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The Center of the Earth in Ancient Thought

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Abstract: Throughout the annals of history, many societies have imagined that places integral to their religious, political, or cultural life should be considered “centers.” These centers are often represented by symbolic constructions, mythologies, and ideological statements. In many cases, notions of centrality are accompanied by claims that a particular space should be considered the “center” or “middle” of the earth; in the Classical World, such a place may also be referred to as the “navel of the earth,” with the *omphalos* connected to the oracle at Delphi being the example *par excellence*. Yet Delphi did not hold a monopoly on Classical notions of centrality. From the archaic period to Late Antiquity, critical responses to Delphi emerged, sparking the appearance of other, competing, centers throughout the Mediterranean. New centers show striking similarities to one another in their associated ideologies, physicality, and mythography, and could be represented through programmatic cartographic, literary, and architectural statements. Regardless of the medium, all avenues of representation are indicators of the myriad ways in which these societies understood their physical and metaphorical place in relation to other civilizations of the ancient Mediterranean. This paper will argue that, through intense cultural contact, societies of the ancient world created imagined centers as a direct—and oftentimes competitive—response to other imagined centers in the Mediterranean, and beyond. All of these reconfigurations and manipulations of fictional and real space can be associated with fundamental shifts in the socio-cultural operations of the society in which the new “center” appears.

Keywords: centrality, *omphalos*, cartography, Delphi, Rome, Constantinople, Jerusalem

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Introduction

In the last several decades, as with many other scientific schemas, the center-periphery model has become first trendy and then passé in scholarly circles.¹ Most often, the discussion focuses around the relationship between an imagined center and the outlying regions and peoples within its concentric sphere, with the center usually located in a large metropolis, where one might expect it. But in the ancient imagination, the center took on greater proportions. In many cases, the center became not just the midpoint of a civilization, but of the earth itself. Often, it was simultaneously connected with space and with the cosmos, forming what Eliade (1961: 39) refers to as a “sacred, mythic geography.” And, as Lefebvre (1992: 331–34) argues, centrality, especially in the ancient world, is a function of both time and space, connecting “the punctual to the global.” The most important aspect of Lefebvre’s notion of central spaces, however, is that centrality is mobile and changeable: some centers are displaced, some “explode,” while others, he argues, are subverted. It is the last of these categories that I wish to focus on here. I will argue that the creation of physical and mental geographies surrounding certain centers often became a way not only for a civilization to place themselves within the environment of an imagined (or real) periphery, but also as an avenue for proclaiming “reactive” competition with other ancient centers. We have attestations of countless centers in antiquity, but here I will focus on three cities: Jerusalem, Delphi, and Rome. My attention to these cities is partly due to the wealth of literary and archaeological evidence surrounding them, but also because the cultures associated with these centers were in direct and productive contact with one another. That cultural contact has interesting implications for the ways in which these civilizations interpreted and manipulated the meanings behind other competing centers; studies of these interactions also better informs us of the ways in which monumental religious, political, and social events effected a society’s self-representation in Classical Antiquity.

The center as contested space: Delphi as reference point

Especially in the Classical World, the idea of centrality was often, though not always, enveloped in an argument that a geographical location was the “navel

¹ In the ancient world in general, a signal publication can be found in Rowlands et al. (1987). Some major critics include those within the anthropological and archaeological communities. See e. g., Stein (1999).

of the earth.” Roscher (1913: 35) points out that, at a cosmic level, the idea of a “navel of the earth” is always associated with a conception of the earth as a horizontal plane; the vertical plane, at its nadir, represents the Underworld, with its apex in the heavens. In more terrestrial terms, the “navel of the earth” is intimately connected to a mountain or natural peak, where the *axis mundi* meets; these places, more often than not, become homes for important sanctuaries. The intersection between these cosmic and terrestrial elements make the “navel of the earth” an important locus for religious ritual, royal legitimation, and other culturally significant activities. Physically, the navel of the earth was often marked by some kind of symbolic attribute, such as the *omphalos* stone (Figure 1) at the Delphic oracle in Greece. As could be expected, when an ancient city receives the designation as “navel of the earth,” that location is imagined to have also been the point of origin of the earth, just as the navel is the origin of the human embryo in ancient thought (Wensinck 1916: xi). While the imagination of a “center” is not always directly associated with a “navel” and vice versa,

Figure 1: Omphalos stone, Delphi Museum. Photograph courtesy of Michael McOsker.

connections between the two are oftentimes implicit. The connotative resonances are international and appear early in premodern history.²

We will begin with Delphi, a standard point of reference for centrality in the entire Classical World. Located on the slopes of Mount Parnassus in Phocis, Greece (Figure 2), Delphi housed the oracle of Apollo from as early as the Mycenaean period (c. 1600 BC-1100 BC), and may have even had prehistoric origins. Aided by vapors emanating from a terrestrial chasm at its site, Delphi quickly became the most prominent oracle in all of Greece, with its Pythian priestess being consulted on such matters as the colonization of Greek city-states and important military affairs.³ In his *Sketch of Geography*,⁴ Agathemerus proclaimed:

Figure 2: Apollo's temple, Delphi. Photograph by author.

Οἱ μὲν οὖν παλαιοὶ τὴν οἰκουμένην ἔγραφον στρογγύλῃν, μέσσην δὲ κεῖσθαι τὴν Ἑλλάδα, καὶ ταύτης Δελφοῦς· τὸν ὀμφαλὸν γὰρ ἔχειν τῆς γῆς.

The ancients drew the earth (*oikoumene*) in a circular way. They placed Greece in the middle, and in the middle of that, Delphi, for this they believed to be the navel (*omphalos*) of the earth.

² One of many examples showing the widespread nature of such beliefs is Elderkin (1962).

³ As one example, a comprehensive study of Athens' relationship with Delphi can be found in Bowden (2005).

⁴ Composed sometime in the first or second century CE. See Diller (1975: 59).

The Greeks marked Delphi as the navel of the earth through the erection of an *omphalos* stone, presumably in the *adyton* (a restricted area where the cult image would often be located) of Apollo's temple. Though the practical use of the stone remains uncertain, artistically the stone is often thought to represent the gift of Rhea, daughter of the earth goddess Gaia, to Cronus, her Titan husband. As the myth has it, Rhea had wrapped the stone in swaddling clothes in order to deceive Cronus, lest he succeed in his plan of eating his son, Zeus, to avoid the fulfillment of a prophecy which claimed that he would be overthrown by his own son. This is one of the myths that localizes the earth's cosmological beginnings at Delphi.

Many scholars have argued that the rituals at Delphi and their various accompanying mythologies were highly influenced by early Mesopotamian and Anatolian predecessors (e. g., Fontenrose 1980). Likewise, early Greek cartography—whose origins appear first in Ionia—was heavily dependent upon Babylonian predecessors. Some of our first Greek conceptualizations of the world appear in the Milesian astronomers Anaximander and Hecataeus. Though their maps do not survive, Herodotus indicates that these earliest Ionian geographers divided the earth into three parts (Figure 3):

Figure 3: A reconstruction of Hecataeus' world map. Recreated by Bibi Saint-Pol. Public domain.

εἰ δὲ ὀρθή ἐστι ἡ γνώμη τῶν Ἴωνων, Ἑλληνάς τε καὶ αὐτοὺς Ἴωνας ἀποδείκνυμι οὐκ ἐπισταμένους λογίζεσθαι, οἳ φασὶ τρία μόρια εἶναι γῆν πᾶσαν, Εὐρώπην τε καὶ Ἀσίην καὶ Λιβύην. (Hdt 2.16.1)

If the opinion of the Ionians is correct, I declare that the Greeks—and the Ionians themselves—are not using proper reasoning, when they say that all the earth is divided into three parts: Europe, Asia, and Libya.

