

8. The Monumental Arches

And so the formula of a novel rounded arch within the traditional classical frame was brought to perfection in a succession of mighty vaulted and arcaded buildings. But the idea could also be pursued in isolation from arcades, and even from any buildings at all. The result was that highly characteristic Roman creation, the monumental or commemorative arch, which has had a greater influence on Europe than any of Rome's other architectural gifts, with the single exception of the Colosseum.

Two superb and peculiarly influential specimens are to be seen in the neighbourhood of the Forum.

The first recorded examples of free-standing arches at Rome date from 196 BC, when one was set up in the Cattle Market (Forum Boarium) and another in the Circus Maximus south of the Palatine.¹ The latter was erected on the central barrier of the course, and not, that is to say, in a position where any processions would walk under its span. This arch cannot, therefore, have been intended for any functional purpose. It still remains possible, however, that earlier commemorative arches, now lost, may have evolved from processional origins. If so, such processions are likely to have been connected with the magic associated with gates, magic that was especially applicable to conquerors going out to war and returning from it (Appendix 2, Temple of Janus).

During the same second century BC, a period which was productive of a great deal of architectural innovation, the Romans built at least three other arches in the capital. One of them, defrayed from the spoils

of a Gallic war, spanned the Sacred Way at the point where it entered the open space of the Forum. This was the Arch of Fabius or Fornix Fabianus, the word *fornix* apparently indicating that this was not a monumental arch (*arcus*) in the later sense of the word – ornamented with columns and other decoration – but a simple span with no such classical surface attached to its pylons.² It was not until the imperial age that the free-standing, ornamental, columnar arch became at all frequent, and even quite late in the first century AD Pliny the elder could still describe it as a modern invention.³

THE ARCH OF TITUS

Pliny died in 79, the year in which the emperor Titus came to the throne. Titus himself died only two years later, and the arch devoted to his memory is one of the most pure and chaste examples of this architectural institution. It stands at the highest point of the Sacred Way, where processions could pass under it, and looks across the Forum to the temple dedicated to Titus and his father Vespasian at the other end. This arch, which is made of Attic marble from Mount Pentelicon (with nineteenth-century travertine additions), commemorated Titus' bloodthirsty conquest of the Jewish Revolt and his destruction of Jerusalem (AD 70). The arch has a single opening, flanked by pylons incorporating on each side two engaged, fluted columns of the Composite Order – a Roman mixture of Ionic and Corinthian that had perhaps been invented in the time of Augustus, with the former Order's spirals and the latter's acanthus leaves. The opening is surmounted by two horizontal storeys, the higher of which displays inscriptions, repeated on either front, indicating

The Arch of Titus, built to commemorate the sack of Jerusalem by Titus in AD 70.

