

## Crystal Rosenthal

PhD Candidate, The University of Texas at Austin

Research Resident, Center for the Art and Architectural History of Port Cities

*Agents on the Shore: Freestanding Arches in Roman Port Cities*

Overlooking the entrance to the port of Lampedusa, *Porta d'Europa* (2008), a steel and ceramic monument in the form of a gateway created by artist Mimmo Paladino, rises from the rugged landscape by the sea. Commissioned as a monument to commemorate migrant deaths in the central Mediterranean, *Porta d'Europa* is located at the symbolic point that many migrants set out to reach: the southern shore of Italy. Architecture critic Chiara Darbolò observes that *Porta d'Europa* constitutes a single node in “a network of artifacts, whose collective purpose is to produce the spectacle of a border.”<sup>1</sup> Darbolò's work participates in ongoing scholarly debate, inspired by the European refugee crisis, that interprets political boundary zones, especially those throughout the Mediterranean, from the perspective of their visual and symbolic manifestations. Yet ancient precursors to these phenomena—both in the form and placement of maritime borderland monuments and the public conversations surrounding them—remain underexplored. A selection of Rome's ports (Puteoli, Portus, Ancona, Leptis Magna, and perhaps in the very heart of Rome on the Tiber River) indicates that harbor skylines were frequently dominated by and unified through a single recurring motif: the harbor arch, freestanding arcuated Roman monuments erected on a mole or a pier of a harbor. Under a policy of open borders during the Roman Empire, harbor arches were an essential medium for negotiating cultural identity, and together, formed a unified visual tradition within the liminal spaces of port cities.

While much scholarly attention has been dedicated to inland arch monuments, their coastal counterparts remain relatively neglected. As refugee crises show no sign of abating, and with critical border theories entering mainstream academic discourse, the time seems right to consider their role in transforming port cities into symbolically significant images for public consumption. My dissertation, therefore, defines harbor arches as a distinct subgenre within the larger genre. In lieu of a broad typological survey, it presents a case study approach of five complete or partially preserved arches, dating to the first to fourth century CE, in order to synthesize a broader assortment of contemporaneous literary and visual representations across a diverse range of media, including glass, coinage, ceramics, relief sculpture, and frescoes. While critical border theory provides impetus for the dissertation project as a whole, each case study offers opportunities to engage the concepts and methods of iconology, contextual analysis, phenomenology, epigraphical studies, literary analysis, and media theory. This approach endows these monuments with agency, while also considering their lives beyond their intended functions. It foregrounds the experience of the viewer in diverse port communities and explores the ways that built environments shape cultural identity.

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<sup>1</sup> Chiara Darbolò. “The Invisible Wall of Lampedusa: Landscaping Europe's Outer Frontier.” *Failed Architecture*. January 17, 2018. <https://failedarchitecture.com/the-invisible-wall-of-lampedusa-landscaping-europes-outer-frontier/>