

CESARE LETTA, *Tra umano e divino. Forme e limiti del culto degli imperatori nel mondo romano*. Presentazione di John Scheid ("La Casa dei Sapienti", 3), Sarzana-Lugano, Agorà & Co. 2021 (pp. XVIII + 206) ISBN 978-88-89526-73-6 € 30.00

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The complex mixture of cult practices linked to Roman emperors, usually named 'imperial cult', is the most showy and pervasive aspect of the Roman civilization, but it has often been misunderstood: very recently it has even been argued that the living emperor was worshipped as a god across the empire, even in Rome. This book attempts to reduce ambiguity and lay down some firm points, first distinguishing between the state cult (officiated in Rome and the military camps), provincial cults (controlled and partly promoted by Rome and officiated by representatives of the communities of every province gathered in *conclia* or *koivà*), civic cults (left to the local initiative), and private cults, totally free.

Through a close analysis of the main literary, epigraphic and archaeological testimonies, the author shows that in the case of the state cult, the principles established by Augustus remained valid throughout the imperial age: a direct cult could only be addressed to the dead emperor, provided that the Senate had officially proclaimed him *divus*; for the living emperor, only indirect homages were allowed, through libations and sacrifices offered not to him, but for him to traditional gods, his *genius* or his *numen*, and various divinized abstractions, bound to him by the epithet *Augustus / Augusta*, that expressed the ideals and expectations of good governance of the subjects. Therefore, libations and specific offers made in front of an image of the living emperor were not addressed to him, but to his *genius* symbolized by that image. Gestures of homage such as bowing or genuflection were only acts of recognition of the emperor's *maiestas*, that is of his superior authority, without making him a god during his lifetime.

All started with Caesar's divinization, a model for subsequent *divi*. The decree of the Senate in 30 B.C., directly following the final victory of Octavian, decided that libations should be offered at any banquet, public or private, and an oath of allegiance to him should be pronounced on the occasion of the annual *vota* for his safety that henceforth were added to the traditional *vota pro salute rei publicae*. Subsequently, the living emperor became the centre of cult activities, not as their direct recipient, but only as their exclusive beneficiary: this is the sense of temples, altars, and priests 'of the emperor' during his lifetime, or of the many centres of cultic activities that bore the name of *Caesareum* or *Augusteum*.

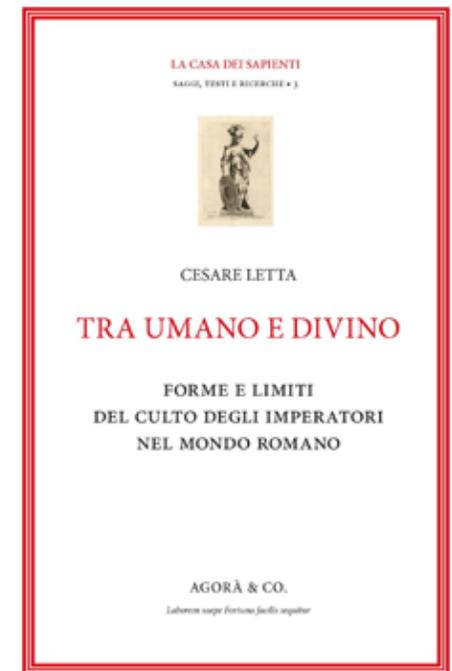
This indirect cult was all the central power requested throughout the empire for the living emperor. With regard even to the Christians, Roman power never expected that the living emperor was worshipped as a god, but only libations to his *genius* and oaths on the same *genius* on the occasion of the annual *vota* or in front of the judge.

The response of peripheral realities to these requests from the centre varied. At a provincial level, we can say that the West roughly complied with them, while the East mostly preferred to consider the living emperor directly as a god. At a civic and private level it seems that Italy and all communities of Roman citizens (colonies and municipia) followed the central model, while elsewhere, above all in the East, the picture is more complicated.

From this multiform and contradictory reality it seems clear that the main feature of imperial cult was ambiguity. Vague and elusive concepts such as *genius* (the individual divine entity who supports and protects every man's life, but figuratively also his personality), or *numen* (the sovereign will of one who holds a superior power, but figuratively also divine power or directly divinity), gestures of homage to the living emperor that were too similar to those paid to the gods, representations of the emperor according to divine iconographies: all were open to the most diverse interpretations, from metaphorical to literal.

It is down to this fundamental ambiguity that such diverse and contradictory conclusions have been reached by historians and historians of the religions about the imperial cult. This book intends to contribute through shedding light on certain important points, while placing the diverse elements in the right perspective, or at least raise some questions as a stimulus for new insights.

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