The Emperor’s New Images – How to Honour the Emperor in the Christian Roman Empire?

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This article discusses the sacredness of Roman emperors during the late Roman Empire, in the fourth and fifth centuries C.E. as the Empire was gradually Christianized. I shall argue that the imperial ideology with the sacred emperor, which had developed in the preceding centuries, was adopted with a few modifications. The most important of the modifications was “tidying up” of emperor worship using animal sacrifices. Imperial images for the most part retained the associations and connotations they had earlier had with prestige, authority and divinity. In this article, I discuss the difficulties and ambiguities with the sacredness of emperors in the Christianizing Empire, focusing on imperial images.

The analysis of a few fourth- and fifth-century Christian writers (for example, Eusebius of Caesarea, Athanasius, John Chrysostom, the anonymous Consultationes Zacchaei et Apollonii, Philostorgius, Severianus of Gabala and Pseudo-Theophilus of Alexandria) reveals a varied and complex set of attitudes towards traditional emperor worship, depending on the socio-political context of the writings. All these views must be examined as part of the debates in which they participate, as in the case of John Chrysostom’s homilies in connection with the Riot of Statues in Antioch in 387, or Philostorgius’ statements as connected with the disputes between Homoian and Nicene Christians.

The Sacred Emperor and his Images

In an anonymous theological tractate Consultationes Zacchaei et Apollonii, dated between the late fourth and late fifth centuries, the fictive discussants – a Christian Zacchaeus and a ‘pagan’ Apollonius – debate the worship of cult statues (simulacra) including those of emperors. The Christian Zacchaeus draws a clear distinction between the worship of the emperors as deities and the reverence paid to the emperors as mortals. Zacchaeus assures us that the reverence paid to Christian emperors had nothing to do with the errors of ‘pagans’.

1 For the dating and identification, see Claussen 1995, 589-614.
The Consultationes Zacchaei et Apollonii belongs to a genre of question-answer literature in which fictive figures discussed several issues, one posed questions and the other answered those questions. Even though the discussions were most likely fictitious, the questions raised in these treatises were important for the writer’s community. Therefore, the writer of the Consultationes Zacchaei et Apollonii discusses many kinds of issues such as miracles, Christian and pagan alike, and the ascetic way of life. Among these other issues, the Christian Zacchaeus and the ‘pagan’ Apollonius dispute the worship of cult images including those of emperors.2

The ‘pagan’ Apollonius says, “we [that is, pagans] worship (adoramus) the images (simulacula vel imagines) of those whom we believe to be gods according to the true religion, or whom – as taught by the traditions of the ancient predecessors – we do not know not to have been gods.”3 Then Apollonius asks why Christians (“you”), to whom that kind of thing is an abomination, venerate the images of humans, in the form of reverence paid to the rulers even as public adoration (sub regum reverentia etiam publica adoratione veneramini), and thus give to humans the honour that should be given to a god only, as Christians themselves announce.4 Apollonius adds, “even though this is illicit and against the law, why do you do this, Christians? Or why do not your priests prohibited this …?” Why then this adoration? is the awkward question of Apollonius. One can infer that non-Christians may have challenged Christians (especially newly converted, uncertain Christians) with these kinds of problems and that is why this inquiry ended up in this question-answer treatise.

The writer of Consultationes Zacchaei et Apollonii offers a solution to the perplexed Christians: the Christian Zacchaeus replies that Christians draw a clear distinction between the worship of the emperors as deities and the reverence paid to the emperors as mortals. He states that it was not allowed for Christians to adore the elements, angels, or any power of heaven, earth or air. He assures his reader that the ceremonies that pagans reprimand Christians for do not constitute a cult (non aliquaem divinum deprehenditis cultum). Zacchaeus explains that the person (that is, the emperor), whose image is greeted, is not called a god; the images are not adored with incense; there are no more altars left for worship; the person (that is, the emperor), whose image is greeted, is not called a god; thus give to humans the honour that should be given to a god only, as Christians themselves announce.5

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In which cases did ecclesiastical leaders regard the reverence paid to imperial images as idolatry, and in which cases as allegiance due to a Christian ruler? Imperial images for the most part retained the associations and connotations they had earlier had with prestige, authority and divinity. The analysis of fourth- and fifth-century Christian writers, for example, Eusebius of Caesarea, Athanasius, John Chrysostom, Philostorgius, Severianus of Gabala and Pseudo-Theophilus of Alexandria, will reveal a varied and complex set of attitudes towards emperor worship.

As the famous maxim from religious studies states, myths may perish – rituals endure.8 This investigation will show that this was also the case with the veneration of imperial images in Late Antiquity: the rituals connected with imperial images persisted even though the ideological framework was modified from the polytheistic Roman civic religion into the Christian Empire.

In order to provide a background for the sacredness associated with late antique emperors, I will start with the allegiance shown to imperial images. Second, I will analyse late antique views on imperial images, and their sacredness and functions will be connected to the ancient theories of images in general. The famous Riot of

3 Consultationes Zacchaei et Apollonii 1.28.2: Nos enim eorum simulacula vel imagines adoramus, quos vel vera religione deos credimus, vel antiquorum traditionibus docti deos non esse nescimus.
4 Consultationes Zacchaei et Apollonii 1.28.3: Vos vero, quibus istud abominatio est, cur imaginis hominum, vel ceris pictas, vel metalis defictas, sub regum reverentia etiam publica adoratione veneramini, et, ut ipsi praedicatis, deo tantum honorum etiam hominibus datis?
5 Consultationes Zacchaei et Apollonii 1.28.4: Quod si et illicitum legique contrarium est, cur hoc facitis, christiani, aut cur hoc vestri non probitant sacerdotes, …?
6 Consultationes Zacchaei et Apollonii 1.28.5-9. Zacchaeus (1.28.6-8) speaks of imprudent reverence continued as a habit and admits that this is abhorred by the more strict Christians.
7 Consultationes Zacchaei et Apollonii 1.28.8: non tamen deus dicitur, cuius effigies salutatur, nec adolurent ture imagines aut coiledae aris superstant, sed memorias pro meritis exponuntur, …
8 Consultationes Zacchaei et Apollonii 1.28.9: Vides ergo nihil vestris eroriibus simile in hoc esse quod arguis.

