

Mercury and Materialism

Images of Mercury and the Tabernae of Pompeii

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1. INTRODUCTION

Near the temple of Janus in Rome stood a statue of Mercury with an unusual sobriquet: *Mercurius malevolus*, "Mercury the ill-willed." The reason for the name, the lexicographer Festus explains, was that the statue "looked toward no trader's shop," as if the god were denying his favor to the exchanges that took place inside.¹ Embedded in this short interpretation of the name is a normative connection between Mercury's image and his role as god of commerce: it is through the materialized gaze of the god that mercantile transactions can receive his benevolence. The purpose of this chapter is to investigate this connection: what place did images of the god have in spaces of Roman commercial life? And, in broader terms, what role did these images play in the materialization of Mercury in his distinctively Roman role as a god of commerce?²

The preserved images of Mercury from Pompeii provide, I contend, some answers to these questions. Looking closely at the Pompeian Mercuries in their archaeological context shows us how the god was embedded in practices and spaces of production and exchange. Due to the unusual state of preservation of the city, we can observe how someone walking along one of the busier streets of Pompeii would have encountered paintings, plaques, and graffiti images of the god before 79 CE. Unlike their unfriendly Roman counterpart, these everyday images of Mercury were especially clustered around the wide doorways of commercial properties—the shops, the bars, the restaurants of the

¹ Festus 152 L. *Malevoli Mercurii signum erat proxime Ianum; qui item erat in Turdellis*. . . . [text damaged in Farnesinus MS]. . . . *Malevoli autem, quod in nullius tabernam spectabat.*

² For the particularly Roman commercial remit of Mercury, see BNP, s.v. *Mercurius* (Phillips).

Campanian city—where the inhabitants bought, sold, ate, and drank, all in the presence of the god.

We are not able to be certain that this experience was paralleled widely in Roman Italy or the empire at large.³ A few similar images found in the French excavations at Delos—rough paintings of Mercury beside the entrances to commercial properties—are suggestive that his presence in Pompeii was not just a local habit, but it is only in Campania that we have sufficient evidence to see how the Romans lived with Mercury.⁴ Still, this body of evidence allows us to move past the early imperial stereotypes of a crassly materialist devotion to the god on the part of the *arriviste* rich. In surviving Roman satirical literature there is an assumed connection between the materialistic man and Mercury: Horace's *alter ego* Damasippus boasts that he won the cognomen *Mercuriale* from the street through his commercial acumen; Persius' greedy worshipper dissipates his fortune on sacrifices to the god; the painted autobiography of Petronius' unforgettable Trimalchio includes an intervention by Mercury himself in his career.⁵ These texts give us the *de haut en bas* representations of the Roman one-percent; they are certainly revealing in their assumptions, but we must turn to other evidence to understand the experiences of the other ninety-nine.

For this reason, the depictions of the god in Pompeian spaces of exchange are particularly useful because they allow us to recover some of the cognitive processes by which Mercury existed as god of commerce for residents of that city. At bottom, this is one of the greatest challenges in understanding ancient polytheism for us modern inhabitants of a disenchanting world: what did it mean for a god to be god of some part of human action?

In order to approach these images, I draw on recent work on material religion to analyze images of Mercury in the lived religion of a Roman city. Over the last two decades, the introduction of new materialism in religious studies has challenged the dominant idealist tendencies in the study of religion.⁶ Certainly, these tendencies have been apparent in the case of Mercury, who has most often been understood as a combination of an ordinary Italian

³ See e.g. Bakker 1994 for the absence of such paintings in Ostia. Flower 2017, a study of the Lares, warns of the dangers of combining evidence for Roman deities into a single global picture and demonstrates the value of avoiding this scholarly pitfall.

⁴ On Mercury at Delos, see Bulard 1926: 245–61, who also highlights the potential differences with the representations of the god at Pompeii.

