
Honours and worship: Emperors, imperial cults and associations at Ephesus (first to third centuries C.E.)

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Summary: Scholars have frequently underplayed the significance of the emperors within actual social and religious life in cities of the Roman empire and have portrayed imperial cults as predominantly political, lacking in religious dimensions. However, this view of imperial cults is misguided and acts as an obstacle to understanding the nature and significance of these cults at the local level. A fresh study of associations (local social-religious groups) in Ephesus helps to clarify the significance of emperors with respect to social, political and religious facets of life. There were two main interconnected ways in which emperors played a role in social and religious life within associations: in regard to networks of benefaction and with respect to cultic activities.

Résumé: Les chercheurs ont souvent négligé l'influence des empereurs dans la vie sociale et religieuse des villes l'empire romain. Ils ont décrit les cultes impériaux comme étant surtout politiques, sans dimensions religieuses. Cependant cette façon de voir est mal fondée et nous cache la véritable nature de ces cultes au niveau local. Une nouvelle étude des associations (groupes locaux socio-religieux) à Éphèse aide à clarifier l'importance des empereurs dans les dimensions sociales, politiques et religieuses de la vie. Il y a eu deux façons principales interreliées qui montrent que les empereurs ont joué un rôle dans la vie sociale et religieuse des associations: dans les réseaux d'assistance et dans les activités du culte.

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Introduction¹

There has been a tendency in the past for many scholars of Greco-Roman religion to underplay the significance of the emperors within the actual social and religious life of the Roman empire. Part of the reason for this tendency relates to the presuppositions and modernizing tendencies of many modern scholars—particularly with regard to restrictive definitions of religion—which have sometimes been an obstacle to understanding the nature and significance of phenomena such as imperial cults or worship of the emperors.² In this article a critical discussion of the ways in which some scholars of the past have viewed imperial cults will set the stage for a fresh investigation of some largely neglected inscriptional evidence; this evidence attests to the important place of emperors in the social, political *and religious* life of local groups or associations in one of the foremost cities of the Roman empire, the metropolis of Ephesus. Associations—small groups or guilds which met on a regular basis under the patronage of deities for various social and religious purposes³—played a key role in the lives of many men and women of antiquity and may provide an important clue as to the nature and popularity of imperial cults at the local level.

Historians of Greco-Roman religion such as Arthur D. Nock, Martin P. Nilsson, G. W. Bowersock, Kurt Latte, Ronald Mellor, Dieter Ladage and Eleanor G. Huzar emphasize aspects of political expediency and loyalty and underplay or discard the importance of “genuine” religiosity with regard to cults of the emperors.⁴ These imperial cults are frequently portrayed as

1 I would like to thank Professors Peter Richardson and John S. Kloppenborg who provided helpful comments regarding the revision of this article. This work is dedicated to my father, William Thomas, whose love and support were a source of strength for me in my studies and in life.

2 By worship of the emperors I mean cultic activities and/or religious rituals and activities addressed to the emperors as gods.

3 Generally speaking, there are four main types of associations attested in cities such as Ephesus: associations based on membership drawn either from a common occupation (guilds), from persons involved in common cultic interests, from persons of a common ethnic or geographic origin (e.g., Romans, Jews) or from networks associated with a particular household. However, no hard-and-fast distinctions can be made between these types, which sometimes overlapped; all such groups served interconnected social, religious/cultic, funerary and other purposes for their members. For a recent overview of associations and their activities see N. R. E. Fisher, “Greek Associations, Symposia, and Clubs,” in M. Grant and R. Kitzinger, eds., *Civilization of the Ancient Mediterranean: Greece and Rome* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1988), Vol. 2, p. 1167-97, and also by Fisher in the same volume, “Roman Associations, Dinner Parties, and Clubs,” p. 1199-1225.

4 See A. D. Nock, “Religious Developments from the Close of the Republic to the Death of Nero,” *The Cambridge Ancient History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1935), Vol. 10, p. 481-503, and “The Roman Army and the Roman Religious Year,” in Z. Stewart, ed., *Arthur Darby Nock: Essays on Religion and the Ancient World* (Oxford: Clarendon Press), Vol. 2, p. 778-81; M. P. Nilsson, *Greek Piety* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1948), p. 177-78, and

empty shells void of any real religious meaning for the participants. Nilsson, for example, states that imperial cult “lacked all genuine religious content,” and, with very few exceptions, the imperial cult’s “meaning lay far more in state and social realms, where it served both to testify to loyalty to the rule of Rome and to the emperor and to satisfy the ambition of the leading families.”⁵ Though Nilsson and others may be partially correct in acknowledging this social and political role, exclusion of religious significance on a local level for various strata of society is not justified.

