

## The Greek culture of dialogue and of political decision-making process at Hellenistic Kings' court

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**Abstract.** *The article deals with the problem of the political decision-making process at the court of the Hellenistic Kings. The Hellenistic Kings possessed a strong power and vast material and human resources. They took the administrative, legislative, juridical, military and other branches of power in their hands. Nevertheless in many cases when we have the possibility to follow the decision-making process one can notice that many kings preferred the collective forms of searching for the best solution of the state problems. The Hellenistic Kings involved courtiers who were their advisers and consultants in the decision-making process and in many cases were open for dialogue and for free discussions, for the alternative opinions of the advisers. The phenomenon of collective discussion could be easily explained as a political pragmatism, when dialogue, discussion or a brain-storm give much better result to find the right solution and to avoid mistakes. At the same time dialogue and discussion were the immanence of the Greek culture, the Greek cultural “code”. The culture of dialogue and discussion was highly developed in a Greek world. It influenced the education, the cultural and political life, etc. The Hellenistic Kings were educated according to the Greek tradition and they transferred the culture of dialogue and discussion into the political life of the state. Thus political pragmatism was combined with the features of Greek culture.*

**Rezumat.** *Autorul tratează în acest articol problema procesului decizional la curtea regilor elenistici. Deținând o putere absolută și resurse umane vaste, aceștia dețin practic toate pârghiile puterii: juridice, militare și politice. Se observă că ei preferă formulele colective de a căuta soluționarea optimă a problemelor statului. Regii elenistici își implicau curtenii în luarea deciziilor, aceștia fiind și consultanți în același timp. Fenomenul discuțiilor colective poate fi lesne explicat ca o formă de pragmatism politic. În același timp dialogul era o imanență a culturii grecești, un „cod” cultural grecesc.*

**Keywords:** Hellenistic monarchy; the court of the Hellenistic king; Greek culture of dialogue and discussion; friends of the king; the council of friends; political decision-making process.

### 1. Introduction

The Hellenistic King's power was rather a contradictory political phenomenon. Numerous facts show the concentration of all kinds of power (legislative, administrative, judicial,

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military, economic and financial power, etc.) in the hands of the monarchs. The idea of the very considerable power of kings became a part of the political consciousness of the population of the Hellenistic states. The very power of monarchs, their right to make any decisions concerning the fate of the cities, of peoples or individuals, including the execution of a people wasn't disputed and not been questioned either by the court or by the army, or by the subjects. Of course, the despotic manner of kings to rule, violent reprisals against relatives or opponents were condemned, but rather from the moral positions, not on the base of law. The unlimited power of the kings was not been a matter of dispute. Moreover, in the ancient political thought and in the public mind the comprehensive nature of the king's power was supported by an ideological justification of the idea that the king represents the law and that he was its living embodiment (νόμος ἔμψυχος), because "everything that will be decided by the king, is fair" (Plut., Dem., 24; also: App., Syr., 61). In the eyes of the subjects the king personally united different parts of the country<sup>2</sup>.

Against this background, our sources give numerous facts of ongoing consultations of Hellenistic kings with their relatives (οἱ ἀναγκαῖοι, συγγενεῖς), "friends" (οἱ φίλοι) and approximate (οἱ σύντροφοί) on various issues of public life<sup>3</sup>. Thus we have evidences of a collective practice of making important political decisions, taken after the discussions. In many cases when the modern reader gets the possibility to follow the procedure of decision-making process, it is clear that kings often preferred to implement them not alone, but jointly – with the help of relatives and "friends", engaging them in discussion, in exchanging of the views. We emphasize that approximate of the king, his "friends" and other courtiers did not act as mute extras, but, on the contrary, often quite openly and independently expressed their opinions, offered advice and even addressed criticism and reproaches to the kings.