⁵ Hor. *Sat.* 2.3.24–6 *hortos egregiasque domos mercarier unus / cum lucro noram; unde frequentia Mercuriale / inposuere mihi cognomen compita*; Pers. 2.44–7 *rem struere exoptas caeso boue Mercuriumque / arcessis fibra: da fortunare Penatis; / da pecus et gregibus fetum. quo, pessime, pacto, / tot tibi cum in flamma iuncticum omenta liquescant*; Petron. *Sat.* 29.5 *in deficiente vero iam porticu levatum mento in tribunal excelsum Mercurius rapiebat.*

⁶ Morgan 1998; Chidester 2000; Engelke 2012. The journal *Material Religion* has served since 2005 as the intellectual hub for this approach to religious studies. See also the related work on “lived religion” by Orsi 2005 and McGuire 2008.

deity of exchange and a Romanized Hermes.⁷ In line with this approach, Mercuries in texts and images have been read most often as representations of the god, who is assigned a dematerialized priority over the individual manifestation. The new materialists, however, have questioned such privileging of the symbolic over the experiential as loaded with Christianizing anxiety around “idolatry” and a Cartesian distinction of mind and body. Instead, they stress the agency of material culture in shaping embodied human interaction with the divine. Images and things do not simply act passively as conduits for religious ideas or meanings, but, in contact with the lives of individual people and groups, they catalyze experiences and sensation of the sacred.⁸ Religion, in this view, does not solely belong to the mind, but is something that also happens both visually and through and around human bodies.⁹

Not all of this is new to the study of Roman religion, which has had a long-standing interest in the importance of both ritual action—*quand faire, c'est croire*, in the words of John Scheid—and sacred space.¹⁰ It has also long been recognized that Romans did not always see cult images of deities in purely aesthetic or representational terms.¹¹ The recent work in material religion is useful for extending this interest beyond the structured activities of formal ritual and interaction with images in defined sacred spaces. The depictions of Mercury on the streets of Pompeii were not cult images—and it is far from clear that Romans could have recognized such a phenomenon anyway—and were not the focus of cult activity.¹² As several scholars have pointed out, in contrast to the marked street shrines for compital cult, there are no altars or spaces for offerings that can be related to the images of Mercury on the façades of buildings.¹³ At the same time, we should beware the temptation to see them as somehow “less Mercury” than statues in public temples. Instead, these images made the god present in the everyday life of the city: their placement on the façades of *tabernae* linked him with banal, repeated experiences of exchange and, in this way, materialized him as the god of commerce.

In the absence of a body of settled doctrine on the nature of the gods or even of any institution that could generate such a set of ideas, the process of linkage is particularly significant for students of Mediterranean antiquity. Roman gods

⁷ Combet Farnoux 1980.

⁸ In paying attention to the interaction of the human and non-human, material religion has much in common with the recent “posthuman” turn: see Latour 1993 and Braidotti 2013.

⁹ See Morgan 2012 for the connection between embodiment and vision.

¹⁰ Scheid 2005.

¹¹ See especially Gordon 1979, Elsner 1995: 15–48, and now the provocative—even iconoclastic—essays by Clifford Ando: Ando 2010 and 2011.

¹² For the difficulty with the concept of “cult image” for ancient religion, see Estienne 2015 for a summation of the varied evidence and scholarly positions.

¹³ See Fröhlich 1991: 48 and Charles-Laforge 2009: 72 for the non-cultic character of these images; though note the possible exception, discussed by Maiuri 1949. See Van Andringa 2000 and Flower 2017: 145–56 for compital cult and altars in Pompeii.

were a matter of social convention; this fact demands that we track the mediation of their identities, powers, and domains in the experiences of Roman society at large. This chapter offers a sketch of the mediation of Mercury in one particular local situation: Pompeii in the years before 79 CE. Focusing on Mercury's material presence, I look first to where we can find the god in the life of the city as a whole, before turning to the experience of mercantile images of the god.

2. MERCURY IN POMPEII

Pompeii is an exception: no other site offers the historian of religion such a great quantity of material evidence for how the inhabitants of the Roman empire lived their polytheism. The raw quantity of this evidence can be deceiving. The vagaries of preservation and, in some areas, the lack of adequate archaeological publication makes the reconstruction of the religious life of the city a precarious and difficult task. In the last two decades, however, several historians and archaeologists have contributed new syntheses of the evidence for Pompeian religion, including William Van Andringa's significant *Quotidien des dieux et des hommes: la vie religieuse dans les cités du Vésuve à l'époque romaine*.¹⁴ Building on this recent work, we can now see more clearly, if still imperfectly, the place of Mercury in the town's religious assemblage and see how he figured in the everyday experiences of Pompeians.

