

<ET>Seleucid Empire

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The Seleucids conquered and then controlled for c.200 years (312–64 BCE) a territory that was remarkably vast and diverse, culturally, linguistically, and ethnically. Theirs was a personal monarchy, based on the king's individual charisma and on military success. However, through their colonial foundations; the establishment (or takeover) of a complex administrative network, aimed at the extraction of surplus by means of taxation but also at provision of services; the creation of a unified Seleucid era; a centralized ruler cult; and flexible dealing with the various groups (communities, cities, dynasts, temple states) that composed the empire, the Seleucids managed to root themselves in the landscape they had conquered, intertwining various cultural traditions: local, Macedonian, Greek, and Achaemenid.

<KW>3500 BCE–1 CE; Ancient History; Imperialism and Conquest; Multiculturalism; Race and Ethnicity

<P>The Seleucid Empire (312–64 BCE) was the largest of the three kingdoms that emerged from the break-up of Alexander the Great's attempt at a world empire. At its moment of greatest expansion, it encompassed all the territory between the Mediterranean and the Hindu Kush; its defining characteristic is arguably its remarkable diversity, of territory, cultures, and languages. The solidity of Seleucid control over this complex space, the nature and means through which this control was exercised, and whether there was a "core" to the empire are all controversial issues. Some scholars have viewed the Seleucid Empire as an inorganic mass, structurally weak because of its heterogeneity. Less negatively, it has been regarded as a non-territorial, "personal" monarchy relying on a Greco-Macedonian elite without strong local attachments, in which royal legitimacy rested on specific kingly practices, such as warfare and benefactions. More recently, yet another approach sees the empire as an extraordinarily adaptable formation, based on the adoption of Near Eastern, and specifically Achaemenid, systems of imperial rule.

These divergences are linked to a historiographical shift. As long as scholarship relied almost exclusively on Greek sources, the Seleucid kingdom was viewed from a Mediterranean perspective, as a Western/Greek/Macedonian formation. In the wake of "postcolonial" approaches this view has been challenged: Kuhrt and Sherwin White (1993) understand the empire as an Eastern kingdom centered on Babylon, and inheriting Achaemenid traditions of dominance. By now, research has moved beyond the dichotomy between a Western- and an Eastern-oriented empire, and beyond the contrast between models that emphasize change (spread of Hellenization) or continuity with earlier Eastern structures. The focus is now on local conditions, as attested by archaeological excavations, coins, inscriptions, cuneiform documents, parchments, and literary texts. The unique way in which the Seleucids conceived of their imperial space has thus begun to emerge, together with a more fine-grained appreciation of the various influences that joined together to shape a kingdom that managed to last for more than 200 years, even though its size and strength fluctuated from early on.

<A>Chronological overview

<P>The empire's founder, Seleucus, a Macedonian, was one of Alexander's generals; in the wake of the military and diplomatic confrontation that followed Alexander's death (323 BCE), Seleucus was awarded the satrapy of Babylonia in 320. During the five years in which he remained in Babylon, until his expulsion by Antigonus in 315, Seleucus built a strong local power base, possibly helped by his earlier marriage with Apame, the Iranian daughter of a Sogdian nobleman (Arrian, *Anabasis* 7.4.6). In 312 Seleucus triumphally returned to Babylon (Diodorus, *Library of History* 19.90–93, 19.100.3–7; details of the fighting for Babylon, which lasted probably until 308, in the *Babylonian Diadochi Chronicle*, BCHP 3); the years of his reign were counted from this date, which also marked the beginning of the "Seleucid era".

Over the next thirty years Seleucus extended his control over most of the Asian territories conquered by Alexander, reaching as far as the Indus, where in 305 or 304 he secured the border through an agreement with the Mauryan king Chandragupta. Also in 305 Seleucus assumed the title of king; and with his victory over Antigonus at the Battle of Ipsus (301 BCE) he established firm control over Syria and Anatolia. In 292, in a move to ensure a smooth succession, he co-opted Antiochus, his son by his Iranian wife, to the throne. By 281, with his victory over Lysimachus at Corupedium, Seleucus controlled all of Asia Minor; his death followed a few months afterward, in the course of a failed attempt to regain Macedonia.

