

Orontid Kingship in its Hellenistic Context

The Seleucid Connections of Antiochos I of Commagene

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For a local ruler, Antiochos I of Commagene made remarkably grand political statements. He adopted the imperial title of Great King, claimed to be a descendant of Alexander the Great and a successor to both the Seleucid and the Achaemenid empires, arranged a marriage alliance with the powerful Arsakid house, and probably expected to become deified and included among the gods after death.

The dynastic representation created by Antiochos continues to puzzle historians and archaeologist. Its meaning usually is considered either in the light of either the Achaemenid past that Antiochos so emphatically refers to, or from the perspective of Roman history. In the first case, Antiochos is seen as an 'eastern' monarch and his royal and religious imagery is accordingly decoded as ancient Persian traditions in Greek disguise.¹ In the second case, Antiochos is primarily seen as a client king whose main political aim was to position his small kingdom in a world dominated by Rome. In both cases, Antiochos' Commagene is believed to be marginal to the Hellenistic world and Hellenistic history.²

But for an alleged client king, Antiochos referred remarkably little to Rome in his self-presentation.³ Moreover, in the mid-1st c. BCE, Roman dominance in the Near East was not a foregone conclusion: when Antiochos succeeded to the throne of Comma-

- 1 See the important remarks of Canepa 2007, emphasizing how Antiochos' 'religious policy' is often anachronistically interpreted from either the Achaemenid past or the Sasanian-era Avesta, rather than in its contemporaneous late-Hellenistic/middle-Iranian context; on the conflation of Hellenistic-period West-Iranian religion and late antique 'Zoroastrianism', see also Jacobs 1992. Canepa's understanding of Antiochos' monarchy as 'Middle Iranian', offers an alternative to the usual antiquarian reading as pre-Hellenistic Persian or Late Antique Zoroastrian (see Canepa 2017).
- 2 The alleged marginality of Commagene under Antiochos vis-à-vis the Hellenistic world is discussed by Versluys 2017, 13.
- 3 From a Roman point of view, Antiochos of course was a subordinate ally, who in 59 BCE had received the *toga praetexta* in recognition of this status (Cic. Ad Q. Fr. 2,102); see Facella 2005a on Cicero's rather skeptical view of Antiochos' loyalty to Rome. The lack of reference to Rome is discussed by Versluys 2017, 166–167.

gene in 70/69 BCE, the greatest power in the Near East was the Armenian Empire of Tigranes the Great; after Tigranes' fall in that same year, the Parthian Empire of the Arsakid dynasty successfully challenged Roman supremacy in the region until the Roman-Parthian peace of 20 BCE (and indeed Antiochos sometimes can be seen to gravitate towards the Arsakids rather than Rome). The reign of Antiochos (ca. 70/69 – ca. 36 BCE) coincided with several military clashes between Romans and Parthians in which the latter were generally victorious, even though they did not succeed in permanently occupying the Levant or ousting the Romans from it. Roman influence on Commagenian architecture and material culture, if any, postdates the reign of Antiochos I. His Persianism meanwhile was a constructed identity with contemporaneous aims and not a case of real 'continuity'.⁴ The historical roots of the Commagenian dynasty – whether Persian, Armenian, Macedonian or a mixture of all that – have little relevance for understanding Antiochos' dynastic policy, which can best be understood in the context of its own time rather than from the Persian 'traditions' that Antiochos presents to us but are not attested in Commagene before his reign.⁵ Conspicuously absent from current interpretations above all is the historically closer political entity that Antiochos himself refers to most of all in his self-presentation: the Seleucid Empire.

This contribution aims to understand Antiochos' kingship in its late-Hellenistic/middle-Iranian context – I see no fundamental contrast between the two, the Seleucid Empire was far more Iranian than was assumed in the past.⁶ In one of the first volumes of the *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, G. Widengren defiantly called Antiochos I "a Seleucid ruler".⁷ This paper will further explore that unorthodox suggestion. It will be argued that the alleged idiosyncratic imagery and rhetoric found on Nemrud Dağ and elsewhere in Commagene are part of a wider movement among local rulers in reaction to Seleucid collapse.

In what follows, we will look at three aspects of Orontid monarchical representation that link the Orontids to the Seleucids: the ancestor galleries in the *hierotherision* on Nemrud Dağ; the use of Seleucid dynastic names and epithets; and the adoption of the title 'Great King' by Antiochos I. I will end my discussion by placing Antiochos' self-presentation within a wider context of post-Seleucid monarchs competing for the Seleucid heritage.

4 On the concept of Persianism, see Strootman – Versluys 2017.

5 See also the contribution by Canepa in this volume.

6 On the Iranian aspects of Seleucid kingship, see Strootman 2011b; Canepa 2018, 170–187. 307–315. For the middle-Iranian aspects of the Nomos Inscription, consult Panaino 2007.

7 Widengren 1986, 135.

The Ancestor Galleries on Nemrud Dağ



Fig. 1 Nomos Inscription on the west terrace of Nemrud Dağ, photo and © R. Strootman

In the Nomos Inscription on Nemrud Dağ (fig. 1), Antiochos famously glorifies his “fortunate roots” of Achaemenid and Seleucid ancestry:

“After taking over my paternal dominion (*archē*) [...] I proclaimed that the kingdom (*basileia*) subject to my throne should be the common dwelling place of all the gods; and I decorated it with representations of their forms by all the kinds of art that the ancient traditions (*logos*) of Persians and Greeks – the fortunate roots of my ancestry – had handed down [to me], and honored them with sacrifices and festivals in accordance with the original law (*nomos*) and common practice (*ethos*) of all mankind.”⁸

8 RIG 735 = OGIS 383, ll. 24–34 (cited from Strootman 2016, 212–213). Two slightly differing versions of the inscription were set up on the east and west terraces (Dörrie 1964, 29–34). The *editio princeps* was prepared by Puchstein in 1883 and published with a German translation in Humann – Puchstein 1890, 262–278; a German translation is also provided by Waldmann 1973, 63–69. The standard edition is now the transcription made by Dörner in 1991, published with an English translation in Sanders 1996, 207–213 (= Dörner 1996); Dörner’s translation is reprinted with permission in Versluys 2017, 255–260.

