Gewoner dan gedacht
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Summary

At the end of the Hellenistic era, a king, Antiochos I of Commagene (69-36 BC), depicts himself on a relief stele as a Persian dressed ruler shaking hands with the naked Greek god Heracles in one of the temples of his cult. This stele is just one example in the huge range of buildings, sculptures and inscriptions that Antiochos, the ruler of a minor kingdom on the western bank of the Euphrates, erected between the expanding Parthian and Roman empire, constructed during his more then thirty year reign. His ruler cult combined, on the one hand, Greek/Macedonian and, on the other, Iranian religious philosophy, iconography, archaeological structures. The theology of his cult, as described in the Greek inscriptions that were installed in his sanctuaries, also combined these two cultures. Both Greek and Persian heritage are described as the ancestors of Antiochos’ family and cult.

This representation has led modern scholars to view the ruler cult of Antiochos as an anomaly in Hellenism, developed at the fringes of the Greek realm and incomparable with the rest of the Hellenistic kingdoms. The fact that not much is known about Commagene, except the time span of Antiochos’ reign, also added to this negative evaluation. To complicate the matters further, we also have no evidence that is not connected with Antiochos and his dynasty. This situation is partially due to the lack of archaeological investigations into matters outside the dynasty.

In this thesis I want to investigate the negative status of the Hellenistic ruler cult of Antiochos. By ignoring the Commagenian cult as the odd one out, much useful material for the study of Hellenistic religious and political developments is wasted. That is why I have selected the main issues that are common to all Hellenistic ruler cults, and compared in this way the Commagenian ruler cult to other ruler cults. These common features are the rituals, the participants and the theology of the Hellenistic ruler cults. My main question is: to what extent is the ruler cult of Commagene a typical exponent of the Hellenistic ruler cult? Ruler cult was not only a religious phenomenon, but also a political development. I therefore ask two sub questions. The first question focuses on the political fundament of Antiochos’ reign. The second question investigates the practices of the ruler cult.

These questions structure the thesis. The thesis is comprised of two parts. The first part is devoted to the sources and history of Commagene, Antiochos and his ruler cult. The first chapter offers an overview of the relevant sources. The sources are divided into three categories: archaeological, epigraphical and literature. The first two are the most useful for the study of the Commagenian cult, since ancient authors have hardly mentioned Commagene
in their writings. The second chapter gives an overview of the history and geography of Commagene. The emphasis lies on the time of Antiochos, for the obvious reasons of lack of other sources and the main focus of this thesis.

The second part of the thesis forms the core. The third chapter concentrates on the political foundation of Antiochos reign. His kingship is compared with other Hellenistic kings. It appears that his court and his royal representation as a monarch are very similar to other Hellenistic kingdoms such as the Seleucids and the Attalids of Pergamon. As a result, we can see that Antiochos kingship did not differ significantly from other Hellenistic kings. His position as a king from a minor kingdom, with a mixed population in terms of ethnicity, is comparable to some Hellenistic kings. The only aspect of his kingship that stands out, is the lack of emphasis on his military achievements in his royal representation. Hellenistic kings from the Diadochs onwards stressed their status as accomplished generals, as a way to reinforce the legitimacy of their rule. But Antiochos could not emphasise military achievements, because he was a client king of Rome.

The fourth and last chapter focuses on the ruler cult. In this chapter, research shows that, again, Antiochos’ ruler cult did not differ significantly from other Hellenistic ruler cults. The main points of comparison were rituals, participants and theology. The rituals of his cult resemble other ruler cults and the ‘normal’ cults. The main participants in Antiochos cults were the king and his family, the professionals such as priests, and the inhabitants of the kingdom. The theology or narrative of his ruler cult was difficult to assess. Antiochos ruler cult did not form an entirely new entity, but incorporated existing aspects of both Greek and local Iranian theologies. This is similar to the narrative of other Hellenistic kingdoms, where existing religious traditions influenced the theology of the ruler cult, for instance the Pharaonic traditions in Egypt.

In this thesis I have tried to show, that Antiochos’ ruler cult was not an anomaly during the Hellenistic age. It did not differ significantly from other Hellenistic ruler cults, nor did it transgress any contemporary boundaries. The status as the odd one out has been created in modern times. The ruler cult of Antiochos of Commagene was much more common than thought of until now. Hopefully this rich material for Hellenistic political and religious developments will be taken into account on a more substantial scale in future research.