



## Summary :

The cult of the Roman emperors was one of the most widespread cults in Asia Minor. It was directly connected with the Roman power and the economic development of the cities.

## Date

Roman period

## Geographical Location

Asia Minor

## 1. Introduction

The imperial cult in the cities of Asia Minor was mainly a Greek practice originating in and evolving from the cult of the gods, the Hellenistic sovereigns, Rome and its officials as well as from the cult of Rome's wealthy benefactors, which evolved into the imperial cult.<sup>1</sup> It was the major way of communication between the Greek part of the population and the imperial power; it declared the loyalty of the subjects while it also offered an opportunity for them to enjoy gifts and special services. The rites of the imperial cult were neither temporary nor incidental; they were established on a permanent and long-term basis.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. Establishment of the Cult

The imperial cult in Asia Minor must have appeared in 29 BC, when [Augustus](#) consented to the construction of imperial temples in [Ephesus](#) and [Pergamon](#). The temple at Ephesus would be built for the Romans, dedicated to Rome and to Augustus' deified father, [Julius Caesar](#), while the temple at Pergamon would be built for the citizens of Asia Minor, dedicated to himself and Rome. In the province of [Bithynia](#), similar temples were built in [Nicaea](#) and [Nicomedia](#).<sup>3</sup> The initiative for the establishment of the cult belonged to the cities, based on a decision by the local authorities, although the possibility of a discreet intervention by the emperor or the proconsul of the province himself cannot be excluded in many cases.<sup>4</sup>

For this reason, the imperial cult was established mainly as a political cult, and its influence extended to many aspects of the public and the social life of the cities. The events which were related to the imperial cult were incorporated in the topography and the institutions of the city and were approved by the authorities, while in most cases they were funded by wealthy citizens.<sup>5</sup> However, the most crucial part of the cult organisation was undertaken by the provincial assemblies ('Koina'), which in the Imperial Period existed precisely for providing services to the imperial cult.<sup>6</sup>

## 3. Priesthood

The constitution of the priesthood of the imperial cult, either in the city or the province level ('Koina'), was modelled upon the priesthood of the cult of the Greek deities. The development of the imperial cult in Asia Minor and the increase of cult centres in a number of cities, such as Pergamon, [Smyrna](#), [Miletus](#) and Ephesus, provided the conditions for the establishment of several priestly offices.<sup>7</sup> The supreme ruler of the [Koinon of Asia](#), who held the highest office in the province, bore the title of archpriest of [Sebastos](#) (Augustus) or [Sebastoi](#), and his main duty was the organisation of the cult, either in the capital of the Koinon or in the [neokoros](#) city, which was granted the privilege to build a provincial imperial temple. The archpriest was usually escorted by an archpriestess, in most cases his own wife, who served the cult of the empress.<sup>8</sup>

Besides the title of the archpriest, another title is attested: it was formed as a compound of the name of the region with the addition of the suffix –arch and indicated the authority of a person in a specific geographic area ([Asiarch](#), [Lyciarch](#), [Bythiniarch](#), [Pontarch](#)). In the



[province of Asia](#) the same person bore the titles of the archpriest and the Asiarch. The fact that the sources mention asiarchs of Asia, of the homeland, of a city, of the temples of a city, etc., resulted in debates about the determination of their authority and jurisdiction, although none of the theories suggested so far is satisfactory or all-encompassing. Nonetheless, it seems that the title was not honorary; it corresponded to that of the archpriest and was created to meet the increasing administrative demands of a multifaceted, evolving cult, which apparently funded the games and agonothesia or –most possibly– the presidency of the Koinon.<sup>9</sup>

As a rule, the (arch)priests and the Asiarchs were members of the wealthiest and most influential families of the local aristocracy and often monopolised the priestly posts of the imperial cult; they were Roman citizens, many of them pursued a career in the provincial imperial administration and became equites and senators.<sup>10</sup>

#### 4. Architecture

The places of imperial cult were usually called Kaisareia or Sebasteia; they could be temples or even precincts with altars and imperial statues. More than 80 temples are known in about 60 cities in Asia Minor.<sup>11</sup> They were modelled after Greek temples and were magnificent, peripteral, hexastyle or octastyle, in the Corinthian order. They were constructed in the centre of the city, at the agora, the acropolis, near the propylon, at the theatre, at the [gymnasium](#) and elsewhere, which indicates the way the Roman presence affected local architecture and city-planning.

