

# **A WESTERN EMPIRE IN THE EAST?**

## **Historiographical approaches to the Seleukid Empire and the cultural boundaries of Modern Europe**

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This article seeks to explore how the modern concept of Europe, and ideas about the differences between ‘East’ and ‘West’, have informed the recent historiography of the Ancient World.<sup>1</sup> The article focuses on the empire of the Seleukids, the dynasty that came to dominate Asia Minor, the Near East, Iran and Central Asia during the centuries after the conquests of Alexander the Great. Departing from the perceived idea that ancient Macedonia and Greece, where the dynasty and many of its initial supporters originally came from, belongs to the West, the empire of the Seleukids has been labelled a ‘Western’ state by many modern historians. Departing from the perceived idea that the geographical area ruled by the Seleukids—the Near East, Iran, and Central Asia—is essentially different from Greece, many other historians have labelled the empire an ‘Eastern’ state—where ‘Eastern’ could have both a pejorative as well as a more positive slant. These widely divergent interpretations have recently caused deep controversy over the cultural identity of the Seleukids. What these divergent interpretations agree upon, however, is the existence of a cultural boundary running somewhere through the Aegean, separating the opposing cultural systems of Europe and the Orient. In spite of a series of radical paradigm shifts over the past two hundred years, one thing therefore has remained a constant factor in interpretations of what is traditionally known (to complicate matters) as the ‘Hellenistic World’: that ever since Droysen defined Hellenism as the *Verschmelzung* of western and eastern cultures,<sup>2</sup> historians have predominantly considered the Seleukids in terms of an antithesis of East and West.

Thus there have been, roughly speaking, two contrasting approaches to the empire. The first of these conceptualizes the Seleukid Empire as a

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<sup>1</sup> This article was originally presented as a public lecture at the Asia Institute of the University of California, Los Angeles, on May 23, 2011; I am grateful to Claudia Rapp and Nile Green for kindly arranging this meeting and for their valuable comments. Adapted versions of the lecture were later given at the Centre of Persian Studies of UC Irvine, at the *Current Issues in Mediterranean and Near Eastern Archaeology* seminar of Leiden University (October 25, 2011), and the *Ancient Culture Seminar* at the University of Utrecht (January 25, 2012). The final draft of this paper has benefited from discussion with Josine Blok, Floris van den Eijnde, Leonard Rutgers and Miguel John Versluys.

<sup>2</sup> J.G. Droysen, *Geschichte des Hellenismus* (Hamburg: F. Perthes, 1836); on Droysen’s thinking about periodization see recently R. Bichler, ‘Johann Gustav Droysen und der Epochenbegriff des Hellenismus’, *Groniek* 177 (2008) pp. 9-22, and the essays by Wiesehöfer, Bichler, and Buraselis in *Johann Gustav Droysen. Philosophie und Politik – Historie und Philologie*, ed. by S. Rebenich and H.-U. Wiemer, (Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 2012).

temporary eastward expansion of the Classical Greek world. To some Classicists this was a generally positive development; in the eyes of many orientalists, however, the establishment of a Greco-Macedonian empire in the Middle East was no more than a brief, slightly annoying interruption of long-term developments in the Orient, while others again have interpreted it in terms of European colonialism. Advocates of the second approach favour an opposite view. They argue that the Seleukid Empire was not a 'Western' polity at all, but an 'eastern' state, and essentially a continuation of the Achaemenid Empire under foreign rulers.

These conflicting views make clear what the key problem with the 'identity' of the Seleukid Empire really is: that apparently the empire transgresses the perceived boundaries of Europe and non-Europe but is nonetheless described in terms of an antithesis of East and West. Thus, the Seleucid Empire constitutes an interesting test case to consider how the historiography of the Ancient World intentionally or unintentionally contributed to demarcating the modern idea of 'Europe'.

## CLASSICS AND THE BOUNDARIES OF EUROPE

East is East and West is West. But where precisely does East end and West begin? Some would argue that this depends, literally, on your point of view.<sup>3</sup> Others would maintain that 'East' and 'West' are first of all, real or imagined, *cultural* categories. Recently, Niall Ferguson in his bestselling book *Civilization* identified as the main characteristics of the 'European Miracle' rational science, a competitive capitalist economy, and democratic institutions. Bernard Lewis in *What Went Wrong?* meanwhile equated Western culture with 'modernity', of which social equality, secularism and civil society according to him are the main components.<sup>4</sup> Others again would claim that the difference between East and West is self-evident: we can disagree on its precise defining characteristics but there can be no doubt that

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<sup>3</sup> A well-known cliché from the tourist industry claims that Turkey, particularly Istanbul, is a bridge between East and West ('the city where East and West meet')—but so is, strictly speaking, Italy (which can, incidentally, also be perceived of as a bridge between *north* and *south*), Austria, or Iran. On the emic and etic construction of Turkey, *viz.*, Istanbul, as the meeting-place of West and East in modern popular culture see D. Bryce, 'Repackaging Orientalism: Discourses on Egypt and Turkey in British outbound tourism', *Tourist Studies* 7 (2007), pp. 165–191, and *id.*, 'Turkey, tourism and interpellated "Westernness": Inscribing collective visitor subjectivity', *Tourism Geographies* 1 (2011), pp. 1–23.

<sup>4</sup> N. Ferguson, *Civilization: The West and the Rest* (London: Allan Lane, 2011); B. Lewis, *What Went Wrong? The Clash Between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002). A contrary view has been propounded by J. Goody, *The Theft of history* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), describing a process of 'systematic attribution of historically significant innovations to periods of European history exclusively', cf. H.P. Colburn, 'Orientalism, postcolonialism, and the Achaemenid Empire: Meditations on Bruce Lincoln's *Religion, Empire, and Torture*', *BICS* 54.2 (2011) pp. 87–103 (pp. 94–95), to whom I owe this reference.

Western civilization somehow exists, and that it can be juxtaposed to oriental culture even if that oriental 'other' is largely an invention.<sup>5</sup> All such definitions typically associate Western Civilization with the culture(s) of *western* Europe.

But even if for convenience we equate Western culture with Western European culture—leaving aside Eastern Europe, Australasia and Anglophone North America—our problems of definition do not end. For historically speaking 'Europe', too, is an idea.<sup>6</sup> The concept of Europe as a topographical or cultural unit furthermore is a relatively new one. It was virtually unknown in the Middle Ages.<sup>7</sup> So how can Europe's geographical or ideological borders be drawn? What is it that binds Europe together?

Since the later eighteenth century, the notion of a Classical heritage has been a pivotal building block in the construction of Europe's cultural boundaries. It has helped elites in north-western Europe to understand the extraordinary rise of the West to global dominance in the age of European commercial and colonial expansion. As Ian Morris recently summarized the process:

[I]n trying to explain why the West was now coming to rule [the world], some eighteenth-century intellectuals imagined an alternative line of descent for themselves. Two and a half thousand years ago, they argued, the ancient Greeks created a unique culture of reason, inventiveness, and freedom. This set Europe on a different (better) trajectory than the rest of the world.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Though perhaps it was not a purely Western invention, as Edward Said in *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (London: Routledge, 1978) maintained it was; it may in part have been a 'joint Eurasian' project as Peter Burke, *Cultural Hybridity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), pp. 94–95, called it in discussing native agency in the production and export of 'exotic' Indian textiles and Chinese porcelain for European markets during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

<sup>6</sup> J. Leerssen, *Spiegelvallen Europa. Europese cultuur als mythe en beeldvorming* (Nijmegen: Vantilt, 2011), pp. 7–12.

