

THE PSYCHOLOGY
OF THE ROMAN IMPERIAL CULT

By its method of posing problems successively, the curiosity of modern historians towards antiquity may sometimes give the impression of snobism or of complaisance towards a "fashion," even when it is actually following a logical bent: just before the last war the multiplication of works on the "imperial cult," or the "imperial mystique" of the first centuries of our era, presented dangerous temptations for exploitation in interpretations favorable to the rule of personal authority.¹ Notably in Germany, the most serious and objective study of the notion of "principat" among the first Caesars found itself compromised even by the vocabulary with which the Latin words were translated: how many dissertations of articles appeared at that time on ancient "Fuehrertum"!

Translated by T. Jaeger.

¹ The text of this article corresponds, essentially, with that of a lecture given under the same title at the Collège Philosophique in March 1959.

Although the greatest part of the specialists engaged in these studies retained its objectivity and sang-froid, a new reflection has been useful to them. The concrete conditions of the ancient cult are quite well defined; less acceptable are the mistaken illusions of certain modern historians. It is, however, clear, some twenty years after the tragic crisis, that this historical movement had sincere motives, and that its results remain beneficial on the scientific level.² Today, when the subject may be considered not, certainly, exhausted, but at least quite completely explored, the history of the "cult devoted to the Roman emperors"—as one said at the time of Beurlier—is being replaced by a more and more demanding exactitude in profundity of perspective, and is worthy of the attention of sociologists as of historians of religion, and of the divine or at least sacred monarchies of the ancient world. The works of H. Frankfort on the kingdoms of Babylon and Egypt are good preparation for this study; and one cannot ignore the christianized vestiges which the Roman system bequeathed to the Byzantine Empire. The desire for precision in the determination of influences, indeed of lines of descent, forbids the Roman phenomenon to be considered separately; it even happens, I believe, that this scruple goes beyond its purpose. The main danger in these matters is that of confusing indirect or diffuse influences with direct borrowings. To take an example over which the admirable method of Franz Cumont can triumph, when manipulated as it was by Cumont himself, or which can produce sophism if applied too schematically: when, at the time of Augustus and the first development of the cult of his genius in Italy, the Parthian king saw himself (as is proved by a Greek inscription of Susa) honored in the same manner for his *daimon*, practically a hellenized figure of the Iranian *fravashi*, it does not follow at all that the Rome of this time, still under the influence of anti-oriental propaganda from the time of Actium, owed anything at all to a Parthian or Mazdean influence. This concomitance, striking as it is, comes from distant traditions, but each of the two civilizations

² See, p. ex., the recently published volume in the "Bibliothèque de Théologie" of Louvain, Series III, Vol. 5, by L. Cerfaux and J. Tondriaux, *Un concurrent du christianisme: le culte des souverains dans la civilisation gréco-romaine* (1956), which has a very complete bibliography.

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added its own elements, its specific conscience. For thirty years now a controversy in these studies, sometimes latent and sometimes open, has placed in opposition those who hold the orientaling theory and the defenders of Rome's relative originality. We don't intend to enter into this debate in detail here, because out of multiple components a unified system was developed fairly early, indisputably to the profit of the Roman emperor; and because from this moment on, if the old oriental traditions seem to penetrate through this cult all the way to the West, one can maintain, conversely, that something of the Roman and Western discipline of the state passed into these oriental provinces; above all because, at all times and particularly at the beginning of this movement, the essential factor is, after all, to be found in the religious or spiritual dispositions of the society of the Roman empire, and in the behavior of a collective conscience. Original inquiries, such as those of von Premerstein, have already shown that the institution of the personal power of the *princeps*, at least in Italy, was the result of a massive phenomenon in which groups of "clients"³ converged. This idea can be traced all the way to the divinization of the prince, where for a long time the notion exists, borrowed from domestic religion, of cultural homage rendered to a paternal and protective power. The remarks which you are about to read tend above all to show which, in this imperial Roman world, were the circumstances or reasons which made acceptable or natural an exceptionally superstitious concept, or, if one prefers, an exceptionally sacred representation of the functions of the chief governing the empire.

In a purely morphological and institutional perspective, it has been possible for historians of "synthesis" to consider Augustus's achievement of high priesthood, in the year 12 B.C., as the point of departure for the Byzantine "caesaropapacy," the union in one person of civil power and religious authority. I believe this view

³ *Vom Werden und Wesen des Prinzipats*, Sitzungsberichte der Bayerischen Akad. der Wissensch., 1937, 15. Several aspects of the problem have been taken up again since then: see notably the series of articles by A. Alföldi in the *Museum Helveticum* of 1952, pp. 204-241, of 1953, pp. 101-124, and of 1954, pp. 133-139; and our essay on "Les Clientèles triomphales de la République romaine," in the *Revue historique*, Vol. CCXVIII, 1957.

