

**The evolution of Imperial and post-Imperial monarchy in a
religious context during the transition from a pre-Christian to a
Christian Roman Empire and after**

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Summary

This dissertation traces the evolution of the religious context of monarchy in a Roman and post-Roman context. Beginning with the formation of the Imperial cult and progressing on to certain other aspects of the relationship between emperors and the divine it seeks to show how the religious aspect of monarchy evolved during the rise of Christianity, as well as the role the Church played in the formation of a Christian definition of monarchy. It then goes on to show how this definition was applied to the Germanic kings who ruled over the early post-Roman successor states in the West.

Although emperors were largely defined by the political and military powers they held, there was also the religious aspect of their role which helped give them authority in the religious sphere of public life. Furthermore, the creation of the Imperial cult venerated deceased and divinised emperors as well as the *genius* of the one in office at the time, so the emperors of Rome enjoyed a very high religious status, with sacrifices and temples being dedicated to the various *divi*.

As Christianity rose to prominence it challenged the established place of the emperor in the religious life of the Empire, and eventually supplanted the pagan ideal of an emperor with its own Christian notion of a god-appointed ruler. This idea became embedded in Christian Roman religious thought, although significant vestiges also remained of the pagan past.

The migration of Germanic tribes into the Roman Empire and their growing influence on it meant that Germanic kings and other notables rose to prominence. Many were converted to Christianity along with many of their followers, and the Church applied its Christian definition of monarchy to these kings as it had done

previously to the emperors, especially when Germanic kingdoms emerged in the 5th century on former Roman territory. This, along with the continued use or adoption of other Roman practices resulted in a certain degree of continuity between the Roman Empire and the Germanic kingdoms.

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Introduction

The purpose of this work is to study the definition of the role of the Roman emperors in a religious context in and the influences that this exercised on religious practice both in a pre-Christian and Christian context. By focusing on the Imperial cult in the earlier part of the study before shifting to the place of the emperor in Christian thought in later chapters the intention is to trace the development of the concept of the divinely-anointed ruler that would define many medieval European monarchies. One of the most prominent monarchies to emerge in the wake of the collapse of the Roman Empire in the West, and certainly one of the most long-lived, would be that of the Franks, and it is to here that the study will look to trace the evolution of the religious context of an early medieval Christian monarchy with comparative references made to other post-Roman kingdoms.

It is during this period that we start to see a clearer divergence between religious and secular matters which in the pre-Christian empire was harder to trace. Up until the advent of Christianity religious matters were largely dealt with by people who also held secular positions. The emperor, for example, was also *Pontifex Maximus* or Chief Priest, and many senior politicians also held priestly office. Under the Christian empire religion became more the preserve of full-time professional priests and bishops. Although not a true separation of powers as we come to recognise it in the modern era, this increasing professionalization of religion does result in the first clear separation of certain key functions previously concentrated in the role of a monarch. With the survival of the Church into the era of post-Roman successor kingdoms this separation of functions became embedded in the constitutional makeup of many Western European countries.

The following work begins by focussing in the first chapter on the evolution of the definition of the place of Emperor in a religious context and also on the emergence of the Imperial cult, which was one of the primary means by which the place of the emperor in relation to the gods was defined. All societies were highly religious at this time, and the Roman Empire was no exception. As a result of his role as *Pontifex Maximus* of the Empire, an office Augustus first took up in 12 BC on the death of Lepidus, the Emperor of Rome had an important role in the conduct of religious policy of the Empire. He was also an important presence in ceremonies prior to and during important military campaigns and other noteworthy state occasions, as depicted on the *Ara Pacis* in the case of Augustus or on Trajan's Column in the case of Trajan, where the latter is depicted presiding over a sacrifice prior to the Roman invasion of Dacia. When it came to recognising the religious status of past and present emperors the main focus of the vast majority of population, or at least that section of the population that mattered, would have been on the Imperial cult. Starting out as an eastern ruler cult that came to be applied to prominent Romans who campaigned in and then governed the Hellenistic kingdoms of the Eastern Mediterranean, the cultic practice of worshiping rulers as gods soon spread to Rome, starting with the divinising of Julius Caesar by Augustus¹. By the late first and early second century, the Imperial cult had become sufficiently established to be a useful means of testing the loyalty of Imperial subjects suspected of being Christians, as borne out in Pliny the Younger's letters to the Emperor Trajan. Whether sacrificing to a divinised emperor or to the *genius* of the living one, it was clear by this point that the Emperor was above every other citizen or subject, and this was to remain the incontestable case throughout the history of the empire.

¹ Suetonius, 1913edn, *Lives of the Caesars*, trans. J.C. Rolfe, *Divus Iulius* p143

Even while the emperors were playing their part in the religious transformations of the 3rd and 4th centuries, the religious definition of the role of emperor did not change that much. The transition from a pagan to a Christian empire did not undermine the position of emperor since the Church, unable and unwilling to contest the existence of the emperor, had developed a definition of the place of the emperor in a Christian context partly in response to the Imperial cult. When the Empire became Christian, this definition, which was only a slight alteration of the pagan one, became established, and so the emperor retained his senior position in religious life. However, his power did not remain entirely undiminished. As a result of the separation of the religious function from the secular ones, the emperor now had to contend with an autonomous church that was able to periodically challenge him. The stand-off between Archbishop Ambrose of Milan and Theodosius was a symptom of this. The emperor had depended on the goodwill of other institutions such as the army for some time so this development was not unique, but it was rather more formal and could not be undone by later medieval rulers.

The Church outlived the Western Empire, and when the latter finally disappeared in the later 5th century the Germanic kingdoms which succeeded it ended up adopting similar Christian religious principles in relation to their kings that the Roman Empire did in relation to its emperors. This was down to the teaching of the Church which was able to wield a considerable influence over a significantly less Romanised and less technically sophisticated ruling class than it was accustomed to dealing with under the Roman Empire.

The following work will be divided up thus: Chapter 1 will cover the origins of the Imperial cult and the position of the emperor in pagan practice. Chapter 2 will show how the events of the 3rd century and the transition from a pagan to a Christian

context helped alter and re-define the religious definition of rulership and the consequent effect on the Imperial cult. Chapter 3 will examine the legal and theological basis of the emperor's position in religion and trace the origin of the Church teaching that will define the Church's attitude to monarchy. Finally, Chapter 4 will look at how this came to be applied to the post-Roman kingdoms, with reference to those of the Franks and the Goths.

Chapter 1

The formation and evolution of the Imperial cult in the pre-Christian Empire

The relationship between Roman rulers and the divine can be traced back to the very origins of Rome itself. As an illustration of just how important this relationship was, the kings of Rome were crowned subject to, among other procedures, religious ritual. An example of one of these rites is outlined in Livy in his description of the crowning of Numa (who was a Sabine) as king of Rome:

“He [Numa] was summoned to the city, and there expressed the wish that the gods should be consulted on his behalf, as in the case of Romulus who at the founding of Rome had assumed power only after the omens had been duly observed. An augur...escorted Numa to the citadel, where he took his seat on a stone with his face to the south; the augur with veiled head sat on his left, holding in his right hand the smooth crook-handled staff called the *lituus*. Gazing out over the city and the country beyond, he uttered a prayer, and marking with a glance the space of sky from east to west and declaring the southward section to be ‘right’ and the northward section ‘left’ he took an imaginary point full in front of him and as far away as his eyes could reach, transferred the staff to his left hand, placed his right upon Numa’s head and spoke these solemn words: “Father Jupiter, if it is Heaven’s will that this man, Numa Pompilius, whose head I touch, should reign in the city of Rome, make clear to us sure signs within those limits I have determined”. Then he named precisely the nature of the sign he hoped would be sent.

Sent they were; and Numa, duly proclaimed king, went down from the hill where the auspices were taken”¹

The reliability of this account is open to question, since it deals with events far removed from Livy’s time and little beyond Numa’s name is known for certain². However, despite his Sabine origin he appears to have an Etruscan name, and the liturgy outlined in the above passage seems to be Etruscan in origin³. In any case, the fact that Numa was a Sabine may have made the need for favourable auspices even more necessary. However, the above quote makes it clear that the need for favourable auspices was also supposed to have applied to Romulus, the previous ruler and founder of the city, and so they could hardly be overlooked in the case of Numa. Furthermore, two of Rome’s kings were non-Roman (Numa and Tarquinius Priscus), and all were in any case from outside the patrician class⁴, so there was nothing really exceptional about Numa’s appointment that would have necessitated a religious ceremony that was unique to him. Evidently, the precedent for a non-hereditary monarch appointed by constitutional means and yet requiring divine favour was well-established in Roman political life at that time.

If nothing else this demonstrates the importance of religion in the political sphere of Roman life. In this respect Rome was not by any means unique, but as it was Rome that went on to dominate first the Italian peninsula and later on the entire Mediterranean world it was Rome’s own particular brand of religious politics that would come to the fore. It is during that time that the principles outlined above were used in the formation of the Imperial cult, which can trace its origins to the reign of

¹ Livy, 1960edn, *History of Rome*, trans Aubrey de Selincourt, London, 1.18

² R.M Ogilvie, 1965, *A Commentary on Livy – Book 1–5*, Oxford, p88

³ Ibid, p92

⁴ T.J. Cornell, 1995, *The Beginnings of Rome: Italy and Rome from the Bronze Age to the Punic Wars*, London, p142

Augustus. By this point, the need had arisen whereby Augustus, although effectively barred by tradition from calling himself a king, had acquired the rather monarchic need to demonstrate that he enjoyed the divine favour of the gods. Moreover, he had to see to it that the cult of his divinised adoptive father, Julius Caesar, was suitably promoted in order to enhance the importance of the position he now held, which is why he built and dedicated a temple to that specific purpose⁵. The Imperial cult is unique amongst all Roman pagan cults in that it was the only one where the objects of devotion were men who were transformed into gods by official decree of the Senate. This process was aided, and possibly even conceivable, due to the development of the notion of a surviving individual soul. This had introduced the concept of personal immortality into Roman thought, and the worship of non-divine souls at an individual and family level was becoming quite common at this time⁶. However, in contrast to conventional ancestor worship the Imperial cult represented the creation and veneration of actual gods attributed with divine power. The Imperial cult was also unusual in that unlike other pagan cults it was created to directly facilitate and magnify the loyalty of the citizenry to the Roman emperor and by extension to the Roman state. While other cults and practices could, and did, exercise a politically Romanising influence in a cultural sense, none actively promoted the person of the emperor as the sole object of devotion. Some emperors (such as Domitian⁷) even went so far as to have themselves declared gods in their own lifetimes, but most emperors, starting with Augustus, settled for their *genius* being the object of religious devotion instead.

The upheavals of the 1st century BC resulted, ultimately, in the passing of the old Roman Republic and the emergence of the position of emperor. However, since

⁵ *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*, 1973edn, ed P.A. Brunt and J.M. Moore, Oxford, p37

⁶ Allen Brent, 1999, *The Imperial Cult and the Development of Church Order*, Leiden, p63

⁷ Suetonius, 1979edn, *The Twelve Caesars*, trans. Robert Graves, London, *Domitian*, 13

the majority of the inhabitants of the Roman Empire were not even full Roman citizens, except those whose family were from Italy and had been full Roman citizens since the end of the Social War in 89 BC⁸, this constitutional change probably made little practical difference to their lives. However, with the accession of Augustus, the reorganisation of offices at the top of the Roman political tree started to have some visible effects. When he was proclaimed *Pontifex Maximus*, Augustus was able to operate in and reform Rome's religious life in a direction that suited him. Besides claiming to have restored 82 'sacred buildings' by around 2 BC⁹, he was able to associate himself more closely with the religious rites deemed necessary to the wellbeing of the Roman state. Furthermore, as a man of enormous political power, and no doubt considerable standing within Rome itself, Augustus was able to get away with things that were to set precedents for the future. On the 9th October 28 BC, Augustus, or Octavian as he then was, dedicated a temple to Apollo in Rome next to his house. In the library adjoining the temple there was a statue of Octavian dressed as Apollo¹⁰. This especially close association with one of Rome's principal deities was to mark the beginning of a long and close relationship between the emperor and the gods. In 12 BC, when he became *Pontifex Maximus*, Augustus gave the official residence that came with that office, the *Domus Publica*, to the Vestal Virgins and turned part of his own house into public area in order to carry out the functions of the *Pontifex Maximus* there instead¹¹. Another example of Augustus's religious role can be found on the *Ara Pacis*, dedicated in 9 BC, where Augustus and Agrippa are portrayed as veiled *sacerdotes* presiding over the sacrifice

⁸ Appian, 1996edn, *The Civil Wars*, trans. John Carter, London, I:53

⁹ *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*, 1973edn, ed P.A. Brunt and JM Moore, Oxford, p37

¹⁰ Allen Brent, 1999, *The Imperial Cult and the Development of Church Order*, Leiden, p59

¹¹ W.K. Lacey, 1996, *Augustus and the Principate: The Evolution of the System*, Leeds, p183

as part of the *augurium pacis* that provided the *pax deorum*¹². It is evident from this that Augustus was taking the role of emperor into a highly religious sphere, and naturally enough the emperor was to be the most prominent element in that sphere save for the gods themselves, that is until he died, when he joined their ranks.

The actual process of Augustus's eventual apotheosis began long before he died when, in 29 BC, the senate decreed that a libation was to be poured to the *genius* of Octavian at every banquet, either public or private. At the same time it was decreed that sacrifices were to be made to Augustus's *genius*¹³. Cassius Dio recorded that:

“The priests and priestesses also in their prayers in behalf of the people and the senate were to pray for him likewise, and at all banquets, not only public but private as well, everybody was to pour a libation to him.”¹⁴

An addition was made later on in that same year:

“...when a letter came regarding the Parthians, they further arranged that his name should be included in their hymns equally with those of the gods...”¹⁵

This was obviously not an instance of transient flattery, for in the latter part of Augustus's reign, in or immediately prior to the year 8 AD, the poet Ovid wrote in his *Fasti*:

¹² Allen Brent, 1999, *The Imperial Cult and the Development of Church Order*, Leiden, p59

¹³ W.K. Lacey, 1996, *Augustus and the Principate: The Evolution of the System*, Leeds, p182

¹⁴ Dio, 1968edn, *Roman History*, trans. Earnest Cary, London, VI 51.19.7

¹⁵ *Ibid*, VI 51.20.1

“And now, when dank night invites...slumber...fill high the wine-cup for the prayer and say “Hail to you! Hail to thee, Father of thy Country, Caesar the Good!” [*patriae pater, optime Caesar!*] and at these sacred words pour out the wine.”¹⁶

Although Ovid was close to the court of Augustus (at least until he was banished in AD 8, leaving his *Fasti* unfinished) this passage seems to imply that these decrees were followed more widely than just in Augustus’s presence, and so the nascent cult of Augustus began to make itself felt in both public and private life. Then, in 12 BC when he became *Pontifex Maximus*, the emperor’s *genius* became part of the official oath of the state¹⁷. By this point, Augustus was also able to take advantage of another part of Roman religious thought to further cement his growing cult. Whereas previously there had only been a vague ‘shades of the dead’ notion of an afterlife inhabited by *manes* bereft of a clear identity¹⁸, and certainly not souls of the dead in a later Christian sense, there now emerged the idea of something of the *animus* of the deceased surviving into the afterlife in an identifiable form that allowed Augustus to further harmonise the cult of ruler worship with Roman religious practice. This would be of obvious benefit to future emperors, though probably less so to himself while he was still alive¹⁹, as it meant there was something more substantial than a mere shadow that survived to be recognised and deified.

The deification of objects or concepts had long existed in the Roman tradition. There were, amongst others, the cult of the *genius publicus* and the cult of

¹⁶ Ovid, 1967edn, *Fasti*, trans. Sir James George Frazer, London, II. 635

¹⁷ W.K. Lacey, 1996, *Augustus and the Principate: The Evolution of the System*, Leeds, p184

¹⁸ Franz Cumont, 1922, *After Life in Roman Paganism*, New Haven, p4

¹⁹ Pat Southern, 1998, *Augustus*, London, p195

the goddess *Roma*²⁰. The idea of taking a collective and giving it a personal identity had allowed the precedent whereby an object of devotion could be created by the hand of man, and that ‘true’ gods did not have a monopoly on religious devotion. At this point there emerges the combination of precedents that were necessary for the Imperial cult to exist. These were the belief that the soul of the deceased continued to live on after their body had died, the ability to create a new divinity, and the ability to define what that divinity is a patron of (e.g. the city and/or the state of Rome as in the case of *Roma*). In simple terms, this permitted one to elevate to the status of a god the surviving individual soul of a lately deceased emperor.

The Imperial cult was, then, a means by which loyalty to the Roman political, religious and cultural state could be encouraged, at least amongst those classes of people who stood some chance of advancing themselves in the Roman system. It must, therefore, be emphasised from the outset that the Imperial cult was not simply an outburst of intense vanity on the part of the emperor, even though vanity was no doubt an encouragement to some later emperors. It was also a mechanism for providing loyal and rich subjects with an opportunity to earn the benefits of acceptance into Roman public life by embracing and promoting the imperial political and religious order. It has also been asserted that the cult was the result of a constitutional and religious reformation during the Augustan revolution²¹, and this view is one that makes a great deal of sense. After all, there was no true Imperial cult prior to the reign of Augustus, although certain prominent Romans such as Pompey and Caesar were harbouring the symptoms of a trend towards excessive

²⁰ Allen Brent, 1999, *The Imperial Cult and the Development of Church Order*, Leiden, p64

²¹ *Ibid*, p19

adulation of a successful leader, even while still alive, and Caesar was posthumously deified by senatorial decree before his funeral was over²².

One particular institution that became fertile ground for the cult, even if more for reasons of corporate cohesion and order than simply for religious reasons was the Roman army. Amongst its many symbols and standards were images of the emperors, usually but not exclusively found on *phalerae* attached to the shaft of a legion's standard²³. The standards of an army were held in high regard, and were entrusted to the care of a specific individual, such as an *aquilifer* or a *signifier*, and were kept in a shrine when not taken out on campaign. They, and the images of the emperor they bore, would have been prominently displayed on the festival days of divinised emperors, which were celebrated by the army across the Empire.

The Roman army fulfilled another function in this respect in that the veterans who retired from the service and were settled in *colonia* took their military-style religion with them, and in the earlier part of the Principate, cults to the emperor figured prominently in these settlements. A good example of this is the colony at Camulodunum (modern Colchester), which was founded on the site of a pre-existing native settlement in the wake of the Roman invasion of Britain in the mid 1st century CE, and where a large temple dedicated to the divine Claudius was constructed. A modest remnant of this temple survives under the present-day Colchester Castle which was built upon its podium, and consists of four vaulted chambers which would have supported a substantial structure of roughly 35 meters by 20 meters in area²⁴. Tacitus states (*Annals*, 12.32) that the settlement of ex-soldiers in the veteran's colony of Camulodunum existed "to protect the country against revolt and

²² Suetonius, 1979, *The Twelve Caesars*, trans. Robert Graves, London, *Caesar*, 84

²³ Michel Feugere, 2002, *Weapons of the Romans*, trans. David G. Smith, Stroud, p48

²⁴ Philip Crummy, 1997, *City of Victory: The story of Colchester – Britain's first Roman town*, Colchester, p59

familiarize the provincials with law-abiding government”²⁵. This has also been read to mean indoctrinating native aristocracy into the ways of Roman law, morality and religion²⁶, and by extension this may well have included the active promotion of the Imperial cult. The fact that the settlement was sacked and the temple of Claudius destroyed in the Boudiccan revolt in AD 62, about a generation after it was established, goes some way to indicating its limited initial success in this respect. However, once the revolt was crushed, the settlement, including the temple, was rebuilt and both settlement and cult enjoyed a fairly stable existence²⁷, for many years after, although the economic focus of the province eventually shifted to *Londinium* (London). This is important as it indicates that with a little persistence even the most unromanised Britons would eventually be subdued into accepting the idea of Roman rule and crucially Roman culture, including religious culture. The emergence of a Romanised elite over the following decades being borne out by inscriptions such as the one found in the forum of *Calleva Atrebatum* (Silchester) dedicated to Hercules and set up by one Titus Tamonius²⁸, Tamonius being a British name. It may be that there was a coercive element in this process, and the destruction of the cult centre at Camulodunum is evidence of a certain amount of resentment that easily boiled over into active hostility, but this was more to do with the fact and the manner of Roman control, and the existence of a temple to the divinised Claudius could only have been one part of this. For those inclined to see a more positive side to Roman rule the same temple could just as easily have provided a useful opportunity of demonstrating an overt display of loyalty to the Roman state. The presence of an altar in its

²⁵ Tacitus, 1996edn, *Annals of Imperial Rome*, Trans. Michael Grant, London, 12.32

²⁶ Georgia L. Irby-Massie, 1999, *Military Religion in Roman Britain*, Leiden, p22.

²⁷ M.J.T. Lewis, 1966, *Temples in Roman Britain*, Cambridge, p63

²⁸ Valerie A. Maxfield, and Brian Dobson (eds), 1995, *Inscriptiones of Roman Britain*, London, Inscription number 206, p114

customary place outside on the steps of the temple of Claudius in Camulodunum²⁹ would have provided just the sort of place for such an overt display of loyalty. It is notable that in another part of the empire that was not easily pacified similar temples also existed. For example, in Celtiberian northeast Spain the town Augusta Bilbilis had a temple to the Imperial cult. The town itself existed prior to the Roman occupation and stood on a rocky outcrop above the Jalón River. The temple itself was built on an acropolis-type structure and was completed by AD 28³⁰. It was built at the southern end of an enclosed forum-like platform of 48.64 meters long by 44.88 meters wide, and was itself about 15 meters wide by 30 meters long³¹. Although relatively small compared to the Camulodunum temple, and the actual emperor to whom it was dedicated being unrecorded, its function would have been broadly similar. Its prominent position in a town that, although native in origin, was to all intents and purposes a Roman settlement in a recently conquered territory suggests a similar pattern of Romanisation with the same opportunities, expectations and obligations that would have occurred in south eastern Britain.

By the early 2nd century, the Imperial cult had emerged as both a coherent religious cult and the standard means by which the loyalty of citizens to the emperor was tested. A good example of this can be found in the correspondence between Pliny the Younger and the emperor Trajan which were written when Pliny was the governor of Bithynia and Pontus, an area that roughly corresponded to modern north-western Turkey. He was there for about three years, probably from AD 109 to 111³² and may have died there. Pliny may have been more familiar than most with the

²⁹ Philip Crummy, 1997, *City of Victory: The story of Colchester – Britain's first Roman town*, Colchester, p60

³⁰ William E. Mierse, 1999, *Temples and Towns in Roman Iberia*, Los Angeles, p152

³¹ Ibid, p154

³² A.N. Sherwin-White, 1966, *The Letters of Pliny: A Historical and Social Commentary*, Oxford, p81

Imperial cult, as there survives an inscription, which was found in Fecchio (*Vercellae*), not far from Como (*Comum*) whence Pliny originated, attesting to his being a priest of the cult of the divinised Titus. It states:

“To Gaius Plinius Caecilius Secundus, son of Lucius of the tribe of Oufentina, consul: augur: curator of the bed and banks of the Tiber...[etc]...priest [*flamen*] of the deified Emperor Titus: dedicated by the citizens of Vercellae.”³³

On the basis the offices named on the inscription are listed in the order they would have been held according to the *cursus honorum* it is likely that it was earlier in his career that he became a priest as it is the last office mentioned, and is by no means the most important. Although it is not clear from the inscription where he held this office, it is highly likely that it was in his native Comum³⁴. By the same token, as Pliny was made consul in around 100 AD the inscription must date from after that time. Thus a man of his position would have been at the very least a close witness to the activities associated with the Imperial cult throughout his career, and the contents of the below letters suggest that Pliny’s experience as a priest of the Imperial cult was a useful attribute when performing the duties of provincial governor.

It is within this correspondence between Pliny and Trajan during Pliny’s time in Bithynia that we see one of the earlier examples of the clash between the Roman state and the early Christians, and in this instance the Imperial cult was to provide the ground on which the contest was fought. It was during the course of interrogating some suspected Christians that the role of the Imperial cult and the religious order of

³³ Pliny the Younger, 1969edn, *Letters and Panegyricus*, Trans. Betty Radice, Harvard University Press, p552

³⁴ *Ibid*, p553

devotion that the emperor enjoyed came to the fore. As Pliny wrote in a letter to Trajan in September 110 AD³⁵:

“...I considered that I should dismiss [i.e. acquit] any who denied that they were or ever had been Christians when they repeated after me a formula of invocation to the gods and had made offerings of wine and incense to your [Trajan’s] statue (which I had ordered to be brought into court for this purpose along with images of the gods)...Others, whose names were given to me by an informer...all did reverence to your statue and images of the gods in the same way as the others, and reviled the name of Christ.”³⁶

Here we see the Imperial cult in action as a means of testing the loyalty of those whose religious convictions were suspect and possibly in conflict with the governance of the province. Whether a similar sort of test was ever employed at the temple at Camulodunum or elsewhere in Roman Britain will never be known, but even at this stage it is clear that the Imperial cult fulfilled more than a merely honorary function.

