

A Divine Right to Rule? The Gods as Legitimators of Power

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1 Introduction

Rome's very first political competition was resolved by calling upon the gods to adjudicate the dispute; the victor then went on to claim the highest position of power in the state. From that moment on, the support of the gods became a way to break into or to climb structures of power and legitimise claims to that power. This first competition was between Romulus and Remus over the foundation of their city: where it should be located, what it should be called, and who should rule over it.¹ When Romulus received a sign of twelve vultures to his brother's six, the city was founded on the Capitoline and named Rome after its first king, whose position of supreme power had thus been legitimised by this display of divine support.² Not all ancient authors accepted this claimed legitimacy at face value, however. Plutarch's account includes a variant in which Romulus lied, claiming the appearance of twelve vultures after Remus announced his six, only to be retroactively proven correct when the twelve vultures then appeared.³ A question of the authenticity of claims for divine support is thus present in accounts of the first use of this technique: should these be understood as genuine expressions of religious belief or cynical political manipulations?

In this paper, I seek to explore how divine support could form a supporting structure for claims of power, and how these developed across the Republic and into the Empire. To do so requires first establishing the political and religious connotations of the strategy, what structures of power it engaged with, and how it did so. It is certainly possible, as shown through Plutarch's inclusion of a sceptical variant, to view claims of divine support as being a manipulation of religion for politics' sake, carried out by canny aristocrats to manipulate the

1 Liv., 1.6.4. All texts and translations, unless otherwise noted, are those of the Loeb Classical Library.

2 Liv., 1.6.4–1.7.1; Plut., *Rom.* 9.4–5.

3 Plut., *Rom.* 9.5.

credulous masses, operating entirely in political terms and not at all in religious ones.⁴ However, in the case of Romulus' alleged initial lie, the target of his false claim was primarily his brother and political rival, and only then the wider population. I would also argue that political manipulation and genuine religious belief do not need to stand in direct opposition to each other, but should rather be seen as two ends of a spectrum; when a claim of divine support was made, some will have seen political manipulations, others a genuine statement of the agency of the gods, most would have fallen somewhere between these two extremes. Even the sceptics, however, may have acknowledged the political merit of such a strategy, despite doubting whether the gods had truly lent their support to a human. Both Livy and Plutarch express such pragmatic views in their accounts of another early use of divine support to bolster an individual's power. The claimant was Romulus' successor, Numa Pompilius, aided by the goddess Egeria, who was said to have advised the king on the construction of his religious programme to ensure Rome's continued success by carrying out rituals which would be most pleasing to the gods.⁵ The authors once more note that there were some who believed that Numa had invented his consultations with the goddess, but continue to suggest that if he had done so, the ends would justify the means and it was a viable political stratagem to secure his position of power. Livy suggests that the lie was motivated by Numa's fear that the contemporary uncivilised Romans would go wild if they did not fear an external threat to check their actions, and Plutarch concludes his discussion with the judgement that, if Numa (or other great men who had adopted the same stratagem) did so, it was because they were necessary: "since they were managing headstrong and captious multitudes, and introducing great innovations in modes of government, they pretended to get a sanction from the god, which sanction was the salvation of the very ones against whom it was contrived".⁶ Thus, even when ancient authors raise the question of the authenticity of the claimed divine support, they nevertheless depict it as a powerful and acceptable political strategy to secure the necessary power to establish a political position or to push through a programme. Furthermore, they offer scepticism as one possible interpretation, but not the only one. Belief was another available explanation.

4 For a recent argument against the manipulation interpretation of augury, instead arguing for the genuine power and belief, see L.G. Driediger-Murphy, *Roman Republican Augury: Freedom and Control* (Oxford 2019).

5 Plut., *Num.* 4.1–8, Liv., 1.19.4–5, Val. Max., 1.2.1.

6 Plut., *Num.* 4.8.

Claims of divine support were not the sole preserve of the regal period, but continued to be made throughout the Republic and beyond.⁷ There are many different degrees of divine support claims, many of which I will not be able to explore here. The commonest such claim would have been that one's family was descended from a deity or hero and thus to have an ancestral connection to that deity, justifying their position of influence and importance through their closer proximity to the god.⁸ In 67 BCE, Julius Caesar delivered the eulogy at his aunt Julia's funeral, boasting of her descent in the maternal line from kings and on the paternal side from Venus. He claims that: "Our stock therefore has at once the sanctity of kings, whose power is supreme among mortal men, and the claim to reverence which attaches to the Gods, who hold sway over kings themselves".⁹ This description of the grandeur of his family in such a public venue, whilst a *quaestor*, was likely intended more to promote himself in future electoral contests than to praise his aunt. Such divine ancestry was seemingly so common that when the emperor Vespasian came to power, a tenuous connection between the *gens Flavia* and a companion of Hercules was hastily discovered.¹⁰ However, the new emperor, choosing to make a virtue of his relative lowly status in comparison to recent holders of the imperial title, rejected the manufactured claim. This is the wider context into which claims of more active and personal connections between humans and gods might be made, in hopes of the claimant gaining entry to or climbing higher on the structures of power.

