

# Before Christ, there was Augustus: Comparing the Imperial Cult in Hispania and Gaul

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The imperial cult shifted the emphasis of Rome's history and purpose. Caesar Augustus, drawing from eastern influences and practice, constructed the foundation for ruler worship in the west that would be expanded upon by his successors. This colossal shift in cultural understanding set a precedent that established an eastern religious practice into an otherwise conservative western society and was fashioned in a manner to be palatable to ancient Roman sensibilities. This ultimately led to his deification and raised status, as the father of his nation.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the model of the imperial cult in regions that recently came under the dominion of the Roman empire, in particular the regions of Spain and Gaul. The provinces in particular are of special interest due to their recent inclusion into the empire as well as their shared Celtic legacy. In order to contrast the development of the imperial cult within these two regions, I must investigate the legitimacy of Hispania as a so-called model province. Thus, the first portion of my paper seeks to provide context for the development of the imperial cult within Hispania and to identify key characteristics that I will then compare and contrast with the development of the imperial cult in Gaul. Overall, I argue that Celtic traditions played a critical role in the development of the imperial cult in both regions, and this is in keeping with the strategy of Augustus. Religious manipulation was perhaps the most important role of social control employed under the Augustan regime and the underlying cultural traditions—in these cases, Celtic traditions—helped determine the efficacy of this social control. This essay will

touch on the Augustan strategy as it relates to the imperial cult through the comparison of Hispania and Gaul and their connecting Celtic traditions.

To understand the Augustan policy and the imperial cult, it is necessary to contextually understand the province of Hispania. Hispania is of special interest due to the long history of settlement within the region as well as its proximity to Roma. While Hispania in its entirety came under the reins of empire in 25- 26 B.C.E, following a campaign against tribes of the Northern peninsula. These military campaigns levied against tribes were emulated within the provinces of Gaul by Drusus in 13-10 B.C.E. Both military expeditions resulted in securing the empire's borders and, as a consequence, increasing Romanization. An unforeseen aspect of this process of Romanization was the integration of the imperial cult. Yet, the processes of erecting temples or altars specific to the veneration of Augustus and Roma within the two provinces diverged from the classical model created in Rome.

### **Tarraco**

The city of Tarraco, the oldest Roman settlement in the Iberian Peninsula, held host to Augustus during his campaign in Cantabira, which would be the last time the precepts commanded a military force onto the field.<sup>1</sup> During his stay Augustus is reported to have constructed an altar where the inhabitants of Tarraco claimed a Palm Tree sprung from. Duncan Fishwick connects this extraordinary happening to another similar account in Tralles, where a palm tree sprouted under a statue of Augustus. The motivations of Tarraco's inhabitants, Fishwick

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<sup>1</sup> Gruen, E. S.. "The Imperial Policy of Augustus" In *Between Republic and Empire: Interpretations of Augustus and His Principate* edited by Kurt A. Raaflaub and Mark Toher, 395-416. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.

argues, were primarily political.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, our literary sources are not without support as there are numerous series of *sestertii*, *dupondi*, *ases*, *semis* and *quadrantes* which were minted at Tarraco.



Figure 1, Picture is from the Museu Arqueològic de Tarragona.

Figure one depicts the Palm sprouting from the altar in Tarraco; the obverse depicts a radiated head of Augustus with the legend reading *DIVVS AVGVSTVS PATER* translates to The Divine Emperor (Augustus) father [of the nation]. The coin could have only been minted after the death of Augustus, during the reign of Tiberius, where the mass production of *DIVVS AVGVSTVS* coins circulated the empire. An otherwise fleeting passage in Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria* provides an early glimpse of the *colonias* attitude towards the Precepts.<sup>3</sup> Whether the palm did miraculously emerge at the altar or not, is not the matter of this paper, but what is important is that the inhabitants of Tarraco believed so and attempted to further bestow honors onto Augustus. Their belief and willingness to honor Augustus was tied to their Celtic traditions,

<sup>2</sup> Fishwick, Duncan. *The Imperial Cult in the Latin West, Volume 1 Studies in the Ruler Cult of the Western Provinces of the Roman Empire Part 1* (1 vols.), (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 16 Nov. 1987, pg. 175; Suet., Aug. 92, 1.

