054: The Seleucid Empire – Kingship & Governance in the Arche Seleukia

It has been quite some time since we last visited the Seleucid dynasty, our last episode ending just after the death of its second king Antiochus I Soter in 261 BC. Despite some setbacks, the empire was still one of the most powerful and largest states in all of Eurasia, and was almost militarily and economically without equal. But before we resume our narrative, I wanted to spend some time investigating the internal structure of the realm which by now had firmly entrenched itself into the lands of the Near East and Asia. How did the Seleucids rule while possessing the largest territory and the most diverse population out of all the Successor kingdoms? What were the policies enacted to allow the kings to create an imperial heartland far away from Macedon? These are just some of the questions I am looking to address in order to give a clearer picture of how the Seleucid Empire was controlled and maintained.

Let us begin from the very top by discussing the nature of the monarchy. Seleucid kingship is a complicated and hotly debated subject, mainly due to the disparity of perspectives in sources through which scholars have to view it. At its core, is it Macedonian? Near-Eastern? Something completely different? The Arche Seleukia, as it was generally known, sat upon a plethora of cultural legacies from which inspiration can be drawn from. The monarchy of the Seleucid’s ancestral homeland of Macedonia, characterized by its personal ties of loyalty and Homeric-like attitudes as exemplified by Philip II and Alexander, is certainly an option. Yet like Alexander, the Seleucids could (and did) adopt the imperial model of a Neo-Babylonian, Neo-Assyrian, or Achaemenid Persian ruler. The diverse nature of the peoples they ruled over meant that the kingship was often eclectic in the way it presented itself, and so we have many interpretations as a consequence.

As I touched upon in our episode on Antiochus I, there are many Near-Eastern traditions and practices that can be easily identified in the Seleucid’s public presentation, as is discussed extensively in Susan Sherwin-White and Amélie Kuhrt’s book “From Samarkand to Sardis”. Perhaps it is skewed towards this direction because Babylon in particular has produced the most archaeological evidence for a non-Greek perspective on Seleucid rule, and Babylon was where the seeds of Seleucid power were sown during the initial years after Alexander’s death. The only surviving Seleucid royal proclamation written in Akkadian cuneiform is the so-called “Antiochus Cylinder”, recovered from the Temple of Ezida about 11 miles southwest of Babylon in Borsippa. We discussed it way back in episode 30, but a cylinder is a barrel-shaped piece of clay, inscribed with cuneiform writing and buried into the foundations of temples and buildings. It is a standard element of Mesopotamian kingship, similar in function and look to the famous cylinders of Cyrus the Great or Nabonidus. This cylinder dates to the reign of Antiochus I Soter during the early 3rd century, marking his involvement in the rebuilding of the temple. The language and terms employed are almost directly lifted from the earlier dedications, including royal titles that are a

2 Sherwin-White, S. and Kuhrt, A. “Hellenism in the East: The Interaction of Greek and non-Greek civilizations from Syria to Central Asia after Alexander” Pg. 1
combination of Babylonian, Persian and Assyrian: great king, king of the world and so on and so forth.\textsuperscript{4} Antiochus’ wife Stratonice is also described in Near-Eastern terminology as bearing considerable political importance.\textsuperscript{5} It is an excellent early example of the Seleucid involvement in the traditional practices of their Babylonian subjects, but given that it was found outside of the city of Babylon proper, it also reflects their willingness to take part in rather localized events while couched in imperial ideology.\textsuperscript{6}

Given that they controlled much of the former Persian Empire, the Iranian element to the Seleucid presentation is also something that cannot be ignored. Antiochus I himself was of half-Iranian origin by way of his mother, the Persian noblewoman Apama, and perhaps it is under Antiochus that we see the conscious adoption of Apollo as the patron god of the dynasty.\textsuperscript{7} Now it might seem strange to be referencing a Greek deity when it comes to looking at possible Iranian influences in the Seleucid kingship, but Apollo’s association with archery might have made him an excellent confluence of Greco-Iranian culture. Many of the tales that record the foundation of the Seleucid Empire involve the deity to some extent or another, either in reference to Seleucus’ divine parentage or oracles predicting his eventual coronation.\textsuperscript{8} But Seleucus himself appears to have had a special connection with Zeus, perhaps because a Macedonian king traditionally acted as his high priest in ceremonies and sacrifices.\textsuperscript{9} It is only in the reign of his son Antiochus that we see Apollo take prominence in coinage and as part of the “Seleucid Romance”, a sort of biographical tradition that was composed after his death as a retroactive attempt to legitimize Seleucus’ right to rule.\textsuperscript{10} The most common examples of Seleucid coinage from Antiochus I to Seleucus IV nearly a century later bears the image of a seated Apollo equipped with a bow on the reverse. It is likely that the use of Apollo was primarily designed to communicate to Greek subjects, but the choice to show the god as an archer can easily appeal to Iranian notions of kingship since Iranian rulers like the Achaemenids were often portrayed in such a manner.\textsuperscript{11} Antiochus’ “adoption” of Apollo as a patron deity may also be a way to use traditional religious practices to curry favor with the Babylonians, since there is strong evidence that Apollo was associated with Nabû, an important god within the Babylonian pantheon.\textsuperscript{12}

