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THE IMPERIAL CULT IN THE CITIES OF THE DECAPOLIS,
CAESAREA MARITIMA AND PALMYRA
A note on the development of imperial cults in the Roman Near East

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One of the most distinctive features of Roman religion in the imperial period is the practice of worshipping the living emperor and his predecessors by means of temples, festivals, prayers and priesthoods. According to the third-century historian Cassius Dio, the practice was found throughout the Roman Empire. It began under Augustus and was continued under other emperors not only among the people of Greece, but also among the other subjects of Rome.¹ Over the past fifty years, various aspects of this so-called imperial cult have received a great deal of scholarly attention.² Two themes dominate these learned writings. Firstly, the origin and religious nature of the imperial cult has been the object of much debate. The worship of mortal beings as deities is difficult to reconcile with modern, western notions of religion and many have tried to solve this apparent contradiction by labelling the imperial cult a political tool. I will not get into this debate but will restrict myself to choosing to side with Simon Price, who argued in his 1984 publication on the imperial cult in Asia Minor that religion and politics cannot be distinguished along these lines in antiquity.³ Secondly, scholars have focussed on the imperial cult as a religion of empire. As such, it has been part of the Romanisation debate. When this debate was started by Francis Haverfield and others, it was assumed that the imperial cult was initiated by Rome and forced upon the provinces.⁴ Consequently,

* This paper has greatly profited from comments and suggestions made by Joseph Patrich (Hebrew University), Thomas Weber (Johannes Gutenberg-Universität) and Robert Wenning (University of Münster). Needless to say, I bear sole responsibility for the final result.

¹ Cassius Dio LI.20.7.

² Literature on the subject is vast. In addition to the groundbreaking studies referred to below, mention should be made of the studies by M. Clauss, *Kaiser und Gott. Herrscherkult im römischen Reich* (Stuttgart 1999); I. Gradel, *Emperor Worship and Roman Religion* (Oxford 2002).

³ S. Price, *Rituals and Power: the Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge 1984). Cf. also A. Chaniotis, 'The Divinity of Hellenistic Rulers' in *A Companion to the Hellenistic World*, ed. A. Erskine (2003), 431-445 (with extensive references to further reading on p. 433).

⁴ F.J. Haverfield, *The Romanization of Roman Britain* (Oxford 1906). Ever since Haverfield, the concept of Romanisation has been the subject of an ongoing debate. For a recent overview of the discussion, see P. le Roux, 'La romanisation en question' in *Annales, Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 59.2 (2004), 287-313 and R. Hingley, *Globalizing Roman Culture. Unity, Diversity and Empire* (New York 2005).

the cult was thought to be rather uniform throughout the empire. More recent debates on Romanisation, however, stress the interaction between centre and periphery and hence argue that there is no such thing as *the* imperial cult.⁵ Instead, it is assumed that throughout the empire there was a series of different cults focussing on the emperor and his family. These cults are thought to function quite differently according to a variety of local circumstances such as the pre-existing religious traditions, the Roman status of the communities and the degree of Roman involvement in the cult. The present article on the imperial cult in the cities of the Decapolis, a Judean city and a Syrian city is a modest contribution to this debate.

My regional approach to the cult profits from several illustrious predecessors. In order to provide you with an idea about the *status questionis* of research and show what the provinces of Syria and Arabia could possibly contribute to the debate, it will be worth discussing the most important studies in some detail. The study by Simon Price of the imperial cult in Asia Minor has been groundbreaking in this discussion.⁶ In this study, Price stresses that knowledge of the Greek and Hellenistic traditions of worshipping living rulers are crucial to a proper understanding of the imperial cult in Asia Minor. Price does not mean that the Roman ruler cult is simply a continuation of the Hellenistic cult. He does argue, however, that the cities of Asia Minor used their own religious traditions in a reaction to the new political situation. Because of the uniform Greek culture of the cities in Asia Minor, Price argues that the imperial cult was more or less the same throughout the region. In Asia Minor, the imperial cult was not modelled on local customs, but on dominant Greek culture.⁷ It is only in Roman colonies that typical Roman offices and practices, such as *augustales* and *flamines*, can be found. In the remainder of Asia Minor, Price argues, the imperial cult was very much a Greek custom. The second scholar who deserves to be mentioned here is Duncan Fishwick, who extensively studied the imperial cult in the western part of the empire. In the west, there was no pre-Roman belief in the divinity of the ruler comparable to the east. Consequently, people from the west adopted forms already established elsewhere, Rome above all, and assimilated these forms of worship into their indigenous religious traditions. Hence Fishwick argues that the development and practice of the western ruler cult differed from area to area.⁸

⁵ For example M. Beard, J. North & S. Price, *Religions of Rome Vol. I: a History* (Cambridge 1998), esp. 318 and 348-349.

⁶ Above, note 3.

⁷ Price, *Ritual and Power*, 87.

⁸ D. Fishwick, *The Imperial Cult in the Latin West. Studies in the Ruler Cult of the Western provinces of the Roman Empire*, 3 volumes (8 books) (Leiden 1987-2005). In addition, Fishwick published numerous articles on the imperial cult in both East and West.

In spite of the regional studies on the imperial cult that have been published in recent years, a comprehensive study of the imperial cult in the Roman provinces of Syria and Arabia is still wanting. Simon Price omitted Syrian material from his study arguing that “Syria, Egypt and various parts of the Latin speaking world form different cultural areas [from Asia Minor] and should only be drawn upon for parallel or contrast”.⁹ An article by Maurice Sartre is the only study to date in which the imperial cult in Syria and Arabia is studied in more detail. Sartre’s focus is on the provincial cult and with respect to this he concludes that there was no such thing as a prominent provincial imperial cult in Syria. This, Sartre argues, is due to the fact that a ruler cult hardly existed in Syria in Hellenistic times.¹⁰ Consequently, he argues that the loyalty of the Syrian subjects towards the Romans was expressed differently. Both Sartre and Price lay great stress upon the influence of pre-Roman traditions in the development of the imperial cult in Syria.¹¹ This is one of the major suppositions that I would like to test in the present article.

