



Birthday Rituals: Friends and Patrons in Roman Poetry and Cult

Author(s): Kathryn Argetsinger

Source: *Classical Antiquity*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (Oct., 1992), pp. 175-193

Published by: University of California Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25010971>

Accessed: 30-07-2018 15:30 UTC

REFERENCES

Linked references are available on JSTOR for this article:

https://www.jstor.org/stable/25010971?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents

You may need to log in to JSTOR to access the linked references.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

University of California Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Classical Antiquity*



Birthday Rituals: Friends and Patrons in Roman Poetry and Cult

THE PEOPLE OF late republican Rome celebrated at least three different types of *dies natales*. In the private sphere, Roman men and women marked their own birthdays and the birthdays of family members and friends with gift giving and banquets. In the public sphere, the *natales* of temples and the *natales* of cities were observed; these “birthdays” were actually the anniversaries of the days on which particular cults, or cities, had been founded.¹ In addition to these, from the time of the principate, the people of Rome celebrated annually the birthdays of past and present emperors and members of the imperial family, as well as the emperors’ *natales imperii*, or accession days.

Each of these various types of *natalis* called for the performance of particular

I would like to thank Professors Peter Brown and Ted Champlin of Princeton University for their advice and support throughout the many stages of my work on this project. I am also most grateful to Emil Homerin, Deborah Lyons, Andy Overman, and Bill Green for reading and discussing with me various drafts of this article, and to *Classical Antiquity*’s Thomas Habinek and anonymous reader for their very useful suggestions.

1. Evidence for Roman private birthday celebration dates to the comedians; see Plautus, *Pseud.* 165, 179, 234, 775; *Capt.* 174; *Cur.* 656; *Epid.* 638; *Rud.* 471; and Terence, *Phormio* 48. References to the *natales* of temples and of cities occur first in Cicero, who twice (*Att.* 4.1.4, *Sest.* 131) remarks on the coincidence that his daughter’s *natalis*, the *natalis* of the Roman temple of Salus, and the *natalis* of Brundisium all fell on the same day (the day that he reached Italy from exile). On Roman birthdays in general, W. Schmidt, *Geburtstag im Altertum*, Religionsgeschichtliche Versuche und Vorarbeiten VII.1 (Giessen, 1908) remains the only monograph. It is useful for the wealth of references provided, but the interpretation of the material suffers from a confusion between Roman *natales templorum* (the dates of particular temple foundations) and *natales deorum* in a mythological sense; there is no evidence that the Romans claimed any knowledge of the days on which the gods might have been born. Schmidt also wrote the article for Pauly-Wissowa, *RE*. More up-to-date in interpretive matters is A. Stuibler’s article in *RLAC* s.v. “Geburtstag.”

religious rituals. Thus the birthdays of private individuals were more closely related to the birthdays of temples and cities than might first appear to be the case, for each private birthday, too, commemorated the anniversary of a particular cult foundation, namely, the cult of an individual's personal *genius* or Juno.² It was to this personal deity that each individual owed an offering on his or her birthday, together with *vota* that the offering would be renewed the following year should the protection of the deity continue.

Of course, in the private sphere, the Romans not only celebrated their own birthdays, they also celebrated each other's birthdays, and it is with this phenomenon that I will be particularly concerned in the present paper. Such birthday celebrations, whether of family members, personal friends, or patrons take place in that crucial sphere where Roman social relations and Roman religious practice intersect, and demonstrate how difficult it is to understand either in isolation from the other. For although a considerable body of work has been done on Roman patronage, on the one hand,³ and on Roman cult practice, on the other, the intimate connection between these two fundamental systems for the mediation of power has too often been missed. Simon Price's work on emperor cult has made the importance of such connections clear. In his terms, it is our modern insistence on a sharp distinction between politics and religion which, more than anything else, has made it difficult for us to form a coherent picture of this cult.⁴ In what follows I hope to show that not only in the public sphere of politics and imperial ceremony, but also in the private sphere, religious ritual was indeed "a way of conceptualizing the world"⁵ that helped to give shape and articulation to the network of social relations within which each individual sought to locate him- or herself. Moreover, a close examination of the ways in which individual Romans observed the birthdays of their friends and patrons is a necessary prerequisite to any understanding of the emergence of imperial birthdays and of the imperial cult in general.

In A.D. 238 the grammarian Censorinus wrote the little book entitled *De Die Natali* as a birthday gift for his patron, Quintus Caerellius. The book, though not

2. Evidence for the cult of the personal *genius* dates to Plautus, while the cult of the personal Juno is not attested prior to the Augustan period; it may be a later development patterned after the older cult of the *genius*. See G. Dury-Moyaers and M. Renard, "Aperçu critique de travaux relatifs au culte de Junon," *ANRW* 2.17.1 (Berlin, 1981) 148. I am grateful to James Rives of Columbia University for allowing me to read his unpublished paper on this problem.

3. For current thinking on the topic, see Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, ed., *Patronage in Ancient Society* (London, 1989).

4. S. R. F. Price, "Between Man and God: Sacrifice in the Roman Imperial Cult," *JRS* 70 (1980) 28; and S. R. F. Price, *Rituals and Power: The Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge, 1984) 247, where he speaks of "the basic similarity between politics and religion: both are ways of systematically constructing power." Here Price draws on the work of C. Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, ed. M. Banton (New York, 1966) = *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, 1973) 87; P. L. Berger and T. Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Garden City, N. Y., 1966); and K. O. L. Burridge, *New Heaven, New Earth* (New York, 1969).

5. Price, *Rituals* (*supra*, n. 4) 7.

materially valuable, was, Censorinus says, intended to serve as a sort of return to Caerellius for the many benefits which his patron had bestowed upon him: “ne beneficiis tuis viderer ingratus” (1.8). Censorinus explains that in giving such a gift he had followed the example of the ancients:

illi enim quod alimenta patriam lucem se denique ipsos dono deorum habebant, ex omnibus aliquid deis sacrabant, magis adeo ut se gratos adprobarent quam quod deos hoc arbitrarentur indigere. itaque cum perceperant fruges, ante quam vescerentur, deis libare instituerunt, et cum agros adque urbes deorum munere possiderent, partem quandam templis sacellisque, ubi eos colerent, dicaverunt; quidam etiam pro cetera corporis bona valetudine crinem deo sacrum pascabant. ita ego, a quo plura in litteris percepi, tibi haec exigua reddo libamina.

(*De Die Natali* 1.9–11)

For, since they possessed their food, their fatherland, the light of day, and indeed their very being as a gift from the gods, they used to sacrifice some part of all these to the gods, more to prove themselves grateful than because they thought the gods needed it. And so, when they had gathered in the crops, before they ate, they made ready to pour the gods a libation; and since they possessed their fields and cities by the gift of the gods, they dedicated a certain portion of them for temples and shrines where they could worship them; certain men even used to grow long hair which was dedicated to a god in return for the health of the rest of the body. Just so do I bring this meager offering to you, from whom I have received a much greater share of learning.

