ROYAL COURTS IN DYNASTIC STATES AND EMPIRES

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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. Archetypal 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).

one early modern European court in particular dominate the scene: Louis XIV's Versailles. Not only is the palace itself often compared to major palatial centres around the world; the imagery and stratagems associated with the Sun King likewise have been starting points for comparative and interpretative excursions. 'Versailles' has become a byword for many things: royal omnipotence, 'tamed' nobles, splendorous architecture—and French national pride.⁵ With the work of Norbert Elias, a specific interpretation of the court of Versailles turned into the single most powerful general model for studies of courts in Europe and elsewhere. In *The Court Society*, Elias used Versailles as a concrete case-study underpinning his general model of civilization, showing how unruly nobles through the increasing pressures of royal power adopted patterns of controlled behaviour they themselves soon started to appreciate as the essential marker of their superior social status. In his case-study, Elias showed how the king could rule in practice, by exploiting elite rivalries rather than through open confrontation. Supplementing Max Weber's discussion of the 'Veralltäglicung' or routinization of charismatic power, he asked himself how the power of dynastic rulers could be maintained over time.⁶ Which social contexts and mechanisms helped hereditary monarchs—not as a rule charismatic, bright, or brave—to maintain themselves? Elias provides a nuanced variant of *divide et impera*, in which the ruler balanced competing groups at court through the careful distribution of graces and honours. Louis XIV manipulated oppositions at court through the highly visible minutiae of ceremony, in which even the king's minor gestures could reshuffle hierarchies and alliances.

Elias' model enjoyed an immediate and protracted success, and dominated a first generation of court historians in Europe.⁷ Notwithstanding its acuity and verve, it has at least two fundamental shortcom-

⁵ Hélène Himelfarb, 'Versailles: fonctions et légendes', in: *Les lieux de mémoire*, Pierre Nora, ed., II *La Nation* (Paris 1986) pp. 235–292; note the role of Versailles in 1871 and 1919—it had become a symbol both of German revenge and French resilience.

⁶ Max Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft. Grundriss der verstehenden Soziologie* (Tübingen 1972 [1921]), pp. 122–176, particularly at pp. 142–148.

⁷ Norbert Elias, *Die höfische Gesellschaft. Untersuchungen zur Soziologie des Königtums und der höfischen Aristokratie. Mit einer Einleitung: Soziologie und Geschichtswissenschaft* (Darmstadt; Neuwied 1969), the publication of Elias' revised Habilitation (1933), soon published in French (1974) and English (1983); the general study: Norbert Elias, *Über den Prozeß der Zivilisation. Soziogenetische und Psychogenetische Untersuchungen* (Bern 1969). I–II, first published 1938. See discussion of the early

ings. Although Elias demonstrated the relevance of details of comportment and rituals, in the end he perceived domestic offices as empty sinecures, the household as segregated from the machinery of 'actual' power. Elias' main line of reasoning, therefore, reflected the anachronistic attitude of late-nineteenth-century historiography, in which the court was seen as a gilded cage for disempowered nobles rather than as the heart of the dynastic state. Secondly, while Elias attempted to put into perspective the individual power of dynastic rulers, stressing the finely tuned power balances at court rather than the vigour of kings, his remedy seems worse than the disease. Elias' model of manipulative kingship demands a level of social intelligence as well as a strength of mind not usually found among hereditary rulers. These two points, the view of the court as a luxurious prison rather than as a place where lines of power and influence converge, and the unintended overstatement of the ruler's capabilities, are also visible in works following Elias' lead. Undoubtedly, there are examples where such views are justified, but we cannot accept them as necessary components of a general model. Other equally fundamental misunderstandings flow from the first two: Elias pictures the court as an arena of almost entirely worldly status competition, with ceremony and rank as largely secular pre-occupations. In practice, religion played a major role at most if not all pre-modern courts. It was indisputably present in ceremonies and rituals and structured mentalities as well as practices.

Elias' interpretation of the French court, dictated by the expectations of his general theory of the civilizing process, became the norm for court studies at the very moment it was losing its charm for specialists of early modern France and Europe. A fundamental revision of the Sun King's 'absolutism' gained strength from the 1980s onwards. The haughty representation of the king's omnipotence, still often illustrated in textbooks by the apocryphal phrase 'l'état c'est moi', hid a policy in which accommodation was an important ingredient.⁸ Louis XIV consolidated power by selectively punishing and rewarding his unruly elites. The king successfully attracted the nobles into his orbit, but in the process recreated a resilient power elite. The court, a main

reception of Elias' works in Jeroen Duindam, *Myths of Power. Norbert Elias and the Early Modern European Court* (Amsterdam 1995).

⁸ See the balanced assessment by an early participant in the revision of Louis XIV's 'absolutism', William Beik, 'Review Article The Absolutism of Louis XIV as Social Collaboration', *Past & Present* 188 (2005) pp. 195–224.

theatre of this operation, quickly became a bastion of noble power, its officeholders dominating army, diplomacy and regional government.⁹ Hence, the very case on which Elias based his model of the court and his example of the civilizing process awkwardly fits the expectations engendered by his theory.

