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ROYAL COURTS IN DYNASTIC STATES AND EMPIRES

Jeroen Duindam

Introduction

At the heart of any royal court stands a ruler, more often male than female. The ruler is accompanied by close relatives, friends, and servants in various capacities. Other groups converge around this flexible and changing core institution. A comparison of courts necessarily starts with the household itself, omnipresent but highly variable. At all levels of society, households shape reproduction, socialization and interaction. In a large share of human history, political organization, too, arose primarily in the context of family and household. The hierarchical pre-eminence of a single family or clan, continuing its hold on power over generations, led to the development of dynasties. Common attributes of family life were magnified: households expanded, quarters—mobile or fixed—acquired more elaborate forms. Servants changed character if they not only served the head of their household, but also acted as administrators of his—and sometimes her—extended domains. Throughout history a range of phenomena related to dynastic households can be found. These include the household organization itself as well as its temporary or permanent abode. Household staffs reflect basic functions such as sleeping, eating, devotion, transport and hunting. Palace complexes, moreover, tend to have relatively secluded inner areas, and zones where a wider presence is allowed and expected. Hence, rules for access into the ruler's immediate environment, or arrangements for the ruler's movement outside of the core area, can be found at most courts. Dynastic reproduction and succession could be organized in many ways, and entailed a marked presence of women at court, even if their presence did not as a rule imply a share in formal responsibilities of government.¹ Politico-religious highpoints in the calendar often came with pageantry arranging participants according

¹ On women at court see Anne Walthall, ed., *Servants of the Dynasty. Palace Women in World History* (Berkeley; Los Angeles 2008).

to rank, demonstrating hierarchy and order. Even the artefacts chosen to highlight the supremacy of the ruler—thrones and daises; canopies, parasols, pendants, standards, and fans; headgear, jewellery, rings; drums and trumpets—show some resemblance across continents and centuries. Dynastic households, moreover, inevitably attracted visitors seeking hospitality, justice, preferment—or simply charmed by the spectacle. Representatives of regions and groups were drawn towards the symbolic and administrative centre, creating common elite identities while coalescing around the ruler.

The random examples offered here are a modest starting point only of a list that can be extended and refined *ad libitum*. Comparison of such forms and patterns can help us to understand functions of households—and hence of the dynastic power structures prevalent in pre-modern history. We need to ask ourselves, however, whether superficial similarities do not hide more profound differences. Labelling a magnificent building as a palace, or a person attending the ruler as a courtier, establishes categories of comparison that obscure cultural and social divergences. The term ‘courtier’ offers a case in point. It can be used as a generic term for all people at court—including menial servants as well as the ruler’s higher-ranking intimates; domestics as well as state servants. Often courtiers are viewed primarily in Castiglione’s literary perspective, as suave elite characters orbiting the court, forming as well as broadcasting its manners. These multiple associations of the term complicate understanding even in a strictly European context, with varying sources and contexts suggesting widely differing interpretations. Cultural translation entails even more problems. Archetypical court functions such as the chamberlain or the cupbearer can be found at many courts, but such functions could be performed by groups of very disparate status, provenance, training, and careers. Who would count as courtiers in the Ottoman Sultan’s palace or in the Qing Forbidden City? Members of the secluded inner courts—eunuchs, slave-pages, boon companions, princes—or state dignitaries who in these palaces as a rule entered only the outer court? Can we compare eunuchs in West and East Asia with high-ranking noble dignitaries in Europe performing similar tasks? To what extent did pages, trained at court in Europe as well as in Asia, play similar roles? Do we find parallels in Asia for the honorary courtiers so conspicuous in Europe, incidentally attending court, but not as a rule residing there? Such questions can be multiplied; they indicate the difficulties as well

as the intellectual appeal of comparison reaching beyond the level of easy analogy.²

Project, Conference, and Volume

This volume is an offshoot of the 14–16 October 2005 Istanbul conference on ‘Royal Courts and Capitals’. The conference itself formed part of a project or ‘action’ (A36) funded by COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology): ‘Tributary Empires Compared: Romans, Mughals and Ottomans in the Pre-industrial World from Antiquity till the Transition to Modernity’. The project quickly went beyond the three empires listed in its title, adopting a comprehensive comparative stance. Over more than four years, a management committee consisting of representatives of fifteen countries had the opportunity to organize two conferences a year, bringing together specialists studying a wide range of empires. Initially three levels were defined to organize our conferences: historical sociology of empire, central structures of empires, and experiences of empire (i.e. in regions under imperial sway). In practice, conference themes emerged that included all levels of discussion, such as armies and warfare, or law. The ‘Royal Courts and Capitals’ conference stood at the beginning of our series. Several other volumes have appeared or will appear in the near future, reflecting other meetings in this joint initiative.

