

HUNC DEUM QUIS CREDET?
SOME CONSIDERATIONS ON THE BELIEF IN THE DIVINITY OF EMPERORS

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Abstract

There are abundant examples of negative assessments of cultic honors to Roman emperors by nineteenth- and twentieth-century researchers. In the minds of historians raised in modern societies, in which monotheistic Abrahamic religions usually reign supreme, this is a completely understandable a priori approach; nevertheless, it hinders a correct understanding of Roman society in antiquity. This paper examines the need to provide a complex answer to the question of whether the inhabitants of the Roman world really believed in the divinity of their rulers. A complex answer to the question can only emerge from a historical contextualization of the phenomenon under analysis, an examination of the imperial cult within the wider changes that were taking place in Roman religion at the time, and application of the necessary empathetic approach.

Keywords: imperial cult, Roman religion, cultic honors, divinity, belief.

The news about the outcome of the sea-battle at Actium was of course unexpected. But there's no need for us to draft a new proclamation. The name's the only thing that has to be changed. There, in the concluding lines, instead of: "Having freed the Romans from Octavius, that disaster; that parody of a Caesar," we'll substitute: "Having freed the Romans from Antony, that disaster. . ."
The whole text fits very nicely.

In a Township of Asia Minor, C. Cavafy (1926, trad. G. Barbanis)

The famous poem by Cavafy that prefaces this article evokes the atmosphere that probably enveloped the award of honors by Greek cities to powerful Roman generals in the latter days of the Republic. This tradition drew on earlier Hellenistic practices, but declined under Augustus, ending what could be termed a republican cycle during which the various Roman oligarchs, who had been sent to the East or had fought there for control of the Mediterranean, received a wide range of accolades and honors. The highest of these were the cultic honors, which after Augustus' accession to power were reserved almost exclusively for himself and other members of the imperial household. Rituals of this kind formed the backbone of the diverse set of practices that historiography calls "the imperial cult."¹

Such practices were generally regarded negatively not only by ancient Christian, Jewish and pagan writers, but also by nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholars engaged in their study. Notable among the classics is Tacitus' well-known evaluation of the Empire, which to varying degrees also surfaces in Suetonius and Dio, who subscribe to the notion that an emperor who strived to promote his cult was a bad emperor.²

There are abundant examples of negative assessments of cultic honors by nineteenth- and twentieth-century researchers. This negative view is also apparent in Cavafy's poem at the beginning of the article. In the minds of historians—and poets—raised in modern societies, in which monotheistic Abrahamic religions usually reign supreme, this is a completely understandable *a priori* approach; nevertheless, it hinders a correct understanding of Roman society in antiquity. Especially notable among the negative voices is that of Dodds, who associated the long decline of traditional Greek religion in the Hellenistic period with the parallel expansion of rendering divine cult to individuals: "When the old gods withdraw, the empty thrones cry out for a successor, and with good management, or even without management, almost any perishable bag of bones may be hoisted into the vacant seat."³ Likewise, Nock's conceptualization of the cult of rulers as a question of status rather than of worship was similarly influential: "Dedications and acts of devotion to deified rulers, it is yet clear that they are all of the nature of homage and not worship in the full sense, for worship implies the expectation of blessing to be mediated in a supernatural way."⁴ Later, other renowned researchers such as Bowersock linked the divine honors granted to rulers with the field of diplomacy:

The East had grown accustomed to the worship of men and women. Hellenistic monarchs and rich benefactors had been accorded cults as tokens of gratitude and of political adhesion. There were many forms and titles of honor, and not all of them carried imputations of divinity . . . The highest honor was worship, disclosing little about the religious life of the Hellenic peoples but much about their ways of diplomacy.⁵

¹ There is a vast literature on the imperial cult. See recent articles by Alarcón Hernández (2014, 2019) for an extensive bibliography. On the decline in cultic honors under Augustus, see Lozano – Muñoz, forthcoming.

² There is a substantial body of literature on the assessment that historians and other ancient writers have made of the imperial cult. For a recent example, see Madsen 2016.

