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# Sacral and divine kingship in Seleucid Empire and Western Han

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## Abstract

This article aims to compare sacral and divine aspects of rulership in ancient China during Western Han dynasty and in the ancient Seleucid empire, with a focus on the divine origin of rulers, rulers as the chief priests, rulers as gods, and divine legitimacy. The cultural evolution involving ideas about the sacral role of rulers and their divinity will be presented, from ancient Macedonia to Seleucid empire and from Shang and Zhou dynasties through the Warring States period and Qin dynasty to the state of Western Han. The article aims to explore the above-mentioned aspects of sacral kingship to find out what forms these aspects took in both respective empires. The article aims particularly at the participation of rulers in local cults, the differences between ruler cults, celestial gods as the supreme authority, and gods connected with conquest and territory in order to contextualize our views of both Seleucid and Western Han empires, and by proxy the views on ancient China and ancient Hellenistic states.

## Keywords

Ancient China; Ancient Greece; Ancient Macedon; Ancient Near East; Seleucid empire; Western Han; sacrality; deification; divine ruler; imperial travels; ruler cult; Zeus; Apollo; Hercules; Heaven; Tian; Taiyi; Shangdi; Five Di; Five gods; deified rulers; cult of the dead; Shang dynasty; Zhou dynasty; Warring States period; cultural comparison; cultural evolution; evolutionary divergence; evolutionary convergence; ancient Chinese religion; ancient Greek religion; ancient Hellenic religion; gods; mortals; immortality; territorial gods; conquest; conquest gods; divine origin of kings; imitation of gods; sacrifices; regional cults

## Sacral and divine kingship in Seleucid Empire and Western Han

Seleucid empire was an ancient Hellenistic empire existing from the 4th to the 1st century BC. It succeeded the empire of Alexander the Great, which spread from the Macedonian kingdom (formerly considered barbarous) to consume much of the then-known civilized world. Alexander's empire was short-lived, and after his death, it was broken apart by several competing generals of Alexander's army. One of them, Seleucus, later known as Seleucus I. Nicator, eventually conquered much of Alexander's realm, creating Seleucid empire, which lasted much longer than its predecessor.

Similarly, Western Han was an ancient Chinese empire existing from the end of the third century BC to the 1st century AD. It was also preceded by the empire of the formerly considered barbarous state of Qin, created by the emperor Qin Shi Huang. It also fell apart shortly after its founder's death, and after a civil war between numerous warlords rising in its decline, one of them, Liu Bang (later known as the emperor Gaozu), rose to reunite it, thus creating Western Han empire.

Given these similarities, this article aims to explore the following aspects of sacral kingship to find out what forms these aspects took in both respective empires, if they were similar, and why:

1. The divine ancestry of the rulers.
2. The role of the rulers as intermediaries between the gods and men.
3. The divinity of the rulers.
4. The authority and legitimacy derived by the rulers from the gods.

The article will first give an overview of the historical evolution in the areas of both empires to contextualize their similarities and differences, then compare and analyse them, and summarize what can be concluded from the analysis and the comparison. It should be kept in mind that the timescales compared are different for each empire, since there is a historical tradition reaching much further back into the past in ancient China.

### The divine ancestry of rulers

To understand Seleucids, we need to look to their predecessors, the Macedonian royal dynasty of Argeads. There are two myths explaining the origin of the Argead dynasty (also called Temenid), both deriving their descent from the heavenly god Zeus, the highest god of Macedonians.<sup>1</sup>

1 Christesen & Murray (2010: p. 430). It should be noted that this is in line with the ancient Greek culture, where already in Homer the kings are said to be the descendants of Zeus, e.g. *Hom. Il.* 2.173.

