

# The Survival of Winged Victory in Christian Late Antiquity

By Jesse Dubois

This paper seeks to explain the problems inherent in the continued depiction of the pagan goddess Victory in early Christian art. While winged angels eventually replaced Victory in iconography, this transformation was not immediate. Victory imagery remained current for hundreds of years amidst a ubiquitous trend toward monotheism among Christians and pagans alike, while other traditional personified deities (Pax, Concordia, Spes, Fortuna) disappeared entirely. This paper presents several possible explanations for her survival, none of which are mutually exclusive: her crystallization in triumphal imagery, unique aspects of her divinity, and her close visual association with the winged angel.

The rise of Christianity in the Roman world effected numerous changes in the art and iconography employed by the diverse inhabitants of the Mediterranean. However, just as numerous are the examples of artistic continuation. As a rare example of a religion that overtook an empire ‘from the inside’, Christian iconography is deeply rooted in that of its pagan predecessors, and these pagan exempla were quickly transferred into Christian images and symbols after the toleration of the early fourth century. Relatively few relics of pagan religious iconography were maintained after this transition, largely due to Christianity’s signature monotheism. However, not all pagan deities went extinct during the Christian era, and winged Victory seems to have had a life of her own in late antique imagery. Modern scholarship tends to neglect certain aspects of Victory’s divinity that problematize her inclusion in Christian art. A recent work on the imperial cult emphasizes the *Pax Augusta* and the *Fortuna Augusta*,

but neglects to mention that the *Victoria Augusta* was stressed with the creation of an altar to Victory in the Forum Romanum<sup>48</sup>. Further, writers on the topic of late antique art and coinage who mention that Victory had a booming cult following in Rome do not seek to explain *how* she was transferred into a merely artistic niche.<sup>49</sup> This paper will attempt to explain the problems and causes of Victory's continued existence in late antiquity

To begin, we must review notable examples of Victory in her Christian context. As is to be expected, the majority of these will be imperial, such as the equestrian image of Constantius II shown in Figure 1. Here, the winged figure's *palla* covers both shoulders, but her armband and her bust-line identify her as a Victory, and the 'Chi-Rho' on the shield behind the emperor clearly demarcates this as a Christian image. But Victory is not found only in imperial settings; a fragmentary image shows a Victory supporting a laurel wreath that encases a jeweled cross and the Greek letters alpha and omega, typical insignia of Christ (fig. 2). Her identification as a Victory, and not an angel, is indicated again by her costume: she wears an armband and her drapery covers only one shoulder, both telltale characteristics of femininity in Roman iconography at a time when angels were depicted as male figures.<sup>50</sup> Typical Christian imagery utilizes angels to flank religious medallions and employs Victories for only secular medallions; thus, this image shows an anomalous mixing of the two types.

Another celebrated member of this group is the so-called Barberini diptych (fig. 3), which depicts the Emperor Justinian flanked by two winged Victories, one being offered

---

<sup>48</sup> Ittai Gradel, *Emperor Worship and Roman Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>49</sup> Michael Grant, *The Roman Forum* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1970).

<sup>50</sup> K. Weitzmann, *Age of Spirituality* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1979), 535-536.

as a figurine and offering a laurel wreath, and the other holding a palm frond. Just above, a bust of Christ is displayed by two angels in the same pose as the Victory in Figure 2. These Victories are differentiated from the angels in the image by their gender, and therefore their costume; the angels appear chaste, donning the *pallium* typical of an early Christian male figure, while one of the Victories is identified by her exposed breast.<sup>51</sup> This diptych shows that not only were angels and Victories contemporaneous in Christian art, they could even both be present on the same image (albeit different panels). Yet, the majority of Victory's extant appearances in late antiquity are found in numismatic evidence. From Constantine until well after the reign of the last emperor of the West, there is hardly a single Roman emperor who does not display Victory prominently on his coinage.<sup>52</sup> The last known image of a personified deity other than Victory minted on imperial coinage is an image of Pax, distributed between 337 and 340 CE under Constantius II. From this date forward, images of personified deities cease to exist in numismatic evidence; however, the words *pax*, *felicitas*, and *spes* continue to appear on coins. They are sometimes accompanied by images of the reigning emperor, but most often, and most interestingly, by an image of Victory herself. It appears, then, that not only did Victory emerge unscathed from the sweeping changes in religious and imperial iconography, but she managed to have her fellow personifications subsumed under her own image.

