


# Constantine and the Christian Empire

Second Edition

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a committed Christian and was developing a sense of mission to serve the God whom he believed had given him supreme temporal power.<sup>35</sup>

The growing sense of missionary zeal which Constantine was developing for the Christian faith was displayed in more public and material ways during his *Decennalia* festival in the summer of 315. Since he had been acclaimed emperor nine years earlier, the beginning of the tenth year of his reign was scheduled to be noted with special celebrations in Rome on 25 July. Constantine traveled to Italy with many of his family members and court officials in order to visit the old capital for the festival. The imperial entourage appears to have reached Rome by 21 July and to have remained there until 27 September 315.<sup>36</sup>

After the formal *adventus* parade, the official greeting ceremony, and the settlement of the emperor and his retinue in the various imperial palaces around the city, magnificent public games and lavish ceremonial banquets were held during the course of the festival. A notable event in the midst of these activities was the dedication of the arch of triumph commemorating the victory of Constantine over Maxentius. The Senate had commissioned this monument as part of the honors it voted the victor in the aftermath of the campaign of 312. The Arch of Constantine had been constructed in the two and a half years since the last visit of the emperor to Rome. It was positioned in the very heart of the city – in the valley between the Palatine, Caelian, and Esquiline Hills where the great roads of the capital converge at the Colosseum and the start of the *Via Sacra* leading into the ancient Roman Forum. Standing about 80 feet in width and 65 feet in height, and composed of old columns and sculptures taken off monuments of the “good emperors” of the second century and new relief panels and inscriptions made for this structure, it was one of the greatest triumphal monuments of the Roman Empire, and presented the pagan senatorial view of the first Christian emperor. Statues and relief sculptures of captives from the Dacian campaigns of Trajan decorated the pedestals above and below the Corinthian columns framing the arches on both faces of the monument; relief sculptures of scenes from the Marcomannic wars of Marcus Aurelius embellished the top panels beside the central inscription of the structure; and relief sculptures depicting animal hunts and sacrifices from the reign of Hadrian were presented in four pairs of round medallions or *tondi* placed above the lower arches on both sides of the monument. The heads of Hadrian in the latter motifs appear to have been recut to depict Constantine and Licinius hunting a lion, a bear, and boars, which symbolize the wild forces in nature and society which they had tamed. Beautiful Traianic reliefs of the emperor also decorated the inner sides of the central arch, and presented Constantine as the LIBERATOR URBIS (“Liberator of the City”) and as the FUNDATOR QUIETIS (“Founder of Peace”). Just as they had done on the special S P Q R OPTIMO PRINCIPI coins minted for his victory in 312, the senators were deliberately comparing Constantine to Trajan and the “good emperors” of past times. Two new