The organisation of the public space was more rationalised.<sup>12</sup> The temples and precincts of local deities accommodated the cult of the Sebastoi in specially designated spaces; this was the case in the [Artemisium of Ephesus](#), the [Asclepieion of Pergamon](#) and the [temple of Artemis at Sardis](#). However, contrary to the prevailing view thus far, in most cases the emperors were inferior to the traditional deities and several temples dedicated to them, such as the temple of Caracalla at Pergamon and that of [Hadrian at Cyzicus](#), seem in reality to have been dedicated to Asclepius and Zeus respectively, while they secondarily served the imperial cult.<sup>13</sup> Some buildings were dedicated exclusively to the Sebastoi. They were usually rectangular and in the form of a temple, with a [pronaos](#), surrounded by colonnades. The imperial statues stood in the interior these buildings along the walls, while the colossal devotional statues together with the statues of deities occupied one side of the building.<sup>14</sup> Apart from temples, virtually any public building could accommodate the imperial cult. The stoas and the [gymnasia](#) had specially designated spaces for the imperial cult.<sup>15</sup>

#### 5. Celebrations and Games

The celebrations in honour of the emperors were among the most important institutional events of the imperial cult in Asia Minor. They contributed greatly to the social, economic and cultural development of a city or an area. They were generally called Kaisareia or Sebastá or were named after the emperors, for example Hadrianeia, Antonineia or Severeia.

The celebrations were modelled after local festivals held in honour of gods and heroes, while they often took place in the same period and included chiefly processions, sacrifices and games. This connection augmented the incorporation of the imperial cult into the religious and cult system of a city and to the equation of the emperor with the respective local deities, which is indicated by the double names (Asclepieia and Kaisareia or Sebastá, etc.). The celebrations were regularly held every four years, although there were also annual and bi-annual celebrations, and were usually held to commemorate the emperor's birthday. Other events, such as the ascension of a new Sebastos to the throne or the announcement of good news, such as a victorious campaign, the exposure of a plot, the recovery of the emperor or a member of his family, also constituted opportunities for celebration. The celebrations could last several days (the celebration of the birthday of Antoninus Pius in Ephesus lasted five days) and were marked by large numbers of participants who came from both the city or the Koinon which organised the celebration and the neighbouring cities and towns.<sup>16</sup> Every day sacrifices were performed and money was distributed among the participants, while in certain cases the celebrations included duels.<sup>17</sup>

#### 6. Imperial Statues



The types of the [imperial statues](#) were created in Rome before their plaster or ceramic casts and models were carried to the provinces, where they were reproduced in marble, bronze and precious materials at local workshops. For this reason, the statues of an emperor are extremely similar to each other, regardless of provenience. The emperors are represented either wearing a breastplate, with the characteristic symbols of the gods, or clad in a toga, the typical Roman garment. The emperors' visual representation *par excellence* can be found without doubt on the obverse of coins, although such representations could also occur on any object of public or private daily use (vessels and lamps), as well as on the wreaths with imperial busts worn by the priests of the Sebastoi.<sup>18</sup>

Imperial statues were on display in the busiest parts of the city, such as the agora, the temples and precincts of the gods, the [theatres](#), the stoa, the gymnasia, the libraries and the [fountains](#). The statues were the emperor's substitutes, thus they were deemed sacred, although they were not always defined as cult objects. At Ephesus, the Roman presence assumed the form of a procession, whereupon statues of the emperor and members of the imperial family as well as statues of deities, statues of personified ideas and benefactors of the city were transported from the temple of Artemis to the city's [theatre](#). The assignment of this task to the imperial priests, and to individuals and councils (or unions) of religious character was considered honorary. The places of imperial cult served as refuges and asylums; in case a slave sought shelter there, all attempts to recapture him ceased.<sup>19</sup>

