

# BETWEEN REPUBLIC AND EMPIRE

## (THE MAKING OF THE ROMAN IMPERIAL CULT — some theoretical aspects)

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The development of the Ancient Roman world gives us some of the biggest achievements of those times. After the Roman conquests until the end of the 2nd century AD, the boundaries of the state to some extent were also the boundaries of the civilized world.

What was the main reason that Rome achieved all this? Maybe it was the ability of the Romans to take the best of every culture, to transform their own culture, to create it on a higher level, making the mixing of cultures not mechanical, but vivid and really alive.

One of the best achievements of the Romans was their system of rulership. Both republican and imperial form are examples of the equality of need and reality. At the beginning when the Roman state was not so big, the republican form of the government with its electorality and often change of the magistrates corresponded very well with the structure of the town.

The crisis of the republican form began with the enlargement of the state's boundaries. The republic was no longer suitable and after a cataclysm of two-three decades was transformed into a personal rulership although republican magistrates were preserved for a while, but the real ruler was more and more only one person—the emperor.

The main purpose of this paper is to follow the development of the cult of the Roman emperor and the transformation through the time from Julius Caesar and Augustus until Constantine the Great.

Second purpose is to show the rising of the Christian ideology and the changes of the imperial cult because of this new religion.

The imperial cult in the Roman Empire is without any doubt one of the most important themes in the Roman history, because the imperial type, formed in the first centuries AD, had a profound influence on the rulership system of the so called successors of the Empire. In Western Europe the imperial cult was transformed into a cult of the king, similar but not equal to the Roman one. In Eastern Europe the most significant heir of the Roman-Byzantine empire created the clearest example of the imperial cult—combination of Roman and Christian traditions.

The imperial cult is the main topic of a few scientific works. More important of them are the book<sup>1</sup> and article<sup>2</sup> of S. R. F. Price, the excellent work of I. R. Taylor<sup>3</sup>, the book of K. Scott about the cult under the Flavians<sup>4</sup>, but there is no book which deals with the theme as a whole. Maybe this is because the imperial

cult in Rome had many faces, for the changes were very rapid, often and from many sides.

Much more are the books about the most important figures between the Roman emperors—for example about the “founders” of the cult J. Caesar and Augustus, about the rulership of Diocletian and Constantine the Great as a turning points.

What was the main reason for such a rapid development of the Roman imperial cult? What was the reason for the jump from the republican to imperial model of rulership? How did the society react to such a change? These are the most important questions in the beginning of this essay.

Probably the main reason for such a change was the change in the human conceptions about the world. From the very beginning the emperor was like a god<sup>5</sup>. He became one of the most important figures in the Pantheon<sup>6</sup>. To some extent the Greek conception was different. Greeks’ point of view was strictly individual, because one of their basic philosophical understandings about society was that it was made of individuals<sup>7</sup>. This conception was valid also for the “society of gods” or more precisely derived from it.

We will try in this essay to prove that in the West the imperial cult was inspired from above, because the soil was not prepared to accept such a seed and was more a policy of the administration<sup>8</sup>. The western part of Roman state seems to have had the imperial cult only for the lower stratum, for which it was typical to worship *Lares* and *Igenius* at the cross roads<sup>9</sup>.

There were also differences between the types of sacrifices for the emperor<sup>10</sup>. According to three authors from 3 century AD<sup>11</sup> there were three reasons for sacrificing to the gods. All these show how difficult it is to divide the different parts of the imperial cult. That’s why it will be better to show the parts of the cult tracing its development from J. Caesar on. But before it will be useful to explain what kind of sources were in the basis of all these.

A Roman poet said after Greece was conquered by Rome: “*Graecia capta ferum victorem cepit.*”. So, in a few words he explained the relations between these two regions of Mediterranean. And it seems to be true, because it is absolutely clear Greece had a greater influence on Rome although she was conquered. So she saved her system of local cults and mystery worship<sup>12</sup> in varying forms, more or less distinguished from the gods<sup>13</sup>. Greece also saved her religious and state conceptions and was far from the idea of the imperial power, similar more to the traditions of Asiatic East than of Greek democracy. Greece also saved many of its characteristics from the Hellenistic age, which transformed Eastern world into one. All the Hellenistic kings had promoted cults of their relatives. They also had supported their own worship establishing cities and giving them their (i.e. of the king) names<sup>14</sup>. In this period the influence of the priests increased also, which was typical both for Greece and for Asiatic parts of hellenistic world. Later in the ages after Christ, Roman emperors received the title *pontifex maximus*, in this way declaring they were religious and civic leaders at the same time.

