Caesar’s Deification and its Impact on Augustan Rome

The idea of divine kinghood is one with deep political roots. From the Egyptian pharaohs to the twentieth century Japanese Emperors, ruling houses have long cultivated an image of royal divinity, whether these kings were literally gods on Earth or would become divine upon their deaths. In the Classical Mediterranean, divine kingship was an idea largely reserved for the East. In both Egypt and various Mesopotamian dynasties, kings were considered divine and worshiped as the image of the gods on Earth, and could rightly be blamed for any mishaps or credited with any good fortune regarding things like the weather or the arrival of plague. However, in the Roman Republic, this idea never really gained any traction, aside from the posthumous deification of Romulus, who, as a likely mythical character, did not impact political culture very much. However, this state of affairs would forever change in 42 BC, following the deification of the mortal Julius Caesar. Caesar’s divinity was affirmed by the Roman Senate, the first time it would ever approve of such a religious move, though far from the last.[[1]](#footnote-0) Following this declaration, subsequent emperors would often be granted divinity following their deaths, with the first imperial deification being granted to the first emperor: Augustus. Augustus’ deification is intractably tied up with that of Caesar, and he used his familial connection to the newly divine Julius Caesar to legitimize his own rule, while retaining some distance from Caesar the man.

In the early and middle Roman Republic, religious and political offices were relatively well-separated. The highest offices were the *pontifex maximus*, the three *flamines maiores*, and the *rex sacrorum*. Of these, only the *rex sacrorum* was in any way connected to executive power. This office was created after the fall of the Roman monarchy, in order to perform rituals for which the king was previously responsible. Unique among high priestly offices in the Republican period, the *rex sacrorum* had to be a patrician, and the *rex sacrorum* was one of the few political or religious institutions with its roots firmly in the office of king present in the Roman Republic. This office, though technically the most prestigious of the Roman priesthood, was not a popular one among ambitious politicians, who deemed it a political dead end due to its lack of tangible power, highlighting the strong anti-regal sentiment that underpinned the political culture of the Roman Republic. The *pontifex maximus*, on the other hand, was seen as a high-profile position, though it also did not have much real worldly power. Sure, the *pontifex maximus* held symbolically important responsibilities such as the appointment of Vestal Virgins and the proper administration of state rituals to honor the *manes*, and yes, a detachment of lictors was provided to ensure the *pontifex maximus*’ safety, but up until the second century BC they generally did not hold *imperium* and and were forbidden from leaving Italy.[[2]](#footnote-1) This severely restricted their ability to wield worldly power in the expanding Roman Republic.

To stave off entrenched authoritarianism, the Republic strictly separated the religious realm from the worldly one of administration, though an individual might occupy both offices during different times in his career. This can most clearly be seen in the duties and powers of the consul. The two consuls, the chief executives of the Roman Republic and its most powerful politicians, were not invested with religious authority, as the religious duties that had belonged to the king had largely been delegated to the *rex sacrorum* and to a lesser extent other priestly offices.[[3]](#footnote-2) Instead, the consuls were strictly executive and secular officials, with veto power over one another to divide power as much as possible in order to stave off the accumulation of too much power in the hands of one individual. A young man’s early decision to enter the priesthood would in all likelihood prevent him from establishing a conventional political career. As such, it is ironic that the man that set in motion radical shifts in Roman religion’s relationship with the state executive would first have been called to the priesthood before fate intervened and allowed him a path into politics. Julius Caesar, at first selected to be a *flamen Dialis*, had this office rescinded upon his father’s death, and only the intercession of the Vestal Virgins allowed him to maintain his wife and house while rejecting the office of *flamen Dialis* itself.[[4]](#footnote-3) His later deeds and the glory they accumulated for him and his house, would forever change Roman religion and its relationship with the state.

Throughout his entire career, Julius Caesar tied his image especially closely with the pantheon of Roman gods and Roman religious office. After all, he was of the *gens* Julia, which claimed its heritage included the legendary founder of Rome, Aeneas. Through Aeneas, Caesar and the rest of his family asserted divine heritage, as Venus was alleged to have been the mother of Aeneas. Such a belief was factually a quite disputable one, but was a key part of his public image, and one source of his popularity. Aside from his abortive foray into the priesthood of the *flamens*, designated initially by Caesar’s father, Caesar, unlike many other ambitious and historically influential Late Republican politicians, sought out the office of *pontifex maximus* under the auspices of his patron at the time, Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus.

