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An odd title belies a very thorough analysis of the family relationships of the Hellenistic Dynasties. Daniel Ogden states that this book ‘is meant to be used’ rather than read cover to cover. Indeed this is a useful statement. After the introductory chapter the book divides into two parts. Part One is a series of discussions of the various dynasties that constituted the Macedonian and Hellenistic monarchies and their family interrelationships. Part Two focuses attention on Hellenistic royal courtesans. Ogden uses these parts and their constituent chapters to demonstrate the various suppositions about the nature of the Hellenistic dynasties that he outlines in his introduction.

The argument is most interesting. It is founded upon a number of hypotheses. First and foremost is that the Hellenistic monarchies ‘failed to establish any consistent method of hierarchising their wives and the sons that were born of them’ (ix). Secondly he argues that the Hellenistic dynasties inherited from the Argeads the same ‘debilitating’ inter family relationships and rivalries that were the product of the polygamous Macedonian kings (x). Thirdly, and very importantly, Ogden states,

[T]he investigation of legitimacy culture has been encumbered over the last century by two fallacies. The first is the belief that the dynasties were serially monogamous rather than polygamous (xiv)... The second... is that these dynasties shared an unchanging, constitutional law of succession (xvii).

He states finally,

[T]he hypothesis of this book is a strong one in so far as it is argued that virtually all generations of the major Hellenistic dynasties can be seen as involved either in amphimetrism or in some sort of process of reaction to it (xxv).

Amphimetrism, the practice of having children through various wives, is a theme throughout the book. It is central to its thesis and reflects the various theories upon which the book is founded. The Hellenistic
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monarchies failed to reconcile this practice with regard to their monarchic succession. That is to say, the children by different wives came into conflict with one another in disputes for the succession and children of the same wife often displayed loyalty to each other against their half siblings.

Ogden looks at the various dynasties, generation by generation, to establish the ways in which each experienced dynastic-succession problems. By looking at the various dynasties separately he is able to highlight how the respective monarchs and monarchies dealt with their dynastic problems. He shows conclusively that they dealt with these relationships differently. He does much to illustrate that the stability of a dynasty was strongly related to the way that each dealt with these relationships. For example the Ptolemies ‘established a degree of stability in the family’s legitimacy’ in sister marriage (67), the Seleucids were ‘dreadfully unstable’ and the implication is that this was the result of amphimetric strife (117). Unlike the other two dynasties, the Antigonids avoided amphimetric strife, until the well documented conflict between the sons of Philip V, due to specific features of Antigonid Macedonia, particularly ‘a paucity of sons’ and ‘a strong internal code of loyalty’ (171).

The wives and mothers of the Diadochoi were central to these disputes. Recently, the work of Carney in particular has illuminated the importance of women in the Hellenistic monarchies, a product of the power of dynasty reminiscent of Western Europe in the middle of the sixteenth century. Having assessed the family relationships of the various Hellenistic dynasties in a series of chapters, oddly addressing Lysimachus and Cassander in the same one (presumably because their dynasties were short lived and could not be considered part of the big four), Ogden moves in Part Two to assess courtesans. Hitherto, there has been no study that specifically addresses the role of courtesans in the Hellenistic monarchies and this justifies the focus of the second half of the book. Needless to say, the subject matter of the second part of the book on courtesans intersects largely with that of the first. Perhaps this is a further reason why the book ought to be ‘used’ rather than read from beginning to end.

Unsurprisingly, there is a degree of difficulty in establishing what the historians meant when they referred to women at court with regard to their status. The terms used of women attached to the court were often vague.
This is something that was true of royal wives as early as the time of Philip II and, perhaps understandably, led to the confusion among earlier modern historians regarding the status of (royal) women in the circle of the court of the Argead monarchs and their Near Eastern successors. Ogden is well aware of this confusion. For example in order to establish that Philip II was polygamous Ogden (17) takes the reader through a passage of Satyrus (F21) preserved by Athenaeus (557b-e). This passage is loaded with terms related to marriage (gamos), wife (gyne), legitimate (genesioi) and not so legitimate (nothoi) children. Many women, Ogden rightly identifies, had more legitimate status at court than that with which the sources often credit them. The sources do not help in their real identification and this must be inferred, often by the status of their descendants.

