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Justin S. Hayes
juhayes@vassar.edu

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**Jupiter's Legacy:
The Symbol of the Eagle and Thunderbolt in Antiquity
and Their Appropriation by Revolutionary America
and Nazi Germany**

**Siddhartha Hayes
GRST 360-04 Senior Thesis**

Introduction

The thunderbolt and the eagle, the armament and armour-bearer of Jupiter – these symbols had profound cultural significance to the ancients. At first one may think that what was sacred for the Romans has no bearing on modern society, but in truth these icons retain much of their meaning and importance even over two-thousand years later. The Western world has been obsessed with and reverent towards ancient Rome since its fall, and consequently, many different groups have associated themselves with the Latin city and its people, holding aloft its ideas and culture in an attempt to take up the legacy of the “best and greatest” power. To investigate the full significance of the grand Roman *aquila* and the deadly *fulmina* (thunderbolts) held in its talons, the motifs' symbolism and meanings must be first discussed with respect to ancient Greece and Rome, the societies in which they originated. Then attention can be given to the symbols' appropriation by two of some of the most prominent powers in the modern world: the United States of America and Nazi Germany. By comparing each nation's eagle with the Roman *aquila*, the distinct character of each bird, the American and the German, will be revealed, giving insight into how two seemingly irreconcilable ideologies can both be represented by nearly identical symbols – each with relative fidelity to the icons' original meanings.

Part I - Antiquity

The General Symbolism of the Eagle

Pliny calls the eagle the “most honorable (or honored) and strongest of all birds” (*NH*.10.3.1), and Aelian remarks that it possesses the “keenest sight of all birds” (*NA*. 1.42), but the animal was not revered in antiquity solely out of admiration for its natural attributes, nor was it exclusively esteemed by the Romans.

Aristotle claims that the bird “flies high in order to see over the greatest area” and that “men call it divine among birds for this reason...” (*HA* 619b.6). To the ancients the eagle is thus divine, owing first to its closeness to the heavens as well as to the domineering and lordly manner with which Aristotle describes it looking over the earth. It is easily seen then why the bird is heavily associated with the king sky god Zeus/Jupiter, as well as the sky itself (Wittkower 307). And indeed Greco-Roman poetry is rife with mentions of the connection. For example, Aeschylus describes eagles as “the winged

hounds of [Artemis'] Father" (Ag. 135), and when speaking to Zeus, Priam calls the eagle, "the dearest of birds to you" (Hom. *Il.* 24.372). These lines show that not only do the Greeks associate the animal with the god, but that the deity himself to some extent employs and favors the creature. In fact, the eagle is so favored by Jove that the sky father grants him preeminence among all the birds: Pindar in his odes often grants to the eagle the epithets of "lord of the birds" (*Isthm.* 6.50) and "king of the birds" (*Ol.* 13.21). This idea, the regal and divine status of the eagle, is not confined to Greek thought, however, and is transmitted into the Roman mythology. Horace explicitly states that, to the creature, "[He], king of the gods, gave kingship over the far-ranging birds..." (Hor. *Od.* 4.4). And indeed it seems difficult to find mention of an eagle *without* it being tied back to Zeus in much of Greco-Roman literature. Ovid in his *Metamorphoses* reinforces this idea, taking it even a step further, for, in recounting Jupiter's rape of Ganymede, he writes that "[Jupiter] found something he preferred to be rather than what he was. But not just any bird would do, only the eagle..." (*Met.* 10.155), thus showing that the god actively identifies with the bird. Jupiter then "...cleft the air on his lying wings and stole away the Trojan boy, who even now... attends the cups of Jove" (*Met.* 10.158-160). The god *becomes* an eagle, and thereby further associates the bird with himself. But here is seen another facet of the raptor, its place not only as the creature of Jove, but also as a link between heaven and earth.

What is being displayed is thus the eagle's (perhaps especially Roman) role in apotheosis, for as Wittkower says, "just as Jupiter is carried aloft by the eagle, so too is the deified emperor" (311). Indeed, Herodian gives a description of the use of the bird during an imperial funeral ceremony: "...from the highest and topmost story an eagle is released, as if from a battlement, and soars up into the sky with the flame [of the funeral pyre], taking the soul of the emperor from earth to heaven, the Romans believe" (4.2.11). It is fitting to have the king of birds carry a king of men to its domain wherein the gods reside and subsequently the eagle acts as the conduit by which the emperor may be associated with the supernal and divine. Cassius Dio (*RH* 56.42) confirms this practice of using an eagle to bear the emperor's spirit to heaven.

So associated with supernatural forces and power was the eagle to the Romans that its body and image, according to their lore, actually possessed quasi-magical

properties: a mixture of the brain or gall with Attic honey was a recipe for a cure for eye opacity (Plin. *NH.* 29.118) – specifically for film on the eyes, dimness, and cataracts (29.123). Aelian remarks that the mixture also enhanced visual acuity (*NA.* 1.42). Thus by consuming the eagle one may gain its keenness of sight. Additionally, Pliny reports the use of what he calls a “smaragdus” an amulet or literally “emerald” that has been inscribed with the image of an eagle, which is supposed to assist the wearer when approaching a king as a suppliant as well as ward off hail and locusts (*NH.* 37.124). He goes on to remark how this is fantastical nonsense, but again the fact that he gives time and effort to cover the ideas only serves to show the subsequent significance of the eagle and the power it holds over the minds of those who believe such things.

Thus the eagle is seen to symbolize a great many powerful ideas and things, namely the sky, Zeus/Jupiter, and apotheosis. As the symbol of the eagle is combined with that of the thunderbolt, the bird’s image takes on even more manifold meanings. But first, the weapon of the sky father in and of itself must be discussed.

The General Symbolism of the Thunderbolt

The thunderbolt or lightning bolt is one of the most prominent symbols of power and divine will in antiquity, being the chosen instrument of the king of the gods himself. One of the earlier mentions of this is in Homer: “[Zeus] thundered terribly and let fly his white lightning-bolt... he hurled it to earth; and a terrible flame arose” (*Il.* 8.134-135). This idea is continued in Roman thought as well. For example when speaking of the Titans, Virgil remarks that they had been “cast down by a thunderbolt” (*Aen.* 6.581), the word used being *fulmen*. He also uses periphrasis to describe the lightning a few lines down, calling it the *flammas Iovis* (6.586), which picks up its fiery nature that Homer mentions. He then uses the word *fulmen* again (6.590), and finally, when speaking of how Jupiter “whirled/hurled” it, the word used is *telum* (6.592). This solidifies the thunderbolt’s place as a missile weapon in the hands of Jove, as the word is often used to mean “spear”. But this idea was not limited to epic, for it was so ingrained in the culture of the times that even philosophical and scientific prose includes traces of this mythological motif. Seneca devotes a rather lengthy book of his *Quaestiones Naturales* to the subject of “lightnings and thunders”. In “*De fulminibus et tonitribus*”, the

thunderbolt maintains its aforementioned status as weaponized, divine fire. He notes that in their classification of various types of lightning bolts, the Etruscans call them collectively *manubrae* or “equipment” (*QN.* 2.41.1), and he himself defines a thunderbolt as “...a fire that has been compressed and hurled violently” (*QN.* 2.16.1), as well as being “...fiery or hav[ing] the appearance of fire” (*QN.* 2.12.2). The word “hurled” here being “*iactus*”, which would be the same verb used to describe the throwing of spears, *tela*, which Virgil had used in place of *fulmen*. The nature of lightning as being comprised of fire should be noted here.

In all, the lightning bolt was indeed very much viewed as a divine weapon which was aimed by the direct (and often destructive) will of the mighty Jove himself, and in fact Seneca states that, “the effects of lightning... leave no doubt that there is a subtle and divine power in [it]” (*QN.* 2.31.1). Granted, Seneca did not likely think that an anthropomorphic entity was sitting in the clouds throwing lightning, but such a point is irrelevant to the validity of the ancient popularity of the idea of lightning as the magical armament of Jupiter. Though he lists many phenomenal and fantastic feats that lightning performs, one of the most notable and peculiar is lightning’s effect on poison: “All the poison of venomous snakes and other animals in which there is death-dealing power is consumed when they are struck by lightning” (Sen. *QN.* 2.31.1). Additionally, he claims that a body laden with poison is purged of it when struck by lightning, citing as evidence the fact that worms do not feed on a body killed by venom, but appear only after the corpse is struck by a thunderbolt (Sen. *QN.* 2.31.2) This displays the conception that lightning is the ultimate supernal and celestial instrument, for it counters that which is lethal and chthonic (for snakes dwell within the earth), that which would cause one to be carried down to the underworld. But perhaps even more fascinating is the seemingly dual nature of the thunderbolt, for “wine congealed by lightning either kills or causes insanity when drunk after it returns to its former state... there is a sickness-bearing power in lightning” (Sen. *QN.* 2.53.1). Where in one scenario the divine fire purges venom of its lethality, in the next it acts almost as if it were poison itself. Thus the thunderbolt has a dual nature of sorts, which will be expanded upon later.

