

BOOK REVIEW

The Hellenistic Court. Monarchic Power and Elite Society from Alexander to Cleopatra. Edited by ANDREW ERSKINE, LLOYD LLEWELLYN-JONES AND SHANE WALLACE. Swansea, UK: The Classical Press of Wales, 2017. Pp. xxx + 442, ill. Hardback, £90. ISBN: 978-1910589625.

This volume has its origin in a conference on the Hellenistic Court held at University of Edinburgh in 2011, though it is not strictly a publication of conference proceedings as some of the papers were commissioned subsequently. The eighteen contributors from across North America and Europe are leading experts in their respective sub-fields of Hellenistic studies, a combination that has resulted in papers of a consistently high quality. As the title indicates, the aim of the volume is to examine the relationship between monarchic power and elite society, or more expressly “the role of palace institutions in the cultural and political milieu of the disparate societies that made up the Hellenistic eastern Mediterranean” in the period c. 323 – 31 BCE (xxii).

In Part I, “Development,” three papers explore the development of (respectively) royal style, royal buildings and institutions and personnel (specifically Seleucid) during the age of the early Successors. Connections are made and comparisons drawn between evolving Hellenistic practices and what existed earlier in Argead and Achaemenid settings. What Wallace sees as “intense experimentation in the representation of power and royalty” (19) helps to explicate the wide disparity of Hellenistic courts, yet clear evidence of some continuity in the function of royal space, for example at Persepolis and Pergamon, and in the relationship of king to (successively) aristocratic kinsmen, *hetairoi*, and *philoï*, is laid out by Janett Morgan and David Engels in their discussions.

Three papers in Part II, “Life at Court,” explore ways in which disparate court societies functioned beyond the developmental stage. The role of *philoï* is a dominant—though not the only—theme, and the ubiquitous presence of royal Friends supports the editors’ claim that despite wide diversity there is enough in common “to justify the use of ‘Hellenistic Court’ as the title” (xxii). Display of status through pomp and fashion was not only indicative of hierarchy within a given

court, but also, as Ivana Savalli-Lestrade points out, a matter of identity and rivalry between courts (109). Rolf Strootman argues that after the age of the Successors, *philoi* became an established aristocracy within the institution of monarchy but in what he calls a “paradox of power” the court “could also have been an instrument of the *philoi* to control the king” (124). Ivana Petrovic also describes the relationship between king and courtiers as more reciprocal than might be assumed: a balancing act “subject to constant re-evaluation and scrutiny” (152).

In Part III, “Marriage,” Sheila Ager takes a fresh approach by examining royal weddings as *events* and, as such, as being symbols of stability, prosperity, victory and empire, while Alex McAuley looks at how Seleucid brides in Cyrene, Cappadocia and Armenia, though “secondary women” in their royal status, were not mere bystanders but rather active players and even “catalysts of Hellenism” (192-4, 200).

The four papers in Part IV, “Beyond the Palace,” examine relationships and interactions between courts and cities and public life. The adoption by Hellenistic monarchs of the *polis* “habit” of partnerships with *hetairai* is, as Kostas Buraselis describes it, a mirroring by royal courts of *polis* life. Conversely, Craig Hardiman suggests that Hellenistic courts offered a paradigm for the display of wealth and luxury that elite society mirrored, though on a lesser scale, in domestic trappings and buildings. Paola Ceccarelli’s look at how members of the Seleucid court are presented to the public in official documents reveals how royal suppression of details about individuals deprived them of personal identity, the only referent being the royal authority. Dorothy Thompson highlights ways in which the Ptolemaic court, as a cultural milieu rather than a fixed space or place, along with the royal entourage functioned when travelling away from the capital.

The multi-ethnic social, cultural and political blend of Hellenistic courts is the theme of Part V, “Crossing Cultures.” Erich Gruen makes the case that royal patronage of writers of indigenous history (Berossos and Manetho, among others) was meant to bring knowledge and understanding of native traditions to the Hellenic world, namely, to Macedonian/Greek monarchs and settlers who intended to stay in the lands they had conquered. Oleg Gabelko discusses the minor monarchies in Anatolia that were not subdued by Macedonians, or only briefly; yet the ruling aristocracy “selectively borrowed elements of Greek culture and Macedonian statehood” (319) resulting in these courts being not fundamentally different from other Hellenistic monarchies. Livia Capponi examines the evidence for Jews at the Ptolemaic court, arguing that more Jews than generally conceded reached positions of prominence as trusted collaborators.

In Part VI, “Disloyalty and Death,” misconduct of courtiers at the Seleucid court is the focus of Peter Franz Mittag’s paper, touching on cases of bribery, desertion, defection, conspiracy and assassination. Actual cases of poisoning are fewer than we might expect, argues Stephanie J. Winder, who looks at poison knowledge, at its use and threat of use primarily by kings as a potent royal tool against rivals and dangerous courtiers. In the final paper Olga Palagia revisits the tombs and deceased at Vergina and Agios Athanasios, highlighting how, despite issues in identifying royal vs. elite tombs, tomb paintings appear to reflect aspects of elite court society.

The royal court with its elite society is an old subject for study, one that had largely fallen out of fashion in the later 20th century but has experienced a recent revival. This volume contributes refreshingly to that revival as the editors have succeeded in bringing together a fine collection of discussions that offer not only new insights into old topics but also introduce new approaches to the study of courts and court life in the Hellenistic period. Collectively, these essays should succeed in broadening our understanding of what ‘court’ means in terms of a physical space, a bureaucratic institution, a society and a culture.

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