Circles of Framing and Light:
Analyzing the Nimbus in the Mediterranean

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“Unions between the human and the divine resist expression precisely because the divine is unlike anything that mortals experience in everyday life—God does not belong in the same category as cars and potato chips.”

--Sara Iles Johnston in “Fiat Lux, Fiat Ritus: Divine Light and the Late Antique Defense of Ritual”

“A Union Jack sewn on an anorak is simply a sign that the wearer is British; the regimental color carried at the anniversary of a famous battle possesses the symbolic power to invoke the glory and ambiguity of war and to invite a present participation.”

--John Polkinghorne, in “Some Light from Physics”

“…the goddess is unwilling to seem painted, but she stands out as though one could take hold of her…the artistry of the painting must be praised, first, because the artist, in making the border of precious stones, has used not colours but light to depict them, putting a radiance in them like the pupil in an eye, and, secondly, because he even makes us hear the hymn.”

--Verity Platt, in Facing the Gods: Epiphany and Representation in Graeco-Roman Art, Literature, and Religion, quoting Philostratus Imagines 2.1-3
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INTRODUCTION

When I reflect back on my time at Dartmouth, the overarching theme of my education, both classical and premedical, has centered on how we think about things. In this light, then, the project at hand is truly the culmination of my undergraduate years, focusing as it does on how we think about something almost completely neglected as its own entity worthy of independent attention: the nimbus.

The nimbus itself is a story about shaping. On one level this is quite literal, as the nimbus is invariably an ellipse with eccentricity at or approaching zero. It has a definite shape that is an essential component of its representation. On another level, it shapes from the perspective of figural representation because of how it backlights heads and portraits; artistically, nimbi only exist in figural works. It frames particular members of a scene, who are invariably anthropomorphic and often, but not always, divine. Its presence in a scene shapes that scene both geometrically and technically by virtue of requiring construction in a certain manner via certain techniques to make it a viable component of symbolic vocabulary, no matter the medium. More abstractly, the nimbus shapes the symbolic representation of a figure wearing it; logically, two representations of the same figure, but one with a nimbus and one without, must be qualitatively different. In summation, the definition I will employ in recognizing a nimbus is a formalistic one: quite simply, a nimbus is an approximately circular body (whether the circle is positive or negative space) appearing behind the head and/or bust (and in the case of the related but rare aureole, the full body) which cannot be determined to be the result of another object within the composition (for example a shield or amphora).

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1 There is one exception to this blanket statement—in late antiquity the phoenix is occasionally depicted with a nimbus. Because of the dating its depictions are outside the scope of this project.
If we turn inward, the nimbus itself has a shape created by its own history, one that arguably began in Ancient Sumer over four thousand years ago, and one that culminates in the motif’s incorporation into Christianity by the fourth century CE. Its story during this time period, however, is not one that has been convincingly told by scholarship, with at least one scholar recognizing how “a coherent account of this stage in its development in the Mediterranean, Near East, and Central Asia has never been written”\(^2\). No monograph written to the standards of modern scholarship has yet been penned on the nimbus for this stage; what work has been done focuses on the nimbus in the medieval and Renaissance eras (see for example Fisher 1995, Mathews 1999), or, in the course of describing an artifact, happens to mention that a figure is nimbate in a mere line or two.

In fact, to my knowledge only two sources primarily deal with this topic in the fourth century and before, both inadequately. The first is Didron’s *Christian Iconography*, the first 165 pages of which discuss the nimbus; its first issue is that it was written in 1851. Classical scholarship has dramatically advanced in the intervening 150 years, making the work very antiquated both in terms of methodology and in sheer discovery of new artifacts since its authorship. More specifically, because of the style Didron uses in documenting pieces, it becomes almost impossible to follow up on the examples he draws upon, rendering his fairly lengthy section on the nimbus next to useless. To quote one, “in the paintings found at Herculaneum, Circe, appearing to Ulysses, is depicted wearing a nimbus precisely as the Virgin Mary and saints are usually represented in Christian art.”\(^3\) The modern reader has no way of knowing exactly what artifact or artifacts Didron is referring to here. This example also highlights another problem with Didron: his apparent willingness to interject “modern” attitudes and interpretations into the ancient works that likely were not held by people at the time with which he is working. What interpretations he is working with can also be an

\(^2\) Canepa 193; I will focus on it the Mediterranean, and to a much lesser degree in the Near East.

\(^3\) 147
open question. As my image corpus will show, the handful of depictions of the nimbus in early Christian art are not standardized, thus causing Didron to beg the question in terms of what type of nimbus he refers to, even what period he refers to, when he invokes the “usual” representation of Mary and the saints. Much of his discussion is also not classically based, focusing on the medieval and Renaissance time periods. Unfortunately and problematically, some of Didron’s statements are patently false: “The nimbus is little seen during the first four centuries of the Christian era, for that distracted period was one of strife, persecution, and contention.” This statement does not hold when put against my image corpus, containing quite a number of images from this time period, some of which are in fact Christian. Didron’s work as the lengthiest examination of the nimbus I know of, serves as a touchstone for how much work truly needs to be done on the motif of the nimbus.

The second is more modern, and is E.H. Ramsden’s 1941 article, “The Halo: A Further Inquiry into its Origin.” His first point is worth quoting in its entirety: “In view of the importance of the halo in art and considering the extensiveness of its use, it is curious to find so little agreement of opinion as to its origin and meaning,” a statement that remains true to the present day. His article takes the not unreasonable mode of seeking a common origin for the “halo” of Buddhist and Christian art, and finds it in Persia, emerging from both the Zoroastrian and Mithraic traditions. Now, at this point the reader may be asking why this project is worth continuing, when we have an explanation of the nimbus’s origins. The answer is that Ramsden’s article is nowhere near comprehensive, weighing in at a mere eight pages and drawing on only a handful of artifacts. His effort, while a starting point, comes across as muddled because he attempts to deal with too many

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4 Didron 97
5 The nimbus and the halo are terms that may be used interchangeably in common parlance. This thesis will consistently refer to the motif as a nimbus.
6 123
cultural traditions in too little detail. He also provides some of the same difficulties as Didron in simply being outdated. Furthermore, my examination is broader and more fundamental than Ramsden’s: yes, more work needs to be done to better understand the nimbus, in terms of factors that may contribute to its origins, but work in the first place needs to be done to characterize, categorize, and understand its appearances across the Mediterranean. This thesis seeks to further that goal.

As such, this thesis will present several ways of understanding this motif: through practical case study of its use in a specific context, here two mosaics featuring a nimbate infant Dionysos that will help demonstrate how the nimbus works (Chapter I); through analyzing its symbolic and artistic antecedents to cast it as a natural outgrowth of prior traditions, including Ancient Sumerian, Akkadian, Sargonid, Egyptian, Greek, and Roman (Chapter II); through examining how analogues of the nimbus are treated from a literary and linguistic standpoint, paying special attention to the vocabulary and connotations—especially light, fire, and celestial words—used to communicate these analogues (Chapter III); and through typological chronicling—formalistic, geographic, chronological, figural—of what aspires to be the corpus of extant nimbi, in order to see larger trends and patterns (Chapter IV) and present possible theories that help to account for my findings. These chapters are followed by a master key for the image corpus, which outlines brief descriptions and background information for each image in the corpus; the image corpus itself follows. Through all of these approaches, I hope to demonstrate the nimbus’s association with what I term bearers of celestial light as well as how the nimbus has a dualistic role, as both a compositional device and iconographic device, as a signifier of divinity for and in the mundane and a representation of divine radiance, and as a circle of framing and light.

Combining the Buddhist and Christian art references in a work of this length seems overly ambitious, and is a considerable factor in the muddled nature of the article. This thesis, which is considerably longer than Ramsden’s article, will not treat Buddhist art.
CHAPTER I

Around the Heads of Babes: Two Images of the Infant Dionysos

I. Introduction

Dionysos is one of the most commonly nimbate divinities depicted in the corpus of classical art, although we cannot rule out the possibility that he is more commonly depicted generally, and as a result a nimbate representation of him is more likely to survive to the present day. Additionally, Dionysos is depicted in a way that most divinities are not: as both infant and adult. Because of this commonality coupled with his idiosyncrasy in representation, he becomes an excellent divinity to work with as an introductory case study to showcase various features of the nimbus. Through examining two case study pieces, we can begin to see the functions and possible meanings of the nimbus in conjunction with Dionysiac iconography.

My examination centers around the infant Dionysos as portrayed in two mosaics, one from the so-called House of Aion at Nea Paphos on Cyprus and the other from a portico in Bath D in Antioch. The Nea Paphos mosaic dates from the fourth century based on a coin of Licinius (317-323) found in the mortar just beneath the tesserae, while the Antioch mosaic dates from a little later in the same century (350-400). We should note the proximity of these two locations in both time and space, which suggests a commonality of iconographic language. Unfortunately, the Antioch mosaic is fragmented, and we do not have the entire scene as we do with the Nea Paphos mosaic, which is actually one panel of a five-panel related series only discovered in 1983. Also, the Nea

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8 These images are labeled as Worcester 1 and Nea Paphos 4 in the image corpus appended. See the introduction of Chapter IV for a further explanation of the labeling system used.
9 See Figure 1.1; the set of images for this chapter immediately follows the chapter.
10 See Figure 1.2.
Paphos mosaic is in situ, while the fragments of the Antioch mosaic have been dispersed to several museums.

**II. Nea Paphos Mosaic**

The Nea Paphos mosaic\(^\text{11}\) is located in a *triclinium* of 9 by 7.6 meters, with the panels arranged in a 2/1/2 sequence. It utilizes a fairly bright and wide-ranging color palette\(^\text{12}\). Each panel is surrounded by a border of sigmoidal shapes in the primary colors, with a white spot in-between each shape. From left to right and top to bottom, the first is of Leda and the Swan, the second is of the presentation of the infant Dionysos, the third is of the contest between Cassiopeia and the Nereids, the fourth is of the triumphal procession of Dionysos, and the fifth is of the contest between Apollo and Marsyas. Of these, the second, third, and fifth depict nimbate figures. The four smaller panels are 1.93 x 1.31 m, and the central panel is 3.9 x 1.29 m.; all are done in stone tesserae of 2 to 5 mm.

The panel of greatest interest, the one featuring the infant Dionysos, shows him being held by a seated Hermes, recognizable via the attributes of the winged hat and sandals, who is holding him through a piece of purple fabric. Dionysos is nude, holding his hands up with palms toward the viewer. Left, above right, and right, respectively, are personifications, identifiable by the inscriptions located above the figures\(^\text{13}\); of Ambrosia (a woman in a white garment), Nectar (a topless male with a rather spiky wreath), and Theogonia (who will be discussed in further detail). The silenus Tropheus, the tutor of Dionysos, is bent over with his hands outstretched toward the infant, both a gesture of taking the infant and a sign of old age that is only reinforced by his balding pate and white beard. To his left are three nymphs arranged in an almost vertical pattern from top to bottom who

\(^\text{11}\) General details of the discussion of this mosaic sequence are drawn from Michaelides 28-31 and Daszewski 56-70.

\(^\text{12}\) This palette is typical of what Daszewski terms the “beautiful style” of the 4\(^{\text{th}}\) century AD, second quarter.

\(^\text{13}\) These inscriptions provide identifications for all figures in the mosaic.
are drawing a bath for the infant. To their left are the female figures of Anatrophe, who represents the bringing up of the infant, and the mountain Nysa herself (personified) beneath a tree resembling a pine.

The only other deity nimbate in this scene is the female divinity to the right of Hermes, who is diademed, wreathed, and nimbate. Again the inscription above gives us her name, Theogonia; she is the personified birth of a god, obviously connected with the infant, perhaps even as a personification merely an extension of a particular aspect of the divinity. She may even recall Hesiod’s *Theogony*, which briefly mentions the birth of Dionysos (940-942)\(^{14}\). As the only other nimbate divinity, she is connected to Dionysos from a purely visual point of view as well. Her nimbus follows the same pattern as the infant’s in moving from a lighter interior to darker exterior, although a portion of the darker exterior on the left side appears to disappear\(^{15}\). We must ask, then, why only these two figures? In this panel there are nine other figures, all of whom are arguably divine in nature, yet none of them are nimbate. Logically, we can reasonably assume the nimbus carries a message to the viewer that is not relevant or pertinent in the case of the other figures.

Additionally, the panel is very symmetrical in its distributions, with similar arrangements on either side of Tropheus who acts as the dividing line of the composition (the two nymphs drawing the bath vs. Hermes and Dionysos, the pair of standing figures on either side, and diademed Nysa on the left under a tree vs. diademed Theogonia on the right next to a figure with a very prominent tree-like wreath that has the same angling as the tree). We see the figural composition creating a set of rays that converge on Dionysos with the nimbus around his head as a bulls-eye, in this case accomplished through the sight-lines cast by the gazes of the figures and the lines of their arm

\(^{14}\) Nelson translation: “And the child of Cadmus, Semele, bore an illustrious son, much-cheering Dionysus, after joining Zeus in love, mortal with immortal; now they both are gods.”

\(^{15}\) There is a crack running through the mosaic that separates the area in question, suggesting that the color difference may be possibly due to either damage or repair and restoration, whether modern or contemporary.
gestures\textsuperscript{16}. The nimbus also takes priority over other aspects of the composition, covering over pieces of Hermes’s wardrobe and the shoulder of the figure beside Theogonia; although we cannot deny the simple logistical considerations of doing so, we can also surmise the importance given to the symbol by such a (super)position.

In addition to their nimbi, both Theogonia and Dionysos have a tiara/diadem and leafy wreath/accents as well. The coincidence seems to argue against the possibility of the nimbus at least in this case representing some kind of accessory, as an artistic representation of a real-world object. With the subject already having two kinds of headgear, a third rapidly becomes impractical and points to the nimbus holding more of a conceptual and visual meaning. In the case of Theogonia, the leaves create symmetry with Ambrosia across Hermes, and the diadem further connects her to Dionysos. For Dionysos, the leaves in the hair are a common attribute, and the diadem connects him to Theogonia, a connection reinforced by the nimbus among other details. The nimbus, in effect, acts as one element amongst several: like the fibers of a cobweb, one fiber, or one element, cannot be understood fully in isolation.

Daszewski also suggests that the panels should be viewed as a totality, as one program featuring a uniting message\textsuperscript{17}. I would extend his argument to include the nimbus and its associated deities as a uniting feature, for we have nimbi directly depicted in three of the five panels\textsuperscript{18}, with the fourth being the Dionysiac procession from which the figure of Dionysos does not survive, who could be reasonably inferred to have been nimbate. The fifth is of Leda and the Swan, who is the mother of Apollo/Phoebus and Artemis/Diana, both of whom hold connections to the Sun and

\textsuperscript{16} See Figure 1.3.
\textsuperscript{17} 68
\textsuperscript{18} The non-Dionysiac nimbi will not be discussed in detail in this section, but will appear in the context of the typologies presented in Chapter IV.
Moon, and are two of the nimbate deities in ancient art\textsuperscript{19}. Essentially, the concept of nimbate deities in interaction with mortals and the non-nimbate seems to be the unifying theme. This concept does not necessarily indicate that these deities are the ones who interact with mortals (a sentiment also true for typically non-nimbate deities like Hermes), but rather that they should be especially significant for the viewer. Dionysos himself further emphasizes this connection, and appears to be the only figure in the entire 5-image panel who looks directly at the viewer. Daszewski makes reference to Macrobius’s \textit{Saturnalia} (I.18.6 and I.18.5) in arguing that Dionysos in a sense represents the other gods, an idea that we could perhaps find an analogy with in Christianity, in such concepts as “god-in-three-persons”. In Daszewski’s view, the synecdoche of Dionysos becomes an embodiment of pagan monotheism, representing the “philosophical climate” in which the Emperor Julian (the Apostate, known for his reinvigoration of traditional Roman “pagan” religion) likely grew up\textsuperscript{20}. Here, then, the nimbus seems to reinforce the status of Dionysos as a divinity, marking him as a divine figure in the non-divine context of a \textit{triclinium}. The scene occurs in a non-sacred context, and as a result the nimbus seems to partially function as a divine signifier, especially as infants generally lack divine representation in the Roman world.\textsuperscript{21}

\textbf{III. Antioch Mosaic}

The Antioch Mosaic also dates from the fourth century (350-400)\textsuperscript{22}, and is roughly contemporaneous with the Nea Paphos mosaic, coming from the Bath D complex. It is currently in the Worcester Art Museum, having been discovered in excavations of the 1930s. The mosaic measures 293.6 x 198.6 cm but is fragmentary, with this fragment appearing to represent the leftward edge of a larger mosaic; the other two fragments recovered depict a female personification

\textsuperscript{19} This statement is truer for Apollo than it is for Diana—see the figural analysis discussion in Chapter IV.  
\textsuperscript{20} 69; regarding Julian the Apostate, see for example Tougher 2007.  
\textsuperscript{21} In regards to the possible argument that the infant Dionysos is designed to counter the infant Christ, the earliest representations of Christ portray him as an adult, not as an infant (see the Image Corpus in the Appendix).  
\textsuperscript{22} General details are drawn from Molholt (Kondoleon) 190-194.
of Joy (Gethosyne) and a putative nymph’s head with portions of a tree and column. Given these fragments, we could surmise that the entire scene may have been similar to the one depicted in the Nea Paphos mosaic, of a presentation of the infant Dionysos, albeit perhaps a different aspect highlighted with the presence of Joy, who does not appear in the Nea Paphos mosaic. After his maturation in Zeus’s thigh (as a result of Semele’s untimely death)\(^{23}\), Dionysos was taken by Hermes to the nymphs of Nysa to be raised, with the first order of business being a bath, making this myth very apt for depiction in a bath complex. The scene is bordered by a red and brown sinusoidal pattern with sets of three white spots opposite crests and troughs. What remains is almost entirely taken up by a largely nude but cloaked Hermes holding a nude infant Dionysos. Hermes’s cloak is intricately detailed, full of folds depicted with grey-black tesserae amongst the shades of red used to create the cloak. The color palette used overall is fairly muted, tending toward the red end of the spectrum. Hermes also appears to be holding his caduceus, the end of which is missing from the fragment. Hermes looks off to the upper left, while Dionysos appears to almost be looking out at the viewer. This connection between the viewer and the nimbate figure draws the viewer in, increasing the accessibility of the artwork.

In examining the composition of the scene, we see that Hermes and his cloak occupy a much greater position of prominence as compared to Dionysos in terms of size\(^{24}\), with the viewer’s eye drawn to the motion the scene depicts; however, Hermes is probably not the main object of the story, merely the messenger and courier. As a result, a device is needed to remind the viewer of Dionysos as the putative primary focus of the scene. That device appears to be the nimbus, serving a function analogous to the spotlight that backlights an actor so as to accentuate his appearance and draw the viewer’s eye, a sort of bulls-eye that acts as the focal point for the set of rays described by

\(^{23}\) Ovid relates this story in the *Metamorphoses*, 3.252-313.

\(^{24}\) As Molholt notes, however, the figures are both approximately 1.5 times life size, so in absolute terms both are still fairly sizeable.
the vertical lines of Hermes’s cloak. Here, we have the nimbus interacting as a visual symbol with other elements in the composition to cause a certain action on the part of the viewer: to look at the head of Dionysos. Again, the nimbus serves as a signifier of divinity in a non-divine context, since this mosaic is from the floor of a bath complex.

