

# Seleucids

ROLF STROOTMAN

The Seleucid Empire (312–64 BCE) was the largest of the three Macedonian empires that emerged after the death of Alexander the Great. It was created by SELEUKOS I NIKATOR (“the Victorious”), from his satrapy of Babylonia, incorporating and transforming the infrastructure of the preceding Achaemenid Empire. The Seleucid kingdom was an archetypal imperial state: a huge, composite entity characterized by wide ethnic, cultural, religious, and political diversity. The empire in its heyday stretched from the Pamir Mountains to the Aegean Sea, reaching its greatest extent around 200 BCE under Antiochos III the Great. From ca. 150 BCE, the empire rapidly declined. Its core territories were taken over by the Romans and especially the PARTHIANS, until in 64 BCE the Seleucid Dynasty disappeared from history virtually unnoticed.

The Seleucid state was in essence a military organization exacting tribute. Kingship was charismatic and intensely martial (see KINGSHIP, HELLENISTIC). The monarchy’s heroic ethos required of the king to be a successful war leader able to defend the interests of his followers and the cities under his protection. Imperial ideology was universalistic, the self-presentation of the Seleucid monarch a continuation and elaboration of the age-old Near Eastern notion of a Great King.

## SOURCES AND APPROACHES

Information about the Seleucids in the literary sources is scant and uneven. What material exists is predominantly written from a Mediterranean perspective and rarely pays attention to Seleucid affairs beyond Asia Minor and the Levant. Of importance are in particular Diodorus (Books 18 and following); Appian, whose *Syrian Wars* contains the only continuous account of the dynasty’s history in the

third century; Livy (especially Books 36–40 on the Roman war against Antiochos III); and Polybius for the late third and early second centuries BCE. Later Seleucid history must be reconstructed mainly from Josephus and the first two books of the MACCABEES. Valuable additional evidence is provided by coins (see Houghton and Lorber 2003; Houghton, Lorber, and Hoover 2008); inscriptions from Greek cities, particularly in Asia Minor (Orth 1977; Ma 2002); and Babylonian cuneiform texts (Oelsner 1986; Boiy 2004). Archaeology suffers from the later overbuilding of Seleucid sites in the western parts of the empire and a relative disinterest in the Seleucid period in Iraq and IRAN; this situation has somewhat improved in the past decades (see below).

In modern scholarship, the Seleucid Empire is a somewhat controversial subject. From the early nineteenth century, historians considered the Seleucids in terms of an antithesis of east and west. Thus Bevan (1902) notoriously found that the Seleucids’ chief claim to fame was spreading Greek (“European”) vitality in the indolent east; but he also believed that in time the Seleucids themselves became orientalized and that the resulting “decadence” was the principal cause of their decline. Although such blatant orientalism has now become uncommon, the history of the Seleucid east is still mostly viewed as a continuation of Classical Greek history. This view also dominates oriental studies, where the Macedonian period is often considered an anomalous interlude in the history of the Middle East, better passed over quickly or left to classicists entirely. A “postcolonial” reaction in the 1980s and 1990s advanced the conception of the Seleucid Empire as essentially an “eastern” imperial culture (see *i.a.* Kuhrt and Sherwin-White 1993). This approach, however, has so far been unable to explain the empire’s evident Greco-Macedonian characteristics and moreover has kept the discussion confined to the explicative cadre of an east – west dichotomy, encouraging teleological questions of continuity and change. In the twenty-first century, the

empire is becoming more an object of study in its own right. Archaeology too has in the past decades began to yield new insights into the empire with important excavations at *i.a.* Merv, Jebel Khalid in northern Mesopotamia, several sites in Elam (Downey 1988: 131–6), and on the island of Falaika in the Persian Gulf.