2 A Historical Example

One of the earliest extant claims of active divine support was made by Scipio Africanus, the victor of the Punic Wars. He, as our sources report, sought to

7 For a complementary argument regarding the use of divine support, particularly that of Jupiter, conveyed by successful auspices to confirm a magistrate's *auctoritas*: F. Van Haepelen, 'Les auspices d'investiture d'Octavien en 43 a.C.: de la légitimation de fonctions de *potestas* par l'*auctoritas* de Jupiter', in: F. Hurllet and J.-M. David, eds., *L'Auctoritas à Rome: Une Notion constitutive de la culture politique* (Bordeaux 2020), 145–153.

8 On this technique, see: T.P. Wiseman, 'Legendary Genealogies in Late-Republican Rome', *Greece and Rome* 21.2 (1974) 153–164; O. Hekster, 'Descendants of Gods: Legendary Genealogies in the Roman Empire', in: L. de Blois, P. Funke, and J. Hahn, eds., *The Impact of Imperial Rome on Religions, Ritual and Religious Life in the Roman Empire* (Leiden 2006) 24–37; K.-J. Hölkeskamp, 'Mythen, Monumente und die Multimedialität der memoria: die ‚corporate identity‘ der gens Fabia', *Klio* 100.3 (2018) 709–764.

9 Suet., *Iul.* 6.1.

10 Suet., *Vesp.* 12.

cultivate the appearance of a close relationship with the gods throughout his life. Since the day he had donned the *toga virilis*, he had adopted the practice of visiting the Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus before engaging in any business, giving the impression that he sought counsel directly from Jupiter, which led some to conclude that he was the god's son, contributing to his selection for the command against Hannibal.¹¹ In the uncertain times of the Punic Wars, who wouldn't choose to put their trust in a man who had the ear of the king of the gods? Scipio is said to have often claimed that his actions were guided by oracular dreams or divine inspiration; for instance, when he was leading the campaign in Hispania in 209 BCE, he sought to capture the key city of Carthago Nova. Scipio discovered that the lagoon which lapped the city walls on one side was tidal, and when the sea retreated, this left part of the wall vulnerable. Scipio informed his soldiers of his plan to take advantage of this weakness, claiming that: "it was Neptune who had first suggested this plan to him, appearing to him in his sleep, and promising that when the time for the action came he would render such conspicuous aid that his intervention would be manifest to the whole army".¹² His stratagem worked and the army, trusting Scipio's calculations and heartened by the god's support, followed his daring plan, taking the city.

Polybius, who was closely associated with Scipio and accompanied him on some of his campaigns, objects to the idea that this stratagem was presented to Scipio by the gods, but insists that it was the general's military skills and calculations that won the day.¹³ If similar perceptions to Polybius' were held by other prominent individuals, this might reveal why claims of divine support were not made by every prominent and ambitious politician. Some may have seen doing so as a diminution of their own personal power or abilities, giving credit to the gods rather than themselves.¹⁴ Despite Polybius' disapproval, the fact that he emphatically argues against the claim of divine support suggests that it was a well-known explanation for Scipio's victory. E. Wheeler argues that such claims for divine aid or inspiration could be strategic, used to restore the flagging morale of an army or, conversely, the lack of divine aid could restrain

11 Liv., 26.19.5–7, Polyb., 10.5.5–8, Val. Max., 1.2.2. The connection between his divine support and election for this command is explicitly linked by Cass. Dio., fr.16.39.

12 Polyb., 10.11.7; J.H. Richardson, 'P. Cornelius Scipio and the Capture of New Carthage: the tide, the wind and other fantasies', *Classical Quarterly* 68.2 (2018), 458–474 has expressed scepticism regarding the veracity of this event, particularly concerning the tidal aspect of the lagoon.

