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Module code: CLAH7017 Module title: Religious Life in the Roman Empire	Student ID number: 1603116	Educational support needs: Yes/ <u>No</u>
Assignment title: Final Paper- Roman Influence on Religious Life in the Province of Asia During the Principate Word Count: 3,374		
Assignment due date: 24 May 2019		
This assignment is for the 1 st ☐ 2 nd ☐ 3 rd ☐ 4 th ☐ 5 th ☐ 6 th ☐ module of the degree MA-Classical Studies		
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Roman Influence on Religious Life in the Province of Asia

Gary Cunningham

Abbreviations Used

<i>IE</i>	<i>Inscripfen von Ephesos</i> , Ia-VIII, 2 (Bonn 1979-84).
<i>OGIS</i>	Dittenberger, W. <i>Orientalis Graeci Inscriptioes Selectae</i> , I and II (Leipzig 1903-5).

Romanisation in Roman Asia?

Modern scholarly thought on the idea of Romanisation has undergone several gradual transformations since roughly the late nineteenth century. In the earliest modern scholarly literature, the various Italic peoples were believed to have united under the canopy of Roman citizenship and, as a result, lost their cultural distinctiveness. The concept may also be applied to the conquered peoples of Gaul, Britannia, and other western provinces.¹ The proponents of Romanisation posited that provincials benefited through this process by adopting Roman customs, language, and technologies. As Kathryn Lomas put it, Romanisation is a ‘transition [to] a characteristically Roman set of cultural attributes and assumptions.’²

And what of Asia? The Christian bishop Irenaeus, who grew up near Ephesus in the second century C.E., said of the Romans, “the world is at peace through their agency; so much so that we are able to travel the highways and sail the seas wherever we wish without fear.”³ While there are elements of exaggeration in Irenaeus’ statement, what is certain is that the Romans

¹ Webster 2001: 211,

² Lomas 1995: 109, cited in Hingley 2005: 21.

³ Irenaeus *Adv. Haer.* 4.30.3 (trans. White); White 1995: 30.

established colonies throughout the empire, Asia included, and colonists brought with them their traditional deities and traditional offices, such as *pontifices* and *augures*, associated with cult practice.⁴

But unlike many other provinces there was no Roman military garrison in Asia.⁵ This means no Roman soldiers (nor auxiliaries who were really not Roman at all) were there to erect monuments, inscribe dedications to their traditional gods, or to celebrate festivals in honour of the gods.⁶ This likely prevented some of the external influences on customs, diet, clothing, and worship experienced by other provinces.

Though Ted Kaizer says the gods of Asia Minor were mostly those of ancient Greek mythical tradition, the Ephesian Artemis was a departure from the familiar Greek goddess, having Anatolian and Near Eastern influence as indicated by her posture, costume, and rows of spherical objects on her chest.⁷ This could be an episode of *interpretatio Graeca* since it is thought that the Ionian Greek who settled in Asia Minor may have encountered this goddess and identified her with the Greek Artemis.⁸

Civic and Sacred Space in Roman Asia.

Ephesus, the foremost economic base in Asia, experienced a ‘building boom’ in the mid-2nd century C.E., and much of this building was of religious architecture.⁹ During the reign of Tiberius many of the Hellenistic-era private homes in Ephesus were destroyed by an earthquake.

⁴ Kaizer, 2007: 447.

⁵ Horsley 1997: 11.

⁶ Kaizer 2007: 448.

⁷ Coleman 1965: 112.

⁸ Coleman 1965: 114.

⁹ White 1995: 30.

Afterwards the new Tetragonos Agora was constructed, being more impressive than its Hellenistic predecessor.¹⁰

Decades later the Romans were still influencing the landscape. Under Hadrian the harbour baths were constructed in Ephesus as was the Temple of Hadrian as Zeus Olympios¹¹. It is tempting to consider the architectural ‘boom’ as evidence of Romanisation. But that only applies if we look closely at the purpose for which the buildings were constructed. Augustus had ordered a new temple dedicated to *Dea Roma* and *Divus Iulius*. Within one-hundred years the temple of the *Sebastoi* was the preeminent on the city’s western agora, and much of the upper city had been renovated from its Hellenistic beginnings.¹²