<sup>3</sup> Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* 6, 3, 72.

which will become more evident. Long before Augustus would purposefully attempt to spread the imperial cult across the provinces, this initial success and positive reaction at Tarraco demonstrated that veneration of the imperial cult in foreign provinces was possible and thus, contributed to future endeavors.

Furthermore, records show that in 15 A.D. an emissary from Tarraco traveled to Rome to ask Tiberius for the construction of a temple within the town.<sup>4</sup>

*“Temple ut in colonia Tarraconensi strueretur Augusto petentibus Hispanis permissum, datque in omnes provincias exemplum.”*

Tacitus, our source, cites how Hispania became a *in omnes provincias exemplum*, yet whether Hispania was an example in ruler reverence or in the model of the imperial cult is highly conjectured. The prevailing interpretation is that an embassy sent by Tarraco traveled to Rome to request the construction of a municipal temple. However, this perspective directly conflicts with Tacitus’s statements, *omnes provincias*, how can a municipal temple set the example for the provinces? Municipal temples to Divus Augustus have already existed within the emperor’s lifetime at Carthage Nova, Barcino, Agusuta Emerita and Eborac.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, there are no other records to speak of emissaries going to Rome to petition for a temple in Latin West. In response, Fishwick concludes that *petentibus Hispanis permissum*, must refer to an emissary made up of Hispania legation drawn across the province rather than the inhabitants of a single city. Thus, the temple at Tarraco was provincial, not municipal, and the behest of a Hispanian

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<sup>4</sup> Tacitus (Ann. 1, 78). Temple ut in colonia Tarraconensi strueretur Augusto petentibus Hispanis permissum, datque in omnes provincias exemplum.

<sup>5</sup> Duncan, Fishwick. *Precinct, Temple and Altar in Roman Spain*. Available from: VitalSource Bookshelf, Taylor & Francis, 2017 pg.150

assembly, not the city of Tarraco.<sup>6</sup> Yet, other scholars push back on parts or all of the premise of provincial versus municipal and the discussion of the extent of this model status. The argument over whether or not the temple existed at the request of the Hispanian Assembly or the city of Tarraco is not essential to the progression of this essay. The essential reality is that Tarraconensis was the first province to take the initiative in establishing the imperial cult and pushed the boundaries of ruler worship far beyond what Augustus was comfortable doing himself. This idea of the model province is why Hispania is a useful comparison with the province of Gaul, as will be highlighted later in this essay.<sup>7</sup>

### **Tradition of Ruler Worship**

Surely political motivations are valid reasoning for the temple's construction, but this limits the sentiment of *Hispania* into a secular framework easily accessible to contemporary historians. The issue that arises from this, is that antiquity was far from secular. S. Price points out a pattern prevalent in the field of Roman studies to separate religion and state, this of course is obsolete.<sup>8</sup> Special consideration should be given to Spain in this regard due to its history and tradition to venerate military leaders. Fragmentary records of Pre-Roman Spanish tribes have allowed historian such as Roberts Etienne to conclude native tribes had a 'protohistoire du culte

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<sup>6</sup> Duncan, Fishwick. *Precinct, Temple and Altar in Roman Spain*. Available from: VitalSource Bookshelf, Taylor & Francis, 2017 pg.150

<sup>7</sup> Fishwick is not alone in this conclusion and is accompanied by the likes of Jean-Baptiste Mispoulet, Thomas Nipperdey, and Emile Beurlier. Mispoulet makes the distinction that the example set by Tarraco only refers to the western provinces. Beurlier follows in this analysis but insists that *omnes provincias* only applies to provinces within Spain.<sup>(1)</sup> As Fiske points out, these distinctions are arbitrary and rather prefers Nipperdey analysis that the temple served as an example for other provinces because it was the first national temple to divus Augustus.<sup>(2)</sup> (1) Beurlier, *Le Culte Impérial: Son Histoire et son Organisation*, (2) George Converse. "Notes on the Worship of the Roman Emperors in Spain." *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 11 (1900): 101–39. <https://doi.org/10.2307/310366>. 135-136

<sup>8</sup> PRICE, S: *Rituals and power. The Roman imperial cult in Asia Minor*, Cambridge, 1984, 239 y ss.

du chef de guerre'.<sup>9</sup> This native practice was first documented in the second century by the Roman general Scipio Africanus the Elder. Scipio indeed spent a large amount of time in Spain, being referred to as the Alexander of the West in his lifetime, and archeological evidence of lavish devotion made to the Roman general seemingly suggest that Etienne's analysis was correct. This conclusion is further reinforced by Livy's account of Scipio's encounter with a leading Celtiberians.

