Diffusion of Political Ideas between Ancient India and Greece: Early Theories of the Origins of Monarchy

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Abstract

This investigation examines the question of whether the similar theories of the origins of monarchy encountered in certain early Greek and Indian literary sources should be taken as evidence of cross-cultural diffusion of political ideas. The paper argues against the alternative explanation, according to which the similarity in form in the Greek and Indian versions of the kingship theory is rooted in similar social processes, by exposing how the earliest extant Greek version of the theory seems to build on a prototype most closely mirrored in one early Indian source.

Keywords

early Greek political thought – early Indian political thought – axial age studies – Indo-Greek studies

1 Introduction: the Axial Age Debate and Cross-Cultural Diffusion

The notion of an ‘axial age’ (Achsenzeit) was first introduced into scholarly debates by Karl Jaspers. Jaspers conceived of this axis of world history as independently instantiated in three separate cultural spheres of the ancient world:
in India, in China and in Greece. Jaspers’ understanding was that the intellectual breakthroughs took place roughly at the same point in time in all three of these spheres, namely around 500 BCE. The result was, as Jaspers thought, a first true awakening of human beings to the human condition (epitomized by epoch-making intellectual figures such as Confucius, Buddha and Socrates).  

Jaspers’ notion of an axial age was broadened in place and in time by Schmuel Eisenstadt. With Eisenstadt, the notion of several breakthroughs of ‘transcendental world views’ was introduced into the axial age debate. Today, there is no general agreement either on how the axial age should be dated, or on which civilizations should be counted as its instances. The profound impact of Jaspers’ theory has lent credibility, however, to the conception of significant intellectual influences moving in one or the other direction between the three cultural spheres he himself counted as partaking in the axial age (Greece, India and China). However, Indo-Greek, Sino-Greek and Sino-Indian cross-cultural parallels may still be taken to reflect plainly underlying affinities in social and political structures – as would any given concurrences with regards to socio-political and intellectual developments between these different axial civilizations.

This investigation situates itself against the backdrop of the scholarly debate surrounding the notion of an axial age. In truth, the present research will strive to transform the frames of reference determined by the nature of the axial age discussion as it has been conducted thus far. In this regard, the presumption will no longer be taken for granted that we are dealing with essentially disconnected cultural spheres – especially in the case of Greece and India. Nevertheless, careful regard will be taken to those parallel thought models that may be accounted for based on contingently shared patterns of social and intellectual development. With regards to ancient China, India and Greece, such patterns include monetisation, non-scribal elite-specific literacy, relative urbanisation, and a certain political pluralism. Specifically with regards to Greece and India, the researcher should also duly pay heed to the shared

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Indo-European heritage. What should be acknowledged as well is the fact that up and until the end of the Greek classical age (i.e., until the conquests of Alexander the Great), most, or all, cultural contacts between Greece and India would have been transmitted through the Persian Empire.

For their part, shared inheritance and similar developmental patterns may (at least to a great extent) explain the emergence of many thought constructs and literary tropes that could otherwise be understood as cross-cultural diffusion. However, even when analogous autonomous processes are considered, the evidence still points towards the possibility of genuine cross-cultural interaction having taken place between ancient India and Greece as early as the 5th century BCE. An example of such possible diffusion treated in previous scholarship is the simile of the ‘soul wagon’, encountered in Plato’s Phaedrus and the Katha Upaniṣad. Another example is the theory of transitions of souls between states of nature evidenced in the Chāndogya Upaniṣad and in Heraclitus respectively.

A particular focus of the present study will be on the parallel political ideas evidenced in ancient Greek and Indian accounts of the origins of monarchy. Accordingly, in the Mēdikos logos – the account of the rise and fall of the Median empire – Herodotus writes of Deiokes, the first king of the Medes. At the outset of the episode, the great lawlessness (anomia pollē) present in the land of the Medes when Deiokes becomes king is underscored (Hdt. 1.96.2). In Book 1, Chapter 13 of the Arthaśāstra, the idea then reoccurs that in a ‘state of anarchy’ – i.e., when the ‘law of the fish’ (mātsya-nyāya) prevails – a king will be elected (Art. 1.13.5). As we shall see, other shared thought contents and literary motifs are to be found in the details of these texts too. Further, we find in another early Indian literary source – the Aggañña Sutta, forming the 27th book of the Dīgha Nikāya – an account of the beginnings of monarchy, which is also recognisably similar to the Herodotean account (Dīgh. Nik. 27.20–21).

