Dedication to the imperial cult at Narbo (CIL XII, 4333) [1]

Typology (Honorific / Funerary / etc.): Honorific
Original Location/Place: Forum of ancient Narbonensis, Gaul.
Actual Location (Collection/Museum): Musée archéologique de Narbonne
Date: 12 CE

Physical Characteristics:
Two panels with inscriptions from a marble altar, set within an incised frame. The lettering is good, with hederae for punctuation. The remaining two sides of the altar have not yet been found, and may have been reused in a later monument. The anterior face of the altar (side A) contains the regulations of the cult, and the lateral side (side B) records the dedication and promise to maintain the monument. This is most likely a 2nd century CE copy of the original.

Material: Marble
Measurements: Height: 110 cm
Width: 58 cm
Depth: 29 cm

Language: Latin

Category: Roman

Publications: CIL XII, 4333

Commentary: This altar from Narbo is one of the best examples of the proper organisation and conduct of Roman religion in the provinces. Dedicated in 12 CE, the marble altar was set up in the Forum of ancient Narbonne, where it provided the central focus for a public cult, modelled on the cults in Rome (Woolf, Becoming Roman, p. 222). There are two inscriptions from the altar: side A records the promise of, and statute for, a cult of the numen Augusti (the divinity of Augustus), which was vowed on 22nd September 11 CE, just five years after Tiberius had dedicated an altar for the worship of the numen Augusti in Rome in 6 CE (Fishwick, Imperial Cult, I.1, p. 146). Side B of the inscription records the dedicatory statement and regulations for rituals performed at the altar.

The inscription on side A of the altar begins with a vow to Augustus, his family and household, the senate and the people of Rome, that the “colonists and residents” (colonis incolisque) of Narbo have “bound themselves to worship his divine spirit in perpetuity!” (se numini eius in perpetuum / colendo obligaverunt). The independence of this statement is important; the construction of the altar is not in response to an official decree or central order, but an autonomous action originating amongst the inhabitants of the city. There follows a list of days on which ritual celebrations will be held: Augustus's birthday – 23rd September – is given as the first date on which offerings will be made, in order to celebrate “the day on which the good fortune of the age bore him to be ruler of the world” (qua die / eum saeculi felicitas orbi terrarum / rectorem edidit). The offerings would continue into the next day, the 24th September, in a regular practice that saw Augustus’s birthday honoured by two days of celebrations across the Roman world. Those making the offerings are also listed here: three equites from the local populace and three freedmen (tres equites Romani / a plebe et tres libertini); an important distinction is being made here, which emphasises that the three equites are to be drawn from the populace(a plebe), rather than being members of the local senatorial elite, thus broadening the appeal and social inclusion of the cultic activity (see Nicolet, L’inscription de l’autel de Narbonne, p. 721-732). Three further dates for sacrifices and offerings are given by the text: 1st and 7th January, and the 31st May. This last date again speaks to the very locally specific context in which the altar was vowed and dedicated, as the text records it is in honour of the day on which Augustus himself resolved a dispute between the ordo decurionem (town council) and the people (plebis decurionibus coniunxit). Michel Gayraud has noted that all of the dates given for these offerings are linked to Augustus (his birthday) and his government, and particularly his exercise of power, both globally and locally, such as in Narbo itself (Gayraud, Narbonne Antique, p. 362). This is interesting in light of the inscription’s repetition of the extent of Augustus’s power; side A of the inscription twice records that Augustus is ‘ruler of the world’ (line 15-16: eum saeculi felicitas orbi terrarium rectorem edidit; lines 24-6: qua die primum imperium orbis terrarum auspicious est), employing the rhetoric of universal rule to reinforce the state of Roman power. The reality that Augustus’s – and therefore Rome’s – power was not universal was irrelevant in pro-Roman imperial ideology, which sought rather to emphasise the extent of Rome’s dominion, irrespective of its precise geographical limits. For such a statement to be reiterated independently by a provincial audience demonstrates the successful dissemination of this message outside of
Rome; the community of Narbo had engaged with the ideological impact of Augustus’s power and the extent to which it reached, and was able to reproduce the rhetoric of the discourse in language that directly imitated the statements and ideas emanating from the capital city.

