

IMPERIAL CULT AND CHRISTIANITY

HOW AND TO WHAT EXTENT WERE
THE IMPERIAL CULT AND EMPEROR WORSHIP
THOUGHT TO PRESERVE STABILITY IN THE ROMAN WORLD?

ZS. MAGYAR

Department of Medieval Studies, Central European University,
Nádor utca 9. H-1051 Budapest, Hungary
E-mail: zsolt_magyar@ceu.budapest.edu

Abstract: The imperial cult played important role throughout the whole antique world. It reached Rome with Caesar. In the centuries following him the divinity of the emperors were accepted by the whole population of the empire. The cult – in the eyes of the Roman population – assured the wellbeing of the state and its inhabitants. The only exception were Christians (together with Jews), who on the bases of their faith regarded emperor worship as idolatry. This is why, they became, in the eyes of the contemporary Roman population, atheists and the enemy of the state. This paper deals with the new results of the research of the imperial cult of Rome and its relationship with Christians.

Keywords: Imperial cult, emperor worship, Romanisation, apotheosis, Christians and the Roman state

The research into emperor worship was a popular subject within Roman studies, since in the New Testament this was the main religious practice which was refused by the Early Christians. Everybody knew about this in modern European, Christian society. Recent scholarship shed light to the hitherto forgotten aspects of emperor worship in the Roman Empire.¹ Gradel draws our attention to the relevance of the cult, which was so important to the inhabitants of the Roman Empire.² Curchin argues that amongst his political functions the emperor was a superhuman, paramount leader in the eyes of the people, especially in the provinces.³ However, I have to point out here that the situation in the city of Rome was slightly different.

The state cult in Rome was older than the Empire. The goddess Roma had been worshipped in the triumviral period and Venus Genetrix, mother of Aeneas – and henceforth the mother of the Roman state – had been worshipped before Caesar's time.⁴ The ruler cult was not new for the inhabitants of the eastern part of the Empire, too. In Egypt, the pharaohs were divine kings, and Alexander the Great was worshipped as a god by the Greeks. Caesar's idea was to link the state cult, stressing his family's mythical ascendance from Venus, and the ruler cult. However, the ruler cult in Rome has developed fully only during the reign of Augustus. The main supporter of the cult was the Roman administrative system, which gave many advantages to the priests, and all of those had been involved in the imperial cult. As a result, the imperial cult flourished for centuries. The emperor cult became the routine expression of allegiance to the state and the monarchy under Augustus.⁵ It was not something emotional, but rather ritualistic. Furthermore, its political function was important too. 'Through the imperial cult ties with and orientation toward Rome took on a new dimension'.⁶ On the other hand, other important aspect of the cult was to ensure the *pax deorum*, the peace of the gods or in a wider meaning, the well-being and peace of the Empire and the inhabitants.

¹ See PRICE 1984 for the Christianisation of the imperial cult.

² GRADEL 2002, 262.

³ CURCHIN 1996, 144.

⁴ REYNOLDS 1996.

⁵ ZANKER 1988, 299.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 305–306.

I. THE DIVINITY OF THE EMPEROR

Did the Romans believe in the divinity of the emperor? The term: believe is not exactly adequate here. Belief refers rather to an emotional movement and is a Christianising term.⁷ The main point is that emperors were worshipped as gods, and the worship was more a ritual than a question of belief in Roman times. It was rather a mechanical process. Divinity in pagan religions was connected with status, not with the transcendent, like in Christianity. The emperor had the highest status in the society, and hence reached the divinity by his status. According that idea Fishwick examines the question rather in connection with status than with belief.⁸ People experienced the incredibly high status of the emperor in their everyday life. When, after the AD 62 earthquake Pompeii had been rebuilt, the main contributor to the building program was Nero. The inhabitants of the town saw how the emperor had the power (and wealth) to rebuild the whole settlement from its ruins. It was something in the eyes of the contemporary inhabitants which was above the capability of a human.⁹

On the other hand, compared with the traditional gods, emperors were far less powerful. Gradel draws our attention to the fact that emperors were elevated to divine status from their human status; hence, they differed from the traditional gods. It is better to speak about divine status than divinity regarding the emperors. However, from the point of view of an average individual the ritual and worship were the most important and these were the same when they worshipped the traditional gods or the emperors. The theological aspects belonged to the philosophy, hence did not affect most of the people.¹⁰ Zanker introduces a special status to the emperors when, he suggests that, especially in early imperial times, emperors were not treated as fully equal to the gods, but the emperors were set beside the gods.¹¹ Liertz mentions two interesting points in connection with the human nature of the divine emperors, firstly the emperors' vulnerability to illnesses, and secondly that the cult was a conscious act of loyalty to the maintenance of the political system.¹² For the first problem Gradel found a perfect solution: in Antiquity only the spirit of the emperor was divine and ascended into the heaven; the mortal body of the emperor was a different case.¹³ This is the reason why on the *mausolea* of the *divi* we can never read among their titles the title of *divus*; their divinity did not belong to their body. The second point seems to be right and refers to the special character of the cult. The heaven was full of gods; it was more important for which area the god was responsible than to be regarded as having pure divinity. Augustus, as a new *divus*, was placed in the lowest rank between the gods, but his status as a god of the Roman state made him important.¹⁴ From human point of view, Augustus' status was far above any other person, but his status was rather a question of power and position than a divine nature.¹⁵ Amongst the gods the *divus* was rather weak.

