

## **Romans through the lens of their architecture**

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### **Introduction**

The Roman Empire is one of history's most prominent, wealthiest, and influential civilisations. Spreading over much of Europe, Western Asia and North Africa, the Romans ruled the Mediterranean. Lasting many years, the empire went through social, political and economic external and internal developments, with each emperor and later senators that replaced their predecessors implementing different policies, campaigns and actions. This left the empire in a constant revolutionary state until its eventual downfall due to civil unrest and barbarian invasion. However, its architecture and monuments symbolise consistency and its legacy within the empire. The architecture of ancient Rome provides valuable insights into various aspects of Roman society, helping us gain a deeper understanding of its structure and changes over time. By examining these architectural elements, we can better comprehend the complexities of Roman life and culture. Roman architecture featured arches, domes, columns, and, most importantly, designs and sculptures alluding to Roman society's social, political, economic or religious aspects. Buildings were constructed for pagan gods, and later, churches were built. They served as monuments for military triumphs and were designed to depict power and strength, among other factors. Consequently, understanding their architecture provides deeper insights into Roman cultural identity. Cultural identity refers to a sense of belonging to a particular group, which may result from an overlap of social, economic, and cultural beliefs and values. This essay will explore how the Roman architecture and monuments, especially temples, arches and entertainment structures, reflect and present the cultural identity of the empire. This will be done through a literary analysis of the three most prominent monuments of the Roman empire: The Arch of Constantine, The Colosseum, and The Pantheon.

### **The Arch of Constantine**

The first monument this essay analyses is the Arch of Constantine, built during a revolutionary period. This arch was made in 315 AD to commemorate Constantine's military victory over Maxentius at the Battle of Milvian Bridge, where he gained control over the western front.



The Arch, a major symbol of Roman ambition and evolving identity, reveals much about the cultural and religious values. Its construction and decoration serve as a visual narrative, reflecting the interplay of military might, political manoeuvring, and the emerging influence of Christianity.

The arch's prominent location along the Via Triumphalis immediately establishes its connection to the long-standing Roman tradition of celebrating military victories. The towering structure itself, adorned with intricate bas-reliefs depicting scenes of battle and imperial power, reinforces the image of Rome as an invincible military force. These visual narratives served to inspire awe and pride in Roman citizens, solidifying the importance of military prowess within Roman cultural identity.

Beyond military might, the arch reveals a sophisticated understanding of political symbolism. The incorporation of architectural elements and sculptural motifs from the reigns of earlier emperors, such as Trajan, Hadrian, and Marcus Aurelius, is a deliberate act of historical appropriation. By linking his reign to these illustrious predecessors, Constantine sought to legitimise his power and connect his rule to a grand historical narrative. This emphasis on historical continuity and the appropriation of past glories highlights the enduring importance of tradition and the desire to maintain a sense of legitimacy and popularity within Roman political culture.

Perhaps most significantly, the arch provides a tangible manifestation of the evolving religious landscape of the Roman Empire. The inclusion of Christian motifs, alongside traditional Roman imagery, reflects the growing influence of Christianity and Constantine's strategic embrace of the

new faith. This subtle yet significant shift in religious symbolism had a profound impact on Roman cultural identity, marking a turning point in the relationship between religion and state power. The arch, therefore, serves as a powerful symbol of this evolving religious landscape, reflecting the increasing importance of Christianity within Roman society.

In conclusion, the Arch of Constantine is more than just a monument; it is a multifaceted reflection of Roman cultural identity. Its very design, location, and decoration reveal the complex interplay of military might, political ambition, and religious influence. By examining these features, we gain a deeper understanding of the values, aspirations, and evolving identity of the Roman Empire.

### **The Colosseum**

Undoubtedly, the Roman Empire's most influential, popular and legacy-rich structure is the Colosseum. The citizens of Rome received the structure as a gift from Emperor Vespasian; it was an Amphitheatre meant for the people's entertainment. On the surface, the Colosseum is seen as an aspect of entertainment in the Roman Empire; however, the overall symbolism seen through deeper understanding of the structure ( its socio-cultural meaning and idea ) shows you how it was not built only for entertainment. Therefore, a deeper understanding of the Colosseum would allow for exploration into the cultural identity of the Romans.



The Colosseum, a marvel of Roman engineering, stands as a testament to the empire's multifaceted and complex cultural identity. The monument is a reflection of Rome's fascination with spectre, power, and control.

The Colosseum was a symbol of Roman might. The sheer scale of the structure, designed to accommodate vast crowds, impressed upon the populace the empire's power and grandeur. Gladiatorial contests featuring both professional fighters and condemned criminals showcased Roman military prowess and the willingness to face death with courage. These events, coupled with wild animal hunts and other spectacles of violence, served to entertain and, perhaps more importantly, to instil a sense of Roman superiority and dominance.

