

# Introduction

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## 1. Hellenistic kingdoms and kingship

Just as interest in the Hellenistic world with its complex cultural interactions and interconnected economies has intensified in recent decades, the dominant political structures of this time, the Hellenistic kingdoms, have also increasingly come into focus of scholarship – albeit from quite different perspectives. Two distinct approaches can be characterised as follows:<sup>1</sup> One line of scholarship, which is particularly influential in the Anglo- and Francophone world, focuses on the institutional foundations of the great realms. In this context, it has proved quite fruitful to examine the Macedonian monarchies in terms of their organisational structures by conceptualizing them as “empires”.<sup>2</sup> This is especially convincing in the case of the Seleukid realm. With its different cultural zones, it comes close to modern concepts of empire and its categorisation as such helps to analyse its multifaceted character.<sup>3</sup> In a recent volume, this is also argued for the Ptolemaic kingdom, and both realms have been – despite their apparent differences in territorial extension and morphology – conceived as multi-ethnic empires and accordingly compared.<sup>4</sup>

A comparative approach is in many ways also important for the conference which formed the basis for this volume. However, its theme follows the second identifiable approach in scholarship on the Hellenistic kingdoms, namely the study of the ideological staging of the persona of the king and his dynasty, that is on ‘symbolic aspects of the Hellenistic monarchies’.<sup>5</sup> This is a field of research that has admittedly been influenced

1 Wiemer 2017, 332–338.

2 Ma 2013. Cf. Schäfer 2014, who – based on the criteria developed by Herfried Münkler – also counts the Antigonids as an empire, with some qualifications. Cf. also Kaye 2022, 2 who sees the Attalid kingdom after 188 as an ‘overnight empire’. Reflections on the notion of empire and its uses in Sinopoli 1994; Gehler – Rollinger 2022.

3 Cf., e.g., Strootman 2013.

4 Fischer-Bovet – von Reden 2021b. If one agrees with Strootman 2019, who characterises the Ptolemaic realm of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century as a maritime empire, this is all the more the case.

5 Bilde – Engberg-Pedersen – Hannestad – Zahle 1996, 12.

to no small extent by recent empire studies.<sup>6</sup> To give only some examples: The role of imperial ideology in motivating action is stressed. Empires are understood not only as a set of centralised and autonomous institutions but as networks of communication. It is recognised that the evocation of an “imagined empire” in texts (e. g. through the mention of interlocutors participating in the respective communication or alluding to the extension of the realm) emanating from the centre or mirrored in civic texts is also part of royal representation.<sup>7</sup> The studies by Paul Kosmin on the construction of space and time in the Seleukid empire are only one example of this trend in scholarship.<sup>8</sup>

Particularly in German-language research, increased attention has been paid in the past decades to the symbolic and ritual communication of the Hellenistic monarchies, after the earlier, primarily constitutional approach to kingship in this era had proved to be insufficient.<sup>9</sup> This is in line with a general trend in scholarship on ancient monarchic systems, which is increasingly focusing on ritual and symbolic communication and the underlying “ideologies” as one of the foundations of the monarch’s acceptance.<sup>10</sup> This approach has shown to be very fruitful for Alexander the Great,<sup>11</sup> but it is also a useful starting point for the study of the Hellenistic kingdoms following Alexander’s world empire, since these were dominions which (especially in the case of the multicultural and multi-ethnic Seleukid empire) had no basis for a common citizenship but had their only centre in the person of the monarch.<sup>12</sup> This is already evident linguistically when kings describe their domination as their “affairs” (*pragmata*) or their “royal rule” (*basileia*) in the sources. In fact, it was not possible to describe a kingdom without reference to the person of the Hellenistic monarch. When a Samian decree from ca. 201–197 BC refers to a time when the polis had been won back by the Ptolemies, this is naturally described as ‘when the city was restored to the *pragmata* of King Ptolemaios (V)’ (ἐν τε τῇ ἀποκαταστάσει τῆς πόλεως εἰς τὰ τοῦ βα[σιλέ]ως Πτολεμαίου πράγματα).<sup>13</sup>

