

**The Seleukid Empire  
between Orientalism and Hellenocentrism:  
Writing the History of Iran in the Third and  
Second Centuries BCE\***

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Wedged between the Achaemenid and Parthian periods in Iranian history, there is the so-called Hellenistic Age, in which the lands of Greater Iran were part of the political organization known as the Seleukid Empire.

For two centuries the Seleukid Empire (312-64 BCE) was the largest of the three Macedonian empires that had emerged after the death of Alexander the Great. It was created by, and later named after, Seleukos I Nikator ('the Victorious') from his satrapy of Babylonia, incorporating and transforming the infrastructure of the preceding Achaemenid Empire. It was an archetypal

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imperial polity: a huge, composite hegemonial system characterized by wide ethnic, cultural, religious and political diversity – like most premodern imperial organizations, the empire can be best described as a centralized network of power relations rather than a rigidly structured ‘state’. The Seleukid Empire was in essence a military organization exacting tribute. Kingship was charismatic and intensely martial. Imperial ideology was universalistic, the self-presentation of the Seleukid monarch a continuation and elaboration of the age-old Near Eastern notion of a Great King. The empire in its heyday stretched from the Pamir Mountains to the Aegean Sea, reaching its greatest extent around 200 under Antiochos III the Great. From c. 150 the empire declined due to internal dynastic conflicts, as a result of which the empire was unable to halt Parthian expansion on the Iranian plateau. In 64 the Seleukid dynasty, by then reduced to a small kingdom in northern Syria, disappeared from history virtually unnoticed when Pompey took the royal title away from the last Seleukids and turned Syria into a Roman *provincia*.

Perhaps surprisingly, the Seleukid period has not yet acquired a place of its own in the *longue durée* of the Middle East. This is notably the case with narratives of Iranian history.<sup>1</sup> Among the succession of empires characterizing Middle East history since the Neo-Assyrians, the Seleukid Empire is one of the least known and remains relatively understudied, particularly in comparison to the preceding Achaemenid Empire.<sup>2</sup>

In the autumn of 2005, the British Museum in London held an exhibition dedicated to the Achaemenid Empire that was called *Forgotten Empire*. A curious title. After all, the Achaemenid Empire is, apart from Rome, the *least* forgotten empire of the Ancient World. This in terms of both popular

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1. See e.g. the cursory treatments in J. Wiesehöfer, *Das antike Persien*, Düsseldorf and Zürich, 1993, and M. Brosius, *The Persians: An Introduction*, London and New York, 2006.

2. In past historiography, the empire has been relegated to a place of secondary importance in Middle East history by various, often rhetorical, means, e.g. by calling it a ‘kingdom’ in opposition to the Achaemenid ‘Empire’ and describing it as a national state of sorts (‘Syria’); by treating the Seleukids as alien intruders who left no lasting impression on the region; by down-dating the beginning of Parthian supremacy on the Iranian plateau; and, more recently, by arguing that the empire was basically a continuation of the Achaemenid Empire. I will return to these viewpoints later.

interest and scholarly attention.<sup>3</sup> The Macedonian Empire of the Seleukids has a better claim to the proud epithet ‘forgotten’ ~~would perhaps be more befitting~~. There are only two textbooks to give a comprehensive overview of the empire’s history. They both date to before the First World War.<sup>4</sup> Other scholarly books devoted to the Seleukids will hardly fill one shelf in the hypothetical library that wishes to bring them all together. There are exceptions to this lack of interest. Seleukid Babylonia has enjoyed a notable increase in scholarly attention over the past two decades.<sup>5</sup> Royal inscriptions in Greek cities in Asia Minor and the events described in the first two books of Maccabees have never failed to attract the attention of scholars. In the historiography of Iran, however, the Seleukid period remains a ~~virtual~~ black hole, with the exception, to some extent, of the Seleukid provinces of Persis (Fārs) and Susiana (Khūzestān), where finds dating to the Hellenistic period have been recovered as a kind of by-product of excavations conducted at

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3. Especially in the past three decades there has been a considerable expansion of interest in Achaemenid history and culture, and the bibliography is accordingly vast; for an excellent (though critical) appraisal of recent developments see T. Harrison, *Writing Ancient Persia*, Bristol, 2011. Even beyond the field of Ancient History, the Achaemenid Empire stands out, and has always stood out, as a model empire – the Achaemenids are rarely absent from volumes offering a diachronic approach to imperialism in world history, while the Seleukids, like the Parthians and Sassanians, usually are; cf. e.g. S. E. Alcock *et al.* edd., *Empires: Perspectives From Archaeology and History*, Cambridge, 2001; A. J. S. Spawforth ed., *The Court and Court Society in Ancient Monarchies*, Cambridge, 2007; F. Hurlet ed., *Les Empires: Antiquité et Moyen Âge. Analyse Comparée*, Rennes, 2008; I. Morris and W. Scheidel edd., *The Dynamics of Ancient Empires: State Power from Assyria to Byzantium*, Oxford, 2009. The same is true of books on empire written for a general audience, e.g. most recently A. Chua, *Day of Empire*, New York, 2009.

4. E. R. Bevan, *The House of Seleucus*, London, 1902; A. Bouché-Leclercq, *Histoire des Séleucides (232-64 avant J.-C.)*, Paris, 1913-14.

