

# Building Roman Civilisation: A Reinterpretation of Two Sacrificial Scenes (86, 98–99) on the Column of Trajan

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## Introduction

It is not possible for anyone visiting Rome to overlook the Forum of Trajan, built to celebrate the victory in the Dacian wars in AD 113[1], especially when passing through Via dei Fori Imperiali from the Colosseum to Vittoriano. Trajan's column[2] is located in a court of the forum and is one of those ancient Roman monuments that have been handed down to us without any serious damages.

It is composed of mainly three parts, the statue on the pedestal, the base[3] and the column proper about 29.6 m in height, which amounts to about 100 Roman feet[4]. The relief of the column shows two Dacian wars fought during Trajan's reign. We have a historical source regarding the wars originally written by Cassius Dio[5] and abridged in the Middle Ages. However, as most of the details of the wars are unknown to us, the relief of Trajan's column is important evidence. On the relief of the column, the first Dacian war starts at the bottom and scenes move spirally up to the top where the second Dacian war ends.

One of the first archaeologists to research the column, C. Cichorius[6], divided the full length of ca. 200 metres[7] into 155 scenes, which include not only battle scenes between the Romans and the Dacians but also *adlocutio*, *submissio*, armies on the march, road construction and so on. It is academically noteworthy that we can find nine sacrificial iconographies[8] performed by Trajan during the wars. As only a few such sacrificial iconographies[9] have been found, they are important to understand religious ceremonies in the time of war. E. Ryberg[10] classifies them into three categories: three scenes as *suovetaurilia*, four scenes as honouring the emperor's arrival and two scenes as the pledge for victory before battles. This study will focus on and examine the two sacrificial scenes interpreted as the pledge for victory by Ryberg.

## 1. Two Sacrificial Scenes (86, 98–99)

Although this paper aims to examine the characteristics of two sacrificial iconographies, the scenes before and after the two sacrificial images may help to understand them; therefore, let us describe the two scenes including them.

Scene 85 represents sacrifices to celebrate Trajan's arrival. The emperor does not appear in this panel but emerges on the next panel to the left. Four *lictors* are represented at the left end of this panel. To their right, four laureate *popae*, in *limus*, and four bovine animals stand around two garlanded rectangular altars. All *popae* hold sacrificial knives in sheaths on their belts. To the right of the altar on the right appear two *togati* waiting for the emperor to come. A *togatus*,

Fig.1. Scene 86,  
113 A.D.,  
Trajan's Column



Fig.2. Scene 98-99,  
113 A.D.,  
Trajan's Column

to the left of the *popae* in the background, lifts up his right hand to greet the emperor. In the right half, two armed soldiers are represented in the camp while 19 men greet the approaching emperor by lifting up their right hands. Scene 86 (fig.1) [11] represents the emperor's sacrifice in a harbour city. In the centre, the emperor, in tunic, pours a libation from a *patera* in his right hand over the flame of a garlanded rectangular altar; he holds a volume in his left hand. Behind the altar, a tunicate *minister*, offering the emperor an *acerra*, is flanked by a soldier and a flautist. Behind the *minister* appears a *togatus*. A *victimarius*, in the foreground, pushes the victim's head to the ground. Nine soldiers and three standards follow the emperor from the left, while 16 onlookers, including two girls and two boys, are represented on the left. In scene 87, Trajan and

his followers have just disembarked and begun their march. At the front of the line stands the emperor, in cloark and tunic. Behind him appear 11 Roman followers and 3 Roman standard bearers.

In scene 97, Trajan on horseback marches with his soldiers to the left in the background, while Roman soldiers cut trees and reclaim the land in the foreground. Scene 98–99 (fig. 2) [12] represents a sacrifice on the Danube. On the left are represented six soldiers with their helmets on their right shoulders, one of whom has a standard. Following them appear three soldiers wearing animal-skin helmets. Three of them hold standards. A *popa* next to them leads a victim and looks back at the emperor. The *popa* wears a *limus* and is armed with a knife in a sheath at his waist. In the right half, the emperor pours a libation from a *patera* in his right hand over the flame of a rectangular garlanded altar. Behind the altar appear a flautist in toga and a togate *minister* holding an open incense box. Around these three represented six soldiers with a horse. In scene 100, the emperor has a talk with barbarian soldiers in front of a wooden amphitheatre.

