance with the divine order of the world; Herodotus sees the victory as a consequence of world history, the course of which has been determined by the conflict between Orient and Occident since the mythical past. Only two generations after the Persian wars Attic vases offer a very different view of the Persian. Now he personifies the distant dream world of life in exotic luxury and fabulous abundance, an old *topos* in Greek thought (Fig. 2). The Greeks’ preoccupation with the Persian stranger is attested in both the art and the literature of the day, and it was this preoccupation with its differing attitudes through which the Greeks developed the consciousness of their own identity.

The idea of the Persian being a countermodel of Greek culture was further differentiated under Alexander the Great and his successors, the Hellenistic kings. On the one hand, in Hellenistic ideology the Persian was discriminated against as a model enemy (e.g. on the mosaic of Alexander the Great). On the other hand, Eastern culture was integrated into Hellenistic life and developed to become one of the most stimulating powers of the time. In this ambivalent situation a new type of barbarian was created: the Celt. (Fig. 3). The Celt, usually exposed in a group, was naked, had a moustache or a beard and long shaggy hair. The mode of

representation also changed dramatically. The Celt was shown as a model of hopeless destiny and barbaric behaviour. His specific situation was characterized in extreme realism, intensified by the fact that (possibly) the victor was not directly part of the group but indirectly present in its monumental environment. The exact countermodel of the Celt was the Hellene. In the urbane world of Hellenism the citizen was not longer naked but dressed in an *himation*. He was beardless and his whole bearing was highly cultivated.

I have tried to outline some of the main iconological traditions which determine the image of the barbarian in Greek art. These traditions were adopted in Italic and specifically in Roman art. The first typical image of a barbarian in Italy is the Celt. Since the late third century BC the Celt is shown in a distinctive motif: plundering a sanctuary (Fig. 4). This iconography is not found in Greek art, although Greek written sources describe pillaging as a typical Celtic behaviour pattern. This barbaric behaviour is reproduced on artefacts, such as Calenian relief cups, Etruscan cinary urns and Etruscan sarcophagi. The best example of the plundering Celt occurs on the terracotta frieze of Civitalba, which must have been conceived by Rome in the middle of the second century BC. The Italic and Roman image of the plundering Celt may be understood on different levels: iconographically as the Italic answer to the new barbarian model of the Hellenistic centres, historically as a reaction to the Celtic invasions of Italy, basically as a countermodel of the cultural traditions in Italy and Rome.

The Hellenistic image of the barbarian is also present in Rome. An important testimony is the marble head of a barbarian in Bruxelles, which probably comes from the metropolis itself (Fig. 15). The chignon on the right identifies the barbarian as a Teuton. The head can be dated on stylistic evidence around 100 BC. It belonged to a group of at least two statues slightly under life-size. The open mouth, the wide open eyes, the energetic contraction of the forehead and the sudden movement of the head show the pathetic expression of the face. Tonio Hölscher has convincingly argued that the head originally came from the monument which was erected by C. Marius and Q. Lutatius Catulus in Rome after their victory over the Cimbrians and the Teutons. In the new centre of the Hellenistic world the long defeated Celt is replaced by the recently defeated Teuton.

A typical Roman image of the barbarian is shown on the reverse of a denar, which was struck in Rome by Faustus Cornelius Sulla in 56 BC (Fig. 6). The dominating figure is the Roman emperor, who sits on a curule chair, the *sella curulis*; two barbarians kneel below him. The scene probably goes back to a group of golden statues which crowned an ambitious monument, erected on the Capitoline Hill by King Bocchus of Mauretania for Sulla in the early first century BC. We know from literary sources that the group portrayed the surrender of the Numidian king, Jugurtha, to the Roman general, Sulla. On the coin Sulla is shown from the side view; in the original group he must have been shown in a representative front view. The arrangement of the figures is the result of a consistent ideological programme. In the upper zone the Roman victor, Sulla, sits on the *sella curulis* and holds the central position; in the lower zone the defeated barbarians, Bocchus and Jugurtha, kneel on either side. This is the first time in Roman art that barbarians are depicted kneeling in front of a Roman authority to which they are symmetrically related. This new iconography of power soon became institutionalized on imperial insignia: the kneeling barbarian took on the function of the legs of several *sellae curules* in Roman art (Fig. 7). Integrated into one of the most important symbols of Roman power the barbarian countermodel became an essential part of Roman identity. Later, a similar concept is manifest in Roman architecture. An example is the Basilica at the forum of Tipasa, constructed in the late second or early third century AD (Fig. 8). The apsis floor was covered with a mosaic which presents in its centre captured barbarians of North African origin. The barbarians 'lie' at the feet of a statue of a Roman representative, which was placed at the top of the apsis. By Late Antiquity the symmetry and hierarchy, demonstra-

ting Roman superiority and barbarian inferiority, has become one of the basic principles determining the image of the emperor.