A recent volume on courts and court societies in antiquity edited by Anthony Spawforth exemplifies the strengths of an approach based squarely on one coherent set of questions.¹⁰ Spawforth, following the gist of Elias' model, effectively integrated a range of critical comments and elaborations in his introduction, and developed a coherent set of questions guiding the authors contributing to his volume. The strong presence of these questions in the contributions gave Spawforth's volume an exceptional coherence, a quality, however, that necessarily entailed a narrowing of perspectives. It is almost impossible to follow Elias' lead without implicitly or explicitly following the expectations generated by his model: a strengthening ruler/state as 'Fremdzwang' plus a nobility of warriors losing power and, in the process, acquiring civilized manners and self-control—or 'Selbstzwang'. It is difficult to extricate the numerous subtle and interesting perceptions from the rigid grid of civilization, state building and modernization. Elias is mentioned in many of our contributions, and discussed at some length in some. For our comparative initiative, not concentrated in one region, period, or thesis, his outdated interpretation of Versailles cannot serve as yardstick.

Alternative models and concepts are available. Anthropological studies of ritual and rulership are less inclined to choose entirely Eurocentric or wholly secular perspectives, and set a different agenda. The relationship between ritual and power, and the role of the ruler can

⁹ Jeroen Duindam, *Vienna and Versailles. The Courts of Europe's Dynastic Rivals, 1550–1780* (Cambridge 2003); Leonhard Horowski, 'Der Preis des Erfolgs. Gunst, Kapital und Patrimonialisierung am Hof von Versailles (1661–1789)', *Zeitschrift für Historische Forschung* 36, 1 (2009) pp. 71–91 and his *Machtstrukturen und Karriere-mechanismen am Hof von Frankreich 1661–1789*, (Ostfildern 2011); on the army see the fundamental studies by David Parrott, *Richelieu's Army. War, Government and Society in France, 1624–1642* (Cambridge 2001) and Guy Rowlands, *The Dynastic State and the Army under Louis XIV: Royal Service and Private Interest, 1661–1701* (Cambridge 2002).

¹⁰ Antony J.S. Spawforth, ed., *The Court and Court Society in Ancient Monarchies* (Cambridge 2007) in addition to Elias, this volume reflects Aloys Winterling's path-breaking studies, *Comitatus: Beiträge zur Erforschung des spätantiken Kaiserhofes* (Berlin 1998); idem, *Zwischen „Haus“ und „Staat“. Antike Höfe im Vergleich* (Munich 1997).

be questioned by contrasting Elias' interpretation with various anthropological approaches. Clifford Geertz famously inverted the habitual view of ritual as an instrument of power by stating that: 'power served pomp, not pomp power'.¹¹ Geertz's formula may be an overstatement, but it is clear that ritual and cultural aspects of rulership and court culture cannot be seen as separated from power. Studies of ritual kingship, moreover, underline the contrast between the all-powerful position of the ruler, and the vulnerability of the incumbent, a perspective that teaches us to discriminate sharply the representation of omnipotence from the far more difficult question of a ruler's actual possibilities.¹² Anthropological studies strengthened a patron-client approach among political historians. Patronage, gift-giving, and the distribution of honours clearly fit into a pattern of political culture close to the practices of courts. Recent studies on ritual as well as on patronage tend to stress the many-sidedness of political communication and to move away from the strict top-down view of state- or ruler-controlled instrumental 'use' of such practices. It is this questioning attitude we adopt in this volume.

Sources and Perspectives

Comparison can be successful only if our knowledge of all elements to be compared is roughly equal. Can we achieve this even among specialists? For some courts, archeology, the remains of monumental buildings, and isolated bits of textual information are our only sources of information. Ottoman, late imperial Chinese and early modern European courts, on the other hand, have an immensely rich legacy of written sources in addition to buildings and artefacts. Hence, matters we can verify and elaborate for one court, we can only guess at for other courts. Nor can we expect this to be a 'neutral' process, simply providing somewhat less detail in one case than in another: the nature

¹¹ Geertz, *Negara*, p. 130; see discussion and various important contributions in David Cannadine, 'Introduction' in: *Rituals of Royalty. Power and Ceremonial in Traditional Societies* (Cambridge 1987); see also Joëlle Rollo-Koster, ed., *Medieval and Early Modern Ritual: Formalized Behavior in Europe, China, and Japan* (Leiden 2002); see a critical assessment of the impact of anthropology in Philippe Buc, *Dangereux rituel. De l'histoire médiévale aux sciences sociales* (Paris 2003).

