SIDERA AUGUSTA:

The Role of the Stars in Augustus’ Quest for Supreme Auctoritas

by

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Abstract

Auctoritas was the foundation of Augustus’ legitimacy, success, and survival in Roman politics. The necessary precondition of successfully founding political legitimacy upon auctoritas, however, was that Augustus’ auctoritas had to be supreme. This thesis will show that one of the most important ways Augustus achieved supreme auctoritas was by integrating himself into traditional beliefs about the stars and by harnessing the associations with the divine and supernatural that were latent in these beliefs. Augustus reinforced his association with these beliefs by employing a number of powerful symbols drawn from among the stars. Chapters Two and Three will focus upon one of these symbols, the sidus Iulium (the comet of Caesar). Chapter Two will demonstrate how Augustus harnessed the general acceptance of Caesar’s astral apotheosis (catasterism) and of catasterism in general in the Roman world at that time and then used the sidus Iulium as a symbol of his connection with Divus Iulius and of his own semi-divine status. Chapter Three will explore how Augustus promoted the sidus Iulium as the harbinger of a golden age for the Roman people and as an omen of the fact that it was his destiny to lead them into it. Chapter Four will turn to another astral symbol, the constellation Capricorn. This chapter will examine how Augustus integrated himself into the greatly popular discipline of astrology and used its language of fate to promote himself as a man of great destiny. Throughout we will consider a variety of evidence, particularly numismatic and literary. This will help us to achieve the fullest possible picture of the lengths to which Augustus went to create a useful ally of the stars in his never-ending quest for auctoritas.
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Chapter 1
Introduction and Literature Review

Actium provided Octavian with his greatest triumph: the hegemony he had long struggled with Antony to achieve. Actium also presented him, however, with his greatest challenge: how to remain alive to enjoy his newfound supremacy. This had been something that his adoptive father Julius Caesar had failed to do. One could argue that Caesar had perished because he had chosen to represent his supremacy using the language and symbolism of potestas. Potestas is a political discourse that involves the formal power to order and compel. Caesar had indicated that his position was supreme because his potestas was supreme and absolute. This had been a tremendous affront to the dignitas (honour) of Rome’s powerful senatorial class, a group of men who jealously guarded the equal and shared distribution of potestas that the res publica represented. These men saw in Caesar’s claims to supreme potestas the actions of a man aspiring to be a rex (king). The actions they took to remove this rex were as violent as those that had been taken against Rome’s last king, Tarquinius Superbus, nearly five hundred years before. This time, however, the results were deadly.

When in 44 B.C. the young Octavian entered the Roman politics, he had his choice of political and ideological precedents and models. Although he closely maintained and promoted his connection with his deceased adoptive father Caesar, Octavian clearly recognized that Caesar’s program of self-promotion and legitimation had played a large part in his demise. These efforts had been too bold, too confrontational, and too replete with the language of potestas. Octavian recognized his father’s error and chose instead to follow in the footsteps of those of his predecessors who had embraced another traditional discourse of power in Rome, the language of auctoritas. This language was a multi-faceted form of political discourse that could be, and was, deployed as a way of understanding and representing the hierarchy of society in all aspects of
Roman life, from the tablinum of the domus to the forum. In this system of societal organization, the Roman who had the most auctoritas was the man who was considered most suitable to lead. As a man who was trying to legitimize the supremacy he had already achieved, Octavian/Augustus spent his whole political career attempting to prove that he was precisely this man. He drew upon every aspect of Roman life to achieve this. Civic ideology and religious belief helped Octavian/Augustus achieve a great deal of auctoritas. His auctoritas did not become supreme, however, until his efforts extended beyond the Roman world and into the Roman night sky. There Octavian/Augustus was to find his most potent ideological allies and symbols.

1.1 Auctoritas Defined

It is important before we continue, however, that we briefly explore the concept of auctoritas and the ways in which it was understood in Octavian/Augustus’ time. Auctoritas is a concept that is notoriously difficult to define. Stated succinctly, auctoritas is informal power that is granted not by the state but by the voluntary consent of those over whom this influence is exercised. Unlike potestas, auctoritas is the power to advise, persuade, and recommend and

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because *auctoritas* rests outside the framework of the state, it is a private and personal kind of power. Indeed, one gains *auctoritas* as a result of the special qualities and attributes that one is judged to possess. These could include one’s achievements (including offices and titles), service to the state, personality, and personal background, especially lineage. Anything that distinguished a person in a positive way was a source of *auctoritas*.

The idea of *auctoritas*, moreover, had a significant hold on the Roman mind. A Roman was willing to listen to and follow someone he judged to have *auctoritas* superior to his own, believing that this made him capable of leading effectively. An excellent example of the clout carried by *auctoritas* is the Roman Senate. While in actuality the Senate had no *potestas* whatsoever, it guided the course of the Roman state and was a body that was not ignored for centuries solely because of the supreme collective *auctoritas* of the great men who were its members.

A Roman could in theory, then, enjoy tremendous influence in Roman politics without holding a single magistracy if he had sufficient *auctoritas*. This made *auctoritas* the perfect choice for Octavian who was trying to find a way to legitimize his new-found hegemony.

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could and did argue that his supreme influence in political matters was simply the natural result of his supreme *auctoritas*. He says precisely this in his *Res Gestae*:

Post id tempus auctoritate omnibus praestiti, potestatis autem nihilo amplius habui quam ceteri qui mihi quoque in magistratu conlegae fuerunt.

After this time [27 B.C.], I excelled all in *auctoritas*, although I possessed no more *potestas* than others who were my colleagues in the magistracies. \(^6\)

Octavian thus saw in *auctoritas* a safe way to define and legitimize his position of supremacy.

### 1.2 Augustus and *Auctoritas*

*Auctoritas* was not something that Octavian had always had in abundance, however. Indeed, Octavian had begun with very little of it. By A.D. 14, Augustus’ *auctoritas* was unparalleled. The reason for this dramatic increase was Augustus’ tireless pursuit throughout his political career of as much *auctoritas* as possible.

He harnessed the traditional sources of *auctoritas*. One such source was religion. Augustus held four major priesthoods, including the post of *pontifex maximus* from 12 B.C. onward. In this capacity, Augustus was the Roman people’s representative before the gods and it was his responsibility to maintain the gods’ favour. \(^7\) Another source was his service to the state.

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\(^6\) Augustus, *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*, 34.2. For an excellent discussion of the ways in which the *Res Gestae* seeks to justify Augustus’ supremacy, see Brian Bosworth. “Augustus, the *Res Gestae*, and Hellenistic Theories of Apotheosis,” in *The Journal of Roman Studies*, vol. 89, 1999. Passages quoted from ancient authors are taken from the best available Oxford, Teubner, or Loeb text. Translations are either the author’s or are drawn from the most recent Loeb edition. The names of the editions and editors chosen by the author for these purposes can be consulted in the bibliography under the heading “Ancient Sources.”

\(^7\) Grebe 2004, p. 42.
His military service, especially against Antony, demonstrated that Augustus was quite capable of ensuring the welfare of the state.\(^8\) He could thus be counted upon to lead the state effectively.\(^9\)

But Augustus did not seek and secure *auctoritas* solely by promoting himself as a hero of the Republic. The example of the ruler cult of the Hellenistic monarchs had introduced a new way to establish *auctoritas*: appeals to the supernatural. This had been largely unknown under the moderating influence of the Senate.\(^10\) The aim of establishing such a connection with the supernatural was to demonstrate that, through the favour of the gods or some supernatural force such as fate or destiny, the man in question (and only that man) was destined to rule.\(^11\) This potentially tremendous source of *auctoritas* was not something Octavian/Augustus ignored. Indeed, he pursued and cultivated this source throughout his career. An excellent example of Octavian’s pursuit of an association with the supernatural is his title of Augustus, granted by the Senate in 27 B.C. Cassius Dio explains that the title *augustus* had previously been associated with only the gods and sacred objects.\(^12\) A man called Augustus, therefore, was far more than simply human.

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\(^8\) Wallace-Hadrill 1993, pp. 9, 15.
\(^9\) The fact that he was also the tribune of the plebs enhanced the idea that he was the people’s champion and protector and thus someone they could count upon. Wallace-Hadrill Augustan Rome, pp. 44-45.
\(^12\) Cassius Dio. *Roman History*, 53.16.8. Ovid also notes that “sancta vocant augusta patres, augusta vocantur templum sacerdotum rite dictata manu” (“the Fathers call sacred things ‘augusta’, and temples ritually consecrated by the hands of priests are called ‘augusta’) [*Fasti* 1.609-610].
In appealing to this idea of special status, Augustus was following in the footsteps of many of the great men of the Late Republic. As in most other things, however, Augustus excelled his predecessors. He extended this ideological motif in a direction that has yet to be fully explored by scholars. This extension carried Augustus’ quest for *auctoritas* into a realm that has always captivated the human imagination and that was the focus of a number of deep-seated beliefs in Roman society: the night sky. The Romans believed that the heavens were the abode of the gods and that it was from there that the gods communicated their will and identified important individuals through signs (*omnia*) of various sorts.

In July of 44 B.C., a comet appeared during the games that Octavian was holding in honour of Julius Caesar. For some Romans, the comet known today from a verse of Horace’s *Odes* as the *sidus Iulium* was an omen sent by the gods to announce the deification of Caesar.\(^\text{13}\) This interpretation also made the comet a confirmation of the fact that Octavian was *divi Filius*, the son of a god. For other Romans, the *sidus* was an omen that signified the beginning of the last age of the world and a period of war, pestilence, and destruction. This was not something that Octavian would have wanted to promote and at least initially Octavian seems to have ignored this interpretation of the *sidus*. Later, however, as his ideological program grew and became more established, Octavian incorporated this interpretation also into his program of self-promotion, albeit in a very different form. In this reinterpretation, the *sidus* still symbolized the beginning of a new age, but this age was to be a golden age. That this portent had appeared at an event overseen by Octavian (the games of Caesar) seemed to many to indicate that it was Octavian/Augustus who was going to lead the Roman people into that golden age.

These traditional ways of interpreting and understanding the night sky were not the only ones available to a Roman in Octavian’s time. Indeed, beginning in at least the second century B.C. an increasingly large number of Romans had come to believe that astrologers, a group of men known variously as *astrologi, Chaldaei*, and *mathematici*, were the most reliable interpreters of the night sky and the objects that appeared in it. Their universe, much like the traditional Roman’s, was a universe of fate and destiny in which everything happened through the influence of the stars. One’s destiny was literally written in (and by) the stars and could, with the assistance of a qualified astrologer, be known. As a man who wanted to establish his special destiny, Octavian/Augustus found a very powerful ally in astrology and he maintained this alliance throughout his career. The symbol of his connection with the stars was a zodiacal symbol with which Augustus felt a connection: Capricorn. It served as a symbol of all of the great things that Augustus was destined to do.

The *sidus Iulium* and Capricorn gave Octavian therefore a powerful tool for the development of his *auctoritas*: easily reproducible symbols. These symbols directly associated and inextricably bound him up with very powerful and influential sets of beliefs about the stars that gave him a special air of destiny, and thus a tremendous degree of *auctoritas*. The goal of the present investigation will be to explore how Augustus systematically harnessed and promoted these beliefs and these two important symbols. We will see that he did so throughout his career on coins and gems, in literature, and on a monument in the Northern Campus Martius. His goal was to make it unmistakably clear that his *auctoritas* was supreme and that this therefore made him the obvious choice to lead the Roman world. He undoubtedly hoped that no one living in a society in which the stars had so much influence would ever question that again.
1.3 Literature Review

The connection we will seek to establish between the *sidus Iulium*, Capricorn, and Augustus’ efforts to establish his *auctoritas* has not hitherto been fully explored or established in scholarship. In spite of this deficiency, much excellent scholarship has engaged with each of the elements in isolation. It is important, therefore, that we briefly examine this scholarship and present the ways in which the work at hand fits within, and responds to, it.

1.3.1 The *Sidus Iulium*

In Chapters Two and Three, we will see that the deployment of the *sidus* in this symbolic role was something that began early in Octavian’s career and that lasted until at least the Secular Games of 17 B.C. and likely even later. It appeared on coins and architecture and in literature. A number of general studies have appeared that have attempted to detail and clarify Octavian/Augustus’ actions. Kenneth Scott focuses mainly upon the extant sources for the appearance of the *sidus*, examining first the literary and then the numismatic and archaeological evidence.14 Domenicucci and Williams also examine the sources but focus upon Octavian’s motives and the continued importance of the *sidus* as a symbol of Caesar’s divinity.15 The most important general study of the *sidus Iulium* is a monograph produced by Ramsey and Licht. It is the product of the combined effort of a philologist (Ramsey) and a physicist (Licht). They do not simply accept, as Scott does, the validity of the literary sources *prima facie*. Rather, they test them by incorporating for the first time the scientific evidence provided by astronomical data.

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found in Chinese records from the late-first century B.C. The result is a comprehensive and incisive study of the *sidus*.

Other scholars have explored specific elements of the appearance of the *sidus* or Octavian/Augustus’ use of it. One particularly tendentious issue that has exercised the minds of a number of scholars has been the timing of the *sidus*’ appearance. It is generally agreed that this was in July, 44 B.C., but there is not yet any consensus as to which festival Octavian was celebrating when it appeared. Some, including Lily Ross Taylor, Kenneth Scott, and Patrizio Domenicucci have suggested that it was during the *ludi Victoriae Caesaris* that the *sidus* appeared. Others, most notably Ramsey and Licht, argue that while the games celebrated many years later in late-July were in fact the *ludi Victoriae Caesaris*, there is a lack of evidence that the existing games, the *ludi Veneris Genetricis*, had been renamed in 44 B.C.

More recently, scholars have confronted the sources, something that earlier scholars like Scott had not done. One problem with the sources, argue Ramsey and Licht and Gurval, is that while we have a number of seemingly independent sources (Suetonius, Cassius Dio, Pliny the Elder, and Julius Obsequens) spread across a relatively extensive period of time, none of these sources is contemporary with the event. These scholars also argue that each source is in fact dependent upon a common contemporary source, Augustus’ own *Commentarii de sua vita*. This makes problematic the assumptions of earlier scholars that these sources are independent. Gurval goes farther than Ramsey and Licht when he asserts that Augustus’ account of the event was a conscious distortion of the event that incorporated and retrojected Augustan values and priorities.

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18 Ramsey and Licht 1997, p. 4-56.
into the past. In Augustus’ hands, Gurval argues, the event was transformed into a myth involving filial piety, the orderly transfer of power, and divine providence. The doubts raised by Ramsey and Licht and Gurval certainly pose a number of daunting problems for anyone seeking to obtain objective information about the appearance of the sidus. This, however, is not our goal. Rather, it is precisely in Augustus’ presentation of the sidus that our interests lie. If anything, the efforts of these scholars show us just how valuable the extant sources are for our purposes, even though they are problematic as objective narratives. They allow us to see the sidus Iulium precisely as Augustus wanted us to see it, coloured by all the ideological motifs that he felt were most important.

1.3.2 The Sidus Iulium as a Symbol of Caesar’s Astral Divinity

There were two ways in which the sidus Iulium was an important Augustan symbol. In Chapter Two, we will explore its use as a constant reminder of the fact that Julius Caesar had become a god and that Octavian was therefore specially connected with divinity. Although there was no consensus in 44 B.C. as to whether the comet was an omen sent by the gods confirming that Caesar had become a god, there was no doubt among those who believed in Caesar’s divinity. They saw in the sidus proof that Caesar had risen into the heavens by way of a process called catasterism. Catasterism had become a common theme in the ideological programs of the rulers of the Hellenistic East. Wallace-Hadrill, le Boeuffe, Williams, and Weinstock provide

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21 Gurval 1997, pp. 41-42.
important accounts of catasterism in this original Eastern context. Peter Green and Beard, North, and Price provide more general accounts of the religious and ideological foundations of catasterism and the idea of the deification of a human being.

There is general consensus that the idea of catasterism found substantial support in Rome among all classes. An important study of the impact of these ideas on the popular level that has yet to be superseded is that of Cumont. Taylor and Sauron discuss more generally the mystical elements of Roman beliefs concerning the stars. Concerning support for catasterism among the aristocracy, many scholars have recognized the importance of Cicero’s *De Re Publica*, specifically the dialogue between Scipio Aemilianus, Aemilius Paulus, and Scipio Africanus known commonly as the *Somnium Scipionis*. There, Cicero indicates that great men rise to the heavens as a result of their virtuous service to the state. An important study of this famous passage is that of Robert Gallagher, who attempts to set this one passage within the larger context of the *De Re Publica*. A number of scholars, including Cumont, Taylor, and Spencer Cole, have suggested that Cicero was influenced here by Euhemerism, the adherents of which believed that the gods had all originally been mortal and had only become divine as a result of their virtuous deeds. Taylor and Cole argue that there was a Roman intermediary who more directly

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influenced Cicero: Ennius, a man who translated the works of Euhemerus into Latin and who was himself, Cole argues, influenced by Euhemerus in his *Annales*.  

Regardless of Cicero’s role in the proliferation of the idea of catasterism in Roman political and social discourse, it is clear that it was a very popular idea especially among the general population. As we shall see, it was also an idea with which the *sidus Iulium* became inextricably bound. It was because of this connection that Octavian, from very early in his career, had the *sidus* portrayed on objects produced by him or under his authority. We will first consider the appearance of the *sidus* on coins and gems. Two indispensable studies are those of Scott, who provides a catalogue of all of the extant physical evidence, and Zanker, who focuses upon Augustus’ ability to use the power of images to spread his message in media accessible to all Romans.  

Scott’s inclusion of a relief from Carthage, which contains a figure Scott identifies as Caesar that once had a star affixed above his head, is now considered dubious at best. Faintich, Gurval, and Valverde discuss the timeframe within which coins depicting the *sidus Iulium* began to appear. Gurval suggests that the earliest of these appearances was ca. 39 B.C, a suggestion that extant numismatic evidence would seem to confirm. Valverde and Whittaker examine two of the earliest known examples, Valverde the *Divos Iulius* series produced in Spain in 37 B.C., and Whittaker a series of *aurei* and *denarii* dating to 36 B.C. Important collections of these series

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32 Gurval 1997, p. 45.
as well as all of the other series containing depictions of the *sidus Iulium* can be found in Crawford for the Late Republic and Mattingly and Sydenham for the reign of Augustus.\textsuperscript{33}

The only major area of disagreement concerning the depiction of the *sidus Iulium* on coins is whether the object depicted is a comet, as would be expected, or a star. Ramsey and Licht, Gurval, Weinstock, and Williams favour the latter, arguing both from the fact that the *sidus* does not resemble the conventional appearance of comets and that a star would be a much more conventional and familiar symbol of apotheosis. Williams and Weinstock both suggest that, for many Romans, the *sidus* would also have been a reminder of Julius Caesar’s own celestial symbol, the star of Venus, suggesting her continuing favour for the Julian family.\textsuperscript{34} It is entirely possible, although impossible to confirm, that this connection with Venus was something present in the minds of the Romans who saw the *sidus* in July of 44 B.C. and fostered by Octavian/Augustus in his ideological program. It would have added yet another connection between the *princeps*, Caesar, and the celestial abode of the gods.

Not surprisingly, Octavian/Augustus’ efforts were not confined to physical media. Indeed, the use of the *sidus* as a symbol of the divinity of Caesar in particular, and astral divinity in general, is a common theme in the works of the Augustan poets. Many scholars have discussed the popularity of this motif in the Augustan period and have shown the influence exercised upon these poets by the *Katasterismoi* of the Hellenistic poet Eratosthenes. The relationship between these poets and the message they were disseminating and the question as to whether the products of their efforts constituted propaganda are issues that remain unresolved. Barchiesi, Wallace-


\textsuperscript{34} Williams 2003, pp. 5-6. Weinstock 1971, pp. 376-377.
Hadrill, Tarrant, Feeney, and Powell, in particular, have examined these questions. Tarrant focuses upon the relationship between Maecenas and his clients and suggests that the poets were not, by any means, forced to write anything by Maecenas or Augustus. Barchiesi and Wallace-Hadrill agree in substance that the Augustan poets were expressing ideas that they either believed themselves or that were at least current and well known in their society. Wallace-Hadrill retains the term propaganda since the ultimate source of the message these authors were disseminating was Augustus but notes that it was secondary propaganda. Barchiesi substitutes the term ‘Augustan cultural discourse’ for propaganda, which he suggests has anachronistic ideological baggage. Powell argues that the Augustan poets were simply expressing genuinely-felt gratitude for the services Augustus had provided to the Roman state.

A number of scholars have examined the theme of catasterism, and the deployment of the sidus Iulium as a symbol of it, in individual Augustan authors. The only major study of this motif in Horace is that of Dicks. More scholars have identified and examined this motif in Virgil’s poetry. Important general studies can be found in Domicucci, Williams, and Grebe, which list the generally accepted appearances of the sidus in the Eclogues, Georgics, and Aeneid. Hall, Wagenvoort, and DeWitt discuss other possible but not widely accepted appearances of the

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sidus. Hall focuses upon *Aeneid II*, suggesting that the flames above Ascanius’ head, and the appearance of a comet in response to Anchises’ request for a sign to confirm that omen, are meant to recall the events of July, 44 B.C. Wagenvoort and DeWitt focus upon *Aeneid V*, specifically the incident in which the arrow of Acestes catches fire during the funeral games of Anchises and argue that this is meant to be a mythological precursor of the funeral games of Julius Caesar. The idea that the *Aeneid* was meant to be a mythological justification of the power of the Julian family has gained general acceptance. Hardie, Grebe, and Grimal have argued that, considering this context, it would be natural for the *sidus* to appear on a number of occasions in the *Aeneid*, especially in connection with figures whose association with Augustus is manifest.

Considerable interest in the motif of catasterism in the works of Virgil’s poetic successor, Ovid, has been generated by the fact that he chose to end his epic tome, the *Metamorphoses*, with a vivid account of the catasterism of Julius Caesar. Elaine Fantham has studied Ovid’s treatment of Caesar’s catasterism and compared it with the catasterisms of Aeneas and Romulus. Tamsyn Barton has noted the great number of stories in the *Metamorphoses* and *Fasti* that end in the catasterism of great men. Newlands and Gee have investigated Ovid’s propensity for using the

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stars, especially in the *Fasti*, and have suggested that his motivations were both literary (to associate him with Eratosthenes and Aratus) and political.\(^{43}\)

It will become clear as we progress through Chapter Two that the *sidus Iulium* was an important symbol of Caesar’s apotheosis that Octavian/Augustus sought to disseminate using all the media available to him. It is generally accepted that this is something he sought to do early in his career but there is disagreement as to whether he continued to emphasize this connection after he became Augustus. Some scholars, most notably Edwin Ramage and to a lesser degree Paul Zanker, have suggested that Augustus attempted to downplay his association with Caesar.\(^{44}\) Others, especially Peter White, have rejected this conceptualization of Augustus’ reign, suggesting that Julius Caesar’s legacy and everything associated with it, including the *sidus Iulium*, were a constant presence in Augustan Rome.\(^{45}\) In light of the numismatic, archaeological, and literary evidence that we will consider, it will become clear that the bi-partite view of Augustus’ reign espoused by scholars such as Ramage is simplistic. The message of Caesar’s divinity was indeed propounded after 27 B.C. It was simply done in a way that was more subtle. The *sidus Iulium* continued to symbolize Caesar’s divinity, but it also gained a new meaning, one that was much more consonant with Augustus’ self-portrayal as the saviour of the Republic.

