

Trajan's Column and Mars Ultor

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ABSTRACT

This paper makes two arguments. The first is that Trajan deliberately orchestrated the dedication of his Column on 12 May, the anniversary of the dedication of the Temple of Mars Ultor, to coincide with the beginning of a new war against Parthia in A.D. 113. The second is that although most modern commentators focus on the function of Mars Ultor as avenger of Caesar, the evidence of his actual invocation from the late first century B.C. through the third century A.D. more strongly supports another interpretation: as agent of vengeance against foreign enemies, and against Parthia/Persia in particular.

Keywords: Trajan's Column; Forum of Augustus; Mars Ultor; Parthian Wars; Civil Wars; Roman coinage; *ludi circenses*

INTRODUCTION

In a 1977 article in this journal, Christopher Simpson pointed out the remarkable connection between the dedication of Trajan's Column on 12 May A.D. 113 and the dedication on the same day, 12 May in the year 2 B.C., of the Temple of Mars Ultor in the Forum of Augustus.¹ The first goal of this paper is to suggest that the choice of 12 May had significance far beyond the Column itself, in particular that it was part of a comprehensive and dramatic attempt by Trajan to set the stage for his new war against Parthia, rooted in the close association between Mars Ultor and vengeance against Parthia. While it is clear that Mars Ultor was understood by the Romans as having more than one specific function, there is a trend in modern scholarship to put more emphasis on the idea of vengeance for the murdered Caesar. Here it is suggested that this runs contrary to the general ancient understanding of the function of the god, and perhaps also contrary to his original purpose. Thus the second goal of this paper is to clarify the Roman understanding of the rôle of Mars Ultor by tracing the evidence for his invocation through time.

The first part of the paper examines the historical circumstances of the Column's dedication on 12 May A.D. 113; the textual and especially the numismatic evidence suggests a link to Trajan's new war against Parthia. Section II establishes the significance of 12 May, the date of the annual *ludi circenses* (circus games) for Mars Ultor. Section III discusses the events of the same day in 2 B.C., the date of dedication of the Temple of Mars Ultor in the Forum of Augustus, and highlights the parallels between the events of 2 B.C. and A.D. 113, both of which were focused on an impending Parthian war. In

¹ Simpson 1977: 94 n. 31. Beaujeu (1955: 91 n. 1) also noted the connection, although he associated 12 May with the dedication of the supposed Capitoline temple of Mars Ultor. Errors in transcribing or translating the date in a number of major publications of the *Fasti Ostienses* have presumably contributed to reducing awareness of the correspondence (see n. 3).

order to determine how the Romans themselves thought of Mars Ultor, the fourth part of the paper traces the evidence for invocations of the god from the time of Augustus to that of Severus Alexander; Section V presents an analysis of this evidence. Finally, the conclusion returns to the events of 12 May A.D. 113, sets them in the physical context of the Imperial Fora, and explores how Trajan may have used these architectural spaces as a stage from which to launch his new war against Parthia. An appendix considers the appearance of the cult statue of Mars Ultor.

I DEDICATION OF TRAJAN'S COLUMN

The Column of Trajan was dedicated later than the other major monuments of Trajan's Forum. The *Fasti Ostienses* record that Trajan dedicated the Basilica Ulpia and his Forum on 1 January A.D. 112, the same day on which the emperor assumed his sixth consulship.² These events were presumably arranged to happen together and they were duly commemorated on the coinage, along with another major monument of the Forum, the emperor's monumental equestrian statue (see below). But the Column was dedicated later: the inscription (*CIL* 6.960) on the pedestal records the emperor as holding the tribunician power for the seventeenth time; this dates the inscription, and presumably the dedication of the monument, between December 112 and December 113. The exact date of the dedication appears to be given by the Ostian *Fasti*, which record that on 12 May in the year 113, 'imp(erator) Traianus / [...]neris in foro Caesaris et / [...]m in foro suo dedicavit'. The missing letters were restored by Calza as '[templum Ve]neris in foro Caesaris et / [columna]m in foro suo': 'the emperor Trajan dedicated the Temple of Venus in the Forum of Caesar and the Column in his own forum'. The restoration of *columna*[m] is not certain, but it fits the number of missing letters and corresponds to the date range given by the Column's inscription, which as far as we know was the only major monument of the Forum that had not yet been dedicated.³

Although our historical evidence is poor, as it is for much of the reign of Trajan, two sources provide some context for the date of 12 May A.D. 113. First, from the fragmentary text of Dio (68.16.3) we have a brief remark on the completion of Trajan's new Forum; this is immediately followed by an equally brief note (68.17.1) that Trajan next set out on a campaign against the Armenians and the Parthians. This major new war occupied the remainder of Trajan's reign. The second source that illuminates this period is the coinage. All three major buildings of Trajan's Forum — façade, basilica and column — are shown on Trajan's coinage. Die links observed in the gold coinage make it possible to reconstruct its exact production sequence.⁴ The gold coinage of Trajan marked COS VI (beginning January 112) but not yet bearing the title *Optimus* (awarded fall 114) falls into two mutually exclusive groups, one earlier and the other later.⁵ The first group dates from early 112 to early 113 and is documented by a

² *Fasti Ostienses* tablet J, 33–4; Degrassi 1947: XXII.33–4 (pp. 200–1); Vidman 1982: 48; Bargagli and Grosso 1997: 37–8.

³ *Fasti Ostienses* tablet J, 54–6; Degrassi 1947: XXII.54–6 (pp. 202–3); Bargagli and Grosso 1997: 37–8, who erroneously give the date as 'III id. Mai.' in their transcription and the correspondingly incorrect translation of 13 May in their commentary; the correct reading may be seen in the photograph fig. 10, p. 66. The same error in transcription is made by Vidman (1982: 48 and 106), which is presumably the origin of Bargagli and Grosso's mistake. For the restoration as *columna*[m], see Calza 1932: 201, who has been followed by most, e.g. Degrassi 1947: 232; Anderson 1984: 151–2; Lepper and Frere 1988: 16; Richardson 1992: 177 (Richardson repeats Calza's error (*ibid.*) of rendering the date as 18 May); Packer 1995: 348; Claridge 1998: 165; Coarelli 2007: 115.

⁴ For die study of the gold coinage of Trajan see Beckmann 2000 and 2007, especially 124–5 for the die link charts; for the chronology of the coinage of this period in general see Woytek 2010: 136–41.

⁵ For the relative chronology of the two groups see Beckmann 2000: 125.

complete chain of die links. It includes new types depicting the Forum Traiani, the Basilica Ulpia, an equestrian statue, and images of Divus Nerva and Pater Traianus. At the very end of the die-link chain there appears a unique die depicting Mars Victor.⁶ These Forum-centred coin types then vanish from the gold coinage and are replaced by a group of entirely new reverse types, again all connected by die links. These are: Roman military standards (an *aquila* flanked by two standards, one topped with a wreath, the other with a hand; Fig. 1); Bonus Eventus (the personification of good outcomes) in the act of sacrificing (Fig. 2); Jupiter Conservator with his arm raised above a diminutive figure of Trajan (Fig. 3); and the Column of Trajan (Fig. 4).⁷ The Column gives the second group an earliest start date of May 113.

The new coin types associated with Trajan's Column have a coherent message. The appeal to Jupiter Conservator and the depiction of Bonus Eventus indicate vows made for the protection of the emperor and for the positive outcome of an impending undertaking; the depiction of military standards suggests that the undertaking was related to the army. The only military expedition we know of in this time period is the war with Parthia. The evidence of the coinage suggests that the beginning of this campaign coincided with the dedication of Trajan's Column.

II 12 MAY AND MARS ULTOR

The idea of a connection between the dedication of the Column and the Parthian War is strengthened by the significance of the specific date of its dedication, which was the same day as the annual *ludi circenses* for Mars Ultor, held on the anniversary of the dedication of that god's temple in the Forum of Augustus.

Multiple calendars from the Imperial period record that 12 May was the day on which games in honour of Mars were held. The *Fasti Maffeiani* record 'lud(i) Mart(i) in circ(o)', 'games to Mars in the circus'; the *Feriale Duranum* records *ludi* for Mars Pater Ultor: 'iiii idus maias ob circenses ma[rtiales] marti pa[tri ult]ori ta[u]rum'; 'on 12 May, for the circus games of Mars, to Mars Father Avenger, (sacrifice) a bull'.⁸ It was normal for games for a particular god to coincide with the anniversary of the dedication of a temple.⁹ Caesar followed this practice when he initiated games for Venus Genetrix on the occasion of the dedication of her temple in his forum.¹⁰

Both Velleius Paterculus and Cassius Dio record that games for Mars were celebrated by Augustus on the occasion of the dedication of the Temple of Mars Ultor. Velleius notes (2.100.2) that this happened when Augustus was consul with Gallus Caninius (2 B.C.) and that the games included gladiatorial shows and a naval battle. Dio (55.10.6–9) gives further details, noting that the naval battle was staged as a fight between 'Persians' and

⁶ Mars Victor: Woytek 2010, cat. no. 410. Youthful Mars naked, helmeted, holding trophy and spear.

