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Why the emperor had to be a god: Divine invisibility, imperial visibility, and the *numen Augusti*

Christophe J. Goddard

to Paul Veyne

In the Greek world, during the Roman imperial period, inscriptions often described the emperor as ἰσόθεος, literally “godlike.” It was an old habit. It was the way Greek cities used to honor their heroes in the past.<sup>1</sup> One could not deny that imperial power was superior, even if it was difficult to forget the mortality of its holder. We are facing here what seems to be a contradiction, but most of the inhabitants of the Roman empire from the end of the first century BC to the middle of the fifth century AD found it logical and did not need any kind of explanation for it. The divine nature of the emperor was obvious enough that its cult, with its temples and its priests, was established rather quickly in provincial cities across the Roman empire from the end of the first century BC onward. Recent studies have shown its growing presence in urban life, though the expansion of the cult had its ups and downs, as John Scheid pointed out for the priests known as the *Fratres Arvales*.<sup>2</sup> However, there has been debate

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<sup>1</sup> S. R. F. Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge, 1984), 48. The following abbreviations are used below: *AE*: *L’Année épigraphique*; *CIL*: *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*; *FIRA*: *Fontes iuris Romani anteiustiniani*; *ILLRP*: *Inscriptiones Latinae liberae rei publicae*; *ILS*: *Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae*; *IRT*: *The Inscriptions of Roman Tripolitania*; *P.Oxy.*: *Papyrus Oxyrhynchus*; *RIB*: *The Roman Inscriptions of Britain*; *SEG*: *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum*.

<sup>2</sup> W. Van Andringa, *La religion en Gaule romaine: Piété et politique I<sup>er</sup>–III<sup>e</sup> siècle apr. J.-C.* (Paris, 2002), 171; *Quotidien des dieux et des hommes la vie religieuse dans les cités du Vésuve à l’époque romaine* (Rome, 2009), 47; J. Scheid, *Romulus et ses frères: Le collège des Frères Arvales, modèle du culte public dans la Rome des empereurs* (Rome, 1990), 60–66, for their first

between those scholars who, like Paul Veyne, consider ceremonies paying homage to the emperor to be without any religious value,<sup>3</sup> and those who, like Simon Price, think that the imperial cult was only addressed indirectly to the emperor.<sup>4</sup> Most rituals involved petitioning the gods to protect the emperor's *salus*, his good health here and now, and not to ensure the immortality of his soul in the afterlife. Most historians think that the imperial cult was intended above all to honor only deceased emperors, and among them only deified ones.<sup>5</sup> We know that this interpretation has its flaws. John Scheid showed, for example, that in Ostia the place of worship dedicated to the emperors discovered in the station of the night guards (*vigiles*), as well as the *augustea* in Cestrus and in Bubon, housed statues of the ruling emperors after their proclamation and not after their death.<sup>6</sup> The cult of the ruling emperor is clearly far more important than we once thought: Duncan Fishwick was right about this point.<sup>7</sup> More recently Ittai Gradel, following Jules Toutain's intuition, wrote that the cult of the *numen Augusti* (the divine power of the emperor) was the true expression of the cult of the living emperor, but his

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mention in the acta of the Fratres Arvales under Tiberius. Scheid, *Romulus*, 430, indicates a decline under the Flavians and Antonines and a resumption in the third century AD.

<sup>3</sup> P. Veyne, *L'empire gréco-romain* (Paris, 2005), 68n220, *contra* F. Millar, "The Imperial Cult and the Persecutions," in *Le culte des souverains dans l'empire romain* (Geneva, 1973), 148, who relies on the examples provided by L. Robert, "La ville d'Euhippé en Carie," *Comptes-rendus de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* 96, no. 4 (1952): 589 (= *AE* 1953, 90); L. Robert, "Recherches épigraphiques: Inscription d'Athènes," *Revue des Études Anciennes* 62 (1960): 318n4 (= *Die Inschriften von Pergamon*, [Berlin, 1895], 2:374) and 322n3 (= *SEG* 6, 59: Ancyra in Galatia; see also *P.Oxy.* 1149, l. 2; 1265); J. Robert and L. Robert, "Bulletin épigraphique," *Revue des Études Grecques* 64 (1951): 148, no. 63, who mention *P.Oxy.* 2130 (AD 267): a man asks an imperial statue to help him avoid a liturgy. See also H. W. Pleket, "An Aspect of the Emperor Cult: Imperial Mysteries," *Harvard Theological Review* 58 (1965): 331. G. W. Bowersock, "Greek Intellectuals and the Imperial Cult in the Second Century A.D.," in *Le culte des souverains dans l'empire romain*, 206, is very close to Veyne's position.

<sup>4</sup> Price, *Rituals and Power*, 216–20.

<sup>5</sup> *Contra* D. Fishwick, *The Imperial Cult in the Latin West* (Leiden, 1990–2005), 2.1:395.

<sup>6</sup> Scheid, *Romulus*, 162 and 426.

<sup>7</sup> Fishwick, *Imperial Cult*, 2.1:375–88.

study raises several issues that must be addressed.<sup>8</sup> Gradel, following Fergus Millar, thinks that our Jewish and Christian preconceptions have prevented us from understanding the true nature of the Roman gods for the inhabitants of the ancient world—its relative and non-transcendent nature.<sup>9</sup> Claiming the divinity of imperial power consisted in stating its extraordinary nature and nothing else. But this only partially answers the fundamental question of why it was logical for the inhabitants of the Roman empire to consider the emperor godlike. To answer it, we need to understand what our sources mean when they refer to the emperor's numen. We will see that the invisibility of the emperor, the invisibility of the source of the numen, as well as the omnipresence of his acta (his deeds), were the key features that induced the inhabitants of the Roman empire to believe that the emperor had to be divine.