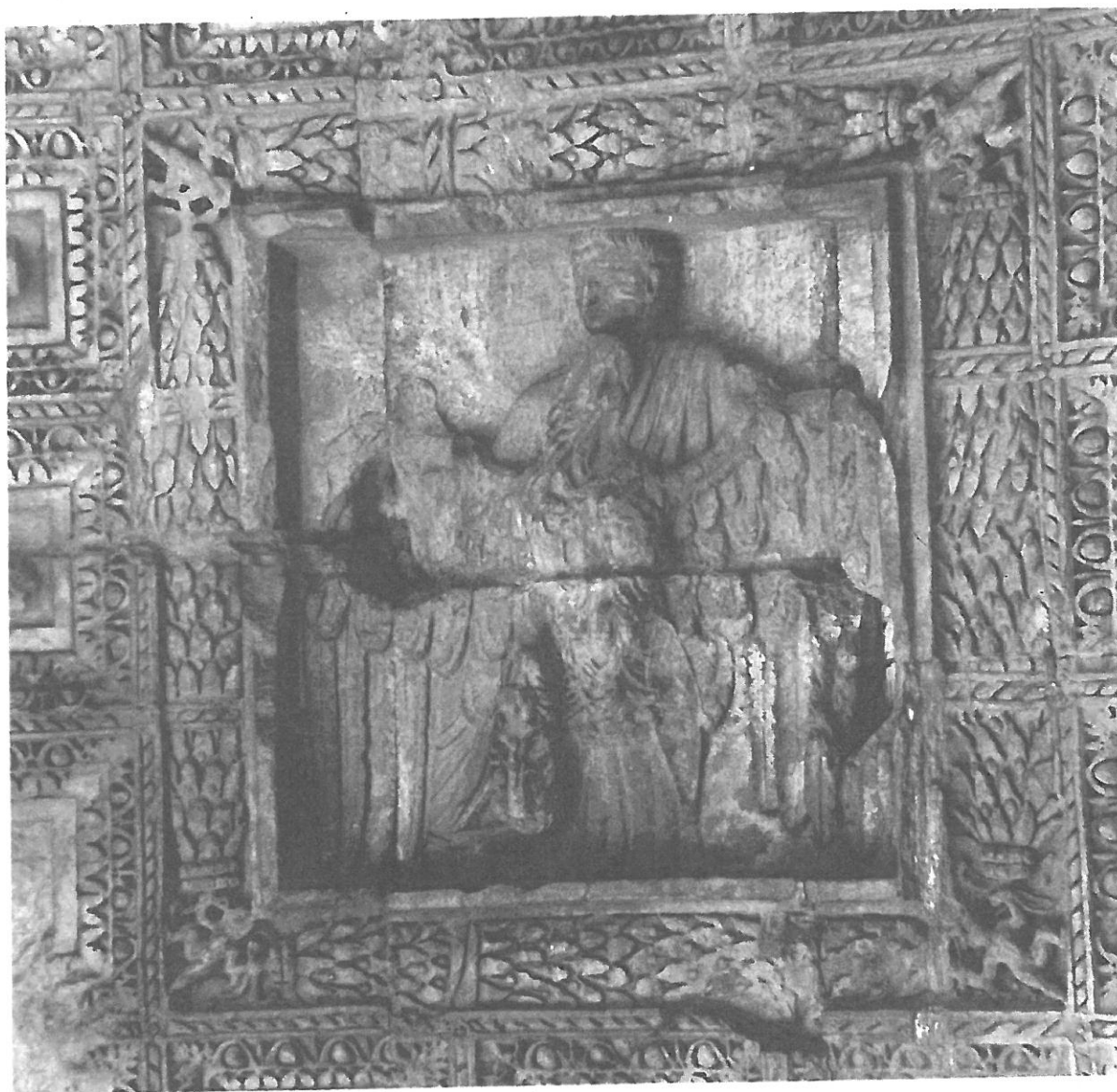
that the monument was dedicated to 'Titus' memory by his brother and successor Domitian.⁴

The insertion of a round arch within the vertical and horizontal lines of Graeco-Roman architecture means that these lines lose their original functional purpose. And yet the formula of the monumental arch permitted the deployment of a whole panoply of classical motifs, and to the student of the 'grammar' of ancient

architecture it is almost, as Sir John Summerson says, 'a grammatical treatise in itself – it gives the clue to so many possible moves in the classical game'.

The Arch of Titus is decorated by a large amount of sculpture. In ancient times there was much more, because an elaborate bronze statuary group stood on the top, displaying Vespasian and Titus in a four-horse chariot. The triangles between the curved parts of the