## HISTORY

The Seleucid state grew from the Babylonian satrapy awarded to Seleukos by the Treaty of Triparadeisos in 320 BCE (*see* TRIPARADEISOS, TREATY OF). By means of conquest and diplomacy, Seleukos first established his rule in the eastern satrapies of the former Achaemenid Empire, securing the support of the eastern aristocracies who would provide his dynasty with cavalry for the next one and a half century. His marriage to Apame, an Iranian princess from Sogdia, presumably helped structuring negotiations with these local aristocracies. In India he made an alliance with the Mauryan king CHANDRAGUPTA, who supplied him with a large number of war elephants in return for territorial concessions. Seleukos then returned to the west to establish his hegemony in Syria and Anatolia, defeating his rival ANTIGONOS I MONOPHTHALMOS in the battle of Ipsos (301) (*see* IPSOS, BATTLE OF). In 281 Seleukos gained Asia Minor and the Macedonian kingship when he defeated Lysimachos at Kouropedion (*see* KOUROPELION, BATTLE OF). His death in 281 led to uprisings in the west and prevented the annexation of Thrace and Macedonia.

Seleukos' son and successor ANTIOCHOS I SOTER, who reigned until 261, restored Seleucid rule in the west but had to accept the *de facto* autonomy of BITHYNIA and PONTOS. The Greek cities of Asia Minor hailed him as savior, apparently after his somewhat elusive victory over the Galatians in the so-called Battle of the Elephants. In the east, Antiochos like his father maintained strong (family) bonds with the Iranian nobility. The son of an Iranian noblewoman, Antiochos had

governed the Upper Satrapies as co-ruler since 292, strengthening the oasis of Merv and rebuilding Baktra (Balkh) as the easternmost Seleucid capital. Antiochos I more than his father organized and consolidated Seleucid rule, posthumously deifying his father and establishing the SELEUCID ERA. This first continuous system of year reckoning in history, with the beginning of Seleukos' reign in Babylon (312–311 BCE) as Year 1, presented the establishment of the Seleucid Empire as history starting anew. In Antiochos' reign too began the long and violent rivalry with the Ptolemies over possession of the Mediterranean seaports. Seleucid–Ptolemaic enmity resulted between 274 and 145 in at least seven wars, known today as the SYRIAN WARS – a misnomer, since much more was at stake than merely conflicting interests in (Koile) Syria.

Following the badly documented reign of ANTIOCHOS II THEOS (261–246), the empire suffered a temporary setback under SELEUKOS II KALLINIKOS, who spent his entire reign desperately trying to keep his ancestral domains together. His rule began with a severe succession crisis in which PTOLEMY III intervened in favor of the infant son of his sister, Laodike, the second wife of ANTIOCHOS II (*see* LAODIKE, WIFE OF ANTIOCHOS II). In this conflict, known as the Third Syrian or Laodikean War (246–241) (*see* SYRIAN WARS), several Levantine cities fell into the hands of Ptolemy, whose troops advanced as far as Babylonia before being forced to retreat to Egypt. Immediately after this war, a conflict broke out between Seleukos and his brother, ANTIOCHOS HIERAX (“The Hawk”), who had established himself as rival king in Asia Minor. This was the first serious outbreak of the dynastic infighting that would plague the empire especially in the second century. The War of the Brothers lasted with intervals from 239 to 228 and brought the empire to the brink of collapse. At this time, too, a nomad people known as the Parni migrated from Inner Asia to northern Iran, and settled in the Seleucid province of Hyrkania and later Parthia (and hence are known as the Parthians). Distracted by his brother's growing

power, Seleukos accepted their presence and formally installed their leader Arsaces (I) as vassal king. His return to the west, however, offered Diodotos (I), the satrap of BACTRIA and Sogdia, the opportunity to proclaim himself king.

