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### Sol

Hijmans, S.E.

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## Chapter 9

### Aurelian, Constantine, and Sol in Late Antiquity

It is widely held that the peak of solar worship in Rome was reached in the 50 years between Aurelian's death and Constantine's defeat of Licinius. Aurelian built a magnificent new temple for Sol in Rome, elevated the priests of Sol to the level of *pontifices*, and instituted quadrennial games for the sun god. Constantine's initial predilection for Sol/Apollo is well documented, though variously interpreted, and although he turned away from Sol Constantine was not the last emperor to support solar cult. Julian also placed great emphasis on the sun. Nor was the support for Sol a purely imperial affair. In the "pagan renaissance" of the late fourth century AD Mithras played an important role. Neoplatonists also showed considerable interest in the sun. In short, solar cult was more important than ever before, or so it would seem.<sup>1</sup> But is the evidence quite so clear-cut, or have scholars attributed more significance to the cult of Sol than it deserves? Questions have been raised over the importance of Sol to Julian, for example, and it is now stressed that in general Julian was more traditional in his approach to paganism and that in particular Cybele was of greater importance to him than Mithras or Sol.<sup>2</sup> Aurelian too has recently been deemed to be less of an innovator and more of a traditionalist.<sup>3</sup>

We begin our discussion at the end, so to say, with the demise of paganism. As we have already seen, Wallraff (2001) makes a strong case for significant influence of what he sometimes terms "solar theology" on early Christianity.<sup>4</sup> Naturally this raises the issue of the nature and scope of that solar theology. That in itself is not Wallraff's topic and therefore he relies on existing research to make sense of it, but he does so critically and with a sharp eye for the weaknesses of the overall consensus concerning Sol and his cult. I still disagree with the picture he paints of solar cult, but not in a manner that undermines the main thrust of his study. On the contrary, I believe that my own emerging understanding of the various forms of solar divinity and cosmology actually strengthen Wallraff's main argument, albeit with different nuances. But that is not something that can be dealt with here.

The traditional paradigm of a dominant solar cult in the final phase of Roman paganism obviously offers Wallraff a ready-made narrative to discuss and explain the phenomena in contemporary Christian theology that are his main object of study. Rather than embrace this narrative, however, Wallraff raises critical questions about key elements. These questions extend even to some of the most widely accepted examples of "solar" influence on Christianity, including the most famous of all: the role of solar cult in the genesis of Christmas. The argument,

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<sup>1</sup> Fauth 1995; Wallraff 2001, 29-39; Berrens 2004. On the so-called pagan renaissance, cf. Bloch 1963; MacMullen 1997; Dillon 2007. For specific examples: Witt 1997, 179-80.

<sup>2</sup> Julian as a solar syncretist: Athanassiadi-Fowden 1981; Julian as traditionalist, and importance of Cybele: Smith 1995.

<sup>3</sup> Berrens 2004, 115-123.

<sup>4</sup> For *Solar-Theologie* see Wallraff 2001, 36. Wallraff's approach to solar cult in the Roman world is nuanced and carefully argued. For general remarks and *caveats* cf. in particular Wallraff 2001, 14.

first systematically set out by Usener,<sup>5</sup> is well-known: the cult of Sol was so powerful in the early fourth century, and so alluring to Christians as well as pagans, that the Church Fathers felt it necessary to neutralize the celebration of the birthday of Sol on the (traditional) winter solstice on December 25<sup>th</sup> by setting that day for the celebration of the birth of Christ. We will begin this chapter with an exploration of that idea and show that the role of Sol in religious terms has been exaggerated. This will clear the way for us to then shift our focus to the role of Sol in the latter part of the third century AD. We end with Constantine and the importance of Sol during the first part of his reign.

### **The Winter Solstice and the birthday of Christ<sup>6</sup>**

It is well-known that we don't know the exact date of birth of Jesus Christ. In most churches December 25<sup>th</sup> is celebrated as such, although many Orthodox Christians retain January 6<sup>th</sup> - Epiphany. But the fact is that the date was not recorded. The whole question of the exact date of Christ's birthday appears to have arisen only when Christian chronographers began writing their chronologies. Obviously, the birthday of Christ had to be established in such chronologies, and numerous dates were proposed. Clement of Alexandria, for instance mentions (and dismisses) proposals that Christ was born on April 19<sup>th</sup> or May 20<sup>th</sup> and himself calculated the date as November 17, 3 BC.<sup>7</sup> Other suggested dates included March 28 and April 2, but not December 25<sup>th</sup>.<sup>8</sup> None of the dates were influential, or enjoyed any official recognition. Their basis varied from learned calculations to pure guess-work.<sup>9</sup> It was only in the 330s, apparently, that December 25<sup>th</sup> was first promoted as a feast day celebrating the birthday of Christ. Initially, this happened only in Rome, but in the 380s it is attested as such in Asia Minor as well, and by the 430s in Egypt.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, other churches, as we have seen, continued to maintain Epiphany - January 6<sup>th</sup> - as the birthday of Christ, and do so to this day.

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<sup>5</sup> Usener 1889, reprinted in Usener 1911. Cf. two essays by P.E. Jablonski (1693-1757), most easily accessible in the Water 1803-1814, vol. 3, 317-376, that in many ways foreshadow Usener's study.

<sup>6</sup> This section is based in Hijmans 2003, supplemented by Wallraff 2001, which I had not yet been able to obtain when my article was submitted..

<sup>7</sup> Clement, *Misc.* I, 21; cf. Cullmann 1956, 22-3 n.6.

<sup>8</sup> March 28: cf. *infra*; April 2: Hippolytos, *Dan.* 4,23, ms. A; Hippolytos calculated Christ's year of birth as AD 8 because that would make it 5500 years after creation as he calculated it - despite the fact that as a result Christ would have been crucified under Caligula rather than Tiberius. Cullmann (1956, 22 n.5), Kraabel (1982, 274, citing Cullmann), and the *EEC s.v.* Christmas (p. 206) all claim that as early as 221 Julius Africanus calculated the date as December 25<sup>th</sup> in his fragmentarily preserved Chronicle, but provide no reference. Wallraff, who directed the project that recently produced the first critical edition of all preserved fragments of the corpus of Julius Africanus (Wallraff 2007), has kindly informed me that he does not know of any such calculation by Africanus.

<sup>9</sup> The *De Pascha Computus*, for instance, written in AD 243, argued that Creation began with the vernal equinox, i.e. March 25th, and that the Sun, created on the fourth day, was therefore created on March 28th. This obviously meant that Christ, the new "Sun of Righteousness" must have been born on March 28th. To support these dates the author proclaimed explicitly that he had been inspired *ab ipso Deo*. Cullmann 1956, 21-2.

<sup>10</sup> On the date of the earliest mention of December 25<sup>th</sup> as birthday of Christ, cf. Wallraff 2001, 179-182.

It is usually suggested that establishing a feast day on the birthday of Christ became important as a result of doctrinal disputes concerning the human and divine natures of Christ. There had been numerous groups that argued for a strong distinction between the two. For example, in the second century the Basilideans taught that the divine Christ appeared on Epiphany to reside temporarily in the body of the human Christ. In their view, the date of birth of the human Jesus was of no interest, as he was only temporarily “host” to the divine Christ. Two centuries later the Manicheans went further, claiming that Jesus either was not born at all, or anyhow did not take flesh of the Virgin Mary, but simply appeared among men - on Epiphany. One can easily imagine how the feast of Epiphany could be linked exclusively to the divine aspect of Christ, which was somehow “revealed” on January 6<sup>th</sup>. If the church were to celebrate Epiphany only, but not the birth of Christ, that could be seen to emphasize that there was indeed a distinction of importance between the two natures of Christ, human (birth, unimportant) and divine (Epiphany, important). Developing a feast for the birthday of Christ was a reaction to these views, counteracting such dichotomies by stressing the importance of the physical birth of Jesus.<sup>11</sup>

But why was the birth date set at December 25<sup>th</sup>, rather than March 28<sup>th</sup>, for instance, or one of those other dates previously proposed? As Heim (1999, 651) states, it is now almost universally accepted “que la date de Noël a été fixée au 25 décembre pour opposer les festivités chrétiennes aux festivités paiennes...”, the pagan festivities being those celebrating the winter solstice. According to the famous *Calendar of 354*, 30 chariot races were held on this day to celebrate the *Natalis Invicti*, that is the birthday of Sol Invictus.<sup>12</sup> This feast of Sol Invictus, then, would be the festival that the Church fathers wanted to displace with Christmas. And indeed, ever since Usener’s studies of the feast of Christmas, the idea that December 25<sup>th</sup> was chosen as Christ’s birthday to counteract this important pagan festival has received wide acceptance.<sup>13</sup>

Usener referred to two sources in particular to support his contention that the 25<sup>th</sup> of December, the winter solstice, was consciously chosen because of its pagan feast for the invincible sun. The first is a scholiast to the Syriac author Bar Salibi, whom Usener (1905, 466) quotes as writing:

“Die Ursache, weshalb die Väter das Fest des 6. Januar (Epiphanie) abänderten und auf den 25. Dezember verlegten, war folgende. Nach feierlichem Herkommen pflügten die Heiden am 25. Dec. das Geburtsfest des Sonnengotts (wörtlicher: das Fest des Aufgangs

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Cullmann 1956, 30. Kraabel (1982, 276-8) discusses the lack of interest in Christ’s birth displayed by the infancy gospels, such as the Protevangelium of James. He emphasizes the importance of a feast celebrating the birth of Christ (and thus his incarnation) to counter the views of docetism, of Arius, and later of Apollinaris and Nestorius, and suggests that it was no chance that the strongly anti-Arian Julius I (337-352) was bishop in Rome precisely at the time that Christmas was first celebrated there.

<sup>12</sup> Stern 1953, 108, 110, 254, 285; Salzman 1990, 149-153.

<sup>13</sup> Usener 1889; 1905; Cullmann 1953; Heim 1999, 651-2 (with refs.). Kraabel (1982, 277-8) lists three possible reasons: actual belief in the date, synchronicity, and *Realpolitik*. He suggests that insofar as *Realpolitik* played a role, it was not merely the replacement of a Solar festival which was at stake, but more generally the construction of a uniform, coherent Christian calendar. For a fuller overview of the main studies on this topic cf. Wallraff 2001, 174-5 n.2.

der Sonne) zu feiern und zur Erhöhung der Festlichkeit Lichter anzuzünden. An diesen festlichen Bräuchen liessen sie auch das Christenvolk theilnehmen. Da nun die Lehrer der Kirche die Wahrnehmung machten, dass die Christen an diesem (heidnischen) Feste hiengen, kamen sie nach reiflicher Erwägung zu dem Entschluss, an diesem Tage (25. Dec.) fortan das Fest des wahren Aufgangs (dh. Geburt), am 6. Januar aber das Fest der Erscheinung (Epiphanie) zu feiern. Und diesen Brauch haben sie bis zum heutigen Tage zugleich mit der Sitte, Lichter anzuzünden, festgehalten”.

We will return to this passage below.

The second passage comes from a homily referred to by Usener as the *De solstitiis et aequinoctiis*, the full title of which is: *De solstitia et aequinoctia conceptionis et nativitatis Domini Nostri Iesu Christi et Iohannis Baptistae* (On the solstice and equinox of the conception and birth of Our Lord Jesus Christ and John the Baptist).<sup>14</sup> Towards the end, we read about the winter solstice:

“sed et invicti natalem apellant. quis utique tam invictus nisi dominus noster qui mortem subactam devicit? vel quod dicant solis esse natalem ipse est sol iustitiae de quo malachias propheta dixit: *orietur vobis timentibus nomen ipsius sol iustitiae et sanitas est in pennis eius.*”<sup>15</sup>

According to Usener these two passages indicate with surprising openness how Christmas was created by church politics to “take over” a dangerous pagan feast of great significance, and as Heim has indicated, most scholars since have followed this line. In doing so, scholars have invariably linked this supplanting of the cult of the sun to the pervasive use of the sun as metaphor for Christ in early Christian literature, in which he is often referred to as “Sol verus”, “Sol Justitiae”, etc.<sup>16</sup> Nonetheless, Usener’s position raises fundamental questions, and Wallraff (2001, 174-195) is therefore significantly more cautious. He warns that in order to understand what impact, if any, Roman solar concepts had on the Christian adoption of December 25<sup>th</sup> as the birthday of Christ, we must first establish what kind of solar festival was celebrated on December 25<sup>th</sup>, how old it was, and what it is that we mean when we say that the feast was “taken over” by Christians.<sup>17</sup>

There can be no doubt that the church fathers who elected to celebrate December 25<sup>th</sup> as the day of birth of Christ were fully aware of the significance that day had in cosmological terms as winter solstice, as well as of any pagan festivals that may have been associated with it. The

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<sup>14</sup> There is no critical edition available of the homily, but Botte (1932) gives the full text, based on his collation of a limited number of manuscripts.

<sup>15</sup> Usener translates: “Aber man nennt den Tag auch Geburtsfest des *Invictus*. Ja wer ist denn so unbesiegbar ausser unserem Herrn, der den Tod siegreich unterworfen hat? Und wenn man sagt, es sei der Geburtstag der Sonne, nun er selbst ist die Sonne der Gerechtigkeit, von dem der Prophet Malachias gesagt hat: “Aufgehn wird euch, wenn ihr seinen Namen fürchtet, die Sonne der Gerechtigkeit, und Heil ist in ihren Schwingen”. Botte 1932, p. 105 lines 434-439.

<sup>16</sup> Encyclopedia of Early Christianity 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1998, s.v. “Christmas”; RAC s.v. Geburtstag sp. 239; cf. RAC s.v. Epiphanie; Heim 1999, 651, with refs.; Wallraff 2001, 174-195.

<sup>17</sup> Wallraff 2001, 174. Wallraff (2001, 194) rejects a direct pagan influence on the choice of Christmas.

question is whether they chose it *because of* or *despite* that significance and, possibly, those festivities. If we ignore, for a moment, the two sources quoted by Usener – both will prove to be less conclusive than they may appear at first glance – and if we accept that the decision to celebrate Christ’s birth with a separate feast was primarily a post-Nicaean move designed to emphasize the incarnation of Christ - a move taken in the context of the struggle against the Arians and other, comparable groups - the adoption of December 25<sup>th</sup> as the birthday of Christ could be seen to be primarily an intra-faith (Christian versus Christian) polemical move, rather than an inter-faith (Christian versus pagan) one, with the initiative (and therefore the risk) on the side of those breaking with tradition, i.e. the anti-Arians. They would need strong arguments to defend their move against the inevitable opposition, and one can easily imagine the problems they would face if their main reason for choosing December 25<sup>th</sup> was the fact that it was the date of a dangerous pagan feast.

Of course, it remains equally possible that the move was initially a relatively insignificant, local development in Rome, which was not directed explicitly against the Arians or other Christian groups, and which for a significant time had little impact beyond the city. Seen from the Christian perspective, the latter scenario would leave more opportunity for the move to have been directed explicitly against a popular pagan feast or practice in Rome, *in casu* the celebrations in honour of Sol Invictus, with the prestige of Rome and her bishop contributing to the subsequent adoption of December 25<sup>th</sup> elsewhere. However, whichever scenario one considers intrinsically more likely from a Christian perspective on the choice, it is obvious that the nature of the pagan feast in honour of Sol which is recorded for December 25<sup>th</sup> will have played some role in the considerations, and it is to this that we must now turn.

