

# Roman Imperial Triumphal Arches

SARAH MIDFORD

**T**riumphal arches were permanent monuments constructed to commemorate an ephemeral Roman triumphal procession. Arches were erected in Rome during the republican period, although because they were predominately made from wood, none have survived. During the imperial period arches were constructed from more durable materials including concrete and marble. The Roman triumphal arches still standing today were constructed between the first and fourth centuries CE. Each one conveys an imperialistic sentiment, although, the reason for their construction was not consistently military victory, as one might presume.

The location, sculptural program and architectural execution of each Roman triumphal arch was designed to convey the power and glory of the emperor. This article compiles information about the size, location, sculptural design and technique, architectural execution, dedication and state of preservation for five triumphal arches in Rome and the provinces: the Arch of Tiberius at Orange; the Arch of Titus at Rome; the Arch of Trajan at Benevento; the Arch of Septimius Severus at Rome; and the Arch of Constantine at Rome. In order to understand why triumphal arches were constructed in ancient Rome it is important to start with an understanding of the triumphal procession itself.

## The Triumphal Procession

The triumph was a ritual ceremonial procession awarded to Roman military commanders by the Senate. It was a traditional institution that developed into a display of imperial splendour and might from 4th century BCE onwards. The triumph had originally been a procession of broken weapons to demonstrate the defeat of Rome's enemy. According to Florus, before Marcus Curius Dentatus's triumph over Pyrrhus and the Tarentines in 275 BCE, triumphs were less spectacular: '[u]p to that time the only spoils

which you could have seen were the cattle of the Volcinians, the flocks of the Sabines, the wagons of the Gauls, the broken arms of the Samnites' (Florus, 1.13.26). After the victory over Pyrrhus, triumphal processions are said to have contained 'Molossians, Thessalonians, Macedonians, Bruttians, Apulians and Lucanians... statues of gold and charming Tarentine painted panels' (Florus, 1.13.27). As time went on and Rome conquered more lands, spoils of war including arms, money, precious metals and jewels, statuary and paintings, trees, people, and kings were brought to Rome. Triumphal processions were expressions of Roman military prowess and glory, and the more glorious the spoils the more powerful and glorious Rome appeared to be. This projection of power and glory was extended to the triumphing general (the *triumphator*)

According to Livy '[T]here was no higher distinction among the Romans than a triumph' (Livy, 30.15) and this was because, during the republican period, the triumph provided the only chance for an individual in Rome to have his deeds publically celebrated, and triumphs were not awarded lightly. In order to be awarded a triumph a Roman military commander must have accomplished *all* of the following:

- Held a magistracy with *imperium* (meaning he had been elected dictator, consul, pro-consul, *praetor* or *pro-praetor*)
- Defeated a foreign enemy of equal status by killing at least 5,000 enemy troops (slaves in slave revolts were not considered a suitable foreign enemy)
- Be declared *imperator* by his soldiers
- Have safely returned his army to Rome (this meant that the war had to be completely finished)
- Gained senatorial approval for a triumphal procession based on above criteria

Because of the difficulties satisfying each criterion, and then proving that they all had been met, the award of a triumph was an extremely rare and prestigious honour.<sup>1</sup> Before the Punic Wars, triumphs were rarely held more often than once every year. However, as Roman expansion progressed, more and more triumphal processions were granted, with thirty-five triumphs awarded between 200 and 170 BCE.<sup>2</sup>

During the republican period there was only a small proportion of the elite who could attain the higher levels of magistracy, and normally one could only expect to be elected consul once. This meant that, in order to be a *triumphator* one had to survive ten years of military service; be wealthy enough to be enrolled in the Senate;<sup>3</sup> be elected to every office on the *Cursus Honorum* (Fig. 1) until reaching at least the magistracy of *praetor*;<sup>4</sup> then, be sent to a province with the potential for a convincingly successful war; and, finally, after having achieved all this, persuade the Senate to grant a triumphal procession. The Senate had the final say over whether the criteria were met and personal rivalries between politicians could affect a general's petition to the

Senate for triumph.

The difficulty of attaining a triumph added to the prestige and the glory it bestowed upon the general who received the honour. The triumphal procession was a vehicle that could demonstrate the complete and well-rounded success of someone who possessed supreme virtue. It showcased the general's political, oratorical and military abilities as well as the divine favour and spectacular wealth brought to Rome.<sup>5</sup> During the republican period, military achievement was the key to political success, and the triumph allowed this achievement to be acted out for the viewing pleasure of the Roman people. The *triumphator* represented Roman imperial success and showcased the glory of Rome, while also promoting the *triumphator's* personal *virtus* and *felicitas*.

