The *Genius Populi Romani*: A Study in Imperial Identity

Romans widely believed in the existence of the *genius*, a spirit that accompanied every mortal from birth to death, and also determined one's nature and fate—similar to the Greek *daemon*, or Christian guardian angel. Starting in the mid-70s BCE, we find the claim made on coinage that the Roman People also had its own corporate *genius*. Representations of the *genius populi Romani* ( = *g.p.R.*) are widespread, particularly on coins. Republican-era portraiture depicts the *genius* as an older bearded male, holding a *cornucopia* in his left hand. Later representations show a young and clean-shaven man, half-naked and still holding the *cornucopia*. My aim is to elucidate the role of this little-discussed figure in the Empire, where it attained its acme of popularity, and consequently its implications for Roman identity.

I argue that the sharp uptick in the appearance of the *g.p.R.* on coins starting in the troubled year 68/69 CE, and then often during times of political turbulence, suggest that this figure was meant to symbolize the unified spirit of the sovereign Roman people, as well as to express the hope for its well-being. I also sketch how emperors, as early as Augustus, sought to integrate the *g.p.R.* with the imperial ruler cult, attesting to the power this image had in the popular imagination. In particular, I highlight the specific ways that Domitian (on the Cancelleria Reliefs of 93 CE) and much later Diocletian (who conspicuously revived the figure on his *follis* coinage) used the image of the *g.p.R.* to signify the solidarity of the Roman People with their respective regimes. I conclude by showing that worship of the *genius populi Romani* was widespread in the Roman Empire until Theodosius I felt compelled to ban it in 392 as part of wider anti-pagan measures.

# Works Cited

McMahon, Darrin. *Divine Fury: A History of Genius.* New York: Basic Books, 2013.

Steinby, Eva Margareta. *Lexicon Topographicum Urbis Romae.* Roma: Edizioni Quasar, 1993.

Scheid, John. "Genius." In *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, edited by Simon Hornblower and Antony Spawforth. 3rd rev. ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Sutherland, C.H.V. "Diocletian's Reform of the Coinage: A Chronological Note." *The Journal of Roman Studies* 45 (1955): 116-118.

Varner, Eric R. *Mutilation and Transformation: Damnatio Memoriae and Roman Imperial Portraiture.* Boston: Brill-Leiden, 2004.

Audio-Visual Needs

I will be using a Powerpoint to display images of coins relevant to my paper. As such, I will provide my own personal computer, which will require an HDMI connection for a projector.