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The Ancient Throne

The Mediterranean, Near East, and Beyond, from the 3rd Millennium BCE to the 14th Century CE

Proceedings of the Workshop held at the 10th ICAANE in Vienna, April 2016

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Liat Naeh
Dana Brostowsky Gilboa (Eds.)

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Liat Naeh – Dana Brostowsky Gilboa (Eds.)
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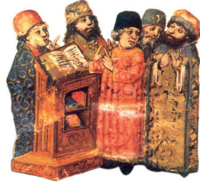

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Reconstructed ivory throne, Salamis (after M. H. Feldman, Communities of Style. Portable Luxury Arts, Identity, and Collective Memory in the Iron Age Levant [Chicago 2014], pl. 16, drawing: U. Naeh; cf. Johnson, this volume, fig. 2).

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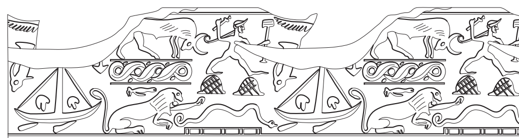

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In the Presence of the Ancient Throne: An Introduction

Liat Naeh[1]

The Ancient Throne: The Mediterranean, Near East, and Beyond, from the 3rd Millennium BCE to the 14th Century CE provides readers with a collection of articles that either study specific thrones known from historical texts, artistic depictions or excavations, or offer an overview of the role of thrones from as early as ancient Mesopotamia in the 3rd millennium BCE to as late as Iran and China in the 14th century CE. The volume thus collates the work of scholars who specialise in diverse cultures and who have all found thrones to be helpful vehicles for promoting unique inquiries into such issues as royalty, society, ritual, and religion within their areas of expertise. The breadth of their collective efforts offers a comparative view through which the dissemination of political and ideological concepts may be better explored. The following collection of articles, however, does not attempt to provide a single answer to the question of what a throne is or is not, but instead presents the authors' individual – and sometimes conflicting – outlooks.[2] While the volume is far from being a comprehensive survey of thrones in Eurasian cultures across the ages, it nevertheless offers readers a specialised bibliography and draws attention to scholarly trends that will be useful to future studies on thrones in general.[3] Most of all, the volume cohesively suggests that thrones have been a meaningful category of material culture throughout history, one that may inspire both inter-cultural and intra-cultural studies of the ways in which types of chairs can embody, execute or induce notions of kingship and a range of concepts pertaining to the religious, ideological, and social spheres.

The papers in this volume are arranged in what is roughly a chronological order. The volume opens with Claudia E. Suter's paper on throne designs in Mesopotamia during the 3rd millennium BCE. Through a careful analysis of texts and visual evidence – mainly stone reliefs and glyptic art – Suter traces the early crystallisation of Mesopotamian throne design and its possible meanings. Her portrayal of the Mesopotamian throne as a god-given symbol of kingship is followed by a discussion on how thrones may have reflected the tension between king and god, showcased specific divine attributes or been associated with specific dynasties – all of which lead her to observe the fluidity and easily-shifting quality of Mesopotamian throne design.

The volume then moves on to a group of papers dealing with thrones in the Aegean world, where multiple examples of such seem to be evident. In their article dealing with thrones in Bronze Age Crete, Caroline J. Tully and Sam Crooks point to a unique affinity between thrones, the natural mountainous landscape, and the use of mountain iconography in Minoan art. Such an affinity, they show, may clarify some questions regarding the existence of Minoan rulership or distinct social classes. According to their analysis, enthroned female figures in the Aegean

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[1] University of Toronto, Canada, liat.naeh@utoronto.ca. I would like to thank Prof. Elizabeth Simpson, Dr. Demi Andrianou, and Dr. David Kertai for commenting on this introduction.

[2] Consider, for instance, that Young [this volume] thinks of thrones in ancient Greece as necessarily having a backrest, while other authors potentially regard backless types of chairs or stools as thrones as well; and that Petrakis [this volume] argues that early Greek *thórnos/thrónos* did not mark out the exceptional seats we currently understand as 'thrones', but was used for other elaborate chairs as well. On a similar note, readers should be advised that authors followed their respective fields' spelling convention, which has resulted in some variations of names of peoples, cultures, and places. For a list of such variations, please consult the volume's index.