Furthermore, Victory seems to be a rare survivor of the Christian mob's systematic attack on pagan statuary in the late fourth century. A statue of Victory near the Curia was

---

<sup>51</sup> K. Weitzmann, *Age of Spirituality* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1979), 33-35.

<sup>52</sup> David Sear, *Roman Coins and their Values* (London: B.A. Seaby, 1964), 231-279. This section is also used to validate the remainder of the claims in this paragraph. Also see Grant, *The Roman Forum*, 125.

never the victim of religious aggression,<sup>53</sup> but other iconic examples of statuary were utterly desecrated by the enraged, monotheist rabble. Archaeologists have even noted that certain temples in the northern Empire were so violently destroyed by ‘Christian ardor’ that no more than two capitals remain intact.<sup>54</sup> As a case-in-point, a catalogue prepared by the Metropolitan Museum of Art shows over six hundred examples of early Christian artworks, including numerous examples of Victory, yet the deities Pax, Fortuna, Spes and Concordia do not occur in a single image.<sup>55</sup> This is not due to a lack of opportunity; the Christian rhetoric emphasizes the hope and peace of Christ, but it is only his victory that is embodied by pagan deities.

The continued depiction of Victory by Christian patrons, especially in imperial contexts, poses problems for our understanding of the conflict between monotheism and traditional paganism in late antiquity. Victory enjoyed a large civic cult in Rome. Livy records the founding of her temple, either on the Palatine or the Capitoline, in 294 BCE (Livy X.33.9), and records another early shrine to *Victoria Virgo* constructed by Cato the Elder in 193 BCE (Livy XXXV.9.6). He also relates a description of a holy procession ending at the Temple of Victory on the Palatine, verifying its use as a cult location (Livy XXIX.14.14). Furthermore, Victory was one of the featured gods of the mass cult-revival during the Augustan era. Cult locations such as the *Ara Pacis* and the temple of *Fortuna Augusta* in Pompeii receive a majority of the scholarly attention because they are extant and fit well into the simplified Augustan program,<sup>56</sup> but Victory was a part of this revival as well: in 29 BCE, Augustus established

---

<sup>53</sup> Brian Croke and Jill Harries, *Religious Conflict in Fourth-Century Rome* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 1982), 51.

<sup>54</sup> Ramsay Macmullen, *Paganism in the Roman Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 133.

<sup>55</sup> Weitzmann, *Age of Spirituality*.

<sup>56</sup> Gradel, *Emperor Worship and Roman Religion*, 103-105; 138-139.

an altar of Victory in front of the Curia, as well as a large cult statue nearby. It would be around this altar that the fate of Victory's continued worship in the Christian era was to be decided.

Sacrifice on the altar was a longstanding senatorial tradition by the fourth century CE when the Christian majority began to despise the continued cult activities. In 357 CE, Christian emperor Constantius II ordered its removal and the cessation of worship; yet strangely, he made no mention of the cult statue.<sup>57</sup> Some years later the altar would be replaced in front of the Curia, only to be removed again under the young emperor Gratian in 384 CE, whose decision was made largely under the influence of Ambrose, bishop of Milan. Importantly, the polemic of Ambrose never once mentions the statue of Victory or advocates for its removal; in fact, while the statue's ultimate fate is unknown, it seems to have been removed due to barbarian invasion rather than at the behest of monotheists.<sup>58</sup> This begs the question: why should Constantius II order the removal of the altar of Victory while keeping the cult statue intact and placing the pagan goddess prominently on his imagery (fig 1)? The debate over this altar is telling of Victory's position in the larger debate between Christians, pagans, and those in between over the muddled topic of monotheism.

The religious and philosophical underpinnings of early Roman Christianity are fairly well documented. Peter Brown convincingly asserts that the Christian belief system was formed under the influence of Greek Neoplatonist philosophies that proliferated among the upper classes during late antiquity.<sup>59</sup> These ideas were especially crucial to the formation of the doctrine of monotheism, and Christian

---

<sup>57</sup> Croke and Harries, *Religious Conflict*, 29.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, The letters of Ambrose are found on pages 30-35, 40-50; the discussion of the statue's fate is on page 51.

