CHAPTER ONE

EARLY PROVINCIAL CULTS IN ASIA

The purpose of this chapter is to survey the three provincial cults of Asia that were established before the cult in Ephesus. The various institutions related to the cults and the historical circumstances of the inaugurations of the cults will be examined as a way of developing an understanding of provincial worship in Asia. Following this, comparative material will be introduced from the growing number of provincial cults outside of Asia. In this way it will be possible to place the cult in Ephesus into the historical context of provincial imperial cults in Asia and throughout the empire.

Pergamum

In 32 BCE Mark Antony controlled the eastern Mediterranean. He and Cleopatra VII spent that winter in Ephesus where Antony had been received earlier as the New Dionysos, perhaps as early as 41 BCE.¹ A group of senators who had opposed Octavian met them in Ephesus and the city became a temporary center of resistance to Octavian.

In the naval battle off the coast of Actium in 31 BCE, Octavian defeated Mark Antony. Antony’s flight and suicide in the following year left the province of Asia in a difficult position. Now that the former ruler had been eliminated, how would Asia greet his successor?

The province lost no time in declaring its allegiance to the man who was consolidating his control over the entire Mediterranean world. In the winter of 29 BCE, the koinon of Asia² requested permission to establish a cult in Pergamum for Octavian.³

¹ Plutarch, *Ant*. 24.4; also 60.3-5 (Athens). Regarding divine honors for Cleopatra, see *Ant*. 26.5; 54.9.
² The koinon was the provincial council of the cities of Asia.
³ Dio Cassius 51.20.6. Tacitus (*An*. 4.37) agrees with Dio that the initiative for establishing the cult was taken by the province. The emperor did not stop them (*divus Augustus...non prohibuisset*) from building a temple for him and for Rome. Bithynia also requested and received such a cult at the same time, which was located in Nikomedia.
Given the political events of the time, a new cult for Octavian in an eastern province in the year 29 BCE was a particularly sensitive issue. Octavian had used religious propaganda quite effectively against Antony, whom he had accused of accepting the divine status accorded to an eastern monarch. It was by no means certain that Octavian would allow such a cult, and if he did, what particular form it might take.

While the cult was established before Octavian took the name Augustus in 27 BCE, all extant evidence comes from after that date. Thus, we do not know what the original title of the temple was, but numerous inscriptions and coins indicate that Asia’s cult came to be known as one dedicated to Rome and Augustus, and Tacitus confirms this identification. It is not clear whether the koinon requested that Rome be included in the cult, or whether Octavian insisted upon it. Whatever the individual roles of the various parties might have been, it is sufficient for our purposes to recognize what kinds of cultic models were being used in order to construct this new cult of the emperor.

Deininger argued for direct continuity between the cult of Rome and Augustus and the cults that the koinon offered to Hellenistic monarchs such as Antiochos I Soter. Deininger’s interest in this was to show that the function of the koinon of Asia changed little from the Hellenistic to the Roman periods. If we examine the format of the two cults rather than the function of the koinon, it becomes clear that there are important distinctions between the cult for Antioch and that for Rome and Augustus.

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4 An. 4.37.
5 Most modern interpreters of the provincial cult in Pergamum theorize that Asia requested only a cult of the emperor but that Octavian required the inclusion of Rome. The basis for this opinion is Suetonius’s characterization (Aug. 52) of Augustus as refusing all cults for himself if Rome was not also worshipped. While it is true that Asia showed much less interest in the figure of Rome than that of Augustus, the passage from Suetonius may or may not be accurate. The Pergamene cult was the first precedent for an Augustan policy on worship of the living emperor. It may even have been the point at which that policy was determined, but that still leaves open the question of who suggested the inclusion of Rome. It is possible that the Asians promoted the inclusion of the goddess Rome, for the provincial elite was not unaware of the various sentiments in the city of Rome regarding the worship of rulers (see Glen Bowersock, Augustus and the Greek World [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965] 115). Furthermore, a close reading of Tiberius’s speech, as rendered by Tacitus (An. 4.37), implies that the province and not the emperor included Rome in the cult, for Augustus is said to have allowed both.