Egypt is a good example how the strong centralizing tradition made needlessly to prove the advantage of the personal rulership<sup>15</sup>.

Many of the Eastern rulers had their origin from the heroes of the different epics. And it was very important, because there was no need for the Romans to prove the divine origin of the supreme power.

All these are evidences that Ancient East was prepared better for the dictatorial model of the Roman imperial cult. Later the same conditions made the East more prepared also for the flourishing of Christianity. It was indeed exactly there that the first monotheistic cult was created that of the Hebrews.

It does not mean that in the East there was no paganism, but that in the West it was even stronger than in Asia and Greece, where Christianity became very popular<sup>16</sup>. In spite of all this, even the clergy in the East believed in the pagan gods with only one difference – they regarded them not as good spirits, but as evil demons<sup>17</sup>.

Another very important difference between East and West (as a religious system) was the mysticism of Eastern religions. Maybe the most popular and significant (for the imperial cult) of all eastern religious cults was that Mithra. Later it became very popular also in Rome both in the lower and in the upper classes. Thus Romans became more orientated to the East, and it was normal because of the increasing need of centralization. So mysticism is another evidence for the crisis in the Roman society in the period of transformation from republic to empire.

What was typical for the roman religion?

Syncretism was one of its main characteristics from the very beginning. The most important triada of the Roman Pantheon was Etruscan. Jupiter was its supreme god, but without any difficulty, after the conquering of Greece, Zeus remained the supreme god of the Greeks. All conquered peoples preserved their own Pantheon and their supreme god. So when there was a need to find some centralizing factor of the state, Roman government realized it would be impossible to use old gods for that purpose. But it was necessary for three centuries to pass for the Romans to understand completely that only an absolutely new religious system based on the idea of "one state – one god – one governor" could unify the Empire. But before that, state religion for a long time was Greco-Roman polytheism shaped by the relationship of two cults and their amalgamation<sup>18</sup>.

The end of AD III and the beginning of AD IV was a time of intermingling of gods<sup>19</sup>, of forming the idea of transition from poly- to monotheism as a first step to the affirming of the personal rulership<sup>20</sup>. So the Romans added the emperor to the unlimited state Pantheon to prove his divinity power. Thus the main obstacle for the final affirmation of the Roman imperial cult was not the republicanism, because the idea of monarchy was familiar to the Romans<sup>21</sup>. We must not forget that at the beginning Rome had kings. So the difficulty was not the lack of imperial tradition but more the impossibility to adapt entirely

politheism to the new rulership system (it is very important not to forget that every dead Roman was a kind of god for a his (her) relatives and there was special festival dedicated to the dead<sup>22</sup>).

Another difficulty for was that in Rome the cult was situated on the Palatine, Capitol and the temple of *Mars Ultor*<sup>23</sup>. Thus the relation between the imperial cult and the old gods was very strong and as we can see it was easier to build a new capital than to change something old.

It is useful to show what innovations Christianity brought. Of course the first one was its monotheism. We think this is most important, but there are many other characteristics which made the system of Christian vision of the world. Christianity combined old with new. Old, for example, were the ideas that supreme governors were chosen from the gods<sup>24</sup>, that if there was one god, there ought to be one governor on the Earth (the idea of the Hebrews with a 1000 years history by the days of the first Roman emperors).

Absolutely new for the Ancient world (except for the Hebrews) was the figure of the Messiah. Jesus Christ appeared everywhere (more as a spirit than as a body) and proclaimed with his existence the beginning of the new era. Thus began the religious transition from body to soul, from natural form to abstract symbol<sup>25</sup>.

Another very important feature of Christianity is that it was possible to accept the syncretical forms with the pagan religions without loosing its monotheism and not becoming polytheistic or henotheistic<sup>26</sup>.

Now we will try to see the development of the imperial cult from J. Caesar to Constantine the Great.

