



Imperial Leadership in the Roman  
World: Traditions and Transformations.

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## Introduction

*(...) there is a conviction of long-standing that those who approach it [the nursery] without ceremony are seized with shuddering and terror; and (...) thrown out by a sudden mysterious force.*

*(...) their dear leader was born under a double rainbow on Mount Paektu (...) [while] a chorus of singing birds announced that a bright star had appeared in the sky.*

I thought of opening this essay on divine leadership with the two quotations above. Both of which describe the same thing, but of different individuals. As you may have noticed already, they both allude in a rather similar fashion to ‘magic’ or ‘transcendent forces’, lingering in what are considered sacred places of conception. Conception narratives like these are found aplenty in all periods of history and can indeed be so alike in tone that one may not necessarily have guessed the first<sup>1</sup> involves the birth of Emperor Augustus<sup>2</sup>, and the second<sup>3</sup> that of Kim Jong-il.

Looking across history, where it concerns leadership, there seem to be two prominent types of leaders: the first type consolidates power and establishes political legitimacy through say, the ‘conventional’ way of tapping into ‘sources’ for legitimacy, such as *tradition, charisma* and *legality*—according to Max Weber the three potential agents<sup>4</sup> of leadership legitimization. Stephen Weatherford’s interpretation<sup>5</sup> of this is that the vitality of one’s leadership is dependent upon one’s ability to operate these agents in order to identify with and play into the various ‘observable attitudes’ of members of society. It is after all them that a ruler needs to convince, as it is they alone that can recognize one’s claim to legitimate leadership.<sup>6</sup> *Convincing*, really is the key word here. Which brings us to the

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<sup>1</sup> Gaius Tranquillus Suetonius, “Divus Augustus,” in *the Loeb Classical Library* (1913), De Vita Caesarum, 2.6.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout the essay mostly referred to as such, rather than ‘Octavian’—for simplicity’s sake.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Piddock, *North Korea* (Milwaukee, WI, United States: World Almanac Library, 2006), 15.

<sup>4</sup> Max Weber, “Politics as a Vocation,” in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, trans. & eds. Hans Heinrich Gerth and Charles Wright Mills (London: Routledge, 1991), 78-81.

<sup>5</sup> Stephen M. Weatherford, “Measuring Political Legitimacy,” in *The American Political Science Review* 86, no. 1 (American Political Science Association, 1992), 149-166.

<sup>6</sup> Wolfgang Mommsen, *The Political and Social Theory of Max Weber* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 20.

second type: rulers that would legitimize their leadership not by convincing the populace through lawfulness or their character, nor strictly speaking tradition, but by creating something new entirely—say, a narrative of divine lineage<sup>7</sup>, a set of myths; a cult. And this particular type of leadership legitimization is what I've delineated this essay's research to.

Seeing how the idea of the 'ruler cult' and the necessary 'myth-making' to establish it, exists to this day, as seen with the regime of a 21<sup>st</sup> century dictator like Kim Jong-il—just one of the most obvious examples—it would be most interesting to see what parallels exist between cases of divine leadership and what we might learn about our contemporary cult rulers when looking at the dynamics of the two-millennia-old cult of the deified Emperor Augustus. I would say the relevance herein, lies in this research angle being relatively unexplored. In this increasingly open and democratized world, the phenomenon of the ruler cult may finally be considered on the decline.<sup>8</sup> And it seems to me that in the pursuit of understanding said phenomenon, the bulk of literature pertaining to divine leadership and ruler cults typically confines itself to a specific timeframe. Moreover, the discussion and inspection of the concepts of divine leadership and the ruler cult across *different* timeframes would contribute to our understanding of *what* defines them, and as such for example be an asset in the increasingly contentious debate<sup>9</sup> about how cults and religions relate to one another. As such, I have formulated a central question that focuses on the reign of Divus Augustus, and in doing so provides opportunity to extrapolate from it new insights in similar but contemporary figures of leadership. A clear case of *to understand motives in the present, one must look at actions in the past*. And on that note, the main question of this essay reads: What may we learn about contemporary cult leaders, when looking at how the ruler cult of Augustus expressed itself as a means to legitimize his 'divine' leadership? I will approach an answer to this question by dealing with a set of sub-questions that will give further body and context to the idea of divine leadership and the ruler cult in current and Roman times. The first two pertain to the cult of Divus Augustus, posing the questions of how the concept of 'myth-making' was employed to tie Augustus to the divine and, second, what the relationship was like between Augustus and his worshipers. And thirdly, to then

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<sup>7</sup> Olivier Hekster, *Emperors and Ancestors: Roman Rulers and the Constraints of Tradition*, first ed. Oxford Studies in Ancient Culture and Representation (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 16-19.

<sup>8</sup> Rachel Morris, "Dictators I Have Known and Loved," in *AQ: Australian Quarterly* 78, no. 2 (March 2006): 27, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20638388>.

<sup>9</sup> Paul J. Olson, "The Public Perception of 'Cults' and 'New Religious Movements'," in *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 45, no. 1 (2006): 97-106, [www.jstor.org/stable/3590620](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3590620).

weave into the larger discussion, I pose the question: how do these concepts of a ruler cult, divine leadership and myth-making fit into contemporary leadership?

Before I delve into these questions, I will first lay out some of the existing theory on the definitions of said concepts and that to which it all leads: political legitimacy.

## Defining Concepts

Starting with the latter, I would refer to Fabienne Peter who, when summarizing existing theories on political legitimacy in 2010, concluded first that legitimacy can be characterized in one of two ways: as *descriptive* and *normative*.<sup>10</sup> The first, as already laid out by Weber, involves ‘people’s beliefs<sup>11</sup> about political authority’, whereas the second involves an interpretation whereby a leader is not just considered ‘legitimate’ if members of society ‘allow’ for him to *effectively* exert political power, but is also able to *justify* the authority to exert said power, in which case that leader’s rule is considered *de facto* legitimate.<sup>12</sup> By means of illustration, if one is to imagine a leader then, by the descriptive interpretation, a legitimate ruler would be one of which his subjects ‘merely’ accept that he *is* in power, whereas by the normative interpretation, legitimate leadership constitutes that people hold the believe he *ought* to be in power. The *is* doesn’t require justification, the *ought* does. And, of course, what would definitely influence the attitudes of people towards whether a leader *ought* to be in power, is if such leadership was for example being justified by certain ties to the divine.

Having a succinct understanding of how ‘legitimacy’ acts as a concept and why it is so that it remains the main objective to many a ruler and regime, as well as the driving force behind the political decisions and attitudes of said rulers or regimes, we come to the thing I earlier stated to be the product of our second type of leader: legitimization by ruler cult. To explain or define what a ‘ruler cult’ entails, one doesn’t have to venture far back into history, as perhaps today we may actually have more acute access to information about the character of ruler cults than ever before. Looking to the East, there are live examples aplenty

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<sup>10</sup> Fabienne Peter, “Political Legitimacy,” *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (April 2010), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/legitimacy/>.

<sup>11</sup> To which Weber refers by the term ‘legitimitäts Glaube’—the main pillar of legitimate political leadership.

<sup>12</sup> Peter, “Political Legitimacy.”

to illustrate what a ruler cult is—also often coined ‘personality cults’ or ‘leader cults’.<sup>13</sup> Though not all of them quite engage with the concept in the same way, ruler cults all express themselves according to the same inner logic. (Think Lukashenko’s Belarus, Ceausescu’s Romania, Nguema’s Republic of Equatorial Guinea, Stalin’s Soviet Union, Mao’s China, Hirohito’s Japan, Berdimuhamedow’s Turkmenistan and indeed, Kim Jong-un’s North Korea.) According to Xavier Márquez, ruler or ‘personality cults’ are, simply put, ‘phenomena involving the apparent worship of political leaders’. Márquez<sup>14</sup> proposes two models of the ruler cult: one that has *propagandistic* utility and one that is of *ritualistic* value. Whichever model is applicable in a certain scenario, its typical characteristic of ‘saturating the public space’ with ‘images, effigies and praise of the leader’ is something consistently present in both modern and ancient ruler cults. In essence, the function of a leader cult is either *persuasive* or *rhetorical*, ever aimed at inducing a populace’s ‘attachment’ to their leader so that he is afforded the political legitimacy needed to maintain his position of power and authority. The ritualistic model only differs from the propaganda model (though neither are mutually exclusive) in that it more explicitly relies on *leader worship*, which requires *participation*, stressing the *cult* side of the ruler cult. This in contrast to a propagandistic ruler cult, whereby the *main* objective is to ‘affect the *beliefs* of large groups of people’ in favour of a ruler’s legitimacy.<sup>15</sup> The ‘filling of the public space’ with ‘excessive glorification’ here, operates in the same way now as it did 2.000 years ago, meaning Alexander the Great’s founding or renaming of 15 cities bearing his name speaks to the same strategy of maximizing exposure as the decision of Zaire’s dictator Mobutu to ban the use of ‘*any* name in local newspapers but his’.<sup>16</sup>

Alexander Haslam, in his psychological exploration of leadership, acknowledges the logic underlying these ideas insofar that he too submits that leadership—*pari passu* with a ritualistic leader cult—is ‘always predicated on followership’<sup>17</sup>, but parts ways with the Weberian analysis of figures of leadership in that according to Haslam ‘leadership’ isn’t necessarily built on the ‘uniqueness’, character traits, decisions and efforts of *one* individual,

<sup>13</sup> Xavier Márquez, “Two Models of Political Leader Cults: Propaganda and Ritual,” in *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 19, no. 3 (August 2018): 265, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21567689.2018.1510392>.

