Arch of Septimius Severus at Lepcis Magna (203-209 CE)

Arch of Septimus Severus

Reliefs from the Arch of Septimus Severus (northeastern and southwestern sides)

Reliefs from the Arch of Septimus Severus (northwestern and southeastern sides)
Name of the artist: Unknown
Patron/Sponsor: Septimius Severus
Original Location/Place: Situated at the junction of the *cardo* and *decumanus* of Lepcis Magna, Tripolitania (Libya).

Actual Location (Collection/Museum): *in loco*. Some of the reliefs have been discovered reused in other locations in the city and some may still remain buried. Those that have been recovered are displayed in the Tripoli museum.

Original Inscription/Graffito: Unknown.
Description: A *quadrifons* – four-faced – arch set at the most important crossing in the centre of Lepcis Magna. The core is of limestone, which is faced with marble panelling. The four pillars support a shallow dome, fragments of the coffering of which still remain in small places, and which was supported by brackets in the shape of eagles. A Corinthian column stands on each side of the four arches, numbering eight in total, each of which is surmounted by a broken pediment. Above the columns are friezes of acanthus leaves, with the space between the broken pediments decorated with erotes and garlands. Each face of the attic of the arch is decorated with a frieze relief, depicting variously scenes of triumph, procession, sacrifice and the *concordia* of the imperial family. Eight reliefs decorate the interior piers, whose scenes include the siege of a city, triumph and sacrifice again. The arch was discovered during the excavations at Lepcis in 1925-26, and further remains of the relief detail were discovered in fragmentary condition and reused in other buildings.

Date: 203 CE to 209 CE
Material: Limestone and marble

Commentary: The Severan arch in Lepcis Magna remains one of the most prominent and important architectural works in the Roman provinces. Its unusual *quadrifons* form – four faces – spanned the junction of the most important crossroad in the city, where the city’s main east-west transverse – the *decumanus maximus* – and north-south axial street – the *cardo* – met, and its elaborate decorative reliefs reveal the new emphasis on the frontality of figures which was to become a key feature in the evolution of classical to Late Antique art; this had already been hinted at in the depiction of Marcus Aurelius on the reliefs of his column in Rome, where his front-facing position singles him out in otherwise crowded scenes, but here the effect is even stronger, and is used to stress the authority and power of the emperor (Newby, “Art at the crossroads,” p. 207; see *Column of Marcus Aurelius* [10]). The arch stood to commemorate the success of the Severan dynasty, their military might, and the benefits they drew from the support of the gods. It was set up as part of a larger programme of building work undertaken by the emperor in his hometown, and which included the construction of a large basilica (see Severan Forum at Lepcis Magna). No inscription has survived from the arch, although it is usually conjectured to have had one, so it has not been possible to identify exactly why, or for what specific reason, the arch was constructed. Scholars generally agree that it must have been built in conjunction with the Severan’s return to Lepcis in 203 CE, although some have noted – such as Anna McCann – that the portrait types depicted in the reliefs are closer to those from slightly later in his reign, suggesting a later date of 205-209 CE, and again in conjunction with an imperial visit (McCann, *The Portraits of Septimius Severus*, p. 74-78; for Septimius Severus’s stay in Africa, see Birley, *Septimius Severus*, p. 146-154).
In the absence of an inscription, we must rely upon the relief decoration to understand the imperial message that was intended by the arch’s construction. The exterior panel on the northwestern side depicts a triumph: a *quadriga* is depicted in profile, carrying Septimius Severus, Caracalla and Geta; the emperor is presented frontally, gazing out towards the city, in a deliberate assertion of his superiority (Newby, “Arch at the crossroads,” p. 207). Both boys have lost their heads, with Geta’s presumably removed deliberately following his *damnatio memoriae* in 211 CE (see Varner, *Mutilation and Transformation*, p. 178-181). The scene moves from right to left with two
Parthian captives at its head, and more following behind with spoils. Unlike other scenes of triumph, such as that on the Arch of Titus, the figures are not accompanied by a crowning Victory, but smaller figures of Victory decorate the chariot itself, in a traditional composition that juxtaposed “active narrative events and static emblematic ones in the same relief,” which allowed the scene to present “a synoptic image of imperial might and dynastic continuity simultaneously” (Kleiner, Roman Sculpture, p. 342; Arch of Titus, Reliefs [11]). As Zahra Newby has further noted, there are a number of contradictory details which complicate our understanding of this triumph as a real or imagined event; although the presentation of the Parthians and the proposed date of 203 CE – when an arch was also dedicated to Septimius Severus in the city of Rome, following his successful conclusion of the Parthian War – would appear to suggest that this scene commemorated events in the capital city, a lighthouse is visible in the background of the scene, possibly that of the harbour of Lepcis herself, which was also constructed in the Severan period. The patron gods of Lepcis – Hercules and Liber Pater – are also represented next to the Victory figures on the chariot, and so the panel may have intended not only to recall Severus’s military victory, but to emphasise his connection with Lepcis Magna and the reflected glory that his victory brought to the city (Newby, “Art at the crossroads,” p. 207-208).

