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# Kingship and the consolidation of religio-political power during the Hellenistic period

# Kingship and the Consolidation of Religio-Political Power during the Hellenistic Period [*]

Luther H. Martin

## Introduction

In lectures I gave at Masaryk University in December 1996 on "Hellenistic Religious Communities",[1] I argued that the multiplicity of Hellenistic communities, whether clubs, cults, philosophical schools, the early Christianities, etc., could be understood as extensions of and variations on a "kinship" type of social organization – in the Weberian sense of ideal types –, and I sought to illustrate this model of social organization with the example of the so-called Hellenistic mystery cults. I also argued in these lectures for a second type of social organization which is antithetical to kinship, namely kingship. Whereas kinship, in its original anthropological definition by W. Robertson Smith is a "natural" mode of social organization in which every human being becomes a member "simply in virtue of his birth and upbringing",[2] kingship, in Smith's definition, refers to the tendency for "the primitive equality of the tribal system … to transform itself [over time] into an aristocracy of the more powerful kins, or of the more powerful families within one kin … [with the consequence that wealth] begins to be unequally distributed".[3] This human tendency towards the social consolidation of power may be no less "natural" than that which Smith attributed to kinship, as the ubiquitous pecking order among chickens and the dominance of Alpha males among most social animals suggests.[4] In addition to evolutionary adaptations in response to the vicissitudes of survival, it is likely

1   Luther H. Martin, "Biology, Sociology and the Study of Religion: Two Lectures", *Religio* 5/1, 1997, 21-35.
2   W. Robertson Smith, *The Religion of the Semites: The Fundamental Institutions* [1889], New York: Schocken 1972, 29.
3   *Ibid.*, 41.
4   Marc Bekoff, "Dominance in Animal Social Groups", in: R. A. Wilson – F. C. Keil (eds.), *The MIT Encyclopedia of the Cognitive Sciences*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press 1999, 240-242.

that our ancestors also evolved adaptations in response to recurrent problems faced by emergent human societies which included, among other adaptive mechanisms, cognitive "capacities for representing social dominance".[5] This evolutionary basis for human social dominance has given rise to the "Machiavellian Intelligence Hypothesis" which posits that "the advanced cognitive processes of primates [and humans] are primarily adaptations to the *special complexities of their social lives* rather than only to nonsocial environmental problems such as finding food".[6] Such a "politicizing" of human social organization is, nevertheless, a socio-historical reality observable from the beginnings of human history. In this presentation, I should like to turn my attention to kingship and, again, to illustrate this type of human social organization from the Hellenistic period.

## 1. Kingship in the Hellenistic Period

Since the publication in 1836 of J. G. Droysen's *Geschichte Alexanders des Großen*, the first volume of his monumental, three-volume *Geschichte des Hellenismus* (1836-1843), historians have marked the beginnings of a Hellenistic period of history by the military conquests, the political consolidations and the cultural coalescences wrought by Alexander the Great. The imperial ideal of cultural hegemony associated with his name perdured to the Roman empire and beyond into the mentality of Western civilization.[7]

The institution of kingship established by Alexander was an innovation for the Greek world, since "monarchy was not a natural feature of ... [that] world before the Hellenistic age".[8] Whereas Alexander's father, Philip II, was, for example, "king" of Macedonia, he was only the "leader" (*hēgemōn*) of the Corinthian League.[9] The power of any "king", where the title survived, e.g., in Sparta, was restricted; as Pindar is reputed to have said, "the law", for the Greek

5   Lawrence A. Hirschfeld, "Naive Sociology", in: R. A. Wilson – F. C. Keil (eds.), *The MIT Encyclopedia of the Cognitive Sciences*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press 1999, 579-581: 580.

6   Andrew Whiten, "Machiavellian Intelligence Hypothesis", in: R. A. Wilson – F. C. Keil (eds.), *The MIT Encyclopedia of the Cognitive Sciences*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press 1999, 495-497: 495; see František Koukolík, *Machiaveliánská inteligence: Eseje ze třetí kultury v roce 2000*, Praha: Makropulos 1999.