On the way to being a divine state god, the *apotheosis* (Fig. 1) was an important step.¹⁶ Once they were deified, emperors received public worship (with the exception of some minor imperial figures, which were deified, but never received public worship). However, the research of Gradel shows that their cult is almost entirely absent from the private sphere.¹⁷ The existence of the cult of the *divi* or *divae* relied on the existence of temples. If they had temples dedicated to their cult, it usually remained prosperous for a long time, however, if not, the cult of that particular divine emperor has died out quickly.¹⁸ Dedications after Augustus' time, such as those of Caligula's sister, Drusilla or Nero's baby daughter cause some problems. It is difficult to accept that their divinity was ever taken seriously. However, because of their connection of the imperial cult it is right to call them divine. After Tiberius' time every emperor who left heirs (who usually asked for their father's deification) have been all deified.¹⁹ The title of *divus* survived the third century crisis and was still common in the fourth century AD, but not as important, as it was before. Gradel argues that emperor worship as a state cult was abolished by the time of Maximianus in the 230s. However, the cult could continue in some provinces (as several evidence prove this) and in special cases within the army.²⁰

⁷ PRICE 1984, 11.

⁸ FISHWICK 2002, 203.

⁹ DOBBINS 1996, 112.

¹⁰ GRADEL 2002, 267.

¹¹ ZANKER 1988, 298–299.

¹² Cited in GORDON 2003, 261–262.

¹³ GRADEL 2002, 322–323.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 270.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 268.

¹⁶ FERGUSON 1978, 778; GRADEL 2002, 305–320.

¹⁷ GRADEL 2002, 343–345.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 348.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 287.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 364–367.



Fig. 1. The *apotheosis* of Antoninus Pius and Faustina (after HESBERG 1978, 990)

II. THE ROLE OF THE IMPERIAL CULT WITHIN THE SPREAD OF THE ROMAN POWER

The issue mentioned in the title of that section dominates the recent literature as the main issue in connection with the emperor cult. Most of the papers written on the subject accept that Romanisation and the emperor cult went together. For example Fishwick presents this argument in the following way: ‘By and large provincial cult in the West appears as an instrument of imperial policy, a device that could be manipulated in whichever direction the purposes of the central authority might require.’²¹ Hoff in the conclusion of his paper also suggests that Romanisation and the emperor cult went hand in hand.²² In another place Fishwick writes that ‘The imperial cult was naturally a key propaganda of official ideology’.²³ He highlights the political importance of the emperor cult in contrast with the overwhelming discussion of the emperor cult under the heading of religion in other literature. Gradel argues that the reason that the worship of the *divi* existed so long was because people believed in their divinity.²⁴ I would argue that there were other reasons (for example political ones) behind the popularity of the emperor worship.

However, if one thinks that in every case the Romans forced the imperial cult to the locals in the provinces, this could be false. In Central Spain, the cult was introduced by the Romans but developed as a local phenomenon.²⁵ The main power behind the cult was the local elite. Within the area where there was very little immigration and no colonisation at the time of Augustus, the emperor cult could only spread among the local, indigenous people.²⁶ What was the main reason behind that? Well, to be a priest of the imperial cult was an important step on the career ladder in the provinces. As a result of that, from the mid first century AD in Spain temples of the imperial cult had been built in Tarraco (Tarragona, Spain) and in Augusta Emerita (Mérida, Spain). In the provincial

²¹ FISHWICK 2002, 219.

²² HOFF 1996, 200.

²³ FISHWICK 2002, 198.

²⁴ GRADEL 2002.

²⁵ CURCHIN 1996, 157.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 145.

capitals large monumental complexes had been built as well. All over the Iberian Peninsula imperial portraits, statues, *fora* and public buildings associated with the emperor worship had been built. Epigraphic evidence also shows the presence of *flamines* and *seviri Augustales*, the two important priestly orders of the imperial cult. Altars dedicated to the Numen Augusti (Fig. 2) were the monuments of the imperial cult even during the lifetime of the emperor.²⁷ As we see the main point was not really the belief in the emperor's divinity but the connection with the imperial cult and the advantages derived from it.