<sup>7</sup> D.F. Tinsley, 'Mapping the Muslims: Images of Islam in Middle High German literature of the Thirteenth Century', in *Contextualizing the Muslim Other in Medieval Christian Discourse*, ed. by J.C. Frakes (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 72. The Mediterranean and Aegean seas constituted areas of connectivity rather than boundaries even after the rise of Islam: see e.g. the recent studies by M. Greene, *A Shared World: Christians and Muslims in the Early Modern Mediterranean* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), and *id.*, *Catholic Pirates and Greek Merchants: A Maritime History of the Early Modern Mediterranean* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011); J.L. Goldberg, *Trade and Institutions in the Medieval Mediterranean: The Geniza Merchants and their Business World*. Cambridge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> I. Morris, *Why the West Rules – For Now: The Patterns of History and What They Reveal About the Future* (London: Profile Books, 2011), p. 14. On the 19th-century European appropriation of the Classical heritage as a means of self-definition consult *i.a.* P. Vasunia, 'Hellenism and empire: Reading Edward Said', *Parallax* 9.4 (2003) 88–97; K. Vlassopoulos, 'Imperial encounters: Discourses on empire and the uses of ancient history during the eighteenth century', in *Classics and Imperialism in the British Empire*, ed. by M. Bradley (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 29–53; F. De Donno, 'Orientalism and Classicism: The British-Roman empire of Lord Bryce and his Italian critics', in *Tributary Empires in*

Inconsistent with this line of thought however was the fact that Greece is one of the more peripheral regions within Europe's self-assigned geographical borders. What once was Classical Hellas furthermore had been an integral, even central part of an Islamic empire for almost four centuries, and home to a substantial Muslim population, until from 1821 to 1922 a century of ethnic cleansing forever changed the lands around the Aegean.<sup>9</sup> Greece moreover was a country that from the beginning of history until at least the late eighteenth century had been conceptualized by its own inhabitants as part and parcel of a wider Mediterranean world rather than of the barbaric European hinterland beyond the Balkans. One solution to this problem was the conceptualization of Western Europeans as the guardians of a Classical heritage since the fall of Constantinople in 1453. In the indolent Near East (including Greece itself), this heritage allegedly had been forgotten. The Classical heritage was however transmitted to the West in the fifteenth century by Byzantine intellectuals who had collectively fled before the onslaught of the terrible Turks. Beginning in the late seventeenth century, European travellers set out for the Aegean to rescue Greek art from Ottoman neglect, and later also to reintroduce Hellenism among the Greeks, and even to fight for Greek liberty.<sup>10</sup>

## THE SELEUKID EMPIRE IN WORLD HISTORY

Even as it was possible to somehow incorporate Ancient Greece's Classical legacy into a grand narrative of Western cultural history, Greek history *after* Alexander the Great posed severe problems. The Macedonian king Alexander could be said to have been a European conqueror who subdued the Persian Empire and spread Western Civilization in the East. But Alexander's successors as rulers in the Middle East and Iran, the Seleukids, were cut off

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*Global History*, ed. by P.F. Bang and C.A. Bayly (Cambridge and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 48–73.

<sup>9</sup> The position of the Balkans *vis-à-vis* Europe remains ambiguous until the present day, an ambiguity for which Maria Todorova has coined the term 'Balkanism' in her book *Imagining the Balkans* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009): depending on context, sometimes the *Christian* inhabitants of the Balkans are considered Europeans and sometimes the *Orthodox* inhabitants of the Balkans are considered non-European 'others'. Islam is usually considered less indigenous than Christianity in the Balkans, though both were introduced there in the Middle Ages.

<sup>10</sup> See generally R. Stoneman, *Land of Lost Gods: The Search For Classical Greece* (London: Hutchinson, 1987); cf. the more recent work by G. van Steen, *Liberating Hellenism From the Ottoman Empire: Comte De Marcellus and the Last of the Classics* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), emphasizing the interrelationship of Orientalism and Hellenism in early modern Europe. W. St. Clair, *That Greece May Still Be Free: The Philhellenes in the War of Independence* (Oxford 1972) is still impressive in its unsettling account of European idealists' traumatic involvement in the Greek Revolt of 1821–1832, which turned out to be not the struggle for freedom Europeans had imagined, but a brutal civil war that had but little to do with the past glories of Marathon or Thermopylai.

from their Macedonian homeland while still being conceptualized in nineteenth-century historiography as Hellenic rulers, even though they were (erroneously) called 'Kings of Syria' in the older historiography.

The empire ruled by the Macedonian dynasty of the Seleukids (c. 312–64 BCE) was created in the aftermath of the wars among Alexander's successors, reaching its greatest extent about a century later under Antiochos III the Great (223/2–187 BCE), who campaigned in areas as far apart as mainland Greece, the Persian Gulf, and present-day Afghanistan and Pakistan. For most of its existence, the empire's economic core regions were Syria and Mesopotamia, as well as western Asia Minor and Baktria for shorter periods of time, while Iran remained important for the Seleukids as a source of troops until the mid-second century BCE. The Seleukids' enduring legacy was the system of vassal states (or 'client kingdoms') that developed in Asia Minor and the Middle East during their rule, and which remained the foundation of both Parthian and Roman rule after the Seleukids had disappeared.<sup>11</sup>

The historiography of the Seleukids provides us with an opportunity to evaluate the interrelationship of modern views of the Ancient past and the conceptualization of the boundaries between West and East. These rulers of mixed Macedonian-Iranian stock seem to fit in neither of the two categories and consequently still have an ambiguous cultural identity in present-day historical views. The Seleukid realm at its peak around 200 BCE was substantially larger than the Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian empires had been, almost twice as big as its principal successor state, the Parthian Empire, and endured longer than its precursor, the Persian Empire. Unlike the Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, and Parthians, however, these Macedonians are not very well incorporated in long-term narratives of Near Eastern and Iranian history. In Near Eastern studies they are often dismissed as outsiders, and the Hellenistic Period—the period between the fall of the Achaemenid Persian Empire in 330 and the final disappearance of the post-Alexandrian Macedonian dynasties in the first century BCE—is usually regarded as an anomalous interlude in the history of the Middle East that is better past over quickly or left to classicists. Thus scholars of Mesopotamian and Iranian history and culture have constructed a curious gap between the collapse of the Achaemenid Empire and the resurgence of 'indigenous' dynasties in the later Hellenistic period.

The Seleukids neither seem to fit very well into Greek history. Their existence is uncomfortably (and always briefly) acknowledged in general

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<sup>11</sup> D. Engels, 'Middle Eastern 'Feudalism' and Seleukid dissolution', in *Seleucid Dissolution: The Sinking of the Anchor*, ed. by K. Erickson and G. Ramsey (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2011), pp. 19–36; R. Strootman, 'Queen of Kings: Cleopatra VII and the Donations of Alexandria', in *Kingdoms and Principalities in the Roman Near East*, ed. by M. Facella and T. Kaizer (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2010), pp. 139–158.

textbooks of Ancient history as a kind of afterword to the section on mainland Greece, before turning back in time to the rise of Rome. Seleukid history and imperial culture consequently remains relatively understudied, especially in comparison to the preceding Achaemenid period. Despite a recent upsurge in Seleukid studies since c. 2000, neither historians nor archaeologists seem to know very well how to place in *longue durée* narratives of Middle East history these Macedonian rulers whose power rested on the support of a Greek-speaking court elite, multi-ethnic armies, cooperation with autonomous cities, the loyalty of indigenous aristocrats, and intermarriage with Iranian vassal dynasties. It is my contention that it is the modern historian's own preconceived notion of a boundary between East and West that makes it so hard to fit the Seleukids in.

As was briefly suggested in the introduction, two contrasting views of the empire in modern historiography have dominated present-day views of the Seleukids. In both views, perceived ideas about East-West dichotomies played a decisive role. First, historians since the nineteenth century have conceptualized the Seleukid Empire as a temporary eastward expansion of the Classical Greek world. They see the empire as essentially a 'Western' state. This view stems ultimately from the conviction that Ancient Greece belongs culturally more to Western Europe than to the ancient Mediterranean world, let alone the Ancient Near East. Even as the Greco-Macedonian identity of the Seleukid dynasty indeed seems obvious in many respects, the comprehension of Greco-Macedonian culture as Western is not. A variant of this approach became popular in the 1960s and 1970s: the disapproving view of the empire as a form of colonial occupation of the Middle East by Europeans.

Second, in scholarship that is more recent the Seleukid Empire has been conceptualized as a continuation of the Achaemenid Empire under a foreign dynasty. Here the Seleukid Empire has become in essence an 'Eastern' state, as the Achaemenid Empire may be said to have been (though the Mediterranean and Aegean aspects of the Achaemenid Empire are still poorly understood). This reinterpretation of the Seleukid Empire however was achieved, not by trying to understand the obvious Greco-Macedonian traits of the empire in an eastern Mediterranean/Near Eastern context, but by renouncing the Hellenistic character of the empire.<sup>12</sup> In what follows, the historiographical development of both views will be separately discussed.

