

Picturing Royal Charisma

Kings and Rulers in the Near East
from 3000 BCE to 1700 CE

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Drawing of an Old Akkadian cylinder seal. After Böhmer 1965, No. 387.



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Introduction

Picturing Royal Charisma: The Image of Kings in the Eastern Mediterranean from the Late Fourth Millennium to the Islamic Period (c. 3250 BCE to 1600 CE)

Arlette David, Rachel Milstein, Tallay Ornan

From the earliest Near Eastern urban civilizations to modern times, rulers and their retinues have disseminated ideological information with regard to the legitimacy of their status, their obligations, and their rights. The visual expressions of these royal statements were the subject of our research group, under the auspices of the *Mandel Scholion Interdisciplinary Research Center in the Humanities of the Hebrew University, Jerusalem*, and of its international workshop, 'Picturing Royal Charisma in the Near East (Third Millennium BCE to 1700 CE)' that took place at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem, January 12–14, 2015. We thank Scholion Interdisciplinary Research Center for supporting our project and providing us with a pleasant and welcoming home for developing our ideas concerning the various aspects of Middle Eastern sovereigns and their manifestation in the visual arts. Special thanks to Prof. Dani Schwartz, former Academic Head of Scholion, and Prof. Elisheva Baumgarten, its current Head, for their continuous support.

This volume comprises some of the papers delivered at our workshop that dealt with the visual presentation of rulers around the ancient and medieval Eastern Mediterranean region. These contributions reflect the endurance of some royal themes and pictorial formulae that were used over a period of more than 4000 years. Considering the Eastern Mediterranean basin, Mesopotamia, and Iran as a geographically connected unit, we aimed to explore their interrelations synchronically and diachronically, through the imagery of rulers and power, from the late fourth millennium BCE to the later Islamic period c. 1600 CE.

Two essential considerations served as a point of departure for our project:

1. Despite the enormous changes in the demographic, social, political, and religious entities of the area, concepts and imagery demonstrate remarkable continuity.
2. As main communication channels between rulers and subjects in the pre-modern world,

visual and textual representations of power are central political and cultural issues.

In the long history of this region, waves of invasions, migrations, trade in merchandise and techniques, wars, and diplomatic exchanges generated a colorful range of socio-economic organizations and groups that included nomads, peasants, city dwellers—each with their own religious beliefs, from animism, polytheism, henotheism to monotheism, and political systems from absolute monarchy to tribal confederation. This central area of settlement and migration bears the endless marks of international clashes and exchanges. Against this background of contradictory interests and aspirations, what does the continuity of royal pictorial motifs and concepts teach us about Rulership in the *longue durée*?

In recent decades, Kingship as a central sociological and anthropological phenomenon in the history of mankind has been a recurrent topic of research and academic analysis. Following Max Weber's theories about the nature of charisma and its routinization (Weber 2013), Elias Norbert's influential study of Louis XIV's court society (Elias 1983), Clifford Geertz' challenging conclusions on the royal courts of Indonesia (Geertz 1980; Geertz 1983: 121–146), among many other studies, various conferences have covered a wide scope of sociological, cultural, and historical issues, often in a comparative approach. To mention only a few examples, *Concepts of Kingship in Antiquity* (Lanfranchi and Rollinger 2007) covers the Eastern Mediterranean and Near Eastern courts, with the comparative case of India (Lanfranchi and Rollinger 2010). In *Royal Courts and Dynastic States and Empires* (Duindam, Tülay, and Kunt 2005), the focus lies on the human structure of the court—household, ceremonies, and government (Duidan, Artan, and Kunt 2011). The geographical and historical scope of this volume goes from France to China, from Assyria to Early Modern Europe. In *Every Inch a King* (Mitchell and Melville 2008), on the other hand, the papers mainly deal with the manifestations of kingship in ancient and medieval Iran, although

some papers cover European courts all the way to Spain and the Safavid rule in Iran around the turn of the 17th century (Mitchell and Melville 2013). More limited in its geographic boundaries, our addition to this list stretches from Rome to Iran, its content mainly focused on the visual expressions of royal ideology.

