

Roman Gods

by Rose Williams

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Roman beliefs about gods have been so thoroughly entwined with those of the Greeks that it is sometimes hard to see what is unique in each system. We will look first at the Roman gods in the rough categories of Nearby Gods, Personal Gods and Faraway Gods; then we will look at the Twelve Di Consentes, who correspond closely but not absolutely to the Twelve Great Olympians.

Roman gods, before they were drawn into the embroidered stories of their Greek counterparts, tended to be sober and hard working. The great god Janus, as well as the personal gods and most of the simple Numina (Divine Powers) such as Terminus, god of boundaries, and Sylvanus, god of the woods, had no close Greek counterparts, so they developed no personal histories and went on respecting their duties: rewarding truthfulness, thrift, morality, and justice. One pleased them by living up to one's bargains and carrying out sacred rituals without error.

Religion was a bargaining process: if a man did his duty, he had a right to expect the god to do his. *Do ut des* – I give so that you may give – was the usual sacrificial prayer. Romans were always in spirit an agricultural people, thinking in terms of cause and effect, of reaping what one sows. The rhythms of their worship followed the rhythms of the seasons.

I. Nearby gods

Many Roman gods were not found far away on a mountaintop, but worked beside the Romans in field and home. Thus we will look at them first.

1. Janus

Janus, thought to be the oldest of the Roman deities, was certainly the most important, as his name was invoked even before that of Jupiter. Since he was the personification of the door, he had two faces as a door has two sides. Thus he was known as Janus Geminus [twin] or Bifrons. All doors and gates were sacred to this god who could watch inside and outside at once.

The Romans considered the door the soul of the house and its protector. When the terrible Pyrrhus beats down the door of Priam's palace in Troy with battering rams, Vergil pictures the women clinging to the doorposts and kissing them. When the doorposts are torn from their sockets, the last defense and the last hope is gone. (*Aeneid*, Bk II, lines 490-493)

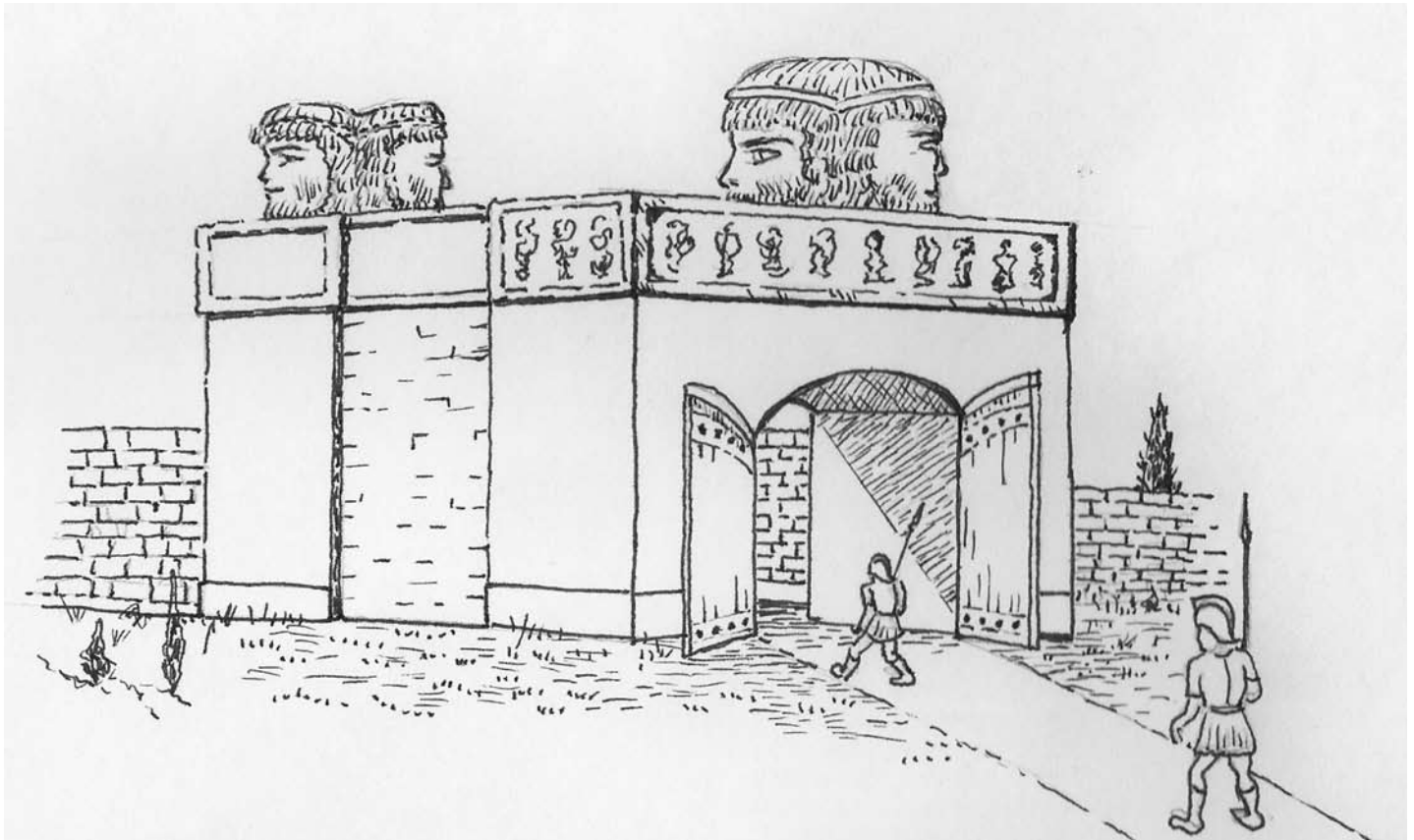
On a lighter note, Ovid makes many references to the door of a desirable lady's house, saying that the doorpost of a beautiful woman has much to bear, as lovers hang all sorts of messages and bouquets up on it. Lucretius sneers at the poor lover who decorates his lady's door with flowers and perfumes and is still not admitted. (*De Rerum Natura*, Bk IV)

