

Pontifex Maximus: from Augustus to Gratian – and Beyond

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This article explores the development of the imperial title pontifex maximus from Emperor Augustus (12 BCE) to fourth-century Emperor Gratian (382 CE) as well as the transformation of the title into that of pontifex inclitus after Gratian. Following the precedent of Augustus, every emperor down to Gratian (d. 383) was pontifex maximus. The title pontifex maximus formed a standing element in the imperial titulature, usually in first place in the litany of titles. The article demonstrates that the title pontifex maximus was modified into pontifex inclitus from Gratian on. Christian emperors were anxious to eliminate the pagan associations of pontifex maximus but they were reluctant to give up their traditional claim to priestly authority.

The story of the emperor as *pontifex maximus* is framed by Augustus (12 BCE) and Gratian (382 CE). Actually, in his quest to accumulate religious authority in the Roman state Augustus was following the precedent of his adoptive father (*pontifex* in 73, *pontifex maximus* in 63, *augur* in 47).¹ In order not to seem to be in a hurry to become *pontifex maximus* he was prepared, as he spells out in detail in the *Res Gestae*, to wait 24 years till the death of the triumvir Lepidus. Yet at the same time he flagrantly violated all precedent in contriving to become a member of all the other priestly colleges, and boasted about that too in the *Res Gestae*.²

Why was it so important to be *pontifex maximus*? The greater part of what it is no exaggeration to call Augustus's religious program was completed long before he became *pontifex maximus* in 12 BCE.³ Furthermore, while the prestige of the office was high, its actual powers, largely consultative, were limited. Since Augustus possessed overwhelming executive power lacking to any earlier *pontifex maximus*, almost everything he did even in the religious sphere far exceeded the formal limitations of the office.

A perhaps more intriguing question is why he wanted all the other priesthoods, which in themselves conferred very little power. In part, the answer must be that

1 For Caesar's priesthoods, Weinstock 1971, 28-34.

2 Augustus, *Res Gestae* 7.3 and 10.2.

3 For a recent survey, Scheid 2005, 175-94.

Augustus wanted a *monopoly* of whatever religious power was available. Each priestly college had a different area of specialization, and despite his grand title, the *pontifex maximus* had no authority over the other colleges. Since he was obviously the most influential member of every college, no one else could hope to match his authority. The ordinary members of all the other priesthoods must have seen their own influence diminish.

Second, membership of the colleges he had done so much to restore to their former dignity (and in the case of the Arval Brethren virtually invent) was highly prized. The traditional way to get into the colleges had always been co-optation by existing members. By being a member, inevitably the most important member, of all the colleges, Augustus was always able to nominate anyone he wished to any college while ostensibly just acting as a colleague among colleagues. The truth is that he had in his gift an almost unlimited number of prizes that cost him nothing and did not involve granting any actual power to potential rivals – in a way like British knighthoods or peerages. It had always been an honour to become a priest. Augustus turned it into a reward for loyalty.

Following Augustan precedent, every emperor down to Gratian (d. 383) was *pontifex maximus*. According to the early sixth-century historian Zosimus, Gratian finally repudiated the office as “not lawful for a Christian”. Since no later emperor is attested with the title, Zosimus’s evidence has usually been accepted, despite his notorious unreliability. After all, so it was assumed, sooner or later a Christian emperor was bound to reject the pagan title. In a recent study I argued that the problems with this chapter of Zosimus are much more serious than hitherto appreciated, and proposed an entirely different account of the final transformation of the imperial *pontifex*.⁴ Though accepted by many, this solution was unwelcome in the usual conservative quarters, and the main purpose of this article is to respond to criticisms⁵ and fortify my thesis with new arguments.

But first, a few more preliminaries. To start with, every new emperor had to wait for the next pontifical election, held in March, but from the accession of Nerva on, in 96, he received the pontificate together with the rest of his imperial powers and membership of the other major colleges (augurs, *quindecimviri*, *epulones* and Arval brethren) by senatorial decree. Furthermore, from an early date every heir apparent was awarded membership of the four major colleges and the Arval brethren before his succession (we have coins proclaiming the future emperor Nero’s membership in all five *ex senatus consulto*).⁶ *Pontifex maximus* formed a standing element in the imperial titulature, usually in first place in the litany of titles (examples are cited below). In addition, right down into the third century the emperor is regularly shown

4 Cameron 2007, 341-84.

5 Paschoud 2006, 67-69 and Paschoud 2012, 359-88 at 362-64; I also respond to a number of points in Rüpke 2008, 57-66; Cracco Ruggini 2011, 405-423, while occasionally questioning my emphasis follows my general interpretation. Stepper 2003 is a mine of information on imperial priesthoods.

6 For the sources, Stepper 2003, 50.

on the coinage sacrificing.⁷ The emperor became virtually the only person shown in art performing sacrifice. As Beard, North and Price put it, “Roman religion was becoming tied to a particular person,” the emperor.⁸

In the first two centuries of the empire, despite spending long periods abroad, whether campaigning (like Trajan, Marcus or Severus) or sightseeing (like Hadrian), emperors were normally resident in Rome and fulfilled in person the most important ritual duties of the *pontifex maximus*, underlining the centrality of his role in Roman society. When they were away from Rome, pontifical duties were fulfilled by a *promagister*, presumably a senior member of the college, only known from inscriptions.⁹ Some have argued that the appointment of a deputy is a sign of the decreasing importance of the emperor’s role as *pontifex*,¹⁰ but the first known dates from 155 CE, and it has plausibly been suggested that the office was a creation of Hadrian, to perform pontifical duties during his extended absences from Rome.¹¹ If so, that might suggest conscientiousness rather than neglect. According to the *Historia Augusta* (22. 11), despite these absences Hadrian “observed Roman rituals very scrupulously and did his duty as *pontifex maximus*,” one of the few literary references to an emperor actually performing pontifical duties. The situation was in any case hardly new. Julius Caesar cannot have performed his duties as *pontifex maximus* when away campaigning in Gaul for eight years.