As Georges Dumézil showed decades ago, numen has a very precise meaning in the Roman context. First of all, it has nothing to do with mana, the supernatural power of Melanesian origin, which anthropologists of the evolutionist school (led by Herbert Jenkins Rose and Hendrik Wagenvoort) considered the archaic form of divinity.<sup>10</sup> Numen, a term that literally referred to the nodding of the head, was thereby etymologically connected to the notion of approval, the "affirmative will" or "performive force" of a god—the "sum of his particular wishes" (l'intégrale de ses volontés particulières).<sup>11</sup> Dumézil notes that in Latin, the word *numen* is normally followed by *deus/dea* in the genitive. He also points out that *numen* was clearly

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<sup>8</sup> J. Toutain, *Les cultes païens dans l'empire romain* (Paris, 1907), 2:53; I. Gradel, *Emperor Worship and Roman Religion* (Oxford, 2002), 7 and 234.

<sup>9</sup> Millar, "The Imperial Cult," 148; Gradel, *Emperor Worship*, 48, 72: "what mattered was power, again relative divinity." *Contra* Veyne, *L'empire gréco-romain*, 68–69n220.

<sup>10</sup> G. Dumézil, *La religion romaine archaïque*, 2nd ed. (Paris, 1974), 37–48; *contra* H. J. Rose, *Primitive Culture in Italy* (London, 1926), 6; H. Wagenvoort, *Roman Dynamism: Studies in Ancient Roman Thought, Language and Custom* (Oxford, 1952), 73–75. See also W. Warde-Fowler, *Roman Ideas of Deity in the Last Century before the Christian Era* (Oxford, 1911), 118.

<sup>11</sup> Dumézil, *Religion romaine*, 47.

distinguished from *deus/dea*.<sup>12</sup> The few cases where *numen* and *deus* seem to be mistaken for one another are simple metonymies. The imperial numen follows the same rule: dedications generally refer to *numen Augusti*, *numen Augustorum*, or *numen Augustum*.<sup>13</sup> They do not mention the numen of a specific emperor. This is very important. Caligula may present a rare exception, for according to Suetonius: “He also set up a special temple to his own godhead, with priests and with victims of the choicest kind. In this temple was a life-sized statue of the emperor in gold, which was dressed each day in clothing such as he wore himself” (Templum etiam numini suo proprium et sacerdotes et excogitatissimas hostias instituit. In templo simulacrum stabat aureum iconicum amiciebaturque cotidie veste, quali ipse uteretur. Magisteria sacerdotii ditissimus quisque et ambitione et licitatione maxima vicibus comparabant. Hostiae erant phoenicopteri, pavones, tetraones, numidicae, meleagrides, phasianae, quae generatim per singulos dies immolarentur).<sup>14</sup> If we read this passage carefully, the historian blames Caligula precisely for not observing the way the numen was supposed to be worshipped and for forgetting

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<sup>12</sup> Dumézil, *Religion romaine*, 36.

<sup>13</sup> The singular *numen Augustorum* as well as the plural *numina Augustorum* are common. See for example in Gaul, *AE* 1978, 453, and in Britannia, *AE* 1992, 1147. It should not be mistaken for *numina augustis*, “augustan divine powers,” which referred to the most important and official gods of the city. See on this point C. J. Goddard, “Un principe de différenciation au coeur du processus de romanisation et de christianisation: Quelques réflexions autour du culte de Saturne en Afrique romaine,” in *Le Problème de la christianisation du monde antique*, ed. H. Inglebert, S. Destephen, and B. Dumézil (Paris, 2010), 125. I do not agree with Fishwick, *Imperial Cult*, vol. 2, part 1, 381, that *numina Augustorum* necessarily included dead and living emperors. The dedications anterior to the presence of co-ruling emperors before AD 161 all refer to *numina divorum Augustorum*, i.e. *numina* of dead and deified emperors (as in *AE* 1937, 112, and *CIL* II, 2009). *RIB* 1, 330, from Benwell/Condercum (Britannia), should not be a surprise: even if the empire was not governed by several emperors, it had numerous *Augusti* who had been deified. *CIL* VIII, 5177, from Zattara (AD 121), which associates the *numen sacrum* of the *divini Augusti* with *imp[eratoris] Caes[aris] divi / Tra/iani Parthici[i] ffilii*, / *diui Ner[vae] nep[otis]*, *Tra/iani Hadrian[i]*, clearly distinguishes between ruling *Augusti* and dead/deified ones (*divi*).

<sup>14</sup> Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars* 4.22, ed. and trans. J. C. Rolfe (Cambridge, MA, 1914), 1:448.

its generic feature, by dressing up his statue like himself every day. The exception not only proves the rule, but reveals it.

The generic aspect of numen is one of the reasons it should not be mistaken with the notion of genius. Each person, each college, each community, each city had its own genius which appeared at their birth and vanished at their death. *Genii* were “ephemeral,” as John Scheid recently put it.<sup>15</sup> Claude Lepelley insisted on the specificity of genius, referring to a famous inscription from Forum Clodii near Rome, dating to AD 18: “And for the birthday of the Caesars Augustus and Tiberius, before the decurions go to dine, their *genii* shall be invited to join a feast with wine and incense at the altar of the *numen Augustum*” (*ut natalibus Augusti et Ti. Caesarum, prius quam ad vescendum decuriones irent, thure et vino genii eorum ad epulandum ara numinis Augusti invitarentur*).<sup>16</sup> As one can see, four years after Augustus’s death, local decurions continued to worship his genius, even if, unlike his numen, his genius was supposed to have vanished. There was clearly a link between an emperor’s genius, honored with a feast on the day of their accession to the empire, and the imperial numen to which the altar was dedicated. But this does not mean that the two concepts were being conflated. First of all, the ceremony was addressed to two *genii* at the altar of a single *numen Augustum*. The ritual was

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<sup>15</sup> Scheid qualified the genius as an “ephemeral” god in his lecture “Dieux de Rome, dieux des Romains: Réflexions sur les théologies romaines,” at the Collège de France in 2013.

