

Hadrian cult - Hadrian as Neos Theos

In the second century, the concept of an emperor becoming a god on his death (in the Latin west) and being a living god (in the Greek East) was not a new one. Hadrian's characterization as "theos" was just part of the religious language employed to address the Roman emperors and the Hellenistic kings before them.

But Hadrian's case is different, because he was presented as a new manifestation of a deity and the Greeks showed this using the epithet "neos" followed by the name of the divinity.

Hadrian was mostly associated with Zeus, father of the gods. The emperor was seen as appointed by the gods to rule the earth in a same way as Zeus was ruling the heavens. It was also a part of Hadrian's plan to promote himself in the Greek East through the promotion of the cult of its major divinity. With regard to Hadrian neos Zeus, we have several epithets that mostly show his actions and benefactions to a city or a province, which in the eyes of his subjects raised him to the status of a divinity. The most used epithet is "Olympios", which comes from number of Greek cities and also Roman colonies of the Greek East and even Rome. It became popular around the year 131, when Olympieion was finished in Athens. Another epithet is "Panhellenios", which Hadrian received after the the foundation of the Panhellenic Council in 131.

More epithets of Hadrian as Zeus are related to local traditions and events that occurred during a visit of the emperor. One epithet is Hadrian Zeus Dodonaios from Nikopolis, then Kynegesios, which comes from an inscription on a statue base in Hadrianapolis in Mysia. Then we have epithet Epikarpios in the city of Corycos. Hadrian's arrival and gifts to the region created an opportunity to equate him to the local deity of Zeus Epikarpios. Last epithet comes from Athens, where Hadrian is called the son of Zeus Eleutherios. Interestingly, more emperors were honoured with this epithet, like Domitian or Augustus.

Another divinity associated with Hadrian is Dionysos. In Athens, on the front seat of the theatre of Dionysus, he received the epithet Eleutheraios in an inscription. He also had a statue in the theatre and presided as agonothetes at the Great Dionysia.

Throughout the Greek world Hadrian was known as neos Dionysos. Since Trajan fused all the different Dionysiac colleges into one universal college, the emperor became the patron of the college and in a sense, took the place of Dionysos.

Hadrian is also a new manifestation of Apollo with the epithet Pythios, mainly in Tegea and Megara, where he completed the temple of Apollo Pythios. Hadrian also contributed a lot to the revival and welfare of the oracle of Delphi.

There is some evidence of Hadrian's connection to Asclepios, which is primarily numismatic. There is an inscription in Pergamos recording a dedication of a stoa and the propylon to the gods, Asclepios, Hadrian and the city. Another inscription that connects Hadrian to Asclepios gives him the epithet Epiphanestatos. Another epithet is "despotes", which comes from the Eastern Mediterranean and becomes very frequent with later Roman emperors as well. This epithet has also some negative connotations since it alludes to "absolute or non-free regime"

and Augustus even forbade using it.

Last manifestation is Hadrian as Neos Helios. First evidence for this comes from an inscribed statue base from Paphlagonia dated to 119.

The epithets clearly reveal the association of Hadrian with Greek culture and his appropriation of local and Panhellenic myths. Hadrian's personality certainly encouraged the use of such language in an environment of competition among the cities, all of which wanted to draw the most benefits from him.