Both these symbols, the eagle and the thunderbolt, take on more meanings when their prophetic significance is considered Therefore each will be discussed individually

with respect to what they portend, after which they may be analyzed in conjunction with one another.

The Prophetic Significance of the Eagle

The eagle, as Wittkower says, is the “bird of divination par excellence” (308), and it was seen as one of the few birds of omen in the ancient world (Sen. *QN.* 2.32.5). The eagle portends the divine will of Jupiter himself, being favorable to the viewer if it is seen on the right, but ill if on the left.

More specifically, the bird as an omen usually signifies victory and triumph for one side or another in a conflict. To ensure the success of his attempt to collect the body of his deceased son, King Priam asks Zeus to, “...send [his] most favorably ominous bird, [his] own swift bearer of omen... and let [it] fly by on the right... that [he] may go on to the ships... trusting in that mighty sign” (Hom. *Il.* 24.37.370-375). And so the “surest of winged omens” (*Il.* 24.378) is dispatched and the king makes it safely to the tent of Achilles. More often, though, the eagle explicitly portends victory in battle, not just in any endeavor. Earlier in the *Iliad*, Agamemnon implores Zeus for aid and receives a visit from “the most prophetic bird” (*Il.* 8.247). When his army “saw the eagle that Zeus sent, their spirits rose and they counterattacked” (*Il.* 8.247). The men are instilled with courage and zeal upon its arrival because the bird’s presence signifies the favor of Zeus, which ensures victory. This status of the eagle is still employed in much later Greek thought and literature, for in Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*, a pair of eagles appear to the titular character and Menelaus “on the side of the spear-wielding hand” (Ag. 115), which a prophet understands to signify the eventual “capture [of] the city of Priam” (Ag. 126). But the idea of the eagle as a symbol of victory was not solely Greek, for Virgil writes that Juturna, “displays in the sky the strongest sign that ever dazed Italian minds... the golden eagle of Jove...” which made the, “...Italians eager to take up arms... confident in victory” (*Aen.* 12.247-256).

The eagle is just as potent a portent of defeat in certain circumstances, however, such as when Zeus sends two eagles to the hall of Odysseus after Telemachus angrily asks his mother’s suitors to leave; the eagles, when over the assembled men, suddenly begin to fight in mid-air, tearing at each other with their talons and beaks (Hom. *Od.*

2.146-154). A wise man named Halitherses then informs the suitors that a “great disaster is wheeling down on them” (Hom. *Od.* 2.163). Much later, the bird again bids ill omen for the suitors of Penelope, as “an eagle... came from the heights and approached them all on the wrong side” (Hom. *Od.* 20.242). And again a man versed in omen remarks that, “clearly [their] plans for Telemachus’ killing will not go so well (Hom. *Od.* 20.245).

Now it is seen that the eagle does not only represent the heavens but the very will of the heavens and those that dwell there, and since the gods are indomitable, so too are any who have their favor, making the eagle just as much a symbol of victory as one of the sky, Jupiter, and apotheosis.

The Prophetic Significance of the Thunderbolt

Lightning’s significance as a symbol is also deepened by its prophetic implications, and it is a particularly strong omen, perhaps even the strongest, if Seneca is correct. Concerning the sources for the study of interpretation of thunderbolts, there are only three extensive treatments in Roman literature: Seneca the Younger’s, Pliny the Elder’s and Servius’ (Wildfang 67). In his investigation, Wildfang found that all three authors’ classifications of lightning bolts could be generally reconciled to a reasonable schema (Wildfang 72-73), but more importantly that in almost all of the large number of passages of Livy, Tacitus, and Suetonius examined for instances of portents, the thunderbolts present fell quite nicely into these categories (Wildfang 74).

But irrespective of classification, “it is clear that thunderbolts were generally regarded as negative portents” for of all the fulgural omens examined, only three were not purely negative (Wildfang 76). Thus, there is no doubt that, like the eagle, “lightning foret[old] future events...” (Sen. *QN.* 2.32.1) and was a very recognizable symbol of divine will. But it is not just any prodigy, for “whatever is foretold by lightning is unalterable and unchangeable by indication of another sign” (Sen. *QN.* 2.34.1), for its “power...supreme... annuls whatever other omens portend” (Sen. *QN.* 2.34.1). A lightning strike is thus seen as the be all and end all in divination, which heightens its already large symbolic potency. One might ask why this is the case; why this phenomenon above all others holds such a position – just as some might ask why the eagle is elevated to an analogous position amongst birds of omen (Sen. *QN.* 2.32.1). It is

because “lightning itself is part of fate” (Sen. *QN.* 2.34.4). This is particularly interesting when taken with a later statement in which Seneca claims that to call Jupiter “Fate” will not be wrong (Sen. *QN.* 2.45.1). If Jupiter is Fate, then his will is the will of Fate itself, making whatever is indicated by the actions he takes to hold the same importance. While the exact and explicit views of Seneca may not be fully representative of the popular take on lightning strikes, as Wildfang has shown, fulgural divination did not differ much between authors, which seems to indicate a generally accepted system for the Romans.

An example of one of these many negative portents in which a lightning strike comes as a warning or an indication of impending doom is found in Suetonius: in Nero’s last year of power, the temple of the Caesars was struck by lightning, and the heads of all the statues subsequently fell off (*Galb.* 1). Suetonius argues this was a clear indication of the fall of the Julio-Claudian dynasty (*Galb.* 1); it is as if Jupiter himself struck down the last of them with his divine fire. But the idea of the thunderbolt as the destructive will of fate is not a Roman creation, but rather a very old Greek idea. In his third *Pythian*, Pindar describes how Zeus blasted Asclepius and his newly revived patient with a thunderbolt for the former’s infraction of raising the latter from the dead, the god angry at “this defiance of fate” (Stoneman 118). Henceforth, no one is able to be raised from the dead; it goes against the will of Jupiter.

It is clearly seen that whatever is linked to Zeus/Jupiter is also connected to fate and thus the sky father’s symbols are the surest indications of events to come. The eagle and the thunderbolt, his bird and his weapon, are thus each powerful omens in their own right. Now that their general symbolism and prophetic significance has allowed for a relatively full view of their iconic meanings, the two will be discussed together, especially with respect to the subtle dual nature of lightning as both venom-purging and venom-like.

The Combined Symbols of the Eagle and Thunderbolt (or Serpent)

First, it should be noted why the two symbols should be taken together at all. The eagle is Jupiter’s armour-bearer (Plin. *NH.* 10.4.15), and his arms are thunderbolts. This motif is everywhere in Roman poetry: Ovid speaks of “the eagle, who bore [Jupiter’s] thunderbolts” (Ov. *Met.* 10.155), Horace of the “winged deliverer of the thunderbolt”

(Hor. *Od.* 4.4), and Virgil of “the eagle that bears Jove’s lightning” (*Aen.* 5.252).

Interestingly, there is not nearly as much of this coupling evident in Greek poetry. There is some loose association given by Pindar’s ode to the victor of a chariot race in which the poet writes that “[Hieron has] quenched the warrior thunderbolts’ everlasting flame: the eagle... of Zeus... sleeps... your song has conquered him” (*Pyth.* 1.6). This however is not nearly as explicit as the Roman examples, and does not depict the eagle actually carrying the bolts. Regardless, the eagle is associated even more profoundly with the king of the gods for the Romans, now as the bearer of his arms. What is seen, if the two symbols – the eagle and the thunderbolt – are combined, is the magnificent harbinger of supernally decreed victory carrying in its talons the ultimate weapon of divine devastation, which both separately, but now even more so together, act as an indicator of divine will. Indeed it is difficult to imagine a more powerful coupling of images, and accordingly, it makes for particularly strong portents.

Prior to the battle of Munda in 45 BCE, “Heaven had beforehand indicated [Pompey’s] defeat very clearly”, for “the eagles of Pompey’s legions shook their wings and let fall the thunderbolts which they held in their talons... thus they seemed to be hurling the threatened disaster directly at Pompey and to be flying off of their own accord to Caesar” (Dio Cass. *HR.* 43.35). Clearly the gilded standards could not have actually been made to move, but such a point is irrelevant, for the resounding significance reported of such a portent holds the same impact as if they had. Here is seen, quite literally, the eagles of victory not only abandoning the younger Pompey in favor of Caesar, but also throwing the thunderbolts at the ground of his camp: a two-fold ill omen for Caesar’s enemy.

An interesting equation may now be made with respect to the dual nature of the lightning bolt as a sign of destructive divine will and a more sinister, purely lethal force. As was aforementioned, Seneca writes that lightning has a “sickness-bearing” power. One of the few other items the eagle is found clutching in antiquity also happens to have similar power: the serpent. Compare these two lines: “not only does the fire destroy the things it strikes but even the things it has breathed upon (Sen. *QN.* 2.53.2), and “it kills... not only by its touch but also by its breath, [it] scorches up grass and bursts rocks” (Plin. *NH.* 8.33). The first is describing the destructive nature of lightning; the second is a

description of the miasmic breath of the basilisk serpent, and yet they are nearly identical. The snake is even said to be *scorching* its surroundings just as if it were the fire of a lightning strike. Not only do thunderbolts and serpents possess similar deadly power, but they are both gripped by the bird of Jove; winged victory clutches the embodiment of destruction, often signaling defeat, here seen in the case of Pompey's standards. Wittkower claims that since ancient times, in a sort of "magical stage" of tribal history, the "zigzag of the snake equates it with the thunderbolt" (309). Given what has been shown, it is not difficult to come to this conclusion, and in fact it seems likely that there was some equation of the two, given the sheer number of similarities and its place in the eagle's talons. But when an eagle is grappling with a snake, the paired symbols together combine to take slightly different connotations.