In this field of research, a particularly influential approach has been to draw on Max Weber’s “Herrschaftssoziologie” and his models of legitimate rule, wherein rulership or domination is the probability that a command will be obeyed by a certain group of persons and legitimacy is to be understood as the acceptance by the ruled both of authority and of the need to obey its commands.<sup>14</sup> In an influential contribution, Hans-

6 Cf., e. g., Degen 2022, 40–51.

7 Cf. Sinopoli 1994; Fischer-Bovet – von Reden 2021a, 4; Ma 2003, 185.

8 Kosmin 2014 and 2019.

9 Wiemer 2017, 308–309.

10 Cf. the overview in Rebenich – Wienand 2017. This is especially apparent in the case of the Roman principate; cf., e. g., Zimmermann 2011.

11 Among recent works on the topic, which has long been a subject of debate among scholars, see Trampedach – Meeus 2020b.

12 Chamoux 2003, 249–250.

13 IG XII.6.1 12 ll. 26–28 (=Austin 2006, no. 145; cf. 162 n. 3 with further examples).

14 Weber 1978. Cf. Trampedach – Meeus 2020a, 9–10: “Two findings of Max Weber are fundamental in this regard: first, the distinction between power (“Macht”) and domination (“Herrschaft”),

Joachim Gehrke has used Weber's ideal type of the charismatic ruler to emphasize the military victoriousness of the Hellenistic king as the very basis of his acceptance by his subjects.<sup>15</sup> This has, of course, been differentiated in recent decades.<sup>16</sup> Warfare was most certainly a 'defining element of the Hellenistic world'.<sup>17</sup> The "charismatic" facet of Hellenistic monarchy was, however, not limited to the military dimension. Rather, the charismatic authority of the kings derived from an ostentatious performance that went beyond the possibilities of a "normal" human being in various areas: in the display of splendor (*tryphe*), for example, at the table at court, but also in the context of large festive processions and in his impressive benefactions.<sup>18</sup> Also, the display of the public image of kings and their families in portraits and coin imagery cultivated nuanced ideas of monarchic rule and kingship. While the identification of such "charismatic" facets is certainly conducive to making this form of monarchic rule more comprehensible – especially in comparison with other monarchic system – the question arises as to whether there actually was a uniform phenomenon of monarchic rule in the Hellenistic age.

## 2. Hellenistic kingship – the same, but different?

Whether there was "a" Hellenistic kingship at all is still a matter of controversy, but especially when compared with other systems like the Roman principate or its predecessor, Argead kingship, sufficient similarities between the Macedonian dynasties that emerged in the succession wars after Alexander's untimely death can be identified to

which invite us to analyse how (military) power developed into (political) domination. Which means did Alexander apply in order to transform the many countries which he victoriously crossed with his army into areas of domination?'

- 15 Gehrke 2013. Weber 1978, 241 defines charisma as: 'a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These are such as are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a "leader"'. cf. Gotter 2008; Luraghi 2013b, 20–22. On Weber's conception of charisma and its foundations, see Joosse 2014.
- 16 Cf. Wiemer 2017. An overview of the development of scholarship building on Weber concerning different fields of the Ancient world is provided by Näf 2015. While Koehn 2007, 77–88 created an unnecessary division by insisting that the wars of the Diadochi are to be explained 'machtpolitisch' and not 'machtssoziologisch', Lendon 2015 has argued forcefully against the use of any of Weber's legitimacy concepts and against the notion of "strategies of legitimation" mainly by the Roman emperors. Roisman 2020, 58–60 remains sceptical about what is gained by characterising the kings as "charismatic".
- 17 Serrati 2007, 461.
- 18 See, e.g., Theokr. 17. On *tryphe* see Heinen 1983. For royal banquets see Vössing 2004 and for *pompai* Köhler 1996. Following Gehrke 2013, Gotter 2013 reduces this rather one sided to victory.

constitute a ‘specific political category of monarchy’.<sup>19</sup> When during the so-called “Year of the Kings” 306/305 BC, the Diadochi proclaimed themselves *basileus* and took the diadem as visual expression of their new status in a kind of chain reaction, this title had neither territorial nor national restrictions, but rather referred to nothing other than the superior status of the person of the king.<sup>20</sup>