An initial stumbling block is the absence of a securely identified temple of Mercury at Pompeii. Nevertheless, a particular set of evidence supports the idea that there was some kind of public cult for him, alongside his mother Maia. A group of stone inscriptions from the first century BCE attests to a college of *ministri* in the city who worshipped them, made up of slaves and freedmen who had been co-opted by the decurion order from prominent *familiae*.¹⁵ At some point toward the end of the century, the college took on an imperial theme as the *ministri Augusti Mercurii Maiaae*; from 2 BCE until the 40s CE, the college was called the *ministri Augusti*, with the names of Mercury and his mother silently dropped. These inscriptions, however, lack an archaeological context. Recently, Mario Torelli, now followed by Van Andringa, has suggested that the cult site of Mercury and Maia was in the *macellum* at the northeastern edge of the forum.¹⁶ By 79, the Pompeian *macellum* had two cultic

¹⁴ Van Andringa 2009. See also the monographs by Krzyszowska 2002 and Charles-Laforge 2009 and the exhibition catalogue by Cicirelli 1995. The older work by Boyce 1937 and Orr 1988 on domestic religion at Pompeii also remains valuable.

¹⁵ *CIL* 10.884–923. See also Combet Farnoux 1980: 457–9.

¹⁶ Torelli 1998: 262–3, followed by Van Andringa 2009: 208–12. For the association of Mercury and Augustus elsewhere, see Combet Farnoux 1980: 433–71.

spaces: a central stepped shrine at the far end of the building from the entrance from the forum, which was dedicated to the imperial family, and another, more modest, in its north-east corner, with an altar and an *aedicula* for a statue.¹⁷ Torelli and Van Andringa argue that the association between Augustus, Mercury, and Maia made by the *ministri* inscriptions fits well this pair of cultic spaces and that the statue in the north-eastern shrine was therefore an image of Mercury. If this proposal is right—and it must remain tentative given the lack of positive evidence—Mercury's public cult place in the city was embedded in the food market. Unlike the malevolent Mercury from Rome, the god's public statue could have watched over a fundamental arena for commercial exchange in an agrarian society.

We have more certain evidence for Mercury as part of private cult. Statuettes and paintings placed the deity in the domestic shrines of several Pompeian houses. For example, the well-known shrines of the household Penates—so-called secondary *lararia*—in the House of the *Amorini Dorati* (vi.16.7) and the House of the *Pareti Rosse* (viii.5.37) both included statuettes of Mercury.¹⁸ In the case of the shrine in the House of *Amorini Dorati*, the large size of the statuette in relation to others has been taken to indicate the particular importance of the deity to the owner of the house.¹⁹ There are nine other houses of various sizes and apparent wealth where Mercury was either certainly or probably part of the household's set of Penates.²⁰ Although it is often assumed that the presence of Mercury in these shrines indicates a commercial occupation of the *dominus*, it is very difficult in reality to be sure how the diverse sets of deities collected as Penates were shaped by and shaped the experience of the inhabitants of the houses.

In the *lararia* found in commercial spaces, however, Mercury was more closely linked to the specific practices of buying and selling. Eight *tabernae* and workshops probably included Mercury in their shrines.²¹ At the outset, I must offer an important caveat: commercial properties in Pompeii often also had a residential function, so it is not always possible to be certain that customers would have encountered the images of the god, especially when the shrines are located in rooms of uncertain use. Customers definitely did see the spectacular *lararium* at the end of the counter in the *thermopolium* at i.8.8 (Fig. 13.1).

¹⁷ See Dobbins 1994: 668–85 for the architecture of the *macellum*. The proposed Mercury shrine is his Room 30.

¹⁸ See Adamo-Muscettola 1984 for the statuettes of Mercury in these shrines.

¹⁹ Krzyszowska 2002: 95. See Gordon 1979: 13–15 for ancient thought on the appropriate size of divine images.

²⁰ i.4.5 (statuette not in situ); i.6.2; iii.2.1; v.2.1b; v.4.3; vii.7.16 (statuette not in situ); ix.6.5; ix.6.g (space of uncertain function); ix.13 (Fröhlich 1991: L110).

²¹ i.8.8; i.20.2; v.1.13; v.2.b/c; vii.4.20 or vii.5.22 (see Kaufmann-Heinmann 1998: GFV 31); vii.12.7; vii.12.17 and 21.



Fig. 13.1. The *lararium* at the end of the counter of the *thermopolium* at i.8.8, Pompeii. Mercury is the far left of the five deities in the image.

Photo: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY.

In this painted *aedicula*, Mercury stands on the left of a group of five deities, which includes the Genius of the proprietor, the two Lares, and Bacchus. Below, two snakes, a common part of the iconography of the Pompeian *lararia*, frame an altar.²² In a fairly standard guise, which we will see again on the façades of the city, Mercury is depicted as a youth, stepping to the left with a money bag in his right hand and a *caduceus* in his left hand. In this way, the god's pose mirrors the physical action of purchase, which involved a customer approaching the counter, as he does, with coins in hand.

