

The Arch of Constantine:  
A Political Monument

Susan Serfontein  
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### The Arch of Constantine: A Political Monument

The Arch of Constantine, built between A.D. 312 and 315, commemorates the victory of Constantine over Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge outside Rome in A.D. 312. Maxentius together with Maximinus had plotted to overthrow Constantine and his ally and brother-in-law, Licinius. The arch of Constantine was raised over the Via dei Tronfi in Rome flanking the Colosseum, where it stands today as a monument to Constantine's imperial triumph and his political acumen. (Figure 1)

The monument is a symmetrical triple-arched structure. Each arch is framed by a decorative semi-detached column which rises from its sculptured base up to an entablature supporting the attic above. The vertical line of these columns, four on each long wall, is continued into the attic by statues of barbarian captives placed directly above the column shafts. This relatively strong vertical movement is effectively counter-balanced by the greater width versus height of the structure (84 feet x 69 feet) and by the careful organization of its sculptural elements. These elements consist of both contemporary as well as earlier sculptural reliefs taken from other monuments. The frieze which girdles the middle of the monument serves to give additional emphasis to the horizontal movement, while the heavy attic with its prominent inscription, seems to effectively suppress and contain the vertical thrust of the columns. The architectural proportions, as well as the sculptural elements were apparently selected by the Arch builders with care and concern for the monument's overall balance and symmetry and its impact on the viewer.

A large portion of the sculptural decoration found on the Arch were taken from other monuments and re-utilized on this edifice to serve the political agenda of Constantine. Sculptural fragments from monuments dedicated to Trajan, Hadrian and Marcus Aurelius were incorporated, as if to "...assert Constantine's place in the succession of great Roman emperors."<sup>1</sup> Significantly, the heads of these emperors were carved into the likenesses of Constantine or Licinius, now co-ruler in the East, possibly to legitimize further their right to succession. In addition, it could have served as political propaganda in support of the co-rulership of Constantine and Licinius who are now identified performing imperial functions of an official or religious nature. The use of reliefs from other sources not only coincided with the political program of Constantine, but also probably expedited the construction of this monumental structure, since the builders were charged with its completion in a period of only three years.

One of the more important sculptural reliefs found on the Arch is the long, narrow frieze which girdles the structure at mid-point. This frieze was produced specifically for the Arch and represents the main historical events relating to Constantine's imperial triumph over Maxentius. Beginning on the narrow west side, this frieze runs from left to right around the Arch in six sections which are linked thematically across the arch-spans and around the corners. Other sculptural elements constructed at that time for display on the monument were: the two medallions, one on each narrow side wall located above the historical frieze; the winged Victories and the Okeanus figures found in the spandrels; the statues of Victory figures and captured barbarians located at the columns bases.

<sup>1</sup> Marilyn Stokstad, *Medieval Art*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1986), p.20.

The sculptural reliefs taken from other sources include: eight medallions from the time of Hadrian (A.D. 117-138); eight attic panel reliefs probably confiscated from a triumphal arch dedicated to Marcus Aurelius (A.D. 161- 180); statues of captured Dacians located in the attic, and four large relief panels taken from an unknown edifice built under Trajan (A.D. 98-117). Two of these four Trajanic panels face each other across the passageway of the central arch, while the remaining two have been placed on the narrow side walls in the attic story. (Figure 2)

Stylistically, these confiscated reliefs provide a stark contrast to those produced specifically for the Arch. These earlier reliefs, to one degree or another, adhere to a "classicizing" tradition of representation. Forms are rendered in ideal proportions, bodies are modelled plastically, spacial depth is illusionistically portrayed, while figures are arranged in natural groupings. In contrast, the Constantinian reliefs are rendered mechanically and abstractly. Figures have become short and squat with large heads. Forms are flattened and rendered in abstract linear patterns rather than plastic modelling. Scenes are limited to a single plane of action. The natural arrangement of figures has become mechanical and contrived, as the repetition of form and gesture replaces the rhythmic flow of natural movement. Extensive drill-work produces sharp contours, and abstract patterns of light and shadow. As a result, the figures have become symbols of mankind rather than representations of individual men. They now adhere to an imposed and contrived order rather than "... an organic order based upon free figures in spontaneous groupings..."<sup>2</sup> Importantly, the emperor has been transformed into a symbol representing the imperial presence and his actions have become "... immutable feature(s) of ...rule rather than ... a pictorial recollection of one specific act...."<sup>3</sup> (Figures 3 and 4)