5. See *i.a.* R. J. van der Spek, “The Babylonian city,” in A. Kuhrt and S. M. Sherwin-White edd., *Hellenism in the East*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1987, pp. 57-74; S. M. Sherwin-White, “Seleucid Babylonia: A case study for the installation and development of Greek rule,” in Kuhrt & Sherwin-White 1987: 1-31; S. B. Downey, *Mesopotamian Religious Architecture: Alexander Through the Parthians*, Princeton, 1988; F. Joannès, *The Age of Empires: Mesopotamia in the First Millennium BC*, Edinburgh, 2000; T. Boiy, *Late Achaemenid and Hellenistic Babylon*, Leuven, 2004; M. J. H. Linssen, *The Cults of Uruk and Babylon. The Temple Ritual Texts as Evidence for Hellenistic Cult Practice*, Leiden, 2004.

such sites as Persepolis, Pasargadai and Susa.<sup>6</sup> Because of the relative abundance of numismatic evidence, several scholars, most of all Josef Wiesehöfer, were able to study the (chronology of the) Fratarakā rulers of Hellenistic Persis.<sup>7</sup> But although it has been established that the Fratarakā (‘governors’ or ‘commanders’) with few exceptions were vassal rulers of the Seleukids and later Arsakids rather than fully autonomous would-be successors of the Achaemenids, the question how Fārs was integrated in the Seleukid imperial framework has not yet been addressed. Only recently has it become more clear that indirect rule through local rulers, instead of being evidence of the Seleukids’ disappearance was typical of the Seleukid Empire’s hegemonial system outside the urbanized core of the Fertile Crescent, notably in the century between the reigns of Antiochos II and the final collapse of the empire in Iran after the death of Antiochos IV (*i.e.* between *c.* 250-150). But generally speaking, remains from the Seleukid period in Iran have rarely been the focus of excavations by archaeologist, who instead have concentrated on Achaemenid and earlier levels. In archaeology there is the additional problem that usually only *Greek*-style remains are associated with the Seleukids: remains from the Seleukid period that modern archaeologists classify as Iranian in style have been disconnected from the Seleukids by conceptualizing them as the products of a Persian Revival.

The problem is, that the Seleukid Empire has always been considered a ‘western’, Greek empire and therefore a Fremdkörper in the history of the

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6. Cf. J.-F. Salles, “The Arab-Persian Gulf under the Seleucids,” in Kuhrt & Sherwin-White 1987: 75-109; D. T. Potts, *The Arabian Gulf in Antiquity. Volume 2: From Alexander the Great to the Coming of Islam*, New York, 1990; E. Dabrowa, “Les Séleucides et l’Élimaïde,” *Parthica* 6, 2004, pp. 107-15; D. Stronach ed. *Pasargadae: A report on the excavations conducted by the British institute of Persian Studies from 1961 to 1963* (Oxford 1978).

7. J. Wiesehöfer, *Die “Dunklen Jahrhunderte” der Persis: Untersuchungen zu Geschichte und Kultur von Fars in frühhellenistischer Zeit (330–140 v. Chr.)*, München, 1994; id., “Fars under the Seleucids and the Parthians,” in V. S. Curtis *et al.* edd., *The Idea of Iran. Volume 2: The Age of the Parthians*, London, 2007, pp. 37-49; an updated version of the latter article appeared as “Frataraka rule in Seleucid Persis: A new appraisal,” in A. Erskine and L. Llewellyn-Jones edd., *Creating a Hellenistic World*, Swansea and Oxford, 2011, pp. 107-22.

Middle East. This is quite remarkable. It is not uncommon for Oriental empires to be created by conquerors coming from the fringes of the Middle East: The Parthian Empire (created by Iranians from Inner Asia), The Ummayyad Empire (Arabs from the steppe fringes and the southern peninsula), The Seljuk and Ottoman Empires (Turks from Inner Asia), the Il-Khanate (Mongols). The Achaemenids and Sassanians are to some extent exceptions, though like the Macedonians they, too, had as their homeland a relatively peripheral territory beyond the urbanized central regions of the Near East. The Seleukid Empire moreover was geographically mostly unconnected with Greece and Macedon, its core regions being Babylonia, Susiana, Media, and northern Syria.

Modern historiography does not know what to do with these Macedonian kings whose power rested on the support of Greek and Hellenized urban elites and the loyalty of Iranian aristocrats. The reason may simply be that historians are still at a loss when it comes to choosing whether the Seleukid kingdom was a 'western' or an 'eastern' empire. The debate has developed into a virtual deadlock because some have *insisted* that it was either a western or an eastern empire.

The aim of this article is to elucidate the state of the question, depoliticize the debate, and propose new ways of looking at the Seleukids, particularly in the context of Iranian history, that will hopefully lead away from the current impasse.

### **The Seleukid Empire: A Very Short History**

The history of the Seleukids begins, as it must, with the Macedonian conquest of the east in the reign of Alexander III, known as The Great (perhaps an allusion to his being the next Great King of the Near Eastern imperial tradition). Alexander, though unconnected with the dynasty in terms of kinship, was to the Seleukids what Cyrus the Great was to the Achaemenids or Djengizh Khan to the Mongol Empire. That is: historically speaking. Except for a very short period in the early reign of Seleukos Nikator, the Seleukids themselves did not legitimize their rule by referring to Alexander, who was much less a role-model for later Hellenistic kings than modern enthusiasts ~~wish to~~ think.

