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Aristotle, Alexander and Seleucus: virtue and legitimacy of Hellenistic kings

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Abstract

This article aims to show an ideological link between the ideas on rulership of the Philosopher Aristotle, king Alexander III. of Macedon and king Seleucus I. of the Seleucid empire. These ideas concern the ideal form of monarchical government, the unique virtue of a ruler, the implications of a ruler's superior qualities and their consequences. The article will seek to provide evidence for such a link by presenting several passages from various relevant sources, such as the philosophical, historical, and biographical works of Aristotle, Arrian, Plutarch and Appian. First, the ideas and thoughts expressed in Aristotle's *Politics* on virtue and an ideal kingdom shall be analysed; then, their connection with Alexander the Great shall be explored; and finally, their influence extending to Seleucus shall be examined. A focus shall be concentrated on various speeches claimed to be spoken by Alexander and Seleucus, and the similarity between them and their contexts. Some examples of theories possibly contradicting the claim of the article shall be briefly discussed and commented on. Hopefully, this article will shed some light on the notably Ancient Greek origins of Hellenistic absolute monarchy conducive to their proper understanding.

Keywords

Aristotle; Alexander the Great; monarchy; Ancient Greek kingship; Anaxarchus; Callisthenes; human virtue

When considering ancient kingships and the basis upon which their foundations lay, one will probably sooner or later encounter the question of legitimacy – or specifically questions like: ‘Why are rulers rulers?’, or ‘What makes it right that there is a ruler at all?’ One could think that these questions a ruler must answer at some point if he wants to keep on ruling. Whether these questions were answered, and how were they answered by certain kings of the Hellenistic age, is the topic I intend to explore. In this article, I intend to propose an ideological link between the Philosopher Aristotle, Alexander III. of Macedon, his pupil, and Alexander’s successful follower, Seleucus I. I intend to show that evidence exists of royal legitimating ideas shared by them, and that these ideas were derived from the philosophical work of Aristotle. These are the ideas of, basically, an absolute rulership based on the superlative virtue possessed by a monarch, which ensures his ability to promote the common good. The evidence for the link between Aristotle, Alexander and Seleucus can be found, in my view, in certain passages from political texts, histories and recorded speeches related to these figures which yield ideas that correspond with each other in a significant measure.

1 Aristotle

Let us start with Aristotle. As is known, Aristotle was an ancient Greek philosopher active during the latter half of the 4th century BC. A student of Plato’s Academy, Aristotle left Athens for the royal court of the Macedonian king Philip II. in 347 BC and ended up as a tutor of his son Alexander, the future conqueror of the Achaemenid Persian empire.¹ He exerted a great influence on Alexander, who kept correspondence with him even throughout his conquest in Asia,² and it can be supposed that this influence reached as well to Seleucus, future founder of the Seleucid empire, one of Alexander’s companions and his age-peer.³

The gist of Aristotle’s view on kingship with respect to the legitimacy of monarchy, specifically on the fifth type of kingship that he describes in *Politics*, i.e. unlimited autocracy, can be summarised thusly: the ultimate goal of any kind of legitimate and uncorrupted constitution (whether that constitution be kingship, aristocracy or politeia) is to secure the best possible well-being and happiness of its citizens:

“At the same time they⁴ are also brought together by common interest, so far as each achieves a share of the good life. The good life then is the chief aim of society, both collectively for all its members and individually...”⁵

1 Meier et al. (2006).

2 Plu. *Alex.* 7–8.

3 Von Bredow et al. (2006), *Arr. An.* 5.13.4.

4 People.

5 οὐ μὴν ἀλλὰ καὶ τὸ κοινῆ συμφέρον συνάγει, καθ’ ὅσον ἐπιβάλλει μέρος ἐκάστῳ τοῦ ζῆν καλῶς. μάλιστα μὲν οὖν τοῦτ’ ἐστὶ τέλος, καὶ κοινῆ πᾶσι καὶ χωρὶς...; Arist. *Pol.* 1278b, 3.4.3, translation by Rackham.

For a monarchy, the only way to securely bring about this goal within the bounds of a citizen state is when a king is an individual of immensely exceptional qualities:

“When therefore it comes about that there is either a whole family or even some one individual that differs from the other citizens in virtue so greatly that his virtue exceeds that of all the others, then it is just for this family to be the royal family or this individual king, and sovereign over all matters.”⁶

The virtue (ἀρετή) mentioned here is a crucial quality, which lies basically in the active ability to do good.⁷ The main source of this virtue lies, according to Aristotle, in the quality of reason; it is through it that virtue is chiefly cultivated by means of education.⁸

Now, as was said, a justified kingship of Aristotle requires kings, in order for it to truly be just and legitimate, to be of exceptional virtue, excelling in it above all others. However, there is more to this: in Aristotle’s view, the rule of a best man is only truly justified if he is on a level wholly apart from humans:

“If then it were the case that the one class differed from the other as widely as we believe the gods and heroes to differ from mankind, having first a great superiority in regard to the body and then in regard to the soul, so that the pre-eminence of the rulers was indisputable and manifest to the subjects, it is clear that it would be better for the same persons always to be rulers and subjects once for all...”⁹