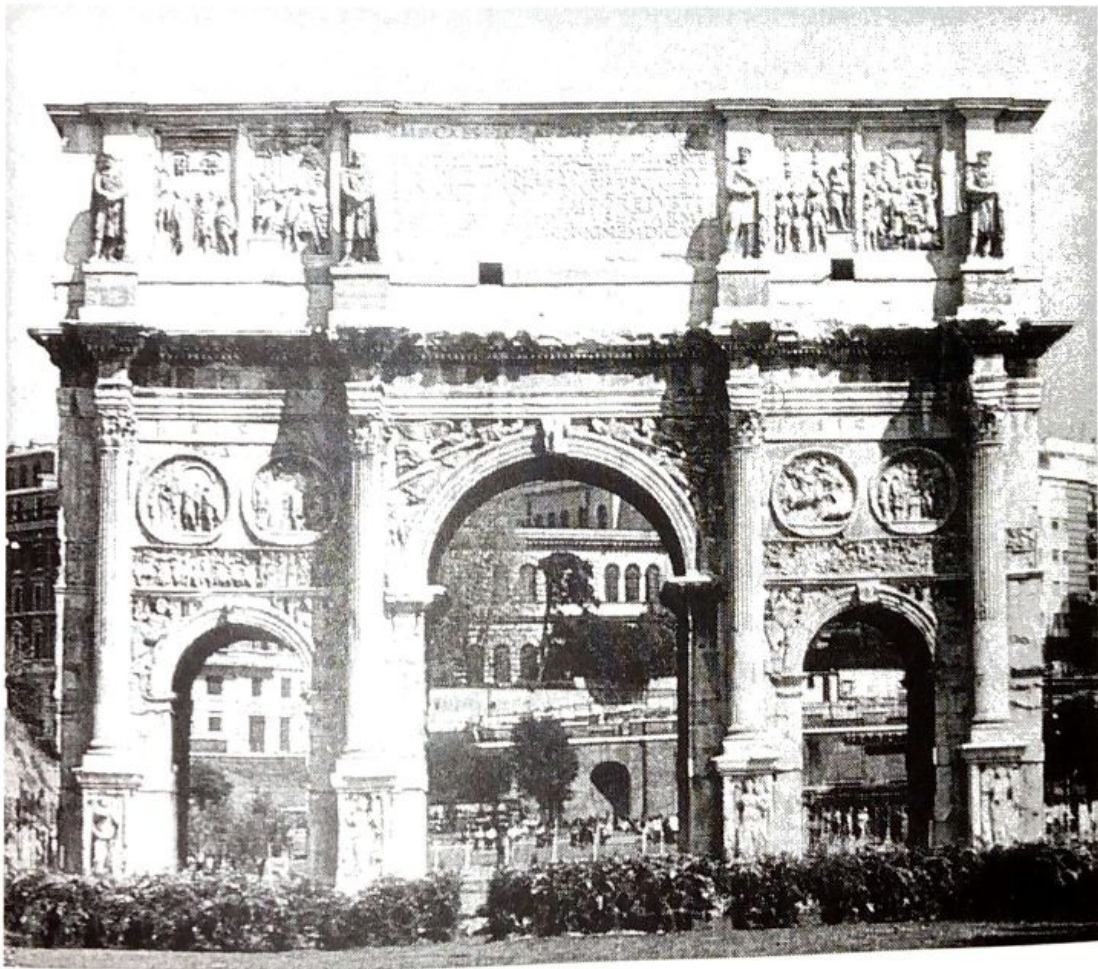
tondi and six relief panels were specially made to portray the victorious campaign and joyful *adventus* of 312. They started midway up the west end of the arch, ran around the south face above the two lower side arches, circled the middle of the east end, and finished on the north face above its lower side arches. The relief panel on the western end depicted the *profectio*, the “march” of Constantine and his forces out of the Alps and into Italy. Above this panel was a new tondo showing the Moon goddess *Luna* descending in her two-horse chariot as a symbol of the darkness covering Italy under the rule of Maxentius. On the south face were panels depicting the most important battles by which Constantine had defeated the forces of the tyrant and liberated Italy – the *obsidio*, the “siege” of Verona on the left, and the *proelium*, the “battle” of the Mulvian Bridge on the right. The relief panel on the eastern end depicted the *adventus*, the “arrival” of Constantine and his troops into Rome. Above this panel was another new tondo showing the Sun deity *Sol* rising in his four-horse chariot as a symbol of the radiance enlightening Rome through the coming of Constantine. On the north face were panels depicting important events during the stay of Constantine in Rome – the *oratio*, the “speech” of the emperor to the Senate and people in the Forum Romanum on the left, and the *liberalitas*, the “distribution of money” by the emperor to the citizens in the Forum Julii on the right. On the southern and northern faces of the monument above the central arch, an inscription stated:

To the Emperor Caesar Flavius Constantine, the greatest, pious and happy Augustus, the Senate and People of Rome have dedicated this arch as a symbol of triumphs, because through the inspiration of the Divinity (INSTINCTU DIVINITATIS) and the greatness of his mind, with his own army he avenged the republic against both the tyrant and all his faction with just arms at one time.

