This is a remarkably innovative book. It owes much to the approach of Simon Price, who was Gradel’s thesis supervisor at Oxford, and offers nothing less than a complete reinterpretation of the phenomenon of emperor worship in Rome and Italy. The basic argument may be stated thus: emperor worship was entirely in line with normal responses to overwhelming individual power in Roman society; unfortunately, the phenomenon has been completely misunderstood by a long line of modern scholars, whose outlook has been distorted by ‘christianizing’ assumptions; particularly misleading has been Lily Ross Taylor’s idea that emperor worship in Rome and Italy was about worship of the living emperor’s genius rather than his current power and status; the emperor was directly worshipped during his lifetime in Italy but not in Rome; his genius, the guardian spirit of his procreative power, was in fact little worshipped.

Such a bald summary does little justice to the complexity of the subjects covered, to the sophistication of the arguments, or to the richness of the evidence deployed. Gradel makes use of literary, epigraphical and numismatic evidence. He also tackles archaeological data, though he modestly claims no great abilities in this field (cf. 103-8). His work seems certain to win widespread approval; the general thesis about direct worship of the living emperor in Italy seems particularly strong. However, the book as a whole deals in such a dramatically different way with so many difficult topics, where the evidence is both familiar and heavily debated, that the treatment appears bound to provoke disagreement on matters of detail. Many cherished positions are unavoidably attacked in the course of Gradel’s study. Furthermore, it is possible that the reaction against genius-worship has been too severe. Indeed, Bridget Buxton’s recent PhD dissertation (‘Rome at the Crossroads, 6 BCE – 4 CE’, Berkeley, 2003, esp. 337-421) finds that worship of the genius of Augustus was absolutely at the heart of imperial cult ceremonies in Rome and in other parts of Italy. The emperor evidently wanted and worked to become Pater Patriae rather than Divus Augustus during his lifetime.

In ch.1 (‘Introduction’, 1-26), Gradel identifies public worship as that funded by the public purse and points out that sacrifice is the
fundamental act of pagan worship. It takes precedence over ideas such as dogma and belief. A great deal of confusion has arisen from application of the christianizing distinction between ‘man’ and ‘god’, which is an absolute distinction. In ancient pagan worship the distinction was relative rather than absolute, so that divinity is mainly a matter of relative power and mortals can thus be worshipped without reference to their absolute status.

In Ch.2 (‘Before the Caesars’, 27-53), Gradel notes our tendency to think that worship of prominent Romans began in the age of Julius Caesar. Yet there was, he demonstrates, a lot of worship of mortal Romans during their lifetimes prior to this period. It was the accepted norm and thus little commented upon. Indeed, direct worship appears to have been a normal response to overwhelming individual power. Cicero (To Atticus 8.16) is contemptuous of Italians who worshipped Pompey in 51 BC but found no difficulty in worshipping Caesar when the latter invaded Italy in 49 BC. The sneer may not be aimed so much at the worship as the change of allegiance. On the other hand, Gradel sees genius-worship as arising from household worship of the genius of the paterfamilias, which is stigmatized as the activity of slaves and freedmen. This may go a bit too far. Gradel uses the scholarship of Richard Sailer to indicate that Roman fathers hardly ever exercised patria potestas over adult sons because of the generation gap between them. Most fathers, in other words, were dead by the time their sons reached adulthood. Does this mean that sons (let alone wives and daughters) should be excluded altogether from genius-worship within the family home? Should free persons within the family be excluded from this worship? Should free persons outside the family, by extension, be excluded from worship of the emperor's genius? This seems to be the progression envisaged by Gradel and it is plain that he has an agenda: he wants to argue that genius-worship was unappealing to free men of distinction because of its association with slaves and freedmen; thus they avoided it; thus primary emphasis upon genius-worship in imperial cult is incorrect.