From Usener (1905) to Heim (1999), all scholars who argue that Christmas was instituted to counteract the feast of December 25<sup>th</sup> in honour of Sol emphasize the strongly pagan nature of that feast and the great importance and popularity of the cult of Sol Invictus in late antiquity. Little evidence is offered for the former contention, beyond reference to the 30 chariot races in honour of Sol recorded for that day in the Calendar of Filocalus (the man for whom the *Calendar of 354* was made). The latter contention, however, is generally supported by extensive discussions on the nature and importance of Sol Invictus. Heim typically dedicates over half his article to a substantial review of the cult of Sol Invictus in the Roman Empire (pp. 640-645), and the continuing influence of the sun god after Constantine (pp. 645-651).<sup>18</sup> These reviews are invariably rooted in the old paradigm that saw the cult of Sol Invictus as Syrian, introduced to Rome by Aurelian, and of major importance in the next decades. The subtext for this paradigm is the notion that traditional polytheism was by this time moribund and that a syncretistic or henotheistic solar theology was the last, best, and from a Christian perspective most dangerous, pagan response to the inexorable rise of Christian monotheism.

I have argued throughout this book that the old paradigms for the understanding of the history and nature of the sun god in Rome and the Roman Empire are simply untenable. It is therefore obvious that we must not rely on arguments based on the old paradigms, nor should it surprise us to find that, upon examination, the notion that the cult of Sol in late Antiquity

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<sup>18</sup> The rest of his article (651-666) is devoted to 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> c. homilies in which reference is made to the winter solstice - December 25, birth of Christ - and the summer solstice.

represented a new pagan religion that potentially threatened to thwart Christianity, is not supported by any clear evidence.

The contention that December 25<sup>th</sup> was an especially popular festival for Sol in late antiquity is equally unfounded, as is as the notion that this festival was established by Aurelian when he supposedly instituted a new cult of the sun. Aurelian did of course build the sun a magnificent new temple and he raised the priests of Sol to the level of *pontifices*. A new festival on December 25<sup>th</sup> would not have been out-of-place in this context, but it must be stressed, *pace* Usener, that there is no evidence that Aurelian instituted a celebration of Sol on that day. A feast day for Sol on December 25<sup>th</sup> is not mentioned until eighty years later, in the Calendar of 354 and, subsequently, in 362 by Julian in his *Oration to King Helios*.<sup>19</sup>

In short, while the winter solstice on or around the 25<sup>th</sup> of December was well established in the Roman imperial calendar, there is no evidence that a religious celebration of Sol on that day antedated the celebration of Christmas, and none that indicates that Aurelian had a hand in its institution.<sup>20</sup> One might think that celebrating the sun on the winter solstice is so self-evident that we need hardly doubt that such a festival had a long tradition, but what evidence we have actually belies that notion. The traditional feast days of Sol, as recorded in the early imperial *fasti*, were August 8<sup>th</sup> and/or August 9<sup>th</sup>, possibly August 28<sup>th</sup>, and December 11<sup>th</sup>.<sup>21</sup> These are all dates that are unrelated to any important celestial alignment of Sol, such as the solstices and equinoxes.

Of these traditional dates only August 28 is mentioned in the Calendar of 354, along with December 25<sup>th</sup>, and multi-day games from October 19<sup>th</sup> to October 22<sup>nd</sup>, the latter being the most important, judging by the unparalleled 36 chariot races with which it was celebrated.<sup>22</sup> There is

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<sup>19</sup> *Or.* 11 (4), 42-3. Cf. Wallraff 2001, 175. An astronomical calendar from Egypt, attributed to Antiochus of Athens, states for December 25<sup>th</sup>: “birthday of the sun; light increases”, but this brief comment is difficult to evaluate, for we do not know when Antiochus lived, do not know if the calendar has been correctly attributed to him, cannot be sure that the words did not enter the text at a later date as a gloss, and in any case cannot interpret this as more than an indication of the winter solstice, as the calendar does not list any religious festivals. Cf. Boll 1910, 7-10; Wallraff 2001, 176.

<sup>20</sup> On G. Wissowa’s (1912, 367) contention that the festival was instituted by Aurelian, cf. Wallraff 2001, 176-7 n. 12; Salzman 1990, 151 n. 106; Heim 1999, 643 with refs. There is no explicit evidence stating that the feast of December 25<sup>th</sup> was instituted by Aurelian. In fact the calendar of 354, supplemented by Julian’s hymn to Helios, is our only conclusive evidence for an official feast day in honour of Sol on that day. On the evidence currently available we cannot exclude the possibility that, for instance, the 30 chariot races held in honor of Sol on December 25<sup>th</sup> were instituted in reaction to the Christian claim of December 25<sup>th</sup> as the birthday of Christ. In general, the extent to which late pagan festivals copied, incorporated, or responded to Christian practices, elements, and dates deserves far more attention than it has received; cf. Bowersock 1990, 26-7, 44-53.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Degraffi 1963, 493 (August 8, 9), 503 (Aug. 28), 535-6 (Dec. 11). All dates based on the early imperial *Fasti*-inscriptions. We have no comparable sources for festival dates in the city of Rome for the period between the last *fasti* (mid-first c. AD) and the Calendar of 354. In the *Feriale Duranum*, a Roman military calendar from Dura Europos, produced around AD 227, Sol is not mentioned.

<sup>22</sup> *Chronica Urbis Romae* (ed. Valentini & Zucchetti) 279.4; *Chronica St. Hieronymi* (ed. Helm) 223. Both sources are quoted by Salzman (1981, 222 n. 37). There is no evidence that the *agones Solis* were first celebrated on December 25<sup>th</sup>, as Wissowa (1912, 367) believes (cf. Salzman 1981, 223 n. 45). See also Scullard 1981 203; Stern 1953, 110; Salzman 1990, 149-153.

direct evidence that in AD 274 Aurelian instituted quadrennial *agones* in honour of Sol, and the Calendar of 354 would seem to suggest that they were held from October 19<sup>th</sup> - 22<sup>nd</sup>, culminating in those 36 chariot races on October 22<sup>nd</sup>.<sup>23</sup> Nonetheless many scholars persist in preferring December 25<sup>th</sup> for Aurelian's *agones*.<sup>24</sup> The argument rests solely on Julian or IV, 156C where he states that the "most magnificent *agon*" for Sol is celebrated at the end of December right after the Saturnalia. "Damit kann eigentlich nur der aurelianische *agon Solis* gemeint gewesen sein" according to Berrens (2004, 109), citing various scholars. The argument for rejecting October 19<sup>th</sup> - 22<sup>nd</sup> is concisely presented by Mommsen in his publication of the Calendar of 354. Commenting on the *ludi* of October 19<sup>th</sup> - 22<sup>nd</sup> Mommsen states:

“Origo incerta. De agone Solis, quem teste chronographo a. 354 et Hieronymo instituit Aurelianus noli cogitare; agones enim diversi fuerunt a ludis neque illi celebrabantur nisi quarto quoque anno.”<sup>25</sup>

Technically, there was indeed a difference between *ludi* and *agones*, at least in the late Republic and early Empire. Whether that distinction was still maintained in 354 is unclear. The Calendar of 354 lists a number of *ludi* but no *agones*, and it seems to me hard to argue that in terms of word-choice the *natalis Invicti* of December 25<sup>th</sup> refers more accurately to the *agon Solis* of our other sources than the *ludi Solis* of October 19<sup>th</sup>-22<sup>nd</sup>. It is also not clear to me which point Mommsen wishes to make with the fact that the games were celebrated only once every four years. Assuming that the *agon Solis* was first held in AD 274, they would have been held in 354 (Calendar) as well as 362 (date of Julian's hymn).

It is towards the end of Julian's hymn that we find the clinching argument against December 25<sup>th</sup> as date of Aurelian's quadrennial *agones*. Julian explicitly differentiates these *agones* (plural) for Sol, which he characterizes as "recent", with the most impressive *agon* (singular) for Sol Invictus that he had just celebrated on the winter solstice, and which he ascribes to Numa.<sup>26</sup> We can ignore that attribution, which is nonsense,<sup>27</sup> but can there be any doubt that the quadrennial *agones* of recent invention that he mentions were the quadrennial games instituted by Aurelian 88 years previously?<sup>28</sup> We certainly have no evidence that there were

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<sup>23</sup> Salzman 1990, 150 (with refs.).

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Berrens 2004, 107-9.

<sup>25</sup> CIL I<sup>2</sup> p. 355. "Origin uncertain. One should not think of the *agon Solis* which, according to the chronographer of 354 and Jerome, Aurelian had founded, for *agones* differed from *ludi*, and they were celebrated every fourth year.

<sup>26</sup> Julian or IV, 41-3

<sup>27</sup> There is no evidence of earlier celebrations of Sol on December 25<sup>th</sup> to back up Julian's claim, and his explanation for the date - a few days after the astronomical solstice (in Julian's day) - is hopelessly convoluted and clearly fabricated as it would not make any sense in the pre-Julian calendar of Numa's day.

<sup>28</sup> Julian describes the *agones* as τετραετηρικός (quadrennial) which technically might mean that the games were held every *three* years in view of the Roman practice of inclusive counting (the Olympic games are generally referred to as πεντετηρικός in antiquity). But the word is late - aside from Men. Rh. 367.7 (Spengel) this is the earliest instance - and used regularly to describe the Olympics or other quadrennial games (cf. Theodoret,

multiple quadrennial games for Sol. Julian clearly considers the *agon* he ascribes to Numa to be unrelated to these quadrennial *agones*, and yet Aurelian's games would have been celebrated in 362 for the 23<sup>rd</sup> time. This must mean that they had been celebrated at a different time, and thus we can rule out December 25<sup>th</sup> as the date of Aurelian's *agones* for Sol.

A closer look at the four-day *ludi* for Sol entered in the Calendar of 354 for October 19<sup>th</sup> - 22<sup>nd</sup> provides us with additional evidence that these must be the games instituted by Aurelian. Our sources are quite clear on the novelty of these quadrennial *agones*, but they give no indication whether they were an expansion of a pre-existing, annual, festival in honour of Sol or were something altogether new. There is circumstantial evidence for the former possibility, because although the early imperial *fasti* do not indicate a festival specifically in honour of Sol for October 19<sup>th</sup>, they do record an *armilustrium* for that day. We know very little about this festival beyond the fact that it formed act two of the ritual ending of the fighting season - act one being the sacrifice of the "October horse" on October 15<sup>th</sup> - and that it consisted of the ritual cleansing of the weapons. The *Salii*, priests of Mars, played a major role in the *armilustrium*, which centered on an area of the Aventine with the same name. The *armilustrium* may have been restricted to that spot, but if Rüpke is right in linking it to the *Equus October*, it seems likely that a circus was also one of the venues. The "October horse" was the right-hand horse of the winning chariot in a race of *bigae* held on the *ides* of October. It was sacrificed to Mars immediately after the race at an altar *ad nixas* or *ad ciconias nixas*.<sup>29</sup> We do not know where these *biga*-races were held. In earlier times the *Campus Martius* seems the most likely location, but if the festival was important enough to draw a large crowd, the Circus Maximus would be a logical choice. It was the nearest racecourse to the *armilustrium* as well as the largest of the city. The circus, of course, was closely linked to Sol and prior to Aurelian the Circus Maximus was site of arguably the most important temple dedicated to him.<sup>30</sup> There is, furthermore, some evidence for shrines of Sol linked to other circuses as well.<sup>31</sup> Given the probable location of at least some of these martial rites in a circus or perhaps even the Circus Maximus, it is conceivable, perhaps even likely, that some celebration of Sol became associated with them. And even if that was not the case, it was symbolically powerful to celebrate the defeat of Zenobia with *agones* for Sol directly linked to the *armilustrium*.<sup>32</sup> Be that as it may, while the *armilustrium* is not specifically named in the Calendar of 354, the October horse is (*equus ad nixas fit*, October 15), on the third day of a six-

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*Graecarum affectionum curatio* 7,15, referring to the Nemean games).

<sup>29</sup> Rüpke 1990, 25-8; Bennett Pascal 1981. The location was long thought to be near the "perching storks" (*ciconiae nixae*) in regio IX, apparently near the upper Tiber harbour, roughly between the Ponte Umberto I and the Ponte Cavour (Bennet Pascal 1981, 285-6). More recently, it has been argued that the *ciconiae* and the *nixae* refer to separate places, both in the same general region; cf. Palmer 1990, 32-4, 53-7.

<sup>30</sup> Degrassi 1963, 532-4.

<sup>31</sup> Giordani 1988.

<sup>32</sup> In the context of the circus, *bigae* would, or at least could, have been associated with Luna. To expand the festive rituals associated with the end of the war-season with races of Sol-associated *quadrigae* would make sense, particularly in this context.

day *ludi* for Jupiter Liberator, whose temple stood on the Aventine.<sup>33</sup> This festival was followed immediately by the four-day *ludi* for Sol.

To summarize, the Calendar of 354 mentions the following three festivals of Sol:

- August 28: Sol and Luna; 24 chariot races;
- October 19-22: *Ludi Solis*, 36 chariot races;
- December 25: *Natalis Invicti*, 30 chariot races.

The standard norm for Roman festivals at this time was 24 chariot races. Of the 63 race-days listed in the Calendar of 354, 59 had 24 races, the only exceptions being February 25<sup>th</sup> and June 1<sup>st</sup>, when only 12 races were held, December 25<sup>th</sup> with 30 races, and October 22<sup>nd</sup> with 36 races.<sup>34</sup> The 36 chariot races of October 22 thus represent the highest number of the year, which further suggests that this was not an annual, but a rarer, quadrennial celebration.<sup>35</sup>

This means that in the early fourth century, when Christmas was established by the church on December 25<sup>th</sup>, anyone surveying the calendar of festivities in honour of Sol would identify the period from October 19<sup>th</sup> to October 22<sup>nd</sup> as far more important than December 25<sup>th</sup>, and the festival of August 28<sup>th</sup> as far older.<sup>36</sup> If the aim was to “neutralize” the cult of Sol by “taking over” its major festival, December 25<sup>th</sup> seems the least likely choice. It is true, of course, that December 25<sup>th</sup>, the *natalis invicti*, was the traditional date for the winter solstice and as such the most logical of the three dates to serve as *birthday* of Christ, if that was the way the “selection process” went. But this leads us to a different consideration. As we have seen, none of the traditional religious feast days for Sol were connected in any way with a specific astronomical date, such as one of the solstices or equinoxes. Yet we know from the abundance of iconographic and other evidence that astronomical dates and phenomena such as the solstices and equinoxes played an important role in Roman society from at least the 1<sup>st</sup> c. BC onwards. One need but think of the numerous depictions of seasons, zodiacs, calendars and planetary gods representing the days of the week, already quite prominent in Pompeian art in the early first century AD, and popular throughout the Roman imperial period. The *parapegmata* (peg-calendars) discovered throughout the empire further attest to the pervasive influence of such concepts as the seven-day planetary week.<sup>37</sup> This evidence is suggestive, because it indicates that there was great interest in the astronomical, astrological and calendrical aspects of the sun, *sol*, as heavenly body, without these being central to the cult calendar of the Roman Sun god, *Sol*.

