

The Sun which did not rise in the East; the Cult of Sol Invictus in the Light of Non-Literary Evidence

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The aim of this article is to review the current theories on the origin and character of Sol Invictus and to reassess these theories paying special attention to archaeological, i.e. non-literary, evidence. It will emerge that in many respects preconceived notions played a greater role in shaping the current concept of Sol Invictus than methodological analysis of the available evidence. In part, this is due to the fact that the extant literary sources offer little explicit information on the cult of the sun in Rome, which has led scholars to interpret what little there is somewhat arbitrarily to fit in with existing convictions¹.

Two basic tendencies have dominated research into Roman sun-cults. The first, though important, is difficult to define precisely. Most earlier studies of both Sol Indiges and Sol Invictus are heavily laden with prejudice. Many scholars have felt uncomfortable with the concept of a Roman sun cult; some were actually hostile towards it. This hostility, which was ideological in nature, has had a strong influence on research into the cult of Sol at Rome. The second tendency is at least as important. Scholars have consistently postulated a clear distinction between the Republican Sol Indiges and the Imperial Sol Invictus. Sol Indiges is generally treated as a Roman sun-god, possibly with Sabine roots, while Sol Invictus is said to have been a totally different, oriental deity, imported from Syria. In order to understand how this differentiation came about, we must first devote some attention to the Republican Sol Indiges.

SOL INDIGES

The literary sources for Sol Indiges, though scant, appear to show that the cult of Sol and Luna was rooted in the earliest Roman history². This has not always been accepted, however. In the 19th century a concept of Early Roman religion was developed, which culminated in the work of Georg Wissowa; and Wissowa (1912, 23-26) claimed that "natural phenomena" were altogether absent from early Roman religion. In his view, the early Romans had straightforward beliefs, with practical gods whose roles were clearly defined, and this excluded more abstract religious concepts. Neither the sun, nor the

stars, nor the planets were revered, astrology had no role to play, and even such "typical" Roman abstractions as Pax, Fides, or Fortuna belonged to later Roman religion.

Wissowa (1912, 315-317) rejected the belief that Sol Indiges was Roman, and suggested that he was in fact the Greek Helios, imported into Rome no earlier than the Second Punic War. He thus denied that Sol Indiges was one of the traditional Roman *Di Indigetes*, despite the fact that the sources unanimously treat him as one of the earliest gods in Rome. Wissowa was not alone in taking this point of view³, although it is no longer defended. Indefensible it may be; yet Wissowa's line of argument is an excellent example of the relative force

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² For the Republican Sol or Sol Indiges cf.: Dion. Hal. *Ant.* 2,50,3. Aug. *C.D.* 4,23. Paul. *Fest.* 22,5 ff. L. According to Varro (*L.* 5,74) the cult should be traced back to the days of Titus Tatius: "Et arae Sabinum linguam olent, quae Tati regis voto sunt Romae dedicatae: nam, ut annales dicunt, vovit Opi, Florae, Vediovi Saturnoque, Soli, Lunae, Volcano et Summano, itemque Larundae, Termino, Quirino, Vortumno, Laribus, Dianae Lucinaeque". Tacitus (*Ann.* 15,74,1) mentions a *vetus aedes apud circum* for Sol, generally accepted to be Sol Indiges in view of the antiquity of the temple; cf. Tert. *Spect.* 8,1. Quintilian (*Inst.* 1,7,12) mentions a second temple (*pulvinar*, cf. n. 8) on the Quirinal. Sol Indiges also had a temple in Lavinium (Dion Hal. *Ant.* 1,55,2; cf. Plin., *Nat.* 3,56). There was a *sacrificium publicum* for Sol on the 8th of August, *feriae* on the 9th of August, and *agonalia* on the 11th of December (*Fast. Vall.* CIL I² p. 240, *Altif. loc. cit.* p. 217, *Amit. loc. cit.* p. 244; Lyd. *Mens.* 4, 155; cf. n. 21). Etymologies of the word Sol are given by Var. *l.* 5,68; Cic. *N.D.* 2,68, 3,54; Macr. *Sat.* 1,17,7, *Somn.* 1,20,4; Mart. *Cap.* 2,188; Lyd. *Mens.* 2,4.

³ Cf. F. Richter (1909-1915), 1138-1139; R. Bernhard, "Der Sonnengott auf griechischen und römischen Münzen", *Schweizerische Numismatische Rundschau* 25 (1933, 245-298), 276. W. Wili, "Die römische Sonnengottheiten und Mithras", *Eranos Jahrbuch* 1943, (Zürich 1944, 123-168), 123, opened his lecture on Roman sun gods and Mithras stating: "Dem Kenner römischer Religion muss es wie Frevel vorkommen, wenn jemand über römischen Sonnengottheiten zu sprechen wagt. Denn er wird gleich den Einwand erheben, dass das römische wie das italische Wesen überhaupt dem Sonnengott abgewandt und ihm gegensätzlich sei"; Wili himself did accept the antiquity of the cult of Sol in Rome, but thought that its role was minor.

of ideology⁴ and methodology in his approach to Roman religion.

In order to prove his point that Sol in Republican Rome was actually the Greek Helios, Wissowa needed above all to explain how Helios came to be called Sol *Indiges*. He himself had defined the *Di Indigetes* as the oldest Roman gods⁵, but in the case of Sol he suggested that the epithet was added in Augustan times in order to denote the earlier Sol (who was actually Helios, according to him) as "(...) den «einheimischen» (...), im Gegensatz zu den orientalischen Sonnenkulten, die gerade in jener Periode in Rom einzudringen begannen (...)".⁶ He offered no reason to suppose that Sol was not called "Indiges" before Augustan times, other than his general dogma that there could be no place for a solar cult in Early Roman religion.

Wissowa's suggestion is not compelling, because there is no parallel for the use of the term *indiges* as "indigenous" or "traditional". However, the meaning of the word is not at all clear⁷. All that can be said with certainty is that *indiges* was used either collectively to denote a group of gods (*Di Indigetes*) or else was linked to individual gods, mainly Jupiter, Pater and Sol. As Wissowa rightly points out, the precise meaning of the word was already forgotten by the time of Varro. Thus his explanation, though unlikely, is not impossible. In a second argument against the existence of an early Roman sun-god, Wissowa (1912, 315) points out that the temple of Sol Indiges on the Quirinal was called a *pulvinar*⁸, and states that this term, linked to the *lectisternia* of the *graeus ritus*, was never used in connection with an Italic-Roman god⁹. This is incorrect, for in fact a *pulvinar* is mentioned in connection not only with Sol Indiges on the Quirinal (Quintil. *Inst.* 1,7,2), Castor in Tusculum (Fest. p. 419, 15-17 ed. Lindsay)¹⁰, and with Juno Sospita in Lanuvium (Livy XXI, 64, 4)¹¹, but also with the deified Romulus (Ovid, *Met.* 14, 827), and even Jupiter Capitolinus (Livy V, 52, 6)¹². Thus, although the practice itself of setting up a *pulvinar* for a god may have been imported from Greece¹³, it was certainly not restricted to non-Roman and non-Italian deities as Wissowa claims.

The only other argument for the non-Roman character of Sol Indiges offered by Wissowa (1912, 315) is that there is no sign of the cult either in the *Fasti* or in the orders of priests¹⁴. This is a weak argument, not only because the extant *Fasti* are

shaping the dominant ideologies of the time. In 19th-century Europe the Roman Empire was taken as a model by the various European empires; in a broader sense, the Graeco-Roman world was considered the source *par excellence* of western civilization. As European imperialism tended to rest on claims of cultural or racial preeminence, studies which maintained the superiority of the Graeco-Roman race and culture played an active role in building the ideological foundation on which European imperialism was constructed. The *idealization* of the Graeco-Roman culture by scholars like Wissowa – R.R. Bolgar speaks of a "cult of antiquity" in his article "The Greek legacy", in: M.I. Finley, ed., *The legacy of Greece*, (Oxford & New York, 1984, 429-472), 465 – has precisely that additional element by which it merits the term *ideology* rather than simply "concept or approach". The importance of this ideology in the shaping of our concept of the Roman god Sol Invictus can hardly be overstated.

⁵ Wissowa 1912, 19.

⁶ Wissowa 1912, 317; cf. G. Wissowa, "De dis Romanorum indigetibus et novensibus disputatio" in *Gesammelte Abhandlungen zur römischen Religions- und Stadtgeschichte*, (München 1904, 175-191; first published in 1892), 184.

⁷ The whole issue surrounding the terms *indiges* and *novensis* is highly complex and controversial. The OLD, 883, s.v. *indiges* states simply that it is an "obscure title applied to certain deities". For the unsolved problems concerning its etymology and meaning cf. OCD 1970², 544-545 s.v. *indigetes* and Kl. Pauly II, 1394-1395 s.v. *indiges* II & III. Koch (1933, 67-118) offers an exhaustive analysis of both the term *indiges* and the *Di Indigetes* in general. For other attempts to solve the etymological problems cf. A. Walde & J.B. Hoffmann, *Lateinisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, (Heidelberg 1938) s.v. *indiges*, as well as M. Leumann, *Lateinische Laut- und Formenlehre*, (München 1977), 373. No convincing solution has been found, and the fourth edition of A. Ernout & A. Meillet, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue latine. Histoire des mots*, (Paris 1985), 315 s.v. *indiges* states simply that the etymology is unknown. Cf. F. Altheim, *A History of Roman Religion*, (London 1938), 109-114; E. Vetter, "Di Novensides, di Indigetes", *IF* 62 (1956, 1-32), 22-28; Latte 1960, 45 n.1; Richard 1976, 917-918; G. Radtke, *Die Götter Italiens*, (Münster 1979³), 150-151. Wissowa never offered a final solution himself (cf. Wissowa, supra n. 6, 179; RE IX, 1334 s.v. *indiges*), but tended to interpret *indiges* as "indigenous", used as an antonym for *novensis*. This is untenable (cf. Kl. Pauly IV, 175 s.v. *novensis*), although the mistaken idea that *indiges* and *indigenus* are somehow linked is tenacious; cf. Halsberghe 1972, 26.

⁸ A *pulvinar* was a sacred couch, but the word could also be used as a *pars pro toto* for a temple (Serv. Georg. III, 533).

⁹ "(...) Dieser mit den Lectisternien des *graeus ritus* untrennbar verbundene Ausdruck [kommt] sonst nie mit Beziehung auf eine italisch-römische Gottheit vor (...)".

¹⁰ According to Wissowa (1912, 269-270) Castor was definitely Greek, as is shown by the *pulvinaria* in Tusculum. The fact that the Romans built a temple for Castor *intra pomerium* on the Forum itself as early as 484 B.C. would simply show that it was the Tusculani who had imported Castor from Greece, while the Romans imported him much later from Tusculum, forgetting his Greek origins.

¹¹ Lanuvium was a very old Italian cult centre according to Wissowa (1912, 187-188); he does not mention the presence there of a *pulvinar lunonis*.

¹² According to R.M. Ogilvie, *A commentary on Livy books 1-5*, (Oxford 1965), 745, the ceremony here described, "being part of the *Romanus ritus*, is of the greatest antiquity (...)".

¹³ RE 23.2, 1977 s.v. *pulvinar*; Koch (1933, 30-32) argues against a close link between the *pulvinar* and the Greek *lectisternium*, stating that in certain cases the setting up of a *pulvinar* was a purely Roman practice.

¹⁴ "Weder im Festkalender noch in der Priesterordnung [findet] sich irgendwelche Spur dieses Gottesdienstes (...)".

⁴ I have chosen this term with care. Unlike "concept", *ideology* has political connotations. By using this term, I wish to stress that the work of scholars like Wissowa played an active role in

very fragmentary, but especially because Wissowa had to emend the *Fasti Amiternini* to create it: he rejected the entry AGIN for AG(onium) IN(digeti) under December 11th, claiming that it must have been a stonemason's error, and proposed AGON(alia) instead, as this would leave the tutelary deity in doubt. The *Fasti Ostienses* however, which have been found since Wissowa wrote, carry the entry [AG]ON(ium) IND(igeti), making Wissowa's emendation untenable¹⁵. Of course these entries could be taken to refer to the *Di Indigetes* in general, but Laurentius Lydus (*Mens.* 4, 155) states that the games of the 11th of December were dedicated γενάρχη Ἡλίου, and for other reasons as well it is now generally accepted that Sol Indiges must be meant¹⁶.

Needless to say, Wissowa's interpretation of Sol Indiges as the Greek Helios is no longer accepted, for even before the discovery of the *Fasti Ostienses* his arguments were not convincing¹⁷. It is now generally agreed that Sol Indiges, a minor god revered together with Luna, had roots in the earliest Roman traditions. He was possibly introduced into Rome by Titus Tatius, together with other Sabine gods, and apparently his cult was soon linked to the Aurelii as one of the *Sacra Gentilicia*¹⁸. We should keep in mind, however, that most scholars agree that this cult was never important, and that it had disappeared altogether by the beginning of the second century A.D.¹⁹. Thus it is still claimed that there was no connection between Sol Indiges and Sol Invictus, who is said to have been imported in the late second or early third century A.D. from Syria.

Although Wissowa's position on Sol Indiges has no adherents today, his approach to the subject offers a foretaste of the type of scholarship we will encounter when reviewing past work on Sol Invictus. It also broaches an interesting, and fundamental, question: why did Wissowa, no mean scholar, feel compelled to go against the ancient sources on Sol Indiges, to attempt an impossible etymology of the term *indiges*, to give clearly incorrect information about the use of the word *pulvinar*, and finally to resort to a patently weak argument from silence, all in order to deny that Sol Indiges was Roman? Richard (1976, 918) felt that "G. Wissowa fut de tout évidence mal inspiré le jour où il développa [cette] idée (...)", implying that it must have been a momentary lapse. A lapse it certainly was, but hardly a momentary one: Wissowa first set out his views in 1892 and maintained them even after the discovery of the *Fasti Ostienses* in 1921²⁰. It was not lack of data, nor lack of reflection which caused Wissowa to be

"mal inspiré", but his general perception of Roman religion, in which he allowed himself to be led by his intuition, his idea of what Romans must have believed²¹. Obviously he vehemently opposed the

¹⁵ The *Fasti Ostienses* were discovered in 1921. Vetter, "Zum altrömischen Festkalender", *Rheinisches Museum* 103 (1960, 90-94), 92-94 suggested that the entry be read as AGON(iorum) IND(ictio), but this is far-fetched (rejected by A. Degraffi, *Fasti anni numani et iuliani accedunt ferialia, monologia rustica, paraepigramata*, Inscriptiones Italiae 13.2, Rome, 1963, 536). For the *Fasti* in question cf. Degraffi *op. cit.*, 104-106 & 185-200. He dates the *Fasti Amiternini* shortly after 20 A.D., and gives the *Fasti Ostienses* a terminus ante quem of 2 A.D. Cf. also the *Fasti Maffeiiani*, the *Fasti Praenestini*, and the *Fasti Antiaties ministrorum Domus Augustae*, with entries AGON or AG for the 11th of December (Degraffi *op. cit.*, 70-84, 107-145, 201-212).

¹⁶ Wissowa (1912, 317) mentions Lydus in passing, but does not explain his statement that the games were dedicated γενάρχη Ἡλίου; cf. G. Wissowa, "Septimontium und Subura" in *Gesammelte Abhandlungen zur römischen Religions- und Stadtgeschichte*, (München 1904, 230-252; first published in 1896), 231-2; *idem*, "Neue Bruchstücke des römischen Festkalenders", *Hermes* 58 (1923, 369-392), 371-2 (cf. n. 21). Further support for the identification of December 11th as the festival of Sol can be found in R. Schilling, "Le culte de l'Indiges à Lavinium", *Revue des Études Latines* 57 (1979), 49-68. In general on Sol Indiges and the *Fasti* cf. Koch 1933, 63-67; Latte 1960, 44-45; A. Alföldi, *Early Rome and the Latins*, (Ann Arbor 1963), 252-253; Degraffi (supra n. 15), 535-536; Richard 1976, 917-918 & n. 15 (with further references); H.H. Scullard, *Festivals and ceremonies of the Roman Republic*, (London 1981), 203. It is worth noting that there are also entries for Sol Indiges on August 8th (*sacrificium publicum*, *Fast. Vall.* CIL I² p. 240) and August 9th (*feriae*, *Allif.*, CIL I² p. 217; *Amit.*, CIL I² p. 244); Latte (1960, 231-232) believes the two entries refer to one ceremony, but Kl. Pauly V, 258 s.v. Sol treats them as different ceremonies. These are virtually ignored by Wissowa who mentions only the entry for August 9th (quoting CIL I² p. 324), qualifying it as an "unsolved problem" (Wissowa 1912, 317).

¹⁷ For early rejections: F. Cumont in Daremberg-Saglio IV.2 s.v. Sol, 1381-1382; J.B. Keune in *RE* 2. Reihe, III (1929), 902-903 s.v. Sol. Cf. A. Von Domaszewski, *Abhandlungen zur römischen Religion*, (Leipzig & Berlin 1909), 173.

¹⁸ Koch (1933) was the first to study Sol Indiges systematically, and to argue for the acceptance of the antiquity of his cult; G. Dumézil, *La religione romana arcaica*, (Milan 1977 – first published in French, 1974), 160-161 is still sceptical, but most now accept this antiquity: cf. Latte 1960, 231-233; Halsberghe 1972, 26-28; Richard 1976, 917-918 and n. 15, with references; Schilling (supra n. 16), *passim*, esp. 60-61; M. York, *The Roman festival calendar of Numa Pompilius*, (New York 1986), 189-191. On the connection with the Aurelii: Paul. Fest. s.v. Aureliam, p. 22 (ed. Lindsay); Richard 1976. However, C. Santi, "A proposito della 'vocazione solare' degli Aurelii", *SMSR* n.s. 15.1 (1991), 5-19, has suggested that the supposed linkage with the Aurelii is a forgery dating to the reign of Aurelian.

¹⁹ *RE* II, 3 s.v. Sol, esp. 905-906; Wissowa 1912, 365; Latte 1960, 233; Halsberghe 1972, 35, 54.

