

10. The fall of the Seleucid Empire

The rise of the Parthians

The origins and history of the Parthians are as mentioned rather obscure. Having no chroniclers themselves, whatever notices remain come from other cultures, whose relationship to the Parthians was usually less than cordial. Consequently, the extant Parthian history seems to consist either of a prolonged series of wars with Greeks, Romans, Jews and the Chinese, or of what the foreign sources thought noteworthy about Parthian culture – usually some rather prejudiced anecdotes about their peculiar behaviour.

But let us not blame the ancient historians, who had to invent their own discipline more or less from scratch. In many cases their reports and analyses are of impressively high quality, but their main focus is on the higher strata of society, and those accounts are further biased by a tendency to lean on the sensational side. Our old friend Justin writes¹, regarding the Parthian lifestyle, that the men were polygamous in order to – as he dryly expresses it – *‘gratify desire with different objects’*. Women were kept isolated from society and unfaithful wives were punished most severely. The army was mostly based on slaves, which the Parthians seem to have been able to keep as armed warriors without much trouble. They were respected but their children were never released. (These ‘slaves’ may in reality have been more like serfs, subjects to a member of the nobility: the structure of the Parthian society resembled a feudal system.) The kings were obeyed out of fear. Further, according to Justin, the Parthians preferred action before speech and reflection. The burial customs were curious, probably of nomad origin – they preferred to leave their dead to be devoured by birds and dogs.

From these scraps of information, however few and unreliable, we can outline the Parthian society as hierarchic and authoritarian. Traits such as polygamy, the prominent role of slaves and the isolation of women have been common for several oriental civilisations. But even though they came to rule a region that had been civilised for a long period already, the Parthians never became prominent in science, culture or technology, and their rule was in such aspects a period of stagnation for Babylonia and Persia. On the other hand, their military organisation was outstanding. The Parthians remained faithful to their nomad origins, and were excellent horsemen who travelled on horseback even after having become sedentary. When other countries were subjugated, the ethnic Parthians moved in to make up a nobility stratum, where most men were raised as warriors. When necessary, the Parthian armies could evacuate vast territories and harass the invaders incessantly with well organised guerrilla raids.

The Parthian expansion began after the defeat of Antiochus the Great, when the Seleucid decline caused a power vacuum. During the reign of Mithridates I (from c. 170 BCE) the Parthian Arsacids developed into the leading Iranian kingdom. Justin writes that some time around the middle of the century, a war erupted between the Parthians and the Medians, a war that ended with the conquest of Media and Elymais. In the east, the Parthians and their allies, the Scythian (Saka) nomads, expanded on behalf of the Greeks

in Bactria. Justin does not provide us with exact dates, and the territories he refers to are difficult to define closer.

There are however some regions where we have auxiliary evidence, in the form of dated or dateable Seleucid coins, augmented by cuneiform documents. The term 'Media', in its wider sense, refers to all of western Iran, which could be divided into three regions. Starting from the north, there was Media Atropatene, but – as usual – we do not know much about this remote mountain region. In the middle region, Media proper, Alexander Balas struck the last Seleucid coins in the regional capital Ecbatana, and the Parthians took over after him. The hegemony of Balas was also interrupted in the southern region, Elymais (or Susiana), by a local dynasty – the first of these rulers, Kamnaskires I, was briefly mentioned in chapter 8. According to a Babylonian astronomical diary, it seems as though forces from Elymais raided Babylonia in 145 BCE, but by doing so, they apparently overextended their resources. Not only were the invaders² repulsed by the forces of Demetrius II: the Seleucid king also recaptured the city of Susa and struck his last coins there the following year. But as mentioned, Demetrius had enough problems with the civil wars in the west, and he soon lost the city to a king called Kamnaskires II, or perhaps Demetrius allowed this member of the Elymaean dynasty to resettle in Susa as his vassal. However, in the last years of the 140s BCE, the Parthians took over in Susa instead, and Kamnaskires II disappeared. That was probably the war between the Parthians and the Medians that Justin refers to.