Side A of the inscription breaks off abruptly, so it is not clear what further rituals or celebrations may also have been listed, but the regulations of the cult are described in the inscription from side B. Here, the altar is dedicated along with instructions for the proper form of worship and interaction. Firstly, we discover that the altar and the sacrifices at it are offered to the “divine power” of the emperor, the numen Augusti, which appears to exist separately and quite distinctly from the body of the emperor. As Duncan Fishwick has stated, the fact that the emperor’s numen can receive prayers and offerings as it appears to do here suggests that it “was conceived as a divinised abstraction to be treated in the same way as a traditional god” (Imperial Cult, p. 385; 388-96. See also Kneissl, Entstehung und Bedeutung der Augustalität, p. 296). The regulations of the cult, including its maintenance, are stated beneath this, with the qualifying declaration that they are the same as those listed for the altar to Diana on the Aventine Hill in Rome (eadem sunt quae sunt ara / Dianae in Aventino). This is in part a reminder to the inhabitants of Narbo that the cults of the colony were specifically Roman in character, the cults of Roman citizens, but it also “serves to insert this new cult into a genealogy of ritual” (Woolf, Becoming Roman, p. 223). This new cult in Narbo was not to be understood as an innovation specific to the colony itself, but rather an addition to a more ancient, cultic tradition, which saw each cult as the descendent of another from across Graeco-Roman antiquity (Woolf, Becoming Roman, p. 223). The regulations also firmly established the legality of the cult, in the sense that the individuals performing its activities were subject to the same propriety and order as any other group administered by the civic authorities (Woolf, Becoming Roman, p. 226). The inscription ends with a reiteration from side A’s text of the colony’s devotion to Augustus, his numen, and his family, including his wife and children, in a clear acknowledgement of the success of propagating the dynastic image of the Augustan household. The stability that a dynasty suggested was clearly attractive to the citizens of ancient Narbo.

The success of the imperial cult at Narbo is indicated by the longevity with which the regulations of its activities survived; the inscription is believed to be a 2nd century copy of the original, indicating that the rites and rituals were still in force in the Antonine period (Fishwick, Imperial Cult, p. 482; 610). Together with the altar believed to have been dedicated to Roma and Augustus at Tarraco in 26-25 BCE (Quintilian, Institutes of Oratory, VI.3.77), the altar at Narbo was the earliest known celebration of the imperial cult in the Latin West; the fact that it appears to have been motivated by the intervention of Augustus in some matter of local dispute is a good illustration of Duncan Fishwick’s point that colonies and municipia tended to establish cults spontaneously, and based on models understood from elsewhere, such as that of the altar of Diana in Rome mentioned explicitly in the text (Imperial Cult, p. 146). This easy adoption of cultic practice in Narbo should, therefore, be understood as evidence for the extent to which the Colonia Iulia Paterna Claudia Narbo Martius was integrated – and felt themselves integrated – into the Roman world; they demonstrated early loyalty to the emperor through the erection of an altar that directly imitated one instituted in Rome, and practiced devotion to his cult routinely and systematically, and seemingly well into the next century. The organisation of the cult – including members of the equestrian class and freedmen – indicates the broad social spectrum that the cult encompassed, and their active attachment to the principate and its institutions.

Keywords in the original language:

- numen [2]
- divus filius [3]
- colonia [4]
- dedico [5]
- divus [6]
- divi filius [7]
- ara [8]
- perpetuus [9]
- hostia [10]
- sacrum [11]
- incola [12]
- lex [13]
- Diana [14]
- Aventinarius [15]
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- pater patriae [16]
- senatus [17]
- populus romanus [18]
- coniunx [19]
- vinum [20]
- donum [21]
- volens [22]
- propitium [23]
- orbis [24]
- felicitas [25]
- terra [26]

Thematic keywords:

- colony [27]
- Narbonensis [28]
- Gaul [29]
- Augustus [30]
- Roman power [31]
- Roman Senate [32]
- Roman people [33]
- imperial cult [34]
- loyalty [35]
- sacrifice [36]
- citizen [37]
- father of the fatherland [38]
- universal rule [39]
- universal happiness [40]

Bibliographical references: Christol, Michel, L'épigraphie et les débuts du culte impérial dans les colonies de vétérans en Narbonnaise [41], Revue archéologique de Narbonnaise 32 (1999) : p. 11-20
Fishwick, Duncan , The Imperial Cult in the Latin West I-II [42] (Studies in the Ruler Cult of the Western Provinces of the Roman Empire ; Leiden: Brill, 1990)
Pippidi, Dionisie M., Recherches sur le culte impérial [47] (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1940)

Other sources connected with this document: Inscription

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