First and foremost among the cornerstones of royal ideology is the source of the king's legitimacy. This issue is so crucial for justifying the hegemony of an individual or a dynasty that almost any regime refers directly or indirectly to the sources of its legitimacy, divine, inherited, personal or rather a combination of these sources, as demonstrated by Michael Sommer in Chapter 7 in the present volume. Building on Weber's insights, Sommer analyzes the Palmyrene crisis of the 3rd century, which eventually led Queen Zenobia to abandon her city in 272 CE, leaving it to the Roman emperor Aurelian. Asking, 'What was the rationale of authority in Rome? And how did Odaenathus and Zenobia substantiate their leadership in Palmyra and the Near East?' Sommer examines the patterns of authority in Palmyra and in imperial Rome and concludes that the conflict between Rome and Palmyra was rooted in antagonistic conceptions of authority and its legitimacy. Personal legitimacy, according to Weber's theory, is the individual charismatic personality of a leader (mostly a brave and successful military commander) generally characterizing the founders of dynasties. Their weaker descendants, lacking personal charisma, resort to their hereditary position, leaning on their forefathers' images, which over time become sanctified (Weber 2013: 1111–1157).

Second to the divine source of legitimacy the hereditary rights stand. Royal inscriptions and epithets of various kingdoms mention the name of the father and the grandfather of the ruling monarch, sometimes with reference to the eponymous founder of the dynasty. The ancient Egyptian royal lists, a phenomenon traceable to the first Dynasty, were inscribed on Ramesside monuments to insert visually and historically the kings of Dynasties 19–20 in a broad tradition of rulership through the cult of royal ancestors (Redford 1986). In order to build their own image on accepted norms, the Achaemenid rulers established visual contacts with the kings of lands conquered by them (de Jong 2015: 90–92). Inscriptions of the early Sasanid kings, for example, occasionally established their legitimacy by mentioning preceding rulers. Certain Islamic regimes connected themselves to much earlier historical or even mythological dynasties, hence the importance and the revival of the ancient Iranian epic, the *Shāhnāma* from the 10th century CE on.

The rulers' legitimacy relies mainly on their relationships with the gods, relationships of different

types in the various political and cultural entities. In ancient Egypt, the first kings on the Turin King List (a Ramesside papyrus listing the kings of Egypt) are gods, the compilers asserting the divine origin of the institution. Following heated debates on the ontology of the Egyptian king, most modern scholars today agree that he was viewed as a man in a divine office, his divine or human characteristics highlighted depending on the period and the religious or more secular context of presentation (Silverman 1995). Examining Akhenaten's revolutionary visual presentation, Arlette David (Chapter 3) shows that during the Amarna Period (Dynasty 18, c. 1350 BCE), the royal image and its staging reflected the politico-religious reform brought about by Akhenaten, at the heart of which stood his belief in a solar creator god ('Aten') and the eviction of the traditional pantheon. The evolution of the visual animal-man hybridism of the king, a feature of the divine expressed through animalistic appendages and monstrous fusions, evinces that Akhenaten finally chose to express his own solar divinity in human form as the 'beautiful child of Aten,' personification of the divine light of the Creator.

In ancient Mesopotamia, according to Claudia E. Suter (Chapter 1), the *Sumerian King List* proclaimed that kingship descended from heaven, god-given; the early Mesopotamian kings cast themselves as representatives of the gods on earth. Suter's paper sums up the various images of the Mesopotamian kings as they appear in their sculpted portraits and in narrative scenes of metaphoric nature.

The most common royal depictions from Egypt, Mesopotamia, and all the way to post-Mongol Iran were scenes of investiture, apotheosis, enthronement, audience, cult, battle, hunt, banquet, and foundation of public monuments. Usually, the kings were accompanied by gods or their heavenly emissaries, family members, and the close court circle—body guards, personal servants, boon companions, advisers, ministers, clerics, army commanders, and entertainers. Among the members of the royal entourage male figures who fulfilled various functions appeared. Irit Ziffer's discussion (Chapter 5) focuses on the visual and textual evidence of beardless eunuchs in Assyria, their visual or written traces in ancient Mesopotamia, down to the Achaemenid, Sasanian, Byzantine, and Mamluk courts. She argues that the eunuch, a term that describes the physically different official, was already identifiable in the third millennium BCE Mesopotamian visual repertoires, the closest parallels appearing in the Islamic Mamluk blazons.

Mediating between their subjects and gods, the status of Mesopotamian kings reached its apogee during the reign of Naram-Sin, king of Akkad (2220–2184 BCE), who

uniquely presented himself with the Mesopotamian divine pictorial classifier—a horned crown (Moortgat 1969: 51–52, Plates 154–155). Although rejected by Mesopotamian art after Naram-Sin, the ambition to elevate kings to a divine sphere was still expressed through indirect measures (Ornan 2014). Tallay Ornan (Chapter 2) presents such a case by examining the defeat of the lion by the king by which the latter was elevated to the status of a lesser member of Ishtar’s entourage. This pictorial formula of the ruler defeating a lion persisted in the stock of Middle-Eastern royal insignia/metaphors all the way to the Islamic civilization.