IV. Comparative Analysis

As far as the nimbus itself, we see a certain pattern in terms of color for the Antioch mosaic that is also true for the Nea Paphos mosaic, where the nimbus moves from a lighter inside to a darker outside; the Nea Paphos mosaic appears to have two layers, but this mosaic seems to have three (the background color, a lighter blue-grey, and a darker blue-grey). While these sets of bands undoubtedly have framing functions by serving to outline the head, as the nimbus completely surrounds the head, we should consider what other functions these might have, as they appear to be almost universal in occurrences of the nimbus. Along these same lines, we can consider the colors used for the nimbus, in both cases shades of blue/grey. As befitting the apparent pattern we are developing, the color choice has both practical and symbolic implications. For the nimbus to have visual impact it needs to be differentiated from the off-white background of the mosaic, a role that blue certainly accomplishes. More speculatively, the blue might recall a portion of the myth being depicted, namely the first bath of Dionysos, with the water serving a cleansing function and indicating purity and innocence. In the Nea Paphos mosaic, the particular shades used seem to primarily occur (Theogonia’s nimbus notwithstanding) in Dionysos’s nimbus, otherwise occurring only sporadically on Hermes’s shoulder garment and within Nysa’s dress, which further emphasizes Dionysos and establishes connections between him and the other figures within the mosaic scene. In

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25 Or at least as much as possible within the confines given by the arrangements of figures.
26 At least when permitted by the medium, since creating this effect is challenging from a practical perspective on certain media.
the Antioch mosaic, the greyer tones of the nimbus seem to only be echoed in the border surrounding the scene, again emphasizing the unique nature of the infant the nimbus bedizens. The scene could be connected with a Christian parallel perhaps alluded to here of baptism. Blue additionally connotes the sky and heavens, making a connection with where Dionysos just came from and with his status as divine, that the heavens are his rightful dwelling place. This connotation emphasizes the nimbus as a celestial signifier.

Michaelides, admittedly without giving any source or rationale for his statement, tells us that the blue nimbus only came into use in the fourth century AD, which if accurate would make the color’s appearance even more interesting, because it then represents a new item of symbolic vocabulary being applied to an old scene. Such an occurrence implies a reinvigoration or reinterpretation based on a new need occurring in this time period, which may be the rise of Christianity in the greater Roman Empire. Unfortunately, Michaelides in his overt generality is inaccurate, as the blue nimbus appears in earlier works, one example located in a Pompeian wall-painting featuring Apollo judging a contest between Venus and Hesperos; if his statement was only intended to refer to or is restricted to Cypriot mosaics, then he is probably accurate.

Both scenes depict aspects of the myth of Hermes bringing the infant Dionysos after his birth. Both scenes also depict the infant Dionysos nude but possibly describable in association with the purple cloth he seems to be held in. Finally, both scenes utilize a blue-grey layered nimbus. This combination suggests both innocence—he is unprotected, resting quite literally in the hands of an older divinity—and royalty, as he is a son of Zeus by the mortal woman Semele, and indeed gestates

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27 Although, Christians of the time period would probably not practice infant baptism, which will become a major theological controversy in about a thousand years.
28 37
29 See Figure 1.4.
30 Although he would have a rather Pyrrhic victory, as to my knowledge the only Cypriot mosaics with a nimbus are from this one mosaic program.
stitched into the thigh of Zeus. Taken together, they depict a story from the mythology of a nascent deity, one who straddles the mortal and divine worlds because of his parentage. The myth is a story that could perhaps be adapted in order to present a counter or parallel to the story presented by Christianity, where the eponymous figure also has a divine father and mortal mother with a birth by rather atypical means.

These two scenes are not the only ones that depict an infant Dionysos in conjunction with Hermes, which as a motif spans several centuries; however, to my knowledge, they are the only two that depict Dionysos with a nimbus. The addition suggests they are qualitatively different from scenes that depict the same or a similar subject yet lack the nimbus\textsuperscript{31}, as scenes of the infant Dionysos have a long history. Additionally, they are representative of the nimbus more broadly, as nimbi never seem to appear in a context that is not two-dimensional or in relief, at least in the Mediterranean and Near/Middle East world\textsuperscript{32}. Both scenes date from a similar time period, and this similarity may be a factor, with a possible historical impetus; a particular idea prevalent at the time or particular historical occurrence may have motivated the addition of the nimbus. However, from an iconographical perspective the addition of a particular motif to a scene, when the body of that scene has already been demonstrated to convey meaning without that motif, must effect a change in emphasis to avoid redundancy. The nimbus, although we cannot make the assumption that it plays the same role in both scenes, must function as an element of artistic vocabulary that works at least in part with the other elements of the scene in order to produce meaning for the audience viewing the scene. The question becomes, of course, what the additional meaning is. Interestingly, Daszewski reaches a similar conclusion in the case of the Nea Paphos mosaic, although his basis for concluding

\textsuperscript{31} See for example the vase by the Phiale Painter of c. 430 BC (Figure 1.5), the Praxiteles sculpture from the mid 4\textsuperscript{th} c. BC from Olympia (Figure 1.6) or the first c. AD Pompeian wall painting (Figure 1.7).

\textsuperscript{32} Free-standing sculptures of the Buddha with a nimbus from Asian art do exist from this time period (see for example Figure C.3 in the conclusion), but are outside the scope of the analysis.
that something separates this scene from other scenes of infant Dionysos is drawn from the other
personifications present in the scene and what he terms the “respectful” way Hermes holds
Dionysos. Daszewski argues that the sequence represents a pagan monotheism frustrated by the
challenges to its worldview offered by Christianity, connecting this pagan monotheism to Julian the
Apostate as previously discussed, and a sort of last gasp of paganism in a world perceiving itself as
being overtaken by Christianity. If we accept this idea we can then have a historical motivation for
the adoption of the symbol in this case.

This last element in particular is one we will keep in mind as we move forward, the dialogue
of Christianity with paganism, and the artistic vocabulary common to both. In addition to this
concept, our case study has shown several other ideas to investigate. One such is that interaction
between nimbate elements in a scene creates layers of meaning within an image. Another is that the
nimbus has framing elements and works in conjunction with other pieces of a composition in order
to highlight a particular figure or compositional element. We also can consider how the addition of a
nimbus to a scene creates a difference in meaning from a similar scene without the nimbus. The
nimbus itself seems to have particular characteristics, among them the backlighting of a figure, color,
and a progression from lighter interior to darker exterior. The nimbus serves to connect its bearer
with the celestial sphere, and acts as a signifier of divinity in a non-divine context. This case study
effectively sets our analysis up for a more in-depth examination of these facets through examining
typologies developed from a corpus, which can be found in Chapter 3.

33 Although as far as I can tell from examining the image, nothing in the manner of holding inherently seems to
suggest respect; Daszewski’s characterization seems a bit of an overreach, especially since he does not explain his
adjective.
34 69
Figure 1.1: The Nea Paphos Mosaic, in situ, Cyprus, 4th c. (Michaelides Plate XXII #27)
Figure 1.2: The Antioch Mosaic, Worcester Art Museum, 4th c. (Molholt/Kondeleon 189)
Figure 1.3: The Sight-Lines and Gestures of the Nea Paphos Mosaic (Michaelides Plate XXII #27), where black arrows represent sight lines and blue arrows represent arm gestures
Figure 1.4: Apollo Judging the Contest between Venus and Hesperos, Pompeian wall painting (image courtesy R. Ulrich, Naples Arch. Museum 9449)
Figure 1.5: White Ground Kalyx Krater by the Phiale Painter, c. 430 BC, from Vulci, featuring Hermes and the infant Dionysos

(http://web.uvic.ca/grs/department_files/classical_myth/gods/dionysos_i.html)
Figure 1.6: Mid-Fourth Century sculpture by Praxiteles, from Olympia, featuring Hermes and the Infant Dionysos

(http://www.usask.ca/antiquities/collection/classicalgreek/hermesdionysos.html)
Figure 1.7: First Century Pompeian Wall Painting featuring the Infant Dionysos (http://lib.haifa.ac.il/collections/art/mythology_westart_dionysos.html).
CHAPTER I

Antecedents of the Nimbus: The Development of an Iconographic Motif

1. Introduction

Tracing the fully-developed nimbus back through time in an attempt to understand its source(s), in the sense of establishing any sort of definite linear genealogy flowing seamlessly from one form and culture to another until the nimbus’s incorporation into Christian iconography, is a fool’s errand. Finding an ultimate concrete source or first principle of the nimbus, such as a definite event, natural phenomenon\(^{35}\), or the like, seems even more of one. However, if we consider the greater Mediterranean world and Near East as engaged in a trade pattern and flow of cultural interaction and ideas\(^{36}\), we can find precursors that suggest such shared concepts as the relationship of light and divinity even if we cannot establish a direct causative link between the iconography of different Mediterranean cultures\(^{37}\). These precursors show certain commonalities of structure and content that seem to interact with other motifs. In fact, we can question the wisdom of going much beyond this level of analysis. Frankfort, expressing a sentiment of being careful not to create divisions where there were none initially, which is useful to keep in mind in the present analysis, actually says in reference to an ambiguous analysis that “Nor is this uncertainty a serious matter, since all three conceptions reflect an identical religious experience and the Ancients would probably

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\(^{35}\) This particular search seems to be a favorite pastime of scholars regarding the vision of Constantine at the Milvian Bridge (see for instance Van Dam 2011). To what degree does it actually matter what Constantine saw? The functions the vision came to have hold much more importance than the actual definitional content of the vision ever held, and even this statement assumes the existence of an actual vision.

\(^{36}\) Examples include Aurelian’s Eastern campaigns against Zenobia (see Watson 1999), the perceived East-influenced eccentricities of Elagabalus (see Icks 2012), and the influence of the Syrian-born Julia Domna, wife of Septimius Severus (see Levick 2007).

\(^{37}\) The reader should note that this discussion of precedents does not attempt to be comprehensive, a feat which would require at least a book on its own, but is selective for those that in the writer’s judgment appear most influential in the development of the nimbus in both iconographic and representational terms.
not have understood our wish to distinguish between them.” Keeping this point in mind, then, the present analysis is structured in terms of geographic area (which incidentally reflects chronology), with attention also paid to formalistic analysis.

II. Ancient Sumer: *Gilgamesh*

Ancient Sumer yields historically one of the most significant ideas informing and influencing the framing of the nimbus as a developed artistic motif. There we find the only word in antiquity that specifically refers to an idea seemingly embedded in the nimbus. That word is *melam*, encompassing such meanings as “terrifying glance; splendor, radiance; awesome nimbus, halo, aura, light.” This concept relates deeply to how we as humans experience the presence of divinity; Sumerian contains a linguistic structural concept, *ni*, for which *melam* presents an action necessitating the use of a word indicating the recipient of such an action. The language seems to set up divinity as something creating an experience for humans.

We see examples of *melam* utilized in the epic of *Gilgamesh* from ca. the second millennium BCE, where the term most prominently describes the state of being of Humbaba, a monstrous being who “when he roars it is like the torrent of the storm, his breath is like fire, and his jaws are death itself.” Humbaba’s description associates him with pure elemental power, making connections to water and fire specifically, and furthermore ominously to death. Additionally, “the rumour of [his] name fills the world,” and he “is not like men who die, his weapons are such that none can stand

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38 Frankfort 100
39 Which also appears in Akkadian as *melammu* (Winter 125).
40 Halloran 172; Note particularly how Halloran employs the word *nimbus* to illustrate directly the definition of *melam*. This definition is not peculiarly his, either: Oppenheim defines *melammu* as a “characteristic attribute of the gods consisting in a dazzling aureole or nimbus which surrounds the divinity” (31).
41 Halloran 193: *ni* “denotes the animate beings towards whom or in favor of whom an action is done”; although the term does not appear to specifically and solely function as a counterpart to *melam*, the usage reinforces the idea that *melam* directly acts upon a person and is not merely something passively observed. See also Winter 126.
42 All citations to *Gilgamesh* use the N.K. Sandars translation.
43 Sandars 74
against him.” Both of these descriptions grant Humbaba elements of majesty, of unbridled greatness, telling us how he goes beyond the mundane state mortals inhabit, and this is without the usage of melam in the text. That sense holds power enough to physically manifest: “Insofar as melammu is visible, radiant, and has the power to overwhelm one’s enemies, it conveys [sic] not just a passive physical aura, but a sort of vital force-field or energy contained within and emanating from the entity it surrounds.” Indeed, the splendor is so physical in nature that it can actually be taken on and off like a garment: “[Humbaba] has put on the first of his seven splendours but not yet the other six, let us trap him before he is armed.” We can also infer from this that this splendor is something that must be activated or added to one’s person in some fashion, in other words that the splendor is not “on” all the time even while it remains a crucial component of the experience of the being wielding it. For in Humbaba’s case the splendor is wielded, with mention made of Humbaba “loosing his glory” against Gilgamesh and Enkidu in battle against them.

However, we should note that Humbaba’s splendor is not inherently his own, but has been bestowed upon him by the chief god Enlil so that he could guard the great forest of cedars; in one sense this conveys the sheer splendor of Enlil, that he has so much he can easily afford to grant some to another being without any. The ability of this power to be granted in the first place is also intriguing and affirms its apparent physicality, even though it represents something fundamental to the nature of the divinity, as if the divinity’s hair, for example, could be stripped off and handed perfectly intact for someone else to wear easily. On the other hand, the power holds a strange nature apparently inimical to human life, maybe even a guarantor of human mortality, for Humbaba with it

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44 Sandars 73
45 Winter 126
46 Sandars 81; the term “splendor” is often employed in translating the word melam, and where seen in this discussion should be taken by the reader to be interchangeable with melam.
47 Sandars 82
48 Sandars 70-71
becomes “terrible to all flesh.” The impression delivered is almost one of a divine sterilization in the same way that an antiseptic induces purity and cleansing of a wound by destroying bacteria, it seems that this splendor is capable of cleansing by destruction those mortals not blessed with the protections of the gods—the effect is literally to induce weakness in those confronted with it. Just being in the vicinity has a palpable effect on those unfortunate enough to be on the receiving end of Humbaba’s melam. The experience reinforces the insignificance of mortal beings in the face of divinity, and in so doing heightens the accomplishment of Gilgamesh and Enkidu in slaying Humbaba. The concept of melam as defined in literature, illustrates a range of meaning embodying the majesty, radiance, power, and the raw nature of relentless divinity. Even at this early date we see qualities that will later be evoked by the nimbus in artistic representations, although later representations appear to lack the destructive force aspect portrayed here.

III. Ancient Sumerian Artwork: The Stele of Hammurabi and the Investiture Panel

The Stele of Hammurabi provides another early example of a nimbus antecedent, namely the fire on the shoulders we see with Hammurabi. The type also appears on cylinder seals (which will be discussed in conjunction with this topic). The Stele itself (dating from 1792-1750 BCE) was found at Susa in Iran during excavations in 1901 and 1902, and is carved from basalt, measuring 2.25 m x 0.65 m. The fire on the shoulders offers a seeming artistic parallel to the idea of melam already discussed. Most scholarship on the artifact focuses on it as the physical recording of the historically

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49 Sandars 71
50 Sandars 71
51 We should note, however, that the feat was only accomplished with the direct intervention of Shamash the sun-god (Sandars 81); it took the power of another god to combat what an original god granted, and elemental power at that (wind, ice, fire, lightning).
52 Examples drawn from literature are discussed more fully in Chapter III.
53 The rationale behind this “destructive-force atrophy” is not readily clear, although it may stem partly from practical considerations such as the difficulty of translating the full implications of the concept into a visual artistic medium.
influential and significant law code it unequivocally is, and as a result deals with questions of translation, linguistics, and law, while neglecting the artistic scene featured on the top third of the Stele.  

The scene comprises two bearded and robed men, one to the left standing with his left arm folded across his body and his right arm raised to his chin as if in contemplation or in the moment of extension to receive what the seated figure to the right is offering. The seated figure is more ornately dressed, wears a spiraling hat, and is seated on a throne with a footstool. Prominently and most significantly, three or four closely spaced wavy lines emanate from the figure’s shoulders. In the traditional interpretation Hammurabi on the left receives what the Louvre terms his “investiture,” apparently a rod and ring, from the seated sun-god Shamash on the right. The composition equates Hammurabi and Shamash in terms of positioning, height, and features, to the degree that they appear to be near duplicates of each other. Such confusion and melding raises the stature of Hammurabi; reinforces the image of authority and power appointed and supported by the divine that one would wish to project on a stele of a law code; and also establishes Hammurabi as a pious and just king, who receives his laws from the gods and quite literally sets them in stone to be promulgated and known by the populace. Hammurabi is both active and passive here, with the stele implying that these laws came down from on high; however, Hammurabi caused the stele to be made. The introductory material reinforces the claim: the inscription begins by relating how Hammurabi’s reign, and the skills and traits necessary to execute that reign effectively, came from the gods. The artifact, both its art and its text, appears designed to convey to its viewers a particular image of the king in relation to divinity.

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55 See Figure 2.1; the images for this chapter appear immediately following the chapter.
56 See for example the description given on the Louvre online entry in footnote 54.
57 Bradshaw and Head 1
The scene featuring Hammurabi has at least one notable iconographic parallel in the so-called “Investiture Panel,”\(^58\) a wall painting dating c. 1800-1750 BCE from the palace of Mari on the Euphrates, the only figural representation of its type extant in situ. The relevant portion of the panel, in approximately its center, depicts the king receiving the rod and ring from the goddess Ishtar, whose sphere of influence is over fertility (both sexual and agricultural) and war. The king gestures with one arm folded and the other extended to receive the rod and ring, a posture that recalls that the representation of Hammurabi. Although Ishtar is not seated, she is standing on a lion, a posture that allows her to be taller than the king and look down on him while at the same time reinforcing her primacy as a divine being with power over mortals. She also has a headdress-type garment possibly similar to the one Shamash wears, although a full characterization is not possible because hers is only partially preserved. Most significantly, like Shamash, she is depicted with something emerging from her shoulders, although in her case this appears to be plant material (or possibly weapons such as arrows). The motif category suggests a unique artistic interpretation of an idea, that the essence of a god, a sort of physical representation of the god’s sphere of influence (s)he holds dominion over, whether fire, weapons, or vines, radiates from that god’s shoulders. Why the shoulders? It seems that if we continue these rays they may be coming from the center of the god, effectively from the god’s core. We do not yet have manifestations connecting with the head, which seems to be particular to the placement of the nimbus.

Additionally, both this scene and the Hammurabi scene contain the idea of presentation, where an object is being presented by a divinity to another figure in the scene. Presentation produces a curious connection with the scenes of infant Dionysos in suggesting possible functions

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\(^{58}\) See Figure 2.2; the description is drawn from Bradshaw and Head, who also provide an excellent discussion of the Panel from a comparative religion standpoint, most of which is beyond the scope of this analysis.
for the nimbus in establishing divine authority at moments of transition (the presentation of investiture marks the formal transition to a new king).

IV. Akkadian Cylinder Seals of Inanna

As we saw earlier with the Investiture Panel, sun-gods are not the only ones represented with things emerging from the shoulders. Inanna (Ishtar) is seen on multiple Akkadian cylinder seals with weapons on her shoulders: a seal from 2330-2150 BCE shows an enthroned Inanna, wearing a horned crown headdress and looking directly toward the viewer, with three attendants, one of whom is pouring a libation.\(^{59}\) She has three weapons coming from each shoulder, including items like scimitars and maces. A pair of lions decorates her throne. Inanna’s weapons represent her essence and communicate her power and authority, reinforced by the fact that she is receiving a libation, a recognition that she is a powerful deity worthy of worship and acknowledgement. Another seal from c. 2334-2154 BCE, an even closer parallel to the Investiture Panel, features Inanna winged with her foot on a lion, also wearing the horned crown and with the set of three weapons springing from each shoulder.\(^{60}\) Beside and slightly above her, an eight-pointed star with wavy points represents her aspect as the star of Venus, reinforcing an astral connection with divine signifiers around the shoulders, whether on gods associated with the sun or with the stars. The wings lend added majesty to what Wolkstein and Kramer term “The Queen of Heaven and Earth,” a goddess triumphant who also is frontal in nature, directly presenting herself to the viewer.