All this makes it clear that the anomalies surrounding the *natalis invicti* (birthday of the invincible one) on December 25<sup>th</sup> are quite striking. We have already seen that this is one of only

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<sup>33</sup> *LTUR* s.v. “Armilustrum” (Andreussi).

<sup>34</sup> The 48 races of November 8<sup>th</sup> are actually two festivals of 24 races, for Nerva and Constantius respectively, who happened to share the same *natalis*.

<sup>35</sup> The first *agones* of Sol were held in AD 274, meaning that the 21<sup>st</sup> *agones* were held in AD 254, the year for which the calendar of Filocalus was produced.

<sup>36</sup> I am assuming some sort of reduced celebration for Sol in the years between *agones* on October 19<sup>th</sup> or thereabout, but this is speculative.

<sup>37</sup> On the Republican origin of the seven-day week in Rome, cf. Brind’amour 1983, 256-265.

four festivals in the calendar (out of 63) not to have the canonical 24 chariot races. What is more, it is the only race day of the year on which the number of chariot races was not a multiple of twelve. A further anomaly is the fact that the calendar here also does not mention Sol by name, as it does for August 28<sup>th</sup>, October 19<sup>th</sup> and October 22<sup>nd</sup>, but only by epithet *invictus*. In the calendar the term *natalis* (anniversary or celebration<sup>38</sup>), which can be used for emperors,<sup>39</sup> gods and heroes,<sup>40</sup> and even events,<sup>41</sup> is invariably followed by the primary name or term used to identify the emperor, god, or event whose *natalis* is celebrated. The single exception to this rule is here. Add to this that the date celebrated, the winter solstice of the Julian calendar, while astronomically important, had no significance that we know of in the Roman religious practices associated with the sun god, and it clear that the entry for December 25<sup>th</sup> is in every way problematic.

The only other reference to a solar festival on December 25<sup>th</sup> is Julian's Hymn to King Helios, and as we have seen, it too is not without problems. In particular, Julian tries rather too hard, and with untenable arguments, to convince us that the winter-solstice *Sol-agon* had been celebrated in Rome since Numa. This suggests that the opposite may have been true and that a festival for Sol on December 25<sup>th</sup> was actually quite new. This could explain the anomalies of the entry for December 25<sup>th</sup> in the calendar of 354, as it may then be a later insertion into the existing template for the calendar.<sup>42</sup> It would also explain why December 25<sup>th</sup> was the sole festival of Sol to fall on an astronomically significant date. None of this tells us when the *natalis invicti* of December 25<sup>th</sup> entered the Roman calendar, but on this evidence we must acknowledge that it is a real possibility that it did not do so until after the bishop of Rome first celebrated Christmas on that day - a pagan reaction to a Christian feast, perhaps, rather than vice versa.<sup>43</sup>

### **Christianizing assumptions**

All this casts doubt on the contention that Christmas was instituted on December 25<sup>th</sup> to counteract a popular pagan religious festival, doubts that are reinforced when one looks at the underlying understanding of Sol and his cult. It is clear that this cult in particular has often been viewed in essentially the same terms as Christianity. Scholars such as Halsberghe present the cult as a henotheistic, almost monotheistic religion which venerated Sol as the supreme deity (or

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<sup>38</sup> Salzman 1981, 223 n. 45.

<sup>39</sup> Jan. 20, 24, etc.

<sup>40</sup> Febr. 1<sup>st</sup>, March 1<sup>st</sup>, etc.

<sup>41</sup> Jan. 25<sup>th</sup> (*natalis chartis* (referring apparently to the arrival of papyrus in Rome), May 18<sup>th</sup>, *natalis annonis*.

<sup>42</sup> It is worth noting that while the summer solstice is entered in the calendar (solstitium, June 24<sup>th</sup>), there is no comparable entry for the winter solstice in December. This represents another element of inconsistency associated with December 25<sup>th</sup>, providing further circumstantial evidence that the original calendar or template was modified with the insertion of new festival on that day.

<sup>43</sup> Wallraff 2001, 175.

the brightest manifestation of the supreme deity), and which strove hard to attain universal acceptance within the Roman Empire.<sup>44</sup> As we have seen, the common narrative has been that after Heliogabalus's initial failure to do so, solar religion was successfully promoted under Aurelian, resulting in the acceptance of Sol as the most important Roman god for the next half century until the reign of Constantine. Under the impetus of Christianity the cult subsequently disappeared rapidly, although it enjoyed a short revival under Julian. It is this narrative that forms the backdrop for the notion that with the establishment of Christmas on December 25<sup>th</sup>, Christ trumped Sol.

In every respect this picture is very unrealistic. To begin with there is the sociologically problematic notion of a god, with an apparently suspect past (under Heliogabalus 218-222), being "established" at a stroke of the pen as supreme deity by one emperor (Aurelian, 270-275). Could Sol really have been accepted as such by "the Empire" (whatever that may mean) to such a degree that his cult became a serious competitor for Christianity? After all, this cult is said to have retained its position of dominance for a mere fifty years (until Constantine, 313-337), only to disappear again as rapidly as it was thought to have surfaced. As an analysis of the role and influence of solar cult, this approach lacks internal logic and cohesion. Think about it: there was no solar cult in Rome, we were told, until Aurelian brought back from Syria a previously discredited cult in AD 274. Roman polytheism was by then so fickle,<sup>45</sup> that Romans immediately allow this oriental god to supplant older, Roman deities such as Jupiter Optimus Maximus as the "most important" (whatever that may mean in a polytheist context) god of the empire. Yet those same fickle Romans who in 274 readily downgraded the old and hallowed Roman cults in favor of a new and oriental one, were said to have so tenaciously maintained their ("old"? "new"?) solar festivals in the 330s and beyond that church leaders felt obliged to neutralize the threat of those ("entrenched"?) practices by imposing Christian feast days on the pagan ones.

This cannot work. But let me stress that I am not, at this point, any longer taking issue with the perceived facts, with which we have already dealt adequately in previous chapters. To my mind it is the basic understanding of Roman polytheism which is at issue here, rather than the actual data concerning the chronology and precise nature of the cult of Sol. Not the current understanding, in modern scholarship, of Roman polytheism in general, but the outdated understanding of polytheism that underpins the notion of a briefly triumphant solar religion in fierce competition with ascendant Christianity. It is that understanding that is flawed and unrealistic, and we must keep that in mind as we continue with this chapter.

### **Christmas and the Winter Solstice**

We have already remarked on the apparent ambiguity of Sol, who is not only a god but also a

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<sup>44</sup> Solar monotheism: Halsberghe 1972, 136, Martin 1989, 8-9; spirituality of solar cult: Halsberghe 1972, 138-9 (and *passim*); competitor for Christianity: Halsberghe 1972, 154. Cf. Cumont 1929. Often the cult of Mithras, closely linked to Sol, is deemed to be the focal point of competitor with Christianity, cf. Martin 1989, 2-3, with good examples. On the problem of Christianizing assumptions in general in the study of Roman religions, *supra* chapter 2.

<sup>45</sup> Halsberghe (1972, 42) calls Roman polytheism of the 2<sup>nd</sup> c. AD an "undermined and weakened body". Cf. Cumont 1929, *passim*.

stable, predictable and visible planet. The sun played a role in the Roman world as a divine cosmic body, and Christians could deal with sol, whose cosmic nature, higher order, and reality were undeniable and whose potential for cosmic symbolism was inspiring, without necessarily dealing with the pagan god Sol, the recipient of ritual and religious cult in longstanding pagan Roman tradition. The fourth century homilies concerning the birth of Christ support this view, for while they routinely refer to the winter solstice and the like, they rarely mention (or attack) pagan feasts on December 25<sup>th</sup>. In fact, one of the earliest such homilies - if, that is, it has been correctly dated to the early 4<sup>th</sup> c. AD - is the anonymous *De solstitia et aequinoctia conceptionis et nativitatis domini nostri iesu christi et iohannis baptistae* quoted by Usener, and it makes quite clear that we should see the date of December 25<sup>th</sup> not in isolation, but as part of a cosmic-symbolic system. The author points out that the birthday of John the Baptist was exactly 6 months before that of Jesus, meaning that he was born on the summer solstice. This means that John was conceived in the autumn - on the equinox to be exact - while Jesus was conceived on the vernal equinox. Having built up and argued this cosmic symbolic system throughout his homily, the author at the very end, in the aside quoted by Usener (*supra*), deals with the problem that the winter solstice also happens to be the “birthday of [Sol] Invictus”. That Christ was born on that day can be no problem, he argues, as Christ is the true “sun of justice”.

In fact, barring the scholiast to Bar Salibi, we find no indication that a feast day of Sol played any role in the choice of December 25<sup>th</sup>, while we do find numerous references to the winter solstice and cosmic considerations.<sup>46</sup> So let us return to that scholiast. Closer consideration shows that Usener’s quotation of the passage is misleading. Not only does Usener translate “birthday of the sun *god*” (polytheist religious) where the Syriac merely states “feast day of the rising of the sun” (cosmic symbolic), but more importantly he presents the scholiast’s passage as an objective statement of fact while it is actually a polemic one. Immediately preceding the section quoted by Usener, the scholiast states:

“The Lord was born in the month of January, on the day on which we celebrate Epiphany; for the ancients celebrated the birth and epiphany on the same day, because He was born and baptized on the same day. Likewise the Armenians celebrate both feasts on the same day. One should also mention here the Doctors of the Church who speak of both feasts together.”

Only then does the scholiast continue with the words quoted by Usener: “The reason why the Church fathers transposed this feast from the 6<sup>th</sup> of January to the 25<sup>th</sup> of December is, it is said, the following...” - etc. (Usener omits the “it is said”). Clearly, the scholiast is orthodox and he rejects the date of December 25<sup>th</sup>.

One such late,<sup>47</sup> and obviously hostile, source has little value in this case. I would argue that the evidence is clear. In the Roman Empire, the divine nature of Sol was open to broad interpretation. As a heavenly body, the sun was often used - together with Luna - as a cosmic symbol or metaphor for eternity. The astronomical reality of the sun and the moon precluded such symbolism from being exclusively pagan, and the evidence of the *De solstitia et aequinoctia conceptionis et nativitatis domini nostri iesu christi et iohannis baptistae*, as well as the passages

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<sup>46</sup> Heim 1999, *passim*.

<sup>47</sup> Bar Salibi died in 1171. The date of the scholiast’s comments is unknown.

of a wide range of homilies collected by Heim (1999) suggest that it was readily adopted by Christians. It is cosmic symbolism of this type which inspired the Church leadership in Rome to elect the winter solstice, December 25, as the birthday of Christ, and the summer solstice as that of John the Baptist, supplemented by the equinoxes as their respective dates of conception. While they were aware that pagans called this day the “birthday” of Sol Invictus, this did not concern them and it did not play any role in their choice of date for Christmas.<sup>48</sup>

### **The Age of Aurelian: a Solar Century?**

This understanding of the concepts that led to the adoption of the winter solstice as an appropriate day to celebrate the birthday of Christ casts a different light on the dynamics between Christianity and solar “theology”. The question was not whether the sun was divine, in the sense of being of a higher, more perfect order. The homily *De Solstitia* affirms the significance of the key solar dates and has the solstices and equinoxes mark moments of fundamental importance to Christianity. The heavenly bodies were undeniably of a higher order, then, and debate centered on what that “divinity” meant theologically. There was no consensus on this among either early Christians or polytheists. At one end of the spectrum were monotheistic positions that demanded that only God, not his creation be revered (including those parts of his creation that were of a “higher order”), but some prominent Christian monotheists could still identify the planets as angels. At the other end were the notions expressed by, for instance, Julian or Macrobius, for whom the Sun was the father of all, the visible counterpart of the God who is not visible.<sup>49</sup> The dividing lines between the two ends of the spectrum do not coincide with dividing lines between pagan and Christian.<sup>50</sup>

We could explore the ideas expressed by philosophers, theologians, and others at length, and would find much that is of great interest of course, but little agreement on who (or what) the sun was precisely. We can safely say that the sun played a major role in the grey area between religion and philosophy, in particular in late antiquity, and in certain circles one could even speak of a philosophically inspired “solar theology”.<sup>51</sup> How large those circles were is difficult to say, but Wallraff articulates a broadly held view when he describes this solar theology as more than merely a characteristic of the final phase of Neoplatonism, and traces it back to the third century AD, which he describes as “die große Zeit der Sonnenverehrung”.<sup>52</sup> It is worth summarizing the evidence Wallraff adduces for this:

- **Astrology:** Wallraff emphasizes that astrology cannot be separated from astronomy and that it should be treated as a branch of ancient philosophy. He points out that the planets

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<sup>48</sup> The homily simply states that the day was called the birthday of Sol, but does not mention any major celebrations.

<sup>49</sup> Wallraff 2001, 29-39; Beck 2006, 166-75; Fauth 1995, *passim*.

<sup>50</sup> Beck 2006, 178-183; Wright 1995, 93-108, 163-184 (mostly dealing with pre-Roman views); Barton 1994, 111-113.

<sup>51</sup> Wallraff 2001, 36; Liebeschuetz 2001.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Liebeschuetz 2001, 187-192.

were the object of particular interest, and states that the sun held a privileged position among them, quoting Cicero and Ammianus, and referring also to Pliny, Macrobius and Jamblichus.<sup>53</sup>

- **Mystery religions:** Wallraff considers mystery religions to be a new religious phenomenon of the early empire (“neuer Frömmigkeitstyp”). The mysteries have a strongly solar cult in Mithraism, he argues, although he feels that it is not possible to establish the relationship between Mithras and Sol precisely. He suggests they constitute a syncretistic duality, similar to the long-established one between Apollo and Helios, and also characteristic of later developments around Sarapis and Dionysus. At its most extreme, syncretism becomes the type of *Theokrasie* that one finds in the early fifth century AD in Macrobius. We should understand this as an attempt to arrive at monotheism without breaking with the traditional gods, according to Wallraff.<sup>54</sup>

- In **politics**, Wallraff sees a natural affinity between *Sonnenverehrung* and monarchy. He quotes the presence of Sol on the breastplate of the Augustus of Prima porta (cat. K2a.2), coins of Trajan and Hadrian, and the like, and then turns to the cult of Sol *invictus*. He treats this as a separate but Roman form of Solar cult,<sup>55</sup> with strong military connotations expressed by the term *invictus*, which can also be used for the emperor. Sol Invictus had a “kometenhafte Aufstieg” to “zentralen Reichsgott” under Aurelian, a status which he retained until Constantine.<sup>56</sup>

- Under **magic** Wallraff also discusses theurgy, which he defines as the “intellectual wing” of magic. In theurgy he feels that we can assume a central role for Sol, pointing out that he is often invoked in magical texts. He also refers to syncretistic tendencies in magical texts, which cast a wide enough net to include Iao, the Jewish Yahwe.<sup>57</sup>

- We have already touched upon **neoplatonism** and its impact. In this context Wallraff discusses Julian’s Oration to King Helios, the *Sonnenfrömmigkeit* of Proclus (and Apollonius of Tyana), and more in general the overlap between philosophy and religion.<sup>58</sup>

Wallraff sees these various expressions of interest in Sol as interconnected - he calls them an *einheitliches Phänomen* - and states that in the third century AD there was a general “solarisation” of religious culture. This does not mean that it was a unified or unitary phenomenon, but rather one that was “programmatically diffuse”, taking place as it did in different areas of religion, but under the common impulse of syncretism. Wallraff concludes his discussion of the solarisation of late Roman paganism with a reference to the rising impact of

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<sup>53</sup> Wallraff 2001, 29-30.