For the continuity of the emperor worship in the fourth century, see Salzman 1990, 131-146.
10 Also used by Lund Warmind 1993, 211.
Statues in 387 will be discussed from the perspective of the allegiance shown to imperial images. Then we will take a look at Christian writers' various views on the veneration of imperial images, both critical and approving, and will set these views into their proper contexts. Finally, I will show what changes and continuities in the sacredness of the emperor can be seen in the attempts to regulate his veneration in late antique legislation.

**The Imperial Image Honoured**

For an ordinary inhabitant of the Empire, the emperor's image, bust or statue was the only thing that she or he ever saw of the ruler. Imperial images were still ubiquitous in late Roman daily life: they were present in prominent public places such as market places. The imperial image was an essential component in law courts, and the governors of provinces invoked imperial images when they needed to appeal to imperial authority. At formal public ceremonies, in which loyalty was shown to the reigning emperor, his image was displayed in his stead.\(^{11}\)

In legislation, honorary inscriptions, coins and panegyrics, the imperial image was connected with the sacred and the divine, but what did this mean? Sabine MacCormack has written that "in some way the imperial images partook of the nature of the sacred" and Luke Lavan speaks of "a religious aura" of imperial statues in Late Antiquity.\(^{12}\) I think it is expedient to approach the question with examples of the regulations concerning imperial images and the use of imperial images.

Storing an imperial image was a grave transgression and could result in imprisonment. Even the accusation of a false accusation of insulting an imperial image was severe enough, as the allegation against Athanasius of Alexandria (c. 296–373) hurled by his ecclesiastical opponents in the council of Tyre in 335 shows. Athanasius’ adversaries accused him of making false accusations against a presbyter who allegedly had thrown stones at imperial statues (Δοθεὶς ἐικόνας ἔθηκε)\(^{13}\)

Disrespect shown to imperial images and to the images of the reigning emperor in particular – whether this disrespect was real or alleged – could also be used as a weapon against ecclesiastical opponents in the fifth and sixth centuries as some cases in connection with the church councils of Chalcedon 451 and Constantinople 553 respectively indicate. The Patriarch Dioscorus of Alexandria was claimed to have shown disrespect to imperial images, and the monophysite monk Isaac the Persian was purported to have destroyed an image of Emperor Justinian. An ecclesiastical opponent who really or allegedly showed disrespect to or even damaged imperial images could thus be argued to be disloyal to the reigning emperor.\(^{14}\)

Furthermore, overthrowing a reigning emperor’s statues was a sign of rebellion. For instance, in connection with an unsuccessful military coup in 354 against Gallus, Emperor Constantius’ erstwhile co-ruler, and thereby against the emperor himself, it was presumed that the rebels would first overthrow Constantius’ statues (post status Constantii deiectas) and then proceed with other actions.\(^{15}\) All kinds of alterations or unauthorized copies of imperial images were severely forbidden. In a law of 381, copying “the sacred imperial features and thus assailing the divine countenance” and thus “sacrilegiously imitating their venerable images” (qui sacri oris imitator et divinorum vultuum adpetitor venerabiles formas sacrilegio eruditus) is listed in the same line with such crimes as parricide, incest and poisoning.\(^{16}\)

Allegiance was shown through images; for instance, military oaths of allegiance were taken in front of the emperor or the emperor’s image. This had been a long-standing practice to confirm the allegiance of the subjects, civilian and military alike but was primarily military. Correspondingly, defacing images of an emperor was a symbolic act of rebellion. Pulling down and destroying the image of the ruling emperor was a sign of revolt,\(^{17}\) as it had already been during the early Empire, when the soldiers of the legions of Germany inferior – instead of taking the oath of allegiance in the New Year to the emperor’s image in 69 – had thrown stones at Galba’s images (saxa in Galbae imaginibus secernit) and the legions of Germany superior had smashed his images (dirumpunt imagines Galbae).\(^{18}\)

Imperial decrees represented the emperor in a similar way and could encounter similar signs of respect and violation respectively. Any damage done to the physical item of the emperor’s declarations was considered treason.\(^{19}\) When imperial decrees were read aloud publicly, the people were expected to listen to them with solemn awe. John Chrysostom (c. 350–407) compares the awe when listening to imperial laws with the fear one should feel when listening to the word of God, which should be feared even more:

> A profound silence reigns when those letters are read. There is not the slightest noise; everyone listens most attentively to the orders contained in them. Whoever makes the

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12 MacCormack 1981, 67-68 and Lavan 2011b, 459. Lavan explains this religious aura as a consequence of centuries of the imperial cult: the statues of living reigning emperors were increasingly considered to have powers similar to the cult images of deceased deified emperors. See also Niemeyer 1968, esp. 18-27.