¹² Elias made this clear in his concept of 'Verkettung' yet still granted the king far more room for maneuvering than his courtiers.

of the sources predetermines our interpretations. Monumental buildings and depictions of ceremony in sculpture, painting, and to some extent also in writing, tend to represent a grand and unruffled view of the court.¹³ Literary sources frequently present courts in a normative perspective, either by depicting the court as a model for dignified behaviour, or conversely by criticizing it as a centre of ambition, vanity and hypocrisy. In fact, the recent reorientation of court history in Europe arose partly as a consequence of the shift of research from literary and printed sources to archival materials. Literary texts usually stand within a discursive tradition and aim to create—or attack—a reputation; archival materials more often reflect routines at court. Even unpublished court ordinances, however, reiterating rules and norms for daily behaviour, have plausibly been read not as descriptions, but as indications of remaining disorders at court: rules repeated are rules unenforced. Archives dealing with requests of court personnel show a lively, competitive, and very human world rather than a temple of glory.¹⁴ Private writings of courtiers, available for early modern Europe, likewise offer a view of ‘backstage’ life at court. Incidentally, reflections produced by rulers themselves, provide an acute insight into their far from easy situation.¹⁵ Even the most powerful characters experienced phases of anxiety and insecurity in their lives, as a rule in youth and old age. We should not mistake the towering pretensions of rulership for the necessarily more human and vulnerable characteristics of the persons carrying this burden.

¹³ See e.g. on the Egyptian court, Rolf Gundlach and Andrea Klug, eds., *Der ägyptische Hof des Neuen Reiches. Seine Gesellschaft und Kultur im Spannungsfeld zwischen Innen- und Außenpolitik. Akten des Internationalen Kolloquiums vom 27.–29. Mai 2002 an der Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz* (Wiesbaden 2006); David M. Robinson, *Culture, Courtiers, and Competition. The Ming Court (1368–1644)* (Harvard 2008) shows how the use of sources less dominated by Literati can give us an altogether different image of the Ming court.

¹⁴ Evelyn Rawski, *The Last Emperors. A Social History of Qing Imperial Institutions* (Berkeley; Los Angeles 1998), refers to James Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance. Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven 1990); Duindam, *Vienna and Versailles*, shows many instances of disorder and stresses the limited success of ceremonial regulations.

¹⁵ Jonathan Spence, *Emperor of China. Self-Portrait of Kang-Hsi* (New York 1974); for Habsburg emperor Leopold I see e.g. Alfred F. Pribram, ed., *Privatbriefe Kaiser Leopold I. an den Grafen F. E. Pötting*, 2 vols (Vienna 1903); even the more rhetorical memoirs of the Sun King implicitly show his vulnerability, *Mémoires de Louis XIV pour l'instruction du Dauphin*, Charles Dreyss, ed., 2 vols (Paris 1860).

The disproportionate availability and the unequal nature of sources, reflecting a wide spectrum ranging from rulers' propaganda and literary discourses to materials dealing with household routines, present a formidable obstacle for comparative research.¹⁶ This obstacle, however, also offers opportunities, as the richer and more varied sources available for one court, can put into perspective interpretations based on more limited materials elsewhere. We have tried to achieve such synergy in this volume by bringing together scholars who have direct research experience with the relevant sources.

The Contributions

Gojko Barjamovic analyzes the spatial structure of the Assyrian North-West Palace at Nimrud and the available written sources in a wide-ranging overview of the court and its functioning. The evidence allows him to give an image of court rituals as well as a layout of major court functions. The women in the inner court are discussed in some detail, from the queen with her own household, via concubines and palace maids, to women of intermediate status occupying formal and important offices. Barjamovic also highlights the different functions performed by either eunuchs or 'bearded men' (i.e. with reproductive potential) at court. The splendour of the North-West Palace at Nimrud, Barjamovic concludes, was the supreme articulation of an empire that in practice was still shaky, an important step towards consolidation. *Rolf Strootman* presents the Seleukid court on the basis mostly of literary evidence, as surviving evidence of palace architecture is very limited. The Seleukid court was far more mobile than the Assyrian court; there was no single all-important residence. Strootman studies the provenance and cultural backgrounds of courtiers, focusing on the upper layers at court, the king's friends or *philoï*. He stresses the role of the court as a meeting point for elites from cities throughout the empire; as the ruler's *philoï* they adopted a second and shared identity as 'Greek' courtiers. The peripatetic Seleukid court provided a collective point of orientation for these civic elites; it merged influences from East and West into a heritage that would influence Parthian

¹⁶ In this volume, McKitterick and Macrides show the impact of sources, and the complications that can arise if we extend our reasoning from one example to another without sufficient contextual knowledge.

kings as well as Roman emperors. In his succinct and incisive introduction *Andrew Wallace-Hadrill* asks how the Roman court, a 'centre of concentration and distribution of power' clearly present in ancient sources, could have been neglected so long by historians. Following Mommsen, who legitimately denied the court a place in the Roman constitution, historians were also discouraged from serious study of the court by converging biases of ancient republicanism and modern liberalism—a combination not unlike that of historians studying the early modern state without including the household in their view. The shifting balance between republican institutions and the increasingly monarchical make-up of the imperial court, 'outside institutions, outside the constitution' makes Rome a particularly interesting case. The Roman case also shows how ideology was inextricably mixed with our understanding of the court in the past. *Peter Bang* follows up this introduction, studying in greater detail the complex relationship between the Republican state and the imperial household. Bang reviews the relevance in the Roman context of Norbert Elias' notions of *Verhöflichung* ('courtization') and domestication: did the new monarchical order undermine the old Roman elites, binding them to the court, redefining their status by adding new groups? Bang concludes that the emperors indeed turned the governing elite into a 'cosmopolitan aristocracy', using the court as a 'vehicle of provincial integration.' On the other hand, Bang shows that emperors were subject to traditions, and stresses that they never were the sole or all-powerful actors. At court, a balance was struck among various groups as well as between the republican and monarchical traditions.