The association of the god with the immediate space of transaction at i.8.8 is not an exception: Mercury was present in very similar ways in other *tabernae*.²³ In the *thermopolium* at vii.15.5, the god, holding his attributes of money bag and *caduceus*, looked down from the end of the short counter.²⁴ This painting may not have stood as a formal *lararium*, but the divinity clearly

²² Flower 2017: 63–70 discusses this Campanian snake imagery.

²³ I thank Prof. Steven Ellis (Cincinnati), who provided me with essential information on these Mercuries from his own work on commercial spaces at Pompeii.

²⁴ *BdI* 1872: 200–1.

presided over the transactions in this little food shop. A passing mention in very early excavation records of the shop at vi.1.2 suggests that a similar painting was found at the end of that counter.²⁵ Similarly at another *thermopolium* at iii.8.8, Mercury was painted with two griffins on the wall behind the counter, again looking over the material exchanges that took place in the space.²⁶ In the *taberna* at vi.14.28, which does not have a counter but seems to have been a gamblers' den, Mercury was painted on the wall, watching over the activities of the customers.²⁷

Repeatedly, then, as we survey the appearances of Mercury in the city, we find him present in spaces of commerce, both public and private. As we will see, this presence was not limited to the interiors of these spaces; one particular venue for images of Mercury at Pompeii stands out: the façades of commercial properties.

3. MERCURY ON THE TABERNAE

A survey of Thomas Fröhlich's authoritative catalogue of the paintings on Pompeian exterior façades reveals a close connection between images of the god and commercial uses of buildings.²⁸ The deity appeared by the distinctive wide entrances of so-called *tabernae*—the shops, bars, restaurants, and inns of the city.²⁹ For the most part these images have been understood, on the one hand, as representations of Mercury *qua* god of commerce and, on the other, as symbols of self-expression on the part of the property owners, who are assumed to have commissioned the paintings.³⁰ However, if we shift perspective from the people who commissioned the images to their viewers, we can find links between human bodies and practices and the god himself.³¹

From the portion of the city that is both excavated and recorded, we can quantify Mercury's presence in the streets. There are images of the god on

²⁵ PAH 1.245 (20 October 1770).

²⁶ NSc 1905: 274.

²⁷ Della Corte 1965: 90–4, Mercury at 91.

²⁸ Fröhlich 1991. In the notes that follow, references in the form "F100" refer to entries in Fröhlich's catalogue, which provides comprehensive bibliography of publication and illustrations.

²⁹ For the definition of *taberna*, see Monteix 2010: 42–8. We are not able to be certain of the function of all, or even many, of these *tabernae*, and they, doubtlessly, were flexible spaces. It is also essential to note that the spaces with wide-entrances were often part of bigger properties, often houses or public buildings. Nevertheless, it is generally agreed that they were commercial spaces in the broad sense.

³⁰ For the images of Mercury on commercial properties as representations of the god as deity of commerce, see Combet Farnoux 1980: 424–6 and Van Andringa 2009: 275; for these images in terms of self-representation, see Fröhlich 1991: 49; Clarke 2003: 109; Potts 2009; Charles-Laforge 2009: 72; Van Andringa 2009: 276–7; Monteix 2010: 56; Hartnett 2017: 288.

³¹ For the now long-established scholarly interest in viewers of Roman art, see, for example, Elsner 1995: 1–14 and Clarke 2003: 9–13.

nineteen of twenty-nine commercial façades that were painted with the images of deities, which constitutes 65 percent of these façades.³² There is a marked conjunction between the deity and the property: the façades of *tabernae* were particularly Mercury's domain. Fewer houses had painted façades; Mercury appears on just six, perhaps often in situations where the occupants of houses chose to mark a personal association with the commercial realm. We find Mercury on the outside of commercial properties at Pompeii more often than any other deity; the next most common are Bacchus, who appears on five painted commercial façades, and Minerva, who appears on four.³³ Aside from the façades proper, we can also add two others where Mercury appeared on the inside door jambs of *tabernae* to similar effect as the images directly on the street: the Mercury at the end of the counter at vi.1.2, mentioned earlier, and another at ix.8.4.³⁴ These popular and sometimes poorly executed images follow conventional patterns in iconography and location. In order to get at the social significance of these Pompeian Mercuries, we must focus on these conventions and look to their cumulative impact on the lived experiences of the city's inhabitants.³⁵

