Such a degree of obedience is also shewn by servants to their masters, and looked upon by them as a source of blessings. Hence for the disciples of His Majesty [the Emperor], it was necessary to add something, the prostration of the *sijdah*; and they look upon a prostration before His Majesty as a prostration performed before God; for royalty is an emblem of the power of God, and a light-shedding ray from this Sun of the Absolute. Viewed in this light, the prostration has become acceptable to many, and proved to them a source of blessings upon blessings. But as some perverse and dark-minded men look upon prostration as blasphemous man-worship, His Majesty, from his practical wisdom, has ordered it to be discontinued by the ignorant, and remitted it to all ranks, forbidding even his private attendants from using it in the *Darbár i’A’m* (general court days).  

This discussion of prostration as a ritual of greeting used by a select and specially favoured group of courtiers to pay obeisance to Akbar, the Mughal emperor (1556–1605) appears in the copious manual of his realm written by the nobleman and ideologue Abul Fazl. The Mughals self-consciously presented themselves as rulers in the grand traditions of central Asia and of Persia. They boasted descent from Timur, the Turko-Mongol conqueror formerly known as Tamerlane, and championed a Persianate style of culture. Persian was the preferred or privileged language at court. Shahjahan, the grandson of Akbar, even had his audience halls designed metaphorically to emulate Persepolis.  

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1 Abul Fazl, *Ain-i-Akbari* I, 74 [H. Blochman, trans. (Calcutta 1927–1949) vol. 1, pp. 158–19]. Apart from the *sijdah*, the more regular forms of greeting were called the *kornish* (right hand on forehead which is then bent down) and the *tasli’m* (back of right hand placed on ground, raised up gently and when standing erect palm of hand on crown of head). John F. Richards, *The Mughal Empire. The New Cambridge History of India*, vol. 1.5 (Cambridge 1993) pp. 47–49 for a brief discussion.  

a drunken party. Rightly or wrongly, the act of prostration, whatever its varying historical forms, holds a prominent place in the Western historiographical conception of Persian imperial lordship. The ancient Greeks and Romans frowned on the performance of the ritual they described with the term *proskunésis*. Prostration in front of the ruler was reproached as a humiliating act of submission not becoming of free men; it was a degrading act of slavery.

One of the main charges brought against Alexander by posterity was that he had allowed himself to be lured by the splendour and rituals of the Persian court and had forgotten about his Greek and Macedonian roots. Later historians celebrated in their works an episode where the nobleman Callisthenes had spoken out against the plans of Alexander, prompted by the advice of a certain Anaxarchos, to demand prostration of his nobles now that he had won the Achaemenid throne:

> It was improper of you to take the lead in this topic; you should rather have remembered that you are not attending, nor advising a Cambyses or Xerxes, but a son of Philip, a descendant of Heracles and of Aecus, whose forefathers came from Argos to Macedonia, and have continued to rule the Macedonians, not by force, but in accordance with custom and law.³

In Graeco-Roman political discourse, prostration/proskunésis was identified with tyranny and despotism, violent oppression rather than the rule of law. Roman emperors were repeatedly reminded not to demand such excessive demonstrations of loyalty from their nobility. Tiberius, emperor CE 14–37, is even reported once to have tripped in his attempt to avoid a senator who threw himself at his feet.⁴ Emperors who less carefully upheld the etiquette of modesty regulating the interaction of ruler and aristocracy were frequently subjected to hostile criticism. The reputations of emperors such as Caligula, Domitian and later Galerius and Diocletian have all been blackened by accusations of megalomania and tyranny. By accepting or demanding the so-called *proskunesis*, it was alleged, they allowed barbarian and Persian ways to debase the proud traditions of Roman liberty.⁵ This kind of critique, however, should not be mistaken, as it often is, for evidence of direct

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⁴ Suet. *Tiberius* 27.
⁵ E.g. Philo *Leg. ad Gaium* 116 (Caligula); Ammianus Marcellinus 15, 5, 18 (Diocletian); Lactantius *de mort. persc.* 21, 2 (Galerius).