

The Hands of the Double God: The Statue of Janus Geminus and the Gates of War

The bronze gates attached to the shrine of Janus Geminus in the Roman forum are well known, and many explanations have been proposed to explain the origin of the counter-intuitive tradition of closing the gates during peacetime and opening them during war. This project seeks to turn attention to another, less studied component of the cult: the bronze statue of Janus behind the gates. It is my intention to demonstrate that it was replaced at some point, almost certainly by Augustus.

Ovid (*Fasti* 1.99) claims that Janus held a staff in his right hand and a key in his left. Pliny (*Natural History* 34.16.33; cf. Macrobius 1.9.10), on the other hand, claims that Janus was depicted with his fingers shaped so as to indicate the 365 days of the year. How exactly the statue's fingers indicated the number 365 has been a matter of uncertainty; one recurrent explanation is that the statue's fingers were contorted so as to suggest the letters of the Roman numerals for 365: the letters c, l, x, and v.

In fact, no such grotesque explanation is necessary. The Romans possessed a tabulation system that used the fingers of both hands to count. The fullest account is preserved by the Venerable Bede in *De Temporum Ratione*. According to Bede, one would indicate the number 300 with the right hand; one would indicate 65 with the left hand; that this is what Pliny intends for us to understand has the position of Janus' fingers is confirmed by John Lydus (1.4), who explicitly states that Janus indicated 300 with his right hand and 65 with his left hand.

This poses a problem for our understanding of Ovid's description, since the two descriptions are irreconcilable. The statue must have been replaced at some point and its typology altered. Taylor (2000, 36) recognizes this, but believes that Ovid's statue is the

older one. This cannot be correct. Pliny claims that the statue he describes was the original one dedicated by Numa, and so obviously must be describing a piece that he believed was original. Ovid will then be describing the statue as he sees it in his own day, and the release of the *Fasti*.

The most likely candidate to replace the statue is Augustus, who closed the gates three times during his principate, the first man to do so since the Second Punic War. This is all the more likely since since the interest, even obsession with Janus in Augustan literature (Vergil, Horace, and Livy) demonstrates the emperor's unique concern with the cult.

I close with the significance of the change in typology. The pre-Augustan statue indicated with the god's fingers the days of the year, and the early connection between the calendar and the war season is well attested in the Roman tradition. The first Roman calendar, according to legend, which was instituted by Romulus, contained 10 months to mark the campaign season. Later, Numa added the two months of January and February to coincide with the non-campaign season.

That Augustus would change the iconography of such a statue of a war god is understandable, since the army that Augustus commanded was a professional army that could fight at any time at the emperor's command. The Augustan statue that Ovid describes held a key, which obviously stands for the opening and closing of the gates to declare war and peace. He also carried a staff. I argue that this staff is a *lituus*, the token of an augur, since the auguries had to be taken in order to declare war. Augustus held the augurship, and so Janus' revised iconography suggests the ability of the *princeps* to

declare war at will. The iconography of the statue then is changed in order to redirect focus away from the calendar and Romulus to the auguries and Augustus.

Bibliography

Taylor, R. "Watching the Skies: Janus, Auspicatin, and the Shrine in the Roman Forum."

Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome 45 (2000).