That the in some respects excessive, “charismatic” image of these new kings was in fact perceived by contemporaries as distinct and novel is particularly evident in that it instantly became a point of reference for other rulers who oriented themselves on this model as *the* expression of monarchical power and rule of the time. Examples for this phenomenon can be found in the West, where immediately in 304 BC the Syracusan tyrant Agathokles proclaimed himself king (fig. 1) and married a stepdaughter of Ptolemaios I,<sup>21</sup> and in the East as well, where non-Greek rulers deemed it necessary to stress their parity with the Macedonian monarchs by joining the club of the kings. The rulers of Bithynia may serve as an example here, as the dynast Zipoites probably used a military victory against generals of Lysimachos to declare himself *basileus* in 297/296 BC.<sup>22</sup> Others, like the Attalid Philetairos, did not dare to take this step. Zipoites’ son and successor Nikomedes (note also the now Greek name which, however, changes again to Thracian under his successors) then started to mint coins (fig. 2) following primarily the Seleukid example.<sup>23</sup>



**Fig. 1** Agathokles. Bronze coin. Obv.: Bust of Artemis Soteira right, with quiver over shoulder. ΣΩΤΕΙΡΑ. Rev.: Winged thunderbolt; ΑΓΑΘΟΚΛΕΟΣ || ΒΑΣΙΛΕΟΣ.

19 Quote after Eckstein 2009, 385 who argues mainly on the basis of Walbank 1984. On the successors see Bosworth 2002; on the Argeads cf. now Müller 2016. Wallace-Hadrill 1982 is still important for the difference between Hellenistic monarchy and the Roman principate.

20 Gruen 1985. On the diadem, its significance(s) and its possible origins see Lichtenberger et al. 2012.

21 De Lisle 2021, 139–177.

22 Paganoni 2019, 37–44.

23 Michels 2009, 158–162.





**Fig. 2** Nikomedes I. Tetradrachm. Obv.: Diademed portrait of Nikomedes right. Rev.: Bendis sitting to left, holding two spears; in front shield. ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ || ΝΙΚΟΜΗΔΕΩΣ.

At first glance, this uniformity seems to fit well with the interconnection of the different Afro-Eurasian spheres that constituted the Hellenistic world and might be seen as an expression of the “globalisation” of this time.<sup>24</sup> Recent studies have nonetheless illustrated and stressed the diversity of monarchical rule in the Hellenistic world. In a way, this also becomes tangible in the specific coin images just referred to. The coins of Agathokles lack a royal portrait, which has often been taken as the most important innovation of Hellenistic royal coins, while Nikomedes did choose to depict his portrait with a diadem on the obverse, but he also associated himself with the specifically Thracian goddess Bendis shown on the reverse.<sup>25</sup>

The main reason for these profound differences lies of course in the diverse framework conditions and traditions under which the different monarchies emerged. The contrast, for example, between the Antigonids ruling in the Macedonian heartland on the one hand and the Seleukids and Ptolemies – ‘exiles from their ethnic homeland’ –<sup>26</sup> ruling over a diverse body of subjects on the other hand is especially stark, yet not great enough to see them as completely different entities.<sup>27</sup>

However, the issue here is not only that there were different specifics in the various kingdoms. There is also no uniform picture within the great empires. This is to a large extent the result of the constellation of foreign rule of the Macedonian monarchs over diverse populations. As a foreign ruler, the Macedonian king assumed a variety of roles that were based on locally coded models.<sup>28</sup> This xenocratic constellation applies to the

24 Cf. Versluys – Riedel 2021, 17–18. Chaniotis 2018, 6: ‘Because of the interconnection of vast areas in Europe, Asia and North Africa, the Hellenistic world and the Roman Empire have justly been considered as early examples of Globalisation.’