<sup>54</sup> Wallraff 2001, 30-31.

<sup>55</sup> Wallraff (2001, 32-3 n. 38) rightly notes, however, that a closer analysis of the use of the term *invictus* is badly needed. I am preparing an article on this topic.

<sup>56</sup> Wallraff 2001, 31-35.

<sup>57</sup> Wallraff 2001, 36-7.

<sup>58</sup> Wallraff 2001, 35-6.

monotheism, and the “integrative potential” of solar cult in this context.<sup>59</sup>

Wallraff’s line of reasoning has a long tradition and is seductive.<sup>60</sup> It does not, however, convince me, as I feel that the evidence is less conclusive than it may appear. But more importantly, perhaps, I am not comfortable with the understanding of Roman polytheism and its evolution that is implied by this view. Therefore before I set out my reasons for rejecting this notion of widespread solarisation of the Roman religious landscape in the third century AD, I wish to take a brief look at Dura Europos, using it as a snapshot of the religious landscape of the second quarter of the third century AD in one outpost of that Empire.

### **Dura Europos and Third Century Polytheism**

Besides being well-preserved and extensively excavated and studied, Dura offers us a frontier town of some strategic importance with a significant military presence, that was destroyed in the middle of the third century. It thus offers good insight into the religions of a provincial town with a significant Roman imperial component as well as a strong local presence. We have temples and other cult buildings, religious art and artefacts, inscriptions, and as icing on the cake the *Feriale Duranum*, a papyrus containing a large portion of the official religious calendar of the Roman army as used in Dura, dating to about AD 227.<sup>61</sup> This rich evidence gives us enough information to divide the religious activities in Dura into three categories: official public cult (*Feriale Duranum*), officially sanctioned mystery cults (shrines and inscriptions documenting military involvement), and unofficial private cult (temples, shrines, dedicatory inscriptions).<sup>62</sup>

The *Feriale Duranum* gives us a good sense of the public cult: unequivocally Roman and remarkably traditional. The *natales* of the deified emperors were all celebrated of course, but venerable Roman deities were also well-represented, with the sacrifice of bulls and cows for Jupiter, Juno, and Minerva as well as Jupiter Victor, Mars Pater and Mars Victor in early January,<sup>63</sup> Mars again on March 1st,<sup>64</sup> the Capitoline triad and Mars again a few days later,<sup>65</sup> the *Quinquatria* festival (counterpart to the *Armillarium* and the October horse) mid March,<sup>66</sup> the

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<sup>59</sup> Wallraff 2001, 36-9.

<sup>60</sup> Many elements can be found in Altheim 1957, and Halsberghe 1972., both with references to earlier studies . Cf. Liebeschuetz 2001.

<sup>61</sup> The traditional view that the *Feriale Duranum* is a military calendar has recently been challenged by Reeves (2005), and probably rightly so. Whether or not it was linked to the military does not really matter to my argument here.

<sup>62</sup> I am basing my views in particular on Pollard 2000, 142-147.

<sup>63</sup> Fink *et al.* 1940, 51-66. These lines are very fragmentary and the editors lean heavily on parallel texts - notably the *Acta Fratrum Arvalium* - to reconstruct their contents.

<sup>64</sup> Fink *et al.* 1940, 82-5.

<sup>65</sup> Fink *et al.* 1940, 85-9.

<sup>66</sup> Fink *et al.* 1940, 94-9

*natalis urbis* on April 21 (with a sacrifice to Roma), the *Rosaliae Signorum* in May,<sup>67</sup> Mars again on May 12<sup>th</sup>, Vesta on June 9<sup>th</sup>, Neptune on July 23<sup>rd</sup>, and Salus on the nones of August.<sup>68</sup> The last few months are missing, so that festivals such as the October horse can only be conjectured.

One can only agree with Fink *et al.* that this list is uncompromisingly Roman. Does it represent a standardized calendar for public cult throughout the Empire? Or should we follow Reeves (2005), and see in the *feriale Duranum* a series of carefully selected Roman festivals specifically for Dura that all have local significance as well.<sup>69</sup> We do not know, but most of the festivals listed on the *Feriale Duranum* are also listed in Filocalus' calendar of 354, well over a century later, suggesting a notable degree of stability and continuity of these festivals in general, and not just at Dura.<sup>70</sup> That continuity is further underlined by the many commemorations of former emperors that the two calendars share.

The public nature of these celebrations in Rome in the mid fourth century AD is obvious given the associated chariot races. In Dura there were sacrifices rather than chariot races - sacrifices were no longer permitted in AD 354 - providing a different but no less enticing lure to participation, namely the opportunity to obtain meat (roast or raw) for personal consumption. The inhabitants of Dura had a clear incentive to attend the rituals and would thus inevitably apprehend the image of Rome and her Empire promulgated at them. This may sound cynical because it doesn't adhere to our notion of what is religious. But the Roman Empire was vast, impressive, and powerful and in Dura these rites were an important vehicle for making Rome present. One could no more be unimpressed by these rites than one could be by Rome herself and her empire.<sup>71</sup> At the same time these rites offered important opportunities to construct and differentiate identities and allegiances. The structure of local society could be reflected in them as well as shaped by them. Which patrons provided the sacrificial animals? Who spoke which words? What news (if any) from elsewhere in the Empire was officially announced? In which order did the participants receive their share of the sacrificial meat or whatever was distributed? In societies without any of the news media we take for granted, frequent public rites of official state religion constituted a forum providing an essential counterbalance to unsubstantiated rumor at all levels of society, from the strictly local to the imperial centre.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Fink *et al.* 1940, 115-120

<sup>68</sup> On all these cults cf. Reeves 2005, 113-137.

<sup>69</sup> Reeves (2005, 138 and *passim*) argues that the calendar was not military and was drawn up specifically for Dura. That does not, however, make the calendar less Roman. It has the effect of integrating Dura's religion more into Rome, for the *feriale* maintains the Roman names, Roman dates, and Roman rites.

<sup>70</sup> Possible and certain parallels with the *Feriale Duranum* include: unspecified Ludi for Jan. 3-5, Jupiter Stator on Jan. 15, Mars on March 1<sup>st</sup>, Juno on March 7<sup>th</sup>, Jupiter Cultor on March 13<sup>th</sup>, Quinquatria on March 19<sup>th</sup>, Minerva on March 21<sup>st</sup>, the *natalis Urbis* on April 21<sup>st</sup>, the ludi Florales of April 30<sup>th</sup> to May 3<sup>rd</sup>, Mars on May 12<sup>th</sup>, Vesta on June 9<sup>th</sup>, Neptune on July 23<sup>rd</sup>, and Salus on August 5<sup>th</sup>.

<sup>71</sup> The importance of rite, in Roman religion, is well-articulated by King 2002, 299: "For the orthoprax Pagans, carefully performed rituals, not carefully purified sets of beliefs, were what the deities desired."

<sup>72</sup> Cf. e.g. Rives 1999, 145.

To an important degree, then, these state rites may be understood to have been impressive, relevant, and integrated into Dura society. They may not have constituted “religion” as we understand it, but they were explicitly religious in Roman terms and as such played an important role in shaping what constituted “religion” in the Roman world in the third century AD. They did not do so alone, for these public rites formed only one branch of what we have identified as at least a tripartite religious experience with comparable roles for mystery cults and a rich palette of local ones.

Roman soldiers were directly responsible for the building of three temples at Dura. In the case of one temple we do not know to which deity it was dedicated; the other two were for Mithras and for Jupiter Dolichenus. Whether any of these sanctuaries were exclusively military is impossible to say. Pollard believes that they were, but Reeves points out that the evidence is simply not conclusive.<sup>73</sup> What is clear, however, is that all three represented a *Roman* element in Dura - the veneer of non-Romanness of Mithras and Jupiter Dolichenus notwithstanding - closely linked to the military.<sup>74</sup>

A range of temples to local and regional deities also flourished in Dura, attracting not only the local population but soldiers as well.<sup>75</sup> Many of these temples pre-dated Roman rule in Dura, and although not all pre-Roman temples flourished under Rome, there can be no doubt that the local religious cults remained lively, attracting a wide variety of worshipers, including soldiers. This wide variety of cults included Judaism, with a substantial synagogue, while a Christian community in Dura had a house-church that, though modest on the outside, was extensively decorated on the inside.

This snapshot of religious activity at Dura suggests it was dynamic and varied. It bears out the growing consensus of the last few decades of scholarship that has moved us away from the old notion that traditional religions could no longer inspire and had become little more than an empty shell, waiting to be smashed.<sup>76</sup> It is relevant to our discussion because it calls into question the determinist evolutionary model for the rise of Christianity which treats monotheism as intrinsically superior to polytheism and the triumph of Christianity hence as inevitable. In this model, syncretism and henotheism are the logical intermediate phase between polytheism and monotheism, and Sol is deemed to be the evident focus for that phase. But we cannot assume that the change was inevitable and unidirectional, caused by some intrinsic inferiority of Roman

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<sup>73</sup> Pollard 2000, 50, 145-6; Reeves 2005, 171.

<sup>74</sup> There is growing consensus that most mystery cults in the Graeco-Roman world are essentially Graeco-Roman behind at best a pseudo-oriental veneer, well illustrated by the various contributions in Bonnet, Rüpke & Scarpi 2006.

<sup>75</sup> Dirven 1999; Pollard 2000, 146-7; Reeves 2005, 173-182.

<sup>76</sup> Price 1984; Fox 1986; Alföldy 1989; Beard, North & Price 1998; Scheid 1998, Rives 1999; King 2002. The latter deals less specifically with late Roman paganism, but offers important insights into the differences between Roman religions and Christianity, defusing the problem of “faith” (or the lack thereof) in paganism and explaining mechanisms - in the realm of orthopraxy, for instance - which enabled Romans to cope with multiple, contradictory natures of deities (e.g. pp. 289-9, with references to religions of late imperial China). Cf. also the numerous contributions to Bonnet, Rüpke & Scarpi 2006..

polytheism, and trending inevitably towards “superior” Christian monotheism. Alternative understandings of the changes in late Roman religion are being entertained with good reason. This is not the place to explore those alternatives in detail. They simply provide the background - as does Dura - against which I will raise my doubts about the evolutionary syncretistic model of late Roman paganism that underpins the postulated emergence of a pan- or henotheistic Sol.

### **The Myth of a Supreme Solar God**

The notion that Sol rapidly emerged in the third century as a supreme deity under which all others were subsumed is not peculiar to Wallraff, but widely shared.<sup>77</sup> Too easily it is assumed that the views of certain fourth and fifth century authors such as Julian and Macrobius, expressing some form of solar henotheism, were common currency in the third and fourth centuries AD. The evidence suggests, however, that belonged mostly to the latter part of the fourth century AD and beyond, and cannot be projected back to preceding centuries.<sup>78</sup> If there were supporting evidence (or rather, if those later writings were adduced in support of the main evidence), matters would be different, but no such evidence exists from the third century AD. The notion of solar henotheism in the third century AD is normally supported by the unproven assumption that the cult of Heliogabalus was henotheistic and the now disproven assumption that Aurelian reintroduced that cult of Heliogabalus, or a variant of it as a new cult and, by extension, new form of religion.

We must stress again that the notion that Aurelian’s oriental Sol or - more recently - Roman-but-distinct Sol, namely *Sol Invictus* did not somehow represented a special version of Sol, who differed from previous Roman sun gods and was by nature henotheistic or in some form a supreme deity. On Roman Imperial coins, we have seen that Sol became a standard fixture from Septimius Severus onwards, but was not called *invictus* until three generations later. And yet the epithet *invictus* had been used for Sol in Rome for at least two generations *before* Septimius Severus, if not more. Throughout this period the iconography of Sol remained stable, with no element distinguishing him as specifically *invictus* in those cases that he is so called.

Both Heliogabalus’ Elagabal and Aurelian’s Sol are much better understood as deities of personal importance to these respective emperors; Sol is sometimes called *conservator Augusti* under Aurelian. But that does not imply henotheism even as their personal religious outlook. In fact, Jupiter is more often the *conservator Augusti* on coins of Aurelian than Sol. While Aurelian gave greater prominence to Sol than any emperor before him, there is simply no sign that Sol is meant to supplant previous Roman deities in their importance. Aurelian’s new temple of Sol is large, but not of unprecedented size and its location well North of Rome’s centre does not suggest that we here have a deity meant to displace or subsume the older gods. Likewise the new *pontifices Solis* do not displace the older *pontifices*. And while the famous (but rare!) coin legends hailing Sol as *dominus Imperii Romani* may suggest henotheism or monotheism from a

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<sup>77</sup> Cf., e.g., Rives 1999, 135 (citing Turcan); Liebeschuetz 2001, quoting (p. 185 n.2) Cumont, Fauth and Demandt.

<sup>78</sup> Liebeschuetz 2001, 204, also lists Nonnus, Martianus Capella, and the Orphic hymns as sources for solar syncretism. Macrobius implies that his notions, as articulated by Praetextatus, were not widely shared, judging by the surprise and awe he ascribes to Praetextatus’ audience (*Sat.* I, 24.1). Attempts to trace Macrobius’ views back to the third century or earlier have been hard to substantiate (Liebeschuetz 2001, 197-200).

Christian perspective, there is nothing there that would force a polytheist to supply a definite article rather than an indefinite “a lord of the Roman Empire”.<sup>79</sup> Far too much has been made of the handful of Aurelian coins with this legend. These bronzes were minted in Rome only, in three types (cat. L2.81-83), and are exceedingly rare; in May 2009, Coinarchives.com listed only two such coins, and they had fetched CHF 15,000 and CHF 50,000 respectively at auctions in 2000 and 2001, a far cry from the CHF 100, or so, that common *antoniniani* of Aurelian command<sup>80</sup> such as *antoniniani* of the imperial mint at Cyzicus, for example, that were minted at the same time and depict Sol handing a globe to Mars Invictus(!).<sup>81</sup>

Berrens is surely correct in rejecting the notion that Aurelian envisaged some sort of fundamental religious renewal, far less an all-encompassing solar monotheism.<sup>82</sup> It is much more reasonable to see Aurelian’s religious policies as Augustan and traditional, Sol being the same as Apollo as well as the god whose cult was one of the *sacra gentilitia*, linked to the earliest history of Rome and the particular responsibility of the *gens Aurelia* from which Aurelian claimed descent.<sup>83</sup>

Other evidence adduced to support solar henotheism in the third century AD is also less than conclusive. It is true, for instance, that Sol could be referred to as the “very greatest and ruler of all”<sup>84</sup> in astrology, or “the mind and organizing agent of the universe”,<sup>85</sup> but this was nothing new in the third century. The two examples quoted here are of the first centuries AD and BC respectively, and the principles they reflect were already firmly established in astrology in the Hellenistic era.<sup>86</sup> It shows that there was a tendency to rank the planets in a rather obvious hierarchy with the largest and brightest as leader. A hierarchy of divinities does not necessarily lead to henotheism, of course, or one would be obliged to argue that the Olympian hierarchy with Zeus as the ruler of the gods would do the same. In fact, the seven planets are demonstrably separate in astrology, with their own distinct influences,<sup>87</sup> and even their hierarchy is not entirely

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<sup>79</sup> Berrens 2004, 101..