This article is not intended to provide a comprehensive view of the imperial cult and its development in Syria. Instead, I would like to focus on three case studies in order to establish the possible influence of local circumstances upon the development of the imperial cult.¹² Contrary to Asia Minor, Syria did not have a uniform Greek culture before the advent of Rome, and this provides us with a unique opportunity to study the possible interaction between local and Roman culture. Since it is impossible to discuss the whole of Syria, I have decided on three case studies. My choice has been determined by differences in pre-existing religious traditions, the Roman status of the communities, and differences in the degree of Roman involvement in the cult. I will start with the Decapolis cities, which nicely illustrate the possible influence of Greek culture on the development of the imperial cult. Subsequently, I shall focus upon the imperial cult in Caesarea Maritima. Although this was originally a Greek city

⁹ Price, *Ritual and Power*, 20.

¹⁰ M. Sartre, ‘Les manifestations du culte imperial dans les provinces syriennes et en Arabie’ in C. Evers (ed.) *Rome et ses provinces. Genèse et diffusion d’une image du pouvoir. Hommages à Jean-Charles Balty*, (Bruxelles 2001), 167-186, esp. 185.

¹¹ In this respect it is worth noting that the ruler cult is a typical Greek practice that does not originate in the ancient Near East. In earlier times the cult of the living ruler was thought to originate from the Near East, notably Mesopotamia or Egypt, but now its Greek origin is widely accepted. On the Greek origin of the concept of divine worship of the living ruler, see Chaniotis, ‘Divinity of Hellenistic Rulers,’ 434-437. On the traditional position of the ruler in the eastern kingdoms that were later ruled by Hellenistic kings, see P. Herz, ‘Hellenistische Könige. Zwischen griechischen Vorstellungen vom Königtum und Vorstellungen ihrer einheimischen Untertanen,’ in E. Small (ed.) *Subject and Rule. The Cult of the Ruling Power in Classical Antiquity: Papers presented at a Conference held in the University of Alberta on April 13-15, 1994 to celebrate the 65th Anniversary of Duncan Fishwick* (Ann Arbor 1996), 27-40.

¹² I borrowed this approach from J.B. Rives, ‘Imperial Cult and Native Tradition in Roman Africa,’ in *The Classical Journal* 106 (2004), 425-436.

as well, it was re-founded when Judea became a client kingdom of Rome. Material from the desert city Palmyra will serve as my third and last example. Here, Hellenistic influences appear to be restricted to a minimum whereas local culture was preponderant in many ways. The question is whether this holds true for the imperial cult in the oasis as well. I shall conclude this article with a comparison of these three cases as a way to suggest the local diversity of the imperial cult in Syria and the Near East. Given the restricted cases studied here, this conclusion is, of course, highly provisional and only intended to serve as incentive for further study.

Before proceeding with the case studies, a few words about the nature and problems of the sources available will be necessary. The hallmark of the imperial cult is that the emperor and his predecessors are offered divine rites. This is frequently performed by imperial priests in temples that are sometimes, but not necessarily, dedicated to one or several emperors. In addition, the emperors may be worshipped with sacred games. These phenomena can be studied through references to the cult in ancient literary sources, inscriptions, architectural remains, statues of emperors and small finds such as coins. The inscriptions play by far the most important role in understanding the phenomenon. Since the imperial cult is concerned with a cult *of* the emperor and not with cults *for* the emperor, it follows in my opinion that dedications made on behalf of the emperor (*eis soteria*, in Greek) do not belong to the imperial cult proper.¹³ Admittedly, these inscriptions are crucial to a proper understanding of the religious function of the emperor in the empire, but in order not to complicate matters here even further, I shall omit them from the present discussion.

DECAPOLIS CITIES

My first case study concerns the cities of the Decapolis. Material pertaining to the imperial cult has been assembled in the indispensable studies of Achim Lichtenberger and Nadine Riedl on the pagan cults in the Decapolis cities.¹⁴ In addition, mention should be made of Nicole Belayche's study of pagan cults in Roman Palestine.¹⁵ The Decapolis cities are particularly interesting with respect to the possible influence of Hellenistic culture upon the imperial cult

¹³ In this, I follow Fishwick, *Imperial Cult in the Latin West* III.3, 359 (contra Beard, North & Price, *Religions of Rome*, 348).

¹⁴ A. Lichtenberger, *Kulte und Kultur der Dekapolis. Untersuchungen zu numismatischen, archäologischen und epigraphischen Zeugnissen*. (Abhandlungen des Deutschen Palästina-Vereins 29, Wiesbaden 2003); N. Riedl, *Gottheiten und Kulte der Dekapolis*, FU Berlin. Digitale Dissertation (<http://www.fu-berlin.de/2005/155/>).

¹⁵ N. Belayche, *Judaea-Palaestina. The Pagan Cults in Roman Palestine (Second to Fourth Century)* (Tübingen 2001), 257-277.

because at least some of them had a Hellenistic past.¹⁶ Syria was part of the Seleucid Empire, and it is in the Hellenistic cities that we may expect to find remains of the cult of living or deceased rulers. Maurice Sartre argued that the imperial cult was never a great success in Syria because there were hardly any ruler cults in the Seleucid period.¹⁷ This is demonstrably false. Material pertaining to Syria in the Hellenistic period is exceedingly sparse. Therefore, the paucity of sources pertaining to the cult of the Seleucid rulers by no means proves the absence of a ruler cult in the region.

The little information that we do have suggests that the cult of Seleucid rulers was widespread in Syria during the Seleucid period. By far the majority of these cults seems to have been organised on a municipal basis, on the initiative of the originally Greek population.¹⁸ In addition, there was a dynastic religion that had been installed by the kings themselves. This dynastic cult is known from the famous edict of Antiochos III dated to 205 BCE, concerning the cult of himself and his wife Laodice in Daphne near Antioch.¹⁹ We can only guess as to whether the cult was invented by this king and whether or not the cult survived his rule. It is, however, telling that the distinction between a locally-organised and a centrally-organised cult closely resembles the situation in the Roman period, when a distinction can be made between the municipal and the provincial imperial cult.