²⁰ Wissowa (supra n. 6, 180-181): "Sol deus (...) Augusti aetate indigeti cognomen accepit, ut probe dinosceretur ab externis dis solaribus, quorum iam tum cultus Romae percrebescere coeperat (...)"; cf. Wissowa (supra n. 16, 1923), 371-372.

²¹ Especially revealing is Wissowa (supra n. 16, 1923), 372, where he gives his reaction to the *Fasti Ostienses* and the reading [AG]ON(ium) IND(igeti): "Denn abgesehen davon, dass

concept of a Roman sun-god, yet one still wonders why. Koch, Latte, and others claim that Wissowa was mainly intent on maintaining his overall structure of Roman religion²². But would the admission that Sol Indiges was Roman really have made such a fundamental difference to that structure? I believe not, especially if the cult were shown to be no more than a minor one. In fact, I believe, it was not Wissowa's perception of Early Roman religion which was at stake, but rather his perception of the nature and character of solar cults. As I hope to show, the claim that all sun-cults were foreign, and notably that Sol Invictus was Syrian, was not a neutral scholarly hypothesis. In the scholarly tradition to which Wissowa belonged, such claims amounted to an indictment of solar cults in general, and that of Sol Invictus in particular, as inferior and unworthy of the "superior" Romans. The origin of such claims, I believe, lay in 19th century ideology rather than in a flawed methodology.

Wissowa himself does little to clarify the ideological preconceptions which govern his work; these are present more by implication than by argument. To get a clearer idea of the framework within which Wissowa worked we must turn to other scholars of the same "school". The manner in which they approached the problem of Sol Invictus will prove to be instructive.

Before reviewing these specific studies, however, it is important to turn for a moment to a more general, and in our case fundamental, tendency in past scholarship. Although in a different context, Halsberghe (1972, 26) states unequivocally: "Religion often provides the best key to the nature and fundamental traits of a people (...)". This clear linkage between the nature of the religion and the character of a people plays a fundamental role in the development of the theories concerning the origin and character of Sol Invictus and it is a persistent, albeit often unstated, theme in the literature on the subject²³. The whole concept cannot be separated from the 18th and 19th centuries, a period of developing nationalism which provided the ideological basis for an ethnocentric approach to religion. Once *ethnos* and religion are connected in this manner, scholars are forced to explain changes in religion in terms of change in the fundamental character of a people and its nationhood as a whole. In the 19th century certainly, western scholarship, in line with the nationalistic, imperialistic and racially oriented concepts of the time, treated the "nature and fundamental traits of a people" as immutable, changing only under the influence of foreign imports and intrusions. The implications are clear: with religion so closely linked to society, it too would change only as the result of the import

of foreign religious concepts and practices, introduced by immigrants, sailors, or soldiers who had been stationed abroad. In other words, this conviction is one of the basic justifications for diffusionistic explanations of religious changes. The importance of this diffusionistic approach will quickly become apparent when we study the 19th-century perception of Sol Invictus.

SOL, SOL INVICTUS, SOL INVICTUS ELAGABAL

The discussion surrounding the imperial Sol Invictus is more complex than that concerning Sol Indiges. It is generally believed today that the imperial sun-god Sol Invictus was an oriental deity, one of the Syrian Ba'alim, who came to the fore in Rome under the Severi, and most notably under Heliogabalus²⁴. After the death of Heliogabalus it is thought that Sol Invictus virtually disappeared from view until he was reinstated by Aurelian as *Dominus et Deus Imperii Romani*. Many believe that for the next 50 years he was one of the most important gods of Rome, until his cult, like that of all pagan gods, was supplanted by Christianity²⁵.

eine Verehrung des Sonnengottes in der frühen Zeit der römischen Religion, aus welcher die Festordnung stammt, allen sonstigen Zeugnissen widerspricht und darum ein so später und bedenkllicher Gewährsmann wie Io. Lydus in dieser Sache keinen Glauben verdient (...), bleiben die durchschlagenden Beweisgründe, die ich an anderer Stelle [i.e. Wissowa *supra* n. 16, 232; 1912, 317] gegen die Möglichkeit einer solchen Ergänzung angeführt habe, mit unvermindertem Gewichte bestehen (...)" (these arguments are of a technical nature, and concern the choice of abbreviations and letter-type used on the *Fasti-inscriptions*). In fact there are no "Zeugnisse" against an early cult of Sol Indiges, and Wissowa simply ignores what evidence there is. For a refutation of his technical arguments cf. Degraasi (*supra* n. 15), 536. On Lydus cf. M. Maas, *John Lydus and the Roman Past. Antiquarianism and Politics in the Age of Justinian*, (Leiden 1992).

²² Koch (1933, 10), "Der altrömische Dienst von Sol und Luna gehört in die Reihe derjenigen Kulte, die von der Religionswissenschaft des 19. Jahrhunderts, welche in dem bedeutenden Werke von G. Wissowa ihre systematische Zusammenfassung erhielt, als ungelöste Rätsel in den Anhang verwiesen wurden, da sie für die Eingliederung in den Bau des Ganzen keine Handhabe boten". As Latte (1960, 233 n. 2) puts it, the problem was that "Theorien den tatsächlichen Befund beiseite zu schieben suchten".

²³ Cf., e.g., Wissowa 1912, 366, describing Heliogabal's religious reforms as "die ärgste Entwürdigung, die römisches Wesen und römische Religion je erfahren haben"; Wili (*supra* n. 3), 164.

²⁴ I shall use this name for the Emperor to avoid confusion with the homonymous god, whom I shall call Elagabal. On the history and meaning of the various forms of the name Elagabal see Turcan 1985, 7-8.

²⁵ For recent summaries of the cult of Sol Invictus along these lines see MacMullen 1981, 85-86, H. von Heintze, "Sol Invictus" in *Spätantike und frühes Christentum*, (Frankfurt am Main 1983), 145-146; Halsberghe 1984; W. Kellner, "Sol-Münzen als Zeugnisse einer politischen Religion" in *Festschrift Herbert A. Cahn*, Basel (1985, 59-77), 60-61, 64; R.

Although all scholars, with the exception of Seyrig (1971), agree that Sol Invictus originated as an oriental god, there has been little consensus on his precise character, and especially on his connection with Elagabal of Emesa. Many scholars claimed that Aurelian's Sol Invictus differed from Heliogabalus's Elagabal, and was actually the Palmyran Malachbel, or even Mithras. Much of what has been written on Sol Invictus can therefore best be characterized as an attempt to identify exactly which oriental god it was that inspired Aurelian to institute his cult of Sol Invictus in Rome²⁶.

In part, the confusion is a result of the fact that the direct literary evidence for the above is extremely meagre. In support of the claim that solar religion was preeminent in Syria, usually Tacitus, *Hist.*, III, 24²⁷ is quoted, although such a conclusion is not, of course, warranted on the basis of this passage alone. In addition, modern scholars regularly define Ba'alim as solar deities, despite the fact that in antiquity they were almost always identified with Zeus or Jupiter. Seyrig (1971), in a study devoted specifically to the solar cult in Syria, strongly opposes the idea that Ba'alim were sun-gods. Indeed, he denies that sun-gods of any kind played a dominant role in the Syrian pantheon²⁸.

We should not be surprised, therefore, that there are no sources which state outright that Sol Invictus was an oriental Ba'al. In fact, although the sources all agree that Aurelian had a special veneration for Sol²⁹, we are hard put to find even indirect indications that this Sol was Syrian or Eastern. One ambiguous passage, often quoted, is SHA Aurel. 5,5:

"Data est ei (sc. Aureliano) praeterea, cum legatus ad Persas isset, patera, qualis solet imperatoribus dari a rege Persarum, in qua insculptus erat Sol eo habitu, quo colebatur ab eo templo, in quo mater eius fuerat sacerdos".

On the basis of this passage Habel (1889) concluded that Aurelian's Sol was identical to the Persian Mithras³⁰. As I understand the passage, however, the main point is that Aurelian, at a time when he was but a *legatus*, was already treated as an emperor by the Persian King. This special treatment is further emphasized by the fact that the plate was apparently "custom-made", representing Sol in a way well-known to Aurelian, and therefore by implication not in a manner typical of Iran.

More to the point is a second passage in SHA Aurel. (25, 3-6), describing the divine help Aurelian received in a decisive battle against Zenobia. After the battle, Aurelian immediately went to the most important temple of nearby Emesa, namely that of Elagabal.

"Verum illic eam formam numinis repperit, quam in bello sibi faventem vidit. Quare et illic templa fundavit donariis ingentibus positus et Romae Soli templum posuit maiore honorificentia consecratum".

At first glance it is not unreasonable to conclude from this that Aurelian recognized the god

Muth, *Einführung in die griechische und römische Religion*, (Darmstadt 1988), 190 n. 519, 201, 286; M. Clauss, "Sol Invictus Mithras", *Athenaeum* 78 (1990, 423-450), 423; R. Del Ponte, *La religione dei Romani*, (Milano 1992), 244-250. Turcan (1985) is more cautious, differentiating to some extent between Elagabal, Sol Invictus, and Sol Invictus Mithras, but he, too, in the end, considers Aurelian's Sol Invictus to be much indebted to Elagabal of Emesa (cf. especially pp. 251-254). Letta (1989) assumes that Sol Invictus was the result of syncretistic tendencies, in which oriental sun-gods played a major role. Cf. also D.E. Kleiner, *Roman sculpture*, (New Haven & London 1992), 359, 400, 463. Among older studies, cf. Keune in *RE* II.3 (1929) s.v. Sol (die orientalischen), 906-913; H. Usener, "Sol Invictus", *Rheinisches Museum* 60 (1905), 465-491; Richter 1909-1915, 1143-1150; Wissowa 1912, 89-90; 365-368; M.P. Nilsson, "Sonnenkalender und Sonnenreligion", *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft* 30 (1933, 141-173, = *Opuscula Selecta* 2, 462-504), 161-2; F. Altheim, *Die Soldatenkaiser*, (Frankfurt am Main 1939), 226-229, 277-286; *idem*, *Der unbesiegte Gott*, (Hamburg 1957); Halsberghe 1972; H. Dörrie, "Die Solar-Theologie in der kaiserzeitlichen Antike" in *Kirchengeschichte als Missionsgeschichte I, die alte Kirche*, H. Frohnes & U.W. Knorr eds., (München 1974, 283-292). To my knowledge only Seyrig 1971, 1973 and I. Chirassi Colombo, "Sol Invictus o Mithra" in *Mysteria Mithrae*, *EPRO* 80, (Leiden 1979), 649-672, hold dissenting views. Seyrig, approaching the problem from a Syrian angle, rejects the idea that Ba'alim were solar deities, and suggests that a different origin for Sol Invictus must be found. Chirassi Colombo discusses the relationship between Mithras and Sol Invictus, and suggests that they were direct competitors. She stresses the Graeco-Roman elements pertaining to Sol and his cult and suggests that it was supported by the emperors as a counterpart to oriental Mithraism. A number of her arguments will be recognized in mine, although she approaches the problem from a different angle. This, perhaps, explains why her conclusions have not been integrated into recent scholarship concerning Sol.

²⁶ Habel 1889, 99-100 (Mithras); Keune, *RE* 2. Reihe 3 (1929) s.v. Sol (die orientalischen), 906-913, also feels that Sol Invictus and Mithras are often identical, but believes that Aurelian imported Malachbel. Cf. Richter 1909-1915, 1147; R. Dussaud, "Notes de mythologie Syrienne", *RA* 4^{me} Série, 1 (1903), 376; Wissowa 1912, 367. Cf. also Nilsson (*supra* n. 25), 162. J. Marquardt, *Roemische Staatsverwaltung*, (Leipzig 1885), vol. 3, 83, suggested that Aurelian reinstated Elagabal on the basis of SHA Aurel. 25,4-6; this was rejected by the *RE*, (*supra*), but taken up again by Halsberghe 1972, 1984 (see below). Although it was generally accepted that Aurelian attempted to combine Graeco-Roman and oriental traditions in the cult of Sol Invictus, this point was not stressed, and attention remained focused on the oriental character of solar religion; cf. *RE* 2. Reihe 3 s.v. Sol (die orientalischen) 908; *OCD*² (1970), 999 s.v. Sol.

²⁷ "Undique clamor, et orientem Solem (ita in Syria mos est) tertiani salutavere". Cf. Halsberghe (1972, 36 n. 1 – but cf. 35-6 n. 10!).

²⁸ Cf. also Seyrig 1973, and see below, p 138.

²⁹ E.g. SHA Aurel. 35,3; 39,2. Eutropius *Brev. AUC* XI,15, and many others.

³⁰ How Aurelian's mother came to be a priestess of Mithras is not explained by Habel.

Elagabal as his divine helper. It is striking, however, that this is not stated explicitly. *Eam formam numinis* is carefully vague, and need not necessarily refer to Elagabal himself; indeed, it probably cannot, because we know that in Emesa the cult of Elagabal was centered on an aniconic sacred black stone or baetyl³¹, while *forma numinis* seems to refer to an anthropomorphic figure³². As *quare* in the second sentence shows, Aurelian took the divine helper to be Sol, for whom he built temples in Emesa and Rome. Sol was invariably represented in traditional Graeco-Roman iconography during Aurelian's reign, and there are absolutely no indications from either coins, inscriptions or any other source that he considered Sol and Elagabal to be identical. On the other hand, as Elagabal was a local solar deity, it is quite plausible that statues of other sun-gods – Helios of Rhodes, for example, or Sol of Rome – were also present in his temple, and that it was in one of these that Aurelian recognized *eam formam numinis*. In short, keeping in mind that the readers for whom the SHA was intended could be expected to know the nature of Aurelian's Sol, there is nothing here which would force them to conclude that Aurelian's Sol Invictus and Elagabal were identical. This passage alone, therefore, cannot qualify as *proof* of this³³.

Indeed, for many scholars it was inconceivable that Aurelian should choose to reinstate the 'infamous' Elagabal in Rome, and they claimed that it was actually Malachbel of Palmyra whom he transformed into Sol Invictus. The two passages quoted in support of this supposition are not conclusive. The first (SHA Aurel. 31,7) states simply that Aurelian wanted the temple of the sun in Palmyra restored, while the second (Zos. 1,61) states that a statue of Bel from Palmyra stood next to a statue of Sol in the temple built by Aurelian in Rome. It is curious that the latter passage should be cited as "proof" that Sol Invictus was no other than the Palmyran Bel; the fact that there were two separate statues seems to imply quite the opposite. Surely the fact that the Palmyran Bel (*akin* to Sol) was set up in Aurelian's temple can be far more logically explained as visual proof of Aurelian's total victory over Palmyra. It is extremely unlikely that Aurelian would have elected the god of a defeated city to be the supreme deity of the Roman Empire³⁴.

Aurelian, of course, is thought to be the second emperor to have introduced the sun-cult into Rome, after the failure of the Severan attempt, especially under Heliogabalus. Concerning this first attempt of the Severi our sources are more abundant (though no more trustworthy); here the problem is of a different nature. There can be no doubt that a new god, Elagabal, was imported into Rome by the emperor Heliogabalus³⁵. Various sources state that he was

installed in Rome as supreme deity³⁶ and that he was a sun-god³⁷, although there are some doubts about his precise nature³⁸. After Heliogabalus's death his religious reforms were immediately repealed³⁹, and the god Elagabal was sent back to Emesa⁴⁰. Thus as far as the sources are concerned, the rule of the Emesan sun-god Elagabal in Rome lasted less than four years (219-222), there being no indication that his arrival antedated the reign of Heliogabalus, or that his cult survived in Rome beyond the latter's death⁴¹. The sources offer no support for the contention that Sol Invictus and Elagabal were one and the same god, yet somehow this has become an almost uncontested commonplace in modern scholarship⁴².

It is perhaps typical of 19th century positivistic historiography that the scant literary sources concerning Sol Invictus were considered adequate to conclude confidently that the god was an oriental Ba'al. Yet obviously these sources are, in fact, inadequate to warrant this statement⁴³. They

³¹ The central importance of this stone for Emesa and its cult is clear from the fact that it appears on many of the coins minted by Uranius in 253/4, when he organized the defence of Emesa against Sapor I. *RIC* IV.3 p. 205 nrs. 1-2, p. 206, nr. 8.

³² *Forma* is used in the first place to denote the figure or stature of a person. In connection with a god, *forma* therefore almost automatically assumes this meaning; *formae deorum* can even – poetically – be used as the equivalent of *dii* (Ovid, *Met.* 1, 73). If Aurelian had seen a vision of the aniconic baetyl in battle, which he later recognized in the temple, *forma* would be ill-suited to describe this, and one would rather expect a word such as *effigies*, *imago*, or *species*. Cf. Turcan 1985, 252.

³³ Aside from the fact that the SHA provides little concrete information on Sol, the source itself is of course an extremely difficult one to interpret. Cf. the introduction to *Histoire Auguste*, texte établi et traduit par J.-P. Callu, Paris 1992.

³⁴ On the identification of the temple of the sun in Palmyra cf. H.W. Drijvers, *The religion of Palmyra*, (Leiden 1976), 20, who rejects the idea that Palmyran sun-gods, minor deities, in any way influenced Aurelian.

³⁵ Herodian 5,5,7 ("νέον θεὸν Ἐλαγάβαλον"); Cassius Dio *Hist.* 79 (80) 8,4; SHA Heliog. 1,6; Zonaras *Epit.* 12, 14, B. ³⁶ Herodian 5,5,7; Cassius Dio *Hist.* 79 (80) 8,4; SHA Heliog. 3,4; 7,4.

³⁷ Herodian 5,6,5; Cassius Dio *Hist.* 78 (79), 31,2.

³⁸ His chariot, for instance, was drawn by six horses rather than the usually prescribed four for Sol (Herodian, 5,6,7). In the SHA Heliog. 1,4 some hesitation is apparent when the emperor is described as "Heliogabali vel Iovis vel Solis sacerdos (...)". The name Elagabal has a Semitic etymology unconnected with sun and its Latinized form Heliogabalus, suggesting a connection with Helios, is late (SHA, Eutropius); earlier writers used more direct transcriptions which did not incorporate 'Helios' (cf. n. 24). On the Jovian nature of Elagabal cf. Seyrig 1971, 340-345.

³⁹ Herodian 6,1,3.

⁴⁰ Cassius Dio *Hist.* 79 (80), 21,2.