13 Polyb., 10.9.2–3.

14 I have elsewhere made a similar argument regarding the motivations behind the choice of military commanders either to or not to claim that the Dioscuri appeared to secure their victory at a pivotal battle: A. Gartrell, *The Cult of Castor and Pollux in Rome: Myth, Ritual and Society* (Cambridge 2021) 109–111.

an army that was too eager to rush into battle before the general was ready.¹⁵ In agreement with Wheeler, I would argue that their strategic benefits do not necessarily mean that they were not believed, rather their credibility is key to their success: if the general's claims were not believed by the majority, the stratagem would not work.

3 Interactions with Structures of Power

These select examples reveal why some may have sought to use claims of divine support as a strategy to either attain or consolidate their power: they gave the claimant an advantage over a political competitor, helped push through a programme of religious development, and set a young man of great promise on the road to military glory. Such claims thus engaged with a range of existing power structures within Roman society, including those connected with politics, religion, and the military. There were a wide variety of concepts of power in Ancient Rome, including the formal and temporary *imperium* or *potestas* of a magistrate or commander, but also the more nebulous personal *auctoritas* and *dignitas*, accrued by an individual over his lifetime because of his accomplishments, character, and others' respect.¹⁶ A claim of divine support on its own would not have been enough to make a nobody consul, but it could form part of a convincing argument for the choice of one candidate over another or to justify an exception being made to an established precedent, for example the selection of the twenty-four year old Scipio as proconsular commander of the war in Hispania.¹⁷

4 Principles of Divine Support

With these potential advantages, it is perhaps surprising that we do not have more examples of claims to divine support. It is likely, owing to the lack of

15 E.L. Wheeler, 'Shock and awe: battles of the gods in Roman Imperial warfare, Part I', in: C. Wolff and Y. Le Bohec, eds., *L'Armée romaine et la religion sous le Haut-Empire Romain* (Paris 2009), 227–228, 231–232.

16 On the concept of *auctoritas*: J.M. David and F. Hurlet, eds., *L'Auctoritas à Rome: Une Notion Constitutive de la Culture Politique* (Bordeaux 2020); Y. Berthelet, *Gouverner avec les Dieux: Autorité, auspices et pouvoir, sous la République romaine et sous Auguste* (Paris 2015); W. Nippel, 'The Roman notion of *auctoritas*', in: P. Pasquino and P. Harris, eds., *The Concept of Authority: a Multidisciplinary Approach, from Epistemology to the Social Sciences* (Rome 2007), 13–34.

17 Liv., 26.19.1–9, Val. Max., 3.7.1a, Cass. Dio., fr.16.39.

contemporary literary sources from the early and mid-Republic, that some claims have been lost. We must also be aware that the claims most likely to have been preserved are the most successful claims made by those men who rose to the highest levels of power and thus left the greatest marks on the historical record. Nevertheless, I would argue it is possible to draw from the examples that we do have some underlying principles which controlled who was most likely to make a successful claim to divine support and thus leverage it to gain or maintain their power. These principles will inevitably be generalisations that will not apply perfectly to all contexts or periods, but will provide an outline for my argument of how this strategy developed and was able to affect and grant access to structures of power.

The proposed principles are as follows:

- 1) The gods pay attention to mortal affairs and will support worthy individuals.
- 2) Divine support helps that individual gain success, which then justifies their position of power.
- 3) The relationship will continue so long as the mortal remains consistently worthy; should they cease to be so; the god's support will cease and legitimacy end.

These three principles create a circular and self-sustaining justification loop: the mortal's claims to divine support were proven by their success; that success proved that their claim to have divine support was correct; thus, so long as they continued to have success, they could claim divine support. However, should their success end, their claim to divine support would be called into question. Whether a single loss in an election or battle would be enough to break the loop is unclear and would probably depend on many other factors, including the significance of the loss, whether it could be rapidly recovered, and the cumulative number of successes they had previously received. Claimants with greater power, allies, and a long run of successes may have found it easier to argue that this was a minor setback and maintain the loop than those with less power and significant enemies.¹⁸ Key to the success of this legitimisation loop is a constant assessment of its credibility; could the audience of this claim find it credible that the claimant would have been supported by the gods? Divine support was not granted automatically or for life; so long as the support was proven by the mortal's run of successes, the loop survives; the moment that credibility is effectively challenged, the loop is at risk of collapse.

18 For a comparable discussion on the impact of a military loss on a political career: N.S. Rosenstein, *Imperatores Victi: Military Defeat and Aristocratic Competition in the Middle and Late Republic* (Cambridge 1990).