Speaking of Nabû, let us talk about the \textit{Akītu} festival. The \textit{Akītu} was an annual festival celebrated during the first twelve days of the New Year, with a ritual procession marking the return of Nabû to Babylon

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\item Stevens, K. “The Antiochus Cylinder, Babylonian scholarship and Seleucid imperial ideology” The Journal of Hellenic studies., 134 , pg. 76
\item Stevens, K. “The Antiochus Cylinder, Babylonian scholarship and Seleucid imperial ideology” The Journal of Hellenic studies., 134 , pg. 66-88
\item Arrian, \textit{Anabasis}, 7.4.6; Plutarch, \textit{Life of Demetrius}, 31
\item Appian, \textit{Syrian Wars}, 9.56; Justin, \textit{Epitome}, 15.4.
\item On the Seleucid Romance and its possible origins/existence, see Ogden, D. “The Legend of Seleucus: Kingship, Narrative and Mythmaking in the Ancient World” Pgs. 275-325; Kosmin, P.J. “The Land of the Elephant Kings: Space, Territory, and Ideology in the Seleucid Empire” Pgs. 94-100
\item Erickson, K. and Wright, N.L., “The ‘Royal Archer’ and Apollo in the East: Greco-Persian Iconography in the Seleukid Empire” in Proceedings of the XIVth International Numismatic Congress, Pgs. 163-168
\item Erickson, K. “Apollo-Nabû: the Babylonian Policy of Antiochus I” in “Seleucid Dissolution: The Sinking of the Anchor (Phillipika)” 50. Harrassowitz. 2011, Pgs. 51-66
\end{footnotes}
from Borsippa by boat with many prayers and offerings – with the god represented as a statue during the parade. On the fifth day, the king would greet Nabû before heading to the Temple of Marduk at Esagila. There he would remove his entire royal garb before entering the inner sanctum to meet with the head priest, who would slap him across the face and demand a confession. The king would respond:

“I have not sinned, Lord of all Lands! I have not neglected your divinity!
I have not ruined Babylon! I have not ordered its dissolution!
I have not made Esagila tremble, I have not forgotten its rituals!...
I honored Babylon and I have not destroyed its walls!”

The king would receive his clothes back, and then was promptly slapped again to see if he would cry or not, since crying meant a favorable omen from the city’s patron god Bel. A few days later the king would “take the hand” of Bel, and bring him into the city. It is remarkable to think that any self-respecting warrior king would allow himself to be slapped and humiliated in an elaborate ceremony, and the exact purpose of the practice is debated. But the Akītu was instrumental in both maintaining order and peace throughout Babylonia and reaffirming the legitimacy of the king through divine approval. The description of the ritual was reconstructed from cuneiform texts dating to the late 3rd century BC, likely under the reign of Seleucus III. We’re not sure how frequently the kings took part in the festival – the general lack of evidence could mean that such occurrences were rare and worthy of being recorded, or we could simply be missing the evidence – but we know that Antiochus III would perform a similar ritual on April 6th in the year 205. In either respect, it still suggests that the Seleucid kings were willing to undergo such rituals to further legitimize themselves in the eyes of their indigenous subjects.

These pieces of evidence indicate that we must consciously take a nuanced approach when it comes to how we define the nature of “Hellenism”. However, it is clear that the Seleucids retained their Macedonian Greek identity throughout the Hellenistic period, and this manifested in its kingship. To be a Seleucid king was to constantly be at war and to be constantly on campaign as commander in chief of the army. The right to rule was determined by success on the battlefield, the economy was fueled by plunder and the maintenance of the military machine. It must be understood that militarism is not exclusive to the Seleucid monarchy; it is a shared characteristic of all of the Hellenistic kings. When compared to their Ptolemaic rivals though, the Seleucids are uniquely militant: of the first fourteen kings of the Seleucid dynasty, twelve were killed in battle or died on campaign. Leading the army in decisive cavalry charges and getting personally involved in the thick of battle was extremely dangerous and hardened back to the traditions of Alexander the Great and the other Macedonian kings. Many of the

