



Arch of Galerius, Thessaloniki (298-299 CE)

Arch of Galerius in 1930



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Patron/Sponsor: Galerius

Original Location/Place: Intersection of *Egnatia* & *Dimitriou Gounari* streets, Thessaloniki, Greece.

Actual Location (Collection/Museum): *in loco*. The reliefs are in the Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki.

Date: 298 CE to 299 CE

Material: Marble and brick.

Measurements: Central arch: 9.7m x 12.5m

Smaller side arches: 4.8m x 6.5m

Building Typology: Triumphal Arch

Description: The arch was built as an octopylon – an eight-pillared gateway that formed a triple arch. Its core is of masonry rubble, faced with brick and decorated with panels of marble relief that depict scenes of battle between Rome and the Persians, the imperial family offering a sacrifice and the crowning of the tetrarchs by the personification of Victory. Much of the sculptural relief has been damaged or destroyed, so the full programme of scenes cannot be fully known; the entire eastern side (comprising 4 pillars) and the southern pillar of the western side have been lost entirely, with only two pillars on either side of the central arched passage still decorated by their marble reliefs. Four niches – the lower parts of two of which remain – were placed to the left and right above the pillars of the central passageway, which may have held statues of the Tetrarchs, or even of their leading divinities, Jupiter, Hercules, Mars and Virtus.

The central arch measures 9.7m x 12.5m, with the smaller arches on each side 4.8m x 6.5m. The central arch spanned the main Roman road from Dyrrachium to Byzantine, the *Via Engatia*, which acted as the *decumanus* of the city. Although ostensibly a triumphal monument in its own right, the Arch of Galerius was part of the larger palatial complex that dominated this previously sparsely occupied area of Thessaloniki; as well as the imperial



palace, the complex included a Basilica, reception rooms, a hippodrome, and the Rotunda, which probably served as a temple dedicated to the patron gods of the tetrarchs.

Commentary: The Arch of Galerius in Thessaloniki was constructed in celebration of Galerius's victory over the Persians in 298 CE; once a large and impressive structure, formed of eight pillars that supported three archways, and decorated with piers of figured reliefs, it has survived in very fragmentary state, with only the two central interior pillars still retaining their complete sculptural programme. Much of the marble decoration has been lost, but as Roger Rees has noted, "more remains of the Arch than any Tetrarchic monument," making it an invaluable source for our understanding of the imperial propaganda of the Tetrarchy and the themes employed within such a framework (Rees, "Images and Image," p. 181).

Gaius Galerius Valerius Maximianus had been born of humble peasant stock in Serdica, in c 250 CE. His military prowess had seen him rise up through the army, until he was acclaimed Caesar by Diocletian in 293 CE. He undertook military campaigns against the Carpi, the Sarmatians, and in the late 290s CE, against Narses of Persia, the victory against whom was celebrated by this triumphal arch (for these campaigns, see Barnes, *The New Empire*, p. 50-60; Southern, *The Roman Empire*, p. 148-153). The Persian campaign had arisen following the accession of Narses, one of the sons of Shapur I, in 294 CE; although the literary sources are sparse, Narses appears to have declared war on Rome in 295 or 296 CE, invading Armenia and claiming back the territory awarded to Tiridates after the peace treaty with Rome in 287 CE (Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* XXIII.5.11). Narses then invaded Roman Mesopotamia, leading to Galerius's campaign against him; following two successive battles in the rocky terrain of Armenia, which was favourable to Rome's infantry forces, Galerius declared victory, going on to seize Narses's camp and harem amongst other spoils (Potter, *The Roman Empire at Bay*, p. 293). This was a decisive victory for Galerius, and led to his promotion as Augustus following the abdication of Diocletian in 305 CE. Before this, however, he had been encouraged to establish his own capital in Sirmium in Pannonia, which he later moved to Thessaloniki (Salonica) in Greece. An imperial court was built, comprising an enormous complex of royal residence, imperial reception rooms, spaces for entertainment, such as the hippodrome, a large basilica, and the so-called 'Rotunda', which appears to have been used for worship of the deities connected to the individual tetrarchs. The Arch of Galerius formed part of this monumental complex, spanning the new *decumanus* – the main east-west thoroughfare – of the city, and leading directly to the palace vestibule, which lay ahead.

