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Rome and the Seleukid East

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Introduction

Altay COŞKUN and David ENGELS

1. *The Rise and Fall of an Empire*

The Seleukid Kingdom (312–64 BC) emerged from the Diadoch Wars as the largest of the successors to the Empire of Alexander the Great (†323). A series of conquests allowed its founder Seleukos I Nikator (312–281) to dominate most of the north-eastern Mediterranean basin, Mesopotamia and parts of Central Asia (temporarily at least) as far as the Indus River. While repeatedly attacked by the Antigonids, Ptolemies and Anatolian middle powers, and while occasionally disrupted by insurrections in Baktria and Parthia, Seleukid rulers were able to reassert their supremacy throughout the 3rd century. With one or two exceptions, it was only in times of inner-dynastic strife that they had to worry about Syria, Mesopotamia and Media, the core regions of their realm. On balance, usurpations happened rarely, did not last long, and failed without exception, at least prior to 162. Antiochos III (223–187) even had a realistic chance of reuniting nearly all the territories that Alexander had formerly brought under his sway. Through the 190s, the prestige of the victorious king was second to none: the northern and eastern territories had returned into vassal status in the course of his glorious *anabasis*; Ptolemaic Egypt was curtailed and bound into an uneven alliance; the kingdoms, leagues and cities of Asia Minor were either his loyal allies or afraid of imminent subjection; and the strongest force in the Greek Motherland, the Aitolian League, was keen on accepting his overlordship.

True enough, with the dust of the Hannibalic and the First Macedonian Wars settling, the Romans were gradually becoming visible on the western horizon. Having crushed the naval empire of the Carthaginians, they had established themselves as the new hegemon of the western Mediterranean. Through waging war on King Philip V of Macedon, they had demonstrated themselves as a force to be reckoned with. Along with military prowess came diplomatic skill and energy, the effects of which were manifesting themselves in a growing network of alliances. These included, amongst others, the Achaian League and the Pergamene Kingdom, lest to forget a long-standing friendship with the Ptolemies. Even before the victory of Kynoskephalai in 197, the Romans showed self-confidence by demanding the – hitherto unstoppable – Antiochos to stay out of Egypt. While they did not prevent him from annexing Koile Syria or expelling Ptolemaic garrisons from Asia Minor, their intervention

nevertheless seems to have been the ultimate reason for Antiochos to hold back from occupying the land of the Nile.

Admittedly, around the year 200, the king would not have conceived the idea that his strength might be inferior to Rome; but he was aware of the potential risk that Roman Italy might join the Ptolemies in an effective alliance, and that such an opposition stood a good chance of being reinforced by Pergamon and other players of central and southern Greece. He avoided that risk, and opted for negotiations. The outcome was the conclusion of formal *amicitia*, the last of its kind that the Romans offered unrequested.¹ The Seleukids and Ptolemies also joined in friendship, which was sealed through the betrothal of his daughter Kleopatra and the child king Ptolemy V. The reconciliation of the former enemies did not stand in the way of good Roman-Seleukid relations, on the contrary, everyone seemed to be satisfied, and fears of a major conflict were dispersed. Antiochos had rightly understood that the Romans would not go to war for Koile Syria and Anatolian territories, for whose annexation he could even present some reasonable claims. With those territories changing hands, however, the effective balance of power was gradually changing. Time was playing into the hands of the Seleukid King. Friendship with Rome cooled down as of 196, when Antiochos fortified Lysimacheia on the Thracian Chersonesos. With this act, he was demonstrating that he had set his mind on more of Europe.²

Seizing what seemed to him a splendid occasion, Antiochos accepted the invitation of the Aitolians and set over the Aegean in 192. Although he only brought small military forces with him, probably lest to provoke the Romans beyond the point of no return, his move changed the fate of his prospering kingdom, and also of the Eastern Mediterranean at large. Irrespective of the military strength and political brilliance he had shown so far, he clearly underestimated the Romans' willingness to bring back their armies, which they had withdrawn in 194 as a sign of good-will to the Greek world. He likewise overestimated his popularity among the Greeks, who were more than hesitant to support him. The battles at Thermophylai (191) and Magnesia (190) once more demonstrated that he had miscalculated the speed, vigor and determination of the Romans. The victors dictated harsh conditions for the truce, and even worsened them somewhat for the Peace of Apameia (188). Antiochos accepted, and this revealed to everyone that he believed the Romans could crush his

¹ The first friendship relation between the Romans and a Seleukid King should be dated to those negotiations in 200/198, see COŞKUN (*Friendship with Rome*) in this volume.