<sup>59</sup> Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity, AD 150-750* (London: Norton, 1971), 77-78.

thinkers put forth numerous interpretations that sought to establish a stable practice of worship. While Christians believed in ‘One True God’<sup>60</sup>, many in the lower-class also revered angels and other holy characters as divinities.<sup>61</sup> In the fourth century, these angels began to acquire a cult of their own, and high-ranking Christians were forced to find a solution to what many believed to be idol-worship. Augustine, perhaps the most influential early Christian writer, sought to elucidate the problem with a distinction between *Deus* and *opera Dei*; the Creator, and the created.<sup>62</sup> Worship was only fitting of the Creator, but the objects of his creation (the angels), even if endowed with extra-human powers, were prohibited from worship; they were mere reflections of God’s power. Another writer, Longinianus, offers a different take. He describes the One True God as containing a multitude of forces (*impletis virtutibus*) that are manifested in the angels.<sup>63</sup> These angels do not constitute reflections but *extensions* of God’s power; thus, their worship is meaningless unless understood to be worship of God himself. Both writers clearly affirm the existence of a single God and render meaningless or sinful the worship of lesser deities.

At the same time, Christian polemicists ridiculed paganism by highlighting the overwhelming vastness of their pantheon. Augustine presents a laundry list of pagan gods, worshipped in inscrutably specific circumstances, to prove his point.<sup>64</sup> However, this view of paganism is demonstrably outdated in the time of Augustine, and employed merely as a rhetorical tool. As Neoplatonism infiltrated the Mediterranean

---

<sup>60</sup> M. Kahlos, “Refuting and Reclaiming Monotheism: Monotheism in the Debate between “Pagans” and Christians in 380-430,” in *Monotheism between Pagans and Christians in Late Antiquity*, ed. S. Mitchell et al. (Leuven: Peeters, 2010), 168.

<sup>61</sup> Therese Martin, “The Development of Winged Angels in Early Christian Art” 2001, 20-21; Berfelt 1968, 21.

<sup>62</sup> Kahlos, “Refuting and Reclaiming Monotheism,” 173.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 175-176.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

world, common views of the traditional pantheon began to be fine-tuned. Many of the personified deities who previously enjoyed their own private cults were seen as mere “members or aspects” of Jupiter.<sup>65</sup> This henotheism is traced by some even back to the Ciceronian age. In Cicero’s later writing, he seeks to explain the art of law-giving in a very Platonic sense, calling it the “*ratio recta summa Iovis.*” (Cicero *de Legibus* ii. 10) Scholars have taken this to mean that a single deity is responsible for all ordered creation, and rules over it in a way not seen in earlier canonical religious thought.<sup>66</sup> As time went on, vestiges of ‘One High God’, distinct from the ‘One True God’ of Christendom, began to replace the multiplicities of deities mentioned by Augustine as pagan thought-leaders embraced Neoplatonism more and more strongly.<sup>67</sup>

In this way, both pagan henotheism and Christian monotheism became quite aware of the impact of the worship of lesser deities, and Victory’s prominent place in the iconography of the age becomes extremely problematic. Victory certainly enjoyed a large cult following, and it is similarly evident that both Christians and pagans were turning away from vast, pantheistic worship and moving toward monotheism. These parallel phenomena demand an explanation, and the following discussion will explain the ideas that set Victory apart from other pagan deities in terms of iconography, religious role, and her visual appearance, allowing her to survive in the Christian era.

Triumphal imagery had already crystallized by the late empire, and this no doubt played a part in Victory’s endurance. While Roman triumphs were originally celebrated for specific victories, emperors by the late third century utilized this imagery perpetually, even in the absence of concrete military success. At this time, the historical victor is

---

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 171.

<sup>66</sup> William Warde Fowler, *Roman Ideas of Deity in the Last Century before the Christian Era* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1914), 51-53.

<sup>67</sup> Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity*, 50-52.

no longer related to only his own triumph; he becomes the ‘*ubique victor*’, and his victory becomes ‘*victoria perpetua*’.<sup>68</sup> No longer do only the nations actually conquered by the current emperor appear in his triumphal iconography, but *all* the enemies of Rome. This is seen most prominently on the Arch of Constantine; almost all treatments of the Arch focus on the ‘generalization’ of the emperor through imagery.<sup>69</sup> Constantine creates an ‘emperor type’ by recycling triumphal scenes of Marcus Aurelius, Commodus, and Trajan. He creates an ‘enemy type’ by showing images of Dacians, Germans, and the followers of Maxentius. Scholars also discuss the effect this generalization has had on processional imagery, but they never go so far as to apply this change in iconography to the decorative scheme, of which Victory is a large part.<sup>70</sup> It is likely that through Constantine’s condensing of iconography, Victory loses her religious implications and stands only for *Rome’s* victory. As the most closely associated deity to imperial triumphs, she becomes generalized in a way that does not extend to any other deity. This explanation would adequately address the continued existence of the cult statue of Victory in front of the Curia – it remained both a symbol of Rome’s victory and, because of its connection to its patron, Augustus, the emperor’s *victoria perpetua*.<sup>71</sup>

