

COINS FROM ASIA MINOR AND THE EAST

Selections from the
Colin E. Pitchfork Collection

2011

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Coins from Asia Minor and the East: selections from the Colin E. Pitchfork collection
by Nicholas L. Wright

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Contents Page

Preface and acknowledgements	6
Foreword	7
Understanding the earliest coinages <i>Gil Davis</i>	11
The island of Hippokrates, silver coins and a portrait myth <i>Håkon Ingvaldsen</i>	17
The heroic image and the portrait coinages of Lykian dynasts <i>Kenneth A. Sheedy</i>	23
The dating on coins: a Phoenician invention <i>Josette Elayi</i>	31
The problem of the autonomous wreathed coinage of Asia Minor <i>Lauren Horne</i>	35
The iconography of succession under the late Seleukids <i>Nicholas L. Wright</i>	41
The emergence of the Greco-Baktrian and Indo-Greek kingdoms <i>Osmund Bopearachchi</i>	47
Selections from the Colin E. Pitchfork collection <i>Nicholas L. Wright</i>	51
Cities and dynasts of Asia Minor	53
Pergamon and the autonomous wreathed tetradrachms of Asia Minor	77
Cities and dynasts of Southern Anatolia	87
Phoenicia	101
Imitative Attic issues of Palestine and Babylonia	115
Seleukid kings	119
Parthian kings	161
Greco-Baktrian kings	167
Abbreviations	180
Bibliography	181

The iconography of succession under the late Seleukids

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The Seleukid dynasty was one of the more complex and convoluted houses to rise from the ashes of Alexander the Great's world empire.¹ Past studies of Seleukid dynastic politics have focused either on the early period of the dynasty which saw the empire at its height, or else on the politics of the bitter internecine quarrels which brought the kingdom to its ultimate demise.² This approach has largely been forced upon modern scholars by the limited and biased nature of the literary evidence available: Appian's overview of the dynasty focusing on the second century BC defeat by Rome, scattered passages in Polybius, Diodorus, Justin, Josephus, Eusebius, Athenaeus and the books of the Maccabees. By and large, the scant archaeological evidence provides little insight into intra-dynastic policy, although epigraphic and numismatic data can be used to provide limited supplementary evidence. It is the intention of this paper to approach the subject of legitimacy and succession among the Seleukidai from a somewhat different angle. After providing a brief history of the dynasty's internal disputes, I hope to highlight one of the mechanisms employed to maintain the functional integrity of the ruling house: the use of coinage to display familial continuity.

When Alexander the Great died in 323 BC, he left no competent heir and his sprawling empire soon collapsed into competing *Diadochic* (successor) states. One of these successors, Seleukos I Nikator, consolidated western and central Asia into the largest of the new Hellenistic kingdoms. The dynasty founded by Seleukos continued to rule parts of Asia for almost two hundred and fifty years until the last of its kings were deposed by the Roman general Gnaeus Pompey in 64 BC. Throughout the early phase of their history (until 175 BC), the Seleukid ruling house showed remarkable stability. Rule of so vast a territory called for the delegation of royal authority and, almost from its inception, the Seleukid empire functioned smoothly as a *diarchy*.³ The king held supreme power but was collegially assisted by his eldest son who was associated with his father in power and considered the undisputed successor upon the king's death. There are several good examples of this process: Seleukos I with Antiochos I;⁴ Antiochos I with his son Seleukos and later with Antiochos II.⁵ The collegial relationship fell apart when power was shared between the brothers Seleukos II and Antiochos Hierax⁶ but resumed its co-operative course under the former's son Antiochos III with Antiochos 'the Son' and later with Seleukos IV.⁷

However, external forces conspired to dismember the program of *diarchic* partnerships. In 188 BC, Antiochos III the Great was compelled to sign the Peace of Apameia which stipulated that one of the king's sons be sent to Rome as a hostage. Antiochos III retained his eldest surviving son and designated successor, the future Seleukos IV and dispatched his next eldest son (the future Antiochos IV Epiphanes) to Rome.⁸ After Seleukos IV's succession, the new king sent his own son Demetrios to Rome in accordance with the Peace. His brother Antiochos was released from captivity and took up residence in Athens. Seleukos IV died unexpectedly in 175 BC and was succeeded by his younger son, another Antiochos, under the guidance of the chief minister (*epi ton pragmaton*) Heliodoros.⁹ However, the late king's brother (still in Athens) was proclaimed king by Eumenes II of Pergamon and drove Heliodoros from the kingdom, assuming the throne as Antiochos IV Epiphanes. Epiphanes established a popular

¹ See figure 1.

