

THE COMING OF THE PARTHIANS: CRISIS AND RESILIENCE IN THE REIGN OF SELEUKOS II

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The Near Eastern galleries are not among the most popular of the Louvre. The least visited parts are the Elamite rooms. There, in a corner easily overlooked, is a small display case containing some remarkable figurines of south Mesopotamian or west Iranian provenance. They represent unidentified female deities. All are dated to ‘The Parthian Period, c. 300 BC–300 CE’. Though they selectively engage with the ‘international style’ of the hellenistic *koinē*, they are neither ‘hybrid’ mixtures nor ‘foreign’ imports. They represent a local, southern Mesopotamian style in its own right. They may date to the period of Macedonian domination in the Persian Gulf region (c. 330–150 BC) or to the early Parthian period (from 140 BC).

It is amusing to see how these items apparently do not fit into any of the traditional categories of cultural history (‘Classical Greece’, ‘The Ancient Near East’, ‘Persia’), and therefore have been assigned their own, peripheral corner beyond the Great Civilizations of the Ancient World. The Museum’s conceptualization of the allegedly ‘indigenous’ Parthians as the almost immediate successors of the Persian Achaemenids is indicative of the discomfort that is still felt by many Near Eastern archaeologists when it comes to positioning the allegedly ‘western’ Seleukid Empire in the long-term history of Iran. But rounding off Parthian beginnings to 300 BC may also be the result of scholarly disagreement on the exact date of the secession of the Parthian Kingdom under the Arsakid Dynasty from the Seleukid Empire. Many scholars have attempted in vain to determine when ‘Parthia’ officially became an independent state. Estimates vary from 256 to 226/5 BC.¹ But as early as 209, a Seleukid army led by Antiochos III forced the Parthians into submission, perhaps for the second time, and there is no direct evidence thereafter for Parthian hostility towards the Seleukid Dynasty until the mid-2nd century.

The reign of Seleukos II Kallinikos (246–226/5) is crucial for modern understanding of Parthian independence. According to the conventional view, Seleukos campaigned against the Parthians but apparently was unable to ‘prevent’ the establishment of an independent Parthian state under the

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Parthian ruler, Arsakes I. Historians therefore have regarded the reign of Seleukos II as a watershed in the history of Iran and Central Asia. Józef Wolski consistently advocated the view that the invasion of the region by a people known as the Parni (which he dates to 239/8) was a disaster for the Seleukids, cutting their empire in two. In its aftermath trade routes no longer connected Central Asia and the Mediterranean, and the Greco-Baktrian realm was cut off from the west.² This view is based primarily on Justin's epitome of the *Historiae Philippicae* of Pompeius Trogus, the principal source for these events, and on Strabo. In Justin's account, Seleukid hegemony in Iran and Central Asia suddenly collapsed because the Parthians and Baktrians simultaneously revolted while Seleukos II was preoccupied by fighting his brother, Antiochos Hierax. To quote the crucial passage in book 41 of Justin's world history:

[The Parni] could revolt with impunity because of the wrangling of the two royal brothers Seleukos and Antiochos, who were so eager to wrest the kingdom from each other that they neglected to suppress the rebellion. At this same time Theodotus [= Diodotos I], governor of the thousand Baktrian cities, also rebelled and had himself declared king. The populations all over the east followed his example and defected from the Macedonians.³

Recent scholarship has nuanced the view that the Parni drove a wedge between the Seleukid east and west and that they thereby caused the breakdown of the Seleukid Empire in Iran. Bernard van Wickevoort Crommelin showed that Trogus synchronized the revolts of Parthia and Baktria for dramatic effect: Trogus' work is structured according to the theory of *translatio imperii*, i.e. the conception of world history as a sequence of peoples that successively dominated the *orbis terrarum*, and accordingly out of literary and stylistic concerns Justin was obliged to find one particular date at which the Seleukid Empire collapsed and the Parthians assumed the mantle.⁴ The revolts of Diodotos and Arsakes in reality did not occur at the same time. It is furthermore clear that the settlement of the Parni in the area between the Caspian Sea and the Elburz Mountains and in the Kopet Dag region cannot have cut Seleukid communication lines with Central Asia. As Susan Sherwin-White and Amélie Kuhrt pointed out, there also was a major route running *south* of these two ranges, directly connecting Central Asia with southern Mesopotamia via Persis, Karmania and Arachosia.⁵ In an important article, J. D. Lerner has argued that since the eastern campaigns of Antiochos III in the later 3rd century, Central Asia was re-integrated into the Seleukid world empire also via the revived sea route between the Persian Gulf and India.⁶

Unsurprisingly, there is neither direct nor indirect evidence for a Parthian empire in Iran in the 3rd century. If the early Parthian polity indeed

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had a territorial foundation it cannot have been more than a regional vassal kingdom. But in fact Justin does not even say that Arsakes assumed the title of king, though he later calls his principality a *regnum* (41.5.5), a rather generic term comparable to Greek *δυναστεία*, *βασιλεία* or *ἀρχή*, words that can also be used to denote a ‘dominion’, one’s ‘authority’, or a territory that one possesses. This lack of monarchical aspiration – which is not in itself indicative of secession – is corroborated by the visual and textual vocabulary on Arsakes’ coinage, on which he appears as a governor or local prince but not as king (see below). Justin’s claim that Diodotos, the satrap of Baktria, in contrast to Arsakes did assume the royal title is corroborated by the appearance of the legend ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΔΙΟΔΟΤΟΥ on Baktrian coinage. Put simply, the notion of Parthian independence under Arsakes I is not supported by Arsakes’ own representation. When Justin later on states that the Parthians (*Parthi*) attained their liberty under Arsakes I, he or his source likely follows ‘official’ court historiography from the reign of Mithradates the Great, the founder of the Arsakid Empire who retrospectively dated the beginning of the Parthian Era to the reign of Arsakes, about a century earlier;⁷ the link is clear from Justin’s statement that ‘the Parthians observe the day on which [Arsakes gained a victory over Seleukos] with great solemnity, as the date of the commencement of their liberty’.⁸

The aim of this chapter is to demonstrate that modern conceptions of state, and of national sovereignty, do not suit political and cultural realities of the ancient Eurasian empires; and to propose an alternative explanation for the emergence of the Arsakids in the 3rd century BC.⁹ Scholars of Iranian history have in the past been perhaps too eager to find as early a date as possible for the foundation of an ‘Iranian’ Parthian Empire to end the ‘European’ Seleukid occupation. I will argue instead that Arsakes I did not establish a rival empire in opposition to the Seleukid Empire, but that he became a vassal king under Seleukid suzerainty. The establishment of a Parthian *empire* took place only after the reign of Antiochos III (223/2–187); in fact, it was not until *c.* 140 that imperial pretensions for the first time appear in Arsakid monarchical representation, *viz.* Mithradates I’s assumption of the title of Great King.

