

BMCR 2022.04.37

“Tra umano e divino”. Forme e limiti del culto degli imperatori nel mondo romano

Cesare Letta, *“Tra umano e divino”. Forme e limiti del culto degli imperatori nel mondo romano. La Casa dei Sapienti*, 3. Lugano: Agorà & Co., 2021. Pp. 224. ISBN 9788889526736 €30,00.

Review by

Luca Lorenzon, Université de Liège. luca.lorenzonz@uliege.be

[The Table of contents is listed below.]

The complex religious and political phenomenon traditionally referred to as “imperial cult” has always aroused substantial interest among scholars. It has generated an enormous bibliography, particularly since the beginning of this century. Studies focusing on specific regions or aspects (priesthoods, festivals, rituals, *etc.*) have considerably increased in recent years. Along with this profusion of specialized studies of smaller size (we should nevertheless mention some extended studies, such as Kantirea 2007 or Camia 2011),^[1] the absence of a synthetic work is particularly noteworthy. Indeed, since Gradel’s *Emperor Worship and Roman Religion*, published in 2002,^[2] no scholar has provided an overview of the religious phenomenon taking recent studies into account.

This book, by Cesare Letta, has been motivated by this lacuna. Consisting of lecture notes given at the University of Pisa from the 1990s onwards, this book is essentially intended as a synthesis aiming to lay the foundations for future reflections on the imperial cult. It begins with an introduction by Alessandro Biancalani, director of the collection *La casa dei sapienti*, whose focus on the relationship between Christians and imperial worship reveals the interest of the Italian academic world (and more generally of the Italian public) in the establishment of Christianity in the Roman Empire. After the introduction comes a presentation of the work by John Scheid, professor emeritus at the *Collège de France*, whose prestige in the field of Roman religion lends legitimacy to the author’s approach.

The so-called “imperial cult” brings together a series of disparate but complementary political and religious realities. In Chapter 1, Letta points out that even ritual acts that were not directly devoted to the emperor contributed to the construction of the sacredness of his persona. However, some suggestions in this first introductory chapter are unfortunate. The subchapter “uomo o dio?” and the question it presents suggests unfamiliarity with the basic premise of Greek and Roman polytheisms. This question brings the debate into the ontological field, inherited from the Christians and largely foreign to polytheistic conceptions. The idea of “divinità relativa” mentioned on page 6, while convenient at a conceptual level, cannot by itself fill this gap. A reaffirmation of the central role of rituals as an essential tool in the process of creating the divine would have been welcome here. In fact, such reaffirmations have been provided consistently in recent years by scholars mainly working on Hellenistic ruler cult, and should be put forward in this study. The relevance of chapter VII, “Venerazione di un uomo o adorazione di un dio?“, could thus have been strengthened. It should also be pointed out that the Hellenistic precedents (p. 6-7) are only superficially taken into account in contrast to Roman precedents. The next section provides a short but satisfactory explanation of the birth of imperial cult worship under Augustus.

The structure of the book between chapters II and VI, reveals the desire of the author to classify the phenomenon of the emperor according to the institutional source of the cult and to its recipient, whether it was the emperor during his reign or after his death. This approach, centered on the concept of agency, makes it possible to truly highlight the dynamic of creation and implementation of the cult. In addition, it instantly underlines the specificities of the various agents according to the institutional and geographical context in which they operated. In this way, the author succeeds in presenting an overview of a complex phenomenon which contains a considerable number of religious and political realities. It is thus firmly established that it was mainly under the influence of Augustus that the imperial cult was conceived, in accordance with the religious traditions of the republican era. A fundamental distinction is also made between the worship of meritorious emperors after their death, and the worship of the living emperor, which was expressed through indirect rituals. One of the strong points of this book is to reaffirm the religious value of the cult to the *genius* of the emperor as well as the cult of the imperial virtues. This approach also makes it possible to reaffirm, particularly on page 135, that provincial worship, mainly in the Greek speaking world, did not follow the same patterns as worship at the capital. Indeed, it seems that Augustus’ action was essentially limited to accepting, refusing or tempering the honors spontaneously proclaimed by the Greek cities, in line with the Hellenistic tradition.