In the remainder of this paper, it will be argued that these parallels cannot simply be accounted for with reference to parallel developments, parallel

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circumstances, or coincidence – but that the level of specificity of the similarities invites us to presume an actual cross-cultural contact. To begin with, however, the scholarly debates revolving around the dating of our Greek and Indian sources will be overviewed – in order to begin to determine the sequence of the composition of the texts. Based on the subsequent close readings of the respective early Greek and Indian versions of the accounts of the origins of monarchy, the question of the nature of Greco-Indian cross-cultural diffusion with regards to early kingship theories will then be thoroughly explored.

2 Dating

2.1 Histories
According to Dionysius of Halicarnassus his compatriot Herodotus – the author of the Histories – was born shortly before the Persian invasion of Greece in 480 BCE.10 From this a terminus post quem of about 470 BCE may be inferred for when Herodotus may have begun collecting the material that would later evolve into the Histories. That Herodotus was still composing his work when the Peloponnesian War (431–404 BCE) had already begun has been deduced from Herodotus’ references to ‘the much later war’ (polemos polloi etesi husteros).11 More recently – based on the presumption that Herodotus refers to Thucydides’ History – it has even been set forth that the latest version of the Histories should be downdated to the 410’s BCE.12 This would leave us with the time limits 470–410 BCE for the full content of the Histories.

2.2 Dīgha Nikāya
The Dīgha Nikāya contains some of the earliest canonical expositions of the teachings of the Buddha, and the dating of the collection thus hinges on the date of the death of Buddha (his parinirvāṇa). Previous to the 1980s, scholars had commonly dated Buddha’s death either following the ‘long chronology’ to the mid-6th century BCE, or in accordance with the ‘dotted record’ to the mid-6th century BCE.13

10 Dion. Hal. Thuc. 5. That Herodotus really came from Halicarnassus – and not from Thurii, which is the alternative birthplace claimed, e.g., by Aristotle (Rhet. 1409α27) – is suggested by the fact that the names of many of Herodotus’ alleged relatives appear in fifth-century BCE inscriptions from Halicarnassus: see D. Asheri & al. 2007, A Commentary on Herodotus Books 1–IV (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 2–3.
11 See Hdt. 9.73.3. Herodotus’ last recorded events may be dated to 430 BCE. See Hdt. 7.137. Cf. Thuc. 2.67.
decades of the 5th.\textsuperscript{13} In more recent decades, however, the alternative dating that has gained ground is the ‘short chronology’.\textsuperscript{14} In compliance with the latter, the death of Buddha would have come to pass as late as the 4th century BCE. This dating adheres to the north Indian Sarvāstivādin sources, holding that Buddha died a century before the enthroning of Aśoka Maurya – i.e., about 368 BCE.\textsuperscript{15} To remain on the safe side, we may thus conclude that the \textit{Dīgha Nikāya} may have been composed at any juncture between ca. 550 BCE and 250 BCE – depending on when Buddha's death took place.\textsuperscript{16}

\section*{2.3 \textit{Arthaśāstra}}

For the \textit{Arthaśāstra} (≈science of wealth/statecraft), dates ranging from the middle of the 1st millennium BCE to the middle of the 1st millennium CE have been proposed. Accordingly, it has been suggested that the \textit{Arthaśāstra} must have predated the Mauryan empire (ca. 321–185 BCE) – since the work represents a minor kingdom in competition with other smaller monarchies.\textsuperscript{17} In contrast, a post-Mauryan date could be argued for based on the Mauryan rulers’ ignorance of many of the laws proposed in the \textit{Arthaśāstra}.\textsuperscript{18} A much later dating, towards the time of the Gupta empire (ca. 319–467 CE), has been advanced, however, because the \textit{Arthaśāstra} seems to be structured similarly to \textit{Kāmasūtra} – which in turn has been dated to the 3rd or 4th century CE.\textsuperscript{19} It has also been proposed that the \textit{Arthaśāstra} lacks a single author (Kauṭilya or Viṣṇugupta in the traditional view) altogether. Instead, it has been presumed that the text as we have it is a compilation that evolved gradually over centuries of ancient Indian history.\textsuperscript{20} To be on the safe side, we may thus settle for

