

Jupiter Columns

What are they?

The Jupiter Columns have been found all through out Gaul and Germany and it is estimated that they were constructed between mid-first to mid-third centuries CE. They are always found in country estates, in towns or at rural shrines. Though the remains of over 150 have been found, no full columns have survived ; so we are forced to rely on the ruins for information. Despite this a lot of information about their construction has been discovered. The largest rising to fourteen meters tall, the columns had three distinct parts. A base displaying four gods, the pillar displaying other deities with a scale or elaborate vine pattern ending in a Corinthian capital. Above this is Jupiter either mounted on a horse or sitting on a throne.

Jupiter or Taranis?

A subject of debate is whether or not the columns display the Roman God Jupiter or his Celtic counterpart. Taranis was a God of thunder and evidence for his worship has been found in Gaul, Britain and Ireland. Though the figure at the top of these columns is recognized as Jupiter, it is not the same Jupiter worshipped in Rome. Jupiter Optimus Maximus is a hybridisation of the Roman God with a Celtic deity. This fusion of Roman and Celtic styles is evidenced in Jupiter. Though often dressed like a Roman the stance he is sculpted in riding a horse is from more Celtic in origin, as no evidence outside of the Romano-Celtic world depicts him mounted. It has even been suggested that these Jupiter columns may be reconstructions of Iron Age timber columns depicting Taranis.

Jupiter symbolism

All Jupiter columns in the Rhineland depict Jupiter atop his horse riding down a serpentine man. What this is exactly supposed to show has been debated by scholars for some time. Some believe that it is a Celtic representation of the gigantomachy. The Roman and Greek myth where Jupiter/Jupiter vanquishes a race of humanoid monsters. The story is meant to portray order vanquishing chaos. Others have argued that it is a representation of civilisation destroying the forces of barbarism. Another theory is that it is that the snake man is a representation of the earth. This argues that Jupiter astride his horse and wielding his thunderbolt is master of both the heavens and the earth. This is based upon not only the depiction of Jupiter but also his status as the head of the Roman Gods.

Jupiter columns in Gallia Belgia and lower Germany depict Jupiter sitting on a throne. Often on these columns Jupiter is shown alongside Juno at the top. This is thought to show how different regions perceived and payed homage to different aspects of Jupiter. How the local beliefs and legends of Taranis were fused with Jupiter. The Rhineland depiction of Jupiter makes sense for the region as due to the much more heavy cultural influence of horses. In Gallia Belgia it is more likely that Jupiter was worshipped not only as a thunder God but also as a sun God. Evidence from this is he greater emphasis on the wheel in depictions of Jupiter. Though seen as a representation of Thunder, some have argued ha it could also be a representation of the sun. Either suits Jupiter due to his role as a sky God. Though Juno's purpose here remains unknown it is speculated to be due t her holding a higher standing in the local community. It also fits with the less warrior and more regal depiction of Jupiter.



Figure 1: A Jupiter column replica located in Mainz. The original one has been relocated to the Landesmuseum. An inscription on the base pedestal reveals it was constructed by private individuals



Figure 2: depiction of the base and column. Displays all the deities worshipped in the local region. Base displays Juno, Minerva, Hercules and Mercury. Days of the week presented are Saturn, Sol, Luna, Mars, Vesta, Neptune and Venus



Figure 3: Close up of Jupiter riding down serpentine monster. More Celtic dress compared to typical depictions of Jupiter



Figure 4: Close up of the 4 seasons. One face for each side of the pillar. Notice the Graeco-Roman design.

Other deities

At the base of every column four gods are depicted, one face on each side. Typically these are Juno at the front, Minerva on the right, Hercules at the back and Mercury on the left. Some times these Gods are different depending on the region the column was found and the other Gods recognized are Apollo, Diana, Venus and Vulcan. Often like Jupiter these are also fused with similar Celtic deities such as Sucellus with either Vulcan or Hercules. Why certain combinations of Gods are chosen is unknown. The most logical answer is that these are the Gods venerated most by the local community. Another possible explanation is that they were the chosen Gods of the columns benefactor.

Above the base are the depictions of the seven days of the week and also the four seasons. The reason for this is unknown other than decoration. It is likely that it is designed to incur the favour of the Gods year round. This is also supported by the addition of an eight figure on some columns. This has been identified as Victoria the Goddess of victory.

Purpose and conclusion

The exact purpose of these columns remains unknown and so is a huge topic of debate for scholars. Some historians have argued that they stand as a representation o the local communities religious views. That the locally worshipped Gods were represented on the pillar with Jupiter above them all as the lord of the Gods. It has also been speculated to be the result of local wealthy men whether as gift to their community or as symbols of status is still discussed.

Regardless the Jupiter columns stand as evidence of Creolisation within the Romano-Celtic world. They demonstrate how the religious beliefs and practices of Rome spread in different regions of the Empire. This was not however all in one direction, as evidence for Celtic Gods such as Epona have been found to have spread through the rest of the Empire. Roman religion was incredibly flexible and often incorporated local deities into its structure. Whether that be outright acceptance such as Epona or the hybridisation such as with Jupiter and Taranis into Jupiter Optimus Maximus.

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Figure 1 found at <http://www.livius.org/pictures/germany/mainz-mogontiacum/mainz-column/mainz-honorific-column-reconstruction/>

Figure 2 found at <http://www.livius.org/pictures/germany/mainz-mogontiacum/mainz-column/mainz-column/mainz-honorific-column-1/>

Figure 3 found at <https://www.flickr.com/photos/carolemage/sets/72157651911309523/>

Figure 4 found at http://musee.metzmetropole.fr/en/pallo-roman-collections/column-of-merten-jumper-with-the-anguished_-r.html#W75ZzHTKJlU