After the death of Alexander, Seleukos Nikator ('the Conqueror'), a Macedonian nobleman and formerly a member of Alexander's inner circle, established himself in Babylonia in the course of a bitter and protracted struggle with his main opponent Antigonos the One-Eyed.<sup>8</sup> From Babylonia, Seleukos first secured Media, Susiana, Elam and Persis, and then northern Iran and Central Asia (Baktria and Sogdia), establishing the Hindu Kush as frontier with the Maurya Empire in northern India. We know next to nothing about Seleukos' eastern campaigns, only that he pacified the whole of the east in less than five years. Apparently he met with serious resistance only from Chandragupta Maurya in India. In obtaining the support of Iranian aristocrats, who provided him and his successors with cavalry, Seleukos presumably profited from his marriage with Apama, the daughter of the late Sogdian leader Spitamenes who had once been Alexander's worst nightmare. Kinship diplomacy probably was the key to Seleukos' relations with the Iranian nobility, especially in the northeast. Apama was the mother of Seleukos' son and successor Antiochos Soter, who became viceroy in Babylonia and the Eastern Satrapies in 292/1. Dynastic marriage ties, especially with Iranian noble families, would later be the basis of the Seleukid vassal state system in the Middle East. At the turn of the century, Seleukos acquired northern Mesopotamia and northern Syria. Around 280 he established imperial hegemony over Asia Minor and laid claim to Thrace and Macedon. Seleukos' successors never formally gave up claims to this very vast realm that comprised all lands formerly under the sway of the Achaemenids except Palestine, the Indian satrapies, and Egypt. Seleukid control of the coastal regions of the Mediterranean was constantly challenged by the rival Ptolemaic house, the Macedonian dynasty that ran a seaborne empire in the eastern Mediterranean and Aegean – an empire that included Egypt but was not therefore an Egyptian empire at that time (Palestine and, for a very short period, India were brought under Seleukid control by Antiochos III at the closing of the third century; in the 160s his son Antiochos IV led an abortive attempt to annex Egypt, Cyrenaica and Cyprus).

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8. The official foundation date is 312/11, the year when Seleukos definitively took possession of Babylonia.

Cities in the empire were normally autonomous, both *de iure* and *de facto*.<sup>9</sup> In the course of the third century, the Seleukid Empire was slowly transformed from a feeble system of provinces policed, for better or worse, by appointed but in practice unruly governors into a system of vassal kingdoms connected to the imperial center – the peripatetic royal court – through marriage ties and ritualized gift exchange. Only the central core of the strongly urbanized Fertile Crescent, and the strategically crucial province of Media, remained under direct royal control.

In the course of the second century, the Iranian plateau was gradually taken over by the Parthians. The decline of Seleukid hegemony was a slow process. The Parthian kingdom at first was just one of several vassal states. Even when the Parthians entirely broke away from Seleukid control, what we should envisage is the simultaneous presence of two competing imperial projects in the same area rather than a clear-cut watershed. Anatolia too was lost only gradually. Here a similar situation existed as in Iran even after the Treaty of Apameia in 188. The fact that the Seleukids ultimately were unsuccessful in their imperial endeavors in second century Iran and Asia Minor does not mean that they weren't there. And even as late as 150 – when Khorasan, Central Asian and Asia Minor had been irrevocably lost – there still remained a huge empire comprising the entire Fertile Crescent.

After c. 150 however the Seleukid Empire was torn between two rival branches of the royal family that both claimed the imperial title in a series of vicious dynastic wars that destroyed the empire from within. As a result of dynastic infighting the Seleukids were unable to prevent the Parthians from taking Media – their principal source of war horses – in c. 148 and Babylonia in the following decades. With the loss of these two core regions, which became definitive with the slaying of Antiochos VII and the destruction of the Seleukid army by the Parthians in 129, the Seleukid

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9. R. Strootman, "Kings and cities in the Hellenistic Age," in R. Alston, O. van Nijf, C. Williamson edd., *Political Culture in the Greek City After the Classical Age*, Leuven, 2011, 141-54; on the Seleukids and the cities in the west see further W. Orth, *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, 1977; J. Ma, *Antiochos III and the Cities of Western Asia Minor*, Oxford, 2000.

kingdom ceased to exist as an imperial power. Dynastic wars continued until nothing more remained of the empire but northern Syria, and in 64 the Seleukid monarchy was abolished by the Romans without a blow.

### **The Seleukids and Iran**

Northern Iran and Khorasan nominally belonged to the Seleukid Empire from *c.* 306 to at least *c.* 170. Western Iranian lands (Media, Susiana, Persis) remained integrated in the Seleukid imperial system until Parthian southward expansion expelled them from the Iranian plateau. Still, the Parthians formally acknowledged Seleukid overlordship until their king Mithradates I (*c.* 171-138) took the title of Great King in defiance of the Seleukid house, ~~most~~ probably in 140/39, the year when he defeated and captured the Seleukid king Demetrios II. A last substantial attempt to reassert Seleukid authority in the eastern satrapies occurred in 130 when the energetic Antiochos VII Sidetes launched a campaign to restore Seleukid hegemony in the east. He reconquered Babylonia but died fighting during the winter of 130/29. Sidetes' death caused his huge invasion army to break down and marked the end of Macedonian imperialism in the east.