7   Charles Marie Ternes, "The Study of Roman Religion after World War II", in: I. Doležalová – L. H. Martin – D. Papoušek (eds.), *The Academic Study of Religion during the Cold War: East and West*, New York – Frankfurt: Peter Lang Publishers 2001.

8   Per Bilde – Troels Engberg-Pedersen - Lise Hannestad – Jan Zahle, "Introduction", in: P. Bilde – T. Engberg-Pedersen – L. Hannestad – J. Zahle, *Aspects of Hellenistic Kingship*, Aarhus: Aarhus University Press 1996, 9-14: 9; Oswyn Murray, "Hellenistic Royal Symposia", in: P. Bilde - T. Engberg-Pedersen – L. Hannestad – J. Zahle, *Aspects of Hellenistic Kingship*, Aarhus: Aarhus University Press 1996, 15-27: 15.

9   Marcus Niebuhr Tod, *A Selection of Greek Historical Inscriptions* II: *From 403 to 323 B.C.*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1948, No. 177, 23: 224, 229.

world generally, "is the king of everyone, man and god" (Pi. *Fr.* 169. 1-2). With Alexander, however, power in all its forms became "radically centralized" into what has been characterized as "perhaps the most important single institution in the Hellenistic period".[10]

Although "no single model" can fully account for the varieties and complexities of the institution of kingship during the Hellenistic period, any period may be characterized and analyzed in terms of the distribution of power, and the history of that distribution, which characterizes its socio-political organization. As persuasively argued by Michel Foucault:

> power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with: it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society.[11]

The distributions and consolidations of power, consequently, offers a way to understand and analyze relationships of dominance and submission between the various constituencies of any given socio-political system. The relationships between the dominator and the dominated are generally one of tacit consent. Again, in the words of Foucault:

> What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression.[12]

Power, in other words, is not always imposed – although it may take that form. As Eric Wolf concludes, for power to be maintained, it must spread "into an ever larger number of instrumental domains, while curtailing the ability of subaltern groups to advance viable alternatives". If such redundancy falters, "the deficit may be made up by force".[13] However established, when power becomes centralized in a particular place or consolidated in the hands of one or a few, we may speak of the institution of kingship.

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10  P. Bilde et al., "Introduction...", 12, 9.
11  Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, trans. by R. Hurley, New York: Pantheon 1978, 93; see the summary of Alan Sheridan, *Michel Foucault: The Will to Truth*, New York: Methuen 1980, 183-185.
12  Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. by C. Gordon, New York: Pantheon 1980, 119.
13  Eric R. Wolf, *Europe and the People without History*, Berkeley: University of California Press 1997, 390.

## 2. Consolidations of Power in the Hellenistic Period

By the time of Alexander's empire, a growing acceptance of the necessity, or even the desirability, of political alliances required a transfer of loyalty from local or regional allegiances to some centralized power and authority, and finally to the imposed reality of empire. In Greece, pre-imperial alliances already included, of course, the well-known *poleis*, the relatively well organized city-state organizations and their various federations, e.g., the Delian League, the Arcadian League, the Aetolian Confederacy, etc., as well as the less well known *ethnē*, large populations (Arist. *Pol.* 1326b) within which individual communities had transferred some, but not all, power to a common assembly with, however, a varying and complex range of loyalties to their collective goals.[14] Whereas the *poleis* were highly centralized organizations of "tribes" (*phylai*) and smaller kinship groups such as phratries and demes, the *ethnē* preserved some measure of local autonomy and identity. Both of these types of socio-political organizations established a collective identity based upon an extended social homogeneity. Such extrafamilial, regional identity is referred to by contemporary social scientists as "ethnicity".[15]

In a well-known passage, Herodotus, defined ethnicity by the four criteria of "common blood (*homaimios*), common language *(homoglōssos)*, common religion (*theōn hidrumata te koina kai thusiai*), and common culture (*ēthea te homotropa*)" (Hdt. 8, 144), in which he gave pride of place to *homaimios*.[16] Greek society and state had been founded on kin groups that claimed common blood through descent from a common ancestor. If, for some reason, a common ancestor was absent or unknown, one might be invented, especially if a heroic or divine progenitor was desired. This ancestor gave his name to the family and the veneration of the ancestor gave religious sanction to these social entities.[17] This sense of kinship was one of the most common characteristics of Hellenistic societies.[18]