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17 For a discussion on the militarism of the Hellenistic monarchies, see Eckstein, A.M. “Mediterranean Anarchy, Interstate War, and the Rise of Rome” Pgs. 82-88; Grainger, J.D. “Kings and Kingship in the Hellenistic World, 350-30 BC” Pgs. 136-151
institutions of the Seleucid court and governance, such as the Royal Friends (philoi), had its roots in royal policy from the time of Philip II and Alexander. They promoted Greek culture by patronizing artists and intellectuals, though not to the same extent as the Ptolemies. Greek-styled cities were founded across the empire on a incredible scale, and were held in higher esteem by the Seleucid rulers rather than the native settlements. Despite the importance it played in the rise of Seleucid power, Babylon was neglected in favor of the nearby Seleukia-on-the-Tigris, which would soon eclipse its predecessor in both size and prosperity – there is evidence that even the respectful Antiochus I forcibly relocated the Macedonian population of Babylon to Seleukia and imposed a unique tax upon the remaining Babylonians as a possible incentive to emigrate. We will discuss these policies in greater detail as we go through the episode, but they do indicate that at least outwardly the Seleucids were fundamentally Greco-Macedonian.

To adequately identify the Seleucids, a good question to ask might be: how did Seleucids perceive themselves? They didn’t control Macedonia, none of its kings besides Seleucus I himself ever lived in or even visited their ancestral homeland. As far as we know of, Seleucid kings tended not to use any explicit ethnic or cultural label when referring to themselves, instead preferring to emphasize their family name or simply just use basileus. It may be of some value to see how both those within and outside of the Seleucid Empire viewed the monarchy. Since most of the authors contemporary to the Seleucids have vanished, we must look at later sources: both Greek and Roman authors, those like Strabo and Tacitus, refer to the Seleucids as “Macedonians” or “Kings of the Macedonians”. The Jewish historian Josephus, writing about the reign of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, refers to the subjugation of Judea “by the Macedonians and their kings”. Although the title “Syrian Kings” was generally more popular, the Ptolemies are almost never described as “Macedonian” in those same sources. We do have a few surviving inscriptions and writings dating to the Hellenistic period that might give us a clearer understanding. In one of the recovered tablets of the Babylonian Chronicles dating to the end of Seleucus I’s reign, it states that:

“[The King] and his army crossed the sea to Maakkadunu, his homeland”. This is referring to the war against King Lysimachus on the European mainland in 282/281 BC when Seleucus nearly conquered Macedonia. The Babylonians themselves clearly recognized Seleucus as

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20 King, C.J. “Macedonian Kingship and other Political Institutions” in “A Companion to Ancient Macedonia” Pg. 382; Grainger, J.D. “Kings and Kingship in the Hellenistic World, 350-30 BC” Pg. 86
21 Strabo, Geography, 16.1.5; Pausanias, Description of Greece, 1.16.3 ; BCHP 5, 6-10; Kosmin, P.J. “The Land of the Elephant Kings: Space, Territory, and Ideology in the Seleucid Empire” Pg. 193; Sherwin-White, S. and Kuhrt, A. question the notion of a neglected Babylon in “Hellenism in the East: The interaction of Greek and non-Greek civilizations from Syria to Central Asia after Alexander” pgs. 20-21
22 Antiochus III certainly had ambitions to conquer Macedonia, but the combined efforts of the Romans and Philip V (the Antigonal ruler of Macedon) put a stop to those plans; Kosmin, P.J. “The Land of the Elephant Kings: Space, Territory, and Ideology in the Seleucid Empire” Pg. 87
23 Austin, M. “The Seleukids and Asia” in “A Companion to the Hellenistic World” Pg. 121-122
27 BCHP9; Kosmin, P.J. “The Land of the Elephant Kings: Space, Territory, and Ideology in the Seleucid Empire” Pg. 83
being a Macedonian, but that was at the start of Seleucid rule. When we look at the inscription on the Antiochus Cylinder, it is curious that Antiochus I describes his father as being a Macedonian, but does not include himself in that same category.\(^{28}\) An inscription dating to almost a century later was recovered from a statue on the island of Delos, written by a Seleucid official which states:

“This statue of king Antiochus the Great of Macedonia, the son of Seleucus Callinicus, his savior and benefactor, was dedicated by Menippus son of Phanias”.\(^{29}\) Menippus’ dedication is perhaps the only known instance of an inscription with formal royal titulature that describes the Seleucids as Macedonian, and may just reflect Antiochus’ ambitions to conquer Macedonia, which he believed to be his by right of Seleucus’ conquest.\(^{30}\) Still, it suggests connection to some degree despite being separated from their homeland for over 130 years, and likely continued down to the end of the dynasty’s rule.