Where are the two sacrificial scenes positioned in the total of 155 scenes? The second expedition of the Roman army is thought to start from scene 79[13], which depicts Roman ships leaving for Dacia at night. As marching scenes for the battlefield are represented from 79 to 99, the two sacrificial scenes (86, 98–99) can also be interpreted as marching scenes.

## 2. The Aim of the Paper

There are two main studies that interpret the meanings of the two sacrificial images. F. Coarelli believes that in scene 86, the sacrifice is executed to celebrate the completion of the bridge seen in the background, although he indicates it as merely one of his descriptions[14]. He does not offer any interpretations of scene 98–99.

Ryberg[15] relates the two sacrificial scenes to the images represented before and after them and suggests that, by the sacrifices, the pledge for victory is represented before their departure[16]. The author pays attention to two soldiers with their luggage on their shoulders, seen on the ship in scene 86, and suggests that the scene represents a sacrificial scene before the soldiers' departure for the battlefield. Ryberg regards the bridges in scene 101 (fig. 3) as the same



Fig.3. Bridge, Scene 101, 113 A.D., Trajan's Column

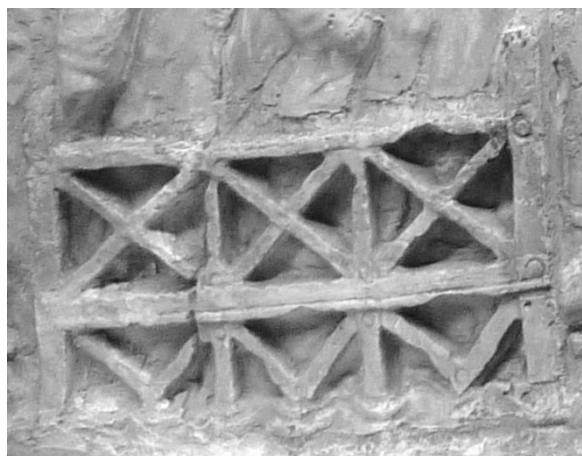


Fig.4. Bridge, Scene 13-14, 113 A.D., Trajan's Column

in scene 98–99 and thinks that the sacrificial image may represent the pledge for victory before the soldiers' advance as well.

However, as V. Huet suggests[17], it may be difficult to regard every scene on the relief as having continuity and a relationship with the scenes before and after. As mentioned above, Ryberg regards the bridge in scene 101 as the same as the one in scene 98–99, but you can find a representation of the bridge similar to that seen in 101 (fig. 3). For example, in scene 13-14 (fig. 4), where it has nothing to do with later images including scene 101, the Romans walk across a bridge whose structure looks quite similar to that in scene 101. Thus, it may be important to keep in mind the possibility that the juxtaposition of the two scenes is irrelevant.

In this paper, I examine the two sacrificial iconographies in terms of iconographical tradition and Trajan's propaganda and argue that, under the purpose of praising Trajan's building programmes, *consecratio*, a kind of sacrifice celebrating a building's completion, may be represented there.

### 3. Iconographical Tradition of Roman Sacrifice

Since the goodwill of the gods was necessary for success of any kind, it was important for the community to win their support and favour. By practising set rituals including sacrifices, the Romans gained favour and established a permanent relationship between the community and the selected god. We can find many sacrificial iconographies, in which an emperor performs sacrifices, in some public monuments[18]. In this section, I would like to compare the two chosen images with sacrificial scenes thought to represent the pledge for victory made from the reign of Augustus to that of Trajan on public monuments for the purpose of confirming whether they represent the pledge for victory or not. The Boscoreale cups (c. AD 10–20) comprise two cups: a cup representing the rule of Augustus and another showing the sacrificial ceremony by Tiberius. The latter will be referred to here as the Tiberius cup[19]. The Boscoreale cups were a part of a hoard, found in 1895, of 109 pieces of gold and silver plates and coins, all of which belonged to the owner of a wine-producing *villa rustica* on the south-eastern slopes of Vesuvius near the modern village of Boscoreale.