Similar assumptions are evident among scholars who discuss religious associations and guilds specifically.⁶ For example, in his monumental study of associations, Franz Poland states that “the cult of the emperors appears relatively seldom [within associations] and, where it does occur, has little independent meaning”; moreover, it had little significance for an association’s “self-understanding.”⁷

But the above-outlined view or paradigm is not without some opponents. E. Will, H. W. Pleket, Fergus Millar and, more recently, Robin Lane Fox, for example, criticize the general tendency within scholarship to overemphasize the political and neglect the religious aspects of imperial cults.⁸ More recent research focussing on the cult of the emperors in Asia Minor by scholars such as S. R. F. Price, Steven J. Friesen and Stephen Mitchell⁹ also

Geschichte der griechischen Religion (München: C.H. Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1961), Vol. 2, p. 384-94; K. Latte, *Römische Religionsgeschichte* (München: C.H. Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1960), p. 294-326, esp. p. 308; R. Mellor, *The Worship of the Goddess Roma in the Greek World* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1975), esp. p. 20-22, 21 n. 50; G. W. Bowersock, *Augustus and the Greek World* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), p. 112-21; D. Ladage, “Sozial Aspekte des Kaiserkultes,” in W. Eck, H. Galsterer and H. Wolff, eds., *Studien zur antiken Sozialgeschichte: Festschrift Friedrich Vittinghoff* (Köln and Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 1980), p. 377-88; and Eleanor G. Huzar, “Emperor Worship in Julio-Claudian Egypt,” *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, II.18.5 (1995): 3092-3142, esp. p. 3102, 3104, 3110-11.

5 For the former quotation see Nilsson, *Greek Piety*, p. 178; for the latter see Nilsson, *Geschichte*, Vol. 2, p. 385 (translation mine). Cf. Bowersock, *Augustus*, p. 112-13, 117.

6 For further discussion of associations and guilds see below.

7 F. Poland, *Geschichte des griechischen Vereinswesens* (Leipzig: Zentral-Antiquarariat der deutschen demokratischen Republik, 1967 [1909]), p. 234, cf. p. 234-35, 532 (translation mine).

8 E. Will, “Autour du culte des souverains (à propos de deux livres récents),” *Revue de philologie de littérature et d'histoire anciennes*, 3rd series, 34 (1960): 76-85, esp. p. 79; H. W. Pleket, “An Aspect of the Emperor Cult: Imperial Mysteries,” *Harvard Theological Review*, 58 (1965): 331-47; F. Millar, “The Imperial Cult and the Persecutions,” in *Le culte des souverains dans l'empire romain* (Geneva: Olivier Reverdin, 1973), p. 145-75, esp. p. 146-48, 163-64; and R. Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1986), p. 39-41.

9 S. R. F. Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); S. J. Friesen, *Twice Neokoros: Ephesus, Asia and the Cult of the Flavian Imperial Family* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1993), and “The Cult of the Roman Emperors in Ephesos: Temple Wardens, City Titles, and the Interpretation of the Revelation of

demonstrates both the inadequacy of some previous assumptions and the need to re-view cults of the emperors on a regional basis.

Underestimating the religious significance of cults of the emperors is partially the result of the imposition of modern viewpoints onto ancient evidence. First, for example, the traditional interpretation of imperial cults reflects the modern distinction between politics and religion. In antiquity, however, social, religious, economic and political aspects of life were intricately intertwined. Thus to say that worship of the emperors was simply an expression of political expediency or to say that it was utterly an expression of religious piety are both misleading. As we shall see, what we can say is that worship of the emperors in western Asia Minor certainly encompassed religious and other aspects to a degree underestimated in the past.

Second, the issue of whether the ancients who engaged in worshipping the emperors believed the emperor to be human or divine, which reflects modern ontological concerns, has also contributed to scholars' underestimation of the religious character of imperial cults.¹⁰ From a modern perspective it is difficult to comprehend that what we as moderns know to be human could be worshipped as a god by ancients, and, as a result, a modern scholar is more inclined to suggest that apparent worship of a human as divine must be superficial (or simply political in the case of emperors). But an approach which focusses primarily on the ontological status of the emperors is inappropriate since we cannot get into the minds of ancients to see what they actually believed; and, more importantly as the present essay begins to show, the vast majority of the evidence that we do have for local imperial cult activities and rituals shows that the characteristics of and practices connected with worship of the emperors virtually coincide with those connected with worship of more traditional deities.¹¹ Moreover, the evi-

John," in H. Koester, ed., *Ephesos: Metropolis of Asia: An Interdisciplinary Approach to its Archaeology, Religion, and Culture* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press, 1995), p. 229-50; and Stephen Mitchell, *Anatolia: Land, Men, and Gods in Asia Minor* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), Vol. 1, p. 100-17.

10 For further discussion and criticism of how this ontological issue has affected past studies of imperial cults see Friesen, *Twice Neokoros*, p. 146-52. Both Price (*Rituals*, chap. 8, esp. p. 213, 233) and, following him, Mitchell (*Anatolia*, p. 117) continue to engage the issue of ontology in arguing that the emperors would have been placed somewhere between human and the divine (see below for further criticism of this position).

11 Cf. Friesen, *Twice Neokoros*, p. 147; Millar, "Imperial Cult," esp. p. 163-64; and J. R. Fears, "Ruler Worship," in M. Grant and R. Kitzinger, eds., *Civilization of the Ancient Mediterranean: Greece and Rome* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1988), Vol. 2, p. 1011: "cult and ritual [connected with ruler worship] give no indication that the figure so worshipped was regarded as in any way distinct from what a modern commentator might deign to consider 'real gods.'"

dence suggests that in practice, within the context of imperial cults, the emperors functioned as gods.¹²

Third, it is quite common in modern contexts to measure true religiosity and piety in terms of emotion or feelings and this tendency sometimes extends to scholars' assessments of ancient religion.¹³ Though there are certainly some cases where religious feelings are very strongly expressed by individuals in antiquity,¹⁴ piety (*eusebeia*) and religiosity were more frequently concerned with the proper performance of cultic acts to maintain fitting relations between communities and the gods rather than with the inner feelings of individuals.¹⁵ This does not make such activity any less genuinely religious within that context.¹⁶

