EVIDENCE FOR THE IMPERIAL CULT IN THESSALONICA IN THE FIRST CENTURY C.E.

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In a recent article in The Catholic Biblical Quarterly (April 2010) entitled “The Imperial Cult in the Pauline Cities of Asia Minor and Greece”, the author, Colin Miller from Duke University (Durham), broaches the issue of the presence of the cult of the Roman emperor in the cities of Asia Minor and Greece, where Paul founded several local churches. On the question of how widespread the imperial cult was between 30 and 60 C.E., Miller holds that it was of limited extent and had only a minor influence on the local peoples. The author’s argument goes against the view of many Pauline scholars, who follow the general study by Simon R.F. Price on the presence of the imperial cult in Asia Minor at the end of the third century C.E., in which Price maintains that the cult was widely spread and highly influential on the Mediterranean world. Among the scholars who adopt this view, mention should be made of Richard A. Horsley (Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society, Trinity Press International, Harrisburg, PA 1997), and of course N.T. Wright (see his recent study Paul’s Gospel and Caesar’s Empire, 2010).

Miller doubts the broad extent of the imperial cult in the mid-1st century C.E., and especially its influence on Paul. He attempts to record and eva-

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evaluate the evidence from this period, which consists of archaeological discoveries and numismatic attestations from the cities that Paul visited. Miller strongly disputes that these findings adequately witness to the existence of the imperial cult in these places and denies that the imperial cult actually operated as a cohesive force for the Roman state. He considers the existing evidence to be very limited and, given the multi-religious environment of that era, he thinks that the cult of Caesar would simply have been just one new religion among many others in the Roman world. On the basis of these assumptions, he draws the conclusion that the cult of the emperor in these cities was a minor or “marginal” one, with only a few exceptions. Miller claims that of the Greek cities Paul visited, “In only two of the major centers, Athens and Corinth, do we have evidence of the imperial cult in Paul’s time. This leaves, most conspicuously, Philippi and Thessalonica -the two cities besides Corinth in which we are sure Paul founded congregations- without evidence for the cult”4. In the case of Thessalonica, he argues that the city “it seems, became a city of the imperial cult only very late, under the emperor Gordian sometime after 238 CE”5.

This view is supported by many modern biblical scholars, who disagree with the claim that Paul expressed in his letters a hostile attitude towards the imperial ideology and theology of the period. Pauline scholars are certainly the most qualified to find answers to these questions pertaining to the so-called Pauline “imperial gospel”, but the issue of whether the imperial cult was so widespread in the cities of Greece and especially Macedonia and Thessalonica in Paul’s time remains open. It is to this issue that this paper is addressed.

What exactly was the imperial cult like in Roman times, and what form and extent did it acquire in the mid-1st century C.E.? In the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire the concept of apotheosis (a term that signified man’s veneration of a god/deus or divus) and the cult of the ruler, the hero, the king or emperor had already become widespread since the Hellenistic period. It was a tradition that had existed at earlier times amongst a number of

4 C. Miller, “The Imperial Cult”, op.cit., p. 319.
5 C. Miller, “The Imperial Cult”, op.cit., p. 322.
peoples of the East, like the Egyptians, the Babylonians, the Elamites, the Assyrians, the Hittites and the Zoroastrians. Apotheotic notions of this kind had, to a certain extent, first been adopted by some of the successors of Alexander the Great, especially during the Hellenistic era, passing gradually into Greece and eventually from there to the Romans. Certainly, these new gods (dei or divi) did not replace the traditional gods, but, as Prof. Pachis from the University of Thessaloniki mentions in one of his papers, “merely took their place alongside the existing gods as a new branch of gods within the Olympian pantheon”. The imperial cult very soon became an important mechanism of control, and the worship of the emperor as a living god spread together with that of his deified ancestors.

Julius Caesar was the first Roman emperor to be deified and his cult is recorded in various cities of the empire. The process of his deification began while he was still alive, as is evident in the epigraphic evidence from Pharsalus and other cities. Also, coinage of the time with his deified portraits bear clear witness to his divinity. Caesar’s successor Octavian Augustus, who realised the power of the so-called imperial ideology or theology, i.e. the divinity of the Roman emperor, asked the Senate to accept the divinity of Julius Caesar and then declared himself as the divi filius, censor and pontifex maximus and a direct descendant of Venus. Augustus was the first to accept

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such titles. Although his successor Tiberius was negative towards divine honours, there are examples of his cult in many Eastern cities and even in the Western provinces. One of the major cities that honoured him as ‘euergetes’ (= benefactor) before 4 C.E. was Pergamus, while another was Smyrna, where there was a single temple to himself. So it can in fact be said that his cult extended throughout the empire. Claudius was also deified by Nero and the Senate shortly after his death. Only two of Augustus’ successors, Caligula and Nero, were not deified by the Senate and there is no evidence of their worship whatsoever.

