Introduction

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Taking the field of ancient history as a whole, including the Middle and Far East as well as Europe and the Mediterranean, the monarchical court cannot be said to have occupied centre-stage in a way that might seem justified by the prevalence of monarchy as a system of power in antiquity.[1] The reasons for this relative neglect are complex and cannot all be unpacked here.[2] But one, certainly, is the sense of the court as a 'moribund social formatio[n]'[3] which has permeated western consciousness since the French Revolution. Back-stairs influence, intrigue and flattery: these generic phenomena of courts have earned themselves a bad reputation in western democracies which pose as the mirror-opposites of 'old-regime' arrangements of power, and in the study of ancient monarchies they are often sidelined, or their associa-tion by ancient writers with 'bad' or 'weak' rulers, or with whole societies classed as degenerate, as the ancient Persians were by the ancient Greeks (Brosius in this volume), taken at face value.[4] In those nineteenth-century European monarchies which survived, especially after 1848, constitutional-ism was the order of the day, as it had been (at least notionally) in the United Kingdom since 1688. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, in the nineteenth and for much of the twentieth century the students of monarchical institutions in the ancient world have often been preoccupied with modernist attempts to define their legal basis – as with the Macedonian kings, say, or the early

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[1] I am grateful to the two anonymous assessors of this book, and above all to my collaborators in this project, for comments which have helped to define and refine the issues raised in this Introduction.

[2] A further indication – apart from this book – that a change is afoot is the conference on 'Royal Courts and Capitals' (Istanbul, October 2005) which compared ancient, Islamic and European courts and included two Roman historians among the speakers: see the conference report: Mansel 2006.

[3] Elias 1983: 8. Cf. ibid.: 'As far as [courts] still exist in developed countries, they have lost much of their earlier power and prestige. As compared to the time of their apogee, the court societies of our day are mere epigones. The representatives of rising social formations usually regard these remnants of a past era with mixed feelings.' In the UK this last point is probably more true now than in the period after the First World War when Elias wrote.

[4] In the UK media some newsprint journalists activate a depreciatory stereotype of the court to criticise government when it is seen to act in an insufficiently open and democratic way: thus 'the court of King Tony [Blair]', the 'courtiers' including unofficial advisors like Alistair Campbell.

Roman emperors. In the legacy of earlier generations of scholars, there are
obvious exceptions to this sidelining of the court, such as the researches of
L. Friedländer on early imperial Rome or H. Berve on Alexander the Great,
and these have proved mighty bulwarks for at least two of the chapters in this
book (Spawforth; Paterson). But even these studies tend to be descriptive
rather than analytical. As the contributors to this book have found out, the
court as a central entity within the monarchies which they study has often
been taken for granted (Brosius; Spawforth), or scarcely conceptualised at
all (Wiesehöfer; van Ess; Spence). A related reason for this neglect is the tra-
ditional separation in western scholarship of the 'trappings' from the 'sub-
stance' of power. The 'trappings' involve aspects of monarchy which scholars
trained to focus on the history of events or institutions have traditionally
found hard to take seriously as objects of study – ceremonial, say.[5] They also
involve the crossing of interdisciplinary boundaries: the study of palaces,
gardens, costume and iconography is traditionally the field of art historians
and archaeologists; the study of feasts – a subject which often comes up in
this book – is arguably more the domain of the social scientist; and so on.
Finally, this interdisciplinary complexity is nowadays being reinforced by the
gendered approaches which are reappraising the role of women in rulers'
courts, both ancient and modern. The prejudice in most if not all ancient
societies against women rulers (see Spence in this volume on Eighteenth
Dynasty Egypt) has meant that powerful royal women have often been pre-
sented as 'unnatural' by ancient (male) writers, from Achaemenid queens
and princesses to the younger Agrippina, when in fact this sort of influ-
ence is a sociological phenomenon arising more or less naturally from the
embedding of a ruler's exercise of power in the domestic setting of the court.