Importantly, the map of Anaximander, much like the relatively contemporaneous Babylonian Map of the World, views the world in a complicated schema that is grounded in science but also highly dependent on ideological concerns. The Babylonian Map of the World (Figure 4) envisions the world as divided into four quadrants, which extend for an incomprehensible distance from Babylonia, at its center (as detailed on line 26'–27' of the reverse; see Horowitz 1998: 40).⁵ The map is meant to show the relation of Babylon to places in which legendary beasts are known to have lived in regions beyond the ocean, which encircled the Babylonian heartland (Millard 1987: 111). A similarly ideological center was depicted by the Ionian cartographers, as it is widely believed that Anaximander adopted the position of Delphi as the center of the earth, as described by Agathemerus (Couprie et al. 2003: 94–96; Couprie 2011: 81; Dilke 1985: 24).⁶ The Babylonian Map of the World and early Ionian cartography both conceptualized the world as being flat, with an encircling ocean (Horowitz 1998: 41)⁷; in both schemas, the circular orientation, based on the four cardinal directions, is further complicated by a tripartition of terrestrial space, which is delineated by major bodies of water (Zaccagnini 2012: 872–73).⁸ Kahn (1985: 84) argues that the striking correspondence between these configurations indicates a dependence of Milesian science on Babylonian tradition. Munn (2006: 195) goes further, suggesting that Anaximander consciously adopted Mesopotamian principles of geography to an Anatolian

⁵ The quadripartite structure is unsurprising; it is no secret that one of the most forceful epithets from Mesopotamian royal inscriptions is the Sargonic *šar kibrat erbetim*, “king of the four corners of the universe,” a phrase that first appeared in the 24th–twenty-third centuries BC and survived most of Mesopotamian history thereafter (Michalowski 2010: 153).

⁶ However, some scholars have also proposed a middle point at Delos or Miletus. See Couprie, Hahn, and Nadaff (2003: 194–201).

⁷ Homer also envisioned an encircling ocean, as is evident from the metaphorical map he places on Achilles' shield. See Aujac (1987: 131–32).

⁸ Thus, a quadripartite structure coexisted with a tripartite one in these early maps; such subdivisions will be the case in Roman and in later Medieval maps, which may have adopted a similar “T-O” shape (Zaccagnini 2012: 865–73).

Figure 4: *The Babylonian Map of the World*, British Museum. © Trustees of the British Museum.

context.⁹ These principles were not just scientific; as Munn (2006: 186) argues, both Babylonian and Ionian maps were primarily concerned with ideological relationships to the world rather than striving for an accurate depiction of space. Therefore, we can understand the placement of Delphi in the middle of early Ionian maps in the context of the cultural transference of “center” ideology: the Greeks adopted Near Eastern symbolic examples to place Delphi in Babylon’s cartographic shadow, using well-known configurations to express their own view of their contemporary political significance.

But inevitably, the creation of a new center in the ancient world was never without its own controversy. And already, in the sixth century BC, the Greek

⁹ Such a proposition is not unlikely, as we have evidence that Anaximander was influenced by Babylonian conceptions of the world; for example, Herodotus 2.109 relates that Anaximander had borrowed the idea for a sundial from the Babylonians and introduced it to the Spartans (Aujac 1987: 134).

philosopher Epimenides doubted the authenticity of the *omphalos* at Delphi as the center of the earth. With a reputation as a divinely inspired prophet himself, who was known for having cleansed Athens of the Alcmeonid curse in the sixth century BC (Ciholas 2003: 18),¹⁰ Epimenides might have been sympathetic to the inner-workings of the Delphic oracle. But instead, as a direct rebuttal to the myth that Zeus had sent two eagles to meet at the center of the earth (which was then established at Delphi), Epimenides tested the theory and inquired of the god. After he received an ambiguous response, Epimenides claimed:

οὐκ ἄρ' ἔην γαίης μέσος ὀμφαλὸς οὐδὲ θαλάσσης· εἰ δέ τις ἔστι, θεοῖς δῆλος θνητοῖσι δ' ἄφαντος. (Plut. *De defectu oraculorum* 409 F)

There was no *omphalos* either in the center of the earth or of the ocean; even if there is one, it is clear to the gods, but invisible to mortals.

For Roscher (1913: 56), this is simply Epimenides' reaction to the fact that there were other well-known *omphaloi* in the Greek world. Roscher gives the examples of Miletus and Paphos, the latter being considered a navel of the earth because of its status as the residency for the cult of Phoenician Aphrodite.¹¹ Butterworth (1970: 35) reconciles the problem by pointing out that Epimenides' denial implies a belief that a central navel of the earth did indeed exist, but that it should be considered of a divine, rather than terrestrial or marine nature.¹²

It was not just the Greeks that took to task the Delphic claims to be the center of the world. In the second century BC, another location arises as a direct competitor to Delphic assertions of its own centrality. In the Book of Jubilees 8.18–19, we see our first clear cartographic image of Jerusalem as the center of the world.¹³ The passage states:

¹⁰ As reported in Diogenes Laertius I.109–115 and Plutarch, *Solon* 12.

¹¹ Cole (2010: 199) points out that the image in which Delphi was in the center of a series of concentric zones was an inherent source of competition for all Greek city-states, as “Each *polis* imagined itself at the center of a conceptual map that divided one political territory from another.” This was the “reality of the human environment;” Delphi, on the other hand, occupied both a geographical and a moral space that was in some sense recognized throughout the Greek world, and from which other human populations were arranged in the Greek world-view (as indicated at the very least by the narrative of Herodotus in Book 4 of his *Histories*).

¹² It should be mentioned that the author of the work in which Epimenides' denial appears is Plutarch, who was a priest at Delphi in the first century CE. For that reason, we should take this quotation seriously, because Plutarch was offended enough by it to write an entire treatise refuting the claim.

¹³ Unfortunately, neither the Greek nor the Hebrew version of the text survives, with most reconstructions coming from Ethiopic manuscripts. Thus, it is unclear whether a Greek translation would have been faithful to the (potentially Hebrew or Aramaic) original.

And he [Noah] knew that the Garden of Eden is the holy of holies and the Lord's dwelling place, and Mount Sinai the center of the desert, and Mount Zion the center of the navel (*omphalos*) of the earth: these three were created as holy places facing each other.

Alexander (1999: 105) urges that we look at this statement in the entire scheme of the *imago mundi* presented by the author of Jubilees; if this unique point of view is considered, he suggests that the strange designation of Zion¹⁴ as both the center of the world and its *omphalos* (what he regards as a “curiously tautologous” notion) is a reaction to Greek nationalist sentiments expressed in Ionian geography. As we already saw, in early Greek, pre-Herodotean cartography, maps were divided into three continents (Europe, Asia and Libya/Africa), with Delphi placed in the middle. The author of Jubilees, Alexander argues, renegotiated this map (and its concomitant concept of the world) by correlating the three sons of Noah with the three Ionian continents (Japhet = Europe, Shem = Asia, and Ham = Libya), and relocating the center from Delphi to Jerusalem¹⁵ (Figure 5). Alexander (1999: 107) associates this shift with the Hasmonean revolution, an intellectual and ideological effect of the violent backlash against Greek rule in the east, most famously represented by the Maccabean revolt.¹⁶

This Hellenistic backlash may have been an affirmation of earlier claims to Jerusalem's superiority over Delphi. Delphi's reach had spanned far already in the tenth century BC. As Elderkin (1962: 112) argues, during the Davidic era, Jerusalem had adopted a center ideology based on the *omphalos*,¹⁷ which originated through Dionysiac worship at Delphi¹⁸ and was mediated through the same cult at Hiram's Tyre. We may be seeing this adoption already revealing itself in the conception of the world as it is given in Genesis; Neiman (1980: 39–42) argues that the writers of Genesis chapter 2 and the “Table of Nations” in Genesis chapter 10 had similar views to the Greeks as to the makeup of the earth, as gleaned from Homeric ethnic and geographic terminology.¹⁹ The only differences in early Biblical and Homeric views, he argues, were “the result of differences in

¹⁴ Mount Zion is often used after the 6th C BC as a synonym for Jerusalem. It has particular associations with center ideology, as hills or mountain peaks were often the locus for the “navel of the earth” in ancient thought (see above). See also Shinan (1999: 120–32).

