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### Sol

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## Conclusion

At the close of this study we are left with a book that in many respects has only scratched the surface with a few scattershot chapters. For each topic that I did explore in the final five chapters there are other chapters of equal or greater interest and impact that have yet to be written. I would hazard, for instance, that Sol was essential in the Augustan program to provide the necessary Latin and Italic element (through Sol's grandson Latinus) to a mythology of Julian power that may otherwise have been too focused on the Trojan origins and background of Aeneas. We could have explored the class-associations of the cult of Sol, which appears to have been a plebeian or lower class public cult, and in general Sol offers an excellent starting point for the study of the intersections between science - cosmology in particular -, cult, and daily life in Rome. The image type [sol-luna] can play a significant role in such a project, as can the planetary week, as it is clear that both were integrated into Roman concepts of time and cosmos no later than the first century BC (and in the case of [sol-luna] probably earlier). The *Carmen Saeculare* illustrates the manner in which such cosmic notions were integrated into public cult and invites research into this integration from a broader perspective. One can think in particular of the profound religious impact of the Julian calendar reforms. Is there any connection between those religious developments and the emergence, in the first century AD, of new iconographies for major regional deities in far-flung corners of the empire incorporating such cosmic-imperial elements as the image type [sol-luna]?

We could go on, but the point is clear: our analysis of the image types [sol] and their deployment in the Roman world has raised more questions than it has answered. To a considerable degree this is the logical result of the ongoing revision of significant aspects of the older understanding of Sol and his cult in Rome to which this study has contributed. In chapter one we saw that over the past decade scholars have turned away from one of the core points of the old paradigm, namely that Rome at different times had two completely different sun gods. Throughout this book it has become abundantly clear that the sun, *Sol*, was a continuous force in Roman religion from as far back as we can trace it until the dismantling of Rome's traditional religious centers, rites and institutions by the Church and the Christian emperors of the later fourth and fifth centuries AD. The visual evidence shows that attempts to differentiate between an "indigenous" and a "foreign" cult of the sun in Rome are futile, as is any attempt to distinguish different cults of Sol based on different nomenclature. Epithets such *divinus*, *invictus*, *aeternus* and the like were used to enhance Sol, but do not define distinct sun gods or cults, nor are they limited to or even predominantly used for Sol. There was a consistent, scrupulously maintained set of iconographical principles governing the depiction of Sol, which did not vary depending upon which epithet is used. Even the epithet *invictus* was apparently used at will, not consistently, and did not dominate even after Aurelian built his temple for Sol in AD 274. The priests in Aurelian's new college of pontiffs simply styled themselves *pontifices Solis* or *dei Solis* without any additional epithet.

We must, then, do away with the core tenet of older historiography on Sol, namely notion that *Sol Invictus* is a specific sun god distinct from, for instance, *Sol Indiges*.

We must also abandon the notion of Sol *adherents*. There is no evidence that the sun god was venerated by congregations of fervent believers. On the contrary, the notion that the sun was divine was in Roman eyes a matter of fact, not of opinion. That in itself was quintessentially

Roman, for Roman religion was founded on knowledge, that is to say the empirically acquired *scientia colendorum deorum*, rather than faith.<sup>1</sup> As a divinity, the sun was due divine honours. There were those who bore particular responsibility for maintaining Sol's shrines and keeping the rites - the Sabine family of the Aurelii, we are told, during the early history of Rome or Anicetus around the turn of the first to the second century AD - but that did not mean they felt that they were part of a special congregation of Sol-worshippers. Even those who, like Julian, believed themselves to have a special bond with the sun god, did not apparently see that as something they did or chose, but as something the god bestowed.

This is a religious dynamic that differs quite substantially from what we tend to associate with religion. It helps to explain a striking feature of the deployment of the image types [sol] in Roman art. What we have seen throughout chapter four and, indeed, throughout this book, is that these image types are used relatively rarely as direct objects of cult or veneration and far more regularly as visual embodiments of abstract concepts such as (divine) cosmic order and stability. Embodiments in an almost literal sense, given that these concepts are conveyed by an anthropomorph image of a radiate youth with specific attributes. That a youthful male figure continued to represent the sun long after ancient science had established that Sol is a fiery orb - and in fact did so even in Jewish and Christian contexts - is interesting enough. That he could also take on metaphorical meanings attached to that orb is a testament to the complexity of signification the Roman visual system could attain.