As well as the triumphal procession, the *triumphator* was awarded special rights and privileges. The *triumphator* was entitled to spend his *manubiae* (spoils) as he wished. This, more often than not, meant that the spoils were split between the state, the army, the *triumphator's* generals and himself as he saw fit. Triumphal spoils were primarily payment to Jupiter Optimus Maximus for his fulfillment of the initial vow taken before the general's embarkation for war to protect Rome. As well as payment, the display of wealth also demonstrated the lucrative nature of war and acted as an assurance to the people of Rome that the war had been undertaken for the benefit of the commonwealth (Livy, 45.39). Great wealth also demonstrated that the defeated enemy was mighty and that, despite their assets and cultural prestige, Rome was the more formidable opponent.

After making payment to Jupiter, the *triumphator* could choose to use his share of the booty to patronise triumphal *ludi* (games) and it was traditional to nail the spoils of his choice to the threshold of his house. These and other honours were displayed in front of the *triumphator's* home for the duration of its existence, even if

1 Bailey (1986), 258.

2 Richardson (1975), 53.

3 Polyb., 6.19.5; traditionally, and until the early first century, the senate was a body of around 300 men, but during Sulla's dictatorship the numbers were increased to between 500 and 600, including 300 *equites* (App., *Civ.*, 1.11.100; Cic., *Att.*, 1.14.5; Scullard (1982), 5; Gabba (1951), 267–9). In 45 BCE the senate had 900 members, after Caesar rewarded his supporters with admission (Dio, 43.47.2; Suet., *Iul.*, 41.1).

4 The *cursus honorum* was fixed by the *Lex Villia annalis* in 180 BCE, which made it impossible to celebrate a triumph until one was at least 37 years. It was essential for a *triumphator* to possess *imperium* so that only consuls and praetors could celebrate a triumph. The instance of praetors celebrating triumphs was rare in the early republic, but, as time progressed, the numbers greatly increased (Richardson (1975), 50–63). This led to the introduction of triumphal restrictions and the unanswerable question: which came first, ambitious men or the *cursus honorum*? Despite the existence of the *cursus honorum* Cn. Pompeius Magnus managed to celebrate a triumph for his victories in Africa (Plin., *HN*, 7.26.95–6; Plut., *Pomp.*, 14.1–3; Val. Max., 8.15.8).

5 Plattus (1983), 99.

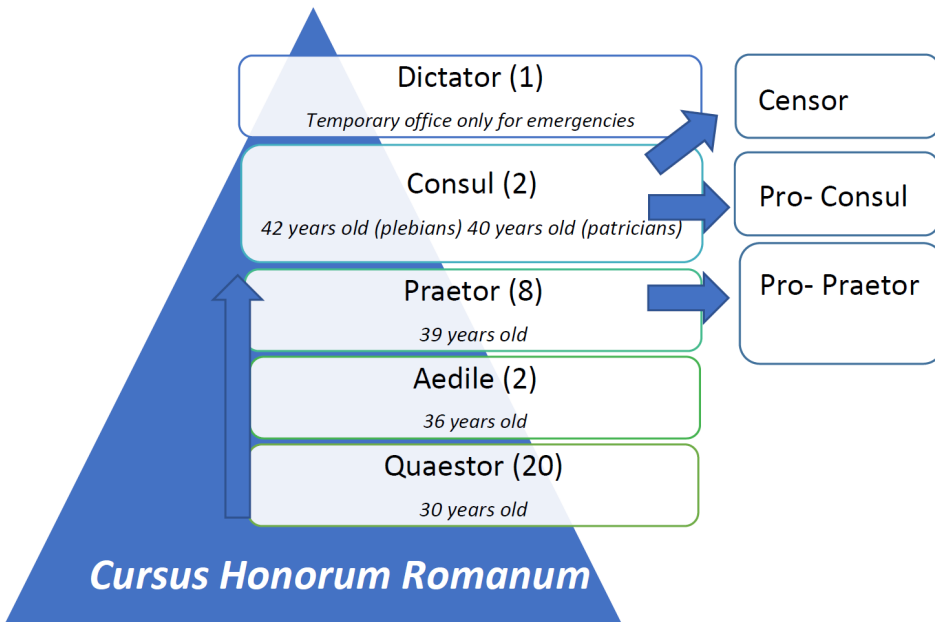


Fig. 1 Cursus Honorum. Diagram: Sarah Midford

the family moved or the *triumphator* died. The *triumphator* could also construct a monument somewhere in Rome if he obtained senatorial approval.