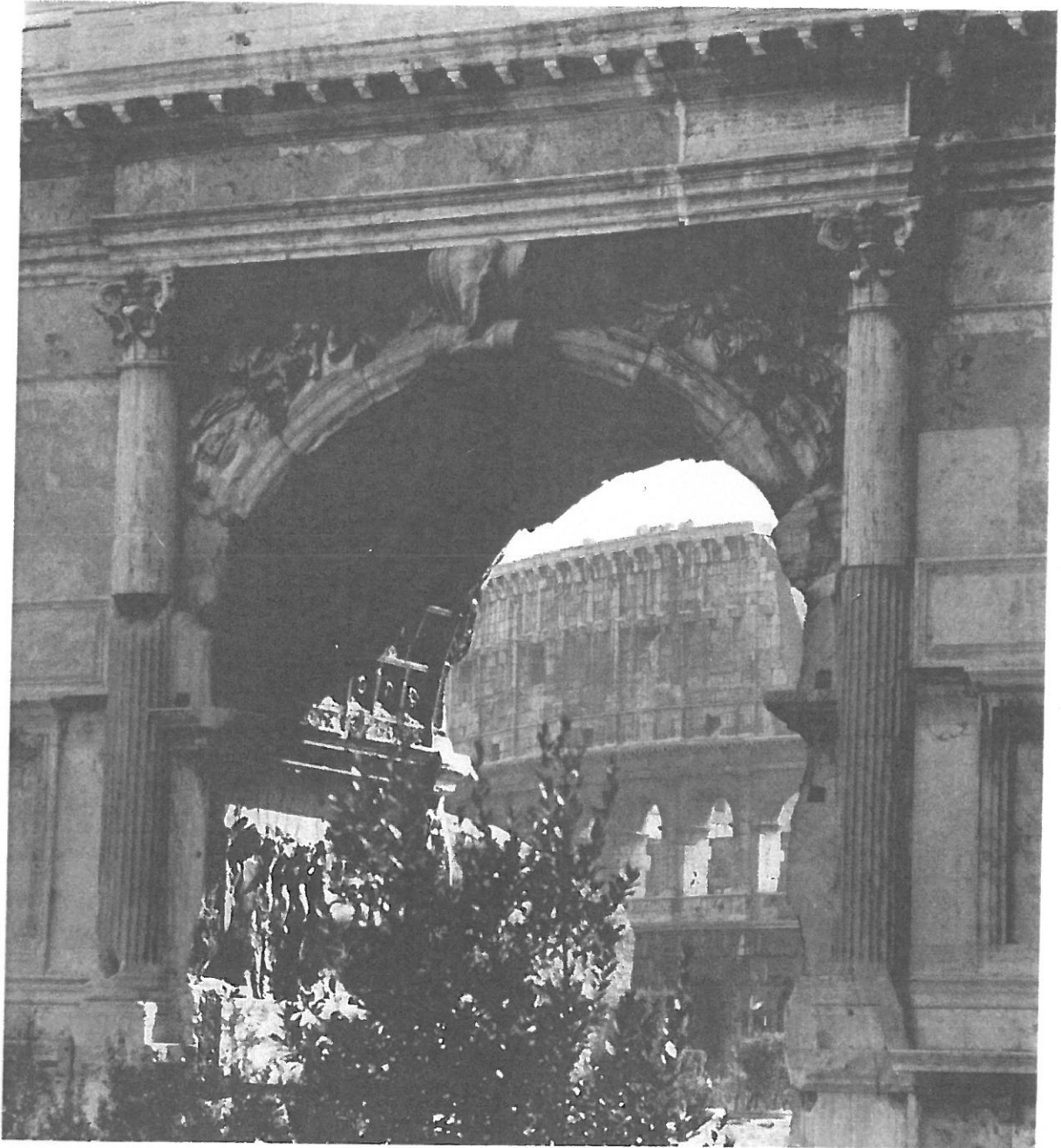
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On the keystone of the vault of the Arch of Titus; the Emperor Titus is borne to heaven by the eagle of Jupiter.
Right: The Colosseum seen through the Arch of Titus.

arch and its right-angled framework are decorated with winged Victories holding standards. Above is a frieze (on rather too small a scale) which represents scenes of a Triumphal procession; a figure reclining in a litter perhaps represents the captive River Jordan. The ceiling inside the opening is vaulted with a rich coffering of sunken squares and decorated with a relief of the emperor being carried to heaven by an eagle.