In a subsequent letter to Trajan, dated to 3rd January 111³⁷ while he was still in Bithynia, Pliny writes about the annual Imperial cult festival that was celebrated as a display of devotion to Trajan:

“We have discharged the vows, Sir, renewed last year, amidst general enthusiasm and rejoicing; and have made those for the coming year, the

³⁵ A.N. Sherwin-White, 1966, *The Letters of Pliny: A Historical and Social Commentary*, Oxford, p691

³⁶ Pliny the Younger, 1963edn, *Letters*, trans. Betty Radice, London, 10:96

³⁷ A.N. Sherwin-White, 1966, *The Letters of Pliny: A Historical and Social Commentary*, Oxford, p713

soldiers and provincials vying with one another in loyal demonstrations. We have prayed the gods to preserve you and the State in prosperity and safety, and to show you the favour you deserve for your many great virtues, and above all for your sanctity, reverence and [unblemished honouring of the gods] [*praecipua sanctitate obsequio deorum honore meruisti*]³⁸].”³⁹

To which Trajan replied:

“I was glad to hear from your letter, my dear Pliny, that the soldiers and provincials, amidst general rejoicing, have discharged under your direction their vows to the immortal gods for my safety, and have renewed them for the coming year.”⁴⁰

The evidence from these few passages tells us a number of things. Firstly, it was to the Imperial cult that Pliny turned when examining Christians and the uniquely important nature of the cult is demonstrated by its distinction from those of the other gods. None of the other gods whose statues were used are named. It is unlikely that their number would have amounted to many (demanding sacrifice to only a few gods would have been enough to test a Christian, and it is likely that whatever images were nearest to hand would have been used), so we may assume that Pliny was seeking to assure Trajan that his images played a particular role in the process, and that an opportunity to demand a display of loyalty to him was not missed. In this instance the Imperial cult fulfilled a dual function, namely advancing the cause of a particular god or gods as well as providing the means to test people’s loyalty to the

³⁸ Pliny the Younger, 1963edn, *Letters*, trans. Betty Radice, London, 10:100,

³⁹ *Ibid*, 10:100,

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 10:101

state in general and the emperor in particular. There was no link between the cult and Christianity at this time, so to say that Pliny's purpose was to try and compel people to accept the cult in place of their own Christian beliefs would probably not be accurate. Rather, the cult was simply a way of testing any religious dissent that may cause social or political difficulties. There were, after all, gods in the Roman polytheistic world that out ranked divinised emperors yet could enjoy religious devotion without undermining the cult.

Although Pliny appeared to be on particularly good terms with Trajan, the festivals mentioned in the second letter were evidently not a specific attempt by Pliny to gain favour with Trajan, but recorded the proper and punctual undertaking sort of religious festivals that would occur at the same time throughout the Empire.

Furthermore, Trajan's reply is somewhat brief and formal, and comes across as something of a standard response to being told that the usual vows had been renewed. What the letters also confirm is that there was a lot more to cultic activity than a few lines incorporated into a prayer, and that it was accompanied by sacrifices and other material manifestations such as *ludi*, as alluded to by the reference to 'enthusiasm and rejoicing'. Aside from the useful, if brief, insight into the carrot-and-stick approach to governing their Empire that the Romans adopted (first we have the Imperial cult being used as an instrument of interrogation, then as a cause for popular celebration), the terminology of Pliny's letter is also interesting. He refers to Trajan's 'sanctity' (*sanctitate*) which hints at more than simple political loyalty and implies a form of holiness.

Pliny, however, did not only write letters to Trajan, but also wrote a panegyric that puts a slightly different spin on the emperor's place. The work was probably written as a token of gratitude on the occasion when Trajan appointed Pliny

as consul in AD 100. The particular spin that this work puts on Trajan's relationship to the divine is plain to see, telling us that:

“For what gift of the gods could be greater and more glorious than a *princeps* whose purity and virtue make him their own equal?”⁴¹

“...it would be evident that our emperor at least was divinely chosen for this task...”⁴²

However, in order to clarify the point that while Trajan may have been equal to a god, he was not actually a god, Pliny states:

“Nowhere should we flatter him as a divinity [*deo*]...we are talking of a fellow citizen, not a tyrant...”⁴³

Pliny continues to elevate Trajan to a quasi-divine status, however, by stating later on the work:

“...but when I tried to picture to myself a ruler worthy of power equalling that of the immortal gods, even in my fondest hopes I never conceived the like of him whom we see before us today.”⁴⁴

⁴¹Pliny the Younger, Panegyricus, 1:4

⁴²Ibid, 1:5

⁴³Ibid, 2:3

⁴⁴Ibid, 4:4

Evidently to presume to be a god was a form of tyranny, and here Pliny may well be referring to the reign of Domitian (AD 81 to 96), who was known to regard himself as '*Dominus et Deus*' ('Lord and God'). Such was his unpopularity that after he was killed Suetonius says the Senate, in an act of *damnatio memoriae* ordered all inscriptions referring to him be effaced and all records of his reign destroyed⁴⁵. Clearly, to suggest that one was actually a god was not something a sensible emperor really ought to do, and Pliny is contrasting Domitian's behaviour with that of Trajan, although the nature of panegyric work does not make this an easy task. Nevertheless, an attempt is made to make Trajan the equal of a god without actually being a god.

However, the highly public nature of this work and the fact that even in flattery Pliny was obliged to conform to a highly ritualised form of literary genre seem to indicate that attributing a near-divine status to the emperor was a generally acceptable sentiment. At the very least Trajan is closely associated with the gods even if he was not counted among their number. Furthermore, Pliny's career certainly did not seem to suffer because of the verse he offered, nor did Trajan's for accepting it. In his panegyric Pliny goes on to say:

“For the same reason, the Father of gods and men [Jupiter] is worshipped under the title *Optimus* followed by *Maximus*, Best and Highest, and the more honour is due to you, who are in the eyes of all equally Highest and Best.”⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Suetonius, 1979edn, *The Twelve Caesars*, trans. Robert Graves, London, p 318

⁴⁶ Pliny the Younger, *Panegyricus*, 88:8

It may seem at first glance as though Pliny was giving to Trajan what Domitian demanded but was begrudged. It is also possible that by this point to accept an emperor, living or otherwise, as quasi-divine had become the norm, following over a century of precedent-setting by Trajan's predecessors. In any case, it would seem Trajan's future promotion to god was not in doubt:

“It is true that the divine Titus in the nobility of his spirit had taken measures for our security and need for vengeance, and because of this was placed among the gods; but how much more will you one day deserve your seat in heaven, for all your additions to those measures for which we recognise his godhead!”⁴⁷

The reference to Titus may be linked in some way to Pliny's role as *flamen divi Titi* (priest of the cult of the divinised Titus). This, combined with the careful adherence to the flattery and political conventions of panegyric work meant that Pliny would assert that as Titus deserved his apotheosis, Trajan, being a self-evidently better emperor, would therefore certainly be far more deserving of his.

Works such as Pliny's panegyric, the contents of his letters and the references to matters or objects relating to the cult in various other works help demonstrate that the Imperial cult was not only some constitutional process to be invoked following the death of an emperor by his successor. Like all religious cults it had to have its regular airing and public promotion. Whereas a regulation or a custom might only be called upon intermittently depending on need, a religious cult, especially the Imperial cult, had to enjoy regular coverage whether there was a need for it or not. Religious

⁴⁷Pliny the Younger, *Panegyricus*, 35:1

matters played a significant role in imperial life, to the point where the secular and religious worlds were indistinguishable, and naturally enough the Imperial cult was no exception. By this time, though, the demand for devotion to the cult was becoming louder. We can see in Pliny's letters that it was becoming increasingly standardised in its role as testing or facilitating people's loyalty to the state, and the swelling ranks of divine emperors caused the cult to expand both physically and politically. At this stage apotheosis was not simply a case of proclamation. Pliny's panegyric refers to the divinising of Nerva by Trajan as involving the setting up of altars and the appointment of a priest⁴⁸, so expanding not only the pantheon of divine emperors a little further but also the ranks of the priests and the occupied floor space in temples.

It is important to note that the Imperial cult was effectively divided into sub-cults, each one devoted to a divinised emperor, some of which would have had entire temples dedicated to them, such as the temple to the divine Claudius at Camulodunum mentioned above. It was only later under the emperor Tacitus (AD 275 – 276) that an attempt (which failed) was made to consolidate the cult into one entity, although the only reference to this is the *Historia Augusta*, which states:

“...and he ordered that a temple to the deified emperors be erected, in which should be placed the statues of the good princes, so that sacrificial cakes might be set before them on their birthdays...”⁴⁹.

The dubious reliability of this source means this statement may not be accurate, but it is certainly plausible.

⁴⁸Pliny the Younger, *Panegyricus*, 11

⁴⁹ *Historia Augusta*, 1932edn, trans. David Magie, Loeb, *Tacitus*, chapter 9 (p 313)

While not every emperor was divinised, and not every *divus* received the same level of devotion, it is fair to say that as time progressed, the number of *divi*, their priesthods and altars and so on would have inevitably risen. As we shall see with the 3rd century *Feriale Duranum* (p24 below), and with a calendar that has survived from the 4th century (see Chapter 2 below), the evidence for this becomes apparent, and it is possible that this started to affect prominence of individual *divi* when it came to cultic devotion. After all, the more divine emperors one has, the harder it becomes to honour them all in the intended manner. Even in the time of Trajan, it may have been necessary to stifle any growing undercurrent of doubt by attaching ever more importance to public displays of devotion to the cult, hence Pliny's use of the cult when testing alleged Christians. Certainly by this time cultic activity would have been well-practised and widely known of. Besides this, the Imperial cult was also becoming a well oiled machine for testing, facilitating and increasing the loyalty of imperial subjects.

Following the death of Trajan, who was inevitably divinised by decree of the senate, the Imperial cult continued its gradual, arguably self-destructive, growth. Hadrian was noted for, amongst other things, divinising Antinous (one his favourites) after he drowned in the Nile in AD 130⁵⁰. This extension of the process of apotheosis to personal favourites of the emperor points to a symptom of decay in the cult, as it suggests that the cult is not so much devoted to divinised emperors whose ranks can be added to by proclamation of the Senate or some other august body, but is in fact the emperor's personal cult to dispose of how he pleases.

The reign of Hadrian was followed by that of Antoninus Pius, who built a temple in the Forum Romanum dedicated to his wife Faustina, whom he divinised

⁵⁰ Donald L. Jones, *Christianity and the Roman Imperial Cult*, 1980, *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt*, 23.2, Berlin, p1037

upon her death. When he died himself and was succeeded by Marcus Aurelius he was also deified and the temple re-dedicated to both Faustina and Antoninus Pius. Interestingly, this temple of the Imperial cult was converted into a church (the church of San Lorenzo in Miranda) at an unknown point towards the end of the first millennium, and the pagan origins of this building can still be traced to this day. Much of the original portico still stands and the inscription above it dedicating the temple to *Divo Antonino et Divae Faustinae* is still traceable. Marcus Aurelius was noted for also appointing a co-emperor, Lucius Verus, whom he deified upon the latter's death. The real decline of the Imperial cult, however, began during and immediately after the reign of Commodus. The reign of Commodus was infamous, and one of the defects that Commodus demonstrated was his demand for divine honours during his lifetime⁵¹. As outlined above, the effect on Domitian's reputation in the eyes of Senate was highly damaging when he had tried the same thing. Therefore Commodus's actions were nothing new, but what followed certainly did the cult no favours. Commodus was murdered in AD 192 and there then followed the brief reign of Pertinax, before Septimius Severus became emperor in AD 193 and deified Commodus in 197 AD, possibly to give the impression of continuity. Gradel, though linking the decline of the cult to the decline of the Senate, says "...the deification of Commodus...cannot have helped."⁵².

There is, however, evidence that the cult survived in its original form until well into the 3rd century. One of the ways in which uniformity and mass devotion toward a particular deity was achieved was through the use of a common calendar, a fragmentary example of which, the *Feriale Duranum*, was found at Dura Europos. This calendar was excavated in the 1931/32 season of excavation and was found in

⁵¹ Oliver Hekster, 2002, *Commodus: An Emperor at the Crossroads*, Amsterdam, p87

⁵² Ittai Gradel, 2002, *Emperor Worship and Roman religion*, Oxford, p356

the remains of the temple of Artemis and Azzanathkona in the *officium* of the *Cohors XX Palmyrenorum*. The surviving fragments indicate that when complete the calendar would have taken the form of a papyrus roll about 23cm high and 120cm long⁵³. This document notes the dates on which particular festivals, including Imperial cult festivals, were to be celebrated. It has been dated to between AD 225 and AD 227, during the reign of Severus Alexander, and it is a military document that seems to have seen considerable use⁵⁴. It can hardly be the first example of its kind nor can it be a type of document unique to the army, though it is the only one to have survived from this period⁵⁵. It is reasonable to assume that earlier examples also had festival days dedicated to deified emperors, although the lack of any earlier examples make exact comparisons impossible. By the time of the *Feriale Duranum* was drawn up the Imperial cult was celebrated on 27 out of the 41 surviving entries⁵⁶. On that basis, the religious life of the army became more and more focused on the Imperial cult as time passed and the number of deified emperors increased. As an official document belonging to a military unit that was written in Latin, in capital script and which makes no mention of local festivals, it is also highly likely that the *Feriale Duranum* was universal and would have been used throughout the Empire with little or no regional variation⁵⁷.

The *Feriale Duranum* distinguishes between three types of festival, namely those of the state gods, those of the army and those of the Imperial cult⁵⁸. Although the date of the calendar explains the dominance of the Severans and the Antonines amongst the cultic dates, the birthdays of Julius Caesar, Augustus and Germanicus,

⁵³ *The Excavations at Dura-Europos*, 1959, Final Report V, Part 1, New Haven, p191

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p191

⁵⁵ Brian Campbell, 1994, *The Roman Army, 31 BC – AD 337: A Sourcebook*, London, p130

⁵⁶ Paul Erdkamp, (ed), 2007, *A Companion to the Roman Army*, Oxford, Chapter 25: Oliver Stroll, The Religions of the Armies, p453

⁵⁷ *The Excavations at Dura-Europos*, Final Report V, Part 1, p192

⁵⁸ Paul Erdkamp, 2007, p453

as well as the date of Trajan's accession, are also celebrated. Notably, Germanicus was not divinised following his death, yet his reputation seems to have assured him a place on the calendar. This is in addition to the birthday and accession date of the incumbent emperor. Although some entries are missing, it is evident that the Imperial cult sought to promote those emperors who were either exemplary in some way or whose former tenure of the Imperial office enhanced that of the current holders i.e. they were his more immediate predecessors. Either way, the cult was evidently meant to promote the position of emperor in the eyes of the troops, either by commemorating its more successful holders in the case of emperors of the more distant past, and by assisting the legitimacy of the current emperor in the case of more recent ones. However, the fragmentary nature of *Feriale Duranum* makes it impossible to establish with certainty which *divi* were celebrated and which had been left out by this point. Some divinised emperors may have fallen into obscurity over the centuries, or have been deliberately left out as may have been the case with Commodus, but broadly speaking the cult accords the status of *divi* to those emperors it refers to, not least by allocating them the same type of festivity accorded to the gods. Interestingly, it was not only emperors who were given divine honours, but also those who were not emperors but of very high rank and held in high regard, such as Germanicus, who had a high military reputation for avenging the Varian disaster in *Germania*. It is also highly likely that the ceremonies demanded on the days laid down in the calendar were repeated in various civic cult centres across the Empire. Although the civic world was inevitably less regulated than the military the Imperial cult had a presence in most *civitates* as well as major military settlements such as legionary fortresses, and although the emperors commemorated may have been different, the function and the event would have been broadly similar.

From this calendar at least it would seem that the decline of the cult, if indeed it was in decline, was a slow process. It must be remembered that while the *Feriale Duranum* records festivals it does not tell us how many more temples were built, how many new priesthoods were established, nor how much more or less elaborate the cultic rituals were compared to Pliny's time. It must also be remembered that the calendar is fragmentary. One could still argue that the apparent ease with which the cult acquired new objects of devotion was bound to make it difficult to maintain a consistent form over the longer term. Yet, there were other factors that could also affect the prospects of the Imperial cult. For example, it was during this period that the city of Rome itself started to lose its influence on the emperors, and by definition its importance to them, as the emperors themselves spent less and less time there. The decline of the political importance of the Senate, and by extension the leading families of Rome, may well have caused some dislocation in the patron-client relationship of the kind that existed between Pliny and Trajan as well. This relationship was important for the cult as it provided a regular supply of people who could be relied on to promote the cult, and whose common point of origin, namely Rome, Italy and a comparatively limited number of provincial families, would have provided a degree of Romanised uniformity. Under the new system, a similar process of patronage still existed as the emperor was bound to attract those who wished to advance themselves, but it would not have been so closely linked to one important place but to a more disparate group of individuals. The accession of Maximinus Thrax (AD 235 to 238) is a case in point. Not only were his alleged lower-class Thracian origins outside that section of society that had up to this point usually provided emperors, but he never visited Rome and judging by his actions he

did not attach as much importance to that city and its traditions as his predecessors, and this would inevitably have an impact on the cult.

According to Herodian⁵⁹ the emperor Maximinus, having started off by confiscating some of the wealth of richer citizens, proceeded to take much that was valuable from theatres, festivals, temple dedications, statues of the gods, “honorary presentations to the heroes” along with any ornamentation from public buildings that could be used. Herodian says this was down to Maximinus’s covetousness, although it is likely that the need to pay for expensive wars against the Germans may also have had a lot to do with it. Although the *divi* are not explicitly mentioned by Herodian, it is reasonable to assume that they would not have been excluded, and it has been suggested by some that this account indicates the end of the Imperial cult in its traditional form⁶⁰, although it is highly unlikely that a cult that could be found in all parts of the empire and which had enjoyed a great deal of patronage for over two centuries could be so quickly swept away. Furthermore, it is not clear whether this cull of devotional wealth was confined to wealthy institutions in Rome, though the source makes no mention of any appropriations outside the city. However, it would seem rather odd if any wealthy temples dedicated to seemingly unimportant gods that were situated at least between the city and the frontier were not told to send whatever they were asked for to the emperor. To confine the plundering to Rome would have been strange indeed, although a comprehensive appropriation of material wealth from across the empire would have been impossible in such a short space of time.

We cannot know for certain if this action by Maximinus was only intended as a temporary measure, or how easily he came to the decision that it needed to be done, though his actions point to the prioritisation of military expediency over religious

⁵⁹Herodian, 1969edn, *History*, trans C.R. Whittaker, Cambridge, Book VII.3, p173

⁶⁰ Ittai Gradel, 2002, *Emperor Worship and Roman religion*, Oxford, p357

ceremony. Armies were (and are) hugely expensive things to run, and when troops were being raised, equipped, trained, fed, moved and sheltered an enormous strain was put on the finances of the Empire as new taxes were raised and the economy was disrupted either by excessive financial and material losses or by manpower shortages, or even simply by the presence of a large army draining the resources of a particular province⁶¹. However, such an appropriation of wealth, as referred to in Herodian, would have meant that well-appointed religious centres would have found it difficult to function when their wealth, the ownership of which contributed nothing to the security of the Empire, was removed. The consequence of this would have been an inevitable diminution of the physical element of pagan practice, at least on a public scale. Buildings could not be so well maintained and large expensive festivals would have been even more burdensome to run, even impossible, especially if the seized wealth included income from estates which helped to fund the temples. Given that this would have applied to the temples of divinised emperors as much as it would to any other, it follows that this removal of wealth would have damaged the cult. To what degree Imperial cult temples suffered relative to temples of other cults and deities is impossible to determine, but it is quite possible that many deified emperors whose reputations were less robust would have disappeared from the religious life of Rome. As will be seen in Chapter 2, it was not guaranteed that every divinised emperor would retain his festival day or even his place in the calendar of Rome. It could be argued that this process of ‘slimming down’ the cult may have helped consolidate it, but the evidence for this is sparse when set against the backdrop of the religious changes of the 3rd century.

⁶¹ Ramsay Macmullen, 1976, *Roman Government's Response to Crisis AD 235 – 337*, Yale University Press, p101 – 106

The behaviour of Maximinus towards the Imperial cult centres of Rome during his reign does point to one important development that the Imperial cult went through during this period of religious transformation. The emphasis was shifting from the memory of past emperors to serving the present one. The religious activity surrounding the current emperor had always been present in cultic activity, but in the earlier days this was to some extent separate from the cultic activity devoted to past emperors, for whom temples were maintained and who had themselves been divinised. However, sacrificing to the *genius* of the living emperor was becoming more and more prominent, to the point where it would displace the divinised emperors as the primary object of religious devotion. The ceremonies conducted by the Arval Brothers bear this out. The Arval Brothers (*fratres Arvales*) were a college of priests who attended to the cult of the goddess *dea Dia* at a site on the edge of the city of Rome. Their involvement with the cult came in the form of making offerings to various *divi* and to the *genius* of the current emperor, although as time progressed we see a shift from the *divi* to the *genius*. Thus, in AD 183 the Arval Brothers made offerings to sixteen *divi*. By 218 AD this had increased to twenty *divi*, then to twenty *divi* plus the *genius* of the living emperor in 224 AD and in 240 AD to the *genius* of the living emperor only⁶². This information is contained on fragmentary inscriptions which were made on marble tables and have been excavated on the site of the sanctuary (originally a sacred grove)⁶³. Given this gradual transfer from *divi* to the *genius* of the living emperor it could be said that the Imperial cult in its traditional sense was evidently undergoing some sort of transformation. However, the Imperial principle which created it still existed and so while the cult itself was transforming it

⁶² Ittai Gradel, 2002, *Emperor Worship and Roman religion*, Oxford, p359

⁶³ Ton Derks, 1998, *Gods, Temples and Ritual Practices*, Amsterdam, p217

was certainly not in any immediate danger of being abolished or being allowed to fade into obscurity.

This increasing preoccupation with the good fortune of the living emperor reflects on the increasingly unsettled times in which the citizens of the Empire were now living. With the tumult of the 3rd century replacing the more peaceful existence of the previous century, it was obvious that more effort should be devoted to obtaining divine favour for the current emperor than celebrating his predecessors⁶⁴. The office of emperor had acquired all sorts of trappings over the years to cement its status, and it is easy to dismiss the notion of the cult being redirected to the current emperors as a combination of vanity on the part of the emperors and of compliant sycophancy on the part of his subjects. However, there were undoubtedly times where the prayers and sacrifices devoted to the gods were sincerely offered in exchange for good governance and a peaceful existence. This, in a way, also reflects the extent to which the cult existed within the cults of other gods by way of these intercessory requests. It is also worth noting that this increasing devotion to the current emperor, and the increasing exclusion of the previous ones, occurs at the same time that the pagan religion of Rome was being consolidated into a state whereby one deity was promoted above all others.

The late 3rd century witnessed various attempts by a number of emperors to consolidate and essentially rationalise the pagan faith by promoting one ‘umbrella’ god with whom they would attempt to associate themselves. This was usually a solar deity of some sort, such a Sol Invictus, but in the case of Diocletian there was an attempt to prop up the position of Jupiter as Rome’s chief deity. Sol Invictus first appears on coins the reign of Antoninus Pius (AD 138 – 161), and thereafter on coins

⁶⁴ Georgia L. Irby-Massie, 1999, *Military Religion in Roman Britain*, Leiden, p29

throughout the late 2nd and 3rd century, notably on those of Aurelian⁶⁵. The state cults are reformed so that a solar deity that appears to be heavily influenced by Eastern equivalents is now elevated above all others, and in effect creates a 'solar monotheism'⁶⁶. Whether this was an attempt to adopt something of organised hierarchy of Christianity or represents an effort to make the most prominent state cult more Levantine in nature in order to attract more support from that quarter is difficult to assess. However, as this was not some passing experiment but a continuing trend it hints at something deeper than the transient policy of an individual emperor. At this point we are seeing the first tangible signs of the place a monarch (of whatever type) would come to occupy in official life following the adoption of Christianity, namely the desire to achieve the favour of one omnipotent god for a divinely appointed ruler. It is interesting to note that with the exception of the creation of divinised emperors, the religious life of the Roman Empire had existed on fairly constant principles since the reign of Augustus, with the rise of various cults (such as Mithraism for example) but with no great change in the established state ritual accorded to the usual gods or with their association with the emperor.

The 3rd century was a time of considerable upheaval in Roman religious life. Gods that had enjoyed pre-eminence for centuries suddenly found themselves under threat in the scramble to find a new deity that would restore Rome's fortunes. The Empire had suffered a great deal during the 3rd century, with barbarian raids becoming more common, and Roman armies becoming less successful in dealing with them. Evidently the Empire no longer enjoyed the consistent protection of the gods, and so it was almost inevitable that new and more potent gods had to be worshipped in order to relieve the Empire of its woes. It was during this time that

⁶⁵ Ramsay Macmullen, 1981, *Paganism in the Roman Empire*, New Haven and London, p84

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, p89

Christianity was also rising to greater prominence, and these only served further to undermine a pagan tradition that was looking increasingly ineffective. Christianity had, however, been on the rise long before the crises of the 3rd century, and its fairly rapid spread during this time seems to indicate a popular movement that was able to supply a spiritual gap that paganism was not able to plug⁶⁷.

