Dynastic Courts
of the Hellenistic Empires

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In the Hellenistic period, royal courts became an important focus of Greek politics. Of course, most peoples and cities in the eastern Mediterranean already were accustomed to dealing with monarchs, both the Achaemenid Great King as well as his various vassal rulers (for instance the Hekatomnid satrap-kings of Karia). However, for the *poleis* of mainland Greece, the necessity to deal regularly with supranational monarchy added a new layer of government to Greek politics, even though the Macedonian kings of the Hellenistic Age rarely interfered directly in the government of cities.[1] In the remainder of the Near East, the wider political constellation changed inasmuch that after Alexander the principal ruling dynasties had become Macedonian, and the imperial elites of their kingdoms were predominantly comprised of Greek families who came originally from *poleis* of both sides of the Aegean: the so-called Friends of the King. In this chapter, the courts of (mainly) the three major Macedonian dynasties of the Hellenistic period – the Antigonids, Ptolemies, and Seleukids – will be examined as instruments of empire and as the loci for the (re)distribution of power, status, and wealth.

A royal court may be defined as consisting of a king's immediate social milieu, the physical surroundings in which he lives and the public ritual of royalty is enacted, and the larger matrix of political and economic relations converging in the dynastic household (Adamson 1999: 7). From a social point of view, a court is basically the household of a dynasty complemented by, and entwined with, the households of the aristocrats belonging to the social circle around the king, for instance military commanders and court functionaries such as the majordomo or chamberlain. A court is not a place because it can – and often does – move from place to place (a notorious case in point is the court of Alexander). The number of people belonging to a particular court is variable; courts expand and contract throughout the year in accordance with the timetable for the aulic "great events" and religious festivals.[2]

Since Norbert Elias' seminal work *Die höfische Gesellschaft* (1969), a study of the French court of the Ancien Regime in the context of the development of absolutism and the rise of the centralized national state, historians have defined the royal court in sociopolitical terms. However, many of Elias' assumptions have been adjusted or even wholly abandoned in recent scholarship, in particular his essential comprehension of the court as a "gilded cage" for the nobility, an instrument of power manipulated by the monarch.[3] Early modern absolutism likewise has been revealed to have been more an ideal than a political reality (Henshall 1992; Burke 1992b). The same, I would argue, applies to the absolutist pretensions of Hellenistic kingship.

The court culture of the three Macedonian empires developed from the Argead household of Philip and Alexander, absorbing diverse Greek, Iranian, and other influences. The courts of the lesser kingdoms of the Hellenistic Age (Pontos, Bithynia, Kommagene, Judaea, Armenia, and others) in turn were exposed to the influence of the Macedonian, particularly Seleukid, courts. The Hellenistic courts also later profoundly shaped the development of the Roman imperial court.

Due to intermarriage, competition, the presence of Greeks in the imperial elites, and a shared Graeco-Macedonian background, the courts of the three Macedonian empires were strikingly similar. There were also noticeable differences, of course. The Ptolemaic court was firmly based in Alexandria while the Seleukid court moved around the empire almost continually. The Seleukids and notably the Ptolemies maintained an elaborate court culture while the Antigonid court after Antigonos Gonatas retained a more sober, traditional Macedonian appearance. Royal women played a more profound role at the courts of the Ptolemies and Seleukids than at the Antigonid court.

Courts and Empires

The Macedonian kingdoms of the Hellenistic Age can best be understood when considered as empires, that is, relentlessly expansive polities based on conquest and composed of a diversity of localized communities, polities and ethnic groups. Especially in the ancient world, empires normally had a universalistic ideology that did not acknowledge any overlord or rival claimant to power – even if they were no longer successful in their expansionist endeavors.[4] Diversity was their essence. Hellenistic rulers were essentially the leaders of military organizations interested primarily in collecting tribute and gaining access to the resources needed to sustain their martial capabilities, and reluctant to become directly involved in the government of subject cities and territories.[5]

Maintaining good relations with cities was of vital importance for the practice of empire. Cities commanded the infrastructure and formed the loci where surpluses were collected, both of which were essential for the exercise of the empires' core business: war-making. In spite of the old truism that Chaironeia terminated the golden age of the independent *polis*, and the related formula that the slogan "freedom for the Greeks" upheld by Hellenistic kings was a hollow phrase, most cities within the hegemonial spheres of the Seleukid empire and the Ptolemaic maritime empire, were not only *de iure* but also *de facto* autonomous states (Strootman 2011b, with further literature).

Rather than coerce cities into submission at all costs, Hellenistic rulers preferred to seek peaceful cooperation with urban oligarchies. Consequently, there was much to gain for the cities, too. Rulers could offer protection and bestow on cities various benefactions, trading privileges, tax exemptions, and so forth. Thus, cities were allied to kings rather than wholly subjected to them.

Another priority of rulers was securing the allegiance of military leaders, whether centrally appointed officials or localized aristocrats, sometimes including, as in the case of the Seleukids, vassals and client kings. This required substantial rewards for success, such as land grants, booty, and honors (Sinopoli 1994: 167). This explains why many empires remain focused on conquest and military success (the Antigonid and Seleukid kingdoms are two notable cases in point) and why so many empires contract as soon expansion stagnates.

At this point it should be emphasized that the Hellenistic world was not primarily a Greek world – although contrary to a now popular view, Greek and Hellenized elites did constitute the ruling classes of the Seleukid and Ptolemaic empires and the Hellenism created and propagated at the courts did serve as a cohesive supranational elite culture, also for non-Greek civic oligarchs. Still, many of the cities and elites with which especially the Seleukid chancellery had to cooperate had a distinct non-Greek identity. The Ptolemies had to do business with the indigenous Egyptian priesthood, whose temples controlled the countryside in Egypt proper together with the Greek landholders protected by the monarchy. The large numbers of Thracian, Illyrian, Paionian, and Agrianian troops that were part of the field armies of the later Antigonids suggest that they, too, had more regular dealings with non-Greek military leaders than the Greek (epigraphical) sources imply.