From the very beginning existed the idea that in every man lived his genius. Being invisible and untouchable this genius was to some extent the divine part of every man. That's why it seemed to be not very difficult to worship the person of the emperor. The bigger problem in the time of J. Caesar was the transformation of the republican institutions to imperial one. This transition was more gradual and was made in a few steps in a period of more than 300 years. Because of all this it will be better to concentrate the problem of the imperial cult as a special part of Roman political system.

The first step into erecting the Roman imperial person above all people was his divinization. As it was already shown every Roman believed in every man there was something divine. So more important will be to point the mechanism.

The doctrine that immortality could be won by virtue was attractive and also usual to the Romans. As Cumont called this process, it was "the republican transformation of the doctrine of the divinity of kings"<sup>27</sup>.

Caesar assembled more republican titles in himself than anybody before. Very important is that he was also *pontifex maximus*, i.e. he had concentrated both religious and civil supreme power in his hands. To understand better the making of the imperial cult it is important to realize that Caesar spent many years in Asian provinces<sup>28</sup>. It is interesting to compare the titles given him in the inscrip-

tions. In Greece and Asia they were *Soter*, *Euergetes*, *Theos* and *Ktistes*, in Italy-*Deus* and *Divus*. These examples show the different opinions of West and East to this new worship<sup>29</sup>. Thus began the division between republican Rome and imperial cult. In the next two centuries it became obvious that the real prosperity of this cult was possible only if it had as its basis the eastern traditions of divinization and worshipping of the supreme governor.

So J. Caesar was the first of the Roman governors who became near the type of the emperor which we see in the next few centuries. It shows us that the tendency for centralization became bigger and bigger. Caesar's time also is an example of the eternal struggle between new and old. In this struggle Caesar was a symbol of progress. He was a victim of those people who hoped that the republican system could be revived and that this system was suitable to the new situation in the Roman state.

The government of Augustus marks the end of the republican cult bringing together the imperial cult to the mystical cults of the East<sup>30</sup>. One example of this is that in Mytilene quadrennial games were founded in honour of Augustus, very similar to those in honour of Zeus<sup>31</sup>. So, in the East, imperial cult made its way much faster than in the West, where there was resistance by the Senate and the public opinion as a whole.

A very important fact from the time of Augustus is that as an adopted son of Caesar, he was titled *divi filius*<sup>32</sup> (one of the first acts of the Second triumvirate was the deification of Julius Caesar on the 1st of January 42 BC)<sup>33</sup>.

There is an interesting example for the "equalization" of the powers into the Roman Pantheon, because when Octavian became a supreme leader of the state, he claimed Apollo (but not usual supreme god-Jupiter) his special patron<sup>34</sup>. At the same time, when he was in Egypt, he understood that he ought to seem like a pharaoh<sup>35</sup> and he tried to look as a pharaoh. In Greece he was titled *Zeus Eleutherios*<sup>36</sup>. There was one new title in comparison with those of J. Caesar and this title was exactly the name of Augustus adopted father-Caesar<sup>37</sup>. It is a proof that the name of Caesar was now used as a title, not as a personal name. This tradition was untouched to the time of early Byzantine empire, when *kaisar* was the second man in the state after *basileus* (equal to emperor).

Octavian also used the title *princeps*<sup>38</sup>. When he accepted the name Augustus (which later also became a title) maybe he tried to view him as a second founder of Rome<sup>39</sup>. He could choose between *Romulus*, *magnus* and *maximus*, but Augustus without any doubt was much better, because it was a synonym of *sanctus* and *divinus*<sup>40</sup>. For example Livy used the word *augustus* as the antonym of *humanus*<sup>41</sup>. Thus the title *augustus* began to show the divine nature of the emperor, whose complete title was *nos imperator Caesar Augustus*<sup>42</sup>. In 12 BC Octavian became also *pontifex maximus*.

To show again the difference between East and West, it will be useful to point that the imperial cult in the East was devoted to the emperor himself, to his children etc., but not to Rome or to the state<sup>43</sup>. And as the eastern orientation

of the Roman emperor became bigger, so the goddess Rome disappeared from the titles of temples and priests<sup>44</sup>. At the same time, the divinization the emperor more and more important. For example Herod the Great founded in Judaea the city of *Caesarea* and restored the city of *Samaria* and called it *Sebaste* (greek equivalent of *Augusta*)<sup>45</sup>. The same had been done by Alexander the Great more than two centuries ago, founding three cities and giving them his own name, according to the custom of the East.