Continuance or Discontinuity? The Imperial Cult in Asia

The aforementioned renovation of the urban landscape was often directly related to the imperial cult. From Asia Minor we have a greater body of evidence for the imperial cult than in any other province.¹³ The earliest evidence of comes from Pergamum of 19 B.C.E. when the city council petitioned Rome to allow a temple to be built for Augustus where annual rites would be performed in his honour.¹⁴ In 9 B.C.E. the provincial assembly (*koinon*) of Asia decreed of Augustus,

“It would be right for us to consider him equal to the Beginning (*archē*) of all things...for when everything was falling [into disorder] and tending toward

¹⁰ Sherrer 1995: 6.

¹¹ Sherrer 1995: 13.

¹² Rogers 1991: 90.

¹³ Price 1984: 20.

¹⁴ Boatwright 2012: 69.

dissolution he restored it once more and gave to the whole world a new aspect.”¹⁵

A first-century B.C.E. inscription from Lesbos tells of that community’s apparent high regard for Augustus when a certain magistrate ordered the celebration of his well-being.

When news came of the safety and victory of Augustus he [the magistrate] sacrificed at the good news to all the gods and goddesses and feasted at the sacrifice the citizens...He also dedicated to the sons of Augustus a sanctuary and temple from his own money in the most prominent part of the square.¹⁶

Epigraphic and numismatic evidence indicate that the cult at Ephesus was known for both Rome and Augustus. A reading of Tacitus would indicate it was the province that decided to include Rome.¹⁷

Scholars still debate whether, or to what degree, the emperor was considered divine. Some have assumed it to be a form of homage and flattery than of outright worship.¹⁸ The evidence leaves Price to conclude cities of the Greek East put the emperor in an intermediate’ category between human and god.¹⁹ But Friesen faults Price for not considering many examples from Asia in which sacrifice was performed both to the gods and to the emperor.²⁰ For instance, an example from Ephesus of 88/89 C.E. states scarifies were made to Demeter and to ‘*theoi Sebastoi*,’

¹⁵ *OGIS* 2, 458 cited in Horsley 1997: 14.

¹⁶ *A Catalogue of Imperial Temples and Shrines in Asia Minor*, cited in Price 1984: 3.

¹⁷ Friesen 1993: 8; Tacitus *An.* 4.37.

¹⁸ Price 1984: 19.

¹⁹ Prince 1993: 223; Friesen 1993: 147.

²⁰ Friesen 1993: 149.

clearly indicating the emperor's divine status.²¹ Friesen then concludes the emperors were viewed in a manner similar to the gods in that each was capable of bestowing 'grace' upon the populace.²² That is, 'they functioned like gods' and as such were worthy of sacrifice.²³

In spite of Friesen's argument for the cult in general, he concludes that the cult of Rome and Augustus was not a divine cult, but rather was dedicated to a particular person and place that were viewed as favourable to cities of the province. He calls attention to the cults predecessors, several local cults to Roman benefactors in the first century B.C.E. For instance, the one to the proconsul P. Servilius Isauricus (46-44 B.C.E.), who was known for restoring the right of asylum to sanctuaries and to whom statues were dedicated in several places with inscriptions referencing the priests of Rome and Isauricus.

The first provincial imperial cult in Asia was established at Pergamon and remained the only provincial cult in Asia for approximately 50 years.²⁴ The temple remains have not been found but its existence is attested on several coins.²⁵ For example, a cistophorus from 20-18 B.C.E. bears the image of Augustus on the obverse and the temple of Augustus and Rome (in Greek style) on the reverse.²⁶ Another coin, a tetradrachma, shows Augustus again in the obverse and the temple (in Greek style again) on the reverse. This time a statue of Augustus is seen within the temple being crowned by a statue of the personified Rome.²⁷ But the focus of these coins is, as Friesen points out, clearly on Augustus as suggested by the image on the obverse, the honour

²¹ Friesen 1993: 149.

²² Friesen 1993: 153.

²³ Friesen 1993: 150.

²⁴ Friesen 1993: 10, 15.

²⁵ Friesen 1993: 11-3.

²⁶ Friesen 1993: 12.