A most significant development in the image of the barbarian in Roman art is to be seen under the reign of Augustus. No other time of Greek and Roman antiquity has produced so many and so representative images of barbarians. Representations of barbarians were everywhere present, not only in every class of monument but also on every level of meaning. Images of barbarians decorated triumphal arches, victory monuments, city-gates, temple friezes, official buildings, private villas and grave monuments; images of barbarians appeared in sculpture, on reliefs, on coins, on cameos, on gems, on silverware and in terracotta. Usually the barbarian is shown as captive, either tied and/or kneeling, supporting and/or serving; only occasionally is the barbarian shown defeated in battle. In the new era of Roman classicism and of *Pax Augusta*, the *saeculum aureum*, the psychological need for a countermodel was particularly strong. Modern scholars have not given this proper emphasis, probably because it did not seem to be compatible with the new Augustan programme of *virtus*, *clementia*, *iustitia* and *pietas*.

A key motif in Augustan ideology was the conflict with the Parthians to whom the Roman army lost several standards. The Parthian conflict was left as a legacy by Caesar for Augustus to solve. In 20 BC by exerting diplomatic pressure Augustus succeeded in winning back the lost standards from the Parthians, a success which was celebrated in contemporary art (and literature) as a triumphal victory of the civilized West over the barbarian East. For the new emperor this success was extremely important, because it was the first spectacular 'victory' over a non-Roman enemy after the traumatic bloodshed of the Civil War. Furthermore, the solution to the Parthian question became the political condition for the beginning of the Golden Age in 17 BC. Horace announced in the *carmen saeculare* (vv. 53-60), the festive poem of the new era of the *saeculum aureum*, that the Romans owed to the victor over the Parthians the fact that *Fides*, *Pax*, *Honos*, *Pudor*, *Virtus* and *Copia* had returned to Rome.

Significant are the images which celebrated this success. A central document is the cuirassed statue of Augustus from Prima Porta (Fig. 5). In the middle of the breastplate a Parthian presents a standard to a Roman (probably the god Mars). Both figures are directly related to each other. The idealized Roman and the realistically characterized Parthian are perfect countermodels. The representation is encircled by allegorical figures, which prove that through the Roman victory the political order on earth was again in harmony with the cosmic order in heaven: the new era of the Golden Age had dawned.

On the same occasion new types of barbarian statues were introduced in Roman art, larger than life-sized figures of kneeling and standing Orientals made of coloured marble. The three kneeling barbarians (Fig. 12; head and hands were restored in the Late Renaissance) can be reconstructed as part of a new monument, which was erected to commemorate the Roman victory over the Parthians (Fig. 9). The kneeling Orientals supported a giant tripod, an allusion to the famous Delphic tripod dedicated by the Greeks after their final victory over the Persians at Plataeae. The standing barbarian can be reconstructed as a support figure in Roman architecture. The first example of this type appears in the Augustan renovation of the Basilica Aemilia in Rome. Fragments of at least 22 statues of excellent workmanship have survived (Fig. 10). The supporting motif of the arms is the same as shown by the Orientals on the relief of M. Virtius Ceraunus. According to Pliny the Elder (n.h.36,102) the Basilica belonged to the three most important buildings in the world and was admired particularly because of its *columnis et Phrygiibus*. The traditional interpretation of the Pliny text fails to show that the famous "Phryges" refer to the unpublished support figures of the hall.