In my opinion, the Macedonian element was the most dominant aspect of Seleucid kingship. However, this does not mean that their involvement in the rituals and practices of their indigenous subjects were just affectations, adopted by the Seleucids out of a sense of pragmatism to secure the loyalty of said subjects. Nor does it mean that the dynasty was incapable of creating something wholly original and outside of the stock categorizations of Macedonian, Near Eastern or Iranian. Let us now turn to the administration of the empire itself, and see how the Seleucids managed the largest state in the Hellenistic world.

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The Seleucid Empire was big. Really, really big. At its greatest territorial extents under Seleucus I and Antiochus III, the breadth of the empire stretched from Bulgaria to Pakistan. It contained some of the most densely populated regions in the ancient world, places like Mesopotamia and the Levant, and possessed an estimated population size between 15,000,000 – 30,000,000 people.\(^{31}\) To compensate for its elephantine proportions in an era when the fastest mode of transportation is the horse, the Seleucids would have to administrate using a combination of pre-existing institutions and their own particular form of ingenuity.

Let us look at the general model of Seleucid administration. Given that the bulk of Seleuc territory was formerly the domain of the Achaemenid Persian Empire, it is unsurprising that they would adopt and adapt the systems of their imperial predecessors. The empire was divided into several regions, termed “satrapies”, based on the Persian model. What the exact number of satrapies were at any time is very difficult to tell, but Appian suggests there were 72 during the reign of Seleucus I.\(^{32}\) This is likely an exaggerated figure, but it is generally thought that at least some of satrapies were subdivided further.

\(^{28}\) Antiochus Cylinder, Lines 1-6 (Livius.org); Engels, D.W. “Benefactors, Kings, Rulers: Studies on the Seleukid Empire between East and West.” Pgs. 123-124
\(^{29}\) OGIS 239 (Attalus.org)
\(^{30}\) That is, of Seleucus I’s conquests in 281. Kosmin, P.J. “The Land of the Elephant Kings: Space, Territory, and Ideology in the Seleucid Empire” Pg. 115
\(^{32}\) Appian, Syrian Wars, 10.62
into hyparchies in an attempt to reduce the power of the satraps who governed them (and by extension the chance to revolt). The responsibilities of the satraps varied, but they would be responsible for overseeing the day-to-day functioning of their provinces, and were given the money necessary to do so. There is some indication that they were involved in providing military forces to the king, like the Bactrian satrap supplying more war elephants, though there were also generals that would handle the actual command of armed forces. It is unclear if they had any involvement with taxes, but there were dedicated officials for such a task. The dioiketes (dee-oi-key-tees) would be the main figure involved with the financial side of the satrapies; their responsibilities included overseeing the revenues and expenses, the minting of currency, and other large-scale financial operations. They could delegate to their subordinates, the oikononomos, and have them handle the royal estates.

A question has been raised about the ethnic makeup of the satraps and the ruling class in general. From a survey of about 250 known Seleucid officials, roughly 98.5% of them bore Greek personal names, and so we can assume that generally they were Greco-Macedonian in origin. Greek was also the dominant language of the royal court, diplomacy, and administration. Some scholars like Amélie Kuhrt and Susan Sherwin-White bring up a very valid counterpoint: just because an individual has a Greek name it does not mean that they were necessarily ethnically or culturally Greek. Under Ptolemaic rule, it was not uncommon for Egyptian subjects to possess a Greek name that was used for business or legal matters while still retaining their own personal Egyptian name. It is quite possible that a similar phenomenon could have been occurring under the Seleucids and the names of those administrators don’t necessarily reflect ethnicity. It also needs to be taken into account that Greek was not the only language used in official capacities. Aramaic, a Semitic language that was extensively used throughout the Levant and Iranian Plateau, would be continually spoken by non-Greek subjects and found on administrative documents and bilingual inscriptions. But the fact that the adoption of Greek names occurred at all suggests that at some level the ruling body of the empire was either ethnically or culturally dominated by Greeks, and the taking of said names was a way for ambitious native officials to “fit in”.