Fig. 2. Altar, dedicated to the Numen Augusti from Tarraco (after ALFÖLDY 2004, 28)

Far from Spain, in Delos, another inscription had been found. From that we got to know Pammenes, a powerful civic officer who was also the priest of Roma and Augustus.²⁸ The text is dated to between 21 BC and 12 BC, hence it is from Augustus' lifetime. The *princeps* only allowed worshipping his person together with the goddess Roma. However, as early as that time the imperial cult clearly played an important part in one's administrative career. To be a priest of the imperial cult, a *flamen* or *sodales*, was a great advantage during the first two centuries AD, until Caracalla granted Roman citizenship to every free inhabitants of the Empire in AD 212. *Flamines* were granted Roman citizenship because of their office.²⁹ Gordon maintains that, apart from the fact, that to be a priest of the imperial cult was an important part of the local career structure, priests had an important mediation role between the deities and humans, as well. Another role of the priests of the imperial cult was to represent the integration into the civic community the divinised imperial power, in accordance with the local pantheon.³⁰ Especially in the countryside, the imperial cult existed with a strong connection of the local pantheon.

²⁷ ALFÖLDY 2004, 30.

²⁸ HOFF 1996, 191.

²⁹ CURCHIN 1996, 147.

³⁰ GORDON 2003, 262.

There was a strong demand for becoming a part of the imperial cult between wealthy freedmen, as well. With the introduction of the office of the *seviri Augustales*, former slaves could play a role in the imperial cult, and they become the main financial supporters of the cult. To a freedman the traditions of the old republic meant nothing, but the new system and the power of Augustus had an important influence on the freedmen's life. For them every office was inaccessible with the exception of the membership of the college of the *seviri Augustales*, hence this was the greatest aim to them to be achieved.³¹ On many occasions they were wealthy, hence not surprisingly they were willing to pay generous amounts for propagating the imperial cult, if it helped them to be a member of the *Augustales*. The *Augustales* were strongly involved in the imperial cult. However, Gradel argues that they were not priests but an order (*ordo*), little bit like the senatorial or equestrian order. To translate these to municipal level the first order in power were the *decuriones*, but the second in power were the *Augustales*.³² D'Arms also supports this idea, when he suggests that the *Augustales* were a social order, a middle layer next to the municipal *decuriones* rather than priests. However, he does not pay too much attention to their responsibility for maintaining the imperial cult.³³

In Lugdunum (modern Lyon, France) the Altar of the Three Gauls – known from coins – was built in 12 BC³⁴ as a federal sanctuary, a supra regional centre (Fig. 3). Before the building of the altar, a *concilium*, a council of the Gallic tribes had been held in Lugdunum and the priests of the altar kept this *concilium* yearly after the building of the shrine.³⁵ From the Roman point of view the centralised sanctuary for the sixty Gallic tribes unified them in the loyalty to the Romans. There was a competition between the tribes; they competed to decide which tribe could send priests to the annual sacrifice at the shrine. To belong to the priesthood of the Altar of the Three Gauls was a prestigious appointment. Roman citizenship was a prerequisite and it was very expensive. Payments for monuments and games were expected.³⁶

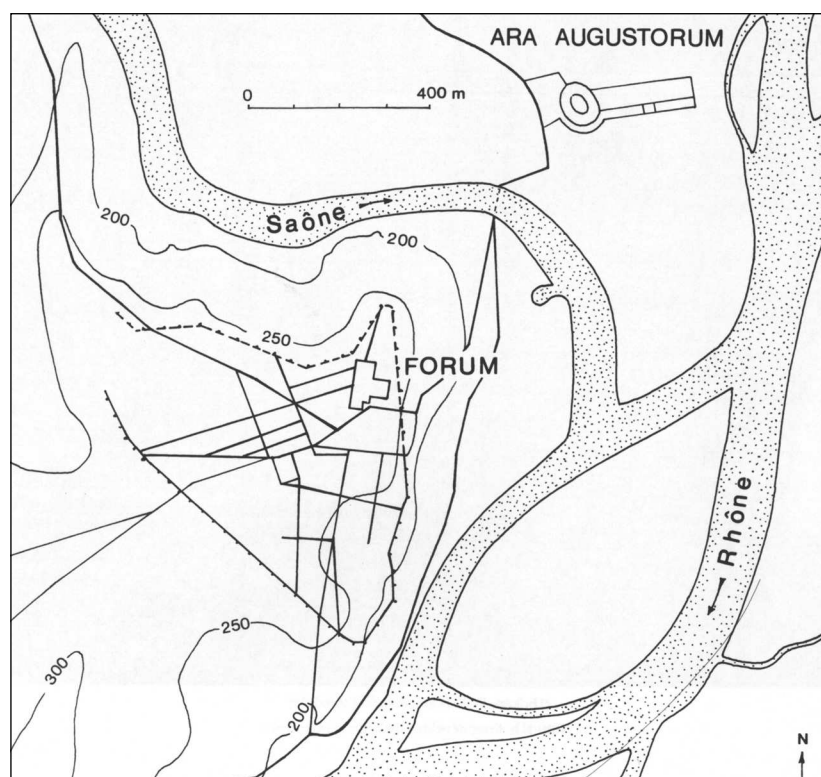


Fig. 3. The possible site of the Ara Augustorum in Lugdunum (after TÓTH 2001, 22)

³¹ ZANKER 1988.