²⁷ Friesen 1993: 14.

bestowed upon him by the personified Rome, and by the fact that other coins showed only the statue of Augustus.²⁸

Friesen proposals that Octavian was attempting to preserve the existing religious system of Asia while at the same time introducing a Roman component.²⁹ Though I have to believe that the concept of ruler cult was more eastern in nature give the evidence just cited. Notably, the temple design on these coins being Greek rather than Roman.³⁰

While there are signs of cults to Hellenistic rulers immediately preceding the Roman era, Price believes the cults were more ‘expressions of gratitude.’³¹ For instance, Antiochus III of Syria wrested control of western Asia Minor from Philip V of Macedon in 197 B.C.E, and an altar to Antiochus was then established on which sacrifices were offered. The office of a priestess to Antiochus’ wife, Laodice, was also established accompanied by an annual procession and sacrifices on her birthday.³² Statues of the king and queen were erected next to the statue of Dionysus at the god’s temple in Pergamon. An inscribed dedication depicts Antiochus’ and Dionysus as saviours of the city, probably referring to the peace and lower taxation that followed the routing of the Macedonians.³³ Roman rule had “provided the necessary generations of peace and stability...which made the Ephesians assertion of the Greek identity of their city in AD 104 possible.”³⁴

Scholars have argued that the imperial cult of Asia is no more than an extension of Hellenistic ruler cults.³⁵ But Price argues for, in some areas of Asia Minor, a lack of continuity

²⁸ Friesen 1993: 14.

²⁹ Friesen 1993: 11.

³⁰ Friesen 1993: 13.

³¹ Price 1984: 29.

³² Price 1984: 30.

³³ Price 1984: 31.

³⁴ Rogers 1991: 2.

³⁵ Price 1984: 45.

between Hellenistic cults and the Roman imperial cult. He provides, for instance, the case of the priest of Attalus whose office seems to have faded with the dawn of the Roman era. Friesen, for instance, he points to an inscription in which the cult for Antiochus I Soter at Klazomenai involved sacrifices to the gods as well as to Antiochus and his family thereby being a precursor to the imperial cult in which sacrifices were made to the emperor and on behalf of him and his family.³⁶ And an important consideration is that, in many areas, cults to Hellenistic kings were modelled not on Greek hero cults, but on cults to the gods such as the priestly office of the ruler cult at Teos which was modelled after that of Poseidon.³⁷ Price relates that the giving of heroic honours to the king would, in essence, have highlighted his mortality and limited his stature in relation to the gods.³⁸

Beside the state-sponsored Hellenistic ruler cults there were public cults to private citizens in cities of Asia also resembling hero cults. Price believes the growth of these cults accompanied the waning of the divine ruler cults.³⁹ Price says that by the second century B.C.E. there was less inclination to honour the ruler in this way due to their reduced sphere influence.⁴⁰ This would particularly have been true after the area came under Roman control after being bequeathed to the Romans by Attalos III in 133 B.C.E.⁴¹

For the cities of the province, to host the imperial cult brought more than just an honorary title. Presence of the cult led to a general economic boon for the city as it led to new construction

³⁶ Friesen 1993: 9.

³⁷ Price 1984: 32-3.

³⁸ Price 1984: 35.

³⁹ Price 1984: 47.

⁴⁰ Price 1984: 225.

⁴¹ Friesen 1993: 4.

financed partly by the empire. It also improved relations between the city's administration and the Roman senate and emperor.⁴²

Another point of continuity, which may seem obvious, is that of animal sacrifices. This was a key element of cult practice in the Greek East and in the Latin West, and of course continued in Asia under Roman rule.⁴³ Unfortunately, we do not have extensive details pertaining to the particulars of ritual sacrifice in the ancient Greek or Roman worlds.⁴⁴ Therefore, it would be futile to speculate as to how, if at all, ritual sacrifice changed between the Hellenistic and Roman periods. Just as we know some details as to what may have been offered as sacrifice in the Latin West, we know from inscriptions what constituted these offerings in Asia.⁴⁵