An example of how the pagan religion of Rome was now starting to come under pressure from competing religious ideas originating even from the emperor himself can be found in the reign of the emperor Elagabalus (AD 218-22), who replaced Jupiter as the chief deity of Rome with a Syrian solar deity that probably originated in or around the mountains of northern Syria⁶⁸, also called Elagabalus since Elagabalus had taken the name of the deity for whose cult he was the chief priest in their joint home town of Gabala in Syria⁶⁹. The association of god with emperor is self-evident. Not content with that, the emperor also moved the statue of Pallas, one of the more revered objects in Rome's religious inventory, to the imperial palace with a view to joining it to the god Elagabalus in some sort of matrimony, though the whole enterprise ultimately came to nothing when Elagabalus was murdered in AD 222⁷⁰. Jupiter was then restored to his original place and was installed in Elagabalus's temple, which was now dedicated to Jupiter *Ultor* (the avenger)⁷¹. Perhaps the failure of Elagabalus's religious reform was inevitable, given that the cult he tried to install at Rome was too particular both to a certain eastern province and to him personally. Also, although the importation of a deity from outside the traditional pantheon was nothing new, to give it seniority over all

⁶⁷ Robin Lane Fox, 1988, *Pagans and Christians in the Mediterranean World*, London, p271

⁶⁸ Martijn Icks, 2011, *The Crimes of Elagabalus: The life and legacy of Rome's decadent boy emperor*, London, p48

⁶⁹ Herodian, 1969edn, *History*, trans C.R. Whittaker, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 5.5.7

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 5.6.3

⁷¹ *Ibid*, 6.2.3 and footnote p80

other traditional deities perhaps doomed the enterprise from the outset. However, the destabilising precedent had been set, and it was quietly symptomatic of the beginning of the end of traditional paganism in some respects. It was during this period that the number of Christians was probably approaching the critical mass whereby it would become one of the major religions of the Empire, and the exclusivity and popularity of this cult meant that besides actively competing for worshippers it was also a wholly different religious system. In many urban centres paganism started losing its grip. The pagan reaction was hardly panic-stricken, but there followed over the course of the third century a series of reforms and alterations, some of which were initiated by the emperor himself and none of which worked. Virtually every reform served only to undermine the traditions and stability upon which the pagan tradition partly relied, and over the course of the century there was an increasing consolidation of paganism into one supreme solar deity, of which Elagabalus had been a primary example, that made paganism look more and more superficially like Christianity. Later on in the century the emperor Aurelian (AD 270-75) dedicated a temple to Sol Invictus at Rome during his reign, and coins depicting the god with the legend '*Dominus Imperii Romani*' appeared, implying that Jupiter had once again been demoted⁷². It has been suggested that Aurelian's introduction of this solar cult was to unite the citizenry of the Empire under a common religion, with all other pagan cults and religions subordinate to it⁷³. It is also interesting to note that Aurelian was referred to as *deus* on some of his earlier coinage, although Aurelian later denied he was divine, but was appointed as emperor by Sol⁷⁴. Again, like the attempt of Elagabalus earlier in the 3rd century to promote his own sun god as chief deity, this promotion of Sol Invictus by Aurelian seems to have been something of a

⁷² Ittai Gradel, 2002, *Emperor Worship and Roman religion*, Oxford, p351

⁷³ John F. White, 2005, *Restorer of the World: The Roman Emperor Aurelian*, Staplehurst, p132

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, p133

‘government initiative’ motivated by the traditional philosophy of the educated classes⁷⁵ rather than the meeting of a popular need of the pagan masses.

Diocletian later attempted to rehabilitate Jupiter, and went as far as taking the name *Iovianus* to promote the cause of Rome’s chief deity⁷⁶. His consort, Maximian, took the name *Herculius*, and between them they claimed to be descended, at least in a religious sense, from their respective patron deities. The conflation of ostensibly Imperial cultic ideas with other prominent pagan cults to such a degree is noteworthy. There exists a panegyric to Maximian in which extensive reference is made both to his divinity as well as that of Diocletian. Written by a *magister* by the name of Mamertinus and presented on 21 April AD 289 at Trier⁷⁷, the work claims that:

“...neither is it a fable stemming from poetic license nor mere belief based on the assertions of bygone eras, but a manifest and confirmed fact, as both the great altar of Hercules attests to this day, and the Pinarian family, guardian of the cult of Hercules, that that hero, the first of your family and name, approached the walls of Pallanteum [i.e. Rome] as victor...”⁷⁸

This allusion could be regarded as simply part of the promotion of the relationship between Maximian and Hercules, and as therefore simple propaganda, but the tradition of a victorious entry into Rome was rooted in a much older tradition, and obviously remained an important concept despite the fact that its importance had

⁷⁵ Polymnia Athanassiadi and Michael Frede (ed), 1999, *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity*, Oxford, p41 – 68

⁷⁶ Stephen Williams, 1985, *Diocletian and the Roman Recovery*, London, B.T. p59

⁷⁷ C.E.V. Nixon and Barbara Saylor Rodgers, 1994, *In Praise of Later Roman Emperors*, Los Angeles, p42

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, p54

declined and that some emperors, such as Maximinus, were known to have never been there as emperors. Furthermore, the selection of Hercules is important since although related to the gods, he was not himself a true god in the fullest sense, which would have been an important distinction given Maximian's somewhat junior status in relation to Diocletian. The panegyric then goes on to say:

“...Or shall I recount the divine origin of your family, which you have attested not only by your immortal deeds, but also by the name which you have inherited?”⁷⁹

Such a statement leaves little room for doubt as to the validity of Maximian's claim to the name of Hercules, however recently acquired. To have inherited rather than have acquired his divine epithet implies actual descent, rather than appropriation. The panegyric continues in another passage:

“...when you were summoned to restore the State by your kindred divinity Diocletian, you conferred more of a benefit than you received.”⁸⁰

Thus Diocletian's divinity is also referred to. This was only natural, considering Diocletian's senior position to Maximian, and the panegyric goes on to refer to the partnership with Diocletian in this passage:

“... but when only divine help was sufficient for [the Empire's] restoration after its collapse in former times, and not even the help of one god sufficed;

⁷⁹ C.E.V. Nixon and Barbara Saylor Rodgers, 1994, *In Praise of Later Roman Emperors*, Los Angeles, p56

⁸⁰ *Ibid*, p57

you came to the aid of the Roman name, as it faltered, at the side of the leader, with that same timely assistance as your Hercules once lent to Jupiter, when he was beset with difficulties in his war with the Earthborn. Hercules then gained a great part of the victory, and proved that he had not so much received heaven from the gods as restored it to them.”⁸¹

Further reference to this partnership and the relative status of its components is made thus:

“For just as all useful things produced in the heavens or on land seem to come to pass for us through the agency of different divinities but nevertheless flow from the supreme creators, Jupiter, ruler of the heavens, and Hercules, pacifier of the Earth, so in all the most splendid exploits, even those carried out under the leadership of others, Diocletian makes the decisions, and you carry them out.”⁸²

These passages are in effect part of the propaganda that was used to promote the divine associations of Diocletian and Maximian. This attempt to re-ignite the Empire by invoking the old Gods under which it rose was part of Diocletian’s attempt to not only restore the Empire but its traditions, and clearly Maximian had his prescribed place in this. Although the deities themselves were nothing like new, their use as a way of explaining this dual-emperorship (albeit one that was not of equals) was.

⁸¹ C.E.V. Nixon and Barbara Saylor Rodgers, 1994, *In Praise of Later Roman Emperors*, Los Angeles, p59

⁸² *Ibid*, p71

The adoption of Jupiter and Hercules extended to the army, where their names were adopted by the Illyrian legions⁸³. Although this attempt at claiming a divine lineage was very much in the traditional style of a Roman emperor, that such an ostentatious attempt was deemed necessary does itself point to a weakening of the old religious order. Diocletian's ineffective persecution of the Christians represented the last significant effort to reverse the tide of religious change, and it is in conjunction with this policy that his support for the traditional cults of Jupiter and Hercules must be seen. In the end, however, it came to nothing. The empire was divided up among various and ultimately warring successors who ended up tolerating Christianity, if only for the sake of peace within their own territories while they were fighting their rivals⁸⁴.

The fortunes of the Imperial cult in its original form were naturally linked to the pagan context from which it emerged and on which it partly depended. It follows, therefore, that when the pagan religious system of the Roman state became unstable, the Imperial cult would also be affected. Furthermore, given the cult's greater function in the secular world, it would also be subject to greater influences from beyond the religious sphere. However, what enabled the cult to survive a process of transformation that would ultimately obliterate other pagan cults was its unique relationship to the person and office of the emperor. So established has the cult become that as long as there was an emperor there would be a cult. Its highly useful, arguably essential, political function meant Christianity could not sweep it away as it could other pagan cults.

Up until the religious changes of the 3rd century the Imperial cult had followed a fairly established form. However, during the course of the third century various

⁸³ Stephen Williams, 1985, *Diocletian and the Roman Recovery*, London, p59

⁸⁴ Johannes Geffcken, 1978, *The last days of Greco-Roman paganism*, New York, p116

forces would emerge that would begin the process of reforming the cult. Although the political and military history of this century is marked by crisis in many respects, the processes that transformed the cult were as much to do with the cult itself as anything else. The trend of paganism in the third century to edge towards a form of monotheism, as evidenced by the growing establishment of a supreme solar deity, combined with the rise of Christianity, was to have a profound effect on the cult. It was during the reign of Elagabalus (AD 218 – AD 222) and his religious reforms, and to the years immediately following the drawing up of the *Feriale Duranum*, that the beginnings of the process can be first traced with certainty.

The reign of Elagabalus was followed by that of his cousin Severus Alexander, who reigned from AD 222 to AD 235, and was noted for his rather more tolerant attitude to the eastern cult of Christianity. It was even claimed, probably falsely⁸⁵, in the less than totally reliable late 4th century *Historia Augusta*, that he included a statue of Christ amongst those of some divinised emperors:

“...in the early morning hours he would worship in the sanctuary of his *Lares*, in which he kept statues of the deified emperors — of whom, however, only the best had been selected — and also of certain holy souls [*animae sanctiores*], among them Apollonius, and, according to a contemporary writer, Christ, Abraham, Orpheus, and others of this same character and, besides, the portraits of his ancestors.”⁸⁶

The same source also goes on to say:

⁸⁵ Ronald Syme, 1983, *Historia Augusta Papers*, Oxford, p90

⁸⁶ *Historia Augusta*, 1924edn, trans. David Magie, p236

“Every seven days, when he was in the city, he went up to the *Capitolium*, and he visited the other temples frequently. He also wished to build a temple to Christ and give him a place among the gods... Alexander, however, was prevented from carrying out this purpose, because those who examined the sacred victims ascertained that if he did, all men would become Christians and the other temples would of necessity be abandoned.”⁸⁷

Despite its anomalous nature, the first quote does make the interesting and seemingly credible statement that divinised emperors were picked and chosen, and that apotheosis did not necessarily translate into perpetual veneration. Even if the account is untrue, its portrayal of Severus Alexander applying selection criteria to divinised emperors is interesting and may well have been fairly common. It is, after all, impossible to worship all the gods all of the time. Even if Severus Alexander’s supposed flirtation with Christianity occurred, although by no means comparable with Elagabalus’s importation of his namesake deity, it would have only been following the trend towards importing proto-monotheistic eastern cults into Roman religious life in the latter part of the third century. This is symptomatic of an increasing obsolescence of traditional Roman paganism that was partly responsible for allowing the rise of Christianity. It was also bound to have an effect on pagan cults, and the Imperial cult was not to be an exception. With the questioning of the old state religious order having begun under Elagabalus and even earlier, there followed the first material strike at the old style of emperor worship when Severus

⁸⁷ *Historia Augusta*, 1924edn, trans. David Magie, p267

Alexander was succeeded by Maximinus, a man who was noted for his more robust reign and his asset-stripping of the Imperial cult along with other cult centres.

As was so often the case, this shift in religious practice begins in the east, and spreads westward. Starting with the Hellenising influence of the Greek states in the last two centuries BC, through the adoption of Christianity and up to the spread of Islam throughout the east and onto the fringes of the west in the centuries following its inception, there was an established trend of cultural and religious migration from East to West. The reasons for this are complex and beyond the scope of this study, but the relative sophistication of the East compared to the West at this time, not to mention its comparative wealth, population and social development made it culturally and religiously dominant in the Mediterranean world at least. It is therefore fair to say the eastern part of the Roman Empire had always exerted a massive cultural and religious influence on the Empire as a whole, and especially amongst those who were wealthy enough to embrace it, and naturally this included the emperor. The religious see-sawing of the third century began with the installation of Elagabalus as the new chief supreme deity, followed by the restoration of Jupiter, then the installation of Sol, followed by a return of Jupiter. This was ultimately concluded with the adoption of Christianity, which all the while had been slowly rising as a religious force throughout this period. The east had initially introduced the concept of divine rulers to the attention of powerful Romans, with Eastern provinces proclaiming Augustus's divinity after the battle of Actium⁸⁸, and now the religious ideas spreading from the east would transform the cult it helped to create.

⁸⁸ Pat Southern, 1998, *Augustus*, London, p195

Certainly there was only one serious attempt to return the Imperial cult to its original and somewhat old-fashioned form in the later years of the 3rd century. According to the unreliable *Historia Augusta*, the emperor Tacitus (AD 275-76) tried to reinstate the cult although what was allegedly proposed was a much watered-down version, namely where there would only be one centre for all the divinised emperors, and only those emperors deemed ‘good’ were to be restored to their previous position. Furthermore, they were to receive the bloodless (i.e. lesser) offering of sacrificial cakes⁸⁹. This attempt at partially reconstructing the old Imperial cult was not successful however, as Tacitus only reigned for six months and his scheme did not survive his death. It should also be pointed out that the source of this story, the *Historia Augusta*, is somewhat unreliable, and all the individuals named in its biography of the emperor Tacitus are regarded as fictitious, with the exception of named emperors⁹⁰. Consequently, there is no way of lending substantial credibility to the story of his restoration of the Imperial cult.

Despite the apparent success of the Imperial cult as an Empire-spanning cult, it cannot really be argued that the Imperial cult was ever a strong enough religious institution in its own right to stand against the rise of Christianity. However, as a political instrument it was indispensable, and as such its religious nature would be subject to change if this was necessary for its survival and this precluded the friction that one may have expected between Christianity and a pagan cult. Whereas Diocletian and Maximian associated their lineage with the cults of Jupiter or Hercules in order to achieve a degree of divinity, Constantine and all of his successors except Julian would rule as Christian God-ordained emperors, a subject which will be examined in greater detail in the following chapter. It is also worth

⁸⁹ Ittai Gradel, 2002, *Emperor Worship and Roman religion*, Oxford, p363

⁹⁰ Ronald Syme, 1983, *Historia Augusta Papers*, Oxford, p214

noting that despite the near-universal presence of various state cults, many people continued to worship gods that were both native to their locality and their own particular religion, sometimes identifying them with Roman equivalents, such as in the case of Sulis Minerva in the city of Bath⁹¹, where the British god was matched with the Minerva of Rome. As a consequence of this diversity there never was a truly universal, uniform pagan Roman religion, but rather there was an assortment of cults, some more common and better resourced than others. This lack of unity undermined the coherence of paganism and made it harder to resist the theologically and administratively more unified and better-organised Christian religion. When the Empire finally did adopt Christianity, it was then that the Imperial cult would slowly divest itself of its old pagan associations and would be Christianised. It is to this process that this work now turns.

⁹¹ Peter Salway, 1993, *A History of Roman Britain*, Oxford, p505

Chapter 2

The cult of the Emperor during the transformation from the pre-Christian to the Christian Empire

In his work on the ‘Christian Attitude Towards The Emperor in the Fourth Century’, Kenneth Setton states:

“The relation of Church and State before the conversion of Constantine was simple enough; the Church was a voluntary society of intractable persons to whom it was sound policy for the State to be hostile. The Church was independent and refused to recognize that the civil authority could have any voice in spiritual matters; as for the State, it refused in a sense even to recognize the existence of the Church. A discussion of the separation of Church and State before the advent of Christianity would have been unthinkable; to the mind of antiquity up to the time of Christ religion and statecraft had been indissolubly united.”¹

This sums up rather neatly the situation prior to the conversion of Constantine. It is entirely reasonable to suggest that from that point onwards, we are dealing with a different age in religious matters, since from that time the status of monarch in the eyes of the state religion becomes more and more akin to what we would recognise in the post-Roman period, although the transition was not immediate and had begun before Constantine’s conversion. It is out of the Christian response to a pagan

¹ K.M. Setton, 1941, *Christian Attitude Towards the Emperor in the Fourth Century*, New York, p41

Imperial cult that this relationship originates, and it is this recognition and re-interpretation of the Imperial cult that allows one to speak of its survival, in a sense, into the Christian era, and its influence into the post-Roman era.

The impact of Christianity on the Imperial cult was profound, but not wholly destructive. On the face of it these two cults were fundamentally incompatible, and that appears to be the view taken by, for example, the Christians examined by Pliny and even Tertullian had reservations when dealing with the subject at the beginning of the third century (see Chapter 3). However, within a relatively short period following the adoption of Christianity by Constantine and thereby its effective adoption as the de-facto state religion of the Roman empire, an institutional compromise was reached whereby the cult continued to exist in some form.

Despite the incompatibility of the pagan Imperial cult with Christianity, it was obvious that any attempt to dismantle one of the main instruments the emperor used to promote the loyalty of his citizens to himself was never going to succeed. After all, it makes little sense for a ruler to dispense with the customs and ceremonies that are intended to demonstrate and promote the loyalty of the people to himself².

Despite his adoption of the Christian faith, Constantine was still accorded divine-like honours and treatment both during his life and after his death. He was associated with a divine ancestry as attested in panegyric works, with his father, and tentatively himself, being associated with Apollo in a work dated to AD 310 but of unknown authorship³. This can lead to an interesting combination of traditions and beliefs. The famous inscription from Hispellum (now Spello, about 100 miles north of Rome) in Umbria is almost self contradictory in the way it promotes the worship

² Andrew Alfoldi, 1948, *The Conversion of Constantine and Pagan Rome*, trans Harold Mattingly, Oxford, p105

³ C.E.V. Nixon and Barbara Saylor Rodgers, 1994, *In Praise of Later Roman Emperors*, Los Angeles, p251

of Constantine and his family on the one hand and the demand that any worship not be blemished by pagan sacrifice on the other:

“Copy of the sacred response. The emperor Caesar Flavius Constantine...and Flavius Constantinus and Flavius Julius Constantius and Flavius Constans...

You Umbrians assert that...priests put on theatrical shows and a gladiatorial contest at Volsinii, a city in Tuscia; but...you earnestly ask that a remedy be granted so that your priest will not be obliged to journey to Volsinii to put on the shows. You ask that on the city currently called Hispellum...we bestow a name derived from our family name; that a temple to the Flavian family may be raised up in that city in a magnificent style entirely appropriate to the greatness of that name; and that the priest...should put on this same place a spectacle, both theatrical shows and gladiatorial contests...

...To the city of Hispellum we have granted the..[name]...Flavia Constans, in whose centre we wish the construction of a magnificent temple in honour of the Flavian family (in other words, our family)...on the express condition that this temple dedicated to our name should not be defiled by the deceits of any contagious superstition [*ne aedis nostro nomini dedicate cuiusquam contagiose superstitionis fraudibus polluat*ur]. As a result we have also granted to you permission to stage shows in the aforesaid city...”⁴

On the one hand it requires the “construction of a magnificent temple” dedicated to the Flavian family, complete with priest and accompanied with gladiatorial contests,

⁴ A.D. Lee, 2000, *Pagans and Christians in Late Antiquity: A Sourcebook*, London, 4.10, p92

while on the other requiring that said temple “should not be defiled by the deceits of any *contagiose superstitionis*”, presumably such as the sacrifice of animals or of cakes, or the pouring of wine as a libation. This would have been a difficult balance for even the most capable priest to strike; having to conduct ceremonies that are entirely pagan by nature, tradition and origin, and that are fundamentally at odds with Christian principles, and yet remove any overt pagan practices. In fairness, however, it does not categorically state in this inscription that any ceremonies attached to the cult should actually be Christian, nor does it suggest that the imperial family are divine, but merely very important. It does not suggest, for example, that they are divinely appointed or exercise divine authority, only that the imperial family should be honoured. If one looks at gladiatorial contests, for example, it is beyond dispute that many churchmen opposed them on moral grounds. For example, the council of Elvira (c. 300 to 309 AD) proclaimed that baptized *flamines* who organised gladiatorial games were to be denied communion, while later on in the 4th century St Augustine describes in disapproving tones in his *Confessiones* (written in AD 397-398) how his student Alypius developed an obsession for them:

...during the season for this cruel and bloodthirsty sport...some friends and fellow students...carried him off to the arena.

...When they arrived at the arena, the place was seething with the lust for cruelty...Alypius shut his eyes tightly, determined to have nothing to do with these atrocities...an incident in the fight drew a great roar from the crowd and this thrilled him so deeply that he could not contain his curiosity...So he opened his eyes, and his soul was stabbed with a wound more deadly than any which the gladiator, whom he was anxious to see, had received in his

body...The din had...forced him to open his eyes, laying his soul open to receive the wound which struck it down...

When he saw blood, it was as though he had drunk a deep draught of savage passion... He revelled in the wickedness of the fighting and was drunk with the fascination of bloodshed. He was no longer the man who had come to the arena, but simply one of the crowd which he had joined, a fit companion for the friends who had brought him.

...He watched and cheered...and when he left the arena, he carried away with him a diseased mind which would leave him no peace until he came back again, no longer simply together with the friends who had first dragged him there, but at their head, leading new sheep to the slaughter.⁵

This occurred in the mid 380s while Augustine was in Italy, and from what he says the gladiatorial contests still seemed to be fairly popular at that point, despite the disapproval of the Church. Their entertainment value seemed to be significant, and when relieved of any pagan ceremony they amounted to little more than a violent contest put on to entertain the public and so this opposition need not be specifically religious in nature but more moral. The origins of the gladiatorial contests as part of elaborate funerary rituals in the 3rd century BC had become obscured by this point, and through their ability to entertain the masses they served a variety of functions one of which was to increase the popularity of the emperor, whether sponsored by himself or by a local individual with his consent as may have been the case in Hispellum, even if such contests were ostensibly part of cultic ritual. It is worth observing that Constantine adopted a policy that may be described as grudging

⁵ Saint Augustine, 1961edn, *Confessions*, trans. R.S. Pine-Coffin, London, Book VI, p122

toleration towards such contests⁶ and the practice of gladiatorial contests continued in some form for another century or so. That such a spectacle should be put on to commemorate the imperial family in early 4th century Hispellum should not be regarded as anomalous, especially since such a spectacle did not necessarily have to harbour any truly religious connotations. Indeed, the Hispellum inscription makes no reference to any god, and assuming any ceremonies conducted in relation to the temple mention only the non-divine emperor and his family, then it is possible to interpret the much of the cult at this time as a lavishly resourced secular personality cult. Thus, as far as his cult was concerned a Christian emperor could strike a balance between the two belief systems simply by not referring to either of them. The reality may well have been different, but as far as the official line as carved in stone and set up in public in Hispellum is concerned the Imperial cult knows no object of devotion other than the seemingly less than divine imperial family.

Despite the carefully worded inscription in this particular instance, Constantine found it difficult to avoid adhering to the long-established conventions of his office with regard to its attendant personality cult. It may be for this reason that he employed pagan iconography in the heart of his new capital during his lifetime. Referring to a statue set atop a porphyry column by Constantine in Constantinople, Zonaras states:

“On it he consecrated a bronze cult statue, a marvel to behold on account of its craftsmanship and size. For it was gigantic, and it exhibited the precision of an ancient hand, almost fashioning things actually animant. It is said that the cult statue was a monument of Apollo which had been transferred from

⁶ Eusebius, 1999edn, *Life of Constantine*, trans. Averil Cameron and Stuart G. Hall, Oxford, p321

the city of Ilium in Phrygia. That most divine emperor erected the statue in his own name, having fastened to its head some of the nails which fastened the body of our Lord to the salvific cross.”⁷

Zonaras was writing in the first half of the twelfth century, and he goes on to say that the statue stood until his own time when it was blown off its pedestal by a strong wind and smashed to pieces as a result. Even if time had clouded the knowledge of the statue’s origins, this passage still raises a number of important points. Firstly, a twelfth century Christian writer was happy to associate a pagan monument of one the most important Roman gods (correctly or otherwise) with the first Christian emperor. Secondly, the emperor in question dedicated this cult object to himself and not a predecessor. Thirdly, the emperor is referred to as ‘most divine’ (*theiotatos*) in the passage, and finally, that Christian relics were attached to the monument. Evidently it was important both to Christianise the previously pagan monument itself and also to associate the emperor as closely as possible to the Christian faith, while at the same time maintaining links with a tradition whose pagan origins were so intrinsic as to be difficult to shake off. Clearly the concept of some sort of cult of the emperor was alive and well, and his association with the divine was being maintained. Furthermore, Constantine was being referred to as divine in the same manner as his pagan predecessors (although he was alive when he erected the statue, Zonaras is referring to a now-deceased emperor when referring to Constantine), therefore indicating that beyond a superficial Christianisation, the pagan cult still existed in the vocabulary applied to Roman emperors. There is, however, no mention made of priesthoods or temples being dedicated to the cult in conjunction with the statue;

⁷ Zonaras, 2009edn, *The History of Zonaras*, trans. Thomas M. Banchich and Eugene N. Lane, Oxford, p155

therefore the cult in the traditional sense did not exist in this instance. By this time the cult in a material and ceremonial sense was undergoing a change, with Christian rites and religious concepts existing alongside the strong residue of their pagan equivalents (in the shape of temples and altars that may or may not have been in use), perhaps in the knowledge that eventually they would supplant them.

A little later on in his work, Zonaras, in describing Constantine's reaction to outcome of the Council of Nicaea, states:

“The emperor, equal to the apostles, was pleased about the unanimity of the fathers...”⁸

The use of the term ‘apostle’ to describe the emperor’s status is interesting, as it is indicative of a high status yet does not accord divinity. Constantine had tried to unify the Church during his reign, and sought to end heresy and theological deviation. Naturally enough, given his status as emperor and his self-appointed mission to eradicate division in the Church he regarded himself to be the God-appointed pope and bishop of all mankind⁹. Under the circumstance appropriating the status of an apostle was not so far-fetched. In the same passage Zonaras also refers to bishops as “divine fathers¹⁰”, and later on, when describing the emperor Constantius’s sympathy for the Arians, he relates how the “divine Alexander”¹¹, the Patriarch of Constantinople, was compelled to receive Arius in communion (though the Patriarch was ultimately able to refuse, which is itself an indication of the shift in power between religious and secular spheres). Clearly emperors did not have a

⁸*The History of Zonaras*, trans. Thomas M Banchich and Eugene N. Lane, Oxford, p157

⁹ Alföldi, Andrew, 1948, *The Conversion of Constantine and Pagan Rome*, trans Harold Mattingly, Oxford, p35

¹⁰*The History of Zonaras*, 2009edn, p157

¹¹*Ibid*, p171

monopoly on being close to God, although the affair is more proof of the religious function of Christian emperors than it is of the appropriation of divine attributes by the Christian priesthood. After all, while priests may be referred to as ‘divine’, it is the emperor who is numbered among the Apostles, and they are much closer to God than any priest. Therefore divine in this context surely means conforming closely to the prescriptions of the Christian faith rather than being of the same nature as a god. It also indicates a use of language that is quite different from that of the earlier principate, where the term *divus* was applied to late emperors who had been apotheosised.

