

Ittai Gradel, *Emperor Worship and Roman Religion*. Oxford: OUP, 2002. Pp. xvi + 398. £45.10/\$85.00. ISBN 0-19-815275-2.

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Ittai Gradel's book on *Emperor Worship and Roman Religion* is the latest in a long line of studies and monographs on the Roman imperial cult. Though arguably imperfect in certain respects, it constitutes a stimulating and valuable contribution to understanding and debate in a notoriously difficult area.

Gradel's introduction briefly discusses some basic themes and concepts: it includes, for example, overviews of the *Acta Arvalia* and of the nature and functions of sacrifice in Roman religious praxis. More importantly, however, it sees the first appearance of the book's central contentions, which bear the unmistakable influence of Simon Price, who supervised the thesis from which *Emperor Worship and Roman Religion* developed. Essentially, Gradel wishes to argue that divinity was a relative category in Roman thought and that *divini honores* were "ultimately an aspect of the honours-for-benefactions structure found in all relationships between parties of vastly unequal power and social standing in Roman society" (26).

Chapter 2 both develops Gradel's theory of divinity as a relative category and examines beliefs and practices relating to the divinization of humans before the time of Julius Caesar. In Republican Rome, Gradel suggests, gods were not worshipped simply as a matter of course: "State sacrifices to Jupiter were not performed simply because he was a god.... Such worship took place because Jupiter was the foremost, most powerful god of Rome" (28). He also notes that it seems not to have been unusual for people to refer to their benefactors in deificatory terms, and that the *genii* of *patresfamilia* were regularly worshipped by the latter's freedmen and clients, a point which will later assume some importance.

Chapter 3 concerns itself with the honours paid to Julius Caesar. Wisely ignoring much of the vast secondary literature, Gradel concerns himself mainly with a judicious analysis of the ancient sources in the light of his general conception of divine honours ("The honours... should be seen as an expression of relative divinity, that is, divine *status* in relation to all other men" (72)). Interestingly, he reverses the usual view that *divus* connoted a lesser degree of divinity than *deus*, taking his stand upon the testimony of Varro and his contemporary(?) Ateius (as paraphrased by Servius). One would perhaps require more evidence to conclude that Varro and Ateius were articulating a generally-held belief, let alone that such a belief informed the Senate's policy towards Divus Julius.

Chapter 4 outlines the evidence for the imperial cult in the *municipia* and concludes that Dio's celebrated affirmation that no Roman Emperor had received cult at Rome or in Italy cannot be taken at face value: he is either referring in a narrow, technical sense to provincial-type cult or is simply wrong. Taylor's suggestion that the Italian

municipals worshipped the imperial *genius* rather than its possessor is also convincingly refuted.

Chapter 5 discusses the evidence relating to Augustus, who seems to have set an important precedent by declining to seek or accept full-blown official deification. Gradel floats the idea that Augustus had toyed with the idea of adopting the ideological persona of *paterfamilias* of the Roman state, a notion finding some intriguing support in evidence suggesting preliminary moves towards establishing a cult of the his *genius*.

Chapter 6 analyses the behaviour of Augustus' successors in very similar terms, insisting that no emperor can be shown to have initiated or endorsed moves *officially* (and the emphasis is necessary) to deify him during his lifetime. Gradel conjectures that such moves as were made in this direction were the product of a senatorial desire to clarify and solidify the Emperor's still-fluid ideological position: "The higher the emperor was placed on the status ladder of the world, the higher was the relative placement of the senators themselves; if the emperor possessed outright divine status, the role and self-esteem of prominent senators would be as in the good old days, when they, first among men, lorded it over the world" (156). I am not sure that I find Gradel's reasoning on this point wholly persuasive, but his suggestion is interesting and certainly worth making.

Chapter 7 deals with the cult of the Emperor's *genius*, noting that it seems to have commenced no earlier than Caligula's time and that it continued, though not without interruption, until the Third Century. Gradel reiterates that genial cult (as we may call it) was usually associated with freedmen and clients: when applied to the Emperor, far from being a tactful alternative to direct cult, it might cause considerable ill feeling among proud scions of the senatorial aristocracy.

Chapters 8 and 9 demonstrate that there is significant evidence for Emperor-worship among private citizens. They discuss the evidence for lararium cults, for libations to the Emperor at dinner (which, contrary to a widely-held belief, were offered to the Emperor personally, not to his *genius*) and for cultic associations which operated without formal public sanction.

Chapter 10 addresses the question of the worship of the imperial *numen*, reaching the conclusion that it equated with direct worship of the Emperor. Gradel's argumentation is not unpersuasive, but I am less sure that every instance of *numen*-worship is necessarily to be seen in this light: are we not perhaps seeing worshippers experimenting with a term which always contained a degree of instability?

Chapter 11 briefly examines the evidence for one curious and isolated cult of a Caeretan censor-for-life by his clients.