³ Dodds 1951, 242.

⁴ Nock 1934, 481–482.

⁵ Bowersock 1965, 112.

Thus, the worship of individuals was generally viewed as being political, worldly and often false or insincere. Even when it was considered a sincere practice, as Veyne did, it was rarely conceded any religious significance:

Une fête patriotique et monarchique, même si elle commence par un sacrifice offert à la divinité du roi, est-elle de la religion au même sens qu'une prière adressée à un dieu dans un moment d'effusion ou qu'un ex-voto promis à un dieu dans un moment de désespoir? Nous n'insinuons pas que le culte monarchique était insincère: rien de plus sincère aussi que le culte du drapeau soit un sentiment intense, ce n'est pas un sentiment religieux.⁶

A partially associated interpretation is the idea that increasing access to divinity implied that these became minor honors of little importance. Perhaps the author who best expounded this line of thought was Mussies in his paper "Identification and Self-Identification of Gods in Classical and Hellenistic Times," when he stated that "generally speaking one may say that in Antiquity anyone who did something that was not understood or that was considered miraculous ran the risk of being looked upon as a god."⁷

Such ideas were challenged by the conclusions Hopkins reached in his book *Conquerors and Slaves*, published in 1978, and subsequently by Price (1984) in his book *Rituals and Power*, published a few years later. These books spurred recognition of the idea that the practice of divine worship of individuals should be understood as a manifestation, in the religious sphere, of more far-reaching changes that first emerged in Greek communities but subsequently spread to all Mediterranean communities as they came under the power of Rome. By happy coincidence, it was in this very same journal that the resulting interpretative shift was first termed the "new paradigm," by Gnoli and Muccioli.⁸

Thus, it is now possible to stress the importance of the Hellenistic ruler cult and its subsequent persistence as the imperial cult, in line with Alföldy's perhaps somewhat exaggerated claim that it was "the most important type of worship,"⁹ and even to turn the tables completely by asking Woolf's question: "The old problem of 'how did Romans and Greeks really come to accept a human being as a god?' is to be replaced with the question 'how did the ancient Mediterranean manage without divine kings for so much of the last millennium BCE?'"¹⁰ Indeed, as suggested by Al-Azmeh in his interesting study on the mediaeval variants of monotheistic kingship: "Sacral kingship was a constant motif in all royalist and imperial arrangements that spanned the entire oecumenical expanse of Eurasia from the very dawn of recorded history until modern times, a vast perspective in which the primitive republicanist image of Rome or of Athens seems aberrant, paltry and inconsequential, if indeed this image of republicanist purity, of the splendid childhood of rational political man, has any historical credibility apart from Jacobin and proto-Jacobin imaginings."¹¹

⁶ Veyne 1976, 561.

⁷ Mussies 1988, 2.

⁸ Gnoli – Muccioli 2014, 21.

⁹ Alföldy 1996, 255.

¹⁰ Woolf 2008, 243.

¹¹ Al-Azmeh 2004, 10. Continuing with this line of thought and the shift in the approach to the cult of rulers in the Mediterranean, as exemplified here by Woolf and Al-Azmeh, it is fascinating to resurrect Hocart's

I. To believe or not to believe: that is the question

As noted above, the work by Hopkins and, most especially, Price, brought about a definitive transformation in the way in which the cult of rulers in the Greco-Roman Mediterranean was interpreted and viewed. Nevertheless, it also is worth noting that, in terms of belief in the divinity of emperors—the subject of study here—Price reached what we consider to be unsatisfactory conclusions that, through various paths of reasoning, echoed the answers that historians had been giving to the question of whether the inhabitants of the Roman world really believed in the divinity of their rulers. Indeed, in line with the negative assessment of the imperial cult noted earlier, the most common response to this question has been a more or less categorical denial. Again, Veyne is one of the best examples because he maintained that “personne, fût-ce le plus primitif des primitifs ou le dernier sujet des pharaons, n’a jamais cru que son souverain était un dieu.”¹² Earlier authors such as Scott preferred to limit the possibility of such belief to the realm of the uneducated, barbarians and Orientals:

Our evidence seems to point to the existence of a reading public which had no genuine religious faith in the ruler cult and we can hardly be mistaken in thinking that the most cultivated Greeks and Romans had as much belief in the apotheosis of a ruler as the same educated class would have today . . . true religious belief in the divinity of the king or emperor is to be sought among the more ignorant lower classes, especially among barbarian people and in the eastern provinces of Roman Empire.¹³

Price has argued that it is misguided to ask about belief in the divinity of rulers, contending that the concept of “belief” has clear Christian connotations: “‘Belief’ as a religious term is profoundly Christian in its implications.”¹⁴ Consequently, to ask about the Greeks’ true beliefs is “implicitly Christianizing,”¹⁵ and he thus left the question unanswered. As will be discussed below, Price’s view raises problems; nevertheless, many authors have embraced his postulates. Thus, Gradel has claimed that “pre-Christian *religio* was not concerned with inward, personal virtues, such as belief, but with outward behavior and attitude; in other words, with observance rather than faith, and with action rather than feeling.”¹⁶

However, there have also been critical voices. In particular, Lozano and Versnel, in 2010 and 2011 respectively, disagreed with the attempt to divorce belief completely from the sphere of Greco-Roman religion. In *Coping with the Gods*, Versnel argues that the centrality of ritual action that characterized classical religion should not be interpreted as an absence of belief in pagan gods: “How does one communicate with divine beings through prayer, gift-giving, and attributing them a full scale of anthropomorphic (and

(1927, 7) powerful and not unwarranted argument that “the earliest known religion is a belief in the divinity of kings . . . man appears to us worshipping gods and their earthly representatives, namely kings. We have no right, in the present state of our knowledge, to assert that the worship of gods preceded that of kings; we do not know. Perhaps there never were any gods without kings, or kings without gods.”

¹² Veyne 1976, 561. See also Veyne 2005, 69. According to a scholar of the stature of Tondriau (1948), belief in the deification of a human being was not possible.

¹³ Scott 1932, 328.

¹⁴ Price 1984, 11.

¹⁵ Price 1984, 11.

¹⁶ Gradel 2002, 4.

allomorphic) features . . . *without* believing (that is taking as true) that these beings exist (in whatever sense of the word ‘exist’)?”¹⁷ As we have indicated elsewhere, we agree with this view.¹⁸ We believe that the answer to the question of whether the inhabitants of the Mediterranean world believed in the divinity of the emperors should be sought from an affirmative rather than negative baseline. The social agreement was that gods existed and should be honored and respected; the contrary seems absurd. This is precisely why emperors were deified, because their divinity or consideration as divine made powerful sense; it explained the position that rulers occupied in the world and, in turn, served to consolidate that same position and power. We do not agree that deification became so commonplace that anyone could be considered a god, nor that deification or the bestowal of cultic honors lost all importance and meaning as a result of overuse. This is not to say, however, that the answer to the question posed here is a simple “yes” universally applied to all Romans and the peoples subject to them. As will be seen in the next section, the answer is more nuanced than that, but can only be reached from an affirmative baseline. We are pleased to note that, in his above-mentioned book, Versnel is even firmer on this subject: “It is only at this point that we now may safely conclude that the question ‘did the Greeks believe in gods’ is intrinsically absurd, but if for the sake of argument taken seriously (and taken in its ‘low intensity’ sense), should be answered in the positive.”¹⁹

In support of our assertion that the question of whether the Romans believed in the divinity of their rulers is a valid enquiry, and before providing a more complex answer, we would like to highlight some of the ancient sources which evidence that there was indeed reflection in antiquity on belief in the divinity of emperors, as well as uncertainty, opposition and indifference. Admittedly, the sources are not many, but we believe that they are significant and help to better frame the thesis of this article.