Let us first describe the sacrificial scene of the Tiberius cup. In the right (fig. 5), the *papa* lifts an axe over his head to strike the victim, which is held by two kneeling *victimarii* on each



Fig.5. Sacrifice, Tiberius cup, 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D., Silver, Louvre Museum

side, one pulling his head down, the other waiting with a knife in his hand. A third *victimarius*, behind the victim, turns his head to look backwards. To the right is the temple of Jupiter adorned with a garland of laurel. Next, a scene around the altar is depicted in the central part (fig. 5). To the left of a tripod altar a figure in a cuirass, probably Tiberius, appears, although the upper part of his body has been obliterated. Immediately after him follow an attendant, a flautist and a *lictor*. Behind the altar appear two *lictore*s with *fasces* and an attendant. All of these figures, except for the *lictor* at the far left, are turning to Tiberius on the left of the altar. Finally, the sacrificial victim is represented in the left (fig. 5). An attendant leads the bovine animal adorned with a band over its back and a triangular frame between its horns. Behind the victim appears a *popa* with an axe over his shoulder, followed by an attendant looking backwards. A. Kuttner suggests that this sacrificial scene represents *nuncupatio votorum*, the announcement to Jupiter of vows to perform further sacrifice and give thanks to the gods at the successful completion of the campaign[20].

There is another relief (fig. 6)[21], found in Trajan's Forum, that depicts a sacrificial scene performed by Trajan. In the scene on the left, a bovine animal on its back is surrounded by a group consisting of a *togatus*, two *victimarii* and a *popa*. At the left end, the *togatus* looks at the liver and interprets it. Then come two *victimarii*, one taking out the liver, the other, in the background, looking to the left. Next to them, a *popa*, having killed the victim, holds an axe over his right shoulder. Victoria is depicted flying over the group, which implies that the result of this divination is good. To the right of the divination group, two *lictore*s carry *fasces* on their left shoulders and two *togati*, whose faces are missing, are standing. One of the two *togati*, in frontal pose, has been identified as the emperor. In the right half of this panel, five *togati*

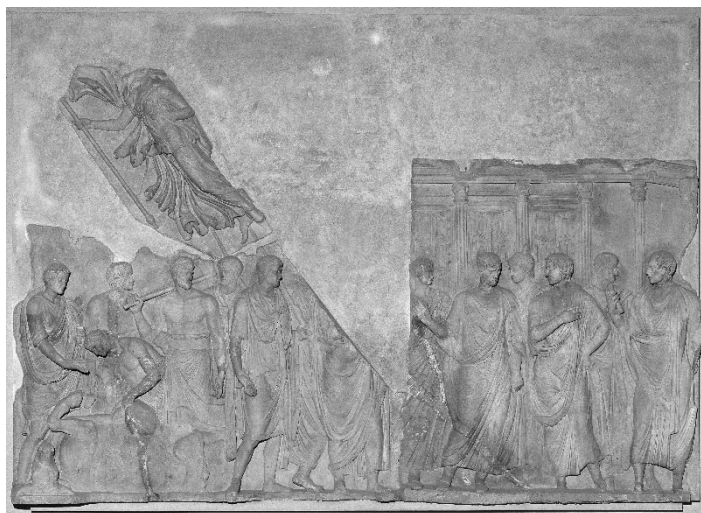


Fig.6 Extispicium Relief, Reign of Trajan, Louvre Museum, Louvre MA 978 and 1089

seem to be having a discussion. In the background of the central part, a *flamen* appears, dressed in a spiky helmet. The temple in the background originally had six Corinthian-style columns and three doors, and it is thought to be the temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus[22] on the Capitoline[23]. Attention must be paid to Victoria, above the divination scene, who illustrates the result of the divination for Trajan. The left half of the relief represents good fortune for Trajan, who probably appears in the centre. D. Kleiner makes a suggestion that the sacrificial scene describes a rite customarily occurred at the beginning of a military enterprise[24].

These two sacrificial scenes have one common trait: sacrifices are performed in front of temple architecture. As P. Zanker suggests, 'the temple façade represented nearby the ritual scene takes on a deeper symbolic meaning and is spotlighted by the accomplishment of the sacrifice'[25].