In contrast to those scholars who reduce imperial cults to the political by discarding its possible religious dimensions for the populace, Price and Friesen correctly emphasize that worship of the emperors or *Sebastoi* (august or revered ones)¹⁷ in the Roman province of Asia was a multifaceted expression of inhabitants from various strata of society which was not limited to the political. The archaeological and inscriptional evidence from Ephesus and Asia Minor, which shows the popularity of the cult of the emperors in this region, leads one to question aspects of the traditional scholarly view. In light of these arguments, it is surprising that Friesen does not discuss associations at all and Price gives only passing attention to

12 Cf. Friesen, *Twice Neokoros*, p. 153.

13 R. Mellor is quite representative of these scholars in his assertion that worship of the goddess Roma and emperors lacked "any religious dimension"; but he seems alone in admitting, in a small footnote, that he uses "religious" in "its modern sense," i.e., with respect to the experiences and feelings of the individual (*Goddess Roma*, p. 21 n. 50). The language of feelings and emotion is also evident in Huzar, "Emperor Worship," p. 3102, 3104, 3108, 3110. Cf. A.-J. Festugière, *Personal Religion among the Greeks* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1960), esp. chaps. 1-2. E. R. Dodds defines true religion in a "Jamesian sense" as relating to the feelings and "personal experience of individuals" (*Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965], esp. p. 2-3). For another criticism of such a limited definition of religiosity see Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, p. 40.

14 Cf. Lucius Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, book 11.

15 Cf. W. Burkert, *Greek Religion*, translated by J. Raffan (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 272-75.

16 Cf. Burkert, *Greek Religion*, p. 275: From a Christian standpoint one is "inclined to dismiss a piety without faith, love, and hope as extrinsic and superficial, not attaining the essence of religion. Yet it would be mistaken to return a verdict of not genuine just because Greek religion is turned to the outward realities."

17 The term *Sebastos* or *Sebastoi* (pl.), the Greek equivalent for the Latin *augustus*, was frequently employed in Ephesus and Asia Minor in reference to the emperors and the imperial family, the revered ones, particularly in connection with imperial cults. I preserve the use of this terminology to draw attention to the Greek character of imperial cults as practised in Asia Minor (see Friesen, *Twice Neokoros*, p. 2-3, for further discussion).

them.¹⁸ Associations may provide an important clue as to the nature and popularity of imperial cults at the local level in cities such as Ephesus.

Moreover, as we shall see in the case of the city of Ephesus, the involvement of local associations in honouring and worshipping emperors confirms the inadequacy of many previous views of cults of the emperors. This evidence attests to the significant role that the emperors could play in the life of associations at the local level, both with regard to honours and social networks of benefaction and with respect to cultic activities directed at the emperors. In practice, the emperors or *Sebastoi* could function as gods within social and religious life, that is, within the cultic activity and networks and hierarchies of the urban setting of which associations were an integral part.

Honours and networks of benefaction

A few words about inscriptions or epigraphical evidence, upon which the majority of this article is based, would be helpful before proceeding.¹⁹ The main source of our information about associations, as with local social and religious life in cities such as Ephesus generally, comes from extant Greek and Latin texts inscribed in stone for various purposes. These inscriptions include gravestones (epitaphs); decrees or regulations of cities or groups; official decisions and letters of local magistrates, governors or emperors; and various kinds of honours presented by individuals, groups and civic institutions for human and divine benefactors in response to benefits conferred or desired, including dedications of altars, statues and buildings or simply an inscription of thanks. Epigraphical evidence such as that discussed in the present article provides a vital window from which to view concrete, and otherwise obscure, facets of social and religious life in antiquity.

Out of about 100 inscriptions relating to associations and guilds in Ephesus (I-III C.E.) over 20 pertain, in some way, either to worshipping or honouring the emperor in a private or public setting or to some direct or indirect contact with the emperor, imperial cult or its functionaries.²⁰

18 Price does mention or briefly discuss specific associations in connection with the themes he covers (cf. Price, *Rituals*, p. 50 n. 122, 85, 88, 90, 105, 118, 190-91).

19 For a general introduction to epigraphy and inscriptions see F. Millar, "Epigraphy," in M. Crawford, ed., *Sources for Ancient History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 80-136, and B. F. Cook, *Greek Inscriptions* (London: British Museum Publications, 1987). Cf. R. MacMullen, "The Epigraphic Habit in the Roman Empire," *American Journal of Philology*, 103 (1982): 233-46.

20 Epigraphical abbreviations follow those outlined as a new standard in G. H. R. Horsley and John A. L. Lee, "A Preliminary Checklist of Abbreviations of Greek Epigraphic Volumes," *Epigraphica*, 56 (1994): 129-69. *IEph* 22, 213, 215, 275, 293, 295, 425, 586, 719, 859a, 1213, 1503, 1506, 1600, 2037, 2061-63, 3329, 3817, 4337.

