

VI

Synthesis: A Golden Age

*You think that you are sitting in a state of peace,
but all the land is in the grip of war*

Kallinos 1.4 ¹

War

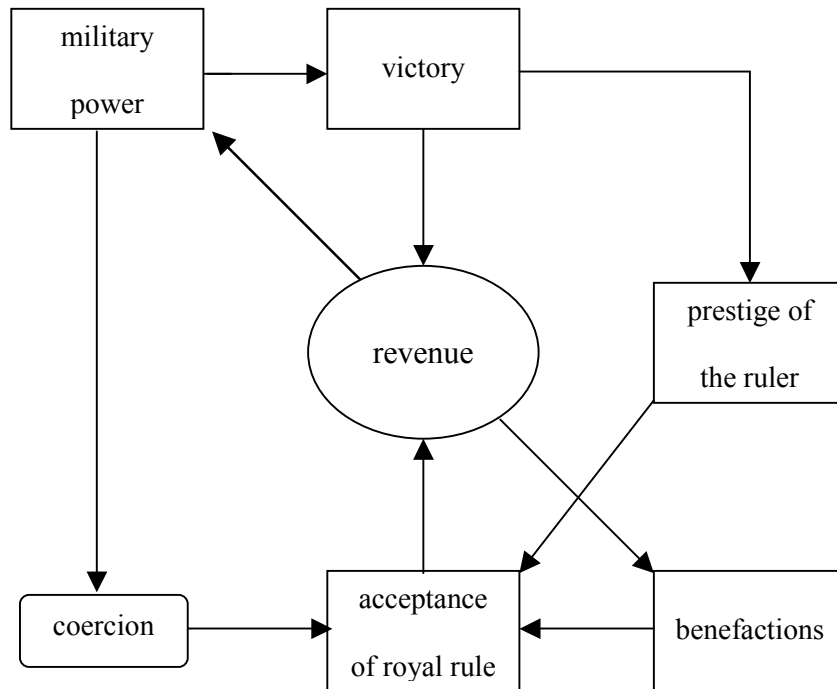
At the beginning of this book it was emphasised that military power was the foundation of Hellenistic kingship (section 1.3). From a modern perspective, monarchic rule seems to be no more than coercion dressed up as protection and benediction. Using force of arms, kingdoms acquired control over material and human resources, especially by coercing or intimidating cities into paying tribute, preferably in silver, needed to pay the army.² Warfare in itself could be directly profitable, too, as it brought in marketable slaves and other spoils. The capital thus acquired was used first of all for the upkeep or expansion of military means, and secondly for other expenditures necessary to sustain the empire, such as benefactions in cities, the distribution of gifts to friends and the upkeep of courtly splendour.

This simple scheme, however, is complicated by the fact that even for monarchies with formidable armies and fleets, subjugating substantial numbers of cities by force alone is all but impossible. Had Alexander been compelled to besiege every single city in the Middle

¹ trans. D. Gerber, *Greek Elegiac Poetry* (Cambridge 1999) 19.

² For the revenues and expenditures of the Seleukid monarchy see now Aperghis 2004. Aperghis' challenging hypothesis is that the Seleukids pursued a deliberate policy to stimulate economic growth in the cities, and introduced a monetary economy in the Near East in order to increase the monarchy's revenue in silver.

East, the conquest of the Persian Empire would have lasted a century or so, if not failed entirely. Although Alexander occasionally made examples—Thebes, Tyre—he conquered most of his empire by defeating the Persian king in battle and by exploiting the prestige he derived from these victories. Warfare, in other words, was not only profitable economically but ideologically as well, producing both revenue and prestige:



This explains why the court was in essence a military organisation, as was argued in section 3.3. It also explains why monarchic propaganda focussed on military matters. The tenet of this propaganda was the principle that military success justifies monarchic rule. As we have seen in chapters 1 and 5, Hellenistic kings derived legitimacy from theatrical militarism, presenting themselves as epic warriors who seemed to be able to single-handedly resolve the outcome of battles.

In the philosophy and practice of Hellenistic kingship, mythic imagery was more than allegoric. The use of divine images in the ornamentation of palaces, the mythical *tableaux vivant* in the Grand Procession of Ptolemaios Philadelphos, the ritualised heroism of kings on the battlefield, the commissioning of victory panegyric in epic form, the employment of Homeric stereotypes in encomiastic poetry – it all added up to an image of the exploits of contemporary kings being no less ‘epic’ than the deeds of kings in the age of heroes.

