Coin of Antiochus III (British Museum)

The Young Antiochus III:

Leader or Figurehead ?

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Antiochus III (c.242-187)

Reigned for 35 years, from 223/222 until his death

The Early Years

'Polybius' narrative of the early reign of Antiochos III gives a good glimpse of the Seleukid monarchy in action over a period of several years, from 223 till 217. The material is clearly derived from a well-informed source which remains characteristically anonymous' (Austin, 2003, p.125).

- The young king's problems
- How they were dealt with, and by whom
- The true nature of the king's involvement

The Young Antiochus III: Leader or Figurehead?

His background

'For Philip, son of Demetrius, being still quite a boy, had inherited the throne of Macedonia, […] Antiochus surnamed "The Great" who was still very young had but a short time previously, on the death of his brother Seleucus, succeeded him in Syria' (Polybius 4. 2'5).

'Antiochus was the younger son of Seleucus Callinicus, and on the death of his father and the succession to the throne of his elder brother Seleucus, he at first resided in the interior, but when Seleucus crossed the Taurus with his army and was assassinated, as I have already stated, he succeeded him and began to reign' (Polybius 5. 40'6).

'In Macedonia, Philippus, on the death of Antigonus his guardian, who was also his father-in-law, assumed the government at the age of fourteen. In Asia, after Seleucus was killed, Antiochus, though still in his minority, was made king' (Justin 29.1).

'Seleucus had a brother called Antiochus. After reigning for three years, Seleucus was treacherously attacked and killed in Phrygia by a Galatian called Nicanor, in about the first year of the 139th Olympiad. He was succeeded by his brother Antiochus, whom the army recalled from Babylon' (Eusebius 1).

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BCHP 12 Seleucus III Chronicle (BM 35421), Obverse (British Museum)

'The king's brother named Ly[sias?] is in the city overseeing a judicial case' (Seleucid III Chronicle, reverse)

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His problems

'He began to reign [by] entrusting the government of Asia on this side of Taurus to Achaeus, and that of the upper provinces to Molon and his brother Alexander, Molon being satrap of Media and Alexander of Persia' (Polybius 5.40'7).

'These brothers, despising the king on account of his youth, and hoping that Achaeus would associate himself with them in their design, dreading at the same time the cruelty and malice of Hermeias, who was now at the head of the government, entered on a revolt' (Polybius 5.41'1).

- Molon and his brother would like to get rid of Antiochus.
- They think that Achaeus might be willing to help them.
- Hermeias is the real person in charge.

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Hermeias

'This Hermeias was a Carian who had been in power ever since Seleucus, Antiochus' brother, on leaving for his expedition against Attalus had entrusted him with the government. Having attained this position of authority he was jealous of all the holders of prominent posts at court, and as he was naturally of a savage disposition, he inflicted punishment on some for errors which he magnified into crimes, and trumping up false charges against others, showed himself a cruel and relentless judge' (Polybius 5.41'2-3).

'The doctors having ordered early walks in the cool of the morning for the king, Hermeias came at the appointed hour accompanied by those of the king's friends who were privy to the plot, the rest being behindhand as the king took the air at a far earlier hour than usual. So they drew Hermeias away from the camp till they reached a solitary spot and then upon the king's retiring for a short distance as if for some necessary occasion, they stabbed Hermeias with their poniards (Polybius 5.56'10-13).

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The King's Advisors

' Finally the king spoke, if indeed we are to suppose that the opinion he delivered was his own; for it is scarcely probable that a boy of seventeen should be able to decide about such grave matters.

It is, however, the duty of us writers to attribute to the supreme ruler the expression of opinion which prevailed at his council, while it is open for the reader to suspect that such decisions and the arguments on which they rest are due to his associates and especially to those closest to his person' (Polybius 4.24'1-2).

'Accordingly, collecting his forces at Apamea in early spring, he summoned a council of his friends to advise as to the invasion of Coele-Syria' (Polybius 5.58'2).

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Molon

The brothers Molon and Alexandros, who had been appointed by the former king, rebelled against his successor' (Strootman, 2011. p.72).

'to fight against rebels was the business of generals but that against kings the king himself should plan the operations and command in the decisive battles' (Polybius 5.45'6)

'The council decided that the king should take the field against Molon and make the matter his sole concern.' (Polybius 5.49'1-6).

'When the armies now advanced against each other, [...] the left wing, as soon as they closed and came in sight of the king, went over to the enemy, upon which Molon's whole force lost heart, while the confidence of the king's army was redoubled. Molon, aware of what had happened and already surrounded on every side, haunted by the tortures he would suffer if he were taken alive, put an end to his life' (Polybius 5.54'1-3).

Zeuxis […] was afraid of the consequences if he stated his own view, but nevertheless, as Hermeias was obviously wrong, he plucked up courage to advise crossing the Tigris' (Polybius 5.51'5).

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Achaeus

'Achaeus, as his kinsman, at once avenged his murder by putting Nicanor and Apaturius to death, and taking the command of the army and the direction of affairs in his hands, conducted both with prudence and magnanimity. For though the opportunity was favourable and he was eagerly urged by the troops to assume the diadem, he decided not to do so, and holding the throne for the younger brother Antiochus, advanced energetically and recovered the whole of the country on this side of Taurus' (Polybius 4.48'9).

'But when he met with a success that surpassed his expectations, […] and made himself master of all the rest of the country he was so elated by his good fortune that in a very short space of time he swerved clean away from rectitude, and having assumed the diadem and styled himself king he was at this moment the most imposing and formidable of all the kings and potentates on this side of the Taurus' (Polybius 4.48'10).

'He continued to advance and was nearly in Lycaonia when his troops mutinied, the cause of their dissatisfaction being that, as it now appeared, the expected was against their original and natural king. Achaeus, therefore, when he was aware of the disaffection, abandoned his present enterprise' (Polybius 5,57'7).

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Conclusion

Male head wearing head-band resembling Antiochus III (Louvre)

- Antiochus was being manipulated by Hermeias.
- He was being used as a figurehead by his advisors.
- This remained the case even when he defeated Molon
- After appointing his own advisors he was not in full control.
- But against Achaeus he was able control events, even when absent.
- To Achaeus' troops he was their rightful leader.

'the significance of the troops' strike is wider, for once Antiochos III realized what had happened, he understood that his political and strategic options were suddenly much wider and clearer than before. He could choose his moment for eliminating Achaeus, whereas Achaeus was unable to attack him' (Grainger, 2010, p.193).

<u>Point for Discussion</u>

Could this be the point at which Antiochus gained the confidence to become a true leader, rather than just a figurehead?

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