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### Sol

Hijmans, S.E.

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*Document Version*

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Publication date:*

2009

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Hijmans, S. E. (2009). *Sol: the sun in the art and religions of Rome*. [s.n.].

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RIJKSUNIVERSITEIT GRONINGEN

**SOL**  
THE SUN IN THE ART  
AND RELIGIONS OF ROME

Proefschrift

ter verkrijging van het doctoraat in de  
Letteren  
op gezag van de  
Rector Magnificus, dr. F. Zwarts,  
in het openbaar te verdedigen op  
donderdag 3 september 2009  
om 13.15 uur

door

Steven Ernst Hijmans  
geboren op 21 november 1960  
te Wijnberg, Zuid Afrika

Promotores:

Prof. dr. P.A.J. Attema  
Prof. dr. M. Kleibrink

Beoordelingscommissie:

Prof. dr. J.N. Bremmer  
Prof. dr. E.M. Moorman  
Prof. dr. R.R. Nauta

*This book is dedicated to  
my father*

*Ben Hijmans  
1929-2008*

ISBN 978-90-367-3931-3



## Introduction

This study has been long in the making. I first became interested in Sol over twenty years ago, when I planned to study the iconography of Sol in the transition from Roman to Christian art in late antiquity for my *doctoraal* thesis. My aim was to study the broader context of the famous image Christ-Helios in mausoleum M in the Vatican Necropolis, but I soon realized that there was no parallel for this image of a solar Christ, or at least not one that was recognizably Christian. I decided to focus instead on the Roman iconography of Sol and graduated in 1989 on a thesis titled *Sol Invictus: een Iconografische Studie*. As I embarked on my career my interests initially drew me away from Sol, but when plans for a field project in Turkish Mesopotamia fell through as a result of the first Gulf War and its aftermath, I returned to Sol and accepted an NWO-funded research position as *wetenschappelijk onderzoeksmedewerker* with the aim to publish a *doctoraat* dissertation that would build on my earlier work. Thus I embarked on writing the book that you now have before you.

My goal, somewhat naive, was to take three or four years to write a close analysis of the extant images of Sol, focusing on what those images could tell us about the chronology, origin, and nature of the cult of Sol in the Roman world. My work progressed well and resulted in a number of articles (Hijmans 1994, 1995, 1996a and b, 1997), but was not even near completion when my three-year research position ended in 1997. The impediments to completion were to some degree practical (illustrated by the sheer mass of material collected in chapter four), but primarily theoretical: I had come to realize that many of the images of Sol in my database did not depict *Sol*, if by *Sol* we mean the Roman sun god. What they did depict was less clear to me, nor was I entirely sure how to find out. I thus found myself facing a choice between pragmatism and principle. With relatively little extra work I could have published an iconographic discussion in the tradition of many volumes in the EPRO-series of Vermaseren. That would have resulted in a book that consisted essentially of chapters one, three and four of this book. But the shortcomings, in this particular case, of such a book were simply too obvious, and in the final analysis I felt certain that I would come to regret such a book as a missed opportunity.

I decided instead to afford myself the luxury of an “old style” approach to my *doctoraat*, i.e. to pursue my career as an academic while continuing to work on my dissertation until I felt it was ready for publication. I must admit that at the time I did not anticipate that it would take me quite so long to reach that point, but I do not regret the decision. It has allowed me to develop my ideas about the Roman art of visual communication, try them out in various seminars with senior undergraduate and graduate students at the University of Alberta and explore their implications for our understanding of the imagery of Sol in a number of case studies (Hijmans 2000, 2003, 2004, 2006, 2007). This does not mean that I consider this study to be more finished than it would have been had I published it earlier. In fact it is, paradoxically, less finished than a “corpus of images and monuments of Sol” in the EPRO-tradition would have been. On two fronts, however, it represents a major improvement over the straightforward iconographic study I briefly contemplated publishing around 2000. It addresses the problems of visual signification and Roman viewing and it explores those issues in a number of loosely linked case studies.

Once my decision was made I initially attempted to find a suitable body of visual or material culture theory to provide a framework for my intended analyses. But I felt like an

anthropologist attempting to study a culture without really knowing its language. The problem with images is that they may seem straightforward but are not. As Magritte points out with his famous series of paintings captioned “ceci n’est pas une pipe”, one cannot smoke a painting. Social codes govern how images function, and those codes are by definition neither universal nor, necessarily, transparent. A society that consistently for centuries depicts the sun as a youthful beardless male charioteer rather than as a fiery orb, for example, clearly has a complexly coded visual system that goes well beyond Magritte’s unsmokable painting. Thus in Roman art what you see is often not what you get, for despite the way in which they depicted the sun, it is quite clear that most Romans did not think that it was a youthful male charioteer, just as they did not think that Eternity was a woman bearing the severed heads of the sun and the moon on her outstretched hands; it was simply the way they visualized the concept. In other words, they thought of the sun as the youthful charioteer when they visualized him in art, but not when they conceptualized him as a cosmic body.

