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Coinage and the Creation of the Seleukid Kingdom

Seleukos I Nikator ruled over the most diverse set of regions and peoples of any of the successor kings.¹ Coinage was absolutely essential for the succession of military actions through which he built up his realm, from the initial capture of Babylon in 311 BCE, through the consolidation of control over Persia and Bactria after 306, his acquisition of Syria in 301, and his conquest of Asia Minor from Lysimachos shortly before his assassination in 280 BCE.² Beyond these military activities, however, coinage also played a key role in transforming the patchwork of Seleukos' conquests into a Seleukid kingdom with ideological and institutional structures that allowed it to survive the death of its founder.

There were a number of roles that coinage played in the consolidation of power for Seleukos generally, as for other Diadochi. By the start of the Hellenistic period, coined money or *chrēmata* was an essential part of a state's or a leader's military power. Without money, commanders could not hope to hire or maintain their troops. Diodoros (*Bibl.* 29.6.1) stated that:

εἰσὶν ἐν τοῖς πολέμοις αἱ τῶν χρημάτων παρασκευαί, καθάπερ ἡ κοινὴ παροιμία φησὶν, ἑταῖραι τῶν πράξεων· ὁ γὰρ τούτων εὐπορῶν οὐκ ἀπορεῖ τῶν μάχεσθαι δυναμένων ἀνδρῶν.

In warfare, ready supplies of money (*chrēmata*) are indeed—as the familiar proverb has it—the bedfellows (*hetairai*) of success, since he who is rich in them is never poor in men to fight.

Seleukos was at war for most of his reign and coinage was thus essential for his success, even his continued survival. Coinage provided pay (*misthos*, *opson*) to friends, followers and armies in a new world of personal mobility in which professionals and specialists ceased to be tied to their smaller *poleis* and *ethnê*. Instead of relying on shared membership of a political community or inherited bonds to create a relationship with his army and officials, Seleukos (like the other Diadochi) based the relationship on pay.³

Pay tied soldiers to their paymaster. Defection meant forfeiting payments that were in arrears (which was common) and the large bonuses habitually paid out at

1 Matthew Trundle passed away in July 2019, leaving an early draft of this paper. Christopher de Lisle undertook the completion of the text. The resulting text may not be what Matthew Trundle would have written, but hopefully does honor to his memory.

2 For Seleukos and the founding of the Seleukid Empire: Grainger 1990; Bosworth 2002, 210–245; Capdetrey 2007, 25–50. General discussions of Seleukos' coinage: Houghton and Lorber 2002, esp. 1–110; Houghton 2004, 49–51; Houghton 2012.

3 Meadows 2014, esp. 173; Strootman 2014, 223.

the end of a campaign.⁴ Moreover, received payments were stored in a soldier's baggage and, so long as commanders maintained control of that baggage, their troops were unlikely to defect.⁵ On a more abstract level, Seleukos, like the other Diadochi, used the language of friendship (*philia*) and gift-giving to represent his relationship with his subordinates—as his friends, they were bound by affection and past good deeds to help him and harm his rivals. Ideally, a good deed to a friend created an obligation to do good in turn, setting up a virtuous cycle which would bind the friends together.⁶ It was not possible for Seleukos to actually maintain a personal relationship with each of the myriad men in his service, but pay served as concrete evidence of a direct relationship between him and each individual payee, a benefaction in exchange for service which created an obligation to further service. This use of debt to create unequal relationships was characteristic of the developing Hellenistic kingship.⁷ Coinage also helped to define the nature of that relationship by broadcasting images that Seleukos wanted promoted, which presented him as a duly appointed successor of Alexander the Great and as a charismatic figure with right to authority as a result of his own spectacular feats. As tangible markers of Seleukos' power, his coinage tied individuals to him, just as coins had functioned in earlier periods amongst tyrannies, cities and mercenary employers since the introduction of coinage in the sixth century BCE.⁸

