

ANTIMONARCHIC DISCOURSE IN ANTIQUITY:  
A VERY SHORT INTRODUCTION

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*Oh, der ist noch nicht König, der der Welt  
Gefallen muss! Nur der ist's, der bei seinem Tun  
Nach keines Menschen Beifall braucht zu fragen.*

Friedrich Schiller  
*Maria Stuart* (Act 4, Scene 10)

It may at first seem surprising to approach the phenomenon of monarchy in antiquity by way of a detour via antimonarchic discourse.<sup>1</sup> As a rule, when analyzing the self-image and the character of the different systems and their strategies for creating obedience and acceptance, the focus falls particularly on the self-representation and the ruler ideology of monarchs. However, this approach is conspicuous in concentrating only on one side. For this reason, it seems productive to approach the matter from the angle of real or merely anticipated criticism against the background of which monarchic legitimization was expressed: what conditions, what elements and what strategies are characteristic of negative discussion of monarchy, and to what extent was the relationship between ruler ideology and antimonarchic sentiments marked by mutual dependence? What significance does the eternal background noise have which as a *contre-discours* compelled Greek and Roman monarchs to justify themselves? It is the intercultural comparison in particular that allows us at this point to work out more clearly not just shared features and parallels but also specific individual characteristics. Thus, it is worth considering not just Hellas and Rome, but also the civilizations of the Ancient Near East. These are the places to start if one intends to approach the phenomenon.

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1 I use “monocracy”, “monarchy” and “sole rule” as more or less synonymous terms here to designate systems in which authority and the highest decision-making power lie with a single individual. This very wide definition of monarchy is, therefore, modelled on the original meaning of the word *μοναρχία*, and it is emphatically not based on constitutional aspects; instead it considers hierarchies of power.

In doing so, however, one must first note that there is no such thing as the “Ancient Near East”, at least not in so far as this traditional expression suggests that the differences between different eras as well as between the different civilizations of the Near East and North Africa are essentially marginal and superficial. As with the “Myth of the Mediterranean”,<sup>2</sup> conceptions which focus on (apparently) connecting features at the expense of special individual characteristics have increasingly been criticized in recent years with regard to the East, too.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, there is one thing at least which does seem to have been by all means typical of the ancient civilizations<sup>4</sup> in Mesopotamia, Iran, Anatolia, and Egypt.<sup>5</sup> From the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BCE at the latest monarchy, usually founded on sacral<sup>6</sup> and dynastic principles, had established itself here as a legitimate and almost “natural” form of government.<sup>7</sup> Exceptions, especially as represented by some city states,<sup>8</sup> were something out of the ordinary. This applies all the more if one also intends to take into account tribally organized societies, such as those characteristic of the Arabian Peninsula and early Israel,<sup>9</sup> as monarchic in principle, despite the fact that there was no single supreme lord.<sup>10</sup> This impression is strengthened by the fact that henotheistic and monotheistic religious concepts developed in conditions in which monocracy was fundamentally considered normal.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, if it is possible to speak about an “antimonarchic discourse” in connection with the pre-Islamic civilizations of this area,<sup>12</sup> then it is in the sense of a discussion of what distinguishes a bad ruler from a good one.<sup>13</sup> The focus is, therefore, not monarchy but the monarch. The ideology of monocratic rule, i. e. discussion about the good king, also necessarily produces a counterpart: as it implies that not every monarch is good *per se*, it must be possible to formulate criteria by which a

2 Cf. Timpe 2004; Malkin 2005.

3 Cf. Kolb 1984: 16: “Die Gemeinsamkeiten etwa zwischen der sumerischen und der hethitischen Kultur oder zwischen dem griechischen Mutterland und der römischen Provinz Nordafrika waren geringer als die Unterschiede”. On the phenomenon of “Orientalism” in the Classical Studies, cf. Hauser 2001; Kuhrt 2012.

4 A good starting point for an engagement with this area is still provided by Kuhrt 1995.

5 On the Egyptian ruler ideology, cf. Blumenthal 1980 and Frandsen 2008.

6 Cf. Jones 2005.

7 Cf. Seux 1980–83; Nunn 2011: 77.

8 Cf. Jacobsen 1943.

9 Cf. Rebenich 2012: 1158–1164.

10 “What we may call chiefs – leading members of dominant families who were accorded privileges in their roles as leaders in battle and judges in disputes – exerted local rule” (Meyers/Rogerson 1997: 136).

11 For the younger parts of the Old Testament, at least, Levin 2004: 85 speaks of a postulated “Notwendigkeit des Königtums”. Cf., however, 1 Sam. 8.10–18.