⁴¹ Halsberghe (1972) claims that the cult was already present in Rome earlier, but provides no conclusive evidence for this.

⁴² Cf. notably Halsberghe 1972, 1984.

⁴³ Inscriptions are often adduced in support of specific tenets, but although they are more numerous than our literary sources, they are less explicit, and none offer conclusive proof for any specific claim concerning Sol Invictus.

provide no proof either of a Syrian origin for Sol Invictus, or for his identification specifically with Elagabal. Why, then, are both tenets still accepted in modern scholarship? *How* could this conviction have taken root so firmly?

As we have already seen, religious historians in the 19th century systematically attempted to exclude solar and astral elements from what they considered truly Roman religion. This made Sol Indiges a problem, but a minor one, solved by presenting him as perhaps Greek rather than Roman, and certainly of minimal importance. Indeed, his cult was played down to the point where it was said to have disappeared completely early in the empire. Against this background it is obvious that Sol Invictus *a priori* had to be considered a foreign god as well. This does not, however, explain why scholars were convinced that he was Syrian. Virtually all cultures within the empire had a sun-god, and surely any sceptical reevaluation of the sources would have been enough to reveal their weakness as proof of an exclusively oriental origin of Sol Invictus. But we should not blame flawed methodology for this conviction.

EX ORIENTE TENEBRAE

The tenacity of the conviction that Sol Invictus was oriental can only be explained in conjunction with the general perception of Solar religion. In 19th century scholarship, which was surprisingly hostile towards solar and astral religions in general, this conviction had a strong ideological function. It tended to treat the advent of Sol Invictus not just as an oriental innovation, but as a bad one at that. To some extent this can be explained by the negative treatment Heliogabalus receives in our sources⁴⁴. But this should not blind us to the fact that many 19th century scholars went further, and bent the sources to fit their own world-view. Réville (1886) perhaps offers the best example of this negative approach, and it is worth quoting his remarks on Heliogabalus and Syria extensively to catch the tone of the discussion (240-242)⁴⁵:

“Cette fois le triomphe de l’Orient était complet. L’empire du monde dévolu à un enfant de quatorze ans, choisi par des soldats parce qu’il était beau et parce qu’il était prêtre! Le gouvernement dirigé par des femmes d’Émèse! Un Baal affirmant cyniquement sa souveraineté à la barbe du Jupiter Capitolin! Et le Sénat de Rom s’inclinant platement devant le dieu et devant son prêtre! (...) Il n’y a, en effet, plus rien de romain ni d’occidental en la personne d’Elagabal ou de sa mère Soaemias. En eux le vieil esprit de Canaan, contre lequel les prophètes d’Israël se sont élevés avec tant

d’énergie, s’affirme encore une fois dans un débordement suprême avant de disparaître de l’histoire. Amenée par deux siècles de bonne administration à un haut degré de civilisation matérielle, la Syrie, d’ailleurs si heureusement dotée par la nature, était devenue un lieu de rendezvous pour les représentants de toutes les traditions religieuses orientales et pour les apôtres de toutes les sectes. Au sein d’une population frivole et légère, ardente à la passion mais indolente à l’effort, avide de nouveautés mais superficielle, rusée et subtile mais sans consistance, toutes les théories et toutes églises s’étaient réciproquement fécondées et avaient produit une abondante floraison de systèmes religieux synchrétistes. (...)

Le dieu d’Émèse (...) était franchement cananéen et n’en avait point honte. (...) C’était un dieu solaire, personnification du principe mâle et de la chaleur fécondante”.

Réville proceeds with a discussion of the meaning of the name Elagabal and a long catalogue of the emperor’s excesses. He emphasizes the oriental nature of these excesses, accusing Heliogabalus of being even worse than the average oriental despot, as the latter at least keeps his debaucheries confined to the palace away from the public eye⁴⁶. For the Romans, he feels, all this must have been the apex of horror, but Réville (1886, 251) resolutely rejects the idea that the emperor was simply mad: “Les nombreuses excentricités d’Elagabal que les historiens ont considérées comme des inspirations de la folie, ne furent également le plus souvent que l’application de certaines coutumes syriennes (...)”. Réville emphasizes that Heliogabalus was simply a typical oriental and that his base character and actions were, in his view, no more than what one could expect of such an individual.

Réville did not stand alone in his conviction that the oriental race was inferior. This evaluation was shared by many and is closely connected with the “decadence”-theory. Broadly speaking, the whole imperial history of Rome was seen as one of cultural, political and moral decline⁴⁷, and according

⁴⁴ M. Frey, *Untersuchungen zur Religion und zur Religionspolitik des Kaisers Elagabal*, *Historia Einzelschriften* 62, (Stuttgart 1989); T. Optendrenk, *Die Religionspolitik des Kaisers Elagabal im Spiegel der Historia Augusta* (1969).

⁴⁵ Réville’s study of the Severans was quite popular; it was reprinted a number of times, was translated into German, is still referred to in the *Kl. Pauly* (e.g. vol. 2 (1967) s.v. Elagabal 1, 239), and even by Turcan (1985).

⁴⁶ This theme already in E. Gibbon, *The history of the decline and fall of the Roman empire*, Methuen’s Standard Library, (London 1905 [1776]), vol. 1, 147, who contrasts the “inexpressible infamy” of the “public scenes displayed before the Roman people” under Elagabal with the “licence of an eastern monarch (...) secluded from the eye of curiosity by the inaccessible walls of the seraglio”.

⁴⁷ In the words of Cumont (1929, 22): “Cette société manque (...) d’imagination, d’esprit et de goût. Elle paraît atteinte

to scholars like Réville this was largely caused by corruptive oriental influences⁴⁸. By idealizing the Republic and vilifying the Empire they followed, to some extent, a trend set in antiquity, sharing the Republican nostalgia of their ancient counterparts⁴⁹.

Obviously this made all typically imperial institutions and innovations highly suspect, but few elements of imperial society were seen as such clear examples of this perceived decadence as the cult of the deified emperor⁵⁰. The distinction between the human and the divine is so deeply rooted in our consciousness that any attempt to cross that barrier has been interpreted as an almost inconceivable act of *hubris*. This perception of imperial divinity brought emperors in conflict with the "ideal" (namely Republican) Roman as described by Livy, among others. The concept of a divine emperor is therefore often considered distinctly "un-Roman" and thought to be modelled on the "oriental despotism" of the hellenistic kingdoms of the Near East⁵¹. The ruler cult, like Sol, with whom many scholars felt it was specifically linked⁵², became "indubitable" oriental imports. The abandonment of Republican temperance and the introduction of the cult of the deified ruler was thus fitted into the general framework of an all-pervasive orientalization of the Roman Empire⁵³.

As the Roman East was the home of Semitic peoples, various scholars tended to discuss the orientalization and perceived decadence of Rome along racist lines. Many felt that all political and religious imports of an apparently Semitic nature were so inferior to Roman usage, that they could never have been successful in Rome if the Semitic population itself had not increased drastically in the West⁵⁴. They not only attributed a supposed decline in morals to this influx of orientals but claimed that it also contributed physically to the decadence of Rome because it caused the degeneration of the superior Italic and Celtic stock of the West⁵⁵.

d'une sorte d'anémie cérébrale et frappée d'une incurable sénilité (...). Elle ressemble à un organisme incapable de se défendre contre la contagion".

⁴⁸ Cf. Cumont (1929, 22) for a concise summary of this race-oriented approach (which he rejects) and Optendrenk (*supra* n. 44), 6; cf. 109 n. 20 with a number of significant quotations; on anti-oriental racism cf. also K. Christ, *Römische Geschichte als Wissenschaftsgeschichte*, 3 vols, (Darmstadt 1983), 5 who quotes G. Niebuhr as describing "orientals" as a "durch und durch böses und sittlich verdorbenes Volk" (1847).

⁴⁹ The pro-Republican bias of Roman historians like Livy and Tacitus has often been discussed, and this is not the place to go into this further. P.G. Walsh, "Livy and the aims of 'historia': an analysis of the third Decade", *ANRW* II, 30.2, (1982, 1058-1074), 1064, states that the temptation to idealize the past was overwhelming for Livy and his whole generation, suggesting that they contrasted Republican Rome with the degeneracy of the first century for personal reasons (civil war) as well as for

propagandic purposes. Cf. the remarks of Price, n. 50; C.H.V. Sutherland, *The emperor and the coinage. Julio-Claudian studies*, (London 1976), 100-101.

⁵⁰ E. Beurlier, *Le Culte Impérial. Son histoire et son organisation depuis Auguste jusqu'à Justinien*, (Paris 1891), 1, shows clearly how his contemporaries felt about the imperial cult stating that "entre les différentes formes des religions antiques, celle qui nous choque le plus est peut-être l'adoration des souverains". An excellent discussion of previous scholarship on this topic, concentrating on preconceptions of the type mentioned here, can be found in S.R.F. Price, *Rituals and power, the Roman Imperial cult in Asia Minor*, Cambridge 1984. In a section entitled "Christianizing Assumptions" (Chapter 1, par. 3, pp. 11-15), Price shows that ruler-cults in the Graeco-Roman world have been regularly treated as a final stage in the decline of ancient religions. Even more interesting is another section entitled "Prejudice" (Chapter 1, par. 5, pp. 17-19), in which Price points out that many scholars, refusing to accept that Romans could have taken the imperial cult seriously, treat it as *Graeca adulation*; "Roman historians surveying the empire from the centre have taken over the attitude of members of the senatorial upper class (...) and have dismissed the Greeks under Roman rule as bickering flatterers contending for empty titles".

⁵¹ The concept of "oriental despotism" played an important role in 18th and 19th century social and political sciences from Montesquieu to Marx, as did the dichotomy between the Graeco-Roman and the Oriental worlds as a whole. W. Nippel, "Max Weber's «The City» revisited" in: A. Molho, K. Raaflaub & J. Emlen eds., *City states in classical antiquity and medieval Italy*, (Stuttgart 1991, 19-30), 24, discusses this in relation to Max Weber, referring among others to J. Deininger, "Die politischen Strukturen des mittelmeeerisch-vorderorientalischen Altertums bei Max Weber" in: W. Schluchter (ed.), *Max Webers Sicht des antiken Christentums* (1985), 72-110. The opposition Orient-Occident was already fostered in antiquity (one need but think of the comparison made between Octavian and Anthony) and this dichotomy has continued to have an almost uninterrupted influence up to the present day. Cf. L. Cracco-Ruggini & G. Cracco, "L'eredità di Roma" in *Storia d'Italia* 5.1, (Torino 1973, 5-45), 17-19; S. Dossa, "Political philosophy and orientalism. The classical origins of a discourse", *Alternatives* 12 (1987), 343-357; P. Springborg, *Western republicanism and the oriental prince*, (Cambridge 1992).

⁵² On the emperor and Sol: Bernhard (*supra* n. 3), 277; Alföldi 1935, 94, 107-8; L'Orange 1935; A.D. Nock, "The emperor's divine Comes", *JRS* 37 (1947), 102-116; Brilliant 1963, 208-211; E. Kantorowicz, "Oriens Augusti - Lever du Roi", *DOP* 17 (1963), 117-178; S. MacCormack, "Change and continuity in late antiquity: the ceremony of the *Adventus*", *Historia* 21, (1972, 721-752), 727-733; R. Turcan, "Le culte impérial au III^e siècle", *ANRW* II 16.2, (1978, 946-1084), 1042-3, 1071-1073; P. Bastien, "Couronne radiée et buste monétaire impériale" in: *Studia P. Naster Oblata* I (1982), 263-274. Cf. *LIMC* Helios/Sol 408-450. In art, emperors are often thought to be assimilated to Sol (cf. p. 147 below). According to SHA Gall. XVIII, 2-3 Gallienus wanted a colossal statue of himself in the guise of Sol, but it was never completed. On coins, the radiate crown may be a solar symbol, especially when the Emperor with radiate crown faces the Empress on a crescent moon, but its precise significance is controversial; cf. M. R. Alföldi, *Antike Numismatik*, Mainz 1978, 172; Bastien 1982; Hijmans, *infra* n. 88, 169-170.

⁵³ Halsberghe (1972, 36-7), referring to the Eastern sun-god: "The emperors, who more and more came to consider themselves as Eastern despots, saw in (...) the indestructible and ever-victorious sun god a symbol of their power".

⁵⁴ The terms 'oriental', 'eastern', 'Syrian', 'hellenistic', 'Semitic', etc., are used so loosely in the studies under consideration that they are virtually interchangeable.

⁵⁵ A much-quoted example of this approach is a study by T. Frank, "Race mixture in the Roman empire", *American Historical Review* 21 (1910), 689-708, based mainly on funeral

We can now begin to discern a pattern of interconnected preconceptions and prejudices, leading to an intricate circular argument. On the one hand there is the negative evaluation of the Roman Orient with its racist connotations, best understood against the background of the 19th-century justification of West-European imperialism. On the other hand we see the widespread and highly popular conviction that the fall of the Roman West followed on logically from its decadence. It is hardly surprising to find the Orient treated as the source of the negative and corruptive influences which led to the supposed decadence of the Roman Empire. Sol Invictus, identified with one or other sun-god of Syria and often closely linked to the maligned ruler-cult, in many ways seemed to epitomize this dominance of the Orient. The very fact that Aurelian identified him as *dominus et deus imperii Romani* could be seen as a sign of the "oriental despotism" scholars loved to deride. Is it going too far to suggest that Wissowa's consistent opposition to a Roman Republican Sol stems from this conviction that the Imperial Sol Invictus was utterly un-Roman and even anti-Roman?

EX ORIENTE LUX

Franz Cumont strongly attacked the predominant negative evaluation of the Orient, and played a fundamental role in reshaping the conception of the role of oriental cults in the Roman Empire. Although Cumont did not deny the decadence of Rome (cf. n. 47), in his view the influence of the East was so strong because oriental cultures, and especially oriental religions, were more advanced than anything Rome had ever offered⁵⁶. Cumont therefore easily accepted the oriental origin of the imperial solar cult as a proven fact⁵⁷. It fitted in well with his interpretation of the general development of later Roman culture and the role the Orient played in it. Cumont (1909) further supported this conviction with a discussion of the philosophical and theological base of the cult of Sol Invictus. He distinguished two major constituent elements, both of which he described as oriental: Chaldaean astrology on the one hand, and Stoic philosophy on the other⁵⁸. According to Cumont (1909, 478-479) this led to a solar theology which was the result of the combined efforts of Mesopotamian and Syrian priests and philosophers. This theology, he feels, probably gained dominance in Syria from the time of the Seleucids, transforming all local Ba'alim into solar deities. From there it penetrated the West from the first century A.D. The success of this cosmic and almost monotheistic religion was due to the fact that it was far superior to Roman "idolâtrie".

In this way Cumont radically changed the tone of the discussion, but strengthened its basic tenets, providing a general oriental background against which the development and spread of the cosmic solar cult could be understood. However, as we have already seen, the interpretation of events in Rome to which Cumont adheres to is doubtful, and his claim that the Syrian Ba'alim were solar deities is rejected by Seyrig (1971). Thus the two central elements of Cumont's thesis are open to doubt⁵⁹.

ORIENTAL ASPECTS OF SOL INVICTUS

Cumont's approach greatly strengthened the conviction that Sol Invictus was Syrian, and by the first decade of the twentieth century the oriental origin of the imperial solar cult appeared beyond doubt. Attention focused on determining when the oriental sun-god entered Rome, the question now being at which point the *Roman* cult of the sun (namely Sol Indiges) was superseded by the *oriental* cult.

Both the perceived problem and the most popular solution are presented by Wissowa (1912, 365): "Einer für Sol oder für Sol und Luna bestimmten Weihinschrift kann man es (...) in den meisten Fällen nicht ansehen, ob sie sich auf den römischen oder den orientalischen Kult bezieht; doch spricht seit der Mitte des 2. Jahrhunderts die Wahrscheinlichkeit an sich für den letzteren, und im dritten ist (...) unter Sol kaum je ein anderer Gott als einer der syrischen Ba'alim verstanden worden"⁶⁰. According

inscriptions. He attempted to show a strong increase of Semitic blood in the occidental veins of the Roman plebs in the first centuries A.D., claiming that this fundamentally changed the racial character of Rome. Cf. Cumont (1929, 22) and N.H. Baynes "The Decline of the Roman Empire in the Western World: Some Modern Explanations", *JRS* 33 (1943, 29-35), 31-33, for discussions (and criticism) of this and similar approaches.

⁵⁶ Cumont 1929, 2: "Si Rome, appuyée sur la force de son armée et sur le droit qu'elle constitua, garda longtemps l'autorité politique, elle subit fatalement l'ascendant moral de peuples plus avancés qu'elle. A cet égard, l'histoire de l'Empire, durant les trois premiers siècles de notre ère, se résume en une "pénétration pacifique" de l'Occident par l'Orient".

⁵⁷ E.g. Cumont 1909, 447.

⁵⁸ Cumont feels that it is justified to treat the whole of Stoic philosophy as basically oriental because a number of Stoic philosophers, such as Poseidonius of Apamea, Cleanthus of Assos, and Chrysippus of Soli came from the East. Actually, according to Dr. B.L. Hijmans Jr. (personal communication), the Romans (e.g. Cicero, Seneca, Epictetus, M. Aurelius, etc.) did not regard the Stoic school as "foreign" or "oriental" at all, and certainly not in the way Mark Anthony and Cleopatra, for example, were seen as such.

⁵⁹ Cumont's influence on the study of Roman religion can hardly be overstated, yet few of his basic suppositions stand up to rigid reexamination. For sharp criticism, cf. MacMullen 1981, 116, 122-3, 200 n. 11.

⁶⁰ At this point Wissowa, in a footnote, cites as "interesting" an inscription (*CIL* VI 700), *Soli sacrum*, dedicated by a freedman in Rome who was born in Syrian Nisibis (currently

to Wissowa the name Sol Invictus or deus Invictus invariably points to an oriental milieu. He emphasizes, however, that Aurelian gave this Syrian cult a Roman form, being "(...) weit entfernt davon, wie Elagabal den ganzen Schwulst und Schmutz eines semitischen Ba'alendienstes den Römern aufdrängen zu wollen". This would explain why Sol Invictus on coins of Aurelian has a wholly Graeco-Roman iconography, according to Wissowa.