<sup>16</sup> *CIL XI*, 3303 = *ILS* 154 = *AE* 2008, 522 (my translation). On the rediscovery in Tuscany of this famous inscription, see L. Gasperini, “L’Augusteo di Forum Clodii,” in *Nuove ricerche sul culto imperiale in Italia*, ed. L. Gasperini and G. Paci (Tivoli, 2008), 91–134; D. Boschung, *Gens Augusta: Untersuchungen zu Aufstellung, Wirkung und Bedeutung der Statuengruppen des julisch-claudischen Kaiserhauses* (Mainz, 2002), 78n482; J. Scheid, *Quand faire, c’est croire: Les rites sacrificiels des Romains* (Paris, 2005), 326. On the confusion between genius and numen, see C. Lepelley, “Une forme religieuse du patriotisme municipal: Le culte du génie de la cité dans l’Afrique romaine,” in *Histoire et Archéologie de l’Afrique du Nord: Spectacles, vie portuaire, religion* (Paris, 1992), 135–36; Fishwick, *Imperial Cult*, 1.1:33; Gradel, *Emperor Worship*, 37 and 86, *contra* D. M. Pippidi, “Le ‘Numen Augusti’,” *Revue des Études Latines* 9 (1931): 83–112; K. Scott, *The Imperial Cult under the Flavians* (Stuttgart, 1936), 117; R. Étienne, *Le culte impérial dans la péninsule ibérique d’Auguste à Dioclétien* (Rome, 1958), 314.

really concerned with the ruling emperor's genius and status: it was intended to raise Tiberius to the level of his predecessor and stepfather Augustus. Secondly, we should not forget that in AD 18, we are still at an early stage of the formation of the imperial cult, as Michael Koortbojian has reminded us.<sup>17</sup> I think that the ceremony was intended to show that ever since his birth, Tiberius had been invested with numen, with an imperial and divine power. But numen and genius belonged to two separate levels, two different categories.

Let's not forget that, since Augustus, only emperors were endowed with numen, just like traditional gods, whereas ordinary citizens only had temporary genii watching over them. This means that the nature and source of the emperor's power made him a superior being: it was the same kind of power possessed by the gods. The construction of the altar in the colony of Narbo (Narbonne) in AD 11–12 clearly shows that this theological construction must have taken place at court at least by that date, since the provincial cult would have required authorization by both the Roman senate and the emperor, as Simon Price showed.<sup>18</sup> We can assume that Augustus himself wanted to be honored not only with a series of tributes to his genius, to his Lares, but through the proper worship of his numen.<sup>19</sup>

I believe we can trace the first step of this religious program to 29 BC, when Octavian established the cult to his great uncle and adoptive father, Gaius Julius Caesar. Octavian built a temple dedicated to Divus Iulius on the forum, facing the sanctuary dedicated to the Capitoline Triad (Jupiter, Juno, and Minerva), echoing its main architectural features—such as the six columns on the façade and the representation of Romulus on his chariot—as if he wanted to

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<sup>17</sup> M. Koortbojian, *The Divinization of Caesar and Augustus: Precedents, Consequences, Implications* (New York, 2013), 170–77.

<sup>18</sup> *CIL* XII, 4333 = *AE* 1964, 187 = *AE* 1980, 609. See Price, *Rituals and Power*, 66, *contra* Koortbojian, *Divinization*, 177, who surmises that the Roman senate was not consulted on the matter.

<sup>19</sup> A. Frascchetti, *Rome et le prince*, trans. V. Jolivet (Paris, 1994), 271.

show that Caesar's power had something Jovian about it.<sup>20</sup> This Capitoline mirror on the forum was the first expression of what Octavian had in mind concerning the source and nature of his own power. What is interesting is that it reflected the nature of his power on a theoretical level without relying, as Caesar had, on a genealogical fantasy. (Caesar had claimed to be descended from Venus, the divine mother of the first "Julius": Iulus, son of Aeneas.) Through urban planning and architecture, he gave a clear view of how he considered himself, placing himself above ordinary men and just below Jupiter, who still stood above him on his hill. This message is reinforced by a series of statues produced during the reigns of Tiberius and Claudius that show Augustus half nude and hipmantled like Jupiter, clearly referring to the same symbolic program.<sup>21</sup> It thereby presented the living emperors and Augustus as "Jupiter's earthly parallel[s]."<sup>22</sup>

Claude Lepelley argued that the adjective *augustus* itself belonged to the vocabulary of the Capitoline Triad.<sup>23</sup> In dedications to the Triad, Jupiter was called *optimus maximus*, Juno *regina*, and Minerva *augusta*. Lepelley believed that Augustus borrowed his new name from Minerva; however, there is no existing inscription or literary mention of Minerva Augusta before 27 BC, when the emperor adopted the name.<sup>24</sup> The only inscription from Italy predating

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<sup>20</sup> On the Temple of Divus Iulius, see F. Coarelli, *Foro romano* (Rome, 1992), 2:258–305; F. Coarelli, *Roma: Guide Archeologiche Laterza* (Rome, 2008), 90–91; M. Montagna Pasquinucci, *La decorazione architettonica del tempio del divo Giulio nel Foro romano* (Rome, 1973), 257; P. Gros, "Iulius, Divus, aedes," in *Lexicon Topographicum Urbis Romae*, vol. 3, ed. E. M. Steinby (Rome, 1996), 116–19; and Koortbojian, *Divinization*, 39–45. On its construction and dedication by Octavian on August 18, 29 BC, see Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 47.19.

<sup>21</sup> See Koortbojian, *Divinization*, 213–14 and fig. VIII.21 (a bronze statue from Herculaneum of a standing Augustus holding the Jovian thunderbolt in his left hand, dating to the reign of Claudius and now at the Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli).

<sup>22</sup> Koortbojian, *Divinization*, 214.

<sup>23</sup> Lepelley, "Une forme religieuse," 137.