12 Following M. Foucault, “discourse” can – to put it in a simplified way – be considered as a context of meaning which is created by speech and text; it reinforces certain ideas which themselves have certain underlying structures and interests, which they perpetuate and generate themselves; cf. Frank 1989. It is not least this aspect of changeability that makes (anti-)monarchic discourse particularly relevant; cf. Morley 2004: 98.

13 Cf. Maset 2002 on the theoretical background to the concept of discourse, which goes back to Foucault, and on its application in historical research. See also Landwehr 2001.

bad ruler can be described. It is not a great step from the possibility of describing him as unjust and therefore illegitimate to the right of revolution.<sup>14</sup> Although there is no example of a monarchy being abolished, as far as I can see, an overthrow of government as a result of which the ruler was replaced was always possible in the Ancient Near East, too. It goes without saying that it was the elites who were bearers of this discourse; however, it usually only becomes tangible in the sources when it was influenced by the monarch himself, or rather his court, or by priests. In this way, they were of course also able to articulate claims; for this reason, the discourse can also be seen as a continuous process of negotiation.<sup>15</sup>

From the Bronze Age at the latest, there was intensive exchange between the Aegean and the Near Eastern-Egyptian area.<sup>16</sup> In the present context, however, relations during the Archaic period are of greater significance,<sup>17</sup> a time when there was not only close contact between the Cypselides of Corinth (Hdt. 3.48), as well as Lydia and Egypt, but also when the Greeks took over from an eastern language the expression “tyrant” (τύραννος) as an apparently neutral term for a monarch.<sup>18</sup> For although it was assumed in classical times that dynastically legitimated kings had once ruled the Greeks,<sup>19</sup> it has by no means been established that such a ‘monarchic’ tradition really did exist.<sup>20</sup> There are doubts as to whether the term *basileus* designated anything more than just one “big man” among others, and this is true not just for the Dark Ages;<sup>21</sup> by now, even the generally held view that there was, in Mycenaean times, a *wa-na-ka* who ruled as a monarch,<sup>22</sup> is disputed.<sup>23</sup>

This is not to say that the Greeks took over the idea of monarchy from the Orient, adapting it to their own special conditions, since it is hardly possible to find

14 At the same time, the image of the *rex inutilis*, who is not a tyrant but who *is* a superfluous failure, appears to be a comparatively late phenomenon; see, however, Dészpa (in this volume). Light has been shed on this concept, which presupposes a basically high acceptance of the monarchic principle, in medieval studies in particular; cf. Peters 1970.

15 A text from the archive of Aššur-bāni-apli (Assurbanipal) may serve as an example. In this text, an unjust ruler, who does not respect the gods, the law or his advisors, is threatened with divine anger. This, it is said, can, in the worst case, lead to Enlil, the king of the gods, sending out a foreign king in order to destroy the unjust ruler and his army; cf. Meissner 1920: 65 f.

16 For an overview, cf. Mee 2008.

17 Cf. Rollinger 2001.

18 Cf. Anderson 2005. According to the prevailing view, Archil. fr. 19 (West) is the *locus classicus* which proves an initially neutral use of the term: οὐ μοι τὰ Γύγεω τοῦ πολυχρύασου μέλει, οὐδ' εἰλέ πά με ζῆλος, οὐδ' ἀγαίομαι θεῶν ἔργα, μεγάλης δ' οὐκ ἔρέω τυραννίδος· ἀπόπροθεν γάρ ἐστιν ὀφθαλμῶν ἐμῶν. Cf. Parker 1998.

19 Cf. Aristot. eth. Nic. 1060b.

20 Cf. Morris 2003.

21 Cf. Hall 2007: 120–127; cf. Schulz 2011: 28 f. The Homeric epics occasionally show to all intents and purposes a positive attitude to monarchy, cf. Hom. Il. 2.204. It is noticeable that, at the same time, there is also already criticism of the unjust ruler; thus, Odysseus himself calls the killing of the suitors problematic: normally murder is punished by death or exile and he has now killed the *aristoi* of Ithaca (Hom. Od. 23.118–122). The killing of (other) nobles by a *basileus* is here considered unambiguously offensive. Cf. also Drews 1983.