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<sup>12</sup> I will not in this article discuss *ancient* views of the Seleukid state as an 'oriental' empire. In Ancient times, the Seleukids were sometimes seen as the New Persians but only in the eyes of their enemies, the Ptolemies and Romans; cf. B. Funck, "König Perserfreund". die Seleukiden in der Sicht ihrer Nachbarn (Beobachtungen zu einigen ptolemäischen Zeugnissen des 4. und 3. Jhs. v. Chr.)', in *Hellenismus*, ed. by B. Funck (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck Verlag, 1996), pp. 195–215; G. Flamerie de Lachapelle, 'L'image des rois hellénistiques dans l'œuvre de Florus', *Arctos* 44 (2010) pp. 109–22, and *id.*, 'Les prises de parole d'Antiochus III dans l'œuvre de Tite Live', *Paideia* 67 (2012), pp. 123–133; D. Braund, 'Athenaeus on the Kings of Syria', in *Athenaeus and His World: Reading Greek Culture in the Roman Empire*, ed.

## WESTERN VIEWS OF THE SELEUKID EMPIRE

The notion that Seleukid history is a continuation of Greek history still dominates the field of oriental studies, and most handbooks of Near Eastern history and archaeology end abruptly with the arrival or death of Alexander.<sup>13</sup> As was suggested above, the reason why the Seleukids have not yet acquired a solid place of their own in long-term Middle East history, may simply be that scholars don not know how to ‘understand’ this empire. Was it an Eastern or a Western empire? Was it Greek or not Greek?

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, notably British historians had little doubt that the Seleukid Empire was a ‘Western’ state, imposing Greek culture on the peoples of the East. Direct parallels with contemporaneous British imperialism were drawn. Thus Edwyn Bevan, in a programmatic introductory essay to his 1902 textbook *The House of Seleucus*, entitled ‘Hellenism in the East’, notoriously found that the Seleukids’ chief claim to fame was their spreading of Greek, viz., European, vitality and freedom in the indolent, despotic East. ‘We may say with perfect truth’, Bevan stated, ‘that the work being done by European nations, and especially by England, in the East is the same work which was begun by Macedonia [and] a peculiar interest must be felt by Englishmen in those Western kings who ruled in Asia twenty centuries ago.’<sup>14</sup> However, Bevan also believed that in time the Seleukids themselves became ‘orientalised’ and that the resulting decadence was the principal cause of their decline. They stopped being Europeans. This view coincides neatly with the nineteenth-century appraisal of the Hellenistic Age as a period of moral and cultural decline for the Greeks, not least because of their alleged absorption of oriental influences and acceptance of despotic kingship. This view also fits the orientalist image of the East as a mysterious, amorphous realm that strong-willed Westerners may conquer with the force of arms and the power of rationality, but that in the end will overwhelm them with its sensual and dreamy timelessness. This

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by D. Braund and J. Wilkins (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000), pp. 514–522. A. Primo, *La storiografia sui Seleucidi: da Megastene a Eusebio di Cesarea*. Studi Ellenistici 10 (Pisa and Rome: Fabrizio Serra, 2009), p. 122, speaks of ‘disellenizzazione’, conscious de-Hellenization of the Seleukids in order to make them look like Oriental despots in the work of the contemporaneous historian Phylarchos.

<sup>13</sup> A. Kuhrt, *The Ancient Near East, c. 3000–330 BC* (2 vols; London and New York: Routledge, 1995); M. van de Mieroop, *A History of the Ancient Near East, c. 3000–323* (Malden and Oxford: Blackwell, 2003); P.M.M.G. Akkermans and G.M. Schwartz, *The Archaeology of Syria: From Complex Hunter-Gatherers to Early Urban Societies (ca. 16000–300 BC)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); D.C. Snell ed., *A Companion to the Ancient Near East* (Malden and Oxford: Blackwell, 2004); M.W. Chavalas, *The Ancient Near East: Historical Sources in Translation* (Malden and Oxford: Blackwell, 2006). A recent exception to the rule is D.T. Potts ed., *A Companion to the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).

<sup>14</sup> E.R. Bevan, *The House of Seleucus* (London: Edward Arnold, 1902), p. 19; compare the implicit comparison of Greco-Bactrian India with British India in W.W. Tarn’s *The Greeks in Bactria and India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1938).

is how Bevan imagined oriental culture to have infected the later Seleukid court:

There was the army of chamberlains and cooks and eunuchs. There was the display of crimson and gold, the soft raiment, the stringed instruments, the odours of myrrh, aloes, and cassia. ... [But] as we cast round our eyes, we should have observed that while material and colour were of an oriental splendour, the form was Greek.<sup>15</sup>

In the first half of the twentieth century, scholars commonly maintained that Hellenistic kingship was derived predominantly from Near Eastern precedents.<sup>16</sup> Notably ruler cult was considered incompatible with the ideals of Freedom and Rationality that nineteenth-century scholars had projected on Classical Greece. It was therefore assumed that the worship of (living) human beings in the Greek *poleis* must have been an import from the decadent Orient.<sup>17</sup> It has now been established however that the Hellenistic practice of giving cultic honours to kings is firmly rooted in the culture of the Greek *polis*, and not many ancient historians today would still think of it as a degenerate fake religion.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Bevan, *House of Seleucus*, pp. 273–74. More nuanced views were articulated by M. Rostovtzeff, 'Syria and the East', in: *The Cambridge Ancient History. Volume 7: The Hellenistic Monarchies and the Rise of Rome*, ed. by S.A. Cook, F.E. Adcock, and M.P. Charlesworth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1928) pp. 155–198, and E.J. Bickerman, *Institutions des Séleucides* (Paris: P. Reuthner, 1938). In 'The Seleucids and the Achaemenids', in *La Persia e il mondo greco-romana* (Rome: Accademia dei Lincei, 1966) 87–117, Bickerman against the trend of his time maintained that the Seleukids consciously imitated the Achaemenids, and that the rule of both Achaemenids and Seleukids was not one of oppression and exploitation but rather of tolerance, as was most clearly seen in both empire's policies towards the Jews.

<sup>16</sup> See e.g. E.R. Goodenough, 'The political philosophy of Hellenistic kingship', *Yale Classical Studies* 1 (1928), pp. 55–102; H.P. L'Orange, *Studies in the Iconography of Cosmic Kingship in the Ancient World* (Oslo: II. Aschehoug, 1953).

<sup>17</sup> For the essentialist conviction that Hellenistic monarchy, esp. ruler cult, is un-Greek and therefore must have had Oriental roots see *i.a.* C.W. McEwan, *The Oriental Origins of Hellenistic Kingship* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1934), and P. Schnabel, 'Die Begründung des hellenistischen Königskultes durch Alexander', *Klio*, 19 (1924), pp. 113–127, who first put forward the influential theory that Hellenistic ruler worship began with Alexander the Great's adoption of Achaemenid court ceremonial in Baktra (the so-called *Proskynēsis* Affair); also see W.W. Tarn, *Hellenistic Civilisation* (3rd edn; London: Edward Arnold & Co., 1952), pp. 49–53, postulating that in the Near East 'the king's divinity [was] a conception familiar for centuries' (p. 49), and F. Taeger, *Charisma. Studien zur Geschichte des antiken Herrscherkultes. Band 1: Hellas* (Stuttgart, 1957), p. 273, who was convinced that the Greeks 'instinctively' objected to this 'unhealthy' form of religion; cf. H.S. Versnel, 'Heersercultus in Griekenland', *Lampas* 7.2 (1974), pp. 129–163, to whom I owe the last two references.

<sup>18</sup> See A. Chaniotis, 'The divinity of Hellenistic rulers', in *A Companion to the Hellenistic World*, ed. by A. Erskine (Malden and Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), pp. 431–45, for a good overview of the state of the question in the early twenty-first century. Also see R. Rollinger, 'Herrscherkult und Königsvergöttlichung bei Teispiden und Achaimeniden. Realität oder Fiktion?', in *Studien zum vorhellenistischen und hellenistischen Herrscherkult: Verdichtung und Erweiterung von Traditionsgeflechten*, ed. by L.-M. Günther and S. Plischke (Berlin: Verlag Antike, 2011), pp. 11–54, challenging on the basis of new evidence for cultic

Resistance rose in the 1960s and 1970s against the Hellenocentric, orientalist approaches that were current in the colonial age, and their one-sided focus on change in the form of a supposed Hellenization of the Near East and Central Asia. Two counter-movements successively came into being. Both may be termed ‘post-colonial’. The first post-colonial ‘wave’ saw Macedonian imperialism in the Middle East as essentially similar to modern European overseas colonialism—but now this was thought of disapprovingly. Samuel Eddy in his influential book *The King is Dead* (1961) took the contradictory view that Near Eastern peoples naturally resisted ‘Hellenism’, while at the same time remaining largely unaffected by it.<sup>19</sup> Comparisons with modern colonial empires were later made by, among others, the early Pierre Briant and by Édouard Will.<sup>20</sup> The latter explained that the violent dissolution of the French colonial empire had shed new light on his own understanding of the Hellenistic world.<sup>21</sup>

All this resulted in a reassessment of the empire as an exploitative colonial national state based on Syria.<sup>22</sup> As Rachel Mairs noted, ‘Hellenism’—since the nineteenth century a term designating the merging of Greek and non-Greek culture—became a byword for ‘colonialism’.<sup>23</sup>

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honours awarded post-mortem to Achaemenid rulers the perhaps too strict present-day conviction that ruler worship was entirely *non-oriental*.