‘Alexander regarded the *Iliad* as a handbook of the art of war’, Plutarch writes, precisely encapsulating the indistinction of myth and history that was typical of monarchic ideology.³ In other words, in Hellenistic kingship past and present, myth and history merged.⁴

³ Plut., *Alex.* 8.3. Alexander ‘took with him’, Plutarch continues, ‘a text annotated by Aristotle, which became known as “the casket copy”, and which he always kept under his pillow, together with his dagger’ – and which he conspicuously showed to his army and court, we can be sure. The casket belonged to the spoils taken from Darius after Issos, and was regarded ‘as the most valuable item of all’; Alexander in turn kept in it *his* ‘most precious possession’ (Plut., *Alex.* 26.1).

⁴ As regards the indistinction of history and myth Lord Raglan, *The Hero* (London 1936) 194, could still write that the defining difference between a mythic and historical hero, is that the first only fights in single combat, seldom has companions, and never commands armies. Today however it is more accepted that the divide between history and myth is a modern convention. Paul Veyne, *Did the Greeks Believe in their Myths?* (Chicago 1988; orig. French 1983) 42, answers the question in the title with a definite ‘yes’: ‘absolutely no one, Christians included, ever expressed the slightest doubt concerning the historicity of Aeneas, Romulus, Theseus, Heracles, Achilles, or even Dionysus; rather, everyone asserted this historicity’. Cf. R.A. Segal, ‘Introduction’, in idem ed., *Hero Myths* (Oxford and Malden 2000) 1-37, esp. 9: ‘The connection between myth and history is blurry. To begin with, a traditional kind of hero might have lived but be credited with exaggerated deeds or attributes. A brave soldier becomes fearless; a kindly soul becomes saintly. Strength typically becomes omnipotence: knowledge becomes omniscience. Indeed, mere bravery, kindness, strength, or knowledge would not suffice. Heroic qualities must be magnified to the point of divinity.’ An interesting case study is N.K.Y. Ho, ‘Cantonese opera in a rural setting: Observations on village drama’, in: G. Aijmer and Å. Boholm eds., *Images and Enactments. Possible Worlds in Dramatic Performance* (Gothenburg 1994) 113-34, showing how in contemporary China theatrical plays with mythical subject matter about the eternal battle between good and evil are regarded as true history by the audience. In other words, as far as the Greeks were concerned, the mythical age of the heroes formed part of history, their ‘classical period’. Cf. E. Visser, *De goede oude tijd* (Groningen 1976), showing that in Hellenistic and Roman times the Greeks’ notion of a classical age was not directed towards the fifth century: the real golden age was the heroic age of epic, when men were stronger and better than ‘today’ – a view already present in Homer (e.g. *Il.* 1.271-2; 5.303-4), and of course in the Archaic idea of successive mythic ages in e.g. Hesiod. Cf. K. Bassi, ‘The semantics of manliness in Ancient Greece’, in I. Sluiter and R.M. Rosen eds., *Andreia. Studies in Manliness and Courage in Classical Antiquity* (Leiden 2003), demonstrating that literature of the Classical period often nostalgically looks back to the Homeric world as a time of true manliness, using the word *andreia* to denote the *lack* of manliness among contemporary men.

Alongside the ritualised display of military power the exhibition of wealth derived from victory was also a key element in the self-presentation of the monarchies. The munificence of Hellenistic kings was proverbial.⁵ Lavish gifts to cities and temples served not only as a mechanism to bind them to the empire, but also were a form of ritual display,⁶ demonstrating the king's success as a war leader and hence his ability to protect and support his subjects.

Empire

Evaluating the history of the Diadochs in the *Life of Pyrrhos*, Plutarch wrote:

For how men to whose rapacity neither sea nor mountain nor uninhabitable desert sets a limit, men to whose inordinate desires the boundaries which separate Europe and Asia put no stop, can remain content with what they have and do one another no wrong when they are in close touch, it is impossible to say. Nay, they are perpetually at war, ... and they treat the two words war and peace like current coins, using whichever happens to be for their advantage, regardless of justice; for surely they are better men when they wage war openly than when they give the names of justice and friendship to the times of inactivity and leisure which interrupt their works of injustice.⁷

Plutarch's critical assessment of the Diadochs' motives is pithily expressed in the word *πλεονεξία* ('rapacity'), *i.e.* the craving for expansion at the expense of others, a vice he attributed in particular to Pyrrhos.⁸ However, just like the vanity and pomposity ascribed to Hellenistic kings by pro-Roman authors was in fact a negative interpretation of *tryphē*, so too was the greed that according to Plutarch characterised these kings ultimately derived from their own self-presentation as triumphant conquerors.

