



Summary :

Alexander the Great introduced the attribution of cult-type honours to the ruler. From the beginning of the 3rd century BC onwards this practice was adopted by the monarchs and successors of Alexander, who were honoured in a god-like manner, with sacrifices, altars, statues, temples, priests, processions, festivals, epithets, etc. The cult was organized on two levels. On the city level, the cult was established through a decree as a token of thanksgiving for the benefactions of the ruler. Dynastic cults, however, were also established by the rulers themselves, to whom a divine substance was attributed. The main ritual was the sacrifice of an animal or the libation over an altar. The temples were usually built in the large cities and priests existed mainly in cities which had temples dedicated to the ruler. The celebrations for the rulers usually bore the name of the honoured person and they comprised processions, sacrifices and games. The epithets which accompanied the ruler's name reflected the reasons and the conditions under which a cult was established, whereas many cities gave to a tribe or a month his name in his honour.

Date

Hellenistic period

Geographical Location

Asia Minor

1. Introduction

The cult of rulers and the successors of [Alexander the Great](#) by the Greeks of Asia Minor constitutes one of the most important facets of the political and religious life of the Hellenistic cities.¹ The ruler cult, however, had also another character. It was the most efficient way to incorporate the central power into the political and ideological system of a city. The cults of the gods was a readily available model for the adoption of an alien political power, on which the city, albeit autonomous, was depending.²

2. Alexander's myth

It was Alexander the Great who introduced the attribution of cult honours towards the ruler. His personality and achievements, most important of which was the conquest of the East, contributed greatly to the transformation of the perception of the monarch. Two events, allowing for ambivalent explanations, constitute the historical landmarks: the prostration before him at Bactria both by the locals and by the Macedonians (327 BC) and his visit to the oracle of Ammon Ra in the oasis of Siwa in Egypt (331 BC), which resulted in his acknowledgement as son of the god by the local priesthood. The honours which followed on behalf of the Greek cities of Asia Minor were divine. Alexander was worshipped as "liberator", "saviour" and "benefactor", because he had freed them from the Persian rule.³

3. The Cult of the Successors (Diadochoi and Epigonoi)

From the beginning of the 3rd century BC onwards, the cult of the Hellenistic rulers was organized simultaneously on two levels: a) the cults founded spontaneously by the cities and (b) the dynastic cults established officially by the monarchs themselves throughout their kingdom.⁴

3.1. Worship in the cities

The cult was established by a city decree. The honours were attributed as a token of thanksgiving for the benefactions that the monarchs had offered to the city (protection from barbarian invasions, grain supply, tax alleviation, public works such as theatres, stoas, gymnasia etc.). Naturally, the kings were in position of offering the largest and most expensive services to a city, and therefore they received honours appropriate for gods, both in form and as far as the attribution was concerned, such as sacrifices, altars, statues, temples, priests, processions, festivals, games, epithets etc.⁵ By establishing a cult, the city hoped that the benefactions would be repeated and in fact that the cult would contribute to that.⁶



3.2. Dynastic cults

The beginning of rulers cult in Seleucid Asia (beginning of the 3rd century B.C.) and slightly later in the kingdoms of [Pergamon](#) and [Commagene](#) trace back to the cult that Alexander's successors established in his honour. In contrast to a city cult, which was more personalised and directed towards a ruler in thanksgiving for his benefactions, the dynastic cult was attributed to the divine substance or quality of the king, which sanctified the regime of absolutism. With the dynastic cult the founder of the dynasty was connected to each king, who thus solidified his position on the throne and rendered his own power legitimate and prestigious, thus creating a centre of legitimisation towards the central power, which was hence considered as holy.⁷

In the Seleucid kingdom the cult must have been established by the first Seleucids, possibly by [Antiochos I](#), who dedicated a temple to his father [Seleucus I](#) in [Seleuceia](#). However, the most important testimony for the organization of a dynastic cult is a decree by [Antiochos III of Syria](#) (194/3 BC), with which the king established a state cult in honour of his ancestors and his wife Laodice. This cult was organized in the example of his own cult and was valid in all [satrapies](#) of his kingdom, each one of which would have its own supreme priest.⁸ The official dynastic cult appears as a factor for unity in a vast and crowded kingdom, which stretched from western Asia Minor to present-day Iran, where various nations co-existed.

A typical example of the institutionalisation of a cult by the ruler himself is dated towards the end of the Hellenistic era. This is a Hellenistic inscription, which belonged to a magnificent monument, set up on the summit of mount [Nemrut Dağ](#) on the Taurus by [Antiochos I of Commagene](#) (62 BC). The monarch, who dedicated this monument to all the gods and to his heroic ancestors, relates the virtues of his double origin and education, Greek and Persian, the existence of a priest and the organization of festivals to commemorate his birthday and his ascension to the throne. On that monument he appears seated on a throne among four syncretistic Greek and Oriental deities.⁹

4. Cult practices and institutions

4.1. Sacrifices, altars and temples

The main ritual was the sacrifice of an animal or the [libation](#) over an altar, which was then becoming the focus of the cult and was usually situated in the city Agora (such as the altar of Lysander in [Priene](#)). The temples, which were expensive to construct, were usually built in large cities. The sources usually refer to sanctuaries or shrines for the rulers, in which altars and statues were dedicated (i.e. Eumenes II in [Miletus](#)).