[3] For instance, the volume does not discuss Egyptian and Etruscan thrones, among other subjects. For some major publications on thrones in these areas, see Steingräber 1979 and Killen 2017, respectively. In addition to the bibliographies of the specific articles in this volume, readers may also wish to refer to some prominent works on ancient furniture, including – but not limited to – FitzGerald 1965; Baker 1966; Richter 1966; Kyrieleis 1969; Andrianou 1996; Herrmann 1996; Andrianou forthcoming.

Bronze Age – both mortal and divine – were visually connected with mountains in multifaceted ways, drawing their social or religious authority from such an association.

Vassilis Petrakis provides an in-depth review of the Greek term *thórnos* or *thrónos*, especially as seen in Mycenaean palatial documents written in Linear B script. Petrakis concludes that the term *thórnos* was used in palatial inventories to indicate elaborate chairs but not 'thrones' in our sense of the word, and certainly not chairs used exclusively by the ruler. Petrakis further supports this point through his analysis of Homer's epics, which leads him to pinpoint a moment in time when the term 'throne' had a broader meaning.

Christina R. Johnson writes about one of the most prominent examples of an Iron Age throne, represented by the ivory fittings excavated in Salamis, Cyprus, and which have become a focal point of research on Levantine and Aegean ivory art. Considering the possibility that the object may be of foreign origin, Johnson explores the meaning of the throne's ritual placement in the Salamis tomb. In doing so, she connects the throne's original appearance, as a radiant ivory and gold object, both to its use and to its economic and diplomatic value. She concludes that the Salamis throne is best understood as a well-designed, multifaceted marker of the tomb owner's political power.

Yael Young offers a review of thrones that appear in Archaic Greek iconography, particularly in Attic black-figure vases depicting Greek gods. Reserving the term 'thrones' for ostentatious chairs with backs rather than other kinds of seats found on Attic vases (such as folding stools), Young detects a nuanced approach in the employment of seats as signifiers of power and hierarchy among the gods. While the use of one throne – or two thrones in the case of a royal couple – seems to mark the higher rank of its owner, thrones on Attic vases, Young finds, are repeatedly juxtaposed with various types of seats, thus raising new questions as to the meaning and status-ordering of seated figures in specific contexts.

Transitioning to the Levant, Aaron Koller points to a difference between the significance of thrones and crowns in Semitic cultures. Comparing various texts and images from the 2nd and 1st millennia BCE, Koller finds that, though West Semitic texts emphasise the throne and staff as emblems of monarchy, they consistently avoid mentioning crowns. The fact that various types of headgear do appear on images of rulers found in the Levant prompts Koller to reflect on the tensions between texts pertaining to and images of royalty and consequently to broaden the discussion to include later periods and neighbouring cultures. Finally, he concludes that over the millennia, Levantine tradition came to highlight enthronement rather than coronation as a symbol of the establishment of kingship.

Elizabeth Simpson revisits the controversial theory that a sculpted ivory figure, excavated in Delphi, Greece, may have once belonged to the throne of the legendary King Midas. By considering extant *comparanda* and focusing on the style and technique of wooden furniture that was excavated in Phrygian Gordion, Simpson argues that the posited association of the Delphi ivory with the throne of King Midas should be rejected. In so doing, Simpson offers new insights on how we may approach the complex problem of matching archaeological evidence with written traditions surrounding the thrones of historical or mythological figures.

Niccolò Manassero presents a detailed study of the technical and typological features of a large group of ivories found in the so-called Square House in Old Nisa, Turkmenistan. Evoking detailed *comparanda*, Manassero interprets the ivories as consisting of both drinking vessels and furniture pieces – all made of ivory – that may have been used in sumptuous banqueting rituals, perhaps relating to the dead. Tracing a nuanced typology of the ivory thrones found in Old Nisa, Manassero reflects on how the design of thrones may be indicative of distinct cultural identities and ideologies, even in an age of global influences.