to be oversimplified and almost inexact, primarily because it was much more important for the first emperor, already the son of a deified Caesar—*divi filius*—to be *Augustus* than it was to be *summus pontifex*: he bore this title since January, 27 B.C. The Senate had given it to him in preference to the name of Romulus, but its resonance was hardly different since, through the inaugural vocabulary, the word evoked the auspices of the foundation of Rome, and the exceptional power of communicating with the divine forces of the heavens and obtaining from them a lasting, perhaps eternal, blessing for the city and its empire. The Roman emperor will always be a founding father; Commodius will take this theme literally and, going back beyond Romulus, make his god Hercules the true first *conditor*. It is probably from this Roman theme that the notion—already flourishing at the time of Commodius, and certainly of ancient oriental, not Italian, origin—was developed more and more strongly that the prince by his coming, was a guarantor or restorer of the whole cosmic order, of a *saeculum felix*, of a fruitful and virtually new human generation, etc. But just as significant for us as the hesitation between Romulus and Augustus, is the role which Munatius Plancius played in these decisions of January 27. This intelligent “rallié,” who made the definitive suggestion, had just come back from the court of Alexandria, where for several years he had been an arbiter of elegance, if not a simple entertainer, for Antony and Cleopatra. With such antecedents, and in the situation resulting from the battle of Actium, it goes without saying that this person could not make Octavius, in Italy, take up the mythological masquerades at which he had been present. Playing now the part of a Roman nationalist, he catered gladly to Augustus’s archaic tendencies in an adequate religious vocabulary. But at the same time, no doubt sincerely, he profited from the experiences he had lived through: the resounding fall of Dionysos and of Aphrodite-Isis in Alexandria by no means meant that the conqueror could revert to a purely rational and political concept of a Roman magistrature, not even a supreme and renovated one. A sacralization was necessary. But could East and West, Italy and the diverse provinces, senators and slaves, understand this in the same way?

We know better and better today what oracular propaganda surrounded, and in general even encouraged, the *mises en scène*

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of Cleopatra and Antony around Alexandria. I think we still underestimate the pressure that they continued to exert on the regime and even on the person of Augustus. He thought, no doubt, that he was free of it, or at least that he alone felt it, when, having constructed the new temple of Apollo on the Palatine, he had the collection of sibylline oracles—duly selected, recopied where necessary, in a word, authentic—placed there. But his apollonism, if it helped him to reconquer the neo-pythagorean cenacles and the favor of philosophic circles, soon turned out to be insufficient to control, not to mention absorb, the new oracular propagand sent out persistently by the East. It would be necessary, a century later, for Nero to dress as Mithras (to crown Tridatus, himself called *Helios* in an inscription recently discovered in Garni, as king of Armenia), for him to confuse the Apollo of Augustus himself with a purely solar god such as the one of Rhodes, to win the sympathy of the “magi,” probably identical with the powerful “maguseans” whose role was reconstructed by Fr. Cumont and J. Bidez. We will find this problem again à propos of the conflict between a purely imperial style and a certain “royal” style. Let us return for the moment to the sacerdotal roles.

Indeed, as grand pontiffs the Roman Caesars were the religious chiefs of the empire until Constantine, but this power was in religious administration rather than in the direction of faith, and played little part, I think, in the development of the imperial cult. It is true that Augustus wanted to be a priest, and that the priesthood—all priesthoods, whose cumulative head he was—seemed to him to correspond to his mission as a modern Aeneas and to the positively ritual work of restoration which he had undertaken. But none of these priesthoods, or almost none of them, imposed specifically religious obligations on the Roman emperor, by which the watching citizens could consider him devoted to the gods, or close to them.⁴ The exotic priestly meaning of Elagabal, who in

⁴ There were, however, some signs in this direction: p. ex. in the rule, applied strictly to the obsequies even of Agrippa, that Augustus should neither touch nor even see a dead person; or in the precaution to postpone any capital punishment while he was in Rome. In spite of the coincidence with the flaminial taboos, it is probable that these abstentions were derived from the *August* quality of the prince (more or less “blessed”), who not only had to be defended from all

the third century will have the symbol of his god Hemesis placed on the Palatine and will officiate in his honor according to the Syrian rite, is something completely different. Even when the oriental religions will have become preponderant in the empire, one will often see the emperors enter them as initiates but rarely as priests, with the possible exception of the cult of Mithras.⁵ Also, at the beginning of the empire the priest is rarely a figure of great prestige to the Greco-Roman population. Certainly the imperial cult will have its "flamini" and their dignity, envied from the start, will mount so high that at the end of the pagan empire, under Julian at the least, these high priests will become the main religious authorities in the provinces: a deliberate answer, therefore, to the progress of the Christian hierarchy but, because of the semi-political nature of the cult, a tendency visible from the beginning. One must not confuse this phenomenon, primarily of an administrative order, with the meaning of the adoration of the emperor as a force serving, or better yet emanating from, the divinity. This will be the tendency of the imperial mystique at least in the second half of the third century, when the emperor will practically be considered the representative of the solar god, himself recognized as the most preponderant divine power. But how many stages there will be before arriving at this point! Not only did the sacralization of the Roman emperor not depend on a monarchic concept of divinity, concentrating in him the reflections of the latter, but one can observe for a long time (especially in the first century A.D., and still in the second) that, on the contrary, every honest attempt to attribute divine honors to the prince is categorically rejected by the believers in a pure and transcendent monotheism, first by the Jews and then by the Christians. The Roman imperial cult developed in a pagan, polytheistic religious atmosphere; in many respects it is the dispersal of divine powers, the fragmentation of devotions, the decline in mythological cre-

profanation but probably also could only retain the power of transmitting the blessing of the gods to Rome at this price.

