III. THE IMPERIAL NUMEN IN ROMAN BRITAIN*

With the welcome appearance of The Roman Inscriptions of Britain, Vol. I: Inscriptions on Stone, by R. G. Collingwood and R. P. Wright, the major part of the epigraphical evidence for the Roman presence in Britain has at last been clearly and conveniently assembled under one cover. An Index, compiled by R. Goodburn and H. Waugh,¹ now gives easy access to the numerous black and white drawings of the stones and their texts and it is a comparatively light task to add later inscriptions published in the annual report of the Journal of Roman Studies from 1955 to 1969 and from 1970 onwards in Britannia. The following remarks have been occasioned by a survey of British inscriptions attesting the worship of the Imperial numen. They are not concerned, except incidentally, with the religious doctrine underlying this concept.² The main purpose is rather to consider some of the epigraphical problems resulting from the various ways in which the cult of the numen is recorded in order to establish a basis on which to discuss the nature and significance of this particular form of worship in Britain.

1. The Numen of the Emperor

Let us begin with a fundamental assumption. This is that to one emperor can be attributed one numen and one numen only. The principal scholar to maintain the contrary, namely that several numina can be attributed to one emperor, was D. M. Pippidi, whose remark "... bon nombre d’inscriptions portent numinibus Augusti..."³ has been responsible for a good deal of confusion on the point.³ In a recent paper J. Deininger has rightly emphasized that the key inscription on which this thesis turns is EphEp 7, 946 (= RIB 611) (Pl LXXVII a), a dedication on an altar found at Kirkby Lonsdale but now lost, the text of which is very much in doubt.⁴ The version given by Pippidi from De Ruggiero, Diz.Epigr. 1, 518 reads [Nu]minibus [Augusti] et [Genii]o collegii [A]pollinis..., which is based on W. T. Watkin’s reading.⁵ The facsimile

² For this see in general "Genius and Numen" above, pp. 381-384.
³ "Le numen Augusti"⁴, REL 9 (1931), 83-112 at 102. For the expansion num(inibus)/n(uminibus) Aug(usti) see also Hirschfeld ad CIL 13, 949, 1320, 1330 et passim.
⁵ AJ 39 (1882), 366; cf. id., Roman Lancashire, Liverpool, 1883, 196 with figure, reproduced in Trans. Cumberland and Westmoreland Antiq. and Arch. Soc. n.s. 46 (1946), 139.
in *RIB*, itself reproduced from Machell MS. II, shows that all that can apparently be read is *MINIB* | ... *NETGE* | ... *O COLGF* | ... . Before the N(?) on the second line is a further letter which *RIB* gives as G with the reading [*Nu*minib(us)] | [Au]*g*(usti) *n*(ostr)i et *Ge*[n]i[o... Whatever the original text may have been (see below, p. 420), it may be observed at once that *numinib(us) Augusti* is a form of dedication without parallel elsewhere in the Empire.⁶ As F. Pfister has shown,⁷ only in poetry can the plural *numina* be attributed to a single god or (more rarely) an emperor, a usage which may well have been invented to suit the requirements of hexametric poetry;⁸ certainly there are no instances where several *numina* of some particular deity are epigraphically attested in dedications. With Roman emperors the rule is clear enough: one emperor, one *numen*.⁹ The conclusion to be drawn from this is fundamental to the following discussion. Whenever *numinibus* is written in

---

⁶ A possible exception is *CIL* 8, 1357, 1.6 (= *ILS* 679; Testur, A.D. 316/7): ...*col(onia) Bisica Lucana devota numinibus* | *maiestatice eius*; but the inscription is known only from a nineteenth-century copy of dubious quality in M. Hoffmann, *Index gramm. ad Africae... titulos Lat.*, Strasbourg, 1878, 105. It is true that most of the other British inscriptions which Pippidi cites (*CIL* 7, 83, 87, 239, 506, 638, 639, 640, 755 = *RIB* 235, 193, 656, 1330 [not 1368!], 1584, 1585, 1586, 1786) do in fact appear in the Index of *CIL* 7, p. 331, s.v. *numina Augusti*. But in not a single case is *Augusti* written in full: only the abbreviation *Aug*. The same point applies to *CIL* 8, 9040; 12, 2224; 13, 1318, which Pippidi also cites in support of his thesis. Furthermore, in none of the British inscriptions above does *RIB* give the expansion *numinibus Augusti* (there is a misprint in 656; see below, p. 419). Instead, we have the form *numinibus*/*numinib(us) Augustorum*; that is, in reading [*nu*] *minib(us) [Au]*g*(usti) in 611 *RIB* breaks its own normally correct practice. Similarly the supplements to *CIL* 7 in *EphEp* correctly expand *numinibus*/*numinib(us) Augusti* to *numinibus Augustorum*; cf. Deininger, (above, note 4) 140, n. 22 quoting *EphEp* 7, 505; 9, 742.

⁷ *RE*, 17, 2 (1937) 1277ff., 1283. For *numina* with a single emperor, see Verg., *Georg*. 1, 30; *Statius*, *Silv.*, 3, 3, 183ff.; 4, 4, 57 and 8, 61f; 5, 2, 154.


⁹ E. Birley, “The Deities of Roman Britain”, *ANRW* 2, 18, 1 (1986) 3-112 at 34ff., accepts the thesis of J. C. Mann, *Britannia* 2 (1971), 313, that the multiplication of the emperor’s powers might be expressed in popular thought through the notion that he possessed multiple *numina*. For the view that *numen* is the essential power or divine force that makes a god a god—therefore by metonymy the deity itself—see “Genius and Nomen”, above, pp. 383ff.; “Augustan Blessings and Virtues”, below, pp. 470, 472; further *Oxford Latin Dictionary* 1202 s.v., 3-6. Logically, therefore, the word should be predicated of the emperor in the singular, as confirmed by the formula *devotus numini maiestatice eius* or the occasional attribution of *numen* in the singular to a plurality of Augusti; for the early cult of the Nomen Augusti see “Genius and Nomen”, above, pp. 378ff. Confused theology is perfectly possible, of course, at a popular level, but the ascription of *numina* to a single Augustus does not seem to be securely attested in inscriptions (above, note 6); the problem is naturally complicated by the use of abbreviations. For *numen* explicitly applied in the singular to a single emperor see, for example, *CIL* 2, 1516; *CIL* 8, 5177; *ILAAlg* 1, 1028; *IRT* 324 (a); *AEpig* (1957) no. 338. Under the circumstances, then, to infer a plurality of *numina* for a single emperor in a particular inscription, as in *RIB* 707 (Birley, op. c. 35, n. 117) or *RIB* 1330 (Birley, *ibid* n. 120), seems arbitrary. Weinstock’s judgment that the concept of *numen* developed late (followed by Mann, *l. c.*) was countered by H. J. Rose in *HTHR* 44 (1951), 109-120. See further “Genius and Nomen”, above, p. 383 with notes 38-40; D. Fishwick, “Nomen Augusti”, *Britannia* 20 (1989), 231-234.