

## Eternal Rome: Guardian of the Heavenly Gates

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**Abstract.** The power of the Roman Empire did not come solely by way of brutal force. A spiritual vision inherited from the Greeks inspired the Romans—an ascent through the classical Planets to the intersections with the Milky Way, where stood the gates of heaven. This vision stretches back, through Macrobius and Cicero, to Plato’s *Republic* and *Timaeus*. The Eternal City, capital of the Empire for four centuries, claimed control over the celestial portals, a tradition that is traced on Roman coins and medals over thousands of years.

Julius Caesar borrowed enormous sums to campaign for the office of *Pontifex Maximus*—high priest of Rome—spending a fortune on “bread and circuses” to secure the support of the masses. Consolidating power at every turn, Caesar as dictator-for-life became absolute master of Rome, the city that, according to its coins, ruled the cosmos.

Though his mortal frame fell to the knives of the senators, Caesar’s soul was seen ascending to heaven as a comet. Thus was born the myth of *Divvs Ivllivs*—the divine avatar of the Roman Empire, whose name would become synonymous with the title of emperor over millennia (German *Kaiser*, Hungarian *Csaszar*, Russian *Tsar*, to name a few).

Caesar’s heir, Octavian, piously waited for Lepidus to die of old age before grabbing the office of Pontifex Maximus for himself, a title that would define the celestial authority of the ruler of Rome until Gratian renounced it four centuries later. Ambrose, bishop of Milan, convinced Gratian that such a pagan title was not fit for a Christian.

Once the Roman emperor discarded the title Pontifex Maximus, the bishop of Rome picked it up and placed it above his own head, as can be seen on coins and medals of the Vatican to this day. In Jubilee years, the Pope knocks down the brick wall that has kept closed the Holy Door for a generation, a ceremony that reaffirms Rome’s control of the celestial gates.

### 1. Introduction

Have you heard this old Roman story? The apostle Peter dies and his soul arrives at the heavenly gates. Standing there is Julius Caesar, the Roman dictator. “What are you doing here?” asks Peter. Caesar replies, “I’m Pontifex Maximus, High Priest of Rome and guardian of the gates of heaven.”

Who held the keys to the heavenly gates before St. Peter?

The exalted office of Pontifex Maximus existed since at least the Middle Republic (Hamlyn 2011), but Caesar’s unbridled ambition led him to combine this religious office with the authority of a senatorial consul and the powers of a plebeian tribune, for which he was acclaimed dictator for life shortly before his death.

For the remainder of the Empire, until Gratian renounced the title around AD 382, every Roman emperor was also high priest of the Roman state cult, *Pontifex Maximus*, who held the power of life or death, as demonstrated in the Colosseum. A defeated gladiator might be allowed to live or his soul might be sent to the gates of the afterlife, where stood Divus Julius, the martyr of the Roman Empire whose soul had visibly ascended to the heavens as a comet.

The apostle Peter purportedly died in Rome about one hundred years after Caesar's demise, and today we hear jokes wherein St. Peter guards the gates of heaven. The flag of the Vatican bears the intersecting keys to the celestial kingdom that—according to Matthew 16:19—were handed to Peter, and that the bishops of Rome have claimed as their own for almost two thousand years. Where did the heavenly gates originate? How did they become so intimately linked to Rome? And when did Rome become the Eternal City?

## 2. Eternal Rome

In the first years of the Empire, the poet Ovid ran afoul of Augustus who exiled him to the Black Sea for corrupting the morals of the younger generation—especially those of the emperor's daughter, who was sent to her room for years on a barren island off the coast of Italy. In vain did Ovid flatter Caesar's divine heir in his *Fasti*, a romp through the months of the year that draws attention to the cyclic stars and constellations that grace the night skies. Half the year is all we have, but in the month of March Ovid invokes the eternal city, when Romulus addresses his father, the war god Mars (Nagle 1995):

Now there, where woods and pastoral retreats had recently been,  
Was a city, when the eternal city's founder said:  
“Ruler of arms, from whom I am believed to have been born. . .”

With the birth of the Empire, Rome inherited eternal ambitions granted by the powers of heaven. The goddess Aeternitas holds the Sun and the Moon on coins of Trajan around AD 111 (Figure 1, *top*), Hadrian stamped “*Romae Aeternae*” on his silver denarius around AD 137 (Figure 1, *middle*), and Maxentius invoked the eternity of the Emperor on his coins around AD 312 (Figure 1, *bottom*), just before Constantine cut his life short at the battle for control of Rome by the Milvian Bridge.