“delighting in this gift and courteous treatment he away to his home, and he filled his countrymen with the well —earned praises of Scipio, saying that there had come a most godlike youth, conquering everything by arms and especially by generosity and favors.”<sup>10</sup>

From this translation, it is evident that Scipio's ability to lead successful military campaigns positioned him as a godlike figure. Thus, the connection to military leadership and divinity had already been part of Hispania's traditions. Etienne arguments has only matured within the study of the Imperial cult as contemporary scholars, such as Leonard A. Curchin, maintain Etienne thesis and assert that “the cult of the leader was well established in pre-Roman Hispania, where the Iberian devotion implied not only respecting the chief but worshipping him and even dying for him”<sup>11</sup> Scipio Africana in this sense enjoyed a divine status.<sup>12</sup>

The Celtic culture had a definite impact on the region's acceptance of the empire. Augustus' last campaign leading men into field indirectly left an impression among the Celtic

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<sup>9</sup> Robert Étienne. *Le culte impérial dans la péninsule ibérique d'Auguste a Dioclétien*. Paris: Boccard 1958.

<sup>10</sup> Livy. *Books 26-50 With An English Translation*. Cambridge. Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann, Ltd. 1943.

<sup>11</sup> CURCHIN, L. A: *Roman Spain. Conquest and Assimilation* , Londres- Nueva York, 1991, 162

<sup>12</sup> This inclination to reason that Spain's pre-Roman past contributed to the success of the imperial cult is also sustained by Duncan Fishwick. Yet Fishwick, in direct contrast to S. Price, interprets the devotions offered to military leaders as mere expressions of political fidelity rather than any genuine reflection of spirituality. Once again, Fishwick is unconvinced and waits for more archeological evidence to make any conclusions.

inhabitants of the Iberian Peninsula. This display of military prowess unexpectedly coincided with a long-standing Celtic tradition of venerating chief and later venerating foreign Roman generals. This would explain the early attempts to further bestow Augustus with titles following the materialization of a palm tree at the altar of Tarraco, as well as reframe the uncommon request, at least in the Latin west, to construct a temple to Divis Augustus following the death of Caesar. Although Tacitus' remarks designate Spain as a model for cult participation, the fact is Spain was oddly unique.

And yet, the temple at Tarraco is not the first installation to house the imperial cult, rather Gaul is accredited with that accomplishment. However, unlike the extensive archaeological, epigraphical, and numismatic evidence found in Hispania, evidence in the province of Gaul is less forthcoming. Concerning this absence of information, the Celtic connection between Gallia and the Iberian Peninsula is therefore relevant to understanding the Gallic reaction and interaction with the ruler cult.

### **Lugdunum**

Now that we have context around the narrative of Hispania as the model province and an understanding of the Celtic characteristics that interacted with the imperial cult, it is time to compare to the province of Gual. The Roman colony of Lugdunum was founded in 43 B.C. by a lieutenant of Julius Caesar, Munatius Plancus. Similar to the campaigns against the Spanish mountain tribes, here Augustus responded to increasing tension and directed his stepson, Drusus, to quell the Germanic tribes. Astonishingly, Drusus, in response, erected an altar dedicated to Augustus and Roma at the confluence of the rivers Rhone and Saone in 12 B.C. This was the first appearance of the imperial cult in the Latin West ever yet there is little documentation on

this novel shift in the empire's relationship to the western provinces. This initiative is interpreted by Fishwick to have been preplanned and, in these aspects, Lugdunum deviates from many patterns observed in Hispania. For instance, sanctuaries were located on the outskirts of the colony as opposed to the temples in the Iberian peninsula which were located at the colony's civic centers.<sup>13</sup> Yet despite these differences, pre-Roman indigenous tradition, as in Spain, played a fundamental role in the development of the ruler cult. Both Hispania and Gaul had a common Celtic background which allows for the application of our knowledge of Hispania's development of the imperial cult to gain a better understanding Gaul's development.