Where the eagle in and of itself is victory, the eagle and snake motif specifically symbolizes triumph of a force over an adversary; the harbinger of victory is not just making an appearance, he is tearing to pieces his opponent. In order to describe the prowess of Tarchon in battle, Virgil compares him to the raptor, as the Etruscan captain is stirred by the "Father of Men and Gods" (*Aen.* 11.855) and he plunges into the fray, "swift as a golden eagle seizes a snake" (*Aen.* 11.883-4). Virgil describes how just as the eagle, flapping its wings, tears into the snake with its talons and beak, so too does Tarchon exhibit such wild ferocity. The Etruscan captain is also compared to "wildfire" (*Aen.* 11.878) and is given the epithet "flushed with triumph" (*Aen.* 11.891). It is almost as if he is both the eagle and the thunderbolt, so fierce is he when empowered by Jove. This idea of the eagle and serpent motif signifying triumph is not at all confined to the *Aeneid*, for it is used to similar effect by authors even as late as Claudian: "the tawny bird, armour-bearer of Jove, swoops down from an open sky and seizes a snake in his curved talons..." which he summarily tears to shreds, much to the excitement of the soldiers below, who are motivated to join battle and made confident of victory (*Gild.* 467-471). When placed on a tombstone or stele, the motif seems to take the connotation of "triumph of the heavenly realm over dark, chthonic forces" as well as "victorious liberation of the soul" (Wittkower 311).

Clearly the eagle and thunderbolt/serpent image captured the minds of the ancients, given the huge amount of significance that these entities were given both

symbolically and prophetically. Now that their more general, cultural meanings and positions have been established, their military significance may be discussed, for they are widely employed and hold much importance within Roman martial culture and thought – especially the eagle.

The Military Significance of the Eagle as a Battle Standard – the *Aquila*

The primary military use of the eagle was as a standard, and while there is mention of its use as a blazon (Wittkower 310), the evidence is paltry, whereas the standards are the famed manifestation of the glory and might of the Roman legion.

The eagle standard was comprised of a golden or gilded metal eagle, clutching thunderbolts in its talons, perched atop a long metal pole with a butt-spike for planting in the ground. Vegetius calls it the “most outstanding symbol of the legion” (*Mil.* 2.13), and indeed it came to be synonymous with the might and splendor of the Roman Empire, but it was a long road to that point from the origins of the battle standard in pre-Republican Rome. Both Ovid and Plutarch place the inception of manipular ensigns with Romulus (*Ov. Fast.* 3.115; *Plut. Rom.* 8), where bundles (*manipuli*) of hay were tied to and held aloft on poles. These seemed to serve as rallying points for units of the army, though the standards functional use will be discussed more in detail in the following paragraph. Eventually, icons of animals replaced these ensigns: the eagle, wolf, Minotaur, horse, and boar (*Plin. NH.* 10.5.16), but as part of his sweeping martial reforms in 107 BCE, Gaius Marius made the eagle the sole standard of the legion (*Plin. NH.* 10.5.16). “By making the *Aquila* the standard for all legions, Marius improved unity and gave soldiers a symbol that expressed their attachment to an all-encompassing body, to which the soldiers’ loyalty could be directed” (Erdkamp 87). Indeed the eagle became the veritable heart and soul of the legions, a symbol so representative of Roman power and majesty that it became known throughout the ancient world (Wittkower 310). Specifically, due to its place at the head of each legion, it became the emblem of the Roman legions, which enforced Roman rule in the provinces, giving the eagle its connotation of dominion. These standards were held in almost god-like reverence as will be discussed later; but first, the eagles’ use in combat will be explored.

Standard-bearers (*aquiliferi*): Their Image and Reputation

The battle standards (*signa*) of the Roman army had always been carried by soldiers called *signiferi*, but after the eagles' rise to preeminence, they were shouldered by men called *aquiliferi* (Veg. *Mil.* 2.13). The word *signifer* did become obsolete eventually, but not until the development of the *dracones*, which will be addressed briefly later (Veg. *Mil.* 2.13). These eagle-bearers – as their name implies – had the honor and sacred duty of carrying the standards into battle. This was an esteemed position that was, hierarchically speaking, just under the *optio*, the centurion's subordinate, in a legion (Erdkamp 189). Consequently these men received better pay (192) and seem to have been responsible for their company's lists of individual pay (310), and it is also likely that they produced documents as well (Erdkamp 297). This indicates that the eagle-bearers needed to be at least somewhat educated, and indeed Vegetius comments that these matters were entrusted to them due to their "trustworthiness, intelligence, and literacy" (*Mil.* 2.7). Clearly the position of standard-bearer, to shoulder the divine eagle of Jove, demanded a worthy soldier, loyal to the state, for such an honor was too great to put into the hands of just any legionary. Just one conflict that displays the eagle-bearers' piety and trustworthiness is the revolt of the German legions, where in his works Tacitus comments much on their fidelity. It is an *aquilifer* who reports to Vitellius the actions of the growing mutiny (Tac. *Hist.* 1.56.11), and it is to eagle and standard-bearers and other "sound elements" that Caecina reads Germanicus' letter of counterattack, that they may "exact justice on the foul" (Tac. *Ann.* 1.48.5). And during the revolt, the *aquilifer* Calpurnius saves the legate Plancus, "fending off the ultimate violence" of the blood of an officer staining the shrine of the standards (Tac. *Ann.* 1.39.17). There can be no doubt that these soldiers were chosen for such valiant and steadfast loyalty.

But perhaps the most famous attribute of the *signiferi* and *aquiliferi* was their selfless devotion to their eagles and to Rome, as they are often seen giving their lives happily to protect the sacred standard. The loss of an eagle was an enormous scandal and dishonor for the legion, for given what the golden bird has been seen to represent – in this case mainly military prowess and victory, it was a symbolic defeat, one that Rome often went to great lengths to remedy (Erdkamp 352). In 53 BCE when the Parthians captured Roman standards, it was a huge blow to the imperial image, and Augustus accordingly

made a huge celebration out of their eventual repossession. To be bereaved of the harbinger of victory surely spells defeat, and with respect to the eagle's connection to that which is regal, such a loss is an affront to the *legion's* king, the state or the emperor, depending on the era. Accordingly, the best eagle-bearers are shown to, accept death happily and with much *virtus*: "Lucius Petrosidius... flung his eagle within the rampart, and was himself cut down, fighting most gallantly..." (Caes. *BG* 5.37.5.2). This man chose to, with his last moments, throw the eagle to safety inside the camp, allowing himself to be killed in the process, rather than attempt to save his own life. But perhaps one of the best examples of the stoic fulfillment of a Roman soldier's duty is seen in the dying words of an eagle-bearer during the civil war, "This eagle when I was alive, I defended assiduously for many years, and now I give it back to Caesar with the same trust. Do not, I beg you, allow to occur what has never before happened to Caesar's army and suffer a military disgrace, but take this safe to him" (Caes. *BC*. 3.64.3.2). This man's last thoughts, though "seriously wounded" (Caes. *BC*. 3.64.3.2), were still of the preservation of the eagle's honor and the glory of his commander; no Roman general could ask for a more worthy soldier.

These gallant and pious men bore the *signa* into battle, but why? It might not be immediately apparent to one unfamiliar with the military function of various officers. They certainly could not fight effectively, as they needed to hold their gilded charge. In addition to the standard-bearer's practical function as a reference and rallying point for the various companies (which will be discussed immediately hereafter), they served a largely exhortative role, encouraging the men to fight for the glory of their Caesar and Rome. A prime example of this occurs at one point in the Gallic war, where Caesar's army was attempting to disembark from their flotilla to assault the beach, and the British natives had already set up their forces on the land, attempting to prevent such a maneuver (Caes. *BG* 4.24). The legionaries were hesitant to engage, seeing that they would have to jump down into the shallows and wade through the waves in their heavy armor in order to join battle, all while the natives could harass them from afar with missiles (Caes. *BG* 4.24). But just then, "the eagle-bearer of the Tenth Legion, after a prayer to heaven to bless the legion by his act, cried: 'Leap down, soldiers, unless you wish to betray your eagle to the enemy; it shall be told that I at any rate did my duty to my country and my

general.’ When he had said this with a loud voice, he cast himself forth from the ship and began to bear the eagle against the enemy. Then [the] troops exhorted one another not to allow such a disgrace, and leapt down from the ship with one accord” (Caes. *BG* 2.25). These men with their standards are able to compel the rank and file to join battle in even the most unforgiving and unwelcoming of circumstances. But the eagles and standards themselves had more technical and organizational uses in battle that ultimately tie back to their symbolic importance, which ought to be discussed.