The ancient Greeks liked euphemisms. The sources, particularly those that reflected the Hellenistic monarchies, were loaded with propaganda, usually malicious. Women who were really wives might often be described as courtesans and no doubt the reverse was true also. Ogden notes throughout, to compound problems of status further, 'there were few absolute distinctions of status or profile between queens, wives, concubines and courtesans' (215). The sons of hetairai could succeed 'unproblematically' to the throne in Antigonid Macedonia (171). Yet, courtesans, as Ogden demonstrates in Part Two did form a distinct group of individuals related to the royal households at least in the sources. Some of these women could achieve status as queens or wives. For example it is possible that Demo married Demetrius Poliorcetes (231). This raises interesting thoughts about the nature and status of women generally, and of hetairai specifically. The status of hetairai was surely only a matter of perception and, as Ogden shows their appearances in historical sources seem to be at specific situations, like symposia (259), or involved in specific activities, like leading the kings astray (266). The attribution of this status therefore perhaps reflected context rather than reality.

The sources for the Hellenistic world are often difficult to trust. The propaganda evident with regard to women was no doubt relevant to other features of the Hellenistic monarchs. While Ogden recognises this he is also at the mercy of men like Justin and Trogus for much of his information. Ogden admits that they revelled in stories about the murder of kin (xxii). Plutarch too enjoyed a good story about dynastic strife. One
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wonders to what extent these historians writing for a Roman audience well versed in its own Late Republican and Imperial family conflicts imbued the Hellenistic monarchies with Julio-Claudian colour. One wonders too about the level of trust that can be applied to these sources in their characterisation of powerful long dead men and, more particularly, women, most especially with regard to their dynastic relationships. No wonder it is often difficult to identify the status of many of the women involved at court.

It should be noted that the theories underpinning this study are not always consistently borne out, for example, and as Ogden himself notes, the ‘Fratricidal War’ between Seleucus II and Antiochus Hierax was fought between full brothers (131). Ogden could usefully have provided the reader with a conclusion to his study. What does it tell us about the big picture of the Hellenistic world? How does the nature of amphimetric disputes and their centrality to the stability / instability of the Hellenistic monarchies change our view of these monarchies? Did the absence of amphimetric disputes aid a dynasty? For example, it remains to be demonstrated that the reason that the Ptolemaic dynasty outlived those of the Seleucid, Attalid and Antigonid families was because of the former’s avoidance of amphimetric disputes through sister marriage. As Ogden recognises, this only created different problems for the family of the Ptolemies, for example infertility and limited life spans (67). External phenomena worked just as hard at upsetting the stability of the various Hellenistic kingdoms as internal troubles.

Much has been written about the Hellenistic world in recent years. Alexander’s successors have received their fair share of attention as individuals and as personalities. They are often seen as empire builders in their own right. Ogden’s book is a useful tool for seeing the kingdoms in the context of the families that ruled them, and, in particular, in the context of the women of the Hellenistic world, who played a more prominent role in the historical record than their classical forebears. As a tool for reference to the relationships of the kings and their families, this book will long be a standard work.

Nevertheless, the majority of books written recently about the Hellenistic world have accentuated the positive image of its kingdoms. Ogden concentrates on the negative. He seems to see the internal family
strife of the dynasties as debilitating to the kingdoms as a whole. This suggests that the very thing that made the monarchies powerful—their central cohesion around the monarch, his family and his well-chosen loyal philoi was inherently a weakness. This weakness was inherited from the Argead Kingdom of Philip II. But here lies another paradox. The ability of the Macedonian kings to marry polygamously was a strength in diplomatic relationships. It meant the king was able to establish strong family ties with many powerful connections both outside and inside his kingdom. The product, however, was amphimetrism and with it amphimetric strife. The monarchies of the Hellenistic world were powerful and long-lived. They were neither successful nor unsuccessful since, like all things, they eventually disappeared. The families that were central to these kingdoms are worthy of close attention. Daniel Ogden’s book will form the basis for further study in one of the principal growth areas of ancient history today.

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