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THE PILLAR OF THE NAUTAE PARISIACI: PARIS’ FIRST PUBLIC MONUMENT

Today, Paris’s Latin motto elegantly evokes the city’s multi-cultural past, while indirectly paying homage to the river flowing through it: *fluctuat, nec mergitur* (Fig. 1).

Long before the arrival of Latin and the Roman road network, the Seine river basin lay at the heart of the Parisii tribe’s territory. Under Roman rule, Parisian navigators continued to oversee transportation and commerce on their local waterway, as did their colleagues throughout Gaul’s rich network of rivers. Longstanding expertise afforded these nautae a privileged position between Rome’s provincial administrators, who communicated in Latin, and the region’s principal producers of goods, who continued to speak Gaulish for quite a while. This position likewise put the nautae in the path of circulating ideas, crafts, and individuals. These encounters may help explain the innovative form, the experimental mingling of Gallic and Roman gods, and the daring rendering of Gallic myth on the pillar they dedicated around 25 CE in Paris, just before this newly founded town took on its familiar Roman form (Fig. 2).

In an emerging cityscape, the pillar’s imposing height (around seventeen feet tall) would have drawn attention to its four tiers of human, animal, and supernatural figures, all helpfully labeled with inscribed Gaulish and Latin words. This arrangement would have seemed familiar to no one: the pillar’s design has no clear precedents either in Rome or in the rest of Gaul. The dedicatory inscription—which designates the Roman god Jupiter as the recipient of the monument—offers no insight into the monument’s
impetus. The pillar’s early date in Paris’ urban history, however, suggests that the Nautae wished to make a mark on their new city.

In doing so, they connected their new Roman allegiance to their enduring cultural memory in nuanced ways. Although they dedicated the pillar to Jupiter in words, for example, they devoted the most visually ambitious and arresting images to the rarely depicted exploits of their own god Esus. The following essay addresses a particular imperial moment in Paris, when new forms of expression captured lingering legends and called forth curious combinations of gods. The cultural and economic roles of the Parisian Nautae are key here, as is the pillar’s place in Paris’s complicated chronological development.

Lutetia Parisiorum

The pillar was unearthed on Île de la Cité in the early 18th century, during work to expand the choir area of Notre Dame Cathedral. The monument’s age reinforced belief in the island’s longstanding significance; its religious subject matter seemed to confirm that Notre Dame had supplanted a pagan shrine. Archaeology, however, indicates that Île de la Cité only gained importance towards the end of the Roman Empire, and that both the pillar and the city of Paris began their lives elsewhere.

The location of Paris shifted a number of times in its early history. The stronghold of the Parisii tribe continues to elude archaeologists, despite a telling hint in Caesar’s Gallic War (50s BCE), where he mentions that they had their base on an island in the Seine River.² Excavations on Île de la Cité have failed to unearth such a settlement, and
archaeologists are now searching for it along other sections of the Seine's ancient course.\textsuperscript{3} Roman Paris, in contrast, is still clearly visible in the modern cityscape. Between 40 and 75 CE, the city center developed to the south of the Seine (the Left Bank), about half a mile inland, in the area that now lies between the Sorbonne University and the Luxembourg Garden (Fig. 3).\textsuperscript{4} The city eventually expanded all the way to the Seine with a standard complement of Roman urban amenities, including an aqueduct, a theater, a hybrid amphitheatre (now a park known as Les Arènes), and bath complexes (one of which forms part of the Cluny Museum, in which the pillar is currently displayed). The city center finally shifted to Ile de la Cité in the fourth century, when violent instability along the empire's German border threatened the Gallic provinces. At this time, the island became endowed with basilicas and bath complexes, as well as an encircling fortification wall.\textsuperscript{5} For all of this work, stones from public buildings and monuments of the earlier town center served as construction material. The pillar's inclusion with this material suggests that it too once stood on the other side of the Seine.

The development of Ile de la Cité also coincided with a change in nomenclature. Only in the fourth century did the city begin to be called simply “Paris,” a change that today continues to honor the region's early residents. In Latin, both the earlier Parisii stronghold and the Roman city were called “Lutetia,” sometimes modified with “Parisiorum.”\textsuperscript{6}

Although Paris is now capital of France, it was not even capital of its province during the Roman era. That honor fell instead to Lugdumun (Lyon), about 300 miles to the southeast, which gave its name to the province Gallia Lugdunensis, within which
Paris stood. Roman Lyon flourished as a cultural center, and benefited from ambitious building initiatives: Roman Paris never matched it in scale or opulence. Paris in fact possessed few stone structures of any kind when the nautae set up their pillar around 25 CE, and their patronage offers insight into local support for this process.