The sculptural programme of the triumphal arch has been compromised by the extent of damage and erosion to the structure. Only two of the four central piers survive, which are faced with the original marble reliefs. These reliefs are divided into four horizontal piers, separated by decorative moldings. Since their first publication by the Danish archaeologist Karl Frederik Kinch in 1890, the reliefs have undergone much scholarly analysis, which has sought to identify the different scenes and to fit them into a speculative iconographic narrative. Kinch proposed that each of the four main piers of the arch was decorated with one of Galerius's various military campaigns, although not in sequence (Kinch, *L'Arc du triomphe de Salonique*, p. 10-14). Cornelius Vermule reassessed these identifications in 1968, proposing that the location of the scenes was more important than their chronological order, and identifying the reliefs in the interior of the central arch and those that faced towards the east – in the direction of the imperial palace – depicted the scenes of greatest importance, but his analysis was dependent on hypotheses for the lost reliefs, and thus his identifications are largely misled (*Roman Imperial Art in Greece and Asia Minor*, p. 336-350). Margaret Pond Rothman's analysis of the thematic presentation of the reliefs remains the most authoritative to date, and guides much of the following discussion, using the meticulous numbering system identified by Hans Laubscher, which was itself based on photographs taken in the 1930s, the details of many of which are lost today.

Pier A.I. is found on the eastern face of the North pier. The reliefs are organised in descending order, beginning with a scene of a Roman cavalry charge, which is led by the figure of Galerius. His troops surge out from the gateway of a Western city, chasing a group of the Persian cavalry who appear on the right. It appears to be a scene from Galerius's final battle against Narses, which is emphasised by the scene immediately below, which depicts the capture of the Persian king's harem. Beneath this is the Roman pursuit of the Persian soldiers across the river Tigris, which is indicated by the inscription ??????? ?????? (*potamos Tigris*). The lowest of the four panels barely survives, but was tentatively identified by Laubscher and Pond Rothman as a "Parade of Animals," due to the figure leading a horse who is still visible to the left. The southern face of the North pier continues the same militaristic theme. The top panel depicts a battle, which has been identified as either the Romans fighting the Persians, or the Romans fighting the Kurds. Beneath this is a scene of submission; the figure of the emperor stands to the far left, forcing a Persian elder into submission, with groups of captives being driven in by Roman soldiers. The third scene on the southern pier is one of *Adventus*, or the arrival of the emperor, who may have been met by the personification of *Victoria*, with the same "Parade of Animals (?)" indicated in the lowest phase of the relief. The first two panels of pier A.III, on the western side of the pillar, represent a formulaic scene of *Clementia Augusti*, in which two barbarian figures are led, almost in mirror image, towards the seated figure of the emperor. Margaret Pond Rothman has interpreted this "anomalous duplication" as a deliberate glorification of both Galerius



and Diocletian, the joint “clemency” of whom is celebrated in the scenes. Beneath them are personified a number of Persian cities, whose figures are carved in two rows, and then another “Parade of Animals (?)”, indicated by the visible hoof at the left end of the relief. The same parade is all that remains on the lower two tiers of the northern face of the North pier (for more detailed discussion of the iconography, see Pond Rothman, “The Thematic Organization of the Panels on the Arch of Galerius,” p. 432-439; Kleiner, *Roman Sculpture*, p. 420-421).

The Southern pillar – B – is similarly arranged with scenes connected to Galerius’s victory against the Persians. B.I, on the eastern face, begins in the top register with a scene of *adlocutio*, or imperial address. This has been identified as Galerius praising his soldiers after the victory, but it is important to note the canonical nature of such a scene; the *adlocutio* was a staple of imperial ceremonial life, and its inclusion here should be read in terms of the iconographic tradition presented on earlier victory monuments, such as the Columns of Trajan and Marcus Aurelius, and the Arch of Septimius Severus, all of which present sequences of invasion – battle – *adlocutio* (Pond Rothman, “The Thematic Organization of the Panels on the Arch of Galerius,” p. 439). Beneath the *adlocutio* Galerius is depicted receiving a Persian delegation – likely the emissary of Narses, Apharban, who led the negotiations regarding the release of the King’s harem. The figure of Roma also appears here, flanking the supplicant Persians and leading four smaller figures behind her, who may have been the personifications of four important cities from the empire, perhaps even representing the capitals of the tetrarchs. The third band of relief is also of crucial importance, showing Galerius and Diocletian sacrificing together, although it is not clear if the scene is one of an actual sacrifice that took place before the Persian campaign, or following the conclusion of the war. This is followed in the lowest register with a parade of Persians, bearing gifts for the emperor. On the northern side of the pillar was another *Adventus*, followed by further battle scenes, this time between Galerius and Narses themselves. The third panel of the northern side contained one of the arch’s most important reliefs – that of the “Emperors Enthroned”; here Diocletian and Maximianus are depicted seated, flanked by their Caesars, Constantius I and Galerius, in a “grandiose and studied proclamation of the earthly and celestial reach of the Tetrarchs’s empire” (Pond Rothman, “The Thematic Organization of the Panels on the Arch of Galerius,” p. 444). Syria and Britain are personified here as kneeling figures, who are being raised up – in commemoration of the successful campaigns of the Tetrarchy in both provinces – by the emperors. This is witnessed by a number of gods, including Jupiter and Virtus. In the scene below, a parade of *Victoriae* stand inside an ornate arcade, embodying the indomitable success of the Tetrarch’s campaigns.

