Mitchell, Lynette. The Heroic Rulers of Archaic and Classical Greece. London; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013. xi, 207 p. $29.95 (pb). ISBN 9781472510679.

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<u n=http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=rS5MAQAAQBAJ>Google Preview</u>

In this slim volume, Mitchell draws upon an impressive range of evidence in a series of focussed arguments intended to significantly revise our understanding of kingship in the Greek world – predominantly in the archaic and classical periods. The most fundamental of these arguments is that the categorical distinctions between basileus and tyrannos made by ancient writers, and to varying degrees taken up by modern scholars, are the product of a literary and philosophical discourse, rather than of practical reality; the individuals we label as 'kings' and 'tyrants' can be seen to identify themselves within ideologies which shared common values 'that remained central for the legitimization of rule over a period of about 600 years (or more)' (p. 2). Within this ideology, a ruler was marked out by the possession of a degree of aretē superior to those around him, demonstrated through claims to distinguished or divine ancestry, success in war and in athletic contests, and other exceptional activities.

After setting out her overall argument, Mitchell presents in her introduction (1–22) the various technical discussions which we might expect. She justifies her chronological focus upon the archaic and classical periods, following Drews in rejecting any attempt to salvage history from the mythical kings of the 'preliterate' era.[[1]] Consequently, Mitchell largely restricts herself to archaeological evidence for the earliest reaches of her investigation. Mitchell then provides a survey of the literary sources available to us, and their respective pitfalls: Homer, lyric poets, tragedians, historians, philosophers. Considering the literary development of the distinction between basileus and tyrannos, Mitchell acknowledges that this discourse was politically influential, arguing that rulers increasingly had to cast themselves in the model of the ideal basileus, and in opposition to the negative stereotype of the tyrant. Overall, however, she emphasizes the complexities and sometime-contradictions apparent even in fourth-century sources, and suggests that where some scholars have identified tyrants 'faking it' as basileis, we should in fact see rulers drawing upon a common 'ideology of ruling'.

Chapter 1, 'Basileia and tyrannis: Exploding Myths' (23–56), begins with a consideration of the various models with which scholars have sought to categorise Greek kingship. Mitchell rightly notes that Greek kingship is often judged against an abstract concept of 'proper' kingship which derives from a false

assumption of uniformity in medieval comparanda. She also discusses anthropological approaches, and the various fashions in which the term basileus has been translated by scholars: king, prince, chief, big man, etc. In all of this, Mitchell provides insightful surveys, highlighting the lack of scholarly consensus, without aligning herself with any single model or approach.

Having discussed modern approaches, Mitchell moves on to the ancient testimony for a conceptual and chronological distinction between basileus and tyrannos, focussing upon Thucydides' explicit identification of an age of hereditary basileis, which gave way to economically empowered tyrannoi (1.13). Scrutinising this distinction, Mitchell does not deny the potency of claims to heredity. However, on the basis of recent scholarship on oral tradition and the limits of social memory, she argues that such a claim need extend back perhaps only three generations to be considered well-established. A claim of hereditary right, or distinguished ancestry, could really be quite recent. Mitchell also highlights the facts that 'tyrants' could produce long-lived dynasties (e.g. the Orthagorids of Sicyon), and that claims to distinguished and even divine ancestry were not limited to generations-old kingships, as is demonstrated by Peisistratus' claims of descent from Neleus.

Just as distinguished ancestry was not limited to basileis, wealth was not limited to tyrannoi. Wealth was of course fundamental for a successful ruler. However, Mitchell emphasizes the evidence for a common expectation that rulers should use their wealth to the benefit of the community. Mitchell provides various examples, but perhaps conjectures too far in attributing the general lack of obvious palaces for either kings or tyrants, and the commensurate rise in erection of public buildings (esp. temples), to a strong social opprobrium towards private ostentation. Ultimately, given the difficulty of conclusively defining Greek kingship, and the flaws in ancient treatments of basileia and tyrannis as dichotomies, Mitchell suggests that an approach focussed upon 'rulership', encompassing both basileia and tyrannis, will prove more profitable.

In the aforementioned discussion of wealth, Mitchell stresses that it was not regarded as a good in itself, but as a means to display one's aretē, and she develops this theme in chapter 2, 'Aretē and the Right to Rule' (57–90). Mitchell begins by arguing that a ruler's position rests upon either coercion or legitimisation. She focusses upon the latter (though I think that there would have been scope for greater discussion of coercion within Mitchell's approach), and defines legitimisation as the demonstration that one possessed unmatched aretē. The process of demonstrating such aretē aimed at a status which was fundamentally heroic, and Mitchell stresses that heroic status – and,

progressively, even divine status – were achievable goals for a Greek ruler in the archaic and classical periods. Such a superabundance of aretē could be demonstrated in various ways. Mitchell acknowledges again the significance of claims to heredity and distinguished ancestry, but stresses that actions could reveal an otherwise 'hidden' basilikos nature. Victory in war and in panhellenic games are both cited as major means to demonstrate one's aretē. Mitchell gives particular attention to city foundation (or re-foundation) as perhaps the best means by which an individual could seek to gain heroic status.