Rule through vassal monarchies, even as these sometimes came into being as *ad hoc* reactions to irreversible political developments, became increasingly a Seleukid policy from the reign of Antiochos I Soter (281–261). It was not until the 140s that the Seleukid Empire began to lose to the Parthians its status as the principal great power in the Middle East and Iran. Until that time, the Seleukids retained nominal imperial overlordship of the ‘Kingdom of Asia’ from Anatolia to Sogdia. Vassalization was a sign

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of the Seleukids' resilience, not of their decline. The Seleukid dynasty claimed imperial status no less than the Achaemenids before them had done. But unlike the Achaemenids, the Seleukids felt that this status allowed them to invest others with royalty. The Parthian ruler, Arsakes I, initially was only one out of many of such vassals. Arsakes never adopted the title of *basileus* on his coinage. Instead he struck coins in his own name (which may have been a title of sorts) or as Arsakes Autokrator. Arsakes I did not use that title in defiance of the Seleukid hegemony but, quite on the contrary, was offered it as a prize by Seleukos II in exchange for his formal submission to Seleukid imperial suzerainty.

I. The paradox of power

Seleukos II Kallinikos ruled over his empire from horseback.¹⁰ He was continuously on campaign, as most Seleukid rulers were. But it seems as if Seleukos II's reign was particularly beset by severe military and political crises: a Ptolemaic invasion of the Seleukid heartland during the Laodikean War (246–241), a revolt in Khorasan, a full-scale dynastic war with his own full brother, Antiochos Hierax (the so-called War of the Brothers, 240/39–237/6),¹¹ and, last but certainly not least, nomadic incursions along the empire's northern frontier. The migration of a nomadic people known as the Parni (or Aparni, later called 'Parthians') from the plains of present-day Turkmenistan into Seleukid Iran was perhaps the single most important event of his reign when it comes to the *longue durée* of Seleukid history.

It has become common to describe the reign of Seleukos Kallinikos as a failure, and the standard story goes that due to the many crises under his rule the empire almost collapsed outright. As Lerner put it, 'Seleukos' utter failure...only served to speed the process of disintegration of the Eastern Seleukid realm.'¹² But to think of Seleukid history (or any empire's history, for that matter) in terms of decline-and-fall is perhaps not the most fruitful approach. The image of a steady decline obviously is at odds with the fact that the Seleukid Empire reached its greatest extent about the year 200 under Antiochos III, that is, *after* the alleged breakaway of Parthia.¹³

Seleukos II Kallinikos can be credited with laying the foundations for the survival of his family and his family's empire for another century or so, despite the severe crises cited above. The pertinent question is not why these crises took place two generations after the formation of the empire, but rather how they were overcome. After all, the dangerous Ptolemaic invasion of Mesopotamia in 246 ended with the withdrawal of Ptolemaic forces to Egypt less than a year later, while Seleukeia-in-Pieria and the Phoenician seaports that had remained in Ptolemaic hands with the peace treaty of 241 were retaken by Antiochos III in 219. The War of the Brothers

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ultimately did *not* result in the breakup of the empire.¹⁴ The Seleukid realm not only survived, but emerged from these crises stronger than before.

Empires are able to 'breathe'. They can first contract and later expand again. The personalized networks that make up imperial rule in premodern societies are for a large part based on the distribution of gifts among the military class which supports the ruler, especially of land.¹⁵ Through the distribution of land and wealth by the empire's founder among the members of his entourage to assure their loyalty, a self-supporting landed aristocracy comes into being. When expansion comes to a halt, gift distribution dwindles and the imperial centre tends increasingly to lose its grip on the polities formally united by the empire.¹⁶ This is the 'paradox of power': to accumulate and maintain power, a ruler has to delegate power to others and in the process risks the formation of an autonomous interest group which seeks to defend its own privileges, and acts on behalf of its own clientèles, against the interests of the same ruler who had empowered it in the first place.¹⁷ Imperial systems based on conquest therefore often contract or collapse in the second or third generation, when expansion ceases. If however an empire survives, it is resilience, not decline that historians most of all should account for. The Ottoman and Spanish empires are notable cases in point: both were assigned an early 'Classical Age' by 19th-century historiography and assumed to have gone into decline after c. 1600, when in fact they endured for several more centuries (!). More significantly, both empires experienced a period of revitalisation and prosperity in the 18th century. The Seleukid Empire, too, was relatively successful for it remained the principal power in central Eurasia for more than 150 years, and may even have experienced a cultural renaissance, too (in the form of 'Persianism'; see below).

The Imperial Turn of the past decades has been particularly influential, and rewarding, in Ottoman studies. As new histories of the 'post-Classical' Ottoman Empire have shown, big empires can survive, and even be revived, when power networks are reorganized and the ruling dynasty is able to ally itself with new social groups, usually in combination with renewed and lucrative warfare.¹⁸ This is what happened in the reign of Antiochos III, when the Seleukid Empire after a period of contraction and disintegration regained strength by changing its networks of power in reaction to internal and external threats.¹⁹ But the process of recovery may already have begun under Antiochos' father, Seleukos II, as we will see below.

II. Parthian secession: when precisely did it happen?

Working from the premise that there can be nothing in between direct rule by a so-called foreign power and a country's complete, formal independence,²⁰

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historians and others have for decades been at pains to establish a date for Parthian secession from the Seleukid Empire, as well as for the secession of Baktria.²¹

An important cause of this scholarly conundrum is the fact that the principal ancient account of early Parthian history, Justin Book 41, is imprecise, particularly when it comes to chronology. Evidence from cuneiform documents and coins provides some firmer ground, but not much.²² Justin's account (41.4.4–5) is complemented by a short reference to the 'secession' of Parthia in Strabo (11.9.2):

When rebellions were attempted by the countries at the other side of the Taurus, because of the fact that the kings of Syria and Media, who were in possession also of these countries, were busily engaged with others, those who had been entrusted with their government first caused the revolt of Baktriana and of all the country near it, I mean Euthydemos and his followers; and Arsakes, a Scythian with some of the Dahai, I mean the Aparnians, as they were called, nomads who lived along the Ochos, invaded Parthia and conquered it.

This passage is not very clear either. It is unlikely that the phrase 'the kings of Syria and Media' refers to Antiochos Hierax and Seleukos II respectively, as some have argued.²³ It should rather be seen as a generic reference to the Seleukid dynasty,²⁴ ruling a dual realm consisting of the Near Eastern lowlands ('Syria') and the Iranian highland, or Upper Satrapies ('Media'). Not much, however, can be made of this passage with regard to our question of chronology.