Notable among these sources is Suetonius’ comment on why Julius Caesar was deified. He claimed that Julius was included among the gods by agreement of the Senate and by the belief of the people (*in deorum numerum relatus est, non ore modo decernentium sed et persuasione volgi*) (Suet. *Iul.* 88). As we have indicated elsewhere, the creation of gods in the ancient world, as with the creation of saints today, required the official sanction of the competent institution, which in the case of Rome in Caesar’s time was the Senate. This official sanction was simpler and more successful when accompanied by a more or less widespread belief in the divine nature of the new member of the Pantheon. This same consideration in Suetonius is also observed in Pliny the Younger’s comments in relation to Trajan and the lengthy process of imperial deifications that had preceded him. The paragraph in question deserves to be quoted at length:

Quem tu lacrimis primum, ita ut filium decuit, mox templis honestasti, non imitatus illos qui hoc idem sed alia mente fecerunt. Dicavit caelo Tiberius Augustum, sed ut maiestatis crimen induceret; Claudium Nero, sed ut irriteret; Vespasianum Titus, Domitianus Titum, sed ille ut dei filius, hic ut frater videretur. Tu sideribus patrem intulisti non ad metum civium, non in contumeliam numinum,

¹⁷ Versnel 2011, 552.

¹⁸ Lozano 2010, 37–68.

¹⁹ Versnel 2011, 559.

non in honorem tuum, sed quia deum credis. Minus hoc est, cum fit ab iis qui et sese deos putant. Sed licet illum aris pulvinaribus flamine colas, non alio magis tamen deum et facis et probas, quam quod ipse talis es. In principe enim qui electo successore fato concessit, una itemque certissima divinitatis fides est bonus successor (Plin. Pan. 11.1–3).

He received the proper honors from you [Trajan], first the tears which every son should shed, then the temples you raised to him. Others have done the same, but with different intent; Tiberius deified Augustus, but his purpose was to introduce the charge of high treason; Nero had done the same for Claudius in a spirit of mockery; Titus had similarly honored Vespasian and Domitian Titus, but only for one to be thought the son and the other the brother of a god. You gave your father his place among the stars with no thought of terrorizing your subjects, of bringing the gods into disrepute, or of gaining reflected glory, but simply because you thought he was a god. This is an honor which means less when it is paid by men who believe themselves to be equally divine; unlike you, who set up his cult with altars, couches and a priest, yet created and proved his godhead still more by being the man you are. For there is no more certain proof of divinity in a ruler who has chosen his successor before he met his end than the worthiness of his choice.

Another example which supports our claim that the question of belief in the imperial cult is a valid enquiry comes from the genre of satire; the *Apocolocyntosis*, a text attributed to Seneca²⁰ which relates the misadventures of the Emperor Claudius on reaching heaven. In a statement so clear that we thought it fitting to quote it in the title of this article, Augustus, critical of the inclusion of the new emperor, deified on earth, exclaimed²¹: “Is this he you want now to make a god? Look at his body, born under the wrath of heaven! In fine, let him say as many as three words quickly, and he may have me for a slave. God! Who will worship this god, who will believe him? While you make gods of such as he, no one will believe you to be gods.”²²

Other sources could be cited, but in our view, this brief selection serves to prove our case. Below, we examine the need to provide a complex answer to the question “*Hunc deum quis credet?*”

II. Difficult questions, complex answers: an alternative approach to belief in the Roman emperors’ divinity

In the introduction to his book *A World Full of Gods*, Hopkins cautions that “inevitably our whole language of understanding and interpretation is deeply influenced by the modern world, and who we are in it.”²³ This is particularly apposite when analyzing the history of religion, because “religious history is inevitably affected by what writers, and their

²⁰ On the authorship of this text, see Marti 1952.

²¹ On the apotheosis ceremony, see Price 1987; Arce 1988. On the importance of the theatricality of imperial funerals, see D’Ambra, 2010; Arce 2010.