The two types of statues are typical examples of the Roman concept of the barbarian. The general appearance of both types is that of any mythical Oriental in Roman art. Long hair, an

idealized beardless face and the typical garb of the East integrate these figures into the multi-cultural world of the Roman empire. This basically positive image is combined with a clearly negative one: the Oriental serves as a support either in a kneeling or in a standing position. The same ambivalence characterizes the exotic marbles used in ancient sculpture for the first time: the white *marmor Phrygium* and the yellow *marmor Numidicum*, both reticulated by veins, crimson to violet in colour. On a realistic level the specific colour and vein structure of the two marbles refer to the distinct colour of the Oriental garb. On a symbolic level the exotic 'spoils' from distant countries signify the universal power of Roman culture. For the first time in Roman art typical Roman values, such as distinct realism, specific symbolism and substantial materialism are focused on the image of the barbarian. The introduction of the Eastern barbarian as any mythical Oriental makes his portrayal a general countermodel of the Roman West.

That this portrayal was generally adopted in Rome may be seen in the small figures of barbarians in private life. Kneeling and standing representations of Orientals are shown as support figures of table legs and in the architectural context of grave monuments. An interesting example is the front relief of a grave monument which was erected in Noceria Alfaterna for M. Virtius Ceraunus, *duumvir* of the *municipium* in the third quarter of the first century AD (Fig. 11). The inscription with the *cursus honorum* is supported by a standing Oriental on each side. The two figures are of the same type as the barbarian statues of the Basilica Aemilia. The space between the two Orientals is dominated by the *sella curulis*. The relief from the country town exemplifies how universally the Roman image of the Eastern barbarian was linked with the Roman symbol of the *sella curulis*.

A more complex case is the figure of a standing Oriental who serves as a table support and presents a wine ladle. Such a figure was found in the Casa del Camillo in Pompeii (Fig. 13). In the function of a table support the Oriental evokes several connotations. The appearance and the attribute of the wine ladle point to the figure as a young and beautiful cupbearer from the East; the most famous and most beautiful cupbearer from the eastern hemisphere was Gany-medes, who also served as a table support. The Oriental costume and the submissive bearing belonged very much to the image of the barbarian in Roman art. The Oriental who serves as an exotic slave in a Roman villa is closely linked with the exclusive world of the Roman upper class. He is a particularly significant countermodel of the Roman way of life, a countermodel in which private dreams and official mentality meet.

Another important tradition is the image of the barbarian in battle scenes based on Hellenistic models. The earliest known examples appear in the third century BC when Rome began systematically to integrate Hellenistic models and became one of the leading political powers in Italy. Since the reign of Trajan battle scenes are one of the main themes of imperial representation. Monuments, such as the Great Trajanic Frieze, the Column of Trajan, the Column of Marcus Aurelius and the battle sarcophagi show a common mode of representation: the well organized Romans in absolute superiority, the chaotic barbarians in desperate inferiority. Since the second century AD a detailed 'realism' is manifest in particularly cruel and perverse images of barbarians: in scene 24 of Trajan's column a Roman soldier is fighting against Dacians, holding with his front teeth a cut-off Dacian head by the hair (Fig. 16). This new realism reflected the new threat to Roman borders and the new horror of invading barbarians.

At the same time colossal statues of Dacians were introduced in Roman sculpture; they were displayed in long rows on the new forum of Trajan (Fig. 14; head and hands were restored in the 18th century). Although the iconography of the standing Dacian refers to the model of the standing Oriental, the appearance of the Dacian is portrayed very differently, namely by particularly harsh, uncivilized features: the physiognomy is not idealized but barbaric (Fig. 17), the fabric of the dress is not sophisticated but coarse, the arms are not raised in allegoric

support but lowered in real submission. Besides white and Phrygian marble two further coloured marbles were used for the Dacians, both very exclusive and expensive. For the first time red porphyry from Egypt and green porphyry from the Peloponnese were presented to the Roman public in spectacularly large quantities. The Dacians made of coloured marble represented 'spoils', never before witnessed in Rome.

The Dacian contributed substantially to the new image of the barbarian in Roman art when he became a real threat to Rome itself. In the second century AD the negative image of the barbarian was brought to a point: exceptional was the importance as a countermodel in most representations of imperial iconography; extreme was the physiognomy, the psychology, the inferiority and the brutality with which the barbarian was slaughtered. At the same time barbarians became more and more integrated into Roman life, especially into imperial institutions, such as the administration, the army and the body guard. In Late Antiquity the barbarian was omnipresent, as a radical countermodel of Roman identity and as an essential element in Roman life. The fundamental opposition between real life and ideological belief was intensified so much that the contradiction could not be resolved. It is this ambivalence which contributed to the final breakdown of Roman identity.