13 Suzomen, Historia ecclesiastica 2.25.


15 Ammianus Marcellinus, Res gestae 14.7.12.

16 Codex Theodosianus 9.38.6 (in 381).

17 Ellingsen 2003, 32-33; MacCormack 1981, 67-68; Browning 1952, 20; Kruse 1934, 12-18, 57-60 with several examples.


19 For imperial law as divine, see Matthews 2000, 181-182 and Lavan 2011b, 462. For examples, see e.g., Lactantius, De mortibus persecutorum 13.2-3 and Eusebius, Historia ecclesiastica 8.5.
slightest noise, thereby interrupting the reading, runs the greatest danger. All the more should one stand with fear and trepidation... in order to understand what is read.20

The imperial image could make a solemn arrival, adventus, into towns and cities instead of the emperor in person, and the same ceremonies were applied to the image as to the emperor. For example, the arrival of the images of the western emperor Anthemius (r. 467-472) in Constantinople replaced the arrival of the emperor himself.21 Provincials received the adventus of the imperial image as if they were welcoming the emperor in person. Furthermore, petitions could be made to the statue of a reigning emperor.22 Fugitives could claim asylum at imperial statues, and in a law of 386 by Theodosius I, for example, the right of asylum at imperial statues (ad imperatoria simulacula) was confirmed.23

Images and Prototypes

The emperor’s presence was reproduced in his image. As I mentioned above, the imperial image could be treated as if it were the emperor himself, with ceremonies, pomp and adoration.24 Correspondingly, violations against the imperial image were taken as offences against the emperor himself. Basil of Caesarea (c. 330-379), for instance, remarks that a person who treats an imperial image (βασιλικὴν εἰκόνα) shamefully (καθυβρὶσαϛ) is condemned as if this person offends the emperor himself.25 Ambrose of Milan (c. 340-397), probably echoing Basil, states that whoever treats an imperial statue (stataum... imperatoris) shamefully is regarded as having committed an offence against the emperor.26

This notion is linked with ancient ideas about the connection between the image and the prototype, the object that the image depicted. In Greco-Roman Antiquity, there prevailed many divergent views and theories concerning the connection between an image and its prototype. Greco-Roman writers thought that cult images were animated by a positive divine presence; similarly, the image of an emperor contained his presence on some level.27

Intellectuals debated for centuries whether images were to be regarded as gods themselves. Some had defended the cult of images, arguing that people did not venerate mere objects themselves but revered the divinities that these images represented. For example, the second-century Platonist Celsus, who reproached Christians for not believing in images, argued that everyone knew that images were not gods but only images representing gods. In the late third century, Porphyry, when discussing the statues of gods, stated that images were visible symbols of the invisible.28 Plotinus writes that ancient sages wanted to secure the presence of divine being by making shrines and images (ἀγάλματος). Accordingly, even though the images were not divine as such, they carried something of the identity and power of the divine that they stood for.29

Emperor Julian’s (r. 361-363) discussion on the image of Magna Mater is part of this long debate. He asserts that the image is “no human thing, but really divine, not lifeless clay but something having life (ἐμφάνου) and divinity.”30 Julian, on the other hand, insists that the images of the gods are by no means the gods themselves in the same manner as the images of the emperor are not the emperor. Images nevertheless are not just material, stone or wood. Julian explains that “he therefore who loves the emperor delights to see the emperor’s statue”. This is compared with seeing the son’s statue: he who loves his son delights to see his son’s statue. And he “who loves the gods delights to gaze on the images (ἀγάλματος) of the gods, and their likenesses (ἀντίγραφα), and he feels reverence.”31 Thus, images were usually, to some extent at least, thought to contain something of the divine nature of its prototype, a god or a godlike emperor.

Comparisons to imperial images in late antique literature, especially in theological considerations, pagan and Christian alike, tell us something about the prevailing conceptions about imperial images. The explanatory power of imperial images can be seen in the deliberations of Christian writers such as Athanasius of Alexandria, Severianus of Gabala and a Coptic writer (Pseudo-Theophilus of Alexandria, In Isaian 13.267 (Patrologia Graeca 30, col. 589A-B). Browning 1952, 20.

20 John Chrysostom, Homilia in Genesisim, Patrologia Graeca 53, col. 112. Translation by Matthews 2000, 188.
21 The protocol was recorded in the Book of Ceremonies by Constantius Porphyrogenitus (De Cerimoniis 1.87). For a discussion, see MacCormack 1981, 67-69; for the text, see Kruse 1934, 29.
22 A description of such an adventus is found in the panegyrich by Procopius of Gaza (Panegyricus, 1). MacCormack 1981, 88-69 and Lavan 2011b, 461, with further examples.
24 Ellingsen 2003, 30; Lavan 2011b, 459.
26 Ambrose, Expositio in psalmum CXVIII, 10.25 (Corpus scriptorum ecclesiasticorum Latinorum 62, 219): et qui statuum contempserit imperatoris, imperatorique cuius statuum conspexitur fecisse videtur inimicum.
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Alexander). These writers used imperial images as points of comparison in which imperial images, a phenomenon familiar to the audience, are meant to make the subtle theological argumentation more understandable.

For instance, around 360 in the middle of the Christian doctrinal disputes, Athanasius in his treatise against the Arians (that is, Homoians whom he called Arians) explained his views of the relationship between the Father and the Son of the Trinity and used the relationship between the emperor and his image as a point of comparison. To elucidate how the Son is the image of the Father, he explains the imperial image:

In the image (ἐικών) [of the emperor] there is the character (ὁμοιότης) and the form (μορφή) of the emperor … For the emperor’s likeness (ὁμοιότης) is exact in the image, so that the one gazing at the image sees the emperor in it, and again the one gazing at the emperor recognizes that he is the one in the image.