As in Mesopotamia, Achaemenid rulership was gifted to the kings by the god, and both god and king complemented each other to maintain cosmic order for the benefit of each and every individual (Kuhrt 2007: 92). The link between god-given rulership and cosmic order was enacted in connection with yearly festivals. The Sasanid kings in Iran were also believed to derive their legitimacy through the so-called ‘divine grace’ or god-granted royal charisma. Under Christian and Islamic monotheistic regimes, this relationship was further nuanced, but never given up. In the nascent Islamic society, which at first negated the very idea of monarchy, less than one century after the birth of the new religion, the Umayyad caliphs styled themselves as God’s deputies, and the oft repeated maxim: ‘the ruler is the shade of Allah upon the earth,’ probably emerged at the end of their rule (Crone 2004: 162–163).¹

In all the periods discussed here, the charismatic founders of dynasties, whose descendants appropriated their fame and authority by routinizing their legitimacy, were usually pictured as valiant fighters and hunters, unifiers of dismembered territories, protectors of their kingdom and just rulers, revealers of an essential doctrine or faith, or a special grace bestowed upon them from heaven. In Weber’s words:

The charismatic hero derives his authority not from an established order and enactments, as if it were an official competence, and not from custom or feudal fealty, as under patrimonialism. He gains and retains it solely by proving his powers in practice. He must work miracles, if he wants to be a prophet. He must perform heroic deeds, if he wants to be a warlord. Most of all, his divine mission must prove itself by *bringing well being* to his faithful followers; if they do not fare well, he obviously is not the god-sent master” (Weber 2013, 1114).

The king’s mission of *bringing well being* was ideally achieved through his role as mediator between man and the gods, as provider and protector. As mediator with the divine, he was expected to see to the building of

temples and prayer houses, and to perform the rituals of the cult. As provider, his administration had to develop the economy (agriculture, industry, and trade), build towns, gardens, roads, granaries, and water supplies. As protector, he had to lead his armies to war or maintain peace through diplomacy, secure safety, and justice. To turn the desert into an earthly paradise, he exerted all three aspects of the king’s mission, which were turned into literary and visual motifs in the Near East and beyond, with variants due to geo-political, economic, and cultural differences.

Maintaining power and securing the elite’s loyalty to the crown require a support system, as the legitimacy of the individual kings or dynasties depends on the effective or imaginary fulfillment of their mission. Therefore, many royal actions, practical and symbolic alike, were taken to convince the king’s subjects as well as his foes of his exceptional powers, good will, and rightful behavior. The ruler’s might as a warrior was commemorated by triumphal gates and monumental depictions of battles, defeated enemies, and spoils. His glory was publicly celebrated in colorful and sonorous parades and well-orchestrated receptions of envoys and guests. His mediation with the divine was embodied in religious centers and performing or providing for rituals, the paraphernalia, gestures, and attitudes associating him with his god(s).

The king’s justice was often witnessed by his appearance at a window or a balcony in the upper wall of the palace, and no less often by corpses of criminals and rebels exposed in public, and motifs showing him offering tokens of his equity and legitimate violence to the gods and the world. In series of communal activities, such as coronations, political marriages, audiences, receptions, hunting parties, banquets, and cultural pastimes, kings solidified their bonds with the elite of their kingdoms. Lower classes were in certain civilizations allowed to visit the king’s palace, but in others caught a glimpse of the monarch himself at public festivals and processions, or contented themselves with the sight of his effigy on rock reliefs, steles, and coins. They could also be impressed by the size and the beauty of their kings’ palaces and *mausolea*, many of which they took an active role in constructing.

Indirect images of the kings and their missions were carefully designed, orchestrated, and disseminated by the court circles through verbal and visual manifestations. The largest public portrayals of royal presence and power were functional and symbolic architectural achievements—city walls and gates, columned boulevards and theaters, water installations, temples, palaces, mausolea, pyramids, large wall-paintings, rock reliefs, steles, and rural monuments. In palaces, or the parts of them that could be visited, the movement of the selected visitors was carefully

¹ Compare Milstein in Chapter 9.

designed so as to create awe, to impart a sense of decorum, and to constantly remind the visitor of the legitimacy of his royal patron or host. Using architecture and reliefs, David Kertai's paper (Chapter 4) highlights the importance of the royal image that seems to govern the structure of Neo-Assyrian palaces as the dwelling of the *persona* at the head of the social order, the mediator between gods and human beings. Kertai shows how the king's image, set between niches in the throne room in the Northwest Palace of Kalhu, guided the visitors' movements into and through the room.