⁷ The few earlier coins that appear to depict the Column of Trajan, especially those with a bird on top, are forgeries, mostly created by reworking the reverse of a genuine coin with engraving tools to create a rarity appealing to collectors; see Woytek 2010: 547–8, pl. 135. There is no evidence that buildings ever appeared on coinage of this period before they were dedicated; cf. the Forum of Trajan and Basilica Ulpia, which only appear on coinage bearing Trajan's title COS VI, which he assumed on 1 January 112, the same day the structures were dedicated.

⁸ *Fasti Maffeiani*: Degrassi 1963: 76. *Feriale Duranum*: Fink *et al.* 1940: col. II, 9, p. 120. Fink *et al.* note that the alternate epithet *victor* can be excluded since it is already attributed to Mars on 1 March in the same text (col. I, 20). The *Fasti Furi Filocali* have *Marticali c(ircenses)* for 12 May (Degrassi, *op. cit.*) and the *Feriale Cumanum* records a *supplicatio molibus Martis* (*ibid.*, 279). On 12 May in general in Roman calendars: Degrassi (*op. cit.*), 456–7; Ehrenberg and Jones 1949: 48; Simpson 1977: 91 n. 6.

⁹ Lipka 2009: 45 notes that this is attested for the *ludi Megalenses*, *Apollinares*, *Ceriales*, *Florales* and even the *ludi Romani*.

¹⁰ Appian, *Civil Wars* 3.28; Dio 43.2.2–3.



FIG. 1. Aureus of Trajan, A.D. 113–14; reverse: Roman standards. *BMCRE* Trajan 457. (© Trustees of the British Museum)



FIG. 2. Aureus of Trajan, A.D. 113–14; reverse: Bonus Eventus. *BMCRE* Trajan 426. (© Trustees of the British Museum)



FIG. 3. Aureus of Trajan, A.D. 113–14; reverse: Jupiter Conservator. *BMCRE* Trajan 493. (© Trustees of the British Museum)



FIG. 4. Aureus of Trajan, A.D. 113–14; reverse: Trajan's Column. *BMCRE* Trajan 450. (© Trustees of the British Museum)

'Athenians'. The specific date given by Velleius corresponds to Augustus' own account (*RG* 22.2) that he was the first to celebrate the *ludi Martiales* when he held the consulate for the thirteenth time (2 B.C.).¹¹ Ovid's description of the Temple of Mars Ultor in his entry for 12 May in his *Fasti* (5.545–98) describes the temple as 'justly given' to the god ('rite templum datum') and concludes with a command for the Romans to celebrate his games ('sollemnes ludos Circo celebrate, Quirites!').

Thus 12 May was both the date of the annual *ludi circenses* for Mars Ultor and the anniversary of the dedication of his temple in the Forum of Augustus.¹² The reason for the choice of 12 May is unknown, though Degrassi speculated that it marked the anniversary of the return of the standards, and Spannagel makes the attractive suggestion that it celebrated the adoption of Gaius and Lucius Caesars.¹³

This — the celebration of the *ludi circenses* of Mars Ultor on 12 May — is significant from the point of view of the dedication of the Column of Trajan, since the earliest evidence for the rôle of the god highlights him as agent of vengeance against the Parthians (see Section IV below). The Parthian aspect of the vengeance embodied in Mars Ultor might be taken as a sufficient, if general, explanation for why Trajan chose 12 May to dedicate his own column and to begin a new war against Parthia.¹⁴ But a more specific connection can be made between the events of 2 B.C. and A.D. 113, one that casts Trajan's undertaking as following in the footsteps of Augustus.

III EVENTS OF 12 MAY 2 B.C.

In the *Ars Amatoria* (a poem earlier by at least six years than the *Fasti*) Ovid attributes not two, but only one meaning to Mars's epithet Ultor. This happens in an awkward insertion of a passage praising Gaius Caesar into a discussion of where in Rome one might meet

¹¹ *Res Gestae* 22.2: 'Consul XIII ludos Martiales primus feci'; 'when consul for the 13th time [2 B.C.] I was the first to celebrate the circus games of Mars.'

¹² This evidence far outweighs the curious suggestion by Dio (60.5.3) that Claudius celebrated games of Mars (no epithet is specified) on 1 August not because it was his birthday (which it was), but because it was the anniversary of the dedication of the god's temple. On this problem in general, see Simpson 1977 and more recently Spannagel 1999: 41–72. The origin of the extensive modern debate is Mommsen's attempt (*CIL* I.2, 318) to solve the contradiction between this passage of Dio and the overwhelming evidence in the various *fasti* for *ludi Martiales* on 12 May. Dio's information is presented in the course of discussing the modesty of Claudius. Simpson points out that this immediately follows a description of how Claudius initiated circus games on the birthdays of Drusus and Antonia, and that Dio earlier (56.46.4) records that after the death of Augustus, it was decreed that circus games 'like those for Mars' should be celebrated on his birthday. Since 1 August was certainly the birthday of Claudius (Suetonius, *Claudius* 2.1; *Feriale Duranum* col. II.23–4 = Fink *et al.* 1940: 150), and since the calendars record *ludi circenses* for Mars only on 12 May, never on 1 August, Dio's explanation probably should be interpreted as a mistake, whether intentional (to burnish the image of Claudius) or a result of confusion or lack of diligence. Anderson (1984: 69) is inclined to follow Simpson in viewing Dio as mistaken; Spannagel (*op. cit.*, 50) calls Dio's testimony on this point 'höchst suspekt'. Mommsen supported his argument for 1 August by asserting that one of the two consuls mentioned by Velleius in the context of the dedication of the temple, L. Caninius Gallus, was suffect consul and therefore could only have entered office after 1 July, which would rule out a dedication date in May. Spannagel (*op. cit.*, 52, n. 238) notes that there is no evidence that the 1 July rule for suffect consuls existed in 2 B.C., and in fact argues (52–3) that our data on the lengths of Augustus' own consulates support a date in May rather than August. On the other major aspect of Mommsen's argument, the supposed Capitoline temple of Mars Ultor, see n. 36 below.

¹³ Degrassi 1963: 280. Spannagel (1999: 55–9, esp. 57–8) bases his suggestion on the fact that many Augustan buildings were dedicated on days of special personal significance to the emperor and his family; the exact date of adoption of C. and L. Caesars is not known.

¹⁴ As by Beaujeu (1955: 91 n. 1), the only person to my knowledge who has noted the Parthian association of 12 May A.D. 113.

women.¹⁵ Ovid considers the possibilities of meeting women at gladiatorial shows and then bursts out:

Quid, modo cum belli navalis imagine Caesar
Persidas induxit Cecropiasque rates?

'What happened when Caesar of late brought on Persian and Athenian vessels under the fashion of a naval fight?' Young men and women came from far and wide, says Ovid, and found love in the crowd. Then:

Ecce, parat Caesar domito quod defuit orbi
addere: nunc, oriens ultime, noster eris.

'Look! Caesar is preparing to add what was lacking to the conquered world: now, farthest East, you will be ours.'¹⁶ The 'naval fight' used by Ovid to segue into his panegyric is generally understood as being the one held during the first *ludi* of Mars Ultor in 2 B.C., mentioned by Velleius Paterculus and described specifically by Dio.¹⁷ The Caesar mentioned is Gaius, who was then preparing for a campaign against Parthia.¹⁸

For Ovid's segue to make sense to the reader, these two events must have been connected. Ovid proceeds to give the exact purpose of Gaius' mission:

Parthe, dabis poenas: Crassi gaudete sepulti,
signaque barbaricas non bene passa manus.
ultor adest, primisque ducem profitetur in annis,
bellaque non puero tractat agenda puer.

Parthian, you shall pay the penalty; rejoice, you buried soldiers of Crassus, and you standards that shamefully endured barbarian violence. Your avenger is at hand, and though his years be few, proclaims his captaincy, and, though a boy, handles wars that no boy should handle.¹⁹

The goal of Gaius' campaign is clear: revenge not only for the dead soldiers of Crassus, but also for the standards that, although already returned to the Romans and safely housed in the Temple of Mars Ultor, still bore the shame of Parthian abuse.²⁰ That is, in 2 B.C. vengeance had not yet been achieved, the simple return of the standards had not been enough.²¹ They and the dead soldiers of Crassus were still to be avenged and this was the task of Gaius Caesar. Gaius was now the avenger, and on his march eastward he was honoured in Athens with a statue as 'the New Ares'.²²

Gaius achieved limited success in the East; he subjugated Armenia (for which he was hailed *imperator* shortly before his death), but he did not complete his vengeance

¹⁵ On the insertion of this passage, see Syme 1978: 14 and further references in his n. 3.

¹⁶ *Ars Amatoria* 1.171–8; trans. J. H. Mozley, adapted.

¹⁷ For the connection between the sea battle, the dedication of the Temple of Mars Ultor and the departure of Gaius, see Weinstock 1977: 132; Bowerstock 1984: 171; Herbert-Brown 1994: 95–108; Davis 2006: 95–7.