The majority of inscriptions set up by guilds and associations in Ephesus relate to benefaction and reciprocation (honours), and it is primarily within this context that benefactors, whether they be humans, gods or emperors, become evident as an important part of association-life. Setting up honorary inscriptions to the emperors was common convention in Ephesus, and several associations took part in this aspect of civic life, including the *mystai* (initiates) of Dionysos who set up an inscription in honour of Hadrian (*IEph* 275).²¹

Another type of honorary inscription attests to the interconnections between emperors, the gods and associations within networks of benefaction. Gods, emperors, human benefactors, associations and other groups or institutions could be honoured alongside one another for their previous or expected actions of benefaction or, in the case of human benefactors and groups, for their acts of piety towards the gods or emperors. For example, a guild of silversmiths was honoured alongside both Artemis and the emperor in one fragmentary inscription (*IEph* 586; c. II-III C.E.). A village near Ephesus honoured a local religious association by dedicating an inscription “to the gods of our f[ather]s and to the *Sebastoi*²² gods” (*IEph* 3817; imperial era; cf. 3329).²³

Near the harbour, the benefactress Kominia Junia dedicated a statue of Isis to Antoninus Pius, the *dēmos* (People)²⁴ of Ephesus and the workers in the fishery tollhouse (*IEph* 1503; c. 138-60 C.E.; cf. *IGR* I 787 [Heraclea-Perinthus (Thracia); 196-98 C.E.]). This example attests to the multidimensional character of benefaction and honours in Ephesus as an emperor and a civic institution are included alongside an association of workers in a dedication to a (Greco-)Egyptian deity.

As with private benefactors, associations could, on occasion, dedicate statues or even buildings to the emperor.²⁵ There is an example of the latter from Ephesus. The above-mentioned fishery tollhouse was built round about 54-59 C.E. by means of donations by the association of fishermen and fishmongers who dedicated the building not only to Nero, but also to his mother, his wife, the *dēmos* of the Romans and the *dēmos* of the Ephesians

21 Cf. *IEph* 293 where a group of *mystai* honour Commodus.

22 See note 17 above regarding the term *Sebastoi*.

23 Date uncertain. For more on the parallel usage of the dative in connection with sacrifices to the emperors as gods alongside traditional deities see below.

24 The *dēmos* (People) and the *boulē* (Council) were the two fundamental civic institutions in cities of the time. The *dēmos* played a key role in the management of civic affairs by means of the assembly (*ekklesia*) of citizens.

25 The role of associations both at the receiving and giving end of benefaction with regard to architectural constructions or modifications could be a topic of future research. Mentions of meeting places or architectural modifications in connection with associations are attested in the inscriptions of Ephesus (cf. *IEph* 454, 547, 549, 553, 554, 1384, 3065, 3818; *IMagnMai* 117; and *ISmyrna* 714).

(*IEph* 20). Membership in this particular association reflects a variety of social and economic strata as the different amounts of donations indicate.²⁶

Far from being isolated groups concerned only with the internal activities of their members, then, the relation of associations to surrounding society could be multidimensional. Associations could maintain relations with benefactors, the civic institutions of their home city and, in a few cases, could even be involved in the larger context of intercity relations (unity or competition) and relations with emperors.²⁷

Other less prominent guilds and associations, however, would have been more modest with regard to their involvement in such broad networks encompassing emperors. For example, one would be hard pressed to suggest that a small guild of nut-sellers (*IEph* 2079; early III C.E.) or of bed-builders (*IEph* 2213), for example, could engage in such broad, almost international, networks, though their involvement in the local networks of benefaction (which were part of larger networks) is attested.

In general, the silence of many inscriptions regarding a group's relations with emperors and other groups and institutions of the city does not allow us to generalize too much in this regard; it does allow us to say that there was a range of possibilities or degrees to which an association could relate to various levels of society, including the empire and its representatives. Evidently, though, dedications and honorary inscriptions within the context of benefaction and other conventions of civic life demonstrate the significant part the emperors could play within the local life of associations. But there were other ways in which the emperors could play a part in association-life, including cults of emperors.

Provincial imperial cult and civic festivals

There is some evidence for the participation of associations in official celebrations of the provincial imperial cult of the league (*koinon*) of Asia. Some associations participated directly in the rites of the provincial cult, such as the associations of hymnodists or singers who sang hymns to the *Sebastoi*/emperors as gods in provincial celebrations (cf. *IEph* 18d.4-24 [44 C.E.], 3801 [41-54 C.E.]).²⁸

26 For further discussion of the social-economic status of membership in this association see S. M. Baugh, "Paul and Ephesus: The Apostle among his Contemporaries," Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, 1990, p. 67-70, 222-25, and G. H. R. Horsley, "The Inscriptions of Ephesus and the New Testament," *Novum Testamentum*, 34 (1992): 127-30.

27 Relations between associations and civic institutions of both the home city and of other cities (and hence aspects of both intra- and intercity relations) are topics I plan to address in future research.

28 For further discussion see J. Keil, "Zur Geschichte der Hymnoden in der Provinz Asia," *Jahreshefte des österreichischen archäologischen Instituts*, 11 (1908) Beiblatt: 101-10; Poland, *Geschichte*, p. 46-49; and Price, *Rituals*, p. 85, 88, 90, 105, 118.