The court was the focal point for all these relations. Before a process of "going out of court" began in the seventeenth century CE – that is, the gradual separation of dynastic household and government – royal courts served as the point of contact between the dynasty and the various ruling classes at the local level of the kingdom (Asch. 1991: 4; Duindam 1995: 92). The courts of Alexander and the Seleukids, on the other hand, while peripatetic, could be split if the king went on campaign while his wife (or mother) stayed put in a core region of the kingdom. Negotiations took place during the great events of the court and the dynasty, such as coronations, birth and marriage festivities, anniversaries, and various religious festivals. Newly created international festivals such as the Ptolemaia of Alexandria, the Seleukid festival at Daphne, or (to include the Attalids) the Nikephoria at Pergamon, seem to have been expressly designed to turn the court into a worldwide social magnet on a regular basis. At such occasions the core of the so-called "inner court" (the king, his family, attendants, and closest followers) expanded to include a larger "outer court" of temporary residents. As not even the Ptolemaic court was entirely static – at least as early as the reign of Ptolemy Euergetes the Ptolemies visited Egypt regularly – kings also actively approached cities and local elites. The courts of the Argeads, Antigonids, and notably the Seleukids were by nature peripatetic, following not only seasonal demands and military logic, but perhaps also civic festival calendars, since it was through personal participation in local and regional cults that the royal presence in a city was structured.

The Hellenistic Royal Court

Ancient Greek displays a variety of words for "court." Most terminology used in the sources confirms the tendency in present-day scholarship to define a court primarily in sociopolitical terms. The fact that a court is in essence a household is reflected by the use of *oikos* in Greek historiography to denote a Hellenistic royal court. This word connotes the house, property, members, and (political and economic) interests of an extended family, and could in the context of monarchy by extension mean "kingdom" (Polyb. 2.37.7).[6] The more specific term was *aulē* (e.g., Polyb. 4.42.2; Diod. 31.15a.1–3; 1 *Macc*. 2.46). Athenaios (189e) explains that this word, which generally signifies the courtyard of a mansion, came to indicate in the Hellenistic period a royal palace "because there are very spacious squares before the house of a king." Archaeology confirms that the structural design of Hellenistic palaces has as its focus one or more open courtyards, and that sometimes there were large squares in front of a palace, for instance at Demetrias, an Antigonid capital, where a Sacred Square (*hiera agora*) separated the city proper from "royal space."[7] The immediate social milieu of Hellenistic kings was therefore frequently designated with the terms "people of the court" (Polyb. 5.26.13; App. *Syr*. 45; Jos. *AJ* 12.215) or *aulikoi* (literally "courtiers": Polyb. 16.22.8; Plut. *Demetr*. 17). Another term often found is *therapeia*, "retinue." Bickerman (1938: 36) maintained that this was the *terminus technicus* for the (Seleukid) court, but the word is not used this way in official royal correspondence. Moreover, *therapeia* can indicate both the king's bodyguard (Diod. 33.4a) and his retinue in a wider sense (Polyb. 5.39.1). The term for "courtiers" appearing most often in both historiography and contemporary official documents, is "the friends of the king" – although strictly speaking this was a wider group than courtiers, also comprising relations of the king who were not present at court.

The Background to Hellenistic Court Society

Hellenistic court culture originated in fourth-century Macedon. The social composition and organization of the Argead household drastically changed as Macedon expanded and the monarchy became more autocratic. In pre-Hellenistic Macedon, the king still shared power with local barons, the so-called *hetairoi*, or companions of the king, a class of landowning, horse-riding warriors. Although official ideology presented the king as an absolute ruler, he was in practice a *primus inter pares* among the high nobility. Philip II (359–336 BCE) took the first steps in breaking the dominance of the *hetairoi*. First, he levied infantry among the common Macedonians (the *pezhetairoi*, "foot companions"), who constituted the phalanx. They were directly answerable to the king and could be used politically to counterbalance the nobility. Second, he attracted to his household men from beyond the *hetairoi* class. Philip's military successes allowed him to promote his own personal friends and followers whom he recruited not only from the ranks of the Macedonian nobility but also among Thessalians and other Greeks. Theopompos (*FGrH* 115 F 225a) expresses how the old nobles felt when finding themselves replaced by non-Macedonian favorites at court and in the army: "From the entire Greek and barbarian world men of debauched, villainous and servile character flocked to Macedon and

obtained the title Companion of Philip.'' The upsurge of Greeks, notably Thessalians, at Philip's court was also a means to bind Greek states to his person. Occasionally an ''outer court'' came into existence, consisting of representatives of Greek *poleis* and neighboring princedoms and tribes, and even Persian guest-friends.

Alexander the Great (336–323 BCE) continued his father's policy of bestowing benefices, honors, and favors upon his personal friends – some of whom were lesser Macedonian nobles, some outsiders – and of eliminating his opponents within the aristocracy in cooperation with these favorites. Because of his military successes, Alexander disposed of a vast array of riches and land to distribute among his followers. This allowed him to systematically manipulate the composition of the court and the command structure of the army, and to enforce his decisions without the consent, or even against the wishes, of the high nobility. Various anecdotes containing verbal exchanges between Alexander and Parmenion, the principal leader of the aristocratic opposition against Alexander's pursuit of absolutism, bear witness to this process (e.g., Plut. *Alex.* 29.4).