¹⁸ Preparations for Gaius' departure appear to be documented on an altar dated (by consular date) to 2 B.C. and depicting Augustus and Gaius *capite velato* taking the military auspices of the *tripudium* (a chicken is depicted pecking the ground beside Gaius). See Pollini 1987: 32–5 and pl. 14; Zanker 1990: 121 and fig. 101 (Zanker interprets the younger male as either Lucius or Gaius); Rose 2005: 47–50. My thanks to J. Pollini for bringing this relief to my attention.

¹⁹ *Ars Amatoria* 1.179–82; trans. J. H. Mozley, adapted.

²⁰ The exact day of Gaius' departure is not known. Herz (1980) argues for a date in January of 1 B.C. based on a restoration of a very fragmentary entry in the *Fasti Praenestini*. Herz is followed by Halfmann (1986: 166). Rose (2005: 45 n. 132) argues against Herz's proposal and suggests instead that Gaius' departure 'was timed to coincide with the dedication of the temple of Mars Ultor in the Forum of Augustus'.

²¹ cf. Herbert-Brown 1994: 106.

²² *IG* II.2.3250; Bowerstock 1984: 172; Schmalz 2009: 100–1.

against the real enemy and died in A.D. 4 with Parthia still unconquered.²³ We should consider the possibility that Trajan purposefully chose 12 May in order to emphasize that he was taking up the sword that had fallen from the hand of Gaius and that he was setting out to accomplish the vengeance that had eluded Augustus.

IV OTHER INVOCATIONS OF MARS ULTOR

This conclusion, if correct, demonstrates that the connection between Mars Ultor and the idea of vengeance against Parthia was strong in the Roman mind in the early second century A.D. But in modern commentaries, the origin of the epithet Ultor is more commonly (and often exclusively) connected to a vow to avenge Caesar made by Octavian on the eve of the Battle of Philippi in 42 B.C.²⁴ Vengeance against the Parthians, if mentioned, is considered a later addition.²⁵ Given the prevalence of this belief it is worth examining the evidence on which it is based. This section traces the known invocations of Mars Ultor from the first century B.C. to the third century A.D., with the goal of identifying patterns that might reveal how the Romans understood his rôle.²⁶ The sources indicate that Mars Ultor was understood in different ways, and also that this understanding may have changed over time. In order to ensure as far as possible an accurate reflection of the contemporary understanding of Mars Ultor and to highlight any changes in his image through time, the evidence is presented in the order of the dates of the sources themselves, not necessarily the period which they claim to illuminate. Thus the most frequently cited authority for Mars Ultor's invocation at the Battle of Philippi, Suetonius, *Augustus* 29.2, is reserved for discussion in the time when it was written, the early second century A.D.

From the Battle of Philippi to the 20s B.C.

There is no source for Mars as Ultor contemporary to the Battle of Philippi, and not for more than twenty years after it. The epithet does not appear in conjunction with Mars

²³ Dio 55.10a.4–8.

²⁴ A number of prominent modern handbooks and encyclopedia explain Ultor exclusively by reference to the supposed vow at Philippi: Richardson 1992: 160; Claridge 1998: 158; Coarelli 2007: 108; H. J. Gehrke in *Kleine Pauly*, s.v. Rache. An exception is R. L. Gordon (in *Kleine Pauly*, s.v. Mars, C. Mars Ultor) who appears to be following Weinstock's suggestion (1977: 132) that the epithet is connected to a vow of revenge against the Parthians originally made by Julius Caesar.

²⁵ For example, A Marbach, *PW*, s.v. Mars, col. 1924; E. Buchner, *PW*, s.v. Ultor, col. 573; Rose 2005: 46, n. 134: 'The redefinition began in 20 B.C. with the voting of the Capitoline Temple of Mars Ultor as a repository for the recovered standards'; Mayer 2012: 71: 'in due course the title was "rebranded" as the vengeance taken on the Parthians.'

²⁶ The end date of this examination is fixed on the reign of the last emperor to invoke Mars Ultor in a comprehensive manner. After this time the god makes more frequent appearances in the iconography of the coinage (our main source for this period), so much so that he appears to have entered the 'normal' repertoire of the mint and to have lost at least some of the special and specific status he had in earlier centuries. Not counting Marbach's discussion under Mars in *PW*, which is brief and does not extend beyond the reign of Augustus, or Buchner's discussion under Ultor in *PW*, which provides more evidence but does not analyse the later material, there have been two attempts to examine the nature of Mars Ultor over a long period of time. The first of these, by Chambalu (1892), focused on the period between Augustus and Vespasian. Chambalu characterized the function of the god as developing from one of personal revenge to vengeance against foreign enemies under Augustus, only to return to personal revenge under Caligula; this then allowed the leaders in the Civil Wars of A.D. 68 to invoke the god on their own behalf. The next and much more recent examination of the god was by Croon (1981), who gave special attention to the numismatic evidence, deliberately did not try to connect 'Ultor' in every case of its appearance with 'revenge', and (tentatively) suggested that this aspect of the god, along with later epithets such as 'Conservator', 'Propugnator' and 'Pacator' were connected to an older understanding of the god as 'protector of the community'. Neither approach presents a complete image of the function of Mars Ultor.

in the poetry of the 20s B.C., and Mars is associated neither with vengeance for the murder of Caesar nor with vengeance against Parthia. Horace, *Odes* 1.2, perhaps written c. 30 B.C., is a useful example.²⁷ This is an appeal to the gods to restore Rome after the Civil Wars, which Horace describes as a crime (*scelus*) and a waste of energy that could have been better spent against the Parthians.²⁸ Horace addresses Mars (epithets or descriptions of the various gods are underlined for emphasis):

sive neglectum genus et nepotes
respicis auctor,
heu nimis longo satiate ludo

Or *you*, if as our founder you have any regard for the race you have neglected and for your own descendants, cease (for you have had your fill) from the game which has gone on, alas, too long.²⁹

After Mars comes Mercury, whom Horace compares with Augustus:

sive mutata iuvenem figura
ales in terris imitaris almae
filius Maiaie patiens vocari
Caesaris ultor

Or you come, o winged son of kindly Maia, if you take on the shape of a young man on earth and are willing to be called Caesar's avenger.³⁰

Horace finally appeals to Augustus to stay long on earth and to exact vengeance against the Parthians:

hic magnos potius triumphos,
hic ames dici pater atque princeps,
neu sinas Medos equitare inultos,
te duce Caesar.

Here rather may you enjoy glorious triumphs, here may you be glad to be called Father and First Citizen, and refuse to allow the Medes to ride unpunished while you are our leader, Caesar.³¹

Vengeance for Caesar's murder has been accomplished by Mercury, Augustus will extract vengeance against the Parthians, and Mars is hailed as founder of the Roman race.

The theme of an impending victory over the Parthians is also evoked by Propertius in his *Elegy* 3.4, written c. 22–21 B.C., where the poet addresses in turn Jupiter, Mars and Venus in the context of an impending war. At the beginning, *deus Caesar* (Augustus) plans a war against the East. Naturally this will be a victory, and once won, 'Parthia's trophies shall become familiar with Latin Jupiter' and the soldiers are urged to 'avenge Crassus' men and the defeat'.³² Then Mars, who is called *pater* (father), is invoked by Propertius (3.4.11–18) that he might allow the poet to see Augustus' triumph, laden with spoils, the names of captured cities, and the captured enemy leaders. Finally Propertius (3.4.19)

²⁷ On the date of the *Odes*, see Mayer 2012: 19 and references there. Publication of the complete book of the *Odes* was 23 B.C., but the suggestion in 1.2 that civil wars belonged in the recent past and that Rome had yet to be put back on her feet might support a date of writing before 27 B.C.

²⁸ The Roman youth 'will hear how citizens sharpened the sword which should rather have slain the deadly Parthians'; 'audiet civis acuisse ferrum / quo graves Persae melius perirent' (*Odes* 1.2.21–30; trans. N. Rudd).

²⁹ *Odes* 1.2.35–7, trans. N. Rudd.

³⁰ *Odes* 1.2.41–4, trans. N. Rudd.

³¹ *Odes* 1.2.49–52, trans. N. Rudd. See Herbert-Brown (1994, 98) for Augustus as Mercury and *Caesaris ultor*.

³² 'assuescent Latio Partha tropaea Iovi'; 3.4.6 (trans. H. E. Butler); 'Crassos clademque piate', 3.4.9.

invokes Venus to protect her child ('ipsa tuam serva prolem, Venus': 'save your own offspring, Venus'). In the poetry of both Horace and Propertius, Mars is qualified as an ancestral/paternal figure and is not directly associated with revenge.

