

## Arch of Constantine in Rome

Rome's first "Christian" Emperor and his famous Arch are two of the most endearing monuments in viewing the Church's ultimate triumph over Paganism, but the question remains as to how much he either was really Christian or just politically doing what had become necessary? We'll never really know beyond the evidence we have, such as that left for us on his arch here in Rome and how it fits right in with the changing aspects of Rome's religious climate.

Rome generally had kind of a "more God's the merrier" kind of approach to religion, which was the practical underpinning of the state and exceedingly mixed up with political happenings. For example there was none of the later medieval confusion between church and state, for the Emperors were themselves the High Priests. Yet, although the Romans could look around and see all of the fabulous basilicas and temples that they had the Gods to thank for as proof of their truth, yet they seemed to be failing people by the mid 200's.

Constantine came at the tail end of arguably one of the worst periods of Roman history, from 235-285, when the empire had a total of 22 different emperors, which doesn't exactly say much for stability. While the Golden Age (90-180) have may have been great for the elite, it was never good for the slaves, and when the economy took a nose dive in the mid 200's, things weren't that great for anyone anymore.

It was at this point that various "mystery" cults started to become exceedingly popular, as people started to at least hope in a better afterlife. Rome's traditional deities were no longer doing their proper job as people started to focus on the next world. This would have been fine, as long as you kept up offering your proper sacrifices to the Roman Gods.

Monotheistic Jews were able to avoid this since the Romans recognized the legitimacy of their Deities ancient roots (even if they didn't agree). The big difference between Christianity and all of the other "mystery" cults (who were willing to offer the appropriate sacrifices to the Imperial Gods) was Christianities obstinacy. With regular life already not being that great, a shocking number would rather loose it for a better afterlife than sacrifice to the Gods according to the unifying political dictates.

The main problem here is that Christians had not yet at this point established their claims well enough that they actually did have ancient roots through the Jews. Plus, Christians were actively encouraging other's to leave their Gods, which could easily enough have been mistaken for treason, beyond the thought that the Gods may actually have been angered.

That difficult period in the 200's saw numerous persecutions of this group because of their obstinacy, which actually paradoxically caused tremendous growth in their ranks. Why? Because people were searching for otherworldly solutions at this point that Christians were even willing to go to their death's to receive, as the great church historian Tertullian wrote, "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church".

**Arch of Constantine:** by Rich Brunn, while serving as a Roman history professor at St. Stephen's high school in Rome, 2003-2004. For high quality **personalized touring options**, contact [rich@rome-day-tours.com](mailto:rich@rome-day-tours.com)

Emperor Diocletian came to power right on the tail end of those depressed years and his persecution was probably the worst the church had yet seen, a persecution that at this point may even have involved about 10% of the population who were no longer willing to offer sacrifices to the faulty Gods or participate in the Deity laden Imperial processions. He had split the empire up into 4 parts and just shortly after he stepped down in 305, civil war broke out amongst rival Caesars.

By 312 in the west, the son of Maximian (The West's 1<sup>st</sup> Aug) was Maxentius (who went on to be the Caesar of the South-West, including Rome) and the son of Constantius Chlorus (The West's 1<sup>st</sup> Caesar) was Constantine (who went on to be the new Augustus of the North-West, including Milan).

Even if Constantine's father was a monotheist of the cult of the Sun (which at least would have disposed him to Christianity), and his Mother St. Helena was a Christian, these reasons are alone not enough to justify why he would soon enough decide to stop persecutions.

Constantine by this point would have been able to see first hand easily enough that Christianity would bend, but would not break, and were certainly here to stay. He would certainly have noticed the growth of Christianity, the ineffectiveness of even the toughest of persecutions that he himself had lived through and maybe even the potential gold mine in harnessing the potency of such an obstinate group.

But how could he do this? Whether his "opportunity" really occurred or not, it was certainly some rather timely "Divine assistance" that served as a unifying force in a battle against his rival Caesar Maxentius in 312 while on his way towards a climactic battle (known as that of the Milvian Bridge). Just a few months later, Constantine officially showed his gratitude to the Church by insisting with his Eastern Augustus Licinius that all persecutions come to in an end in the "Edict of Milan".

Many people see the "Edict of Milan" as something special, like it had never been done before, but it had actually been Emperor Gallienus all the way back in 261 to have issued the first "Edict of Toleration" for the Christians, and then Galerius (the Augustus of the East) issued "HIS" first "Edict of Toleration" on his deathbed in 311.