22 Cf. Shear 2004; Schmidt 2006.

23 Cf. Schmitt 2009.

evidence for such an idea in the sources.<sup>24</sup> It is, however, certain that by classical times at the latest, the vast majority of poleis were not ruled by monarchs (not in Sparta, either), even if at that time *basileia* – at this point in clear opposition to *tyrannis*<sup>25</sup> – was at least theoretically understood as a legitimate form of rule alongside democracy and aristocracy or oligarchy.<sup>26</sup> In Athens, in particular, democracy, or rather *isonomia*, played a prominent role, although one should not overlook the fact that influential authors such as Thucydides or Aristotle did in fact distance themselves from it. The fact that feasible forms of rule between which one could choose existed alongside each other was crucial; under these circumstances an oligarchic as well as an antimonarchic discourse could develop, which was carried by the intellectual members of the secular elites and which we can grasp far better than in Egypt or the Near East on account of the more favorable preservation of relevant sources. When talking about monarchy, it did, of course, make a great difference in this context whether one lived under a monarch or not.

On account of the existence of plausible alternatives, the pressure to prove oneself as a legitimate ruler increased on anyone who was aspiring to monarchy in the Greek and Roman world or who, indeed, already ruled as a monarch. Every monarch could be accused of being a tyrant or a despot, who turned people into his slaves. Although all strategies that were commonly used in order to delegitimize a ruler in the Orient could also be employed, in principle, in the West, too, the possibility in this context of questioning monarchy as such appears to have been a characteristic of the Greek and Roman world. This assumption is the central premise of the present volume.

In classical times, after the Persian Wars at the latest,<sup>27</sup> “freedom” (ἐλευθερία) had been declared to be a defining characteristic of the Greeks, distinguishing them from the barbarians, and the “Asians” in particular.<sup>28</sup> This view has not only left marked traces in the European history of thought until very recent times: already in

24 See, however, Hall 2007: “That the Greeks should borrow a word to describe an autocratic regime only makes real sense if this was a system of government with which they were relatively unfamiliar” (139).

25 Cf. the contributions in Morgan 2003. This was true above all of the Greek motherland; in that part of Asia Minor which was under Persian control (cf. Wiesehöfer 2008) tyrants did exist at this time, too, in the same way as they did with the Greeks of Sicily and southern Italy.

26 Cf. de Romilly 1959 and Carlier 2010. The *locus classicus* is the fictitious constitutional debate, which Herodotus sets at the Persian court in the year 522 BCE (Hdt. 3.80–82); cf. Lanza 1977: 225–232; Pelling 2002. By using the transparent device of only discussing the ‘ideal’ versions of the three forms of government, Herodotus has Darius I emerge victorious from the discussion as a champion of monarchy: if *basileia* is defined as the rule of the best person, then aristocracy necessarily means that less good individuals participate in the exercise of authority, and this ought to be avoided: *quid enim optumo melius cogitari potest?* (Cic. rep. 3.35.)

27 On the continued influence of this tradition in Rome, cf. Spawforth 1994.

28 Aristot. pol. 3.1327b. It has been pointed out in more recent research that *inner* freedom and autonomy were apparently primarily meant here; by contrast, in case of doubt, freedom with regard to external politics was of subordinate importance for most poleis: the assumption that independence is a constitutive element of a city state derives primarily from modern constitutional thought; cf. Hansen 1995. Cf. also Dmitriev 2011.

antiquity it offered the possibility of characterizing monocrats as enemies of freedom and associating them with barbarians. The relevant teachings concerning tyrant-related *topoi* were fully developed and established by around 430 BCE at the latest. It is true that in Hellas aristocratic-oligarchic and democratic models of government could never claim to be accepted automatically, either, and conflicts between their representatives could, indeed, play a part in the *staseis* of this period.<sup>29</sup> However, the pressure to show himself to be the legitimate ruler was particularly high on every monocrat in the world of the polis,<sup>30</sup> and it is hardly a coincidence that Greek tyrants did not, as a rule, manage to maintain their position for more than three generations at most.<sup>31</sup> The idea of what constituted a “good” ruler appears to have first arisen as a counterpart to tyranny.<sup>32</sup> On the other hand, outside the world of the polis, in Macedon in particular, a legitimate monarchy (*basileia*) succeeded in establishing itself, but it is precisely the example of the Argeads that shows the precariousness of the position of this dynastically legitimated sovereignty, too.<sup>33</sup>

The rule of a single individual was fundamentally contrary to the central norms of the world of the polis. Any individual who ruled alone had to attempt to adapt to this matrix in order to gain acceptance.<sup>34</sup> This is of decisive importance: if monocracy was not considered a matter of course, it had to prove its worth. For this reason, unlike in the Near East, the monarch in question did not just have to demonstrate his personal aptitude; instead, the burden of proof went the other way: it was almost as if he were suspected of being a tyrant on principle. Boundaries were not clearly defined, and he had to show that his achievements and qualities justified the loss of freedom.<sup>35</sup> Put in a very simplified way, in Hellas, it was not just a matter of proving that a particular ruler was unsuitable, but rather, the monarch had to prove that, despite the fact that he ruled, he was not bad. For this reason, even a successful ruler could always be attacked circuitously by way of criticism of the system: in case of doubt, he was unable to give much of an answer to the accusation that he was an enemy of freedom simply on account of his existence. Conversely, criticism of individual rulers could always also be understood as an attack on the political order. This phenomenon was a specific characteristic of monocracy, as it was only within this form of government that the political system and its exponent, the monarch, were largely one and the same.