On the coin of Maxentius, the Dioscuri stand guard over the Lupa Romana as she suckles the twins Romulus and Remus, who would one day found the Eternal City, a multi-layered interplay of myth, astronomy, and politics.

Ill-fated Maxentius was advertising Rome's special relationship with the heavenly twins, who rescued the Roman cause at the battle of Lake Regillus around 490 BC. For their divine help, a grand temple would be built in the Forum in their honor, and the Dioscuri were made patrons of the equestrian order that stood between the golden patricians on the hills and the brassy plebs in the streets—patrons of the military order that maintained order throughout the Empire and would often declare the next emperor.

Besides the obvious affinity between terrestrial twins and heavenly Twins, why are the Dioscuri invoked on the coin of Maxentius? Why did the Dioscuri appear on silver coins of the Republic for hundreds of years?



Figure 1. Rome and Eternity. *Top*: Denarius of Trajan / Aeternitas holds the heads of the Sun and the Moon (Seaby 1954). (Aeternitas Numismatics) *Middle*: Denarius of Hadrian / Romae Aeternae legend (Seaby 1954). (Beast Coins) *Bottom*: Aeternitas Avg legend on reverse of coin of Maxentius, where the Dioscuri stand guard over Romulus and Remus being suckled by the Roman she-wolf (Sutherland 1966a). (Munzhandlung Ritter)

### 3. Dioscuri at the Celestial Intersections

Up in the night sky, the twin stars of Gemini—Castor and Pollux, the Dioscuri, or sons of Zeus—stand guard at the intersection in the heavens of the Milky Way and the path of the Planets (Zodiac) where, according to Macrobius, stand the gates of heaven (Stahl 1952).

Macrobius did not invent this scheme. He was commenting on Cicero’s “Dream of Scipio” where, at the end of *On The Republic*, Cicero retools the “Vision of Er” at the end of Plato’s *Republic* for a Roman audience. In *Timaeus*, Plato constructs the cosmic  $\times$  where stood the celestial gates that he describes in *Republic*’s afterlife vision (Latura 2013).

Silver coins of the Republic depicted the celestial Twins over hundreds of years, at times alluding wittily and specifically to their location in the sky by the heavenly crossroads. The Roman commander Postumius had vowed a temple to the Dioscuri at

the battle of Lake Regillus, after which, it was said, the Twins appeared at the fountain of Juturna in the Forum to announce the glad tidings (Figure 2, *top*).

The twin stars of Gemini standing by the heavenly intersection of the Milky Way and the zodiac appeared on a coin struck by Servilius around 136 BC. The Dioscuri ride horses that prance in opposite directions, while the twin stars sit above their heads and their spears intersect behind them, indicating the celestial crossroads by Gemini (Figure 2, *middle*).

On a denarius of Antestius, a small dog runs below the Dioscuri, representing Canis Minor, the constellation that sits below Gemini (Figure 2, *bottom*).



Figure 2. Dioscuri on coins of the Republic. *Top*: The divine Twins water their horses at the fountain of Juturna, announcing the Roman victory at Lake Regillus (Seaby 1952). (Roma Numismatics) *Middle*: Twin stars of Castor and Pollux shine by their intersecting spears that indicate the crossroads in the sky (Seaby 1952). (Numismatica Mayor) *Bottom*: The Dioscuri as the constellation Gemini ride side-by-side, while below them runs a small dog, the constellation Canis Minor (Seaby 1952). (Roma Numismatics)

With the gates of heaven located at the celestial intersections, how might a soul reach them? Through the celestial ladder of the classical Planets that are stacked along the ecliptic like a stairway to heaven, according to Cicero (Keyes 1928), Vitruvius (Granger 1934), Celsus (Hoffman 1987), Macrobius (Stahl 1952), Martianus Capella (Stahl et al. 1977), and even Dante's fourteenth century *Paradiso* (in Canto XXI).

#### 4. Roman Standards As Planetary Ladders

The popularity in the Roman army of the Near East cult of Mithras—with its ladder up the Planets as told by Celsus—indicates that this planetary symbolism would have been familiar to most Roman soldiers.