The argument as a whole is fashioned so as to bring down the massive edifice that is Taylor’s long-held theory. It may not be necessary to do this. When the genii of Augustus and Tiberius appear together in public cult on an altar from Forum Clodii in northern Etruria (CIL XI. 3303), Gradel is forced to argue that, since this is a cult of the emperor’s numen, the worship is explicitly classed as divine
rather than human. It is not like the cult of a paterfamilias. Thus, social humiliation is not relevant and the socially independent freeborn may participate (245). Why not allow that both free and slave, or upper and lower class, could participate in genius-worship but that Taylor was nevertheless wrong to depreciate direct worship of the emperor’s nature because she was thinking in terms of the absolute distinction between man and god, which is not so applicable to the ancient pagan world? This would, for one thing, more readily explain the presence of the emperor’s image in the lararia of private households in Pompeii. It would also make the exiled Ovid’s shrine to Augustus and the imperial family a more natural display of devotion (Letters from the Black Sea 4.9.105-10).

Chapter 3 (‘Caesar’s Divine Honours’, 54-72) does not distinguish ‘divine’ from ‘political’ honours (another anachronistic distinction). Caesar was honoured as Divus Julius with the full intention of making him one of the highest class of gods in the Roman state. It is refreshing to see Caesar’s honours treated this way, though Gradel seems once again to go a bit too far. Suetonius (Life of Julius 76), for instance, distinguishes honours which were ‘too great for mortal man’. Certainly, this should not be pressed. The aristocratic context at Rome is undoubtedly crucial, so that Suetonius’ attitude is probably designed to appeal to members of the Roman aristocracy, conditioned by their traditions of power-sharing. However, it still seems that the picture is richer, or a bit more complicated, than Gradel allows with his reductionist view that the honours react to relative power rather than absolute status. Absolute distinctions are sometimes made explicitly.

Gradel follows Varro in arguing that divus was originally a term for gods of the highest status and power, gods who had always been gods. It came to denote a secondary class of gods, deified mortals, only through subsequent association with dead emperors and their kin who had been deified after death. Gradel concludes that divus had become associated with death (cf. 330). In general terms this seems reasonable. Augustus provided the model by refusing to become a divus during his lifetime. ‘Political’ reasons are often supplied for this: he did not want to offend traditional ideas about the sharing of power in the Senate. Perhaps this underestimates the example of Julius Caesar (cf. 263), who had been given the title Divus Julius during his lifetime but had been murdered before the relevant measures could be carried to fruition. Might this have been a bad omen for the honour? Was Caesar’s
example a lesson against deification at Rome in a slightly different way than we have thought (i.e. with more negative ‘religious’ content than we are used to)? Alternatively, Augustus might have seen genius-worship as a more satisfying way to fulfil his divine aspirations.

Chapter 4 (‘Beyond Rome: “By Municipal Deification”’, 73-108) argues that direct worship of the living emperor in Italy was quite normal, whereas worship of the divi was much less so. This is almost the reverse of the situation which existed in Rome. Augustus was worshipped more than any other. Instead of resisting attempts to deify him in Italy, he actively sought worship and was also reacted to independently. By contrast, Gradel argues that the genius was little worshipped and that genius-worship was a lower-class activity. The chapter concludes with some good observations on the Forum of Pompeii, which turns out not to have had so many imperial cult buildings as has been thought, and instead of a room for banquets there was probably a statue hall (103-8).

The tendency to depreciate the social attractiveness of prominent modes of imperial worship is continued in Gradel’s investigation of the compital cults in ch.5 (‘The Augustan Settlement’, 109-39). These are described as being funded by freedmen, dominated by freedmen, and shunned by upper-class Romans. Gradel even thinks that the compital cults ultimately failed because of their lower-class associations. The fifth chapter of Bridget Buxton’s dissertation, by contrast, reads very differently on the nature and importance of these cults. She has no difficulty conceiving of them as state cults: they were governed by city-wide ‘rules’; the vicomagistri were ‘state’ officials, sharing responsibilities traditionally associated with urban praetors and aediles; and Augustus’ patronage of the compital cults was direct and heavy. It is not hard to imagine that they might have been backed by some form of legal ratification and might have been available to members of the state beyond the freedmen. Gradel’s concentration on the prominence of freedmen leads him away from such possibilities. It might pay to leave them open.

