

Seleucid Dissolution

The Sinking of the Anchor

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and Gillian Ramsey

2011

Harrassowitz Verlag · Wiesbaden

ISSN 1613-5628
ISBN 978-3-447-06588-7

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Acknowledgements

This volume is a collection of papers given at the conference ‘Seleukid Dissolution’ held 14–17 July 2008 at the University of Exeter, UK. The conference was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council Collaborative Research Training Scheme, the Society for the Promotion of Hellenic Studies and the Exeter Centre for Hellenistic and Romano-Greek Culture and Society. The editors, who were also the conference organisers, wish to thank these bodies for their earlier support, which gave opportunity for the important discussions reflected by the chapters herein. We thank the other participants in the conference for their valuable contributions to the discussion of later Seleucid history, and for their appreciation of its merits and enthusiasm for pursuing research in this important area. We also wish to thank our colleagues at the Department of Classics and Ancient History at the University of Exeter for their encouragement, advice and support in organising the conference and editing the resulting volume, especially Stephen Mitchell, Daniel Ogden and David Braund, who took on board the aims of their PhD students for this project even in the midst of many other duties, including supervising our own theses.

Particular gratitude and appreciation is owed to Cristian Ghiță, co-organiser of the conference. His passion for studying the Hellenistic period and the later Seleucids and their neighbours drove the conception and planning of the ‘Seleukid Dissolution’ conference forward, and his technical and design expertise brought it off. We are so very indebted to him and his creativity and are glad for the inspiring years we spent together with him at Exeter.

KE
GR

June 2011

Introduction: the Sinking of the Anchor?

Gillian Ramsey and Kyle Erickson

The idea for a conference on the end of the Seleucid empire grew out of a shared sense that the issues of continuity and change within the Hellenistic near east, so ably set forth by Susan Sherwin-White and Amélie Kuhrt for the initial establishment and consolidation of the Seleucid empire,¹ ought also to be considered for the later years of the empire.² This latter period of Seleucid power appears largely as one of decline in the available literary ancient accounts. Loss of territory and thus of resources and manpower, diminished political clout in the face of Roman interference, and the Seleucid dynasty's apparent slide into dissolute luxury all make their impression upon the historian. Persisting in envisioning the end of the Seleucids in such terms, however, belies the new picture of adaptability, cohesiveness and institutional continuity that has emerged in the last two decades regarding the Seleucids' first century and a half of rule.³ How could a system of rule which we now characterise in positive terms – that it was an able successor to the Achaemenid infrastructure, accommodated regional diversity, developed its economic organisation – decline so quickly, if at all?

The paradoxical subtitle to this volume reflects this conundrum. Perhaps the Seleucid anchor was simply following its *raison d'être* and the dynasty sank on its destined course: dissolution of the empire and the absorption of its royal house into the amalgam of east Mediterranean aristocratic families. If so, then how does earlier Seleucid history set up this trajectory? What signs of the impending decline may we discern? Or, perhaps the anchor as symbol of Seleucus' family reflects the more positive view, and the Seleucid system of rule stabilised the near east and, even though submerged beneath the various overwhelming regimes of the Roman empire and the Parthian empire (among others), continued to fix it upon the seabed of older Assyrian, Babylonian and Achaemenid systems of social, economic and political organisation.

Talk of empires in a state of dissolution and anchors sinking may give the impression of attempt at a poetically grand narrative of later Seleucid history, or in the reverse, a cohort of historians ruefully recounting the grim failings and ineptitudes of an unsuccessful state. In

1 S. M. Sherwin-White and Amélie Kuhrt, *From Samarkhand to Sardis: A new approach to the Seleucid empire* (London, 1993).

2 'Seleucid Dissolution: The Sinking of the Anchor, Fragmentation and Transformation of Empire' was held at the University of Exeter, 14–17 July 2008. It was conceptualised by Cristian Ghiță and the volume editors with the aim of bringing together Seleucid researchers in a variety of disciplines to assess the nature of the end of the Seleucid empire and the state of evidence for it.

3 Cf. the positive and recent work by L. Capdetrey, *Le pouvoir séleucide: Territoire, administration, finances d'un royaume hellénistique (312–129 avant J.-C.)* (Rennes, 2007).

fact, the conference papers from which the chapters of this volume emerged cheerfully presented a multiplicity of possible views on Seleucid decline, embracing the poetics of the subject matter and the complexities of the evidence. As a whole, this volume serves to underscore the need for and great value in a new theorisation of the Hellenistic era. This is not an explicitly theoretical volume, but its theme prompts thinking along certain lines, in particular how one is to explain the complexities of the subject area in a coherent and meaningful way that has broader application to other periods of antiquity and other disciplines of historical inquiry.