<sup>80</sup> Göbl 1995, 49-50, pl. 81, 151-152.

<sup>81</sup> Göbl 1995, 65, pl. 145, 349-350. Cat. L2.100-101.

<sup>82</sup> Berrens 2004, 125.

<sup>83</sup> On Aurelian and Augustus cf. Berrens 2004, 115-123; on Aurelian and the Aurelii cf. Santi 1991. I see no reason why the tradition of the Sabine gens Aurelia’s traditional responsibility for the cult of Sol should be doubted, as Santi proposes.

<sup>84</sup> Beck (2007, 88), quoting an horoscope by Titus Pitenius of AD 81.

<sup>85</sup> Cic. *Somn.* 4,2 as quoted by Beck (2007, 80).

<sup>86</sup> Beck 2007, 15-17. Barton 1994, 203-6 presents the traditional view of an oriental Sol - with some errors (e.g. the claim that depictions of Sol on Roman coinage became increasingly popular in the second century AD, culminating with Commodus!) - and sees clear links with astrology, without accepting the notion of solar monotheism.

<sup>87</sup> Beck 2007, 74-76.

fixed. In Mithraism - arguably the Roman religion most fully influenced by astronomy/astrology - the sixth level of initiation is that of *heliodromus*, connected with Sol, while the seventh and highest level - that of *pater* - is the one associated with Saturn. This primacy of Saturn is also expressed in other ways - his is the first hour of the first day of the week for instance - and can be explained by the fact that he is closest to the outer sphere of the universe, the highest of the planets.

This brings us to the realm of mystery cults and the somewhat obscure hendiadys of Mithras and Sol. Mithraism is commonly seen as a solar mystery cult - the cult's protagonist, after all, is Sol Invictus Mithras - but as we have already seen, Sol does not govern the highest rank of initiation. In Mithraic art we find further confirmation that Sol does not occupy the highest position in the divine hierarchy of the cult. The sun is depicted kneeling before Mithras in certain scenes, indicating subservience. Wallraff suggest that the roles are reversed in another scene, in which Mithras steps onto a chariot behind Sol. Wallraff describes it as Sol pulling Mithras onto the chariot, which he interprets as a sign of Sol's seniority,<sup>88</sup> but this is not, in fact, the case. The passenger in a chariot is normally of higher rank than the charioteer - king Darius, for example, is the passenger in his chariot on the famous Alexander Mosaic in Naples - and therefore the basic implication of this scene is that Mithras, the passenger, outranks Sol, his driver. In this particular instance, given the specific circumstances - the solar chariot could not be driven by any other than Sol, according to myth - an ancient viewer might have been comfortable with this division of roles even if he expected Sol to be the senior of the two, but that expectation would have to be based on prior knowledge. The image itself, *pace* Wallraff, gives no indication that Sol is the senior. Given that in all other Mithraic imagery Sol is depicted either on equal footing with Mithras or as subordinate to him, there are no grounds to see a reversal of that hierarchy between Sol and Mithras in the chariot-scene.

Wallraff also makes the rather bold claim that Sol was of central importance to other mystery religions, even if they were centered on other oriental gods.<sup>89</sup> Aside from Mithraism, Wallraff's only example is drawn from Lucius' induction into the mysteries of Isis in book 11 of the Golden Ass of Apuleius, during which he describes seeing the sun shine at midnight.<sup>90</sup> How this illustrates Wallraff's general observation of "solarisation" of the mystery cults is not immediately clear to me. All we appear to have here is the impossible, and hence miraculous, joining of polar opposites: day and night. That is common enough. The juxtaposition of Sol (light/day/heavens) and Serapis (darkness/night/underworld) is well-attested,<sup>91</sup> for example,

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<sup>88</sup> Wallraff 2001, 31.

<sup>89</sup> Wallraff (2001, 30): "Wichtig ist jedenfalls, daß es sich ... nicht in erster Linie um solare Kulte im engen Sinn handelt, also um Kulte, die den Sonnengott als höchste Gottheit verehren. Vielmehr stehen andere Gottheiten (meist orientalischer Provenienz) im Zentrum, die in schwer zu durchschauender Weise solare Eigenschaften zugeschrieben bekommen oder mit dem Sonnengott identifiziert werden."

<sup>90</sup> Apul. *Met.* 11,23,8.

<sup>91</sup> For Helios Sarapis in Greek inscriptions: *IG* 12.2, 114, 12 suppl. 408, IK Sinope 115, Marek, *Pompeipolis* 24-5, *Epigr. Anat.* 23:105,13, Bosch, *Quellen Ankara* 245,184-5, IK Side I 16, Gerasa 15-16, Delta I 241,13, 242,14, 251,25, 419,13, *Portes du désert* 89, *Pan du désert* 21, 38, 42, 71-2, Akoris 20, Kayser, *Alexandrie*

notably in the imagery of Sol kissing Serapis (cat. G1e), but this appears to be more in the tradition of “harmony of opposites” that we observed in Mithraism, than any type of solar syncretism. In many inscriptions, however, Zeus or Jupiter Optimus Maximus is added to the mix of Sol and Sarapis, which at first glance may appear a more complete syncretism, though not one that necessarily has Sol as the preeminent component. We should take care not to miss the balance and tradition underpinning such a triad. It is very reminiscent of the rhythm we observed in mausoleum M of underworld (tombs), upper world (three scenes on the walls) and sky/heavens (Sol). Serapis represents the underworld, Zeus or Jupiter the “over-“ world,<sup>92</sup> and Sol the heavens. I do not see why combining the three into one litany would necessarily imply that they were revered as a syncretized entity, particularly because tripartite divisions along closely similar lines had a long tradition in Hellenistic and Roman society. In 179 BC<sup>93</sup> an oath sworn by Pharnakes I of Pontos when he concluded a defensive alliance with Chersonesos opened with:

μνῶ Δία, Γ ν, Ἡλιον, θεο ς Ὀλυμπίους πάντας κα πάσας , a common formula used in all parts of the Hellenistic world.<sup>94</sup> Often other deities are added, usually beginning with Poseidon. The formula was not restricted to state treaties, but was used more widely and is also attested for the Roman imperial period. An undated inscription on Andros, for example, records a “circle (περιφέρεια) of Zeus, Ge and Helios”,<sup>95</sup> and in the Bosporan kingdom during the reign of king Sauromates (probably Sauromates II, who ruled from AD 173/4-210/1), a certain Chrestes and his wife Chemata manumitted their slave Thalouσα π Δία, Γήν, Ἡλιον.<sup>96</sup> In art we find the same. On a gold diadem from a tomb near Kertsch in the Crimea, Hades and, possibly, Demeter at one end are balanced by Zeus and Sol at the other.<sup>97</sup>

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imp. 48, 54, Bernard, Mus. du Louvre 34, IGR I,5 1049-50, 1092, 1254, 1256, 1321, OGIS 678, SB1:4963. 4:7309, 5:8448, SEG 31, 1548, IRT 310a, 313, IG 14, 1127, IGUR I 77, 99, 189-90, 193-4, I.Porto 12-3, 16-7, 19.

<sup>92</sup> Essentially the realm that Chronos (Saturn), his father, created when he liberated Earth from the stifling embrace of Heaven by cutting loose the latter with his sickle of adamant. That realm is not earth (Ge) nor the heavens (Ouranos) but what extends between the two, coinciding - not by chance - with the realm of the living.

<sup>93</sup> 179 BC is the date traditionally assigned to this inscription. Højte (2005) proposes that the date may be 255 BC.

<sup>94</sup> IosPE I<sup>2</sup> 402. I swear by Zeus, Ge, Helios, and all the Olympian gods and goddesses. This was a very common way to begin an oath. For other examples of oaths beginning with Zeus, Ge and Helios: IG II<sup>2</sup> 127 line 38; 281 line 9; 687 line 87; Hesperia 8:35,9 line 6; IG IV<sup>2</sup>,1 68 line 140; Syll.<sup>3</sup> 366 line 7; IG IX,1<sup>2</sup> 1:82; IG IX,1<sup>2</sup> 1:170; EKM 1. Beroia 1 line 26 (ca. 200-166 BC); SEG 38:603 lines 17 and 23 (ca. 200 BC); KretChr 1969:281,2 line B9-10 (sworn by Attalos I, 241-197 BC); Iasos 83 lines 35, 43, 48, 53 (four oaths, between Iasos, Ptolemy I, and mercenary leaders, 309-304 BC); Iasos 95 line 11 and Iasos 96 line 22 (both 304-282 BC); Theangela 8 line 22 (ca. 310 BC); Smyrna 14 lines 60 and 70 (mid 3<sup>rd</sup> c. BC); IvP I 13 lines 23-4 and 51-2 (ca. 260 BC);

<sup>95</sup> IG XII, Suppl 297

<sup>96</sup> CIRB 74. The same formula is used in a manumission of the first century AD in that region, cf. CIRB 1126. Cf. Gibson 1999, 98-108.

<sup>97</sup> J1.1. The small scale and rather perfunctory execution of the depictions suggest a generic, easily recognized image.

Ge and Sarapis are not identical, of course, and the Jupiter-Sol-Sarapis formula is found in votive inscriptions, not oaths, and predominantly in the Roman era rather than the Hellenistic period. But the basic rhythm of earth/underworld, sky/overworld, and heaven/cosmos is clearly similar. We have already seen this rhythm in other contexts of Roman date and also find it reflected in a shrine of uncertain, but definitely Roman imperial date in Smyrna, dedicated by Apollonios Sparos, who describes its contents in proud, almost garrulous detail in an inscription. The temple was dedicated to Helios Apollo Kisauloddenos, and in it were set up a statue of the god himself, various cult furnishings (a marble table with sculpted griffon legs, a marble bowl “for the use of those bringing sacrifice”, and a rectangular marble thymiaterion with an iron receptacle for incense), a statue of Artemis next to Apollo (on a base fashioned from a millstone, π παραστίδι μωλίν ), a statue of Mên on a marble base, more cult furnishings (a rectangular painted table), a marble altar decorated with the eagle of Zeus ( χων ετ ν ν αυτ Διός) and, most interesting, statues - or, more likely, statuettes - of Pluto-Helios and Kore-Selene hidden away in a wooden shrine of which the furnishings are described in detail. The inscription closes with the mention of iron weapons, eight in number, placed by the statue of Helios Apollo Kisauloddenos “for the sake of decoration” (το κόσμου χάριν).<sup>98</sup> Here too, a whole range of parallels and opposites are established, elaborated, even enacted with the play on visibility and invisibility of the various cult statues.

We can not explore this “rhythm” in detail in its varied manifestations and lengthy history, but what we are dealing with, in very general terms, are short-hand references to the basic components of the cosmos and cosmic order, with the various deities manifesting the various aspects of that order and illustrating their relationship to each other. Sol plays an unsurprising role in such constructs, as the obvious candidate to represent the celestial spheres, but that is a far cry from being the focus of syncretism or henotheism. Indeed, to return to the realm of mystery cults, Sol is ranked second in Mithraism, one of three (or more) in the cult of Serapis (and note that Jupiter remains *optimus maximus* in many of the relevant Latin inscriptions), and he played only a minor role in other mystery cults, such as that of Jupiter Dolichenus or the venerable Eleusinian mysteries, if indeed he played any role at all.

It is to the same rhythm or patterning that we should look to understand the role of Sol in ancient magic. Again that role is often overstated. Fauth has collected an impressive number of Greek magical papyri in which Helios is mentioned, but these do not support the notion of a central role for the sun in ancient magic in terms of solar syncretism or Sol-centered henotheism.<sup>99</sup> Sol may often be the most powerful force for the specific magic invoked, but that does not mean that he subsumes or syncretizes all other powers.<sup>100</sup> In fact, one can argue with

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<sup>98</sup> Smyrna 91; Lane 1971-8, pl. 16; Thompson 2005. For a similar juxtaposition of Helios, Zeus, Artemis, Pluto and Kore, cf. SEG 18:561.

<sup>99</sup> Fauth 1995, 32-120 (in particular 114-120). Liebeschuetz (2001, 188) is of the opinion that the sun was considered “pre-eminent in power and effectiveness” in ancient magic.

<sup>100</sup> Fauth (1995, 115) notes that Helios can lead the way in a list of gods in a magical formula without it being clear to what degree the gods are “assimilated” to each other. Fauth is inclined to assume they often are, but can offer no conclusive evidence for the degree of “Theokrasie” he suspects. An added factor in the evaluation of the evidence is the influence of local traditions. A significant proportion of our evidence derives from Egypt, and the

equal justification (and equal lack of hard evidence) that such notions as the complete supremacy of Sol hinted at in some Greek magical papyri can be ranked under the arcana that contributed to the element of mystery that permeated spells.

As for politics, Sol on the breastplate of the Augustus of Prima Porta is not a case of solar symbolism linked to a divine ruler, but is yet again an example of Sol as one element in the same cosmic “rhythm” of Caelus, Sol, and Luna above, balanced by Tellus, Apollo, and Diana below, together framing the main scene, the return of Crassus’ standards. We have already seen that the radiate crown of the emperors is not a direct solar symbol, but rather an Augustan one. It’s solar associations were not lost on the Roman viewer, but in its formal meaning the imperial radiate crown identifies its bearer as not-Sol, not as Sol, and evokes Augustus, Actium and the legitimation of imperial rule as essential to maintain stability and head off inevitable civil strife.<sup>101</sup> Connotations of Sol as emblem of cosmic order are exploited - one can think of the depictions of the emperor and empress quoting the image type [sol-luna] to emphasize their *concordia aeterna* - but I see no evidence in Roman art for the expression of supreme or sole power of the emperor through the deployment of solar symbolism.

On occasion, then, Sol or Helios may be referred to in exalted terms, but these are exceptions.<sup>102</sup> There were certainly scattered individuals or groups who tended towards syncretic or even henotheistic notions centered on Sol, but there is no evidence that those notions were ever widespread. The role of Sol in public religion after Aurelian supports this conclusion. Sol retained an important role after the death of Aurelian, but barring perhaps the early years of Constantine’s reign it was not a dominant one. At no point does Sol eclipse Jupiter, Hercules, Mars, and other traditional deities.<sup>103</sup>

## Planet and God

But Christianity did displace Roman paganism, and Constantine played a major role in that process. Is it fortuitous that Constantine showed a special interest in Sol in the first part of his reign, and is this evidence that Sol was somehow closer to Christianity than other pagan gods? Framed in these terms the question is unanswerable, because it creates a religious category “Sol” where there was none, and then discusses that non-category in apposition to Christianity. Paganism was not a series of “Christianities” - the cult of Sol, the cult of Hercules, the cult of Jupiter, etc. - with different gods and theologies. Following Rothaus, the issues which render that

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role of Ra in traditional Egyptian religion was much more significant, of course, than that of Sol in Roman religion. The clearest examples of a supreme Sun are texts 117-124, 170 (Fauth 1995, 227-8, 250); other texts do not give Helios any preeminence, but do address a supreme, henotheistic deity, cf., 163 (p. 244-5).