However, the Colosseum also reveals a darker side of Roman culture. The emphasis on violence and death, from the gladiatorial combats to the public executions, highlights a cultural acceptance, even celebration, of brutality. This aligns with the Roman military tradition, where captured enemies often faced death in the arena rather than imprisonment.

Politically, the Colosseum served as a tool for social control. Free admission and even food distribution attracted the masses, effectively appeasing the populace and diverting attention from potential social unrest. As it became known, this "bread and circuses" strategy allowed the emperors to maintain order and control while showcasing their generosity to the people.

Furthermore, the Colosseum provides a glimpse into Rome's evolving religious landscape. The early persecution of Christians within its walls stands in stark contrast to the later adoption of Christianity as the official religion of the empire. This shift reflects Rome's evolving religious and cultural beliefs, showcasing the dynamic nature of Roman society.

In conclusion, the Colosseum, a symbol of Roman engineering and architectural prowess, also offers a window into Roman cultural identity's complex and often contradictory and evolving aspects. It embodies the empire's fascination with power, violence, and spectacle while also revealing the political manoeuvring and social control mechanisms employed by the Roman authority.

### **The Pantheon**

Romans have been highly recognised for their religious architectural contributions in the form of basilicas and churches after the religious revolution. However, an overlooked aspect of Roman religious architecture are the pagan temples made for gods like Saturn, Jupiter and Augustus. The Pantheon, being a major temple used for the older pagan practices, hence useful when wanting to gain a deeper understanding into Roman cultural identity, allowed for a deeper comprehension of the religious and cultural identity of the Romans before the change to Christianity.





The Pantheon, initially designed as a temple for all Roman gods (pan-theos), stands as a testament to the deep-seated religious beliefs and the opulent lifestyle that characterised Roman civilisation. The very foundation of the structure, with its Egyptian granite columns resting on white Pentelic marble, speaks volumes about the immense wealth and luxury invested in honouring their deities. This lavishness extended beyond the Pantheon, which was evident in the widespread use of luxury materials like marble, gold, and imported goods throughout the Roman Empire, as well as in their opulent tombs and jewellery.

The Pantheon's architectural marvels—the vast, unreinforced concrete dome, the symmetrical design, the majestic colonnade, and the symbolic oculus—further underscore the Romans' ambition and desire for grandeur. The oculus, connecting the temple to the heavens, not only served a functional purpose but also held profound religious significance, reflecting the Romans' belief in a divine connection.

This emphasis on religious spectacle and architectural prowess served a dual purpose. It showcased the empire's power and wealth and also served as a tool for political control. By uniting the people under a shared religious experience, often orchestrated by the authorities, the Romans sought to maintain social order and consolidate their power.

Furthermore, the Pantheon's extravagant design reflects a certain Roman arrogance and a deep-seated desire for ostentatious display. The Romans were a people who valued luxury in all aspects of life, and their religious practices were no exception. From opulent temples to lavish festivals, religion was integral to their luxurious lifestyle.

In conclusion, the Pantheon, with its blend of architectural brilliance and religious symbolism, provides a window into the multifaceted nature of Roman cultural identity. It reveals a society

deeply rooted in religious beliefs, driven by a desire for grandeur and political control, and characterised by a luxurious lifestyle that permeated every aspect of their lives.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this essay has depicted the overall cultural identity of the Romans as militant and brutal, religiously prominent and devoted, politically controlled and deceptive, and characterised by wealth and luxury. The militant cultural identity can be seen through the Arch of Constantine and the Colosseum. The Arch depicts how the brutality of a militaristic triumph is solidified in stone, celebrating violence. While in the Colosseum, games and celebrations depicted how violence and death were seen as a special occasion and something to be celebrated and watched for pleasure. Both these works of architecture highlight the overall trend of militancy and brutality as ingrained in the cultural identity of the Romans. The religious identity can be seen through the Arch as well as the Pantheon, both demonstrating religious motifs. The Arch shows how Christianity impacted the course of triumph in the Constantine War, while the Pantheon shows how a pagan temple converted into a Christian church. Both depict the lengths the Romans would go to in order to depict religious prominence in their society, as well as its impact through the symbolic meaning of the Arch and the Pantheon. The political control can be seen through all three architectural works; the Colosseum shows the authority maintaining power over the masses by either distracting them or bribing them with games for loyalty. The Arch depicts and exaggerates constant power, comparing Constantine to other great rulers and showing him as a liberal revolutionary emperor. The Pantheon further emphasises how religion was used to maintain control over the masses. Lastly, the cultural identity of luxury and extravagance is once again shown by all three structures, with immensely high elements of luxury incorporated into each and every work in order to show and demonstrate Roman wealth.

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