1.3.3 *The Sidus Iulium* as the Harbinger of an Augustan Golden Age

The source of this new meaning of the *sidus Iulium* was popular belief once again. From the very beginning, there had been those who had chosen to believe that the *sidus* was a portent not of Caesar’s apotheosis but rather of the end of the ninth *saeculum* (age) in which they were

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living and the beginning of the tenth, and last, saeculum. Some important general discussions of the Romans’ attitude toward celestial portents include Beard, North, and Price, le Boeuffle, and Green.  

This was a particularly troubling omen because, according to this Etruscan-inspired system of measuring time, it was in the tenth saeculum that the world would end. Hall provides an important study of the Etruscan traditions concerning the saeculum. He also discusses the usual sorts of portents that indicated when a saeculum ended, the length of a saeculum, and the impact these Etruscan beliefs had upon the Romans. Ramsey and Licht discuss the role of the haruspex Vulcanius in this particular interpretation of the sidus, a man who is reported by Cassius Dio to have presented his analysis publicly. Barton and Bouché-Leclercq discuss the possibility that the sidus had multiple interpretations as a result of the many schools of divination in Rome in 44 B.C.  

In time, however, this interpretation of the sidus’ meaning changed. Inspired by the Greek doctrine of palingenesis, the tenth saeculum became a golden age whose existence was owed entirely to Augustus. The role of Greek thought has been discussed by Brenk, Ramsey and Licht, and Galinsky. Taylor, arguing on the basis of her interpretation of Varro’s De Gente Populi Romani, has suggested that palingenesis was a particularly influential idea at that time.

47 Hall 1986.  
Ramsey and Licht have also suggested the possibility that this interpretation was influenced by a prophecy of the Cumaean Sibyl.  

This new interpretation made the *sidus* an even more attractive and irresistible symbol for someone who was attempting to raise his *auctoritas* to unmatchable heights. This explains why we see the *sidus* used clearly as a symbol of the impending golden age on coins and in Augustan literature. The theme of a golden age in literature, as Brenk notes, was as old as the *Works and Days* of Hesiod. Poetry was, therefore, a suitable medium for disseminating the *sidus* and its message of the golden age. The most explicit example of this motif in Augustan literature is Virgil’s *Fourth Eclogue*. Wagenvoort and Galinsky insist that we are meant to identify the *puer* in this poem with Octavian. This suggestion has not met with universal acceptance, especially given the fact that in 40 B.C., the time at which the poem was at the very least originally conceived, Octavian was by no means the clear choice to lead Rome. Nevertheless, Octavian was the younger of the two rivals and a reference to Octavian as *puer* would not have been unusual for the Romans, for whom a *puer* could be as old as eighteen years of age (Octavian’s age in 44 B.C. when the *sidus* appeared). It is, of course, possible that the reference is to the child expected to result from the marriage between Antony and Octavia arranged by Antony and Octavian in 40 B.C. The difficulty in definitively interpreting the *Fourth Eclogue* has arisen from the fact that the poem was composed as a prophecy. Potter, Brenk, and Ramsey and Licht have attempted to decipher Virgil’s prophetic persona and to identify some of the influences upon it. Brenk has noted that this persona had a great many components. Potter provides an important discussion of the Sibylline books, the one generally accepted source for, and influence upon, Virgil’s poem.

53 Brenk 1980.
The sidus itself appears as the omen of this golden age in the Ninth Eclogue, a connection that Williams has noted.56

The most important way in which Augustus promoted the idea that he was responsible for the inauguration of a golden age was his celebration of the ludi Saeculares, the festival that marked its beginning. Hall, Davis, Turcan, Severy, Galinsky, and Beard and North have all discussed the traditional reasons the Romans held these games and have noted that Augustus’ reasons were only superficially traditional.57 The inscriptions from the Campus Martius which detail the way in which Augustus carried out these games are published by Pighi (in Latin) and in Cooley (in English).58 Filippo Coarelli has attempted to identity a number of sites used during the celebration of the ludi saeculares.59 Perhaps as a sign of how important these games were to Augustus, the princeps and the quindecimviri sacris faciundis, the priestly college in charge of the performance of the games of which Augustus was a member, commissioned the poet Horace to compose a hymn, the Carmen Saeculare. It was to be performed before the temples of Apollo Palatinus and Jupiter Optimus Maximus. Davis and Grimal have discussed the clear ideological objectives that Horace’s poem was designed to achieve and the way it, much like the games themselves, cloaks new ideas in the language of tradition.60 Davis goes further and says that this subsumption of tradition was intentional.

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56 Williams 2003.
The advent of the golden age was something the *sidus* had predicted twenty-seven years previously and this explains why the *sidus* appears on coins commemorating these games. Scott, Wagenvoort, Hall, Boyce, and Galinsky have offered important discussions and interpretations of this coinage and have suggested that the appearance of the *sidus* on these coins was a deliberate choice.  

1.3.4 Augustus and Capricorn

Once we have fully examined Augustus’ use of the *sidus Iulium*, we will then turn in Chapter Four to his use of another *sidus*, this time the constellation Capricorn. Our first goal will be to achieve a clear picture of the status and popularity of astrology in the Roman world before and during Augustus’ lifetime among both the upper and lower classes. Important general introductions to ancient astrology, within and without the Roman world, are Bouché-Leclercq, Barton, Whitfield, Beck, le Boeuffe, Tester, and Bakhouche. Each scholar traces the history of astrology from Babylonia to Greece and then to Rome. We will see that astrology had established a significant influence in Rome among all classes by the mid- and late-first century B.C. Luck, Bakhouche, Stierlin, Sauron, Cramer, Cumont, Nilsson, and Abry have discussed some of the reasons why astrology became so influential in the Roman world. They suggest that the most

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important reason was that the divinity and power of the stars was a deep-seated Roman belief. A popular theory explaining the spread of an acceptance of astrology among the upper classes has been the influence of the Greek Stoic philosopher Posidonius. Bouché-Leclercq, Cramer, Barton, and Long discuss his role. Bouché-Leclercq and Cramer identify him as the principal cause; Barton and Long are more skeptical, suggesting that we do not know enough about Posidonius’ activities and beliefs to reach a firm conclusion. At the very least, it is clear that his Stoic teachings popularized the idea of the importance of fate. This was an idea that was central to astrology. Whatever the cause, astrology had become popular and fashionable among the aristocracy by Augustus’ time. Habinek, le Boeuffe, Abry, Dicks, Cramer, and Barton find evidence for this in the careers of P. Nigidius Figulus and Varro and in the numerous references to astrology in the writings of Virgil, Horace, Propertius, Ovid, Manilius, and Germanicus Caesar.

Not nearly as much is known about the degree of support astrology found among Rome’s lower classes before and during Augustus’ time. This is a reflection of the fact that our sources were largely written by, and for, the upper classes. Nevertheless, the edicts that were issued by the Roman state as early as the second century B.C. in an attempt to control the activities of astrologers suggest that this support was significant. Barton, Cramer, Whitfield, Stierlin, and Beard, North, and Price have discussed the reactions of, and the regulations issued by, the state. Le Boeuffe, Bouché-Leclercq, and Barton have discussed the other sources we have, which

include passages from Cato the Elder, Ennius, and Plautus.\textsuperscript{67} Evidence from later sources such as Petronius, Apuleius, Pliny the Elder, and Juvenal suggest that popular interest in astrology only increased during the course of the first century A.D.

An excellent example of a contemporary debate about the merits of astrology is Cicero’s \textit{De Divinatione}, which discusses in dialectical fashion the merits and faults of astrology. Attempts to infer Cicero’s own opinion from this dialogue have not arrived at a general consensus. Many scholars, such as Beard and Rasmussen, have emphasized that the character Marcus in the dialogue, who rejects astrology, does not necessarily reflect Cicero’s views.\textsuperscript{68} Rasmussen sees the \textit{De Divinatione} as a philosophical exercise and argues that it does not conflict therefore with the seemingly opposite views that Cicero expresses elsewhere.

Astrology, therefore, was a popular doctrine in the first century B.C. But it could also be a powerful political tool because of its language of fate and destiny. This was a connection that Augustus established. In doing so, he was following a number of Greek and Roman precedents. One important Eastern precedent was Antiochus I of Commagene. His \textit{hierothesion}, excavated between 1953 and 1973 by a team led by Theresa Goell, is now generally accepted to be a monument whose ideological message was delivered, at least in part, by astrology.\textsuperscript{69} A pair of reliefs that depict Leo, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, and the Moon have been interpreted by Otto Neugebauer as horoscopes.\textsuperscript{70} Neugebauer has suggested that they were meant to commemorate Antiochus’ coronation. This interpretation is generally accepted in scholarship. One exception is

\textsuperscript{70} Sanders 1996.
Tuman who rejects this idea and suggests that it depicts a rare alignment of the sun, Mercury, Venus, Mars, and Jupiter. Even this divergent interpretation suggests that the reliefs depict an event of astrological importance.71

Augustus also had Roman precedents. Tamsyn Barton has investigated the rise of importance of astrology in Roman politics in the Late Republic and has suggested that this rise was due largely to the fact that the leading men of the Late Republic were operating outside of the traditional power structure of the state and that they therefore looked to non-traditional methods of divination for validation and self-promotion.72 Astrology was a natural choice. It was, as Barton, Bakhouche, Kostopoulos, Domenicucci, le Boeuffe, and Grzybek have argued, able to give these men an air of destiny.73 Cramer has provided a thorough summary of all of the known relationships established by these great men with astrology.74

We will then turn to the constellation Capricorn itself. Most scholarly work on this subject has focused on trying to determine why Augustus chose this sign. Suetonius suggests that Augustus chose Capricorn because it was the sign “quo natus est.”75 Modern interpreters who translate Suetonius’ phrase as “under which he was born” consider this to be untrue. Augustus was born on September 22nd/23rd, meaning that he was born under the sign Libra. Abry, Barton, Domenicucci, Bakhouche, and Brugnoli provide good discussions of the history of this problem,

to which scholars have proposed a number of solutions.\textsuperscript{76} There are two solutions that have enjoyed particular popularity. One holds that Capricorn was Augustus’ moon sign at the time of his birth. Abry, who reconstructed Augustus’ horoscope, has shown that the moon was indeed in Capricorn on Augustus’ birthday.\textsuperscript{77} The other holds that Capricorn was the sign under which Augustus was conceived. There is not at present a general consensus, nor does it seem, barring the discovery of new evidence, that there will be one. Tamsyn Barton has suggested that the answer to this question is not essential to our understanding of Augustus’ use of Capricorn.\textsuperscript{78} She argues that there were within astrological doctrine many ways in which Capricorn was Augustus’ birth sign, most of which were not mutually exclusive. The insistence upon one’s birth sign being one’s sun sign is, she emphasizes, a modern belief.

Libra was also Augustus’ birth sign and so there must have been something that led Augustus to choose Capricorn instead of Libra. Abry, Domenicucci, Barton, and Rehak have summarized the many possible reasons Augustus had for preferring Capricorn.\textsuperscript{79} Barton and Abry note that Capricorn was associated with the West and that it would have been a potent symbol during Octavian’s struggle with Antony, a time when Octavian controlled the western half of the empire. This was when Capricorn first appeared on coinage issued by Octavian.\textsuperscript{80} A particularly appealing interpretation offered by Barton, Rehak, and Abry holds that Capricorn was the sign under which the Winter Solstice occurred. This is the point in the year when the days begin to

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{74} Cramer 1954.
  \item \textsuperscript{75} Suetonius. \textit{Life of the Deified Augustus}, 94.12.
  \item \textsuperscript{78} Abry 1989.
  \item \textsuperscript{79} Barton 1995.
\end{itemize}
grow longer again.\textsuperscript{81} The Romans believed that this was when the sun and the world were reborn. This would have been something that Augustus, who had ended Rome’s own dark days and begun a new era of peace and prosperity, would have wanted to have been associated with and through Capricorn, he could be. Barton and Abry caution us, however, about settling upon one particular aspect of Capricorn’s ‘meaning’ that would have led Augustus to choose it. They emphasize the elasticity and polyvalency of astrological symbols and argue that Capricorn could have carried all of these as well as other positive meanings.

We will then consider the ways in which Capricorn and its messages were disseminated. The most common method was on coins. Barton, Faintich, Whitfield, Brugnoli, Kostopoulos, and Morawiecki have discussed the many coin issues upon which Capricorn appears.\textsuperscript{82} We also possess a number of gems, generally agreed to have been for private use, that depict Augustus in association with Capricorn. Wallace-Hadrill, Gee, and Barton discuss the most important of these, the so-called \textit{Gemma Augustea}.\textsuperscript{83} It depicts Augustus with the image of Capricorn above his head and with members of the Julio-Claudian family.

Capricorn also appears in Augustan literature. The two most important examples of this are the \textit{Astronomica} of Manilius and the \textit{Aratea} commonly ascribed to Germanicus Caesar, the great-nephew of Augustus and nephew of Tiberius. Goold’s introduction to his Loeb edition of the \textit{Astronomica} provides a good summary of the current state of Manilian scholarship. He, along with Housman, Cramer, Abry, and Flores, discuss the most persistent problem in this field: the

dating of the *Astronomica*. The most commonly held opinion is that part of the *Astronomica* was written during the last years of Augustus’ reign and that the rest was written during the early years of the reign of Tiberius. Abry discusses the information the *Astronomica* provides us about the context within which it was written, especially about the popularity of astrology among the elite. An excellent discussion of this intellectual context is provided by Rawson. Other important Manilian scholars include Habinek, Volk, Bajoni, and Neuburg. Scholarship concerning the *Aratea* is far less abundant. Barton has discussed the ways in which the *Aratea*, just like the *Astronomica*, directly connects Augustus with Capricorn.

Augustus explicitly established his connection with astrology late in his reign when he published his horoscope. Barton, Cramer, Domenicucci, Beck, and Potter discuss this publication and the problems relating to dating it that have arisen, owing to the divergent testimonies of Suetonius and Cassius Dio. Suetonius suggests that this event occurred early in Octavian’s political career. Dio mentions it in connection with the end of Augustus’ reign. Scholarly consensus favours Dio’s testimony. It certainly seems more likely that Augustus would have taken this fairly radical step only late in his reign when rumours of his impending death abounded. The publication was perhaps meant, therefore, to quash these rumours.

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87 Barton 1995.

1.3.5 Augustus and the *Horologium Augusti*

Our final task will be to consider whether Augustus chose to commemorate his association with stars with a monument in the Campus Martius that the German archaeologist Edmund Buchner called the *horologium Augusti*. Buchner argued that the *horologium* was both a monumental sundial and part of a complex that included the *Ara Pacis Augustae*. Buchner went to great lengths in his article “Solarium Augusti und Ara Pacis” to demonstrate and prove that there were intricate mathematical connections between the two monuments. He subsequently obtained authorization to carry out excavations in the heart of Rome’s Campo Marzio and eventually his efforts were successful. He found parts of the travertine pavement of the *horologium*, including the central meridian line. He has documented his efforts in his article, “Horologium Solarium Augusti: Bericht über die Ausgrabungen.” While the immediate response to Buchner’s theories was one of enthusiasm, there were those who saw flaws in Buchner’s work. The first major critic was Rodríguez-Almeida. He had analysed the topography of the Campus Martius at the location identified by Buchner and found that it would have been impossible for there to have been a fully-laid out sundial of monumental scale as Buchner had suggested. He suggested the possibility that it had been a half-sundial, from the meridian line east. The next critic was the physicist Michael Schütz. His objection was to Buchner’s mathematical calculations, which Schütz had discovered were either erroneous or based upon

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figures of Buchner’s choosing. Schütz suggested that the supposedly precise mathematical relationship between the two monuments was, therefore, just as arbitrary and erroneous.  

Despite these two seemingly devastating critiques, support for and citation of Buchner’s interpretation of the monument did not wane. Maes and Barton provide important discussions of this problem. An example of a stubborn adherent to Buchner’s theories is Beck. Heslin has recently tried to rectify this problem by combining the arguments of Rodríguez-Almeida and Schütz and by presenting another interpretation of the monument. Heslin argues that the monument was instead a meridian line instrument, another device known in the Ancient World. Such devices were designed, in part, to help calibrate calendars. Bowersock has suggested that this was the main reason Augustus, in his role as pontifex maximus and thus guardian of the official calendar, had the horologium built. It will become clear during the course of our discussion that Buchner’s theories are not tenable given the present state of the evidence.

We will then discuss other interpretations of the monument that have been offered. Useful summaries of these interpretations have been provided by Rehak, Coarelli, and Barton. The most attractive of these theories is one that closely connects this monument with Capricorn. Indeed, some scholars, especially Barton, Wallace-Hadrill, and Bakhouche, have suggested that the horologium’s pavement and meridian line were laid out in such a way that Augustus’ special

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zodiacal sign was given prominence because the pavement ended precisely at the point of Capricorn and did not continue further.\textsuperscript{98} This, they argue, would have served as a visual connection between the Winter Solstice and Capricorn and have clearly demonstrated that it was within Augustus’ sign that the Sun and the world were reborn each year. It is certainly not impossible that Augustus chose to commemorate this connection with Capricorn and the stars in monumental form in the Campus Martius. There was no better place in Rome to promote one’s claims to glory and special status. Boyle, Coarelli, Elsner, Wallace-Hadrill, Nicolet, and Rehak have discussed the nature, function, and ideological aims of the monumental building projects that were built in the Campus Martius by Rome’s great men.\textsuperscript{99}

Now that we have examined the ground that has been covered by previous scholars, we are in a better position to explore just how closely Augustus associated himself with the stars, and the popular beliefs about them, in order to increase his \textit{auctoritas}.
Chapter 2

The Sidus Iulium and Divus Iulius

At the dawn of his political career, the only source of auctoritas the young Octavian had was his newly acquired name, Gaius Julius Caesar. In the hope of perpetuating his connection with the deceased dictator, Octavian made arrangements in July 44 B.C. to celebrate the games of Venus Genetrix, an event Caesar himself had inaugurated. Little did Octavian know that during the course of these games an object would appear in the sky that would help to elevate his scant auctoritas to levels never before enjoyed by any Roman.

From the very beginning this object, the sidus Iulium, was interpreted within the framework of Roman beliefs concerning those things that appear in the sky, a system that in Late Republican Rome was by no means uniform. This meant that the sidus could have many interpretations. Two interpretations, however, were of especial popularity and importance. In this chapter, we will explore the first of these interpretations, that the sidus was a sign sent by the gods to confirm the apotheosis and divinity of Julius Caesar. One reason why the sidus was interpreted in this way was that Caesar himself had promoted the idea of his divinity. His image had been placed among those of the gods in religious processions; a pediment had been placed upon his home, making it a sort of temple; and a flamen (a priest), Mark Antony, had been assigned to him. For many Romans, the sidus was a confirmation sent by the gods of the validity of Caesar’s assertion of divinity. The other probable reason why the sidus was interpreted in this way is the fact that catasterism (celestial apotheosis) was an idea that was popular in Rome at that time. An exploration of this mode of thought and belief will form an important part of this

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chapter. We will examine the history of catasterism both in terms of its Eastern antecedents and its arrival and emergence in the Roman world. We will then be in a much better position to show how these ideas played a definitive role in the interpretation of the *sidus Iulium*.

We will then see that this interpretation made the *sidus* a potent symbol of Caesar’s divinity and of the fact that Octavian was the son of a god. This close association with divinity gave Octavian a special status and a tremendous degree of *auctoritas*. As Peter Green has noted, “as a god’s son, adopted or not, [Octavian] would be in an unassailable position.” As a symbol, the *sidus* had the great advantage of being an easily reproducible image that Octavian could, and did, use to recall his association with Caesar and thus his own unique status. In spite of what some scholars have argued, this connection with *Divus Iulius* was something that Octavian/Augustus promoted not only during his “early period”, from 44–31 B.C., but indeed throughout his whole political career. Throughout that time, the *sidus Iulium* remained the symbol of Caesar’s divinity and Octavian/Augustus’ special status in material culture, especially coins, and in literature. It was indeed due in large part to the careful dissemination of this powerful symbol that Augustus achieved a degree of *auctoritas* far beyond what he ever could have imagined when the fiery object first appeared in the night sky over Rome.

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4 The question of the role and importance of Julius Caesar in Augustan Rome has been an issue of long-standing contention in scholarship. Scholars generally take up one of two positions. Some, most notably Edwin S. Ramage, have argued that the memory of Caesar was something from which Octavian distanced himself as much as possible after his ‘transformation’ to Augustus in 27 B.C. The problems with this view have been effectively discussed by Peter White. Firstly, it creates a strict and artificial dichotomy in Augustus’ reign, hinging on 27 B.C., in which there is little continuity in ideas from the earlier to the later period. Secondly, it proffers an interpretation of the Augustan period and Augustan political ideology that negates all associations with the supernatural and the divine. This is an interpretation that is as foreign to the realities of Augustus’ reign, as we shall see, as it almost certainly would have been to the Romans and to Augustus. They placed a great deal of credence in the divine and supernatural. The material and literary evidence simply does not substantiate the claims of Ramage and others. See Edwin S. Ramage. “Augustus’
2.1 The Ludi Veneris Genetricis and the Appearance of the Sidus Iulium

Octavian’s main priority after his return to Rome from Apollonia and his appearance before the praefectus urbi, Gaius Antonius, to accept the terms of Caesar’s will was to establish his political legitimacy.\(^5\) His earliest efforts did not succeed. At the games of Ceres at the end of May and beginning of June in 44 B.C., Octavian tried to have Caesar’s golden seat and diadem put on display but was rejected. Octavian was not yet in a position to force the issue.\(^6\) One month later one of Caesar’s murderers, Marcus Junius Brutus, held the ludi Apollinares (annual games in honour of Apollo) at lavish expense. Brutus’ goal was to generate popular support for his faction and their cause of libertas.\(^7\) This bold and provocative action likely motivated Octavian to fund personally the celebration of his own games. He chose to sponsor the games in honour of Venus Genetrix, a deity whom Caesar had transformed into the tutelary goddess of the gens Iulia.\(^8\)

Caesar had instituted the games of Venus Genetrix in 46 B.C. to promote and celebrate this connection as well as to celebrate the dedication of his patroness’ temple in his Forum Iulium.\(^9\) The games of 46 B.C. were held in September but by 44 B.C. at the absolute latest, when they fell under Octavian’s control, they were held from July 20\(^{th}\) until July 30\(^{th}\).\(^10\) It was at some


\(^{7}\) Ramsey and Licht 1997, p. 55.

\(^{8}\) The games were held in the month of Quintilis, which had only recently been renamed Iulius, making the games event more of a political statement. Ramsey and Licht 1997, p. 55. Weinstock 1971, p. 368. Taylor 1931, p. 90.


point during the early days of this festival that the *sidus Iulium* appeared. There are a number of sources that describe this occurrence and the reaction of the people of Rome. Before we continue, we must consider and evaluate these sources.

2.1.1 Evaluating the Ancient Sources

Four principal sources describe the appearance of the *sidus*. The earliest and most important is the testimony preserved in Book Two of Pliny the Elder’s *Natural History*. Its particular importance arises from the fact that Pliny quotes from what is generally believed to be Augustus’ autobiography, the *Commentarii de Sua Vita* written ca. 26/25 B.C.:

Ipsis ludorum meorum diebus sidus crinitum per septem dies in regione caeli sub septentrionibus est conspectum. id oriebatur circa undecimam horam diei clarumque et omnibus e terris conspicuum fuit. eo sidere significari vulgus credit Caesaris animam inter deorum inmortalium numina receptam, quo nomine id insigne simulacro capitis eius, quod mox in foro consecravimus, adiectum est.