The First Invocation of Mars Ultor

The earliest specific evidence for Mars Ultor is found on coinage of 19/18 B.C.³³ These coins have varied iconography, though common to all is the depiction of one, two or three Roman military standards. These are the standards of Crassus (and of two other defeated Roman armies; *RG* 29.2), which Augustus compelled the Parthians to return in 20 B.C. The standards are shown either held by a young Mars (*Fig. 5*; sometimes in a small shrine or temple, *Fig. 6*) or standing by themselves in a temple (either alone, *Fig. 7*, or in a chariot, *Fig. 8*), with legends specifying MARTIS VLTORIS (or similar), 'of Mars Ultor', or SIGNIS RECEPTIS, 'the standards recovered'. In a remarkable example of co-ordinated dissemination of iconography, these coins were struck at multiple locations in the Empire: aurei and denarii in Spain for circulation in the West, cistophori at Pergamum for circulation in Asia Minor (*Fig. 9*), and even bronze coins in Egypt for use solely in that province.³⁴

These coins would have served to publicize in all parts of the Empire the connection between Mars Ultor and the standards returned by the Parthians. The depiction of the standards together with the name of the god would have cemented the public understanding of Mars Ultor as the god of vengeance against the Parthians. This revenge against Parthia represented the achievement of a major goal of the Roman state since the time of Caesar,³⁵ and it was fitting that Augustus should publicize it across the Empire. The coin types struck in Augustus' name in and after 19 B.C. appear to declare this vengeance achieved, and perhaps also to announce Augustus' plan to build the temple that was to rise in his own Forum (this is extensively debated³⁶).

³³ Cistophori (large silver coins worth four drachmae) from Pergamum (*Fig. 9*) dated IMP IX TR POT IV or V (19–18 B.C.) show one standard in a temple with the legend MART(i) VLTO(ri) (*RIC* I (2nd edn), 507) or an arch decorated with standards and the inscription S P R (*sic*) SIGNIS RECEPTIS (*ibid.*, 508–10). Undated aurei and denarii from uncertain mints in Spain show various combinations of similar types and inscriptions (*ibid.*, 28, 41, 68, 81, 104).

³⁴ For the Alexandrian bronze: Poole 1892, cat. no. 7. The coins depict a shrine with an object inside; Poole (*ibid.*, 2) interprets the object inside the shrine as a censer, but the details of the object make it fairly certainly a standard. The inscription on the reverse does not say Mars Ultor, but rather ΚΑΙΣΑΡ.

³⁵ Weinstock (1977: 128–32) argued that the original vow that gave rise to the epithet Ultor was undertaken not by Octavian but rather by Caesar himself, against the Parthians. Herbert-Brown (1994: 100) follows Weinstock. Dio (43.51.1) records a universal desire for revenge against Parthia in the last year of Caesar's life, which led to their voting command of the campaign to Caesar and the beginning of preparations for it. Appian records the same and notes that Caesar was murdered just four days before he was to depart on this mission: *Civil Wars* 2.110–11. For these sources, see Weinstock, *op. cit.*, 130, n. 13.

³⁶ The structure shown on many of these coins was interpreted by Mommsen as an actual building in Rome and ever since has been taken by most scholars as a known fact; it even has its own entry in the *Lexicon Topographicum Urbis Romae* (Ch. Reusser, *LTUR* III, 230–1, s.v. Mars Ultor (Capitolium)). The ancient evidence is contradictory. Dio (54.8.3) records that Augustus planned a temple (νεών) to Mars Ultor on the Capitol to hold the recovered standards, and that he carried this out; this led Mommsen in his commentary on 12 May (*CIL* I.2, 318) to propose the existence of an *aedicula* on the Capitol built to receive the standards and dedicated on 1 August. In an attempt to solve the problem of Dio 60.5.3 (see above, n. 12) Mommsen theorized that this dedication was also the occasion of the institution of the *ludi Martiales*, despite Augustus' own assertion (*RG* 22.2) that he first celebrated these games in 2 B.C. Simpson (1977: 92) noted that a contemporary witness, Horace (*Odes* 4.15.6–8), suggests that the standards were returned to a temple of Jupiter ('et signa nostro restituit Iovi direpta Parthorum superbis postibus') and argued that this contemporary testimony is to be preferred and that Dio is mistaken. Simpson's argument is followed by Rich (1998: 79–86), with the modification that Augustus initially did plan a temple of Mars Ultor on the Capitol, but then changed his mind and shifted the building to his new Forum. Spannagel (1999: 60–78), however, views the coin images



FIG. 5. Denarius of Augustus, Spain, c. 19 B.C.; reverse: Mars Ultor with standards. *BMCRE Augustus 332.* (© Trustees of the British Museum)



FIG. 6. Denarius of Augustus, Spain, c. 19 B.C.; reverse: Mars Ultor with standards in temple. *BMCRE Augustus 369.* (© Trustees of the British Museum)



FIG. 7. Denarius of Augustus, Spain, c. 18 B.C.; reverse: standards in temple. *BMCRE Augustus 371.* (© Trustees of the British Museum)



FIG. 8. Denarius of Augustus, Spain, c. 18 B.C.; reverse: *aquila* in chariot in temple. *BMCRE Augustus 388.* (© Trustees of the British Museum)



FIG. 9. Cistophorus of Augustus, Ephesus, 19–18 B.C.; reverse: standard in temple. Cf. *BMCRE* Augustus 704. (© Trustees of the British Museum)

The next source in chronological order reinforces the association of Mars Ultor and Parthia, but appears to qualify the degree of vengeance achieved by Augustus in 20 B.C. This is Ovid's description of the games that attended the dedication of the Temple of Mars Ultor in the *Ars Amatoria*, written c. 2 B.C. (discussed in Section III above). The poet calls on both the standards and the dead soldiers of Crassus to rejoice because their avenger, Gaius Caesar, is at hand. This suggests that, at least in 2 B.C., the vengeance achieved by Augustus in 20 B.C. was not considered complete.

The First Connection to Philippi

The first mention of the vow of vengeance at Philippi in association with Mars Ultor comes at least six years after this, in Ovid's *Fasti*, probably written after A.D. 4.³⁷ Here Mars is presented as the agent of vengeance against both Parthia and the murderers of Caesar; nine lines of the *Fasti* are devoted to the vow at Philippi, while fourteen describe Mars's vengeance against the Parthians. Ovid purports to give the very words of Augustus' vow at Philippi: 'you will have a temple, when I am the victor, and you will be called Avenger' ('templa ferēs et, me victore, vocaberis Ultor'; *Fasti* 5.577). Herbert-Brown has pointed out that Ovid casts Augustus' vow in a carefully nuanced way: Augustus invokes Mars to avenge Caesar the god, not the man.³⁸ Revenge against Parthia is also a theme, but in contrast to the *Ars*, in the *Fasti* Ovid is clear that the humiliation caused by the capture of the standards had been removed by the act of their return (*Fasti* 5.

as evidence of a plan to build such a structure, but one that was probably never completed, replaced instead by a plan to build the much larger temple of Mars Ultor in the Forum of Augustus. For the substantial bibliography on this debate, see Spannagel 1999 and Simpson 1993.

The coins themselves cannot be taken as evidence of the existence of such a shrine, since they show various and different renderings of the structure and its contents, and since there is evidence of other unbuilt buildings appearing on coins in this period, e.g. the temple of Clementia Caesaris (Burnett 1999: 141). Burnett (*ibid.*, 146) on the Temple of Mars Ultor remarks: 'The case of the Temple of Mars Ultor underlines the point made earlier, that the depiction of a structure on a coin cannot be regarded as proof that it existed at the time or indeed that it ever existed.' For the depiction of buildings before they had been built, see Prayon 1982. One wonders if Dio was influenced by the existence of these coins when he wrote his history; the historian displays a remarkable attention to numismatic detail when discussing coins of Brutus with liberty cap and daggers (47.25.3).

³⁷ Ovid (*Tristia* 2.549–52) says that his fate (*sors mea*, presumably meaning his exile) put an end to his work on the *Fasti* after the writing of six books. Herbert-Brown argues (1994: 233) that Ovid began his work after the adoption of Tiberius, A.D. 4.

³⁸ Herbert-Brown 1994: 68–71, 99–100. Ovid, *Fasti* 5.573–5, trans. Frazer. In his entry for the ides of March, Ovid has Vesta herself mourn for her murdered priest ('meus fuit ille sacerdos'; 3.699) and then draws the reader's attention to Philippi and Octavian's vengeance.

589–90 and 594). The poet appears to have changed his mind about the significance of the return of the standards between the time he wrote the *Ars* and the *Fasti*.

The First Century A.D.

In his *Res Gestae*, which Augustus says he wrote in his seventy-sixth year (the last year of his life; *RG* 35.2), the emperor records both his vengeance against the Parthians and his vengeance against the murderers of Caesar. But he (*RG* 2) disassociates his revenge against the murderers of his father from the battles that followed; revenge was accomplished by the exile of the offenders, while the following battles were fought in defence of the republic when these men attacked it.³⁹ Augustus' only reference (*RG* 29) to the function of Mars Ultor's temple is as a repository for Roman military standards recovered from Spain, Gaul, Dalmatia and Parthia.