Further on, the inscription associates “the divine representations of the manifest deities consecrated on the holy hill” with “the heroic company of my forebears, whom you behold before you” (lines 45–53). The gods and ancestors of the text thus refer directly to the colossal statues of gods and the ancestor galleries, which can be found on both the east and west terraces of the *hierotherision*. The deified Antiochos Theos himself, who is represented among the statues of the gods, is the link between the two.



Fig. 2 Bases of the Seleucid ancestor gallery on the west terrace of Nemrud Dağ, photo and © R. Strootman

The dual rows of stelae on both the east and west terrace (fig. 2) represent Antiochos’ *progonoi* in respectively the male and female line⁹: the first traces his ancestry through Commagenian kings and Armenian satraps to the Achaemenid dynasty (EN I, 1–15; WS I, 1–15); the second consists of Seleucid monarchs (ES I, 1–17; WW I, 1–17), originating with Seleukos Nikator and “the Great King Alexander, son of King Philippos”.¹⁰ The matrilineal ancestor gallery comprises several royal women. A series of three stelae

9 In what follows, I use the following abbreviations: E = East, W = West, N = North, where the first letter indicates the terrace, and the second the side of the terrace where the row of stelae is situated (for this system of notation, see Jacobs 2000).

10 WW I, stele 1. On the ancestor galleries, see Dörner 1967; Dörner 1975; Dörner 1996; Young 1996, 254–350; Jacobs 2000; Jacobs 2002; Messerschmidt 2012; Facella 2006, 270–275; Strootman 2016.

behind the longer galleries flanking both terraces may have been dedicated to children of Antiochos (ES II 1–3/ON II 1–3).¹¹

The male, Achaemenid line today is often seen as more significant; notably Antiochos' adoption of the title Great King is conventionally (but mistakenly, as will be argued below) understood as a specifically Achaemenid inheritance. However, the Macedonian dynasties of the Hellenistic world were based on dual descent; they accepted the transmission of inheritance through both the male and female line.¹² Royal women therefore played a key role in the transmission of the dynastic heritage, of which royalty (*basileia*) was the principal element. Being himself part of this tradition, Antiochos seems to have adhered to the Hellenistic custom of heritage transmission.¹³ The Achaemenid and Seleucid lines are therefore presented as equal; they mirror each other and are not hierarchized in any visible way.

The identification of the 15 *progonoi* of the Achaemenid line poses no problems, though this line of ancestry likely is largely fictitious. The gallery spans a period of about four centuries. Beginning with Darius I, there are five Achaemenid kings, three satraps plus four kings of Armenia, and three rulers of Commagene: Ptolemaios, Samos, and finally Mithradates I, Antiochos' father.¹⁴ As regards the historicity of Antiochos' Achaemenid ancestry: a marital bond between the Orontid rulers of Armenia and the Achaemenid dynasty has indeed been attested, and is referred to on Nemrud Dağ by the mentioning of Rhodogune, daughter of Artaxerxes II, on stele 6, which is dedicated to the first of the Armenian satraps, Aroandas/Orontes I (Artaxerxes II precedes him on stele 5): "Aroandas son of Artasuras, who married Queen Rhodogune, daughter of Artaxerxes".¹⁵ A weak link, however, appears in the form of the first Commagenian ruler, Ptolemaios, who is supposed to be the connection between on the one hand the rulers of Commagene and on the other hand the Orontid kings of Armenia. The Armenian Orontids controlled Commagene as part of their holdings until it became a separate administrative unit or kingdom within the Seleucid Empire, perhaps in the reign of Antiochos III the Great.¹⁶ Next to nothing, however, is known about this Ptolemaios, who ruled as an independent Seleucid client from ca. 163 or 150 BCE.¹⁷ While the link between the Achaemenids and the Orontids of Armenia is

11 Jacobs 2000, 298–299. Antiochos honors his *progonoi* also in the cultic inscription of Arsameia on the Nymphaios, in which he boasts to have set up altars for them, along with cult statues of the gods (A 60–65). Here however only Antiochos' paternal ancestors are mentioned. Whatever the reason for this, I do not think that it can be taken as evidence that the female line was of less importance (*pace* Jacobs 2002, 83). Hoepfner 1983, 24 suggested that at Arsameia, too, an ancestor gallery was set up; cf. Versluys 2017, 135 n. 123.

12 Carney 1994; Mirón Pérez 2000; Strootman 2010 and 2014, 101–107.

13 Strootman 2016.

14 Dörner 1996, 361–77; cf. Messerschmidt 2012, 89–93; Jacobs 2002, 77–82.

15 Young 1996, 294–295.

16 Facella 2006, 190–200.

17 See below, ns. 36–37.

indicated by the mentioning of Rhodogune, a connection between Ptolemaios and the Armenian Orontids is conspicuously absent, though a marital link is not in itself impossible.¹⁸

Identifying the individuals in the Seleucid ancestor gallery offers more challenges due to the state of preservation of the stelae and their accompanying inscriptions; but it is also more straightforward as it presents a single dynasty only, rather than merging three families, as the patrilineal gallery does. The matrilineal galleries on both terraces consist of seventeen stelae, four of them dedicated to royal women. The male rulers are represented in military dress that may be more authentic than the Persianistic attire of the Achaemenid kings.¹⁹ The list below follows the original, still cautious reconstruction of Dörner (square brackets indicate names that have been entirely lost on both terraces).²⁰

1. Alexander the Great
2. Seleukos I Nikator
3. Antiochos I Soter
4. Antiochos II Theos
5. [Seleukos II Kallinikos]
6. [Seleukos III Soter]
7. [Antiochos III Megas]
8. [Seleukos IV Philopator]
9. [Antiochos IV Epiphanes]
10. Demetrios I Soter
11. Demetrios II Nikator
12. [Antiochos VII Euergetes ('Sidetes')]
13. Antiochos VIII Epiphanes ('Grypos')
14. [female ancestor]
15. [female ancestor]
16. Isias Philostorgos
17. [female ancestor]

Dörner tentatively includes Antiochos IV Epiphanes, even though he is not really the ancestor of the kings succeeding him.²¹ He may have been added to present Seleucid history as harmonious instead of plagued by dynastic strife between the descendants of this Antiochos and those of his older brother, Seleukos IV.²² Most of all, as a suc-

18 Sullivan 1977, 747.

19 For the surviving evidence, see Sanders 1996 2, 240 figs. 468–470. 254 fig. 511. 256 fig. 515. For the historicity of the attire given to the Achaemenid kings, see Jacobs 2002, 80–81 with n. 13.