This common line of thought hinges on the assumption that the epithet *invictus*, despite being Latin, is so obviously Syrian that the oriental origin of Sol Invictus is clear from his name alone. Yet I have been unable to discover any evidence that *invictus* is a specifically "oriental" term. Cumont (infra, n. 61), 47, claims that the term *invictus* was a translation of the oriental-Greek ἀνίκητος, was not used in the West until the beginning of the Roman Empire, and after that was almost exclusively applied to deities of a solar or astral character. This is not supported by the available evidence, for one can easily give a Roman tradition for the epithet *invictus*: the OLD (1973, 959 s.v. *invictus* 2b) quotes *Apollo Invictus*, *Jupiter Invictus*, *Hercules Invictus* and a number of other gods from authors like Hostius, Vergil, Ovid, Properce, Horace and Martial. Hercules Invictus is also mentioned on coins, and on inscriptions he is almost as popular as Sol Invictus. Other *invicti* on inscriptions include Jupiter, Mercurius, Saturnus and Silvanus. Surely one cannot maintain that in all these cases "oriental", "solar" or even "astral" gods were meant⁶¹. Weinstock (1957), in a more general approach, traces the origins of the epithet to Alexander the Great, who was called ἀνίκητος by the Pythia in Delphi in 336 B.C. In the East, Alexander's example was followed by the Seleucids; in the West Scipio Africanus introduced *invictus* as a semi-divine epithet for himself in a concerted programme clearly inspired by Alexander⁶². Other generals followed this example with variations, and Weinstock (1957, 229-237) extensively discusses Caesar's policy in this respect, referring to a statue of him, dedicated in the temple of Quirinus with the inscription *Deo Invicto*. Not surprisingly, Augustus dropped all references to Alexander, stressing his human preeminence as *imperator* rather than a divine status implied by invincibility⁶³. Commodus, the 'new Hercules', was the first emperor to readopt the title *invictus* officially, obviously referring to Hercules Invictus. Caracalla was the next, and in this case, according to Weinstock (1957, 242), it was due to his interest in Alexander; he rejects the idea that any reference to Sol Invictus is intended. After Caracalla, *invictus* remained as a standard title for emperors until 324.

Weinstock's study shows conclusively, I believe, that *invictus* cannot be treated as an oriental term, imported into Rome in the early Empire, and used specifically for astral deities. It was already present in Rome as a semi-divine epithet by the early third century B.C., and by the first century A.D. it had as strong a tradition in the West as it ever did in the East⁶⁴.

Another important point tackled by Wissowa is the iconography of Sol Invictus, well known from the many coins on which he appears. How striking it is that among all the oriental gods in the Roman Empire, Sol Invictus alone appears to show no trace of oriental or non-Roman elements in his iconography! Wissowa's explanation that Aurelian had this done on purpose to disguise the oriental origin of his sun-god misses the point, because the iconography of Sol was established long before Aurelian's reign.

Various scholars have tried to identify an oriental or Semitic element in the iconography of Sol Invictus in the later Empire, pointing notably to his raised right hand⁶⁵. L'Orange (1935, 93-94)

Nusaybin on the Turco-Syrian border). One inscription has little force as evidence, of course, and in fact another inscription in the same volume of the *CIL* (2821 & 32551), not noticed by Wissowa, carries a dedication dated 246 A.D. by some *Belgian* soldiers from Viromandui to Jupiter Optimus Maximus, Mars, Nemesis, Sol, Victory, *et omnibus diis patrensibus*. Despite this, the footnote in question is often cited as "proof" of the oriental origin of Sol Invictus; e.g. Richter 1909-1915, 1142. ⁶¹ F. Cumont, *Textes et Monuments Figurés relatifs aux Mystères de Mithra*, Vol. 1. (1899), 47-48 n. 2, referring to the many inscriptions in *CIL* VI (nrs. 312-332), is puzzled by the popularity of Hercules Invictus. He tentatively suggests that in these cases "Hercules" stands for the planet Mars. Similarly he explains Silvanus Invictus as a result of the fact that this god "était devenu un dieu solaire". With Jupiter the epithet *Invictus* is simply poetic for *omnipotens* (Cumont refers only to Horace 3.27.73). In fact Cicero (*leg.* 2, 28 – not mentioned by Cumont) clearly implies that *Invictus* was a normal epithet for Jupiter. The circularity of Cumont's "explanations" for Hercules Invictus and Silvanus Invictus is obvious. For *invicti* cf. *Thes. L.L.* s.v. *invictus* Ic (Hercules Invictus inadequately represented). I do not know of any explanations of the "oriental" character of *invictus* more explicit than that of Cumont. Keune (*RE* 2. Reihe 3 (1929) s.v. Sol, 906) states baldly: "Man nimmt jetzt zumeist an, dass wir (...) überall da mit fremden Gottheiten zu tun haben, wo auf einer Inschrift etwa der Zusatz *aeternus, divinus* oder *invictus* (bei letzterem ohne Einschränkung) begegnet". L'Orange (1935, 93-4) simply refers to Usener (supra n. 25), 469, who does not give any sources or explanation. Letta (1989, 593) also simply states that the term is oriental, without providing sources. Cf. M. Rosenbach, *Gallienus Augusta. Allgott und Einzelgötter im gallienischen Pantheon*, (Tübingen 1958), 51.

⁶² Weinstock 1957, 221-222.

⁶³ As Weinstock (1957, 239 n. 159) points out, this decision was probably directed against Anthony, rather than Caesar.

⁶⁴ Cf. Chirassi Colombo (supra n. 25), 665-667.

⁶⁵ On the supposedly Semitic character of the gesture: F. Cumont, "Il Sole vindice dei delitti ed il simbolo delle mani

claimed that the introduction of the gesture in the iconography of Sol coincided with the introduction of the oriental Sol, named Invictus, by the Severi⁶⁶. This claim, however, is difficult to maintain. The oldest dated inscription mentioning Sol Invictus is from 158 (*CIL* VI, 717), clearly antedating both the Severi and the earliest images of Sol with raised right hand⁶⁷. Also worth noting are three medallions and an aureus discussed by Guarducci (1957-9). They each depict the same scene, but on the three medallions, which predate the reign of Septimius Severus, Sol holds a whip in his (lowered) right hand, while on the aureus, minted during Severus's reign, Sol raises his right hand in the gesture under discussion. As the inscription on one of the medallions dedicates it *Inventori lucis Soli Invicto Augusto*, this shows that the term *invictus* is not linked inseparably with this gesture. Furthermore, one wonders how an image of the sun-god which was already known under Antoninus Pius, and which remained current under the Severi, either with raised or with lowered hand, could ever be taken to represent two different gods.

Leaving these arguments aside, I find it extremely unlikely that the raised right hand of Sol was an innovation which would be recognized by the Romans as an oriental gesture, identifying this figure of Sol – otherwise unchanged – as a new Syrian god. As a gesture, the raised right hand, palm facing outwards, fingers straight, is so common that one meets it in all cultures and ages, albeit with differing details and meanings⁶⁸. Therefore I agree with Brilliant (1963, 209) that we should probably see no more in it than a “conventional and ecumenical sign of the radiant power” of Sol.

Neither is it very significant that the gesture was common in Syrian art under the Roman Empire⁶⁹. In fact, this makes it all the more striking that in Syrian art the sun-god was hardly ever depicted with a raised right hand. Surely one cannot argue that such a universal gesture as the raised right hand served to remind Romans of Syrian sun-gods, when these themselves were virtually never represented in this manner. On the other hand, if the Severi had wanted to add a Syrian element to the Graeco-Roman iconography of Sol making him clearly identifiable as a new Syrian sun-god, the obvious differences between the iconography of the Syrian sun-gods and Sol would have given them enough possibilities. For the Syrian sun-gods were war-gods, armed with spear and sword and wearing armour. I do not know of any such representations of the sun-god outside Syria. We must therefore reject L'Orange's theory, and conclude that the iconography of Sol shows no oriental elements⁷⁰.

It is impossible to find criteria by which the supposedly Syrian Sol Invictus can be distinguished from the preceding Roman Sol. Yet the dichotomy is still maintained, even in the two most recent studies on Sol Invictus, written by G. Halsberghe (1972, 1984)⁷¹. Halsberghe's work is valuable, for it provides us with the most extensive review of literary and epigraphical sources for Sol Invictus to date, but he interprets the material completely within the framework of his predecessors, whose theories he accepts as proven. Thus Halsberghe (1972, 34-37) offers a fair amount of evidence, mostly epigraphical, dating from the first century A.D., which, he feels, refers to the “autochthonous”

alzate”, *MemPontAcc* 1 (1923), 65-80, esp. 69-72; *idem*, *Fouilles de Doura-Europos* (1922-23), (Paris 1926), 70. Cf. F. Ghedini, *Giulia Domna tra Oriente e Occidente. Le fonti archeologiche*, (Rome 1984), 33-36.

⁶⁶ Cf. Cumont (*supra*, n. 68, 1923); Alföldi 1935, 107; Brilliant 1963, 208-211.

⁶⁷ I know of only one earlier Roman representation of Sol with raised right hand, on a Cretan coin dating from the reign of Vespasian, *BMCGrC* IX, 3 nr. 13. Letta (1989) claims that this is the oldest example of Sol “nel gesto” in the Classical world. There are, however, also examples in Italic Greek art: cf. Helios in his quadriga on an Apulian oinochoe (*LIMC* Helios 78; cf. 19).

⁶⁸ Brilliant 1963, 24-5, offers examples ranging from the 8th century B.C. on Sardinia to the 6th century A.D. in Syria. H. Demisch, *Erhobene Hände: Geschichte einer Gebärde in der bildenden Kunst*, (Stuttgart 1984), 131-134 admittedly discusses the gesture as one typical of the hellenistic Orient, but see his figs. 160, 168, and 174, which show how widespread it actually was. The Apulian vases referred to in the previous note show that Helios could also be represented with a raised right hand in the Greek context of Southern Italy, although they cannot, of course, be connected with the Roman representations some four to five centuries later.

⁶⁹ L'Orange cites Cumont (*supra* n. 68, 1926), 70-71, where a large collection is given of men and gods in Syrian art with raised right hand.

⁷⁰ On the Palmyran sun-gods Yarhibol, Malachbel and Shamash cf. Drijvers (*supra* n. 34), *passim*; J. Teixidor, *The pantheon of Palmyra*, *EPRO* 79, (Leiden 1979); *LIMC* s.v. Iarhibol and s.v. Malakbel. Gawlikowski (*LIMC* V.1 s.v. Helios, in *peripheria Orientalis*, p. 1034) believes that Malachbel was not originally a sun-god, but that his solar aspect was the result of solar syncretism. On Shamash in Harran cf. J. Tubach, *Im Schatten des Sonnengottes*, (München 1986), 140-141; on coins of Helios-Shamash in Hatra, Tubach *op. cit.*, 286-290; on Barmanen in Hatra, Tubach *op. cit.*, 300-333.

⁷¹ In the following I shall refer only to Halsberghe's book in the *EPRO* series (1972), as his article in the *ANRW* (1984) is little more than a summary of the former. Halsberghe's work has met with heavy (and justified) criticism, yet to my knowledge no-one has systematically analyzed and refuted his conclusions. For criticism, cf. J. Beaujeu “Le paganisme romain sous le Haut Empire”, *ANRW* II 16.1, (1978), 19: “problématique, information, analyses, discussions, conclusions manquent également de pertinence et de solidité”. On Helios in late antique literature (mainly Orphic hymns, magical papyri, Nonnos' *Dionysiaca*, Neoplatonic works, etc.) see now W. Fauth's *Helios Megistos. Zur synkretistischen Theologie der Spätantike* (Leiden 1995); this work was not yet available when this article went into press.

Sol of Rome⁷². He subsequently states simply that "when, starting in the second century A.D., the Eastern sun worship begins to influence Rome and the rest of the Empire, the rare indications bearing witness to an ancient cult of Sol disappear", failing to provide any evidence in support of this conclusion. Halsberghe identifies the new Sol Invictus decisively as Elagabal, the Emesan Ba'al and sun-god⁷³, whose cult was spread over the Empire not only by converted soldiers and emigrated Syrians but also through the proselytism of the Emesan priests. In part he attributes the success of oriental cults to the fact that "(...) in the course of the second century Rome had become an undermined and weakened body, unable to continue to resist the attacks and infiltrations of the Eastern religions"⁷⁴. According to Halsberghe (1972, 45-48) the Severi did not, therefore, *introduce* the Syrian sun cult into Rome, but simply gave it their official support. Not only Heliogabalus played a key role in this, but also Julia Domna, the wife of Septimius Severus, who came from Emesa and was the daughter of a priest of Elagabal.

Halsberghe (1972, 103-116) is the first to emphasize (rightly) that the cult of Sol Invictus did not disappear after the death of the emperor Heliogabalus in 222. In this way he provides a double link between Aurelian's Sol Invictus and Elagabal of Emesa. Aurelian's decision to elevate Sol as highest god of the Roman empire was inspired by his experience at Emesa, according to Halsberghe, but the god himself was modelled on the more Romanized version of Elagabal, still present in Rome⁷⁵. This Elagabal was no more than a point of departure for Aurelian in the development of a new Sol, who was to be *dominus imperii Romani*⁷⁶. The final product was a Roman sun-god modelled on the Syrian Elagabal, but also incorporating elements derived from Roman models⁷⁷; most notable among the latter, according to Halsberghe, is the iconography Aurelian chose for Sol Invictus. Halsberghe (1972, 162) attributes a lasting success to this Roman sun-cult of Aurelian, which he believes was a serious rival to Christianity. Even after the conversion of Constantine, he feels that the cult continued to be strong⁷⁸.

Halsberghe accepts the findings of his predecessors uncritically, even restating the conviction that Rome in the second century was an "undermined and weakened body". He struggles with the abundant evidence for a cult or cults of the sun in Rome well before the reigns of the Severan emperors, and is hard put to it to show the difference between Sol Invictus and the previous sun-god. In the end the evidence he adduces shows simply that the dichotomy between the Roman Sol Indiges and the

"eastern" Sol Invictus is wholly unconvincing. Equally Halsberghe does not show how all references to Sol from the second century onwards can suddenly refer to Elagabal only, as he claims. He also fails to give an adequate explanation for the continued existence of the cult of Sol Invictus after the death of Heliogabalus, although the sources state clearly that the cult of *Elagabal* was shipped out of Rome. Why persist in the assumption that Sol Invictus was the same as Elagabal, if Sol Invictus was present in Rome well before the Severi, if he cannot be differentiated from previous sun-gods in Rome, and if he remained present in Rome after the death of Heliogabalus despite the fact that all explicit references to Elagabal disappeared? For Halsberghe this assumption is essential, because he is convinced that Aurelian was inspired in Emesa to raise Sol Invictus, i.e. Elagabal in his view, to the level of supreme deity. As Halsberghe is the first to acknowledge fully the abundant epigraphical and numismatic evidence for a continued presence of Sol Invictus in Rome after the death of Heliogabalus, he is forced to reject Cassius Dio's claim (cf. n. 40) that Elagabal disappeared from Rome immediately afterwards. Otherwise he would be unable to explain the relationship between this Sol Invictus, already present in Rome, and Aurelian's Sol Invictus "imported" from the "Orient".

This review of previous scholarship and its underlying ideology and preconceptions has shown how little factual evidence there is for the current understanding of the origins of the cult of Sol Invictus. Its basis is rooted in an ideologically biased and long since discredited approach to the religious developments in imperial Rome. There is, in fact, no evidence for the postulated dichotomy between Sol Indiges and Sol Invictus, nor are there any conclusive sources in support of an oriental origin for Sol Invictus. This need not surprise us. In the last two decades, scholars have increasingly undermined the idea that an all-pervasive "orientalization" of religion took place in the Roman Empire. No one would deny that Eastern cults had a certain degree of influence throughout the Empire. But that Sol Invictus was not an oriental deity would fit

⁷² Halsberghe (1972, 26-37) discusses Sol Indiges at length, regularly calling him the "autochthonous Sol".

⁷³ Halsberghe 1972, IX-X; 45, 52-53. Halsberghe claims, without supporting evidence, that all inscriptions mentioning only Sol Invictus also refer to Sol Invictus Elagabal.

⁷⁴ Halsberghe 1972, 42.

⁷⁵ Halsberghe 1972, 139.

⁷⁶ For the various phases of the introduction of this "new" supreme deity see Halsberghe 1972, 139-148.

⁷⁷ Halsberghe 1972, 157-159.

⁷⁸ Halsberghe 1972, 168-171.

in with the general reevaluation of Roman religious developments currently underway⁷⁹.

At this point, however, we have nothing with which to replace the existing concepts, because the true problem, often acknowledged but rarely faced squarely, is the inadequacy, not just of our source-material on the origins of Sol Invictus, but also of sources on his character in general, his cult, and his importance in the Roman pantheon. Although Halsberghe (1972, 1-25) adduces a promising number of texts, the volume is misleading: a large proportion is about Heliogabalus and his religious policies or about Aurelian, many other texts mention facts unrelated to the nature of the Roman cult of Sol, others again are Christian polemics, aimed solely at ridiculing the notion that the sun is a god. The fact, indeed, that Macrobius (ca. 400 A.D.) and Julian are our "best" sources on the nature of Roman beliefs linked to Sol is telling. They are so far removed – both chronologically and socially – from the general Roman cult of Sol (if, indeed, that ever existed), that it is impossible to judge their trustworthiness. There is little point, therefore, in yet another reevaluation of the inadequate literary sources concerning Sol.

In the remainder of this article I therefore propose to explore the feasibility of an alternative assessment of the origins and character of Sol Invictus on the basis of a hitherto ignored category of evidence, namely the iconographical sources. In the following review of this material, I hope to show that it not only can contribute significantly to our understanding of Sol Invictus, but that it should, in fact, be treated as our prime source.

THE REPRESENTATION OF SOL IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE

Research into Sol Invictus has so far virtually ignored the archaeological material pertaining to him, despite its relative abundance. In general the archaeological sources can be divided into two groups: architectural remains (mainly temples and shrines) and iconographical material. I will limit myself to a discussion of the second group, which is by far the largest⁸⁰.