Occasionally we even see multiple gods in the same scene “wearing” divine shoulder signifiers: a seal from 2330-2150 BCE features Inanna in the center flanked by a pair of indeterminate figures on either side in association with some sort of geographic feature like a

\(^{59}\) See Figure 2.3; description is drawn from Wolkstein and Kramer 52 and 189.
\(^{60}\) See Figure 2.4, description is drawn from Wolkstein and Kramer 92 and 193.
mountain. The goddess is also frontal and has rays emanating from her shoulders similar to those of Shamash from the Stele of Hammurabi. She holds a ring in her hand, which Volkstein and Kramer see as an allusion to a ring taken from Inanna during her journey into the underworld. The seal is especially interesting, however, because of the presence of the same rays on one of each pair of the other figures, giving three sets of the rays in one seal. Inanna is the only frontal figure with these rays; the other two are in profile, one seated, one standing. A clear identification of the two figures is not currently possible, but they do serve to create a symmetry that highlights Inanna in the center. The highlighting keys the viewer into the figure that deserves the most focus.

V. Sargonid Cylinder Seals

Cylinder seals, particularly those of the Sargonid dynasty (circa late 8th century to late 7th century BCE) represent fire emerging from the shoulders, especially in depictions of the sun god. In one example, the sun god, holding a saw or mace and wearing an ornate horned crown headdress, with three rays streaming from both his left and right shoulders, steps onto a mountain while his attendants draw back the gates of Heaven, a scene that apparently depicts an incarnation of the sun rising, a being who “flamed forth” and “unbarred the bright heavens.” The sun-god is also flanked by a pair of indeterminate objects that seem to be topped by seven-pointed stars. A similar scene, albeit less ornate, occurs on another seal, in which an emergent divinity comes forth into the world to exert his influence and majesty. Another seal depicts the sun god from the waist up, either a representation of sunrise as the god apparently rises over the mountaintops, or sunset.

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61 See Figure 2.5; description is drawn from Wolkstein and Kramer 57 and 190.
62 There seems to be some confusion as to what sun god is actually being represented on these seals, with Shamash, Marduk, Assur, Nergal, and Ninurta all having solar characteristics or qualities at some point in their existence. See Frankfort 95-98. This discussion will follow his lead in merely referring to a general sun god without ascribing a definite name to said god.
63 See Figure 2.6.
64 Frankfort 98; Frankfort 98 quoting King 32
65 See Figure 2.7.
because stars crown the apex of each of the rays that emerge from the sun-god’s shoulders.\textsuperscript{66, 67} Frankfort connects the scene type of the sun god emerging from the gates of Heaven to the real-world presence of a cult statue revealing itself upon the opening of the temple doors, both likely occurring in the morning.\textsuperscript{68}

Another scene type involving the sun god, albeit not as common, invites comparisons to other cultural iconographic traditions. The type involves the sun-god in his boat, seated in typical dress with the typical flames rising from the shoulders. In a pair of representative examples\textsuperscript{69}, unlike many other scenes where the figure bearing divine signifiers around the shoulders occupies a place of prominence within the scene, the sun god lacks the place of prominence, because of the compositional complexity of the scene and the relative size of the sun god. The eye of the viewer is simply not immediately drawn to the scene. Based on the other elements of the scene, such as a figure directing a plow, Frankfort\textsuperscript{70} de-emphasizes the astral nature of the god in favor of an agricultural characterization. The divine presence lends authority in moments of uncertainty, such as would have been undoubtedly encountered in the act of planting a field in ancient times (without knowledge of whether the crop would fail). However, the scene does recall at a concrete level Egyptian journeys of the sun-god Re-Horahkty seated in a boat of his own. More broadly, the scene represents the iconographic idea of a sun god identified compositionally as a sun god in a means of transportation (such as Helios or Sol in his chariot). Presenting solar deities in such a fashion reflects the mechanism of the sun’s movement across the sky and various conceptions of what happens when the sun is not in the sky, and connects it as well with moments of transition and motion. The meanings we see here have obvious relevance to depictions of the nimbus.

\textsuperscript{66} See Figure 2.8. 
\textsuperscript{67} Frankfort 99 
\textsuperscript{68} 99 
\textsuperscript{69} See Figures 2.9 and 2.10. 
\textsuperscript{70} 68; 108
VI. Ancient Egyptian Art: The Sun Disk

A similar motif signifying a connection between light and power associated with a divine being\(^7\) hails from Egypt, a culture marked later on in its history by extensive interaction with the greater Mediterranean world, for example the Hellenizing influences of Alexander, and Roman influences typified by the likes of Marc Antony and Julius Caesar. We should consider, however, the peculiar nature of Egyptian iconography in that any representation of a god is the god, an idea carried to its zenith with temples as not merely residences for the god but as re-enactments of a created and stable, unchaotic world; essentially, art formed reality\(^7\). Egyptian art in general is imaginative but within defined parameters, as “the Egyptian art basically sought to permanently fix the absolute, the symbolic, the ideal, the essence of what things should be”\(^7\). The most relevant example is the Egyptian sun disk and its appearance in connection with humans and gods\(^7\). Although the symbol reached its greatest peak with its new significances under the reign of Akhenaten, it has a history and rich body of iconography running throughout Egyptian history, which will be briefly summarized through examination of a few exemplars.

The first of these is from the Nineteenth Dynasty tomb of Sennedjem at Deir el-Medina\(^7\), its painted plaster occupying an entire wall of the burial chamber. It depicts a fairly complicated set of scenes from the Book of the Dead, chapter 110, whose purpose was to permit the dead to continue in death the rudimentary activities they performed in life. Of particular note for this analysis is the presence of the bird-headed sun god Ra-Horakhty, who is journeying in a boat

\(^7\) In Egyptian cosmology the Pharaoh is a divine figure as well, so this category is not restricted by virtue of being human.
\(^7\) Najovits 217
\(^7\) Najovits 218
\(^7\) As a thought-provoking aside, Najovits 224 also tells us that green, gold, blue, and white are the colors most commonly used in conjunction with divine beings and their eternal natures; although this could be coincidental, the latter three colors come to be used with a large number of representations of the nimbus.
\(^7\) See Figure 2.11, description is drawn from Robins 185.
through the underworld. The Egyptians saw this so-called “solar barque” as the vehicle by which astral bodies traversed the skies as if they were a river. He appears twice on the wall, the first time sitting in the boat holding an ankh, flanked by two baboons who salute the setting sun from behind and the rising sun from in front. Ra-Horakhty himself has a sun disk almost his size sitting atop/touching his head; this sun disk, an orange-red color, is encircled by the uraeus (which roughly translates as “she who rears up”), a rearing cobra with raised hood that carries associations with both kingship and fire as “the fiery eye of the sun god.” The uraeus creates a layered body, with a darker outer layer and a lighter inner layer, a pattern we see in the motif of the nimbus. Its presence reinforces the divine authority and solemn mission of the sun to rise again the next day, and also reinforces a connection between kingship and the sun. There is a time component here as well, with both the journey to the underworld portrayed and the repetition of the sun god’s travels, as we see in his second appearance in the scene.

The sun disk wrapped by the uraeus is not limited to Re-Horakhty and appears on a number of other gods and goddesses. One example is the bull Apis, such as on a bronze statue from the twenty-sixth dynasty, circa 600 BCE, although in Apis’s case the sun-disk does not appear until after the New Kingdom era. Significantly, the piece sculpturally features the sun disk: not as a flat two-dimensional representation, but as a three-dimensional representation in the round. The disk is represented as flat, almost an upturned plate that sits between the horns of the bull. The uraeus, rather than completely wrapping around the sun disk, only emerges from the bottom of the disk and rears up in the center of the disk directly between the two horns. The representation implies that the sun disk was seen by the Egyptians as quite literally a disk, and not necessarily as any kind of

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76 Lurker 113
77 Lurker 125
78 Lurker 29; see Figure 2.12.
physical manifestation of the god’s power, although it does admittedly point out the limitations of representing certain concepts in art.

The three-dimensional version of the sun disk is also seen on a statue of the lioness-headed goddess of fortune Sakhmet in bronze (28.5 cm tall, 8.5 cm wide, and 17 cm deep) from the late period (664-332 BCE), from the Serapeum at Sakkara. Sakhmet is seated on an unornamented throne and prominently features a sun disk closely resembling the one on the previously discussed Apis bull statue, with the disk resting between Sakhmet’s ears, and the uraeus rearing in between the two ears to appear in the center of the disk. Interpreting the sun disk on a goddess termed an “Egyptian version of the fates”80 who could act to ensure times of plenty for those who worshipped her (as the statue features a dedicatory inscription) is a little challenging, but it seems to reinforce her status as a divinity with authority worthy of being worshipped, as the statue itself may have been a sort of votive left by her worshippers. It also draws attention to a continuity of form across Egyptian iconography of similar time periods that does not seem to be present in other cultures (where we typically see many variations on a particular form or motif, instead of the static continuity Egyptian iconography presents us with). This sun disk in the round also gives us ideas of how the nimbus may have been thought of as a three-dimensional concept81.

We see the sun disk most prominently in the form of Aten, as in a stone relief depicting Akhenaten, Nefertiti, and daughters, c. 1370 BCE82. Under Akhenaten (formerly Amenhotep IV, who changed his name so that he could represent himself as the incarnation of the sun god), Aten

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79 See figure 2.13; description is drawn from Hornung and Bryan 175.
80 Hornung and Bryan 175
81 In Mediterranean art the nimbus in the round is extremely rare, occurring on as few as one or two extant pieces, such as on a first century CE sculpted column section of Sol in his chariot currently in Trier, Germany (Trier 48). Even this piece is debatable, since the relief is not fully separate. The only cultures that seem to prominently feature the nimbus in the round are in the region centering on India; these occur on representations of the Buddha, such as a second or third century CE seated Buddha from Gandhara in Pakistan (see figure C.3).
82 See Figure 2.14; description is drawn from Lurker 30-31.
(who had already existed as a personification of the sun disk, mentioned on an inscription from the reign of Tuthmosis IV\textsuperscript{83}), became the sole (in the sense of state-sanctioned) god, with a standard depiction of the sun disc, whose rays end in little hands holding the ankh, the symbol of life. Aten as a term first shows up in the Middle Kingdom, and by the New Kingdom eighteenth dynasty comes to mean “throne” or “place” for the sun god and comes to be a manifestation of the sun god itself\textsuperscript{84}. In the relief Aten is beaming down his quite literally life-giving rays upon his favored royal couple of Akhenaten and Nefertiti, both of whom are seated. In Redford’s estimation, Aten should more correctly be seen not as the sun disk itself, but instead as the rays themselves.\textsuperscript{85} Assmann reinforces Redford in noting how god is present in the light, to the degree that “nobody can escape the sensual experience of the presence of god in the light.”\textsuperscript{86} Such a concept of Aten strongly recalls other motifs, particularly the radiance idea of melam from Sumer, and poses an intriguing conception of divinity as something that is to some degree impermanent or transient\textsuperscript{87}. In contrast with the concept as we understand it of melam, however, Aten represents not a corrosive force inimical to life, but rather a benevolent force that bestows life. Moreover, the royal family exercised a crucial role as intermediaries between Aten and the greater populace of Egypt, many of whom were connected with Egypt’s traditional cult centers. The greater populace, then, held hostility toward the royal disdain for the traditional Egypt pantheon, the perception of which could only have been amplified by Akhenaten’s relentless building program to create a new capital and multiple major temples for his god Aten.\textsuperscript{88} Many of the fruits of the program were torn down upon the end of his reign (or

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{81} Lurker 31
\item \textsuperscript{84} Redford 22-23
\item \textsuperscript{85} Redford 23
\item \textsuperscript{86} Redford 24
\item \textsuperscript{87} Assmann 77, 79
\item \textsuperscript{88} Ironically enough this transience turns out to be historically true, since at the end of Akhenaten’s reign Aten was promptly dropped from the Egyptian pantheon, and the royal couple were subjected to the Egyptian version of damnation memoriae. See Redford 25.
\end{itemize}
shortly after\(^9\), marking an extremely tangible sign of the hostility felt. Nevertheless, the status of the royal family as intermediaries unambiguously connects the light of divinity with royal kingly power, perhaps analogous to the later Roman conception of Sol in connection with imperial power\(^{90}\). In a sense, the motif seen in Aten’s representation combines the divine shoulder signifiers we see in the Mesopotamian art examples with the Egyptian sun disk, suggesting a possible interplay of iconography between different cultures. Additionally, in this relief the disk itself takes priority over all else in the image, as it and its rays are central and framed by the flanking symmetry of the royal couple. The relief depicts the royal couple receiving life, and an implied receipt of favor, from the god, as if through his light he is providing them the life to represent him on Earth in both building monuments in his name and voicing his will to the people.

**VII. Greek Heads Inside Disks**

The remainder of the chapter marks a slight shift in consideration, from Near Eastern material to artifacts drawn from the body of Greco-Roman art. We see iconographic precursors to the nimbus in the form of categories we will term “heads inside disks” and the related “stars or disks touching or above heads”, along with “framing devices.”

A vase fragment\(^91\) dating from circa 425-375 BCE currently in the State Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg, Russia, features three figures that have been identified as Nyx, the night goddess, Hesperos the evening star, and Selene the lunar goddess. Assuming this identification is correct\(^92\), the head of Hesperos is depicted in profile inside a disk, presumably the head representing his entire presence. We can construe the disk behind or surrounding his head as the physical, natural

\(^{90}\) Briefly, Roman emperors from the very beginning were depicted radiate (as for example Augustus on the Marlborough Cameo), which is unambiguously solar. See also the discussion relating to the imperial solar cult in Hijmans 2009.

\(^{91}\) See Figure 2.15.

\(^{92}\) Because of the fragmentary nature of the artifact, there seems little reason to dispute these identifications.
representation of the evening star, with the head being the anthropomorphized representation, and Hesperos embodying both aspects simultaneously. Looking closely, Hesperos’s disk has two layers, a thin outer layer that seems more luminous, and a thicker inner layer that predominates. This dual-layered composition is a feature shared by the conventional nimbus (which may also have additional outer layers), but is one difficult to explain in the context of this representation. If the disk is the evening star, why have two layers that do not seem to correspond to a real star? The thin layer could be thought of as an outline, giving a sense of depth to the head. More broadly, Hesperos in his disk works within the broader scene in conjunction with Nyx and Selene; Nyx’s outstretched hand is just below Hesperos’s disk, as if the disk of the Evening Star has just been released from the waxen fingers of Night, who is followed in close succession by the Moon in her luminous cloth. The scene is a procession, a progression, of the course of the nocturnal time of day. The nimbus itself, as will be discussed in a later chapter, has solar and lunar components that may function on a similar iconographic basis as the case discussed here.

VIII. Greco-Roman: Heads Above or Touching Disks

A red-figure kylix\textsuperscript{93} attributed to the Brygos Painter, dating from 500-450 BCE, illustrates another category of representation, the “disks touching or above heads.” The tondo of a kylix features the moon goddess Selene being pulled in a chariot by two winged horses. The wings and bodies of these two horses occupy a substantial half of the figural space, which seems an odd design choice for a kylix presumably featuring Selene. However, when looking closely we can see that the wings form a subtle crescent moon shape around the body of Selene, creating a clever and innovative artistic method of representing one of Selene’s most widely recognized attributes, the lunar crescent. Furthermore, a representation of the full moon sits on top of Selene’s head, and was

\textsuperscript{93} See Figure 2.16.
apparently deemed important enough to overlap with the geometric border surrounding the main field; the border cuts the moon in half, but the edge of the moon extends almost to the edge of the kylix itself and is similar in size to Selene’s head. The moon is also flanked by a pair of what are probably stars, depicted with a dot in the center surrounded by four “arms” or rays seemingly emerging from but lacking direct connection to the point in the center.

The astral depictions obviously reflect the night sky, but they also connect to other later motifs, such as one used by the Romans on a Republican coin of 217-215 BCE from Campania featuring a radiate, nimbate Sol on the obverse, but above the label “Roma” on the reverse, featuring a lunar crescent, an orb, and a pair of eight-pointed stars that also do not have the points directly touching the center of the star. The pair of stars, lunar crescent, and a representation of the full moon are the attributes employed by the Brygos Painter to signify Selene. On the Republican coin, we then have a representation of the Sun on one side and the Moon on the other, with the label “Roma” as possibly a statement that Rome endures whether day or night. Overall, the moon touching Selene’s head signifies her sphere of influence and serves as a ready identifier for her, and creates an association of divinity and divine attributes with the head, yet lacks the framing attributes of the nimbus, which appears around or behind the head.

IX. Roman Framing Devices

The nimbus has another practical function, namely framing the head, a feature serving the compositional purpose of directing viewer attention and guiding the visual reading of a piece. The idea, however, of framing has resonance with other objects. One example is from the Caecilia

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94 See Figure 2.17.
95 From a more speculative standpoint, it does not seem unreasonable to think that the moon could slip behind the head, as it would not theoretically lose the attributive significance it holds, and would also resolve the compositional quandary of how to represent the moon without resorting to an unseemly overlapping of it with the border of the kylix that is supposed to be framing the main image instead of becoming a part of it.
Metella Museum on the Via Appia Antica in Rome\textsuperscript{96}, dating from the 1\textsuperscript{st} c. BC, which is a stone relief showing a young boy, with a partially preserved older male figure to his left. Of particular interest is the half circle indented into the stone above and behind his head. What purpose does this half-circle serve? It helps to give depth to the relief, giving an appearance of sculpture as opposed to relief that functions to highlight the head of the boy, which draws the viewer’s attention to focus on him.

A similar function is accomplished with the depictions of the matronae\textsuperscript{97}, which run from the first through the fifth centuries CE and are known primarily from the northwestern area of the empire; the feature of note for them is the large circular object behind the heads of the two female figures flanking a third who lacks the feature. What the circular object is remains unclear, although it does not appear to be a nimbus, with everything from it being the females’ hair, to a headdress or similar accessory, to a hood or hat, as possible proposals for its definition. Whatever it is\textsuperscript{98}, it does serve to draw attention to the heads of the figures, which are also extremely frontal in gaze, engaging the viewer in an interaction with the piece, and perhaps by proxy, with the matronae themselves.

Framing objects are also fairly common in battle scenes, with heads framed by shields or chariot wheels, for example. A case in point is the Alexander Mosaic\textsuperscript{99} from the House of the Faun in Pompeii, dating from c. 100 BC and measuring 3.13 x 5.82 m. The two pertinent portions of the mosaic are a soldier and his horse framed by wheels of Darius’s chariot in the center-right section of the piece, and a soldier to the lower right of the previously mentioned soldier, whose face is reflected in a shield. The first soldier has a full-body frame that includes his horse as well, mirroring

\textsuperscript{96} See Figure 2.18.
\textsuperscript{97} See Figure 2.19.
\textsuperscript{98} Again, like the vision of Constantine, a pragmatic functional approach as opposed to a more definitional approach will ultimately be more useful in terms of characterizing a body of evidence as eccentric as the cult of the matronae.
\textsuperscript{99} See figure 2.20.
some of the full-body framing devices we see in red-figure pottery, for example on a vase dating from 350-340 BCE currently in Kiel, Germany, featuring a male and female figure in a chariot with a tri-layered arch above and behind that seems to emerge from a point at their shoulders (which recalls the previously discussed Sumerian material that placed emphasis on the shoulders in signifying divine attributes)\(^{100}\). The chariot wheel doing the framing is large enough to have no less than six distinguishable layers, not only highlighting the ornate nature of the piece, but also signaling the importance of its role and pointing out the plight of the soldiers on the battlefield. From a compositional perspective the chariot wheel frames the end (or beginning) of a diagonal that runs from the framed soldier’s gaze to the head of Alexander. The framing device is not only employed to guide the viewer’s attention to inside its bounds, but also to direct the viewer’s attention once fixed on a certain spot to another area of the mosaic, thereby facilitating the reading of a complex work.