Another answer may be found in the very letter sent by Ambrose to Gratian during the debate over the altar of Victory in the late fourth century:

---

<sup>68</sup> Hans Peter L’Orange, *Art Forms and Civic Life in the Late Roman Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), 31.

<sup>69</sup> Nancy Ramage and Andrew Ramage, *Roman Art: 5<sup>th</sup> Edition* (Upper Saddle River: Pearson, 2009), 345-349. L’Orange, *Art Forms and Civic Life*, 31. J. Elsner, *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 81-82.

<sup>70</sup> L’Orange, *Art Forms and Civic Life*, 95-96.

<sup>71</sup> This idea is voiced in Grant, *The Roman Forum*, 125; though he states that Victory had become a symbol of Rome’s greatness without speculating on the method of transformation.



She whom the Africans worship as Celeste, the Persians as Mithras, most worship as Venus; the name varies but the divinity does not. Thus they believe even victory is a goddess, although she is something offered, not a power in her own right. She is a gift not a queen; she is effectiveness of the legions not a power of reverence. Can this be a great goddess, then, who proves herself by a crowd of soldiers, or is granted from the outcome of battles?<sup>72</sup>

By removing her divinity, Ambrose allows the image of Victory to be included in imperial art. She is not a deity in herself, nor is she an extension or aspect of the One True God, but exists merely as modern readers would describe her: a personification. Examining the iconography of Victory, one can see that she occupied a hazy middle ground in the pagan theology that governed the militaristic mindset of the empire. She was simultaneously a goddess with the power to grant victory to an emperor, and an embodiment of that victory. This is shown visually by the Barberini diptych (fig. 3). On the left panel we see Victory *herself* being offered to Justinian, while on the right Victory is the benefactor, offering a laurel wreath to the emperor. Perhaps this dichotomy allowed Victory to avoid the persecution that plagued the other pagan gods: when the major cults were being eradicated, the image of Victory was retained as a symbol; when the other symbols of benefits prominent in imperial iconography (*spes, felicitas, pax*) were being removed, she was so deeply connected with the concept of the triumph that her removal was impossible.

A final reason for Victory's survival may have been her close visual association with the winged angel from the fourth century onward. In the canonical texts of the Christian bible, angels are never once described as winged; they are

---

<sup>72</sup> Croke and Harries, *Religious Conflict*, 48.

simply messengers from God who ‘appear’<sup>73</sup> or ‘come down’<sup>74</sup> from heaven. Thus, the earliest examples of angels in Christian iconography were non-winged, male, and were never used for artistic adornment (i.e., fig 4).<sup>75</sup> The appearance of wings in angel iconography creates a motif that is completely dissociated from these early examples. This switch seems to have two roughly simultaneous causes in the late third and early fourth centuries: the burgeoning trend to describe angels as winged in apocryphal texts and the newly Christianized imperial court’s realization that they could transfer Roman imagery into Christian terms<sup>76</sup>. The first cause does not concern us, but the conversion of Constantine had profound effects on the future of the images of Victory.

In his book, *A Study on the Winged Angel: The Origin of a Motif*, Gunnar Berefelt describes the transformation of Victory imagery into that of the winged angel in the Roman world after the Battle of the Milvian Bridge.<sup>77</sup> His discussion breaks the majority of angelic depictions into four categories: advancing, frontal, hovering, and two angels hovering with a medallion in the center, along with their Victory-type counterparts (figs. 5-8). Not only do these images share a striking resemblance, they largely occupy the same function and location in the parallel imagery. The Victory in Figure 5 and the angels in Figure 6 both serve to exalt and hold up the image that is within the medallion or wreath above them. Likewise, the parallel Victories and angels in Figures 7 and 8 accentuate and decorate the image between them in the exact same pose.

---

<sup>73</sup> The Gospel of Luke, 24:4.

<sup>74</sup> The Gospel of Matthew, 28:1-8.