The collection gathered in the *LIMC* shows clearly that representations of Sol form a well-defined and recognizable group. He invariably appears as a young god, clean-shaven, and is depicted in three basic aspects: in bust, standing, or riding a four-horse chariot (*Figs. 1-4*)⁸¹. He is normally represented with rays or a nimbus around his head and almost always carries either a whip or a globe (sometimes both) as an attribute. He is generally naked, but always wears a short chlamys. If he is dressed, it is in a long chiton (*Fig. 5*). In later

imperial times one of the hallmarks of his iconography is his raised right hand. On rare occasions he participates in a specific mythological scene, but usually he stands alone or in a group without an active role.

An important percentage of known representations of Sol is on coins, on which he was mainly depicted between the late 2nd and early 4th century A.D. Often the inscription on the coins identifies him as Sol Invictus⁸². Other representations are found on relief-sculptures, in frescoes, mosaics, and on products of the various minor arts such as

⁷⁹ G. Alföldy, "Die Krise des Imperium romanum und die Religion Roms", in *Religion und Gesellschaft in der römischen Kaiserzeit*, Kolloquium zu Ehren von Friedrich Vittinghoff, W. Eck ed., (Köln & Wien 1989), 53-102, offers an extensive reassessment of the so-called orientalizing of Roman religion. MacMullen's (1981, 112-130) radical reduction of the influence of the East is also highly refreshing, which makes it all the more surprising that he did not extend this to his evaluation of Sol (*cf. n. 25*); *cf.* R. Merkelbach, *Mithras*, (Hain 1984), on Mithras as a Roman god (the general approach is sound, but in specific arguments Merkelbach is often unconvincing); R. Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, (Harmondsworth 1986), 35-36, 574-575; W. Burkert, *Ancient mystery cults*, (Cambridge, Mass. 1987), 1-3; R. Turcan, *Les cultes orientaux dans le monde romain*, (Paris 1989), 13; R. Gordon, "Religion in the Roman Empire: the civic compromise and its limits" in *Pagan priests*, M. Beard & J. North ed., (Cambridge 1990), 240-248; E.M. Staerman, "Le culte impérial, le culte du soleil et celui du Temps", *Mélanges P. Lévêque* 4 (1990, 361-379), 367.

⁸⁰ The best collection of iconographical material is by C. Letta in the *LIMC* s.v. Helios/Sol. In addition I have made extensive use of my unpublished thesis (Hijmans 1989) for this section of my article. *Cf.* also K. Schauenburg, *Helios. Archäologisch-mythologische Studien über den antiken Sonnengott* (Berlin 1955).

⁸¹ For ancient sources on the iconography of Sol *cf. e.g.* Apuleius *Met.* XI, 24; Arnob. *Nat.* 6, 12. Two representations of Sol seated are mentioned in the *LIMC* (Helios/Sol 160-161). In certain mythological and Mithraic scenes in which Sol participates actively, the range of types is obviously larger.

⁸² Between the 2nd and the 4th century A.D., I have counted at least 1500 different coin-issues with an image of Sol (the true figure is presumably substantially higher). For inscriptions on coins naming him *Sol Invictus cf.: LIMC* Helios/Sol 85 (Victorinus, Cologne, 269 A.D.), 87 (Probus, Rome, 276-282), 89 (Constantine, Trier, 310-313), 106 (Macrianus, Antioch 261-262; Gallienus, Antioch, 267; Diocletian and Maximianus, Carthage, 296-305; Constantine, various mints, 309-317), 107 (Maximinus Daia, Antioch, 311-313), 134 (Probus, Serdica, Cyzicus, and Ticinum, 276-282), 137 (Maximinus Daia, Trier and Antioch, 310-313), 138 (Constantine, London, 316), 158 (Aurelian, unknown mint, 270-275; Carausius, London, 287-293), 192 (Aurelian, Milan and Tripoli, 270-275; Constantine, Aquileia and Rome, 312/3 & 316/7), 196 (Aurelian, Ticinum, 270-275), 417 (Aurelian, Serdica and Cyzicus, 270-275); *Sol Oriens: LIMC* Helios/Sol 80 (Hadrian, Rome, 118); *Sol Augustus: LIMC* Helios/Sol 105 (Claudius Gothicus, Antioch, 268-270); *Sol Propugnator: LIMC* Helios/Sol 118 (Heliogabalus, Eastern mint, 218-219); *Sol Dominus Imperii Romani: LIMC* Helios/Sol 133 (Aurelian, Serdica, 270-275); *Sol Conservator: LIMC* Helios/Sol 417 (Aurelian, Serdica and Cyzicus, 270-275); *Sol Comes Augusti: LIMC* Helios/Sol 418 (Constantine, five mints, 317-321), 419 (Constantine, Antioch, 324-5).



*Fig. 1. Fresco, Sol; 1st c. A.D. Naples, Museo Nazionale 9819.
Photograph author.*



*Fig. 2. Mosaic, Sol within a zodiac; 3rd c. A.D. Bonn, Rheinisches Landesmuseum.
Photograph DAIR 64.704.*



Fig. 3. Intaglio, Sol in frontal chariot; 3rd c. A.D. Debreceen (Hungary), Déri Museum R XI 1.10. Photograph courtesy Déri Museum.



Fig. 5. Follis (rev.), Sol; A.D. 319. Photograph DAIR 35.549.

Fig. 4. Mosaic, Sol. Tunis, Bardo Museum A10. Photograph courtesy Bardo Museum.



Fig. 6. Relief, sacrifice to a statue of Sol; early 3rd c. A.D.. Naples, Museo Nazionale. Photograph author.

oil-lamps, silverware, gems, statuettes etc. In these media as well on coins, if a figure is explicitly identified as Sol Invictus, he invariably fits into this iconographic group in all respects. No full-length Roman statue of Sol has been preserved, but a few busts have been found⁸³. Cult-statues certainly existed, and there is one relief which shows a group placing offerings on an altar in front of a statue of a god who is almost certainly Sol (Fig. 6)⁸⁴.

IDENTIFYING SOL

No single element of Sol's iconography is sufficient to make his identification certain. This is even true of his rays or radiate nimbus. Although Sol almost always has rays or at least some type of nimbus, this is not invariably the case. The figure

of a young man on the left side of a votive aedicula in Rome has an iconography reminiscent of Sol in every respect: he is naked except for his chlamys, clean-shaven, has long wavy hair, raises his right hand, and holds a whip in his left. Even without the confirmation of the inscription, his identity as Sol would be beyond doubt, despite the absence of any indication of rays or nimbus⁸⁵.

On the other hand, there are various examples of male figures with nimbus, rays, or radiate crown who cannot be identified with Sol. Often this is obvious and confusion is impossible: the identity of Men, with rays, on an intaglio from Caesarea Maritima, for instance, is unmistakable because of his Persian cap and crescent⁸⁶; most other deities who were sometimes represented with rays or – more often – with a nimbus were likewise easily identifiable because of other elements of their iconography⁸⁷. Yet care must also be taken if the figure is a young, beardless man without obviously non-solar attributes. A number of wall-paintings from Pompeii, representing a mythological scene which has proven difficult to identify, provide a case in point. The young male figure always present on the left cannot be Sol, as is sometimes thought, for although he is young, beardless, and radiate, he carries none of Sol's specific attributes (sc. chlamys, whip or globe, etc.) (Fig. 7). As he appears to counterbalance Venus, he is usually identified as Hesperus, the evening star, and this would explain the nimbus (Fig. 8). It is the context,

⁸³ A. Frantz, *The Athenian Agora XXIV. Late antiquity: A.D. 267-700*, Princeton 1988, 41 (a bust of Sol, buried in a well in the early or middle 6th century); Cf. *LIMC Helios/Sol* 12-13 (both from a Mithraic context). There is a statue in Raleigh which C.C. Vermeule, "The rise of the Severan dynasty in the East: young Caracalla, about the year 205, as Helios-Sol, *North Carolina Museum of Art Bulletin* 14.4 (1990), 30-48, interprets as Caracalla in the guise of Sol, but this interpretation is doubtful (cf. n. 142). The statue of Sol in the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek (inv. 623) is a dubious amalgamation of fragments (cf. M. Squarciapino, *La Scuola di Afrodizia*, 1943, 39; Hijmans, *infra* n. 142), therefore difficult to interpret.

⁸⁴ The relief is in the National Archaeological Museum of Naples, inv. 6678: cf. *LIMC Helios/Sol* 189. Although hardly visible on photographs, inspection of the relief showed that there are unmistakable traces of the (radiate?) nimbus behind the head – now missing – above the shoulders. Nero's Colossus, next to the Flavian amphitheatre to which it gave its name, was, of course, transformed by Vespasian into a statue of the sun, but can hardly be described as a cult-statue. L'Orange (1935, 94-95) believes that the representations of the standing Sol with a raised right hand, popular on Roman coins from the Severi onwards, were directly inspired by a famous Severan statue of Sol.

⁸⁵ *LIMC Helios/Sol* 93, cf. 143.

⁸⁶ A. Hamburger, *Gems from Caesarea Maritima*, 'Atiqot, English Series 8, (1968), 18.

⁸⁷ Cf. M. Collinet-Guérin, *Histoire du nimbe des origines aux temps modernes*, (Paris 1961), 212-214.



Fig. 7. Fresco, "Sternestreit", detail. Naples, Museo Nazionale 9449. Photograph DAIR 9537.



Fig. 8. Fresco, "Sternestreit". Naples, Museo Nazionale 9449. Photograph DAIR 1936.309.

therefore, and not just the iconography, which shows that this figure is not Sol⁸⁸.

If rays alone do not constitute adequate grounds on which to identify a figure as Sol, the same can be said for every other element of his iconography taken singly. The whip identifies him as a charioteer, but is not specifically "solar"; the globe represents the cosmos, but as a symbol of (cosmic) power is certainly not limited to Sol. The raised right hand became a hallmark of his iconography in the third century, and is an important aid in identifying him, but not even this was unique to Sol. Therefore at all times only a combination of the above-mentioned iconographic elements identifies a figure as Sol⁸⁹.

SOURCE AND HISTORY OF THE ICONOGRAPHY OF SOL

Obviously the dates and the iconographical traditions of the representations of Sol Invictus are important in helping us to determine where Sol Invictus originated and when his cult was introduced into Rome.

There can be no doubt that the iconographical antecedents of Sol Invictus can be traced to the Greek and Roman-Republican representations of Helios and Sol. One of the most important precursors of the Sol Invictus type of the later Empire was Helios of Rhodes. On South-Italian red-figured ware we also find many representations of Helios, as well as in relief-sculpture etc. Some basic elements of Sol's iconography, such as the four-horse chariot, the rays around his head, the chlamys and the chiton of the charioteers, and the whip are all already present in these images of the sun-god⁹⁰. None of the iconographical elements of Helios and Sol are in any way discordant or unexpected in a Graeco-Roman god (Fig. 9).

The chronology of the known representations of the Roman Sol is less easy to establish. The dates of a large percentage of the representations are very approximate or even controversial. Of 372 objects (excluding coins) presented in the *LIMC* s.v. Helios/Sol⁹¹, 49 have no date, 60 are dated within two centuries (usually 2nd-3rd century), 137 in one century (of which 92 in the 3rd century), 68 with a margin of error of about half a century⁹², and only 58 with a margin of error of four decades or less. This means that less than 16% of the objects can be considered accurately dated, while almost 30% are either not dated at all, or else have a margin of error of almost two centuries.

There is also a marked difference in the distribution of dates of objects dated accurately and of those dated less accurately. The latter are usually placed in the 2nd or 3rd century, while a high

proportion of the accurately dated objects is placed in the 1st century A.D. Usually, the accurate dates are based on a criterium independent of the presence of Sol. Terracotta lamp-types, for example, have been carefully studied and can often be dated to within a few decades. The *LIMC* includes 28 lamps in its catalogue, of which 2 are not dated, 12 are placed in the 1st century, 3 in the 2nd century, 8 broadly in the 2nd-3rd century, 1 in the 3rd century, 1 in the 3rd-4th century, and 1 in the 4th century. The largest single group, over 42% of the total, thus belongs to the 1st century⁹³. Although

⁸⁸ The scene can be found in Pompeii in the houses of Fabius Rufus (VII 16,22), and Apollo (VI 7,23), and in Naples, Mus. Naz. 9239 and 9449. The painting of "Helios and Rhodes", Naples Mus. Naz. 9537 (*LIMC* Helios/Sol 160), is probably a fragment of this scene showing only "Hesperus"; cf. S.E. Hijmans, "Sol or Hesperus? A Note on two fragments of the 'Stemenstreit' in the Archaeological Museum in Naples", *Mededelingen NIR* 54 (1995), 52-60; *LIMC* Apollon/Apollo 420-421, E.W. Leach, "The iconography of the black salone in the casa di Fabio Rufo", *KJbVFrühGesch* 24 (1991), 105-112; L. Caso, "I affreschi interni del cubicolo" amphithalamos "della casa di Apollo", *RivStPomp* III (1989), 111-130; E.M. Moormann, "Rappresentazioni teatrali su scaenae frontes di quarto stile a Pompei", *PHS* I (1983), 73-117, esp. 84-91; O. Elia, "Lo stibadio dionisiaco in pitture pompeiane", *RM* 69 (1962), 118-127 (who identifies the figures as Helios, Dionysus, and Aphrodite).

⁸⁹ Certain "negative" criteria for the identification of Sol may also be helpful. I do not know of any representations of a bearded Sol, for example, except – possibly – on the arch in Orange (*LIMC* Helios/Sol 361).

⁹⁰ Cf. *LIMC* s.v. Helios, *passim*. Good examples are: 135, a bust of Helios with rays, long hair, and a chlamys (3d cent. B.C.; cf. n. 152); 380 (= fig. 9), a relief from Troy with Helios (radiate nimbus) in a quadriga (ca. 300 B.C.; cf. nr. 120, a relief of ca. 340 B.C. on which Helios has a nimbus only, and representations on Apulian vases, e.g. 23, 28, 78). For Helios on Greek coins of the pre-Roman period: *LIMC* Helios 178-190 (Rhodes) and 194-221, 241-285 (other Greek cities; 35 in Asia Minor and Syria; 24 in Greece, including the islands, Macedonia, etc.; 14 in Magna Graecia; usually more than 1 coin per entry).

⁹¹ The aim of this paragraph is to check the objectivity of the dates given, and to attempt to gain an impression of the measure in which the presence of Sol influenced the dates. Therefore only the main object per entry was counted, because parallels and objects only referred to briefly are never dated by Letta in the *LIMC*. Coins were not included for two reasons; in the first place they can be dated objectively without taking the presence of Sol into account, and in the second place they form a very specific group of evidence, which should be treated separately, and not be confused with the other visual media (see below).

⁹² This includes vague indications such as "first half of 3rd century" or "beginning of 2nd century", etc.

⁹³ These lamps come from all parts of the Roman Empire. The *LIMC* gives only a small selection of lamps with representations of Sol. Sixteen lamps from the 3rd and 4th centuries presented by V. Tram Tan Tinh, "Le baisier d'Helios", *Alessandria e il Mondo ellenistico-romano. Studi in onore di A. Adriani*, (Roma 1984), vol. 2, 318-328, e.g., on which Sol kisses Sarapis, are only referred to as parallels under n. 238, and have therefore not been included in these calculations. It seems likely that similar groups of lamps remain "hidden" behind each of the examples discussed. As I cannot ascertain how representative the group of lamps in the *LIMC* is, the figures presented here do not justify firm conclusions; and in any



Fig. 9. Relief, metope, *Helios*; ca. 300 B.C. Berlin, Staatliches Museum SK 71-72.

usually these lamps depict only busts of Sol, the chlamys, the rays, and at times either a whip, a globe, or both are also represented⁹⁴, so that the image as a whole always fits in completely with the standard iconography of Sol (Fig. 10).

Besides lamps, a fair number of other objects can also be dated firmly to the Republic or the Early Empire. On Republican coins, Sol was a rare, but not unknown figure⁹⁵. Sol had a Republican temple near the Circus Maximus, and although no Republican representations linked to Sol are known from this temple, we may have some from imperial times⁹⁶. Various wall-paintings representing Sol as a full-length figure or bust are known from Pompeii (Fig. 11, cf. Fig. 1)⁹⁷, while there were also a number of smaller representations of the sun as a charioteer⁹⁸. In Germany there is a 1st-century representation of Sol on the well-known *Jupiter-Pillar* of Mainz (dated A.D. 60), and other representations of Sol from the 1st century have also been found in Germany and France⁹⁹.

Thus, although the number of Roman representations of Sol that can be securely dated to either the 1st century A.D. or earlier is relatively small, it is clear that the iconography of Sol Invictus was already well established throughout the Roman Empire long before the reign of the Severi. Therefore the fact that many of the less accurately dated objects are conventionally placed in the 2nd-3rd centuries is, I suspect, in part the result of a circular argument. Provincial art is notoriously difficult to analyse, and if, as is often the case, the find-circumstances are unknown, the dates become

case 28 lamps form too small a "sample". We must also take into account that lamps may form a specific, atypical group in view of the potential connection between lamps and the light of the sun-god.

⁹⁴ LIMC Helios/Sol 9.

⁹⁵ H.A. Grüber, *Coins of the Roman Republic in the British Museum*, (London 1910), Vol. 1, 146 nrs. 995-997 (124-103 B.C.); nrs 3245-3246 (76 B.C.); 474 nr. 3833 (61 B.C. or 52 B.C. cf. J.P.C. Kent, *Roman Coins*, London 1978 nr. 71); 525 nr. 4044 (46 B.C.); 536 nrs. 4110-4113 (45 B.C.); 578 nrs. 4248-4254 (39 B.C.); 585 nrs. 4284-4289 (38 B.C.). Vol. 2, 137 nrs. 125-135 (217-215 B.C.; dates according to Göbl (infra n. 104), 2, nr. 1419); 268 nr. 509 (dates vary from 115 to 94 B.C.; cf. Kent *op. cit.* nr. 40); 300 nrs. 645-646 (90 B.C.); 398 nrs. 60-62 (42 B.C.); 486 nrs. 87-92 (42-1 B.C.); 506 nrs. 141-143 (38-7 B.C.).

⁹⁶ Tacitus *Annales* XV 74. Guarducci (1957-9) suggests that the representation of Sol on the 3 medallions and the aureus, discussed above (p. 125), was inspired directly by a famous relief or painting in this temple.