The different regions brought together within Seleukos' empire differed from one another in the role that coinage played in their local economies. Accordingly, Seleukos' monetary policy in each region differed. In Asia Minor, coinage had been a central part of the economy for centuries. There was a large supply of coinage on the Attic weight standard in circulation, chiefly Alexander coins, posthumous Alexanders, and the coinage of Lysimachos. Thus, there was little fiscal need for Seleukos to mint coinage.⁹ In Mesopotamia, coinage was still relatively novel, but there had been a flood of coinage minted at Babylon by Alexander after 325 BCE. Bronze coinage, which had a face value far in excess of its intrinsic worth, was an accepted instrument of exchange in the west, but unheard of in Mesopotamia; the advent of the "copper coins of Ionia" is recorded with dismay by the authors of the Babylonian *Astronomical Diaries*.¹⁰ Further east, in Bactria, coinage had only circulated as bullion before Alexander's conquest and there was very little coinage in circulation to meet

⁴ Trundle 2004, 90–91. Bonuses: Arr. 7.12.1 (Alexander at Babylon); Arr. Succ. 1.31–32 (Perdiccas' veterans at Triparadeisos in 321).

⁵ Diod. 20.47.4; Roisman 2012, 165–170.

⁶ Dover 1974, 177–184; Mitchell 1997.

⁷ For example, Bringmann 1993; Ma 1999, 182–193; Strootman 2014, 152–159.

⁸ Trundle 2006.

⁹ Aperghis 2004, 230–236; Duyrat 2004, 381.

¹⁰ AD -273B; Houghton and Lorber 2002, 3 and 27–44; Joannès 2004; Pirngruber 2017, 123–127.

new expenses in the region that had to be paid in coinage: pay for Greek garrisons and the costs associated with founding new cities.¹¹

One of the key questions in current scholarship on the Seleukid realm is how general, empire-wide concerns were balanced against local circumstances and actors. The seminal work of Amélié Kuhrt and Susan Sherwin-White stressed the importance of these local factors.¹² Without downplaying those factors, scholars like Laurent Capdetrey, Paul Kosmin, and Gerasimos George Aperghis have since presented arguments for the existence of unified institutions, ideologies, and economic policies that the Seleukids applied to their whole empire.¹³ A large part of Seleukos' success rested on his willingness to preserve and co-opt local power structures, while also systematising the regions under his control and asserting the supremacy of royal power. These two tendencies—regionalism and uniformity—could have come into conflict, but Seleukos and his heirs managed to create a system in which they actually reinforced one another instead. Seleukid coinage is a valuable example of how this balance was struck ideologically and economically.

Royal financial Policy

That there was a royal financial policy of some sort and that coinage played a role in it is suggested by pseudo-Aristotle's *Oeconomica*, which was probably written around 275 BCE with the Seleukid regime in mind.¹⁴ The text identifies four types of financial administration: the royal (*basilikê*), the satrapal, the civic, and the individual. The comments on royal finance are brief and possibly corrupt ([Arist.] *Oec.* 1345b 20):

Πρῶτον μὲν τοίνυν τὴν βασιλικὴν ἴδωμεν. ἔστι δὲ αὕτη δυναμένη μὲν τὸ καθόλου, εἶδη δὲ ἔχουσα τέσσαρα, περὶ νόμισμα, περὶ τὰ ἐξαγώγιμα, περὶ τὰ εἰσαγώγιμα, περὶ τὰ ἀναλώματα. Τούτων δὲ ἕκαστον, περὶ μὲν τὸ νόμισμα λέγω ποῖον καὶ πότε τίμιον ἢ εὖωνον ποιητέον, περὶ δὲ τὰ ἐξαγώγιμα καὶ εἰσαγώγιμα πότε καὶ τίνα παρὰ τῶν σατραπῶν ἐν τῇ ταγῇ ἐκλαβόντι αὐτῷ λυσιτελήσει διατίθεσθαι, περὶ δὲ τὰ ἀναλώματα τίνα περιαιρετέον καὶ πότε, καὶ πότερον δοτέον νόμισμα εἰς τὰς δαπάνας, ἢ ἀντὶ νομίματος ὥνια.

Let us look at the royal administration (*basilikê*) first, then. This has power over everything, but has four aspects: coinage (*nomisma*), outgoings (*exagôgima*), incomings (*eisagôgima*),¹⁵ and expenses (*analômata*). Taking each of these separately: on coinage, I mean what kind and when it should be made expensive or cheap; on outgoings and incomings, when and which things it will

¹¹ Houghton and Lorber 2002, xvii, 3–4, and 90; Bopearachchi 2004.

