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SELEUCID HISTORY: NEW PERSPECTIVES AND CURRENT CHALLENGES

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The treatment of Seleucid history in the last two decades reflects a rich diversification in perspective.[1] Rather than a fractured, declining successor state, these recent works argue for an ideologically cemented empire - integrated yet adaptable, central yet locally negotiated. Economic, administrative, political, and ideological dimensions, to name but a few, are now all embraced in a polyphonic historiographical chorus.[2]

To cite but a few examples. Kosmin[3] explores the concept of space and territory in the Seleucid Empire, arguing that the Seleucid Empire was more than a fragile successor kingdom, it was a deliberately constructed, ideologically coherent state model, spatially imagined from the very beginning of its existence. Chrubasik[4] investigates political dynamics and internal fragmentation in his work focusing on the recurring pattern of usurpation as part of normal Seleucid political life. He maintains that usurpers avoided challenging the dynasty outright as they operated within its ideological frames, claiming legitimacy through popular and military support with kingship negotiated more than an inherited strategy. In doing so, he skillfully shifts the narrative away from viewing

[1] This is the review article of: T. Daryaee, R. Rollinger and M.P. Canepa (eds.), *Iran and the Transformaiton of Ancient Near Eastern History: the Seleucids (ca. 312-150 BCE). Proceedings of the Third Payravi Conference on Ancient Iranian History, UC Irvine, February 24th-25th, 2020* (Classica et Orientalia 31), Harrassowitz Verlag, Wiesbaden 2023.

[2] The best and most current bibliography on the Seleukids is Strootman's unpublished collection of works from 1870 to 2021, see Strootman 2022.

[3] Kosmin 2014.

[4] Chrubasik 2016.

these crises as pure chaos, highlighting instead their resilience and underlying political structures. A third area covers administrative and spatial histories. Aperghis[5] and Capdetrey[6] provide systematic studies of administrative institutions, territories, and state financial systems. In so doing, they supply the missing administrative and fiscal bedrock that earlier works often neglected.

Yet, gaps remain. There is still much lacking in regard to social history and non-elites as most texts remain top down in their approach, oriented toward elites: A dearth exists for in-depth studies on rural populations, women, slaves, and cities outside administrative cores. While administrative syncretism (Greco-Babylonian, Hellenistic-Iranian) is acknowledged, integrated studies examining inter-cultural dynamics are limited. Finally, the later periods of the dynasty and its decline are still lacking. While much progress has been made regarding usurpers, there is much that remains unexplored about the late Seleucid cult, identity formations, and memory or how locals perceived their rulers are ripe for discovery. Taken as a whole, these studies from multiple traditions solidify the Seleukid Empire's place in the broader Hellenistic and Near Eastern historical narrative. It is in this context that the present work falls.

It has become common in recent years for some scholars to postulate specific terms that embrace theoretically the spirit of Hellenism and how it should shape historiographic and ideological perceptions of the Hellenistic world in future research. There is a tacit agreement on how to formulate such an approach by demonstrating its applicability – in the present case - to Seleukid history. This necessitates the collation of various interpretations to establish a conceptualization that accurately captures the essence of Hellenism. The result has led to some unhappy inventions of rather discordant sounding terms, like "glocal" or "glocalism" – a combination of "global" and "local," an amalgam of universalism and particularism. The idea is embedded in the notion of connectivity as well as mobility so that "globalized styles and concepts can become *de-terriorialized*, somewhat detached from their presumed origin and available on a much wider scale than before."[7] These theoretical concepts are taken from global studies. As Hoo frames it:

> globalization concepts of complex connectivity, time-space compression, deterritorialization, glocalisation, and translocation deeply challenge and unsettle traditional stances and notions on localism and change. As such, they provide critical theoretical observations and useful heuristic tools to productively approach Hellenism and cultural inbetweenness during the time period in focus.[8]

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[5] Aperghis 2004.

[6] Capdetrey 2007.

[7] Kruijer 2024, 35.

[8] Hoo 2022, 243.

Unfortunately, these ideas often do not translate well when applied to the specificity of the content that they are analyzing – in this case, the Hellenistic kingdom of the Seleukids.