² For example, Bevan 1902; Bellinger 1949; Grainger 1990; Sherwin-White and Kurt 1993; Ogden 1999: 117-70.

³ Ogden 1999: 117-8.

⁴ App. *Syr.* 61; Euseb. *Chron.* Schoene edition p.247; Plut. *Vit. Demetr.* 38; *SC* 1: nos.233, 235, 279-82, 283a, 285-90, Ad19.

⁵ Trog. *Prologue* 26; Austin 2006: nos.163, 169.

⁶ Plut. *Mor.* 489a.

⁷ Welles 1934: no. 32; Vatin 1970: 87; Ogden 1999: 137-8.

⁸ App. *Syr.* 39; I Macc. 1.10.

⁹ App. *Syr.* 39 45.

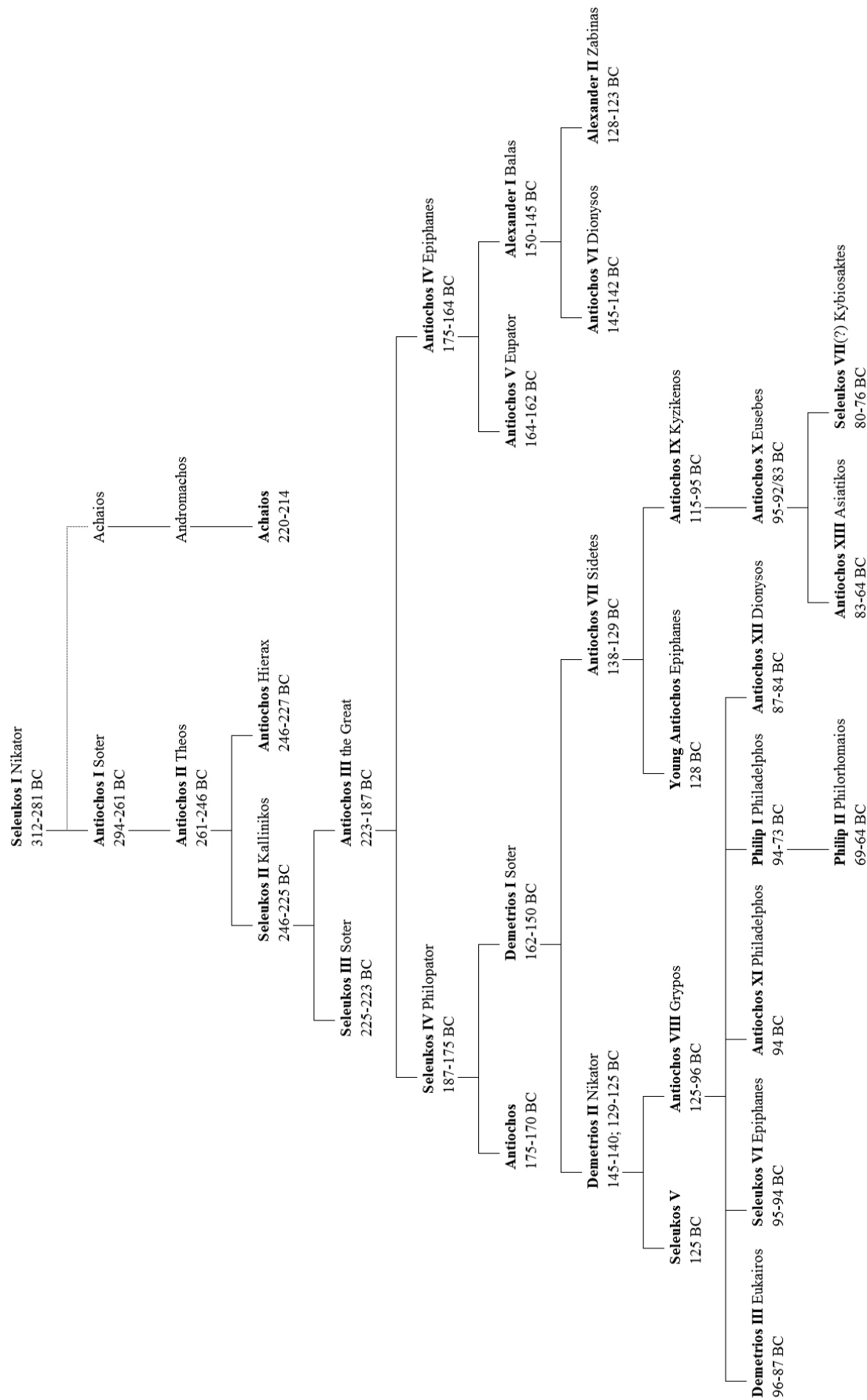


Figure 1. Stemma of the Seleukid kings.

kingship and, married to the late king's widow, founded his own line of successors.¹⁰

Thus upon the death of Epiphanes in 164 BC, there were two equal claimants to the Seleukid kingship: Demetrios I, son of Seleukos IV, and his cousin Antiochos V, son of Antiochos IV Epiphanes. The next forty years saw endemic conflict between the senior and the Epiphanaic branches of the Seleukids which only ended with the death of Alexander II Zabinas, the last of the line of Epiphanes.¹¹ However, a further schism had already developed within the senior branch of the dynasty. The detention of Demetrios II at the Parthian court between 138 and 129 BC led to the accession of his brother Antiochos VII Sidetes who, like Epiphanes before him, proved a popular and successful king and founded his own line of legitimate successors.¹² From 114/3 BC the descendants of Demetrios II and Antiochos VII Sidetes perpetuated a self-destructive civil war which saw up to four kings (in 94 BC) disputing an ever shrinking territory until the kingdom was dissolved in 64 BC.

