# CHRISTIAN SUN WORSHIP AND THEURGY IN LATE ANTIQUE ROME

by

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of
The University of North Carolina at Charlotte
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts in
Religious Studies

Charlotte

2021

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# ABSTRACT

JUSTIN SELLS. Christian Sun Worship and Theurgy in Late Antique Rome.
(Under the direction of DR. JAMES TABOR)

In Late Antique Rome the worship of the sun penetrated into Christian belief and practice. This is usually explained in terms of a type of syncretism, where the sun god in Roman religion during this time (often seen as being at the apex of the pantheon) was conflated with the Christian god. These ideas are often drawn from an analysis of texts from the time, particularly those of Roman philosophers and the Christian clergy and theologians. By using the methodology of a people's history – with a focus on reading between the lines of the works produced by the elites who dominated the literature, as well as with special attention to material artifacts – we can begin to look at what the sun worship meant to the actual Christians, and not simply from the perspective of their critics. This methodology allows us to understand that the Christians who were worshipping the sun in Late Antique Rome were not doing so out of a type of syncretism, but rather that they were participating in the popular form of magic known as theurgy, which included the invocation of certain deities (such as the sun) for the sake of the soul's ascension after death.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

# Introduction

On December 25th, 451, Pope Leo I preached a sermon on the Nativity. Amidst the usual theological commentary on the celebration and its meaning, Leo made a remark about something scandalous that he had been witnessing among his parishioners. After climbing the large steps to St. Peter's Basilica on Sunday morning, Christians were turning their back on the church, facing the rising sun and paying it homage through 'bent neck' and with prayer. This sight, though shocking in its own right, should not come as too much of a surprise. Sun worship was prevalent throughout the Roman empire, but not exclusively among the pagans. There are a few synagogues, such as the ones at Beit Alfa, Tzippori, and others, that house mosaics of the sun god within an astrological context. There is a Christian tomb, Mausoleum 'M,' that contains a mosaic of the sun god.

I take these to be signs of sun worship, not in the sense that the images themselves were necessarily worshipped, but in the sense that they, at the very least, indicate the worship of the god. As far as the act of worship is concerned, I include acts such as prayer, iconography, and anything else that would aid in venerating or invoking the deity, such as amulets and spells. As far as theurgy goes, as we will see, 'worship' is mostly in the form of invoking or commanding the deity for some end, not being strictly defined as a passive adoration of the deity (hymns, thanksgivings, offerings, etc.). This might seem like a loose definition of the word 'worship,' especially since some theurgy involves the actual *commanding* of the deity (and not supplication). Regardless, the focus of this paper is the connection between Late Antique Christianity and solar theology, whether that includes a more traditional understanding of 'worship' or a different form of invocation. My general use of the term 'worship' is thus expedient for the purpose at hand.

Whereas the sun god was very popular in Late Antique Rome, it is shocking to find adherents of (often assumed) monotheistic religions such as Judaism and Christianity (the primary focus of this paper) sometimes including his worship. This shock value is only increased as we realize how late Pope Leo's reference was— decades after the supposed extermination of paganism in the fourth century. Furthermore, apart from scant references— veiled ones at that— by church fathers like Pope Leo, these Christians don't show up in the literary record, their voices being suppressed except, perhaps, in the archaeological record. This brings me to a few necessary questions. What can we understand, through church writings, early Christian art and archaeology, and perhaps the unique religious activities of Constantine himself, about these Christians and the role of the sun in their theology? Using some methods of a traditional 'people's history,' such as reinterpreting patristic writings and strongly emphasizing material evidence, I will argue that these Christians took a theurgic view of the sun as a theophany which played an important role in the progression of the soul from birth to ascension after death.

This project is important to the academic study of religion because it demonstrates the religious diversity that existed in Late Antique Rome, especially among the masses who have not left behind writings about their beliefs, or at least not as much as the orthodox authorities and intellectual elites who have dominated the literature. In the face of this homogenous literature, my project seeks to understand the practices and beliefs of those Christians who did not have a voice to sound their ideology of sun-worship.

## Background

Sun worship was prevalent in Late Antique Rome. The worship of Sol Invictus, the extremely popular sun god of the late Roman empire, was introduced to the Romans in the third century. This was simply a reworking and revitalization of the older Roman deity Sol, but

surpassing the likes of Apollo and Helios in popularity, although the various sun gods (among other non-sun gods) were often conflated. The sun gods' popularity during this time did not extend to the traditional worship of the Roman pantheon, but extended deep into the realm of astrology. Pope Leo I, mentioned above, believes that some of the sun worship taking place at St. Peter's is driven by astrological motives.[1] Christians were by no means averse to astrology, despite the practice being constantly condemned by clerical authorities. For example, there are many Christian burial inscriptions relating to fate, as well as astrological imagery in depictions of Jesus.[2]

The worship of Sol Invictus was very common among the emperors. The emperors Elagabalus and Aurelian helped to establish the worship of Sol Invictus across Rome. This imperial patronage of the sun god would continue well into the fourth century with the likes of Constantine and Julian. Whereas it comes as no shock that Constantine, prior to the Battle of the Milvian Bridge (312) where he allegedly converted to Christianity, would continue this practice of worshiping Sol Invictus, as scholars are beginning to realize, Constantine was continuing to do so well after his conversion. This took place in the iconography of his coins[3], his famous victory Arch in Rome[4], and the monumental porphyry column in the emperor's new capital of Constantinople.[5]

Although this project incorporates the powerful figure of Constantine the Great, as well as pulling in references to other political and religious elites, my research is focused heavily on the relatively anonymous sun-worshippers found scattered in the literary and material record. Thus, my work partially fits into the scholarship of a people's history, shining light on a group of

[1] Pope Leo the Great, *Sermon 27.3-4*.
[2] Tim Hegedus, *Early Christianity and Ancient Astrology*, New York: Peter Lang, 2007, 197-8.
[3] Stanley A. Hudson, "Tracing the Spread of Early Christianity Through Coins," *Bible Review* 1, no. 4 (1985): 38.
[4] Elizabeth Marlowe, "Framing the Sun: The Arch of Constantine and the Roman Cityscape." *Art Bulletin* 88, no. 2 (June 2006): 223-42.
[5] Martin Wallraff, "Constantine's Devotion to the Sun after 324." *Studia Patristica* 34 (2001): 261-2.

people almost invisible in the historical record. Furthermore, this research fits into the recent approaches of the scholarship which seeks to understand the underpinnings of religious identity, especially among the dissident, or otherwise nonconforming, masses.

## Literature Review

History on the subject best begins in the early 20th century with Franz Cumont. His book, *The Oriental Religions in Roman Paganism,* provides an extensive survey of the religious influence that eastern provinces and nations had on traditional Roman religion. One of the main arguments that he makes is that, through the permeation of eastern solar symbolism, the Romans created their own solar religion.[6] This solar religion, primarily through worshipping the sun as Sol Invictus Deus, could be considered either pantheistic or henotheistic. According to Cumont, this undoubtedly paved the way for the empire's conversion to Christianity, breaking down the barriers between their former polytheism and the Abrahamic monotheism.[7]

Scholarship throughout the 20th century continued to argue this or similar points regarding the 'oriental' (or 'east of Rome') origin of the god Sol Invictus. Attention is often drawn to the fact that, despite two solar deities in Apollo and Helios, the Syrian emperor Elagabalus established the worship of his native sun god El-Gabal (referred to as Sol Invictus Elagabalus). Elagabalus' patronage of this deity was met with criticism in Rome due to its foreign and exotic rituals that often shocked Roman sensibilities. Despite this, worship of the new sun god (or those like it) gave way to the emperor Aurelian's new framing of the deity: Sol Invictus Deus. This new 'Romanized' take on Sol Invictus was simply a way of cloaking the eastern nature of the new deity. This story, often repeated in mid-20th century histories, separates Sol Invictus from both the traditional deities Apollo and Helios, as well as the even more ancient

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[6] Franz Cumont, *The Oriental Religions in Roman Paganism*, (Chicago: Open Court, 1911), 89-90.
[7] Ibid., 134.

Sol Indiges. This latter deity, according to the typical story, stops appearing towards the end of the Republic era, being replaced by Sol Invictus, an entirely new (and foreign) deity.

The connections between the worship of Sol Invictus and Christianity began to complicate towards the end of the 20th century with new scholarship on the ancient mystery cults, or, more generally, cults dedicated to one deity. In the past, scholars like Cumont, or afterwards, R. E. Witt, highlighted similarities between the mystery cults and Christianity.[8] These similarities focused not only on the rituals that they might have shared (such as baptism) but also on their monotheistic and personal takes on the deities being compared to Jesus or the Christian god — Mithras in the case of Cumont, or Isis in the case of Witt. These mystery cults, alongside Cumont's eastern Sol Invictus, bridged Roman religion between traditional pagan polytheism and Christianity. The transition was dominated by an influx of monotheistic and foreign cults.

This view began to be challenged with the likes of Walter Burkert and Polymnia Athanassiadi. Burkert argues against the eastern origin of the mystery cults, as well as their incompatibility with traditional Roman paganism.[9] Athanassiadi argues that neither the cults dedicated to one deity nor Christianity were exactly 'monotheistic' and either could be incorporated within a 'pagan' context.[10] These scholars present a story far different from Cumont's, deconstructing his theory of eastern henotheism being the bridge from paganism to Christianity. These scholars extensively blur the lines between all categories involved. In fact, the thrust of the scholarship at the turn of the century emphasizes our inability as scholars to construct such concrete categories which forces Roman paganism, sun worship, Christianity, etc. into a false notion of incompatibility.

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[8] R. E. Witt, *Isis in the Graeco-Roman World*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971.
[9] Walter Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cult*s, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987, 2-4.
[10] Polymnia Athanassiadi ed., *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, 1-2.

The scholarship emerging in the 21st century continues the process of problematizing this old notion that Roman paganism, the mystery cults, and Christianity were distinct and incompatible (as well as hindering our ability to trace a timeline of their 'evolution'). It is also during the turn of the century that we begin seeing work concentrating on the role that art plays in demonstrating the compatibility and coexistence of these various religious groups. The work of Elizabeth Marlowe, Philip Peirce, and Martin Wallraff focuses on the important reign of Constantine and the coexistence of solar theology with Christianity in his monuments.[11] The work of Yaffa Englard and Lucille Roussin highlight the solar imagery within Jewish synagogues during the imperial era.[12] The most sweeping work in recent times (in terms of breadth and quality of scholarship) is Steven Hijmans's *The Sun in the Art and Religions of Rome.* Hijmans offers analysis of artifacts throughout Roman history, including the pieces highlighted by scholars interested particularly in Constantine or synagogues.

All of these scholars have drastically different interpretations of the artifacts in question. For example, Englard argues that the synagogue mosaics depicting a personified sun are merely artistic symbols depicting the sun for calendrical and astrological purposes. Roussin, on the other hand, argues that these mosaics point towards a possible reconciliation or even syncretizing of the sun deity and the Jewish god. Hijmans is particularly skeptical of the thesis that some early Roman Christians utilized any solar theology whatsoever, opting for a dismissal of Christian elements among key artifacts, or taking Englard's conservative interpretation of any coexisting religious elements.

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[11] See Marlowe, "Framing the Sun."; Philip Peirce, "The Arch of Constantine: Propaganda and Ideology in Late Roman Art." *Art History* 12, no. 4 (December 1989): 387-418; Wallraff, "Constantine's Devotion to the Sun after 324."

[12] See Yaffa Englard, "Mosaics as Midrash: The Zodiacs of the Ancient Synagogues and the Conflict Between Judaism and Christianity." *Review of Rabbinic Judaism* 6, no. 2 (January 2003): 189-214; Lucille Roussin, "Helios in the Synagogue." *Biblical Archeology Review* 27, no. 2 (March/April 2001): 52-6.