During the days of my [Augustus’] games, a comet [*sidus crinitum*] was visible for seven days in the northern part of the sky. It was rising about an hour before sunset and was a bright star, visible from all lands. The common people believed that this star signified that the soul of Caesar had been received among the spirits of the immortal gods, and on account of this, the emblem of a star was added to the bust of Caesar that we [Augustus] shortly afterwards dedicated in the Forum.11

Augustus’ account provides a number of important details, including the time and point in the sky at which the *sidus* appeared and the reaction of the *vulgus* to its appearance. Of particular importance is Augustus’ assertion that the common people’s identification of the *sidus* with the apotheosis of Caesar was a spontaneous act. Augustus then portrays his placement of a star upon Caesar’s statue as a reaction to the people’s interpretation.

11 Pliny, *Natural History*, 2.94. For the dating of the *Commentarii*, see Ramsey and Licht 1997, p. 63.
The account presented by Cassius Dio supports the idea of a spontaneous identification among the common people of the *sidus* with the deified Caesar:

επεί μέντοι ἄστρον τι παρὰ πάσας τὰς ἡμέρας ἐκεῖνας ἐκ τῆς ἀρκτοῦ προς ἐσπέραν ἐξεφάνη, καὶ αὐτὸ κομήτην τῷ τινῷ καλοῦντω καὶ προσημαίνειν οἷα που ἐίωθε λεγόντων οἱ πολλοί τούτῳ μὲν οὐκ ἐπίστευον, τῷ δὲ δὴ Καῖσαρι αὐτὸ ὤς καὶ ἀπηθανασμένῳ καὶ εἰς τὸν τῶν ἄστρων ἀριθμὸν ἐγκατειλεγμένῳ ἀνετίθεσαν, θαραήσας ('Οκταυιοῖς) χαλκοῦν αὐτὸν ἐς τὸ Ἀφροδίσιον, ἀστέρα ὑπὲρ τῆς κεφαλῆς ἔχοντα, ἐστησέν.

However, when a certain star appeared throughout all those days in the north, toward evening, and although some called it a comet and said that it portended the usual things, the multitude did not believe this, but ascribed it to Julius Caesar, supposing him to have been made immortal and enrolled among the number of the stars. Octavian gained confidence and set up in the temple of Venus a bronze statue of Caesar, having a star above its head.\(^\text{12}\)

Dio’s testimony offers much of the same information as Augustus presents about the *sidus’* appearance. Scholar Robert Gurval has argued on the basis of this similarity that the accounts of the event produced by later historians like Dio were in fact only summaries of Augustus’ account, thus eliminating their value as independent testimonia.\(^\text{13}\) As we consider these later sources and their subtle but clear differences, however, we will see that Gurval is not correct.

It must be conceded that Dio’s account is similar in most of its details to Augustus’ narrative, particularly in terms of the details of the *sidus’* appearance in the sky, but an ancient investigator of such an extraordinary event would naturally have been drawn to a first-hand account to obtain this sort of information. Dio’s narrative also includes information, however, that Augustus’ account does not provide, information that Augustus would have wanted to downplay


or to omit from his own interpretation of the event. Firstly, Dio notes that there was a second interpretation of the *sidus* that had nothing to do with Caesar. Secondly, Dio suggests that the identification of the *sidus* with Caesar by the common people caused the eighteen-year-old Octavian, a political novice, to gain confidence. This suggests that confidence was something Octavian had not had beforehand, a fact to which Augustus in later years likely would not have admitted. Dio perhaps gleaned this information from another source.

The two other accounts affected by Gurval’s argument are found in Suetonius’ *Life of the Deified Julius* and Julius Obsequens’ *Book of Prodigies*. Suetonius describes the event as follows:

…in deorum numerum relatus est, non ore modo decernentium, sed et persuasione uolgi, siquidem ludis, quos primo[s] consecrato[s] ei heres Augustus edebat, stella crinita per septem continuos dies fulsit exoriens circa undecimam horam, creditu[m]que est animam esse Caesaris in caelum recepti; et hac de causa simulacro eius in vertice additur stella.

… [Caesar] was assigned to the company of the gods not only by the text of a decree but also by the conviction of the common people. For at the games that Caesar’s heir established in his honour and celebrated for the first time, a *stella crinita* shone for seven days in a row, rising at about the eleventh hour, and it was believed that it was the soul of Caesar, who had been taken up into heaven. For this reason, a star was added to his statue, above his head.\footnote{Suetonius. *Life of the Deified Julius* in Suetonius, 88.}

There are indeed many elements of Suetonius’ account that suggest that he was working in part from Augustus’ account. The first sign that Suetonius had other sources at his disposal, however, is a minor difference in terminology: Suetonius calls the *sidus* a *stella crinita* where Augustus calls it a *sidus crinitum*. The second sign is that Suetonius notes that Augustus himself had established the games he was celebrating in Caesar’s honour.\footnote{Compare this with the modern scholarly debate concerning the games of July, 44 B.C. discussed in Chapter One.} Augustus does not mention this
and thus Suetonius learned this information from another source. The third sign also involves information that Suetonius includes but Augustus does not. Suetonius indicates that Caesar’s deification was due only in part to the will of the common people of Rome, in addition to the text of more official documents, some of which were written when Julius Caesar was still alive. Whether because the issue of Caesar’s having been a living god was still an uncomfortable subject or because the idea of legislating divinity took the elements of divine and popular consent away from Caesar’s apotheosis, Augustus omits mention of any such decrees. These differences, though subtle, seem to suggest that Suetonius had more than one source at his disposal pertaining to the appearance of the sidus.

The account provided by Julius Obsequens (ca. A.D. 350) presents largely the same historiographical situation. It bears some similarity to Augustus’ account but also bears a number of differences:

Ludis Veneris Genetricis, quos pro collegio fecit, stella hora undecima crinita sub septentrionis sidere exorta convertit omnium oculos. Quod sidus quia ludis Veneris apparuit, divo Julio insigne capitis consecrari placuit.

At the games in honour of Venus Genetrix, which [Octavian] gave on behalf of the collegium, a stella crinita rose in the north at the eleventh hour and caught the eye of everyone. The decision was made to dedicate this star to the deified Julius as an adornment of his head.\textsuperscript{16}

Obsequens’ inclusion of the term \textit{stella crinita} suggests that he was working from the same additional source Suetonius had used. Furthermore, Obsequens notes that Octavian was celebrating the games “on behalf of the collegium.”\textsuperscript{17} Augustus describes the games as an act of filial piety that he was performing on his own. Obsequens portrays the event in a way that much

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{16} Julius Obsequens. \textit{Liber de prodigiis}, 68. \\
\textsuperscript{17} Julius Obsequens. \textit{Liber de prodigiis}, 68. \\
\end{footnotesize}
more closely reflects the reality of 44 B.C. when Octavian was only eighteen and not in a position to act with such autonomy, a fact that Augustus quite naturally omits. Obsequens almost certainly gleaned this information, therefore, from another source.

The commentary on Virgil’s *Ninth Eclogue* of Servius (fl. ca. A.D. 300) may very well preserve part of one of these alternate contemporary accounts of the event. There he provides a brief summary of the information we have already encountered in the passages from Pliny the Elder/Augustus, Dio, Suetonius, and Julius Obsequens but Servius cites a man named Baebius Macer as an authority, a man who is generally considered by scholars to have been a first-hand witness of the games of 44 B.C. Servius describes Octavian/Augustus’ games as follows:

... cum Augustus Caesar ludos funebres patri celebraret, die medio stella apparuit. ille eam esse confirmavit parentis sui.... Baebius Macer circa horam octavam stellam amplissimam... ortam dicit. quam quidam ad inlustrandam gloriam Caesaris iuvenis existimabant, ipse animam patris sui esse voluit eique in Capitolio statuam, super caput auream stellam habentem, posuit....

... When Augustus Caesar was celebrating funeral games for his father, a star appeared at mid-day. He affirmed that it was associated with his father.... Baebius Macer says that a very broad star rose at about the eighth hour. Some people adjudged [the star] to have risen to exalt the glory of the young Caesar, but Augustus himself insisted that it was the soul of his father, and for him he dedicated a statue that had a golden star upon its head on the Capitoline.\(^{18}\)

Perhaps because Servius was working largely from a different source, there are four important deviations from the accounts we have already considered. The games Octavian is celebrating are funeral games; the *sidus* appears at noon; Octavian plays an active role in encouraging the

\(^{18}\) Servius. *ad Ecl.*, 9.46.
people’s identification of the *sidus* with Caesar; Octavian dedicates a statue on the Capitoline, not (or not simply) in the Temple of Venus Genetrix.¹⁹

The fact that there is information present in our four main accounts that is absent from Augustus’ account suggests, then, that the authors of these accounts were working from more than one source. Hence Gurval’s assertion that these sources lack value as historical narratives because of their reliance upon Augustus alone is incorrect. These sources likely provide therefore reasonably reliable testimony as to the acceptance among the general population of the fact that the *sidus* was the sign that confirmed Caesar’s divinity and place among the stars.²⁰

### 2.2 Catasterism

The idea that a special destiny among the stars awaited certain individuals after death had a very long history in the ancient world, particularly in the East.²¹ Stories describing this destiny took many forms, involving clouds, eagles, and chariots, but the common element was that the individual involved had been a hero of often semi-divine descent.²² The reason such heroes were granted the unique honour of an afterlife spent as a god among the stars was their superior virtue and positive contributions to the world and to humanity.²³ Among the Greeks, these deified demi-gods included Castor and Polydeuces (Pollux), Dionysus, Asclepius, and, most of all, Heracles.²⁴ Indeed, Heracles was the model for catasterism in literature.²⁵ Accounts of his final moments

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¹⁹ Servius. *ad Ecl.*, 9.46.
²¹ Weinstock 1971, p. 356.
describe Heracles’ ascension of the pyre on Mount Oeta and subsequent rise amid the clashes of thunder of a severe storm to the heavens or Olympus. Two accounts, one found in Sophocles’ *Philoctetes* and the other found in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, indicate how the details of this story varied but that the outcome remained the same. In Sophocles, Heracles joins the number of the gods untouched by the flame while in Ovid Heracles is burned. Ovid makes clear where Heracles is destined to go: “quem pater omnipotens inter cava nubila raptum / quadraiiugo curro radiantibus intulit astris.” Horace indicates in an ode that Hercules’ pre-eminent virtue lay at the heart of this ascent to the stars: “hac arte Pollux et vagus Hercules / enisus arces atticit ignes.” He had earned his place therefore among the stars.

### 2.2.1 Apotheosis and Catasterism in the Hellenistic World

In time, however, the idea of rewarding great virtue with a place among the stars was extended to include great (historical) men as well. This development occurred especially in the courts of the Hellenistic kings. A portrait of Alexander painted by court painter Apelles and described by Pliny the Elder suggests that this development may have come begun with Alexander himself. Pliny says that the painting depicted Alexander with Castor and Pollux, two demi-gods who had been apotheosized and raised to the stars and who were often portrayed with stars and other celestial symbols. At any rate this ideological theme had developed sufficiently for the Athenians to address Demetrius Poliorcetes upon his entry into Athens as a god who had

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27 “And the all-powerful Father placed [Hercules], who had been snatched away among the hollow clouds on a four-horse chariot, among the glowing stars.” Ovid. *Metamorphoses*, 9.272.
28 “It was because of this merit that Pollux and wandering Heracles strove for and then reached the fiery citadel.” Horace. *Odes*, 3.3.9-10.
earned a place among the stars. While there were obvious tangible benefits for cities like Athens in greeting their imperial masters in this way, there was also a clear ideological benefit for the ruler in surrounding himself with the trappings of celestial divinity. The rulers were transformed into great heroes who had earned divinity in the same way heroes like Heracles had: through extraordinary virtue and service, as the epithets chosen by some of these rulers, such as *soter* (saviour) and *euergetes* (benefactor), suggest. One Hellenistic ruler, the Seleucid king Antiochus IV, indicated with a star on one of his coins that his final destination was also the same as Heracles’: the stars.

![Figure 1: Tetradrachm of Antiochus IV: Antiochus IV with a star above his head.](Image from Weinstock 1971, Plate 28.1)

Another way a Hellenistic ruler could promote the idea of his impending celestial apotheosis was in literature. The earliest and most important example is Callimachus’ famous description (known principally through Catullus’ translation) of the catasterism of a lock of hair dedicated by the Ptolemaic queen Berenice to Aphrodite to ensure the safe return of her husband Ptolemy III Euergetes I from the Third Syrian War. The astronomer Conon confirmed that this

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33 Image from Weinstock 1971, Plate 28.1.  
34 Cumont 1960, p. 97.
lock had become a constellation, the *coma Berenices*. This story, produced and confirmed by intellectuals sponsored by the Ptolemaic court, further established the association between the royal family and catasterism.

The development of the idea of catasterism during the Hellenistic period was perhaps occasioned, and certainly encouraged, by the ideas of the Greek philosopher Euhemerus of Messene (fl. ca. late fourth century B.C.). Euhemerus argued that all religion was in fact the worship of the memory of great benefactors who had at one point been mortal but whose great service to humanity had occasioned divinity for them. This idea opened the door to divinity for men of more recent memory.

2.2.2 Catasterism in Rome

Whatever Euhemerus’ role in the development and spread of the idea of apotheosis and catasterism in the Hellenistic East had been, it is generally accepted that he played a role in its acceptance and spread in the Roman world through the Romanized poet Ennius. Ennius translated the writings of Euhemerus into Latin. Cicero describes Ennius in the *De Natura Deorum* as follows: “Quae ratio maxime tractata ab Euhemero est, quem noster et interpretatus est et secutus … Ennius.” The *ratio* Cicero describes here is apotheosis and catasterism and Cicero’s testimony suggests that Ennius not only translated but advocated Euhemerus’ ideas.

A fragment preserved from Ennius’ *Annales*, which describes the astral apotheosis of Romulus, suggests that Cicero was correct: “unus erit quem tu tolles ad caerula caeli templa.”

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37 “This line of thought was propounded most of all by Euhemerus, whom our Ennius both interpreted and followed.” Cicero. *De Natura Deorum*, 1.119. Green 1994, p. 56. Taylor 1931, p. 42.
38 “There will be one whom you will raise to the celestial realms of heaven.” Ennius. *Annales* 1.54 = Fr. 50 (Steuart). Mary Frances Williams. “The *Sidus Iulium*, the divinity of men, and the Golden Age in Virgil’s
For the Romans, Romulus was the quintessential (and only) example of a man who had become a god. Extended accounts of his apotheosis can be found in Livy’s *Ab Urbe Condita* and Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*.\(^{39}\) In discussing Romulus’ apotheosis, Cicero makes clear in his *De Re Publica* that Romulus’ ascension was occasioned by his great deeds and virtues: “virtus tamen in caelum dicitur sustulisse.”\(^{40}\) In Ovid’s account, celestial divinity also awaits Romulus’ virtuous wife Hersilia: a *sidus* travels down from the sky and carries Hersilia into the heavens, her hair catching fire during the journey. She emerges from the transformation as the goddess Hora, destined to spend eternity among the stars alongside her newly deified husband, Quirinus.\(^{41}\)

What is not clear, however, is when and how the idea entered Roman religious belief that human beings from beyond the realm of myth could become individual gods.\(^{42}\) The idea that every Roman became part of a sort of homogeneous divinity known as the *di Manes* or *divi parentes* was ancient.\(^{43}\) It is certainly possible that an Eastern influence was responsible for the appearance of individualized apotheosis. Roman generals had contact with Hellenistic ruler cult and the ideas of men like Euhemerus whose works as we have seen were available in Rome from the second century onward.\(^{44}\) The increasing tendency of these great generals to claim a special connection or relationship with the divine would suggest that they were influenced by these ideas.\(^{45}\) The great influx of slaves and travellers from the East who were familiar with catasterism


\(^{40}\) “Virtue, however, is said to have carried him up into the heavens.” Cicero. *De Re Publica*, 1.16.25.


\(^{42}\) Taylor 1931, p. 44.

\(^{43}\) Beard, North, and Price 1998, pp. 31, 141.


\(^{45}\) Examples of this are legion and range from Scipio Africanus and his special connection with Jupiter to Caesar’s association with Venus. It is interesting that the only known examples of this kind of discourse
and apotheosis, moreover, from the court ideology of their homelands likely played a role in the dissemination of these ideas among the general population, who would have had regular contact with these new arrivals.\footnote{Taylor 1931, p. 52.}

Another possible source of validation for this idea may have come from Cicero’s \textit{De Re Publica}. This philosophical dialogue, modelled on Plato’s \textit{Republic} and completed in the late-50s B.C., discusses the ideal commonwealth and the place of the state and statesman in the greater scheme of reality. Only a brief section of the sixth book of this considerable dialogue has ever really been of widespread interest, however. This section is often referred to as the “Dream of Scipio.”\footnote{Taylor 1931, p. 42.} There Cicero describes the rewards that the virtuous statesman can expect to enjoy after death through a dream experienced and recounted by Scipio Aemilianus. In this dream, Aemilianus’ deceased relative Scipio Africanus, the hero of the Second Punic War (218-202), appears to him and says:

\begin{quote}
Sed quo sis, Africane, alacrior ad tutandam rem publicam, sic habeto, omnibus, qui patriam conservaverint, adiuerint, auxerint, certum esse in caelo definitum locum, ubi beati aevō sempiterno fruantur….
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
[B]e assured of this, Africanus, so that you may be even more eager to defend the commonwealth: all those who have preserved, aided, or enlarged their fatherland have a special place \textit{[definitum locum]} prepared for them in the heavens, where they may enjoy an eternal life of happiness….
\end{quote}

\footnote{Hardie 1986, pp. 73-74. One scholar, Robert Gallagher, has attempted to remedy the distorting effect of removing this passage from the context of the rest of the dialogue demonstrating the connections between the dream-passage and the rest of the \textit{De Re Publica}. These efforts are impeded to a degree by the incomplete preservation of the text but are nonetheless important. See Robert L. Gallagher. “Metaphors in Cicero’s \textit{De Re Publica},” in \textit{Classical Quarterly}, 51.2, 2001.}


before the Late Republic are associated with Rome’s kings, especially Numa Pompilius and Servius Tullius. Taylor 1931, p. 52.
Africanus the Elder describes such a life of service as follows: “ea vita via est in caelum et in hunc coetum eorum, qui iam vixerunt … illum incolunt locum, quem vides… Quem vos… orbem lacteum nuncupatis.” 49 Cicero describes the message expressed by the dream in other, more pragmatic words in his Tusculan Disputations: “quid in hac re publica tot tantosque viros ob rem publicam interfectos cogitasse arbitramur? … nemo umquam sine magna spe inmortalitatis se pro patria offerret ad mortem.” 50 Cicero sought therefore to indicate the place of celestial apotheosis within the republican system. 51

2.2.3 The Catasterism of Julius Caesar

In spite of the popularity of the idea of the catasterism of great men, however, no Roman achieved this destiny again after Romulus until Julius Caesar. 52 Caesar’s catasterism, like Romulus’, was indicated by a celestial sign, this time a sidus. 53 Caesar too had earned his divinity. Many authors describe Caesar’s catasterism as the product of his great deeds. Valerius Maximus calls these deeds divina opera and says that through them Caesar had brought about his place among the stars. 54 Whatever role Cicero had played in the development and acceptance of catasterism and astral divinity, Cicero makes clear that he was in no way convinced as to Caesar’s divinity: “adduci tamen non possem, ut quemquam mortuum coniungerem cum deorum

49 “That [way of] life is the road to the skies, to that gathering of those who have completed their lives and who live in that place which you now see… and which you on earth… call the Milky Way” Cicero. De Re Publica, 6.16.
50 “What are we to think that the many great men in this state who were slain for the public’s well-being had in mind? … Without great hope of immortality, no man would ever offer up his life for his country.” Cicero. Tusculan Disputations, 1.32.
51 Hardie 1986, pp. 73-74.
52 Green 1994, p. 57.
53 Taylor 1931, p. 92. It is almost certainly no coincidence that Caesar’s catasterism (and, incidentally, that of Augustus fifty-eight years later) bore many similarities to that of Romulus. Green 1994, p. 54.
immortalium religione.”⁵⁵ A great many members of Rome’s general population do not seem to have felt Cicero’s reticence, however.⁵⁶

Popular support for Caesar’s divinity and for other acts honouring Caesar seems to have swelled after the appearance of the *sidus*. This is suggested by a passage from Dio: “ἐπειδὴ τε οὐδὲ τούτῳ τις φόβῳ τοῦ ὀμίλου ἐκώλυσεν, σὺνω δὲ καὶ ἄλλα τινὰ τῶν ἐς τὴν τοῦ Καίσαρος τιμὴν προδεδογμένων ἐγένετο.”⁵⁷ Mark Antony though a supporter of Caesar ensured that one honour, the official recognition of Caesar’s divinity, would not be passed. One of Antony’s motivations was almost certainly to ensure that Octavian did not enjoy at least officially the benefits of being the son of a god (*divi fili*). Antony avoided the people’s wrath by making concessions such as the addition of a day in Caesar’s honour to all festivals of public thanksgiving.⁵⁸

### 2.3 Establishing the Connection

Antony’s act of obstruction indicates that he recognized how potent a weapon Caesar’s divinity could be for Octavian, a fact Octavian did not fail to recognize either.⁵⁹ From 44 to 42 B.C., however, Octavian could only promote unofficially the idea that his adoptive father had

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⁵⁵ “I could not be induced to unite any man who has died with the religion of the immortal gods.” Cicero. *Philippics*, 1.13. Taylor 1931, p. 46. Spencer Cole. “Cicero, Ennius, and the Concept of Apotheosis at Rome,” in *Arethusa* 39, 2006, p. 539. Cole argues that Cicero’s *De Re Publica* provided approval for the idea of catasterism and enlarged the Romans’ religious sensibilities thus enabling them to accommodate the idea of apotheosis.

⁵⁶ Taylor 1931, p. 412.

⁵⁷ “And when this act [the placement of a star upon a statue of Caesar after the *sidus* had appeared] was also allowed, with no one trying to prevent it because of fear of the populace, then at last some of the other decrees already passed in honour of Caesar were put into effect.” Cassius Dio. *Roman History*, 45.7.2 [emphasis added]. Frederick H. Cramer. *Astrology in Roman Law and Politics*. Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1954, p. 79.


risen to the stars.\textsuperscript{60} The sources make clear that one tactic Octavian employed during this time
was the placement of stars upon the statues of Caesar that were already in Rome and upon new
statues of Caesar he dedicated. Dio and Suetonius note that one such statue was dedicated in the
Temple of Venus Genetrix in the \textit{forum Iulium}.\textsuperscript{61} Servius describes the practice more generally:
\textquote{\textit{nam ideo Augustus omnibus statuis, quas divinitati Caesaris statuit, hanc stellam adiecit.}}\textsuperscript{62}
Servius also notes another way in which Octavian promoted this important connection: \textquote{\textit{ipse vero
Augustus in honorem patris stellam in galea coepit habere depictam.}}\textsuperscript{63} The star sat upon
Octavian’s brow just as it did upon Caesar’s in the Temple of Venus Genetrix.