Alexander's initial strategy was to advance to prominent positions certain young men who had been royal pages together with him and now were among the seven *sōmatophylakes*, (''bodyguards''), responsible for the king's safety and personal well-being. Against tradition, Alexander promoted his *sōmatophylakes* to important positions in the army; in 325 he even broke with the traditional number of seven bodyguards by creating an eighth post for the officer of the infantry guard, Peukestas, a favorite, whose role was to support Alexander's introduction of Achaemenid court ceremonial. Thus Alexander was able to gradually remove the leaders of the old nobility and members of the former entourage of his father from senior positions at court and in the army, and replace them with his protégés. The increasingly harsh conflicts with the Macedonian aristocracy culminated in the execution of Parmenion and his sons in the winter of 330 BCE.

After the final defeat of Darius in 330, Alexander adopted aspects of Achaemenid court culture in order to transform his household into a court more befitting his status as world ruler, and in order to increase his autocratic power by ritually distancing himself from the growing number of courtiers and commanders (see Spawforth 2007). Part of this process of transformation was the creation of the chiliarchate, presumably in continuation of the Achaemenid office of the *hazarpat* (Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1980: 176). The chiliarch can perhaps be compared with the *grand-maître de l'hôtel* of the Ancien Regime (rather than with a modern prime minister), that is, a key dignitary responsible for the daily affairs of the royal household who helped regulating access to the king's person (Strootman 2007: 152; see also Meeus 2009). The introduction of Persian ceremonial furthermore helped bind the Iranian nobility to his person.

After the battle of Gaugamela (331), Alexander also promoted Persians to senior positions, most famously Darius's brother Huxšathres (Oxyathres) and the former Achaemenid grandee Mazday (Mazaios), who became satrap of Babylonia. They were allowed to call themselves *suggenēs* (''relative'') of the king, an honorific title also in use at the Achaemenid court, and had the right to greet the king with a kiss. Of course, Alexander initially may not have been able to remove all Iranian nobles from their positions even if he had wanted to. But the king probably benefited from the presence of these powerful outsiders at his court, too, as indeed the irritated reactions of several Macedonian aristocrats reveal (Arr. *Anab.* 7.11.6; Plut. *Alex.* 43). However, various

Achaemenid officials who at first had been left in office were replaced by Macedonians from Alexander's inner circle upon the king's return from the east. For instance, Orxines, the satrap of Persis, was accused of maladministration and summarily executed to make place for Peukestas.

The Friends of the King

Like Philip and Alexander, the Diadochs tried to select their closest collaborators on the basis of loyalty and merit. Lysimachos, Antigonos, Seleukos, and Ptolemy all benefited from warfare and conquest, which supplied them with land, wealth and honor to distribute among their followers.

The transition from pre-Hellenistic Macedonian court society to the Hellenistic court societies was marked by the replacement of "companion of the king" by "friend of the king" as the genuine Greek term for someone belonging to a social circle connected with the monarchy.[8] "Friend" (*philos*) in the course of time acquired a somewhat more formal connotation in some contexts, but up until the end of the Hellenistic period the most powerful Friends remained attached to the royal household by means of informal ties of ritualized friendship known to the Greeks as *philia*. Royal *philia* is a broad term indicating any friendly relationship between the king and private persons, including those not present at court. The *philoi* of the king were of varied ethnic origin, though they were primarily citizens of Greek *poleis* (Habicht 1958; O'Neil 2003, 2006; Strootman 2007: 124–134). They were drawn into the orbit of the court from an immense area, coming even from cities beyond the empires. For instance, at the court of Antiochos the Great (223–187 BCE), out of a total of 41 friends whose place of origin has been recorded by Polybios and Livy, more than 50 percent came from cities outside the actual Seleukid sphere of influence (Strootman 2007: 126). The Seleukids relied particularly on Greeks from Asia Minor and the Aegean, even after their Anatolian empire had been lost in 188 BCE. That said, it is also noticeable that within the open and cosmopolitan social framework of the Hellenistic courts, a minority of Macedonian nobles continued to dominate the highest stratum of the court societies of the three major dynasties, although their number continually decreased even in the Antigonid kingdom.

As we have seen, Alexander left many former Achaemenid grandees in crucial positions following the defeat of Darius in 330, but attempted to replace them after his return from Baktria and India. The indigenous elites reacted to their exclusion from the center of power by retreating to their provincial power bases in relatively peripheral regions like northern Anatolia, Armenia and the Zagros Range. From there, Iranian principalities such as Pontos, Atropatane, and Parsa gradually emerged, states initially forming part, one way or other, of the Seleukid imperial superstructure. The foundation of this was Seleukos Nikator's good relations with Iranian aristocracies, who presumably helped him pacify conquered territories and gave him access to the manpower resources of the Iranian east, where heavy cavalry was recruited.[9] The number of Iranians that formed part of the social circles surrounding the royal family must have been substantial – also as a result of constant intermarriage with lesser Iranian dynasties. At the Ptolemaic court of the second and first centuries BCE, Egyptians turn up as favorites, that is, outsiders promoted to high office to offset the power of the established court society. This said,

it remains noticeable that the formal *philoi* even of the Seleukids and Ptolemies were Greeks or men who cultivated an Hellenic identity.

The Paradox of Power

By sharing power with others, kings inevitably risk losing power. This is the recurring dilemma of all despotic, personal forms of rulership: handing out favors and land will initially create a group loyal to the king, but almost as a rule this will eventually burden the ruler with newly established interest groups defending their own privileges instead of working in the interest of the king (Duindam 1995: 50–51).