When Marcus Aurelius and his adoptive brother Lucius Verus became joint emperors in 161, only Marcus took the title *pontifex maximus*, logically enough. There should only be one *maximus*. But when Pupienus and Balbinus took power jointly on the death of Maximin in 238, illogically enough both were proclaimed *pontifex maximus*. In 369 Valentinian I, Valens and Gratian are all three styled *pontifex maximus* (see below). From the second half of the third century on emperors spent less and less time in Rome. How did this factor, nicely called “die Romferne” by German scholars, affect the emperor’s role as *pontifex maximus*? Obviously an absent emperor could not attend the meetings of the various colleges or the festivals in person. But as we learn from the *Acta* of the Arvals, imperial nominations to the priesthoods were often made by letter. For example, *ex litteris Imp(eratoris) C[ae]sar[is] Traiani Hadriani Augusti fratrem arvaem cooptaverunt*.¹² Pliny wrote to Trajan asking for an augurate or septemvirate when he was on the far side of the Roman world fighting in Dacia (*Epistula* 10.13).

Rüpke, determined to minimise imperial participation in the priestly colleges, claims that after 204 “there are no recorded instances of personal participation by

7 Manders 2012, 133-154.

8 Beard et al. 1998, vol. I, 186.

9 Van Haepelen 2002, 197-201.

10 Manders 2012, 143 n. 218.

11 Hammond 1959, 69.

12 Scheid 1998, no. 68. I. 28-30; cf. 69. 23; 114. I. 20.

the reigning emperor in the periodic meetings of any college,” apparently regarding the practice of communication by letter as implying a more distant and less significant relationship. But surely the fact that (for example) Trajan took the trouble to write to the college of augurs on Pliny’s behalf from the Danube frontier suggests the very reverse. According to the *Historia Augusta*, Alexander Severus (222-235) “paid great deference to the *pontifices*, *quindecimviri* and augurs, even permitting some religious cases that he had already decided himself to be reopened and differently resolved” (*Vita Alexandri Severi* 22.5).¹³ The implication is that in the ordinary way the emperor now decided cases on his own, without needing to attend meetings or consult his fellow priests. It was enough that he communicated his decisions or nominations in a letter. Emperors consulted their fellow pontiffs at least as late as the reign of Trajan, but even on routine issues that fell within the purview of the college, such as the transfer of buried remains, unusually well documented in our sources, we find emperors answering requests in person by issuing subscriptions addressed to individuals.¹⁴

By the mid third century the title *pontifex maximus* appears less often on the coinage; in addition coins tend to represent the gods the emperor worshipped rather than the emperor himself sacrificing.¹⁵ As for inscriptions, according to Rüpke “There was no longer any interest in the title, and its use was avoided, perhaps intentionally.” The latter point at any rate is simply untrue. The title is certainly found less often on dedications, but that does not prove lack of “interest,” much less that it was “avoided.” Take the tetrarch Galerius, Caesar from 293 to 305, Augustus from 305 to 311. To be sure few of his inscriptions offer the title, but those that do give it in its regular place in the full imperial titulature. In illustration, here is a recently published dedication from Macedonia:¹⁶

Imperator Caesar Galerius Valerius Maximianus Pius Felix Augustus, pontifex maximus, Germanicus maximus VI, Sarmaticus maximus V, Persicus maximus II, Britannicus maximus, Carpicus maximus V, Armeniacus maximus, Medicus maximus, Adiabenicus maximus, tribunicia potestate XVII, imperator III, pater patriae, proconsul...

The full style was still calculated with some care. Even the victory titles are given iteration numbers, commemorating not just victories won by Galerius himself, but all victories won by all members of the imperial college.¹⁷ Here the year (307/308) is the seventeenth of Galerius’s tribunician power, but only his third as *imperator*,

¹³ Of course, this *vita* is largely late fourth-century fiction, but presumably this detail at any rate reflects how it was hoped or expected that a “good” imperial *pontifex* would act.

¹⁴ Millar 1977, 359, 361.

¹⁵ Manders 2012, 133-145.

¹⁶ AE 2002, 1293, from Heraclea Sintica, 307/308: Lepelley 2004, 221-31; Corcoran 2006, 231-240. Here and later I both expand and supplement without indication abbreviations and restorations that are not in doubt.

¹⁷ Barnes 1982, 27.

meaning Augustus (305). That is because he received the tribunician power when he was created Caesar in 293.¹⁸ If he had been consul (here correctly omitted, since he was not), that would have been registered before *imperator* with the iteration number.¹⁹ It was not till he became Augustus that he was able to add the title *pontifex maximus*. Dedications naming all four members of the first tetrarchy give the title to only Diocletian and Maximian. Likewise dedications naming Constantine together with his three or four sons as Caesars style only Constantine himself *pontifex maximus*. The fact that the title was strictly limited to Augusti is clear proof of its continuing significance.

The emperor’s formal titulature, originally no more than a line or so, had grown exponentially over the years. It is understandable, given considerations of space and the complexities of the constantly changing iteration numbers, that in most contexts an abbreviated style came into general use, already by the third century often no more than *pius felix Augustus*, after Constantine *pius felix triumphator semper Augustus*. Michael Peachin’s study of imperial titulature from 235 to 284 lists separately examples with just the first half of the standard official formula, *Imperator Caesar* (name) *pius felix Augustus*, from formulae containing the second half as well, namely *pontifex maximus tribunicia potestate consul pater patriae proconsul*.²⁰ Thomas Grünewald’s collection of more than 500 Latin inscriptions of Constantine distinguishes between “Standardtitulatur” (by which, significantly enough, he means the short style) and “erweiterte, klassische Kaisertitulatur”.²¹ It is only the latter, a much smaller group, that ever includes *pontifex maximus*. So while it happens to be true it is nonetheless misleading to say that most Constantinian inscriptions omit the title. For it is not just *pontifex maximus* they omit, but the entire second half of the standard formula. There is not the slightest reason to believe that Constantine avoided the *pontifex* title. Grünewald cites 43 examples. In most cases the decision to use the short rather than long form is not likely to have been made at a high level, let alone by the emperor himself. The importance of the document and in some cases even the space available on the stone must have been factors.

According to Rüpke, after Constantine “the title is extremely rare” (p. 62). That is true but irrelevant, a consequence of the increasing rarity of the full style and the decline of the epigraphic habit. Only three examples survive for Constantius II. Yet during his one brief visit to Rome in 357 Constantius filled vacancies in the priestly colleges (*replevit nobilibus sacerdotia*).²² To the so far uncontested assumption that he did this in his capacity as *pontifex maximus*, Rüpke objects that “the only explicitly attested electoral function of this office was confined to the *flamen*

¹⁸ Though in a document of 311 Galerius is given as *trib. pot. xx imp. xix*: for the details, Barnes 1982, 26.

¹⁹ For the complicated consular proclamations in 307-308, Bagnall et al. 1987, 150-151.