The next record of the invocation of Mars Ultor is found in the *Commentarii Fratrum Arvalium*, an inscribed record of ceremonies and sacrifices made by the Arval Brethren, an ancient college of priests dedicated to Dea Dia but which also offered sacrifice and made vows on important occasions associated with the emperor.⁴⁰ On 23 June A.D. 59 the Arval Brethren sacrificed on the Capitol to Jupiter, Juno, Minerva, Salus, Felicitas, Divus Augustus, Diva Augusta and Divus Claudius, and in the Forum of Augustus to Mars Ultor and the Genius Augusti, on the occasion of a vow for the safety and return of Nero ('pro salute et] reditu Neronis').⁴¹ Scheid suggests that Mars is included here (as he is later in sacrifices for the *dies imperii*) because of the triumphal nature of Nero's return and the functions of the temple in this context as spelled out by Augustus.⁴²

Only ten years later Mars Ultor appears again, this time on coinage. During the Civil Wars of the years A.D. 68/69, Mars Ultor was a major type on the anonymous coinage struck in Gaul under C. Iulius Vindex and in Spain under Galba to pay troops in their revolt against Nero.⁴³ Vindex, governor of Transalpine Gaul, was the first to revolt against Nero in the spring of 68; he obtained the support of Galba but was defeated by the still-loyal troops of the governor of Germany before Galba could come to his aid, after which he committed suicide.⁴⁴ This coinage bears no imperial portrait but instead is adorned with gods, personifications and other objects. One type (*Fig. 10*) shows Mars as a naked helmeted figure striding with shield and raised spear, identified by the inscription as Mars Ultor; the obverse of these coins normally bears a portrait of the Genius of the Roman People.⁴⁵ On the other major type (*Fig. 11*) the god is shown on the obverse as a helmeted, bearded male bust with the legend MARS VLTOR. This bust is most often paired with a reverse showing three legionary standards, an altar, and the legend SIGNA P R.⁴⁶

³⁹ *RG* 2: 'Qui parentem meum trucidaverunt, eos in exilium expuli iudiciis legitimis ultus eorum facinus, et postea bellum inferentis rei publicae vici bis acie'; 'I drove into exile the murderers of my father, avenging their crime through tribunals established by law; and afterwards, when they made war on the republic, I defeated them in battle', trans. Brunt and Moore 1967: 18–19. For this argument, see Weinstock 1977: 131 and Cassola 1971: 99, n. 1. Spannagel (1999: 75) counters that the motivation of revenge 'hätte Weinstock nicht bezweifeln sollen', citing Dio 47.42.5, though without noting that Weinstock himself cites this passage. Dio is contrasting the motivations of the opposing armies, one noble, the other base, and he presents vengeance as the desire of the aggrieved soldier whose favourite general (Caesar) had been slain, rather than as the official, public motivation of the campaign.

⁴⁰ On the nature of the text, which was adapted from (presumably more detailed) written *codices*, see Scheid 1998: i–vii.

⁴¹ *Commentarii* 28, a–c, 24–30; Scheid 1998: 71; Henzen 1874: lxxiv–lxxv.

⁴² Scheid 1990: 398–9.

⁴³ *RIC* I (2nd edn), 197–215; Martin 1974.

⁴⁴ Dio 63.24.1–4.

⁴⁵ *RIC* I (2nd edn), Civil Wars 16–22; Martin 1974, types 24–36.

⁴⁶ *RIC* I (2nd edn), Civil Wars 50 (aureus) and 51 (denarius); while other obverse types are also paired with the



FIG. 10. Aureus of Civil Wars, Gaul, A.D. 68–69; reverse: Mars Ultor. *BMCRE Civil Wars 21*. (© Trustees of the British Museum)



FIG. 11. Aureus of Civil Wars, Gaul, A.D. 68–69; obverse: Mars Ultor; reverse: standards, altar, SIGNA P R. *BMCRE Civil Wars 38*. (© Trustees of the British Museum)

The significance of Mars Ultor in this context is unclear. Chambalu favoured an interpretation focused on vengeance against Nero, while Croon interpreted the coins in a more general way, as intended to support Galba's claim as a successor of Augustus.⁴⁷ Mattingly made a different argument, suggesting that in the Latin word *ultor* 'we may reasonably see a direct allusion to the Gallic leader', since *vindex* also means avenger.⁴⁸ Mattingly's idea of a connection with Vindex is strengthened by two observations. The first is that Mars Ultor does not appear on any coins of Galba struck at Rome, even though that coinage does repeat a number of earlier Spanish types (suggesting that the type was pertinent to the provincial theatre, not the capital).⁴⁹ The second is that Mars Ultor continues to be struck on Spanish issues even into the beginning of the reign of Vespasian (from whose Roman coinage the god is also absent).⁵⁰

SIGNA reverse, these are rare while the Mars/standards combination is listed as 'common' in *RIC*, suggesting it was meant to be the main type combination; Martin (1974, n. 46) types 60 and 61.

⁴⁷ Chambalu 1892. Croon 1981: 271; his view may be supported by the fact that the series of coins of which the Mars Ultor/SIGNA type is part also included a number of types taken from the lifetime coinage of Augustus, including the famous capricorn and the comet of Julius Caesar. The connection is confirmed by a die link between the *Salus Generis Humani* and Augustus series (Martin 1974: 28).

⁴⁸ Mattingly: *BMCRE I*, cxcii. Kraay (1949: 135) argued that Mars Ultor and standards were intended as a reply to a late Neronian coin type that also shows three standards, to show that now the standards belonged 'with Vindex, and not with Nero'.

⁴⁹ On the coinage of Galba at Rome, see *RIC I* (2nd edn), 221–30.

⁵⁰ These are rare aurei and denarii struck in Spain at the very beginning of his reign (A.D. 69/70) as part of a small group of coins that also re-used other types of the Civil Wars, including the geographically specific Hispania. *RIC II.2* (2nd edn), Vespasian 1297–9, 1358 and 1373. Die links establish the coherence of the group (except for 1358

The *Commentarii Fratrum Arvalium* record the inclusion of a sacrifice to Mars Ultor (along with Jupiter, Juno, Minerva, Victoria, Salus, Felicitas and the Genius Augusti) in A.D. 69 on the *dies imperii* of Galba's immediate successor, Otho, then five months later for the *dies imperii* of Vitellius, and again for Vitellius' safety and arrival (both times with a similar constellation of other gods).⁵¹ Chambalu argued that this was directly related to the strong theme of vengeance that he believed permeated the whole period of the Civil Wars.⁵² Scheid on the other hand suggests that the military functions ascribed to the Temple of Mars Ultor by Augustus provide a better explanation for a sacrifice to the god on the occasion of a *dies imperii*; he also suggests, noting that Mars (no epithet specified) is included in sacrifices on *dies imperii* of Domitian, that the god became part of the normal commemorative ritual on that occasion.⁵³ The incompleteness of the *Commentarii* (no entries preserved between Caesar and Claudius) makes it impossible to know when Mars Ultor first appeared in the sacrifices of the Arvals.

The Tropaeum Traiani

The next evidence for the invocation of Mars Ultor, and the only major monument known to have been dedicated to this god since the time of Augustus, is the Tropaeum Traiani at Adamklisi, just south of the Danube in Moesia Inferior. The monument was a large stone trophy atop a massive cylindrical masonry base decorated with relief sculptures depicting scenes from Trajan's Dacian Wars. The inscription begins MARTI VLTOR[I]; the mention of Trajan's thirteenth tribunician power dates the monument to A.D. 107/108.⁵⁴ The dedication is followed by Trajan's name and titulature, but the second part of the inscription, where presumably the reason for its dedication was given, is not preserved except for a few letters that may reference 'the army of the Dacians'. Trajan had won two major wars against the Dacians, but the dedication to Mars Ultor shows that this was not a simple victory monument. The god appears to have been invoked by Trajan as avenger of past Roman defeats at the hands of the Dacians, including the loss under Domitian (and later recovery by Trajan) of a Roman standard.⁵⁵ A nearby funerary altar commemorates by name 3–4,000 Roman soldiers who died fighting for the republic; whether these were soldiers of Domitian or Trajan is not clear, but the siting

and 1373) and provenance provides some supporting evidence for Spanish origin (*ibid.*, 36–7 and 40–1 for discussion of attribution and chronology). No types labelled Mars Ultor are produced at Rome in the reign of Vespasian (Mars Victor on the other hand is common), but an unlabelled type (*ibid.*, Vespasian 22–3) common on aurei and denarii produced at Rome in A.D. 70, shows Mars advancing with spear carrying an *aquila* over his shoulder; this may have been meant to be understood as Mars Ultor.

⁵¹ On 16 January A.D. 69 for the *dies imperii* of Otho (*Commentarii* 40, I, 1–7, 35–9; Scheid 1998: 100; Henzen 1874: xci; 72 for discussion), on 19 April of the same year for the *dies imperii* of Vitellius (*Commentarii* 40, I, 85–8; Scheid 1998: 102; Henzen 1874: xciv) where the sacrifices mentioned are to Jupiter, Juno, Minerva, Jupiter Victor, Salus, Felicitas and the Genius Populi Romani on the Capitol, to Mars Ultor and the Genius Augusti in the Forum of Augustus, and [*pro*] *salute et a[diventu]* of Vitellius on an unknown date in April or May (*Commentarii* 40, II, 1–5; Scheid 1998: 102; Henzen 1874: xciv), to an identical group of gods.

⁵² Chambalu 1892: 734.

