Janus (Roman deity)

Definition: Janus from Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable

The ancient Roman deity who kept the gate of heaven and is, therefore, the guardian of gates and doors. He was represented with two faces, one in front and one behind, and the doors of his temple in Rome were thrown open in times of war and closed in times of peace. The name Janus is used allusively with reference to two-facedness and to war.

Summary Article: JANUS from Gods, Goddesses, and Mythology

Janus was an important Roman god who protected doorways and gateways. He had two faces, one looking forward, the other backward, just as a door faces two ways. He was also the god of beginnings and endings: January, the first month of the modern calendar year, was named for him.

Janus was one of the oldest of the ancient Italian gods. He was the guardian of all entrances, thresholds, beginnings, and endings. For most Romans, Janus's crucial role was to keep evil from crossing the threshold of the home. As the divine gatekeeper, he was depicted holding a porter's staff in one hand and a set of keys in the other. According to Roman poet Ovid (43 BCE–17 CE), these were the keys to the gates of heaven, which Janus opened whenever Jupiter wanted to pass through them himself or allow others to do so. It was also Janus's responsibility to close them afterward. The first hour of every day belonged to Janus, as did the first day of every month, and the first month of every year. Without Janus's blessing, new undertakings were doomed—thus, when Romans prayed, Janus was usually invoked first, even before Jupiter, the ruler of the gods.

The Two-Faced Dog of Greek Mythology

The two-faced Roman god Janus had no true equivalent in Greek mythology. The closest likeness to him was Orthus or Orthrus, the two-headed hound that guarded the beautiful red cattle belonging to Geryon, the mighty three-bodied, three-headed, six-handed grandson of Medusa. For many years, Geryon lived peacefully on the remote island of Erytheia with his watchdog, his herds, and a herdsman. Then, Heracles came to steal the cattle as one of his labors. Orthus tried to stop the hero, rushing toward him and barking fiercely, but Heracles killed him with a single blow of his club. After slaying the herdsman and then Geryon, Heracles rounded up the cattle and took them in tribute to his cousin Eurystheus, king of Argos. As Geryon's blood spilled out, a tree sprang up that would later bear red, cherry-like fruits when the constellation of the Pleiades rose in the night sky.

Orthus was the brother of two of Heracles' other adversaries—Cerberus, the canine guardian of the underworld, and the many-headed serpent the Hydra—and he was the father of a third, the Nemean lion. Some sources say the dog's other offspring was the Theban Sphinx, a monster
with a woman's head, a lion's body, and the wings of a bird. The Sphinx waylaid travelers and asked them a famous riddle—"What has four legs in the morning, two legs in the afternoon, and three legs in the evening?" She killed those who failed to answer it correctly. The riddle was finally solved by Oedipus, who gave the answer, "Man." Like his master, Orthus also became connected with the heavens—with Sirius, the Dog Star. The first rising of Sirius occurs in July, after it has been obscured by the sun. The event marked the start of the New Year in Athens. Like Janus, Orthus was depicted with one head looking backward at the old year and one looking ahead to the new year. However, Orthus and the summer New Year never had the same significance in Greece as Janus had in Rome.

Guardian of the threshold

However, Janus's month was not the first month of the year until the Julian calendar was introduced in 45 BCE, and the start of the Roman year was moved from March to January. After this, Janus's role was extended to protect the threshold of the New Year. In his honor, people celebrated the first of January with gift-giving—coins with the faces of Janus were especially popular. For many centuries Janus had been portrayed with two faces as a sign of his watchfulness over a house's doorway. Now, with the calendar change, his two faces took on a new significance: one face looked back at the year just ended, the other looked forward to the year ahead. No other Roman deity had a double aspect of this nature.

Some early statues of Janus from the second century BCE depict him with four faces, but later representations show him with just two, one bearded and the other clean-shaven, possibly symbolizing age and youth. Later still, he is most often shown with two bearded faces. In Book Seven of the Aeneid, the poet Virgil (70–19 BCE) describes a statue of Janus Bifrons ("with two faces") in the palace hall of Latinus, a mythical king of Latium.
This 18th-century copperplate engraving shows several of the classic ways in which the two-faced Roman god, Janus, appeared. The porter’s staff and key that he is holding point to his role as keeper of the gate of heaven.

Mortal beginnings

According to one legend, Janus was born a mortal in Thessaly (part of modern Greece, northwest of Athens), the son of the god Apollo. Exiled from his native country, he fled to Latium, a region of central Italy extending from the Apennines to the Tyrrhenian Sea, and the capital of which was Rome. There he was welcomed by the ruler, Camesus, who shared the kingdom with him. Another version of the story names the ruler of Latium as a woman, Camese, whom Janus married, becoming coruler. Janus had several children with Camese, including a son, Tiberinus, who drowned in the river that flows through Rome, which was subsequently named the Tiber in his memory. After the death of Camesus, or Camese, Janus ruled Latium alone. One legend says that he built a city on the highest hill in Rome and named it Janiculum after himself. Other myths claim that he received the exiled Saturn into his kingdom.

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Saturn was the Roman god of agriculture and the father of Jupiter, Juno, Ceres, Pluto, and Neptune. He later became identified with the Greek Titan Cronus, whom some accounts linked to plentiful harvests. When Saturn was banished from Mount Olympus, the home of the gods, by his son Jupiter, he took refuge in Latium, where the hospitable Janus shared his throne with him. Saturn established the village of Saturnia on the Capitoline Hill, across the Tiber from Janus's settlement, and introduced agriculture and wine making to the district. Together Janus and Saturn created a Golden Age, ruling over a race of blissful humans who never showed signs of aging.