**Nautae Parisiaci: Shipping Specialists of the Parisian Basin**

In the pillar’s dedicatory inscription, the patrons describe themselves as the “Nautae Parisiaci.” In Latin, “nautae” designates sailors, and can be used for members of shipping corporations (*collegia nautae*), particularly those on rivers. In such cases “nautae” is typically modified by the name of a river or a town. The Parisian corporation is unique in defining itself by a tribal region, which seems to be the meaning of the unusual variation “Parisiaci.” In this case, their sphere of influence is assumed to the basin of the Seine River, between its tributaries, the Marne and Oise rivers. Although such corporations are attested elsewhere in the empire, along Rome’s Tiber River for example, they were particularly prominent in Roman France. The territory’s extraordinary profusion of rivers offered crucial means of travel and shipping, an advantage that Gallic tribes recognized long before Rome’s arrival. This system of river transport would eventually be complemented, but not replaced, by the Roman road network. The Seine River is likely what drew the Parisii tribe to the region as early as the 3rd century BCE. The extraordinary series of gold coins circulating here in the pre-Roman era hint at the wealth generated by the area’s natural resources and by taxing goods in transit along the river and its tributaries (Fig. 4).
To develop along Roman lines, Paris required massive amounts of stone for its new, classicizing architecture. Although Paris itself contained some useful material, the most prized stone was quarried at Saint-Maximin and Saint-Leu-d'Esserents along the Oise river, about 27 miles north of Paris. The Nautae themselves likely oversaw the transport of such limestone, which was notably used for Paris' forum. This same stone constitutes the nautae's pillar.

The Pillar of the Nautae Parisiaci

Prior to conquest by Rome, few stone monuments were erected by the Gauls, and none were inscribed with words. The subsequent mania for commemoration suggests that public monuments should probably be added to the list of Roman civilization's lures. The Parisian nautae seem to have been the first in their territory to adopt this practice, which allowed patrons of monuments to assert publicly their affiliations in familial, civic, and religious realms. With their pioneering pillar, the nautae recognized Roman rule, articulated a range of divine allegiances, and asserted their new commercial role within the empire. In doing so, they commissioned a monument distinct in the history of both Roman and Gallic art. The pillar's design reveals the startlingly successful and imaginative innovations possible when artists are not yet bound by convention. In certain areas, it also betrays the awkward execution of an ambitious and unfamiliar assignment.
The monument’s inscriptions are the oldest yet found in Paris, and they reveal language traditions in flux. The Latin dedicatory inscription occupies half of one panel; the lower half is lost, but could have featured a Gaulish component (Fig. 5).17

TIBERIO CAESARE | AUG(USTO) IOVI OPTUMO | MAXSUMO | NAUTAE PARISIACI | PUBLICE POSIERUNT

The Parisian Boatmen, with their common funds, set up this monument for Jupiter Optimus Maximus, during the reign of Tiberius Caesar.

The reference to the emperor Tiberius, who reigned from 14-37 CE, helps establish the monument’s date. The spelling irregularities in several words distance the inscription from those of Rome, or even Lyon. The uneven word spacing and awkward letter execution likewise indicate an inexpert hand. The same can be said for the labels above all of the figures. These use the Latin alphabet to record the names of the Roman gods as well as the Gallic ones. Fragmentary Gaulish words survive on the panels contiguous with the dedicatory inscription, but these unfortunately remain undeciphered.

Archaeological losses have complicated attempts to reconstruct the pillar: each of the monument’s four surviving registers originally comprised at least two stones, and today three of the registers are missing their lower halves. If the stones were stacked, as most now accept, an estimated 384 potential solutions exist along the vertical and horizontal axes.18 J.-P. Adam’s hypothetical reconstruction offers a common starting point for the monument’s study.19 In the uppermost register (4), Adam places the stone representing the Greco-Roman heroes Castor and Pollux and the Gallic gods Smertrios and Cernunnos (Figs. 6-8). Register 3 then features the Roman gods Jupiter and Vulcan and the Gallic figures Esus and Tarvos Trigaranus (Figs. 9-11). Register 2 has the
dedicatory inscription on one side (Fig. 5), Gallic warriors on two sides, and on the fourth, a group of figures too badly eroded to identify (Figs. 12-14). Register 1, likewise poorly preserved, presents a pair of gods in each panel (Fig. 15). Of these, only the Roman deities Mars and Fortuna can be discerned with certainty. If Adam is right in adding an unsculpted base beneath this register, the monument would have risen to seventeen feet and towered over the emerging cityscape.