⁵³ Scheid 1990: 385–7. Mars Ultor is also included in the sacrifices of the Arvals on the return of Hadrian to Rome on 9 July A.D. 118 and on the occasion of the German victory of Caracalla in A.D. 213 (*ibid.*, 406).

⁵⁴ *CIL* 3.12467, 13733.

⁵⁵ Domitian had fought an inconclusive war against the Dacians under Decebalus and the Roman army had suffered serious defeats; the peace Domitian concluded required the Romans to pay a subsidy to the Dacians (Dio 67.6–7; Suetonius, *Domitian* 6.1). Dio (68.6.1) relates that Trajan was offended by the subsidy and wanted to check the growing 'power and pride' of the Dacians. Dio (68.9.3) also records the recovery by Trajan at the end of the first Dacian War of a Roman standard lost by Domitian's general Fuscus; Trajan presumably would have dedicated this standard in the Temple of Mars Ultor, following the custom established by Augustus.

of a trophy dedicated to Mars Ultor only 250 m from a monument to Roman dead was almost certainly intended to show a connection between the two.⁵⁶

Tacitus and Suetonius

Tacitus and Suetonius wrote in the early second century A.D. I have delayed considering their testimony in order to avoid mingling contemporary records with later sources that may reflect an understanding of Mars Ultor at the time of writing, rather than as it was in the period referred to. The references of Tacitus and Suetonius to Mars Ultor are discussed here in chronological order within each author's work.

Tacitus records (*Ann.* 2.64) that in the year 17 Germanicus, having installed a new king of Armenia (the control of which the Romans regularly contested with the Parthians), was rewarded with an arch built beside the Temple of Mars Ultor. This appears to support the Parthian association of the god. On the other hand, in A.D. 20, after the conspiracy of Piso, Tacitus records (*Ann.* 3.18) proposals by senators to set up a golden statue in the Temple of Mars Ultor and an 'altar of vengeance' ('*aram ultionis*'); in addition it was suggested that certain people should be publicly thanked for avenging Germanicus ('*ob vindictam Germanici*'). This seems to point to a more personal interpretation of the vengeance expressed by Mars Ultor, presumably derived from the idea of vengeance against the murderers of Caesar.

Tiberius' reaction (as recorded by Tacitus) is striking: he forbade both the statue and the altar on the grounds that 'these memorials were consecrated after victories abroad; domestic calamities called for sorrow and concealment' ('*prohibuit, ob externas ea victorias sacrari dictitans, domestica mala tristitia operienda*'; *Ann.* 3.18, trans. J. Jackson). Here Tacitus depicts the emperor dismissing an association between Mars Ultor and personal vengeance, instead emphasizing his function as avenger against foreign enemies. Another foreign (and specifically Parthian) connection is related by Tacitus in the time of Nero. In A.D. 54 the Parthians seized Armenia and Nero ordered Roman forces to be mobilized and allied kings to cross the Parthian borders (*Ann.* 13.6–7). A domestic rebellion caused the Parthians to withdraw from Armenia, but the Senate reacted as if a great victory had been won. They voted Nero triumphal regalia, an *ovatio*, and a statue of the emperor equal in size to that of Mars Ultor, to be set up in the same temple (*Ann.* 13.8).

Suetonius, *Augustus* 29.2 is the second and most frequently cited source for the vow at Philippi (the first being Ovid, *Fasti*), despite a generally overlooked uncertainty in its reading. While discussing the many public works of Augustus, Suetonius records the building of his Forum and the Temple of Mars, to which he adds: '*aedem Martis bello Philippensi pro ultione paterna suscepto voverat*': 'he had made a vow to build the temple of Mars in the war of Philippi, which he undertook to avenge his father' (J. C. Rolfe trans.). However, the archetype from which all our manuscripts are derived had a different reading: *provisione* instead of *pro ultione*; the latter is a correction supplied by a twelfth-century scribe.⁵⁷ Gustav Becker, commenting on Roth's edition of 1858, suggested splitting this word and reading *pro visione paterna*, 'in accordance with a paternal vision'; he connected this to the story (given by both Suetonius and Dio) that the ghost of Caesar had appeared on the eve of the battle, in one version (Suetonius) promising victory.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Stefan 2005: 437–8, fig. 190 and 675, fig. 277. The altar appears to have been set up on the site of a Roman defeat of A.D. 85.

⁵⁷ The correction *ultio* was first supplied by the writer of a twelfth-century manuscript, designated ζ by Kaster (2014: 179), who was also responsible for a large number of other significant corrections (*ibid.*, 147–50).

⁵⁸ Becker 1867: 694. The vision: Suetonius, *Augustus* 96.1, Dio 47.41.2; they record that a Thessalian saw (Suetonius) or dreamed of (Dio) Caesar, who foretold victory (Suetonius) or asked Octavian to wear something that had once belonged to him (Dio).

On the other hand, there is good reason to accept the correction *pro ultione*. The text of Suetonius is very corrupt and the archetype contains hundreds of errors.⁵⁹ Robert Kaster notes that the process by which *visione* might have been introduced for a misspelled *ultione* can be easily envisaged: VLTIONE becomes VITIONE (VL- and VI- being barely distinguishable in ancient capital script) which is 'corrected' to VISIONE. In addition, Kaster notes that *pro* is rarely used by Suetonius to mean 'in accordance with' and that *visio* (a rare word before Late Antiquity except for a limited number of Classical authors) is not used elsewhere by Suetonius, though he frequently uses *ultio*.⁶⁰

Suetonius references Mars Ultor in two other places. Augustus is said by Suetonius (*Aug.* 21.2) to have used the Temple of Mars Ultor as part of a ritual to ensure that barbarians maintained peace with Rome. The point was presumably that should they break their oath, Mars would aid the Romans in exacting vengeance. Suetonius also relates that Caligula 'dedicated to Mars the Avenger, with an explanatory inscription, three swords designed to take his life' ('tres gladios in necem suam praeparatos Marti Ultori addito elogio consecravit'; *Caligula* 24.3, trans. Rolfe). The number three was in reference to Caligula's three sisters, whom he believed had conspired against him with Drusilla's husband Lepidus.⁶¹ Newlands cites Suetonius, *Vitellius* 8.1 as evidence that a sword belonging to Julius Caesar was kept in the Temple of Mars Ultor, but this appears to be incorrect.⁶²

Later Invocations of Mars Ultor

After the time of Trajan, it seems that Mars Ultor receded into the background. He was rarely represented on coinage: Mars Ultor appears (as a simple standing type with spear and shield) once on the coinage of Antoninus Pius and once again on the coinage of Commodus; in neither case does the issue appear to have been large, or the type to have been associated with any particular event.⁶³ Perhaps surprisingly, Mars Ultor does not appear on the coinage of Lucius Verus or of Septimius Severus, both of whom fought campaigns against Parthia.⁶⁴ But the god does appear during Severus' lifetime on the coinage of his eldest son, Caracalla, dated A.D. 197/198.⁶⁵ A youthful helmeted Mars Ultor marches right, a trophy over his left shoulder and a spear in this right hand. On the obverse Caracalla is titled Caesar and pontifex. The most common type of that year is Caracalla as *princeps iuventutis*, and it is to this that we should probably connect the appearance of Mars Ultor, following Dio's note (55.10.2) that one of the functions decreed by Augustus for the Temple of Mars Ultor was as the site of enrolment of youths attaining military age.

The final written source, in order of writing, is the text of the historian Cassius Dio. The historian concludes his work in the year 229, when he was ordinary consul with Severus

⁵⁹ On the manuscript tradition of Suetonius: Kaster 2014.

⁶⁰ R. Kaster, pers. comm. The word *visio* is used in classical Latin by Cicero, Quintilian, Apuleius and Gellius. Instead of *pro*, Suetonius normally uses different language, e.g. 'ex nocturno visu' 'because of a dream' (*Augustus* 91.2).

⁶¹ A version of this story is also given by Dio 59.22.7.

⁶² Newlands 1995: 88, n. 7. In Suetonius' account Vitellius (not yet emperor) has recently arrived in Lower Germany, where he had been sent by Galba; suddenly late one evening he is roused by his soldiers and declared emperor. 'Then he was carried about the most populous villages, holding a drawn sword of the deified Julius, which someone had taken from a shrine of Mars (*strictum Divi Juli gladium tenens detractum delubro Martis*) and handed him during the first congratulations' (Rolfe). Suetonius does not mention Mars Ultor, and it would seem more likely that someone had impulsively taken a sword supposedly belonging to Caesar from a local shrine of Mars, rather than that someone had been able to remove a sword from the Temple of Mars Ultor in Rome, then bring it to Germany and there wait for Vitellius to be hailed emperor. Shrines to Mars were extremely common in Roman Germany: Franconi 2014: 149.

⁶³ Antoninus Pius: *BMCRE* Pius 503 (aureus, A.D. 143–4) and 1252 (sestertius, same type as 503); Commodus: *BMCRE* Commodus 351–2 (denarius, A.D. 191–2). A denarius for Pertinax recorded by Cohen and listed in *RIC* (Pertinax 28) is called by Mattingly and Sydenham (ibid.) 'doubtful' because of its unusual obverse.

