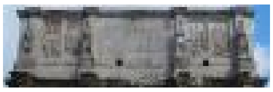
The Arch of Constantine

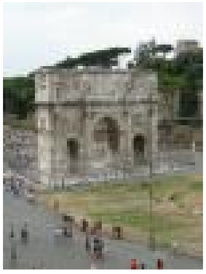
South Attic with inscription


[1]

[South side, from the Via Triumphalis](#) [2]


[3]

[North side, from the Colosseum](#) [4]


[5]

[Relief panels, round reliefs and frieze over left (west) arch, from south](#) [6]


[7]

[Round reliefs and frieze over right (east) arch, from south](#) [8]


[9]

Detail of relief panel, south side, right panel of left arch **[10]**


[11]

Detail of north plinth on second column from east, viewed from east, with Victoria (left) and prisoners (right) **[12]**


[13]

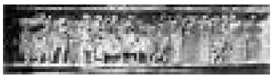
Round relief, south side, far left, showing the departure for the hunt **[14]**


[15]

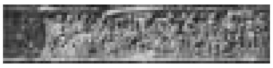
West: Profectio (departure for the battle from Milan) **[16]**


[17]

South West, Obsidio (the Siege of Verona) **[18]**


[19]

South east: Proelium (Constantine's troops defeating Maxentius's army in battle) **[20]**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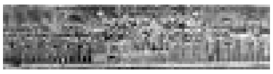
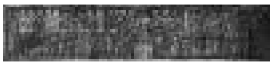
East: Ingressus (Constantine and his troops march into Rome) [22]


[23]

North East: Oratio (Constantine's speech to the citizens of Rome) [24]


[25]

North West: Liberalitas (Constantine distributes money to the Roman people) [26]


[27]

Detail of the Liberalitas [28]


[29]

Patron/Sponsor: Constantine the Great
Original Location/Place: Rome, next to the Colosseum
Actual Location (Collection/Museum): In loco
Original Inscription/Graffito:
(The translations are mine)

Dedicatory Inscription on North Side:

IMP CAES FL CONSTANTINO MAXIMO

P F AUGUSTO SPQR

QUOD INSTINCTU DIVINITATIS MENTIS

MAGNITUDINE CUM EXERCITU SUO

TAM DE TYRANNO QUAM DE OMNI EIUS

FACTIONE UNO TEMPORE IUSTIS

REM PUBLICAM ULTUS EST ARMIS

ARCUM TRIUMPHIS INSIGNEM DICAVIT

To the Emperor Caesar Flavius Constantine Maximus, pious and blessed Augustus. The senate and people of Rome have dedicated this arch engraved with triumphs, because inspired by the divine and his greatness of mind, with his army he has avenged the state in just battle from the tyrant and all his adherents at the same time.

Central Passageway Inscriptions:

FVNDATORI QVIETIS

To the founder of peace

LIBERATORI VRBIS

To the liberator of the city

Date: 315 CE
Material: Marble
Measurements: c.21 metres high, 25.2 metres wide, 7.4 metres deep.
Central archway 11.5 metres high and 6.5 m wide, and lateral archways 7.4 metres by 3.4 metres.
Building Typology: Triumphal Arch
Description:
The unmissable Arch of Constantine, standing roughly 21 metres tall and 25 metres wide is constructed of grey and white Proconnesian marble, and features three arches. There is a large central arch flanked by two shorter, narrower arches on each side. In between the arches and on the ends of the monument are four Corinthian columns of Numidian yellow marble, which each stand on a pedestal topped with an entablature. From this extend four pedestals, which each hold a statue representing a Dacian prisoner. Each of the four facades bear a Hadrianic roundel in purple porphyry. The frieze of the main entablature was constructed in green porphyry. The statue pedestals were Carystian green, and the statues themselves were in Phrygian purple. The arch was therefore a combination of vibrant colours. Sculpted panels and an inscription, repeated on both sides, decorate the block above the arches. The arch was constructed from a combination of earlier first and second century monuments. The marble panels were taken from the Arch of Marcus Aurelius. The arch features eight marble panels, four on each of the façades, depicting scenes where the emperor is at war (on the south side) or carrying out civic duties (north side). The head of the emperor on these images has been re-cut to resemble Constantine. The eight white Luna marble tondi on the north and south façades are reused from a lost monument dedicated to Hadrian, and are set in pairs depicting various hunting scenes, and sacrificial ceremonies to Hercules, Apollo, Diana, and Silvanus. The white marble reliefs in the two inner central arches, slightly altered, are from the Great Trajanic Frieze taken from the Basilica Ulpia in the Forum of Trajan. The first two panels show Trajan or Domitian (again with the head altered to represent Constantine) charging at barbarians on his horse, and the emperor being crowned by Victory, flanked by females possibly representing Honour and Virtue, dressed respectively as an Amazon and in armour. The Corinthian columns were commandeered from a first century Flavian monument, with the Dacian prisoners standing above them possibly being taken from an unknown monument to Trajan. The frieze scenes below each pair of medallions, were specifically sculpted for the arch. The left side of the south façade depicts the siege of Verona, while the right side of the south façade shows the battle against Maxentius. On the north façade, the left side depicts the emperor addressing the people in the Forum, while the right side shows Constantine distributing money. Above the two small arches the sculpture includes river gods and two victories, and the column bases bear winged victories with palm branches, Roman legionaries, and captives. There are round sculptures depicting the Sun (east) and Moon (west) riding chariots on each of the short sides of the monument, and below these is a frieze depicting the entry into Rome (east) and the departure from Milan (west).