The first indication of Celtic influences is seen in the site name, Lugdunum, which translates into "the fortress of Lug(h)", lug being the name of a primary Celtic deity.<sup>14</sup> Another coincidence left to conjecture was the fact that the annual inauguration and observation of the imperial cult at Lugdunum fall on the 1<sup>st</sup> of August. Called the *Concilium Galliarum*, which constituted an assembly of 60 *civitates* (citizens) from the three provinces of Gaul to venerate Roma and August.<sup>15</sup> This assembly, this gathering of tribes is rooted in pre-Roman tradition, in fact, the date 1<sup>st</sup> of Augusts coincides with the Celtic calendar and festival Lughnasad. These "games of lug" were to celebrate the annual harvest and foreshadowed the upcoming winter.<sup>16</sup> Being one out of only four major festivals in the Celtic religions, the fact that these dates seemingly coincide with the Roman *Concilium Galliarum* out of sheer coincidence is difficult to

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<sup>13</sup> Fishwick, Duncan, *The imperial Cult in the Latin West: studies in the ruler cult of the western provinces of the roman empire*, Volume 3, pt. 3. 105

<sup>14</sup> Christopher Gregg. *Augustan Policy and Celtic Tradition: The Imperial Cult Lugdunum*. *Archaeological News*, 2000, 45-55, V. 23

<sup>15</sup> Strabo, *Geography* IV, 3.2

<sup>16</sup> H. D. Rankin, *Celts and the Classical World* (London 1987) 267.



accept. Rather in this situation, Fishwick's interpretation that the imperial cult in Gaul was designed or planned, is most likely the case and would explain the festival date as aligning.

The deity Lug is the common denominator in both the city's name and festival, however, to connect Lug and the imperial cult is a difficult task because the worship of Lug during the Greco-Roman period is not documented in either epigraphical or literary sources. Indeed, the information that is available to us comes from later Irish sources and must be taken with some amount of skepticism. Nonetheless, the connection to Lug can be witnessed throughout ancient cities of Lyon, Leignity, Leyden, and St. Bertrand-de-Cummings. The frequent use of the lug as, "toponymic marker is surely reflective of the deity's place in European Celtic pantheon."<sup>17</sup> However, the question remains what did the cult of Lug offer to make it a desirable foundation for the imperial cult?

In this respect, the nature of the Celtic god is important to understand due to the similarities shared with Roman deities. In the Celtic tradition, Lug is described as an omniscient solar deity that embodies both warrior prowess and artisanal craftsmanship.<sup>18</sup> These characteristics are parallel by many Greco Roman deities, however, classical archaeologists Christopher Gregg, claims the roles of Apollo as a "warrior, harper, poet, healer and god of light" mostly closely parallels that role of Lug in the Celtic belief.<sup>19</sup>

Apollonian imagery and symbolism were used to ingratiate the new regime and became a staple of Augustan propaganda. Augustus indeed went to great lengths to connect himself to the sun god and constructed temples dedicated to Apollo following the battle of Actium. Where Apollo laid his harp down and took up arms against eastern influences. After the threat of war

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<sup>17</sup> Gregg, C. Augustan Policy and Celtic Tradition: The Imperial Cult Lugdunum.

<sup>18</sup> Gerhard Herm, *The Celts: The People who Came out of the Darkness* (London 1975) 131.

<sup>19</sup> Gregg, C. Augustan Policy and Celtic Tradition: The Imperial Cult Lugdunum.

was once done away with, Apollo was once again able to return to music, poetry, and literature. This duality is directly influenced by Augustan propaganda as Apollo actions attempt to reconcile Augustus's early career as a young war lord to becoming the father of his nation. Coins struck at Lugdunum, fig. 2, attest to manipulation of the moral and the defied. The coin depicts on the obverse an image depicting an image either of Caesar or Apollo, the ambiguity is on purposes, while on the reverse depicts Diana.