Kings needed helpers who were both competent and controllable. Ideally, they chose as their closest collaborators men who could not themselves claim positions of importance by right of birth or otherwise, as such men are least difficult to remove from high office and thus more loyal. In other words, kings tend to select their courtiers as much on personal grounds as for their military or other professional capabilities. In practice, however, kings rarely had full control over the social composition of their courts. The first generation of Diadochs may have had exceptional opportunities to "hand-pick" their friends, but not even they had at their disposal the absolute power needed to appoint men of their own choosing to all crucial posts at court and in the army. The loyalty of the *philoi* therefore always remained a matter of constant concern for kings. The principal danger was not revolt. Rebellion against the legitimate monarch was difficult to conceive of or foment and furthermore hazardous, since the armed forces were normally loyal to the dynasty. In the east there are examples of non-dynastic rebels from within trying to replace the (Seleukid) dynasty with their own *basileia*, most notoriously Molon and Diodotos Tryphon, but they failed. Malcontent courtiers could however unite with a dynastically legitimate claimant to the throne or join a rival court, taking their personal satellites, influence, and even troops with them. Most threatening for kings was the situation in which powerful men remained devoted adherents of the dynasty but acted completely at their own discretion, without the king's consent or even against the king's wishes. This persistent problem will be further discussed later on.

The Royal Council

The upper crust of the *philoi* at court had a seat in the royal council, or *synedrion*, granting them access to the person of the king on a regular basis, and hence influence on political matters. Especially at the Argead, Antigonid, and Seleukid courts, the members of the council were military commanders before anything else. In all accounts of the informal meetings of the royal council at Alexander's court, its members invariably discussed military matters (Hammond 1989: 143–144). Polybios (4.87.7) calls the counselors of Philip V alternately the king's "courtiers," "commanders," and "co-generals."

The council advised monarchs on important matters, especially concerning war and foreign relations. In the Ptolemaic kingdom, the council at various occasions managed the affairs of the monarchy in the name of a minor successor (e.g., Polyb. 4.76.1; Caes. *BCiv*. 3.105), with sometimes one of the council members being appointed

guardian (*epitropos*) of the child-king (Polyb. 15.25.21; Diod. 30.15.1; 2 *Macc*. 3.7; Caes. *BCiv* 3.108). Members of the *synedrion* were often present when kings received foreign ambassadors. Yet the authority of the royal councils was unofficial and informal. In historiographical sources the *synedrion* appears as the single most important body in the Hellenistic kingdoms, but the word is absent from inscriptions. A fundamental aspect of the ideal of equality among the *philoi* who were present at the council was forthrightness, *parrhēsia*, an aristocratic ideal and a pivotal virtue in the moral complex of *philia* (Konstan 1997: 93–94; Raaflaub 2004). In the context of Hellenistic monarchy this finds expression in the *topos* of the ruler going towards his doom after ignoring the advice of his friends (e.g., Ptolemy Keraunos in Diod. 22.3.1), and the *topos* of the king who is corrupted by power and surrounds himself with sycophants never disagreeing with him (Philip V in Liv. 35.17.3–4; cf. Polyb. 15.24.4). Moreover, in case of disagreement influential persons or factions could sometimes enforce a decision against the king's wishes, so that a king needed to secure support for his plans in advance. To the world outside the court, however, king and council always presented an image of harmony and unity.[10]

The Royal Pages

One interesting group around the ruler, attested for the courts of all Macedonian kingdoms, are the royal pages (*basilikoi paides*) – an age group consisting of youths between the ages of about 14 and 18 and functioning as "a training school for the commanders and officials of the Macedonians" (Curt. 8.6.6). They were the sons of nobles, including the king's own sons. They were educated and trained at court, waited on the king, and guarded him. It was originally an Argead institution, dating back to the late fifth century BCE (Hammond 1990: 261–264), and was continued by the Antigonids, Seleukids, and Ptolemies "until the kings from whom the Romans many years later took away all power" (Curt. 8.6.6). There is some evidence that a similar institution for girls existed at the Ptolemaic court.[11]

In the Macedonian kingdoms after Alexander *basilikoi paides* presumably came from leading families of the kingdom's provinces, and/or were the sons of courtiers and foreign *xenoi*. The king's own children, too, were *basilikoi paides* during their adolescence. It is not known on what grounds boys were admitted to the pages corps. Neither is it possible to say whether non-Macedonian, non-Greek magnates sent their sons to court, as one would expect especially in the Seleukid empire.

The king's sons and the other pages received an education under the supervision of a court dignitary usually called *tropheus* (foster-father). The office of *tropheus* had been a position of great honor already at the court of Philip II (Plut. *Alex*. 5). Even after their accession to the throne, kings normally held their former *tropheus* in esteem, addressing him as "father" (Polyb. 31.20.3; Plut. *Ant*. 5.31; *OGIS* 148, 256; 1 *Macc*. 11.1; Jos. *AJ* 12.127; Diod. 33.4.1). Illustrative in this respect is the career of Krateros, a courtier of Antiochos IX, who had been the king's *tropheus* and was honored by his former pupil with impressive aulic titles: "Foster Father of Antiochos Philopator; First Friend of King Antiochos; Chief Physician and Chamberlain of the Queen" (*RIG* 1158; cf. App. *Syr*. 68; Jos. *AJ* 13.271). Men who had been brought up together with the king as pages

were afterwards honored as the king's *syntrophoi* (foster-brothers), and addressed one another as "brother."

Detailed information concerning the pages' duties is provided only for the court of Alexander the Great (see Heckel 1992: 237–298). The classic text is Curtius 8.6.2–6:

> They took turns keeping watch at night at the door of the king's bedchamber, and let in his women through an entrance other than that watched by the armed guards. They also took the king's horses from the grooms and presented them for the king to mount; they accompanied him in the hunt and in battle; and they were educated in all aspects of the liberal arts. They regarded it as a great honor that they were allowed to wait on the king at his table.

The presence of pages at court is an all-time monarchical phenomenon. It was a means to pacify the nobility. Royal pages may have been hostages of sorts, but bringing up the children of powerful men in the royal household cut off from their families and under the custody of the king was, first of all, a means to create a loyal elite and to manipulate noble identity. Indeed, kings often recruited their closest collaborators from the ranks of their former fellow pages – their boyhood friends, so to speak. However, the presence of pages may have endangered the domination of the king over his court. If the *paides* were indeed (in part) the sons of *philoi*, the page system was tantamount to the emergence of an hereditary aristocracy at the royal courts, and thus may have gradually undermined the kings' freedom in choosing their friends.