Chapter 12, by far the longest in the book, takes as its subject the *post mortem* deification of emperors by the Senate. Gradel goes into considerable detail on Augustus' funeral and consecration, and notes that the exceptional award of divine honours for which Augustus had long hoped gradually became devalued as "it came to entail only the not necessarily very positive verdict of "not guilty"" (288). A particular concern for him is the act of official deification: this, he cogently argues,

was a *dynamic* act, and therefore quite dissimilar from the canonizations of Catholic and Orthodox saints, which purport simply to recognize an already-existing state of affairs.

An interesting discussion of the iconography of imperial apotheosis is followed by a reprise of Gradel's theme that divinity was not a theological absolute and a reading of the *Apocolocyntosis* consistent with his theoretical agenda. Most of the rest of the chapter is taken up by a plausible argument that the cult of deceased emperors came closely to be linked with contemporary issues regarding the relationship between and aspirations of the living Emperor and his Senate and an account of the demise of the system of official deification and the system of religious thought with which it was entangled. The latter concludes with the interesting suggestion that the persecutions unleashed against the Christians by the later emperors paradoxically "advertised the Christian church as a logical alternative" to the beleaguered pagan religious system, "so that oppositional elements of all kinds would now take an interest in the sect" (369).

Such is the substance of Gradel's book, which is consistently thoughtful and learned, and succeeds in stimulating even where it does not convince. Now for a brief examination of those areas in which it leaves me unpersuaded.

Firstly, Gradel makes and maintains a rigorous distinction between official, public state cult and other forms and levels of religious discourse and praxis. I believe that this distinction is unhelpful, at least in the form in which it appears in *Emperor Worship*. Gradel, for example, maintains that the evidence relating to Caligula is consistent with his view that later emperors continued Augustus' policy of refusing to allow themselves officially to be made into gods. Yet can the emperor's extravagant cult with all its flamboyant paraphernalia really be excluded from consideration simply because it was established and funded by the *princeps* himself as a private project (149-159)? After all, Gradel himself later acknowledges that the official cult could itself be construed as a private enterprise (278f). The same section contains passages such as the following:

Caligula was, still according to Dio, called by divine titles (Jupiter, *deus*, and *divus* are explicitly mentioned) to the extent that such names even found their way into documents - of an official nature, that is, or the comment would be pointless. Probably Dio or his source had found such epithets in senatorial decrees. But that does not mean that they became part of official titulature until formally decreed by the Senate, which clearly did not happen. (156)

Gradel surely here risks inviting the charge of pedantry: at the top of the imperial state, public and private jostled and shaded into each other in this area as in others.

Secondly, the idea that divinity was a relative rather than an absolute category in the Roman world is a little too much for this reviewer at least to swallow. Gradel does not merely repeat the not unfamiliar claim that the ancients did not employ discrete, mutually exclusive and opposite ontological categories of divinity and humanity: he apparently holds that ontological issues were irrelevant in defining what a god was. This surely goes too far: is it really the case that (for example) "terms such as *deus* or

divinus, sacer and *numen* expressed [] primarily status and power, not nature” (268)? After all, the border between mortality and deity was policed by some of the most popular and memorable myths and *Kunstwerke* of the classical world, from the *Iliad* to the *Bacchae* to the tale of Tantalus. To the Greeks and Romans, a god was not merely powerful, but *supernaturally* powerful, as well as being free from normal human constraints, material and immaterial. I myself do not feel encouraged to believe that the question of who was or was not a god could ever be answered in purely relative or situational terms, even if divine honours - which, I freely acknowledge, were simply one component of a complex classificatory system - could sometimes be paid to human beings.

One further point suggests itself. Admittedly, Roman religion was characteristically more interested in praxis than dogma. The Roman world produced no pagan Aquinas; no controversies arose as to whether Jupiter was *factus* or *genitus*; Romandom, as a Gibbon might put it, was never divided by an iota. Yet we should hesitate to posit a complete lack of interest on the Romans’ part in the question of the Emperor’s relationship with the ‘real’ gods, and indeed with the supernatural in general. *Was* he, in fact, truly divine, in the Christianized sense of the term? If not, did he partake in a lesser kind or degree of sacrality? It is surely inconceivable that the Romans had no opinions (or spectrum of opinions) on such issues, however uninterested most of them may have been in abstract philosophical speculation, and it seems equally improbable that those opinions failed to influence the ways in which they paid their emperor cult. Gradel, however, is constrained by an unnecessarily narrow theoretical approach from even considering such issues as these.

None of which detracts from the many merits of *Imperial Worship*. Gradel assembles a large quantity of valuable information concerning the imperial cult, erects a thought-provoking interpretative superstructure upon it and points the way to a number of fruitful future topics of research. I commend his book without hesitation as an admirable piece of scholarship which no work on its subject matter can henceforth afford to ignore.