The project was an enriching experience in many ways, not only because participants widened their horizons of knowledge and their potential for comparative research. It also made clear that comparison can be organized in many ways, each with distinctive advantages and shortcomings. A somewhat overstated typology may help to illuminate this. A generalizing approach, focusing on a single theme or idea, based mostly on secondary literature in a limited number of languages, and performed by one scholar, can lead to concrete and coherent results. These can be discussed and tested by others, challenging, complementing, or readjusting interpretations. An approach based on knowledge of many specific cultures, languages, and sources can only be organized as a collective effort. This tactic has the advantage of

² See Jonathan Shepard, ‘Courts in East and West’, in: *The Medieval World*, Peter Linehan and Janet L. Nelson, eds. (London 2001) chap. 2, pp. 14–36.

highlighting diversity, exposing superficial analogy and pursuing comparison where it seems to lead to more profound conclusions. While such an approach makes ample room for individual examples and for the complexities of comparison, it usually leads to diffuse results rather than to a clear thesis. Ideally comparison combines clarity of focus, purpose, and result, with knowledge of sources and languages and an eye for the specifics of different cultures. That ideal is far from easy to reach. In fact, the two approaches are necessary as subsequent steps in an ongoing process, in which the extremes can gradually come closer.

The 'Royal Courts and Capitals' conference had the advantage of a clear focus: the dynastic household in its urban and wider social context. This clear focus allowed us to invite specialists of courtly traditions throughout global history, asking them to address specific points of the courts they study, for a general audience interested in courts in other epochs and cultures. In other words: we chose not to define a general thesis to be discussed by all participants, but accepted diversity as a necessary precondition for comparison based on specialized knowledge of various cultures. Most papers in this volume are Janus-faced: they have a point to make for their own academic communities—ancient historians, Ottomanists, and the like—but at the same time introduce their court to the general reader. Discussion during the conference helped to show where comparison promised stimulating results, and where it needed to be treated with circumspection. This introduction takes up some of the points raised in these debates.

While the conference followed a thematic grid, reaching from the nature of dynastic power, via the connections between household and government, to the household organization, the role of courts as meeting places, and finally to the court as a conspicuous cultural centre, this volume is organized chronologically. In fact most papers in their more elaborate written form deal at some length with several of our conference themes, or cover the entire field. This book includes eight selected conference contributions, expanded and adapted to fit the outcome of our discussions. In addition to these contributions seven specialists (two of whom would originally have taken part in the conference) proved willing to write chapters covering courts or themes not yet covered. Among a total of fifteen chapters, four are devoted to 'early' courts in Assyria, the Seleukid Hellenistic kingdom, and Rome; five deal with the phase between 500 and 1500 BCE, six with the early

modern world. With two contributions on the Byzantine court and Constantinople, as well as two contributions on the Ottoman court, the venue of our conference is the geographical entity best-represented in our volume. European courts from Charlemagne via the Papal See to Louis XIV are discussed in three contributions, whereas two are devoted to the Chinese court. The Abbasid and Mughal courts are each given a chapter. Readers will immediately notice that this is by no means a representative overview of courts in world history. The Safavid court, close to the Mughal as well as the Ottoman cases in many respects, is absent.³ No contributions on African, South-East Asian, Japanese, or pre-columbian American courts are included. A rich historical and anthropological literature is available about these courts, and they have been excluded largely for practical reasons.⁴ Coverage even within the territories we did include is limited, as most periods and dynasties remain invisible. The aim of this volume is to make accessible to a general readership specialized knowledge of a wide range of courts in world history, in a form that invites further comparison—not to bring together a global compendium of court life.

A Model for Court Studies?

Why didn't we choose to organize our co-operative effort around a model or a debate in recent scholarship? A rich literature from a variety of disciplines, ranging from history and history of art to sociology and anthropology, provides descriptions and explanations of dynastic courts in many settings. The phase of growth and splendour of courts in Europe from the later middle ages into the eighteenth century often serves as a point of reference. In fact, interpretations of

³ See Sussan Babaie and Kathryn Babayan, et al. *Slaves of the Shah. New Elites of Safavid Iran* (London; New York 2004).

⁴ See e.g. Stanley J. Tambiah, 'The Galactic Polity in Southeast Asia', in: *Culture, Thought and Social Action, an Anthropological Perspective* (Cambridge, Mass. London 1985); Clifford Geertz, *Negara. The theatre-state in nineteenth-century Bali* (Princeton 1980); Geertz, 'Centers, kings, and charisma: reflections on the symbolics of power' in: *Local Knowledge. Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York 1983), pp. 121–146; see also John Beattie, *Understanding an African Kingdom: Bunyoro* (New York 1960); Lee Butler, *Emperor and Aristocracy in Japan, 1467–1680: Resilience and Renewal* (Harvard 2002); Eiko Ikegami, *The Taming of the Samurai: Honorific Individualism and the Making of Modern Japan* (Cambridge, Mass. 1995); Takeshi Inomata, Stephen D. Houston, ed., *Royal Courts of the Ancient Maya*, 2 vols (Boulder Co 2001).