Sheila Blair traces the rise and decline of women in Mongol depictions of enthronement in the 13th and 14th centuries CE in order to assess both their fluctuating social status and changes in their cultural affiliations. Although early Mongol representations of this kind portray women to the left of their enthroned male spouses, and images of the Yüan Period in China and the early Ilkhanate show the royal couple sharing a throne and other symbols of royalty, women, Blair argues, came

to be marginalised and consequently altogether excluded from enthronement scenes once the Mongols became integrated into Persian society.

Concluding the volume, Allegra Iafrate reflects on the throne of yet another legendary king – King Solomon. Iafrate reviews the ways in which the Biblical description of King Solomon's throne evolved into a wonderous, animated object in later Jewish, Christian, and Arab tradition. She sees these later accounts as closely mirroring the technological development of medieval mechanical *automata*. Through careful examination of textual and material evidence, Iafrate considers how the stories surrounding the throne of a legendary king led to its being perceived as an ideal embodiment of kingship by the Abrahamic religions.

More than a collection of case studies, the volume is a curated juxtaposition of articles that illuminate each other in unexpected ways through shared themes. These themes, which resurface in nuanced ways throughout the volume, include: the portrayal of thrones as objects that display similarities to, and convey the tension between, the earthly and the divine, the god and king; thrones as animated or vivified objects; the zoomorphic qualities of thrones – specifically the close visual affinity between thrones and lions, apparent above all in the prevalent use of lion legs – but likewise notable in the recurring depiction of birds or wings; the materiality of thrones, particularly the symbolic use of ivory and wood; thrones as metonyms for the practice of banqueting; and finally, thrones as reflections of landscape or architecture. From yet another perspective, the volume may be read as an attestation of how thrones came to be associated with the heritage of legendary figures, such as King Solomon and King Midas, and how, in turn, the stories of their thrones became carriers of meaning in their own right, circulating and diffusing traditions across millennia. Thus, the volume's articles also serve as further invitations to explore new questions about cultural continuity and contacts as seen in the development of thrones.

A Chair by Any Other Name

Today, we practically take chairs for granted in our daily lives; they are merely functional pieces of furniture, aimed at seating a person. At face value, chairs are not necessarily luxury items or status symbols, although they can readily be made to assume these qualities as well. To modern, Western society, chairs almost seem neutral, lending themselves to any possible design and interpretation, and are viewed as adjustable and appropriable to any kind of human occasion or attitude.[4] Nevertheless, we are aware of (and sometimes vigilant about) the chair's role as a marker of social hierarchy.[5] In Western culture, chairs indicate rank and order, or provisionally equalise individuals who may otherwise seem different from each other.[6] For instance, we would be careful not to seat a person of a higher rank on a chair that is plainer or lower than the one occupied by a person of lesser rank. Such inherent sensitivity to the use of chairs as markers of status is also preserved in English, our *lingua franca*, in the word 'chair'. Derived from Greek, and better known from the Latin 'cathedra', the word is nowadays also used to describe a leader of a department, an event, or a committee.[7] By the same token, a 'chairperson' is the one who heads a meeting; the term illustrates our belief that the most influential person in the group is imagined as sitting in a chair to express his or her leadership, power, and authority to make decisions.

4 See Massey 2011, 7.
5 See, for instance, Rybczynski 2016, 13, 201–202.
6 See De Dampierre 2006, 8; Massey 2011, 7–8.
7 "Chair", Merriam Webster dictionary, online <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/chair> (last accessed 26 Apr. 2016). See also Giblin 1993, 29; Cranz 1998, 30–31; Massey 2011, 15–16; Rybczynski 2016, 201–202.