20 Dörner 1967; cf. Dörner 1975; Dörner 1996, 371–377. See also Messerschmidt 2012, 93–96, discussing alternative reconstructions.

21 Dörner 1967, 208–209.

22 Cf. Wright 2010, 260.

successful general and reformer, Antiochos IV was a ruler with much prestige. Alexander likewise was not really an ancestor. His inclusion may reflect a genuine belief of the 1st c. BCE that he was the father of Seleukos I's wife, Apama.²³ But the inclusion of Alexander and Antiochos IV could also indicate that not all the stelae are meant to represent direct ancestors but could include illustrious predecessors.²⁴

Remains of images in relief suggest that the last four stelae (14–17) were dedicated to female ancestors²⁵, but the only name that has been preserved is “Queen Isias Philostorgos” (ΒΑΣΙΛΙΣΣΑΝ ΙΣΙΑΔΑ [ΦΙΛΟΣΤΟ]ΡΤΟΝ) on stele 16 of the west terrace²⁶, along with three Greek letters PAN from stele 14.²⁷ Remains of an altar in front of Isias' stele indicates that she had predeceased Antiochos. Dörner suggested that she was the mother of Mithradates I Kallinikos and Antiochos' paternal grandmother²⁸, but later thought that she could also have been the wife of Antiochos I.²⁹ A newly discovered inscription of Mithradates II from Karakuş shows that Antiochos was indeed married to an Isias and the latter suggestion therefore seems most likely.³⁰

The most plausible reconstruction of the female ancestors, I think, is that of Jacobs, which is based on the probability that Isias Philostorgos must be the same as Isias, the wife of Antiochos I.³¹ The first female ancestor (stele 14) then would be Kleopatra Tryphaina, the Ptolemaic wife of the Seleucid king Antiochos VIII 'Grypos'. Grypos is epigraphically attested as being represented on stele 13, so that we would have Antiochos' grandparents standing next to each other on stelae 13 and 14.³² This interpretation matches the preserved letters PAN, which could be complemented as [ΚΛΕΟΠΑΤ] PAN.³³ The next female ancestor (stele 15) can be no other than Antiochos' mother, Laodike Thea Philadelphos, the Seleucid wife of Mithradates I Kallinikos. Stele 16 as we have seen was dedicated to Antiochos' own queen, Isias Philostorgos. Only the

23 Young 1996, 325; cf. Strootman 2012, 222 n. 22.

24 It is interesting to compare Antiochos' ancestor galleries with the 28 remarkable bronze statues of 'ancestors' before the tomb of the Habsburg emperor Maximilian I (r. 1493–1519) in the Hofkirche in Innsbruck, built in 1553 by his grandson, Ferdinand I. Apart from several genuine ancestors, the Habsburg ancestor gallery includes the mythical king Arthur; Theodoric, king of the Ostrogoths; and the Frankish king Clovis. The Hofkirche originally housed also a number of busts of Roman emperors, whose successors the Habsburgs claimed to be. On the Cenotaph of Maximilian I, see Bader-Wiesauer et al. 2004.

25 Dörner 1996; Jacobs 2000. Fischer 1972 and Young 1996 suggested that there were five female ancestors, but this is improbable (see Jacobs 2009, 300 for the arguments).

26 WW I, 16.

27 WW I, 14, preserved on a drawing in Humann – Puchstein 1890, 313.

28 Dörner 1967; accepted by Waldmann 1973, 56.

29 Dörner 1975.

30 Wagner 1983, 209.

31 Jacobs 2000, 303–306; endorsed with some reservations by Facella 2006, 272–275.

32 Jacobs 2000, 305.

33 Dörner 1996, 373, who, however, believed her to be Kleopatra Thea, the mother of Antiochos VIII 'Grypos'; against this identification, Jacobs 2000, 302.

identity of the last royal woman on stele 17 poses a problem; she likely was a daughter of Isias and Antiochos who had predeceased her father (her stele, like all stelae of the two main galleries, had an altar in front of it); the most plausible candidate is Laodike, who married the Parthian king Orodes II and was assassinated, probably in 38 BCE.³⁴ The line of royal women would thus be:

14. [Kleopatra Tryphaina, wife of Grypos]
15. [Laodike, daughter of Grypos]
16. Isias Philostorgos (wife of Antiochos I)
17. [Laodike, daughter of Isias and Antiochos]

Commagene and the Seleucids before Antiochos I

Commagene became part of the Seleucid Empire with Antiochos III's reorganization of Armenia³⁵, but had been a Seleucid satellite before that.³⁶ Ptolemaios, the *epistatēs* (a rather unusual term for a governor) of Commagene, according to Diodoros "asserted his independence".³⁷ The establishment of Commagenian autonomy is traditionally dated to 163/2 BCE, but a later date (150 BCE) has also been proposed³⁸, and is perhaps more plausible: until that time, Ptolemaios' coinage – imitation drachms based on issues from the imperial mint at Antioch – expressed allegiance to the Seleucid suzerain Demetrios I Soter.³⁹ To be sure, the lack of contemporaneous numismatic evidence that Ptolemaios assumed the title of king suggests that Commagene remained a Seleucid dependency for the entirety of Ptolemaios' reign (until ca. 130 BCE); the single reference to him as *basileus* on an inscription of Antiochos I from Gerger probably is an invention.⁴⁰ Ptolemaios' successor, Samos (whose reigning years are extremely difficult to reconstruct), struck regal coins in his own name, some showing the ruler wearing a 'pointed tiara', others modeled after contemporaneous Seleucid examples. Seleucid emblems of power such as Helios and the double cornucopia remained important devices on Orontid coins until the end of the kingdom.⁴¹

Samos' successor, Mithradates I (ca. 100–70/69 BCE), renewed relations with the Seleucids when he married Laodike, the daughter of Antiochos VIII Epiphanes

34 Cass. Dio 49,23,3–4; cf. Wagner 1983, 212.

35 Facella 2006, 184–199.

36 Sullivan 1977, 742–734.

37 Diod. Sic. 31 fr. 19a; on this elusive figure see Sullivan 1977, 742–748; Facella 2006, 199–205.

38 Jakobsson 2013.

39 Jakobsson 2013, 3; for the conventional dating, see Facella 2006, 199–205.

40 Versluys 2017, 174; I would not go as far as to presume that Ptolemaios himself was invented. For the inscription (Waldmann 1973, no. 141 no. Gf = IGLSyr 46), see Sullivan 1977, 747–748; Facella 2006, 201.