Another area in which the survival of old habits occurs is in the area of panegyric works. An unknown author addressed a panegyric to Constantine in August of AD 310 at Trier¹², and amidst the customary flattery, the following passages can be found:

“And so I shall begin with the divinity who is the origin of your family, of whom most people, perhaps, are still unaware, but whom those who love you know full well. For an ancestral relationship links you with the deified Claudius [the 3rd century emperor], who was the first to restore the discipline of the Roman Empire when it was disordered and in ruins...”¹³

This panegyric was delivered only four years into Constantine’s tenure as Herculian Caesar (i.e. when he was not a sole or senior emperor), and two years before the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, so it was especially important from the outset that his status be correctly asserted, and according to the conventions and traditions of the

¹² C.E.V. Nixon and Barbara Saylor Rodgers, 1994, *In Praise of Later Roman Emperors*, Los Angeles, p212

¹³ *Ibid*, p219

time this included emphasising his imperial lineage which began with a divinised emperor. The point is further emphasised when further on there follows this passage:

“...when he [Constantine’s father Constantius] was about to join the gods, he gazed upon the Ocean, that father of the gods, who rekindles the fiery stars of heaven, so that when about to enjoy thereafter perpetual light, he might now see there almost continuous daylight. For in truth immediately the temples of the gods were opened for him, and he was received by the divine conclave, and Jupiter himself extended his right hand to him.”¹⁴

This seems to suggest that images or statues of Constantius were installed in pagan temples, including those dedicated to Jupiter. The panegyrist then goes on to say of Constantine himself:

“Immortal gods, when will you grant that day on which this most manifestly present god, with peace reigning everywhere, may visit those groves of Apollo as well...”¹⁵

This is not the only time that Constantine had been associated with Apollo, with Zonaras writing of how a cult statue of Apollo had been set up in Constantinople in the name of Constantine (see above). Clearly Constantine was not so immersed in his Christian faith as to willingly and entirely dispense with the traditional pagan monuments that were set up to honour an emperor, however much of an attempt was made to Christianise them.

¹⁴ C.E.V. Nixon and Barbara Saylor Rodgers, 1994, *In Praise of Later Roman Emperors*, Los Angeles, p227

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p251

There is one other panegyric, attributed to one Nazarius, that alludes to some degree of divinity in Constantine by associating him with Hercules, although in this case it is a little later in date, having been dated to AD 321¹⁶. In one particular passage it states:

“As Hercules is said, while still a babe at the breast, to have crushed two serpents with his hands, so that the inborn nature of future strength burst forth from him even when he was a tiny infant, so you, Emperor, in the very cradle of your rule, as if you were slaying twin dragons, amused yourself with the celebrated punishments of savage kings.”¹⁷

The reference to the pagan Hercules may be a reference to Constantine’s earlier reign as a Herculian Caesar, although reference to it in an otherwise Christian context is not a completely isolated instance, as there is evidence of a Christian prayer being based on a prayer to Hercules on an early 5th century window lintel in Syria¹⁸. Nevertheless, aside from this there is no other direct reference to an association with a pagan divinity with Constantine in this particular work. By this stage the Christian religion had come to play a greater role in the reign of Constantine, especially after the Edict of Milan was passed in AD 313. It would follow that pagan concepts would start to figure less as Constantine’s reign progressed, but it was still early days as far as Christianity becoming the dominant religion in the Empire was concerned, and it is impossible to prove to what extent Constantine’s Christianity had on

¹⁶ C.E.V. Nixon and Barbara Saylor Rodgers, 1994, *In Praise of Later Roman Emperors*, Los Angeles, p338

¹⁷ Ibid, p362

¹⁸ Frank R. Trombley, 1994, *Hellenic Religion and Christianization c.370 – 529, Volume 2*, Leiden, p258

panegyric work that was intended as much for the consumption of those others who were present when it was read out as it was for the emperor himself.

After Constantine there was only one pagan emperor, namely Julian, who reigned for a mere 18 months between AD 361-3. Although his policies aimed at reviving paganism are well known, his attitude to the Imperial cult is less obvious, partly due to his brief reign. However, something of his beliefs can be gleaned from the account of his death in the account of Ammianus Marcellinus, who wrote:

“...everybody present was in tears, and Julian rebuked them with all his usual dignity, saying that it was beneath them to mourn for a prince who was restored to heaven and numbered with the stars.”¹⁹

It is not clear whether Julian was singling himself out for impending apotheosis, whether his statement reflected the general belief in the fate of the soul after death, or possibly both. The notion of a celestial home for souls of the departed and for the gods themselves is found elsewhere in one of the works written by Julian himself. In his work *Ioulianou autokratoros Kata Galilaion Logos* ('Discourse of Julian against the Galilaeans') he states:

“I mean that we are all by nature so closely dependent on the heavens and the gods that are visible therein, that even if any man conceives of another god besides these, he in every case assigns to him the heavens as his dwelling-place; not that he thereby separates him from the earth, but he so to speak establishes the King of the All in the heavens as in the most

¹⁹Ammianus Marcellinus, 1986edn, *The Later Roman Empire (A.D. 354 – 378)*, trans. Walter Hamilton, London, p295

honourable place of all, and conceives of him as overseeing from there the affairs of this world...

...There exists no man who does not stretch out his hands towards the heavens when he prays; and whether he swears by one god or several, if he has any notion at all of the divine, he turns heavenward. And it was very natural that men should feel thus. For since they observed that in what concerns the heavenly bodies there is no increase or diminution or mutability, and...their movement is harmonious and their arrangement in concert; and that the illuminations of the moon are regulated, and that the risings and settings of the sun are regularly defined, and always at regularly defined seasons, they naturally conceived that the heaven is a god and the throne of a god.”²⁰

For Julian at least the ascent of the soul into the sky, there to reside alongside the gods, was an accepted convention. This, however, did not necessarily translate into apotheosis since ascending into heaven did not necessarily mean the same as becoming a god. It does though conform to the general portrayal of the process of divinisation.

There is another useful indicator as to the condition of the Imperial cult from mid 4th century, and that is the Codex Calendar of AD 354. It was produced for a wealthy Christian aristocrat in Rome called Valentinus, and the actual task of drawing it up was undertaken by a noteworthy calligrapher called Furius Dionysius Filocalus, who was himself a Christian²¹. As an official document it is indicative of the place of the cult in official life, and as such can be compared to the *Feriale*

²⁰ *The Works of the Emperor Julian, Volume III*, 1923edn, trans. Wilmer Cave Wright, Cambridge, p321

²¹ *On Roman Time: The Codex-Calendar of 354*, 1990, Michele Renee Salzman, Los Angeles, p3

Duranum which was discussed in a previous chapter. It is also important as it provides a strong indication as to which previous emperors still mattered and which had fallen into obscurity, either by accident or design. According to the Codex Calendar of AD 354 the number of festivals devoted to the Imperial Cult was still extensive²². Its festivals are the most frequent in the calendar, with 98 days of festivities in the name of an emperor and/or his family as compared with 69 for the festivals of the pagan gods. Sixty nine of these days are devoted to the dynasty of Constantine, with the remaining 29 days devoted to earlier (pagan) emperors and their achievements. According to M R Salzman in her commentary on the calendar this tendency towards the celebration of the ruling emperor and his dynasty reflects a general trend of the 4th century, and she regards this as a process begun by Constantine and continued by his successors²³. One reason that has been put forward for this is that the unsettled and less-than-peaceful condition of the empire at this time made it wise to try to focus divine favour on the living emperor who actually fought and led armies, rather than simply honour the relatively powerless gods that certain long-dead and irrelevant emperors had become²⁴. However, a more practical reason in a Christianising society is that the emperor had to reconcile a useful cult with the Christian religion, and that this entailed not only a gradual disassociation from pagan practices, but also a more rapid divestment of commemorations to pagan emperors who may have been active persecutors of Christians. This, combined with the need to emphasise the position of the current emperor and encourage support for him, especially in a time of crisis, meant that it was inevitable that the focus would shift away from the plethora of discredited *divi* of a pagan past to the current emperor himself. Naturally though, no emperor would want to break entirely with the past,

²² Ibid, p131

²³ Ibid, p141

²⁴ Georgia L. Irby-Massie, 1999, *Military Religion in Roman Britain*, Leiden, p29

especially if it was viewed as a happier and more glorious age. In a conservative Roman world there were still many opportunities to commemorate it despite the growth of Christianity, not least through the secularised activity of *ludi* and *circenses*, both of which figure greatly in the Calendar of 354, especially in connection with the Imperial cult. The cult is an example of a tradition that survives in a de-paganised and somewhat secularised form through public events that require little theological input in order to function, regardless of whatever moral standpoint a Christian may hold on them (the disapproval of gladiatorial games being an example). It is in this regard that the few references to emperors of the distant past occur in the calendar, examples being the *ludi Augustales* which, despite being established by Augustus, are celebrated for a solitary day on the 12th October, while the *ludi Palatini* are celebrated for a total of 5 days, from the 17th to 19th of January and again two days later on the 21st and 22nd of January. It is interesting to compare this with the *Feriale Duranum*, where much greater emphasis is placed on past rulers, and goes to show the extent to which the cult was changing in the early 4th century. Although the *Feriale Duranum* is a military document, and could be expected to be more conservative and emperor-focused, there can be little doubt that it reflects the state religion of the early 3rd century. It is more about tradition and veneration of a glorious past, whereas the calendar of 354, as far as the Imperial cult is concerned, focuses more on the ever-pressing present, and provides an impression of the cult that reminds one of an overhauled personality cult intended to shore up an institution that was past its best.

Perhaps one of the more obvious things about the Codex Calendar is that although it was written for a Christian aristocrat, it is not only lacking in any

Christian festivals but it also contains numerous references to pagan gods²⁵. As this calendar is based on the official calendar of Rome, it is clear that the Christian calendar had yet to gain general acceptance as the official calendar of the Roman Empire. This is important as it demonstrates the extent to which people still lived their lives according to a cycle of pagan festivals. It was in the latter part of the 4th century that the pagan calendar began to significantly lose prominence particularly when various edicts banning pagan practice began to take effect²⁶. Although not the end of paganism, such edicts would have made official support for the pagan calendar untenable.

This separation of calendars is also indicative of a substantive division between Christian and pagan in that rather than Christianity trying to influence an existing pagan calendar it was attempting instead to present a clear alternative that would eventually displace the pagan equivalent. The Imperial cult dwelt primarily on the pagan calendar, and had no festival days on the Christian one, so evidently the place of the emperor in Christian thought was not of the sort that would warrant a festival day in its own right but was rather a hierarchical notion that depended on a theological and church-political arrangement. An example of this is the prayer that Constantine required his troops to say on parade every Sunday:

“You alone we know as God,
You are the [emperor] we acknowledge,
You are the help we summon.
By you we have won our victories,
Through you we have overcome our enemies.

²⁵ *On Roman Time: The Codex-Calendar of 354*, 1990, Michele Renee Salzman, Los Angeles, p125

²⁶ Jörg Rüpke, 2011, *The Roman Calendar from Numa to Constantine: Time, History and the Fasti*, trans. David M.B. Richardson, Chichester, p153

To you we render thanks for the good things past,
You also we hope for as giver of those to come.
To you we all come to supplicate for our Emperor
Constantine and for his Godbeloved Sons:
That he may be kept safe and victorious for us in long,
Long life, we plead.”²⁷

Here we see the reference to the emperor appended to the end of a fairly standard-sounding Christian prayer. This particular prayer was meant to be said by pagan soldiers while the Christian ones attended a church service where, one assumes, they had to utter a prayer for the emperor as part of the service. This sort of practice is what would, ultimately, replace the cult festivals of the sort mentioned in the Calendar of 354.

The frequency of the festival days of the Imperial cult in the Calendar of 354 demonstrated that the emperor still expected to enjoy the adulation of his subjects, but as Christianity came to dominate the religious life of the Roman Empire the festivals of the Calendar of 354 came to represent a tradition that operated more in a secular sense, and indeed it does not make clear the extent to which it was the traditions that caused these festivals to be celebrated that mattered rather than the gods to which these festivals were ostensibly dedicated. That the loyalty of a people could be bought with ‘bread and circuses’ was beyond doubt, and it may well be that the Calendar of 354 reflects the employment of traditions by the state to buy the loyalty of the people. That the opinion and influence of the city Rome itself was losing its political influence during this time perhaps supports the notion that the

²⁷ Eusebius, 1999edn, *Life of Constantine*, trans. Averil Cameron and Stuart G. Hall, Oxford, IV.20, p160

festivals noted in the calendar were permitted because the opinion of people who celebrated them did not matter and so it was easier to just let them get on with the traditions they knew. This does of course have implications for the Imperial cult, and as the Christian religion increased its hold it would have become more important than ever to ensure that the emperor had a place in Christian teaching commensurate with his status.

In general, the main point of the cult still stood, namely the continued practice of consecrating a deceased emperor in a manner that is highly reminiscent of pagan practice. As inferred in the *Life of Constantine* by Eusebius, the process of consecration, or apotheosis, is one undertaken by the prompting and consent of the Senate in Rome²⁸. Given that the Senate, a venerable, respected and conservative institution, remained largely pagan in this period it follows that certain concessions had to be made to it, though if one could regard allowing it to deify a recently deceased emperor as a concession, then it is a relatively superficial one. The emperor would have easily found another body to look to for celestial support should the Senate have chosen to relieve itself of one of the few substantial functions it had left, the body in question being the Church. Indeed, throughout this period the rise of the Church, and its close association with an increasingly Christian imperial office, meant that the religious basis for the emperor's right to rule inevitably became more Christian. This basis entailed the continued veneration of a divinely chosen ruler after his death in order to demonstrate his continued senior position in heaven over the rest of the Christian flock.

However, the concept of a divinised emperor lives quite late on into the 4th century, at least superficially. We have an account of the oath soldiers took

²⁸ Eusebius, 1999edn, *Life of Constantine*, trans. Averil Cameron and Stuart G. Hall, Oxford, IV:69, p180

following the completion of their basic training in a military manual written by Vegetius, which can be dated to the late 4th century by the following passage:

“From the founding of the City down to the time of the deified Gratian, the infantry army was equipped with both cataphracts and helmets.”²⁹

This dates the work to, or shortly after, AD 383 as Gratian died in that year. Almost nothing is known about Vegetius himself, but the tone of the *Epitome* seems to suggest a man in line with the commonly accepted views of the time, and so to insert a reference to a divine emperor would imply that such an idea was still sufficiently accepted for its inclusion into a text relating to a state institution to be deemed acceptable. As for the oath taken by the soldiers, Vegetius provides us with what seems to be a fairly full account of it in which he refers to it in the context of the recruitment process. The oath is highly Christian in nature, with the recruits swearing by the holy Trinity and the Roman emperor. This is perhaps predictable, considering the increasing numbers of Christians in the army during this time, as a number of inscriptions containing a number of Christian symbols attest³⁰.

Interestingly, aside from the fact that a Christian emperor is taking auspices, he is also referred to as being second only to God in importance, and he rules by God’s authority:

“So when recruits have been carefully selected who excel in mind and body, and after daily training for four or more months, a legion is formed by order and auspices of the invincible emperor. The soldiers are marked with tattoos

²⁹ Vegetius, 1993edn, *Epitome of Military Science*, Trans N.P. Milner, 1:20, p18

³⁰ Herman Dessau, 1892, *Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae*, Berlin, inscriptions 2806, 2811, 2812

in the skin which will last and swear an oath when they are enlisted on the rolls. That is why (the oaths) are called the “sacraments” of military service. They swear by God, Christ and the Holy Spirit, and by the Majesty of the Emperor which second to God is to be loved and worshipped by the human race. For since the Emperor has received the name of the “August”, faithful devotion should be given, unceasing homage paid him as if to a present and corporeal deity [*praesenti et corporali deo*]. For it is God whom a private citizen or a soldier serves, when he faithfully loves him who reigns by God’s authority. The soldiers swear that they will strenuously do all that the Emperor may command, will never desert the service, nor refuse to die for the Roman State.”³¹

The reference to auspices is unusually given the Christian context, more so than the reference to the emperor’s quasi divinity. It is not entirely clear if this is a reference to an entrenched military tradition or whether it represents an Imperial cult ritual. In any case the passage provides a useful secular view of the place of the emperor in a Christian state (there is no evidence to suggest Vegetius was a priest or had any theological training). It is, of course, an idealised view, and the corruption of the army and the employment of barbarian *foederati* would have undermined the sort of established and stable military system necessary to ensure Vegetius’s guidelines could be followed, even if many of the said barbarians (particularly the Goths) were already Christian. Vegetius’s work remained a standard military text throughout the medieval period³², and although this passage is brief and is the only part where the place of the ruler in a Christian context is mentioned, it could hardly have been lost

³¹Vegetius, 1993edn, *Epitome of Military Science*, Trans N.P. Milner, 2:5, p34

³² Maurice Keen (ed), 1999, *Medieval Warfare: A History*, Oxford, p146

on those medieval rulers, officials and soldiers who read it, not to mention the churchmen who would have copied and translated it. There are, however, a couple of things worth noting about this passage. Firstly, Gratian is referred to as *divus*, which if nothing else is evidence of an old idea dying hard. Since Gratian was a Christian ruling a largely Christian empire, and given that Vegetius also seems to be Christian, this term may represent a naming convention used in passing rather than an actual religious belief. The second point is rather more substantial, and occurs where Vegetius also says that the emperor should receive “faithful devotion” and that “unceasing homage paid him as if to a present and corporeal deity”. It is true that Constantine styles himself as an apostle, but that was not the same as actual divinity, and while it is natural for Christian emperors to be set apart from men at least in the eyes of the divine the above passage appears to be more of a survival from pre-Christian times.

To some extent this demonstrates the influence of the emperor on the religious thinking of the Church. However closely the Roman Empire and the Christian church were bound up, the notion thus expressed in the Epitome must be a principle created for the former and tacitly accepted by the latter. It could be of course that Vegetius is presenting an ideal and is over-stating things, but this is impossible to say. We do not know how accurate a record of the oath the Epitome preserves, how uniform any oath taken was from unit to unit, nor do we have any comparable oaths against which it could be measured. We have even less of an idea how seriously it was taken by those who took it. Nevertheless, given the instruction-manual-like nature of Vegetius’s work and the wide audience it was intended for, it is most probably reliable.

What Vegetius's work points to is the increasing Christianisation of pre-Christian practice. Even if only in terms of concept and vocabulary, it suggests that as far as literature is concerned there was a rather gradual shift from a pagan context to a Christian one as the context of Empire itself shifted from pagan to Christian. Christianity, though strong, had not yet displaced paganism, despite an assortment of measures taken over the course of the 4th century to strengthen its position, and the shift from one religion to another was far from immediate. The relatively slow shift in literary convention points to a correspondingly gradual displacement of pagan style, with a rapid change likely to damage the Church were it likely to achieve this by taking overt exception to what was being said of Christian emperors. It was in the interest of the Church to be the stable, pro-Imperial institution that it was eager to present itself as. In any case the Church, having been an object of hostility for the emperors, was now a potentially useful institution. As such it came to terms with the idea that it could and should accept the holder of the office of emperor as being fundamentally compatible with Christian beliefs.

Thus when the emperor became Christian it was relatively easy for Christians to find a place for him in the order of things. Naturally he could never be accepted as a god; D.L. Jones puts it succinctly by stating of Christian belief "honours which should be reserved for God alone could not be bestowed upon men."³³, but God-favoured and God-appointed he certainly was. Origen had addressed this matter in detail in his work *Contra Celsum* which was written between AD 246 and 248, and we shall look at his work on this in Chapter 3. It was therefore acceptable, indeed desirable, to venerate him as one who was holy, and the focus of earthly authority as placed in him by God.

³³ Donald L Jones, 1980, *Christianity and the Roman Imperial Cult*, Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt, 23.2, Berlin, p1023

It was also difficult for the church to have its own way all the time. By becoming Christian, the most powerful man in the empire had, through that position, become effective head of the church. For that reason it would have been difficult for the church to publicly undermine a cult that promoted loyalty to the emperor, especially since it had benefitted greatly through having such a figure as a patron³⁴. However, although having the emperor in such a powerful position it made it difficult to oppose him most of the time, such a relationship was not without its political benefit. By enjoying the patronage of the emperor, the Church increased its influence over the people, both in a 'soft' way although the increase in wealth which allowed it to provide to some small degree for the needy, and in a 'hard' way by allowing it to pull down pagan temples with the sanction (overt or otherwise) of the state. Through this patronage the Church thereby appropriated a degree of political power, which it was able to direct, very occasionally, back towards the emperor. For example, archbishop Ambrose was able to compel the emperor Theodosius to change the law on capital punishment to ensure no one was sentenced to death with undue haste³⁵, something that a pagan priest of the first and second centuries probably would have found impossible to do in a religious capacity even if he was so inclined to try. The relationship between church and emperor was not simply a case of master and servant, but one of leader and advocate cum moral counsel. By giving the emperor the religious basis to rule the empire, by allowing him his cult, and by acting as his agents in religious matters the church enjoyed patronage and influence. Whether through its significant political influence, its exemption from taxes, its right to enforce certain religious practices, or simply through the acquisition of lands and

³⁴ Ramsey MacMullen, 1997, *Christianity and Paganism in the Fourth to Eighth Centuries*, New Haven and London, p34

³⁵ Zonaras, 2009edn, *The History of Zonaras*, trans. Thomas M. Banchich and Eugene N. Lane, Oxford, p185

other resources³⁶, the church found itself growing in wealth and power under the Christian emperors to an extent that was previously unimagined. This would have made biting the feeding imperial hand over something as increasingly trivial as an easily de-paganised and yet indispensable cult rather unwise. Yet in the case of Constantine he regarded it as the role of the state to stamp out heresy and schism, and to that end he needed a unified and strong Church³⁷.

What we see here is the transition of the cult from a material form to something that exists in a more theoretical sense. The cult was still used as a reason for games and festivals, and it still existed on coins, inscriptions and in literature, but the actual religious ceremony that surrounded it in the earlier and mid empire was diminishing with each passing reign. The transition from high-value deification complete with temples, priesthoods, sacrifices, prayers, libations and so on to mere convention plus personality cult plus occasional ceremony (such as those surrounding Constantine in Constantinople in the years after his death) allowed the cult to recede into the area of deference at court and amongst the populace, and veneration in religious circles. This is important as it meant that no new temples were built to the emperors (the last attempt at such a manifest act was in AD 276 under Tacitus), and no new priesthoods were devoted to them. As the 4th century progressed, the emphasis would shift to manifestations such as the emperor's name being proclaimed in prayers that were devoted chiefly to the one God (such as the one Constantine instructed his troops to say), and nowhere would he be held to be the equal of that God. His divinity would no longer be taken literally, and suggestions of it would be confined to the conventions of coins (such as those of Constantine; see above), inscriptions (such as that of Hispellum; see above) and panegyric works

³⁶ A.H.M. Jones, 1964, *The Later Roman Empire: 284 – 602*, Oxford, p933

³⁷ *Ibid*, p934 – 935

during the first half of the 4th century. Eventually, as the various pagan priesthoods of the empire were replaced by a single Christian priesthood, even the part-time priests of his cult would cease to exist. At this point we see the transition from Roman emperor to medieval monarch underway, at least in respect of the secular ruler's relationship with the church and with God. The legal basis for some sort of cultic survival, as laid down in the Theodosian Code (which will be covered in the next chapter), meant that a significant residue of the cult would survive into the 5th century in the West, but by this time the church, the guardian of the emperor's 'divine' image, was having to contend with new rulers, and build relationships with them that would also take into account their relationship with the divine. The advent of Germanic kings in the West, some of whom were Orthodox Christian, others Arian Christian, and still others not Christian at all, meant that the legacy of the cult, and the religious principles the church developed to accommodate it, would be recycled and adapted to fit this new context, and so in a sense would continue to exist in this context.

There can be no doubt, however, that the position of emperor was itself changing in the late 3rd century. The response of Diocletian to the troubles of empire was to appoint a co-emperor (Maximian) in AD 285, before creating the Tetrarchy in AD 293, where both he and Maximian each appointed a junior partner who was given the title of 'Caesar'. These junior partners, Galerius Maximianus and Flavius Constantius respectively, were meant to ensure a smooth succession, but inevitably this institutionalised division and despite having, in effect, four emperors, revolts eventually sprang up and took considerable time and resources to put down³⁸. The effective division of the Empire into Western and Eastern halves, each with its own

³⁸ Adrian Goldsworthy, 2010, *The Fall of the West*, London, p159 – 162

emperor, virtually invited conflict, and the growing inability of the emperors themselves to assert their authority over their territories to the degree necessary to prevent the seemingly endless rise of usurpers and rebellions of one sort or another forced them to spend precious resources securing their own position that in a previous age would have gone to defending the Empire from both the external and internal political threats that contributed to this insecurity in the first place. Perhaps one of the more obvious examples of this is the reign of Honorius at the beginning of the 5th century, a reign which was marked by his defeat of various usurpers in the West (for example Constantine III), and yet he was unable to prevent the Vandals, Alans and Sueves from crossing the Rhine frontier in 406 AD or to prevent the Gothic sack of Rome in AD 410³⁹. The large numbers of Germanic peoples moving across the frontier relative to the size of the army, plus the desertion of many *foederati* to Alaric after the fall of Stilicho in AD 408 would have made it difficult for the Roman army of the time to deal with the situation effectively, especially at provincial level⁴⁰.

Just as the increasing division and dislocation of the empire was becoming more of a problem, so the rise of a unified, centralised and hierarchical Christian church as the new dominant religion only added to the number of powerful factions that emperors had to please. Whereas previously religion was a fairly haphazard affair that was too diverse to effectively oppose the political will of an emperor, the Christian Church was a unified, hierarchical and an increasingly powerful and wealthy institution, with churchmen having conflicting loyalties to their faith and their church on the one hand, and to their emperor on the other. The rise of powerful churchmen with the material resources to contest the loyalty of the citizenry to the

³⁹ Roger Collins, 1999, *Early Medieval Europe: 300 – 1000*, Basingstoke, p59 – 60

⁴⁰ A.H.M. Jones, 1964, *The Later Roman Empire: 284 – 602*, Oxford, p196 – 198

state did not in itself undermine the office of emperor directly, but the prevailing political disorder at the time allowed the Church to take advantage of the emperors' weakness.