⁵ The intermediary position will be represented, if you like, by that of a Julian, in the fourth century, adoring Helios Basileus the Sun King as his god, acting as his priest rather than as his temporal vicar, and dreaming of an apotheosis in which he joins his Mithras in the Beyond (see the end of his *Banquet of the Caesars*).

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ations and even the banalization of the anthropomorphic representatives of the gods which permitted the *numen* living and acting in the emperor to appear more and more as the most present and efficacious divine power. One can also determine that this power concentrates in itself all the principal functions of the traditional gods, and that it is capable of supplanting them in an iconographic system that becomes more and more rigorously bound.

What we have meant to say about the relations between the imperial cult and an eventual priestly representation of the emperor can also be put this way: until the great oriental religions accustomed a large part of the population—at the beginnings of the empire it was only a minority—to see priests actually officiate in the honor of the divinity, to transmit for him initiations, grades or hopes for the Beyond, the insignificance of pagan priestly actions instinctively moved opinion to attribute this role of an essential intermediary between human society and the gods to the imperial function. The archaeologists have commented for a long time on a certain bas-relief of the triumphal arch of Trajan at Benevento, where the meeting between Jupiter and the emperor seems to express, under the appearances of equal prestige, the idea of a formal delegation of authority made by the supreme god in favor of the *optimus princeps*. The most recent works, moreover, have made the nuances more precise; they speak less than formerly of an “abdication” of Jupiter. The scene is as unmystical as possible; it is not exactly mythological either. It is true that the monument is a work of official art; but it expresses a more and more widespread belief. At this point, too, one finds the empire halfway between the dynastic cults of the beginnings of the empire and the oriental devotions to which the Syrian emperors will be given. In fact, most of the Caesars had a tendency to patronize, in a very elastic pantheon, a divinity who was particularly their protector; and with the help of Greek flattery this tie of protection always tended more or less to an assimilation, and in the best cases to the belief in an “epiphany,” of this divinity in the person and actions of the prince. We understand better and better today, thanks to the progress of our knowledge of imperial astrology, the subtle influences—which could not be publicly admitted in Rome—that were exercised periodically over the Caesars, not only,

as is generally believed, from the time of the oriental monarchic traditions that this false science preserved, but already in the last royal dynasties surviving within the framework of the empire. That of Commagenus, above all, passionately devoted to astral speculations, marked the Roman emperors of the first century, and especially Nero, through Balbillus, the favorite astrologer of the prince, who was so dishonored for that by the judeo-christian tradition that one has sometimes supposed that he was the basis of certain imprecations of the Johannic Apocalypse against the cult of the Beast.⁶ But all in all this theme, which at the end of the last century was considered essential for the study of the Roman imperial cult, the assimilation of the emperor with official divinities, is rather fallacious. Such identifications favored the iconography and confusions which followed in the popular imagination; religiously speaking, they could not lead very far, except when the divinity whom the emperor thus approached maintained some power, great sanctuaries and oracles (such as the Apollo of Augustus and Nero; the Hercules of Trojan and above all of Commodus, etc.). In fact, the *numen* of the emperor will depend above all, from the Severii on, on the omnipotence of the astral gods, and especially of the solar god; one can easily see, at the moment when Aurelian institutes the official cult in Rome and represents the god under two aspects, that of the Greco-Roman *Sol*, and that of the Syrian *Bel* brought back from Palmyra, that all the usual anthropomorphic representations become inadequate. One also begins to find, first on the walls of Doura-Europos, a naïve but basically sincere and more significant phenomenon: these are the Syrian astral gods, adopted by the soldiers of the empire, who begin to be depicted with the appearance and costume of Roman emperors!⁷

⁶ Aired since Renan, the problem was recently taken up by St. Giet, *l'Apocalypse et l'histoire*, the argument of which has at least made probable the importance and reality of the outrageous provocations of the imperial cult at the time of the Flavians (according to the author, already in the time of Vespasian) for the origin of the Johannic allegories concerning the Beast.

⁷ The studies of H. L'Orange, his articles in the *Symbolae Osloenses* and his recent *Studies on the Iconography of Cosmic Kingship in the Ancient World* (Oslo, 1953), have usefully completed on this subject the authoritative restitution

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This is one of the keys, I believe, to the psychology of the imperial cult. The archaeologists and historians of paleo-Christian art know that the first effect of the christianization of the empire (I mean of imperial power) was not immediately, in great official art, to represent the emperor kneeling before his God, but rather to transfer to Christ, simultaneously with a vocabulary, an iconography borrowed from that of the triumphant emperor. Or rather, as André Grabar has notably shown, the Christian art of the great basilicas, for example in the fifth century, has taken up against an intricately bound iconographic system (by superimposed registers) where the central position, in former times, had been occupied by the emperor, in order to express the glory of Christ. This could be only an iconographic influence, and indeed to a great extent it is just that; but it is not excessive to think that the extraordinary concentration of the attributes of power, victory and majesty, around the person of the Roman emperor, to which the population of the empire had become more and more accustomed by an omnipresent imagery ranging from bas-reliefs on triumphal arches to the reverse sides of simple coins, contributed to prepare the pagan world for a monotheistic representation from which the evangelizing forces finally profited, at the same time bequeathing to the church of Christ the danger of too great complaisance towards the imperial function.