41 Sullivan 1977, 749.

Kallinikos (121–98/7 BCE), who is also known as ‘Grypos’.⁴² With this marriage, Mithradates likely received the title of *basileus* from his father-in-law.⁴³ It was an unequal marriage, not a sign of equality.⁴⁴ Seleucid kings mostly arranged for their daughters (and sometimes sisters) hypogamous marriages, where a woman is married to a man of lower status, thus affirming the superiority of the imperial house over the vassal dynasty.⁴⁵ From at least the reign of Antiochos III the Great (223/2–187 BCE), it had become standard practice to grant royal status to vassal rulers who had become independent, and often the arrangement was sealed with a dynastic marriage.⁴⁶ The Seleucids were thus able to bring local dynasts into their extended family, and thereby exchanged in the periphery of the empire failing attempts at direct rule for rule by proxy.⁴⁷ By this arrangement, Seleucid royal women had key diplomatic roles as representatives and intermediaries.⁴⁸ As local dynasties also married among each other, an intricate web of interdynastic relations developed that would survive the Seleucids for more than a century.⁴⁹ Though the Seleucid dynasty at the time of Antiochos VIII’s reign had lost most of its core territories to the Parthians, and was violently torn apart by inter-dynastic conflicts, Antiochos VIII’s status was still that of a ‘Great King’ placed above other kings, as attested *i. a.* by his introduction of the so-called Zeus Ouranios coinage with its astounding universalistic imperial imagery.⁵⁰

Direct Commagenian links with the Seleucids ended in 86 BCE when Commagene became a vassal principality of Tigranes the Great.⁵¹ When Tigranes was defeated by the armies of the Roman warlord Lucullus in 69 BCE and forced to give up his con-

42 On the reign of Mithradates I, see Facella 2006, 209–224.

43 Hellenistic kings usually married their (principal) queens in the context of their accession to the throne, the wedding ceremony being an extended part of the inauguration celebrations; see Strootman 2021.

44 Seibert 1967, 70.

45 See Strootman 2021. Eumenes II of Pergamon once rejected a marriage with a daughter of Antiochos III because this would give her father too much authority over his kingdom (Pol. 21,20; App. Syr. 5; cf. Ager 2017, 176).

46 Strootman 2011b; cf. Engels 2014; Wenghofer – Houle 2016.

47 Strootman 2010; Engels 2011.

48 McAuley 2017.

49 This web of relations has been charted for the post-Seleucid period by Sullivan 1990, and more recently has been studied in its Seleucid context by D’Agostini 2013 and McAuley 2018b.

50 Houghton et al. 2008, no. 2281a. The reverses of these coins show a standing (naked or draped) Zeus with inscription ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΑΝΤΙΟΧΟΥ ΕΠΙΦΑΝΟΥΣ (“[coin] of King Antiochos the Manifest [God]”); he has a long royal scepter in his left hand while his right hand is stretched out in a gesture of omnipotence, holding an image of the Sun; an image of the Moon is placed above his head (on the gesture, see L’Orange 1953, 139–170; on Hellenistic universalism in general, Strootman 2014b). The Zeus Ouranios coinage was struck between 122/1 and 113 BCE, a relatively peaceful phase in Antiochos VIII’s long reign; cf. Ehling 2008, 215–216.

51 In contrast to what is often written, Tigranes never ruled the Seleucid Empire. The Seleucid Empire was not a territorial state but a dynastic entity and Tigranes did not belong to that dynasty; he was king of Armenia and created an empire of his own. On the nature of the Seleucid Empire as a dynastic network polity, see Strootman 2011a.

quests, there no longer was an imperial overlord to preside over Commagene. Lucullus was recalled in 67 BCE. The Roman Republic did not yet have an emperor to bind together the various local kings of the Hellenistic Near East. This was the situation that Antiochos I found himself in when he came to the throne in the year 70/69 BCE.

The Use of Seleucid Names and Epithets

On Nemrud Dağ, Antiochos I presented his maternal line of ancestry as equal to the paternal line of kings that he claimed descent from. The presence of the matriline is a more striking choice than the obvious presence of the patriline. Ancestor galleries are not uncommon in Hellenistic ruler representation – they have been attested for e. g. Mausollos, Philip II, Antigonos II, Attalos I, and Ptolemy IV – but these normally focused on the patriline, even as female family members were regularly included.⁵²

The relative emphasis on Seleucid descent finds a parallel in the Orontid use of dynastic names. It is impossible to know whether Antiochos I was named so at birth by his father or took that name himself upon his accession, as Hellenistic kings often did. It was at any rate a reference to the Seleucids for the name referred to his maternal grandfather, Antiochos VIII ‘Grypos’, and this singular break with the Hellenistic dynastic custom of naming the first son/heir after his *paternal* grandfather must have been intentional and meaningful. ‘Antiochos’ was the most used name for Seleucid kings. It had been the name of fifteen reigning kings, around half of the total number of male rulers (the other half using Seleukos, Demetrios, Alexander, and Philip). In Commagene, ‘Antiochos’ systematically recurs as a throne name after Antiochos I’s reign. The last king of the dynasty ruled as Antiochos (IV) Epiphanes (38–72 CE), and the same name and epithet was used by his son and co-ruler (though he was named only “Epiphanes” on his coins). The son commanded a contingent of Commagenian troops during Titus’ siege of Jerusalem in 70 CE, where he emphasized his Seleucid identity by surrounding himself with a bodyguard of “Macedonians”.⁵³ The funerary monument for the king-without-a-kingdom, consul Antiochos Epiphanes Philopappos on the Hill of the Muses in Athens, still celebrated the Seleucid ancestry of the deceased. Philopappos was a grandson of the last Commagenian king, Antiochos IV

52 For an overview and discussion, see Versluys 2017, 130–132; also see Hintzen-Bohlen 1990; Højte 2002; Kosmetatou 2002. Earlier and later ancestor galleries consisted of statues or busts, never a ‘wall’ of stelae as was erected on Nemrud Dağ. Other views of the galleries’ origins include Jacobs 2002, who argues that Antiochos’ ancestor cult combines older Greek and Persian elements; Facella 2006, 276–278, and Facella 2015, 174–176, who sees an Armenian background; and Messerschmidt 2011, arguing for lingering Hittite traditions in Commagene, and making the important observation that Hittite monuments were still visible in the landscape.