A study of wear patterns on the mosaic\(^{101}\) found that the area surrounding the framed soldier had a large degree of wear and was thus of comparatively higher interest to the viewers. This finding begs the question of what about the image was enticing to its audience: the attractive feature is likely the detailed, pathos-imbued, reflected face of the soldier being run over by Darius’s chariot. More significantly, his face is framed: the mosaicist has given a visual cue to the audience by dint of the shield (which has a darker outer rim and a lighter interior space, something it shares with the nimbus) that whatever is inside the framing is important and worthy of consideration and detailed observation. The visual cue tells the audience how to read the scene, in this case by providing points of focus amidst the large number of diagonals running through the piece, crucial in a piece of the size and complexity of the Alexander Mosaic. The example dates from a period when we have

\(^{100}\) See Figure 2.21.  
\(^{101}\) Lorenzi 2010
examples of extant nimbi, and perhaps not surprisingly we see some of the same elements. Clearly, ancient art has a number of devices for framing that guide viewer attention in various ways; the framing serves to accentuate points of focus within an image. Why, then, should the nimbus be considered specially, or to be anything other than a device for framing, given that it appears as one technique among a host of others for carrying out a particular compositional focus? The central difference, the element that separates the nimbus from other framing devices, is in the nimbus’s almost exclusive association with divine figures, figures who could be classified as such (like Roman emperors), or named mythological figures (like Andromeda or Narcissus).

**X. Conclusion**

This chapter has served to illustrate a smattering of the vast numbers of antecedents and related motifs for the nimbus, both in terms of a more visual-compositional standpoint and an idea-associative standpoint. The ancient Sumerian concept of *melam*, in the context of *Gilgamesh*, conveys a strong association between light and divinity in its presentation of the awe-inspiring radiance that can be donned by a divinity (or divinity by proxy). In Sumerian/Mesopotamian art such as the Stele of Hammurabi and cylinder seals we see the fire from the shoulders, connecting the divine with a sense of authority, particularly at moments of transition and thereby uncertainty, and providing an artistic means of representing the essence of a god. The Egyptian sun disk continues carrying over this sense of authority, coupling it with the radiance concept and even involving framing elements in terms of the *uraeus*. We see heavenly bodies portrayed in conjunction with the heads of divine figures, whether behind them, touching them, or above them, as with the moon on the head of Selene, or the “star” of Hesperos, associating the “planetary” corpus with divinity and emphasizing a natural, cosmic role for that divinity in depictions of it. We even see framing antecedents that serve

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102 At least, the mosaic itself dates from this period; the piece may be a copy of a 4th century non-extant Hellenistic painting, which would still place it after the time nimbi first start appearing in the Mediterranean.
to guide the viewer and create points of focus within a composition; those framing devices can be anything from the chariot wheels and shields of the Alexander Mosaic to the hair/hat/headpieces of the Matronae. The nimbus comes to take on these roles for divine and mythological figures, particularly astral deities like Sol/Helios and Luna/Selene. Although many other corollary examples could be drawn upon, those presented here suffice to lay the framework for the essential ideas and representations that lie behind the nimbus.
Figure 2.1: Stele of Hammurabi (replica, original in the Louvre Museum), c. 1792-1750 BCE

(http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Code_of_Hammurabi_replica_stele_REM.JPG)
Figure 2.2: Investiture Panel, Palace at Mari, c. 1800-1750 BCE, Louvre

Figure 2.3: Cylinder Seal of Inanna, Akkad period (2330-2150 BCE), private collection

(Wolkstein and Kramer 52)

Figure 2.4: Cylinder Seal of Inanna, Akkad period (2334-2154 BCE), Oriental Institute of Chicago (Wolkstein and Kramer 92)
Figure 2.5: Cylinder Seal of Inanna, Akkad period (2330-2150 BCE), Louvre (Wolkstein and Kramer 57)

Figure 2.6: Sargonid Cylinder Seal (Frankfort Plate XVIII)
Figure 2.7: Sargonid Cylinder Seal (Frankfort Plate XVIII)

Figure 2.8: Sargonid Cylinder Seal (Frankfort Plate XVIII)
Figure 2.9 and Figure 2.10: Pair of Cylinder Seals showing a sun god in a boat (Frankfort Plate XIX)
Figure 2.11: Wall of Tomb of Sennedjem, Deir el-Medina, 19th dynasty (Robins 185)
Figure 2.12: Bronze Statue of the Apis Bull, British Museum, 26th Dynasty c. 600 BCE

(Lurker 29)
Figure 2.13: Bronze Statue of Sakhmet, Serapeum at Sakkara, Late Period 664-332 BCE

(Hornung and Bryan 175)
Figure 2.14: Relief Depicting Aten, Amenhotep and Nefertiti, Ägyptisches Museum, Berlin, Germany, 18th Dynasty, Amarna Period (Robins 156)

Figure 2.15: Red-Figure Selene/Nyx/Hesperos Fragment, Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia, 425-375 BCE (http://www.theoi.com/Gallery/N1.1.html)
Figure 2.16: Red-Figure Kylix of Selene with Horses and Chariot, Antikensammlung Museum, Berlin, Germany (Berlin F2293) 500-450 BCE

(http://www.theoi.com/Gallery/T18.1.html)
Figure 2.17: Roman Republican Coin, Romano-Campagnan, c. 217-215 BCE

(http://www.wildwinds.com/coins/sear5/s0614.html#Syd_0096)
Figure 2.18: Relief of a young boy at the Mausoleum of Caecilia Metella on the Via Appia, Rome (Image Courtesy R. Ulrich)
Figure 2.19: Matronae Relief, Bonn, Germany, Imperial era

(http://www.euratlas.com/Atlas/germany_rhine/bonn_matronae.html)
Figure 2.20: Alexander Mosaic, House of the Faun, Pompeii, c. 100 BCE (Image taken by author, in Naples Arch. Museum)
Figure 2.21: Red-Figure Vase from Kiel, Germany, 350-340 BC (LIMC MID 14181)
CHAPTER III

The Nimbus in Literature?: Fire, Light, Divinity, and the Heavens

I. Introduction

Gaining a better understanding of the nimbus warrants an examination of relevant literary works to locate parallels and analogues to the nimbus. This task is rendered more difficult by one key point: the Latin term “nimbus” is not used in Latin literature to refer to the artistic motif and concept under investigation. Rather, the word simply means “cloud,” and is not of itself a very commonly used word, used overwhelmingly to reference weather-related phenomena.103 The term “nimbus” itself first comes into parlance to refer specifically to the artistic motif during the Renaissance, specifically the early 1600s.104 105

Of course, the discovery begs the question of what the ancient word for the motif actually was, if there was one at all. In fact, one does not seem to exist, at least in the sense that no singular name defines the concept and is consistently used to refer to it. Instead, several different words seem to characterize the usage in literary situations that approximate the concept over both genre and chronological period. This state of affairs holds a couple of possibilities regarding its significance. One is that the motif is not important enough or differentiated enough as a concept to merit its own name; in other words, the concept is not worthy of a separate linguistic term. Another possibility is that there was a name, but no texts utilizing that name are extant, causing the word’s

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103 Based on a Perseus database linguistic search.
104 Merriam-Webster entry for “nimbus”
105 Why does the word nimbus come to apply to the motif? While we cannot be completely sure, ironically enough, Biblical passages suggest the literal meaning of the nimbus as a cloud may actually reflect a sort of cloaking mechanism for the aura of the nimbus, which will be discussed more thoroughly later.
effective disappearance from the Latin lexicon\textsuperscript{106}. A third possibility is that the concept is too complex or powerful for representation with a single word; various writers, struggling to bring across the meaning of the concept, needed multiple sets of words to convey their intended meanings. An alternative yielding this same result is that the motif is an import and consequently not part of the Latin/Italic vocabulary, which necessitates description involving multiple words to invoke the concept, instead of a simple label provided to a “native” concept. The concept may also have been seen as indistinguishable from, or part of the essence of, the figure in relation to whom it was appended, and naming it would have then been superfluous. Regardless of which of the possibilities listed here may be true, the apparent lack of a name does not preclude recognition of the artistic motif.

In terms of structure, this chapter will analyze material thematically according to broad themes developing from the corpus of examples after an initial background discussion of examples drawn from the \textit{Iliad} of Homer, \textit{Thebaid} of Statius, and Lamentations from the Old Testament. The more fundamental material comes from the Greco-Roman corpus, with examples (listed here in no particular order) drawn from the \textit{Aeneid} of Vergil, \textit{Ab Urbe Condita} of Livy, \textit{Life of Constantine} by Eusebius, \textit{On the Deaths of the Persecutors} by Lactantius, Vellius Paternculus’s \textit{Roman History}, Plutarch’s \textit{Life of Romulus}, Lucan’s \textit{Pharsalia}, Statius’s \textit{Silvae}, and Ovid’s \textit{Metamorphoses}. These examples will be discussed before moving on to Biblical passages\textsuperscript{107}, drawn mostly from the Old Testament plus

\textsuperscript{106} However, the situation is not without precedent; there are some Latin terms that only occur once in the entire Latin corpus, usually in a technical context. One example from a non-technical context relevant to the chapter will suffice to illustrate the point. This example is the word \textit{radiosus}, as used in Plautus’s \textit{Stichus}, Act 2, Scene 2, lines 40-41, from Perseus: “After, with the daybreak, you had sent me to the harbour, the sun with its beams opportunely arose from out of the sea.” (\textit{postquam me misisti ad portum, cum luci simul, commodum radiosus sese sol superabat ex mari}). The passage is noteworthy because of its use of the word \textit{radiosus}, referring especially to the beams of light the sun emits. In a search of Perseus’s word frequency statistics, this is the only occurrence of the word in the entire database, marking it as a unique usage. We see this usage in reference to the actual astral body, with no deity seemingly present, and the passage otherwise appears relatively unremarkable.

\textsuperscript{107} English translation of Biblical passages unless otherwise noted will come from the NRSV. In terms of ancient languages, both Greek and Latin will be considered (drawn from http://www.newadvent.org/bible/gen001.htm,
Matthew and Revelation. The Biblical examples appear particularly relevant because of the increasing importance of Christianity in the Mediterranean during the Roman Empire. All of these passages will illustrate the variety of constructions employed in conveying a concept.

II. Background: Light and Power

The Greco-Roman corpus is replete with examples that connect light, fire, and power. A couple of examples will serve to illustrate general points before our discussion shifts to examples more directly relevant to the subject at hand. Chapter 2 illustrated how the body of antecedents the nimbus might be drawing from are fundamentally connected with light. Chapter 4 will also illuminate how the nimbus is connected to celestial light. Keeping such ideas in mind, this chapter will look at literary representations of light, divinity, and the celestial sphere.

The initial examples, from the *Iliad* and from the *Thebaid*, serve as touchstones over time, the former from the c. 8th c. BCE and the latter from the end of the 1st c. CE. Both works are in the epic style. In 15.597-598 of the *Iliad*, Homer refers to “the inhuman weariless strength of fire” (θεοποιαθεὶς πυρέμβαλοι ἀκάματον); in order, the Greek means “kindled by a god,” “fire,” “throw in,” and “without sense of toil.” In terms of broader context, Zeus is casting power upon the Trojans, his favored peoples, before the tide of battle inevitably washes against them. He is here, then, granting power and glory so much so that it becomes intertwined with fire, quite literally “kindled by a god.” Lattimore’s translation of “inhuman” in this passage does not seem to quite convey the full sentiment, since the stress appears to be on the fire as cast by a divinity as opposed

which appears to be the only source that cross-displays all three languages), although the reader should be aware the writer has no background in Greek linguistics. Analysis is heavily drawn from the linguistic and word study tools provided by Perseus, for both Greek and Latin.

108 *Iliad* examples are drawn from the Lattimore translation.
109 *Thebaid* examples are drawn from the Jane Wilson Joyce translation.
110 Greek text is from Perseus. Unless otherwise noted, Perseus is the source of all Greek and Latin text in this chapter.
to on the fire as something alien to humanity and impersonal. Of course, it also intuitively makes sense that fire of the gods does not grow weak or weary.

The *Thebaid* portrays even more of a general relation between light and power, with a seeming equation of the two in the 7.771-772: “For the last time Apollo revealed himself to his servant, then said: ‘Use the light you have, acquire lasting fame, while I at your side make irrevocable Death afraid!’” (*Tandem se famulo summum confessus Apollo ‘utere luce tua longamque’ ait, ‘indue famam, dum tibi me iunctum Mors inrevocata veretur*). Amphiaraus, priest of Apollo, is about to experience a decidedly odd descent into the underworld in his chariot. Apollo, knowing how Amphiaraus’s final journey is coming, appears to his priest in a revelatory fashion. Through his words, Apollo suggests that he is lending his divine light to Amphiaraus to perhaps literally go out in a blaze of glory, using the light (perhaps a stand-in for both the life he has remaining as well as prowess and talent on the battlefield) he has to do so. The Latin is worth noting, particularly *iunctum* in conjunction with *veretur*: because Apollo is “joining ranks” with his servant (*famulo*), Death itself (*Mors*) will “stand in awe” of that servant. In other words, the presence of a god working through a mortal inspires awe even in figures who normally lack such emotions. The divine presence in this case is seemingly accomplished through Amphiaraus’s light (*luce*), which will enable him to “wear” fame (*indue famam*). The scene on the whole is a challenge to death, with god working through mortal.

The *Thebaid* also renders the description at 5.613 of a “star-bright face” (*siderei vultus*), in this case applied to Archemorus, a child who has just been killed by a monstrous serpent. The epithet associates the light of an Illuminated face with the heavens, particularly the light cast by the stars, and may also refer to the appearance of human skin at night in the moonlight. The reference to the face specifically could be interpreted as synecdoche for the head, connecting this example to

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111 Which, in terms of modern astronomy, is starlight as well, since what we see as “moonlight” is in actuality reflected light from the sun, the star of our solar system.
others where apparitions of fire and light appear around the head. The connection of light with celestial bodies is seen in artistic depictions as well\textsuperscript{112}. Additionally, both this example and the previous one associate light with death, with Amphiaras plunging into the underworld and Archermorus dying. We could read the association as establishing something otherworldly about the figures; in other words, because they have become associated with death through light, they lose mortal qualities and become almost transcendent, albeit not to the level of an apotheosis scene\textsuperscript{113}.

In Lamentations 2.3, the following passage continues the idea of a divinity burning in a mortal: “He has cut down in fierce anger all the might of Israel; he has withdrawn his right hand from them in the face of the enemy; he has burned like a flaming fire in Jacob, consuming all around.” (Latin for the later portion: *succendit in Jacob quasi ignem flamma devorantis in gyro* (Greek: ἄνηψεν ἐν Ἰακόβ ὡς πῦρ φλόγα καὶ κατέφαγεν πάντα τὰ κύκλῳ). The passage connects with the Apollo passage from the *Thebaid*, where a divinity imbues a mortal with some of the deity’s essence or power. Here, that power is explicitly couched in the language of fire, with the use of multiple fire words probably emphatically in both languages (πῦρ φλόγα and ignem flamma), and even a verb meaning to kindle (*succendit* in Latin, and ἄνηψεν in Greek, although for the latter “to kindle” is a secondary meaning, with the primary meaning being to make fast on or secure, arguably what God is doing by burning like a flame in Jacob). Clearly, the power of a divinity manifests in the language of fire and consumption.

III. Greco-Roman: Fire Around the Head as Divine

The latter point, the language of divinity manifesting in fire, in addition to stars, is one of the overarching themes emerging from the corpus of examples.

\textsuperscript{112} See Chapter IV typologies.
\textsuperscript{113} A discussion of these scenes occurs later in the chapter.
Our examination for the theme begins with Livy’s *Ab Urbe Condita* from the latter half of the first century BCE, in particular during 1.41\(^{114}\) when Servius Tullius is at the point of becoming the sixth king of Rome after the dying Tarquinius Priscus. The passage in full is as follows (the speaker is Tanaquil, wife of Tarquinius Priscus): “‘Servius,’ she cried, ‘the throne is yours, if you are a man. … Rise to your true stature; follow the gods who long ago by the circlet of heavenly fire declared that your head should wear the crown. Let the memory of those flames, assuredly divine, rouse you to act.” (“*tuum est* inquit, ‘Serui, si uir es, regnum, … erige te deosque duces sequere qui clarum hoc fore caput divino quondam circumfuso igni portenderunt, nunc te illa caelestis excitet flamma; nunc expergiscere uere”\(^{115}\). The Latin is worth examining here, with two words used for fire: *ignis* and *flamma*, the generic word for “flame,” or “fire,” and a blazing roaring flame, respectively. The fire is described in conjunction with divinity (*divino*). In fact, the entire scene is a result of divine action: the apparition of fire was sent by the gods as a message effectively anointing Servius as a future king through creating a supernatural version of the crown he would someday wear. The manifestation furthermore rouses Servius from complacency and spurs him into acting to take advantage of the situation presented to him. Since only a few were privy to knowledge concerning the previous king’s dying, circumstances enable Servius to lay the groundwork in order to make sure that he becomes the next king. Thus, a conjunction between fire, divine decree, and regal power intermeshes to create a powerful image heralding the divine appointment of a new king.

Relevant examples of divinity in association with cephalic fire in Vergil’s first-century *Aeneid*, starting with Book 2.679-691\(^{116}\):

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\(^{114}\) All Livy references unless otherwise noted are to the De Selincourt translation.

\(^{115}\) To remind the reader, the Latin text of primary sources, unless otherwise noted, is drawn from the version on the Perseus online library/database.

\(^{116}\) Text is drawn from the Ahl translation.
She was filling the house with her echoing sorrows when there arose a most sudden, remarkably wonderful portent. During the conflict of looks, words, arms between desperate parents, look, a slim halo of light seems to shine from the crown of Iulus’ head. And it’s shedding a glow that can touch without burning: a gentle flame licking over his tresses and grazing the down on his temples. Scared by the sight into spasms of fear, we flail the ignited hair and extinguish the sacred flames with our fountains of water. Father Anchises, however, eyes raised to the starts in elation, stretched out his palms, reached out with his voice to the heights of the heavens: “Mightiest Jupiter, if your resolve ever bends when petitioned, look at us, that’s all I ask. If our righteousness shows we deserve it, then, Father, show us an augural sign that this was a true omen.”

(Talia vociferans gemitu tectum omne replebat, cum subitum dictuque oritur mirabile monstrum. Namque manus inter maestorumque ora parentum ecce levis summo de vertice visus Iuli fundere lumen apex, tactuque innoxia mollis lambere flamma comas et circum tempora pasci. Nos pavidi trepidare metu, crinemque flagrante excutere et sanctos restinguere fontibus ignis. At pater Anchises oculos ad sidera laetus extulit, et caelo palmas cum voce tetendit: “Iuppiter omnipotens, precibus si flecteris ullis, aspice nos; hoc tantum, et, si pietate meremur, da deinde auxilium, pater, atque baec omnia firma.”