In the important Constantinian frieze girdling the structure at mid-point, the historical events portrayed are (beginning on the west side wall moving to the right): the departure of the Roman army from Milan, the "Profectio"; the siege at Verona (left south wall); the battle and Roman triumph over Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge (right south wall); the victorious entry of Constantine and his troops into Rome, the "Adventus" (east side wall); Constantine's address to the Roman people, the "Oratio" (left north wall); and lastly, the distribution of imperial gifts, the "Liberalitas". In the latter two scenes, the Oratio and Liberalitas, figures are symmetrically arranged around the central, oversized figure of the emperor who appears in a fully frontal position. In these two scenes, focus and movement are directed internally toward the central figure of the emperor in contrast to the proceeding military scenes which flow in a left to right movement both within individual reliefs, as well as across the arch-spans and around the comers. The figures are frequently seen in profile as they seem to anticipate the events ahead. (Figure 5)

In its entirety, this frieze glorifies the imperial virtues of the emperor in his role as military and civilian ruler. Various virtues such as superior intelligence, "mentis magnitudine" and his ability to intercede with the divine, "instinctu divinitatis", are blatantly stated in the attic inscription, while others, such as his justice, generosity and courage are clearly visualized in the relief scenes.

In the departure scene on the west side wall, foot-soldiers are portrayed carrying statues of

<sup>2</sup> Hans P. L'Orange, Art Forms and Civic Life in the Late Roman Empire (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), p.89.

<sup>3</sup> Marilyn Stokstad, Medieval Art, (New York: Harper and Row, 1986), p.21.

two deities on poles. These gods have been identified by Hans L'Orange as the winged Victory and Sol Invictus, or Sol Apollo. Both deities recur frequently within the decorative scheme of the Arch, indicating their importance in the political program of Constantine. The winged Victory becomes the constant companion of the emperor. She appears in the "siege of Verona" crowning an oversized Constantine with a laurel wreath, the symbol of victory. She accompanies Constantine in his triumphal entry into Rome, flying over his imperial carriage as he approaches the city gates. Winged Victories also appear bearing war trophies both in the spandrels of the arch, as well as on the bases of the semi-detached columns where statues of multiple Victory figures are portrayed together with subjugated barbarians. (Figures 6 and 7)

The second deity, Sol Apollo, is visually linked to Constantine on the east side wall of the Arch. He appears as the rising sun in the medallion located above the frieze depicting Constantine's victorious entry into Rome. He is rendered driving his quadriga into the heavens over the recumbent figure of Okeanus. (Figure 8a) The strategic juxtaposition of the medallion over the "Adventus" scene below transforms Constantine's triumphal entry into Rome into an event of cosmic significance.<sup>4</sup> This historical event becomes an unmistakable symbol of the dawning of a new day/glorious era for the Roman Empire to be realized through the figure of Constantine. Additionally, the scenes on the opposite side wall serves to further emphasize this symbolic link between Constantine and Sol Apollo. In the long relief, the emperor is depicted departing from Milan, while above is a medallion portraying Luna, the moon, as she plunges her chariot into the ocean. (Figure 8b). The juxtaposition of these two images suggests the advent of darkness with the departure of the emperor. The visual message, then, strongly links Constantine with Sol Apollo and suggests that divine assistance together with his own innate abilities, has enabled Constantine to achieve victory over Maxentius and that the power to renew the ancient splendour of the Roman empire is within his capacity.