Price stresses that whereas sacrifices were usually made only *on behalf* of emperors they were only made *to* the gods.⁴⁶ According to Dio, the emperors Tiberius, Gaius and Claudius all forbade sacrifice to themselves, but we know from other sources that Gaius did in fact encourage sacrifice to him.⁴⁷ Philo of Alexandria wrote of Gaius' anger when certain Jewish leaders from Alexandria who came to call on him failed to sacrifice to him, but had only sacrificed on his behalf.⁴⁸

An interesting piece of numismatic evidence exists from early third-century Ephesus which depicts worshippers engaged in sacrifice in front of a temple with their arms raised. In the pediment is the Latin word *vota*. Price believes this shows a connection to the Roman practice of annually making vows to the gods on behalf of the emperor, and indicates a change in the use of Greek temples in Asia which by that time were being used to sacrifice to the gods on the

⁴² Friesen 1993: 16.

⁴³ Price 1984: 207.

⁴⁴ Price 1984: 208.

⁴⁵ Price 1984: 209.

⁴⁶ Price 1984: 210.

⁴⁷ Price 1984:210; Cass. Dio 58.8., 59.4.4., 60.5.4.

⁴⁸ Price 1984: 209; Philo *Leg.* 349-67.

emperor's behalf.⁴⁹ Friesen agrees with Price stating that they believe evidence suggests emperors were in a divine category but "without actually equating them with the gods."

An apparent contradiction to this evidence is the presence of the statues of emperors placed at a higher level than statues of deities in temple precincts. The solution is that it is not an indication of the importance of the emperor over the traditional god, but a matter of to whom the particular precinct is dedicated.⁵⁰ Therefore, we may find grander statues of emperors placed higher than Artemis in an imperial cult temple precinct, but the opposite would be true at a temple of Artemis.

Price assumes that "the archetypical Greek city, whose institutions were fairly uniform, provides an adequate framework in which to slot evidence from different places."⁵¹ But Friesen counters that

The evolving nature of provincial cults in Asia from those devoted to the emperor *and* [emphasis added] another person or institution, to cults developed solely to an emperor or emperors cannot be explained if the archetypical Greek city is assumed to be ever present.⁵²

Friesen believes the imperial cult in Asia was based on the model of the Olympian pantheon where Zeus was the model for the emperor and the other, subordinate, deities for the imperial family.⁵³ Imperial temples were "constructed according to the same motifs and patterns" as those

⁴⁹ Price 1984: 214-5.

⁵⁰ Price 1984: 146-56; Friesen 1993: 73-4.

⁵¹ Price 1984: 4-5; Friesen 1993: 143.

⁵² Friesen 1993: 143-4.

⁵³ Friesen 1993: 166.

of the traditional gods. images of the emperor were frequently placed in temples of the traditional gods⁵⁴

Returning to the question of Romanisation, importantly, the *neokoros* along with its imagery and architectural design were all Greek concepts, not Roman inventions.⁵⁵ It relied on Greek traditions in architecture, terminology, and ceremonies⁵⁶

Unfortunately, evidence for details about the workings of the *Sebastoi* cult is incomplete (e.g., we have no details of the ritual practices). Complicating things further it is that imperial cult was not a “static phenomenon” in part to the large number of individuals and families honoured over the decades from Augustus to the end of the third century. Friesen says this is an important factor overlooked in Price’s work.⁵⁷

Civil Life under Roman Rule

If there was some degree of continuity in the religious life of the cities of Asia, that did not mean they were free from Roman influence and from what they probably viewed as interference. From time to time Roman provincial administrators intervened in local religious affairs. One example is the case of 44 C.E. when proconsul Paullus Fabius Persicus issued an edict preventing local officials of Ephesus from selling the office of the priesthood, and it’s possible that Persicus even dismissed those who had obtained the priesthood in this manner.⁵⁸ The proconsul’s motives were not entirely out of concern for the integrity of the cult however. Apparently, the priests were able to borrow money from the temple, and this would have raised the fear that these loans if not be

⁵⁴ Horsley 1997: 20.

⁵⁵ Friesen 1993: 75.

⁵⁶ Horsley 1997: 22.

⁵⁷ Friesen 1993: 145.