## 2. Discussion and dialogue at the court of Hellenistic kings

Ancient sources offer many examples of political discussions and dialogues on the political issues in the history of the Hellenistic kingdoms, from the era of the Diadochi and until the very end of the Hellenistic World. Thus, when Antigonus Monophtalmos captured Eumenes, he was thinking about the future of his captive for several days and was listening to the different advises and proposals from his entourage and also from his son Demetrios and Cretan Nearchos (Plut., Eum., 18). Before the fateful battle with the Celts in 279 BC "friends" of Ptolemy Keraunus tried to persuade him to wait for reinforcements. Ptolemy did not listen to their advice, perished in the battle himself and destroyed the army, putting Macedonia on the brink of disaster (Diod., XXII, 3, 1). In the history of the Seleucid kingdom, in particular,

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<sup>2</sup> WALBANK 1984, 66–67, 71, 80–84, etc.; MUSTI 1984, 178–181; BICKERMAN 1985, 13–14, 16–19.

<sup>3</sup> CORRADI 1929, 231–255, 269–290; ALLEN 1983, 133–135; WALBANK 1984, 68–71; BICKERMAN 1985, 41–49; HATZOPOULOS 1996, 323–330, 334–336; CAPDETREY 2007, 278–279.

during the reign of Antiochus III, the practice of the king's meetings with "friends" and relatively free debate in decision-making on major issues of life of the state is often referred to. For example, in connection with the revolt of Molon, Antiochus III was repeatedly summoned the council, giving the right to speak to various members of it (Polyb., V, 41, 6–9; 42: 1–5; 49: 1–7). In 219 BC at the council of Antiochus III, the last word belonged to the doctor Apollophanus who strongly promoted his point of view and persuaded the king and the council members to go to war for the reconquest of Seleucia (Polyb., V, 58). Even earlier—in the period of domination of Hermias—the same Apollophanes played an important role organizing the coup against the influential favorite and persuaded the king to take the necessary steps to destroy him (Polyb., V, 56). Polybius points out that the question of the fate of a captured rebel Achaïos under Antiochus III was decided by the Council (Polyb., VI, 23, 2). During the eastern campaign "friends" did not recommend Antiochus III to free the young ruler of Armosata Xerxes, despite the fact that this opinion does not coincide with the mood of the king. When the final decision was taken, Antiochus III did not heed the advice of his "friends" (Polyb., VIII, 25, 3–4). Before the war with Rome, Antiochus III again repeatedly summoned the council, including Hannibal as a member of the board. It is known that the "friends" of the king opposed the strategic plan proposed by Hannibal; King took the side of his advisers (Just., XXXI, 4, 9; 5: 1–9; 6: 1–2)<sup>4</sup>. This information shows at least that there was a free opinion exchange at the meetings. Livy, describing one of the meetings of the king's council concerning the war with Rome, emphasized that Acarnanian Alexander, who had once been a "friend" of Philip V and ran to Antiochus III, rather insistently promoted the idea of a war with Rome (Liv., XXXV, 18, 3)<sup>5</sup>. Later, after the defeat of Antiochus III army at Magnesia, "friends", according to Appian, accused the king for his quarrel with Rome, and for inept planning of the military campaign, and for leaving Chersonese and Lysimacheia, and for the lost final battle (App., Syr., 37).

The series of striking facts of that kind could be added by a well-known case in the history of the Antiochus IV. When in 168 BC Syrian king marched to war against Egypt and came with his army to Alexandria, Roman embassy attempted to stop him. The head of the embassy G. Popilius Laenas in tough and undiplomatic manner demanded to stop the offensive. Antiochus IV, according to the information of some ancient authors, did not want to give an answer right away, but made a very characteristic statement that he must first discuss the decision with his friends. Only the offensive behavior of the Roman envoy made Antiochus IV decide immediately (Polyb., XXIX, 27. 1–8; Just., XXXIV, 3; somewhat different account of the situation: Diod., XXXI, 2; App., Syr., 66; 12; Plut., Apophthegm. reg. et imp., 86; Valer Max., VI, 4,

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<sup>4</sup> According to Livy, a major role in making this decision has played the Aetolian strategos Phoant, an ambassador between Antiochus III and the Aetolian League who was not a courtier of the king (Liv., XXXV, 12, 4–5; 32, 2–11; 42, 4–14; 43, 1–2).