Fictive kin ties, extended by adoption and marriage, was a common Graeco-Roman practice of kin recruitment that ensured legitimate descendants in the face of high mortality. And Hellenization, in the sense of assimilating non-

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14   Catherine A. Morgan, "Ethnicity", in: S. Hornblower – A. Spawforth (eds.), *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, Oxford: Oxford University Press [3]1996, 559.

15   O. Patterson, "Context and Choice in Ethnic Allegiance: A Theoretical Framework and Caribbean Case Study", in: N. Glazer – D. P. Moynihan (eds.), *Ethnicity: Theory and Experience*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1975, 305-349: 308.

16   Clyde Kluckhohn, *Anthropology and the Classics*, Providence: Brown University Press 1961, 29-30; J. L. Myres, "Herodotus and Anthropology", in: R. R. Marett (ed.), *Anthropology and the Classics*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1908, 121-168: 134.

17   Martin Nilsson, *Cults, Myths, Oracles, and Politics in Ancient Greece*, (Acta Instituti Atheniensis Regni Sueciae, Series In 80, 1), Lund: C. W. K. Gleerup 1951, 65.

18   John S. Kloppenborg – Stephen G. Wilson (eds.), *Voluntary Associations in the Graeco-Roman World*, London: Routledge 1996, 13, 18, 112, 132, 134-135, 180, 189.

Greeks to Greek culture, often involved inventing for colonized or conquered peoples eponyms that were connected with figures from Greek myths who had similar names.[19] It is upon such claims to inclusive kinship that extrafamilial polities were constructed and by which the early kinship organizations became subordinated to larger political entities.

Monarchs typically attempted to appropriate the ideological values of kinship alliances in support of imperial allegiance and stability. Such values of universal kinship were attributed to Alexander himself. Arrian, for example, reported that Alexander sacrificed to the gods and offered prayers on behalf of the kinship of mankind (*Anab.* 7.11), and Diodorus Siculus wrote that among Alexander's "last plans" was his desire to bring the largest continents into a common harmony through intermarriage and ties of kinship (D.S. 18.4.4). Similarly, Plutarch averred that Alexander "bade ... all consider as their fatherland the whole inhabited earth ..., as akin to them all good men ..., being blended together into one by ties of blood and children" (Plut. *Mor.* 329C-D). And Alexander did, in fact, confirm his own political alliances by marrying first of all the daughter of a Bactrian noble in 327 and again a daughter of Darius in 324.

### 3. The Hellenistic Emperor Cult

The traditional forms of socio-political organization which had served the Greeks with remarkable success for centuries proved inadequate for the functioning of international empire. With their breakdown, new, universal forms of legitimating imperial authority were required. In Persia, Alexander had encountered cult practices that attributed divine qualities to their king; in Egypt, too, he found an official cult devoted to the king as god[20] and, in both places, the young conqueror was himself so received. The idea of "paying cult to a man in his lifetime" is, however, "essentially Greek, linked, since the early fourth century B.C., with the cult of heroes".[21] Accounts of Alexander's own heroic exploits told of his descent, on his mother's side, from Achilles, the bravest of Homeric heros and, on his father's side – despite tales of his virgin mother having been impregnated by a lightning bolt – from Heracles, the greatest of the Greek heroes (Plut. *Vit. Alex.* 2).[22] Both Achilles and Heracles had, according to Greek mythology, ascended from heroic to divine status; and Alexander was to follow suit. "If", in the words of Isocrates to Alexander's father, Philip of Macedon, "you make the barbarians helots of the Greeks and force the [Persian] king called great to do your command ... then nothing remains for you except