For Censorinus, the parallel between his own position in relation to his patron and the position of all men in relation to the gods could not be clearer: both are relationships to those in positions of power; both operate according to similar assumptions about the nature of benefits, indebtedness, and responsibility;⁶ both call for *pietas* in the scrupulous fulfillment of obligations. And, we might add, in both cases one specific obligation called forth by benefits bestowed is the celebration of a *dies natalis*. In the case of a divine patron, the *natalis* is the anniversary of the day on which a cult relationship was established; in the case of a human patron, it is the birthday in our sense, the patron’s day of physical birth.

Thus Censorinus feels strongly the obligation to celebrate Caerellius’s birthday; in fact he says that his patron’s birthday has become for him as important as his own birthday:

Sed cum singuli homines suos tantummodo proprios colant natales, ego tamen duplici quotannis officio huiusce religionis adstringor; nam cum ex te tuaque amicitia honorem dignitatem decus adque praesidium, cuncta denique vitae praemia recipiam, nefas arbitror, si diem tuum, qui

6. For the operation of such assumptions in the social sphere, see Richard P. Saller, *Personal Patronage under the Early Empire* (Cambridge, 1982).

te mihi in hanc lucem edidit, meo illo proprio neclegentius celebravero.
 ille enim mihi vitam, hic vitae fructum adque ornamentum pepererunt.
 (*De Die Natali* 3.5–6)

But while other men honor only their own birthdays, yet I am bound every year by a double duty as regards this religious observance; for since it is from you and your friendship that I receive esteem, position, honor, and assistance, and in fact all the rewards of life, I consider it a sin if I celebrate your day, which brought you forth into this world for me, any less carefully than my own. For my own birthday gave me life, but yours has brought me the enjoyment and the rewards of life.

Censorinus writes in the third century A.D., but he was not the first Roman to express such a sentiment. The same thought can be found in Horace, *Odes* 4.11, where Horace says of his patron Maecenas's birthday that it is "iure sollemnis mihi sanctiorque paene natali proprio" (lines 17–18: "a solemn day for me, and almost holier than my own birthday"). Indeed, it seems likely that Censorinus had this Horatian passage in mind, since his phrase "decus adque praesidium" echoes Horace's dedication of his own book to his patron Maecenas (*Odes* 1.1), where he addresses Maecenas as "praesidium et dulce decus meum." But other authors writing in the years between Horace and Censorinus express similar thoughts in language of their own. Martial says of his friend Quintus Ovidius's birthday that he loves it just as he loves his own:

Si credis mihi, Quinte, quod mereris,
 natalis, Ovidi, tuas Aprilis
 ut nostras amo Martias Kalendas.
 felix utraque lux diesque nobis
 signandi melioribus lapillis!
 hic vitam tribuit sed hic amicum.
 plus dant, Quinte, mihi, tuae Kalendae.

(*Epigrams* 9.52)

If you believe me, Quintus Ovidius, I love your April birthday as much as my own in March—and so I should. Each is a happy day to be marked with a fairer stone. The one gave me life, but the other gave a friend. Your birthday, Quintus, gives me more.

The younger Pliny writes to his wife's grandfather that he feels an obligation to celebrate the older man's birthday in just the same way as his own: "Debemus mehercule natales tuos perinde ac nostros celebrare, cum laetitia nostrorum ex tuis pendeat, cuius diligentia et cura hic hilares istic securi sumus" (*Epistles* 6.30: "for the joy of my own birthday derives from the happy returns of your own day, inasmuch as it is due to your own attentiveness and care that I am both light-hearted and free from care"). And perhaps the strongest (certainly the most amusing) statement of this sort comes from Marcus Aurelius in a personal letter to Fronto: "Scio natali die quousque pro eo, quous is dies natalis est, amicos

vota suscipere; ego tamen, quia te iuxta ut memet ipsum amo, volo hac die, tuo natali, mihi bene precari” (*Ad M. Caesarem* 3.10, editio Teubner 1988: “I know that on birthdays friends undertake vows for the one whose birthday it is; but because I love you just as I love my own self, on this birthday of yours I want to offer prayers on my own behalf”).

Thus the idea that another’s birthday could be of an importance equal to or greater than one’s own appealed to each of these Roman writers as a way of expressing deep feeling for another. But such statements are not mere examples of a literary topos; they also reflect a social reality: even if they did not often consider them as important as their own, the Romans really did take on the formal celebration of their friends’ birthdays, as, for example, the passage from Marcus Aurelius shows (“scio natali die . . . amicos vota suscipere”). On the simplest level, friends might be invited to attend a birthday celebration at the home of a friend. A writing tablet recently excavated at Vindolanda in northern Britain and dated ca. 100–105 contains a well-preserved example of such an invitation. In this tablet, a certain Claudia Severa, the wife of a Roman officer, invites another officer’s wife to her house on the third day before the Ides of September, “ad diem sollemnem natalem meum.”⁷

But if a friend or relative was not able to be physically present at a birthday celebration, he or she might still observe the day independently in some fashion. This is what Pliny implies he will do in the letter to his wife’s grandfather, quoted above. And the emperor Augustus, in a letter preserved in Aulus Gellius, writes to his grandson Gaius: “Set praecipue diebus talibus, qualis est hodiernus, oculi mei requirunt meum Gaium, quem, ubicumque hoc die fuisti, spero laetum et bene valentem celebrasse quartum et sexagesimum natalem meum” (*Noctes Atticae* 15.7: “But especially on such days as today do my eyes seek for my Gaius; but wherever you were today, I hope that you celebrated my sixty-fourth birthday in good spirits and in good health”). As the placement of the words in Latin makes clear, the “hope” is for Gaius’s good health, not for the celebration of the birthday; Augustus assumes he will be doing that. Moreover, the intimate tone of the letter implies that Gaius will be celebrating the birthday not so much because Augustus is the emperor, but more because he is Gaius’s grandfather.