<sup>5</sup> See also another examples of consultations with "friends": Diod., XXXIV, 16; I Macch., 6; Jos. Antiq., XII, 3, 4.

about the harsh disposition of the Roman politician: Liv., XLV, 10, 8). In 162 BC after consultation with approximate, Demetrius, the future king Demetrius I Soter, who lived in the "Eternal City" as a hostage, decided to flee from Rome. The advice was given by the teacher of the future king Diodorus, who also helped to organize the escape. In addition, Demetrius consulted about his intentions with the historian Polybius and with one of his "friends", Apollonius (Polyb., XXXI, 19, 4-9; 20, 3).

In the history of the Ptolemaic kingdom, we also mention a number of such examples. Ptolemy IV Philopatoros took a decision concerning the request of the Spartan king Cleomenes III, who was in Egypt at the head of his army, with the participant of the "friends" (Polyb., V, 35, 6-8, 12). After the invasion of Antiochus IV in Egypt when the threat arose for the country, it was decided at the king's board to form a special council of the most experienced people (Polyb., XXVIII, 19). In another situation, the influential Tlepolemos was condemned also at the meeting of the royal council in Alexandria. Tlepolemos, in turn, in anger called a council to accuse openly his opponents (Polyb., XVI, 22, 9). Another of Ptolemy V Epiphanes's influential courtiers, Aetolian Scopas, was likewise sentenced by the board where its members took speeches (Polyb., XVIII, 54, 1-3). Some more vivid examples of collective decision-making process are given by the final events in the history of the state of the Ptolemies. The fate of Pompey the Great, who fled after the defeat at Pharsalus in 48 BC in Egypt, was discussed at the royal council. Eunuch Pothinus who held the position of "ὁ ἐπὶ τῶν πραγμάτων", the teacher of young Ptolemy Theodotus from Chios and the Egyptian Achilles were the main persons who decided the tragic fate of Pompey (Plut., Pomp., 77).

The regular consultations and meetings with the "friends" were commonplace in the ruling practice of the Macedonian kings Philip V and Perseus<sup>6</sup>. In 218 BC Philip V conferred with "friends" concerning the sea war against the Aetolians (Polyb., V, 2, 1). During the trip to Sparta the king again consulted with "friends" on the further plan of military actions (Polyb., V, 22, 8). In 217 BC Philip V collected "friends" to discuss the termination of the war with the Aetolians (Polyb., V, 102, 2). In 197 BC, according to Polybius, at the meeting with T. Quinctius Flaminius Philip V expressed the same position as Antiochus IV: he cannot make a decision immediately, because he has no advisers (XVIII, 7, 4). After the massacre against the residents of Maronea, the Macedonian king had consulted with "friends" Apella and Philokles about how to answer to Rome's inquiry (Polyb., XXII, 18, 7).

Polybius tells us a joke of Titus Quinctius Flaminius towards the Macedonian king indicating the role of the "friends" at the court of Philip V: "It is clear why you are alone now as you killed all the friends who could teach you excellent advice" (Polyb., XVIII, 7, 5-6; see also: Plut., Apoptegm. reg. et imp., 76). During the rule of Perseus the same significant role of

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<sup>6</sup> On the role of the king's council in a decision-making process in the state of Antigonids see: HATZOPOULOS 1996, 337-339, 341 f.