53 Jos. BI 7,11,3 (460); a second son of Epiphanes was named Kallinikos (see below).

Epiphanes. He died in 116 CE, some 45 years after the disappearance of the Commagenian kingdom, but nonetheless bore the title of *basileus*.⁵⁴

The names of alleged Achaemenid ancestors are conspicuously absent in the royal house even in the reign of Antiochos himself, who most of all was responsible for the construction of this ancestry: Antiochos for some years ruled together with his heir, Mithradates (II), who therefore must have had that throne name already during his father's lifetime and with his father's consent.⁵⁵ He was named after his paternal grandfather but where the grandfather derived that name from is uncertain. There are two options. First, the name 'Mithradates' was a dynastic name recurring in the Pontic kingdom since the reign of its first king, Mithradates "the Founder", in the early 3rd c. BCE. Second, the name 'Mithradates' (middle-Iranian 'Mihrdād') was introduced in the Arsakid dynasty by the first Parthian 'Great King', Mithradates I (ca. 171–138 or 165/4–132 BCE), and was also used by the powerful Parthian 'King of Kings', Mithradates II (ca. 123/2–88/7 BCE). There is slight evidence tipping the balance in favor of Pontos: a coin of Samos shows on the reverse a queen called Pythodoris, a name appearing a century later as a Pontic queen.⁵⁶ If a marital connection with the Mithradatids of Pontos indeed existed, Pythodoris may have been a daughter of Mithradates V Euergetes of Pontos (150–120 BCE). Be that as it may, it must not be forgotten that due to intermarriage with the Mithradatic house of Pontos, 'Mithradates' had become a Seleucid dynastic name, too (though not of reigning kings). Most famously, Antiochos IV Epiphanes (the 2nd c. BCE Seleucid emperor, not the 1st c. CE Commagenian king) was named Mithradates before he became king.⁵⁷ In addition, the reference to the Indo-Iranian deity Mithra in the theophoric name 'Mithradates' may be associated with the Commagenian Orontids' public adoption of an Iranian dynastic identity.⁵⁸ Iranian identity in Antiquity was not a matter of language but of shared religious ideas and practices (in the Hellenistic period, Aramaic and Greek were also languages used by Iranians)⁵⁹, and the emphasis on religion in Antiochos' self-presentation is consistent with this definition.

Antiochos I gave Seleucid names to his daughters as well. The names of two of them, Laodike and Antiochis, have been recorded on inscriptions set up at Karakuş by their brother, Mithradates II.⁶⁰ Laodike, probably the oldest of the two, was married to the

54 On Philopappos, see Facella 2006, 354–358; on the monument and its ancestor statues of Seleukos I Nikator and Antiochos IV Epiphanes of Commagene, see Kleiner 1983; for analysis, see Jacobs 2015; Wu 2016.

55 The joint rule is attested on coinage; see Wagner 1983, 206–207.

56 ΒΑΣΙΛΙΣΣΗΣ ΠΥΘΟΔΑΔΡΙΑΔΟΣ; see Sullivan 1977, 752 with the references in n. 78; for the possible link with Pontos, also Facella 2006, 208.

57 Coşkun 2016.

58 Versluys 2017, 165.

59 de Jong 2017; also see de Jong's contribution to this volume.

60 Wagner 1983, 196. 209; on naming practices for Seleucid queens, consult McAuley 2018b.

Arsakid ‘King of Kings’, Orodes II. Again, it is striking that these royal women were not named after their Orontid ancestors.⁶¹ Laodike was named after her grandmother, the Seleucid princess who had married Mithradates I Kallinikos. It is interesting to note that by the reign of Antiochos II, the name Laodike had also become current among the Commagenian court elite, as is clear from the inscription on a funerary altar from Sofraz Köy which lists three generations of Laodikēs in a single family.⁶²

It is likely that Mithradates adopted his father-in-law’s best known cult title, ‘Kallinikos’, upon this occasion to stress his affiliation with the imperial family; the title also appears among the epithets of two successors of Antiochos VIII, Mithradates’ ‘brothers-in-law’ Demetrios III and Antiochos XII.⁶³ Towards the end of the Commagenian kingdom, the second son of the last Commagenian king, Antiochos IV Epiphanes, according to Josephus was named Kallinikos – a name or epithet that likely still referred to his ancestors Mithradates I Kallinikos and Antiochos VIII Kallinikos.⁶⁴

Finally, Antiochos I underlined his link with the Seleucid house by giving his mother, Laodike, the title of ‘Goddess’ (Thea), but did not call his father ‘God’. The epithet had previously been used by four Seleucid monarchs, including Laodike’s very powerful grandmother, Kleopatra I Thea. Antiochos also adopted the title himself, emphasizing his bond with his mother and her Seleucid ancestors.⁶⁵ In Antiochos’ dedicatory inscriptions, Laodike received in addition the title of Philadelphos to stress that she was the sister of no less than five Seleucid monarchs: Seleukos VI, Antiochos XI, Philippos I, Demetrios III, and Antiochos XII.⁶⁶ The accentuation of these dynastic links, I argue, did not merely aim at increasing Antiochos’ prestige, but was meant to claim inheritance. This aspect will be further discussed in the next and final section of this paper.

61 It was only from the reign of Mithradates III (ca. 20–12 BCE) that the ‘indigenous’ dynastic name Iotape was used in Commagene, accentuating links to the local royal houses of Atropatene, Emesa, and Judea (Sullivan 1978, 302; on the evolution of ‘Iotape’ as a dynastic name in Commagene, see still Macurdy 1936).

