

# *Introduction*

## Beyond Isolation

### Re-positioning Ruler Cults in the Hellenistic Culture<sup>1</sup>

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DOI – 10.7358/erga-2016-002-intr

The five contributions of this volume are a selection of the papers presented at the panel *Meet the New Gods, Same as the Old Gods? Formula, Ritual, and Status in Hellenistic Ruler Cult*, hosted by the 8<sup>th</sup> Celtic Conference in Classics, Edinburgh, June 25-28, 2014. The call for papers had a dual purpose, which I could figuratively resume as «zooming in» on the fine-grained linguistic and pragmatic specificities of Hellenistic cultic honours for human beings, and «zooming out» in order to understand the place of such honours in relation to the broader social, political and cultural processes of the period.

This methodological approach is a response to the special success that the study of Hellenistic ruler cults has enjoyed in the last decades<sup>2</sup>. The once dominating paradigm interpreted ruler cults as a religious and moral paradox in Greek history, and more specifically as a token of the decline of the *polis* political, cultural and religious system during the Hellenistic period. Such decline would have left space to an attitude of submissive collaboration with Hellenistic dynasts and/or to a process of Orientalization of Greek traditions<sup>3</sup>. Conversely, the recent scholarship has given back

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<sup>2</sup> Recent general discussions of the new perspectives in the discipline are provided by Iossif - Lorber 2011; Gnoli - Muccioli 2014; Iossif 2014; Caneva 2015a; Caneva 2015b; Caneva-Paul 2015.

<sup>3</sup> The paradigm of political and cultural decline is epitomized by the evaluation of ruler cults by Dodds 1956, 297, commenting on the ithyphallic hymn for Demetrios Poliorketes (for which cf. Landucci in this volume): «When the old gods withdraw, the empty thrones cry out for a successor, and with good management, or even without

to ruler cults a place in Greek history, although this place is still mostly limited to political, institutional and diplomatic history. However, an increasing number of studies have started providing a more encompassing cultural interpretation of the phenomenon. In our opinion, the path towards a broader appreciation of cultic honours for human beings should indeed combine the study of their socio-political underpinnings, to which the current paradigm of the «euergetic discourse» provides a satisfactory interpretative framework<sup>4</sup>, with a strong focus on their more far-reaching cultural and religious ramifications and interactions with other contemporaneous trends in the Hellenistic world.

The methodological warnings related to the attempt at implementing this vision are, of course, many and of various nature. The effort to identify general trends cannot be carried out without testing them in light of diachronic and geographical variations. Context-specific studies are necessary if we want to identify the socio-political frameworks of cults and their operating patterns in distinctive historical settings, or to compare them. On the other hand, the results of these analyses need to be combined in an encompassing perspective of *longue durée* in order to understand the big picture of the mutual influences between ruler cults and other paramount socio-cultural processes taking place during the Hellenistic period.

Studying cultic honours for human beings out of isolation requires that we deal with them as parts of a dynamic web of experiences, which shaped the practice and meaning of social and cultural life in the Hellenistic world<sup>5</sup>. From this perspective, ruler cults can be studied *per se*, as a distinct field of analysis, but they can also be discussed with the purpose of contributing to more general debates in Hellenistic history. The papers published in this dossier respond to this call by dealing with transversal

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management, almost any perishable bag of bones may be hoisted into the vacant seat». The reference is clearly to the passage where the hymn contrasts Demetrios as a present saviour and the traditional deities who fail to protect the Athenians. For a reassessment of Dodds' opinion within the framework of the new paradigm, which stresses continuities and adaptations against ruptures in Hellenistic Greek religion, cf. Caneva 2012, 76-78. For a brief overview of the main opposing paradigms used by twentieth-century scholars in Hellenistic history, cf. more in general Ma 2008.