On the Iranian plateau, the Seleukids maintained bonds with local aristocracies rather than with cities. Seleukos I had married the daughter Spitamenes; later Seleukid kings systematically concluded marriage alliances with the Iranian dynasties of *i.a.* Pontos, Kommagene and Armenia. At least three Seleukid kings had Iranian mothers. The good relations that Seleukos I maintained with the Iranian nobility through his son and viceroy Antiochos, and ultimately based on kinship ties, may explain in part why the Iranian east remained so conspicuously loyal to the Seleukids while in the west revolts often broke out,<sup>10</sup> and why vast numbers of Iranian horse were part of Seleukid armies until at least the reign of Antiochos IV

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10. J. Wolski, "L'effondrement de la domination Séleucides en Iran au III<sup>e</sup> siècle av. J.-C.," *Bulletin International de l'Académie Polonaise des Sciences et des Lettres* 5.13, 1947, pp. 13-70; J. Wiesehöfer, "Discordia et Defectio – *Dynamis kai Pithanourgia*: die frühen Seleukiden und Iran," in B. Funk ed., *Hellenismus. Beiträge zur Erforschung von Akkulturation und politischer Ordnung in den Staaten des hellenistischen Zeitalters*. Tübingen, 1997, pp. 29-56.



(175-164). But although the second Seleukid king, Antiochos I, was the son of an Iranian noblewoman, and the Seleukid dynasty thereafter frequently intermarried with Iranian noble houses, it would be historically meaningless to say that the Seleukids were 'half-Iranian'. When Antiochos III arrived in Baktria in 208, he apparently did not refer to his Iranian ancestry to assume an Iranian persona to enhance his charisma in the northeastern provinces.<sup>11</sup> But in that context, I would argue, *kinship* ties were more relevant than ethnic *identity* in negotiating with local rulers.

Seleukid presence in Iran was restricted to the fortification and occupation by military settlers of strategic sites along the main land routes, in particular the artery known as the High Road, which led from Mesopotamia to Baktria and beyond. The principal Seleukid power base in western Iran was Ekbatana (Hamadān) in Media. Commanding the passage from Babylonia to Iran, Ekbatana was a royal residence (the pre-existing Achaemenid palace was kept in use by the Seleukids) and treasury and harbored a royal mint. Seleukid kings struck coins there until *c.* 150.<sup>12</sup> In addition, military colonies were founded in the vicinity of Ekbatana, particularly on the rich Nisaeen Plain, famous for its war horses, where a fortified city bearing the dynastic name Laodikeia was founded. In northern Iran, the principal Seleukid strongholds were Rhagai (near modern Tehran) and Hekatompylos (perhaps Shahr-i Qumis). On the coastal plain of Fārs the city of Antiocheia-in-Persis was founded by Antiochos I. The Seleukid administrative capital of Fārs, where a Macedonian governor resided until at least 221 (Polybios 5.40.7), was either Pasargadai or Istakhr until Fārs became a semi-autonomous client kingdom in the late third century. In Khūzestān, Susa was renamed Seleukeia to become a royal residence and the site of a royal mint (Strabo 15.3.5). Regarding religion, the archaeology of Elam (Seleukid Elymais) reveals mostly continuity of indigenous

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11. R. Mairs, "The places in between: Model and metaphor in the archaeology of Hellenistic Arachosia," in S. Chandrasekaran et al. edd., *From Pella to Gandhara: Hybridisation and Identity in the Art and Architecture of the Hellenistic East*. Oxford, 2010, pp. 177-187, esp. p. 180.

12. O. Mørkholm, *Antiochus IV of Syria*, Copenhagen, 1966, p. 178; P. F. Mittag, *Antiochos IV. Epiphanes. Eine politische Biographie*, Berlin, 2006, p. 52.

religious architecture, e.g. at the sites of Masjid-i Solaiman and Bard-è Néchandeh.<sup>13</sup>

The situation in the northeast was different. Seleukid presence here lasted shorter but was much **more** stronger. The first Seleukid kings clearly carried out a robust imperialist project there, systematically constructing fortifications in Sogdia, Margiana and Baktria. Antiochos I built a wall around the oasis of Marv, where he established a town named Antiocheia after himself (Strabo 9.516; Plinius, *Natural History* 6.47). Coins found at Marv suggest an uninterrupted Seleukid presence in Margiana until the middle of the second century. There was a royal mint in Baktra, the administrative capital of Baktria,<sup>14</sup> and / or Ai Khanoum.<sup>15</sup> In Sogdia, early Hellenistic remains suggest the existence of a military colony at Marakanda (Samarkand).<sup>16</sup> It has been argued that defensive measures at the north-eastern frontier resulted in a decrease in trade relations in Central Asia and an increase in hostilities between nomads and sedentary agriculturists.<sup>17</sup> Central Asian economy, however, flourished under the Seleukid dynasty, as the dynasty encouraged migration to the Baktrian Valley and actively stimulated the expansion of irrigation networks there.<sup>18</sup>

From c. 250 the Seleukid east was gradually transformed into a system of vassal kingdoms. The Seleukids had always been willing to acknowledge local autonomy in return for tribute, military aid and formal acknowledgment of Seleukid imperial suzerainty. Protecting civic autonomy had been the basis of their relations with the Greek cities in the west from the beginning. A similar shift from direct administration by royal officials to

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13. Downey 1988: 131-36; cf. R. Strootman s.v. "Seleucid Empire," in E. Yarshater ed., *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, forthcoming.