²⁰ Peachin 1990, 105, also distinguishing a third group with “exact chronological indications”.

²¹ Grünewald 1990, 179-272.

²² Symmachus, *Relatio* 3.7.

Dialis and *virgines Vestales*,” and that he was simply “participating in senatorial appointments.” This is an excessively legalistic approach and probably not correct even on these grounds. No electoral functions were involved. Since the imperial *pontifex* had for centuries automatically been a member of all the other colleges, he was entitled to nominate new candidates for each one. Pliny asked Trajan to nominate him for one of the two colleges where there was a vacancy, the *augurs* and the *septemviri epulonum*. By 357 it had been many decades since any new member of the colleges had received the honour of nomination by the (normally absent) imperial *pontifex maximus*. Having just made a concession to Christian senators (the removal of the altar of Victory from the senate house), Constantius tactfully conceded another to pagan senators.

“Julian of course constitutes the notorious exception,” Rüpke concedes, citing four inscriptions with a *passim*, as though they were countless. There are indeed more for Julian (22 out of a total of 192) than (say) for Constantius II (though not nearly as many as for Constantine).²³ We may even be able to date the earliest epigraphic evidence: four milestones on the road between Serdica and Naissus.²⁴ It was when he stopped off at Naissus on his way from Paris to Constantinople that Julian heard the news of Constantius’s death, probably towards the end of November 361. Historians have used these inscriptions as evidence for when Julian “assumed” the title. From the fact that there is no earlier epigraphic evidence it has been inferred that he waited till Constantius’s death. Arce argues for October/November 361, adding that in March 362 he was “using” the title regularly; K. Dietz and S. Conti agree that the news of Constantius’s death marked the turning point.²⁵ When publishing the well-known dedication in Israel that proclaims Julian *templorum restaurator*, A. Negev wrote of Julian “renew[ing] this old imperial title”.²⁶

There is no question that Julian saw the office of *pontifex maximus* as in some way authorizing his religious policies, “rejoicing”, as Libanius put it, “in the title of priest no less than in that of emperor” (χαίρει καλούμενος ἱερεὺς οὐχ ἦπτον ἢ βασιλεύς).²⁷ In one letter he appealed to what he rightly styled his ancestral title (εἰμί κατὰ μὲν τὰ πάτρια μέγας ἀρχιερεὺς) and in another referred to his status as ἀρχιερεὺς μέγιστος.²⁸ Both Socrates and Sozomen say that after he became Augustus Julian started calling himself ἀρχιερεὺς. According to Stepper this meant

that he “mit Amt und Titel sichtbar in Erscheinung trat”,²⁹ surely in fact no more than a reference to Julian’s own claims in his letters.³⁰

The fact is that he neither renewed nor even assumed the title. He did not need to. It came to him automatically on the death of Constantius, as it had to all his predecessors (and at least four successors), Christians no less than pagans, for the past three and a half centuries. Arguably (and certainly on a retroactive computation) it came to him the moment he assumed the title of Augustus in Paris in February 360. Nor is there anything provocatively pagan about his *pontifex* dedications. All but three are entirely conventional. Here is one picked at random, a milestone from near Sirmium:³¹

Imperatori Caessari domino nostro Fl. Claudio Iuliano pio felici victori ac triumphatori semper Augusto, pontifici maximo, imperatori VII, conssuli III, bono rei publicae nato, patri patriae, proconsuli.

As on thousands of exactly similar documents, the pontificate is registered in its standard place between the words *Augusto* and *imperatori*. The only even slightly irregular version appears on three milestones found close together on the same Roman road near Turin:³²

imperator Caesar, pontifex maximus, Fl. Claudius Iulianus semper Augustus.

The jumbled word order (*pontifex maximus* after *Caesar* rather than *Augustus*) is surely an error rather than an attempt to emphasize the pontificate, especially since all three lack the last four titles and even *d(ominus) n(oster)* before the proper name.

Arce notes that one milestone also bears the names of Valentinian and Valens, who did not (he adds) delete Julian’s pontificate.³³ Why should they have? This presupposes that any Christian would have found the title offensive, an unmistakable indication of Julian’s paganism. Yet both Valentinian and Valens (and Valentinian’s son Gratian) bore it themselves, as attested by the following full style dedication, commemorating the erection of a bridge in Rome in 369.³⁴

23 Conti 2004; for an earlier collection, Arce 1984, 101-176.

24 Conti 2004, nos. 58-61.

25 Arce 1984, 124, no. 19; Dietz 2000, 811-812; Conti 2004, 49.

26 Negev 1969, 172.

27 Libanius, *Oratio* 12.80.

28 Julian, *Epistula* 88 and 89, in J. Bidez, *L'empereur Julien: Lettres* (Paris 1960), pp. 151. 6 and 166. 14.

29 Socrates, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 3.1.39 and Sozomen, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 5.1.2; Stepper 2003, 214 n. 17.

30 So G. Sabbah in Sabbah, Festugière, Grillet, *Sozomène, Hist. Eccl.* v-vi (Paris 2005), p. 80 n. 5.

31 *ILS* 753 = Arce 1984, p. 109 no. 97; Conti 2004, p. 123 no. 91. As before, for ease of comprehension I have expanded all abbreviations without indication. The double s is found in a number of Julian inscriptions.

32 Arce 1984, p. 103, nos. 25-27; Conti 2004, nos. 80-82.

33 Milestones often bear the names and titles of successive emperors.

34 *ILS* 771; it will shortly become clear why I have highlighted all the occurrences of *maximus*.

Domini nostri imperatores Caesares Fl. Valentinianus pius felix maximus victor ac triumphator semper Augustus, pontifex maximus, Germanicus maximus, Alamannicus maximus, Francicus maximus, Gothicus maximus, tribuniciae potestatis VII, imperator VI, consul II, pater patriae, proconsul; et Fl. Valens pius felix maximus victor ac triumphator semper Augustus, pontifex maximus, Germanicus maximus, Alamannicus maximus, Francicus maximus, Gothicus maximus, tribuniciae potestatis VII, imperator VI, consul II, pater patriae, proconsul; et Fl. Gratianus pius felix maximus victor ac triumphator semper Augustus, pontifex maximus, Germanicus maximus, Alamannicus maximus, Francicus maximus, Gothicus maximus, tribuniciae potestatis III, imperator II, consul primum, Germanicus maximus, Alamannicus maximus, Francicus maximus, Gothicus maximus, tribuniciae potestatis III, imperator II, pater patriae, proconsul... pontem felicis nominis Gratiani in usum senatus ac populi Romani constitui dedicarique iusserunt.