In answer to this concern, this volume incorporates discussions from multiple fields, each with their own methodologies and bodies of evidence. But it is not too artificial a conflation, as the Seleucid cultural context which generated the pyro-avian foundation legend of Antioch also produced the hill-top settlement overlooking the north Euphrates plain and fired the syncretistic innovation of royal iconography. The variety of the chapters contained here thus identifies a further aspect of the necessary theorisation: whether it is enough that various phenomena occurred within the Seleucid realm or as part of its heritage to allow their comparison, or if that is not possible, that their proximity permits them to be used as case studies in the same line of inquiry. We have proceeded in the belief that it is possible, necessary and quite fruitful to do so. Theorisation of the Seleucids, and of the wider Hellenistic world, must begin with what the evidence supplies, and, as here, it often yields a potluck of illuminating insights to circumstances and *mentalité*.

The first section deals with the ways that the political organisation of the Seleucid empire was a factor in its decline, and how the historical traditions playing into political life helped set in motion the fragmentation of its component regions away from royal control. D. Engels presents a case for understanding the Seleucid empire as part of a longer feudalisation among the empires of the east, from the Achaemenids through to the Parthians. He argues that neither was the empire based upon a stable centralising trend nor did it require one, and that Seleucid political strength came from the successful management of pre-existing local autonomies. The perpetuation of satrapies under the Seleucids not only continued the Achaemenid form of territorial organisation but it also allowed regional distinctions to remain in force, and for the later regional separations and declarations of independence away from Seleucid and Parthian authority to be founded on long-term distinctive local identities. Engels sees important precedents in the Achaemenid conceptions of the “Great King” as imperial master of multiple realms and of the role of tribute in linking together subject regions under a single rule. The Seleucid tactics of forming marriage alliances with various leading nobilities from strategic regions in or on the fringes of the empire and of engaging in diplomatic-style relationships with regional leaders and demanding from them only recognition of suzerainty and tribute bear more resemblance to a loose, feudal organisation than a centralised state. Thus for Engels, Seleucid dissolution does not equate to the defeat of the dynasty by more powerful enemies, but to the escalation of the feudalism within the empire and the perpetuation of a powerful *longue durée* trend.

Management of regional connections and the importance of having territorial governors recognise Seleucid suzerainty are also examined by Ramsey, but from the perspective of Macedonian courtly traditions and the role of Greco-Macedonian power-holders as agents of Seleucid authority. The forces driving the fragmentation of the empire are presented as

the competitive political culture prevailing among top officials at the royal court that emphasised acquisition and consolidation of personal authority as the highest aim of political activity and the cycles of disruption to the essential ties of loyalty that bound territorial governors to the kings. Both led to violence between kings, their officials and rival claimants to the throne, violence that over time weakened the relationships holding the empire together to the point that the Seleucid dynasty no longer had a territorial or political basis for effective imperial rule. Territorial differences came into play particularly for the eastern empire, with the creation of the independent Bactrian kingdom and a number of crucial revolts by powerful individuals with power-bases in Persia, Media and Babylonia. The point argued here is that the aims of the revolts and separations were not regionally motivated so much as politically, and those who stood to benefit were the Greco-Macedonian governors and leaders who had connections to the Seleucid court, royal aspirations of their own and a sufficient grasp upon material resources and the loyalties of soldiers to prioritise personal ambitions above Seleucid cohesion.

The second section examines how the Seleucids attempted to integrate various *ethne* into their empire, and the consequences of their success or failure. One paper closely examines the successful relations between the Seleucids and Babylonia and argue for long term Seleucid stability in the region based on the actions of Antiochus I. Erickson argues for an equation of the Babylonian god Nabû with Apollo on Seleucid coinage. He questions the assumption that Seleucid numismatic iconography is solely representative of a Greek outlook by arguing that within a Babylonian context the depiction of Apollo on the omphalos was identifiable with Nabû. The significance of the Seleucid connection to Nabû was not limited to coinage but was also reflected in the increased building activity in Babylon and the Borsippa cylinder. Erickson's analysis adds a broader picture to the analysis of Seleucid relations with Babylonia and provides a model for successful Seleucid interaction with an *ethne*. This close interaction and understanding of a separate cultural heritage may have produced the framework which encouraged Babylonia to stay loyal to the Seleucids until it was permanently subjugated to Parthian rule by force.

In contrast to the successful model of interaction between the Seleucids and the Babylonian elite, the origins of the Seleucid failure to accommodate the Jews in Jerusalem under Antiochus IV are examined by Aperghis. He explores the conflict from the Seleucid perspective, not only by filling the gaps in existing Jewish tradition but by using what he defines as normal Seleucid administrative and political policy as a touchstone from which to measure Antiochus IV's divergence. In considering the transformation of Jerusalem to a *polis*, Aperghis clearly outlines the potential benefits to the Jewish proponents of integration into the broader Greek world. Apart from Jewish impetus for Hellenisation, he demonstrates that Antiochus IV's first entry to the temple was compatible with normal Seleucid practice. Aperghis analyses the possible motives for the order to force religious change on the city. He concludes that much of the change was brought about not by Seleucid dictat but by Jewish Hellenisers. He finds this process within the bounds of the normal Seleucid practice of non-interference in the internal religious affairs of their subjects. This analysis moves how scholars consider the Maccabean revolt from an anomaly of Seleucid practice carried out by a megalomaniac to one consistent with normal policy, and suggests that local factors led to the revolt rather than overt Seleucid pressure.