\begin{thebibliography}{10}
\bibitem{13}C.S. Prebish, ‘Cooking the Buddhist Books: The Implications of the New Dating of the Buddha for the History of Early Buddhism’, \textit{Journal of Buddhist Ethics} 15 (2008), pp. 1–21, at pp. 4–7. Some traditional chronologies give much earlier dates, however – such as the Eastern Buddhist tradition placing Buddha’s life between 1029 and 949 BCE.
\bibitem{16}The \textit{terminus ante quem} has been decided on the basis of the presumption that a Buddhist literary canon should have taken shape a century after Buddha’s death.
\bibitem{17}M. Bisht, \textit{Kauṭilya’s Arthashastra: Philosophy of Strategy} (London: Routledge, 2023), p. 15.
\bibitem{19}J. Jolly, R. Schmidt, \textit{Arthaśāstra of Kauṭilya} (Lahore: The Punjab Sanskrit Book Depot, 1923), pp. 24–33.
\end{thebibliography}
the wide margins of ca. 500 BCE–500 CE for when the *Arthaśāstra* may have been composed.

2.4 Conclusion

We thus arrive at the rather discouraging conclusion that the *Histories* (470–410 BCE), the *Dīgha Nikāya* (550–250 BCE) and the *Arthaśāstra* (500 BCE–500 CE) may be either roughly contemporary – alternatively that either the one or the other, or both, of the Indian works are somewhat later than the Greek text. Hence, we cannot really determine the direction of influence between our texts based on dating. Instead, a provisional working hypothesis can be posited, which, in what follows, will be tried against readings of the key parts of the texts.

According to this hypothesis, the kingship theory evidenced in the *Dīgha Nikāya* is slightly earlier than the version of the *Histories* – whereas the theory as evidenced in the *Arthaśāstra* was contrived some centuries later. Accordingly, the cross-cultural diffusion would have passed originally from the ancient Indian cultural sphere towards the Greek.

3 Readings

3.1 *Dīgha Nikāya*, 27.20–21

Now those beings, Vāseṭṭha, gathered themselves together, and bewailed these things, saying: From our evil deeds, sirs, becoming manifest, inasmuch as stealing, censure, lying, punishment have become known, what if we were to select a certain being, who should be wrathful when indignation is right, who should censure that which should rightly be censured and should banish him who deserves to be banished? But we will give him in return a proportion of the rice. Then, Vāseṭṭha, those beings went to the being among them who was the handsomest, the best favoured, the most attractive, the most capable and said to him: Come now, good being, be indignant at that whereat one should rightly be indignant, censure that which should rightly be censured, banish him who deserves to be banished. And we will contribute to thee a proportion of our rice. And he consented, and did so, and they gave him a proportion of their rice. Chosen by the whole people, Vāseṭṭha, is what is meant by Mahā Sammata; so Mahā Sammata (the Great Elect) was the first standing phrase to arise [for such an one]. Lord of the Fields is what is meant by
Khattiya; so Khattiya (Noble) was the next expression to arise. He charms the others by the Norm – by what ought (to charm) – is what is meant by Raja; so this was the third standing phrase to arise.21

3.2  

*Histories, 1.96.1–1.98.1*

There appeared among the Medes a man of ability whose name was Deïokes, and this man was the son of Phraortes. This Deïokes, having developed a lust for despotic power, did thus: – whereas the Medes dwelt in separate villages, he, being even before that time a respected man in his own village, set himself to practise just dealing much more and with greater zeal than before; and this he did although there was much lawlessness throughout the whole of Media, and although he knew that injustice is ever an enemy of justice. And the Medes of the same village, seeing his habits, chose him for their judge. So he, since he was wooing power, was upright and just, and doing thus he had no little praise from his fellow-citizens, so that those of the other villages learning that Deïokes was a man who more than all others gave decision rightly, whereas before this they had been wont to suffer from unjust judgments, themselves also when they heard it came gladly to Deïokes to have their causes determined, and at last they trusted no one else. Then, as more and more continually kept coming to him, because men learnt that his decisions proved to accord with the truth, Deïokes perceiving that everything was referred to himself refused to sit in the place where he formerly used to sit in public to determine causes, and said that he would determine causes no more, for it was not profitable for him to neglect his own affairs and to determine causes for his neighbours all day. So then, since robbery and lawlessness prevailed even much more in the villages than they did before, the Medes having assembled together considered with one another and spoke about the state in which they were: and I suppose the friends of Deïokes spoke mostly to this effect: “Seeing that we are not able to dwell in the land under the present order of things, let us set up a king from among ourselves, and thus the land will be well governed and we ourselves shall turn to labour, and shall not be ruined by lawlessness.” By some such words as these they persuade themselves to have a king. And when they at once proposed the question, whom they should set