29 The most famous example is without doubt the *stasis* in Corcyra (Diod. 13.48); according to Thucydides it was at least ostensibly marked by a conflict between oligarchs and democrats (Thuc. 3.79–84); cf. Gehrke 1985: 88–93; Price 2001: 6–66.

30 An illegitimate monocrat was a tyrant, and as such he was, in principle, considered as an ἄσεβης and an outlaw. Cf. Luraghi 2013c.

31 According to some Greek authors, a community which was ruled by an absolute monocrat could not even be called a polis anymore; cf. Soph. Ant. 737; Eur. Suppl. 429–432; Ain. tact. 10.11.

32 Cf. Luraghi 2013b.

33 Cf. King 2010.

34 Cf. Gotter 2008b: 185 f.

35 The virtues which Xenophon ascribes to the king of the Spartans, Agesilaus, are illuminating in this context; cf. Xen. Ag. 11.

This was also true of Alexander the Great, who was unmatched when it came to success: irrespective of his achievements he was not infrequently also seen as a destroyer of Greek freedom. Nevertheless, meritocratic thinking offered a feasible route to securing a person's rule and to making a prominent position plausible, a route taken by Hellenistic rulers in particular.<sup>36</sup> If one did not have any genuine successes to show, it was at least important to claim that one did.<sup>37</sup> The meritocratic principle thus presented an answer to the problem of how to justify one's rule, but on the other hand, it also made the monarch vulnerable, as it made it possible to make statements about the ruler's quality which could be assessed in a more or less objective way.<sup>38</sup> He, for his part, had to live with the basic fear that antimonarchic discussion could, possibly, be followed by corresponding actions.

Although the Greek world was – regardless of the continued existence and vibrancy of democratic structures in many poleis<sup>39</sup> – dominated by monarchies after Alexander, monarchy itself nevertheless was never considered natural;<sup>40</sup> the part played by kings was subject to continuous negotiation.<sup>41</sup> The situation may have been different for most of the non-Greek subjects, especially those of the Seleucids and of the Ptolemaic rulers;<sup>42</sup> and in those Greek towns of Asia Minor which had been under Achaemenid rule prior to Alexander's campaign the longing for *eleuthe-*

36 Cf. Gehrke 2013 and Haake 2013. In addition to this, Schubart 1936 is still of importance. The 17<sup>th</sup> Idyll of Theokritos (in particular 17.73–130), which was composed in around 270 BCE, probably conveys a good impression of the way in which kings wanted to see themselves portrayed.

37 Cf. Gotter 2013; Strootman 2014: 247–263.

38 The basic idea of judging a ruler by his achievements is nowhere clearer than in the famous, and very probably Hellenistic, definition of *basileia*: οὐτε φύσις οὐτε τε τὸ δίκαιον ἀποδίδουσι τοῖς ἀνθρώποις τὰς βασιλείας, ἀλλὰ τοῖς δυναμένοις ἡγεῖσθαι στρατοπέδου καὶ χειρίζεν πράγματα νουνεχῶς (*Suda* B 147). Cf. Ma 2003 for more recent research on Hellenistic kingship; amongst other things, his paper emphasizes the multitude of roles which monarchs could play in different communication contexts.

39 For recent discussion concerning the character of the Hellenistic town, cf. Zimmermann 2008; Wiemer 2013.

40 It is significant that Plutarch, probably going back to Hellenistic sources, claims in a famous passage that the Diadochoi had immediately changed for the worse after accepting the title of king; Plut. Demet. 18. Cf. Plut. Kleom. 13; Pol. 15.24.4.

41 Thus, it is noticeable that kings, for example when communicating with Greek towns, generally did not present themselves as rulers and monarchs, but as “benefactors”; cf., for example, OGIS 223 (Seleucids) or SEG 47.1745 (Attalids). Cf. Bringmann 1993; Strootman 2011. “The whole issue of autonomy and city liberty (...) might be another local tradition, which the kings had to accommodate by playing a specific role to be found within modes of interaction” (Ma 2003: 180). However, one must not forget that the Greek cities were of special importance to the kings: “Auf griechische Funktionäre und Militärs waren die Herrscher in hohem Maße angewiesen, und diese rekrutierten sich im Wesentlichen (...) aus den griechischen Städten” (Gehrke 2006: 217).