After the short reign of SELEUKOS III KERAUNOS (226–223), Seleucid authority in the Upper Satrapies was reasserted by ANTIOCHOS III MEGAS (223–187), under whose reign the empire reached its greatest extent. Despite being defeated by the Ptolemies in the Fourth Syrian War (219–217) (*see* RAPHIA, BATTLE OF), Antiochos in 211 embarked on a successful prolonged campaign through Iran, Bactria, and India, where he collected tribute and picked up new war elephants. In the Fifth Syrian War (202–195), Antiochos inflicted a crushing defeat on the Ptolemies at the Battle of Panion (200), occupied Palestine and the Ptolemaic possessions in Asia Minor, and annexed Thrace. Further westward expansion came to a sudden halt when Seleucid expansion in Greece provoked war with Rome. The Roman legions drove Antiochos back to Asia Minor, where they decisively defeated him at the Battle of Magnesia in 189. The peace treaty concluded at Apamea the following year forced Antiochos to give up Asia Minor and his Mediterranean fleet, and to pay a huge indemnity (*see* APAMEA, PEACE OF). Contrary to a once widespread belief, the loss of Asia Minor was no fatal catastrophe for the Seleucids (Kuhrt and Sherwin-White 1993; Grainger 2002), although it still was a severe blow to Seleucid power and the charisma of its warrior-king, inciting dangerous uprisings elsewhere in the empire (Antiochos soon after died fighting in Elam) and leaving Rome as the only superpower in the Mediterranean (*see* ANTIOCHOS III MEGAS).

ANTIOCHOS IV EPIPHANES (“God Manifest”; 170–164) reorganized the empire and campaigned against the Ptolemies in Egypt, laying SIEGE to Alexandria and probably being crowned pharaoh in Memphis. Parthian expansion in Iran forced him to accept a humiliating Roman ultimatum to abandon

Egypt. His efforts to restore Seleucid authority in the east and perhaps to prepare for a new war against Rome ended with his premature death in Iran in 164. After his short but remarkable reign, political decline accelerated and the Parthians took over the role of the Ptolemies as the Seleucids’ principal military antagonists.

During the last century of its existence, succession wars between two rival branches of the royal family destroyed the empire from within. While all around vassal rulers asserted their independence, the Parthian king Mithradates I took possession of Media in 148 and Babylonia in 141. Attempts at reconquest by Demetrios II Nikator in 140/39 and by the energetic Antiochos VII Sidetes in 130/29 both failed (*see* DEMETRIOS II; ANTIOCHOS VII). The permanent loss of Iran and Mesopotamia to the Parthians effectively terminated the existence of the Seleucid state as an empire. The dynasty lingered on for another sixty-five years. At the beginning of the last century BCE, all that remained of the Kingdom of Asia was a small state in northern Syria, fractured by civil war. After a brief occupation of Syria by the Armenian king TIGRANES, the Roman general POMPEY abolished the monarchy without a blow in 64/3 BCE, turning Syria into a Roman province. Rome initially preserved a reorganized version of the imperial vassal state system as it had existed under the later Seleucids, taking over the Seleucids’ role as protectors of cities. In Mesopotamia and Iran the PARTHIAN KINGS, too, took on the role of the Seleucids as imperial suzerains over a patchwork of peoples and polities.

### MONARCHY, COURT, AND ARMY

The empire in its heyday had no fixed capital. King, court, and army traveled around almost continually in pursuit of glory and booty, and to (re)affirm the ruler’s charisma as Great King by ritually demonstrating his splendor and military might. Along the Royal

Road, the main east–west artery, the Seleucids maintained various palaces for their peripatetic court, including those at Sardis in Lydia, Antioch in Syria, Seleukeia in Babylonia, Ekbatana and Hekatompylos in Iran, and Baktra (and perhaps Ai Khanoum) in present-day Afghanistan.

Since the posthumous deification of Seleukos Nikator, most Seleucid kings became gods after death. Antiochos I was awarded divine honors during his lifetime by the Greek cities of Asia Minor. The divine status of the Seleucids also was apparent from their close association with Apollo, who was not merely the ancestor of the dynasty but also the father of Seleukos I. Apollo remained the tutelary deity of the Seleucid family, depicted on the reverse of royal coins, until under Antiochos IV Zeus, too, was put to the fore as a symbol of Seleucid power (other heraldic emblems of the dynasty, favored particularly in the Early Empire, were the horse, the elephant, and the anchor). In ca. 200, a centralized “state cult” for the reigning couple (Antiochos III and Laodike) was established.