Appian (*Syr.* 65) says something similar, namely that the Parthians 'began their revolt taking advantage of the confusion in the Seleukid Empire'. He mentions this in passing after a short account of the Laodikean War (246–241), but like Strabo, he is far too vague to be of use in establishing a sound chronology. Justin (41.4.3) states that the Parthians 'first revolted' in the reign of the great-grandson of Antiochos I. This would be Seleukos III, who was king only from 226 to 223. But why would anyone start counting Seleukid reigns from Antiochos I? Perhaps Justin meant 'grandson' instead of 'great-grandson' – or more likely he meant the great-grandson of Seleukos I instead of Antiochos I. But Justin also relates that the Parthians revolted during the consulships of Lucius Manlius Vulso and Marcus Atilius Regulus, *i.e.* 256 BC, which in turn places us firmly in the reign of Antiochos II (261–246).²⁵ Seleukos II in that case is nowhere in sight – the principal reasons why D. Musti has advocated a 'high dating' of the Parthian secession to the reign of Antiochos II.²⁶ Justin, however, stresses that the king who fought against these elusive Parthians was called 'Seleukos'. Farhad Assar and M. Bagloo have therefore suggested another

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solution, namely that Justin conflated two separate campaigns: a first, unsuccessful campaign when Seleukos was in charge of the Upper Satrapies as co-ruler and his father, Antiochos II, was still the principal king; and a second, more successful endeavour after Antiochos' death when Seleukos himself was the senior king.²⁷ This makes sense. All that we can conclude with any certainty, however, is that according to Justin the Parthians revolted against the Seleukids several times, but we still do not know how often and in what stretch of time. When Antiochos III fought the Parthians in 209 this was an attempt to suppress the rebellion of a local ruler against the imperial dynasty, not a war between two sovereign states of equal status. This is the case too with the campaigns of Antiochos IV, Demetrios II, and Antiochos VII against the Parthians, which took place much later. An additional problem is that Justin, when speaking of 'the Parthians', rarely makes clear whether or not he specifically means the Parni, i.e. the (semi)nomadic 'tribe' (or war band: see below) that settled in Parthia at an uncertain date in the 3rd century BC. Sometimes he seems to mean other people living in the province of Parthia, in Khorasan, *before* the settlement of the Parni in this region.²⁸ Justin further relates that at roughly the same time a certain Theodotos in Baktria also revolted. This too is evidently a (slight) mistake for it can be established on firm numismatic grounds that the ruler of Baktria and Sogdia at that time was called Diodotos (I).

The Parni, who like the Macedonians originated at the fringes of the Ancient Near East, initially settled in the Seleukid province of Hyrkania (present-day Mazandaran and Golestan), along the lush south-eastern coastline of the Caspian Sea. Justin describes them, derogatively, in terms that are reminiscent of a war band rather than a coherent ethnic group:

They ride on horseback on all occasions; on horses they go to war, and to feasts; on horses they discharge public and private duties; on horses they go abroad, meet together, traffic, and converse... The disposition of the people is proud, quarrelsome, faithless, and insolent; for a certain roughness of behaviour they think becoming to men, and gentleness only to women. They are always restless, and ready for any commotion, at home or abroad; ...They obey their leaders, not from humility, but from fear. ...To their word or promise they have no regard, except as far as suits their interest.²⁹

In fact, the image of the Parthians as rough, unorganized nomads may in large part have derived from Roman imperial propaganda, in which the unconquered Parthian had to be constructed as an inferior, barbaric 'other'.³⁰ The fact that the Parthian Empire, like so many other Eurasian empires, was a composite system of polities, lightly controlled by a universalistic King of Kings, of course was not a Roman or Persian invention.

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Bound together by allegiance to a charismatic and successful leader, Arsakes (I), the Parni invaded the province of Parthia and killed the Seleukid governor, Andragoras, who according to Justin had also revolted. The Parni then revolted too. All of these events are enigmatic: the assertion that Andragoras revolted against the Seleukids is contradicted by his coins, on which he rather seems to present himself as a vassal of the empire, not as an independent ruler *vis-à-vis* the empire.³¹ And if he did indeed try to break away, or became too unruly for the Seleukids to maintain him as their agent, there remains the distinct possibility that the Parthians were called in by the imperial court to overthrow him.³²

It will not be necessary to repeat and review everything that has been written about (the chronology of) the various insurrections of Andragoras, Theodotos/Diodotos and Arsakes. Most important for the present argument is the observation that the confusing array of revolts and breakaways in 3rd-century Iran and Baktria as reported by Justin in Book 41 is the result of an attempt to find a single date for the beginning of the Parthian Empire in hindsight. It also merits mention in this respect that the Parthians dominated most of the Middle East in 'Trogus' and Justin's own time, and Parthian origins would have been an attractive contemporary topic of the Augustan period and later. A gradual, decades-long development from subordination to autonomy moreover would be at odds with Justin's simplistic view of history as a succession of empires. Justin gives himself away, in a sense, in Book 27. This, and not Book 41, is the part of Justin's history that is dedicated to the reign of Seleukos II, the time that the Parthians supposedly broke away and began their own imperial history. But in Book 27 the Parthians are not even mentioned. In fact, they are absent in all of Justin's epitomes of Trogus' *Historiae Philippicae* until the beginning of Parthian expansion in the 140s (in Book 36). It is only then that Justin formulates his ideas about Parthian beginnings.

Of course, Justin's epitome of Trogus has not been transmitted in its entirety. But we do have an additional source for the contents of 'Trogus' work that is independent of Justin: the so-called 'Prologues', a detailed list of the contents of the respective books of Trogus' lost universal history, collated about 300 AD.³³ The Prologues show that in Trogus' original work the Parthians are absent too until the mid-2nd century BC. The sudden 'breakaway' of the Parthians during the reign of Seleukos II is most likely a construction of Justin himself, that may be based on the official dynastic history of the Parthian court after 140; it does not occur in this way in the work of Trogus, who almost certainly dated the end of Seleukid hegemony in the Middle East and Iran more sensibly after 150, when the Parthians successively defeated Demetrios II and Antiochos VII, and conquered Media

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and Mesopotamia; these events are firmly attested in the contemporaneous cuneiform record from Babylonia.³⁴

It nevertheless seems reasonable to gather from Justin's account that a Seleukid king called Seleukos – and he must be Seleukos II – campaigned against the Parthians, who therefore must have revolted at some time in the second half of the 3rd century. But we are then confronted with a subsequent problem: who won the war? Justin's narrative is so confused that modern historians are free to choose whether Seleukos' campaign was a success or a failure. Arsakes I was either defeated but saved because Seleukos was forced to march to Asia Minor in order to deal with a graver military threat (probably his brother, Antiochos Hierax, stirring up trouble); *or* Arsakes was victorious, defeating the Seleukid army in battle and forcing Seleukos to retreat to the west. Modern historiography usually favours the Parthians, and their supposed victory over the Seleukids sometimes has been constructed as *mutatis mutandis* a 'liberation' of Iran from foreign, viz., 'western', colonial occupation.³⁵ With the aid of an ambiguous statement in Athenaios, it has even been hypothesized that Seleukos was captured by the Parthians, who released him in return for his acknowledgment of Parthian independence, and that Seleukos thereupon grew a 'Parthian' beard, and had himself depicted with this beard on his coins, to celebrate his defeat.³⁶

Most historians prefer the scenario according to which the campaign of Seleukos II (as sole king) against the Parni was a failure, culminating in the establishment of an autonomous Parthian kingdom that severed the Seleukid dynasty from Central Asia. This interpretation is supported by Justin's claim that Arsakes defeated Seleukos in battle and that 'the Parthians have ever since commemorated that day as being the start of their independence' (Just. 41.4.9–10). But the only source to actually offer a brief account of the course of this war, Strabo (11.8.8), says that Seleukos forced the Parthians to abandon Parthia and Hyrkania, driving the invaders back to the Caspian steppe. A Seleukid victory therefore is more likely, as Jan Willem Drijvers rightly pointed out.³⁷

But what if *both* accounts are true? Did the acceptance by Seleukos of Arsakes' rule really amount to the creation of an autonomous state outside the empire? Or is there a possibility that Seleukos first forced Arsakes into submission and *then* made him king?