These minutiae support the general picture: the Parthians gradually absorbed Iran while the Seleucids were preoccupied with their civil wars. The rural areas were probably lost before the walled cities, since the Parthian cavalry was not suited for sieges. The better part of the Iranian territories thus fell to Mithridates I, either as provinces or as vassals, even though Justin does not mention what happened to Persis, or Carmania in eastern Iran. In July 141 BCE, the Parthian forces occupied Seleucia on the Tigris, the eastern capital³. Now the Seleucids could no longer ignore the Parthians, civil war or not.

Demetrius II attacks Parthia

Soon after, there arrived an embassy from Bactria to the Seleucid court, asking for an alliance against the Parthian menace. Upon hearing this, Demetrius II gathered his forces, and reinforced them with auxiliaries from those states who still recognised or at least feared the Seleucids. Bactrian soldiers were said to have participated, which might imply that the land route via Iran was still open, but more probably the Bactrian forces, perhaps led by Heliocles attacked the Parthians from the east. The armies of Demetrius were successful: they defeated Parthian forces in several encounters, and their onslaught forced the Parthians to retreat towards their craggy homeland in Iran. Seleucia on the Tigris was taken back, its mint issuing Demetrius' coins again from 139 BCE.

The Parthians had difficulties standing their ground against the well-organised Greek army on the battlefield, but on the other hand they were not easily decisively beaten. After a failed encounter, their cavalry units disbanded, only to re-form once they were in safety. Demetrius had gone to great lengths to set up his army, especially with Diodotus

Tryphon still a threat, and being a young and impatient man who had only recently become master of his own actions, he was eager to bring the war to a decisive victory. His great-grandfather Antiochus the Great had been able to penetrate the Parthian heartland and force them to submit completely, but since then the Parthians had grown stronger and better organised. When the forces of Demetrius reached the mountains of northern Iran in the summer of 138 BCE, they were ambushed: those who were not cut down fled in all directions and Demetrius himself was taken prisoner⁴.

Mithridates now headed west, and took control over the Seleucid province of Babylonia. There was no longer any government there – Tryphon’s authority did not extend that far east – and Mithridates could effortlessly occupy Seleucia-on-the-Tigris permanently. The fertile lands between the Euphrates and the Tigris were now Parthian, and the chocked Demetrius was paraded as a prisoner in the cities where he had once ruled himself. Mithridates was however shrewd enough not to kill him, but treated him with utmost courtesy. He married Demetrius to his daughter Rhodogyne and settled him in a castle by the Caspian Sea.

The decline and fall of Diodotus Tryphon

Back in Syria Diodotus Tryphon tried to improve his position, but with little success. His murder of the young Antiochus VI, the son of Alexander Balas, was a rash act that had cost Tryphon much of his popularity, and as Josephus wrote⁵: Tryphon appeared to be a wise and moderate person as long as he was a private citizen, but after he became king *‘he was the true Tryphon’* – hardly a flattering verdict! Under such circumstances it was hardly surprising that Cleopatra Thea, who still remained in Syria, gained widespread support. Her sons with Demetrius II, who of course were named Seleucus and Antiochus, were however far too young to act as kings, and public attention was therefore naturally centred on Demetrius’ brother Antiochus, nicknamed *Sidetes* after the city of Side in Asia Minor, where he had been quietly raised by the eunuch Craterus after the killing of his parents. Sidetes was a handsome and energetic young man, and his reputation had not been stained by the failures and atrocities associated with his brother.

This was precisely what Tryphon had feared, and he did all that he could to stop his rival: he bribed the Syrian troops and warned them that if Sidetes became king, he would punish all those who had seceded from his brother Demetrius. Though Tryphon managed to keep Sidetes from crowning himself in any of the coastal cities, this only made matters worse: Sidetes was instead summoned by Cleopatra Thea to join her. And so in 138 BCE Sidetes succeeded his brother not only on the throne but also in the royal bed: he married Cleopatra Thea as her third husband. Even though the marriage was clearly one of convenience to the advantage of both parties, she had every reason to be satisfied with her new husband who now became king Antiochus VII⁶. Cleopatra Thea was not yet thirty years old (Antiochus VII Sidetes was perhaps twenty), and she bore him several children, among them a son named Antiochus who died young, at least one daughter named Laodice who perhaps did likewise, and also a younger son who would in due time become Antiochus IX.



Ill: Antiochus VII Sidetes. Courtesy of Piotr Vesely.