In his quest for and ultimate attainment of the office of *pontifex maximus*, Caesar proved himself an exception to the traditional path of Late Republican statesmen like Sulla, the Gracchi Brothers, Pompey, or Marius. These men came from secular political backgrounds or the military, largely removing themselves from religious affairs. Crucially, Caesar broke the historic taboo of the *pontifex maximus* being forbidden from leaving Italy. He wasn’t the first to do so, as the taboo had slowly withered away starting in the second century BC, beginning with Publius Cornelius Scipio Nasica Serapio. This *pontifex maximus* took refuge in Anatolia following his leading of the mob that assassinated the *populare* tribune Tiberius Gracchus, which created many domestic enemies for the conservative pontiff.[[5]](#footnote-4) However, this move was essentially done for Serapio’s own safety, as it was considered too risky for him to remain in Rome. Fueled by these controversies, in the decades preceding Caesar’s rise to power, the office of *pontifex maximus* became increasingly politicized and grew closer to the executive.

By the time of Caesar, the position of *pontifex maximus* had become so politicized that Sulla even essentially appointed his own, Quintus Caecilius Metellus Pius.[[6]](#footnote-5) Caesar, who famously did not always have the most regard for Republican political traditions and the restraints on power they entailed, obviously took full advantage of the rising political power of the position of *pontifex maximus* to further his own career. He held onto this highest religious office as he left Italy to take the governorship of Hispania Ulterior, in what is now Southern Spain. He maintained it as he attained the office of *praetor* in 63 BC, as well as consul in 59 BC. Likely most importantly, Caesar continued to serve as *pontifex maximus* during the conquest of Gaul, making him the *pontifex maximus* with by far the most illustrious military record. Despite the best intentions of the early Republicans to split religious and secular authority between the two consuls and the largely powerless *rex sacrorum*, by the Late Republic, the office of *pontifex maximus* had become an incredibly politically useful position, utilized by many ambitious men to further their goals of attaining high office. This merging of political and religious authority, though it began in the Republic, would be executed to its fullest extent during the Imperial period.

Caesar would retain the office of *pontifex maximus* for the rest of his life. He was the first holder of the office to simultaneously become dictator, which he was granted in 49 BC, and he kept his position as he was appointed dictator-for-life in 44 BC. Caesar was now unquestionably the most powerful political and religious figure in the Roman state. His face was printed on coins, an honor previously only reserved for the gods or the dead, and he named the month of July after himself on the Julian calendar he commissioned.[[7]](#footnote-6) Additionally, between 48 BC and his ultimate death in 44 BC, Caesar was engaged in a relationship with Egyptian pharaoh Cleopatra, with whom he had a son, Caesarion, in 47 BC. Though Caesar did not publicly acknowledge this child, Cleopatra did, indicating to the world at large that a Roman ruler had a son who was heir to the Egyptian throne. Egyptian rulers had long embraced the concept of the divine rule of kings, portraying themselves as gods on Earth, an idea with deep cultural and political roots in the Eastern Mediterranean. The idea of an orientalization of the Roman executive office, with the secular and constrained dual office of consul being replaced with the absolute rule of a divine king, was utterly horrifying to many conservative Romans, with their deep-seeded anti-monarchical sentiment. The idea that Caesar would crown himself king (*rex)* and end the Republic, potentially bringing his Egyptian heir and only biological son to rule in a hereditary absolute divine monarchy, was the driving motivation of his assassination by a cabal of Senators in 44 BC.