Connections between other associations and the provincial imperial cult are less direct. There are, however, several cases where associations in Asia, such as the silversmiths (*IEph* 425; c. 81-117 C.E.) at Ephesus, had connections with the provincial cult and its main functionary, the high priest (*archiereus*), through social networks of benefaction.²⁹

There are also examples of the identity of a particular association being closely bound with the identity of the city of Ephesus, particularly that city's role as temple warden of the provincial imperial cult.³⁰ One association of the early II C.E., for example, using a common phrase, calls itself "the silversmiths of the greatest metropolis of Asia and three times temple-warden (*neokoros*) of the *Sebastoi* of the Ephesians."³¹

On a more local basis, associations could participate as a group in civic festivals, processions and rituals that included the worship of emperors, but such participation seems to have been primarily limited to the more officially recognized civic groups officially connected with the gymnasia (*paides*, *ephebes*, *neoi*, *gerousia*; cf. Xenophon of Ephesus, *Ephesian Tale*, 2-3; Strabo 14.1.20; *IEph* 27) and associations of performers and athletes, such as the Dionysiac Artists.

The more prestigious associations of Dionysiac Artists and of athletes were very much involved in performing at the public festivals and contests which would have included, in Roman times, devotion to the *Sebastoi*.³² Sometime in the first century there emerged a worldwide, or ecumenical, organization of just such Dionysiac Artists with local branches throughout the cities of the empire (e.g., *IEph* 22); these groups engaged in cultic activities for the emperors alongside Dionysos.³³ Their participation in various

29 Similar connections between associations and high priests are attested in other cities in the province of Asia: cf. *ISmyrna* 639 (II C.E.); *JGR* IV 907 (Cibyra; c. 114-120 C.E.); *ILydiaKP* 1 42 (Philadelphia; II C.E.); and *ILydiaKP* II 74 (Thyatira; I C.E.).

30 The first official provincial imperial cult temple in Ephesus was introduced under Domitian (see Friesen, *Twice Neokoros*, p. 29-49).

31 D. Knibbe and B. Iplikcioglu, *Jahreshefte des österreichischen archäologischen Instituts*, 55 (1984) Hauptblatt: 130-31; cf. *IEph* 22.40-45.

32 On the Dionysiac Artists see A. Pickard-Cambridge, *The Dramatic Festivals of Athens*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), p. 279-321; for the Artists in Asia Minor see D. Magie, *Roman Rule in Asia Minor to the End of the Third Century after Christ* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950), Vols. 1-2, p. 617-19, 899-900, 940-41, 1477-78. On athletic associations see H. W. Pleket, "Some Aspects of the History of Athletic Guilds," *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik*, 10 (1973): 197-227.

33 The extra-local connections this suggests and the concept of a world-wide or ecumenical guild of artists with various branches and communications throughout the empire are subjects that could be given further attention by social historians of the Roman world. Though such organizations of artists are, in some ways, not directly comparable to Christian communities due to the former's officially recognized status, they do attest to comparable interconnections from city to city and region to region, demonstrating both unity and competition. Certainly statements by scholars such as W. A. Meeks that there was no

festivals, which was considered a work of piety, would have included worship of emperors, who frequently appear as patrons of such groups, particularly by the reign of Hadrian. But it is important to note the exceptional character of these particular associations with regard to their direct involvement in public festivals and even direct correspondance with emperors (cf. *ISmyrna* 600, 601).³⁴

The majority of associations in Ephesus and Asia were not *officially* involved as a group in public festivals and celebrations connected with imperial cult. Most of the evidence for worship of the emperors with regard to associations is better characterized as private rather than public in this sense.

Group celebrations, rituals and mysteries

The evidence for celebrations and worship of the emperors within associations, though scanty due to the nature of the evidence, suggests that religious rituals in honour of the emperors could be celebrated alongside other activities associated with the gods. The fact that many of these rites were practised in private on a local basis (though certainly the inscriptions we do have were displayed publicly) without realistic expectation that the emperor himself would, for example, acknowledge the validity of the association or provide them with other privileges (with some exceptions) is indicative of the genuine nature of these practices. Such practices were not merely expressions of political loyalty, but also could be *religious expressions in the same sense one could speak of religious expressions towards the traditional gods*, all of which were intertwined with social, political and other facets of civic life. In cultic practice, emperors were treated as gods. In these cases it is incorrect to suggest, as some of the scholars discussed earlier do, that cultic activities connected with the emperors were imposed from above, were not genuinely religious, or were insignificant for a group's self-understanding.

There are several inscriptions from Ephesus which suggest that emperors were viewed as patrons on a level with other patron deities and were sometimes equated with these gods. A few words of background will be helpful here. Within the context of honours and worship, it was not uncommon practice in Ephesus and Asia Minor generally to worship a ruler

such thing as extra-local connections among associations is in need of revision. See W. A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983), p. 77-80, esp. p. 80; cf. R. Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1984), p. 34-35.