<sup>19</sup> S.K. Eddy, *The King is Dead: Studies in Near Eastern Resistance to Hellenism, 334-31 BC* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961).

<sup>20</sup> See e.g. P. Briant, ‘Colonisation hellénistique et populations indigènes. La phase d’installation’, *Klio* 60, 1978, 57–92; É. Will, ‘The formation of the Hellenistic kingdoms’, in *The Cambridge Ancient History. Volume 7.1: The Hellenistic Age*, ed. by F.W. Walbank (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 101–117, and id., ‘Pour une “anthropologie coloniale” du monde hellénistique’, in *The Craft of the Ancient Historian: Essays in Honor of Chester G. Starr*, ed. by W.J. Eadie and J. Ober (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1985), pp. 273–301. For a critical discussion of these trends see the excellent treatment by R. Mairs, ‘Hellenistic India’, *New Voices in Classical Reception Studies* 1 (2006), pp. 19–30 (pp. 22–24).

<sup>21</sup> Will, ‘Anthropologie coloniale’, p. 281: ‘le choc de la décolonisation nous a fait prendre conscience de ce qu’étaient les réalités coloniales [...] il peut nous aider aussi à réviser certaines de nos perspectives sur le passé hellénistique’; cf. Mairs, ‘Hellenistic India’, p. 24.

<sup>22</sup> ‘Colonial empire’ may be defined with S. Subrahmanyam, ‘Imperial and colonial encounters: Some comparative reflections’, in *Lessons of Empire: Imperial Histories and American Power*, ed. by C.J. Calhoun *et al.* (New York: New Press, 2006), pp. 217–228, as ‘exploitative economic relations between an imperial core and a subject periphery’ (p. 220); cf. J. Pitts, ‘Political theory of empire and imperialism’, *Annual Review of Political Science*, 13 (2010), pp. 211–235 (p. 214). H. Braunert, ‘Hegemoniale Bestrebungen der hellenistischen Großmächte in Politik und Wirtschaft’, *Historia* 13 (1964), pp. 80–104, using the model of modern overseas colonialism, explained the imperial activities of Seleukids and Ptolemies in the Aegean from these monarchies’ desire to create and protect sales markets for their export products. Most recent literature on empires however emphasizes the *differences* between modern European colonialism and territorial tributary empires in premodern Eurasia, see e.g. P.F. Fibiger Bang and C. Bayly, ‘Tributary empires – towards a global and comparative history’, in *Tributary Empires in Global History* (Cambridge and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 1–17.

<sup>23</sup> Mairs, ‘Hellenistic India’, p. 22: ‘Greeks are still Europeans, but where once, to a European writer, this gave a positive slant to their presence in the East, it has increasingly become something negative. The Greeks—like the British in India—were no longer bearers of

Consequential for the direction of modern research, too, was the ascription to the Seleukids, being Europeans, of a distinct (and, it was felt, unfortunate) western bias. Employing the classic pattern of decline and fall, it was believed that the empire began to break down already in the third century because the Seleukids were preoccupied with the Mediterranean parts of their realm. They failed to appreciate the strategic and economic significance of the lands to the east of Asia Minor and the Levant. As a result, the Central Asian provinces soon broke away from the empire, while the nomadic Parni (later known as the Parthians) were able to take over the Iranian plateau with relative ease, for the Seleukids had failed to consolidate these regions and did not make a determined effort to oppose the invaders. Thus, in the third volume of the authoritative *Cambridge History of Iran* (1983), the distinguished scholar of Seleukid and Hellenistic Jewish history, Elias Bickerman, advocated the influential view that soon after the death of the empire's founder, Seleukos I (who had begun his career as satrap of Babylonia), the Seleukid centre of gravity shifted to the west, and Antioch in north-western Syria became the empire's new capital.<sup>24</sup>

The identification of the imperial capital with Antioch—present-day Antakya in what is now the Turkish province of Hatay—is typical of the conceptualization of the Seleukid Empire as a kind of European-style territorial state, to be identified with Syria. Such a state of course must have a capital: a single administrative centre where a central, national administration was located. There is, however, no compelling evidence that Antioch held a place of honour as the central seat of royalty among the various royal residences maintained by the dynasty, let alone that this was the city from where they actually reigned.<sup>25</sup> Seleukeia-on-the-Tigris near Babylon was a larger city by far and more important to the Seleukids until they lost Babylonia to the Parthians in the 140s. The royal court furthermore was itinerant and since there is no indication that in the Seleukid Empire a formal separation of royal household and bureaucracy had taken place, the

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civilization, but of exploitation and repression.' Also see J. Ma, 'Paradigms and paradoxes in the Hellenistic world', in *Studi Ellenistici* 20, ed. by B. Virgilio (Pisa and Rome: Fabrizio Serra, 2008), pp. 371–386 (p. 371), discussing the 'dominant "colonial" paradigm, which interprets the Hellenistic world as one of radically separate cultures.'

<sup>24</sup> E.J. Bickerman, 'The Seleucid Period', in *The Cambridge History of Iran. Volume 3: The Seleucid, Parthian, and Sasanian Periods*, ed. by E. Yarshater (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 3–20; compare the view of A. Invernizzi, 'Seleucia on the Tigris: Centre and Periphery in Seleucid Asia', in *Centre and Periphery in the Hellenistic World*, ed. by P. Bilde (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1998), pp. 230–250: 'Founded only a few years later, Antioch [...] replaced Seleucia on the Tigris as the royal seat and became the actual capital of the Seleucids' (p. 236).

<sup>25</sup> At least not until the later reign of Antiochos IV Epiphanes (175–164 BCE), who conducted grand building-projects at Antioch that were clearly meant to elevate the city above its former status of provincial centre; for Epiphanes' building activities at Antioch see the excellent treatment by P.F. Mittag, *Antiochos IV. Epiphanes. Eine politische Biographie* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2006), pp. 145–149.

concept of a Seleukid capital where a state administration resided even if the king and his court were absent is an anachronism. It is also a matter of semantics: if one chooses to call the Seleukids ‘Kings of Syria’, as they themselves never did, the other parts of the empire will automatically seem of secondary significance (e.g. Babylonia and Asia Minor), become ‘occupied’ territories (e.g. Palestine in the time of the Makkabean revolt), or disappear from view altogether (Eastern Iran and Central Asia).

To be sure, the tendency to understand ancient Macedonian imperialism as *mutatis mutandis* a modern colonial enterprise thrived not only in the context of the Seleukid Middle East and Central Asia. Also regarding the Seleukid Empire’s main rival, the Ptolemaic Empire, social and economic relations have since the 1970s been reinterpreted in the light of the European colonial experience.<sup>26</sup> In the Ptolemaic context, this gave rise to two seemingly contradictory, but in their essence similar models for understanding Hellenistic Egypt. First, the view that Greeks and Macedonians ‘colonized’ Egypt, monopolizing land ownership to exploit the country and its autochthonous native population.<sup>27</sup> Second, the converse view that not Greece but Egypt was the colonial ‘motherland’. According to this latter model the third-century Ptolemaic empire in the wider Mediterranean—which included control of vast tracts of the Levantine and Anatolian coastlines, with tentacles reaching into the Black Sea, the Greek mainland, Asia Minor, Arabia and the Indian Ocean—was conceptualized as ‘overseas possessions’, a form of foreign policy, or indeed European-style colonialism.<sup>28</sup>

## THE SELEUKID EMPIRE AS AN EASTERN STATE

A subsequent ‘post-colonial’ approach to Hellenistic studies came into being in the wake of Edward Said’s book *Orientalism*, published in 1978. The second wave was critical of the colonial paradigm that preceded it, and took issue with the view that the Seleukid Empire was a Western empire oriented on the west. Not the Seleukids, it was argued, had a western bias, but the sources: the Ancient historiography about the Seleukids that we depend on,

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<sup>26</sup> See J.G. Manning, *The Last Pharaohs: Egypt Under the Ptolemies, 305–30 BC* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 36, warning against ‘analyzing Ptolemaic state formation through the lens of nineteenth-century nation state colonial experience or twentieth-century postcolonial reactions to colonization’.