Victory monuments including temples, shrines, arches and civic monuments, were commonly erected along, or in view of, the triumphal route.<sup>6</sup> Placing monuments on the triumphal route implied the continuity of the *triumphator's* achievement by reminding its beholder of the military victory as well as its dedicator, while recalling the spectacle of the procession. Triumphal monuments often incorporated new styles brought from the conquered lands. This meant that monuments visually recalled specific military campaigns and conquests.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> During the Punic Wars eighteen of the thirty temples dedicated were constructed on the triumphal route, Beacham (1999), 40; Patterson (2000), 34.

<sup>7</sup> On the linguistic dissection of *monumenta* see Jaeger (1997), 15; Gowing (2005, 11) defines *monumenta* as components of Roman *historia*, which included histories, poetry and inscriptions; for the positioning of monuments to create a sense of

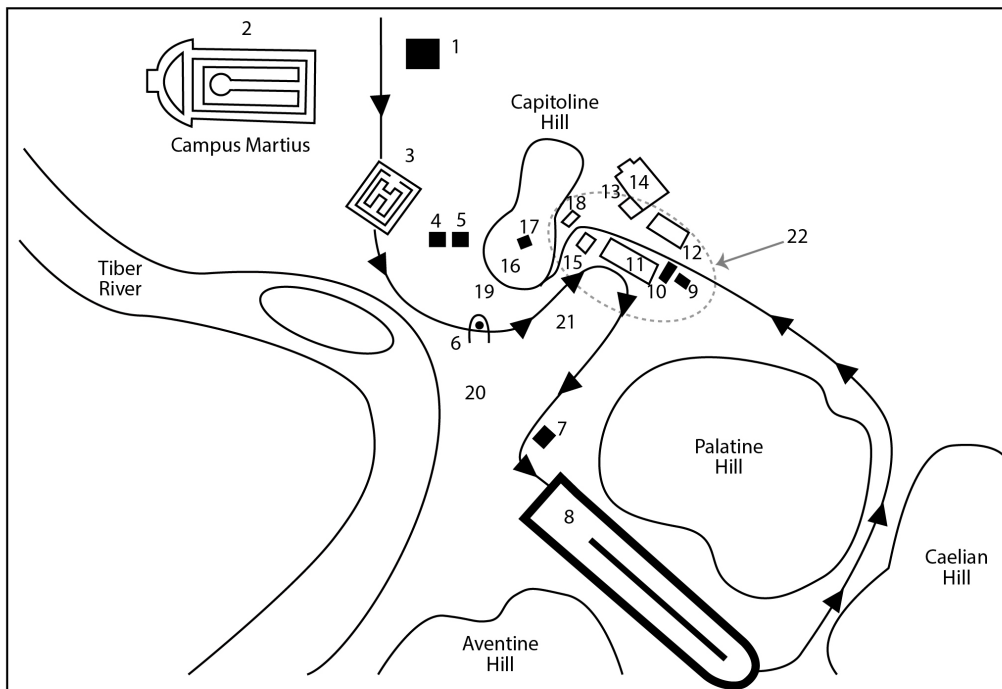
The ritualistic nature of the procession meant that the order of each was the same (at least during the republican period). Every procession was led by the Senate and other Roman magistrates, musicians would follow ahead of the triumphal spoils and the animals for sacrifice upon the altar of Jupiter Optimus Maximus. Prisoners of war were paraded in front of the *triumphator's* bodyguards and the triumphant army. If a commander or any royals of the defeated people had been captured, they would feature just before the triumphant general himself, who would ride on a *quadriga* pulled by four horses. Behind him would stand a slave holding a wreath above the *triumphator's* head whispering the words: *respice post te! hominem te memento!* (Look behind you [ie. to the future]; remember you are a man).<sup>8</sup>

continuity see Favro (1996), 82.

<sup>8</sup> Although the slave is obliquely referred to in other sources, Tertullian is the only source that alludes to the immortality of the *triumphator*, Tert., *Apol.*, 33.4. For an in-depth discussion of the existence and importance of the slave see Beard (2007), 85–92.