⁹⁷ Naples, Museo Nazionale 9819 (from Casa dell'argentaria, Pompeii VI 7,20); virtually identical is the representation of Sol still *in situ* in the Casa di Apollo, Pompeii VI 7,23 (LIMC Helios/Sol 90-91). Busts of Sol in the Casa della caccia antica (Pompeii VII 4,48) on the Via dell'Abbondanza, Pompeii IX 7,1 (LIMC Helios/Sol 271), in the atrium of a small house, Pompeii IX 7,19 (the painting has now disappeared), and Naples, Museo Nazionale 9519, from Pompeii (LIMC Helios/Sol 270).

⁹⁸ E.g. in frescoes of the myth of Daedalus and Icarus: Casa del Sacerdos Amandus (I 7,7), Casa dei cubicoli floreali (I 9,5), Casa del fabbro (I 10,7), and Caserma dei gladiatori (V 5,3); cf. LIMC s.v. Daedalus & Icarus 38.

⁹⁹ LIMC Helios/Sol 363. For other early representations of Sol cf. a relief from Vienne, France (LIMC 27), various intaglios (LIMC 38, 144, 202), a bronze statuette from Boscoreale (LIMC 114), the altar of the Lares Augusti (LIMC 168), the niello inlay on the breast-plate of the so-called Caligula-statue in Naples (LIMC 218), a relief from Mainz (LIMC 256), a fresco from the villa della Farnesina in Rome (LIMC 302), and a relief in the Capitoline Museum, Rome (LIMC 353, cf. 354).



Fig. 10. Lamp, Sol; ca. A.D. 100. Brussels, Musée Royale R 602 bis. Photograph ACL 35647 E, Brussels.



Fig. 11. Fresco, Sol. Pompeii VI 7,20 (house of Apollo), atrium. Photograph ICCD N 38458, Rome.

very approximate. The presence of Sol Invictus, it seems, has often led scholars to assume automatically that the object must date from the late 2nd or 3rd century, because it is generally accepted that the cult of Sol was not introduced into most parts of the empire before then. As I have shown, the validity of this assumption is doubtful. If it were possible to date these objects more accurately using independent criteria, as in the case of the typology of terracotta lamps, I suspect that many would, in fact, prove to be earlier. Thus to adduce the conventional dates of much of the archaeological evidence, which appear to be based on the assumption that Sol belongs especially to the 3rd century, in support of the same assumption, is obviously unacceptable. It should be stressed that in any case the actual numbers have little meaning in these comparisons, unless they are placed in context of the total numbers of comparable monuments for each period. In the case of the lamps discussed above, for instance, it may well be that figural representations as a whole were much more popular on lamps in the 1st century than in the 3rd century. MacMullen (1981,

116) illustrates the danger of quantifying objects in isolation by tabulating all known Latin inscriptions pertaining to Isis. He shows that the number steadily increased in the course of the first two centuries A.D. to a peak in the early 3rd century, followed by a sharp decline. This seemingly significant variation in the number of Isiac inscriptions does not, in fact, tell us very much about the fortunes of that cult, for as MacMullen points out, a table of frequency of all Latin inscriptions shows a virtually identical fluctuation. In other words, the rise and fall of Isiac inscriptions coincides with that of Roman inscriptions as a whole.

To my knowledge no figures or tables have been compiled concerning the relative numbers or the geographical spread per period of iconographical monuments from the Roman Empire. This makes it impossible at this stage to offer any conclusions about the relative popularity of Sol in different periods and different regions. We can only conclude that Sol was present in all parts of the empire, and that his iconography had an uninterrupted history from the 4th century B.C. to the end of Antiquity.

Coins constitute the only non-literary sources frequently mentioned in studies on Sol Invictus. Unfortunately coins are rarely taken into account systematically. Usually a few coins on which Sol appears are cited haphazardly, without due consideration for their numismatic context and the limitations inherent to this source-group¹⁰¹.

Sol appeared sporadically on Republican coins from the second half of the third century B.C. onwards¹⁰². After Mark Antony, however, no Roman coins bearing Sol were minted until the reign of Vespasian¹⁰³. This gap was followed by another until the reigns of Trajan and Hadrian, each of whom minted a few coins with the bust of Sol or Sol in a chariot. Under Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius no Roman coins with Sol were minted, but a few medallions did appear (Guarducci 1957-9). In 186 and 191 Commodus issued a number of coins bearing Sol and from his reign to that of Constantine, virtually every emperor did so. Septimius Severus probably issued coins representing Sol yearly from 196-211, and Caracalla issued a number of such coins in 215, 216 and 217. Heliogabalus also issued a fair number of coins bearing Sol in 219-221. After a short break, Severus Alexander resumed the minting of coins on which Sol was represented in 229, and continued this until his death in 235. Of the soldier emperors, Maximinus Thrax (235-238), Gordianus III (238-242), Philippus I and Otacilia Severa (244-249), Valerian I (253-260) and Macrianus all minted a fair number of coins bearing Sol. Gallienus (253-268) appears to have minted such coins yearly, and Saloninus and Salonina minted coins with Sol in the same period. Claudius Gothicus (268-270) issued a surprisingly large number of coins with Sol, and even Quintillus (270) issued a number of such coins during the few months of his reign. A number of usurpers in the West, including Postumus (259-268), Regalianus (260) and Victorinus (268-270), also issued various coins bearing representations of Sol. None were minted by usurpers in the East, except Vabalathus (271-274; I know of only 1 emission).

Obviously Sol was a firmly established deity on Roman coins when Aurelian became emperor (270-275). Aurelian, however, issued far more coins bearing Sol than his predecessors did and with greater iconographical variation. He was also the first (and only) emperor to call Sol *dominus et deus imperii Romani* on his coins. The special importance of Sol for Aurelian is thus confirmed by his coinage. In the following decennia, Jupiter held a similar importance for Diocletian, Hercules

for Maximianus Herculus, and Sol, again, for Constantine. There is absolutely nothing in Aurelian's coinage to suggest that Sol was new or oriental, any more than Diocletian's Jupiter was, or Maximianus's Hercules.

From Aurelian to Constantine all emperors issued coins bearing Sol, but the frequency of these issues varied. Tacitus (275-276), Carus and Carinus (282-3), Diocletian (284-305), Maximianus Herculus (286-305), Constantius Chlorus (293-306), and Severus II (305-307) all issued only a few coins with Sol. On the other hand Florianus (276), Probus (276-282), Numerianus (283-284), Galerius Maximianus (293-311), Maximinus Daia (305-313) and especially Constantine (306-337) issued far larger numbers of coins representing Sol (*Fig. 12*). This lasted until 317, when the number of issues per year started to drop. The last known Roman coin with Sol was minted in Antioch shortly after 323.

A number of conclusions can be drawn from this review of the coins on which Sol is represented. In the first place it is obvious that the coins of Sol issued by Heliogabalus are part of a broader Roman tradition which shows no oriental influences. Despite this, Frey (*supra* n. 44, 78-9, 101-2) voices a common opinion when he suggests that Sol on the coins of Heliogabalus refers to the

¹⁰⁰ In the following survey, I will refer only to Roman Imperial coins, ignoring the local autonomous coinage of the Greek cities. I have avoided references as this would overburden the footnotes of this article. Most coins can be found in the *LIMC* Helios/Sol 18-24, 60-62, 79-89, 104-112, 118-121, 132-138, 155-159, 192-197, 208-209, 237-238, 317-321, 336-337, 398, 410-422, 432-444 (often a large number of coins per entry). Cf. n. 101.

¹⁰¹ I have discussed the relevant coins extensively in my unpublished thesis: Hijmans 1989, vol. 1, 16-34 & vol. 2, 140-170. The most comprehensive published surveys are by Usener (*supra* n. 25), Bernhard (*supra* n. 3), D.W. MacDowall, "Sol Invictus and Mithra. Some evidence from the mint at Rome" in *Mysteria Mithrae*, EPRO 80, Leiden 1979, 557-571; and Kellner (*supra* n. 25). Coins are important sources for ancient history, but often they are wrongly interpreted. Cf. the warnings of D. Mannsperger, "Römische Reichsprägung", *ANRW* II, 1 (1974, 919-996), 920-928; R. Göbl, *Antike Numismatik*, (München 1978), 186, stresses that "(...) alle Münzausgaben in einer ganz bestimmten ökonomischen und politisch-propagandistischen Absicht und daher nach bestimmten Prägeplänen veranstaltet wurden (...)". Cf. also A.H.M. Jones, "Numismatics and history", in: R.A.G. Carrson & C.H.V. Sutherland, *Essays on Roman coinage presented to Harold Mattingly*, London 1956, 13-33; Sutherland (*supra* n. 49), 96-121 (esp. 120-121), 132; A. Wallace-Hadrill, "Galba's Aequitas", *NC* 141 (1981), 20-39.

¹⁰² Cf. n. 95.

¹⁰³ J.P.C. Kent, B. Overbeck & A.U. Stylow, *Die römische Münze*, (München 1973), nr. 226. It seems more than likely that this coin should be linked to the transformation of the Colossus of Nero into a statue of Sol. Cf. the coins of Aeternitas bearing busts of Sol and Luna, p. 143 and n. 134 below.



Fig. 12. Multiple Solidus, Constantine (obv.) and Sol (rev.); Siscia, A.D. 317. Photograph DAIR 35.530.

Emesan god Elagabal. I believe this to be incorrect. The Roman Sol on the coins of Heliogabalus is almost invariably identical in every iconographical respect with the established types of Sol, which had been current in Rome for quite some time. There is nothing in the legends or iconography of these coins to suggest that Heliogabalus considered this Roman Sol to be identical with his own Elagabal, as Frey believes. In fact, during Heliogabalus's reign Elagabal regularly appeared on Roman Imperial coins in his normal guise as an aniconic rock on a wagon, surmounted by an eagle¹⁰⁴. On these coins the rock is either identified as *Sanctus Deus Sol Elagabal*, or else he is called *Conservator Augusti*. The coins of Sol, on the other hand, rarely have a descriptive legend, although once he is called *Conservator Augusti*, and once *Propugnator Sol*¹⁰⁵. This is the only example of *propugnator* as an epithet for Sol, and on the coin Sol has a unique iconography: he carries the thunderbolt of Jupiter rather than his own whip or globe. Elagabal, of course, was a Ba'al, and Ba'alim were normally identified as Zeus/Jupiter. As we have seen above, there was some confusion concerning the identity of Elagabal himself in this respect (cf. n. 38). Was this adjustment in the normal iconography of Sol made in order to bring Sol closer to the Ba'al of Emesa by giving him an attribute of Jupiter? If this was the case, then the fact that such a modification was considered is further evidence that the normal Sol of Rome was no closer to Elagabal of Emesa than to

any other local solar deity of the Roman empire¹⁰⁶. Indeed, with the death of Heliogabalus in 222 the aniconic rock of Elagabal disappeared from Roman coins and never reappeared¹⁰⁷, while Sol remained, and appears only to have grown in popularity. It is especially interesting that Gallienus issued so many coins with a representation of Sol. Previous scholarship on Sol Invictus has virtually ignored this fact, yet in many respects Gallienus's numismatic policy towards this god foreshadows that of Aurelian¹⁰⁸. De Blois (supra n. 108, 165-169) tries

¹⁰⁴ LIMC s.v. Elagabalos 4, 6, 8-11, 15 (including local coinage – more than one coin per entry). Cf. M. Thirion, *Les monnaies d'Elagabale*, Bruxelles & Amsterdam 1968, nrs. 243-245 (minted in Rome), 358a-365 (minted in the orient).

¹⁰⁵ On the legends, cf. RIC 4.2, pp. 24-5. For Sol without identifying legend: Thirion (supra n. 104) 97-98, 140, 161-169, 205-216, all minted in Rome; the only coin with Sol minted in the East, according to Thirion, is the one with the legend *Soli Propugnatori* (nr. 366).

¹⁰⁶ It is probably not by chance that this coin of Sol with a thunderbolt is the *only* coin of Sol from Heliogabalus's reign on which a legend identifying him as Sol was deemed necessary. According to Thirion (supra n. 104, 75 nr. 366) this is the first time Sol is mentioned by name on a Roman coin; however, cf. the Sol Oriens-issue by Hadrian, supra n. 82.

¹⁰⁷ Coins of Emesa minted by Uranius Antoninus form the only exception, cf. n. 31.

¹⁰⁸ Cf. Rosenbach (supra n. 61), 41-52, with references. Rosenbach suggests that Gallienus saw the pantheon much in line with the theories of Porphyry and Plotinus, but as L. De Blois, *The Policy of the Emperor Gallienus*, (Leiden 1976), 167-169 shows, this is all highly speculative, based on a series of often implausible assumptions.

to place Gallienus's coins in a broader context, and refers to a number of other emperors who also minted such coins in the period between Heliogabalus and Aurelian. Accepting the general position that Sol was a Syrian deity, he suggests that these coins were part of the aggressive policy of these emperors towards the Persians and Parthians in the East. In fact, however, the number of coins bearing representations of Sol that were issued between 229 and 268 suggests that virtually each year saw at least one emission, and that all emperors minted their share. A number of these emperors never campaigned in the East, and the fact, furthermore, that certain Western usurpers such as Regalianus or Postumus also minted coins representing Sol makes it hard to maintain that such coins formed part of the imperial war-propaganda against the East¹⁰⁹.

On the other hand, the large number of coins bearing Sol which were issued by Gallienus may imply that he had a special veneration for the sun. Perhaps they should be placed in the context of certain remarks in the SHA Gall. 16 2-5, stating that Gallienus also ordered a colossal statue representing himself as Sol, that he sprinkled his hair with gold-dust, and that he regularly went about wearing a radiate crown. Whether Gallienus had a special veneration for Sol or not, it is certainly obvious from the number of coins representing Sol issued both by himself and his successors Claudius Gothicus and Quintillus that Aurelian hardly needed to travel to Syria to find inspiration for "his" sun god Sol Invictus.

Yet this review of Roman coins bearing Sol, interesting though it is, cannot help us to determine the relative popularity of Sol with more precision. Roman coins constitute a very specific type of source. They are certainly not a direct reflection of Roman society and its religious views. Rather, coin-representations were the result of a complex interaction between Roman numismatic tradition, standard imperial propaganda-themes and to some extent the specific religious or ideological messages communicated by the reigning monarch (cf. n. 101). Only Roman numismatic tradition, for instance, can explain the fact that Sol Invictus appears on more Roman imperial coins than Mithras, Isis, Sarapis, Cybele and Attis, Jupiter Dolichenus and a few other oriental deities taken together¹¹⁰. The latter are hardly represented on imperial coins, apparently because it was against Roman tradition (or imperial policy?) to grant clearly un-Roman deities a prominent place on imperial coins. Sol Invictus, on the other hand, is present on at least 1500 emissions from the second

to early fourth centuries¹¹¹. Obviously, we should be wary of any conclusions concerning the relative popularity of Sol based on these data.

Similar care should be taken in any attempt to relate the chronology of representations of Sol on coins to the chronology of his cult. The striking hiatus between the Republic and the 2nd century A.D. as far as representations of Sol on coins are concerned does not reflect an absence of Sol in Roman religious life in that period. We need but consider the two obelisks in Rome dedicated to Sol by Augustus¹¹², Nero's well-documented interest in the god¹¹³, the evidence adduced by Halsberghe (1972, 34-37) and the archaeological material from the 1st century A.D. already discussed, to realize this. The gap must therefore be explained within the framework of the imperial minting policy: such an explanation, which must be based on an analysis of the policies involved in the choice of religious coin-representations for the whole 1st and 2nd century A.D., is well beyond the scope of this article.

With this survey of the iconographical evidence pertaining to Sol, certain conclusions are already clear: we have established beyond doubt that the iconography of Sol Invictus had an uninterrupted history and development in the Graeco-Roman world from the late 5th century B.C. to the 4th century A.D. and beyond. This tradition offers no support for the contention that Sol Invictus was introduced by the Severi from the orient as a new deity, breaking with the Graeco-Roman sun-god (Helios or Sol Indiges). If Sol Invictus was Syrian, and if the difference between him and the Roman Sol Indiges was in any way important, one would have expected an iconographical differentiation between the two to avoid confusion¹¹⁴. No oriental god in the Roman Empire had a Latin name, clear Greek

¹⁰⁹ The theory put forth by De Blois was not new. Cf. R. Turcan, *Le Trésor de Guelma. Étude historique et monétaire*, (Paris 1963), 15-18, for references and a more detailed refutation.

¹¹⁰ I am referring to Roman coins from the official imperial mints only; the autonomous coinage of the Greek cities forms a separate topic with its own difficulties. Cf. K. Kraft, *Das System der kaiserzeitlichen Münzprägung in Kleinasien*, (Berlin 1972).

¹¹¹ Hijmans 1989, II, 140-170.

¹¹² *CIL* VI, 701-702.

¹¹³ Cf. M. De Vos, "Nerone, Seneca, Fabullo e la *Domus transitoria* al Palatino", *Gli orti Farnesiani sul Palatino* (Roma Antica 2), (Roma 1990, 167-186), 176-178, with references; Staerman (*supra* n. 79); O. Neverov, "Nero-Helios" in *Pagan Gods and Shrines of the Roman Empire*, M. Henig & A. King eds., (Oxford 1986), 189-194.

¹¹⁴ The attempts by various scholars to treat the introduction of the epithet *invictus* and the iconographical element of the raised right hand as such an innovation do not carry conviction, as we have seen.

and Roman antecedents, a fully Graeco-Roman iconography and a substantial presence on Roman imperial coins. The names, the iconography, and the coinage of Isis, Sarapis, Mithras, Attis, Cybele, Jupiter Dolichenus etc. reveal a marked contrast. Seyrig (1971, 1973), moreover, points out that in the 2nd century the sun-god was only a minor deity in Syria. The Ba'alim, supposed inspirators of the Roman Solar cult, were at that time still invariably equated with Zeus or Jupiter, and had a cosmic, but not a specifically solar aspect. The idea that they were truly solar deities is a 19th-century misconception, based on an uncritical reading of the written sources. In fact, as Seyrig shows, the concept of the Ba'alim as solar deities probably originated in the West in the 3rd century, under the inspiration of the solar cult, which was enjoying a growth in popularity at Rome¹¹⁵. We may conclude, therefore, that Sol Invictus was not a Syrian deity, imported into Rome by the Severi, but a Roman god, present in the city from its earliest history. The far more difficult task now facing us is to gain a measure of understanding of the role and position Sol had in the Roman pantheon. Here too the iconographical and archaeological evidence can provide important information, but the task is a complex one, and at this point I can give little more than a preliminary analysis of the material available.

