

## Introduction

Dio Chrysostom, the famous Greek orator of the early Roman Principate, explains in his speech 49 the important role of priests in their capacity as “philosophers” for successful politics:<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, since they (i.e. the Greeks) cannot always be ruled by kings who are philosophers, the most powerful nations have publicly appointed philosophers as superintendents and officers for their kings. Thus the Persians, methinks, appointed those whom they call Magi, because they were acquainted with Nature and understood how the gods should be worshipped; the Egyptians appointed the priests who had the same knowledge as the Magi, devoting themselves to the service of the gods and knowing the how and the wherefore of everything; the Indians appointed Brachmans, because they excel in self-control and righteousness and in their devotion to the divine, as result of which they know the future better than all other men know their immediate present; the Celts appointed those whom they call Druids; these also being devoted to the prophetic art and to wisdom in general. I all these cases the kings were not permitted to do or plan anything without the assistance of these wise men, so that in truth it was they who ruled, while the kings became their servants and the ministers of their will.

According to Dio, priests not only advise kings and “powerful peoples” as “wise men” and philosophers through intellectual and religious knowledge, but also influence them through concrete political impact. This specific element, the political power, influence, and practice of the “priestly personnel” in detail, is the core issue addressed in this volume. Of course, religion and politics, faith and power, rituals and the state are intensively researched topics. The close intertwining of religion and “state” in pre-modern societies, such as ancient Rome, Greece, Egypt and Mesopotamia, is also well known. Already Cicero postulated the political influences of the priests as a general transcultural phenomenon (de divinatione 1.43.95):

But who fails to observe that auspices and all other kinds of divination flourish best in the best regulated states? And what king or people has there ever been who did not employ divination?

How the political influence of the priestly personnel (“the priests”) works in detail, however, remains vague. Only the fact of their importance becomes clear when Cicero explains:<sup>2</sup>

And as this is the case, o priests/pontifices, recall now your attention from this subtle argument of ours to the general state and interests of the republic, which you have before now had many gallant men to assist you in supporting, but which in this case you are upholding on your own shoulders alone. To you the whole future authority of the senate, which you yourselves always led in most admirable manner during the discussion of my case; to you that most glorious agita-

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1 Dio Chrysost. 49, 7–8 (Declining office as archon); translation Crosby 2001, 301.

2 Cic. De domo sua 142–143.

tion of Italy, and that thronging hither of all the municipal towns; to you the Campus Martius, and the unanimous voice of all the centuries, of which you were the chiefs and leaders; to you every company in the city, every rank of men, all men who have any property or any hopes, think that all their zeal for my dignity, all their decisions in my favor are not only entrusted, but put wholly under your protection.

Cicero makes the central importance of the priests in public and political life very clear: religion and cult had to be consistent with official, political (and also military) action. Against this background, the responsible priests possessed important influence on political institutions. However, Cicero does not explain in detail the modes of operation of a “priest-led” political decision-making process. For classical Greece, Kai Trampedach examined in particular the modes and characteristics of political communication through the oracles and the *mantes* as “priestly specialists” in classical Greece.<sup>3</sup> Although he characterizes the sophisticated political knowledge and foresight of the “priestly personnel,” he emphasizes the phenomenon of influence without clear political commitment. However, the example of Alexander III shows the important role of the *mantes* who accompanied the Macedonian king on his campaign against the Achaemenid Empire. In close association with the king, as part of his court society, the *mantes* were involved in politically and militarily decisive situations and could influence decision-making. Although historiographical sources such as Diodorus, Arrian, Plutarch or Curtius Rufus report these events, however, the concrete act of political interaction between the king and the priestly personnel remains unclear in detail.<sup>4</sup>

On the other hand, prophecies and mantic practices are central elements in the cultures of the ancient Near East. Huge ‘archives’ of mantic literature are known, for example, from Mesopotamia, Egypt, Syria and the Levant or eastern Asia Minor.<sup>5</sup> Many examples illustrate the close relationship to political themes.<sup>6</sup>

In general, these pre-modern societies, like the Roman Republic or the Hellenistic monarchies, show how the influence of the local priesthood – for example, in Egypt for the Ptolemies or in Babylonia for the Seleucids – was a core element for political success and the establishment of new rulers. In other words, religious personnel often had a fundamentally political function beyond religious aspects and ritual acts. The Kiel conference therefore discussed the question in which way the ritual personnel or “priests” used their possibilities – in the mixture of religious, administrative and political competences – to pursue active politics. Specifically, the following contributions address the question of how exactly to define the role and actions of ritual personnel as politicians.

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<sup>3</sup> Trampedach 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Trampedach 2020, 45–51.

<sup>5</sup> See an overview in Schmitt 2014, 17–27.

<sup>6</sup> For the Old Testament: Schmitt 2014, 77–80; Zwickel 2016, 198–199, 202–204; for Mesopotamia see for example Pongratz-Leisten 1999; Kleber 2008.