¹⁵ This tripartite schema was later adopted again, perhaps unsurprisingly, by the Christian apologist Orosius (Humphries 2007: 52).

¹⁶ See also Scott (2002: 32–33), who argues that the author of Jubilees is adapting the *periegesis* (“circuit”) tradition of geography from Greek examples.

¹⁷ And specifically, the “networking” pattern of the *omphalos* stone, which appears on the tomb of Christ, according to Eusebius. See Elderkin (1962: 102).

¹⁸ Delphi houses the tomb of Dionysus, according to some traditions.

¹⁹ Such influence would make sense, as current scholarship assumes that the Book of Genesis was written sometime in the postexilic period because of an attempt to build community under

Figure 5: A “T and O” representation of the biblical *mappa mundi*, from the first printed version of Isidore of Seville’s *Etymologiae* (1472). Photograph courtesy of the University of Texas at Arlington, Foundations of Western European Cartography in Texas Collections, and distributed in the public domain.

perspective caused by the displacement of the foci of their respective circular maps” (Neiman 1980: 42). The purpose of the assertion of a central ideology at Jerusalem, argues Terrien (1970: 331), was to not only propel Jewish nationalism but also to legitimize single-rulership. If this is the case, the Hellenistic period—in which there was an initiation of a new (Greek and non-Jewish) monarchical rule—would serve as a fitting occasion for a reaffirmation of Israelite centeredness. These assertions, as earlier, would again be made as direct reactions to Delphic claims to centrality, which would now resonate with the conqueror’s ideology²⁰ but also to an ideology ingrained in the mythology about Jerusalem (Terrien 1970: 338). Any association with monarchy ultimately subverted Delphi’s

Persian imperial rule (Ska 2006: 217–229). This proposed timeframe would allow for the possibility of the transference of Homeric ideologies through Ionia and into the Persian heartland.

20 See Collins (1999: 63), who argues that Jewish revisionist history during the Hellenistic period is often framed using criteria that is recognizable in its Hellenistic context.

purpose, as it had always served as a polis-centered “conflict-resolving mechanism” (Scott 2014: 175)²¹; thus, in both the Davidic and the Hellenistic periods, the claims of Jerusalem’s centrality as against those of Delphi can be viewed as competitive. The concomitant rise of Rome during the Hellenistic period caused the dialogue about Jerusalem to intensify. In fact, Rome’s complex political and ideological relationships with both Delphi and Jerusalem would manifest itself in a similarly complex history of declarations about its own centrality, to be explored in the next section.

The Hellenistic period had fostered the growth of Greek ideas in the East and caused competitive reactions in areas conquered by the Hellenistic kings. But as Delphic claims to centrality became sticking points for those under Hellenistic rule, the Greeks themselves continued to (re)consider Delphi’s position as the center of the earth. Following the early example of Epimenides, in the second century CE the Greek orator Aristides, a representative of the Second Sophistic movement,²² wrote a revisionist Greek history in his *Panathenaicus* whereby Attica becomes the middle of Greece; Athens the middle of Attica; and their own religious building, the Acropolis, lies in the middle of that central city:

ἡ δ’ αὐτὴ θέσις τῆς τε χώρας ἐν τῇ Ἑλλάδι καὶ τῆς πόλεως ἐν τῇ χώρᾳ, μέση γὰρ ἐν μέσῃ κεῖται, τοσοῦτον πρὸς θάλατταν ἐπικλίνουσα, ὅσον τοὺς λιμένας ἥς εἰσι φαίνεσθαι. τρίτη δὲ ἀκόλουθος τούτων ἀνέχει, περιφανῆς ἄνω διὰ μέσης τῆς πόλεως, ἡ πάλαι μὲν πόλις, νῦν δὲ ἀκρόπολις, κορυφῇ παραπλησίως, οὐχ ὡς ὕστατον εἶναι τῆς πόλεως, ἀλλ’ ὡς περὶ αὐτὴν πᾶν τὸ λοιπὸν σῶμα τῆς πόλεως, ἄκρου καὶ μέσου ταυτοῦ συμπεπτωκότος, τὸ διὰ πάντων ἥδη τοῦτο κάλλος καὶ ὁ τελευταῖος ὅρος τῆς περὶ γῆν εὐκαιρίας. (*Panath.* 159 D 16)

The placement of the city [Athens] is in the same position in its territory as the land [Attica] in Greece; it lies in the center of a central land, leaning only so far to the sea as the harbors show clearly whose they are. And conforming with this as a third centrality, rising high through the center of the city, what was the old city and is now the Acropolis, resembling a mountain peak, not to be the last part of the city, but so that all the rest of the body of the city is around it, where the high and central point coincide, rich in all aspects and the final boundary marker of the good position of the land.

Aristides’ descriptions of these several central locations are in clear rhetorical wordplay with the Delphic concept of the position of the *omphalos*, as the laudation of Athens reiterates the midpoint of each concentric space described

²¹ Delphi’s decline in the Hellenistic period is evidence for its utility in a Greek world now operating under a monarchy; the Hellenistic kings no longer had use for it, and though Delphi was not completely destitute, as its importance became replaced with a center for games in the Hellenistic and Roman periods (see Scott 2014: 287), its function did drop precipitously.

²² For good general overviews of The Second Sophistic, see Swain (1996) and Whitmarsh (2005). For Aristides in particular, see Day (1980).

using a variation of μέσος (“center”) four times. Notably, Aristides also highlights the position of the Acropolis (the navel within the navel within the navel) as a κορυφή, “mountain peak,” which as we saw above is often connected to a standard ancient conceptualization of the earth’s navel.

The second century CE also saw contestations of the Greek conception of the “center of the earth” beyond just Delphi; another Greek astronomer living in Alexandria had an entirely different idea altogether. In Book 2 of his *Tetrabiblos*, Claudius Ptolemy, an astronomer residing in Alexandria, adopts a quadruplicate conception of the inhabited world. In his analysis, the center of the inhabited earth lies “situated around a center that seems to be located in the Mediterranean somewhere north of Egypt” (Secord 2012: 28).²³ As would seem natural, competing conceptions of the middle of the world reigned in The Second Sophistic, and were highly dependent upon where one resided in the post-Alexander Hellenistic world. The rise of Rome would complicate this Mediterranean-wide dialogue even further.