Janus was also, suitably enough, the god of beginnings and endings. As the god of beginnings, he was very important to the Romans, because if an undertaking had an unsuccessful beginning, it would lead to failure. Thus Janus' blessing was always sought in new undertakings, as well as at the beginning of every day, month, and year. The first month of the reconstructed year, January, is named after him. Janus was also the god who presided over the sowing of the crops, as sowing represented a beginning.

On the north side of the forum stood a shrine of Janus, usually referred to simply as **Ianus Geminus** or **Ianus Quirinus**. This building ran east and west, where the day begins and ends, and between its two doors stood his statue with two faces. It was also called **Geminae Belli Portae**, (twin gates of war). Shrine that it was, whether it was an enclosure with an altar and a pair of gates at each end, or some other structure, it seems doubtful that it was a temple in the usual sense. When it was erected is also

obscure. According to one story (Macrobius, *Saturnalia* I.9. 17-18), it was present at the founding of Rome. Another tradition was that Romulus and his co-king Titus Tatius built the temple (or whatever it was) as a sign of the union of the two communities; still another that it was erected by King Numa as an indicator of the status quo, (Livy I. 19) so that when open it might indicate that Rome was at war, and when closed that she was at peace.

This signaling of war or peace became the accepted mission of the shrine, and after the reign of Numa, who died in 673 BCE, its doors were next closed in 235 BCE after the first Punic War. The next hiatus came in 30 BCE after Augustus won the battle of Actium. Thanks to his **Pax Augusta**, which became the **Pax Romana**, the gates were closed at more frequent intervals down to the fifth century.



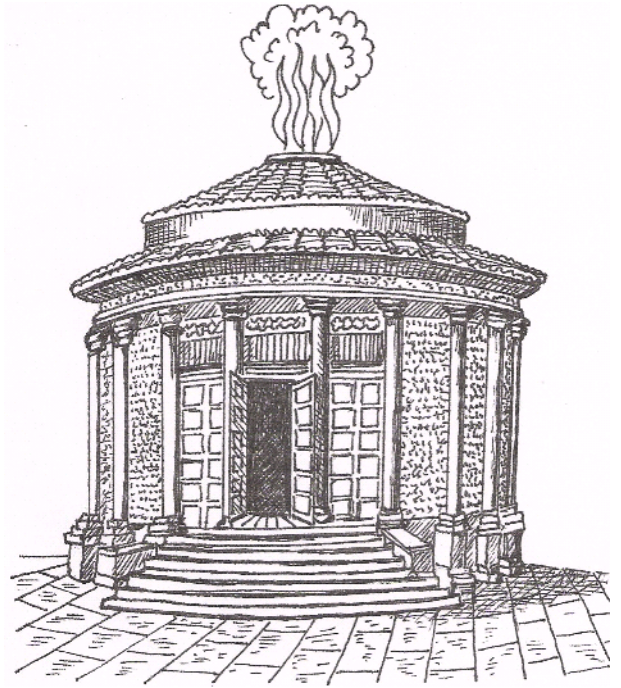
Artist's conception of the Gates of Janus by James Hillyer Estes

Procopius and various coins tell us the the Janus Gate was a small rectangular structure of bronze, with two side walls and double doors at each end. The walls, not as high as the doors, had grating on top. These gratings and the arches over the doors supported an entablature extending all around the building, but there was no roof. The ancient bronze statue of the two-faced god stood in the centre of what was evidently no temple in the ordinary sense, but a passage (**ianus**). No traces of the structure have ever been found, and there is no reference to it after Procopius.

