CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

PROVINCIAL CULT

Any attempt to reconstruct the content and character of provincial cult in the western empire faces the fundamental difficulty that direct evidence is for the most part non-existent. No account of the rites conducted at provincial centres has come down in the literary sources, which are essentially restricted to notices of the trappings and apparel of provincial priests or of the competitions and games that accompanied imperial festivals. Inscriptions likewise mention the regalia of provincial sacerdotes, flamines and flaminicae or the bare fact of sacrifice on regular occasions but preserve no calendar of the anniversaries to be marked at provincial level on the lines, say, of the feriale prescribed for military use at Dura and inferentially throughout the empire. Coins and archaeological vestiges abundantly confirm the existence of altars or temples and can even portray the projected form of the provincial cult idol as in Hither Spain, while the topography and physical lay-out of provincial centres sometimes permit inferences on the possibility of processions with the transportation of imperial images, traces of which survive in one form or another. Similarly, though bas-reliefs again depict mostly the accoutrements and cultic implements of imperial priests, iconographic reminiscences of provincial ritual occasionally occur, meagre as they yet are. The result of this fragmentary record is that one has to work largely in the dark in a frustrating attempt to piece together what is at at best a partial picture, fitfully illuminated by paltry, frequently defective, tangible remains.

Aside from the accident of survival, the reason for this dearth of evidence is doubtless the circumstance that what was normal and customary was not thought deserving of record, whereas an unusual occurrence such as the performance of a taurobolium at Narbo seemed something worth reporting to posterity. Yet despite the poverty of our sources cautious inference from comparative evidence elsewhere, particularly the practice of eastern provinces, can provide a working outline of the principal characteristics of provincial cult in the Latin west, tentative and provisional though this must be. It will be appropriate, therefore, to conclude the present analysis by sketching a general picture of what
we know or can at least be inferred of the rites performed by provincial priests in the Latin west, together with the kind of occasion to which these were appropriate. But first; a word on the pro salute formula.

i. pro salute Imperatoris

Throughout the Latin west the gods were frequently invoked on the emperor’s behalf. Countless dedications, ex votos, statues, altars and monuments are preserved in the African provinces, the Spains, the Gauls, Britain, the Germanies and the Danube region, all addressed to a wide range of deities pro salute imperatoris, a petition regularly followed by the name of the dedicator. The formula is attested from the early principate down to the late second and third centuries, particularly under the Severi, when like most categories of epigraphical texts it proliferates. Typical examples, of particular interest for present purposes, are dedications for the emperor’s salus set up by provincial priests. Thus at Sarmizegetusa M. Antonius Valentinus, sacerdos coronatus of Tres Dacie, erected a marble altar for the salus of Gordian to Mars Augustus. As Mars has here been transformed into an Augustan god—that is, a deity who extends his or her protection to the Augustus—the intention of the dedication is doubly articulated (IDR 3/2, 266, Pl. 151: A.D. 238–44; above, p. 291). With this monument may be compared a defaced tablet, likewise at Sarmizegetusa, that the provincial council addressed to some god for the salus of Severus Alexander (IDR 3/2, 79, Pl. 153: before A.D. 235; above, p. 294). Again, near Siscia in Upper Pannonia G. D[…] Q. Victorinus made a dedication to Iuppiter Optimus Maximus Nundinarius on behalf of the salus of Gordian:

I(ovi) o(ptimo) m(aximo) nundinario pro salute imp(eratoris) Gordiani Aug(usti) G(aius) D[…] Q(uirina) Victorinus dec(urio) col(oniae) Sisc(iae), II vira(lis), eq(ues) Rom(anus), sac(erdos) p(rovinciae) P(annoniae) sup(erioris) et G(aius) D[…] Victorinianus fil(ius) dec(urio) col(oniae) Sisc(iae), eq(ues) R(omanus) et L[uc]iliaconiunx sacerdot(alis) Pio et Proculo co(n)s(ilibus).

CIL 3, 10820: A.D. 238

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1 For the pro salute formula in Britain see Fishwick (1961) 221 with n. 53.
3 Vol. II, 1, 446–54.
4 Vol. III, 2, 256, 265.
5 Vol. III, 2, 256, 264.
6 Vol. III, 2, 267 (Nundinarius is misprinted), 274.