It seems that at least the cities of Corinth and Athens can provide sufficient evidence for the imperial cult at an early date (50-54 C.E.), honouring the Roman emperor as they did with devotional festivals and games. In the province of Roman Macedonia similar evidence exists from Beroea, Philippi, Dion, and of course from Thessalonica.

In the case of the latter, the first epigraphic attestations of the presence of the imperial cult were brought to light by Duchense and Bayet in the last few decades of the 19th century. In the early 20th century and in the following years, various new archaeological finds came to the fore, mainly through excavations. Most of them were studied and presented by well-known scho-

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Iars of the period, such as Makaronas, Pelekanidis, Bakalakis, Edson, Vickers and, more recently, Hendrix, Donfried, Rizakis, Velenis, Stefanidou-Tiveriou, Touratsoglou, Harrison, Nigdelis and others.

In the 1st century C.E. the city of Thessalonica was one of the major trading centres of Macedonia and attracted many travellers and traders, some of whom became permanent residents. As a "civitas libera", that is to say a "free city", it provided many legal and social institutions and economic benefits.

The establishment of Roman merchants in Thessalonica and other cities in Macedonia like Amphipolis, Beroea, Apollonia, Pella, Acanthus, Idomenai and Edessa, has been dated to between the second century B.C.E. and the 1st century C.E. These merchants belonged to the *Cornelia* and *Claudia* clans and they were known as the community of *συμπραγματευομένων Ρωμαίων* (conventus civium Romanorum). Information about them can be found on two dedicatory inscriptions of the 1st century C.E. They arrived in Thessalonica after the Mithridatic War and they flourished there, reaching their peak of prosperity in the 1st century C.E. It seems that some Romans moved to the city from Philippi in order to find better trading opportunities. Their involvement in the social life of the city is recorded in a number of inscriptions of the period, where they are presented as holding various public offices, such as politarch (city governor), treasurer, ambassador, high priest or priest or agonothetes of the imperial cult. Although there were numer-

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22 *IG*, 37, 124, 126, 127, 226, 252 (politarches), 126, 133 (treasurer), 19 (ambassador), 133, 171, 186, 201 (high priest or priest or agonothetes); cf A.D. Rizakis, “Η Κοινότητα των
ous civic and religious cults in the city\textsuperscript{23}, it seems that the most important “civic” cult was the Roman imperial cult. We know today that the most prominent form of worship in the city after the 1st century BC was that of the Goddess Rome and Zeus Eleftherios\textsuperscript{24}. Equal in status (σύνεδρη) to the other first-century cults was that of the “Roman benefactors” (Ῥωμαίων ἐυεργετῶν), whose members assembled at the Templum Divi Caesaris. This was a temple directly related to the imperial cult and it should be noted that it is unique among all Greek cities\textsuperscript{25}. In 2009 Prof. Theodosia Stefanidou-Tiveriou, in her paper at the international conference on the Classical tradition in the sculpture of Roman Greece, argued that the remains of a building found in the centre of Thessaloniki in 1936, close to Dioikitiriou and Krystalli streets, was not a temple dedicated to Venus, but a temple of the Goddess Rome and of Zeus Eleftherios or Aigiochos\textsuperscript{26}. This temple was embellished during the reign of Hadrian and was closely associated with the imperial cult\textsuperscript{27}. A


similar opinion on this building was expressed by Prof. George Karadedos with reference to the involvement of Aeneas, the reputed founder of the first, archaic, temple. Aeneas was considered to be the son of Venus and according to Roman imperial propaganda was the founding father of the Iulii, the ancestors of Julius Caesar. Prof. Karadedos believes that the Thessalonians, who were allies of Anthony, dedicated Aeneas’ temple to Octavian, after Anthony’s defeat at Actium, as a final attempt to appease the emperor. Among the finds from the excavation, apart from a statue of the Goddess Rome, a statue of a man clad in a tebenna was found, together with two statues of men with richly decorated body armour and a nude statue holding an aegis. According to Stefanidou-Tiveriou, of these statues at least the last three were imperial statues.

