

**Dennis TROUT**

## **Starry Heroes in Late Ancient Rome**

The inscriptions of fourth- and fifth-century Rome record the desire of many Romans to lay claim to an astral paradise. This paper examines the background to this rush to the stars. Its goal is to reveal the competitive context of this late ancient re-conceptualization of the afterlife by considering how contemporary pagans and Christians influentially re-positioned their divine and saintly heroes as Roman stars. The dynamics of this discourse are already evident in the tension between the representation of the Dioscuri (Castor and Pollux) on coins and monuments, such as the Arch of Diocletian, and the new public cult of Peter and Paul, dubbed Rome's "new stars" in a monumental *elogium* of Pope Damasus. My argument will conclude with consideration of the early sixth-century apse mosaic of Cosmas and Damian in the Roman Forum. Christ's gesture here towards a phoenix and a starburst is a bold and eloquent statement whose full force can only be appreciated when set against the earlier competitive background. It is possible, of course, to think of the line of development that leads from Diocletian's Arcus Novus to the apse of Cosmas and Damian as the story of a pagan survival. It is also reasonable, however, to narrate this tale as another case of the Christian cooption of a vivid and powerful mode of representation that could serve well the cause of imagineering Roman civic identity and history anew in the aftermath of Constantine's conversion.