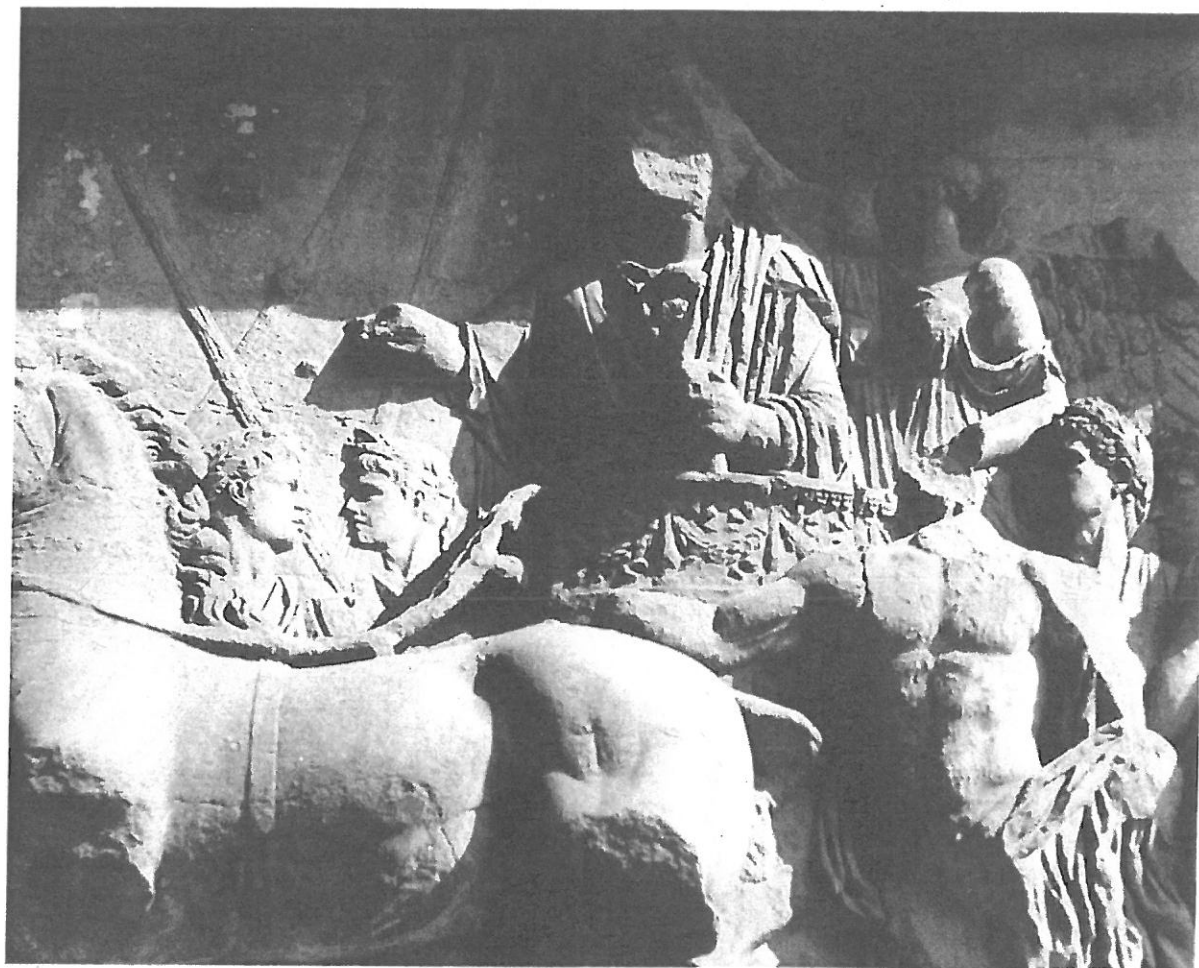
On either flank of this inside tunnel of the arch are reliefs representing the two principal moments of Titus' Triumph. One of them shows the Triumphal procession approaching an arch. Young men wearing laurel wreaths are carrying the spoils plundered from the Temple of Jerusalem: here, as Shelley declared, 'is sculptured, in deep relief, the desolation of a city'. The other relief shows the Goddess Rome leading the



Below : Rome leading the four-horse triumphal chariot of Titus.
Opposite : Sculpted friezes on the Arch of Titus; the Emperor Titus rides
 in his triumphal car while Victory places a wreath on his head.