Commentary:
The Arch of Constantine, which stands prominently in Rome on the triumphal route, was built in around 315 CE, and commemorates the emperor's victory over the tyrant Maxentius at the battle of the Milvian Bridge near Rome. The Roman senate dedicated the arch to the emperor, having commissioned it upon his triumphal entry into Rome in 312 CE (see the commentary on *Life of Constantine* I.39 [30]). Constantine had actually entered Rome on 29 October 312, amidst great rejoicing, and the Senate then commissioned the monument. The arch was dedicated on the 25th of July 315 CE, on the Decennalia (the tenth anniversary of Constantine's reign). During the Tetrarchic period, the city of Rome was somewhat neglected by the emperors, who made their imperial residences elsewhere in the empire, choosing to focus on defending its threatened borders.

Constantine's triumph over Maxentius is presented in a way that views him as a liberator of and benefactor to this ancient and renowned city and its people, freed from a tyrannical regime that debased them (see the commentary on the *Life of Constantine* I.39). This propagandistic message, where Constantine is presented as ushering in a bright new age for Rome under one divinely chosen leader, restoring it to its former glory, was forwarded on the arch by emphasising both Constantine's military victories and his connections to Rome's older, renowned emperors. It has often been argued that Constantine was not particularly interested in Rome's pagan traditions, choosing primarily to build churches; he has been understood as "a Christian first and an emperor only secondarily" (for instance, see Hans Pohlsander, *Emperor Constantine*, p. 60-61; for the quotation, Elizabeth Marlowe, "*Liberator Urbis Suae*," p. 205-206). However, this very black and white understanding of the emperor's conversion to Christianity and the way in which it impacted upon his relationship with pagan religion is now more widely challenged. The evidence rather seems to suggest that Constantine, while keen to make clear that he had strong links to the divine, preferred to keep this somewhat ambiguous. Indeed, numismatic evidence indicates that he maintained ties to Sol Invictus, for example. Both in terms of religion and Rome's past, then, Constantine can be seen to be establishing and/or maintaining links. The arch acted as a prominent visual representation of ideology, helping to forward the image of the emperor as a mighty conqueror, generous benefactor, and divinely chosen leader.

As Timothy Barnes notes, when the senate dedicated the arch to Constantine, they chose similar language to that which Eusebius describes as being in the inscription attached to a prominent statue of the emperor in Rome: "Through this sign of salvation, which is the true symbol of goodness, I rescued your city and freed it from the tyrant's yoke, and through my act of liberation I restored the senate and people of Rome to their ancient renown and splendor" (see *Life of Constantine* I.40 [31], which is discussed in the commentary on the Colossus of Constantine; Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, p. 47). As Iain Ferris points out, although the inscriptions are remarkably similar, Eusebius does not mention the arch at all (*Arch of Constantine*, p. 19). However, highly significant is the designating of Maxentius as a "tyrant" (*tyrannus*). After the conclusion of the battle of the Milvian Bridge, Maxentius's drowned body was dragged from the river Tiber, and his head cut off and dragged through Rome's streets to show the people that the ruler was no more. Then began a campaign of propaganda which aimed to cast into permanent shadow the name of the usurper Maxentius, and praise that of Constantine, his defeater. The arch's inscriptions contrast the "liberator" Constantine with the "tyrant" Maxentius, and contribute towards the writing out of Maxentius from Rome's continuum of emperors. Constantine also sought to do this by declaring a formal *damnatio memoriae* on Maxentius's name. While attempts were made, then, to sever Maxentius from Rome's history, as mentioned above, the arch seeks to firmly associate Constantine with some of its most successful past rulers, suggesting a prosperous future for the Roman people.