This is the latest surviving dedication on which an emperor is styled *pontifex maximus*, in fact three emperors, one of them none other than Gratian. Pursuing his conviction, largely based on a misunderstanding of the growing epigraphic silence, that emperors had in effect ceased to be *pontifex maximus* even before the end of the third century, Rüpke found it hard to take this very precise and solid evidence at face value. “It cannot be stressed enough,” he argued, “that the only post-Julian evidence for the pontificate of emperors” concerns a bridge. That is to say, we are asked to believe that this is not really a reference to the office of *pontifex maximus* but, in the bridge-building context, an etymological play on words, “showing the extent to which it had already lost prestige...an attempt to ‘manage’ a title that, as a component of the imperial title, was seen as being as problematic as it was traditional”.³⁵

Quite apart from the sheer improbability of a pun on the imperial titulature in a public dedication, there are a number of more specific objections. There was no need to employ the full style in its entirety, complete with iteration numbers, just to make a pun on pons. A second dedication on the very same bridge uses the abbreviated style: *Gratiani triumphalis principis pontem...ddd. nnn. Valentinianus, Valens et Gratianus victores maximi ac perennes Augusti incohari, perfici dedicarique iusserunt*.³⁶ More important, the argument presupposes that *pontifex maximus* still had embarrassing pagan associations, best cloaked in some way. But if so, why not simply drop it, or (like almost such dedications) use the short style? If this is the latest surviving example of the full imperial titulature, it is also correct and regular in every detail, prominently displayed on a public monument in Rome, cast-iron evidence that all three emperors were laying claim to the title as late as 369.

³⁵ Rüpke 2008, 63a.

³⁶ ILS 772. Note too ILS 769 (365/367) from a slightly earlier bridge in Rome: *Imperatori Caesari domino nostro Fl. Valenti, maximo, pio, felici, victori ac triumphatori semper Augusto...Valentiniani pontis.*

It is regularly stated that, since Theodosius I is never attested with the title, he never bore it and that it must therefore (as Zosimus claims) have been Gratian who repudiated it. But since we have no Theodosian dedication that offers the full style, the argument is worthless. Indeed, if (as I argue below) Gratian’s action should be dated to 382, for the first three years of his reign Theodosius almost certainly did bear the title – and Valentinian II for the first eight years of his. In 2007 I cited a Byzantine text that describes “Theodosius the Great” as “priest as well as emperor”.³⁷

Most of those who have discussed the question have been unaware that we do in fact have two documents that offer the full style for three much later emperors, one eastern, the other western.³⁸ First a letter of Marcian and Valentinian III, dated to 452, preserved in the *Acta* of the Council of Chalcedon:³⁹

Imperatores Caesares Flavius Valentinianus, pontifex inclitus, Germanicus inclitus, Alamannicus inclitus, <Francicus inclitus>, Sarmaticus inclitus, tribuniciae potestatis vicies septies, imperator vicies septies, <consul septies> et Flavius Marcianus, pontifex inclitus, Alamannicus inclitus, Francicus inclitus, tribuniciae potestatis ter, imperator iterum, consul...

And second a letter of the emperor Anastasius addressed to the senate of Rome in 516:⁴⁰

Imperator Caesar Flavius Anastasius, pontifex inclitus, Germanicus inclitus, Francicus inclitus, Sarmaticus inclitus, tribunici<ae potestatis> XXV, imper<ator> XXV, consul tertio,⁴¹ pius, felix, victor ac triumphator semper Augustus, pater patriae, proconsul...

While none of the three emperors is styled *pontifex maximus*, all are nonetheless styled *pontifex*, not *maximus*, but an entirely new title, *pontifex inclitus*. No less important, every *maximus* we see in ILS 771 has been replaced by an *inclitus*⁴² in these two documents, not only the *maximus* in *pontifex maximus*, but the *maximus* added to all the victory titles. On this basis I argued in 2007 that Gratian did not in fact *repudiate* the office of *pontifex maximus*, but “redefined his priestly authority in less specific terms”.

³⁷ Pseudo-Gregory II (715-731), ed. J. Gouillard, “Aux origines de l’iconoclasme: le témoignage de Grégoire II”, *Travaux et Mémoires* (1968), 300-303, with Dagron, *Emperor and Priest* (Cambridge 2003), 162; Cameron 2007, 367.

³⁸ An honorable exception is Rösch 1978, 85-88 (cf. Stepper 2003, 219), who comes close to my own position, though ascribing the initiative to Theodosius rather than Gratian. I regret not doing justice to his work in 2007.

³⁹ ACO II. 3. 346. 38-347. 3; supplements courtesy of Tim Barnes, on the assumption (possibly unjustified) that the originals were correct in every detail.

⁴⁰ *Collectio Avellana* no. 113.

⁴¹ Anastasius’s third (and last) consulship actually fell in 507, and was apparently just repeated thereafter.

⁴² Manuscripts often offer *inclitus*, but for the sake of uniformity I write *inclitus* throughout.

Paschoud dismissed both documents as too “tenuous and late” to undermine the authority of Zosimus.⁴³ Yet Zosimus was an incompetent eastern historian, especially ill-informed about western affairs, writing more than a century after the event, while both these texts are official, contemporary documents, apart from one or two mechanical omissions and mistaken expansions of abbreviations correct down to the iteration numbers. The letter of Marcian correctly includes both members of the imperial college, with his senior (though younger) colleague Valentinian III correctly named first. One and quite possibly probably both are actually earlier than Zosimus.⁴⁴ Paschoud was unwilling to see any connection between Gratian supposedly repudiating the office of *pontifex maximus*, and his successors officially proclaiming themselves a different sort of *pontifex*.

Above all, he ignored the surprising (and revealing) substitution of *inclitus* for the *maximus* added to victory titles, first found for L. Verus. It has been argued that this innovation was a compensation for Verus not being able to share the supreme pontificate with his senior colleague Marcus,⁴⁵ which if true would be highly relevant to my argument. However that may be, an intensifying *maximus* soon became standard in victory titles,⁴⁶ however many there might be. The heading to the letter of Galerius quoted above offers no fewer than eight victory titles, every one followed by an intensifying *maximus*. Given the hundreds of examples of victory titles plus *maximus*, there can be no doubt that in the imperial letters of 452 and 516 *inclitus* was substituted throughout for the formerly standard *maximus*. This is especially conspicuous in the four victory titles each of Valentinian III and Marcian.