62 SEG 38, No. 1544.

63 Sullivan 1990, 60–61; on ‘Kallinikos’ as a royal epithet, see Muccioli 2013, 342–345. Dörrie 1964, 15 suggested that the epithet referred to a military victory of Mithradates against Antiochos VIII, and that the marriage was meant to seal the peace between the two kings; this has been shown by Seibert 1967, 70 n. 87 to be mere speculation. Kallinikos (“Gloriously Victorious”) is originally an epithet of Herakles, who in the Seleucid Empire was equated with Bahrām (MP Wahrām or Warahrān; Avestan Vərəθraγna), the victorious Iranian warrior god (Gnoli – Jamzadeh 1988; cf. Canepa 2018, 185); in the Nomos Inscription of Nemrud Dağ, Vərəθraγna appears as “Artagnes-Herakles-Ares” (l. 57).

64 Jos. BI 7,11,3 (460).

65 On the meaning of the epithet, see Hazzard 1995; cf. Muccioli 2013, 281–309.

66 An additional reason why Laodike was given such a pivotal place in the self-presentation of her son, perhaps was the fact that her mother, Kleopatra Tryphaina, was the daughter of the Ptolemaic royal couple Kleopatra III and Ptolemy VII Physkon. Antiochos could thus boast to be the descendent of both Seleukos I Nikator and Ptolemy I Soter, respectively the founders of the Seleucid and Ptolemaic dynasties. But the latter connection apparently was not stressed by Antiochos.

Antiochos I and the Title of Great King

Antiochos I's emphasis on his Seleucid ancestry implies that an important key to understanding the dynastic image he created is precisely that Seleucid connection. In this last section we will therefore turn to the broader Seleucid context – or rather, the political landscape of the *post*-Seleucid Near East.

The imperial pretensions of the Seleucids had already been successfully challenged in the 140s BCE by the Arsakid king, Mithradates I, who had conquered Iran and Babylonia; several Seleucid kings attempted to regain the lost provinces. They all failed. Seleucid power irrevocably collapsed when from 83 BCE Tigranes of Armenia conquered the last remaining holdings of the dynasty in Syria, Phoenicia and Cilicia.⁶⁷ The Commagenian kingdom had become a vassal of Tigranes already in 86 BCE. Tigranes' empire fell when the Romans defeated him in 69 BCE, the same year in which Antiochos I of Commagene came to the throne (70/69 BCE).

The power vacuum left behind by the Seleucids in the Near East, I argue, is the primary context in which Antiochos operated as a politician and as a producer of dynastic/religious identity and cultural memory. In the first half of the last century BCE, the outcome of Roman imperialist endeavors in the Near East was still uncertain, and many at that time must have seen the Parthian Arsakids as the strongest power in the region. Uncertainty caused an outburst of claims to imperial hegemony by a variety of competing monarchs.

Following in the footsteps of the Achaemenids, Alexander and the Seleucids had claimed imperial hegemony, using similar universalistic rhetoric as had been common in the Near East for many centuries. Their principal royal title, *basileus*, initially sufficed to express these imperial claims (in the pre-Hellenistic period, *basileus* had been the preferred term by which Greek writers referred to the Achaemenid emperor and by extension to the Persian Empire). But when the number of client *basileis* under their aegis increased, some Seleucid rulers in addition adopted the title 'Great King' (*basileus megas*) to express the idea of a hierarchy of kings.⁶⁸ The Arsakid empire-builder Mithradates I had appropriated that title after the conquest of Seleucid Iran. Mithradates II, who further extended the Arsakid Empire, in addition adopted the newly (re) invented title 'King of Kings' (*basileus basileōs*). Also Tigranes of Armenia, an enemy of the Arsakids, used both titles to express his overlordship over other kings and to generate confidence among local elites. Mithradates I and II, as well as Tigranes, had been able to claim imperial status by right of victory. It is important to note, however, that several other claimants to that status were able to do so on the basis of their descent from the Seleucid house *in the matriline*.

67 Ehling 2006, 250–253.

68 Strootman 2014b; Strootman 2019b.

Among those claiming the Seleucid heritage we find Mithradates VI Eupator of Pontos (r. ca. 120–63 BCE), a grandson of Antiochos IV Epiphanes. Like Antiochos of Commagene, Mithradates of Pontos claimed descent from Seleukos and Alexander, as well as from the Achaemenids.⁶⁹ Another well-known instance is Kleopatra VII Philopator (51–30 BCE). Cassius Dio reports that during the inauguration festival known as the ‘Donations of Alexandria’ (34 BCE), Kleopatra claimed all the lands that once belonged to her ancestors “from the Hellespont to India”; she adopted the imperial title ‘Queen of Kings’ while her minor son, Ptolemy XV (‘Caesarion’), became her co-ruler and was given the title ‘King of Kings.’⁷⁰ In the region west of the river Euphrates, which was largely under her and Antony’s hegemony, these titles were meant to give coherence to the system of client states that the Seleucids had left behind there; east of the Euphrates, where the empire was still imaginary, they were meant to generate the support of cities and local elites for Antony’s intended campaign of (re)conquest and ‘liberation’ from the Parthians. Plutarch’s slightly confused version of these events hints at a pairing of Macedonian and Persian imperial traditions not unlike what we see on Nemrud Dağ, when he writes that Antony made one of his sons with Kleopatra, Alexander, viceroy of Armenia, Media and Parthia (*i. e.* the Upper Satrapies) “as soon as he would have conquered it”; to his other son, Ptolemy, he gave Phoenicia, Syria and Cilicia. During the festivities in 34 BCE, “he presented Alexander, dressed in a Median garb with a tiara and a kitaris, and Ptolemy in krepides, chlamys, and a kausia encircled with a diadem; for the latter was the attire of the kings who had come after Alexander and the former that of the kings of Media and Armenia.”⁷¹

As we have already seen, Antiochos of Commagene called himself ‘Great King’. His dedicatory inscriptions use the title in a stock phrase that is repeated all over Commagene as an opening formula: βασιλεὺς Μέγας Ἀντίοχος Θεὸς Δίκαιος Ἐπιφανῆς Φιλορώμαιοις καὶ Φιλέλλην ὁ ἐκ Βασιλέως Μιθραδάτου Καλλινίκου καὶ Βασιλίσσης Λαοδίκης Θεᾶς Φιλαδέλφου [...]: “The Great King Antiochos, God, the Just, the