Other principles that underline this strategy are the concept of worthiness and the agency of the gods to choose to whom they offer their support. If there was no element of judgement and the gods selected who to favour at random, without considering whether that person was worthy of their support, then entrusting that person to hold a position of power would be a much riskier proposition: that divine support could be withdrawn as suddenly and as arbitrarily as it had appeared.¹⁹ The connection between worthiness and divinely given success can be seen on a much larger scale in Cicero's boast of the superiority of Roman piety, made in 56 BCE:

who, once convinced that divinity does exist, can fail at the same time to be convinced that it is by its power that this great empire has been created, extended, and sustained? However good be our conceit of ourselves, conscript fathers, we have excelled neither Spain in population, nor Gaul in vigour, nor Carthage in versatility, nor Greece in art, nor indeed Italy and Latium itself in the innate sensibility characteristic of this land and its peoples; but in piety, in devotion to religion, and in that special wisdom which consists in the recognition of the truth that the world is swayed and directed by divine disposal, we have excelled every race and every nation.²⁰

In this passage, Cicero argues that the Romans have consistently met the criteria for worthiness: their piety and care for the gods, and thus the gods have rewarded them with the creation and maintenance of Roman power across the Mediterranean world. The unspoken implication is that, so long as they continue to display the correct degree of piety, Rome will enjoy continued hegemony.²¹ Similar criteria may be applied to the smaller scale personal

19 A useful analogy might be drawn to the views of the more capricious Fortuna, who did not always weigh the merits of those she helped or hindered, as seen in Polyb., 29.21, quoting Demetrius of Phalerum: "Fortune, who never compacts with life, who always defeats our reckoning by some novel stroke; she who ever demonstrates her power by foiling our expectations, now also, as it seems to me, makes it clear to all men, by endowing the Macedonians with the whole wealth of Persia, that she has but lent them these blessings until she decides to deal differently with them". Although compare with Cicero's view of a more discerning Fortuna in Cic., *Leg. Man.* 47. On Fortuna more widely: D. Miano, *Fortuna: Deity and Concept in Archaic and Republican Italy* (Oxford 2018); J. Champeaux, *Fortuna: Recherche sur le culte de la Fortune à Rome et dans le monde romain, des origines à la mort de César* (Rome 1982–1987).

20 Cic., *Har. Resp.* 19.

21 Cicero is not a disinterested party in this speech, the piety he wishes the senate to display is for them to condemn Publius Clodius Pulcher and his impious actions, including the

claims to divine support. The claimant must be able to make a credible case for their worthiness to stand a chance of being successful. Scipio's success made his claim to have Neptune's support credible; a less successful general would have found the claim much harder to sustain or leverage for political prestige.

The second caveat for the credibility of claims to worthiness and thus divine support is that for the divine support to be maintained, so too must the worthiness of the claimant. This would most easily be proven by a consistent run of successes. The gods' support needed to be maintained through continual renegotiation and display of the qualities that led to the first successful claim. A useful parallel might be drawn here to F. Santangelo's argument for the reinterpretation of the concept of *pax deorum* – the state of peace between gods and humans that was the aim of Roman religion to maintain – as not being a stable or default state, but instead one that required constant vigilance and active maintenance, engagement, and negotiation to preserve.²² If it was not maintained, if the signs of the gods were ignored, if the correct rituals were not performed, then Rome would no longer be worthy and accordingly would lose divine support. The consequences if the state were to lose that support would be dramatic: military defeats, loss of territory, and dominance. For an ordinary senator, the scale would be smaller: the end of their successful political or military career, loss of an office or political prestige, and a slide into obscurity. For the most powerful men, who made the greatest claims for divine support, the removal of that support might have a more dire and immediate impact. O. Hekster has identified a phenomenon of 'Reversed Epiphanies', in which the gods appeared to either announce directly or signal their withdrawal of support from a mortal.²³ Perhaps the most dramatic of these divine abandonments was that of Dionysius as he ceased to support Mark Antony, who had been closely associated with the god.²⁴ However, following the defeat of his and Cleopatra's forces at the Battle of Actium in 31 BCE, when they had retreated to Alexandria and the night before Antony was preparing to meet Octavian in battle outside the city, Plutarch describes:

During this night, it is said, about the middle of it, while the city was quiet and depressed through fear and expectation of what was coming,

attempted consecration of Cicero's house, thus restoring the good relationship between the Romans and the gods.

22 F. Santangelo, 'Pax Deorum and Pontiffs', in: J.H. Richardson and F. Santangelo, eds., *Priests and State in the Roman World*, (Stuttgart 2011), 166.