What, then, is a 'court'? All the chapters in this book have sought to
answer this question with reference, first, to contemporary perceptions.
In some ancient societies a word for 'court' is harder to track down than
in others, and here the issue may require more lexicographical research
(Spence and Wiesehöfer in this volume). Elsewhere, with Chinese *ch'ao*, say,
meaning literally 'morning audience', a modern dictionary may retroject
today's sense of 'court', a meaning of which the Han Chinese may not have
been fully conscious (van Ess in this volume). It is clear, though, that the
ancient Greeks and Romans had conceptualised the court at least to some
degree.[6] Thus the Greek word from which the modern neologism 'aulic'
derives, *aulē*, along with the Latin equivalent *aula*, is used by ancient writers

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[5] There are, of course, significant exceptions to this, e.g. Price 1984; Cannadine and Price 1987.
[6] Winterling 1997: 151 n. 1. Quite how much is debated: Herman 1997: 204–5; Gregor 1997: 31.

both of the ruler's dwelling as a physical entity and in a more abstract sense of the people to be found there – 'those *peri tēn aulēn*' (see Spawforth, Paterson and Smith in this volume).

This idea, that 'the court' is both the spatial framework of the ruler's existence and also the social configuration with which he shares that space, is fundamental in modern attempts to define and analyse the court. It might be argued that the word 'household' then starts to look like a perfectly adequate alternative to 'court', in the sense of the members of the ruler's family cohabiting in his dwelling, along with their domestic attendants and bodyguards. There is some cogency in this viewpoint. But a concept is needed which takes account of more than simply household personnel. For a start, the dwellings of ancient rulers were the focus for decision-making and governance in monarchies which were all (in the case of the ones studied in this book) personal and more or less absolutist. Factored into the ruler's entourage in this kind of 'Weberian' patrimonial monarchy, therefore, must be the comings-and-goings of political 'helpers' and, in some cases (the late Roman and Han Chinese empires, say: see Smith and van Ess in this volume), a fledgling state bureaucracy. The apocryphal saying of Louis XIV, 'L'état c'est moi', could not be more misleading about the complex reality of the exercise of royal power in pre-Revolutionary France, where 'ideas, practices and even institutions' did much to limit – albeit not control – the French king's 'theoretically formidable' authority (Antoine 1989: 175–9). Some such formulation, albeit with less emphasis (perhaps) on 'institutions', could be put forward in summary of the powers of most, if not all, the monarchies studied in this book (the *nomoi* or 'customs', say, which restrained the Macedonian king). For this reason, the ruler's space was also the potential site of exchanges between ruler and all manner of subjects who were not necessarily members of his household or even in any sense his officials. This space, finally, was also where envoys of foreign powers were received. The attempts by each side to control or manage these exchanges gave rise to the theatricality often thought of as characteristic of courts: pomp and circumstance on one side; a carefully controlled demeanour, incorporating deference, ingratiation and flattery, on the other. The semantic field 'court' best conceptualises the idea of a social configuration characterised by these distinctive modes of communication.

The chapters which follow highlight the state elites as the key-group of subjects in the workings of ancient courts. The study of monarchical courts, then, is unavoidably a form of elite history, since no ancient monarchies (or at least, none of those studied here) conceived themselves as instruments of 'people power', even if gift-giving to the masses (the 'bread and circuses'