A common type of image found on these façades places a youthful Mercury next to or above the doorway. In many respects, these depictions conform closely to Hellenistic sculptures of Hermes, an example of which was found in the sanctuary of Apollo by the town's forum.³⁶ Like Greek images of Hermes, Mercuries of this type are portrayed as unbearded youths, who wear a *petasos* and carry a *caduceus*, although several also carry a particularly Roman money bag. The Mercuries on pillars by entrances 1.12.5, iii.8.1, vii.4.22/23, and two from along the Via di Nola in *regio* iv, no longer extant, all are of this Hellenistic type.³⁷ A nineteenth-century drawing of one of these now-lost paintings, held in the archive in Naples, allows a more detailed description of an example of this type.³⁸ Painted on a fairly narrow pillar and framed by a long fruitful vine, the naked god stands in *contrapposto* position, holding a

³² For this quantification, I follow the catalogue provided by Fröhlich 1991: 351–3. See also Monteix 2010: 52–3 for a different quantification of the painted commercial façades with extant images of deities: he finds that Mercury appears on 46 percent of these façades. Both counts show the preponderance of images of Mercury over other deities.

³³ For the relative appearance of other deities on these façades, see Monteix 2010: 52–3 and Charles-Laforge 2009: 86–93.

³⁴ For ix.8.4, see NSc 1879: 241 and 282; Mercury was depicted with a cockerel and snake coiled around an *omphalos* (see Fröhlich's F28 and F34 and the Mercury by the counter at vii.15.5 for similar iconography). This painting was already damaged when excavated in 1879 and is not extant.

³⁵ See Fröhlich 1991: 189–210 for comments on the “volkstümlichkeit” of façade paintings in the Vestuvian cities and 140–4 for the iconographies of Mercury in particular.

³⁶ See Mau 1907: 88.

³⁷ F11, F20, F26, F27, F49.
³⁸ F26; a painting of Bacchus was found on the other pillar of this façade. The drawing is now ADS 100 in the archive, but is unpublished.

caduceus in his left hand and outfitted with winged *petasos* and boots. A cloak is draped from his shoulders and over his left arm. The familiar attributes and the statuesque pose suggest a replication of the familiar image—known to us and, presumably, contemporary viewers from the large number of statuettes of this type—which here took on additional significance from its placement beside the opening of a *taberna*, presumably a bar.³⁹

Some of these images are more complex. The painting of standing Mercury at vii.4.22/23 was elaborated by placing the young god together with Venus in a sacro-idyllic landscape featuring an ithyphallic column, exotic to the street near the Pompeian forum in which the painting originally belonged. In another case, the painted portrait of a youthful Mercury holding a *caduceus* above the entrance of a shop on the Via Dell'Abbondanza (ix.7.1) looked down on the street alongside three other deities—Sol, Jupiter, and Luna.⁴⁰ In these latter two examples, Mercury's divinity was emphasized respectively by the alternative landscape and association with other (heavenly) gods. Whether alone or with other deities, these images repeatedly implicated him with commerce. The open façades of these commercial premises meant that, unlike most houses, the activities inside were visible from the street, right alongside or beneath the god. From the perspective of the passer-by on the street, the god was present by the wide entrances of the *tabernae*: looking at the building entailed looking at Mercury and vice versa.

In one case, at ix.7.7, the juxtaposition between the god and the practice of commerce can be found in the painting itself (Fig. 13.2). In a tall painting on the pillar to the left of the door, Mercury walks out of a small shrine, wearing his *petasos* and holding *caduceus* and money bag. Below, a woman sits behind a table stacked with the product for sale; another table fills the foreground. Based on a scene of felt-making on the right side of the door and nearby graffiti, it has been suggested that this is the shop of Marcus Vecilius Verecundus, a *vestiarius* or clothing merchant.⁴¹ In the painting, Mercury is positioned above a painted version of the shop that he seems about to step into. Jeremy Hartnett has suggested that the clothing worn by the god corresponds to the cloth on sale in the image below, and so the deity models the product on offer inside the opening.⁴² The double juxtaposition between the god and the real and painted shops reinforces the association between

³⁹ See, for example, Cicirelli 1995: 31–2 for this common type of statuette.