In chapter 3, 'Ruling Families' (91–118), Mitchell identifies a pattern of 'family-based rule', arguing that 'although there may have been one person who dominated the family, the tendency seems to have been that in ruling families power belonged to the family as a whole, just as the responsibility for ruling was also shared in the family' (p. 91). Mitchell provides numerous examples for the involvement of wider family in ruling, including the granting of gifts, the exercise of political or military commands, deployment in politically-motivated marriages, including endogamous unions, etc. Overall, she highlights the extent to which competition to demonstrate one's superior aretē occurred even within ruling families, complicating the matter of succession, particularly within polygamous contexts. Mitchell amply demonstrates the involvement in ruling of the wider family. However, this could be demonstrated for almost every historical kingship. Consequently, I would suggest that Mitchell's model of family-based rule is more successful as a widely applicable analytical approach, which encourages us not to fixate exclusively upon 'the head that bears the crown', than as identifying a notable or exceptional characteristic of Greek rulership per se.

In chapter 4, 'Rulers in the polis' (119–152), Mitchell acknowledges a tension apparent between one-man rule and the egalitarian ethos of the Greek polis, and considers how this was negotiated. In relation to laws and civic order, she notes the process whereby an early conception of 'ruler as law' gave way to codified 'laws' and an abstract conception of 'the law', both of which set expectations for behaviour upon rulers. Within this context, Mitchell notes the commonly-made distinction between 'constitutional' kings and 'unconstitutional/extra-constitutional' tyrants. Mitchell acknowledges the 'preoccupation' of ancient writers with the negative concept of the unrestrained ruler, and the significance that this representation has had for scholars. However, she stresses the extent to which even seemingly 'absolute' Greek rulers in fact had to accommodate other political and social institutions. She proceeds to give detailed analyses of two particularly notable instances of constitutional rule: Molossian and Spartan kingship. Using these two examples, Mitchell underlines her theme of 'accommodation', arguing that dynamic but volatile monarchic rule had to show restraint and give space to other institutions if it was to prove stable.

In an epilogue–cum–conclusion, 'Athens, Ruling and aretē' (153–166), Mitchell highlights the extent to which our understanding of one-man rule originates in Athens, a society which held an especial fear of autocracy and tyranny. In light of this, Mitchell notes the irony that Athens also provides most of the extant positive theorisations of one-man rule. These are provided in particular by authors such as Plato, Isocrates, Xenophon and Aristotle, coming out of an anti-democratic tradition which argued for proportionate equality, greater or lesser in accordance with one's aretē.

Some minor typographical errors are apparent. More notably, several items which Mitchell cites are missing from her bibliography — a pity, since her combination of detailed reading on a wide variety of topics should make her work very useful to students and other relative newcomers to this subject.[[2]] Mitchell's analysis and argumentation are succinct. She deploys a wide range of evidence and recent scholarship as building-blocks for an intelligent and highly original argument. This wealth of material could easily have bloated Mitchell's work, and the writing of this book has clearly required considerable discipline on her part. Mitchell deliberately constrains the depth of her discussions of many of the scholarly debates with which she engages, at some points covering notable issues with only a brief statement and relevant bibliography. However, it is not her aim to provide an encyclopaedic study of Greek kingship. By the same token, one could object that some of the evidence upon which Mitchell draws in her efforts to provide the fullest possible picture, and indeed some of the individual conclusions which she herself draws, could potentially be challenged. However, the question for the reader is whether doubts regarding one or more of these individual points undermine Mitchell's wider argument. For my own part, I am happy that they do not.

Ultimately, Mitchell's revisions of common scholarly conceptions of the nature of 'kingship' in the archaic and classical periods are intended to challenge, or – one might argue – circumvent, a more fundamental and entrenched modern orthodoxy on this subject. By collapsing the distinction between 'legitimate' kingship and 'illegitimate' tyranny, and so expanding the boundaries of the political form under consideration, Mitchell seeks to move beyond the orthodoxy that monarchy dwindled within Greek history and thought in the classical period. Instead, she is able to argue 'that "kingship" remained an important and legitimate political option in the world of the archaic and classical polis' (p. 1). Whether Mitchell's readers are convinced on this point will be the most telling test of her work.

[[1]] Drews, R. 1983, Basileus: The Evidence for Kingship in Geometric Greece, New Haven, CT.

[[2]] E.g. Corcella 2007 (p. 146 n. 28); Elias 1983, Kettering 1993 (p. 147 n. 49).