34 For an excellent discussion of associations of performers or athletes and their diplomatic relations with emperors, involving embassies and correspondence, see F. Millar, *The Emperor in the Roman World* (London: Duckworth, 1977), p. 456-63.

or emperor as a particular deity and, as Friesen points out, there was “no hesitation in assimilating the emperors to the gods.”³⁵ For example, Plutarch relates a story about Mark Antony’s reception at Ephesus (c. 41 B.C.E.) where the people were “hailing him as Dionysos Giver of Joy and Beneficent” (*Antony*, 24). From the second century C.E. there are numerous inscriptions from Ephesus honouring emperor Hadrian as “Zeus Olympios” (*IEph* 267-271a). Similar identifications were made elsewhere in Asia as attested by the *mystai* (initiates) of Breiseus Dionysos at Smyrna who likewise honoured Hadrian as “Olympios, saviour and founder” (*ISmyrna* 622).³⁶

The identification of emperors or their relatives with gods occurred within associations at Ephesus, thereby placing worship of the gods alongside worship of the emperors at the popular level for some groups. An interesting example is provided by a resolution of a group of Demetriasts (devotees of the goddess Demeter) at Ephesus³⁷ (c. 19-23 C.E.) who deified *Sebaste* (the emperor’s wife) as their patron deity Demeter Karpophoros. The same group identified other members of the imperial family, the twin sons of Drusus Caesar, as the sons of Zeus, the “new *Dioskoroi*” (*IEph* 4337); the *Dioskoroi* (Dioscuri), the divine twins Castor and Polydeuces, were renowned as examples of fraternal devotion and came to be used in the context of Hellenistic and imperial ruler cults generally.³⁸ A fragmentary inscription from another group engaged in mysteries to Dionysos, Zeus Panhellenios and Hephaestos mentions a “new Dionysos” in reference to Hadrian (*IEph* 1600).³⁹

A few inscriptions of associations incidentally mention their own celebrations and rituals or mysteries associated with the emperors, even though the nature of inscriptional evidence limits the degree to which we should expect the internal religious rituals and practices of associations to be

35 Friesen, *Twice Neokoros*, p. 149. Here he argues against Price, who, though opposing the stark distinction made by scholars in the past, nonetheless continues to emphasize some distinction with regard to sacrifice (*Rituals*, esp. chap. 8). See Friesen (p. 147-49) for a convincing critique of this aspect of Price’s otherwise very useful study.

36 For further examples from Asia Minor where an emperor or members of the imperial family were identified with particular deities see Magie, *Roman Rule*, Vol. 1, p. 471 (Augustus as Zeus and as Apollo), 512 (Gaius’ sister as Aphrodite), 544 (Claudius as Zeus) and 618-19 (Hadrian as Zeus).

37 There is probably a connection between this group and the Demetriasts who wrote to the proconsul in 89-90 C.E. requesting reacknowledgment of the performance of their mysteries to both Demeter Karpophoros and to the *Sebastoi* (*IEph* 213; see below).

38 See J.S. Kloppenborg, “*Philadelphia*, *Theodidaktos*, and the Dioscuri: Rhetorical Engagement in 1 Thessalonians 4.9-12,” *New Testament Studies*, 39 (1993): 265-89, esp. p. 281-89. On the Dioscuri generally see Burkert, *Greek Religion*, p. 212-13.

39 See Hicks, *IBM* III 600. See also *IEph* 293, where another group of *mystai* refer to Commodus as “new Dionysos” (cf. *ISardBR* 13, 14).

revealed to us. These religious rituals, then, may be indicative of similar ones practised within other associations for which evidence has not survived. The dedication and purification of an altar to the “gods *Seb[astoi]* and] the *mystai*” suggests the possible importance of the emperors in connection with the sacrifices of this group (*IEph* 1506; II C.E.).

More directly, one inscription from the early second century refers to an association of “physicians who sacrifice to the ancestor Asklepios and to the *Sebastoi*” (*IEph* 719). Evidently this group of physicians performed sacrifices—which would have included the customary accompanying meal⁴⁰—to the *Sebastoi* alongside their traditional patron deity with little or no distinction between the two evident in the inscription itself (except that Asklepios is mentioned first), as the double use of the dative suggests. Compare also an earlier reconstructed inscription which mentions a freedman dedicating money to an association (synod) “in order to perfo[rm] the sacrifice [to Roma and] the goddess . . .” (*IEph* 859a; c. 27 B.C.E.).⁴¹

These inscriptions are also incompatible with Price’s claim that, in general, sacrifices were consciously made “on behalf of” the emperors rather than “to” the emperors.⁴² His argument in this regard is fundamental to his overall suggestion that in ritual practice the emperors were *not* equated with the gods but, instead, located somewhere between humans and the divine.⁴³ The above inscriptions involving associations and further inscriptions discussed below (esp. *IEph* 213) are examples where no such distinction is made and, as Friesen also notes, “there is quite a bit of evidence from Asia and not cited by Price that equates the gods and the emperors in a sacrificial context. In fact, the vast majority of evidence does not distinguish gods from emperors.”⁴⁴ Once again it is important to stress that, in practice, the emperors could *function as gods* within social and religious life at the local level, that is, within the cultic activity and networks and hierarchies of the urban setting.⁴⁵

40 It was customary to have a meal using the remains from the sacrifice in the Greek part of the Roman empire (Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, p. 79-81).

41 The text has been re-edited since the completion of *IEph*. For the updated text see H. Engelmann, “Ephesische Inschriften,” *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik*, 84 (1990): 89-94.

42 See Price, *Rituals*, p. 207-33. Price asserts that “language sometimes assimilated the emperor to a god, but ritual held back” (p. 213), which is part of his contention that “the emperor stood at the focal point between human and divine” (p. 233).

43 Price’s other suggestion that when imperial images appeared in temples of other gods they were always subordinate is also somewhat misleading since even gods did not share fully in the temples of other gods. Hence, both of Price’s reasons for suggesting that the emperors were not perceived as divine but somewhere between human and divine are unconvincing. See the similar criticisms of Friesen, *Twice Neokoros*, p. 73-75. Mitchell (*Anatolia*, p. 117) also readily accepts this aspect of Price’s thesis.