The first one derives the Argead ancestry from Temenus, a descendant of Heracles, son of Zeus,<sup>2</sup> and the second one from Argeas, son of the eponymous founder Macedon (also a descendant of Zeus).<sup>3</sup>

Just as the Macedonian kings were considered to be gods' descendants, so were Seleucids. Seleucus I. was claimed to be descended from Apollo, whose oracle prophesized his kingship<sup>4</sup> (thus making Apollo another source of royal authority alongside Zeus, also widely worshipped by Seleucus I.).<sup>5</sup> A preserved myth tells how the mother of Seleucus had a dream of having sex with Apollo, who rewarded her with a ring bearing a symbol of an anchor for her future son; subsequently, Seleucus was born and later became a king.<sup>6</sup>

If we turn to Western Han dynasty, we must begin with their ancient predecessors, starting with Shang dynasty. The question of Shang kings' divine origin is somewhat complicated: while there are records mentioning their divine origin,<sup>7</sup> it is unclear whether it should be ascribed to Shangdi, the chief god of Shang.<sup>8</sup> This changed for the subsequent Zhou dynasty. Hou Ji, the ancestor of Zhou described as having a supernatural origin, was claimed to have been born after his mother stepped into the footprint of Shangdi, having performed compelling sacrifices to this deity before.<sup>9</sup> Also, the royal title 'Son of Heaven' (tianzi)<sup>10</sup> can be seen as reflecting ideas about the king's divine ancestry.

With the fall of Zhou, the situation changed. Instead of Shangdi or Heaven, the lords of the emerging feudal states turned to worship local gods less connected to the former dynasty: the state of Qin, for example, began worshipping White Di, who was later claimed to be the ancestor of its rulers.<sup>11</sup> When this cult later grew with four other deities and was, after the fall of Qin, adapted by Western Han, a myth emerged, according to which the mother of Western Han founder Gaozu (called Liu Bang as a commoner) slept near a lake and dreamed of a god having sex with her, with her husband hearing thunder and seeing a great dragon upon his wife, after which Liu Bang was born.<sup>12</sup> In another myth recorded in *Shiji*, after deserting from Qin administration, Liu Bang encounters a white snake blocking his path, which he slays – a wailing voice is then heard, claiming that the son of the Red God had slain a son of the White God.<sup>13</sup>

2 King (2010: p. 376), Hdt. 8, 137–139, Thuc. 2,99,3.

3 King (2010: p. 376), M–W 7.

4 Hammond (1989: pp. 285, 320–321), OGI 227, Diod. Sic. 19, 90.

5 Anagnostou-Laoutides (2017: p. 151).

6 Just. Epit. 15, 4.

7 Li (2013: p. 54), Sima (1994: p. 41).

8 Li (2013: p. 99).

9 Puett (2004: pp. 68–72), Li (2013: pp. 144–145), Karlgren (1974: pp. 200–201).

10 Palmer & Shive & Wickeri (2011: p. 158).

11 Sima (1971: pp. 80–81).

12 Sima (1971: p. 77).

13 Sima (1971: pp. 80–81).

## The rulers as chief priests

In Macedonia, the king was the main priest of his subjects, serving as their mediator with gods.<sup>14</sup> This can be seen in his duties, such as daily enactments of sacrifices meant to gain the gods' favour with respect to important state issues, such as warfare.<sup>15</sup> This duty lasted to Alexander the Great, who performed sacrifices daily.<sup>16</sup>

As for Seleucids, there is evidence of kings making sacrifices in non-Greek contexts, such as Antiochus III. participating in the Babylonian New Year festival and sacrificing to the Babylonian gods.<sup>17</sup> Vitality for the natives, the festival was supposed to make gods renew the world order.<sup>18</sup> There is also a record of Seleucid Greek cities honouring their kings for their "piety shown to (our) temples".<sup>19</sup> This all indicates kings' participation in religious activities in the interest of their subjects. Along with the right to appoint religious officials,<sup>20</sup> and their arbitration in questions of religious propriety,<sup>21</sup> it can be said that Seleucid kings did have a similar role to Macedonian ones. This is similar to Persian Achaemenid rulers gaining divine favour from their chief god Ahura Mazda for themselves and their people.<sup>22</sup> However, there seems to be no record of Seleucids worshipping Ahura Mazda in any significant way. The participation in the Babylonian ritual, as well as in religious activities at Borsippa and Uruk,<sup>23</sup> testifies that partaking in local and regional cults of the empire was a practice existing in the Seleucid empire.