“But if there is any one man so greatly distinguished in outstanding virtue, or more than one but not enough to be able to make up a complete state, so that the virtue of all the rest and their political ability is not comparable with that of the men mentioned, if they are several, or if one, with his alone, it is no longer proper to count these exceptional men a part of the state; for they will be treated unjustly if deemed worthy of equal status, being so widely unequal in virtue and in their political ability: since such a man will naturally be as a god among men. Hence it is clear that legislation also must necessarily be concerned with persons who are equal in birth and in ability, but there can be no law dealing with such men as those described, for they are themselves a law.”¹⁰

6 ὅταν οὖν ἡ γένος ὅλον ἢ καὶ τῶν ἄλλων ἓνα τινὰ συμβῆ διαφέροντα γενέσθαι κατ’ ἀρετὴν τοσοῦτον ὥσθ’ ὑπερέχειν τὴν ἐκείνου τῆς τῶν ἄλλων πάντων, τότε δίκαιον τὸ γένος εἶναι τοῦτο βασιλικὸν καὶ κύριον πάντων, καὶ βασιλεύει τὸν ἓνα τοῦτον. Arist. Pol. 1288a, 3.9.12., translation by Rackham. It should be mentioned that while there are some doubts, e.g. Nagle (2000: pp. 121–122) and Newman (1902: pp. 121, 123–132), on whether this type of highly ideal kingship is even applicable in discussion about expansive empires, when the ideal king should rule polis, a society of citizens, I don’t think that this really poses a problem. A Hellenistic king of Alexander’s or Seleucid type could simply act as king of the individual Greek cities within their empires and still be king over non-Greek, non-polis communities beside the Greek ones at the same time.

7 Kiernan (1962: p. 509); for the ancient Greek understanding of virtue, see also Finkelberg (2002: p. 43).

8 Arist. Pol. 1332a–1332b, 1334b.

9 εἰ μὲν τοίνυν εἴσαν τοσοῦτον διαφέροντες ἄτεροι τῶν ἄλλων ὅσον τοὺς θεοὺς καὶ τοὺς ἦρωας ἡγούμεθα τῶν ἀνθρώπων διαφέρειν, εὐθὺς πρῶτον κατὰ τὸ σῶμα πολλὴν ἔχοντες ὑπερβολὴν, εἶτα κατὰ [20] τὴν ψυχὴν, ὥστε ἀναμφισβήτητον εἶναι καὶ φανερὰν τὴν ὑπεροχὴν τοῖς ἀρχομένοις τὴν τῶν ἀρχόντων, δηλονότι βέλτιον αἰεὶ τοὺς αὐτοὺς τοὺς μὲν ἄρχειν τοὺς δ’ ἄρχεσθαι καθάπαξ..., Arist. Pol. 1332b, 7.12.13. Translation by Rackham.

10 εἰ δέ τις ἔστιν εἰς τοσοῦτον διαφέρων κατ’ ἀρετῆς ὑπερβολὴν, ἢ πλείους μὲν ἐνός μὴ [5] μέντοι δυνατοὶ πλήρωμα παρασχέσθαι πόλεως, ὥστε μὴ συμβλητὴν εἶναι τὴν τῶν ἄλλων ἀρετὴν πάντων μηδὲ τὴν δύναμιν αὐτῶν τὴν πολιτικὴν πρὸς τὴν ἐκείνων, εἰ δ’ εἰς, τὴν ἐκείνου μόνον, οὐκέτι θετέον τούτους μέρος πόλεως: ἀδικήσονται γὰρ ἀξιούμενοι τῶν ἴσων, ἄνισοι τοσοῦτον κατ’ [10] ἀρετὴν ὄντες καὶ τὴν πολιτικὴν δύναμιν: ὥσπερ

A true ruler is the best of men, but also more than that – his capacities (including the intellectual ones, the reason) are of a godlike nature, and they are themselves a law. Therefore, since part of this reason is the ability to make the correct decisions, and since, unlike the reason of common men, the ruler's reason is divine-like and supreme, the ruler can do no wrong because he is always right.¹¹

2 Alexander

These ideas lead us to some interesting connections, because this line of thinking is expressed in the primary sources with connection to both Alexander's and Seleucus' royal policies, and their ideologies.¹² The *Anabasis* of Arrian contains an anecdote concerning the murder Cleitus the Black, Alexander's companion, murdered by Alexander during a heated and drunken discussion of grievances Alexander's followers had with him.¹³ While Alexander grieves and laments for the friend he murdered, he is consoled by his courtier Anaxarchus:

*“Some say that Anaxarchus the sophist was called to come and counsel Alexander, and that, finding him groaning on his bed, he chuckled and said that Alexander was forgetting why it was that the wise poets of old had Justice enthroned beside Zeus: they meant that justice was inherent in any action that Zeus determined. So too with any great king: whatever he causes to happen must be taken as just, first by the king himself and then by the rest of the world. Though this argument consoled Alexander at the time, in my view Anaxarchus did Alexander a great disservice, something much more serious than this temporary indisposition, if indeed he did present as received wisdom the notion that the obligation does not in fact lie on the king to think carefully about the justice of his actions, but on everyone else to accept as just whatever the king does and however he does it.”*¹⁴