The logic underlying the monument’s seemingly random subject matter continues to inspire sharp debate. A number of theories have been advanced, ranging from the astral, in which the figures symbolize constellations as they appear at key moments in the Gallic calendar, to the documentary, in which the second register records the monument’s dedication ceremony. It has been noted that some of the gods are known to offer special protection to mariners, some have likewise been thought to appeal to the varied allegiances of the nautae’s regional clientele. The monument’s visual strategies, however, have not yet been taken into account.

The pillar’s only fully extant register contains strikingly different representational modes. The Roman gods, in frontal stances, peer out of panels devoid of setting, while the Gallic figures, in profile, stride through a discursive scene within an evocative landscape. Specifically, both Jupiter, the monument’s designated honoree, and Vulcan, the Roman smithing god especially popular in Gallic port cities, stand alone in their panels and are recognizable not through their actions, but through their standard attributes (Figs. 9, 10). The Gallic Esus, in contrast, steps rightward to hack away foliage in his pursuit of a bull and three cranes (Tarvos Trigaranus) through densely forested
terrain (Figs 1a-b). If later Irish legends preserve the same tale, Esus here seeks to kill a supernatural bull, which is either protecting or being protected by a goddess who has transformed herself into three canes. The artist cleverly draws on the corner shared by the contiguous panels to divide the scene in two, which heightens anticipation. This technique, common in horror movies today, allows the viewer to see the killer lurking around the corner, while the potential victim remains blissfully ignorant of the looming danger.

The sophistication of this visual storytelling is especially surprising because Gallic art, prior to Roman conquest, had no narrative tradition of its own. The pillar's sculptor, bound by no conventions for the story's rendering, likely invented this novel solution. Its success becomes all the more striking when compared to a roughly contemporary rendering of the same tale, this one in Trier, a leading city (and later capital) of the neighboring province Gallia Belgica. Here the story appears on one side of a rectangular monument dedicated by an individual named Indus Mediomaticus to the Roman god Mercury. Compressed into a single panel—where the action flows from right to left and the birds flock with the bull atop the tree—the story loses its narrative tension (Fig. 16). These two sculptures count among the few visual evocations of the tale. As Henri Lavagne as noted, this moment tellingly coincides with drastic reprisals against the druids, who had supposedly refused to commit their cultural knowledge to text, in favor of an exclusively oral transmission. In these two monuments, dedicated by men adopting a new Roman practice, we may have a glimpse of a complex response to the
social and cultural disruption caused by the suppression of the powerful guardians of Gallic heritage.

On the Parisian pillar, the Esus and Tarvos Trigaranus panels are the most visually striking. In almost all of the pillar’s other sculptures, figures stiffly confront the viewer from panels without background definition; some of these panels do contain multiple figures, an arrangement which raises intriguing, yet unanswerable, questions about their mutual relations. Only two other panels take a slightly different approach, and both can be found on Adam’s uppermost register. Cernunnos, one of the most frequently represented of Gallic beings, is recognizable from his torque-adorned horns. Although he is typically shown seated in a cross-legged pose, his position here has been lost with the lower half of the register. In the next panel, Smertrios, in profile, prepares to club a serpent; his lower torso and legs have likewise been lost. Although contiguous, these panels lack formal connections, such as the swaying trees which unite Esus and Tarvos Trigaranus scene.

To perpetuate memory, monuments must attract attention. The pillar’s multiple visual strategies and the uneven execution of the inscriptions today give an impression of heady experimentation. They also leave unresolved the tension between the pillar’s textual and visual emphases: although Jupiter is the focus of the Latin dedicatory inscription, his indistinct representation is overshadowed by the rest of the sculptural program, not least by the visually arresting Esus and Tarvos panels on the very same register. This tension may well have arisen from the adoption of an unfamiliar practice in a time of cultural transition; it need not necessarily convey indecision about political
allegiance to Rome or devotion to Gallic heritage. These are not, in any case, mutually exclusive positions.