At the center of the empire were the so-called FRIENDS OF THE KING (*see* COURT, HELLENISTIC). They were predominantly Greeks and Macedonians from civic elite families, associated with the royal family by means of (fictive) kinship and ritualized guest-friendship, and acting as intermediaries between the monarchy and the cities.

Although warfare in the Hellenistic Age was mainly siege warfare, the empire for major campaigns was able to assemble formidable field armies of 60,000 to 80,000 men (*see* ARMY, HELLENISTIC). The core was a professional standing army of Macedonian-style guard infantry known as the Silver Shields, various cavalry guard units, and war elephants. To these could be added phalanx regiments consisting of military settlers who were given farmland in return for military service and whose loyalty to the dynasty was proverbial. Vast numbers of light infantry, allied troops and mercenaries, were levied on an ad hoc basis for major military campaigns.

Typical for Seleucid armies was furthermore the employment of large numbers of horsemen, including Iranian heavy cavalry and the dreaded armored cataphracts.

## THE SELEUCID STATE

Like most empires, the Seleucid state was essentially a military organization aiming at collecting resources (manpower, food supplies, timber, and metals) for its war making, and the extraction of the capital needed to finance the empire’s military apparatus and the gifts and status expenditures with which the loyalty of cities and powerful individuals was secured. Good relations with cities – the markets where surpluses were collected and turned into coin – were therefore the key prerequisite for the practice of empire.

Geopolitically speaking, the empire was a patchwork of varying forms of control arranged around several clusters of cities: western Asia Minor, Syria, Babylonia, Susiana (Elam), Media, and Bactria. These core regions were connected by land routes protected by chains of fortresses and fortified cities. The many cities founded (or refounded) by Alexander and especially Seleukos I constituted the cornerstones of Seleucid imperial rule (*see* FOUNDATIONS (HELLENISTIC)). In addition, military colonies, known as *katoikia* in Asia Minor, were founded and garrisoned by Macedonians who received land from the crown in exchange for military service. Sometimes, as in the case of Dura-Europos in northern Mesopotamia, such fortresses developed into flourishing cities.

Greek and non-Greek cities alike were approached in accordance with local expectations. Particularly, kings approached cities through the patronage of, and participation in, local cults. They paid for the maintenance of temples, provided offerings, and when present partook in the rituals in person – for instance Antiochos III performing the role of a “traditional” Babylonian king in the Akitu Festival or Antiochos IV making offerings to Yahweh in the Temple of Jerusalem.

There were no deliberate attempts to “Hellenize” the population, but civic elites often assumed a double identity, such as Greek-Babylonian or Greek-Jewish, to express their allegiance to the empire, so that in the course of time a supranational imperial culture came into existence based on the Hellenic culture of the court.

Urbanized areas were loosely administered by centrally appointed military governors known variously as *stratēgoi* or satraps. They were entrusted with collecting tribute, levying troops, and keeping the peace. In rural areas local, particularly Iranian, aristocracies remained in control of military resources. Maintaining good relations with them, too, was of pivotal importance for the empire. Cities moreover were more or less autonomous, and various remote and thinly populated areas within the empire’s “borders” were never fully pacified.

From ca. 250 BCE onward, the Seleucid Empire gradually transformed into a hegemonial power loosely uniting a growing number of autonomous vassal states and small princedoms around a more or less directly controlled imperial core consisting of Iraq and Syria. This process began immediately after the death of Seleukos, but the most prolific kingmaker was Antiochos III – hence presumably the pronunciation of his status of Great King in his official Greek title of Megas, “the Great.” The bonds between the imperial family and the various vassal monarchies were cemented with gifts and dynastic marriages. Seleucid weakness in the mid-third and second half of the second century led to increasing autonomy of these vassals – first in Asia Minor (Pergamon, Bithynia, and Pontos), then in northern Iran and Bactria, and finally along the fringes of the Fertile Crescent (*i.a.* Judaea, Kommagene, Armenia, Charakene, Persis, and various autonomous city states ruled by local dynasts). Ironically, it was one of these vassal polities – the Parthian monarchy – that would eventually terminate and take over the Seleucid kingdom’s position as the principal imperial power in the Middle East.