Although the Decapolis cities presented themselves as Greek cities in the time that they were part of the Roman Empire, very little is known about their actual history in the Hellenistic period. Fortunately, one of the few instances pertaining to the dynastic cult of the Seleucid rulers originates from Scythopolis, one of the cities of the Decapolis. It is a fragmentary inscription that commemorates the inauguration of a dynastic cult during the reign of Demetrios II Nikator with a service by priests whose album has been found.²⁰ Apart from the inscription from Scythopolis, there is no definitive proof of a Hellenistic ruler cult in the Decapolis cities. There are, however, several indications that the Greek custom of bringing high honours to an important ruler or liberator was apparently

¹⁶ F. Millar, *The Roman Near East 31 BC-AD 337* (Cambridge Mass. & London 1993), 409-410.

¹⁷ Above, note 10.

¹⁸ E. Lanciers, 'Die Opfer im hellenistischen Herrscherkult und ihre Rezeption bei der einheimischen Bevölkerung der hellenistischen Reiche,' in J. Quaegebeur (ed.), *Ritual and Sacrifice in the Ancient Near East. Proceedings of the International Conference organized by the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven from the 17th to the 29th of April 1991* (Leuven 1993), 212; H. Müller, 'Der hellenistische archiereus,' in *Chiron* 30 (2000), 519-542.

¹⁹ E. Bickerman, *Institutions des Séleucides* (Paris 1938), 252. C.B. Welles, *Royal Correspondence in the Hellenistic Period. A Study in Greek Epigraphy*, (New Haven 34; Reprint Rome 1964).

²⁰ SEG VIII (1936), 33; Bickerman, *Institutions des Séleucides*, 343; B. Lifhitz, 'Scythopolis. L'histoire, les institutions et les cultes de la ville à l'époque hellénistique et impériale,' in *ANRW* 18,2 (Stuttgart 1977), 273-274; Belayche, *Iudaea-Palaestina*, 262.

common in these cities. Firstly, there are the coins with the bust of the Roman procurator Gabinius from Scythopolis.²¹ Secondly, it is telling that many cities that were liberated by Pompey from Hasmonean rule in 64 BC established a new era in his honour.²² This is, of course, no proof that Pompey received divine honours, but establishing a new epoch was part of the Greek tradition in order to bestow high honours upon those who had liberated them.

In Tell Shalem, 10 kilometres south of Scythopolis, a beautiful bronze statue of Hadrian was found.²³ It is undoubtedly related to the encampment of the Legio VI during the second revolt. If it was a cult statue, it testifies to a ruler cult in the Roman camp which should be distinguished from the cults of the city proper. From Scythopolis comes a more-than-life-size body of a cuirassed marble statue of an anonymous individual, probably an emperor. Since its original location and function are unknown, we have no way of telling whether it was an honorary statue or a cult statue. We have little proof dated to the Roman period pertaining to the imperial cult in Scythopolis; neither the so-called Caesareum nor the inscription that was dedicated by the city to the well-being of Marcus Aurelius provides firm proof in this respect.²⁴

Apart from Abila, where an unpublished inscription was found commemorating a dedication to Augustus and Roma dated to 69 CE,²⁵ all the evidence pertaining to the imperial cult originates from Gerasa (modern Jerash). In total, eight inscriptions were found here that relate to the imperial cult and that bring important aspects of it to light.²⁶ The first and oldest inscription has not been published officially so far. It is dated to the year 9/10 CE and presents a dedication for the well-being of the emperor Augustus and his whole house by a certain Demetrios, son of Apollonios, son of Daisôn, who had been a former priest of Augustus.²⁷ This can only mean that there was a cult of Augustus in Gerasa during his lifetime. This presents us with one of the oldest instances of

²¹ R. Barkay, 'Coins of Roman Governors issued by Nysa-Scythopolis in the Late Republican Period,' in *Israel Numismatic Journal* 13 (1994-99), 54, no. 5 and 56, no. 5. Lichtenberger, *Kulte und Kultur der Decapolis*, 134-135, pl. 18, MZ 63 and 64.

²² J.-P. Rey-Coquais, 'Syrie romaine. De Pompée à Dioclétien,' in *JRS* 68 (1978), 45

²³ G. Foerster, 'A Cuirassed Bronze Statue of Hadrian,' in *Atiqot* 17 (1985), 139-160, pls. XXXIV-XXXVII.

²⁴ Belayche, *Judaea-Palaestina*, 266-267.

²⁵ The inscription is mentioned in passing by Rey-Coquais, 'Syrie romaine', 47-48.

²⁶ In addition to the unpublished inscription mentioned in the next note, six inscriptions were published in C.H. Kraeling, *Gerasa. City of the Decapolis* (New Haven 1938), nos. 2, 10, 49, 53, 188, 192. One in M. L. Lazzarini, 'Iscrizioni dal santuario di Artemide 1984-87,' *Syria* 66 (1989), 48, no. 8.

²⁷ E. Delpont, *Jordanie. Sur les pas des archéologues. Exposition présentée du 13 juin au 5 octobre 1997. Institut du Monde Arabe* (Paris 1997), 139. The stone was found in the foundations of a modern construction, to the west of the temple of Zeus. The French translation reads: "A la bonne Fortune. Pour le salut d'Auguste et de toute sa maison et pour la concorde du peuple, Démétrius, fils de Apollonios, lui-même fils de Daisôn, ancien prêtre d'Auguste, l'an 72, a dédié à ces frais la construction, par piété, conformément au décret antérieur du conseil."

the imperial cult in Syria, dated to the reign of Augustus. This implies that it dates from the time that the imperial cult took off in the empire as a whole.²⁸ Apparently, Syria did not lag behind in this respect.