<sup>27</sup> On past views of the nature of the Ptolemaic state see R.S. Bagnall, ‘Decolonizing Ptolemaic Egypt’, in *Hellenistic Constructs. Essays in Culture, History, and Historiography*, ed. by P. Cartledge, P. Garnsey, and E. Gruen (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 225–241; and Manning, *Last Pharaohs*, pp. 11–18 and 29–53.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. e.g. É. Will, ‘The Succession to Alexander’, in *The Cambridge Ancient History* 7.1 (1984), pp. 23–61 (pp. 41–42); Braunert, ‘Hegemoniale Bestrebungen’, 91–94; R.S. Bagnall, *The Administration of the Ptolemaic Possessions Outside Egypt* (Leiden: Brill, 1976).

emanated from beyond the empire, created by such Greek and Roman historians as Polybios, Diodoros of Sicily, Livy, Justin, and Appian. Most of them wrote from an overt pro-Roman angle. With the exception of Justin, these historians were not really interested in the affairs of Mesopotamia, Iran and Central Asia. Roman and pro-Roman sources have been responsible for the classification of the Seleukids as kings of 'Syria', the contemporaneous name for the Levant current in the *western* Mediterranean that could also serve as *pars pro toto* for all lands beyond the Mediterranean's eastern shoreline. Relatively western, too (from a Seleukid perspective), and even more antagonistic, are the Jewish sources that provide much of the written evidence for later Seleukid history: 1 and 2 Maccabees, the book of Daniel, and Josephus' *Jewish History*. Contemporaneous epigraphic evidence furthermore is written almost exclusively in Greek and stems predominantly from the westernmost part of the empire, *viz.*, Asia Minor. Because the 'eastern' side of the empire is underexposed in the written sources, the 'eastern' side of the empire is underexposed in modern historiography too.

Instead of viewing the Seleukids as 'Western' or 'Greek', historians in the 1980s like Pierre Briant, Susan Sherwin-White and Amélie Kuhrt emphasized the non-Greek nature of the Seleukid Empire. They pointed out continuities of indigenous political culture and institutions in opposition to the change that Hellenization supposedly brought. This new approach, which came to dominate the field of Seleukid studies in the past decades, was made possible by (and in turn enhanced) the growing availability of non-Greek, particularly cuneiform Babylonian sources. However, in the often vigorously advanced reaction to the traditional Hellenocentric views, the old notion of 'Hellenism in the East' was sometimes reversed so radically that the Hellenic aspects of the Seleukid Empire all but disappeared from view. Thus, the paradigm of change was substituted by the paradigm of continuity.

The publication of *Hellenism in the East* in 1987 heralded the ascendancy of the 'eastern approach'.<sup>29</sup> This ground-breaking collection of papers, titled after the colonialist first chapter of Bevan's *The House of Seleucus* (1902) that we already encountered above, forced attention to the east, and away from the traditional Hellenocentric views of Hellenistic history. The editors and several of the contributors argued that not Syria but Babylonia was the true heartland of the Seleukid Empire even after the reign of its first king, Seleukos I Nikator. It was claimed that not Antioch in Syria but Seleukeia on the Tigris was the Seleukid capital, at least initially.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> A. Kuhrt and S. Sherwin-White eds., *Hellenism in the East: The Interaction of Greek and non-Greek Civilizations From Syria to Central Asia After Alexander* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987).

<sup>30</sup> Invernizzi, 'Seleucia on the Tigris', 235; H. Seyrig, 'Seleucus I et la fondation de la monarchie syrienne', *Syria*, 47 (1970), pp. 290–311; E. Marinoni, 'Le capitale del regno di Seleuco I', *Rendiconti dell'Istituto Lombardo* 106 (1972) pp. 579–631; Ernest Will, 'La capitale

The fact that Seleukid Babylonia was brought to the forefront of Seleukid studies, where it has remained ever since, has radically changed modern views of the empire. However, notwithstanding the evident greater importance (relatively speaking) of Babylonia as compared to many (but not all) other provinces, the emphasis on Babylonia as the heart of the Seleukid Empire carried with it two heuristic problems. First, it disallowed *a priori* the possibility that the Seleukid Empire was composed of a *variety* of core regions, connected by the itinerant court, and without a fixed capital; specifically, it undervalued the significance of western Asia Minor, Syria, Iran, and Baktria.<sup>31</sup> Second, the book's central question—how and why Greek and non-Greek cultures rubbed shoulders in the Seleukid Empire—juxtaposed 'Greek' and other cultures in a manner that seemed to confirm rather than question the Eurocentric binary opposition of Greeks and Orientals. Moreover, it may be doubted whether the older historiography really has ignored the eastern aspects of the empire. The contrary may even be true. Victorian historians like Edwyn Bevan wrote about the Seleukid Empire from a genuine fascination for the Orient, too, however politically incorrect their Orientalistic view of the empire as decadent and despotic may seem to us now.

A Second milestone was the publication of the monograph *From Samarkhand to Sardis* by Kuhrt and Sherwin-White, a synthesis of previous research which offered a rich overview of the archaeology and epigraphy of especially the eastern parts of the empire.<sup>32</sup> In the first sentence of the introduction to the book, the authors wrote that '[it is] our firmly held view that the Seleukid kingdom was an eastern empire.' This statement is substantiated by discussing non-Greek sources, pointing out similarities with the Achaemenid Empire, and presenting evidence that the Seleukids *were* interested in, and did not neglect, the provinces east of Syria, and that the imperial elite had varied ethnic origins. The great advance that *From Samarkhand to Sardis* made, is that next to Babylonia it also brought into focus Armenia, Iran and Central Asia as integral parts of the Seleukid imperial project.

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des Séleucides', in *Akten des XIII. Internationalen Kongress für klassische Archäologie, Berlin 1988* (Mainz am Rhein: Verlag Philipp von Zabern, 1990), pp. 259–265.

<sup>31</sup> Recent scholarship has mitigated the current 'Babylonocentrism' by rethinking Seleukid rule in Iran, see e.g. J. Wiesehöfer, *Die "Dunklen Jahrhunderte" der Persis: Untersuchungen zu Geschichte und Kultur von Fars in frühhellenistischer Zeit (330–140 v. Chr.)* (Munich: Verlag C.H. Beck, 1994); *id.*, 'Fars under Seleucid and Parthian rule', in *The Idea of Iran. Volume 2: The Age of the Parthians*, ed. by S. Curtis and S. Stewart (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007) 37–49; M. Canepa, 'Achaemenid and Seleukid royal funerary practices in Middle Iranian Kingship', in *Commutatio et Contentio: Studies in the Late Roman, Sasanian, and Early Islamic Near East in Memory of Zeev Rubin*, ed. by H. Börm and J. Wiesehöfer (Düsseldorf: Wellem Verlag, 2010) 1–21.

<sup>32</sup> A. Kuhrt and S. Sherwin-White, *From Samarkhand to Sardis: A New Approach to the Seleucid Empire* (London: Duckworth, 1993).

Since *Hellenism in the East* and especially *From Samarkhand to Sardis*, the continuity paradigm has become the leading concept in the study of Macedonian imperialism in the Middle East. Most present-day scholars emphasize as a matter of course the Seleukids' (and Alexander's) debt to the Achaemenids as well as their use of 'traditional' local idiom pertaining to kingship, particularly in Babylonia.<sup>33</sup> Three objections however may be made against this emphasis on continuity and the Seleukids' passive adoption of local customs and traditions. First, that it thinks about the Seleukid Empire in terms of the historical *past* instead of the historical present. Second, that it understands local cultures as coherent, self-contained entities. Third, that it conceptualizes 'Oriental' culture as essentially static.

