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INTRODUCTION
THE DYNAMICS OF RITUALS IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE

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1. Ritual Displacement

The Roman envoys sent to settle affairs in the East after Rome’s victory over Macedonia in 167 BC must have been shocked at the spectacle that awaited them in Nikomedeia, the capital of the kingdom of Bithynia. They expected to meet Prusias, king of Bithynia, a friend and ally of the Roman people. But the man who appeared in front of them had his head shaved and was wearing the attire of a Roman freedman: a white cap, toga, and boots. The king, in this ‘theatrical costume’ (διαυκόμη), stretched out his right hand to the envoys and greeted them with the words: “Behold your freedman, who is willing to endear himself to you and emulate all your customs.” Polybius, our source, describes another bizarre scene with the same protagonist, this time in Rome:

When he came to the entrance that leads to the senate, he stood at the little door facing the council and, lowering both his hands to the ground, he prostrated himself in front of the threshold and those who were seated and exclaimed: ‘hail, you saviour gods!’

In Nikomedeia, Prusias performed a Roman social ritual, in Rome a Greek religious one: lying entirely flat on the ground in front of a divinity, a practice known both from literary sources and from iconography. The ritual of προσκυνεῖν or γονυπετεῖν, primarily attested in connection with saviour gods, was often associated with supplication and primarily performed by women. By adopting it, Prusias assumed the passive role of a suppliant and a woman. The ritual at Nikomedeia was intended to make the Romans into Prusias’ patrons; the ritual in Rome transformed the building of the senate

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1 Polybius 30.18-19; cf. Livy 45.44.