Paul Magdalino takes us from the Eternal City to the New Rome: Constantinople. The city took over many of the structures characteristic of imperial Rome, notably the juxtaposition of a palace complex and an adjoining hippodrome. Interactions between court and capital took form largely around the races in the hippodrome, with the competing 'factions' of the Blues and Greens representing the capital. They did not fit within the court hierarchy, but were present in most outward manifestations of the court, and for special occasions were allowed into the palace. Magdalino argues that this vital connection between court and capital gradually dwindled, following the diminishing imperial ambitions of Byzantium. The court increasingly withdrew from the capital, spatially and in terms of ceremonial interaction. With *Isenbike Togan's* study of Tang emperor Tang Taizong (626–649) we leave the zone of interaction between Europe and West Asia. Togan

shows how the restructuring of power in early Tang went hand in hand with the institutionalization of commission-written dynastic historiography at court. This model of official history writing, in which the experiences of earlier dynasties were seen as useful examples for their successors, would set the standard for later Chinese court historiography. Togan focuses on the collective nature of this venture, and argues that this initially reflected the integration of various elite groups at court: the strategy of 'power-sharing' even influenced the modes of official historiography. On the other hand, Tang Taizong's strong personal involvement in the process of history writing becomes clear. The emperor, starting his reign by ousting his father and killing the crown prince (626) and achieving prominence through his victory over the Early Türk (630) was intent on controlling the image of his actions as represented to posterity, carefully balancing his personal interests with the longer-term interest of his dynasty. *Rosamond McKitterick* re-examines the familiar image of Charlemagne's itinerant rulership. Combining a careful reading of charters with modern Internet-based travel planning, she demonstrates that Charles could never have been at all the places where charters were issued with his signature: palace notaries signed in his name. A network of communication and the active intervention of senior officials were essential for Charles' rule, and 'royal movements were not integral to the system of Carolingian government.' The idea of itinerant kingship was extrapolated backwards from Ottonian and Salian examples. McKitterick argues against facile generalizing from one experience, and warns against anachronistic assumptions turning the elusive and variable early medieval court into a static institutional environment. *Nadia El Cheikh* looks at the court from the perspective of the Abbasid prince Abu al-'Abbas, eldest son of the caliph al-Muqtadir (AH 295–320/ CE 908–932). El Cheikh underlines the polycentric and eclectic layout of the court, partly located in a palace complex dominating Baghdad, partly scattered over other palaces. She shows the ambiguity surrounding the notion of 'courtier', and the heterogeneity of groups at court. An outline of women at court leads to a discussion of the education, retinue, and roles performed by the prince. Abu al-'Abbas formally held important offices from an early age onwards, but these were performed by substitutes. In fact his role was often mostly ceremonial, notably as the key figure in processions, and sometimes practical, when he carried his father's personal messages. Proximity to succession carried with it the threat of revolt, and hence made ruling caliphs wary of princes: they

kept them on a short leash. *Ruth Macrides* opens with the contrast habitually seen between an interactive court and capital in early Constantinople and a withdrawn court in the post-1261 phase. Macrides argues that this may be an overstatement, based on the reading of the anonymous fourteenth-century *Treatise on the court titles* in terms of the categories of its more famous tenth-century predecessor, the *Book of Ceremonies* by Constantine VII. These books were very different indeed in orientation and organization. The *Book of Ceremonies* was a repository of ceremonies past and present, centred on movement and localities, the *Treatise* a very selective reflection of living ceremony, seen as a static tableau of dress and rank. Ceremonies may have continued without being mentioned in the *Treatise*, whereas, on the other hand, the *Book of Ceremonies* may have included ceremonies no longer practiced. Macrides underlines the necessity of careful contextual reading of sources.

With *Maria Antonietta Visceglia* we return to the court of Rome, now in its Papal guise. Visceglia presents a careful breakdown of personnel at the Papal court. She shows how staffs, groups, and hierarchies long remained fluid, conforming roughly to the tripartite division into *domini*, *officiales* and *famuli*—serving respectively in close proximity to the pope, in executive service, and in the establishment's household services. In the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, members of the court establishment acquired more privileges, and through their offices were entitled to noble rank. Conversely, noble rank became a requirement for entering court service. In the same period, court office in all sections came to be dominated increasingly by clerics. *Sabine Dabringhaus* analyzes change at the Chinese court during the transition from Ming to Qing. Both dynasties used 'inner court' groups as a counterweight against the literati-dominated central bureaucratic administration, or 'outer court'. However, the composition of the inner court changed substantially under the Qing, with a marked decrease in influence for eunuchs, partly through the introduction of Manchu bondservants at court. Changing marriage, reproduction, and succession rules, moreover, put a limit on the power of the dowager-empress. Qing rulers also introduced an element of aristocracy at court, wider than the imperial lineage itself though mostly based on the Manchu conquerors, plus Mongol and Chinese allies. Military expansion of the Qing empire went together with a policy of integrating newly conquered elites in various ways into the courtly machinery, with special rules for each group. Dabringhaus points to Elias' stress