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Triumphal four-horse chariot of Titus, while Victory, accompanied by the twin deities Honour and Courage (Virtus), places a wreath upon his head. His official attendants, the lictors, can be seen in the background.

The talented designer of these reliefs, like portrait-sculptors of this same age, emphasizes the points of highest relief by deep shadows and vivid contrasts of light and shade. As in slightly earlier mural paintings

at Pompeii, which was obliterated by Mount Vesuvius in Titus' reign, there is an advance towards illusion: the illusion of movement seen through a window silhouetted against the sky. These experiments fall short of complete realism, but display realistic effects that are not unconvincing. The cleverly superimposed planes give an impression of depth; for increased technical dexterity, applying traditional methods with



A relief on the Arch of Titus showing Jewish ritual objects, the spoils of Jerusalem, including the great seven-branched candlestick (*Menorah*).

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new success, and making it possible to begin thinking in terms of a third dimension. It still remained for the sculptors of the Florentine Renaissance, fourteen hundred years later, to complete the conquest of the problem of perspective. But they could only do so because they had ancient models such as the Arch of Titus to study and learn from.

The spoils which the procession are carrying include the silver trumpets which the sons of Aaron had blown to summon the hosts of Israel, the golden Table of the twelve loaves of the Shewbread which were renewed in the Temple every Sabbath day, and the golden candlestick or Menorah with its seven branches – or rather six branches on a central stem. This was the most sacred object that the Jews possessed. The Lord had spoken unto Moses, saying,

‘Thou shalt make a candlestick of pure gold: of beaten work shall the candlestick be made: his shaft, and his branches, his bowls, his knops, and his flowers, shall be of the same. And six branches shall come out of the sides of it; three branches of the candlestick out of the one side, and three branches of the candlestick out of the other side. . . . And thou shalt make the seven lamps thereof; and they shall light the lamps thereof, that they may give light over against it. . . . Of a talent of pure gold shall he make it, with all these vessels, and look that thou make them after their pattern, which was shewed thee in the mount.’⁵

Solomon had installed these venerated symbols in the Temple at Jerusalem. Titus seized them and took them to Rome; and now they have disappeared. Although the twelfth-century itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela asserted that Titus ‘kept them in a cave near the Church of St Sebastian’, they were in fact lodged in the new Temple of Peace, part of the Forum of Vespasian. But later, according to one story, while Maxentius was fleeing from Constantine (AD 312) the Menorah fell into the Tiber from the Milvian Bridge. Another report declared that Alaric the Visigoth seized the spoils when he sacked Rome a century later, and that they were buried with him in the River Bucento. But according to a more authentic version they were taken from Rome to north Africa by Gaiseric (Genseric) the Vandal when he sacked the city in 455. ‘And so,’ says Gibbon, ‘at the end of four hundred years, the spoils of Jerusalem were transferred from Rome to Carthage by a barbarian who derived his origin from the shores of the Baltic.’

In the following century the Byzantine general, Belisarius, retrieved the precious loot and removed it

to Constantinople,⁶ and his emperor, Justinian, restored the principal objects to Jerusalem. But in 614 they were carried off again, this time by the Persians. They also took relics of the Holy Cross, which alone can compete with the Menorah for the mass of legends woven round its wanderings and its inviolable magical powers.

Since then the spoils have never been seen again. But there has been no lack of rumours about their fate – including a twelfth-century suggestion that they were still being kept secretly in the Lateran Palace at Rome. Lionel Davidson’s novel *A Long Way to Shiloh* is constructed round the belief that the Romans never got the real Menorah at all, but were fobbed off with a fake: and that the authentic one is still hidden somewhere in Israel – fittingly enough, since it is now that country’s national emblem.

Pope Paul IV introduced very stringent measures against the Jews of Rome, establishing a ghetto in the southern part of the Field of Mars and forbidding them to live in any other part of the city.⁷ For centuries they gave the Arch of Titus a wide berth. But in the processions that accompanied papal installations a Jew was required to stand beside the arch in order to swear an oath of loyalty to the Pope and present him with a copy of the Pentateuch. It was not until Pius IX (1846) that the custom was discontinued. Two years later, he demolished the walls and towers of the ghetto, and the rest of it was pulled down in 1887.