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21  Tr. T.W. Rhys Davids.
up to be king, Deiokes was repeatedly put forward and commended by everyone, until at last they agreed that he should be their king.22

3.3 Arthaśāstra, 1.13.2–13

Secret agents wrangling with each other should engage in debates at sacred fords, assemblies, congregations, and gatherings of people: “We hear that this king is endowed with all virtues. But we don’t see any virtue in this man who oppresses the inhabitants of the cities and the countryside with fines and taxes.” The other should rebut him, as also the people there who would applaud it: “Oppressed by the law of the fish, people made Manu, the son of Vivasvat, king. They allocated to him as his share one-sixth of the grain and one-tenth of the merchandise, as also money. Subsisting on that, kings provide security to the subjects. Those who do not pay fines and taxes take on the sins of kings, while kings who do not provide security take on the sins of their subjects. Even forest dwellers, therefore, present one-sixth of their gleanings, with the thought: ‘This is the share of him who provides us protection’. The position of Indra and Yama – it is this that is occupied by kings, but with their wrath and grace visibly manifest. Divine punishment itself strikes those who treat them with disrespect. Therefore, kings should not be treated with disrespect.” In this way he should restrain the common people;23

All three above accounts assume that the enthroning of the first king was preceded by escalating social disorder. Thus in the Dīgha Nikāya, Buddha explains how it came to pass that relentless stealing, censure, and lying caused the people to acknowledge their need for a sovereign authority. This ruler was then denominated mahā-sammata (‘the great elect’), khattiya and rāja – all titles for kings. In the Arthaśāstra, in turn, a ‘secret agent’ (sattrin) describes the primordial social disorder with the symbol of ‘the law of the fish’ (mātsya-nīyāya). Finally in the Deiokes episode, the narrator underlines the ‘great lawlessness’ (anomia pollē) abounding in Media when Deiokes first began his work.

The Greek account, however, includes a deviation: Deiokes is not made king immediately. Rather, he deceives the people to establish him in his position. Initially, Deiokes thus works as a local judge (dikastēs), then begins to exercise jurisdiction over other village communities – whereafter he momentarily

22 Tr. G.C. Macaulay.
23 Tr. P. Olivelle.
resigns. The latter action results in renewed lawlessness, which in the end secures his election as king (basileus), too. In the Aggañña Sutta and the Arthaśāstra, in contrast, the kingly order is established without further ado. Might it be, then, that the Greek version evidenced in the Histories actually forms a reaction against the Indian accounts? To decide if this could have been the case, we ought to inspect the content of the Deiokes episode more closely. Particularly, we need to determine whether further motifs pointing towards a mirroring of ancient Indian sources may be detected in the Herodotean narrative.

In all actuality, several details in the Deiokes episode clearly do have their closest correspondences in the Indian literary tradition.24 Firstly, one of the actions taken by Deiokes to consolidate his rule is to place ‘spies’ (katas-kopoi) throughout the realm (Hdt. 1.100.2). This directive is manifested in the Arthaśāstra, too. Here, the need for the king to position spies at key locations all over the land is stressed repeatedly (Art. 1.13.23; 1.21.29; 2.35; passim). Secondly, Deiokes is said to have instituted the rule that ‘no one was to come into the presence of the king’ (esienai para basilea médena), since the ‘king was to be seen by no one’ (horāsthai basilea hupo médenos) (Hdt. 1.99.1). This recalls an ancient Indian conception according to which it was not permitted to view the body of the king.25 Thus in the Manusmṛti, e.g., it is set forth that the king burns ‘eyes and minds’ (ca-kṣūṃsi ca manāṃsi ca), so that no one on earth can gaze at him (na cainaḥ bhūvi śaknoti kaścidapyabhidvitum) (Manu. 7.6).