It goes without saying that Caesar’s accounts are likely quasi-fictitious and over-dramatized to act as propaganda. But again, it does not matter if the events described occurred exactly as reported, for if indeed Caesar is attempting to portray what the public would perceive to be a perfect soldier, then his idyllic representation of such a man indicates truthfully the idealized character of the best standard-bearer in the Roman mind: he who places duty above the self. In order to craft a particular image of himself and his army, Caesar highlights the deeds and words of the *aquiliferi* and other officers such as *centuriones* to demonstrate his soldiers’ loyalty to him and bravery in battle.

The Use of the *Aquila* in Battle

The *signa* allowed the Roman army to maintain organization and structure, and though it is not clear when precisely they became integral to military practice, they would have “acted as invaluable rallying points on a fluid manipular battlefield” with the *pilani* – the last rank of the battle lines, the *triarii*, armed with spears – stationed in a dense mass behind for support (Erdkamp 59). Indeed even after the regularization of the legionaries and the disappearance of distinctions in the equipment of the *triplex acies*, they would still serve the same function. The standards would be able to be seen above the masses of soldiers and allow legionaries to determine their position relative to their allies and enemies. This level of organization is crucial on a hectic battlefield for unit cohesion and subsequent success. By the time of Vegetius, the other non-eagle standards had been entirely replaced by *dracones* and *vexilla*, dragons or “serpents” and flags or “ensigns”, respectively (Veg. *Mil.* 2.13). It was here, with the disappearance of the traditional standards, that the term *signifer* ceased to be used for the legions, as the men who bore the new standards were called *draconarii* and *vexillarii* (Veg. *Mil.* 2.13).

Dracones “are made of colored cloth stitched together, and from the head along the entire body, they look like snakes... During the charge is when they most resemble the creatures: they are inflated by the wind, and even make a sort of hissing sound as the air is forced through them (Arr. *TechTac.* 35.2-4). Here the dragon standards are being used as an instrument of intimidation as well as an indicator of order, as they are clearly meant to represent the lethal serpent. Each legion has an eagle; each cohort has a dragon, and each century an ensign with “letters indicating the century’s cohort and ordinal number within it”. This system allows for precise maintenance of the aforementioned organization. The standards were particularly useful to indicate to the legionaries when exactly battle should be joined, for “...well-disciplined soldiers stood fast, waiting for the raising of the banner, the signal to begin battle” (Amm. Marc. 27.10.9).

It should be noted that it was the great honor of the first cohort to protect the eagle, for it “exceeds the remainder [of the cohorts] in the number of soldiers and rank, and seeks out the most select men as regards to birth and instruction of letters” (Veg. *Mil.* 2.6). The first cohort held the crucial position of the furthest right and forward in the battle-line of the legion, commanded by the *Primus Pilus*, the senior centurion of the entire legion. Each cohort has 6 centuries, and thus 6 centurions, which rank from lowest to highest from the back left to the front right. This same schema is seen in the status of the centurions of the other cohorts as well. Thus the most senior officers command the foremost and rightmost cohort, the first. Only the best of the legion – this double-strength cohort – had amongst its members those worthy of the rank of *aquilifer*. Therefore, the eagle became not only the “especial and distinctive sign” of the legion as a whole (Veg. *Mil.* 2.6), but particularly a symbol of the primipilate (Erdkamp 458; Plin. *NH.* 14.9), the rank of First Spear, chief centurion of the legion, for it is he and the first cohort specifically that “undertakes the worship of...[the] divine and propitious *signa*” (Veg. *Mil.* 2.6). Accordingly, it is said that *Primipili* would often die to protect it, just like the eagle-bearers (Erdkamp 458), as at the 2nd battle of Cremona, during the civil war of 69 CE, where the “eagle was saved only by Atilius Varus’ desperate execution upon the enemy and at the cost of his own life” (Tac. *Hist.* 3.22.4). It becomes clear that defending the eagle symbolically grants the protector immediate validation of character in the eyes of the Romans. Thus it becomes very fashionable for high profile individuals to partake

of such actions.

There are several instances of Caesar being described as engaging in such valiant acts of generalship, wherein he rallies his army single-handedly by taking the place of the wounded or fleeing eagle-bearers (Suet. *Jul.* 62.1.4). In a section of his work entitled *De fortitudine* – “On bravery”, Valerius Maximus recounts the tale of Caesar grabbing a fleeing *aquilifer* by the throat and asking, “*quorsum tu abis?*”: “Where are *you* going?” After which he takes the eagle from him and rallies his troops back into battle formation (3.2.19.10), which Caesar himself had wrote of in his account of the siege of Dyrrachium (Caes. *BG* 3.69). It was also said of Augustus Caesar that, when the eagle-bearer was wounded, he shouldered the standard himself (Suet. *Caes.Aug.* 10.4.5). To step in and fulfill such a crucial role in combat is a great and meaningful feat for a general, and it attests to their character as well. But the significance of the eagles and standards is not confined to the field of Mars; in fact some of what occurs *outside* of battle is even more indicative of the elevated status the *signa* enjoy.

The Treatment of the *Aquila* in the Camp

First and foremost, when in Rome, the standards are kept in the treasury, overseen by the *quaestores* (Liv. 3.69.8), which already displays their importance. Within the battle camp (*castra*), there was a shrine at the rear side of the central axis at which the standards and colors were stored (Erdkamp 403).

The sheer amount of ritual that the *signa* are involved in attests to their importance to Roman culture. Men of the first cohort always guarded the shrine, for as was aforementioned, the supervision and worship of the eagle along with other “sacral duties” (Erdkamp 458) were concomitant with said cohort and the primipilate (Veg. *Mil.* 2.6.2; 2.8.1). Even the morning reports would include “names and ranks of personnel performing *excubatio ad signa* (ritual guarding of the standards)” (Erdkamp 292). Perhaps one of the greatest indicators of the standards’ elevated status is the fact that perfumes, which Pliny deems the “most superfluous of all luxuries”, had found their way into the camp, where at all holidays and events the eagles and standards are anointed with them (Plin. *NH.* 13.4.23). He supposes that perhaps the “eagles [are] bribed by this to conquer the world!” (Plin. *NH.* 13.4.23). Amongst these events were the birthdays of the

flags and standards (Erdkamp 458). So fervently were they idolized, that the famed early Christian author Tertullian criticized the practice by saying “that the religion of the camps was limited to the worship of the *signa*, which enjoy preeminence over all other gods” (*Apol.* 16.8). Here he mockingly and sarcastically lifts the standards to the status of gods, for as he sees, there is no other explanation as to why the “pagan” soldiers go to such lengths. But perhaps in his mockery Tertullian has struck a chord of truth, for what is the eagle bearing the thunderbolt other than the truest sigil of Jupiter himself?

But the *signa* served a functional purpose in the camp as well, for just as when at Rome they are kept in the state treasury, their shrine serves as the camp’s treasury. “It was a divinely inspired tradition of the ancients to deposit ‘with the standards’ (*apud signa*) one half of the donative which they received and to save it there for each soldier so it could not be spent on extravagance or the acquisition of vain things” (*Veg. Mil.* 2.20). This is logical, as the standard-bearers were, as aforementioned, in charge of managing their company’s pay roster. Additionally, “a soldier who knows his spending money is ‘*apud signa*’ never thinks of deserting, has a greater love for standards, and fights for them more bravely in battle, since it is human nature to care most about things on which one’s fortune is staked” (*Veg. Mil.* 2.20). Now the eagles hold not only psychological and ideologically symbolic significance, but concrete pecuniary meaning as well; as Vegetius says, the soldiers’ livelihood is tied to them, and this certainly enhances their potency as an exhortative instrument.

For Rome, the eagle was Jupiter; it was victory and divine triumph. It bore the thunderbolts against and tore at the snakes that were the enemies of the Roman people. To carry the eagle into battle was to carry the most powerful portent of victory itself in order to ensure divinely favored success. It is no surprise that such an old and potent symbol became used widely throughout the world by numerous cultures and nations.

Appendix

Before full attention is given to the eagle in modernity as employed by the United States of America and the *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* (NSDAP), the *Physiologus* will be explored briefly in order to begin to see how the symbol was adapted by a sub-set of late antique society – early Christians, as theirs’ is perhaps the religion

that provides the most constant influence over the worlds of colonial America and post-WWI Germany.