γάρ θεόν ἐν ἀνθρώποις εἰκὸς εἶναι τὸν τοιοῦτον. ὅθεν δῆλον ὅτι καὶ τὴν νομοθεσίαν ἀναγκαῖον εἶναι περὶ τοὺς ἴσους καὶ τῷ γένει καὶ τῇ δυνάμει, κατὰ δὲ τῶν τοιούτων οὐκ ἔστι νόμος· αὐτοὶ γὰρ εἰσι νόμος. Arist. *Pol.* 1284a, 3.8.1–2. Translation by Rackham.

11 Nagle (2000, pp. 121–122); Newman (1902: p. 289).

12 As for the sources of Plutarch and Arrian for the passages below, they both seem to use an encyclopaedic compilation of histories about Alexander, dating from 3rd to 1st centuries BC, which, according to Powell, seem to be used by both Arrian and Plutarch in their passages, where they concord without citing the source, as opposed to the spurious letters of Alexander. See Powell (1939: pp. 229–40, especially p. 234).

13 Arr. *An.* 4. 8–9.

14 εἰσὶ δὲ οἱ λέγουσιν Ἀνάξαρχον τὸν σοφιστὴν ἐλθεῖν μὲν παρ' Ἀλέξανδρον κληθέντα, ὡς παραμυθησόμενον: εὐρόντα δὲ κείμενον καὶ ἐπιστένοντα, ἀγνοεῖν, φάναι ἐπιγελάσαντα, διότι ἐπὶ τῷδε οἱ πάλαι σοφοὶ ἄνδρες τὴν Δίκην πάρεδρον τῷ Διὶ ἐποίησαν ὡς ὅ τι ἂν πρὸς τοῦ Διὸς κυρωθῆ, τοῦτο ξὺν δίκῃ πεπραγμένον. καὶ οὖν καὶ τὰ ἐκ βασιλέως μεγάλου γιγνόμενα δίκαια χρῆναι νομίζεσθαι, πρῶτα μὲν πρὸς αὐτοῦ βασιλέως, ἔπειτα πρὸς τῶν ἄλλων ἀνθρώπων. ταῦτα εἰπόντα παραμυθησασθαι μὲν Ἀλέξανδρον ἐν τῷ τότε, κακὸν δὲ μέγα, ὡς ἐγὼ φημι, ἐξεργάσασθαι Ἀλεξάνδρῳ καὶ μείζον ἔτι ἢ ὅτῳ τότε ξυνείχετο, εἴπερ οὖν σοφοῦ ἀνδρὸς τήνδε ἔγνω τὴν δόξαν, ὡς οὐ τὰ δίκαια ἄρα χρὴ σπουδῇ ἐπιλεγόμενον πράττειν τὸν βασιλέα, ἀλλὰ ὅ τι ἂν καὶ ὅπως οὖν ἐκ βασιλέως πραχθῆ, τοῦτο δίκαιον νομίζειν. Arr. *An.* 4. 9., translation by Hammond.

In the account of the same episode by Plutarch, this is preceded by the attempts made by Callisthenes, Alexander's court historian and also a student and a relative of Aristotle, to console him:

*"Therefore they brought in to him Callisthenes the philosopher, who was a relative of Aristotle, and Anaxarchus of Abdera. Of these, Callisthenes tried by considerate and gentle methods to alleviate the king's suffering, employing insinuation and circumlocution so as to avoid giving pain;..."*¹⁵

However, Callisthenes, who notably keeps on tiptoeing around the subject, is interrupted by Anaxarchus, who gets to the core of the issue:

*"...but Anaxarchus, who had always taken a path of his own in philosophy, and had acquired a reputation for despising and slighting his associates, shouted out as soon as he came in: 'Here is Alexander, to whom the whole world is now looking; but he lies on the floor weeping like a slave, in fear of the law and the censure of men, unto whom he himself should be a law and a measure of justice, since he has conquered the right to rule and mastery, instead of submitting like a slave to the mastery of a vain opinion. Knowest thou not,' said he, 'that Zeus has Justice and Law seated beside him, in order that everything that is done by the master of the world may be lawful and just?'"*¹⁶

These texts present a link between the Aristotelian thoughts on kingship expressed in *Politics*: that a true king, being the godlike man of supreme virtue, is to men a law himself,¹⁷ by which logic his actions and decisions are always right and just. Following their narration about Cleitus' death and the advice of Anaxarchus, both Arrian and Plutarch further show that Alexander based his policy upon these ideas,¹⁸ and, in response to the advice, sought to establish his godhood and to claim divine honours, such as, for example, the enactment of proskynesis (i.e. the Persian custom of ritual bowing to a person of high status)¹⁹ by his Hellenic subjects:

- 15 διὸ Καλλισθένην τε τὸν φιλόσοφον παρεισηγαγον, Ἀριστοτέλους οἰκεῖον ὄντα, καὶ τὸν Ἀβδηρίτην Ἀνάξαρχον. ὦν Καλλισθένης μὲν ἠθικῶς ἐπειράτο καὶ πρῶως, ὑποδοκίμενος τῷ λόγῳ καὶ περιῶν ἀλύτως, λαβέσθαι τοῦ πάθους,...; Plu. *Alex.* 52, translation by Perrin (1958).
- 16 ὁ δὲ Ἀνάξαρχος ἰδίαν τινὰ πορευόμενος ἐξ ἀρχῆς ὁδὸν ἐν φιλοσοφίᾳ, καὶ δόξαν εἰληφῶς ὑπεροψίας καὶ ὀλιγωρίας τῶν συνήθων, εὐθὺς εἰσελθὼν ἀνεβόησεν 'οὗτός ἐστιν Ἀλέξανδρος, εἰς ὃν ἡ οἰκουμένη νῦν ἀποβλέπει ὁ δὲ ἔρριπται κλαίων ὡσπερ ἀνδράποδον, ἀνθρώπων νόμον καὶ ψόγον δεδοικῶς, οἷς αὐτὸν προσήκει νόμον εἶναι καὶ ὄρον τῶν δικαίων, ἐπεὶπερ ἄρχειν καὶ κρατεῖν νενίκηκεν, ἀλλὰ μὴ δουλεῖν ὑπὸ κενῆς δόξης κεκρατημένον οὐκ οἶσθα,' εἶπεν, 'ὅτι τὴν Δίκην ἔχει πάρεδρον ὁ Ζεὺς καὶ τὴν Θέμιν, ἵνα πᾶν τὸ πραχθὲν ὑπὸ τοῦ κρατοῦντος θεμιτὸν ἦ καὶ δίκαιον;' Plu. *Alex.* 52, translation by Perrin (1958).
- 17 This choice of words, strongly reflecting and basically the same as the phrase used in the Arist. *Pol.* 1284a, 3.8.1-2, and also in the same context (that is, claiming that true ruler is a law himself while also claiming that he is like a god), is, I believe, evidence that the thoughts expressed in Aristotle on the one hand and in Arrian and Plutarch on the other hand are ideologically linked.
- 18 It should be noted, however, that while these ideas are expressed by Aristotle in his work, the question whether he would agree with the way Alexander and others acted on them is another matter. It certainly seems that there was some tension in Aristotle's thoughts on kingship, and that the idea of a true king whose right to rule is based on his supreme virtue and abilities is more an ideal and a theory than verified practice. See also Nagle (2000: pp. 117-132).
- 19 This practice is perceived in these primary sources as proper only in the context of paying respect to de-

“For example, the prevailing account has Alexander keen to introduce formal obeisance²⁰: behind this was his conviction that his true father was Ammon²¹ rather than Philip, but he was already showing a taste for the culture of the Persians and Medes in his change of dress and other innovations in court procedure. Even on this issue there was no lack of flatterers to indulge his wish, including in particular two of the sophists he kept in his retinue, Anaxarchus and Agis, an epic poet from Argos.”²²

In Plutarch, proskynesis is subsequently mentioned with connection to Callisthenes, who supposedly persuaded Alexander to drop the matter.²³ Despite that, Alexander didn't cease to seek divine honours. He supported and influenced their establishments in Greek cities, among which was Sparta and Athens.²⁴

Furthermore, I would argue that the Aristotelian ideas are also reflected in Alexander's speech in Opis to his soldiers, who rebelled against him for multiple reasons including his acceptance of Persian customs, using native Iranian soldiers and sending his old veterans home at the same time, as recorded by Arrian.²⁵ In the same way that Aristotle considers the ideal king to be in a class wholly different even from otherwise virtuous men, so does Alexander put a similarly sounding comparison between himself and his father, the previous king Philip, who won numerous victories and governed to a great benefit of his subjects:

“These services rendered you by my father are substantial enough when considered in isolation, but they pale into insignificance in comparison with my own... Tell them of his²⁶ victories over Persians, Medes, Bactrians, and Sacae; his subjection of Uxians, Arachosians, and Drangians; his conquest of Parthyaea, Chorasmia, and Hyrcania as far as the Caspian Sea; how he went over the Caucasus beyond the Caspian Gates, crossed the river Oxus and the Tanais, even the Indus which no one but Dionysus had ever crossed before, as well as the Hydaspes and Acesines and Hydraotes, and would have crossed the Hyphasis too if

ities, and not a mortal man whom they consider Alexander to be. Hence, it is considered barbaric when applied to mortal rulers as was done in the Achaemenid kingdom. It should be noted, however, that it didn't actually have this meaning in the Achaemenid Persian culture, and the Greek view of it is probably a result of cultural misunderstanding. In general it seems more likely that the Hellenistic practice of divine cults of kings has roots within the Greek culture itself (though of course with other influences as well), see also Kvapil (2023).

20 The proskynesis.

21 An Egyptian god whose oracle in Egypt Alexander visited, upon which the oracle declared him the son of this deity, Badian et al. (2006).