on balances of power at court, yet notes the fact that manipulation was possible only for a determined and astute emperor. Inner and outer court return in *Metin Kunt's* discussion of the Ottoman court, though in a very different context. Kunt presents a brief overview, highlighting the *devshirme* system of recruitment, palace training in the inner court, and promotion (*chikma*) to service in provincial government, in the outer (*bîrûn*) or inner (*enderûn*) court. *Devshirme* recruitment and palace training created a strong group identity, and secured many privileges. The intrusion of numerous Anatolian mercenaries into Selim II's service, after Süleyman's death in 1566, caused immediate disturbances and in the longer term upset the palace system by inflating numbers. A minor repetition of this process in 1574, during the succession of Murad III, shows that at least during this moment of changeover, the notion of a 'state' supervised by the imperial council or Divan, and distinct from the new household or even the will of the new ruler, was noticeably present. *Ebba Koch* portrays the Mughal court under Sjah Jahan (1628–1658), outlining its various audience ceremonies in their architectural settings. She then traces the multiple artistic exemplars of the Mughal audience halls throughout the Persian-Islamic world. Sjah Jahan's audience hall followed examples from Achaemenid Persepolis via a series of intermediate dynasties to Safavid Iran. Mughals, notable for their syncretism in many realms, displayed a 'disarming lack of inhibition' in combining artistic influences from many directions. Koch illustrates through the Mughal audience hall the strength and variety of traditions of rulership in the Persian-Islamic world. *Tülay Artan* studies festivals organized on the occasion of marriages of the sultan's daughters in early eighteenth-century Istanbul. Why and how did Ahmed III (1703–1730) and his grand vezir Damad Ibrahim Pasha restore the great urban festivals, flourishing in the sixteenth century, but no longer practiced in the seventeenth century apart from the isolated example of the 1675 festival in Edirne? Artan focuses on the 1724 festival, showing that this 'reinvention' entailed major redefinitions, relating to the trajectory and the form of processions, as well to the way in which these visualized the changing balances between the sultan and his grand vezir, and the connections between court and capital. *Jeroen Duindam* presents recent reorientations in the history of the European court, underlining its variability in terms of occasions, locations and groups present. Court life remained more dynamic and multipolar than we usually take for granted; it was never comfortably isolated from decision making. Duindam outlines three layers

of officeholders found at the early modern European court: a small upper layer of noble officers leading household staffs and close to government, a wider echelon of honorary officers connected to the court loosely through job rotation, and finally a numerous and diverse non-noble staff taking care of daily tasks. These three layers held very different positions, and need to be discussed separately in interpretations of the court. The notion of ‘domestication’ so central in Elias’ model, for example, can be judged quite differently for each of these layers.

Themes

The chronological arrangement of the papers in this volume should not obscure the fact that they coalesce around several themes, equally relevant for all courts under discussion. Four themes tied closely to the history of the court—dynasty, palace and capital, staffs and groups converging around the ruler, and the contacts between the court and the outer world—serve here to highlight some of the parallels evident in the following chapters.

Dynastic power is based on transmission of power from generation to generation; spouses, mothers, heirs and siblings are the building blocks of dynasticism. The organization of reproduction ranged from monogamous marriage to slave concubinage, including combinations of these two systems. In Europe as well as in Asia, women tended to occupy the most secluded section of the palace; they were served mostly either by other women or by eunuchs—practices safeguarding the dynastic lineage. Spouses could be important, as for instance the contributions by Gojko Barjamovic and Rolf Strootman on Assyria and the Hellenistic kingdoms underline, but without exception their status would rise markedly after producing a male heir, reaching pre-eminence when their sons became ruling princes.¹⁷ Offspring were an absolute necessity for every dynasty and yet without a doubt also represented a persistent challenge to individual rulers. Heirs became impatient and restless, particularly during long reigns; male siblings turned into fierce competitors for the throne, even during the lifetime

¹⁷ The role of mothers emerges forcefully in Walthall, *Servants of the Dynasty*; Leslie P. Peirce, *The Imperial Harem. Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire* (Oxford 1993), and Clarissa Campbell-Orr, ed., *Queenship in Europe. The Role of the Consort* (Cambridge 2004).

of their fathers. Sons of brothers figure among leaders of rebellions in more than one empire. What to do with sons and siblings, guaranteeing dynastic continuity yet also dispersing sovereignty and offering a legitimate alternative to the personal power of the ruler?¹⁸ In addition to rules that aimed to secure the potential successors' subservience, such as the system of secret succession that became habitual under the Qing, two options seem to have been used most consistently to neutralize successors. They were either maintained in a splendid but relatively powerless position in the environment of the ruler (the origin of Elias' gilded cage metaphor), or alternatively sent out to govern outlying provinces and command distant armies. In his discussion of the princes' households, Metin Kunt charts the changes at the Ottoman court in the later sixteenth century, gradually turning from the second to the first alternative; Nadia El Cheikh explores the vulnerable yet ceremonially conspicuous position of princes at the Abbasid court. Tülay Artan examines the marriages of the Sultan's daughters, not relevant for Ottoman succession, but important as indicators of political alliances around court. Isenbike Togan points to Tang Taizong's takeover forcing out his father as well as his siblings; clearing the historical record ranked high among Taizong's motives for reforming court historiography.