¹² Sherwin-White and Kuhrt 1993.

¹³ Capdetrey 2007; Kosmin 2014a; Aperghis 2004.

¹⁴ Aperghis 2004, 129–135.

¹⁵ These are usually translated as “imports” and “exports”. The interpretation of them as flows of goods between various bodies within the empire is followed here: Aperghis 2004, 118–121.

profit him to distribute, having received them from the satraps in the requisition (*tagê*);¹⁶ on expenditure, what is to be paid off and when, and whether expenses should be paid with coinage or with goods instead of coinage.

The author then moves onto the various ways that satraps and cities can collect revenue and never returns to royal finance again. Scholars have differed in the amount that can be made of this passage.¹⁷ Aperghis has argued that this text reflects a unified financial policy applied by Seleukos to the whole empire—one in which coinage played a central role. In his view, the foundation of new cities, the establishment of regional mints and revenue collection in coinage across the empire were closely connected phenomena. He proposes that the founding of cities was an economic strategy to open up “relatively underdeveloped land to economic exploitation”. Agricultural producers would bring their produce to market in the new towns, where they would sell their produce for coinage, which would then be used to pay tax to the Seleukid government. Founding cities would then be a way of increasing the amount of tax income collected in coin rather than kind.¹⁸ This theory has been challenged. The Krateuas and Mnesimachos inscriptions provide evidence that agricultural producers paid a portion of their tax in coin in the early Hellenistic period in Asia Minor, but they also seem to indicate that that payment in coin had already been established in Achaemenid times.¹⁹ All the evidence derives from (probably Antigonid) Asia Minor; it does not follow that payment of agricultural taxation in coin was extended to other Seleukid territories (the Ptolemaic grain tax was always collected in kind).²⁰ It is clear that the establishment of new foundations and new garrisons was accompanied by greater monetization of the east, it is far less clear (and far harder to prove) that this was a key goal behind the wave of city foundations, as Aperghis maintains.

Nevertheless, a few aspects of Aristotle’s passage are significant for this chapter. Firstly, although the author has disappointingly little to say about it, he does assume the existence of a royal level of financial administration. Secondly, the king receives, redistributes, and spends wealth, but beyond setting an amount that he is to receive (the *tagê*), it seems clear that the author expects the king to delegate most financial activity to local actors—the satraps and cities whose activities occupy most of the following pages. The third significant aspect is that, despite this decentralized approach, coinage and its production are placed firmly in the royal sphere.

¹⁶ Van Groningen 1933, 34–35 interprets this as a set amount (“contributions”, i.e. tribute); Aperghis 2004, 119–120 interprets this as the jurisdiction of the satrap. The former interpretation is preferred here.

¹⁷ Aperghis 2004 represents the maximalist approach; Thonemann 2015, 116 the minimalist.

¹⁸ Aperghis 2004, 117–262.

¹⁹ Billows 1994, 111–145; Thonemann 2009.

²⁰ Ptolemaic system: Von Reden 2001, 84–102; Manning 2003, 149–181; Criscuolo 2011.

Restriction of Coining and Proliferation of Minting

Indeed, by the end of Seleukos' life, coinage within his realm was produced almost exclusively by royal mints and the iconography of that coinage was either imitations of Alexander coinages or Seleukid royal iconographies. Under the Persians, governors and satraps had often minted coinage in their own names. The only examples of this practice under Seleukos were some coinages issued by the Bactrian satraps, which were eliminated in 290 BCE, and perhaps the Frataraka coinage produced by the local rulers of Persis, whose date and significance are disputed.²¹ With a few exceptions in western Asia Minor, which came under Seleukos' control only in the last year of his reign, civic coinages were not minted within Seleukos' realm either. It is clear that the Seleukid administration made an effort to mint currency throughout the empire. When Alexander had died, Babylon and Susa were the only mints east of the Euphrates. Seleukos opened a major mint at Seleukeia-on-the-Tigris to serve Babylonia and further mints in northern Mesopotamia and at Ecbatana. After 290, Antiochos I as co-regent opened around a dozen mints in Drangiana, Arachosia, and Bactria. In the west, the new foundations in Syria—Antioch, Apameia, Laodikeia, Seleukeia-Peria, and several others—each came with their own mint. In total, Houghton and Lorber identify around fifty mints operating under Seleukos I.²²