2. Vesta

Vesta was one of the most popular and mysterious goddesses of the Roman pantheon. Not much is known of her origin except that she guarded the fire at the center of every Roman home, which was very hard to rekindle if it went out. Every day, during a meal, Romans threw a small cake on the fire for Vesta. Good luck was assured if it burned with a crackle.

Although the worship of Vesta, like much of Roman worship, originated in the home, quite early her worship evolved into a state cult set up by King Numa Pompilius (715-673 BCE), who established the six Vestal Virgins to keep the national fire burning. (*Livy I, 20*). This fire was relit every March 1st from a coal of the old one and had to be kept alight all year. According to legend, if anything ever happened to either the fire, disaster would fall on Rome. The *Aedes Vestae*, her temple in the Forum, was small and round, like the earliest Roman houses.



Aedes Vestae by James Hillyer Estes

3. Diana

Her name is evidently a contraction of *Dea Iana*, and she is the feminine counterpart of *Janus*. Strangely, the male of this pair guards the house, while the female cares for outdoor things: the forests, young animals, and hunters. Possibly because of Greek influence, she was identified with *Luna*, the Roman goddess of moons and seasons. First and foremost, however, she was a goddess of the woodlands: her sanctuaries were commonly in groves, and all groves, especially those of oak, were sacred to her. She was praised for her youthful strength, athletic grace, beauty, and last but not least her hunting skills. With two other deities, *Egeria* the water nymph, her servant and assistant midwife, and *Virbius*, a woodland Italian divinity, she made up one of those triads of which the Romans were so fond.

4. Mars

Mars, one of the most prominent Roman gods, was in early Roman history a god of spring, growth in nature, fertility, and the protector of cattle, and he worked beside Roman farmers. Later he became a god of death and finally a god of war. In this later form he was portrayed as a warrior in full battle armor, wearing a crested helmet and bearing a shield, and accompanied by *Fuga* and *Timor*, the personifications of flight and fear. As *Romulus* and *Remus* were descended from him, *Mars* became the protector of the Roman state. *Augustus* gave him the *Temple of Mars Ultor* (Avenger) after the death of *Julius Caesar's* assassins.

5 Venus

Evidently originating in *Ardea* and *Lavinium* in central Italy, the Roman *Venus* began as grand patroness of gardens and vineyards, a nature goddess associated with the arrival of spring and with growth. Thus she became the personification of beauty, vitality, and ultimately of love. The Romans worshipped her as *Venus Genetrix*, the mother of the hero *Aeneas*, the founder of the Roman people; as *Venus Felix*, the bringer of good fortune; as *Venus Victrix*, the bringer of victory; and as *Venus Verticordia*, the protector of feminine chastity. She had numerous practical and homely duties and titles that would never have suited Greek *Aphrodite*. Under the Empire she became almost synonymous with *Roma*, the deified state. *Hadrian* erected a grand double temple to *Venus* and *Roma*, with *Venus Felix* facing the *Colosseum* and *Roma Aeterna* facing the *Forum*.

6. Saturnus

He was one of the Numina who in early Rome had no distinct personalities and were distinguished only by what they controlled. He was held to have ruled Italy with his wife Ops (Plenty) in the Golden Age and to have retired to the sky. His name is associated with the sowing of grain, and his festival, the Saturnalia, began on December 17 after the winter grain was sown. The Saturnalia reproduced the Golden Age, so that during it no wars could be started or executions carried out, slaves sat at table with their masters, gifts were exchanged and goodwill encouraged. After Greek influence became strong in Rome, he was identified with Cronus, the father of Zeus.

7. Quirinus

Quirinus may have originally been a Sabine god. In very early times he had an altar on the Collis Quirinalis, or Quirinal Hill, one of the Seven Hills of Rome. He, along with Jupiter and Mars, was a member of the original Capitoline Triad worshipped on the Capitoline Hill. Later the Capitoline Triad, possibly because of Etruscan influence, became Jupiter, Juno, and Minerva. Quirinus was often identified with the deified Romulus, sometimes with Janus, and occasionally with Mars. In later Roman life he almost disappeared, but he was represented by his priest, the Flamen Quirinalis, one of the patrician flamines maiores who took precedence even over the Pontifex Maximus.