<sup>14</sup> Márquez, “Two Models,” 266.

<sup>15</sup> Márquez, “Two Models,” 268.

<sup>16</sup> Crawford Young and Thomas Turner, *The Rise and Decline of the Zairian state* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 169.

<sup>17</sup> Alexander Haslam, Stephen Reicher, and Michael Platow, *The New Psychology of Leadership: Identity, Influence, and Power* (Hove England: Psychology Press, 2011), 2.

but also occurs as a common enterprise—meaning leadership may also arise from ‘we-ness’ rather than ‘I-ness’. A distinction that becomes important when looking at the *coordination* needed to establish a leader cult. After all, again, if one wishes to consolidate power, one needs to *convince* those that either recognize or reject your claim to legitimacy. And as Haslam adds, ‘a person’s capacity to influence others always depends on who those others are’.<sup>18</sup> To not ‘connect’ (which means to know which emotions govern people’s attitudes) and identify with a people, is to rule out ever being ‘revered’ or worshiped by them—be it by being loved *or* feared. As such, the importance of a convincing story mustn’t be understated, as the divinity or ‘heroism’ of a ruler stands or falls with the ‘relationship between leaders and the followers who tell their stories’.<sup>19</sup>

An interesting take that adds to this is the idea of how a leader cult can at one point become self-sustaining, in that according to *emulation theory*, something like the deification or elevation of a leader in a cult-like context can have the effect of others (these being the followers) looking to imitate and aspire to become *like* such a leader.<sup>20</sup> The aforementioned dictator of Turkmenistan seems to have realized this, and is known to have gone out of his way to consolidate his rule by getting people to *want* to have him be in power indefinitely by presenting himself as a ‘likeable’ person with qualities and ambitions on a level any one follower could attain and attempt to live up to—creating a false sense of a ‘modest’ *primus inter pares*-type imminence to his followers.<sup>21</sup> This theory of emulation in turn also translates to the idea that followers’ awe and envy of a ruler cult may ‘procreate’. To elaborate on the meaning of that, McNamara<sup>22</sup> uses the example of Gaius Julius Caesar having ‘wept at the thought of how little he had accomplished compared to the Macedonian [Alexander],’ leading<sup>23</sup> or at least contributing to Caesar’s aspirations of becoming the ‘founder of the Roman Empire and the embalmer of the Roman Republic’—

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<sup>18</sup> Haslam, Reicher and Platow, “The New Psychology,” 19.

<sup>19</sup> Richard A. Couto, *Political and Civic Leadership: A Reference Handbook* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2010), 59.

<sup>20</sup> Patrick McNamara and David Trumbull, *An Evolutionary Psychology of Leader-Follower Relation* (New York: Nova Science Pub, 2009), 19-22.

<sup>21</sup> Rafael Sattarov, “Turkmen Leader’s Personality Cult Goes Viral,” *Carnegie Moscow Center* (November 2018), <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/77733>.

<sup>22</sup> McNamara and Trumbull, *An Evolutionary Psychology*, 89-91.

<sup>23</sup> Henry Fairfield Burton, “The Worship of the Roman Emperors,” in *The Biblical World* 40, no. 2 (1912): 80, [www.jstor.org/stable/3141986](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3141986).

a feat of leadership which he ended up being deified<sup>24</sup> for, laying the groundwork for Augustus to make his entrance.

But a ruler cult does not just have the potential to invite imitation of certain leadership qualities—it is in itself in part engaged in imitation, right at the point where the idea of the ruler cult meets with that of divine leadership. As John Pollini puts it, ‘the special relationship that individual leaders claim to enjoy with the gods’ could be expressed through ‘assimilation or imitation of a divinity’.<sup>25</sup> And that’s where the importance of leadership *portrayal* comes in. Pollini defines his ‘divine assimilation’ as ‘the representation of an individual with divine symbols or attributes’. Hekster underpins this line of thought, saying different kinds of ‘local media’ like coinage, would contribute to the shaping of a leader’s image.<sup>26</sup> But also things like (divine) *ancestral messages* and *dynastic leadership* would be part of the process of communicating a larger narrative in order to establish a ruler cult.<sup>27</sup> The term that encompasses some of the most iconic ways to construe and convey a ruler’s divine image, may very well be ‘myth-making’. There are almost no ruler cults in past or present that I can identify as having entirely abstained from making use of the opportunity to have its leadership be represented by divine symbolism and indeed for leaders to link themselves to the divine by means of advertising their own unique brand of creation mythos. Myth-making seems almost inherent in the dynamics, though by no means exclusively in the employ, of ruler cults. Nicholas Higham has explored the dynamics of myth-making and has too found it to be a tool used to consolidate power. At least as much is apparent from Higham’s case study of English dynasties vying for monarchical legitimacy by linking themselves to certain aspects of the King Arthur legend. In other words, myth-making has utility that caters to all sorts of people in positions of power—and is as such not exclusively a cog in the wheel of ruler cult formation. Higham implies<sup>28</sup> myth-making—or, ‘political mythification’—to be, as I interpret it, the deliberate

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<sup>24</sup> Also sometimes called ‘apotheosis’.

<sup>25</sup> John Pollini, “Man or God: Divine Assimilation and Imitation in the Late Republic and Early Principate,” in *Between Republic and Empire: Interpretations of Augustus and His Principate*, eds. K.A. Raaflaub and M. Toher (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 334-335.

<sup>26</sup> According to Pollini, Augustus was known to have had himself depicted *like* Jupiter, emulating his divine stature.

<sup>27</sup> Hekster, *Emperors and Ancestors*, 28.

<sup>28</sup> Nicholas J. Higham, *King Arthur: Myth-Making and History* (London: Routledge, 2002), 236-238.



exercise of shifting people's attitudes<sup>29</sup> towards a certain individual or idea, whereby earthly historicity is supplanted by a narrative of a numinous nature.

Now that we have explored some of the existing literature on the definitions of our concepts, we can turn to Ancient Rome and try to distil how these concepts expressed themselves, isolate a set of examples—of, say, leader worship—and put them up against present-day counterparts. In providing said examples, when looking at Augustus' ruler cult, I will try to stay as close to the period as I can, though of course also make use of some of the most excellent secondary literature. Concededly, *most* sources, be it Suetonius *or* Galinsky<sup>30</sup>, that are available to explore and describe the workings of Augustus' cult are, strictly speaking, equally 'secondary'. As such, I will also make use of such figures as Livius and Seneca, though their contributions might seem limited. Having not *just* lived through Augustus' reign, but actually written a contemporary *vita* on Augustus<sup>31</sup>, the most *complete* primary source to involve might have been that of Nicolaus of Damascus. Unfortunately, the original was lost and only later over-excerpted and inauthentically reassembled into unreliability. As such, as far as primary sources are concerned, I will stay with the aforementioned, as well as those like Tacitus, Virgilius, Appianus, Cassius Dio and of course, Augustus himself. Furthermore, it should be noted that in this *particular* study of Augustus, the topics of *deification*, self-aggrandizement through *material depiction*, *mythification* and ruler *cultism* have it that the historical sources not always being first-hand accounts isn't necessarily a disadvantage.

## The Augustan Benchmark

Staying with the idea of 'narratives of a numinous nature', and returning to the quote at the beginning, telling us of Augustus' nursery being warded by mysterious forces, a first connection that ties past to present can be easily identified when looking at the Roman

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<sup>29</sup> Echoing the same line of thought as Weatherford about the *attitudinal* aspect of the leader-follower relationship's importance to leadership legitimization.

<sup>30</sup> The former an ancient scholar and the latter a contemporary one, though neither's accounts are truly 'first-hand'.