Figure 2, 11 B.C.- 03 B.C., Denomination Denarius, Minted in Lugdunum, Photo from: numismatics.org

The connection between Celtic and Roman deities is not a pioneering discovery, as even our ancient sources draw parallels between the two cultures. While campaigning in Gaul, Julius Caesar in his war commentaries describes the Roman interpretation of the Gallic pantheon. Stating that, “Mercury in particular” was especially coveted as he invented all arts, guided their journeys, and was patron of commerce.<sup>20</sup> Following Mercury in importance was the worship of Apollo, Mars, Jupiter, and Minerva; this pantheon, is noted, not exclusive to a single

<sup>20</sup> Julius Caesar, Commentaries on the Gallic War book 6, ch.17, Translation from Mellor, Ronald. The Historians of Ancient Rome. 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. Taylor & Francis

tribe rather it is generally applicable to “other nations.”<sup>21</sup> Even Caesar notices characteristics of Roman deities within the Celtic religion and granted Roman identities onto them.



Figure 3, 'Bird God' Archaeological Museum of Dijon. Cl. Fr

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Augustus is very clever in the implementation of a cult in the context of the pre-Roman tradition of the deity Lug. The fact that Lug greatly parallels Apollo in character means that the same subconscious imagery could be then embedded into the Celtic people. Once again Augustus is able to convey himself as a peacemaker, fierce warrior, and defender of the peace but through a non-Roman-Celtic deity as opposed to the Roman gods. If the goal of the imperial cult was to cultivate loyalties to the person of the emperor and further Romanization, chiefly in recently pacified region, as Fishwick claims, then the creation of a cult that catered to Celtic

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<sup>21</sup> Julius Caesar, Commentaries on the Gallic War book 6, ch.17, “ They worship as their divinity, Mercury in particular, and have many images of him, and regard him as the inventor of all arts, they consider him the guide of their journeys and marches and believe him to have great influence over the acquisition of gain and mercantile transactions. Next to him they worship Apollo, and Mars, and Jupiter, and Minerva; respecting these deities they have for the most part the same belief as other nations: that Apollo averts diseases, that Minerva imparts the invention of manufactures, that Jupiter possesses the sovereignty of the heavenly powers; that Mars presides over wars.”

traditions would have exhibited or reflected Celtic participation.<sup>22</sup> However, due to the lack of sufficient evidence, any further conjecture on this matter is difficult. Or at least that was the case until the discovery of a statue unearthed at Alesia, known as the “bird god.”

This statue is dated to the Gallo Roman era, possibly in the late first century to the early second century. Figure 3 depicts a full-face deity, wearing a short tunic, breeches, and cloak tied over the right shoulder and covering the chest. He is also flanked by two ravens on either shoulder and in his right hand, he holds a stick on the ground, in front of which is seated a dog. Although there is no inscription on the statue, archeologists assert that the Gallo Roman statue mostly likely depicts Jupiter.<sup>23</sup> However, the statue also oddly replicates motifs specific to Lug, namely the ravens, as the deity is described by Irish tradition often attended by ravens that sit on his shoulder and whisper tidings.<sup>24</sup> Yet to suggest that the statue is a craving dedicated to Lug, is rather perfunctory. What the idol does suggest, is that the precedent for Roman and Celtic religious syncretism was established early in the republic and undoubtedly continued well into the late empire.

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<sup>22</sup> Duncan Fishwick, *The Imperial Cult in the Latin West: Studies in the Ruler Cult of the Western Provinces of the Roman Empire*, volumes 1, and 2 (New York 1987) vol 2, 389.

<sup>23</sup> Pierre-Antoine Lamy, “A new Gallo-Roman bust of the “God with birds” discovered in Alesia (Côte-d’Or)”, *Revue archéologique de l’Est*, tome 63 | 2014, 459-465.

<sup>24</sup> Gerhard Herm, *The Celts: The People who Came out of the Darkness*.