²² Sen. *Apocol.* 11: *Hunc nunc deum facere vultis? Videte corpus eius dis iratis natum. Ad summam, tria verba cito dicat, et servum me ducat. Hunc deum quis colet? Quis credet? Dum tales deos facitis, nemo vos deos esse credet.*

²³ Hopkins 1999, 2.

readers, believe.”²⁴ In this respect, Alvar has observed that humans have always found it easier to accommodate the core notions and values of the religion in which they have been socialized—however, surprising and irrational those ideas may be—than the tenets of other contemporary or past faiths. Thus, he reports that he never ceases to be amazed by the way in which “cada cultura tiene por buena su propia construcción del universo irreal de las fantasías divinas y tiene por mala la construcción de sus propios vecinos. Es difícil determinar qué es necesario establecer para que se tome la ideación propia con la misma capacidad crítica que la ajena.”²⁵ Indeed, studies on the imperial cult are a good example of this resistance to accepting other people’s ideas. As noted at the beginning, the difficulty in answering the question of belief in the divinity of emperors, or rejection of the very enquiry, is largely the result of the baseline ideas, limitations, obstinacy and sometimes even prejudices of modern researchers. However, as Hopkins contends, “history is, or should be, a subtle combination of empathic imagination and critical analysis.”²⁶

Below, we present a series of reflections that contextualize the question of belief in the divinity of emperors and which, in our opinion, yield a more accurate and complex answer.²⁷ First, we discuss how the complexity of the question of belief in the new imperial gods inevitably requires complex answers from historians. Second, we explore the cultic honors that certain cities wished to bestow on the emperors and the latter’s varying attitudes towards these divine honors. Third, we analyze the diversity of manifestations of the imperial cult according to their insertion within existing civic cults and the varying attitudes of participants. Together, these three themes suggest that a complex answer to the question can only emerge from a historical contextualization of the phenomenon under analysis, an examination of the imperial cult within the wider changes that were taking place in Roman religion at the time, and application of the necessary empathetic approach proposed by Hopkins and Alvar.

II.1. *Historians*

The historiographic literature on imperial worship abounds in reflections on the belief—or rather disbelief—of the inhabitants of the Roman Empire in the divine nature of the emperors, and historians have frequently reached categorical and unequivocal conclusions. However, this question cannot be answered simply in the affirmative or negative, because the imperial cult emerged in a particular context and underwent a series of changes throughout the Principate. Among other factors, changes are documented in the way in which this new cultic practice was organized, depending on the emperors, the provincial and local elites and the city or region in question. Nor did devotees respond identically to the cult. As Friesen has noted: “How would elites and sub-elites assess

²⁴ Hopkins 1999, 2.

²⁵ Alvar Ezquerro 2010, 9.

²⁶ Hopkins 1999, 2.

²⁷ These reflections are in addition to and build on those we raised earlier in the conferences organized by the Sarus, *Apoteosis, de lo humano a lo divino: la figura de los Héroes* at University of Sevilla, publication of which is forthcoming.

these institutions? Male and female? Old and young? Well-fed and hungry? Slave, freed, and freeborn? Healthy and disabled? The privileged and the exploited?"²⁸ The formulation of such questions in relation to any society would necessarily yield a multiplicity of answers; thus, rather than oversimplifying the characteristic and fundamental complexity of their object of analysis, historians should instead seek to inform, describe and portray ancient societies from various analytical perspectives.

Despite early reluctance to explore the emotions, feelings and heightened states of mind aroused by cults, recent approaches to ancient religion through *Lived Religion* have highlighted the important role played by the body and sensory organs in the reproduction of belief systems, in the construction of meanings and in shaping religious identity through experience and action.²⁹ Some years ago, Scheid (2005) pithily indicated the inseparable relationship between ritual action and belief with his maxim: *quand faire, c'est croire*. Human perceptions and experiences of the world (i.e. communication between humans and the external world) are determined by social, cultural and ambient impacts; consequently, the context of such communication is decisive.³⁰ In this respect, imperial cult festivals represented the ideal context in which an appeal to the participants' senses could be used as a tool for transmitting meanings and an explanation of the world.³¹ Ritual acts excite devotees' senses, generating unforgettable religious experiences and creating particular religious discourses; in our case, the pre-eminence of the imperial *domus* in accordance with its divine nature. Thus, the senses occupy a central position in structuring religious belief, because there is a clear relationship between ritual and belief. In *Coping with the Gods*, Versnel³² has drawn attention to the importance of ritual in the cult of rulers, as it fosters participants' belief in what they observe; according to their schemes of perception, these may or may not accept the fiction evoked by such a practice.