Her political expectations on the marriage also turned out satisfactorily. Antiochus VII Sidetes gathered a huge army and set out from the port of Seleucia ad Pieria where Cleopatra's court was, and shortly after faced Tryphon in battle – the place is unknown – won the day and drove him out of northern Syria. Tryphon retreated to the mountain stronghold of Dora in Phoenicia, where he was besieged. Antiochus Sidetes contacted Simon, head of the Hasmonean state, for an alliance, one of the benefits being that Simon supplied Antiochus' besieging troops. The siege continued for a long time, but eventually Tryphon's situation became untenable, and being a headstrong man, he was not willing to go down quietly. He broke the siege with a small force and headed for the port of Apamea, but the troops of Antiochus were on his heels. They stormed the city and executed Tryphon; this probably happened in 137 BCE. Tryphon had been the first non-dynastic king in Syria, and he was able to seize power only because confidence in the Seleucids had been tainted by the civil wars.

As for Sidetes, he might have used this unpopularity to his own advantage: a key factor to his success could have been Roman support. Scipio Aemilianus, a descendant of Scipio Africanus, was sent on a mission in the eastern Mediterranean at this time, to settle political matters after Roman preferences, and he may have given Sidetes the thumbs up⁷. The civil wars had changed the Roman view of the Seleucids, who were no longer seen as a threat but as incompetent vassal kings whose rule was in fact an asset for Roman power, in accordance with the device 'divide and conquer'. Numismatic evidence suggests that Cappadocia might also have supported Sidetes, for curiously enough some of his issues seem to have been imitated there.

By and large, Sidetes appears to have been a fine – if somewhat carefree – ruler, especially given his traumatic background. According to Plutarch, Sidetes was fond of hunting, and once during a hunting-party he became separated from his entourage and got lost. Sidetes knocked on the door of a small cabin to ask for direction, and was welcomed in for a meal. As he did not reveal his identity, the inhabitants of the cabin freely discussed the government in his presence; they generally praised the king but complained that he was often tricked by his decadent counsellors – and he spent way too much time hunting! When Sidetes eventually was found by his hunting-companions, he praised his hosts, telling them that this was the first time he had ever been told the truth about himself⁸.

The siege of Jerusalem

With Tryphon out of the way, the alliance between Antiochus Sidetes and the Hasmonean state soon came to an abrupt end. Josephus morosely writes that it was Sidetes' wicked and treacherous nature that caused him to renounce his friendship with Simon, but from a Seleucid point of view, the Hasmoneans were troublesome, insubordinate vassals who had taken over an important border province and needed a good chastising. It also seems as though Sidetes thought that the important port of Joppe (Jaffa) had been taken over by the Hasmoneans in a manner that violated their treaty. So he sent the Seleucid general Cendebeus to pillage in Judea and if possible arrest the old high priest. When Simon heard of this, he was quite understandably enraged and resumed the guerrilla tactics from the wars of his youth. His units harassed the troops of Cendebeus so heavily that they were temporarily forced to evacuate Judea. Simon also renewed his alliance with Rome, another well-trying counter against Seleucid aggression.

But Simon's successes had provoked more enemies than the Seleucids. In February 134 BCE, Simon and his family visited one of their commanders, a certain Ptolemy who was Simon's son-in-law, in his castle Dok just outside of Jericho. Ptolemy arranged a lavish banquet for his guests, but in the middle of the festivities he sent in a detachment of soldiers who killed Simon and took the rest of the family as hostages. Ptolemy probably intended to exterminate the Hasmoneans and become leader of the Jews himself, for he also sent assassins to finish off John Hyrcanus, Simon's third son, who had been left behind. Hyrcanus however made good his escape back to Jerusalem, where he gained popular support and was made the new high priest. The forces of Ptolemy tried to enter the city but were promptly driven out, and instead Hyrcanus was able to march on Dok and besiege the castle. The pressured Ptolemy brought out the rest of John Hyrcanus' family to the castle walls and tortured them there; under such circumstances Hyrcanus refrained from continuing the siege.