Against this backdrop of familial feud and domestic violence, individual kings took certain measures to shore up their support base and the continued prosperity of their own line at the expense of their brothers and cousins. One powerful mechanism was the employment of rival sets of dynastic iconography. In the early second century BC, Apollo, the mythical progenitor of the Seleukid house, was far and away the single most dominant religious figure depicted on Seleukid coinage (see for example, coin nos.59-60 and 62-7 in the Pitchfork collection). With Antiochos IV Epiphanes' usurpation in 175 BC came an iconographical reform which saw Apollo surpassed by Zeus as the royal patron (see nos.68-9). The reasons behind the religious change have been discussed elsewhere and need not be repeated here;¹³ it is sufficient to say that Epiphanes' iconographic program was perpetuated by kings who claimed their legitimacy through him: Antiochos V (no.70), Alexander I (no.72), and Alexander II (no.78). In contrast, the descendants of Seleukos IV (Demetrios I (no.71), Demetrios II (no.73) and Antiochos VII (no.75)) retained either the more traditional Apollo imagery, or else introduced their own unique iconographic types such as Atargatis-Tyche or Athena. Epiphanes also introduced the radiate crown as an attribute of Seleukid divine kingship and, like his utilisation of Zeus imagery, the radiate crown was employed by his descendants (see for example no.74), but was ignored or rejected by their contemporary rivals, the descendants of Seleukos IV. That both the Zeus imagery and radiate crowns were popularly received in Syria is best illustrated by their adoption by Antiochos VIII Grypos (nos.79-80), the descendant of Seleukos IV who finally removed the threat of Epiphanaic claimants through his defeat of Alexander II.¹⁴