This is probably the basic phenomenon of the imperial cult, in the course of the first three centuries, too little visible if one is content to follow only its institutional history. Indeed, on this level one observes a conventional order: the emperor is only truly the object of a cult, as *divus*, after his death, and the principle, inherited from hellenistic philosophy at least as much as from

of the "Théologie solaire du Paganisme romain" done by Fr. Cumont. The *Sol comes* (*Augusti*) of the coins of the Illyrian emperors, in the last third of the third century, is not conceived exactly like the Master or the transcendent image of the emperor, but as his "battle companion," as is shown by the expression. It does not seem impossible to me that this conception owes something through official transcription, as throughout the solar cult in the empire at this time, to the representation of the divine companionship of Mithras and the Sun. Fr. Cumont has shown that this would be proper both for the theology and for the canonic imagery of the religion of Mithras.

sidereal speculations, remains that he does not become *divus* unless his "celestial" merits have been recognized by the senate, and unless his body, or at least his waxen image, when consumed by the pyre of the *consecratio*, has liberated the divine being which the eagle immediately carries to the heights of the heavens. Much could be said about these rites of apotheosis; although they are banal, and probably were considered conventional by the greater part of contemporaries, indeed quite mediocre in a world that could see an emulator of Hercules like Peregrinus climb voluntarily, alive, onto a pyre which he had himself constructed at Olympia—nonetheless they had retained enough oriental elements and astral notions to command a magic, if not religious, respect for this ascension into the heavens. But it is evident that these cold and complicated ceremonies have less and less importance for determining the divinity of the emperor: first because the very Roman precaution, or modesty if you will, which consisted of inscribing the prince as "consecrated" among the official gods while retaining for him his separate personality, made too artificial an obstacle to the instinctive movement which led one to consider every apotheosis as a sort of absorption into the heavenly being by whom the hero was inspired during his life, rather than as an autonomous afterlife; secondly and above all because, for the same reason, from the third century on at the latest, consecration is no longer the divine reward for a Roman emperor's exceptional human career, but rather the official verification that this supernatural power was in him and animated him during his life. Apotheosis becomes the return to the stars of a predestined being that they sent, and indeed formed; and it was the action of this presence in the reigning emperor which became more and more the object of religious attention and even of a cult.

I do not want to allude here only to those forms of the cult devoted to the living emperor through his *genius* or *numen*, which were the expressions—Roman, or Italian if you will—of the imperial cult, but also to the ever clearer sacralization of the attributes of power given to the prince: in the first place his victory—*Victoria Augusti* (or *Augusta*)—and also his valiance—*Virtus Augusti*.

These "deified abstractions," as they are customarily called, are important from the beginning of the empire, and were soon given

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more and more stereotyped graphic expression, of facile circulation.⁸ At first sight, they are a particularly unpleasing and mediocre product of Roman religious psychology, which seems to bring us back to the heavy primitivism of the *indigitamenta*, with their *numina* lacking real life, their morose prayers in a contractual vein, without possible effusion. They serve also in some cases as indirect homage, less personalized, and without doubt there is something of this calculation in the use that Nero's successors made of "august" allegories. (However, if we look closely at this word in its primitive Latin meaning, it is its application to a human person which is the most unusual). But if you take these notions in the first century, when they are in full bloom and trace their imagery, if you follow for example the representations of *Virtus Augusti*, from the truly military campaigns of Trajan to the hunts in Hadrian's style in the midst of nature, and then to the *venationes* of Commodus in the midst of the Roman amphitheatres, you see clearly that the spectacle of divine energy is involved and that, differing in form or in object only from one emperor to the next, this energy is considered specifically imperial. The believers in astrology could explain it by a celestial vocation. At this time, certainly, one isn't emperor by virtue of being the son of the preceding ruler, unless one possesses a *genesis imperatoria*, an appropriate theme of birth; and the rule is confirmed by the mortal danger run by anyone not a member of the ruling family to whom the astrologers impute such a horoscope.⁹ However that may be, each of the "imperial virtues" (four were to be found in Augustus) has a more and more clearly functional character, and on the other hand each (at first still primarily a moral notion) is gradually transformed into what historians of religion call a "charisma," a divine grace. For the archaeologist who inspects the figured monuments closely, this transformation

⁸ Gilbert Ch. Picard determined its history in his recent work on *Les Trophées Romains* (Bibl. des Ecoles d'Athènes et de Rome), in pushing to its limits (see our remarks in the *Journal des Savants*, July-September 1958) the correspondence between the themes of iconography and those of the imperial mystique.

