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Student Name: Gary Cunningham		
Student University Email: 1603116@student.uwtsd.ac.uk		
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A Gallo-Roman Icon from Southern Gaul: Its Significance for Understanding Religious Change During the Principate

Gary Cunningham

The Changing Cultural Landscape in Gaul

Rapid changes took place in Gallic communities following Caesar's conquests, especially in comparison to the preceding few centuries.¹ Under the auspices of Caesar and then Augustus, widespread settlement of Roman army veterans occurred in southern Gaul expanding colonies such as Arles, Orange, and Fréjus. The impact on the indigenous population was significant as locals were evicted or forced to sell their land.² But more changes occurred in subsequent decades in terms of material culture, customs, and religion.

We see a large increase in the prevalence of votive objects and inscriptions beginning with the first century B.C.³ Some of the traditional cults faded away or were eliminated by the Romans. The unique hero-ancestor cult in *Gallia Narbonensis* vanished, perhaps because the associated head cult (*Têtes coupées*) was contradictory to Roman *humanitas*.⁴

According to Pliny, Tiberius Caesar had the Druids, '*et hoc genus vatium medicorumque*,' eliminated because of the practice of magic (Plin. *HN* 30.4). This may be viewed as part of the overall process of expanding Roman *humanitas* to the provinces by eliminating what the Roman's viewed as *superstitio*.⁵

The Wheel in Gallo-Roman Religion

¹ Häussler 2008: 15.

² Woolf 1998: 38.

³ Häussler 2008: 18.

⁴ Häussler 2008: 18.

⁵ Woolf 1998: 221. Woolf notes that it was Claudius who Suetonius attributed with extinguishing the Druid religion (Suet. *Claud.*25).

The object under study here is a stone relief figure from Séguret (Provence), in what was the Roman province *Gallia Nabonensis* (Fig. 1). It depicts a god in Roman military garb, possibly even representing the *numen* of the emperor.⁶ He holds a lightning bolt while an eagle stands at his left side. With his right hand he balances a large wheel. Certain characteristics of this object resemble a bronze ‘wheel god’ found at Le Châtelet in central France. The deity is a bearded figure holding a wheel and lightning bolt but without the military garb or eagle.⁷ The object of interest, which I will now reference as the ‘Jupiter Wheel-God,’ also has a striking similarity to a depiction of the classical Roman Jupiter with lightning bolt and flanked by an eagle (Fig. 2). The military garb of the Séguret object is rather puzzling since Jupiter is not typically depicted as a soldier, with the notable exception of Jupiter Dolichenus.⁸

Gallic Wheel Symbolism

Pre-Roman Gallic deities were not typically anthropomorphic but were represented by animals or ‘animal-human hybrids’ as well as trees and, important for this paper, by wheels.⁹ Wheels appear in singularity and in conjunction with other symbols in many forms to include objects of stone, metal, and bone, and clay. These objects include jewellery (possibly talismans), votive objects and, much later, coinage.¹⁰ Many come from graves, possibly serving some purpose for the departed in the afterlife.¹¹

A classic example of Celtic wheel symbolism is the Gundestrup Cauldron (possibly originating around Jutland) which depicts a bearded deity holding a wheel and surrounded by mythical creatures.¹² The object is dated to a range from the Middle La Tène Iron Age to the early Roman era. Very little is known

⁶ Green 1984: 170.

⁷ Green 1984: 136; Fig. 57, Pl. LXXIX,

⁸ Green 1984: 170-1.

⁹ Woolf 1998: 212; Green 2011: 615.

¹⁰ Green 1984: 10-33; 2011: 642.

¹¹ Green 2011: 642.

¹² Green 1984: 139.

about pre-Roman Celtic cosmological views.¹³ However, Miranda Green suggests that the wheel could be associated with a Celtic 'solar cult' dating back to the Bronze age, with the wheel representing the sun's motion across the sky.¹⁴ If this is the case, then I think we can imagine the 'spokes' representing the sun's rays, and the 'rim' representing the solar aura.¹⁵

Linkage of wheel symbolism to a particular deity does not appear until the Roman era. According to Green, many of the stone monuments from the Celtic regions of Europe indicate a direct link between the wheel and a deity that may be in some way equated with the Roman Jupiter.¹⁶

'Romanisation' in Gaul

Nineteenth-century scholars wrote of the 'Romanising' process, whether they actually called it that or not. De Coulanges believed the Gauls embraced Roman culture to share 'the most cultivated and noble manners, arts, studies, labours and pleasantries known to humanity' and it was this acculturation, more than imposition by the Romans, that contributed to Gallic adoption of Roman mores.¹⁷

Gallic life was transformed through the granting of Roman citizenship, election to the Roman Senate, appointment to local administrative posts, and as priests – who also received high rank in the new order as *primores Galliarum*.¹⁸ Locals were also in the service of wealthy Romans who established estates in southern Gaul.¹⁹ The conquest also came with Roman-style.²⁰

¹³ Derks 1998: 74.

¹⁴ Green 1984: 296.

¹⁵ Green 1984: 41; 2011: 678.

¹⁶ Green 1984: 103.

¹⁷ De Coulanges 1891: 134-9, cited in Woolf 1998: 4.