of imperial Rome) was one of 'the necessary costs of stable autocratic government' in antiquity.[7] The court in its physical sense was not entirely isolated from the people – the linkage of the late Roman imperial palace to the hippodrome is the most striking example of the quasi-integration of ordinary subjects into the spatial configuration of the courts studied here (Smith in this volume). More often, however, as the following chapters show, the court turns out to be a place where issues of access to the ruler seem mainly to focus on the elites: these were the people whose face-to-face encounters with the ruler Akhenaten's Window of Appearance (Spence in this volume), say, or Alexander's state tent (Spawforth in this volume), not to mention feasts and hunts (Smith in this volume), were – to differing degrees – intended to manage. Ancient monarchs, like those of later periods, relied on trustworthy servants with whom they were obliged to share their power if territories were to be administered, armies commanded, and other functions of ancient-world governance discharged. From the ruler's point of view, management of relations with his elites was critical, since it was this group which provided both his key helpers and, as often as not, the most potent source of attempts to supplant him. The chief spatial and social setting in which both ruler and elites sought to manage their mutual interaction was the court. In the following chapters the manner of this interaction is shown to be culturally specific in different ancient societies in a range of ways; in all chapters, however, it is a recurrent and a major theme. Most chapters distinguish an 'inner' from an 'outer' court, the former comprising the ruler and those whom service or kinship kept more or less permanently in his vicinity, the latter denoting members of the elite who were a more intermittent presence, in part by virtue of the coming-and-going between centre and periphery imposed on them by the delegated power with which the ruler entrusted them.

Ancient courts, then, were complex entities. In negotiating this complexity, contributors to this volume were able to take their bearings in part thanks to the edifice of current scholarship on medieval and early modern courts inspired, as even his critics concede, by the German social historian Norbert Elias.[8] Elias was the first scholar to impart scholarly rigour to the study of monarchical courts. His doctorate was first published in 1933. As *Die höfische Gesellschaft* ('The Court Society') it only became widely known a generation later, however, following the publication of a new (and different) German edition in 1969. This was translated into French in 1974, with English translation by Edmund Jephcott following in 1983.

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[7] Paterson 2004.   [8] E.g. the comment of Duindam 2003: 7.

Elias centred his work on the court of Louis XIV and his successors at Versailles, for his picture of which he was heavily reliant on the brilliant but partisan memoirs of a courtier, the duc de Saint-Simon (1675–1753). The text of Elias is rich and dense. One of his central propositions, that the court society of pre-Revolutionary France marked a necessary stage in the 'socio-genesis' of the nineteenth-century French state, does not directly concern this book. Another, however, is more relevant. Basing himself on Saint-Simon, Elias posed the question: How do hereditary monarchies of the patrimonial type reproduce themselves from one ruler to the next, often over a period of centuries? He argued that the crucial relationship in this type of monarchy was between the ruler and the elites (see above), and that the court was the means by which each sought to bring influence to bear on the other – its fulcrum. In his case study, Louis XIV was cast as a conserving ruler, third king of the Bourbon line, whose chief aim was to maintain his inherited position of power. Louis achieved this by constructing the 'hyper-palace' of Versailles. Here he ensnared the kingdom's elite – the French high nobility – by means of an elaborate system of etiquette. This kept grandees in their place by conferring or withholding prestige-fetishes, such as the notorious privilege of holding the candlestick at the royal coucher. The Versailles system worked for Louis XIV, according to Elias, because it manipulated the aristocratic outlook of noble courtiers and in particular their obsession with honour and distinction. For the monarchy, Versailles offered the means to replace the real power of the high nobility with honorific functions.

Elias' arguments have not escaped a revisionist assault from historians in recent years. In particular, it is argued that he exaggerated the absolutism of Louis XIV and underplayed the fact that Louis and his courtiers were engaged in a mutual negotiation, in which the latter exchanged their attendance and their deference for royal patronage and the wherewithal to maintain traditional aristocratic status-goals;[9] and, even if Louis XIV can be said to have dominated his court, this was less obviously the case with his two successors, where the reverse could seem more the case.[10] Even so, the work of Elias still remains perhaps the richest source of reflections on the ruler's court as a social configuration. One of its strengths is that it constantly stands back and risks general observations about power, monarchy

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[9] Duindam 1995; 2003: esp. 7–10 with earlier refs.