Unlike any mortal Roman who preceded him, Caesar was honored in 42 BC with deification by the Senate under the auspices of the Second Triumvirate of Octavian, Mark Antony, and Marcus Aemilius Lepidus, who had succeeded Caesar as *pontifex maximus*. This deification was justified by the great deeds of Caesar and his popularity among the general population, as well as the appearance of a comet in July of 44 BC, just a few months after Caesar’s assassination. The appearance of the comet was a clear indication to many Romans of Caesar’s apotheosis, or becoming a god after his death.[[8]](#footnote-7) A temple called the Temple of *Divus Iulius*, or divine Julius Caesar, was commissioned by the Second Triumvirate in 42 BC following his deification. The Temple of *Divus Iulius* was a lavish complex, occupying a prominent position in the Roman Forum alongside temples to the conventional Roman pantheon, and was the first such temple to honor a mortal Roman.[[9]](#footnote-8) However, despite its commissioning by the Triumvirate at large, it would only be dedicated by Octavian in 26 BC, by which point, he had claimed victory at Actium, claiming Egypt as his own. By defeating Antony, his last major opponent for absolute power in Rome, Octavian also ensured that Caesar’s biological son Caesarion would pose no threat to him. He also marginalized Lepidus, exiling him and ultimately taking his title of *pontifex maximus*. In 27 BC, Octavian would crown himself *princeps* of Rome, and changed his name to Augustus. Augustus carefully rejected the title of *rex*, which was such a loaded term that the mere rumor of Caesar’s claiming of it was enough to precipitate his assassination by the still-influential conservative faction of the senatorial class. In practice, however, Augustus ruled Rome as an emperor, combining the religious authority of the *pontifex maximus* with the political absolutism of a dictator-for-life. Augustus would use both these powers to shore up his rule and set the stage for his own deification following his death.

As the unquestionable ruler of the new Roman Empire, Augustus had an unprecedented degree of control over political narratives. He used this power to carefully construct an image of Caesar that solidified his own control and linked him to the divine. A consistent theme in Augustan literature is the bloodshed that Caesar’s reign brought on the Roman world, in stark contrast to the *Pax Romana* and stability ushered in by Augusuts. One clear instance of this emphasis on the bloody civil wars undertaken by Caesar comes from Virgil in his *Aeneid*, where, upon Anchises shows Aeneas visions of Romans of the future, Vergil writes:

*Illae autem, paribus quas fulgere cernis in armis,*

*concordes animae nunc et dum nocte premuntur,*

*heu! quantum inter se bellum, si lumina vitae*

*attigerint, quantas acies stragemque ciebunt . ..*

*ne, pueri, ne tanta animis adsuescite bella,*

*neu patriae validas in viscera vertite viris;*

*tuque prior, tu parce, genus qui ducis Olympo,*

*proice tela manu, sanguis meus[[10]](#footnote-9)*

While the text does not cite Caesar or Pompey by name, Classical scholar William M. Green asserts that this passage condemning the fraternal bloodshed among Romans refers to them and their bloody civil war. Vergil laments the violence that marked the rise of Caesar, and though he does not outwardly criticize the former dictator-for-life, the relatively peaceful reign of Augustus is portrayed in a more favorable light than the chaos of Cesarean Rome.

Augustus himself also attempted to portray the reign of Caesar as one of great military glory, but also instability and tyranny. Though Augustus also put his face on Roman coinage, he declined to use the title of *dictator perpetuo*, reserving this appellation for Caesar himself, in a less than flattering light. Similarly, though Caesar was portrayed in Augustan coins wearing a golden crown, which served a symbol for kinghood and therefore antithetical to Roman values, Augustus was always either without any kind of headgear or simply wearing a laurel wreath.[[11]](#footnote-10) Following his victory at Actium, Augustus removed Caesar from coinage altogether, keeping only his own face. Augustus is also careful to note in his *Res Gestae*, that he always denied the office of dictator, noting “[t]he dictatorship offered me by the people and the Roman Senate, in my absence and later when present, in the consulship of Marcus Marcellus and Lucius Arruntius I did not accept.”[[12]](#footnote-11) He made similar rejections of offers to make himself consul for life.[[13]](#footnote-12) Augustus’ scrupulous claims of legal legitimacy distinguished him from Caesar, who was all too often willing to relatively openly defy Republican norms to attain more power, while Augustus, despite holding at least as much or greater power as Caesar ever did, and holding it for far longer, tried his best to maintain an appearance of legitimate and legal political control. As Augustus’ adoptive father, Caesar was always held in high regard for his military achievements especially, but his lax attitude towards Roman tradition and the norms of political culture ultimately undermined his rule and led to his assassination, an outcome Augustus desperately wanted to avoid.