Alongside the emphasis on archaeology, the 21st century has also seen the emphasis on sociological ideas regarding religious identity. Within the context of Christianity and paganism, scholars such as Alan Cameron, Philip A. Harland, Maijastina Kahlos, and Éric Rebillard, among others, analyze how people in Late Antique Rome identified themselves and were identified in terms of their religion.[13] This scholarship branches from turn of the century scholarship that questions categories such as paganism and the incompatibility of 'pagan' beliefs and practices with Christianity. Often, this work on Christian identity in Late Antique Rome points out how people who identify themselves as Christians believe or practice things that church authorities claim is contradictory to the faith. This also ties in, somewhat, with literature on heresy. Scholars such as Talal Asad and, more recently, Averil Cameron, have reinterpreted ancient polemics against heresy, arguing that these descriptions of heretics might not correspond to reality, but, as mentioned above, are simply casting different social groups into older heterodox categories for the sake of stability within the church.[14]

My research takes the form of a 'people's history.' This is difficult to do when narrowed in on a specific belief system rather than a cohesive group. Although there might have been actual communities of Christians who worshipped the sun, it is impossible to place, with certainty, into a single category the sun-worshippers that Pope Leo mentions with, for example, the owner of Mausoleum 'M.' Nevertheless, I am studying people who have been persecuted and silenced by the church authorities, who do not show up in the literature except in the

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[13] See Alan Cameron, *The Last Pagans of Rome*, Oxford: University Press, 2011; Philip A. Harland, *Dynamics of Identity in the World of the Early Christians: Associations, Judeans, and Cultural Minorities*, New York: T&T Clark, 2009; Maijastina Kahlos, *Debate and Dialogue: Christian and Pagan Cultures c. 360-460,* Abingdon: Routledge, 2007; Éric Rebillard *Christians and their Many Identities in Late Antiquity, North Africa, 200-450 CE*. New York: Cornell University Press, 2012; Éric Rebillard and Jörg Rüpke, eds. *Group Identity and Religious Individuality in Late Antiquity*. Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2015.

[14] Averil Cameron, "How to Read Heresiology,"; idem "The Violence of Orthodoxy," in *Heresy and Identity in Late Antiquity*, Eds. Eduard Iricinschi and Holger Zellentin (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008): 102-114; Talal Asad, "Medieval Heresy: An Anthropological View," in *Social History,* no. 11:3 (October 1986): 345-362.

condemnations of the church fathers. Thus my research is a 'people's history' in the methodological sense. As Viriginia Burrus writes in her 'people's history' of Late Ancient Christianity, "The telling of a people's history requires that we read old sources in new ways while also attending to sources that have frequently been ignored, not least the rich realm of material culture."[15] My research does just this, reading between the lines of ancient church writings and, perhaps moreso, delving into the 'material culture' of Late Antiquity.

**Outline**

As far as the structure of the thesis goes, the first chapter will analyze ancient Roman astrology, given that Pope Leo situates his sun-worshipping parishioners in the context of star worship for the sake of overcoming astrological fate as well as the other artifacts related to fate. Particular attention will be paid to other evidence of astrology in the lives of Christians with the hopes of understanding what role the sun played in their astrological beliefs. Much of this evidence will come in the form of art such as burial inscriptions and church mosaics, such as the Mausoleum 'M' and Dura Europos church mosaics. These primary sources will shed light on the actual thought processes and beliefs of these Late Antique sun-worshipping Christians.

From there I will move into a more chronological study of this sun worship throughout the Roman empire. Of particular importance is Constantine and his religious policies and monuments. This chapter will help to trace the development of Christian sun worship and help to situate Christian sun worship in its historical context even up to the fifth century. On top of secondary sources, which build off of years of historical analysis of the period, I will also be using the writings of early church fathers in order to understand the more general views of the sun by Christians at this time. Of particular importance is Eusebius, given his close connections

[15] Virginia Burrus, *Late Ancient Christianity,* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2005, 5.

with Constantine and his cult, but also interesting to note are orthodox theological writings from this period which actually bring the sun into a theological framework.

Following this will be a study of Christian identity, more specifically how these sun-worshipping Christians might have identified themselves and how they were identified by the clergy in power. In order to better understand the unique theology of these Christians, as well as the broader questions of *what* they are and *how* they appear in 5th century Rome (in full view of the Pope, no less), it is important to study issues of identity and how they categorized themselves. This is important when studying these Christians on their own terms and not on the terms of the orthodox authorities. For this I will be relying mostly on secondary sources due to the theoretical nature of this topic, as well as the lack of many personal testimonies, especially from the groups that I am studying.

As far as primary texts go, I am relying on the more recent and authoritative translations where possible. My method of studying these texts will be a combination of historical and redaction criticism. In the context of this research, the historical criticism will be aimed at understanding the particular views of the sun and solar theology in each author's beliefs or the beliefs of those around them. The redaction criticism will pick up on this to understand the theological motives behind early church references to solar theology and sun worship. In light of contemporary scholarship on heresy, this redaction criticism will allow me to read between the lines and understand the social context of these writers, especially when they use potentially anachronistic or exaggerated descriptions of these sun-worshippers. These two types of criticism, combined with the archaeological evidence, allows for a greater understanding of these sun-worshippers than previously conveyed by clerical and other authoritative sources.

## Chapter 1: Astrology

In Late Antiquity, the sun could be worshipped from a number of perspectives. It could obviously be worshipped in the line of a typical Roman deity— there were temples to the sun gods scattered across Rome, each with the typical modes of worship such as sacrifice and holy

days. Another form of sun worship emerged in the form of astrology. Here the sun, and other celestial bodies, like in the Roman pantheon, "were considered gods or manifestations of gods or their instruments."[16] The forms this worship took varied extensively, as the attitudes towards the role of the sun in astrology varied. The sun, moon and stars could be worshipped as the gods who controlled fate in the astrological system, or they could be treated with resignation on account of the immutability of fate. By Late Antiquity, theurgy would allow for individuals to 'command' the gods who controlled the astral forces and thus change their fate, opening the way for a third attitude towards the heavenly bodies in the astrological system.

Despite the apparent lack of unity in how the heavenly bodies were perceived by practitioners of astrology, it is apparent that the system "was always explained as being on the model of the Sun, whose effects on the Earth and life on it were too obvious to need much justification."[17] This mostly took the form of 'cosmic sympathy' where the relative location of the sun, moon, planets and zodiac signs served as direct causes of events on earth.[18] In less deterministic views of astrology, such as in the mind of Neoplatonic philosopher Plotinus, the heavenly bodies do not serve as a direct cause of earthly events, but simply predict it, allowing for a form of astrological prophecy.[19]

There are two major types of material evidence that help us understand astrology in ancient Rome: papyrus horoscopes and coins.[20] Horoscopes are "a description of the positions of the celestial bodies relative to a given terrestrial location at the given time."[21] Horoscopes were most commonly used for births, in order to understand the future of the individual in question,

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[16] Roger Beck, "Greco-Roman Astrology" in *Handbook of Archaeoastronomy and Ethnoastronomy,* ed. Clive Ruggles, (New York: Springer, 2015), 1630.
[17] Tamysn, Barton, *Ancient Astrology,* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 1994), 102.
[18] Ibid., 54.
[19] Ibid., 55.
[20] Beck, 1629.
[21] Ibid., 1630.

but could also be used for entire cities. Another important tool in the astrologer's repertoire is katarchic astrology, which "examined *future* celestial configurations to determine auspicious times for undertakings such as sea voyages."[22] This will become more important later, when we examine the role of astrology in the political realm of the emperors and the legitimization of their rule.

Astrology had a tumultuous history in Rome. Throughout much of the Republican era, astrology experienced highs and lows, although never quite breaking into the fore as a predominant belief system, particularly among the upper classes and intelligentsia. In the second century BCE, and on into the first century BCE, astrologers experienced extensive persecution. In the year 139 BCE astrologers were expelled from Rome. The reasons for this were many, ranging from them being "highly suspect foreigners" to their craft being considered "a fraud practiced on the gullible masses."[23] This began to change towards the end of the first century BCE, however, with the likes of Posidonius, Nigidius Figulus and Terentius Varro, who all championed beliefs in fatalism and the astrological belief in cosmic sympathy. Frederick Cramer, a historian writing in the mid 1950s, claims that, thanks to these philosophers, "By the time of Julius Caesar's death the majority of Rome's upper class had been converted."[24]

From this time onwards, astrology would be used frequently among the Roman upper classes, particularly for political reasons. The emperors, largely without exception, would use astrology to legitimate their rule, going so far as to hold off coronations until the proper time according to their favorite court astrologers.[25] This does not mean that these astrologers were free from worry. Should these astrologers aid other elites in seeing the future (usually death) of the

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[22] Ibid.
[23] Frederick H. Cramer, *Astrology in Roman Law and Politics,* (Chicago: Ares Publishers, 1996), 80.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Barton, 47.

emperor and thus the ripe time for a revolution or coup, they would be swiftly disciplined with either exile or death.[26] Thus, despite the popularity of astrology among the lower classes and its power among the elites, sweeping punishments like the one in 139 BCE would recur. Tamysn Barton writes that, "Between the death of Julius Caesar and that of Marcus Aurelius in 180 CE, no fewer than eight, and possibly as many as thirteen, decrees expelling astrologers and other groups from Rome and Italy are recorded."[27] Indeed, despite the continual use of astrology among the lower classes, and sole use among the emperors, "By the time of Diocletian, in 296, there was an empire-wide ban on astrology."[28]

As we will see below, despite these imperial decrees, astrology *would* survive among the lower classes (as we will see from the material evidence), and *would* continue to be used by the emperors to legitimate their rule, even being used by the Christian emperors. "Despite centuries in which astrologers had to keep a low profile, it re-emerges in our sources in the early tenth century in Byzantium as if it had never left the court. Dangerous it might be, but for the emperors it was irresistible."[29] This danger is not limited to the imperial court, but to the Church as well. And as irresistible as it was for the emperors, so it was for the laity.

The revival of astrology from the first century BCE culminated towards the end of the first century CE. Historian Frederick Cramer writes that this period, "witnessed the final conversion of the Roman nobility to the most profound faith in fatalistic astrology it ever acquired."[30] We can see this 'conversion' in the imperial edicts of the era. Rather than outlawing and expelling the astrologers, Augustus issued an edict in 11 CE which would serve as the groundwork for astrology and the law. The edict allows for the practice of astrology within

[26] Ibid., 44-6.
[27] Ibid., 50.
[28] Ibid., 52.
[29] Ibid., 211.
[30] Cramer, 144.

reason. There are simply a few things that astrology cannot be used for: to discern anything regarding someone's death, or to discern pretty much anything to do with the emperor or their family— anything related to that would obviously be tantamount to treason and swiftly punished.[31] Despite this law, and the subsequent attempts of future emperors to stamp out treasonous astrologers, it remained quite ineffective on the larger scale.[32]

By the time of the Christian emperors, divination and magic were seen as going hand in hand, perhaps one being a subset of the other.[33] The question was what term to use in regard to them. The word *superstitio* gave it a more pagan religious element whereas *haruspicina* did not have the same negative connotations. Nevertheless, during Constantine's reign, *superstitio* in the form of divination was permitted; Valentinian I in 371 even referred to benevolent *haruspicina* as 'religio,' the word opposite of *superstitio* that Christians used in reference to their own religion.[34] Valentinian's law carried on the Augustan tradition of separating good and bad divination— *haruspicina* and *maleficium* respectively.[35] It wouldn't be until the reign of Honorius when we see the first laws strictly condemning astrology and ordering expulsions as punishment,[36] first in 409 and then later in 425 (where the practice was mentioned in connection with the long condemned Manichaeans).[37]

Christian emperors would continue the practice of the former emperors in using astrologers to aid in their reign. The Arian emperor Valens would have a court astrologer despite being commonly seen as a fanatical Christian.[38] Astrology, despite not being mentioned in the historical record as much, likely continued to be treated the same by the Christian emperors until,

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[31] Ibid., 232.
[32] Ibid., 144.
[33] Barton, 195.
[34] Jill Harries, and I. N. Wood, *The Theodosian Code,* (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1993), 145.
[35] Ibid., 146.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Barton, 65.
[38] Ibid.,, 66.

as mentioned above, Honorius took a strict position on it. Constantine continued to allow it and Valentinian reified what was legal use of astrology. This similar stance on astrology didn't just extend to the legal realm, however, but also to the way that it was viewed in relation to the life of the emperor as well. The Christian and astrologer Firmicus Maternus, in the year 334, repeats that it is both wrong and illegal to use astrology to make inquiries towards the emperor and the empire. But it wasn't just improper use of astrology: it was useless. "The emperor alone," writes Firmicus, "is not subject to the course of the stars and in his fate alone the stars have no power of determination. Since he is master of the whole world, his destiny is governed by the judgement of the god most high."[39] As we can see, the conversion of the imperial throne to Christianity did not do much to change the laws and perception of astrology, at least for the first century or so.