Evelyn Rawski, in her monumental study of the Qing court, plausibly presents the talented first Manchu emperors as conscious manipulators of hierarchies and tensions, creating a finely tuned system of checks and balances that allowed them at least for a while to escape the misfortunes of earlier dynasties. While history provides endless examples of plotting courtiers and manipulative rulers it is clear that many rulers were neither willing nor able to pursue such strategies. Clifford Geertz presented Balinese kings as immobilized by an extravagant theatre of power arranged for them, as transfixed kings of chess rather than as active players. Dabringhaus stresses that the operation of the Qing court 'system', with its numerous checks and balances, remained contingent upon the active involvement of the ruler. Togan underlines not only the activist stance of Taizong, but also his power-sharing. Artan portrays the conscious 'reinvention' of the urban festival under

¹⁸ This was a general elite dilemma, particularly acute for dynasties, see discussion in e.g. Gerard Delille, *Les noblesses européennes au XIX^e siècle* (Milan; Rome 1988) pp. 1–12.

Ahmed III, giving the dynasty a new visibility in the capital. How can we characterize the position of rulers at the heart of their courts? Where could they operate forcefully, where did they abide by rules set by their predecessors, or alternatively where did they feel forced to give in to pressures of courtiers and advisers? Kunt shows that long-term change under Selim II was engendered partly in response to demands of his own princely followers and his father's household. Strootman underlines that Hellenistic rulers were less powerful than we have imagined them to be. Bang shows the strength and active involvement of emperors as well as the necessity to situate them in a court based on interaction and negotiation with elites.

Most other contributions hint at the various positions assumed by rulers, from active involvement to total withdrawal. Clearly, the problem of agency remains a difficult one. How can we ascertain the degree to which rulers themselves were active agents, and how can we assess the balance between them and their courtiers and servants? Answers change not only from ruler to ruler, but also within the life-cycle of a single individual, particularly during long reigns. The variety in circumstances and personalities cannot adequately be expressed in generalized statements pointing in either direction. Rulers rarely were wholesale social engineers in the style of Napoleon, who struck a new balance after a protracted phase of radical change, polarization and disruption. Turbulent phases of warfare and rebellion made room for—or even demanded—such forceful intervention and change. More often, it appears, dynastic rulers embodied and defended what they perceived as tradition, even if in the process they may have introduced change and reform. The challenge taken up by Elias, to come to a more balanced understanding of the ruler's power potential, remains to be solved—although it is unlikely that it can ever be solved through a single encompassing formula.

Palaces figure in most of the contributions to this volume.¹⁹ Palace layout, architecture and decoration invite comparison and investigation of the similarity of functions as well as the impact of cultural examples—as Ebba Koch's study of Mughal audience halls illustrates. Whenever palaces are discussed at some length, we find 'inner' and 'outer' sections, usually referring both to palace layout and buildings

¹⁹ Another recent attempt at comparison of palaces: Marie-France Auzépy and Joël Cornette, eds., *Palais et Pouvoir de Constantinople à Versailles* (Saint-Denis 2003).

as well as to the groups and functions related to these locations. The contributions by Barjamovic, Togan, Kunt and Dabringhaus show that Assyrian, Ottoman and Chinese palaces were organized spatially and institutionally on the basis of an inner-outer divide. Other palaces likewise show patterns of graduated access into the core areas, arranged through spatial, temporal, functional and social restrictions. The structure of the palaces made room for interaction with the—usually urban—environments: rituals in which outsiders entered the palace, or the ruler and his following left it for outdoor pageantry. Such spatial-ceremonial connections with the outer world were important for all courts, although patterns of contact might vary from rigid formality and seclusion to frequent mixing and even camaraderie. Rules and practices pertaining to the ceremonial connections between courts and capitals—originally our conference title—are dealt with in detail by Magdalino, Macrides and Artan, and alluded to in many other papers. Courts and capitals often developed in conjunction, with the main residence of the court stimulating the expansion and centrality of the capital.²⁰ Rulers could also escape from cities, relocate their courts in new environments, whether new urban constructions, or country palaces—Versailles, Abbasid Samarra, and Nimrud are examples.