## 7. Sacrifices

The performance of sacrifices constituted the cult practice *par excellence* in Greek religion. Sacrifices were performed by local rulers and citizens on public and private occasions. The most common form of sacrifice was incense-burning and the slaughter of an animal, usually a bull, on the altar, accompanied by the chanting of hymns. The sacrifices to the emperors were modelled after the sacrifices to gods rather than heroes (enagismos and holocaust).<sup>20</sup>

There were two types of imperial sacrifices: to the emperors and for the emperors. The former type was rarer and presupposed the identification of the Sebastoi with gods. The imperial priests sacrificed to the emperors by invoking their divine nature, like the priests invoked the divine nature of gods in their sacrifices. The latter type of imperial sacrifice was more common. The sacrifices were addressed to the gods and asked for the health, salvation and eternal reign of the emperors, according to the annual vota (wishes) in Rome at the beginning of the year. The signifying difference between the two types of sacrifice enhances the understanding of the place of the emperor in the cult system of a society or a country.

This distinction becomes clearer when it is examined in connection with the ritual practices of monotheistic Judaism. The [Jews](#) refused to sacrifice to the emperors, thus not recognising them as gods, but they regularly sacrificed and prayed to their god for them. The Christians adopted a different approach; in their devotional system the sacrifice took the form of the Eucharist, thus being completely opposed to idolatrous practices. The Christians could pray to God for the salvation of the emperors, but they could not sacrifice. This reluctance to conform to the existing cult system was the main reason for their successive persecutions (e.g., the persecutions of [Decius](#) and [Diocletian](#)).<sup>21</sup>

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1. Habicht, C., *Gottmenschentum und griechische Städte* (Zetemata. Monographien zur klassischen Altertumswissenschaft, Heft 14, München 1970); Gauthier, P., *Les cités grecques et leurs bienfaiteurs* (Supplément BCH 12, Athènes – Paris 1985); Quaß, F., *Die Honoratiorenschicht in den Städten des griechischen Ostens* (Stuttgart 1993); Sartre, M., *L'Orient romain. Provinces et sociétés provinciales en Méditerranée orientale d'Auguste aux Sévères; 31 av. J.-C.-235 apr. J.-C.* (Paris 1991), pp. 105-106.

2. Price, S.R.F., *Rituals and Power. Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge 1998), pp. 1-22, 53-77. Important sources of the imperial cult are the hundreds of epigraphic texts reporting the activities of the local aristocracy, which mainly practised the imperial cult, organised celebrations and games and performed sacrifices. Of great importance are also the archaeological evidence about the existence of temples and statues, whose form is also completed by their representations on coins. Finally, the literary early Christian tradition is also of great value.