This complexity explains why the categorical answers given by historians are unconvincing, as in the case where a clear difference is established between the skepticism of a social elite, as opposed to the credulity of groups belonging to lower social strata.³³ It is for this reason that it is difficult to accept Bowersock's³⁴ assertion that not a single educated Roman believed in the divine status of a living emperor, but could conceive of his deification after death. His contention is misguided both because it encompasses all upper class Romans in a single simple answer—yes/no—and because it shows a propensity to accept an ideation similar to one's own—deification after death—but not an ancient construct so foreign to contemporary Western societies as deification during an individual's

²⁸ Friesen 2011, 25.

²⁹ Raja – Rüpke 2015; Rüpke 2016; Albrecht *et al.* 2018; Gasparini *et al.* 2020.

³⁰ According to the body-environment approach, the physical body is necessary for cognitive processing, and the surrounding environment affects cognition. See Alvar Nuño – Alvar Ezquerro – Woolf 2021, 7–8.

³¹ On the instrumentalization of the senses as a political tool, see, for example: Zanker 1988; Hekster 2005; Bradley 2009, 189–211.

³² Versnel 2011, 471–472.

³³ The quotation from Scott (1932, 328) given earlier in the text is illuminating in this respect. On the existence of an intellectual elite skeptical about the divine nature of their rulers, see also Taylor 1931, 235–236; Fishwick 1978, 1252; Liebeschuetz 1979, 77; Veyne 2005, 69.

³⁴ Bowersock 1973, 206.

lifetime.³⁵ Hence, it becomes plain that the various religious notions that characterized Roman society are not treated by historians with the same empathetic approach.³⁶

II.2. *The emperors: necessary contextualization*

Arriving at a complex answer to the question of the Romans' belief in the divinity of members of the imperial *domus* necessarily requires a historical contextualization of the phenomenon. Here too, historians tend to oversimplify the process. It would be beyond the scope of this paper to discuss such contextualization at length; however, a consideration of its development over time is essential. Much of the literature perpetuates the thesis posited by Charlesworth (1939), who established the existence of an Augustan model which served as a guide for Augustus' descendants in terms of the rejection of cultic honors.³⁷ However, the emperors' own words point to a much more complex reality. Three examples, drawn from the Julio-Claudian dynasty, are highly illuminating in this respect.

In the case of Tiberius, in his reply to the city of Gytheion concerning the series of honors it proposed, he accepts "exceptional honors which are due to gods for the great benefactions of [his] father." Nevertheless, for himself, he prefers "more moderate honors which are proper for men." With regard to the honors proposed for his mother, it is striking that the emperor states that she herself "will reply to [them] when she hears . . . what decision [they] have reached concerning the honors in her case."³⁸ If the decision on the appropriateness of the divine honors decreed by the city for Livia was to be left up to Livia herself, one would have to assume that there was no solidly established formula. The absence of a model should not come as a surprise, since this represents an early stage in shaping the discourse on this new cultural phenomenon. Other scholars have also drawn attention to Tiberius' ambiguous response.³⁹ In any event, the sacred law of Gytheion (*SEG* 11.923) reserved the second day of this religious festival to honor Tiberius.⁴⁰

For his part, Germanicus gave a very forceful reply to the Alexandrians in 19 CE: "those invidious divine acclamations of yours I reject absolutely." The divine honors proposed by the city of Alexandria should only be bestowed on the man "who is really the savior and benefactor of the whole human race, namely my father [Tiberius] and his mother, who is my grandmother [*Iulia Augusta*]." Regardless of Tiberius' attitude towards such honors, according to his own words Germanicus clearly reserved divinity for the

³⁵ Thus, in the process of canonisation, virtuous candidates are judged after their deaths by a synod of bishops who decide whether or not to include them among the saints: Lozano 2010, 56.