35 Grainger, J.D. “The Rise of the Seleukid Empire, 323-223 BC” Pg. 146; This may not always be the case though, as there is some evidence of the satraps levying troops, see Sherwin-White, S. and Kuhrt, A. “From Samarkhand to Sardis: A new approach to the Seleucid Empire” Pg. 47
36 Sherwin-White, S. and Kuhrt, A. “From Samarkhand to Sardis: A new approach to the Seleucid Empire” Pg. 47
38 Sherwin-White, S. and Kuhrt, A. “From Samarkhand to Sardis: A new approach to the Seleucid Empire” Pg.50;
42 Strootman, R. “Hellenistic Court Society: The Seleukid Imperial Court under Antiochus the Great, 223-187 BCE” in “Royal Courts in Dynastic Empires” Pgs. 81-83
Within the general framework of the administration lies a rather unique subgroup, not quite hired officials but certainly allied with Seleucid interests. These are what can be described as “local power holders”, individuals that operated in the empire with a large degree of semi-autonomy, enabled by the possession of political or economic power.\(^43\) They could be individual warlords in command of a single city, or a family that controlled an entire region: this includes the Attalids of Pergamon, the Frataraka of Persis, and the Diodotids of Bactria. We’ll discuss the nature of these local power holders in greater detail when we get to the Seleucid narrative in a few episodes, but this arrangement was a matter of Seleucid pragmatism. Often times these dynasts had many local connections and maintained order within their “domains”, and the Seleucids were willing to bargain or even “outsource” the administrative duties in regions that were remote or where the king was unable to be. The exact parameters of each arrangement varied from case to case, and there was no singular Seleucid policy for such matters. So in return for their allegiance, these local power holders would have several privileges that could be quite surprising: the right to mint money in their own name, the right to found cities, to command armies etc.\(^44\) The ability to take the initiative regarding any potential crises could prove to be very valuable to Seleucid interests – so long as the dynasts’ goals lined up with that of their benefactors. By the late 3\(^{rd}/\)early 2\(^{nd}\) century, this would develop into a system of client-kingships and ultimately contribute to the gradual disintegration of the Seleucid Empire. However, that is a story for another day.

Despite the efforts to delegate, political power was ultimately centralized in the hands of one man: the king. All of the territorial holdings of the empire were the personal property of the Seleucids through right of conquest, described as doryktetos chora, “spear-won land”\(^45\). But as I mentioned already, the sheer size of the empire created a problem when it came to actually overseeing it, even with the appointment of satraps and local power holders. If a major event like a revolt or invasion occurs in a distant province, it could take months to receive the news and muster an army in order to deal with it. So rather than remain stationary, the Seleucids devised a rather unorthodox solution: the king would always be on campaign.

I don’t mean to imply that at all times the king was moving against some sort of target or enemy army, though military matters were definitely behind the rationale of this practice. Seleucid kings and their courts were in a constant state of mobilization, a peripatetic government that would journey throughout the empire to reinforce the authority of the monarchs and to handle administrative affairs. In some sense, this is not surprising. The kings of Persia operated in a similar manner, migrating seasonally from palace to palace along a series of routes known as the Royal Roads which were staffed with road markers indicating distances and with waystations.\(^46\) There is also a strong indication that the Seleucids continued to maintain the Royal Roads and used them in a similar fashion.\(^47\) In his book “The Land of the Elephant Kings” Paul Kosmin roughly reconstructs and maps the itineraries of Seleucid kings, and it is

\(^{43}\) Chrubasik, B. “Kings and Usurpers in the Seleukid Empire: The Men who Would be King” Pg. 23
\(^{44}\) Chrubasik, B. “Kings and Usurpers in the Seleukid Empire: The Men who Would be King” Pgs.
\(^{46}\) Briant, P. “From Cyrus to Alexander: A History of the Persian Empire” Pgs. 357-359
quite revealing: the vast majority of movements occur from Antioch in Syria to Sardis in west Asia Minor, and then again from Antioch to Mesopotamia, passing through places like Dura-Europus before ending up in Babylon and Seleucia-on-the-Tigris.\textsuperscript{48} These routes crisscrossed the most economically and militarily vital parts of the empire, the control of which would be of utmost importance. Unlike Imperial Rome, there was no fixed capital, but several of them along these highways that contained palaces for the king and his family to reside in.\textsuperscript{49} Conversely, it also appears that the kings rarely travelled to their easternmost provinces like Bactria, which is partially why Antiochus III’s \textit{anabasis} into Bactria and India during the late 3\textsuperscript{rd} century was considered such an extraordinary event (and perhaps why Seleucid control over the region deteriorated).