It is not quite clear whether Demetrios was priest of a municipal or a provincial cult. A municipal cult seems to be most likely, since provincial priests were so highly honoured that they were normally considered to be worth mentioning.²⁹ Be that as it may, there can be no doubt there was a provincial imperial cult in Syria from Augustus' reign onwards. This follows from a second inscription from Gerasa that was found in the south theatre. It is a dedication from the year 119/20 for the well-being of the emperors by Diogenes Emmeganos, who is priest of the four *epargeia* in the metropolis Antiochia.³⁰ It is not certain what exactly an *epargeion* was; Jones, Rey-Coquais and Sartre suppose it is part of a *koinon*, the provincial gathering.³¹ Others, such as Pierre-Louis Gatié and Achim Lichtenberger, very much doubt this to be the case.³² Be that as it may, it is highly probable that the communal cult in Antioch refers to a provincial imperial cult. This may be inferred from an inscription from Apamea, in which a certain Dechandros, who served as a provincial imperial priest during the reign of Augustus, is mentioned.³³ In the translation of Fergus Millar it reads:

...and above all Dexandros, the first man to have been priest of the province, his great-grandfather (who) by the decree of the deified Augustus, because of his loyalty to the Roman people, was inscribed as a friend and ally on bronze tablets on the capitol.³⁴

²⁸ Price, *Rituals and Power*, 54-58 on the decisive change in the ruler cult from the reign of Augustus onwards.

²⁹ Delpont, *op. cit.*, assumes it was the provincial cult. He does not, however, substantiate his claim. In contrast, Lichtenberger, *Kulte und Kultur der Dekapolis*, 321, argues it is a clear example of a municipal cult.

³⁰ Welles, *Gerasa*, 399-400, no. 53:

Ἀγαθῆ Τύχη. Ἐτους βπρ'. Ὑ[πέρ]
τῆς τῶν Σεβαστῶν σωτηρίας
Διογένης Ἐμμεγάνου ἱεράσασμενος
τῶν τεσσάρων ἐπαρχειῶν ἐν Ἀντιοχείαι
τῆι Μητροπόλι ἄγαλμα Δικαιοσύνης
ὑπὲρ Εὐμένους τοῦ υἱοῦ τῆι πατρίδι
ἀνέθηκεν ὃ ἐπηγγείλατο ὑπὲρ τοῦ
Εὐμένους ἀγορανομοῦντος

³¹ A.H.M. Jones, 'Inscriptions from Jerash,' *JRS* 18 (1928), 157; Rey-Coquais, 'Syrie romaine,' 53-54; Sartre, 'Manifestations du culte impérial,' 168-169.

³² P.-L. Gatié, 'Philadelphie et Gerasa du royaume nabatéen à la province d'Arabie,' in P.-L. Gatié e.a (eds.), *Geographie historique au Proche-Orient* (Paris 1988), 164, 169, note 53; Lichtenberger, *Kulte und Kultur der Dekapolis*, 17, who follows the argument of A. Stein, set forth in an unpublished doctoral thesis, *Studies in Greek and Latin Inscriptions on the Palestinian Coinage under the Principate* (Tel Aviv 1990) (non vidi).

³³ J.-P. Rey-Coquais, 'Inscriptions grecques d'Apamée,' in *AAS* 23 (1973), 43.

³⁴ F. Millar, 'State and Subject: The Impact of Monarchy,' in F. Millar & E. Segal (eds.), *Caesar Augustus. Seven Aspects* (Oxford 1984), 54.

It is most telling that the emperor personally honoured this individual who functioned as his high priest. It is furthermore illustrative of the high honour of this office that it is still remembered after three generations. The existence of a provincial imperial cult in Syria during the reign of Augustus may also be inferred from an inscription from Magnesia Meandria, in which an athlete, who thrice won the *koinon* of Syria is honoured.³⁵ Apparently, games celebrated in honour of the emperor were part of the divine honours rendered to the emperor by the *koinon* of Syria.

Apart from the inscription of the priest Diogenes, all the other extant inscriptions seem to refer to a municipal cult in Gerasa. Priests figure prominently in these inscriptions. Out of the nine inscriptions from Gerasa that mention priests, no less than seven are priests of the imperial cult. This undoubtedly reflects the high social status that was attached to the office.³⁶ It follows from comparison with other inscriptions from Gerasa that these priests were recruited from the most prominent families in the city.³⁷ It is equally significant that several of the inscriptions associate the imperial priests with the cult of Zeus Olympios, the city god of Gerasa. In an inscription dated to 22/23 CE, the priest of the Emperor Tiberius contributes to the building of a temple. Although it is not expressly stated, this is in all probability the temple of Zeus Olympios, the god to whom the inscription is dedicated.³⁸ An inscription that was found in the south theatre commemorates Asklepiodoros son of Malkos, priest of the emperor Trajan, who financed the statue of Zeus Olympios, the god of the fathers.³⁹

³⁵ O. Kern, *Die Inschriften von Magnesia*, 149. Cf. Rey-Coquais, 'Syrie romaine,' 48, who opts for a date in Augustus' reign.

³⁶ Lichtenberger, *Kulte and Kultur der Dekapolis*, 321, who lists the relevant inscriptions in note 191.

³⁷ According to Welles, *Gerasa*, 374, the priest of Tiberius may well have been a brother of the gymnasiarch Aristonos of inscription no. 3, who also contributed to the building of the temple. According to Welles, *op. cit.* 397, Sarapion son of Apollonios, who was priest of Nero, probably had a grandson who held the same office, who is mentioned in no. 121.

³⁸ Welles, *Gerasa*, 373-374, no. 2:
 Ἀγαθῆ τύχη. Διὶ Ὀλυμπίῳ
 ὑπὲρ τῆς τῶν Σεβαστῶν σω-
 τηρίας καὶ τῆς τοῦ δήμου ὁμ-
 νοίας Ζαβδίων Ἀριστομάχου
 ἱερασάμενος Τιβερίου Καίσαρος
 τοῦ[υ] ἐπ' ἔτους ἐπέδωκεν ἐκ τῶν
 ἰδίων εἰς τὴν οἰκοδομὴν τοῦ ἱερ-
 οῦ δραχμὰς χιλίας εὐσεβείας
 ἔνεκεν.

