



Analyzing 2nd millennium Oriental Kingship with Aristotle – The question of ‚Despotism‘ revisited

Workshop der DFG-Kollegforschungsgruppe 2615: Rethinking Oriental Despotism - Strategies of Governance and Modes of Participation in the Ancient Near East

25. – 26. Februar 2021

Der Workshop findet in Form zweier Webex-Meetings statt. Um den Interessierten aus Übersee eine Teilnahme zu ermöglichen, beginnen wir jeweils am Nachmittag um 15:00 (MEZ). Den Zugang zum Online-Meeting finden Sie auf der Webpage der Kfg unter > <https://fu-berlin.webex.com/fu-berlin/j.php?MTID=mfae703fd2495aco4052dd6092971054b>

In his *politica*, Aristotle describes the rule of the Persian king as comparable to that of a master over his household. In his understanding, this type of rulership lies outside the types of political governance, which comprise the three dichotomous pairs, namely monarchy - tyranny, aristocracy - oligarchy and polity - democracy. When Aristotle describes the Oriental king as a *despotes*, literally “head of the household”, he resorts to the image of a “master” in his relationship to his slave. This type of non-political authority is a matter of natural law and not of the laws of the city. Although such an approach might be troubling or at least surprising to a Greek philosopher, it was seen as a power dynamic, deprived of the negative characteristics of injustice, arbitrariness or lasciviousness usually associated with it. As W. Kogge and L. Wilhelmi have shown in a recent article („Despot und (orientalische) Despotie – Brüche im Konzept von Aristoteles bis Montesquieu“) these connotations of the modern term *despot* go back to shifts in the uses that the concept has known over the centuries in European political theories and that culminate in Montesquieu’s work *De l’esprit des lois*.

The terms *despot* and *despotism* are tainted beyond repair in Ancient Near Eastern studies as designations of rulers vested with the very features laid out by Montesquieu. Such a view is prevalent in modern scholarship, especially that of the first half of the twentieth century. However, one might wonder if Aristotle would not have also captured the essence of kingship in Mesopotamia, since the term *despotes* in its literal Greek sense seems valid for the description of the royal power, especially in second millennium, Mesopotamia and beyond. Therefore, the accuracy of Aristotle’s description deserves further investigation. The lexicon of political power, especially the use of Akkadian words such as *bēlu(m)* “master” and *ardu(m)* “servant” in administrative or diplomatic contexts, or *palāhu(m)* “to fear”, the importance of personal relationship in daily governance, and the lack of counterpower, point to a conception of authority based, at least theoretically, on the sole will of the king. Obviously, things were more complicated on the ground and primary sources show that negotiation was a constant tool in the decision-making process. Other avenues should be investigated, for instance the patrimonial approach to royal authority or the essentialization of the royal figure, both in the Near Eastern and Greek political cultures. The workshop seeks to address the question whether or not these characteristics are in line with the core of Aristotle’s notion of *despotes* as the “head of the household” in the realm of the Mesopotamian political life.

Organisation: Sophie Démare-Lafont, Lisa Wilhelmi und Werner Kogge

Donnerstag, 25. Februar 2021

- 15:00-15:20 Eva Cancik-Kirschbaum (Kollegforschungsgruppe „Governance-Strategien und Partizipationsformen im Alten Orient“)
Zur Einführung: „ ... and the Greeks were right after all: etic views and emic evidence on the notion of *despotes*.“
- 15:20 – 16:20 Sophie Démare-Lafont (Université Paris II - Panthéon-Assas, EPHE, PSL)
”The royal authority in Mesopotamia: between official discourse and political negotiation”
- 16:20 – 16:30 *Pause*
- 16:30 – 17:30 Lynn Zimmermann (DPhil – University of Oxford, Faculty of Oriental Studies)
„Private property and patrimonialism in the Kassite period“

Freitag, 26. Februar 2021

- 15:00 – 16:00 Lisa Wilhelmi/ Werner Kogge (Kollegforschungsgruppe „Governance-Strategien und Partizipationsformen im Alten Orient“)
„*despote* vs. *despotes* - Differences in the Conceptual Frameworks of Montesquieu and Aristotle“
- 16:00- 16:15 *Pause*
- 16:15- 17:15 Yves Schemeil (Emeritus Professor of Political Science, the University of Grenoble)
„Tyranny or Hegemony? From Ancient Eastern Arrogance to Greek Hybris“