

The Path to Deification in Fifth-Century Greece

Scholars frequently have claimed that deification of a living figure in ancient Greece arrived no earlier than Lysander and was not a significant concept until the time of Alexander the Great or shortly afterwards (Robinson 1943; Flower 1988; Hammond and Price 2005). I grant that Lysander was apparently the first living figure to be deified by someone other than himself and to have accepted this honor. I also grant that deification did not occur on a grand scale until the Hellenistic era. However, in this paper I demonstrate that the traditional view of heroes rooted in the Homeric tradition and the honoring of dead and living figures as heroes encouraged the blurring of the distinction between the divine and the human and led, eventually, either to the honoring of powerful figures as god-like or to full deification in fifth- and early fourth-century Greece.

The Homeric epics, though ambiguous in places, carry the potential for viewing powerful humans as divine. In the *Iliad*, heroes are at least in some ways god-like but are far inferior to the gods, in part because they are mortal (e.g. 5.436-443, 12.310-328, 21.108-113). In the *Odyssey*, however, the gods grant some heroes immortality (e.g. 5.92, 135-136, 333-335; 11.298-304). Throughout epic, terms of immortality and divinity are associated with one another and are contrasted with terms of mortality and humanness. For example, ἀμβροσίη, the drink of the gods, is related to ἀμβρόσιος, meaning “immortal” and “divine,” and ἀμβρόσιος itself is a compound of ἀ-, expressing absence, and βρόσιος, which is related to the term βροτός, a noun frequently translated as “mortal man.” Therefore, by acquiring immortality epic heroes enter the realm of the divine.

Toward the end of the Archaic age and into the Classical age the line between heroes and gods is not as distinct as in the Homeric epics. Fifth-century sources, including Pindar and

Herodotus, as well as later sources, such as Plutarch and Pausanias, indicate that at least by the late sixth century the worship of heroes was at times nearly indistinguishable from the worship of the gods. The distinction between the human and the divine continued to erode when fifth- and early fourth-century Greeks gave heroic or divine honors to people who had recently died. The most notable objects of worship are Harmodius and Aristogeiton, known as the “tyrannicides,” and the war dead of various city-states. Greeks in this period, then, sometimes placed both historical figures and figures in living memory into the same class as heroes and gods in the way they spoke of them and in the ceremonies they held in their honor. This raises the question, “Was it, then, a great break with accepted belief to render to the living that acknowledgement of his services to which he would be entitled upon his death?” (Boak 294)

Finally, the Greeks began deifying living figures in the fifth and early fourth centuries. The most well-known deification of this period is known from Plutarch’s *Life of Lysander*. However, Diogenes Laertius also mentions that Empedocles, a fifth-century figure, was a god. Perhaps Empedocles thought he was a god and encouraged this belief in others (Currie 2005). If this is so, it is an example of the deification of a living figure, albeit a self-deification, before the deification of Lysander. In *Sayings of the Spartans*, Plutarch also mentions the Thasians’ attempt to deify Agesilaus, a fifth-century Spartan. Lastly, Clearchus of Heraclea, an early fourth-century tyrant, deified himself (Boak 1916). Although Empedocles and Clearchus deified themselves and Agesilaus rejected deification by the Thasians, these examples still indicate that some fifth and fourth century Greeks were comfortable with accepting living figures as gods.

By the fifth and early fourth centuries, then, the distinction between the divine and the human had been blurred enough to allow for the deification of living figures. The deifications of Alexander the Great and his Successors were not random phenomena that occurred in a vacuum.

Rather, Greek thought about the gods, heroes, and humans, as well as Greek practice toward mythical, dead, and living figures, prepared the way for later Hellenistic deifications.

Works Cited

Boak, A.E.R. "The Theoretical Basis of the Deification of Rulers in Antiquity." *The Classical Journal* 11.5 (1916): 293-297.

Currie, Bruno. *Pindar and the Cult of Heroes*. New York: Oxford UP, 2005.

Flower, Michael A. "Agesilaus of Sparta and the Origins of the Ruler Cult." *The Classical Quarterly* 38.1 (1988): 123-134.

Hammond, Mason, and Simon R.F. Price. "Ruler-cult." *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*. 3rd rev. ed. Ed. Simon Hornblower and Anthony Spawforth. Oxford UP, 2005. *Oxford Reference Online*. 21 November 2012.

Robinson, C.A., Jr. "Alexander's Deification." *The American Journal of Philology* 64.3 (1943): 286-301.