

Arch of Constantine

CONTEXT

The Arch of Constantine was a triumphal arch through which the emperor would have processed with an enormous procession and in a very ceremonial way. It was dedicated in 315, three years after Constantine's victory over his rival Maxentius at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge outside Rome, and two years after his Edict of Milan which halted persecution of Christianity.



It stands in the centre of ancient Rome, just below the Palatine Hill, beside the Colosseum which you can see on the right of this image, which shows the view from the south.



THE TRIUMPHAL ARCH



In this view from the north, you can see the basic form of the Triumphal Arch, which comprises:

- three openings with attached columns between them;
- an upper storey which is a room-space accessible by staircases in the sides of the arch;
- an inscription above the central opening, repeated on both sides.

The sculpture on the column is a combination of newly executed work (principally the scenes immediately above and around the openings), and work taken from earlier Roman monuments (including the figures and scenes along the upper stage, the roundels, and the scenes on the sides of the passages through the arch.

- **Inscription**
- **Sculpture from earlier Roman monuments**
- **Hunting and sacrifice scenes**
- **The siege of Verona**

INSCRIPTION



Translation (Amanda Claridge, *Rome: An Archaeological Guide* (Oxford Archaeological Guides; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 272, modified):

‘To the emperor Flavius Constantine, the Great, pious and fortunate, the Senate and People of Rome, because by divine inspiration (*instinctu divinitatis*) and the greatness of his mind (*mentis magnitudine*) with his army on both the tyrant and all his faction at once in rightful battle he avenged the State, dedicated this arch as a mark of triumph.’

Sculpture from earlier Roman monuments



Detail of the south side, upper stage, to the right of the inscription.

The large figure on the left represents a captive from Dacia (north of the River Danube), and on grounds of its style must have been taken from a monument of the emperor Trajan (98-117), who conquered Dacia.

The scene on the left shows the emperor standing on a pedestal on the left, apparently addressing his generals, who have the standards behind them. This seems to have originally shown a triumph in 176 of the emperor Marcus Aurelius and must have adorned one of this monuments. It has been reused here, and the emperor's face has been recut to make it look like Constantine's.

HUNTING AND SACRIFICE SCENES



Sculpted roundels from the south side of the arch, to the right of the central opening.

These roundels are thought on grounds of their style to have been taken from monuments of the reign of the emperor Hadrian (117-38).

The one on the left represents the emperor hunting, and points to the importance of this activity for rulers.

The one on the right shows the emperor standing to the left of what is evidently a pagan altar with a statue of a god on it. The emperor's face has been recut to make it resemble Constantine's. It is notable that such a scene should have been included when Constantine was at the time of the arch's dedication openly Christian and supportive of Christianity.

THE SIEGE OF VERONA



Detail of the panel above the left-hand opening, viewed from the south.

This scene, which was carved for the arch and so belongs to Constantine's period, shows that emperor's army besieging the city of Verona (Italy) en route to its victory at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge outside Rome. Aside from the interest of the details of armour, costume, and fortifications, notice the winged victory, a pagan figure, who is supporting the emperor:



The emperor is on the right of this detail, with the winged victory gesturing towards him from the sky.

SIGNIFICANCE

a. How Christian was Constantine?

- A triumphal arch was a typically pagan monument, which had been used throughout the history of the Roman Empire for processions and ceremonies of distinctly pagan character.
- A number of the scenes reused on this arch or carved for it were themselves pagan in subject.
- The inscription does not mention Christianity, although it does not mention pagan gods either. Also, it uses the terms 'divine inspiration' (*instinctu divinitatis*) and 'the greatness of his mind' (*mentis magnitudine*) in the singular, which might show that the senators who erected it were trying to refer to Constantine's Christian religion without offending their own pagan sensibilities.

b. How creative was the Roman Empire in the fourth century?

The significance of the reuse of earlier sculpture on this arch and whether this points to a decline in creativity and capability in the Later Roman Empire.

c. The influence of the arch on later structures

The similarities between this arch and the Carolingian Lorsch Arch may provide evidence for the influence of Roman emperorship, especially that of Constantine, on later kings.