Astrology, throughout its history of persecution and comeuppance in the first century BCE onwards, became popularised among all social classes. As far as who *produced* astrological ideas and tradesmen, it is almost impossible to tell from the historical record. Much of the astrological literature borrows material from older material, to the point to where we cannot even be sure if certain ideas are Babylonian, Persian, or Greek. On top of that, it is impossible to tell if these writings were produced by astrologers from royal courts or not due to the texts being taken and edited outside of their context. As Barton writes, "It is simplest to see the social world of the astrologers as a composite culture."[40]

Much of the information that survives from this period, however, was produced by the elites. As far as the astrological texts go, such as actual horoscopes, we can tell that the lower classes were given much more attention than the elites. Because of this, we can understand what

[39] Firmicus Maternus, *Mathesis*, 2.30.
[40] Barton, 160.

kinds of things the lower classes sought to learn from astrology. Predictions are offered on time and manner of death, what might be the most successful occupation for the client, and even what might come of their sexual lives.[41] Some clients were not only concerned about their own horoscope, but that of their children or loved ones.[42] We can compare this use of astrology among the lower classes to that of the elite, who were concerned about personal things like the right time to start a revolution or to be coronated *and* curiosity for the future of others, such as when the emperor might die. The appeal of astrology spread across the social classes. People from the poorest beggar to the emperor himself were curious as to their own future and the futures of those around them.

During the second century CE, we see an increase in literature that is skeptical against astrology. This polemic came in two forms: antifatalism and rationalism. It is worth noting here that antifatalism was also used by Christian authors to combat astrology. Fate was seen as being opposed to both a Christian's free will as well as the omnipotence of God— fate being seen as necessarily stripping God of free will as well.[43] These two forms of skepticism during the second century were in contention with the popular form of astrology that Cramer dubs as 'scientific astrology' as opposed to the newer form of mystical astrology that began to be imported by the Roman armies who had been influenced by the eastern religious cults.[44] As a result, "An astral hierarchy, ruled by the sun, now contended with and finally superseded the official deities of the Roman empire."[45]

Now this idea of the solar henotheism, or perhaps pantheism, having come from eastern precedents is a very old idea. Franz Cumont echoes this, claiming that the predominant sun

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[41] Ibid., 162-9.
[42] Ibid., 171.
[43] Hegedus, 113,
[44] Cramer, 149.
[45] Ibid., 224.

worship that appeared in the second and third centuries came from Syrian Baal worship and Chaldean astrology.[46] Both Cumont and Cramer are writing at the beginning of the twentieth century. Whereas some of their ideas, and the extent to which they are correct in assuming that there really was an eastern theological invasion thanks to the military, might be questioned, it is important to note that they both speak of the shift in astrological systems. That is to say, the Roman populace during this time began to be taken more and more to theurgy, invoking the stars not as simple automatons predicting the future, but as gods that need to be worshipped for the sake of their material and spiritual wellbeing.

Theurgy is often considered a form of magic.[47] The earliest use of the term dates to the reign of Marcus Aurelius where we find the first so-called theurgist, Julianus. It is possible that he invented the word 'theurgist' (θεουργός; 'god-worker') to distinguish himself from 'theologians' (θεολόγοι; 'god-talkers'). Julianus was believed to have similar abilities to magicians, including his ability to summon ghosts, split stones, and cause thunderstorms—tradition claiming that he caused the storm that saved Marcus' army in the 173 CE campaign against the Quadi.[48] But his powers didn't stop there. Julianus also had a spell to summon Kronos and could cause people's souls to leave and re-enter their bodies.

This theurgy is different from what is usually considered ancient 'magic' because of its unique relationship with ancient 'religion.' E. R. Dodds explains it by writing, "Whereas vulgar magic used names and formulae of religious origin to proface ends, theurgy used the procedures of vulgar primarily to a religious end."[49] In this sense, it was seen as a more ritualistic and

[46] Cumont, 89-90.
[47] E. R. Dodds, "Theurgy and Its Relationship to Neoplatonism," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 37 (1947): 55.
[48] Ibid., 56.
[49] Ibid., 61.

perhaps mystical way to interact with the gods, placing itself more in contention with philosophy than other forms of magic. The Neoplatonist Iamblichus, if he is the authentic author of *De Mysteriis Aegyptiorum*, argues that philosophy doesn't achieve union with the gods, but rather proper ritual through the use of 'tokens,' or magical artifacts used by theurgists.[50] It is important to note, however, that Iamblichus later contradicts his stance on the use of material artifacts, opting for a more mystical approach to theurgy.[51]

Theurgy can be split into two forms, one that can be conducted privately and one which requires the use of a medium. In both of these forms the mechanism is the same: the power of the god in question, or the god itself, is cast into either a magical artifact or the medium. The artifact and medium are used as receptacles for this deity, and are often used for prophetic purposes. If we blur the lines a bit between the 'magic' of ancient Rome and this new 'theurgy,' then we can draw comparisons between the writings of Iamblichus, Julianus (or the commentaries that we have left of his works) and others, with the magical papyri which often use the same concepts but for material gain and healing rather than prophecy. These similar concepts include the idea that the gods each have a sympathetic representative in the animal, mineral and vegetable world, which is why we see specific uses of these three in the spells.[52]

The more religious purposes behind theurgy (as compared to the materialistic magic) include the final resting place, or apotheosis, of the soul. Often this resting place would be with the deity that is worshipped, although there were common ideas about the soul ascending to the sun and stars past the seven planetary spheres.[53] This idea heavily influenced the Neoplatonists, who had strong connections with theurgy. Inspired by Plato's reference to the sun as the image of

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[50] Ibid., 59.
[51] Gregory Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul : The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus,* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 39.
[52] Dodds, 62.
[53] Shaw, 223-4.

the Good in his *Republic* (509b, 2-10), these Neoplatonists began to see the physical sun as the revealer of the divine *Nous*, or mind of god which is the first emanation of the Good.[54] Thus, the return of the soul to the sun, often only reserved for those who attained perfect union with the Good in this life (others will be reincarnated), is the pinnacle achievement for the individual.[55]

In theurgy, deities were also worshipped (by use of theurgic practices) in order to modify their destinies or fate. As we have seen, by the second century there was a new astral system or cosmology where the stars and planets were seen moreso as being divine (and possessing agency). It makes sense, therefore, that some powerful deities would be able to command the stars and planets in order to change the fate of a loyal worshipper.[56]

Thus theurgy had a material *and* spiritual scope, but both under the umbrella of obtaining the aid of a deity who can protect the theurgist and their soul. It is no wonder, then, that we get some semblances of henotheism during this time, where worshippers were often focused on one deity who could guarantee that level of personal security. As we saw with Iamblichus' comment, this could bring a quicker and more sure union with the gods than philosophy ever could. Dodds argues that theurgy might have offered comfort to those pagans who only saw that the theoretical philosophy of past centuries was only resulting in the continual downfall of their culture and the growth of Christianity. He writes, "As vulgar magic is commonly the last resort of the personally desperate, of those whom man and God have alike failed, so theurgy became the refuge of a despairing intelligentsia."[57] As we will see when we begin digging into the material evidence, especially of our sun-worshipping Christians, theurgy was not only a refuge for the intelligentsia, but moreso of the commoners.

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[54] Frederick Copleston, *Greece and Rome*. Vol. 1. A History of Philosophy. (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 467.
[55] Ibid., 471-2.
[56] John Block Friedman, *Orpheus in the Middle Ages*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), 58-60.
[57] Dodds, 59.

## Chapter 2: Historical Context

So far we have been examining the astrology of Rome and how it was affected by the politics and laws of the Republican and Imperial eras. We have even begun to look at what role the sun might have played in this astrological framework. Before moving into a broader exposition of the sun in ancient astrology, I believe it would be helpful to elaborate on the traditional 'pagan' views of the sun gods. This will be integral for our understanding of the roles the sun played in astrology as the sun was still largely seen to be the same god— being simply transferred from the background of the divine court to the center of the universe. This will further aid our understanding of sun worshipping Christians since, as we will see below, the worship of the sun god (in the traditional, not astrological, sense) would influence both the social world and the theology of Late Antique Christianity.

We have already encountered Franz Cumont above. His influence on the study of ancient Roman religion cannot be overstated. One topic that Cumont spends much time discussing is the

rise of the sun god Sol Invictus and its supposed eastern origin, which will be the first topic of discussion of this section. I will begin with the traditional chronology of the rise of Sol Invictus and begin to move into an in depth analysis of sun worship during this time according to more recent scholarship.

Sol was not a new deity to the Romans. As far back as the fourth century BCE, we find inscriptions mentioning Sol Indiges. This Sol, usually mentioned alongside the moon, Luna, was likely worshipped as early as the oldest calendar and thus possessed important fertility qualities. Despite this, the god Sol was not very popular throughout the Roman republican era, much less a chief deity like Jupiter. Nevertheless, its patronage continues into the late Republican era and into the imperial era. Marc Antony, in the first century BCE, puts Sol on some coins alongside symbolism unique to other deities. Gaston Halsberghe takes this to be the inklings of solar syncretism (Halsberghe, 29).[58]

Augustus would 'continue' the patronage of the sun but in the form of Apollo. Halsberghe, drawing a comparison between Augustus' and Antony's policies, writes that, "By favoring the cult of Apollo he laid the basis for the extension of the theology of the sun a few centuries later."[59] It isn't until the second century CE that we begin to see this new theology of the sun emerge. Halsberghe places this emergence during the reign of Hadrian who had served as legate to Syria during Trajan's reign and was thus influenced by the eastern sun worship.[60] Hadrian would mint coins with himself being depicted as the sun god, a practice that, although not new, would become more and more popular throughout the second century and into the third and fourth centuries.

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[58] Gaston Halsberghe, *The Cult of Sol Invictus*, (Leiden: Brill, 1972), 29.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Ibid., 46.

Here is where we encounter the idea that this second-century sun worship comes from the east. Cumont believes that this new sun god came from two different eastern religions.[61] Firstly, Chaldean astrology, where the sun was at the center of the cosmos and thus the chief god. Halsberghe adds to this the idea that eastern royalty claimed to be earthly 'avatars' of this sun god, thus introducing political motivation for the Roman emperors to adopt new theology.[62] Secondly, Cumont points to the Syrian Baal worship. By Baal worship, Cumont means the worship of a tribal or local androgyne, where there was a masculine and feminine deity, typically in a theogamy or divine marriage. It is no wonder, then, that these scholars point to a major religious shift when Rome acquires an emperor who was not just Syrian, but a high priest of the Emesan 'Baal' Elagabalus.