42 Cf. Shipley 2000: 59–107. The non-Greek subjects of Hellenistic kings are, as a rule, likely to have largely considered the monarchic principle normal, as for example in Egypt. Cf. Mittag 2003.

*ria* will also have been somewhat limited.<sup>43</sup> All of these had in common the fact that they had been accustomed to monarchic systems for a long time. But there were important groups among which things stood differently, as antimonarchic sentiments were always attractive to the elites. These could be expressed in different genres – in addition to historiography, the most important areas were biography and rhetoric and to some extent also drama –, and it provided an outlet which made it possible to overcome the cognitive dissonance which existed between reality, often marked by opportunism, and the self-image of the aristocracy.

From the very beginning, Hellenistic kings made use of dynastic<sup>44</sup> and later also religious strategies of legitimization<sup>45</sup> in order to immunize themselves better against criticism and attacks,<sup>46</sup> and regardless of the difficult question concerning the extent to which this represents mere analogy or conscious appropriation of older, Near Eastern concepts,<sup>47</sup> comparable approaches can be observed in the *Imperium Romanum*.

Immediately after the end of the last relevant Hellenistic monarchy, Egypt, the Roman Empire for its part turned into a *de facto* monarchy. In this context, the Principate was, historically speaking, a special case: the *nobiles* of the *res publica* had for centuries defined themselves by means of a strict ethic of achievement and the ideal of aristocratic *libertas*.<sup>48</sup> The ostentatious rejection of monarchy was, apparently, the lowest common denominator which most of the members of the Roman ruling classes had been able to agree on for a long time.<sup>49</sup> In this context, however, two things must be considered: on the one hand, it is entirely unclear, not least because of the sources available, as to how and whether monarchy was a subject of discussion in Rome before the second century BCE.<sup>50</sup> On the other hand, for

43 Cf. Errington 2008: 3: “Since these ‘liberated’ Greek states were not used to exercising real political choice, they were generally content to recognize the Macedonian’s essential goodwill and therefore largely acquiesced in being ruled by him as successor to the ‘Great King’, quietly continuing to pay what his governors demanded.” Cf. Strootman 2011: 143: “Monarchic empire was only a new phenomenon for the cities in mainland Greece (...). Greek poleis in Asia Minor had been accustomed to Persian hegemony for centuries”. It is unclear to what extent those towns which had been founded after Alexander felt bound to the tradition of the polis (cf. Kosmin 2014: 183–251); it is certain, however, that Greeks as well as Macedonians were among the first citizens of these towns; cf. Austin 2003: 129.

44 Thus, it is conspicuous that in a Hellenistic *basileia*, the women of the ruling dynasty also played an important public role from an early date; this differs from the state of affairs under a tyrant; cf. Shipley 2000: 71 f.

45 Habicht 1970 still represents the classic investigation on the topic of the Hellenistic ruler cult; an up-to-date overview is offered by Chaniotis 2003. These efforts were doubtless taken to an extreme by the θεός Antiochus I of Commagene; cf. Wagner 2012.

46 On attempted usurpations, especially in the Seleucid Empire, see Chrubasik (forthcoming).

47 Cf. the contributions in Günther/Plischke 2012. On the Hasmonean Dynasty, an especially interesting case, see Trampedach 2013; Bernhardt 2015.

48 Cf. Beck 2008.

49 Cf. Erskine 1991, who assumes that the antimonarchic sentiments in Rome are a later development which only arose after contact with Hellenistic kings. See also Sigmund 2014.

50 Cf. Classen 1965. Thus, it is entirely conceivable that the relevance of antimonarchic discourse only increased after men such as Publius Cornelius Scipio (and perhaps also already Gaius

the period following this, one should not make the mistake of underestimating the variety of positions, interests and opinions inside and outside the ruling classes.<sup>51</sup> Nevertheless, one thing is quite clear: the *regifugium* was, in the late Republic, a central founding myth of the *nobiles* – but perhaps less so for the *plebs* – and it played an important part in political discourse.<sup>52</sup> It was not least because of this ideology that Caesar failed.<sup>53</sup> When he assumed the *dictatura perpetua*, even men like Brutus, who owed him a personal debt of gratitude, reached for the dagger.<sup>54</sup>