- 69 Just. Epit. 38,7,1; on the ancestral claims of Mithradates the Great, see Lerouge-Cohen 2017; cf. Versluys 2017, 217–218.
- 70 Cass. Dio 49,40,2–41,3. Kleopatra descended from Seleukos I through a maternal female ancestor, Kleopatra I, daughter of Antiochos III the Great. On the meaning of the ‘Donations of Alexandria’, see Strootman 2010; on the actual, and quite substantial, reach of Kleopatra’s authority in the Eastern Mediterranean, see Schrapel 1996.
- 71 Plut. Antonius 54,3–6. Note that just as in Commagene under Antiochos I, lack of knowledge of ancient ‘Median’ (*sc.* Persian) royal style was countered by the use of contemporaneous Armenian style; see Versluys 2017, 218–219. Note, too, that the name Alexander was used in the Ptolemaic dynasty since the 2nd c. BCE and suggests that Alexander the Great was believed to be at the beginning of the Ptolemaic line of kings and queens, too. In 35 CE, the Parthian emperor, Artabanus, demanded tribute from the Roman emperor, Tiberius, and “added menacing boasts about the old frontiers of the Persian and Macedonian empires, promising to seize all the lands that Cyrus and Alexander had once ruled” (Tac. Ann. 6,31,1); on this passage, see Fowler 2005, pointing out that the dual reference to the Macedonian and Achaemenid empires was a Hellenistic rather than an Iranian imperial tradition.

[God] Manifest, Philorhomaïos and Philhellēn, son of King Mithradates Kallinikos and Queen Laodike, the Goddess, Lover of her Brother[s].⁷² Antiochos transmitted the title to his heir, Mithradates II. An inscription discovered by Dörner in 1938 on a pillar in Karakuş but first transcribed by Wagner in 1975, opens with the formula, “The Great King Mithradates, son of the Great King Antiochos [I] and Queen Isias.”⁷³

There are two additional expressions of imperial power accompanying the title of ‘Great King’ on Nemrud Dağ and elsewhere in Commagene. The first is the use of the word *archē*. Though *archē* can be translated as “leadership”, “rule”, or “dominion”, it is the Greek standard term for what we would now call “empire”, and in ancient Greek is often used interchangeably with the less common term *hegemonia*. The word is used several times in the Nomos Inscription, and occurs e. g. as πατρώϊαν [ἀ]ρχήν (“ancestral empire”) in line 24.

The second instance of imperial rhetoric is the reference to “all the gods” in the text of the Nomos Inscription: “And whoever [...] takes over this dominion (*archē*) as king or dynast, may he [...] enjoy the favor of the deified ancestors (*daimones*) and all the gods.”⁷⁴ This is reminiscent of earlier Hellenistic universalistic imagery, for instance at the procession staged by Antiochos IV during the festival at Daphne in ca. 166 BCE, when images “of all the gods (*theoi*) and all the *daimones*” were brought to Daphne to participate in the celebrations:

“It is impossible to give an account of all the statues; for images of every god or divinity mentioned or believed in by human beings, as well as of all the heroes, were carried along. Some were gilded, others dressed in robes that had gold threads running through them; and the stories that went with all of them lay next to them in expensive editions that followed the traditional accounts. Images of Night and Day, Earth and Sky, and Dawn and Noon followed them.”⁷⁵

72 IGLSyr nos. 1. 3. 5. 8. 14–18. 22. 26–28. 31–35. 46–47. 52.

73 Wagner 1983, 209. Βασιλεύς Μέγας Μιθραδάτης ὁ ἐκ Βασιλέως | Μεγάλου Ἀντιόχου καὶ Βασιλίσσης Ἰσιάδος. The inscription dedicates a statue of “Queen Laodike, the sister of the king and the wife of the King of Kings Oroses” (Βασιλίσσης Λαοδίκης βασιλέ[ως ἀ]δελφῆς καὶ βασιλέως βασιλέων Ἰσρώδ[ου γυν]αϊκός); the mentioning of an Arsakid King of Kings next to the Orontid Great King complicates matters: was there a hierarchy of imperial titles, or had the two titles equivalent meanings as they also had in the Achaemenid Empire? On the evolution of ‘King of Kings’ as an Arsakid title in the Hellenistic period, see Wiesehöfer 1996; Shayegan 2011; Engels 2014.

74 RIG 735, ll. 228–234; transl. Dörner. [...] Ὅστις τε ἂν βασιλεὺς ἦ | δυνάστης ἐν μακρῶι χρόνῳ ταύτην | ἀρχὴν παραλάβῃ, νόμον τοῦτον | καὶ τιμὰς ἡμετέρας δια- | φυλάσσων καὶ παρὰ τῆς ἐμῆς | εὐχῆς ἴλεως δαίμονας καὶ θεοὺς | πάντας ἐχέτω. [...]. On the pantheistic rhetoric of Antiochos I as a typical Hellenistic phenomenon, see Hoepfner 2012, 130–132.

75 Ath. 5,195a–b ap. Pol. 30.25.12–19, transl. S. D. Olson (Loeb; 2nd edn, 2007): τὸ δὲ τῶν ἀγαλμάτων πλῆθος οὐ δυνατὸν ἐξηγήσασθαι· πάντων γὰρ τῶν παρ’ ἀνθρώποις λεγομένων ἢ νομιζομένων θεῶν ἢ δαιμόνων, προσέτι δὲ ἡρώων εἰδῶλα διήγετο, τὰ μὲν κεχρυσωμένα, τὰ δ’ ἠμφιεσμένα στολαῖς διαχρύσοις. καὶ πᾶσι τούτοις οἱ προσήκοντες μῦθοι κατὰ τὰς παραδεδομένας ἱστορίας ἐν διασκευαῖς | πολυτελεῖσι παρέκειντο. εἴπετο δ’ αὐτοῖς καὶ Νυκτὸς εἰδῶλον καὶ Ἡμέρας, Γῆς τε καὶ Οὐρανοῦ, καὶ Ἡοῦς καὶ Μεσημβρίας.

