

Court, Hellenistic

ROLF STROOTMAN

Hellenistic court culture developed from the Argead household of Philip and Alexander (see ARGEADS), absorbing diverse Greek, Iranian, and other influences. The Hellenistic courts in turn profoundly influenced the development of the Roman imperial court. Court culture in the smaller Hellenistic kingdoms (Pontos, Bithynia, Kommagene, Judaea, and Armenia) underwent the influence of the Macedonian, particularly Seleucid, courts too. Due to intermarriage, diplomatic exchange, competition, and a shared Greco-Macedonian background, the courts of the three major Hellenistic empires were strikingly similar. There were also differences, of course. The Ptolemaic court was firmly based in Alexandria, while the Seleucid court moved around the empire almost continually. The SELEUCIDS and notably Ptolemies maintained an elaborate court culture, while the later Antigonid court (see ANTIGONIDS) retained a more simple Macedonian appearance (see ANTIGONIDS). Royal women played a more prominent role at the courts of the Ptolemies and Seleucids than at the Antigonid court.

Because Hellenistic kingship was personal and charismatic (see KINGSHIP, HELLENISTIC), the royal court was essentially the household of the royal family and is often referred to as *oikos* in Greek sources. Another common designation is *aulē*, literally “court,” probably derived from the fact that the core of Hellenistic palaces was an open courtyard surrounded by banqueting rooms (see PALACES, HELLENISTIC). However, in ancient historiography and documentary evidence, the royal court is usually defined in social terms like “retinue” (*therapeia*), “courtiers” (*hoi peri tēn aulēn* or *aulikoi*), and notably “the friends of the king” (*hoi philoi tou basileōs*).

The *philo*i constituted a status group sharing in the power and prestige of the king. They were bound to the king by *philia* and *xenia*, forms of ritualized FRIENDSHIP with traits of

fictive KINSHIP. The *philo*i were predominantly Greeks even in the Seleucid Empire, coming from a wide range of cities (see FRIENDS OF THE KING). As they maintained bonds with their hometowns, they could mediate between monarchy and city. Although court societies presented an image of harmony to the outside, internally they were imbued with competition for favor, power, and status, and were frequently torn apart by vicious dynastic struggles.

Gift exchange was the fuel of social relations at court, and brokerage was the motor. In the early Hellenistic period, kings were to a large extent in control of the social composition of their courts because the upheavals of the Wars of the Successors provided them with plenty of wealth and land to distribute among their followers. Kings often recruited their closest associates from the ranks of the *syntrophoi*, “foster-brothers,” mostly ethnic Macedonians who in their youth had been royal pages (*basilikoi paides*) together with the reigning king and were addressed by him as “brother.” From the late third century, the court system of the SELEUCIDS and Ptolemies became progressively more rigid, with a hereditary, landholding aristocracy at the top and professional administrators at the lower levels of the hierarchy. An elaborate system of court titlature developed, including such purely honorific titles as “relative of the king” or “most honored friend,” and function titles like “chamberlain” or “master of the hunt.” Military titles such as *stratēgos* or *elephantarchos* belong to this category, too, because the same social group that constituted the upper echelons of the court also constituted the upper echelons of the army (hence the standard expression “the king, his friends, and the army” in Seleucid royal correspondence). It is impossible to say whether court titles reflected or created hierarchy. Rather than being indicative of bureaucratization, complicated court titlature was a form of formalized informality, an instrument for the king to retain his grip on an increasingly autonomous imperial elite (Strootman 2011). In the

second and first centuries BCE, kings also took to favoring outsiders (women, non-Greeks, and eunuchs) to counterbalance the power of the settled members of the royal council (*synhedrion*).

The court was a stage for the performance of the rituals of kingship, and a center for the patronage of arts and sciences. Most illustrious in the latter respect was the court of the first Ptolemies at Alexandria, with its museum and library. By collecting geographic and ethnographic knowledge, exotic plants and animals, foreign books, and objects of art, the Ptolemies exhibited their wealth and far-reaching imperial dominance, turning the vast, semi-public royal district (*basileia*) of Alexandria into a symbolic microcosm. At the same time, they deliberately promoted Greek culture at their courts. Among those who profited from Ptolemaic patronage were Theocritus, Callimachus, Euclid, Eratosthenes, Herophilos, ERASISTRATUS, and Hero. Rivalry with the Seleucids, together with an intense internal competition for the favor of the king, gave the impetus for an unprecedented atmosphere of innovation and experiment at the early Ptolemaic court (Strootman 2010).

Public monarchical ritual stressed the universality of empire, the heroic nature of Hellenistic kingship, and the king's role as (semi-)divine savior and bringer of peace and prosperity. Following pre-Hellenistic examples (such as Aigai and Halicarnassos), theaters or hippodromes were constructed adjacent to palaces to facilitate the theatre of kingship, for instance at Pergamon, Antioch, and Caesarea – a practice with a long afterlife in Rome and Constantinople. Ceremonial events like inauguration or marriage rites, and periodic

“royal” festivals such as the Ptolemaia of Alexandria (see Rice 1983) or the Nikephoria of Pergamon, had a diplomatic function as well, attracting a temporary “outer court” of visitors who came to pay homage and to do political business.

SEE ALSO: Alexandria (Egypt); Antigonids; Kingship, Hellenistic; Library of Alexandria; Palaces, Hellenistic; Seleucids; Women, Hellenistic.

REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS

- Herman, G. (1997) “The court society of the Hellenistic age.” In P. Cartledge, P. Garnsey, and E. Gruen, eds., *Hellenistic constructs: Essays in culture, history, and historiography*: 199–224. Berkeley.
- Mooren, L. (1975) *The aulic titlature in Ptolemaic Egypt: Introduction and prosopography*. Brussels.
- Nielsen, I. (1994) *Hellenistic palaces: Tradition and renewal*. Aarhus.
- Rice, E. E. (1983) *The grand procession of Ptolemy Philadelphus*. Oxford.
- Strootman, R. (2010) “Literature and the kings.” In J. Clauss and M. Cuijpers, eds., *A companion to Hellenistic literature*: 30–45. Oxford.
- Strootman, R. (2011) “Hellenistic court society: The Seleukid imperial court under Antiochos the Great, 223–187 BCE.” In J. Duindam, M. Kunt, and T. Artan, eds., *Royal courts in dynastic states and empires: A global perspective*: 63–90. Leiden.
- Weber, G. (1993) *Dichtung und höfische Gesellschaft. Die Rezeption von Zeitgeschichte am Hof des ersten drei Ptolemäer*. Stuttgart.
- Weber, G. (1997) “Interaktion, Repräsentation und Herrschaft. Der Königshof im Hellenismus.” In A. Winterling, ed., *Zwischen “Haus” und “Staat”: antike Höfe im Vergleich*: 27–71. Munich.