\textbf{2.3.1 The Material Evidence}

It was not until after Caesar’s divinity was officially recognized in 42 B.C. that Octavian
could officially call himself \textit{divi filius} and it is clear from the material evidence extant from the
early-30s BC that this is precisely what he did. Coins played a very important role in the
dissemination of his message as they had in the dissemination of the messages of countless
potentates before him. Coins could carry his message to a wide area, and, through the use of
visual language, to a much wider audience.\textsuperscript{64}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[60] The declaration of Caesar’s divinity was one of the first acts of the triumvirate and took place on January 1\textsuperscript{st}, 42 B.C. Taylor 1931, p. 96. Scheid 2003, p. 184.
\item[62] “Augustus added this \textit{stella} to all the statues which he set up in honour of Caesar’s divinity.” Servius. \textit{ad. Aen.}, 8.681.
\item[63] “Augustus indeed began to sport a star that was painted \textit{[depictam]} on his helmet in his father’s honour” Servius. \textit{ad Aen.}, 8.681.
\item[64] From 44 to 31 B.C., Octavian’s insistence upon this connection and his status as \textit{divi filius} was carried to extremes, due in large part to his relatively uncertain hold on power. While the emphasis was lessened to some extent after Octavian’s triumph over Antony and his emergence in 27 as Augustus, it was nevertheless never absent and remained an important factor in his ideological program and on his coins. Zanker 1988, pp. 33-34, 36. David Potter. \textit{Prophets and Emperors: Human and Divine Authority from Augustus to Theodosius}. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1994, p. 124. Augustus’ personal interest in what appeared on his coins is suggested by a passage in Suetonius (94.12).
\end{footnotes}
One of the earliest extant coins of this type is a *sestertius* from ca. 40 B.C. which depicts Octavian *divi Filius* and Caesar *Divos Iulius* on opposite sides.

![Sestertius of ca. 40 B.C.](image)

**Figure 2: Sestertius of ca. 40 B.C.**

A *denarius* from 38 B.C. shows the two men together on one side with the legend DIVUS IULIUS.

![Denarius of 38 B.C.](image)

**Figure 3: A denarius of 38 B.C.**

The clearest example from this early period of the *sidus* is an *aureus* of 36 B.C., probably from Africa, which depicts a temple that has DIVO IULIO inscribed upon the architrave and the image of a star on the pediment. From the context, this star is likely the *sidus Iulium*.

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65 Image from Zanker 1988, p. 36 (fig. 28a).
66 Image from Zanker 1988, p. 36 (fig. 28c).
Figure 4: Temple of Divus Iulius on an aureus from 36 B.C.\textsuperscript{67}

Within the temple, there is a figure. It is generally accepted that this is a statue of \textit{Divus Iulius} and that the temple depicted is in fact the Temple of \textit{Divus Iulius}, which would not be officially dedicated until 29 B.C.\textsuperscript{68} This coin was part of a series of \textit{aurei} and \textit{denarii} issued in 36 B.C.\textsuperscript{69} The temple was Octavian’s boldest statement of Caesar’s divinity, his connection with it, and the \textit{sidus’} role as its symbol. The temple was situated in the very heart of Rome and thus ensured that Caesar’s divinity would not be forgotten.\textsuperscript{70}

The promotion and affirmation of Octavian/Augustus’ connection with \textit{Divus Iulius} on coinage did not end after Octavian was granted the name Augustus in 27 B.C., however. Indeed, this theme continued throughout the course of Augustus’ reign. Many examples come from 17 B.C. and the series of coins issued by the moneyer Marcus Sanquinius. Some show a youthful,

\textsuperscript{67} Image from Galinsky 1996, p. 17 (fig. 1).
\textsuperscript{68} Scott 1941, p. 262.
\textsuperscript{69} Whittaker 1996, pp. 87-89.
\textsuperscript{70} Whittaker 1996, p. 89.
laureate head with a comet above it on the reverse. This figure is possibly Caesar or a young Octavian but perhaps the ambiguity is deliberate and both are implied.\textsuperscript{71}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.3\textwidth]{figure5.png}
\caption{Youthful figure with \textit{sidus Iulium} above his head.\textsuperscript{72}}
\end{figure}

Other coins issued by Sanquinius have the same motif on the reverse but have Augustus’ head on the obverse.\textsuperscript{73} To make Octavian’s connection with the deified Caesar absolutely clear, Augustus is surrounded on those coins by the legend AUG. DIVI F. Certain \textit{denarii} and \textit{aurei} issued that year by Sanquinius depict the \textit{sidus} on its own with the legend DIVUS IULIUS.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.3\textwidth]{figure6.png}
\caption{The \textit{Sidus Iulium}\textsuperscript{74}}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{71} Scott 1941, p. 264.
\textsuperscript{72} Image from Galinsky 1996, p. 105 (fig. 40).
\textsuperscript{74} Image from Weinstock 1971, Plate 28.9 (magnification added).
Augustus’ head and the legend CAESAR AUGUSTUS appear on the other side. A *denarius* issued by Lucius Lentulus in 12 B.C. portrays Augustus crowning a statue of Caesar with the *sidus*.

![Image](image.png)

**Figure 7: Augustus crowns a statue of Divus Iulius with a star (the *sidus Iulium*)**

While no other coins of this type have survived from the period after 12 B.C., this is perhaps due as much to the vagaries of coin preservation and time as to the priorities of Augustus and the Roman moneyers. We will never know for certain, therefore, whether the *sidus Iulium* continued to be a popular motif on Augustan coins during this later period.

### 2.3.2 The Literary Evidence

While the numismatic evidence is extant only up to 12 B.C., literary evidence of Augustus’ use of the *sidus Iulium* as a symbol of his connection with his divine father exists for the period up to the year of Augustus’ death (A.D. 14) and beyond. Indeed, the *sidus* and the idea of catasterism were regular features of Augustan literature. The writings of the Hellenistic poets, especially Eratosthenes, Aratus, and Callimachus, provided the Augustan poets with the

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75 Scott 1941, p. 264.
76 Image from Zanker 1988, p. 34 (fig. 25a).
appropriate poetic language to describe the idea of Caesar’s divinity that was so important to Augustus.  

The lyric poets Horace and Propertius used their Hellenistic precedents in precisely this way. In his *Odes*, Horace emphasizes the divinity of Caesar as symbolized by the *sidus* but he also emphasizes the fact that this connection naturally entailed Augustus’ own ascension to the stars as a god one day. Horace’s only explicit mention of the *sidus* comes in the first book of his *Odes*: “micat inter omnis / Iulium sidus velut inter ignis / Luna minores.” The idea of Augustus’ own catasterism is most clearly expressed in the third book of his *Odes*. There Horace describes a scene in which the divine Augustus reclines beside two other demi-gods who were catasterized because of their virtues: “Hac arte Pollux et vagus Hercules / Enisus arcis attigit igneas / quos inter Augustus recumbens / purpureo bibet ore nectar.” Augustus is therefore the next in a long line of heroes whose merits have gained them a place among the stars for all eternity.

77 Carole E. Newlands. *Playing with Time: Ovid and the Fasti*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995, pp. 29-30. It is worth noting briefly that, although the literary texts that survive from the Augustan period are replete with so-called Augustan ideas and ideals, they are not propaganda in the sense in which that word is used today. At most, these texts and authors reflect and affirm the ideas that were current and, indeed, widely circulated by Augustus and his agents. These ideas reflect what Alessandro Barchiesi calls instead of propaganda the ‘Augustan Cultural Discourse,’ the way of perceiving the world that Augustus promoted during his reign. He suggests that the Augustan writers were immersed in and a part of this discourse and passed on its terms in their writing or expressed support for them because they actually agreed with them. Andrew Wallace-Hadrill insists that this is, in fact, the most powerful kind of ‘propaganda’, a term he uses in a conscious and circumscribed manner to describe the ideological programs employed by rulers and the manifestations of these programs in the private sphere. For important discussions, see Andrew Wallace-Hadrill. “Time for Augustus: Ovid, Augustus, and the *Fasti,*” in *Homo Viator: Classical Essays for John Bramble*. Michael Whitby, Philip Hardie, and Mary Whitby, edd. Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1987. Alessandro Barchiesi. *The Poet and the Prince: Ovid and Augustan Discourse*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997. Grimal 1968. The Manipulative Mode: Political Propaganda in Antiquity – A Collection of Case Studies. Karl A.E. Enenkel and Ilja Leonard Pfeijffer, edd. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2005. Tamsyn Barton. *Power and Knowledge: Astrology, Physiognomics, and Medicine under the Roman Empire*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994c, p. 47. A. Bouché-Leclercq. “L’Astrologie dans le Monde Romain,” in *Revue Historique*, vol. 65, 1897, p. 246.


79 “It was because of this merit that Pollux and wandering Heracles strove for and reached the fiery citadel, in whose company Augustus, his mouth purpled, will recline and drink nectar.” Horace. *Odes*, 3.3.9-12.
Propertius also deploys the *sidus* and the theme of catasterism as a way to honour Augustus and his family. In Propertius’ dramatic description of the Battle of Actium, Caesar looks down from the stars and witnesses Augustus’ great achievement and says: “At pater Idalio miratur Caesar ab astro / ‘Sum deus. Est nostri sanguinis ista fides.’”\(^{80}\) In the third book of his *Elegies*, Propertius commemorates the tragic death of Augustus’ nephew Marcellus by suggesting that “qua Siculae victor telluris [Marcus] Claudius [Marcellus] et qua / Caesar ab humana cessit in astra via.”\(^{81}\) Propertius suggests, therefore, that catasterism was a fate that awaited Augustus and all the members of the *gens Julia*.

The *sidus* and the theme of catasterism played an even more important role in the poem that came to be considered Rome’s national epic. This poem was Virgil’s *Aeneid*. In the Virgil’s earlier writings, the *sidus* makes only one explicit appearance, in the *Ninth Eclogue* during the description of the apotheosis of Daphnis: “Ecce Dionaei processit Caesaris astrum.”\(^{82}\) The language Virgil uses to describe the apotheosis of Daphnis bears an interesting similarity to the language Virgil would use two decades later to describe astral apotheosis in the *Aeneid*: “Daphnimque tollemus ad astra / ... Daphnim ad astra feremus” and “Candidus insuetum miratur limen Olympi / sub pedibusque videt nubes et sidera Daphnis.”\(^{83}\) Servius’ comments on this passage indicate that many in his time identified Daphnis with Caesar.\(^{84}\) While the *sidus* does not appear in the *Georgics*, the theme of astral divinity does: “anne novum tardis sidus te mensibus...

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\(^{80}\) “But Father Caesar said in amazement [as he looked down] from the Idalian star: ‘I am a god; this [victory] is proof that [you, Octavian, are] of our blood.’” Propertius. *Elegies*, 4.6.59-60.

\(^{81}\) “Marcellus has departed to the stars from the path of man by the way which [Marcus] Claudius [Marcellus], victor of the land of Sicily, and Caesar went.” Propertius. *Elegies*, 3.18.33-34.

\(^{82}\) “Behold the star of Dionaean Caesar has passed across [the sky].” Virgil. *Eclogues*, 9.46.

\(^{83}\) “We shall raise Daphnis to the stars.... We shall bear Daphnis to the stars.” “Bright white Daphnis marvels at the unfamiliar threshold of Olympus and sees clouds and stars beneath his feet” Virgil. *Eclogues*, 9.51-52, 56-57.

\(^{84}\) Servius. *ad Ecl. 9.*
addas / qua locus Erigonen inter Chelasque sequentis / panditur.”

Virgil suggests that the stars will re-arrange themselves to accommodate Augustus’ arrival.

In the *Eclogues* and *Georgics*, Virgil uses the *sidus* and the stars solely to flatter Augustus, just as Horace and Propertius did. In the *Aeneid*, however, Virgil’s use of this motif is more profound and very much in keeping with his general aim of providing a mythological history of the Julian family and its special association with the gods. This is why the *sidus*, which had come to play such a prominent part in Augustus’ personal mythology, had an important role in Virgil’s epic. The only definite appearance of the *sidus* in the *Aeneid* is in Book 8 during the description of the shield of Aeneas, a shield that foretells Rome’s future. There Augustus is described as leading the Romans into battle: “Hinc Augustus agens Italos in proelia Caesar / patribus populoque, penatibus et magnis dis / stans celsa in puppi, geminas cui tempora flammis / laeta vomunt, patriumque aperitur vertice *sidus*.” This passage makes unmistakeably clear the fact that the *sidus Iulium* was still of great symbolic importance to Augustus at the time this passage was written and that it was associated with him to such a degree that it could still be used as a reference that Virgil’s readers would understand.

There are two other possible references to the *sidus Iulium* in the *Aeneid*. The first comes from Book Two. During the flight from Troy, flames suddenly emerge from the top of Aeneas’ son Ascanius’ head. The fact that these flames do not harm Ascanius suggests to Aeneas’ father

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85 “… whether you add yourself as a new star/constellation among the lingering months, at the point between Virgo and pursuing Libra, where a space is being opened.” Virgil. *Georgics*, 1.33-35.
86 Augustus’ frequent letters to Virgil inquiring as to when his great project would be completed clearly indicate that Augustus recognized the value and importance of the *Aeneid* for the dissemination of his ideological message. Grimal 1968, pp. 67, 71, 77. Grebe 2004, p. 35.
88 Williams 2003, p. 8.
Anchises that they are a sign sent from the gods. Anchises asks the gods for a second sign to confirm the omen and the sign the gods send is described both as a *stella facem ducens* and as a *sidus*. 

The other possible appearance occurs in Book Five during the games held by Aeneas in honour of his deceased father Anchises. During these games, an arrow shot by Acestes bursts into flames:

Amissa solus palma superabat Acestes, 
qui tamen aerias telum contendit in auras 
ostentans artemque pater arcumque sonantem. 
hic oculis subitum obicitur magno futurum 
augurio monstrum; docuit post exitus ingens 
seraque terrifichi cecinerunt omina vates. 
namque volans liquidis in nubibus arsit harundo 
signaetque viam flammis tenuisque recessit 
consumpta in ventos, caelo ceu saepe refixa 
transcurrunt crinemque volantia sidera ducent.

Father Acestes alone was left, the prize now lost, yet upward into the air he aimed his bolt, displaying his ancient skill and the ringing of his bow. Thereupon a sudden portent met their eyes, one destined to prove to be an omen lofty in importance; the mighty issue of this feat was in time revealed, and in later days terrified seers proclaimed this omen. For flying amid the airy clouds the reed caught fire, marked its path with flames, then vanished away into thin air as shooting stars do … their tresses streaming in their wake….

The arrow had been transformed into what seemed to be a comet or shooting star (*volantia sidera*). In contrast with those around him, Aeneas is not frightened by this omen and indeed he recognizes that it was an omen meant for him concerning his father since it had appeared at

\[89\] Virgil. *Aeneid*, 2.693f. Domenicucci 1996 suggests that the flaming hair is perhaps a reference to a comet, pp. 39-40.
\[91\] Virgil. *Aeneid*, 5.104-603.
games he had organized in his father’s honour, just as Octavian would many generations later.\textsuperscript{93} This passage clearly establishes a mythological precedent for the events that occurred in July 44 B.C.

In spite of Virgil’s clear integration of the \textit{sidus} into the mythos and history of the Julian family, it would not be until Book 15 of Ovid’s \textit{Metamorphoses} that an explicit and extended description of the important event of 44 B.C. appeared in Augustan literature. Ovid’s account, written late in Augustus’ reign, reveals however an almost inverted interpretation of the meaning and value of Caesar’s deification. Ovid suggests that Caesar had been made a god so that Augustus could have a divine father.\textsuperscript{94} Caesar’s divinity, therefore, had been determined by Augustus’ own great destiny, a destiny that held a voyage among the \textit{cognata sidera} in store for Augustus also.\textsuperscript{95} This makes Augustus the greatest of Caesar’s achievements.\textsuperscript{96} The process of catasterism itself begins when Venus carries Caesar’s soul to the stars. Along the way, his soul begins to glow and burn and to trail a tail of fire.\textsuperscript{97} Upon reaching the heavens, Caesar sees Augustus’ deeds and confesses that they are greater than his own: “Terra sub Augusto est.”\textsuperscript{98} Augustus had achieved what Caesar could only have dreamed of. Ovid’s testimony reveals that even in the later years of Augustus’ reign the \textit{sidus Iulium} and the process of catasterism it symbolized still played important roles in Augustan culture, important enough to serve as the natural culmination of, and conclusion to, Ovid’s great epic poem.

\textsuperscript{92} Virgil. \textit{Aeneid}, 5.519-528. \\
\textsuperscript{93} Virgil. \textit{Aeneid}, 5.530-531. \\
\textsuperscript{95} Ovid. \textit{Metamorphoses}, 15.839. \\
\textsuperscript{96} Ovid. \textit{Metamorphoses}, 15.751. \\
\textsuperscript{97} Ovid. \textit{Metamorphoses}, 15.846-850. \\
\textsuperscript{98} “The earth is under Augustus’ control.” Ovid. \textit{Metamorphoses}, 15.850, 859.
Throughout the course of Augustus’ reign, the *sidus* had served quite usefully as a symbol of all of the things that made Augustus special. In this chapter, we have examined one of these ways: Octavian/Augustus’ association with the divine Caesar and the cult of *Divus Iulius*. In the next, we will see how Augustus harnessed the other dominant interpretation of the *sidus* which had existed since July 44 B.C. and used the *sidus* as a symbol of this very different message as well.
Chapter 3
The Sidus Iulium and the Augustan Golden Age

When the fiery *sidus Iulium* first appeared, almost no Roman who saw it would have doubted that it was a sign sent by the gods to inform them of something important. These mortal observers of July, 44 B.C. did not agree, however, which message the gods wanted them to glean from this omen. As we saw in Chapter Two, some Romans believed that the *sidus*’ message pertained to Julius Caesar’s divinity. Not every Roman accepted that interpretation, however. Indeed, some Romans believed that the *sidus* was an omen that portended the end of the ninth age (*saeculum*) and the beginning of the tenth, an age that in traditional Etruscan and Roman belief held nothing but death and destruction in store.

From the beginning, this interpretation of the *sidus Iulium* existed alongside the ‘Caesarian’ interpretation but some of its details began to change with the passage of time, particularly concerning what the nature of the tenth *saeculum* was. In time, the tenth saeculum came to symbolize a period of regeneration, peace, and prosperity: a modern day golden age. It should not surprise us that this reinterpretation took place at a time when Octavian had risen to supreme power and was claiming to have brought about a period of peace and harmony for a restored Roman republic.

This new interpretation of the tenth *saeculum* had arisen from the intellectual and cultural milieu of the Late Republic, in which an interest in the idea of *palingenesis*, or rebirth, had encouraged some Romans to reconsider accepted notions about the *saecula* and the nature of time. Whatever Augustus’ role in this transformation, his role in the dissemination of this new understanding of the tenth *saeculum* using the *sidus Iulium* as a symbol is clear. The *sidus* appears in Augustan literature and on Augustan coins produced in close association with the
festival, the *ludi saeculares*, that marked formally the passage into the long-heralded tenth *saeculum* in 17 B.C.

The *sidus* thus developed a second, parallel role in Augustus’ ideological program. Its purpose in this role as we shall see was to show that the gods had individually selected Octavian for the task of ushering the Roman people into this new and better time. They had done this in 44 B.C. by sending an omen at the games he was celebrating at personal expense for his father.¹

### 3.1 A Dirum Omen of the End of the World

Long before Octavian’s status as the saviour of the Roman people had become a commonly promoted idea and the golden age had begun, there had been at least one man present at the *ludi Veneris Genetricis* in 44 B.C. convinced that the object he saw in the sky portended nothing good for the Roman people. His name was Vulcanius and he was a *haruspex*. Thus influenced by Etruscan ideas about the *saecula* and the nature of comets as omens, Vulcanius pronounced his assessment of the *sidus*.² As Servius reports, “Vulcanius [h]aruspex in contione dixit cometen esse, qui significaret exitum noni saeculi et ingressum decimi.”³ Vulcanius was presumably among the many people whom Dio says “ἀυτὸ κομήτην τέ τινων καλούντων καὶ

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These “usual things” were invariably negative.⁵ Pliny the Elder succinctly notes that a comet is “terrificum magna ex parte sidus.”⁶ Manilius provides a good summary of the consequences of a comet’s appearance in Book One of his Astronomica: famine, plagues, war, and civil war.⁷ Seneca the Younger adds to Manilius’ list when he says that comets can also foreshadow earthquakes.⁸ Seneca also notes that everyone expects the worst when a comet appears.⁹ The reason for this, Seneca suggests, is that a comet is so rare an omen that its meaning is difficult to perceive by those charged with interpreting them.¹⁰

3.1.1 Omens in the Late Republic

The Romans took the interpretation of omens very seriously. They believed that omens carried messages from the gods concerning personal and public issues and they consulted experts to determine what these messages were.¹¹ Quintus, a character in Cicero’s De Divinatione, summarizes this belief very well:

Gentem quidem nullam video neque tam humanam atque doctam neque tam immanem atque barbaram, quae non significari futura et a quibusdam intelligi praedicique posse censeat.

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⁵ Domenicucci 1996, pp. 37-38, 73.
⁶ “…is for the most part a terrifying celestial object.” Pliny the Elder. Natural History, 2.92.
⁷ Manilius. Astronomica, 1.877-879; 880-895; 898-905; 906f. Tibullus says in his Elegies that “[The Sibyls] said that a comet would be the evil sign of war.” Tibullus. Elegies, 2.5.71.
⁸ Seneca the Younger. Naturales Quaestiones, 7.16.2.
⁹ Seneca the Younger. Naturales Quaestiones, 7.5.
Now, I am aware of no people, however refined and learned or however savage and ignorant, which does not think that signs are given of future events, and that certain persons can recognize those signs and foretell events.

and

... sed ita... inchoatum esse mundum, ut certis rebus certa signa praecurrerent, alia in extis, alia in avibus, alia in fulgoribus, alia in ostentis, alia in stellis, alia in somniantium visis...

...the universe was so created that certain results would be preceded by certain signs, which are given sometimes by entrails and birds, sometimes by lightning, by portents, by stars, sometimes by dreams....

A Roman’s aim in seeking the meaning of an omen was both to get a glimpse of what was in store for him and to help him understand what had already happened and thus to help him make sense of life. This process of consultation was as important to the life of the state as it was to the lives of Rome’s citizens. Divination was a crucial part of state procedure and was considered to be at the heart of the legitimacy of the state’s actions. Livy notes that the consideration of prodigies had first place in the Senate’s agenda.

The night sky was considered to be a very important place to look for these omens. As Manilius says, “numquam fututilibus excanduit ignibus aether...” To the Romans, the heavens were a realm of permanence and thus divinity. This made the appearance of ephemeral

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12 Cicero. De Divinatione. 1.2, 1.118.
15 Livy. Ab Urbe Condita, 24.11.1.
17 Le Boeuffle 1989, p. 37.
anomalies such as comets and eclipses all the more wondrous and striking. As Seneca the Younger remarks, “cum aliquid ex more mutatum est, omnium vultus in caelo est.” A comet represented a dramatic change in the usual nature of the heavens and thus it had to signal something important.

Those in charge of interpreting anomalies such as the *sidus Iulium* were numerous in Late Republican Rome. As Quintus notes in the *De Divinatione*:

Nec unum genus est divinationis publice privatimque celebratum. Nam, ut omittam ceteros populos, noster quam multa genera complexus est!

Nor is it only one single mode of divination that has been employed in public and private. For, to say nothing of other nations, how many our own people have embraced!

As a result, there were as many interpretations of these omens as there were schools of diviners.

The question as to whose interpretation was the correct one became the subject of dispute between the experts who included unofficial experts such as astrologers as well as the official priesthoods, namely the *pontifices*, the *quindecimviri sacris faciundis*, and the *haruspices*.