<sup>31</sup> Called Βίος Καίσαρος; in full, *On the Life of Augustus and His Agōgē*.

emperor cults. For instance, in a *Lysenko's biology*-like<sup>32</sup> manner<sup>33</sup> Roman emperors since Vespasian have been known to espouse a type of miracle working to reinforce their reign.<sup>34</sup> Trevor Luke submits that ruler cults in the form of the Roman emperor cult would in a way make use of the Weberian sources for legitimacy too, as he points out that ‘wonders were a means through which the *charisma* of the emperor was manifested.’ The only difference is of course that this form of charisma wouldn’t be a product of an emperor’s personality, but rather the other way around, meaning that something like ‘healing miracles’ would channel an emperor’s connection to the divine, *creating a perception*<sup>35</sup> of his person as being charismatic, regardless of whether that emperor would *actually* be able to demonstrate charisma in person. The irony of this is that leader glorification through something like miracle working makes it so that a personality cult can become increasingly *less* of an accurate reflection of a leader’s personality in reality. Luke uses the example of Vespasian, whose countenance had reportedly<sup>36</sup> fallen victim to leprosy—looking like everything *but* divine—and still managed to create for himself an image of divine leadership by attestations, as Suetonius reports, of his mysterious ability to, by mere touch, cure blindness.<sup>37</sup> And though according to Luke not ‘obviously’ miraculous, Augustus’ imperial cult benefited too from Augustus having ‘crafted his own *aretalogy*<sup>38</sup> in his *Res Gestae*’, where his accomplishments were not in so many words labelled as divine, but rather implied to be.<sup>39</sup>

Like miracle working, the earlier mentioned idea of a conception narrative (also called ‘infancy gospel’) is part of the greater concept of myth-making. In Augustus’ case, one way in which this expressed its presence in the forming of Augustus’ emperor cult is through his—read: the Greco-Roman world’s ‘common’<sup>40</sup>—version of the *Immaculate Conception*.

<sup>32</sup> Nils Roll-Hansen, “Wishful Science: The Persistence of T. D. Lysenko’s Agrobiological Politics of Science,” in *Osiris* 23 (2008): 166-188, <https://doi-org.proxy-ub.rug.nl/10.1086/591873>.

<sup>33</sup> Referring to the ‘extraordinary’ custom-made brand of pseudo-science to support the ‘glory’ of the ‘scientific’ endeavours facilitated by Stalin’s personality cult regime.

<sup>34</sup> Trevor S. Luke, “A Healing Touch For Empire: Vespasian’s Wonders in Domitianic Rome,” in *Greece & Rome*, Second Series 57, no. 1 (April 2010): 77-78, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40929429>.

<sup>35</sup> Peter Wiles, “North Korea: Isolation and the Cult of Personality Under Communism,” in *Asian Perspective* 5, no. 2 (1981): 133-134, [www.jstor.org/stable/43737969](http://www.jstor.org/stable/43737969).

<sup>36</sup> Luiz Fernando Ferreira, Karl Jan Reinhard and Aduino Araújo, *Foundations of Paleoparasitology* (Rio de Janeiro, Brasil: Editora Fiocruz, 2014), 448.

<sup>37</sup> Gaius Tranquillus Suetonius, “Divus Vespasianus,” in *the Loeb Classical Library* (1914), *De Vita Caesarum*, 8.7-8.

<sup>38</sup> First-person biographical listing of one’s own divine attributes.

<sup>39</sup> Luke, “A Healing Touch,” 93.

<sup>40</sup> Carsten Hjort Lange, *Res Publica Constituta: Actium, Apollo and the Accomplishment of the Triumviral Assignment* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2009), 43.

The story of Atia, his mother, tells<sup>41</sup> of how the emperor was born of a sacred union between her and the god Apollo, having appeared to her as a snake in the same way divinity had introduced itself to Olympias, mother of Alexander—again showing that emulation theory was at play *between* origin stories of cult figures. And also alike in nature, was the way ruler cults developed, as the perceptions of leaders amongst their followers didn't necessarily have to concur with one another across different places. Whereas in Rome Augustus' initial use of the title 'princeps' instilled an image of primacy, it also meant for the emperor's image to cling to his mortal coil while in places like Karnak graffiti<sup>42</sup> of Paeanists<sup>43</sup> would already depict Augustus as a fully-fledged deity. As such, cult traditions could vary—which is to say differences could exist in how followers or worshipers in different places would participate in the cult of the emperor. Before I delve any further into myth-making and the relationship between cult leader and worshiper in the case of Augustus, I should explore the origin of the *idea* of the worship of the Roman emperors, and how precisely this took shape during Augustus' life.

Though his adoptive father too was deified, it was Augustus who became the first<sup>44</sup> Roman to be proclaimed a deity *during* his reign, for *more* than political reasons. The instinctual tendency to elevate or crown oneself to a higher status when ascending to power had been native to the rulers of the West-Mediterranean region for some time. But the idea of a god-ruler, the idea of ruler-worship, that was according to Henry Fairfield Burton an impulse that originated in the East.<sup>45</sup> In fact particularly in Asia Minor, where Morten Warmind points out, divine rulers were 'almost a commonplace'.<sup>46</sup> A precursor of Roman divine rule in the form of the emperor cult, was that of the in Greece conceived deity of *Dea Roma*, a 'divine personification' of Rome's ever growing power in what later became the Eastern Roman provinces. But the 'Eastern' idea of leader-deification was but the final piece needed to complete the emperor cult-puzzle, as most of the foundations for a Roman ruler cult, had already been there for centuries. One of the first titles of Augustus for

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<sup>41</sup> Suetonius, "Divus Augustus," 2.94.

<sup>42</sup> James H. Oliver, "Paeanistae," in *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 71 (1940): 314, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/283131>.

<sup>43</sup> Those who would join in celebratory songs of praise, joy or triumph; early exercise of 'Roman thanksgiving'.

<sup>44</sup> Arguably half-true, as Gaius Julius Caesar has purportedly been referred to as a 'demigod' during his time, though this has equally often been cast aside as mere flattery, or 'homage', rather than worship.

<sup>45</sup> Fairfield Burton, "The Worship," 80.

<sup>46</sup> Morten Lund Warmind, "The Cult of the Roman Emperor before and after Christianity," in *Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis* 15 (1993): 212, <https://doi.org/10.30674/scripta.67213>.

example, that of *Pater Patriae*, wasn't new. A father of the nation-type reverence for Roman leaders had been a familiar thing to the Roman people for some time. It can be traced back to what is known to the Roman religion as worship of the human spirit, the 'divine soul' of every being, 'the *Genius* of the man, the *Juno* of the woman.'<sup>47</sup> Which in the case of, say, a *paterfamilias*, was 'worshiped by the members of every household' the same way Romans worshiped their *ancestors* as forces of divine guidance. And looking at the emperors through the lens of them being, in effect, *paterfamilias* to their subjects<sup>48</sup>, it becomes clear enough that the worship of live<sup>49</sup> emperors was perhaps only a natural, inevitable evolution of the relationship between Romans and their leaders.

But then to what degree really, is 'the East' responsible for the rise of the emperor cult? *More* significantly than Burton might let on, seems to be the position taken by Simon Price. According to Price<sup>50</sup>, the idea of the emperor cult was an effort by the Greeks to distinguish between the Roman emperor and the monarchical rulers they had had up to that point. To bring order to the confusion about the emperor's place in the Greek religious domain, the Roman emperor needed a status that would explain him as symbolizing something of an overarching power. Much *unlike* the Hellenistic kings, whose earthly authority and rule was always understood as something tied solely to politics and 'traditions of self-governing cities'. To *explain* the place of the new Roman authority that had inserted itself into the Greek world, linking the emperor to the divine would set up a clear relationship between him and his many new subjects.

In the case of Augustus, the 'order' that his cult brought to Greece was evident in that administratively, rule over the region had become, as Arnaldo Momigliano points out, one of 'local elites dominating lower classes' with the powerful, *centralizing* symbolism of the empire in their corner—in other words 'imperial', rather than truly politically 'local'.<sup>51</sup> And as Price puts it, from Augustus onwards, Roman imperial rule was only ever going to become *more* centralized, as it was more 'elaborate' and 'systemic'. Something the Greeks

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<sup>47</sup> Fairfield Burton, "The Worship," 81.

<sup>48</sup> Gradel Ittai, *Emperor Worship and Roman Religion*, part of series Oxford Classical Monographs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 132.

<sup>49</sup> Citing Quintus Horatius Flaccus, in Lily Ross Taylor, *The Divinity of the Roman Emperor*, Philological Monographs / Published by the American Philological Association, no. 1 (Middletown, Connecticut: American Philological Association, 1931), 191.

<sup>50</sup> Simon R. F. Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge Cambridgeshire: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 247-248.