Josephus, our source for this, continues his account with the somewhat puzzling notice that the siege was prolonged for a considerable period, but perhaps he meant that the soldiers of Hyrcanus still guarded the entrances to Ptolemy's castle, without attempting to storm it. Be that as it may, the guards eventually left their posts unmanned during a Jewish holiday, and Ptolemy was able to escape. He found refuge in the nearby city of Philadelphia, ruled by a local tyrant called Zeno, and so disappeared from history.

Antiochus Sidetes seems to have been busy strengthening his frontiers against the Parthians, but when he heard of the Hasmonean setbacks, he found the time ripe to once again attempt to subjugate Judea. He repeated his claims for the concession of Jaffa and a tribute from Hyrcanus, but to little effect, and so he marched south himself in the autumn of 134 BCE. Just as before, the Jews were unable to stand their ground against the main Seleucid army, and retreated to Jerusalem, which Antiochus eventually put siege to. The city was however heavily fortified and the defenders kept their spirits high, especially after some unusually heavy rains had thwarted Antiochus' hope of draining their water supplies, but the Syrians were determined to take the city and isolated the defenders by encircling the walls with a long trench.

They also constructed a hundred massive siege towers from which they persistently attacked the walls, while the defenders countered with stealthy attacks. In the end, Hyrcanus was unable to feed the entire city population and emptied the city of all but his armed soldiers. The problem was that Antiochus did not let them across the trench, so the starving people were forced to gather outside of the walls. The defenders must have suffered horribly from seeing their friends and families dying before their eyes, and during the Feast of Tabernacles in the autumn of 131 BCE, Hyrcanus let the survivors inside once more, despite having no rations for them.

At the time of the festival, Hyrcanus asked for a temporary truce, and Antiochus granted him this. The king was then wise enough to send a magnificent sacrifice to the temple, consisting of bulls with their horns gilded, spices and cups of gold and silver. This gesture made the besieged Jews realise that Antiochus was not interested in destroying their religion, and so they chose to begin negotiations instead of fighting to the last. Antiochus demanded to place garrisons in the cities of Judea, but Hyrcanus was able to make him renounce that claim for a tribute of five hundred talents and a hostage, which included a brother of Hyrcanus. Josephus writes that Hyrcanus was so admired for his moderation that he was given the epithet *Eusebes*, the Pious.

Hyrcanus had to dig deep into his vaults to make this payment: he took the drastic step of opening the tomb of King David, whence he extracted three thousand talents. One wonders whether Josephus could be correct here, for the semi-legendary ruler David had lived almost a millennium earlier, and Jerusalem had been looted several times since then. Were there really treasures in his tomb still? Possibly the money was in fact temple treasures deposited in a grave long after David's death. Ironically, John Hyrcanus made an excellent deal out of his defeat to Antiochus Sidetes, for after having paid his tribute he was still two thousand five hundred talents up. He used those to buy foreign mercenaries, and with their aid his family was transformed from rebel chieftains into a proper royal dynasty, no longer dependent on the religious fervour of Jewish levies.

Antiochus Sidetes restores the empire

The right to the Seleucid throne was a complicated matter. Antiochus Sidetes held it in his brother's absence, but Demetrius II was still alive in his Parthian captivity. In addition, both brothers had children with Cleopatra Thea, and there was no knowing who

was to inherit the kingdom. There is no evidence that Antiochus Sidetes intended to put his own line on the throne for good; then again, we cannot exclude it. In Pergamon there had been a similar dilemma half a century before, when king Eumenes II had been summoned to Rome to be interrogated by the Senate, who had become suspicious of him despite his heroic behaviour during the war against Antiochus the Great. On the way home, Eumenes II was the victim of an accident and was missing, with everyone thinking he was dead. His brother Attalus II then took over the Pergamene throne, but when Eumenes II was eventually found and returned home, Attalus ceded the kingship peacefully and was thus given the epithet *Philadelphus*, brother-loving (and Eumenes in his turn founded the city of Philadelphia, after which the American city is named to this day.)

Would Antiochus Sidetes have acted as nobly if his brother Demetrius had returned home? The new Parthian king, Phraates II, did not think so. His reason for keeping Demetrius in his comfortable prison seems to have been to keep up the threat to send him home to challenge Sidetes. (It is in fact possible that Sidetes had arrived in Syria to become king even when his brother was still campaigning: Sidetes' first coins were issued at most a few months after Demetrius capture.)