As for ancient China: by sacrificing to gods, Shang kings also ensured the well-being of the state, the people, and the royal family along with their own.<sup>24</sup> Shang kings offered sacrifices to gain divine favours such as good harvests and protection in wars from Shangdi (and other gods of their divine pantheon of dead ancestors).<sup>25</sup> After their fall to Zhou dynasty, Zhou royal ancestral cult as the basis of the state cult did not differ significantly from Shang, with Shangdi being joined with the deity Heaven at the top of the ancestral pantheon.<sup>26</sup> Later on, after Qin united China and Han dynasty adopted their state cult, this role of kings stayed the same – Western Han emperors were portrayed as

14 Christesen & Murray (2010: pp. 429, 440), Hammond (1989: pp. 21–22).

15 Christesen & Murray (2010: p. 440), Arr. Anab. 7.25.2, Curt. 4.6.24.

16 Hammond (1989: p. 22), Plut. Vit. Alex. 23, Arr. Anab. 7, 23.

17 Kuhrt (1996: p. 48), Sachs & Hunger (1989: pp. 327–335).

18 Bottéro (2001: p. 158).

19 „εὐσεβείας ἔνεκεν τῆς εἰς τὸ ἱερόν“, OGI 219, own translation.

20 Ma (2000: p. 122); this could also explain the Seleucid kings' lack of participation in religious activities. Malay (1983: pp. 7–17).

21 OGI 224.

22 Brosius (2021: pp. 90, 92), Skjaervo (2013: p. 554). This also seems to be confirmed by some of the Achaemenid inscriptions from Persepolis, e.g. Kent (1950: pp. 135–136).

23 Kuhrt (1996: pp. 44–51), Sherwin-White & Kuhrt (1991: pp. 75–77).

24 Li (2013: p. 102).

25 Li (2013: p. 99). For the translated examples of primary sources, see Eno (2009: pp. 70–71).

26 Lewis (2007: p. 185), Puett (2004: pp. 66–68).

still charged with the conduct of sacrifices and other religious acts on the general behalf, like e.g. in some of their imperial hymns:<sup>27</sup>

“In the steadfastness of the great norm  
 [We] receive the shining of the [Heavenly] Emperor!  
 To the joy of the people below  
 may sons and grandsons maintain the brilliance!  
 Receiving and following, mild and gentle,  
 [We] obtain the brilliance of the [Heavenly] Emperor!  
 The chosen offerings are superbly fragrant,  
 may [We] live long and remain unforgotten!”<sup>28</sup>

The emperors of Qin and Han also engaged in the practice of appropriating local cults through imperial journeys and the extension of imperial commanderies, with sacrifices and ceremonies made in the regional cultic places to deities.<sup>29</sup> The intention behind the practice was, among other things, to integrate regional cults into the imperial religious system with the state cults at its top, and amassing divine favour.<sup>30</sup>

## The deification of a ruler

During the 4th century BC there were first cases in Macedonia of deifications (or near-deifications) of the deceased rulers, such as Amyntas III. and his son Philip II., who both had a shrine next to their tombs at Aigai.<sup>31</sup> There are also the first indications of a deified living ruler: during the festival held right before his assassination in 336 BC, as statue of king Philip II. was exhibited among the statues of other gods,<sup>32</sup> and Alexander the Great received divine honors during his lifetime.<sup>33</sup> These tendencies have notable precursors in ancient Greek history, e.g. the case of Theogenes, an athlete deified for his exceptional physical prowess and supernatural signs connected to him.<sup>34</sup>

The tendencies for the deification of Macedonian kings were continued by Seleucids, starting with the cult of Seleucus I., who received a cult posthumously from his son, Antiochus I.<sup>35</sup> Afterwards, Seleucid rulers regularly received divine worship and cults<sup>36</sup>

