

Building the Imperial Cult: Religion and Urbanism in Augustan Pompeii

In this paper, I will discuss the sudden expansion of public building projects related to the imperial cult in Pompeii that accompanied the rise of Augustus in Rome. While scholarship has examined the development of the imperial cult in the empire at large and analyzed individual building projects at Pompeii from this period (e.g. Dobbins 1994), none provides a comprehensive picture of how the imperial cult arrived at Pompeii and how it sharply reshaped its urban context. In this study, I examine the underlying political, social, and religious factors that led to the public “worship” and semi-divine status of Augustus at Pompeii.

The first section argues that the imperial cult arrived at Pompeii through a significant religious shift Italy experienced in the late Republican and early imperial periods. In spite of Augustus’ attempt at a religious revival, Pompeii along with the rest of Italy experienced a weakening of traditional religion in the late Republican period, when Romans sought greater divine revelation as the Republic became increasingly unstable. The rise of powerful political individuals accompanied the adoption of savior cults from the East, among them the cult of Augustus himself (c.f. Fishwick 1987-2005). The Temple of Isis shows the adoption of Eastern mystic cults in Pompeii itself, while the wide range of Eastern cults in Campanian cities like Puteoli shows the trend of diffusion into Italy. The breadth of expression of the imperial cult in Pompeii, both on its own and celebrated jointly with other deities, not in one uniform repeating structure but many configurations of shrines, shows how the cult of the emperor is not tied to a particular city and set of practices, like the Lupercalia on the Palatine, but has been globalized to express a more general utopian ideal.

In the second section, I discuss the opportunity for expanding civic participation through the imperial cult, particularly among elite women and freedmen. As evidence, I will use the construction of the Eumachia Building on the forum, the inscription of Mamia, the building projects and tombs of the Augustales, and the shrine of the imperial family inside the Macellum. The new cult necessitated new priesthood positions, and the public activity of women within the imperial family, as well as Augustus' creation of the cult of Lares Compitales administered by freedmen, created an opening for new demographics to become involved in public life, and therefore in building projects that altered the urban fabric.

In the third section, I discuss how Pompeii imitated the Augustan model for revitalizing traditional religion, integrating preexisting religious elements in the city with the imperial cult. *Aemulatio Augusti* ties opportunities for civic participation to the piety of Augustus in particular. Pompeii's status as a Roman colony, as well as its preexisting ties to deities with which Augustus claimed a personal connection, Apollo and Venus, created a sense of special position in relationship to Rome, prompting a greater *aemulatio Augusti*. Both the Temple of Apollo and the Sanctuary of Venus underwent significant transformations during the Augustan period, including the acquisition of land for their sites and architectural improvements (Ball and Dobbins 2017). The expanded worship of the Lares and the Genius Coloniae in Pompeii is also closely linked with the emperor, leading to a debate about the function and chronology of two buildings on the forum, the Imperial Cult Building (or so-called Sanctuary of the Public Lares) and the Sanctuary of the Genius of Augustus (or Temple of Vespasian) (e.g. Gradel 1992, Fishwick 1995).

Taken together, these sections demonstrate why the imperial cult was widely adopted in the city of Pompeii, how it led to a phase of large-scale urban construction among a diverse

demographic of Pompeians, and how the imperial cult developed its own distinct character through its adoption in the West and the unique identity of Pompeii.

Bibliography

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