Iran and the Transformaiton of Ancient Near Eastern History consists of fourteen contributions that were mostly presented at the third meeting of the series, *Payravi Conferences on Ancient Iranian History*, held at the University of California Irvine in 2020 organized by the book's editors.[9] In the Introduction, T. Daryaee and R. Rollinger, argue that at its apex the Seleukid Empire "was neither 'Eastern' nor 'Western'…neither 'Babylonian' nor 'Iranian,'" rather it was "Seleucid in its foundation, ideology, and identity." At the same time, the Empire in its first 150 years had succeeded in becoming "part of Iranian history" (5). The term that the editors settle on to describe the approach taken in the volume is "Irano-Hellenica" which they attribute to A. Zournatzi in her "Overview" (6). The reality is that the term "iranohellenica" forms part of the web address (http://iranohellenica.eie.gr/content/overview) of a preliminary draft release of her project. Zournatzi herself prefers the term, "Greek-Iranian." It is also worth noting that this is the only place in the book where this term appears. Nonetheless, "Irano-Hellenica" is intended to close the gap created by the dichotomy posed by terms, such as "Orient – Occident," or by extension "Hellenism and Persianism" with the latter sometimes written as "Iranianism."[10] The idea is to transcend the spatial division created by purely geographical and/or socio-cultural perceptions and instead seeks an approach that connotes both localism and globalism, think glocalism, which appears to act as a synonym for the concept of *inbetweeness*, according to which the "in" corresponds to the idea of *local* and the "between" to the *global*.[11] As is the case with many conferences, the papers fluctuate from the very specific to the very synthetic and take on widely varying subjects and points of view that are not always positioned well together under the rubric of the stated work.

R. Strootman's "How Iranian was the Seleucid Empire?" argues that the empire was to a degree Iranian due to its military structure, such as the kingdom's resources used for martial purposes, and the contributions made by local Iranian dynasts. Chronologically, the analysis extends from 330 BCE with the destruction of Persepolis by Alexander the Great to the conquest of Ekbatana by Mithradates I in 147 BCE. The chapter begins with a brief overview of the historiography of "Hellenism" in Iran and the inherent problems posed by the use of the term "Hellenistic," although he concedes that it must remain until a better expression can be found. In discussing the effect of Seleucid rule in Iran, he

[9] The papers of the first two conferences were published as a single volume, Daryaee / Rollinger 2021.

[10] Strootman 2020.

[11] Versluys / Riedel 2021, 13-18; Hoo 2022, 21-33.

asserts that by the 3rd century the Seleucid Empire had become "a multipolar network polity: it had an itinerant court and a variety of imperial centers" that stretched from Asia Minor to Central Asia (19). He also entertains the notion that prior to the conquest of Babylonia by Mithradates I, the Seleucids and the Arsacids were rivals for control of Iran as opposed to a neat transfer of power from one to the other. In addressing Iran's significance for the Seleucids, he expands on the theme that the country served as a wellspring of men and resources for military purposes, especially the safeguarding of trade routes. As an interesting parallel, Seleucid kings treated the women in their family as resources: marriages of their sisters and daughters were used to promote the reach of empire, particularly to local dynasts. This leads him to discuss the roles that Iranian elites played as officials in the empire, resulting in the "'Iranization' of the Seleucid Empire," even though they are largely invisible in the historical record owing to Hellenization (25). He concludes by noting the absence of identifiably "Greek" material culture attributed to the Seleucid era in the lands that had encompassed the empire, "which compels us to reconsider what we mean by "Seleucid" (27).

In S.M. Burstein's, "The Seleucid Conquest of Koile Syria and the Incense Trade," emphasis is placed on the importance of controlling the region for its "strategic significance" that also acted as "its special curse" (37). This leads to the heart of the analysis, for he argues that in addition to the military and political considerations of Antiochus III's victory in the Fifth Syrian War (c. 202-195 BCE), there were economic ramifications that affected the transportation of goods that moved through the region between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean. Attention is given to the latter with focus on incense and spices that were transported overland along two well-travelled caravan routes across Arabia.[12] To make up for the loss in revenues from the Seleucid control of these lucrative trade routes, Ptolemy VIII employed explorers who rediscovered the African source of incense in ancient Punt by securing the hazardous sea route in the Red Sea. As was the case with Ptolemy II, Ptolemy VIII subsequently undertook similar strategies in having Eudoxus sail to India to open direct lines of trade and commerce. The repercussions of this undertaking were long-lived, not only when the Roman participated in these exchanges but also when the Ethiopian kingdom of Aksum played a dominant role by the third century CE.