Another invaluable source of information about the existence of the imperial cult in Thessalonica is the epigraphical evidence. A very important inscription was discovered by Duchesne and Bayet in 1874 and was presented by Ch. Edson in 1940. It dates from the 1st century C.E. and was found in the ruins of the Kassandreotike Gate. It includes a list of priests from Thessalonica and there is a reference to a Temple of Caesar. Another two dedicatory inscriptions (IG, X, 2.1, 32 and 33), which were also studied by Ch. Edson and dated to the 1st century C.E., mention the imperial cult in the city during that period. One more inscription, which is dated between 12 B.C.E. and 14 C.E., includes a reference to the worship of Caesar Augustus, along with Hercules and a number of Egyptian gods. In 1996 Prof. G. Velenis pre-

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32 SEG 43 1993, No. 457.
sented an honorary inscription from the market area of Thessalonica which came to light in 1993. It dates from c. 27 B.C.E.-14 C.E. and includes an explicit reference to the existence of the imperial cult in the city, for it says that the inscription was dedicated “during the time of the priest and agonothetes of the Caesar God Son of Sebastos” (ἐπὶ ἱερέως ἱερεῖ τοῦ Καίσαρος Θεοῦ υἱοῦ Σεβαστοῦ)33. Inscriptions from other Greek cities support the view that the “priest” who is mentioned here belongs to the cult of the Roman emperor. In this particular inscription a hitherto unknown priest of the imperial cult in Thessalonica is mentioned by the name Nikolaos Demetrios Kletomachos (Νικολάου Δημητρίου τοῦ καὶ Κλιτομάχου)34. Moreover, inscriptions of the mid-1st and 2nd centuries C.E. from the area of the “Sebasteion”, a temple of the imperial cult in the so-called “area of the sacred” also attests to an active cult of Augustus along with the cult of Claudius35. According to Vickers, the imperial cult was based in the western part of the city, on the west or north-west side of the ancient agora, where a headless statue of the emperor was found in 195736. In 1939, to the north of the sanctuary of the Egyptian gods, a kind of Thessalonian “Sebasteion”, situated in the present-day Stratigou Doumbioti St. (no. 16), a marble statue of Octavian Augustus was found and is now preserved in the city’s Archaeological Museum (ΜΘ 1065). The statue possesses features that are consistent with the political propaganda which endorsed the emperor as a superior power with divine status. It is dated to between the years 14-37 C.E.37 A very short distance

37 Οδηγός της Έκθεσης Θεσσαλονίκη. Από τα προϊστορικά μέχρι τα χριστιανικά χρόνια, Athens 1986, p. 76 fig. 47; J. Vokotopoulou, Οδηγός Αρχαιολογικού Μουσείου Θεσσαλονίκης, Athens 1996, pp. 85-86; H.L. Hendrix, “Archaeology and Eschatology at Thessalonica”, in B.
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A third source of information comes from the coins issued during the period under examination. There are coins that strongly attest to the existence of the imperial cult in Thessalonica. Older coins bear depictions of Julius Caesar while later on, in a new series of coins, two particular items have been found with the head of Augustus and the inscription "ΚΑΙΣΑΡ| ΣΕΒΑΣΤΟ|Σ". Another example is a coin minted shortly after the victory of Octavian Augustus at Actium, on which there is a representation of the head of Julius Caesar with a crown and a laurel wreath and the inscription "ΘΕΟΣ", while on the reverse side there is a representation of Augustus. It is obvious that in this way the legitimacy of Julius Caesar’s succession by Octavian Augustus was propagated. Julius Caesar was very likely worshipped as a god in the city while he was still alive and this can be deduced from a certain coin that portrays the head of Augustus’ wife Livia with the inscription “ΘΕΟΥ ΛΙΒΙΑ” (= God’s Livia). Members of the emperor’s family were also worshipped and this is shown by coins minted with depictions of, Livia and the inscription “ΘΕΑ” (goddess). Because of the growth of the imperial cult in the days of Claudius, the coins of this period minted in the city depict the heads of Claudius and Augustus on either side, suggesting the legitimacy of Claudius' rise to the imperial throne. A series of coins with similar representations has been found at Pella, Amphipolis and Philippi. The Goddess


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40 H. Gaebler, *Die Antiken Münzen*, *op.cit.*, no. 43, 45; Ch. Edson, "Macedonica", *op.cit.*, 132; H. Hendrix, *Thessalonians Honor Romans*, *op.cit.*, pp. 170-171.