One aspect of the ritual that could be slightly altered was the route the procession took through the streets of Rome. This was in part due to the ever-changing Roman cityscape. As new buildings and monuments were constructed, old routes would have been blocked, making following earlier processional paths impossible. The result was that no triumphal procession ever followed the same route. Individual *triumphatores* visited particular altars and temples associated with their families so that their achievements could be celebrated with their ancestors.

The approximate triumphal route (Fig. 2) followed the ancient *pomerium*, which traversed the valleys between Rome's seven hills. During the Roman republic, the procession started at the *Villa Publica* on the *Campus Martius* and passed through the *Circus Flaminius*, where the spoils were displayed before the procession. The parade crossed the *pomerium* into the *Forum Holitorium*, either through the *Porta Carmentalis* or the fabled *Porta Triumphalis*. The route did not cross straight to the *Forum Boarium* but followed an ancient path, along the *Vicus Iugarius* to the statue of Vortumnus in the *Forum Romanum*. This



- |                      |                                       |                      |
|----------------------|---------------------------------------|----------------------|
| 1. Villa Publica     | 10. Temple of Castor                  | 19. Circus Flaminius |
| 2. Theatre of Pompey | 11. Basilica Iulia                    | 20. Forum Boarium    |
| 3. Porticus Octaviae | 12. Basilica Aemilia                  | 21. Velabrum         |
| 4. Temple of Apollo  | 13. Curia Iulia                       | 22. Forum Romanum    |
| 5. Temple of Bellona | 14. Forum Iulium                      |                      |
| 6. Porta Carmentalis | 15. Temple of Saturn                  |                      |
| 7. Altar of Hercules | 16. Area Capitolina                   |                      |
| 8. Circus Maximus    | 17. Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus |                      |
| 9. Regia             | 18. Temple of Concord                 |                      |

Fig. 2 Map: Sarah Midford and John Howell

allowed the procession to avoid the *Velabrum*, which was once a swamp and was always liable to flooding. From there it turned to the *Vicus Tuscus*, passing the *Ara Maxima Herculis* and the temple of Hercules Victor on its way to the *Forum Boarium*. The procession probably entered the *Circus Maximus* through its central arch and ran the length of the stadium, perhaps circling the *spina* before exiting. It then followed the valley between the Palatine Hill and the Caelian Hill, around the Palatine - this was part of Rome's first boundary ploughed by Rome's mythical founder Romulus.<sup>9</sup> The procession then followed the *Sacra Via* through the *Forum Romanum*, pausing at the *carcer* to offload prisoners for execution, and then climbed the *Clivus Capitolinus* on its way to its final destination, the temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus in the *Area Capitolina*.

During the imperial period, triumphal processions ceased to be competitive honours earned by ambitious Roman generals and became the exclusive right of the emperor and the imperial family. As the Senate became less involved in the award of triumphal processions the honours associated with the triumph, including the construction of triumphal arches, became more ostentatious. Another consequence was the movement away from the erection of triumphal arches commemorating purely military achievements to the celebration of civic and religious events.

## Triumphal Arches

Triumphal arches were first erected in Rome in about the second century BCE. They were usually rectangular constructions made up of a single, or, possibly, multiple arches topped with an attic, which acted as a platform for the statuary that would sit on top of the whole monument. Arches spanned roadways so they could be passed through, and also sometimes connected buildings. Over the course of the Roman era more than fifty triumphal arches were erected in the capital, with a further fifty

known to have been erected on the Italian peninsula, another thirty-six in Gaul and one hundred and eighteen in Africa.<sup>10</sup> Now, only a handful of arches remain standing throughout the Roman Empire.

The *Porta Triumphalis* was the gate through which all triumphs passed into Rome. There is uncertainty around whether the *Porta Triumphalis* was a separate gate that was closed off throughout the year, or whether another gate was transformed into the *Porta Triumphalis* for the duration of the triumphal procession. Triumphal arches may have been conceived as a monumental emulation of this sacred gate, to be used and admired throughout the year as a free-standing gateway. It was not until the third century CE that honorific arches became collectively known as *arcus triumphales*. Before this each individual arch was more strongly connected to the dedicator and the event commemorated by its erection.<sup>11</sup>

Those arches that remain largely depict imperialistic scenes including captive prisoners, triumphal spoils and the arch's dedicator winning victory, celebrating conquest, or performing civic and/or religious rituals and duties. These sculptural programs can be read to reveal the reasons behind an arch's construction and give us an insight into imperial machinations at the time of construction, as well as any messages an emperor hoped to send to those who viewed the monument.