### CONTINUITY OR CHANGE?

Recently Makis Aperghis provided new backing to the continuity paradigm by summing up aspects of imperialist practice that according to him the Seleukids had taken over from their Persian 'teachers'.<sup>34</sup> Aperghis however did not try to make sense of continuity, or explain *why* according to him there was no change, let alone elucidate Seleukid choices in terms of imperial transfer or interaction—*i.e.* the ways in which the empire, *viz.*, the imperial elite, positioned itself *vis-à-vis* its Achaemenid predecessor and its contemporaneous rivals. Consequently, the inventory includes broad similarities that could as well have been the result of geographical

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<sup>33</sup> See *inter alia* P. Briant, 'The Seleucid Kingdom, the Achaemenid Empire and the history of the Near East in the first millennium BC', in *Religion and Religious Practice in the Seleucid Kingdom*, ed. by P. Bilde (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1990), pp. 40–65, speaking of a 'process of historiographical "decolonisation"' (p. 42); A. Kuhrt and S. Sherwin-White, 'The transition from Achaemenid to Seleucid rule in Babylonia: Revolution or evolution?', in *Achaemenid History 8: Continuity and Change*, ed. by A. Kuhrt, H.W.A.M. Sancisi-Weerdenburg, and M.C. Root (Leiden: Brill, 1994), pp. 311–327; P. Herz, 'Hellenistische Könige. Zwischen griechischen Vorstellungen vom Königtum und Vorstellungen ihrer einheimischen Untertanen', in *Subject and Ruler: The Cult of the Ruling Power in Classical Antiquity*, ed. by A. Small (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), pp. 27–40; L. McKenzie, 'Patterns in Seleucid administration: Macedonian or Near Eastern?', *Mediterranean Archaeology*, 7 (1994), pp. 61–68; K. Szelényi-Graziotto, 'Der Kult in Babylon in seleukidischer Zeit. Tradition oder Wandel?' in *Hellenismus. Beiträge zur Erforschung von Akkulturation und politischer Ordnung in den Staaten des hellenistischen Zeitalters*, ed. by B. Funck (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996), pp. 171–194.

<sup>34</sup> G.G. Aperghis, 'Managing an empire – teacher and pupil.' in *Ancient Greece and Ancient Iran: Cross-cultural Encounters. 1st International Conference (Athens, 11-13 November 2006)*, ed. by S.M.R. Darbandi and A. Zournatzi (Athens, 2008), pp. 137–48. Related to the prevalent view of the Seleukid Empire as no more than a continuation of the Achaemenid Empire under a different dynasty is the equally popular characterization of Alexander the Great as 'the Last Achaemenid'; this is the main thesis in P. Briant's book, *Alexandre le Grand* (Paris 1974); recently translated by A. Kuhrt as *Alexander the Great and his Empire: A Short Introduction* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), *passim*.

determination, ad hoc measures, or even coincidence.<sup>35</sup> For instance the claim that the Seleukids continued to use the Persian Royal Road can hardly be thought of as meaningful: the use by an empire of an integrative communication network that involves horse couriers and a mobile court is in itself not very surprising, while the used routes are determined by the landscape of the Middle East with its imposing mountains and vast tracts of steppe and semi-desert.<sup>36</sup> It tells us nothing about the Seleukids' attitude towards their predecessors. The mere fact that the Seleukids utilized pre-existing networks of communication certainly is no proof that they wanted to be seen (let alone saw themselves) as the 'New Achaemenids'. As far as we can tell, such a claim did not play any role in their own legitimization. On the contrary, it rather seems that the Seleukids, for all their cooperation with *other* Iranian noble families, radically distanced themselves from the Achaemenid dynasty. Within Seleukid Iran, the former Achaemenid heartland of Parsa (Greek Persis, modern Fārs) clearly was of secondary importance as compared to Media, Elam or Margiana. As far as we can tell, the Seleukids never resided in Pasargadai or Persepolis (in the Achaemenid heartland), whereas they did reuse Susa in Elam (Kūzestān) and Ekbatana (Hamadān) in Media as royal residences. Most of all: they never associated themselves with the Achaemenids in their representation and propaganda.

The 'new approach' of the past three decades has stimulated new research, but it has not led to a fundamentally better understanding of Hellenistic kingship and the nature of the Seleukid state precisely because of its disregard for the Aegean side of Seleukid imperial culture. By conceptualizing the Seleukid Empire as 'Eastern' in opposition to 'Western', detaching the Ancient Greeks from the historical civilizations surrounding them, the latter post-colonial approach has paradoxically underscored the conventional East-West dichotomy and endorsed the modern West European appropriation of the Ancient Greeks as the forerunners of present-day Western European society.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> On these interactions see M. Aust, A. Miller, and R. Vulpius eds, *Imperium inter Pares: The Role of Transfers in the History of the Russian Empire: 1700–1917* (Moscow, 2010).

<sup>36</sup> On the Royal Road see P. Briant, 'From the Indus to the Mediterranean: The administrative organization and logistics of great roads of the Achaemenid Empire', in *Highways, Byways, and Road Systems in the Pre-Modern World*, ed. by S.E. Alcock, J. Bodel and R.J.A. Talbert (Malden and Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012) pp. 185–201, rightly emphasizing that the Achaemenids operated a network of roads rather than a single Royal Road; also see D.F. Graf, 'The Persian Royal Road system', in *Achaemenid History 7: Continuity and Change*, ed. by H.W.A.M. Sancisi-Weerdenburg, A. Kuhrt, and M. Cool Root (Leiden: Brill, 1994) 166–189.

<sup>37</sup> Here I am in agreement with R. Rollinger, 'The eastern Mediterranean and beyond: The relations between the worlds of the "Greek" and "non-Greek" civilizations', in *A Companion to the Classical Greek World*, ed. by K.H. Kinzl (Malden and Oxford: Blackwell, 2006) pp. 197–226: 'the juxtaposition of "Greeks" and "non-Greeks" suggest these were two separate worlds, and the opposition of "Greeks" and "non-Greeks" implied therein clearly betrays a Hellenocentric point of view and one which is likely to detract from how this period must be more objectively approached'.

In other words, by seeing ‘the Orient’ as a separate entity, the now prevalent ‘eastern’ view of the Seleukid Empire has unintentionally articulated the self-assigned cultural boundaries of Europe and ‘the West’. Paradoxically, this is exactly what back in 1978 Edward Said criticized in *Orientalism*. Moreover, it really is hard *not* to see that some form of ‘Greekness’, emanating from the imperial court, developed into a kind of prestigious reference culture that was sometimes adopted by members of local elites and indigenous aristocracies who thereby expressed, and derived status and power from, their bonds with the dynasty.<sup>38</sup> This happened in Babylon and Jerusalem, where it is well-attested that elite members were able to ‘code switch’, *i.e.*, to go from one cultural mode to another depending on context.<sup>39</sup> For local elites this meant that, while retaining a Babylonian or Judaic persona in a local context, they could ‘go Greek’ when dealing for instance with the imperial the court.<sup>40</sup> Just as we are able to identify imperial ‘high culture’ in the Ottoman Empire as *Ottoman* (and never as Turkic, Turco-Byzantine, Persian, or ‘hybrid’), imperial elite culture in the Seleukid Empire can best be understood as ‘Seleukid’ rather than ‘Greek’, even though it was for a large part based on cultural traditions that may be identified as Hellenic. The prestigious elite culture of the court may not have spread as the result of a well-planned, active promotion of Greek culture by the dynasty, but neither was it a wholly spontaneous, accidental process.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> R. Strootman, ‘Dynastic courts of the Hellenistic Empires’, in *A Companion to Ancient Greek Government*, ed. by H. Beck (Malden, MA, and New York: Wiley-Blackwell, in press), pp. 38–53; and *id.*, ‘Babylonian, Macedonian, King of the World: The Antiochos Cylinder from Borsippa and Seleukid imperial integration’, in *Shifting Social Imaginaries in the Hellenistic Period: Narrations, Practices, and Images*, ed. by E. Stavrianopoulou (Leiden and Boston: Brill, in press) pp. 67–97.

<sup>39</sup> A. Wallace-Hadrill, ‘To be Roman, go Greek: Thoughts on Hellenization at Rome’, *BICS* 71 (1998) 79–91.

<sup>40</sup> Present-day instances of such situational biculturalism suggest however that a strict separation of the respective cultural roles, especially among immigrants (e.g. a ‘German’ identity in the public sphere versus a ‘Turkish’ identity in the private sphere) is extremely difficult to sustain, and that sooner or later ‘the divisions between spheres in the “double life” will melt away’: P. Burke, *Cultural Hybridity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009) p. 112.