27 Pines (2014: pp. 275–276), Kern (1996: pp. 43–44, 51), Chavannes (1898: pp. 614, 611).

28 Translation by Kern (1996: p. 43).

29 Puett (2004: pp. 238, 241), Bujard (2009: pp. 782, 784), Sima (1993: pp. 16–18).

30 Bujard (2009: pp. 782, 787–790), Puett (2004: pp. 304–305).

31 Hammond (1989: p. 151).

32 Chaniotis (2005: p. 434), Diod. Sic. 16.92.5.

33 Christesen & Murray (2010: p. 443), Puett (2004: pp. 235–236), Din. 1.93.

34 Ekroth (2007: p. 101), Paus. 6.11.2–9.

35 Hammond (2000: p. 151), App. *Syr.* 63.

36 OGI 246.

with temples, priesthoods, sacrifices, and festivals.<sup>37</sup> Epithets were used to refer to their divine nature, such as Theos (the god) for Antiochus II. or Soter (the saviour), a title commonly used for gods, born by Antiochus I.<sup>38</sup> Some living kings were also deified: Antiochus III. mentions in his letters a divine cult dedicated to him established during his lifetime.<sup>39</sup> Notably, this practice of deification seems to be in stark contrast with the Achaemenid royal ideology, where kings claimed to be representatives of Ahura Mazda (and not gods), as stated e.g. in Persepolis inscriptions.<sup>40</sup>

As for ancient China, there was an old tradition of worshipping deified ancestors dating back to Shang, with a state cult formed from the deceased rulers and members of the royal family.<sup>41</sup> Zhou dynasty had a similar ancestor cult.<sup>42</sup> After their fall, the ancestor cults did not vanish: Zhou ancestral worship was adapted by new rulers for the (not necessarily Zhou-linked) cults of their own families, even though the ancestral worship lost its political relevance towards the Warring States period.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, Western Han established a cult of their imperial ancestors, with great tombs served by specialized staff with sacrifices and festivities.<sup>44</sup>

With Qin Shi Huang's conquest of all the Warring States during the latter half of the 3rd century BC, the institution of the emperor was established. It included divine aspects, among them the title Huangdi.<sup>45</sup> The word 'di' in this title was also used as a title for deified dead monarchs (and later the living ones),<sup>46</sup> gods such as the directional deities of Qin, or Shangdi. For the First Emperor, this title signified his status as a semi-divine ruler.<sup>47</sup> After Han toppled Qin, they adopted the Huangdi title.<sup>48</sup> The emperor Wu of Han also made sacrifices on the sacred mountains meant to enable communion with gods, elevating him to their divine status, giving him their powers and immortality.<sup>49</sup> In this way, he sought to emulate men-turned-gods such as the Yellow Emperor (or Yellow Di) of the Five Gods of Qin and Western Han. In the words of emperor Wu' advisors:

“...he<sup>50</sup> shall commune with the spirits at the Feng and Shan sacrifices. Of all the seventy-two rulers who attempted the Feng and Shan, only the Yellow Emperor was able to ascend Mt.

37 Chaniotis (2005: pp. 438–439).

38 Svoboda (1973: pp. 57, 581), App. Syr. 65, OGI 246.

39 Sherwin-White & Kuhrt (1993: p. 205), OGI 224.

40 Brosius (2021: p. 90), Kent (1950: pp. 135–136).

41 Puett (2004: p. 49).

42 Puett (2004: pp. 66–68).

43 Cook (2009: p. 238).

44 Lewis (2007: p. 188), Loewe (1986c: p. 666).

45 Pines (2014: p. 263), Sima (1994: pp. 136, 10); also e.g. Kern (2000: pp. 25–34).

46 Cook (2009: p. 246).

47 Pines (2014: p. 268), Puett (2004: pp. 239–240).

48 Sima (1971: p. 106). The 'huangdi' title is here translated simply as 'emperor'.

49 Puett (2004: pp. 237–245), Bujard (2009: pp. 782, 787), Sima (1993: pp. 26, 35–44).

50 A descendant of Gaozu.

Tai and perform the Feng!...The ruler of Han shall also ascend the mountain and perform the Feng, and when he has done this, then he will become an immortal and will climb up to heaven!”<sup>51</sup>

## The authority and legitimacy derived by rulers from gods

The authority the Macedonian kings derived from their ancestor Zeus came from the passing of divine power from father to son and thus from the veneration of the king by his people, one of the bases on which the king’s legitimacy stood.<sup>52</sup> It is in this way the Macedonians treated Alexander after his recovery from a sickness:

“Each of the men grasped his right hand and thanked him as if he were a deity come to help them. The Macedonians have a natural tendency to venerate their royalty...”<sup>53</sup>

Apart from Zeus, Macedonians were (through the Temenid myth of Argead origin) descended from Heracles, a man who was promised a world rule by Zeus<sup>54</sup> and later became god whom Alexander the Great sought to emulate and even surpass.<sup>55</sup>

