



An Analysis of the Religious Symbolism Behind the Pantheon's Dome

Sloane Atterbury

Abstract

Hadrian's Pantheon is among the most architecturally significant buildings of the ancient world. No floorplan survives from the Pantheon's construction at the end of the 1st century BC or from its renovation in the early 2nd century AD, so the meaning behind many of its architectural features remains a mystery. Scholars have interpreted that some aspects of the building reflect Roman religious beliefs and have proposed connections between elements of the building's architecture and elements of Roman religion. The question remains whether Hadrian and his architects intended for these connections or whether the structure's design was meant to allow for multiple interpretations. This paper aims to investigate the religious significance of the Pantheon's dome. I will argue that it serves as a direct link for the viewer between the heavens and the earth.

Keywords: Pantheon, Roman Architecture, Religious Symbolism, Dome, Oculus

Introduction

The Pantheon in Rome is one of the most influential architectural structures of the ancient world, yet the symbolic meaning of its design remains uncertain. Structures from the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul to the Jefferson Memorial in Washington, D.C., to St. Peter's Basilica in Rome have all imitated aspects of its design. Although the Pantheon is appreciated for its impressive engineering, its architecture expresses a deeper religious meaning. This paper argues that the Pantheon's dome serves as a direct link for the viewer between the heavens and the earth.

Origins of the Pantheon

The first Pantheon began as a temple during the reign of Augustus, around 27–25 BCE (Joost-Gaugier 24). It was built by his close ally, Marcus Agrippa. A temple was a sacred building that the Romans dedicated primarily to a specific god or goddess, and it was used as the dwelling-place of the god's statue and as a focus for religious rituals. The name "Pantheon" comes from a combination of the Greek words *pan* ("all") and *theon* ("gods"), so it was a temple dedicated to *all* the Roman gods and goddesses (McEwen 57). As the Roman Empire continued to spread throughout the world and more gods and goddesses were recognized among the Romans, the Pantheon came to symbolize the unity of the empire through its enormous scale.

The original structure was destroyed by fire in 80 AD, and it was later completely rebuilt under Emperor Hadrian in 126 AD (Betjes 164). This can be confusing to the modern visitor, because Hadrian decided to preserve Agrippa's original inscription on the façade of the Pantheon. Throughout all the iterations of the Pantheon, the oculus has remained the focal point of the building. It expresses the connection between the architectural building and the heavens.

Design and Purpose

The Pantheon's design is a blend of classical geometry and groundbreaking Roman engineering (seen in Figure 1). It is centered on a large circular rotunda, or *cella*, that is joined to a traditional portico, or *pronaos*. The portico is lined with sixteen massive granite Corinthian

columns that measure forty feet in height and are arranged in three rows (Joost-Gaugier 31). The proportions of the interior illustrate the Roman fascination with harmony and the order of the cosmos. Its height and diameter are equal (approximately one hundred forty-two feet), and it forms a perfect sphere within a cylinder (Khaled 6). This symmetry is not only aesthetically pleasing but also structurally important. It was precisely designed for the purposes of balancing its massive weight and withstanding powerful impacts (Joost-Gaugier 31).



Figure 1. Rome, the Pantheon: the north entrance (photograph by Sloane Atterbury).



Figure 2. Closer view of the Pantheon's columns (photograph by Sloane Atterbury).

The rotunda is capped by a massive, freestanding dome. The dome's ceiling is lined with coffers, or sunken panels (Khaled 9). A massive hole, or *oculus*, pierces the dome's center and measures approximately thirty feet in diameter (seen in Figure 3). These also serve multiple purposes. They, first, remove some of the dome's weight, and they, second, add an attractive decorative element. The structure's use of diagrammatic geometry, such as rotated squares and root-2 constructions, displays the advanced engineering skills of ancient Roman architects. The Romans also used concrete combined with various aggregates to achieve different densities. They utilized lighter materials at the dome's apex to minimize the structure's weight. This groundbreaking method resulted in a robust and long-lasting temple (Lancaster 124).

The Pantheon was originally built as a temple for all of Rome's gods; however, its precise religious function is still uncertain. Romans were famous for absorbing the gods of conquered peoples instead of trying to destroy them. Romans thought that the more gods who protected Rome, the better, so they welcomed foreign gods and goddesses into their religion and identified them with Roman ones (Michael). For example, the Greek Zeus became the Roman Jupiter. They even adopted cults, or the ways that gods and goddesses were worshipped, and they built many temples in Rome itself. Some scholars argue that ceremonies may have taken place inside the Pantheon to also honor divine ancestors or the imperial family. Many Romans believed that emperors could receive divine help during their lifetimes, but they became fully divine usually only after they died through an official Senate vote (Michael). Worshipping the emperor helped express loyalty to Rome and to unite the empire both politically and religiously.

Not every emperor was deified, though. The Pantheon was consecrated as a Christian church in the 7th century, which meant that it was preserved rather than quarried, and it survives into the modern era (Joost-Gaugier 28).

Dome and Oculus

The Pantheon's most famous feature is its coffered, concrete dome with a central oculus. It creates a dramatic interior space, and the oculus is the structure's only direct source of light, since there are no windows along the curved walls (Sparavigna, 1). The Pantheon faces north whereas other Roman temples typically face south (McEwen 58). This is most likely due to the astronomical alignments for the sundial. Because the Pantheon's entrance faces in this direction, the sun does not shine straight in through the door except in rare seasonal moments. This creates an environment where the light from the oculus shifts constantly as the sun moves, and the beam of the sun traces a path across the dome's interior (Magli 492). This allows the visitor to mark the time of the day and even the season of the year.

