

RULING ALONE:
MONARCHY IN GREEK POLITICS AND THOUGHT

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Archaic Greek tyrants, Spartan *basileis* and Hellenistic kings are not often dealt with in the same book – except for general handbooks of Greek history, that is. Division of labor among scholars certainly plays a role, but more decisive is the widespread idea that these political regimes have so little in common, that no comparative discussion can be really fruitful – an idea that derives essentially from views expressed in the works of ancient (mostly Greek) authors. The present book is meant to challenge this notion. Common to all the contributions is an approach to the evidence that derives its categories and concepts from modern social and political science rather than from ancient literature. The various political regimes that are investigated in the contributions that comprise this book are all seen as particular species of one and the same kind of political order. Such order could be called monarchy if the word could be counted upon to convey only its etymological meaning. But the use of the word ‘monarchy’ in modern history, in its various transliterations from the Greek *monarchia*, has made it semantically inseparable from the field of ‘king’ and ‘kingship,’ with all sorts of connotations that would be anachronistic and/or misleading when applied to ancient Greece. Accordingly, we have made recourse to periphrases such as ‘sole rulership’ or ‘ruling alone’ in order to convey the meaning of what in German would be called *Alleinherrschaft*.

Conceptual clarity is not the only consideration that recommends such an approach. To be sure, the danger of inadvertently mixing or hybridizing ancient and modern political concepts and categories is a constant threat to any study of Greek political thought and practice, one of which all the authors in this book are well aware. However, one result that we hope will emerge clearly from the contributions here assembled is that a comparative approach to various forms of sole rulership, as practiced, suffered, or imagined by the Greeks, brings to light an essentially unitary notion, that pervades the whole trajectory of Greek culture, surely not without changes and dynamism, but with a surprising degree of consistency over time. Fundamental to such notion was the inherent lack of legitimacy of sole rulership in Greek eyes. Of course, the Greeks did not fail to notice that sole rulers were a widespread phenomenon, especially in the Eastern Mediterranean and beyond, and they realized that such rulers, apart from exceptions caused by specific circumstances, were seen as legitimate by their subjects. This situation however was for them a by-product of the more general difference between themselves and all the others, the people they called *barbaroi*. Accepting to be subject to a sole ruler was one of

the most important aspects of the otherness of the *barbaroi*. On the contrary, ruling alone over a political community of Greeks could be construed as desirable for the ruler – most of the time it was indeed construed in such terms¹ – but not as acceptable for the subjects. *Archesthai*, to be ruled over, was tolerable only insofar as it constituted a preparation for *archein*, ruling over others. In the whole of Greek literature until the end of the Hellenistic period one would be very hard pressed to find a single statement to the effect that it is a good thing for a community of *politai* to be ruled over by an individual – as opposed, of course, to the idea, more frequent among oligarchs, that it was good for an army to be led by one single commander, which is obviously a different thing.

To put this in general terms, we could say that the very notion of an individual ruler clashed with non-negotiable portions of the system of values and norms that characterize Greek political culture. The *polis* constituted itself by acknowledging, or creating, a sphere of shared interest on which shared operative decisions were made in public – by bringing decisional power *es to meson*, as the Greeks said.² Individual decisions binding for the whole political community and subtracted to the public eye were therefore doubly unacceptable. Furthermore, the *polis* was an environment of relatively flat hierarchies with a strong underlying current of egalitarianism that undermined the sharp and steep hierarchical boundary that separates the sole ruler from his subjects.³ The idea of a supremely virtuous and superhumanly perfect sole ruler could be formulated only paradoxically as a political utopia, and the very thinkers who formulated it make it as clear as it can possibly be that they did not consider it desirable, let alone practicable. However, this theoretical notion chimes with and points to a central aspect of the historical experience of the Greeks with sole rulers. If individual power could not be construed as traditional or rational, it is clear that the only possible window of legitimacy for this kind of political order in the framework of Greek political culture has to be looked for in the general area of what Weber called charismatic rule. In other words, the logic of the system would lead us to expect that individual rulers, real or imaginary, could be seen as legitimate, if at all, only based on specific characteristics inherent to the single individual. Historical evidence, such as it is for the several periods, appears fully to confirm this prediction, and actually makes it possible to flesh it out with details, sharpening in various ways the category, which has a dangerous built-in tendency to evolve into a catch-all,⁴ and making it possible to sketch a history of sole rulership in the political practice and imagination of the Greeks. The purpose of this introduction is to offer the reader a way of appreciating the several contributions that comprise this book as chapters of a coherent story – coherent in both historical and sociological terms.

