

BECOMING GOD

DEIFICATION FROM ANTIQUITY TO THE PRESENT

LECTURE 1: INTRODUCTION

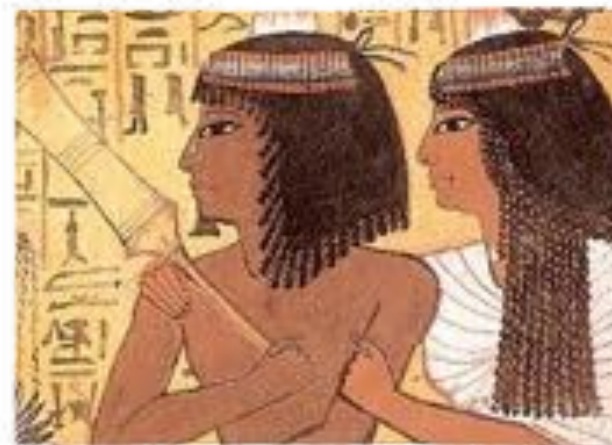
DR. NICKOLAS P. ROUBEKAS

UNIVERSITY OF VIENNA

Email: nickolas.roubekas@univie.ac.at



Θεός



Modes of Deification

- There are many modes of deification. How do we organize them?
- A major question: Who was deified, by whom, and why?
- Types/Categories: a) Ante mortem; b) Post mortem; c) Kingship; d) Rebel; e) Hero
- Genre
- Archaic / Ancient / Modern / Post-modern
- Positive & Negative Impact
- Meaning / Explanation / Interpretation

Etymology / Meaning / Terminology

- The process of making someone (or something) a god/goddess
- *Deus + facio*
- Broadest sense: the attainment of some sort of superhuman transcendence
- Synonyms: divinization (Lt *divinus*); theosis (Gr *θεός*, *theos*); apotheosis; exaltation

Typology / Classification

- **Positional:** deification of proximity or intimate relation = Deity and humanity are closely related but still divided in their fundamental natures.
- **Penetrative:** realistic union of divinity and human beings without compromising their individuality = we could still pull apart deity and humanity after their union and make them distinct again.
- **Metabolic:** a full transformation of humanity into deity.

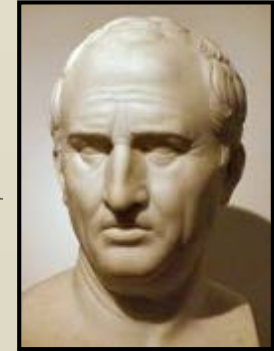
(Some) Varieties

- Political deification
- Deification through beauty
- Deification via ascent
- Deification as magic
- Deification as imitation
- Self-deification
- Knowledge/Gnostic deification

Opinions

Cicero (106–43 BCE)

“For there is nothing in which human virtue approaches divine power more closely than in founding new states and preserving those already founded” (*Republic*, 1.12; cf. 6.13)



Plutarch (c. 46–120 CE)

“The impulse toward truth, and especially truth concerning the Gods, is a desire for divinity” (*Moralia*, 351e)



Theorizing Deification: Euhemerism

- Euhemerus of Messene (4th-3rd c. BCE)
- *Sacred Inscription* (*Ἱερά Ἀναγραφή*)
- Euhemerism
- Criticism / (Re-)Interpretation / Approach
- Hellenistic (Divine) Kingship
- Gods evolved from kings
- Greek Mythology & Cosmological Worldview

Euhemerism: Diodorus

And going to Babylon he was entertained by Belus, and after that he went to the island of Panchaea, which lies in the ocean, and here he set up an altar to Uranus, the founder of his family. From there he passed through Syria and came to Casius, who was ruler of Syria at that time, and who gave his name to Mt. Casius. And coming to Cilicia he conquered in battle Cilix, the governor of the region, and he visited very many other nations, all of which paid honour to him and publicly proclaimed him a god.

Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History* 6.1.10

Euhemerism: Lactantius

Ennius in his Sacred History, after describing all the deeds which he performed in his life, thus writes at the end: “Then Jupiter, after he had circled the lands five times and divided the command among all his friends and relatives, and left to men laws and customs, and prepared grain, and had done many other good things for them, affected by immortal glory and memory left lasting memorials of himself. When his age was completely spent in Crete, he exchanged this life and passed to the gods. His sepulcher is in Crete, in the town of Cnossos (Vesta is said to have founded this city) and on his sepulcher is inscribed in ancient Greek characters, ZAN KRONOY; in Latin, Jupiter son of Saturn.”

Lactantius, *Divinae Institutiones* 1.11.45–46

Kingship, Gods, and Politics in Euhemerus' Time

Demetrius the Besieger (337–283 BCE)

The Hymn to Demetrius

... Now, know that other gods are far away or
have no ears or don't exist or do not
care about us. But you, we see here present,
Not wood, nor stone, but real to the bone.

To you we send our prayer:

So first of all make peace, o most beloved, For you have the
power ...