A good example of this is the well-known stand-off between archbishop Ambrose of Milan and the emperor Theodosius, which the bishop won after eight months. While not a total demolition of the emperor's authority, and an event that was something of a one-off, it showed that the balance of power was shifting away from the emperor. The relationship between the emperor and the church had never been perfect even after the conversion of Constantine, with a great deal of friction being caused by the dissent within the church, during the course of which the emperor could not avoid taking sides, even if he was eager to see a united church and was prepared to use his power to achieve it, even if he chose to rely on the advice of senior clergy before acting⁴¹. Added to this was the on-going conflict between pagan and Christian as well as the church's involvement in politics. Having gained the emperor as a powerful ally the Church did not necessarily have any easy time of keeping that ally on board. However, as time progressed the church found it could argue with and make demands of the emperor where previously this had been the preserve of the army.

When Theodosius massacred 15,000 people in Thessalonica Ambrose took the opportunity to deny communion to the emperor, and demanded that he change the law on capital punishment. Of this event, Zonaras wrote:

“After [Theodosius] had reached Thessalonica with his army, he was insulted by the Thessalonians and the prefect was murdered, the populace

⁴¹ A.H.M. Jones, 1964, *The Later Roman Empire: 284 – 602*, Oxford, p934

having rioted as a result of certain grievances. Now the sovereign then seemed to exhibit forbearance toward the populace's action. But subsequently he announced an equestrian contests and, when the populace had gathered in the theatre, the army surrounded them and with arrows and javelins shot the populace down, with the result that of them almost 15,000 died. After he had sated his anger in this fashion, Theodosius departed and went to the city of Mediolanum. There he was censured by Ambrose the Great and not allowed to enter the church. He did not permit him entrance to the divine precinct unless he enacted a law that capital sentences not be enforced until thirty days should elapse after the sentence. This he did on account of the sovereign's predisposition toward anger, in order that, his anger being spread through the thirty days, he re-examine his sentences dispassionately and confirm the lawful but annul those that had perhaps been promulgated through rage."⁴²

One would find it difficult to imagine even the Senate standing up to the emperor in this way, and the fact that it was a religious figure who stood up to Theodosius would have had an obvious impact on how the emperor's place in the divine order of things was portrayed. Whether or not Ambrose counted on the religious faith of those around the emperor and that of the emperor himself to keep him safe from reprisal is unclear, yet the fact remains that here was an emperor being chastised by a priest to a degree that went somewhat beyond the slight differences of theological opinion that one could expect. One would have difficulty imagining such a thing happening during the pre-Christian empire. While pagan emperors were beholden to auspices

⁴² Zonaras, 2009, *The History of Zonaras*, trans. Thomas M. Banchich and Eugene N. Lane, Oxford, p185

and other religious ceremonies, such as the need to perform sacrifice, the idea of a pagan priest talking to the emperor, who was after all *Pontifex Maximus* would have been difficult to imagine. If a Christian emperor was God's chosen, then it was up to the Church as keeper of the Christian faith to regulate the behaviour of God's chosen ruler so that he behaved in the manner that a divinely appointed emperor should. He was, after all a mortal, and not a God. The incident between Ambrose and Theodosius was to have long-lasting consequences. An 11th century historian by the name of Cedrenus wrote an account of the event that stated:

“And straightaway, when the sovereign had commanded that this law be written and had confirmed with his own hand, Ambrose released the bond and allowed him to enter the church. And when he had entered, having fallen flat upon the floor, he cried with a shout, “My soul is joined to the floor. Revive me according to your word Lord” [Psalms 119.25]. And with his hands he began to tear the hairs from his head, to smite his face, to drench the earth with tears, and to importune God until the hour of communion. Then, when he had arisen and approached the chancel, wishing to enter, he was hindered by Ambrose, who declared to him, “Know, sovereign, that the things within are accessible to priests alone, but to all others inaccessible and not to be touched. Indeed now, depart and share the space with the others. For a purple robe normally makes sovereigns, not priests.””⁴³

⁴³ Cedrenus, 2009edn, 556.6 – 21, quoted in *The History of Zonaras*, trans. Thomas M. Banchich and Eugene N. Lane, Oxford, p262

Ambrose's remarks to Theodosius at the end of the passage are an early reference to what would become the division between spiritual and temporal lordship of the post-Roman and Medieval period, and would be known as the 'two swords' doctrine. An earlier historian, Theodore Anagnostes, wrote of this event in the early 6th century, and stated:

“...Ambrose admitted him to the church. But he still did not allow him to enter the area of the altar, though he had previously had the traditional power to do so, but rather he suffered the sovereign to stand outside with the people. And from that occasion this practice is maintained.”⁴⁴

While Symeon Magister wrote;

“Then, when he had eventually been received after much supplication and repentance, Ambrose, having as usual brought forward the customary gifts, after he had given instruction on the character of priests and sovereigns, ordered him to stand outside of the sanctuary. When he arrived in Constantinople, he used this as a model – sovereigns prior to this having stood within the sanctuary.”⁴⁵

While Ambrose using his influence as a powerful churchman to get the law changed was important enough, another arguably more important change as far as the emperor's image is concerned is that henceforth he was banished to stand among the

⁴⁴ Theodore Anagnostes, 2009edn, *Epitome 270*, quoted in *The History of Zonaras*, trans. Thomas M. Banchich and Eugene N. Lane, Oxford, p262

⁴⁵ Symeon Magister, 2009edn, 95.10, quoted in *The History of Zonaras*, trans. Thomas M. Banchich and Eugene N. Lane, Oxford, p264

masses when attending church, and that he appeared to have been divested of a substantive role in religious ceremonies. While laws may come and go, this change in affairs seemed to be permanent. If one thinks back to the pagan past where the emperor was expected to have a religious function in terms of seeking auspices and performing sacrifices, not to mention their depiction on monuments (for example on the *ara pacis* in the case of Augustus or Trajan's Column in the case of Trajan) it is clear that emperors once played an important role in religious ceremonies. Indeed this practice continued until the beginning of the late third and early fourth century, as the emperor Galerius is depicted performing a sacrifice on the Arch of Galerius in the city of Thessaloniki. However, under the new unified and monotheistic Christian Roman religion, emperors were increasingly relegated to the secular sphere, and this must have been a telling indication of the emperor's subordination before God.

It is worth noting that Ambrose seemed to make a habit of haranguing the emperor, for later in the same passage he is found objecting to the emperor's decision to order certain individuals who had burned down a synagogue in Callinicum (Syria) to pay for its reconstruction. He did this in public and in church, where Theodosius:

“...had come to the church for one of the dominical celebrations...”⁴⁶

Evidently getting Theodosius to change the law on pain of exclusion from the holy sacraments was something Ambrose could get away with and this is indicative of the strength of his position. Evidently Theodosius could not just use troops to muscle into the church or have Ambrose arrested. It is likely, however, that the political shifts that allowed it to happen had been occurring for some time, and it is highly

⁴⁶ Zonaras, 2009edn, *The History of Zonaras*, trans. Thomas M Banchich and Eugene N Lane, Oxford, p186

indicative of the loosening of the emperor's grip on the authority needed to overcome influential Church figures such as Bishop Ambrose. It is important to note, however, that the tradition of praising the emperor in divine terms still existed, as the following quotes from a panegyric written by Latinus Pacatus Drepanius indicate:

“She [Spain] gave the Empire the great Trajan, and then Hadrian; to her the Empire is indebted for you. Let the land of Crete, famous as the cradle of the child Jupiter, and Delos, where the divine twins [Apollo and Artemis] learnt to crawl, and Thebes, illustrious as the nursemaid of Hercules, yield to this land. We do not know whether to credit the stories we have heard, but Spain has given us a god whom we can actually see.”⁴⁷

“And before I come to those things which you accomplished at a mature age, let me touch briefly upon that partnership of yours with your divine father in the camps...”⁴⁸

“Divine beings surely enjoy perpetual motion and eternity maintains its energy by continuous activity, and whatever we mortals call work is your nature.”⁴⁹

These quotes all come from the same work addressed to Theodosius at Rome between June and September AD 389. Therefore, around the time that Ambrose was asserting the authority of the Church over the emperor Theodosius, the emperor

⁴⁷ C.E.V. Nixon and Barbara Saylor Rodgers, 1994, *In Praise of Later Roman Emperors*, Los Angeles, p452

⁴⁸ Ibid, p458

⁴⁹ C.E.V. Nixon and Barbara Saylor Rodgers, 1994, *In Praise of Later Roman Emperors*, Los Angeles, p460

himself was still being praised in pagan terms as quasi divine. Apart from being a good indication of the respective positions of paganism and Christianity, the above quotes also show that old literary habits were dying hard and that even a Christian emperor might not object to being praised as very nearly divine. The second quote refers to Theodosius's 'divine' father, and the other two allude to his own divinity. Whether the audience present at the recitation of this work included frowning churchmen we will never know, but it is possible that there were inconsistencies in the Christianity of the court that may have prompted churchmen such as Ambrose to try and increase their influence over the emperor, besides the more obvious motive of acquiring political power and all the benefits that brought.

To that end, Ambrose had proved that the emperor, far from being in charge of his own cult, could, if necessary, be subordinated in a sphere where in pagan times he could not be. While the incident pointed to a slight re-definition of the authority of the emperor it was only a symptom and not itself a cause. It is true that the sight of an emperor being humbled by an institution that existed within the Empire could not have helped his standing with those immediately around him, but by this stage the office of Emperor in the West was starting to show signs of decline. The Church had acquired a significant amount of political power as well as influence over the population, and so could be regarded as a potentially significant divisive element in a way that religion had not been previously. Furthermore, the Western Emperor was further weakened by the fact that the army was no longer as effective as it was in protecting the empire from external threat, at least in the West, since it was forced to face more effective and mobile barbarian opposition that was being organised on a greater scale and to whom had passed a degree of initiative. Apart from being militarily overstretched it was also being funded on the back of an economy that was

not capable of supporting an army of a sufficient size to secure the entire frontier⁵⁰, hence the passage of tribes such as the Goths and Vandals into it. Aside from its military problems, the army also had a destabilising political impact as it was also responsible for elevating usurpers to the throne which deflected effort away from other equally pressing military matters.

In the following century the Church found itself having to confront a new set of rulers, specifically the leaders of the Germanic peoples who began settling within the Western Empire in the later 4th century and who would go on to establish monarchies on territory formerly part of the Roman Empire. Although it was not until the Roman Empire actually fell in the west in the later 5th century that these kingdoms started to formally establish themselves, the relationship between the Church and these new entities had already been germinating for some time. Many of the tribesmen living adjacent to the Roman frontier, particularly the Danube frontier, had converted to Christianity (although mostly to the Arian form of it) and were already familiar with the Roman Empire and what distinguished it from them. The Christian Church began the process of bridging this difference in the 4th century, and in doing so began to transfer its own version of the relationship between a monarch and God to these peoples. Here it was confronted with a considerably less sophisticated system of government, so the Christian notion of the divinely-appointed kings would emerge among these peoples in perhaps a purer form than in the more sophisticated, conservative and tradition-bound Empire.

It was during the 4th century, when the Empire became more formally Christian that Christianity first began to spread to the Germanic peoples beyond the frontier.⁵¹ At the time the possibility that these peoples would eventually rule the

⁵⁰ A.H.M. Jones, 1964, *The Later Roman Empire: 284 – 602*, Oxford, p1035 – 1038

⁵¹ Carole M. Cusack, 1998, *Conversion among the Germanic Peoples*, London, p39

territories and surviving subjects of the Roman Empire would have seemed remote, and so the Church probably took little interest in how the average tribal king or *dux* related to the Church. However, the role of king was not entirely overlooked as it provided a useful means of furthering the Christian faith through the network of patronage and dependency that kings controlled. By converting a king it was more likely that a king's subjects would themselves be converted. In this respect the missionaries probably had something to say about the role of God and the place of the king in the order of things, but this would have been incidental, and would not compare to the shifts occurring between the Church and the Roman emperor.

In the following century the almost residual importance of the Imperial cult would decline in Europe in conjunction with the decline of the Western Roman Empire. However, the ideology that the Church developed to accommodate the emperor in its thinking would live on as the Church found itself having to do the same with the post-Roman kingdoms that emerged during the 5th century.

Furthermore, the Empire left a legacy in the shape of the Theodosian Code. It is also important to compare the legal position with the theological one as defined by a significant theological authority, and it is to these two important aspects that we will now take a more detailed look.

Chapter 3

The legal and theological place of the emperor in religious thought in the Christian Empire

An important step in understanding the evolution of Imperial cult into the Christian definition of monarchy in the 4th century and later is the understanding of the religious status of the emperor in a formal, legal position. As a religious institution in the first instance, the Imperial cult is not easy to define, but some idea of how it came to be viewed in this period can be obtained from one source in particular, namely the Roman law code known as the Theodosian Code, a text that is heavily charged with Christian ideology. The Theodosian Code is a compilation of about 2,500 constitutions issued between the accession of Constantine in the west in AD 313 and AD 437 during the reign of Theodosius II¹. As such it is almost exclusively a document of the Christian empire, even though some laws passed by the pagan Julian are also preserved, although none of his laws relate to the Imperial cult. For such a large work, references to the Imperial cult are few and far between, yet the rules relating to it are not so trifling as to suggest the wholesale abandonment of the cult.

The Later Empire, much like every other developed state, was “...a legally oriented society...”², and given the complexity of the Code and the matters it deals with, it is fair to assume that the law must have had a significant impact on most inhabitants of the empire in this period, though no doubt its application was uneven, both across time, place and social status.

¹ John F. Matthews, 2000, *Laying Down the Law: A study of the Theodosian Code*, New Haven, p11

² Jill Harries, 1999, *Law and Empire in Late Antiquity*, Cambridge, p78

Although the Theodosian Code is full of religious language, the topics it covers up to and including Book 15 are almost entirely secular in nature. Even when it strays onto religious territory in Book 16, it is more about re-enforcing the position of the Church by banning Christians from being the custodians of temples, exempting clergy from taxes and ultimately banning pagan sacrifice. It also sought to outlaw heresy and, amongst other things, banned re-baptism, so it is also about enforcing Orthodox Catholic teaching. It contains very little that had a direct bearing on either the Imperial cult or the place of a divine or quasi-divine emperor (living or dead) in religious life. In fairness, parts of Books 1 to 5 are missing (possibly up to two thirds³), though these chapters mostly deal with fairly mundane matters that are unlikely to have referred either to the Imperial cult or other religious matters relating to the emperor.

However, while the Code is evidently not a document that concerns itself with the Imperial cult in any great measure owing to its origin in a more Christian era, it is possible to tease a handful of pronouncements out of it from which we can learn something about the residual place of the cult. Starting with a law in Book 9 dated to AD 386 in the reign of Theodosius I, the code permits people to flee for sanctuary to the statues of the emperors for up to 10 days. The law itself says:

Emperors Valentinian, Theodosius, and Arcadius Augustuses to
Cynegius, Praetorian Prefect.

We suffer those persons who have taken refuge at the statues of the
Emperors, either for the purpose of avoiding danger or of creating ill will,
neither to be taken away by anyone before the tenth day nor to go away of

³ John F. Matthews, 2000, *Laying Down the Law: A study of the Theodosian Code*, New Haven, p86

their own accord; provided that, if they had definite reasons for which they had to flee to the statues of the Emperors, they shall be protected by law and the statutes. But if they should be revealed to have wished to create ill will against their enemies by their own artifices, an avenging sentence shall be pronounced against them.⁴

The law does not say anything about where these statues are situated, although some may have remained within surviving temples. Coin evidence suggests that statues were indeed situated within temples, and as late as the AD 150s a sestertius of Antoninus Pius shows a statue of the recently-divinised Faustina within a temple⁵. The above also does not clarify whether it only applies to certain types of statue. For example, it does not indicate if it applies to those erected in certain places at the instruction of the emperor as opposed to those erected at the behest of private citizens or public servants (with or without official permission), or whether it applies to the statues of all emperors or Christian emperors only. By the lack of clarification it is reasonable to interpret the law as meaning any statue of any emperor in any public place. This would have included statues of emperors in a temple dedicated to the Imperial cult, numbers of which still would have existed throughout the empire, as well as those statues found in other public buildings and places. Indeed, during the 4th century cult statues were still being erected, as the colossal statue of Constantine in Rome demonstrates. Furthermore, many of these would have been found in conjunction with an inscription, such as the following which was located in the mausoleum of Hadrian in Rome, close to St Peter's basilica:

⁴ *The Theodosian Code*, 1952edn, trans. Clyde Pharr, Princeton, p264

⁵ Peter Stewart, 2003, *Statues in Roman Society: Representation and Response*, Oxford, p211

“To the divine Emperor Caesar Trajan Parthicus son of the divine Nerva, the divine Trajan Hadrian Augustus his grandson, chief priest, holder of tribunician power 22 times, holder of the imperium twice, consul three times, father of his country, and to the divine Sabina.

The Emperor Caesar Titus Aelius Hadrian Antoninus Augustus Pius, chief priest, holder of tribunician power for the second time, consul for the second time...father of his country [dedicated this to] his parents.”⁶

The pagan phraseology of this inscription would have been found in an equally pagan building, one moreover dedicated to the Imperial cult and pronouncing the divine nature of the emperors memorialised therein. Yet for all of that, the above law would still have applied despite its Christian context, and in general terms this law points to two things; the survival of the material remains of the Imperial cult in sufficient quantity to be deemed worthy of a law, and an importance that was still attached to those remains and that was on a par with Christian religious sanctuaries such as churches. Many statues of emperors would have existed in public places at this time, and given the wording of the above-mentioned law these statues evidently still mattered. However, although there does not appear to be a legal distinction between emperors, in practice one suspects those of the reigning dynasty were treated with greater reverence than most of the rest. Nevertheless, the precedent of allowing such an expensive image of an emperor, pagan or otherwise, to become an object of indifference was not one Theodosius I seemed willing to set.

The importance of images of an emperor is further emphasised in another law, found in Book 15 and dated to AD 406 in the reign of Arcadius:

⁶ Herman Dessau, 1892, *Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae*, Berlin, no. 322 (p83)

The same *Augustii* [Arcadius and Honorius] to Aemilianus, Prefect of the City.

If it should become necessary at any time to repair porticoes or any buildings which have become dilapidated through age or chance happenings, it shall be permitted to take down Our images or those of previous Emperors, with due reverence, even without consulting Our Clemency, and they shall be restored to their proper places after the building is repaired.⁷

Aside from requiring any images to be treated with due reverence, the law makes a point of applying itself to those images of previous emperors as well as the current ones. Here we see the importance that is to be attached to the imperial office, and the absence of any distinction between pagan, Christian, cultic and non-cultic contexts demonstrates the willingness of the emperor to overlook any religious scruples for the sake of honouring that office. It is in exceptions like this that the survival of the Imperial cult, an intrinsically pagan concept, is assisted through the highly pragmatic need of the emperors to maintain the importance of their position.

Later on in Book 15 we find another law relating to the Imperial images:

Emperor Theodosius Augustus and Valentinian Caesar to Aetius, Praetorian Prefect.

If at any time, whether on festal days, as is usual, or on ordinary days, statues or images of Us are erected, the judge shall be present without employing the vainglorious heights of adoration, but so that he may show that his presence has graced the day, the place, and Our memory. Likewise

⁷ *The Theodosian Code*, 1952edn, trans. Clyde Pharr, Princeton, p428

if Our images are shown at plays or games, they shall demonstrate that Our divinity and glory live only in the hearts and the secret places of the minds of those who attend. A worship in excess of human dignity shall be reserved for the Supernal Divinity.⁸

Dated to AD 425 in the reign of Theodosius II, this law represents an interesting dichotomy, whereby the divinity of deceased or living emperor is clearly stated, but recognition of it is to be confined to the conscience of the people, whereas only the supreme deity, and the only divinity if one accepts the basic creed of Christianity, is to enjoy overt devotion. So the emperor, living or dead, seems to be a divinity in theory but not in practice and only in a restrained, almost hesitant manner. The relatively late date of this law compared to other laws in the corpus makes this suggestion particularly surprising, but demonstrates quite nicely that the language of the Imperial cult persisted for some time after the religion that created it ceased to function at an official level.

There follow in a few places a number of pronouncements that seem to allow an interpretation that would have an effect on the Imperial cult, or at least what remained of its material existence. Starting with a law in Book 16 passed in AD 396, the code punishes the superstition of idolatry by those who are Christian, with the punishment being the loss of a right to make a will and the property being inherited instead by the individuals designated in the law.

Emperors Arcadius and Honorius Augustuses to Caesarius, Praetorian
Prefect.

⁸ *The Theodosian Code*, 1952edn, trans. Clyde Pharr, Princeton, p432

If any persons have defiled themselves with the impious superstition of idolatry when they were Christians, they shall incur the penalty of not having the power to make a testament for the benefit of extraneous persons, but the aforesaid offenders shall have as heirs a specific succession of their family, namely father and mother, brother and sister, son and daughter, grandson and granddaughter; and no such person shall vindicate to himself the power to proceed farther.⁹

This points to the survival of pagan customs in a population that was supposed to be increasingly Christian, and is evidently meant to make those who were Christian actually behave as Christians. Although the impact on the Imperial cult would not have been direct (no religious or civic official, however zealous, would do anything to undermine a mechanism of showing devotion to the emperor), it would have served to drum into the population the line that there was only one Christian God. By doing so, this law may have unintentionally encouraged people to consider that these imperial *divi*, whom they were expected to revere, might not be *divi* after all. This does not, however, imply an undermining of the emperor in a religious sense, since by the time this law was passed in AD 396, the church had already developed a theology that cemented the place of rulers generally, and the emperor in particular, into the divinely-ordained order of things (as we shall see later in this chapter)

Later on in Book 16, we find a series of decrees under one title (Title 10)¹⁰ that amount to a collection of chronologically-ordered regulations relating to pagans, sacrifices and temples passed between AD 321 and AD 435. They are in fact increasingly severe pronouncements against pagan practice, though allowing some

⁹ *The Theodosian Code*, 1952edn,trans. Clyde Pharr, Princeton, p466

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p472

exceptions for the sake of facilitating public entertainments (No. 3) or preserving something of artistic value (No. 8) for example. No doubt objects of artistic value included statues of the imperial *divi* that continued to enjoy the veneration of legal protection (see above), not to mention the accompaniment of *ludi* and *circenses* on those days originally allotted to the celebration of the Imperial cult in which they would have played a prominent part. The question of the artistic value of either the images themselves or the contexts in which they were found would have resulted in a predictably positive response from those deemed important enough to ask (i.e. the emperor or his representative), unless of course they were dedicated to a previous emperor held in low regard by the current imperial incumbent.

Finally, there is the regulation under title 12 of the Sirmondian Constitution¹¹, dated to AD 407, which is yet another general pronouncement against pagan and unorthodox practice, for example Donatism (the law was posted in the forum at Carthage in North Africa, where there were many Donatists). Reference is made to the evil of idolatry, the welcome destruction of idols and altars, against having religious banquets in funereal places, and the appropriation of non-Christian religious buildings for the public use. Reference is also made to the laxness of public officials in enforcing similar regulations which had been previously issued and which this law re-states. Yet again, this law could be interpreted as implying a significant survival of pagan practice even within the more thoroughly Romanised parts of the empire, as well a more-than-residual sympathy on the part of the authorities towards those practices, not least when one considers that many individuals in high office were still pagan.

¹¹ *The Theodosian Code*, 1952edn, trans. Clyde Pharr, Princeton, p482

In an indirect way laws such as this point to a sort of Christianising of the Imperial cult, since if something of the cult still survived yet pagan practice was essentially banned, then evidently the Imperial cult was becoming acceptably Christian. In any case, by its nature as a mechanism for promoting loyalty to the emperor, it could not be banned and only fundamentally altered with difficulty, and that is what these laws were helping to do. In any case, it is not easy to measure the extent to which the Code meant anything more to the average citizen than it being the basis for the collection of taxes and other dues. Certainly in times of crisis, the payment, or just as likely the surrendering, of the *annona militaris* every four months to the *canonicarii*¹² may well have been all Roman law meant to most inhabitants. The Roman Empire had no civilian police force as we would recognise it, whilst the concept of equality before the law never existed. Legal protection was enjoyed by those rich and important enough to afford it i.e. the *honestiores*. To enter into any kind of legal action was to incur enormous expense, travel large distances and deal with judiciary that was not chosen for its legal expertise and was probably under the influence of social pressure and possibly intimidation¹³. The application of many laws would have been less than rigorous.

On the question of the legal status of the emperor in a religious or cultic sense though, it is reasonable to argue that the law fulfilled one important function. Even if only in a relatively minor way, it enshrined the concept that the emperor was not like other men, and that a degree of reverence was to be shown both to him as a person and any object that bore his image or was in some way derived from him. Once this precedent was recognised, especially in a legal code that effectively enshrined the

¹² A.H.M. Jones, 1964, *The Later Roman Empire: 284 – 602*, Oxford, p458

¹³ *Ibid*, p470

Christian faith into the Roman state, the position of the emperor as being above other men in both a legal and theological sense was assured.

This, however, only sets a legal precedent; it does not in itself provide anything more than the barest of guidelines on how the imperial image was to be treated and nothing at all on where exactly the emperor stood between God and man. For that we must look a little further afield.

In its simplest form, the Imperial cult was a religious concept, and for that reason it existed more in the world of priests than lawyers. On that basis, as the Roman Empire passed from being a largely pagan entity to a largely Christian one, so the rites formerly associated with the Imperial cult passed from the hands of pagan priests, the *flamines*, to those of the Christian priesthood. During the course of this transfer it underwent certain alterations that allowed it to exist in a world where there was, in theory, only one God and no other being could be divine in the sense that it could also be regarded as a god. Given the increasing political strength of the Church at this time, the theology developed to accommodate the Imperial cult became, essentially, that part of the legal system in the hands of religious officials rather than those of political ones. Here again, however, we are lacking a convenient handbook of regulations, and must obtain the 'official line' from sources even closer to the Church than the Theodosian Code.