<sup>101</sup> See chapter 6.

<sup>102</sup> E.g. IK Knidos I 91, of the second half of the second c. AD, honoring Aurelia Eirene, *panegyriarch* of Cnidus, daughter of Marcus Aurelius Eudoxus, priest of the “greatest and most manifest ( ἡ φανεστάτου) god Helios”.

<sup>103</sup> Berrens (2004, 126-146) gives a fairly good overview, but overstates the importance of Sol, notably for Diocletian. The minor role of Sol on the *decennalia* base is more typical for the Tetrarchy (C4.21).

common, but generally unarticulated notion problematical can be summarized as follows.<sup>104</sup> In the traditional dichotomy pagan-Christian, the people of late antiquity are essentially divided into a defined set (those who worship Christ) and a non-set (those who do not worship Christ). The latter are undefined, as they share no common characteristic and their “set” therefore has no boundary or defined content.<sup>105</sup> In practice, what many scholars have done is to approach individual pagan cults as interchangeable with paganism, treating those cults - singly or as a group - as the “opposites” of Christianity. In this way they provide content to the otherwise undefinable set “pagans”. They place “those who worship Christ” opposite “those who worship Sol and/or Zeus and/or Isis etc.” The Christocentricity of this approach is immediately apparent, and its effects clearly visible. It is along these lines that the Sol of the nineteenth century oriental paradigm could be implicitly understood as a god with a self-contained cult and institutions, rooted in the orient and transposed from there by true believers (priests like Elagabal, and other adherents)<sup>106</sup> to Rome and other parts of the empire whose inhabitants - through force, decree, or proselytization - were subsequently “solarized” and came to revere this new god as their supreme deity within a “fluid” polytheist context. Conceptualized in that way, the difference between the cult of Sol and Christianity lies in what they believed, not in how they perceived (and celebrated or experienced) religion.

Such a Christocentric approach can only obscure, not elucidate the nature of Roman polytheism. Many have argued that we must move away from a focus on its supposed teachings and beliefs to emphasize practice and ritual. That is to say: we must divest our understanding of Roman religion of its (early modern, Christianizing) restrictions if we wish to grasp the full scope and effect of polytheism within Roman society.<sup>107</sup> As a god, *Sol*, in everyday Roman polytheist consciousness, would then have been defined primarily by (public and private) practice and ritual (whether daily, annual or quadrennial) - the realm of *religion*, one might venture. Speculations concerning the nature of the *sun*, and his place and role in the cosmos of deities and humankind, by contrast, were restricted to a tiny elite and deemed more the realm of *philosophy*, perhaps, and in particular those branches of philosophy that we tend to label astronomy and astrology and that

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<sup>104</sup> Rothaus 2000, 4-7.

<sup>105</sup> The former, of course, are also undefined as one can hardly speak of “those who worship Christ” as one, clearly distinct group. Rothaus’s point remains valid, however, not because the set actually existed, but because the set (“Christians”) has been perceived to have existed - in clear opposition to “pagans” - by countless scholars of late antique polytheism and early Christianity.

<sup>106</sup> Halsberghe (1972, 148) claims that Aurelian was “brought up to revere the Sun god” and became “even more devout” in the course of his reign. Bergmann (1998, 195) describes Eumolpus as a longstanding member (*dauerhaftes Mitglied*) of the Sol-congregation (*Gemeinde*) attached to Sol’s temple in Trastevere (*supra* chapter 5). Traces of this approach can be found in Wallraff (2001, 28-37) who speaks of an emerging “pagane Sonnenfrömmigkeit” in the second and third centuries, resulting in “eine neue Form der Sonnenreligiosität, die dem Christentum als eigenständige Größe gegenübertrat”. This new solar religion had many roots, but was supposedly a unified phenomenon. Note, however, that Wallraff (2001, 37-39) stresses that these religiously laden terms are problematic, and that any attempt to find central organizing principles or coherence in Roman solar religion fails.

<sup>107</sup> Cf.. MacMullen 1981; Price 1984; Lane Fox 1986; Versnel 1990; Feeney 1998; Beard *et al.* 1998; Rothaus 2000, 4-7; Beck 2006.

included theology. Our written sources concerning Sol - in any event both scarce and late - are more or less restricted to such philosophical musings of the elite, but shed little light if any on the broader practice and ritual surrounding Sol. More informative are material sources - often directly reflecting ritual action - but as the present study illustrates they pose their own interpretative challenges. Nonetheless, I believe that material evidence for Sol and his cult, as discussed in the preceding chapters, presents a very different picture of the nature of Sol in Roman polytheism, especially if we abandon Christocentric preconceptions concerning polytheist cult and divinity in general.

I have already suggested that there was a certain duality or ambiguity in the nature of Sol in Roman religion. In many respects, the difference between the Sol whose major feast was celebrated October 22<sup>nd</sup>, and the Sol who was the planetary symbol for Sunday, for instance, is the same as the difference, in modern editions of Latin texts, between *Sol* with a capital letter and *sol* without. On the one hand there is a deity, with a cult, temples, priests, festivals and rituals, and on the other there is a heavenly body - an orb of fire - that rises in the morning in the east and sets in the evening in west at fixed times and according to a pattern that repeats itself annually without the slightest variation. This ambiguity - from *our* perspective, not the Roman - in the nature of Sol (and Luna) is not shared to an equal extent by any of the other Roman gods. Even the other five planets are so much less visible that they do not impinge on our consciousness in the same way Sol and Luna do.

In Roman art the manner in which the image types [sol] are used reflects and to some extent defines this duality. On the one hand, there are images which depict Sol as a god among gods, apparently on an equal footing with his peers. There were presumably cult-statues in temples (although none have been preserved), on occasion statuettes in *lararia* (rare), depictions of Sol on coins (sometimes claimed to reflect cult statues), a small number of reliefs depicting - *inter alia* - a cult statue of Sol, etc. However, indisputable representations of Sol as a god among gods were rare. Far more common were representations of Sol as a cosmic and temporal symbol. We saw that this was the case on coins minted by Vespasian, Titus, Domitian, Trajan and Hadrian on which we find *Aeternitas*, standing, holding small busts of Sol and Luna in her hands. Often, Sol and Luna are depicted as small busts flanking or framing some scene; sometimes the pair is represented as full-length figures (very rare) or charioteers of their quadriga and biga respectively. That they do not participate in the main scene, but have a symbolic function in relation to the scene to which they are appended is invariably clear from their position (peripheral), relative size (small), or iconography (bust or disassociated *quasriga*), or a combination of these factors.

As the coins of Vespasian indicate, Sol and Luna in this symbolic role are attributes defining or guaranteeing eternity, and we have also explored possible complementary connotations, such as Romanness or liminality. They are, of course, the two most visible cosmic bodies whose appearances follow clear, immutable patterns, but as the parallel use of the Phoenix as symbol of *Aeternitas* implies, the symbolism goes beyond that. The sun and the moon are in a constant flux - the moon either waxing towards, or waning from full moon, and the sun never rising and setting at the same time two days running; from the winter solstice to the summer solstice the days lengthen and the nights grow shorter, and then for the next six months the pattern is the reversed. Sol and Luna, then, not only symbolize Eternity, but also explain how stability, be it cosmic or imperial, can be sustained despite temporal fluctuations.

We saw that the symbolic use of Sol and Luna was common in a wide range of religious contexts in the Roman Empire, having found it on Jupiter Dolichenus triangles, Mithraic reliefs, Danube rider plaques, the ependytes of Aphrodite of Aphrodisias, Jupiter giant pillars, etc.<sup>108</sup> Nor was this symbolic use limited to Sol and Luna as a pair. Comparable Danube rider plaques depict Sol only, and there are other examples of Sol alone as a symbol as well. The temporal and cosmic symbolism of Sol in such cases is exceptionally clear on a Mithraic bronze relief from Brigetio (cat. C2c.67). Framing the main scene of the tauroctony we have Sol and Luna, the four seasons, and the seven planetary gods of the week, all clear cosmic symbols providing a framework for the main scene, rather than any actors in it. Clearly, Sol in all these images is depicted as a cosmic body whose presence contributes to the framing and defining of the nature of the main scene.

That this was the case should not surprise us. The cosmic reality and astronomical predictability of sol was and is incontestable - not a matter of faith but a matter of fact. It was to those incontestable aspects of the sun and moon that Sol and Luna or Sol alone refer, directly as well as metaphorically, in the contexts we have just discussed. It is also these aspects of Sol which are important in, for instance, the mosaic floors of the late antique synagogues of Hammath Tiberias, Beth Alpha, and elsewhere (cat. D1a.2-7). Here too, Sol is the anthropomorph representation of the visible “planet”, and as such is a cosmic symbol rather than a polytheist god. The cosmic associations are evoked by the zodiac around him and the four seasons accompanying him.

The adoption of this formerly polytheist symbolism is not limited to Judaism. In early Christian art we find the same use of the busts of the sun and the moon, flanking crucifixion scenes as well as other major events in the life of Christ, such as his baptism.<sup>109</sup> In short, the most prolific imagery related to Sol (and Luna) treats the sun not as a god (in our modern, anachronistic understanding of the term), but as cosmically inspired symbol, and despite the polytheist source of the anthropomorph iconography employed, the actual cosmic-symbolic connotations of the image types [sol] were so well understood that they could be deployed without significant variations by pagans, Jews, and Christians alike.

This does *not* mean that Romans somehow differentiated between a divine Sol (cult, temples) and a cosmic Sol (astronomy, calendars). That the planets and stars were of a different, more perfect matter, i.e. divine, was not a question of faith but fact rooted in solid astronomy and philosophy (from the Roman perspective). This was accepted widely not just by polytheists but also among early Christians.<sup>110</sup> For the latter it was not the “higher order” of the heavenly bodies *per se* that was problematic, but rather the derivative practice of astrology and its implied determinism, not to mention polytheist religion and associated cult. Hegedus (2007) shows that Christian polemics against astrology tend to militate against the practice rather than the

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<sup>108</sup> *Supra*, chapter four, *passim*.

<sup>109</sup> Cf. an intaglio in the British Museum, depicting Christ on the cross, with the small busts of Sol and Luna above, inv. EG 561. On this symbolism in early Christian art see Deonna 1946, 1947, with numerous examples, and Kerscher 1988.

<sup>110</sup> On Christian attitudes cf. Beck (2006, 166-176) and Hegedus (2007), both dealing in particular with Christian attitudes (and ambivalence) towards astrology.

underlying principle - astrology was unacceptable, not impossible. Indeed, the ability of the three Magi to find the newborn Jesus with the aid of the star of Bethlehem was widely understood as an example of sound astrology in action.<sup>111</sup> For Tertullian, an adamant opponent of astrology, there was no question that the Magi were astrologers; he argued only that there could be no valid use for astrology after the birth of Christ.<sup>112</sup> Other Christian groups, ranging from the Arateans to Bardaisan, mostly later defined as heretic, took a far more favourable view.<sup>113</sup> Thus if one leaves aside astrology, usually narrowly defined in early Christian polemics as the practice of reading the heavens to establish what future and fate awaits an individual, the basic principle that the heavenly bodies were of an higher order and that their movements were meaningful (though not for us) was acceptable to Christians.

### Constantine and Sol

It is somewhere in this nebulous and confusing range of Christian and Pagan views concerning Sol that we must place Constantine when he dealt with the tension between his support of Christianity and his espousal of Sol in the first two decades of his reign. There can be no doubt that Sol played an important role in the public religion of Constantine until well after the battle at the Milvian bridge. What that role entailed precisely - what Sol actually *meant* to Constantine - is, however, a topic fraught with controversy. The (literary) evidence for Constantine's religious convictions and policies has been aptly described as paradoxically both good and bad at the same time.<sup>114</sup> The source material is rich, but clearly written *cum studio* and, often, *ira*. Consequently, modern scholarship on Constantine is remarkably varied in its outcomes and opinions.<sup>115</sup> I do not propose to discuss Constantine's religious reforms comprehensively in the remainder of this chapter, but will review the visual evidence for Sol in connection Constantine, and attempt to do so insofar as possible with "Roman eyes".

A Roman entering the city of Rome in 315 - a short while after the inauguration of the Arch of Constantine perhaps - would see few visual signs of the religious revolution Rome was about to undergo. In his purse the coins minted in Constantine's name had depictions not just of Sol, but also of Jupiter *Conservator*, Mars, the Genius of the Roman people, Victory, and Roma, all potentially in reasonable numbers.<sup>116</sup> He would also have coins of current or recent co-

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<sup>111</sup> Matt 2.1-12.

<sup>112</sup> Hegedus 2007, 307-17.

<sup>113</sup> Hegedus 2007, 261-306.

<sup>114</sup> Wallraff 2001, 127.

<sup>115</sup> For recent studies on Constantine: Wallraff 2001, 126-143; Potter 2004, 299-440; Girardet 2006; Lenski 2006; Demandt & Engemann 2007; van Dam 2007. For earlier studies, cf. Wallraff 2001, 126 n. 3.

<sup>116</sup> Examples of common coins include: **Jupiter**: RIC VII, 7 (Antioch, AD 313-4), RIC VII, 3 (Cyzicus, AD 313-315), RIC VII, 5 (Heraclea, AD 313-4), RIC VI, 69 (Nicomedia, AD 311), RIC VI, 229 (Siscia, AD 313), RIC VI, 61 (Thessalonica, AD 313)cf. RIC VII, 13 (Alexandria, AD 317-320), RIC VII, 26 (Antioch, AD 317-320), RIC VII, 14 (Cyzicus, AD 321), RIC VII, 51 (Heraclea, AD 321-4), RIC VII, 43 (Nicomedia, AD 321-4); **Genius**: RIC VI, 156 (Alexandria, AD 312), RIC VI, 164 (Antioch, AD 312), RIC VI, 11 (Cyzicus, AD 312), RIC VI, 49

emperors, such as Licinius,<sup>117</sup> Galerius,<sup>118</sup> Severus,<sup>119</sup> Maxentius,<sup>120</sup> and Maximinus Daia,<sup>121</sup> with the same range of images, not to mention older coins. Sol was common on these late tetrarchic coins, but not exceptionally so (even on the coins of Constantine). More common were various types of Genii (though they occur rather less frequently on the coins of Constantine) followed closely by Jupiter, as well as Mars and Hercules.<sup>122</sup>

Limiting ourselves to Sol, there is nothing in the images that would particularly startle our Roman viewer. Perhaps he possessed one of the folles minted in Trier between AD 310 and 313 with a bust of Sol on the reverse.<sup>123</sup> In that case he may have been struck - as modern scholars have been - by the remarkably heavy-set features and thick neck of Sol, quite reminiscent of the features of Constantine on the obverse.<sup>124</sup> It is difficult to say how much he would have made of this (if anything), but the details of the well-executed bust of Sol, such as the carefully emphasized *anastole*, invite careful viewing. The similarities with Constantine's portrait are not explicit. The emperor generally has a larger and more pronounced chin, thicker lips, a longer nose with a curved ridge, shorter hair, and no *anastole*. There is no doubt that Sol's features are different, but given their date and place of issue the similarity is enough to plausibly connect these coins to Constantine's vision of AD 310, in which Apollo appeared before him prophesying a long reign. During that vision Constantine reportedly recognized his own traits in those of Apollo.<sup>125</sup> We can assume then that these coins were but one element of many deployed to publicize that vision. The panegyric reporting it is another such element, and assuming that there were others, visual as well as verbal, their context would make the reference of the newly minted

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(Heraclea, AD 312), VI, 103 (London, AD 307-310), RIC VI, 74 (Nicomedia, AD 312), RIC VI, 31 (Thessalonica, AD 306-7), RIC VI, 667 (Trier, AD 306-7); **Victory**: RIC VII,1 (Antioch, AD 312), RIC VI, 213 (Lyons, AD 307), RIC VI, 56 (Nicomedia, AD 308-310), cf. RIC VII, 96 (Antioch, AD 335-6), RIC VII, 190 (Arles, AD 319); **Roma**: RIC VI, 117 (Aquileia, AD 307), VI, 246 (London, AD 312), RIC VI, 93 (Ticinum, AD 307); **Mars**: RIC VI, 108 (London 307-310), RIC VII, 12 (Lyons, AD 314-15), RIC VII, 23 (Ticinum, AD 314-5), RIC VI, 725 (Trier, AD 307), RIC VI, 885 (Trier, AD 310-3), RIC VII, 51 (Trier, AD 313-5); **Hercules**: RIC VI, 75 (Nicomedia, AD 313); for **Sol** see L2. For a complete overview of the pagan deities that appeared on Constantinian coinage, see Christodoulou 1998.