<sup>41</sup> A complementary model to help us explain the spread of Hellenism has been proposed by J. Ma, ‘Peer polity interaction in the Hellenistic Age’, *Past and Present*, 180.1 (2003), pp. 9–39, elaborating upon the concept introduced by C. Renfrew and J. Cherry eds., *Peer Polity Interaction and Socio-Political Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); see now also the regional case studies by C. Michels, *Kulturtransfer und monarchischer ‘Philhellenismus’: Bithynien, Pontos und Kappadokien in hellenistischer Zeit* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008). ‘Hellenization’ was known to contemporaneous non-Greek observers as *hellenizein*, ‘doing Greek’, the *locus classicus* being 2 Maccabees 4; compare *P.Col.Zen.* I 66, one of the Zenon Papyri, containing a letter by an Arab (?) camel-driver who complains that the Greeks won’t pay him properly because ‘I do not know how to *hellenizein*...’ Instead of being dismissed as historically irrelevant because it was just a ‘thin varnish’ that had no impact beyond elite circles, ‘Hellenization’ likely may become a fruitful object of research for the study of cultural encounters, but increasingly so in a depoliticized, post-postcolonial manner, just as it also seems that we are now leaving behind us the times that ‘Hellenism in the East’ was a *controversial*, semi-colonialist subject, cf. Mairs, ‘Hellenistic India’, 24. Recent publications dealing with cultural interactions in *inter alia* the Hellenistic

There is yet another reason why it would perhaps be better to stop demanding from scholars the constant separation of underlying Greek and non-Greek foundations of elements of style seen in the material culture of the Hellenistic Near East and Central Asia: the fact that recent anthropological theory teaches us that cultures do not exist in isolation as coherent, well-demarcated entities.<sup>42</sup> Cultures continuously interact with each other. They are always in flux due to the constant appropriation of 'foreign' cultural influences, and in reaction to changing political and social circumstances. This is the case particularly at the main hubs of cultural and political interaction in imperial world systems—hubs like Bactria, Babylonia, or northern Syria in the context of the Seleukid imperial system. It follows that it is impossible for us to identify specific ethnic groups behind specific cultural styles.<sup>43</sup>

In the same volume in which Aperghis again went through the arguments that underpin the idea 'that the Seleucids continued many of the administrative practices of the Achaemenids',<sup>44</sup> the British professor of Persian history Christopher Tuplin contributed a paper that criticized the trend to inscribe Alexander and the Seleukids into the extended reach of Achaemenid history.<sup>45</sup> According to Tuplin, '[g]eneral factors in favour of continuity do exist. We are dealing with two monarchic tributary empires in overlapping geographical spaces, and there is a diachronic narrative linking the two [sc. Alexander's conquest of the Achaemenid Empire]. [...] But if continuity is non-banal, there must be more to it than that.'<sup>46</sup> Scepticism of

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world include J.-C. Couvenhes and B. Legras eds., *Transferts culturels et politique dans le monde hellénistique. Actes de la table ronde sur les identités collectives (Sorbonne, 7 février 2004)* (Paris, 2006); S. Chandrasekaran, A. Kouremenos, and R. Rossi eds., *From Pella to Gandhara: Hybridisation and Identity in the Art and Architecture of the Hellenistic East* (Oxford, 2010); R. Rollinger et al. eds., *Interkulturalität in der Alten Welt. Vorderasien, Hellas Ägypten und die vielfältigen Ebenen des Kontakts* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2010), and E. Stavrianopoulou ed., *Shifting Social Imaginaries in the Hellenistic Period: Narrations, Practices, and Images* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, in press). Very useful is furthermore the theoretical introduction to processes of cultural transfer in the Ancient Mediterranean by M.J. Versluys, 'Understanding Egypt in Egypt and beyond', in *Isis on the Nile: Egyptian gods in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt. Proceedings of the IVth International Conference of Isis Studies*, ed. by L. Bricault and M.J. Versluys (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2010), pp. 7–36.

<sup>42</sup> R.J. Thornton, 'The rhetoric of ethnographic holism', in *Rereading Cultural Anthropology*, ed. by G.E. Marcus (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992) pp. 15–33; K. Ashley and V. Plesch, 'The cultural processes of "appropriation"', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 32.1 (2002) pp. 1–15.

<sup>43</sup> The presence of *polis* institutions in, say, Hellenistic Babylon—where a gymnasium and theatre, a body of *politai* and magistrates like a gymnasiarch have been attested—is not in itself evidence for the existence in Babylon there of a separate social group of migrants from Greece; see Strootman, 'Babylonian, Macedonian', 84–85. This is implied also by John Ma's model of peer polity interaction, which allows us to see that *polis* institutions can circulate independently from other aspects of Greek culture and indeed from ethnic Greeks.

<sup>44</sup> Aperghis, 'Teacher and pupil', p. 137.

<sup>45</sup> C. Tuplin, 'The Seleucids and their Achaemenid predecessors: A Persian inheritance?' in *Ancient Greece and Ancient Iran: Cross-cultural Encounters*, ed. by S.M.R. Darbandi and A. Zournatzi (Athens 2008), pp. 109–36.

<sup>46</sup> Tuplin, 'A Persian inheritance?', pp. 109–110.

the current *communis opinio* has in the recent past also been expressed by Michel Austin in the landmark *Blackwell Companion to the Hellenistic World*.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, already in 1996, Oliver Hoover cautioned that, 'while there is no denying the great debt of the Seleukid empire to its predecessors, the Seleukid kings should therefore not be thought of simply as pseudo-Achaimenids in Makedonian clothing.'<sup>48</sup> Andreas Mehl's appeal to consider the Seleukid Empire as 'jenseits von Ost und West' neither made a lasting impression on current Near Eastern historiography, perhaps because Mehl in the end did not fundamentally challenge the conceptualization of 'East' and 'West' as objectively existing cultural entities.<sup>49</sup>

## CONCLUSION

In this paper I have tried to show how modern constructions of a cultural divide between East and West have influenced views of the Hellenistic Middle East in contemporary historiography. Historians of the early twentieth century such as Edwyn Bevan wrote about the Seleukids in a manner that confirmed the self-assigned cultural boundaries of Europe. Later historians, although they did not write from a biased Eurocentric perspective, still adhered to these boundaries when claiming that the Seleukid Empire was an Eastern rather than a Western state. My argument went beyond the mere identification of a problem in Seleukid historiography. These preconceptions had various direct effects on the interpretation of the empire. Most problematic of these has been the fact that the association of the Seleukids with the 'West' and with Europe has led to the an understanding of the empire as a European-style nation state and the subsequent attribution to Seleukid imperialism of features of modern European colonialism. Another major unsolved problem, is the tension between on the one hand the cultural and ethnic diversity that, like any empire, characterised the Seleukid state, and on the other hand integrative processes, viz., the creation of imperial cohesion in ideology and the co-opting of local elites in the framework of imperial rule. The now prevailing idea that the Seleukids simply adapted their rule to various local circumstances is totally at odds with the marked Hellenism (or 'Hellenism') of the court, with the spread of Iranianism in the

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<sup>47</sup> M.M. Austin, 'The Seleukids and Asia', in *A Companion to the Hellenistic World*, ed. by A. Erskine (Malden and Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), pp. 121–133.

<sup>48</sup> O.D. Hoover, *Kingmaker: A Study in Seleukid Political Imagery* (doctoral dissertation, Hamilton, 1996), p. 1.

<sup>49</sup> A. Mehl, 'Zwischen West und Ost / Jenseits von West und Ost: das Reich der Seleukiden', in *Zwischen Ost und West. Studien zur Geschichte des Seleukidenreichs*, ed. by K. Brodersen (Hamburg 1999), pp. 9–44.

later empire,<sup>50</sup> and more generally with the notable processes of cultural exchange taking place so rapidly in the Hellenistic period.

Perhaps it would be best not to consider Seleukid history and culture in terms of an East-West dichotomy at all. It may be more fruitful to see the empire as an integral part of Middle East history, and the Aegean world as integrated into a wider Mediterranean and Near Eastern world system rather than as the home of a singular proto-European civilization alien to the Near East, as both Classicists and Orientalists have done in the past. Accepting that Greeks and Macedonians can be part of Near Eastern history would also force us to rethink the cultural boundaries of present-day Europe, and the place of Classical Civilization in Western Civilization. After all, Ancient History has been emancipating itself from the 'venerated field' of Classics for decades now and surely can no longer be thought of as embedded in a tradition of textual valorisation that is 'located within and serves the purposes of Western self-understanding [...] and the realization of Western identity', as one scholar recently claimed it still is.<sup>51</sup> If instead we no longer think about the Seleukid Empire from the perspective of modern Europe, we may be able to develop a new model for understanding the Seleukid Empire.