The western side of the Southern pillar, B.III, celebrates Galerius’s triumphs in the form of “pastiche of conventional symbols of victory” (Pond Rothman, “The Thematic Organization of the Panels on the Arch of Galerius,” p. 445). In the top relief Galerius is posed holding a globe, and as though awaiting the crown from the personification of *Victoria-Felicitas* who stands to his left. She is mirrored on the right by an elephant drawing in a triumphal wagon, symbolising the Eastern victory. The scene below this returns to the narrative of battle, and particularly in celebration of the *virtus* of Galerius; he is shown trampling a fallen Persian soldier on horseback. The lower two registers depict the *pompa triumphalis* – the triumphal procession – including captives and booty, and an arcade scene in which Roma sat centre stage, holding a globe to represent the *orbis terrarum*, and likely surrounded by figures of Victories, although little remains visible of them in the panel today. The southern side of the pillar, like the northern side of North pillar, again only retains two scenes in the lowermost registers, here depicting the personification of Victory in the centre, who holds a *clipeus*, or votive shield, dedicated to celebrate Galerius’s victory, beneath which is a further “Parade of Animals (?)” (for detailed discussion of this iconography, see Pond Rothman, “The Thematic Organization of the Panels on the Arch of Galerius,” p. 439-447).

The overall message of the surviving relief decoration is the power and invincibility of the Tetrarchs. The most important scenes – both in terms of historical narrative and ideological concept – decorate the interior of the central archway, and symbolically lead the viewer through the arch in the direction of the palace complex. Although many scholars have attempted to attribute an ordered chronology or sequential progress to the scenes, the interspersion of ceremonial and symbolic scenes alongside those in which particular events can be identified should not be confusing; just as on the Arch of Septimius Severus in Rome, particular moments of battle are depicted alongside scenes of triumphal imagery that is largely emblematic in terms of the iconography that they include (Pond Rothman, “The Thematic Organization of the Panels on the Arch of Galerius,” p. 449). The primary messages of the sculptural programme aimed at communicating the military *virtus* of Galerius, basing his legitimacy – and indeed that of the whole tetrarchy – on the victory won against the Persians, key moments of which were depicted in the reliefs. On a symbolic level, the ceremonial activities of Galerius are celebrated, showing both his abilities as a military leader, performing the rites of *adventus* and *adlocutio* as tradition demanded, but also highlighting his *clementia* and generosity in his negotiation of peace and his acceptance of the Persian supplicants. His *pietas* and religiosity is also emphasised in the scene of sacrifice, along with the presentation of the different gods, including Roma, who holds the globe to describe the nature of the victory; with the support of the gods Galerius has defeated the Persians, not simply for Rome, but for the *orbis terrarum* – the whole world of Rome, who will benefit from the *securitas* that his conquest brings. The scenes of the panel reliefs can, therefore, be said to be divided in “historical” scenes and “panegyric” ones, which culminate in the depiction of the “Emperors Enthroned” on the



northern face of the Southern pillar (Kleiner, *Roman Sculpture*, p. 424). Here, the emperors are presented in perfect harmony, emphasising the unity of the Tetrarchy and the *concordia* of their shared rule. By presenting the emperors – in the correct hierarchical order, with the seated Augusti flanked by their Caesars standing – it is clear that the triumph won and celebrated here is not simply that of Galerius, but one dedicated to all the emperors (Kinch, *L'Arc du Triomphe de Salonique*, p. 11). As Roger Rees has suggested, this was in keeping with other sculptural programmes from the period which sought to establish the “group identity” of the Tetrarchy, the “overriding message of [which] is that their strength lies in their unity and solidarity” (Rees, “Images and Image,” p. 183). The individual victory may have lain with Galerius and his troops, but it was utilised and promoted by all four emperors as a showcase for their imperial power and legitimacy.

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