Seleucus' son Antiochus I (r.281–261) had to deal with uprisings immediately on accession, then with invasions of Galatian tribes (c.275), and the first of the wars between Seleucids and Ptolemies over control of Coele-Syria. This is the "formative" period of the Seleucid Empire: structures are established (the co-rulership and the principle of inheritance, or the time reckoning according to a Seleucid era, for instance); borders are delineated, colonies founded, and a "diasporic" geography established. The following period, from the accession of Antiochus II Theos in 261 to Antiochus III's accession in 222, appears as a time of slow erosion and dynastic crisis, due mainly to the continuous attrition caused by the wars with the Ptolemies over Coele-Syria, the separatist tendencies of the central Asian satrapies, and strife within the Seleucid family.

Antiochus III's long reign (r.222–187), marked by continuous campaigns aimed at bringing back under Seleucid control the land once conquered by Seleucus, heralded a resurgence of Seleucid power – but also eventually led to its clash with Rome. Antiochus campaigned in turn against Molon, the satrap of Media (222–220); Ptolemy IV (217); and Achaeus, who had set himself up as independent dynast in Sardis (216–213). With the western part of the empire under control, Antiochus turned to the East, reasserting in the course of his great "Anabasis" (212–205) Seleucid control over Armenia, Parthia, and Bactria, and renewing the treaty with India. Next, he annexed all the Ptolemaic territories in Asia Minor and the Levant, occupying Palestine (Fifth Syrian War, 202–195). His subsequent intervention in Greek affairs, however, attracted the attention of Rome: at the Battle of Magnesia (190), Antiochus suffered a decisive defeat at the hands of Eumenes II of Pergamon and his Roman allies.

Notwithstanding the loss of Asia Minor and the heavy fines imposed by the Romans, in the following twenty years the empire showed its ability to regroup (Kuhrt and Sherwin-White 1993: 215–229). But the establishment of two rival branches, caused by the succession to the throne of two sons of Antiochus III, Seleucus IV (r.187–175) and Antiochus IV (r.175–164), ultimately led to its demise, helped along by Roman interference and external pressure from the Parthians. After the loss of Iran and Mesopotamia to the Parthians, the Seleucids remained in control of northern Syria only; the transformation of Syria into a Roman province by Pompey in 64 BCE marked the end of the Seleucid kingdom.

<A>Structures

<P>The Seleucid Empire consisted of the lands “spear-won” by Seleucus, and it was only the charismatic power of each king, his personal (military and organizational) achievement, that kept it together. Interaction between the king and his subjects was vital: the kingdom has been defined as “a network of bilateral relationships between the ruling king and the communities in his sphere of power” (Austin 2003: 123). Thus, royal movement, the epiphany of the king in his far-flung territories, whether simply for travel from one of his capital cities to another, or during one of the military campaigns designed to reassert the king’s power, was integral to Seleucid governmental practice.

Even such a personal monarchy, however, depended on collaborative relationships. In this respect, the Seleucids showed extreme flexibility, adopting selectively from, and combining, Greek, Macedonian, Achaemenid, and local pre-Achaemenid institutions and practices (Ma 2013).

The king was surrounded by a court of “friends” (a Macedonian inheritance). These friends, ranked through a number of formalized titles, seem to have been predominantly Macedonians or Greeks from elite families; they acted as a council, could be left behind as functionaries representing royal authority, and often served as intermediaries between the king and the cities. The friends’ authority depended entirely on the king’s will (the status of “friend” could not be inherited); the king recompensed a friend’s loyalty with gifts of land (which might be given in full possession, or only in usufruct) or important positions.

The basis of royal power was the army: war (of conquest or pacification) was the main activity of the king, and also his main source of expenditure. The core of the army was formed by a standing force of “national troops”, both infantry and cavalry, drawn from the royal settlements in the territory, and by elephants. To these professional troops were added temporary levies from the local population, in the tradition of the Achaemenid Empire, as well as mercenaries, often from Greece. Moreover, permanent local troops (garrisons and troops under the command of provincial governors) could be called upon. When drawn up for campaign, the Seleucid army at the time of Antiochus III could be up to 70,000 strong (Polybius, *Histories* 5.79; Livy, *Ab Urbe Condita* 37.37.9).

Maintaining the royal lifestyle and residences, the “friends”, and the army involved huge costs, which could only rarely be compensated by booty. The king, the court, and the army maintained themselves on the basis of extraction of resources from the territory, and this required a fine-grained network of administration.