1 See CONNOR 1977, 98–99.

2 For a memorable discussion of the political meaning of this spatial metaphor, see VERNANT 1962.

3 See e.g. Aristot. *Pol.* 5.10.1313a3–10 with the comments of CARLIER 1984, 513.

4 As remarked by GOTTER 2008.

1. THE SHADOW OF THE *BASILEUS* AND THE MASK OF THE *TURANNOS*

Many modern reconstructions of the political world of early Greece, between the end of the Dark Ages and the eighth century BCE, follow a story-pattern that speaks of the progressive loss of power of royal dynasties that had hitherto ruled over the several poleis and of their replacement by political regimes of an oligarchic type – which modern scholars tend to call aristocracies.⁵ This pattern derives directly from Greek historiography. It may have originated in the late fifth century and was certainly widely accepted by the middle of the fourth. The rulers who were replaced by the new-style regimes are called *basileis*.

Whatever this consensus was based upon, it cannot have been supported by what we would call reliable historical evidence. During the fifth century, when Greek intellectuals first sat down to write in prose about the past, all they could rely upon as far as the early archaic period was concerned was oral tradition – rich, meaningful, aesthetically pleasing, but utterly unreliable beyond a span of about a century.⁶ Archaic lyric poetry, that started being exploited as historical evidence during the fourth century, did not reach back in time beyond the middle of the seventh, quite apart from offering very fragmentary and occasionally misleading information.⁷ Inscriptions, too, proved helpful only for the more recent portion of the archaic period.⁸ Indeed, the difference in quantity and quality between what Herodotus can tell about the period from Croesus onwards and about earlier times is too evident to require elaboration. The fact that, during the fourth century, such a difference tended to diminish, without actually ever disappearing completely, should if anything caution the modern reader against the all-too-often accepted assumption that later authors did nothing but report what they had read in the works of earlier colleagues.⁹

The plausibility, for ancient and modern audiences, of this story-pattern, which was replicated in a rather similar way in the case of the transition from monarchy to

5 For an authoritative formulation of this view, which can be found in countless narratives of early archaic history, even though it appears to be less popular in recent decades, see BUSOLT 1920, 340–344. It is laid out in the most detailed fashion in CARLIER 1984. The modern concept of aristocracy, when applied to archaic Greece, corresponds roughly to the self-perception of the Greek ruling elites as articulated in archaic and early-classical poetry (and laid out magisterially by FRAENKEL 1969); as such, it refers to a system of values and ideals and a life-style, not to an identifiable subsection of the citizen body. For the sake of clarity, it is best avoided. ‘Oligarchy’ is more descriptive and accordingly less ambiguous. On the expression of social differentiation in archaic Greek society, see now DUPLOUY 2006.

6 On this, the standard works of reference remain MURRAY 1987 and THOMAS 1989. FINLEY 1965, rather more skeptical, is still well worth reading.

7 The use of archaic lyric poetry as historical evidence by Greek historians awaits a systematic investigation; prominent cases should include Solon and Tyrtaeus. For the pitfalls involved in using this kind of evidence, see the comments of Strabo on Tyrtaeus in Strab. 8.4.10.

8 On the use of inscriptions by Greek historians, see various contributions in BIRASCHI ET AL. 2003.

9 Exemplary on this point the observations of MURRAY 1992, 50–51 on the development of the legend of Phalaris in the fourth century.

republic in Rome, is somewhat surprising. The replacement of monarchy by an oligarchy, without external intervention, is not exactly a very common occurrence in the annals of world history. Weak monarchs who are in effect controlled by groups of nobles of course are, but this is a rather different matter. One would be tempted to say that lack of direct experience with monarchy is almost a necessary precondition for this story to have been seen as plausible by the Greeks – but this conclusion would side-step the issue. Rather, it is necessary first to address an obvious historical question: if the commonly agreed-upon reconstruction of the early *basileis* was not based on historical evidence, what was it based upon? And here, a tentative answer can be formulated. Two main factors may have plaid a role. First, and in some ways less momentous, was the idea, fairly widespread among the Greeks from the second half of the fifth century onwards, that the *barbaroi* represented, especially in political terms, a less developed stage in a general scheme of evolution that potentially applied to the whole of the human race. In this framework, it was easy to think that the present of the *barbaroi*, characterized by the omnipresence of monarchy, corresponded to the past of the Greeks. But much more important must have been the reading of epic poetry, and especially of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, as historical evidence, which was commonplace for the Greeks.