The importance that was attached to having one’s birthday celebrated by relatives and dependents is clearly shown by a number of inscriptions dealing with endowments established for the purpose of enabling others to celebrate the birthday of the benefactor. One from Ariminum in Italy is fairly typical, and is well-preserved. Here one C. Faesellius, among other benefactions, gives a sum of money “ad emptionem possessionis, cuius de reditu die natalis sui sportular(um) divisio semper celebratur” (*CIL* 11.379). A Julia from Ameria provides money to a *collegium* “ut die natalis sui v id mai ex usuris eius

7. A. K. Bowman and J. D. Thomas, “New Texts from Vindolanda,” *Britannia* 18 (1987) 125–42.

summae epulantes imperpetuum divider (sic)" (*CIL* 11.4391), while in Rome itself a heavily restored inscription speaks of the sum of money given by Q. Cornelius "[ut] . . . om[nibus annis die nata]lis sui univer[si . . .] epularentur" (*CIL* 6.10297). Other examples from various parts of Italy and Spain may be compared.⁸ Though one inscription specifies that the annual banquets are to continue "quoat vixero" (*CIL* 2.1276), most of the endowments are specifically set up to provide for the continuation of the birthday celebrations after the death of the benefactor.⁹ Though in the present paper I exclude the birthday celebrations of the dead from consideration as representing a distinct phenomenon, it is nevertheless clear that such celebrations were in part based on the same principles as were the birthday celebrations of physically absent living people. Certainly the banqueting and distribution of *sportulae* would go on at a place like Ariminum or Ameria whether the benefactor happened to be in town or not.

But what of those private individuals, like Censorinus or Pliny, who say that they have, of their own accord, and without the impetus of a public endowment, taken on the celebration of another's birthday as a formal obligation? What would a man like Pliny be expected to do on his grandfather-in-law's birthday? We know that the celebration of one's own birthday was marked in part by specific cult observances; thus when writers claim to be celebrating the birthday of another in just the same way as their own birthday we should logically ask whether such celebrations also included cult observances, and, if so, what type of practices would have been involved. But here the epistolary and epigraphical traditions are of little help. The letters and inscriptions prove that the Romans really did observe each other's birthdays, but they tell us very little about specific cult practices.

Another body of evidence does exist, however, in the form of Latin "birthday poems." These poems, by such authors as Tibullus, Sulpicia, Horace, Ovid, and Martial,¹⁰ are, for the most part, compositions in honor of the birthdays of particular people; sometimes the poets celebrate their own birthdays in verse, but more often they compose on the birthdays of their friends or patrons, and frequently intend the poems themselves to be birthday gifts. In a book that appeared in 1929, Emanuele Cesareo classed such poems together as a distinct, and distinctively Roman, literary type.¹¹ While Cesareo probably exaggerated the generic unity of the poems he discusses, it is nevertheless true that the birthday poems correspond precisely to nothing in Greek literature.¹² The po-

8. *CIL* 2.1174, 1276; 9.1618, 3160; 10.4736, 5654, 5849, 5853; 11.4391; 14.367, 431, 2793.

9. *Collegia* might also be established for this purpose; an inscription left by one such group is discussed by A. Stuijber, "Heidnische und christliche Gedächtniskalender," *JbAC* 3 (1960) 24–33.

10. For a complete listing of the poems, see Cesareo (*infra*, n. 11).

11. E. Cesareo, *Il carne natalizio nella poesia latina* (Palermo, 1929).

12. There are some small birthday poems in the Greek anthology; see *AP* 6.227, 261, 321, 325, 329, 345; 9.93, 349, 353, 355. These, however, all date from the Roman period, are nearly all addressed to Roman patrons (often the emperor), and never refer to any type of birthday ritual.

ems, then, are not literary imitations, but rather have their grounding in the traditional and ritual observances of real Roman birthdays. As *munera* presented on the *natales* of important friends and patrons, the poems both reflect the practices associated with such occasions and themselves have a role to play in establishing and maintaining each poet's own web of social relationships. In the words of Martial:

venator leporem, colonus haedum,
piscator ferat aequorum rapinas.
Si mittat sua quisque, quid poetam
missurum tibi, Restitute, credis?

(*Epigrams* 10.87.17–20)

Let the hunter bring a hare, the farmer a young goat, the fisherman the spoils of the sea. If each one sends what he has, Restitute, what do you think a poet will send to you?

The answer of course is a poem, and the result for us is a group of poems which provide considerable detail about Roman birthday ritual.

We have already had occasion to quote one such birthday poem in its entirety, Martial's *Epigram* 9.52 above. There Martial expresses the idea that his friend Quintus's birthday has a claim on him equal to the claim of his own birthday, or perhaps even greater ("plus dant mihi tuae Kalendae"). Still, we are given no hint about what such a claim might specifically involve; we are only told that the friend's birthday will be marked on the calendar as a lucky day. The focus of the poem is on the emotion of a close friendship, not on any particular religious duty that such a friendship might call for. But if we compare the opening lines of *Epigram* 10.87, the birthday present to Restitute, we find quite a different situation:

Octobres age sentiat Kalendas
facundi pia Roma Restituti:
linguis omnibus et favete votis;
natalem colimus, tacete lites.

(*Epigrams* 10.87.1–4)

Come, let pious Rome mark the birthday of eloquent Restitute: Let every tongue be reverent; let all prayers be favorable. We are performing birthday rites; let litigation cease.

They are generally either verse descriptions of a gift that is being sent, or else a simple statement that the poem is being sent as a gift. One of them (6.325) seems to have influenced Martial's 10.87, though, again, not in terms of the ritual described in the Latin poem. In general, although the Greeks of the Hellenistic period were fond of celebrating monthly the birthdays of such extraordinary individuals as monarchs, city founders, and founders of philosophical sects, there is no good evidence for a Greek tradition of personal birthday celebration similar to the Roman domestic tradition of annual birthday celebration. See *OCD*², s.v. "Birthday," and Schmidt (*supra*, n. 1).

Though this epigram is clearly a light, clever piece, without religious or emotional *gravitas*, nevertheless, we are here far removed from a purely secular approach to birthday celebration. Restitutus's pious clients (teasingly referred to as all of Rome) are pictured at a formal birthday ceremony ("natalem colimus"); it is requested that they maintain a holy silence and that they be "favorable with their *vota*." The friends of Restitutus, then, are expected to mark their patron's birthday not only by sending gifts, but by participation in specific cult activities.

That the situation of Restitutus's friends and clients is by no means unique is made clear by an examination of other Latin birthday poems (nor is Martial's presentation entirely tongue-in-cheek). Nearly all the poems contain various details, like the holy silence and the *vota* of the Restitutus epigram, which reveal a background of formal cult observance. Moreover, if we compare those poems in which a person celebrates his or her own birthday to those in which one person celebrates another's birthday, we find the same sorts of details mentioned in either case.