14. E. T. Newell, *The Coinage of the Eastern Seleucid Mints from Seleucus I to Antiochus III*, New York, 1938, pp. 228-30.

15. B. Kritt, *Seleucid Coins of Bactria*, Lancaster, 1996.

16. A. Kuhrt and S. Sherwin-White, *From Samarkand to Sardis: A New Approach to the Seleucid Empire*, London, 1993, p. 106.

17. M. J. Olbrycht, "Die Beziehungen der Steppennomaden Mittelasiens zu den hellenistischen Staaten (bis zum Ende des 3. Jahrhunderts vor Chr.)," in Funk 1997: 147-69.

18. R. N. Frye, *The Heritage of Central Asia: From Antiquity to the Turkish Expansion*, Princeton, 1996, p. 113.

indirect rule through vassal rulers, with connections established by marriage and ritualized guest-friendship, and cemented by gifts, is also noticeable in the mountainous regions of Armenia and Anatolia.

Although the result rather than the cause of Seleukid decline, the loss of Iran set in motion the gradual dissolution of the Seleukid Empire as a world power. Iranian lands, including Baktria and Sogdia, were of fundamental importance for the empire because in addition to tribute these regions provided much of the cavalry on which Seleukid military power was to a large extent based, as well as light infantry, particularly archers. At the Battle of Magnesia in 190 Antiochos III fielded no less than 6,000, presumably Iranian, cataphracts and more than 10,000 Elamite and Persian light infantry (Livy 37.40.1-14); as late as 166/5 Antiochos IV paraded 1,500 cataphracts and 1,000 Parthian or Saka horse archers during a festival in Syria (Polybius 30.25.6), and in 140 Demetrios II was still able to mobilize troops from Fārs and Elam to fight against the Parthians (Justin 36.1.4).

### **East and West**

In modern scholarship the Seleukid Empire is a controversial subject. There have been various paradigm shifts in the last century. From the early nineteenth century historians have considered the Seleukids in terms of an antithesis of east and west. According to this early paradigm the Seleukid kingdom was a 'western' empire, imposing Greek culture on the peoples of the east. Thus Edwyn Bevan (1902) notoriously found that the Seleukids' chief claim to fame was their spreading of Greek ('European') vitality in the indolent east. But Bevan also believed that in time the Seleukids themselves became 'orientalized' and that the resulting decadence was the principal cause of their decline: they stopped being Greeks. Although such blatant orientalism has now become uncommon,<sup>19</sup> the notion that Seleukid history is a continuation of classical Greek history still dominates oriental studies, where the Macedonian period is often considered an anomalous interlude in the history of the Middle East, better past over quickly or left to classicists entirely. For this reason most handbooks of the Ancient Near East end abruptly with the arrival or death of Alexander.

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19. But see P. Green, *The Hellenistic Age: A Short History*, New York, 2007, p. 180.

Resistance rose from the late 1970s against the Hellenocentric, Orientalistic approaches of the colonial age and its one-sided focus on ‘change’ in the form of a supposed ‘Hellenization’ of the Near East. The counter-movement was facilitated by, and itself enhanced, the growing availability of non-Greek, especially cuneiform Babylonian sources. It also profited from the deconstruction of “Hellenism” as a cultural concepts that had taken place in the 1960s and 1970s. Unfortunately, in their vigorously advanced ‘postcolonial’ reaction, scholars sometimes went very far, turning around the notion of Hellenism in the East so radically that the Hellenic aspects of the empire disappeared from view in favor of an image of the Seleukid Empire as really an *eastern* empire, merely a continuation of earlier developments. Thus the paradigm of change was substituted by the paradigm of continuity. Here we may think of Pierre Briant’s characterization of Alexander the Great as ‘the Last Achaemenid’,<sup>20</sup> or the now fashionable perception of the Seleukid Empire as essentially a continuation of the Achaemenid kingdom, and not a new creation in its own right. But all empires are inclined to find ways to relate to their predecessors and rivals, adopting and adapting features of them. The Seleukid Empire certainly was not in any way exceptional in this respect.

In their important study *From Samarkhand tot Sardis* (1993) Amélie Kuhrt and Susan Sherwin-White advanced the (by then no longer very new) view of the Seleukid Empire as an ‘eastern empire’ by presenting non-Greek sources, by pointing out similarities with the Achaemenid Empire, and by focusing on Babylonia and provinces further east to demonstrate that the Seleukids did not neglect the ‘east’, as some historians had suggested in the past.<sup>21</sup> The book’s main flaw is its own reverse neglect of the Greco-Macedonian aspects of Seleukid monarchy, Seleukid relations with Greek

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20. P. Briant, *Alexander the Great and his Empire: A Short Introduction*, Princeton and Oxford, 2010.

21. E.g. E. J. Bickerman, “The Seleucid Period,” in: E. Yarshater ed., *The Cambridge History of Iran. Volume 3: The Seleucid, Parthian, and Sassanian Periods*, Cambridge, 1983, pp. 3-20, and especially E. Will, *Histoire politique du monde hellénistique (323-30 av. J.-C.)*, Nancy, 1979; but note Will’s ferocious denial of these allegations in *Topoi* 4.2, 1994, pp. 433-7. The purport of Kuhrt & Sherwin-White 1993 is expressed clearly on p. 1, line 1: “[It is] our firmly held view that the Seleukid kingdom was an eastern empire”.