In *A Dictionary of Ancient Roman Coins* we learn that “standards were decorated with a variety of objects on their shafts. Paterae, phalerae, crescents, and circles (perhaps lunar and solar symbols). . .” (Jones 1990), while Lucinda Dirven (2005) admits that “standards were thought to provide divine protection and fortune during battle.”

The history of the standards, as seen on coins of Rome, suggests a celestial connection. The primary gods of the Romans were the planetary deities that often graced Roman coins, whether as Jupiter (*Conservator*), Mars (*Ultor*, or avenger), Venus (*Victrix*), Luna (*Lucifera*, or light-bringer), or Sol (*Invictus*, or undefeated). The planetary pantheon—as the Roman *signum*—was carried at the forefront of legions as they marched into battle, guaranteeing a celestial ascent through the Planets should a soldier fall in the field.

Mark Antony’s thirty legions all carried the standard with the Moon crescent at the bottom, even as he supposedly advertised his religious office of *Augur*, one who reads the will of the gods through heavenly signs (Figure 3, *top*).

Augustus widely advertised his diplomatic success in retrieving the Roman standards that had been lost to the Parthians by Crassus. Once returned, the planetary standards were installed in the temple of Mars Ultor, the Avenger, the blood-red planet (Figure 3, *middle*). Planetary symbolism abounds: the temple of Mars, the crescent of Luna, the eagle of Jupiter, and circles that indicate the other Planets that travel along the ecliptic.

The importance of the planetary standards to Roman pride and self-esteem is seen on the statue of Augustus found at Porta Prima in 1863, a statue that demonstrates his greatest achievements. On his breastplate, a Parthian is shown handing back one of the lost standards to a Roman. The bird of Jupiter sits at the top of the standard while planetary orbs are strung along the shaft, and the Parthian gazes up at the celestial gods depicted above.

The planetary symbolism of the Roman standards would still survive in the early days of the Christian empire, where it can be seen on coins of Constantine and his sons. Though Christian symbols rarely appear on Constantine’s coins, we do find his nephew Delmatius and his sons Constantine II, Constantius II and Constans, combining the pagan planetary standard with the newly minted Christian symbol, the Chi Rho (Figure 3, *bottom*).

Over centuries, we can trace the influence of the Hellenistic planetary religion, from Julius Caesar and his lieutenant Mark Antony, to Caesar’s heir Octavian (Augustus), and from there, through every Roman ruler almost through the end of the empire.

#### 5. Divus Julius: Imperator and Pontifex Maximus

With the Planetary gods as the primary patrons of Rome, Julius Caesar claimed descent from Venus herself—the morning and evening star. Going against Roman tradition, Caesar combined the executive and legislative authority of the ruling body with religious practice, in effect uniting church and state.



Figure 3. Roman planetary standards. *Top*: Denarius of Mark Antony with planetary standards flanking the imperial eagle—the bird of Jupiter—bears his religious title of *Augur* (Seaby 1952). (Incitatus) *Middle*: Denarius of Augustus / Temple of Mars Ultor with planetary standards returned by the Parthians (Seaby 1952). (Lucernae) *Bottom*: Coin of Delmatius, junior emperor under Constantine / The planetary ladder on a Roman standard leads up to the Christian Chi Rho that now guards the heavenly gates (Sutherland 1966b). (Roman Lode)

After his victories in battle, Caesar's troops acclaimed him *Imperator*, a common practice in the Roman army. But Caesar had also been elected Pontifex Maximus at Rome, a post for which he had campaigned in 63 BC by borrowing huge sums to provide "bread and circuses" to the plebeian masses that would elect Rome's highest priest.

Around 48 BC, Caesar defeated the legions of Pompey, one of Rome's top generals, and soon mopped up the remaining forces that stood in his way. A coin dating to around 46 BC touts that Caesar has been named dictator again—around the bust of Ceres, the goddess of the Mysteries of Eleusis. The reverse shows priestly implements and Caesar's religious titles—*Augur*, or official diviner, and Pontifex Maximus (Figure 4, *top*).