Demetrius, for his part, was not content with his captivity. After a few years, he was secretly visited by his friend Callimander in his castle by the Caspian Sea. Callimander had disguised himself in Parthian garments and prepared an escape plan. Demetrius and his followers fled on horseback, but the Parthian pursuers were more familiar with the territory and able to intercept the fugitives. Callimander was however not punished, but instead rewarded his loyalty towards his master, though Demetrius was for a while kept under stricter surveillance. A few years later Demetrius and his Parthian princess had had children, but despite this he made another attempt to escape. When he was caught once more, the Parthian king was angered with Demetrius for being so untrustworthy and headstrong. Not only was Demetrius put under stricter guard once more, he was also humiliated by a gift of golden dice, which the Parthian king gave him to imply that he behaved like a child and thus was in need of toys⁹.

In 130 BCE, Antiochus Sidetes had been king for eight years, and finally thought his position strong enough to attempt to exact revenge on the Parthians. The official reason for the war was to liberate Demetrius, but as mentioned, it is impossible to know whether Antiochus actually wanted this. According to Justin, his army was immense: 80 000 men, not counting the auxiliaries from vassal rulers such as John Hyrcanus and Arabian chieftains, but once again Justin is not very credible, for he claims that more than 200 000 civilians travelled with the army: cooks, confectioners and actors! Justin claimed that the Syrians were so effeminate that they were more prepared for going to a banquet than to a field of battle, and so luxuriously dressed that even their sandals were made of gold¹⁰. He was not alone in this verdict: the philosopher Posidonius wrote that the Syrian soldiers

'brought daggers and short spears encrusted with dirt and rust; they wore helmets with visors to bring shadow but open around the throat to breathe easily, they brought

*drinking-vessels of wine and all kinds of food, and beside these lay flutes and horns, instruments for drinking, not for battle.*¹¹

The view that the inhabitants of Syria and Egypt were decadent weaklings is found throughout many ancient works of history, used as the default explanation for why the Hellenistic kingdoms fell, by historians who cherished the allegedly more puritan Romans as their ideal. It is little short of a prejudiced, almost racist rationalisation. Even though the courts of Egypt and Syria indeed saw many wanton luxuries, efficient fighting forces were an absolute necessity for their kings. There were perhaps occasions when mercenaries would gain too much influence over a weak king and live in debauchery – as such as the Cretan troops of Demetrius II – but this also occurred in Rome during the era of the feared Praetorian guard. The bottom line is that the Seleucid army was generally a fearsome and well-disciplined war-machine. How else could the empire have been sustained for as long as it actually was? Those troops who left Antioch in 130 BCE to deal with the Parthians once and for all were definitely neither cowardly nor effeminate, and they were under the command of a king, who, just like many of his ancestors, was a prominent general.

And their success was indeed not long in coming. Antiochus advanced into Babylonia and was met with open arms by the population, who had grown weary of Parthian rule – their takeover had been marked with temple lootings and other outrages. The Parthian vassals seceded in large numbers and renewed their allegiance to the Seleucids. Antiochus Sidetes met Parthian detachments in three battles and won them all, the largest by the river Lycus against a Parthian general named Indates, and he was already compared to Antiochus the Great. According to Josephus, Antiochus maintained good relationships with John Hyrcanus who had been brought along with his soldiers, and allowed two days of rest after the battle of Lycus in order for the Jews to celebrate their *Pesach*. He also built a victory monument.



Ill: Tetradrachm of Darius Soter. Despite his Persian name, Darius chose to copy the Seleucid coinage in every detail, including the epithet and the Apollo reverse. Darius ruled briefly in the Median capital of Susa, during or after the final showdown between the Seleucids and the Parthians. Similar coins were issued by Kamnaskires (II) Nikephoros, Okkonapses Soter and Tigraios, three other short-lived Median pretenders. Courtesy of www.cngcoins.com, Triton XIII, Lot: 247.