The complicated case of Rome

When evaluating potential reactions to identifying the “true” center of the earth, Rome is perhaps the most complicated case. Her rhetoric of centrality was likely to be a response to the contemporaneous import of Delphi in the eastern Mediterranean; at least, our descriptions of her foundation are reflective of an early imperial understanding as such. The first century BC Roman historian Livy has Romulus, the mythical founder of Rome, request that a messenger announce to all “*ut mea Roma caput orbis terrarum sit*; that my Rome is the head of the world” (Livy 1.16.6). Plutarch, a first century CE Roman author, adds that Romulus is said to have drawn a circle of the first furrow in his ritual act of founding the city, into which the first fruits of the year were thrown as a sacrifice; additionally, all new citizens of Rome were required to cement their status by throwing dirt from their native land into this pit (Plut. *Rom.* 11).²⁴ The central point for this activity was the *mundus*, considered to be the door to the underworld: this area is thus located in the space where the horizontal and vertical axes of the earth are thought to join. The foundation legend of Rome

²³ For more on Ptolemy, see Dilke (1985: 75–86); Roller (2015: 196–202); and Jones (2012: 109–128).

²⁴ Plutarch’s account is problematic, as it describes the *mundus* as a trench drawn around the Comitium, whereas most sources place the Romulean foundation on the Palatine Hill and do not include the Comitium. See Aicher (2004: 98).

thereby reflects an understanding of the notion of the center as a “bond” between mortal and divine planes, just as at Delphi.

According to Festus (157 M), a fourth century CE historian, the *mundus* was a domed structure that was large enough for a man to enter. The *mundus* may be connected to a small shrine on the Palatine associated with Rome’s founding (the so-called *roma quadrata*). It has been suggested that the *lapis niger*, a curious black stone that represents the only surviving remains of the old Comitium (the Republican era assembly space at Rome), should be recognized as the *mundus*. The *lapis niger* was a monarchical period (753–509 BC) construction and perhaps meant to commemorate the tomb of Romulus. Others have attempted to connect the *mundus* with a bee-hive chamber found below the northeast peristyle of the Domus Augustiana, a palatial residence of high imperial date (1st-third centuries CE, see Platner and Ashby 1929).²⁵ If the bee-hive chamber is indeed to be connected to the *mundus*, the assumption of Roscher (1913: 88) that the *mundus* is an *omphalos* symbol would be attractive. Indeed, Scott (2014: 27–28) argues that during the same period as Rome’s founding in the late eighth and early seventh centuries BC, the oracle at Delphi was “astoundingly active,” making it quite probable that her reputation had reached Rome—and caused the city to react accordingly—even in its infant stages.

While Romulus’ activity seems to have been centered on the Palatine Hill, very soon after Rome’s initial foundation, the Capitoline Hill was developed and a large temple was instated. Purcell (2007: 191) argues that this historical establishment was an explicit part of the Roman theory of centrality, by incorporating aspects of the hilltop landscape, the building of a temple, and the creation of a mythology surrounding its main god, Zeus. The introduction of the Capitoline Triad (Jupiter, Juno, Minerva) in the sixth century BC, he argues, can then be understood as a calque from Hellenic divine exemplars, a reading “of many contemporary ways of establishing hierarchical order with reference to symbolic centrality” (Purcell 2007: 191). In combination with the potential for Greek influence on Roman ideas of a cosmically-inspired navel (perhaps connected to Romulus’ foundation of the city), this behavior underlines the influence of ideologies of centrality, and exhibits the reactive nature of the foundation of an ancient center in the archaic period.

Indeed, direct reactions to Delphi’s claims to centrality increased during the course of the Republican period, most clearly with the construction of the

²⁵ Platner and Ashby’s 1929 *A Topographical Dictionary of Ancient Rome* can be retrieved via perseus.tufts.edu. Müller (1961: 22–35) finds both terrestrial and cosmological significance in the demarcation of Rome into four parts that are centered by the *mundus*.

umbilicus urbis Romae, the “navel of the city of Rome.” This monument is a circular, three-stepped concrete structure faced with brick (Gorski and Packer 2015: 155). It was discovered at the north corner of the rostra of Augustus, a speaker’s platform built in the Forum during the first emperor’s reign (Richardson 1992: 404). While Coarelli (1996: 288–89) has shown that the extant remains date to the Severan period, he assumes that the structure maintained elements from its original construction, which Verzàr (1976/1977: 380–98) dates to the second century BC. A construction in this period would make great sense, since Delphi came under Roman control during the second century BC.²⁶ Some scholars have attempted to connect the construction of the *umbilicus* to the *mundus* (Gorski and Packer 2015: 155), but it seems clear that the two are archaeologically distinct sites. The *umbilicus urbis Romae* does not appear in literary testimonia until the post-Constantinian era (after 337 CE), in a document called the *Notitia urbis Romae*, where it becomes tied up in late imperial politics (ca. 337–476 CE, see below).

It was during the fall of the Republic and the rise of Augustus that a Roman theory of centeredness really began to take hold. A quadruplicate conception of Rome as a center appears to have become increasingly popular as the self-awareness of the Roman state increased. Inspired by the cardinal directions (north, south, east, and west), many conceptions of central cities are associated with quadrangles from a very early period, such as the First and Second Jerusalem temples. The Classical Greeks, too, had utilized basic components of this idea, with the fourth century BC historian Ephorus following a similar schema, making his map rectangular in shape (Naddaf 2005: 110). But the adoption of a quadruple vision of the world is no more starkly evident than in the commission by Julius Caesar in 44 BC of four Greeks, who were to create a map of the Roman world based on four regions: Nicodemus was to work on the Eastern portion, imagined as everything East of Asia Minor; Didymus the West, perceived as all of Europe except for Greece, Macedonia and Thrace; Theodotus the North, which included the latter three and Asia Minor; and Polyclitus the South, imagined as all of Africa (Dilke 1985: 40; Nicolet 1991: 95–98). In Julius Caesar’s imperial vision of the world, Rome is at the center of a distorted quadrangular view. This formation is in concert with the way in which the first century BC architect Vitruvius imagined how the navel, or center, fits into a quadruplicate vision of the world:

²⁶ Stadter (2014: 90) points out that Plutarch represents Delphi as the stage for a dramatic change in history, whereby upon their official subjugation of Greece at the battle of Cynoscephalae in 197 BC, the site became a display for Roman power (Plut. *Flam.* 11–12).

Item corporis centrum medium naturaliter est umbilicus. Namque si homo conlocatus fuerit supinus manibus et pedibus pansis circinique conlocantum centrum in umbilico eius, circumagendo rotundationem utrarumque manuum et pedum digiti linea tangentur. Non minus quemadmodum schema rotundationis in corpore efficitur, item quadrata designatio in eo invenietur. Nam si a pedibus imis ad summum caput mensum erit eaque mensura relata fuerit ad manus pansas, invenietur eadem latitudo uti altitudo, quemadmodum areae quae ad normam sunt quadratae. (Vitruvius, de Arch. 3.1.3)

The navel, naturally, is the center, the middle of the human body. For if a man lies flat, with hands and feet extended, from his navel as the center, a circle can be located, and by wheeling around the circle, the lines of both his fingers and toes will touch. It is not only in that way that the shape of a circle can be visible in the body. Likewise it can also be found in a square formation. For if one measures from the feet to the top of the head, and these measurements are drawn out to the extended hands, we find the latter measure equal to the former; in that way the angles come into the pattern of a square.

This idea of centrality was applied by the Romans in practical terms as well; Müller argues that such a quadruplicate conception was integral to the functioning of the entire Roman Empire, with the basic surveying and city-planning techniques of the Romans based on these principles. This mental and physical mapping is evident in the so-called “centuriation” of cities and colonies throughout the empire, in which the towns were planned on an east-west (*decumanus*) and north-south (*cardo*) structure (Figure 6). In fact, this overwhelming tendency to imagine their empire in such a way has caused Edgerton (1987: 22) to muse that had Rome not “finally been thwarted by the rebellious Goths, [she] might have turned all Europe into one vast sheet of graph paper.” As we have already seen, a quadruplicate vision of the world was very popular between the second century BC and the second century CE, as Ptolemy’s *Tetrabiblos* (above) makes clear. This quadruplicate conception would freely coexist with a triplicate ideology of Roman centrality, much as had been the case in the Classical Greek world.