The function of this near-constant movement served the administration of the empire in many different ways. The physical presence of the king was by itself an important aspect of reasserting imperial authority, and the accompanying wives and children would be a part of emphasizing the continuation and stability of the dynasty.\textsuperscript{50} Certainly the presence of a large army can be a very blunt way to ensure good behavior, but it would be rather simplistic to view it as just that. Arguably, one could describe the relationship between king and subjects as transactional.\textsuperscript{51} The arrival of the king and company was a highly ceremonial event, and the cities or regions that would play host to this entourage would do so at an enormous cost. We actually get quite a few hints about these grand entrances from Jewish writers and historians. The author of 2 Maccabees tells us that when Antiochus IV Epiphanes visited Jerusalem, he was greeted by the High Priest and citizenry who held torches and chanted as the king entered the city.\textsuperscript{52} Josephus also reports how the High Priest John Hyrcanus helped furnish the army of Antiochus VII that was passing by Jerusalem while en route to fight the Parthians at a mighty sum of 3000 talents.\textsuperscript{53} This throwing of the gates was also effectively a form of submission, and to refuse would be an act of rebellion, which would be responded to with extreme prejudice.\textsuperscript{54}

Despite the costs and the implicit threat of violence, the communities that would honor the Seleucid king and his court often received perks or gifts in return. Legal charters could be written up that would recognize the city’s generosity.\textsuperscript{55} For their service during the Fifth Syrian War, Antiochus III granted Jerusalem tax exemptions and a guarantee that the religious and political customs of the Judeans would not be trampled upon.\textsuperscript{56} Babylon also had similar privileges when it came to its religious freedoms.\textsuperscript{57} Royal patronage and donations helped maintain and beautify the city with ornate building projects or religious festivals. Wives and mothers of the royal household would be involved in this process too:

\textsuperscript{48} Kosmin, P.J. “The Land of the Elephant Kings: Space, Territory, and Ideology in the Seleucid Empire” Pg. 145
\textsuperscript{49} Strootman, R. “Hellenistic Court Society: The Seleukid Imperial Court under Antiochus the Great, 223-187 BCE” in “Royal Courts in Dynastic Empires” Pg. 71
\textsuperscript{50} Kosmin, P.J. “The Land of the Elephant Kings: Space, Territory, and Ideology in the Seleucid Empire” Pg. 164
\textsuperscript{51} Kosmin, P.J. “The Land of the Elephant Kings: Space, Territory, and Ideology in the Seleucid Empire” Pg. 154
\textsuperscript{52} 2 Maccabees, 4.22
\textsuperscript{53} Josephus, \textit{The Antiquities of the Jews}, 13.249-250; It must be understood that Judea at this time was independent from the Seleucid Empire, and could also be seen in the “local power holder” framework as argued by Chrubasik, B. “Kings and Usurpers in the Seleukid Empire: The Men who Would be King” Pg. 56
\textsuperscript{54} Kosmin, P.J. “The Land of the Elephant Kings: Space, Territory, and Ideology in the Seleucid Empire” Pg. 155
\textsuperscript{55} Sherwin-White, S. and Kuhrt, A. “From Samarkhand to Sardis: A new approach to the Seleucid Empire” Pgs. 51-52
\textsuperscript{56} Josephus, \textit{The Antiquities of the Jews}, 12.138-146
\textsuperscript{57} Pausanias, \textit{Description of Greece}, 1.16.3
Queen Laodice, wife of Antiochus III, provided the city of Iaso the funds necessary to pay for the dowries of daughters from poor families. If natural disasters struck, the Seleucids would intervene with relief in the form of money or food, like when Seleucus II aided the city of Rhodes after it was struck by a series of terrible earthquakes in 226 which also took down their famed Colossus. The constant movement of the king also meant that the city could not be taken advantage of and become crushed by the expenses of feeding such a great host. It is also very expensive and time-consuming to besiege a city, so the Seleucids were more than willing to negotiate if the cities requested more political autonomy. If the siege did commence though, all bets were off and the city would be treated the same as any enemy fortification.

The relationship between king and city or the city officials was but one part of the large network that defined the nature of Seleucid rule. It was not a matter of allegiance to a nation or a flag; no one actively went about saying that they were loyal members of the Seleucid Empire. Loyalty was tied directly to the king, established through a personal relationship between the crown and the local elites which involved a degree of negotiation and cooperation to create a sense of harmony. This pattern is carried over into the Seleucid court, where those ties of friendship or familial connections played an essential role in the administration of the empire. At its core were the philoi, the “Royal Friends”, an institution that had its origins in the “Companions” (hetairoi) of Philip and Alexander. These were the close associates of the king, taken up into the highest echelons of the political elite of the empire, and could be from all backgrounds: Greek or non-Greek, military man or intellectual, and a wide variety of other avenues.

Like with the hetairoi, it was also common practice for some of the philoi to be taken from a group of pages that were raised alongside the young prince, or were actually members of the royal family. As Seleucid court culture developed, a hierarchy emerged along with it: First Friends, Honored Friends, Highly Honored Friends, et cetera.