³² GRADEL 2002, 228–231.

³³ D'ARMS 2000, 129.

³⁴ FISHWICK 2002, 9–19; from 10 BC–7 BC according ZANKER 1988, 302.

³⁵ FISHWICK 1987, 97–130.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 135–137.

The Ara Ubiorum in Cologne was built just after Altar of the Three Gauls for the future province of Germania. There were *sacerdotes* – a general name for priests – proclaimed to the cult of Roma and Augustus. There is no evidence for *concilium* of priests, as in Lyon. The reason behind this is possibly the fact that Germania was not an organised province at the time when the altar was built.³⁷ Another important municipal altar in Gaul was in Narbo, built in AD 11, dedicated to the Numen Augusti.³⁸ Later, a temple of the Divus Augustus had been built here.³⁹ Another place for imperial cult was in the area of today's Panzerkleid (Germany), which is depicted in a coin of Claudius.⁴⁰

In Pompeii the imperial cult also left traces, but in the cases of some buildings, it is still in discussion, whether they were connected with the imperial cult or not.⁴¹ For some we have clear evidence, such as the statue of Eumachia in the so-called Eumachia building at the forum. The model of this statue was the empress Livia, who was not only the wife of Augustus but also the first priestess of the deified emperor, as well. Through the imperial cult, the inhabitants of the town had connection with Rome and the living emperor.⁴²

The fact that the imperial cult was present in colonies like Pompeii or Aphrodisias (in Greece) as early in the first century AD shows that the cult of the Roman emperors spread quickly from the imperial court.⁴³ Furthermore, the inhabitants of the provinces and colonies propagated the cult of the emperor because this was created a good opportunity, too, to the local elite on the way to power. For Greeks it was not new. Many Greek monarchs had cult, the most famous amongst them was Alexander, the Great. When the Greek cities were colonized they started to worship the new power, but instead of a defined person they worshipped the goddess of Dea Roma, a fictive leader. This was only because the colonization of Greek cities started in Republican Rome, hence there was not a sole leader of the new power, but the cult of Dea Roma, representing the Roman state was already present in Republican Rome.⁴⁴ It is not a random coincidence that the cult of Augustus in the beginning was often connected with the cult of Dea Roma. Augustus knew that the imperial cult had a tradition and a strong base in the East; he firstly allowed the eastern cities to introduce his cult, being the first temple dedicated to him in Bithynia (together with Dea Roma) in 29 BC. It was a clear political act to strengthen the Roman occupation in the East. Lugdunum, the first western cult place for the worship of the emperor was built considerably later, and it was also connected with the political message that the imperial cult was the representation of the Roman power.⁴⁵ In Judea, King Herod built a whole new city in honour of the emperor and called it Caesarea. Not surprisingly, the temple of Roma and Augustus had been founded here. There is plenty of evidence about the provincial cult in Africa, where for example *flamines* and *sacerdotes* were mentioned on inscriptions.⁴⁶ The infamous Palestinian governor's, Pontius Pilate's inscription, found in Caesarea in 1961 is interpreted in the connection of the imperial shrine of Tiberius.⁴⁷ Governors played an important role in the spread of Roman power and the spread of the imperial cult. They had to ratify the acts of the imperial cult, because they were the immediate embodiments of the authority of the Roman administration. In special cases, they even started a special rite in connection with the cult. The Roman governor of the province of Asia, for example, made a successful proposal that the year should begin on Augustus' birthday.⁴⁸ Another evidence from a recent excavation in Narona (Vid, Croatia) shows that the governor of Illirycum during Augustus' time, P. Cornelius Dolabella, dedicated an inscription to the Divus Augustus in AD 14, immediately after he was deified. That governor played an important role in establishing the cult of Augustus, not just in Narona, but also in other towns, such as Aenona and Issa.⁴⁹

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 137–139.

³⁸ FERGUSON 1987, 770.

³⁹ FISHWICK 1987, 240–256.

⁴⁰ ALFÖLDI 1970, 165.

⁴¹ See for example GRADEL 2002, DOBBINS 1996 and SMALL 1996.

⁴² DOBBINS 1996.

⁴³ REYNOLDS 1996.

⁴⁴ MARTON 1936, 43–44.

⁴⁵ MARTON 1936, 50–53. See also for the eastern emphasis of the imperial cult in the age of Augustus: HÄNLEIN-SCHÄFFER 1985.

⁴⁶ FISHWICK 1987, 257–268.

⁴⁷ GORDON 2003, 263, see also TAYLOR 2006.

⁴⁸ PRICE 1984, 70.