Constantine introduced yet another maximus into the imperial titulature, to mark his status as senior Augustus, after his name and before *pius felix...Augustus*. To quote just one out of more than a hundred examples, *domino nostro Constantino maximo pio felici victori ac triumphatori semper Augusto*.⁴⁷ This *maximus* is common but not invariable in the titulature of later emperors, sometimes illogically applied to the entire imperial college, as in *ILS 771*, to Gratian no less than Valentinian and Valens, in the sequence *pius felix maximus...Augustus*.

It is true that the letters of Marcian and Anastasius are 70 and 130 years respectively later than Gratian, but the substitution of *inclitus* for what we may style the Constantinian maximus can be traced back to within one year of Gratian's death. There are several early fifth-century examples: another letter of Valentinian III and Marcian quoted in the Chalcedon *Acta*, *Victores Valentinianus et Marcianus incliti triumphatores semper Augusti* (451); a letter of Theodosius II to Valentinian III (447), *domino Valentiniano inclito victori ac triumphatori semper Augusto*; and

43 “des éléments ténus et très postérieurs,” Paschoud 2006, 68.

44 That is to say, on Paschoud's own date for Zosimus: see his *Zosime, Histoire nouvelle* I2 (Paris 2000), xvi.

45 Hammond 1957, 53-54.

46 Kienast 1996, 40-41.

47 *CIL* VI 1142 = no. 243 in Gr̄newald's catalogue; see too his word index at pp. 266-68.

two letters of Honorius, *Victor Honorius inclitus triumphator semper Augustus* (419).⁴⁸ But the earliest by far are the numerous imperial apostrophes in the *Relationes* of Symmachus from 384: *domine imperator Valentiniane inclite victor ac triumphator semper Auguste*; *domini imperatores Theodosi et Arcadi incliti victores ac triumphatores semper Augusti*; and *domini imperatores Valentiniane Theodosi et Arcadi incliti victores ac triumphatores semper Augusti*. It has not, I think, been previously noticed⁴⁹ that in every case this *inclitus* replaces what would have been a *maximus* in documents drafted before Gratian.

While it is hard to imagine what reason anyone could have for changing the *maximus* in *maximus Augustus* or *Germanicus maximus*, it is obvious why it was thought high time to do something about *pontifex maximus*. Of course, it would have been far easier just to drop the title altogether – as indeed Gratian has hitherto been thought to have done. Instead it was decided to solve what must finally have been recognized as a problem by substituting a different epithet. The *maximus* had to go, but some new, uncontroversial limiting epithet had to be found. A Christian emperor could not call himself simply *pontifex*, which would (falsely) imply that he was a cleric. Why *inclitus* was chosen, an elevated, archaic word, found in epic and the historians, but with no documented history in formal imperial titulature, is anyone's guess.⁵⁰ The choice was presumably in itself unimportant, so long as the new epithet had no pagan associations.

It seems that Christian emperors from Gratian on, while evidently anxious to eliminate the pagan associations of *pontifex maximus*, were nonetheless reluctant to give up their traditional claim, going back to Augustus himself, to some sort of priestly authority. In the full style the formulae *maximus Augustus*, *pontifex maximus* and *Germanicus maximus*, *Sarmaticus maximus* etc. were uncomfortably close to each other. Even if *pontifex* was stripped of its *maximus*, there were enough left in the context to recall the now embarrassing combination. Better get rid of every maximus. Whence the global substitution of *inclitus* for maximus throughout. Perhaps the most intriguing feature of *inclitus* is how colourless and unspecific a substitution it seems for the emphatic superlative *maximus*. *Pontifex inclitus*, “famous priest,” is curiously unemphatic. Paschoud objected to my explanation that *inclitus* “does not have a very strong technical sense”. This is certainly true, but misses the point. That surely was the point: an entirely unspecific, uncontroversial epithet.

48 Theodosius II, *Novel* 2; ACO II. 4. 167. 1; *Collectio Avellana* nos. 35 and 37. R̄sch 1978, 162-170 quotes many more examples, going down to Heraclius, mostly Greek with *inclitus* rendered ἔνδοξος (see note 50).

49 Not even by myself in 2007.

50 For examples applied informally to emperors (*inclute princeps* and the like), see Cameron 2007, 373-74. For ἔνδοξος as the Greek equivalent for *inclitus* (e.g. Νικηταὶ Οὐαλεντινιανὸς καὶ Μαρκιανὸς ἔνδοξοι τροπαιοῦχοι ἀεὶ σεβαστοὶ, ACO II. 1. 10. 5; R̄sch 1978, 44, 167-70). Paradoxically, the superlative ἔνδοξότατος was applied to Caesars and lower officials (R̄sch 1978, 44; Bagnall and Worp 2004, 221).

It is hard to believe that the three substitutions were made independently of each other or at different times. We have seen that the substitution of the “Constantinian” *maximus* in the imperial titulature first appears in the *Relationes* of Symmachus, datable between June/July 384 and Jan. / Feb. 385, barely a year after Gratian’s death. The latest dedication to feature the traditional *maximus* throughout is *ILS* 771 of 369. Apparently something happened between 369 and 384/5 to cause the *pontifex maximus* title to become unacceptable. This brings us, finally, to Zosimus.

The chapter in question (4.36) is a fictionalized history of the supreme pontificate from King Numa to Gratian, ignoring the entire Republican period, glossing *pontifex* as γεφυροῦς (rather than Plutarch’s more accurate γεφυροποιός),⁵¹ and deriving it from a bridge in mythical Thessaly! I discussed the passage at length in 2007, arguing that it was “a tissue of ignorance and misinformation from start to finish”.⁵² Nonetheless most moderns passionately defend the passage as describing a key moment in the war against paganism. Yet nothing elsewhere in Zosimus suggests that Gratian pursued any such policy. And why should anyone have thought that repudiating a title born for three quarters of a century by Christian emperors would be (to quote Henry Chadwick) a “dramatic break with the pagan past”.⁵³

The passage is a digression from Zosimus’s main narrative. Half the chapter deals with pre-history, and the preceding chapter (4.35) has already recorded the defeat and death of Gratian. All that need concern us here are the two following sentences:

- 1) As soon as each [emperor] assumed supreme power, the priestly robe (ιερατικὴ στολή) was brought to him by the *pontifices* and he was styled *pontifex maximus*...
- 2) But when the *pontifices* brought the robe to Gratian *in the usual way* (κατὰ τὸ σὺνηθεῶς), he rejected their request, considering it impious for a Christian to wear such garb.