³⁹ Welles, *Gerasa*, 379-380, no. 10:
 [Ἀγαθ]ῆ τύχη ἔτους[ς ...]
 [ὑπὲρ τῆς τῶν Σε]βαστῶν σωτηρ[ί]ας
 [Ἀσκ]ληπ[ι]δωρος] Μάλχου του Δημητρίου
 [ἱε]ρόμεν[ος Καίσα]ρος Τραιανοῦ ἐξ ἐπαγ
 [γε]λίας ἄγαλμα Διὸς Ὀλυμπίου τῆ πατρίδ[ι]
 ἀ[νέ]θηκεν.

The connection between the imperial cult and the city god was common in Asia Minor, where emperors frequently received cult status in the main sanctuary of the city.⁴⁰ Whether this was the case in Gerasa too can no longer be established, but the close relationship between the priest of the imperial cult and the city god exemplified by the inscriptions is telling.

These aspects of the imperial cult in Gerasa, the high honours connected with the office and its relationship with the civic cult are very much in line with what we know about the cult in Asia Minor.⁴¹ This is perhaps not very surprising, given their shared Greek culture.

CAESAREA MARITIMA

Caesarea Maritima provides the second case study in our search for the development of the imperial cult in the Roman Near East. Although the city was a Hellenistic foundation like some Decapolis cities, its re-foundation by Herod the Great, a client king of the Romans, was decisive for its character as a city in Roman times. In the reign of Vespasian, from 70 onwards, Caesarea received the status of Roman colony.⁴² Hence the local circumstances differ radically from the cities of the Decapolis, in particular with respect to the Roman status of the communities and the degree of Roman involvement in the imperial cult. Compared to the Decapolis cities, where the material pertaining to the imperial cult was predominantly epigraphic, the material from Caesarea is much more diverse; in addition to inscriptions, we have literary sources, a building that can be identified as a Caesareum, and also remains from sculpture.⁴³

The city was founded by Herod the Great in BCE 22 on the spot of the Ptolemaic harbour Stratonos Pyrgos (Straton's Tower), in honour of Augustus, who had donated the land to Herod in 30 BCE.⁴⁴ As in Samaria/Sebaste, Herod had the new city named after the emperor and built a temple for his worship. According to Flavius Josephus, Herod built the temple that was dedicated to

⁴⁰ Price, *Rituals and Power*, 146-156.

⁴¹ Lichtenberger, *Kulte und Kultur der Dekapolis*, 336, suggests games were celebrated in Gerasa in honour of the emperor. If correct, this is a third similarity with Asia Minor.

⁴² J. Patrich, 'When was Caesarea proclaimed a Roman colony?' (forthcoming).

⁴³ On pagan cults in Caesarea Maritima, see Belayche, *Judaea-Palaestina*, 171-199 and R. Gersht, 'Representations of Deities and the Cults of Caesarea Maritima,' in A. Raban & K.G. Holum (eds.), *Caesarea Maritima. A Retrospective after Two Millennia* (Leiden, New York, Köln 1996), 305-326. On the imperial cult in Caesarea Maritima, see M. Bernett, *Der Kaiserkult in Judäa unter den Herodiern und Römern. Untersuchungen zur politischen und religiösen Geschichte Judäas von 30 v. bis 66 n. Chr.* (Tübingen 2007).

⁴⁴ On Straton's Tower as a Ptolemaic instead of a Phoenician foundation, see J. Patrich, 'Herodian Caesarea: the Urban Space,' in *The World of the Herods. Volume 1 of the International Conference 'The World of the Herods and the Nabateans' held at the British Museum, 17-19 April 2001* (ed. N. Kokkinos, *Oriens et Occidens* 14, Stuttgart 2007), 96-98.

Augustus and Roma on the top of the hill.⁴⁵ Hence it literally dominated the city and could be seen from afar by the ships approaching the harbour. The temple has been localised and the finds accord remarkably well with the literary descriptions.⁴⁶ Inside, Josephus tells us, stood a statue of Augustus that was similar to the statue of Olympian Zeus, whereas Roma was modelled upon a Polykleitan statue of Hera at Argos.⁴⁷ The comparison of Augustus with Zeus was by no means invented by Herod's sculptors and is well known in the poetry of the time.

The imperial cult in Caesarea by no means ended when Herod's kingdom came to an end. From a famous, but fragmentary, inscription, it is known that Pontius Pilatus, who governed Judea from 26 till 36 CE, created a Tiberieum in Caesarea. The much-discussed inscription reads:⁴⁸

[---] tiberieum
[- Po]ntius Pilatus
[praef]ectus Iuda-[ea]e

No trace of this so-called Tiberieum has been found during the excavations so far. Consequently, there has been much debate about its nature and location. Some have argued that the Tiberieum is unlikely to be a temple, since Tiberius discouraged divine honours for himself.⁴⁹ However, the fact that Tiberius did have a priest during his lifetime in Gerasa and elsewhere strongly suggests that religious practice and religious ideal did not necessarily convene.⁵⁰ Alternatively, the Tiberieum may have been located inside the temple of Augustus, or may even have been the new designation of Augustus' temple now that Tiberius had become emperor. This is substantiated by an account of Philo, who tells how the Emperor Tiberius ordered the golden shield inscribed in his honour to be transported from Jerusalem to Caesarea to be placed in the temple of

⁴⁵ Josephus, *Ant. Iud.* 15, 339; Josephus, *Bell. Iud.* I, 414 (21,7). Cf. Philo, *leg. ad Gaium* 305.

⁴⁶ Lisa C. Kahn, 'King Herod's Temple of Roma and Augustus at Caesarea Maritima,' in *Caesarea Maritima. A Retrospective after Two Millennia*, 130-145 and Patrich, 'Herodian Caesarea,' 105-108 (with references to the relevant excavation reports), with fig. 3.