“friends” in the government remained. Before the beginning of the Third Macedonian War and at the beginning of the war Perseus repeatedly held meetings with the “friends” who are often expressed different opinions about the relationship with the Romans (Liv., XLII, 50; 51; 1; 57; 1-2; 62, 3, 8). In 171 BC after the cavalry battle against C. Licinius Crassus, the “friends”—members of the military council in Pella—persuaded Perseus to send envoys to the Roman consul, to see if the Romans are willing to the peace agreement (Polyb., XXVII, 8, 1-5; App., Mac., XII; Liv., XLII, 57-62). The negotiations were unsuccessful, Perseus achieving nothing, wrongly behaved himself. Polybius says that in this situation Perseus was criticized by the majority of “friends” for the fact that, winning the first encounter, he offers peace as if he was a loser (XXVII, 8, 14). In this context it is important, that after the defeat at Pydna Perseus was looking for a reason to put the blame for the defeat on any of the approximate (Plut., Aemil. Paul., 23). This style of his behavior is possible only in one case — if the decision was taken collectively or according to an advice of his courtiers. After the battle at Pydna upon arrival to Pella the treasurers Euktos and Euleus began to express their regret and reproach to the king; they also gave belated advice, for which he immediately killed them both (Ibid.). In this situation, the most surprising is not so much the fact of the massacre of the courtiers by the king, as their confidence that they have the right to reproach the king and advise him, even in such an unsuitable situation.

In the history of the Attalid kingdom there is a very impressive example of decision-making process at the meeting of the king’s council given by the letter written by the king Attalos II to the priest of the temple of Cybele in Pessinus. This letter is one of the whole correspondence group, dating back to 164-156 BC, regarding the relationship with the Galatians (RC., 55-61)<sup>7</sup>. One of these documents (RC., 61) seems to be the a sort of the protocol of the king’s council.

ἔλθόντων ἡμῶν εἰς Πέργαμον καὶ συναγαγόντος μου οὐ μόνον Ἀθηναίων καὶ Σώσανδρον καὶ Μηνογένην, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἑτέρουσ πλείονασ τῶν ἀναγκαίων καὶ πρσιθέντος περὶ ὧν ἐν Ἀπαμείᾳ βουλευόμεθα, λέγοντός τε περὶ ὧν ἔδοξεν ἡ μῖν πολλοὶ μὲν ὑπεραγόντως ἐγίνοντο λόγοι, καὶ τὸ πρῶτον πάντες κατέρρεπον ἐπὶ τὴν αὐτὴν ἡμῖν γνώμην (ll. 2-8)

“When we came to Pergamum and I assembled not only Athenaeus and Sosander and Menogenes but many others also of my “relatives”, and when I laid before them what we discussed in Apamea and told them our decision, there was a very long discussion, and at first all inclined to the same opinion with us” (transl. Ch. B. Welles).

The next lines of the letter of Attalus II fixed the discussion of the members of the council of “relatives” concerning the problem of relations with the Galatians. One of the courtiers, a

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<sup>7</sup> On the documents see: WELLES 1934, 241-253; HANSEN 1971, 126, 131-132; ALLEN 1983, 142-144. Chr. Mileta dates the first letter to the end of 3<sup>rd</sup> c. BC – after 207, but right before the sacred stone of Magna Mater was transported to Rome (MILETA 2010, 116-119).

certain Chlorus, expressed the suggestion that does not coincide with the opinion of the king and of all the members of the board. The courtier mentioned in the letter could after a while reverse the general mood and urge the king to make the decision, opposite the original one (ll.8, ff.).

In connection with all these facts, it is important to pay attention to the judgment of the historian Polybius who was well-informed in the realities of the Hellenistic epoch and who knew the political “kitchen” of the time. He wrote about the meaning of “friends” and the king’s companions, that they either destroy his power or enhance it (Polyb., VI, 4, 6). Of course, this is true only on the base of one crucial condition: “friends” give recommendations to the king, and actively influence the decision-making and the political behavior of the monarch.

At this point I have to make a very important caveat: one shouldn’t absolutize the practice of debate and dialogue in the process of making responsible decisions, as well as to idealize the court relationships of the Hellenistic era. The court atmosphere was full of intrigue, flattery, fighting of the court cliques, betrayal, the bloody massacre of opponents, the desire of favor with the king, readiness to serve to the kings with all the means even dishonorable and unmoral and other negative traits. In this regard, it is worth remembering that at feasts of Demetrius I sounded toast in honor of king Demetrius, of Ptolemy the chief of navy, of Seleucus the chief of elephants, of Lysimachus the keeper of the treasury, of the ruler of Sicily Agathocles. These speeches Demetrius himself listened with favor: the flattering words about his royal dignity combined with the insult of other Diadochs, also declared themselves kings (Plut., Dem., 25). Livy also draws attention to the fact that when discussing the war with Rome, Antiochus III courtiers strongly demonstrated martial ardor, hoping thereby to gain the king’s favor (Liv., XXXV, 17, 3–4). However, these examples of flattery and sycophancy of “friends” and courtiers to the kings did not change the overall impression, expressed above, in principle. Numerous examples of frank discussion and dialogue on political issues in the royal council suggest that this was precisely the rule of management.