¹⁸ Woolf 1998: 40; Boatwright 2012: 52-3.

¹⁹ Woolf 1998: 42.

²⁰ Woolf 1998: 72-3.

Jane Webster suggests that Roman provinces were ‘creolized’ rather than ‘Romanized.’²¹ She proposes that creolization of material culture, ‘represents not the gradual replacement of one way of life by another, but the blending of both,’ resulting in a cultural hybrid, for which she uses ‘Romano-Celtic iconography as a case study.’²²

Interpretatio

Julius Caesar of the Gauls: ‘*Deum maxime Mercurium colunt...Post hunc Apollinem et Martem et Iovem et Minervam.*’ Of Jupiter, Caesar says, ‘*Iovem imperium caelestium tenere*’ (Caes. *B Gall.* 6.17). So it would seem that, at least in Caesar’s view, not only did the Gaul’s worship the same deities as did the Romans, but the assumed function of these deities was universal among the Gallic tribes.

In what has become known as *interpretatio Romana*, Romans often recognised their own gods in provincial deities.²³ That is, the Roman interpretation of local indigenous deities. The term appears once in classical literature, in Tacitus’ *Germania*, where he describes a sacred grove and ritual of the Naharvali tribe in association with their deities the Alcis, ‘*sed deos interpretatio Romana Castorem Pollucemque memorant*’ (Tac. *Germ.* 43.4).²⁴ Other classical authors recognized the general concept. Varro wrote that the deities known to the Romans as *Caelum et Terra*, were known in Egypt as *Serepis et Isis*, but in Latium they were known as *Saturnus et Ops*. Thus, he says, *Terra et Caelum* are known by *multis nominibus* (Varro. *Ling.* 5.58-9).²⁵

Clifford Ando believes *interpretatio Romana* was more than simply an exercise in cross-referencing names from one culture to another, proposing that if it had been simply that, we would find a greater

²¹ Webster 2001: 209.

²² Webster 1995; 2001: 218.

²³ Ando 2005; 2008: 56.

²⁴ Ando 2005: 41.

²⁵ Ando 2008: 54.

abundance of such mapping (where in fact such mapping is scarce) and ‘near universal consensus on particular *interpretationes*.’²⁶

The Jupiter Wheel-God

Back to the object in question, just who is this deity? We saw above that a link has been suggested between the object and the *numen Augusti*. The imperial cult took hold in south-eastern Gaul during the early Principate. One point of evidence is a sanctuary to the emperor that was very much Roman in design and function complete with gladiatorial games erected at *Lugdunum* (Lyon).²⁷ The cult is also apparent at Narbo where in A.D. 11 a marble altar was inscribed detailing the cult of the *numen Augusti*, prescribing the fulfilment of annual sacrifices by priests of a particular social stature.²⁸

Lucan’s *Pharsalia* mentions the Gallic theonyms *Teutates*, *Esus*, and *Taranis*.²⁹ The Celtic god Taranis, for which there is sparse evidence, seems to be associated with thunder, and the Jupiter Wheel-God holds a lightning bolt (as do the Le Châtelet figure and the Louvre Jupiter).³⁰ But the theonyms of Jupiter and Taranis appear together on only handful of inscriptions from the U.K., Dalmatia, and Germany.³¹

Jupiter as stand-in for Taranis might be an example of *interpretatio Gallica* or *interpretatio Celtica*. Miranda Green proposes that the conflation of deities could be a ‘two-way’ street, with *interpretatio Romana* and *interpretatio Celtica* intermingling to produce a ‘composite’ deity.³² I think it is much simpler than this, but it is difficult to hard to tell who produced this object: a Gallic local, a transplanted Roman, or a soldier who originated from from anywhere in the empire.

²⁶ Ando 2008: 55.

²⁷ Woolf 1998: 216.

²⁸ Woolf 1998: 223.

²⁹ Luc. I.444-6; Woolf 1998: 212.

³⁰ Green 1984: 299; Häussler 2008: 36.

³¹ Green 1979: 357; *RIB* 452 = *CIL* VII, 668; *CIL* III, 2804; *CIL* XIII, 6478; and *CIL* XIII, 6094.

³² Green 1984: 303.

Woolf asks why the Gauls would have exchanged their traditional religion for a new religious system greatly influenced by the Romans, assuming (and I think this is a logical assumption) that the old religious system made perfect sense to the Gauls. He says it may be that the new system made 'equally good sense' or even better sense. But he goes on to explain that the Gallic religion under the Principate was a hybrid, a blend of the old and the new.³³ I believe the scarce evidence linking Jupiter to Taranis requires a different conclusion. Since the wheel appears on several inscribed monuments in Britain and Gaul with dedications to Jupiter, and we have found similar iconography on statues of the Classical Jupiter, this would support the hypothesis of the conflation of a Celtic wheel-god with Jupiter.³⁴

³³ Woolf 1998: 230-2.

³⁴ For example, see Green 1984: Fig. 35-44, pl. LXVIII-LXXII.

Images.



Figure 1: Deity with wheel and eagle. Musée Lapidaire d'Avignon. Photo source: Musée Lapidaire d'Avignon.



Figure 2: Jupiter. Paris, Musée du Louvre.

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