⁴⁹ GORDON 2003, 262–263.

III. THE PRESERVATION OF STABILITY IN THE ROMAN WORLD

The *pax deorum*, the gods' peace, the natural order of things, was very important to the Roman mind. If the gods were angry, the results were civil wars, natural disasters and diseases. The official cult had to ensure the *pax deorum*, the peace of gods through the so-called *ius augurium*.⁵⁰ Augustus as *pontifex maximus* (Fig. 4), through the *ius augurium*⁵¹ could restore the *pax deorum*, the peace and stability of the state. The Ara Pacis Augustae shows that Pax, as a divinity, was a part of the divine essence of Augustus.⁵² The *pax* was the symbol

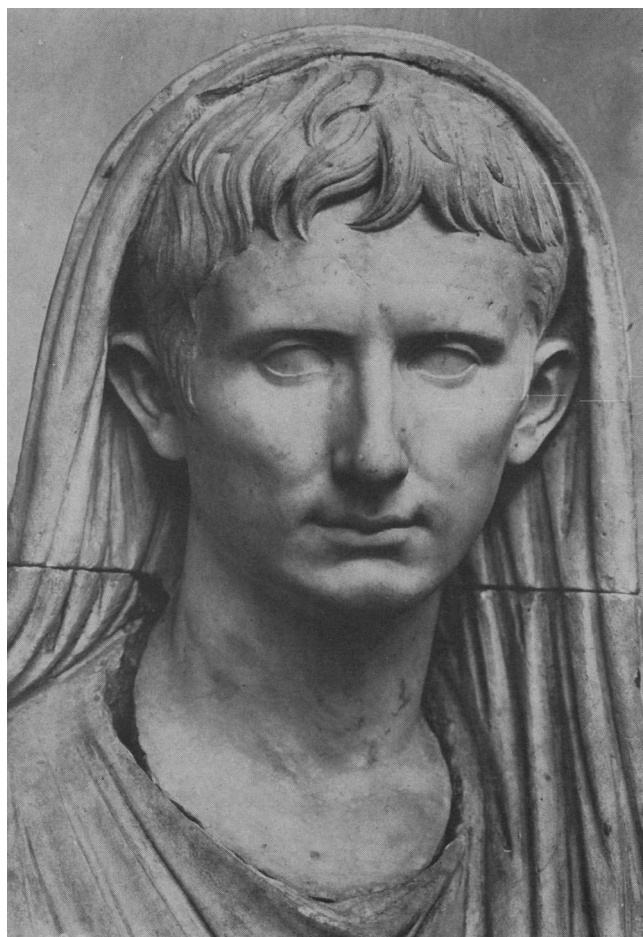


Fig. 4. Augustus as Pontifex Maximus, a sculpture made c. 20 BC; now in the Museo Nazionale Romano (after HAUSMANN 1981, Tafel XVIII. 36)

of stability, which Augustus brought to the world. In connection with this peace a new age had been initiated, the golden age, the *saeculum aureum*,⁵³ an age when 'cities flourish with good government, concord, and prosperity and the flower and harvest of all good'.⁵⁴ Securing peace and stability was an important role for all of the later *augusti*. The title: Augustus, Reverend, had a strong connection with the *ius augurium*, through which the *augusti* could keep the safety, peace and stability of the world.⁵⁵ The statue of Trajan, found in Misenum, contains a relief

⁵⁰ BRENT 1999, 28.

⁵¹ See for example the depiction of Augustus with the *augur's* staff on a Roman coin (ALFÖLDI 1970, 229).

⁵² BRENT 1999, 36.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁵⁴ An inscription from Halicarnassus, cited in: BRENT 1999, 70.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 37–39.

depicting a togate male figure carrying a *cornucopia*, a clear symbol of well-being.⁵⁶ The Pax Augusta was one of the most popular symbols on imperial coinage that were representing the stability connected with the emperor.⁵⁷ Later, Hadrian was called ‘a restorer of the peace’ and Aelius Aristeides wrote: ‘Confusion and strife came to an end, and universal order entered as a brilliant light over the private and the public affairs of men’.⁵⁸ Antoninus Pius had temples in Rome dedicated to Victoria, Pax, Felicitas and Fortuna, all of them associated with the emperor. The temples of Salus, Hilarias, Pietas and Libertas in Commodus’ Rome had been honoured as the attributes of the emperor.⁵⁹ In the Roman mind, if the gods were satisfied it brought necessary well-being, stability, peace and all of the material advantages. However, if for one reason or other they were not, it might have caused enormous problems, which cannot be controlled by humans, the common belief was that catastrophes had happened because the gods had not been satisfied.