It was probably partly because of this experience, too, that Caesar's great-nephew, Augustus, proceeded more cautiously when, after a further civil war, he had gained sole authority in the Empire: *neesse est multos timeat quem multi timent*.<sup>55</sup> The complex web of personal obligations and formal legal powers of authority served in the main to disguise the monocacy of the *princeps* with its huge resources and thus made it easier for the *nobiles* to cooperate.<sup>56</sup> In practice, Tacitus was surely not the first to realize that the *res publica libera* had come to its end and that, effectively, Augustus' rule represented the beginning of a monarchy.<sup>57</sup> However, public discussion of the political situation was often deliberately ambiguous. For Augustus and the *principes* who followed him meritocratic thinking thus remained a central pillar of their position; officially, the main argument employed to create acceptance of their position of authority, and thus voluntary obedience of orders, was that their *auctoritas*, which exceeded everything else, had been gained through achievement.<sup>58</sup> There could be only one *optimus*, and the idea was that he should be the one to rule.

Flaminius) had begun to disturb the equilibrium within the ruling classes.

- 51 Cf. Meier 2014. When a *quaestor* in 69 BCE, Caesar is supposed to have held a eulogy for his late aunt Julia in which he proudly traced his *gens* back to the *rex* Ancus Marcius; cf. Suet. Div. Iul. 6. Assuming that this is not a later invention, it shows that referring back to kings did not have to be a taboo.
- 52 *Nunc mihi dicenda est regis fuga. Traxit ab illa sextus ab extremo nomina mense dies. Ultima Tarquinius Romanae gentis habebat regna, vir iniustus, fortis ad arma tamen* (Ov. fast. 2.685–688). The question of whether there really was kingship in the early Roman period is of secondary importance in this context; on the “nature of kingship at Rome” cf. Cornell 1995: 141–150 (in parts methodologically problematic); Linke 2010; Smith 2011.
- 53 Thus, the murderers of Caesar evidently justified their act as the recovery of freedom: οὔτε γὰρ ἐπὶ δυναστείᾳ οὔτ' ἐπ' ἄλλῃ πλεονεξία οὐδεμιᾷ ἀπεκτονέται αὐτὸν ἔφρασαν, ἀλλ' ἴν' ἐλευθεροί τε καὶ αὐτόνομοι ὄντες ὀρθῶς πολιτεύονται (Cass. Dio 44.21.1).
- 54 Cf. Gotter 1996: 207–232. Outside Rome, too, Brutus and Cassius were sometimes celebrated as tyrannicides, the most famous example undoubtedly being Athens, where it was decided to erect statues in their honor next to Harmodius and Aristogeiton; cf. Cass. Dio 47.20.4. (I will leave aside the question of whether this was truly a voluntary act, given the power structures at the time.)
- 55 Sen. de ira 2.11.3. The aphorism is ascribed to Caesar's contemporary Decimus Laberius and in fact belongs to a different context.
- 56 The co-existence of *princeps* and senate was famously described as “diarchy” by Theodor Mommsen; this conception has recently been advocated again; cf. Winterling 2005.
- 57 Cf. Tac. ann. 3.56; Tac. ann. 4.33.
- 58 Res Gest. div. Aug. 34.3. Cf. Börm/Havener 2012.



It has long been known that the individual Roman emperors of this period were dependent on the assent of their subjects – and especially of the soldiers<sup>59</sup> – to a particularly high degree, as the emperors' position was, *de facto*, indispensable, but its formal legitimization was weak.<sup>60</sup> For this reason, they were not only obliged to distinguish themselves from the rest of the population,<sup>61</sup> but also from their predecessors – and this was true not only in cases of a violent changeover of power. Every *princeps* was expected to guarantee internal peace, in particular, that is, the absence of civil war and lawlessness, and this was often a difficult task. However, the situation of the Empire's elite was also complicated.<sup>62</sup> Writers did not always succeed in judging correctly the extent of the *libertas* which they were allowed.<sup>63</sup> At the same time, a man such as Titus Labienus, who crossed the line, also created a difficult position for the ruler: on the one hand, attacks could, once they had reached a certain intensity, only be tolerated with difficulty without risking a loss of authority; on the other hand, a harsh reaction revealed the *princeps* as an enemy of freedom more than ever and thus proved the accusations to be true. It is likely that a desire to escape this dilemma contributed to the vast majority of historians of the imperial period deciding not to write about living *principes*.<sup>64</sup> More than ever, talk of the past became the playing-field of (anti-)monarchic discourse, while the historians themselves stated that it had become more difficult since the beginning of the imperial period to obtain reliable information about the government; this gap was filled by rumors and allegations.<sup>65</sup>

As time went by, monarchy became more and more natural in the Roman Empire, which was, moreover, surrounded by neighbors in which monarchy was the dominant form of rule. From the middle of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE, in particular, the influence of the ideology of the Principate, which had, anyway, always been di-

59 One of the most astonishing and at the same time most overlooked achievements of the first *princeps* was, by the way, that Augustus managed to maintain his control over the legions, the decisive pillar of his power. The Roman troops do not really appear to have realized until the late second century that they were not only able to proclaim emperors but that they could also kill them.