44 Friesen, *Twice Neokoros*, p. 149.

45 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 146-53.

Other associations of Ephesus engaged in celebrations and rituals connected with the emperors. Evidently, the Ephesian branch of the worldwide Dionysiac Artists, besides their public role in festivals, also engaged in private celebrations, including celebration of the birthday of their other patron god, Antoninus Pius (*IEph* 22.34-35; c. 142 C.E.; cf. *ISmyrna* 600.9-10; c. 157 C.E.). It would not be surprising to also find, for example, sacred plays in the religious celebrations of such groups of performers, perhaps even including impersonation of the *Sebastoi*, as may have been done by the artists at Ancyra (Ankara) in Galatia during their "mystical contest" (c. 128 C.E.).⁴⁶

An issue that deserves particular attention in connection with cults of the *Sebastoi* relates to imperial mysteries, religious mysteries (*mystēria*) performed in connection with worship of the emperors, sometimes within associations. Scholars such as Nilsson and Nock question or disregard these mysteries, seemingly based on the supposed non-genuinely religious nature of imperial cults generally as discussed earlier.⁴⁷

There is some Ephesian evidence for the celebration of mysteries in connection with cults of emperors within associations. An inscription from the reign of Hadrian, which I have already mentioned, includes a reference to "new Dionysos," i.e., Hadrian, within the context of a list of participants in mysteries (*IBM* III 600 = *IEph* 1600).

There is another more substantial inscription associated with mysteries which preserves a letter from an association of Demetriasts in Ephesus to the proconsul of the province of Asia about 88-89 C.E. (*IEph* 213). In the letter the Demetriasts make their request as follows:

Mysteries and sacrifices are performed each year in Ephesus, lord, to Demeter Karpophoros and Thesmophoros and to the *Sebastoi* gods by *mystai* with great purity and lawful customs together with the priestesses. In most years (these rites) were protected by kings and emperors, as well as the proconsuls of the period, as contained in their enclosed letters. Accordingly, as the mysteries are pressing upon us during your (time of office), through my (agency) the ones obligated to accom-

46 *SEG* vi 59 = W. H. Buckler and J. Keil, "Two Resolutions of the Dionysiac Artists from Angora," *Journal of Roman Studies*, 16 (1926): 245-52. Cf. Pleket, "Imperial Mysteries," p. 336-37.

47 Nilsson, "Royal Mysteries in Egypt," *Opuscula Selecta* (Lund: C. W. K. Gleerup, 1960), Vol. 3, p. 326-28; Nilsson, "Kleinasiatische Pseudo-Mysterien," *Bulgarska akademii na naukite, sofia arkhelogicheski institut*, 16 (1959): 17-20; Nilsson, *Geschichte*, Vol. 2, 370-71; Nock, "Synnaos Theos," in *Arthur Darby Nock: Essays on Religion and the Ancient World*, p. 247-48. Nock briefly mentions *IEph* 213 (see below) and 1506 (discussed above) before lightly disregarding, without argument, the possibility of actual mysteries connected with the emperors as gods. See Pleket, "Imperial Mysteries," for further discussion and criticism of Nilsson's views.

plish the mysteries necessarily petition you, lord, in order that, acknowledging their rights. . . .⁴⁸

Unfortunately, the inscription does not reveal the nature of these "mysteries." But, once again, here is an example of religious mysteries and sacrifices being made "to the *Sebastoi* gods" alongside the patron deity, Demeter, with no distinction being made between the two in the language of the inscription (*contra* Price's thesis).

The above inscription also suggests that the mysteries of the Demetriasts in Ephesus had been in some way acknowledged in the past. This acknowledgment of the association's religious practices by rulers and even emperors is somewhat exceptional and probably reflects the fact that worship of Demeter, including the celebration of public festivals in her honour, had a long history in Ephesus dating back at least to the time of Herodotus (cf. Herodotus 6.16; Strabo 14.1.3).⁴⁹ It may be indicative of the group's connections with persons of high social-economic standing in the city. It may be that the mysteries of this particular association, which perhaps began privately, came, in some ways, to include public activities, such as processions similar to those of the Eleusinian mysteries in Attica.

Returning to the issue of imperial mysteries, there is further evidence from Ephesus, from the provinces of Bithynia and Galatia and from the city of Pergamum. Three Ephesian inscriptions pertain to statues set up for T. Flavius Montanus (*IEph* 2037, 2061, 2063; c.102-12 C.E.). In these inscriptions Montanus, a high priest of the imperial cult of Asia and Roman prefect, is also called a *sebastophant*; a guild of clothing cleaners at Acmonia set up an honorary inscription for the same man, who is again referred to as a *sebastophant* and high priest of Asia.⁵⁰ There are inscriptions from Bithynia, Galatia and elsewhere in Asia, not necessarily pertaining to associations, which likewise mention a *sebastophant* in connection with imperial cults.⁵¹ Like the *hierophant* in the Eleusinian mysteries, the *sebastophant* probably

48 Translation mine. Cf. *NewDocs* iv 22. Also see the brief but helpful discussion of the Demetriasts at Ephesus by R. E. Oster, "Ephesus as a Religious Center under the Principate, I. Paganism before Constantine," *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, 11.18.3 (1990): 1671-73.

