

One of the more remarkable aspects of the ancient Romans was their highly developed sense of history. Apparently aware that Rome was destined to leave an indelible mark on human history, the Romans, both individually and collectively, sought to ensure the survival in memory of great men and deeds. At first such efforts centered around the individual family: the domus would commonly be adorned with realistic portrait busts of the family's ancestors as a constant reminder of past achievements and doubtless as a spur to future glories.

As time passed, however, and Rome came more and more to dominate the Mediterranean world, new and more monumental forms of commemoration developed. One such form was the triumphal arch, designed to record in stone, for all time to come, outstanding military achievements. So many and so impressive were these structures that the triumphal arch has become today symbolic of the imperial might that once was Rome's.

Military triumphs had always been appropriately celebrated at Rome. During the Republic, a general who had achieved a notable victory over some foreign foe could look forward to a triumphus, or procession, upon his return to Rome. Elaborate as such processions might be (with their parading of war captives, enemy spoils, sacrificial victims, etc.), they were nonetheless ephemeral and impermanent. It was no wonder, then, that one L. Stertinius in 196 B.C. used spoils gained in Spain to set up two arches in the Forum Boarium at Rome: now there would be lasting physical monuments to greatness long after all the shouting and parading were over and forgotten. The arch, which had always been vital to Roman engineering (eg., in sewers, aqueducts, and bridges), now was to be adapted from the realm of practical architecture to serve a purely symbolic purpose. By the time of the early Empire, the triumphal arch had become a well-established convention.

As the accompanying sketches show, the triumphal arch was a free-standing architectural unit; it conveyed no water, drained no swamps, supported no structure, but simply stood as a memorial to someone (most commonly an emperor) who had distinguished himself militarily, leading one historian to describe the arch as a "monumental Roman commercial". At first having just a single opening, the triumphal arch eventually came to contain three passages; the façade was usually made of expensive marble, and sculptured reliefs were added to depict the actual victory being commemorated. A typical arch would also have engaged columns, and an impressive "attic" story which bore the commemorative inscription. On top of this would be a statue of the victor himself, usually depicted in a chariot drawn by four horses (as in the real-life triumphal procession). In fact, it has been argued that the sole "function" of the entire arch was to provide a monumental base for these statues.

Examples of imperial arches include the famous Arch of Titus at the eastern end of the Forum Romanum, the Arch of Septimius Severus near the western end of the Forum Romanum, and the Arch of Constantine near the Colosseum. The Arch of Titus was built

in 81 A.D. to commemorate the taking of Jerusalem by the young future emperor in 70 A.D.; sculptured reliefs within the single passage show the spoils taken from the holy temple of the Jews. The Arch of Septimius Severus dates to 203 A.D., and honours that emperor's victory over the Parthians; the reliefs on this triple arch are quite extensive, and provide a rich narrative account of the struggle. Another triple arch is that of Constantine: erected in 312 A.D., this arch commemorates the victory of Constantine over his rival Maxentius; what is worthy of special note is the fact that this arch is "recycled", that is, it incorporates pieces of sculpture taken from earlier imperial monuments. For example, eight round plaques, known as tondi, were taken from a hunting monument erected in honour of the emperor Hadrian, who, fortunately, was no longer around to witness this desecration!

Other imperial arches once existed, but are now lost: one, erected in honour of Augustus in the Forum Romanum, had the distinction of being at first a single arch, which was later expanded by the addition of two "gateways", one on each side. There were also many arches set up outside Rome, such as the so-called Arch of Tiberius still standing at Orange in France. As Mortimer Wheeler has written, in his Roman Art and Architecture, "the Arc de Triomphe and the Marble Arch of London have indeed a teeming ancestry".

Another statement of Wheeler's may also give us pause: "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 and impose their self-gratification in idle contrivances of such grand but nonsensical irrelevance . . . The thought adds interest and piquancy to any attempted understanding of the Roman mind."