Then Athanasius explains that the image could say:

“I and the emperor are one; I am in him and he is in me. That which you see in me you behold in him, and what you look upon in him, you behold in me.” Therefore whoever adores the image (τροποκύνου) also adores (τροποκύνει) the emperor in it, for the image is his form (μορφή) and character (ὁμοιότης).31

This passage shows that this comparison was comprehensible for Athanasius’ audience – or at least, Athanasius in interaction with his listeners assumed so. In the process of successful communication, a speaker needed to use arguments and scenarios that sounded plausible to an audience. Therefore, we may presume that Athanasius’ listeners took it for granted that the emperor and the imperial image were ‘one’ and that the imperial image was adored as if it was the emperor who was adored. The imperial image carries the power of the emperor as well as sharing the nature and character of the emperor. In other words, the imperial image was understood as a direct substitute for the emperor’s person, carrying all his authority – the authority connected with his position.32

The early fifth-century bishop of Gabala, Severianus, who made a comparison with the ubiquity of imperial images and the ubiquity of the Christian god, also had the same understanding. Because the emperor could not be present everywhere in his empire, it was necessary to have the emperor’s portraits (τὸν χαρακτέρα τοῦ ἱερατεύουσα

32 Ando 2000, 238 with further examples. Ando 2000, 238 connects the explanatory power of imperial images with the fact that emperors were the most common and least controversial figures in Late Antiquity.


34 Similar comparisons are made by Basil of Caesarea, De spiritu sancto 18.45 (Patrologia Graeca 32, 149). Ambrose, Expositio in psalmum CXVIII 10.25 (see n. 40) and Ambrose, In epistulam ad Colossenses 2.16-17 (Patrologia Latina 17, 432). Francis 2009, 296; Laven 2011b, 461; Stewart 1999, 169-170; Brubaker 1995, 4-5; Murray 1989, 298.

The Imperial Image Violated

The issue of imperial images was by no means just a topic among philosophers and theologians but a life-and-death question for people living ordinary lives. The aftermath of the so-called Riot of Statues in Antioch in 387 shows how drastic measures the government could take in dealing with the violators of imperial images. This infamous incident is reported by John Chrysostom in his homilies and by Libanius (c. 314-392/393) in his speeches.35

During the reign of Emperor Theodosius I (r. 379-395), the riot began as a reaction to the imperial edict that announced a new tax that would bring a considerable increase in taxation. The Antiochian people attacked the palace of the emperor and took the statues in the palace and over the whole city. If the image of the emperor, then no man will be able to oppose him, even though the emperor is naught but a mortal man; and he is taken to a court of law. Let us, therefore, my beloved, honour the image of our Lady the veritable Queen, the holy Theotokos Mary, the mother of our God.36

The Coptic writer assumes that his audience takes the power and sacred nature of the imperial image – for instance, he refers to its protective function (“a protection to the whole city”) and its function as an asylum (“he goes and takes hold of the image of the emperor, then no man will be able to oppose him”).37


37 The later development of Byzantine icons has often been connected with the veneration of imperial images, e.g., by Kitzinger 1954, 121-125. Now, more recently Mathews (2001, 163-177) has pointed out that the developing Christian cult of icons can be seen as a parallel with the private cult of images among the pagans at the same time.

38 John Chrysostom, 21 homilae ad populum Antiochenum de statu (Patrologia Graeca 49); Libanius, Orationes 19-23.
of the provincial governor and showed their irritation by pulling down wooden panel pictures with the emperor’s portrait and casting down the bronze statues of the imperial family, that is, the emperor, his wife Eudoxia and his son Arcadius. The riot was eventually suppressed and the ringleaders arrested and punished. Emperor Theodosius threatened the people of Antioch with further, more extensive punishments: he wanted to strip the city of its several privileges, cut off the annona and close down the hippodrome, theatres and baths. Furthermore, many members of the city council were ordered to be imprisoned. People even feared that the emperor would order his soldiers to massacre the populace and sack the city.13 These were threats of considerable punishments and reflect the importance of imperial images and their symbolic function.44

Both the Christian presbyter John Chrysostom and the pagan teacher of rhetoric Libanius defended their city-folk intensively. John Chrysostom delivered twenty-one homilies in which he defended the people in the aftermath of the riot. He describes the punishments inflicted on the Antiochians as completely out of proportion to the offence they committed against the imperial images and reminds his audience – the people, the imperial court and the emperor – that this is nothing compared to the insults that are directed against God every day.45 In another sermon, John Chrysostom puts his criticism of excessive chastisement into the mouth of a monk: the statues that had been thrown down were again set up; thus the damage had been speedily rectified. This is then compared with the capital punishments that were impending upon the rioters. The monk declares:

… if you put to death the image of God, how will you be again able to revoke the deed!
Or how can you reanimate those who are deprived of life, and restore their souls to their bodies?46

Accordingly, John Chrysostom argues that the insults to the imperial images are nothing compared to the impending punishments that are offences against the images of God – humans. I will return to John Chrysostom’s defence below.