The Parthian rulers, despite their supposed independence *vis-à-vis* the Seleukid Empire, depicted themselves on numismatic portraiture with a governor's cap combined with a diadem on their coins.³⁸ They thus presented themselves as subservient to a higher king in their own representation. Because it was Seleukos, the only imperial ruler in the

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region at that time, who acknowledged Arsakes, what we have here is an imperial overlord bestowing princely or royal status on a lesser ruler in return for acceptance of his imperial suzerainty. It amounted to what in the management idiom of the 1990s was called a ‘win-win situation’: for Seleukos it was a means of (re)integrating the rebellious Parthians back into the fabric of imperial hegemony; the Parthian ruler on the other hand could now present his rulership as legitimate because it had been officially sanctioned by the empire.

It has already been pointed out that according to the list of contents of the books of Pompeius Trogus, the so-called ‘Prologues’, the Parthians are conspicuously absent from the books devoted to Macedonian history until Book 35, which deals with the reign of Demetrios I (162–150). In Justin’s version, the Parthians are mentioned for the first time in the epitome of Book 36, which opens with Demetrios II’s campaign of 140–139 (Justin 36.1–6). The problem, as we have seen, is that Justin has inserted into Book 41 a flashback dating the establishment of the Parthian Empire some 100 years before the establishment of the Parthian Empire actually began. The Arsakids indeed went back that long as a *local* dynasty (as their coinage shows); but their *imperial* history, which is the main theme in Trogus’ universal history, did not (as their own coinage shows, too). Cuneiform sources show that the Parthians became a force to be reckoned with from the mid-2nd century with their southward expansion into Media and Babylonia. That is a hundred years after the breakdown of the Seleukid authority in Iran according to Justin. But as Justin himself makes clear, when the attacks against Media and Babylonia took place after 150, ‘the peoples of the East’ were still not used to Parthian rule as they supported the Seleukid ruler Demetrios II as a matter of course.³⁹

III. The Seleukid kingdom as empire

To make sense of all this apparent ambiguity, it is of fundamental importance to understand that the Seleukid Empire was not a unified ‘national state’ with well-defined borders and territory, but that it was a hegemonic, ‘universal’ empire.⁴⁰ The principal characteristic of the Seleukid Empire was its heterogeneous internal composition: the imperial framework comprised a dazzling variety of fully autonomous cities, semi-autonomous cities, provinces under governors, vassal kingdoms, mountain tribes, steppe tribes, temples, war bands, landed aristocracies, *et cetera*.⁴¹ Like most premodern empires, the Seleukid Empire tried to overcome internal political diversity by means of universalistic ideology, i.e. the idea that the civilized world was more or less a unity under a single ruler.⁴²

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This may seem self-evident, but modern historians have commonly conceptualized the Seleukid Empire as a modern national state *avant la lettre*. This is evident from the customary identification of the Seleukid Empire with ‘Syria’, the generalization of local practices of administration in Asia Minor or Babylonia as empire-wide state policy, or the idea that the empire had a ‘capital’, *viz.* an ‘official’ administrative centre.⁴³

Like most pre-modern military empires, the Seleukid Empire was essentially a negotiated enterprise, flexible and responsive to change. The Seleukids accessed the military resources of the Middle East and Central Asia through personal networks of alliances, friendship and kinship. Approaching Seleukid *basileia* as an organization of the imperial type enables us to understand the presence of a diversity of state forms of varying degrees of autonomy as an integral part of the empire, unified by the ideological umbrella of universal monarchy and the god-like charisma of a *qualitate qua* victorious and benevolent king.⁴⁴

IV. The Parthian monarchy and the vassalization of the Seleukid Empire

After *c.* 250 the Seleukid Empire developed into a hegemonic power loosely uniting a growing number of autonomous vassal states and minor princedoms around a more or less directly controlled imperial core consisting of the Fertile Crescent.⁴⁵ This was partly the result of efforts of the imperial dynasty to replace established (Greek and Macedonian) elites by supporting new allies; partly it was the result of changing geopolitical circumstances beyond the dynasty’s grasp, *viz.*, the rise of local (Iranian) dynasties along the imperial fringes.⁴⁶ This process began in earnest during the reign of Seleukos II, and reached its high point in the reign of his son Antiochos III, whose title *Megas*, adopted after his eastern *anabasis*, presumably referred to his status as the very big man placed above the world’s lesser kings.⁴⁷ By that time, a new Parni leader, Arsakes II (*c.* 211–191), had broken away from Seleukid hegemony. Antiochos defeated the rebellious Parni at the beginning of his *anabasis* and reduced their leader to vassal status again (Polyb. 10.27.12–31.31).

In Asia Minor (Pontos, Cappadocia) this mechanism was perhaps as old as the empire itself,⁴⁸ but it was most of all Seleukos II who laid the foundations for this policy in the Seleukid east. He did so in reaction to growing regional autonomy, a process that could not be halted but could be accommodated in the imperial system with benefits for all parties involved. It was a means to (re)integrate local rulers into the imperial superstructure and to find new allies against established elites.⁴⁹ The bonds between the imperial family and the various vassal monarchies were often

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cemented with dynastic marriages. Antiochos III in particular used dynastic marriage to bind vassals to his own family through kinship: in honour-driven societies, kinship could potentially create stronger bonds of allegiance than *philia*, the principle by which the first hellenistic kings bound powerful men to their persons.⁵⁰ Instead of financing the Seleukid war machine through the exaction of tribute, the Seleukid emperor could now hope to receive direct military aid from the lesser kings united under his suzerainty. And it worked: as late as the Parthian campaign of Demetrios II in 140 the Seleukid king could count on the rulers of Persis, Elam and even Baktria to send auxiliary troops (Just. 38.9.4).

The Fratarakā rulers in Persis are a case in point. Starting with Josef Wieschöfer's dissertation on hellenistic Persis,⁵¹ we have begun to understand that the creation of a Persid monarchy in Pārsa/Persis in c. 205 was not a sign of Seleukid weakness resulting in the breakaway of an autonomous Persid state. In fact, most of the early Fratarakā were vassal rulers under Seleukid suzerainty, as Wieschöfer showed, and both D. Engels and the present writer have placed the emergence of these rulers in the broader context of the vassalization of the Middle East in the later Seleukid Empire.⁵² These local rulers of Persis were to all accounts local monarchs of sorts, but they called themselves *fratarakā*, which means governors (or 'place-holders', 'representatives', to be more precise). Ardaxšāhr (Artaxerxes) was around the year 200 the first Fratarakā ruler with royal status. On the obverse of his coins he appears with a diadem and wearing the *kyrbasia*, the satrap's cap with chin flap – rather as the first Parthians kings did.⁵³