We have dealt with this seeming disconnect between what is depicted (abstract concept) and how it is depicted (anthropomorph image types [sol]) by treating the image types as basic semiotic signs in the visual communicative system that we refer to loosely and imprecisely as Roman Art. This allows for the indexical or even symbolic relationship between the signifier (anthropomorph image) and signified (abstract concept). It also allows for gradual changes in the Roman understanding of Sol or [sol] without accompanying changes in the image types. Chapter two was devoted to setting out the basic theoretical framework for this approach, with at its core the notion that "visual meanings" (my rather simplistic way of referring to types of meanings that can be expressed more adequately through visual rather than verbal communication) were conveyed in a markedly structured and systematic manner in the Roman world.

The theoretical framework set out in chapter two puts the spotlight on two issues with regards to Sol, neither of which has been fully resolved in this study. The first concerns what we could call the semiotic aspect of Roman art. The more structured the visual system of signification, the more likely it is that the meanings of an image are a matter of social convention. Chapter three revealed the high degree of detail and consistency in the rules governing the iconography of the image types [sol]. Even such aspects as the depiction of divine light were governed by strict rules that remained in force over centuries, prescribing clearly which iconographic conventions for divine light were suitable for which figures. In chapter six we applied this principle of strict differentiation of visual conventions to the imperial radiate crown, and concluded that it was an Actian, Augustan and imperial symbol, rather than a solar and divine one. This outcome supports our position that approaching Roman art as a coherent and subtly constituted semiotic system can yield worthwhile results, but it also illustrates the

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<sup>1</sup> Ando 2008, xvii, 13-18.

problems this system poses us: we do not always know the conventions as well as Roman viewers who learned them from early youth, and hence miss or misinterpret meanings that to a Roman viewer may have been quite obvious. Besides the imperial radiate crown, the overlooked cosmic “rhythm” of mausoleum M is a good example.

This brings us to the second major point to emerge from our theoretical framework: the importance of viewing with Roman eyes. To modern scholars the notion that the imperial radiate crown has nothing to do directly with divine or solar radiance has clearly been counter-intuitive. The two have seemed to us too similar to be so different. We are not accustomed to viewing and visualizing in accordance with such strict rules as Roman art used. In a sense we are like the foreigner in Turkey who sees no reason why of the two words *güzel* and *güzol* only one can be Turkish while the other cannot. Yet to any Turkish speaker it is immediately clear that *güzol* not only *is* not, but *cannot* be a Turkish word. It is fundamentally un-Turkish because it clashes with the all-important Turkish principles of vowel harmony. In other words, what constitutes a major difference in the ears of Turkish speakers (vowel harmony in *güzel* and the lack thereof in *güzol*) is easily missed by those who don't know the language. The difference between the imperial radiate crown (with ribbons) and the solar one (without), may be comparable in nature - seemingly negligible to us as relative outsiders but readily recognized as significant by Romans. They simply constructed and viewed their visual discourse with a different set of rules.

This difference in viewing is not just a matter of placing greater emphasis on iconographic details, or of knowing the social conventions concerning what an image type could mean. It goes beyond that to the issue of expectation, or rather habitus. I have not sought to actively deploy Bourdieu's concept of habitus in this study, but I think that together with related notions of embodiment it is a key for what we have defined as our search for the “Roman viewer”. For what we are looking for is really the *system of dispositions* that Romans embodied in their production of and interaction with the visual. We have not pursued that search very far in this study, but have at various times uncovered elements of a Roman “habitus” in this sense. One example could be the tendency to imbue or frame images or concepts with a rhythm of heaven, earth and underworld, or sky, land and sea, or light and darkness and the like. Such “rhythms” are well suited for closer analysis, pursued with some theoretical rigour - a Bourdieuan or similar approach that forces us to study the process of interaction between viewer and the viewed and to some degree provides us with the tools to do so. This would allow us to focus on differences between the Roman habitus (plural) and ours, and challenge us in particular to confront aspects of Roman habitus which differ with ours to degrees that run counter to our intuition.