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19   M. Nilsson, *Cults, Myths...*, 97-98, 105.
20   Lily Ross Taylor, *The Divinity of the Roman Emperor*, Middletown, CT: American Philological Association 1931, 6.
21   Dundan Fishwick, *The Imperial Cult in the Latin West* I, 1-2, Leiden: E. J. Brill 1987, 4-5.
22   M. Nilsson, *Cults, Myths...*, 108.

to become a god" (Isoc. *Epist.* 3; see *Phil.* 132). And, Alexander's teacher, Aristotle, concluded that a man of such political virtue and ability might well be considered "a god among men" (Arist. *Pol.* 1284a). With Alexander's successful establishment of Greek hegemony over Persia, he realized his father's ambition and in 324/323 B.C., Athens, followed by other Greek cities, voted Alexander to be Dionysus – if not in response to Alexander's demand, at least in recognition of his desires (Ael. *VH* 2, 19; Plut. *Mor.* 219e).[23] Although accounts of this identification of Alexander with Dionysus have been challenged as originating in later tradition,[24] it does seem to be the case that Alexander was recognized at that time as "son of Zeus" (Hyp. *Dem.* 31.[25] His distinctive image on coins, while recognizable, was influenced by representative clichés of heroes and gods, and was shown with divine attributes, the most common being the horns of Zeus Ammon.[26]

Although the "boundary between gods and men was narrower in Graeco-Roman belief than in ours and more fluid",[27] and "cults of single rulers ... spontaneously created by ... individual *poleis*" were well-known, Greek notions of divine incarnation – Euhemeristic myth aside – were not so common[28] and the emergence of a state cult of the monarch was even more of an innovation for the Greeks than was the establishment of the kingship itself.

With the precedent argued by Euhemerus,[29] and by claiming kinship with or "descent", i.e., succession, from Alexander, the Hellenistic kings asserted their own heroic and/or divine status.[30] The real heirs of Alexander, however, were Julius Caesar and Augustus, both in terms of their successful consolidation of political power as well as in that of the divine right to rule they claimed – a right subsequently claimed by monarchy in the West until the rise of the modern democratic state.

Divine right to rule, whether as divinity incarnate or by divine sanction, provided, in the observation of A. D. Nock, "an etiquette for the relation of monarch and dwellers within his sphere of influence: on their side homage, on his side a divine pose which admitted of a wide range of variation between

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23  L. R. Taylor, *The Divinity...*, 21-23; D. Fishwick, *The Imperial Cult...*, 9-10.
24  Arthur Darby Nock, "Notes on Ruler-Cult I-IV"[1928], in: A. D. Nock, *Essays on Religion and the Ancient World*, ed. by Z. Stewart, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1972, 134-159: 134-144.
25  *Ibid.*, 135.
26  Robert Fleischer, "Hellenistic Royal Iconography on Coins", in: P. Bilde – T. Engberg-Pedersen – L. Hannestad – J. Zahle (eds.), *Aspects of Hellenistic Kingship*, Aarhus: Aarhus University Press 1996, 28-40: 29, 37.
27  D. Fishwick, *The Imperial Cult...*, 41.
28  A. D. Nock, "Notes on Ruler-Cult...", 152.
29  Actually Leon of Pella (Aug. *Civ. Dei* 8, 5; 12, 11; Min. Fel. *Oct.* 21, 3); see L. R. Taylor, *The Divinity...*, 26-27.
30  L. R. Taylor, *The Divinity...*, 25; D. Fishwick, *The Imperial Cult...*, 11-20.

moderate and exaggerated forms".[31] Whatever the source of the ruler-cult in the West, however the details and history of this cult might finally be interpreted and however different the situation might have been in different areas and in different times, there is no question that the Hellenistic period can be characterized as a period in which there was a consolidation of religious as well as political power around the person and office of the emperor. Were ideas concerning a divine emperor simply a means to establish authority and to enforce his (or her, as in the case of Egypt) absolute rule – "more of a matter of practical politics than of religion", as an earlier generation of scholars concluded?[32] Or, as suggested by Simon Price, was the imperial cult a socially effective way to articulate the overwhelming power of the emperor who stood at the focal point between humans and gods but was, nevertheless, very much human?[33] Or might the situation have been a more subtle projection by the king of "himself as [the] principal agent in transmitting the favour of the gods [and their power] to the subjects of his realm", as suggested by Erich Gruen?[34] The final evaluations of such questions depends, of course, on one's definition of "religion".[35]

