

Reconsidering the arches (*fornices*) of the Roman Republic

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Under the empire, the freestanding arch became one of the most widespread of Roman monuments, with a total that once must have far surpassed the 800+ examples known to us today.¹ This building type, which is equally ubiquitous in the capital, Roman East and West, and which came to represent both an efficient tool of Roman urbanism and a coherent emblem of imperial order and rule, has been the subject of many comprehensive studies,² yet, despite a scholarly focus on particular imperial arches,³ relatively little attention has been given to the early development of the type. Many recognize the importance of the arch in the building program of Augustan Rome and the prominent rôle it played in the urban landscape of the 1st c. A.D.,⁴ but there has been scant interest in the poorly-known Republican arches that preceded them. The arches of the Republic, prior to Augustus termed *fornices*, have normally been considered only as a preface to the Imperial era.⁵ The earliest *fornices* have been widely labeled “votive” monuments, which implies that Republican arches had religious associations and were “set up not to glorify emperors or other mortals but to honor divine beings”.⁶ As a result, the monument type is conventionally divorced from the discourse on Roman military commemoration and the competitive environment of personal self-aggrandizement that manifested itself in the built environment of Republican Rome. The purpose of this article is to look at the evidence for the earliest known Roman arches in order to reconsider the “votive” classification, and then situate them more precisely within the context of the architectural development of the city and the political, economic and social realities of the 2nd and 1st c. B.C. It will also consider to what degree Imperial arches continued the traditions (functional, decorative, urbanistic, symbolic) established in the *fornices* of the Republic, and whether the Augustan arch represents a new direction for the architectural type.⁷

1 In addition to extant monuments, this includes arches known from archaeological, literary, epigraphical and pictorial evidence. Fähndrich (2005, 3 n.18) suggests that 200 arches be added to the 630 catalogued by H. Kähler in 1939.

2 Major studies include: Graef 1888; Kähler 1939; Pallottino 1958; De Maria 1988.

3 Arch of Nero: Kleiner 1985; Arch of Titus: Pfanner 1983; Arch of Trajan at Beneventum: Fittschen 1972; Arch of Septimius Severus: Brilliant 1967; Arch of Constantine: Pensabene and Panella 1999; Melucco Vaccaro 2001.

4 See in particular the articles in Mansuelli 1979a.

5 Exceptions include: Biliński 1961; Calabi Limentani 1982; Coarelli 1988.

6 Kleiner 1991a, 199. Also Calabi Limentani 1982, 135; Kleiner 1985, 14-16 and 1992, 153; De Maria 1988, 262, nos. 49-50; Cassibry 2008, 424-25.

7 Pliny (*NH* 34.27) wrote: ‘the purport of placing statues of men on columns was to elevate them above all other mortals; which is also the meaning conveyed by the new invention of arches’ (*columnarum ratio erat attolli super ceteros mortales, quod et arcus significant novicio invento*). Since Pliny utilized *arcus* (an Imperial term) instead of *fornix*, De Maria (1985, 55) argued that he was referring to the re-invention of arch’s function, form, decoration and nomenclature that occurred under Augustus. *Contra* Kleiner (1989a), Künzl (1988) and Mansuelli (1979b) suggested that Pliny’s use of *arcus* was an anachronism in his day and that he was simply contrasting Greek honorary columns with all Roman arches. This is perhaps undermined by the fact that Livy and Orosius continue to use *fornix* in reference to Republican arches.