### 3.1.2 The Haruspices, Comets, and the Saecula

As we saw earlier, the *haruspices* did not consider comets to be a favourable omen at all. It is not surprising, therefore, that Vulcanius interpreted it to be the sign of the worst possible

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19 “Usually, when anything changes, everyone turns his face toward the sky.” Seneca the Younger. *Naturales Quaestiones*, 7.2.
20 Cicero. *De Divinatione*, 1.2.
event, the beginning of the tenth *saeculum* and the end of the world. The *saecula* seem to have been the units in which the Etruscans measured history and the passage of time. Each *saeculum* was equivalent to the lifespan of the person who lived longest in each generation but because the identity of this person could never be known for sure, Etruscan divinatory experts like the *haruspices* relied upon divination and divine revelation. These experts believed that the gods sent signs to indicate when a *saeculum* had ended. These signs included comets. Such omens were then interpreted through the arts of the *Etrusca Disciplina* and recorded by the *haruspices* in their books of records, the *Libri Fatales*. At some point in the development of Roman religious belief, the measurement of time in *saecula* and the other beliefs contingent to this system entered the Roman world. The timing of this introduction is not known but it seems almost certain that its source was Etruria.

The traditional conception of the tenth *saeculum* in the Etruscan system and its Roman equivalent held that it was to be a steady and violent decline toward the end of the world. At some point during the Late Republic, the idea developed that the tenth *saeculum* held some very different in store for the Roman people. Some began to suggest that the tenth *saeculum* would in fact be a period of regeneration and prosperity, the exact opposite of the traditional belief. The

27 Hall 1986, pp. 1568-1569.
28 Hall 1986, p. 1569.
reasons for this change are not fully known but one Greek idea in particular seems to have played a very important role.

3.2 Re-interpreting the Tenth Saeculum

This idea was palingenesis or rebirth. It was a notion common to a number of schools of Greek philosophy but was closely associated with the Stoics and Neopythagoreans. It held that after a certain period of time the world would regenerate and be reborn, a time known as metacosmesis. At this time the stars returned to the positions they had originally occupied. The interval between these two alignments was known as the Great Year. Cicero describes the Great Year in his De Re Publica:

... cum autem ad idem, unde semel profecta [astra] sunt, cuncta astra reierint eandemque totius caelis discriptionem longis intervallis rettulerint, tum ille vere vertens annus appellari potest....

... But when all the stars return to the place from which they at first set forth, and, at long intervals, restore the original configuration of the whole heaven, then that can truly be called a vertens annus [‘turning’ or ‘hinge’ year]....

He goes on to say that the last known occurrence of the Great Year was in Romulus’ time:

... quandoque ab eadem parte sol eodemque tempore iterum defecerit, tum signis omnibus ad principium stellisque revocatis expletum annum habeto....

... when the sun shall again be eclipsed at the same point and in the same season, you may believe that all the planets and stars have returned to their original position, and that a year has actually elapsed...\textsuperscript{34}

St. Augustine, quoting Varro, reports in his \textit{City of God} that a belief in rebirth for those alive during this period of transition was a part of this system of thought:

Genethliaci quidam scripserunt... esse in renascendis hominibus quam appellant \textit{παλιγγενέστατον} Graeci; hac scripserunt confici in annis numero quadrigentis quadragina ut idem corpus et eadem anima quae fuerint coniuncta in homine aliquando eadem rursus redeant in coniunctionem.

Certain astrologers... have written that men are destined to a new birth, which the Greeks call \textit{palingenesis}. This will take place after four hundred and forty years have elapsed; and then the same soul and the same body, which were formerly united in the person, shall again be reunited.\textsuperscript{35}

The Great Year was not therefore simply an astronomical or cosmological event. The process of \textit{palingenesis} affected everything in the universe, including stars, planets, and every living thing, including human beings.\textsuperscript{36}

\textbf{3.2.1 Palingenesis and Roman Thought}

The entry of the doctrine of \textit{palingenesis} into Roman thought occurred at a time when there was much speculation about the meaning and nature of the passage of time but it is not known why the conception we have been exploring came to enjoy particular popularity.\textsuperscript{37} One reason may have been a prophecy uttered by the Sibyl at Cumae that seems to be referenced in Virgil's \textit{Fourth Eclogue}. This poem is in essence an extended description of the process of

\textsuperscript{34} Cicero. \textit{De Re Publica}, 6.22.
\textsuperscript{35} St. Augustine of Hippo. \textit{The City of God}, 22.28.
\textsuperscript{36} Taylor 1934, p. 226.
palingenesis and the age of prosperity, a golden age, that was believed to be its result.\textsuperscript{38} Virgil seems to hint that the Sibyl’s prophecy was his inspiration when he writes, “Ultima Cumaei venit iam carminis aetas / magnus ab integro saeclorum nascitur ordo.”\textsuperscript{39} Such a prophecy would have been part of a large and well-known body of writings to which Virgil would have had access.\textsuperscript{40}

A great deal of interest was focussed upon these writings and upon the Sibyl herself during the Late Republic and the Augustan period.\textsuperscript{41} Varro, for instance, expended considerable effort to ascertain the number of Sibyls, ultimately concluding that there were fifteen.\textsuperscript{42} The Sibyl also became a stock character of extreme age.\textsuperscript{43} It was at precisely that time, moreover, that the Sibyl emerged as the pre-eminent prophet, where before she had been but one prophet among many.\textsuperscript{44} The collection of the prophecies made by the Sibyls across the centuries, the Sybilline Books, played an important role in the life of the state. During times of great distress for the Roman state, the quindecimviri sacris faciundis, the officials charged with protecting and interpreting the books, consulted them to find out what to do to avert the crisis.\textsuperscript{45} These texts were destroyed, however, in 83 B.C. when the Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus on the Capitoline was destroyed by fire.\textsuperscript{46} These texts were so important that a new collection drawn from prophetic sources throughout the Mediterranean was made.\textsuperscript{47} These sources included Greek and Eastern

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{41} Potter 1994, p. 78.
\bibitem{42} Potter 1994, p. 78.
\bibitem{43} Potter 1994, p. 81.
\bibitem{44} Potter 1994, p. 81.
\bibitem{45} Potter 1994, p. 78.
\bibitem{46} Potter 1994, p. 82.
\bibitem{47} Potter 1994, pp. 82, 84.
\end{thebibliography}
religious and theological writings. It is entirely possible, therefore, that it was in the years following 83 B.C. that the idea of *palingenesis* entered the Sibylline prophetic literature.

### 3.2.2 Virgil, *Palingenesis*, and the Golden Age

Whether or not Virgil was in fact influenced by a Sibylline prophecy, he decided to write a poem in which the *ultimum saeculum* of the world resembles closely the golden age of regeneration associated with *palingenesis*. In poetry, the golden age was a trope whose history began in the Graeco-Roman world with Hesiod’s *Works and Days*. Hesiod’s golden ‘age’ was not a period of time but a race of men. His conception of time, moreover, was linear and he saw the process as the decline and degradation of man from an original golden race. It was therefore a pessimistic vision. Virgil’s vision, conversely, held that time was cyclical and that the process was regenerative, much like the vision of his Greek philosophical predecessors.

Another important difference between the *Works and Days* and the *Fourth Eclogue* is that Virgil expresses the expectation that this golden age of regeneration will occur in his own time, perhaps even during the consulship of the poem’s dedicatee Asinius Pollio: “Teque adeo decus hoc aevi te consule inibit / Pollio, et incipient magni procedere menses.” Pollio was consul in 40 B.C., a time characterized by a general hope for peace and a return to prosperity following the apparent reconciliation of Octavian and Mark Antony at Brundisium. Virgil suggests that a saviour, the anonymous *puer*, will be the one responsible for the advent of the

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48 Potter 1994, p. 84. Brenk 1980, p. 84.
50 Potter 1994, p. 70.
51 Brenk 1980, pp. 81-82.
54 “And in your consulship, Pollio, yes yours, this glorious age will begin and the mighty months will begin to advance….” Virgil. *Eclogues* 4.11-12.
Golden Age in an appeal to Lucina, the goddess of childbirth: “Tu modo nascenti puero, quo ferrea primum / desinet ac toto surget gens aurea mundo….” Later, Virgil exhorts the puer to begin his task:

Incipe, parve puer, risu cognoscere matrem; matri longa decem tulerunt fastidia menses. incipe, parve puer. qui non risere parenti, nec deus hunc mensa dea nec dignata cubili est.

Begin, baby boy, to recognize your mother with a smile, she to whom ten months have brought travail. Begin, baby boy! No god honours with his table, and no goddess honours with her bed, him on whom his parents have not smiled.57

This puer has long been interpreted as a reference to Octavian.58 Since this poem was written very early in Octavian’s career, however, the likelihood that this is a reference to Octavian is uncertain. The internal reference to Pollio’s consulship suggests that it was written in or before 40 B.C. but the poem was not published until 37 B.C., along with the rest of the Eclogues.59 Octavian/Augustus certainly could, nevertheless, suggest that he was the puer and reference the poem in subsequent years when he was promoting the idea that he was the man responsible for Rome’s golden age.60

It would seem, therefore, that Greek ideas about the golden age played an important role in the re-interpretation of the tenth saeculum that occurred in the Late Republic. The lack of details about when and how this process occurred prevents us from concluding, however, what

56 “Pure Lucina, smile on the birth of the child under whom, first, the iron race shall cease, and a golden race shall spring up throughout the world” Virgil. Eclogues, 4.8-9. Galinsky 1996, pp. 92, 100. Zanker 1988, p. 44. Brenk 1980, pp. 81, 83.
57 Virgil. Eclogues, 4.60-63.
59 Brenk 1980, p. 83.
role specific historical agents such as the Sibylline prophecies and the poetry of Virgil played in it.

3.3 A Harbinger of the Golden Age

This process did, nevertheless, take place and the *sidus Iulium* was the perfect symbol of this transformation’s final form and of the fact that Augustus’ virtue and valour had made the golden age possible. The appearance of the *sidus* at the games presided over by Octavian in 44 B.C. had made this perfectly clear. In Book Six of the *Aeneid*, Virgil has Anchises express this idea explicitly:

Hic vir, hic est, tibi quem promitti saepius audis,
Augustus Caesar, divi genus, aurea condet saecula….

This man, this man here whom you’ve quite often heard promised to you, Augustus Caesar, the offspring of a god, will bring about a golden age….61

In Book One, Jupiter makes clear to Venus that at long last, under Augustus’ steady and divinely-inspired guidance, “…aspera tum positis mitescent saecula bellis.”62 The gates of war will be locked forever thus giving Rome peace.63 The clearest suggestion that this golden age was directly connected with the appearance of the *sidus Iulium* comes in Virgil’s *Ninth Eclogue*:

Ecce Dionaei processit Caesaris astrum,
astrum quo segetes gauderent frugibus et quo
duceret apricis in collibus uva colorem.

Behold, the star of Dionaean Caesar has passed across the sky, the star through which the crops will rejoice in their produce and

62 “With wars set aside, the harsh years will grow mild” Virgil. *Aeneid*, 1.290.
through which the vine will bring forth its colour on the sunny
hillsides.\textsuperscript{64}

The appearance of the \textit{sidus} constitutes, then, a great blessing for the Roman people.\textsuperscript{55}

The Roman people would have to wait nearly three decades after the omen of the golden
age appeared, however, for the arrival of this much anticipated, and promoted, blessing. Indeed, it
was not until 17 B.C. that the time came for the transition between \textit{saecula} and the traditional
festival that marked this occasion, the \textit{ludi saeculares}. The heralds that traveled about the city in
early May made it clear that the wait had been worthwhile for the people of Rome because they
were about to enjoy a festival grander and more important than any celebrated within living
memory.\textsuperscript{66}

The coins of Marcus Sanquinius that we had occasion to examine in Chapter Two as
examples of Augustus’ connection with the cult of \textit{Divus Iulius} were in fact issued within this
context as a commemoration of the \textit{ludi saeculares}. Understanding as we now do the context
within which these coins were produced, we can now see that the appearance of the \textit{sidus Iulium}
on these coins was not only a reference to \textit{Divus Iulius}. It was also an attempt to make a direct
connection between the purpose of the games, the ushering in of a new golden age, and the man
whom the \textit{sidus} had marked out as the one who would lead the Roman people into it.\textsuperscript{67} The \textit{sidus}
was, then, a polyvalent symbol.\textsuperscript{68} An extent coin, an \textit{aureus} minted by Sanquinius, portrays the
procession of the heralds throughout Rome.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{64} Virgil. \textit{Eclogues}, 9.46-50.
\item \textsuperscript{67} Hall 1986, p. 2583. That the comet on these coins is in fact the \textit{sidus Iulium} is not doubted, especially
because there are no known comet sightings from 18, 17, or 16 B.C. and because the legend DIVUS
\item \textsuperscript{68} This is a term employed by Tamsyn Barton in her article, “Augustus and Capricorn: Astrological
\end{itemize}
Figure 8: An aureus of Sanquinius depicting a herald of the ludi saeculares.\(^{69}\)

On the herald’s shield, there is a star or a star-like image. Some scholars, most notably Boyce, have convincingly suggested that this star is none other than the *sidus Iulium*.\(^{70}\) The design does indeed closely resemble the star that appears above the youthful head on the obverse.

If this hypothesis is correct, then the *sidus Iulium* was inserted visually into the games. Even if it is not, however, the other uncontested appearances of the *sidus Iulium* on Sanquinius’ coins that we explored in Chapter Two indicate that the *sidus Iulium* was at the very least closely associated with these once-in-a-lifetime games.

### 3.4 The Ludi Saeculares

The infrequency with which the *ludi saeculares* were celebrated, coupled with the great antiquity that these games were believed to have, gave them a great air of mystery.\(^{71}\) The fact that no one alive knew how the games were supposed to be celebrated save for the *quindecimviri sacris faciundis*, the priests charged with the responsibility for organizing them, however, meant

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\(^{69}\) Image from Galinsky 1996, p. 105 (fig. 40).
that the games could be altered by someone like Augustus looking to promote an ideological message.\textsuperscript{72} Augustus placed himself in a position in which he could largely control the games by becoming one of the four magistri of the quindecimviri and by having his lieutenant Agrippa also serve among them.\textsuperscript{73} Letters written by Augustus to the quindecimviri and the Senate that are preserved in the Acta, the records of the games, indicate Augustus’ important role in the organization of the games.\textsuperscript{74} In one letter, Augustus indicates that he wanted “bi[ni chori” composed of “pueros virginesque patrimos matrim[osque ad carmen can]endum.”\textsuperscript{75} This request as we will soon see was granted, along with many others.

As the leading member of the quindecimviri, moreover, Augustus controlled the only surviving instructions pertaining to how the ludi saeculares were supposed to be celebrated.\textsuperscript{76} The Sibylline Books we encountered earlier contained these instructions. Dio reports that these books were edited by the quindecimviri under Augustus’ guidance in 18 B.C.\textsuperscript{77} These men organized the collection of prophecies into one coherent volume in which true prophecies were retained and false prophecies were discarded. The resultant volume was then placed in the base of the statue of

\begin{footnotes}
\item[72] Davis 2001, p. 113.
\item[74] The \textit{acta} were inscribed in bronze on marble tablets and put on display in the Campus Martius the location closely associated with the games, the Terentum. These records were discovered during archaeological excavations in the Campus Martius in 1890 and 1930. Coarelli 1997, pp. 74, 87. Davis 2001, p. 112. Feeney 1998, p. 30.
\item[76] Davis 2001, p. 113.
\item[77] Cassius Dio. \textit{Roman History}, 54.17.
\end{footnotes}
Apollo in the Temple of Apollo Palatinus where it could not be disturbed without Augustus’ knowledge.\(^\text{78}\)

It was subsequently to these edited *Sibylline Books* and to the advice of the noted jurist Ateius Capito, an expert in religious law, that the *quindecimviri* turned as they began to organize the *ludi saeculares*. Capito also developed a system of calculating the timing of the games and it was likely to this system that Augustus appealed in justifying his choice of 17 B.C.\(^\text{79}\) The basis of this system was the assumption that the last Secular Games had been celebrated in 126 B.C. Capito asserted that the games were supposed to be celebrated every one hundred and ten years.\(^\text{80}\) This assertion is contrary, however, to the traditional interval of one hundred years and to the fact that the previous Secular Games had actually been held in 149 B.C.\(^\text{81}\) Censorinus notes the two conflicting dates and systems of calculation.\(^\text{82}\) He cites Varro and Livy as his authorities that the one-hundred-year interval is the traditional one but also notes, without naming authorities, that there were supporters of the modern recent system of calculation.\(^\text{83}\) It would seem, therefore, that the system of one-hundred-and-ten-year intervals and the selection of 17 B.C. were part of an attempt on the part of the *quindecimviri* and thus probably Augustus to justify their choices. The reason the games were not celebrated earlier is perhaps due to the fact that the Roman world was not sufficiently stable internally and externally until the years immediately preceding 17 B.C. to declare that a golden age was at hand.\(^\text{84}\)

\(^\text{79}\) Davis 2001, p. 114.
\(^\text{81}\) Ramsey and Licht 1997, pp. 142-143.
\(^\text{82}\) Censorinus. *De Die Natali*, 17.11.
\(^\text{84}\) Galinsky 1996, p. 101. Stefan Weinstock argues that Julius Caesar had intended to celebrate the Secular Games before departing for his Parthian expedition. This would have placed his games roughly in line with the traditional interval of one hundred years. Weinstock 1971, pp. 191-197. Ramsey and Licht 1997, p. 143.
3.4.1 The Traditional Ludi Saeculares

The timing of the games was just one of the many changes that Augustus and the quindecimviri sacris faciundis made to the traditional form of the Secular Games and, in fact, to the very reason why these games were held. The Romans attributed the first Secular Games to a Sabine man named Valesius, from whom the gens Valeria claimed descent. This Valesius had desperately searched for a cure for his gravely ill children and ultimately discovered that water from the River Tiber heated on the altar of Dis Pater and Proserpina was the answer. In gratitude for the gods’ assistance, Valesius performed rites of thanksgiving that lasted three days. The sources offer a variant interpretation wherein Valerius Publicola held the first games in 508 B.C., also in honour of Dis Pater and Proserpina, to avert a plague. In both versions, the rites are performed at a subterranean altar located in the Campus Martius adjacent to the bank of the Tiber at a site known as the Terentum.

The traditional purpose of these rituals, then, was to ward off disease and to restore health, of children in Valesius’ case and of the Roman people in Publicola’s. Dis Pater and Proserpina were the only gods to whom these rituals were devoted. The Secular Games were celebrated in this way by the Roman people for centuries until the ludi saeculares of Augustus.

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85 This is, perhaps, part of a Valerian attempt to justify that family’s traditional association with the games. Hall 1986, pp. 2569-2570.
88 Coarelli 1997, pp. 74, 87.
89 Turcan 2000, p. 83.
3.4.2 The *Ludi Saeculares* of 17 B.C.

In Augustus’ hands the *ludi Saeculares* ceased to be the expression of a desire for deliverance.\(^{91}\) Rather, the purpose of Augustus’ games was to express thanksgiving to all of the gods for the deliverance, peace, and prosperity that had already been given to them through the agency of Augustus.\(^{92}\) The gods had shown their involvement in the events that had led to the new golden age through the omen they had sent in 44 B.C., the *sidus Iulium*. The specific gods Augustus had in mind can be deduced from the proceedings of the games, which were in themselves a carefully orchestrated series of events.\(^{93}\)

These events began on May 31\(^{94}\) and lasted until June 3\(^{rd}\), 17 B.C. Preparatory rituals including the purification of the entire population of the city through the use of *suffimenta*, a substance composed of sulphur and pitch, had already been performed during the preceding weeks.\(^{94}\) A coin minted by Lucius Mescinius in 17 B.C. depicts the distribution of the *suffimenta* by Augustus.\(^{95}\) During this time, sacrifices of first fruits were also made to Apollo Palatinus and Diana.\(^{96}\)

![Augustus distributes the suffimenta](image)

**Figure 9: Augustus distributes the suffimenta.**\(^{97}\)

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\(^{94}\) Turcan 2000, p. 84.

\(^{95}\) *Zosimus, New History*, 2.5.1.

\(^{96}\) Turcan 2000, p. 84.

\(^{97}\) AUG. SUF. P. = Augustus suffimenta populo. Image from Cooley 2003 (L26).
The games proper began with sacrifices to the Moirae (Fates) at the Terentum and a feast for Juno and Diana hosted by one-hundred and ten matrons on the night of May 31st/June 1st. On June 1st, white bulls were sacrificed to Jupiter, a white heifer was slaughtered in Juno’s honour, and theatrical performances were given for Apollo. During the night of June 1st/June 2nd, a sacrifice of three kinds of cakes was performed for the Ilithyiae, the goddesses of childbirth. The night of June 2nd/3rd saw the sacrifice of a pregnant black sow to Tellus (Earth), with the sacrificial victim and its recipient both clearly associated with fertility and reproduction.

June 3rd represented the culmination and conclusion of the ritual. Sacrifices were performed for Apollo, Diana, and Latona at the Temple of Apollo Palatinus and then repeated on the Capitoline for Jupiter and Juno. Both sets of sacrifices were accompanied by the performance of the Carmen Saeculare, the poem Horace had written for the occasion. Augustus had insisted upon the performance of this hymn as we saw earlier. The poem, a prayer, addresses all of the gods honoured by the games but focuses especial attention upon Apollo and Diana. Both are addressed in terms that emphasize their celestial qualities, Apollo as the “lucidum caeli decus” and Diana as the “siderum regina bicornis.” The central hope expressed by the poem is that these deities will continue to help Rome prosper. That they were the two deities with whom Augustus most closely associated himself is almost certainly not a coincidence.

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99 Turcan 2000, p. 84.
100 Turcan 2000, p. 84. The promotion of childbirth as an indispensable part of Rome’s regeneration had been an important part of the lex Iulia, which had been brought before the Senate by Augustus in 18 B.C. Severy 2003, p. 59.
101 Turcan 2000, p. 84.
102 Turcan 2000, pp. 84-85.
104 “The gleaming jewel of the sky” and “the two-horned queen of the stars” Horace. Carmen Saeculare, ll. 2, 35.
105 Horace. Carmen Saeculare, ll. 67-68.
106 Davis 2001, p. 120.
had been through their assistance and support that Augustus had been able to bring about the Golden Age. The *Carmen Saeculare* and indeed the *ludi saeculares* as a whole represent, therefore, an expression of thanksgiving to the gods as much for Augustus as for the new *saeculum* of prosperity.

The *games* seem to have had the desired effect, as can be adjudged from the fact that at least four of Augustus’ successors held *ludi saeculares* of their own. Claudius clearly recognized the value of holding the games because he manipulated the system of calculation in order to justify his decision to hold the games in A.D. 47. Domitian justified his decision to hold the games in A.D. 88 by appealing to Augustus’ system of calculation. Septimius Severus held them in A.D. 204. Even one of the soldier emperors, Philip the Arab, held them in A.D. 248. Each of these emperors declared that a new golden age of prosperity and peace was at hand. Reformulated in the hands of Augustus, Agrippa, and the *quindecimviri sacris faciundis*, the Secular Games had become a powerful political tool. They had been transformed from a ritual expiation into the celebration of a golden age.

Whatever Augustus’ role had been in the transformation of the ideas concerning the tenth *saeculum* that underlay the games, at the very least he recognized the political and ideological potential of this transformation and chose to associate and promote himself with it. The *sidus Iulium* was an ever-present reminder for the Roman people of this connection and provided a simple and convenient visual way to evoke it. As we have seen, this evocation was repeated in a variety of media.

As this chapter and Chapter Two have shown, the *sidus Iulium* was a powerful symbol. It embodied the popular beliefs into which Augustus deliberately incorporated himself as a means

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to promote himself and his auctoritas. In Chapter Two, we saw that the sidus helped establish the belief that Octavian/Augustus was the son of a god. In this chapter, we explored how the sidus helped spread the belief that Augustus was responsible for a new golden age. But the sidus Iulium was not the only sidus that helped Augustus’ auctoritas rocket far beyond anything achieved by any Roman before him.