For example, the "Garland of Sulpicia" contains four poems about birthdays. Two (preserved as Tibullus 4.8, 4.9) are very short and are concerned only with whether Sulpicia will spend her birthday at Rome or in the countryside. The other two are longer and of real interest. In Tibullus 4.6, Sulpicia celebrates her own birthday and addresses her "Natalis Juno." Three types of offerings are made to the Juno: incense, ritual cakes, and wine. Flames are alight on the altar, prayers are offered, and *vota* are undertaken. In Tibullus 4.5, Sulpicia writes about the birthday of her sweetheart, Cerinthus. Again we find incense, *vota*, and an altar. Clearly Cerinthus is performing a birthday ritual for himself, and, just as "all Rome" attended Restitutus's birthday ceremony, so Sulpicia is evidently present at Cerinthus's ceremony and is offering prayers to his *genius*. But Sulpicia may not simply be present at the ceremony; she may herself be involved in ritual actions. The incense in line 9 of the poem ("mane Geni, cape tura libens votisque faveto") has most frequently been interpreted as Sulpicia's own offering to the *genius*.¹³ To me it seems more natural to take lines 9–10 together with lines 11–12, and, understanding the *tura* and *vota* as those which Cerinthus is offering, to translate as follows:

mane Geni, cape tura libens votisque faveto,
 si modo, cum de me cogitat, ille calet.
 quod si forte alios iam nunc suspiret amores,
 tunc precor infidos, sancte, relinque focos.

(*Carmina* 4.5.9–12)

13. For example by Hubert Creekmore, *The Erotic Elegies of Albius Tibullus* (New York, 1966): "Kind Spirit, please accept incense and grant my prayer"; Constance Carrier, *The Poems of Tibullus* (Bloomington, Ind., 1968): "and [I] bring that spirit incense now"; Philip Dunlop, *The Poems of Tibullus* (Harmondsworth, 1972): "Good spirit, be pleased to take my incense and approve my prayer."

Good Genius, take the incense willingly, and willingly grant his prayers, so long as he burns when he thinks of me. But if by any chance he now sighs over another love, then, holy one, desert the faithless altar, I pray.

Still, Sulpicia is clearly offering a prayer; thus it is easy to see why the *tura* and *vota* have so often been interpreted as her own, and the poet may very well have been intentionally ambiguous here.

Turning to the rest of the Tibullan corpus, we find in Tibullus 2.2 a certain Cornutus celebrating his own birthday; his *genius*, too, has been offered *liba* and wine, and here we find the additional details that the *genius* has been wreathed and anointed:

ipse suos Genius adsit visurus honores,
 cui decorant sanctas mollia sarta comes.
 illius puro destillent tempora nardo,
 atque satur libo sit madeatque mero.

(*Carmina* 2.2.5–8)

May his genius be at hand to witness his own honors. May delicate floral crowns grace his holy hair; may his temples be wet with pure nard, may he take his fill of honey cakes and be drunk with unwatered wine.

Cornutus also has a request to put to his *genius*, and this prayer for the continued love of his wife is referred to as *vota* in line 17. Tibullus 1.7, on the other hand, involves one man (Tibullus himself) celebrating the birthday of another (his patron, Messalla), and it is Tibullus who addresses the *genius* of Messalla, just as Sulpicia addressed the *genius* of Cerinthus in our first example. But in this case Tibullus clearly presents himself as an active participant in a ritual, the elements of which, once again, include incense and ritual cakes: “tibi dem turis honores, / liba et Mopsopio dulcia melle feram” (*Carmina* 1.7.53–54: “Let me give you the honor of incense; let me bring you cakes sweet with honey”). Another guest at the celebration (a very special one, to be sure—the god Osiris) is to pour wine: “Genium . . . concelebra et multo tempora funde mero” (line 49), and again the added details include the anointing and wreathing of the *genius*: “illius et nitido stillent ungenta capillo, / et capite et collo mollia sarta gerat” (*Carmina* 1.7.51–52: “Let unguents drip from his shining hair; let his head and neck be circled with delicate wreathes”). Though this time there is no specific mention of *vota*, Tibullus does request for Messalla that his children may grow up to augment their revered father’s accomplishments. Thus guests at Messalla’s birthday celebration are pictured as performing precisely the same series of cult actions as Messalla himself would have performed.

A pair of poems from Ovid’s *Tristia* offers a final example. *Tristia* 3.13 deals with the poet’s own birthday celebration, while *Tristia* 5.5 is written on the occasion of his wife’s birthday. The evidence from this last poem is particularly important, since here there can be no ambiguity about the fact that Ovid, being

in exile, is celebrating his wife's birthday in her absence. In 3.13, where Ovid celebrates his own birthday, we once again find the incense and cakes, as well as the additional details of floral crowns to be placed on the altar and white clothing to be worn by the celebrant. Ovid addresses his own *genius*:

scilicet expectas soliti tibi moris honorem,
 pendeat ex umeris vestis ut alba meis,
 fumida cingatur florentibus ara coronis,
 micaque sollemni turis in igne sonet
 libaque dem proprie genitale notantia tempus.
 concipiamque bonas ore favente preces.

(*Tristia* 3.13.13–18)

Thou awaitest, I suppose, thine honour in its wonted guise: a white robe hanging from my shoulders, a smoking altar garlanded with chaplets, the grains of incense snapping in the holy fire, and myself offering the cakes that mark my birthday and framing kindly petitions with pious lips.

(tr. A. L. Wheeler, Loeb Classical Library)

But in *Tristia* 5.5, where Ovid celebrates not his own but his wife's birthday, we find the same white clothing, bedecked altar, and incense; wine is also mentioned:

sumatur fatis discolor alba meis
 araqe gramineo viridis de caespite fiat,
 et velet tepidos nexa corona focos.
 da mihi tura, puer, pingues facientia flammis,
 quodque pio fustum stridat in igne merum.

(*Tristia* 5.5.8–12)

Let me now put on the white garb that matches not my fate. Let there be made a green altar of grassy turf, the warm hearth veiled with a braided garland. Give me incense, boy, that produces rich flame, and wine that hisses when poured in the pious fire.

(tr. A. L. Wheeler, Loeb Classical Library)

So Ovid, as pious husband, performs on his wife's birthday (and in her absence) precisely the same ritual that he performs on his own birthday.

From the evidence of Latin birthday poetry, then, it is clear that when relatives, friends, or clients celebrated a relative or patron's birthday, they were bound, if they were truly pious, by just the same sort of specific cult requirements as they were on their own birthdays. But such a conclusion leads to further questions. Ovid, in exile, tells us that he heaps up an altar on his wife's birthday, but to whom is the altar heaped? The recipient of the offering of wine and incense is left unnamed. Horace, too, in a poem that we shall consider more closely below (*Odes* 4.11), presents himself as bound by an annual obligation to celebrate the birthday of his patron, Maecenas, and as doing so even in Maecenas's absence. The ritual he performs is described in detail, but, again, the

recipient of the ritual is left unnamed. Would we more accurately call this a ritual in honor of Maecenas, or a ritual in honor of a god, on behalf of Maecenas?

