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Ancient Courts, with Special Reference to Alexander the Great

Professor Spawforth has been the leading figure in recent attempts to apply the ideas, models and methods of ‘court studies’ to the courts of the ancient world. This paper illustrated how rewarding that approach can be, while, at the same time, fully recognising the problems created by the scarcity of the surviving sources. The case of Alexander the Great is particularly interesting as there are a number of literary sources, yet, as is well-known, those are all highly problematic. They tell us as much about the cultural preconceptions about royal courts, through which their information was being filtered – an important topic in itself – as about Alexander’s actual court. Also, as Spawforth noted, traditions about Alexander fascinated many of those later monarchs whose courts have more usually been studied by court historians in recent decades. One complication is that Alexander’s itinerant court probably meant that its material culture was always rather ephemeral. Ancient writers, as much as more recent historians, were fascinated by his sex life. As he was probably bisexual, he could be seen to represent either Greek masculinity or Asian effeminacy. The latter played on Greek stereotypes about the East and a recurring concern for Greek writers was that Alexander had been corrupted by his contact with Persian court culture. Alexander probably did adopt Persian court dress, including the *diadema*. There is also good reason to think that he began to use Persian-style royal tents. More controversial is whether he dressed as Artemis while hunting. Was he a transvestite? Spawforth thinks that this was actually Persian male hunting attire and that this shows that Alexander was holding royal hunts in the Persian manner. In other words, he was making a conscious effort to appear to his new Persian subjects as the type of ruler with which they were already familiar. Spawforth also suggested that, to the Macedonians, Persia was not quite the antithetical ‘other’ later writers wanted to assume it had been. **AB**