But nobody really pays attention to these other guys in focusing so much on Constantine's uniqueness, or maybe it's just because Constantine's edict is seen as the definitive one in which no other persecutions followed. Wrong again, because the peace between Constantine and Licinius didn't seem to last, and conflict is sparked again in 321 by Licinius having renewed persecutions.

This "Crusader Like" Constantine uses these renewed persecutions to begin a new civil war, and for how much he was "helping the church", he wasn't bashful at all about using this situation to aggrandize his own position, for the words along with the symbol were "Through this sign you will conquer!," which doesn't really seem all that Christian.

His arch contains a very ingenious inscription (politically speaking) in order that he would be able to please virtually anybody who saw it when it was first unveiled in 315.

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Both the poly and monotheists were able to read the description of the cause of his latest tide turning victory against Maxentius and be completely satisfied, for it said that it was “By means of the Inspiration of the Divine Mind and his own Greatness”, a rather smooth form of speech.

Sure, one can explain away all they want about how his Arch’s relief’s were pillaged by previous monuments because of the astonishing degree to which the arts at dropped, but the point is that he was at least comfortable enough in having such things as, 4 relief’s of sacrificial offerings to various ancient Roman Gods, and then another one to Apollo and Diana. It is probably an understatement to say that this type of imagery is “not good Christianity,” but it does seem to have at least been good politics.

The arch was placed over the area which had traditionally been used by Rome’s military generals, with the symbolism of going from War (South) to Peace (North), and thereby benefiting the populaces view of your own rule, in a world where virtually any outdoor monument was potentially a political act.

Even though the Milvian Bridge was at the end of a no longer than two mile direct route north from the Forum, right along Rome’s 2<sup>nd</sup> oldest road known as the Via Flaminia from 221 BC, Constantine most likely had no need to go down it in order to “take over the city after Maxentius died.”

Especially in civil wars involving rival Caesar’s, the reason that he would have had no need to do that, was that once the enemy Caesar was dead, there wasn’t really all that much hope of resistance, and there was really only one clear choice for who would then be the supreme ruler, the victorious Caesar.

Going along with these God’s on his arch is the recurrent theme of the Emperors beneficence, showing scenes of the emperors “Triumphal Entrance” into Rome and the emperors “Distribution of Gifts”. These things not only showed Constantine’s own qualities of generosity and physical experience, but he also managed to unite them with the monuments and therefore, the very lives of some of the most loved emperors of the past, from in fact the “Golden Age” of Rome mentioned above.

His memory still now lives on here with the presence of his arch, in a much stripped down but at least very similar way as it did after his defeat of Licinius to become the sole emperor. Did the destabilizing aspects of Christianity somehow manage to replace the unifying factor of the old God’s for Constantine by itself being seen as the new underpinning for the state?

With Christianity being so exclusive of all other beliefs, (owing allegiance to Christ even before the Emperor), the alternative soon enough began for the Emperor to become Christian too.

Here is the exact inscription found on the arch (including spaces which are not present) with my own personal translation that I underlined and highlighted appropriately so it

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may be easier to follow exactly what English words are associated with the exact Latin words:

## Arch of Constantine

IMP CAES FL CONSTANTINO MAXIMO  
To the great emperor Caesar Flavius Constantinus

P F AUGUSTO S **PQ** R  
Pius Felix Augustus, the Senate **and** the People of Rome

QVOD INSTINCTV DIVINITATIS MENTIS  
By means of the inspiration of the Divine mind and

MAGNITVDINE CVM EXERCITV **SVU**  
His own greatness, with **his** Army and **Just arms**

TAMDE TIRANNO (Maxentius) QVAM DE OMNI EIVS  
Not only from the Tyrant (Maxentius) But also simultaneously from all of his **supporters**

**FACTIONE** VNO TEMPORE **IVSTIS**  
**REMPUBLICAM** VLTVS EST **ARMIS**  
he freed **the republic**.

**ARCVM** TRIVMPHIS INSIGNEM **DICAVIT**  
**Dedicated** this important triumphal **arch**.

I fully realize that this is just merely a very basic introduction to the questions and growing pains that surround the development of Christianity in the early church. What's really cool though is to see this stuff first hand on site in association with things like the Colosseum, ancient Roman Forum and some of the coolest of early Christian and pagan architecture.

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