25 Michels 2009, 159–160.

26 Shipley 2000, 295.

27 Walbank 1984, 65.

28 Stressed, e. g., by Ma 2003, 186.

cultures of the Near and Middle East with their oftentimes longstanding monarchic traditions as well as to the old and new Greek cities. To recognize the key expectations emanating from the political culture(s) of the subjects was crucial for the successful exercise of power –<sup>29</sup> Alexander in Egypt whom we meet here as Horus ‘the ruler of the rulers of the entire land’ or ‘the strong-armed’ being probably the most-quoted example.<sup>30</sup> How consciously the Ptolemies then – in conversation with the powerful priestly elite – specifically addressed traditions of the indigenous population is apparent, e. g., in the Rosetta stone when it is decreed that the planned statues of Ptolemaios V are to be placed beside accompanying statues of the main deity of the respective sanctuary which gives Ptolemaios the weapon of victory made ‘in the Egyptian fashion.’<sup>31</sup> Also, the choice of Pharaonic iconography and local stones in some Ptolemaic royal portraits underline this specific target group orientation towards local audiences.<sup>32</sup>

Other “rules” had to be recognized by the kings when dealing with the Greek city states both of their realm, and also of the wider Aegean, which formed, so to speak, the core of the Hellenistic world of states: When Lykortas, the father of Polybios, wanted to induce the Achaian League to give military aid to the Ptolemaic side against Antiochos IV in 169/168 BC, he read out a register contrasting the past benefactions of the Ptolemies to the league with those of the Seleukids.<sup>33</sup> Of course, kings showed their munificence also towards their other subjects as is strikingly illustrated by the Kanopos Decree from 238 BC which praises Ptolemaios III for having given grain not only to the residents of the temple but to all the inhabitants of Egypt which suffered from a drought at the time.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, the euergetic exchange between kings and *poleis* (and *koina*) brought forth culturally specific rituals with their own language.<sup>35</sup>

When considering monarchical representation (rather than propaganda<sup>36</sup>) – to be understood as visual and textual expressions of rulership as well as all actions connected with or referring to the king – special attention must therefore be paid to the respective communication partner and context.<sup>37</sup> The various roles to be assumed by the ruler, his virtues, norms of behaviour, and his canon of duties and responsibilities

29 But see Chamoux 2003, 251: ‘No other state model was ever less eager for pretence, less keen on any attempt to justify the power it held.’

30 Bosch-Puche 2013, 134.

31 OGIS 90 (= Austin 2006, no. 283), ll. 39–40: κατεσκευασμέν[α τὸν τῶν Αἰγυπτίων] | τρόπον. The reconstruction is based on the Hieroglyphic text.

32 Kyrieleis 1975.

33 Pol. 29.24.11–16.

34 Kanopos Decree (= Austin 2006, no. 271), ll. 14–19.

35 Bringmann 2000; Ma 2002.

36 Whether the term “propaganda” is at all applicable for the ancient world is still debated today. Oftentimes, cf. Baynham 2021, the problem of anachronism is rather brushed aside. Especially the discussions on the Roman empire and “propaganda” (see, e. g., Weber – Zimmermann 2003a; Meister 2021) have shown that the term should rather be avoided and replaced with representation.

37 Cf. Eich 2003; Gotter 2008.

were not prescribed by the ruler alone, but rather resulted from interaction with different communication partners.<sup>38</sup>

Many instances of monarchical interaction in the Hellenistic world may be described as having a decidedly “glocal” character, which means that they comprised both imperial or global elements that can be classified with the cultural containers “Graeco-Macedonian” and “Achaimenid” as well as aspects endowed with meaning on a local, respectively meso-regional level.<sup>39</sup> Whether it is possible to clearly differentiate between ‘local roleplaying and unitary ideology’ or if the impulses and guidelines provided at the level of local interaction also had consequences for the general ruler-image of the respective realms is certainly a complex question complicated by the scarcity of sources.<sup>40</sup>



**Fig. 3** Ptolemaios VI Philometor, seal, diademed and bearded portrait bust left.



**Fig. 4** Ptolemaios VI Philometor, seal, bearded portrait bust left, with pschent and diadem, pectoral.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. also Lichtenberger 2015.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Lichtenberger 2021.

<sup>40</sup> Ma 2003, 186.