<sup>24</sup> All dedications mentioning Minerva Augusta are posterior to Augustus's reign, e.g., *AE* 1914, 55, under Marcus Aurelius; *AE* 1892, 145 under Caracalla. For the augural sense of the adjective



Augustus's principate that seems to refer to an *augustus* or *augusta* is too fragmentary to allow us to reach such a conclusion. The inscription, from Betriacum/Cavaltone and dated to 59 BC, has been lost and is only known from the sixteenth-century Venetian scholar and printer Aldo Manuzio.<sup>25</sup>

...]ug Laribus d(onum) d(ederunt):

Ap(h)rodisi(us) Ploti(i) C(aii) s(ervus),

Apollon(ius) Ofilli N(umeri) s(ervus),

Philemo Mesc(iniorum) L(ucii) s(ervus),

Pothus Virriae s(ervus),

Philogen(es) Curtil(i) P(ublili) s(ervus),

Dama Vetti(i) Pu(pi) s(ervus),

Surus I(u)vent(i) P(ublili) s(ervus),

Apollon(ius) Arri(i) Cn(aei) s(ervus),

Antioc(us) Ploti(i) C(ai) s(ervus),

Tiasus Deci(i) P(ublili) s(ervus),

Diogen(es) Metili C(ai) s(ervus),

Orp(h)eus Afini(orum) L(ucii) s(ervus),

Bacchus Afini(orum) L(ucii) s(ervus),

Artimid(or)us Spediol(i) C(aii) s(ervus),

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*augustus*, see Koortbojian, *Divinization*, 64, citing Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars* 4.7, who explains that Augustus was proposed by Munatius Plancus as Octavian's new name because it would increase (*auctus*) his dignity.

<sup>25</sup> *ILLRP* 200 = *CIL* V, 4087 = *AE* 2008, 302 = Aldo Manuzio, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat. lat. 5237, fol. 468r.

Sulla Flavi(i) P(ublīi) s(ervus),  
 Pamphil(us) Noni(i) P(ublīi) s(ervus),  
 Eucærus Flavi(i) P(ublīi) s(ervus),  
 Antioc(hus) Mes(ciniorum) Q(uinti) s(ervus),  
 Pharnac(es) Egnat(ii) P(ublīi) s(ervus),  
 C. Iulio (Caesare I) / M. Calpur(nio Bibulo) co(n)s(ulibus).

Should we follow the traditional interpretation and read the first two words as *[A]ug(ustis) Laribus* (“to the Augustan Lares”)? Or should we follow Gian Luca Gregori’s suggestion that Manuzio misread the beginning of the inscription, and that it should instead be read as *[Hisc(e) m]ag(istri)* (“the following magistrates”), which would be similar to an expression found on an inscription erected by slaves in Capua (*Hisce ministris Laribus*)?<sup>26</sup> There is no way to be certain. One cannot use this document to prove that the adjective “augustan” was used for Lares before Augustus's reign. The only thing we know for sure is that the emperor chose a name that ended up being a qualifier for Minerva. And if it was one of Minerva's attributes before Octavian chose it as his new name, why would he want to share such an attribute with the goddess? Like Minerva, the prince intended to offer counsel, guidance, and protection to the state. All these elements suggest the consistency of his political and religious program from 12 BC, that is, from the moment he became *pontifex maximus*, as Augusto Frascetti showed in 1994.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> G. L. Gregori, “Da *Minturnae* a *Sabbioneta*? Un’ipotesi per CIL, V, 4087 = I<sup>2</sup>, 753 (*Ager Mantuanus*),” in *Est enim ille flos Italiae: Vita economica e sociale nella Cisalpina romana; Atti delle giornate di studi in onore di Ezio Buchi* (Verona, 2008), 191–210, citing CIL X, 3789 = ILS 3609 = *ILLRP* 718. See also Gradel, *Emperor Worship*, 133.

<sup>27</sup> Frascetti, *Rome et le prince*, 345.

The construction of the aforementioned altar in the colony of Narbo in AD 11–12 (that is, during Augustus's lifetime) surely belongs to this very same religious program, even if it seems to have come from a local initiative. Its inscription reads as follows:

T. Statilio Tauro L. Cassio Longino | co(n)s(ulibus) X k(alendas) Octobr(es) | numini Augusti votum | susceptum a plebe Narbo|nensium inperpetuom. | "Quod bonum faustum felixque sit imp(eratori) Caesari, | divi f(ilio), Augusto, p(atri) p(atriciae), pontifici maximo, trib(unicia) potest(ate) | XXXIII, coniugi liberis gentique eius, senatui | populoque Romano et colonis incolisque | c(oloniae) I(uliae) P(aternae) N(arbonis) M(artii), qui se numini eius in perpetuum | colendo obligaverunt, plebs Narbonensium aram Narbone in foro posuit; ad | quam quot annis VIII k(alendas) Octobr(es), qua die | eum saeculi felicitas orbi terrarum | rectorem edidit, tres equites Romani | a plebe et tres libertini hostias singu|las inmolent et colonis et incolis ad | supplicandum numini eius thus et uinum | de suo ea die prae|stent; et VIII k(alendas) Octob(res) | thus uinum colonis et incolis item praestent; k(alendas) quoque Ianuar(ias) thus et uinum | colonis et incolis praestent; VII quoq(ue) | idus Ianuar(ias), qua die primum imperium | orbis terrarum auspicatus est, thure | vino supplicent et hostias singul(as) in[molent et colonis incolisque thus vinum ea die praestent; | et pridie k(alendas) Iunias, quod ea die T. Statilio | Tauro M. Aemilio Lepido co(n)s(libus) iudicia | plebis decurionibus coniunxit, hostias | singul(as) inmolent et thus et vinum ad supplicandum numini eius colonis et | incolis praestent. | Exque iis tribus equitibus Roman[is...] | libertinis unu[s...]"