Perhaps the best place to look in terms of establishing the Christian policy towards the emperor and also the Imperial cult are some of the religious texts produced by a number of Christian authors. Beginning with the Bible itself we can trace from an early point in Christianity's history the problems followers of that faith would have in reconciling their monotheism with the demands of the Roman state. It states in Exodus, 20.3-5:

“Thou shalt have no other gods before me. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me;”

That, it seems, is quite clear enough. This is the first of the Ten Commandments, which help form man’s covenant with God. As such, from the Christian point of view, there is no arguing with it. Later on in the Bible there is an indication of actual friction between Christianity and the state, and one that has been interpreted as being directed towards the Imperial cult, specifically the Book of Revelation 2:13, 13 and 17:1¹⁴. Here, it has been interpreted that in the case of Chapter 13 the first beast is a reference to the Roman Empire, while the second one represents the state machinery of the empire that is there to enforce the worship the first beast.¹⁵ Indeed, many passages in Revelation can be easily interpreted as being against the Roman Empire, which is hardly surprising given that it was supposed to have been written around the time of the persecution of the Christians under Domitian, an emperor famed for his somewhat high opinion of himself. It is noteworthy that during his reign Domitian increased the profile of the Imperial cult and directed more of its energy toward himself (notably by insisting on being addressed as *dominus et deus*) as opposed to his deceased predecessors. In Asia in particular, where there were many Christians, Domitian sought to conflate existing

¹⁴ Donald L. Jones, 1980, *Christianity and the Roman Imperial Cult*, Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt, 23.2, Berlin, P1034 – 1035

¹⁵ Ibid, p1034

religious cults with his own, for example instructing that his own festival be celebrated on the same day as the festival of Zeus, building a temple in Laodicea to his victories in Germany, and building a large (approximately 6m high) statue of himself in the precincts of the temple of Artemis in Ephesus¹⁶. He also took the Imperial cult in a new direction by instituting the practices of taking an oath by the emperor's *genius* and offering incense and libations before his statue¹⁷ (as opposed to those of dead emperors who had been deified). Despite being condemned for requiring this excessive worship, the practices were retained by his successors, and under Trajan's reign they were used as a means of testing the religious convictions of suspected Christians by Pliny the Younger (see Chapter 1). On the basis of these Biblical passages, and the Christian response to the religious innovations that took place during the reign of Domitian, it is possible to see how they could have contributed to the conflict between Christianity and the Roman state.

According to one author, the first Christian apologist to deal with the Imperial Cult with regard to its hitherto intrinsically pagan nature was Tertullian¹⁸. He is also perhaps the most important, since he approached the subject directly and in some detail. Although one could argue that the first Christian text to deal with the place of the emperor was the Bible, it is certainly true that Tertullian had much to say that is useful when it comes to defining the Christian relationship with the emperor, and his cult. Tertullian himself was born around the year AD 170 century at Carthage and his family background seems to have been well educated¹⁹. He may have converted to Christianity at an early point in his life, but joined the Montanists at some point prior to his death in the early 3rd century. There later emerges an African sect called

¹⁶ W.H.C. Frend, 1965, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church: A study of a conflict from the Maccabees to Donatus*, Oxford, p194

¹⁷ Ibid, p213

¹⁸ Marta Sordi, 1983, *The Christians and The Roman Empire*, trans. Annabel Bedini, London, 1983

¹⁹ Timothy David Barnes, 1971, *Tertullian: A Historical and Literary Study*, Oxford, p58

the *Tertullianistae*, although whether this sect derives from Tertullian founding his own sect having become disaffected with Montanism or whether it was simply the name given to African Montanists will never be known for certain²⁰. From this background, and his experience as a Christian in a city which still had a significant pagan population at this time²¹, we can deduce that he was highly familiar with pagan custom including that relating to the place of the emperor both politically and religiously. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that in his apologetical works he devotes some chapters to the place of the emperor in the Christian order of things.

The chapters that deal directly with the place of the emperor in a religious context are chapters 28 to 36²² of his *Apologeticus*. Taken together, these chapters deal directly with the Christian problem with the Imperial cult and offer solutions that effectively form the foundation of the Christian response to this cult and substantially contribute to the Christian understanding of the place of the ruler, whether emperor or king, in the order of things.

The relevant section of text begins at the end of chapter 28, where Tertullian states:

“We have come, then, to the second charge alleged against us, that of offending a more august majesty. You pay your obeisance to Caesar with greater fear and craftier timidity than to Olympian Jupiter himself...But you do this, not for any logical reason, but out of regard for his manifest and perceptible power. In this point, too, it will be seen that you are lacking in

²⁰ Timothy David Barnes, 1971, *Tertullian: A Historical and Literary Study*, Oxford, p258

²¹ Ibid, p87

²² Tertullian, 1950edn, *Apologetical Works*, trans. R. Arbermann, E.J. Daly and E.A. Quain, New York, pp 84-94

religious feeling toward your gods, since you show more fear to a human lord [*humanus dominus*].”²³

This paragraph advances the Christian view of the cult as practiced by pagans, although it is directed more at the folly of pagan worship than the status of the emperor. It asserts that the emperor is a ‘*humanus dominus*’, but does not disparage him in any way and does not suggest he is merely the equal of other men. From a Christian point of view it makes perfect sense and, given the political status of the Imperial cult and the capacity of the state to bend the poor and weak to its will, it is one that may well have found a sympathetic audience in the lower, and probably cynical, echelons of Roman society. Indeed, these were the very same echelons where Christianity happened to be making the most progress at the time of Tertullian’s writing.

This view, however, merely emphasises the need to develop a Christian response to the position of the emperor, whose existence and power could not be denied in a material sense. This Tertullian does in the succeeding passages of his *Apologeticus*. Starting at the beginning of chapter 20, he states:

“First, then, let it be established whether those to whom sacrifice is offered can grant health to the emperor or to any man at all, and then proclaim the charge of treason against us if the angels or demons, who are by nature the most evil of spirits, work any good; if the lost can save and the damned grant freedom; if finally the dead ... can protect the living.”²⁴

²³ Tertullian, 1950edn, *Apologetical Works*, trans. R Arbermann, E.J. Daly and E.A. Quain, New York, p84

²⁴ Ibid, p84

Tertullian then points out that the gods' "statues, images and temples" have to be kept safe by the emperor's soldiers and the materials from which they are made come from the emperor's mines and indeed entire temples "depend upon the nod of a Caesar". He goes on to say that if the gods gain the goodwill of an emperor he confers on them some (material) gift, and that if they are therefore within his power, how can he be in theirs? In fairness, even on the premise of Tertullian's argument that pagan gods are demons of limited power, this would become something of a specious argument in later centuries, when giving grants of some sort or size to the church in return for some kind of divine favour became common practice amongst those rich enough to afford such a bargain. Furthermore, Tertullian's argument is based on a wilful misunderstanding of paganism. His argument could apply to local divinities of which only one or two significant images may have existed, but the value attached to these idols was in all likelihood commensurate with that attached by Christians to holy relics, such as those of Saint Peter in Rome, or other holy objects. The argument starts to look less robust when one considers the example of Zeus, of whom hundreds, possibly thousands, of statues existed across the Empire both within temple precincts and other settings and yet according to Tertullian pagans would believe each one was Zeus. However, having dealt with the argument for sacrificing to the gods, Tertullian now turns to the notion of a divine emperor himself.

In chapter 30, Tertullian begins by stating that Christians pray to God for the welfare of the emperor:

“For, in our case, we pray for the welfare of the emperors to the eternal God, the true God, the living God...”²⁵

This small, innocuous remark is extremely important, since it immediately and succinctly states that Christians are supportive of the emperor and by extension the empire. They are not, it implies, a threat. However, Tertullian then goes on to suggest that the emperors are closet Christians, and that they know and believe that the one (i.e. Christian) God has given them all that they have. Such is the terminology of the text, but the principle is sound enough, namely that the emperors derive their power from God and that as such they cannot deny that they are below Him even if they are above their fellow humans. Tertullian states:

“They know who has given them power; they know – for they are men – who has given them life; they feel that He is the only God in whose power alone they are, commencing with whom they are second, after whom they stand first, who is before all and above all gods. Why not? – since they are above all men; since, as living beings, they surpass, at any rate, the dead. They consider to what extent power of empire avails and thus they come to understand God; against Him they cannot avail, through Him they know they do avail. Let the emperor [have a mind to] war against heaven, lead heaven in chains in his triumph, send his sentries to heaven, and on heaven impose his tax! He cannot do it. So he is mighty...for he is himself the property of Him to whom heaven and every creature belong. Looking up to Him, we Christians...constantly beseech Him on behalf of all emperors. We ask for

²⁵ Tertullian, 1950edn, *Apologetical Works*, trans. R. Arbermann, E.J. Daly and E.A. Quain, New York, p85

them long life, undisturbed power, security at home, brave armies, a faithful Senate, an upright people, a peaceful world, and everything for which a man or Caesar prays. Such petitions I cannot ask from any other save from Him, and I know that I shall obtain them from Him, since He is the only One who supplies them and I am one who ought to obtain my request”²⁶

The first part of this passage is interesting, since it implies a certain understanding of Christianity on the part of the emperor. It is not, however, an entirely absurd notion since in AD 222 Severus Alexander succeeded to the purple, and was said to have been sympathetic towards Christianity to the point where he was claimed by the *Historia Augusta* to have included a statue of Christ amongst those of other deities in his private chapel²⁷. However, as explained in a previous chapter, this story is hard to believe. However, Severus Alexander is recorded as being rather more tolerant of religious diversity, and if this was indeed the case then it would date Tertullian’s *Apology* to after the succession of Severus Alexander. In any case, having stated his position thus, Tertullian then goes on to argue the superiority of the Christian prayer as an offering to the divine over the material, and comparatively worthless, sacrifice of pagan ritual, thereby cementing the worth of Christian prayers for the emperor. This one passage sums up the view of the Christian religion towards the emperor’s place. It is one that enjoys divine favour, but is not in itself divine.

In chapter 31, Tertullian goes on to cite the New Testament to support his argument, notably in the First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to Timothy (2.2) where Paul exhorts Timothy to pray

²⁶ Tertullian, 1950edn, *Apologetical Works*, trans. R. Arbermann, E.J. Daly and E.A. Quain, New York, p85-86

²⁷ Donald L. Jones, 1980, *Christianity and the Roman Imperial Cult*, *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt*, 23.2, Berlin, P1043

“For kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty.”

He then points out that although they may be outsiders, Christians suffer along with everyone else should disaster strike.

Tertullian emphasises this point at the beginning of Chapter 32, before going on to state that Christians take an oath by the prosperity of the emperors, not their *genii*. He explains this by saying:

“Are you not aware that *genii* are evil spirits and, thence, to use a diminutive term, are called *daemonia*? We respect in the emperors the decision of God, since He has placed them over the people. We know that in them is that which God has willed, and so we wish that what God has willed be safe and sound, and we consider this an important oath. As for evil spirits, that is, *genii*, we are in the habit of exorcising them in order to drive them out of men, but not to swear by them in the manner that would confer upon them the honour of divinity.”²⁸

This passage could well be regarded as one of Tertullian’s most controversial from the point of view of an emperor-worshipping pagan. To denounce the *genii* as intrinsically evil would not go down well in the ranks of a cult that had been sacrificing to them for over two centuries. Tertullian is careful, however, to assert that Christians do not deny the whole concept of the emperor’s place in a religious

²⁸ Tertullian, 1950edn, *Apologetical Works*, trans. R. Arbermann, E.J. Daly and E.A. Quain, New York, p88

context, merely that their own approach to it is different and, as it happens, correct. This passage also takes care to make it perfectly clear that Christians regard the emperor as having been chosen by God, and as such their position far exceeds that of any other man. If, as the Christians argue, there is only one, supremely powerful, omnipotent God, then to be the solitary beneficiary of the divine favour of the all-powerful office of emperor was clearly an honour that exceeded all others, including any that could be offered by an assortment of fickle pagan ‘gods’, who were more influential than actually powerful.

Just to make the point, Tertullian begins his 33rd chapter by stating:

“Why should I say more about the respect and the loyalty of Christians toward the emperor? We are under obligation to look up to him as one whom our Lord has chosen. So, I might well say: ‘Caesar belongs more to us, since he has been appointed by our God.’²⁹

If the calling the *genii* evil was not contentious enough, Tertullian effectively claims a pagan emperor as being spiritually affiliated to Christianity. One doubts whether this would have gone down well amongst more traditional circles. Tertullian goes on to explain himself thus:

“And so, as he is mine, I do more for his welfare, not only because I pray for it to Him who can really grant it, or because I am such that I deserve to be heard, but also because, as I set the dignity of Caesar below that of God, I commend him the more to God to whom I alone I subordinate him.

²⁹ Tertullian, 1950edn, *Apologetical Works*, trans. R. Arbermann, E.J. Daly and E.A. Quain, New York, p89

However, I do subordinate him to God; I do not make him His equal. I will not call the emperor God, either because I do not know how to lie, or because I dare not make fun of him, or because even he himself does not want to be called God. If he is a man, it is to his interest as a man to yield precedence to God. Let him consider it enough to be called emperor. That, indeed, is the title of dignity which God has given him. One who says he is God says he is not the emperor; unless he were a man he could not be emperor.³⁰,

Though this passage is, to some extent, a reinforcement of what he has already said, it does explain quite neatly why Tertullian grades the emperor in relation to God in the way he does. He seems to be premising his argument on the idea that pagans consider the living emperor to be a god, which of course they do not, although in some cases they come fairly close, such as in Pliny's panegyric to Trajan. By stating that "...I set the dignity of Caesar below that of God...to whom I alone I subordinate him." Tertullian has actually come fairly close to the pagan notion of the place of the emperor in relation to the gods. The issue becomes, in effect, not one of status but the number of gods below which the emperor is ranked; one God or many gods. What Tertullian does do is explain why the emperor is acceptable to Christians, and why they are loyal to him; the emperor, as everything else, exists by the leave of God, whether he knows it or not.

In succeeding chapters, Tertullian addresses the question of flattery towards the emperor, and how dishonest this flattery is. At the beginning of chapter 34 he points out that Augustus himself did not want to be called 'lord' (*dominus*), and that

³⁰ Tertullian, 1950edn, *Apologetical Works*, trans. R. Arbermann, E.J. Daly and E.A. Quain, New York, p89

he will only call the emperor 'lord' in the conventional meaning of the word³¹. He suggests that this term, when applied to emperors, means 'father of his country', thus implying paternal responsibility (and is actually a formal title some emperors held i.e. *pater patriae*). He goes on to say:

“...improper is it that the emperor should be called God, which is unthinkable save in terms of a most disgraceful and pernicious flattery...If flattery like this, which addresses a man as god, does not blush for its hypocrisy, let it at least have fear of misfortune. It is blasphemous to call Caesar god before his apotheosis.”³²

This passage seems to be aimed not at the emperor himself, as most emperors did not regard themselves gods, but at the flatterers of any type who may be tempted to do so. Again, Tertullian is careful not to ridicule the emperor, but those who go a little too far in their praise of him. This was a widely accepted view, not least because some previous emperors had either deified themselves while still alive (such as Domitian), or had been deified after they had died even though they patently did not deserve to be ranked among the gods (such as Commodus). As such, this view cannot be regarded as uniquely Christian but was in fact shared by people across the various beliefs within the Empire. It can be interpreted, therefore, as an attempt to reconcile Christianity with people of other beliefs and not present it as being wholly different or excessive, but adhering to certain basic and sensible opinions which were shared by many others.

³¹ Tertullian, 1950edn, *Apologetical Works*, trans. R. Arbermann, E.J. Daly and E.A. Quain, New York, p90

³² Ibid, p90

Finally, in Chapter 35, Tertullian address one final Christian approach to the Imperial cult, namely the attitude towards the festivals associated with it. In this chapter he rounds on the excessive behaviour of the public in these festivals, and questions whether or not such immoral behaviour is really the best way to demonstrate loyalty to the emperor. He states:

“There is no question about it: it is a splendid ceremony to bring out in public the braziers and banquet couches, to dine in the streets, to make the city smell like a tavern, to make mud with the wine, to chase around in bands in order to commit crimes, effrontery, and the seductive pleasures of lust. Is it in such fashion that the public expresses its delight, with public degradation? Are such actions as these becoming on solemn festivals of the emperors, though they are not becoming on other days? Are those who keep order out of respect for the emperor to abandon it because of the emperor? And shall their immoral licentiousness be considered loyalty; the opportunity for excessive indulgence, religious respect?...It is an honourable practice, indeed, when a public festival demands that you deck out your home with the appearance of a new brothel!”³³

Naturally, all good Christians would never think of demonstrating such extravagance in the name of a pagan festival for the sake of a mortal man, even if he is the emperor, any more than they would actually believe in the false notion of the existence of a god amongst men, however powerful a position he occupies.

³³ Tertullian, 1950edn, *Apologetical Works*, trans. R. Arbermann, E.J. Daly and E.A. Quain, New York, p91

These passages from Tertullian's *Apology* represent the best account of the Christian attitude towards the Imperial cult and the emperor himself at the beginning of the third century, or any century for that matter. Having dealt so clearly and decisively with the Imperial cult and the notion of a divine emperor, it was not really possible for Tertullian's view to be improved upon. Most other references are rather less elaborate. However, it is important not to disregard the views of other theologians of this period on the matter of the emperor, and one example we can use by way of comparison is that of Origen. Origen was a third century theologian who devoted a moderate amount of his work *Contra Celsum* to the question of imperial divinity and the place of the emperor. The work was probably written between AD 246 and AD 248, about 30 years after Tertullian wrote his apology and in the years leading up to the Decian persecution. Rome celebrated its millennium in AD 247, and this time of heightened regard for tradition would not have made life easy for those seeking to challenge it. The uneasy climate in which Origen wrote his work is reflected in the tone he takes with regard to emperor worship in Book VIII of *Contra Celsum*. For example, he remarks of Celsus in Chapter 63 that he:

“...did all he could to bring our soul down to the level of daemons. But now he wants us to propitiate also the rulers and emperors among men. Of these life and history are full, and I have not thought it necessary to quote any examples now.”³⁴

Later on, in Chapter 65 Origen goes on to say:

³⁴ Origen, 1953edn, *Contra Celsum*, trans. Henry Chadwick, Cambridge, p 500

“We ought to despise the kindly disposition of men and of emperors if to propitiate them means not only that we have to commit murders and acts of licentiousness and savagery, but also that we have to blaspheme the God of the universe or make some servile and cringing utterance, alien to men of bravery and nobility... ”³⁵

This is a clear reference to the *munera* (gladiatorial contests) that are put on as part of the Imperial cult’s festivals and rituals. Their association with the cult is linked to their function as part of funerary rites, and are intended to be a form of sacrifice to appease and to some extent reinvigorate the *manes* of the departed. The blood thereby spilt would enable the *manes* to recover some small degree of animation and this revival could result in a form of apotheosis³⁶ since this spirit could then, if properly induced, exert a positive influence on the lives of those who worshipped them, much like a ‘proper’ god. This whole concept was contrary to Christian belief, and over the course of the 4th century there were various attempts made to ban the practice, starting with Constantine in AD 326. However, the games remained popular as Constantine himself permitted gladiatorial contests to take place in honour of his own cult in Hispellum (see Chapter 2). The *munera* seem to have continued in some form until about AD 429³⁷. By the 3rd and 4th centuries the games were primarily a form of public entertainment, and were both difficult to ban and useful as a means of enhancing the popularity of a particular cult or individual. For that reason the incentive to actually get rid of them was relatively small. The Christian opposition to them grew, and Origen then states in the above quote that not only was he opposed to the bloodshed, but also the religious rites that were associated with

³⁵ Ibid, p 501

³⁶ Roland Auguet, 1972, *Cruelty and Civilisation: The Roman Games*, London, p22

³⁷ Michael Grant, 1967, *Gladiators*, London, p118

them. The totally pagan nature of these festivals made it impossible to support them, but he also goes on to say that to suffer as a consequence is not the result of insane disobedience, but, on the contrary, is the inevitable consequence of following God's ordinance that:

“...there is no power except by God's permission; the powers that be are ordained of God; so that those who resist the power resist the ordinance of God.”³⁸

Evidently Origen's views come across as somewhat less conciliatory than Tertullian's, and despite recognising the emperor's God-ordained right to rule, it is clear that there can be no concession on matters of religious practice. Origen clearly states:

“...we certainly do not swear by the fortune (*genius*) of the emperor, in the same way as we do not swear by any other supposed gods...Or if...the so-called *genius* of the emperor is a daemon, in this case we ought rather to die than to swear by a wicked and faithless daemon which often commits sin with the man to whom it has been assigned, or sins even more than he does.”³⁹

Equating the *genius* of the emperor with a daemon is certainly less than flattering, and at the time would have been something of a challenge to the pagan establishment

³⁸ *Romans*, Chapter 13, verses 1 and 2.

³⁹ Origen, *Contra Celsum*, trans. Henry Chadwick, Cambridge, p 502

view on the matter. Book VIII then changes subject slightly before returning to the matter of divinely appointed monarchs in the latter part of Chapter 67, saying:

“...in our judgement it is certainly not true that all earthly things have been given to [the emperor]; nor do we receive from him whatever we receive in this life. Whatever we receive that is right and good we have from God and His providence...⁴⁰”

Origen then goes on to dismiss Celsus’s assertions that monarchs are appointed by the son of Kronos, contesting that they are instead appointed by:

“...Him who ‘appoints and changes [emperors] [*Basileis*⁴¹] and from time to time raises up a useful man on the earth’. [Emperors] are not appointed by the son of Kronos who drove his father from his rule...but by God who governs all things and knows what He is doing in the matter of the appointment of [emperors]”⁴²

Once again Origen re-iterates the view that emperors are appointed by divine will, which in this case would not seem to make them any less significant, merely that it was a Christian god that appointed them rather than a pagan one. There is no reference to pagans regarding an emperor as divine, but then few were regarded so while they reigned. The polytheistic principle which facilitates apotheosis goes unremarked upon in this passage. Origen then rounds off his remarks on this matter with:

⁴⁰ Ibid, p 504

⁴¹ Origen, 2001edn, *Contra Celsum libri VIII*, M Marcovich, Leiden, p 584

⁴² Origen, 1953edn, p 504

“Let [all men] deny the Homeric doctrine [*Omerican dogma*⁴³], while keeping the doctrine of the divine right of the [emperor]...”⁴⁴

He then remarks that if everyone followed this doctrine there would be universal peace and conformity, with all modes of worship dispensed with save for that of the Christians.

Origen’s work is, of course, written in response to a pagan work criticising Christianity, and it is this, combined with the circumstances in which it was written, that probably gives it a more confrontational air. This, to some extent, makes it seem at first glance a more clumsy work than that of Tertullian, but the fundamental belief is the same, namely that the Christian God appoints monarchs, whoever that monarch may be and whatever he may be like, and for that reason their position must be respected, even if they are misguided enough to be regarded, and regard themselves, as gods. If denying this assertion results in punishment, then that punishment can be traced back to God’s ordinance and such must be willingly endured.

Naturally the pagan terminology surrounding the Imperial cult would continue to exist for some time after Constantine’s conversion, but these opinions of Tertullian and Origen contributed to the formation of what passed for the official Christian view of emperorship and later kingship. These passages presage the notion of divinely appointed kings which was to develop in later centuries. Given the intrinsically pagan nature of the Imperial cult, it is not really surprising that its reform and re-definition was attended to more by the Church and not the lawyers in

⁴³ Origen, 2001edn, *Contra Celsum libri VIII*, M. Marcovich, Leiden, p 585

⁴⁴ Origen, 1953edn, *Contra Celsum*, trans. Henry Chadwick, Cambridge, p 505

the Christian period of the Empire, and hence why it accounts for so little space in the Theodosian Code.

However, Tertullian's arguments, and to a lesser extent those of Origen, demonstrate that this outcome is not inevitable, since without contradicting the Bible's not excessively negative view of the empire, they argue, quite successfully, that not only are Christians able to live under the rule of the emperors, but they are happy to do so since it is the will of God that they should. What all this tells us, however, is that despite the differing approach, the place of the emperor in Christian thought was assured. He is important because God favours him, but he is not a god.

To single out an emperor as being chosen by God is no small matter, and though not intended to be flattering, it must occasionally have appeared to be just that when the emperors became Christian. For all his convincing argument for the Christian point of view, Tertullian's *Apology* in fact challenged the theory of the Imperial cult less than one would think. The emperor is still different in the eyes of God to other men, his position as such must be recognised by all, and his distinct position enshrined in prayer, ceremony and law. The Theodosian Code is in effect a reflection of this. Its rules relating to the Imperial cult are a reaction to the effect of Christianity on that cult, and along with other evidence (to be dealt with later in this work) it is one example of how the line espoused by Christian theologians had worked its way through the system of government. The ceremonies and imagery surrounding the cult actually remained little-changed in the Christian empire, at least to begin with⁴⁵. According to Eusebius in his biography of Constantine, the death of Constantine was memorialised at Rome in art by depicting

⁴⁵ A.D. Lee, 2000, *Pagans and Christians in Late Antiquity: A Sourcebook*, London, 4.10, p92.

