Royal Ideology in Archaic and Classical Cyprus

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Introduction

During the Archaic and Classical periods (8th–4th centuries BC), Cyprus is characterised by political division. For more than eight centuries the cities of the island have been governed by monarchs who were the most predominant members of the local royal families. The history of the kings and their family members coincides with the history of the city. History, however, is not limited to the political events involving the royal family. It also includes the ways through which monarchs chose to represent their authority.

No text of ancient Greek literature has survived describing the institutions of Cypriot kingdoms. Furthermore, there are no extensive sources on the ideological manifestations of Cypriot kingship. This surely does not mean that these texts never existed. In particular, writers of the Hellenistic age were aware of the fact that Aristotle wrote the *Cyprion Politeia* and Theophrastus the *On Cypriots’ Kingship* (*Περί Βασιλείας Κυπρίων*). Unfortunately, these texts are lost; except for *Athenaion Politeia* by Aristotle and *Lacedaimonion Politeia* by Xenophon, we possess no other complete text *Περί Πολιτείας*. We can assume, therefore, that through references to the distant, mythical past and to the so-called historical times, these authors present the historical evolution of political institutions and address the political and ideological particularities presented by the monarchical constitution.

The scarcity of references to the ideological manifestations of Cypriot monarchy does not forbid us from further studying a subject of this importance. The combined examination of primary and secondary sources may well reveal new aspects of the royal ideology of the Cypriot states.

The term “royal ideology” designates the dynamic and polymorphic representations of royal authority, which shape the image that the king himself wishes to project within, but also outside the borders of his kingdom. The royal inscriptions and the royal insignia, the clothing, the cults and the rituals, the image of the ruler in public places, the royal funerary monuments, the cult of the ancestors, the genealogy of the royal family, the foundation myths and the narratives of the heroic actions are, amongst others, expressions and functions of the royal ideology. The in-depth study of the primary sources, such as philological testimonies, inscriptions, coins, archaeological evidences, allows us to reconstruct aspects of this interesting subject and illuminate facets of an extremely
complicated world, that of the Cypriot cities.

It is noteworthy that this subject has become the focus of extended research only recently. Historians and Archaeologists, relieved from previous methodological entanglements and elaborately constructed theories, have studied in detail the primary sources and ventured to put forward original conclusions, which have reversed or completed pre-existing theories. Scientific publications on art, economy, economic policy related to the numismatic production, political history, religion, on the relation of the kingdoms with the Greek world and the Near East, on the conditions of their appearance and evolution, on the complicated process through which they shaped their identity, shed light on various dark aspects of the history of the Cypriot kingdoms. The study of a subject as rich and multifaceted as the royal ideology of the Cypriot city-states will have to systematically take into account the constantly updated primary and secondary sources.

It would be unwise to attempt proposing an epigrammatic presentation of this matter. For this reason, we have decided to concentrate on two specific but equally important expressions of the royal ideology: the symbolic representations of the historical continuity of the royal family and the royal symposia. Let us begin however with a brief but necessary deviation.

During the Archaic but also during the Classical period, the monarchy constituted one of the main forms of political organization of the Greeks. In the archaic period most of the cities have adopted monarchical constitutions, while in the classical period areas such as Macedonia, Syracuse, Cyprus, and even Sparta, have developed monarchical political institutions.

The monarchic government of the Cypriot city-kingdoms is consequently not a paradox. What is unique is their long duration. The first clear mention of names of kings and kingdoms is dated in 673 BC; it is fully attested that the kingdoms ceased to exist around 310 BC, when they were annihilated by Ptolemy I Soter. It has been correctly stressed out that the chronological horizon of their appearance is dated in the 11th-10th c. BC; in this context, some of the kingdoms appear to have survived for more than eight centuries.

The long duration of the Cypriot city-kingdoms cannot be explained as a testimony of the Cypriot conservatism or a weakness to adopt more complex forms of government. It is evident that it is due, amongst others, to the flexibility with which the bodies of the central authority responded to the demands of each era. Their incorporation in important political constellations, such as the Neo-Assyrian Empire (707-612 BC) or the vast Achaemenid Empire (545-332 BC), not only did not lead to their extinction, but on the contrary appears...
to have contributed to the expansion of their political, economic, cultural and ideological horizons. The economic evolution that is visible on the island during those years is reflected on the impressive royal tombs of Salamis and the rich archaeological material. The elaborated royal champers, thrones, necklaces, seals, scepters, monumental palaces, royal inscriptions, coins, constitute testimonies of a fully developed monarchic system. This presupposes the dynamic transformation of a complex royal ideology which, despite any external influences, is characterised by a noteworthy originality. Below we shall briefly attempt to discuss several expressions of the royal ideology which allow us to suggest that the long duration of the Cypriot city-kingdoms war far from hazardous.