For a long time, scholars have been studying the close connection between religion and politics, such as the Cluster of Excellence “Religion and Politics” at the WWU Münster since 2007.<sup>7</sup> These studies focus on the relationship between religion and politics,<sup>8</sup> the particular political conditions of religions,<sup>9</sup> the power of religion itself,<sup>10</sup> or the religious competencies or aspects of certain political institutions. All the more, the contributions to this conference volume do not intend to examine religious or ritual matters, the character of religions, or theological concepts with their development and implications. Rather, the contributions to the volume focus on the following questions: For what reasons was religion used for political purposes? What goals were to be achieved? A focus should also be on the political role of religious personnel. What media (texts, inscriptions, images, rituals, etc.) were used? What can be said about the misuse of religion for political purposes? Has there been a shift or change in methods and what might be the reason? Can we observe cross-cultural links or even the form and nature of the transfer of political and religious knowledge between different cultures?

The close connection between religion and politics in antiquity is evident, in which personal entanglements and cooperations have already been intensively studied.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, the question remains in what concrete way ‘priestly’ activities and influences on political processes take place? Even if the factual interconnection between the areas of priestly interest or competence on the one hand and political decision-makers on the other is obvious, it seems complicated to trace the individuals in the details of their activities. Rather, the ritual or priestly personnel in their political actions do not seem to be of interest in most cases. Who are these individuals? Often, their priestly, social and political position remains unclear, as does the specific nature of their influence. In this context, we must ask how these powerful individuals or groups are to be treated and whether they can be assigned to a political orientation. Do they enjoy a kind of “religious immunity” or does their political position require the replacement of priestly personnel in the event of political changes?

As obvious as it is to establish the intertwining of religion and politics in pre-modern societies, it is difficult to prove the concrete interaction of priestly and political “personnel,” and thus a self-motivated or self-initiated political activity of priests in detail. This is especially the case when officials who were political decision-makers held priestly powers or attributes in personal union. For example, the Egyptian pharaoh was always also the highest priest in addition to and as part of his position as

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7 Cf. [https://www.uni-muenster.de/Religion-und-Politik/en/publikationen/2023\\_gesamt.shtml](https://www.uni-muenster.de/Religion-und-Politik/en/publikationen/2023_gesamt.shtml) (accessed 11 August 2023).

8 See for example, Faber 1997, especially for antiquity with the articles of N. Wotkart and J. Rüpke; Brantl et al. 2013.

9 See for example Rüpke/Woolf 2021; Rüpke 2014.

10 See for example Trampedach 2015; Price 1984.

11 See for example Gschnitzer 2003, 145–152.

ruling king of the country. The case of ancient Egypt is therefore an appropriate example to illustrate the complexity of the priestly-political nexus, but also to demonstrate the difficulties of defining the core area of impact and influence in action. As the introductory articles show, all the other contributors and the editors of the volume are aware that the papers presented are selected examples in a much broader field of discussion. They are based on the background of a stimulating conference held at the Christian-Albrechts-Universität zu Kiel from November 29 to December 1, 2018. Therefore, we would like to conclude by thanking all participants who stimulated the discussion in a broader context with their thought-provoking contributions. Contributors to the conference were:

- Igor Alexeev (Moskau): “God’s Rule vs. Power of Clergy: Ibn Khaldun’s Apology of Umayyads and Dynamis of Power Sacralization in Early Islamic History”
- Mariano Barbato (Münster/Passau): “Power through Pilgrimage. How Priests Became Pope”
- Lutz Berger (Kiel): “Islamic Theocracy. Historic Realities and Modern Fallacies”
- Maurits de Leeuw (Tübingen): “Politics in the Life of Daniel the Stylite. The Holy Man as a Political Player in Late Antique Constantinople”
- Andreas Effland (Kairo): “Knowledge is Power – Power of the Priests Against the Ptolemies”
- Veit Groß (Freiburg): “Harnessing the Power of the Priests – Clerics as Instigators and Ressources of Popular Politics in the Late Middle Ages”
- Reuven Kiperwasser (Jerusalem): “The Power of the Rabbis and the Power of God(s): Reading Urban Stories of Late Antiquity”
- Katharina Knäpper (Wien): “The Sacred Dimension of Bureaucracy. Constructing Consensus via Oracles”
- Eleni Krikona (Hamburg): “A New Constitutional Order in the Late Sixth Century BCE Athens, Powered by the Delphic Oracle”
- Sabine Kubisch (Kiel): “The Oracle in Pharaonic Egypt”
- Etki Liebowitz (Jerusalem): “Gender, Politics and Religion in Antiquity: The Challenge of the Reign of Queen Alexandra”
- Ahmed Mansour (Alexandria): “Behind the Scene: Religion at the Service of Politics in Ancient Egypt. Views from the Philae Island Texts”
- Nenad Marković (Prague): “Master of the Secrets of the Sky, the Earth, and the Underworld: The High Priest of Ptah at Memphis During the Kushite and the Saite-Persian Periods (746-after 486 BC)”
- Darja Sterbenc-Erker (Berlin): “Transformation of Political Power of Roman Priests: Augustus as a Priest”
- Michel Summer (Dublin): “Early Medieval Missionaries as Political Agents: The Case of Willibrord (AD 690–739)”
- Kai Trampedach (Heidelberg): „Staging Charisma: Alexander and Divination”
- Harald Wiese (Leipzig): “Did Brahmins Have Power in Premodern India?”

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