Finally, in Chapter VIII, the author analyses the tense relationship between Christianity and imperial worship. A brief study of the Greek vocabulary used by Paul of Tarsus in the first letter to the Corinthians to describe his views of imperial worship sheds light on the causes of his opposition. This provides a solid foundation for exploring successive eras, especially those of persecutions of the Christians.

This book as a whole is minimalistic in its approach: the use of footnotes is limited, and the final bibliography is far from exhaustive and only partially reflects the considerable number of studies on imperial worship conducted over the last decades. This minimalism comes from the author’s intent to create an introductory work. However, the desire to write a synthesis did not prevent the author from developing some personal hypotheses. On several occasions, Letta contradicts the proposals of Gradel, whose work is regularly considered a reference. For example, he convincingly argues that Julius Caesar had initiated a process of being honored as a deity already during his lifetime (p. 10-13 and 17-22). The deification of the dictator is thus presented as the culmination of a heated debate in Rome at the end of the Republic, as briefly indicated in the pages dedicated to Roman precedents.

In conclusion, this work’s main asset is its successful synthesis of the topic, as intended by the author. The simplicity of the writing combined with the division of the book into relatively short sub-chapters makes it easy to read. The author also makes a systematic effort to present the texts studied in their original language and with his own translations into Italian. In addition, epigraphic and literary sources are considered complementary to one another, without suggesting that the contemporary discussion of imperial worship, often controversial in nature, was a reality constantly underlying the rituals devoted to the emperors.

The whole work is accompanied by three detailed indices, in which literary and epigraphic sources are considered separately. The book is an interesting teaching tool that could prove itself extremely useful in a Roman history course. With this in mind, the affordable price offered by the publishing house Agorà & Co. is a strong argument for its wider distribution, particularly among students at Italian universities and may be a valuable tool that establishes itself in the Italian academic landscape for quite some time.

Table of contents

A. Biancalani, *Introduzione*, p. IX

J. Scheid, *Presentazione*, p. XIII

C. Letta, *Premessa*, p. XVII

I. Il culto imperiale come problema, p. 1

II. Il culto di stato dei divi, p. 15

III. Il culto di stato dell’imperatore vivente, p. 35

IV. Il culto pubblico in Italia, p. 101

V. Il culto privato, p. 117

VI. Il culto provinciale, p. 125

VII. Venerazione di un uomo o adorazione di un dio?, p. 137

VIII. Il culto imperiale e i Cristiani, p. 147

IX. Nel segno dell’ambiguità, p. 163

Abbreviazioni bibliografiche, p. 167

Opere citate, p. 169

Indice delle fonti letterarie, p. 179

Indice delle fonti epigrafiche, p. 187

Indice dei nomi e delle cose notevoli, p. 193

Notes

[1] Camia, Francesco (2011): *Theoi Sebastoi. Il Culto Degli Imperatori Romani in Grecia (Provincia Achaia) Nel Secondo Secolo d.C.*, Athènes. Kantirea, Eva (2007): *Les Dieux et Les Dieux Augustes. Le Culte Impérial En Grèce Sous Les Julio-Claudiens et Les Flaviens* (Meletemata, volume 50), Athènes.

[2] Gradel, Ittai (2002): *Emperor Worship and Roman Religion*, Oxford; New York.

Comments

BMCR provides the opportunity to comment on reviews in order to enhance scholarly communication. Comments are moderated. We ask that comments be substantive in content and civil in tone and those that do not adhere to these guidelines will not be published. Expressions of thanks or praise should be sent directly to the reviewer, using the email address in the review.

Your email address will not be published. ×

Comment

Name *

Email *

Website

Post Comment