A council of these philoi would meet to help advise the king, each giving their own opinion before the matter would be decided by the monarch. We have quite a few examples of these advisory roles during the reign of Antiochus III as recorded by Polybius, who may have relied on official Seleucid documents during his research. Philoi often acted as the representatives of their home region, directly appealing to the king through petitions and negotiations that would earn them statues or accolades from their “constituency”. They also could become satraps, or serve as commanders of the army. Given the size

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58 SEG 26.1226
59 Polybius, Histories, 5.89.8-9
60 Ma, John. “Antiochos III and the Cities of Western Asia Minor” Pgs. 179-242
61 King, C.J. “Macedonian Kingship and other Political Institutions” in “A Companion to Ancient Macedonia” Pg. 382
62 Dreyer, B. “How to Become a ‘Relative’ of the King: Careers and Hierarchy at the Court of Antiochus III” American Journal of Philology, Vol 132, 1 (525) Pg. 47-48; Athenaeus, Deipnosophists, 155b
63 Grainger, J.D. “Kings and Kingship in the Hellenistic World, 350-30 BC” Pg. 88; Chrubasik, B. “Kings and Usurpers in the Seleukid Empire: The Men who Would be King” Pg. 64
64 Strootman, R. “Hellenistic Court Society: The Seleukid Imperial Court under Antiochus the Great, 223-187 BCE” in “Royal Courts in Dynastic Empires” Pgs. 85-86
65 Polybius, Histories, 5.51.2-52.1
66 Strootman, R. “Hellenistic Court Society: The Seleukid Imperial Court under Antiochus the Great, 223-187 BCE” in “Royal Courts in Dynastic Empires” Pg. 71
67 Sherwin-White, S. and Kuhrt, A. “From Samarkhand to Sardis: A new approach to the Seleucid Empire” Pg. 133
of the empire and the ultimate authority of the king, his court would be subject to a constant flurry of messages between him and any of his delegates on what courses of action must be taken. A letter between Antiochus III and his longtime philoi Zeuxis is allegedly preserved in the histories of Josephus, which indicates the general familiarity and lack of honorifics used between the two parties, along with the types of instructions given. Plutarch also gives us an anecdote of the frustration likely felt by some of these rulers, quote:

“At any rate Seleucus, they used to tell us, constantly repeated that if people in general knew what a task it was merely to read and write so many letters, they would not even pick up a crown that had been thrown away”

The question of whether the Seleucid government was “strong” or “weak” has been bandied about for decades, some arguing that the Empire was in a general state of decline following Seleucus I’s death in 281 until its end in 63 BC. Indeed, many of its institutions had fundamental weaknesses that would threaten the authority of the monarchy. The philoi could wield tremendous political power – at least one Seleucid king is said to have been assassinated on the initiative of one of his “friends” – and if there was a boy-king on the throne then they could effectively rule in the child’s stead. The wealth afforded to the philoi and the dynasts in the form of land and money with a degree of ambition could prove to be a dangerous combination, and destabilize the empire as a whole when they decided to revolt or declare independence. The constant need for the king’s presence and the inability to create an effective stand-in was certainly less successful when compared to other imperial entities like the Roman Empire. But to some extent or another, the Seleucid kings managed to successfully rule over one of the world’s largest empires for over 200 years. We will be returning to this theme again in future episodes, but I wanted to give you a general idea of how the Seleucid realm operated by the middle of the 3rd century.

Let us conclude our discussion by talking about one of the most fascinating and enduring creations of the Seleucids, built to aid their control of the empire: the so-called “Seleucid Era”. In the ancient world, virtually all forms of chronological record keeping and public dating were centered on political offices or on significant events. For the Greeks there was the Athenian Archon, and for the Romans there was the Consul, since they were both single-year terms. Alternatively you had the Olympiad, based upon the Olympic Games which took place every four years. In Mesopotamia and the Near East there was a greater emphasis on regnal dates: “in the 10th year of Aššurbanipal” for example. Years can also be given names based upon notable events, such as an expedition or the founding of a temple. Even though they were ruled by a monarchy, the Seleucids chose not to follow regnal dating. Instead, Seleucus I instituted a system in the year 306 BC which would be a continuous and predictable measurement of time,