22 ἐπεὶ καὶ προσκυνεῖσθαι ἐθέλειν Ἀλέξανδρον λόγος κατέχει, ὑποῦσης μὲν αὐτῷ καὶ τῆς ἀμφὶ τοῦ Ἄμμωνος πατρὸς μᾶλλον τι ἢ Φιλίππου δόξης, θαυμάζοντα δὲ ἤδη τὰ Περσῶν καὶ Μήδων τῆς τε ἐσθῆτος τῇ ἀμείψει καὶ τῆς ἄλλης θεραπείας τῇ μετακοσμήσει. οὐκ ἔνδεῃσαι δὲ οὐδὲ πρὸς τοῦτο αὐτῷ τοὺς κολακεία ἐς αὐτὸ ἐνδιδόντας, ἄλλους τὲ τινας καὶ δὴ καὶ τῶν σοφιστῶν τῶν ἀμφ' αὐτὸν Ἀνάξαρχόν τε καὶ Ἄγιν Ἀργεῖον, ἐποποιῶν. Arr. An. 4. 9. Translation by Hammond.

23 Plu. Alex. 53.

24 E.g. Plu. *Moralia* 219E–F, Din. *Orat. Att.* 94.

25 Arr. An. 7, 8–11.

26 Alexander's.

*you had not lost your nerve; how he burst out into the Great Sea by both mouths of the Indus, and came through the Gedrosian desert, where no one had taken an army before...*²⁷

In this speech, Alexander portrays himself as an individual of successes (and thus qualities)²⁸ so great that even the late great king Philip cannot compare to him. He lists extensively the successes of his conquest, and notes his deeds rivalling those of the gods, such as his crossing of Indus, a river which was only crossed before by the Greek god Dionysus. Also, he speaks of his crossing of the Gedrosian desert – a deed no one accomplished but him, surpassing even gods.

As we can see, not only is there a visible direct link in Arrian and Plutarch between Alexander's ruler ideology and Aristotle's thoughts from *Politics*, but there is also their reflection in his actual deeds and speeches, such as his incitement of divine honours for him in Greek cities (e.g. Athens and Sparta) and his speech to the soldiers who mutinied in Opis. But what about the Seleucid empire? What links to these thoughts are there?

3 Seleucus

Traces of these Aristotelian thoughts can be found in the primary sources connected to Seleucids just as in those related to Alexander. For example, in the *Syrian Wars* of Appian, a story is recorded concerned with Seleucus I., Antiochus, his son and future king, and the second wife of Seleucus, Stratonice. According to this story, Antiochus fell in love with his father's new wife.²⁹ Once Seleucus learned of his son's desire, he decided to give up Stratonice and marry her to Antiochus.³⁰ Consequently, he rallied his army to justify this implicitly immoral act before them:

“Seleucus was overjoyed,³¹ but it was a difficult matter to persuade his son and not less so to persuade his wife; but he succeeded finally. Then he assembled his army, which perhaps by now suspected something, and told them of his exploits and of the extent of his empire, showing that it surpassed that of any of the other successors of Alexander, and saying that as he was now growing old it was hard for him to govern

27 ταῦτα μὲν τὰ ἐκ τοῦ πατρὸς τοῦ ἐμοῦ ἐς ὑμᾶς ὑπρηγμένα, ὡς μὲν αὐτὰ ἐφ' ἑαυτῶν σκέψασθαι μεγάλα, μικρὰ δὲ ὡς γε δὴ πρὸς τὰ ἡμέτερα ζυμβαλεῖν... ἀπαγγεῖλατε ὅτι τὸν βασιλέα ὑμῶν Ἀλέξανδρον, νικῶντα μὲν Πέρσας καὶ Μήδους καὶ Βακτρίους καὶ Σάκας, καταστρεψάμενον δὲ Οὐξίου τε καὶ Ἀραχωτοῦς καὶ Δράγγας, κεκτημένον δὲ καὶ Παρθυαίους καὶ Χορασμίους καὶ Ὑρκανίους ἔστε ἐπὶ τὴν θάλασσαν τὴν Κασπίαν, ὑπερβάντα δὲ τὸν Καύκασον ὑπὲρ τὰς Κασπίας πύλας, καὶ περάσαντα Ὅξον τε ποταμὸν καὶ Τάναϊν, ἔτι δὲ τὸν Ἰνδὸν ποταμὸν, οὐδενὶ ἄλλῳ ὅτι μὴ Διονύσῳ περαθέντα, καὶ τὸν Ὑδάσπην καὶ τὸν Ἀκεσίην καὶ τὸν Ὑδραῶτην, καὶ τὸν Ὑφασιν διαπεράσαντα ἄν, εἰ μὴ ὑμεῖς ἀπωκνήσατε, καὶ ἐς τὴν μεγάλην θάλασσαν κατ' ἀμφοτέρα τοῦ Ἰνδοῦ τὰ στόματα ἐμβάλοντα, καὶ διὰ τῆς Παδρωσίας τῆς ἐρήμου ἐλθόντα, ἢ οὐδεὶς πῶ πρόσθεν σὺν στρατιᾷ ἦλθε...; Arr. An. 7, 9–10. Translation by Hammond.