The iconographic programs of Alexander I Balas and Alexander II Zabinas provide an interesting case in point. The two kings (his son and grandson respectively) drew their legitimacy from Antiochos IV Epiphanes, although both were subject to negative propaganda which cast doubt upon their parentage. At best, Alexander Balas was accepted as a Seleukid king without comment;¹⁵ at worst he was derided as a young man of the lowest station who falsely claimed royal paternity.¹⁶ He was accepted in Rome as the legitimate successor of Antiochos Epiphanes, although in Appian he is referred to three times as *Alexandros Nothos* – Alexander the Bastard.¹⁷ It is within this claim of bastardy that we find the original reason behind the accusation that Balas was illegitimate. Beside his wife Laodike IV, Antiochos Epiphanes was known to have bestowed great honours upon his concubine Antiochis and it seems likely that this woman was the mother of Epiphanes's second son, Alexander I Balas.¹⁸ All previous Seleukid rulers had been the legitimate children of a Seleukid king and his queen – in Alexander Balas we may have the first son of a concubine to assume the Seleukid diadem. His mother's lack of royal status could

¹⁰ App. *Syr.* 45; Athen. 5.193d; Livy 41.20-1; Polyb. 30.25-6.

¹¹ Just. *Epit.* 39.2.5-6.

¹² App. *Syr.* 68; Joseph. *AJ* 13.222.

¹³ Wright 2007-08.

¹⁴ Wright 2005: 74.

¹⁵ Diod. 31.32a; Joseph. *AJ* 13.35.

¹⁶ Athen. 211a; App. *Syr.* 67; Just. *Epit.* 35.1.6-8; 2.4; Livy *Epit.* 52.

¹⁷ Polyb. 33.18; App. *Syr.* 67-9.

¹⁸ II Macc. 4.30; Ogden 1999: 145-6; Wright 2007-08: 536-7.

cast him as both low born and a bastard although, as the eldest surviving son of the popular Epiphanes, he was able to make a successful claim for the royal title. In apparently similar circumstances, the non-royal maternity of Ptolemy XII of Egypt would cause him to be defined *Nothos*, either overtly or implicitly by opponents of his reign.¹⁹

Regardless of his actual paternity, Alexander Balas issued coins as the true successor of Antiochos Epiphanes and the latter's eldest son, Antiochos V. Aside from a more general application of the radiate crown and Zeus imagery, Balas allowed emissions of quasi-municipal coinage at numerous mints across the Levant and Mesopotamia, a privilege previously allowed by Antiochos IV Epiphanes and Antiochos V.²⁰ He also produced regal coinage employing the epithet *Theopator* (no.72) in reference to his direct descent from Antiochos Epiphanes' own *Theotes* or godhead (no.68), as well as issuing posthumous coins in honour of both Epiphanes and Antiochos V, thereby cementing his filial and fraternal relationships with his predecessors.²¹ The eldest son of Alexander I Balas, Antiochos VI was also designated *Nothos* by Appian although as his parentage was indisputably legitimate and royal on both sides, the term *nothos* may here imply that his father's illegitimacy was carried over, or perhaps merely implies that as a member of the cadet line of the Seleukidai, he was therefore spurious rather than a bastard.²²

At this juncture it is interesting to note that Alexander Balas introduced a short-lived obverse type at the central mints of Antioch and Apameia which depicted the king's head wearing the scalp of a lion.²³ The types are traditionally seen as alluding to the king's successful namesake Alexander the Great and there can be little doubt that a rather hope-filled parallel was being drawn.²⁴ Alexander the Great's famous coin type employed a youthful Herakles head on the obverse, and the Macedonian king was sometimes depicted wearing a lion-scalp helmet.²⁵ However, as Smith rightly posits, there was also the secondary evocation of Herakles, ancestor of the Macedonian royal house and prototype of the process of *apotheosis* through which mortals could be deified on account of their benefactions.²⁶ A third hypothesis might be offered for Balas' resumption of the lion-scalp headdress iconography. Both Herakles and Alexander the Great were individuals of unconventional paternity. It was widely put about that Alexander's father was not Philip II but Zeus-Ammon,²⁷ while Plutarch states that the Athenians acknowledge Herakles as the patron of *nothoi* because, as the son of a divine father and mortal mother, he was himself a *nothos* among the gods.²⁸ Balas' epithet *Theopator* stressed the king's divine paternity but said nothing of the nature of the king's mother. Her status was irrelevant next to the illustrious bearing of his divine father, Antiochos IV *Theos* Epiphanes. It could be said that this type of iconographic manipulation was a potentially dangerous line for Balas to take, but if his illegitimacy was commonly accepted fact, the Herakles imagery suggested that it was enough that the king was the son of a god. Beyond merely associating Alexander Balas with the Macedonian conqueror, his employment of Heraklean imagery annulled the negative connotations of the monarch's bastardy by bringing to mind the illegitimacy inherent in the two greatest culture heroes of the Hellenistic world.