On the other hand, it is typical Roman architecture, not a temple that is represented in the background of the two chosen sacrificial images. In the background of scene 86, one can see the façade of a huge theatre, which has three entrances in the lower register, eight windows in the middle register and the seats for the audience as seen from immediately above. To the left of the façade is a garden surrounded by columns and a gate whereas to the right are two buildings next to a temple and a raised-floor-style architecture. Temple architecture is seen in the right corner, but the façade of a huge theatre is focused on in the centre of this scene. In scene 98–99, Trajan pours a libation from his *patera* over the flame of the altar in front of a bridge, allegedly built by Trajan's favourite architect, Apollodorus. It has five piers, four of which are described in the water.

In the two images on Trajan's column, it is a Roman theatre or a bridge, not a temple that is focused on in the background of sacrificial iconographies. Although Ryberg regards them as the pledge for victory, it appears that another interpretation would fit better based on the architecture in the background.

#### 4. Characteristics of the Architecture in the Two Scenes

The theatre complex (scene 86) and the bridge (scene 98–99) seem to have two distinctive architectural characteristics: they are not only built of stone but also represented realistically[26]. The theatre architecture looks as though it is made of stone in scene 86, and, likewise, the bridge has five piers composed of stone in scene 98–99. Against previous studies defining the relief on Trajan's column as recording historical events, E. Thill examines all the architecture represented in the backgrounds and argues that they may be depicted based on the differences between the Romans and the Dacians[27]. Thill, first, classifies more than 300 iconographies of architecture seen in the background as 'Roman', 'Dacian' or 'unclear'. In addition, as to the material of the architecture, she categorises them as 'stone', 'wood', 'combination' or 'unclear'. After all, out of 225 architectural structures defined as 'Roman', 154 are built of stone only; 36 are made of wood; 2 are a combination; and 33 are unclear. On the other hand, Thill categorises 88 architectural structures as 'Dacian': 22 are made of stone only; 49 are built of wood; 4 are a combination; and 3 are unclear.

Especially, the author pays attention to 'Roman' military architectural aesthetic, such as the use of stone, and suggests this depiction has something to do with the connotations of cut-stone masonry in the Roman world. As cut-stone masonry requires considerable resources and technical skills, according to Thill, it would remind the Romans of the technical expertise and efficiency of the Roman Empire. Moreover, she suggests that the architectural depictions cannot be merely topographic signposts or incidental backgrounds, but they have the important role of making a thematic impact: architectural depictions on the Roman side emphasise the skills and permanence of Roman military and culture, whereas Dacian culture is represented as primitive, foreign and transient. It seems important to me that stone-made Roman architecture emphasises the sophistication of Roman culture and the superiority of the Roman military in the two sacrificial scenes.

Second, the architecture in both scenes is represented in a realistic way and, it seems,



Fig.7. Bridge, Scene 58, 113 A.D.,  
Trajan's Column



Fig.8. Bridge, Scene 48, 113 A.D.,  
Trajan's Column



Fig.9. Bridge, Scene 131, 113 A.D., Trajan's Column

created based on at least real structures. In scene 98–99, the bridge has a complex structure: it is made of five stone piers with wooden arch; the handrails are represented as seen from diagonally upwards between which there is a pathway. It looks very different from other representations found on the frieze. We can find four kinds of representations: handrails and piers of almost the same length depicted in profile (fig. 4)[28]; bridges with shorter handrails and longer piers seen in profile (fig. 7)[29]; ramps from ships to ships or ships to land (fig. 8)[30]; and bridges without any handrails seen from diagonally upwards (fig. 9)[31]. They have smaller and simpler structures than the bridge in scene 98–99. Cassius Dio, in the 68th chapter of his book[32], describes a bridge with 20 piers Trajan constructed to cross the Danube. Lepper thinks this bridge may be the one represented in scene 98–99. In addition, Lepper suggests the place of the bridge may be Drobeta-Turnu Severin on the Danube in Romania, as we still can find remains of 20 piers there[33].

Also, the theatre in scene 86 is represented realistically. In the centre depicted the façade of the theatre. In the lower part of the façade is an arched entrance between two doors adorned with two columns, while in the upper part are eight windows and fences under the auditorium seen from above. In the left of the façade, one can see colonnades up to the third floor, which

probably show the intention of representing it three-dimensionally.