⁵⁸ Rogers 1991: 11.

repaid could bankrupt the temple. The temple's prosperity was strong linked to the prosperity of the city, and the cities financial period could have disrupted the provincial economy.⁵⁹

Continuity in Cults of the East

Artefacts from Ephesus show that Egyptian religions were present there as far back as the seventh century C.E., though Walters asserts that what these artefacts tell us about religious life is less significant than what they tell us about the local adoption of Egyptian art.⁶⁰

The cult of the Anatolian Mother Goddess, Magna Mater, derived from Cybele, spread out across the Roman Empire along with Rome's expansion, and continued to be popular in Asia.⁶¹ Before the Roman period, the province already worshipped a Hellenised version of the Anatolian goddess in the form of Meter (known as the mother of Zeus in the cult at Pergamon) and this continued in the Roman period during which the goddess was known by many localised epithets including Meter Pontanene, Meter Malene, and Meter Kiklea.⁶²

The apparent spread of the cult is attested through an increase in the number of inscriptions, which may also be partly due to a general increase in literacy, but we also see an increase in votive statuettes found throughout the province.⁶³ Many of the dedicatory inscriptions are of a personal nature, such as those honouring the goddess in fulfilment of vows and thanking the goddess for favours.⁶⁴ Numismatic evidence is also plentiful throughout Asia (and Asia Minor in general) during the late first, second, and third centuries.⁶⁵

⁵⁹ Rogers 1991: 11.

⁶⁰ Walters 1995: 283-4.

⁶¹ Roller 1999: 327.

⁶² Roller 1999: 327-8.

⁶³ Roller 1999: 329.

⁶⁴ Roller 1999: 329.

⁶⁵ Roller 1999: 330.

Mater's function in urban Roman Asia seems to be similar to her place in Rome itself which is that of a protector of the city. Though her presence is great in rural areas as evidenced by her many shrines in remote areas where she is represented as the Mountain Mother, the protector of the countryside. Roller theorises this is a reflection of Roman influence in which traditions remained stronger in rural areas compared to the more Hellenised cities.⁶⁶

An interesting nuance of the cult comes from Apollonia Salbake (near Aphrodisias) where we find a house of the virgin priestess of Mater, a rarity in the cult of this or other deities.⁶⁷ I believe this may perhaps reflect Roman influence modelled on the virgin priestesses of Vesta. Another possible influence of Rome on the Anatolian cult is the case of Sardis, where we find monuments and inscriptions to Attis beginning with the second century C.E. Reliefs from the area show the god in a scene from the myth of Attis and Cybele possibly influenced by Ovid.⁶⁸

Some significant changes did take place in the cult of the Mother Goddess during the Roman period, and may be considered an effect of Roman presence. For instance, Attis, the goddess' consort became part of the cult.⁶⁹

Interestingly, evidence for cults of Eastern gods such as Mithras is lacking in the province of Asia. Of Ephesus in particular, Richard Oster writes that "prominent Syrian and Phrygian deities...extended virtually no influence in the [imperial] period...Though Ephesus was an eastern city geographically, its religious ethos was not."⁷⁰

Cultural Resistance?

⁶⁶ Roller 1999: 330.

⁶⁷ Roller 1999: 335.

⁶⁸ Roller 1999: 336.

⁶⁹ Roller 1997: 328.

⁷⁰ Oster 1990: 1727, cited in Walters 1995: 282.

By the early second century C.E., Roman citizens in Ephesus had contributed to significant building programs which altered the landscape of the city.⁷¹ But then we find a reinvigoration of the traditional religion and heritage which Rogers believes was at least in part a direct response to that Roman influence.⁷² In 104 C.E., a sort of ‘refoundation’ occurred in which a new festival and a procession beginning and ending at the Temple of Artemis were instituted. The event was marked by a re-enactment of the city’s mythic past in which Leto gave birth to Artemis.⁷³ Rogers sees the establishment of this ritual as a direct defence and counter to Romanisation “demand(ing) the existence of a patron deity with impeccable Greek divine credentials.” To the Ephesians, “the past was a source of power wielded by the men of Ephesos over the young, over new founders and, at last, over the new gods.”⁷⁴

⁷¹ Rogers 1991: 36.

⁷² Rogers 1991: 136.

⁷³ Rogers 1991: 136-53.

⁷⁴ Rogers 1991: 140.

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