The Significance of the Eagle in the *Physiologus*

Foremost, in the Hebrew Psalms, the eagle had already appeared as a symbol of resurrection and rejuvenation (Wittkower 313): “thy youth is renewed like the eagle’s” (*Ps.* 103.v5). But it is the *Physiologus*, a Greek didactic proto-bestiary written some time in the second or third centuries CE, which perhaps presents the most complete account of this notion. It says that, “when [the eagle] is aging, his wings grow heavy and his eyesight dims” so “he seeks first a pure spring of water and flies aloft to the ether of the sun, burns off his old feathers, and casts off the darkness from his eyes” (*Phys.* 6). Aristotle had written (in the 4th century BCE) of one part of this venture that eagles undergo (*Arist. HA* 8). He recounts how a mother eagle forces her young to look toward the sun, unflinching, though this sun-bound flight is not for the purposes of chick rearing but rather for self-rejuvenation. It is this aspect of the eagle’s symbolism that seems to be focused on in the budding symbolism of Christianity. “Then [the eagle] flies down to the spring, and therein dives three times under and renews himself and become young again” (*Phys.* 6). This motif is followed by an explanation of how these actions all tie to Christian religious faith and practice: “And thou now...when...the eyes of your heart are grown dull, seek the spiritual spring, the Word of God... and fly aloft to the sun of righteousness, Jesus Christ, and... dive three times under in the ever-flowing spring of penance in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost... and then will the prophecy of David be fulfilled and your youth renewed like the eagle” (*Phys.* 6). Here the eagle is such a symbol of piety that its behavior outlines how to become a good Christian, and thus the eagle is assimilated here into the Christian faith and mythos. Here the eagle is now becoming associated more with the Sun, the life-giving celestial fire, as opposed to the thunderbolt, the destructive form of celestial fire. It is also worthy of note that Christ is also being equated with the Sun, and thus the eagle is now becoming associated with him in place of Jupiter.

The Eagle as the Bird of Christ

The fact that the eagle's solar flight is now being taken as a symbol of intrepidity – an unshakeable belief in Christ – suggests quite dramatically that Christ is being identified with the sun, especially considering the phrase “the sun of righteousness, Jesus Christ” wherein the sun itself is given his full name. This is not strange, for as Inman remarks, “in examining ancient Jewish, Phoenician, and other Shemitic cognomens...” one finds the “supreme” god to be “the sun” (Inman xix), indicating a trend within these religions of holding the sun god in highest esteem, and the sun became an increasingly important god in late Roman religion, as well. The eagle is seen to be identified with Christ not only for its solar, Christ-bound, flight, but also in many other scenarios. On an Antioch chalice, Jesus Christ is enthroned with an eagle under his footstool, “like a new Jupiter” (Wittkower 312). Furthermore, St. John the Evangelist is often associated with Christ's ascension in early Christian art has as his symbol the eagle as well (Lander 28), stressing again the old theme of apotheosis. There may in fact be a connection between the eagle's divine rebirth outlined in the *Physiologus* and the ascension of the eagle over the pyre of an emperor, as they both symbolize heavenly rejuvenation, which is clearly the aspect of the eagle being stressed. Christ with his eagle of pious renewal and resurrection now replaces Jupiter, with his eagle of destruction-bearing victory, a comparison that illuminates the natures of the two theologies and cultures in general. The eagle is no longer physical power, but spiritual, and furthermore it is benign and life giving.

This interpretation was maintained by Christianity into the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, where, with the re-discovery of ancient texts, there was a mild revival of pagan associations, but of course they did not overshadow the progression that had already been made (Wittkower 321). Next will be discussed the appropriation and use of the eagle and thunderbolt/serpent by modern states, each attempting to emulate antiquity in their own manner. Through this analysis it may become clear how it is possible to place such drastically different ideologies as that of the United States and the Nazi party both under the old Roman banner of the eagle.

Part II – Modernity

The Western world has always been captivated by the idea of Rome, and ever since its fall, peoples have tried to reclaim its glory. For modernity, the city signifies permanence, order, and authority (Edwards 2), for it not only existed but also thrived for the better part of a millennium – something almost entirely unheard of in human history. It is no wonder that it is called “the eternal city” (Edwards 6), for such maintenance of identity and sovereignty over such a long period of time is exceptionally rare. “Different nations have competed sometimes to identify themselves with Rome...” (Edwards 11) in various ways, some rather explicitly while others more subtly, even if they seem to be openly averse to such identification. One such manner in which a nation or political entity may attempt to link themselves to Rome is through the adoption or appropriation of Roman symbols. In this section, the American eagle of the Great Seal of the United States will be compared and contrasted with the *Parteiadler* of the German Nazi Party in order to investigate the distinct methods by which each nation takes up a portion of the Roman banner and makes it a symbol of their own interpretation of Rome.

A. The United States of America

The American Eagle in the Great Seal of the USA

As a newly formed nation, the United States of America understood that it needed an insignia. Thus at the Continental Congress of 1776, Dr. Franklin, Mr. Adams, and Mr. Jefferson were tasked with the creation of an “emblem and national coat of arms to give visible evidence of a sovereign nation and a free people with high aspirations and grand hopes” (DSBPA 1). After two committee meetings, an excess of ideas and a lack of any real success, a man named William Barton proposed the design of a crested white eagle, displayed, as the sole supporter to the seal’s escutcheon (DSBPA 3). Charles Thompson, also working on the project, in his design replaced Barton’s imperial (as in the species) eagle with the American bald eagle, added thirteen stars surrounded by clouds above the bird’s head, and portrayed the eagle clutching an olive branch in its right talon, and a bundle of arrows in its left (DSBPA 3). He also added a scroll for the eagle to grasp in its beak that reads *e pluribus unum*, the classic motto of American unity (DSBPA 4). This design was modified once more by Barton to create the final device which is still used

today: the American eagle with wings displayed, tips up, bearing upon its breast the escutcheon with thirteen white and red stripes under the blue chief, holding the olive branch, the bundle of thirteen arrows, and the scroll with its beak, and with the thirteen stars forming a six-pointed star above the supporter (DSBPA 4).



“The Eagle displayed is the Symbol of Supreme Power and Authority,” wrote Barton in 1782; just as it was in antiquity. The committee members were all learned men who understood the classical connotations of the eagle and were very much comfortable with expressing such a connection. Indeed in his “remarks and explanations”, Thompson wrote that the “Eagle displayed... [is] truly imperial...” (Patterson 37). So here at least at the country’s inception, an intentional identification with Rome and imperial power can be seen, but this is logical, as what the emblem attempts to convey is the fledgling state’s sovereignty and independence. Thompson also explains that he decided to use the “American Eagle without any other supporters [in order] to denote that the United States of America ought to rely on their own Virtue” (DSBPA 5); that they “need no supporters but their own Virtue” (Patterson 37). The eagle thus evokes the less aggressive idea of honorable character and righteousness, though the word virtue clearly has the classical connotation of “manly courage” – Latin *virtus* – that is almost exclusively shown in battle. The clear allusion to Rome that comes from the eagle representing federal

authority and virtue is enhanced and modified to display a unique American outlook by the objects that the bird of Jove possesses.

The olive branch and bundle of arrows “denote the power of peace and war”, according to Thompson, but with the eagle’s head turned toward the right, toward the sprig, America’s preference for peace is signified (DSBPA 6). This is where the American eagle differs most from the legionary *aquila*, for the latter represents – as has been shown – victory and triumph over an enemy and the bearer of the ultimate weapon, while the former maintains its talons, so to speak, but prefers not to use them. It should be noted, however, that while the arrows represent war, it takes no stretch of the imagination to see their likeness to the thunderbolt. Arrows often signify rays of the sun, being associated with Apollo as both an archer and sun deity (Becker 23). The arrow was also the symbol of Mithras, a Persian sun god, furthering the correlation with arrows and “shafts” of light (Whittick 209). The Latin *telum* typically meaning, “spear” is also used to describe missile weapons in general as well as beams of light. Virgil uses *telum* (6.592) to describe Jupiter’s *fulmen* (6.590), but earlier in the *Aeneid*, he uses *tela* (1.188) to describe *arcum... celerisque sagittas* (1.187). What is thus seen is that the arrow is a form of weaponized celestial fire, like the thunderbolt, sometimes even being called by the same word. The American eagle clutching the bundle of arrows is thus equivalent to the *aquila* with its thunderbolts, the difference between the two primarily being the addition of the olive branch in the former, a Christian peace symbol due to its connection with the story of Noah’s dove (Becker 220). Why precisely the Americans chose the arrow as opposed to the thunderbolt is unclear. Perhaps it was to distance their eagle from Rome’s and its subsequent imperial connotations, or perhaps it is a more modest and strictly military motif. But the Seal’s iconography is not solely what gives it a classical connection, for the script and mottos that were proposed during its drafting and are present in the final device all (save *e pluribus unum*) harken back to antiquity and/or the eagle’s old meaning.

In Barton’s original design, his eagle was accompanied by two phrases: *deo favente*, and *virtus sola invicta* (Patterson 25). The former stresses the eagle’s connection to the divine and its symbolism of divine favor, while the latter emphasizes its triumphal nature, being unconquered, since the eagle here *is* virtue, as Thompson wrote. Barton also

considered the phrase *in vindiciam libertatis* (Patterson 29), keeping the victorious nature but adding an interesting new, and particularly American, component: freedom. This suggests that the eagle grants freedom with its divine power to the United States. Thompson's mottos, both of which are in use on the reverse of the Seal today, were directly from antiquity: *annuit coeptis*, and *novus ordo seclorum* (DSBPA 4). The first is derived from Virgil's *Aeneid* (9.625) (Patterson 34), and the second from the *Eclogues* (4.5). *Annuit coeptis* is similar to Barton's *deo favente*, as it signals divine "providence in favor of the American cause" (DSBPA 6). It is worthy to note concerning the latter motto that it was written at a time when the Republic was crumbling and Antony was vying for power with Octavian, which in retrospect makes the "new order of ages" the Roman Empire. While Thompson is certainly not attempting to claim the birth of the new American Empire and is probably merely stressing the fact that it is an important political turning point for the nation, it is one more imperial connection that shows just how influenced the Great Seal of the United States was by Rome.