After the death of Caesar, Roman society was changed forever by the institution of the empire under the reign of Augustus (27 BC–14 CE). During this period, Augustus further developed upon the ideology of Roman centrality, and the city’s image was fashioned anew from whole cloth. One of the most important and oft-discussed symbols of this increasing attention to geopolitical ideology is represented in the so-called “map of Agrippa.” Begun by Augustus’ close confidant and son-in-law before his death in 12 BC, and later finished by Augustus (Tierney 1962–64: 151), the map is described as a “world map.”²⁷ In Book 3.2.17 of his *Natural History*, Pliny tells us that the map—considered a true attempt at a

²⁷ Moynihan (1985: 154) and Tierney (Tierney 1962–1964: 155) both believe the map to have been an attempt at an accurate representation of the world as it was known at the time.

Figure 6: Late nineteenth century military map showing the effects of Roman centuriation, bibliothèque de Ferrare municipal, Italy. Distributed in the public domain.

comprehensive description of the Roman *oikoumene*—was displayed in the Porticus Vipsania; it contained both a map and painted scenes (Nicolet 1991: 98–101). Moynihan (1985: 154–55) argues that this map adopted the triplicate view of the earth common to Greek geography, and seeks to recreate the new Roman imperial vision as “similar in size and shape to the one proposed by Strabo and his predecessors.” Dilke (1985: 41) recognizes that the map served an important function upon Augustus’ establishment of the empire, both to found new colonies for his veterans and “to build up a new image of Rome as benevolent head of a vast empire;” it was likely one of many such maps that were a popular feature in the public landscape of Augustan Rome (Roller 2015: 167).

This visual repurposing of Hellenic geography—what Talbert (2012: 169) describes as a “cartographic power statement”—is prominent also in Augustan literature, where we have a proliferation of statements that amount

to Delphic denials. Varro, a first century BC Roman author, denies that Delphi was the center of the earth (*de Lingua Latina* 7.17), claiming that the Greeks have it all wrong in the first place when they designate the navel to be the center of man, as that is not where life originates (i. e. we should draw this line at the place that distinguishes whether one will be a male or female, “where human life starts”). The earth itself, he claims, is the center of the universe, and *Praeterea si quod medium id est umbilicus pilae terrae, non Delphi medium*, “Meanwhile, if there was a middle of the earth at all, it isn’t Delphi!” This designation, in his opinion, is simply an overinterpretation of the Greek word *omphalos*, which became in Latin *umbilicus*. The implication is that the concept of the navel could now be usurped by the dominance of Rome. And in fact, these philosophical claims are buttressed by the literary works of Vergil, who claims in *The Aeneid* that the entrance to the underworld (often, as we have seen, associated with the earth’s navel) is in the center—of Italy:

*est locus Italiae medio sub montibus altis,
nobilis et fama multis memoratus in oris,
Amsancti valles; densis hunc frondibus atrum
urget utrimque latus nemoris, medioque fragosus
dat sonitum saxi et torto vertice torrens.
hic specus horrendum et saevi spiracula Ditis
monstrantur, ruptoque ingens Acheronte vorago
pestiferas aperit fauces, quis condita Erinys,
invisum numen, terras caelumque levabat (Vergil Aen. 7.563-571)*

There is a place in the center of Italy, underneath the high mountains,
noble, and mentioned by tradition in many lands,
the valley of Amsanctus: here it is hemmed in with dense foliage,
darkly, and on both sides of the forest, and in the center a roaring torrent
gives the rocks to echo, rushing in a twisted whirlpool.

There a terrible cave and an air-hole for savage Dis
are shown, and a huge cavern, out of which Acheron bursts,
opens its destructive jaws, in which the Fury,
that hated goddess, hid, freeing earth and sky.

Here again we have language associated with the center (*medius*) and mountain peaks, much as we saw with Aristides. In his commentary on this passage, Servius (7.563) explains that this is the place called the “*umbilicus* of Italy by the chorographers: *Hunc locum umbilicum Italiae chorographi dicunt.*” In this way, Rome had, retroactively, always been the center of the world, part of a long tradition and known among many lands and

peoples²⁸; Delphic claims to such a position were negated with a flick of the Augustan wrist.²⁹

Neither was Jerusalem immune to Augustan imperial assertions; in the second-century BC Book of Jubilees, explored above, we find a statement about the inevitability of a nation's rule which seems to garner a reaction from a rising Roman empire. After articulating the unique position of Jacob and his people among the nations of the earth, we read: "May [God] strengthen you and bless you; may you possess the entire earth" (22:14). According to Scott (2002: 33), the purpose of the statement in Jubilees is to justify and anticipate that "the descendants of Shem [will] rule the world from their privileged position in the center of the earth." A century later, during the reign of Augustus, the Roman geographer Strabo would publish his *Geography*. In it, he describes Italy as such:

ἐν μέσῳ δὲ καὶ τῶν ἔθνῶν τῶν μεγίστων οὖσα καὶ τῆς Ἑλλάδος καὶ τῶν ἀρίστων τῆς Λιβύης μερῶν τῷ μὲν κρατιστεύειν ἐν ἀρετῇ τε καὶ μεγέθει τὰ περιεστώτα αὐτὴν πρὸς ἡγεμονίαν εὐφυῶς ἔχει

And furthermore, being in the middle of the largest races [the Iberians, the Celts, and the Germans] on the one hand, and Greece and the best parts of Libya on the other, [Rome] surpasses the countries that surround it both in the excellence of its people and in its size, making it naturally suited towards hegemony ... (Strabo, *Geog.* 6.4.1)

Here, Rome is envisioned as sitting in the middle of a tripartite description of the most important places of the world, much as the Ionian geographers would describe Delphi, and later, the authors of Jubilees would envision the place of Jerusalem. Thus, in its heightened awareness of its own international importance, Augustan Rome participated in a counterdialogue not just with its Greek counterpart in Delphi, but also with the symbolic centrality of a much older nation situated with Jerusalem as its center.

28 Barchiesi (2017: 151–65) characterizes the Roman appropriation of Greek/Trojan spatial narratives in *The Aeneid* as "Vergilian geopoetics." The Trojan Aeneas' itinerary, he argues, is such that his journey represents the future Roman Empire with Rome at its center, destined from the beginning to become the center of the Mediterranean. Of course, the composition of *The Aeneid* took place under the patronage of Augustus and is widely understood as an ideological document meant to legitimize his new imperial rule.

29 Furthermore, as argued by Clarke (1999: 219–21), the view from Strabo's first-century BC *Geography* is from Rome, positioned as the center to which all resources flow. Clarke believes this insistence on the centrality of Rome to be a reflection of the ideology presented in Augustus' *Res Gestae* (see below for Augustus and his part in reiterating the physical aspects of Rome's centrality).