The connection between stability and the satisfaction of the gods had a long tradition in the ancient Mediterranean as early as Homer’s time (see for example the Iliad). The Romans felt that it was so important to satisfy the gods that they even worshipped the ‘unknown god’,⁶⁰ just in case they forgot to worship one divine being, and this might cause trouble. In addition, donations given by the emperor helped for charities in a world where modern social and health insurance was unknown and natural catastrophes could destroy whole communities. That was also part of the well-being of the state, and part of the emperor’s role. The well-being of the emperor was connected with the well-being of the state. The emperor was the head of the state. If the head was ill, the whole state was ill. This was one of the reasons why Christians had been persecuted when they refused to sacrifice to the emperor. With this act they attacked the whole system of the Roman state organisation. Zanker argues that the power of the emperor (and the Roman state) was expressed through the imperial cult. In remote provinces people never met the emperor, but through the cult, they had ‘direct’ communication with the ruler. The cult behaved like a medium. The imperial cult changed the relationship between the inhabitants of the provinces and the emperor. It carried a new and positive sense of belonging to the Roman Empire.⁶¹ This Empire had a divine leader who, because of his divinity, was reachable through sacrifices. He was not a remote dictator anymore. If he was pleased, he poured his blessings on the community, if not, his curses. Hence, the imperial cult played a crucial role in the life of the local communities.

IV. WHAT HAPPENED WHEN HONOURS TO THE IMPERIAL FAMILY WERE REFUSED?

In AD 177 in Lyon an anti-Christian uprising broke out. The Christians were mostly immigrants from Asia Minor, but the main reason behind the uprising was not their immigrant status as Musurillo suggests, but their unwillingness to sacrifice to the gods.⁶² Christians by that time were expelled from every public place.⁶³ They were the only religious group in the Empire who has ever suffered from this kind of negative separation. In the Christian version of the passion of the the martyrs of Lyon some interesting parts shed light to the clear reasons behind the Romans’ savage acts: ‘Others laughed and mocked them, at the same time exalting their own idols, attributing their punishment to them’.⁶⁴ It is clear that the non-Christian inhabitants of the city thought about their punishments as they received it as a punishment from the gods because of their negligence towards them. Another interesting part of the martyrs’ story is the execution of Pathius: when the crowd started to hit him, everybody ‘acted as though it were a serious fault and impiety to fall short in their viciousness towards him, for they fought that in this way they could avenge their gods’.⁶⁵ This way of thinking only makes sense if we understand that Christians were atheists in the eyes of their executioners and consequently they disturbed the *pax deorum*. Apart from Christians, Stoics had also been persecuted in some period. In AD 62 both groups opposed Nero’s autocratic and theocratic directions. The Stoics of the ruling classes (senators and equestrians) were accused of political crimes, while Christians were accused of religious crimes, *superstitio illicita*.⁶⁶ When sacrifice was refused by the

⁵⁶ D’ARMS 2000, 131.

⁵⁷ FERGUSON 1987, 772.

⁵⁸ AELIUS ARISTIDES addressing Antonius Pius, cited in:

FERGUSON 1987, 774.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 775.

⁶⁰ Famously quoted in the Bible: Acts 14:23.

⁶¹ ZANKER 1988, 298.

⁶² MUSURILLO 1972.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁶⁶ SORDI 1983, 33–34.

Christians, the Romans were frightened that it might cause serious damage to the well-being of the state. At a time of lost battles, declines and other crises non-Christians saw this as an obvious reason behind the catastrophes. We tend to see the imperial cult and the pagan religions from the Christian point of view, but in the eyes of the pagan Romans, Christians were the enemies of the gods and hence of the Roman state.⁶⁷

After Caracalla's citizenship law in AD 212 the majority of the population of the Roman Empire became citizens, including Christians. From that time, the Roman administrative machinery became involved in securing the act of sacrifice by every Roman citizen for the sake of the unity and the *pax deorum*. The imperial cult became the symbol of imperial unity. That was the reason why it was legally enforced.⁶⁸ By the time of the Severan emperors, the imperial cult was the only unifying spirituality in the Roman world; hence, it became extremely important in the governance of the Empire.⁶⁹ Decius in his edict in the third century AD supported the pagan religions on the basis of their common ground that everybody sacrificed to the gods. The only exception was the Christian religion.⁷⁰ However, the major persecutions under Decius (in AD 249), Valerian (AD 253–260) and Diocletian (AD 285–305) were not linked directly to the imperial cult, but rather to the cult of the traditional gods.⁷¹ The role of the emperors was giving order to everybody to sacrifice. That was an important act for the well-being of the state in a unified Empire, where most of the inhabitants were citizens. Price also argues that the imperial cult did not play as important role in the persecutions of the Christians as the cult of the other gods.⁷²