There are good examples of such counterintuitive unease in this study, not only concerning Roman attitudes towards the visual, but also relative to their religious concepts where we have repeatedly encountered the influence of Christianizing assumptions on scholarly opinion. As mentioned, Ando has recently argued that knowledge rather than faith underpins Roman religion. The empirical basis of the *scientia deorum*, the knowledge of the gods, introduces an element of flexibility into the Roman mode of religious thought which runs counter to our intuitive understandings of religions as dogmatic, faith-based, and hence inherently inflexible. Roman flexibility is manifested on various fronts, ranging from the acknowledgment of deities from outside the Roman tradition to the adaptation and change of existing forms of Roman cult in

the light of new insights or circumstances.<sup>2</sup> Sol is an obvious example of the latter following the great advances of Hellenistic and early Imperial astronomy that revolutionized the knowledge of cosmic bodies in general, and in particular of the seven planets and their movements. Roman concepts of Sol were adapted accordingly. One need but think of the gradual adoption of the planetary week from the first century BC onwards. One of the major shortcomings of earlier scholarship on Sol has been its failure to recognize the impact of these scientific advances on Roman religion, and the light Sol sheds on the manner in which this was integrated into Roman religion.

Although this process is clear in the broadest terms, the specifics remain unclear. It is safe to say that many if not most Romans of the imperial era understood the sun to be a divine fiery orb rather than a youthful anthropomorph god in a chariot. But what particular powers they associated with this fourth and brightest of the wandering stars at any given time is far more difficult to establish. In chapter nine I expressed reservations about the extent to which our written sources shed light on this. Julian or Macrobius, for instance, give some insight into concepts current at the very end of antiquity, but it remains unclear whether their views were representative of more than a select few.<sup>3</sup> I argued that the image types [sol] have the potential to shed more light on the changing concepts related to Sol, because they are more numerous and less idiosyncratic. But the images pose their own challenges, not only because images are less explicitly informative than texts, but also because they are often deployed to visualize concepts that are only indirectly related to Sol, if at all. This is clearest in the image type [sol-luna] which as we have seen is not the same as the image type [sol] and the image type [luna] who happen both to be in a scene.<sup>4</sup> It is also clear in situations where the image type [sol] stands for the heavens, or light, or sky, as is typically the case in images with a sky-earth-underworld.

In such cases the image types [sol] do not represent Sol *per se*, but I argued at the end of chapter eight that it is nonetheless too facile to dismiss the sol-component of such “symbolic” image types as altogether irrelevant to Sol proper. These images are not just derived from Sol, but construct notions of Sol or [sol] as well. I compared this in chapter nine to setting the stage and providing the backdrop for individual Sol-related “events”, but the disadvantage of this simile is that it insufficiently captures the duality of the image as both element of the backdrop and individual event at the same time. As image type it is “backdrop” and as individual image it is “event”, but given the strong dialectic between the two aspects, the division is to a degree artificial.

There are also added dimensions. The tauroctony relief in a given mithraeum, donated by the *pater*, is an image type [tauroctony] and religious event (donation of *this* relief). In the latter capacity it is unique, but also sets the stage for future religious events in its particular Mithraeum - that is to say that in its mithraeum this specific relief forms the backdrop or repeated common element for numerous events both as image type [tauroctony] and as unique image [donation of *pater X / my (or not my) Mithraeum / new (or venerable), etc.*]. It imbues each particular event

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<sup>2</sup> Ando 2008, 7. Much of Ando’s book is devoted to exploring these various processes.

<sup>3</sup> Julian *or.* 11 (4); Macr. *Sat.* 1,17-23. Cf. in general Fauth 1995.

<sup>4</sup> For an example of the image types [sol] and [luna] not forming an image type [sol-luna], cf. E2.3.

for which it forms the backdrop not only with common Mithraic meanings (as image type) but also with image- and location-specific meanings connected with that particular shrine, its initiates, and its atmosphere (as votive of *pater X*, as defining image for *my* Mithraeum, etc.). As the example of *Il Pasquino* in chapter two illustrated, these are ongoing and wide-ranging processes, with potentially surprising results; Who could foresee that a ruinous statue of Ajax and Patrocles could become a symbol of freedom of speech? Yet they are not wholly unstructured. It would be remarkable for a low-ranked initiate such as a *corax* or *nymphus* to donate the tauroctony relief rather than the *pater*, for instance, just as it would be quite surprising to find such a relief in, say, a temple of Isis. But the structure does not define the image. A tauroctony does not cease to be an individual image by adhering to the rules of the image type [tauroctony], and if this is so, then it is true of the individual components of the tauroctony as well. Likewise in the image type [sol-luna], component parts, such as [sol], do not cease to exist as meaningful units in their own right. It is still the image type [sol] - albeit in a very particular role - and as such part of the overall structure of potential meanings and functions of [sol].

