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# COURTS AND COURTIER IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST AND MEDITERRANEAN

As is well known, the interest of historians in the court, and especially in ancient courts, is a rather recent phenomenon. In the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, such an interest appeared largely unjustified, or sometimes deplorable. Generally speaking, the domestic dimension, the role of palace relations, as well as pomp, insignia and ceremonial were disregarded, while attention was focused on clerks, councils, and assemblies. As for the ancient world, interest in the court, its intrigues, could appear prurient. At most, the study of formal aspects – pomp, insignia, rituals – had something of the antiquarian about it (cf. Friedländer's *Darstellungen aus der Sittengeschichte Roms*), or was highly selective, in the approach of historians who gave primacy to the investigation of empire (cf. Mommsen, who considered the insignia of power only insofar as they were attributes of real power).

There is no need to say here how the rediscovery of this dimension – the court as a political object, the insignia not as an adornment but as a constituent element of power itself – came about in the second half of the twentieth century and owes much to Norbert Elias's famous book (*Die höfische Gesellschaft*). This, an eminently sociological study, showed the need to reinterpret a whole series of aspects or even categories of people, such as the household, in political history. Elias' book appeared in 1969 but had actually been worked on as early as the 1930s. It is useful to note that it was in these very years that the study of the 'informal' – it means non-institutional – aspects of imperial power took on a new impetus, taking, however, quite peculiar forms. As Momigliano noted, it is not without cause that 'some of the of the most original work in the Roman imperial cult should have been done around the years 1929–34 in that ambiguous

atmosphere of the revival of emperor-worship in which it was difficult to separate adulation from political emotion, and political emotion from religious or superstitious excitement',<sup>1</sup> quoting J. Bickerman's paper on apotheosis, L.R. Taylor's book on the divinity of the Roman emperor and A. Alföldi's on monarchical ceremonial, and various studies by A.D. Nock on rulers' worship.<sup>2</sup>

Elias' book stimulated a flourishing of studies on the court in all fields, echoing, somewhat belatedly, also in the field of ancient history.<sup>3</sup> However, even today, the status of ancient courts is ill-defined. While it is widely accepted that in the ancient world monarchical systems created specific political and social structures with appropriately configured spaces and rituals, the role ascribed to these structures, starting with the court itself, is perceived diversely: sometimes marginalised, sometimes emphasised, sometimes denied. An important step was marked by the volume published by the sociologist Alois Winterling, *Zwischen 'Haus' und 'Staat': antike Höfe im Vergleich*, which appeared in 1997 and which was followed by other studies characterised by a comparativist approach (still marked by a particular interest in court as a 'society'), while in recent times, moving away from an eminently sociological perspective, there has been a return of interest in the material, ceremonial aspects that shape ancient courts.<sup>4</sup> I think that returning to a study of realia concerning court and ceremonies is beneficial. Obviously, with an awareness different from that with which these realities were still looked at in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Alföldi's aim was to understand 'the essential features of ceremonial ("wesentlichen Züge") and to sketch its evolution'. In Alföldi's opinion, the great changes are perhaps best detected in the 'inconspicuous exteriority' ("unscheinbar anmutende Äusserlichkeiten") that coloured and dominated the life of the emperors' court. Underlying this view was the premise of a reciprocal action/interaction (*Wechselwirkung*) between the forms of ceremonial representation and the socio-political conditions in which they manifest themselves.<sup>5</sup> Today, we are aware that the court and its ceremonial, like the insignia, do not directly reflect a socio-political framework. They are not a way of legitimising power in the eyes of those outside the court by reaffirming its constitutional nature. Rather, they are meant to legitimise it in the eyes of the sovereign himself and his entourage. We are also aware that in the elaboration of the apparatus of ceremonials, the sovereign is not necessarily a protagonist: however, in this process, the courtiers play a very important role as they can control access to the sovereign through those ceremonials, often serving their own interests. All this allows

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<sup>1</sup> Momigliano 1987 (for the quotation p. 298).

<sup>2</sup> Alföldi 1934; Alföldi 1935. Later assembled in Alföldi 1970.

<sup>3</sup> Winterling 1997; Winterling 1999.

<sup>4</sup> Spawforth (ed.) 2007; Duindam, Artan, Kunt (eds) 2011.

<sup>5</sup> Alföldi 1970: 4-6.

us to overcome the image of the manipulating sovereign and victim courtiers. As Clifford Geertz states in his 1980 book in which he described the ‘theatre state’ of Bali,<sup>6</sup> with its very strong spectacular component, ‘Power served pomp, not pomp power’: this requires us to take distance from the common overstatement of royal power, in its classic ‘absolutist’ form or in Elias’s vision. Comparativism in this sense is useful to delineate derivations, influences, concerning individual aspects of the monarch’s representation, individual insignia, or ceremonial.

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<sup>6</sup> Geertz 1980.