A second son of Alexander I Balas, Alexander II Zabinas, also received mixed reviews from the ancient sources. As with Balas, Josephus accepts Zabinas' kingship as legitimate without criticism and his coin iconography again conformed to the Epiphanaic familial program, including the repetition of Balas' lion-scalp headdress.²⁹ Like Antiochos VI, Alexander II Zabinas also made significant use of Dionysiac themes on his bronze coinage which, while not unique, was otherwise unusual in the Seleukid

¹⁹ Trog. *Prologue* 39; Cic. *Verr.* 2.4.27-30; *Leg. agr.* 2.42; Paus. 1.9.3.

²⁰ *SC* 2: nos. 1799, 1800, 1803, 1806-10, 1820, 1822-3, 1825-8, 1833-4, 1838, 1847-53.

²¹ Mørholm 1960: 29; 1983: 59-60; Le Rider 1995: 394; Gariboldi 2004: 370; *SC* 2: nos. 1883-7.

²² App. *Syr.* 69; Ogden 1999: 144.

²³ *SC* 2: nos. 1795 and 1805.

²⁴ Newell 1918: 54-5; *SC* 2: 212, 443.

²⁵ See for example the famous sarcophagus of Abdalonymos from Sidon, Smith 1988: 63-4.

²⁶ Smith 1988: 40.

²⁷ See for example Curt. 4.7.25-30; Plut. *Vit. Alex.* 27.

²⁸ Plut. *Vit. Them.* 1. See also Aristoph. *Birds* 1640-70; Ogden 1996: 199-203; Belfiore 2000: 80.

²⁹ Joseph. *AJ* 13.9.3; *SC* 2: no. 2231.

corpus; this reinforced the fraternal solidarity between the two kings.³⁰ Furthermore, Zabinas produced an obverse portrait depicting the king in an elephant-scalp headdress.³¹ The elephant headdress is perhaps more specifically oriented towards Alexander the Great, echoing images of the king's conquest of the East (specifically India) produced first by Ptolemy I at Alexandria³² and later by Seleukos I at Babylon, Susa and Ekbatana.³³ However, the earliest models of this type clearly drew their inspiration from Alexander's own Herakles obverse and although not central, the god should not be left completely out of the understanding of the imagery. Specifically, the elephant-scalp headdress could be seen as an allusion to the Bacchic conquest of the East and it may be significant that it is only Alexander II Zabinas, whose official epithet was *Dionysos*, who utilised this imagery.³⁴

On the other hand, Justin states that Zabinas was really the son of an Egyptian merchant named Protarchos who only adopted the name Alexander on his accession.³⁵ The popular pseudonym ascribed to Alexander II, Zabinas, was a Semitic proper name roughly translated as 'Purchased [from a god]'. Implicit is the underlying slander that he had been 'bought' by Ptolemy VIII of Egypt and was therefore his creature.³⁶ However there is something odd with Justin's account. Protarchos, an Egyptian merchant with a Greek name, was supposed to have given his Egyptian son a Semitic name. It is dubious to suggest that despite slander and bad press, this low-born Egyptian pretender, whose claims to the throne were based on generally accepted falsehoods, was still received as a viable Seleukid king by the cities of Syria. That the name Zabinas has persisted through the millennia is no surprise due to its scandalous connotations, but the entire story feels inconsistent and was probably invented in the rival courts of Demetrios II or Antiochos VIII and kept alive by later authors specifically on account of its disparaging nature.³⁷