⁴⁰ Early interpretations of the four gods depicted above this doorway suggested that they represent planets or particular days of the week. More recently, John Clarke has suggested that such readings of the four gods are over-elaborate and prefers a more straightforward reading of them as anthropomorphic deities (Clarke 2003: 87–9).

⁴¹ See Spinazzola 1953: 189–210 and Clarke 2003: 105–12 for discussion of the whole program of this painted façade.

⁴² Hartnett 2017: 90–1.

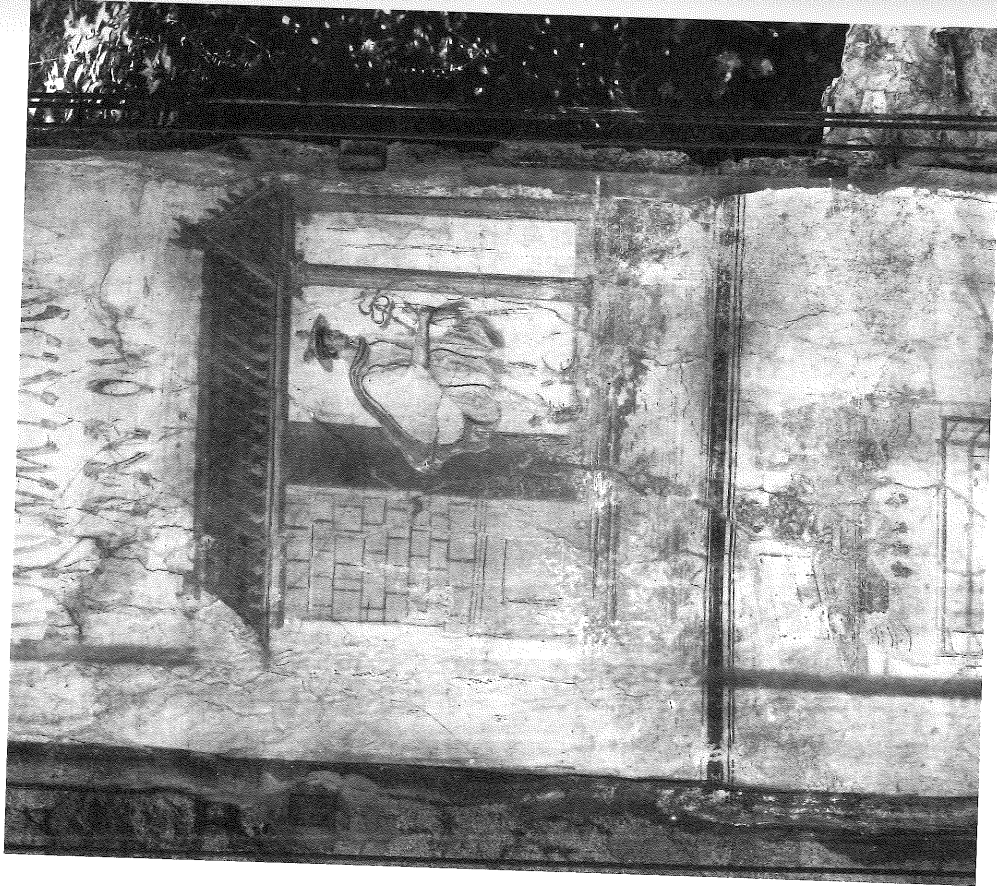


Fig. 13.2. The left doorpost of the taberna ("the taberna of Marcus Vecilius Verecundus") at ix.7.7, Pompeii. Mercury steps right from a small temple.

Photo: Alinari/Art Resource, NY.

deity and commerce for the viewer: in characteristically Mercurial fashion, he is just at the threshold of both shrine and shop. Indeed, the figure of Mercury must have matched the step of the would-be shopper, hopefully also carrying a money bag, into the shop. Bound within the painting by medium and location, but connected by his action with the viewer on the street, Mercury steps between pictorial sacred space and the real commercial space.

Despite the elaboration of this particular painting, this is not an exceptional image of the god. Eight images of Mercury painted on the façades of various

tabernae show the god striding, holding a money bag.⁴³ In the cases where we know the placement of the painting in relation to the commercial threshold, the god always steps toward the door of the shop. Again, the body of the god matches the body of the ideal viewer, the consumer, headed for the door with a bag full of coins. The kinesthetic parallelism between the two bodies, those of the deity and the pedestrian, connects the embodied human experience of commerce with Mercury. This is his particular trait; no other deity in these façade paintings moves toward the door of the shop in this way. At entrance v.6.1, for example, we find a contrast between a static Bacchus on the right of the entrance and, on the other side, a quick-stepping Mercury with billowing cloak. Walking alongside the people on the pavement, these Mercuries move as models of the shopper and for the shopper.