The one dimension in which Augustus intractably linked himself with his adoptive father was through Caesar’s divinity. As noted above, Augustus commissioned and consecrated the Temple of *Divus Iulius*, and the Temple of *Mars Ultor*, which he allegedly vowed to build if he emerged victorious over Brutus and the other assassins of Caesar at Philippi.[[14]](#footnote-13) Through these Temples, Augustus promoted Caesar as a member of the traditional pantheon of Roman gods, and even granted him a *flamen* priest specifically dedicated to his veneration, an honor not even granted to Romulus, another Roman alleged to have undergone apotheosis. Though some historians have claimed that Augustus himself was instrumental in the spread of belief in Julius Caesar’s deification due to the appearance of Caesar’s comet, classicist Nandini Padley asserts that “[t]he story that Octavian "spun" the comet of 44 b.c.e. to his political advantage, though compelling in our age of mass-media democracy, cannot be substantiated based on the scanty historical evidence for the occasion.”[[15]](#footnote-14) Contemporary sources such as Suetonius instead claim that it was the common people themselves who initiated the belief the comet indicated that Caesar had entered heaven, rather than Augustus himself. However, regardless of his involvement in the creation of the belief in the *Divus Iulius*, Augustus used the myth to full effect to shore up his rule. For example, in the Augustan-sponsored writings of Vergil, the benevolence of *Divus Iulius* brings fortune for the people of Rome, regardless of Caesar’s flaws as a mortal being and politician. In the *Eclogues*, Vergil writes “Daphnis, why are you looking to the rises of old constellations? Behold the star of the Dionian Caesar has arisen-the star under whose influence the fields may rejoice in their crops.”[[16]](#footnote-15) In these lines, Caesar is portrayed as somewhat similar to Ceres, bringing fertility and prosperity to Roman agriculture, and yet influencing the world in a positive way from the divine realm, not the material one. Caesar’s reputation in some sense bifurcated during the Augustan period. On the one hand, in his mortal form, his tyranny and ambition were condemned or at least viewed with deep suspicion, but in his divine form, he is portrayed as a god with benevolent influence, showering good fortune and prosperity on the Roman people.

It may seem strange for Augustus to sponsor the divinity of his controversial predecessor, but it must be remembered that legally, Julius Caesar was Augustus’ father, and as such, if Caesar was a god, then Augustus was the *divi filius*, or son of god. Divine lineage was a powerful legitimizing force in the Classical world, and served to strengthen Augustus’ rule. Though Augustus was not considered a god during his own lifetime, his relation to a man so aggressively deified by state and private actors, as well as his firm control over Roman religious practice, gave him a unique level of *auctoritas*. Ovid corroborates the intense level of respect commanded by Augustus as *divi filius* by writing “[m]y works are never without honor to Augustus,and even if the writer is in bad standing, still the praises of the gods must be allowed.”[[17]](#footnote-16) Though this line does not explicitly refer to Augustus as a god, it implies that he has divine links, making him worthy of intense deference. Ovid was instrumental in promoting the posthumous deification of Augustus, and though Augustus never made any claim to divinity during his own lifetime, he linked himself tightly with Caesar to try and maximize his godly connections.[[18]](#footnote-17) Other emperors would not show the same restraint as Augustus, with Caligula considering himself a god even during his own lifetime, and the deification of emperors became a rather regular occurrence as the Imperial period wore on to the point that the Imperial Cult became a cornerstone of Roman polytheistic religion, but the legitimization of *de facto* regal rule through connections to the gods began with Augustus and his promotion of *Divus Iulius*.[[19]](#footnote-18) The deification of Caesar, though he was not an emperor himself, was the foundation on which this Imperial Cult was built, and became a cornerstone of Imperial Roman political and religious culture.

The transformation of Rome from Republic into essentially an absolute monarchy between the second century BC and the end of the first marks one of the more radical political transformations of the Classical era. Through the political instability brought about by territorial expansion following the Second Punic War, Rome’s distinctive political system came under intense strain due to the pressures of managing such a sprawling and wealthy state. It is ironic that Caesar, whose ultimate deification fostered the growth of the Imperial Cult, an institution crucial to the legitimacy of the emperors, had his only biological son with the ruler of Egypt, whose political system of divine kingship represented everything conservative Roman Republicans feared becoming. Instead of repudiating claims that his adoptive father had been deified, Augustus leaned into them to strengthen his own rule, and in so doing fundamentally destroyed the separation between secular and religious authority in Rome which the Republic had instituted to try and stave off the rise of kings. Though the deification of Julius Caesar served Augustus well in his mission to be the absolute ruler of the Roman Empire, it fundamentally shifted the political and religious nature of the Roman state, reshaping its institutions to increasingly more closely resemble the traditional monarchies of the East rather than the old Roman Republic.

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