SYNNAOS THEOS
IMAGES OF ROMAN EMPERORS IN GREEK TEMPLES

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In memory of Hans-Georg Niemeyer

Introduction

My paper is dedicated to a subject that has been relatively often discussed under various aspects: the synnaoi theoi, i.e. monarchical rulers, in this case Roman emperors, honoured and venerated as gods within temples of so-called traditional gods. My renewed discussion points to the active role of images in this context and to the question of whether the religious contextualisation of ruler’s portraits required special modes of representation.

Images were certainly important for establishing a cult partnership between different deities within one temple, a “temple-sharing”, as it was named by several historians. A standard formula in decrees by institutions of Greek cities says that the image of the ruler should be put up next to the image of the original owner of the temple. The latter appears in the dative case (τοῦ θεοῦ), whereas the ruler is mentioned as a co-partner (σύνναος or σύνθρονος). The installation of the new image is a kind of constitutive action for the “temple-sharing”. It happens “in order to make the ruler a co-partner”: ἵνα ἦσυνναος τοῦ θεοῦ. In such formulae, moreover, is always clear who had been the first and original god and which deity was added later.¹ What will follow here is an investigation on the modes of visual introduction and legitimisation of cult partnerships.

A brief look at the previous scientific discussion will be helpful to which A.D. Nock and S.R.F. Price have made fundamental contributions. In his article, published for the first time in 1930, Nock describes the elevation of Hellenistic kings and Roman emperors to *synnaoi* as an extraordinary and rather rare religious honour, which could be granted only by the subjects, *i.e.* the Greek cities, to their rulers, inasmuch as the rulers themselves did not dispose directly of civic cults and temples. On the other hand, the rulers had to accept the honour. This was not to be taken for granted. According to a famous episode from Suetonius’ biography of Tiberius, this emperor tried to prevent his likenesses from being placed within temples amidst the images of the gods (*inter simulacra deorum*).²

Price, in his study on ruler cult in Roman Asia Minor, stresses even more strongly the reciprocity of relations established by means of “temple-sharing”.⁴ And much more determinedly than Nock, he postulates a subordination of the emperor and his image in relation to the “traditional gods”. Even in the extreme case of temples, which were erected for a god and an emperor at the same time, the hierarchy, according to Price, remained a clear one. Thus, Trajan appears on coins of Pergamon standing next to the enthroned Zeus Philios, with whom he shared the temple at the peak of the Pergamenean acropolis. He looks like a person attending the real ruler (fig. 65).⁵ In such visual arrangements, to believe Price, the religious authority of the Roman emperor was derived from the one exercised by the “traditional gods”.

It is especially this aspect, which has been critically commented upon by M. Clauss. In Clauss’ own view, expressed in his monograph on Roman ruler cult, the divinity of the emperor is linked exclusively to the ritual veneration that he personally receives. Thereby, and only thereby,

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³ Suet. *Tib.* 26. Cf. Hitzl 2003, 100–102. Pekářy 1985, 147, rightly calls attention to the fact that Tiberius’ restraint makes sense only against the background of a normal practice by which images of emperors were placed everywhere in the public and sacral spaces of the cities. A general duty of request or other legal restrictions (*Bildnisrecht*) probably did not exist, *pace* Niemeyer 1968, 18. Creations of new ruler cults instead must have been authorised, establishing thus a “system of exchange”, see Price 1984, 65–77.

⁴ Price 1984, esp. 146–156.