<sup>117</sup> Primarily coins depicting Sol, Genius, or Jupiter.

<sup>118</sup> Primarily coins depicting Mars, Genius, or Jupiter; more rarely Hercules or Sol.

<sup>119</sup> Almost exclusively coins depicting Genius, but he ruled only a short time.

<sup>120</sup> Roma, Genius, Dioscuri.

<sup>121</sup> Genius, Jupiter and Sol, more rarely (but not uncommon) Mars, Hercules.

<sup>122</sup> On the coinage of Constantine, cf. Bruun 1991; Christodoulou 1998.

<sup>123</sup> RIC VI 227 nos. 886-895.

<sup>124</sup> On Constantine's thick neck, cf. Bruun 1995.

<sup>125</sup> *Paneg.lat.* 6(7),21,3-7. On the vision(s) of Constantine, cf. Weiss 1993, 2003.

coins unmistakable. One can still wonder, however, whether such a connection would have been apparent to our Roman five years later in Rome.<sup>126</sup>

Be that as it may, Constantine's coinage upheld traditional state gods during his first two decades in power, and gave no indication of a particular solarisation of religion. In fact, in terms of Roman deities depicted, Constantine's coinage is at least as varied as that of his (near) contemporaries, and often more so, which is logical given his longer lease on power. Given the coordinated nature of the emissions, with far-flung mints producing the same basic types in the same years, we must look to the imperial centre for the source of these visual themes. There is imperial policy involved at a high level.

All this does not mean that Sol does not occupy a prominent position on Constantine's coinage. We should note in particular that most coins of Constantine with Jupiter on the reverse were struck by mints under Licinius' control, while those in Constantinian territory tend to mint coins depicting Sol. But too much is read into these coins. Berrens, for instance, consistently equates the emission of coins depicting Sol with the propagation of the cult of Sol, and hence sees Licinius' Jupiter and Constantine's Sol almost as competing gods.<sup>127</sup> Leaving aside any speculation about Constantine's personal beliefs,<sup>128</sup> this whole notion of individual emperors promoting specific cults is a perfect example of the type of Christianizing assumptions discussed above. When Berrens ranks Constantine among the "große Förderer des Solkultes" this is very reminiscent of Bergmann's contention that Eumolpus was a member of a small congregation of true Sol-believers, and both contentions are examples of what Rothaus aptly described as treating individual pagan cults as "opposites" of Christianity. Berrens, in fact, places "those who worship Sol" not only in opposition to "those who worship Christ" but to a degree also to "those who worship Jupiter" when he discusses the deities dominating the coinages of Constantine and Licinius respectively.

From a polytheist perspective this would be difficult to understand. The fact that Sol is especially common on coins of Constantine would not be seen by a Roman as a sign that Constantine was trying to strengthen the worship of Sol - unless one wishes to argue that Galerius and Severus were trying to strengthen the worship of certain *Genii*, Licinius of Jupiter, etc. The deployment of image types [sol] on coins was not about Sol and his cult, but about the emperor and his reign. The message was not that the emperor wanted the viewer to personally forge closer bonds with Sol, but that the viewer should respect the emperor as one with close ties to the divine sun (or Jupiter, or Mars, or whichever deity was highlighted). In Rome, men of power had done this for centuries. One need but think of Pompey's Venus Victrix (trumped by Caesar's Venus Genetrix), Augustus' Apollo, Domitian's Minerva, Commodus' Hercules, etc.

Our fictitious visitor to Rome would presumably understand Constantine's Sol-coins in that tradition. He would probably also draw parallels between Constantine's Sol-Apollo and Augustus's Apollo as well as Aurelian's Sol. Constantine was himself an Aurelius (Flavius

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<sup>126</sup> The vision was in Gaul, and coins depicting thick-necked busts of Sol were minted only at Trier.

<sup>127</sup> Berrens 2004, 161-2.

<sup>128</sup> Berrens 2004, 162. Wallraff (2001, 127) in particular stresses that it is fruitless to attempt to establish Constantine's personal religion.

Valerius Aurelius Constantinus), making the connection to Aurelian an obvious one. Constantine's visions of AD 310 and 313 would also recall Aurelian and his vision of Sol on the battlefield against Zenobia.<sup>129</sup> I see no indication, however, that our ancient viewer would see anything in these coins suggesting that Constantine was propagating some form of solar monotheism, henotheism, or (new) preeminence of the sun god along other lines. Between 307 and 315, the western mints under direct control of Constantine had also minted a fair number of coins depicting Genius, Mars, and Roma as well as various personifications, and Mars, for instance, could be *pacifer*,<sup>130</sup> *conservator*,<sup>131</sup> *propugnator*,<sup>132</sup> *fundator pacis*,<sup>133</sup> and the like. These coins are not especially rare, and there is no reason to doubt that our Roman would know them.

In short, the coinage of Constantine as our Roman viewer in AD 315 would see it, was typical in every respect. The same could be said of other elements of Constantine's "program" at this time. Our Roman would no doubt be struck, though not surprised, by the significant building projects taking place in Constantine's name. At the Circus Maximus, a section of the stands that had collapsed a few decades earlier - reportedly killing 13,000 spectators - was being restored to greater splendor, we are told, than ever before.<sup>134</sup> The arch of Constantine had just been completed, the Colossus had been changed back into a statue of Sol again (rather than of Maxentius' son Romulus), a basilica of unprecedented size was nearing completion between the Colossus and the Forum Romanum, and on the Quirinal a major bathhouse was being built.

All these buildings were undoubtedly richly adorned with sculpture, reliefs, stucco, and other ornamentation, little of which survives. From the basilica we have the well-known colossal acrolith of Constantine, the surviving parts of which have been on display in the courtyard of the Palazzo dei Conservatori since the sixteenth century. Other Constantinian statues in Rome include the two Dioscuri on the Quirinal, the two river personifications in front of the Palazzo Senatorio on the Capitoline hill, and the statues of Constantine and Constantius on the balustrade of the Capitoline, all from the Baths of Constantine on the Quirinal, as well as the remains of a colossal bronze statue of Constantine that were housed in the Lateran before they were moved to the Palazzo dei Conservatori in 1471.

Constantine had even more grandiose plans for Rome, for he probably intended to erect an obelisk on the *spina* of the Circus Maximus. With such a move, Constantine would clearly

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<sup>129</sup> *Supra* chapter 1; cf. Brandt 1995. Visions and miracles associated with emperors were common and include, most famously, the rain miracle of AD 171. Fundamental for the study of imperial dreams and visions is Weber 2000. On the rain miracle, see Kovács 2009.

<sup>130</sup> RIC VI 94 (London, AD 307).

<sup>131</sup> RIC VI, 95 (London, AD 307), RIC VI, 304 (Lyons, AD 309-10), RIC VII, 12 (Lyons, AD 314-315), RIC VII, 23 (Ticinum, AD 314-5), VI, 725, 730 (Trier, AD 307), RIC VI, 772 (Trier, AD 307-8), RIC VI, 885 (Trier, AD 310-3), RIC VII, 51 (Trier, AD 313-5), and more.

<sup>132</sup> RIC VI, 108 (London, AD 307-10), RIC VI, 741 (Trier AD 307).

<sup>133</sup> RIC VII, 12 (Rome, AD 313).

<sup>134</sup> Aur.Vict. *Caes.* 40,27; *Paneg.Lat.* 4,35,5.

have aligned himself with Augustus and the Julio-Claudians.<sup>135</sup> But Constantine did not see the plan through, and the obelisk did not reach the city until some decades later, when Constantius finally arranged for its transport. It was erected in the Circus Maximus on the occasion of Constantius' visit to Rome in AD 357. From the perspective of our Roman visitor, however, the later delays are immaterial as the question simply is whether he would have been aware of Constantine's original plans in AD 315. The question is as hypothetical as our Roman visitor, of course, but let's assume for the moment that he would have known if he could have. Could he have known of the plan to bring an obelisk to Rome AD 315, or was the whole notion not hatched till later? The evidence is confused. Constantine had visited Egypt in the entourage of Diocletian in AD 301/2, and so it is certainly conceivable that he started planning the whole operation soon after his capture of Rome. Unfortunately our sources do not tell us. In fact, our sources are not even unanimous on the destination Constantine had in mind for the obelisk. Ammianus Marcellinus states unequivocally that it was Rome; Constantius' inscription (now lost) on the base of the obelisk states equally unequivocally that Constantine had destined it for Constantinople.<sup>136</sup>

Fowden argues that Ammianus is the more reliable.<sup>137</sup> Certainly one can imagine that Constantius saw advantage in a little political spin. It is far more generous to give a gift that was first intended for a rival than to (finally) give a gift that took decades too long to arrive. So let us add another assumption to the potential knowledge of our fictitious Roman, namely that the obelisk was, indeed, destined for Rome from the outset of the project. If we follow Fowden, that Roman would still know nothing in AD 315, as Fowden believes that the whole idea was probably not floated until after Constantine had defeated Licinius and annexed the East in 324. In his view, the obelisk was meant to be a conciliatory gesture towards the pagan elite horrified at Constantine's plundering of the riches of the pagan temples and shrines.

If so, it was a very grand gesture. Of all the art looted for the new capital on the Bosphorus, nothing could compare to this obelisk in terms of size, antiquity, symbolism, and the logistics involved in simply getting it to its destination. Giving such a major gift sends a potent message, but so then does the act of not-giving, in particular if the gift was originally supposed to serve a diplomatic and conciliatory purpose. Not-giving implies a major shift in attitude towards the intended recipient, or else toward the gift. We know that Constantine initially fully intended to ship the obelisk out of Egypt, for it had been transported from Thebes to Alexandria before he abandoned the project. The question now is: did something change in Constantine's attitude either toward Rome or toward obelisks that would lead him to abandon the whole project?

Ammianus apparently does not know, for he is vague about the time that elapsed between the removal of the obelisk from Thebes and its arrival in Alexandria, as well as why following the death of Constantine the project "lost urgency" and was abandoned. Perhaps we should accept Ammianus' account and simply assume that it did indeed take almost thirteen years to transport

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<sup>135</sup> The obelisk of Augustus was still a prominent part of the Circus, and no Roman emperor had transported an obelisk to Rome since Caligula. Cf. Marlowe 2006, 240 n. 43; Fowden 1987.

<sup>136</sup> Amm. Marc. xvii. 4.12-14; *CIL* VI, 1163 (31249).

<sup>137</sup> Fowden 1987, 54-5.

the obelisk from Thebes to Alexandria (324/5-337), but I cannot quite make sense of this. One of the most difficult and perilous tasks would be to take down the obelisk, which stood in the precinct of Amun, virtually on the banks of the Nile. That required a large number of skilled labourers. Once the obelisk was lowered, these workers would have less trouble transporting the obelisk safely on rollers to the barges nearby. It would no doubt be slow work, but a matter of days nonetheless, not, not months or years. Once on the barge, transport to Alexandria would likewise be measured in weeks, perhaps even a few months, but not more. The only real possibility of delay that I can find in this route is between the temple and the Nile at Thebes. The exact distance would depend on where the barge was moored, but it cannot have been much more than 1 km. At ten metres an hour, that is less than ten days work. Hence I find it difficult to imagine that, once all the labourers had been assembled for lowering the obelisk, the authorities would not keep them assembled to transport the obelisk to the river.

On the other hand, the preparation leading up to the removal of the obelisk probably took much longer. The operation had to be planned, a suitable river barge built, scaffolding and cranes constructed for the lowering of the obelisk, and the necessities for overland transport prepared. This must have taken months at least, offering far more scope for interruption due to unforeseen events. What those events may have been is impossible to say, but having already ventured much further down the hypothetical path than is safe, I may as well take one step more. Perhaps our hypothetical Roman did know of the obelisk plan, because perhaps Constantine had already set things in motion shortly after the defeat of Maxentius. Constantine had a contentious relationship with Licinius, but on various occasions the two did patch up their differences. An agreement to erect an obelisk in Rome, perhaps even jointly, could conceivably be a component of one of their reconciliations. In that case, a resurgence of the hostilities between Licinius and Constantine could explain how the obelisk came to be stranded halfway its journey.

I know that this is far too speculative to qualify as a serious hypothesis, but I put these possibilities forward primarily to highlight the problems that our sources leave us with: we don't know when Constantine decided to remove the obelisk from Egypt, we don't know whether it was destined for Constantinople or Rome, and we don't know why the project was not yet completed when Constantine died. This last question is the one that I find most intriguing. I find it difficult to imagine that the reasons for the delay in Alexandria were purely logistical, given the scale of Constantine's other projects. If it was important, ways would have been found to transport the obelisk from Alexandria to its final destination. This means that the project was either begun so late that it was cut short by Constantine's death, or that by the time the obelisk had reached Alexandria Constantine had lost interest. We will return to this below.

### **Sol, the arch, and Constantinian building in Rome**

One reason why the questions surrounding the obelisk are so tantalizing is because of the light the answers could shed on potential role(s) of Sol in Constantine's building policies in Rome. Sol is prominent on Constantine's arch, and Marlowe (2006) has recently demonstrated that the arch was carefully positioned to integrate the Neronian colossus of Sol in its overall effect as well. Anyone approaching the arch along the main road between the Palatine and Caelian hills would see the Colossus tower up directly behind the arch until they were quite close, at which point the statue of Sol would be visible through the central arch and would be framed by it. This interaction between arch and colossus is as striking as it is unmistakable, and by drawing

our attention to it, Marlowe has significantly enhanced our understanding of this much discussed Constantinian monument.<sup>138</sup> It strengthens the already significant role of Sol in the decorative scheme of the arch, but not to the point that the arch can be deemed a solar monument. The arch commemorates Constantine, and incorporates Sol as his patron deity, notably in the Eastern arch, as well as through its alignment with the colossus. As patron deity Sol also occurs three times as *deus militaris* in the Constantinian friezes recording the emperor's march on Rome. The tondi of Sol and Luna on the short sides of the arch should be read as the image type [sol-luna], rather than a depiction of Sol and Luna separately.