43 Touratsoglou, *op.cit.*, p. 35.

44 *RPC* I, 1548 (Pella); *RPC* I, 1627 to 1628 (Amphipolis); *RPC* I, 1650, 1653, 1655; *RPC* II1, 343-345 (Philippi).
Rome is found on coins at Amphipolis, while other coins with the deified Livia have been found in several parts of Macedonia\(^{45}\). Finally, mention should be made of the inscription *IG*, X, 2.1, 31, which bears witness to the existence of a temple dedicated to the worship of the emperor Gaius Julius Caesar as early as the era of Augustus. This inscription reads έποη[σε]ν τὸν/Καίσαρος να[ὸν]... (= he built the temple of Caesar)\(^ {46}\). As for the exact location of the monument, Prof. Velenis believes that it is of considerable significance that the honorary inscription was found in the area of the Roman Agora. Given the fact that the emperor’s temple would have had a special presence in the city and that the priest of the imperial cult was of high social status, he assumes that the most probable location of this temple was on a site near the ancient agora, probably in the area between Olympou, Agiou Demetriou, Makedonikis Amynis and Agnostou Stratigou streets\(^ {47}\). Indeed, as is attested by inscriptions, the priest of the *Sebastoi* (venerable gods, i.e. the Roman emperors) was a prominent citizen of the city who assumed responsibility for the cult and the games in honour of the deified emperors. Similar evidence also comes from Veria and other places\(^ {48}\).

We believe that the evidence presented in this paper makes quite clear that at the time of Paul’s visit the imperial cult was flourishing in Thessalonica because of the presence of an active Roman community in the city and also because of the friendly attitude of the Thessalonians towards the Roman state. This imperial cult was well organized with temples and a priesthood of high social rank and enjoyed the favour of the Roman authorities. It was not

\(^{45}\) *AMNG*, III, 2, pl. 10, No. 7, 9 (Amphipolis); RPC I, 1506 (Macedonia); S. Kremidi-Sisilianou, “Οι κοπές των πόλεων στους αυτοκρατορικούς χρόνους: Το παράδειγμα της Μακεδονίας”, *Η ιστορική διαδρομή της νομισματικής μονάδας στην Ελλάδα*, Ethniki Idria Erevnon (ΕΙΕ), Athens 2002, pp. 47-62, 55-56.


\(^{48}\) T. Stefanidou-Tiveriou, *Η Θεσσαλονική από τον Κάσσανθο ως τον Γαλέριο*, op.cit., p. 4.
hostile to other religious cults in the city, such as the cults of Dionysus, the Egyptian gods and the Kabeiroi, which also flourished, thus justifying its cohesive role in the vast Roman empire\footnote{H. Koester, Introduction to the New Testament, Volume 2: History and Literature of Early Christianity, New York/Berlin: Martin de Gruyter, 1987, p. 363.}.
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ΣΤΗ ΘΕΣΣΑΛΟΝΙΚΗ ΚΑΤΑ ΤΟΝ ΠΡΩΤΟ ΑΙΩΝΑ Μ.Χ.

ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Στις ρωμαϊκές ἐπαρχίες τῆς Ρωμαιικῆς Αὐτοκρατορίας ἡ πρόσληψη τῆς ἀποθέωσης καί ἡ λατρεία τοῦ ἡγεμόνα, τοῦ ἤρωα, τοῦ βασιλιᾶ ἢ τοῦ αὐτοκράτορα εἶχε διαδοθεῖ εὐφέρως ἢδη ἀπὸ τὴν ἐλληνιστικὴ περίοδο. Ἡ αὐτοκρατορικὴ λατρεία κατέστη πολὺ σύντομα ἕνας σημαντικός μηχανισμός ἐλέγχου καί ἡ λατρεία τοῦ αὐτοκράτορα ὡς ἐνὸς ξάνθῳ θεοῦ διαδόθηκε μαζὶ μὲ αὐτόν τῶν θεσποιμένων προκατόχων του. Στό ἐρώτημα πόσο διαδεδομένη ἦ-
tan ἡ αὐτοκρατορικὴ λατρεία στή Θεσσαλονίκη μεταξὺ τῶν ἐτῶν 30 καί 60 μ.Χ. καὶ ποιὰ ἐπιδρασὶ ἄσκησε αὐτή στὸν ἀπόστολο Παῦλο, ὑπάρχου στοι-
χεία ὅτι ἀναπτύχθηκε ἐξαιτίας τῆς παρουσίας μιᾶς ἀκμάζουσας ρωμαϊκῆς κοινότητας στὴν πόλη, καθὼς καὶ λόγῳ τῆς θετικῆς στάσεως τῶν Θεσσαλο-
νικέων ἀπεντει ϊ στὸ Ρωμαιικὸ κράτος. Αὐτή ἡ αὐτοκρατορικὴ λατρεία ἦταν καλὰ ὀργανωμένη μὲ ναοὺς καὶ ἱερατεῖο ποῦ ἀνήκε στὰ ἀνώτερα κοινωνικὰ στρώματα καὶ εἶχε τὴν εὔνοια τῶν ρωμαϊκῶν ἄρχων.