THE ARCH OF SEVERUS

The Arch of Septimius Severus (AD 193–211), at the opposite end of the Forum, is a much more elaborate affair than the Arch of Titus. Seventy-five feet high and eighty-two feet wide, it is large enough to have its interior divided into several vaulted chambers reached by an internal staircase. Moreover, the arch does not have just one single opening, but three, in accordance with a custom that came from the Greek east, where there was a tradition of multiple monumental gateways. The Arch of Severus, like the Arch of Titus, is built of Pentelic marble. Owing to the passage of centuries it stood higher than the ground level of the Republic, and the artificial, stepped base of the arch raised it to an even greater height; the base also meant that there could be no question of processions passing under it as they passed under Titus’ arch. The monument of Severus had no such function. Representations

The Arch of Septimius Severus. The relief panels show Roman military triumphs including the capture of Seleucia and Ctesiphon. Through the central arch can be seen the Temple of Julius Caesar.

on coins and medallions show that it was originally crowned by statues of the emperor and his sons in a chariot of six horses, with further equestrian statues to right and left.⁸ Holes at the sides of the arch suggest that shields and other metal ornaments or trophies were attached to it.

The purpose of the monument, indicated in a long inscription repeated on each of its frontages, was to celebrate the victories of Severus, his sons and his

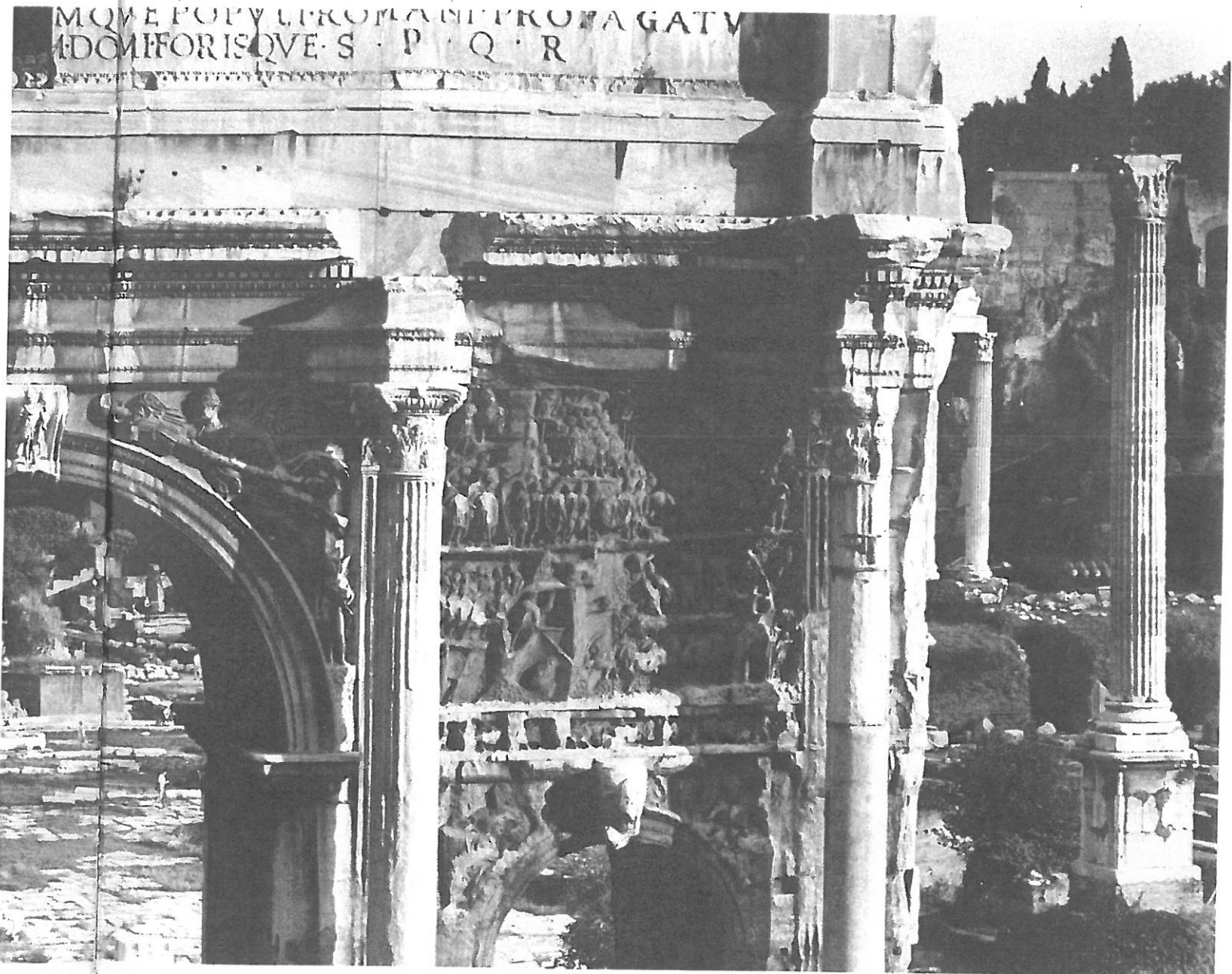
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colleagues Caracalla and Geta over the Parthians and their allies in Mesopotamia and Assyria (AD 195–9). The emperors had allegedly 'restored the Roman State and extended its empire', though in fact the campaigns were appallingly expensive in proportion to the incomplete results achieved.⁹