Ahl’s translation actually employs the word halo, which is probably the closest English equivalent to the nimbus. The Latin uses terms like sacred flames (sanctos... ignis) or flamma in reference to the apparition in question. Austin’s description of the former implies the others in the scene realize the fire has divine associations, but they do not go so far as to fully comprehend the nature of the divinity at this point because of the natural parental reaction to the child being on fire.117 Horsfall describes the latter as “V. seems to envisage a persistent, gentle flame playing about Iulus’ head, which harms him not at all.”118 The fire actually grows as the lines progress, with crinemque flagrante suggesting the fire grows until Ascanius’s head is entirely aflame119; the Latin phrase also sets up an association between fire and hair, inviting comparisons with such celestial phenomena as comets120. Indeed, the fire almost appears to have some degree of agency, with Jordan remarking that pasci is “normally used of animals browsing”121. The image the word conveys is one where the fire grazes Ascanius’s head, invoking a language of consumption to imply the active presence of divinity in order to communicate a true message.

117 Austin 255
118 Horsfall 486
119 486
120 See the discussion of Caesar’s apotheosis later in this chapter for further analysis of the association.
121 68
Statius’s first-century work *Silvae* provides additional examples of the divine connection with manifestations of fire and radiance. In 3.4, Statius writes the following (especially pertinent Latin is given in parentheses following the English):

She saw a lad, himself a bright star of unmatched beauty (*hic puerum egregiae praeclarum sidere formae*)…he had no bow, Nor shadowy wings springing from radiant shoulders (*sed non erat illi arcus et ex umbris nullae fulgentibus umbrae*) … So saying, she swept Him up through the air, in her swan-drawn chariot. Swiftly they reach the Latian Hills, and the Palatine Once Evander’s home, newly adorned by Domitian Father of the globe, level now with the highest stars (*quos mole nova pater inclitus orbis excolit et summis aequat Germanicus astris*).…Thus she combs those locks, drapes the lad in Tyrian Garments, grants him rays of her own fire (*sic ornat crines, Tyrios sic fundit amictus, dat radios ignemque suum*).

Although not included in the excerpt given, the passage previously refers to Venus as *aurea*, golden. The probable connection of this word to the English aura suggests that the reference may not be to her garment or skin, but instead to her innate nature as a divinity. Other aspects of the passage are especially worth noting. The first is how the boy himself is a “bright star of unmatched beauty” (*egregiae praeclarum sidere formae*), which seems a bit of a poetic translation given that the Latin seems to indicate an exemplary form. Regardless, the connection of his physical appearance with that of a shining celestial star (*praeclarum sidere*) suggests the reason for Venus’s attraction to him: he is a figurative mortal counterpart to her own role as a literal bright star (the “star” of Venus). The second is the radiant shoulders (*umeris…fulgentibus*) of the boy, a description unique among the examples given in this chapter and one that recalls the ancient Sumerian artistic depictions of fire emanating from the shoulders. The phrase involves the verb *fulgere* meaning to flash, gleam, glitter, or shine, furthering the star comparison already set up, which is cemented by how the place she takes him to in her chariot (suggestive of the chariot of Apollo) is on level with the highest stars (*summis aequat astris*). The third is where Venus gives the boy rays of her own fire (*dat radios ignemque suum*). The phrase recalls *Gilgamesh* as previously discussed in Chapter 2, where the radiance of a god

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was a transferable entity. Overall, the presence of Venus as the divinity in association with these concepts is intriguing as well, but she is probably here because of her star aspects.

The vision of Constantine, as recorded in the fourth century accounts of Eusebius and Lactantius\textsuperscript{123}, has been studied exhaustively by scholars such as Van Dam (2011), and will not be dealt with extensively here. We will merely draw upon an idea or two suggested by the accounts. Both accounts (Eusebius \textit{Life of Constantine} I.26-31 and Lactantius \textit{On the Deaths of the Persecutors} 64) emphasize the divine nature of whatever Constantine saw; Eusebius’s account further emphasizes the connection of the vision with the sun, creating the fire, royalty, and divinity triad. Something about divinity generally seems to require fire and light in order to deliver certain kinds of manifestations and apparitions, for Constantine’s vision too is a portent. If Constantine adopts the sign in the sky as instructed to do so by the vision, he will be victorious in conquering under its aegis. Eusebius gives us even more guidance in relating how Constantine apparently ordered a representation of the sign set with gold and precious stones. His action creates what must have been an awe-inspiring display that would reflect the light of the sun that factored so strongly in his vision, effectively recreating the vision in a sense for anyone who beheld that standard.

\textbf{IV. Roman: Fire Around the Head as Elemental}

The next section here points out how manifestations of fire around the head are characterized in elemental language, invoking associations or setting up juxtapositions with such forces as wind and water. The juxtapositions reinforce a vision of such manifestations as involving the language of the natural world to convey notions of the supernatural.

\textsuperscript{123} The Lactantius account is from \url{http://www29.homepage.villanova.edu/christopher.haas/Lactant-Const.htm}, and the Eusebius account is the Cameron and Hall translation.
Returning to Livy 1.41, the passage establishes elemental associations as well as its signals of divine fire. The primary word of interest for the theme is *circumfuso*, which indicates the fire around Servius’s head somehow poured around his head, creating an unusual image. *Circumfuso* itself, from *circumfusus*, adds the prefix *circum* (around) to the base verb *fundere*, which generally means to pour in relation with liquid but can also have meanings connected to smelting (and thus Livy might be harkening to the appearance of molten metal). Potentially, there may even be some wordplay with the related *fundare*, meaning to set a foundation or make secure: the “circlet of heavenly fire” in its appearance conveys a message that lays the foundation for Servius to ultimately secure his rule. It is the foundation of his fate. The wordplay also reinforces the elemental nature of the motif, with air, water, and fire being combined in some fashion in this scene.

Intriguingly, as with the Livy example, the *Aeneid* at 2.679-691 also makes use of a *fundere* (to pour, shed) in relation to the light emissions of the manifestation; Horsfall\(^{124}\) remarks with reference to Catrein that the passage is apparently meant to convey a “familiar” type of synesthesia, in order to connect light to the liquid state and the idea of water pouring. However, the statement sets up a strange dichotomy, where an inherently fire-based manifestation, using quite literally fiery vocabulary, is connected with an action typical of water. The dichotomy invokes both the elemental nature of the manifestation and the opposite power of water to quench, setting up an image of deliberation, sort of a controlled manifestation of the divine. Furthermore, the scene is a portent from the gods, although its significance or status as a true omen requires confirmation through a direct divine act. Ascanius as the son of Aeneas, founder in a sense of Rome, could be construed as regal, thus creating that same triumvirate of fire, royal power, and divine signal we saw in the example from Livy.

\(^{124}\) Horsfall, 485

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V. Greco-Roman: Fire, Light, and Crowns

Often, images of fire and light are connected with crowns and kingship, or at least with someone wielding power. The previously discussed case of Servius Tullius is one example, with Servius receiving a sign from the gods in the form of a crown of fire that intimates his future fate, preemptively crowning him as a king of Rome. Another example is Ascanius, whose line leads to the founding of Rome. Such scenes connect divine fire with royal power.

While on the topic of the crown manifestations, Velleius Paterculus’s first-century Roman History 2.59.6\(^\text{125}\) relates an intriguing scene in relation to the young Octavian: “As he approached Rome an enormous crowd of his friends went out to meet him, and at the moment of his entering the city, men saw above his head the orb of the sun with a circle about it, coloured like the rainbow, seeming thereby to place a crown upon the head of one destined soon to greatness.”(Cui adventanti Romam inmanis amicorum occurrit frequentia, et cum intraret urbem, solis orbis super caput eius curvatus aequaliter rotundatusque in colorem arcus velut coronam tanti mox viri capiti imponens conspectus est.) Keeping in mind that according to an editor’s note the text here is corrupt, the description is nevertheless one of the clearest depictions of what one of these manifestations logistically looks like, with a solar orb (solis orbis) surrounded by a circle (possibly akin to the nimbus surrounded by an outlining frame), in a variety of rainbow colors (in colorem arcus) (or perhaps more accurately something like the sheen on a soap bubble, where white light is minutely split into light of its component wavelengths). Like the crown of Servius in Livy, the crown here is indicative of future imperial greatness.

Ovid’s first century Metamorphoses\(^\text{126}\) presents an example that is more divine in nature. In 2.121-23, Ovid tells how “Next the father anointed the face of his son with a holy balsam, to offer

\(^{125}\) The English is the Shipley translation; both it and the Latin were accessed through LacusCurtius online library.

\(^{126}\) Raeburn translation.
protection against the scorching flames, and placed his radiant crown on the young man’s head”

(Tum pater ora sui sacro medicamine nati contigit et rapidae fecit patientia flammae imposuitque comae radios). The passage occurs in the story of Phaethon’s fateful chariot ride, where Apollo as Helios/Sol is giving over his accoutrements to his son. The image the scene suggests, of flames (rapidae… flammae) separate from the rider of the chariot who is nevertheless oiled and shining resplendent in a radiant crown, is powerful. The description of the crown may be figurative rather than literal, as the rays are described in conjunction with his hair—comae radios, perhaps meant to connect him with a comet trailing through the sky just as Phaethon presumably would in his chariot. The image created highlights the transferability of the essence of divinity, the radiance of the Sun, to another, who as the story progresses is incapable of handling the power. Phaethon’s inability to command tools of the divine implies how powerful and terrifying those tools must be.

Vergil relates another example in Aen. 8.678-684:

“Caesar Augustus, on this side, is leading Italians to combat, backed by the Senate and people, the household spirits and great gods, stationed high on the aft-deck, his joyful temples erupting twin flame-plumes. His paternal star is the badge on his helmet. Else, and towering high, in command of the fleet, is Agrippa favoured by winds and divine support. On his temples is blazing war’s proud medal, the naval crown with its pattern of ships’ rams (Hinc Augustus agens Italos in proelia Caesar cum patribus populoque, penatibus et magnis dis, stans celsa in puppi; geminas cui tempora flammae laeta vomunt patrimque aperitur vertice sidus. Parte alia ventis et dis Agrippa secundis arduus agmen agens; cui, belli insigne superbum, tempora navali fulgent rostrata corona”).

The passage details a clear association between blazing/flames and the head, specifically the temples. It suggests as well a clear connection between the aforementioned association and divinity, as Augustus is backed by the gods, and Agrippa is favored with divine support. What actually is on Augustus’s head, though, is open to interpretation; Conington¹²⁷ does not see the phenomena in question as literal flames (although they continue the linguistic trend of flamma), but rather as ornamentation emerging from Augustus’s helmet, which Conington thinks may be alluding to

¹²⁷ 152
Romulus’s two-crested helmet. While his interpretation may hold some validity, if we take them as literal flames, they recall the passage earlier in the work with Ascanius, creating a genealogical link for Augustus. The fiery manifestation also connects him to Servius Tullius, creating something that recalls the crown Servius received from the gods. The flames would also serve to heighten the perceived divinity of Augustus, who acts with the backing of the gods (even though they are last in a list of the senate, people, and household spirits). Although characterizing him as an avatar probably is too extreme, the term suggests something of what might be happening here. Additionally, the paternal star (sidus) refers to the comet of Caesar (see the discussion of Caesar’s apotheosis later in this chapter), which Williams argues is presented in the Aeneid as a means of glorifying Augustus, even further heightening his stature.

In a more speculative vein, Agrippa’s naval crown, bedizened with the beaks of ships, might resemble the radiate crown often depicted in conjunction with the sun god and with the Roman emperor. In 49.14.3, Cassius Dio says of Augustus that “Upon his lieutenants he bestowed various gifts and upon Agrippa a golden crown adorned with ships' beaks — a decoration given to nobody before or since.” (τοῖς τε ὑποστρατηγοῖς ἄλλοις τε ἄλλα καὶ τῷ Ἄγριππῷ στέφανον χρυσόν ἐμβόλοις ἑσκομένον ἐδώρησατο; ὃ μήτε πρότερον μήτ’ αὖθις ἄλλῳ) The gold further cements a possible connection with the radiate crown (στέφανον χρυσόν), literally a “golden that-surrounds,” a rather roundabout way of conveying a crown, although the connection is only amplified by the special attention paid to the uniqueness of Agrippa’s crown. The Latin fulgent in reference to the Aeneid scene tells us that his crown shines and glitters, presumably because it is gold, but the description perhaps alludes to the dance of flames in the light as well.

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128 Williams 128
129 We will see claims of emperors about their special relationships with divinity in some of the artifacts of Chapter IV. 130 Loeb translation by Earnest Cary, accessed through the LacusCurtius online library.
The last example from the *Aeneid* is 12.161-167: “In the midst of a host of attendants, Latinus drives out his four-horse team; and a gold crown circles his temples gleaming with two rows of six bright radiant spikes, symbolizing ancestry traced to the Sun...Aeneas, the father, the root-stock of Roman growth, sets forth from the camp with his star-bright shield and celestial armour: a vision of fire.” (Interea reges, ingenti mole Latinus quadriiugo vehit curru, cui tempora circum aurati bis sex radii fulgentia cingunt, Solis avi specimen; bigis it Turnus in albis, bina manu lato crispans hastilia ferro; binc pater Aeneas, Romanae stirpis origo, sidereo flagrans clipeo et caelestibus armis,”). “Sidereo flagrans” is especially interesting, seeming to suggest the fiery burning of the stars in relation to Aeneas’s military equipment here. Such a characterization appears to set up a contrast between Latinus, who is cast in solar terms with the four horse chariot (quadriiugo) and a radiant crown (cui tempora circum aurati bis sex radii fulgentia cingunt) of precious metals and shining light, and Aeneas, who is cast in lunar terms with his shield and armor (caelestibus armis). Tarrant particularly emphasizes Latinus’s status as a descendant of the sun god but also indicates the existence of some scholarly dispute as to whether or not the manifestation is a physical radiate crown or a purely radiant construct of light. The burning associated with Aeneas is also interesting in the context of the rest of his description, particularly as the progenitor of Rome (Romanae stirpis origo), which gives somewhat of a timeless quality to the scene.

The last example in this section comes from Lucan’s later first century epic *Pharsalia*, specifically from 7.455-459: “And yet for this disaster, we have all the revenge that Gods can rightly grant to Earth: civil wars will make deified men equal to deities; with thunderbolts, haloes, and stars, Rome will bedizen her dead and, in the Gods’ own temples, swear her oaths by their shades.” (Cladis tamen buins babenus Vindictam, quantam terris dare numina fas est. Bella pares superis facient civilia divos:

131 Jane Wilson Joyce translation.

132 Jane Wilson Joyce translation.
Fulminibus manes, radiisque ornabit, et astris, Inque deum templis iurabit Roma per umbras.) The example comes from the end of a fairly lengthy prophetic section of text. As such, the meaning of the passage is somewhat unclear. Still, the relations it examines between mortals and the divine, particularly in the context of deifying dead men and associations of deification with thunderbolts, haloes, and stars, are clear enough for the discussion at hand. Electricity (fulminibus) is characterized in terms of light and fire, especially since the word can very specifically refer to the lightning strike that causes a fire. The “halo” referred to in the English may be a stretch as an accurate translation, since the Latin is radiis, beams or rays; however, in context the reference could be to a nimbus or radiate crown, either of which would fit with other usages discussed in this chapter (such as connections with the underworld and death). Stars (astris) as paragons of fire and light also fit with the pattern inherent in Lucan’s list. All three—lightning, rays, stars—fall within a category of fire and light in association with divinity (as numina, diros, and deum all show up in the quoted passage).

VI. Greco-Roman: Scenes of Apotheosis

One entire category of scenes in the Greco-Roman corpus dovetails neatly with the concepts under consideration here: scenes of apotheosis, where mortals become deified. Examining how the process of apotheosis functions provides more material for consideration, especially in regard to the burning away of mortality and catasterism.

The apotheosis of Romulus in Plutarch, Life of Romulus 28.1-3 serves as the first example:

he had seen Romulus coming to meet him, looking taller and comelier than ever, dressed in shining and flaming armour…It pleased the gods, O Proculus, that we, who came from them, should remain so long a time amongst men as we did; and having built a city to be the greatest in the world for empire and glory, should again return to heaven. But farewell; and tell the Romans, that, by the exercise of temperance and fortitude, they shall attain the height of human power; we will be to you the propitious god Quirinus…there mingled with it a certain divine passion, some

133 Perseus linguistic/word study tools.
134 The English is the Dryden translation.
preternatural influence similar to possession by a divinity; nobody contradicted it, but, laying aside all jealousies and distractions, they prayed to Quirinus and saluted him as a god.\textsuperscript{135}

The passage describes the first appearance of Romulus after his deification; the obvious component of the passage is in his initial description of having armor associated with light and flame (\textit{λαμπροῖς καὶ φλέγουσι}); his armor is quite literally burning and radiant. However, perhaps the most interesting component is at the end of this section, namely the idea of “divine passion,” (which seems to come from \textit{δαιμόνιον} and \textit{ἔνθουσιασμῷ}) that rises almost to the level of divine possession or the creation of an avatar. The entire passage seems designed to cast a pall of divinity over everything that Romulus did; it serves as a literary representation of the Roman tendency to mythologize quasi-historical figures who were part of Roman foundation and origin stories. It also suggests a separation between humans and the divine, albeit a more fluid one than we have seen so far. Here, Romulus is characterized as a god among men, building a city with an inexorable destiny to be the greatest city in the world, one of glory and majesty, maybe even a city with divine aspects. In the Roman mind, it would only be fitting for their founder to become a god and watch over the city forevermore.

Ovid gives a number of apotheosis scenes to examine in the \textit{Metamorphoses}. In 9.239–271, he presents the apotheosis of Hercules. Because of the lengthy nature of Ovid’s scenes, we will excerpt a few lines of particular interest in discussing them. The first of these lines is as follows: “Let not

vain thoughts alarm you, nor the rising flames of Oeta; for Hercules who conquered everything, shall conquer equally the spreading fires which now you see: and all that part of him, celestial — inherited of me—immortal, cannot feel the power of death.”

(Sed enim ne pectora vano fida metu paveant: Oetaeas spernite flammas! Omnia qui vicit, vincet, quos cernitis, ignes nec nisi materna Vulcanum parte potentem sentiet: aeternum est a me quod traxit et expers atque inmune necis nullaque domabile flamma.) The language in the example is riddled with both fire—IGNES, flamma—and separation (cernitis, spernite, inmune), suggesting that the flames, in a bit of a departure from other examples, are acting upon Hercules to separate him from his mortal nature, leaving only the divine portion of him untouched. The passage ends with “And him, the glorious father of the Gods in the great chariot drawn by four swift steeds, took up above the wide-encircling clouds, and set him there amid the glittering stars.”

(Quem pater omnipotens inter cava nubila raptum quadriiugo curru radiantibus intulit astris) The passage sketches an image of shining stars (radiantibus...astris), but their significance is particularly noteworthy: Hercules is ascending to Heaven to join the stars themselves, assisted by someone already divine. His act establishes a connection between the celestial realm and becoming a divinity. Hercules is not the only figure who accomplishes apotheosis in the manner he does, either, as we are about to see.

The end of Book 14, from 805 on, discusses the apotheosis of Romulus and his wife Hersilie. Two aspects of the story merit attention. The first is “His mortal flesh dissolved into thin air, as when a ball of lead shot up from a broad sling melts all away and soon is lost in heaven.”