³⁶ The situation in early Christianity should put researchers on their guard. As Hopkins (1999, 291) has noted, "early Christians also fiercely disagreed among themselves for several centuries about the degree and nature of Jesus' divinity: was he divine from birth, or from baptism, or only after his resurrection? Was he wholly divine, or a mixture of humanity, or, as pagans and Jews thought, wholly human?"

³⁷ "I feel reasonably sure that Augustus had, before 2 BC, already given in some pronouncement the 'correct' answer and shown what was the right attitude to adopt towards such offers from Greek or Greek-speaking peoples": Charlesworth 1939, 6. On the origin of the idea, see Taylor 1929.

³⁸ Oliver 1989, 63, no. 15 = *SEG* 11.922.

³⁹ On the ambiguity of Tiberius' reply, see: Charlesworth 1939, 3; Oliver 1989, 64–65.

⁴⁰ Camia – Kantiréa 2010, 376–377; Lozano 2010, 198–199.

emperor and his mother, *Iulia Augusta*. As a result, “the deeds reputed as [his] are but an additional working of their divinity.”⁴¹

Lastly, the Emperor Claudius addresses a letter to the Alexandrians in 41 CE in which he refers to the series of cultic honors that the city has offered him. He says that he will accept them for the most part, although he declares that he “has no great taste for such things.”⁴² He allows them to keep his birthday as a sacred day and to erect a series of statues of himself and his family in various places, as well as two golden images. The first of these images is the *Pax Claudiana Augusta*, which was to be erected in Rome. The second—no further information is given about it—“shall be carried in procession on name-days in [Alexandria] in the manner [they] think best,” together with a throne, in accordance with the demand and request of the Alexandrians. Claudius accepts more honors when he states that “it would perhaps be absurd . . . to allow such great honors and to refuse the creation of a Claudian tribe and the dedication of groves after the Egyptian custom.” However, he is firmly against the appointment of a high priest and establishment of a temple, “not wishing to be offensive to [his] contemporaries.”⁴³ Thus, although the image that Claudius wishes to project in terms of divine honors granted to his person seems clear, one might wonder about the nature of the golden image that he accepts and which would be carried in procession in Alexandria in the way they deem best, since in accordance with its processional function, it would probably be the recipient of cultic honors.

Claudius also addressed at least two letters to the Guild of Roving Athletes. In the first of these (46 CE), the emperor thanks the Guild for the golden crown sent to him “on the occasion of the victory over the Britons.”⁴⁴ As for the second (47 CE), it is worth noting the emperor’s announcement granting Roman citizenship to a man who had recently been high priest of the imperial cult. It is striking that although Claudius refused to accept a high priest in the city of Alexandria, he decided to grant Roman citizenship to a high priest serving the Guild of Roving Athletes Devoted to Heracles.⁴⁵

A closer examination of the testimonies yields evidence of changes, adjustments and evolution as regards manifestations of imperial cult, even within the same dynasty. While it seems that Tiberius tries to restrict divine honors to Augustus in his reply to the city of Gytheion, Germanicus exalts the divinity of Tiberius and *Iulia Augusta*. Subsequently, Claudius refuses a series of cultic honors in Alexandria, but grants Roman citizenship to an imperial cult priest serving the Guild of Roving Athletes Devoted to Heracles.⁴⁶ The emperors’ attitudes towards the divine honors that individuals, groups, cities, leagues and provinces desired to bestow on them must be contextualized. This cultic innovation emerged in the Principate and was perhaps initially viewed with a degree of suspicion, but by the end of the Julio-Claudian dynasty it was perceived very differently—not only by the imperial family but also by the provincials—and even more so by the end of the

⁴¹ Oliver 1989, 67, no. 17.

⁴² Oliver 1989, 81, no. 19.

⁴³ Oliver 1989, 82, no. 19.

⁴⁴ Oliver 1989, 103, no. 27.