With Seleucid dynasty, there came changes: as was mentioned earlier, Apollo (also a son of Zeus) started to be considered the founder of the dynasty. Along with him and Zeus, Heracles was also worshipped; as a Seleucid ancestor, he legitimized their rule, which was not derived only from the ancestor Zeus, ruler of the gods, and Apollo, but also from the promise that was given by Zeus to Heracles of world rule.<sup>56</sup> Though other gods were propagated through official means too, it is Zeus and Apollo who held the most importance rather consistently throughout Seleucid era, as evidenced by their appearance on Seleucid coinage.<sup>57</sup>

In ancient China, Shang kings held legitimacy due to their positions as the chief sacrificers to the royal pantheon, with their high god Shangdi at its top.<sup>58</sup> After Zhou came to power, a deity called Heaven (Tian) was made the ultimate divine authority ruling the world,<sup>59</sup> along with Shangdi:<sup>60</sup> Heaven blessed Zhou with its Mandate, enabling them to

51 Sima (1993: p. 36), translated by Burton Watson.

52 Hammond (1989: pp. 21–22), King (2010: p. 376).

53 „pro se quisque dexteram ejus amplexi, grates habebant, velut praesenti Deo. Namque haud facile dictu est, praeter ingenitam illi genti erga Reges suos venerationem...“, Curt. 3.6.15, translation by John Yardley – Yardley and Hammond have this passage marked as Curt. 3.6.17., but it is the same passage.

54 Hom. *Il.* 19.95–133.

55 Anagnostou-Laoutides (2017: p. 162), Arr. *Anab.* 1.4.5., 2.24.6., 3.3.2, 4.28.4.

56 Anagnostou-Laoutides (2017: pp. 161–167, 175), Lib. 11.91, Hom. *Il.* 19.95–133.

57 Zahle (1990: pp. 127–133).

58 Li (2013: p. 102).

59 Palmer (2011: p. 158).

60 Li (2013: pp. 144–145); in early periods of Western Zhou, Shangdi and Heaven are often interchangeable: Puett (2004: pp. 54–60).



overthrow Shang, who transgressed against it through immoral actions.<sup>61</sup> Thus, royal legitimacy was derived from Heaven's consent, its grant of mandate, and the right to rule to Zhou founding kings, further inherited by their progeny.<sup>62</sup>

With the fall of Zhou and their feudal system, new states were formed by their former vassals: unwilling to base legitimacy on the foundations of the system they chose to abandon, they sought the sources of divine authority elsewhere.<sup>63</sup> Thus, the legitimacy and authority of new rulers were based on other deities.<sup>64</sup> One of the new states, Qin, raised its own state cult, starting (among others) with the worship of the White Di, a directional deity of the West (with Qin being the westernmost Chinese state), in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC.<sup>65</sup> As Qin slowly grew and started to conquer China, forming the first Chinese empire, the other directional gods, Yellow, Green and Red, were added to this state cult as the religious expression of Qin conquest.<sup>66</sup>

After Qin collapsed at the end of the third century BC Western Han borrowed their cult of the four directional gods, with Gaozu adding a fifth one; Han emperors attributed these Five Gods with ultimate authority with respect to their rule over the empire.<sup>67</sup> Later, during the reign of Emperor Wu, a new deity was added above them: the Taiyi, or Great Unity, a deity seen during Western Han times as a sky god,<sup>68</sup> fittingly joined with a cult of a deity called Empress Earth.<sup>69</sup>

This led to a dispute between two court factions on the proper choice of imperial cult: on one side, there were supporters of the cults of the Five Gods and Taiyi, with imperial tours being made and sacrifices enacted during them in order to appropriate cults and divine support; the other side were (mostly Confucian) scholars who aimed to replace this system with what they perceived to be the old Zhou cult of the Heaven, with the intent of centralizing the state cult and cutting the expenses for the maintenance of the previous system, with its numerous ancestral burial temples and costly imperial journeys.<sup>70</sup> Gradually the old Qin-Han cults began to be replaced with a cult of Heaven,