In the Oratio on the left north wall, Constantine is depicted addressing the people from the Rostra at the Forum Romanum which is identified by its architectural background. Behind Constantine is seen the four statues of the Tetrarchs flanking the central figure of Jupiter. The choice of venue selected for this scene probably signifies Constantine's claim to be the true successor of the Tetrarchs.<sup>5</sup> The emperor's large figure faces the crowd in a relaxed controposto as he "...decreed that those who had lost property under Maxentius should receive it back again..., recalled exiles, and ...released those who languished in prison for their opposition to (Maxentius) the previous ruler of Italy."<sup>6</sup> According to Hans L'Orange and the visual references made on the Arch itself, Constantine also declared a new and glorious era of prosperity and peace for the Roman Empire. To either side of the Rostra, statues of seated figures oversee the proceedings. They are identified by facial features, beard, hair style and dress as Marcus Aurelius and Hadrian to the left and right respectively.<sup>7</sup> (Figures 9 and 10) The appearance of these two "good" emperors

4 Sabine MacCormack, Art and Ceremony in Late Antiquity, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), p.36.

5 Timothy Barnes, Constantine and Eusebius, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), p.44.

6 Barnes, p.47.

7 Hans L' Orange and v. Gerken, Der Spatantike Bildschumcks des Konstantinsbogens. (Berlin: Verlag von

flanking Constantine on either side lends additional credibility to his right to succession, stronger impact to his role of "good" emperor and imperial witness to his declaration of a new era for the Roman Empire.

In the Liberalitas scene, the emperor is again portrayed fully frontal, sitting on a high central throne. The scene takes place indoors, in a basilica-like building which is divided into lower and upper levels. The scene depicts the distribution and receiving of imperial gifts. The upper story is further divided into two rooms on either side of the emperor, each room containing four figures in a symmetrical arrangement. Roll call, accounting, distribution and the receipt of monetary gifts are all being recorded by the bureaucrats inhabiting the upper story as the expectant citizens anxiously wait below. (Figure 4) This scene celebrates Constantine's triumph over the "tyrant" Maxentius by the distribution of monetary gifts to every citizen, senator and plebeian alike. In both this scene and in the previous Oratio scene, the emperor is elevated to a symbol of imperial power. He is portrayed not as an individual, but rather as the dominating imperial presence dispensing wisdom, justice and alms to an acclaiming congregation. The imperial and political image which Constantine wished to portray in this historical frieze also extended to those sculptural fragments taken from other monuments. Not only did he attempt to further legitimize his right to succession, but also to underscore the important imperial "virtues" which would ensure prosperity and peace in the empire. Eight medallions were confiscated from an edifice dedicated to Hadrian and placed directly above the long frieze on the south and north walls. On the south wall from left to right are portrayed: Hadrian departing on the hunt; the emperor sacrificing to Silvanus, the forest god; hunting bear from horseback; and, lastly his sacrifice to Diana, the goddess of the hunt. On the north wall from left to right, the scenes depicted are: Hadrian on horseback hunting boar; the emperor sacrificing to Apollo; Hadrian triumphant over a dying lion; and, his sacrifice to Hercules. Importantly, the features of Hadrian were replaced by those of Constantine or Licinius and a nimbus was also included around the head of each emperor figure which served to acknowledge their recognition of Christianity.<sup>8</sup> (Figure 12) The placement of the medallions on the Arch was carefully planned so that Constantine alternated with Licinius in the various scenes. For instance, on the north wall, Constantine is portrayed hunting and Licinius sacrificing in alternating medallions. Taken out of their original context, these scenes become stock representations of events rather than specific acts. The alternation between Constantine and Licinius as they each hunt and sacrifice could intend to emphasize the equivalent abilities of both men in temporal as well as sacred functions. Hence, these medallions seem to have become a visual endorsement for their co-leadership and a portrayal of their comparable imperial virtues of strength and piety.

Similar to the Hadrianic medallions, the features of Marcus Aurelius appearing in the panel reliefs of the attic have also been replaced. It is assumed, that initially these reworked heads were meant to represent Constantine and Licinius in an alternating sequence similar to the medallions below. However, the original organization is lost due to the restoration of the heads in 1733 by

Walter de Gruyter, 1939) p.82.

<sup>8</sup> L'Orange and v. Gerken, p.170.

Pietro Bracci.<sup>9</sup> Rather than represent a specific historical event or act, then, these panel scenes were probably intended to symbolize the official functions of the emperor's position. As such, they became once again endorsements for the co-leadership of Constantine and Licinius. However, whereas the Hadrianic medallions were thematically limited to general hunting and sacrificial events, the scenes portrayed in the Aurelian panels encompass a wider range of subjects.

