

The Column of Marcus Aurelius

Spring, 172. The Danube rushes past the log walls of a legionary fort. At a bend, where a pontoon bridge has been thrown across the river, a line of soldiers marches into barbarian territory. Standard bearers and trumpeters lead the way, followed by troops in plate armor, a squadron of the Praetorian Guard, and finally the emperor Marcus Aurelius himself, distinguished by his long general's cloak.

At the first marching camp, the army, now joined by troops of cavalry, assembles to watch the emperor perform the traditional sacrifice of purification. A courier, bearing news of the barbarians' movements, rushes into the camp. Warned of the enemy's proximity, the legions set forth, burning barbarian fields and villages as they march. Barbarian outriders are captured, interrogated, and executed.

At a river deep in the German forests, the Romans encounter a small party of barbarians, who pelt the emperor and his guards with sling stones before melting into the woods. Shortly thereafter, a large barbarian force surrounds the Roman camp. The Germans roll a siege tower forward; but miraculously, just before the tower reaches the camp wall, it is incinerated by a lightning bolt. A sortie scatters the barbarians. Shortly thereafter, the Romans cross a stream in the teeth of barbarian opposition, and pursue war bands through trackless mountains.

After the army reunites to face the main barbarian host, the soldiers and their livestock begin to suffer from heat and drought. They are saved by a sudden thunderstorm, which sends nourishing rain onto the Romans and floods out the barbarians.

And so on and on as the reliefs of the Column of Marcus Aurelius spiral upward. Roman soldiers march in neat ranks, barbarians die, villages burn – and through it all, the emperor stands aloof - godlike and alone. Though intended to emphasize his quasi-divine power, this representation neatly evokes the austere personality of Rome's philosopher-emperor.

Marcus Aurelius was a stoic. He believed that virtue was the only good, and that the essence of virtue lay in self-governance: that, in short, it was imperative to accept, without joy or sorrow, all things beyond one's control. Over his long years of campaigning, he jotted down – apparently for his eyes only – the series of moral reflections we know as his *Meditations*. In this philosophical diary, Marcus reminds himself to accept misfortune with understanding, to never fear death, and to always be mindful of his duties. One is left with the picture of a thoughtful and rather melancholy man, doggedly pursuing moral perfection.

Marcus had begun his studies of Stoicism in childhood when, as a distant relative of Hadrian, he had been tutored by some of the foremost scholars in the Empire. We still possess some of Marcus' letters to his tutor Fronto, which show a precocious and very earnest teenager already imbued with a sense of duty. This sense was only strengthened when, at the age of seventeen, Marcus was formally adopted by Hadrian's chosen successor, Antoninus Pius.

From a combination of skill and good luck, the 23 year reign of Antoninus Pius was characterized by virtually unbroken peace and prosperity. Marcus, as heir apparent, continued his

education and assumed the traditional senatorial offices, taking an increasingly important role in the imperial administration as Antoninus aged.

Upon Antoninus' death, Marcus was immediately declared emperor by the Senate. In keeping with a promise he had made decades before to Hadrian, he insisted that the Senate declare his adoptive brother Lucius Verus co-emperor. For the next eight years, Marcus and Verus ruled in concert – though in practice Marcus was always the senior partner.

During the summer of 161, only a few months after Marcus' accession, the Parthian king Vologases IV invaded the Roman protectorate of Armenia and installed a new ruler. Shortly thereafter, a legion led by the Roman governor of Cappadocia (now eastern Turkey) was decisively defeated by Parthian forces. To stem the crisis, Marcus sent Lucius Verus to the eastern frontier with a retinue of experienced generals. These officers performed admirably, swiftly retaking Armenia and pushing into the Parthian heartland. In 165, the brilliant general Avidius Cassius took the Parthian capital at Ctesiphon, effectively ending the war.

While in Mesopotamia, however, Avidius' troops contracted a strange new disease. It began with fever and cramps. After a few days of vomiting and diarrhea, the victim's body was covered with reddish spots, which rapidly developed into raised pustules. Then, very often, he died. Smallpox had arrived in Europe.

The plague spread rapidly through the provinces, eventually killing an estimated 10% of the Empire's population. One of its last victims may have been Lucius Verus himself, who died suddenly in 169. At this critical moment, as the legions reeled from loss of manpower, the barbarians invaded.

For centuries, two German tribes – the Marcomanni and the Quadi – had dominated the forested lands along the left bank of the upper Danube. Emboldened by the drain of Roman troops toward Parthia, chieftains of these tribes had begun to lead raiding parties into the provinces of Noricum and Pannonia (roughly modern Austria and Slovakia). Recognizing the severity of the threat, Marcus reinforced the Danube frontier, and had begun to mass troops for a major offensive when the plague struck. He was further delayed by Verus' death, which compelled him to return to Rome for several months.