*poleis*, and western provinces such as Anatolia, Syria and Palestine. Thus the ‘new approach’ has kept the debate confined to the explicative cadre of an east-west dichotomy, encouraging teleological questions of continuity and change.<sup>22</sup> But pointing to continuities and discontinuities does not explain the forces behind these developments. It does not elucidate the nature of Seleukid royal ideology and Macedonian imperialism.

The post-colonial paradigm of the 1980's and 1990's, which relied heavily on Edward Said, did result in a more positive evaluation of the ‘eastern’ aspects of the Macedonian empire in Asia in modern scholarship and a better understanding of Orientalistic stereotype in both ancient and present-day historiography. It is questionable, however, if it has really *created* interest in the so-called ‘eastern’ side of Alexander’s and Seleukos’ empires, and whether it really constitutes a *new* approach. Interest in the eastern side of the Seleukids had always existed and it would certainly go too far to claim, as *e.g.* Briant did as recently as 2010 – in a newly written methodological appendix to the English translation of his 1974 book on Alexander the Great – that ‘traditional’ scholarship has *ignored* non-Greek sources; Bevan in his much despised 1902 monograph on the Seleukid Empire eagerly used whatever cuneiform sources were available to him – only not too many non-Greek *were* available to him at that time. Indeed, the notion that Hellenistic kingship is derived from Near Eastern precedents goes back a long way.<sup>23</sup>

The ‘new approach’ however has not led to a better understanding of

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22. Cf *e.g.* P. Briant, “The Seleucid kingdom, the Achaemenid empire and the history of the Near East in the first millennium BC,” in P. Bilde *et al.* edd., *Religion and Religious Practice in the Seleucid Kingdom*, Aarhus, 1990, pp. 40-65; A. Kuhrt and S. Sherwin-White, “The transition from Achaemenid to Seleucid rule in Babylonia: Revolution or evolution,” in H. W. A. M. Sancisi-Weerdenburg *et al.* edd., *Achaemenid History 8: Continuity and Change*, 1994, pp. 283-310. Already in 1996, Oliver Hoover cautioned that, “while there is no denying the great debt of the Seleucid empire to its predecessors, the Seleucid kings should therefore not be thought of simply as pseudo-Achaemenids in Makedonian clothing” (O. D. Hoover, *Kingmaker: A Study in Seleucid Political Imagery*, Hamilton, 1996).

23. See *e.g.* E. R. Goodenough, “The political philosophy of Hellenistic kingship,” *Yale Classical Studies* 1, 1928, pp. 55-102; C. W. McEwan, *The Oriental Origins of Hellenistic Kingship*, Chicago, 1934; J.-R. Palanque, *Les impérialismes antiques*, Paris, 1948; H. P. L’Orange, *Studies in the Iconography of Cosmic Kingship in the Ancient World*, Oslo, 1953.

Hellenistic kingship and the nature of Macedonian imperialism in the age of the Seleukids precisely because of its disregard for the Aegean side of Hellenistic imperial culture. By conceptualizing the Seleukid Empire as ‘eastern’ in opposition to ‘western’, the postcolonial approach has in fact underscored the conventional east-west dichotomy and unintentionally endorsed the view that the Ancient Greeks and Macedonians are more akin to modern Western European society than to the historical civilizations immediately surrounding them.

The older tendency to consider Hellenistic Asia from a purely Greek viewpoint meanwhile has not died out with the ascendancy of the eastern paradigm. The view that the history of the Hellenistic Middle East is not Middle East history, that it is *Greek* history, persists – but independently, not as a rival approach inspiring debate. The power of convention is demonstrated by the new Routledge series *History of the Ancient World*, where the two volumes dedicated to Ancient Near East, even as these have been written by Amélie Kuhrt, do not venture beyond Alexander the Great. The addition of a third volume on the Seleukid and Parthian periods would have been really ground-breaking. Instead the Macedonian conquest of the Achaemenid Empire is integrated in a volume devoted to *Classical Greece*, while subsequent Near Eastern history is incorporated in a volume titled *The Greek World After Alexander* (my emphasis, RS).<sup>24</sup>

### **A different approach to the Seleukid Empire**

Mainstream historiography considers Seleukid imperial enterprises in Iran as a failure. This is due to two factors. The first is a lack of proper differentiation between a national state and an empire in modern historical writing in the Seleukids. The second factor is the conviction that only what modern historians and art historians have classified as ‘Greek’ should count

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24. A. Kuhrt, *The Ancient Near East, c. 3000-330 BC*, London and New York, 1995; S. Hornblower, *The Greek World 479-323 BC*, London, 2002; G. Shipley, *The Greek World After Alexander, 232-30 BC*, London and New York, 2000. The Sassanian Empire is in similar manner reduced to subordinate status in volumes dedicated to Roman history (though interestingly the volume titled *The Roman Empire at Bay, AD 180-394*, written by D. S. Potter [2004], has on its cover a picture of the Persian rock relief showing the Roman emperor Valerian’s submission before the victorious Sassanian king Shapur I).

as part of the Seleukid legacy. Whatever we think of as ‘Iranian’ is not Greek and can therefore not be Seleukid.