Varius Avitus Bassianus (218-222) would eventually become known by the name of the god he served, Elagabalus (which we will refer to him as below; distinction will be made between him and the deity). After becoming emperor of Rome, according to the *Historia Augusta*, he would begin building temples to his god and claiming that all other gods were servants of his.[63] This biographical entry on Elagabalus paints the picture of a young, debauched emperor whose main motivation was sacrilege, portraying himself as Elagabalus (the god) at the expense of the traditional Roman religion and its mores. But this picture might not be completely accurate. The *Historia Augusta* is known for pushing fiction, especially on the reigns of certain emperors, not least Elagabalus.[64] Halsberghe, for example, argues that we must not dismiss these accounts completely.[65]

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[61] Cumont, 89-90.
[62] Halsberghe, 37.
[63] *Historia Augusta*, "Antoninus Heliogabalus," 7.15.
[64] Anthony Birley, "Introduction" in *Lives of the Later Caesars*, 14.
[65] Halsberghe, 70.

Nevertheless, many scholars of the twentieth century, although perhaps dispensing with some of the rumors regarding Elagabalus' personal life, maintained the idea that this young emperor attempted to place his eastern god at the center of the Roman pantheon. We see the god often being placed next to Sol Invictus, an attempt to amalgamate the two deities (although Elagabalus might not have been a sun god). This led to a higher place in the pantheon for Sol Invictus, a god whose worship was picking up in momentum. There were allegedly major religious reforms during the reign of Aurelian (270-5), who desired to maintain the worship of Sol as the chief deity, but attempted to 'Romanise' the god to make it more appealing to the native populace whose sensibilities were shocked by the foreign rites of Elagabalus. This culminated in the patronage of a new formulation for the sun god, Deus Sol Invictus.[66]

After the emperor Elagabalus' reign we see his religious policies being reversed. This is most notably seen in the removal of the god from public worship, just four years after the emperor introduced it to Rome.[67] Aurelian's new religious policies, another key milestone in the chronology of Sol according to the old scholarship, only point towards a continued reversal of Elagabalus' policies. Halsberghe might be correct in pointing towards political motivation for Aurelian's patronage of Sol, and this new epithet might speak to the sun god's new place atop the Roman pantheon.

The political motivations of the Sol patronage are tied up with the divinity of the living emperors, who did not wish to wait until their death to be decreed divine by the Senate. This idea of a king being divine isn't new, even the claim that they *are* the physical manifestation of the sun god— we must recall Akhenaton doing so in the fourteenth century BCE. Likewise in Rome specifically, some emperors were already worshipped as gods after their death, an idea some

[66] Ibid., 136.
[67] Steven Hijmans, *The Sun in the Art and Religions of Rome,* (Groningen: Groningen University Press, 2009), 12-3.

attempted to adopt while living (such as Commodus [176-92] who claimed to be Hercules). For the sake of the project at hand there is one emperor in particular who we must look at: Constantine the Great. His religious policies and relationship with Sol Invictus are important for both establishing the social world of the sun-worshipping Christians at hand, as well as possible connections between sun worship and Christianity, both of which were practiced by Constantine.

Constantine the Great was born Flavius Valerius Constantinus in the year 272 or 273 CE.[68] Like his father Constantius Chlorus, who was also an emperor (more specifically an Augustus, or co-emperor), Constantine earned distinction in the military. Constantine would struggle to attain the title of Augustus like his father, despite being hailed so by the British troops after his father's death. Eventually, succeeding in obtaining some more recognition as the Augustus of the Western half of the empire, Constantine would make war on Maxentius, who claimed that same title. Constantine, being stationed in Britain, eventually defeated Maxentius, who was based in Italy. Afterwards, Constantine continued to steamroll his way across the Imperial territories until, in 323, he accepted the surrender of Licinius, Augustus of the east. This would see Constantine as finally becoming sole Roman emperor, something that had not happened since 286 when Diocletian relinquished sole-rule to split the empire into a tetrarchy.[69]

What I would like to focus on, despite the importance of Constantine's military and political policies, is his religion. Constantine's father, Constantius, is sometimes considered a Christian, as is Constantius' wife Theodora, as they named one of their children Anastasia, 'resurrection' in Greek. Despite this, as classicist Michael Grant writes, we cannot conclude that Constantius was a Christian, although he was perhaps a monotheist.[70] And, finally, his mother Helena was devoutly Christian, although Eusebius claims that this conversion came at the behest

[68] Michael Grant, *Constantine the Great: The Man and His Times*, (New York: Scribner, 1994), 15.
[69] Ibid., 50.
[70] Ibid., 16-7.

of her son.[71] This family life might have influenced Constantine himself who, as a young man, was interested in monotheism. Constantine's monotheism, however, was not directed towards a vague supreme being like his father's god was sometimes considered, but was focused on the sun god. In the year 311, we see, Constantine hails the Sun as his tutelary god.[72] We thus see the Sun god appearing frequently on his coins.

Constantine's 'conversion' is shrouded in some controversy, mainly because it is the result of modern understandings of conversion itself. Constantine is believed to have had a vision before the Battle of the Milvian Bridge against his rival Maxentius in the year 312. Apparently he saw a cross (or christogram, ☧) transposed or above the sun. Alongside it in the sky were the words, 'Conquer by this.' That night, still at a loss how to interpret the sign, Constantine was visited by Christ who brought him the symbol from the sign with the command for him to make replicas of it to use as a sign of protection. This is the story told by Eusebius, the church historian and religious advisor to the emperor.

After possibly inscribing the symbol on the shields of his soldiers (a detail only mentioned by Lactantius who provides a less accurate account than Eusebius), Constantine won the battle. From then on, according to the traditional story, Constantine was a Christian, worshipping the Christian God who had proven His power and existence. As Eusebius writes, Constantine "had found in Him a saviour, a protector of his empire, and the provider of all good things."[73]

The next year, in 313, Constantine would meet with Licinius (whom he would eventually defeat) and issued the Edict of Milan. This edict, among other things, legalized Christianity and prohibited legal persecution of them. Throughout the rest of his reign Constantine would build

[71] Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, 3.47.
[72] Ibid., 134.
[73] Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, 1.27.

basilicas and martyriums, as well as issue laws preserving Christian orthodoxy. He even played a key role in organizing the Council of Nicaea which saw orthodox, trinitarian victory over Arius. Constantine thus transformed society for Christians by not only legalizing the religion, but by protecting and developing certain institutions and creeds. The everyday lives of Christians, at least in the metropolises of the empire, were undoubtedly changed during the reign of Constantine.

A quick note on the Council of Nicaea seems warranted. The Council was meant to combat and finally defeat the heresy that had led to the Arian Controversy. This heresy, propagated by its namesake, Arius, taught that Jesus was not *truly* God, at least in the sense that God is transcendent and unbegotten whereas Christ was created by this transcendent God. To Arius, only the Father was truly unchangeable and unbegotten.[74] The opposite view, which Constantine solidified with the Council of Nicaea, upheld that Jesus and God the Father were coequal— that Christ was at the same level of divinity as the Father.[75] In sum, we see Constantine fighting for the divinity of Jesus, for the place of another divinity in the Christian pantheon— even if the likes of Athanasius would develop the doctrine of the trinity as fundamentally monotheist.[76]

So far Constantine seems like a genuinely 'converted' emperor: his policies and construction projects reflect that. And this conversion had major impacts on the social, religious, and political world of the Christians in the empire. But how much can we actually speak of Constantine's 'conversion'? Did he actually give up belief and veneration for his old tutelary

[74] Richard L. Diesslin, *A Journey through Christian Theology: With Texts from the First to the Twenty-first Century,* (Minneapolis: 1517 Media, 2010), 41-2; 6.
[75] Ibid., 42.
[76] Ibid., 51-2.

god, Sol? For this we need to look not just at some artifacts discovered during his reign, but we also need to go back to his vision.

One obvious detail that speaks of a continued presence of the Sun god in the life of Constantine is the fact that his vision has the cross (or chi-rho) being associated locationally with the sun. Furthermore, the idea that Constantine saw a chi-rho (as opposed to a cross) might make the vision more shocking. Grant writes that, "The *Chi-Rho* was, previously, almost unknown as a Christian emblem."[77] He likens it to the abbreviated form of *chreston* (Gk: good), as well as the mystic Egyptian *ankh*. Grant points to these ambiguities as signs that this really didn't have much to do with Constantine's personal beliefs, but was rather politically motivated: "The Christogram [chi-rho] could be reverenced by both pagans and Christians: an illustration of Constantine's desire to play to both audiences."[78]

Should we accept the idea that Constantine's vision was authentic (or at least believed so by the emperor), we still do not need to interpret this as a moment of conversion. Apart from later artifacts which we will analyze below, we must also consider non-monotheistic ways of approaching the vision and its aftermath, especially given that Constantine was no monotheist at the time. The main *purpose* of the vision was to grant Constantine victory in battle over Maxentius. Even if the vision was taken to be given by the Christian god, it by no means requires us to believe that Constantine immediately forsook the other deities (or at least dismiss their existence). It simply means that Constantine was likely to continue worshipping this powerful deity. Religion in the ancient world was based on what worked, not on faith (as is understood today). The Christian god helped Constantine in this earthly way, thus ensuring Constantine's reverence to Him "as a god of power, as *the* God of power."[79]

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[77] Grant, 142.
[78] Ibid., 143.
[79] Ibid., 147.

But now let us look at the artifacts of Constantine's later reign and what they might tell us about his personal religion as well as the religious and social landscape of Christianity during this time. Let us begin with coins minted during his reign. Now, the Romans used coins for religious purposes as a rule: typically emperors would mint coins with depictions of their favorite gods and goddesses, and there are no fewer than twenty-seven major deities (just counting their Latin version).[80] Regarding Christian imagery, we see coins with a christogram in the year 315, prior to Constantine's 'conversion.'[81] But as we saw above, the christogram might not have been specifically Christian. Regardless, there are rumors that some emperors prior to Constantine were sympathetic to Christianity, such as his father as we saw. Sympathy or not, these christograms on the coinage are circulated alongside coins with solar imagery, no doubt pointing to an inclusivist attitude towards Christianity should the chi-rho be interpreted that way.

After Constantine's 'conversion' there was no abrupt change in the coinage; neither did he commemorate his victory at the Milvian Bridge despite most of his coinage depicting military scenes.[82] But what we do see is a continual display of Sol Invictus on his coins. These coins were minted as late as 324, several years after his apparent conversion and just one year before the Council of Nicaea. These coins usually depict the sun god with an inscription reading *Soli Invicto Comiti*— 'Sol Invictus, companion.'[83] This begs the question: why did Constantine continue to mint Sol on his coins? Interpretations could range from the idea that he didn't convert until later (but his 'conversion' would have undoubtedly been before 324) or that he didn't want to rush and erase pagan imagery from the public sphere. This latter idea, as we will continue to see during this section, is unsatisfactory. Constantine's public works, including

[80] Hudson, 37.
[81] Wallraff, 259.
[82] Hudson, 38.
[83] Ibid.

coinage and monuments, were purposeful. And when his other public works contain imagery of the sun god, one can only think that the coins were minted with the same purpose in mind— to worship the sun god.

Next, let's look at Constantine's victory arch in Rome. Constantine erected this arch to commemorate his victory over Maxentius in 312 CE. To construct the arch, he used portions of other emperor's victory arches, including those of Marcus Aurelius, Trajan and Hadrian. Much of Constantine's arch depicts scenes from various battles. Most important to us are the ones that have religious connotations. To begin with, we must realize that there is nothing on the arch to suggest any Christian interpretations of any reliefs.[84] Sol, however, does make an appearance on the eastern facade.[85] What is perhaps most telling about the arch, however, is not any of the reliefs, but its location as well as what was on top.