The occasion chosen for this celebration was the tenth anniversary of the reign (203). The name of Severus' younger son Geta, which originally appeared

in the inscription near those of his father and elder brother, is no longer to be seen: for nine years after the erection of the arch, following the death of Severus at York (Eboracum), Caracalla assassinated Geta, and ordered the erasure of his name from all official inscriptions. As can be seen by looking at the fourth line, the dedication on this arch was no exception. The name of Geta is blotted out, and additional honorific titles for his murderer have replaced it.



Below, left: The Arch of Severus on a silver coin of his son Caracalla (c. AD 205).

Below, right: Relief of prisoners, their wrists chained, on the pedestals of the columns of the Arch of Severus.

Opposite: The coffered vault of the Arch of Titus.

The vaults inside the three openings are elaborately ornamented with sunk panels, and the flat spaces on either front are crammed with reliefs. As on the Arch of Titus, winged Victories are to be seen in the angles of the central curve. The angles beside the smaller lateral openings contain reclining personifications that may represent eastern rivers, the models for many a Renaissance statue. Figures of prisoners are sculptured on the bases of the columns and on the horizontal course that crowns their capitals.

But much the most important reliefs are those in the large frontal panels above the lateral arches. Unfortunately, however, they are ill-preserved; they can best be viewed from the Via del Foro Romano, on the side facing away from the Forum. These reliefs depict scenes from the eastern campaigns. Each of the four panoramas, as now reinterpreted, is concerned with a single Mesopotamian city (or in one case two cities) that provided an episode in the wars.¹⁰ The stories have to be read in chronological order from the bottom upwards, each panel being divided into two main

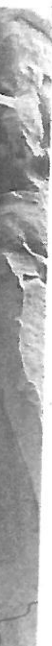


zones by an irregular horizontal ground line. In the lower zones all events are contemporary, in the upper ones the sequence is from left to right.

These complex tales are very different from the self-contained pictures on the Arch of Titus. The tradition which the Severan artists follow is more reminiscent of