Chapter 6 (‘The Augustan Heritage and Mad Emperors’, 140-61) indicates that Caligula pushed further down the absolutist trail than his predecessors, demanding conspicuous direct worship in Rome and offending contemporaries among the Roman aristocracy. This provoked the inevitable negative reaction. Chapter 7 (‘The Emperor’s
Reveiwns

Genius in State Cult', 162-97) examines a number of well known monuments, such as the 'Frieze of the Vicomagistri'. The attempt to reinterpret this monument as showing a sacrifice to two divi, namely Augustus and Livia, at the latter’s consecration, depends heavily on identifying imperial princes in the frieze. The arguments suffer from the need to take account of the vast body of recent scholarship that attempts to determine portrait types for these princes. Furthermore, the Belvedere Altar and the ‘compital’ inscription and altar from Acerrae are vital for any investigation of the imperial cult under Augustus and they are absent from the discussion. On another tack, Gradel believes that Claudius tried to overcome the unfortunate identification between formal state deification and death by introducing a state cult of the emperor’s genius in January AD 42. This cult was, in Gradel’s view, intimately connected with Claudius’ assumption of the title Pater Patriae, but was soon to disappear because elite worshippers were concerned about its servile connotations. Something does not quite add up here. The Pater Patriae title, which could be taken to imply such worship, was assumed regularly by later emperors, whether absolutist in attitude or not. Both the state cult of the emperor’s genius and the functional link with the PP title might be illusory.

Chapters 8 (‘In Every House”? The Emperor in the Roman Household’, 198-212) and 9 (‘Corporate Worship’, 213-33) look at domestic worship and corporate worship respectively. We would, of course, like more evidence but it does seem that there was rather a lot of direct emperor worship in these settings, of the ruling emperor rather than the divi (199, 206), and it did not necessarily require a specific or quantifiable benefit. The emperor was a potential benefactor. It is argued, perhaps correctly, that the libation decreed by the Senate in 30 BC was to young Caesar himself, not to his genius, but predictably the explanation is that this ‘would have imposed on the proud and noble a cult form deeply humiliating to their social self-esteem’ (212). Refusals of divine honours, where they occurred, were merely formulaic, ‘a touchstone enabling the emperor to flaunt his moderatio, and thereby calm down a nervous Senate’ (233). They show in fact that private worship of the emperors was both common and permanent. Chapter 10 (‘Numen Augustum’, 234-50) shows that the numen and the genius were not the same thing. Worship of the emperor’s divinity (numen) ‘was simply synonymous with worshipping him directly, as a god’ (245). Chapter 11 (‘A Parallel: C. Manlius, Caeretan “Caesar”’, 251-60) interprets the Augustan altar of C. Manlius of Caere as depicting
direct worship of this private citizen, censor perpetuus of his town, during his lifetime. This conclusion has been resisted in previous scholarship because it contravenes the absolute distinction commonly thought to exist between man and god.

Chapter 12 ("Heavenly Honours Decreed by the Senate": From Emperor to Divus', 261-371), the longest in the book, stands apart in a number of ways. It furnishes a historical narrative of the development of state cult of the emperor in Rome and Italy and might even have formed a monograph in its own right under different circumstances. The impression of separateness is not helped by a fair amount of repetition of earlier ideas and arguments in this chapter, such as in discussions of absolute as against relative divinity and the meaning of divus. Watersheds are seen with the reigns of Augustus and Caligula, deification of an emperor is described as one way of impressing the senatorial ideal upon his successor, and there is a good discussion of the collapse of the system as the number of divi grew, their essential powerlessness came into focus, and outside religious influences, such as sun-worship and Christianity, began to affect Roman state worship.

This is a rich and rewarding book. There is a huge amount more that could have been commented upon. However, the important message to leave is that the general thesis of this stimulating study is very largely convincing, as is its approach. If questions about genius-worship remain in the mind of this reviewer at least, there can be no doubt that Gradel’s book will need to be appreciated thoroughly by anyone who might in future be moved to write on emperor worship in Rome and Italy.

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