<sup>4</sup> This consideration applies to both international diplomacy and inter-personal relationships. For the level of international diplomacy, cf. Ma 2002<sup>2</sup> (kings and cities). For the broader dimension of inter-personal interaction, cf. for instance Ma 2013 on Greek *poleis* and Strootman 2014 for royal courts. On the importance of gift-giving and its ambiguous role in promoting equity but establishing hierarchy, cf. also Gomingo Gyax 2013 and Caneva in this volume.

<sup>5</sup> The consequences of this process are certainly to be found in the Roman period too, yet this chronological extension does not concern us in this dossier.

themes: the coexistence of local and global trends in the Hellenistic world; the cohabitation of different traditions and the intercultural contacts between them; the issue of social agency and the role of the Greek *polis* in a competitive socio-political ecosystem where an increasingly important role was played by a variety of actors, acting below the *polis* system (individuals and groups holding little or no institutional role), above it (leagues and kingdoms; royal officials and other «supra-*polis*» elites) or across it (professional networks and alike).

The contributions of Alessandra Coppola and Franca Landucci deal with the use, abuse or rejection of ruler cults in the construction of a message of power legitimacy and continuity in the early Hellenistic period. Coppola's comparative analysis of the way early Hellenistic dynasties used the religious sphere to build a multi-faceted ideological mechanism of inter-generational continuity provides a general narrative framework within which we can better understand the contrast between the different strategies of self-representation adopted by Demetrios Poliorketes and his son, Antigonos II Gonatas, as discussed by Landucci. While Demetrios can be seen as a forerunner and a model for the intensive use of religious honours in the definition of a charismatic model of kingship, Antigonos appears to have focused on a more traditional depiction of the monarch as a pious leader protected by the gods. These two contributions also deal with the issue of agency in the establishment of honours, by drawing attention to the importance of considering centralized/global and local initiatives, top-down and bottom-up dynamics in the definition of honours and representations of kingship in an intertwined perspective. One of the points discussed by Coppola deals with a crucial matter of vocabulary. Scholars generally distinguish cultic honours for Hellenistic rulers in two categories, labelled as «dynastic» and «civic», in order to contrast cults established on the initiative of the central power and those decreed and practised by cities on their own initiative. This dual pattern has certainly played an important role in the history of the discipline as it has contributed to the replacement of a simplified top-down understanding of the genesis of cults for rulers with one based on the category of diplomatic reciprocity, as resumed by the current paradigm of «energetic discourse». When seen from the perspective of the construction of dynastic continuity, however, the dichotomy «dynastic *vs* civic» risks becoming ambiguous in terms. Contrasting «dynastic» and «civic» honours implies that we exclude the possibility for ritual honours decreed by cities to bear a dynastic meaning, in the sense of expressing a message of inter-generational, hereditary continuity within a ruling family. As aptly pointed out by Coppola, inter-generational continuity as expressed by honours for royal couples (father and son, king and

queen) is a common feature of civic ritual honours. Evidence even shows that cities gave religious shape to the message of royal continuity before the Diadochi were strong enough to actively establish top-down, «centralized» cults for their (at first, deceased) predecessors<sup>6</sup>.

Continuity and innovation in Greek religion constitute the core of the contribution by Stéphanie Paul, whose dual focus on the local features of cultic honours for kings in Aigai and Pergamon and on the broader treatment of the topic of *soteria* in Hellenistic Greek religion warns against reading the practicalities of ruler cults as an isolated exception in the history of post-classical Greek religion. Well beyond the status of cultural paradox to which they have been relegated in the past, ruler cults are now acknowledged a place in the history of Greek religion, as one component in a dynamic process of interrelated transformations. Focus on the processes of manipulation of the community's social space and time which accompany the creation of new cults for rulers points at a variety of possibilities by which local institutions could adapt the traditional toolkit of Greek *polis* religion to new needs. In doing so, they not only added royal ritual honours to existing cults<sup>7</sup>, but also embedded them in the existing religious and political life of the community. Questions concerning agency and the organization of ruler cults are also discussed by Paul with regard to the social and institutional figures called to play a part in the definition, communication, implementation and preservation of the new rites.