(corpus mortale per auras dilapsum tenues, ceu lata plumbea funda missa solet medio glans intabescere caelo.) This portion of the text describes the actual moment that Romulus undergoes apotheosis. Like the Livy example, we are given an image drawing on hot metal (in this case traveling at high speeds) to illustrate a concept of Romulus’s mortality fading away. The second portion, and the most interesting, is the wife of Romulus, Hersilie, joining her husband: “Descending through thin air there

136 English text for the remaining Ovid examples is from the More translation.
came a star, and then Hersilia her tresses glowing fiery in the light, rose with that star, as it returned through air.” (ibi sidus ab aethere lapsum decidit in terras, a cuius lumine flagrans Hersilie crines cum sidere cessit in auras.) Hersilie’s apotheosis is facilitated by a star (sidere, sidus), resulting in her hair glowing (lumine flagrans... crines), akin to both Ascanius in the Aeneid and the boy in the Silvae. The multiple references to hair suggest that the manifestations of fire and light may be connected to the hair of a being just as much as to their face, head, or more rarely shoulders. Aerial language like aethere reinforces the celestial nature of her apotheosis, and the manifestation of the fire around her head as she starts glowing suggests that she herself is starting to become a source of divine radiance as the nascent goddess Hora alongside her husband Quirinus.

The last apotheosis considered is that of Julius Caesar, who transforms into a comet, occurring in 15.745 to the end. At one point Caesar is mentioned as a “brightly flaming star” (in sidus vertere novum stellamque comamtem); given the Latin, brightly flaming is a loose translation, but two words for star (sidus, stellamque) are used, as well as comamtem. In English, the latter word could be admittedly rendered in the present context as brightly flaming, but such a rendering misses the allusions to growths resembling hair, as apparently the Romans thought of the tail of a comet. Later, Ovid tells that “Nor till his age shall equal Nestor's years will he ascend to heavenly dwellings and his kindred stars. Meanwhile transform the soul, which shall be reft from this doomed body, to a starry light” (nes nisi cum senior Pylios aequaverit annos, aetherias sedes cognataque sidera tanget. Hanc animam interea caeso de corpore raptam fac inhar). The notion of the resting place of a ruler being among the stars (aetherias sedes cognataque sidera tanget) is intriguing, and perhaps partially explains the prominence of celestial connections amongst these apotheosis scenes and apparitions of fire and light generally. With regard to this point Green notes how the ruler (“god-king”) was envisioned as an intermediary between earth and heaven, between the divine and mortal; effectively, significant beings

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and events are in the stars. Also interesting here is the verb *inbar*, which quite literally means to become or make a star or constellation, fully suggestive of the light of celestial entities. The Latin suggests his body is being transfigured into a star, and in doing so is taking on radiance. The last portion of relevance is “She did not give it time so that it could dissolve in air, but bore it quickly up, toward all the stars of heaven; and on the way, she saw it gleam and blaze and set it free. Above the moon it mounted into heaven, leaving behind a long and fiery trail, and as a star it glittered in the sky.” (Caesaris eripuit membris neque in aera solvi passa recentem animam caelestibus intulit astris. Dumque tulit, lumen capere atque ignescere sensit emisitque sinu: luna volat altius illa, flammiferumque trabens spatioso limite crinem stella micat natique videns bene facta fatetur esse suis maiora et vinci gaudet ab illo.) Two words for star are used (*astris* and *stella*), and we also see the words *flammiferumque* and *ignescere*, indicating fiery and to kindle or ignite, respectively. The passage relates the moment Caesar becomes, linguistically, a star that behaves like a comet, with the star described as doing things stars don’t typically do (*trabens…crinem* as an example—again note the hair reference). The lines represent the culmination of Caesar’s apotheosis, now that he has become a “star” giving off his own radiance from his “head,” and incidentally the lines also represent the culmination of Ovid’s entire work.

Scenes of apotheosis all suggest the stripping away of the mortal components of significant mortal beings as they become deified, often in the process taking on components of elemental forces, like Hersilie’s blaze as she joins a star and rises to be with her husband.

**VII. Greco-Roman and Biblical: Where the “Nimbus” Comes From?**

An earlier issue raised in the first footnote of this chapter is why the nimbus moniker came to apply to the motif. By looking at Greco-Roman and Biblical examples, we will see how the labeling might have happened and how the cloud acts as a cloaking mechanism for divinity.
The first Greco-Roman example is from the *Pharsalia* as somewhat of a more elemental portrayal, from the beginning of 7 (1-6): “Reluctant to rise from Ocean as ageless Laws required, the sorrowing Sun urged his horses as never before to resist the air, bucking Heaven’s on-rolling rim; wearily he yearned for suffering, yearned for the pain of light eclipsed; he drew clouds about him, not to stoke his fires, but to stop his light from shining clear in Thessaly’s sky ("Segnior Oceano, quam lex aeterna vocabat, Luctificus Titan numquam magis aethera contra Egit equos, currumque, polo rapiente, retorsit: Defectusque pati voluit, raptaeque labors Lucis: et adtraxit nubes, non pabula flammis, Sed ne Thessalico purus luceret in orbe"). The example draws a connection between the Ocean and the Sun, reinforcing the fire and water elemental concepts previously charted. The Sun here is also much more a personification of an elemental force than an anthropomorphic being. However, the most pertinent portion is when the Sun draws clouds around him to block his light (expressed as a negative—*ne…luceret*—not to shine). Clouds (*nubes*) are acting to block the light and fires (literally the *flammis*) of a divinity. The clouds serve to prevent light from getting through; we should distinguish, however, that the clouds never seem to function to extinguish radiant light, but rather to merely interrupt or cloak it.

Shifting to Biblical examples, our first comes from Exodus 24.15-18:

Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. The glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud. Now the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain.”

Later in Exodus, we also have (34.29-35):

Moses came down from Mount Sinai. As he came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face was shining, and they were afraid to come near him…When Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil on his face, but whenever Moses went in before the Lord to speak with him, he would
take the veil off, until he came out; and when he came out, and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, the Israelites would see the face of Moses, that the skin of his face was shining.

In the former passage, a cloud signifies the presence of the Lord in a location: when the glory of the Lord comes to Sinai, the physical indicator is a cloud settling over the mountain for a lengthy period of time. The words used for cloud are *nubes* and *nebulae* in the Latin and νεθέλη (a mass of clouds). The cloud hides the essence of the Lord, blocking it from the sight of the sinful people of Israel but permitting it to be seen by the person chosen to be God’s designated messenger to the people, the prophet Moses. Indeed, the cloud described appears to block this radiance from appearing to everyone except those who can talk to divinity. The seventh day symbolism mentioned in the passage is pervasive in the Judeo-Christian tradition, but here rather than resting on the seventh day, God acts on the seventh day to call to Moses. His action hints that the cloud may be impenetrable without divine permission.

In the latter passage, the Latin *cornuta* in reference to the face of Moses is traditionally understood to be a mistranslation of the Hebrew *qeren*, which can mean horns or rays of light. The Greek renders this reference as δεδόξασται, which means something like to magnify, extol, or glorify, giving a more figurative interpretation than the Hebrew. By going inside the cloud and speaking with the Lord and receiving commandments wrought by him, Moses took on some of the radiance present within the cloud. His veil almost serves as a micro-version of the cloud in terms of acting as a cloaking mechanism preventing others from accessing that radiance. The two related passages also recall elements from *Gilgamesh*—the veiling of Moses’s shining face suggests that the radiance can be covered, although unlike in *Gilgamesh* it apparently cannot be removed. The veil merely acts to prevent it from being seen and presumably overwhelming other people, a motivation

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implying something unworldly, supernatural, or divine about the shining. Similarly to other passages, fire is associated with divinity, particularly in the aspect of divine glory.

In 1 Kings 8.10-11 we see another example of this cloud phenomenon: “when the priests came out of the holy place, a cloud filled the house of the Lord, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud; for the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord.” The Latin uses forms of *nebula* here, which can indicate a mist, fog, or cloud, but can also indicate darkness or obscurity, reflecting the blocking mechanism the cloud seems to enact; the Greek continues the use of the word *νεφέλη*, a mass of clouds. The cloud suggests the presence of something antithetical to ordinary human functioning—the portion of the verse after the semicolon heavily suggests the reason the priests could not minister is because of the glory of the Lord embodied in the cloud. A god in a non-anthropomorphic state (or at least a hidden one) makes his presence felt in his holy place; the cloud may not be a literal storm-cloud, but perhaps (if there was indeed a physical presence and not just a spiritual one) a haze or fog. The cloud seems to allow humans to rationalize a noncorporeal divinity and fit it into their understanding.

Matthew 17.2 and 17.5, in reference to Jesus, tell how “And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white,” (et transfiguratus est ante eos. Et resplenduit facies ejus sicut sol: vestimenta autem ejus facta sunt alba sicut nix. καὶ μετεμορφώθη ἔμπροσθεν αὐτῶν, καὶ ἐλαμψεν τὸ πρόσωπον αὐτοῦ ὡς ὁ ἡλιος, τά δὲ ἵματα αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο λευκὰ ὡς τὸ φῶς) and “While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, “this is my Son, the Beloved, with him I am well pleased, listen to him!” (ἐτὶ αὐτοῦ λαλοῦντος, ἰδοὺ νεφέλη φωτεινὴ ἐπεσκίασεν αὐτοὺς, καὶ ἰδοὺ φωνὴ ἐκ τῆς νεφέλης λέγουσα: οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ υἱὸς μου ὁ ἀγαπητὸς, ἐν ᾧ εὐδόκησα: ἀκούετε αὐτοῦ. Adhuc eo loquente, ecce nubes lucida obnumbravit eos. Et ecce vox de nube, dicens: Hic est Filius meus dilectus, in quo mihi bene
complacui: ipsum audite.) Verse 2 uses a form of resplendere meaning to shine brightly, in this case just as brightly as the sun (sicut sol). Verse 5 seems to use the cloud (again νεθέλη in the Greek and nubes in the Latin) as a means of transportation, adding the bright epithet, *Lucida* and φωτεινή, both terms holding a definition of bright or full of light, the Greek indicating especially the nature of light as revelatory. Intriguingly, the cloud appears with brightness, almost as if the radiance of the Lord cannot be fully contained because of his pleasure, or perhaps radiance spills out with the voice. Radiance may even be the means by which the voice is communicating. The two verses recall the description of Moses from Exodus, and also suggest something of the apotheosis scenes previously discussed, where the mortal components of a being are stripped away as the divinity takes hold, although in this case only temporarily. God here is acting directly to express a message to mortals, and the cloud and radiance appear as his means to do so.

Thus, the cloud is clearly affiliated with divine light and radiance; ironically enough, however, it is affiliated not with the expression of such radiance, but with the cloaking of it.

**VIII. Biblical: The Appearance of the Lord**

The most prominent display of radiance and fire in connection with divinity in the Bible can be found in descriptions of the appearance of the Lord, or of entities like angels that can be reasonably connected with him. Ezekiel 1.26-28 relates one such description:

“And above the dome over their heads was something like a throne, in appearance like sapphire; and seated above the likeness of a throne was something that seemed like a human form. Upward from what appeared like the loins I saw something like gleaming amber, something that looked like fire enclosed all around; and downward from what looked like the loins I saw something that looked like fire, and there was a splendor all around. Like the bow in a cloud on a rainy day, such was the appearance of the splendor all around. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord.” (Et super firmamentum quod erat imminens capiti eorum, quasi aspectus lapidis sapphiri similitudo throni: et super similitudinem throni similitudo quasi aspectus hominis desuper.

http://biblesuite.com/greek/5460.htm

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27 Et vidi quasi speciem electri, velut aspectum ignis, intrinsecus ejus per circuitum: a lumbis ejus et desuper, et a lumbis usque deorsum, vidi quasi speciem ignis splendentis in circuitu, 28 velut aspectum arcus cum fuerit in nube in die pluviæ. Hic erat aspectus splendoris per gyrum.

ὁρᾷ, ὁπαζίρ λίθος ἔπιποιμα θρόνος ἐπὶ τοῦ ὁμοίωματος τοῦ θρόνου ὁμοίωμα ὡς εἴδος ἀνθρώπου ἠνωθεν 27 καὶ εἶδον ὡς ψυπν ἡλέκτρου ἀπὸ ὄρασίως ὁσφύως καὶ ἔπανω καὶ ἀπὸ ὄρασιως ὁσφύως καὶ ἐως κάτω ἐξὸν ὡς ὁρασίν πυρὸς καὶ τὸ φέγγος αὐτοῦ κύκλῳ 28 ὡς ὁρασίς τόξου ὅταν ἦν ἐν τῇ νεφέλῃ ἐν ἡμέρᾳ ὑπὸ οὕτως ἡ στάσις τοῦ φέγγους κυκλόθεν αὐτή ἡ ὁρασίς ὁμοίωματος δόξας κυρίου καὶ εἶδον καὶ πίπτω ἐπὶ πρόσωπόν μου καὶ ἤκουσα φωνὴν λαλοῦντος)

The passage emphasizes the description of the manifestation of the glory of the Lord; somewhat akin to what we saw with the *Gilgamesh* episode, the glory is a physical representation of overweening divine power and majesty. Unlike examples considered earlier, where the Lord visits the earthly plane, the current example reverses the situation, featuring a mortal ascending into heaven. As a result, the depiction here arguably showcases the Lord in his natural habitat, where radiance and splendor seem to permeate everything Ezekiel sees. The representation is characterized with the language of fire and light (*ignis, ignis splendentis in circuitu, splendoris, πυρὸς* (fire), φέγγος (light/splendor)) with fire enclosing the body of the Lord, amber gleaming (*speciem electri/*ηλέκτρου), and the rainbow (*arcus*) forming. The description is rich, both in terms of opulence and linguistic detail, conveyed through a series of similes. The similes express the difficulty of discussing divinity in mundane human language; divinity can only be envisioned through analogy, not through direct description. Dichotomous elemental language occurs as well, particularly in the cool blue of the sapphire throne and the association of the rainbow with storms (possibly an allusion to the postdiluvian rainbow). The characterization strongly suggests that radiance is something integral to the nature of divinity, and in human perception renders itself in terms of fire, light, and things that look like fire and light (such as amber).

To return to the Book of Exodus, Exodus 24.15-18 presents a different description of the Lord’s appearance: “Now the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the
top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain.” Similarly to other passages, fire is associated with divinity, particularly in the aspect of divine glory. The passage employs a similarity of expression regarding the presence of the Lord as we saw with the passage from Lamentations in characterizing the Lord as a devouring fire (πῦρ φλέγων and ignis ardens, making “devouring” a stretch, although it would connect to other depictions of divine fire as consuming). The appearance here is of the glory of the Lord, implying that the glory is something different or separate from the appearance of the Lord himself, which reinforces concepts from Gilgamesh about radiance as something that is simultaneously its own entity and an extension of a divinity.

As far as New Testament depictions, the Book of Revelation contains two significant passages. Revelation 10.1 relates “And I saw another mighty angel coming down from heaven, wrapped in a cloud, with a rainbow over his head; his face was like the sun, and his legs like pillars of fire.” Revelation 12.1 also tells how “A great portent appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars.” The first of the two passages recalls the earlier Ezekiel passage regarding the appearance of the angel in a cloud (nube/νεφέλην), with legs that are columns of flame (pedes ejus tamquam columna ignis /πόδες αὐτοῦ ἡς στῦλοι πυρός) and a rainbow (iris/ἲρις). For the second passage, the idea of a woman clothed in the sun (mulier amicta sole / γυνὴ περιβεβλημένη τὸν ἡλιον) suggests the literary equivalent of an aureole, or a full-body nimbus. Her starry crown (corona stellarum duodecim /στέφανος ἀστέρων διώδεκα, although the Greek star also indicates a degree of action) also could be connected to the radiate crowns previously discussed; although her identity is debatable, she is connected to heaven and thereby to divinity because of where she appears.
IX. Conclusion

Although the examples given here come from disparate sources, they do seem to present at least some unity and coherence of ideas. The corpus of examples chosen displays the development of a language of fire and light, often in association with other elemental language, notably that of water, creating various dichotomies. The corpus also portrays manifestations of divine power or association through seemingly wondrous appearances of apparitions based around fire and light. The manifestations may be around a divinity or mortal, but if around a mortal never seem to be of the mortal’s own volition. They are instead caused or produced by a god or gods. Strangely, the mortals who are the subjects of these manifestations rarely (if ever) appear troubled by them, with no suggestions of shock or terror at suddenly having one’s head on fire, for example. The manifestations seem to occur at moments of transition or revelation, whether from mortal to divinity in a scene of apotheosis or as part of a portent or vision sent by the gods to communicate a message to mankind. Lastly, the manifestations have clear celestial connections, along with their divine radiances that surround, full of fire and light.
CHAPTER IV

Tabling the Nimbus: Typologies of its Characteristics, and their Significance

1. Introduction

To my knowledge, the nimbus has never been subjected to typological analysis. How does it appear from a formalistic perspective, in terms of such compositional properties as number of bands, color, whether it is radiate and if so what kind, the number present within a scene, and the medium? How does it vary geographically and chronologically? How does it appear in terms of the figures depicted with one? Are there patterns or trends in any of these categories? How do these categories interact? This chapter seeks to explore all of these questions through a series of tables that categorize examples from the Greco-Roman corpus, drawn from the entire Mediterranean region, in terms of the categories already given. In terms of logistical arrangement, each example has been given a unique identifier, consisting of a name that is the city in which the artifact currently resides plus an arbitrary number. The label is then applied across a series of tables of categories which includes all currently known possibilities for the nimbus within that category. Because the labels are consistent across categories, a particular artifact can be tracked through the tables; the simple labeling system also avoids the problem of assigning cumbersome strings of characters to categorize each piece while at the same time permitting trends amongst the groups to be noticed. The duplicate appearance of a label within a table is not an error, but reflects that that artifact has multiple nimbi, which may or may not fall in the same option within a table.

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140 Insofar as this information is known; if no location can be determined, as in the case of one artifact (Unknown 82) intercepted from the art market, the name used will be Unknown.

141 Note to reader: the images with these numbers can be found in the Appendix at the back of the thesis, with information about each image available in the Master Key preceding the Appendix. The images are listed sequentially by the assigned number. Also, these images may be viewed online: see the website information given in the Image Corpus Overview.
I. Formalistic Analysis

The first broad category of tables all fall under the auspices of formalistic analysis, describing how the nimbus physically appears within an artistic composition and the choices that are made in doing so. Formalistic analysis will include the number of bands, color, radiate nature, presence, and medium.

IA. Number of Bands

Table 1: Number of Bands With Which the Nimbus is Depicted

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Relevant Numbers</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3+bands</td>
<td>Worcester 1, Nea Paphos 5, Paris 15, Paris 15, Timgad 16, Shahba 17, Shahba 17, Bulla Regia 22, Malibu 25, Tunis 26, El Djem 31, El Djem 31, Catacombs 37, Naples 46, Munich 72, Munich 72, Tunis 80, Tunis 80, Unknown 82, Unknown 82, Madrid 98, Rome 109/110, Hamburg 122</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>aureole</td>
<td>Cleveland 73, Boston 77</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This table reflects the number of bands a nimbus is represented with. The nimbus is a fundamentally circular object; what I refer to as “bands” are rendered as sets of concentric circles. When multiple bands are present, they are rarely of the same width. Typically, they feature one large innermost band [proximate to the head] and one or more outer thinner bands [surrounding that one]. Based on the literary analysis of Chapter 2 coupled with my image examinations, I see no suggestion that the sets of concentric circles were thought of as circles behind circles, but rather as more of a bulls-eye in terms of being one unified shape or form. Although the vast majority of bands are uniform in type, a few examples, such as Timgad 16, exist where the bands are not uniform, creating an almost mottled or jagged effect that seems an exclusively North African phenomenon.

