CHAPTER TWO

THE DEIFIED EMPEROR: PROVINCIAL CULTS (A.D. 14–69)

The second stage in the evolution of provincial ruler worship runs from the accession of Tiberius to the year of revolution that put the Flavians on the throne.¹ Apart from the development in Britannia, where the opening phase of a provincial cult seems to have followed the pattern set in Gallia Comata and elsewhere, the distinguishing feature of the period is the institution of the cult of the deified Augustus in the Romanized provinces of Hispania citerior and Lusitania. That this was at the request of the Spaniards themselves seems clear at least in Hither Spain, which according to Tacitus sent an embassy to Rome on the matter in A.D. 15 (Ann. 1, 78). It is important to note that this is one of only two instances in the entire history of western provincial cult when the sources expressly confirm spontaneous action on the part of the provincials.² No such delegation is recorded from Lusitania, possibly because the initial step of Hither Spain with the response it elicited from the Roman central government set an example for other provinces to follow, as Tacitus appears to say (ibid.). Otherwise the federal cult of the Three Gauls, as they were later called, continued in the direction already set at Lugdunum, where construction of an amphitheatre at the close of Augustus’ reign or shortly thereafter marked a significant advance in the evolution of the federal cult and its associated activities. Contrary to what has sometimes been supposed, however, there is no evidence at this point for a provincial cult in Noricum, where such a development must in any event have succeeded the dissolution of the regnum Noricum and the conversion of the eastern Alps into a province under Claudius.

¹ For rejection of any evolution in provincial cults see the unsupported assertion of Le Roux (1994) 401, that the imperial religion, “essentiellement augusitencne dans ses fondements, a touché dès le départ toutes les provinces sans autre adaptation que culturelle”.

² For the unsuccessful request of Baetica to erect a temple to Tiberius and Livia in A.D. 25 see below, pp. 111–12.
The background to the new cult of Divus Augustus in Hither Spain and Lusitania was the deification of Augustus in Rome, where the senate’s act of consecration on 17 September, A.D. 17, regulated his cult, priesthood and temple. Worship of the deified ruler was a key element, of course, in the influences from Egypt and the Greek east that played a vital role in shaping the political and religious climate of Augustan Rome. A state cult of the deified ruler appears in Ptolemaic Egypt as early as the reign of Ptolemy II and seems to have spread from there to Seleucid Syria and possibly elsewhere. But recent analysis has been at pains to demonstrate that the communal cult of the divi is firmly rooted in native Roman practice, specifically the collective cult of ancestors, the di parentes. R. Turcan in particular has shown that the deification of the deceased Roman emperor is not an effect of the “orientalization” of the masses, as F. Cumont thought, but rather a continuation of the traditional deification of the dead. Plutarch, for example, drawing on Varro (Quaes. Rom. 14), reports that the ancient custom at funerals was for sons to surround their father’s tomb, revering this as a temple of the gods, then when they first came across a bone, after the corpse had been incinerated, to declare that the deceased was now a god. It follows that in his capacity as pontifex maximus and pater patriae, the emperor will have acted as the paterfamilias of the Roman people in offering to his predecessors, related whether by blood or by office, the domestic cult due to ancestral imagines. Against this traditional background, then, one can well understand that Tiberius, acutely aware he was far outshone by Augustus, was quick to deflect attention away from his own person and that the senate of which he was a member rather encouraged the cult of Divus Augustus—especially when, as in the case of Hither Spain, the initiative for a provincial cult came from below.

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5 Vol. I, 1, 51.
9 Vol. I, 1, 163.