Friendship

The principal arrangement underlying the relation between king and courtiers was *philia*, the Greek moral complex of ritualized friendship. *Philia* may be defined as a personal, reciprocal bond of loyalty and solidarity between two or more individuals of approximately equal status who share roughly the same interests; they were committed to each other by mutual obligations, and could rely on each other for help (Goldhill 1986: 82; Herman 1996: 116–117). The objective of *philia* normally was to achieve a common goal, and united action towards that end was a means to strengthen and display the bond (Herman 1996: 612; Konstan 1997: 97). *Philia* moreover had traits of fictive kinship. In the *Iliad* it is said that a good friend is "in no way less than a brother" (8.584–586; cf. van Wees 1992: 44–48). This may be associated with Aristotle's dictum that a *philos* is "one's other self" (Eth. *Nic.* 1169b6), which in turn is reminiscent of a famous anecdote, related by Curtius (3.12.17), in which Alexander exclaimed that Hephaistion "is Alexander too." This explains why royal *philoi* are sometimes honored as the *syggeneis* ("relatives") or *adelphoi* ("brothers") of the king (*OGIS* 148 and 259; Polyb. 4.48.5; Plut. *Mor*. 197a; 1 *Macc*. 3.32; 2 *Macc*. 11.12; Liv. 30.42.6). Honor was a driving force of the court's face-to-face social dynamics, and violation of friendship was considered highly dishonorable, even impious (Belfiore 2000).

Royal *philoi* came from a wide range of Greek cities, even from beyond the boundaries of the empires. A partial explanation of this has been offered by Gabriel Herman (1987) who placed Hellenistic court politics in the context of the Greek tradition of *xenia* (or *philoxenia*), a form of interactive ritualized personal relationships usually translated

as "guest friendship." *Xenia* relations constituted supranational elite networks linking men of approximately equal social status but of separate social units (notably *poleis*), thus uniting the Greek world at its highest level. It was an aristocratic ideal, an archaic legacy, prominent for example in the *Odyssey*. Through participation in a social sphere outside the city, civic elites distanced themselves from their inferiors at home and linked up with their equals elsewhere. *Xenia* was believed to be perpetual, passed on in the male line from generation to generation (Herman 1996: 116). By availing themselves of preexisting *xenia* networks, Hellenistic kings could connect with Greek elite families and this "account[s] not only for the preponderance of Greeks among the newly recruited Hellenistic court members, but also for the increasing similarities between the three courts" (Herman 1987: 208).

Since *philoi* joining a royal household normally retained links with their hometowns and families through several generations (Savalli-Lestrade 1996; Muccioli 2001), *xenia* networks connected the royal families indirectly with oligarchic families in the cities. At court, members of governing elites acted as mediators between the dynasty and their own communities of origin, "deriving substantial benefits from both systems" (Herman 1996: 613; cf. Bringmann 1993). In cities we therefore find both honorific decrees for kings dedicated by *philoi* (e.g., *OGIS* 128, 171, 255) and decrees in honor of *philoi* dedicated by the king (e.g., *Syll.*³ 462; Welles 45; *OGIS* 317).

This web of relations bound the empires together. Kings could influence civic politics through their *philoi*, whose families in turn derived status from royal favor and thus acquired a decisive advantage over other factions in the internal political struggles of the cities. As members of oligarchic families dependent on royal support, *philoi* ideally represented the interests of the cities at court, and the interests of the court in the cities.

Gift Exchange

The key to creating and maintaining bonds between king and *philoi*, was the exchange of gifts and favors (*charites*; cf. Konstan 1997: 4, 78). Gift exchange moreover was tantamount to the royal virtue of generosity, directly related to royal euergetism and the public display of wealth known as *tryphē*. In *Idyll* 17, the court poet Theokritos praises Ptolemy Philadelphos as a man who is "generous with gifts, as a king befits, generous to cities and loyal friends" (lines 124–125), and Plutarch skeptically remarked that "kings hunt for men by attracting them with gifts and money, and then catch them" (*Cleom.* 13.5). The most rewarding gift for the king to give was land. The distribution of landed estates, often including buildings, laborers, and slaves, provided the *philoi* with status as well as a steady source of income.

The exchange of gifts is instrumental in creating or affirming social relations, and is normally a highly ritualized process (P. Burke 1992a: 69–71). In his seminal essay on the gift, Marcel Mauss (1925) theorized that all gift exchange is subject to three rules: the obligation to give, to receive, and to reciprocate; reciprocity however is not balanced because the person with the highest status is obliged to offer the most valuable gifts or favors. In an anecdote retold by Plutarch (*Mor.* 127b), a courtier who asked Alexander for dowries for his daughters was offered the astronomical sum of 50 talents; when the courtier replied that 10 talents would suffice, the king retorted: "Enough for you

to receive, but not enough for me to give.'' Such unbalanced gift exchange affirmed status hierarchies but also had the practical consequence that the lesser-ranking person remained indebted and dependent because he would never be able to reciprocate fully. Thus, the exchange of gifts created not only horizontal bonds of loyalty but also vertical bonds of dependence to offset the formally egalitarian ideal of *philia*.