<sup>51</sup> Arnaldo Momigliano, "How Roman Emperors Became Gods," in *The American Scholar* 55, no. 2 (Spring 1986): 183, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41211307>.

were soon to explain to themselves as the end of the politically pluralistic, free-for-all, geographically divided, disorderly unified and bound by brotherly infighting land of Hellas. The one thing that had proven to be able to effectively bind all of Greece together had been that of ritual and cult—the role of which the Roman emperor would in part grow to supplant. Amongst the Greeks, Price submits, the perception had taken root ‘that the birthday of Augustus was simply the equivalent of the beginning of all things’.<sup>52</sup> And so, it becomes clear why indeed one would say that the Roman imperial cult has significant roots in the East or, less imprecisely, in Greece. It’s presumably<sup>53</sup> for that reason that Tacitus spoke of the Roman ruler cult as *Graeca adulatio* (‘Greek adulation’).

How the Greeks understood that the emperor cult was not going to be the end of their religious universe as they knew it, but rather a new beginning of it, was not necessarily apparent to the Romans themselves. As much is the case according to Warmind at least. Augustus himself seems to have been aware of this, when during the establishing of his cult in Rome, his institutionalization of said cult also carried on ‘a thorough restoration and revitalization of the ancient Roman religious institutions’.<sup>54</sup> Augustus wanted to express that this ‘new age’ of the emperor cult ‘did not signify the dissolution of the old ways’. Somewhat similar to how Augustus is known to have initiated the beginning of the *Principate* by stating he was to ‘restore the republic’, rather than dissolve it. We now know of course that claiming to ‘restore’ the republic was just a ploy to forge an empire behind the scenes and through the system. In the same way that the ‘institutionalization’ of him being worshiped as a divine leader, was to legitimize his rule. But how exactly, did this come about?

Augustus, or Gaius Octavius (birth name, after his father), was born 63 BCE in Rome, to parents Gaius Octavius and Atia Balba Caesonia, members of small-town Velitraean<sup>55</sup> aristocracy.<sup>56</sup> Mentioning Augustus’ birth alone, already confronts us with the same uncertainty that shrouds the facts about the *nature* of his birth, as shown in the excerpt at the beginning of this essay. Though most agree upon the year 63, the date of his birth would seem slightly harder to pin down. Karl Galinsky looks to Suetonius for this,

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<sup>52</sup> Price, *Rituals and Power*, 244-245.

<sup>53</sup> Simon Hornblower, Antony Spawforth, and Esther Eidinow, eds., *The Oxford Companion to Classical Civilization*. Second ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 689.

<sup>54</sup> Warmind, “The Cult of,” 212-213.

<sup>55</sup> Demonym for denizens of present-day Velletri, Italy.

<sup>56</sup> Karl Galinsky, *Augustus: Introduction to the Life of an Emperor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 2.

attributing this problem to the fact that later in life, Augustus had silver coins minted depicting the horoscope of Capricorn as his birth sign, despite his birth being dated to either September the 22<sup>nd</sup> or the 23<sup>rd</sup>—meaning Libra.<sup>57</sup> Galinsky adduces this may be explained by one of two reasons. The first being Julius Caesar’s calendar reform in 45 BCE, which he argues would have placed Caesar’s adopted son’s birth at a later date, somewhere around the Winter solstice and, thus, congruent with the Capricornus constellation. The second, a more likely scenario, is that of some ‘back-editing’ being at play here—meaning the combination of Augustus’ birthdate and star sign being an intentional inconsistency rather than a coincidental one. Good myth-making, starts with a conception narrative of divine proportions. And so how convenient was it that Capricornus<sup>58</sup>, the star sign that Augustus had elected for himself<sup>59</sup>, was also that associated with the birth of Romulus<sup>60</sup>, Rome’s demigod founder, son of Mars and the mythical Rhea Silvia. And if indeed Augustus saw in Romulus’ conception a reflection of his own, he very cleverly established for himself a symbolical link not necessarily with the divinity of *Romulus*, but with the *immaculacy* of his *birth*—after all, like with Mother Mary, Vestal Virgin Rhea’s offspring too was supposedly a product of parthenogenesis.<sup>61</sup> By no means a coincidence it was, as Galinsky submits, but in fact likely a part of Augustus’ ‘advertising campaign’, that the birth sign of Capricorn allowed for Augustus to associate himself with this very specific Roman ancestry and the divinity therein. It is as Tamsyn Barton describes<sup>62</sup> in his 1994 book’s chapter ‘Star Wars in the Greco-Roman World’. When it comes to setting up a ruler cult, ‘accurate dates of birth were not essential to the enterprise’. Rather, astrologers were quite content to try and fit their ‘clients’ births into timeframes congruent with their desired horoscopes, which to them, became fought-over commodities.

As such, being born *under* the right circumstances, we now know, was something Augustus had proven to be malleable. What couldn’t be retroactively altered was the luck one needed to be born *in* the right circumstances. Which is to say, the military and political success of his biological father who, after putting down a slave rebellion in Thuri, was

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<sup>57</sup> Suetonius, “Divus Augustus,” 2.94.

<sup>58</sup> *Coincidentally*, most visible in the sky in *August*.

<sup>59</sup> Momigliano, “How Roman Emperors,” 189.

<sup>60</sup> Galinsky, *Augustus: Introduction*, 4.

<sup>61</sup> Titus Livius, “Ad Urbe Condita Libri,” in the *Perseus Digital Library*, ed. Benjamin Oliver Foster (Cambridge: Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann, Ltd. 1919), 1.3.

<sup>62</sup> Tamsyn Barton, *Power and Knowledge: Astrology, Physiognomics, and Medicine Under the Roman Empire* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 44.

awarded the cognomen ‘Thurinus’—much like his son was given the titular ‘Augustus’ by the Roman senate.<sup>63</sup> Augustus’ father in the year of his son’s birth, had been busy making a run for the praetorship, climbing the ladder—called the *cursus honorum*—that is the hierarchy of Roman politics. Octavius Sr., or Thurinus, had it all: respect, wealth, confidence and above all: *connections*. After all, his wife Atia’s uncle was later going to be the man intended to adopt young Augustus, paving the way for his groomed entrance into Roman politics. This uncle was Julius Caesar. And as Thurinus’ luck ran out with his death when his son was no older than four, young Augustus was taken under the wing of his uncle, who had had no son of his own. Aged sixteen, Augustus joined his uncle’s campaign in Spain, to fight during the second-last year of what came to be known as the Great Roman Civil War. With plans to join his uncle’s planned expedition into Parthia after, Augustus was sent to Apollonia to finish his Greek education and train with soldiers of Caesar’s legions, bearing the title *magister equitum*.<sup>64</sup> But before any such uncle-nephew bonding could occur, on the *Ides of March*<sup>65</sup> in 44 BCE, news had arrived of Caesar’s assassination—and so Augustus’ struggle for power had begun.<sup>66</sup>

Having proven to not have suffered much from the laziness-inducing ‘decadence and snobbery’ that was his upbringing<sup>67</sup>, the young Augustus quickly managed to climb the ladder of politics as his father had done before him. And now having taken on *Caesar*, the name of his *de facto* adoptive father, as his third name, and *Octavianus* as his fourth, Augustus was forthwith known as *Gaius Julius Caesar Octavianus*—‘Caesar’ because he knew Caesar’s ‘old soldiers would flock to support’ someone bearing that name and ‘Octavianus’ to show he was a proud scion of the Velitraean Octavii.<sup>68</sup> In that same year Augustus had stated to ‘aspire to the honors of his father’.<sup>69</sup> But, as Galinsky adds, Augustus knew he didn’t want to just be ‘a copy of Julius Caesar’, but rather wished to forge his own destiny. And so, the ambition to ascend to a greater self, a self-made leader, to become bearer of a legacy transcending that of mere mortals, was born. Thirteen years later, after the fall of Caesar’s assassination plot’s conspirators Cassius and Brutus, and after

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<sup>63</sup> Margaux Baum and Fiona Forsyth, *Augustus* (NY, New York, United States: The Rosen Publishing Group, Inc, 2016), 10.

<sup>64</sup> Noticing the potential of his to-be-adopted son, Caesar promoted him ‘Master of the Cavalry’.

<sup>65</sup> March 15, so Caesar had been warned of, was fated to be the day of his demise.

<sup>66</sup> Baum and Forsyth, *Augustus*, 14-16.

<sup>67</sup> Galinsky, *Augustus: Introduction*, 5.

<sup>68</sup> Baum and Forsyth, *Augustus*, 18.

<sup>69</sup> Galinsky, *Augustus: Introduction*, 16.

bringing the War of the Second Triumvirate<sup>70</sup> to a close with the Battle of Actium, the path to sole dominion over Rome had come within Augustus' grasp. And thus began the making of an imperial ruler cult.