For his part, Libanius delivered five speeches that discussed the riot. In his oration 19, addressed to the emperor, he asks the emperor to cease from his anger and revoke the punishments.43 He attributes the riot to some supernatural (demonic) intervention, trying to discharge the people from responsibility in this way.44 Libanius argues that in the past, sensible rulers have pardoned outbreaks of the people and that an emperor should be like a father who treats the recklessness of his sons gently.45 In another oration, Libanius compares the violation of imperial images to the insults hurled against the gods and stones thrown at heaven. Yet the gods refrain from punishing people even though they have the power to punish them. Thus in his speech Libanius reminds the emperor of divine patience in the face of insults in a way similar to that of John Chrysostom. Libanius states that the emperor will show himself to be more of a peer to the gods (θεοί ἵσος) by not taking pleasure in punishing his subjects, even if the punishments are justified.46

As mentioned above, an attack against the image of the emperor could be taken as an attack against the person of the emperor and consequently be seen as treason. This is how John Chrysostom portrays the tearing down of imperial images: “And now this is the first and only instance of insurrection [of Antioch] against its rulers.”47 Besides an act of treason, the attack was also a sacrilege against the sacredness of the emperor. Libanius admits that those attacking imperial images were οἱ συνασεβήσαντες, guilty of sacrilege, and insulting imperial images was βλασφημία.48 Therefore, the response of the emperor had to be immediate and suitably austere.49 Emperors, as Harold Drake describes their position, “sat on the horns of a dilemma: too much force turned them into rogue emperors, unfit to govern by the rules of cīvitās; too little simply invited contempt.”50 Thus, balancing between cīvitās and sternness, the emperor had to punish, or at least severely threaten to punish those who had destroyed imperial images.

 Destruction of a private person’s statues was an assault against an individual’s social persona.51 In the case of the emperor much more was at stake, as we saw above. Loyalty was publicized by showing respect for imperial images, whereas seditious action was often channelled by violating them.

39 Libanius, Oratio 21.5-6; 22.7-8. For the riot and the evaluations of John Chrysostom’s and Libanius’ accounts, see Browning 1952, 15-16; Sandwell 2007, 129: 173-174; Leppin 1999, 103-123. The ringleaders were clave leaders of the theatre factions. Apparently the riot was not a religious conflict (Leppin 1999, 121; Engemann 1988, 1044) even though the riot has also been seen in connection with the growing tension between different religious groups in Antioch (e.g., Mitchell 2007, 325).
40 Browning 1952, 15 n. 40 compares imperial images to the flags and coats of arms of modern times.
41 John Chrysostom, Homilia de status 17.3 (Patrologia Graeca 49, col. 173).
42 John Chrysostom, Homilia de status 3.18 (Patrologia Graeca 49, col. 56-57).
43 Libanius, Oratio esp. 19.38; 19.45. Even though Libanius (Oratio 19.2-4) speaks as if he were present in the imperial palace, we do not know whether he really gave the speech in front of the emperor. Mitchell 2007, 18.
44 Libanius, Oratio 19.7: ἐπείδη διατόμενη, 19.29: ἐπείδη μονεύουσα; 19.31: καὶ ἐπείδην; 19.34: John Chrysostom (Homilia de status 21.1-3) also shifts the responsibility to demons. In addition, by referring to people with recourse to their god, Libanius insinuates that the rioters were mainly Christians (Oratio 19.25; 20.3).
45 Libanius, Oratio 19.11; 19.18; 19.48-49; for examples from the past, see also Oratio 20.25-30.
46 Libanius, Oratio 20.11-13.
47 John Chrysostom, Homilia de status 3.3.
48 Libanius, Oratio 19.36; also 20.10; 21.5.
49 For the fears of the Antiochians, see Libanius, Oratio 23.12-14.
50 Drake 2011, 211.
51 Stewart 1999, 161. For the importance of destroying the face in particular, see Stewart 1999, 167.
Magistrates expected the imperial images to be regarded as sacrosanct, revered and inviolate. Various acts such as ill-mannered gestures or altering or defacing images could be interpreted as disrespect towards the emperor and regarded as acts of lèse majesté. Forging or defacing the image of the emperor on coins was also an act of high treason, a notion that was still valid in the Late Roman Empire as the law of 389 in the Theodosian Code shows. In one of his homilies, John Chrysostom reproaches the makeup of women and compares the female face to an image of the emperor: he remarks that a person who would try to make changes to an image of the emperor after it was set up, would eventually incur extreme danger.

The Veneration of Images – Blame and Approval

To return to the questions posed in Consultationes Zacchaei et Apollonii at the beginning of this article: How should Christians deal with the power and presence of the emperor in imperial images in a Christianizing Empire? What would be the appropriate way of showing loyalty to Christian emperors and the proper way to venerate imperial images: with or without incense and an altar, and with or without animal sacrifices? During the early imperial period, this had been a sore point for Christian groups.

On one hand, for many Christians the adoration given to the emperor as to a god compromised the Christian teaching that veneration was due to the Christian deity only. It is nonetheless worth remembering that the adoration shown to the emperor, or to the gods in general, was not an issue to all Christians, as many complaints by leaders of Christian groups reveal.

A number of Christian apologists in the first to the third centuries condemned the reverence paid to the emperor and his images. In the late second century, Theophilus of Antioch, for instance, had shown an uncompromising attitude: "Why do the Christians not worship the emperor? Because he is not a god, but a man, appointed by God, not to receive homage, but to give judgment rightly." Tertullian explained in Apologeticum in 197 that it was because of the refusal of Christians to venerate the emperor that they were harassed by Roman authorities: "So that is why Christians are public enemies – because they will not give the emperors vain, false and rash honours." On the other hand, to be able to cope with imperial authority Christians had to demonstrate their loyalty to the emperor in some way. Christian apologists were at pains to convince their audience that Christians were loyal subjects of the emperor and took part in social life just like any other Roman. Tertullian assured his listeners that Christians prayed for the welfare of the emperor (pro salute imperatoris).

In the early Empire, sacrifice had been an essential part of the public Roman religion, emperor worship included. In their aim at religious unity and control of their subjects in the third century, emperors Decius and Valerian had ordered the whole population of the Empire to perform Roman rites as a mark of their loyalty to the Empire and the emperor. The crucial test was the performance of sacrifice, thus participating in the sacrificial system of the Roman society. Making sacrifices, especially animal sacrifices, became another sore point for many Christians and a defining line in Christian self-understanding. It was imperative for ecclesiastical leaders to convince others that Christians never made sacrifices – either now or in the past.