Pliny the Elder writes in his *Natural History* that arches usually have statues on top, often with the commemorated persona on horseback or riding in a quadriga. Whereas there is no statue surviving from Constantine's arch, it would have been likely that he continued this practice. If this is the case, it would be most likely that the statue depicted him in a quadriga, the chariot that the sun god uses, with his typical *aureole* that (as we will see below) Constantine usually depicted himself with, another symbol of the sun god. For more evidence of this interpretation, let us look at the location of the arch in Rome.

The arch rests in one of the most heavily trafficked places in Rome, near the Colosseum. What is most striking about the location of the arch, however, is that it is not centered on the road as one would expect an arch to be (as people were meant to walk through it). Rather, the arch is centered on a statue of Apollo that is 'behind' the arch.[86] This creates quite an optical illusion or

[84] Wallraff, 256.
[85] Marlowe, 235.
[86] Ibid., 225.

sorts. Visitors to the city of Rome can see the large statue of Apollo from the gates, giving it the illusion of dominance on the cityscape. The closer one gets to the statue, particularly when standing immediately before Constantine's arch, the statue of Apollo is *underneath* the arch. Should a statue of Constantine rest on top (which is most likely given Roman convention), the emperor, depicted in a quadriga with his solar *aureole*, would be positioned above Apollo. This created the image of the emperor, depicted as the sun god Sol Invcitus, as being above the god Apollo. And as we will see below, this fits right in with Constantine's policy of commemorating himself publicly as being above all else, both mortal and god.

When Constantine began to develop the city of Constantinople (324-330), he deliberately chose certain buildings and monuments to construct. We can learn a lot from looking at some of these decisions that Constantine made. Despite coming over a decade from his conversion, Constantine never depicted Christ nor exalted him in the public art of the city.[87] The only things that appeared remotely 'Christian' were the buildings dedicated to it, churches and martyriums specifically. There is, however, a very important monument constructed in the city that might tell us more about Constantine's relation with the sun as well as his public image. In the heart of his new city, Constantine built a porphyry column with a statue of himself on top. This statue depicted him as the sun god— replete with the aureole. Whereas the statue doesn't stand anymore, its image is preserved in the *Tabula Peutingeriana,* and a 10th century manuscript preserves the inscription at the base of the column: "For Constantine who is shining like the Sun."[88] The church historian Philostorgius, writing in the early fifth century, relates a rumor that

[87] Katherine Marsengill, "The Visualization of the Imperial Cult in Late Antique Constantinople," *The Art of Empire*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2015), 272-3.
[88] Wallraff, 261-2.

Christians were offering sacrifices as this statue.[89] Some scholars take this to be a veiled admission of such a practice.[90]

Furthermore, we hear of a procession that Constantine ordered where a gilded effigy of himself was processed through the city into the hippodrome. The chariot would circle the *spina* in the hippodrome before coming to a stop before the emperor's personal seating area. Constantine ordered this procession to take place even after his death, and this practice might have been carried out in honor of Constantine up until the sixth century.[91]

So what do these public works and rituals mean? How did they affect the Christian populace who looked towards Constantine as both the ruler of the empire and the savior of the Christian race (saving them from the persecution of past emperors by legalizing and protecting the religion)? Katherine Marsengill believes that there was a time and place for everything, writing, "This mirrored the way Christianity worked at the time, where there was space in which the emperor and his veneration could exist in a Christian scheme of world order that did not conflict with the goals of the faith."[92] Further, "Emperor and Christ, civic and Christian were two focal points in an ellipse, visual markers around which circulated a well-ordered universe."[93] Martin Wallraff, however, takes a different approach. Using the porphyry column as evidence he believes that it was simply difficult to take the worship of the sun out of public belief—including the belief of some Christians in the empire.[94]

It would seem strange that the first Christian emperor, who did so much for the development and establishment of the religion, should have been so concerned with the worship of a pagan god, as well as his public image *as* the pagan god. Was this something that simply

[89] Philostorgius, *Church History*, 2.17.
[90] Wallraff, 262.
[91] Marsengill, 283.
[92] Ibid., 274.
[93] Ibid., 305.
[94] Wallraff, 268.

died out towards the end of his reign, either through a gradual conversion or through political and social safety? To answer this, there is a theory regarding the type of Christian that Constantine was. Wallraff writes, "We can probably assume correctly that he considered himself a Christian, but what he understood by Christianity was quite different from what we understand, and from what even the contemporary theologians understood by Christianity."[95] But, given his public projects and coinage, what kind of Christianity can we assume that Constantine adhered to? Grant believes that "He may well have believed that Christ and the Unconquered Sun-god were both aspects of the Highest Divinity…"[96]

The syncretism between Christ and Sol is a difficult thing to prove. First of all, as we learned from Marsengill, there were no depictions of Christ in the public works of Constantine. Is there anything amidst the copious exaltions of Sol that might suggest a Christian interpretation, at least regarding Constantine's belief? In the year 316 Constantine minted a coin in Ticinum with the usual depiction of Sol and the inscription reading, 'Sol Invictus my companion.' What is unique about this particular coin are the two symbols flanking the god. Whereas other similar coins have the initials 'S' and 'I,' this particular coin has a star and a cross, making it the earliest coin to bear a Christian symbol.[97] Hudson uses this to question the possibility of Christ being the 'new' Sol. He asks if Sol *became* Christ the way that other deities did in that time, taking a new name but retaining some characteristics. The coin, however, doesn't seem to me as very strong evidence of this point. There is one other thing that Constantine did that might help support this, however.

Upon his death, Constantine was buried in the Church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople. For a description of Constantine's burial here, we rely on Eusebius who writes

[95] Ibid., 267.
[96] Grant, 135.
[97] Hudson, 38.

that there were twelve monuments which surrounded Constantine's own coffin. Wallraff points out that Eusebius is doing his own interpretation of these monuments as representing the apostles— something that would be an obvious interpretation for a Christian. This caused a problem as it thus identified Constantine as Christ, being in the center of the twelve apostles. But Wallraff questions what a pagan perspective might be. Could this also be interpreted as Constantine in the midst of the twelve signs of the zodiac— the go to interpretation for the number twelve? If so, could Constantine be interpreted as the sun as was common in depictions of the zodiac?[98]

I would like to combine Wallraff's theory of distinct Christian and pagan interpretations. There are four mosaics found in synagogues at Beit Alpha, Tzipori, Hamat Tiberias and Dura Europos, each with the twelve signs of the zodiac and the characteristic Sol in the center (Roussin; cf. Englard for a conservative interpretation). I take this not only as evidence of Constantine as the sun, being in the center, but also that stereotypical 'monotheists' could participate in this zodiac imagery. I also acknowledge the obvious interpretation of the twelve monuments being representative of the apostles— after all it is called the Church of the Holy Apostles. If so, Wallraff is right in assuming the Christian interpretation of Constantine *as* Christ. But as we saw with Grant's and Hudson's theories, why could it not be both? Could Constantine, a man who portrayed himself as the sun god in public and portrayed himself as Christ in this very church, be making the point that Christ *is* the sun— the very Sun of Righteousness from Malachi 4:2? Constantine would thus be the earthly avatar of the sun which would itself be the earthly manifestation of Christ. But does this idea have any grounding, any metaphysical precedence that we can then link to our sun-worshipping Christians? For this, I feel it is necessary to turn to another, future, emperor who worked doubly as a philosopher, Julian the Apostate.

[98] Wallraff, 264-5.

Whereas Julian was not a Christian, the social and intellectual world that he inherited was undoubtedly affected by the policies of Constantine who preceded him by only a few decades. It will be important for us to study his beliefs because, although coming from an elitist intelligentsia, we know that he drew criticism from fellow philosophers because of his affiliation with theurgy. Thus, it might be possible to draw a connection between his theurgic metaphysics and the theurgy of other Romans during the fourth century. Hopefully, this will aid us in not only understanding the social world of our sun-worshipping Christians, but also the beliefs that they might have held.

Julian was emperor from 331-363. He earned the appellation of 'apostate' because of his hostile stance towards Christianity. Julian attempted to restore the worship of the Roman gods after the succession of Christian emperors dismantled them, or at least attempted to publicly. Whereas we cannot say how much of an effect either the Christian emperors or Julian had on swaying the religious beliefs of the people, it is important to note that some effect is undoubted due to the public works of these emperors and thus the transformation of the social environment. Julian's love for the Roman gods did not stop at simply reviving their worship through laws and policies, he actively participated in the resurgence of hellenistic philosophy. Although very little of what Julian wrote survives, we know that he wrote on a wide number of topics, not limited to his personal religions and philosophy, criticisms of Christianity, and satires.

Regarding his personal religion, Julian was strongly favourable of the sun god, sometimes being referred to as Sol and other times as Helios. In an attempt to strengthen the role of Sol in the Roman pantheon, he argues that it was always held to be the highest god since the beginning of Rome's history.[99] His views of the sun god begin to delve into his 'Neoplatonism'

[99] Susanna Elm, *Sons of Hellenism, Fathers of the Church : Emperor Julian, Gregory of Nazianzus, and the Vision of Rome,* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 290.

or, in this case more accurately, his theurgy. Julian believed the sun to be a trinity, emanating between three dimensions and appearing in ours as the disc of the sun. He writes, "As a product of the activity (*energeia*) of the Highest Good and the Great Helios, the visible sun permits man to deduce by analogy the operation of the intelligent and intelligible Sun from which it proceeded".[100] This 'activity' that Julian speaks of is creative, being responsible for creating the material world just as the Highest Good creates, or generates through emanation, the Great Helios himself. It is a type of chain creation— Julian himself was the son of the 'Great Helios' and not the High God directly.[101]

When we sort through this cosmology we can see two important themes that Julian points out. First, that the emperors (including himself) are the earthly manifestations (or avatars) of the sun. But the sun in the sky isn't simply *the* sun god, but rather the earthly manifestation of the transcendent Helios (sometimes referred to as Zeus-Helios or Sol). This Highest God (or sometimes Highest *Good*) exists on another realm or plane, not our material one. Thus we have a tri-connection between Julian and the High God. Rather than being the earthly manifestation of the High God, he is the earthly manifestation of the sun which is itself the material or visible manifestation of the High God. From here it becomes easier to see the same tri-connection between Constantine and Christ, with the sun remaining the same and the High God being Christ— should we keep intact the chain of creation or generation where Christ (the Logos) is responsible for creation (John 1:10).

But what role did this cosmology play for the everyday person? Obviously they were not earthly manifestations of the sun themselves— the emperors were. Nevertheless, in theurgy the soul is believed to have been created or generated by the sun, even partaking in this chain of

[100] Ibid., 297.
[101] Ibid., 334.

emanation and thus being the lowest 'divinity.'[102] Furthermore, with the sun as a link between the different realms, in Julian's thought, the ascension of the soul is thus going to be centered through the sun, "the initiator in the recollection and return of souls."[103] Julian's *Hymn to the Mother of the Gods* speaks to this 'apotheosis' of the soul to the sun.[104]

As we can see, theurgy had its place among the public works, policies, and writings of the emperors of the fourth century. This theurgy was informed mostly by Neoplatonism and sun worship— in particular the Neoplatonic as well as astrological understanding of the sun. Whereas this theurgy was seen most prominently and openly in the reign of Julian, we can see its subtle markers in the reign of Constantine who likely shared a similar belief that the emperors were avatars of the sun who was itself one link in the chain of divine emanation. The only difference between the two was the identification of the gods higher up on the chain. Whereas Julian takes a very Platonic and general approach ('High God,' 'Highest Good'), Constantine appears to have adopted a Christian cosmology, believing Christ to be above the sun, likely because of his superior aid in the Battle of the Milvian Bridge.