Similar to the function of the narrative surrounding his birth, myth-making was employed to glorify Augustus' victories. Actium, so he had intended to establish as legend, was won only with Apollo's divine grace at his back.<sup>71</sup> Warmind speculates this is significant as Mercury<sup>72</sup> is known to have symbolized being a 'mediator between the divine and the human worlds'—and to be considered a 'gatekeeper' to all that is sacred and numinous, is perfect a role for a ruler that seeks to legitimize himself to a people ever zealously gazing at the heavens.

And like present-day Turkmenistan's dictator Berdimuhamedow, Augustus seemed to have realized the best way to remain in power is to have one's subjects *want* you to remain in power. And to achieve that, the absolutism of his rule needed a 'face' with a likeable appearance. And so, as the year 27 BCE had begun, rather than proclaiming himself *dictator* as Caesar had done, or claiming the title of emperor for himself, Augustus presented himself 'saviour of the Republic'. On the back of an *aureus*<sup>73</sup> minted in Ephesus, we can read 'he *restored* laws and rights to the *res publica*'.<sup>74</sup> And indeed he himself states as much by saying that upon receiving 'absolute control of affairs, I transferred the republic from my own control to the will of the senate'.<sup>75</sup> Claiming to be a mere 'first amongst equals,' Augustus' 'Prince'-like<sup>76</sup> rule began, stressing 'that of power he possessed no more than those who were my colleagues in any magistracy'.<sup>77</sup> In reality, a set of staged deliberations would ensue whereby Augustus would be 'offered'<sup>78</sup> the power of an office, would then state to 'never accept it', go even further by indeed renouncing offices he already held, but only to surreptitiously have transferred back onto him those same senatorial powers sometime later.<sup>79</sup> A process he would repeat, right until he had become, in effect, an awkwardly omnipotent 'consultant' to the senate—and indeed, 'emperor' in all

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<sup>70</sup> Waged between Augustus and his former decade-long co-dictators, Antonius and Lepidus.

<sup>71</sup> Warmind, "The Cult of," 212.

<sup>72</sup> Latin name for Apollo.

<sup>73</sup> A gold coin.

<sup>74</sup> Galinsky, *Augustus: Introduction*, 62.

<sup>75</sup> Gaius Octavius Augustus, "Res Gestae Divi Augusti," in *the Loeb Classical Library* (1924), 34.

<sup>76</sup> Publius Cornelius Tacitus, "Annales," in *the Loeb Classical Library edition of Tacitus III* (1931), 1.1.

<sup>77</sup> Augustus, "Res Gestae," 34.

<sup>78</sup> Augustus, "Res Gestae," 5-6.

<sup>79</sup> Galinsky, *Augustus: Introduction*, 66.



but name.<sup>80</sup> Though saying this mode of operating made Augustus likeable is somewhat of a stretch, it had certainly made him less unlikeable. In line with this subtle ascension to power, Seneca mentions how Augustus would ‘pardon former enemies’, ‘forgive those that he conquered’ and even allow for defeated rivals like Lepidus ‘to wear the ensigns of his dignity’.<sup>81</sup> However, this was not *just* to create an image of being a benevolent and forgiving ruler. Augustus had realized that thankful former adversaries could prove to be loyal allies, as they would repay the debt of amnesty in gratitude. As Seneca points out<sup>82</sup>, after having pardoned an Antonian collaborator, the collaborator’s son Furnius, responded to Augustus by saying: ‘you have forced me to live and to die owing you a greater debt of gratitude than I can ever repay.’ This benign version of his character however, only seemed to be a recent development. Suetonius presents a different account<sup>83</sup>, saying Augustus had also been somewhat of short-fused paranoid, as for example he had ordered that a Roman knight called Pinarius be assassinated on the spot, just for ‘suspiciously’ taking notes during assembly. Or the case of Gallius who, simply holding some folded tablets under his robe, Augustus ordered be tortured and executed as he ‘suspected’ him to be an assassin. Whatever is the case, now that he was to become emperor, he seemed to want to be a ‘good emperor’ rather than a ‘bad’ one—or at least be *recognized* as ‘good’.

At any rate, to amass further generosity-induced likeability, upon the announcement of Augustus’ victory at Actium, that day was henceforth considered a festival day.<sup>84</sup> And to further emphasize how this victory was but the will of ‘the heavens’, upon Augustus’ arrival in Rome ‘a great halo with the colours of the rainbow’ was said to have ‘surrounded the whole sun’.<sup>85</sup> Not much later, after having been offered the title ‘Father of his Country’, ‘in every town’ across the empire games were held in Augustus’ honour<sup>86</sup> and, by 11 BCE, the senate had officially decreed that Augustus’ birthday be a state-festival called the *Augustalia*.<sup>87</sup> All this jovial self-aggrandizement had of course in part been an attempt to try and get the Roman people’s attention diverted from the more ‘ugly’ things Augustus had

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<sup>80</sup> Having finally acquired the exclusive powers of the *Imperium Consulare Majus*.

<sup>81</sup> Lucius Annaeus Seneca, “De Clementia,” in *Project Gutenberg* (2017), trans. Sir Roger L’Estrange, from his original print version (Chicago: Belford, Clarke & Co., 1882), 393.

<sup>82</sup> Lucius Annaeus Seneca, “De Beneficiis,” in *Project Gutenberg* (2009), ed. Aubrey Stewart, 2.25.

<sup>83</sup> Suetonius, “Divus Augustus,” 2.27.

<sup>84</sup> Cassius Dio, “Historia Romana,” in *the Loeb Classical Library IV* (1916), 51.19.

<sup>85</sup> Cassius Dio, “Historia Romana,” 45.4.

<sup>86</sup> Suetonius, “Divus Augustus,” 2.58-59.

<sup>87</sup> Cassius Dio, “Historia Romana,” 54.34.

done to consolidate power. Like, as Seneca recalls<sup>88</sup>, ‘all the navies he had broken in Sicily,’ reddening the seas with the blood ‘of both Romans and foreigners’, or Augustus’ mad human ‘sacrifice to the ghost of Julius’, laying waste to ‘300 lives at the Perusian<sup>89</sup> altars’ on a single occasion. When working on one’s image, so Augustus knew even from before he became emperor, the optics of this would prove unfavourable. Where festivals and games had the purpose of dealing with the *aftermath* of Roman civil war weariness, he had before his reign already taken action to minimize the damage to his person by, as Appianus describes it<sup>90</sup>, burning as many of ‘the writings which contained evidence concerning the civil strife’ as possible. To legitimize his reign, mythicizing the details about the nature of his birth was one thing. And by trying to erase the memory of pre-empire strife, and even banning publication of senatorial records that could attest to said strife<sup>91</sup>, he equally hoped to confine the facts of the war-torn conception of his emperorship to blissful rumour and oblivion.

Of course retaining a likeable image wasn’t enough. Augustus had something to prove. As stated, he was not just to prove himself Caesar’s heir, but the heir to all that is the *idea* of Rome, the ‘shape’ of Rome as one would envision in one’s *dreams*—its glistening *divine destiny*. As much was clear from Augustus’ obsession with the symbolism of Capricornus, that which governs<sup>92</sup> one’s ‘Lot’<sup>93</sup>—Augustus felt his destiny was written in the stars. And why would he not believe as much? Some, like Sabine Grebe make the case<sup>94</sup> that the likes of Vergilius were distinctly ‘pro-Augustan’, as he had already prophesized<sup>95</sup> Augustus’ greatness in poem and hymn:

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<sup>88</sup> Seneca, “De Clementia,” 393.

<sup>89</sup> In Perugia, present-day Perugia, Italy.

<sup>90</sup> Appianus Alexandrinus, “Bellum Civile,” in *the Loeb Classical Library* (1913), 5.132.

<sup>91</sup> Galinsky, *Augustus: Introduction*, 63.

<sup>92</sup> Galinsky, *Augustus: Introduction*, 4.

<sup>93</sup> A word meaning ‘fortune’ or ‘destiny’.

<sup>94</sup> Sabine Grebe, “Augustus’ Divine Authority and Vergil’s ‘Aeneid’,” in *Vergilius* (1959-) / Published by The Vergilian Society 50 (2004): 35-36, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41587284>.

<sup>95</sup> Publius Maro Vergilius, “Aeneis,” in *the Internet Classics Archive*, trans. John Dryden, book 6.

*Augustus, promis'd oft, and long foretold,  
Sent to the realm that Saturn rul'd of old;  
Born to restore a better age of gold  
Afric and India shall his pow'r obey;  
He shall extend his propagated sway  
Beyond the solar year, without the starry way,  
Where Atlas turns the rolling heav'ns around,  
And his broad shoulders with their lights are crown'd.*

As Grebe sees it, when it came to the task of legitimizing Augustus' rise to emperorship, he was by no means without support in achieving this.