Curiously, neither the pillar nor the Esus and Tarvos Trigaranus composition had any direct successors. The moment for representing Gallic narratives on public monuments seems to have passed relatively quickly, although Gallic gods did continue to make appearances on commemorative altars for some time. The pillar’s emphatic polytheism, however, does resonate with the later phenomenon of so-called Jupiter columns, hundreds of which were erected in the Rhineland and the Gallic provinces. On these freestanding columns, inscriptions designated Jupiter as the recipient; statues of this god (shown either vanquishing Giants or seated alongside his spouse Juno) stood atop them. The columns’ rectangular bases, however, featured representations of other gods; these were almost exclusively Roman.

Conclusion

The Pillar of the Nautae Parisiaci underwent conservation from 2001 to 2003, funded principally by the Bateaux Mouches Association. Today, these modern successors of the Nautae use their fleet of distinctive boats to offer international tourists glimpses of the city’s historic sites, all from the Seine’s perspective. News of the conservation briefly brought national attention to the pillar, which is otherwise known primarily to a small coterie of Gallo-Roman specialists. In a city famous for its monuments, the very first one—as innovative as it is multi-cultural—deserves to be better known.


The main Roman roads are now called Rue St. Jacques and Rue St. Michel. For the city’s development, see most recently, Didier Busson and Sylvie Robin, eds., *Les Grands Monuments de Lutèce: Premier Projet Urbain de Paris* (Paris: Paris Musées, 2009).


“Lutecia” is another variation found, for example, on the Peutinger map.


For the Nautae Parisiaci, see Izarra, *Hommes et Fleuves*, 178-181.


According to Caesar, for example, Dumnorix became wealthy by underbidding for the collection of tolls and other taxes (*Gallic War*, I.18). The Roman officer Labienus was supposedly able to seize a fleet of fifty vessels (*Gallic War*, VII.58).


Those famously enumerated in Tacitus’ *Agricola* (21) include porticoes, baths, and fine dining.


23 Béal has convincingly refuted this circular theory, namely that the men shown here must be the nautae, and that because they are shown armed, the nautae must have been allowed this privilege. He argues instead that the armed men are heroes from the past bearing historical Gallic armor. J.-C. Béal, “Les ‘Nautes armés’ de Lutèce: mythe ou réalité?,” Revue Archeologique 2 (2005): 315-337.


As Lambert puts it, “L’attachement des druides à une transmission exclusivement orale de leurs traditions a été fatal à cette culture.” Lambert, *La Langue Gauloise*, 10. Caesar (VI.14) describes the druids’ resistance to writing down their knowledge (although they used Greek letters for more mundane record-keeping).

In analogy to Jupiter columns (discussed below), the pillar is often assumed to have supported a statue of Jupiter. No evidence survives for such an attachment.

Figure 1. Coat of Arms and Motto of Paris (Hotel de Ville Metro Station)
Fig. 2. Pillar of the Nautae Parisiaci, 14-37 CE
Reconstruction: http://www.paris.culture.fr/

Fig. 3. Map and Reconstruction of Roman Paris.
http://www.paris.culture.fr/
Fig. 4. Parisii Coins

Fig. 5. Pillar of the Nautae Parisiacci
Inscription and Reconstruction
http://www.paris.culture.fr/
Fig. 6. Castor and Pollux

Fig. 7. Smertrios

Fig. 8. Cernunnos

Pillar of the Nautae Parisiaci, Level 4

All reconstructions: http://www.paris.culture.fr/
Fig. 10. Vulcan

Pillar of the Naufragia, Parisiaca, Level 3

All reconstructions: hipp./www.parisiaculture/
Fig. 11b. Esus and Tarvos Trigaranus

Pillar of the Nautae Parisiaci, Level 3

All reconstructions: http://www.paris.culture.fr/
Figs 12 & 13. Unbearded and Bearded Gallic Warriors

Fig. 14. Unidentified (note that boat reconstruction is unlikely)

All reconstructions: http://www.paris-culture.fr
Pillar of the Nautae Parisiæ, Level 2
Fig. 16. Pius, Pillar dedicated to Mars, Trier

Fig. 15: Paired divinites

All reconstructions: http://www.paris.culture.fr/