II. Personal and family gods

The father of the family was the high priest for these gods; they were worshiped at the dinner table, because the family circle was holy.

1. Lar

This deified spirit of an ancestor protected the family from ghosts and spiritual evils, while Janus protected it from physical evil. The need to continue the worship of the Lar gave rise to the Roman practice of adoption, as the family needed a male heir.

2. Penates

Lares were assisted by the two or more Dii Penates, spirits guarding food and household concerns from everything from spoilage to theft. The household cult served as the model for several practices of the state cult, e.g. there were the Lar Praestites, Penates Publici, etc. The ghost of the slain Trojan hero Hector tells Aeneas to flee the burning city and carry the Penates of Troy to a new home. When Aeneas leaves Troy, he entrusts the little gods to his father, as his own hands, having shed blood, must be purified before he can touch them. (*Aeneid, Book II*).

3. Genius

The Genius was the guardian angel of a man, particularly of the paterfamilias, the head of the family. To curse a man's Genius was a mortal insult, and a death curse for him and his family. The Genius, who was basic to Roman religion as the guardian spirit of a single man, like the Lar and the Penates advanced from household deity to state deity. References are made during the Late Roman Republic to the temple of the Genius of the Roman People. During the Empire, the Imperial cult came to be based on the household cult, now interpreted as the cult of the Genius of the Emperor, paterfamilias of the family of all the Romans. To curse this Genius was a death wish for the Roman state.

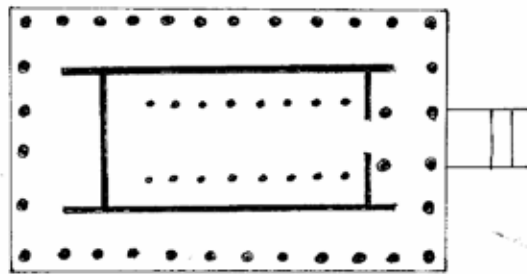
4. Personal Juno

The Juno was the personal spirit or guardian angel of a woman.

III. Faraway gods

1. Jupiter (Jove Pater)

This powerful but far removed god of sky and rain god became more prominent as the Roman realm widened. Special temples were sometimes erected to him for specific deliveries, such as the temple of Jupiter Tonans (Thunderer), built by Augustus to commemorate his escape from death by lightning in the Spanish wars; of Jupiter Stator (the Stayer), to commemorate his holding Romans firm in battle, and of Jupiter Victor to commemorate Roman victories. The greatest temple was that of Jupiter Capitolinus, which was divided into three *cellae* for the great Etruscan triad Jupiter Optimus Maximus, Juno Regina, and Minerva the Guardian. The central and greatest *cella* contained a huge seated statue of Jupiter Optimus Maximus made of gold and ivory and embellished with precious stones.



Temple of Zeus -- very similar to the temple of the Capitoline Jupiter

2. Juno

This goddess of marriage and wife of Jupiter slowly took on the attributes of Hera, wife of Zeus. Though Juno was protector of the Roman people and especially women, being the goddess of marriage, fertility and all aspects of pregnancy and childbirth, she remained guardian and special counselor of the Roman state. She was worshiped as Juno Capitolina as part of the Capitoline Triad, in conjunction with Jupiter and Minerva, at the temple on the Capitoline Hill in Rome. From her title "Juno Moneta" comes the modern word "money," as the Roman mint was built close to her temple on the Arx, one of the two prongs of the Capitoline hill. Juno Sospita (Savior), who had her own festival on February 1st, was the matron goddess of the state, and her temple for this function was in the Forum Holitorium in Rome. She was the only deity to be worshipped by all 30 *curiae*, the Roman military and administrative units introduced by Romulus.

3. Minerva

The Roman goddess Minerva or Menerva, like Jupiter and Juno, the other two members of the Capitoline Triad, was evidently of Etruscan origin. Since she was the daughter of Jupiter and the virgin goddess of wisdom, presiding over learning, all handicrafts, inventions, arts and sciences, she was equated

to Athena. As usual the Romans gave Minerva many attributes and names such as Minerva Victrix, goddess of war and Minerva Medica; patroness of physicians. She was also the inventor of numbers and musical instruments, so Ovid had good reason to call her the “goddess of a thousand works.” (*Fasti* III, 833).

4. Mercurius

Mercury was the Roman god of trade, profit and commerce; his name is possibly derived from the Latin **merx** or **mercator**, a merchant. Merchants prayed to this overseer of trade and profit in order to get good business. Originally the deity of traders in corn (by which term the Romans meant virtually any seed crop with a hard surface), he became the guardian of travelers and the messenger of the gods.