These insinuations were also buttressed with physical attestations of Rome's centrality. By the end of Augustus' rule, Rome—like Jerusalem—also had three “centers:” the *mundus* (established by Romulus), the *umbilicus urbis Romae*, and the *miliarium aureum* of Augustus.³⁰ As *curator viarum*, Augustus erected the *miliarium aureum* in 20 BC. The *miliarium* was styled as a column of gilded bronze, with a travertine foundation³¹; its remains were discovered in the nineteenth century (Gorski and Packer 2015: 159). During excavations by Kähler, he located the *miliarium* at the southeast corner of the Rostra of Augustus.³² There has been scholarly disagreement regarding whether or not the *miliarium* and the *umbilicus* were two separate structures,³³ but by and large the *communis opinio* is that they should be viewed as architecturally distinct.³⁴ Dio describes the erection of the *miliarium*:

τότε δὲ αὐτός τε προστάτης τῶν περὶ τὴν Ῥώμην ὁδῶν αἰρεθεὶς καὶ τὸ χρυσοῦν μίλιον κεκλημένον ἔστησε, καὶ ὁδοποιούς αὐταῖς ἐκ τῶν ἐστρατηγηκότων, ῥαβδούχοις δύο χρωμένους, προσέταξε.

At that time he [Augustus] was chosen commissioner of the roads around Rome, and in this capacity set up the so-called golden mile-stone, and as road-surveyors he appointed those from the number of the ex-praetors, each with two lictors. (Cassius Dio 54.8.4)

According to Plutarch (*Galba* 24.4), this milestone was the place in which there was an end to all of the roads that cut through Italy (εἰς ὃν αἱ τετμημένα τῆς Ἰταλίας ὁδοὶ πᾶσαι τελευτῶσιν). It is no accident that this golden milestone was placed nearby the *mundus*; the connection between Romulus and Augustus was quite deliberate, as Hölscher (2006b: 115–16) points out:

30 Aicher (2004: 98–99) is an example of the popular idea that three centers at Rome is “redundant.” Here he also presents useful bibliography on scholarly attempts to reconcile these three centers (which normally consists of combining two of them as one). Here I will argue that they were indeed separate, and that all served a political purpose in their particular chronological place in Rome's history.

31 It is not a coincidence that this milestone was fashioned as golden; much of the imagery in Augustan Rome was based on a return of the “gilded age.” See Zanker (1988: 167–92).

32 Richardson (1992: 254), citing Kähler (1964: 23, 58–59).

33 Richardson (1992: 404) believes that the two should be considered the same monument, “because it is unlikely that the city could have tolerated two supposedly precise centers of the city close to each other.”

34 Platner and Ashby (1929) locate the *umbilicus* on the north end of the hemicycle of the rostra, while the same authors place the *miliarium* between the rostra and the temple of Saturn, as per Pliny *NH* 3.66, who places it in *capite Romani fori*, and Tacitus *Hist* 1.27 and Suetonius *Otho* 6, who place it *sub aede Saturni*.

Die Neugestaltung des Forums wie der gesamten Stadt unter Augustus wurde somit als große konzertierte Aktion inszeniert, in der Mitglieder aller bedeutenden Gruppen der Gesellschaft einen Beitrag zur neuen Hauptstadt leisteten und dadurch ihren Konsens zur Herrschaft des Augustus kundtaten.

As *curator viarum* Augustus erected this monument as a visual and ideological assertion of the idea that “all roads lead to Rome,” which also became known as “kilometer zero.” Müller (1961: 34) argues that Rome itself had not only terrestrial but cosmographic significance, being at the same time the Nullpunkt of Roman existence and the beginning of Roman history, a type of mythical zero-date. This indicates a Roman consciousness of their place in the *longue durée* of world history, established physically by means of their particular ideology of centeredness in a perverted manipulation of the space-time continuum.

Finally, it is of note that during the Augustan period and later, the *umbilicus*, the *miliarium*, and the *mundus* would have all been visible; if the *mundus* is to be identified with the *lapis niger* (as argued above), all three would have been in close vicinity to one another in the Roman Forum (Figure 7). If this view is accepted, we might recognize the placement of a third center during the reign of Augustus as a physical engenderment of the triplicate Roman view of the world map, as expounded upon in Agrippa’s cartographic enterprise. Since Agrippa’s map was finished during the reign of Augustus, it would not be surprising to find a very physical assertion of the triplicate view of the world in the city of Rome, as the construction of the *miliarium* was carried out in the same period. Thus all three of Rome’s “centers” very literally took possession of the whole world, all in a prominent space in the city. Rome’s discourse about her own centrality would have been on full display late into the imperial period; until its fall, Roman rhetoric continued to present a global image with Rome at its center, and the history of that conversation would have been profoundly visible.³⁵

Late Antiquity saw the decline of Rome’s influence and the rise of imperial states in the East. In this atmosphere, ideas about Rome as the center of the world would be blurred to accommodate a new capital in the east: Constantinople. Dedicated in 330 BC by the progressive first Christian emperor Constantine, Constantinople served as an ideological replacement for Rome. The programmatic reconfiguration of the “centers” in Rome can serve as a micro-cosmic view of the awkwardness with which this change was received. In the

³⁵ As brilliantly argued by Talbert (2012: 177–90) with respect to the Peutinger Map, a late imperial (tetrarchic, as he surmises) Roman map that survives in only one Medieval copy.

Figure 7: Map of the western end of the Roman Forum, showing the locations of the *umbilicus*, the *miliarium aureum*, and the *lapis niger*. Map by Encyclopedia Britannica (1926) and distributed in the public domain.

Curiosum Urbis Romae, a Constantinian document that serves as a statistical evaluation of the administrative districts of Rome, the *umbilicus* is not listed, whereas the *miliarium aureum* does appear. However, in the *Notitia Urbis Romae*, a document whose origin is likely to be directly after the death of Constantine,³⁶ we see our first mention of the *umbilicus*. So why would a Constantinian document fail to list the *umbilicus*, which was clearly visible at the time? Brodersen (1996/97: 276–280) argues that in the *Notitia Urbis Romae*,

³⁶ See Brodersen (1996/1997: 275 f. 15) for bibliography related to the dating of these two documents. For a comprehensive examination of the possibilities for dating these two texts (in addition to the *Notitia Urbis Constantinopolitanae*, see below), see Behrwald (2009: 185–211). He argues that the two texts have a very similar structure, which may indicate contemporaneity; however, the additions in the *Notitia Urbis Romae* (e. g. the Forum of Constantine in Regio IV; the Genius of Constantine's cavalry in Regio VIII; and the description of the arch of Constantine as *arcum divi Constantini* in Regio XI) are strong indicators of a post-Constantinian date.

the *miliarium* and the *umbilicus* become conflated, with the *umbilicus* absorbing the function and the position of the *miliarium* (as the *miliarium* is no longer mentioned). This is not an inconsequential issue, as it indicates that, after the death of the first Christian emperor, shifts were occurring in the late imperial perception of (Augustan) Rome.

In many ways, Augustan Rome was the inspiration for many of Constantine's projects, both in Rome and in Constantinople. The most famous Constantinian monument in Rome, his triumphal arch, is styled both as a tableau of Roman imperial highlights and a traditional senatorial monument (Elsner 2000a: 149–84); the latter is especially evident in the inscription, which fronts the dedication of the arch by the Senate and the People of Rome (SPQR), and hails Constantine as having delivered the Roman people from the tyranny of a faction (associated with Maxentius, with whom Constantine had fought a bitter civil war), much as Augustus had claimed to have done in his *Res Gestae*.³⁷ Thus Constantine viewed the radical shift to an Augustan empire as a sufficient model for his intended transformation of the empire.³⁸ For that reason, the appearance of the *miliarium* in the *Curiosum* is sensible. However, during the reign of Constantine, the *miliarium* was supplanted by another “golden milestone,” the *milion* (also sometimes referred to as the *miliarium*), at Constantinople (Figure 8).