Most rulers did not limit their perambulations to the capital city—though others, such as the late Ming emperors, hardly emerged from their palaces. Excursions into the wider world—hunting expeditions, inspection tours, military campaigns—are typical for dynastic rule.²¹ Strootman underlines the essentially mobile character of the Seleukid court, often moving alongside (and overlapping with) the major army. Indeed, many rulers retained a substantial level of mobility into the modern age notwithstanding the development of capital cities as Duindam shows. Conversely McKitterick points out that Charlemagne's travels were not the necessary element of his rule that earlier historians

²⁰ See e.g. Susan Naquin, *Peking: Temples and City Life, 1400–1900* (Berkeley 2000); and a rapidly expanding literature on courts and cities in Europe: Werner Paravicini, ed., *Der Hof und die Stadt: Konfrontation, Koexistenz, und Integration in Spätmittelalter und Früher Neuzeit* (Ostfildern 2006); Susanne Pils and Jan Paul Niederkorn, eds., *Ein zweigeteilter Ort? Hof und Stadt in der frühen Neuzeit* (Innsbruck; Vienna 2005); Gary B. Cohen and Franz A.J. Szabo, eds., *Embodiments of Power. Building Baroque Cities in Europe* (New York; Oxford 2008); Malcolm Smuts and George Gorse, eds., *The Politics of Space. European Courts ca. 1500–1750* (Rome 2009).

²¹ See a recent study underlining this for the high Qing emperors Michael G. Chang, *A Court on Horseback. Imperial Touring & the Construction of Qing Rule, 1680–1785*, Harvard East Asian Monographs 287 (Cambridge, Mass.; London 2007).

assumed on the basis of a misreading of evidence. In any case the king-emperor developed relatively fixed patterns later in his reign.

Palace architecture and layout form a convenient starting point for the analysis of groups at court. In addition to their location within palace topography, groups at court can be ordered according to various criteria: function, rank and status (always a key concern at court), training and provenance. On the basis of such criteria, a systematic comparison of court elites can be attempted. At all courts, we find various categories of personnel, and more often than not indeed several households. Barjamovic, Strootman, El Cheikh, Dabringhaus, Kunt, Visceglia and Duindam examine staffs and categories of personnel at court. At the level of functions, the similarities are substantial: household routines as well as administrative tasks lead to similar sets of officers. Although names vary, chamberlains, tasters, carvers, cupbearers, guards, and heralds are as ubiquitous in the history of the court as scribes and councilors. Can we translate inner and outer as pertaining respectively to the personal attendants catering for the ruler, and the groups taking care of the government of his realm? A functional differentiation fits palace topography to some extent in the Ottoman and Qing cases. At European courts, however, the borders were far less clearly drawn, with blurred and overlapping functions as well as zones. Wallace-Hadrill and Bang explain that the Roman imperial household, existing side-by-side with the formal Republican state structure, suggests yet another variant of the balance between 'state' and household. Decision-making usually included the immediate circle of intimates around the ruler—much to the chagrin of state or outer court dignitaries who felt excluded. In this sense, 'inner' indicated the political heart of the court, certainly not a 'private' sphere irrelevant for policy decisions.

Rank and status are complicated because they themselves implicitly include a variety of criteria, including *Nähe zum Thron* (or *Königsnähe*, the ruler's proximity and favour), descent, and capabilities. All courts know a tension between a hierarchy based on established social rank, and an unstable 'shadow hierarchy' based on favour and actual or perceived influence on the prince. Rulers could raise their favourites to great heights, yet steep promotions could be followed by even more abrupt downfalls.²² Ranking, training and provenance of person-

²² Two important recent volumes on European history: Jan Hirschbiegel and Werner Paravicini, eds., *Der Fall des Günstlings: Hofparteien in Europa vom 13. bis zum*

nel at court show wide cultural divergences. The 'slaves of the Sultan' recruited through *devshirme* and trained in the palace serving in inner as well as outer court, stand out against the Chinese gentlemen-literati selected through the civil service examinations and serving in the outer court. The strong European emphasis on hereditary status, and hence the vested position of nobles at court and in government seem distant from both.²³ These contrasts in elite legitimation, however, obscure a general tendency towards social reproduction, alternating with phases of greater mobility.

Courts could have many functions in addition to catering for the dynasty and organizing government. Courts were centres of education, a theme not consistently pursued in this volume.²⁴ Also, while courts usually figure as centres of (conspicuous) consumption, they could function as centres of (luxury) production as well—a situation hinted at by Barjamovic.²⁵ Most contributions to this volume show that courts were a heterogeneous environment. Contradictions between inner-outer, robe-épée, government-household, upstairs-downstairs; between functional and status hierarchies, and among the levels of these hierarchies; between men, women and eunuchs; between shades of religious persuasion and varieties in regional provenance, and many other elements created a multifaceted and competitive world. A recurring figure at court, on the individual as well as on the group level, seems to be the outsider, cut off from vested local power elites. Eunuchs, standing between the genders, in a sense were outsiders *par excellence*; go-betweens connecting the sacralized ruler and his subjects, mediating between men and women.²⁶ The *devshirme* system of

17. Jahrhundert (Ostfilden 2004); J.H. Elliott and L.W.B. Brockliss, eds., *The World of the Favourite* (New Haven; London 1999).