5. Neptune

Neptune was originally simply the god of all waters for Romans, as well as Neptune Equester, creator of the horse. In the early days Romans had as little to do with the sea as possible, but as their history advanced they not only fell under Greek influence but also acquired some extra-peninsular enemies. As they felt the need of divine protection when dealing with the always moody Mediterranean, Neptune was therefore promoted to god of the sea (as Neptune Oceanus).

6. Volcanus or Vulcanus

The Roman fire god Vulcan, also called Mulciber, was very old; his festival, the Vulcanalia, dated back to the ancient Roman kingdom. He was the son of Jupiter and Juno, two of the Capitoline Triad, and the husband of Venus. Although he was the divine craftsman who made art, arms and armor for gods and heroes, Vulcan seems to have originated as a god of volcanoes; thus the Romans were never as comfortable with him as the Greeks were with Hephaestus. With a wary eye on the destructive nature of his fire power, the Romans tended to build his temples outside of town. His Volcanal altar in the Area Volcani in the Roman Forum was one of the most ancient religious centers of Rome, and probably goes back to the time when the Forum, or Marketplace, was outside the city on the Palatine and Capitoline hills. His newer temple was in the Campus Martius.

7. Pluto (Hades, Dis)

The Romans paid as little attention to Pluto/Hades/Dis as they politely could. Ceres and not Pluto was among the twelve Roman Dii Consentes. He and his wife Proserpina (the Latin name of Persephone) were known as the Dii Inferi, Gods of the Underworld (Inferus). They symbolized the power of the Earth to provide human beings the necessities for living, as Proserpina was the Spring Maiden and Dis controlled the riches underground as well as the Inferus, the home of the dead. Strangely enough Pax, the Roman goddess who was the personification of peace, was depicted with an untipped spear, holding an olive twig in her hand and the young Pluto in her arm.

8. Apollo

The shining god of the sun, music, medicine, and truth was not Roman, and perhaps not even Greek, in origin. From his many northern shrines and the Land of the Hyperboreans, his worshippers who live behind the north wind, he may be a northern god. His connection with the number seven his stronghold in Troy and his support of Troy against the Greeks indicate that he may be an eastern god. Whatever his origin, he came to Greece and Etruria early, and probably through Etruria to Rome. In 433 BCE the Vestal Virgins erected a shrine to him, the Apollinar, when a plague abated, and Augustus built the great Temple and Library of Apollo on the Palatine Hill.

9. Liber Pater or Bacchus

This Roman god of wine and fertility was identified with the Greek Dionysus. From the Bacchanal, a wine-drinking festival of Dionysus, both gods acquired the name Bacchus. Liber himself never seems to have been viewed as particularly dangerous or subversive, being associated with growing vines or, at the outside, fertility in general, vegetable and human. His festival was a homey affair, at which old ladies sold honey cakes in the street. As in Greece however, his Bacchus persona was another matter, and was outlawed by the Roman Senate. His festival was the Liberalia on March 17.

10. Ceres

The great grain-goddess had a temple on the Aventine Hill which became a focal point for plebeian class consciousness and political organization in the early Republic.

After identification with the Greek goddess Demeter she was worshiped along with Liber (corresponding to Dionysus) and his female counterpart Liberia (corresponding to Persephone) on the Aventine Hill as the Triad especially connected with the common people. This Aventine Triad, allegedly created as the result of a consultation of the Sibylline Books, was the plebeian counterpart of the Capitoline Triad of Jupiter, Juno, and Minerva. Perhaps this was natural, as Ceres, Liber and Liberia were concerned with agriculture much more than with statecraft, which occupied a great part of the patrician, or upper, class's attention. Her festival was the Cerealia on April 19.

Di Consentes

According to the Roman poet Ennius, who lived in the 3rd century BCE, the group of twelve Gods especially honored by the Romans, called the Dii Consentes, were Jupiter, Juno, Minerva, Vesta, Ceres, Diana, Venus, Mars, Mercury, Neptune, Vulcan, and Apollo. The Twelve Great Olympians of Greece were Zeus (Jupiter), Hera (Juno), Athena (Minerva), Hestia (Vesta), Artemis(Diana), Aphrodite(Venus), Ares(Mars) , Hermes(Mercury), Poseidon (Neptune), Hephaestus (Vulcan), Pluto/Hades, and Apollo. Thus Ceres the grain goddess, the counterpart of Greek Demeter, made the Roman Great Gods list in place of Pluto/Hades.