This obvious difference between image and concept depicted underlines the importance of the social coding in Rome’s visual system and hence the importance of being privy to those codes if one is to understand the image. Are we well-versed in Rome’s visual codes? My research led me to realize that we are not, or at least not as well as we like to think. We are certainly not illiterate when it comes to Roman art, but we do not come close to the fluency of a “native viewer”. Problems still arise at various levels of interpretation. At the basic, lexicographical level it is still common to find images defined as “Sol” that clearly do not depict him, as well as images defined as “not-Sol” that do. Likewise there is still confusion over which iconographic elements and attributes are or are not indicative of Sol. For example, one can find certain conventions for the depiction of radiance described as “solar” or typical of Sol, and thus giving the bearer a “solar aspect”, despite the fact that the particular convention under discussion may be one that was actually *never* used for Sol. For the fluent Roman viewer the use of such a convention would thus actually have the opposite effect of conclusively defining a figure as not-Sol, just radiant.

Problems of this type are straightforward and could be adequately resolved in a publication of the EPRO-corpus type. But establishing that an image “is” Sol does not tell us very much, because all that we have done is securely recognize the image, not the concept that image depicts. Reconstructing the social conventions that render the image recognizable gives us the correct ways to “spell” the image, but does not define what the image, thus spelled, means. Classicists have generally side-stepped this problem by assuming that the image meant the same as the most closely associated Latin word: the image of Sol is “Sol”. But in the case of Sol it is soon apparent that this does not work, for while an image of Sol may be deemed to be Sol, it has long been recognized that an image of Sol and Luna together usually means *aeternitas*, not *Sol Lunaque*.

Upon closer consideration it is quite obvious that verbal and visual modes of communication differ too fundamentally to be equated. The primary dimension of verbal communication is temporal, not spatial, whereas visual communication is spatially organized, but not temporal. In short, we cannot rely on our knowledge of Latin to understand Rome’s visual social codes. Words construct meanings differently from images.

Reaching this point was not difficult, particularly because Sol and Luna are very often

appended as a symbolic pair to an image in which they have no direct role, making it was quite obvious that an image of Sol regularly represented - or co-represented - concepts that were not directly related to the Latin word Sol. More difficult was the question how to proceed. I faced the conundrum that is so typical for our field of knowing too little for a sophisticated art historical analysis and too much for a prehistorical approach. I realized that really I had no choice but to attempt to gain a more fluent understanding of the basic *potential* meanings of an image of Sol, the range of predefined possibilities a Roman would have in the back of her mind as she viewed and interpreted a particular image. This led me to ground my study in a very basic, semiotic framework.

Other problems presented themselves. Do images evoke meanings that cannot, or at least cannot easily, be expressed in words? How does one recognize and define such meanings? How does one deal with all the other images that contribute to our understanding of the image of Sol, but that we likely do not know or recognize any better than we do images of Sol? What is the most effective methodology to decipher the social codes that govern the agreed upon meanings of a given type of image, and how does one deal with the inevitable gradual change of those concepts over time? These are some of the fundamental questions that came to drive much of the research now presented here.

This study does not come close to answering all these questions. Indeed in many respects it barely scratches the surface. But it does acknowledge the importance of these questions and others like them, and the impact that they have, or should have, at every step of the interpretative process. The common denominator in all these questions is that they force us to reflect on the complex factors at play in the interaction between viewer and the viewed. And while there is a great deal more to learn, I believe that asking these questions has already paid significant dividends in the present study. The conclusions I arrive at here have challenged me to rethink some of our most basic ideas about the role and nature of the sun in Roman religion. They show that long-held notions concerning, for instance, the origins and chronology of solar cults in Rome, the nature and importance of those cults, or the role of solar cult in the deification of emperors, must be reconsidered or even simply rejected. In a broader perspective, I believe the conclusions of this study demonstrate the potential of this type of visual analysis to enhance and subvert our current ideas concerning many aspects of Roman religion and social history in general.