The engaging discussion of Hellenistic patterns of heroization by Thibault Boddez fully deploys the set of questions that we should raise when dealing with the ambitious attempt at understanding the concurrent developments of royal and heroic cult and their possible mutual influences. Honours for rulers as city founders show that the early Hellenistic trend towards royal divinization could be embedded in contexts which were traditionally heroic. The question then arises of whether cultic honours for great non-royal benefactors, an increasingly documented phenomenon from the mid-Hellenistic period, should also be interpreted in a religious perspective, as a symmetrical phenomenon of hybridization between heroizing processes for public benefactors and the religious toolkit of royal cult. Boddez' answer to this tantalizing question is necessarily nuanced and refers to the socio-political developments of the post-classical *polis*, where the extension of cultic honours from royal figures to non-royal elite mem-

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<sup>6</sup> This observation does not imply that we endorse a generalizing evolutionist explanation of the centralized cult as a process of royal systematization of pre-existing, autonomous cultic initiatives. Against this reading, cf. Iossif 2014.

<sup>7</sup> Cf., in this respect, the observations on «appended festivals» by Buraselis 2012.

bers followed the progressive replacement of royal euergetism with that of distinguished aristocrats. In line with this sociological perspective, Boddez also contrasts the traditionalism of Hellenistic processes of heroization when administered by civic institutions and the innovative approaches of cultic and political groups acting autonomously within the *polis* system. The analysis of the possible interrelated developments between royal and heroic cults finally leads Boddez to address the issue of the gap between the abundance of ritual honours for benefactors and the rare bestowal of the *heros* denomination upon them. While the fact that non-royal benefactors are usually referred to as *euergetai* and *soteres* points to a direct link with the royal euergetic discourse of the early Hellenistic period, Boddez proposes that the limited use of the heroic denomination for benefactors may also have been influenced by the increasing diffusion of the term *heros* in the context of funerary honours. In funerary practice, the euergetic justification of ritual honours tends to disappear in favour of a strengthened link between honours for the dead and private cultic foundations, another feature of historical development which can be ascribed to the Hellenistic period.

To conclude with, my study of religious intercession, as expressed by the preposition *hyper*, in the Hellenistic world and especially in the Ptolemaic kingdom draws attention to the impact of different agents and contexts of ritual communication on dedicatory habits, including the possibility of transfers between Greek and non-Greek traditions. The dual Greek system of performing ritual action in name of/in favour of other persons, or to them (in the dative, a formula ritually positioning the benefiting party at the same level as the honoured gods), is documented in relation to a variety of agents in the Greek world, from *poleis* to individuals. However, the focus on Ptolemaic evidence has shown that such general habit could take up specific implications depending on the context to which it was applied. In the Ptolemaic kingdom, where the Greek *polis* system played a very limited socio-political and cultural role, religious intercession became a powerful instrument to express special inter-personal bonds and to give shape to social hierarchies. Moreover, the analysis of specific case studies has shown that the interplay between dedications in the dative and with *hyper* plus the genitive was flexible enough to express a variety of meanings and functions. Greek cities did not have problems in using both formulae, also in combination, to refer to kings in their dual characterization as saviours and benefactors, whose interventions could be equated to those of traditional gods, and as human leaders in need of divine protection. Individuals could also choose between alternative dedicatory habits in order to stress their own social

position and to express a variety of social links with other agents. This dynamic use of the Greek dedicatory tradition ultimately reveals that the efficacy of the communication expressed through ritual was what counted first for ritual agents, rather than the need for a theoretical definition of the status of the honorands in relation to the divine sphere. Because no rigid theoretical definitions of the borders between the divine, the heroic and the human sphere existed in the practice of Greek religion, ritual agents had a flexible toolkit of communication strategies at their disposal and made effective use of it in compliance with their individual or group's interests and agenda.

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