**Kingship by law**

Cypriot kingship was hereditary. The king was obliged to obey the rules set by the forefathers, respecting the royal stereotypes and their ideological connotations. In this sense, the Cypriot kingship was a kingship “by law”. This does not signify that the king would obey written laws, but that his uncontrolled authority was constricted by a series of customary but also institutional rules to which he owed respect. In brief, his rule was expected to be a visible and tangible guarantee of the continuity of the kingdom.

It is significant that the ruler bore the same title as his predecessors, which is that of the king (in Cypriot syllabic *pa-si-le-wo-se*). This is sufficiently proven by the primary sources, mainly by inscriptions and coins of the archaic and classical periods. That this does not concern only the Greek kings of the island, but also the Phoenicians who bear the respective title in their own language (*mlk*). This is not merely a symbolism, but attests to the true concern of ensuring the political and ideological continuity of the kingdom. It is noteworthy that when Evagoras I adopted the Greek alphabet on the royal inscriptions but also on his coinage, he continued using the Cypriot syllabic, acknowledging that crucial expressions of the royal ideology of Salamis were directly related to the use of this script.

To summarize, the use of the word “king” symbolized, amongst others, the unbroken continuity of the city-state. At this point it is not difficult to evaluate the importance of the construction and preservation of collective memory, indispensable for the harmonious coexistence of the members of a strictly hierarchic society.

**Memory and royal ideology**

The evolution of epic poetry in the courts of the kings of Archaic Cyprus, and the
composition of epic cycles, which preceded the Homeric ones and had panhellenic resonance, decisively contributed to the creation of the image of the hero-king. The cosmopolitan Herodotus stresses the heroic dimension of the Cypriot monarchy, as does Isocrates in *Evagoras*. The last king of Salamis, Nikocreon, introduces himself in the Panhellenic games in honor of Hera in Argos as a descendant “of the most sacred people” (θειότατων προσώπων), of a distant heroic past. However, Nikocreon does not omit to evoke his father, Pnytagoras, thus underlining the unbroken continuity of the royal family of the Teucrids.

The memory of this past is more than a mere intellectual construct. For it to be substantial and effective it also has to be dissipated all around the kingdom. We have to assume that the theatric representation in the public space of royal symbols, images, statues, or even impressive funerary monuments, as well as the massive participation of the subjects in royal ceremonies, as for example the ceremonial announcement of the new king or his funerary procession, the festive ceremonies of remembrance of great accomplishments, the ceremonies in honor of the protective gods engender a sense of a common past, the king being, of course, the common point of reference in a strictly hierarchized society. This does not signify, nevertheless, that the collective memory remained captured in one uncompromising ideological moment. It is well understood that in such a case it would have become incompatible with the historical context which actively influenced the exercise of power, as well as its ideological representations.

Thus, the attachment to a strictly traditional and institutional monarchic way of ruling did not in any way prevent the new king from abandoning older practices and attempting the political and ideological modernization of the kingdom. The long duration of the Cypriot kingdoms is also due to the flexibility, with the central authority responded to the demands of each era. The dynamic evolution of institutions, but also the successful adaptations of the royal ideology were often related to the historical, political, economic, social and cultural context. It would therefore seem that the adaptation of the kingdoms in the constantly changing international but also national environment was not superficial but substantial. A brief overview of the foundation myths of the Cypriot kingdoms can enlighten certain aspects of this phenomenon.

*Foundation myths and royal ideology*

The foundation myths of Cypriot kingdoms constitute part of the epic cycle of *Nostoi*, narratives according to which the return of the Achaean to their home country after Troy’s
occupation was accompanied by new adventures which led them to several areas of the Mediterranean, where they founded new cities. According to the philological tradition, Teucros originating from Saronic Salamis, founded Salamis of Cyprus; Agapenor, King of Tegea and commander of its troops in Troy founded Paphos, Praxandros the Lacedaemonian founded Lapethos, and Acamas and Demophon the Soloi with the elaboration of a heroic past was an extremely dynamic procedure and certainly the Cypriot kings played a key role in the diffusion of these narratives.