Thus images of Sol in [sol-luna] image types do contribute to the “stage” for particular Sol-events, but only in a secondary way. Their primary role lies elsewhere: in Mithraism for instance, or the cult of Saturn in Africa, and the like. That is why from our Sol-centered perspective they pose such a challenge. One cannot analyze them in any detail without drawing on the images they accompany - an enormous undertaking.

But in setting the stage, these images, indeed all Sol-images, contribute to a basic horizon of expectation, a basic rhythm of depiction that forms a touchstone in the mind’s eye of the Roman viewer when viewing or experiencing a specific event (in the broadest sense) in which image types [sol] are involved. A significant part of the impact of the individual image of Sol derives from the way in which it interacts with that touchstone. The catalogue and discussion at the core of this study provide us with the closest parallel for such a touchstone. I have argued throughout chapter four that we need far more research on adjacent image types before we can even begin to fully assess the Sol-images discussed here, but we are certainly in a position to formulate some broad conclusions (as well as many questions). Sol emerges from our analyses of the images as a divine cosmic power, presented and revered as a prime element of stable cosmic movement, eternally changing yet eternally unchanged. His role in art is predominantly to enhance a given image, usually together with Luna, by representing its cosmic dimensions. In these cases we should see Sol and Luna as *partes pro toto*, standing for the cosmos as a whole or the heavens as a distinct part of it. Particular emphasis is given to the stability (*aeternitas*) of the cosmos notwithstanding its constant movement and flux. We also detected a certain sense of liminality, possibly derived from the status of the planets as the divine mediators between earth and the prime mover beyond the outer sphere of the heavens.

As planetary deity in the company of the other six planets Sol is more specifically the sun, but still subsumed into the broader cosmic fabric. He is invariably depicted on par with his fellow planets with no indication in either his iconography or position that he is in any way special or superior. The week is invariably opened by Saturn, with Sol in second place, and Venus closing it. Sol did occupy a prestigious place when reckoned by distance from the earth, namely the central sphere, with three planets closer to earth and three beyond, but this order is almost never actually depicted. In visual terms, the planetary Sol is thus inevitably the modest second day of the week, rather than the more prominent Sol of astronomy.

Sol had at least four temples in Rome, as well as temples in other parts of the Empire. We know of cult statues, as well as public feasts at one time or another on August 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, and 22<sup>nd</sup>, October 19<sup>th</sup> - 22<sup>nd</sup>, and December 11<sup>th</sup> and December 25<sup>th</sup>. Although late sources claim that the cult of Sol was in early times one of the *sacra gentilitia*, one gets the impression that the public cult of Sol was long of plebeian or lower class. The location of the public temples we know of suggests this, as they were on the Quirinal, the stands of the Circus Maximus, and in Trastevere. The few priests we know from inscriptions are of equestrian rank at best, certainly leading members of their class of Romans, but far-removed from the most elevated circles of Roman society. It is clearly a public Roman cult, but when official sanction is needed from the religious authorities for specific refurbishment and associated sacrifices, the *pontifices* delegate the task to their assistants, the *kalatores*. This changes under Aurelian, who elevates the priesthoods of Sol to the level of *pontifices* as a result of which they become popular with members of the senatorial elite. That we know more priests of Sol from after Aurelian's reforms has everything to do with this change of status. Romans of senatorial rank were far more likely to erect numerous commemorative inscriptions than Romans of lower rank.

Iconographically the Sol venerated in these temples is not differentiated in any meaningful way from the cosmic sol of the planetary week or the image type [sol-luna]. Sol is a power, *invictus*, trampling Rome's enemies underfoot, *comes* and *conservator* of emperors, but none of these tasks are unique to Sol. He emerges in late antiquity as one of the important imperial deities, but there is no evidence in the visual record that Sol ever occupied a privileged or predominant position in Rome's pantheon of official gods and goddesses.

Sol's primary role, then, was that of symbol or index of the divine fabric of the cosmos and the essential stability and eternity associated with it. It is in some form of this role that we see the image types [sol] most often deployed. And it is in this role that Sol also acquires meanings associated with Roman notions of Empire and Imperial destiny. The fact that Apollo is Sol and that Apollo was the patron deity of Rome's first emperor, Augustus, could further enhance the imperial associations evoked by the sun god.