In case the ruler was sharing the same altar or temple with another deity, they were called "symvomoï" or "synnaoi" respectively. The existence of statues of a ruler in the temple of another god did not necessarily mean that the ruler was "synnaos" with that god, as was the case with the honorary statues of Ptolemy I in the [temple of Apollo](#) in Miletus. Cult statues of rulers could be erected in the most crowded spots of the city (such as the statue of [Lysimachos](#) in the Agora of Priene) as well as in gymnasia, which were transformed into important centres of ruler cult, particularly towards the end of the Hellenistic period.¹⁰

4.2. Priests

The first extensive order of priests in honour of a monarch was created for Alexander in many cities of Asia Minor. The priest offices had usually a duration of one year and were almost monopolised by the members of the most prominent and powerful local families. Priests usually appear in the cities that had a temple dedicated to the monarch. Their main duty was to maintain the temple in good condition and to perform the sacrifices. In the cities which did not possess a priestly order, the sacrifices were performed by priests of other deities or by the local magistrates. The monarchs were worshipped as founders of the cities which they had built (Seleucus I in Dura Europos in Syria, possibly Antiochos II in Laodicea ad Lycum) and their priests were usually eponymous, such as those of the heroes and the city founders.¹¹



In the Attalid kingdom the groups of Attalists and Eumenists are attested, which were apparently cult organisations of private character for honouring Attalus and Eumenes respectively, possibly post mortem. The cult of the Attalids was also served by the artists' guild with [Dionysus](#) as protector-god.¹²

4.3. Festivals, processions and games

According to the example of festivals in honour of gods, the equivalent festivals in honour of rulers bore the name of the honoured person (Seleuceia in Erythrae, Antigoneia in the homonymous Syrian city on the [Orontes](#) river etc) and comprised processions, sacrifices and games. Usually they were annual, in honour of the birthday and the ascension day of the ruler, or quinquennial, but there were also some which were celebrated on a monthly basis (such as that of the Pergamene kings in Erythrae, the ephebic games in honour of Seleucus I in Ilion, organized by the [gymnasiarchs](#)). They were celebrated in the sanctuaries and agoras of the cities and started with a procession. The priests of the king and the city magistrates with wreaths on their heads led the procession and the entire population followed dressed in festive garments. Then, a sacrifice took place and the reciting of hymns and paeans in honour of the rulers. Finally, the games started (i.e. music competitions, gymnastics and horse-races) like those in honour of gods, particularly those who were sometimes honoured simultaneously, such as Dionysus.¹³

4.4. Divine epithets

The epithets accompanying the name of the monarch were usually “benefactor” (euergetes), “saviour” (soter) and “god”; the second one was quite often accompanying quite the gods [Zeus](#) and [Asclepios](#). The fact that the king himself could bear several epithets, both in the same and in different cities, constitutes an indication that these epithets did not have the value of names, but rather reflected the reasons and the conditions under which a cult was institutionalised. The rulers were worshipped as benefactors, saviours or gods in return for their services towards the city. Calling the rulers with these epithets did not necessary prove their deification, but it could verify the existence of a cult according to their context.¹⁴ In some cases they were generalised and incorporated in the dynastic cult as an indispensable part of the monarch's titlature. In this way, [Antiochos IV](#) of Syria received the title “theos Epiphanes”, which then became a typical epithet of the Seleucid dynasty.¹⁵

Simultaneously with the cult epithets, which were preserved on the bases of honorary or cultic statues, the rulers often bore divine symbols (the horn of a bull, as a symbol of Dionysus, on coins of [Attalus I](#)) on their statues and their numismatic representations. Quite often the rulers lent their facial characteristics to statues of deities, usually young Dionysus ([Mithridates VI Eupator](#) of Pontus), something totally compatible with the Greek religious mentality.¹⁶

4.5. Tribes and months

Several cities, in order to honour the ruler, gave to their tribes his name (Alexandris in Ilion, Seleucis in Colophon and in Magnesia on the Maeander, Attalis in several other cities). In these cases, the ruler was honoured in a similar way as the city's founder, as hero *archegetes*. During the months bearing the names of the monarchs (Seleucios in Ilion, Antiochios in Laodicea on the Lycus in honour of Antiochos II, Laodiceon, Antiocheon and Stratoniceon in Smyrna) the greater honours were offered to the monarchs and ceremonies were performed.¹⁷

1. The oldest testimony for the attribution of cult honours (sacrifices, paeans, games) to a mortal person is the case of the Spartan general Lysandros in Samos (end of 5th century B.C.). It probably was a post-mortem cult, and consists a sole example of cult behaviour from the classical period; it is explained within the historical context of the end of the Peloponnesian war (Plut. *Lys.* 18.5-10).

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12. Préaux, Cl., *Le monde Héliénistique. La Grèce et l' Orient de la mort d' Alexandre à la conquête romaine de la Grèce*, 323-146 av.J.-C., 1⁴ (Nouvelle Clío, Paris 1997), pp. 264-265 and 267-269. Hansen, E.V., *The Attalids of Pergamon* (Ithaca-New York 1947), pp. 410-426.
13. Habicht, C., *Gottmenschentum und griechische Städte* ² (Zetemata. Monographien zur klassischen Altertumswissenschaft, Heft 14, München 1970, pp. 147-153.
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Egypt After Alexander

http://www.iub.edu/~iuam/online_modules/egypt/portraits.html

Glossary :



gymnasiarch, the

The man responsible for the supervision of the youngsters and the adolescents who were trained at the gymnasia and at the palaestrae. This rank, widely diffused in all cities of the ancient Greek world, constituted a public office which was usually bestowed on the most eminent and rich citizens, since it required great expenses.



libation

A kind of sacrifice. The term libation denotes all religious ceremonies which involve the pouring of various precious liquids, such as wine, incense, honey, and milk, over an altar or onto the ground as an offering to the gods.



satrapy, the

1. Administrative division of the ancient Persian state. 2. The office of a satrap and the period of his government.