⁹ This horoscope is ideally that of a *cosmocrator* in the Egyptian astrological style; thereby it is confounded with that of Alexander the Macedonian, as vulgarized under the Roman empire by popular versions of the *Roman d'Alexandre*.

begins very soon; if the Senate was satisfied with offering Augustus a *clipeus virtutis* made of gold (which almost immediately became a superstitious object, by the way) the *virtutes* of Caligula will be sung by choruses in procession. But then, wasn't Aristotle the author of the first cantata in honor of deified *Areté*? Did not the same divinity have its priests or priestesses among the Seleucids? Perhaps one cannot speak strictly of cult until the moment where a visible liturgy is organized; in this respect the imperial cult developed logically. Notably the works of André Alföldi have shown well how the movement of adulation, beginning with almost spontaneous and inspired acclamations under Augustus, for example, in often sincere ecstasies of gratitude, gradually took on definite liturgical forms, the words becoming more and more fixed, and even the number of times which they should be repeated. Such studies, clearly, can be applied less to the forms of worship offered the emperor in temples or at altars dedicated to his genius—places where worship generally imitates the style of public cults—than to the collective public demonstrations which surrounded the emperor in his functions, his palace or the senate, and above all at the spectacles where he comes in contact with the crowd. When one reads in Suetonius the acclamations with which the Alexandrian sailors disembarking at Bouzsoles surprised the aging Augustus—"it is thanks to him, they say, that they live, thanks to him that they sail"—and when one compares the "panegyric on Augustus the savior" which Philo the Jew inserted in his *Ambassade auprès de Caligula*, one realizes that on that day the tone of an Alexandrian cantata, like so many influences of hellenistic Egypt, was heard in Campania in that city tied to the very celebrations of the *Caesareum*. But half a century later Nero will be surrounded by these acclamations in Rome itself, and so as to be better served he will organize a special chorus of his *Augustiani*. The development of these themes of salvation by the emperor, if I may call it that, is so curious, and presents so many points of contact with that of the cults of gods of salvation, that the intercession of scholars dedicated to the study of the New Testament has not been without its use, for example, in explaining the whole significance of the scene, so often represented on coins, of the *Adventus Augusti*: the arrival in Rome of the ever-victorious emperor, always bringing back to

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the city, as did Augustus on the return from his two great voyages, the peace and prosperity that his absence threatened to compromise. Certainly a cliché, and perilous rhetoric. But we remind you of its pervasiveness exactly in order to make more comprehensible how, beyond every definition of religious right, even beyond any temple, the sacralization of the living emperor turns into the adoration of a savior.

This movement, by the way, is not exclusively to be condemned. Its most honorable side—noticeable especially at the time of the Antonines, when the more outrageous forms of adulation were tempered by wise princes—was the expectation which it expressed, among the peoples of the empire, of a beneficial and in some ways heroic activity on the part of the emperor. This was often a terribly demanding expectation. From the beginning of the empire, Hercules had been proposed as the best model for the prince to imitate: did he not conquer the sky while purging the earth of its monsters? Augustus, attracted by other gods, attached little importance to this one; but he was destined to fascinate the emperors, and at the same time offered an ideal occasion for reconciling the imperial function with the thinking of philosophers—of those Cynics and Stoics for whom Hercules remained the model of moral effort as well—or, if you prefer, an opportunity for accustoming the Caesars to a sufficiently philosophical conception of their role. From Trajan to Marcus Aurelius, indeed, this model became constantly more powerful, and the tendency to imitate him became ever more clearly philosophical. At first sight it is an extravagant surprise of history, after three quarters of a century of purification and ennoblement of the *Virtus Augusti* in the sense of energetic combat for the good of the empire, to see the “imitation of Hercules” set loose a sort of dementia which brought back all the old abuses of tyranny, and some new ones, under the sons of Marcus Aurelius. Hercules is made incarnate to the misfortune of the empire: he shows himself in the amphitheater, proud of his muscles; he dresses himself in women’s clothes; he even shoots arrows at the sick, if some witnesses are to be believed. What has happened?

To try to rehabilitate Commodius would be a bad role, and no historian would accept it. At best it is possible, as in the cases of Caligula and Nero, to determine precisely the influences which

perhaps influenced him, which made him guilty of this sort of folly, to find the profound motives for his brutal masquerades. And I believe that on this score it is no longer possible to be satisfied with the point of view of Renan, that the last chance for a government of men (in the ancient world) according to reason perished with Marcus Aurelius, and that together with the grossness of Commodius only superstition was in action. All the nobility of soul and intention that characterized Marcus Aurelius, in the first place, were not able to give his government control over all the difficulties of the empire, where the pressure of barbarians at the borders aggravated the economic contrasts in the interior. This pressure even obliged the imperial function, almost exclusively civil since Hadrian, to become once more openly military and to aim at heroic energy. The most beautiful sarcophagi sculptured by the generations of the second half of the second century and the first half of the third celebrated the labors of Hercules and the exploits of Achilles; in the third century the theme of the last combat of Achilles with the Amazon Penthesilea, focussing on the moment when he falls in love with his expiring victim, is also frequently chosen by the mosaic artists of the Roman empire. Whether or not these are really the sarcophagi of notables, in certain cases of high officers, the archaeologists have had to conclude that only the celebration of the imperial *virtutes* could have inspired this insistent choice and almost rigorous interpretation of themes among the schools of sculptors. And if Commodius liked to think of himself as Hercules reincarnate, and to play the role, or if Caracalla, a generation later, makes himself a New Achilles and simultaneously a New Alexander: taking into consideration the semi-silence of Latin literature in the third century, it is difficult to see how else the popularity of the main heroes of the Homeric epic and the Trojan cycle, still apparent when Constantine was seeking a site for his new city near the Straits, could have been kept so alive, if not by the persistent imitation of these heroes by the emperors.¹⁰ Com-