<sup>75</sup> Martin, “The Development of Winged Angels,” 16-17.

<sup>76</sup> The apocryphal texts are discussed in Martin, “The Development of Winged Angels, 15-16; the imperial connection is noted in A. Grabar, *Christian Iconography, a Study of its Origins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968). 38-41; and Berefelt, “A Study of the Winged Angel, 21.

<sup>77</sup> Berefelt, *A Study of the Winged Angel*, 21.

No other elements of pagan and Christian iconography are so evidently and directly related as Victory and the winged angel. The point is perhaps best illustrated by contrast with one of Christianity's most complex iconographic figures: Christ himself. Andre Grabar notes the pagan religious references in the formation of Christ's face and head, especially from Jupiter, Neptune and Pluto, yet reminds that the images are not interchangeable. "There is certainly a relationship," he writes, "and it appears likely that the Christian image-makers used this type of head to signify the all-powerful sovereignty of Christ. It may be difficult to envisage this borrowing in actual practice, *since no Christian could have thought of Christ with the head of a pagan god.*"<sup>78</sup> No such difficulty is found in the winged angel. Figure 2 even seems to suggest that many uneducated Christians would never have known the difference between the iconography of angels and Victories. With the exception of the subtle change in costume and the loss of breasts, Christian winged angels mirror Victory in form and function; even the hair of the angels, though now on a masculine body, mimics Victory (compare figs. 2, 3, 6, and 8). This extremely close connection undoubtedly camouflaged Victory in her new Christian context.

We have seen that Victory played a role in early Christian art which curiously transgressed both Christian and Neoplatonist ideologies about the existence and function of lesser deities in relation to the One True God. This can be explained by subtle shifts in the minds of the viewers of Christian art. Victory was subsumed as a decorative necessity to triumphal imagery after the time of Constantine. Exempla such as the Barberini diptych also suggest that she held an ambiguous status in pagan theology, halfway between a mere personification and an active goddess with her own cult and worshippers. Additionally, her close association with and resemblance to the winged angels of Christian iconography

---

<sup>78</sup> Grabar, *Christian Iconography*, 34. The Italics are mine.

may have hidden the philosophical incongruities of her presence. As a result of these factors, Victory lived much longer than any other pagan god, and right in plain sight.

Figure 1: Grabar 1968, Index of Illustrations, 125.  
Constantius II Adventus with soldier holding Chi-Rho shield and winged Victory. 4th Century.



Figure 2: Weitzmann 1979, 535-6. Victory holding a medallion with Christian insignia. Egypt, 5th to early 6th century. Wool and linen.



Figure 3: Weitzmann 1979, 33-4. Ivory diptych of Justinian. Constantinople, second quarter of 6th century. Ivory.



Figure 4: Bussagli 1991, 59. Sarcophagus of Isaac, Museo gli Lateranense, now in the Vatican Museums. 1st century CE.

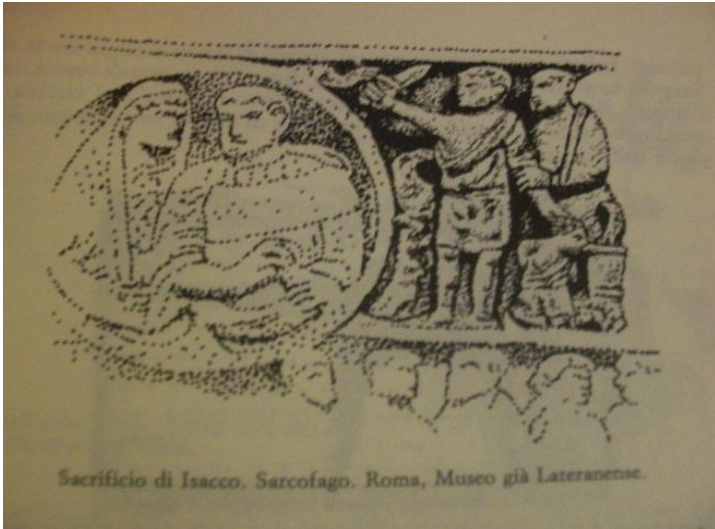


Figure 5: Berefelt 1968, 25. Victory bearing a laurel wreath. From the right panel of an imperial diptych, ca. 450 CE. Currently in the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin.