The corpus reflects a preference for single-banded nimbi (76) as compared to double-banded (51). Both types exist in higher numbers than the relatively few occurrences of triple and greater bands (23), let alone the even rarer aureoles (2). This state of affairs may reflect the compositional significance of the nimbus as a framing device, with single-banded and double banded nimbi more effective in simple framing. Employing three or more bands seems compositionally busy, and aureoles occur so rarely as to render difficult much meaningful discussion of them as a category. One of the most prominent examples of the latter, however, Cleveland 73, features Medea within what is at least functionally an aureole, and makes her the unequivocal focus of the scene, which suggests that at least in the framing aspect an aureole is similar to the more typical nimbus. Indeed, we might even think of the aureole as a “super-nimbus,” by virtue of how it spatially and visually dominates the composition in which it appears. We should also note the apparent lack of a

142 To remind the reader, the aureole can be defined as a full-body version of the nimbus, lacking the nimbus’s attachment to the head specifically; Didron 25 in fact defines it as “the nimbus encircling the body.” Categorical statements about the aureole beyond this point are difficult to make simply because the motif is so rare in classical art.
geographical or chronological pattern to this category; in other words, we do not see a particular band type appearing more commonly in one region or time period, which may lend credence to the compositional hypothesis presented.

**IB. Colors**

Table 2: Colors of the Nimbus

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Color</th>
<th>Relevant Numbers</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White inside, dark outside</td>
<td>Naples 8, Tunis 10, Paris 15, Paris 15, Bulla Regia 22</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yellow/gold based</td>
<td>Naples 7, Italica 21, Catacombs 32, Naples 38, Bonn 45, Antakya 61, Cleveland 75, Naples 76, Sparta 79, El Djem 100</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three plus colors</td>
<td>Tunis 26, El Djem 31, El Djem 31, Catacombs 37, Tunis 80, Tunis 80</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>other</td>
<td>Shahba 18, Tunis 40, Naples 60, Cleveland 75, Arles 78, Tunis 89, El Djem 101, Brantingham 103/104 (x6), Hamburg 122, Marino 123, Marino 123</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Color unknown b/c colored image is unavailable</td>
<td>Rome 41, Berlin 56, Berlin 57, Berlin 58, Damascus 59, Palmyra 88, Tunis 90, Timгад 91, Sousse 96, Arles 97, Madrid 98</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This table reflects the most commons colors with which the nimbus is depicted. This aspect is worth exploring in greater detail; unfortunately, the present analysis is dependent upon images of varying quality captured by others, since personally traveling to view all of these artifacts and take pictures is impractical (and in some cases, as with artifacts either housed in Syria or stolen, impossible). As a result, determining the color of a nimbus becomes partially reliant on image quality, as well as on my judgment.

A significant number of images are essentially excluded from the present analysis because of the nature of their medium—stone reliefs, metal objects, and lamps, for example—are not usually colored. Furthermore, meanings of color are extremely limited in other media such as red-figure vase painting or gold glass. In practical terms, these considerations mean that this table is drawn from those media which employ meaningful representations of color, primarily mosaic and wall painting. The most prominent characteristic this table helps to make tangible is the degree to which the nimbi tend toward the blue/grey region of the spectrum (53 images fell in this category). The meaning of the finding is unclear; one possibility may be that this compositional choice reflects the sky in order to reinforce the apparent celestial nature of the nimbus. Kosky makes an intriguing suggestion that blue may represent distance, where it “introduces a third, intermediate, or borderline realm between the brilliant purity of heaven’s white or golden light and the refracted splendor of that light as it appears on the many colored earth below.” If we accept his suggestion, it serves to highlight how the nimbus quite often occurs on representations of deities. While not the

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143 In fact, as the table reflects, some images could not be categorized because of the apparent lack of an existing color image in both print and electronic sources.
144 In the case of stone reliefs, particular artifacts may have been initially colored, and would as a result fall within the color analysis here. Unfortunately, no artifact in stone relief in the corpus has visible paint traces or appears to have been chemically analyzed for pigment, meaning the current analysis cannot consider the artifacts as to color.
145 Even more broadly, if my supposition is correct, the blue-grey nimbus could arguably be situated within a broader artistic and architectural paradigm of a Roman interest in portraying the heavens, as with the so-called “Vault of Heaven” (see for example MacDonald 1982: 56-63 on the vaulting of the Aula Regia of the Domus Flavia).
146 His suggestion is presented in discussing an entirely unrelated subject, but is still applicable here.
deity itself (as these images are not cult statues and lack the divine presence noted in Chapter 1 with Egyptian art), we could view the image as a mediator between the divine itself and the human viewer. Under this construction, the blue nimbus helps the artwork occupy a liminal space between humans and the divine. Additionally, with only one exception (Arles 78), all images of Dionysos eligible for consideration as to color fall into this category. Might the color choice be meant to reflect his dominion over wine? The color may reflect what Nonnus tells us in the *Dionysiaca* (12.380)\(^{147}\): “To Dionysos alone had Rheia given the amethyst, which preserves the wine drinker from the tyranny of madness”, amethyst of course being a purple-blue in hue. Thus, an association of Dionysos with blue-purple may refer to this myth.

A number of other colors do appear, however, particularly those that are yellow/gold-based; the set overwhelmingly depicts solar deities such as Helios or Sol\(^{148}\). The significance of representing solar deities with gold and yellow seems self-evident (recalling the light the sun emits). A few depictions utilizing a white/light interior and a dark exterior also exist; although less uniform than the yellow-based depictions, these nimbi seem to be on primarily oceanic scenes, also with an exception that is in this case a depiction of Ceres (Naples 8). A couple of examples of three or more colors in a nimbus appear as well—reflecting what we saw previously regarding the number of bands in terms of compositional complexity, multiple colors seem to be used in cases where the rest of the composition is otherwise fairly simple. More specifically, the colors seem used when the head is a particular focus of the scene, or where the head or bust is the only figural element of the scene (see for example Catacombs 37). Catacombs 37 is the exception to the appearance of many-colored


\(^{148}\) As with most categories, there is one outlier here: Narcissus is depicted with a nimbus of this color (Antakya 61). The significance of this is unclear, as nothing in his mythology appears to have solar connections. One possibility may be that this choice of coloring reflects the color of the flower that Narcissus will turn into, thus giving the viewer a hint or reminder of the mythological story inexorably tied up with Narcissus. An additional outlier may be Cleveland 75, where the yellow nimbus appears on a satyr; the significance is unclear, although it is possible given the artifact’s nature as a textile that it has faded or changed over time from a different color.
nimbi solely in North Africa, specifically in modern-day Tunisia. The apparent attraction of the region to crafting many-colored nimbi does not have a readily apparent explanation, and developing one awaits further study in Roman/indigenous North African color symbolism.

**IC. Radiate Nature**

Table 3: Characterizing the Radiate Nature of a Nimbus

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Radiate Type</th>
<th>Relevant Numbers</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Radiate—rays begin at edge of nimbus and extend outward</td>
<td>Lepeis Magna 11, London 14, London 24, Malibu 25, El Djem 31, Catacombs 32, Coin 33, London 43, Naples 46, Naples 47, Munich 72, Munich 72, Cleveland 73, Boston 77, Vatican 83, Arles 97, Hamburg 122, Marino 123</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radiate—rays begin at head and extend beyond edge of nimbus</td>
<td>Naples 9, Italica 21, Vatican 30, Emerita 35, Naples 38, Bonn 45, Rome 63, Sparta 79, El Djem 100, Hammath Tiberias 106</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radiate—nimbus and rays are one continuous entity</td>
<td>Vatican 84, Essen 118</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This table depicts whether or not a nimbus is radiate, and if so, what type of radiate behavior it displays. Importantly, radiate nimbi only appear on a select subset of the image corpus—namely, they only occur on solar deities or on someone who is deliberately invoking solar deities (the category of the Roman emperors). These radiate nimbi exist in three primary forms: 1) where the solar rays begin at the head but terminate when the circular disk of the nimbus ends 2) where the rays begin at the head but do not terminate when the nimbus ends, and in doing so extend beyond the edge of the nimbus, and 3) where the rays begin at the edge of the nimbus and extend outward. A fourth minor category, of the rays and nimbus blended together, seems to be a peculiarly Etruscan phenomenon, with its only two occurrences both Etruscan. The third category and first category are tied in having the most occurrences (both at 18). This state may be compositional in rationale, avoiding busyness near the head; it may also be regional for the first category, where a large portion of the images come from Syrian representations.

In addition, an analogue to the traditional radiate nimbus, with its spokes extending in relation to the central circle, exists in the form of what I am calling the lunar nimbus, something that appears heretofore undiscussed in the secondary scholarship as a nimbus. Just as the radiate spokes can exist separately of the nimbus, so can the lunar crescent, which typically occurs on top of the head or perched on the forehead. The motif of the lunar nimbus, however, features a lunar crescent behind the head, with the points of the crescent rising in such a way as to create either an explicit circle or a circle of negative space behind the head\(^{149}\). The lunar nimbus unsurprisingly appears only on lunar deities such as Selene and Luna, but never seems to appear on Artemis (who admittedly only has three nimbate appearances in the corpus), in contrast to the solar side of things, where her twin Apollo is sometimes depicted radiate. This whole state of affairs represents an artistic compositional inversion of the symbolic inversion inherent between solar and lunar deities: the solar

\(^{149}\) Tunis 40 serves as an excellent example of the motif.
deity is portrayed with a radiate nimbus of positive space, and the lunar deity is portrayed with a lunar nimbus of negative space. As the Sun and Moon are counterparts, to an ancient audience it may have seemed intuitively obvious for the solar and lunar nimbus to be each other’s counterparts as well.

**ID. Presence within the Scene**

Table 4: Presence Within the Scene of One Versus Multiple Nimbi

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Presence</th>
<th>Relevant Numbers</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>multiple</td>
<td>Nea Paphos 4, Nea Paphos 5, Paris 15, Shahba 17, Shahba 18, Italica 21, Vatican 30, El Djem 31, Emerita 35, Palmyra 44, Rome 63, Damascus 65, Damascus 66, Damascus 67, Damascus 71, Munich 72, Seville 74, Cleveland 75, Tunis 80, Unknown 82, Carranque 99, Brantingham 103/104, Marino 123</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This category simply reflects whether a scene features only one nimbus, or multiple nimbi. On its own, the presence of only one versus multiple nimbi within a scene does not seem to be a particularly pertinent concept for analysis on the corpus level, with the appearances weighted toward

~ 96 ~
singular depictions (98 single depictions versus 23 multiple depictions). The distribution may be skewed because of the fragmentary nature of many of the artifacts, or because the artifact in its totality only depicts one subject. Overall, this category seems to lack any pattern or trend. However, on the level of the individual scene, analysis with respect to this criterion becomes useful in examining which subjects are nimbate and which are not.\footnote{As we saw in Chapter I, this type of individual analysis can tell us quite a lot about how the nimbus functions within a specific scene. That level of analysis, however, is not germane to this chapter’s focus on analysis of the corpus as a whole. Individual scene-level analysis of every scene in the corpus with particular attention paid to the nimbus could be a future direction for study.}

**IE. Medium**

Table 5: Media on Which the Nimbus is Depicted

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>Relevant Numbers</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wall/ceiling mosaic</td>
<td>Catacombs 32, Rome 109/110, Rome 111</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relief sculpture</td>
<td>Rome 3, Vatican 30, Palmyra 44, Trier 48, Trier 49, Trier 50, Antalya 51, Rome 63, Rome 64, Damascus 65, Damascus 66, Damascus 67, Palmyra 68, Palmyra 69, Damascus 70, Damascus 71, Rome 85</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Red-figure vase painting</td>
<td>London 14, London 24, Malibu 25, Dallas 39, Tarentum 42, London 43, Naples 46, Naples 47, Munich 72, Cleveland 73, Boston 77, Hamburg 122</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lamp</td>
<td>London 52, London 53, London 54</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metallic/minor arts</td>
<td>Madrid 2, Coin 33, Vatican 83, Vatican 84, Berlin 86, Coin 87, Geneva 105, Milan 114, Milan 115, St. Petersburg 116, Vatican 117, Essen 118</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\footnote{As we saw in Chapter I, this type of individual analysis can tell us quite a lot about how the nimbus functions within a specific scene. That level of analysis, however, is not germane to this chapter’s focus on analysis of the corpus as a whole. Individual scene-level analysis of every scene in the corpus with particular attention paid to the nimbus could be a future direction for study.}
The nimbus occurs on a variety of media; that being said, certain media types seem privileged in terms of appearances of the nimbus. Representations exist primarily on mosaics (59+3), with some also found on red-figure vase painting (12), wall/ceiling painting (12), metallic and minor arts (12) and relief sculpture (17), with token examples from lamps, glass, and textile. This appearance of privilege may partly be a result of preservation: mosaics tend to preserve fairly well and were ubiquitous in the Mediterranean, increasing the likelihood of their survival to the present day. Conversely, it is unsurprising that the corpus only includes two textile examples given the propensity for damage and decomposition. Furthermore, along with wall painting, the use of color offered by mosaics as compared to other media opened up rich possibilities for conveying meaning and creating representations. For both red-figure vase painting and relief sculpture the appearances of the nimbus tend to be overwhelmingly solar or lunar in nature. The solar-lunar virtual monopoly suggests that the nimbus may in fact function as an attribute in these situations, allowing for the ready identification of a figure by the audience, particularly on media like relief sculpture, where space is valuable and conveying certain representations may be more difficult.

We should also note that no representations of a nimbus within certain media seem to have currently been found, particularly sarcophagi and black-figure vase painting. For black-figure vase painting, as typologies later in the chapter will show, we should not expect to find a nimbus in archaic Greek art, with the first example of the nimbus I know of not apparently appearing until the late 6th century BCE (Vatican 84) in Etruscan art. Although black-figure vase painting persists as a deliberately archaic style, it never seems to have incorporated the motif of the nimbus.
In terms of sarcophagi, the lack of representation does not have a readily apparent rationale. Possibilities include that something else (like the *clipeus*) takes the role of the nimbus, or that the nimbus does not compositionally work well with a sarcophagus. Sarcophagi generally lack color to clearly differentiate a nimbus and are often ornately detailed, something not as true of relief sculpture harboring a nimbus. Relief sculptures bearing a nimbus tend to be fairly compositionally simple (see for example Trier 49 and 50). Clearly representing something as small as the nimbus on a sarcophagus would likely be artistically difficult.

II. Geographic Analysis

This category analyzes the geographic distribution of extant depictions.

Table 6: Geographic Points of Origin for Depictions of the Nimbus

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Relevant Numbers</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Central and Northern Italy</td>
<td>Rome 3(?), Vatican 30 (?), Catacombs 32, Catacombs 37, Rome 41, Rome 63 (?), Rome 64, Vatican 83, Vatican 84, Rome 85, Rome 109/110, Rome 111, Toledo 113, Milan 114, Milan 115, Vatican 117, Essen 118, Marino 123</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>Bonn 45, Trier 48, Trier 49, Trier 50, Trier 55, Trier 107</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France and Switzerland</td>
<td>Orbe 36, Arles 78, Arles 95, Arles 97, Geneva 105</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>Italica 21, Emerita 35, Seville 74, Madrid 98, Carranque 99</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British Isles</td>
<td>Bignor 102, Brantingham 103/104</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>Madrid 2, Zeugma 28, Antalya 51, Berlin 56, Berlin 57, Berlin 58, Gaziantep 120, Gaziantep 121</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Israel</td>
<td>Sepphoris 34, Hammath Tiberias 106</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syria</td>
<td>Worcester 1, Princeton 12, Suweida 13, Shahba 17, Shahba 18, Shahba 19, Suweida 20, Damascus 23, Kyoto 29, Palmyra 44, Antakya 61, Princeton 62, Damascus 65, Damascus 66, Damascus 67, Palmyra 68</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

151 The possibility may be the reason the nimbus does not seem to show up on glass until the invention of gold glass; putting one in glass might have proven too challenging.

152 See too footnote 144 regarding color on stone relief; the sentiments expressed hold true for sarcophagi as well.
A couple of points are worth commenting on in terms of geography. First, the nimbi are distributed all over the Mediterranean; they are not a phenomenon localized to one particular area. This finding reflects how the nimbus must have served a function or functions with a degree of universal meaning, lending some credence to the hypothesis of its essential function as a compositional framing device. That being said, some concentration of nimbate depictions in particular areas does seem to occur, although this could again be a function of preservation. These particular areas are Italy (19+18), Syria (24), and North Africa (20). In fact, the oldest nimbus depictions come from Southern Italy and Etruria, which seem strange places for an artistic motif to originate. Perhaps we simply lack evidence that the Mediterranean nimbus is older. A missing link in the archaeological evidence may exist, for it seems especially strange to not have any representations from Greece, particularly when the nimbus shows up in numbers in the Greek colonies of Southern Italy. In a more speculative light, the finding might be an additional piece of evidence for the theory of an Eastern origin for the Etruscans. Most evidence for the theory is based on literary and archaeological evidence, and more recently on DNA evidence, making the type of evidence presented here (artistic typology) fairly novel. In my interpretation, the Etruscans brought with them the more Eastern ideas that led to the nimbus, and the nimbus spread from them to the Southern

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153 The question of Etruscan origins has a wealth of scholarly research devoted to it: for a few starting points, see Beeke 2003 and Haynes 2000: 1-2 for the literary and archaeological evidence, and for DNA evidence see Pellecchia et al 2007 and Achilli et al 2007 (for) and Ghirotto et al 2013 (against).
Italian representations (which are later in date than the oldest Etruscan ones) and then out across
the Mediterranean. As a final note, the subjects depicted nimbate for whom there are enough images
in the corpus (see Thematic Analysis later in this chapter) strikingly lack concentrations in a
particular region (for example, representations of a nimbate Dionysos are not concentrated in
Germany). The lack implies that with regard to nimbate figure, the nimbus lacks a regional character.

III. Chronological Analysis

This category analyzes the depictions of the nimbus in terms of their distribution through time.\(^\text{154}\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time Period</th>
<th>Relevant Numbers</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6(^{\text{th}})-5(^{\text{th}}) c. BCE</td>
<td>London 24, Cleveland 73, Vatican 83, Vatican 84</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4(^{\text{th}})-3(^{\text{rd}}) c. BCE</td>
<td>London 14, Malibu 25, Coin 33, Dallas 39, Tarentum 42, London 43, Naples 46, Naples 47, Munich 72, Boston 77, Vatican 117, Essen 118, Hamburg 122</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2(^{\text{nd}})-1(^{\text{st}}) c. BCE</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1(^{\text{st}})-2(^{\text{nd}}) c. BCE</td>
<td>Rome 3, Naples 7(?), Naples 8(?), Naples 9(?), Tunis 10, Lepcis Magna 11, Timgad 16, Italica 21, Zeugma 28, Naples 38, Rome 41, Palmyra 44, Trier 48, Rome 63, Damascus 65 (?), Damascus 66, Damascus 67, Palmyra 68, Palmyra 69, Damascus 70, Naples 76, Arles 78 (?), Pompeii 81, Rome 85 (?), Timgad 91 (?), Arles 95, Arles 97, Sabratha 112, Gaziantep 120 (?), Gaziantep 121 (?), Marino 123</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{154}\) The reader should note that the 2\(^{\text{nd}}\)-1\(^{\text{st}}\) c. BCE entry is not an error; the table merely reflects the apparent lack of any extant representations found from that time period.
For ease of analysis, because of the relatively large swath of time this analysis covers, and because of the often imprecise dating of artifacts depicting a nimbus, the nimbi have been sorted into two-hundred year groupings. Even with such seemingly large groupings, some trends emerge. We should remember, however, that the chronological distribution of the nimbi appearances is at least partially a function of preservation, which is in turn a function of medium. Certain media, such as red figure vase painting, only appear at certain time points, and thus it is almost tautological that as a result nimbi on those media only appear at those times.