60 Reference should be made to the influential conception of the Principate as a “system of acceptance”: as there was no official provision in Rome for the position of monarch, it was also not possible for there to be an undisputed source of legitimacy for an individual emperor – if the *princeps* lost the support of vital groups of society, the risk of usurpation increased; cf. Flaig 1992: 174–209 and Flaig 2011. “Falls der Begriff der Legitimität überhaupt einen Sinn ergeben soll, muß er beinhalten: eine Institution ist fraglos akzeptiert. Daß die einzelnen Kaiser gestürzt werden konnten, heißt, daß sie nicht legitim – also nicht fraglos akzeptiert – waren, sondern ihre Akzeptanz sichern mußten” (Flaig 2014: 743).

61 On the Roman Imperial cult, cf. Gordon 2011 (with further literature).

62 Cf. Geisthardt 2015. *Unde angusta et lubrica oratio sub principe qui libertatem metuebat adulationem oderat* (Tac. ann. 2.87). This accusation goes back a long way and is found already in Herodotus: ἦν τε γὰρ αὐτὸν μετρίως θωμάζης, ἄχθεται ὅτι οὐ κάρτα θεραπεύεται, ἦν τε θεραπεύη τις κάρτα, ἄχθεται ἅτε θωπί (Hdt. 3.80.5).

63 Cf. Rutledge 2009: 24–28.

64 Cf. Matthews 2006. However, it should be conceded that most earlier historians also apparently avoided writing about individuals who were still alive.

65 Cf. Cass. Dio 53.19.2–4; Eun. fr. 50 (Blockley).

rected primarily at an Italian audience, decreased significantly. Given the serious crisis to which the Roman monarchy was subject at the time,<sup>66</sup> emperors increasingly looked for new ways of stabilizing their precarious position. Moreover, consideration for the sensitivities of the *nobiles* receded in proportion to the growing marginalization of the senatorial aristocracy. In Late Antiquity, Rome had become close to a ‘normal’ monarchy.<sup>67</sup>

Diocletian systematized court ritual, which was intended to emphasize the singularity and superiority of the *dominus*, and Constantine not only strengthened dynastic thinking,<sup>68</sup> but also quite openly introduced elements and symbols of kingship to Roman imperial rule – the most conspicuous example is probably the diadem.<sup>69</sup> In the period that followed, a common set of stylistic elements of late antique monarchy developed, not least through exchange with the Sasanian Empire.<sup>70</sup> This left its traces in Iran, the Eastern Roman Empire and right into the emerging *regna* in the Roman west. Nevertheless, the distinctive structural features of imperial rule remained visible, not least because the discourse on monarchies exhibited conspicuous features. Thus, even a Late Roman *Augustus* faced the risk of losing legitimacy on account of despotic behavior – especially the killing of *nobiles* – and being considered a tyrant from that point on.<sup>71</sup>

Moreover, traditional elements were preserved for a long time in secular literature because of the markedly conservative nature of *paideia*, which remained a mark of status for the elites until the reign of Justinian at least. “Kaiserkritik” was virtually a marker of genre, especially in late antique historiography, as it allowed authors to demonstrate their love of truth and their incorruptibility. In addition to this, it was possible to voice a fundamental feeling of unease as regards monarchy: even if it was always directed at individual, and usually deceased, rulers<sup>72</sup> and did not directly attack monarchy itself as a system, the omnipresence of criticism of the emperor

66 Cf. Körner 2011.

67 It is, of course, difficult to answer the question of what the characteristics of such a monarchy are. Here, the fact that it was fundamentally accepted as natural is viewed as the most prominent feature of such a system. In addition to this, the aspect which relates to constitutional law is of significance – is the monarch’s position provided for in the ‘constitution’? Furthermore, deriving from this, the presence of an unambiguous rule of succession is relevant. The consistent application of the dynastic principle, however, is not one of the significant elements. One should perhaps not make the mistake of viewing those forms which the western European kingdoms developed from the late Middle Ages onwards as the standard.