The political world of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* was dominated by rulers, who most of the time act in the poems in their quality of military leaders, called *basileis* or more rarely *anaktēs*. Ever since Moses Finley argued that the social configuration depicted in the poems was sociologically plausible and reflected the situation of Dark Age Greece, scholars have been debating the role of the *basileis*, occasionally bringing in parallels from social anthropology.¹⁰ By far the most detailed and most persuasive scrutiny of the evidence, done by Pierre Carlier, has pointed to a series of incontrovertible facts: wherever we can tell, the power of the *basileis* was hereditary; it is often referred to by metonymy with the word *geras*, indicating a privileged share or portion of land or revenues that the subjects grant to the *basileus*; when it comes to making operative decisions, there is a strong expectation that the king will conspicuously seek the advice of the most authoritative members of the community and the approval of the people, but he is ultimately in charge and can go against both if he so wishes.¹¹ In reference to this last aspect, Egon Flaig speaks appropriately of a consensus-based system.¹²

Carlier insists that the right name for Homeric *basileis* is ‘king’, and he is certainly right as long as this translation is applied to the single *basileus* who holds the scepter in his community.¹³ The problem is, however, that the world depicted in epic poetry is inhabited also by another sort of *basileus*, who appears in the plural, forming a council of sorts that advises the *basileus* in the singular. The *basileis* in

10 FINLEY 1954. For possible parallels to the *basileis* taken from social anthropology, see especially QVILLER 1981, ULF 1990, 95–125, and the criticism of CARLIER 1996, 5–11.

11 See CARLIER 1984, 151–177.

12 See FLAIG 1994 and RAAFLAUB 1997, 15–16.

13 Notice however that Carlier’s position has become more nuanced with time; in CARLIER 1996, 19 ‘roi’ is the ‘moins mauvaise’ translation of *basileus*.

the plural can also be called *gerontes*, the elders.¹⁴ The presence of the *basileis* surrounding the *basileus* is much more than a problem of terminology, for what monarchy can exist that does not have different names for the king and his nobles? Tellingly, other scholars, most prominently Kurt Raaflaub, have been inclined to regard the parallel presence of the *basileus* in the singular and of the *basileis* in the plural as an anachronism, interpreting the former as a reflection of the political situation of the end of the Dark Ages and the latter as the prototype of the oligarchies of the early archaic period.¹⁵ Raaflaub's understanding of the *basileis* is supported by the appearance of the word, in the plural, as indicating a ruling elite in Hesiod's poems, commonly dated somewhere between the end of the eighth and the first half of the seventh century BCE.¹⁶ However, it cannot be denied that this solution silently gives up Finley's axiom of the coherence of Homeric society and thereby undermines the whole conceptual edifice.

And yet, this is obviously the way to go. In order to support the notion of the historicity of the Homeric society, it is necessary to leave out of the picture the actual nature of the poems as we understand it – poetic texts, in the first place, and the product of a long process of creative and transformative transmission, whose roots are usually and with good reason thought to go back to the Bronze Age. It is surely correct to expect that the poems would make sense to their Greek audiences in terms of the values they promoted and the patterns of behavior they displayed – for that matter, they never really ceased to do so. But there is no methodology that makes it possible to distil a history of political institutions out of them. Considering that monarchy appears to have been the political focus of Late Bronze Age Greece, it seems hard to escape the conclusion that Homer's individual *basileis* are to be regarded as a pale and garbled reminiscence of Mycenaean *anakes*, as they appear to have been called: in other words, monarchy featured in the imaginary world the poets sung, not in the real one the poets inhabited.¹⁷

This conclusion, however, is relevant only for a modern history of Greek political institutions, because it is crystal clear that, from as early as we can tell, Greek historians and philosophers took Homeric monarchy seriously and tried to make sense of it by establishing a relation with what they were familiar with, i.e. the prevalence of oligarchies in archaic Greece. The main question they needed to answer was, where had the Homeric *basileus* gone, and the replacement of monarchy by oligarchy was their answer, an elegantly economic one, facilitated by the fact

14 The evidence is collected and discussed by CARLIER 1984, 145–150.

15 RAAFLAUB 1991, 235–236.

16 See again RAAFLAUB 1991, 230–233. Hesiod's *basileis* get short shrift in CARLIER 1984, 411–412.

17 On this, I cannot but subscribe to Kurt Raaflaub's conclusion: "... by the time of Homer and Hesiod the option of establishing a real monarchy, if it ever existed, was long gone. Accordingly, in archaic Greece there never was a 'monarchy' properly speaking; 'kings' did not disappear, they never existed, and thus the traditional terminology ('kings', 'kingship', 'monarchy') should be eliminated from our books." (RAAFLAUB 1993, 79). On the nature of Mycenaean monarchy and the political structure of the Mycenaean world, see SHELMEKDINE 2008, esp. 292–293 with further references.