SEE ALSO: Antioch in Syria; Apamea, Syria; Seleukeia; Syrian wars.

## REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS

- Aperghis, M. (2004) *The Seleukid royal economy: the finances and financial administration of the Seleukid Empire*. Cambridge.
- Bar-Kochva, B. (1976) *The Seleucid army: organisation and tactics in the great campaigns*. Cambridge.
- Bar-Kochva, B. (1989) *Judas Maccabaeus: the Jewish struggle against the Seleucids*. Cambridge.
- Bevan, E. R. (1902) *The House of Seleucus*. London.
- Bickerman, E. J. (1938) *Institutions des Séleucides*. Paris.
- Bickerman, E. J. (1983) “The Seleucid period.” In E. Yarshater, ed., *The Cambridge history of Iran*, vol. 2: *The Seleucid, Parthian, and Sasanian periods*: 3–12. Cambridge.
- Bilde, P. et al., eds. (1990) *Religion and religious practice in the Seleucid kingdom*. Aarhus.
- Boiy, T. (2004) *Late Achaemenid and Hellenistic Babylon*. Leuven.
- Capdetrey, L. (2007) *Le pouvoir séleucide. Territoire, administration, finances d’un royaume hellénistique (312–129 avant J.C.)*. Rennes.
- Cohen, G. M. (1978) *The Seleucid colonies: studies in founding, administration, and organization*. Wiesbaden.
- Cohen, G. M. (2006) *The Hellenistic settlements in Syria, the Red Sea Basin, and North Africa*. Berkeley.
- Downey, S. B. (1988) *Mesopotamian religious architecture: Alexander through the Parthians*. Princeton.
- Ehling, K. (2008) *Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der späten Seleukiden (164–63 v. Chr.). Vom Tode des Antiochos IV. bis zur Einrichtung der Provinz Syria unter Pompeius*. Stuttgart.
- Grainger, J. D. (1997) *A Seleukid prosopography and gazetteer*. Leiden.
- Habicht, C. (1989) “The Seleucids and their rivals.” In *Cambridge ancient history*, vol. 8: 324–87. 2nd ed. Cambridge.
- Heinen, H. (1984) “The Syrian-Egyptian Wars and the new kingdoms of Asia Minor.” In *Cambridge ancient history*, vol. 7.1: 412–45. 2nd ed. Cambridge.

- Holt, F. L. (1999) *Thundering Zeus: the making of Hellenistic Bactria*. Berkeley.
- Houghton, A. and Lorber, C. (2003) *Seleucid coins: a comprehensive catalogue. Part I: Seleucus I–Antiochus III*. New York.
- Houghton, A., Lorber, C. C., and Hoover O. D. (2008) *Seleucid coins: a comprehensive catalogue. Part 2: Seleucus IV through Antiochus XIII*. New York.
- Kuhrt, A. and Sherwin-White, S., eds. (1987) *Hellenism in the East: the interaction of Greek and non-Greek civilizations from Syria to Central Asia after Alexander*. London.
- Kuhrt, A. and Sherwin-White, S. (1993) *From Samarkhand to Sardis: a new approach to the Seleucid Empire*. London.
- Lerner, J. D. (1999) *The impact of Seleucid decline on the eastern Iranian Plateau: the foundations of Arsacid Parthia and Graeco-Bactria*. Stuttgart.
- Ma, J. (2002) *Antiochos III and the cities of western Asia Minor*. Oxford.
- Mehl, A. (1986) *Seleukos Nikator und sein Reich. I: Seleukos' Leben und die Entwicklung seiner Machtposition*. Leuven.
- Oelsner, J. (1986) *Materialien zur babylonischen Gesellschaft und Kultur in hellenistischer Zeit*. Budapest.
- Orth, W. (1977) *Königlicher Machtanspruch und städtische Freiheit. Untersuchungen zu den politischen Beziehungen zwischen den ersten Seleukidenherrschern (Seleukos I., Antiochos I., Antiochos II) und den Städten des westlichen Kleinasien*. Munich.