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Spring 2023

## From Homer to Rome and Beyond: A Study of the Ruler Cults of the Hellenistic World

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### Recommended Citation

Meade, Sarah, "From Homer to Rome and Beyond: A Study of the Ruler Cults of the Hellenistic World" (2023). *Williams Honors College, Honors Research Projects*. 1706.  
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## **Sarah Meade - Executive Summary**

### ***From Homer to Rome and Beyond: A Study of the Ruler Cults of the Hellenistic World***

#### **Abstract**

Rulers at the helm of imperial states seem to be surrounded by material culture and protocol (i.e. rituals) to legitimize their position and ensure the continued loyalty of their subjects. An interesting iteration of this phenomenon are the ruler cults of the Hellenistic world, which evolved out of ancient Greek hero worship. When Alexander of Macedon began his conquests, he not only utilized the familiar aspects of the Greek cults, but he also integrated Egyptian and Persian practices in order to establish his ruler cult. Alexander's influence was then responsible for the ruler cult spiking in popularity during the Hellenistic period. It is unlikely the concept would have spread as far and as widely across the world as it did without his powerful influence and divine status behind it. The following establishment of the Imperial Cult of the Roman Empire can arguably be credited to the Hellenistic ruler cults, with Caesar Augustus modeling many of his own strategies for legitimacy after those of Alexander. The Imperial Cult struggled throughout its long history with religious minorities in the empire, and the cult slowly fell into decline after the deathbed conversion of Constantine.

The ruler cult did not fully disappear after the fall of Rome. Instead, it inspired. In the United States of America, the ruler cult continues to survive in the form of the veneration of the presidents, most notably highlighting George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Abraham Lincoln. American intellectuals have adapted ancient Greco-Roman cultic practices that connect the past with the present in a top-down process. Art and architecture are utilized to illustrate this bridge. Other common practices of ancient ruler and hero cults can also be seen being employed

in order to establish legitimacy. Regardless of the time in which a society exists, the continuous and evolutionary nature of the ruler cult suggests it will maintain a presence in some capacity so long as there are rulers to worship.

### **Chapter One - The Ancient Greek Hero Cults**

In order to best understand the history and nature of the Hellenistic ruler cults, I began my thesis by studying the hero cults of ancient Greece, as these cults are arguably the origins of the ruler cults that would later be founded by Alexander of Macedon. The first section of the chapter explores the question, “What is a Greek hero?” There are certain criteria an individual had to meet in order to be deemed worthy of the worship of a hero cult in ancient Greece. The first was having divine ancestry and/or royal blood. Most heroes met both criteria. The second criteria was having some sort of special circumstances surrounding the hero’s birth. This was most often accompanied with a prophecy and the interference of the gods. The third quality was being a skilled warrior, which was an unsurprising quality for Greek heroes to possess, considering most were royalty and thus were automatically part of the warrior class. Finally, the last criteria was accomplishing incredible, often supernatural feats.

The next section of this chapter focuses on three ancient Greek heroes of note, and I chose these heroes’ cults specifically for the influence I argue they had on Alexander of Macedon in the Hellenistic period. The heroes I chose were Achilles, Heracles, and Lysander. Alexander openly worshiped Achilles and Heracles and claimed descent through both of them. This would allow for a bridge between the hero cults and the creation of the ruler cult. These cults were also powerful in their own right and spread across the Greek world, particularly in the case of the cult of Achilles, where the largest temple dedicated to the hero was located on the island of Leuke in modern-day Ukraine. The spread of this cult through the Euxine is evidence of

how religion traveled during Greek colonization, as it is believed the worshipers who initially established the cult centers along the shores of the Black Sea were Greek sailors. Similarly, Heracles was extremely popular in the ancient Hellenic world, and even more so in Phoenicia. He was an Indoeuropean hero, which contrasted him from Achilles, and he was equated with the Phoenician god Melqart.

Lysander was a more unique choice. Lysander was an esteemed Spartan naval commander who won the Peloponessian war by destroying the Athenian fleet. He was the first Greek to be deified during their lifetime, and while this was a cause of great controversy, I argue it was likely to have been a source of inspiration to Alexander. Alexander was tutored by Aristotle and would have known about Lysander's deification by his men as a result of his military conquests, and it is possible he may have used the case of Lysander as justification to himself as to why he should be deified. Alexander had achieved far greater than Lysander ever had and had the pedigree to support it, so, in his mind, what reason would there be for him not to be declared a god in his lifetime?