that Homeric monarchy itself did not look like a particularly strong regime, given all the limits posed by the elite to the power of the king. In the end, a strict analysis of the political prerogatives of the heroic *basileus* brought Aristotle to the conclusion that his was no real monarchy, but little more than a life-long generalship.¹⁸ In the meantime however, the social and political model depicted in the epic poems had impacted Greek political culture in more ways than one. Apart from suggesting a trajectory for the development of political institutions, it offered a possibility to construe monarchic power as traditional, and thereby as in some sense legitimate.¹⁹ It is telling that such offer was not taken advantage of except by the tyrants.²⁰

It may however be worth entertaining the possibility that the emergence of Spartan double-*basileia*, a rather puzzling political construct, may be seen as a case of activating the potential of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* as repositories of political tradition.²¹ Modern explanations usually tend to presuppose that the double-*basileia* was made inevitable by some special circumstance, such as the merging of two originally independent political entities into early Lakedaimon, but this notion, apart from explaining *obscurum per obscurius*, sits uncomfortably with the insistent presence of the symbolism of the twins in association to the Spartan *basileis*.²² It may be worth exploring the idea that the main and obvious consequence of having two *basileis* at the same time, i. e. the fact that neither one of them would be able to rule, was also the reason why the double-*basileia* was introduced in the first place: a pseudo-conservative measure, very much in keeping with Spartan constitutional thought as we know it.²³ The pervasive analogies between the privileges of the Spartan *basileis* and those of the Homeric kings, as well as the relationship between *basileis* and *gerontes* both in Homer and at Sparta, support this line of thought. It would not be the only case of invention of tradition in Spartan constitutional history.²⁴

Ultimately, the emergence of double-*basileia*, like most things to do with the Spartan constitution, can only be the object of speculation. All that can be said is

18 See especially the conclusion of the comparative considerations in *Pol.* 3.1285b33–1286a9: only *pambasileia* is really a *politeia*.

19 Not a very strong one, however, because epic poetry is extremely poor when it comes to articulating an ideology of monarchic power. Sure enough, Homeric *basileis* received their scepter from Zeus, but this put them only a little above any highborn Greek, considering how widespread divine or heroic descent was, and in any case, divine support had a negligible role in the political imagination of the Greeks. The few passages from the *Iliad* that point to the rightfulness and desirability of the leadership of the *basileus* actually refer to leadership in war. In the end, together with problems of genre and tradition, it is probably the ambiguity of the relation between *basileus* and *basileis* that undermined the possibility for epic poetry to convey an ideology of sole rulership.

20 See esp. CATENACCI 1996, 132.

21 CARLIER 1984, 240–324 offers by far the most detailed discussion – almost a small monograph. Among the more recent contributions, see CARTLEDGE 2001.

22 See CARLIER 1984, 299–301 and 309–310.

23 As a parallel, consider the origin of the ‘Great rhetra’ as reconstructed by NAFISSI 2010. On the role of double-*basileia* in limiting the power of the ruler, see CARLIER 1984, 309.

24 For a comprehensive discussion of this phenomenon, see FLOWER 2002.

that before the Hellenistic period the Spartan *basileis* resembled rulers only when they were on campaign, and not at all when at home in Sparta. We reach a firmer ground as we move to what was, according to the reconstruction presented here, the real first appearance of sole rulership in archaic Greece. With the seventh century, in the cultural climate dominated by contact with the Eastern Mediterranean and the Near East, a new kind of ruler emerged in the Greek world. His name, *turannos*, most likely derived from an Anatolian language – once again, not really a Greek word.²⁵ Later authors depict him as an autocratic ruler who seized power by ruse and/or force, opposed by the whole of the citizen body and supported almost exclusively by outsiders, preferably foreign mercenaries. Unrestrained violence, that could be thought of as performed or suffered by the *turannos*, points to a perception of this regime as involving a radical abolition of social order, a veritable return from culture to nature for the political community.²⁶ By the time of the Persian Wars, almost all of the most prominent among the Greek *poleis* had been for some period of time ruled by a *turannos*, and in many cases by a short dynasty – usually no more than three generations. From the middle of the fifth century onwards, *turannoi* became extremely rare, especially in mainland Greece, and only in the third century they experienced a real comeback.