[Pleb]s Narbone(n)sis a[ram] | numinis Augusti de[di]cavit / [...] legibus iis q(uae) i(nfra) s(criptae) s(unt). | "Numen Caesaris Aug(usti) p(atris) p(atriciae) quando tibi | hodie hanc aram dabo dedicabo|que, his legibus hisque regioni|bus dabo dedicaboque, quas hic | hodie palam dixero, uti infimum | solum huiusque arae titulorum|que est: si quis tergere ornare | reficere volet, quod beneficii | causa fiat, ius fasque esto, sive | quis hostia sacrum faxit, qui | magmentum nec protollat, id|circo tamen probe factum esto; si | quis huic arae donum dare au|gereque uolet, liceto, eademq(ue) | lex ei dono esto, quae arae est; | ceterae leges huic arae titulisq(ue) | eaedem sunt, quae sunt arae | Dianae in Auentino. Hisce legi|bus hisque regionibus, sic uti | dixi, hanc tibi aram pro Imp(eratore) | Caesare Aug(usto), p(atre) p(atriciae), pontifice maximo, tribunicia potestate XXXV, coniuge liberis genteque eius, | senatu populoque R(omano), colonis | incolisque col(oniae) Iul(iae) Patern(ae) Narb(onis) Mart(ii), qui se numini eius in per|petuum colendo obligauerunt, | doque dedicoque, uti sies uolens | propitium."<sup>28</sup>

<sup>28</sup> *ILS* 112 = *CIL* XII, 4333 = *FIRA*, 7, p. 106 (Bruns) = III<sup>2</sup>, p. 227 (Riccobono) = C. Nicolet, "L'inscription de l'autel de Narbonne et la 'Commendatio' des chevaliers," *Latomus* 22, no. 4 (1963): 721–32 = M. Gayraud, ed. and trans., *Narbonne antique des origines à la fin du III<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris, 1981), 358–60. The altar is now in the collection of the Musée archéologique de Narbonne.

In front:

In the consulship of Titus Statilius Taurus and Lucius Cassius Longinus, on the tenth day of the calends of October [September 22, 11 AD], the plebs of Narbo gave a perpetual vow to the numen of Augustus. “In order to ensure happiness, prosperity, and felicity to Emperor Caesar Augustus, son of the divine, father of the fatherland, *pontifex maximus*, holding the tribunician power for the thirty-fourth year, to his wife, children, and house, to the Roman senate and people, and to the colonists and residents [*incolae*] of the Colonia Iulia Paterna Narbo Martius, who have bound themselves to worship his numen in perpetuity, the plebs of the Narbonensians have erected in the forum at Narbo an altar. Every year on the ninth day of the calends of October [September 23]—the day on which the good fortune of the age bore him to be ruler of the world—three Roman equites [proposed] by the plebs and three freedmen shall sacrifice one animal each and shall at their own expense on that day provide the colonists and residents with incense and wine for supplications to his numen. On the eighth day of the calends of October [September 24], they shall likewise provide incense and wine for the colonists and residents. Also on the calends of January [January 1], they shall provide incense and wine for the colonists and residents. Also on the seventh day of the ides of January [January 7], the day on which [his] first imperium was inaugurated on earth, they shall make supplication with incense and wine, shall sacrifice one animal each, and shall provide incense and wine for the colonists and residents on that day. And on the day before the calends of June [May 31], because on that day, in the consulship of Titus Statilius Taurus and Manius Aemilius Lepidus [AD 11], he reconciled the plebeians to the decurions, they shall sacrifice one animal each and shall provide the colonists and residents with incense and wine for supplications to his numen. And of these three Roman equites and [...] freedmen one [...]”

On the side:

The plebs of Narbo have dedicated the altar of the numen of Augustus [...] under the regulations inscribed below. “O numen of Caesar Augustus, father of the fatherland, on the day I give and dedicate this altar to you, I shall give and dedicate it under the regulations and limitations I shall proclaim here on this day publicly, as well as the ground this inscription and this altar lie upon. If anyone wishes to clean, decorate, or repair and do it as a favor, it shall be lawful and permissible. If anyone sacrifices an animal without postponing the additional offering [*magmentum*], it shall nevertheless be accounted properly done. If anyone wishes to offer a gift to this altar and enhance it, he shall be permitted to do so, and the regulations that apply to the altar shall apply to such gift. The other regulations of this altar and its inscriptions shall be the same as those for the altar of Diana on the Aventine Hill. Under these regulations and limitations just as I have stated, for Emperor Caesar Augustus, father of the fatherland, *pontifex maximus*, holding the tribunician power for the thirty-fifth year [between July 1, 12 AD and June 30, 13 AD], for his wife, children, and house, for the Roman senate and people; and for the colonists and residents of the Colonia Iulia Paterna Narbo Martius, who have bound

themselves to worship his numen in perpetuity, I give and dedicate this altar to you that you may be favorably and kindly disposed.”<sup>29</sup>

Ittai Gradel strangely considers this dedication to be a private one because the organization and financing of the cult were partially left to the *incolae*, that is, the residents of the city.<sup>30</sup> *Incolae* were not citizens of the colony in which they lived, but they could hold Roman citizenship. They were not necessarily *peregrini* legally speaking. Marcel Gayraud, François Jacques, André Chastagnol, Claude Nicolet, and Michel Christol have demonstrated that *incolae* had a legal capacity in provincial cities of the Roman Empire.<sup>31</sup> They could even participate in *comitia* (local elections), in a special *curia* (voting unit), as explained by the jurist Gaius; he also notes that they had to fulfill their municipal duties in both their city of origin and their city of residence: “An *incola* (resident) has to obey the magistrates where he is settled and those where he is a citizen; not only is he subject to the legislation of both cities [*municipium*], but he also must perform his public duty [in both places]” (*Incola et his magistratibus parere debet, apud*

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<sup>29</sup> The present translation is modified from N. Lewis and M. Reinhold, *Roman Civilization. Sourcebook II: The Empire* (New York, 1966), 62–64.

<sup>30</sup> Gradel, *Emperor Worship*, 240.