This monument appears in the *Collectio Civitatis*, a total list of monuments in the city of Constantinople that is appended to the *Notitia Urbis Constantinopolitanae*, a “regional inventory of the city dedicated to Theodosius II” (Matthews 2012: 82), and therefore post-dating Constantine by a century. We are told that the *milion* resided in Regio IV of the city, constructed as a domed tetrapylon. Built by Constantine in the fourth century CE, the *milion* was surrounded with statues of the emperor and his wife Helena, with a cross positioned between them; a statue of Tyche, the Greek goddess of Fortune, was also present. But even here there was a clear dialogue between the *miliaria* at Rome and Constantinople: the *milion* at Constantinople was placed “mit dem östlich anschließenden Augusteion in engem Zusammenhang” (Müller 1961: 216), a central government quarter that was built using old Severan establishments in the city. It is no coincidence that the *milion*, an Augustan-style monument, was

³⁷ For the inscription as a “miniature *Res gestae* for Constantine,” see van Dam (2007: 48–49, with bibliography).

³⁸ On the ways in which Constantine's assumption of the emperorship can be productively viewed as an analogue to the difficulties faced by Augustus in his shaping of the Roman empire, see van Dam (2007: 3–11).

Figure 8: The placement of the *milion* in the center of late antique Constantinople. Drawing by Cplakidas adapts Müller-Wiener and Mango, and is distributed through the GNU Free Documentation License Version 1.2.

placed in a porticoed square bearing its namesake's moniker.³⁹ Furthermore, as van Dam (2010: 65) points out, Constantine had moved an important Augustan statue into the Hippodrome at Constantinople upon his construction of the city. The statue, originally erected near Actium in western Greece, celebrated the victory of Octavian (to become Augustus) against Mark Antony there in 31 BC. This triumph was widely recognized as the point at which, as Octavian, Augustus had now consolidated the Roman Republic into his own imperial holdings. The resonances for Constantine's own imperial program are self-

³⁹ Schmidt (1981: 436–37) does not believe that the two monuments can be directly related because they exhibit different typological structures (with the *miliarium* appearing as a column, and the *milion* a much more complex structure). Further, he argues that garrisons in the Roman Empire also had these milestones, and that they no longer measured the distance to and from Rome.

evident: he could represent himself in the style of the first ruler of the Roman empire, who had established a center at Rome. But now Constantine was a new “first (Christian) emperor” of a new Roman empire in the East, at Constantinople. Harvesting the memory of Rome and transferring its centrality into a new context made this rather abrupt transition more palatable. Augustus had finessed the transition from Republic to Empire in much the same way; he had harnessed resonances of Delphi in shaping the ideological centeredness of Rome. Now, Constantine had very literally “moved” Rome to Constantinople, making the latter’s centrality—and his own emperorship—virtually inevitable.

As time went on, the remnants of the Roman Empire became more clearly divided between East and West; this division is reflected in the *Notitia Urbis Romae*, which ignores the *miliarium* at Rome, only mentioning the *umbilicus*. The later conflation in the *Notitia*—with the *miliarium* and the *umbilicus* fused in concept—may represent a greater ideological program in the late empire: this symbolic reconfiguration represents a different idea about the status of Rome and its counterpart in Constantinople. This topographical reconceptualization of the two cities would also explain the disappearance of the *miliarium* in the documentation: since the time of Constantine, there had been a new *miliarium* in Constantinople. Rome could no longer maintain a mile zero, as there could be only one. But the Nullpunkt of the Roman Empire could be different from “the earth’s navel,” as the latter was significantly bound to Classical Greco-Roman pagan ideology. The absorption of the *miliarium* into the *umbilicus* in post-Constantinian documents represents a different geopolitical understanding of Rome: practicality and symbolism are not always mutually exclusive propositions, and this ideological reconfiguration allowed the empire to reevaluate and subvert its own ideology of centrality to reflect the complicated nature of its situation. Rome was still allowed to be an undifferentiated—pagan—“navel of the earth,”⁴⁰ but all roads led to Constantinople.⁴¹

40 On pagan Rome’s “rejectionist” attitude towards Constantine and his building projects, see Krauthimer (1983: 38–40).

41 According to Schmidt (1981: 436–37), it was only in a later period, not in the reign of Constantine, that this idea of Constantinople as a new Rome was first developed. Georgacas (1947: 354) points out that while Constantinople is referred to in several sources as “new Rome,” Constantine himself likely imagined it rather as a “second” or “another Rome.” Ultimately “new” Rome and “second” Rome are both fundamentally imitative of Rome, and yield the same results. See, in general, van Dam (2010: 47–80), on Constantinople’s appropriation of the history of the city of Rome.

After Rome

Thus in the reign of Constantine, we have a *Roman* reaction to *Rome* as the center of the earth! Indeed, the establishment of other capitals—especially Constantinople—were particularly sensitive to Rome’s long-held influence in the ancient world. With the fall of Rome and the onset of barbarian invasions in the fifth century CE, Jerusalem reasserted itself as an important religious center. Already beginning in the reign of Constantine, a new Jerusalem was envisioned; but this one would be developed wholly under the auspices of Christian theology and ideology. The new Christian importance of Jerusalem—which had until this time been a “non-city ... a provincial backwater” (Elsner 2000b: 189), now appears in a new light, as a significant part of the organizational principle in the itinerary of the so-called “Bourdeaux pilgrim.” Here, Jerusalem is styled as an important capital (along with Rome, Constantinople, and Milan),⁴² taking its place among these other centers as a part of the Christianized “imaginative conception of the empire” which had occurred already within two decades of Constantine’s defeat of Maxentius. However, although Jerusalem became a center of a newly envisioned empire, it was styled in the itinerary as fundamentally different than our other pre-established cities: as Elsner (2000b: 195) notes, the itinerary was “the first Roman Christian text to present Jerusalem as the centre of its world and yet as the spiritual and scriptural Other to the administrative and secular norms of its world,” representing Jerusalem in a traditional travel-writing style, but with a “Christian dispensation.” Now, the possibility arose for a differentiation between a “heavenly” and a “terrestrial” center of the earth; this postural ambiguity can be compared to the position of the two *miliaria* that coexisted—in the same period—in Rome and Constantinople.

The fundamental distinction between the terrestrial and heavenly “centers” in the aftermath of the fall of Rome is nowhere more evident than in Augustine’s *City of God*, in which the city of Rome, the “earthly city,” is associated with temporary, material goods (as afforded by the Roman Empire), while Jerusalem, the “heavenly city,” harbors love only for God (De Bruyn 1990: 61). The textual and ideological shift of Jerusalem from an historic to a symbolic center was part and parcel of the contextualization of the city within a new Christian schematization; at the same time, the history and memory of the terrestrial Jerusalem

⁴² Rome itself had largely avoided being “Christianized” in favor of such projects being undertaken in Constantinople (Goodman 2007: 550–560). Through the restoration and enhancement of Christian symbols within Constantinople, it served now as a place to reinforce the abolishment of any memories of paganism (Goodman 2007: 560–577).