If the linkage between Mercury and commerce here is based on a possible identity between human and god, alterity defines his agency over commerce in two other images of Mercury as phallic deity. In the first, at the right of entrance ix.12.6, a Mercury once again strides, holding the *caduceus* and money bag, toward a shop entrance (Fig. 13.3).

Here, however, the large penis, absent *petasos*, and the mature beard differentiate this image from most of the other representations found on façades. Rather than conform to Hellenistic models, this Mercury is a witty response to the classical herm.⁴⁴ Both are bearded and marked by their large *phalloi*, but the Pompeian Mercury is mobile and naturalistic, while the herm is static and artificial. This Mercury hastens toward the door, but a herm could only look out from Greek thresholds. The divine phallus bestows its protection and favor on the activities inside the shop. By this playful relationship with the classical artistic form of the god (and other apotropaic *phalloi* on view throughout the city, including in images of another deity, Priapus) and the departure from regular human anatomy, the movement toward the door relates the deity with the practice of commerce inside the entrance.

A Mercury engraved on the right side of the façade of the Thermopolium of Asellina shares the phallic attribute, just a few entrances away on the Via Dell'Abbondanza at ix.11.2. Although this graffito is no longer extant, a recently published photograph shows Mercury, with phallus hanging from his groin, carrying a money bag and moving toward the open entrance of the

⁴³ These were found by the following entrances: ii.1.1 (F14); v.6.1 (F34); vii.6.35 (F51: the precise location is uncertain, though see *B&I* 1859: 68–9); vii.11.13/14 (F58); vii.12.9/10 (F59); ix.3.14/15 (F62); and two along the Via di Nola (F26 and F28).

⁴⁴ See, similarly, Clarke 2007: 187–8. Herms are most significantly associated with classical Athens, though they are still found in Roman-period iconography. See Johns 1982: 52–4, including herms from Pompeii and on a mold-made bowl in early imperial Arretine ware (for another example of the latter, see Clarke 1998: 75, fig. 25).



Fig. 13.3. A painted image to the right of the door of the taberna at ix.12.6, Pompeii. An ithyphallic Mercury runs left towards the entrance.

Museo Archeologico Nazionale. © Vanni Archive/Art Resource, NY.

tavern.⁴⁵ Given the proximity to the painted ithyphallic Mercury, it is tempting to see this as an ersatz copy of the bearded phallic god, designed to bring favor to the premises. A graffito above the figure called the god *munificus*, “generous,” highlighting the power of the divinity over the transactions inside. In his guise as naked ithyphallic god, Mercury may not have matched the body of the clothed shopper, but that distance from the viewer highlighted the more-than-human favor he could confer on the activities inside the establishment.

A dipinto near another Mercury by the entrances at vii.11.13/14 also testifies to this sort of agency of the image. The dipinto calls the god *Mercurius felix*, “Lucky Mercury,” and, if the nineteenth-century transcription was

⁴⁵ Maulucci Vivolo 1993: 72. Note that the drawing of this graffito on the following page (73) omits the phallus, which is visible on the photograph and, at any rate, described by Della Corte in *CIL* 4.9097.

correct, places a very large number (100,030) next to the money bag carried by the god.⁴⁶ The best interpretation for this number is that it represents a desired or real profit. The unusual number may suggest that betting on dice was a potential source of this kind of profit; we have plenty of evidence from the imperial period for the popularity of such gambling and the social fascination with disproportionate winnings.⁴⁷ We can also contextualize the dipinto in the streetscape: James Franklin has shown how the graffiti in this part of the city, near the famous *lupanar*, allow a glimpse of a neighborhood crowd who used writing as a means of social dialogue.⁴⁸ The boast of a gambling win fits in that context, but it also demonstrates a response to the presence of Mercury in the street. In this case, the dipinto assigned agency over the human practice of gaming to this image of the god.

As we have seen, Mercury repeatedly appeared on the façades of *tabernae* at Pompeii. These images differ in form, between statuesque Hellenistic nude and dynamic Roman youth, between realism and preposterous phallism, but they all share a role as sites of linkage between the divinity and the human practices of buying and selling. One mode of this linkage was presence: very simply, Pompeians frequently saw Mercury on the façades of *tabernae*, and often at the counters of the *tabernae*. Mercury was *there* when they shopped. Mercury’s image on the façades could also go beyond this “mere” presence: we have observed how some functioned as divine correlates for shoppers or as phallic protectors. Graffiti also show how some were clearly granted agency as bringers of profit (*munificus, felix*) by their viewers. Above all, what is striking is the iteration of these images: the façades of commercial properties belonged to Mercury.