² Modern scholars have frequently evoked the 'Cold War' for those transitional years; esp. BADIAN (1959), cf. BURTON (2011). But historical comparisons have their limitations: one should not forget that the official friendship between Antiochos and Rome held until 193, if not beyond; and while the ancient crisis escalated in 192, it did not come to a major confrontation in the 20th-century.

kingdom, if only they wanted to – a prudent decision, though a dangerous message which probably triggered the autonomist hopes of his subjects, vassals and neighbours.

According to the set terms, Antiochos ceded the territories north and west of the Taurus range in south-eastern Asia Minor, handed over most of his fleet as well as his war elephants – the emblem of Seleukid power since the Battle of Ipsos (301)³ –, offered hostages, including one of his sons, and agreed to pay huge indemnities, part of them on the spot, and more to come in 12 yearly instalments, adding up to over 15,000 talents.⁴ The loss of territory and prestige was damaging, as were the required payments and other limitations. All of them surely had negative effects. Modern scholarship has repeatedly pointed to Apameia as the most crippling event that not only weakened the kingdom, but destroyed it in the long run.⁵ How painful the loss of tax income and royal lands from wealthy Asia Minor was, remains controversial. The fact that Antiochos III and his successor Seleukos IV are said to have been killed while or after pillaging temple treasures has reinforced the impression of financial despair,⁶ especially since *2 Maccabees* draws an explicit connection between the stripping of the Judaeans and the need to pay off the required indemnities.⁷ Others have pointed to the inner-dynastic strife as a result of holding back the legitimate successor Demetrios in Rome. Yet others claim that the damage to Antiochos' reputation of invincibility encouraged the vassals in the eastern territories to seek independence.⁸ All of this may well be true to a certain degree, but, since Seleukid kingship endured for more than a century after Apameia and even seems to have recovered to a surprising extent under the rule of Antiochos IV, something must be missing in this picture.

³ See KOSMIN (2014b); COŞKUN (2012c) and SEKUNDA in this volume.

⁴ The terms of Apameia have most recently been re-examined by PAYEN (2016); cf. ELVIDGE (2017), and see SEKUNDA, SCOLNIC, WENGHOFER and COŞKUN (Epilogue) in this volume.

⁵ Cf. e.g. BOUCHÉ-LECLERCQ (1913/1914), p. 220–222: 'Jamais souverain n'avait été plus cruellement humilié qu'Antiochos [...]. En somme, Antiochos devait recommencer, avec moins de forces [...], la tournée qui lui avait valu le surnom de Grand, s'il voulait prévenir l'écroulement de total de l'édifice élevé par Séleucos Nicator.'

⁶ Antiochos III: DIOD. SIC. 28.3; 29.15; JUST. 32.2.1–2. Seleukos IV: APP., *Syr.* 45. Also see TAYLOR (2013), p. 152–158.

⁷ *2Macc* 8.11 explains the pillaging of the Seleukid governor Nikanor under Antiochos IV with the debts to Rome; generally on the greed of Seleukos IV (contrasting though with 3.2) and Antiochos IV (contrasting with 4.37f., cf. 3.7–4.25; 5.21; 9.2; also *1Macc* 1.16–24. There are good reasons for caution, see the discussion by COŞKUN (Epilogue, section 3, with further references).

⁸ E.g., CAPDETREY (2007), p. 439.