[10] E.g. Louis XVI's 'très-arrière-cabinet', with the comment of Verlet 1983: 525: 'Le superlative dit, à lui seul, le développement du mal dont souffre le souverain, repoussé chez lui plus loin par la pression de ses courtesans, dans ce château [Versailles] où il étouffe.' But see Hours 2002 for an Eliasque reappraisal of Louis XV's 'strategy of control of his Court'.

and social structure. The interest of these for scholars of ancient courts can be gauged by the number of citations of Elias in the chapters which follow. For students of ancient courts, Elias is also highly stimulating for his analysis – less fresh in 2007, of course, than at the time when he wrote it – of the 'substance' of monarchical rule by means of the 'trappings', and for insisting on the importance of sociological concepts, notably conspicuous consumption and status, in trying to understand the workings of courts. Less remarkable now, to be sure, than when he originally wrote, this kind of approach, while it may seem commonsensical these days in some fields of history-writing, cannot be said to be taken for granted in the study of antiquity.

In recent years the work of Elias has started to attract historians tending one particular corner of antiquity, namely Greece and Rome. In the 1970s the potential of the Eliasque approach was recognised by Keith Hopkins, well known for using methodology informed by the social sciences to break new ground in studies of the Roman empire.[11] In the mid-1990s, in his chapter on the court of the Julio-Claudian emperors for the *Cambridge Ancient History* Andrew Wallace-Hadrill acknowledged his debt to Elias,[12] as did Gabriel Herman in an original study of Hellenistic court politics and court etiquette (see below).[13] More recently there has been a spate of German studies of ancient (classical) courts within the Elias tradition led by the wide-ranging historian Aloys Winterling, who worked first on the court of the early modern electors of Cologne[14] before turning to ancient (classical) courts, above all the Roman imperial court.[15] This volume is greatly indebted to the contributions of Winterling and his colleagues. That said, their work is not well known in Anglophone scholarship.

Turning to the present volume, it was born out of a common conviction among the contributors that our understanding of ancient monarchies could be usefully improved by viewing them through the optic of the court. A first aim is to explore ways of adding conceptual rigour to an aspect of ancient rulership which, as noted earlier, has tended to be taken for granted, if it has been considered at all. A second aim is to take the Elias-inspired debate about the court to a range of ancient societies. To an extent this approach has been anticipated by Winterling (1997), in a collection which looked comparatively at the ruler's court across the sweep of classical antiquity. The Newcastle project, however, sought to take the discussion of ancient courts out of this classical 'box' and to adopt a cross-cultural perspective. Egypt, Persia and

[11] Hopkins 1978: 181. See Smith in this volume.   [12] Wallace-Hadrill 1996: 285 n. 13.
[13] Herman 1997.   [14] Winterling 1985.
[15] Winterling 1997b; 1998; 1999. In the later stages of the preparation of this volume another collective work of German scholarship has appeared which explicitly seeks to 'theorise' the court: Butz, Hirschbiegel and Willoweit 2004.

China were chosen for a number of reasons. Diversity is one. Han China was clearly not influenced by the practices of the classical world; nor was Egypt in the period studied by Spence in this volume. Along with Persia, all three were ancient societies where little or no explicit attempt has so far been made to model the ruler's court, and this chance to experiment was a further attraction. Eighteenth Dynasty Egypt, moreover, was at best a proto-historic society, and Spence's investigation necessarily addresses the methodological challenge of melding historiographic models with archaeological evidence to a far greater extent than other chapters in the book. Within classical antiquity, Alexander the Great was an attractive figure because on the one hand his court ceremonial is relatively well attested, while on the other he tends to be seen chiefly as a military, not an aulic, figure. As already noted, the court of the Roman emperors is far from being virgin territory. But we felt that there was still room for reviewing the imperial court in an explicitly comparative way. The Roman Principate allows the initial stages in the creation of a court society to be followed in some detail by the usual standards of ancient evidence. The two chapters on Rome by Jeremy Paterson and Rowland Smith not only debate with Elias, but also take account of recent German work as yet relatively unknown in the Anglosphere. With all the ancient states under review, in one respect the project sought to compare like with like. States were chosen which combined strong monarchies with empire in the periods of their history examined in this book, because these seem to be the conditions in which, historically, court culture has tended to flourish.