To the left of the theatre, there is an arched pathway and a garden surrounded by columns; to the right is a building with two windows on the second floor, a building with a window on the second floor, and a temple and a building with two windows supported by columns on the first floor. I believe the theatre complex is intended not to show a generic theatre, but to provide a realistic depiction of a specific architecture.

It is not unusual to depict a historical theatre in a realistic way, as you can find such a representation in the tomb for the Hatii, now in the Vatican Museum, representing the Colosseum, in which the capitals of the column are, as in reality, depicted in Ionian style on the second floor and Corinthian style on the third floor. One can see sculptures in the arches of the Colosseum in this work[34], though nothing is left today. As coins minted in AD 80 show sculptures in the arches[35], K. Welch guesses that they actually existed there[36].

Although it is suggested that the theatre in scene 86 may be in Salona[37], the Dalmatian administrative centre, on a route to Dacia, it is not possible to identify the building, as there are no remains of a theatre there. However, as we can see the intention of representing it realistically from its depictions, it seems that the theatre was represented based on a prototype that actually existed somewhere.

## 5. Interpreting the Two Sacrificial Scenes

In chapter 3 and 4, the traditions of sacrificial iconographies and characteristics of the two scenes were discussed. But what do the two sacrificial scenes mean? In scene 98–99, as mentioned above, the theatre seen in the background is emphasised. In addition, the group represented to the right of Trajan includes not only grown-ups but also two boys and two girls in togas. Even if they have been represented here as onlookers, children have nothing to do with wars. There are also some public iconographies representing children in other works made before the reign of Trajan, but there is no example of a representation of children related with war[38]. Therefore, it may be difficult to interpret this sacrificial scene as the pledge for victory.

Then, how can it be interpreted? In ancient Rome, consecrations of human constructions such as gymnasia and theatres were celebrated[39] because they were devoted to a divinity or they needed his or her protection or both[40]. In the *consecratio*, sacrifice was an important element and it could be a blood sacrifice[41]. Suetonius describes a sacrificial scene in *consecratio* as follows:

He (Claudius) opened the games at the dedication of Pompey's Theatre, which he has restored when it was damaged by a fire, from a raised seat in the orchestra, after first offering sacrifice at the temples in the upper part of the auditorium and coming down through the tiers of seats while all sat in silence (V, 21.1)[42].

Taking not only art historical evidence but also Suetonius' description of *consecratio* in the reopening of the theatre, it is likely that the iconography represents *consecratio*.

As for scene 86, the bridge is thought to be one of the most important constructions made



during the Dacian wars, which appears in Cassius Dio. Furthermore, W. Gauer believes that the person just to the right of Trajan could be Appollodorus, Trajan's engineer who allegedly designed the bridge[43]. As we see Trajan pouring libations with Appollodorus in front of the bridge, it appears that the scene also represents *consecratio*.

## 6. The Two Sacrificial Scenes and the Frieze of Trajan's Column

How can we relate the two scenes to Trajan's propaganda in the frieze? Only some views regarding the meanings of the frieze have been proposed, probably due to the frieze's length and details. Traditionally, it is thought that the scenes of the frieze document the process of the Dacian wars from the beginning to the end. Based on this idea, some inaccurate depictions of the scenes[44] or the relationships between iconographical and textual evidence[45] have been suggested.

In contrast, some recent scholars have regarded the relief as propaganda: they proposed that the scenes in the relief are intended to praise Trajan or promote the ongoing war[46]. Zanker suggests that the relief does not show actual events but scenes documented by the senate as the achievements of Trajan and his army[47]. I agree with Zanker's view and believe that Trajan and his army's successes are juxtaposed in the relief.

The two scenes (86, 98–99) discussed above also contribute to the idea that the frieze praises Trajan and his army: the sacrificial rites performed by the emperor, in front of Roman architecture, may indicate Trajan's achievements of constructing Roman architecture even during the Dacian wars. In other words, the two *consecratio* scenes not only celebrate the completion of the buildings but also show the building infrastructures of the Roman society in Dacia with their brilliant techniques.