First of all, the “priestly robe” is Byzantine fiction, only otherwise known from a fanciful description by John the Lydian.⁵⁴ More important, Paschoud still clings to the traditional assumption that the second sentence describes an actual meeting, in Rome, between Gratian and pontiffs – supplying the desired clash between

51 Plutarch, *Numa Pompilius* 9. 65; for other Greek terms used for *pontifex*, Mason 1974, 115-116.

52 Cameron 2007, 343-354. Paschoud 2006, 68 reproaches me for exaggerating the shortcomings of the passage, disingenuously referring to Van Haepelen 2002 for a more sympathetic evaluation. But this is because she follows Paschoud’s now generally discredited claim that Zosimus’s main source Eunapius drew on a contemporary Latin source, the *Annales* of Nicomachus Flavianus (Van Haepelen 2002, 32, 162, 176-83).

53 Chadwick 1976, 114; countless similar verdicts might be cited.

54 Cameron 2007, 352-54; see too Stepper 2003, 216-19 and Rüpke 2008, 65, explanations improbable in themselves and presupposing the essential historicity of Zosimus.

Christian emperor and pagan aristocrats.⁵⁵ Paschoud dates this meeting to autumn 376, during what he claims to have been Gratian’s only visit to Rome. The fact is that Gratian *never* visited Rome.⁵⁶ In any case, the qualifying “in the usual way” shows that Zosimus does not even purport to be describing an actual encounter but is simply transferring to Gratian the meeting between pontiffs and emperor on his assumption of power described in the first sentence, evidently assuming that nothing had changed since the Julio-Claudians. But by Gratian’s day emperors had for centuries simply assumed the pontificate together with all their other titles on their proclamation, wherever they happened to be at the time.⁵⁷ Furthermore, since it had been at least a century since any emperor assumed power in Rome, it was certainly no longer “the usual way” for new emperors to be greeted by a deputation of pontiffs. With or without the mythical robe, the imperial pontificate had long ceased to be in the gift of the pontiffs – or even the senate.

Nothing could be more false than the following recent statement:⁵⁸

Gratian refused to take up the role of *pontifex maximus*, which meant [that] the state cults became separated from the formal government apparatus and that their correct observance was no longer officially connected to the prosperity of the state.

The fact that in the year 369 three Christian emperors, one of them a child, none of whom had ever visited Rome, *all* bore the title is proof enough that it was no longer a key link between pagan cults and “government apparatus”. Perhaps more important still, the fact that in the past century the emperors had paid no more than four or five brief visits to Rome meant that the college of pontiffs must have grown accustomed to handling its affairs without a *pontifex maximus*. Indeed, the more or less permanent absence of the imperial *pontifex* must have allowed the rank and file *pontifices*, and the other priestly colleges as well, to recover something of the independence they enjoyed in pre-Augustan times. Pagans of the generation of Symmachus cannot possibly have seen any advantage in having the emperor as *pontifex maximus*, whether pagan or Christian. A Christian emperor might be persuaded, as Constantius II was on a rare visit, to nominate a few nobles for the priestly colleges. But when Gratian removed the altar of victory and withdrew public subsidies from the cults, it was one of the rank and file pontiffs, Symmachus, who led the opposition against the imperial *pontifex maximus*!

55 As indeed did I in my earlier paper, Cameron 1968, 95-102; so too Cracco Ruggini 2012, 416.

56 Paschoud 2006, 68 and Paschoud 2012, 363, relying on an article by Girardet 2004, 109-44, which actually produces better arguments against a visit; see now decisively against, Kelly 2013, 393-397.

57 Kienast 1996, 27.

58 Demarsin 2011, 9-10.

Finally, it is clear from the combination of sentences 1 and 2 that Zosimus thought Gratian refused the title on his accession.⁵⁹ If he meant 367, when Gratian was proclaimed Augustus at the age of eight that is disproved by *ILS* 771 of 369. If he meant 375 when he took over the reins of power on the death of Valentinian I that is disproved by two passages of Ausonius's *Gratiarum Actio* for his consulship. Long taken as proof that Gratian was still *pontifex maximus* when the speech was delivered in the second half of 379, both passages have been implausibly reinterpreted by Paschoud and Van Haepere.

First § 35:

*unus in ore omnium Gratianus, potestate **imperator**, virtute **victor**, **Augustus** sanctitate, **pontifex** religione, indulgentia **pater**, aetate **filii**, **pietate** utrumque.*

One name is on the lips of all, Gratian: in virtue of his power, **Emperor**; of his courage, **Victor**; of his sanctity, **Augustus**; of his devotion, **Pontifex**; of his tenderness, **Father**; of his age, Son; of his **Piety**, both.

The words in bold type are all elements of the long form of the imperial titulature (with *pater* implying *pater patriae*, and *pietate* implying *pious*). That Ausonius did indeed have Gratian's official titulature in mind is confirmed by the fact that in § 9 he praises him as *Germanicus*, *Alamannicus* and *Sarmaticus*, the first two titles confirmed by *ILS* 771 of 369, the last otherwise undocumented and presumably acquired later, in commemoration (it seems) of a victory over the Sarmatians actually won by Theodosius.⁶⁰ That is to say, Ausonius must have had in front of him another, slightly later dedication to or letter from Gratian in the full style, perhaps the very letter from which he quotes in § 51. Why would Ausonius have included *pontifex* to illustrate Gratian's qualities if it were no longer part of the current imperial titulature?

Second, §§ 41-42:

comitia consulatus mei armatus exerces. **tributa** ista quod in urbe Sirmio geruntur, an, ut quod in procinctu, **centuriata** dicentur? an ut quondam **pontificalia** vocabuntur, sine arbitrio multitudinis sacerdotum tracta collegio? sic potius, sic vocentur quae tu **pontifex maximus deo participatus** habuisti.

You hold the elections for my consulship under arms. Are they elections of the *comitia tributa* because they were held in Sirmium? Or the *comitia centuriata* because they were held on active service? Or what used to be called pontifical elections, handled in the priestly college without reference to the people's will. That would be best, let the elections be so called that you held as *pontifex maximus* and a participator in the designs of God.