The arch represents Constantine as a continuation of the greatest emperors from Rome's past, who were remembered for their victories in battle as well as their good governance. The arch incorporates various Constantinian themes, with its propagandistic message centred on the emperor's military victory and his domestic policy. Reflecting these themes, the short inscriptions on the central passageway read FVNDATORI QVIETIS and LIBERATORI VRBIS, respectively "To the founder of peace" and "To the liberator of the city." As Richard Brilliant states, the monument seeks to make clear "the pivotal position of Constantine's rule between an old order, still great, and a new order rising from it to a glorious future" ("North Façade," p. 68). In this connection, the arch's location is not insignificant either, standing next to the Flavian Colosseum and at the bend of the triumphal route between the arches of Vespasian at the Circus Maximus and Titus [32] at the entry to the Forum. Significantly, in their conquering of Jerusalem (which the Arch of Titus commemorates) the Flavians had established their power. For Brilliant, Constantine, who had conquered Jerusalem but also Rome too, could therefore present himself as a new Flavian emperor, drawing and improving on the glory and success of their era. Indeed, the arch features many reminders of Rome's glorious past, and shows Constantine carrying on Roman tradition; this is also emphasised through the reacquisition of fragments from older monuments. Brilliant views the remodelling of the heads of former emperors on the reused panels as a way of assimilating "these great persons into the present majesty of Constantine" ("North Façade," p. 68). It should also be noted that Constantine's war with Maxentius is described in the inscription with the term *iustus* (just, rightful). This commemorates not just the fact that he is victorious in military campaigns, but rather that because his military actions have restored the people of Rome, they are therefore particularly righteous. Constantine has not simply subdued enemy peoples and expanded Rome's territory; his actions within civil war are presented as completely justified and necessary for Rome's future success.

The emperor's relationship with the divine is a major focus of the arch. The main inscription, which sits prominently on the top section of the monument, acknowledges that Constantine was divinely inspired. Brilliant interprets the *instinctu divinitatis* of the arch's main inscription to refer to Constantine's vision of the cross of Christ, which Christian sources report he had prior to the battle against Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge, assuring him that he would win (see *Life of Constantine* I.26, 28-29 [33]; "North Façade," p. 68). This may be the case, but given that the arch notably does not boast any specifically Christian features, we must be very wary of such a one dimensional view. It may be that this is partly what is alluded to in the inscription, but given that the arch contains numerous depictions of pagan deities, this is only in an ambiguous way at best. Indeed, as Noel Lenski has argued, *instinctu divinitatis* ("divine instigation") was a phrase used by pagan authors often in connection with Apollo/Sol, the deity formerly linked with Constantine ("Evoking the Pagan Past," p. 204-257; see also Salzman, "Constantine and the Roman Senate," p. 20). This same argument comes into play when considering Constantine's coinage, which in addition to blatant Christian symbolism on various issues, also depicts both Mars and Sol Invictus after Constantine had already adopted Christianity (see Follis depicting the head of Constantine and Sol Invictus (310-313 CE) [34]). The famous heavenward gaze which Constantine sports both on coinage and on the famous Colossus of Constantine [31] is also understood by some scholars to function in a somewhat ambiguous fashion, representing the pious character of the emperor but leaving his precise divine affinity or, rather, affinities up to the viewer to decide. Elizabeth Marlowe has analysed the arch within its broader urban context. She highlights the fact that as one walked through the arch from the Via Triumphalis to the south, they would be met immediately by the vision of the colossal statue of the sun god, Sol, which stood 108 metres behind the arch. This, she argues, would have played a strong role in visually associating Constantine with Sol, and also the sun god with the triumphal procession itself. For Marlowe, it is much more logical to interpret the arch, particularly because of its topographical location, as attributing Constantine's military success to the favour of the sun god, rather than the Christian deity. Indeed she disagrees that the inscription should be read with a Christian message behind it (see "Framing the Sun").