⁴⁷ Above, note 44. On these statues, see T.M. Weber, 'Der beste Freund des Kaisers. Herodes der Grosse und statuarische Repräsentationsformen in orientalischen Heiligtümern der frühen Kaiserzeit' in *Augustus – Der Blick von aussen. Die Wahrnehmung des Kaisers in den Provinzen des Reiches und in den Nachbarstaaten. Akten der internationalen Tagung an der Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz vom 12. bis 14. Oktober 2006* (hersh. D. Kreikenbom, K.-U. Mahler, P. Schollmeyer & T. Weber), 253-258.

⁴⁸ C.M. Lehmann & K.G. Holum, *The Greek and Latin Inscriptions of Caesarea Maritima* (The Joint Expedition to Caesarea Maritima Excavations Reports, Vol. 5, Boston 2000), 67-70, no. 43.

⁴⁹ For references to the extensive publications and commentaries on this inscription, see Lehman & Holum. *Greek and Latin Inscriptions*, 17 and 69-70. B. Lifshitz, 'Inscriptions latines de Césarée (Caesarea Palaestinae),' in *Latomus* 22 (1963), 783, suggests it may have been a library or light-house.

⁵⁰ Welles, *Gerasa*, 373-374, no. 2. Cf. Above, note 38, for the text of this inscription.

Augustus.⁵¹ This shows that the cult in Augustus' temple became dynastic after the first emperor passed away and that the living emperor was still being worshipped here.

Another unexplained building with respect to the imperial cult is a so-called Hadrianeum (βατμιοσ του Αδριανου) mentioned in an inscription dated to the fifth or sixth century.⁵² It is frequently assumed that this was in fact a shrine dedicated to the emperor built shortly after he visited Caesarea, either in 117 or in 129-130. However, so far no trace of this building has been found and consequently its exact function with respect to the imperial cult is unclear.

The next reference to the imperial cult consists of a fragmentary dedication of an Augustalis. It is undated, but the quality of the letters indicates a date in the late first or the second century.⁵³

[sevir] augustalis [...] colon(iae) pro [ludis] Augustali(bus) fecit ex decreto d(ecurionum)

..an Augustalis, one of the Six Men...of the colony, made (it?) for the Augustan (competitions?)

Despite its fragmentary character, it is clear that this is a dedication of an anonymous *Augustalis*, for the *ludi Augustales*, the games for Augustus. These games were established as a quinquennial festival in honour of Augustus and included *munera* and *venations* that were held in the stadium. They are attested in Caesarea as late as the Severan period.⁵⁴ The *sevir Augustalis* is an association of wealthy freemen that is very common in Roman colonies. It is, however, attested mostly in the west and is rare in the east Roman provinces. In fact, this inscription is the only evidence for *Augustales* at Caesarea and we know of no other *Augustales* in either Palestine or Syria.⁵⁵

Sacred games were still being celebrated in Caesarea around the middle of fourth century CE, as may be inferred from the famous so-called 'Caesarea cup' that is now in the Louvre.⁵⁶ The bronze cup (8.2 cm high, 20.2 cm upper diameter) was commissioned in the fourth century to commemorate the sacred games (*agones ieroi*, inscribed above the heads of the five divine busts) that

⁵¹ Philo, *Leg.* 299-305. Cf. Patrich, 'Herodian Caesarea,' 108.

⁵² Lehman & Holum, *Greek and Latin Inscriptions*, 80-82, no. 58. Cf. Belayche, *Iudaea-Palaestina*, 180-181.

⁵³ Lehman & Holum, *Greek and Latin Inscriptions*, 120-121, no. 122.

⁵⁴ Z. Weiss, 'The Jews and the Games in Roman Caesarea,' in *Caesarea Retrospective*, 443. J. Patrich, 'Herod's Hippodrome/ Stadium at Caesarea and the Games conducted Therein,' in L.V. Rutgers (ed.), *What has Athens to do with Jerusalem. Essays in honour of Gideon Foerster* (Leuven 2002), 26-68.

⁵⁵ Duthoy, *Epigrafische Studien* 11 (1976), 143-214. He lists three Severi in Syria.

⁵⁶ E. Will, 'Le coupe de Césarée de Palestine au musée du Louvre,' in *Monuments et mémoires de la fondation Eugène Piot* 65 (1983), 1-24. Reprinted in E. Will, *De l'Euphrate au Rhin. Aspects de la hellénisation et de la romanisation du proche-orient* (Beyrouth 1995), 219-242. Patrich, 'Herodian Caesarea,' 98-100, fig. 2.



Fig. 1. Roman official performing a sacrifice before the Tyche of Caesarea Maritima. Detail from the Caesarea Cup. (Drawing by L. Dirven)

accompanied the celebration of Tyche's birthday. These games were celebrated in the Stadium of Caesarea on March 5-7 in commemoration of the moment that the city was proclaimed a Roman colony in 70 CE.⁵⁷

Most interesting with respect to the imperial cult is the scene in which a Roman magistrate (perhaps the provincial governor) can be seen offering before the city's cult statue of Tyche labelled *genio colonia(e)* by the Latin inscription (fig. 1). Tyche is shown enthroned and holds a bust in her extended right hand. Similar representations on coins strongly suggest this is the bust of the emperor.⁵⁸ Ernest Will proposes that it is probably Augustus', the emperor in whose honour the city was founded.⁵⁹ Alternatively, the bust may be identified as Vespasian,

⁵⁷ Patrich, 'Herodian Caesarea,' 98. J. Patrich, 'Herod's Hippodrome/Stadium at Caesarea and the Games conducted therein', in L.V. Rutgers (ed.) *What has Athens to do with Jerusalem. Essays in Honour of Gideon Foerster* (Leuven 2002), 29-68. Cf. also J. Patrich, 'When was Caesarea proclaimed a Roman Colony?' (forthcoming). Thanks to Joseph Patrich for these references.

⁵⁸ R. Gersht, 'The Tyche of Caesarea Maritima', in *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 116 (1984), 110-114.