2. *The Study of the Seleukid Empire I:
From Seleukid Dissolution to the Series of Seleukid Study Days*

Nearly a decade ago, the conference *Seleukid Dissolution. The Sinking of the Anchor* (Exeter 2008) had been organized to shed new light on the factors that weakened or even crippled the kingdom. In the course of the conference, however, it became clear that not only weakness and decline should find more pertinent descriptions and cogent analyses; but, first of all, the strengths of Seleukid rule need to be understood better, in order to allow for a fairer assessment of Seleukid imperial history.⁹ Scholars of Classical Studies traditionally focus on the empire's western territories, especially the Greek cities of Asia Minor with their rich epigraphic evidence and the Levant with its wealth of coinage, besides the unique literary sources that exist for Judaea under the Maccabees. This concentration created a certain imbalance in the modern perception, as it led to the view that the kingdom was weak and declining ever since the death of its founder Seleukos Nikator. Such perspectives were further reinforced through the negative bias of the literary sources: their authors were often hostile to the Seleukids, or simply more impressed by the successful Romans.¹⁰ The Exeter conference emphasized the advantage of adopting a broad geographic approach that duly considers the Mesopotamian and Iranian parts of the Empire. This had previously been claimed most forcefully by S. Sherwin-White and A. Kuhrt (1993), in the wake of which a number of substantial studies on the eastern satrapies appeared, especially on Persia, Baktria, Parthia and Babylonia.¹¹ Some more narrowly themed studies can be added that combine

⁹ See the introduction of the proceedings, ERICKSON / RAMSEY (2011), p. 13–18.

¹⁰ Major accounts with stronger coverage of the west and the understanding that the kingdom was doomed to inevitable failure due to the moral shortcomings of the epigones or because of the lack of cohesion: e.g., BEVAN (1902); BOUCHÉ-LECLERCQ (1913/14); WOLSKI (1999); GRAINGER (2014). Preponderance on the western areas: e.g., WILL (1979/1982); GRAINGER (1990a); DABROWA (2011); FEYEL / GRASLIN-THOMÉ (2014). Such a preference is less surprising for studies focussing on diplomacy and inscriptions, e.g., ORTH (1977); MA (1999), or concentrating on the conflicts with the Ptolemies, e.g., GRAINGER (2010), or Rome, e.g., SCHMITT (1964); GRAINGER (2002); DREYER (2007); also see BURTON (2011); GRAINGER (2015b). The distortion in our literary sources have been studied, e.g., by PRIMO (2009); J. ENGELS (2011); CECCARELLI (2011).

¹¹ Persia: LERNER (1999); ROUGEMONT (2012); ENGELS (2013); PLISCHKE (2014); ENGELS (2017a); STROOTMAN / VERSLUIS (2017). Baktria: POSCH (1995); HOLT (1999); LERNER (1999); COLORU (2009); WENGHOFER / HOULE (2016); WENGHOFER (ca. 2018). Parthia: WIESEHÖFER (1998); DABROWA (2014). Babylonia: FINKEL / VAN DER SPEK (2004/2006); KOSMIN (2014a); ERICKSON (2011); ERICKSON / RAMSEY (2011); MONERIE (2014); PIRNGRUBER (2017). Also see ENGELS (2017b) for an overview over recent publications.

East and West,¹² if not try an assessment of the Empire as a whole.¹³

The Exeter conference reinforced this trend: D. Ogden exemplified the creativity visible in the foundational myths;¹⁴ contrasting the factual side of the ‘Elephant Victory’ of Antiochos I, A. Coşkun showed that the Seleukids effectively lost control over parts of Asia Minor, but that they had, at the same time, the ability to contain losses and even integrate former enemies such as the Galatians into their own networks;¹⁵ K. Erickson and P. Kosmin exemplified how closely interwoven Seleukid ideology and Babylonian cultic traditions were;¹⁶ D. Engels argued for a paradigm change showing that the process away from a centralized administration to a more feudalized network controlled by a ‘King of Kings’ had started under the Achaimenids and continued, after some delays, under the Seleukids and later also under the Parthians; but even so, the change towards more indirect rule should not be confused with growing weakness.¹⁷ On the negative side, the notion of dissolution was emphasized by G. Ramsey by pointing to the ‘competitive political culture prevailing among top officials at the royal court’.¹⁸ On balance, however, it became apparent that not Seleukid decline, but rather the diverse foundations of Seleukid strength and resilience deserve better exploration, and that an interdisciplinary cooperation was the best way to achieve this.