Michele Salzman has also argued that the iconography of the arch should be interpreted with an appreciation of the fact that there was a traditional pagan view of Constantine's victory in 312 CE in addition to a Christian one. While during the years that the arch was being constructed there were circulating narratives of Constantine's support for Christianity, there are no indications of this on the arch itself. For instance, the soldiers who are represented do not carry shields with the Christogram on them, and as discussed above, the inscription is non-specific about the origin of the divine support the emperor received. Rather, Salzman argues, the iconography on the arch depicts traditional pagan imagery of the divine aid which Constantine received. Salzman points to the second-century reliefs that were reused on the arch, and drawing on the work of Stephan Faust, highlights their consistency in the depiction of the imperial virtues of *virtus* and *pietas* (bravery and piety, or dutifulness). The latter, for instance, is present in the four Hadrianic roundels which show the emperor sacrificing to pagan deities, and in the Antonine reliefs, one of which shows him performing a *suovetaurilia* (the sacrifice of a pig, sheep, and bull) (see Salzman, "Constantine and the Roman Senate," p. 12, 20; Faust, "Original und Spolie"). The images of sacrifice, however, Salzman argues would have been problematic for Christian viewers of the monument, as well as some non-Christians, given that the past decade had seen debate over how central the role of sacrifice was in citizenship tests for loyalty to a Christian emperor. The fact that such imagery is prominent on the arch, is for Salzman evidence that the senate, which was still largely pagan, had a primary role in its design and construction, and wished to emphasise the role of traditional Roman religion ("Constantine and the Senate," p. 21). The representation of continuity of Rome's past is therefore a central feature of the arch, both through connections with previous emperors and with pagan religion, despite the new Christianity which Constantine had adopted. While as some scholars have suggested, there may be hints at ambiguous connections to the role of Christianity in the emperor's victory in the inscription, the imagery of the arch is very clearly one which evokes traditional religion, and understands Constantine's victory firmly within this cultic context.

Thematic keywords:

- triumphal arch [35]
- Constantine [36]
- battle [37]
- Milvian Bridge [38]
- Maxentius [39]
- tyrant [40]
- military power [41]
- Roman power [42]
- Roman emperor [43]
- senate [44]

- Roman people [45]
- Rome (city) [46]
- liberation [47]
- Flavians [48]
- triumph [49]
- Sol Invictus [50]
- Roman religion [51]

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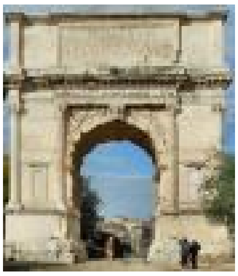
Other sources connected with this document: Architecture

Arch of Titus, Roman Forum (81-82 CE)_Architecture **[65]**

Western façade of the triumphal arch of Titus **[66]**

Western façade of the triumphal arch of Titus (2) **[67]**



Inscription on the western façade of the triumphal arch of Titus [68]

- Read more about Arch of Titus, Roman Forum (81-82 CE)_Architecture [65]

Text

Eusebius of Caesarea, *Life of Constantine* I.39 [69]

Constantine’s triumphal entry into Rome

- Read more about Eusebius of Caesarea, Life of Constantine I.39 [69]

Text

Eusebius of Caesarea, *Life of Constantine* I.26, 28-29 [70]

Constantine’s vision of Christ prior to the battle at the Milvian Bridge

- Read more about Eusebius of Caesarea, Life of Constantine I.26, 28-29 [70]

Relief / Sculpture

The Colossus of Constantine [71]

- Read more about The Colossus of Constantine [71]

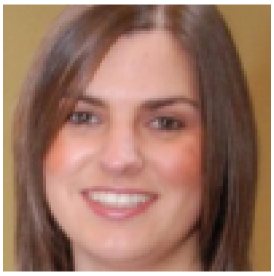
Numismatic item

Nummus depicting the head of Constantine and Sol Invictus (310-313 CE) [72]

- Read more about Nummus depicting the head of Constantine and Sol Invictus (310-313 CE) [72]

Realized by:

Kimberley Fowler [73]



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[3] http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/sites/default/files/styles/large/public/2_10.jpg?itok=Mc-vbmGG
[4] http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/file/north-side-colosseum
[5] http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/sites/default/files/styles/large/public/3_8.jpg?itok=32twgX_-
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[50] http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/sol-invictus
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