I see many avenues for further research beyond the conclusions presented here; research further exploring specific aspects of the images of Sol, research expanding beyond Sol (to Luna, for instance, or the Dioscuri), as well as research to strengthen the theoretical and methodological framework for the types of analyses pursued here. One fundamental pre-understanding is the premise for this, namely that Roman society was profoundly visual. That visuality is evident in the proliferation of meaningful images in the Roman world. Living Romans were surrounded by inanimate ones, in the form of statues, reliefs, paintings and the like, to a degree that is difficult for us to conceive. Walking through public spaces in imperial Rome must have been akin to walking through a baroque church in Rome today - with works of art vying for your attention from all sides. The ground level alone of the Forum of Augustus formed the stage for close to 100 statues, if we accept Zanker's reconstruction. At the same time, Romans were not as inundated with images as we are by every medium from children's books to television. The effort



required to produce even one of those statues on Augustus' Forum dwarfs the effort required to publish a photograph in a weekly magazine. No matter how widespread they were, images in the Roman world therefore commanded more respect and, quite possibly, attention than the ubiquitous imagery that we process today. In a world without mass media they were bound to. Thus from coins to statues Romans deployed art to communicate key social concepts and ideals in public as well as private settings.

This premise is fundamental to this study, but not argued extensively in it. Of course one can accept the premise and still reject my conclusion, but I do not see how one can reject the premise, yet accept the outcomes of this study.

Thanks are due to very many people.

First and foremost I must single out the museums and their staff. I have received assistance in one form or another from virtually every museum in the catalogue, for which I am most grateful. Studies such as this one would be impossible without them.

Numerous colleagues have also encouraged me, challenged my views, and provided assistance in various other ways: Leonardo de Arrizabalaga y Prado, Roger Beck, Joe Bryant, Tristan Ellenberger, Arwen Fleming, Garth Fowden, Richard Gordon, Margriet Haagsma, Nathalie de Haan, John Harris, Tracene Harvey, Chris Mackay, Eric Moormann, Frits Naerebout, Inge Nielsen, Andrew Palmer, Reinder Reinders, Jeremy Rossiter, Selina Stewart, the staff of the Netherlands Institute at Athens, the staff of the Netherlands Institute at Rome, untold numbers of critically inquisitive students, and many, many others. A very special word of thanks is due to Peter Attema and Marianne Kleibrink for their unflagging support and incredible patience. After so much help and advice, all remaining errors are, of course, my own. Special thanks is also due to my mother, for her editorial assistance, to my daughters Zoë, Anna, and Phoebe for keeping me sane, and above all to Margriet for, well, everything and more.

This book is dedicated to my father, Ben Hijmans, who contributed more to it than he ever knew.

## Table of Contents

Introduction		v
Chapter 1.	Sol in the Roman Empire: Previous Research, General Trends; A Brief Survey of the <i>Status Quaestionis</i>	1
Chapter 2.	Classical Art, Roman Religion, and Visual Meanings	31
Chapter 3.	Description and Discussion of the Iconography of Sol	71
Chapter 4.	The Images: Catalogue and Discussion	103
	A. Sculpture: life-size or larger	107
	B. Sculpture: small-scale	125
	C. Relief sculpture	135
	C1. Architectural reliefs	135
	C2. Votive reliefs and other religious reliefs	146
	C2a-b. Sol alone and Sol with Luna	146
	C2c. Mithraic reliefs	152
	C2d. Jupiter Dolichenus	186
	C2e. Jupiter-giant pillars	190
	C2f. So-called “Danubian Riders”	195
	C2g. Hosios kai Dikaios	217
	C2h. Saturnus	219
	C2i. Planetary deities	233
	C2j-C2x. Various deities	245
	C3. Funerary reliefs	253
	C4. Other reliefs	270
	C5. Identity of Sol doubtful	275
	D. Mosaics and Opus Sectile	280
	E. Wall-paintings and stucco decorations	289
	F. Decorated plates and vessels	294
	G. Lamps	301
	H. Intaglios	322
	H1. Sol on quadriga to the left	322
	H2. Sol on quadriga to the right	327
	H3. Sol on frontal “split” quadriga	327
	H4. Sol on frontal or three-quarter quadriga	330
	H5. Sol/Usil on frontal triga	331
	H6. Sol standing	332
	H7. Head or bust of Sol to the left	341
	H8. Head or bust of Sol to the right	353
	H9. Frontal or three-quarters head or bust of Sol	353

	H10. Sol as minor figure	355
	H11. Sol and Luna as minor figures	358
	H12. Sol riding on horseback	361
	H13-H18. Varia	361
	HA. Intaglios in ancient rings	364
	I. Cameos	386
	J. Jewellery, costume (including ependytes), personal ornaments	386
	K. Minor objects	394
	L. Coins (selection)	411
Chapter 5	Temples of Sol in Rome	467
Chapter 6	Not all Light Comes from the Sun. Symbolic Radiance and Solar Symbolism in Roman Art	509
Chapter 7	Sol-Luna Symbolism and the Carmen Saeculare of Horace	549
Chapter 8	Image and Word: Christ or Sol in Mausoleum M of the Vatican Necropolis?	567
Chapter 9	Aurelian, Constantine, and Sol in Late Antiquity	583
Conclusion		621