Norbert Elias (1969) hypothesized that the requirement of status expenditures drained courtiers of their financial resources to the benefit of the absolutist monarch because it made them reliant on royal generosity. In reaction to Elias' thesis, Duindam (1995: 86, 95) asserted that the king, too, was the prisoner of the spending pattern because the obligation to validate one's status through extravagant expenditures placed a heavier financial burden on the king than on anyone else. Over-consumption on the part of the king could eventually erode the financial foundation of his military power, or even lead to dependence on wealthy *philoi*, as happened notoriously to Antiochos III at the beginning of his reign (Polyb. 5.50.7). Kings however could forestall this danger by distributing symbolic gifts as a public means to allocate favor and establish the receivers' place within the court hierarchy. The value of a gift was not only determined by its exact worth, but also by the fact that through a gift the status of the giver reflected upon the recipient. To be received and rewarded by a king increased one's own social status enormously (Jansen 1984: 58; cf. Allen 2005). Typical monarchical gifts such as golden crowns and purple clothing – and the right to wear them – were visible tokens of such intangible rewards as protection or favor. When Hellenistic kings allowed their guests to take home after banquets the tableware from which they had drunk and eaten, this provided the recipient with concrete evidence, in other social contexts, that he had been a guest at the royal table. A royal gift moreover served as a *symbolon* – an inheritable material reminder of a *xenia* bond. It is also important to note here that relations between kings and cities were structured in the same manner as those between kings and individuals, that is, as an exchange of gifts and honors, bartering for instance divine honors or tribute for the military protection of a city's autonomy.

Court Titles

In the Seleukid and Ptolemaic kingdoms, court hierarchy was regulated and explicated by means of court titles and offices. The distribution of titles was a form of gift exchange, too. Titles were awarded in combination with material gifts, in particular purple clothing, crowns, or horse's trappings, so that the recipient could show his rank to others and derive status from that. Plutarch relates how a man who had received the title of *philos* with the accompanying gifts from Mithradates Eupator, ''put on the purple robe, leaped upon the horse and rode through the city, crying: 'All this is mine!'''(*Pomp.* 36.5).

Although most evidence for court titulature stems from the Ptolemaic empire in the second century, where indeed the most sophisticated titles system seems to have developed, the system of titulature at the Seleukid court was in essence similar, albeit rather less elaborate. The Antigonids in Macedon were content to stick to old Macedonian titles predating Alexander, retaining for instance the honorific office of *sōmatophylax* at the heart of the inner court (Diod. 30.10.2, 30.11.1). Because of the disparate nature of the evidence, the meaning of most court titles remains elusive. In the context of

the Ptolemaic court, Mooren (1975: 2) distinguishes "honorific titulature" and "real aulic titulature," i.e. titles indicating concrete aulic functions, such as majordomo or chamberlain.

At the Ptolemaic and Seleukid courts, the word *philos* (in itself a title of honor) was at the basis of the complex of honorific titulature. After around 200 we hear of such titles as First Friends, Honored Friends, and First and Highly Honored Friends at the Ptolemaic court (Walbank 1984: 70; Mooren 1975: *passim*); the first two also turn up in a Seleukid context (Jos. *AJ* 12.53; 1 *Macc*. 11.27). How exactly these titles related to each other can only be guessed. Two other notable titles of honor attested for all Macedonian courts are *syngenēs* (kinsman of the king) (e.g., Arr. *Anab*. 7.11.1; 1 *Macc*. 11.31; 2 *Macc*. 11.12; *OGIS* 148, 259; Liv. 30.42.6; Polyb. 4.48.5; Plut. *Mor*. 197a; Jos. *AJ* 16.288) and *syntrophos* (foster-brother of the king: Polyb. 5.9.4; 15.33.11; *OGIS* 247, 1–3; 2 *Macc*. 11.22). The latter title indicated that the man had been a royal page together with the ruling monarch. The title *syngenēs* may have had a similar connotation but could also be awarded *honoris causa*.

The category of "real aulic titulature" comprises first of all titles connected with the domestic affairs of the household. At the early Ptolemaic court the principal dignitary was the *dioiketes*, the majordomo, and "finance minister" of Egypt; he was aided by a steward, who was responsible for the reception of guests and the progress of symposia and banquets (Jos. *AJ* 12.2.12). Two more examples of court officials are the chamberlain (Porphyr. *FGrH* 260 F 20; *RIG* 1158) and captain of the bodyguard (Polyb. 7.16.2; Jos. *AJ* 12.17). The chancellery was led by a (chief) secretary known variously as *grammateus* (Polyb. 15.27.7), *epi tou grammateus* (Polyb. 4.87.8) and *epistolographos* (Polyb. 31.3.16). Military titles such as *stratēgos* (general), *elephantarchos* (commander of the war elephants) and *nauarchos* (admiral) were part of this category, too, because the higher military offices were monopolized by members of the court. Because it could be done on an ad hoc, temporary basis, the distribution of military commands was a potential instrument of power of the king.

Proximity to the Throne

Since the king was the central figure within the court society, a courtier's relative status was determined by the principle of proximity to the throne, or "favor" – that is, the degree to which he was able to gain access to the person of the king, or to persons near the king, or to persons near the persons near the king. Gift exchange, court titulature, and etiquette, too, helped to determine a courtier's position within the subtle hierarchy of the court.

Like so many autocratic monarchs, Hellenistic kings attempted to regulate access to their own persons as an instrument to manipulate the court's function as a center for the redistribution of power and status. Prohibiting most people from approaching the king directly accentuated the privilege of the few individuals who did have routine access to him, for instance *syntrophoi*, royal women, the king's personal servants, his physician, or his bodyguards. Such individuals acted as brokers between the king and others. Queens and royal concubines especially played a crucial role in this respect (Strootman 2007: 141–2).

Behavior and "good manners" distinguished courtiers from non-courtiers and could be a means to maintain social hierarchies within the court society.[12] Polybios (22.22.1–5) gives a rare description of an "ideal" Hellenistic courtier, in his portrayal of the Ptolemaic *philos* Aristonikos: "He was a born soldier and spent most of his time in the company of other such men, and studying military matters. He was also very good in the art of conversation. In addition to that he was by nature benevolent and generous."