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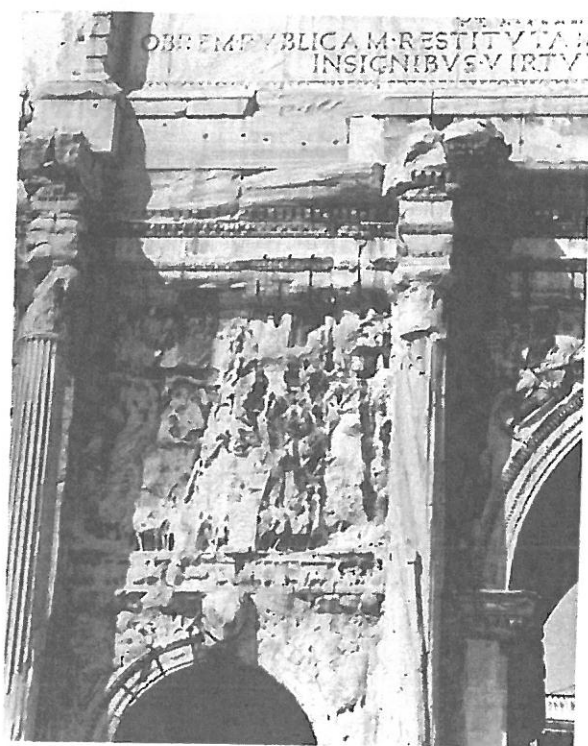
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Above: Slender columns bearing reliefs decorate both sides of the Arch of Septimius Severus.
Opposite: The Arch of Severus marks a move away from classicism in Roman sculpture.



Above and opposite: The most important reliefs on the Arch of Severus are the panels above the lateral arches depicting dramatic scenes from the Eastern campaigns.

the prolonged martial narratives which wind spirally upwards round the monumental Columns of Trajan and Marcus Aurelius, both of which are still standing today – one in the Forum of Trajan close by, and the other in the Piazza Colonna, situated in the area that was formerly the Field of Mars. However, the reliefs of the Arch of Severus do not follow the *continuous* narrative method of the two Columns. This, as Richard Brilliant observes, is not a flowing epic but a series of highlighted and always significant dramatic acts.

Moreover, although the Column of Aurelius had only been completed a very few years before the Arch, it is possible to detect a stylistic development: a further move away from classicism. Already on Aurelius' column this had begun to lose its serenity. Now, on the Arch of Severus, individual human beings have become squat and insignificant: they are intended to stand for crowds rather than persons. Grouped in ceremonial tableaux which are dominated

by the emperors who declaim to their serried ranks, the figures take on the undulating rhythms of a single undifferentiated mass. The intricate division between scenes, shown at the lower levels in a bird's eye perspective, conveys the impression of a textile surface. The style was probably inspired, however, by paintings, such as those which Severus is known to have exhibited at his Triumph.¹¹ And those paintings in their turn may have been prompted by the popular, radical, provincial undercurrents that always flowed beneath the classical tradition, reacting against what seemed the insipid pomposity of the customary official, imperial art.

This shift of style is much more apparent on the large panels of the Arch than on its smaller reliefs. It is clearer still, and more accentuated, on a better preserved contemporary arch at Lepcis Magna in north Africa. There is a move away from the old, classical humanism which had now degenerated into decadence – towards the two-dimensional, unplastic, frontal, rhythmically repetitive techniques of Byzantine art. A hundred years later it would be possible to design the highly un-classical statue of Constantine in the Basilica of Maxentius. But already, even now, times were changing. Severus, it is true, made great play with his inheritance of the tradition. Yet he also took large steps towards army-rule and the authoritarianism that was needed to pay for it. And the increasing anonymity of the individual human being, which is already detectable on these reliefs, forms the artistic expression of an age in which private liberties, always restricted to the higher reaches of a steep social pyramid, were beginning to vanish altogether.

A replica of this arch formed the entrance of the imperial palace at Berlin. Arcs de Triomphe and Marble Arches abound – taken from the same model and from its sequel, the Arch of Constantine which still stands beside the Colosseum. Personality cults have proved unable to resist the idea; and Sir Mortimer Wheeler has written pertinently about the Roman psychology that invented it:

If one were to seek a single emblem from the combined majesty and ostentation of successful Rome, those monstrous toys the triumphal arches were difficult to deny. It is a thought that a great people, who could drain marshes and make roads that are still our roads, build great aqueducts and shape laws that are written into our modern civilization, and after travail give a great religion and ethical code to the world, could also pause to express their self-gratification in idle contrivances of such grand but nonsensical irrelevance.

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