Thus it is seen that the American eagle of the Great Seal clearly alludes to the bird's ancient connotations and meanings, though it was made unique by its rather un-Roman preference for peace.

B. Nazi Germany

1. The History and Meaning of the Swastika

Before the equivalent treatment can be given to the *Parteiadler* and the National Emblem of Germany during the Nazi era, the history and meaning of the swastika must be discussed, for since the eagle is never without the it, to fully comprehend the insignia in its entirety demands, first, a thorough investigation of the *crux gammata*.

The word "swastika" is of Sanskrit origin: *su* means "well" and *asti*, "being", where *ka* is a suffix, making the term essentially come to mean "well-being" (Whittick 328). The Sanskrit word *svasti* also means "fortune", and so these etymologies are not mutually exclusive as they both convey essentially the same idea (Becker 289).

But the symbol itself is far older than the Sanskrit name for it. Indeed the oldest swastika-like patterns are on objects made from mammoth-ivory, placing the artifacts at over ten thousand years old, many of which are female idols (Loewenstein 49). Similar

swastika motifs are also found on four thousand year old female figures from Samarra in the near east, as well as on the female face urns of Troy (Loewenstein 50). What is very clear is that for early man, the swastika was associated with the woman (Loewenstein 50). At these times being discussed, it is known that much art produced by mankind was not merely decorative but intended to be magical – that is, to have functional effects. Thus, due to the fact that the swastika was found almost exclusively on excessively fertile-looking female idols, it is clear that the symbol was one of fecundity (Loewenstein 50). The association of the swastika with fish – another ancient fertility symbol due to the creatures’ reproductive power – affirms this idea, as does its appearance on representations of sexual organs (Loewenstein 50). Samarran sepulchral pottery also depicts the swastika in conjunction with the snake, a long-standing symbol of rejuvenation due to the serpents’ molting (Loewenstein 50). But this association brings a new layer to the symbols’ meaning: sepulchral pottery and the serpent associate the swastika with death, which when combined with its nature as a fecundity symbol causes it to signify rebirth. Loewenstein notes “fecundity magic and the death-cult are intimately connected from the earliest times” (50). As another example, he cites what is called the “Ochre-grave culture” found as early as 3000 BCE in Russia where red ochre was both used to prepare bodies for burial as well as cover the aforementioned female fertility idols, which were often placed in the graves (Loewenstein 51). The symbol appears similarly on Boeotian grave idols and Theban sepulchral pottery where it is framed by two snakes, and later on tombstones and grave-weapons, more explicitly associating it with death (Loewenstein 51). It is thus seen that over the long history of this Indo-European symbol, the swastika comes to signify not only fecundity and prosperity but also death and rebirth. For the “Aryans”, however, the motif was also solar (Loewenstein 54).

For the “early Teutonic tribes”, the swastika was a “symbol of profound religious significance...” (Taylor 510). As an ancient Teutonic device, “the swastika or sun-wheel promoted the quality of sun and light.” (Taylor 510). The solar association is not at all mutually exclusive with its previous position as a fecundity symbol, as many peoples recognize the sun as the primary life-giving body; accordingly, the swastika as a rotating sun also signifies the continuous reaffirmation of life (Koshar 120). This significance is

almost identical to the Hindu take on the symbol, where it is not only the sun but also the wheel of birth and rebirth (Bruce-Mitford 21)¹. This almost identical significance expresses the continuity of meaning of this motif across wide stretches of time and land. But just as the swastika has been shown to represent the sun and fecundity, it was also seen on objects associated with death.

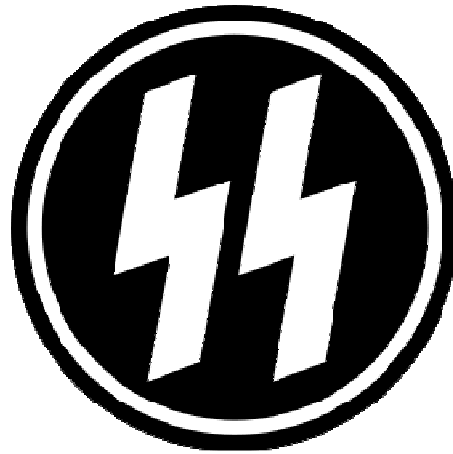
For the symbol is also easily interpreted to be intersecting lightning bolts, as it was a common representation of Thor's hammer Mjolnir, which in Norse myth caused lightning strikes when the sky god would throw it earthward (Becker 289). Images of Vishnu, the Hindu deity, often depict him with a *chakra* – a “wheel of existence” – around one of his fingers, which is represented as a swastika (Bruce-Mitford 21)¹. It should be noted that there is an Indian weapon called a *chakram* that Vishnu is often depicted wielding, which is a bladed ring flung from the finger, and thus a missile weapon. The Hindu sky god Indra's thunderbolt, *Vajra*, is also often crossed to form a sun wheel. What can clearly be seen here is that the swastika is not merely celestial fire in the form of the sun, but a universal representation of the sky god's weapon – the ultimate weapon: the fiery thunderbolt. Thus as a symbol of life, the swastika is the sun, and as a symbol of death, it is lightning.

To reinforce the argument of the swastika as representing both the sun and lightning, as well as to corroborate its old Teutonic roots, the Germanic runic alphabets will be briefly examined. In the Elder Futhark, the “S” rune is called *sowulo*, and is written as a lightning bolt, signifying the sun, illumination, the vital quality of daylight, and “power directed in a devastatingly straightforward way” (Pennick 57). It resists the forces of death and heralds triumph of light over darkness (Pennick 57), as the sun and lightning (and even the eagle) often do, as has been discussed earlier. In the Younger Futhark, the rune's name becomes *sol*, and is very clearly still the sun, and is written identically (Pennick 71). By the time of the Middle Ages, the rune was called *sauil* or *sugil*, and stressed the ascendancy of light over darkness, and was the power of the sun, both physically and spiritually (Pennick 75). By the modern era and the Armanen runic

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□ The life force in Hinduism – *Shakti* – is represented as a snake, furthering the swastika as an ophidian symbol.

system, the rune became *sig*, which is very close to the German *sieg*, “victory” (Pennick 42), representing success, sun power, and conquering energy (Pennick 81). It is this rune that, when coupled with itself became the dreaded insignia of the *Schutz-Staffel* (Pennick 42). Thus two sig runes, two lightning bolts, crossed, as was aforementioned, form a swastika, a major symbol of the NSDAP as a whole, and the two, adjacent, form the insignia of the party’s elite guard. Perhaps it could be said that just as the eagles bore Jove’s thunderbolts, so did the SS bear Hitler’s.

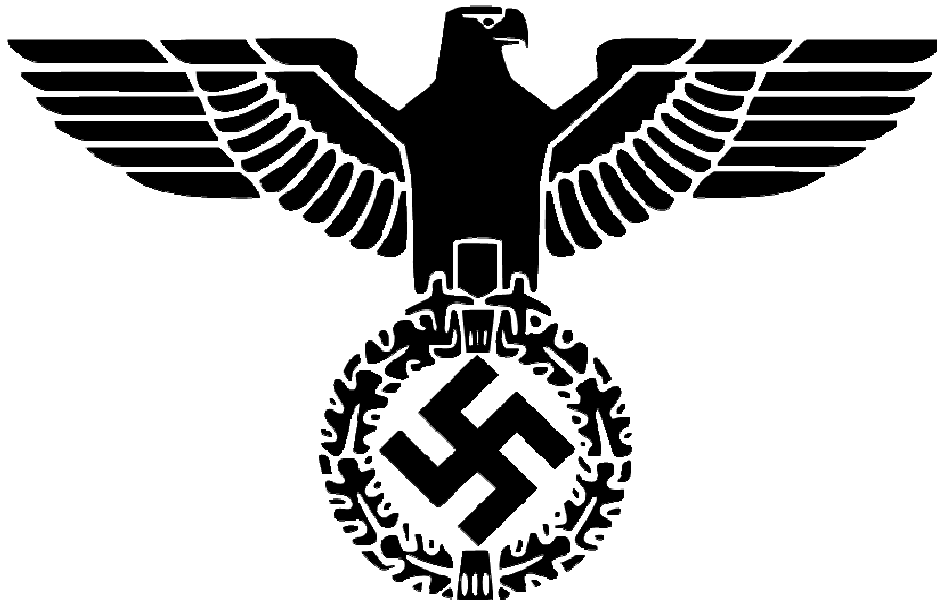


When the Nazi party came to power, it rejected the old black, red, and yellow colors in favor of the swastika, “presented as the deepest historical expression of the German *Volk*” (Taylor 510). As a symbol of reaffirmation of life, Hitler used the swastika as a symbol of revival of *national* life (Whittick 239). Interestingly enough, Hitler’s swastika is superimposed on a white disc, also an ancient sun symbol, which could be said to be universally common (Whittick 328, 329).