49 Cf. Oster, "Religious Center," p. 1671-73.

50 *IGR* iv 643; re-edited by W. M. Ramsay, *The Social Basis of Roman Power in Asia Minor* (Amsterdam: Adolf M. Hakkert, 1967), p. 33. For further discussion of this man and his family see Ramsay, *Social Basis*, p. 33-35, and R. A. Kearsley, "A Leading Family of Cibyra and Some Asiarchs of the First Century," *Anatolian Studies*, 38 (1988): 43-46.

51 Inscriptions where the position of *sebastophant* is mentioned include: *IGR* III 22 (Cius, Bithynia-Pontus); 63, 69 (Cierus Prusias, Bithynia-Pontus); 162, 173, 194, 204 (Ancyra, Galatia); 225 (Sivri-Hissar, Galatia); 232 (Pessinus, Galatia); *IGR* iv 521 (Dorylaeum, Asia); and 1410 (Smyrna, Asia).

revealed images of the *Sebastoi* at an appropriate point in the performance of religious rituals or mysteries.⁵²

Besides their public role in the provincial imperial cult discussed earlier, the hymnodists of Pergamum in Asia engaged in mysteries within their association along with their celebration of Augustus' birthday (*IPergamon* 374). The inscription mentions "images of the *Sebastoi*" (part C, line 13); as in the traditional mysteries, in this case we may have an example where the images of the *Sebastoi* were revealed by a *sebastophant* in the context of the rituals of the association.⁵³ It is possible that the mysteries of the Deme-triasts at Ephesus, or other associations for which evidence is lacking, included similar rituals.

Pleket concludes from his study of imperial mysteries that Nilsson's use of the term "pseudo-mysteries"⁵⁴ to refer to rites such as these is unwarranted since "the mysteries at Pergamum as far as their rites are concerned were true copies of the traditional mysteries; both include hymns, glorification . . . , showing of the image."⁵⁵ Nilsson's assertions that these imperial mysteries, like other cultic activities associated with the emperors, were merely "a public demonstration of loyalty" and were "really devoid of any mystical content," is based less on any evidence of such than it is on his own presuppositions and overall paradigm, discussed earlier, with regard to the nature of imperial cults generally.⁵⁶ Overall, the evidence itself suggests that religious rituals such as mysteries addressed to the emperors as gods played a significant role in the activities of some associations. There is no reason evident in the inscriptions from Ephesus and Asia to suggest that these religious rites and mysteries were any less meaningful, mystic or religious than those connected with worship of the traditional gods in that context.

Conclusion

Evidently, emperors could play a significant role in the social *and* religious life of local associations in cities such as Ephesus, both with regard to honours and networks of benefaction and with respect to cultic activities.

52 Pleket, "Imperial Mysteries," p. 338-41. Pleket does not mention the former examples from Ephesus. In a similar vein, there is also mention of a *sebastologos* in a Milesian inscription, who most likely delivered a eulogy on the *Sebastoi* (see L. Robert, "Le culte de Caligula à Milet et la province d'Asie," in *Hellenica: Recueil d'épigraphie de numismatique et d'antiquités grecques* [Paris: Adrien-Maisonneuve, 1949], Vol. 7, p. 206-8).

53 Pleket, "Imperial Mysteries," p. 341-46.

54 See Nilsson, *Geschichte*, Vol. 2, p. 370-71, and Nilsson, "Kleinasiatische Pseudo-Mysterien."

55 Pleket, "Imperial Mysteries," p. 346; cf. Price, *Rituals*, p. 191.

56 Nilsson, *Geschichte*, Vol. 2, p. 370 (translation mine); cf. Nilsson, "Kleinasiatische Pseudo-Mysterien," p. 17-20. He is correct to note, however, that the term "mysteries" came to be used in a far less limited sense in the Roman period than in earlier times.

This important place of the emperors within interconnected social, political and religious realms of life at the local level, which is also attested with respect to guilds and associations elsewhere in the empire,⁵⁷ has not been sufficiently acknowledged in the past and points to some of the inadequacies in many scholars' presuppositions and assessments of the imperial cults. It also draws attention to the often restrictive (and modernizing) definitions of religion and religiosity which have been detrimentally applied to the study of such phenomena in antiquity.

Looking at the inscriptional evidence for phenomena such as associations can help to provide scholars with glimpses into important facets of civic life under Roman rule. Such glimpses will help us not only to comprehend the popular nature of imperial cults in cities such as Ephesus, but also to better understand the concrete ways in which individuals, groups and communities in the Roman empire maintained what they saw as fitting relations both with one another and with emperors and gods.

57 R. Meiggs discusses the prominence of imperial cults in guilds at Ostia, for example (*Roman Ostia* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960], esp. p. 325-27). F. M. Ausbüttel notes the imprint of imperial cults on associations in the western provinces (*Untersuchungen zu den Vereinen im Westen des römischen Reiches* [Kallmünz: Verlag Michael Lassleben, 1982], p. 54-55). There is considerable evidence from Egypt for the importance of rulers and emperors in the social and religious life of associations there (cf. *P.Lond.* 2710; M. San Nicolo, *Ägyptisches Vereinswesen zur Zeit der Ptolemäer und Römer* [Munich: C. H. Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1972 (1912)], Vol. 1, p. 26-29, 46-61).