Erudition and esprit were essential qualities in the competition for favor and status (e.g., Jos. *AJ* 12.2.12, 12.4.9). Philip II enjoyed being surrounded by men "who could say funny things" (Athenaios 435c). The image of the courtier as a flatterer, although topical, testifies to the importance of the art of conversation at the Hellenistic courts, especially during banquets and symposia. The complexity and learnedness of court poetry, with its references to obscure versions of myths and ingenious literary allusions, give some idea of the level of sophistication that was required to take part in table talk at court.

Conflict

Theoretically, the *philoi* depended on the king's grace for obtaining and preserving status at court. As Polybios says, kings "measured friendship and enmity by the sole standard of expedience" (Polyb. 2.47.5; cf. Plut. *Mor.* 183d). In practice the monarch rarely was the sole source of income and prestige for nobles: "The monarch bestowed favors upon parts of the elite to bind them, and subsequently eliminated troublesome opponents in cooperation with those elites. The elite in turn interceded at court for its own clientele" (Duindam 1995: 79).

Philip and Alexander had been relatively successful in pacifying the hereditary nobility of old Macedonia. In the course of the third century, however, new landowning aristocracies with hereditary prerogatives came into existence, and ancestry again became a condition for status at court. The longer the kingdoms existed, the more the families of leading *philoi*, who were rewarded for their services to the crown with riches, estates, and status, acquired independent sources of wealth and status. Powerful *philoi* maintained retinues of their own (Plut. *Cleom.* 32.2; Diod. 34.3.1; Athenaios 245a). The size of one's personal following both created power and was indicative of power. But being a patron created obligations to act in the interest of one's clients; *philoi* furthermore acted as mediators in the interest of their cities of origin (cf. Savalli-Lestrade 1996), or at least of the oligarchic factions to which they belonged. Thus various, often opposite, interests were represented at court.

Rivalry among the *philoi* was not the only cause of discord. Because Macedonian kings were polygamous, succession strife was a recurring source of conflict at the Hellenistic courts, as was argued by Ogden (1999: ix) who maintained that the "amphimetric disputes" resulting from the supposed failure of the kings to formally hierarchize the royal wives and their sons caused the decline and fall of the Macedonian dynasties. However, kings had at their disposal various informal means to overcome the problem of unhierarchized offspring, including the installation of a favorite son as *basileus* during the father's lifetime and the Ptolemaic practice of brother–sister marriage. It is furthermore difficult to ascertain whether succession strife may sometimes have been due rather to a

deliberate policy on the part of the ruling monarch to control the household by keeping it divided.

To secure their positions and overcome their rivals, *philoi* joined forces in factions round powerful men or women – queens, princes, leading men from the *synedrion*. Faction leaders in turn tried to gather around themselves a following as large as possible, as both a source of power and as a tangible sign of their importance at court (see for instance Polyb. 15.25.31–34). Thus, conflicts between courtiers could become interlinked with rivalry for the throne. Through involvement in the struggles between wives and half-brothers, *philoi* could win a lightning career if the prince they supported succeeded to the throne, but risked exile or death when this was not the case. The career of the philosopher Demetrios of Phaleron, former leader of Athens and trusted counselor of Ptolemy, ended abruptly when he supported the wrong candidate for the succession after Ptolemy's death (Diog. Laert. 5.77–78).

Kings tried, for better or worse, to benefit from these rivalries through the principle of "divide and rule." Often, however, kings failed to remain lofty arbiters but themselves became participants in factional conflict. This happened when Philip V succeeded to the Antigonid throne in 218 BCE (Polyb. 5.25–29) and when Antiochos III became Seleukid king in 223 (on these events, see Herman 1997; Strootman 2011a).

The Promotion of Favorites

To deal with the growing power of the established *philoi* class, Ptolemaic and Seleukid kings from about 200 BCE increasingly resorted to the promotion of "favorites." Promoting favorites is an all-time principle of monarchical rule. The ideal favorite was elevated by the ruler to a position of power to which he had no title through noble descent or acquired social status, and which he could never have obtained without the king's grace, so that he was entirely reliant on the king for the preservation of his status. Preferably, a favorite would have no children to whom he could transmit his power, at least not officially (Burke 1992a: 48). By making such individuals their closest advisors kings tried to bypass the *synedrion* and screen themselves off from the *philoi*. The favorite would take responsibility for unpopular measures, or take the blame when things went wrong – hence the generally negative reputation of favorites, who are typically stereotyped as a wicked advisor controlling the king (a good example of this is the description of Herakleides, the Greek favorite of Philip V, in Diod. 28.2; cf. Polyb. 13.4).

Hellenistic kings employed various types of favorites: exiles, defectors from rival courts, foreigners, eunuchs and, last but not least, women (see Strootman, forthcoming). The most exemplary instance of an exile is Hannibal, who sought refuge at the Seleukid court in 196 BCE and became a senior advisor of Antiochos III during the king's war with Rome (191–188); he is described as an anomaly within the *synedrion*, constantly disagreeing with the other *philoi*, hated by them, but enjoying the full confidence of the king who deliberated with him behind closed doors (Liv. 34.14.4–5, 42.5–14, 36.41.2–3; Diod. 29.3). The career of Demetrios of Pharos at the court of Philip V provides another example. Exiles were not by definition outcasts: violation of the rules of *philoxenia* by a king could induce a *philos* to transfer voluntarily to a rival court,

accompanied by his own followers (see e.g., Polyb. 5.70.10). Another type of favorite was the social outsider. At the Seleukid and Ptolemaic courts of the Late Hellenistic period eunuchs and non-Hellenes were employed as favorites. An Egyptian eunuch named Aristonikos (the ideal courtier we encountered earlier in this chapter) became the foremost *philos* of an unknown Ptolemy in the second century BCE (Polyb. 22.22.1–5). From 169 to 164, Ptolemy VI patronized an Egyptian called Petosarapis, who was also known by the Greek name of Dionysios. Diodoros (31.15.1–4) claims that Petosarapis wielded greater influence at court than anyone else; he also characteristically accuses him of trying to win control of the kingdom. Among the Seleukids, Demetrios II relied on a general called Dionysios the Mede (Diod. 33.28.1), perhaps a eunuch, and both Antiochos VII and Antiochos IX favored a eunuch called Krateros (*RIG*: 1158).