Christian writers made their revulsion of animal sacrifices – blood, flesh and smoke – manifest. The Christian disgust for blood sacrifices is reflected in the legislation of Christian emperors in the fourth and fifth centuries. In the imperial decrees that restricted the performance of many kinds of sacrifices, Christian emperors announced their resentment towards animal sacrifices. Emperor Constantine, for instance, condemned blood sacrifices in his speeches and correspondence. The imperial government nonetheless wanted to retain the old-style civic festivities and spectacles that were important to the people. A decree of 392, for instance, mentions the sorrow that would be produced if theatrical

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56 Tertullian, Apologeticum 35.1: Propretiae igiur publici hostes Christiani, quia imperatori sunt neque vanos neque mentientes neque temerarios honores dicant. ... For the discussion on Tertullian and his stance on the worship of emperors, see Tobias Georges' article in this volume.

57 Tertullian, Ad Scapulam 2.6-8; also Tertullian, Apologeticum 30.4. Similar assurances are found in Theophilus of Antioch, Ad Autolycum 1.11; Athenagoras of Athens, Legatio pro Christianis 37.2-3; Cyprian, Ad Demetriana 20; Arnobius, Ad nationes 4.36.

58 For the issue of making sacrifices, see e.g. Hart 1990, 7-27; Bradbury 1994, 120-139; Belaeye 2002, 101-126; Belaeye 2005, 343-380; Kahlos 2007, 119-126 and Ullucci 2012, esp. 137-144.

59 E.g., Prudentius, Contra orationem Symmachii 1.8 described the toga of the respectable pagan senators as tinted by blood and smoke. For Christian disgust about blood sacrifices, see Kahlos 2013, 159-171; Kahlos 2007, 120-123; Bradbury 1994, 129.

60 E.g., Codex Theodosianus 16.10.13 (in 393): abominanda sacrificia. It is important to remember that not all sacrificial rituals were forbidden once and for all; the main target was animal sacrifices. Emperors such as Constantine and Constantius II were primarily worried about private sacrifices and private divination. From Codex Theodosianus 16.10.10 (in 391) onwards, legislation against magical practices was gradually extended to cover pagan sacrifices, and the total abolition of pagan sacrifices was completed in the early fifth-century legislation of Arcadius and Honorius.

61 Constantine in Eusebius, Vita Constantini 4.10 and Constantine, Oratio ad sanctorum 11. Eusebius (Vita Constantin 2.45.1) claimed that Constantine banned all sacrifices, but this has raised a wide dispute among modern scholars. For a survey of the discussion, see Kahlos 2007, 122 n. 43.

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53 John Chrysostom, Homilia in Matthaeum 30.6 (Patrologia Graeca 57, col. 370).

54 As Outi Lehtipuu also reminds us in her article in this volume.

55 Theophilus of Antioch, Ad Autolycum 1.11.
spectacles were forbidden.\textsuperscript{62} As a compromise between the traditional needs of the people and the demands of sacrifice-loathing church leaders, the imperial legislators ended in tidying up civic celebrations of their cultic features, that is, sacrifices. A decree of 399 declares that amusements shall be performed for the people as before but without sacrifices and superstition.\textsuperscript{63}

In the fourth century, Christian emperors in their legislation most likely and Christian bishops certainly supported the veneration of emperors without animal sacrifices. Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 260-339/340) in his Life of Constantine states that Emperor Constantine forbade the setting up of imperial images (εἰκόνας αὐτοῦ) in temples of idols (τῶν ἀπειρομένων μολύνοντο). Eusebius’ reference to forbidden things has usually been interpreted as a reference to animal sacrifice. Thus, at least for some Christians and Christian emperors, the combination of the reverence shown to imperial images and some traditional (‘idolatrous’) practices constituted a danger.\textsuperscript{64} Let us have a look at what Gregory of Nazianzus says about this sort of combination.

In his invective against Emperor Julian, Gregory of Nazianzus (c. 330-390) lists the usual honours that a ruler receives – Gregory more or less tolerates these honours though he does not appreciate them very much. These are the royal customs among all peoples and also among the Romans: honouring rulers with public images (τεχνά), then also crowns and diadems, the dye of the purple robe, and so forth. In addition to these, “rulers require adoration (προσκύνησις) in order to appear more august (σεμνότεροι) and not only that they are to be adored in person but also their statues and pictures (ἐν πλάσματι τε καὶ χρώμασι) in order that the reverence (σέβας) is more insatiable and more complete”\textsuperscript{65}.

These are understood as the customary honours of the emperor. What were the limits of customary or acceptable honours of the emperor? What kind of veneration or adoration or reverence for the emperor was appropriate? What is disturbing in Emperor Julian, in the eyes of Gregory, is the element of idolatry that Julian cunningly tries to sneak into these customary imperial honours. Gregory states that Julian machinates traps for weaker Christians by mixing, like poison into food, impiety (τὴν ἀσέβειαν) with the customary honour of the emperors and by thus putting together the Roman laws and the worship of idols (εἰκόνων προσκυνήσων) and connecting his own images with those of demons (τοῖς ἐναρχομενοῖς ἀποτρόπαιοις τοὺς δάμαντας). Consequently, by paying honour to the emperor, people paid the same honour to the idols. If one shunned paying honour to the idol, one insulted the ruler because the worship of the two was combined. According to Gregory, only a few, more cautious and intelligent Christians could escape Julian’s trap; many, more ignorant and simple Christians were, however, caught.\textsuperscript{66} Thus, the combination of the reverence shown to the imperial image and the worship of what Gregory calls idols is condemnable, not the veneration of imperial images as such.