One interpretation might be that this proliferation of mints was part of an effort by Seleukos to assert sovereignty by claiming the exclusive right to mint throughout his realm. However, Thomas Martin has argued that the idea of a close connection between sovereignty and minting arises from medieval and early modern political philosophy and was not a concept that existed in the ancient world.²³ Martin's case study was early Hellenistic Thessaly, where the beginning of Macedonian rule in 353 BCE was accompanied by the cessation of Thessalian coinage. Rather than being something that any authority would rush to do, minting was an unattractive task that most avoided if they could. Minting in Thessaly was not suppressed by Philip II, it ceased because the volume of coinage produced by Philip II and subsequent Macedonian kings met the demand for coinage. Similar circumstances pertained in the Seleukid realm. So much Alexander coinage had been put into circulation in the eastern Mediterranean after 325 BCE that most authorities did not need to mint.²⁴ Within Seleukos' empire, it was the Seleukid administration that needed to make large payments for troops and city construction and thus—when and where

21 Sherwin-White and Kuhrt 1993, 23, 42; Mørkholm 1985, 103; Bactria: Bopearachchi 2005, 354–355. Frataraka: Engels 2013, with extensive bibliography.

22 Houghton and Lorber 2002, 11–14; Aperghis 2004, 214–216.

23 Martin 1985. Important qualifications: Howgego 1995, 39–44.

24 Meadows 2014, 182–183.

the existing money supply proved insufficient—it was the Seleukid administration that had to undertake the task of minting.

The large number of mints indicates a conscious decision to carry out coin production at a local level, instead of conducting all minting in a central location. Not all the Diadochi arranged their minting systems in this way: Ptolemy I produced most of his coinage in Egypt at a single mint, first Memphis and then Alexandria.²⁵ In the second century CE, four or five silver mints were sufficient for the entire Roman Empire.²⁶ Perhaps the Seleukid arrangement reflects the quality of the empire's transport network. The supply of bullion taken from the Achaemenids was dispersed throughout the empire in treasuries, like Kyinda, Susa, and Pergamon.²⁷ It was logical to mint locally, rather than gathering bullion to a central place, minting it and then sending it off to wherever it was required. But issues of transportation cannot explain everything. In practice, bullion must have been transported around the Seleukid Empire. Some areas of the empire—notably Mesopotamia—lacked native silver supplies but produced large amounts of silver coinage, while Bactria was the main source of gold for the whole empire.²⁸ Large military campaigns in the far east and west cannot have been funded purely from the local supply of precious metals. Whatever difficulties there were in transporting precious metal did not prevent some mints serving very large areas, most notably Seleukeia-on-the-Tigris, which was the only mint in central and southern Mesopotamia and the main mint for most of the eastern empire. On the other hand, the four cities of the Syrian Tetrapolis were so close to one another and so well-connected that transportation would not have been a serious problem, but each of them had their own mint under Seleukos.

The advantage of this system of multiple mints was that it allowed local flexibility, with each individual mint producing at the volume, with the iconography, and (initially at least) on the weight standard that that region required. This is obvious in the case of the mints in far-off Bactria that have already been discussed. It also helps to explain situations like the four mints of the Syrian Tetrapolis. These four cities all seem to have been built on a similar plan (their *insulae* have the same dimensions), but the construction of each was managed by its own chief-of-works. At Antioch, this was a man called Xenarios, assisted by three “supervisors of the buildings”.²⁹ The expenses arising from the process of constructing these new cities, which surely went on for several years, were probably not easily predictable. Rather than requiring the supervisors of the construction to appeal to a central authority for more coinage every time that a new expense arose, which would have been inefficient and would have placed a substantial amount of currency in the hands of a sin-

²⁵ Lorber 2018, 247–310.