The problem of distinguishing between sacrifices “to” and sacrifices “for” (i.e., “on behalf of”) is well known in the context of imperial religion.¹⁴ The poets’ lack of precision about the recipients of birthday cult performed in the absence of the celebrant is a first hint that some of the well-known problems of imperial theology may not be specific to emperor cult at all. Still, in the present context, even when a poet does not name a recipient for the birthday offerings he or she describes, it may seem a natural assumption that such offerings would be directed to the *genius* or Juno of the birthday celebrant. So Ovid would heap up an altar to his wife’s Juno, and Horace would direct his yearly sacrifice to the *genius* of Maecenas.

Nevertheless, even if we could assert with complete confidence that a *genius* or Juno was the recipient of each of the rituals described in our birthday poems, problems would remain. For the proper definition of the *genius*, and the degree to which he should be identified with the person whose *genius* he is, is another well-known scholarly problem. Is the *genius* within each man or external to him? Is he a sort of ego extension into the divine sphere, or rather an independently conceived guardian angel?¹⁵ Each possibility has been defended, but as Georges Dumézil has pointed out,¹⁶ the debate has been possible only because the various sources seem to lend support to widely different conclusions. Already in Plautus, for example, the term *genius* seems several times to mean little more than the self, or perhaps some internal part of the self—the soul or the appetite¹⁷—yet, also in Plautus, parasites refer to their benefactors as their *genii* (e.g., *Mer.* 138), clearly on the analogy of the *genius* as protector or guardian-angel type. The *genius* can be so closely identified with the man himself that he is described as dying with him;¹⁸ elsewhere he is identified with the individual only in that he offers him a special patronage and protection.¹⁹ The challenge for us in interpreting such materials is not to make a choice between such varied statements, but rather to account for the essential ambiguity in the nature of the *genius*. For it is

14. Price (*supra*, n. 4: *JRS*) 30.

15. See esp. A. D. Nock, “The Emperor’s Divine comes,” *JRS* 37 (1947) 102–16 = *Essays on Religion and the Ancient World*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, 1972), 653–75; P. Veyne, “Ordo et populus: Génies et chefs de file,” *MEFRA* 73 (1961) 229–74; R. Schilling, “Genius et ange,” in *Rites, cultes, dieux de Rome* (Paris, 1979) = *RLAC* s.v. “Genius”; G. Dumézil, *Archaic Roman Religion*, tr. P. Krapp (Chicago, 1970), 356–63. I am in basic agreement with Dumézil’s arguments.

16. Dumézil (*supra*, n. 15) 357.

17. Plautus, *Aul.* 724–26, *Per.* 263, *Stich.* 622, *Truc.* 184.

18. As in Horace, *Ep.* 2.2.183–89: “cur alter fratrum cessare et ludere et ungui / praeferat Herodis palmetis pinguibus, alter / dives et importunus ad umbram lucis ab ortu / silvestrem flammis et ferro mitiget agrum, / scit Genius, natale comes qui temperat astrum, / naturae deus humanae, mortalis in unum / quodque caput, vultu mutabilis, albus et ater.”

19. As in Censorinus’s definition: “Genius est deus, cuius in tutela ut quisque natus est vivit” (*De Die Natali* 3.1).

his essential nature to be both a part of a man as well as an external deity; he is neither entirely a “self” nor a “patron,” but a bit of both at once.

In fact, a blurring between the categories of “self” and “patron,” if that is what we have, begins to make sense when we consider that a typical Roman way of thinking about, of discussing or defining, the self is through proper location of the self in a network of relationships, and especially relationships to patrons either human or divine. In religious terms, those who follow a particular trade, belong to a particular household, *gens*, age group, etc., are all bound by particular cult obligations. Their divine patrons reveal who they are. The *genius* functions in just the same way, but on such a specific, circumscribed level that he becomes at times scarcely distinguishable from the person whose self he helps to define. Moreover, in the birthday material, we can observe this propensity to define the self in terms of the patron functioning not just on the religious level, but on the human, social level as well; for we have seen how common it is for a Roman writer to claim that a patron’s birthday has become as important as his own, or in other words that his own life is defined by the life of the patron.²⁰

Horace’s *Ode* 4.11, in which the poet tells of his celebration of his patron Maecenas’s birthday, offers an excellent example of how this “blur” between self and patron could work on both the social and religious levels. The date of the celebration is given, and Horace describes the day as being “solemnis mihi sanctiorque paene natali proprio” (lines 17–18: “a solemn day for me and almost holier than my own birthday”). He will observe the day with a ritual that includes the sacrifice of a lamb at an altar: “ara castis vincta verbenis avet immolato spargier agno” (lines 6–8: “the altar, bound with sacred boughs, longs to be sprinkled with the blood of a sacrificial lamb”). Horace undertakes this ritual on his own; the poem is addressed to Phyllis, whom he invites to the celebration, but Maecenas seems to be nowhere around. Granted that Maecenas is meant to read the poem and therefore discover that Horace has been celebrating his birthday, and granted that in the real Roman world there would have been at least as much point in making sure your patron found out you were celebrating his birthday as in celebrating it at all; still, Horace presents himself as acting independently, and so with no hope of direct reward from his patron.

The implication is that for Horace personally, Maecenas’s birthday has become as important as his own; Horace’s patron has become like another self, a sort of alter ego. Such a reading finds support in *Ode* 2.17, which is, unlike 4.11, addressed directly to Maecenas. Maecenas is referred to as “pars meae animae” (line 5); if he were to die Horace would not be a “superstes integer” (line 7). They are in fact so clearly two parts of one soul that they must die at the same time. Horace speaks of an oath he has taken that he and Maecenas will never part: the Catullan image of a friend who will follow his friend anywhere is here

20. Clearly the two levels (religious and social) are related; any society’s images of a divine world must reflect the social patterns familiar to the worshippers.

given a new turn in its inclusion of even the “supremum iter” (lines 11–12). The seriousness with which Horace takes the celebration of Maecenas’s birthday in *Ode* 4.11 is a ritual expression of the feelings he claims for himself in *Ode* 2.17; the ritual demonstrates the extent to which his own identity is bound up in his relationship to Maecenas.

But let us look again at just what Horace does on this day: “*ara castis vincta verbenis avet immolato spargier agno.*” Every one of these words has strongly ritualistic connotations either in the sacred objects they name (*ara vincta, castae verbenae, immolatus agnus*) or in the archaic nature of their diction (*avet, spargier*). But these terms imply ritual of a much more solemn kind than do the religious words we have encountered in other birthday poems, such as *tus, liba*, and *coronae*. In fact they are words not generally associated with birthday celebration; birthday offerings to the *genius* did not include animal sacrifice. This is a point made explicit by Censorinus: “*id moris institutique maiores nostri tenuerunt, ut, cum die natali munus annale genio solverent, manum a caede ac sanguine abstererent, ne die qua ipsi lucem acceperant alii demerent*” (*De Die Natali* 2.2: “This is the custom and practice which our ancestors adhered to: when on their birthdays they made yearly offering to the *genius*, they held back their hands from slaughter and blood, lest they deprive another of the light on the very day on which it was granted to them”).