In his church history, the Eunomian Christian writer Philostorgius (368-439) criticized the cult of the Nicene Christians in front of the image of the deceased Constantine. He mentions Christians’ “worshipping with sacrifices (θυσίαις) the image of Constantine set up upon the porphyry column, paying homage to it with lamp-lighting (λυχνοκαίαις) and incense (θυμιάμασι) or praying (εὐχὰς) to it, as to a god (ὡς θεῶ) and making apotropaic offerings (ἀποτροπαῖα ἱκτερίας).”\textsuperscript{67} Hence Philostorgius condemns practices connected with the reverence paid to the imperial image of the departed Constantine. It is worth noting that this criticism comes from the context in which the Eunomian Christian disapproves of the activities of his Christian rivals, the Nicene Christians. Practices such as sacrifices and prayers, addressed to the imperial image as if it were a god, were included in the disparagement and meant to embarrass the rival group.

Similarly, we need to put John Chrysostom’s discussion on the reverence paid to the imperial images into its proper context. He defends the Antiochian people after the Riot of Statues that we discussed above and represents the chastisement inflicted on the Antiochians as too severe in regard to the offence. As was noted above, he argued that the offence against the imperial family was nothing in comparison with the insults against God. The insults against imperial images were only insults against images, “not done to his face” (οὐ κατ᾿ὄψιν), “nor while he was present to see or hear it” (οὐδὲ παρὼν καὶ ἀκοὺων), and nevertheless none of those who perpetrated these deeds obtained forgiveness from the emperor. Furthermore, he reminds his audience that humans were the image of God. He then remarks that the bronze statue of the emperor was not even of the same substance as the emperor. And yet people who had insulted it had to pay the penalty:\textsuperscript{68} I am inclined to see John Chrysostom’s ideas about imperial images as part of his defence of the Antiochian people. The same applies to John Chrysostom’s other homily that was discussed above and in which he presents the

\textsuperscript{62} Codex Theodosianus 15.6.1 (in 392).
\textsuperscript{63} Codex Theodosianus 16.10.17 (in 399).
\textsuperscript{64} Eusebius, Vita Constantini 4:16. Lavan 2011b, 460. The ambiguous wording of this passage as well as other similar Constantinian ambiguities, e.g., in the rescript of Hispellum, could have been interpreted both as forbidding sacrifices in general or prohibiting magical practices. Saizmann 1987, 172-188; Kahlos 2009, 101; Gamseoe – Humfress 2001, 163-164. See also the discussion on the rescript of Hispellum in the article by Van Andringa in this volume.
\textsuperscript{65} Gregory of Nazianzus, Oratio 4.80. Then follows a list of different representations of actions such as subduing and slaughtering barbarians, depicted in various forms. For discussions on this passage, see Ando 2000, 231; Elmi 2012, 354-356; and Engemann 1988, 1643.
\textsuperscript{66} Gregory of Nazianzus, Oratio 4.81.
\textsuperscript{67} Philostorgius, Historia ecclesiastica 2.17. Ed. Bidez 28. For the cult adoration paid to Constantine’s image, see Amidon 2007, 35 n. 49; Bowersock 1982, 181; the imperial statue was celebrated annually with hymns, acclamations and a procession. Constantine’s image was also venerated annually in Constantinople and Rome: Lavan 2011b, 465; Lund Warmind 1993, 215.
\textsuperscript{68} John Chrysostom, Homilia de statuis 3.18 (Patrologia Graeca 49, col. 56-57). John Chrysostom reinforces his argument with references to biblical passages.
Imperial Images in Legislation

It is understandable that the veneration of imperial images needed to be regulated and controlled by the emperors themselves. In a law of 425 Emperor Theodosius II wanted to control ceremonies connected to imperial images:

If at any time, whether on festal days, as is usual, or on ordinary days, statues or images of us are erected, let the magistrate be present without employing any vainglorious heights of adoration, but so that he may show that his presence has graced the day, the place, and our memory.\(^{70}\)

What this “vainglorious heights of adoration” or “overzealous element of worship” (\textit{adorationis ambitiosum fastigium}) ever meant was probably resolved by local administrators. The law continues:

Likewise, if our images are shown at public spectacles, they shall demonstrate that our divinity (\textit{numen}) and praises live only in the hearts and secret places of the minds of those who attend. Worship in excess of human dignity (\textit{excedens cultura hominum dignitatem}) shall be reserved for the supernal divinity (\textit{superno numin}).\(^{71}\)

This concerns veneration of imperial images subject to certain controls. Thus, the divinity, \textit{numen}, of the emperor should be venerated within limits, but it is worth noting that the legislator still retains the term \textit{numen} for the emperor. The emperor is \textit{numen} but the highest honours, “worship in excess of human dignity”, should be reserved for the \textit{supernum numen} only. As Glen Bowersock points out, this distinction follows the Roman tradition in which the emperors from Emperor Augustus onwards shunned excessive worship, thus keeping the separation between the divine emperor and the true deity.\(^{72}\)

Along with these constraints from Theodosian legislation, it is clear at the same time that imperial images were an essential and vital part of societal life.\(^{73}\) How effective this regulation by Theodosius II was is another question.\(^{74}\) What is important here is the tidying-up process of emperor worship led by the Christian emperors. Most likely this process led to veneration without sacrifices, if only that could be controlled. But processions with imperial images continued; imperial images were ubiquitous and present in the cityscape. Imperial images for the most part retained the associations and connotations they had earlier had with prestige, authority and divinity. Occasions connected with loyalty and power relations remained largely the same.\(^{75}\) Here we can return to the aphorism mentioned at the beginning of the article: myths may perish – rituals endure. Rituals connected with imperial images had become such an essential part of the life of Greco-Roman communities that they seem to have been more persistent than beliefs that were in the process of change in the Christianizing Empire.