²³ See the surprise expressed by many European travelers in West as well as East Asia on the relative lack of importance of birth as a status marker: Busbecq, *The Turkish letters of Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq, imperial ambassador at Constantinople, 1554–1562*, E. Seymour Forster, ed. (Baton Rouge 2005), pp. 59–60; Jean-Baptiste Du Halde, *Description géographique, historique, chronologique, politique et physique de l'empire de la Chine et de la Tartarie chinoise... 4 vols* (The Hague 1736) vol. II, p. 69–75.

²⁴ See e.g. Werner Paravicini and Jörg Wettlaufer, ed., *Erziehung und Bildung bei Hofe. 7. Symposium der Residenzen-Kommission der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen* (Stuttgart 2002).

²⁵ Walthall, *Servants of the Dynasty*, stresses the role of women at court in production of various kinds.

²⁶ On eunuchs: Keith Hopkins, *Conquerors and Slaves* (Cambridge 1981) chapter IV on the political power of eunuchs; Shaun Tougher, ed., *Eunuchs in Antiquity and Beyond* (London 2002); Nadia M. El-Cheikh, 'Servants at the Gate: Eunuchs at the Court of al-Muqtadir', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 48, 2

elite recruitment and reproduction through slave concubinage made 'outsiders' prominent in Topkapı palace. Strootman mentions Hannibal serving as favourite at the Seleukid court after his defeat in the second Punic war. We can add the familiar examples of Marco Polo and Ibn Battuta, who during their travels offered their services to rulers far away. The presence of outsiders at court makes clear that rulers sought and needed trusted advisers, loyal to them rather than to vested group interests represented at court. The reliance of rulers on outsiders and trusted intimates of lower rank, recurring in history, hints at the insecurity and discomfort rulers experienced in their conspicuous roles.

Among the persons at court, one last group needs to be discussed: part-time honorary servants and visitors attending special occasions rather than serving on a permanent basis. Strootman's discussion of the Hellenistic court makes clear that the king's retinue included a variable group of friends—loosely connected to the court but taking up its Greek-Macedonian high culture as a secondary identity. Duindam underlines the relevance of honorific service at the Habsburg court for creating a comprehensive court culture based on loyalty to Catholicism and the dynasty—a feat of the *gesamthabsburgische Adel* deep into the nineteenth century. The court, in other words, could serve as a powerful point of orientation in diverse and composite territories. It could achieve this through the creation of honorary distinctions, entitling persons to come to court and serve on major occasions. A great variety of ceremonial interactions between the court and the wider world could strengthen the connection between dynasty and realm. All courts organized regular points of contact, inviting in tributaries and diplomats, or following their own itineraries from court to city and further, cheered by crowds. Barjamovic, Magdalino, Macrides, McKitterick, El Cheikh, and Artan all discuss aspects of such connections. Dabringhaus, for example, points to the special relationship maintained between the Manchu and their Inner-Asian subjects, notably the Mongol tribes, typified by the rituals and buildings around the imperial summer resort at Chengde, and by the Qing cultivation of Tibetan Buddhism.

(2005) pp. 234–252; Kathryn M. Ringrose, *The Perfect Servant: Eunuchs and the Social Construction of Gender in Byzantium* (Chicago 2003); David Ayalon, *Eunuchs, Caliphs and Sultans: A Study in Power Relationships* (Jerusalem 1999); Babaie and Babayan, *Slaves of the Shah*; Peirce, *The Imperial Harem*.

Dynastic centres could help to bring together the territories under their dominion through the creation of a common point of orientation and a common elite culture. Conversely, conspicuous consumption could have contrary results, leading the court to be perceived as centre of vanity, ambition and intrigue honest people would shun. The 'concentration and redistribution of power' given by Wallace-Hadrill as the key function of the court, connects the negative and the positive experiences. Favours drew people towards the court, stimulated competition and ambition, and hence displeased those frustrated in the fray as well as more distant moral critics. Phases of positive identification and integration alternate with phases of disintegration and disruption. Apparently, it was difficult for dynasties to command the loyalty of their supporters and subjects over a protracted period. Traditional political thinkers, from the Bible to Ibn Khaldun and Montesquieu, stress the cyclical element in power—a pattern likewise frequently applied to Chinese history. Dynasties after establishing their power succumb to luxury, decline in moral values, lose the loyalty of the initial group of supporters, and finally forfeit legitimacy by exploiting the populace.

In this introduction we have provided a thematic layout for approaching the history of the court, conforming to the basic challenges and questions that had to be addressed by all dynastic rulers—from dynastic succession, to palace layout, groups at court, and interaction with the outer world. In the following chapters, the reader will find a variety of concrete descriptions and analyses of courts. We consciously sidestep the issue of modernization and the rise of Europe, so dominant in recent comparative work. Why seek out elements of backwardness or decline in one particular phase of court history whereas similar patterns had prevailed for millennia? Only on the basis of systematic and careful comparison will it be possible to reach an analytical understanding of the variants of success and decline in a dynastic context. The diverse legacies of dynastic power organized around household and palace, the form of power predominant in world history, need to be analyzed and compared on their own terms before we can connect them to issues of modernization. The ambition of this collection of articles is to move forward this process by providing, through concrete examples and discussion, a basis for a next stage of comparative work that adds specialized knowledge and informed detail to comparative scope and vigour.