“...heaven in coloured paintings, and portrayed him resting in an aetherial resort above the vaults of heaven.”⁴⁶

Later on the same passage, he goes on to say:

“At the same time coins were struck portraying the Blessed One on the obverse in the form of one with head veiled, on the reverse like a charioteer on a quadriga, being taken up by a right hand stretched out to him from above.”⁴⁷

Here we begin to see the effect of the marriage between the Imperial cult and Christianity. The images conveyed here are distinctly pagan, portraying as they do an emperor ascending to heaven in the traditional manner (in his account of the funeral of Augustus, Suetonius records that an ex-praetor had sworn that he had seen the form of the emperor Augustus ascending to heaven following the cremation of his body⁴⁸). The hand receiving him in the coin image may, however, just as easily be interpreted as the hand of incarnate Christ as that of some pagan deity, and being raised to heaven in this manner was not a uniquely pagan portrayal. There is no suggestion that Constantine has become a god, merely that he has gone to reside with the God who favoured him above all other men. Of course, it helps that Constantine entered the historical record as a good emperor (as though Christian historians could regard him as anything else), but the fact remains that the Christian principles as laid down by Tertullian have not been broken in this case, though arguably stretched a little, and so the cult survived into the Christian era.

⁴⁶ Eusebius, 1999edn, *Life of Constantine*, trans. Averil Cameron and Stuart G. Hall, Oxford, p181

⁴⁷ Ibid, p182

⁴⁸ Suetonius, 1979edn, *The Twelve Caesars*, trans. Robert Graves, London, p106

If anything changes at all, it is the removal of the unseemly excesses associated with the cult in the early 3rd century and before, and as attested to by Tertullian. Naturally, his remarks in this regard are influenced by the fact that the people engaged in such shameful licentiousness are pagans, but the slightly more dignified air of Eusebius's text does imply a more reserved affair, and here we see the effect of Christianity at its more pronounced. If there is any excessive celebration it is not at the behest of the Church, now the official custodian of the Imperial cult, and such activities gradually became increasingly separate from it. The fact that Eusebius dealt with the death of Constantine in the passages outlined above in the terms he chose certainly helps explain this, but also the inclination of the citizenry to celebrate when given reason to do so is not really linked to religion or indeed the Imperial cult. Any adequate excuse could be used to engage in festivities of some sort, so it is important not to dwell too much on this aspect of the cult when trying to define its place in either law or religion. Tertullian's arguments in relation to excessive behaviour in relation to the cult are more to do with cementing the opinion that Christians approach the position of the emperor and his relationship with God in a more considered, dignified and sincere way. This is an important point since it demonstrates the seriousness with which Christians take the divinely-ordained position of the emperor, and that just as God is treated with respect, so must 'his' emperor be.

The origins of the practice of crowning the kings of the post-Roman medieval period by priests in the presence of their leading subjects, rather than by their leading subjects possibly in the presence of their priests (on both sides of the frontier of the pre-Christian empire), can be traced from this time. Emperors were traditionally acclaimed by either the Senate or the army (usually the army), no doubt while

claiming some religious support, but it was the non-religious acclamation that mattered politically and legally. However, with the rise of Christianity there emerges a particularly Christian definition of the religious position of the ruler which survived the empire for which it was designed. It came to be applied by the Church to, amongst others, the monarchies of post-Roman Western Europe, perhaps most famously in the crowning of Charlemagne as Holy Roman Emperor by the Pope in AD 800. The transition from paganism to Christianity was bound to be felt in all levels of official life, but the emergence of a clearer distinction between the secular and religious world meant that the religious functions of the state would now fall under the responsibility of someone other than the emperor who was, first and foremost, a secular ruler even if he was still the Church's foremost patron. There also emerges the notion that while an emperor is appointed by God he is also answerable to God, and so the Church plays a much more significant role in defining and to some extent regulating the position of the emperor. An example of this can be found in *Vita Constantini* where Eusebius says of Constantine:

“...he always kept his God before his mind and endeavoured to conform his actions to God's purposes, and he was anxious to avoid great slaughter. He was therefore as careful to preserve the enemy's men as his own. So he also urged his men when they had won a battle to spare their prisoners, and as men themselves not to forget their common humanity.”⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Eusebius, 1999edn, *Life of Constantine*, trans. Averil Cameron and Stuart G. Hall, Oxford, p100

Whether this was true, and if it was whether there was a more pragmatic reason for sparing defeated enemies than simple decency cannot be established for certainty. That it was the sort of behaviour expected from a Christian emperor is beyond doubt.

The contrast between this and the Imperial cult of the pre-Christian era seems fairly stark to the point where neither could co-exist, but the cult's uniquely indispensable position meant that, unlike the other pagan cults, it remained in a variety of literary forms long after it had materially ceased to function. Its survival into the Christian era, though in a much diminished form, required the Church to respond to it and create an alternative yet equally valid set of beliefs that would not have been necessary if the cult could simply have been swept away. It is in this response that the religious definition of later monarchies originates. If one looks at the arguments of Tertullian and Origen, and even the Bible, one finds the same ideas and opinions used when referring to the Christian kings of the following centuries, and this will be examined in the next chapter.

Here we see that the institution of religion had become separated from the rest of the state and become a concept entirely within its own right. In earlier centuries, the role of religion was innate, with magistrates and emperors expected to organise and oversee religious ceremonies, often in the capacity of priests themselves⁵⁰. With the emergence of the widespread belief in one universal God, there came the creation of one universal priesthood, which dealt with all the areas previously divided up amongst many priesthoods, many of which were staffed on a part time basis. This allowed for a professionalization of state religion which in turn allowed the Church greater freedom to comment on the place of the emperor in relation to the Church. The laws of Book XVI of the Theodosian Code went some

⁵⁰ Allen Brent, 1999, *The Imperial Cult and the Development of Church Order*, Leiden, p19

way to strengthening the power of the later papacy⁵¹, which would have helped create a centralised, corporate Church. This in turn would have meant that the influence of most Roman of institutions would still be felt in parts of the Empire that passed to barbarian control. This contributed to the survival of a Romanised society in those parts, and would ultimately help to Romanise those barbarians that ruled them and define their positions as kings in Romanised Christian religious terms.

⁵¹ J.M. Wallace-Hadrill, 1962, *The Long-Haired Kings and other studies in Frankish History*, London, p37

Chapter 4

The transition from a Roman to a Germanic context

By the beginning of the 5th century the image and place of the emperor in a Christian context had been largely defined. In both a legal and theological sense, he was God's anointed ruler and although he did not undergo apotheosis upon his death in the way his pagan predecessors were, he was certainly above the average mortal. Although the emperor had to contend with senior churchmen in terms of authority, he was still a very powerful figure. However, in the Western Empire the authority of the Roman state was in decline, and while there are various reasons why this was the case the principal cause was a growing failure to control what was happening on territory that was ostensibly part of the empire. The arrival of various tribes on the frontier and their passage into the empire where they began to settle caused a degree of instability which, in conjunction with economic and political disorder, the Empire was unable to deal with. The failure to control what was happening within the borders of the Empire ultimately led to the formation of Germanic kingdoms, notably those of the Franks, Goths and Vandals and other peoples who crossed the frontier¹.

The model of Germanic kingship that developed in the aftermath of the fall of the Roman Empire in the West was to some extent rooted in a non-Roman origin, but it did employ concepts developed by the Church to explain the place of the emperor in relation to the divine. There is evidence for this in the manner in which the Church addressed itself to these monarchs in the *Vita Severini*, a hagiographical work on the life of St Severin of Noricum which will be examined later in this chapter, and

¹ Bryan Ward-Perkins, 2005, *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilisation*, Oxford, p42

this forms part of the evidence of how the Church helped shape the religious basis of their rule.

The origins of the style of kingship employed by the Germanic tribes go back to earliest times, and by far the most useful early account of its emergence can be found in Tacitus. In his *Germania* we find the first detailed descriptions of Germanic kingship and its place in Germanic society in the first century. Interestingly, at this time Germanic kings seem to have a stronger religious role, and this may be down to the fact that at that point of their development the concept of religion had yet to become separated from the normal activities of daily life. This is backed up by the evidence that priests, as the primary religious figures in society, seem to wield considerable influence over many key social functions such as the administration of justice, such as it was, and the organising of tribal gatherings. Firstly, the following passage outlines how kings are chosen and their relationship with other key leaders of Germanic society, the military commanders and the priests:

“They choose their kings for their noble birth, their commanders for their valour. The power even of the kings is not absolute or arbitrary. The commanders rely on example rather than on the authority of their rank – on the admiration they win by showing conspicuous energy and courage and by pressing forward in front of their own troops. Capital punishment, imprisonment, even flogging, are allowed to none but the priests, and are not inflicted merely as punishments or on the commanders’ orders, but as it were in obedience to the god whom the Germans believe to be present on the field

of battle. They actually carry with them into the fight certain figures and emblems taken from their sacred groves.”²

The idea that kings are chosen on account of their noble birth suggests a form of hereditary monarchy, and its distinction from the role of ‘commander’ implies that a king had duties besides leading his people to war. After all if he did not, there would be nothing to distinguish him from the military commanders and so the office of king would not really exist. It has been suggested that ‘noble birth’ means an ancestry that can be traced back to a god³, and although not explicitly referred to in the passage, later Germanic kings do claim a divine origin for their royal family as a means of setting their lineage above that of everyone else. Examples of this would include the pagan kings of the early Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, most of whom traced their ancestry back to Woden⁴ and the Merovingian dynasty of the Franks, who claimed descent from a sea-monster⁵. The most important aspect of the above passage is the way it describes priests as being not only religious officials, but also a form of judiciary in a society where religion and legal justice seem to be closely bound up, although this was also the case in Roman society, and so was not unique. Evidently religion played a highly significant role in this society as demonstrated by the reference to its presence in military matters at the end of the passage. Indeed, it could be easily inferred from this passage that when there were significant events to deal with the priests held most of the influence in Germanic society, and that both king and commander was subordinate in some way to religious matters governed by the priests.

² Tacitus, 1970edn, *Germania*, Trans. Harold Mattingly, London, p107

³ Carole M. Cusack, 1998, *Conversion among the Germanic Peoples*, London, p36

⁴ Bede, 1935edn, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, trans. Thomas Stapleton, London, 1:15, p24

⁵ Ian Wood, 1994, *The Merovingian Kingdoms 450 – 751*, Harlow, p37

This relationship between priest and monarch is borne out by another passage from the *Germania*. Here we see the role the monarch plays alongside the priest in religious ritual, and the extent to which the political role of a king can occasionally cross into the religious role of the priest:

“Although the familiar method of seeking information from the cries and the flights of birds is known to the Germans, they have also a special method of their own – to try to obtain omens and warnings from horses. These horses are kept at the public expense in the sacred woods and groves that I have mentioned; they are pure white and undefiled by any toil in the service of man. The priest and the king, or the chief of the state, yoke them to a sacred chariot and walk beside them, taking note of their neighs and snorts. No kind of omen inspires greater trust, not only among the common people, but even among the nobles and priests, who think that they themselves are but servants of the gods, whereas the horses are privy to the gods’ counsels.”⁶

It was evidently necessary for a king to be seen to be taking part in an important religious ceremony in order to secure divine guidance for his people, but there is no suggestion here that the king was subordinated to the priest in this particular instance. Indeed the source points out that both deferred to the equine oracles in their charge, and the concept of seeking the goodwill from a higher authority was one that cut across society to the point where it is difficult to distinguish between a secular sphere and a religious one.

⁶Tacitus, 1970edn, *Germania*, Trans. Harold Mattingly, London, p109

Finally, in the following quote, we see where at least some of the king's authority resides when it comes to governing his people:

“When the assembled crowd thinks fit, they take their seats fully armed. Silence is then commanded by the priests, who on such occasions have power to enforce obedience. Then such hearing is given to the king or state-chief as his age, rank, military distinction, or eloquence can secure – more because his advice carries weight than because he has the power to command. If a proposal displeases them, the people shout their dissent; if they approve, they clash their spears. To express approbation with their weapons is their most complimentary way of showing agreement”.⁷

It is interesting to note that again it is the priests who have the authority to issue instructions to the people, but only in the capacity of meeting organisers; no mention is made of them influencing the decision reached. The actual decision-making itself is somewhat more democratic, with the monarch's advice being given, but not necessarily followed. Although the king's power appears to be limited, the references to his 'age, rank, military distinction, or eloquence' as means of securing his right to be heard implies that his position is dependent as much on his proven capacity to deliver results both on and off the battlefield than his status as a monarch of divine ancestry. Here the distinction between 'king' and 'commander' does not exist, so it is evident that kings fulfilled a military function in addition to such civic duties they had and that their office covered the whole tribe, while the 'commanders' referred to earlier were men elected to lead only a portion of a tribe's warriors on a

⁷Tacitus, 1970edn, *Germania*, Trans. Harold Mattingly, London, p111

specific enterprise. In a society where the bearing of arms by every adult free male was the norm, but where an organised corporate state was unknown, this slightly ad-hoc arrangement is only to be expected.

From the time of Tacitus's account, Germanic kingship slowly evolved into a more centralised and overtly hereditary affair. Although still largely dependent on their military reputation we start to see the concentration of wealth and power in an emerging elite that comes to control Germanic society, if only loosely. During this time interaction between Germanic and Roman society had become more extensive, and by the 4th century it was possible for a Germanic ruler to enjoy something of a career in Roman service. A good indication of how Germanic kings interacted with the Roman state can be found in the work of Ammianus Marcellinus, in whose account of the later 4th century the career of a Frankish king by the name of Mallobaudes can be faintly traced, as the following passages indicate. We first come across him during the arrest of the Caesar Gallus in AD 354

“There he [Gallus] was kept in close confinement, half-dead with fear of his approaching fate, till he was visited by Eusebius, at that time grand chamberlain, Pentadius, a notary, and Mallobaudes, a tribune of the guards [*tribunas scholae armaturarum*]; they had orders from the emperor to question him in detail on the reasons which had led him to order the death of each of his victims at Antioch.”⁸

We know from later references that Mallobaudes was a Frankish king, although at this point he may only have been an aristocrat or relative of the king. This passage

⁸ Ammianus Marcellinus, 1986edn, *The Later Roman Empire (A.D. 354 – 378)*, trans. Walter Hamilton, London, 14:11, p62

above is particularly interesting as it implies that barbarian mercenaries were not simply hired soldiers whose sole purpose was to fight but in some cases could also be relied on to perform slightly more political functions. While we do not know exactly what Mallobaudes's role was during the questioning of Gallus it is fair to assume that as a *tribunus*⁹ he was doing more than just guarding the door. During this period *tribuni* were often military officers who commanded units such as the *scholae palatini*, *vexillationes* and *cohortes* of the army¹⁰, so evidently Mallobaudes enjoyed a senior position within the Roman army. He crops up again during the events leading up to the usurpation of Silvanus in AD 355. Here Ammianus tells us that:

“...he [Malarich] asked that he himself should be despatched at once to fetch Silvanus, who was certainly not guilty of what was imputed to him by these ruthless conspirators; he would leave his relations as hostages, and Mallobaudes, the *tribunas scholae armaturarum*, would give security for his return.”¹¹

Once again, Mallobaudes is performing a significant role, and one that would require a certain understanding of Roman politics that went beyond passing familiarity. According to Ammianus, not only was Silvanus also of Frankish origin, but there was also a large number of influential Franks in the imperial palace at that time¹². He also says later on in his account that Silvanus was killed while on his way to a Christian service, suggesting that amongst the Germanic element in Roman service

⁹ A.H.M. Jones, J.R. Martindale, and J. Morris, 1971, *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire, Volume 1*, Cambridge, p539

¹⁰ Hubert Cancik, and Helmuth Schneider, (eds), 2009, *New Pauly*, Leiden, Volume 14, p903

¹¹ Ammianus Marcellinus, 1986edn, *The Later Roman Empire (A.D. 354 – 378)*, trans. Walter Hamilton, London, 15:5, p72

¹² *Ibid*, p73

the acquisition of Christianity in addition to the knowledge and experience of running a military unit was useful. Whether this was purely out of choice or professional expediency is not clear however.

Mallobaudes appears again when Ammianus relates the death of the Germanic king Macrianus in AD 374, stating:

“At a later date he [Macrianus] perished in the land of the Franks, where he advanced too rashly in the course of a sanguinary raid and fell into a trap set by the warlike king [*bellicosi regis*] Mallobaudes.”¹³

From this we can establish that Mallobaudes was no longer directly employed by the Romans, but was back with his tribe and ruling them as king. It is possible to interpret his killing of Macrianus, who was an enemy of the Romans, as the action of a barbarian king who was either sympathetic to the Empire or simply in their pay and judging by his previous career neither is an unreasonable supposition. However, it cannot be proven. The last time Mallobaudes is mentioned it is during the defeat of the Lentienses in AD 378:

“He [Gratian]...put the business in the hands of a brave but prudent general called Nannienus, joining, however, with him in the command Mallobaudes, *comes domesticorum* and king of the Franks, who was always spoiling for a fight. So, while Nannienus kept in mind the fickleness of fortune and

¹³ Ammianus Marcellinus, 1986edn, *The Later Roman Empire (A.D. 354 – 378)*, trans. Walter Hamilton, London, 30:3, p393

counselled caution, Mallobaudes, who could brook no delay, was driven by his habitual consuming eagerness for battle into attacking the enemy.”¹⁴

It is evident from these passages that Mallobaudes was a Frank who held high office in the Imperial household, ultimately Count of the Household Troops (*comes domesticorum*). He was also a figure of some significance among his own people, and the suggestion is that as a younger man he served in the Roman army as some sort of apprenticeship while later in life he became king of a Frankish tribe, though retaining his status within the Roman system. During this time, his close proximity to the court of the emperor would have exposed him to the ritual of that court including the religious ritual surrounding the person of the emperor himself, such as listening to the sort of panegyric works mentioned in a previous chapter, or witnessing the involvement of the emperor in religious rites in some way. Whether or not he actually took part cannot be established, but witnessing alone would have been enough to learn of and be influenced by courtly religious ritual. No mention is made of his Roman connections in the third passage, so by this time it could be inferred that he had returned to his own people and become their king, having built up the necessary experience and credibility in order, for example, to be taken seriously at the sort of tribal councils where Tacitus remarked that kings were given such a hearing as their age and military distinction permitted. By the fourth passage Mallobaudes is both king of the Franks and a Roman official, although no further mention is made of him in the remaining books of Ammianus. This is not to say his career both within and beyond the Roman Empire was over though as Ammianus's

¹⁴ Ammianus Marcellinus, 1986edn, *The Later Roman Empire (A.D. 354 – 378)*, trans. Walter Hamilton, London, 31:10, p428

history ends in AD 378, the year Mallobaudes helped defeat the Lentienses, but we will never know for certain one way or the other.

What can be said with some certainty though is that in the 20 or so years in which he is recorded as having played a role in the Empire Mallobaudes, besides his political and military education, may well have been exposed to the Roman ruler cult and the Christian teachings that defined it through his time spent at the court of the emperor. The extent of this exposure will never be known, but since he was more than a mere run-of-the-mill mercenary, and a significant figure amongst a superficially friendly tribe, he would hardly have been consigned to a distant corner of the camp or court. Whether or not he allowed his experiences to influence his own view on how he should have been treated as king among his own people is impossible to say, but he certainly was not the only Frank in imperial service to achieve high office (as attested by Silvanus) and to have seen first-hand how the Roman system worked at that level, hence there were many opportunities for Roman political practice to influence that of the Franks. We do not know Mallobaudes's religious convictions, but he is likely to have been fairly familiar with Christianity and its teachings; Silvanus certainly was. If this pattern of involvement was repeated enough times we can begin to see how the Roman Empire influenced the political arrangements of the peoples beyond the frontier in more subtle ways than through the compulsions of war. It is also worth noting that the example of Mallobaudes was not an isolated example of Germanic nobility serving the Roman state in some capacity. Other individuals included the pagan Richomeres who rose to the rank of *comes domesticorum* in 377 AD and *magister militum per orientem* in 383 AD. At some point prior to 384 AD he also became a consul¹⁵. His nephew Arbogastes was *comes*

¹⁵ A.H.M. Jones, J.R. Martindale, and J Morris, 1971, *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire, Volume 1*, Cambridge, pp 765-766

rei militaris around 380 AD and *magister militum* between 388 and 394 AD¹⁶. If any such individuals who had served in a similar capacity had returned to their tribe in the manner of Mallobaudes, they too would have brought Roman influence with them thus facilitating a more comprehensive Romanising process than would have otherwise been the case.

It is important to consider the spread of Christianity when it comes to considering the export of its ideas. Although it is generally impossible to ascertain most individual tribesmen's religious convictions with any precision, it is possible to work out a general idea of the spread of Christianity, and by extension its ideas on kingship, beyond the Roman cultural sphere. There is evidence of Christianity amongst the Germanic peoples of the frontier, as a Christian funerary inscription from the Rhine frontier of the mid 4th century is dedicated to memory of two Germans called Riculfus and Guntello¹⁷. This at least indicates not only the geographical extent to which Christianity had spread, if only tenuously, but also that it some sort of presence in the Germanic communities that almost certainly would have had contacts with both sides of the frontier.

In the case of the Goths a bishop of the Goths is said to have attended the Council of Nicaea in AD 325 and there was almost certainly some low-level conversion through trade and through Gothic service in the Roman army during the 4th century, but the exact details of early conversions are unknown¹⁸. Then there was the mission of Bishop Ulfila in the 340s, which resulted in a Gothic translation of the New Testament and the further spread of Arian Christianity among the Goths. Although Ulfila's initial concern was for Christians living among the Goths who

¹⁶ A.H.M. Jones, J.R. Martindale, and J Morris, 1971, *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire, Volume 1*, Cambridge, p95

¹⁷ Ernest Diehl, 1961, *Inscriptiones Latinae Christianae Veteres*, Berlin, no. 4827

¹⁸ Carole M. Cusack, 1998, *Conversion among the Germanic Peoples*, London, p39

were probably slaves or captives, his interest in providing a Gothic translation of the Bible and the length of time he spent among the Goths points to a desire to convert the previously non-Christian Goths and not just minister to their captives. The leadership of the Goths seem to have been initially opposed to Christianity however, as they launched a persecution of Gothic Christians which lasted from AD 369 to 372, partly because they regarded Christianity as identified with the Roman state and a potentially subversive influence¹⁹. Taken together with this conversion activity among the Goths prior to the 370s, the below passage, taken from Jordanes's *Getica*, can be interpreted as meaning that the Goths had some prior experience of Christianity and were therefore primed, if not necessarily universally eager, to acquire more. The reasons for this may have been a spiritual or cultural requirement, or, as the below passage suggests, necessary to acquire the emperor's confidence in their intentions. It also gives us some idea of how specifically Arian Christianity came to further establish itself amongst the Germanic peoples around the frontier:

“After long deliberation by common consent they finally sent ambassadors into Romania to the emperor Valens, brother of Valentinian, the elder Emperor, to say that if he would give them part of Thrace or Moesia to keep, they would submit themselves to his laws and commands. That he might have greater confidence in them, they promised to become Christians, if he would give them teachers who spoke their language. When Valens learned this, he gladly and promptly granted what he had himself intended to ask. He received the Getae into the region of Moesia and placed them there as a wall of defense for his [empire] against other tribes. And since at that time

¹⁹ P. Heather, 1996, *The Goths*, Oxford, p61

the Emperor Valens, who was infected with the Arian perfidy, had closed all the churches of our party, he sent as preachers to them those who favoured his sect. They came and straightaway filled a rude and ignorant people with the poison of their heresy. Thus the Emperor Valens made the Visigoths Arians rather than Christians. Moreover from the love they bore them, they preached the gospel both to the Ostrogoths and to their kinsmen the Gepidae, teaching them to reverence this heresy, and they invited all people of their speech everywhere to attach themselves to this sect.’²⁰

Although the passage is a useful account of how the Arian brand of Christianity became further established among the Goths, we know the Goths had in fact been converting to Christianity, and probably Arian Christianity, for some decades prior to this. Though lacking in the details of conversion, the point about being taught the religion of Christianity in their own language is important one. As with Ulfila translating the Bible into Gothic, it suggests that the Goths, or at least those in position of leadership and those who spoke for them, wanted to learn of Christianity in a language they understood, which implies an interest in its actual teaching i.e. for its religious purpose, which would mean understanding its teachings in as efficient a way as possible and therefore doing so through the medium of Gothic. However, this may also suggest a desire to limit the influence of Rome, as had Gothic Christianity maintained a largely Roman identity it would have been an even more Romanising influence that would have entailed learning Latin or Greek, or at least be seen to be using it in religious matters. Furthermore, the Gothic language provided a quicker vehicle to the conversion to Christianity than either Latin or Greek, and also

²⁰ Jordanes, 1908edn, *The Origin and Deeds of the Goths*, Trans Charles C. Mierow, (Biblio Bazaar, 2008), p51

helped shield the Gothic people from swift religious Romanisation. However, total isolation was impossible and the use of the Greek alphabet as a basis for the Gothic one is evidence for this. Besides, as the alphabet of a prominent language of the eastern Empire it may also have been one that some literate Goths may already have been familiar with.

Whatever the difficulties encountered by the process of conversion, it is fair to say that by the beginning of the 5th century the Goths were largely Arian Christians. They had by now moved into the Empire and were in frequent contact with Roman cultural and military life, and though not Romanised in the way that fully subjugated non-Roman people would have become in first century Gaul or Spain for example, they were certainly no longer the same unromanised tribesmen portrayed in the works of Tacitus. However, the limits of Romanisation can be inferred from the fact that while they had adopted Roman religion they were still appointing their own kings and in manner highly reminiscent of an earlier age. Jordanes's account of the crowning of Alaric around the year AD 400 provides an account of how kings come to power and how they exercised influence over their people:

“The contempt of the Goths for the Romans soon increased, and for fear their valour would be destroyed by long peace, they appointed Alaric king over them. He was of famous stock, and his nobility was second only to that of the Amali...Now when this Alaric was made king, he took counsel with his men and persuaded them to seek a kingdom by their own exertions rather than serve others in idleness.”²¹

²¹ Jordanes, 1908edn, *The Origin and Deeds of the Goths*, Trans Charles C. Mierow, (Biblio Bazaar, 2008), p55

This passage reminds one of Tacitus's account of how kings were appointed and their advisory role in tribal decision-making, so their power is not absolute. Furthermore, there is no mention of any priests or religious duties in Jordanes's account, presumably because the Goths were by this time Christian and so the role of their priests had changed along with the religion. Amongst the Burgundi the case was slightly different, as Ammianus has this to say of them:

“In their country a king is called by the general name Hendinos, and, according to an ancient custom, lays down his power and is deposed, if under him the fortune of war has wavered, or the earth has denied sufficient crops; just as the Egyptians commonly blame their rulers for such occurrences. On the other hand the chief priest among the Burgundians is called Sinistus, holds his power for life, and is exposed to no such dangers as threaten the kings.”²²

This passage covers the practice as it stood around the later AD 360s. It shows that there was still a continuation of the practice whereby a king survived as long as his reputation did, while priests retained their role more securely, which suggests religious affairs enjoyed a sort of priority. It is quite possible that while priests spoke for the gods the kings spoke for themselves, their retinue and possibly their other followers, and that as it was not possible to depose a god so it was not possible to depose a priest. A king however was an altogether more earthly affair, and could, it seemed, be denied the divine favour that in turn would result in consequences for his

²² Ammianus Marcellinus, 1939edn, *History of the Roman Empire*, 28:5, trans J.C. Rolfe, Volume III of the Loeb Classical Library edition, p169. Taken from http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Ammian/28*.html ('Bill Thayer's website')

people, whereas a priest sought no favour for himself, but was merely an intermediary of sorts.