We may assume that humans always sit on chairs – or have always sat on chairs. Yet even today, as anthropologists point out, chair-sitting is not a universal human practice, and ways of sitting are, in fact, highly culturally determined.[8] Western studies on chairs and sitting positions often focus on visual evidence from Ancient Egypt and classical Greece as potential sources of the modern, Western practice of sitting on chairs,[9] but this tendency may be better understood as a reflection of the Western preference for being associated with these ancient cultures than as proof of any traceable, direct influence. Yet – as hinted by the aforementioned discussion of the use of 'chair' as idiom – there seems to be a shared human receptiveness to the idea that chair-sitting can potentially express power.[10]

Indeed, it is precisely this attunement to chairs as signifiers of social order that allows us to relate to the concept of a *throne*. Originating from the Greek *thronos*, the English word 'throne' is understood as a specific category of chair that serves as a social indicator of the highest order, one used to mark the top of a hierarchy and associated primarily with royalty, but also with other members of elite social strata, such as high dignitaries within various contexts and certainly gods. We think of thrones as idioms for sovereignty – rivals fight for and usurp the throne[11] – but also as symbols of specific monarchies. These notions of dominion are manifested and imbedded in the design of thrones; though the individual characteristics of any throne are culturally determined, they all seem to be distinguished from other seats by their relatively excessive size, higher elevation, rich materials, lavish decorations, or any combination of these criteria that radiates prestige and luxury and contributes to a sense of dominion and abundance (though not necessarily comfort). If the function of the chair is to seat a person, then the function of a throne must be to elevate the seated among her or his peers, and in so doing, to signal to the audience that the enthroned is a prominent person.[12] While the use of thrones to divide space and create a visual hierarchy between the enthroned and the so-called 'other' is not necessarily universal, it is certainly a meta-phenomenon, one that a myriad of human societies understand, relate to, and – perhaps most importantly – respond to. Thus, we may understand what a throne is trying to communicate to us even if we do not fully grasp the exact meaning of any other visual messages depicted on it. While it may be true that there is no clear-cut, material definition that unconditionally separates a throne from a chair, and no right answer to what a throne could – or could not – be, this volume demonstrates that there are, in fact, certain conceptual and contextual criteria that consistently differentiate a chair from a throne. Regardless of how different thrones may be built and appear in each given culture or period, and regardless of who used them and how, they do seem to share certain qualities that set them apart from mere chairs. The first is the quality of being an object of ritual, and the second is the fact that they perform in a spectacle, altering their viewers' state of mind (rather than merely their owners' state of mind, as some chairs may do). Indeed, the volume's articles reiterate that context, above all else, is what transforms a chair into a throne. Such transcendence may be signalled by an

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8 For classic anthropological studies on cultural variations in sitting positions see Mauss 1973 [1935] and Hewes 1957. Mauss comments that "you can distinguish squatting mankind and sitting mankind... people with chairs and people without chairs" (Mauss 1973 [1935], 81), while Hewes notes that a quarter of the world's population rests and works in a squatting rather than a sitting position (Hewes 1957, 123). Additional developments on the subject include Giblin 1993, 1–4; Cranz 1998, 25–30; Massey 2011, 7; Rybczynski 2016, 5, 39–40, 50. On the migration of sitting positions – and chairs – through cross-cultural contacts see for example: FitzGerald 1965; Tenner 1997; Çevik 2010; Rybczynski 2016, 5, 48, 52.

9 See Hewes 1957; De Dampierre 2006, 19; Massey 2011, 16–19; Rybczynski 2016, 5.

10 Rybczynski 2016, 13.

11 "Throne", Merriam Webster Dictionary, online <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/throne> (last accessed 26 Apr. 2016); "ascend to the throne", Merriam Webster Dictionary, online <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ascend (to) the throne> (last accessed 26 Apr. 2016). See also Richter 1966, 13–15; Cranz 1998, 31; Rybczynski 2016, 202.