As under the Achaemenids, the territory was organized in satrapies, governed by a general (*strategos*, a Greek term) who answered directly to the king and was responsible for the “civil” administration. Most satrapies (there may have been twenty at the moment of greatest extension of the empire) were further subdivided into hyparchies, with a hyparch at their head; some satrapies, such as Coele-Syria, had further intermediate subdivisions called meridarchies, headed by a meridarch. Satrapies could be grouped together to form a higher command, such as that of the Upper Satrapies, held by the co-ruler (e.g., Antiochus I in 292) or by an official (such as the Macedonian Cleomenes: Kuhrt and Sherwin-White 1993: 223). Asia Minor, with its capital in Sardis, formed another such high command: Antiochus III left Zeuxis as “the official in charge of affairs on this side of the Taurus” during his seven-year campaign in the Upper Satrapies .

The land itself had a variety of statuses, and so different forms of control applied (Aperghis 2004; Capdetrey 2007; Ma 2013). The *chora basilike* or “royal land” was directly owned by the king, who levied rent from it, probably in kind. Other areas (the *chora*, including most non-Greek cities, rural communities, temple states) were under the king’s sovereignty and the strict control of officials (civil, military, and economic): the territory was subject to tribute (in kind or cash: the latter was necessary to pay the army), and the inhabitants were subject to various types of taxation, to corvée labor, and to the billeting of troops. There were also city-states that were subordinate, but not part of the royal territory: they were permitted their own calendar, but were nonetheless subject to taxes, tribute, and service. Finally, there were communities that enjoyed, through a gesture of the king, a “free and autonomous” status, which could, however, always be revoked. Similarly, local dynasts and princes of peripheral kingdoms reached arrangements, often sanctioned by a dynastic marriage, that could vary depending on the balance of power (compare the cases of Euthydemus of Bactria, Xerxes of Armenia, and the Attalids). These differences in status also implied different levels of taxation.

By the time of Antiochus II, the administrative civil structure formed by the *strategos* and his subordinates was paralleled by an economic administration, independent of the former and answering directly to the king. The financial administration of the satrapies (including the levy of taxes) was in the hands of *dioiketai*, to whom subordinate financial officials (*oikonomoi*) at the level of the hyparchies answered; for the time of Antiochus III a supra-regional financial official is also attested. Taxation was not only directed to the land and its produce: natural resources (timber, salt), imports, and exports were also targeted (Capdetrey 2007: 398–407). A source of revenue may also have been the minting of coins, although in this area the Seleucids, unlike the Ptolemies, maintained an open market, accepting all currencies of Attic standard, and minting only whenever it was necessary to top up the supply (Aperghis 2004; Callataÿ in Chankowski and Duyrat 2004).

As each decision had formally to be the king’s, the royal chancery played a vital role: writing letters and receiving embassies were fundamental duties of the king. The Seleucid chancery developed a specific language in which to express the king’s decisions; the letters were posted throughout the empire, and inscribed on stone as dossiers, emphasizing even visually the different elements of the bureaucratic chain and thus the reach of the empire (Ma 2002; Capdetrey 2007). But although the kingdom remained rooted in the persona of the king, and although the Seleucids

flexibly adapted to different local practices, efforts were made to ground the kingdom in more permanent ways.

One unifying element was the calendar. Here, the Seleucids mixed tradition and innovation. They adopted the Macedonian calendar, like the other Hellenistic kingdoms. But all official documents, throughout the kingdom, were dated on the basis of the Seleucid era, which began with the date of Seleucus I's return to Babylon (Nissan = April 311 in the Babylonian calendar, Dios = October 312 in the Greek/Macedonian calendar). Not only was the king "master of time", but the time thus drawn encompassed the duration of the empire and did not restart afresh with each new king – a solution unique to the Seleucids (Savalli-Lestrade 2010; Kosmin 2014).

Further, co-rulership was instituted as an attempt to facilitate succession. This was only moderately successful: already with Antiochus I issues arose. A royal Babylonian cylinder from Borsippa, commemorating the rebuilding of Esagil and the laying of the first stone in Ezida in 268 BCE, mentions "Antiochus, king of lands, king Seleucus, his son, and Stratonice, his consort, the queen" (Kuhrt and Sherwin-White 1993: 36–37). But soon afterward Seleucus was executed, and Antiochus I's second son Antiochus was appointed co-ruler instead. Antiochus II died leaving the succession unsettled; Antiochus III returned to the practice of designating a co-ruler, his son Antiochus, who predeceased him (Seleucus IV was then associated with the kingship).