(which, as we saw above, was not as significant) could be contrasted to the (now extremely important) religious and symbolic one (Perrone 1999: 223–234).⁴³ This tension culminates with the statement of St. Jerome, who replaces Rome with Jerusalem as center of the earth. In the prologue to his commentary on Ezekiel (*Patrologia Latina* 25.16), the fifth century CE theologian proclaims that with the sack of Rome in 410 CE, “the head of the Roman Empire was cut off, and, if I’m speaking truthfully, the entire world died with that one city” (*Romani imperii truncatum caput¹ et ut verius dicam, in una urbe totus orbis interiiit*). Later on in the same commentary, we read:

Jerusalem in medio mundi sitam, hic idem Propheta testatur, umbilicum terrae eam esse demonstrans. Et Psalmista nativitatem exprimens Domini: Veritas, inquit, de terra orta est. Ac deinceps passionem: Operatus est, inquit, salutem in medio terrae. A partibus enim Orientis cingitur plaga quae appellatur Asia. A partibus Occidentis, ejus quae vocatur Europa. A meridie et austro, Libya et Africa. A Septentrione, Scythia, Armenia atque Perside et cunctis Ponti nationibus. In medio igitur gentium posita est. (Patrologia Latina 25 cols. 52b)

Jerusalem is situated in the center of the world. This is confirmed by the Prophet, showing that it is the navel of the earth, and by the psalmist expressing the birth of the lord: “Truth,” he says, “rose from the earth.” And the next passion: “[God] worked,” he says, “salvation in the center of the earth.” From the eastern parts it is surrounded by the region that is named Asia; from the western parts, by that which is called Europe; from the south, Libya and Africa; from the north Scythia, Armenia and also Persides and by all the nations of the Black Sea. It is therefore situated in the center of the peoples.

Thus Jerome sets up the transference of the “head of the earth” from Rome to Jerusalem. But Jerusalem would struggle with maintaining its identity as a center in the face of Rome’s resurgent religious dominance, especially in the Middle Ages. An example is the famous thirteenth century CE Hereford map (Figure 9). The map is a circular representation of the *mappa mundi* with the continents divided into three parts (in what is known as the T-O formation, see also Figure 5). It measures more than five feet in diameter on a single piece of parchment. The model for this map is believed to be Agrippa’s map (above).⁴⁴ While the top of the map features an image of the Risen Christ, perhaps more striking is the presence of Caesar Augustus in the bottom left-hand corner of the map. He is shown commissioning a description to three men. These three men

⁴³ Also in the fourth and fifth centuries CE, argues Ciholas (2003: 25), the Delphic *omphalos* and the Christian cross—whose center was imagined to be at Jerusalem—became competing symbols, representing two completely different and religiously/intellectually contradictory centers.

⁴⁴ See the bibliography located in Kline (2001: 58 n. 14) on the map’s association with Agrippa’s schema; on the Hereford Map in general, see Kline (2001).

Figure 9: The Hereford World Map, available through unesco.org and distributed in the public domain.

are the same as those who are listed as being given the cartographic commission made famous by Julius Caesar. Interestingly, the fourth man, Didymus, is missing. His task was to complete a map of the West, in which Rome would have been included.⁴⁵ Thus Humphries (2007: 37) suggests that we view the Hereford map as “ancient geography seen through the refracting lens of Christian belief,” which “took its form and content from classical antecedents,”⁴⁶ but which also challenged them openly.

⁴⁵ Just like in the Roman world, Medieval maps could take on either both a tripartite and a quadripartite schema (Woodward 1987: 294–298).

⁴⁶ In yet another Late Antique Christian document, the *Expositio Totius Mundi et Gentium* (An Exposition of the Whole World and Its Peoples), Asia Minor is imagined as *media terrena*, the “center of the inhabited earth” (45.1). See Humphries (2007: 48). Christian conceptions of the “middle” were, naturally, often associated with Christian religious sites; Secord (2012: 28–29) argues that the conception of the “middle regions of the world” for the early Christian theologian Irenaeus was directly associated with the apostolic churches of Rome, Ephesus, Smyrna, and Corinth.

Jewish tradition, too, argues Wolf, had been caught up in this metaphor of Rome as the head of the world for a long time, even since the composition of the Book of Jubilees (this should be unsurprising given Roman attacks on Jerusalem, especially in the first century BC under Pompey and first century CE under Titus and Vespasian). While the Hereford Map places Jerusalem in the center of the *mappa mundi*, Rome is still yet honored with the designation: “*Roma capud mundi tenet orbis frena rotundi*; Rome, head of the world, holds the bridle of the spherical earth.” According to Wolf, this tension represents a Jewish world view in which Jerusalem is described as the “navel of the world” simply “zur rhetorischen Waffe gegen das ‘caput mundi’” (Wolf 2010: 79).⁴⁷ The ideological battle continued as Medieval struggles for papal recognition raged on and the church became increasingly militant. In this environment, Rome both mirrored and shadowed the central position of Jerusalem in the battle over the preeminence of sacred Christian spaces (Kupfer 2014: 364).

Conclusion

It has become clear throughout our discussion that the emergence of an ideology of centeredness almost always occurred in the context of a major shift in the fundamental religious, political, or social space of the society in question. The ideology of centrality first emerged in biblical thought—likely influenced by the importance of Delphi—as a reaction to The Babylonian Captivity; much later in history, Jerusalem became the center of the world (again) during the Middle Ages after the devastation wreaked by the Crusades. And, I would argue, Rome became the navel of the earth not once, but three times: with the initial foundation of the *mundus* by Romulus in the eighth century BC; with the establishment of the *umbilicus* in the second century BC; and again with the installation of the *miliarium aureum* by Augustus in the late first century BC. For a final time, Rome became centralized somewhere else, upon the foundation of a “new Rome” in Constantinople, where a new *milion* was installed and the *miliarium* and *umbilicus* in the city of Rome itself became conflated as one entity; all of this confusion indicates the

⁴⁷ On anti-Roman reaction in Jerusalem, see also Neusner (1985). Woodward (1987: 341) argues that Rome’s return (as opposed to Jerusalem) into the center of Medieval maps can be explained due to the use of Greco-Roman (rather than Christian) models for the maps; Jerusalem once again shifted to the spiritual, rather than terrestrial, center, likely because of the Crusades.

difficulties in representing the size and complexity of an overgrown (Christian) Roman empire. Importantly, every Roman foundation of a center coincided with major political shifts, all cast as (re)establishments of ancient institutions: for Romulus, the foundation of the Roman state and the introduction of the first Roman kingship; for Augustus, the refoundation of the Republic and the emergence of the Roman Empire, as is famously expressed in his *Res Gestae*⁴⁸; and for Constantine, the (re)foundation of (a relocated) Rome, expressed as a reinvigorated form of Augustus' own imperial propaganda. Significantly, in all new formulations of "center" ideology, Delphi loomed in the background as an example and an inspiration.

Interestingly, these conceptions of centeredness and their associations with power, wealth, and religion yielded a new disease, common in both ancient and modern societies, aptly titled "omphalos syndrome." Characterized by a belief that a particular people or nation is divinely appointed to the center of the universe, all great peoples, from the Babylonians to the Muslims, have suffered from it. Ultimately, we have to keep in mind, as Maul (1997: 122–23) points out, that these centers have to be "created" by a person or entity with a political or theological agenda. So it is that central spaces are both products and productive (as illuminated in Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*), and allow insight both into major transformational events within an ancient culture's environment, as well as their reactions to the foundational ideologies of their own and other, foreign, societies. In this way, exploring the milieu of an imagined center can yield a complex of interesting results for students of the ancient Mediterranean.

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48 Chapters 19–21 of this document focus on the restoration of existing Roman structures, especially temples. See Edwards (1996: 48–49) for the literary manifestation of the idea that Romulus and Augustus were both "founders" of Rome, with Augustus functioning as a "new" Romulus. Augustus' construction projects—not least the restoration of the Temple of Jupiter Feretrius, dedicated by Romulus following his victory over the Etruscan king Acro—exhibit a deliberate programmatic intention to this effect (Hölscher 2006a: 87–88).

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