61 Li (2013: pp. 143–144), Puett (2004: pp. 57–58), Müller (1879: pp. 181–188).

62 Li (2013: p. 144).

63 Lewis (2007: p. 185), Cook (2009: p. 238).

64 Lewis (2007: p. 185).

65 Loewe (1974: p. 167), Sima (1993: p. 7).

66 Lewis (2007: p. 186), Loewe (1986c: pp. 661–662), Sima (1993: pp. 8, 11).

67 Lewis (2007: pp. 186–187), Loewe (1986c: p. 663), Sima (1993: pp. 18–19, 20–21, 22, 24–25). The sacrifices offered to Five Gods in reaction to favourable omens confirming imperial rule in these passages from *Shiji* seems to support this notion. The importance of the Five Gods could be also seen in the hesitance of emperor Wu towards a proposal to sacrifice to Great Unity instead of them (Sima 1993: pp. 35–38).

68 Lewis (2007: p. 187), Loewe (1986c: p. 663), Sima (1993: pp. 26–27). The deity seems to be specifically asserted to be a celestial deity within the context of establishing its cult, Sima (1993: p. 26).

69 Loewe (1986c: p. 663), Lewis (2007: p. 187), Sima (1993: p. 663); the deity is called 'Earth Lord'.

70 Bujard (2009: pp. 777–779, 789–790), Puett (2004: p. 307), Loewe (1986c: pp. 663–668), Sima (1993: pp. 3, 6, 24–39, also 30–40, 42, 43, 45, 41), Loewe (1974: pp. 166, 175–176, 179–180), for the literati's proposals of the reforms, eg. see the Loewe's translation of the memorandum mentioning the proposed reforms: Loewe (1974: pp. 171–172), Ban (1944: pp. 375, 378–389).

until, following the fall of Western Han and the rise of the usurper Wang Mang, the high god of Zhou dynasty replaced them as the main state deity.<sup>71</sup>

As for the cult of the deceased emperors, though no longer the main state cult, it still retained some aspects of it. Han emperors repeatedly stressed that the protection of ancestral temples was one of their main tasks, and the presentation of a new emperor in the temple of the founder Gaozu was a necessary part of the enthronement ceremony.<sup>72</sup> This suggests that the role of the ancestors in the establishment of authority and legitimacy in Shang and Zhou times continued to be at least somewhat important down to the times of Western Han.

## Comparison and analysis

Now that the overview of the sacral aspects of both empires has been given, we can discuss the forms they took, how similar or dissimilar they made both empires and why.

In the element of the divine origin of rulers, we find similarity between both states. Seleucid dynasty, just like Western Han, had myths narrating their divine ancestry, in Seleucid case from Zeus, Apollo and Heracles, and in Western Han from the Five Gods (specifically from Red Di), and also from Heaven in their capacity as Sons of Heaven. This seems to have been caused by the need to establish a link between the gods legitimating and authorizing the rulers, which these deities were. This link also seems to be highlighted in both cases by the myths giving accounts of the miraculous and divine conception of the kings, and the signs given at their birth prophesizing their future rule.

Why was this so? I would argue that in both cases the rulers largely relied on adapting traditional cultural patterns employed by their predecessors. This can be seen in Seleucid adaptation of Argead ancestors Zeus and Heracles, notably in the fact that they derived their ancestry from Temenos, just as the Argead did.<sup>73</sup> Similarly, Western Han, aside from deriving ancestry from the state gods of their Qin predecessors (and thus following their trend of adapting Qin political institutions),<sup>74</sup> are also following the tradition of other culturally prominent dynasties before them, like Shang and Zhou, who employed their own myths of divine origin. This seems to indicate that both dynasties' royal ideologies relied on the tried and tested methods of the past. There were also innovations: Seleucids took Apollo as an additional ancestor god, and Western Han derived their descent from Red Di instead of the White Di of Qin, in line with their opposition to and criticism of Qin<sup>75</sup> dynasty.

As for the roles of the rulers as chief priests, these were also present in both cases, which are both fundamentally similar to each other: in both empires, rulers engaged in

71 Lewis (2007: pp. 187–188), Loewe (1986c: pp. 663–664).

72 Ban (1955: pp. 61–62), Ban (1938: p. 229).

73 Lib. 11.91. It would also probably help the Seleucid dynasty in gaining legitimacy in the eyes of their Macedonian subjects and followers.