In fact, an appreciable amount of what Herodotus tells us about Deiokes’ activities as judge and king is directly paralleled in both the Aggañña Sutta

24 The exogenic influences in the Deiokes episode which are the easiest to detect, however, undoubtedly stem from Achaemenid Persia. Accordingly, the summer residency of the Achaemenid rulers, Ecbatana, is converted to the capital in Deiokes’ kingdom: Hdt. 1.98.3–5. Moreover, Achaemenid court etiquette may be pinpointed in Deiokes’ ordinance that no one was to spit or laugh before the king: Hdt. 1.99.1–1. Further, it has been assumed that the sacred number seven represented in the seven walls surrounding Deiokes’ capital refers specifically to Persia: B. Patzek, ‘Die Deiokes-Erzählung im Rahmen der Persergeschichten Herodots: Überlegungen zu den Entstehungsbedingungen griechischer Geschichtsschreibung’, in M. Meier (ed.), Deiokes, König der Meder: Eine Herodot-Episode in ihren Kontexten (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2004), pp. 53–74, at p. 68. On this note, it was revealed by one of the reviewers of this article that the Elamite temple at Chogha Zanbil in southern Iran (which was under Achaemenid rule too) has a series of concentric walls, recalling Herodotus’ description of Deiokes’ palace at Ecbatana.

and the *Arthaśāstra*. Particularly, we encounter in all three of these accounts the following ideas:

i) that the first judge/king was righteous in his practice of justice,

ii) that it was his excellent judgments that justified his election as king, and

iii) that in return for his judicial work, the people granted him privileges.

Together with the mutual premise recognised above – the idea that kingly rule followed from social disorder – this common composition suggests that the early Greek and Indian theories of the origins of monarchy indeed drew on a shared archetype. The archetype in question would be tantamount to a prototypical theory, or historicising narrative, relating to the instigation of kingly order in human societies. By the same token, it may be argued that of our sources, it is the *Dīgha Nikāya* that contains the version of the theory of the origins of monarchy that lies closest to this archetype.

For, in the *Dīgha Nikāya*, the kingship theory forms part of an allegedly historical tale of how the hierarchical Buddhist social model – consisting besides of rulers, also of Brahman, artisans, servants, and ascetic recluses – first took shape. In this account, the inauguration of kingly rule is of paramount importance, since it entails the ending of the social disorder (*Dīgh. Nik. 27.20–26*). The kingship theory of the *Aggañña Sutta* hence presents a legitimising historical allegory, designed to reinforce the Buddhist order. Despite some humorous ingredients, the narrative thus assumes the shape of socially and morally significant myth-historical fact.²⁶ It may be concluded, then, that the theory of the origins of monarchy encountered in the *Dīgha Nikāya* does echo an earlier narrative – which in its original form most likely incorporated a historicising legitimation of kingly rule as part and parcel of the social order, too.

However, as we turn our focus to the kingship theory occurring in our second Indian source, we may observe that this historically allegorising function has been erased, or neutralised. For in the *Arthaśāstra* we are no more presented with purportedly factual myth-history. Instead, the theory of the origins of monarchy is here proposed by a spy, who by communicating it executes his duties to the king. Particularly, the spy’s task is to justify the crown’s collection of fines and taxes. The spy thus recounts his version of the theory – which obviously incorporates a belief in the king’s right to taxation and fining – to oppose the conception of an ideal ruler forgoing such measures. Hence, the kingship theory has here actually been bereaved of its historicity. For what

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was still presented as factual myth-history in the Dīgha Nikāya, has in the Arthaśāstra been openly accepted as just another tool utilised by the ruler to secure his power.27

In case of the Histories, on the other hand, we have already noted that a similar transformation, or devaluation, of an original mythicising account was secured through a splitting of the narrative – into the two distinct stages of judge and king. We may add that this division without a doubt served a purpose, namely, the exposing of the self-made nature of Deiokes’ rule.28 By extension, a reaction against the archetypal account conceiving of the instigation of kingly rule as a necessary guarantor of social order – which we have affirmed is most closely mirrored in the Aggañña Sutta – may certainly also be recognised here.

3.4 Conclusion

The above readings proceeded from the working hypothesis that the Dīgha Nikāya is slightly earlier than the Histories, whilst the Arthaśāstra derives from a later age. It was then argued that all three versions of the theory of the origins of monarchy stem from a common archetype, conceiving of the instigation of kingship as a necessary promoter of social order. Thereafter, it was concluded that, of our three accounts, the Dīgha Nikāya lies closest to the archetype. The Arthaśāstra and the Histories, again, were both seen to have deviated from the archetype in that they entailed a devaluation of the historically legitimising conception still evident in the Dīgha Nikāya.