As the sun moves across the sky each day, the light shining through the oculus creates a slowly moving circular beam on the interior surfaces (seen in Figure 4). In the morning, the light appears on the left side, or the northwest part of the interior. At noon, the sunlight falls high on the dome and moves downward. In the late afternoon, the sunlight moves toward the opposite side. The position also changes with the sun's height throughout the year (Magli 492). In the winter, the sun is lower in the sky, and the beam sits lower inside the building. It can illuminate areas near the floor and the entrance. During mid-winter, sunlight may hit parts of the interior that are mostly dark the rest of the year. During the summer, the sun is much higher overhead, and the beam stays up on the upper walls and dome. This often creates a dramatic glowing effect around the lower dome (Magli 492).

The Pantheon's dome has one hundred forty coffers in total, and they are arranged in five concentric rings, with twenty-eight coffers to each ring (Khaled 9). The dome and its coffers lighten the massive surface visually and structurally. The repeated pattern of the coffers draws the eye of the viewer upward. Once the viewer is looking upward, the effect is that the dome seems to float rather than to press down on the viewer. The repeated pattern also guides the gaze of the viewer toward the oculus, through which the sky above is clearly visible. At the same time, the coffers catch the shifting light and shadow throughout the day, so the interior looks dynamic and almost alive. Therefore, it turns the immense concrete space into a visually uplifting experience.



Figure 3. The interior of the Pantheon's dome:
depicts sunken panels and oculus
(photograph by Sloane Atterbury).

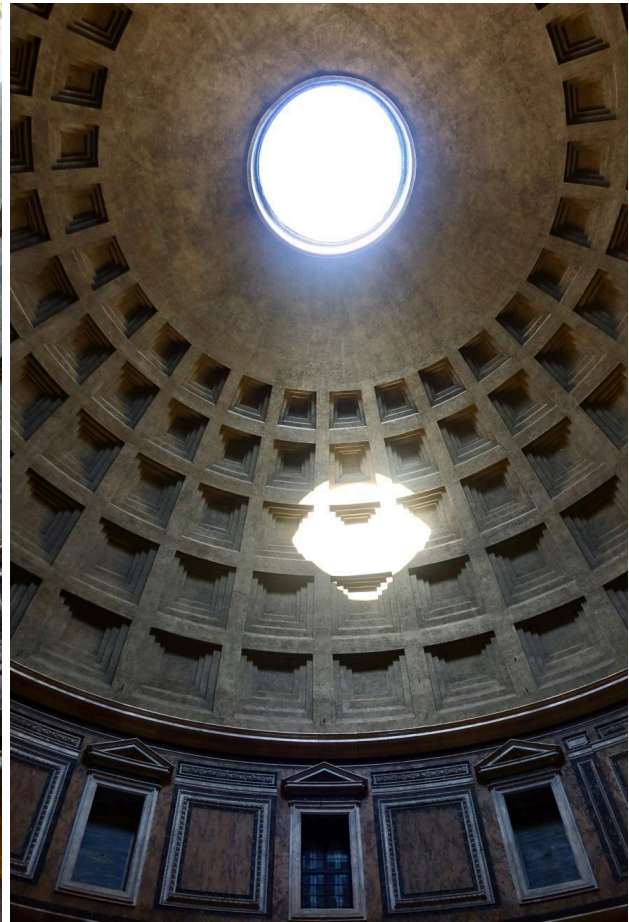


Figure 4. Incoming light in the interior of the Pantheon at 10:00pm, 25 February 2026
(photograph by Sloane Atterbury).

Symbolism and Astronomy

The Pantheon's dome serves as a direct link between the heavens and the earth, or a symbolic meeting point between the gods and the people. The viewer is enclosed in a perfectly spherical space that represents the cosmos (Magli 492). The cosmos is made up of the sun, the moon, the planets, and the stars. The Romans believed that a sphere was the most perfect geometric shape, because it was balanced, smooth, and complete. It had no beginning or end, so it made sense that the heavens would be shaped like a sphere. The dome's shape resembles the vault of the heavens, and the oculus functions almost like the sun at the center of the cosmic sphere (McEwen 61). People inside would feel like they were looking upward into a literal opening to the heavens and to the divine while they were still standing on earth. Put simply, the dome was a bridge between human space and the eternal sky.

This argument becomes stronger when one considers that the Pantheon was built as a temple to honor all of the gods and goddesses of the Romans. For the Romans, astronomy and religion were deeply intertwined, and many deities were directly associated with celestial bodies. For example, the sun god was called Sol, the moon goddess was called Luna, and the planets



were each named after major gods, such as Mars, Venus, and Jupiter (Ngo-Trong). The Pantheon reflects this perfectly. It is dedicated to all gods of the cosmos, and, since its massive, spherical dome and central oculus represent the cosmos itself, it brings the heavens and the gods into one architectural space where humans could experience the entire cosmos directly.

Conclusion

The Pantheon stands as a permanent testament to the skills of Roman engineering, and its freestanding concrete dome is one of its most impressive aspects. I have argued in this paper that the dome, with its massive oculus, serves as a direct link for the viewer between the heavens and the earth. The shape of the dome reflects the shape of the cosmos, and its coffers lead the viewer's eye to the sky through the oculus. Additionally, the moving light and shadows on the surface reflect the dynamism of the cosmos. When standing inside the Pantheon and looking up, an ancient Roman viewer may have felt a connection to all of the gods and goddesses that the building is named in honor of.

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