Conclusion

In the Christianizing Empire, Christian rulers expected to be shown due allegiance and reverence as before. The imperial ideology with the divine emperor, established during the previous centuries, was modified by abolishing animal sacrifices. Imperial images nonetheless retained their position in public celebrations, maintaining their prestige, authority and divinity. The reverence paid to imperial images continued to be an expression of loyalty. The writings of fourth- and fifth-century Christian authors reveal that reverence paid to the emperors and their images led to ambiguity about the status of the emperor’s divinity. These notions were intensely discussed and debated among Christians themselves, and even with pagans as the anonymous Consultationes Zacchaei et Apollonii may indicate.

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69 John Chrysostom, \textit{Homilia de status} 17.3 (Patrologia Graeca 49, col. 173).

70 \textit{Codex Theodosianus} 15.4.1 (in 425): \textit{Si quando nostrae statuae vel imagines enciguntur seu diebus, ut adsolet, festis sive communibus, adsal iudex sine adorationis ambitioso fastigio, ut ornamentum diei vel loco et nostras recordationi sui probet accessisse praesentiam.} Translation by Pharr 1952 (modified).

71 \textit{Codex Theodosianus} 15.4.1 (in 425): \textit{Ludis quoque simulacra proposta tantum in animis concurrentum menilisque secretis nostrum numen et laudes vigere demonstrat; excedens cultura hominum dignitatem superno numini reservetur.} As Ando (2009, 237) remarks, “addressing public veneration of their portraits alludes to this belief, even as it reveals its authors’ utter lack of reflection on the religious import of the traditional vocabulary of Roman legislation”; see also Lavan 2011b, 460; Browning 1952, 20, n. 84; Garnsey – Humfress 2001, 164.

72 Bowersock 1982, 180.

73 The importance is stressed by Bowersock 1982, 179-180.

74 A similar question can be posed about how the legislation of Theodosius II forbidding many ‘pagan’ practices was ever put into effect; see Millar 2006, 117-123; Kahlos 2009, 91-92, 108.

75 Lavan 2011b, 460-465 speaks of an imperially-led reform and writes that there “had been some concessions to Christianity, but this was a tidying-up of existing practice rather than a positive Christianisation”. For expurgated forms of the imperial cult, see also Barnes 1996, 174 and Galinsky 2011, 15.
The Riot of Statues in Antioch in 387 shows that imperial images were still central symbols of allegiance in public life; the imperial government interpreted their destruction as a sacrilege and a rebellion, and the punishments could be severe. The imperial image represented the emperor and it was to be esteemed with appropriate ceremonies as if it were the emperor himself. These conceptions of the emperor and his image were intrinsically connected with the prevailing general ideas of the image and its prototype. The cult images of gods were believed to contain something of the divine nature of the gods, and accordingly, imperial images contained the presence of a godlike emperor. The explanatory power of imperial images was taken for granted in the theological argumentation by Athanasius of Alexandria, Severianus of Gabala and the Coptic writer, the so-called Pseudo-Theophilus of Alexandria.76

Late antique Christian writers take the veneration of imperial images as a self-evident part of public life. For example, the critical voices by John Chrysostom, Gregory of Nazianzus and Philostorgius must be pondered in their specific contexts. John Chrysostom’s criticism of imperial images is part of his defence of the Antiochian people in connection with the Riot of Statues: in order to diminish the transgression of the rioters he needed to minimize the importance of imperial statues.

For his part, Gregory of Nazianzus condemned the honours paid to imperial images when they were connected with the cult of the old gods during Julian’s reign. It was the combination of the reverence shown to the emperor’s images and the ‘idolatry’ that was condemnable for Gregory, not the veneration of imperial images as such. When the Eunomian church historian Philostorgius sneers at the Christian veneration of the deceased Constantine’s image, his criticism is to be understood as an attempt to embarrass Christian rivals, the Nicene Christians. In this disparagement, Philostorgius highlights such perplexing features as sacrifices and prayers addressed to the imperial image as to a god. In the imperial legislation, this disparagement, Philostorgius highlights such perplexing features as sacrifices and prayers addressed to the imperial image as to a god. In the imperial legislation, attempts were made to control the ways in which the emperor and his image were venerated. The highest honours were reserved for the supreme god, but it was made clear that the emperor was a numen as well. The show with imperial images when they were connected with the cult of the old gods during Julian’s reign. It was the combination of the reverence shown to the emperor’s images and the ‘idolatry’ that was condemnable for Gregory, not the veneration of imperial images as such. When the Eunomian church historian Philostorgius sneers at the Christian veneration of the deceased Constantine’s image, his criticism is to be understood as an attempt to embarrass Christian rivals, the Nicene Christians. In this disparagement, Philostorgius highlights such perplexing features as sacrifices and prayers addressed to the imperial image as to a god. In the imperial legislation, attempts were made to control the ways in which the emperor and his image were venerated. The highest honours were reserved for the supreme god, but it was made clear that the emperor was a numen as well. The show with imperial images went on in the public life of Late Antiquity.

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76 It is noteworthy that arguments based on the worship of imperial images were later reused in the context of the Iconoclastic Controversy: see Kitzinger 1954, 124.


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