It has been shown then that the swastika is a highly complex motif that predates almost all cultures existing today, and it accordingly has many layers of symbolism due to its extensive and pan-global use over the course of several millennia. For the German peoples however, it was primarily a solar prosperity symbol as well as the representation of weaponized, divine fire. Now that the swastika has been properly discussed the National Emblem of the Nazi party may be investigated. Where the American eagle reluctantly clutches its missiles while it looks toward peace, the *Parteiadler* grasps its crossed thunderbolts with both talons, seemingly exhibiting a fervor for violence akin to the Roman *aquila*.

2. The Emblem of the Nazi Party – the *Parteiadler*

When the NSDAP took as their insignia the eagle, it was not the adoption of a novel device. When the partially Germanic Holy Roman Empire came about, they took the Roman eagle as their own in order to link the legacies and lineages so as to justify their claims of authority and identity. Specifically the double-headed Byzantine eagle was adopted (Becker 114), which became the emblem of Germany during the middle ages (Whittick 236), and the bird continued to be the national insignia in either its single or double headed form. Whereas the American eagle was meant to represent virtue, the *adler* here clearly retains much more of the militaristic significance that the *aquila* held, for it gazes over its left shoulder, toward the sinister. This seems to suggest, especially when compared to the American eagle, a preference of the *adler* for war, rather than peace. Additionally the NSDAP changed the iconography to make the eagle sharper, darker, and more intimidating, but also placed in its talons a swastika encircled by a stylized oak wreath.



This wreath does not serve the same function as the Eagle's olive branch whatsoever, for the oak is a sacred Teutonic tree that represents strength, glory, and supreme honor (Whittick 284), as well as durability and immortality due to the tree's toughness (Becker 218). This wreath of strength is thus roughly the 20th German equivalent of victory laurels (Becker 218), as both trees were associated with lightning –

where according to old popular belief, oak attracts it and laurels ward it off (Becker 218; 174) – and victory (Becker 174). Thus with the wreath stressing triumph, the *adler* is being invoked here in its old significance as the herald of victory and the destroyer of enemies and dark things (much like the lightning bolts that comprise the swastika).

The oak and the swastika together is in fact a traditional Germanic symbol (Koshar 117), and in many instances the tree is placed “in the midst of flames” (Mosse 41). This serves to further augment the “Germanness” of the motif, since most of its parts, even in conjunction with one another, can be traced back to an earlier time of German history.

All of this together as the National Emblem signifies an exceedingly heavy emphasis on triumphal symbolism and ancient fiery power (in addition to the other symbolic meanings) while simultaneously exhibiting both Roman and Germanic motifs. The eagle is victory, the wreath is victory, and the swastika –the crossed thunderbolts – is victory and power. For the NSDAP, like the Americans, the eagle still symbolizes federal authority, as both groups were attempting to stake their political clout, sovereignty, and capability with their insignias. But the eagle here is once again bearing the thunderbolts as it did in antiquity and it is not reluctant to implement them, as the American eagle is portrayed. In this vein, there is an interesting distinction in the placement of solar symbols between the two devices: while the *Parteiadler* is clutching its “sun”, the American eagle is underneath the star of thirteen stars. Perhaps it is telling that the American bird is beneath the celestial body, being guided by divine providence since “He favors [America’s] undertakings”, whereas the *adler* is wielding the divine fire as the ultimate weapon of the pagan sky gods. What is thus becoming very clear is the heavy emphasis Nazi Germany is attempting to put on its Roman connections. Where the NSDAP actively “compete[s]... to identify [itself] with Rome” (Edwards 11), the United States seems to shun such explicit connections, or at least to adjust them when invoking them.

3. The German Identification with Rome

“The classical tradition and [Germanic] romanticism did not merely confront each other within the rising spirit of national consciousness. They combined into a loose

synthesis, or indeed co-existence, which was to determine the way Germans expressed their national spirit and its worship” (Mosse 33). Indeed the NSDAP through the inclusion of both Roman and Germanic practices and symbols blended the history of both peoples in order to both exhibit nationalism and racial pride as well as a legacy of supremacy and conquest; they managed to combine the two ancient cultures into one single ideology. In his 1878 essay “*Was ist Deutsch?*”, Richard Wagner concisely captures the chilling phenomenon: “In their longing for ‘German grandeur’, Germans can... commonly not yet dream of anything other than something similar to the restoration of the Roman Empire. In this even the most good-natured German is seized by an unmistakable lust for domination and a craving for supreme power over other peoples” (Winkler 123). The fact that this was written some fifty years before the Nazi seizure of power attests to the long-term presence of this school of thought in the minds of the Germans.

Hitler and the Party legitimized such “lust for domination” by claiming a direct national genealogy that, according to them, can be traced back to the Roman Empire itself. This is what Arther Moeller van den Bruck had on his agenda when he coined the term *Dritte Reich* (Third Empire) to describe the Nazi regime (Winkler 122). By claiming the NSDAP administration was the Third Reich, it implied that the Wilhelmine Empire of Bismark of 1871 was the Second Reich, which in turn implied that the Holy Roman Empire (962-1806 CE) was the First (Winkler 122), and before that, Charlemagne was crowned Roman Emperor in 800 CE (Winkler 122). The remainder of the years that existed between this crowning and the fall of the Western Roman Empire in 476 CE were written off as a “mere suspension of Roman History” (Winkler 122). By this genealogy, the German leaders in 1933 “could claim long-standing connections to ancient Rome [as well as] a Roman influenced ancestry” (Winkler 122). Indeed Adolf Hitler remarked that “it was in Greece and Italy that the Germanic spirit found its first terrain favorable to its blossoming” (Winkler 123), attempting to claim that the Greco-Roman and Germanic peoples were one and the same. It is an ironic statement, considering the fact that in the eyes of the Greeks and Romans, the Germans were barbarians. In addition to the possibility of the use of such a connection as a sort of legitimizing agent of imperialism, this huge effort to stress a classical lineage can in part also be explained by Hitler’s

academic interest and obsession with antiquity.

Hitler's fixation with all things Roman could be discerned even at the very beginning of his career, as in 1920 he "gave a long speech about the attempt of the Romans to expand their power throughout the whole world" (Losemann 223). He would come to call Rome the "greatest... political creation... of all" (Winkler 123), claiming that it "never had its like... hav[ing] succeeded in completely dominating all neighboring peoples! And no empire has spread so unified a civilization as Rome did" (Losemann 225). Thus, he considered Rome to be the "best teacher" (Losemann 221), one whose example should clearly be followed. Concerning Hitler's ethnocentrism, it is particularly interesting to note, as Scobie points out "that it is nearly always the Romans, and not the Spartans to whom Hitler refers when praising military discipline and expertise in the ancient world" (Scobie 22). This implies that "Rome surpasses [what Hitler called] the purest racial state in history" (Losemann 224). This may be because unlike Rome, Sparta, as a small Grecian city state, was not imperialist in its policies; on the contrary it was one of the most isolationist-minded of the ancient *poleis*, which is not agreeable with Hitler's agenda: to develop a "positive view... of the creation of a world empire" (Losemann 231). For it seems rather clear that "[Hitler] was primarily interested in Rome as a model for ruling a world empire" (Loseman 231). He even clung to the "Roman example" in the midst of his defeat, instructing Goebbels "to publish extensive treatments of the Punic War in the German press", attempting to liken the state of affairs to post-Cannae Rome (Losemann 234) in order to re-instill the hope for victory, likely after the crushing defeat at Stalingrad. It is interesting to note the lack of what Hitler would call racial purity in ancient Rome, what with the myriad of peoples and ex-slaves that eventually were allowed to become citizens. Perhaps he did not know, or perhaps he knew this and chose to avoid bringing it up due to the problems it would cause for his ideology.

With Hitler as the commander of the Third Reich and the chancellor of Germany, much of the Nazi party's actions and undertakings were thus tinged with a classical style and manner. Some of this appropriation of antiquity came about due to the close ties between the Nazi and [Italian] Fascist parties (Winkler 126) – "Caesar by way of Mussolini" so to speak (Winkler 126). The NSDAP adopted the Fascist salute that is now universally recognized as the Nazi salute, replacing "*Ave Imperator*" with "*Heil Hitler*"

(Winkler 124). To this “*salute Romano*” as it is called was ascribed “some vague Germanic past” in an attempt to Germanicize it more fully, but regardless, the gesture had neither a Roman nor Teutonic history, as it was contrived in the modern era (Winkler 125). The NSDAP still claimed that it was a Roman gesture, and were clearly attempting to embody Roman militarism with its implementation. The use of Roman-type standards for parades and the like were “indeed modeled on *vexilla* of legions” (Winkler 126). The cultural exchange carried both ways, and the so-called “goose-step” was adopted by Mussolini, who called it the “*passo Romano*” (Winkler 126), following the Nazi manner of ascribing Roman nature to a non-Roman gesture. Thus both Italy and Germany began to build off of each other’s attempts to embody Roman culture. But the emulation of Rome was hardly limited to gestures: “Nazi art and architecture was deeply influenced by the classical...” (Mosse 32). Hitler allegedly changed the designs for his congress hall after visiting the Colosseum in order to have it better exhibit the classical style (Losemann 224). An entire book could be written on the subject of the emulation of Roman architecture and art in Nazi Germany, due to the sheer extensiveness of said imitation by the Germans, but it is only being glossed over here in the most cursory fashion in order to list it as one of the many facets of Nazi emulation. Hitler also, perhaps most strikingly, actually seemed to model his development of territory after the Roman example: “Under the direction of Caesar, and during the first two centuries CE, it was by means of construction of roads and tracks that the Romans reclaimed the Marshlands and blazed trails through the forests of Germania. Following their example, our first task in Russia will be to construct roads” (Hitler, as quoted by Losemann 224).