Chapter 4

Capricorn and the Power of Astrology

Astrology gave Augustus his second sidus. Astrology had had a presence in the Roman world since at least the late-third century B.C. Initially its acceptance and popularity seem to have been confined to Rome’s lower classes but in the middle of the first century B.C. astrology’s support began to rise remarkably among upper-class Romans. Some of these Romans were the great generals of the Late Republic who saw in astrology a mode of divination that lay beyond the control of the Senate. An alliance had been forged between politics and astrology before this time in the Hellenistic world including, as we shall see, in the court of the king of Commagene, Antiochus I. The Roman world would have to wait until the reign of Augustus, however, to see this potent relationship between power and the stars, at least on a significant scale. Augustus used astrology and its language of fate and destiny to emphasize that his status as the bringer of peace and prosperity to the Roman world was his destiny that had been written in the stars. In so doing, the man of destiny gained a great deal of auctoritas.

Augustus chose to reinforce his alliance with astrology with a symbol that could, like the sidus Iulium, be easily and frequently reproduced. The symbol Augustus chose was the constellation Capricorn. He chose Capricorn undoubtedly because of its meaning and symbolism in contemporary astrological thought. As we shall see, Capricorn like all zodiacal signs had many meanings and Augustus clearly felt a connection with some of them. Indeed, he used Capricorn to promote himself on coins and gems, in literature, and with a monument in the Northern Campus Martius. Augustus clearly recognized that Capricorn could, if used properly, help make him seem like a man marked out by fate and thus like a man who had to be listened to, the very definition of auctoritas.
4.1 The Rise of Astrology

As powerful as astrology came to be in the Roman world during and after the reign of Augustus, the Romans were never quite sure of its origins. Babylonia and Egypt were the two most common candidates. Egypt was likely considered because it had since Herodotus been viewed as the repository and source of all foreign knowledge. Others believed that astrology had been come from Babylonia. The usual narrative held that a Babylonian named Berossus introduced astrology into the Greek world and that from the Greek world in turn astrology came to Rome. This is almost certainly why astrologers were given the name ‘Chaldaeans’ first by the Greeks and then by the Romans. Whatever its origin, astrology nevertheless appeared and thrived in the post-classical Greek world.

At that time, Babylonian astrological ideas seem to have arrived from the East, as part of the general diffusion of culture and ideas that occurred during the Hellenistic period, and to have fused with Greek cosmology and mathematics. Although details about this synthesis are unclear, the result was a sophisticated system that combined Babylonian ideas about the constellations, the zodiac, and mathematics with Greek mathematical methodology and cosmological theory. The resultant system came to influence other, more well-established disciplines such as philosophy,

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2 Barton 1994a, pp. 9, 10.
meteorology, botany, and medicine. This influence gave the nascent discipline of astrology a great degree of respect and helped make it a very important method of divination and prediction. Another reason why astrology became influential in the realm of divination was the fact that astrology had the allure of being a precise and modern science. This made it seem to be the best available method of knowing the future. The deeply-abiding belief among the Greeks that the stars played a powerful role in human life further enhanced astrology’s influence. Agriculture described the role of the stars using an idea known as sympatheia (cosmic sympathy), which held that everything in the universe was causally united and governed by heimarmene (fate). In such a universe, when one element is affected, everything else is affected. The concept of sympatheia thus explained scientifically the influence that the planets and stars were commonly believed to have on human character and destiny. An astrologer could point out that sympatheia and the regularity of the universe could be witnessed on a nightly basis among the stars, which moved with unswerving regularity. It was precisely this regularity that enabled the practitioners of


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astrology to be able, with the proper training, to predict the motions of the stars and thus their effects on human life.\textsuperscript{16}

This proper training made astrologers a highly desirable source of advice.\textsuperscript{17} An astrologer’s client usually wanted to know what the result of an intended action would be or what the conditions at his birth had destined the course of his life to be.\textsuperscript{18} The former was called horary astrology; the latter was called genethlialogy, which involved the construction and analysis of horoscopes.\textsuperscript{19} Both forms of astrology became an attractive alternative to traditional divination in the Hellenistic world to those who wished to gain what was perceived to be secure knowledge about the future.\textsuperscript{20}

4.2 The Advent of Astrology in the Roman World

As influential a discipline as astrology became in the Hellenistic East, it was destined to become even more powerful and influential among the Romans, a people who strongly believed in the power of the stars.\textsuperscript{21} When and how astrology entered the Roman world is not entirely clear but the likeliest timeframe is the late third or second centuries when the influence of Greek culture in the Roman world intensified as a result of Rome’s conquests in the East.\textsuperscript{22} These conquests brought waves of Greeks, especially slaves, and their ideas to Rome.\textsuperscript{23} It is entirely

\textsuperscript{17} Cumont 1960, p. xiii.
\textsuperscript{21} Le Boeuffe 1989, p. 3.
possible that itinerant Greek astrologers numbered among these immigrants.\textsuperscript{24} Pliny the Elder 
suggests that one such astrologer was a man named Manilius Antiochus, a slave who had been 
brought to Rome from the East. Pliny refers to him as the founder of astrology in Italy.\textsuperscript{25} Whether 
or not this man actually existed (and this is debatable) Manilius Antiochus likely represents a 
phenomenon that was occurring during the time that Pliny describes.\textsuperscript{26} 

Definitive evidence that these early astrologers did in fact exist can be first found in Cato 
the Elder’s \textit{De Agri Cultura}, which dates to ca. 160 B.C. There Cato advises the good farm 
overseer not to consult fortune-tellers, so as to prevent the overseers’ slaves from being exposed 
to their ideas. Among these fortune-tellers, Cato includes the Chaldaeans: “Haruspicem, augurem, 
hariolum, Chaldaeum nequem consuluisse velit.”\textsuperscript{27} By 160 B.C., then, the Chaldaeans were 
common enough to be considered as much a threat as any other class of fortune-tellers. A passage 
of Ennius’ \textit{Telamon}, preserved in Cicero’s \textit{De Divinatione}, suggests the place in Rome where 
these prophetic charlatans tended to congregate: “Non habeo denique nauci Marsum augurem / 
non vicanos haruspices, non de circo astrologos, non Isiacos coniectores, non interpretes 
somnium….\textsuperscript{28} The astrologi fit seamlessly among Rome’s naturalized ‘charlatans’ who have set 
up shop near the Circus Maximus.\textsuperscript{29} It was there that Rome’s ‘prophecy market’ flourished and 
that these experts peddled their wares to the general population:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textit{Emperors: Astrology and Politics in Julio-Claudian Rome}. Doctoral Dissertation: University of Wisconsin-
\item \textsuperscript{25} Pliny the Elder. \textit{Natural History}, 35.199. Barton 1994a, p. 34. Bakhouche 2002, p. 35.
\item \textsuperscript{26} It has been suggested that the name is an accretion perhaps derived from the name of the poet Manilius. 
\item \textsuperscript{27}a Let [the overseer] not wish by any means to consult the \textit{haruspex}, the augur, the soothsayer, or the 
\item \textsuperscript{28} “I couldn’t care less about the Marsian augur, or the nearby haruspices, or the astrologers at the circus, or 
the Isiacan interpreters, or the interpreters of dreams…” Cicero. \textit{De Divinatione}, 1.132.
\item \textsuperscript{29} Barton 1994a, pp. 32-33. Cramer 1954, p. 40.
\end{itemize}
… superstitiosi vates, impudentes harioli, aut inertes aut insani quibus egestas imperat qui sibi semitam non sapient, alteri monstrant viam. Quibus divitas pollicerentur ab iis drachmam ipsi petunt de his divitiis sibi deduent drachmam, reddant cetera.\(^{30}\)

… But superstitious prophets and impudent soothsayers, averse to work or mad, or ruled by want, who direct others how to proceed and yet do not know which road they should take. They beg a coin from those to whom they promise wealth. Let them take their coin from what they promised as toll and pass the balance on.

It would seem, then, that in this early period the general population of Rome was a ready consumer of astrological predictions, so much so that by 139 B.C. the astrologers attracted the attention of the praetor peregrinus, Cn. Cornelius Hispalus, who believed them to be petty crooks who were cheating the Roman people. As such, Hispalus issued a decree ordering all Chaldaeans to depart Italy:


Cn. [Gnaeus] Cornelius Hispalus, praetor peregrinus, in the consulate of M. Popilius Laeneas and L. Calpurnius, ordered the Chaldaeans in an edict to leave the city and Italy within ten days because through their lies, by means of fallacious interpretation of the stars, they were fomenting in unstable and shallow minds an ardour from which they themselves profited financially.\(^{31}\)

This decree suggests that the astrologers were seen not only as hucksters but as a source of unrest among the common people during that time, unrest on which men like Tiberius and Gaius

\(^{30}\) Cicero. *De Divinatione*, 1.132.

\(^{31}\) Valerius Maximus. *Memorable Doings and Sayings*, 1.3.3.
Gracchus would later capitalize.\textsuperscript{32} The biggest threat that astrologers in particular posed was their status as foreigners beyond the (religious) control of the state.\textsuperscript{33}

The decree of 139 B.C. and later attempts to keep these counsellors of the common people in check amounted to nothing.\textsuperscript{34} Astrology continued to grow in popularity among the general population during the centuries that preceded and followed Augustus’ reign. In the process, astrology became a major force in Roman life.\textsuperscript{35} Many of the details of astrology’s growth in appeal among the general population are limited by the fact that the sources we have that describe astrology were written by, and for, the elite and thus say little about popular astrology.\textsuperscript{36}

Some sources do, nevertheless, exist. Most of them are literary and come from the genres of comedy and satire, thus suggesting that astrology was a common enough phenomenon to be considered worthy of jest. Plautus’ \textit{Amphitryon} is one such source. In it the character Sosia, Amphitryon’s slave, speaks lines that betray a familiarity among the audience with the stars and perhaps rudimentary astrology:

\begin{quote}
nam neque se Septentriones quoquam in caelo commovent, 
neque se Luna quoquam mutat atque uti exorta est semel, 
nec Iugulae neque Vesperugo neque Vergiliae occidunt. ita 
statim stant signa, neque nox quoquam concedit die.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{34} Whitfield 2001, p. 67.
\textsuperscript{36} Barton 1994a, pp. 32-33, 160.
Why, the septentriones haven’t moved a step anywhere in the sky, and the moon’s just as it was when it first rose, and Orion’s belt (Iugulae) and the Evening Star (Vesperugo) and the Pleiades (Vergiliae) aren’t setting either. Yes, the constellations are standing totally still and no sign of day anywhere.\(^{37}\)

Although Plautus employs native, Latin terms for these astral phenomena, the ideas expressed, especially the motion of the stars and constellations, may be astrological.\(^{38}\) Later sources indicate that the appeal of astrology among the common people only increased between the second century B.C. and the first and second centuries of our era. Juvenal’s *Sixth Satire* suggests that astrology had especial appeal among women. The wife of the addressee, a woman named Tanaquil, frequently consults the Chaldaeans:

\[
\text{Tamen [Tanaquil] ignorant quid sidus triste minetur} \\
\text{Saturni, quo laeta Venus se proferat astro,} \\
\text{quis mensis damnis, quae dentur tempora lucro:} \\
\text{illius occursus etiam vitare memento,} \\
\text{in cuius manibus ceu pinguia sucina tritas} \\
\text{cernis ephemeridas, quae nullum consultit et iam} \\
\text{consultitur….}
\]

Yet she at least cannot tell what Saturn’s gloomy / conjunction portends, or under which constellation / Venus is most propitious; which months bring loss, which gain. / When you meet such a woman, clutching her well-thumbed / almanacs like a string of amber worry-beads, keep very clear of her. She isn’t shopping around / For expert advice; she’s an expert herself….\(^{39}\)

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\(^{37}\) Plautus. *Amphitryon* ll. 273-275. Plautus’ audience also would have been familiar with the configuration of the sky from their use of stars as a way to measure time and as an aid for navigation, something that was of great importance in agrarian societies. This traditional need for the stars would have made astrology, which systematized and regularized these traditional practices, very appealing. John T. Ramsey and A. Lewis Licht. *The Comet of 44 B.C. and Caesar’s Funeral Games*. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997, p. 98. Cramer 1954, p. 44. Kostopoulos 2004, pp. 37. Le Boeuff 1989, pp. 15-16, 26. Thomas Habinek. “Probing the entrails of the universe: astrology as bodily knowledge in Manilius’ *Astronomica*” in *Ordering Knowledge in the Roman Empire*, Jason Konig and Tim Whitmarsh, edd. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 229.

\(^{38}\) Le Boeuff 1989, p. 10.

Such a portrayal is, of course, a gross exaggeration but it does suggest that astrology, along with other forms of fortune-telling, was of interest to Rome’s women.

Juvenal reinforces this idea later in the same satire: quae nudis longum ostendit cervicibus aurum consulti ante fals delphinorumque columnas.**40** It would seem that the fortune-telling market flourished as much (if not more) in Juvenal’s time as it did in Ennius’. Slightly later testimony provided by Apuleius’ *Golden Ass* suggests that the popularity of the ‘Chaldaeans’ remained high outside of Rome: “Nam et Corinthi nunc apud passim Chaldaeus quidam hospes miris totam civitatem responsis turbulentat et arcana fatorum stipibus emerendis edicit in vulgum.”**41** In the second century of our era, then, astrology was still available in Greece, one of astrology’s first homes.

A passage from Petronius’ *Satyricon* reveals that astrology was something familiar to freedmen like Trimalchio by the first century of our era. Indeed, Trimalchio manages to incorporate astrology into a course of his dinner party: “Rotundum enim repositorium duodecim habebat signa in orbe disposita, super quae proprium convenientemque materiae structor imposuerat cibum.”**42** The social class that Trimalchio was emulating was the aristocracy and the fact that Trimalchio would think to include astrology among his attempts to seem aristocratic suggests that by that time the appeal of astrology had broadened to include the upper class.**43** Indeed, astrology was common enough an interest among the elite for Pliny the Elder, an upper-

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40 “Here, by the dolphin-columns / And the public stands, old whores in their off-shoulder / Dresses and thin gold neck-chains come for advice…” Juvenal. *Satires*, 6.589-590.

41 “There is in Corinth a traveling Chaldaean who throws the whole town into an uproar with his astonishing responses and reveals to those who pay the price the secrets of their destinies....” Apuleius. *Golden Ass*, 2.12. Le Boeuffe 1989, p. 65.

42 “It was a round plate with the twelve signs of the zodiac spaced around the edge and on each the chef had put a morsel of food suited by nature to its symbol.” Petronius. *Satyricon*, 35.4.

class Roman, to chastise his (upper class) contemporaries for being so infatuated with astrology.\textsuperscript{44} This broadening had, in fact, begun and been largely completed in the first century B.C.\textsuperscript{45}

### 4.2.1 Astrology and the Roman Elite

This process of broadening had not been seamless, however. Astrology continued to have vocal opponents among the aristocracy well into the first century. These were men following in the tradition of Cato the Elder who believed that astrology was something for the \textit{vulgus}.\textsuperscript{46} The opinions of such men can be found in the words of the interlocutor Marcus in Cicero’s \textit{De Divinatione}.\textsuperscript{47} While Marcus is critical of all forms of divination, he heaps the most scorn upon astrology and its practitioners:

\begin{quote}
[Astrologi] non veri simile solum, sed etiam verum esse censent, perinde utcunque temperatus sit aer, ita pueros orientis animari atque formari, ex eoque ingenia, mores, animum, corpus, actionem vitae, casus cuiusque eventusque fingi.
\end{quote}

[Astrologers] think it not only plausible but also true that howsoever the atmosphere is modified, so the births of children are animated and shaped, and by this force, their mentalities, habits, mind, body, action, fortune in life, and experience are fashioned.\textsuperscript{48}

Marcus rejects the Chaldaeans’ claim that they are able to do this and insists, using the words of the Greek astronomer Eudoxus, that “Chaldaeis in praedictione et in notatione cuiusque vitae ex natali die minime esse credendum.”\textsuperscript{49} Such claims are ludicrous in Marcus’ opinion and constitute a “delirationem incredibilem et tanta dementia” and one of the most pernicious of the many

\begin{footnotes}
\item[47] See Chapter One for a full discussion of the scholarship on the question of Cicero’s ‘true’ opinion.
\end{footnotes}
superstitions: “fusa per gentis, oppressit omnium fere animos atque hominum imbecillitatem occupavit.” Indeed, Marcus feels that astrology, like all other forms of superstition, must be uprooted because:

Instat enim et urget et, quo te cumque verteris, persequitur, sive tu vatem sive tu omen audieris, sive immolaris sive avem adspexeris, si Chaldaeum, si haruspicem videris.

[Superstition is] ever at your heels to urge you on; it follows you at every turn. It is with you when you listen to a prophet, or an omen; when you offer sacrifices, or watch the flight of birds; when you consult an astrologer or a soothsayer….

Marcus’ opinion is not the only one expressed in the *De Divinatione*, however. Indeed, the interlocutor Quintus speaks first and presents a defence of the many kinds of divination, among which he includes astrology. Quintus claims that the great age of astrology makes it a very valuable and important divinatory art. As he says ironically:

…etiam Babylonem et eos qui e Caucaso caeli signa servantes numeris motibus stellarum cursus persequuntur; condemnemus, in quam, hos aut stultitiae aut vanitatis aut impudentiae, qui quadringenta septuaginta milia annorum, ut ipsi dicunt, monumentis comprehensa continenti et mentiri iudicemus….

Let us scorn the Babylonians too and those astrologers who from the top of Mt. Caucasus observe the celestial signs and with the aid of mathematics follow the courses of the stars; let us I say convict of folly, falsehood, and shamelessness the men whose records, as they themselves assert, cover a period of 470 000 years, and let us pronounce them liars….

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49 “No reliance whatsoever is to be placed in the Chaldaean astrologers when they profess to forecast a man’s future from the position of the stars on the day of his birth.” Cicero. *De Divinatione*, 2.87.
50 “[It is an] incredible delirium and tremendous dementia that has spread among the peoples [of the world] and that has oppressed the minds of almost everyone and taken control of men’s imbecility” Cicero. *De Divinatione*, 2.90, 2.94, 2.148.
52 Cicero. *De Divinatione*, 1.36.
Quintus also points out that Marcus himself incorporated astrological ideas into his poetic
description of his own consulship entitled *De Consulatu Suo*, which Quintus quotes:

> Et, si stellarum motus cursusque vagantis
> nosse velis, quae sint signorum in sede locatae…
> omnia iam cernes divina mente notata

When one has learned the motions and various paths of planets,
stars that abide in the seat of the signs… then will he know that
all [the signs] are controlled by an infinite wisdom.  

Thus even the man who would go on to condemn astrology in Book II could not stop himself
from being attracted to it. The attitude toward astrology expressed by Quintus and hinted at in the
passage from Cicero’s *De Consulatu Suo* quoted by Quintus in the *De Divinatione* demonstrate
that the opinions of some of Rome’s elite regarding astrology were changing and becoming
favourable.  

One reason for this change in opinion seems to have been the popularity of Aratus’ poem
*Phaenomena*, which was a versification of the work of the Greek astronomer Eudoxus. From its
first chapter, Roman readers of the *Phaenomena* would have been exposed to theories about the
constellations, the zodiac, and a multitude of other ideas about the stars.  

The number of young Romans who translated it into Latin, from Cicero (ca. 89-86) to Germanicus Caesar, and showed
interest in it hints at its popularity.  

Hyginus, who wrote a treatise on astrology, wrote a
commentary on the *Phaenomena* and was influenced by it just as were Virgil, Manilius, and
many others.  

29.  
57 Le Boeuffle 1989, p. 8
Another reason for the aristocracy’s change in attitude toward astrology was the growth in the number of Romans who had a favourable attitude toward the Stoics, who themselves likely looked upon astrology favourably. This favourable opinion gave astrology a great deal of credibility among the upper classes.\textsuperscript{58} It is not at all clear when the Stoics developed this favourable attitude. Cicero reports in the \textit{De Divinatione} that Diogenes of Babylon, the head of the Stoa who came to Rome in 156 B.C., claimed that astrologers were able to tell the disposition and future vocation of a child from the stars but Cicero does not say whether Diogenes thought astrology was in general a legitimate form of divination.\textsuperscript{59} Cicero makes clear, however, that Diogenes’ successor Panaetius regarded astrology with skepticism.\textsuperscript{60} It is not, in fact, until we come to Panaetius’ pupil and successor Posidonius of Apamea that we find a Stoic who seems to have an unequivocally favourable attitude toward astrology.\textsuperscript{61} One of our sources for Posidonius’ favourable opinion is St. Augustine who, though hostile toward the doctrines he was describing, would have had access to Posidonius’ works should he have wished to consult them. Augustine describes Posidonius as follows:

\begin{quote}
Posidonius Stoicus, multum astrologiae deditus, eadem constitutione astrorum natos eademque conceptos solebat asserere. Ita quod medicus pertinere credebat ad simillimam temperiem valetudinis, hoc philosophus astrologus ad vim constitutionemque siderum, quae fuerat quo tempore concepti natique sunt.
\end{quote}

Posidonius the Stoic was much given to astrology [and] used to assert that [the likeness of twins] happened because they were born and conceived under the same constellation. Thus what the physician thought was due to a similar physical constitution, this

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{59} Cicero. \textit{De Divinatione}, 2.90-91.
\textsuperscript{60} Cicero. \textit{De Divinatione}, 2.97.
\textsuperscript{61} Barton 1994a, p. 35.
\end{flushright}
philosophus-astrologus ascribed to the influence and position of the stars at the time when they were conceived and born.\textsuperscript{62}

This passage has been interpreted to mean that Posidonius was favourable to astrology and that it was he, as the man who oversaw the education of countless young Roman aristocrats on Rhodes, who played a large part in the popularization of astrology among the Roman elite.\textsuperscript{63} Indeed, it has been argued that Quintus’ speech in the \textit{De Divinatione} was based upon the ideas Cicero had learned at the feet of Posidonius decades before.\textsuperscript{64}

At the very least, Posidonius and other Stoics taught these young Roman aristocrats about the Stoic conception of fate. Their conception of fate was essentially the same as the one that lay behind the theories of astrology. Cicero provides a useful summary of the Stoic’s understanding of fate in Book II of his \textit{De Natura Deorum} through the interlocutor Lucilius Balbus, a Stoic: “Quid enim potest esse tam apertum tamque perspicuum, cum caelum suspeximus caelestiaque contemplati sumus, quam esse aliquod numen praestantissimae mentis, quo haec regantur?”\textsuperscript{65} The similarity between this Stoic doctrine and astrology likely would have made astrology appealing to those students who accepted Posidonius’ lessons about destiny, whether or not he ever actually taught them about astrology.\textsuperscript{66} The role played by philosophy in the acceptance of astrology among the aristocracy was likely an important one but it should not be over-emphasized. Not every Roman found philosophy appealing and some, influenced by traditional attitudes, considered it an unmanly and suspicious activity unsuitable for a good Roman. It seems,

\begin{enumerate}
\item \textsuperscript{62} St. Augustine. \textit{City of God}, 5.2.
\item \textsuperscript{64} The arguments presented in Book II, in turn, were based upon the writings of the sceptic Carneades and his student Clitomachus. William A. Falconer. “Introduction,” in \textit{De Divinatione in Cicero: De Senectute, de Amicitia, de Divinatione}. William Armistead Falconer, ed. and trans. London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1953, p. 217.
\item \textsuperscript{65} “For when we gaze upward to the sky and contemplate the heavenly bodies, what can be so obvious and manifest as that there must exist some power possessing transcendental intelligence by whom these things are ruled?” Cicero. \textit{De Natura Deorum}, 2.4.
\item \textsuperscript{66} Barton 1994a, p. 35. Barton 1994c, pp. 37-38.
\end{enumerate}
however, that in the Late Republic and onward, this opinion about philosophy was in the minority.⁶⁷

Two Roman elites who lived during this time of transition stand out as particularly ardent supporters of astrology. One was Publius Nigidius Figulus, a senator and friend of Cicero whom Cicero says was devoted to “all things recondite.”⁶⁸ This suggests that there were some aristocrats who were willing to devote much of their time to the study of astrology and other recondite doctrines, although they were relatively few in number.⁶⁹ The result of this intense devotion were two texts that treated astrology, the Sphaera Graeca and Sphaera Barbarica, as well as works on augury, extispicy (inspecting the viscera of sacrificial victims), thunder-omens, and the Babylonian/Stoic idea of world-conflagration.⁷⁰ To later generations, Nigidius was a legend. Dio describes him as follows:

[∇ιγίδιος Φίγουλός] ἀριστά γὰρ τῶν καθ’ ἑαυτὸν τὴν τε τοῦ πόλου διακόσμησιν καὶ τὰς τῶν αστέρων διαφοράς, ὅσα τε καθ’ ἑαυτοὺς γιγνόμενοι καὶ ὅσα συμμιγώμετες ἀλλήλοις ἐν ταῖς διαστάσεις ἀποτελοῦσι, διέγνω, καὶ κατὰ τούτο καὶ αἵτινα ὡς τινὰς ἀπορρήτους διατριβὰς ποιούμενος ἔσχεν.