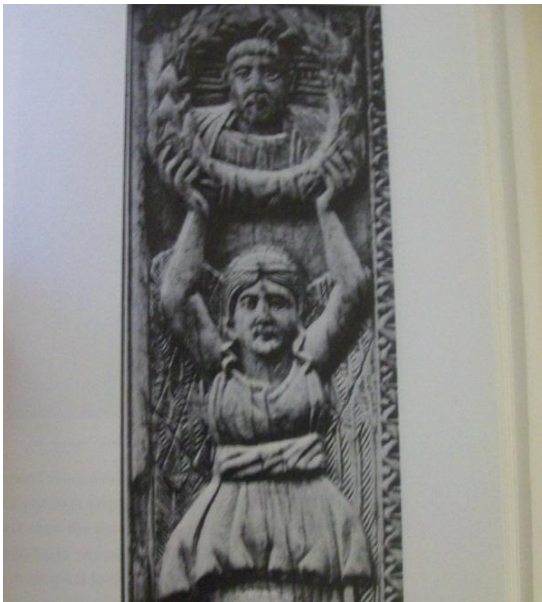


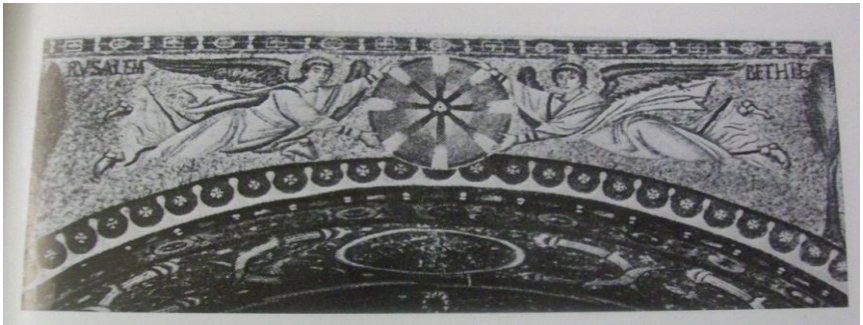
Figure 6: Berefelt 1968, 26. Angels bearing Christ's monogram. Vault mosaic in the Archiepiscopal Chapel at Ravenna, ca. 500.



Figure 7: Berefelt 1968, 30. Sarcophagus from Via Aurelia Antica, 3rd Century CE, Palazzo dei Conservatori, Rome.



Figure 8: Berefelt 1968, 31. Mosaic showing the apotheosis of Christ's monogram. from the triumphal arch in San Vitale, Ravenna.



## References

- Berefelt, G. 1968. *A Study of the Winged Angel: The Origin of a Motif*. Stockholm : Almqvist & Wiksells.
- Brown, P. 1971. *The World of Late Antiquity, AD 150-750*. London: Norton.
- Bussagli, M. 1991. *Storia degli Angeli*. Milan: Rusconi.
- Croke, B. and Harries, J. 1982. *Religious Conflict in Fourth-Century Rome*. Sydney, Australia: Sydney University Press.
- Elsner, J. 1998. *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.



- Fowler, W. 1914. *Roman Ideas of Deity in the Last Century before the Christian Era*. London: Macmillan and Co.
- Grabar, A. 1968. *Christian Iconography, a Study of its Origins*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Gradel, I. 2002. *Emperor Worship and Roman Religion*. Oxford Classical Monographs: Oxford University Press.
- Grant, M. 1970. *The Roman Forum*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.
- Kahlos, M. 2010. "Refuting and Reclaiming Monotheism: Monotheism in the Debate between 'Pagans' and Christians in 380-430," in Mitchell, S. and Van Nuffelen, P. Eds., *Monotheism between Pagans and Christians in Late Antiquity*. Leuven: Peeters. 167-180.
- L'Orange, H.P. 1972. *Art Forms and Civic Life in the Late Roman Empire*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- MacMullen, R. 1981. *Paganism in the Roman Empire*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Martin, T. 2001. "The Development of Winged Angels in Early Christian Art", *Espacio, Tiempo y Forma, Serie VII*, Vol. 14. 11-29.
- Ramage, N. and Ramage, A. 2009. *Roman Art* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.). Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson.
- Sear, D. R., 1964. *Roman Coins and their Values*. London: B. A. Seaby.
- Weitzmann, K., Ed. 1979. *Age of Spirituality*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

**Note:** This paper was originally written in Spring 2012 at the Intercollegiate Center for Classical Studies, Rome, under Professors Massimo Betello (SUNY Buffalo) and Gregory Bucher (Creighton College).