



THE ATHENS GREEK RELIGION SEMINAR, November 12, 2019 at 15h.

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***Isotheos between Alexander and Augustus: From ritual equation to conceptual hierarchy***

**ABSTRACT**

The decades following the death of Alexander witnessed the multiplication of ritual honours granted to outstanding political leaders, mainly on the initiative of cities, but also of non-institutional agents such as members of elite groups and associations. *Isotheoi timai*, i.e. ‘god-like honours’, is a formula attested in sources of the Hellenistic and Roman period in relation to this practice and has generally been interpreted by scholars as the encompassing category by which the Greeks referred to the bestowal of cultic honours upon monarchs, great benefactors, and emperors. At the same time, scholarship has abundantly discussed the question of which implications the prefix *iso-* (‘equal to’) entails with regard to the positioning of ritually honoured leaders in relation to the divine sphere. Current publications often support the assumption that *isotheos* implied an intermediate status of the monarchs between humankind and the divine.

However, a detailed analysis of the Hellenistic evidence urges us to reconsider various fundamental aspects of this thesis. First, in the early Hellenistic period, the formula *isotheoi timai* is not more common than other comparable expressions explaining that a political leader will share in the honours of the gods; when a multiplication of its occurrences can be identified (in the 1<sup>st</sup> cent. BC), this formula refers to non-royal civic benefactors. Second, Hellenistic decrees - our main source of information about the establishment and functioning of cults for political leaders - do not deal with the ontological implications of granting ritual honours to human benefactors as to, or on the side of, traditional gods, as their purpose is only to effectively embed the new rituals within the existing religious life of the community. Third, and most importantly, the intermediate connotation generally ascribed to the adjective *isotheos* in honorific language cannot be traced before the late-Hellenistic



period, and more precisely during the Augustan age, when we can identify a change in the reference of *isotheos* from outstanding honours to a certain category of men deserving them. A fundamental question then arises of whether this process of hierarchization should be seen as an internal evolution of the honorific practice in the Greek world or as a direct impact of Romanization and of the transfer of the Roman juridical approach to the status of recipients of honour and cult.