The proposed selection of the facts relating to the discussions and dialogue in making political decisions by the kings is very revealing. The kings discussed with their approximate a variety of topics – military strategy and tactics, diplomatic actions, internal policies, and finally, judged individuals. The facts we have at our disposal belong to different periods of Hellenistic history—from the era of the Diadochs to the Roman conquest—and represent the history of all the Hellenistic states. Thus, we have reason to believe that this is a universal phenomenon, typical characteristic of the very nature of the Hellenistic state. Researchers who wrote about the royal court and about the highest level of power in the Hellenistic states had marked the above-mentioned phenomenon<sup>8</sup>. The fact that ongoing consultation of kings

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<sup>8</sup> BICKERMAN 1985, 47–48. Not. 175, 176; CORRADI 1929, 331–342; HAMMOND 1992, 391–392.

with their friends and other members of the inner circle of power and decision-making with their active participation shows that the king's power was not a completely unlimited one. The king's power was limited by the influential courtiers, by the supreme administrative and military elite. Hellenistic kings had to take elite's interests and position into consideration and to consult with its highest representatives concerning the policy of the state.

### **3. Why the practice of discussion and dialogue was implemented?**

It's time to discuss a question as to why there was such a practice in the decision-making process at the court of Hellenistic kings? The first explanation is that the collective nature of the discussion of the state problems and collective decision-making process allows to find the best way out of difficult situations and to avoid voluntarism, ill-considered, impulsive and therefore harmful and dangerous for the state and for the ruling class decisions.

However, in addition to the above, it can be assumed that the collective decision-making procedure on the basis of the dialogue and discussion was an integral element of the Greek culture, it was a basis of the Greek "cultural code" that kings assimilated in the process of training and education, and that inevitably reproduced in their state activity. In Roman history this phenomenon was described by Georgy Knabe. Noting the large role of collective forms of discussion and decision by the Roman emperors of the Principate era, G. Knabe linked it to an interactive form of communication and with the idea that the bearer of true wisdom and experience was a community, a group of people not the individual; therefore, the adoption of individual decisions seemed to the Greeks and Romans inadmissible<sup>9</sup>.

The idea, proposed by G. Knabe, is highly productive, and may explain many facts that were presented in the first part of the article. It is important to stress that the verbal forms of communication, the dialogue and discussion played the significant role in the Greek culture. Among Greeks, not only the monologue speech or the personal decision but interactive, discussion form of communication, as well as the appropriate form of learning and decision-making played very important role.

### **4. Greek culture of dialogue**

It is well known that in the ancient practice of teaching one of the most advanced training methods was dialogue, which involves the formulation and awareness of the problem, the collective—by the teacher and the students—nomination of arguments, their inspection and final decision. This method is called Socratic, has also been used by philosophers and teachers of other schools of philosophy (Diog. Laert., II, 22, 29). Discussion

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<sup>9</sup> KNABE 1981, 49–50.