⁵⁹ Will, 'Coupe de Césarée', 6.

who bestowed the status of Roman colony upon Caesarea, or as the reigning emperor. Interestingly, there are another five busts of deities represented in the background. The fourth from the left is also an emperor's bust and it is suggestive for his elevated divine status that he stands between the busts of Athena, Helios and Poseidon, who were undoubtedly the most important deities of the city.⁶⁰ Ernest Will suggests the scene under discussion is modelled upon a ritual that took place in Caesarea's Stadium at the beginning of the games. If correct, this implies that the (deceased?) Roman emperor still received a cult in Caesarea around the middle of the fourth century, at the time that the reigning emperor had become Christian.

To judge from this material, emperor worship figured prominently and persistently among Caesarea's public cults. As a community, the Caesareans identified themselves strongly with Rome. As a Roman colony the city took over some typical Roman practices and offices, such as the *Augustales*.

PALMYRA

My third and last example is provided by material from the city of Palmyra, the famous oasis located in the Syrian Desert between Damascus and the Euphrates. Little is known about the city in the Hellenistic period apart from that it existed.⁶¹ It is most unlikely, though, that its inhabitants strongly identified themselves with Greece, like many of the cities in western Syria. The rise of the oasis coincides with the arrival of Rome and its incorporation into the Roman Empire can at least be dated back to the reign of Tiberius.⁶² It is frequently stated that Rome hardly had any influence upon the Palmyrene religion. Palmyrene deities abounded and it seems Rome was not actively involved in Palmyrene religious affairs.⁶³ Undoubtedly, there is much truth in this conclusion. However, although the evidence with respect to the imperial cult is confined to three, perhaps four, inscriptions, these inscriptions do show beyond doubt that the imperial cult was a prominent institution and that it was an immensely prestigious religious office in Palmyra.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ On the identification of these busts, see Will, 'Coupe de Césarée', 7.

⁶¹ Over the last years a Syro-German mission has searched for remains of Hellenistic Palmyra. Their finds have been partly published: A. Schmidt-Colinet & Kh. Al-As'ad, 'Twenty Years of the Syro-German Mission at Palmyra,' in *AAAS* 45/6, 2002/03, 207-214. Idem, 'Zur Urbanistik des Hellenistischen Palmyra. Zweiter Vorbericht,' in *ZORA* (forthcoming).

⁶² A recent overview of the history of the oasis can be found in M. Sommer, *Roms orientalische Steppengrenze. Palmyra – Edessa – Dura-Europos – Hatra. Eine Kulturgeschichte von Pompeius bis Diocletian* (Oriens et Occidens 9, Stuttgart 2005), esp. 149-159.

⁶³ M. Gawlikowski, 'Les dieux de Palmyre,' *ANRW* II 18,4 (1990), 2605-2658, esp. 2652-2653. Recently: T. Kaizer, *The Religious Life of Palmyra* (Oriens et Occidens 4, Stuttgart 2002), 239.

⁶⁴ For an overview of all the material that possibly refers to the imperial cult in Palmyra, see J.-B. Yon, *Les notables de Palmyre* (Beyrouth 2002), 122-123, with note 191.

One of the first testimonies of Roman rule, in fact, is the base of the statues of Tiberius, Drusus and Germanicus, which were set up by a legatus of the Legion X fretensis.⁶⁵ The inscription reads:

[Dr]uso Caesari; Ti. Caesari, divi Aug f., Augusto, divi Iuli nepoti; Ge[rmanico caesari] / imperatoribus posuit/ [Min]ucius T. f., Hor., Rufus, legatus leg. X Fretensis

Drusus Caesar; Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus, descendant of the divine Julius; Germanicus Caesar. Erected by Minucius Felix legatus of Legio X Fretensis

Later, by a second hand, the titles of Drusus and Germanicus were complemented in much smaller letters with: *Ti. Aug. f. divi nepoti*, 'descendants of the divine Tiberius Augustus.' The sequence of names is not common and can only be explained by the three statues that were set up above.

When found, the inscription was inside the cella of the temple of Bel. The base must date from between CE 14 and 19, whereas the cella was only dedicated in CE 32.⁶⁶ Obviously, therefore, this cannot possibly have been its original location. However, the block is so large that it is most unlikely to have come from afar, and hence it is most probable to assume that these statues originally stood in the temenos of the temple of Bel, Palmyra's most important sanctuary.

Of course, the dedication of three honorary statues by a Roman official by no means testifies to the existence of an imperial cult in Palmyra at this early date. However, both the fact that these honorary statues were set up in the main sanctuary of the city and the fact that the divine descent of Drusus and Germanicus is stressed in the inscription provide the statues with a superhuman flavour.

That the Palmyrenes appreciated this message follows from a change in the iconography of their most important gods that took place around the middle of the first century CE, shortly after Palmyra's incorporation in the Roman Empire. As in many cities and villages in the region military deities were extremely popular in Palmyra.⁶⁷ Before the advent of the Romans, they wore a so-called strip-cuirass of Hellenistic origin. Around 80 CE, however, the most prominent gods of the city such as Iarhibol, Aglibol and Arsu changed their

⁶⁵ Seyrig, 'L'incorporation de Palmyre à l'empire romain' in *Syria* 13 (1932), 267, figs. 1-2; J. Starcky & M. Gawlikowski, *Palmyre. Édition revue et augmentée des nouvelles découvertes* (Paris 1985), 37.

⁶⁶ Mention of the dedication of the cella to Bel, Iarhibol and Aglibol is made in an inscription dated to AD 45: D.R. Hinnels & E. Cussini, *Palmyrene Aramaic Texts* (Baltimore & London 1996), henceforth abbreviated PAT 1347. Cf. L. Dirven, *The Palmyrenes of Dura-Europos. A Study of Religious Interaction in Roman Syria* (Leiden 1999), 51-52 and Kaizer, *Religious Life of Palmyra*, 69-71.