74 Loewe (1986b: p. 119).

75 Loewe (1986c: p. 709), Loewe (1986a: pp. 731–732).

religious activities on behalf of their subjects, and in both cases, they participated in the regional cults of their empires. Where does this similarity come from? Aside from the keeping of tradition, it seems that this was caused by the similar situational conditions of both empires: the rulers answered similarly to the similar worries and needs of their subjects. Just as Shang kings in the far past sacrificed to their gods in order to gain good harvests, Emperor Wu of Han also

“journeyed about the empire and performed sacrifices to the Earth Lord, praying for the sake of the common people that the grain might grow well.”<sup>76</sup>

And just as the kings of Macedonia sacrificed to ask gods for victory in battle,<sup>77</sup> so did Seleucid kings ask gods for

“the overthrow of the countries of my enemies, the achievement of my battle-wishes against my enemies, permanent victories...”<sup>78</sup>

The conspicuous use of the word ‘my’ in this passage should be noted: it shows that the religious acts on the public’s behalf intersected with personal interests. Just as Emperor Wu sought personal immortality, so did Antiochus I. also seek benefits for himself and his family in the text cited above.<sup>79</sup> However, since victories in the wars led by rulers are generally in the interests of their subjects, and also with occurrences of Seleucid kings showing piety to the temples of their Greek subject cities,<sup>80</sup> and participating in religious ceremonies with vital importance for non-Greek subjects, such as the Babylonian New Year festival, it seems probable that the religious interests of subjects were (at least outwardly) answered to by Seleucid kings in their religious capacity.

Both dynasties engaged in the practice of deifying their rulers, mostly the dead ones, but sometimes also the living. As for why they developed ancestral cults with dead rulers regularly elevated to godhood, it seems that these were in each case a result of significantly different historical evolution. In ancient China, the worship of dead ancestors practiced by Shang, and adopted by later dynasties, was originally derived from the acknowledgment of the ancestors’ position in the social and familial hierarchy, hence their (divine) power.<sup>81</sup> In ancient Greece then, the practice of deifying humans was a result of the tendencies in the Greek world to ascribe divine status to individuals with extraordinary prowess (beyond the simple worship of the dead)<sup>82</sup> like the athlete Theogenes; and if an athlete could be viewed as a god, there was all the more reason to recognize the

76 Sima (1993: p. 34).

77 Curt. 4.6.24.

78 Sherwin-White & Kuhrt (1991: p. 77).

79 Sherwin-White & Kuhrt (1991: pp. 75–77).

80 OGI 219.

81 Keightley (1986: pp. 255–256), Puett (2004: pp. 44–48, 77). Similar seems to hold for Western Han, as evidenced by the political and ceremonial importance of the temple of the dynasty founder Gaozu.

82 Felton (2007: pp. 86–88).

divinity in rulers with their enormous political, military and religious power, especially after the great feats of Philip II. and Alexander the Great.<sup>83</sup> In both cases, we can see the same underlying reason: the recognition of power, whether the power inherent in the hierarchical position of Chinese ancestors or the power acknowledged in extraordinary individuals.

Attempts to deify a living ruler also took place in both empires, where monarchs had titles implying divinity, such as Theos or Huangdi. There was also the cult of a living king established by Antiochus III., and the sacrifices of Emperor Wu intended to gain him immortality. These especially seem peculiar, since on Seleucid side, there seems to be an absence of efforts to achieve a more physical apotheosis of a king. Why are they absent (or do they just seem to be due to a lack of evidence)? Does their occurrence in Western Han imply their presence in Seleucid empire? It certainly cannot be entirely ruled out, since there existed ideas about and methods of gaining divine attributes, such as immortality and supernatural powers, in ancient Greece too.<sup>84</sup> The importance of Heracles, a man who became god, for Seleucids, could also imply the presence of such ideas (more on that later). For now, however, it seems uncertain. The absence of immortality/divinity seeking in terms of a sacrifice to gods, however, can be explained – while such ancient Chinese rituals traditionally had the function of enabling communion between gods and men, and could allow the ruler to partake in divinity,<sup>85</sup> the ancient Greek sacrifices had different meaning (among others): they demarked borders between the worlds of mortals and gods.<sup>86</sup>