Three of the Exeter participants agreed on a more systematic cooperation at a Hellenistic conference at Waterloo (2010). Besides the organization of various conference panels, so far six numbered *Seleukid Study Days* followed suit which tried to foster collaborative agendas. Locations alternated between Europe and Canada (Exeter 2011, Waterloo 2011, Bordeaux 2012, Montreal 2013, Brussels 2015, North Bay, Ontario 2017). The declared intention is to include all sub- and neighbouring disciplines of Classical Studies, such as Philology, Epigraphy, Numismatics and Archaeology. It is especially beneficial to that enterprise that ever more participants command languages of the ancient Near and Middle East, such as Babylonian, Persian, Aramaic and Hebrew, besides Greek and Latin.

Seleukid Study Day I (2011) showed a particular interest in King Antiochos I (294/281–261): his personal roots and close involvement with the Iranian satrapies, his utilization of Apolline cults to establish links with local traditions, and the discrepancy between his poor achievements against the Galatians on the

¹² E.g., HELD (2002); KOSMIN (2014b); STROOTMAN (2014) and STROOTMAN (2017).

¹³ BRODERSEN (1999); MEHL (1999); CAPDETREY (2007).

¹⁴ OGDEN (2011); cf. OGDEN (2017); also ERICKSON (2013) and ERICKSON (2014).

¹⁵ COŞKUN (2011); cf. (2012c).

¹⁶ ERICKSON (2011); KOSMIN (2014a) (published outside the conference volume).

¹⁷ ENGELS (2011); cf. ENGELS (2013); STROOTMAN (2013); ENGELS (2014a); ENGELS (2014b); ENGELS (2017a); ENGELS (2018).

¹⁸ RAMSEY (2011); quotation from ERICKSON / RAMSEY (2011), p. 15.

one hand, and his propagandistic exploitation of the alleged victory on the other.¹⁹

Seleukid Study Days II (2011) and *III* (2012) were dedicated to open questions on the development of the Seleukid Kingdom in the 3rd century.²⁰ Examined were inner-dynastic rivalries²¹ and the emergence of new kingdoms in Asia Minor and the Iranian territories. Most importantly, it was argued that upheavals in Baktria and Parthia were only temporary, and that Seleukid suzerainty was quickly re-established, albeit under a different form. Once again, not weakness and fragmentation, but strength and resilience of the ruling house was underlined.²²

Seleukid Study Day II also exemplified the need to study more systematically the female counterparts of the kings, and to investigate the functions they had both for the construction of royalty and the development of feudalistic structures. Accordingly, the creation of the role of queen and the paramount phenomenon of inter-dynastic marriage were chosen as topics for *Seleukid Study Day IV* (2013). This workshop became the forum not only for comparing substantial studies on prosopography and genealogy, but also for analyzing propagandistic and literary constructs of the ‘good’ and ‘evil queen’ respectively.²³

After having paid much attention to the establishment and repeated defence of the Empire through the 3rd century, the *Seleukid Study Group* moved its focus to the 2nd century for the fifth gathering (Brussels 2015), whose proceedings are here presented. The impact that the various diplomatic and military encounters with Rome had was investigated from multiple perspectives (see next section). One of the conclusions was that not only the creative construction of Seleukid royal ideology deserves attention, but also the subtle ways of its reception and modification as well as its outspoken rejection by subjects, vassals and rivals need to come under systematic scrutiny. This is the theme that *Seleukid Study Day VI* (North Bay ON 2017) has most recently been dedicated to.²⁴

¹⁹ Studies on Antiochos I: ERICKSON (2011); COŞKUN (2012c); ENGELS (2013); (2017b). Report: COŞKUN (2011b).

²⁰ Reports: COŞKUN (2012a), (2012b). Proceedings of *Seleukid Study Day III*: ERICKSON (ca. 2018) is currently at the proof stage.

²¹ E.g., COŞKUN (ca. 2018a); D’AGOSTINI (ca. 2018); ERICKSON (ca. 2018b); MCAULEY (ca. 2018); HOLTON (ca. 2018). Now also see CHRUBASIK (2016).

²² E.g., ENGELS (2017a); STROOTMAN (2017b); WENGHOFFER (2017); also COŞKUN (ca. 2017a).