⁶⁷ H. Seyrig, 'Les dieux armés et les arabes en Syrie', in *Syria* 47 (1970), 77-112, esp. 92.

costume for a Roman body cuirass, the cuirass normally worn by the Roman emperor.⁶⁸ It is noteworthy that it is only the city gods of Palmyra that take on this costume; the military deities worshipped in the villages around Palmyra remain clad in their traditional outfit.⁶⁹ This suggests that the adoption of the emperor's dress for Palmyra's deities assured these deities a place in the Roman order of things. In all likelihood, the deliberate Romanisation of these deities was initiated by members of the cultural and religious elite of Palmyra that sought contact with their Roman overlords.⁷⁰

In spite of this indirect evidence, we have to wait until the second half of the second century CE before the first explicit reference to the imperial cult is made; in a bilingual inscription dated to 171, mention is made of a Caesaraeum, translated in Palmyrene as *bt qsry'* (*beet qasrya*).⁷¹ The exact location of this building is still unknown, but its existence is confirmed by another inscription that dates from the last years of the city's existence.⁷² In the inscription dated 171 CE, an unknown individual is honoured by the demos of the city with an equestrian statue in the Caesareum, as well as with a honorary statue in the temple of Bel, and in the so-called four sanctuaries of the city.⁷³ This inscription clearly shows that the Caesareum was of civic importance. In this respect it was comparable to the Temple of Bel, the main temple of the city. The fact that an equestrian statue instead of a honorary statue was set up in the Caesareum is, in my view, telling; equestrian statues were the most prestigious of honours available and far exceeded that of a normal honorary statue.⁷⁴

The civic importance of the imperial cult in Palmyra is confirmed by a third inscription that can be related to the worship of the emperors. It is inscribed in

⁶⁸ The earliest datable instances of a body cuirass being worn by Palmyrene deities are the sculptural decorations from the peristyle of the Temple of Bel, dated to about 80 CE. They were formerly dated to 32 CE, but M. Pietrzykowski, *Adyta swiętyń palmyrenskich. Studium funkcji i formy* (Polish, with a French summary) ed. M. Gawlikowski (Warszawa 1997), 125-35, convincingly argued they ought to be dated about fifty years later. Cf. Dirven, *Palmyrenes of Dura-Europos*, 52-53, with figs. 16-19. Seyrig, 'Dieux armés,' 107, still dates these reliefs to 32 CE and dates the introduction of the body cuirass accordingly. On the adoption of the body cuirass by Palmyrene deities and its implications for emperor worship, see L. Dirven, 'The Julius Terentius Fresco and the Roman Imperial Cult' (forthcoming).

⁶⁹ For the iconography of gods in the region around Palmyra, see D. Schlumberger, *La Palmyrène du Nord-Ouest*, suivi du Recueil des inscriptions sémitiques de cette region ar H. Ingholt et J. Starcky, avec un contribution de G. Ryckmans (Paris 1951).

⁷⁰ On the interaction between Palmyra's local elite and Rome's central authorities, see Yon, *Notables de Palmyre*.

⁷¹ PAT. 2769 (= J. Catineau, 'Tadmorea (suite),' in *Syria* 17 (1936), 278-280). Cf. Kaizer, *Religious Life of Palmyra*, 44-45 and Yon, *Notables de Palmyre*, 122.

⁷² K. Michalowski, *Palmyre I. Fouilles polonaises 1959* (Warszawa, La Haye, Paris 1960), 208, no. 2. The inscription is dated between 260-270.

⁷³ S. Schlumberger, 'Les quatre tribus de Palmyre,' in *Syria* 48 (1971), 121-133. Cf. Kaizer, *Religious Life of Palmyra*, 60-66.

⁷⁴ References to equestrian statues are rare in Palmyrene inscriptions. Another example is PAT 1063, dated 198 CE.

a lintel that was found in Qasr el Heir, about 40 kilometres east of Palmyra, but which undoubtedly originates from the oasis itself.⁷⁵ According to the very plausible reading of this text proposed by Glenn Bowersock, the text commemorates the erection of two imperial statues (of Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus respectively) in 166 by an individual who simultaneously acted as high priest (*archiereus*) and *symposiarch* of the priests of Bel and priest (*iereus*) of the emperors. The fact that the most prestigious religious office of the city and the cult of the emperor are administered by the same person clearly shows that the imperial cult had a communal meaning and was very prestigious. In this respect it is worth recalling that other inscriptions that commemorate the erection of imperial statues were likewise set up by the most important of Bel's priests.⁷⁶

CONCLUSION

What can we conclude from these three case studies? Is Simon Price correct in his statement that Syria was a different cultural area to Asia Minor? Only partly so. The situation in the Decapolis cities very much resembles the state of affairs in Asia Minor. Like the citizens of Asia Minor, the elite used the cult in their relationship with the emperor. The few testimonies that we have from these cities show that the imperial cult was very much a communal thing. In Caesarea Maritima – a foundation of a client king of Rome that became a Roman colony in the Severan period – the whole city breathed imperial cult. Here, it was very much part of the communal identity of the city. After the city became a colony, it adopted typical Roman practices and offices such as the Augustales and sacred games that commemorated the foundation of the colony. This too tallies with the situation in other colonies in the empire. Palmyra, the third and last example, is perhaps the most telling. In spite of the local character of its pantheon, the imperial cult was amazingly well integrated in the civic, communal life of this desert city. Although it was not an important Hellenistic city, like the cities studied by Price in Asia Minor, the imperial cult was dominated by the Palmyrene elite and was well integrated into its civic cult. As far as we can see, the imperial cult was not altered in any significant way because of its integration in the religious life of the oasis. Apparently, into matters of the imperial cult, one did not need to be a Greek city to behave like one.

⁷⁵ G. Bowersock, 'A New Antonine Inscription from the Syrian Desert,' in *Chiron* 6 (1976), 349-355.

⁷⁶ Cf. the list of inscriptions in Yon, *Notables de Palmyre*, 123, with a list of inscriptions that testify to symposiarchs of the priests of Bel who set up statues for members of the imperial house on p. 42-43.