Keeping the aforementioned points in mind, coupling this table with others in the analysis allows us to sketch a rough history of the nimbus. The nimbus seems to first show up in the Mediterranean in the late sixth and early fifth century BCE, although likely not in wide parlance as we have only four examples from that period, primarily artifacts from the Etruscans; more examples show up in the fourth and third centuries BCE. With one exception, all of these examples are on red-figure vase painting from Southern Italy, meaning the motif seems to be appearing in the regions of the Greek colonies, but without ever seeming to have appeared on the mainland, as previously mentioned. Even more interestingly, the nimbus apparently disappears for two hundred years after this point, with no extant examples found from the second or first centuries BCE. These years represent the end of the Roman Republic, so it might be reasonable to think that its disappearance may be connected with the chaos of the time period, when generally less of everything shows up in the archaeological record. When the Republic stabilizes into the Empire, the nimbus starts showing up again in greater numbers than it did in prior history during the first and second centuries CE (31 images), although it remains an open question whether the nimbus’s reappearance marks a revival or rediscovery, or whether it marks an independent reinvention. The former is more likely than the

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155 This exception is the Roman republican coin, labeled Coin 33. This coin also comes from Southern Italy, so the conclusions hold true even for a different medium.
latter, simply because the region of nimbate appearances does not change, but merely broadens. The nimbus's reappearance in the Imperial timeframe may reflect a previously unrecognized aspect of the classicizing tendencies of the Julio-Claudian emperors that was augmented over time. Regardless, the number of nimbate appearances increases even more (62 images) in the twilight of the Empire during the third and fourth centuries CE, perhaps hinting at its gradual adoption by the Christians.

IV. Thematic Analysis

This category looks at who is depicted with a nimbus and what the possible significances of those representations might be.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Relevant Numbers</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dionysos/Dionysiac</td>
<td>Worcester 1, Nea Paphos 4, Princeton 12, Shahba 18, Shahba 18, Shahba 19, Tunis 27, Zeugma 28, Kyoto 29, Sepphoris 34, Trier 55, Cleveland 75, Cleveland 75, Arles 78, Palmyra 88, Antakya 92, Gaziantep 120, Gaziantep 121</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artemis/Diana</td>
<td>Suweida 13, Tingad 16, Carranque 99</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aphrodite/Venus</td>
<td>Shahba 17, Suweida 20, Bulla Regia 22, Tunis 26, Seville 74, Tingad 91, Bignor 102, London 108</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neptune/Marine (Nereids, Amphitrite, etc.)</td>
<td>Nea Paphos 5, Nea Paphos 5, Nea Paphos 5, Tunis 10, Paris 15, Paris 15, Damascus 59, Tunis 80, Tunis 80</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zeus</td>
<td>Nea Paphos 5, Naples 7</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athena</td>
<td>Nea Paphos 5, Seville 74</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ares</td>
<td>Shahba 17</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The nimbus can be further categorized in terms of the subject or subjects within a scene who are depicted nimbate. Broadly, these categories can be divided into divinities, humans, and abstract personifications. Each of these categories will be examined.

For divinities, the appearance in the corpus is heavily weighted towards some divinities, although most do make a token appearance nimbate. As the chart above depicts, the most common divinities to be nimbate are Dionysos/Dionysiac (18); solar deities (Helios, Sol, Apollo, and the like) at 36, the most of any in the corpus; lunar deities (Selene/Luna) at 15, 3 for Artemis/Diana, 8 for Aphrodite/Venus, 9 for Neptune and associated marine deities (Nereids, Thetis), 2 for Zeus, Aion, and Athena, and 1 each for Mercury, Ceres, Ares, Gaia, and Hecate. Two minor deities appear as well, Astrape (goddess of lightning) and the Genius of the Year (who might have connections to Aion because of the time aspect). The Syrian gods listed are Aglibol and Malakbel, with 12 appearances.
We also have several abstract personifications, like Theogonia or Roman provinces and places, totaling 8 appearances. Non-divine figures are considerably less common, with only 6 appearances total of mythological humans: Oedipus, Orpheus, Hylas, Narcissus, Medea, and Andromeda; and 8 on non-mythological humans, all Roman emperors/aspirants, including Nero, Theodosius, Hadrian, Constantius II, Magnentius, Valentinian I or II, and Marcus Aurelius. These representations tend to come from the later portion of the empire, with the exception of Nero.\footnote{Unfortunately, his representation is non-extant.} Christ is his own category at 7 appearances, with both divine and human aspects (the exact nature of which was a source of great theological contention at the time); he represents the gradual adoption of the motif in Christian art. Intriguingly, with the exception of Catacombs 32, the earliest appearances of Christ do not invoke solar imagery; likewise, with the exception of Catacombs 32, none of these depictions bears a radiate nimbus. Although 7 images is admittedly a small sample size, the sample does still suggest that the development of the iconography of nimbate Christ emerges from the functions discussed in this thesis of the plain nimbus, with one important innovation: the plain nimbus on Christ signifies divinity in a divine context (as with Rome 109/110, Rome 111), which just does not occur in the Roman world.

One immediate question these appearances raise, however, is what if anything unites these divinities and humans. Why are certain divinities depicted nimbate much more commonly than others? Why are some deities, such as Hera/Juno, Hades/Pluto, or Eros/Cupid, never nimbate? The most interesting thing about the mix of divinities is that for the most part, each one of them ties into a concept I will term “bearers of celestial light”; the humans tie in as well, actually, through their connections to these divinities in the relevant myths or through direct allusion as made by the Roman emperors. Briefly, I will sketch how these divinities fit into this concept. Dionysos connects with an uncommon astrological phenomenon called the zodiacal light, which exists at particular
times of year when dust particles in the solar system line up in certain ways and reflect solar light to create a sort of heavenly staircase in the sky; passages in both the Bacchae and Antigone help us recognize this connection.\(^{157}\) Aphrodite is of course the star Venus; as well, her birth (related in Homeric Hymn 6.1-18\(^{158}\)) emphasizes connections with gold (the word being used five times), a material known for its shine and radiance. Neptune and the marine figures like Nereids likely tie in through reflection from water; furthermore, the Sun rises from the Ocean (see Pharsalia 7.1-6, discussed in Chapter 2). Artemis/Diana and Luna/Selene are the representatives of the moon, which would appear luminous to an ancient audience (even though in reality it merely reflects light from the sun and lacks independent light-emitting capabilities). Sol/Helios/Apollo and other solar gods obviously connect with the Sun itself, the ultimate emitter of celestial light. In terms of the less common gods, Hecate wields a torch and as such is a light-bearer. Zeus is both the planet Jupiter and the ruler of the sky, the celestial plane itself. Ares is the planet Mars, and Hermes is the planet Mercury. Aglibol and Malakbel are respectively Syrian moon and sun gods, and thus tie in through those spheres of influence.

The six mythological humans tie into the celestial framework too: Andromeda ties in both through her mother Cassiopeia, punished as a constellation, and in the marine aspect of her being chained to the rock to be devoured by a sea monster; Hylas was abducted by water nymphs, putting him in the marine arena as well; Narcissus fell in love with his own reflection; Orpheus may have learned music from Apollo himself and in some versions of his myth his lyre may have been placed among the stars (as the constellation Lyra) after his death; Oedipus requires a bit of a stretch\(^{159}\), but Apollo sent the plague to Thebes that helps instigate the events of his story; and Medea was a

\(^{157}\) Beke 75
\(^{158}\) White translation, quoted in Michaelides Reflections 403.
\(^{159}\) The image he shows up in (Arles 97) is fragmentary, and the identification as Oedipus is only tentative.
descendant of Helios himself, in some versions of her myth actually using Helios’s own chariot to flee after murdering her sons.

We do have outliers to this overall hypothesis, however—namely, the abstract personifications and some of the deities (Gaia, Athena, Ceres, and Aion) who occur nimbate only once or twice do not seem to as readily match into the concept. Regarding the abstract personifications, these are either places for 5 images (typically provinces, such as Gallia, Raetia, and Macedonia, but also Cyprus and Paphos) or ideas (like Theogonia—“birth of a god”—Ktisis—“foundation”—and Krisis—“judgment”). For the places, these only come from two mosaics, with complete context known for neither; the three nimbate representations in Berlin (56, 57, 58) are three of 27 known fragments of a larger mosaic, probably featuring many other provinces, from Turkey; the two from the Unknown 82 mosaic are unfortunately on a mosaic that was stripped from its context and only came to scholarly attention when the Cypriot government intervened in its sale. These may represent true outliers to the hypothesis. For the ideas, two of three occur in the immediate context of a figure with clear celestial connections (infant Dionysos and Cassiopeia); the third, Ktisis, occurs on her own as a bust in a central medallion, and does seem to be a true outlier. Gaia (in Damascus 23) may be a misidentification; alternatively, as the Earth itself she does qualify as a planet even though she may not have been conceptualized as such by an ancient audience.

Nothing in Athena’s mythology seems to be relevant to the celestial hypothesis; if we examine the two instances she occurs in, though (Nea Paphos 5 and Seville 74), in the former she is compositionally paired with Zeus in the sky above the main scene, perhaps giving a rationale for the nimbus, and in the latter scene (a judgment of Paris), she is given a gray nimbus along with Mercury while Venus is given a blue one, perhaps indicating a hierarchy within the scene. We may note here

\[\text{\footnotesize 160 1907 AJA, 476}\]
\[\text{\footnotesize 161 Michaelides Reflections 401-403}\]

\[\sim 107 \sim\]
that Athena does not seem to appear nimbate on her own, but only in scenes with multiple nimbi. Ceres also seems to defy categorization, although we could perhaps invoke the story related in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, where she attempts to make Metaneira’s child immortal by means of fire before herself shedding a mortal guise to appear in full divine radiance\(^{162}\); unfortunately her image (Naples 8) occurs without any real context for the scene. Aion is a problem worthy of study in his own right as a more obscure and poorly-understood deity; he can be understood to be the male counterpart of Aeternitas, who ties into the iconography of Antoninus Pius, famously participating in his apotheosis scene on the column base in the Vatican. In this sense, admittedly tenuous, he may fit into the celestial hypothesis.

Under the celestial hypothesis presented here, then, deities without nimbate depictions may lack celestial ties. The lack is apparent with such deities as Pluto, whose demesne is the underworld, the antithesis of the celestial realm; notably, his wife Persephone/Proserpina, and other infernal deities like Charon, do not seem to have nimbate depictions either. Other gods, such as Juno and Vesta, may lack nimbate depictions simply as a function of overall number of appearances. Neither goddess commonly appears in artistic representations at all, making nimbate representations even more unlikely. Eros seems a special case, but his lack of a nimbus may be connected with his wings, since with only the exceptions of Astrape in Malibu 25, who is a unique representation to begin with, and Vatican 83 and 84, which are Etruscan depictions of solar gods from the very early stages of the nimbus, no subject is depicted with both wings and a nimbus.

V. Conclusion

Overall, typological analysis of the nimbi featured in 123 images of artifacts reveals a number of intriguing findings, particularly in terms of color, geography, chronology, and especially the

\(^{162}\) Nagy translation, [http://www.uh.edu/~cldue/texts/demeter.html](http://www.uh.edu/~cldue/texts/demeter.html).
nimbate subject. All of these findings are not immediately explainable, although we have examined possible rationales for the more puzzling situations without readily apparent solutions, some of which may be related to the nimbus’s compositional role in framing. To combine some of these findings, the nimbus initially appears to develop in relatively small numbers in Italy, shifting from an Etruscan context (perhaps based on antecedents in the environment of the Near East) to a Greek colonial context, in the late 6th and early 5th centuries BCE, persisting into the 4th and 3rd centuries. At this point, the nimbus completely vanishes for a couple hundred years from the archaeological record, only to resurface in the Imperial era and proliferate all over the Mediterranean. Color representation may help account for the spread of media the nimbus occurs in. Blue is its most common color, and all nimbi not on solar or lunar figures or figures invoking the sun are non-radiate. Nimbate subjects almost entirely fit into the category of bearers of celestial light. Additionally, although context is not known for many artifacts included in the corpus, those that are known (like Nea Paphos 4/5/6, Worcester 1, Carranque 99) occur exclusively in secular contexts. To my knowledge we have no extant nimbate representations from a sacred context such as a temple or altar, perhaps the most powerful point of evidence for the nimbus as a signifier of divinity in a non-divine space.
CONCLUSION

Through this project, I have sought to begin a scholarly examination of the nimbus within the Mediterranean world, something that has not been hitherto attempted. I have explored how a body of iconography and artistic motifs already existed within the Near East and Mediterranean regions, a body which extended all the way back in time to the Sumerian concept of *melam* in the third millennium BCE; this body provides a framework for the emergence and development of the nimbus. This emergence and development occurred in two broad contexts of both formalistic considerations as a framing device and more idea-based considerations of the nature of divinity, particularly in its associations with light and the celestial realm. I examined the literary ideas that existed during the times of prominence for the nimbus, both Christian and Greco-Roman, to better understand how these considerations were thought about, and thereby explore how divine light is connected with the head and the heavens. I assembled a corpus of images of the nimbus, drawn from artifacts encompassing many different media, time periods, and geographic areas within the greater Mediterranean. I conducted a case study on an uncommon representation, the nimbate infant Dionysos, to explore how the nimbus works in practice. Finally, I developed a typological framework in which to systematically analyze specific representations of the nimbus in classical art and to seek to understand what significance aspects like the nimbate subject might hold. This typological analysis revealed a number of interesting findings with respect to nimbate compositional structure, color, geography, chronology, and radiate nature, some of which merit further study, and provided additional evidence for nimbate subjects as bearers of celestial light.

FURTHER DIRECTIONS

I do not cherish any pretensions of this corpus and project being comprehensive, which is why I wish to finish by discussing some directions for further analysis and future study. The nimbus,
both because of the lack of significant scholarship focused on it and because of the dearth of information about many of the artworks and artifacts on which it is represented, deserves further study, and will likely be a lifelong interest of mine. I hope the website that accompanies this thesis will be of at least some use in filling the void. Of course, the project could be extended employing the multiplicity of approaches presented through this thesis, adding in even more data to further refine conclusions (through such pursuits as adding more literary examples, searching for additional artifacts, and characterizing more possible antecedents, especially in Near Eastern cultures this thesis does not examine). Formalistic analysis akin to the case study in Chapter I for every scene in the corpus might yield useful findings as well, but would be at least a book-length project.

Over the course of my research, however, which was relatively far-reaching and broad, I came across a number of motifs that, while not truly a nimbus or in the category of nimbate representations, seem to warrant additional attention. One of these is the arch seen over the two figures in the chariot in a vase currently in Kiel, Germany, from 350-340 BCE, LIMC MID 14181. One nimbus never occurs on two figures, yet this arch does seem to have a framing aspect for the pair, and was clearly deemed important enough to represent that it overflows into the egg-and-dart border above. Further exploration as to what this motif actually is, how common it is, and whether it merits expanding our definition of a nimbus could be fruitful.

Another of these motifs is the appearance of fabric drapery in an arch over the head (the term velificans refers to this motif), which to broadly generalize, seems to take the place of a nimbus in some representations (as in London 52, where the fabric drapery occurs on the female Luna but a nimbus occurs on the male Sol, suggesting a possible gendering component for the motif), but is combined with a nimbus in others (see for example Tunis 80). Clearly, work is needed to better

\[163\] See Figure C.1 in the images immediately following this section.

\[\sim 111 \sim\]
understand this motif and its possible relationship, if any, to the nimbus. The notion suggested with just this one artifact of a pair of motifs operating in tandem based on gender is highly intriguing, and merits research to determine if my assertion holds true.

A third, which relates more closely to the project, is the lunar crescent. I have argued for considering the specific representation of the lunar crescent behind the head to be a previously unrecognized variant of a nimbus, but that characterization may not apply to other forms of the crescent, for example those that occur on the forehead or perched on top of the head. This motif, like the nimbus, appears relatively unstudied as an independent object, and would benefit from broader typological analysis.

A fourth is the obscure cult of Apollo Karneia, which caught my attention because of a Greek vase with a depiction of elaborate headgear, more specifically the name vase of the Karneia Painter\textsuperscript{164}. The representation appears to be unique, and as far as I know a real-world artifact of the type depicted here has never been found. Might there have been a real-world analogue to the nimbus that people could have worn, after all? The radiate crown, the *corona civica*, and the like seem to belong to a separate category from the plain nimbus\textsuperscript{165}, with the radiate nimbus as an overlap between the two categories albeit with explicitly solar derivation, but the general category of “ceremonial headgear,” especially those garments and accessories that are not as well-known, could be a fruitful avenue of study.

The motifs list could probably go on\textsuperscript{166}, as the artistic category in general is under-represented in scholarship as an object of study in and of itself, but another direction that could be

\textsuperscript{164} See Figure C.2.
\textsuperscript{165} I will note, however, that the proximity of the headdress to someone wearing a radiate crown is especially intriguing. Is there meant to be a degree of reciprocity suggested here?
\textsuperscript{166} The extended list would probably include the phoenix, the only non-anthropomorphic figure depicted with a nimbus in the classical world. Depictions of it fall outside the date range under consideration here.
followed is to turn East instead of West. It seems fairly clear that the art and ideas leading to the nimbus emerge in large part from the Mesopotamian and Near Eastern arenas, but the nimbus developed in the Asian sphere as well as the Mediterranean, and study of the Asian nimbus, performed by someone with expertise in the area along the same lines as the analysis here, could open the door for comparative perspectives. Did the nimbus develop similarly in both areas? Was there interaction between the two? These and more questions are waiting to be answered.

The last arena I want to suggest is one of interfaces. Most scholarship that deals with the nimbus at all explores the medieval and Renaissance periods. How did the classical nimbus develop into the nimbus of these periods? What changes happened, when, and where? What significance do those changes reflect? These questions cannot be satisfactorily answered without an understanding of the classical nimbus. Thus, it would be valuable to combine this project with existing scholarship on later periods to compile a true history of the nimbus, possibly as a monograph.

As a concluding thought, to harken back to the three quotes I opened with, the nimbus does not have to have an either/or characterization. It unambiguously plays a framing role, something scholars seem to have ignored, but at the same time it reminds the viewer of associations with the manifestation and power of divinity. It invites audience participation within the world the image creates, particularly in a mundane setting like a bath building or triclinium—revealing the divine within the mundane. This thesis is but a beginning to understanding its mysteries.

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167 See for example Figure C.3.
Figure C.1: Red-figure vase in Kiel, Germany, 350-340 BCE, depicting the arch in question

(LIMC MID 14181)
Figure C.2: Name Vase of the Karneia Painter, red-figure, circa 400 BCE, from the Spartan colony of Taras in South Italy, detail depicting the unusual headdress

(http://www.beazley.ox.ac.uk/tools/pottery/painters/keypieces/lucanian/karneia.htm)
Figure C.3: Representative Example of the Nimbus in Asian Art, Seated Buddha from Gandhara, Pakistan, in the British Museum, 2nd/3rd c./ CE. (http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_objects/asia/s/seated_buddha_from_gandhara.aspx)
Introduction


For the opening quotes:


Chapter I


*Image sources are listed with the image.

Chapter II


Chapter III


<http://www29.homepage.villanova.edu/christopher.haas/Lactant-Const.htm>.


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English and Latin.


Williams, Mary Frances. “The Sidus Iulium, the divinity of men, and the Golden Age in Virgil’s Aeneid.”  

*Unless otherwise noted all non-Biblical Latin and Greek text comes from the Perseus online database. Use was also made of the Greek and Latin Word Study Tools feature of Perseus.*

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Chapter IV


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<http://rspb.royalsocietypublishing.org/content/274/1614/1175.long>.


*Print sources for the image corpus are listed with full citations here. See also the Master Key for the Image Corpus.*

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