



# Classical Art and Archaeology: Teaching Latin and the Humanities with the Monuments of Rome with Karen Moore

## Lecture 8: Divine Symbolism in the Arch of Titus

### Outline:

*“In this lesson, we turn to another imperial monument intended to glorify another Imperial dynasty... The Arch of Titus... which stands along the Via Sacra at the entrance to the Roman Forum, depicts the triumphal procession of Titus in AD 71, a triumph that celebrated the conquest and subjugation of Judea.”*

### Introduction

In this lesson, Karen Moore looks at the Arch of Titus through the accounts of ancient historians and its sculptural reliefs, to unpack its meaning as a symbol of Roman triumph and imperial deification.

### The Arch of Titus

- The Arch of Titus was an imperial monument intended to glorify the Imperial dynasty.
- It was constructed in AD 81 to commemorate the death and deification of Titus who died in September of that year.
- The arch measures 15.4 meters (50 feet) in height, 13.5 meters (44 feet) in width, and 4.75 meters (15.5 feet) in depth.
- It is made of Pentelic marble, with the attic part (flat entablature in the upper region) made of Luna marble.

### Historical and Symbolic Significance

- The arch stands along the Via Sacra and depicts the triumphal procession of Titus in AD 71, celebrating the conquest and subjugation of Judea.



- An ancient inscription on the arch reads “Senatus Populusque Romanus Divo Tito Divi Vespasiani F”.
  - The acronym SPQR stands for “the Senate and People of Rome.”
  - The F stands for *Filio*.
- The acronym SPQR is found in both ancient inscriptions and modern elements around Rome.
- The history behind the monument is explored through insights from ancient historians, including Tacitus, Josephus, and Suetonius.

## Tacitus' Account

- Tacitus describes Titus' rise to power and his role in the conquest of Judea at the request of his father Vespasian.
  - *Eiusdem anni principio Caesar Titus, perdomandae Iudaeae delectus a patre et privatis utriusque rebus militia clarus, maiorem vi famaue agebat, certantibus provinciarum et exercituum studiis.* ([Tacitus, Histories 5.1](#))
  - Translation: In the beginning of that same year, Caesar Titus, chosen by his father for the subjugation of Judea and well-known in private matters as well as in military service, was then rising in greater power and fame among the competing enthusiasm of the provinces and the armies.
- This was before Titus and Vespasian had become the imperial family and were well-known generals in Emperor Nero's army.
- In Book 5, chapters 12 and 13, Tacitus describes the temple as a citadel and mentions divine omens and prophecies related to the destruction of Jerusalem and Titus' victory.
  - *Visae per caelum concurrere acies, rutilantia arma et subito nubium igne conlucere templum. Apertae repente delubri fores et audita maior humana vox excedere deos.* ([Tacitus, Histories 5.13](#))
  - Battle lines had been seen running through the sky by the glowing arms and the temple, wholly illuminated by sudden fire from the clouds. The doors of the inner shrine were suddenly open and a voice greater than mortal was heard [to declare] “The gods are departing.” At the same time there was a great motion of departing.



- Tacitus also writes that many Jewish spectators began to recall a prophecy that they believed that this spoke of them, but Tacitus disagrees.
  - *Quae ambages Vespasianum ac Titum praedixerat, sed vulgus more humanae cupidinis sibi tantam fatorum magnitudinem interpretati ne adversis quidem ad vera mutabantur.* ([Tacitus, Histories 5.13](#))
  - These mysterious sayings had foretold of Vespasian and Titus, but the common people, with the usual human desire, interpreted such mighty destinies as pertaining to themselves, and indeed were not changed or persuaded by adversities to believe the truth.
- In Matthew 24 and Luke 21, Christ also prophesies about the destruction of the temple.

## Josephus' Account

- Josephus, a Jewish general and historian, provides details about the fall of the temple and the treasures handed over to Titus.
  - The treasurer of the temple also, whose name was Phineas, was seized on and shewed Titus the coats and girdles of the priests, which were a great quantity of purple and scarlet and were deposited for the uses of the veil, as also a great deal of cinnamon and cassia, a large quantity of other sweet spices which used to be mixed together and offered as incense to God every day. ([Josephus, Of the War 6.8.3](#))
- He tells the story of Phineas, the temple treasurer, who bargains for his pardon by handing over temple treasures to Titus.
  - A great many other treasures were also delivered to him; with sacred ornaments of the temple, not a few. Which things thus delivered to Titus, obtained of him for this man the same pardon, that he had allowed to such as deserted of their own accord. ([Josephus, Of the War 6.8.3](#))



## Suetonius' Account of the Triumphal Procession

- Suetonius confirms that Titus participated in a triumphal procession with his father, Vespasian.
- Sequence of events:
  - First, Titus and his participation in the war against Judea;
  - Second, the conquest of Judea;
  - Third, Titus' triumphal procession with his father, Vespasian.
- Triumphal processions were important for showcasing Roman power and included the general, his soldiers, conquered nobles of the enemy, and the loot taken in the conquest.
- Vespasian used the loot from the Judean conquest to build the Colosseum (Flavian Amphitheater). This is revealed on a plaque used for its dedication:
  - *Imperatur Caesar Vespasianus Augustus  
amphitheatrum novum  
ex manubis fieri iussit*
  - The Emperor Caesar Vespasian Augustus  
a new amphitheater  
he ordered to be created from the spoils of war.
- Vespasian also used the war proceeds to build a nearby Temple of Peace which was used to store the Jewish treasures until it was destroyed by fire in AD 192.

See [Latin Alive Book 2](#) for additional readings on

## Reliefs and Imagery on the Arch

- Three particular reliefs on the arch are examined in detail.
- Each is carved from Pentelic marble and measures about 2 x 3.85 m.
- One relief depicts the apotheosis of Titus, showing him being taken to Olympus by Jupiter's eagle.
  - Beginning with Julius Caesar, it was customary to deify a Roman emperor upon his death.
  - Shakespeare records in his play, "Julius Caesar," when the crowd interprets Halley's Comet as a sign of Caesar's deification.
  - Similarly, on his deathbed, Vespasian announces, "*Vae! puto, deus fio.*" - "Alas, I think I am becoming a god."



- As Titus ascends to Olympus, his image resembles Julius and Augustus Caesar and signs of aging are absent. These suggest his new divinity. *See Diana Kleiner, Roman Sculpture.*
- The interior panels display the divine figure of *Victoria/Nike* (Victory) crowning Titus with a laurel, while *Honos* and *Virtus* guide his chariot through the procession.

## Depictions of the Jewish Treasures

- Opposite the image of Titus on the north, the parade of spoils of the conquered Jewish people is depicted on the south side.
- The spoils include the sacred menorah and the showbread, providing the only extant image of the menorah as it stood in the Temple of Jerusalem.
- The structure of the menorah comes from Exodus when God instructs Moses on how to build the lampstand for the tabernacle:
  - "You shall make a lampstand of pure gold. The lampstand shall be of hammered work. Its base, its stem, its cups, its calyxes, and its flowers shall be of one piece with it, and thus shall be six branches going out of its sides, three branches of the lampstand out of one side of it, and three branches of the lampstand out of the other side of it. You shall make seven lamps for it, and the lamps shall be set up as to give light on the space in front of it." ([Exodus 25:31-37](#)).
- The menorah on the Arch of Titus serves today as inspiration for modern representations, such as the national symbol of Israel.

## Conclusion

- Studying classical art and archaeology alongside literature is important for understanding the stories they can tell us.
- Engaging with both physical evidence and literature brings the *Latina lingua* to life for students.