This chapter closes with a brief introduction to Alexander of Macedon and establishes his divine legacy, most notably the fact that his mother, Olympias, had convinced him from childhood that his father was the god Zeus. This section outlines the ways in which Alexander meets the criteria to meet the standards of an ancient Greek hero. He is both of divine blood and royal lineage. It is established that there were special circumstances surrounding not only his birth, but also his conception. Examples are given of how Alexander was one of the finest warriors of his time, which included exacting revenge on the Persians for their desecration of Athens, as well as never having been defeated in battle. Finally, he accomplished incredible feats. He toppled the Persian Empire, which took over two hundred and fifty years to build, in

less than four years. He built the largest empire the world had ever seen at that point in history. He exacted revenge on his people's enemies for disrespecting the Greek gods, and as previously mentioned, he was never defeated. No one even knows for certain how he died. He conquered his horse, Bucephalus, when he was still a child despite the horse seemingly being untamable. He met the golden standard of being an ancient Greek hero, but as I go on to write in my second chapter, that was not enough for Alexander. He did not want to be a hero, and he did not want to be only the son of a god. He wanted to be a god.

## **Chapter Two - The Hellenistic Period**

In this chapter, I trace the emergence of the ruler cults in the Hellenistic period as a result of Alexander of Macedon's conquest and subsequent efforts to bridge cultural differences, make the new overlords palatable to diverse populations and solidify their claim to power. The resulting institution was uniquely Hellenistic and had profound implications for the representation of the ruler which stretch to the present day. The worship of deified Alexander under the Ptolemies set an important precedent for at least two Hellenistic dynasties, the Ptolemies and the Antigonids, which in turn instituted ruler cults. These cults lasted until Octavian arrived in Egypt in 30 BCE and paid tribute to the body of Alexander while conquering the last independent Hellenistic kingdom. Octavian would take inspiration from the cult of Alexander when later forming the Imperial Cult of Rome.

The first section of this chapter studies the birth of Alexander's ruler cult, which centered around his divine parentage. The desert oracle of Ammon at Siwa played an important role in this. This was where Alexander was publicly acknowledged as the son of Ammon-Zeus. It is fairly certain that this trip was intended to be a propaganda tactic meant to endear Alexander to the native Egyptians. All that is known is that Alexander entered and spoke to the oracle with the

intent to determine if he truly was the son of Zeus-Ammon. He confirmed he received the answer “his heart desired.” and returned to Memphis to sacrifice to Zeus-Ammon. When he arrived in Memphis, he received word from the Greek oracles Didyma and Erythrae, and both confirmed that Alexander was the son of Zeus. Alexander’s semi-divine status, and with it his legitimacy as Pharaoh, was firmly established. This would form the basis of his ruler cult.

The next section of the chapter examines Alexander as a god. Alexander established his divinity to his men and his people through imagery. One way in which historians argue Alexander embraced his divine heritage while on campaign by emulating his purported ancestor was particularly through his coinage. The obverse of the coins would bear the head of Alexander wearing a lion’s skin as a helmet, much like how Heracles was depicted draped himself in the skin of the Nemean lion after slaying the beast. The reverse of the coinage would display various gods with whom he wanted to establish connections. Alexander especially was in favor of reminding his subjects of his divine parentage by stamping the image of Zeus on coinage.

The chapter also discusses the negative political ramifications of Alexander’s deification. The uneasiness and even scandal that could come from such an act as declaring oneself a god can be reflected in the negative reactions to the deification of Lysander (discussed in detail in Chapter 1). Yet, that is exactly what Alexander did, and it made his men uneasy. There would also be conflicts between Alexander and his men between Alexander’s embracing of Persian cultural tradition. This would eventually result in a near-mutiny, which Alexander was able to quell with a speech and by arresting the ringleaders, as well as using Macedonian titles for his Persian officials.

Finally, the chapter discusses a few of the most important cults after Alexander’s death, the first of which being the Cult of Alexander at Alexandria and how Alexander was worshiped.

Ptolemy I Soter intercepted Alexander's body on its way to burial and brought it to Alexandria, where it became the focus of a cult that celebrated Alexander as the civic founder, and legitimized the rule and worship of the Ptolemaic dynasty. Sacrifices were made in honor of the late king, and games were played in his name during festival days, i.e., on the anniversary of his death and birth, as well as the founding date of the city. Additionally, every home in Alexandria possessed a shrine to Alexander, where daily sacrifices were made in his honor. Alexander was also worshiped at Luxor alongside Ammon. The first dynasty to follow Alexander's trend of a ruler cult was the Ptolemies. The cult began developing after the death of Ptolemy and his wife, Berenice, when Ptolemy II declared his parents gods in 305 BCE. The cult of the Ptolemies was not only for the sake of imitating Alexander. It was a strong argument of the dynasty's legitimization, who were very much outsiders in the country- Macedonian Greeks who did not speak Egyptian with few notable exceptions. By establishing worship of themselves as gods, they were fully acting the role of Pharaoh and portraying themselves as the divine chosen ones of the Egyptian pantheon. They adopted worship of both the Egyptian and Greek pantheons, embracing the ideas of religious syncretism.

I also study the ruler worship of the Antigonids from Macedonia and the Attolids from Pergamon in Asia Minor and examine the statues and gods with whom these rulers were worshiped in conjunction. I dedicate a significant portion of this chapter on the significance of the statue in propaganda and legitimacy, as the statue held important political and spiritual/ritual/religious meaning in the Hellenistic world (it was believed to house the soul of the individual whom it portrayed). It was a tool for religion and politics, making it the perfect vessel for the ruler cult.