The south-eastern relief panel survives in a very fragmented condition, but appears to have depicted a continuation of triumphal imagery, this time including the emperor's wife, Julia Domna, alongside figures of possibly Hercules and Roma or Virtus, as well as men on horseback and captive women on litters (Strocka, “Beobachtungen an den Attikareliefs”, p. 165-167). The third panel, on the north-eastern side of the arch, shows a scene of sacrifice; the imperial family gathers with other figures – presumably dignitaries – to witness the sacrifice of two oxen. Although now lost, the centre of the relief is believed to have depicted the figure of Roma or Virtus, with Julia Domna and Caracalla to the left and Septimius Severus and Geta to the right (see Kleiner’s description, Roman Sculpture, p. 343; Newby, “Art at the crossroads,” p. 209). The family group appears again in the final relief, from the south-western side, in a scene of Concordia Augustorum; Septimius Severus shakes hands with his co-emperor son Caracalla, as Geta stands between them, with Julia Domna again standing to the side watching the scene with the gods present in the earlier reliefs, Hercules, Liber Pater, Roma/Virtus and possibly Tyché of the city of Lepcis. The message here is clear; as Diana Kleiner has rightly noted, it is one of concord between the emperor and his sons with the gods of both the empire and Lepcis specifically, all of whom appear in support of the dynasty that is presented in the figures of Caracalla and Geta (Kleiner, Roman Sculpture, p. 343).

The eight panels of interior relief, which adorned the piers of the arch, were also decorated with scenes that corresponded to those on the attic and which combine with them to suggest a combined ideological statements about the Severan rule of Rome. The imperial family again appear watching a sacrifice in the north-eastern inner relief, indicating the strength of their pietas. The message of the north-western side was clearly that of virtus, with the inner relief responding to the attic panel’s triumphal scene with one of military victory; the reliefs are badly damaged and it is hard to note the precise detail, but their military prowess appears to be indicated through scenes of warfare, and possibly the siege of a town (Newby, “Art at the crossroads,” p. 211; Ward-Perkins, “The Arch of Septimius Severus,” p. 229). The interior reliefs of the southern side of the arch are harder to identify with the same specificity, although it can be assumed that the message of Concordia intimates by the attic of the imperial family on the south-western side was repeated in the inner reliefs, which may have included some of the fragments that have been excavated depicting Severus and Julia Domna with the attributes of Jupiter and Juno, and possibly the third member of the Capitoline Triad, Minerva (Bartocci, “L’Arco quadrifronte dei Severi a Lepcis,” p. 80). The final message of the south-eastern side may have corresponded to another of the established imperial virtues, such as felicitas, or even securitas.

The quadrifrons arch constructed in the centre of Lepcis Magna was evidently intended to glorify the emperor, and by extension to enhance the reputation of the city in which he was born. Although we cannot be certain of the specific reason for which the arch was dedicated, it is possible that it was set up in conjunction with the city’s promotion to a colony with Italian Rights (colonia iuris italic), or simply to honour Severan victories across the empire as an expression of loyalty, particularly after his pacification of the bloody-fighting in the east (Bandinelli, The Buried City, p. 69). The overall message of the arch, though, was one of the stability and success of the imperial family; the triumphal arch in Rome commemorated Severus’s victory in Parthia, but the arch in Lepcis considered the prosperous aftermath of that victory, and the successful establishment of a dynasty, as indicated through the presence of the imperial family and particularly the reliefs in which the emperor appears shaking hands with his son and heir (Newby, “Art at the crossroads”, p. 211). The inclusion of the gods indicated that they too approved of his plans, again emphasising the concordia of his reign. It was a “complex, living design,” which took into account the actual spectators on the ground, the presence of the gods, and the centrality of the emperor as the focus of all attention, both in Lepcis and beyond (Bandinelli, The Buried City, p. 69). The particular inclusion of the gods of Lepcis stressed the city’s connection with the imperial family, with their equal presentation alongside the gods of Rome indicative of the “growing awareness that cities had of their place within the empire” (Newby, “Art at the crossroads”, p. 211).
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