Not only did Caesar control every aspect of Roman life as absolute dictator, he also, as Pontifex Maximus, controlled the very gates to the afterlife that stand at the celestial intersections shown on coins struck by Mussidius Longus (Figure 4, *middle*),



Figure 4. Caesar on Roman coins. *Top*: Denarius shows Ceres, the goddess of Eleusis, and declares Caesar dictator yet again, while the reverse bears sacerdotal implements and Caesar's priestly titles, Augur and Pontifex Maximus (Seaby 1952). (Roma Numismatics) *Middle*: Denarius struck by Mussidius Longus bears Caesar's portrait; the reverse claims control (rudder) of the heavenly gates at the intersecting paths, while nearby stand planetary symbols: the caduceus of Mercury and the apex hat of Mars (Seaby 1952). (Dmitry Markov Coins) *Bottom*: Denarius of Augustus commemorates the comet that showed the soul of Divvs Ivlivs ascending to heaven (Seaby 1952). (Roma Numismatics)

as well as on coins of other moneyers. When the senators revolted and struck Caesar down in 44 BC, the comet that appeared during his funerary games was claimed to be Caesar's soul joining the heavenly gods, a claim Augustus would make repeatedly on his coins (Figure 4, *bottom*).

## 6. Roman Emperor As Pontifex Maximus

Though Caesar bought his way into the office of Pontifex Maximus, Augustus waited patiently for Lepidus—who had been named to the post—to die of old age, as he relates in his *Res Gestae* (Cooley 2009). Then he took the title for himself, and every emperor thereafter would follow suit.

Tiberius, Augustus' heir, advertised his position as Pontifex Maximus on his coins (Figure 5, *top*), while Vespasian, who had no family connection to the Julio-Claudians, meticulously imitated the reverse of Caesar's Ceres coin (Figure 4, *top*) with his own denarius that trumpeted his roles as Augur and Pontifex Maximus (Figure 5, *middle*).



Figure 5. Emperor as Pontifex Maximus. *Top*: Denarius of Tiberius, circa AD 20 (Seaby 1954). (Goltbeeck Ancient Coins). *Middle*: Denarius of Vespasian, circa AD 70, declaring him Augur and Pontifex Maximus just like Julius Caesar (Seaby 1954). (Mauseus) *Bottom*: Denarius of Trajan, circa AD 99 (Seaby 1954). (Romae Aeternae Numismatics)

As the highest priest of the Roman state cult, the emperor ensured that the celestial gods (Jupiter, Sol, Mars, etc.) bestowed their blessings and protection on their favorite city, with Trajan's coins also bearing the priestly title (Figure 5, *bottom*), as would the coins of later emperors.

## 7. Celestial Intersections On Roman Coins

The portals at the crossroads in the sky—as described by Plato in *Timaeus* and in the Myth of Er at the end of *Republic* (Latura 2013)—underscored the Roman ruler's control of not only the earthly realm, but of the heavenly spheres as well. The intersecting paths on a celestial globe appeared on coins from the times of Julius Caesar, Augustus, and then on Imperial coins over centuries.



In Caesar's glory days, the moneyer Carisius struck coins (circa 46 BC) whose reverse would be echoed on coins struck by Mussidius Longus with Caesar's portrait years after his death (Figure 4, *middle*). Carisius' denarius depicts Roma on the obverse, while the reverse shows the heavenly sphere with intersecting paths (Figure 6, *top*). A scepter at left indicates that Rome controls the celestial gates, while a rudder at right claims that Rome steers the destiny of the cosmos.

Augustus adopted the astrological sign Capricorn as his personal emblem (as seen on a denarius that includes a celestial orb with intersecting lines) and a rudder, demonstrating that Augustus controlled the heavenly gates located at the celestial crossroads (Figure 6, *middle*).

Similarly, Antoninus Pius depicted Italia enthroned on the celestial globe, where shining stars surround the intersecting paths where stood the heavenly portals, according to Plato's cosmology (Figure 6, *bottom*).



Figure 6. Intersecting paths on celestial sphere. *Top*: Denarius struck by Carisius, circa 46 BC, showing Roma; on reverse, a celestial globe with intersecting paths, scepter to the left, rudder on the right (Seaby 1952). (Urskola). *Middle*: Denarius of Augustus, circa 18 BC, with Capricorn, his personal emblem, ruling the heavenly orb, rudder behind (Seaby 1952). (Numisantique). *Bottom*: Sestertius of Antoninus Pius, with Italia atop a celestial orb with stars and intersecting lines (Mattingly 1968). (Mike Vosper Coins)

The celestial gates at the heavenly crossroads would appear on Roman coins for centuries, while Roman emperors and empresses made the earthly pilgrimage to

Athens, to the Mysteries of Eleusis, where stood the gates of Hades that Plato describes in *Republic* (Book X).