INTERPRETING REPRESENTATIONS OF SOL

Sol, like any imperial Roman god, was a figure whose role and character cannot be caught in one definition, but depends largely on the context within which he figured. This is immediately apparent when we study the *LIMC* s.v. Helios/Sol, and especially its subdivisions, the number of which is perhaps less surprising than their complexity. Letta gradually progresses from purely descriptive categories to more interpretative ones: there is a substantial difference between "Sol alone; head full-face", for instance, and "Sol and Luna as cosmic frame" or "the emperor as Sol". What emerges is that the iconographically homogeneous group of Sol-representations actually encompasses a wide range of "types" with highly divergent roles and meanings. Often such a diversity of "meanings" is to be found within one "type". For example as "Sol alone: standing" the *LIMC* (Helios/Sol 114-119) includes virtually all bronze statuettes of Sol. In some cases it seems likely that these statuettes came from lararia¹¹⁶, but in other cases they may equally well have been part of a larger bronze object, such as a lamp¹¹⁷. Here the

LIMC is of little or no help. It gives no information about the direct context of the objects it lists, let alone the broader conceptual context. Its subdivisions are based primarily on iconographic criteria and material considerations and are therefore of little use in the analysis of the role and meaning of Sol in the various currents of Roman religion.

Sol differs markedly from almost all other traditional Roman gods in one important sense: the sun, as a natural phenomenon, is both visible and reliable. Although Sol is a god, this visibility sets him apart from most other gods, whose presence is not immediately apparent and whose advent is unpredictable. This difference from the traditional Roman gods is apparent in the treatment of Sol in the Roman Empire. Sol appears to have had a function, not just as a god, but also as a reliable cosmic phenomenon. I would suggest, as a working hypothesis, a division of the representations of Sol into two basic groups, reflecting this dichotomy:

1. Sol as a god in the traditional sense, which would include statuettes from lararia, representations of Sol in mythological scenes in which he has an active role (rare), and cult statues of Sol (lost, but copied on reliefs and perhaps on coins, and referred to in literary sources). The fact that temples of Sol existed and feast-days were dedicated to him is further evidence that he had a role as a god in the classical sense.
- 2a. Sol as a cosmic or temporal emblem or element (planet), which would conventionally include most representations of Sol and Luna "framing" a scene in which they have no specific role, Sol (with or without Luna) in cosmological contexts such as the mosaic of Merida, Sol as the god of a day in the week, etc.
- 2b. Sol as an image of heaven, a group which is related to the preceding, but can be differentiated from it because here Sol is shorthand for part of the world (sky – as opposed to Tellus or Oceanus) rather than of the cosmos.

¹¹⁵ Cf. M. Gawlikowski, "Helios (in peripheria Orientalis)" in *LIMC* V.1, p. 1034, who states clearly that the importance of solar gods and the expansion of solar syncretism in Roman Syria has been much exaggerated.

¹¹⁶ In Boscoreale, e.g. a statuette of Sol was found together with two statuettes of Isis, one of Jupiter, one of Neptune, one of the Genius Familiaris, and one of a faun (?) on a podium in room 12 of a villa rustica directly south of the train station (*NSc* 1921, 436-442, esp. 440-441 & fig. 11). A bronze statuette from Ortona (J. Mertens, *Ortona V*, Brussels 1976, 31, pl. X; cf. *NSc* 1975, 528 fig. 36) was also found in a villa rustica, and may well have belonged to a similar context.

¹¹⁷ Cf. the statuette of Sol on a bronze lamp in the Archaeological Museum of Florence (inv. nr. 1676), *LIMC* Helios/Sol 316.

The role and meaning of Sol as an independent god is difficult to analyse. It is obvious that Sol was revered as a god. The relief in Naples, dedicated by L. Arruntius Philippus and Q. Codrus Iason *pro salute (?) et memoria Imperatoris Caesaris Marci Aurelii Antonini Augusti*, shows the dedicants in the act of offering meat on a tripod on which a fire is burning, in front of a statue of Sol (Fig. 6)¹¹⁸. It is not clear whether the emperor is Marcus Aurelius¹¹⁹ or Caracalla¹²⁰. The raised right hand of the statue of Sol, however, makes it more likely that it dates to the time of Caracalla, as this gesture does not appear to have been a common element of the iconography of Sol before the reign of the Severi¹²¹.

Here we are obviously dealing with a god in close connection with the imperial ruler-cult, clear evidence that Sol was more than a symbol or emblem only. There is more evidence of this type. The votive aedicula in the Palazzo Conservatori in Rome, also mentioned above (p. 130), carries a representation of Sol and is dedicated to Jupiter, Mars, Nemesis, Sol, Victoria and *omnes dii patrenses*. Various statuettes of Sol apparently formed part of the *lararia* of certain households. Sol had an important role as an independent god in the cult of Mithras, and he was one of the *dii militares* under Constantine (Figs. 13-14). On a sarcophagus in Grottaferata he and Vulcan together reveal Venus's infidelity to Jupiter, showing that Sol could also partake actively as a god in his own right in mythological scenes¹²². Both in inscriptions as well as in literature there is evidence that Sol regularly played a role as a god in his own right.

Various representations show Sol apparently on an equal footing with another god (e.g. Jupiter, Saturn, Mars, Sarapis) (Figs. 15-16)¹²³. This is especially true for the Jupiter-pillars in Germany, on which Sol appears alongside Ceres, Fortuna, Hercules, Juno, Jupiter, Luna, Minerva, Neptune, Venus, Victoria, Vulcan, and the weekday-gods¹²⁴. A group of terracotta lamps from Egypt is also interesting in this respect. The lamps show the bust of Sarapis being kissed by Sol. This is linked to specific "miracles" which took place in the temple of Sarapis in Alexandria, and which are also recorded on coins and in literature. Rufinus tells us that on a certain day the rays of the sun, shining through a tiny hole in the wall, fell on the lips of the statue of Sarapis. Anticipating this moment an iron statue of Sol was drawn magnetically to the statue of Sarapis, thereby appearing to move of its own accord. Apparently Sol was

represented as a visiting god, in what Thelamon (*infra*, n. 128, 250) describes the ritual union of Sarapis and Sol (Fig. 17)¹²⁵.

It is quite likely that many representations of Sol alone refer to him as an independent god. These lack a direct, iconographical context clarifying the position of Sol, which means that only the broader archaeological context within which the representation was found can help to determine his role. The *LIMC* mentions a great many representations of Sol alone, but often the context is either unknown, or else difficult to ascertain. The fresco of Sol found in the Casa dell' argenteria in Pompeii (VI 7,20), for instance, comes from the atrium of that house (Fig. 1). The scant publications concerning the excavation suggest that other paintings in the atrium included representations of the four seasons, implying that Sol is not so much a god here, as a cosmic symbol¹²⁶. Further information is necessary, however, and would include closer study of the related painting of Sol in the casa di Apollo (VI 7,23), also poorly published (Fig. 11). Only consultation of the excavation diaries, photographic archives, etc., can provide the necessary additional data.

For many other representations of Sol alone, for instance on gems, lamps, small statuettes of Sol, etc., even the most basic information concerning the circumstances of their discovery is lacking. In all these cases, it will be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to determine the character of Sol with any degree of certainty.

¹¹⁸ I.S. Ryberg, *Rites of the state religion in Roman art*, (Rome 1955), 173, suggests that the fact that the dedicants are not *capite velato* shows that Sol Invictus is worshipped in a non-Roman manner. This may be true, but it does not necessarily reflect on the Roman or non-Roman character of Sol. Ryberg also illustrates two sarcophagi, for instance, on which a bull is sacrificed for Jupiter and a man pours a libation for the god without being *capite velato*.

¹¹⁹ H. Von Hesberg, "Archäologische Denkmäler zu den römischen Göttergestalten", *ANRW* II 17.2 (1981, 1032-1199), 1054-5 nr. 5b.

¹²⁰ *LIMC* Helios/Sol 189.

¹²¹ Although I do not doubt that this is a statue of Sol, this cannot be certain, for the head is missing and it may, of course, have been a portrait.

¹²² *LIMC* Helios/Sol 186.

¹²³ E.g. *LIMC* Helios/Sol 233-238.

¹²⁴ *LIMC* Helios/Sol 256-260, 262-263, 278-282 (sometimes more than one monument per entry). For other monuments in NW Europe cf. *LIMC* Helios/Sol 261 (from Plumpton: Sol, Venus, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter – i.e. five of the seven weekdays?), 265 (From Newcastle-Upon-Tyne: Sol, Apollo, Mithras, and a local – solar? – deity), 268, 269, etc.

¹²⁵ Cf. Rufinus *H.E.* II, 23 (*G.C.S.*, IX2 pp. 1027-1028), F. Thelamon, "Serapis et le baisier du soleil", in: *Aquileia et l'Africa* (Antichità alto-adriatiche 5, 1974), 227-250 (with further sources and parallels); Tran Tam Tinh (*supra* n. 96).

¹²⁶ *Annali dell'Istituto di Corrispondenza Archeologica* 1938, 175-178. Cf. K. Schefold, *Die Wände Pompejis*, Berlin 1957, 101-2.

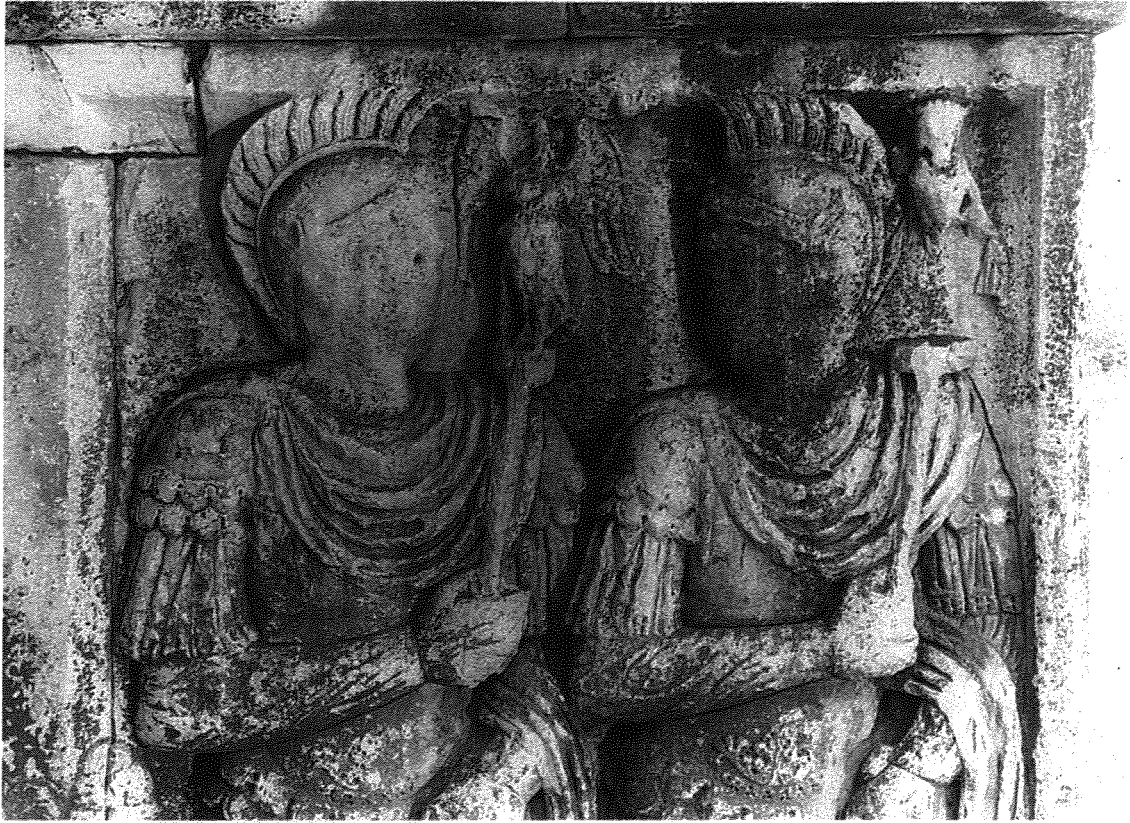


Fig. 13. Relief, Soldiers carrying the Dii Militares Victoria and Sol; ca. A.D. 315. Rome, Arch of Constantine. Photograph DAIR 1935.622.

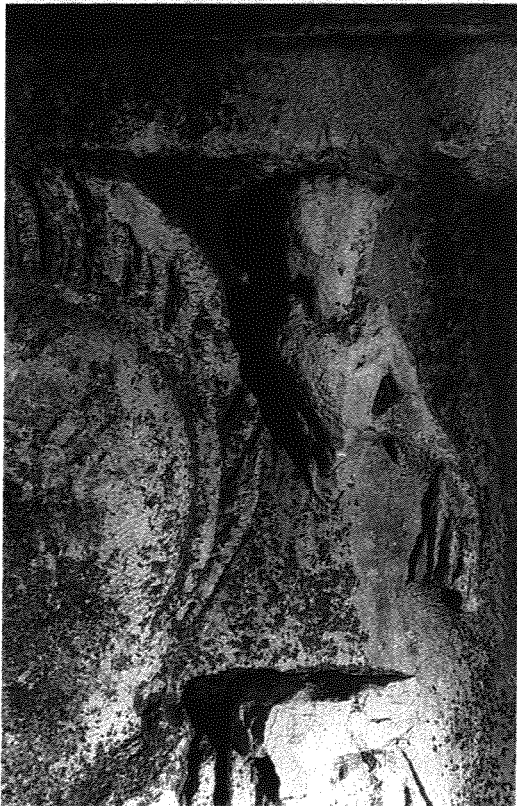


Fig. 14. Detail of fig. 13. Photograph DAIR 1935.624.



Fig. 15. Intaglio, Sol and Jupiter. Copenhagen, Thorvaldsens Museum 3677. Photograph Lehnart Larssen.



Fig. 17. Lamp, Sol kisses Sarapis; 3rd c. A.D. Alexandria, Musée Gréco-Romaine 29062. Photograph courtesy Musée Gréco-Romaine.



Fig. 16. Relief, Minerva, Sol, Fortuna (on the sides not shown: Juno, Victoria, Mars, Ceres, Vulcan, Venus). Cologne, Römisch-Germanisches Museum. Photograph Rheinisches Bildarchiv 22381.



Fig. 18. Votive triangle, in the apex Sol on moon crescent; in the lower register Sol (r.) and Luna (l.). Wiesbaden, Museum 6775 (on permanent loan to Frankfurt, Museum für Vor- und Frühgeschichte). Photograph courtesy Museum für Vor- und Frühgeschichte, Frankfurt.

SOL AND LUNA AS "COSMIC" DEITIES

Sol and Luna often appear as a pair of symbolic or emblematic figures without any obvious role. This is quite clear on various ringstones on which Sol and Luna are represented as minute busts, somehow connected with (but not active in) the main scene¹²⁷. On many reliefs, mosaics, paintings, etc. we find similar "flanking" representations of Sol and Luna (Fig. 18)¹²⁸. Scholars have offered various interpretations for this pair. On sarcophagi, for instance, it has been suggested that Sol and Luna indicate the time (day or night) when the main scene took place. Sol is usually in the upper left-hand corner, rising up in his chariot out of the Ocean, while Luna in her biga descends towards the Ocean on the right. This would represent the beginning of the day, with the sun rising, while the presence of Luna on the left and Sol on the right would mean that it is the beginning of the night¹²⁹. It should be noted, however, that Sol and Luna appear only rarely on mythological sarcophagus-reliefs. The vast majority of representations of Sol and Luna as a symbolical pair can be found in non-mythological contexts. Therefore, the interpretation of Sol and Luna on sarcophagi as indicators for "day" or "night" is doubtful, even though it is simple and straightforward. It would be preferable to find a more generally applicable interpretation of the meaning of this pair.

Perhaps a sarcophagus from Pozzuoli, now in the archaeological museum of Naples, offers a clue which can indicate the right direction¹³⁰. In the upper left-hand corner, Luna in her biga is riding to the right, while in the upper right-hand corner Sol is galloping to the left. This is the only scene of this type that I know of in which Sol and Luna are represented as riding in opposite directions. It is

¹²⁷ Cf. e.g. Zwierlein-Diehl, *Die antiken Gemmen des kunsthistorischen Museums in Wien*, (München 1979), vol. 2, 152 nr. 1198; *Antike Gemmen in deutschen Sammlungen 3*, Kassel, (München 1968-1975), nr. 82.

¹²⁸ *LMC Helios/Sol* 323-407. The selection is quite incomplete; cf. e.g. the many reliefs of Saturn from North Africa with Sol and Luna, not mentioned in the *LMC*: M. Le Glay, *Saturne Africain*, Paris 1966, 223-228. For illustrations: M. Le Glay, *Saturne Africain, Monuments*, 2 vols. Paris 1961-1966, pls. IV.3, VII.5, XII.6, XIII.1.3, XXI.2.3, XXIII.2, XXIV.1.2, XXV.5-7, XXVII.4(?), XXVIII.2,3,7, XXXIII.2 (weekdays), XXXIV.4, XXXVIII.3,5. Many more reliefs are not illustrated by Le Glay. I wish to thank Dr. E.M. Moormann for calling my attention to this publication.

¹²⁹ Cf. e.g. the Prometheus-sarcophagus in Rome, Capitoline Museum, inv. 329: the chariot of Sol rises up from the lap of Oceanus, H. Sichtermann & G. Koch, *Griechische Mythen auf römischen Sarkophagen*, (Tübingen 1975), 63-64, nr. 68, pls. 165-7; cf. 28-9, nr. 18; 65 nr. 70; *LMC Helios/Sol* 342.

¹³⁰ *LMC Helios/Sol* 347. Sichtermann & Koch (*supra* n. 132), 62-63, kat. 67, pl. 162-4.

interesting that the myth represented in the main scene, that of Prometheus, is a myth of creation, and it is tempting to think that Sol and Luna symbolize the chaos before creation by driving in such an uncoordinated manner.