Because Censorinus does make this point explicit (and he names Varro as his source), the ritual described in *Ode* 4.11 has aroused comment. Didn’t Horace know the rules?²¹ We should note, however, that Censorinus says nothing about the preferred sacrifice of the *genius*, only that it was considered wrong for a man to take a life on the day he was born. Horace was *not* born on the Ides of April, so it may have been appropriate for him to perform animal sacrifice for Maecenas’s *genius*.²² Then, too, Horace nowhere states precisely who is honored by the ritual of this day; he may not be sacrificing to Maecenas’s *genius* at all, but rather to another deity for whom animal sacrifice would be more usual.²³ While the poems of Ovid and Tibullus described a ritual that remained identical whether it was carried out on one’s own or on another’s birthday, Horace’s poem describes a ritual that calls forth a different comparison. It resembles instead the type of

21. For discussion, see G. Wissowa, *Religion und Kultus der Römer*, 2d ed. (Munich, 1912), 177; R. Schilling in *RLAC* 10 s.v. “Genius,” col. 56.

22. In the reign of Nero we find the Arval Brothers sacrificing a bull to the emperor’s *genius* on his birthday, so unless the *genius* of an emperor is different in kind from the *genii* of other men, animal sacrifice clearly could be considered an acceptable offering for the *genius*. See W. Henzen, ed., *Acta Fratrum Arvalium* (Berlin, 1874) 57 = E. M. Smallwood, *Documents Illustrating the Principates of Gaius, Claudius and Nero* (London, 1967) 17–18; and now John Scheid, *Romulus et ses frères* (Paris, 1990) 415.

23. The Acts of the Arval Brothers offer a parallel for this, too, and one that is closer in time to Horace himself; for Nero was the first emperor to whose *genius* the Arvals sacrificed. On the birthdays of the earlier Julio-Claudians, sacrifices were made not to the emperor’s *genius*, but to the traditional deities of the Roman state, on behalf of the emperor. See Henzen (*supra*, n. 22) 56–57 = Smallwood (*ibid.*) 17–18; Scheid (*ibid.*) 414.

ritual that could be performed for a god with whom a special cult relationship had been established as a return for a particular favor.

The tale told by Horace in various of his *Odes* (2.13, 2.17, 3.8) about his brush with death from a falling tree trunk offers a good example of how such a ritual might come to be established. In *Ode* 2.17 Faunus is named as the god who saved Horace from this untimely death just as, on a previous occasion, Maecenas had been snatched from death by the protecting power of Jove. Astrology, representing the idea of an inexorable fate, is dismissed; instead the poem goes on to show how fate can in fact be overcome by the efforts of a powerful divine patron:

te Iovis impio
tutela Saturno refulgens
eripuit volucrisque Fati
tardavit alas, cum populus frequens
laetum theatri ter crepit sonum:
me truncus illapsus cerebro
sustulerat, nisi Faunus ictum
dextra levasset, Mercurialium
custos virorum.

(*Odes* 2.17.22–30)

To thee the protecting power of Jove, outshining that of baleful Saturn, brought rescue, and stayed the wings of swift Fate what time the thronging people thrice broke into glad applause in the theatre. Me the trunk of a tree, descending on my head, had snatched away, had not Faunus, protector of poets, with his right hand warded off the stroke.

(tr. C. E. Bennett, Loeb Classical Library)

Maecenas has gained the protection of Jove, and Horace that of Faunus; to insure the continuation of such protection the requirements of piety must be fulfilled. Maecenas is instructed to dedicate a temple, while Horace intends to sacrifice a lamb: “Reddere victimas / aedemque votivam memento: / nos humilem feriemus agnam” (*Odes* 2.17.30–32: “Remember then to offer the victims due and to build a votive shrine! I will sacrifice a humble lamb” (tr. C. E. Bennett, Loeb Classical Library).

Even more interesting for our purposes is the last poem dealing with this same event of the falling tree trunk, *Ode* 3.8. It shows the final result of this escape from disaster, though Horace now names Liber as the god who saved him rather than Faunus. At any rate, we now see Horace performing the sacrifice that he vowed in thanksgiving for his rescue, and we are given the specific date, the first of March, on which the sacrifice is performed:

Martiis caelebs quid agam Kalendis,
quid velint flores et acerra turis
plena miraris positusque carbo in
caespite vivo,

docte sermones utriusque linguae?
 voveram dulcis epulas et album
 Libero caprum prope funeratus
 arboris ictu.

(*Odes* 3.8.1–8)

What I, a bachelor, am doing on the first of March, what mean the flowers, the casket full of incense, and the embers laid on fresh-cut turf—at this you marvel, o you who are learned in either tongue? I had vowed to Liber a savoury feast and a pure white goat, what time I narrowly escaped destruction by the falling tree.

(tr. C. E. Bennett, Loeb Classical Library)

Most importantly, this sacrifice is to be carried out not once only, but every year on the first of March. Horace says, “Hic dies anno redeunte festus [erit]” (line 9). Thus the date, the memorial of his personal salvation from danger, has become for Horace a personal holiday or *dies festus*, just as, for example, Cerinthus’s *natalis* did for Sulpicia,²⁴ or Maecenas’s for Horace. And here we might recall again Horace’s advice to Maecenas in *Ode* 2.17, that he, in return for his rescue, should build a votive temple for Jove: “reddere victimas aedemque votivam memento” (lines 30–31). If Maecenas were actually to build such a temple, its foundation date would, in fact, be referred to as a *natalis*.

To undertake celebration of another’s birthday, then, can indeed be seen as analogous to establishing a special bond with a god and establishing a new *dies festus* for him. Human patrons can indeed be treated analogously to divine patrons (or vice versa). In Latin poetry, such treatment of a human patron is pushed to its farthest limits in Vergil’s first *Eclogue*, when the herdsman Tityrus establishes a new *dies festus* for himself, a day that will be dedicated to the *iuvenis* who for Tityrus, personally, will always be a god: “namque erit ille mihi semper deus; illius aram / saepe tener nostris ab ovilibus inbuet agnus” (lines 7–8: “For he will always be a god for me; a tender lamb of my flock will often stain his altar with its blood”). The *iuvenis* has offered a sort of salvation to Tityrus in allowing him to stay on his land; the result is that Tityrus will honor him with sacrifice, and, moreover, the sacrifice will take place on a regular basis, evidently every month: “hic illum vidi iuvenem, Meliboeae, quotannis / bis senos cui nostra dies altaria fumant” (lines 42–43: “That’s where I saw that young man, Meliboeus, the one my altar smokes for twelve days out of every year”).