28 It is important to understand here that in ancient Greek culture, the virtue (ἀρετή) would be notably connected with heroism, courage and fame-seeking, which are necessarily linked with military capabilities and conquest, especially with regards to Alexander the Great; see also Renaud (2006).

29 App. Syr. 59.

30 App. Syr. 59–61.

31 Because of finding out what was the cause of his son's sickness, presumably.

it on account of its size. 'I wish,' he said, 'to divide it, in the interests of your future safety, and to give a part of it now to those who are dearest to me. It is fitting that all of you, who have advanced to such greatness of dominion and power under me since the time of Alexander, should co-operate with me in everything. The dearest to me, and well worthy to reign, are my grown-up son and my wife. As they are young, I pray they may soon have children to aid in guarding the empire. I join them in marriage in your presence and send them to be sovereigns of the upper provinces now. The law which I shall impose upon you is not the customs of the Persians and other nations, but the law which is common to all, that what the king ordains is always right.' When he had thus spoken the army shouted that he was the greatest king of all the successors of Alexander and the best father. Seleucus laid the same injunctions on Stratonice and his son, then joined them in marriage, and sent them to their kingdom, showing himself even stronger in this famous act than in his deeds of arms."³²

A similar, though slightly different passage³³ can be found in Plutarch's biography of Demetrius Poliorcetes:

*"Consequently Seleucus called an assembly of the entire people and declared it to be his wish and purpose to make Antiochus king of all Upper Asia, and Stratonice his queen, the two being husband and wife; he also declared it to be his opinion that his son, accustomed as he was to be submissive and obedient in all things, would not oppose his father in this marriage; and that if his wife were reluctant to take this extraordinary step, he called upon his friends to teach and persuade her to regard as just and honourable whatever seemed good to the king and conducive to the general welfare. On this wise, then, we are told, Antiochus and Stratonice became husband and wife."*³⁴

32 Σελεύκω δὲ ἠσθέντι ἔργον μὲν ἐγένετο πείσαι τὸν υἱόν, ἔργον δ' ἐπ' ἐκείνῳ τὴν γυναῖκα: ὡς δ' ἔπεισε, τὴν στρατιάν συναγαγὼν, αἰσθημένην ἴσως ἤδη τι τούτων, καταλογίζετο μὲν αὐτοῖς τὰ ἔργα τὰ ἑαυτοῦ καὶ τὴν ἀρχήν, ὅτι δὴ μάλιστα τῶν Ἀλεξάνδρου διαδόχων ἐπὶ μήκιστον προαγάγοι: διὸ καὶ γηρῶντι ἤδη δυσκράτητον εἶναι διὰ τὸ μέγεθος. 'ἐθέλω δέ,' ἔφη, 'διελεῖν τὸ μέγεθος ἐς τὴν ὑμετέραν τοῦ μέλλοντος ἀμεριμνίαν, καὶ τὸ μέρος ἤδη δοῦναι τοῖς ἐμοῖς φίλτατοις. δίκαιοι δ' ἐστὲ μοι πάντες ἐς πάντα συνηγεῖν, οἱ δὲ τοσοῦτον ἀρχῆς καὶ δυνάμειος ἠϋέθητε ὑπ' ἐμοῦ μετ' Ἀλεξάνδρον. φίλτατοι δ' εἰσὶ μοι καὶ ἀρχῆς ἄξιοι τῶν τε παίδων ὁ τέλειος ἤδη καὶ ἡ γυνή. ἤδη δ' αὐτοῖς καὶ παῖδες, ὡς νέοις, γένοιτο ταχέως, καὶ πλέονες φύλακες ὑμῖν τῆς ἡγεμονίας εἶεν. ἀρμόζω σφίσιν ἀλλήλους ἐφ' ὑμῶν, καὶ πέμπω βασιλέας εἶναι τῶν ἐθνῶν ἤδη τῶν ἄνω. καὶ οὐ Περσῶν ὑμῖν ἔθη καὶ ἐτέρων ἐθνῶν μᾶλλον ἢ τόνδε τὸν κοινὸν ἅπασιν ἐπιθήσω νόμον, ἀεὶ δίκαιον εἶναι τὸ πρὸς βασιλείῳ ὀριζόμενον.' ὁ μὲν δὴ οὕτως εἶπεν, ἡ στρατιὰ δὲ ὡς βασιλέα τε τῶν ἐπὶ Ἀλεξάνδρῳ μέγιστον καὶ πατέρα ἄριστον ἠϋφήμει καὶ ὁ Σέλευκος Στρατονίκη καὶ τῷ παιδί τὰ αὐτὰ προστάξας ἐξεύγγυν τὸν γάμον καὶ ἐπὶ τὴν βασιλείαν ἐξέπεμψεν, ἔργον αἰοιδίμον τὸδε καὶ δυνατώτερον τῶν ἐν πολέμοις αὐτῷ γενομένων ἐργασάμενος. App. Syr. 61, translation by White.