Pre-emperorship, while Augustus was still in open competition with Antonius, even signs of *divine* sponsorship appeared to the Romans in all sorts of forms. At one point Augustus had organized seven days of games to honour his deceased adoptive father and, according<sup>96</sup> to at least thirteen literary accounts, even the heavens rooted for Augustus to take Caesar's empty throne, as during all seven days a bright burning comet had appeared in the sky. Surely, it was thought<sup>97</sup>, this was Caesar's soul ascending to the Elysian Fields.<sup>98</sup> Caesar, had now become *Divus Iulius*, and so Augustus' divine right was unquestionable. Apparently his destiny was indeed laid out for him—he just had to *fulfil* it.

The following decades Augustus would further his campaign of mythification, self-glorification and image-building. One way of doing the latter that proved particularly successful was that of 'propaganda' through the distribution of *glass tokens*. 'Inexpensive to manufacture, and they could be produced quickly by the thousands', Galinsky remarks. Like coins, glass pastes were to become one of the mass mediums of Augustus' time. While the effigy of Augustus passed through the hands of every Roman citizen across the empire, Augustus had at the beginning of his reign insisted still, that he be just a mere 'obedient servant of his country in all things'.<sup>99</sup> Like said coins, statues of the divine leader could be found equally in all corners of the empire. How images of the emperor—be it via coinage, tokens, vases, graffiti, buildings or indeed statues—were treated by Augustus' cult subjects,

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<sup>96</sup> Galinsky, *Augustus: Introduction*, 22-23.

<sup>97</sup> Taylor, *The Divinity of*, 242.

<sup>98</sup> Gaius Tranquillus Suetonius, "Divus Iulius," in *the Loeb Classical Library* (1913), De Vita Caesarum, 1.88.

<sup>99</sup> Appianus, "Bellum Civile," in *the Loeb Classical Library* (1913), 3.41.

varied. The relationship between the emperor and former slaves<sup>100</sup> for example, was notable. Raaflaub, Toher and Bowersock mention those of the emperor's worshipers that were known as the 'Augustales': 'members of collegial associations officially devoted to the imperial cult'<sup>101</sup>—or, to be more precise, his *genius*.<sup>102</sup> Such popularity amongst newfound 'freedman' might be explained in that—being predominantly former slaves ever barred from political offices—through the congregation<sup>103</sup> of the imperial cult they could at least accrue *some* civic esteem.<sup>104</sup> And like the *cursus honorum* would allow for a Roman citizen to become *homo novus* and be elected to the senate, certain informalities were put in place to facilitate for slaves and *layfolk* to be able to climb the *social* ladder and outgrow being a household's 'hireling for life'.<sup>105</sup> Though this was rarely the occasion still, Seneca adds that sometimes even officials had been appointed to 'hear complaints of the wrongs done by masters to their slaves, whose duty it is to restrain cruelty and lust.' Apparently, Augustus' ruler cult had a 'friendly face' that would occasionally present itself not *just* to the Roman upper classes. Again, speaking to likeability, Seneca goes as far as to speculate<sup>106</sup> 'a tenderness to be used even toward our slaves' would show the emperor's *virtue*. It is through the relationship between these subjects and the emperor too, that the significance of his image can be illustrated. Warmind points out<sup>107</sup>: 'all depictions of the emperor were cult-images and therefore sacrosanct', so that when 'a slave was sold,' 'the seller was obliged to inform whether the slave had ever taken refuge at the foot of the emperor's statue'. It was so that at 'the foot of the emperor's statue, a person was unpunishable'—with of course one exception. The statue was, in effect, to be treated as though it was the very emperor himself. To affront *it* was to affront *him*. As Augustus was divine, his effigies were sacred. And as if the coins in everyone's purse depicting his face weren't enough, Augustus had shrines for the ancient crossroad cult worship of the spirits of the dead<sup>108</sup> replaced or

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<sup>100</sup> Particularly wealthy ones.

<sup>101</sup> Kurt A. Raaflaub, Mark Toher, and G. W. Bowersock, *Between Republic and Empire: Interpretations of Augustus and His Principate* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 364-365.

<sup>102</sup> Meaning not 'brilliance', but the emperor's *divine spirit*.

<sup>103</sup> The imperial cult also had a 'communal' function, in that it united people in worship across the empire, whereas otherwise there would be division. See Gwyneth McIntyre, *Imperial Cult*, Part of series Brill Research Perspectives: Brill Ancient History (BRILL, 2019), 6.

<sup>104</sup> Steven E. Ostrow, "'Augustales' along the Bay of Naples: A Case for Their Early Growth," in *Historia: Zeitschrift Für Alte Geschichte* 34, no. 1 (1985): 64-65, [www.jstor.org/stable/4435911](http://www.jstor.org/stable/4435911).

<sup>105</sup> Seneca, "De Beneficiis," 3.22.

<sup>106</sup> Seneca, "De Clementia," 379.

<sup>107</sup> Warmind, "The Cult of," 213.

<sup>108</sup> Known as the *Lares Compitales*; 'lares' meaning the Roman 'household deities'.

restored with shrines of his own.<sup>109</sup> As Lily Taylor submits, Augustus' image was to permeate every crossroad and every household.<sup>110</sup> He had, while ever still 'concerned' with his humility, made 'his private household worship an official cult of the Roman state'. As Christians would speak of God being immanent in all things, so was Augustus ubiquitous in the empire's every nook and cranny.

Of course as different peoples and social classes viewed their relationship to the divine leader in different ways, the *meaning* of Augustus' divinity to his worshipers and subjects somewhat varied across the realm. For example, Augustalian cultism was most prevalent in the Western parts of the empire<sup>111</sup>, while in the East the emperor cult was one devoted to a deity as it would to any other gold-veined god. Whereas in Rome Augustus 'was satisfied with being the son of a god' and 'a protégé of Apollo'.<sup>112</sup> And lest the people forget this be the case, Augustus made sure that there be permanent reminders of his divine greatness by commissioning various impressive architectural marvels in the capital, such as 'his forum with the temple of Mars, the temple of Apollo on the Palatine' as well as the 'fane of Jupiter on the Capitol'.<sup>113</sup> And of course if *that* wouldn't bring every soul under Uranus' sky to worship Augustus, he could always still resort to the one thing everyone *did* understand<sup>114</sup> in the same way: the threat of being persecuted should one object to, renounce or falsely swear by the emperor's genius.<sup>115</sup> In whatever shape or form Augustus—and his family<sup>116</sup>—was revered through his ruler cult, the message was clear, Augustus was the empire and its citizens' divine master, and he was *one* with his dominion: *l'Empire, c'est moi, parce que c'est mon destin divin*.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Thenceforth called the *Lares Augusti*.

<sup>110</sup> Taylor, *The Divinity of*, 183-186.

<sup>111</sup> Ostrow, "Augustales' along," 66.

<sup>112</sup> Momigliano, "How Roman Emperors," 187.

<sup>113</sup> Suetonius, "Divus Augustus," 2.29.

<sup>114</sup> Tyranny needs no translation. As Albert Maysles once said of politics during the McCarthy era: "Tyranny is the deliberate removal of nuance."

<sup>115</sup> Taylor, *The Divinity of*, 241.

<sup>116</sup> Gwynnaeth McIntyre, "Deification as Consolation: The Divine Children of the Roman Imperial Family," in *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 62, no. 2 (2013): 234, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24433673>.

<sup>117</sup> I added this sentence in French because I feel it's very reminiscent of I-think-we-all-know-who, and as such an illustrative link between past and present.

## Divine Leadership and Ruler Cults at Present

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Now that we have a decent picture of how the idea of divine leadership and the ruler cult in the case of Emperor Augustus expressed itself at its embryonic, infant and more maturing stages, we ought to beg the question whether this can tell us something about the nature of myth-making and divine leadership in contemporary ruler cults. Again, the opening anecdotes prove useful, as they demonstrate that the dynamics of self-mythification or cult-formation between different times are ‘reciprocal’. What I mean by this is that we may recognize some Augustus in modern ruler cults, while at the same time we can recognize Kim Jong-il in the conception of the emperor cult—think ‘bright stars appearing in the skies’, be it that of Caesar’s or the one decorating the heavens above Mount Paektu. In fact, there seems to be a cornucopia of striking resemblances in the making of divine leadership and cult myth—take the case of Turkmenistan for example.