⁶⁴ Of Severus himself, one type of 'barbarous' style is listed in *RIC* (Severus 339A, a denarius found at Chester).

⁶⁵ *BMCRE* V, Wars of the Succession 202–3 (denarius), p. 152 for sestertius and as (no cat. nos).

Alexander and after which he retired, as he says, to his homeland of Bithynia. His history is preserved more or less fully between 69 B.C. and A.D. 46, after which it is very fragmentary. Dio (55.10.6–9) describes the games held to mark the dedication of the Temple of Mars Ultor (see Section II above), noting that they included a sea battle between Persians and Athenians — probably meant to call to mind the Parthians and the Romans — which the Athenians won. Dio's description (55.10.2–4) of the functions of the temple specified by Augustus includes multiple military associations, in particular that generals embarking on foreign campaigns should start there, that the Senate should meet there to award triumphs to victors, and that those honoured by a triumph should have statues in the Forum. Dio does not mention the function of vengeance against the murderers of Caesar.

At the end of Dio's history a new eastern enemy makes its appearance. Dio (speaking now of his own time) reports fear and alarm across the Roman Empire and beyond, because of the situation in Mesopotamia.⁶⁶ Artaxerxes had defeated the Parthians, thus establishing a new Persian empire, and had gathered a large army and intended to reconquer the territory that had belonged to the old Persian empire.⁶⁷ This crisis may have inspired the depiction of Mars Ultor on two very-large-volume issues of the coinage of Severus Alexander, taking a prominent place in this medium for the first time since the Civil Wars after the death of Nero.⁶⁸



FIG. 12. Sestertius of Severus Alexander, c. A.D. 231–33; reverse: Mars Ultor with spear, shield and standard. Cf. *BMCRE Alexander 806*. (After *BMCRE VI*, pl. 27)



FIG. 13. Denarius of Severus Alexander, c. A.D. 231–33; reverse: Mars Ultor with spear, shield. Cf. *BMCRE Alexander 833*. (© *Trustees of the British Museum*)

⁶⁶ Dio, Boissevain 80.3.1 = Cary (Loeb ed.) 483.

⁶⁷ Dio, Boissevain 80.4.1 = Cary *ibid.*

⁶⁸ Using the evidence of hoard finds, Rowan (2012: 233) concludes that Mars accounts for 17 per cent of Alexander's total denarius coinage; Mars Pacifer ('bringer of peace') is the dominant form in which the god is presented in the 220s, but Mars Ultor accounts for almost all the versions of the god in the 230s (*ibid.*, fig. 80).

These coins belong to the later part of Alexander's reign and, though the dating is not certain, probably are to be associated with the emperor's Persian war, fought between A.D. 231 and 233.⁶⁹ On the coins Mars Ultor is shown standing with spear and shield and, significantly, a Roman military standard (Fig. 12) or advancing with shield and spear (Fig. 13).⁷⁰ Also from the reign of Severus Alexander is the *Feriale Duranum*, the military calendar of Dura Europos discussed in the second part of this paper, that specifies a sacrifice to Mars Pater Ultor on 12 May.⁷¹ The epithet Pater appears to have been officially associated with Mars Ultor in the reign of Severus Alexander, when it also appears in the commentaries of the Arval Brethren.⁷²

V THE CHANGING UNDERSTANDING OF MARS ULTOR

The sources, considered in order of their creation, show the following: before 19 B.C. there is no mention of Mars as Ultor; if an epithet is given to Mars in the poetry of the 30s–20s B.C., he is called Pater or Auctor, both of which highlight his rôle as founder of the Roman people. In this period vengeance, both against the Parthians and against the murderers of Caesar, is a prominent theme, but Mars is not connected to this function. Mars Ultor appears for the first time on the coins of 19/18 B.C., associated exclusively with the standards recovered from the Parthians. He is hailed again as avenger against the Parthians in 2 B.C., by Ovid in the *Ars Amatoria*, in a passage that is connected to an account of the games held at the dedication of the Temple of Mars Ultor and the departure of Gaius Caesar for the East.

The first mention of Mars as avenger of Caesar occurs after A.D. 4, in the *Fasti*, where he is specifically connected to an oath made by Octavian at Philippi. The difference in the way Ovid describes vengeance against Parthia in his two poems is striking. In the *Ars*, Ovid focuses on the completion of the vengeance against Parthia that had been begun by Augustus, to be achieved by the god's instrument, Gaius Caesar. In the *Fasti*, vengeance against Parthia is said to have already been achieved by the return of the standards in 20 B.C. Ovid's change of mind may be explained by a major change in the political situation: the death of Gaius. This event, which left the goal of vengeance expressed at the dedication of the Temple of Mars Ultor in 2 B.C. unachieved, may have called for a distraction: the story of the oath at Philippi. If the story of the oath was not invented at this time, it must have had a very low profile to not have appeared in any of our sources up to this point.

After Ovid, there appear to have been two ways of thinking about Mars Ultor: as agent of vengeance against foreign enemies, and as agent of personal vengeance. If Tacitus' story of Tiberius rejecting a senatorial proposal of a dedication to Mars Ultor for avenging Germanicus is true to contemporary events, it suggests that there was confusion even at high levels as to how the god should be understood. That such confusion could exist is perhaps surprising, but it may be connected to the nuanced manner in which Ovid

⁶⁹ R. A. G. Carson (*BMCRE* VI, 80–2) confidently assigned the coins to what he terms 'issue 14' and 'issues 15–18' of Alexander's coinage, to which he assigns precise dates of A.D. 231 and 232–5, but these assignments are ultimately based on the assumption that 'some reverses carry overt reference to specific events in the reign, such as the war with Persia' (*ibid.*, 40); Mattingly and Sydenham's more cautious conclusion (*RIC* IV, 68) that these types 'were probably issued in connection with the Persian war' is to be preferred.

⁷⁰ Mars with standard: *BMCRE* Alexander 802–6 (denarii and sestertii); Mars advancing: *BMCRE* 830–53 (appearing in all metals and denominations).

⁷¹ For the date of the calendar, Fink *et al.* 1940: 22–3, who placed it 'with some probability' between A.D. 225 and 227.

⁷² *Commentarii Fratrum Arvalium* 105, b, 9; Scheid 1998: 314; Henzen 1867: xxiv. The date is A.D. 224; the occasion is a sacrifice following the destruction in a storm of the sacred grove of Dea Dia; numerous other gods are also recipients of sacrifice on this occasion.

presented Mars as avenger of Caesar (as priest of Vesta and a god himself); the senators under Tiberius may not have appreciated this distinction, until corrected by Tiberius. But the idea of Mars Ultor as an agent of personal vengeance persisted: it may have been part of the motivation behind the depiction of Mars Ultor on the coinage of the Civil Wars after the death of Nero, and it was foremost in the mind of Suetonius when he wrote about the god's temple. On the other hand, official state invocations of the god in the second and third century highlight his function as avenger against foreign enemies: against the Dacians under Trajan, the Parthians under Trajan and their successors the Persians under Severus Alexander. Persian associations may have persisted into, or have been revived in, the fourth century: the *Fasti Filocali* record, in addition to *Marticali* on 12 May, *ludi Persici* from 13 to 17 May.⁷³

VI 12 MAY A.D. 113

Trajan's orchestration of the dedication of his Column on 12 May is clearly in keeping with the most common Roman understanding of Mars Ultor: vengeance against Parthia. The dedication of the Temple of Venus Genetrix on the same day invoked the support of Venus, the natural companion of Mars, and perhaps recalled Caesar's original plan to wage war against Parthia. The co-ordination of these events on one specific and symbolic day strengthened the connection between the gods through their temples in the Imperial Fora: now both shared the same day of dedication.

The simultaneous dedication of these two monuments also presented Trajan with the opportunity to elevate the events to an elaborate ritual set within the topographic context of the Imperial Fora. The gods Mars and Venus would have been linked by the actual movement of the emperor and his party on 12 May. After dedicating the Temple of Venus in the Forum of Caesar, Trajan would have needed to proceed to his own Forum (if we accept that the sequence of dedications listed in the *Fasti Ostienses* reflects the actual order in which these happened), probably via the Forum of Augustus and through the new monumental courtyard connecting the two complexes.⁷⁴ The dedication of the Column of Trajan that followed would have recalled the only other major monument dedicated to Mars Ultor, the Tropaeum Traiani at Adamklisi, which honoured the god for the same victories commemorated by (and on) the Column. The successes of the past would have augured well for Trajan's new undertaking. It is even possible that the actual decision to go to war with Parthia was integrated into the events of the day and made in the Temple of Mars Ultor itself, as Ovid notes that 'from it [the temple of Mars Ultor] might the Marching God fitly open his fierce campaigns', while Suetonius asserts that this was an official function of the temple, decreed by Augustus.⁷⁵ And on this day the very contents of the temple were surely of the highest significance, the standards lost by Crassus and recovered by Augustus. One wonders if the standards on the coinage of A.D. 113 (Fig. 1) might be a specific reference to those returned from Parthia, rather than merely a general allusion to the army.

Having more closely aligned Venus with Mars and linked his Column, the symbol of his earlier military success, to both, Trajan would have been well placed both religiously and

⁷³ Degrassi 1963: 457 for discussion of the *ludi Persici*. It is not known who instituted these 'Persian Games'.