In the Histories, the devaluation of the original myth-historical account was effected through the splitting of the narrative: first judge, then king. This division caused the recognition of the self-invented nature of Deiokes’ authority. In the Arthaśāstra, too, a demystification of the original theory was carried through by means of the narrative structure. In this, the account of the origins of monarchy was placed in the mouth of a spy, who recounted it seemingly in full awareness of the theory’s mundane origins and purpose.

Hence, a shared developmental pattern – from historicising myth to heightened awareness of the arbitrary nature of the kingly order – may be recognised

27 In the ancient Indian sphere, this progression may perhaps be explained with reference to the ‘secular attitude’ allegedly characterising the Arthaśāstra generally: an allowance for the ruler to exploit all social and/or religious powers in his own interest: I. Mabbett, ‘The Kauṭiyā Arthaśāstra and the Concept of Secularism’, South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies 33 (1) (2010), pp. 13–32, at pp. 25–26.

in our Greek and Indian sources. But may we conclude, too, that the similarities in structure and content in the early Indian vis-à-vis Greek theories of the origins of monarchy are in fact specific enough to posit cross-cultural diffusion?

4 Conclusion: the Question of Indo-Greek Diffusion

Speaking against pre-Hellenistic Indo-Greek diffusion of political ideas is the dissemination throughout the ancient world of the basic premise underlying our sources: the conception that monarchy originated in a state of social disorder. Accordingly on the Greek side, we find in another text stemming from the pre-Hellenistic age, the *Anonymus Iamblichii*, the express idea of social disorder as an antecedent to sole rule. Here, it is stated that tyranny rises from lawlessness (*ginetαι hê tyrannis ouk ex allou tinos è anomias*) (*Anon. Iambl. 7.12* (Diels & Kranz)). And on the Indian side, the idea of kingship as a bulwark against social disorder comes to the fore also in the *Śānti parva* (Book XII of the *Mahābhārata*). Here, it is stated that it is only out of fear of the king that people will withhold from devouring each other (*parajā rājabhayād eva na khādanti parasparam*) (*Mhb. 12.68.8*). What is more, already in the Babylonian myth of creation, the *Enūma Eliš*, kingly rule is conceived of as resulting from disorder caused by a goddess (Tiamat) turning against her divine comrades by creating monsters to destroy them. As a consequence, the other gods must grant sole rule to the strongest among them (Marduk) – since otherwise he would not be willing to protect them (*En. El. 2.123–162*).

However, what distinguishes the Greek and Indian sources we have examined from preceding mythological accounts of the above kind is precisely an absence of a direct connection to a godly sphere. For as we have seen, in our sources the kingly order is established due to preceding disorder expressly among humans. Thus it is in the *Aggaṇña Sutta* that we encounter the earliest theory of the origins of monarchy, accounting for the establishment of kingly rule exclusively as part the mundane order. In the Deīokes episode, this de-deification is then taken a step further. For here, the instigation of kingly rule assumes the shape of a self-authorised act. Finally, we witnessed how the Greek awareness of the arbitrary character of kingly rule is mirrored also in the

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Arthaśāstra – where the theory of the origins of monarchy is presented plainly as a device designed for the king to secure his rule.30

It is safe to say, then, that the early Greek and Indian kingship theories do indeed resemble each other to a considerable degree. At the same time, however, the Greek and Indian accounts undoubtedly also depended on earlier mythical sources. For instance, the basic assumption of kingly rule being established because of social disorder may well have been borrowed from earlier Mesopotamian mythical imaginary. Alternatively, it is of course conceivable, too – especially with consideration of the wide dissemination of this idea in the ancient world – that the conception of a ‘violent state of nature’, to which kingship is the solution, simply represents an anthropological constant.