Following in the footsteps of Babylonian, Assyrian and Persian kings, the Macedonian emperors of the Hellenistic period presented themselves as world rulers, claiming the entire

⁵ Cf. Heinen 1983, 116-21 (Ptolemaic *tryphē* as a condemnatory topos in Roman propaganda).

⁶ T. Linders, 'Ritual display and the loss of power', in: P. Hellström and B. Alroth eds., *Religion and Power in the Ancient Greek World. Proceedings of the Uppsala Symposium 1993*. Boreas 24 (Uppsala 1996) 121-4. For the king as benefactor in general consult Bringmann 2000.

⁷ Plut., *Pyrrh.* 12.2-3.

⁸ Nederlof 1940, 58. The word appears also at 7.3 en 9.6, cf. 23.2 and 30.3.

oikoumenē as their dominion and accepting no other kings as their equals.⁹ Hence the association of earthly kingship with the all-embracing heavenly rule of Zeus. We find for instance on the reverse of a series of coins of Antiochos VIII, struck between c. 121 and 96, a picture of Zeus Ouranios stretching out his right hand in a gesture of omnipotence.¹⁰ In his right hand the King of Heaven holds the sun and in his left hand a royal sceptre. Above his head a moon is depicted and the whole picture is framed by a victory wreath. The obverse, of course, shows the portrait of the earthly king Antiochos. And already in the late fourth century a fresco was commissioned in Athens for the Demetria Festival, depicting Demetrios Poliorketes enthroned on the *oikoumenē*, presumably pictured as a sphere.¹¹

The ideal of universal empire was communicated through the use of cosmic symbols: the zodiac, the moon and, above all, the sun, symbol of almighty and eternal power.¹² Such symbolism had antecedents in Greece, Egypt and the Near East. But in the Hellenistic empires the sun became an emblem of kingship more than in any of the preceding monarchies, finding expression for instance in the use of radiant crowns attached to a king's diadem, as depicted on coins and in all probability worn in reality during ceremonial occasions. When Darius offered Alexander half of his empire, 40.000 talents *and* his daughter, Alexander allegedly

⁹ As was emphasised in chapter 1.3, ideological claims do not necessarily conform to historical reality. Of course, the Hellenistic kings' relentless pursuit of expansion was increasingly unsuccessful, but claims to universal dominance were never mitigated, and conquest remained the principal task of rulers throughout Hellenistic history, as the examples of Philippos V, Antiochos III and Kleopatra VII make evident. An ambiguous but characteristic feature of Hellenistic imperialism is the fact that alongside the formal ideology that there can be only one 'real' ruler of the *oikoumenē*, Antigonid, Seleukid and Ptolemaic kings treated each other as equals in diplomatic contacts (see above, section 1.3).

¹⁰ On this gesture see H.P. L'Orange, *Studies in the Iconography of Cosmic Kingship in the Ancient World* (Oslo 1953) 139-70.

¹¹ Ath. 535f. See MacCormack 1981, 127-32, for the Imperial Roman image of the emperor enthroned or standing on a *globus*, though here principally used for deceased emperors; in Christian iconography of the later Roman Empire the *oikoumenē*-globe was turned into a throne for Christ.

¹² Kingship as reflection of the sun in the Near East: R. Eisler, *Weltenmantel und Himmelszelt. Religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zur Urgeschichte des antiken Weltbildes* (Munich 1910); L'Orange 1953; P. Calmeyer, 'Der "Apollon" des Dareios', *MDAI(I)I* 22 (1989) 125-30; W. Nagel and B. Jacobs, 'Königsgötter und Sonnengottheit bei altiranischen Dynastien', *IA* 29 (1989) 337-89; Goodenough 1928, 78-83; W.W. Tarn, 'Alexander Helios and the Golden Age', *JRS* 22 (1932) 135-60; Grant 1972, 142-4; Śnieżewski 1998, 135-8.

replied that ‘the universe (*kosmos*) cannot be governed by two suns nor the world (*oikoumenē*) by two masters’.¹³ In a poem of Hermodotos, Antigonos Monophthalmos was praised as ‘the offspring of the sun’,¹⁴ just like the Seleukids claimed that Seleukos I was the son of Apollo. And the so-called Star of Vergina, used as an heraldic emblem also by the Seleukids, presumably is a sun as well, to be understood as a symbol of universality rather than a ‘national’ Macedonian emblem.¹⁵

The image of a Sun King whose rule enlightens the whole world and who promises the coming of a Golden Age became—from Imperial Roman notions of cosmic rulership to Louis XIV’s self-presentation as ‘roi soleil’—one of the most enduring influences of Hellenistic kingship in later ages.¹⁶

Representation

The Hellenistic kingdoms were empires, loosely uniting multifarious peoples and societies. This was notably the case in the Seleukid Empire. But also the Ptolemies and even the Antigonids had to reckon with diverse ethnic, cultural, and political entities within their

¹³ Diod. 17.54; cf. Plut., *Mor.* 180c: ‘But he made answer to Darius that the earth could not tolerate two suns, nor Asia two kings’.