To some extent we can say that Octavian did not want to become a god before he died. He was a son of a god, who won his status with his virtue. Octavian himself also tried to win his deification with his life given up to the interest of Rome. Trying to look not like a usurper of the supreme power, he, according to Dio<sup>46</sup>, told the Senate he returned "the army and the provinces, the the revenues and the laws"<sup>47</sup>. So he preferred to look like a restorator of the Roman republic. But the real power was in his hands and his rulership was the beginning not of restoration of the republic but of the monarchical system of government.

One of the basic components of the new (not as a whole and not in every part) system of rulership from the time of Augustus and after that was that hierarchy and central control increased their importance. It was positive to some extent, because the authority of the government was restored, but there were some negative consequences like the increasing of the bureaucracy. These consequences were not so much a result of bad new system as of the "republican inheritance".

The process of centralization only began at the time of Caesar and Augustus. It was not finished even in the beginning of the Ath century AD. The immediate successors of Augustus did little (except Claudius) to improve the created system.

First additions were made by the emperors from Nero to Marcus Aurelius<sup>48</sup>. They represented a compromise between the army and the Senate<sup>49</sup>. At those times of wars the most important element in the state was of course the army. It was one of the main powers in all Roman history, but now it was the power which raised and dethroned the emperors<sup>50</sup>. It seems that, in those times of prosperity of the state, the disputes about the supremacy looked to be forgotten. Obviously when the army was the main imperial power, the most important were political motives<sup>51</sup>. The emperors were also generals and it was impossible for the Senate to be their real rival.

At the beginning of the 2nd century AD the equalization, centralization and standardization of the Empire had already started<sup>52</sup>. The most important part of the emperor's title was *imperator*, i. e. the man who had the supreme military power.

In the arts the free forms of the early Roman empire began to transform into homogenous and unified forms<sup>53</sup>.

The successor of M. Aurelius-Commodus-was an example that in the Roman empire there was not a good system of successim, because M. Aurelius, pointing

his son for his successor, spoiled the custom (there was no law about it) that the next emperor was the most able of the retinue. But for us Commodus is a good example of the size of the authority of the emperor and how important was the army-Commodus was dethroned only when he lost the sympathy of his soldiers.

At the beginning of the 3rd century AD there was a demonstrative act for the changing situation in the Empire. In AD 212 *Constitutio Antoniniana* gave Roman citizenship to all free people. It is a proof that Italy lost its leading position.

The barrack emperors were the examples of the depression and crisis in the Roman state. There was a complex of reasons, but it seems to us that the main was the burning controversy between the three great powers – Emperor, Senate and Army<sup>54</sup>. Burckhardt points as a main reason to the loss of harmony between the great powers because of the barbarian incursions: an external reason. There was also an internal reason – a lack of a government system equal to the new economic and social conditions in the Empire.

Diocletian was the first who did something to stop the crisis. There was something symbolic in his name, which connected him with gods (*Dio-cletian*)<sup>55</sup>. His Roman cognomen was *Jovius* and it shows the relations with Jupiter<sup>56</sup>.

The tetrarchy system, which Diocletian created was a real re-establishment of the emperor's authority. It stopped the tradition that it was armies' "right" to make emperors. Diocletian was also in conflict with the Senate, because he did not ask it for co-operation in choosing the second Augustus and the two Caesars<sup>57</sup>. Nevertheless the new emperor won the battle with the other two powers in the empire – the Senate and the Army. The problem of disharmony seemed to be solved, but there was another problem – the religious one. Diocletian tried to solve it, reviving the old cults and gods. After emperor Decius, he was the second one who persecuted Christianity so severely. It is clear now that this persecution was a mistake, because all the old gods were particular deities in contrast to the universality of the monotheism<sup>58</sup>. But in those times, obviously it was not so clear. According to some data the Christians in the empire were between 1/10 and 1/15<sup>59</sup> (more at the East). Even though all the data about the Antiquity are merely guesses, it is obvious that at the time of Diocletian it was not so evident Christianity had some advantages comparing with Paganism.