To begin with the first point. I believe that it would be best to consider the Seleukid Empire as an hegemonial empire instead of approaching it as a kind of national state with formal administrative institutions, a unified system of taxation, an impersonal *raison d'état*, a capital, and well-defined ‘defensible’ borders. You will find none of the kind in the Hellenistic Near East above the level of cities and minor sovereignties. Like most premodern empires, the Seleukid Empire was basically a non-state: a tribute-taking, military organization centered around an itinerant dynastic household that preferred cooperation with local powers to direct rule and focused on controlling the roads rather than to try to ‘govern’ peoples and lands. Like any imperial power, the Seleukids were relentlessly expansive as the aggressive policy of even Antiochus IV and his successors demonstrate. Other than modern historical atlases suggest, an area is not either inside or outside an empire. There are many shades: autonomous cities, temples and tribes in the imperial heartland; tribute-paying vassal states; non-tribute-paying vassal states; allies; friends.

The equation of ‘Seleukid’ with ‘Greek’ is most clearly the case with regard to material culture: recognizable Greek-style remains like the Artemis Temple on Falaika are considered as Seleukid but not, say, the so-called Fratarakā Temple in Persepolis (even though a Greek inscription has been recovered there). It is also true of more immaterial aspects of Seleukid imperial culture. For instance when the Parthian kings in the late third century began to strike coins on which they appeared with tiaras and other Persian insignia of royalty, this has been rendered a revival of Iranian culture.<sup>25</sup> But their headdresses are *governor's* tiaras, marking them as vassal kings under nominal Seleukid suzerainty. The (Greek) title *basileus*

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25. See most recently V. S. Curtis, “The Iranian revival in the Parthian period,” in V. S. Curtis and S. Stewart, eds., *The Idea of Iran. Volume 2: The Age of the Parthians*, London and New York, 2007, pp. 7-25. M. P. Canepa, *The Two Eyes of the Earth: Art and Ritual of Kingship Between Rome and Sasanian Iran*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2009, and M. R. Shayegan, *Arsacids and Sasanians: Political Ideology in Post-Hellenistic and Late Antique Persia*, Cambridge, 2010, were not yet available to me when writing this article.

*meGas* (Great King), adopted by the Parthian ruler Mithradates I (c. 171-138) on the coins of his later reign, was taken over from the Seleukids, who had been the ‘universal’ imperial rulers until the Parthians took over that role from them by right of victory – at that time the assumption of the title of Great King certainly was not yet an attempt to refer back to the Achaemenids.<sup>26</sup> Of course, we should allow for a certain amount of Iranianizing cultural invention in the creation of monarchic iconography by the sub-kings of Persis, Parthia, Armenia or Kommagene. The Fratarakā in particular employed carefully chosen symbols that seem to have presented them as the guardians of an Achaemenid legacy, and something similar was done by Antiochos I when he created for his house a fictive Achaemenid ancestry on Nemrut Dağı. Of more relevance is the fact that the present state of research allows us to say next to nothing with any confidence about culture in Iran during the previous hundred years. The assumption that an Iranian revival took place as early as the late Third Century and early Second Century BCE, postulating an absence of Iranian culture in the intermediate period, is implausible and methodologically unsound. All that these and other, notably Baktrian, coins show, is that only from the late Third Century vassal kings were established in various parts of the Seleukid east and that they began to strike coins.

To be sure, rather than constituting a break with past practices, the Seleukid vassal state system developed from the increasingly hereditary system of non-royal governors, a process of transition that seems to have started in the reign of Antiochos II in the mid-Third Century but accelerated under Antiochos III (223-187),<sup>27</sup> who assumed the epithet ‘the Great [King]’

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26. R. Strootman, “Queen of Kings: Cleopatra VII and the Donations of Alexandria,” in M. Facella and T. Kaizer eds., *Kingdoms and Principalities in the Roman Near East*, Occidens et Oriens 19, Stuttgart, 2010, pp. 139-58. For the Parthian state system and imperial title see J. Wiesehöfer, “‘King of Kings’ and ‘Philhellên’: Kingship in Arsacid Iran,” in P. Bilde *et al.* edd., *Aspects of Hellenistic Kingship*, Aarhus, 1996, pp. 55-66, and R. Fowler, “King, bigger king, king of kings: Structuring power in the Parthian world,” in: Facella & Kaizer 2010: 57-79.

27. R. Strootman, “Hellenistic court society: The Seleukid imperial court under Antiochos the Great, 223-187 BCE,” in J. Duindam, M. Kunt, and T. Artan eds., *Royal Courts in*



in 205 to emphasize his work as king-maker. ‘Indigenous’ vassal states that were part of the later Seleukid imperial system further included Kommagene, Sophene, Charakene, and Atropatene, to name but a few. That the Seleukids accepted local nobles as local rulers is hardly surprising. In other words: if a ‘revival’ of Iranian culture indeed took place, this development began in the Seleukid period, and in the context of Seleukid imperial policy, however ad hoc and ultimately unsuccessful their attempts to hold on to Iran and Central Asia may have been. A case in point here is also the iconographical program at Nemrut Dağı of Antiochos I of Kommagene, who claimed the title of Great King not only rightfully on the basis of his direct descent from the Seleukids, but also on the additional ground of a fictive Achaemenid ancestry. Traditionally, however, the use of indigenous imagery in the self-presentation of local rulers is interpreted as the opposite of ‘Seleukid’ in an ill-founded zero-sum attempt to find the exact date of this or that region’s breakaway from the Seleukids. But history, and especially the history of empires, is in reality often for more complex and inconsistent than that.<sup>28</sup>

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*Dynastic States and Empires: A Global Perspective*, Leiden, 2011, pp. 63-89; D. Engels, “Antiochos III. der Große und sein Reich. Überlegungen zur „Feudalisierung“ der seleukidischen Peripherie,” in K. Schmidt *et al.* eds., *Orient und Okzident – Antagonismus oder Konstrukt? Machtstrukturen, Ideologien und Kulturtransfer in hellenistischer Zeit*, forthcoming; id., “Middle Eastern “Feudalism” and Seleukid dissolution,” in K. Erickson and G. Ramsey edd., *Seleucid Dissolution: The Sinking of the Anchor*, Wiesbaden, 2011, pp. 19-36; cf. Wiesehöfer 2011 on the status of the Persian Fratarakā as Seleukid ‘sub-kings’.