The Newcastle project explicitly adoped an interdisciplinary approach, and all contributors are aware of, and in different ways have been stimulated by, contemporary court studies. Inevitably, the figure of Elias looms large. It is important to stress, however, that the project was not intended to be merely reactive to Elias and modern court studies. Indeed, the collection is not touting a methodology as such, nor does it espouse any one model of the court. In fact, despite the impact of *The Court Society* on modern work on the court, currently there appears to be no authoritative model of a court to which early modern historians all subscribe.[16]

In order to strike a balance between diversity and the coherence of theme required to sustain a multi-authored approach, the editor provided an initial briefing paper for contributors to consult when writing their first drafts. All contributors attended a workshop in Newcastle in May 2004, where each pre-circulated draft was discussed among the group. The workshop concluded by subscribing to a common agenda around which final contributions

[16] Note Duindam 2003: 318–20.

could cohere.[17] Various issues were agreed to merit discussion, although it was up to individual contributors to decide where the emphasis should lie.

It was proposed that each paper in its final form should reflect on two broad questions: whether it was legitimate to talk of a 'court' in the specific monarchy being discussed, and how crucial the ruler's court was for understanding the machinery of power in the double sense of actual decision-making and power's 'representation'. To pursue these questions, further issues were identified which should, or could, be considered.

1　Can the concept of a 'court' and of 'courtiers' be identified in contemporary thought and language?

2　Who belongs to the court? How does membership break down into different status groups? Is it helpful to think in terms of an inner and outer court of, respectively, people permanently in the ruler's personal vicinity and others whose presence is temporary?

3　How are the people closest to the ruler recruited? How far is the ruler's freedom to recruit these people tempered by, for instance, established career-structures, where these can be said to exist at all?

4　What structures of communication characterise the court? How is physical access to the ruler articulated? In the interaction between ruler and courtiers, what part is played, and for what 'structural' reasons, by flattery and servile opportunism, or intrigue, or faction?

5　What is the relationship of the ruler's domestic setting or household function to decision-making? How far, and for what particular reasons, do members of the household, including relations and domestic functionaries, influence decision-making?

6　Does the ruler's residence function as a site of representation? 'Representation' embraces the whole range of forms of symbolic communication, such as art and architecture, ceremony and costume, which legitimate the ruler's authority.

7　Does the court display 'stateliness', in the sense of clearly amounting to an institution in its own right, acquiring organisational complexity, or coming to function of its own volition, or influencing social attitudes, or generating an autonomous 'court society'?

8　How important is the court as a symbol of social order, a place where social ranking is put on display and different elite groups are integrated by means of ceremony?

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[17] Particular thanks are owed to Josef Wiesehöfer, who kindly offered the workshop a preview of Butz et al. 2004, a volume which, at the time, was still in press.

In considering this wide range of issues, contributors were of course left free to place the emphasis where they thought fit. But the working definition of the court and court society was intended to ensure a measure of rigour when contributors sought to assess – as they were encouraged to – whether a genuine court phenomenon could be diagnosed for a given society, that is, an entity which clearly went beyond the inevitable 'group dynamics around leaders' (Duindam 2003: 318; but see Spence in this volume).

From the outset, it was clear that the ancient sources would be a critical constraint in the investigation of these issues. All contributors were therefore asked to make explicit the strengths and drawbacks of the source material at their disposal. It cannot be emphasised enough how limited these sources are when compared to those, for example, available to the modern historian studying the court of Louis XIV. In this last case, the material includes works of literature and reports by observers (Saint-Simon's memoirs; the missives of foreign ambassadors), courtiers' journals (the marquess de Dangeau's notably[18]), official records of court departments and court ceremonies, royal artefacts, and of course the royal residences themselves, which, even if destroyed or (as in the case of Versailles) severely altered since the Revolution, are still copiously documented by the surviving archives.