### **Chapter Three - The Imperial Cult of Rome**

I begin this chapter by discussing the two different founding myths of Rome: the story of Aeneas (the older Greek version) and the story of Romulus (who was descended from Aeneas). Both rulers would eventually be deified and be considered a king, and they were worshiped as such. This made the very basis of Rome a ruler cult.

I continue the chapter by establishing the origins of the Imperial Cult, which began with the death of Julius Caesar in 44 BC. Augustus, who was his adopted son, wanted to reach the likes of Alexander, so upon his “father’s” death, he had the Senate vote to have Caesar deified so his dad might be a god just like Alexander's was. The Senate thought it was appropriate for the first Emperor’s father to be a god, so they granted his request, and this was the first of the Imperial Cult. Approximately twenty years later, Augustus himself was voted to be a living god, as well, and cult statues and temples were built across the empire.

I also discuss the nature of propaganda within the cult, including the *Aeneid*, which was the greatest piece of propaganda in Augustus’ reign. Aeneas was fashioned as Augustus, a willing servant of the gods and son of the goddess Venus. Statues (ie. the *Augustus of Prima porta*), coinage, and temples were also viewed as propaganda throughout the empire. Furthermore, I discuss the differing opinions regarding the cult throughout the empire. In Rome proper, the cult was disliked. It was seen as improper. The emperor was meant to be treated as a citizen, not a god. In the east of the empire, however, in lands already more accustomed to having ruler cults in the Hellenistic period, the Imperial Cult was accepted for the most part.

Finally, my last major point of this chapter is the conflict of religious minorities and the Imperial Cult. The Imperial Cult persecuted Christians and Jews throughout the empire, attempting to force them to worship the emperor. There were periods of extreme persecution, though after the deathbed conversion of Constantine, there came a point under Theodosius, that



the worship of pagan gods became punishable by death. This was when the Imperial Cult as it had existed for hundreds of years after Alexander of Macedon finally came to a close.

#### **Chapter Four: The Ruler Cults of Modern America**

In this chapter, I argue the ruler cult continued after its fall during the Roman Empire, though it did so in a secular context. In this iteration, it venerates the early modern American presidents, specifically George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Abraham Lincoln. It maintained many of the Graeco-Roman hero and ruler cult aspects, though they were applied in a secular and paradoxical context. Ancient techniques of representation and propaganda were utilized to bolster the legitimacy of the new nation as well as its rulers, including temples and funerary monuments, cult images, coinage, and festival days, among other things. Through these methods, an ancient tradition continues to exist in a modified fashion.

In this ruler cult, the past often collides with the present in a neoclassical fashion to show this legitimacy. These depictions represent the unification of the Old World with the New World, the past with the present. Washington himself is depicted as a god or aligned with the gods in various pieces of art, such as Horatio Greenough's statue of George Washington, the *Apotheosis of Washington*, and even the utilization of the obelisk as the Washington Monument, which is a traditional symbol of Egyptian kingship. Mount Vernon is a modern version of an ancient Greek tomb-shrine, or heroön. The Lincoln Memorial harkens back to the Temple of Zeus at Olympia, an ancient site of pilgrimage, and it is considered a modern temple and site of honor. The statue itself acts as a cult image for the modern ruler cult, and the fasces (an ancient Roman symbol of imperium) decorate the memorial to create the association between Rome and Lincoln. Additionally, the Jefferson Memorial was modeled, in part, after the Pantheon in Rome. In the cult statue's hands, Jefferson holds the Declaration of Independence, which acts as a cult object

for the modern ruler cult. The monument is engraved with quotes that could be held sacred to Jefferson and his life, giving them a quasi-religious context.

Finally, the modern ruler cult also has sacred symbols in the context of the American flag and perhaps even the bald eagle, and the cult even has its equivalent of a festival. Just as Alexander of Macedon had a festival in Alexandria to celebrate his birth, the modern ruler cult has a festival to celebrate the birth of Washington in the form of Presidents' Day/Washington's Birthday. While athletic games and sacrifices may not be held in honor of the day, it is still observed on a federal and state level, making it akin to a festival.

### **My Personal Takeaways**

The ruler cult has a history that stretches back before recorded history, before the oldest myths existed, before the oldest legends were written. Yet, it is fascinating because it is still relevant. The ruler cult is one of the few ways in which ancient history continues to relate to the present day, because it still exists even if most people don't realize it. It is still happening and continuing to impact our lives. Ancient history really isn't so ancient in this instance, and history is continuing to repeat itself in the most fascinating of ways. I have loved studying this topic, because this phenomenon that Alexander would have loved (and I have studied Alexander on my own since I was twelve years old, so I am very passionate about him) continues to impact people today, and it is all because of Alexander of Macedon. Alexander's influence still remains in the world if people care to look close enough to see it, and I find that breathtaking. The ruler cult is everything I love about ancient history wrapped into one big bow, and I cannot wait to continue studying it in my future education.