All of this contextual information is key for the next section of this thesis— the actual analysis of material culture from our sun-worshipping Christians who, apart from Constantine, we haven't seen much of. But as is the case in a people's history, where the 'people' in question are silent in the historical record, we must rely on what we can, which in this case are several material artifacts. But in order to interpret these artifacts which, unfortunately, have no accompanying descriptions, we must have a thorough knowledge of the social and religious context. In our case, the combined understanding of popular astrology and the social and

[102] Shaw, 45.
[103] Ibid., 226.
[104] Ibid., 225.

religious climate of the second to fourth centuries will allow us to interpret these often confusing and shocking artifacts.

## Chapter 3: The Artifacts

The first sign of our sun-worshipping Christians that I would like to look at is not actually an artifact but a couple texts. These texts are sermons from Pope Leo I (the Great). Often, in a

people's history, one needs to look not only at what was produced by the 'people' in question (which is often scant such as in our case) but also what was produced *about* the 'people.' In this case, Pope Leo is a good example to start us off.

Pope Leo is the first of only two popes called 'the Great.' Born at the turn of the fifth century, Leo was elected pope in 440. He would become known as an important leader not just within the church, but within the imperial government, helping to facilitate good relations among the worldly authorities, such as the dispute between Aëtius and Albinus, two Roman generals who were at each other's throats in 439.[105] Whereas there are a few references to Christian sun-worship in the sermons of Pope Loe, there is one in particular that is worth noting here. In Sermon 27, given on Christmas day of 451, Pope Leo begins to talk about the true nature of Jesus— both divine and human. He begins to emphasise the need for adherence to orthodoxy, true doctrine. But then he begins to talk about people who have been dragged into error by the devil. Leo writes that the devil promises the deceived "remedies for illnesses, indications of future events, the appeasement of demons, and the dispelling of shades."[106] As we saw above, these are all practices of theurgy— practical healing, prophecy, and necromancy.

Alongside this Leo places those who practice astrology and believe in astral fatalism. Their astral cosmology adheres so much to the old notions of fatalism that neither our wills nor God's are free, but under the power of other deities. But even so, this is not ordinary astrology where fate is unchanging. Rather, these Christians "assert that these fates can be changed— if only supplication be made to those stars which are unfavorable."[107] As we saw in the previous sections, this belief of controlling or worshipping the deities who themselves control fate is not

[105] Jane Freeland and Agnes Conway, *The Fathers of the Church: St. Leo the Great Sermons,* Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America, 1995, 4.
[106] Leo, *Sermons*, 27.3.
[107] Ibid.

mere astrology, but theurgy. When we place it beside the aforementioned complaints that Leo raises, as well as the fact that his sermons were likely given to a general audience in Rome, it becomes clear that he is speaking to Christians in his congregation who were practicing theurgy.

But then Leo begins to describe something all the more shocking. He describes a scene where Christians ascend the steps of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome on Sunday morning and, before entering the church, turn their back to face the rising sun (the Basilica's entrance facing east). They then "bow down to honor its shining disk."[108] Here we have Christians publicly worshipping the sun in the fifth century. And this was not the traditional sun cult as these Christians were not performing authorized sacrifices at temples to Sol. They were offering simple prayers at a Christian site which they were about to enter to worship Christ.

Pope Leo gives a couple of reasons as to why Christians might be worshipping the sun. Firstly, he claims that it is "done partly through the fault of ignorance and partly in a spirit of paganism."[109] He also suggests, perhaps naively, that some are worshipping the Creator *through* the Creation, still something condemnable for the sake of those who have converted from paganism (and thus are presented with a stumbling block). But what is most important is the overall context of this passage— Pope Leo positions this during a condemnation of theurgy. He even begins the passage about sun-worship with, "From such customs as this [i.e. theurgy] has the following godlessness been engendered."[110]

As we saw in the previous section, the sun plays an important part in theurgy, being the generator of the soul as well as its final resting place. We also saw that theurgists such as Julian thus worshipped the sun, believing that doing so would secure this final resting place. But this sermon of Leo's doesn't quite explain this. Whereas Leo is very helpful for identifying

[108] Ibid., 27.4.
[109] Ibid.
[110] Ibid., 27.3.

sun-worship in his congregation, as well as possible origins for the practice, he doesn't allow us to clearly see into the intentions of the sun-worshippers. Our next task, then, should be to look for Christian sun-worship in relation to this idea of *apotheosis* where we will be able to see more clearly its connection to theurgy.

Beneath the same St. Peter's Basilica that Pope Leo references sprawls a vast necropolis termed the Vatican Necropolis. During the 1500s renovations of the Basilica, specifically in 1574, a mausoleum from the Tomb of the Julii was discovered. This mausoleum, termed 'M,' dates from the late second to early fourth centuries, with a cutoff of 320.[111] It is decorated with four mosaics on the walls and ceiling. Three of them are undoubtedly Christian images: the Good Shepherd with the sheep over his shoulders (John 10), a fisherman (a repetitive motif throughout the New Testament harking to some apostles' professions), and Jonah being swallowed by the fish.[112] But the mosaic on the ceiling seems completely contradictory to the Christian-ness of the rest of the tomb. It is a depiction of the sun god, replete with the quadriga of four white horses, the globe in hand, and the *aureole*. What is even more remarkable, and, as we will see below, most important, are the vines that seem to surround the sun god.

I would like to quickly address the dating of the tomb and its possible consequences. Given that the cutoff date for the mosaic is the first years of Constantine's reign, I think it is safe to assume that the owner of the tomb has not been influenced by the religious and social policies and projects of Constantine (or, of course, Pope Leo). I believe that, given a possible early date of the second century, it would be wise to take this as being an earlier representation of Christian sun-worship from the precedents we analyzed above. That being said, theurgy as a practice did not emerge in the fourth century where we have been keeping our gaze for some time. If that is

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[111] Hijmans, 369.
[112] Andrey Feuerverger, "The Tomb Next Door: An Update to "Statistical Analysis of an Archeological Find"," *The Annals of Applied Statistics* 7, no. 4 (2013): 2086-7.

the case, then there is no reason to assume Christian theurgy emerged only in the fourth century. This tomb, in my opinion, points to this, acting as a key to interpreting the later Christian sun-worship and theurgy.

This mosaic is often referred to as the Christ-Helios mosaic. Hijmans is averse to this name, arguing that it is rash to assume that the potential Christian context of the tomb can change the meaning of the mosaic.[113] One such scholar, for example, interprets the mosaic as referencing Christ's incarnation.[114] I am apt to agree however, that there is no reason, pictorially, to assume that the mosaic represents Christ in any way. All such interpretations rely on various themes relating Christ to the sun, either with his ascension, his coming into the world, or as banishing darkness from the world (a savior motif that was also applied to Sol in Antiquity). That being said, the context of the mosaic is still key for understanding it.

This tomb is a Christian tomb. As we saw above, each of the three other mosaics are Christian themes. Whereas a mosaic of a fisherman might not be explicitly Christian all the time, combined with the Good Shepherd and Jonah, it leaves no doubt as to the interpretation of the tomb. Some scholars, such as Hijmans, question this Christian nature, opting for a critique of each mosaic individually: the image types have a meaning apart from the other images, and thus need to be interpreted individually.[115] Thus, if we take each mosaic on its own, we have no reason to assume a religious interpretation for the images, much less a Christian one. For example, the fisherman, shepherd, and 'Jonah' imagery also finding parallels in non-Christian imagery.[116] And if, as we saw above, these mosaics *are* Christian (and so the owner of the tomb), the interpretation of the Sol mosaic is still unchanged due to this individual approach. It would

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[113] Hijmans, 570.
[114] Lee M. Jefferson and Robin M. Jensen, eds, *The Art of Empire: Christian Art in its Imperial Context*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2015), 45.
[115] Hijmans, 571-2.
[116] Ibid., 571, 7.

simply be a pagan image within a Christian tomb, and not a Christianized version of the pagan image. Hijmans argues that it would not have been odd for a Christian during this time to use a Roman image type in their art.[117]

Thus, according to Hijmans, we cannot interpret the sun mosaic as being Christ-Helios as we cannot interpret it in light of the other, potentially Christian images and as there are no explicit parallels of a Christ-Helios image type. I agree with this conclusion, but we are then left with an even heftier task of finding the meaning of the mosaic. Operating on the idea that the other mosaics are Christian, how then did our deceased view the sun? Were they a pagan who used Christian imagery, or were they a Christian who used an image of the pagan god Sol? Hijmans believes that it is merely the sun, or the personification of the sun. This, he claims, "allows a far more straightforward interpretation of the image cycle."[118] This is because Hijmans believes that the entire piece, all of the mosaics included, has one specific meaning. This, despite arguing that we can take each mosaic individually, is a point that Hijmans concedes should we be able to find a pattern among the images. Which is what he does, providing two possible interpretations. The first is that it represents a mock cosmos: the shepherd represents land, the Jonah image the sea, the fisherman a transition from shore to sea, and, finally, the sun represents the sun.[119] Hijmans recognizes that there are no direct parallels to this interpretation, but points to the similar uses of the shepherd and angler imagery in other tombs, albeit with the angler representing the sea.[120]

The second interpretation that Hijmans provides presents each mosaic as following the theme of death and salvation or rebirth. The Jonah represents the individual being 'lost' while the

[117] Ibid., 576,
[118] Ibid., 577-8.
[119] Ibid., 575.
[120] Ibid.

shepherd represents them being 'found' (the Good Shepherd). The angler, meanwhile, represents the moment of capture prior to the salvation, given that the fisherman is in between the two. The sun, however, is almost its own, self-contained, cycle of death and rebirth, obviously a reference to the setting and rising of the real sun.[121] Indeed, I think that it might have been more effective to argue that the Jonah and Good Shepherd mosaics were self-contained as well, having their own implications of salvation. But the angler causes me to doubt this interpretation, just as it did the first one (not matching up with parallels in Hijmans' mock cosmos theory). It could be a reference to Matthew 4:19 where Jesus offers to make the apostles 'fishers of men.' But if this is the case, then it makes all three mosaics on the walls of the tomb Christian. And whereas the sun is used as a metaphor in the Bible, it is never really used in the context of death and rebirth (perhaps salvation generally speaking, in Malachi 4:2, but it does not take the form of a parable or story like the others, and anyway references the end of the age, not the present salvation of the Christian).

I believe that the death-rebirth interpretation is close. Certainly, salvation (albeit in different modes) is the theme of the Good Shepherd and Jonah stories.[122] And regardless of where the angler comes from, it is likely Christian. The sun, however, must necessarily follow this theme, but, as we just saw, it cannot be said to be Christian in its nature despite the context. The overall context might be a 'Christian' one, but the image itself has no distinct Christian features or parallels. And, rather than assuming, as Hijmans does, that the Christian nature of the other mosaics means that the sun cannot be *explicitly* pagan, I believe that it is. As we have been studying, there were Christians who worshipped the sun— it should come as no shock, then, for one to have a mosaic of the sun god in their tomb. But Hijmans never references the

[121] Ibid., 576.
[122] Friedman, 43.

sun-worshipping Christians, and seems to not notice their existence apart from other scholars' interpretations of this tomb. I believe that the sun represents the theurgic view of Sol as the generator and recipient of the soul. Specifically, it represents the *apotheosis* of the soul.