[Nigidius Figulus] could distinguish most accurately of his contemporaries the order of the firmament and the differences between the stars, what they accomplished by themselves and when together, by their conjunctions and intervals, and for this reason [he] had incurred the charge of practicing some forbidden art.⁷¹

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⁶⁷ Barton 1994a, p. 36.
⁶⁸ Cicero. In Vatiniun, 14.
⁷¹ Cassius Dio. Roman History, 45.1.3-4.
Tradition held that Nigidius’ greatest prophetic achievement was his prediction of the greatness of the future Augustus when he told Gaius Octavius that he had fathered the “dominum terrarum orbi” (master of the whole world).\(^{72}\) In Lucan’s *Pharsalia*, Nigidius is portrayed as the man who accurately predicted the civil war and the beginning of a new age using the stars.\(^{73}\)

There was at least one other Roman who fully devoted himself to astrology: Lucius Tarutius of Firmum. He also happened to be a friend of Cicero. Cicero describes Tarutius as such in the *De Divinatione*: “L. quidem Tarutius Firmanus, familiaris noster, in primis Chaldaecis rationibus eruditus….”\(^{74}\) Very little is known about Tarutius apart from the fact that he was asked by Marcus Terentius Varro to calculate Romulus’ horoscope.\(^{75}\) Plutarch describes Tarutius as a philosopher and mathematician who had often occupied himself with producing horoscopes.\(^{76}\) Plutarch then says that Tarutius used normal astrological practice to produce Romulus’ horoscope: he studied the events of Romulus’ life and death and gave Varro three dates, Romulus’ conception and birth and the founding of Rome.\(^{77}\) These dates were given using the Egyptian calendar which was commonly used in astrological calculation.\(^{78}\)

### 4.3 Astrology and Politics

The careers of Nigidius Figulus and Tarutius of Firmum along with the testimony offered by Book I of the *De Divinatione* indicate that astrology’s popularity had grown significantly

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\(^{73}\) Lucan. *Pharsalia*, ll. 639-672.

\(^{74}\) “Our good friend L. Tarutius of Firmum, who was steeped in Chaldaean lore….” Cicero. *De Divinatione*, 2.98.


among Rome’s upper classes during the first century. But this growth was not confined to upper-class scholars and intellectuals. Indeed, astrology gained a number of very powerful and enthusiastic adherents among Rome’s politicians and generals. These men recognized in astrology, first of all, a means of divination that lay outside the control of the Senate and that could thus serve their needs on an individual basis, unlike the traditional diviners we met in Chapter Three. The desire to prevent leading statesmen from individually consulting diviners without authorization was almost certainly one of the reasons why the Senate had taken control of divination after the expulsion of Tarquinius Superbus, who had like his predecessors performed individual divination. But in the first century, the Senate’s ability to enforce this traditional control was fading rapidly. In this environment, many of Rome’s leading men began to establish personal connections with modes of divination and the diviners who practiced them. For many of these men, astrology seemed to be the best choice available. Indeed, unlike traditional systems of divination, astrology could provide specific answers to a variety of questions. Furthermore, the answers that were given could be tailored to give these great men the answers they wanted to hear because astrological doctrine was flexible and open to many interpretations.

The aspect of astrological doctrine that made astrology a particular attractive option to these powerful men who were looking to establish the legitimacy of their positions was its ability to endow any individual or action with an aura of destiny and fate. Indeed, with the help of an astrologer, such a man could claim that he was destined to rule and he could prove it by

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78 Grafton and Swerdlow 1986, pp. 149-150.
producing his horoscope and the interpretation of the astrologer. Astrology offered these men, then, a sort of scientific predestination. It is not surprising, therefore, that the alliance between politics and astrology was one that flourished in Rome from the first century B.C. onward. This was the time when one-man rule flourished in Rome and as numerous examples from Europe and the Near East show, monarchs most of all require justification for why they alone should rule. Astrology could provide precisely this justification and this is why monarchs throughout history have chosen to use it to underpin their claims to sole power.

4.3.1 Astrology in the Court of Antiochus I of Commagene

One such monarch was Antiochus I who ruled over Commagene, a region in south-eastern Turkey and north-western Syria, from 69-34 B.C. As a man of mixed heritage ruling over a kingdom that was itself a combination of different peoples, Antiochus probably felt an especial need to assert why he was the best man to rule Commagene. Astrology was one of the many ways he chose to do this. Striking evidence of Antiochus’ association with astrology was discovered by archaeologist Theresa Goell during her excavations, from 1953 to 1973, of Antiochus’ hierothesion located atop the summit of Nemrud Dagi, a hill that is part of the Taurus

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86 Potter 1994, p. 17.
87 Barton 1994a, p. 33.
90 L’Orange 1953, pp. 21-22, 28.
Mountains in south-eastern Turkey.\textsuperscript{91} This \textit{hierothesion} was intended to serve both as Antiochus’ tomb and as a dwelling-place for all of the gods. Antiochus’ decision to place his temple-tomb atop Nemrud Dägi, a summit that was visible in all directions, meant that his \textit{hierothesion} could not be missed or ignored.\textsuperscript{92} The complex is divided into four sections: a conical tumulus and three rock-cut terraces that flank it on the north, west, and east.\textsuperscript{93} The focus of Goell’s excavations was the eastern terrace, where she found a wealth of sculptures and inscriptions.\textsuperscript{94} One of her most important discoveries was a series of four \textit{stelae} that depict Antiochus’ reception by his tutelary deities (Zeus-Oromasdes, Apollo-Mithras-Helios, and Heracles-Ares) in an act of deification.\textsuperscript{95} Goell then found a fifth \textit{stela} that, although badly damaged, revealed when reconstructed as fully as possible a striking image: a lion surrounded by, and studded with, stars. This \textit{stela} was, in fact, identical to the one that field surveys conducted in the 1890s had found fully intact on the western terrace.\textsuperscript{96}

\textsuperscript{92} Sanders 1996, pp. 1-2. The term \textit{hierothesion} is found only at Nemrud Dägi.
\textsuperscript{93} Sanders 1996, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{94} Sanders 1996, p. xiii.
\textsuperscript{95} Sanders 1996, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{96} Sanders 1996, pp. 40, 253.
The stela contains in total nineteen eight-pointed stars, three of which are labeled along the left corner and upper edge.\(^98\)

Further investigation of the stela, assisted by Otto Neugebauer, a prominent scholar of astrology, revealed that the nineteen stars correspond to the stars of the constellation Leo. Neugebauer concluded that the three stars labelled were in fact Mars, Mercury, and Jupiter and that the stela depicted their conjunction in Leo. This discovery led him, in turn, to conclude that the stela as a whole was a horoscope. His calculations determined that the horoscope corresponded to the year and month of Antiochus’ coronation at the hands of Pompey on July 6/7, 62 B.C.\(^99\) The current scholarly consensus is that Neugebauer is correct.\(^100\) Antiochus perhaps felt

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97 Image from Sanders 1996 (fig. 323).
98 These labels read: ΠΥΡΟΕΙΣ ΠΡΑΚΛΕΟΥΣ, ΣΤΙΛΒΩΝ ΑΠΟΛΛΩΝΟΣ, and ΦΑΘΟΝ ΔΙΟΣ. Sanders 1996, p. 108.
100 See Barton 1994a, p. 47 and Domenicucci 1996, p. 25 for a discussion.
that his association with astrology was important enough to include his horoscope in his *hierothesion* in a very prominent location.\(^{101}\) While his precise intentions for including the horoscope in his temple-tomb will almost certainly never be known, it is possible to conclude from the horoscope’s position, beside four *stelae* that portray Antiochus’ deification, that the fifth *stela* was meant to give his ascension to the kingship and deification an aura of destiny.\(^{102}\) This was the gift astrology could give any message and any monarch.

### 4.3.2 Astrology and Roman Politics in the Late Republic

The Roman general who presented Antiochus with his crown in 62 B.C., Gnaeus Pompeius, was himself a man who like many of his contemporaries was seeking to find a way to justify his pre-eminent status. Pompey and the other generals who visited the East would have seen how the Hellenistic rulers established their legitimacy and would have brought back with them to Rome the methods they found appealing. One of them was astrology.\(^{103}\) Other politicians who had not traveled to the East would have encountered astrology in Rome and elsewhere in the Roman world where, as we have seen, it was flourishing in the first century B.C. A number of examples show that many men striving for power in the Roman world recognized these potential benefits and established a connection with astrology.

The earliest known example comes from the Second Sicilian Slave Revolt, which threw Sicily into turmoil from 104 to 100 B.C. A Greek man named Athenion emerged during the course of the conflict as the slaves’ leader. Before the revolt, he had been an overseer but unlike the good overseer described above by the Cato the Elder, Athenion did not avoid astrology. On

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\(^{101}\) Sanders 1996, p. 3, 88.

\(^{102}\) Domenicucci 1996, p. 25.

the contrary, he became an expert astrologer. He was able to rise to the leadership of the revolt by claiming that the gods had shown him among the stars that he was destined to become king of all of Sicily. Although his purported destiny was not in the end fulfilled (he was killed in 101 or 100 B.C.), Athenion’s ability to secure supremacy using astrology demonstrates its power as an argument for legitimacy, even for those like a former overseer of slaves who would normally have had no access to power whatsoever.

Astrology did not just appeal to ambitious overseers, however. One example of the fact that men who did have access to power were influenced in their political decisions by astrologers is Gnaeus Octavius, Sulla’s consular colleague in 87 B.C. Plutarch reports that Octavius was persuaded by Chaldaeans and other diviners to remain in Rome even though Marius and his men were about to arrive. Octavius seems clearly to have placed great value in the Chaldaeans’ advice as he remained in Rome where he was killed. Plutarch says that a diagramma Chaldaikon was found on Octavius’ person after he was slain.

Octavius was not the only consul of 87 B.C. who seems to have invested a great deal of confidence in astrology. Indeed, the testimony of Plutarch reveals that astrologers numbered among the many diviners Sulla consulted. On one occasion, these ‘Chaldaeans’ told Sulla that he would be the greatest man in the world, thus giving the backing of the stars to something Sulla almost certainly already believed and promoted. On another occasion, Sulla was told that he would end his days at the height of his fortune. Plutarch’s source on this occasion was Sulla’s

107 Plutarch. *Life of Marius*, 42.4.
That Sulla accepted this prediction is suggested by the fact that he finished writing his autobiography two days before he died. Sulla’s achievement of hegemony (and thus the height of his fortune) after his return to Italy from the East may have suggested to him that his end was near. Perhaps the Chaldaeans had given him a date.

Not every important man in Rome became an adherent to, or a supporter of, astrology but that did not prevent the astrologers in Rome from attempting to win them over as Cicero’s *De Divinatione* makes clear. Indeed, Marcus includes the sheer number of predictions made to Pompey, Crassus, and Caesar by these astrologers that they would die in old age as one of the most damning proofs of his assertion that astrology is nonsense:

> quid plura? Cotidie refelluntur. Quam multa ego Pompeio, quam multa Crasso, quam multa huic ipsi Caesari a Chaldaeis dicta memini, neminem eorum nisi senectute, nisi domi, nisi cum claritate esse moriturum! Ut mihi permirum videatur quemquam extare qui etiam nunc credat iis quorum praedicta cotidie videat re et eventis refelli.

But why say more against a theory which every day’s experience refutes? I recall a multitude of prophecies which the Chaldaeans made to Pompey, to Crassus, and even to Caesar himself... to the effect that no one of them would die except in old age, at home, and in great glory. Hence it would seem very strange to me should anyone, especially at this time, believe in men whose predictions he sees disproved every day by actual results.

Some scholars have suggested that, at least in the case of Caesar, the astrologers’ efforts were successful. The basis for this argument is the suggestion that Caesar had the zodiacal sign Taurus, which also happened to be one of the houses of Venus, displayed on his legionary standards.

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although ancient evidence for this is at present lacking.\textsuperscript{115} Caesar does seem to have had an interest in the stars: he is believed to have written a treatise entitled \textit{De Astris} to provide a \textit{parapegma}, or astronomical-meteorological calendar, oriented for the latitude of Italy for the use of Italian farmers.\textsuperscript{116} Pliny the Elder references it in his \textit{Natural History} on at least two occasions.\textsuperscript{117}

4.4 Augustus and Astrology

By the time Octavian rose to power, then, astrology had become an important and accepted method of divination and means of political legitimization and self-promotion in the Roman world. As in most things, however, Octavian/Augustus did not just follow his Hellenistic and Roman predecessors: he went far beyond them and consistently promoted himself using the language and symbolism of astrology. He focussed his efforts with a single symbol, the constellation Capricorn, and had this symbol disseminated on coins and gems, in literature, and with a monument constructed in the Northern Campus Martius.\textsuperscript{118} Just as he did with the \textit{sidus Iulium}, then, Augustus harnessed contemporary belief in the name of self-promotion and the augmentation of his \textit{auctoritas}.\textsuperscript{119}

\textsuperscript{115} Luck 2006, p. 374. Abry and Le Boeuffl e are more skeptical and accept this idea as an unconfirmed possibility. Abry 1983, p. 49. Le Boeuffl e 1999, p. 276.
\textsuperscript{116} Daryn Lehoux has suggested that this Caesar may in fact have been Germanicus Caesar who is believed, as we shall soon see, to have translated Aratus’ \textit{Phaenomena} and who would thus have been familiar with the stars. See Daryn Lehoux. \textit{Astronomy, Weather, and Calendars in the Ancient World: Parapegmata and Related Texts in Classical and Near Eastern Societies}. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 492. Le Boeuffl e 1989, p. 9. Ramsey and Licht 1997, p. 98. Cramer 1954, pp. 61, 75-77.
\textsuperscript{117} Pliny the Elder. \textit{Natural History}, 18.57.214, 18.65.237.
\textsuperscript{119} We should be careful, however, not to make Augustus’ efforts sound more sinister and manipulative than they may actually have been. Augustus was a man of his own time and culture and thus it is entirely possible that he believed what the astrologers were telling him. As Suetonius notes, Augustus was a very superstitious man who was devoted to consulting omens. Suetonius. \textit{Life of the Deified Augustus}, 90-97. Indeed, Augustus only made decisions and took action on the anniversaries of positive events and on days
4.4.1 Augustus and Capricorn

One problem that has long perplexed scholars is why Augustus chose Capricorn as his astrological logo. An anecdote in Suetonius is the starting-point for anyone considering this question. There, Suetonius describes a visit made by Octavian and Agrippa in 44 B.C. during their time in Apollonia to see the astrologer Theogenes, who predicts the two men’s destinies based upon their natal conditions. Theogenes predicts a destiny so glorious for Octavian that he prostrates himself before him. As a result of Theogenes’ prediction, Suetonius suggests, “from that time on, Augustus had such faith in his destiny that he made his horoscope public and issued a silver coin stamped with the sign of the constellation Capricorn, under which he had been born.” This clear statement of Augustus’ actions has in fact been the source of confusion about Augustus’ choice: the sign under which he was born was Libra not Capricorn.

Some scholars have approached the problem in the way they feel an astrologer would have, and have looked for astrological reasons why Capricorn was particularly attractive. Some have suggested that Capricorn was the sign under which Augustus was conceived nine months before September. They argue that the conception sign was just as important as the sun sign at birth in ancient astrology. Others, as early as Johannes Kepler, have suggested that Capricorn was Augustus’ moon sign at birth. Still others have suggested that Augustus’ Lot of Fortune was located in Capricorn.

of good omen. The following is a good example of how superstitious Augustus was: “In the morning, if he unthinkingly put his left shoe on his right foot, he saw this as a menacing omen” [Augustus, 92.1]. Pierre Grimal. Le Siècle d’Auguste. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1968, p. 16.


121 Suetonius. Life of the Deified Augustus, 94.12.


123 Domenicucci 1996, p. 116. Barton traces the history of this argument in Barton 1995, p. 38, but concludes that the moon was just outside of Capricorn on September 23rd. Rehak 2006, p. 84. Abry,
Tamsyn Barton has observed that the problem with this approach is that unlike modern astrology there were many ways in which a sign could be one’s birth sign. The ancient system was indeed very flexible. Octavian or his astrologer could thus choose the sign from among his many birth signs that had the most appealing (and in Augustus’ case most politically useful) associations and symbolism. There must have been something about Capricorn, therefore, that made it more appealing to Octavian or Theogenes than his other birth signs, including Libra.

One reason for choosing Capricorn may have been that, within the branch of astrology that divided up the world into zones over which a particular sign exercised especially strong influence, Capricorn was associated with Western Europe, especially Spain, Gaul, and Germany. Manilius describes this theory in his *Astronomica*: “Tu, Capricorne, regis quidquid sub sole cadente / est positum gelidamque Helicen quod tangit ab illo / Hispanas gentes et quot fert Gallia dives / teque feris dignam tantum Germania matrem / asserit ambiguum sidus.” Horace calls to Capricorn as the “…tyrannus Hesperiae… undae.” This region of the empire just happened to be under Octavian’s control before his victory over Antony at Actium. Capricorn would have been a very useful symbol, then, during the Civil War.

Another possible reason for Augustus’ choice of Capricorn is that Capricorn was the sign in which the Winter Solstice occurred. This made it a symbol not only of the lengthening of the

days after the darkest times of the year but also of rebirth and regeneration.\textsuperscript{132} This was also a very important month in the cult of Apollo, Augustus’ patron deity, and indeed Capricorn was seen as the birth sign of the sun.\textsuperscript{133} Indeed, as Manilius notes, the rebirth of the sun was perceived to be Capricorn’s duty and destiny just as the rebirth of the Roman world was Augustus”.\textsuperscript{134} This latter rebirth had itself begun in Capricorn when on January 13\textsuperscript{th}, 27 B.C. Octavian was declared Augustus and the Principate began.\textsuperscript{135} In this sense, then, Capricorn was a symbol of the fact that Octavian had been destined to be Rome’s saviour.\textsuperscript{136}

4.4.2 The Dissemination of Capricorn on Coins and Gems

Laden with these and possibly many other meanings, Capricorn appeared on a variety of material media throughout the course of Octavian/Augustus’ career, particularly on coins and gems.\textsuperscript{137} Indeed, many coins that bear the image of Capricorn have survived. The first example comes from Pergamum where in 27/26 B.C. a series of \textit{cistophori} was minted. On the reverse, Capricorn is depicted carrying a cornucopia and is framed by Apollo’s laurel wreath.

\textsuperscript{130} Bakhouche 2002, pp. 176-177.
\textsuperscript{133} Brugnoli 1989, p. 25. Barton 1994c, p. 41.
\textsuperscript{135} Barton 1995, p. 46. Barton 1994c, p. 41.
Figure 11: Capricorn depicted on a series of cistophori from Pergamum, 27/26 B.C.  

Another example is a denarius minted in Spain ca. 17-15 B.C. which depicts Augustus on the obverse and Capricorn clutching a globe and cornucopia on the reverse.  

Figure 12: Capricorn with globe and cornucopia on a denarius from Spain, ca. 17-15 B.C.  

Our final example is an aureus minted ca. 18 B.C. that depicts Augustus on the obverse and Capricorn with a globe, rudder, and cornucopia on the reverse with the caption AUGUSTUS.

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138 Image from Zanker 1988, p. 48 (fig. 36a).
140 Image from Galinsky1996, p. 116 (fig. 53).
Figure 13: *Aureus* depicting Capricorn, ca. 18 B.C.¹⁴¹

This coin shares the cornucopia and globe as symbols with the *denarius* minted in Spain and the *cistophori* from Pergamum. These, along with the rudder, were symbols of the goddess Bona Fortuna.¹⁴² Individually, the rudder symbolizes orderly government, the globe world domination, and the cornucopia prosperity and abundance.¹⁴³ That the cornucopia was portrayed alongside Capricorn on coins issued in 18 and 17 B.C. is particularly telling given our discussion of the Secular Games in Chapter Three. In this context, then, Capricorn is likely a symbol of prosperity, rebirth, and Augustus’ golden age.¹⁴⁴

Capricorn also appears on a number of gems, the most famous of which is the so-called *Gemma Augustea*, whose production has been dated to late in Augustus’ reign.¹⁴⁵ This gem’s great value suggests that it originally belonged to a very wealthy owner, perhaps even a member of the imperial family.¹⁴⁶ On it, Capricorn appears within a disk projecting rays of light situated above the head of a semi-nude Augustus who is sitting on a double-throne beside the eagle of

¹⁴¹ Image from Cooley 2003 (L8).
Jupiter and being crowned by a female figure, perhaps *Oikoumene* (the habitable world personified). Augustus’ family is pictured perhaps suggesting that they like Augustus have the backing of the stars.

![Figure 14: The Gemma Augustea](image)

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146 Barton 1995, p. 50.
147 Barton has plausibly suggested that the disk is either the *sidus Iulium* or the sun. Barton 1994c, p. 44. Galinsky 1996, p. 120.
148 Barton 1994c, p. 44.
149 Image from Galinsky 1996, p. 120 (fig. 57).
4.4.3 Astrology and Capricorn in Augustan Literature

As common as astrology was as a theme on coins minted during the reign of Augustus, it was an even more common motif in Augustan literature. A sudden surge of astral imagery and the unprecedented use of the language of astrology almost certainly reflect both the contemporary popularity of astrology and Augustus’ own association with it. At the very least, imperial support made it fashionable to know and write about astrology, so much so that a basic knowledge of

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\(^{150}\) Image from Galinsky 1996, p. 120 (fig. 57) (magnification added).
astrology became one of the goals of elite education. A remark made by Ovid about Romulus in the *Fasti* reveals that a link had been forged between astrology and refinement in Ovid’s time: “scilicet arma magis quam sidera, Romule, noras…” Astrology, then, had become one of the marks of modern Roman civilization that Romulus lacked.

It is not surprising, then, that astrology appears often in the Augustan period in poetry, the most highly refined mode of literary expression. Virgil incorporates astrology into the *Aeneid* beginning with the song of Iopas in Book I, which tells of the wandering moon, Arcturus, the Hyades, and many other fixtures of the night sky. Virgil later makes the famous seers Helenus and Asilas not only well aware of, but experts in, astrology even though they lived long before the development of astrological theory. Helenus is described as a man who “sidera sentis” and Asilas is referred to as “ille hominum divumque interpres… caeli cui sidera parent.” For Virgil, then, astrology was a legitimate means of divination.