The foundation of colonies was another way of rooting a royal presence in the territory (Capdetrey 2007; Kosmin 2014). In 306 Seleucus I founded Seleucia, on the right bank of the Tigris, as his new capital; the new foundation, supported by an integrated system of second-tier foundations, moved the main axis of Babylonian life from the Euphrates to the Tigris, in line with the new horizons of the empire. Northern Syria too received the sustained attention of Seleucus I, with the foundation of Seleucia-in-Pieria, Laodicea-by-the-Sea, Antioch-by-Daphne, and Apamea-on-the-Axios/Orontes; the so-called "tetrapolis" remained the heartland of the dynasty until the end, in 64 BCE. But the colonizing activity of the Seleucids went much further: more than a hundred settlements were founded throughout the empire, including cities and military settlements (*katoikiai*). In an imperial gesture, the new foundations were given dynastic names, or names of Greco-Macedonian towns; in some cases, pre-existing settlements were renamed. Traditional Macedonian institutions were present in the new foundations: an *epistates* (city governor) and *peliganes* (councillors) are attested not only at Laodicea-by-the-Sea and Seleucia-on-the-Tigris (Polybius, *Histories* 5.54.10), but also at Babylon (BCHP 18B, 3): Greeks were present there (compare the *politai* "who anoint with oil" of BCHP 14, and the existence of a gymnasium and theater).

This opens the disputed issue of the (degree of) Hellenization throughout, and in various parts of, the kingdom. The ruling elite remained on the whole a Greco-Macedonian one, and there were no deliberate attempts to hellenize the population. But citizens from the Greek cities of Asia Minor sent colonists to foundations located in the East (e.g., Magnesia on the Maeander to Antioch in Persis: Kuhrt and Sherwin-White 1993: 163–164). Furthermore, members of local civic elites in Mesopotamia and Judaea often assumed a double identity, the most famous case being that of Anu-Uballit, governor of Uruk, who received the Greek name

Nicarchus from Antiochus II (Kuhrt and Sherwin-White 1993: 150–155). Obviously a degree of cooperation with the local elites was indispensable.

A similar double movement is observable in the area of religious policy. From the beginning, Greek cities dedicated civic cults to individual kings (Seleucus I was deified soon after his death; the entrance of a king into a city was ritually celebrated), and from the beginning, the Seleucid kings participated in Babylonian religious rituals (e.g., the New Year festival, as attested by the entry for 188/187 in a Babylonian astronomical diary: Kuhrt and Sherwin-White 1993: 216). Processions and festivals played a role in celebrating the authority, and in legitimizing the power, of the king. But at least from the reign of Antiochus II onward, an “official in charge of the shrines” was instituted; under Antiochus III, in 209 BCE, this administrative charge was combined with the “high priesthood of all shrines on this side of the Taurus”, which gave the incumbent authority over all the priests of local shrines (Ma 2002: no. 4). The date at which state cult for the king and his ancestors was first instituted is a matter still under discussion; in 193 BCE, at any rate, on the order of Antiochus III, an official cult for Queen Laodice III was set up throughout the kingdom (Ma 2002: no. 37). This implied the nomination in the satrapies of high priestesses of the queen, whose name had to be appended to contracts, after the name of the high priest of the king and the ancestors. The central cult may well have been meant to offer a unifying model for the various local cults; it is also remarkable that the king gave as reason for his decision the reciprocal affection existing between the queen and himself, thus publicly affirming the patrimonial nature of the empire (Ma 2002).

According to Plutarch, Antiochus III “wrote to the cities that if he should at any time write for anything to be done contrary to the law, they should not obey, but suppose it to have been done out of ignorance” (in *Moralia* 183 F). This nicely epitomizes the tension between respect for local customs and the expectation that the king would write to issue orders.

<XREF>SEE ALSO: Achaemenid Empire; Bactrian or Graeco-Bactrian Kingdom; Egypt: 2. Ptolemaic; Macedonian Empire; Parthian Empire; Pergamon, Kingdom of (Attalids); Roman Empire; war, weaponry, and empire: 1. Ancient

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