## 4. Consolidations of Religious Power in the Hellenistic Period

Religion and politics are both ways of organizing power as a viable social system.[36] Like any political system, religion may be understood as that social system which seeks to legitimate and to maintain itself by appealing to rituals of power, whether the exercise of those rituals are consensual or imposed. The sole difference between religious and political systems is that the nature of the power appealed to in legitimation of religious systems is superhuman.[37] This

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31  Arthur Darby Nock, "Ruler-Worship and Syncretism"[1942], in: A. D. Nock, *Essays on Religion and the Ancient World*, ed. by Z. Stewart, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1972, 551-558: 552-553; see D. Fishwick, *The Imperial Cult...*, 11.

32  E.g. L. R. Taylor, *The Divinity...*, 35, 237.

33  Simon R. F. Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1984, 233; see the similar position suggested by A. D. Nock, "Ruler-Worship...", 552-553.

34  Erich Gruen, "Hellenistic Kingship: Puzzles, Problems, and Possibilities", in: P. Bilde – T. Engberg-Pedersen – L. Hannestad – J. Zahle, *Aspects of Hellenistic Kingship*, Aarhus: Aarhus University Press 1996, 116-125: 118.

35  D. Fishwick, *The Imperial Cult...*, 42-43.

36  Luther H. Martin, "Religia i władza polityczna: Hipotezt krytyki wybranych wzorów zależności", *Przegląd Religioznawczy* 2/168, 1993, 67-74.

37  Scholars of religion have traditionally focused all of their efforts on descriptions, taxonomies, etc. of this singular characteristic of religious systems. This focus on the dimension of superhuman power rather than on the social *claims* to superhuman power as a strategy of legitimation has led to conclusions about the *sui generis* nature of religion which neglect, thereby, the role played by this system in the context of its socio-cultural domain (Pascal Boyer, *The Naturalness of Religious Ideas: A Cognitive Theory of Religion*, Berkeley: University of California Press 1994, 116).

is, of course, a taxonomic definition which allows the scholar to analyze religious systems in different cultural domains, whether or not such a system is actually differentiated from other effective systems in that domain. For example, the official religions of Greece and Rome, and the distributions of power they represented, were not distinguished from their respective political systems and the distributions of power they represented – unlike modern Western ideas about the separation and autonomy of these systems. Consequently, we would generally expect that the structures and transformations of a particular religious system would parallel those of the political system in a common cultural domain. For example, the Hebrew deity received the title *malek* (king) only in the context of Israel's post-exilic construction of a royal epic first of all in the form of a promise (Deut. 17: 14) that was only realized, according to the Deuteronomic narrative, when "all the tribes of Israel [were gathered] together", i.e., when they became consolidated as a singular political entity (Deut. 33: 5).

Consolidations of religious power in the first centuries of the Christian era have been termed, a "monotheistic trend". Such consolidations were not, however, the historical destiny claimed by theologians in explanation of the "triumph" of Christianity in the face of the imperial state and of the Hellenistic religious alternatives but represented, rather, a systemic consolidation of religious power in parallel to the successive consolidations of political power from Alexander to Augustus. Parallel examples of the consolidation of religious power include the iconographic homogeneity of Mithraism (still not fully explained historically) and the reemergence of Platonic essentialism in face of Aristotelian taxonomies from the pseudo-Platonic dialogue of Axiochus in the first century B.C. to its theo-political apogee with Plotinus in the third century.[38] The culmination of the parallel consolidation of political and religious power during the Roman empire was, of course, their convergence under Constantine's reunification of the empire and his reconsolidation and reassertion of Roman political power following the administrative division of the empire under Diocletian, a division which reflected a wider political discord, on the one hand, and his embrace of an increasingly consolidated Christian monotheism, on the other, a successful religio-political alliance of various strands of the early Christianities that received juridical confirmation by Theodosius at the end of the fourth century.[39] As history has shown, when religious and political power become joined as one, that power is formidable indeed.