Hermokles of Kyzikos (preserved by Athenaeus 257f)



Divine Kingship / Sacred Kingship

- Kingship is one of the most enduring forms of human governance.
- Unknown precise historical origins in time and space.
- Attested during virtually all eras on all continents.
- For most of human history the tendency was for it to become more common, not less.

Divine vs. Sacred Kingship I

Divine Kingship

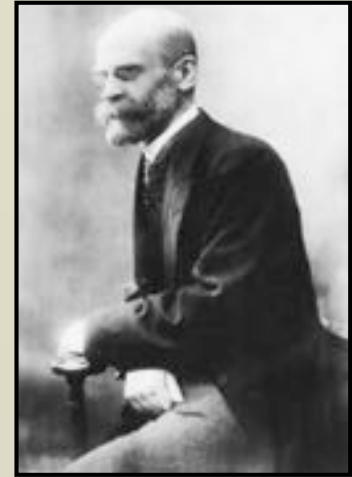
- The essence of sovereignty.
- The ability to act as if one were a god:
 1. Step outside the confines of the human and return;
 2. Bring rain;
 3. Cause destruction, etc.
- Such power is accompanied by the theory that the king demonstrates that:
 1. He is an actual embodiment of some already-existing metahuman being; or
 2. Becomes a metahuman being.

Divine vs. Sacred Kingship II

Sacred Kingship

Sacred = to be set apart.

Emile Durkheim (1858–1917):



“The division of the world into two domains, the one containing all that is sacred, the other all that is profane, is the distinctive trait of religious thought... But by sacred things one must not understand simply those personal beings which are called gods or spirits ... anything can be sacred.” (*The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, p. 52)

Divine/Sacred Kingship in History: Genre

- For half of humanity the creation of mortal kingship represents a major blow: kings are, in virtually every known case, archetypically *male*.
- Fixing divine political power in the male head of a royal household was a blow for *patriarchy* in two ways: a) the primary human manifestation of divine power was now masculine; b) the main purpose of the ideal household is producing powerful men.
- Paleolithic or Neolithic representations of powerful female figures but mostly mere “mythological” representations, of no political significance.

Creating & Manufacturing Divine Kingship

- Origins of dynasty: heroic prince from a greater outside realm, near or distant, legendary or contemporary, celestial or terrestrial.
- The hero manifests a nature above, beyond, and greater than the people he is destined to rule—hence his power to do so.
- His kingdom is often peacefully established.
- Prosperity follows.

'Treating' Divine Kingship

- ***Symbolic Reading***

= Divine kingship is about humans rather than about gods or the world

- ***Literal Reading***

= the referent is the straightforward, apparent one, i.e. king as god

Self-Deification: The Rebel

- ‘Cosmic’ rebellion occurs when a demigod, king, or monster rebels against another, older divinity. War ensues, coupled with destruction. Out of the epic clash a new world is born.

Examples: Marduk in *Enuma Elish*; Zeus vs. the Titans

- The rebel is often already a divinity, but a subordinate (or younger) god who challenges the king of the pantheon.
- When the rebel explicitly claims divinity (or the divine power of the reigning God), a myth of self-deification is born.

Self-Deification: The Hero

- “Hero myths”
- The hero is son of the high God, destined to inherit the kingdom of his divine father.
- He typically assumes human form, is subject to human emotions, and develops a human self-understanding.
- When the hero is too powerful or too wild to fit into society, he embarks on a journey.
- He faces opposition in the world, often in the form of monsters or demons.
- People spurn and reject his person and fear his extraordinary powers.
- The divine son proves his true nature and rises to heaven.

But What is a 'God/Divinity'?

An agent believed to be free (though not always completely) from the physical, psychological, and moral constraints that limit humans. (Who, however, are thought to function in ways analogous to those of ordinary human beings.)

But:

- They may ask for food (e.g., the feast of Lugalbanda)
- They may have adversaries (e.g., the Devil)
- They may not be omnipotent nor immortal (e.g., Egypt)
- They may be amorphous or anthropomorphic (e.g., Greek and Roman gods)

Etymology of 'god/divinity'

Most commonly: a celestial god is the divinity that comes to mind

Judaism & Christianity

But also:

Proto Indo-European **deiwos* (root **dei-* = shine), meaning 'luminous,' 'celestial'

Moreover: Turkish & Mongol *tngri* (= sky & supreme god); Chinese *Tian* (*T'ien*)

Boundaries between God(s), Humans, and Nature

- God(s) create humans (and nature)
- God(s) reproduce with humans
- God(s) may take the shape of humans (or natural objects)
- God(s) can communicate with humans (or animals)
- God(s) can control humans (animals, or the nature)
- Vice versa?

Becoming God (by, to, and for whom)

- Humans deemed gods by society
- Identities are social
- Deification is a product of society

“The responsiveness to new labels suggests extraordinary readiness to fall into new slots and to let selfhood be redefines... It is [a very] dynamic process by which new names are uttered and forthwith new creatures corresponding to them emerge.”

(Mary Douglas, *How Institutions Think*, 1986, p. 100)