The Arch of Constantine has often been interpreted as “a fitting monument of an age of transition.” With the old motifs from the second century in a free and organic style, it reflected the principial order of the classical past. With the new motifs of the fourth century in a static and regimented style, it depicted the dominatial order of the Byzantine future. By failing to portray either the offering of a pagan sacrifice to Capitoline Jupiter or the marking of Christian signs on Constantinian arms in the relief panels, the Roman Senate recognized the Christian conversion of the emperor without betraying its own pagan beliefs. By invoking the inspiration of “the Divinity” in the central dedication, the Senate followed the official policy of the emperors as recorded in the Milan agreement and reflected in the Trier panegyric of 313 which allowed their subjects to worship the *Summa Divinitas* in whichever way they felt most comfortable. The Senate knew that Constantine now identified the “Highest Divinity” with the Christian

Deity; but it also saw that he was still allowing Sol to appear as his "companion" on the imperial coinage. Constantine seems to have realized that Sol could serve as a bridge over which his subjects could follow him from pagan polytheism through Solar syncretism to Christian monotheism. The owners of the Julii chamber in the Vatican cemetery had foreshadowed this imperial policy when they commissioned an artist to place a radiate Christ in the chariot of the Sun god on a ceiling mosaic decorating their family tomb not long before this time. Whereas the Senate and the pagan populace might still see the "Highest God" as *Sol Invictus*, the emperor and the Christian faithful could recognize him as the *Sun of Righteousness*. Therefore, the Arch of Constantine with its invocation of "the Divinity" in the dedicatory inscription and the image of Sol in a rising *quadriga* above the *adventus* relief perfectly represented the religious environment of the years from 312 to 315 in which the edges of syncretistic paganism blended with the edges of Christian monotheism (Ills. 36–38).<sup>37</sup>

Constantine certainly must have been pleased with such a magnificent monument, and the manner in which it honored him. However, by the time



Ill. 36 South face of the Arch of Constantine in Rome, with the relief panels of the Verona Siege and the Mulvian Bridge Battle above the lower arches, and the inscription with the *INSTINCTU DIVINITATIS* phrase above the central arch (315).



Ill. 37 East end of the Arch of Constantine in Rome, with the tondo of Sol in his *quadriga* above the *adventus* relief.

his triumphal arch was dedicated, the emperor had already advanced beyond the kind of neutral religious syncretism which it represented in his personal religious beliefs. He thus began to proffer less ambiguous expressions of his private faith in the public arena. He had arranged for the minting of special silver medallions at the Ticinum mint in northern Italy, and he had these brought to Rome for distribution as donatives to important personages during the *Decennalia*. These beautiful commemorative coins were larger and heavier than the standard silver *argenteus* of the First Tetrarchy, averaging about 6.5 grams in weight and coming close to the American 50-cent piece in width. The reverse motif honored the horse soldiers who had played decisive roles in the battles of the Italian campaign three years earlier. It showed the emperor on a rostrum addressing his cavalry, who were gathered around him with their mounts, and carried the inscription SALUS REIPUBLICAE ("the Safety of the State"). The more important obverse motif illustrated his religious convictions for the first time on the imperial coinage. Within the inscription IMP CONSTANTINUS P F AUG, the emperor was depicted in a rare frontal portrait wearing a high-crested war helmet, and holding his horse with one hand and a shield and scepter in the other. At the top front of the helmet was a badge marked with the Christogram symbol (☩) — the first two letters from the Greek word for Christ intersected to make a monogram. Protruding above the shield was a Christian cross topped with a globe. The monogram was the sacred sign of the *nomen Christi*, which



III. 38 The Solar Christ (Christ Helios) mosaic on the ceiling of the Julii Tomb beneath San Pietro in Vaticano.

Constantine had employed since his conversion to invoke the salutary power of the Christian Deity to aid his endeavors.<sup>38</sup> The globular cross scepter was a novel symbol devised by the emperor and his advisors to illustrate artistically the new political theory of Christian imperial theocracy which was emerging at court. The pagan emperors had frequently been shown on coins receiving a globe (often topped with a Victory figure) as a symbol of earthly power from a patron god – e.g., the common *antoniniani* of Diocletian and Maximian. Since Constantine no longer worshipped the pagan gods, they would soon disappear from his coinage; but a globe as symbolic of the earth which the true Deity had created could remain. A motif combining a terrestrial globe and Christian symbols perfectly portrayed the Christian political theory which the new convert and his ecclesiastical advisors were developing. By allowing himself to be depicted wearing a Christ monogram on his helmet, and