¹⁴ Plut., *Mor.* 182c.

¹⁵ Seleukid ‘Vergina’ stars appear as heraldic emblems on the Seleukid shields depicted on the friezes in the *temenos* of Athena at Pergamon. Even the ostentatious display of gold in the *pompē* of Philadelphos may have had a solar connotation, as the association of gold with the sun is common in many Near Eastern cultures, including Greece. In New Kingdom Egypt, the golden jewellery and regalia worn by the pharaoh—who was not without reason called the Golden One or the Mountain of Gold That Brightens All The Lands—symbolised his status as the son of Re, the sun-god; the hieroglyph for ‘gold’ was a beaded necklace, augmented by a falcon or a solar disk to signify ‘Golden Horus’ or ‘Gold Sun’: H.W. Muller and E. Thiem, *Gold of the Pharaohs* (Ithaca 1999) 60.

¹⁶ On ‘cosmic’ rulership in Rome and Byzantium see S. Weinstock, *Divus Iulius* (Oxford 1971) 371-84; MacCormack 1981, esp. pp. 17-61; L’Orange 1953 *passim* (the latter being showing also continuity in the Sassanian Empire). At his accession in 1653, which marked the end the violent and chaotic period of the Fronde, Louis XIV performed as a dancer in the *Ballet de la nuit*, playing the role of the ‘triumphant sun’ who chased away the chaos of the night: L. Utrecht, *Van hofballet tot postmoderne dans. De geschiedenis van het akademische ballet en de moderne dans* (Zutphen 1988). For the revival of the concept of universal empire in Renaissance Europe: F. Bosbach, *Monarchia Universalis. Ein politischer Leitbegriff der frühen Neuzeit* (Munich 1985).

spheres of influence. In neither of these kingdoms kings could easily appeal to a common set of social values endorsed by all the subjects. As was shown in chapter 3, kings presented themselves in accordance with local expectations, preserving and further developing various traditions of kingship. Still, an umbrella ideology of empire which was overall Hellenistic was developed to create a sense of commonwealth of the nations under the rule of the king.

The court functioned as the unifying centre of these heterogeneous empires. The accumulation of knowledge of the entire world at court was a means to demonstrate political supremacy, a symbolic conquest of the *oikoumenē* as it were. At the same time, the court was a centre for the spread of culture to the periphery. The Hellenistic imperial elites were Hellenic in terms of culture and values. This does not necessarily mean that the courts were hermetically closed to indigenous people. We cannot rule out the possibility that, alongside the odd favourite, substantial numbers of non-Greeks formed part of the court under Greek names, particularly in the later period. However, if this was indeed the case, then it is not their presence itself which is significant but the fact that they assumed Greek names and, we can be sure, embraced Hellenistic court culture. It was not racial prejudice on the part of the Greeks that made the courts so Greek, but the conscious or unconscious tendency to develop an imperial identity for the elite, which is a characteristic of territorial empires throughout history. The typical Greco-Macedonian culture determining the identity of the Hellenistic courtiers, manifest in for example clothing and court literature, distinguished the rulers from the ruled, like Greek culture in general distinguished the privileged from the common subjects in the Seleukid and Ptolemaic empires. At the same time 'Hellenism' lend coherence to these culturally heterogeneous empires by means of a culturally homogeneous ruling group. This group not only dominated the imperial centre, *i.e.* the court, but also monopolised a widespread network of strategic positions in the provinces (*satraps, stratēgoi*). Conversely, local elite members who were allied to the king often assumed a partly Hellenized identity to shape their allegiance to the empire. Thus Hellenistic culture tied the imperial elites together, not unlike 'Ottoman' culture united the magistrates, civil servants and military of the Ottoman sultans at the top level, even though they could be Serbs, Turks, Greeks, Arabs or Albanians. Ottoman court culture was a blend of the Persian and Byzantine court culture, with the addition of Turkish and Arabian elements. The Hellenistic royal courts, albeit to a somewhat lesser degree, were cultural melting-pots as well.