The more or less simultaneous development of a more or less 'national' monarchy in Persis and in Parthia, with both dynasties selectively using Iranian vocabulary in their monarchical representation, has in the past been cited in support of the claim that the Seleukids left Iran at an early date.⁵⁴ It is tempting to think that an 'Iranian Revival' took place in the 2nd century as a sign of resistance against the Seleukids. But there is no reason to assume that in the 3rd century (*i.e.*, before the presumed Iranian revival) Iranian culture had disappeared or had been suppressed; in fact, the spread of 'Greek' material culture in Iran dates mainly to the 2nd and 1st centuries BC. If there indeed was an Iranian revival of sorts among the Iranian royalty of the 2nd century – and indeed the creation of a 'Persianistic' royal style can be seen in several satellite states (Parthia, Kommagene, Pontos) – this can perhaps better be classified as a Seleukid rather than as an anti-Seleukid phenomenon.⁵⁵ Seleukid imperial culture had an Iranian component, too.⁵⁶

*The coming of the Parthians: crisis and resilience in the reign of Seleukos II***V. Later developments in Seleukid-Parthian relations**

From the middle of the 2nd century the Parthians replaced the Ptolemies as the main military adversaries of the Seleukid dynasty. It was Parthian expansion that eventually brought down the empire of the Seleukids. Not the Romans, but the Parthians eventually took over most of the Seleukid realm. So the settlement of the Parni in Khorasan may be considered the single most important event of Seleukos' remarkable reign when viewed in a longer chronological perspective. But precisely how these migrations influenced Seleukid authority on the Iranian plateau is difficult to assess. We can be sure of one thing: historical reality was far more complicated than the neat, zero-sum view that the establishment of a Parni monarchy in the province of Parthia amounted to the formal secession of an autonomous Parthian 'state' that cut the Seleukids off from Central Asia, and in turn caused the formal autonomy of Baktria and Sogdia under Graeco-Baktrian rulers. This view, as we have seen, is flawed in several respects. First, it is teleological because it uncritically follows Justin in projecting the emergence of the Parthian Empire in the mid-2nd century back to the 3rd century, foregrounding Parni migrations; the really important historical question – how can we explain the emergence of a Parthian Empire in Iran under Mithradates I the Great (c. 171–138)? – is rarely asked in modern scholarship because of the perceived idea that a Parthian Empire had already come into existence under Arsakes I (c. 238–217?).⁵⁷ Second, it is modernistic because it thinks of both the early Parthian polity and the Seleukid Empire as modern, European-style territorial states. And third, it ignores all evidence attesting the ongoing Seleukid presence in the Upper Satrapies until 140.

In this chapter, I have proposed a different understanding of the settlement of the Parni/Parthians, working from the broader geopolitical perspective of the development of vassal kingdoms. The reign of Seleukos II was not the reign in which the dynasty proved unable to prevent the secession of autonomous regions but the reign in which the dynasty tried to deal with increasing regional autonomy. As I have suggested, the problem of insubordinate local governors was caused by what might be termed the 'paradox of power', aggravated by military setbacks during the reigns of Antiochos I and Antiochos II. The acceptance of local autonomy in the reign of Seleukos II may simply be a *solution* to the problem of growing local autonomy, replacing unruly Macedonian officialdom with Iranian royalty – a solution that for a long time proved to be quite successful, as Antiochos III's remarkable reign shows, and should be understood as historical change, viz., as a re-organization of the empire, rather than as 'decline' – a term that

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like its twin, ‘decadence’, has a-historical romantic and orientalist connotations.

When the first Parthian kings started to strike coins on which they appeared with Iranian insignia, this was not yet a sign of secession. The ‘Persianism’ of the early Arsakids (i.e. the development of an ostensibly ‘Iranian’, dynastic identity) can be explained as a Seleukid phenomenon, a development that took place all over the empire in the context of imperial policy.⁵⁸ The headdresses that the first Parthian rulers wear on their own coins, are *governor’s* insignia. On his coinage, Arsakes I did not even use royal titulature, let alone imperial vocabulary by which he would have claimed status equal to the Seleukid king and his dynasty. Instead, Arsakes I used quasi-monarchical titles with the connotation of local ruler or military leader: *autokratōr* and *karanā*, as well as his own name, Aršak.⁵⁹ Does this make the Parthians any less autonomous in actual practice? Perhaps not, but the fact that Arsakes I, according to his own representation, was a ruler of secondary or even tertiary status within a larger imperial world order definitely defies modern attempts to find a precise, clear-cut date for an irreversible Parthian breakaway from the empire. This was a gradual process and it was probably no earlier than 139 or 138 that the Parthian king Mithradates I finally assumed imperial pretensions by adopting the Greek title of *basileus megas*, Great King, on his coins, thereby openly defying Seleukid suzerainty. The use of the title Great King, and later King of Kings, put the Arsakid kings on a par with the Seleukid kings, whether the latter liked that or not. At the time, the assumption of the title of Great King by the Parthian king certainly was not an attempt to refer back to the Achaemenids. It referred to the Seleukids, albeit in a negative way. The use of imperial titulature was a claim to have succeeded the Seleukids as the overlords of the civilized world by right of victory.⁶⁰

VI. Conclusion

The reason why it is so difficult to find a precise date for the secession of the Parthian kingdom from the Seleukid Empire in the 3rd century is simply that the Parthian kingdom did not secede from the Seleukid Empire in the 3rd century. It was not until the 140s that the Parthians conquered the Seleukid core provinces of Media and Babylonia (though not Syria) and thereby terminated the existence of the Seleukid Empire as a great power. Before that time, Parthians may have been the most uncontrollable vassals the Seleukids ever had, but they were vassals nonetheless. The real breakaway of ‘Parthia’ must be placed after the death of Antiochos III, whose prestige had suffered badly from his defeat at the Battle at Magnesia, or perhaps even later – after the death of Antiochos IV in 164.

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Between the death of Antiochos III in 187 and the Seleukid-Parthian wars of the 140s and 130s, the Seleukids gradually lost control of the Iranian plateau (though they remained in control of Western Iran until 140); but they retained even during that period strong claims to be imperial suzerains in Iran and Central Asia.⁶¹ Even if we accept the assumption that Arsakid rulers were aiming to control the Iranian plateau in the first half of the 2nd century, this still does not exclude the parallel existence of rival claims to (and local support for) empire from the side of the Seleukids. As late as 148, only a year or so before the Parthians overran Media, a Seleukid governor in Ekbatana, who was charged with the overlordship of the 'Upper Satrapies' – meaning not just Media (which this governor effectively controlled) but nominally the entire land mass east of the Zagros Mountains, including Baktria and Sogdia, has been attested in a contemporaneous document.⁶² Seleukid and pro-Seleukid imperial networks east of the Zagros Range were still operational at that time. Indeed, as late as 140, the ruler of Baktria contributed troops for a major Seleukid campaign, as we have seen above. The southern lines of communication connecting Central Asia to the central parts of the Seleukid Empire at that time apparently were not yet controlled by the Parthians, nor was the sea route that linked the Persian Gulf via the Indus Valley to Baktria. Indeed, the last attempt of the Seleukids to recover the Upper Satrapies took place as late as 130/29, and ended when Antiochos VII Sidetes was slain in battle in the winter of that same year.