## Arch of Tiberius, Orange

Dimensions: 9.57m wide, 8.40m deep, 19.21m high

The Arch of Tiberius (Fig. 3) is a very early monumental arch located in the town of Orange in southern France. The arch may have once featured an inscription to Tiberius, although the absence of the original bronze lettering has meant that there is conjecture

<sup>9</sup> Ov., *Fast.*, 4.819, 825-26; Plut., *Rom.*, 11.2-3.

<sup>10</sup> Claridge (1998), 53; 'Triumphal Arch' in Homblower and Spawforth (2003), 1554.

<sup>11</sup> Beard (2007), 45-6.





Fig. 3 Arch of Tiberius, Orange. Photograph Taken by Andim (CC BY-SA 3.0)

over what the inscription originally said as well as the date of the arch's construction.<sup>12</sup> It is thought that the arch was erected in c. 25 BCE to commemorate Roman victory over the Gauls and serve as the town's northern gateway. The arch was reconstructed in the 1820s after being incorporated into the medieval city walls. Its east end is better preserved than the west, and the north face is the best-preserved surface.

The Arch of Tiberius is the first known triple fornic construction (i.e. with three openings).<sup>13</sup> It is decorated with engaged columns, scrolled vegetation and figurative sculptural relief. No other arch in the empire at this time was so thoroughly covered in relief sculpture and

its decoration has few Roman parallels until the second century CE.<sup>14</sup> Constructed using unmortared limestone blocks, the arch features semi-engaged, fluted, Corinthian columns and honeycomb patterned vaults. Originally it would have supported a statuary group, and drilled holes in the spandrels of the central fornic imply that bronze Victories would have originally filled these spaces. An unusual feature of the arch is its two level attic, which adds height but also makes the fornic appear disproportionately small when the arch is viewed as a whole. The lower attic features symbols of naval conquest, including ships' prows, which are sometimes associated with Augustus' victory at the Battle of Actium.<sup>15</sup> There are figures of

12 Anderson (2012), 87–9.

13 Sear (1982), 216.

14 Anderson (2012), 83.

15 Mierse (1990), 321.

Romans and Gauls fighting each other on the upper attic of the arch and it is interesting to note that the 'civilised' Romans are clothed, whereas the 'barbarian' Gauls are unclothed. Over the outer arches there are depictions of captured arms, including spears, shields and cuirasses. The panels feature another depiction of Rome's imperial dominance in the shape of captives below spoils and trophies, at the feet of the victors.

The most striking difference between this and earlier triumphal arches is that it is not in Rome and it is therefore not associated with either a triumphal route or a triumphal procession. The arch is located on the *Via Agrippa*, along a trade route between Lyon and Arles, on the border of Gaul and *Provincia Romana*. It marks a boundary between civilization and barbarism and is an early symbol of Rome's imperial power over the land and sea.



Fig. 4 Arch of Titus, Rome. Photograph taken by Jean-Christophe Benoist (CC BY-SA 3.0)



## Arch of Titus, Rome

Dimensions: 13.5m wide, 4.75m deep, 15.4m high

The Arch of Titus (Fig. 4) is a single fornx arch located on the *Sacra Via* in Rome, directly on the triumphal route. An inscription on the eastern face states: ‘The Senate and People of Rome, to Divus Titus, son of Divus Vespasian, Vespasian Augustus’. This indicates that Titus’ brother, Domitian, who succeeded him as emperor, dedicated the arch after Titus’ death in 81 CE. The arch commemorated Titus’ capture of Jerusalem in 70 CE and the subsequent triumphal procession held jointly by Titus and his father Vespasian in 71 CE.

This procession is a feature of the arch’s relief sculpture. The direction of the relief sculpture follows that of the actual triumphal procession, which would have come from the Colosseum (also a Flavian monument, begun by Vespasian and opened by Titus) and passed through the location of the arch as it headed toward the Capitoline Hill. This arch is the first monument to combine historical, divine and allegorical figures on the same relief panel, a practice that would become increasingly common later in the

imperial period. Inside the arch on the northern side there is a depiction of Titus in his *quadriga* as *triumphator* (Fig. 5). The personified deity Roma leads a horse and, in place of the usual slave, Victory stands behind the triumphant emperor holding a wreath above his head.