Alexander's last successor

As the war slowed down towards the autumn of 130 BCE, the whole of Babylonia and western Iran was more or less secured. This is confirmed by the reopening of the eastern mints: Seleucia on the Tigris issued triumphant silver coins for Antiochus, with Nike and a laurel wreath, and we even know of a bronze from Susa. Antiochus was unwilling to wage war during the cold winter months¹² and so distributed his troops amongst different cities to have them provisioned. This seems to have been an unwise move, even though one asks what the alternative was, for the heavy burden of keeping all these soldiers soon cooled down the native enthusiasm about the Seleucid return. Very likely the troops of Antiochus were all too keen to enrich themselves and began pillaging, for many of them would have been mercenaries without the same personal loyalty to the Seleucids as before. Given that Antiochus had been king only of Syria and parts of Mesopotamia it is impressive that he managed to gather an army that seems to have measured up to those of his predecessors, but despite his successes, he was unable to restore the unity of the empire, such as it had been before the civil wars began.

The Parthians did not pass up this opportunity; they sent agents to the cities of Babylonia and fuelled the discontent there. Meanwhile Phraates II played what he thought was his trump: he released Demetrius II, hoping this to cause a fraternal war. We do not know if that would have happened. When Antiochus Sidetes, who had settled for the winter in Ecbatana in Media, heard about rebellions in several of his cities, he hastened to put them down with his royal guard and those troops he had at his disposal. On his way there he rode straight into the main Parthian army, led by king Phraates II himself. Antiochus

Sidetes was the heir of seven generations of Seleucids and the last successor to Alexander in the east, and he was not intimidated by the Parthians. Gambling all, he launched a lightning attack against their superior forces and fought with all his courage, and when the remnants of his guard turned and fled he remained on the battle field.

The battle outside Ecbatana in the spring of 129 BCE¹³ is not one of the more famous in ancient history, but it still marks the end of an era. There and then the concept of the empire of Alexander the Great definitely ended. The people of Persia and Babylonia would come to forget the Greeks and identify themselves with the Parthian kings, who became increasingly Persian themselves, and the borders between east and west would close and never again open up in the same fashion. Around this time, the Greek empire in Bactria had also collapsed, and the Indo-Greeks were but an isolated parenthesis.

Antiochus Sidetes was the last great Seleucid king, and also the last who claimed to be *Great king*, the title of the old Persian rulers. He had inherited the skill and courage of his ancestors, but he also possessed an impatience that led to his demise. Like many other Macedonian kings, he may well have been drinking. When the corpse of the Seleucid king was brought to him, it is said that Phraates II proclaimed that Antiochus had been vaingloriously trying to drink Parthia in one draught but choked on the potion¹⁴. Apart from this remark, he treated his dead enemy with all due respect. Phraates also pursued Demetrius II, but he had already made good his escape back to Syria. Other members of the royal family had joined the campaign and fell into Parthian hands, among them Laodice, the daughter of Demetrius II, whom Phraates II married, and a prince named Seleucus whose paternity and fate historians are uncertain about.

Most of the headless and disorganized remaining Seleucid forces surrendered to the Parthians, but their allies seem to have marched back home again with no further care for the Seleucid cause. John Hyrcanus definitely survived the campaign. The people of Antioch were paralysed with grief over the lost war, the brave king and all the dead or captured men. When the army collapsed, the territories that Sidetes had won back were lost – this time for good.



Ill: Tetradrachm of Phraates II, struck by Greek celators in Seleucia-on-the-Tigris, with Greek legend. The Parthian kings usually called themselves Arsaces, and rarely used their personal names except in times of civil war. Another difference is that the Parthians styled themselves Great King (sometimes even Great King of Kings on coins). Courtesy of cngcoins.com, auction 150: lot 171.

Some comments on the collapse

It is difficult to know exactly why the Seleucid Empire collapsed, or if the collapse could have been avoided in the long run. There are as mentioned diverging views among scholars on the stability and integration of Seleucid rule. Only in the later years have we been able to get a somewhat clearer view of the impressive extent and cohesion of the Seleucid administration in the eastern provinces. This has long been rather neglected, which meant that the default view was that the Greeks would soon inevitably lose control in the east after the death of Alexander the Great, but today we know that matters were more complicated than that – a view supported by the case of the seemingly incredulous rise of the Bactrian empire.