Then what was the achievement of Christianity? What new thing did this religion possess which made it better for the Roman empire? Why did Constantine the Great legalize it and make it his "favored" religion? To understand all these, it will be necessary at the beginning to see the person of Constantine, who without any doubt made one of the most important steps for our civilization. The book of Alföldi<sup>60</sup> gives us a vivid description of emperor Constantine with his positive and negative features trying to explain the motives of his actions. Alföldi does not agree to the end with Burckhardt<sup>61</sup> that the edict of Milan and the religious policy after that was a work of cold and calculating politician. It does not mean that Alföldi describes Constantine as an unbalanced emperor. He only

tried to understand the complex of the reasons for the new religious policy. He divides three stages in the process of the religious transition to Christianity:

1. 312-320 AD – Constantine hardly touched paganism, but exalted the Church with increasing energy;

2. 320-330 AD – the emperor thrust the Church into the foreground of public life and at the same time directed a frontal attack on polytheism;

3. last period – he broke all but a few trends that still bound him to the national past and opened war on the old religions from his new capital in the East<sup>62</sup>. This progressive toleration of Christianity seems to be a proof of the opinion of those historians who think that for Constantine the most important were political reasons and motives<sup>63</sup>. He began to understand two of the main problems, which Diocletian failed to solve – the religious problem and the problems of the currency<sup>64</sup>.

For the theme of this essay it is very important to see the changes in the imperial cult after the edict of Milan (AD 313). They were not so much in quantity than in quality. It means that after AD 313 there was an equality between paganism and Christianity for they both were official religions. From this moment on Christianity began to prove its advantages. In ideological aspect monotheism increased the popularity and the authority of the emperor, even though he continued to be titled also *pontifex maximus*. More and more the emperor became the only one supreme ruler of the Earth, just like God was the only one ruler of the Universe. The Christian clergy proclaimed Constantine to be the emperor from the name of God. So the earthly empire became projection of the world. Eusebius of Caesarea, who was the first historian of Christianity and the first apologist of Constantine, called him *autokrator*, *kaisar* and *basileus*<sup>65</sup>. At the same time on coins Constantine was also called *pontifex maximus* (66), *princeps*<sup>67</sup>, *salus et spes rei publicae*<sup>68</sup>, *tribunus*<sup>69</sup>. All these traditional Roman titles show that the change of titles was not a quick process and “pagan” titles were used also for the Christian emperors.

Constantine understood that for the new situation he also needed a new capital, because the old one was a symbol of the pagan Roman empire<sup>70</sup>. That's why in 330 AD the building of the new capital was finished. Constantinople became a symbol of the new faith and a centre of the emperors. The day of the dedication of the new capital was chosen very carefully – 05/11/330 was the day of Saint Mocius (martyr under Diocletian or Licinius). This day was a symbol that it was finished the pagan past of the state<sup>71</sup>.

Connecting his name with the stabilizing of the empire, Constantine became without any problems the main figure in the Church's affairs. Thus he established the traditional relation between the emperor and the clergy in which the emperor was a little bit higher than the patriarch. At the same time he continued the most useful of the state Roman traditions. He was again *augustus* and *caesar* and more than that – he named his new capital *Nea Rome*, with this proclaiming that the Roman empire was now on a new stage of its power.

Baker is absolutely right that the long life of the Byzantine empire was due to the monarchy founded by Constantine, and this monarchy was not tzarist and absolute, but based upon individuals<sup>72</sup>. The main role in the centralization of the state was played by Neoplatonism, which combined the various classical cults into a systematic unit<sup>73</sup> and showed the necessity of a strong, all-mighty person to be at the top of the hierarchy.

Thus in 4th century AD the final step of centralization of the Roman state was made. One of the most important components of this process was the increasing role of the emperor. A great and large state in the 1st century BC, Rome was not able to be republican any longer. The republican institutions, which worked before so well, now were out of date, because of the increasing territory, which needed a centralization of the power in one person. This necessity bore the reasons for increasing role of the first man in the state. Caesar proved the necessity of a leaderhuman and god at the same time. His adopted son-Augustus-created the foundation of the imperial cult combining these parts of the different cults and religions, which he needed. He added his name as an emperor's title to this of Caesar. Diocletian gave second birth to the emperor's power, creating the tetrarchy system. A little later Constantine the Great ended the imperial cult, making Christianity one of the legal and protected religions. He and his successors were now lieutenants of God on Earth.