The Americans in no way match this extensive and blatant identification with the Roman Empire made by Hitler and the NSDAP. Though there are nearly as many implicit classical allusions in the American Seal as the *Parteiadler*, the US seems to not only not associate itself with the Roman Empire, but often to actively reject such identification, as it does with any monarchical or non-democratic power, having been founded in direct opposition to such an entity. Another distinction between the two governments that ought to be made is the relative presence of Christianity within them, and how this affects the use of the eagle and Roman-ness.

C. Comparison

1. The Disparity of Christian Character between the US and Nazi Germany

America was founded by Christians: Puritans (Wills 7), Anglicans and other Protestants and even Catholics (Wills 9). Of this there is no doubt. And even though Thomas Jefferson, like the other founding fathers was “deistically inclined” (Wills 15), Christian thought and ideology was (and is) an inextricable part of American culture. On the other hand, the Nazis often associated Christianity with Bolshevism and the Slavic masses undermining the state (Losemann 225). And in the later years of the regime, many Nazi leaders outwardly expressed antagonism towards Christianity, in addition to the paganists who always had (Steigmann-Gall 259). Though it cannot be said that Nazi Germany was entirely anti-Christian, as its members certainly hailed Martin Luther and believed they were waging a “war for God against the Devil” (Steigmann-Gall 261), it was much more hostile towards the sects of the religion than America, which is to say of the latter, almost not at all. Perhaps this difference in “relative Christian character” of the two governments is tied to their respective portrayals of the eagle, and that the different ideological states of mind are linked to this distinction. As has been briefly discussed, in early Christianity, the eagle was no longer interpreted as a vicious triumphal symbol but rather stressed as the embodiment of revival and penance. Perhaps this interpretation was preserved in Christian America and gave rise to the Eagle’s peaceful nature, whereas the anti-Christian, pro-Rome NSDAP took on the more aggressive and militant portrayal of the bird. But though the two nations differ greatly here, there is relative uniformity in their military use of the eagle.

2. The Military Decorations and Battle Dress of the US and Nazi Germany

Long gone is the age of battle-standards, and thus in modernity the eagle cannot be used militarily in the same fashion as it was in antiquity, but it is used extensively in rank insignias and decorations. The dress cap of all US Army officers bears the Seal of the United States, whereas the caps of Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard officers bear eagles which are incorporated into each branch’s own unique insignia (Bunkley 48;

145; 169; 175). The shoulder loop of a colonel depicts an eagle bearing arrows (Bunkley 52), aides to all ranks of general bear an “enameled shield surmounted by an eagle displayed with wings reversed” (Bunkley 59-60), quartermasters, warrant officers, and members of both US military academies and the WAAC (Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps) all have eagles on their collar ornaments (Bunkley 61). And in full dress, eagles are featured sometimes on belt clasps and service buttons (Williams 79).

During World War II, the “National emblem [of Germany was] worn on all headgear and on the right breast of all uniforms” (Bunkley 287). While there is much less variance in the insignias of the soldiers of Nazi Germany, the implementation is precisely the same as those of the United States: the eagle borne on both the cap and uniform. But what then is the functionality of this? Perhaps it is merely a visual device to identify the individual as belonging to their respective faction, but perhaps this practice of wearing the nation’s insignia is related to the ancient use of a symbol as sympathetic magic: the belief that by emblazoning one’s shield (in this case one’s uniform) with the harbinger of victory, triumph is attracted to the bearer. Perhaps it elevates the wearer to the status of “eagle-bearer”, a class of men who were portrayed as the bravest and most virtuous of legionaries. It is likely that there is a Roman connection to this usage, but it is neither necessary nor entirely clear. What is indubitably Roman, however, is the use of decorations as honors of virtue and distinction.

Military decorations as we know them in modernity seemed to have first appeared with comparable complexity in Roman society. Many honors granted by the United States feature eagles: the Army and Navy Distinguished Service Medals, the Army Distinguished Service Cross, as well as the Army Medal of Honor (Bunkley 211). This last one not only contains an eagle, but one surmounting the world “valor”, (essentially *virtus*) as well as a star encircled by a wreath. It is “awarded... to each person who, while an officer or enlisted man... in action involving actual conflict with an enemy distinguishes himself conspicuously by gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty” (Bunkley 211). This medal is strikingly similar to the Roman *corona civica*, one of the most esteemed decorations awarded for, in battle, saving the life of a fellow citizen and either beating back the enemy or holding the position (Maxfield 70). The US, like Rome, honors the soldier who risks his life displaying

“conspicuous gallantry” in combat. It is interesting to note that the *corona civica* was made from oak leaves (Maxfield 70), just like the wreath in the talons of the *Parteiadler*. There is then much similarity between the Medal of Honor and the Nazi emblem, what with each eagle surmounting the wreath – or perhaps *corona* – which in turn encircles a star in the former, and the sun (a star) in the latter. This in no way indicates a relationship between the two, and is being addressed merely to note once again the convergence of like iconography in both cultures.

And that is what is so particularly fascinating: that the same symbol, the eagle, can be appropriated by two distinct states and employed in nearly diametrically opposed ways to represent very different ideas while simultaneously retaining much of its original meaning in both contexts. It is difficult to say, despite the huge discrepancies between the implications and meanings of each country’s emblem and their respective approach to their identification with Rome – or lack thereof – which emblem, the Eagle or the *Adler* is the truest child of the *aquila*. But if one excludes the Nazi ideas of racial superiority and the need for purity, and takes into account the pacifist leanings of the American eagle, perhaps the *adler* is a bit closer to the Roman model. At the same time, however, perhaps the lack of religious significance of the bird for the Germans – which could be a conscious rejection of Christianity compared to the relatively more “Christian” American eagle – and the higher focus on victory makes their *adler* even more concentrated and violent than the Roman eagle.

Conclusions and Looking Forward

The eagle emblem is far older than any state that currently uses it as its insignia, and originates in the ancient Mediterranean. For the Greco-Roman peoples, the eagle was a symbol of celestial divinity and power, coming to symbolize victory as the herald of the most powerful of the gods, *Zeus* himself, or, in his Roman incarnation, *Iuppiter Optimus Maximus*. In proportion to the status of Zeus/Jupiter, his armour-bearer was viewed as the best and greatest of birds and omens, an idea that was kept alive by the Western world’s love of and fascination with antiquity. In almost all of its history, the eagle has been an overwhelmingly positive symbol.

However, since its relatively recent employment by the now defunct NSDAP and

Italy during WWII, as well as its general association with imperialism, the eagle has acquired the capacity to act as a symbol of Fascism, totalitarian governmental power, and ruthless ethnocentrism; all problematic ideas, especially in the late 20th/early 21st century. So strong is this negative tinge that it sometimes causes alterations of long-standing insignias, such as the logo used by the banking company Barclay's. In 2007, the company was considering dropping their eagle logo due to “Nazi connotations”. Their eagle is not even particularly akin to the *Parteiadler*, showing more resemblance to the late Holy Roman Empire's *Reichsadler* (see below) or even the modern *Bundesadler* (not shown). It is typically white on a blue background – but when backed by white, black – and features three crowns, one on the eagle's breast, and one on each wing. Perhaps the crowns could be construed as being analogous to the victory wreath of the Nazi eagle, but overall the insignia bears no more resemblance to the *Parteiadler* than does the American eagle on the Great Seal. Regardless, the association with National Socialism is so strong that the company was afraid of offending customers.



Though its history is complex and recently tarnished, the eagle is much too old and potent of a symbol to be tossed aside, and it will certainly continue to be used, only perhaps with conscious effort to mute any imperialistic and violent connotations. It is not as if most of the states which bear an eagle as their insignia have ceased to use it since WWII; the eagle can still be seen on the flags and emblems of many nations around the world. The flag of the United Mexican States features an eagle – fighting a snake, no less – and the bird is still included in the Coats of Arms of many European states, such as Germany, though it has been long since the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire which first took up the symbol in mainland Europe. And one must not forget the American eagle, which by dint of its position as the national bird comes to symbolize American

ideology: the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. It seems rather myopic and ignorant to omit the eagle's history prior to 1933 when considering it as a symbol, political or otherwise, especially if its depiction is nowhere near to that of the *Parteiadler*. The bird's natural majesty and splendor first left its mark on the human psyche many thousands of years ago, and it seems unlikely that it will cease to be widely used as a sigil merely because of its recent, negative associations.

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