Beyond straight iconographic programs, royal portraiture too played a role in legitimising a monarch's succession. This was less obviously the case with the early kings, whose reigns were practically uncontested, than with their second and first century BC successors. There was clear continuity in portraiture between later coins of Antiochos III (no.65) and those of his sons Seleukos IV (no.66) and Antiochos IV Epiphanes (no.68). The kings appear at once mature but full of vitality, their faces neither gaunt nor fleshy, with short cropped hair which recedes towards the diadem above the temple. The nose may show a slight bump but is essentially straight. The same basic features were continued (albeit slightly rejuvenated) on the portraiture of Epiphanes' eldest son and successor, the child king Antiochos V (no.70). Contrary to the account in Diodorus that Alexander I Balas was accepted as the son of Antiochos IV Epiphanes because of a close familial resemblance, Balas' coin portraits bore little in common with the image of his presumed father (no.72).³⁸ Among the senior branch of the Seleukidai, there was a certain likeness in the rendering of Demetrios I (no.71) and his sons Demetrios II (no.73) and Antiochos VII Sidetes (no.75), particularly in the depiction of a fuller face and a developing aquiline shape of the nose. The most obvious use of familial likeness as an expression of legitimacy was employed among the parallel lines descended from the latter two brothers.

The second son of Demetrios II and Kleopatra Thea was Antiochos VIII Epiphanes Philopator Kallinikos, popularly known as Grypos or 'Hook nose' (see for example nos.79-80).³⁹ Indeed, although his father, uncle and grandfather had all been depicted with relatively aquiline noses, the bump of Grypos' nose was often especially accentuated. In contrast, his rival Antiochos IX Kyzikenos (no.81), the son of Antiochos VII Sidetes and Kleopatra Thea and therefore Grypos' half brother and cousin, was

³⁰ Wright 2005: 81.

³¹ SC 2: no. 2234.

³² Zervos 1967: series B-D; Lorber 2005.

³³ SC 1: nos.101, 188-90, 222-3.

³⁴ Smith 1988: 41.

³⁵ Just. *Epit.* 39.1.4-6.

³⁶ Euseb. *Chron.* Schoene edition p.257; Bevan 1902: vol. II p.306.

³⁷ Wright 2007-08: 537-8.

³⁸ Diod. 31.32a.

³⁹ Euseb. *Chron.* Schoene edition p.257.

depicted with a far more linear nose, occasionally turned up slightly towards the tip. The conflict between the two kings carried over into the succeeding generations. The sons of Grypos, five of whom ruled as kings – Seleukos VI (no.83), Demetrios III (no.82), Antiochos XI, Philip I (no.85) and Antiochos XII – were all depicted with exaggerated, hawk-like, downturned noses confirming that their legitimacy was drawn from their long-reigning, hook-nosed father. The son of Kyzikenos, Antiochos X Eusebes, could equally draw upon the reign of his own father as the source of his authority. Eusebes set himself against the sons of Grypos by depicting his own nose as short with a knob or up-turn at the end (no.84).⁴⁰ The two branches emphasised distinct and contrasting physiognomic features to set themselves apart in the minds of the Syrian populace.

The divisions within the Seleukid house, sown initially by the foreign captivity of princes Antiochos IV, Demetrios I and Demetrios II, were ultimately to cause the downfall of the dynasty and its kingdom. However, that is not to say that the end result was inevitable, nor that the scions of the royal house sat back idly and watched while their inheritance crumbled around them. It must be stressed that except for an early struggle between Seleukos II and Antiochos Hierax, and a brief incident between Philip I and Demetrios III, succession by primogeniture was respected within each patrilineal branch of the Seleukidai. No two claimants of the Epiphaneic line emerged simultaneously, nor until the mid-90s BC did any other branch see more than a single king ruling contemporaneously. The problem was that once an individual was accepted as a king, his eldest living son evidently saw himself as eligible to succeed, even if there were already equally qualified successors of previous rulers waiting in the wings. From the reign of Antiochos IV Epiphanes, mechanisms were instituted to mould and define the royal image in order to emphasise continuity and stress an individual's right to rule over the rights of his cousins. The war of imagery encompassed both the obverse and reverse of royal coinage, identifying the king's partisanship through the advertisement of divine patronage and the use of divinising imagery, and accentuating the legitimacy of a king through his physiognomic inheritance.

⁴⁰ Interestingly, the nasal shape exhibited on the numismatic portraiture of Antiochos IX and Antiochos X resembles that of the Late Seleukid matriarch, Kleopatra Thea, as shown on coin no.79.