The idea that the Parthians seceded from the empire under Arsakes I, and Justin's claim that the Parthians venerated this event 'with great solemnity, as the date of the commencement of their liberty', is contradicted by Arsakid coinage before the conquest of Media in 141. The Parthian kings only claimed to have succeeded the Seleukids as Great Kings when Mithradates I acquired that title on the same grounds as Alexander the Great had previously obtained this status: by right of victory, after having defeated its previous holder, Demetrios II, in battle. Mithradates may have assumed the title of Great King when he took Demetrios II captive in 139. It was only about 100 BC when the Parthian monarchy introduced its own imperial time reckoning on royal coinage: the Parthian Era, which retrospectively dated the foundation of the empire to the reign of Arsakes I; before this, the Seleukid Era continued to be used.⁶³ It is hard not to see this backdating as a form of invention of tradition.

It has not been my intention to advocate a strong view of the Seleukid Empire. The early Roman emperors, who inherited the Seleukid system of vassal states (called 'client kingdoms' by historians studying the Roman

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Near East), were able to appoint and dismiss sub-kings from a distance, from Rome. This chapter aimed to foreground Seleukid *resilience* until the mid-2nd century, as an alternative to the teleological paradigm of decline. By changing its internal power structures, the Seleukid Empire under Seleukos II, Antiochos III, and Antiochos IV was able to overcome the severe crises that confronted the dynasty. Although the Seleukid dynasty ultimately failed to continue its domination of the Middle East, Iran and Central Asia after 150, this failure had causes other than growing internal political diversity. Indeed, the political organization of the Middle East as in part a complex system of autonomous vassal kingdoms unified by the charisma of a ‘Great King’ and a vigorous universalistic ideology persisted in both the Roman and the Parthian empires – and this is one of the enduring contributions of the Seleukids to the development of both Roman rule and Iranian monarchy.

Notes

¹ All dates hereafter are BC unless otherwise indicated. By ‘Parthia’ I mean the satrapy in the north of Iran, part of the greater region of Khorasan (Parthava, Parthyene). The modernistic use of ‘Parthia’ as a synonym for the Arsakid Empire falsely gives the impression that the empire was a single unified state or nation. For the location of the satrapy see Sherwin-White and Kuhrt 1993, 84–5. The most apt modern name for the empire is ‘Arsakid’, for it was a dynastic project. On the actual organisation of the Arsakid Empire as a multiform conglomerate of polities and peoples (not unlike the Seleukid Empire) see Fowler 2010, cf. Keall 1994. Because of their association with this satrapy, the Parni already in Antiquity were known as ‘Parthians’. The nature of Parni ethnicity is still badly understood, as is their relationship with the dynasty; the Arsakids probably relate to ‘Parthians’ more or less like the Achaemenids related to ‘Persians’ or the Seleukids to ‘Macedonians’, *i.e.* as a ‘conquest clan’ originally associated with a specific territory or ethnos that under the empire developed into a more open aristocracy or military people deriving its identity primarily from its association with the dynasty. On the Parni/Parthians as a people (perhaps originally a nomadic war band) see further below.

² Wolski 1993, 51; Wolski 1947, 13–70, esp. 32–7; Wolski 1956–57, 35–52; Koshelenko and Pilipko 1994, 131–50, esp. 131–2; Lerner 1999. A contrary view had already been expressed by Frye 1963, 173.

³ Just. 41.4.4–5; translation Yardley 1994, 255–6. A second important source for the Parthian revolt is Strabo 11.9.2, cited below.

⁴ van Wickevoort Crommelin 1998, 259–77, esp. 261–3.

⁵ Sherwin-White and Kuhrt 1993, 84–90.

⁶ Lerner 2004; on the integration of Baktria into the Indian Ocean trade system of the late hellenistic period see Mairs 2012.

⁷ Assar 2003; also see below.

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⁸ Just. 41.4.10: quem diem Parthi exinde sollemnem velut initium libertatis observant.

⁹ See e.g. Wolski 1969, 275–80: ‘Parthien [gehörte] zur Zeit der Invasion Arsakes nicht zur syrischen Monarchie, sondern [bildete] einen unabhängigen Staat, der während des 3. syrischen Krieges (245) und als Folge des Aufstandes des Satrapen Andragoras entstanden war’ [‘Parthia at the time of Arsakes’ invasion did not belong to the Syrian monarchy but was an independent state, that had come into existence during the Third Syrian War in 245, as a result of the rebellion of the satrap Andragoras’] (p. 279).

¹⁰ In fact, Seleukos died in 226 or 225 after a fall from his horse (Just. 27.3.12). For a general overview of this king’s reign see my entry on ‘Seleukos II Callinicus’ in the *Encyclopaedia Iranica* online (2015 [2008])

¹¹ Alternative dates (241–238 BC) have been proposed by Assar and Bagloo 2006, 25–35.

¹² Lerner 1999, 37.

¹³ The image that the Seleukid Empire, like Alexander’s empire, was too big and too weak from the start, and therefore doomed to disintegrate, pervades conventional historiography of the 20th century; for some influential expressions see e.g. Will 1979, 281–90; Musti 1984, 210–20; Green 1990, 555. Bevan 1902b sees the empire as potentially strong but ascribes decline to the Seleukids’ increasing tendency to become ‘oriental despots’.

¹⁴ Dynastic infighting is often considered a fundamental weakness of the Seleukid Empire, but as Wright 2011, 41–6, reminded us, the War of the Brothers was in fact a singular occurrence in Seleukid history: with the exception of a brief incident between Philip I and Demetrios III, it is the only known instance of a military conflict between two brothers; dynastic wars between rival branches of the imperial family, much farther removed from each other, began only after the death of Antiochos IV in 164 BC.

¹⁵ Sinopoli 1994, 167. For the post-conquest distribution of land and booty to military leaders in the hellenistic empires see Roussel 1934, 40 and 46; Feyel 1935; Pouilloux 1960, 27–32; Orth 1977, 170; Wörrle 1978, 207; Hatzopoulos 1988 and 1999. On land ownership and land distribution in the Seleukid Empire in general consult van der Spek 1986; Mileta 2008. See now also D’Agostini 2013.

¹⁶ Cf. Sinopoli 1994, 168: ‘When geographic expansion ends, the costs of maintaining empires soon exceed their material benefits. This may lead to a range of outcomes, including sacrifice of some territories in order to maintain a strongly ruled central core, emergence of new forms of organization, or political collapse.’ On the paradox of power in the hellenistic empires see Strootman 2017a.

¹⁷ The concept was successfully employed by Duindam 1995 to criticize Norbert Elias’ view of the royal court as an instrument to pacify the nobility; though writing specifically about France in the age of Absolutism, Duindam notes that ‘it appears to be a universal principle that handing out favours is temporarily effective as an instrument of power, but eventually burdens the dispenser with newly-established interest-groups’ (p. 50). An interesting multipolar geopolitical dimension may be added through the use made of this term by De Vries 2007, 467–72; in understanding the cultural history of local settlements in what used to

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be called Rome's imperial 'periphery', De Vries envisages 'a two- (multi)directional flow of influences, not so much between center (Rome) and periphery (frontier), but between two centers' (p. 468). According to Max Weber, as summarized by Bendix 1960, 347–351 (and I owe this reference to Arch Getty): 'When these office-holders become local dignitaries who constitute themselves as a status group of notables, they may be able to prevail over the ruler and his personal dependents. ... The decline of central authority is also furthered by the officials' physical distance from the center of authority. ... Patrimonial rulers, however, do not accept such fragmentation of their authority without resistance'.