¹⁰ This problem is related to a known question in the history of literature: that of a possible role, at the origin of the tradition of the mediaeval *chansons de geste*, of the "cantilenas" of the Late Empire—such as the biography of Aurelian in the *Histoire Auguste* has preserved for us. Certainly, there is nothing homeric in these primitive military songs, which use a poor language and mediocre repeti-

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modius, therefore, in taking all the attributes of Hercules literally and representing his exploits positively before the Roman public, gave the Herculean movement which already underlay the imperial role a conclusion that was perhaps burlesque, but nonetheless of logical intention. At the same time he profited from the tradition cherished by the Roman cult that his hero had passed over the site of Rome before its human foundation, well before Romulus, and even before Aeneas and Evander, to show himself in the role of Hercules the Founder. I have tried to show, more particularly, that in taking the surname *Amazonius* he was not only commemorating one of the Herculean exploits, the victory over the queen of these female warriors, but—as his own transvestism suggested—he insisted on the double nature, the double power, masculine and feminine, contained by the Herculean genius. And I have tried to show that this “amazonian” double nature was doubtless also, for the connoisseurs, the very secret of the power of Rome.¹¹ In spite of some suggestive studies, this subject—the androgynous Roman emperor—is still too little known to permit definite conclusions. I believe that the tendency was important, that it is the key to certain affairs of scandalous vice, and that it represented, in the ensemble of the imperial mystique, a discreet contribution to occult movements that were closer to Hermes Trismegistos than to the real eastern theologies. I believe it is good in any case to admit that Commodus had an intention, unacceptable as it may have been, and that this intention was the product of an almost theological cult of Hercules. This is the last effort which was made in Rome itself to give the imperial *virtus* a mythological justification in Greco-Roman terms. For soon, under the Severii, the astral religions will be unfurled, and although elements of sidereal speculation may have been notoriously included in Commodus’s cult of Hercules, and al-

tions. Whether or not they originated with the barbarians, the fact is that they served as retorts for the soldiers of the empire—themselves barbarized—in brutal campaigns. But I do not believe that one can disassociate their study from that of the military style of the emperors at the same period.

¹¹ “L’Hercule impérial et l’amazonisme de Rome,” in the *Revue d’histoire et de philosophie religieuses*, Strasbourg, 1954.

though the apotheosis of Hercules himself was easily taken as a model for the consecration of princes, one feels how profoundly the ideas of the emperor's divinity change under the slowing influence of iconographic routine, when instead of the club or bow of Hercules, the victorious arm of Caesar holds the whip of *Sol Invictus*, and on his head the radiant crown replaces once and for all the *léontè*. Certainly it is possible to follow the rivalry between the solar and Herculean tendencies throughout the third century; we know that Diocletian, in the organization of his Tetrarchy, gave great importance to Hercules once more. In the fourth century the triumph of Christianity put them paradoxically in agreement. Christ, replacing the solar god, also had that which *Sol Invictus* had always lacked in order to replace Hercules: a human career, a Passion, a redeeming role. A suggestive little book by M. Marcel Simon treated this paradoxical subject—a Christian Hercules!—some years ago. Let us say here only that the insistence of the Roman empire on giving the imperial role to the model of Hercules, a tendency certainly favored by philosophic opinion but also easily acceptable to the religious psychology of the peoples who remained in Roman paganism—that is, were not influenced by oriental religions—contributed considerably to the notion among ancient societies that to govern a large group of men, and to defend them, was an heroic role, and that anyone assuming this role approached divinity. There again, the veritable sequence of influences is probably different from that suggested by appearances. Franz Cumont has shown very well that if the Roman emperors from the second century on—from Commodus on, that is—became more and more indulgent, more favorably inclined toward the diverse oriental religions, this was because these served the concept of their power. All of them served thus, more or less; but this was especially true of the cult of Mithras. Indeed, for the emperors of the third century the hesitation is no longer truly between Hercules and the Sun as an astral god, but between Hercules and this Mithras a solar genius, certainly, but fighting for the salvation of men. The concentration in the imperial role of functions salutary to men, and the presentation of this role as a cosmic power, helped more than a little to accustom the peoples of the Roman world to a monotheistic vision of the universe, and a monarchic vision of the *orbis Romanus*.

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The complaisance of a large part of the population before the exhibition, so to speak, of such an imperial role is the absurd and repugnant aspect of the phenomenon for modern man; it is also, I believe, the key to the movement. Let me insist a little.

I used the word "heroic" intentionally throughout the preceding remarks. The appropriate word is perhaps the Greek word "agonistic," and this is why: in the ensemble of the Roman world, the emperor's principal rivals in prestige, and in superstitious prestige, were not the leaders of the liberal opposition in the senate, nor—at least until the third century—the main chiefs of the armies, but rather the athletes, the charioteers, the gladiators, etc., whom the crowds acclaimed on the circus tracks and in the amphitheaters, and who seemed to be blessed—like the emperors—with a victorious grace emanating from the stars or the gods. It was precisely the complete winners of the Olympic Games (only eight in the imperial epoch) who were numbered from Hercules and counted as his descendants. The avid curiosity of the public, especially in Asia, for the exploit never before seen, the incredible thing, the heroes *paradoxoi*, etc., encompassed everything from the most courageous gladiators, the most skillful charioteers, to the itinerant thaumaturges—an Appolonius of Tyane under the Flavians, an Alexander of Abonotique under the Antonines. Lucian exposed some of their tricks in vain, and in vain made fun of the credulous; their success was still only too easy. Now, from the beginning of the empire on, and even in Rome, the Caesars believed themselves obliged to present and preside over perpetual *spectacula*. In the time of Augustus and Trajan—and really at all times—the Circus Maximus, and in the time of Commodius the amphitheater, are the places where this form of communication between the public and the emperor, at the same time familiar and subject to protocol, from which a rhythmic acclamatory style would be born, was most strongly developed: for it was there that the crowd could contemplate the prince in his "loge," could cheer him with *vivats*, could address requests to him. But at the beginning of the phenomenon, in the best case, the emperor had his favorites among the charioteers (or the gladiators or the *venatores* of the wild animal hunts), and tried to impose them on the public, utilizing their popularity