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LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Fig. 1 - Greek and Persian. Attic red-figured Oinochoe of the Chicago Painter (about 460 BC). Boston, Museum of Fine Arts inv. 13.196. Photograph of the museum.

Fig. 2 - Orientals at the Symposium. Attic red-figured Column- Krater (early 4th century BC). Salerno, Museo Archeologico. Photograph from K. Schauenburg. *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts. Athenische Abteilung* vol. 90 (Berlin 1975) pl. 38,2.

Fig. 3 - Celts Ludovisi (about 220 BC). Rome, Museo Nazionale Romano inv. 8608. Photograph Deutsches Archäologisches Institut Rome neg. 56.343.

Fig. 4 - Plundering Celts. Terracotta frieze from Civitalba (about 150 BC). Bologna, Museo Civico Archeologico. Photograph from I Galli e l'Italia, Exhibition Catalogue Rome (Rome 1978) p. 200 fig. 544a.

Fig. 5 - Roman and Parthian, surrounded by allegorical figures. Cuirassed statue of Augustus from Prima Porta (shortly after 20 BC). Vatican, Museo Chiaramonti inv. 2290. Drawing from H. Jucker, *Hefte des Archäologischen Seminars der Universität Bern* vol. 3 (Bern 1977) p. 17 fig. 1.

Fig. 6 - Kneeling barbarians. Denar of Faustus Cornelius Sulla (reverse), Rome 56 BC. *Münzen und Medaillen AG Basel* vol. 53 (1977) no. 203 (neg. at the Seminar für griechische und römische Geschichte der Universität Frankfurt).

Fig. 7 - Relief with sella curulis, supported by kneeling barbarians (Hadrianic). Copenhagen, Ny Carlsberg Glyptothek Inv. 817. Photograph of the museum.

Fig. 8 - Captured barbarians at the feet of a Roman. Tipasa/Algeria, reconstruction of the apsis of the Basilica at the forum (late second or early third century AD). Drawing Ilja ten Brink.

Fig. 9 - Reconstruction of an Augustan monument in Rome, commemorating the Roman victory over the Parthians. Drawing D. Tonn.

Fig. 10 - Oriental, statue made of Phrygian marble from the Basilica Aemilia (Augustan). Rome, Antiquario Forense. Photograph Soprintendenza Archeologica di Roma.

Fig. 11 - Relief of M. Virtius Ceraunus (Neronian). Naples, Museo Archeologico Nazionale. Photograph Alinari.

Fig. 12 - Oriental, statue made of Phrygian marble (Augustan). Naples, Museo Archeologico Nazionale inv. 6115. Photograph Deutsches Archäologisches Institut Rome neg. 83.2160.

Fig. 13 - Oriental servant as table support (Neronian). Naples, Museo Archeologico Nazionale inv. 120403. Photograph from B. Andreae - H. Kyrieleis (eds.), *Neue Forschungen in Pompeji* (Recklinghausen 1975) fig. 252.

Fig. 14 - Dacian, colossal statue made of Phrygian marble (Trajanic). Rome, Arch of Constantine. Photograph Fototeca Unione neg. 4216 F.

Fig. 15 - Head of a Teuton (about 100 BC). Bruxelles, Musée Royaux d'Art et d'Histoire inv. A.1145. Photograph Deutsches Archäologisches Institut Rome neg. 76.1783.

Fig. 16 - Roman with cut-off Dacian head. Rome, Column of Trajan (scene 24). Photograph from P.G. Hamberg, *Studies in Roman Imperial Art* (Uppsala 1945) pl. 19 (detail).

Fig. 17 - Dacian, head of a colossal statue (Trajanic). Copenhagen, Ny Carlsberg Glyptothek inv. 1293. Photograph R.M. Schneider.