The similarity is striking. At least the emphasis on the entire pantheon being present I think is significant (at the Daphne Festival, this probably followed from the festival's character as a New Year celebration).⁷⁶ Panthea were a somewhat common phenomenon in the Hellenistic world; they have been archaeologically attested *i. a.* in the town Kamiros on Rhodes, and textually for Ilion, Erythrai, Antioch-on-the-Meander, and Alexandria.⁷⁷

Conclusion – A Hellenistic King in a Post-Seleucid Political Landscape

The aspect of Antiochos I's dynastic identity that to my mind is most of all in need of explanation, is his use of the imperial title 'Great King'. The title seems too pretentious for Antiochos' small kingdom and his relative subordinate position *vis-à-vis* the Romans and the Arsakids. In his discussion of the Sofraz Köy stele, Wagner suggested that Antiochos adopted the title with the extension of his kingdom by Pompey in 65 BCE; but that still does no right to the imperial pretensions associated with that title.⁷⁸ As I have argued elsewhere⁷⁹, Antiochos could legitimately claim that title because of the "fortunate roots" of his Macedonian and Persian ancestry. But what did he hope to achieve by adopting it? There can be no doubt that the significance of the (Greek) title *basileus megas* must be explained from its late-Hellenistic, post-Seleucid context – and not from the three centuries old context of the largely forgotten Achaemenid Empire, as is so often thought. As Versluys has shown in his 2017 monograph on cultural production in late-Hellenistic Commagene, the dynastic iconography surrounding Antiochos I's claims to Persian ancestry is predominantly a Persianistic 'invention' of tradition, that despite its relative uniqueness is far less idiosyncratic than commonly assumed if seen in the light of cultural developments elsewhere in the late-Hellenistic Near East.⁸⁰ This contribution aimed at adding late-Hellenistic *political* developments to a better understanding of "wacky Antiochus and his giant garden gnomes" (as one Classical art historian during a discussion once phrased it).⁸¹

76 Strootman 2019a, 192–195.

77 Hoepfner 2012, 131, summarizing Jacobi 1930.

78 Wagner 1983; see now Jacobs in this volume, redating the Sofraz Köy stele to 64–62 BCE, disconnecting the adoption of the 'Great King' title from the expansion of Commagenian territory (I am grateful to Stefan Riedel for these references). On the Hellenistic title 'Great King' and its possible meanings, see Strootman 2019b.

79 Strootman 2016.

80 See also Kropp 2013, who shows how the various local dynasties of the late-Hellenistic Near East, in dialogue with each other, selectively appropriated aspects of Seleucid and Ptolemaic kingship in combination with presumed local traditions.

81 See Versluys 2017, 20 with ns. 47–50, for a selection of other derogative judgments by modern scholars, as well as the more nuanced views of Goell and Hoepfner. A well-known conspiracy theory on the Internet claims that the statue of Antiochos on Nemrud Dağ is in fact a portrait of

So what did Antiochos want? The sources say next to nothing about his political aims, let alone about their development in the course of Antiochos' long reign. We know that he alternately supported Parthia and Rome, and had to beware of the military strength of both. But the age in which he lived was also politically an age of uncertain outcomes: everything was possible. In Hellenistic history, political fortunes and 'interstate' power balances could shift dramatically by a single military victory or an unexpected royal death, and it would not have been the first time that a local ruler had been able to transform his kingdom into a powerful empire. Only one generation earlier, Mithradates of Pontos and Tigranes of Armenia had done precisely that, exploiting the power vacuum caused by Seleucid collapse and the political turmoil resulting from Roman and Parthian raids in Anatolia and the Near East. Mithradates had made good use of his alleged dual Macedonian and Persian descent: his actual Seleucid ancestry (including an assumed descent from Alexander) and his claimed Achaemenid ancestry. But whereas the coin production of Mithradates was enormous, coins of Antiochos of Commagene are rare⁸², and this does not suggest a lot of military activity. Yet, although Antiochos as far as we know never very actively showed the ambition of becoming a great conqueror, his political rhetoric was imperial. There is also the possibility that Antiochos at some point during his reign played out his Seleucid and Achaemenid heritage in accordance with Roman political aims, trying to win over local rulers and elites – precisely as Kleopatra, in cooperation with Caesar and later Antony, would capitalize upon her ancestral prestige to create imperial cohesion in the Near East.⁸³ Roman hegemony in the Near East was based on the continued existence of the system of vassal kingdoms set up by the Seleucids and Ptolemies. The need to control this fragmented and very monarchical political landscape explains why Roman leaders from Pompey to Nero adopted the ideology and trappings of Hellenistic kingship, and tried to cooperate with the friendly descendants of these imperial dynasties. Commagene was very strategically located, with easy access to the Syrian and Cilician plains, the Anatolian highlands, and to Mesopotamia.

Be that as it may, I hope to have shown that we need to understand Antiochos' dynastic policies in the context of Seleucid collapse. To make that point, I have moved Rome more to the background than historical narratives usually do. I did so to accentuate ongoing Seleucid prestige in the region and Antiochos' relatively large degree of autonomy, and also to highlight the substantial political role that the Parthians played in the Near East in the first century BCE.⁸⁴ But Rome of course was there – and not

Elvis Presley (search for "Antiochus Commagene Elvis Presley" *vel sim.*); if this is true, and if Elvis is indeed alive and living in Las Vegas, 'The Giant Garden Gnomes' would be a good name for his band.

82 See the contribution by Facella, this volume; cf. Facella 2005b; Gariboldi 2007. For the coinage of Commagene, consult Bedoukian 1995.

83 Strootman 2010.

84 On the connections between Antiochos I and the Arsakid Empire, see now Shayegan 2016.

only in the background, as a Roman *provincia* had been established in Syria already in 64/63 BCE. In 31 BCE, Antiochos' successor, Mithradates II, joined Kleopatra and Antony at Actium, but afterwards was still confirmed as king by the victorious Octavian.⁸⁵ Only from that date on there would be increasingly *direct* Roman intervention in Commagene, and it seems that this loss of independence resulted in a drastic reduction of the royal cult established by Antiochos I.⁸⁶ The Roman emperor now actively decided who would rule in Commagene. Such a strong Roman presence however was not yet in place during Antiochos I's reign.

The title of 'Great King' returned under Antiochos IV, who also adopted the grandiose epithet Epiphanes. But perhaps by that time the meaning of 'Great King' had devaluated and now merely expressed that this later king ruled Commagene plus some other lands.

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85 Plut. *Antonius* 61.

86 Speidel 2009, 566–567 with n. 22; cf. Bowersock 1965, 46–51.

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