¹⁸ See e.g. Aksan 2007; Barkey 2008; Murphey 2008.

¹⁹ Strootman 2011a, 63–89. Antiochos III, more than any of his predecessors, created vassal kingdoms along the northern and eastern fringes of the empire, often ruled by local, Iranian dynasties. By aligning his house with Iranian aristocratic families, Antiochos was able to break the power of the established Macedonian imperial elite. Also see Engels 2011 and 2014; Strootman 2012 and 2015.

²⁰ See most recently Grajetzki 2011, 10; cf. Will 1979, 281–90; Walbank 1981, 123.

²¹ Baktria, too, remained far more incorporated into Seleukid imperial networks than conventional scholarship assumes, as is argued by Wenghofer in this volume (also see Dumke 2014; Wenghofer and Houle 2016; Strootman 2017b); cf. McAuley, this volume, on Asia Minor.

²² The cuneiform evidence is discussed by Assar and Bagloo 2006.

²³ E.g. Musti 1984, 175–220, esp. 219–220.

²⁴ Brodersen 1986, 378–81, esp. 380.

²⁵ For the possibility that Seleukos II conducted two campaigns, the first when he was still co-ruler next to his father, Antiochos II, see below. The year 259 in the western Mediterranean saw Regulus' invasion of Africa, cf. van Wickevoort Crommelin 1998, 263, arguing that Trogus for dramatic effect attempted to synchronize the establishment of the Parthian Empire and the beginning of Roman overseas expansion in the First Punic War.

²⁶ Musti 1984, 219–220; against this view, and in favour of a 'low dating' for the War of the Brothers, see Brodersen 1986.

²⁷ Assar and Bagloo 2006.

²⁸ E.g. Just. 11.15.2; 12.4.12; 13.4.23. For the satrapy, and its importance for the Parni, see above, n. 1.

²⁹ Justin 41.3.1–9, transl. Watson. Arsakes is described in a similar vein as a war leader of the charismatic type rather: '[he was] a man of uncertain origin, but of undisputed bravery, who happened to arise at this time; he was accustomed to live by plunder and depredations' (41.4.6–7). This view is also held by M. Eiland, 'Parthians in Nineveh: Identifying a nomadic administration' (2003), available online at www.parthia.com (last accessed 17-07-2016). Though the Parni originally may have emerged among the conglomerate of Central Asian people called Dāha on the Daivā inscription of Xerxes at Persepolis (*XPb* 3, Schmitt 2000, 88–95; cf. Bivar 1983, 27), and spoke an Iranian language 'midway between Median and Scythian' (Just. 41.1), Eiland rightly cautions that it would be a mistake to assume that all Parthians were Iranian nomads from Turkmenistan, and that they

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remained ethnically ‘pure’, as conventional scholarship often maintains, claiming instead that ‘the Parthians were probably a mixture of ethnic groups that shared common cultural features’, comparable to e.g. the Cossacks of early modern history. Eiland also draws attention to the fact that a distinctive costume for Parthian women is absent from Parthian material culture: all female figures in the (Mesopotamian) archaeological record of the Parthian period wear generic hellenistic-style ‘urban’ clothing, in contrast to the abundantly attested style of costume of the typical Parthian male warrior – an indication too that the original Parni were a flexible group of mounted warriors who took local wives in the areas where they settled (cf. the considerable discrepancy between men and women in the Justin passage cited here).

³⁰ Hauser 2005; the image later was adopted and adapted by the first Sasanian kings in order to frame Arsakid misrule as fundamentally different from their own civilized and well-ordered empire. On the in fact strong degree of continuity from Arsakid to Sasanian rule see now Alram, Curtis, Daryaei, Pendleton 2016. On the Roman image of the Parthians see Lerouge-Cohen 2007 and Schneider 1998, cf. *id.* 2007.

³¹ E.g. Mitchiner 1973, type 19, 1, a rare gold stater attributed to ‘Andragoras’ (not ‘*King* Andragoras’) on the reverse but showing the diademed head of a bearded man on the obverse; other coinage presumably struck by Andragoras carries Aramaic legends, which is indicative of a local king rather than a contender challenging the Seleukid emperor; on this coinage see Wolski 1969.

³² See also Wenghofer, this volume.

³³ On these so-called ‘Prologues’ see van Wickevoort Crommelin 1998, 259–60, with further literature.

³⁴ The best study of these sources is now Shayegan 2011; cf. the papers collected in the landmark volume Wiesehöfer 1998.

³⁵ On these trends in recent historiography see Strootman MS, a 2012 discussion paper, available as downloadable pdf on my homepage at www.academia.edu.

³⁶ E.g. Lerner 1999, 35–6; on Seleukos II’s bearded coin portraits see Lorber and Iossif 2009, who convincingly identify a campaign-beard, ‘an outward token of a vow to a god or gods to ensure the success of a particular military campaign’; cf. Wright 2013, adducing new evidence and additional arguments in support of the interpretation that Seleukos’ beard ‘was seemingly the visible expression of a vow to defeat the Parthians, not an advertisement of his defeat and humiliation’ (p. 22).

³⁷ Drijvers 1998, 278–92.

³⁸ See Engels, this volume.

³⁹ Just. 36.3: ‘the peoples of the East..., after growing used to the old empire of the Macedonians, they found [Parthian rule] difficult to bear’.

⁴⁰ In recent approaches to premodern empire, the key words in definitions of ‘empire’ are *networks*, *diversity*, and *change*. Thus, Barkey 2008, 9, defines empire as ‘a large composite and differentiated polity linked to a central power by a variety of direct and indirect relations. ... These relations are, however, regularly subject to negotiations over the degree of autonomy of intermediaries in return for military and fiscal compliance’. Similar approaches can be found in e.g. D’Altroy 2001, 125–7: ‘The outstanding feature of preindustrial empires was the continually

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metamorphosing nature of relations between the central powers and the societies drawn under the imperial aegis' (p. 125) and Härmäläinen 2008, 441: 'intersecting, often shifting networks of power [rather] than rigidly structural polities.' Diversity is stressed by *inter alia* Sinopoli 1994, 159–80: 'geographically and politically expansive polities, composed of a diversity of localized communities and ethnic groups' (p. 159), and Howe 2002, 15: 'Empires must by definition be big, and they must be composite entities. ... Diversity – ethnic, national, cultural, often religious – is their essence'. Bang and Bayly 2011, 12, emphasize political diversity too: 'premodern empires normally had miniscule provincial administrations, and power was often segmented and loosely organized'; Dominic Lieven more succinctly said that, 'the relationship between an Achaemenid emperor and his regional satraps in many ways has more in common with George W. Bush's relations with the King of Saudi Arabia than with an American state governor' (D. Lieven, 'Empire's place in international relations', at www.lse.ac.uk/collections/european_institute/articles; last accessed 01-03-2008). The Seleukids had a similar relationship with the kingdoms of Bithynia and Baktria: they did not 'rule' these but could call upon them to send troops for the king's army.

⁴¹ For a comprehensive overview consult Capdetrey 2007; also see Sherwin-White and Kuhrt 1993; Engels 2014a.