⁴⁵ Oliver 1989, 103–104, no. 28.

⁴⁶ Lozano – Muñoz (forthcoming).

second century CE, once two hundred years had passed since its inception and the rituals agreed upon for the emperors were fully integrated into Roman religion.⁴⁷

II.3. Devotees: the insertion of the imperial cult into Roman religion

A final consideration is necessary with regard to the complexity of the answers. Despite possible directives from Rome, insertion of the imperial cult into established civic cults generated a richly nuanced practice, as clearly seen in the cities in the Greek East and in the agency⁴⁸ of the provincials. In this respect, Friesen⁴⁹ has recommended using the plural, “imperial cults,” in order to avoid perpetuating the notion of a uniform phenomenon:

My suggestion is: Let us stop referring to the worship of the emperors with the singular ‘imperial cult’ and insist on the plural ‘imperial cults’. In other words, let us treat it like any other normal religious phenomenon. Who would talk about ‘the Dionysus cult’ in the ancient world, or ‘the Artemis cult’? Words fail us when we call this phenomenon “imperial cult,” because the singular undercuts our efforts to develop sophisticated, nuanced interpretations of imperial cults. The new vocabulary might lead to new insights.⁵⁰

The imperial cult as a single, homogeneous ritual, independent of other religious practices in the Empire, never existed. For this reason, in contrast to Hopkins⁵¹ definition of the new cultic phenomenon as a symbol of imperial unity, Woolf⁵² has asserted that “ubiquity is not the same as uniformity,” and this is supported by the testimonies. The imperial cult was inserted into established civic cults, and traditional religion was used as a model for the new imperial gods and their rituals. Whereas in Christianity, an absolute, universal god claimed the exclusive right to receive worship, in the Roman world the pagan population’s conception of deity was more fluid and allowed for the inclusion of the emperors in the divine sphere.⁵³ The power of the honored individual was a fundamental aspect⁵⁴ and to a large extent, the naturalization of this was made possible by the insertion of the emperor into the traditional pantheon. The use of existing sacred spaces, imagery and rituals guaranteed the cult’s success.

⁴⁷ Lozano 2011.

⁴⁸ Rüpke 2015. As Alvar Nuño – Alvar Ezquerro – Woolf (2021, 5) have indicated, “apart from the growing interest in the subordinate and the identity-markers of whole social groups that characterized the post-war twentieth century, the last decades have witnessed a shift in the spotlight towards the individual. In the case of the study of Roman religion, this shift has favored the popularization of well-established concepts in anthropology and sociology such as embodiment, agency and religious individualisation.”

⁴⁹ Friesen 2011, 24.

⁵⁰ See also Beard – North – Price 2007, 348.

⁵¹ Hopkins 1978, 242.

⁵² Woolf 2008, 247.

⁵³ Nock 1928, 31; Veyne 1976, 567; Gradel 2002, 25–31. See Levene’s (2012) critique of Gradel’s reflections.

⁵⁴ Gradel 2002, 25–26, 28, 30–32; Gordon 2011.

As a result, the imperial cult did not subvert the polytheistic religious system or destabilize the markers of religious and cultural certitude in imperial society.⁵⁵ Far from becoming a destructuring element, the emperor-god was incorporated as a new marker of certitude and his divinity was as accepted or denied as much as that of any other deity in the thronging Roman pantheon. The Christological debate that arose within early Christianity about the divine and human nature of Christ reveals the complexity of the question—and the answer(s)—about belief in the divinity of the emperors.⁵⁶ Only by contextualizing each case, conducting a critical analysis and adopting an empathetic approach to the phenomenon can we begin to glimpse a possible solution to this Gordian knot in Roman religious studies.

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⁵⁵ Lozano 2011.

⁵⁶ “He [Jesus] is a mirage, an image in believers’ minds . . . But as with all beliefs, most is imagination and inspiration . . . ancient Christians constructed many Jesuses, as modern believers still do. Fixation on any particular version as the true Jesus is more a matter of believer choice, than of historical truth or falsity” (Hopkins 1999, 6).

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