

The Imperial Cult in Ephesus began under Emperor Augustus as a display of allegiance to Rome but evolved into a competition for distinction among the eastern provinces.

The Imperial Cult in Ephesus was characterized by the construction of temples and the minting of coins bearing the title **neokoros**, which originally referred to the priest of the imperial cult but later became a title for favored eastern cities. The Imperial Cult temples, initially built to show reverence for Rome and the Emperor, were transformed into symbols of competition and a means to promote the city's status.

The term neokoros first appeared on Greek coins, and its usage as a title for cities can be traced back to the time of Augustus. The neokoros title played a significant role in the competition between Ephesus, Pergamon, and Smyrna. Each city sought to outdo the others by acquiring more neokoros titles and constructing more imperial cult temples. This competition was not merely about displaying allegiance to Rome but also about demonstrating the city's importance and prestige within the Greek world. The neokoros title was a symbol of recognition from Rome, and acquiring it was a way for Greek cities to assert their superiority over their rivals. The Imperial Cult temples and the associated titles served as tangible proof of a city's favorable relationship with Rome, making them highly sought after by Greek cities.

Not to be outdone, Ephesus applied for and finally received its first temple under Claudius. This temple is cause for speculation because it was portrayed in numismatic evidence as an imperial cult temple to Claudius, although it was more likely a cult temple to Artemis. The second temple was the first official imperial neokoria from Domitian, yet the coins in that time were already marked as „twice neokoros“- Third temple was granted under the reign of Hadrian after which the coins still said twice neokoros. The possibility for that is explained by that maybe under Hadrian the first Claudian temple was actually recognised to be dedicated to Artemis Ephesia and unworthy of the title neokoria. Another controversial move was Caracalla granting a neokoria to Artemis of Ephesus and called it the only neokoria to Artemis – he went out of his way to please the people of Ephesus by honoring Artemis on an equal footing as the Roman Emperor. After that the coinage finally said three time neokoros. The Imperial cult temples in the east were not for emperor worship but to compete with other cities to become the First City of Asia – also called “ΠΡΩΤΩΝ ΑΣΙΑΣ” – which appeared on their coins after Ephesus gained four neokorite temples. The last and fourth neokoria title was aquired under the emperor Elagabalus, but it was later revoked.

Artemis was worshiped all over Asia Minor. However, it was in Ephesus, in the first century A.D., when the worship of Artemis exploded onto the streets. A riot against the Apostle Paul and his disciples occurred when belief spread through the city that the images of Artemis were going to be stripped from the city and her temple torn down. Because of the belief that Artemis was born on the temple site, or that she dropped out of heaven there, the people drove Paul and his men out of the city claiming that their longstanding tradition of worshipping Artemis would never cease. The importance of Artemis is later evidenced in the Severan coins from Ephesus. The sheer volume and "unusual degree to which Artemis designs predominate among coinage of Ephesus reflects the extraordinary importance of her". Since almost the beginning of minting in Ephesus, Artemis is seen on their coinage, an unmovable and unchanging image that stresses the city's devotion to her.

The founding myths of Ephesus, depicted on coinage, were crucial to the city's identity. The bee founding myth story, which originated from the Athenians founding Ionia, was a significant aspect of Ephesian culture. The story states that before the Athenians went out searching for a new country, they prayed for guidance in finding a land worthy to call a sister city. When they set out on their quest, the Athenians were led to the site of Ephesus by the muses appearing in the form of bees.

Another major part of the Ephesian founding myth is Artemis. Although many ancients knew the story of Artemis and Apollo being born in Ortygia, the Ephesians attributed the birthplace of the twins to the city of Ephesus. The practice of incorporating a god or goddess into a city's founding myth is not uncommon and is seen in many eastern cities including Smyrna, Mytilene, and Hierapolis.

The neokorite temples, also depicted on Ephesian coins, were a significant aspect of the Imperial Cult. However, there is often no temple depicted on the coin. In its place, the term neokoros is often listed on the reverse. In the time of Augustus, the term neokoros was interpreted as the title "temple warden" and was assigned to the chief priest of an imperial cult temple. As time passed from Augustus down to the Severan dynasty, the term morphed from the honored name of a single priest to an expression of grandeur for a city.

Ephesian coins from the Severan dynasty almost always depict a Roman emperor on the obverse with Ephesian imagery on the reverse. This type of coin, called an "imperial/local modal" coin, mixes the Hellenic past with the Roman present. Those with authority to mint provincial coinage and where that authority came from must be considered. The local population of Ephesus had little input to the image selection or production of coins. Therefore, we are left with local elites and Rome itself, in the form of magistrates, making decisions about minting.

However, the reverse of the coins, which often shows some type of civic pride, usually in the form of a founding myth or inscriptions stating the greatness of the city, indicates that Ephesus placed itself on the same par as Rome.