On the south wall from left to right are represented: the coronation of a vassal king by the emperor; subjugated barbarians imploring the emperor for clemency; the emperor addressing his troops; and, finally, the sacrifice of purification after battle, the "suoventaurilia". On the north wall from left to right the scenes portrayed are: the victorious entry of the emperor into Rome in which the allegorical figures of Mars, Roma and winged Victory appear; the emperor's departure on a military expedition, again included an allegorical figure inviting the emperor to set foot on the highway; the distribution of imperial gifts; and lastly-, the submission of a barbarian chieftain to an enthroned emperor. (Figure 13) These attic panels do not seem to follow an internal thematic organization, rather they appear to coincide with the general content of the Constantinian frieze girdling the Arch below. For example, the attic panels on the left north wall which depict the emperor's entry and departure include allegorical figures. These scenes are placed above the Oratio relief in the frieze below, which also includes the allegorical figures of Marcus Aurelius and Hadrian. Additionally, above the Liberalitas scene in the long frieze on the right north wall, is a coinciding Liberalitas scene in the attic above, together with the subjugation of a barbarian chieftain. In a similar manner the emperor is depicted enthroned in all three scenes. (Figure 3)

The final series of "re-used" reliefs consist of four sculptural panels taken from an unknown monument dedicated to Trajan which commemorates his battle with and victory over the Dacians. Two of the panels are located on the central passage-way of the Arch, the remaining two on the narrow side walls of the attic. The two panels located on the upper side walls portray the Roman army in pitched battle against the Dacians (east wall) and the capture and subjugation of barbarian forces (west wall). The emperor does not appear in either of these scenes. (Figures 14a and 14b) These Trajanic panels were taken out of their original context and placed on the Arch by its builders probably in order to symbolize the overall superiority of the Roman forces over all its enemies, not only the Dacians.<sup>10</sup> The placement of these panels within the grouping of the Aurelian reliefs also seems to complete a cycle. While the Aurelian panels depict scenes before and after battle, the two side reliefs portray war itself, in which heated battles are fought and captives are taken.

The two Trajanic reliefs in the passage-way depict the emperor in battle and in victory. On the west wall, he is shown on horseback charging into the Dacian lines. Enemy resistance has broken and the Dacian forces flee before his onslaught. In its midst, a barbarian kneels before the emperor in a gesture of submission, with arms outstretched and palms raised. On the opposite east wall, the victorious entry of the emperor into Rome is portrayed. A winged Victory crowns Trajan as the goddess Roma leads him triumphally into the city. In the right section of the relief is portrayed the submission of a barbarian in similar pose to its counterpart on the opposite wall.

<sup>9</sup> L'Orange and v. Gerken, p.184.

<sup>10</sup> L'Orange and v. Gerken, p.187.

(Figures 15a and 15b)

In these two passage-way reliefs, the features of Trajan have been replaced by those of Constantine, hence transforming a specific battle against the Dacians into a symbolic image of battle and victory.<sup>11</sup> The one Roman enemy now represents all its enemies and its defeat is the defeat of all enemies to the superior might of the Roman forces. Importantly, Constantine is transformed into a symbolic image of courage and superhuman power and strength as he turns back the enemy forces almost single-handedly, a figure possessing qualities far beyond any man and one who freely consorts with the deities.

Overall, the Arch of Constantine is a highly successful vehicle for the communication of the political and imperial image Constantine wished to present to the people. The sculptural reliefs and attic inscription served to highlight his primary aim of legitimizing his right to succession, as well as to provide important visual emphasis to those imperial "virtues" which were upheld by the Roman world as vital for a "good" ruler in the manner of Trajan, Hadrian, or Marcus Aurelius. The unique ability of Constantine which enabled him to access divine council was also stressed and impactfully communicated in the Arch reliefs, thereby conferring almost a divine status to Constantine himself. Furthermore, the manipulation of the re-used sculptural fragments also served to endorse favourably the co-rulership of Constantine and Licinius. The Arch is an impressive memorial, not only to Constantine's military success, but also to his political shrewdness and public relation skills.

<sup>11</sup> L'Orange and v. Gerken, p.190.

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