68 The dynastic principle had already played an important role since Augustus, as the *principes* had always tried to pass on their power within the family. In this context it is, by the way, significant that the first *princeps* made membership of the senate hereditary, thus creating the *ordo senatorius*; this placed qualifications on strict meritocratic thinking. Cf. Börm 2015.

69 Cf. Kolb 2001: 76 f.

70 Cf. Canepa 2009; Mitchell 2015: 167–175.

71 Cf. Börm 2013: 140–148.

72 It is, of course, usually impossible to establish how much ‘reality’ may lie behind the accusations levelled at individual rulers; however, given the great age and authority of the traditions which were being continued, *mimesis*, for example, of literary models doubtlessly always played an important part.

may be an indication that the secular elites continued to see imperial rule more as a necessary evil rather than anything else. In addition to this, rivalries within the ruling classes, on which every monarch depended, could become manifest in this way. In a monarchy, proximity to the ruler ultimately determined one's career,<sup>73</sup> and this meant that there were necessarily always many losers. In this context, the accusation that the system lacked legitimacy could increase the level of frustration that a person could tolerate, as one's failure could be put down to circumstances rather than lack of personal ability. This function of criticism as an outlet for frustration may be a reason why rulers – especially those whose position was relatively secure – generally tolerated such comments, as long as a certain red line was not crossed.

The second distinctive feature of Late Antiquity is the development of a religious, Christian discourse on monarchy. Constantine had turned to a faith, which, not least because of an increasingly more radical monotheism and claim to exclusivity, appeared to be suited to enabling an affirmative discussion of a monarchic order on earth, as a mirror of heaven,<sup>74</sup> so to speak.<sup>75</sup> But at the same time, this created new points of attack; already in the fourth century, a Christian discourse which was critical of the ruler developed in the *Imperium Romanum*.<sup>76</sup> The Christianization of imperial rule thus increased the acceptance of monarchy in principle, but could also increase the pressure on an individual ruler.

The relationship between monarchy and monotheism, indications of which are already found in pre-Christian times, is of course far too complex for it to be adequately examined here.<sup>77</sup> Nevertheless, it seems likely that the triumphant advance

73 It is not possible to discuss here whether the concept of “Königsmechanismus” (cf. Elias 1997: 235–259) can be applied to the late Roman court, that is, whether the emperor was able to deliberately and successfully play off different groups of his “apparatus” against one another.

74 Eus. vit. Const. 1.43 and Eus. Tria. 3.4. I would like to deliberately leave aside here the old question of whether a personal experience of conversion, in addition to political considerations, also played a role in the *conversio Constantini*.

75 Cf. Amerise 2007. Already Tertullian had stated that monarchy and the Christian religion fitted together well: *Christianus nullius est hostis, nedum imperatoris, quem sciens a Deo suo constitui, necesse est ut et ipsum diligat et revereatur et honoret et salvum velit, cum toto Romano Imperio, quousque saeculum stabit: tamdiu enim stabit. Colimus ergo et imperatorem sic quomodo et nobis licet et ipsi expedit, ut hominem a Deo secundum; et quicquid est a Deo consecutum est, solo tamen Deo minorem. Hoc et ipse vult. Sic enim omnibus maior est, dum solo Deo minor est. Sic et ipsis diis maior est, dum et ipsi in potestate eius sunt* (Tert. ad Scapul. 2). – “A Christian is enemy to no one, least of all to the Emperor, whom he knows to be appointed by his God, and so cannot but love and honor; and whose well-being moreover, he must needs desire, with that of the empire over which he reigns so long as the world shall stand – for so long as that shall Rome continue. To the emperor, therefore, we render such reverential homage as is lawful for us and good for him; regarding him as the human being next to God who from God has received all his power, and is less than God alone. And this will be according to his own desires. For thus – as less only than the true God – he is greater than all besides. Thus he is greater than the very gods themselves, even they, too, being subject to him” (tr. Thelwall, with modifications). In the *Apologeticum*, however, Tertullian argues that a Roman emperor cannot be a Christian (Tert. Apol. 21.24).

76 Cf. Börm 2010: 175 f.

77 Cf. Rebenich 2012: 1188–1192.

of monotheism also contributed to the fact that the late antique order which had established itself between the Atlantic Ocean and India by the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE consisted almost exclusively of monarchic systems, both in the east and in the west. At the same time, the demise, to a large extent, of the classically educated secular elites in this period meant that those who had transmitted the Greek and Roman (anti-) monarchic discourse over centuries disappeared. The world followed different rules after the end of antiquity.

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