Saturn gave Rome one of its major festivals—the midwinter Saturnalia, a time of abundant food, wine, and boisterous behavior. In this manifestation, Saturn was a god of joy and plenty. He had another, less pleasant, aspect, however: the Saturn of astrology was the grim ruler of the sign of Capricorn, which begins at the winter solstice and runs through the first half of Janus's month of January. This Saturn was a dour lord of time and a stern, inflexible taskmaster.

**Savior of Rome**

Janus is credited with having intervened personally to save Rome from its enemies. After Romulus—the legendary eighth-century-BCE founder of Rome—kidnapped the women of the Sabine tribe to the north of the city, the Sabine men gained entry to the Capitol with the aid of an insider and were poised to attack the Romans. Suddenly Janus caused hot springs to erupt in mighty torrents, scalding the Sabines and scattering them in all directions. From then on, the door of Janus's shrine was always kept open in wartime so that he could personally help defend the Romans.

Some sources name Janus's wife as Juturna (or Diuturna in earlier versions). She was a healer goddess of springs—her own sacred well was near Janus's shrine in the Roman Forum, the city's religious and commercial center. Janus and Juturna had a son, Fontus or Fons, who was a god of springs like his mother.

According to Ovid, Janus also fathered the beautiful nymph Canens, whose singing voice was so lovely that it could soothe savage beasts and move rocks and trees. She married the handsome Picus, a son of Saturn. While hunting one day in the forest, Picus was seen by the enchantress Circe, who fell in love with him. When Picus spurned her attentions, she turned him into a purple woodpecker. After searching in vain for Picus for six days and nights, Canens lay down beside the Tiber River, where she wasted away and died of grief.

In another Ovid story, Janus pursued and outwitted Carna, a capricious nymph who delighted in teasing her suitors by directing them to wait for her in a shady cave, where she promised to join them shortly. She would then go and hide in the forest, leaving them in the lurch. However, Janus saw Carna taking refuge behind a rock with the eyes in his backward-looking face. He caught her, and in recognition of his victory over her she slept with him. In gratitude, Janus made Carna the protectress of door hinges, giving her the power to keep out evil spirits.

**Origins of Janus's name**

Some legends state that Janus's wife was Jana—her name is a variant form of Diana (or Dione), just as Janus may be a corruption of Dianus. Janus and Jana, or Dianus and Diana, may have been the sun and moon deities of central Italy's earliest inhabitants. When Rome came to dominate all of Italy, and the customs of its Latin-speaking people spread throughout the peninsula, the worship of Jupiter and Juno started to eclipse that of some of the old, established deities.

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Opinion varies about the origins of Janus's name. The Latin word *ianua* means "door," but modern scholars are divided about whether Janus took his name from "door" or *ianua* took its name from the god. According to American mythologist Joseph Campbell (1904–1987), the Romans believed that a divine presence (*numen, plural numina*) existed everywhere, with its most important manifestations being those connected to the home. So, for example, the divine presence of fire was personified as the goddess of the hearth Vesta and that of the door was personified as Janus. From this perspective, Janus would have taken his name from the door. The opposite view was expressed by Scottish anthropologist James Frazer (1854–1941), the author of *The Golden Bough*, who pointed out that the same root for door appears in many Indo-European languages—for example, *dur* (Sanskrit), *thura* (Greek), *Tür* (German), *door* (English), *dorus* (Old Irish), and *foris* (Latin). But *ianua* is unique, with no similarities elsewhere in the Indo-European world. From this observation, Frazer concluded that *ianua* must be a derivation from the name of Janus.

**Worship of Janus**

Romans worshiped Janus in temples and in the home, and during an annual festival. The god's main center of worship was the temple of Janus Geminus, situated on the north side of the Forum. It was a small rectangular building of bronze, with two side walls and two great double gates at either end. A bronze statue of Janus stood in the middle of the temple, which had no roof. In wealthy private households daily offerings were made to the god. These normally consisted of wine and a sacred cake, known as the *strues*. Prayers were offered for the safety of the household and family, and from time to time a young pig would be sacrificed.

From the earliest times an annual festival known as the Agonium was held on January 9 in Rome in honor of Janus. The ceremonies were conducted by the god's high priest, who was known as the *rex sacrorum* ("king of rites"); the votaries (attendants) wore new robes for the occasion. After aromatic plants and incense had been ritually burned on the altar, a young ram would be sacrificed to the deity.

**The public faces of Janus**

Janus had a crucial part to play in Roman civic matters. He protected bridges, shipping, and trade; he was credited with the introduction of agriculture, civil law, and worship. He was also strongly linked to currency—Rome's oldest bronze coins bore an image of Janus on one side and a ship's prow on the other. In the Forum, the massive gates of the Janus Geminus were oriented on an east-west axis, the path of the sun across the sky. Through these gates the Roman legions marched off to battle. In times of peace, the doors would be closed to safeguard the power of the shrine. In times of war, they would be opened in a state ritual that marked the outward flow of military power. Some sources have suggested that returning victorious Roman armies also marched through the gates of the Janus Geminus, and that this gave rise to the idea of a triumphal arch. Certainly Janus's influence extended to all gateways and arches, and his likeness appeared on many archways throughout Rome.

**See also:** APOLLO; CALENDAR; CIRCE; CRONUS; DIANA; HERACLES; JUNO; JUPITER; MOON; PROMETHEUS; ROME; ROMULUS AND REMUS; SATURN.

**Further reading**