There are many construction scenes in the 155 scenes of the frieze: 6 scenes show the building of roads[48]; 14 scenes show the construction of military camps (fig. 10)[49]; 2 scenes depict the construction of bridges (fig. 11)[50]; and 2 scenes display the cutting of barley[51]. In a broader sense,



Fig.10. Building Camp, Scene 39, Trajan's column, 113 A.D.



Fig.11. Building bridge, Scene 19, Trajan's column, 113 A.D.

construction scenes are represented in one sixth of the entire frieze. According to my research, there are no works of public art showing as many construction scenes as this work. It can be said that some parts of the frieze are intended to show Trajan's achievement of constructing infrastructures with high techniques. As a part of this, the two sacrificial scenes showing *consecratio* are also represented.

In addition, the inscription on the column may also show praise for Trajan's building programmes. On the base, it is written that the column is constructed 'in order to show how high a mountain—and the site for such great works was nothing less—had been cleared away'[52]. As the excavation in 1906 by Boni shows, even if a natural hill occupied the site where the column stands, the escarpment there is estimated to be about half the height of the column[53]. Now that the inscription cannot be understood literally, it is interpreted as praise for Trajan's building achievements[54]. Thus, given that Trajan's constructions are also shown in the inscription, it is not surprising that the emperor's construction is also praised in the frieze.

## Conclusion

In the previous studies, the two sacrificial scenes were understood as a process of the Dacian wars, and as such, they were interpreted as the pledge for victory. However, if we see them from the tradition of sacrificial iconographies, it is more likely that they show *consecratio*. In addition, both scenes were probably created with the purpose of praising Trajan for his building programmes, as were other scenes of the frieze or the inscription.

In the frieze, the Dacian wars are represented, whereas in the inscription, it is written that praising Trajan's constructions is the purpose of building the column. These have been regarded as irrelevant and examined separately. However, if my discussion here is worthy of consideration, they share the common characteristic of praising Trajan's building activities.

## Notes

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- [4] Lepper, *op.cit.*, 14.
- [5] Cass. Dio, IXVIII, 6-15.
- [6] Cichorius, *op. cit.*
- [7] Packer, *op.cit.*, 75.

- [8] scene 8, 53, 80, 84-85, 86, 91, 98-99, 102, 103.
- [9] For example, a relief made in the reign of Hadrian and now stored in the national museum of Scotland. See Balty, J.C., and Boardman, J. *et al.* (eds.), *Thesaurus cultus et rituum antiquorum*, vol. 1, Getty Publications, 2004, 210, fig. Rom.100.
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- [12] Lepper, *op. cit.*, 48-151; Coarelli, *op. cit.*, 162.
- [13] Lepper, *op. cit.*, 125-126.
- [14] Coarelli, *op. cit.*, 162.
- [15] Ryberg, *op. cit.*, 125-127.
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- [32] Cass. Dio, IXVIII, 13.
- [33] Lepper, *op. cit.*, 149.
- [34] Welch, K.E., *The Roman Amphitheatre*, Cambridge University Press, 2007, 137.
- [35] *Ibid.* Fig. 88.
- [36] *Ibid.* 138.
- [37] About the identification of the theatre, see Lepper, *op. cit.*, 136.
- [38] For example, children are represented in the south side of Ara Pacis Augustae or Alimenta relief in Benevento, but neither has something to do with war.
- [39] Balty, J.C., and Boardman, J. *et al.* (eds.), *Thesaurus cultus et rituum antiquorum*, vol. 3, Getty Publications, 2004, 343.

- [40] *Ibid.*, 337-342.
- [41] *Ibid.*
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- [45] For example, Speidel, M.P., Trajan's Column and the Arch at Benevento, *MdI*, Römische Abteilung 112, 2005/2006, 189-206.
- [46] Davies, *op. cit.*, 131-132
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- [49] Scene 11, 12, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 39, 52, 60, 65, 67, 68, 129.
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- [54] Lepper, *op.cit.*, 207; Davies, *op. cit.*, 129-130.

#### Illustration Sources

- Figure 1. London, Victoria and Albert Museum, Photo M. Sakata.
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- Figure 5. Paris, Louvre Museum, Photo (C) RMN-Grand Palais (musée du Louvre) / Christian Jean / distributed by AMF
- Figure 6. Fondation Eugène Piot, *Monuments et Mémoires*, V, Paris, 1899, plate XXX1.
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