My impression is that the interest of certain emperors in Sol, such as Aurelian or Constantine, was primarily rooted in these imperial and Augustan connotations of the sun and his cult. I see little evidence to show that the cult ever commanded broad religious fervour. The notion that the sun was divine appears to have been both self-evident and unremarkable to most Romans throughout antiquity. Philosophical speculation concerning the place of Sol within the divine order of things was a logical corollary of this accepted divinity, the more so because of Sol's visible prominence. But at no time did Sol receive widespread veneration as supreme deity. The commonly heard suggestion that Sol was the most important Roman deity of the last quarter of the third century AD and the first quarter of the fourth is not supported by any hard evidence.

It is true that Aurelian gave particular emphasis to Sol on his coinage and on one occasion refers to the sun as *dominus imperii romani*.<sup>5</sup> But in a polytheistic environment this does not imply the elevation of Sol to a privileged position nor the demotion or rejection of other deities.

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<sup>5</sup> Far too much has been made of this coin legend. As Berrens (2003, 101-2) stresses, the wording is derived from imperial titles in use since the first century AD and the few coins with that legend were issued for a strictly targeted, limited audience. In the same series Aurelian is also depicted under the protection of Jupiter and in close connection with Mars and Hercules.

There is no indication in subsequent coinage that Sol had gained exceptional prominence after Aurelian, and the same is true outside coinage. In inscriptions Sol is certainly mentioned in this period, but not in any special way. On the *decennalia* base in Rome, Sol appears to have been included only as part of the standard image-type [sol & luna] decorating the cloak of Roma - hardly a sign of major cult, far less of major importance for the sun god.<sup>6</sup>

But what then of Mithraism or Syrian cults of the sun such as that of Elagabal? Do these not indicate a wider veneration of the sun than I have so far been willing to admit in this conclusion, and do they not provide evidence for the existence of congregations of sun-worshippers that I have tried to deny? Here too I think the evidence is less clear-cut than is often thought. Clearly individual Romans could forge particular bonds with a specific deity.<sup>7</sup> But again we should note that this does not translate into any sort of monotheism centered on the chosen god or goddess. There is no reason to believe that initiates in the mysteries of Mithras deemed 'their' god to be more important. Indeed, Beck's recent study on Mithras takes the position that the mysteries were not so much concerned with some lost creed or teachings of Mithraism but were much more experiential, providing initiates the experience of a ritual instantiation of divine cosmic order.<sup>8</sup> The divinity of this cosmic order was itself as commonplace and self-evident a concept as the divinity of Sol. Hence if we accept Beck's understanding of Mithraism, which I find highly persuasive, then its uniqueness lay not in its creed but in its ritual which enabled the initiate to ritually experience his (or his soul's) place in the cosmic order of things.

Such then are our conclusions, and we have already opened this final chapter with some of the many questions that remain. There is one further point to be made. The importance of the visual in the Roman world is illustrated not just by the stability of Sol's iconography, but also by the fact that its rules were known and followed in all corners of the Empire. This sheds an interesting light on such visual factors as style. I have not taken that into account in this study, not least because style is a notoriously difficult criterium to define. Nonetheless the inclusion of a Roman cosmic image type [sol-luna] on a local relief in local style (e.g. C2h.81) carries with it an inherent tension between "Roman" and "Regional". There are numerous examples of this, but how numerous has yet to be determined, particularly in relative terms. Was there a tendency to visualize Sol in a high Graeco-Roman style, such as we find used for most statuettes (plates 7-10)? How was the depiction of Sol in a distinctly local style viewed? Style is a visual entry to a potentially informative array of quintessentially visual meanings, and as such deserves as much attention in future research as any of the questions raised in this conclusion. This is just another indication of how much work can still be done in the study of image types [sol] and Roman religious art in general, with the promise of furthering our understanding of Sol, of Roman religions, and of Roman Art.

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<sup>6</sup> For the *decennalia* base see C4.21. I take the traces of a female bust next to that of Sol, reportedly still visible in the Renaissance, as evidence that we are dealing here with a typical image of the sol-luna type.

<sup>7</sup> There is ample evidence for this. Book 11 of Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* offers excellent examples.

<sup>8</sup> Beck 2006.