Figure 3, Denomination dupondius, via  
(Musée d'archéologie nationale de Saint-Germain-  
en-Laye, inv. 2396 N)

Lastly, special consideration must be given to the fact that the focus of the imperial cult in Lugdunum was an altar and not a temple. From figure 4, we can see a rectangular altar inscribed with ROM(AE)-ET-AVG(USTO), To Rome and Augustus, flanked by either side by two pillars on top of which two Victories stands holding a laurel.

The existence of the altar is further supported by the writings of Strabo, who confirms the coin's image; notes that's the altar bore the names of 60 Gallic tribes and statues surrounded the altar.<sup>25</sup> Even Fishwick acknowledges this phenomenon, as the choice of an altar as the first monument of the ruler cult in the west is surprising when Greco- Roman temples had established themselves as the standard place of worship since the early republic. Fishwick contends that

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<sup>25</sup> Strabo, Geography , IV 3.2 ,Lugdunum itself, then, (a city founded at the foot of a hill at the confluence of the River Arar and the Rhodanus), is occupied by the Romans. And it is the most populous of all the cities of Celtica except Narbo; for not only do people use it as an emporium, but the Roman governors coin their money there, both the silver and the gold.<sup>a</sup> Again, the temple that was dedicated to Caesar Augustus by all the Galatae in common is situated in front of this city at the junction of the rivers. And in it is a noteworthy altar, bearing an inscription of the names of the tribes, sixty in number; and also images from these tribes, one from each tribe, and also another large altar.

under Augustus, altars after the Hellenistic model returned to fashion.<sup>26</sup> Although a valid rationale, the choice of altar serendipitously matches the open-air model of Celtic sanctuaries. Sacred groves, rivers, grottoes, and fields, or in other words, the natural world played a significant role in Celtic worship. This Celtic tradition of worshipping in open spaces would seemingly explain why four altars were established rather than a temple. Professor Gregg comes to the same conclusion and asserts, “in each of these cases, the indigenous population (of Lugdunum) had a pre-Roman tradition of outdoor sanctuaries.”<sup>27</sup> If the goal was to establish a new cult, then perhaps the consideration of indigenous practice would have played a factor in making the transition less traumatic.

Much of what has been discussed in this paper has reasoned that the ruler cult in Lugdunum in its exterior presented as Roman but in its interior incorporated Celtic religious traditions, or as C.Gregg states a “Romanized mask behind which is a Celtic face.”<sup>28</sup> The same consideration paid to Roman tradition and customs, with respect to the imperial cult, could have then been implemented again in Gaul. The difference being, instead of catering to Roman republicanism, Augustus tailored the Imperial cult to consider major Celtic beliefs. Just as Augustus tied the worship of himself with that of Roma as not to offend Roman sensibility, Augustus connected himself with major Celtic festivals, rituals, and customs.

The Roman religion was not the only pantheon to incorporate the worship of the Roman emperors. For the Roman world was home to countless belief systems, cults, creeds, and sects,

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<sup>26</sup> “In itself the choice of an altar might seem surprising when the Greco-Roman temple had so decisively established itself as the normal place of worship since the beginning of the Republic. But under Augustus, the altar form, now constructed on the Hellenistic model ... had recently returned to fashion.” Fishwick, *The Imperial Cult in the Latin West* V.1, 102.

<sup>27</sup> Referring to the four altars located in Croix-Rousse, Cologne, one on the bank of the Elbe river, and a possible fourth temple erected before the death of Augustus in Gallia Narbonensis.

<sup>28</sup> Christopher Gregg. (supra. 14) 51.

and, as our sources demonstrate, religious fluidity was the norm rather than being the outlier. To presume that Augustus did not employ the same stratagem that cemented his place among Gods in Rome onto foreign religious institutions and traditions is imprudent. When considering the purpose of the Imperial cult was to focus loyalties onto the person of the emperor, especially in newly pacified regions such as Spain and Gaul, then the conclusion that Augustus considered the established native traditions of Tarraco and Lugdunum and incorporated core themes into their respective acts of devotion makes sense. Where the sentiments of Tarraco were organic and spontaneous, the response in Lugdunum was designed. Without a doubt, Celtic tradition of Spain and Gaul played a fundamental role in the reaction and interaction of the Imperial cult.

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