23 O. Hekster, 'Reversed Epiphanies; Emperors deserted by Gods', *Mnemosyne* 6:3 (2010), 601–615.

24 Plut., *Ant.* 24.3; Hekster 2010, op. cit. (n. 23) 610–611.

suddenly certain harmonious sounds from all sorts of instruments were heard, and the shouting of a throng, accompanied by cries of Bacchic revelry and satyric leavings, as if a troop of revellers, making a great tumult, were going forth from the city; and their course seemed to lie about through the middle of the city toward the outer gate which faced the enemy, at which point the tumult became loudest and then dashed out. Those who sought the meaning of the sign were of the opinion that the god to whom Antony always most likened and attached himself was now deserting him.²⁵

Dionysius had judged Antony's worthiness and found him wanting; perhaps the loss at Actium was his first move in this withdrawal, but this departure was certainly an explicit statement of its completion. In Plutarch's account, Antony is depicted as no longer adhering to Roman values, such as *virtus* but instead hands out Roman dominions to his children with Cleopatra and holds excessively luxurious and debauched parties.²⁶ When even the most luxurious and licentious god Dionysius withdrew his support, the loss of his primacy was inevitable. The legitimacy loop had been broken, Antony was no longer a credible candidate for divine support and thus his navy and cavalry followed the god's example and deserted him.

5 Innovations in Divine Legitimation

Having thus established the underlying principles of how claims to divine legitimation could be used to access structures of power, I will now consider how this technique developed. There is a distinct increase in the number of individuals who cultivated long term claims to divine support as we draw closer to the fall of the Republic, likely owing to this being a period of increased extraordinary commands and concentration of power in smaller numbers of prominent men, as well as the greater prevalence of contemporary evidence. Once this strategy had proven successful for one politician, others would seek to use it for their own ends, and as it became a more common and accepted strategy, the competitive ethos of Republican politics would lead to increasing claims.²⁷ In many of these cases, claims of divine support became refocused, being used

25 Plut., *Ant.* 75.3–4.

26 Plut., *Ant.* 36.2–3.

27 On the growing trend of mortal-divine assimilation in the Late Republic: S. Cole, *Cicero and the Rise of Deification at Rome* (Cambridge 2013), particularly chapters one and two.

less to gain positions of power or to justify a single action, but instead part of a wider and longer running justification of their extraordinary status and powers. The dictator Sulla was among the first to adapt this legitimising strategy as he sought to break into and then rewrite existing structures of power. Following his triumph and assumption of the dictatorship, he styled himself with a pair of epithets which suggested that he possessed unusual fortune and the support of Venus: *Felix* and *Epaphroditus*.²⁸ These claims were made at the peak of his power and the legitimisation was not, therefore, that he should be chosen as dictator, but rather that his usurpation and use of the magistracy and position at the top of the structures of power was justified and sanctified by the goddess.²⁹

The next development of this strategy that we may trace is direct competitive use of rival divine claims. The earlier examples were standalone claims; as far as we are aware, there was no contemporary rival to Scipio who also claimed that Jupiter favoured him, nor did anyone challenge Sulla for Venus' favour. Although there might be many gentilicial claims to descent from a single deity, this does not seem to have become a subject of direct competition between these different families. The claims formed part of the general competition for power amongst the elite, but they were not themselves set against each other, with one family repudiating another's claim. However, this dramatically changed in the period of the civil wars when there were competing claims to a single deity's favour between two political rivals: Pompey and Caesar for Venus. Caesar, as I have already noted, could claim a long-standing ancestral connection with the goddess, which he was drawing on by 67 BCE.³⁰ Pompey, however, had no such reason behind his selection of deity, but had made his rival claim public at least by 55 BCE, when he dedicated a temple of Venus Victrix at the top of the *cavea* of his monumental theatrical complex in the Campus Martius. Caesar responded by making his ancestral claim explicit in the epithet applied to his own new temple of Venus in his eponymous Forum: *Genetrix*, the ancestress. Although the temple was dedicated in 46 BCE, it had been vowed before

28 Plut., *Sull.* 34.2, App., *B. Civ.* 1.451–452. The connection between Venus and Victory was depicted on a series of coins minted between 84 and 83 BCE, which show the goddess' head on the obverse, above Sulla's name and accompanied by Cupid holding a palm branch of victory. The reverse also links religion and victory, showing the priestly symbols of a jug and lituus between a pair of trophies, the legend celebrating Sulla's acclamation of *imperator*: *RRC* 359/1, 359/2.