But the ideal favorites in the Hellenistic kingdoms were neither foreigners nor eunuchs, but women. Queens held an ambiguous position in the Macedonian dynasties. On the one hand they were outsiders in the male spheres of government and army, on the other hand they were central figures in the royal families and households. Because of polygamous marriage the mother of the heir apparent could be expected to be a loyal ally of the reigning king, and to regard the interests of her husband's family as her own. A queen presumably was promoted to this cardinal position by conferring on her a diadem and the title of *basilissa* (on this title see Carney 1991). The role of queens was not confined to traditional female responsibilities such as the public-and-private cult or the internal management of the household. As temporary regents they necessarily took over the male duties of their husbands or sons, transgressing the traditional borders between the feminine and the masculine. For instance, when Antiochos III was campaigning in the Aegean, taking his eldest son with him, his principal consort Laodike represented him as monarch elsewhere, maintaining diplomatic contacts with the cities of Asia Minor on his behalf and having authority over the royal treasury (Austin[2] 198; *SEG* 26.1226).

Summary

At the Hellenistic courts, *philoi* functioned as intermediaries between monarchy and city. The court society constituted the locus of a complex and far-reaching network of patronage relations. The tentacles of this network "reached into every section of the kingdom, so that the king's power was manifested to his subjects through the members of his court" (Herman 1997: 200). The system, however, worked the other way round also, permitting cities and elite families to exert influence at court. Moreover, royal courts were not the only source of political power in the Hellenistic world. As long as the king was successful and wealthy, he could bind powerful men to his person and with their help control cities and territories. But when a monarchy became impoverished or lost charisma (usually the result of military failure), regional leaders turned away readily to join a rival court or become political rivals themselves.

The court was instrumental in creating cohesion by integrating the dispersed elites of the kingdoms. The *philoi* who had risen to power in their home towns precisely because they were the friends of the king and were able to exert influence at court on behalf of their cities, at the same time were dependent on the monarchy and the empire for

the continuation of their elevated positions. This disconnected them from their peers at home but also connected them with royalist aristocrats from other cities so that an empire-wide elite commonwealth came into being, a sense of being connected with the empire as well as with one's city. Thus the court did not merely use preexisting supranational elite networks, but actively promoted their establishment and growth.

NOTES

1 See O'Neil (2000), discussing the epigraphic evidence for Hellenistic kings' interventions in Greek civic politics, and concluding that they did so mostly in the capacity of mediators, taking care that their decisions were embedded in civic law; cf. Kosmetatou 1997, showing that the Seleukids despite a strong military presence in Pisidia rarely interfered in the domestic affairs of the towns of that region.

2 See also below; for a discussion of these and other characteristics of dynastic courts consult the introduction in Duindam (2003).

3 For the present approaches of the royal court see Duindam (1995; 2003) and Butz *et al.* (2004).

4 Definition after Sinopoli (1994: 159); Pagden (2001: 7–11); Howe (2002: 13–15); for the Hellenistic ideology of world empire see Strootman (2012).

5 For the circular interrelationship of civic markets, surplus exaction, and a monarchy's coercive means see Tilly (1997: 1–37).

6 A more common designation for "kingdom" was *ta pragmata*, the "affairs" or rather "interests" of the king; *basileia* meant "kingship" rather than "kingdom."

7 For an overview of the evidence consult Nielsen (1994); on Hellenistic palace architecture see further Brands and Hoepfner (1996). The *hiera agora* at Demetrias: Kramolisch (1989: 191). The Romans adopted the word as *aula* and via this route it reached its present use in modern European languages ("cour," "court," "Hof"), cf. Tamm (1968). The customary word for a Hellenistic royal palace is *basileion* (Polyb. 10.27.9; Diod. 19.18.1; Plut. *Luc.* 29.8; Athenaios 654b; Jos. *AJ* 13.136) or *basileia*, the name of the royal district in Alexandria (Strabo 17.8–9).

8 Modern literature on the various *philoi* societies is still not very substantial; for general discussions see Herman (1980/1981 and 1997); Le Bohec (1985); G. Weber (1997); Savalli-Lestrade (1998); O'Neil (2003, 2006); Strootman (2011a).

9 Iranian loyalty to the Seleukid house remained intact well into the second century BCE: the armies of Antiochos III at the battle of Magnesia (190 BCE) and Antiochos IV at the Daphne festival (*c.*165 BCE) included thousands of Iranian noble cavalry (Liv. 37.40.1–14 ; Polyb. 30.25.1–11).

10 In continuation of former Argead practice, the Hellenistic *synedrion* also acted as a tribunal in cases of treason against the king, though not as a formal judicial court: counselors tried their peers because treason was first of all violation of *philia* and because it was a noble prerogative to be tried by equals.

11 Polyb. 15.33.11, mentioning "some young girls who had been (Queen) Arsinoe's *syntrophoi*." In the Grand Procession of Ptolemy Philadelphos there were 500 girls dressed in purple chitons with gold girdles (Athenaios 200e). For evidence and literature concerning post-Argead pages in general: Strootman (2007: 181).

12 The significance of courtly behavior as an hierarchizing mechanism was recognized by Elias (1969: 135), although he wrongly attributed to the king a free rein in manipulating court etiquette to his own discretion (Duindam 1995: 97–101).