⁴² See Bang 2011, 171–192, arguing that because premodern agrarian empires claimed unity but were never in a position to really homogenize their realms, they accentuated the paradox, emphasizing universality to make sense of diversity; cf. Bang and Kołodziejczyk 2012. On universalistic ideology in the hellenistic empires see Strootman 2007, 352–7; 2011a; 2014b, and esp. 2010, discussing the use of universalistic royal titles as a means to create ideological coherence in the Seleukid world of vassal kings and satellite states, and the endurance of the Seleukid make-up of the Near East under Roman rule (the so-called 'client kingdoms'). On hellenistic imperial universality also see Bang 2012; specifically on the use of the universalistic imperial title Great King by the Seleukids see Engels 2014b, 336–41 and Strootman in press.

⁴³ Cf. Mann 1986, 10: 'The unitary, highly centralized imperial societies of writers like Wittfogel or Eisenstadt...is mythical'. There is indeed no evidence that the Seleukid Empire was ever administered from anywhere other than the (itinerant) court – or one of several courts, as the heir and co-ruler who was sometimes appointed to rule the Upper Satrapies had a second court around him (and presumably a second field army, at least in the 3rd century), as well as sometimes the king's first wife, as in the case of Seleukos I and Apama, and Antiochos III and Laodike.

⁴⁴ Unlike other historians, ancient historians sometimes distinguish 'empire' from 'hegemony', but with the exception perhaps of the Roman Empire, such a distinction obscures rather than clarifies the multifarious forms of imperial rule in the ancient world. Thus Braunert 1964, 80–104, distinguished between *Imperialismus* and *Hegemonie*, where the latter term is understood as the supremacy of one state over another, and projected the model of modern European colonialism on the 3rd-century Ptolemaic Empire by conceptualizing Egypt as a nation state of sorts and the other parts of the empire as its 'overseas possessions', where raw materials

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were obtained for the colonial ‘motherland’; there is however no evidence that the Ptolemies invested the income (if any) they derived from their empire specifically in Egypt – quite the contrary: they rather seemed to have used the riches of the Nile Valley and the Fayum to finance their maritime power. Braunert in the early 1960s had very little literature about empire at his disposal, but he does cite Rostovtzeff 1956, I, 54, who already understood that imperialism in the ancient world was not only the pursuit of territorial expansion but also the search for political hegemony and the wish to play a leading role in the political life of the civilised world in general (p. 80–1). But still Vogelsang 1992, 304–15, while convincingly evaluating the nature of Achaemenid imperialism in Central Asia as ‘recognition by local rulers of the overlordship of the... Achaemenid sovereign, with personal ties established by marriage or other connections, cemented by gifts’, maintains that this is ‘hegemony’ *in opposition to* ‘empire’, where the latter apparently is understood as direct, state-like control. Mueller 2006, 42, unfortunately does the same by disputing the validity of the word ‘empire’ for the Ptolemaic thalassocracy of the 3rd century in favour of ‘Ptolemaic sphere of influence’. Both Vogelsang’s and Mueller’s are important, path-breaking studies; my point is, that if contemporaneous sources tell us that ancient imperialism is something quite different from preconceived, modernistic definitions, this compels us to reconsider the definition, not the evidence. To be sure, virtually all modern studies of Eurasian empires after Antiquity describe and define empire in terms of diversity, including multifarious forms of indirect rule, hegemonial control and even alliances (see n. 40, above).

⁴⁵ This process has been most extensively described by Engels 2011, 19–36, and 2014. For the Seleukid Empire as a system of (non-Greek) vassal states see also Capdetrey 2007, 112–33, and Strootman 2010, 139–58.

⁴⁶ Strootman 2011a.

⁴⁷ So already Bevan 1902a, 241–44, followed by Spranger 1958, 22–58, esp. 29–33. For the chronology of Antiochos III’s use of imperial titulature see Ma 1999, 271–6.

⁴⁸ See McAuley and D’Agostini in this volume.

⁴⁹ See now Strootman 2017b, with further literature and references to the sources; the new view of the later Seleukid Empire as a system of vassal states to my best knowledge goes back to Strootman 2010 and 2011a, and Engels 2011; for a different view of Seleukid ‘indirect’ rule see Capdetrey 2010.

⁵⁰ No marriage alliance was created between the Seleukids and the Arsakids, until a century later the Parthian kings in their turn became the imperial overlords, and Rhodogune, daughter of the Great King Mithradates I, was given in marriage to the defeated and captured Seleukid king Demetrios II, reversing the hierarchy. On *philia* and imperial integration in the hellenistic world see Strootman 2014a with further literature.

⁵¹ Wiesehöfer 1994; cf. Wiesehöfer 2011, 107–22.

⁵² Engels 2013; Strootman 2016.

⁵³ But see Engels 2013, arguing that this diadem ‘also may allude to the Achaemenid custom of singling out the king’s *syngeneis* by conceding to them the right of wearing a diadem, which would imply that the Frataraka wanted to claim

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a status as former Achaemenid and probably also current Seleukid courtiers in order to legitimate their power?.

⁵⁴ See above, note 1.

⁵⁵ On the methodological difficulties entailed by the idea of a ‘Persian Revival’ as an anti-Seleukid phenomenon (in which ‘Seleukid’ is equated with ‘Greek’) see Strootman 2011b; on ‘Persianism’ as a form of cultural memory in the later hellenistic period and beyond see Strootman 2017b.

⁵⁶ On the Seleukids and Iran see now Plischke 2014.

⁵⁷ In fact, we do not even know the *approximate* dates of this king, who is to the Parthian Empire what Cyrus the Great is to the Persian Empire or Seleukos Nikator to the Seleukid; see Assar 2005, proposing a radically revised chronology (165/4–132 BC).

⁵⁸ Canepa 2014 and 2016; Strootman 2016.

⁵⁹ For the titles featuring on Arsakes’ coinage see Olbrycht 2011; also see Shayegan 2016.

⁶⁰ Strootman 2013; Strootman in press. On Arsakid imperial titulature see above all Shayegan 2011. On the campaigns and conquests of Mithradates see Dąbrowa 2006; Olbrycht 2010.

⁶¹ Compare Jos., *AJ* 13.185, stating that in 140 BC it was Demetrios II’s final aim to reconquer all the Upper Satrapies, and that ‘Greeks and Macedonians living in this region were in fact continually sending envoys to him, promising to go over to him, if he would come to them, and to join him in making war on Arsakes, the king of the Parthians.’

⁶² Robert 1963, 76; cf. Luschey 1996, 59–60. In Diodoros’ account of the Macedonian empire in 318 BC, the Upper Satrapies consisted of seven satrapies, *viz* Persis, Karmania, Arachosia, Paropanisos, Drangiana, Baktria (with Sogdia), and India (Diod. 19.14.1–8); Diod. 18.39.5–7 (on the Triparadeisos arrangement) also includes Media, Parthia (with Hyrkania), and Areia (combined with Karmania), cf. Just. 13.4.9–25.

⁶³ Frye 1963, 175. The beginning of the Parthian (or Arsakid) Era is 1 Mihr = 1 Nisānu (14/15 April) 247 BC (Assar 2003; cf. Bickerman 1943–44; Korn 2006).