29 For a recent reappraisal of the reception of Sulla's claim to be *Felix*: A. Eckert, 'Good Fortune and the Public Good; Disputing Sulla's Claim to Be Felix', in: H. van der Blom, C. Gray, and C. Steel, eds., *Institutions and Ideology in Republican Rome: Speech, Audience and Decision* (Cambridge 2018), 283–298.

30 See above, p. 13.

their final battle at Pharsalus two years earlier.³¹ The question naturally arises: why would these two prominent military men seek to claim the favour of this goddess? In part, her connection to Aeneas and thus the foundation of Rome is likely to have played a role, as may have Sulla's choice to single her out. But I would also argue that the goddess was selected by Pompey, whose claim is the later, at least in part to compete with Caesar not only in the political arena, but also in the religious. He sought to defeat Caesar on his own turf: if he could prove the credibility of his claim to Venus' favour was superior to that of her descendant, it would be a severe blow to Caesar's *dignitas* and *auctoritas*. Their rival claims were tested at the Battle of Pharsalus: Plutarch relates a dream of Pompey's, in which he saw himself entering his theatre to great applause and adorning his temple of Venus Victrix with spoils of battle. Upon awakening, he identified two potential interpretations of this dream: that the spoils were those he had won and thus Venus had chosen to support his claim to power; alternatively, that the celebration was because of his defeat, the spoils of war had once belonged to his army, but had been taken by the victorious Caesar.³² Unbeknownst to Pompey, Caesar had made a rival bid for Venus, with the specific epithet called upon by Pompey, using 'Venus Victrix' as the watchword for the same night.³³ Pompey's fear, as described by Plutarch, is framed explicitly in terms of divine support: that Caesar's ancestral claim would surpass his own claim to Venus' aid; a fear which was proven justified.

The competitive use of rival claims to divine support continued to be a tactic used throughout the last years of the Republic. However, in the competition between Octavian and Antony, they did not seek to dispute the specific deity claimed as legitimator, but instead each assembled a team of rival divine claims. Antony, as has previously been noted, called upon Dionysius as well as Hercules, from whom he claimed descent via a son named Anton.³⁴ Octavian, whose power and presence was concentrated in Rome and Italy, claimed Apollo as his main divine support, but also drew upon many other deities. Both of their claims were challenged in regard to worthiness. Mark Antony, as noted above, was judged by Dionysius to no longer be worthy of his support following his defeat at the Battle of Actium in 31 BCE.³⁵ However, even before this, the question of whether these were appropriate or worthy deities for a Roman

31 App., *B.Civ.* 2.424.

32 Plut., *Pomp.* 68.2.

33 App., *B.Civ.* 2.319.

34 Plut., *Ant.* 4.1–3; the connection was represented on an aureus minted in Rome by L. Livineius Regulus in 42 BCE, which featured the portrait of Antony on the obverse and a depiction of a seated Hercules on the reverse: *RRC* 494/2a–b.

35 See pp. 18–19.

commander to call upon was debated. Hercules had long been worshipped in Rome, first, it is suggested, as a god connected to trade before gaining more military associations, as shown by the number of temples he possessed that were either paid for by the spoils of war or were given a victory based epithet: *Invictus* or *Victor*.³⁶ These were likely the motivations for Antony's selection of the deities, along with both deities' connections to eastern conquests. However both also possessed a negative side, one connected to loss of control, luxury, and a tendency towards excess: easy elements for Octavian to emphasise in his propaganda, suggesting that it was these negative aspects that Antony shared with the gods, rather than their conquering and civilising ones.³⁷ It was not just Antony's choice of deities that was questioned, however, Octavian too reportedly mis-stepped in the acceptable level and manner of such claims. In the infamous Banquet of the Twelve Gods, reported by Suetonius, Octavian attended a luxurious banquet dressed as Apollo, whilst the people of Rome suffered through a famine.³⁸ Although the question of his worthiness to be compared to Apollo was not raised, the comparison made was not flattering, likening him not to a healing or beneficent aspect of the god, but rather to Apollo *Tortor*, the tormentor. The criticism of Octavian's actions was widespread, included in letters of Antony as well as a widely circulated verse, depicting the gods turning their faces from earth and Jupiter fleeing his golden throne.³⁹ Antony could not be too smug however, for a similar anecdote was applied to a banquet of his own upon his arrival in Ephesus. Although his supporters welcomed him as 'Dionysius Giver of Joys and Beneficent', his opponents cast him as 'Dionysius

36 M. Daniels, 'Heros *invictus* and *pactor orbis*: Hercules as a War God for Roman Emperors', in: M. Dillon and C. Matthews, eds., *Religion and Classical Warfare: The Roman Empire* (Yorkshire 2022), 99.