Throne rooms, and often the thrones themselves, constituted focal points in the *mise-en-scène* of the ruler's legitimacy. As such, their components, forms, and metaphoric value in the long Islamic period are the subject of Rachel Milstein's paper (Chapter 9). Her discussion follows the development and evolution of the sense of royalty in a civilization that was initially opposed to kingship, hostile to figurative images, but which could not stay blind to the rich ceremonial art of former and contemporary civilizations.

Since visits to the palaces were often limited to selected minorities, larger crowds were offered a glimpse of the monarch's presence or image through public religious and military ceremonies and, most importantly, in royal burial architecture. Visits paid to the dead are still highly popular and meaningful in the Near East and the entire Islamic world, and are strongly encouraged by certain governments even today. At the beginning of the 16th century CE, the Safavid Shah Isma'īl built his own burial tower next to that of the dynasty's eponymous founder in Ardabil, and at the end of this century, as shown by Milstein, Shah 'Abbas I connected the two towers by a new unit, which was inaugurated as his own seat or throne. In Istanbul, visits to the graves of the Ottoman sultans, which were declined throughout the 20th century, have been recently organized by the current regime. The unique importance of *mausolea* is expressed by their longevity, often due to the stone material used for their construction. Not only have these architectural constructions often survived where palaces have disappeared, but their very *raison d'être* is to give the dead eternal presence, if not to diffuse a message of his eternal existence. In general, architecture becomes a scene and backdrop for ceremonial presentations of the kings, as expressed by Canepa:

Sovereigns created architectural and visual environment with the knowledge that they would provide focus for ritual activities. These ritual activities, in turn, commented on and shaped further additions. As the ritual and artistic elements of imperial ceremony were interwoven, it is not surprising that an alteration in the fabric of one

had implications for that of the other. A change in ritual practice could imply a new meaning for the structure, and new structures or images within a ritual environment could modify the performance and significance of the ritual (Canepa 2009: 8).

A case-study illustrating this point is the analysis discussed by Galit Noga-Banai (Chapter 6) of Titus' triumphal arch in Rome and its later reflection in the installment of holy Christian relics in the Church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople. The author concludes that the transition from Judean ritual implements to Christian holy relics, from Jerusalem to Rome, and eventually to Constantinople, enabled the construction of the New Jerusalem, thus conferring legitimacy upon Constantinian and his new capital.

As sites of the royal presence, many capital cities can be seen as maps of kingly ceremonial and power; but the city map may also be a testimony of political and economic tensions between the king and his family, or the court, the aristocracy, and the bourgeoisie. In her study, Anna Gutgarts (Chapter 8) reveals the tension between the monarch and the aristocracy in Frankish Jerusalem and its manifestation in the transfer of the royal palace from its initial location in the Al-Aqsa Mosque to the Tower of David. By moving the royal residency to the Tower of David, the ties of Frankish ideology with the biblical past were certainly strengthened. The involvement of the rulers in complex politico-religious circumstances shaped the city's development in the 12th century and its transformation into a Latin Christian capital.

Every type of material support seems to have been used for picturing and propagating rulership and its doctrine. Since the topic of this volume is the depiction of royal charisma, a few words about the nature and the constraints of our field are in order. A study of the way in which a material object transmits a message necessarily involves two main aspects: the ideological message embedded in the visual form; and the media and the means of expression, i.e., the formal language and the artistic or 'poetic' devices used to express the ideological content. Taking for granted that the visual forms and compositions vary to a considerable degree from one civilization to another, one should ponder how much a variation in a visual motif reflects a change in meaning. Written evidence, of course, is our best guide to understanding ideological, socio-political, and religious phenomena, but visual testimonies may fill gaps in case of meager textual sources. Moreover, certain unique characteristics of the material and visual language, such as the use of surface and space, the choice of medium, and even the nature of design, besides the evident power of depiction, often disclose neglected or intentionally concealed realities. These

veiled aspects of the concepts and practice of kingship in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Persian world are briefly explored in the articles of this volume.

The power of the picture derives from its need to enunciate abstract concepts by means of visual forms, which necessarily relate to identifiable fragments of material (or historical) reality. Without this visual identification a totally abstract form cannot make sense. Since semiotics can help to unravel hidden layers in linguistic materials, the same approach is no less efficient in the case of the pictorial language (see David in Chapter 3 on Akhenaten's presentation). However, in many cases the visuals are fully descriptive, and their symbolism is so clear that the explicit message and additional layers of content are easily revealed through comparison with relevant texts and other works of art, even from remote periods.

The repertoire of Near Eastern motifs is vast and nuanced yet often repetitive. Texts and visuals build the royal image metaphorically in the likeness of the gods, and kingship in the likeness of the cosmos.

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