Octavian immediately headed to Eleusis in gratitude for his victory over Mark Antony, and he returned a decade later as Augustus, a higher-grade initiate. The connection between the Mysteries and Plato's cosmology would be revealed by the theurgist authors of the *Chaldean Oracles* around AD 160, linking Plato's cosmic  $\times$ , the World Soul, to Hekate's crossroads, where the guardian of the gates of Hades meets the anguished Demeter and helps her find her abducted daughter (Latura 2014).

When Christianity began making inroads into Roman life, the celestial intersections would still represent the heavenly portals and declare Rome's control over the entrance to the afterlife.

## 8. Celestial Intersections Toward the End of the Empire

Christian symbols rarely appear on coins of Constantine, but his piety towards the planetary gods cannot be doubted. The king of the gods, Jupiter Conservator, offers the emperor the celestial orb (Sutherland 1966b), while more often Sol Invictus proffers the same cosmic sphere with visible intersections (Figure 7, *top*).

With the bloody purge that followed Constantine's death, his son Constans acquired control of Rome and with it, control of the celestial gates, as advertised on coins where Constans holds the cosmic orb in his grasp (Figure 7, *middle*). The sphere with intersecting lines and stars above and below underscores that such orbs are of a celestial nature and point to a specific location in the firmament.

The symbolism of Rome controlling the heavenly gates would endure at least until the reign of Gratian, who renounced the title of Pontifex Maximus, under the advice of Ambrose, bishop of Milan. Yet Roma enthroned—and presenting to the emperor the heavenly orb with intersecting lines and dotted with stars—could still be found on coins of Gratian (Figure 7, *bottom*).

The heavenly gates described in Plato's *Republic* and located at the celestial intersections described in *Timaeus* (see Rafael's *School of Athens* fresco in the Vatican, where Plato holds the telling tome) would survive for more than two thousand years, with Rome claiming control over the heavenly portals for much of that time.

## 9. Heavenly Gates Guarded by Rome Today

According to the Gospel of Matthew (16:18–19), the disciple Peter was given the keys to the heavenly kingdom, against which the gates of Hades would not prevail. The intersecting keys to the celestial afterlife appear prominently on the flag of the Vatican.

The celestial gates and infernal gates of the Gospels mirror Plato's heavenly gates and infernal gates (in *Republic*, Book X), while coins and commemorative medals of the Vatican display Rome's control of the portals to the hereafter.

A revealing scenario is played out during Jubilee years that come every fifty years, or Holy Years that occur when the Pope so decides. The Holy Door that has been walled up since the previous celebration is ceremoniously re-opened by the Pope, who knocks down the bricks with a silver hammer (Figure 8).

A devout Catholic who makes the pilgrimage to Rome during the Jubilee year can earn a plenary indulgence by walking through the Holy Door. According to Catholic



Figure 7. Celestial intersection and Christian Emperors. *Top*: Coin of Constantine, with Sol Invictus offering the celestial globe with intersecting lines to the emperor (Sutherland 1966b). (Munzhandlung Ritter) *Middle*: Coin of Constantine's son, where the son of Constantine grasps in his hand the heavenly orb with intersecting lines and visible stars (Kent 1981). (Thierry Dumez Numismatique) *Bottom*: Coin of Gratian with Roma enthroned holding the celestial sphere with intersecting lines and dotted with stars (Pearce 1933). (David Connors Ancient Coins)

dogma, God will forgive a repentant soul, but that soul still has to be cleansed through a painful passage in Purgatory, perhaps lasting years or decades. But a plenary indulgence guarantees that the recipient will not have to go through Purgatory, but will advance directly to the gates of heaven.

The Opening of the Holy Door—and its walling up for decades at the end of the Jubilee year—illustrates that Rome still claims control over the heavenly gates to this day, with the intersecting keys to the celestial portal at the heavenly intersections sitting above the Holy Door on the medal seen here.



Figure 8. Commemorative Medal by Emilio Monti of Pius XII, Pontifex Maximus, in the Jubilee year 1950. *Reverse*: Pope knocks down bricks with a silver hammer, opening the gate to heaven that shows the intersecting keys above and Jesus with a celestial cross and angels at top. (Coins To Medals)

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