⁷⁴ Meneghini and Santangeli Valenzani 2007: 45–6, 98, figs 33, 97. The north-west portico of the Forum of Augustus originally had a second, smaller hemicycle opening onto it; this was destroyed during the construction of a large (25 by 27 m) colonnaded court that gave entrance to the Forum of Trajan.

⁷⁵ 'hinc fera Gradivum bella movere decet'; *Fasti* 5.556; Frazer. Suetonius records that Augustus 'decreed that in it the senate should consider wars', *Augustus* 29.2; Rolfe: 'sanxit ... ut de bellis triumphisque hic consuleretur senatus.' Multiple military functions were included in the *lex templi* of Mars Ultor; see Dio 55.10.2–5, Bonnefond 1987: 254–62.

topographically to initiate a new Parthian campaign. Unlike Gaius, Trajan was successful: after an arduous campaign in the East he defeated the Parthians and on 20 February 116 was named Parthicus by the Senate, becoming the first Roman emperor to bear this name.⁷⁶ This was not merely a diplomatic victory, or a successful scuffle over Armenia; the Parthians were routed in battle and their territory seized. Two new provinces, Armenia and Mesopotamia, were created and Trajan assigned a king to the Parthians to rule what was left of their land; these actions were prominently commemorated on the coinage.⁷⁷ The significance of his victory was well understood by the Senate, which according to Dio (68.28.2–3) offered the emperor not one but as many triumphs as he desired. Trajan died before reaching Rome but he was honoured with a posthumous Parthian triumph (Fig. 14) and Dio (69.2.3) reports that Parthian Games were celebrated and continued yearly thereafter. The association between Trajan and victory over Parthia remained strong into the third century, when Septimius Severus appears to have chosen to celebrate his Parthian victory on the same date, 28 January, as the *dies imperii* of Trajan.⁷⁸



FIG. 14. Aureus of Hadrian, c. A.D. 118; obverse: Divus Traianus Parthicus; reverse: Trajan in chariot, TRIVM PHVS PART HICVS. BMCRE Hadrian 47. (© Trustees of the British Museum)

Trajan's choice of 12 May to dedicate his Column tells us something of how Trajan understood the function of Mars Ultor. To Trajan, Mars Ultor was avenger of Roman defeats, both against the Dacians and the Parthians. Trajan also apparently did not consider vengeance against the Parthians to have been fully achieved by the return of the standards in 20 B.C. Like Gaius in 2 B.C., Trajan was setting off to complete this task.

APPENDIX: THE ALGIERS RELIEF AND THE CULT STATUE OF MARS ULTOR

There is no certain evidence for the appearance of the cult statue in the Temple of Mars Ultor. The earliest depictions of the god (I refer here only to depictions that are clearly identified by an inscription as Mars Ultor), on coins c. 19 B.C., show a youthful Mars wearing only a crested helmet and cloak, holding the recovered standards (e.g., Figs 5–6). This cannot be an image of the cult statue in the temple in the Forum of Augustus, since it had not been built at that time. This

⁷⁶ *Fasti Ostienses* Kb 14–15; Bargagli and Grosso 1997: 40; Vidman 1982: 48, 114.

⁷⁷ BMCRE Trajan 1033–40, Trajan standing between personifications of Tigris and Euphrates, Armenia in foreground, with legend ARMENIA ET MESOPOTAMIA IN POTESTATEM P R REDACTAE, and 1045–9, Trajan seated on tribunal, king and kneeling Parthian before him, legend REX PARTHIS DATVS.

⁷⁸ Documented in the *Feriale Duranum* 1.14–16; Fink et al. 1940: 77–81. The 28th of January was most likely also the date of Caracalla's *dies imperii* (ibid., 81).

exact image of Mars Ultor does not appear again. The next appearance of the god is on the coinage of the Civil Wars in A.D. 68–69, where he is bearded but still naked, advancing with raised spear and shield (Figs 10–11). These coins were produced far from Rome and it is not known what the designers used as their model. The first possible depiction of the actual cult statue appears on coins of Antoninus Pius, where the god is shown bearded and in full armour, holding a spear and resting his left hand on a shield, with a cloak draped over his arms and behind his back. What qualifies this as a possible image of the cult statue of Mars Ultor is that it is the first certain depiction of the god created in Rome after the completion of the Temple of Mars Ultor.⁷⁹ This fact does not make it certain that these coins of Antoninus Pius represent the cult statue, but it is a sensible assumption that the designers of these coins, working in the capital (the mint at the time was located south-east of the Colosseum, about 1 km from the Forum of Augustus), would have taken this as their model.

The iconography of Mars Ultor on the coinage of Antoninus Pius is closely paralleled in a relief sculpture from Carthage, now in Algiers. This relief is frequently cited not only as evidence for the appearance of the cult statue of Mars Ultor, but also for the presence of statues of Venus and especially Caesar inside the temple of Mars Ultor. The relief depicts Venus, Mars and a semi-draped figure of a young man with a portrait characteristic of the Julian period, though without sufficient individuality to allow exact identification.⁸⁰ Venus and Mars seem to stand on pedestals, which give them the appearance of statues, and they seem to gaze at each other. Stéphane Gsell linked this composition to a passage of Ovid's *Tristia* (2.295–6) where the poet says in the Temple of Mars 'stat Venus Ultori iuncta', 'Venus stands joined with the Avenger'. Gsell proposed that these figures represent the actual cult statues from the temple; he identified the young man as Caesar on the basis of a hole on his forehead for (perhaps) the addition of a metal star.⁸¹ Paul Zanker initially rejected Gsell's connection of Ovid's verse to this relief, preferring to link the reference in the *Tristia* instead to a version (perhaps the original) of the well-known Mars/Venus group in the Museo Nazionale delle Terme, but later appears to have changed his mind.⁸² Zanker did consistently follow Gsell in taking the Algiers relief as a depiction of the cult statue group and in identifying the third figure as Caesar.⁸³ Reception of this idea has varied from enthusiastic to highly sceptical.⁸⁴ Countering one objection, that the third figure is too young to be Caesar, Fishwick has recently argued that it represents a youthful Nero.⁸⁵ But there are two further problems with this idea. The first is that the relief does not give any specific indication of a setting in the Temple of Mars Ultor. The second and more important is that the relief with its three figures is not a complete composition. Instead, the relief was part of a longer frieze with other figures (part of Venus's left foot, for example, was carved on the now-missing frieze block

⁷⁹ *BMCRE* Pius 503. A colossal marble statue of Mars, apparently found in the Forum of Nerva and now in the Capitoline Museum, is generally dated to the Flavian period and often cited as a copy of the cult statue in the Forum of Augustus (or perhaps even the original; Kleiner 1992: 181, fig. 150; Stemmer 1978: 140, who dates the sculpture to the reign of Domitian). It is very similar in appearance to the image of Mars Ultor on the coins of Pius, but as Zanker (1968: 18) notes, much of the statue is restored, and when it was originally found it lacked all limbs and consisted only of a torso and head; the original appearance (though already with restored legs) is given in a sixteenth-century drawing by Francesco da Olanda (*ibid.*, pl. 48).

⁸⁰ Kleiner 1992: fig. 84, and other references in notes below.

⁸¹ Gsell 1899: 40 for the identification of Caesar.

⁸² Against Gsell; Zanker 1968: 19. For the Mars/Venus statue group: *ibid.*, fig. 52; Kleiner 1992: 249. Zanker appears to have changed his mind by the time he wrote *Power of Images* (1990: 160), where he associates the *Tristia* quotation with the cult statues.

⁸³ Zanker 1968: 20 and 1990: 160.

⁸⁴ Fittschen (1976: 187) followed Gsell enthusiastically (see especially n. 52!), but Hölscher (1984: 32), while accepting the depiction as one of the cult statues, only identified the third figure as 'die Statue wohl eines Prinzen, dessen Rolle in diesem Zusammenhang noch ungeklärt ist'. Kleiner (1992: 102) accepts the identification of the third figure as Caesar 'magically transformed [–] into an eternal youth', but Beard and Henderson (2001: 172, misattributing Gsell's idea to Zanker) caution against putting too much weight on Ovid as evidence for the actual cult statues, while Spannagel (1999: 302) judges Caesar's presence among the cult statues 'äusserst unwahrscheinlich'.

⁸⁵ Fishwick (2003: 82–90) cites as evidence Tacitus, *Ann.* 13.8 and the early portraiture of Nero.

joining on the left).⁸⁶ In the context of a long relief with many gods, the pairing of Mars and Venus might be expected, and it is possible that the young figure may not be related to them at all. The iconography of Mars in the Algiers relief may well be derived from the Augustan cult statue of Mars Ultor, but there is no firm evidence that the Algiers relief represents a group of statues in the temple in the Forum of Augustus.

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ABBREVIATIONS

BMCRE (British Museum Catalogue, Roman Empire) = *Coins of the Roman Empire in the British Museum*

RIC = *Roman Imperial Coinage*

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⁸⁶ Spannagel 1999: 303.

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