The ancient societies viewed here exemplify enormous diversity in the different sorts of limitations imposed by the evidence. For classical antiquity we are heavily reliant on the artful works of a literary elite predisposed – by cultural tradition as much as by political feeling – to sing the praises of personal autonomy and view monarchy with ambivalence. In Alexander's case this literary bias is further skewed by the fact that the extant Alexander-historians wrote, at the earliest, some three centuries after Alexander's death; inevitably, they import the cultural colouring of their (Roman) time. Ancient Chinese historiography provides the basis for the study of the Han Chinese court and displays similar difficulties for the modern historian (van Ess in this volume): the great Ssu-ma Ch'ien was critical of imperial policy; the *Book of the Later Han* was composed some four centuries after the start of the Later Han period; and so on. The most striking feature of the sources for the Achaemenid Persian period is the authority of a body of contemporary writing from a largely hostile, neighbouring culture (Greece), which used (and arguably distorted) representations of the Achaemenid empire

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[18] Along with the memoirs of Dangeau's grandson, the duc de Luynes, this journal suggests the enormous interest which a court society takes in what might seem to modern historians to be the trivia of the king's day, including details of the king's drinking, sleeping and hunting habits, recalling Alexander's journal (*ephēmerides*), a work held by some modern scholars to be an ancient fiction (Hammond 1983: 5–10).

as a means of constructing the cultural 'other'; this can be offset to a lim-
ited degree by contemporary documents and archaeology, given full weight
by Brosius in this volume. Sasanian Persia, likewise, has left behind no
contemporary literature of its own about the court, although there is rele-
vant material in the literary culture of a hostile neighbour (the late Roman
empire), not to mention much later Iranian traditions with the usual prob-
lems of distortion and colouring. Inscriptions play an important part in
offsetting the dearth of other kinds of written testimony in the cases of Per-
sia and Egypt. These texts are not, of course, without problems of their own:
Egyptian funerary inscriptions address eternity; official inscriptions of the
Achaemenid or Sasanian rulers belong to the field of royal representation
and must be understood as such. As for material remains, for one of the con-
tributions, on Alexander, they are simply not available: modern knowledge
of the physical setting of Alexander's court is dependent on written descrip-
tions. For the other ancient societies studied in this volume there is, indeed,
archaeological evidence, although the modern tradition of archaeological
exploration is much stronger for some parts of what was once the ancient
world, such as Egypt, than for others, such as the Sasanian empire (respec-
tively Spence and Wiesehöfer in this volume). Eighteenth Dynasty Egypt
and Achaemenid Persia are particularly remarkable for the survival of a rich
body of 'royal' art depicting the ruler and the court; these to some extent
compensate for the absence of much (Egypt) or anything (Achaemenid Per-
sia) in the way of indigenous written observations about the ruler's court.

The chapters in the book illustrate this diversity of ancient source-material
and also show how this diversity limits, in different ways, our attempts to
analyse ancient courts. At one extreme, that of Sasanian Persia, simply to
delineate the court in broad brush-strokes, on the basis of a fragmentary and
problematic palette of evidence, is an achievement. At the other extreme,
the court of the fourth- and fifth-century Roman emperors is attested by a
copious body of evidence across a wide range of media. The varying nature
of the surviving evidence inevitably makes for difference in the length of
chapters in this book. The one on Sasanian Persia, a first attempt to document
the Sasanian court, is relatively brief. The length of the chapter on the later
Roman empire (Rowland Smith), by contrast, is justified by the richness of
the evidence and the consequent complexity of the topic.

What can be said to have emerged from this book? Some general remarks
can first be made about the Eliasque approach and its relevance to ancient
courts. In terms of the physical arenas for courtly behaviour, none of the
ancient courts studied here turns out to have been like Versailles in the sense