with an imaginary opponent was an essential part of training in the rhetorical schools. In this connection, we should also pay attention to the wide dissemination of such kind of genre, as a philosophical and polemical dialogue. It was used by Plato, Xenophon, philosophers of Aristotle's school<sup>10</sup>. In the Hellenistic times, the philosophical dialogue was cultivated very efficiently in the schools of Aristotle and by the Cynics. Cynics, referring their speeches to the different segments of society, tried to find clear forms of presenting their ideas for the ordinary people. They widely used the form of diatribe, which was a presentation not only of the philosophical, but also of the everyday and moral themes in a lively, imaginative style. Statements of philosophers supplemented with quotations from the works of famous poets, proverbs, anecdotes; the monologue often transformed into a dialogue with an imaginary opponent. Master of the genre was Bion of Boryspheues who not only led the verbal conversation, but also published his works (Diog. Laert., II, 77; IV, 52). Among the cynics of the Hellenistic epoch Teles of Megara and Menippus were especially famous for their diatribes<sup>11</sup>. Thus, the dialogue, the discussion form of communication, of training, of presentation of knowledge and the search for truth has been one of the very important characteristics of ancient Greek culture throughout its history, a kind of cultural constant, which has had an impact on other spheres of life, including—invariably—and policy. Hellenistic kings received education according to the Greek tradition<sup>12</sup>. It means that they were trained and educated in the framework of the dialogue culture and inevitably transferred this culture to their management practices, including the practice of discussion and adoption of important government decisions.

In connection with the tradition of the decision-making on the basis of the discussion it becomes clearer the emergence of informal institution of royal advisors and consultants from among scientists, philosophers, doctors or teachers<sup>13</sup>. They acted informally, in a manner of private communication with the king and participated in the discussion of complex public policy issues and helped in decision-making. A good example of that kind is the situation with the prince Attalus, the brother of king Eumenes, who was sent as an ambassador to Rome and whom Roman politicians persuaded to ask for the part of the Pergamon kingdom. His elder brother, the king Eumenes II was very prudent and foresighted, that is why he sent doctor Stratios as a member of the embassy. Stratios managed to dissuade the prince from this rash step via discussions (Polyb., XXX, 2; Liv., XLV, 19, 20, 1–3). It is important to note that, unlike the members of the council of “friends”, this category of courtiers—informal advisers and

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<sup>10</sup> On the method of dialogue and discussion in the spheres of education and philosophy in Ancient Greece: ZHURAKOVSKY 1940, 135, 149 f.; AKHMANOV 1955, 174, 177; NERSESIANTS 1977, 58–65, 76–77; KESSIDI 1999, 104–106, 139–152, etc.; MARROU 1998, 95–96, 282–285; MORRISON 2006, 108–110, 114–116; GILL 2006, 140–147.

<sup>11</sup> RADZIG 1969, 414; NAKHOV 1981, 46–52, 129–130, etc.; 1982, 195, 196.

<sup>12</sup> On the education of the Hellenistic kings according to the Greek tradition: KLIMOV 2013, 239–242.

<sup>13</sup> KLIMOV 2011, 141–160.



consultants from among the intellectuals, who lived at the court—used to help developing solutions behind the scenes, in the process of informal communication with the kings. It is clear that the presence of this category of persons at the court also confirms the need for the interactive, collective form of decision of the state problems.

## 5. Conclusion

To summarize, we note that the institution of “friends” of the king and the council of “friends” were not decorative bodies or private meetings of the king’s friends and companions, but a real political institution that influenced the adoption of responsible government decisions. To some extent, the “friends” of the kings and the board of the “friends” determined the policy of the king and limited the Hellenistic monarch power<sup>14</sup>. Thus one of the distinctive features of governance in the Hellenistic world is a contradictory combination of the strong imperial power with the collective forms of decision-making, it is assumed with respect to freedom of expression and conduct discussions for the group of courtiers. At the heart of this decision-making practice laid down not only the managerial pragmatism, which demanded the collective forms to find optimal solutions to the problems, but also long-term Greek cultural and educational tradition — the tradition of dialogue and debate, in which Hellenistic kings were formed as a persons and that they implemented in their public activity.

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<sup>14</sup> BICKERMANN 1985, 46–48; KLIMOV 2010, 172–173; CORRADI 1929, 240–255, 269–290, 318–340; WALBANK 1984, 68–71; MUSTI 1984, 179–180; HATZOPOULOS 1996, 328, 330, 334–336, 338–343; STROOTMAN 2007, 119–123, 155–158; CAPDETREY 2007, 278–279.

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