Royal patronage played an important role in the creation of imperial culture (chapter 4). The court supplied poets and philosophers with typical aulic topics and forms: aetiology, dynastic history, pastoral fantasy, urban mime, panegyric, sympotic epigram,

‘Fürstenspiegel’, and of course mythological subjects associated with kingship or empire: Herakles in his role as civiliser and *sōtēr*; barbarians living at the world’s edge; military victory over said barbarians; the battle between the Gods and the Titans (or Giants); the primordial Golden Age; Greek colonisation myth; Apollo, Zeus and Dionysos.

Peace

In chapter 5 we saw that ceremonial entries and royal processions amounted to the presentation of the victorious ruler as the bringer of peace, prosperity and justice.¹⁷ The emphasis on victory, the ostentatious display of military and economic power, connected the ceremony of entry with the ideology of the ruler as a manifested *sōtēr* who has conquered the forces of chaos and darkness to bring peace.

The eschatological promise of a better world, a new Golden Age, was closely related to the dream of world empire. Like many other Near Eastern forms of kingship, Hellenistic kingship was believed to be connected with the prosperity, even the fertility of the land. Moreover the ruler was presented as a divine or semi-divine saviour, whose military prowess safeguarded peace. Thus, in bucolic court poetry the world is idealised as a place of bliss and tranquillity, where the vicissitudes of love are the main worries of men and gods alike. The image of the shepherd symbolises the peaceful life. In Apollonios’ *Argonautika* herdsmen are associated with an idyllic world of order and peace; the pastoral communities that the Argonauts encounter during their voyage are sometimes deliberately reminiscent of Hesiod’s description of the mythic Golden Age.¹⁸ The promise of a Golden Age is also prominent in Theokritos’ *Idyll* 16 and 17, and in Kallimachos’ *Hymn to Delos*. In these poems, the connection between the reign of the king and the peaceful world is immediate; in *Idyll* 16 images of a mythic Golden Age are even directly connected with Hieron’s (expected) triumph over the Carthaginians. In other literary texts the opposite of the royal order is put to the fore: the barbarian, peripheral ‘other’ who threatens civilisation but is vanquished by the king and subsequently adopts Hellenic culture.¹⁹ The equation of actual victory over barbarians with

¹⁷ On the image of the entering king as the bearer of good fortune in various ancient cultures, but especially the (Hellenistic) Near East and Rome, see Versnel 1970, 371-96.

¹⁸ H. Bernsdorff, *Hirten in der nicht-bukolischen Dichtung des Hellenismus*. Palingenesia 72 (Stuttgart 2001) 66-89; cf. e.g. *Argon.* 2.649-60; 4.964-78.

¹⁹ The emphasis on the progress and expansion of civilisation is particularly evident in Kallimachos’ *Aitia*, in which the poems about Herakles concentrate on his role as saviour and civiliser: Herakles

the mythic triumph of the gods over Titans or Giants bestowed on kings an aura of being divine *sōtēres* who saved the world from Chaos. Even hunting could be understood as a cosmological act of saving: dangerous beasts eliminated, the civilised world purged from threats, and order imposed.²⁰

The peace and order kings promised were often real, as kings would in actuality protect cities who submitted to their rule and act as arbitrators in inter-city and inner-city conflicts. Consequently, the Golden Age that kings promised could result in *real* peace and prosperity. On the other hand, the practice of kingship and imperialism was also the single most important cause of war in the Hellenistic world.²¹

defeats monsters, pacifies barbaric peoples and introduces Greek culture in far-away lands (Harder 2005, 246).

²⁰ D. Leyten, 'Ordering en legitimatie', in: H.J.M. Claessen, *Macht en majesteit. Idee en werkelijkheid van het vroege koningschap* (Utrecht 1984) 36-43, esp. 38. Cf. R.D. Barnett, *Assyrian Palace Reliefs in the British Museum* (2nd edn.; London 1974) 32; H. Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods. A Study of Ancient Near Eastern Religion as the Integration of Society and Nature* (2nd ed.; Chicago 1978) 3.

²¹ The success of Hellenistic royal propaganda extends to our own time. A reviewer of N.G.L. Hammond's *The Genius of Alexander the Great* (Chapel Hill 1997), was surprised to find that 'the book projects an unqualified positive image of Alexander, which is favourable in a strikingly modern way: from this volume the picture of Alexander the peacemaker emerges, who brings prosperity' (see e.g. p. 50); Csaba A. La'da in *Mnemosyne* 52 (1999) 757-61, at 759. For the real horrors of Alexander's peacemaking mission see F.L. Holt, *Into the Land of Bones. Alexander the Great in Afghanistan* (Berkeley and Los Angeles 2005).