while controlling it easily.¹² In the second century the success of the most popular athletes irritated the emperors; didn't they say that Commodus was born from the intimacy of Faustina with a gladiator (apparently a satiric fable), indeed that this empress, the mother of many children, extended her favors to the principal mime of the time? Nero had already heard the Roman emperor's triumphal pomp confused with the "selastic" entries in the Greek athletic tradition. When Commodus descends into the amphitheater to be a gladiator or hunter himself, he certainly forgets the imperial dignity, and a justified assassination will end by sanctioning his provocation; but it is most probable that this maniac, in his always delirious logic, thought he was taking advantage for the emperor of the prestige accorded in this place to the most celebrated athletes, that he was showing that only the emperor was a living Hercules, that only he truly had the power of constant victory, that the people had to recognize or encourage with litany-like formulas: "You vanquish, you vanquish in all eternity, O Hercules, O Amazonian!"¹³ One century later the apotheosis of the charioteer Scorpis, mounting into the sky with his chariot and four horses, already ornamented the funereal stele of a Flavian functionary; it is possible that this person belonged to a sort of little known Jockey Club which determined basically, in imperial Rome before Byzantium, the "colors" of the charioteers in the Circus Maximus. But in any case, a few years after a dying Vespasian made fun of his own destiny as *divus*, this allusion is

¹² We know the favorite color of some first-century emperors (that is, in Byzantine terms, the "faction" or "deme") through Suetonius; and the Chronicle of Malalas of Antioch is full of information for the following reigns, albeit not necessarily reliable. This problem is still insufficiently explored.

¹³ We know that the formula for the seats of senators is cited by Dion Cassius, LXXII, 20, who attended this occasion personally. It is, to tell the truth, a problem still discussed by specialists, to determine the exact meaning of the title *Amazonius*, thus used. One would rather have expected *Amazonicus*, designating a "defeater of Amazons"—and certain scholars have thought that Commodus was comparing himself rather with the son of the Amazon, Hippolytus. I think that in any case the word evoked the presence in Commodus of the androgynous power unique to the emperor, and that this presence was thought to have resulted, in the case of Hercules, in his victory over the warrior queen—victories that are each time a conquest or acquisition of magical powers.

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significant. Not only did the famous athletes share with the emperor a sort of triumphal monopoly; in the eyes of the astrologers their victories had the same origins, and therefore implied the same sidereal promises.¹⁴ In the same way we have seen that the heroism necessarily expected from the *Virtus Augusti* in the middle of the second century tended to express itself in hunting exploits just as much as in military successes.¹⁵ The preponderance of an athletic type among the Roman emperors, so noticeable in Commodus and in his case still noble, and more brutally visible in the military emperors of the third century such as Maximin, was prepared for by these developments, and not just imposed by the augmentation of the military tasks of these Caesars.

In short, the psychology of the "spectacle," which was so deleterious to the manners and morals of this imperial society, is also largely responsible both for the facility with which the superstitious concept of the imperial function was accepted, and for the singular degradation which the imperial function periodically underwent. But, is it necessary to remind you that in the majority of provinces the most sumptuous spectacles, and the most exciting, were those which were produced on the festivals of the imperial cult, and that the preparation of these spectacles was the principal task of the priests of this cult?

To the omnipresence of the heroic, salutary, almost divine functions of the emperors through a great number of public spectacles, there corresponds more and more the obsession of a very organized imagery. The "imperial images" are everywhere: at

¹⁴ The contamination of these notions was such that I see no other way of explaining the use, in the Hippodrome of Constantinople, of a formula of acclamations (preserved by Constantine Porphyrogenetos) which openly considers the victories of charioteers as coming from the emperors, or promising them the equivalent. Although this liturgy is entirely christianized, and moreover contains curiously preserved Latin words such as *roumbikas* for *tu vincas* in its Greek formulas. I believe it possible to prove that the principle, and even most of the expressions, are already clearly visible in the Circus Maximus of Rome in the third and fourth centuries—for example at the moment when Constantine replaces Maxence in Rome (cf. *Rev. d'hist. et de phil. relig.* 1933).