On the southern frieze of the inner arch the spoils of King Soloman from the sack of the Great Temple at Jerusalem are depicted being paraded through Rome on their way to be deposited in Vespasian’s Temple of Peace (Fig. 6). These scenes preserve the memory of the triumphal procession, recalling the day itself. Details of the procession including informative placards including images and names of the conquered cities and peoples are visible in the background and may depict those actually marched through Rome on the day of triumph. The frieze includes a figure that has been interpreted as the River Jordan. Personifications of the Roman people (a partially nude figure) and the Senate (a toga-clad figure) are also evident. In the central arch, Titus is carried heavenwards by Jupiter’s eagle (Fig. 7). This representation of the emperor’s apotheosis reinforced the divine ancestry of the current emperor, Domitian.



Fig 5. Detail, Arch of Titus: Titus as *triumphator* in *quadriga*. Photograph taken by sailko CC BY-SA 3.0)





Fig 6. Detail, Arch of Titus: Spoils of the temple of Solomon. Photograph taken by Sodabottle (CC BY-SA 3.0)



Fig. 7 Detail, Titus' Arch: Apotheosis of Titus. Photograph taken by Sarah Midford

The depth of the relief sculpture on this monument is notable. Those figures in the foreground stand out dramatically against the shallow carvings of background figures. Originally constructed using Pentelic marble the monument was restored using travertine after being used as part of a medieval wall that saw conflict in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.<sup>16</sup> Some external reliefs were removed during the medieval period and reused in other buildings and holes in those reliefs still attached to the arch are the product of its incorporation into the medieval Frangipani fortress.<sup>17</sup> The arch features engaged columns with fluted shafts and an early use of composite capitals. The spandrels are home to winged victories holding wreaths, who rest their feet on globes, and the keystones display representations of *virtus* and *honor*.<sup>18</sup>

### Arch of Trajan, Benevento

Dimensions: 8.6m wide, 15.6m high

The Arch of Trajan is a single fornix archway

<sup>16</sup> Claridge (1998), 118.

<sup>17</sup> Ramage and Ramage (2000), 163.

<sup>18</sup> 'Arcus Titi' in Richardson (1992), 30.

dedicated in 114 CE (fig. 8). Construction of the arch started during Trajan's reign but was completed by Hadrian after his death. The arch is located where the *Via Appia* had been extended into the *Via Traiana*, a road to Brundisium constructed by Trajan, and functions as a gateway to the east.<sup>19</sup> One sculptural relief depicts a sacrifice and could represent the *Via Traiana's* dedication.

This arch is not dedicated to Trajan's military victories (although he was a successful military figure) but, rather, to the civic act of road

building. The reliefs, therefore, are civic rather than militarily focused. Trajan's benevolence is depicted in a scene where he gives financial support to the poor children of Benevento (*alimenta*). Also featured in this panel are the people of Benevento and a female personification of the city. An imperial procession is depicted on another panel, part of which is an illustration of Trajan passing under an arch. Numerous divinities are depicted on the arch including the Capitoline Triad (Jupiter, Juno and Minerva), as well as Hercules, Bacchus, Ceres and Mercury.



Fig. 8 Arch of Trajan, Benevento. Photograph taken by Tiia Monto (CC BY-SA 3.0)

<sup>19</sup> On Trajan's Arch see Ramage and Ramage (2000), 200–2.

The panels included on the attic include images of Trajan's successor Hadrian who completed the arch after the emperor's death. A female personification of Mesopotamia bending in submission before Trajan and Hadrian, depicted as a young man in the background, represents Trajan's Parthian conquest. Personifications of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers feature in the lower portion of the panel and refer to the borders of the conquered territory. The tranquility of this scene ignores the revolts which later occurred in the province and which eventually led to Hadrian abandoning it. Each spandrel includes a personification of a season to symbolize the prosperity of the emperor's reign throughout the year. Victories fill the remainder of two spandrels on one side of the arch and on the other side a river god and a water nymph are featured. Below the attic is a plebeian style frieze that depicts short, stout figures with thick heads. This is almost certainly executed by different craftsmen to those who carved the larger panels.