<sup>31</sup> Nicolet, “L’inscription de l’autel de Narbonne,” 721–32; Gayraud, *Narbonne*, 353; F. Jacques, *Les cités de l’Occident romain: Du I<sup>er</sup> siècle avant J.-C. au VI<sup>e</sup> siècle après J.-C.* (Paris, 1990), 81; A. Chastagnol, *Le Sénat romain à l’époque impériale: Recherches sur la composition de l’Assemblée et le statut de ses membres* (Paris, 1992), 68; followed by J.-M. Lasserre, *Manuel d’épigraphie romaine* (Paris, 2005), 351; M. Christol, *Une histoire provinciale: La Gaule narbonnaise de la fin du II<sup>e</sup> siècle av. J.-C. au III<sup>e</sup> siècle ap. J.-C.; Scripta Varia* (Paris, 2010), 375–90. According to Fishwick, *Imperial Cult*, 3.4:247–55, the inscription may be a reproduction of the Antonine era. N. Tran, “Coloni et incolae de Gaule méridionale: Une mise en perspective du cas valentinois,” *Mélanges de l’École française de Rome – Antiquité* 127, no. 2 (2015): 498n69, following M.-L. Bonsangue, “L’emporion de Narbonne: Économie et société (II<sup>e</sup> siècle av. J.-C.–I<sup>er</sup> siècle ap. J.-C.)” (PhD diss., Université de Paris 1 – Panthéon Sorbonne, 2006), reminds us of the common presence of *peregrini* possessing Roman citizenship in provincial cities.

quos incola est, et illis, apud quos civis est: nec tantum municipali iurisdictioni in utroque municipio subiectus est, verum etiam omnibus publicis muneribus fungi debet).<sup>32</sup>

Since the dedication from Narbo followed a vow made by the official body of the colony, which included the *incolae*, we should consider the organization of the imperial cult in Narbo to be official, not private. One might add that the previous misunderstanding of the inscription is due to an incorrect translation of “tres equites Romani a plebe.” This sentence does not mean that three Roman knights came from the local plebs (*ex plebe*), but that they had to be chosen by the plebs (*a plebe*), as Claude Nicolet showed more than thirty years ago.<sup>33</sup> This participation of local *incolae* just meant that everyone was involved in the cult. No one in the city was excluded, whatever his or her personal status. This system also allowed all those involved to share the expense of the organization of the cult. Furthermore, just because a ceremony or a temple was supported by private funds does not mean that it was not public or official. A big part of municipal life relied on euergetism.<sup>34</sup> What was expected from the citizens of Narbo was *munus*, an official duty that groups of citizens had to perform every year for the city at their own

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<sup>32</sup> Gaius, *Lib. 1, Provincial edict*, in *Digest* 50.1.29. Trans. (in French) Jacques, *Les cités*, 81 and no. 43b.

<sup>33</sup> Nicolet, "L'inscription de l'autel de Narbonne," 721–32, followed by Gayraud, *Narbonne antique*, 359.

<sup>34</sup> On euergetism, see P. Veyne, *Le pain et le cirque: Sociologie historique d'un pluralisme politique* (Paris, 1976); and A. Zuiderhoek, *The Politics of Munificence in the Roman Empire: Citizens, Elites and Benefactors in Asia Minor* (Cambridge, 2009). Koortbojian, *Divinization*, 169 and 180, explains that the private gift of a sanctuary dedicated to a public figure like the emperor or a god built in a public space does not make it a *locus sacer* (or even a *locus religiosus*). On this particular point, see J. Scheid, *La religion des Romains* (Paris, 1998), 57–59. There was a complete disconnection between the nature of a gift and the legal status of its destination; the latter could only be decided by the Roman state (represented by the senate, magistrates *cum imperio*, and ultimately the emperor, as stated in the third century AD by Ulpian, *Libro sexagensimo octavo ad edictum* 68, in *Digest* 1.8.9.1.

expense.<sup>35</sup> It is therefore difficult to deny that the cult of the *numen Augusti* in Narbo was an official one.

Let's now turn to another issue. Was the *numen augustum* transmitted from one emperor to another, or did each of them have his own? We have already partially answered this question by showing that the imperial *numen* was somewhat generic. A quick study of the ceremony that made the emperor a *divus* at his death may give us a few clues:

Now these rumours began to be current at a later date. At the time they declared Augustus immortal, assigned to him priests and sacred rites, and made Livia, who was already called Julia and Augusta, his priestess; they also permitted her to employ a lictor when she exercised her sacred office. On her part, she bestowed a million sesterces upon a certain Numerius Atticus, a senator and ex-praetor, because he swore that he had seen Augustus ascending to heaven after the manner of which tradition tells concerning Proculus and Romulus. A shrine voted by the senate and built by Livia and Tiberius was erected to the dead emperor in Rome, and others in many different places, some of the communities voluntarily building them and others unwillingly. Also the house at Nola where he passed away was dedicated to him as a precinct. While his shrine was being erected in Rome, they placed a golden image of him on a couch in the temple of Mars, and to this they paid all the honours that they were afterwards to give to his statue. Other votes in regard to him were, that his image should not be borne in procession at anybody's funeral, that the consuls should celebrate his birthday with games like the Ludi Martiales, and that the tribunes, as being sacrosanct, were to have charge of the Augustalia. These officials conducted everything in the customary manner—even wearing the triumphal garb at the horse-race—except that they did not ride in the chariot. Besides this, Livia held a private festival in his honour for three days in the palace, and this ceremony is still continued down to the present day by whoever is emperor. Such were the decrees passed in memory of Augustus, nominally by the senate, but actually by Tiberius and Livia. For when some men proposed one thing and some another, the senate decreed that Tiberius should receive suggestions in writing from its members and then select whichever he chose. I have added the name of Livia because she, too, took a share in the proceedings, as if she possessed full powers.<sup>36</sup>

An emperor could only be recognized as *divus* (divine) after the senate and his successor had agreed on the matter. There is here something typical about Roman religion in general. John

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<sup>35</sup> F. Jacques, *Le privilège de liberté: Politique impériale et autonomie municipale dans les cités de l'Occident romain (166–244)* (Rome, 1984), 687; C. Lepelley, *Les cités de l'Afrique romaine au Bas-Empire* (Paris, 1979), 1:246–47.