Astrology also appears in poetry less lofty than Rome’s national epic. In the second book of his *Odes*, for example, Horace discusses the zodiacal signs at length, including Libra, Scorpio, and Capricorn, as well as the influences the planets have in our lives, particularly Jupiter and Saturn. This consideration of the role of the stars in our lives is continued in his second book of his *Epistles*, where Horace considers the influence of one’s natal star on the course of life and

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152 “You know well, Romulus, that you knew arms better than you knew the constellations.” Ovid. *Fasti*, 1.29.
153 Le Boeuffe 1989, p. 11.
ultimately decides that one’s genius (nature) tempers this influence. In the first book of his Odes, however, Horace adopts a different persona and a different and far from favourable attitude, warning the addressee not to be persuaded by the “Babylonios… numeros.” Conversely, in the fourth book of his Elegies, Propertius criticizes the Homeric seer Calchas for not being an expert in astrology. This criticism is part of an elegy that is in fact an extended discussion of astrology that is replete with astrological terminology used without explanation, thus suggesting that both Propertius and his audience were familiar with it.

Even poetic invective was enriched by astrology, which gave Ovid yet another way to heap scorn upon his victim in his Ibis. Indeed, Ovid uses the astrological conditions of Ibis’ birth to suggest just how hopeless Ibis’ situation is: “Natus es infelix… nec ulla / Commoda nascenti stella levise fuit. / Non Venus affulsit, non illa Iuppiter hora….” These immutable natal conditions would ensure that Ibis remained hopeless.

The influence that astrology had on Augustan literature was so pronounced that Quintilian remarked in his Institutio Oratoria that “nec, si rationem siderum ignoret, [grammaticus] poetas intellegat.” None of the authors discussed above makes direct reference to Augustus’ personal sign, Capricorn. Yet their frequent use of astrological ideas and terminology during a time when Rome’s princeps was directly associating himself with astrology suggests that their actions were meant at least in part to praise and please Augustus. Two of these

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158 Horace. Epistles, 2.2.183. This integration of a traditional Roman idea suggests a true engagement with astrological doctrine and an attempt to reconcile foreign ideas with traditional belief.
159 Horace. Odes, 1.11.2-3.
162 You were born unhappy… and no favourable and beneficial stars presided over your birth: at that time, neither Venus nor Jupiter shone…” Ovid. Ibis, II. 209-211.
163 “If [the student of literature] is ignorant as to the study of the stars, he will not be able to understand the poets” Quintilian. Institutio Oratoria, 1.4.4. Barton 1994a, p. 42.
writers, moreover, Virgil and Horace, wrote most of their poetry at a time when Octavian/Augustus perhaps did not emphasize Capricorn as much as he seems later to have done.

The works of Manilius and Germanicus Caesar, written at the very end of Augustus’ reign, do in fact directly mention Capricorn perhaps suggesting therefore that Augustus’ association with Capricorn had grown much closer over the decades. Manilius’ *Astronomica* is in fact an extended astrological treatise dedicated to Augustus (and possibly Tiberius as well). As we saw earlier, one of Manilius’ references to Capricorn associates the zodiacal sign with the West. Another reference directly associates Capricorn with the rebirth of the sun: “… brumam Capricornus inertam / per minimas cogit luces et maxima noctis / tempora, producitque diem tenebrasque resolvit.” It is not hard to imagine this line rewritten with Augustus substituted for Capricorn.

The *Aratea* of Germanicus Caesar, a translation of Aratus’ *Phaenomena* produced ca. 14-19 A.D. is dedicated to Augustus and asserts the connection between Augustus and Capricorn. The context is Augustus’ funeral. There, Capricorn is used as an expression of the final stage of Augustus’ great destiny, which was inscribed long ago among the stars: his journey to join his

164 Manilius makes this connection clear when he says: “… contra Capricornus in ipsum / convertit visus (quid enim mirabitur ille / maurus in Augusti felix cum fulserit ortum?)…” “Capricorn on the other hand turns his gaze upon himself (what greater sign can he ever marvel at, since it was he that shone propitiously upon Augustus’ birth?)…” (*Astronomica*, 2.507-509).
167 “Capricorn drives lifeless winter through the [times of] least light and the longest nights, and leads daylight forth and dissolves the shadows” Manilius. *Astronomica*, 3.637-639.
168 Barton 1994a, pp. 41-42. Abry 1983, pp. 52, 58.
father Julius Caesar among the stars as a reward for his virtues and service.\(^{169}\) To the amazement of those Romans and foreigners present at Augustus’ funeral, Augustus is carried into the heavens atop his special sign, Capricorn.\(^{170}\) Here Capricorn stands in for other, more usual means of rising to the heavens, such as the eagle or a cloud.\(^{171}\) Germanicus likely chose Capricorn to suggest that Augustus’ apotheosis was as inevitable as everything else that had happened to him and that he had done during the course of his life.

### 4.4.4 An Unbroken Bond

If the images on coins and gems and the words of poets had not been enough to establish in the minds of Augustus’ contemporaries his association with Capricorn and astrology generally, his decision in the later years of his reign to publish his horoscope would have made this connection unmistakable.\(^{172}\) Both Suetonius and Dio confirm this.\(^{173}\) Dio’s testimony suggests how this was carried out: “καί τοι οὗτως οὐδὲν τῷ Ἀὐγοῦστῳ τῶν καθ’ ἑαυτὸν ἐμελέν ὡς τε ἐκ προγραφής πάσι τίμ τῶν ἀστέρων διά ταξιν, ὡς ὁ ἐγεγένητο, φανερώσαι.”\(^{174}\) The problem with the two testimonies is that they seem to suggest two different dates for when Augustus did so: Suetonius suggests that it occurred at the beginning of Octavian’s political career after his encounter with Theogenes at Apollonia but Dio’s notice appears in the context of A.D. 11, although he does not at any point say that Augustus’ publication occurred in that year. The present consensus is that the publication occurred later in Augustus’ reign but some scholars,

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\(^{169}\) This reveals an interesting interplay between our present subject and Chapter Two. Neither message was mutually exclusive but rather part of a comprehensive attempt to make the entire night sky Augustan. Rehak 2006, p. 74.

\(^{170}\) Germanicus Caesar. *Aratea*, ll. 558-560. cf. Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* 15, where the means of catasterism is the *sidus Iulium*.

\(^{171}\) See the discussion of catasterism in Chapter Two.


\(^{174}\) “But so little did Augustus care for himself that he set out the arrangement of the stars under which he was born for everyone to see in an edict (ἐκ προγραφής).” Cassius Dio. *Roman History*, 56.25.5.

Augustus’ connection with the stars showed his successors just how powerful an ally astrology could be and indeed many of them strove to establish a connection with it.\footnote{Barton 1994a, p. 40. Barton 1995, p. 48.} Indeed, astrology became so closely associated with imperial power that the trope of the would-be emperor and the astrologer became common in accounts such as Suetonius’ Lives, as did the theme that those who are destined to rule are marked out early in life by various astral portents.\footnote{Barton 1994c, p. 38. Barton 1994b, pp. 150, 155-156. Domenicucci 1995, p. 101. Grzybek 1999, p. 113.}

The problem with using astrology to legitimize power, however, was that the emperor did not enjoy a monopoly over astrology or the astrologers. The many ‘Chaldaeans’ in Rome and throughout the empire meant that anyone could promote himself using it.\footnote{Barton 1994a, p. 42. Barton 1994b, p. 154. Kostopoulos 2004, p. vi.} This is probably why the emperors, beginning with Augustus, took steps to limit the ways in which these Chaldaeans could be consulted. Indeed, in A.D. 11 Augustus issued an edict that put constraints in place.\footnote{Bakhouche 2002, p. 167.} Dio describes what they were: “καὶ τοῖς μάντεσιν ἀπηγορεύθη μὴτε κατὰ μόνας τινὶ μήτε περὶ θανάτου, μὴδὲν ἄλλοι συμπαρασώσιν οἶ, χρᾶν….”\footnote{“It was forbidden to diviners to prophesy to any person alone, or to prophesy regarding death, even if others should be present…” Cassius Dio. Roman History, 56.25.5.} One suspects that the death Augustus was most concerned about in A.D. 11, his seventy-fourth year, was his own, something that would have been of great interest to possible contenders for his position.\footnote{Stierlin 1986, p. 111. Beard, North, and Price 1998, p. 232. Barton 1994a, p. 42. Beck 2007, p. 127. Barton 1994b, p. 154.} Augustus’ edict remained in force during the reigns of his successors alongside other more severe measures to
contain the astrologers, such as expulsion, which were brought to bear as many as thirteen times before A.D. 180.\textsuperscript{183} These measures reflect a duality in the attitude of the emperors toward astrology, an irony that was not lost on the historian Tacitus. He observes that astrologers are a “genus hominum … quod in civitate nostra et vetabitur semper et retinebitur.”\textsuperscript{184} The emperors were unable to resist the opportunity to see their destinies inscribed among the stars.\textsuperscript{185}

### 4.5 Augustus and the ‘Horologium Augusti’

The one question that remains for us to consider is the viability of a theory proposed by German archaeologist Edmund Buchner. In his article “Solarium Augusti und Ara Pacis,” Buchner presented a strikingly new argument about a monument situated in the Northern Campus Martius that he called the horologium Augusti (the sundial of Augustus). This monument is known only from a brief passage in Pliny the Elder’s *Natural History* and possibly from a brief notice in Petronius’ *Satyricon*. Pliny describes this monument as follows:

\begin{quote}
Ei [obelisci] qui est in campo divus Augustus addidit mirabilem usum ad deprendendas solis umbras dierumque ac noctium ita magnitudines, strato lapide ad longitudinem obelisci, cui par fieret umbra brumae confectae die sexta hora paulatimque per regulas, quae sunt ex aere inclusae, singulis diebus decresceret ac rursus augesceret, digna cognitu res, ingenio Facundi Novi mathematici.
\end{quote}

The [obelisk] in the Campus [Martius] was put to use in a remarkable way by Divus Augustus so as to mark the sun’s shadow and thereby the lengths of days and nights. A pavement was laid down for a distance appropriate to the height of the obelisk so that the shadow cast at noon on the shortest day of the year [the Winter Solstice] might exactly coincide with it. Bronze rods fixed into the pavement were meant to measure the shadow day by day as it gradually became shorter and then lengthened.

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{Beard} Beard, North, and Price 1998, p. 231.
\bibitem{Barton} Barton 1994a, p. 50.
\bibitem{Tacitus} “[Astrologers are] a class of men… who will always be prohibited and always be retained in our state.” Tacitus. *Histories*, 1.22. Le Boeuffle 1989, p. 55.
\bibitem{Barton} Barton 1994a, p. 211.
\end{thebibliography}
Buchner had meticulously analysed this passage and concluded that it was describing a horizontal sundial composed of an obelisk (the gnomon, or shadow-casting object) and a paved surface marked with bronze lines, including a central meridian line which indicated the day and month.\(^{187}\)

Pliny says that this obelisk had been transported to Rome by Augustus from Egypt.\(^{188}\)

When Buchner realized that the centre of this obelisk was, according to his calculations, only eighty-seven metres from the western edge of the *Ara Pacis Augustae*, Buchner concluded that this could not have been a coincidence.\(^{189}\)

As such, he investigated further and discovered to his surprise what he believed to be a precise mathematical relationship between the two monuments.\(^{190}\)

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\(^{188}\) Pliny. *Natural History*, 36.70. Rehak 2006, p. 81. Coarelli 2984, p. 82.

\(^{189}\) Buchner 1982b, pp. 322, 347. Buchner 2001, p. 19. Bakhouche 2002, p. 199. The fact that the area in which the two areas were built had been unoccupied previously does indeed suggest that their proximity was not an accident. Rehak 2006, p. 7. Coarelli 1984, p. 86.

\(^{190}\) Buchner 1982b, pp. 332-338. Rehak 2006, p. 84.

\(^{191}\) Image from Buchner 1982b, p. 337 (fig. 7).
Buchner argued that the purpose of this mathematical relationship and of the monument itself was revealed each year with dramatic effect on September 23rd, Augustus’ birthday. On that day, the sun traveled along the equinoctial line of the pavement and then fell directly upon the western entrance of the *Ara Pacis* at sunset. The purpose of this visual display was clear to Buchner: to show that Augustus had been born to bring peace to the Roman world. This message was doubly confirmed, he felt, by another mathematical link he discovered, this time between the line marking the winter solstice and the *Ara Pacis*.

**Figure 17: The Visual Effect of the Horologium Augusti**

It was in the hope of confirming his ambitious theories that Edmund Buchner sought and was granted permission to begin the process of uncovering the *horologium* in 1979. During the preceding centuries, the obelisk had already been unearthed. This had occurred gradually, beginning in 1502 when the fragments of the shattered obelisk were found by a barber who was digging a latrine pit. Pope Julius II ordered an excavation but soon realized that a proper excavation and the careful removal of the fragments were not possible at that time and so he

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194 Image from Buchner 1982b, p. 353 (fig. 14).
abandoned his plan.\textsuperscript{195} It would not be until 1748 that these fragments would be unearthed, at the behest of Pope Benedict XIV.\textsuperscript{196} In 1789, Pope Pius VI ordered that the fragments be reassembled and by 1792 this process was complete, using parts from the column of Antoninus Pius. The obelisk was then erected and put on display in the Piazza Montecitorio.\textsuperscript{197}

Buchner’s goal, therefore, was to find the horologium’s pavement and bronze markers. His first efforts in July, 1979 at the location of what should have been the equinoctial line were unsuccessful.\textsuperscript{198} His success in November of that year at No. 48 Via di Campo Marzio, however, more than made up for his initial set-backs. He found at this location a layer of travertine pavement into which bronze lines and letters had been fixed.\textsuperscript{199} These letters formed parts of words: PARTH[ENOS], [LEO]N, TAUR[OS], and [KRI]OS (zodiacal signs); and ETESIAI PAUONTAI situated between [LEO]N and PARTH[ENOS] and THEROUS ARCHE to the right of TAUR[OS] (indicators of the change of seasons).\textsuperscript{200} Buchner had thus found the meridian line.

\begin{center}
\textbf{Figure 18: The Meridian Line.}\textsuperscript{201}
\end{center}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{195} Coarelli 1984, p. 80.
\textsuperscript{196} Coarelli 1984, p. 80. Maes 2005, p. 16.
\textsuperscript{197} Coarelli 1984, p. 81. Maes 2005, pp. 16-17.
\textsuperscript{199} Buchner 1982a, pp. 356-359.
\textsuperscript{200} These zodiacal signs are Virgo, Leo, Taurus, and Aries respectively; the seasonal indicators are “The Etesian [Winds] cease” and “The beginning of summer” Buchner 192a, pp. 356-369. Buchner 2001, pp. 21-23. Heslin 2007, p. 6.
\textsuperscript{201} Image from Buchner 1982a, p. 367 (fig. 6).
This discovery seemed to completely validate all of Buchner’s his theories about the horologium. Indeed, his ideas and diagrams soon appeared in a number of publications.\textsuperscript{203}

Not all of Buchner’s colleagues, however, were convinced. The first to raise a dissenting voice was Rodríguez-Almeida. He had studied the topography of that part of the Campus Martius and knew that two markers (cippi) which indicated the extent of the pomerium in the time of Vespasian and of Hadrian had been found there in 1930.\textsuperscript{204} This meant that the pomerium would have passed through the western half of the horologium during the time in which that Pliny the Elder saw it. Since the extension of the pomerium was effected traditionally (more prisco) with a plough, this seems like something Pliny would have mentioned.\textsuperscript{205} Rodríguez-Almeida concluded

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{figure19.png}
\caption{Meridian Line (Excavation Photo)\textsuperscript{202}}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{202} Image from Buchner 1982, p. 110 (plate 4).
\textsuperscript{203} For a discussion of this reception, see Heslin 2007.
\textsuperscript{205} Heslin 2007, p. 9.
from this that the *horologium* was at best a half-sundial, something Buchner’s inability to find the equinoctial line west of the meridian line seemed to support.\textsuperscript{206}

Another dissenting voice emerged in 1990 that expressed an objection to Buchner’s reconstruction as a whole and the mathematical techniques that Buchner had used to produce it. Michael Schütz, a German physicist, argued that Buchner’s methods were unsound, particularly in his calculation of the height of the obelisk and in his placement of the obelisk, which he claimed Buchner had done arbitrarily to make his calculations work.\textsuperscript{207} Schütz created a reconstruction of his own using what he considered to be legitimate methods and discovered that Buchner’s supposed mathematical connection between the two monuments was specious. The shadow of the obelisk did not fall upon the *Ara Pacis* and even if it did the shadow would not have been visible at that distance from its source.\textsuperscript{208}

It would seem, therefore, that Buchner’s theory is at best problematic. Nevertheless, certain scholars have either continued to reproduce Buchner’s arguments without knowing about the serious faults that have been found in them or have tried to find ways to support them.\textsuperscript{209} Recently, Peter Heslin has tried to bring this scholarly inertia to an end with his article, “Augustus, Domitian, and the So-called *Horologium Augusti*.”\textsuperscript{210} Heslin combines the objections of Rodríguez-Almeida and Schütz into a convincing argument as to why Buchner’s theories are false and then provides an alternative explanation. Heslin suggests that the structure was in fact not a sundial but a meridian line instrument, a device whose purpose was to track the movement

\textsuperscript{206} Coarelli 1984, p. 82. Heslin 2007, p. 1.
\textsuperscript{209} For a discussion of this problem, see Heslin 2007.
\textsuperscript{210} Heslin 2007, *passim*. 119
of the sun at noon throughout the year. These instruments were known in the Roman world and are in fact described by Pliny the Elder. This indicates that he knew the difference between them. Meridian instruments were very useful in the construction of calendars. This was something for which Augustus was directly responsible after 12 B.C. when he became Pontifex Maximus. Heslin suggests, therefore, that the horologium was meant to be a symbol of these efforts and constituted a sort of monumental solar calendar.

In spite of these many objections, one element of Buchner’s understanding of the horologium continues to enjoy support: his assertion that the horologium was designed at least in part to commemorate Augustus’ association with Capricorn. Pliny the Elder’s description of the meridian line does indeed indicate that the pavement ended precisely at the point marking the Winter Solstice. Although, of course, this was the point where the meridian line had to end, it was not the point where the pavement had to end. This visual effect would have made the turning back and the rebirth of the sun all the more prominent a sight each year on December 21st.

Additionally, the meridian line was a monumental expression in stone of Augustus’ association with astrology generally. The words arranged along the meridian line were the signs of the zodiac, arranged in their proper order. Recently, moreover, scholars have revisited Buchner’s

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211 Heslin notes that nineteenth century Italian scholar Roberto Bandini, who was hired by Benedict XIV to study the obelisk, rejected the theory of Athanasius Kircher that the obelisk was part of a sundial and suggested that it was a meridian line instrument. Heslin 2007, pp. 1, 3.


214 For an expression of this idea, see Buchner 2001, p. 19.

suggestion that the individual lines running along the meridian line were days and have suggested that they marked instead the three hundred and sixty degrees of the zodiac.\textsuperscript{216} If this suggestion is correct, and current scholarly consensus suggests that it is, then Augustus’ meridian line was, in effect, a monumental astrological/zodiacal calendar that put before the eyes of any Roman who came to see it a demonstration of how the universe worked and how Augustus’ destiny fit into it.

Even after Buchner’s claims have been set aside, therefore, the monument that he discovered in Campus Martius still appears to have been designed at least in part to commemorate Augustus’ connection with the stars. As we have seen, this is something that Augustus was eager to do with all of the means at his disposal, both material and intellectual. He was aided in this process by Capricorn, a symbol that, through its various astrological associations, helped him promote his message that destiny had made him the leading man and restorer of Rome. His role as saviour, he could claim, had indeed been written long ago among the stars. Most Romans of Augustus’ time had at least some degree of faith in astrology and likely all of them would have agreed that the man for whom the stars held out the great destiny of saving the Roman people was the best man to guide them into the future. Astrology and its language of fate played a major part, therefore, in Augustus’ efforts to frame and legitimize his hegemony in the language of \textit{auctoritas}.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

In A.D. 14, the sun was setting on Augustus’ time of leadership of the Roman people. It was then, perhaps, that he sat down to look over the manuscript of his Res Gestae one last time. This was to be the great testament of his many achievements and would hang for all time at the entrance of his massive mausoleum. When he came to the section of the Res Gestae that explained the nature of his predominance, he would have seen the word that distinguished him from his predecessor and adoptive father: auctoritas. This one word represented one of the main reasons why he had remained alive to enjoy old age while Caesar, who had relied upon the more overt and confrontational language of potestas, had not. Augustus had learned that he could achieve a lot by more making his fellow Romans want to follow him than by forcing them to. In so doing, he avoided seeming like a rex or dictator.

The necessary condition of maintaining power on the basis of auctoritas, however, was that Augustus had to have the most of it. Pursuing the traditional sources of auctoritas helped him achieve a significant degree auctoritas but a degree that any member of Rome’s aristocracy could in theory match. Augustus needed a source of auctoritas that would elevate him far beyond all of his senatorial peers. As we have seen, this source was the stars. They had always fascinated the Roman people and had become the focus of a number of very deeply held beliefs, some older than others. The Romans believed that the gods lived among the stars and that the best and most virtuous of mortals, men like Heracles and Romulus, would be lifted up among the stars after their deaths in a process called catasterism.

No Roman after Romulus had been virtuous or great enough to enjoy this fate, that is until Julius Caesar. It had been a comet, the sidus Iulium, that had confirmed that Caesar had
undertaken a journey to the stars after his death and had thus become a god. This also meant that Octavian, his adoptive son, was a demi-god (*divi filius*). This was a tremendous source of *auctoritas* that no one else could claim. It was this comet that repeatedly appeared on coins and literature to remind the Roman people of Octavian/Augustus’ special status.

The rival interpretation of the meaning of the *sidus Iulium*, borne of another set of beliefs about the stars, also came quite paradoxically to serve as a tremendous source of *auctoritas* for Augustus. This was because under the aegis of Augustan peace and prosperity the idea that the *sidus* was a harbinger of the end of the world was replaced by a new interpretation. Influenced by the Greek idea of *palingenesis*, the traditional understanding of what tenth *saeculum* held in store changed (or was changed) in such a way that it more closely reflected the present reality and the likely future. Augustus’ tenth *saeculum* would be a golden age and the gods had singled him out to lead the Roman people into it by sending an omen, the *sidus Iulium*, during games that he had personally hosted for Julius Caesar in 44 B.C.

The stars were also the focus of a system of thought that had emerged in the Roman world more recently than omen lore, first among the common people but eventually among Romans of all classes. This system was astrology and Augustus, like many political figures in the Hellenistic and Roman worlds before him, had recognized the potential ideological benefits astrology’s language of destiny and fate could offer him. Once again the night sky furnished a symbol that could represent his connection with astrological thought. This time it was a constellation, Capricorn, a symbol that he reproduced through his reign through material and intellectual means.

A reflective Augustus would have recognized as he made his final changes to the *Res Gestae* that these had been the ways the stars had helped elevate him in *auctoritas* far above his
peers. They had helped confirm him as the son of a god, a saviour, and a man of destiny in a way that was grounded in widely held belief. In so doing, Augustus forged a link between the position of *princeps* and the stars. Some of his successors would push this connection to its extremes but few if any would turn a blind eye to the newly politicized realm into which Augustus had transformed the night sky. It too like everything else had become Augustan.
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