The main reliefs, however, focus on Constantine and his victory, not Sol. The specific events commemorated by the arch are depicted in the Constantinian frieze, but modestly and on a small scale as befits the inevitably painful and problematic dimensions of a civil war victory. The more eye-catching reliefs are all spolia reused here, namely Trajanic reliefs in the central arch, tondi taken from a Hadrianic monument on the North and South sides, and the eight attic reliefs flanking the inscriptions and taken from a monument of Marcus Aurelius. These portray stock imperial themes related to the emperor's main virtues and functions (*pietas*, *virtus*, *liberalitas*, *adventus*, and the like). Reusing old reliefs associates Constantine with the "good" emperors of the Empire's most prosperous century and, more in general, gives an air of "old-fashionedness" to the arch (which was in any case old-fashioned, as its model, the arch of Septimius Severus, was over a century old already). As such, they make an important contribution to the overall meanings of the monument.

This reuse of older reliefs has been much debated. Many have seen it as a sign of haste or a lack of resources or expertise.<sup>139</sup> Our Roman viewer, however, would not have been troubled by this "theft" from other monuments. Accustomed to the communicative intent of such monuments he would first attempt to read the inclusion of older reliefs as a contributing factor to the overall meaning of the arch (which is not very hard to do).<sup>140</sup> Whether he recognized the specific references to Trajan, Hadrian and Marcus Aurelius or simply more general references to the second century AD would depend on the viewer, but that the incorporation of these reliefs was purposeful would be assumed by all. Rome was filled with skilled craftsmen, working on such monuments as the ones sponsored by Constantine, mentioned above, and fresh from the major buildings erected or at least begun by Maxentius, such as his imposing villa and racecourse by the Via Appia, or the elegant temple for his deified son, not to mention the grandiose basilica he had begun and that Constantine completed. Skilled artists were producing the artwork to adorn these buildings, including such high quality work as the colossal bronze statue of Constantine now in the Capitoline museum. Who knows, perhaps our Roman had old-fashioned tastes and shared the dislike of many modern art historians for art produced in his day. It would not have occurred to

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<sup>138</sup> On the arch see also Elsner 2000, L'Orange & von Gerkan 1939. A good summary of the debate over a possible predecessor for the arch that was merely remodeled by Constantine is given by Jones 2000, cf. *RendPontAcc* 66 (1993/4 [1997]) with various articles, as well as Pensabene & Panella 1999.

<sup>139</sup> Berenson (1954) is the classic example of negative evaluation of the arch. Cf. Marlowe (2006, 223), who pointedly speaks of the arch serving many agendas in modern scholarship. On Berenson, cf. Elsner 1998.

<sup>140</sup> Peirce (1989, 388) speaks of "obviously propagandistic motives".

him, however, to attribute the conspicuous use of old art to an inability of the emperor to find artists capable of producing something contemporary that was worthwhile. He would no doubt dismiss that notion as ludicrous.<sup>141</sup>

There is another aspect to this appropriation of older reliefs that deserves attention. Something had to replace the second century reliefs after they had been removed from their original location. Because we do not know the provenance of the reused reliefs, the issue of replacement is generally given scant attention. Many doubt that the reliefs can have been “in use” when Constantine appropriated them.<sup>142</sup> Again, the assumption appears to be that it would have been a problem in the eyes of our Roman viewer, if the reliefs were cavalierly removed from another building.<sup>143</sup> But from the perspective of communicative art, this did not create a void but an opportunity. By replacing the old reliefs with new ones of his own in the buildings that originally housed them, Constantine could literally insert himself into the older monument, thus again stressing his message of a return to the past with himself as a new Trajan/Hadrian/Marcus Aurelius. Perhaps his interventions were combined with necessary restorations - damaging fires of the late third century are often cited - but I see no reason why such an excuse would have been particularly necessary.

What our viewer saw, in short, was a noticeably conservative and backward looking emperor building a bathhouse, a basilica, a triumphal arch, and new stands for the circus. He was presenting himself as a new Hadrian or Marcus Aurelius, and aligning himself with Augustus in his choice of patron deity, Sol-Apollo. The sun god thus fits into this message, but not as a “new” god or in a new role as syncretized supreme deity. Nor is he presented as such. Whether it is on his coinage or on his arch, Constantine depicts Sol in time-honoured fashion with no hint of anything significantly different.<sup>144</sup> This does not mean that Sol had a modest place. We have already seen the close and careful correlation between Sol’s colossus and Constantine’s arch, and Marlowe argues, persuasively I think, that we should also include the Circus-Maximus (with its Constantinian restorations) and the adjacent Septizodium with its planetary connotations among the visual references to Sol deployed by Constantine. Indeed, it is tempting to add the location of the baths of Constantine on the Quirinal as well, as they arose close to the Republican *pulvinar Solis*. Did that shrine still exist? And even if not, can it be chance that three of the oldest and most prominent monuments related to Sol - the Republican temples on the Quirinal and in the Circus Maximus, and the early imperial Colossus - were at or near major building projects of Constantine?

This is why the errant obelisk is so tantalizing. Did Constantine intend it for Rome? Did

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<sup>141</sup> As does Peirce (1989, 387), stating that Berenson “goes to bizarre lengths” to make his case that Rome under Constantine was bereft of sculptors capable of work with even a modicum of quality.

<sup>142</sup> Peirce 1989, 389.

<sup>143</sup> Cf. Jones (2000), who regards it as unlikely that buildings in Rome were “actively dismantled”, suggesting that there were probably “stockpiles” of such materials salvaged from ruined older buildings. Cf. Kinney 1997, 120-5.

<sup>144</sup> This includes Sol as *deus militaris*, for which we may have evidence as early as the late first century AD (see cat. K2a.1; cf. C1f.6 and C4.4).

he begin preparations for its transport after defeating Maxentius but before the defeat of Licinius? We could then perhaps see the outlines of a true program, modeled to recall Augustus who had, after all, erected the other obelisk in the circus maximus and had dedicated it to Sol. As it is, we cannot be sure to what degree Constantine's restoration of the stands of the circus maximus really had "solar connections", as Marlowe argues, nor to what extent the obelisk was intended to be a solar monument.

### **Aurelian, Constantine and Sol: some conclusions.**

Although at first glance it may not appear so, the main focus of this chapter has again been the imagery of Sol - on coins as well as other monuments - as deployed from Aurelian to Constantine. We devoted considerable attention to the broader religious backdrop, but only as much as was needed to demonstrate that the notion of a far-reaching solarisation of late Roman religion is less firmly established than often thought. It was not my aim to prove that notion wrong, but just to show that it would be wrong to expect that our interpretations of the material evidence would be in line with that notion. The point, of course, is that I see no evidence at all in the sources gathered and discussed in this study to support the postulate that Sol-centered syncretism led to henotheistic or even monotheistic solar cults in the last few decades before the edict of Milan in AD 313. And so I reversed the rhetoric, and sought to explain away the star witnesses for that view, such as the contention that Christmas originated in response to a dangerous pagan festival for Sol, or the notion that Aurelian and Constantine were almost proto-monotheists in their promotion of the cult of Sol. I supported these frontal attacks with a flanking movement aimed at certain vital (but almost forgotten) supply lines, striking out in particular at the christianizing assumptions and the determinist lines of reasoning which first led scholars to occupy these syncretistic positions.

My "attack", however, was only a feint, an essay of strength to see how far a "polytheist" understanding of material culture sources for solar cult in late antiquity could take me. Far enough, I think, to raise doubts about the strength of the traditional position, but not enough yet to dismiss the notions I am challenging. This chapter makes the case that the presumed solarization of religion in late Antiquity is not reflected in the relevant material culture, and it illustrates with a few examples why that is perhaps less surprising than one might assume. This chapter does not, however, provide an alternative that integrates all relevant evidence. The views of Julian or Macrobius have not suddenly become irrelevant; Wallraff's study of solar influences in early Christianity still stands. The challenge the material evidence sets us is to re-understand these sources and phenomena in a manner that does justice to the visual communication of the age.

One is tempted to add "and vice versa" to that last sentence, but re-interpreting visual sources in the light of literary evidence has been too common and, unfortunately, often too facile in classical studies. It is in part for that reason that we are less adept at reading the visual than one would like and, even worse, are at times quite unaware of our misreadings. Examples abound in this book alone, and are undoubtedly not limited to misreadings by others. So let me try to make the argument for granting primacy to the visual evidence in this case.

We are dealing with religion. That means that we are not concerned with history in the sense of unique events, but in the sense of social attitudes, expressed repetitively and ritualistically over long periods of time - *histoire du longue durée* rather than *histoire*

*événementielle*. In sufficient quantity, visual sources have the potential to outline fundamental aspects of these attitudes because they define the setting for ritual and religious expression. Many forms of religious expression also have an outcome in (permanent) material form - votives for instance. These material culture sources provide us with the most direct, unfiltered window on ancient cult and ritual. No matter how eloquent the individual author, (s)he gives only one, personal, view, and it is difficult to argue that the views of one - of a Macrobius for instance - and shared with few (what percentage of the population actually read what Macrobius wrote?) should trump the views expressed by many or circulated among many, on common-denomination coinage for example, issued year after year by a wide range of minting authorities. These views are repeatedly expressed in different communicative forms, suited to different types of content and message.

In effect, the written text is an individual, one-time actor on the long-term stage that is set (for us at least) by the tradition, range, and arrangement of our visual sources. That text or actor is but one of the innumerable ones - the vast majority ephemeral - for which our images provided a setting and expression. It is impossible to say whether a text that by chance has survived is representative of the countless lost ones, but by their very existence the text(s) we have are in important ways outliers, exceptions to the rule of regular, ephemeral religious expression. If the text proves difficult to reconcile with its material con-text, this may be no more than a further sign of the text's idiosyncrasy.<sup>145</sup> There is no reason, of course, why an idiosyncratic text should be in agreement with common practice, and that just compounds our problems of interpretation. Is the text an outlier because we misunderstand the text, misunderstand the broader context (the "stage") or simply because it does express opinions that were not shared widely?

With images, we have many texts, given that our basic assumption is that images do not illustrate but enunciate. Pictures do not elaborate on a textual detail, but together lay the foundation upon which (and the backdrop against which) individual texts express and, perhaps, elaborate. This assumes of course that we are able to "read" the visual texts successfully. In principle there is no reason why we should not be able to, but as this study illustrates it will require a lot of work, and more rigour in the analysis of Roman visual semantics from a scholarly tradition that has been rather prone to treating images as illustrative appendages to written texts than vice versa.

What, then, do the images of late antiquity enunciate with regards to Sol? Aurelian built a major temple in Rome for Sol in AD 274 following his victory over Zenobia. In doing so he honored his divine patron much the same way as Augustus had done with his temples for Apollo on the Palatine, at Nicopolis, and elsewhere. And like Augustus, Aurelian set up quadrennial games for his divine patron, celebrated from October 19th-22nd. This quadrennial festival was new, but had old roots. Aurelian's sun god was not new, but his cult was renovated and its priesthood upgraded to senatorial rank.<sup>146</sup> The effect of that upgrade of the cult on its visibility in the surviving record should not be underestimated.

Aurelian's coinage has a wide range of Sol images. None of these is incompatible with the basic image types [sol], and while a close analysis of Aurelian's coinage as a whole may

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<sup>145</sup> The same can be said of groups of texts, if they are all closely related and belong to the same milieu.

<sup>146</sup> Cf. Chapter 5.

reveal specific accents or trends, there is nothing strikingly innovative that could be taken to signify major religious change. It is true that Sol is the dominant figure on Aurelian's coinage of AD 274-5, but that is hardly surprising. It would not occur to a polytheist analyzing Aurelian's coin design policies to view this dominance of Sol as a displacement of other deities. The dynamic such a notion implies - cults in competition, adherents vying for converts - is inherent to a Christianizing mindset. Our Roman polytheist observer would confidently expect other deities to make their return, and see his confidence vindicated soon enough.

If there is little in the coinage, monuments, and image types [sol] of Aurelian to support the notion of solar syncretism, there is even less under his successors. Sol remains one of the potential divine patrons of emperors, but given the many precedents, stretching back to Augustus, that does not qualify as a sign of religious revolution. There is thus also nothing inherently surprising in the fact that Sol was initially the divine patron of Constantine. In fact, by this time Sol ranks as one of three deities most likely to be the patron of one of the emperors, behind Jupiter and on par with Mars. Constantine's choice does not imply dominance of Sol over other pagan gods, anymore than that of any of his predecessors.

The imagery of Sol continues to relay traditional themes. There is attention for his power (invictus), his cosmic connotations and his symbolism of empire. Our ancient viewer would have no trouble with these images. The same is true of the buildings and other images related to Constantine's public persona prior to the defeat of Licinius. We focused on Constantine's activities in Rome and found them to be remarkably traditional, bordering on the distinctly old-fashioned. This is especially clear in the case of his triumphal arch, the first to be erected in Rome since that of Septimius Severus - to which Constantine's arch openly refers. The arch further stresses its old-fashionedness through its re-use of older reliefs as part of its overall message of conservatism.

This traditionalism was purposeful, as the decision to use older reliefs shows, but not wholly so. To a degree it was inherent to the visual media deployed. From arch to bathhouse and from basilica to the coin-images used, Constantine's Roman program adhered to long-established and hallowed lines and patterns. By the very length - by Constantine's time - of these traditions they created an atmosphere of retrospection. In effect each new building built and image decorating it was positioned at the front of an ever longer line of predecessors that co-defined it. These older images constitute the visual associations that a particular picture would invoke. In a city like Rome, with its concentrations of major, famous images, we should not underestimate the extent to which the context - i.e. the city-scape - shaped and even defined the range of meanings a viewer could glean from an image. The arch of Constantine can again serve as an example. While we do not know what Sol "meant" to Constantine, it is more than likely substantially different from what he meant to Eumolpus or Anicetus two and more centuries earlier in Sol's temple in Trastevere. But by integrating the colossus in his design, Constantine nonetheless associated his arch with that first-century Sol. He had little choice. Everywhere in Rome it was the same. This was, by Constantine's day, a city that had not fallen prey to an enemy in 800 years. That is an unimaginably long time. The image systems interwoven with this eternal city were so strong and the context so overwhelming that any attempt to promote major renewal in the monumental and visual language was bound to be difficult. Constantine, or for that matter Aurelian, could ascend the existing stage with a new message but it would likely be overpowered by the rhythm of tradition the images define. The setting does not prefigure imminent change even when it was

imminent because of the sheer weight of tradition. In that sense we should be wary of underestimating the desire for change. I have cited the location of Aurelian's temple as a sign that Sol was not intended to displace other gods of Rome. At one level that is undeniable - the location of his temple is unassuming. But did Aurelian have the stature in Rome to take on traditional centres of real importance? *Could* he have built his temple on a monumental scale in the heart of Rome had he wanted to?

Ultimately, Aurelian did not rearrange the stage and his temple blended in, Constantine did change the setting, quite drastically, by building Constantinople. Sol never made it there in any major capacity, and his cult soon floundered.