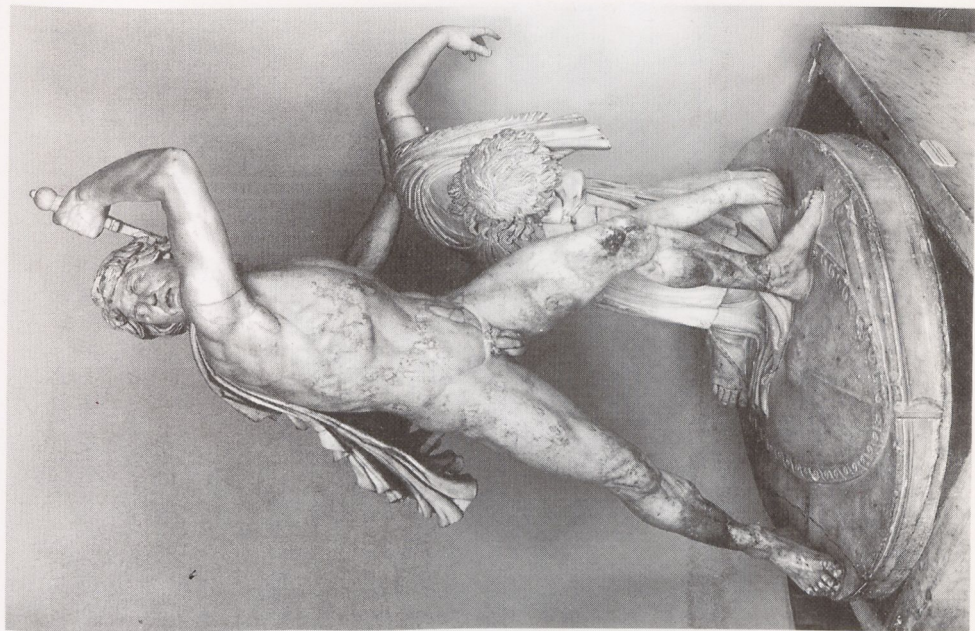


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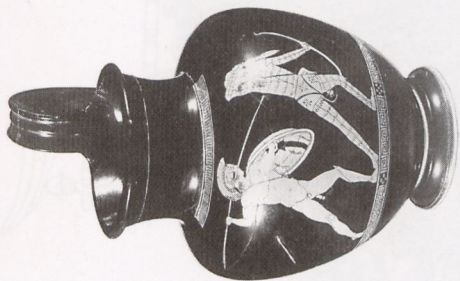


Fig. 1.



Fig. 2.



Fig. 4.

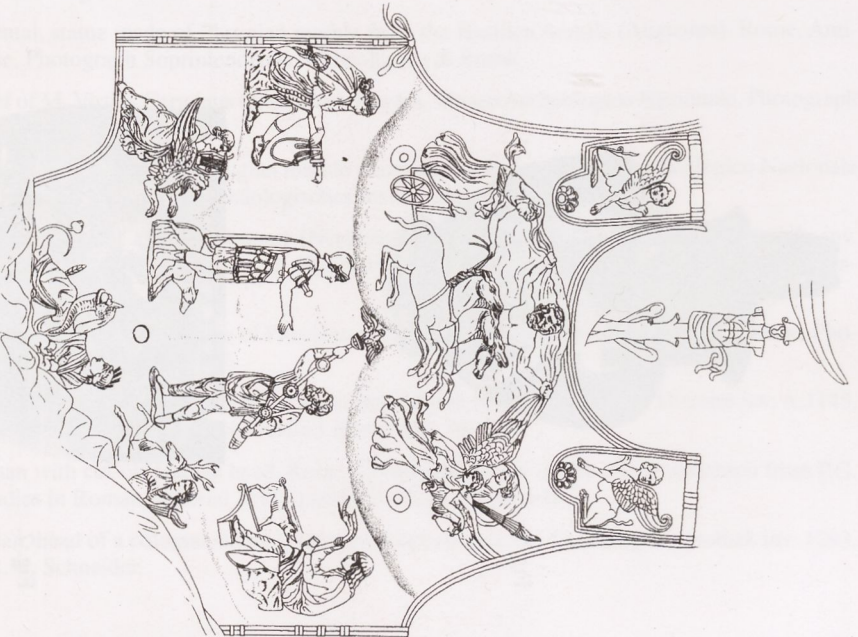


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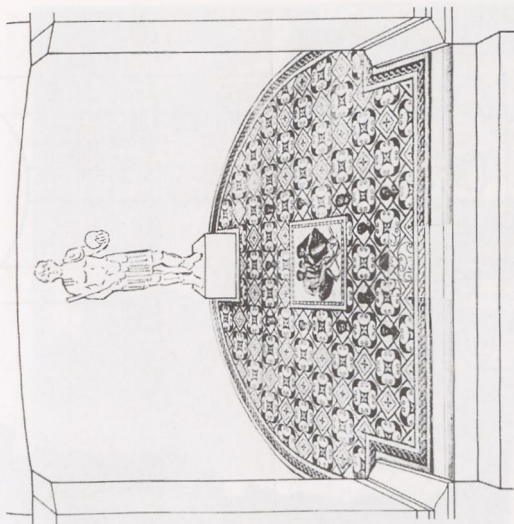


Fig. 8.