33 There are various versions of this tale recorded by various authors; the reason why I chose to include Appian and Plutarch exclusively from among them is that, to the best of my knowledge, they are the only sources mentioning the kingly speech of Seleucus justifying the act, while, as far as I know, not being contravened significantly by the other versions. For the analysis of various version of this Seleucid tale, see Ogden (2017: pp. 212–225). Ogden also demonstrates that marriage to the previous king's widow by his successor was not an unseen thing in Macedonia, which could put to doubt the idea of Seleucus needing to legitimize his act – Ogden (2017: pp. 240–243); however, the marriage of a son to his father's wife was generally problematic within the ancient Greek culture, see Wilgaux (2011: pp. 217–229), even more so presuming that Antiochus married Stratonice while his father was still alive.

34 ἐκ τούτου τὸν Σέλευκον ἐκκλησίαν ἀθροίσαντα πάνδημον εἰπεῖν ὅτι βούλεται καὶ διέγνωκε τῶν ἄνω πάντων τόπων Ἀντιόχου ἀποδεῖξαι βασιλέα καὶ Στρατονίκην βασιλίδα, ἀλλήλοις συνοικοῦντας: οἴεσθαι δὲ τὸν μὲν υἱὸν εἰθισμένον ἅπαντα πείθεσθαι καὶ κατήκοον ὄντα μὴθὲν ἀντερεῖν αὐτῷ πρὸς τὸν γάμον: εἰ δ' ἡ γυνὴ τῷ μὴ νενομισμένῳ δυσκοινοῖ, παρακαλεῖν τοὺς φίλους ὅπως διδάσκωσιν αὐτήν καὶ πείθωσι καλὰ καὶ δίκαια τὰ

Each of these passages, though differing slightly in their content, bears striking resemblance both to Plutarch's and Arrian's narrative about Anaxarchus consoling Alexander on the one hand,³⁵ and Alexander's speech at Opis to the soldiers that rebelled against him on the other: in the same way as there, we have here a king who finds himself in a need of justifying (morally) questionable acts, and, as in the case of mutiny in Opis, in front of his soldiers (or, alternatively, before his soon-to-be-remarried queen), who, prefacing his justification by the listing of his great achievements (similarly to Alexander's speech at Opis), legitimises his actions by claiming that king is always right.³⁶ In Plutarch's version, the king's decisions are also expressly linked with assuring general welfare, precisely in line with the Aristotle's view on kingship touched upon earlier.

Regarding the tendencies of Alexander the Great for establishing his divine royal cult, we can find the basically the same tendencies in the Seleucid royal family. Since Seleucus I., cults of the deified deceased kings of the Seleucid house were established and temples were built to worship them.³⁷ Even during the life of Seleucus I. and Antiochus I., temples were built in the empire where Greek gods were worshipped dually with royal names attached to those of deities, such as were Apollo or Zeus.³⁸ This tendency culminated in the reign of Antiochus III. the Great, who established a centralised state cult of himself (and his wife Laodike, whom he interestingly also called his sister-queen) during his own lifetime, following in the footsteps of Alexander.³⁹

There are some other interpretations of the passages concerning the Seleucid family in Appian and Plutarch: one, according to which this is a reminiscence of an historical anecdote concerning Persian king recorded by Herodotus, used as a literary trope highlighting the 'easterness' of Seleucid kings;⁴⁰ the other interpretation sees this passage as a conscious Seleucid attempt to emulate the absolute monarchy of the Achaemenid dynasty, while also being influenced by (and influencing) a wider Iranian tradition.⁴¹ While I don't intend to outright debunk these interpretations, in the case of the first one, it seems to me to be improbable: the story, as given in Herodotus, doesn't match in its structure the one given in Appian and Plutarch. In that tale, the king decides to

δοκούντα βασιλεῖ μετὰ τοῦ συμφέροντος ἡγεῖσθαι. τὸν μὲν οὖν Ἀντιόχου καὶ Στρατονίκης γάμον ἐκ τοιαύτης γενέσθαι προφάσεως λέγουσι. Plu. *Demetr.* 38, translation by Perrin (1920).

35 This was noticed also by Eduard Meyer, see Meyer (1925: pp. 44–45).

36 Not only that, but he also claims that this maxim is a commonly valid law, which further indicates that the use of this justification is an Alexandrian ideological policy, used throughout his empire and reused by Seleucus. Also, given that Seleucus was an age-peer of Alexander the Great and one of Alexander's companions too, he must have been familiar with the teachings Aristotle transmitted to Alexander; given that Seleucus also reemployed number of other Alexander's policies – see Sherwin-White and Kuhrt (1993: p. 38) – the likelihood that the similarity with the ideas recorded by Arrian and Plutarch is not accidental, and that these ideas are directly related to each other, is increased.

37 Chaniotis (2005: pp. 438–439).

38 Chaniotis (2005: pp. 439).

39 Sherwin-White and Kuhrt (1993: p. 205), OGI 224.

40 Macurdy (1932: p. 79); Almagor (2016: pp. 77–78), Bevan (1902: p. 64, n. 2); see also Brodersen (1985: pp. 466–468); special thanks to Mr. Brodersen for providing me with a copy of his article.