The Church, although still in theory an organ of the Roman Empire on account of it being the official custodian of that state's religion, found itself involved in the politics of these new Germanic polities for various reasons. One of them was the continued presence of Romanised Orthodox Christian populations within the emerging Germanic polities established in the 5th century on former Roman territory. This in turn caused friction as many Germanic rulers and their tribes were either Arian Christians or pagans, and found themselves ruling over and living alongside a largely Orthodox Christian population. A good example of this was the friction that occurred when the Vandal kingdom was established in North Africa. Here the Arian Vandals engaged in a persecution of the Orthodox Church which varied in its intensity but was notably strong in the reign of Huneric²³. The dichotomy of cultures and beliefs invariably gave rise to conflict, though given the civic, largely demilitarised nature of Roman life within the Empire most citizens were unable to resist the rise of the Germanic kingdoms and in some cases had little reason to do so anyway. Despite religious differences, there is no evidence to suggest that life under the later empire was any better than life under Germanic rule, especially if Germanic rule, in order to succeed, had incorporated many of the methods and instruments of the late Roman state in order function. Taxation, for example, appears to have been based on the surviving *civitas* administration²⁴. From the Church's point of view this meant coming to terms with the existence of Germanic kings and explaining their place both in a worldly and religious context in Christian terms. To actually oppose the power of such kings directly would not have been possible and would only have

²³ Andy Merrills and Richard Miles, 2010, *The Vandals*, Oxford, p185

²⁴ Ian Wood, 1994, *The Merovingian Kingdoms 450 – 751*, Harlow, p62

resulted in an unwinnable conflict. However, by acculturating them into the Christian thought developed in the later Roman Empire it would be possible to influence their rule in ways beneficial to the Church and also to its flock. By doing this, the Church preserved the concepts applied to the place of the Roman emperor in a religious context by transferring them to the barbarian kingdoms that evolved into the medieval kingdoms of Western Europe. By preserving them this way the long-term survival of the late-Roman Christian model of monarchy was more assured and so it could be argued that the model of kingship employed in the middle ages owed more to the emperors of Rome than a mere aping of their distant and misunderstood Imperial glories.

A good example of how this process occurred can be found in the biography of St Severinus, the *Vita Severini*, which was written by Eugippius and dates to either the later part of the 5th century or the early 6th century, and covers the life and works of St Severin in the province of Noricum in the late 5th century, right at the end of the Roman Empire in the West. As such, it was written not long after the events it describes, and indeed it is likely that Eugippius witnessed some of them²⁵. At various points throughout the work there are accounts of Saint Severin's dealings with the local Germanic elite, and although probably not an exact account of what happened, they do point to interaction between important churchmen and an increasingly powerful Germanic aristocracy during this time. However, there are flaws in the account that can be rather obvious. For example, we hear of so-called 'barbarians' holding a Roman town early in the work, where Eugippius writes:

²⁵Eugippius, 1965edn, *The Life of Saint Severin*, trans. Ludwig Bieler, Washington, p6

“Then he [Severin] turned away to a neighbouring town, which was called Comagenis. This town was held in strict occupation by a troop of barbarians inside, who had concluded a treaty with the Romans, and nobody would easily be given permission either to leave or to enter.”²⁶

Although this is an entirely believable state of affairs, the fact that the account subsequently describes how Severin is allowed to enter the town apparently unmolested and then that the barbarians have to force the Romans to open the gates in order to flee from an earthquake, apparently caused as a result of Severin’s good works, renders the actual status of the barbarians somewhat unclear. One obvious reason is that it implies that the ‘barbarians’ in the above account were not actually in charge of the town because if they were surely they would themselves be in command of the gates. This points to some sort of *hospitium* arrangement²⁷, whereby the Romans inhabitants were rendering food, lodging and services to what appears to be some sort of mercenary element that had arrived in the town, although the arrangement sounds a little too exploitative for this to necessarily be the case. Then there is the miraculous occurrence of the earthquake itself, the account of which records no damage being done to the town as a result. If one was to look at this account sympathetically the most that could be said with some degree of certainty is that the barbarians were hired mercenaries who had overstayed their welcome and whom the townspeople were eager to rid themselves of. The circumstances of their departure and certainly whether or not they actually fled in response to a miraculous earthquake will never be known for certain.

²⁶Eugippius, 1965edn, *The Life of Saint Severin*, trans. Ludwig Bieler, Washington, p57

²⁷ Hubert Canick and Helmuth Schneider, (eds), 2009, *New Pauly*, Leiden, Volume 6, p527

This is the sort of problem we encounter when using hagiographical works, and should be borne in mind when looking at the passages where St Severin deals directly with the barbarian rulers. The first such account relates to a meeting between Severin and the Alamannic king Gibuldus, which probably took place around AD 473, and runs as follows:

“There [in Batavis] blessed Severin had built a monastery for a few monks in his usual manner because he was often asked by the citizens to come to that place, especially in view of the frequent invasions of the Alamanni, whose king, Gibuldus, greatly honoured and loved him. At one time the king, wishing ardently to see Severin, even went there to see him. The saint, fearing that the king’s coming might be a burden to the city, went outside to meet him. He addressed the king so firmly that the latter began to tremble vehemently in his presence; after they had parted, the king declared to his army that never before, either in battle or in any peril had he been shaken by such trembling. When he gave the servant of God his choice to demand of him what he wanted, the wise teacher asked him that, in his own interest, he should restrain his people from the devastation of Roman territory, and that he should graciously release those who were being held prisoners by his men.”²⁸

Ultimately, after a little more wrangling, the prisoners are released. The passage is heavily glossed with the view that barbarian kings, for all their military strength, are a little bit backward and generally respond in the desired manner when confronted by

²⁸Eugippius, 1965edn, *The Life of Saint Severin*, trans. Ludwig Bieler, Washington, p77

a learned and pious man of God speaking on behalf of the Roman community. It is highly likely that, had such a conversation taken place, it was more of a negotiation, with Severin speaking in his capacity of a leader figure for the beleaguered Roman citizens. However, there can be no doubt that Severin would have worked some Christian vocabulary into the negotiations, and any discussion that occurred would no doubt have exposed the Alamannic king to some of the Christian ideas of how a king should exercise his authority. After all, Severin was not addressing a committee of Alamanni, but their king. That the Alamanni could be dissuaded from attacking a settlement by their king who was acting upon the intervention of Severin indicates both that Germanic kings had some degree of control over their warriors and that Severin could act as a diplomat as well as a churchman, and this points to religious figures taking on a local leadership role outside their purely religious duties. From the point of view of Germanic leadership, to be seen in a position of relative parity during such negotiations as these would have had a positive effect on their standing amongst their retinue. This is precisely the sort of context where Christian perceptions of kingship can be applied and can influence the emerging style of kingship we see at this time.

The second account relates an incident a few years later, where Severin is called upon by the people who had congregated at Lauriacum to negotiate with a Rugian king who was intent on capturing them and forcing them to live in towns that paid him tribute.

“When Feletheus, king of the Rugi, also called Feva, heard that the remnants of the people of all the towns that had escaped the sword of the barbarians, on the advice of the servant of God, had gone to Lauriacum, he came with

his army – with the idea of taking them by surprise and carrying them with him in order to place them in the cities that paid him tribute and were near to him; one of these was Favianis, separated from the Rugi by nothing but the Danube. About this, all the people were greatly upset and humbly approached St Severin to meet the king on his way and persuade him to make a less drastic decision. Severin hurried along the whole night and met the king twenty miles from the town in the early morning. The king got a shock when he saw him come, and confessed that he was much grieved about Severin’s wearisome journey, and he asked him what was the cause of this unexpected meeting. The servant of God said: ‘Peace be to you, best of kings! I come as a messenger of Christ, begging mercy for those who are entrusted to me. Think of God’s grace, call to your mind the divine favours by which your father often felt supported. For during all the years of his reign, he never dared do anything without consulting me. And as he did not resist my salutary warnings, he learnt the great value of obedience; he also learnt that a victor, for his own good, should not get proud by his victories’. The king said: ‘I shall not allow this people, for whom you have come as a loving advocate, to be robbed by the plundering Alamanni and Thoringi, or to be slain by the sword, or led into slavery. We have tributary towns in the vicinity where they are to be settled.’ The servant of Christ replied firmly: ‘Have these people been rescued from the frequent raids of plunderers by your bow or sword? Have they not rather been preserved by the favour of God so that they may obey you for a short while? Well, then, best of kings, do not reject my advice. Give these subjects into my trust, lest they, being in the hands of such a big army, be routed rather than transplanted. I trust in

my Lord that He, who made me come to their assistance in their distress, will make me an able guarantor for their being led to safety.’ To these modest representations, the king gave way, and immediately went back with his army.”²⁹

Again, Severin is playing a role that is somewhat beyond that of simple religious duty, although his diplomatic efforts employ a respectful and highly Christianised vocabulary and he is able to imply both what constitutes proper behaviour for a king and that perhaps Feva is not meeting these requirements. He does the same again when he is on his deathbed and Feva and his wife come to visit him. Clearly there were expectations of a king which could be easily delivered in religious terms:

“When at last, after many contests and long fights, blessed Severin knew by God’s revelation that he was about to leave this world, he summoned to him the said king of the Rugi, Feva, with his cruel wife, Giso. Having made to the king some salutary exhortations, namely, that he should deal with his subjects in such a way as he would think fit for one who was to account for the state of his realm before the Lord...”³⁰

The need to speak to a king on such a matter implies that the role of kings among the Germanic tribe was still very much in the process of developing from that of a war leader into that of one who rules a defined territorial state and takes on all the responsibilities which that implies. Immediately prior to his death Severin is again found speaking to another king in similar terms:

²⁹Eugippius, 1965edn, *The Life of Saint Severin*, trans. Ludwig Bieler, Washington, p87

³⁰Ibid, p92

“When Ferderuchus, as was his custom, went to greet him, the soldier of Christ began to talk to him about his journey more emphatically, and adjured him with these words: ‘Know’, he said, ‘that I shall soon go to my Lord. Therefore, I warn you, take care not to try, after my departure, to lay hands on anything that is under my trust, or to touch the livelihood of the poor and the captives. If you dare any such thing, which heaven forbid, you will feel the wrath of God.’”³¹

Despite protestations that he would follow Severin’s demands, according to Eugippius’s account Ferderuchus proceeded to help himself to clothes meant for the poor and to the Church silver after Severin’s death. Although the account of this meeting sounds a little too pious and far-fetched it does convey the idea that important Churchmen had ideas as to how kings were expected to behave, and that they will be subject to divine wrath if they do not. To see the idea of God punishing a mortal for behaving badly applied by an exemplary Christian figure to a barbarian king who was apparently in need of such instruction gives us some idea of what Christian writers thought the role of the Church was in relation to these barbarian rulers.

Interestingly, in Eugippius’s account we also see another supposedly barbarian king taking on the protecting role previously held by the Roman emperor. When the Rugian royal family descend into disorder and start fighting each other, one Odovacer intervened. Odovacer was a barbarian who had found employment in what remained of the Roman military but was actually de-facto ruler of Italy in

³¹Eugippius, 1965edn, *The Life of Saint Severin*, trans. Ludwig Bieler, Washington, p94

conjunction with Gundobad, a barbarian aristocrat who was *magister militum* in Gaul. Gundobad was replaced by Orestes when the former returned to his late father's Burgundian kingdom to win his claim to his father's throne. Odovacer refused to support Orestes when Orestes made his own son, Romulus Augustulus, emperor. Odovacer's followers rebelled in AD 476 and Odovacer was proclaimed king following the defeat of Orestes and the forced retirement of Romulus Augustulus³². It is around this time that Eugippius relates how Odovacer declared war on the Rugi and defeated them. Later on, Odovacer sends his brother Onoulf to the province both to defeat the resurgent Rugi and to evacuate the province of its Roman inhabitants:

“Onoulf, however, acting on his brother's instructions, ordered all the Romans to emigrate to Italy. Then the whole population, freed of a life that was daily threatened by the robbery of the barbarians – the house, as it were, of Egyptian servitude – recognised the prophecies of St Severin.”³³

Judging by his concern for the inhabitants of Noricum, it is likely the events happened when Odovacer was now a king; as a mercenary in the Roman army he was unlikely to have had the authority or inclination to intervene in such a matter in the manner that he did. As king of Italy he would have taken on certain responsibilities that previously rested with the emperor, which would have included defending Roman citizens from attack and securing the northern frontier. At this point we start to see the concerns of the Germanic kings spreading from the immediate control of their tribal followers, through a combination of military success

³² Matthew Innes, 2007, *Introduction to Early Medieval Western Europe, 300 – 900*, Oxford, p121

³³ Eugippius, 1965edn, *The Life of Saint Severin*, trans. Ludwig Bieler, Washington, p98

and the acquisition of resources, to governing the entire occupants of the territory over which they ruled using the bureaucratic and political instruments bequeathed to them by the Roman Empire.

One thing that is becoming increasingly clear is the lack of any reference to the kings' religious role, which they seem to have lost since becoming Christians. As far as those kingdoms established on former Roman territory were concerned religious matters were in the hands of a professional Romanised Christian priesthood. The religious schooling and bureaucratic training of these priests meant that the Church was generally more sophisticated than the Germanic political entities that were in control, and this helped make the world of religion autonomous from the state and the monarch that ruled it. This in turn meant that the Church was able to challenge the rulers of these territories, albeit in a subtle and peaceful way. This situation reflects that which existed previously between the Church and the Roman emperor and for this reason the kings who ruled after the emperors found the religious basis of their office operating on similar terms to the Roman emperors. The trappings of empire greatly appealed to these new kings, and one place where this was demonstrated is the tomb of Theoderic in Ravenna, where his remains were housed following his death in AD 526. It was built in a similar fashion to those of Roman emperors such as Augustus, and remains an impressive funerary monument to the present day. Theoderic was also depicted in a mosaic in the church of San Vitale along with his family, although these mosaics were replaced with images of the Byzantine emperor Justinian, his wife and other individuals when Ravenna was taken by Byzantine forces later in the 6th century³⁴.

³⁴ Matthew Innes, 2007, *Introduction to Early Medieval Western Europe, 300 – 900*, Oxford, p154

The conversion of the Frankish king Clovis at some point in the last two decades of the 5th century (there are disputes over the precise date)³⁵ further marks the assimilation of Christian thought developed during the later Roman Empire into post-Roman monarchy. Gregory of Tours provides this account:

“King Clovis asked that he might be baptized first by the Bishop. Like some new Constantine he stepped forward to the baptismal pool...As he advanced for his baptism, the holy man of God addressed him in these pregnant words: ‘Bow your head in meekness, Sicamber. Worship what you have burnt, burn what you have been wont to worship.’

...King Clovis confessed his belief in God Almighty, three in one. He was baptized in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, and marked in holy chrism with the sign of the Cross of Christ. More than three thousand of his army were baptized at the same time. His sister Albofled was baptized...Another sister of Clovis, called Lanthechild, was converted at the same time. She had accepted the Arian heresy, but she confessed the triune majesty of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, and received the holy chrism.”³⁶

The reference to worship what he had burnt and burning what he had been “wont to worship” may be a reference to the plundering of churches by Clovis’s soldiers in the early part of his reign, with the theft of an ewer being remarked on by Gregory³⁷.

Although Clovis was already a king by the time he was baptised the event is important as it marks the point where the Frankish monarchy formally became part

³⁵ Roger Collins, 1999, *Early Medieval Europe: 300 – 1000*, Basingstoke, p111

³⁶ Gregory of Tours, 1974edn, *History of the Franks*, trans. Lewis Thorpe, London, II.31, p144

³⁷ Gregory of Tours, 1974edn, *History of the Franks*, trans. Lewis Thorpe, London, II.25, p139

of the Orthodox Catholic Church. This means that the Church's ideas on kingship would henceforth play a key role in the consolidation of what was to become the most powerful monarchy in Europe, and so a set of ideas first applied to Christian Roman emperors in response to the Imperial cult and the reality of living under an all-powerful pagan emperor came to be applied to post-Roman kings who in any case were eager to emulate their imperial predecessors. The above quote also says that Clovis's baptism was only part of a much larger mass baptism of Franks including family members. That this was achieved in concert with the baptism of the king suggests the large degree of authority that king had both over his immediate household and over his people as a whole. This does not suggest the relatively transient authority of the popularly-elected Germanic kings of old, but the beginnings of a powerful and controlling monarchy more akin to that of the emperors of Rome with the ability to compel their people in certain matters, albeit on a much smaller scale.

There is also the matter of the almost wholly Romanised context in which the Franks, for example, existed. Despite being the dominant social group in Gaul, they were surrounded by a Roman provincial society, and indeed depended on many of its surviving bureaucratic functions to rule their new territories. With the collapse of Roman civic authority, what remained of Roman bureaucracy survived to a large extent within the Church, with its literate and highly educated bishops and local administration of property, law and so on. The kingdom of the Franks also evolved within the Roman Empire, partly at the behest of the Romans themselves³⁸, and within a Roman political and religious culture. Although it wasn't until the reign of

³⁸ Edward James, 1988, *The Franks*, Oxford, p163

Clovis, or his immediate predecessor, that Frankish kings became Christian, the context in which it emerged will have inevitably influenced its development.

It is interesting to note that despite the Christian context, the Merovingian dynasty was said to have traced its origins to a Quinotaur³⁹ in a manner that was similar to the habit of Anglo-Saxon kings tracing their ancestry to Woden. In a similar way the Langobardi traced the origin of their name to the intervention of Freya, the wife of Woden, prior to a battle between themselves and the Vandals⁴⁰. This is in contravention to Christian opinion where no one could claim divine or mythical descent. This habit is not peculiar to Germanic kings or Roman emperors, but both in time discovered that they could not continue this pattern of belief and be proper Christians. In this respect Christianity had an identical effect on both institutions.

It should be borne in mind, however, that the Church also had to accept certain non-Roman aspects of these new rulers and here the archaeology of the period can also produce interesting evidence. For example, the lavish burial of the Frankish king Childeric, found by accident in 1653 at Tournai, does not have any parallel in either pagan Roman or Christian Roman tradition. Childeric was probably (but not certainly) pagan and his burial, in terms of the quantity and quality of its grave goods, bears testimony to this. While a few items can be found in a Christian grave, they never compare to the grave-goods found in Childeric's grave. Childeric died in AD 482, and so was of the right time frame to have known something of the Christian concept of kingship, and indeed it is less than a decade before this time that Saint Severin was providing useful instruction to the kings on the Danube frontier. Yet Childeric's grave, despite its location within the borders of a former Roman

³⁹ Ian Wood, 1994, *The Merovingian Kingdoms 450 – 751*, Harlow, p37

⁴⁰ Paul the Deacon, 1907edn, *History of the Lombards*, trans. William Dudley Foulke, Philadelphia, I.7, p16

province, appears to follow a more non-Roman burial tradition. Among other things, his grave was found to contain the remains of two richly decorated swords, a battle axe, a spear and the head of horse⁴¹. This is very much the grave of a warrior aristocrat, and it is likely that the horse's head belonged to an animal that was ridden to, and possibly in battle and that may have been slaughtered specifically so it could accompany its master into the afterlife. There was also a signet ring with the legend CHILDERICI REGIS, so there can be little doubt as to who the owner thought he was, although he used Latin to announce it. The art style employed on many of the artefacts is in fact Roman in character⁴², so despite being very much a Germanic king Childeric obviously liked to adopt some of the more Roman imagery that would have still been present at that time in Gaul. Childeric obviously had ideas on how he wanted to be seen as king, and the Roman-style artwork on many of the artefacts found in his grave suggests that he preferred to adopt a more Roman appearance. He couldn't call himself an emperor, however, as such a claim would have been difficult to support under the circumstances, and in any case his Frankish identity may have been strong enough to have prevented thinking of such a thing anyway. However, this style of burial did change over time, and when Charlemagne died in AD 814 he was buried in a re-used sarcophagus in the royal chapel at Aachen⁴³.

In Italy the situation was slightly different. Besides Theodoric's mausoleum we also have evidence from coins which bear Romanised images of Gothic kings that were based on earlier Roman examples⁴⁴. To some extent this is hardly surprising as the only currency Germanic kings had ever known was a Roman one, but their

⁴¹ Peter Lasko, 1971, *The Kingdom of the Franks: North-West Europe before Charlemagne*, London, p25

⁴² Ibid, p26

⁴³ Pierre Riché, 1993, *The Carolingians: A family who forged Europe*, trans. Michael Idomir Allen, Philadelphia, p139

⁴⁴ Bryan Ward-Perkins, 2005, *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilisation*, Oxford, p74

willingness to actually adopt an image similar to that of a Roman emperor indicates at least some desire to be seen as somehow more Romanised. The proximity of Italy to the remaining eastern part of the Roman Empire, and the continued direct involvement of that empire in Italy, would have exposed the Gothic kings to an existing and active Roman political system. The fact that they held the city of Rome and much of the peninsula that was the very heart of the Roman Empire must have also made an impression. This may well partly explain the construction of the mausoleum and the San Vitale mosaic. All this would have portrayed the king in a very Roman light, although the retention of Arian Christianity and a continued sense of a separate ethnic identity would continue to make the possibility of total Romanisation remote.

The sense of Germanic separation was also manifested in the law known as the *Lex Salica* (Salic Law) that the Franks passed in around AD 500 that gave themselves a higher legal status than Romans⁴⁵. The introduction of the concept of *Wergild*, whereby the monetary value of an individual is set depending on their social status and, in this instance, their ethnicity, is a Germanic concept. Needless to say any given Frank had a higher value than a Roman of the same class. This suggests a need by the Franks to distinguish themselves from the existing Roman population for reasons of preserving their political superiority and identity, although it does not necessarily indicate a rejection of Roman material culture. This peculiar dichotomy was bound to have consequences for the office of king, as this legal distinction is symptomatic of the growing distance between the Germanic and Roman eras.

⁴⁵ Ibid, p71

On the other hand, the existence and apparent effectiveness of such a law is itself indicative of a settled society that can be governed along the lines laid down therein. This settled society was laid down along Roman lines and was based on the villa economy of the later Roman Empire in the West to which the Franks had adapted⁴⁶, and it has been noted that royal power was based on the administrative features of late Roman Gaul rather than an earlier Germanic equivalent and that while the *Lex Salica* was not the same as Roman law it required a Roman setting to exist⁴⁷. Added to this degree of Romanisation is the highly influential position that the Church came to hold. Led by educated figures with a degree of influence over the Gallo-Roman population, the Church was at first useful to the Frankish ruling class and, as this class became settled and Romanised, it then became indispensable. The ability of churchmen as administrators and bureaucrats when it came to governing a relatively developed society, aside from their religious functions, meant their influence increased over time, especially after the conversion of the Franks to Orthodox Christianity. The Church in Gaul also recognised the authority of Rome, so whatever was handed down from Rome to the provincial bishops was bound to make itself felt in the court of the Frankish king. The Church, in many respects, helped develop and define what was to become the most powerful monarchy in Europe in terms it had itself developed and which it best understood.

Over time the successor kingdoms of Western Europe would develop into something quite distinct from the late Roman context from which they emerged, and consequently the monarchs themselves would exist according to an increasingly different political and legal arrangement. It was only in the theology of the Church that explained a monarch's right to rule and that was developed under both the pagan

⁴⁶ J.M. Wallace-Hadrill, 1962, *The Long-Haired Kings and other studies in Frankish History*, London, p2
⁴⁷ Ibid, p4

and Christian Roman emperors that a shadow of the later Roman monarchy would continue. This is in a way a form of cult since, although not emperor-worship in the pagan sense, it still raised the monarch to a level well above the ordinary man and much closer to God.

Some elements of Roman ritual practice also survived until quite late. Gregory of Tours relates the following account of the coronation of Sigibert in AD 575 when he succeeded to the kingship of Soissons:

“He advanced to the royal villa of Vitry and assembled the entire army around him. They raised him on a shield and elected him as their king”⁴⁸

This has been seen as reminiscent of a practice introduced into the Roman army by Germanic soldiers in the 4th century. However, although the tradition is of non-Roman origin it becomes the recognised manner in which Roman soldiers declare someone an emperor⁴⁹, notably in the case of Julian in AD 360⁵⁰. Whether or not the practice continued among the Franks as an attempt to emulate Roman procedure or because it was the method they employed from the outset is difficult to say. However, this is not really relevant as what matters is that there is, for whatever reason, a degree of continuity between Roman and Germanic practice.

⁴⁸ Gregory of Tours, 1974edn, *History of the Franks*, trans. Lewis Thorpe, London, IV.51, p248

⁴⁹ Edward James, 1988, *The Franks*, Oxford, p163

⁵⁰ Ammianus Marcellinus, 1986edn, *The Later Roman Empire (A.D. 354 – 378)*, trans. Walter Hamilton, London, 4:14, p189

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