²³ Reports: COŞKUN (2012a); COŞKUN / MCAULEY (2013). Proceedings: COŞKUN / MCAULEY (2016).

²⁴ *Seleukid Study Day VI: Reception, Response, and Resistance: Reactions to Seleukid Claims to Territorial Hegemony*. URL: <http://www.altaycoskun.com/ssd06>.

3. *Rome and the Seleukid East*

Seleukid Study Day V was convened on the assumption that the observations made at the previous workshops remain relevant for the later period as well, despite the comet-like rise of Roman hegemony all over the Mediterranean coast line: the importance of the eastern territories as a source of military recruits, taxes and prestige for the Seleukids; the constant awareness of the need to adapt and reconstruct the image of the royal persona(e); and the complex intermarriage strategies, which then, however, triggered dynastic conflicts to a degree unexperienced before.

Although the Romans forcefully demonstrated their dominance at Magnesia and Apameia (190/188), the Seleukids continued to be a power to be taken into account.²⁵ Seleukos IV managed to stabilize the kingdom after the death of Antiochos III, and Antiochos IV was still considered the most powerful king of his time, and this irrespective of his humiliation by Pompilius Laenas at Eleusis near Alexandria (168).²⁶ Despite the turmoil at the beginning and the end of Demetrios I's rule (162–150), he was, for the most part, capable of firmly controlling the Empire. Only when Ptolemy VI Philometor gave his support to the usurper Alexander I Balas (150), sealing this alliance with the hand of his daughter Kleopatra II, the infighting became dramatic. The incessant dynastic wars triggered the loss of Persia, Media and Mesopotamia to the Parthians by 142. The disaster was exacerbated by the capture of Demetrios II in 138. And yet, the success of Antiochos VII Sidetes, first against Diodotos Tryphon, second against the Judaeans, and third even against the Parthians, at least initially, demonstrated for the last time the unique potential of resilience inherent in this dynasty – regardless of the fact that his campaign ended in total failure in 129. With this, the loss of the territories east of the Euphrates was permanent, and the spiral of disintegration accelerated.²⁷ But even so, Seleukid scions continued to claim, and fight for, their royal inheritance until Pompey deposed the last would-be king of this family with Antiochos XIII. Even so, this late sequence of petty kings shows that the dynasty managed until its very end to win the support of parts of the former Empire's subjects. This process of disintegration may truly be dubbed 'dying hard'.²⁸ In addition, we should not forget the many neighbouring or successive dynasties who not only continued aspects of Seleukid ideology, but even boasted Seleukid blood in their veins: there was barely a Hellenistic king as far north as the Bosporan Kingdom, as far south as

²⁵ See esp. PAYEN in this volume.

²⁶ Seleukos IV: MILETA (2014); ELVIDGE (2017). Antiochos IV: MITTAG (2006); FEYEL / GRASLIN-THOMÉ (2014). And see PAYEN, SEKUNDA, STROOTMAN and SCOLNIC in this volume.

²⁷ EHLING (2008); GRAINGER (2015b); also WENGHOFFER in this volume.

²⁸ HOOVER (2007); EHLING (2008); DUMITRU (2012) and (2016).

Egypt and as far east as Baktria who was not a descendent of Antiochos III.²⁹

Hence, Roman military prowess and the damaging conditions of Apameia cannot be the decisive factors for the gradual decline of the erstwhile most powerful ‘Successor’ Kingdom. Other causes need to be taken into consideration as well. Most of all, Roman diplomacy in the East needs to be studied closely, particularly the quite flexible and at times perilous ‘friendship’ relations of the Romans.³⁰ They not only involved the Seleukids into the inner logic of their diplomatic network, but also other communities in the eastern Mediterranean world that gradually gained freedom from Seleukid control sometime after Apameia, such as Kommagene, the Phoinikian cities and Judaea. The latter is of the highest interest, given the unique insights into the triangular diplomacy with Seleukids and Romans that the *First* and *Second Book of Maccabees* and Flavius Josephus’ *Jewish Antiquities* provide.³¹