V. CONCLUSIONS

The imperial cult initiated by Augustus changed the whole Roman world. It rooted as in the traditional Roman religion as in the eastern ruler cults. Concerning the divinity of the emperor, until recently, scholars (with a very few exceptions) did not think that the divinity of the emperor was a serious issue in Roman times. To oppose this, modern research (for example by Fishwick and Gradel) shows that actually it was a very important issue. Of course, it was not the same in the case of every divine emperors. There were deified members of the imperial family who actually never received worship. Nevertheless, evidence for worshipping the emperors has been found everywhere in the Empire. Another aspect of the effect of the imperial cult is the spread of the Roman power. The local elite in the provinces quickly realised the advantages of the cult. Provincial and municipal cult centres were built all over the Empire. Provincial priests had been nominated and a new order, the *seviri Augustales* had been founded, which gave the opportunity for wealthy freedmen to become the part of the provincial elite. Famous cult centres, such as the Altar of the Three Gauls, generated a huge amount of money to the government and played an important role in unifying the rebellious locals. Provincial governors also propagated the imperial cult, because that was sign of their loyalty.

The stability of the Roman state – restored by Augustus – was equal with the *pax deorum*, the peace of the gods. Augustus, as Pontifex Maximus played an important role in this process. The well-being of the emperor was so important for the *pax deorum*. The strong connection between the emperors and the state (divine emperors became the gods of the Roman state) meant that the well-being of the emperor was strongly connected with the well-being of the state. The famous Ara Pacis in Rome had been dedicated to the peace of Augustus and many emperors built temples to the personification of Pax, Felicitas and Victoria. When honours were refused to the imperial family and the gods by Christians or Stoics, the consequences were serious. In an empire which was relatively unified in sacrificing to the gods, refusal to sacrifice to the divine emperor and to the gods meant refusal of the state. Furthermore, because of the emperors' divine nature, refusal of worshipping them caused trouble in the *pax deorum*. However, in opposition to common knowledge, the refusal of sacrificing to the emperor was not the main issue in the persecutions of the Christians. Firstly, because by the time the imperial persecutions started in

⁶⁷ While worshipping emperors as gods were impossible for true Christians, the person of the emperor left a strong impression on the Christian church. Just to mention the depictions of Christ as imperator or the *insignia* of the pope and bishops in later time, which clearly derived from the *insignia* of the emperors (see ALFÖLDI 1970, 276.)

⁶⁸ BRENT 1999, 329.

⁶⁹ FERGUSON 1987, 776.

⁷⁰ GRADEL 2002, 368.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 367.

⁷² PRICE 1984, 220–222. See also: MILLAR 1973.

the third century AD (the persecution under Nero in the first century AD as an exceptional case) the imperial cult did not play important role; secondly, because *divi*, the divine emperors, were in the last rank among the gods. The emperors' role, however, was important in the persecutions, because they had to ensure that the entire population of the Empire sacrificed to the gods (not necessarily to the divine emperors), so the gods might have been satisfied. This had main importance, especially during the troubled time of the third century AD, when the Empire had its first crisis.

To evaluate the scholarly work undertaken on the imperial cult, the following tendencies can be pointed out; in the older literature – but not exclusively so – the Christian perspective is dominant. These works try to interpret the imperial cult from the aspect of Christianity. However, in the 1970s, D. Fishwick and others started to understand the different nature of the pagan religions, and among them, the imperial cult. In the 1980s, the most important work written on the subject was Price's book.⁷³ Modern works still rely on the research of Fishwick and Price, but discuss the divinity of the emperors and the political aspects of the cult rather differently. The most recent monograph written on the subject is Gradel's book, which makes many revolutionary points.⁷⁴ However, this work also contains some theories, which need time and scholarly discussion before they could become accepted generally. There is a need for new works which discuss the imperial cult on its own right and in every important aspects. Discussion of the imperial cult under the heading of religions apparently ignores other important aspects such as the political attitude of the cult. On the other hand, works which dealt solely with the imperial cult tended to see only the political aspects and are not concerned with the religious aspects. New works need to find the balance between these different approaches.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am very much indebted for the inspirational discussions to M. Carroll of the University of Sheffield (UK) and for her useful comments on the previous stage of this paper, and also to P. Kovács of the Pázmány Péter University, Piliscsaba (Hungary) for his suggestions of further references. I would also like to express my gratitude to J. Widdowson also from the University of Sheffield for proofreading the manuscript and providing me with several stylistic comments.