## NOTES

- 1 Price, *Rituals and power*
- 2 Price, "Between man and god", *JRS*, 1980
- 3 Taylor, *The divinity*
- 4 Scott K., *The imperial cult under the Flavians*, NY, 1975
- 5 Price, *Rituals and Power*, p. 9
- 6 *ibid*
- 7 *ibid*, p. 10
- 8 Taylor, *The Divinity*, p. 212
- 9 *ibid*, p. 214
- 10 Price, "Between man and god", pp. 30,31
- 11 Price, "Between man and god", p. 36
- 12 Burckhardt, *The Age of Constantine the Great*, p. 130
- 13 *ibid*, p. 190
- 14 Price, "Between man and god", p. 39
- 15 Price, *Rituals and Power*, p. 227; Price, "Between man and god", p. 40; see also Taylor, *The Divinity*, appendix I
- 16 Alfoldi, *The Conversion*, p. 109
- 17 *ibid*, p. 56/7
- 18 Burckhardt, *The Age of Constantine the Great*, p. 128
- 19 *ibid*, p. 134
- 20 see *The Transformation, I – The Crisis of the 3th Century*, p. 30–59
- 21 Taylor, *The Divinity*, p. 42
- 22 *ibid*, p. 49

- 23 *ibid*, p. 222/23
- 24 Alfoldi, *The Conversion*, p. 32
- 25 Williams, *Diocletian*, p. 159
- 26 Alfoldi, *The Conversion*, p. 55
- 27 Taylor, *The Divinity*, p. 53
- 28 *ibid*, p. 60
- 29 *ibid*
- 30 Price, *Rituals and Power*, p. 49/50
- 31 Price, "Between man and god", p. 34/5
- 32 Taylor, *The Divinity*, p. 99
- 33 *ibid*, p. 96
- 34 *ibid*, p. 118
- 35 *ibid*, p. 143
- 36 *ibid*
- 37 *ibid*, app. III
- 38 *ibid*, p. 155/56
- 39 *ibid*, p. 157/58
- 40 *ibid*, p. 160
- 41 *ibid*, p. 165
- 42 *ibid*
- 43 *ibid*, p. 206
- 44 *ibid*
- 45 Ward – Perkins, *Roman Imperial Architecture*, p. 309
- 46 Taylor, *The Divinity*, p. 157
- 47 *ibid*
- 48 see Scott about the previous dynasty of the Flavians
- 49 Baker, *Constantine the Great*, p. 3
- 50 Williams, *Diocletian*, appendix III
- 51 Scott, *The Imperial Cult*, Preface
- 52 L'Orange, *Art Forms*, p. 3
- 53 *ibid*
- 54 Burckhardt, *The Age of Constantine the Great*, p. 15; see also Williams, *Diocletian*, app. III; Ferrill, *The Fall*, p. 31
- 55 Burckhardt, *The Age of Constantine the Great*, p. 43
- 56 *ibid*
- 57 *ibid*, p. 55
- 58 Williams, *Diocletian*, p. 154
- 59 Burckhardt, *The Age of Constantine the Great*, p. 124; there are pointed different opinions
- 60 Alfoldi, *The Conversion*
- 61 *ibid*, p. 25
- 62 *ibid*, p. 30; see also Barnes, p. 247
- 63 Keresztes, *Constantine*, p. 167
- 64 Baker, *Constantine the Great*, p. 191
- 65 Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, pp. 298, 316, 358, 445 – 465, 475, 479f.
- 66 Cohen, *Coin – Inscriptions*, p. 62
- 67 *ibid*
- 68 *ibid*, p. 77

- 69 *ibid*, p. 62; for Constantine's titles on the coins see also Alfoldi, *The Conversion*, pp. 56, 58, 64, Bowder, *The Age of Constantine and Julian*, Chapter III and Price, "Between man and god", p. 33
- 70 Alfoldi, *The Conversion*, p. 97
- 71 Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, p. 222
- 72 Baker, *Constantine the Great*, p. 327
- 73 L'Orange, *Art Forms*, p. 130

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