12 See Giblin 1993, 5–8, 33; Cranz 1998, 34–35; De Dampierre 2006, 18–19, 23–24, 48; Massey 2011, 19–22; Rybczynski 2016, 13.

amalgamation of alternating visual cues and cultural usage, often with excessive, conspicuous labour. In this regard, there is an inherent tension between the function of the throne – to serve as a seat – and the ways in which it functions as an object of ritual, signalling that it serves functions that go beyond the earthly. Most of all, it is the physical position of the enthroned that marks her or his imposing social standing and that is an essential aspect of the throne's role in the performance of ritual, because factors such height and design affect the sitter, his or her posture, manner of occupying space, and command their field of vision. Much like ceremonial clothes – worn on the body of an officiant and intimately belonging to him or her, while also contributing to the public spectacle – a throne is simultaneously discoursing with the personal and the public spheres as it formulates the body of its user, inspiring them to assume a ritualistic persona that embodies notions of rulership. The physical qualities of the seat are thus operating on the sitter and on their audience in corresponding ways; the audience observes the transformed body of the enthroned and responds to it, experiencing sensations ranging from fear, awe and deference to respect or admiration, all of which promote subjugation. We are in some ways programmed to interpret social situations through the arrangement of objects in space and their effects on our physical position and field of vision; furniture – particularly chairs – seems to feed into that tendency.[13]

Framing the Throne as an Object of Study

Such reflections on what thrones are – or may be – begin to illuminate the potential of thrones as objects of scholarly focus and therefore indicate the issues in which the present volume engages. If a throne is an object that indexes the identity, values, legacy, and vision of its owners, it must represent the most idiosyncratic features of its place and time. Yet, simultaneously, it is also designed to induce reverence in such a way that it easily communicates its message not only to insiders but also to foreigners such as captives, travellers or diplomats. Consequently, in this volume, the throne is shown to be an object grounded in its location and, at the same time, a portable carrier of cultural conventions. Something of the throne's well-planned set of material qualities – deliberately designed to address an audience, to arrest its attention, to induce a reaction – does cross the borders of time and place, as demonstrated repeatedly in the volume's case studies. A synthesised reading of the volume's articles therefore suggests that the presence of a throne – or even its conspicuous absence – may be perceived by scholars as conveying social order or practice, ideology, and religion, in contexts ranging from courts and elite locations to temples, and can serve as anything from a metaphor that allows for the reconstruction of past world views, a metonym for now lost environments, to a relic of a historical or legendary figure. Building on the seat's anthropomorphic qualities and the ways in which it evokes a sense of personhood, we may be reminded of Napoleon Bonaparte's famous remark:

"What is the throne? This wooden frame covered with velvet? No, I am the throne"[14].

These reflections on what thrones are, and what role they may play in scholarly debate, are the *raison d'être* of the present volume.

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[13] Like architecture in general, furniture too has an impact on human psychology, especially through its effect on height, posture, visibility, or field of vision. For discussions on how the orientation and position of chairs may alter human response to social situations – decreasing the sense of safety or increasing territoriality – see Joiner 1971, and references therein; Mehrabian – Diamond 1971; Massey 2011, 8–9.

[14] Tarbell 1896, 128–129.

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The Ancient Throne provides readers with a collection of articles that either study specific thrones known from historical texts, artistic depictions or excavations, or offer an overview of the role of thrones from as early as ancient Mesopotamia in the 3rd millennium BCE to as late as Iran and China in the 14th century CE. The volume thus collates the work of scholars who specialise in diverse cultures and who have all found thrones to be helpful vehicles for promoting unique inquiries into such issues as royalty, society, ritual, and religion within their areas of expertise. The breadth of their collective efforts offers a comparative view through which the dissemination of political and ideological concepts may be better explored. The following collection of articles, however, does not attempt to provide a single answer to the question of what a throne is or is not, but instead presents the authors' individual – and sometimes conflicting – outlooks. While the volume is far from being a comprehensive survey of thrones in Eurasian cultures across the ages, it nevertheless offers readers a specialised bibliography and draws attention to scholarly trends that will be useful to future studies on thrones in general. Most of all, the volume cohesively suggests that thrones have been a meaningful category of material culture throughout history, one that may inspire both inter-cultural and intra-cultural studies of the ways in which types of chairs can embody, execute or induce notions of kingship and a range of concepts pertaining to the religious, ideological, and social spheres.