If the inversion of Sol and Luna suggests chaos, it may not be farfetched to suggest that in the normal composition, Sol and Luna stand for cosmic order. This is certainly the line followed by Deonna (1947), and often repeated. According to Quet (1981, 132), Sol and Luna stress the cosmological character of a given representation, or symbolize its eternity and all-encompassing nature. In her discussion of Sol and Luna in the cosmological mosaic in Merida, Quet (1981, 135) concludes that they are the guarantors of cosmic harmony and the universality of cosmic order. Sol and Luna are regularly explained in these terms. On a relief from the temple of Jupiter Dolichenus on the Aventine in Rome, the lower register shows Isis and Sarapis flanked by Juno and Jupiter Dolichenus, while in the upper register Castor and Pollux face each other in the middle, flanked by a bust of Sol on the left and of Luna on the right¹³¹. According to von Hesberg (*supra* n. 122, 1085), Sol and Luna place the representation "in eine kosmische Sphäre"¹³². Quite a number of gods are accompanied by Sol and Luna in this manner, sometimes in contexts where Sol or Luna also play different roles. On Mithraic reliefs, for instance, Sol regularly appears in two different guises, often on the same monument: together with Luna he forms a "cosmic frame", but he also has an active role in many of the scenes from Mithraic mythology (cf. *LIMC* Helios/Sol 242-255, many examples per entry). There are even cases where Sol is an active god, a cosmic symbol, and a weekday at the same time. On a relief from Bologna representing Mithras slaying the bull, Sol, in the left corner, sends his raven-messenger to Mithras as he generally does on such reliefs. Luna, on the right, forms a "cosmic" pair with Sol, and between them, from left to right, are the busts of Saturn, Venus, Jupiter, Mars, and Mercury, i.e. the weekdays. They have been placed in inverted order so that Sol and Luna would keep their respective flanking positions¹³³. To refer to Sol and Luna simply as "cosmic" deities in such representations is not very informative, however. We can grasp their meaning more fully if we turn to coins on which Aeternitas, personified, is represented. Her most common attribute is a phoenix, but almost as often she carries a bust of Sol in one hand, and a bust of Luna in the other. These busts, in fact, are her attributes on the earliest Aeternitas-coins, which were minted by Vespasian¹³⁴. That the concept of *aeternitas* is

linked to the cosmos is clear, but Sol and Luna – light and darkness – do more than simply stress that link: like the Phoenix they refer to the ebb and flow, the constant death and renewal which characterizes cosmic eternity; periods of darkness are always followed by periods of light¹³⁵.

As a conventional pair of the type described here, Sol and Luna do not disappear with the advent of Christianity. This is surprising, because all the other evidence shows that Sol was treated in the same way as all pagan gods: he disappeared from the coinage of Constantine, and references to him were purged; he played an important role in the pantheon of the conservative senatorial opposition to the Christian emperors and in Julian's religious alternative to Christianity. In other words, he was as incompatible with Christianity as any Roman god. And yet, as a "cosmic frame" together with Luna he continued to exist, without interruption, side by side in both senatorial and early Christian art, well into the Middle Ages. Here apparently, the differing fortunes of Sol closely follow the lines of the dichotomy described above. Sol as a god disappears, but Sol and Luna as an emblematic or symbolic pair are retained¹³⁶.

It is obvious from the examples cited above that Sol and Luna were a popular pair, and this short discussion has brought us only to the beginning of an understanding of their role as a symbolic emblem. Clearly there is scope for further study, based on a wider collection of material than that offered in the *LIMC* (cf. n. 131). This is necessary not only to clarify further what the cyclical or

¹³¹ *LIMC* Helios/Sol 364.

¹³² Sol and Luna often figure on objects linked with the cult of Jupiter Dolichenus, such as the triangular bronze votive plaques, cf. e.g. *LIMC* Helios/Sol 331-334.

¹³³ Merkelbach (*supra* n. 79), 320 fig. 71. The busts of a number of the weekday gods have been restored.

¹³⁴ *LIMC* Aeternitas 2-10, 16-24, 26.

¹³⁵ Cf. R. Van Den Broek, *The myth of the phoenix according to classical and early Christian traditions*, *EPRO* 24, (Leiden 1972), 233-304 for the relationship between Sol and the Phoenix.

¹³⁶ Deonna (1947, 1948) gives the most extensive discussion of the theme of Sol and Luna, following it from Antiquity to the Middle Ages and beyond. Although his article is a useful source of information, his interpretation of symbols as "Sol and Luna" is often dubious: on a Republican denarius, e.g., he interprets an X as a "solar cross" while in fact it is simply a value-mark (1947, 35); many of his examples of Sol and Luna in funerary art are equally unconvincing (1947, 42-47). For some interesting examples of Sol and Luna in early Christian art, cf. also F. Gerke, *Spätantike und frühes Christentum*, (Baden Baden 1980 [1967]), 58-59. Surprisingly, Gerke implies that the Sol-Luna duality was initiated by Constantine on his arch in Rome: "Sie begründete (...) die im ganzen Mittelalter verbindlich gebliebene christliche Sol-Luna-Ikonographie". This, of course, cannot be maintained in view of the popularity of that pair in Antiquity.



Fig. 19. Antoninianus (rev.), Sol with prisoners; Aurelianus, A.D. 270-275. Photograph DAIR 35.541.

“cosmic” connotations are of Sol and Luna, but also to establish the chronology of this symbolism, the specific religious or social contexts in which the symbolism may have been especially important, possibly significant regional variations, as well as any other patterns which may emerge once the material is studied systematically. I need hardly apologize for not going into these questions here – such a study merits at least an extensive article, if not a book, of its own.

SOL AND THE EMPERORS

In some cases, finally, Sol appears to hover between the two basic groups described: as *comes* of the Roman emperor, for instance, he is probably to some extent cosmic, emphasizing that the emperor guarantees order and continuity on earth as Sol does in the cosmos, or some such idea. Sol can apparently also actively help the emperor, however, if we accept the literary witnesses to Aurelian’s belief that Sol helped him against Zenobia at Emesa. Certainly on many of Aurelian’s coins, Sol is flanked by one or two seated captives, whom he is sometimes represented as trampling

underfoot (Fig. 19). Here, it seems, Sol is rather an image of (imperial?) power than of cosmic order; perhaps the coins even refer to his direct aid to the emperor.

Another interesting example is the arch of Constantine. Here we find Sol in a tondo on one side, counterbalanced by Luna on the other side, in a typical example of Sol-Luna-iconography (Figs. 20-21)¹³⁷; in a military procession, a statue of Sol is carried as one of the military deities together with Victoria (Figs. 13-14)¹³⁸; and in the Eastern arch Sol is represented on one side, opposite the emperor, whose iconography echoes that of Sol (Figs. 22-23)¹³⁹. On Constantine’s arch, therefore, we find Sol as a symbol with Luna, Sol as a god in his own right, and Sol in close relationship with the emperor.

The emperor and Sol are often closely connected¹⁴⁰. Letta dedicates two chapters to this topic in the *LIMC Helios/Sol* (H & I), suggesting that on the one hand there are monuments on which Sol

¹³⁷ *LIMC Helios/Sol* 362.

¹³⁸ *LIMC Helios/Sol* 201.

¹³⁹ *LIMC Helios/Sol* 408.

¹⁴⁰ Cf. n. 52.



Fig. 20. Relief, Sol; ca. A.D. 315. Rome, Arch of Constantine. Photograph DAIR 32.71.



Fig. 21. Relief, Luna; ca. A.D. 315. Rome, Arch of Constantine. Photograph DAIR 32.20.

and the emperor were represented as separate figures, with Sol symbolizing the emperor's supreme powers, while on others the emperor was represented as Sol. The so-called Licinius-cameo (*LIMC* Helios/Sol 409) is an example of the first type of symbolism. The emperor, standing on a frontal quadriga (echoing the solar chariot), receives a globe (cosmic symbol of power) from Sol and Luna, while two Victories emphasize his invincibility (*imperator invictus*). In the actual iconography of the emperor, however, there is no element reminiscent of Sol. In that sense, the bust of Constantine in his arch in Rome is more closely related to that of Sol, as both have raised their right

hand, both are *invictus* (Constantine is crowned by a Victoria) and both probably held a globe in their left hand (*Figs. 22-23*). Other examples of this group in the *LIMC* consist of medallions and coins with staggered busts of the emperor and Sol (*Fig. 24*), representations of Sol handing over a globe to the emperor, etc. In all cases the emperor and Sol are separate figures, but Sol is somehow closely involved with the emperor¹⁴¹. This role of Sol is logical, if only because certain emperors obviously considered themselves to be under the specific protection of Sol.

¹⁴¹ *LIMC* Helios/Sol 410-422.



Fig. 22. Relief, Sol; ca. A.D. 315. Rome, Arch of Constantine. Photograph DAIR 32.605.

The second group in the *LIMC* (Helios/Sol 426-450) is quite a different matter. According to Letta this group consists of images of the emperor as Sol, although what this exactly means remains vague. To the best of my knowledge, no emperor was ever represented as *identical* with Sol, for in all cases he carries attributes which show clearly that he is not Sol¹⁴². Letta (1989, 624), however, attaches great importance to the role of the radiate crown in this respect¹⁴³. In his view it should be interpreted primarily as a solar symbol, and therefore when the emperors are represented with a radiate crown, and also copy certain other elements of Sol's iconography (globe, raised right hand) this results in their identification with Sol "in maniera più o meno palese". In fact, the significance of the radiate crown, especially on coins, has been much discussed, and the whole topic is still controversial¹⁴⁴. Imperial radiate crowns are clearly represented on coins as actual physical objects, probably worn by

emperors on certain occasions as part of their ceremonial dress. All emperors from Nero to Constantine were represented radiate on coins, but this was generally restricted to certain denominations only (e.g. dupondii, antoniniani, i.e. double denarii and double sesterii), suggesting that radiate busts identified "double" denomination coins. This conventional use of the radiate crown, as

¹⁴² An exception may be the marble statue in the Museum of Art in Raleigh, North Carolina. Vermeule (*supra* n. 86) believes it to represent the young Caracalla as Sol. I disagree, and have argued elsewhere that the statue represents a Dioscur rather than Sol ("Castor, Caracalla, and the so-called Statue of Sol in the North Carolina Museum of Art", *BABesch* 69 (1994), 165-174).

¹⁴³ Cf., e.g., *LIMC* Helios/Sol 432.

¹⁴⁴ Turcan (1978, 1042): "Parmi les attributs dont la signification fait l'objet d'exégèses problématiques comptent au premier chef la couronne solaire des empereurs et la croissant lunaire des impératrices"; Bastien (*supra* n. 55) gives a summary of the discussions. Cf. Hijmans, *supra* n. 88, 169-170.



Fig. 23. Relief, emperor (presumably Constantine); ca. A.D. 315. Rome, Arch of Constantine. Photograph DAIR 35.612.

prominent under emperors who ignored Sol as it was under those who revered him, casts doubt on the crown's "solar" connotations. On the other hand, there are clear examples of emperors manipulating this conventional symbol to recall Sol; on certain coins, for instance, the radiate bust of the emperor facing the bust of the empress on a crescent moon, must surely recall Sol and Luna. An echo, however, is not an identification; whether such emperors considered themselves to be an *imperatore-Sol* in the sense that Letta would have it has yet to be proven¹⁴⁵.

CONCLUSIONS AND GENERAL REMARKS

This article has two purposes: the first is to show that the current theories concerning the origin and character of Sol Invictus are wrong, with the subsidiary aim of explaining the development of these

¹⁴⁵ Allusions on inscriptions to emperors as a "new sun" and the like (cf. Lane Fox, *supra* n. 82, 12 & n. 4) are a separate matter. The sun is a physical reality which, as the source of light, has great symbolical power. Most ancient literary allusions to sun(light) draw primarily on that symbolism, rather than referring to the sun as a god. Only thus can we explain how Christ, just as those emperors, could be referred to as the new sun in early Christian literature. On the imperial radiate crown, cf. Alföldi (1935, 139-144), who gives the most extensive discussion of its origin and symbolic meaning. He links it to representations of Hellenistic rulers (cf. R.R.R. Smith, *Hellenistic royal portraits*, Oxford 1988, 42; H. Kyrieleis, "Θεοὶ ὀπατοί. Zur Sternensymbolik hellenistischer Herrscherbildnisse" in *Studien zur klassischen Archäologie, Festschrift F. Hiller*, 1986, 55-72), who wear a diadem which actually existed, from which symbolic rays of divine light emanate. On Roman coins, Alföldi feels, the whole crown should be interpreted as symbolic, because the diadem, being a symbol of kingship, was tabu in Rome and could not have been actually worn by the emperors. This is an *ad sententiam* argument, which ignores both literary and iconographic evidence to the contrary. A more balanced discussion of the radiate crown can be found in a study by Bastien (1982). Unfortunately, Bastien limits himself to the meaning of the radiate crown on



Fig. 24. Aureus (obv.), Constantine and Sol. Photograph DAIR 35.552.

theories and the strength of their influence. The second purpose is to introduce an alternative approach to the problem of Roman solar cults.

It was a lengthy but unavoidable task to reveal the weakness of the influential though outdated studies of earlier generations. Turcan (1985) quotes Réville extensively – not uncritically, but the unwary reader will hardly realize the underlying ideology in Réville's work. Wissowa is regularly quoted, as are scholars from his "school", and the same is true of Altheim. Cumont remains influential: his most important works are still being reprinted¹⁴⁶. As we have seen, the relatively recent studies of Halsberghe (1972, 1984) are fully in line with the tradition established by these scholars. It is their continued influence that makes an analysis of their methodology and ideology necessary. Their studies of Sol, proceeding from a biased interpretation of inadequate sources, have obscured, rather than illuminated, the character of this god.

The ground has been cleared for renewed research on Sol Invictus, and as we have seen the most promising way to proceed is to try to deduce his role in Roman religion from the archaeological evidence. Archaeological material such as that reviewed above is not well adapted, however, to answer typically "historical" questions. It requires its own interpretation, in which we must beware of the common approach in Classics to make maximum use of literary sources. There are essential differences between the two types of sources,

which, unfortunately, are only rarely acknowledged. Written sources often provide detailed factual information, but essentially exist in isolation, confined within the narrow limits determined by their author and his aims. It is the task of the historian to identify these limits and to determine the extent to which the information provided by the source has a broader validity beyond them. Archaeological sources, on the other hand, should never be studied in isolation, but derive meaning solely from their context. The task of the archaeologist is to identify and analyse the complex network of contextual relationships within which the individual archaeological data fit, and which, by revealing recurring patterns, imbue them with meaning. Broadly speaking, one could conclude that written sources are most suited for *histoire événementielle*, while archaeological material is better adapted for *histoire de la longue durée*. Yet in practice, classicists tend to use only written sources to write the general story, while archaeological data serve only to illustrate specific details. As a result of this, both types of source-material are often studied in the wrong way: written sources are overinterpreted, while archaeological data are discussed in isolation. Frey's interpretation of Sol on the coins of Heliogabalus as Elagabal is a good example. Had Frey studied the iconographic tradition and the numismatic context of these coins, he would have been more cautious.

Context, in the broadest sense, is thus fundamental to the study of archaeological evidence. In this article I have concentrated on the iconography of Sol, making it possible to place individual representations of Sol within an iconographical tradition. This has already yielded interesting results; but the iconographical tradition is not the only important contextual aspect of the material. A broader approach should be taken, aimed at including the physical, geographical, chronological and parallel iconographical contexts as well. This would help to identify more complex and meaningful patterns and groupings than those already discernible, and could result in a better understanding of such phenomena as: the relative popularity of Sol; the various religious and social spheres in which the god

imperial busts on coins. Whether the object actually existed, and if so, when and where it was worn, and what it meant, are questions he does not touch upon. The matter is too complex to discuss fully here, but I shall return to the radiate crown of the emperors in another place. Cf. LIMC Helios/Sol 443 for coins of the emperor and empress recalling Sol and Luna. Most examples in Letta's section on "imperatore-Sol" (LIMC Helios/Sol 426-450) are unconvincing.

¹⁴⁶ E.g. F. Cumont, *Le religioni orientali nel paganesimo romano*, Rome 1990³.

functioned; his relationship to other gods and their cults; the geographical spread of the various aspects discerned; and the changes these aspects underwent in the course of time. Literary sources can aid us in the interpretation of these patterns, but care must be taken to ask the right sort of questions. If we accept that archaeological sources are suitable only for the analysis of general trends in history, then the only written sources we can turn to in support of our conclusions are those which are extensive enough, general enough, and *detailed* enough to allow us to extrapolate general developments from them. It is essential that we never use written sources on one level of detail, to support our interpretation of archaeological material at another level.

But it is not just the differences in substance between literary and material sources which should always be kept in mind. Of foremost importance is the identification of the prime sources. In the case of Sol Invictus, the prime sources are archaeological, and these must be studied independently until we are able to hypothesize general trends and developments in certain aspects of solar religion or related attitudes to Sol. Only at that point will it be worth searching for information on those trends (or similar ones) in other sources (literary, epigraphical), in an attempt to support or modify the hypothesis. In a final stage, the detailed fragments of information, so typical of the written record, can be consulted, and fitted in within the broad trends.

The primacy of the archaeological record is valid for the study of many aspects of Roman history, for archaeology does, indeed, "have unique access to the long term"¹⁴⁷. Furthermore the literary record for the Roman period shows such major lacunae that we regularly find ourselves virtually in prehistory when dealing with aspects of the Roman past¹⁴⁸. It is not just in the case of Sol Invictus that the archaeological record proves to be far richer than the literary one. Nor has the biased interpretation of the literary evidence been restricted to the study of Sol. It is time, therefore, that archaeologists broke the vicious circle which devalues their material in current scholarship, and interpreted their evidence independently. Only then can we hope to attain a true synthesis of the archaeological and the written evidence.

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¹⁴⁷ I. Hodder, *Reading the past*, (Cambridge 1986), 77-102 (esp. 101), cf. 177.

¹⁴⁸ G. Fowden, "Between pagans and Christians" (review article of Lane Fox, *supra* n. 82), *JRS* 78, (1988, 173-182), 180.

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