The Homeric hero Teucros, arriving in his home country after the fall of Troy, confronted the wrath (μῆνιν) of his father, Telamon, the famous King of Saronic Salamis. The rupture of their relations was due to Teucros’ failure to defend his half-brother, Aias, who committed suicide, because he could not accept the fact that Odysseus, and not himself, had prevailed in the fight to win Achilles’ weapons. Therefore, condemned to exile, he reached Cyprus, where he founded a new polis, Salamis. However, the Nostos of Teucros does not consist of anything more than the core of an ever transforming story. Pindar, Sophocles, Euripides, Isocrates, and the very Kings of Salamis added or removed elements in their attempt to integrate the myth in a precise historical context, which determined its final form.

Therefore, it is not a coincidence that the last King of Salamis, Nikocreon, re-creates his genealogical tree in a manner highlighting all those elements, which would allow him to present himself as a relative of Alexander the Great, who, from 332 BC onwards, had incorporated the Cypriot cities in his kingdom. This ingenious elaboration allowed Nikocreon and his kingdom special treatment from Alexander and his successors, at least up to the moment when he became opposed to Ptolemy I.

The incorporation of Cypriot states in the vast Persian Empire was another factor which influenced the way certain Kings chose to represent their distant past. This is confirmed by the appearance of Perseus in the Cypriot royal iconography. According to Herodotus, the very same Persian monarchs presented the mythical King of Argos as one of their ancestors. Considering this observation, we could conclude that some of the Kings aimed -without of course rejecting their identity- at highlighting at least one constructed ideological relation with the Great King.

Before completing this section, it is necessary to stress the following observation: it is crucial to conceive that the attempt of keeping alive the memory of the origins of the royal family, either through language or heroic narratives, does not consist of an arbitrary choice. It aims at historicizing a distant, but nonetheless real fact: the arrival of their ancestors in Cyprus.
We shall now attempt reconsider a erroneous, as we believe, conception, according to which one of the manifestations of Cypriot ideology is the exuberantly luxurious way of life of the monarchs.

Royal symposiums and royal ideology

Athenaeus in his *Deipnosophistai*, mentions extensively the prodigal life of Cypriot Kings, their waste and their luxurious habits, which touched the limits of *hubris* (ὕβρεως). Unfortunately without naming him, he refers to a young King of Paphos, who enjoyed prodigal life, lying down on a bed with silver legs, covered with fabrics from Sardis and Amorgos, while his head was placed on luxurious, linen pillows\(^21\). The luxury of the royal court is also described by the comic poet Antiphanes, who mentions a King, again from Paphos, who bedewed himself with ointments from Syria, enjoying the services of many slaves\(^22\). Furthermore, in one of his most famous texts, where the prodigal life of Cypriot monarchs is attested, Athenaeus talks about the impressive symposiums organised by Nikocles, which surpassed in indulgence those of the King of Sidon, Straton, who, in his turn, organized magnificent symposiums and surpassed everyone in luxury and a hedonistic way of life\(^23\).

Let us immediately underline the following points: the perception of these texts as “historical sources” leads to simplified approaches, which create a distorted image of Cypriot Kingship. It is obvious that these texts reproduce stereotypes of the Greek writers regarding the delight and the luxury of royal courts. In their eyes this was associated with a barbarian habit which revealed the limitless power of the Persian monarch and the distance that separated him from his subordinates. This image contrasted with the aristocratic symposiums, where participants were all equal and expressed themselves freely\(^24\).

These texts necessitate cautious examination. Through Athenaeus’ text on Nikocles we shall attempt to shed light on certain, less evident, aspects of the Cypriot royal ideology.

Nikocles and the royal symposiums

The systematic reading of Isocrates’ text as well as of other primal sources leads to the conclusion that Nikocles was a competent King, who methodically tried to heal the wounds left behind by the ten-year war against the Persians in 392/1-381/0 BC. His wise rule contributed decisively to the political and economic reorganization of the Kingdom\(^25\). We
would add that he managed matters relating to the royal ideology in the same skillful manner. Paradoxically, this is confirmed by the texts of Athenaeus, as the symposiums, to which he refers, consist of nothing more than particular representations of royal ideology.

The extremely rich table symbolized mainly the material and political superiority of the monarch in comparison with the aristocracy and all his subordinates. He appeared as the benevolent benefactor of the royal family members and of his officials, to whom he offered gifts during the dinner as well as the possibility to share with him valuable goods. This practice, which was in itself a manifestation of political art, had a very particular goal: to secure the favor of the members of the aristocratic elite, who remained politically and ideologically dependent on the monarch. By accepting the gifts of the King and enjoying his generous hospitality, they confirmed, in the most formal way, the acceptance of the monarch’s rule as well as their subservient position. Furthermore, we should consider that during a symposium they competed with each other for the favor of the King. The whole procedure followed a ritual, which confirmed the strictly hierarchical form of government. As we have already underlined, we are dealing with a royal symposium, where the superiority of the monarch was emphasized by all means available.