What we should look for, I would suggest, is a model from which we can approach the Seleukid Empire as a premodern universal *empire* instead of a rigidly structured nation state *avant la lettre* with well-defined borders, a centralized bureaucracy disconnected from the dynastic household, and a territory.<sup>52</sup> Instead I propose to see the empire, in accordance with recent work on premodern Eurasian empires and new developments in Seleukid studies, as a huge but flexible power network that connects through often shifting means a diverse variety of localized polities, including semi-autonomous vassal principalities (e.g. Pārsa/Persis under the *fratarakā*) and fully autonomous satellite states (e.g. Pontus, or Baktria in the mid-second

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<sup>50</sup> The rise of local Iranian dynasties in the later Seleukid Empire ultimately resulted in the construction of a cultural memory of the Achaemenids notably in western Seleukid successor states like Kommagene and Pontus. For the 'Persian revival' after c. 150 BCE as a typical Hellenistic, viz., Seleukid phenomenon see R. Strootman, 'Hellenistic court society: The Seleukid imperial court under Antiochos the Great, 223-187 BCE', in *Royal Courts in Dynastic States and Empires: A Global Perspective*, ed. by J. Duindam, M. Kunt, and T. Artan (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011) 63–89.

<sup>51</sup> T.C. McCaskie, "'As on a darkling plain": Practitioners, publics, propagandists, and Ancient historiography', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 54.1 (2012), pp. 145–173 (p. 64). In fact, one of the most thriving fields within Ancient History today is the study of the Achaemenid and Sasanian empires, with exciting new research conducted by such scholars as Matthew Canepa, Henry Colburn, Elspeth Dusinberre, Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones, Rahim Shayegan, Caroline Waerzeggers, among others.

<sup>52</sup> Against the interpretation of empires 'as well-demarcated territorial entities on the model of nation-states' also see Pitts, 'Political theory of empire', p. 225. Attempts to enforce the present (or Weberian) concept of a centralized nation(al) state on ancient empires is most clear from the repeated attempts to estimate the total area in km<sup>2</sup> or total population of the Seleukid and especially the Achaemenid Empire—Wikipedia even treats us to an estimated average population density of 5.9 p. km<sup>2</sup>.

century).<sup>53</sup> This will allow us to see the Seleukid Empire as a state that is relentlessly expansionist and to a high degree militarized but prefers to negotiate with local elites rather than coerce them into submission at all cost in order to access the economic and military resources of the Middle East;<sup>54</sup> a polity furthermore that has no clear borders and instead tries to keep each and everyone together by means of a vigorous universalistic ideology;<sup>55</sup> and finally, a state that is flexible in its relations with local elites and is able to ‘breathe’, that is, to contract and then expand again, instead of following a linear development of continuous decline.<sup>56</sup> A rewarding new avenue of

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<sup>53</sup> The bibliography is extensive and I cite here only the recent literature which has most informed my thinking: C.M. Sinopoli, ‘The archaeology of empires’, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 23 (1994), pp. 159–180; D. Lieven, *Empire: The Russian Empire and its Rivals* (London: John Murray, 2000); S. Faroqi, *The Ottoman Empire and the World Around It* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004); H. Münkler, *Imperien. Die Logik der Weltherrschaft: vom Alten Rom bis zu den Vereinigten Staaten* (Berlin: Rowohlt, 2005); J. Darwin, *After Tamerlane: The Rise & Fall of Global Empires, 1400-2000* (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2007); K. Barkey, *Empire of Difference: The Ottomans in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); and P. Hämäläinen, *The Comanche Empire* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008), whose analysis of how in a given area two or more competing imperial projects can be at work simultaneously may shed new light on our understanding of Asia Minor in the third century or Iran in the second. For the new view of the Seleukid Empire as a network state comprising a diversity of polities and forms of direct and indirect rule (contra the view of the empire as identical with territory) see Engels, ‘Middle Eastern feudalism’, Strootman, ‘Queen of Kings’, and Richard Wenghofer’s two forthcoming articles on the entanglement of ‘autonomous’ Bactria and the empire in the SSD volumes *War Within the Family* and *Seleucid Royal Women*. Also see Capdetrey, *Pouvoir séleucide*. Of importance in this context, too, is Alexander McAuley’s research project ‘The Genealogy of the Seleucids’ at McGill University, Montréal, which aims at reconsidering Seleucid marriage politics and dynastic structures in Asia Minor; see preliminary [www.seleucid-genealogy.com](http://www.seleucid-genealogy.com), cf. M. D’Agostini, ‘La strutturazione del potere seleucidico in Anatolia: il caso di Acheo il Vecchio e Alessandro di Sardi’, *Erga/Logoi* 1 (forthcoming) 87–106, and A. McAuley, ‘Once a Seleukid, always a Seleukid: Seleukid princesses in their nuptial courts’, in: A. Erskine, L. Llewellyn-Jones, and S. Wallace eds., *The Hellenistic Court* (Swansea: Classical Press of Wales, forthcoming), and id., ‘The House of Achaëus: The missing piece of the Anatolian puzzle’, in *War within the Family: A Reassessment of the First Half-Century of Seleucid Rule*, ed. by K. Erickson (Swansea: Classical Press of Wales, forthcoming).

<sup>54</sup> For the Seleukid Empire as a negotiated enterprise see *i.a.* Ma, *Antiochos III and the Cities*; R. Strootman, ‘Kings and cities in the Hellenistic Age’, in *Political Culture in the Greek City After the Classical Age*, ed. by R. Alston, O. van Nijf, and C. Williamson (Leuven: Peeters, 2011), pp. 141–53; *id.*, ‘Babylonian, Macedonian’; and K. Erickson, ‘Apollo-Nabû: The Babylonian policy of Antiochus I’, in *Seleucid Dissolution: The Sinking of the Anchor*, ed. by K. Erickson and G. Ramsey (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2011), pp. 51–66.

<sup>55</sup> Seleukid universalistic ideology: P.F. Bang, ‘Between Aśoka and Antiochos: An essay in world history on universal kingship and cosmopolitan culture in the Hellenistic ecumene’, in *Universal Empire: A Comparative Approach to Imperial Culture and Representation in Eurasian History*, ed. by P.F. Bang and D. Kołodziejczyk (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 60–75; R. Strootman, ‘Hellenistic imperialism and the idea of world unity’, in *The City in the Classical and Post-Classical World: Changing Contexts of Power and Identity*, ed. by C. Rapp and H. Drake (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, in press) pp. 38–61; and *id.*, ‘From King of Asia to King of Kings: Imperial titulature in the Seleukid and post-Seleukid Middle East’, in *Seleukeia: Studies in Seleucid History, Archaeology and Numismatics in Honor of Getzel M. Cohen*, ed. by R. Oetjen and F.X. Ryan (Berlin: De Gruyter, forthcoming).

<sup>56</sup> Cf. T.N. D’Altroy, ‘Empires in a wider world’, in S.E. Alcock *et al.* eds., *Empires: Perspectives From Archaeology and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) pp. 125–127:

research for instance could be to chart—on the basis of literary sources, epigraphy, and landscape analysis—the networks of interactions between the itinerant court and representatives of local elites, and identify the agents and intermediaries; this would allow us to better understand processes of interaction between global empire and the local level, but also processes of cultural exchange taking place between different localities. A better understanding of the process of ‘vassalisation’, too, may offer new insights in both the Macedonian and Middle Iranian imprint on the Middle East in terms of *longue durée* history. I hope to return to these and related matters in future publications.

At the same time, we should avoid the pitfall of thinking about the Seleukid Empire (or the Hellenistic world in general for that matter) primarily in terms of continuity and change. The historical, pre-Hellenistic antecedents of the Seleukid monarchical and imperial culture, whether they be Greek or Babylonian or Persian, are of far less relevance than its contemporaneous functioning and meaning. To put it differently, it would perhaps be better to depoliticize the debate and accept the fact that the Seleukid Empire was neither Western nor Eastern (let alone ‘in between East and West’), but Seleukid.

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‘The outstanding feature of preindustrial empires was the continually metamorphosing nature of relations between the central powers and the societies drawn under the imperial aegis’ (p. 125).