Before Turkmenistan’s Berdimuhamedow ascended to power, the in many respects even greater figure of dictatorial cultism, Saparmyrat Niyazov, ruled over the country. He’s known to have published the panegyric aretalogy of the Turkmen, called the ‘Rukhnama’.<sup>118</sup> It was the idea that Niyazov’s ruler or personality cult would see its legitimacy<sup>119</sup> be established if only a certain national creation mythos would bind him to the birth of the nation of Turkmenistan and the people itself. An excerpt<sup>120</sup> of the Rukhnama reads:

*History is your ancestors and grand children  
And grandfathers, father, children and nation.  
Entering the most fortified palaces with your horse,  
You are the Turkmen with strong and agile arms.  
The rich and noble are godly like saints  
Your horsetail-standard is always hoisted brightly,  
Your words are fine, pleasing, and heart is illuminated  
You are the Turkmen, with his face and heart smiling.*

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<sup>118</sup> Literally, ‘The book of the Spirit’.

<sup>119</sup> Riccardo Nicolosi, “Saparmyrat Niyazov’s Rukhnama: The Invention of Turkmenistan,” in *Tyrants Writing Poetry*, eds. Albrecht Koschorke and Konstantin Kaminskij, trans. David A. Brenner (Budapest, New York: Central European University Press, 2017), 241

<sup>120</sup> Nicolosi, “Saparmyrat Niyazov’s Rukhnama,” 232.

In *Ashgabat*, the Turkmen capital, stands a bizarre monument in the shape of a partly gilded, 32 feet tall copy of Niyazov's book.<sup>121</sup> Niyazov who, in a rather Augustan manner, had the Turkmen People's Council 'give' him the title *Türkmenbaşı* (meaning 'Head of the Turkmen') had intended for the book to be *the* guide to the *spirit* that his Turkmen subjects were to live up to. This guidance, or the dear leader's wisdom, Turkmen society was to be completely submerged in—being read to the people from dawn till dusk, in schools, libraries, and in the evening after supper.<sup>122</sup> In fact *any* book that would challenge his wisdom and vision of past, present and future, he had ordered to be burned.<sup>123</sup> At any rate, the meaning of 'spirit' was implied to be twofold. As can be read in the passage above, Niyazov too realized the importance of mythical lineage<sup>124</sup> and ancestry in the legitimization of his cult. So, to give weight to the conception narrative of his rule and realm, the 'Holy' Rukhnama also drew from the Turkic origin epic of *Dede Korkut*<sup>125</sup>, in the same way Augustus had found inspiration in Vergilius' Aeneis. Niyazov, in other words, was to represent the Turkmen and their channelling of the ancestral spirit and glory. And equally similar to Augustus' reign, the mythification and glorification of the Turkmen people would do for Niyazov what Augustus' ruler cult had done for him: *bind* the people together and render state and leader a union. Niyazov through his ruler cult had made Turkmenistan a 'paternalistic organ', making him the pater patriae to his venerating citizens, 'transforming the people into a single nation'.<sup>126</sup> Moreover<sup>127</sup>, as one might expect by now, Niyazov too, had a month of the year named after him, his birthday celebrated as a national holiday and the national anthem be a song of praise to him, similar to how Augustus had Roman lyric Horatius write him into Horatius' 'Song of the Ages', praising

<sup>121</sup> Nicolosi, "Saparmyrat Niyazov's Ruhnama," 233.

<sup>122</sup> Jan Šír, "Cult of Personality in Monumental Art and Architecture: The Case of Post-Soviet Turkmenistan," in *Acta Slavica Iaponica* 25 (2008): 204, 206.

<sup>123</sup> Ahmet T. Kuru, "Between the State and Cultural Zones: Nation Building in Turkmenistan," in *Central Asian Survey* 21, no. 1 (2002): 77, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02634930220127955>.

<sup>124</sup> Nicolosi, "Saparmyrat Niyazov's Ruhnama," 243.

<sup>125</sup> Also called 'Book of Korkut Ata'; featuring the mythical narrative of the Oghuz Turks, 'forefathers' to the Turkmen people and like them, descendants of the legendary Oghuz Khan—the Remus & Romulus to Turkmenistan.

<sup>126</sup> Slavomir Horak, "The Ideology of the Turkmenbashi Regime," in *Perspectives on European Politics & Society* 6, no. 2 (Augustus 2005): 305, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15705850508438920>.

<sup>127</sup> Šír, "Cult of Personality," 204.

gods, Rome and emperor.<sup>128</sup> Like the Lares Augusti, or indeed Augustus in general, Niyazov's presence became impossible to escape, so Jan Šír illustrates:

*His face is virtually omnipresent; all banknotes, basic foodstuffs as well as the cheapest vodka feature the picture of the first President. Somewhat eerily, Turkmenbashi was present every time a TV was on, as a small golden picture of his face placed in the upper right corner of the screen accompanied each and every broadcast of Turkmen channels.*

And yes, even Augustus' forum and temple of Mars got its Turkmen counterpart with 2014's commissioning of Niyazov's *Spirituality Mosque*, capable of seating 10.000 worshippers. What made this building different from other monuments however, was its signifying of Niyazov's semi-apotheosis<sup>129</sup> whereby he, in Roman terms, was sacralised so that the cult of his personality had now, in effect, become a cult of his genius.<sup>130</sup> And as restrained as Augustus had initially been in embracing being referred to as a god, so too had Niyazov gone no further but to later on refer to himself as 'God's last Prophet'.<sup>131</sup>

It is remarkable how Niyazov's cult-formation seems to be but a transcript of that of Augustus, almost followed to the letter. And we can observe this be the case not just with Niyazov and his successor. We need only slightly tilt our gaze to observe the myth-making and re-writing of history that's taking place under the cultic rule of Putin, where legitimizing the rule of his being as a 'glamorous hero, endowed with vision, wisdom, moral and physical strength'<sup>132</sup>, varies per Russian federal subject.<sup>133</sup> Like with an empire as wide-stretched as that of Rome, in Russia the relationship between cult ruler and followers, as with Augustus' cult, evolves differently in different regions of the federation. While in the

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<sup>128</sup> Horatius, "Carmen Saeculare," in *Project Gutenberg* (2004), trans. John Conington.

<sup>129</sup> Šír, "Cult of Personality," 214.

<sup>130</sup> One might want to dub it the cult of the *Lares Türkmenbaşı*.

<sup>131</sup> Nicolosi, "Saparmyrat Niyazov's Ruhnama," 236-237.

<sup>132</sup> Helena Gosciolo, "Putin As Celebrity and Cultural Icon," in *BASEES/ Routledge Series on Russian and East European Studies* 80, ed. Richard Sakwa (New York: Routledge, 2012), *abstract*.

<sup>133</sup> Russia's constituent entities are made up of 'federal subjects': republics, krais and oblasts.



Republic of Buryatia the people claim<sup>134</sup> a legendary lineage to be traced back to Genghis Khan in the same way the Turkmen trace theirs back to Oghuz Khan, the larger cult narrative that *binds* all Russian federal subjects together, is still one that revolves around Putin as we do around the Sun. Be it in Buryatia, Siberia, or indeed the historic region of Muscovy, Putin is ‘revered at home as the saviour not only of Russia’s economy, but of its national pride and international status’.<sup>135</sup> Had he lived to see the glorified Tsar Peter the Great’s portrait hanging<sup>136</sup> in Putin’s office, or indeed known of Putin’s name and image permeating Russian society, Tacitus may well have spoken of *Ruscia adulatio*. Like Niyazov however, Putin isn’t quite implied to be an actual divinity the way Lenin<sup>137</sup>, Japan’s Emperor Hirohito<sup>138</sup> or indeed Kim Il-sung is—who is to this day *the* god and ‘eternal president’ of North-Korea<sup>139</sup>, establishing a dynastic cult that would sustain the worship of him and his successors into the future.

‘God’ or ‘god-like’. ‘Worship’ or ‘veneration’—the expression of divine leadership varies per ruler cult, but all cult-formation adheres to the same inner logic, so political scientist Pao-min Chang submits in his describing of the personality cult as ‘the artificial elevation of the status and authority of one man’ (...) ‘through the deliberate creation, projection and propagation of a godlike image.’<sup>140</sup> Whereas Emperor Augustus, Hirohito and Kim Il-sung succeeded to have their divinity survive their deaths, some cult figures’ legacy however, did not. As they would rise, so too could they fall, showing that most transcendental or divinity-emulating leaders weren’t quite able to stand the test of time as their divine inspirations Uranus, Odin, Tengri or Tiān could.<sup>141</sup> As Berdimuhamedow has slowly started to dismantle the cult of Niyazov, so Khrushchev made it his mission to denounce<sup>142</sup> the mythification and deification of Stalin. And like dominos, with the fall of the

<sup>134</sup> Ewa Nowicka-Rusek, and Ayur Zhanaev, “The Image of Genghis Khan in Contemporary Buryat Nation Building,” in *Polish Sociological Review*, no. 187 (2014): 382-383, [www.jstor.org/stable/24371636](http://www.jstor.org/stable/24371636).