38    Luther H. Martin, "Self and Power in the Thought of Plotinus", in: A. Komendera – R. Padoła – M. Śliwy (eds.), *Człowiek i wartości*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Naukowe WSP 1997, 91-99. On a general consolidation of knowledge characteristic of this period, see Michael R. Greenwald, *The New Testament Canon and the Mishnah: Consolidation of Knowledge in the Second Century C.E.*, Diss. Boston University 1989.
39    Averil Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire: The Development of Christian Discourse*, Berkeley: University of California Press 1991; Garth Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity*, Princeton: Princeton

Religio-political consolidations of power may, of course, be challenged, as when Athens and Sparta purportedly ridiculed the deification of Alexander,[40] or when the Maccabees led the Jews of Palestine in armed revolt against the policies of Antiochus.[41] And, religious power can consolidate in ways parallel to but alternative to official consolidations of religio-political power, as in the construction on the basis of fictive kinship alliances of the ubiquitous clubs and cults that populated the Hellenistic world. Such local assertions of power threaten the pretensions of absolute sovereignty even as political consolidations challenge the identity and autonomy of local distributions of power. Such consolidations were viewed (often correctly), by Rome for example, as a potential threat to the power of the state and these threats, whether real or perceived, had to be controlled. The most well-known example of Rome's control of a religious movement was the suppression of the Bacchanalia by senatorial decree in 186 B.C. According to this decree, cult officials and a common treasury were prohibited and any practice of the Bacchanalia required official permission – and then it was limited to five persons, no more than two men and three women at any celebration, measures that finally restricted any organized continuity for this group (Livy 19. 8-18). This action by the senate with respect to the Bacchanalia may have been part of the legal precedent employed by Rome against the early Christianities.

The kinship/kingship model of ideal types here proposed offers a theoretical rationale for the numerous religio-political entities of the Hellenistic world, for their relationships to one another and to the empire at large. Actual distributions of power in the context of Hellenistic, as of any, culture represent, of course, a potentially infinite number of historical variations between these ideal types of human socio-political organization.

University Press 1993.

40   L. R. Taylor, *The Divinity*..., 21-22.
41   For studies in the Near Eastern resistance to Hellenism, see Samuel K. Eddy, *The King is Dead: Studies in the Near Eastern Resistance to Hellenism, 334-31 B.C.*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 1961.

RÉSUMÉ

**Království a konsolidace nábožensko-politicko moci v helénistickém období**

V přednáškách, které jsem na Masarykově univerzitě proslovil na téma „helénistických náboženských komunit" *(Religio* 5/1, 1997, 21-35), jsem se pokusil doložit, že početní nárůst sociálních skupin, který charakterizuje helénistické období, by mohl být chápán jako rozšiřování a variace „královského" *(kingship)* typu sociální organizace. Poznamenal jsem též, že „království" *(kingship)* zakládalo druhý typ sociální organizace, protikladný „příbuzenství" *(kinship)*. V této přednášce rozvíjím tento „královský" model a zmíněný typ sociální organizace ilustruji na příkladech z helénistického období.

Od počátků helénistického období, které většina badatelů datuje od založení říše Alexandra Velikého, profiluje západní dějiny instituce království. Upevnění politické moci, jež je pro království charakteristické, byla doprovázeno konsolidací náboženské moci, nejprve v podobě helénistického panovnického kultu, podporujícího království, poté ve formě křesťanského monoteismu, vznikajícího jako alternativa království, a nakonec v podobě propojení Konstantinova impéria s křesťanskou církví.

Model příbuzenství a království *(kinship / kingship)* jako ideálních typů sociálně-náboženské organizace, předložený v této i v předchozích přednáškách, nabízí východisko pro teoretické uchopení rozličných nábožensko-politických entit helénistického světa, pro pochopení jejich vztahů mezi sebou navzájem i vůči celému impériu.

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