The idea of Sol accompanying the ascension of souls is corroborated by other images in Late Antiquity. For example, the Belvedere Altar, set up by Augustus to commemorate the ascension of Julius Caesar, has him ascending into heaven *in* a quadriga. More shocking, however, is that Sol is in his own quadriga in the corner.[123] While it would be sensible to claim that the Sol in Caesar's ascension is simply representative of the sun— after all he is ascending into the sky, it makes sense for the sun to delineate that in the art. But this also overlooks the fact that he is ascending *in* a quadriga, a key symbol for the sun god. He is not the only one: traditional *apotheosis* images of Constantine have him ascending into heaven in a quadriga.[124] This was not the only way to depict an ascension, as we see with the Munich Ivory which has Christ ascending on clouds.[125] These last two, having Christian connotations, might have as their background the ascension of Elijah motifs. Lee Jefferson and Robin Jensen also draw comparisons between Elijah's Greek name, *Elias*, and Helios.[126]

There is something specific about these ascensions that links the act to Sol. It is almost as if Sol is overlooking the ascension of the soul, or aiding in it, which is one of the chief goals of theurgy as we saw above.[127] This can help us interpret the Sol mosaic in Mausoleum 'M' simply based on its location on the vault of a tomb. Perhaps the inhumed has Sol there to aid in the ascension of their soul. But before we can be definitive about this interpretation, we must look at another characteristic of the mosaic, which points more definitively at it having a theurgic nature.

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[123] Jefferson, 38.
[124] Ibid., 41-2.
[125] Ibid., 35-7.
[126] Ibid., 43.
[127] Shaw, 223-5.

Surrounding the sun god are vines. Normally vines symbolize Dionysis, or in this Roman case, Bacchus.[128] But we cannot assume that this identifies the god as Dionysis as it is obviously the sun god. So we are brought to the question of what the vines symbolize. Hijmans notices the lack of scope in his treatment of this mosaic, pointing out that his main goal was to disprove an interpretation of the sun god as Christ, something that I agree with. But he only makes half-hearted attempts at interpretation. These interpretations, which we saw above, do not mention the vines, or account for them in any way. Hijmans recognizes this, claiming that his lack of a full treatment of all characteristics of the mosaics (including the vines) requires more attention in another study.

Given that there are no other representations of Sol with vines, I believe that the vines must represent something else. Whereas vines might have a place among the Christian mosaics, perhaps referencing Jesus as the True Vine, or wine in the Last Supper, I do not think the vines are necessarily Christian. After all, they are surrounding the mosaic of the sun god, not the Christian mosaics. But this does not mean that they are not 'Christian,' neither the vines nor Sol. The practice of 'syncretizing' deities, or at least naming them alongside each other, was common in ancient Rome. This practice continued among the theurgists who were either conflating deities with similar roles (usually as psychopomps, or beings aiding in the *apotheosis* of the soul), or simply invoking as many gods as possible to increase your chances of appealing one of them.[129]

One theurgic amulet formerly held in the Berlin Museum but now lost, has a shocking picture.[130] Above a crucifixion victim is seven stars, as well as a moon resting on top of the cross. The inscription below reads Orpheus-Bacchus-Christ, with Orpheus being another psychopomp

[128] Renate Schlesier, ed, *A Different God? : Dionysos and Ancient Polytheism*, (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, Inc., 2011), 132.
[129] Friedman, 72.
[130] Reproduced in Friedman, 58.

not as relevant for our current purposes. Nevertheless, here we see an explicitly Christian image, the crucified Jesus, but with Bacchus also being invoked. I bring this up in my treatment of the vines in Mausoleum 'M' to argue that ancient Romans invoked Christ alongside other deities, including Bacchus, who is often represented alongside vines. This makes the interpretation of our mosaic clear: here we have Sol-Bacchus. But, as Hijmans reasonably argues, we cannot add Jesus' name to this divine figure— there being nothing explicitly Christian in the image to warrant this. But given the Christian images alongside Sol-Bacchus, especially images with an emphasis on salvation, a key theme in theurgy,[131] it appears that the inhumed is attempting to invoke all three deities, just not all three within the Sol mosaic itself. The inhumed is thus invoking three major deities for the theurgic purpose of the *apotheosis* of their soul.

So far we have looked at two major sources related to Christian sun-worship. Both of these, when applying the methods of a people's history, begin to point us into one direction as far as interpretation is concerned. They seem to be concerned with the issue of overcoming fate, particularly the fate of the soul, sealing its transition into the heavenly realm. But these are not the only two 'artifacts.' There are a number of inscriptions that seem to point us in this same direction but more directly.

Apart from a few surviving horoscopes of Christians,[132] most prevalent are burial inscriptions that point to some astrological themes, such as references to fate and the stars. Richmond Lattimore's *Themes in Greek and Latin Epitaphs* provides a good source of these types of inscriptions, even highlighting the parallels that the Christian varieties have with pagan inscriptions. For example, one Christian epitaph reads: "Since *Moira* (Gk: fate) so spun his

[131] Ibid., 59.
[132] Hegedus, 198.

thread that he must leave life."[133] Despite being the Greek personification of fate, a Christian epitaph is using *this particular* term, rather than a more neutral variety of fate as appears in this Christian epitaph in Latin: "*Fatorum seriem felici sorte peregi.*"[134]

One 6th century epitaph is more shocking, speaking towards the stars as the resting place of the soul:

> If mental power and a more placid enjoyment of the light return to one who has died in Christ, he does not experience Tartarus and the Cimmerian lakes. His merits survive death and he abrogates the law of earth and the tomb. After leaving the daylight thus, he is among the stars and cannot die.[135]

This inscription is interesting not simply because it is Christian and yet mentions the soul going to the stars upon death (on its own this would not be shocking). It also mentions the alternative: Tartarus. It is important to note that Tartarus, in Greek and Roman paganism, is but one part of Hades. Whereas the sinful are punished in Tartarus, *everyone's* soul goes to Hades upon death. The good simply inhabit that part of Hades called Elysium. But this epitaph offers an alternative: worship Christ and you can avert both options, with your soul ascending to the stars (where the gods dwell), rather than inhabiting the same place as ordinary souls, Hades.

Another inscription, this one on a tomb in Rome, refers to the inhumed as a *heliopais*, or 'child of Helios.' The surrounding symbols of a lamb and two fish hint at a Christian interpretation.[136] As we saw with the Good Shepherd and Angler, the lamb and fish combination is likely Christian, which affects the meaning of the inscription. This 'child of Helios' is a Christian. The only interpretation that allows for this co-existence follows the same path of our previous artifacts, namely that the sun was worshipped alongside Christ for theurgic reasons.

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[133] Richmond Lattimore, *Themes in Gree and Latin Epitaphs*, (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1942), 317.
[134] Ibid.
[135] Ibid., 312.
[136] Friedman, 67.

Given that this person is called a 'child' of the sun god makes it appear as if the sun was a tutelary deity, something that would have not been uncommon given Constantine and Julian's personal religion.

Many of these aforementioned artifacts raise an important question. Some of them, including Mausoleum 'M' and the *heliopais* inscription, do not have a Christian label. What I mean is, whereas surrounding them is undoubtedly 'Christian' imagery, there is no claim by the inhumed that they are *a* Christian (with, perhaps, the exception of Pope Leo who refers to the sun-worshippers as erroneous Christians). After all, as we see with emperors such as Severus Alexander, some pagans included Christ in their personal pantheon.[137] Likewise, many magical and theurgic formulas include Yahweh and Christ in their list of deities to be invoked.[138] But are these theurgic spells 'Christian' or 'pagan'? Surely Severus Alexander was no 'Christian' who also happened to worship other gods.

So far I have used the term 'Christian' loosely, referring to any artifact with 'Christian' imagery as being just so in its entirety. But what, during the time period in question, made a 'Christian,' and can we separate them from pagans who also happened to worship Christ? More specifically, are the aforementioned theurgists 'Christian'? These questions will guide the topic of the next section, which will use the same methods of a 'people's history' to study the religious identity of the sun-worshippers in question.

[137] *Historia Augusta*, "Severus Alexander," 29.2.
[138] Georg Luck, *Arcana Mundi: Magic and the Occult in the Greek and Roman Worlds: a Collection of Ancient Texts,* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 98.

## Chapter 4: Who Are They?

The issue of Christian identity is a relatively new one in scholarship. While looking at pagan influences on Christianity is nothing new, studying the contexts of how they did so, as well as how the individual Christian's viewed themselves, are. The main theory that accompanies this is not that Christians were unconsciously influenced by the religion around them, but were consciously participating in it, whether it was civic religion or a personal religion that incorporated other deities. This should be obvious at this stage of my project as we have seen first hand material evidence of this practice of polytheism. But let's delve deeper into the question of how this worked, how this practice still constituted a part of their Christianity. This will incorporate more of a 'people's history' of my sun-worshippers as we obviously do not have their own attestations of identity. And apart from just using the methods of a 'people's history' to study this, it is also important for the base content of a 'people's history.' After all, we need to know who these people were considered to be in Late Antiquity.

Much of this issue had to do with culture. For many Christians across the Empire were converts and still lived alongside other, non-Christ worshipping, polytheists. These Christians

thus "would often consciously engage in pagan activities because their complex cultural identities were flexible enough to shift according to the occasion, and without feeling their faith compromised for doing so."[139] Indeed, they likely would have had no reason to feel their faith compromised as they were doing nothing in contradiction to it. Religious authorities during this time had immense difficulty not just in enforcing boundaries, but in drawing them in the first place (Rebillard, Group, 11).[140] One example of this is Tertullian's consternation at how narrow a definition of idolatry that Christians in his congregation had: "Most people simply think that idolatry is only then to be assumed, if somebody makes a burnt offering or brings a sacrifice or organizes a sacrificial banquet or makes himself guilty of certain other sacred activities or priesthoods." (Tertullian, *On Idolatry,* 2.2)

If we were to travel back in time to the imperial era, then, we would not see a bunch of exclusivist religious groups (despite what their authorities may have desired), but rather a marketplace where individuals were free to "purchase" beliefs and symbols for the practice of their own personal religion. 'Christianess' was just another one of these purchasable symbols. Romans could incorporate Jesus into their personal belief, either as just another deity, as we saw with Severus Alexander, or Jesus as their chief deity of worship, albeit incorporating other, more ancient, deities to "cover their bases" (Marsengill, 293). The prevalence of Christians 'covering their bases' has led one scholar to suspect "whether accusations of not worshipping the [other] gods were sustained more by early examples of martyrs and common knowledge about Christian beliefs than by any controversy generated by Christians' actual abstention from participation in public worship of the gods."[141]

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[139] Marsengill, 279.
[140] Rebillard, *Group Identity*, 11.
[141] Rebillard, *Christians and Their Many Identities,* 19.

This was met with obvious outrage by the church authorities, as we already saw with Tertullian's quote. But complaining was not the main tactic used by the clergy to combat or correct these erroneous Christians. The most powerful tool in their repertoire was polemics. Polemics served as a tool for defining boundaries between Christianity and other religions. It thus served to draw a boundary between the strict orthodox Christianity and paganism, the two being seen as incompatible in the eyes of the clergy.[142] This dichotomy between paganism and Christianity, however, as we have been seeing all along, was created by the polemicists, and did not reflect the actual religion of the everyday Christian.[143]

Some Christians who were in between these two groups, paganism and Christianity, were designated as *incerti*. The term is similar to our word 'uncertain' and, although it insinuated that the individual in question was neither truly pagan nor Christian, it was used to push people towards strict orthodoxy.[144] The *incerti* were also at the front end of some polemics, being accused of opportunism, either converting to Christianity or retaining pagan practices for the sake of economic or social gain.[145] Retaining pagan practices for the sake of material 'gain' is referred to in several sermons of Augustine, who "refutes an argument that he claims Christians use as a rationale to justify their behavior: the worship of God is for the sake of the kingdom of heaven, while for the sake of earthly benefits the devil or the demons are to be worshipped."[146]

This worship of the devil and demons, obviously a reference to the pagan deities, might very well be a reference to theurgy, already widespread during Augustine's time in the fourth and fifth centuries. Theurgy, as we need to remember, dealt not only with the salvation of the soul (something that could have actually attracted practitioners to Christianity) but also material

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[142] Kahlos, 3.
[143] Ibid., 15.
[144] Ibid., 31-7.
[145] Ibid., 42.
[146] Rebillard, *Christians and Their Many Identities,* 71.

benefits. Augustine specifically references propitiatory prayers, astrology, charms, and magic among this demon worship that he sees among his congregants. These practices were not necessarily holdovers from paganism which found no substitute in Christianity: "The division indicates contexts in which Christianness was not the principle on which Christians acted."[147] In other words, these were not 'Christians' who were practicing theurgy, but were theurgists in one context (apart from their Christian identity) and Christians in another context (apart from their identity as theurgists).