<sup>135</sup> Helena Goszilo, “Russia’s ultimate celebrity: VVP as VIP objet d’art,” in *BASEES/ Routledge Series on Russian and East European Studies* 80, ed. Richard Sakwa (New York: Routledge, 2012), 6.

<sup>136</sup> Susan B. Glasser, “Putin the Great: Russia’s Imperial Imposter,” *Foreign Affairs* (September 2019), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/2019-08-12/putin-great>.

<sup>137</sup> Anita Pisch, “The Rise of the Stalin Personality Cult,” in *The Personality Cult of Stalin in Soviet Posters, 1929–1953: Archetypes, Inventions and Fabrications* (Australia: ANU Press, 2016), 132-134.

<sup>138</sup> L. H. Tibesar, “Hirohito: Man, Emperor, ‘Divinity,’” in *The Review of Politics* 7, no. 4 (October 1945): 497-498, [www.jstor.org/stable/1404070](http://www.jstor.org/stable/1404070).

<sup>139</sup> Tai Sung An, “North Korea: From Dictatorship to Dynasty,” in *Asian Affairs* 4, no. 3 (January 1977): 173-174, [www.jstor.org/stable/30171470](http://www.jstor.org/stable/30171470).

<sup>140</sup> Pao-min Chang, “The Phenomenon of Power: Some Random Thoughts,” in *Zhongshan Xueshu Luncong (Zhongshan Academic Writings)*, no. 18 (2000): 141.

<sup>141</sup> All four representing the same: the sky fathers or sky gods of their respective pantheons across different cultures.

<sup>142</sup> Balázs Apor, “The Collapse of the Rákosi Cult,” in *The Invisible Shining: The Cult of Mátyás Rákosi in Stalinist Hungary, 1945-1956* (Budapest, New York: Central European University Press, 2017), 300.

personality cults of Lenin and Stalin, so too fell certain other Soviet theocracies spread across Europe.

They had built their cults by tying themselves to mythified figures such as Lenin and Stalin to legitimize their reign, as Augustus had tied himself to the legacy of Caesar. And who knows what Augustus would have done had Caesar suffered *damnatio memoriae*<sup>143</sup>? We know what the decade-long revered leader of Hungary, Mátyás Rákosi did when the cult of Stalin was facing damnation. Quite unparalleled for a cult leader, in an attempt to ensure his legacy would survive, he actually contributed to the fall of his own personality cult, exercising self-criticism in hopes of shifting blame for the miseries of his country unto others. ‘Local leaders’ too, he said, had been guilty of dictatorship, ruling like ‘petty monarchs’ or ‘infallible popes’.<sup>144</sup> And though I wouldn’t call his plight fortunate, Rákosi was, unlike most other cult figures, at the end of his reign only forcibly retired to the Soviet Union. And so, in a way, to all the anti-cult movements of the era, he became ‘the one that got away’. Still, the rise of his ruler cult was in many respects similar to that of Augustus. At its conception, the country of Hungary already ‘possessed a wide variety of cultic traditions,’ having ‘assembled a fairly impressive heroes’ pantheon’.<sup>145</sup> Like with Augustus, coincidence had it the groundwork for Rákosi’s cult had been laid before he had even reached puberty. At age eight, the family had changed their name from ‘Rosenfeld’ to ‘Rákosi’.<sup>146</sup> Quite conveniently, the cult figure ‘of Prince Ferenc Rákóczi II, leader of the War of Independence against Austria in 1703–1711,’ had become the star of a hero-epic enshrining the emancipation of Hungary—as the *Aeneis* had become a foundation for Roman identity. But there was no shortage of Hungarian heroes<sup>147</sup> that Rákosi could draw inspiration from, as but decades before his birth, Hungary had begotten its own pater patriae: Lajos Kossuth. Having been responsible for bringing down the Habsburgian Dual Monarchy, Kossuth was worshiped<sup>148</sup> as ‘Moses of the Hungarians,’ ‘Our Father,’ ‘God’s Second Son,’ ‘the Champion of the Pulpit,’ ‘the Messiah of the Nation,’ ‘the Hermit of Turin,’ and ‘the Holy Elder’—in totality, perhaps tantamount to deification. For Rákosi,

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<sup>143</sup> The *condemnation of memory*, to which some Roman emperors had been subjected.

<sup>144</sup> Apor, “The Collapse of,” 305-306.

<sup>145</sup> Balázs Apor, “The Chronology of Cult Construction (1925–1953),” in *The Invisible Shining: The Cult of Mátyás Rákosi in Stalinist Hungary, 1945–1956* (Budapest, New York: Central European University Press, 2017), 39.

<sup>146</sup> Apor, “The Chronology of,” 33.

<sup>147</sup> Among others, was the later military leader-turned cult figure Miklós Horthy de Nagybánya—right up until the rise of Rákosi.

<sup>148</sup> Apor, “The Chronology of,” 40.

these were *big* shoes to fill. But as we know, the bigger the shoes, the bigger the potential for legitimizing one's reign. Hungary had a history of *cultivating* cults around revered figures of leadership and, while perhaps lacking attestations of ancestral ghosts ascending to the stars, or a passing comet to usher in the new ruler, there had been no reason for Rákosi not to believe the dominion over Hungary was but his destiny.

At present however, fewer such ruler cults remain. Think of the aforementioned cult of Putin being on the rise, the more subtle Lukashenko of Belarus<sup>149</sup> or the cult of Kazakhstan's Nazarbayev.<sup>150</sup> Bar the latter, the first two—though having not yet claimed any kind of divine status—have gone about establishing the cults of their leadership in a rather covert manner, ever denying there's even taking any such process place. Not in person, but through the voice of his subjects, Putin has expressed his *de facto* self-proclaimed reign be but a restoration of the Great Russian federation and not an attempt to make it into the image of his idol Tsar Peter's empire. As Nick Walsh points out: 'Kremlin advisers have dismissed the increasing adulation' and, as though borrowing from an old Octavii family trick, claimed to fear 'that it may damage Mr. Putin's bid to appear as a *new* breed of Russian *leader*, bent on *reform*, not *consolidation of personal power*.'<sup>151</sup>

Having looked at some specimens of contemporary ruler cultism, myth-making and divine leadership, it's become hard to escape the fact that the first seems to be a ubiquity of all times; the second an equally ubiquitous ingredient to allow for the first; and the third one engaged in with either modesty<sup>152</sup> or megalomania<sup>153</sup>, depending on the local tolerance for all things inconsistent with tradition and the ideological establishment.

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<sup>149</sup> Laurens Cerulus, "Lukashenko's brand image is the real thing. What's a dictatorship without a cult of personality and an ideology?" *Politico* (July 2005), <https://www.politico.eu/article/lukashenkos-brand-image-is-the-real-thing/>.

<sup>150</sup> Joanna Lillis, "Kazakhstan: Does a Personality Cult Grow in Astana?" *Eurasianet* (November 2012), <https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-does-a-personality-cult-grow-in-astana>.

<sup>151</sup> Nick Paton Walsh, "Cult of personality grows in Russia," *The Guardian* (June 2002), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/jun/29/russia.nickpatonwalsh>.

<sup>152</sup> Like Augustus' reluctance to officially acknowledge his divinity, while still being made into statues of him on his bare feet (a symbol of his divine status).

<sup>153</sup> Think Francisco Macías Nguema, who had made Equatorial Guinea's motto "There is no other God but Macías Nguema." As cited in Ibrahim K. Sundiata, "The Roots of African Despotism: The Question of Political Culture," in *African Studies Review* 31, no. 1 (April 1988): 22, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/524581>.

## Conclusion

Making Augustus' divine leadership and ruler cult a benchmark to this essay, has allowed for both specific and superficial comparing to various contemporary cult leaders of ours. And it would seem to me that this has exposed at least two prominent constants<sup>154</sup> in what I earlier called the 'inner logic' to cult rule and leadership. This first constant would be that which McNamara and Trumbull approximated with their emulation theory: ruler cults consist of leaders that *emulate* certain features of individuals, narratives or (divine) entities that are of great meaning to the ruler cult's (potential) worshipers/subjects; while at the same time ruler cults *imitate* one another in the way they operate and in how they are conceived. And secondly, there's the main ingredient to said conception: the *forging of a* 'past'. Of course, this is multi-interpretable. Ruler cults have indeed been founded on conception narratives or origin stories, but they may involve anything from myths, legends, epics of heroism, victory tales, founding father-figures, cult-predecessors, noble lineage to ancestry. And despite being a phenomenon in decline: having established that the *idea* of the ruler cult has survived in such pure form at least ever since Augustus up until now, is perhaps an unwanted omen of 'leader-cultification' being an unquashable aspect of the human leader-follower relationship.

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<sup>154</sup> Or, 'features of dynamic' consistently present in both Augustus' reign and that of contemporary figures of cult leadership.

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