⁵⁹ Paschoud 2012, 363 claims that Zosimus "does not say anything of the sort". Not directly and explicitly, perhaps, but "in the usual way" clearly refers back to "as soon as each assumed supreme power", obviously meaning on his accession.

⁶⁰ So Errington 1996, 448-450.

Ausonius here directly styles Gratian *pontifex maximus*, usually taken as proof positive that he had not yet repudiated the title by late 379. Yet according to Paschoud,⁶¹

when the Christian Ausonius addressed the Christian Gratian, it is clear that the *religio* referred to was the Christian religion, the deity that of the Christians. Ausonius flattered a Christian emperor in making him a pontiff, *even supreme pontiff of the new religion, shortly after the moment when he had ceased to be pontifex maximus of the old religion* (my italics).

No one disputes that Gratian and Ausonius were Christians. Indeed Ausonius goes on to quote (§ 51) from a personal letter in which Gratian says that he followed the prompting of God himself – obviously the Christian God – in nominating Ausonius. Yet there are nonetheless serious problems with this interpretation. Paschoud, like Van Haepere, makes much of the fact that the term *pontifex* had long been applied to Christian bishops. There are indeed scores of examples.⁶² It was one thing to flatter a Christian emperor by praising his piety, which Ausonius does at 42, 63, and 66. But Ausonius goes much further than this. Nor does he just compare Gratian to a priest. Rather he states that he is a priest. In Christian terms this was not only untrue, but would have horrified the church. Fifth-century popes indignantly rejected the idea of an emperor claiming to be a priest.⁶³

Moreover Ausonius calls Gratian precisely *pontifex maximus*, and no Christian bishop is so styled before the Renaissance.⁶⁴ As Kajanto put it "*Pontifex maximus*, in contrast to simple *pontifex*, was...clearly avoided in Christian nomenclature". It is surely inconceivable that Ausonius would have been tactless enough to call Gratian *pontifex maximus* after he had repudiated the title as "impious for a Christian". The true explanation must be that Ausonius was writing (a) when Gratian still bore the title; and (b), more importantly, *before* imperial use of this originally pagan title became controversial. Gratian's full official style in 379 must still have included the title *pontifex maximus*, as we know it did ten years earlier in 369 (*ILS* 771). A few pages later Ausonius does compare Gratian to a priest, but *not* to a Christian priest (§ 66):

*In cibis autem cuius **sacerdotis** abstinentior caerimonia? ... aperto conclavis tui non sanctorum ara **vestalis**, non **pontificis** cubile castius nec pulvinar **flaminis** tam pudicum.*

In the matter of food, which priest's ritual was more self-denying? ... The altar of Vesta is not more hallowed than the privacy of your bed-chamber, the bed of a *pontifex* is not more chaste, the couch of a *flamen* is not more pure.

⁶¹ Paschoud 1975, Ch. 3; Paschoud 2012, 363.

⁶² Assembled by Van Haepere 2003, 137-159.

⁶³ Texts cited by Cameron 2007, ignored by Paschoud.

⁶⁴ Kajanto 1981, 37-51 (quotation from p. 45).

Sandwiched between *Vestales* and *flamines*, this *pontifex* at any rate can only be a pagan *pontifex*. Since Vestals were required to be virgins, the first comparison is understandable, if still somewhat surprising in a Christian writer. For example Mamertinus on Julian (*Iectulus... Vestalium toris purior*, *Pan. Lat.* iii. 13. 3). But there was no obligation on pontiffs to be chaste, and it was only images of the gods, not *flamines*, who reclined on pulvinars. Yet however poorly he understood its details, Ausonius is manifestly drawing here on the imagery of pagan cult.

To look at the question from a more literary point of view, what can have prompted the bizarre antiquarian comparison of Ausonius's appointment as consul to the pontifical elections of long ago? At § 13 Ausonius boasts that he had not been obliged to undergo the ordeal of the old-time election process, the canvassing, bribery, handshaking and so forth, a commonplace of the imperial *gratiarum actio*. There are similar developments in Mamertinus's *gratiarum actio* to Julian in 362 (*Panegyrici Latini* 3.19.1) and Symmachus's speech on behalf of his father, who died consul designate in 376 (*Oratio* 4.7). To contrast receiving the consulship as a gift from the emperor with the corruption and bustle of republican elections at least made sense in a consular *gratiarum actio*, but where do Ausonius's *pontifical* elections come from? Once again, the only plausible explanation is that Gratian still actually bore the title *pontifex maximus*. This must be what gave Ausonius the idea of adding this particular embellishment to the motif of old-style consular elections that he found in Mamertinus and Symmachus, which then led him to the even more extravagant comparison with Vestals and *flamines*.

So every detail in Zosimus's account of Gratian's supposed repudiation of the supreme pontificate is false. Nonetheless, behind this garbled story must lie some confrontation that drew attention to the pagan origin of what had for centuries been an uncontroversial imperial title. Christian emperors had borne the title *pontifex maximus* for nearly sixty years without apparently causing a stir among the faithful. There is no hint of any sort of protest before Zosimus. The church historian Eusebius quotes the proclamation ending persecution of Christians issued under the names of Galerius, Constantine and Licinius, giving Constantine the title *pontifex maximus* without comment, ἀρχιερεὺς μέγιστος in what he implies is his own Greek translation.⁶⁵

So the date Gratian modified (rather than repudiated) his pontifical title must fall between 379 (the date of Ausonius's *gratiarum actio*) and his death in 383. The obvious solution is 382 and the occasion the controversy over the removal of the altar of Victory from the senate house and the withdrawal of public subsidies from the Roman cults. It is easy to believe that in the course of this controversy someone drew attention to the embarrassing fact that, in his capacity as *pontifex maximus*, the emperor was still technically head of the Roman cults. This date and occasion have (of course) been suggested before, but on the assumption that rejection of the pontifical title was an integral, deliberate and provocative part of

⁶⁵ Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 8.17.3-5; improved text in Barnes 1982, 22-23.

a campaign against paganism.⁶⁶ I suggest rather that it was an unanticipated and inconspicuous consequence of the affair. The title had been borne by Christian emperors for so long that no one can have believed that it any longer had any real pagan content. Least of all in 382, given the open conflict between rank-and-file *pontifices* and imperial *pontifex*. Furthermore the full style was now so seldom used that few outside the administration were perhaps even aware that *pontifex maximus* remained an element in the emperor's full titulature.