The identification of this poem’s *iuvenis* with Octavian, first made by the ancient commentators and “accepted almost universally in modern times also,”²⁵

24. Tibullus 4.5.1–2: “Qui mihi te, Cerinthe, dies dedit, hic mihi sanctus / atque inter festos semper habendus erit.”

25. C. Hardie, “Octavian and *Eclogue* I,” in *The Ancient Historian and His Materials*, ed. B. Levick (Westmead, 1975) 115. This article provides a good deal of evidence to challenge the identification of the *iuvenis* with Octavian. As far as I know, the identification was first challenged in the modern literature by A. Grisart, “Tityre et son dieu,” *LEC* 34 (1966) 115–42.

has been challenged in recent years; the fact that Octavian did ultimately become a god for the Romans, unlike any other young man of his generation, has without doubt had an influence on subsequent generations' reading of this poem. But the poem itself was written well before any official cult of Octavian, nor would Vergil have had any way to foresee such a cult. We must accept the poem as a portrait of a freedman who creates, on his own, a personal cult of an important patron, whoever that patron may be. The cult devised by Tityrus was, evidently, the sort of thing that could, at this period, happen to a patron; the reference in this same poem to "praesentes divos" (line 41) shows clearly that the *iuvenis* was not in a unique position. The resemblances between Tityrus's cult, as described by Vergil, and later imperial cult are significant; they should not, however, determine our identification of the *iuvenis*.

Moreover, if Tityrus's cult bears a resemblance to later imperial cult, it also bears a resemblance, at least equally strong, to the birthday celebrations we have been considering here. Though it is nowhere specified that the festival that Tityrus creates will take place on his patron's birthday,²⁶ nor is it referred to as a *natalis*, nevertheless its connection with birthday practices should be clear. If we put each of the poems we have been considering side by side, we find, in fact, a continuum of ritual situations: (1) a group of clients, friends, or family members attend in holy silence as a birthday celebrant performs cult for his *genius*; (2) the attending clients, friends, or family members themselves take part in the cult acts; (3) clients, friends, or family members perform the same cult acts on their own, independent of the actual birthday celebrant; (4) a client performs cult on his own for his patron's birthday, but utilizes not birthday ritual but rather the ritual generally reserved for a deity who has saved the worshipper from danger; (5) a client performs cult (not necessarily on the patron's birthday) that recognizes the patron as a deity who has saved him from danger.

Each of the ritual situations in this series is organically connected to the others: at no one point do we see a sudden conceptual break. Though in the last instance the patron is finally referred to as a god, it is only the ritual situation itself, so closely connected to the other ritual situations of the series, that can give rise to such a reference. An altar has been set up in the patron's honor and a lamb is being sacrificed for him; so, in this context, it becomes proper to refer to him as a god. The convention on a birthday may be to sacrifice not to a patron as a god, but rather to a patron's *genius* (though the poets can be vague on this point); yet, even in the most conventional of situations, the *genius* is never conceived of as wholly independent from the man of whom he forms an intimate part.

The picture of Roman birthdays that emerges from this study of Roman poetry reveals the close connection, conceptually and ritually, between human

26. The idea, however, is not impossible; one supposes from his name that Tityrus is a Greek, and the birthdays of Greek gods were celebrated monthly rather than annually, so that Tityrus's monthly festival is a realistic touch on the part of Vergil. See Schmidt (*supra*, n. 1) 12ff.

and divine systems of patronage at Rome.²⁷ The ideal patron, whether human or divine, was viewed as a giver either of life or of the fruits of life, of benefits, whether material or more abstract, that helped to make the recipient what he was and to define for him his position in the world.²⁸ In return, the ideal dependent owed *pietas* above all, which meant not only scrupulous fulfillment of any secular duties, but could also entail the specific ritual obligations of the *dies natalis*.

My principal purpose in this paper has been to shed some light on the workings of this social and religious system of birthday celebration as it applied to relations between private individuals. Part of the topic's interest, however, is its relevance for the interpretation of the imperial cult that was beginning to take shape in the very period that produced most of the "birthday poems" we have been looking at. The emergence of emperor cult and the history of the Roman *dies natalis* are, in fact, intimately connected. From the principate of Augustus, the birthdays of the emperors and their family members began to be named in the official calendar of the Roman state, and these imperial *natales* soon became the most popular and enduring of all imperial festivals,²⁹ successfully combining elements of earlier private and public *natales*.³⁰

In the first place, then, the social and religious context out of which imperial *natales* emerged is clear. If it was normal Roman practice for friends and dependents to undertake the formal celebration of their friends' or patrons' birthdays, then for each individual citizen to honor the birthday of the *princeps*, who claimed to be the protector of all Romans, would be a natural development.³¹

27. I speak here of "divine patronage" without any implication that I am thereby following Latin usage. The Romans did not, in any examples of which I am aware, apply the term *patronus* to deities. Nevertheless, they clearly had a strong sense that the function of a deity with whom one had a cult relationship was to bestow benefits, and, in particular, protection. Censorinus speaks of the function of the personal *genius* as *tutela*; Horace speaks of Jove's *tutela* of Maecenas, and of Mercury as his own *custos*. I think, then, that we are justified in referring to such gods as "patron deities." For problems with and justifications for using the language of patronage even where the Romans themselves did not, see R. Saller, "Patronage and Friendship in Early Imperial Rome: Drawing the Distinction," and A. Wallace-Hadrill, "Patronage in Roman Society: From Republic to Empire," both in Wallace-Hadrill (*supra*, n. 3) 49–50, 65–66.

28. As Cicero makes clear in the opening paragraphs of the *Post Reditum in Senatu*, there are two categories of beings to whom one is indebted from the moment of birth: one's parents and the gods. Each are bestowers of life and of identity. Thus, throughout life, anyone who bestows benefits is acting analogously to a parent, or to a god. Three centuries after Cicero, Censorinus still calls upon the two categories of family members and gods to elucidate the relationship of dependents to their patrons; see *De Die Natali* 1.9–11, 15.5.

29. Peter Herz, "Kaiserfest der Prinzipatszeit," *ANRW* 2.16.2 (Berlin, 1978) 1136.

30. Like private birthdays, they commemorated the days on which particular individuals had been born; like the birthdays of temples and cities, they were named in official calendars and eventually became the most numerous festivals of the imperial year, just as the birthdays of the gods' temples had been the most frequently named republican festivals: compare the *Fasti Antiates Maiores*, most recently published in A. Degrassi, ed., *Fasti Anni Numani et Iuliani*, *Inscriptiones Italiae*, vol. 13, fasc. 2 (Rome, 1963), with R. O. Fink, A. S. Hoey, and W. F. Snyder, *The Feriale Duranum*, *YCS* 7 (New Haven, 1940).