S.E. Cole's, "Seleucid and Ptolemaic Imperial Iconography in the Syrian Wars (274-168 BCE): The Role of Dynastic Women," argues that both dynasties portrayed royal women in military settings. The Ptolemies began this practice by appealing to their Greek population with the use of mosaics and to their Egyptian subjects by employing stelai to represent the queens as loyal wives and mothers, who promoted dynastic stability and whose cults safeguarded the empire.

[12] On the economic and political role played by the Nabataeans in the Hellenistic era, see Pearson 2011, 5-41.

The Seleucids adopted this practice later during the reigns of Antiochus III, Seleucus IV and Antiochus IV chiefly as a countermeasure to the threats posed by Parthia and Rome. The focus of the argument centers on the Thmuis mosaics of Egypt supplemented with coins, epigrams, and pottery. The Ptolemaic practice of incorporating the Seleucid anchor with flukes extending upward or other Seleucid dynastic emblems was intended to invoke Ptolemaic victories, such as the seizure of Seleucia Pieria. Whereas mosaics were limited to private settings among elites, the Raphia Stelai contain decrees that were erected "before Egyptian temples and thus presented a public-facing message to local priesthoods and communities" (65). Three fragmentary stelai composed in Greek, hieroglyphs, and Demotic Egyptian, known as the Raphia Decree, venerate a priestly council after the Fourth Syrian War, and contain images of Ptolemy IV and his sister-wife Arsinoe III, who adorn two of the stelai. Arsinoe's presence at the battle is depicted in the guise of the protector of her husband and hence the kingdom. Fewer remains exist from the Seleucids. Although they presented themselves as inheritors of the Achaemenids in written sources, they seem not to have done so in art. The sole exception is coinage, in which queens appear only in the second half of the dynasty with Laodice III the wife of Antiochus III and their daughter Laodice IV as the sister-wife of both Seleucus IV, then Antiochus IV. Subsequent coinage of Seleucid queens emphasizes their position as forebearers of the dynastic line. The Seleucids appear to have modelled the representation of their royal women after Ptolemaic practices.

"Seleucus I and the Seleucid Dynastic Ideology: The Alexander Factor"[13] by K. Nawotka seeks to determine how the memory and image of Alexander the Great were used to formulate Seleucid ideology and whether they were merely a holdover from Seleucus I himself and subsequently Antiochus IV, or if they were truly meaningful to Seleucus I and acknowledged by his successors. He begins with an assessment of Libanius who provides indirect evidence alleging that Seleucus was related to Temenos, the founder of the Temenid/Argead clan and thus to Alexander's dynasty. He then turns to the monument set up at Nemrud Dağı by Antiochus I of Commagene, in which the king's maternal ancestors are presented in a gallery starting with Alexander the Great, then Seleucus I followed by successive Seleucid dynasts. He then takes up stories prophesizing Seleucus as the eventual successor of Alexander. The tradition surrounding Alexander's will is also wrapped in this tradition as Seleucus is recognized as the king's lawful heir apparent. For his coinage and in his inscriptions, Seleucus chose Zeus as his patron deity, as "his god of choice…as it was of Alexander" (95). Thus, Seleucus' legitimacy as ruler and as Alexander's rightful successor was based on his ability to remake his image as ruler of Babylonia and embrace Zeus as his patron deity, even though Apollo also played a similar role in the royal genealogy.

[13] To Nawotka's impressive bibliography on Seleucus, one may add Hannestad 2020, which would not have been available when he wrote the article.