The limestone arch with Parian marble facing is covered with fourteen sculptural panels that depict the emperor twelve times. The relief sculptures generally follow traditional first century CE styles and can be compared with those on the Arch of Titus in Rome. One difference is the tendency on this arch to depict the emperor on a larger scale than figures around him. This reflects the political shift in the emperor's position from *princeps* to *dominus* as the imperial office became more established.<sup>20</sup>

### Arch of Septimius Severus, Rome

Dimensions: 25m wide, 11.35m deep, 23m high

This very large and well-preserved triple fornix arch was constructed next to the *Rostra* in the *Forum Romanum* at the north-west end of the *Sacra Via*, on the triumphal route (fig. 9). The arch was positioned in such a way that it cut

off the Senate house (*curia*) from the Forum.<sup>21</sup> The arch was variously used over the centuries as a fortress and a shop, both of which have resulted in damage to the relief sculpture.<sup>22</sup> An inscription once decorated with bronze trophies and garlands reveals that the arch was dedicated in 203 CE to Septimius Severus, Caracalla and Geta in honour of conquests in the East (Parthia 194/5 and 197-99CE). It states that the emperor and his sons 'restored the Republic and expanded the dominion of the Roman people'. Geta's name was removed after the arch's completion and replaced with further praise for Septimius Severus and Caracalla.

The arch was faced with Proconnesian marble and features eight freestanding composite columns, also made from Proconnesian marble. The core of the arch and the hollow attic is made from Travertine marble. After it was built gilded bronze statues were positioned on top of the arch around a central group depicting the emperor and his two sons riding in a triumphal chariot drawn by six horses. Victories fill the spandrels of the central fornix and personifications of river gods fill the spandrels of the outer fornices. Below these, the four seasons are personified as young boys to represent the year-round prosperity brought by those who had dedicated the arch.

The arch features four panels above each outer fornix that work together to compose a continuous narrative of the Parthian campaign that reads from left to right, top to bottom. The first panel depicts preparation for war, battle scenes between the Romans and the Parthians, and the emperor and his troops. The second panel features scenes from the war with Osroeni, the emperor leading his troops, the surrender of King Abgar and the Roman attack on the city of Edessa with war machines. The third panel depicts the emperor's victorious entry into city of Seleucia and fleeing Parthians, and the fourth

<sup>21</sup> Stambaugh (1988), 81.

<sup>22</sup> On the Arch of Septimius Severus see Claridge (1998), 75-6.

<sup>20</sup> Strong and Toynbee (1995), 153.





Fig. 9 Arch of Septimius Severus, Rome. Photograph taken by Alexander Z (CC BY-SA 3.0)

the victorious emperor addressing his troops and the attack on Ctesiphon, the Parthian capital city, with war machines.

These reliefs were true to contemporary sculptural style. Figures are static and stylistic in comparison with earlier classical reliefs. They look to the Arch of Titus for stylistic rendering but the later execution meant that the softer and more fluid lines found on the earlier arch fail to be faithfully replicated.

### The Arch of Constantine, Rome

Dimensions: 25.7m wide, 7.4m deep, 21m high

The Arch of Constantine was erected by the Senate and dedicated on 25 July 315 CE to honour Constantine's victory over Maxentius

who had co-ruled with Constantine between 306 and 312 CE before being ousted as a tyrant (fig. 10). The arch was also dedicated to the emperor's *decennalia*, which celebrated the tenth anniversary of his rule. It was constructed along the triumphal route, actually spanning it, between the Caelian and Palatine Hills and the *Circus Maximus* and the *Forum Romanum*.

The arch is the largest remaining Roman triumphal arch. Closely approximating the architectural design of the Arch of Septimius Severus, Constantine's arch used marble relief sculpture from numerous earlier monuments. The multi-period sculptural program included Hadrianic, Trajanic and Aurelian relief sculpture but the heads of earlier emperors were modified into Constantine's image.



Although most of the arch was constructed using recycled Proconnesian marble, its jigsaw-like nature means that it features various marble types. These include various grey and white marbles and four fluted Numidian yellow marble Corinthian columns that were taken from a Flavian building to feature on each face of the arch. One of these columns was removed in the late sixteenth century by Pope Clement VIII to fashion a yellow door but was replaced with the purple Phrygian marble column still visible today.<sup>23</sup>

The southern reliefs depict a re-cut image of Constantine at war and the northern reliefs feature scenes of civic duties. It is understood

that these reliefs originally depicted Marcus Aurelius' triumph of 176 CE. The attic features an inscription, which translates as follows:

**To the Emperor Flavius Constantine,  
the Great,  
pious and fortunate, the Senate and  
People of Rome,  
because by divine inspiration and his  
own great spirit  
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.**



Fig. 10 Arch of Constantine, Rome. Photograph taken by Alexander Z. (CC BY-SA 3.0)

<sup>23</sup> On the Arch of Constantine see Claridge (1998), 273–5.