37 For a discussion of an argued identification of an analogy between Hercules/Antony and Omphale/Cleopatra on an Arrentine bowl, a parallel reported by Plutarch: Plut., *Comp. Dem. Ant.* 3.3, and argued by P. Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*, trans. A. Shapiro (Ann Arbor 1988), 33–77; see O. Hekster, 'Hercules, Omphale and Octavian's "Counter-Propaganda"', *BABESCH – Annual Papers on Mediterranean Archaeology* 19 (2004), 159–166. Antony may also have been attempting to compare himself with Alexander the Great, who was also associated with Herakles, as other Roman generals had also sought to do, including Pompey: K. Erickson, 'Sons of Heracles: Antony and Alexander in the Late Republic', in: K.R. Moore, ed., *Brill's Companion to the Reception of Alexander the Great* (Leiden 2018), 254–274.

38 Suet., *Aug.* 70.1–2.

39 Suet., *Aug.* 70.1. T.S. Luke, *Ushering in a New Republic: Theologies of Arrival at Rome in the First Century BCE* (Ann Arbor 2014), 152–158 argues that this banquet took place in 36 BCE, as a banquet celebrating the anniversary of the defeat of Sextus Pompey at Naulochos, held in the Capitoline Temple itself. The Jupiter fleeing his throne is thus identified as the cult statue itself, in rejection of the impious feast.

Carnivorous and Savage'.⁴⁰ The claim of divine association in these examples were thus seen to be credible, but not in the way that either man hoped, which reveals the potential of the strategy to backfire.

The credibility of Octavian's claim to divine support, and more divine support than any contemporary rival, was proven by the outcome of the Battles of Actium and Alexandria, after which there was no one left who could make a credible case that they were supported by the gods more than he was. Octavian consolidated a wide range of divine support in himself, legitimising his supreme position in the Roman state, despite his youth. This is vividly depicted by Virgil in his description of the shield of Aeneas, in which a wide range of Roman gods: Venus, Apollo, Neptune, Mars, and Minerva fight on his behalf against Anubis and the other gods of Egypt.⁴¹ It is worth highlighting here that the gods ranged against Augustus are all Egyptian, Dionysius and Hercules have disappeared from Antony's ranks of supporters once more. This was the first imperial innovation, to make divine legitimation exclusive to the *princeps*, with a slight expansion later to his family members, but also to multiply the number of deities from whom he could claim support.⁴² Avenues that might have been used by potential rivals to claim a relationship with a divine legitimator were closed off and made the sole preserve of the *princeps* and his family; the last temple attested as being dedicated by someone outside the imperial family was that of Apollo Sosianus, near the theatre of Marcellus, by Gaius Sosius in the late 30s BCE. Similarly, the chances for military proof of divine legitimacy through triumphs became curtailed over time; Lucius Cornelius Balbus was the last general who was not a member of the imperial family to triumph in 19 BCE. Thus, Augustus ensured that he was *primus inter pares* not only in political terms, but also in religious ones. As he boasts in his *Res Gestae*, he accrued an extraordinary number of priesthoods, his name was incorporated in the hymn of the Salii, and he restored eighty-two temples in a single year.⁴³ All of these combined to reveal that Augustus was supported by

40 Plut., *Ant.* 24.4; Luke 2014 op. cit. (n. 39) 158.

41 Virg., *Aen.* 8.696–706. To this might be added comparisons drawn between Augustus and the Dioscuri, Hercules, Bacchus and Quirinus, all gods who had been deified owing to their deeds in life: Hor., *Od.* 3.3.9–16.

42 Previous individuals had associated themselves with more than one god, but not on the same scale of Augustus; for example both Pompey and Caesar were also connected to Hercules, although not to the same extent as Venus: see Daniels 2022 op. cit. (n. 36) 101–102. I have argued elsewhere for the use of the Dioscuri as divine parallels to pairs of potential heirs in the early imperial period, to legitimise their current but also potential future positions of power, as well as to reassure the population of Rome that the succession would be peaceful. See Gartrell 2021 op. cit. (n. 14), 145–193.