<sup>36</sup> Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 56.46–47, trans. E. Cary (Cambridge, MA, 1914–27), 7:104–7.

Scheid has always rightly insisted on what he calls its “contractual” nature: a new god or goddess had to be invited and welcomed by the senate before joining the pantheon of the city and receiving official worship.<sup>37</sup> The same rule applied to the deceased or ruling emperor. This also means that when an emperor was not recognized as *divus* after his death, he was not considered to have been endowed with *numen* during his lifetime and his legislation did not outlive its author. Conversely the legislation of a *divus* outlived its author. It was not ephemeral. It was not mortal. It had to have something divine about it. Its generic nature seems to suggest that it was transmitted from one emperor to another through their noble deeds. It only revealed its full nature, its immortality, at the death of its temporary recipient.

Immortality was not the only feature of the *numen Augusti* that made the emperor ἰσόθεος (godlike). First of all, for most inhabitants of the empire, the Augustus was invisible, just like the gods. For Cicero, the very image of the gods walking through the forum among citizens seemed ridiculous: “What, then, are we waiting for? Till the immortal gods converse with us when we’re in the Forum, in the street, or at home? Although they do not present themselves to us directly, they spread their influence far and wide” (Quid igitur expectamus? An dum in foro nobiscum di immortales, dum in viis versentur, dum domi? Qui quidem ipsi se nobis non offerunt, vim autem suam longe lateque diffundunt).<sup>38</sup> Roman gods remained unseen, though citizens could ask them questions or verify their presence through divination. As John Scheid and Jorge Rüpke showed, the city had to gather all its human and divine citizens, at least symbolically, before making any

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<sup>37</sup> For the senate's authority on religious matters, see Scheid, *La religion des Romains*, 110; M. Beard, J. North, and S. Price, *Religions of Rome: A History* (Cambridge, 1998), 1:29; F. Van Haepelen, *Le collège pontifical (3<sup>ème</sup> s. a. C.–4<sup>ème</sup> s. p. C.): Contribution à l'étude de la religion publique romaine* (Brussels, 2002), 238.

<sup>38</sup> Cicero, *On Divination* 1.79, trans. D. Wardle (Oxford, 2006), 71.



important decisions.<sup>39</sup> And to be sure that they were present, Roman magistrates, assisted by official seers, mainly augurs and haruspices, had to follow a very precise divinatory procedure. This procedure was not meant to look into the future, but to ensure that Jupiter or other gods were present before putting a proposal to a vote. Divine presence was so essential that some of the gods were even represented physically by a specific priest called a flamen.<sup>40</sup> The emperor, another divine absentee who played an essential political function in provincial cities as well as Rome, also had his flamen, a priest that would incarnate him. The fact that such priests were appointed all over the empire clearly shows the way local decurions conceived of the nature of the emperor. The emperor was barely seen in most places but his decisions affected everyone, every city, every community at the same time. The imperial numen remained invisible but its noble—or dreadful—deeds could be seen by all everywhere.

The emperor may not have been omnipresent like a god, but his decisions made him present in different parts of the empire at the same time. The imperial *vota*, the ceremonies paying tribute to the emperor on January 3, manifested his numen in plain sight throughout the Roman world, showing his divine omnipresence.<sup>41</sup> It was also a way for ordinary citizens to

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<sup>39</sup> J. Scheid, “La parole des dieux: L’originalité du dialogue des Romains avec leurs dieux,” *Opus* 6–8 (1987–89): 125–36; Scheid, *La religion des Romains*, 94; Cicero, *De la divination*, trans. G. Freyburger and J. Scheid (Paris, 1992), 7 and 97; J. Rüpke, “Die öffentliche Divination in Rom,” in *Thesaurus Cultus et Rituum Antiquorum (ThesCra)*, vol. 3 (Los Angeles, 2005), 83.

<sup>40</sup> On the function of the flamen, see Scheid, *Romulus*, 265–66; Dumézil, *Religion romaine*, 165 (on the *flamen Dialis*); Van Haepelen, *Collège pontifical*, 342; *contra* G. Wissowa, *Religion und Kultus der Römer* (Munich, 1912), 515–16, who considered the flamen a “sacrificer,” and T. Mommsen, *Le droit public romain* (Paris, 1893), 3:153–54, who understood him to be the manager of a temple designated by the *pontifex maximus*. On the creation of a *flamen Augusti* during Augustus's reign, see the inscription *IRT* 319 (July 1–December 9, 8 BC), and M. Christol, “La municipalisation de la Gaule Narbonnaise,” in *Cités, municipes, colonies: Les processus de municipalisation en Gaule et en Germanie sous le Haut Empire romaine*, ed. M. Dondin-Payre and M.-T. Raepsaet-Charlier (Paris, 1999), 14.

<sup>41</sup> See J. Scheid, “Les réjouissances des calendes de janvier d'après le *sermon* Dolbeau 26: Nouvelles lumières sur une fête mal connue,” in *Augustin prédicateur (395–411)*, ed. G. Madec

proclaim the special relationship they had not only with their ruler but also with each other, and to display the complex relationships that existed between citizens of the empire and also between different communities. As Simon Price put it, the imperial cult was “a major part of the web of power that formed the fabric of society.”<sup>42</sup>

Another point to consider is the presence of imperial statues in public space. The first thing to remember is that the emperors did not exercise a monopoly here: their statues were placed alongside those of other figures that Rome and the provincial cities had decided to honor. As Koortbojian has illuminated, the attempt to give characteristic features to the statues of the Augustans was doomed to failure, because their efforts to distinguish themselves from other recipients of statues in public spaces were ultimately copied by those of lower status.<sup>43</sup> Thus the semi-nude, hipmantled model of Caesar and Augustus was eventually adopted by senatorial and local dignitaries, whose rank and identity we often ignore, as suggested by two statues adorning the theater of Venafro.<sup>44</sup> According to Koortbojian, this statuary language of heroism was therefore not limited to the prince. The divine specificity of the emperor could not manage to materialize easily in stone.<sup>45</sup> Statues of the Augustus adopted his physical features, displayed some of his qualities, and celebrated his achievements here and now. The famous Augustus from the Villa of Livia at Prima Porta in Rome glorified the *imperator* whose breastplate recalled that in 20 BC he had managed to recover the Roman standard from the Parthian king Phraates IV,

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(Paris, 1998), 353–65, for the difference between the celebration of the calends and the imperial *vota* of the third of January.