Statues of Dacian prisoners taken from a Trajanic monument are placed on plinths around the dedicatory inscription. The pedestal bases upon which the statues of the Dacian prisoners sit are made of Carystian green marble. Between the statues on either side of the inscription are eight Italian luna marble panel reliefs.

Inside the arch a continuous relief panel depicts Constantine going into battle on horseback. The relief, known as the Great Trajanic Frieze, is made of white Pentelic marble and the figure of the emperor was recut to depict Constantine. It is not certain whether the original emperor depicted was Trajan or Domitian, although the fact that Domitian suffered *damnatio memoriae* means that depictions of him would have been readily available for reuse. On the opposite relief Constantine's image is recut into a scene where he stands to be crowned by Victory while personifications of Honour and Virtue look on. Victories also feature on the pedestal bases of the arch and in the spandrels of the central archway. The river gods reclining in the spandrels of the outer fornices recall those on the Arch of Septimius Severus, although the stylistic execution is more static and less fluid than the earlier sculptures.

The eight circular carvings positioned above the smaller arches on each side of the monument are known as the Hadrianic roundels. A purple-red porphyry veneer serves as a background to the white Italian luna marble roundels. The roundels depict hunting and sacrificial scenes. Some of the heads on the roundels have been recut, but only the sacrificial scene depicts Constantine. It is not certain that these roundels are Hadrianic. They exhibit early to mid second century sculptural style and Hadrian's beloved companion Antinous appears to feature in the background of one of the roundels. However their identification is difficult because some of the reliefs are unfinished. Two further roundels, located on the short sides of the arch, were carved during Constantine's reign and feature Sol and Luna driving chariots. The two roundels work together to convey the eternal nature of the Roman city and their inclusion on

this triumphal arch links Constantine to Rome's ongoing prosperity.

The arch also features contemporary relief sculpture telling the story of Constantine's military pursuits and official actions in Rome. A frieze depicts the emperor setting off for war, the Battle of the Milvian Bridge and his triumphant return to Rome, including the distribution of spoils. One panel depicts an *oratio*, a speech to the people of Rome from the *Rostra*. The arch of Septimius Severus is depicted here, as is the now destroyed Arch of Tiberius. The other panel depicts a *donatio*, the bestowal of a monetary gift to the people of Rome. The surrounding figures turn toward the central depiction of Constantine who is carved to be larger than the other figures. The composition and execution of these panels recalls relief sculpture found on contemporary sarcophagi. The head of each figure is more carefully carved than the heavy-set bodies clad in static, linear drapery.

### The Legacy of the Triumphal Arch

Roman imperial triumphal arches projected the empire's might as well as the good fortunes of the emperors who constructed them. Republican tradition meant that the arches themselves were closely associated with the achievements of an individual and during the imperial period emperors used arches to impart information about their military and civil achievements. The arches erected in Rome were arguably designed to establish the emperor's power to the Roman people, but those erected on crossroads and provincial boarders were more likely aimed at foreigners and passers-by.

The symbolism of the triumphal arch has endured into the modern world. However, their traditional purpose as monuments to military victory has been replaced with the use of the structure to commemorate war dead. The Parisian Arc de Triomphe (1836) dedicated to those who fell in the Napoleonic Wars and during the French Revolution represents both victory and mourning. However, the Menin Gate (1927) in Ypres, which commemorates

almost 55,000 World War I Allied soldiers who died nearby, is not at all triumphal in nature. This shift in function follows that of Roman triumphal arches from simple wooden archways strongly associated with the triumphal procession to elaborately decorated assertions of an emperor's power and glory during the imperial period. All triumphal arches are monumental symbols of the consequences of war that reflect the values of the society for which they were constructed. Either as an expression of imperial might or of loss and grief, triumphal arches are long-lasting monuments designed to deliver their message to all who encounter them over the centuries they endure.

 Sarah Midford  
La Trobe University  
s.midford@latrobe.edu.au

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