As for the authority derived by the rulers from gods, this too did take similar forms in both empires. Legitimacy was largely derived from celestial gods, such as Zeus and Apollo on Seleucid side and Taiyi and Heaven for Western Han. As for why Seleucids elevated Apollo to the level of Zeus, it seems that it was, among other possible reasons,<sup>87</sup> due to his connection with Seleucus I. (as his progenitor and the one prophesizing his kingship) and thus a founder of Seleucid royal family, as a part of establishing a dynastic tradition.<sup>88</sup> But what about Heracles and the Five Gods? What do they owe their importance to? I would argue that at least part of the reason for them being so important lies in their common function discernible through their parallels: Heracles was promised by Zeus to rule over the world. Based on this right, his descendants, both the Argeads in the person of Alexander the Great and later Seleucids, conquered and held their empire.<sup>89</sup> In the same vein, the Five Gods were gods of world directions, and therefore rulers of the respective parts of the world. Based on that entitlement, their descendants, both Qin

83 Christesen & Murray (2010: pp. 441–442).

84 Puett (2004: pp. 87–94).

85 Puett (2004: pp. 257–258, 287–315), Bujard (2009: pp. 787–790). Eg. Sima (1993: p. 26).

86 Bremmer (2007: p. 140), Zaidman & Pantel (1989: pp. 164–169), Burkert (1985: p. 57). And even with the Mesopotamian cultural influence taken into the account, there still doesn't seem to be anything relevantly comparable with immortality-seeking Han sacrifices. Bottéro (2001: pp. 125–131, 158–164, 105–106).

87 Anagnostou-Laoutides (2017: pp. 149–175).

88 Sherwin-White & Kuhrt (1993: pp. 27–28).

89 Anagnostou-Laoutides (2017: p. 162), Arr. Anab. 1.4.5., 2.24.6., 3.3.2, 4.28.4.

dynasty with its First Emperor and the subsequent Western Han dynasty, conquered and held their empire, adding one deity of world direction after another to their state cult as they were conquering it. This seems to indicate that the empires needed a conquest god, legitimizing their very conception, hence their importance. It is further interesting (and deserves an investigation beyond the scope of this article) that these deities were closely connected to living rulers' deification. As was said, Heracles, a man who became a god, was worshipped and emulated by Alexander, who saw the establishment of his own divine cult. Similarly, Huangdi, the Yellow God, was used as the model for Emperor Wu of Han in his own attempts at deification.<sup>90</sup> This would be in line with Michael Puett, who points to the recurrence of deification claims in connection to the emergence of empires.<sup>91</sup>

## Conclusion

The comparison of Seleucid and Western Han empires shows us that these two had very much in common in terms of forms their sacral rulership took: In both, their rulers derived their ancestry from gods, with Seleucid being framed as descendants of Zeus, Apollo and Heracles, and Western Han emperors as the descendants of one of their Five Gods, while both inherited this practice as a part of their cultural tradition, which was especially old in the case of Western Han. In both empires, rulers acted as mediators between gods and humans, performing religious activities in various parts of their empires on behalf of their people. The practice of deification of rulers, with cults of ancestors granted their own temples and sacrifices, is also shared, just as the deification of living monarchs; here, however, we may see a major difference in the manner of it, with Western Han trying to gain rather more physical godhood and immortality through sacrifices. While this can be partly explained by different evolution of religious ideas about sacrifices, it also raises a question as to whether some similar practices could have been employed by Seleucids too. Both dynasties also derived their right to rule from worship and connection to celestial rulers of gods, such as Zeus, Heaven or Taiyi. But perhaps most importantly, there also existed an institution of deities that were the legitimators not only of the rule itself but of imperial rule and of the creation of an empire through conquest on both sides, such as Heracles and the Five Gods, the connection of which to deification claims should perhaps be further investigated. This close similarity between both states can be rather striking. However, while some mutual influence between them does not necessarily have to be denied, their closeness seems to be explainable in terms of the historical processes that took place in their respective cultural areas, and therefore it is unnecessary to assume that one influenced the other. While this article in no way claims to contain all that could be said about the subject, hopefully it will help contex-

90 Sima (1993: p. 36), Loewe (1974: p. 184), Puett (2004: pp. 242–245).

91 Puett (2004: pp. 225–236).

tualize the character of these states, which doesn't seem to be as different as one could expect from an ancient Hellenistic kingdom and an ancient Chinese empire.

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