4. CONCLUSION

In Pompeii, Mercury was a god of commerce through his presence in spaces of exchange. Context was everything: as he was materialized in and on the façades of shops, bars, and workshops, his domain—his place in the world—was experienced and internalized by the inhabitants of Pompeii. These images of the god were not simply “representations” of an abstract idea. Instead, they were sites of linkage between human and divine, indices of the god’s presence and agents of good fortune.⁴⁹ A hint of this mediation is found in one of

⁴⁶ *CIL* 4.812. For the form of the number, see Cagnat 1914: 31. Fröhlich 1991: 330 and Van Andringa 2009: 295 suggest the large number refers to desired profit.

⁴⁷ See Purcell 1995: 10–11 and 21 for the Roman interest in the large numbers associated with gambling.

⁴⁸ Franklin 1986.

⁴⁹ As Ando 2010 points out, Augustine’s Platonizing construction in *Serm. Dolbeau* 26.24 of a pagan seeing an image of Mercury as an index for *ingenium* need not reflect Roman realities.

Persius' satires, when a rich man reproaches his heir: "I'm Mercury to you, I come here, a god, like in paintings" (*Sat.* 6.62–3: *sum tibi Mercurius; uenio deus huc ego ut ille / pingitur*). The poet blurs the distinctions between deity, painted image, and human speaker, even as the lines affirm Mercury's role as the god of Roman materialism. The poem too suggests how images alone did not make Mercury into the Roman commercial god: a huge amount of cultural work, including text, ritual, and other forms of experience must also have played a role in granting this province to the divinity. I suggest, though, that we should not be deaf to the hint given to us by Festus: it was through his images that the god could confer his benefits on the *tabernae* of Roman cities—or, in the case of *Mercurius malevolus*, withhold them.⁵⁰

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- ⁵⁰ I thank the editors of this volume and the audience in Charlottesville for their responses and great labor in the development of this project. Liza Asbury Newman, Steven Ellis, Ted Peña, and the participants in a brown-bag seminar at LMU München all made essential suggestions or provided information that improved the chapter enormously.

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14

Did Mercury Build the Ship of Aeneas?

Thomas Biggs

Sed me per hostis Mercurius celer
denso paventem sustulit aere;
te rursus in bellum resorbens
unda fretis tulit aestuosis.

But swift Mercury bore me, frightened,
through the enemy in a thick mist;
whereas a wave sucking you back
carried you to war on a seething sea.

Horace C. 2.7.13-16

In the first book of his *Historiæ*, Polybius describes a key event of 256 BCE, the ninth year of the First Punic War. The consul M. Atilius Regulus crosses to Africa with the Roman fleet, and as Polybius relates, "the advance squadron reached the coast just south of Cape Hermaea (τῆν ἀκρὰν τῆν Ἐρμαίαν), as it is called, which points across the sea toward Sicily and is the most prominent headland on the gulf where Carthage is situated."¹ The actual location of this Headland of Hermes has vexed scholars,² but it appears again with certainty in Livy's report of P. Cornelius Scipio's arrival in Africa for the final campaign of the Second Punic War (29.27.6-8):

And after mid-day they encountered a fog, so that with difficulty could they avoid collisions between the ships. In the open sea the wind was gentler.

¹ Polyb. 1.29.2. Cf. 1.36.11. Trans. Paton et al. 2010. See Walbank 1957 ad loc. and on 3.22.5 (a). This same Headland of Hermes was also the explicit setting for a Roman naval victory during the rescue of Regulus' men from North Africa after the failed campaign, offering a symbolic glimpse of the god on Rome's side in the war (1.36.10-12).

² Capes and Promontories of Hermes are plentiful in the Mediterranean, serving as guides and navigational aids. See Vella 2005; Biggs 2017: 354-5. Scholarly interest in the landmark largely relates to the geography of the various prewar treaties between Carthage and Rome. See Polyb. 3.22.5-6 with Walbank 1957. On the treaties in general, see Scardigli 1991 and 2011. Serrati 2006 addresses the role of other landmarks within the treaties, as does Giusti 2014.

Tracking Hermes, Pursuing Mercury

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