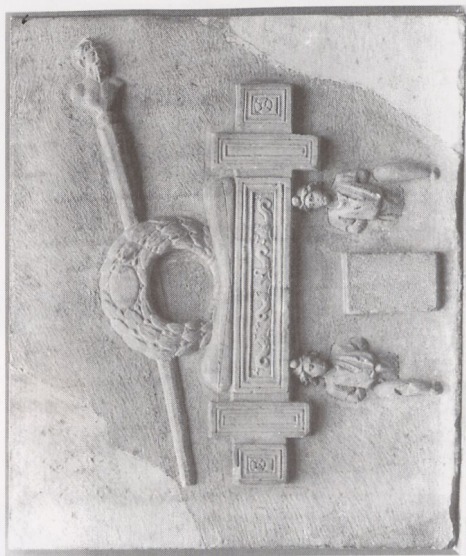


Fig. 7.



Fig. 6.

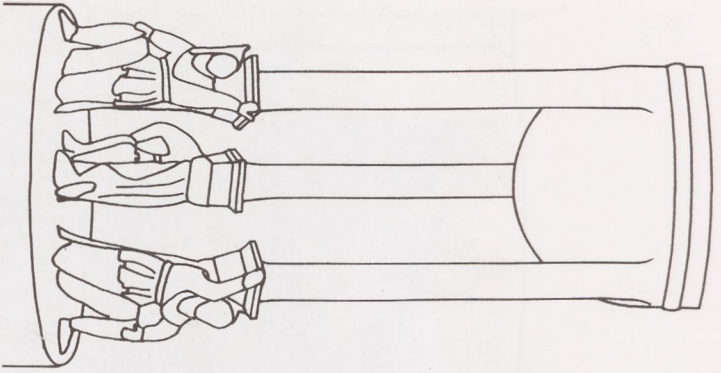


Fig. 9.

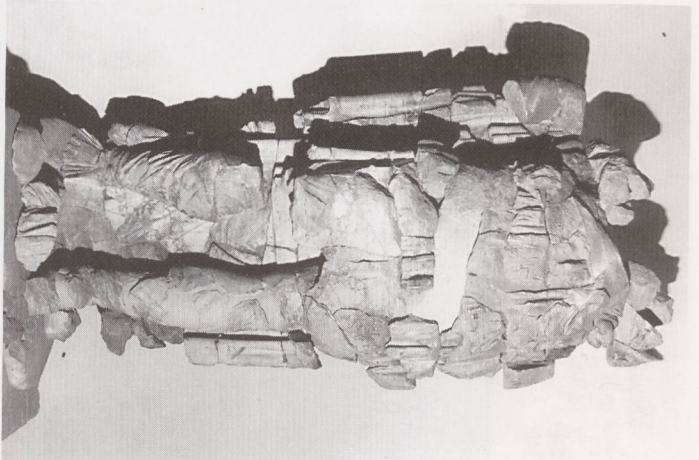


Fig. 10.

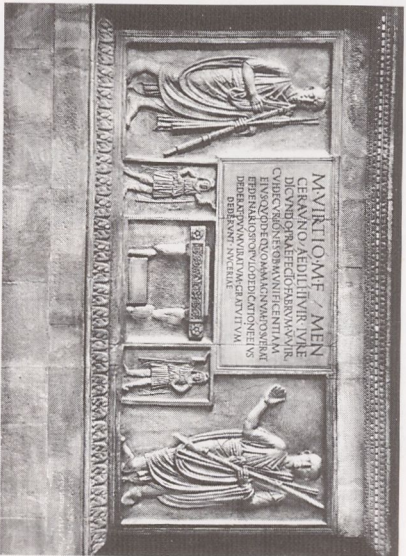


Fig. 11.



Fig. 14.



Fig. 13.



Fig. 12.



Fig. 15.



Fig. 16.



Fig. 17.