Although Augustine and Tertullian never mention worshipping the sun explicitly, Pope Leo does. And Leo also calls these sun-worshippers Christians. They are merely worshipping the sun out of 'ignorance' and a 'spirit of paganism.'[148] These Christians thus share a similar identity to the *incerti*, in the sense that they are close to Christianity, but still being weighed down by older, pagan practices and beliefs.

In another place, however, Leo considers these sun-worshippers as belonging to another group entirely: Manichaeism. He claims that there are those who are serving the creation rather than the Creator, and doing so through fasts on Sunday and Monday in honor of the sun and moon. These people, he writes, "no one doubts are Manichaeans."[149] This was a popular practice in the polemics of the time. Labelling an unorthodox practice or group among your congregation as a more ancient, well-known heresy, had a greater effect. Not only does it heighten the absurdity of the contemporary belief or practice, but allows for two far more combative tools. Firstly, it allowed the polemicist to simply use the tried and tested arguments against the older heresy, without having to actually confront something with newer arguments. And it also allowed the belief and practice in question to fall into a legal dilemma, as many of these ancient heresies

[147] Ibid., 73.
[148] Leo, 27.4.
[149] Ibid., 42.5.

were outlawed.[150] In short, it allowed for better polemics and allowed for actual concrete persecution.

This is undoubtedly what Pope Leo was going for in labelling these sun-worshippers as Manichaeans, an extremely common label in anti-heretical works of this time.[151] This can partly be seen in his continued diatribe against the group. Whereas he initially set out to criticise these people for (actually) worshipping the sun and moon, he then goes on to describe other beliefs of Manichaeans. He also begins to incorporate New Testament passages (mostly Paul), making it seem almost as if the apostle were writing specifically against the very people Leo is referencing.[152]

So, as far as how our sun-worshippers were labelled by the religious authorities, we are at an interesting place. Whereas it is not surprising that they would be accused of ignorance, perversity, and error, or that they should be mislabelled as an ancient, major heresy, it is surprising that they should still be considered Christians. Note that Tertullian, Augustine, and Leo all take it for granted that these people are Christians— to include Tertullian's idol worshippers and Augustine's theurgists. But did the sun-worshippers label themselves as Christians? How did they view their own commitment to Christianity?

These are questions that are impossible to answer with any certainty as we do not have any writings from these people as a whole. The material artifacts that we do have are not quite enough to answer the question either— obviously there is Christian material there, but did they consider themselves a part of this exclusive religion, or at least identify themselves as such while worshipping in a Christian context? This is something that, despite the numerous invocations of Christ, depictions of Christian imagery, etc., is not enough to tell. But what about ourselves? Can

[150] Averil Cameron, *How to Read Heresiology*, 480.
[151] Ibid., 482.
[152] Leo, 42.5.

we consider these people to be Christians, or should we lump them in with the outdated and ambiguous term 'pagan'?

Rebillard begins his book, *Christians and Their Many Identities*, by writing that "on-the-ground confessional identities are less important than contemporary sources state."[153] This brings us back to what historian Maijastina Kahlos writes about Christian polemicists inventing dichotomies between Christianity and other religion, and that such a dichotomy is still influencing academic interpretation of religion in Late Antiquity.[154] Because there were no established terms for pagans and paganism before the reign of Theodosius I (347-95), we should not use such terms to delineate those who are not Christian (or belonging to another erroneously considered exclusivist group like Judaism). The same thing can be said of the category 'Christian,' which was an identity constructed by church authorities to delineate an "internally homogenous and externally bound group."[155] But if we are to maintain such an idea as identity (or our ability to understand the identity of those who do not write about it— i.e. such as in the project at hand), then we must understand its salience.

Rebillard provides three types of identity: social, role, and personal.[156] These are 'activated' at different times based on context. People can thus have multiple identities which can be 'activated' independently of each other, although they can also be coexistent even within the same membership category (such as someone having the identity as both a mother and a daughter in an extended family context). Regarding religious identity, as we have seen from the quotations of church fathers above, many Christians did not let their Christian identity supersede other identities, or at least direct their lives outside of a Christian context. That is one way of

[153] Rebillard, 1.
[154] Kahlos, 15.
[155] Rebillard, *Christians and Their Many Identities,* 2.
[156] Ibid., 4.

reconciling the fact that Christians were visiting astrologers and worshipping idols— they were not in a Christian context (i.e. a church), therefore they were not 'Christian' and thus not contradicting any set of beliefs (i.e. prohibitions on such activities). But this assumes that such Christians were even aware about such prohibitions.

Christians during Late Antiquity rarely visited churches. A generation after Constantine's legalization and patronising of Christianity, we only see one eighth of imperial funding going towards the bishop and his services— the other seven eighths were dedicated to martyrs and the deceased.[157] This is the main point of Ramsay MacMullen's *Second Church*— the idea that you had two types of Christianity, one centered around the 'proper' Christianity and the other around the martyr cult (or cult of the dead generally once we factor in the continuance of ancestor worship). And although the funding given to the martyr cult *did* result in the construction of churches (which were obviously administered by the bishop and his priests), the sheer emphasis on the martyr cult and its numbers are worth noting. The 95%, which MacMullen claims to represent this second and forgotten church, were concerned with worshipping saints, seeking their aid in both material and spiritual matters, ranging from miraculous cures to the salvation of the soul.[158] According to MacMullen, the majority of these Christians (and the other 5% for that matter), rarely went to church.[159]

If it is the case that these Christians were not attending church, it might be reasonable to surmise that they were not exposed to the sermons of the clergy. The delineated boundaries of what was 'Christian,' according to the clergy, was thus unknown to them. As far as our work goes, their identity as Christians must come from self-attestation, not that of authorities who

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[157] Ramsay MacMullen, *Second Church: Popular Christianity A.D. 200-400,* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 86.
[158] Ibid., 106.
[159] Ibid., 110.

were often neglected even by the so-called 5% of Christians who belonged to their type of Christianity. And because they considered themselves Christian, we must as well, even if the prescriptions for Christian practice were only taken as suggestions.[160]

Whereas sole usage of the clerical texts would bring us to the conclusion that these people *were* Christian, using the method's of a 'people's history' allows us to uncover even more. These were not simply some erroneous Christians, succumbing to the pagan practices of either their former lives as pagans or those pagans around them. They likely made up the majority of Christians in Late Antiquity. And whereas the 95% that MacMullen speaks of, should we accept his exaggerated number, likely were not visiting theurgists (charm makers, astrologers, etc.), their worship of the saints closely resembled the practice. But, regardless of MacMullen's possible numerical exaggeration, as well as the very idea that there were two churches (and with it no overlap), the heavy martyr worship makes it all the more reasonable to assume that Christian theurgy, and with it Christian sun-worship, was far more prevalent than the clerical record states.

## Conclusion

[160] Ibid., 95.

As we have seen, sun worship was present among Christians in Late Antiquity. The various references and artifacts that we have analyzed point not only to the fact of this practice, but also hint at its purpose. The sun worship appears to be situated within a theurgic framework, meaning that the sun was worshipped largely as the resting place of the soul and as the savior of the soul. Through breaking the power of fate, the sun god, usually Sol or Helios, could be invoked as a psychopomp, or a deity that aided in the *apotheosis* or ascension of the soul. Jesus could also be invoked as a psychopomp, which we saw with his invocation alongside Bacchus and Orpheus, two other psychopomps. We thus saw that these early Christians were invoking Jesus and the sun simultaneously.

Pope Leo's reference points to this as the sun-worshipping Christians were worshipping the sun on the steps of St. Peter's Basilica. The way Pope Leo paints the picture, we have a scene where a few Christians ascend the steps on a Sunday morning to celebrate the Eucharist, stopping just outside to pray to the sun. Whereas Leo doesn't tell us what these Christians were praying for, he positions the practice alongside the astrological practices of the time— visiting astrologers, palm readers, etc., as well as attempting to change your individual fate through invocation of the stars, a direct reference to theurgy. It is impossible to know what place the sun and Jesus had in these Christians' beliefs. Were they both psychopomps? Was one invoked for the sake of material benefit, something that either the sun or Jesus could do? Whereas it's possible that they could have served different purposes, like the amulet mentioned above (with Christ, Bacchus and Orpheus) it seems reasonable to assume that they were both invoked for spiritual salvation.

Mausoleum 'M,' which we argued above for being a Christian tomb despite the doubts posed by some scholars, places the sun and Christ within the same realm. Although we do not

have any images of Christ in the tomb, the Christian imagery that is present allows for just such an interpretation. The owner of the tomb undoubtedly worshipped Christ. The only question that remained was, what was the purpose of the sun god on the vault of the tomb? Through comparisons with the Christian imagery that was present, the Angler, Jonah, and especially the Good Shepherd, we argued that the sun served as a psychopomp. The vines surrounding the sun god also drew comparisons to the invocation of Bacchus alongside two other deities on a theurgic amulet.

This material culture allowed for the 'people's history' to work by providing us a glimpse into the world of people who did not produce any writings (apart from the funerary inscriptions). We were able to look into their beliefs and practices and, albeit with some guesswork, were able to understand the role that the sun played in their theology. Fortunately for us, material artifacts are important in theurgy, with charms and amulets believed to possess magical properties. And although most of these magical artifacts do not contain any coexisting Christian and solar imagery, we did find one that aided in our interpretation of another artifact.

The 'people's history' aspect also allowed us to use, in some ways, the writings that we *do* have, albeit ones from the elite and powerful. Through this method we were able to look more deeply into their words to figure out what was actually going on. Pope Leo in particular was useful for us as he helped in our conclusions that these sun-worshipping Christians were practicing a form of theurgy, as well as allowing us to better understand how these Christians were identified by themselves and the clergy of the time. Leo thus contributed to both the section on artifacts and the section on identity. Tertullian and Augustine likewise came into play in the section on identity, albeit their work was only minorly used to understand the actual goings-on of their congregation.

This project was thus important for two reasons. Firstly, by demonstrating the diversity but also interconnectedness of the religious landscape in Late Antique Rome. The ancient astrological and theurgic systems won adherents among the Christian population (or vice versa), leading to the co-worship of Christ and Sol. So despite what the orthodox clergy would have us believe, or even what many elitist philosophers would have us believe, a large portion of the population was continuing to practice astrology and theurgy. The rigid dogmatism of orthodoxy, whether Christian or Platonic, apparently did not penetrate the entirety of the lower classes who sought to continue that age-old Hellenistic practice of purchasing a bit of everything in the religious market.

Secondly, this project was important for its use of 'people's history.' Whereas it is not an exhaustive study of the group at hand, largely focusing on the role of the sun in their beliefs, it did make use of the methods typically applied in a 'people's history,' namely the emphasis on material culture and the re-reading of a homogenous body of literature. This allowed us to discover the voice of a group of people who were silent in the historical record. And whereas it is nice to uncover the voice of this one group, the very act of doing so makes the statement, "that reworking the story's plot with lay piety as the central narrative will be a contribution of lasting value."[161]

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[161] Burrus, xv.

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