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Writing History, Shaping Images in Later Roman Empire

The article focuses on the image of sovereign during the period of the Later Roman Empire, and the “rhetoric of power” on imperial monuments erected during the 4th century, mostly in Rome. The author compares these with the traditional imperial iconography and looks at possible changes brought about by the conversion of Constantine which is traditionally associated with his victory over Maxentius at the Milvio Bridge in 312. The iconography of the triumphal arch erected three years later in Rome is compared to the new concept of imperial rule which is developing since Diocletian and his tetrarchy. Simultaneously, the author examines the reasons for the absence of Christian influence on imperial iconography at this point. Starting with Constantine’s triumphal arch in Rome, all the way to the base of the obelisk erected in Constantinople by Theodosius the Great sometimes around 390, imperial monuments are practically devoid of Christian symbols. The author suggests that these monuments are meant to assure the continuity with the traditional concept of imperial power and rarely hint at the conversion of the empire, despite major changes which have occurred in imperial legislature regarding traditional religion (banning of sacrifices, closure of temples) and despite the whole new theology of imperial rule, as developed by Church historians, notably Eusebius. The cult of the emperor, especially during the reign of Arian emperors, continues to bestow on the figure of the emperor his dual role of imperator and sacerdos, but although traces of the traditional rituals have vanished from imperial art, no new iconographic formulas have come to replace this particular aspect of imperial essence. It is only with the beginning of the 5th century that imperial art and public monuments begin to reflect the new era – Christiana tempora. There is a striking parallel to this slow process of Christianization of imperial art – it is traditional historiography, which rarely abandons models inherited from classical writers of the discipline and remains firmly anchored in the traditional “rhetoric of power”.