41 Eg. Engels and Erickson (2016: pp. 51–59).

marry his second wife to his son. Subsequently, he summons an assembly of his followers (his army in one version, ‘the people’ in the other) and makes a claim about king always being right which justifies this action. The story given in Herodotus, on the other hand, has Persian king Cambyses intending to marry his sister (and expressly being condemned for it in the text); because of this, he summons royal judges, asking them whether there is any law allowing a man to marry his sister, to which they reply that while there is no such law, there is one allowing the king to do whatever he wishes. While there certainly is a similarity between these anecdotes, there are also considerable differences: first, while one king calls for an assembly of soldiers or ‘the people’ and justifies himself by his claim of royal rightness, the other one calls for royal judges, who are then those who pronounce that the king is allowed by law to do as he wishes.⁴² Why would either Appian or Plutarch (or their sources)⁴³ change the royal judges into the army or popular assembly? There is no apparent reason to, especially since similar officials seem to have existed under the Seleucids.⁴⁴ And why would the author of the anecdote put the justification of the deed into the mouth of the king instead of those he calls upon? Furthermore, it could be also argued that the messages of the two stories differ: while in Appian and Plutarch the king asserts the justness of his actions – that he is essentially, in a moral sense, right to do what he does, in Herodotus, the king doesn’t assert any sort of essential justice on his part, he is merely assured that he is allowed by law to do whatever he wants to. Though the implications of both anecdotes are, admittedly, in the end the same (i.e. that the king can do whatever he wants), their framing is markedly different.⁴⁵ As for the interpretation of Appian and Plutarch as being influenced by the Achaemenid-modelled Seleucid propaganda surviving in their sources, it should be noted that this doesn’t necessarily contradict the notion that Seleucids employed the Aristotelian political ideas through Alexander – it could be the case that the ideologies simply overlapped.

Conclusion

Based on the evidence presented, I would thus argue that Alexander the Great and Seleucus I. shared the same ideological justification of monarchical rule,⁴⁶ derived and

42 Hdt. 3. 31.

43 Both Appian and Plutarch seem to have as their sources for this anecdote early Hellenistic authors such as Hieronymus of Cardia, Phylarchos or Duris of Samos; see Almagor (2016: p. 77, n. 41).

44 Sherwin-White and Kuhrt (1993: pp. 50–51).

45 In Brodersen’s view, at least in case of Appian, the passage is written in conformity with the zeitgeist of his time, when Roman emperors ruled supreme; Brodersen (1985: pp. 465–468). This seems to me only to confuse the matter even more – if Appian wrote this anecdote in this way to conform with the ideals of absolute monarchy of his time, why would he use as a recognizable model for his story an anecdote from Herodotus the entire point of which is to condemn absolute monarchy?

46 Though, in my view, there are further potential reflections of this kind of ideology of (at least in case of Seleucids) in primary sources, their proper analysis would unfortunately exceed the allowed extent of this article too much; however, for some possible examples of such reflections, see e.g. OGI 219, 250 and 253

in concordance with the ideas about unlimited kingship expressed in Aristotle's *Politics*. They fashioned themselves to be individuals of paramount abilities and virtue, in fact on par with the gods themselves (or even posed as gods themselves). Through this excellence, it was presupposed that they were infallible, and best suited to fulfil the goals that human and civic society should reach, the best possible common good and well-being. This ideology is reflected in their proclamations and policies, as evidenced by the narratives recorded by Arrian, Plutarch and Appian, and generally by the sources documenting their tendencies to create divine cults of rulers in concord with the ideas expressed in these documents.⁴⁷

While the idea of an always-right, supremely excelling, godlike ruler may seem to many of us today abhorrent (and rightly so), it is important to not dismiss such ideas just as some simple, brutish flight of fancies of the powerful – within the context of their time, when warfare and external threats (both imagined and real) were common and where the military capability of leaders could mean the life or death (or even prosperity) of a state, such a conception of government is fairly defensible (but also attackable!). By tracing their source in theories on the ideal forms of the state and human virtue and quality, and thus linking them with their historical effects, I hope to contribute to the development of understanding of such autocracies, which loom ever so darker in our present days.

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with respect to the virtue of kings connected to their benefactions to cities and claims of divinity, and Ma (1999: pp. 329–335), especially pp. 331–332 and 333–334, for the claim about king's task of ensuring the well-being of society.

47 It is important to note, however, that there is one point on which the Seleucid practice and the ideas expressed by Aristotle differ to a considerable extent: the inclusion and view of barbarians as naturally inferior and subservient to Greeks. On the contrary, there are many examples of Seleucids accepting in the ranks of their high officials and commanders people of Iranian descent and others, and Antiochus I. even posed as ruler framed through native views and customs in Babylon. See Sherwin-White and Kuhrt (1991: pp. 71–86).

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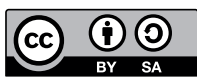
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