REFERENCES

- ALFÖLDI 1970 = A. ALFÖLDI: Die monarchische Repräsentation im römischen Kaiserreiche. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft. 1970.
- ALFÖLDY 2004 = G. ALFÖLDY: Római császárok és feliratos emlékeik: antik "médiások" a hatalom szolgálatában. Ókor 3/2 (2004) 27–34. (In German with notes: Die Repräsentation der kaiserlichen Macht in den Inschriften Roms und des Imperium Romanum. In: The Representation and Perception of Roman Imperial Power. Proceedings of the Third Workshop of the International Network Impact of Empire (Roman Empire, c. 200 B. C. – A. D. 476), Netherlands Institute in Rome, March 20–23, 2002. Ed.: L. de Blois – P. Erdkamp – O. Hekster – G. de Kleijn – St. Mols Amsterdam 2003 [2004] 3–19.)
- D'ARMS 2000 = J. D'ARMS: Memory, money and status at Misenum: Three new inscriptions from the *Collegium* of the Augustales. JRS 90 (2000) 126–144.
- BRENT 1999 = A. BRENT: The Imperial Cult and the Development of Church Order: concepts and images of authority in paganism and early Christianity before the age of Cyprian. Leiden : Brill, 1999.
- CURCHIN 1996 = L. CURCHIN: Cult and Celt: indigenous participation in emperor worship in Central Spain. In: Subject and Ruler: the cult of the ruling power in Classical Antiquity. Ed.: A. Small. JRA Suppl. Ser. 17. Ann Arbor 1996, 143–152.
- DOBBINS 1996 = J. DOBBINS: The Imperial Cult Building in the forum at Pompeii. In: Subject and Ruler: the cult of the ruling power in Classical Antiquity. Ed.: A. Small. JRA Suppl. Ser. 17. Ann Arbor 1996, 99–114.
- FERGUSON 1987 = J. FERGUSON: Classical religions. In: The Roman World. 2. Ed.: J. Wachter. London : Routledge, 1987, 749–765.

⁷³ PRICE 1984.

⁷⁴ GRADEL 2002.

- FISHWICK 1987 = D. FISHWICK: *The Imperial Cult in the Latin West: studies in the ruler cult of the western provinces of the Roman Empire*. 1. Leiden : Brill, 1987.
- FISHWICK 2002 = D. FISHWICK: *The Imperial Cult in the Latin West: studies in the ruler cult of the western provinces of the Roman Empire*. 3/2. Leiden : Brill, 2002.
- GORDON 2003 = R. GORDON: *Roman inscriptions 1995–2000*. JRS 93 (2003) 212–294.
- GRADEL 2002 = I. GRADEL: *Emperor Worship and Roman Religion*. Oxford : Clarendon Press, 2002.
- HÄNLEIN-SCHÄFFER 1985 = H. HÄNLEIN-SCHÄFFER: *Veneratio Augusti: eine Studie zu den Tempeln des ersten römischen Kaisers*. Roma : Bretschneider, 1985.
- HAUSMANN 1981 = U. HAUSMANN: *Zur Typologie und Ideologie des Augustusporträts*. In: ANRW II. 12. 2. Berlin 1981, 513–598.
- HESBERG 1978 = H. von HESBERG: *Archäologische Denkmäler zum römischen Kaiserkult*. In: ANRW II. 16. 2. Berlin 1978, 911–995.
- HOFF 1996 = M. HOFF: *The politics and architecture of the Athenian imperial cult*. In: *Subject and Ruler: the cult of the ruling power in Classical Antiquity*. Ed.: A. Small. JRA Suppl. Ser. 17. Ann Arbor 1996, 185–200.
- MARTON 1936 = L. MARTON: *A római császárok cultusa: Vallástörténeti tanulmány a római birodalom fénykorából enyézetéig [The Cult of the Roman Emperors: An essay about the history of religion from the heydays of the Roman Empire until its decline]*. Budapest : Bethlen-Könyvkereskedés, 1936.
- MILLAR 1973 = F. MILLAR: *The Imperial cult and the persecutions*. In: *Le culte des souverains dans l'Empire romain*. Éd.: W. Boer. Vandouvres : Hardt 1973, 145–165.
- MUSURILLO 1972 = H. MUSURILLO (ed.): *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*. Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1972.
- PRICE 1984 = S. PRICE: *Rituals and Power: the Roman imperial cult in Asia Minor*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1984.
- REYNOLDS 1996 = J. REYNOLDS: *Ruler-cult at Aphrodisias in the late Republic and under the Julio-Claudian emperors*. In: *Subject and Ruler: the cult of the ruling power in Classical Antiquity*. Ed.: A. Small. JRA Suppl. Ser. 17. Ann Arbor 1996, 41–50.
- SMALL 1996 = A. SMALL: *The shrine of the imperial family in the Macellum at Pompeii*. In: *Subject and Ruler: the cult of the ruling power in Classical Antiquity*. Ed.: A. Small. JRA Suppl. Ser. 17. Ann Arbor 1996, 115–136.
- SORDI 1986 = M. SORDI: *The Christians and the Roman Empire*. London : Croom Helm, 1986.
- TAYLOR 2006 = J. TAYLOR: *Pontius Pilate and the imperial cult in Roman Iudaea*. *New Testament Studies* 52 (2006) 555–582.
- TÓTH 2001 = E. TÓTH: *A császárkultusz főoltára Pannonia Superiorban (Ara Augustorum in Pannonia Superior)*. *ArchÉrt* 126 (2001) 5–33.
- ZANKER 1988 = P. ZANKER: *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*. Ann Arbor : University of Michigan Press, 1988.