<sup>42</sup> Price, *Rituals and Power*, 248.

<sup>43</sup> Koortbojian, *Divinization*, 226.

<sup>44</sup> Koortbojian, *Divinization*, 222 and figs. VIII.30–31. See the so-called General of Tivoli from the early first century BC (Tivoli, Palazzo Massimo alle Terme/Museo Nazionale Romano), which Koortbojian believes was intended for a private domus; *ibid.*, 197 and fig. VIII.6.

<sup>45</sup> Koortbojian, *Divinization*, 226.

thus avenging the affront suffered by Crassus at Carrhae thirty-three years earlier (53 BC).<sup>46</sup> Let's remember that the statue was erected in Rome while the emperor was absent, campaigning in the eastern part of the empire, and therefore not visible. It should be remembered also that this was a point in his reign when the honor of triumph was becoming an imperial privilege. In 19 BC, the African proconsul L. Cornelius Balbus was the last to receive such an honor for his victories over the Garamantes in Africa. Augustus decided that any further Roman victories would be achieved under the superior auspices of the *imperium proconsulare maius et infinitum* granted to him by the senate in 23 BC.<sup>47</sup> Koortbojian has rightly pointed out that the recurrence of augural themes on statues of Augustus signaled his own membership in the priesthood, like Romulus in the program of refounding the Roman state.<sup>48</sup> As Paul Zanker put it, in his statues and all his representations, Augustus "offered himself as the most impressive paradigm of piety."<sup>49</sup> His statues thus referred to his earthly action, described at length in his *res gestae* inscribed on the Ara Pacis.<sup>50</sup> The fact that they remained in public spaces after the emperor's death takes on a special meaning when one sees their association with the statues of his successors, for here it is all a matter of context.<sup>51</sup> It was in their respective placement at particular sites, notably those sites devoted to the imperial cult, that the statues revealed their full significance and power. The mutual proximity of these statues produces an invisible link between those endowed with imperial numen. Clifford Ando has recently addressed the complex

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<sup>46</sup> P. Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*, trans. A. Shapiro (Ann Arbor, MI, 1988), 188–92.

<sup>47</sup> *Acta Triumphorum*, in *CIL* I<sup>2</sup>, p. 50; Velleius Paterculus, *Historiarum Libri Duo* 2.51.3 (who seems to confuse L. Cornelius Balbus *senior* and *iunior*); Strabo, *Geography* 3.169; Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 5.36. See R. Syme, *The Roman Revolution* (Oxford, 1939), 339 and 367.

<sup>48</sup> Koortbojian, *Divinization*, 53–77. See for example the famous altar of the Vicus Sandaliarius from Rome, now at the Uffizi in Florence: Koortbojian, *Divinization*, 74 and fig. III.21.

<sup>49</sup> Zanker, *Power of Images*, 126.

<sup>50</sup> See *Res gestae divi Augusti: Hauts faits du divin Auguste*, ed. and trans. J. Scheid (Paris, 2007).

<sup>51</sup> An interesting point made by Koortbojian, *Divinization*, 179.

issue of the visibility of the Roman gods in the city in sanctuaries and in certain ceremonies, particularly the ritual banquets known as *sellisternia* and *lectisternia*.<sup>52</sup> The gods were invited to take part in these rituals through the intermediary of empty seats (*sellae*) or the symbolic *capita deorum* (literally “heads of gods”) made of grass or wicker and installed on couches (*lecti*); Ando concludes that these ceremonies revealed the “aniconic” nature of these cult objects.<sup>53</sup> The presence of the divinities they referred to was revealed by their very absence. We might likewise say that the materiality of divine statues, their visibility even, manifested the invisibility of their referent. To return to the argument at hand, imperial statues justified the divinity of the emperor by their proliferation and their maintenance in public space by his successors, more than their inherent visibility. In fact, their meaning and their power depended on the absence of their referent. Paradoxically, they summoned the invisibility of the emperor’s divine source of power—his numen.

To summarize, ruling emperors and deceased emperors who were recognized as *divi* by the senate were all endowed with numen. Their “performative force” was divine: its source usually could not be seen; it was omnipresent at least in the Roman empire and outlived its legal representative through his *acta*. This numen was distinct from the emperor’s genius, which could also be worshipped, but generally during his lifetime. There was no distinction between the cult of the deceased emperor and the cult of the ruling emperor. One should likewise not deny the very existence of a cult of the living emperor or consider imperial worship to be a mere tribute to

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<sup>52</sup> C. Ando, “*Praesentia numinis* Part 1: The Visibility of Roman Gods,” *Asdiwal* 5 (2010): 45–73; “*Praesentia numinis* Part 2: Objects in Roman Cult,” *Asdiwal* 6 (2011): 57–69; “*Praesentia numinis* Part 3: Idols in Context (of Use),” *Asdiwal* 10 (2015): 61–76. On these ritual banquets see also Scheid, *La religion des Romains*, 92–93.

<sup>53</sup> Ando, “Objects in Roman Cult,” 63–64, 69.

a political figure without any religious meaning. It was in fact logical to consider the emperor as a god for the inhabitants of the Roman empire.