Those losses notwithstanding, the most deleterious turned out to be the secession of the Parthians, who gradually absorbed the Iranian satrapies before invading Mesopotamia. A question that has not yet found a commonly accepted answer though is whether Parthian success was the reason for Seleukid decline or the other way round. At least, recent research has suggested that the Seleukids’ growing retreat from the ‘Upper Satrapies’ was not the result of a barely contained popular resentment against Hellenistic oppression; to the contrary, the Seleukids seem to have been able to command the loyalty not only of the Baktrians,³² but also the Persian Frataraka dynasts³³ for much longer than initially presumed. Another group of negative factors were inner-dynastic rivalries that resulted partly from polygamy and partly from intermarriage with other ruling houses, most dangerously with the Ptolemies of Egypt, who had their share in absorbing the resources of the Seleukid Empire. Incestuous marriages and blood spilled by kin fuelled the disdain for the descendants of Seleukos among ancient historiographers and modern scholars alike. Those misdeeds seemed to justify moralizing concepts such as ‘debauchery’ or ‘degeneration’, which were viewed as typical for the oriental ‘race’ then and until recently. But a better understanding of nuptial practices at Hellenistic courts and of the often-distorted representation of powerful queens, as discussed

²⁹ MCAULEY (2011); COŞKUN / MCAULEY (2016) and *Seleukid Study Day VI* (above, n. 25).

³⁰ BADIAN (1958); BRAUND (1984); GRUEN (1984); COŞKUN (2005), (*APR*), (2008), (2015), (2017b); BURTON (2011).

³¹ Recent treatments of the Maccabean dynasty: DĄBROWA (2010); REGEV (2010); GRAINGER (2012); ECKHARDT (2013). For a particular focus on the relations with Rome: SEEMAN (2013) and (only with much caution) ZOLLSCHAN (2017); also DĄBROWA and COŞKUN (Triangular Diplomacy) in this volume.

³² WENGHOFER / HOULE (2016); WENGHOFER (2017).

³³ See now PLISCHKE (2014) and ENGELS (2017a).

at *Seleukid Study Day IV*, should caution us against overly rash conclusions.³⁴

In sum, it is timely to reconsider – in a collective and pluri-disciplinary effort – the complex factors that brought about Seleukid decline in the 2nd century. The present volume pursues the following questions: what defined the strength of Seleukid rule before the defeat at Magnesia?³⁵ How were the Seleukids and their soldiers perceived by their contemporaries, and how did the Seleukid kings integrate different population groups into the army which enabled them to resist for such a long time against the Ptolemies and Parthians alike?³⁶ How damaging were the peace conditions of Apameia meant to be, which immediate effects did they have, and to what degree were the successors of Antiochos III bound to the stipulations of the treaty?³⁷ How destructive was Roman diplomacy after Apameia, what were its mechanisms, and what were its aims?³⁸ How influential were the rulers of Asia Minor (esp. the Attalids and Ariarathids) and Ptolemaic kingdoms in the further course of Seleukid dissolution?³⁹ How long did the vassal kings and satraps show loyalty, and when did the (well documented, but perhaps overestimated) Judaeans elapse the grip of the Seleukids?⁴⁰ And finally: was the series of dynastic infighting more a symptom or a cause of the existential crisis?⁴¹ While following up on these questions, it turns out once more that a shift of perspective is needed: away from focusing on decline towards accounting for the persistent appeal of the dynasty, its capability of gathering resources and remaining active in eastern Mediterranean politics and warfare for generations after Apameia.

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³⁴ OGDEN (1999); WHITEHORNE (2001); COŞKUN / MCAULEY (2016); WENGHOFER in this volume. Also see STROOTMAN (2014).

³⁵ See VISSCHER, ALMAGOR, ERICKSON and ENGELS in this volume.

³⁶ See ENGELS and STROOTMAN in this volume. Also see HOULE (2015).

³⁷ See above, n. 4.

³⁸ See above, n. 5–7.

³⁹ Attalids: MICHELS in this volume. Ariarathids: MCAULEY in this volume. Ptolemies: see above, n. 34, also WENGHOFER in this volume.

⁴⁰ Babylonia: RAMSEY in this volume. Judaea: see above, n. 31.

⁴¹ See CHRUBASIK (2016) as well as WENGHOFER and SCOLNIC in this volume.

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