

Gods of War

A large part of the Roman pantheon is dedicated to warfare, despite the fact that the Romans did not have any brutal war god like Ares. Deities were exclusively responsible for protection and defence. Mars for instance was the protector of the peasants' fields, cattle and family. The bloody sacrifice of the October Horse must be seen as a ritual linked to harvest. However, the Romans believed that the gods would only grant them victories if they behaved in accordance with the concept of pietas. Pietas was more than just piety. It was the commitment to follow all old traditions in every detail.

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Gods of War

Gods grant victories

Many central Roman gods were directly linked to warfare.



Rotunda in the Altes Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. Photo: Wikicommons / Manfred Heyde / <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>

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Gods of War

Mars – a multifaceted god of war

One of the most central and also one of the oldest Roman gods is Mars. On coins, he is always represented with helmet and weapons. This is despite the fact that he is not actually a god of battle like his Greek counterpart Ares, who drove the Greeks into a blood frenzy.



Didrachm, around 235. Obverse: Mars. Reverse: Horse head.

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Gods of War

Rome wages war only to protect the people

He only provided protection for those who defended their own land, family, cattle and fields.



Statue of Mars in the Forum of Nerva, Rome. Photo: Wikipedia / Jean Pol GRANDMONT / <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>

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Give the god of war a horse!

The October Horse depicted on this coin references an age-old tradition: Every year on the 15th of October, a horse race took place on Campus Martius. The horse on the right of the victorious team was then chosen as sacrificial victim and killed with a spear by the responsible priest, the flamen martialis, following precisely specified rules.



Litra, around 235. Obverse: Mars. Reverse: October Horse.

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Gods of War

The gods love pietas

Strict adherence to the rules of the ritual was important to the gods, or so the Romans believed. And priestly accuracy was an indicator of pietas.



Ara Pacis Augustae, 13–9 BC. Rome. Photo: Wikipedia / Wolfgang Rieger / <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>

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Gods of War

Pietas secures victories

Pietas, the goddess you can see here, does not represent what we understand as piety. Rather, she symbolises the willingness to observe the sacred rituals and traditions of the Roman ancestors with great care. Only if people acted according to the will of pietas, the Romans believed, would the gods be willing to grant their people victories.



Denarius, Northern Italy, 81. Obverse: Pietas. Reverse: Priestly utensils.

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Gods of War

Dutiful at all times

The place in which the Temple of Pietas once stood became home to the Theatre of Marcellus under Augustus. The temple's founding myth tells the legend of exemplary conscientiousness in the family household: According to this legend, the temple was erected in the spot where a dutiful daughter had once kept her imprisoned father alive by feeding him milk from her own breasts.



Theatre of Marcellus, 13 BC. Rome. Photo: Wikipedia / Alexander Z. / <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>

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Gods of War

War and its goddess

Bellona, the female counterpart of Mars, was equally able to bring victories. The columna bellica stood in front of her temple on the Campus Martius: The column served as prop in a ritual in which priests declared wars outside Italy by symbolically throwing a blood-soaked spear onto the ground which had been marked enemy zone before.



Bellona. Painting by Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn, 1633. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Foto: Wikipedia / www.metmuseum.org / Jan Arkestijn / <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>

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Gods of War

Bellona or Roma?

Until today, scholars disagree about the question whether this coin depicts Bellona or the goddess Roma. Although it is more likely Bellona, numismatists have grown used to calling the goddess Roma over many centuries.



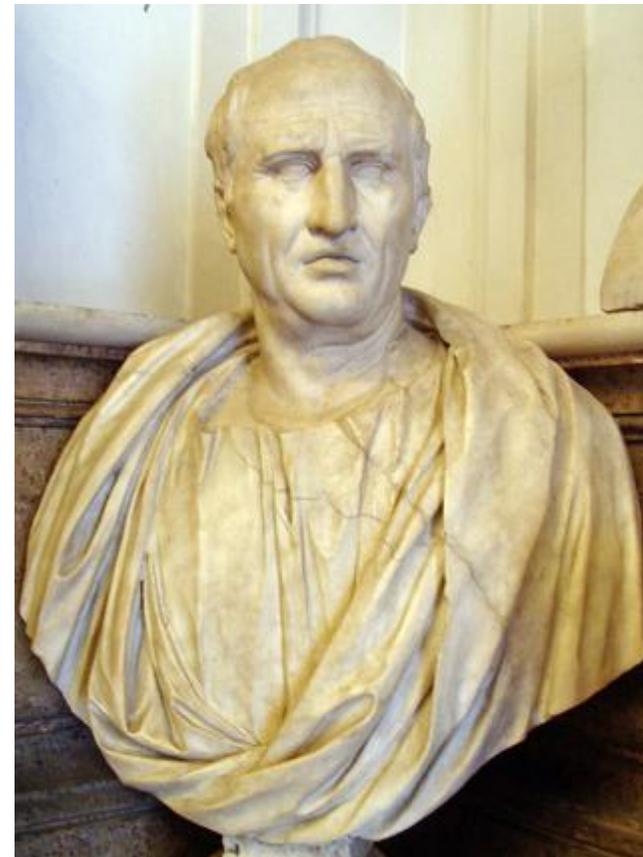
Uncia, around 215. Obverse: Bellona or Roma(?). Reverse: Ship's prow.

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Gods of War

A chosen people

It was Cicero who found the perfect words to express the nature of the Romans' religious self-understanding: '(...) it is in and by means of piety and religion, and this especial wisdom of perceiving that all things are governed and managed by the divine power of the immortal gods, that we have been and are superior to all other countries and nations.' (De haruspicum responso 19).



Bust of Cicero, Capitoline Museums, Rome. Photo: Wikipedia / Glauco92 / <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>

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Gods of War

Divine twins

This coin shows the Dioscuri, Castor and Pollux. They owe their prominent role in Roman worship to their intervention in the Latin War in 499 BC.



Denarius, 207. Obverse: Roma. Reverse: Dioscuri.

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Gods of War

Cultic worship of the helpers in need

Of course, the Dioskouri had their own temple in Rome: It was situated on the Roman Forum and, like of so many other temples, there are only ruins of it left today.



Ruins of the Temple of Castor and Pollux, Roman Forum, Rome. Photo: Wikipedia / MM / <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>

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Gods of War

Victory's Laurels from Victoria herself

Victoria was worshipped as the divine bringer of victory. On this coin, she puts down Victory's Laurels on a trophy. In ancient Rome, trophies were heaps of weapons, often artificially arranged, that had been taken from the enemy in battle. Numismatists call coins such as the one depicted here, after their name giver, *victoriati*.



Victoriatus, 211–208. Obverse: Jupiter. Reverse: Victoria crowns trophy with a garland.

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Gods of War

Victoria today

The goddess Victoria survived the centuries, all through to modernity. Representations of the ancient goddess are still common today. Every Berlin tourist for instance has come across the 'Golden Lizzy', the Victoria statue on top of the Berlin Victory Column.



Bronze sculpture of Victoria on top of the Berlin Victory Column. Friederich Drake, 1873, Berlin. Photo: Wikipedia / Eisenacher / <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>