28. For instance the Achaemenids no less than the Seleukids considered Greeks to be somehow part of their imperial system, which was global by definition. The Ionian Greeks of course were part of it directly. Macedon was a Persian vassal state or ally until the reign of Philip II. But Persian imperial policy extended also to mainland Greece and beyond even after the Greco-Persian Wars. A brief summary will suffice to make the point. The King’s Peace, the general peace brokered by the Achaemenid emperor in 386 to end the Corinthian War, is a telltale sign that members of Greek civic elites somehow related to the concept of world unity under a great king who protected peace and civic autonomy. When the Thebans declared war against the Macedonians in 335, they called upon all the Greeks to join “the Thebans and the Great King in liberating the Greeks and destroying the tyrant of Greece (*sc.* Alexander)” (Diodoros 17.9.5; cf. Plutarch, *Life of Alexander* 11.7-8). Aristocrats banished from Sparta or

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My final suggestion for looking at the Seleukid Empire anew is to no longer consider Seleukid history and culture in terms of an east-west dichotomy, as both the Hellenocentric *and* postcolonial schools have done. It is better to see the empire as an integral part of Middle East history, and, for that matter, Greeks and Macedonians as peoples integrated into a wider Mediterranean and Near Eastern ‘world system’ rather than as proto-Europeans alien to the Near East (as both Classicists and Orientalists have done).

### **The Seleukid legacy in Iran**

The Seleukid imprint on Iran was political, military and economic rather than cultural. Because the Seleukids never attempted to alter the existing social, cultural and political situation in Iran, their rule left little clear traces in later culture, with the important exception of monarchic ideology and religion, and the combination thereof.

The Seleukids left behind them a partially coin-based economy and an improved infrastructure (they created defensible roads by constructing fortresses and fortified cities). They helped build up the Silk Road by connecting Central Asia more closely with the Mediterranean, showing that their relatively greater interest in the ‘west’ as compared to the Achaemenids could actually be beneficially for the ‘east’. And for what it’s worth: they enriched Middle East warfare for centuries to come with the heavily armored war elephant and the cataphract, the mailed cavalryman riding a heavy war horse of the type that was bred on the Nisaeen Plain of Media.

Like the Achaemenids before them, the Seleukids structured negotiations with local elites by patronizing local cults. But they did so more systematically and intensively. They also utilized cultic patronage as a

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Athens often took refuge at the Persian court, where apparently they already had connections. In Greek cities as far as Syracuse elite persons derived enormous status from contact with the Great King (L. Allen, “Le roi imaginaire: An audience with the Achaemenid King,” in O. Hekster and R. Fowler edd, *Imaginary Kings: Royal Images in the Ancient Near East, Greece and Rome*. Oriens et Occidens 11, Stuttgart 2005, pp. 39-62). And of course Greek mercenary armies fought for Achaemenid kings.

means to integrate elites and create imperial cohesion, and in doing so profoundly influenced religious developments. In particular they seem to have systematically favored various local and, especially, regional sanctuaries dedicated to indigenous Moon and Sun deities, who were thus not only associated with one another, but also with the dynasty's tutelary twin deities, Apollo and Artemis, who could in turn be associated with the reigning couple of king and queen.<sup>29</sup> The eventual consequences of imperial policy for the development of Hellenistic syncretistic and henotheistic religion need still to be examined. At least it seems, that Seleukid religious policy was an essential step in the evolution of centralized imperial religions that would culminate in Late Antiquity in the adoption of monotheism as an instrument of imperial unification.

Another significant development that occurred in this period, and particularly in areas ruled by Iranian aristocracies (northern Anatolia, the Armenian highlands, the Zagros region and Khorasan) was what David Engels has called the 'feudalization' of the Middle East: the creation of a vassal state system that would endure for centuries under Parthian and Roman rule.

The Seleukid Empire was no foreign interregnum in the history of Iran. The Seleukids considered themselves the heirs of the age-old eastern title of Great King, and of the eastern ideal of universal empire. From c. 200 the Seleukids translated Great King directly into Greek as *basileus megas*, and transmitted that title to the Parthians, the Romans and beyond.

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29. For the association of Sun and Moon deities in the Hellenistic and Roman Near East see L. Dirven, *The Palmyrenes of Dura-Europos: A Study of Religious Interaction in Roman Syria*, Leiden and Boston, 1999. Specifically in the Seleukid imperial context: R. Strootman, *The Hellenistic Royal Court: Court Culture, Ceremonial and Ideology in Greece, Egypt and the Near East, 336-30 BCE*, Utrecht, 2007, pp. 114-308. The Seleukids also seem to have associated 'high gods' with one another, e.g. Zeus Olympios, Ba'al, Marduk-Bēl, and Yahweh.