43 Aug., *RG* 7.3; 10.1; 20.4, trans. A.E. Cooley, *Res Gestae Divi Augusti: Text, Translation and Commentary* (Cambridge 2009).

the most gods, more than anyone else could claim, and thus his pre-eminent position at the top of the structures of political, religious, and social power was justified: as he claims: “I excelled everyone in influence (*auctoritate*), but I had no more power (*potestatis*) than the others who were my colleagues in each magistracy”, in part, because he was the only one able to marshal such a legion of divine legitimators.⁴⁴

Not all emperors who followed Augustus drew on this legitimising strategy to the same extent, nor was it universally successful for those who did. Tiberius, who came to power after Augustus’ death in 14 CE, may have felt secure enough not to need to do so to the same extent, or may have felt his relationship with the recently deified *Divus* Augustus was a more immediate justification and legitimisation for his position. Tiberius’ successor, Caligula, however, came to power aged twenty-five with little to recommend him to the position in which he found himself apart from his descent from Augustus. It is not surprising therefore, that he was the next emperor to draw upon divine legitimators to support his claim to power, although unsuccessfully.⁴⁵ He followed in his great-grandfather’s footsteps in two ways when doing so, firstly by associating himself closely with a wide range of deities and, secondly by adorning himself with their insignia and attributes, as Octavian was accused of having done during the Banquet of the Twelve Gods. Philo, who had met the young emperor during the ill-fated embassy of the Alexandrian Jews, describes how Caligula first began to liken himself to Dionysius, Heracles, and the Dioscuri, before moving on to Olympian deities: Hermes, Apollo, and Ares.⁴⁶ Philo describes Caligula’s rationale in doing so, in which he uses an analogy of the power differential between herds of animals and their shepherds, thus, by analogy, he, as emperor, was the shepherd of men and was of a higher status and power than them, therefore, he assumed his own divinity.⁴⁷ Caligula’s misuse of divine legitimators is criticised by Philo explicitly in terms of worthiness and credibility, asking him “And yet what business had you, Gaius, to take the insignia commonly used to adorn the images of the said deities? For you should have emulated their virtues”.⁴⁸ He continues to list Caligula’s failings regarding each

44 Aug., *RG* 34.3.

45 Aspects of this section appear in Gartrell 2021 op. cit (n. 14) and are reprinted with permission from A. Gartrell, *The Cult of Castor and Pollux in Ancient Rome: Myth, Ritual, and Society* (Cambridge 2021).

46 Philo, *Leg.* 78–113, see also Cass. Dio., 59.26.5–8.

47 Philo, *Leg.* 76.

48 Philo, *Leg.* 81.

of the deities: the Dioscuri were devoted brothers, who were willing to die for each other, but Caligula executed his 'brother' Tiberius Gemellus and exiled his sisters; while Apollo brings light and healing to the sick, Caligula prefers the darkness and brings destruction and harm to the healthy.⁴⁹ Whilst we need to acknowledge the explicitly hostile nature of this text against Caligula, the fact that Philo's criticism against Caligula's actions is framed in such a way reveals that it is his unworthiness which renders his claim to truly be one of the gods and thus supported by them to be incredible. The further implication being that if Caligula had lived up to these models, he may not have only reigned for four years, but instead his claim to power would have been supported.

6 Conclusion

To conclude, I have shown one way that the gods could serve as divine legitimators and examined some of the principles that underlay the strategy and its subsequent innovations, key to which were the criteria of worthiness and credibility. Without one or both of these, this strategy would not support claims to access or climb the structures of social, political, or military power. Divine legitimators, as laid out in the Republic, continued to be used in the imperial period, but developed from the claimed pre-eminence of an individual, which suited the individual based political competition of the Republic, to be consolidated in the figure of the *princeps*, who could claim the most divine legitimators of all. The imperial use of the strategy legitimised the extraordinary position of the *princeps* and, in turn, of his successors. Although the structures of power may have changed from Republic to Empire, the principles of this strategy for claiming that power remained consistent and the strategy itself became a traditional way to claim power. The greatest innovation was in the control of that tradition and the restriction of who was allowed to draw upon it. The changes and indeed the strategy itself were rarely spelled out, or at least do not seem to have been in the sources which survive, and perhaps this is one of the reasons behind its longevity and success, that the links between a tradition of divine support and structures of power were not spelled out, but rather left to the implicit understanding of the principles outlined above and the role of religion in the state. Caligula's misuse and failure to successfully integrate himself into even the changed structure of power in the imperial period might serve as a warning against innovating too far and making the supporting

49 Philo, *Leg.* 84–87; 103–110.

structure to his power explicit, allowing his worthiness and the credibility of his claim to be rejected.

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