

Power, Royal Agency, and Elite Women in the Hellenistic and Roman World
(the first in a series of virtual events on *Power and Royalty in the Ancient World*)

The Waterloo Institute for Hellenistic Studies
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Interest in the subject of women in positions of power – chiefly royalty – in antiquity has been greatly magnified over the past two decades. The groundbreaking work of Grace Harriet Macurdy in the 1930s (*Hellenistic Queens: A Study of Woman-Power in Macedonia, Seleucid Syria, and Ptolemaic Egypt* and *Vassal-Queens and Some Contemporary Women in the Roman Empire*) remains of great value, if only because nothing so comprehensive has replaced it as yet. Nevertheless, more contemporary approaches, a plethora of new evidence, and, more generally, increased interest in an alternative, more systemic and court-oriented view of power have created the opportunity and the need for vastly expanded work on ancient royal women. Among the more recent works of scholarship are the valuable collections of essays published by Anne Bielman Sánchez and others (2016, 2019), Elizabeth Carney and Sabine Müller (2021), and Altay Coşkun and Alex McAuley (2016). Monographs on specific queens include Whitehorne (1994), Carney (2000, 2006, 2013, 2019), Clayman (2014), and van Oppen (2015).

What has been missing? Despite the frequent appearance of the term “power” in these studies, we have yet to see a sustained theoretical and analytical discourse on the *meaning* of “power” (or “powers”) and its application specifically to “powerful” females. The title of Macurdy’s treatise on Hellenistic queens indicates that the concept of power was core to her work, but like others, Macurdy tends to describe power (or individual manifestations of it) rather than define it. Moreover, the structure of her work focuses on individual queens arranged by their particular dynasties; discussion of the question of power is parsed out among these various case studies, rather than embedded in a topical discussion of its own. With the great increase of interest in ancient female royalty, sufficient evidence has now been collected, studied, and published to allow us to undertake an in-depth examination of what is meant by “power” in the context of ancient royal women.

The overarching context for this project is Hellenistic female royalty; nevertheless, given the impact and influence of the Hellenistic kingdoms on subsequent constructions of monarchic power, examples from the Roman world and from non-Greco-Macedonian dynasties could also be illuminating. Examples of non-royal elite women could also be instructive, though the focus of the event will be royal women. In all cases, however, we will be wanting to delve into the meaning of power, rather than a description of individual instantiations of it. Contributors are also asked to keep in mind questions of royal power in the larger context, not simply as evidenced (or not) in the case of queens. Understanding more about female power will also

serve to enrich our understanding of the diverse components of ancient monarchy and its agents, male and female.

What might we look at? These are simply a few suggestions, but ultimately the goal is to build, if not consensus, then a coherent framework within which we may begin to situate our understanding of power and ancient royalty.

- What are the sources of power?
- What are the measures of power?
- Typologies of power (influence, agency, authority, etc.)
- “Rebellious” queens
- Support bases, including military
- The impact of polygyny on female power
- Queenly intercession
- Networks
- Status
- Is queen’s power existentially different from king’s power?
- Power as performance
- Representations of power
- Audiences of power
- Queens and the divine (kings and the divine)

This event, or rather events, is intended to be the first in a series of colloquia that will explore power and royalty in the ancient world more broadly. Future themes we might collectively consider can include succession of power (transition, transmission, delegation); the question of legitimacy; power and control; force, violence, and clemency – these are only a few suggestions.

This inaugural set of events on female royalty and power will take place virtually over the course of the **fall and winter of 2021/22**, with differing time frames to accommodate people in differing time zones at their maximum possible comfort level. The papers will take between 20-30 minutes and will be followed by question and discussion time. The organizers aim to collect the finalized papers in a publication that will maintain strict focus on the overarching and connecting theme. To this end we will consider sharing them as working papers in advance.

We invite abstracts of 150-250 words, to be sent to praewhellenistic@gmail.com. The deadline for abstracts is **1 June 2021**.

Works Cited:

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