31. P. A. Brunt (*The Fall of the Roman Republic* [Oxford, 1988] 438–42) has recently taken exception to the notion of the *princeps* as universal patron: "That would be a bizarre conception. . . ."

Such a view, nevertheless, stands in direct contrast to the conclusions of most recent scholars who have investigated the problem. Herz, while recognizing “a weaker Roman stream” as contributing to what became the tradition of imperial birthday celebrations, finds the key to the festivals’ origins in the Hellenistic kingdoms, where public birthday celebrations of the rulers stood at the end of a thousand years of Near Eastern tradition.³² Weinstock says of the public celebration of Caesar’s birthday, “There is no Roman precedent. . . . The inspiration must have come from the East.”³³ While I would not deny that the public birthday celebrations of Eastern monarchs may have had an influence on imperial birthday celebrations, it is clear that the practice was adopted at Rome with such success only because it fit so well with contemporary Roman practice.³⁴ That it was fully intended to do so is demonstrated by the fact that, in the West, the emperor’s birthday was always celebrated annually rather than monthly, as those of the Eastern monarchs had been.

Second, the close connection between human and divine systems of patronage that is revealed so clearly by the practices surrounding Roman birthday celebrations should affect our approach to imperial theology. Much of the immense scholarship on Roman emperor cult has, in one way or another, aimed at answering the theological questions that seem so central to modern investigators: Did the Romans really believe that the emperor was a god? Was it he that they worshipped, or his *genius*, or his *numen*? The evidence is contradictory,³⁵ and much of it remains to be collected and evaluated. Duncan Fishwick, in the process of pulling together the results of his own considerable research into the

The patron of all would be useful to none” (p. 439). But here Brunt uses the term “patron” only in the most limited, technical sense. In this sense it is of course true that Augustus had his own private clients quite distinct from the citizenry at large. Yet Brunt himself shows that the term was often used, even by the Romans, more figuratively to mean simply “protector,” without correlation to clients in the technical sense (pp. 405, 439); cf. remarks and references *supra*, n. 27.

32. Herz (*supra*, n. 29) 1139.

33. S. Weinstock, *Divus Julius* (Oxford, 1971) 207.

34. Writers in the earlier part of the century likewise emphasized the Roman background to imperial birthdays (see esp. L. R. Taylor, “The Worship of Augustus in Italy During His Lifetime,” *TAPA* 51 [1920] 116–33; *eadem*, *The Divinity of the Roman Emperor* [Middletown, Conn., 1931]; and D. M. Pippidi, “Le ‘Numen Augusti,’” *REL* 9 [1931] 83–112), but their views were based on a set of assumptions that have since been called into question: that cult at Rome on the emperor’s birthday was directed toward his *genius* only; that the *genius* was a being quite distinct from the emperor as a man; that there was a complete identity between the imperial *genius* and the imperial *numen*; that there was a clear distinction between imperial cult at Rome and the cult in the provinces. I would not accept any of these assumptions, but I would not therefore reject the connection between imperial birthdays and traditional Roman birthdays; I have tried rather to expand our picture of what a traditional Roman birthday might involve.

35. Of the three earliest inscriptions dealing with the observance of Augustus’s birthday in the West, the first (from Cumae, dated between A.D. 4 and 14) indicates that an unspecified victim is to be dedicated simply to *Caesari*, the second (from Narbo, dated between A.D. 12 and 14) calls for sacrifice and *supplicationes* for the *numen Augusti*, while the third (from Forum Clodii, dated A.D. 18) specifies offerings for the *genius* as well as the *numen* of the emperor. The inscriptions may be found in Degraffi (*supra*, n. 30: 41), *ILS* 112, and *ILS* 154, respectively.

history of the imperial cult in the West, has recently asserted that we are still far from the stage where “a comprehensive synthesis of the full evidence [will] become practical.”³⁶

Yet as we engage in the process of assembling and interpreting evidence, I think it is very likely a mistake to assume that sufficient evidence will eventually supply us with unambiguous answers to our questions. For concepts like *genius* and *numen* quickly become intractable when questioned in terms of our own religious and psychological discourse. And when we ask whether the Romans could really have believed that the emperor was a god, we insist before we even start on an unbridgeable gap between the human and divine spheres, a gap that a concept like *genius* is able to straddle comfortably.³⁷ Imperial birthday ritual was designed to reflect the emperor’s position as a uniquely powerful patron and protector of the Roman people, but not to reveal whether the emperor was himself a man or a god; no matter how closely we study the ritual, we cannot force it to do so.

In undertaking celebration of another’s birthday a Roman undertook in part a religious obligation expressed by annually renewed *vota* and ritual. Exactly what was “worshipped” by such ritual does not, I think, emerge clearly from our sources, nor is it the right question to ask. As the poems we have considered make clear, the emphasis for the person performing a birthday ritual was on the *pietas* expressed by the ritual, on the bond between two people that the ritual articulated, and on the sense of self that emerged from the articulation of the bond.³⁸ Such a bond, once expressed ritually, became a sacred bond. Whether in the course of the ritual one addressed a *genius*, a *numen*, a *deus natalis*, some other god, or even a mortal patron, a mundane relationship was, by means of the ritual, elevated to a new plane; through this act of piety a Roman gained a new network of divine as well as earthly friends and patrons.

University of Rochester

36. D. Fishwick, *The Imperial Cult in the Latin West: Studies in the Ruler Cult of the Western Provinces of the Roman Empire*, 4 vols., *Études Préliminaires aux Religions Orientales dans l’Empire Romain*, vol. 108 (Leiden, 1987), I, 1: ix.

37. We should not, then, settle for a simple definition of the *genius*, as Fishwick does when he sees him only as a patron, completely external to the emperor, or as Scheid does when he identifies him so closely with the emperor that he has trouble seeing him as a patron at all. See Fishwick (*supra*, n. 36) II, 1, p. 382: “For the purposes of the present discussion the most significant aspect of the *genius* is that it was conceived as something not internal but external to a man: his *comes*, guiding star, or spiritual companion, under whose *tutela* he lived”; and Scheid (*supra*, n. 22) pp. 344–46: “À une exception près . . . les vœux des arvaies ne concernent jamais le Génie de l’empereur, car il est difficile d’associer le *Genius*, ce ‘double’ né avec l’empereur, à la protection de celui-ci: cela reviendrait en quelque sorte à demander par contrat à l’empereur de prendre soin de lui-même.” These are only the two most recent writers to express such views; Fishwick’s view of the *genius* as an external divinity matches that of Taylor (*supra*, n. 34); Scheid’s view of the *genius* as no more than a “personality” matches that of Veyne (*supra*, n. 15).

38. The beauty of imperial ritual, too, was that it allowed an unlimited number of people to enter into a personally expressed bond with the emperor.