During the fifth and fourth centuries, coming to terms, usually in retrospect, with this form of rule gave the Greeks' ideas about sole rulership their most characteristic features. From the very beginning, however, the position of the *turannos* is seen in an ambiguous light, as something worth aspiring to, but at the same time highly objectionable.²⁷ Our earliest authorities, Greek lyric poets who were at the same time members of the political elite, are so busy conveying all sorts of connotations associated with the *turannos*, that they fail to explain in any way what was the source of his power. Becoming a *turannos* brings great wealth, but also great danger (Solon fr. 33 West²). Only a political community that is out of its collective mind can accept to live under one (Alcaeus fr. 348 Voigt). His rule is inseparably associated with *hubris* (Solon fr. 32 West²). With a remarkable consistency, the Greek political imagination outlined a standard portrait of the *turannos*, a particular type of man characterized by a typical selection of vices: cunning, cruel, greedy, but also sexually incontinent, annoyed by flattery but incapable of tolerating free speech. In many ways, this portrait can be said to be psychological rather than political. In order to illustrate it, examples could be picked from Sophocles, Herodotus, Aristotle or almost any other Greek author.²⁸

The Greek discourse of tyranny hides more than it reveals, but of course, its very silences are themselves revealing. Its most obvious blindspot covers almost completely the question of how and why a significant part of the citizen body decided to support such an obviously despicable ruler, a question urged on the modern

25 See PINTORE 1983, so far mostly ignored by ancient historians, and now UCHITEL 2007. On the political background, see also PINTORE 1979.

26 As I try to show in my contribution to the present volume.

27 In relation to a later period, such ambiguity is explored in TRAMPEDACH 2006.

28 LURAGHI 2013.

observer by the very frequency of *turannoi* in Greek history. The insistence on the matchless cunning of the *turannos*, which may at first sight seem like a loophole in his all-round negative image, was clearly a way of addressing this question. Few chances are left for the modern enquirer to go beyond the tight web of the discourse of tyranny as transmitted by Greek authors. However, in the only case where this is possible in a sustained way what we see is what we would expect: Christian Mann's scrutiny of praise poetry commissioned by *turannoi* shows them projecting an image of legitimacy with a modicum of pseudo-traditional elements linked to the image of the Homeric *basileus* and a much heavier dose of charisma, derived from the central symbols of Greek social ideology, such as personal excellence and justice.²⁹

2. THE CLOVEN RULER: IMAGINING THE GOOD *BASILEUS*

One key aspect of the Greek discourse of tyranny is its irresistible cultural plausibility. Epic poetry, with its remarkable social authority, could only support an ideology of social excellence – which is precisely what it did. It could not however offer an alternative way of thinking and talking about sole rulership: on this, the discourse of tyranny had no alternatives. It provided metaphors that could be applied to all sorts of relationships characterized by ruthless domination, from interstate politics to imbalance among the elements that compose the human body.³⁰

The dominance of the discourse of tyranny underpins the golden age of Greek political thought, from the Peloponnesian War to the age of Alexander the Great and surfaces in paradoxical ways – most strikingly, in the way Greek political theorists tried to come to terms with the problem of the good monarch. In the course of the fourth century, the systematic needs of an accepted typology of political orders, together with historical circumstances that could not be ignored, increasingly drew the attention to this conceptual problem.³¹ Already the three-fold typology inherited from the fifth century – democracy, oligarchy, tyranny – carried the implicit problem of distinguishing good from bad forms. If there was a good and a bad democracy, there had to be some sort of good counterpart to tyranny. The first formulation of the concept of the good monarch, who took the expected name of *basileus*, may go back to Socrates.³² After his death, it appears that the men who aspired to be recognized as the most prominent representatives of his school were competing

29 For the connection between charisma and central symbolic complexes, see SHILS 1965.

30 On the tyrant-polis and in general on tyranny as a metaphor for imperial domination, see TULLIN 1985 and RAAFLAUB 1979. *Monarchia* is used as a metaphor for disease, seen as the lack of equilibrium between elements in the human body (called *isonomia*), in Alcmaeon fr. B 4 DK; see TRIEBEL-SCHUBERT 1980, 40–44 with further references; for a more comprehensive approach to the use of metaphors derived from the political space to describe the universe, see VERNANT 1962, 119–130.

31 On the interest in monarchy of early-fourth century thinkers and its roots, see BERTELLI 2002, 17–20.

32 At any rate, a version of it is attributed to Socrates by Xenophon, *Mem.* 4.6.12; see LUCCIONI 1953, 145–146.