¹⁵ The origins and development of the phenomenon are well expounded in the work of J. Aymard, *Essai sur les chasses romaines* (Bibl. des Ecoles d'Athènes et de Rome), 1951.

first among those of the gods and later, towards the end of the empire, in their place. Those of Augustus were so sacred that from the time of Tiberius on they served as a pretext for suspicions of sacrilege; and when the imperial police wanted to trap refractory citizens, first the Jews and then the Christians, the worship accorded one of these images was often the decisive test. It is difficult for us today, even after having seen personal regimes where the portrait of the chief was the object of hallucinatory propaganda, to imagine to what extent this iconographic system must have formed—and also limited—the imagination of the people. Triumphant in spirit even when not applied to historic military victories, official imperial art expresses itself more and more around the figure of the prince, in action or in majesty, and the image of majesty itself will become more and more preponderant as a heavy ceremonial develops around the public appearances of the prince. On the Augustan bas-reliefs of the “Ara Pacis” and again on those of the second-century triumphal Columns, the emperor represents the empire before the gods; he often still sacrifices in their honor.¹⁶ At the end of the empire he is practically the living god, and it is to him that nearly all figures are turned, from his dignitaries to suppliant prisoners, or those “oriental bearers of offerings” whose theme the Christians adopted in the adoration of the Magi. When the official forms of the cult of the Augusti have become routine in the provinces, when it seems that in Rome the cult of the *divi* is only formally served, these are the clear signs by which one measures the true progress of the sacralization of imperial power.

Even in christianized form, this sacred power will remain so special and so fraught with prestige that for a long time, as we know, the title and memory impose themselves—either as embarrassment or as protection—on the little barbarian kingdoms, and even on the medieval kingdoms with coronations and anoint-

¹⁶ We still have good bas-reliefs of the Antonines sacrificing before altars or great temples, and the triad of the three Severii is still represented in sacrificial action on the backs of coins. Then the scene becomes, ever rarer; and, in parallel, the series of coins permit us to follow the significant evolution of the theme of the emperor concluding a pact with a god (p. ex. Hadrian with Serapis): the preponderance of the figure of the prince tends to succeed a simple equality of the two figures.

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ments. In tracing this power from Augustus to Constantine it is possible to come across instances in which it has interfered with what was left of the "royal" tradition in the Orient. In spite of the amphi-bology of vocabulary with which the title is translated into Greek and which will become customary in Constantinople—*basileus* meaning *princeps*—the Roman emperor is completely different from a king, and much more. Nonetheless, we see some Caesars in the first century, especially Caligula and Nero, who cultivate the visible nostalgia of the pomp and superstitious prerogatives of kings, presiding over "royal dinners" which involve some sort of magical *mise en scène*, making themselves distributors of crowns and, if need be, receiving them themselves from their vassals.¹⁷ Except for the fact that these tendencies were generally not well received in Rome, they could not affect the representation of the Roman emperor as sacred except insofar as he, the heir of hellenistic monarchs in several oriental provinces, was obliged to show himself on the frontiers of the Euphratis as more powerful and more prestigious than the king of the Arsacidian Parths. The essential attribute of these ancient Seleucid and Lagidian kings ended by being integrated with those of the Caesars, and even in the details of the imperial cult there are traces of the worship rendered these earlier dynasties; but it is not excessive to say that the divinization of the Roman emperor conquered a vaster public, rose higher, and developed more consequences. The ties of this cult with the worship of the emperor in Rome, ties of an almost complete community of mystic attributes—for Rome is as invincible as Augustus, but in the third century, for his part, the emperor is theoretically as "eternal" as Rome—at the same time defended the political unity of the empire and the prestige of its capital against the centrifugal movements that inevitably threatened it.

No modern person can easily resign himself to admit that such a phenomenon, developed over such a long period and to such an extent, was normal, or that it can have been beneficial to the civilization and the moral posture of the people who experienced it. In a way, it is responsible to later centuries both

¹⁷ See the note of the essay on "L'Empereur romain et les rois," in the *Revue historique*, April-June 1959.

for the difficulty of the Christian church in organizing itself independently and, until the explosion of the quarrel between church and empire, for the long confusion between political authority and the directing of consciences. But one can no longer pretend, I think, that all this was artificial and harmful. As far as sincerity is concerned, in spite of the absurd complaisance of many Caesars towards this adulation, in spite of the odious system of informers, we must recognize that many men in the Roman world needed it in some way, primarily in order to feel themselves protected, when the emperor was respected as the equal of the gods. And we see clearly, at the beginning, that the modest classes distinguished themselves by their zeal, under the mistaken illusion that the imperial power, from the time of Marcus Aurelius and in spite of his moral principles, acted in favor of the condition—economically more and more precarious—of the *humiliores*. At the end of the empire protocol became heavier, and the worship became schematized; the contemporaries of St. John Chrysostom, in the New Rome which is Constantinople, where they contemplated the majesty of the “Basileus,” can almost be excused for imagining the Heavenly Court in the image of the court of the emperor. The real content of the cult was no doubt impoverished, but the framework in which it had developed, schematized by official art, had a prolonged life. The transpositions which Christian art made from this imperial art were essentially, as we have seen, only a system of iconographic borrowings. But even psychologically speaking, in the third to fifth centuries, how many traits in the representation of God, of Christ, are the legacy of the imperial image! Contrary to the tradition inherited from Israel, Christians became used to the fact that the monarchic sovereignty of God had its correspondent, and even its representative, in a unique and sacred prince. The custom of coronation was established little by little; the custom of anointment will develop much later. Even “crowned by God,” the Christian emperor of the fourth and fifth centuries continues to reunite in his person the sacred attributes which escape the priesthood, and are thought to serve the community of men on a different level.