V. Messina's, "Seleucia-on-the-Tigris: Embedding Capitals in the Hellenizing Near East," seeks to ascertain the veracity of "the effectiveness of interpretive models created for describing" the city as one of the most important "in the Hellenizing world" (101). He begins with a discussion of the foundation of new capitals in the Hellenistic world, followed by the shifting perception of cities in the ancient Near East. One facet of these changing assessments is the notion of "disembedded capitals" presented as a model "to explain the caesurae between new foundations and pre-existing contexts" (105) by returning to the earlier works of R. Stanley and A. Joffe.[14] The idea is to understand these sorts of capitals as a distinctive type whose foundation was most likely associated with major formal ceremonies. As such, disembedded capitals are understood as "urban sites founded *de novo* and designed to supplant existing patterns of authority and administration."[15] He concludes that Seleucia-on-the-Tigris contradicts the model, even though "it can be argued on sound arguments that such a policy was pursued" (122).

The city also forms the basis of the next contribution by J. Degen in his "Seleucus I, Appian and Seleucia-on-the-Tigris: The Empire Becoming Visible in Seleucid *Ktíseis*." The analysis focuses on Appian's *Syriake* 58 regarding the foundation (κτίσις) of Seleucia-on-the-Tigris and how this account informs us of Seleucus' "ideological background" of this imperial project, why he made it visible as "a symbolically laden performance," and how the event provides insight into his notion of "imperial identity" as a means of legitimizing competing concepts of his rulership (127). This leads him to undertake a close read of Appian's account by examining the role of the Babylonian priesthood, the attempt by the Magi to frustrate the city's foundation out fear that it would displace the preeminent position long held by Babylon, and the imperial policy that Seleucus pursued within the context of his Macedonian background which he brought to the Near East. The idea is amplified in his examination of the fluctuating ideas about kingship starting with the Assyrians. The study then turns to how Seleucus won legitimation for his royal prerogative in Babylon by posing as a Babylonian king. The model from which he draws his reconstruction derives from the so-called "Cyrus-Cylinder" in which the Babylonian priesthood had remade Cyrus into an ideal Babylonian ruler. Both Cyrus and Seleucus succeeded in quelling local opposition to their rule by highlighting their status as divinely chosen. Appian's passage reveals that "Seleucus defeated the Babylonian priests with Babylonian strategies of legitimate kingship making it a complex account that is full of symbolism meaningful to multiple cultures and political traditions" (150).

For its part Babylon figures prominently in J. Haubold's, "Iran in the Seleucid and Early Parthian Period: Two Views from Babylon." In this case, Haubold mines two sources - Berossos' *Babyloniaca* (c. 280 BCE) and the *Astronomical*

[14] Stanley 1980; Joffe 1998.
[15] Joffe 1998, 549.

Diaries for the period spanning c. 145-120 BCE - to grasp how the Babylonian priesthood perceived Iran and Iranians. He draws on the former to ascertain this view in the early decades of Seleucid rule and the latter to comprehend the degree to which this view changed in the post-Seleucid era marked by the beginning of the Arsacid period. Together both works reflect how the priesthood made sense of their Iranian neighbors within the context of Babylonian history and culture.

In "From Sennacherib to the Seleucids: The Settled Landscape of the Assyrian Heartland during the Hellenistic Period," R. Palermo notices that Mesopotamia, especially in the southern and central part of the country, remains archaeologically underexplored for the Seleucid period. As more excavations have been conducted in the northern region of Mesopotamia in Kurdistan, the analysis focuses on the spatial impact from the late Iron Age to the early Parthian period in terms of settlements and the region's physical transformation, drawing on data from the Erbil Plain Archaeological Survey coupled with legacy evidence and historical records. The goal is to derive information regarding "colonization, migration, landscape exploitation and top-down, or bottom-up, imperial strategies" (185). He concludes that the landscape as it appeared during the Assyrian Empire changed markedly in the Seleucid period and shows the diminishment of the centrality once enjoyed by Babylonia. The settlement pattern in the Erbil plain is less conclusive as changes in settlement pattern cannot yet be deciphered with any degree of certainty as to why variations in the archaeological record exist.