3. Dio Cassius, 50.20.6-9.
4. The decision of the cities of the Koinon of Asia (9 BC), which modified the local calendar so that it would start with Augustus' birthday, was made following a proposal of the proconsul Paulus Fabius Maximus, *SEG IV*, 490. Laffi, U., 'Le iscrizioni relative all'introduzione nel 9 a.C. del nuovo calendario della provincia d'Asia', *SCO 16* (1967), pp. 5-98.
5. Sartre, M., *L'Orient romain. Provinces et sociétés provinciales en Méditerranée orientale d'Auguste aux Sévères; 31 av. J.-C.-235 apr. J.-C.* (Paris 1991), pp. 106-109.
6. Deininger, J., *Die Provinziallandtage der römischen Kaiserzeit von Augustus bis zum Ende des dritten Jahrhunderts n. Chr.* (Vestigia 6, München 1965), pp. 53-55; Millar, F., *The Emperor in the Roman World, 31 BC-AD 337* (London 1977), pp. 363-463; Sartre, M., *L'Orient romain. Provinces et sociétés provinciales en Méditerranée orientale d'Auguste aux Sévères; 31 av. J.-C.-235 apr. J.-C.* (Paris 1991), pp. 109-116.
7. Deininger, J., *Die Provinziallandtage der römischen Kaiserzeit von Augustus bis zum Ende des dritten Jahrhunderts n. Chr.* (Vestigia 6, München 1965), pp. 37-50.
8. See Robert, L., 'Le culte de Caligula à Milet et la province d'Asie', *Hellenica VII* (1949), pp. 206-238, as well as about other priestly offices of the imperial cult; Campanile, M.D., *I sacerdoti del koinon d'Asia (I sec. a.C.-III sec. d.C.). Contributo allo studio della romanizzazione delle élites provinciali nell'Oriente greco* (Studi Ellenistici 7, Pisa 1994), pp. 18-27.
9. About the different opinions, see Rossner, M., 'Asiarchen und Archiereis Asias', *Studii Clasice 16* (1974), pp. 101-142; Kearsley, R.A., 'Asiarchs, Archiereis, and the Archieriai of Asia', *GRBS 27* (1986), pp. 183-192. Complete list given by Friesen, St.J., *Twice Neokoros. Ephesus, Asia and the Cult of the Flavian Imperial Family* (Leiden – New York – Köln 1993), pp. 169-208; portrait made by Campanile, M.D., *I sacerdoti del koinon d'Asia (I sec. a.C.-III sec. d.C.). Contributo allo studio della romanizzazione delle élites provinciali nell'Oriente greco* (Studi Ellenistici 7, Pisa 1994).
10. Campanile, M.D., *I sacerdoti del koinon d'Asia (I sec. a.C.-III sec. d.C.). Contributo allo studio della romanizzazione delle élites provinciali nell'Oriente greco* (Studi Ellenistici 7, Pisa 1994), pp. 159-175.
11. List given by Price, S.R.F., *Rituals and Power. Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge 1998), pp. 249-274.
12. Price, S.R.F., *Rituals and Power. Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge 1998), pp. 136-146.
13. Price, S.R.F., *Rituals and Power. Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge 1998), pp. 146-156.
14. Price, S.R.F., *Rituals and Power. Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge 1998), pp. 156-162.
15. Price, S.R.F., *Rituals and Power. Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge 1998), pp. 140-146.
16. Price, S.R.F., *Rituals and Power. Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge 1998), pp. 101-131.
17. Friesen, S.J., *Twice Neokoros. Ephesus, Asia and the Cult of the Flavian Imperial Family* (Leiden – New York – Köln 1993), p. 98.
18. Zanker, P., *Augustus und die Macht der Bilder*<sup>2</sup> (München 1990)
19. Price, S.R.F., *Rituals and Power. Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge 1998), pp. 170-206.
20. Enagismos: Purgation ceremony. Holocaust: Sacrifice followed by complete cremation of the animal.



21. Price, S.R.F., 'Between Man and God: sacrifice in the Roman imperial cult', *JRS* 70 (1980), pp. 28-43; Price, S.R.F., *Rituals and Power. Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge 1998), pp. 207-233. See also Friesen, St.J., *Twice Neokoros. Ephesus, Asia and the Cult of the Flavian Imperial Family* (Leiden – New York – Köln 1993), pp. 149-150, according to whom the two types of sacrifice are not incompatible and do not indicate any differences between the man and god; they are complementary parts of the same ritual system.

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## Glossary :

	<b>gymnasium</b> The gymnasium was one of the most important centres of public life in Greek cities. The institution of the gymnasium, directly connected with the development of the Greek city, aimed to create virtuous citizens and gallant warriors. As educational institutions of public character, the gymnasia were intended for the physical and theoretical education of the young and consisted of separate spaces for special purposes.
	<b>pronaos</b> The porch in front of the cella of a temple
	<b>sebastos</b> ("venerable") Title of honour created by Constantine IX the Monomachos in the middle of the 11th century. Originated from the translation of the imperial adjective augustus. This title was given successively to the two mistresses of the emperor.