Still, the Hellenistic civilisation was probably unstable in the long run, for despite all their efforts towards integration between east and west, the Greeks by and large remained a foreign elite in the territories east of Syria, and the Seleucid royal administration was more developed in the western parts of the empire. Babylonia was undoubtedly a well-integrated province, an important provider of grain and other resources, and Seleucia on the Tigris was a Hellenistic metropolis. But there were only a handful of mints in the east, whereas almost every city in the Mediterranean region under Seleucid control produced royal coins at some time. Without denying the consistency and longevity of the Seleucid administration in the east, the Greek and Mediterranean arena was usually the highest priority for the kings. In the same fashion, while eastern troops were important to the

Seleucid forces, the Greeks and Macedonians never lost their position as the backbone of the army.

For the Seleucids had to rely on military strength to maintain their rule of their many and variegated provinces, and when the army was weakened – as happened during the reign of Seleucus II, and even more after the defeat of Antiochus the Great to Rome – the outlying territories would slowly but inevitably regain their independence. Since the successes of Alexander, the Graeco-Macedonian art of war had been completely dominant for a long period, but this could not last infinitely. The Roman as well as the Parthian armies developed new tactics to challenge the Hellenistic supremacy. The paramount reason for the collapse was however the civil wars, which drained the Seleucids of public confidence and paralysed them at a time when all their efforts were needed to repel outer threats.

And these wars were made worse by the exposed position of Antioch on the Orontes, the empire's first capital. With the loss of Asia Minor and the weakening of the Seleucid navy after the peace of Apamea in 188 BCE, the court became constantly vulnerable to attacks from Rome and Egypt. If the kings had been able to rule from Babylonia, which was the geographic centre of the empire, the distance would have meant that Rome and the Ptolemies would have had difficulties pressuring them. Then perhaps the civil wars may have been avoided, and Persia kept under closer surveillance. For better or for worse, the Seleucid Empire was oriented towards the Hellenistic world in the west, and in the long run this made it a difficult task for the kings to act as the successors of the Persian kings in the east.

Notes

¹ Justin, *Epitome*, 41. The chronology of this chapter is largely based on Houghton, Lorber and Hoover, *Seleucid Coins II*. Alfred Bellinger's *The end of the Seleucids* has also been used.

² According to Hopkins, www.parthia.com website, there were three local Elymean kings: Kamnaskires I Megas Soter (the king mentioned in ch.8), and then Kamnaskires II Nikephoros and Okkonapses Soter, who both copied Seleucid coins, with sitting Apollo on the reverse. Okkonapses took over Susa after Demetrius II. However, *Seleucid Coins II* refers only to one king Kamnaskires.

³ Hopkins, www.parthia.com website, discussion under Mithridates I of Parthia.

⁴ Justin, *Epitome*, 36:1. The year was probably 138 BCE, as shown by Mark Passchl, *Demetrios Nikator's Second Arsakid War*, published online on the Yahoo Hellenistica Group, 2005. A cuneiform document from Babylonia (Sachs and Hunger, *Astronomical Diaries*), confirms that Mithridates I, who had been busy on his eastern front fighting the Sakas, regrouped in the cities of Media and launched a counter-attack.

⁵ Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, book 13, throughout this chapter.

⁶ Named so after the city of Side in Asia Minor, where he was raised by a eunuch named Craterus after being orphaned. His official epithet was in fact *Euergetes*, the Benefactor. Appian (*Roman history*, 11.67) wrote that Cleopatra Thea married him out of jealousy over Demetrius II being remarried to the daughter of the Parthian king, but there is no need to believe such gossip.

⁷ Livy, *Periochae*, 57.8

⁸ Plutarkos, *Moralia* 207-8

⁹ Justin, *Epitome*, 38.9

¹⁰ Justin, *Epitome*, 38.10

¹¹ Posidonius of Apamea, *History*, 16

¹² The harsh winter climate in Iraq/Iran is well known. Compare for instance with the two Gulf wars, where the American land offensives did not begin until springtime.

¹³ It is possible that the battle took place later, and in that case Justin's account, with the Seleucid army still in their winter quarters, is not entirely correct. The last bronzes of Antiochus VII at Seleucia on the Tigris were struck in Seleucid year 184, a year that began in the second half of 129 BCE. Hence, *Seleucid Coins* dates, against the sources, the defeat of Antiochus VII to late that year, not early in the spring. But it is perhaps possible that these bronzes were posthumous by a few months.

¹⁴ Poseidonius of Apamea, *History* XVI