O. Coloru's, "Seen from Ecbatana: Aspects of Seleucid Policy in Media," discusses two historical phases of Media under Seleucid sovereignty. The first, "Building Seleucid Media (306-246 BCE)," began when Seleucus I brought Media under his administrative umbrella and the role that the country played in the kingdom. The year 246 BCE stands as the date when the Seleucids lost the Upper Satrapies. This leads to the second phase - the reorganization of the Upper Satrapies (246-148 BCE).

The chapter by L. Martinez-Sève, "Seleucid Religious Architecture in Ai Khanoum: A Case Study" investigates how the intermural temple-sanctuary constructed during the reign of Antiochos I at the site of Ai Khanoum (northeastern Afghanistan) as religious architecture can be used to define Seleucid imperial identity. Emphasis is placed on the different kinds of architectural forms used in the construction of this temple and its later reconstructions to glean insight into the selections made by the architects. She sets forth an overview of the temples and their appearance, which leads her to calculate that the post-Seleucid Greco-Bactrian temple rose 12-15 meters set atop a podium to achieve a height of up to 16-17 meters (225-226). The discussion then proceeds to a postulation of the ornamentation of the Greco-Bactrian temple and a comparative analysis of building traditions in the Near East with special attention given to Bactrian, Iranian, and (Syro-)Mesopotamian temples.

In K. Ruffing's chapter, he provides a historiographic synopsis of scholarship on "The Economy (-ies) of the Seleucid Empire" that undergirded the kingdom within the framework of ancient economics. He takes as his starting point the "Bücher-Meyer-Controversy" of the last decade of the 19th century. The former argued that economic development underwent three stages beginning with the "closed domestic economy" of the ancient world as opposed to the latter who emphasized similarities between the economy of antiquity with that of his own. He then considers the pioneering work of Rostovtzeff, who signaled that central to the Seleucid economy was "monetizaton, Greek immigration and colonization, and thus political, social, and economic unification" (257). The 1960s and 1970s marked the emergence of "primitivist orthodoxy" developed primarily by Jones and Finley, which was superseded by Sherwin-White and Kuhrt in the 1990s. They, like Aperghis, whose thesis benefited from the supervision of Kuhrt, renewed many of the insights originally proposed by Rostovtzeff in his own 2004 monograph. A few years later, van der Spek applied the "New Institutional economy" to the Seleucid Empire, while Capdetrey viewed the Seleucids as continuing many of the practices inaugurated by the Achaemenids. This led to the notion of searching for the roots of the Seleucid economic system in Assyria and subsequently in the Babylonian economy during the Hellenistic era. The overview concludes with a discussion on which ethnicon to use as a term for characterizing Seleucid economics, the difference between public and private economy and the problem of how to interpret sources written in Greek from those in Babylonian.

"The Seleucids and the Sea" is an examination by C. Schäfer of two areas in which the Seleucids were involved with maritime affairs. The first concerns the eastern fleet focusing on the activities of the first two Seleucid kings, who assigned warships to patrol the waters of the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean. The historical record is spotty at best. Only a few naval bases serving as supply depots in the Gulf are known. The perennial problem for the fleet was access to fresh drinking water as warships could remain at sea for only brief periods of time, because "rowers needed an enormous amount of freshwater" (274). The kings also undertook exploratory expeditions of the Caspian Sea.[16] Schäfer follows the estimate of Aperghis[17] that there were no more than 20 triremes manned by 5,000 men charged with safeguarding this part of the empire. More information is forthcoming about the Seleucid fleet in the Mediterranean. In order to determine the extent of Seleucid participation in this theater, the analysis rests on a comparison with the maritime activities of the Antigonids, Ptolemies and later the Romans and their eastern allies. The Seleucids were never dominant players

[16] To the bibliography on Patroclus' journey along the coast, add Rtveladze 2010; Ртвеладзе 2012; Lerner 2014; Lerner 2020.

[17] Aperghis 2004, 199.

in the Mediterranean with their fortunes ebbing and flowing depending on their military successes or failures. Any pretenses of Seleucid hegemony in the region were dashed with Antiochus III's agreement to curtail any further military encroachment into the region as a result of his signing the Peace of Apamea in 188 BCE, although Antiochus IV seems to have tried to revive the navy during his reign. All told, the strength of the Seleucid fleet seems never to have exceeded 10,000 men at any time in the Mediterranean (281).