Be that as it may, the more specific version of this account that we have identified in the early Greek and Indian literary traditions is not paralleled anywhere else: the conception of an eminent but non-divine human elected to be the first judge-king in circumstances of serious social disorder.31 Furthermore, the present investigation has revealed that the earliest extant Greek version of this

30 Of course, we cannot rule out the possibility that the possibly younger Arthaśāstra was in fact influenced by the Histories with regards to the notion of monarchy as an arbitrary arrangement. However, a prevalence of varying governmental forms is attested within the ancient Indian social system even before the age of Mauryan rule. This is corroborated by the report of Megasthenes, who was the Seleucid ambassador to the pre-imperial Mauryan court. According to Megasthenes’ eye-witness account (ca. 300 BCE), some Indian ‘city-states’ were ruled by kings, while others lacked kingly rule (abasileutos ōn). The latter were controlled instead by what Megasthenes (in Diodorus Siculus’ rendering) refers to as magistrates (arkhontes): Diod., 2.41.3. Since a plurality of constitutional forms may thus have been in place in India already before cultural contacts with Greece began in earnest, we are not able to prove that the account of the origins of kingship in the Arthaśāstra has been externally influenced.

31 About 450 BCE – i.e., in the time of Herodotus – a theory of the origins of monarchy somewhat resembling those of our Greek and Indian accounts surfaces in ancient Israel, too. The early Israelite theory is encountered in The First Book of Samuel: 1 Sam. 8. Although the conception of the origins of monarchy in social disorder is absent here, the account in Samuel implicitly includes the idea that kingly rule was preceded by judicial power-holding: 1 Sam. 8.1. It is not inconceivable, either, that the Israelite theory influenced the earliest Greek theories – alternatively that some formulations in the Greek versions guided the composition of the Israelite theory (cf. Hdt. 1.97.3: fere stēsōmen hēmein autōn basilea (’come, let us set up a king over us’) and 1 Sam. 8.5: katastēson ef’ hēmās basilea (’set up a king over us’)). However, due to the structural dissimilarity – i.e., because of the absence in Samuel of the overarching idea of the origins of monarchy in social disorder – it is difficult to argue for intertextuality between these texts. For the dating of the monarchy theory in Samuel to the mid-5th century BCE, see W. Oswald, ‘Die Verfassungsdebatten bei Herodot (3,80–82) und im Samuelbuch des alten Testaments (1Sam8)’, Historia: Zeitschrift für alte Geschichte 62 (2) (2013), pp. 129–145, at p. 133.
account – the one of the Deïokes episode – even reflects a number of more detailed motifs mirroring more or less contemporary Indian literature: the creation of a sophisticated system of intelligence and the conception that it was not permitted to gaze at the king. Accordingly, the hypothesis that the early Greek theory of the beginnings of kingly rule was in fact influenced directly by Indian accounts cannot be outright rejected.32

But how could it be that political ideas moved between these geographically widely separated cultural spheres in the first place? In fact, scholars agree that diffusion channels enabling such communication had been installed already in pre-Hellenistic times.33 Particularly, the function of the Achaemenid Empire as an advocate of cross-cultural contacts has been highlighted. For it is a fact that the Greek city-states of Asia Minor, and northern India, had been brought under Persian rule already in the 6th century BCE, by Cyrus the Great. And we know that Greeks and Indians, along with other Persian-rulled people, did come together regularly – at least at the Achaemenid court in Susa. Indeed, many of these elite travellers to the Persian capital were multilingual, and probably spoke the lingua franca of the Achaemenid empire, Aramaic, too – in which language some of them could have undertaken in-depth discussions with fellow-travellers from far away, for instance on topics such as how the kingly order first came to be established.34 It may well have been an intellectual exchange of this kind, then, which permitted the more or less simultaneous emergence of the very similar theories of the origins of monarchy, which we have detected and brought under scrutiny in the ancient Indian and Greek literary traditions.

32 That the theory of origins of monarchy evidenced in the Deïokes episode gained a firm hold in ancient Greek political thought is shown by its resurgence in Aristotle’s Politics. Here, Aristotle attributes the kind of kingly rule that Deïokes according to Herodotus instigated to ‘the heroic times’ (hoi heroiokoi khronois): Arist., Pol. 1285b.1–10. This notion of ‘heroic kings’ – introduced into Western thought by Herodotus and passed on by Aristotle – was subsequently transmitted through the Middle Ages: B. Tjallén, Aristotle’s Heroic Virtue and Medieval Theories of Monarchy; in S. Fogelberg, A. Hellerstedt (eds.), Shaping Heroic Virtue: Studies in the Art and Politics of Supereminence in Europe and Scandinavia (Leiden: Brill 2015), pp. 55–68.
33 Karttunen, India in Early Greek, p. 59; Seaford, The Origins, p. 10.