Within this context, we should also interpret the “anecdotes” regarding the minimum tolerance of Cypriot monarchs towards those who criticized them or made irrelevant comments during said symposiums. As it is known, one of the first victims of Monarchy is the freedom of speech, the παρρησία. As Diogenes Laertes emphasized, the philosopher Menedemos almost lost his life when, during a royal symposium in Salamis, he provoked the wrath of King Nikocreon, who felt resented by the persistence of his guest to doubt his word in front of the other guests. The philosopher Anaxarchus also met a tragic end, when he offended Nikocreon in front of Alexander.

These “anecdotes” do not convey a tyrannical cast of mind or lack of culture of the Cypriot kings. The Cypriot states were not democratic but monarchical, and the monarch could not tolerate criticism or doubt in public. His response to these phenomena had to be direct and severe in order to prevent the disturbance of order. The right of free speech or even of criticism was the privilege of only a small number of people, the philoi of the monarch, with whom he would define fundamental aspects of his policy during private audiences.

Finally, it is obvious that with the royal symposiums the monarch seeks to impress, not only his subordinates, but the other Kings as well. The rich table set with valuable material goods from different areas of the world, interspersed with the presence of foreign guests, such as philosophers, singers, actors, artists, symbolizes the ability of the monarch to transform the
royal court into a miniature of the οἰκουμένη. It is obvious that Nikocles, and maybe equally other Cypriot kings, imitated the Persian royal symposiums. However, this does not signify that they uncritically adopted Persian royal institutions: the King is fully aware that a blending of heterogeneous elements is necessary. On the one hand, there is the metropolis of his kingdom, Athens, of which he is a citizen. However, he knows only too well that ideological and political kinship with Athens should not overshadow political reality, meaning the fact that he is tributary to the Great King. His survival within the Achaemenid state required the adoption of ruling practices, which would secure him a special position, not only among local rulers but in the surrounding area of the Near East and obviously of Phoenicia as well. It is not a case of political opportunism or of validating naïve opinions on the hybrid character of Cypriot kingship. If the symposiums organized by Nikocles competed with those of the king of Sidon Straton, and if the symposiums of the Cypriot kings reproduced aspects of those of the Persian King, this is because the ideological, political and cultural horizon of the Cypriot cities extended far beyond Cyprus itself. Constantly contemplating the Aegean, Asia Minor, Egypt and Persepolis, the Cypriot Kings transformed their cities into bustling and colorful city-states.
List of illustrations

The images that follow are available in the digital version of the present article in the website Kyprios Character. You can view the images by following the link: kyprioscharacter.eie.gr/en/t/A5
Endnotes

1 Hoffmann 2008, 65.
3 Iacovou 2013.
4 Markou 2011.
6 Papantoniou 2012.
7 Zournatzi 2005.
8 Iacovou 2002.
9 Christodoulou 2014.
10 Carlier 1984.
11 Fourrier 2010.
12 Satraki 2012.
13 Iacovou 2006· Markou 2015.
14 Franklin 2014.
15 Herodotus, 5.105-115.
16 IG IV, 583: «Ματρόπολίς μοιχθών Πέλοπος, τὸ Πελασγικὸν Ἀργὸς, / Πνυταγόρας δὲ πάτηρ, Αἰακοῦ ἐκ γενεᾶς· / Εἰμί δὲ Νικοκρέων, θρέψεν δε μεγᾶ περίκλυστος Κύπρος, θειοτάτων ἐκ προγόνων βασιλῆ / Στᾶσαν δ’ Ἀργεῖοι μεχάρι τοὺς χαλκοῖτοι / Ἥρᾳ ὃνεἰς ἐροτιν πέμπον ἄεθλα νέοις».
17 Christodoulou 2009.
18 Christodoulou 2014.
21 Athenaeus, Deipn. 6.255c.
22 Athenaeus, Deipn. 6.257d-f.
23 Athenaeus, Deipn. 12.531a-e.
25 See the original analysis of Markou 2011.
26 On the ideological symbolism of royal symposiums see the comments of Azoulay 2013.
27 Diogenes Laert. 2.129-130.
28 Diogenes Laert. 9.58-59.
29 On this point see the fertile comments of Briant 1996.
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