S. Stark, "Some Observations on the Early Seleucid Northeastern Frontier," drawing on "relevant" archaeological evidence and textual sources reevaluates two current approaches for studying parts of the Upper Satrapies under Seleucid rule – either the dynasty's direct involvement in the region or its "general structural problems" (285). In so doing, he isolates two distinct areas: the Kopet-dagh micro regions, consisting of portions of the satrapy Parthia-Hyrcania; and the Zeravshan Delta in Sogdiana. The conclusion is centered on the relationship between Seleucid administration of the region and its relationship with "tribes," or as he prefers, "pastoral groups." He briefly dismisses the notion that pastoralists relied on agricultural goods from sedentary societies, that there is no evidence to corroborate a "Daha invasion," or that the Seleucids adopted a "closed-door" border policy. Rather the early Seleucids implemented a "flexible and multi-dimensional" program in their dealings with pastoral groups at their northeastern frontier (295).

M.P. Canepa's, "The Seleucid Empire and the Creation of a New Iranian World," serves as the proceedings last entry in which he references many of the contributions. The chapter frames the Seleucids as dynasts who ruled an Iranian Empire and fashioned a program of imperial urbanism. He briefly presents an overview of the Seleucid economy, while also placing the kingdom within a geopolitical context. The article concludes with a discussion of the transformation of how Iranian religions were practiced during this period.

The proceedings achieve the goal of demonstrating the range of expertise that can inform how the varying complexities of the Seleucid Empire can be analyzed. In this regard, the collection makes a valuable contribution to the study of the Hellenistic period. The work also offers a fine example of the range of specializations, tools, and perspectives that can be brought to bear to forge an understanding of this period of history.

Despite the many admirable qualities of the volume, there are some editorial problems that diminish the overall usefulness of the proceedings. The book struggles somewhat to strike the right balance between presenting individual entries and components of a whole. There is ample repetition in the repeated focus of Seleucus I and Antiochus I and the need for more unified interdisciplinary action, which seem to intimate that chapters will be read independently.

These minor issues aside, the volume will undoubtedly attract attention and provide a solid background for further research as there are still many questions to be answered about ancient Iranian history during the Seleucid period. It serves as an important addition to our knowledge of the subject and will be useful to both historians and archaeologists studying this part of the Hellenistic world.

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Abstract

This comprehensive review article examines the recent transformation in Seleucid historiography, analyzing fourteen contributions from the third Payravi Conference on Ancient Iranian History held at UC Irvine in 2020. The work addresses a fundamental shift in scholarly perspective from viewing the Seleucid Empire as a fragmented, declining successor state to understanding it as an ideologically coherent, adaptable empire that successfully integrated central authority with local negotiation across diverse territories from Asia Minor to Central Asia. The article traces the evolution of Seleucid studies over the past two decades, highlighting key theoretical developments including Kosmin's spatial analysis of territorial conception, Chrubasik's examination of usurpation as normal political practice, and systematic administrative studies by Aperghis and Capdetrey. The authors introduce the concept of "Irano-Hellenica" to transcend traditional East-West dichotomies, though they acknowledge the limitations of applying globalization theories like "glocalism" to ancient contexts.

The fourteen contributions span diverse methodological approaches and geographical regions. Methodologically, the contributions demonstrate the field's increasing sophistication in combining textual analysis with archaeological evidence, numismatic studies, and comparative imperial analysis. The work particularly emphasizes the importance of Babylonian sources and the complex dynamics of center-periphery relationships in imperial administration.

The review identifies persistent challenges in Seleucid studies, including the continued focus on elite perspectives, limited integration of intercultural dynamics, and insufficient attention to the empire's later periods. Despite these limitations, the volume represents a significant advancement in understanding the Seleucid Empire as neither purely "Eastern" nor "Western" but distinctly "Seleucid" in its foundation, ideology, and identity, while simultaneously becoming integral to Iranian history during its first 150 years. This work contributes substantially to Hellenistic and Near Eastern historiography by providing new theoretical frameworks, methodological approaches, and empirical evidence that will inform future research on ancient Iranian history, imperial studies, and cultural transformation in the post-Achaemenid period.