When Marcus finally returned to the frontier in the spring of 170, the Marcomanni and Quadi were ready for him. Just north of the legionary fortress at Carnuntum (not far from modern Vienna), the barbarians inflicted a serious defeat on the hastily-assembled Roman troops. Then, led by their king Ballomar, they raced around Marcus and made for Italy, raiding and pillaging as they went. By late summer, the Germans were besieging the great city of Aquilea, near modern Venice.

Marcus summoned troops from every frontier and managed – barely – to drive the barbarians from Italy and the Balkans. Then, determined to destroy the German threat, he gathered the full might of the Roman military machine and, in the spring of 172, crossed the Danube into the territory of the Marcomanni – the episode that begins the reliefs on the Column of Marcus Aurelius.

Despite losses inflicted by the plague, the legions of the late second century was an extremely effective force. The Roman Empire's maintenance of a large professional army was anomalous. Until the early modern era, virtually all states preferred the cheaper alternative of levying troops just before a campaign, and then disbanding them when the fighting was over. The emperors, however, managed to keep upwards of 300,000 soldiers under arms at all times. This policy was ruinously expensive – even in peacetime, paying the troops consumed about two-thirds of the imperial budget – but it produced the most effective military in premodern history.

By 172, there were thirty legions, thirteen of which would eventually be involved in the Marcomannic Wars. A legion proper consisted almost exclusively of heavy infantry – usually around 5,000 men, organized into ten cohorts. Each legion, however, was brigaded with a roughly equal number of auxiliaries, who provided its light infantry, cavalry, and special units. Thus, at full fighting strength, a legion typically had about 10,000 men to work with.

Roman soldiers signed on for 25 years of service. During peacetime, and especially in the first months after their recruitment, much of their time was spent in forced marches and weapon training. As a result, legionnaires tended to be vastly superior to the German tribesman they faced in terms of training, tactics, and equipment. Their actual performance in combat, of course, depended largely on strategy and leadership; and in that respect, the troops who fought in the Marcomannic Wars were well-served by Marcus and his staff of professional generals.

Soon after Marcus and the legions crossed the Danube in the spring of 172, they encountered the Marcomanni in a major battle. The fighting was intense – Marcus' praetorian prefect was killed – but the Romans were victorious. By the end of the campaigning season, the Marcomanni had been pacified. The next year, however, the Quadi attacked Roman territory and had to be subdued in their turn. It was during this campaign that Marcus' prayers seemed to call lightning down on a barbarian siege tower and summon rain for the parched Roman troops – two episodes commemorated prominently toward the base of the column.

In 174, having crushed the Quadi, Marcus moved the legions east to begin a new campaign against the Sarmatians, a nomadic tribe famed for its heavy cavalry. After winning a series of victories, Marcus was forced to cut the campaign short by the news that his trusted lieutenant Avidius Cassius – the hero of the Parthian War – had declared himself emperor. Avidius managed to gain control of Syria, Palestine, and Egypt – but when the legions of the Rhine and Danube remained loyal to Marcus, his support swiftly melted away, and he was conveniently executed by his own troops.

After touring the eastern provinces to confirm their loyalty, Marcus returned to Rome for the first time in eight years and celebrated a grand triumph over the Marcomanni, Quadi, and Sarmatians. He seized the opportunity to have his fifteen year old son Commodus declared co-emperor – a gesture that would prove to be his greatest mistake.

After Marcus' death, Commodus would prove to be a disastrous ruler. At first merely incompetent, he would become erratic and unstable, and increasingly obsessed with the gladiatorial combats. In the last years of his reign, he began to appear in the arena himself, often

costumed as Hercules and armed with a great bow. In this getup, Cassius Dio tells us, he once killed one hundred bears in a single morning at the Colosseum. In the evenings, he sometimes entertained his friends by dressing criminals as mythological monsters and shooting them down in the palace gardens.

But in 176, when Marcus made him co-emperor, Commodus had not yet revealed his instability. He seems, in fact, to have been a dutiful heir apparent, accompanying his father back to Germany when the Marcomanni and Quadi revolted and again attacked Roman territory. Commodus was with Marcus when he died at Vindobona – modern Vienna – in March 180; and it was likely Commodus who commissioned the Column that celebrates his father's victories, sometime shortly before or after Marcus' death.

The Column of Marcus Aurelius was modeled directly on Trajan's Column, which had been dedicated sixty years before as part of Trajan's great Forum. The size of Trajan's column was imposing but it was most famous for the scrolling relief, 650 feet long, which depicted the progress of the Dacian Wars.

The Column of Marcus Aurelius was designed to be 100 Roman feet tall, the same height as Trajan's, and was decorated with a similar relief band. But where the reliefs of Trajan's column celebrate the establishment of order, and focus more on construction and ritual than on battle, the reliefs of the Column of Marcus Aurelius show all the savage realities of war. Men writhe and die on the battlefield, woman scream as their homes are burnt, captives weep as they are led to execution. But one figure rises above the storm of hate and fear. In scene after scene, the emperor appears cool and composed, with eyes that seem to look beyond the horrors of the battlefield, and toward the impossible path of virtue.