

Contentious statues

The statue debate continues, with Prime Ministerial content adding to the coverage. So let me today explore the issues concerning a prominent statue in York. For me it is central that the future of statues is settled by peaceful and democratic means, and not by criminal damage to them. A town or county or nation has to find a way to be at peace with its past so the factions with differing views can accept the decision.

In York near the Minster, with the throne of the Archbishop, rests a modern statue of Emperor Constantine. He has been selected because he spent time in York, and because he converted to Christianity.

There are a number of issues about his life and times which should give us pause before we celebrate his success in promoting Christianity or in uniting his vast empire. He was the Emperor who developed Constantinople as the new centre of the Roman colonial system.

We should ask how acceptable it is that he presided over a system based on slavery. Much of the hard work in building his cities and palaces, in providing for a sybaritic lifestyle for the grandees, and in carrying out the chores of urban living fell to the slaves. Slaves were often badly treated and traded.

We should remember that in York he worked with and through the large army barracks and fortified system, encouraging the army to keep the local population obedient to Roman law. Dissent was dealt with brutally.

We should bear in mind that he led armies against people the Romans called barbarians because they happened to disagree with Rome and wished to govern themselves, or were settled just beyond the edges of Roman military rule.

He supported a large barrier wall between England and Scotland, with military suppression of any worrying contact between the two places and peoples.

I myself would vote not to have statue to such a man close to one of our great cathedrals were I to have such a vote. It would be better off in a museum to Roman life somewhere. The very least that could be done is to place more explanatory text about this man prominently for all to read if they wish, to explain the good and the bad we now see in him.

There are similar issues with the statue of Trajan by the City of London.