In the past it used to be thought that it was Julian's flaunting of the title in connection with his pagan revival that led Gratian to refuse it. Tempting as this might seem, it fails to explain why Julian's Christian successors, Jovian, Valentinian, Valens and indeed Gratian himself, continued to bear the title for another twenty years.⁶⁷ Why did they keep a title one might have thought irretrievably tainted by Julian's excesses? Why indeed did Constantine, the first Christian emperor, not at once drop the title? It cannot be argued that he unthinkingly perpetuated a fossilized titulature. Constantine seems in fact to have taken a keen interest in his official titulature, since he made no fewer than three modifications in the traditional litany of titles: the *maximus* before Augustus to indicate that he was senior Augustus, and the addition of *invictus* and *triumphator*.⁶⁸ But *pontifex maximus* he left alone. I think we are bound to conclude that, by Constantine's day, if not long before, the scope of the office was no longer thought to be confined to the traditional cults of Rome.

Some have seen the actual priestly functions of the imperial *pontifex* as essentially confined to the meetings of the Roman colleges and the cults of Rome. By the third century the combination of "die Romferne" and the increasing isolation and sacralization of the emperor are held to have rendered this limited power less useful to him. This is why Rüpke made so much of the supposed disappearance of the title from the imperial titulature. It is true that pontifical law was not supposed to extend beyond Italy. But that does not mean that the power of the imperial *pontifex* was limited to Italy.

Beginning already with Augustus, emperors were regularly consulted and gave rulings on non-Roman cults. With dedications all over the Roman world proclaiming him *pontifex maximus*, it is hardly surprising that provincials saw the emperor as the final court of appeal on such matters. Suetonius describes Augustus "sitting in judgment of a case at Rome" involving the privileges of Eleusinian priests; when issues of secrecy came up, he dismissed his *consilium* and heard the disputants in private. Marcus too decided disputes about eligibility for Eleusinian priesthods, far from both Rome and Athens, at Sirmium.⁶⁹ In earlier times such disputes had been

⁶⁶ So Cameron 1968.

⁶⁷ There is no surviving evidence for Jovian (a gap that could be filled by a single dedication in the full style), but if he had rejected the title, it is surely inconceivable that the Christian Valentinian would have restored it.

⁶⁸ Grünwald 1990, 87, 136, 147 and *passim*.

⁶⁹ Suetonius, *Augustus* 93; Jones 1971, 166-167.

settled in the court of the *basileus archon* at Athens.⁷⁰ Evidently Athenian grandees with Roman connections saw the imperial *pontifex* as a more satisfactory solution to their disputes.

The emperors themselves probably could not have said which of their many hats they were wearing when they gave this or that ruling, dealing as they did with petitions of all sorts from all over the Roman world. But an entire large category of these petitions is concerned with temples, priesthoods and festivals.⁷¹ Moreover a number of emperors – Hadrian is only the best documented case – held eponymous priesthoods and sponsored the building or restoration of temples and maintenance of festivals in many cities, especially in the eastern provinces. As Mary Boatwright put it, “as local priest [the emperor] replicated *in situ* his position as *pontifex maximus* and the accumulator of multiple religious positions in Rome”.⁷²

Historically by far the most important area in which the imperial *pontifex* extended his judicial purview was disputes between Christians. Notoriously Constantine’s first foray into Christian territory was in response to a petition to adjudicate a dispute between Donatists and Catholics in North Africa. Forty years earlier the pagan emperor Aurelian adjudicated a dispute between Paul, bishop of Antioch, and the faction that had deposed him. Aurelian also introduced what was probably an eastern cult of the Sun into Rome, with a splendid temple and a new college of priests, styled *pontifices solis*. The old college of pontiffs was thereafter known as *pontifices maiores*. That is to say, unlike Elagabalus, Aurelian incorporated the priests of his new eastern deity within the framework of the existing, centuries-old priestly colleges of Rome, under his supervision as *pontifex maximus*.⁷³

It is unrealistic to attempt to identify the actual powers available to an all-powerful ruler in any given capacity. Did Augustus think he was acting as *pontifex maximus* when he decided on the privileges of Eleusinian priesthoods? But one thing is surely clear: the scope of the office that he passed down to his successors was already radically different from and more all-embracing than the one held even by his adoptive father. As Dio put it, “by virtue of being consecrated in all the priesthoods, and of their right to bestow most of those positions on others... [the emperors] hold in their hands supreme authority over all matters both profane and sacred” (53.17.8). Given the all-inclusiveness of the emphatic but conveniently unspecific *maximus*, there was no reason why emperors and subjects alike should not think that the field covered by a *pontifex maximus* included Christianity.

“It must in effect have been in his capacity as *pontifex maximus*”, I wrote in 2007, “that Constantine and his Christian successors legislated about church affairs, endowed churches and convoked councils to deliberate church doctrine”. So too

⁷⁰ Rhodes 1981, 636-637.

⁷¹ See the section “Temples, Priesthoods and Festivals” in Millar 1977, 447-56.

⁷² Sherk 1993, 285-288; Boatwright 2000, 57-72 and 127-143; quotation p. 58. There is a particularly large dossier of imperial letters at Delphi concerning festivals and the oracle (Millar 1977, 450-451).

⁷³ Watson 1999, 188-198.

some earlier scholars.⁷⁴ “Must” certainly goes too far, and I now doubt whether Constantine appealed to any special or specific powers inherent in the office. Similarly while much has been made of Julian’s appeal to his status as *pontifex maximus*, it should be noted that no part of his pagan program owed anything to any actual powers or functions of the *pontifex maximus*. Julian never visited Rome, and probably knew very little about the nature and competence of the Roman priestly colleges. But given Constantine’s desire to bring unity to the new faith he had chosen and Julian’s to revive the worship of the old gods he thought neglected, both surely found some personal support or justification in the fact that their imperial title included priestly oversight, however vaguely defined, of their realm.

Another perspective may be no less important. Up till Constantine it is unlikely that anyone except the unsuccessful litigant objected to emperors deciding cases about priesthoods, temples or festivals. But once an emperor began taking sides in the doctrinal controversies of the church, his authority to do so at once became an issue. Whether or not any Christian emperor explicitly relied on the title when convoking councils or deposing bishops, it may have been thought that to abandon it would weaken his claim to play the major role in Church affairs that was Constantine’s fateful legacy to his successors. Whence the need to modify rather than abandon the title. If this is correct, the pontifical title had perhaps already lost exclusively pagan connotations even before Julian’s attempted pagan revival.

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⁷⁴ Cameron 2007, 360, with bibliography.

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