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69 Plutarch, *Moralia*, 790b. Thanks to E. Garcia-Molina for the heads up on this quote.  
70 Engels, D.W. “Benefactors, Kings, Rulers: Studies on the Seleukid Empire between East and West.” Pg. 30  
71 Appian, *Syrian Wars*, 62  
72 Kosmin, P.J. “The Land of the Elephant Kings: Space, Territory, and Ideology in the Seleucid Empire” Pg. 178  
73 A topic extensively treated in Kosmin, P.J. “Time and Its Adversaries in the Seleucid Empire”  
74 The works of Diodorus Siculus are the most obvious example, often using both at the start of every year in his work (eg. 19.2.1)  
75 As seen in Polybius’ *Histories*
regardless of the ruler in charge or whatever incidents may have occurred that year. “Year 1” would begin in 312/311 BC, and continues on to the present day, which would be approximately Year 2330 at the time of writing this episode. The Seleucid Era has two variations, one based on the Macedonian calendar which is slightly earlier than the other, which is based on the Babylonian calendar. The dates also tend to be written and read backward, from the smallest to largest unit, unlike most modern conventions of largest to smallest. For instance, in Seleucid Year 123, it would be transcribed as “the year three and twenty and one hundred”.

What is the significance of making such a change, and why did they choose 312/311 as Year 1? For those who remember, the dates of 312/311 might be a surprising choice: Seleucus himself did not formally undergo a coronation until the year 306, which seems like a much more obvious pick to begin a new era. In actuality, 312/311 marks the date of Seleucus’ return from exile to Babylon after being driven out of the city by the general Antigonus Monophthalmus four years prior. If we follow the Babylonian convention, Seleucus returned in the month of Nisannu in 311, the Babylonian New Year and roughly equivalent to March or April of the Gregorian calendar. The Macedonians adopted the lunar calendar of the Babylonians and substituted the names of their months, but still considered the autumn equinox to be the beginning of the New Year on 1st Dios 312. Seleucus’ decision in 306 to retroactively turn 312/311 into Year 1 is important precisely because his arrival fell on the Babylonian New Year, and coincided with the traditional role of a Babylonian King to take part in the Akītu festival and restore order and justice in the land. This meant that Seleucus could claim legitimacy as a king in the eyes of his native Babylonian subjects. But this could also serve to legitimize himself in the eyes of the Greeks as well. In comparison, Ptolemy I worked hard to connect himself with Alexander the Great to secure his claim, whether it was possessing the king’s body or pushing his claims that Alexander was the son of Nectanebo or that Ptolemy was a bastard of Philip. Seleucus was more of his own man, as it were. The Seleucid Era subtly suggested the notion that the time before Seleucus was a sort of unknowable mess, whereas Seleucid rule provided a sense of order and predictability based upon imperial vision and continuity. This was reinforced and standardized by its constant presence and in the daily lives of everyone across the empire, whether it was found on contracts, weights and measures, or coinage. Its placement on such items also could instill a sense of confidence for those like merchants who needed a reliable currency, or parties needing the backing of the government. The ever-marching progress of Seleucid time would be especially useful to a body prone to usurpations, rebellions, and civil wars. It didn’t matter whether there was one or two or zero kings on the throne, time simply kept on going.

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76 Plutarch, Life of Demetrius, 18;
77 Diodorus Siculus, Library of History, 19.91.1-2
78 Kosmin, P.J. “Time and Its Adversaries in the Seleucid Empire” Pgs. 31-35
79 Kosmin, P.J. “Time and Its Adversaries in the Seleucid Empire” Pg. 90
The Seleucid Era was the first of its kind, and its resounding success lead to it becoming the model for many of the world’s calendrical systems that followed: those like the contemporary Bithynian and Parthian eras, the Christian Anno Domini, the Islamic Hijrah and several others.\textsuperscript{80} When the city of Arados of southern Syria rebelled in 259, they abandoned the Seleucid Era but still retained the dating system starting with 259 as their own Year 1.\textsuperscript{81} Long after the last Seleucid king was deposed, the Seleucid Era would still be found gracing the tombstones of Nestorian Christians who lived in Mongol-controlled Kazakhstan during the 14\textsuperscript{th} century, a testament to the lasting creativity of the Seleucid dynasty.\textsuperscript{82}

\textsuperscript{80} Hallow, W. “The Nabonassar Era and Other Epochs in Mesopotamian Chronology and Chronography” in “A Scientific Humanist: Studies in Memory of Abraham Sachs” Pgs. 175-190; Kosmin, P.J. “The Land of the Elephant Kings: Space, Territory, and Ideology in the Seleucid Empire” Pg. 101
\textsuperscript{81} Rey-Coquais, J.P. “Arados et sa Peree” (Paris, 1974)
\textsuperscript{82} Dickens, M. “Syriac Gravestones in the Tashkent History Museum” in “Hidden Treasures and Intercultural Encounters: Studies on East Syriac Christianity in China and Central Asia” Pgs. 13-49
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