²⁶ Rome, Kappadokia, Antioch, Alexandria, and the cistophoric mint: Beckmann 2012, 405–407; Yarrow 2012, 424–429.

²⁷ Diod. 18.62.2, 19.17.3, 20.108.2; Str. 13.4.1.

²⁸ Sherwin-White and Kuhrt 1993, 63; Potts 1997, 174, 178–179.

²⁹ Cohen 2006, 80–81.

gle official, each city had its own mint, where it could coin as actual costs required. Once the initial building was completed, some of these mints faded away (for example, Apameia), while others found new roles (for example, Laodikeia).

This flexibility extended to the organization of personnel involved in coin production. The monograms on coins are generally understood to represent individual responsible magistrates in the mints, probably operating as part of a college.³⁰ A series of coins, which were probably minted in Persis (perhaps at Persepolis) bear the Aramaic letters wāw and dālath as a control mark (SC 195). Aramaic remained the main language of administration in the east of the empire, as it had been under the Achaemenids, and this control mark suggests that that linguistic reality was taken into account in the staffing of the mint as well.³¹ On the other hand, it also seems that there were officials who were transferred from one mint to another. In several cases, the same monogram occurs at multiple mints in succession, suggesting that a magistrate was moved from one mint to another. Houghton and Lorber cite the example of , first encountered as a minor monogram at Ecbatana (SC 409) late in Seleukos' reign or early in Antiochos' reign, and subsequently the main monogram on several denominations at a new mint in Bactria (SC 469–471).³² These patterns imply the existence of mint officials whom the regime assigned on the basis of their technical expertise, managerial skills and/or personal relationship to the dynasty, rather than for knowledge of the particular local context. This is logical, given that coin production was a complicated and novel procedure in much of the empire, and a sensitive activity that Seleukos had a strong interest in maintaining control over. The same pattern of trusted agents being transferred from one region to another is seen in other spheres of the Seleukid administration, such as the deployment of Achaïos first as a general and city founder in the far east of the empire and then as a local lord (*kyrios tou topou*) in western Anatolia.³³ As in other spheres of administration, the system of mint administration established by Seleukos allowed a balance to be struck as required in each mint between local and imperial concerns.

The open Circulation System

The key feature of the monetary system of the Seleukid Empire was the so-called “open financial system” or “open monetary system” developed under Seleukos I and continued until the late second century BCE.³⁴ In this system, all silver coinages,

³⁰ Houghton and Lorber 2002, xxi.

³¹ Marest-Caffey 2016, 13–14, with earlier bibliography. These coins have sometimes been interpreted as local imitations, but they are die-linked to the undoubtedly Seleukid mint in Susa, implying that the mint was part of the Seleukid administration.

³² Houghton and Lorber 2002, xxi, 147, and 160–161.

³³ McAuley 2018.

³⁴ Le Rider 1986; Howgego 1995, 51–52; Meadows 2014; Thonemann 2015, 115–118, and 126–127.

even those minted outside Seleukos' realm, circulated freely within the kingdom as long as they were based on the Attic weight standard (drachm of 4.3 grammes and thus a tetradrachm of 17.2 grammes). This standard had already been used for the coinage of Alexander and the posthumous Alexander coinage issued in great quantity at a number of mints by his successors. It was thus the main standard in circulation in much of the Seleukid Empire and the standard expected by crucial groups of Seleukid payees, most notably Greek and Macedonian troops. The Seleukid system meant that this Alexander coinage continued to circulate throughout Seleukos' reign and for more than a century and a half afterwards. Georges Le Rider's analysis of the third-century hoard evidence from the Seleukid Empire shows that Alexander coinage consistently dominated hoards from both Asia Minor and the east, ranging between 52% and 95% of the total coins in a given hoard. The other coins in these hoards included some minted by the Seleukids, but also coinage of Lysimachos, the Antigonids, the Attalids, and some cities of Asia Minor.³⁵

What can we make of this open system? The system meant that regime did not need to mint as much coinage, effectively allowing Seleukos to profit from the large numbers of coins minted by Alexander the Great, Perdikkas, and even direct rivals like Antigonos and Lysimachos. Such coins paid troops, who spent the coins, which could then return to the Seleukid treasury through taxation and be paid out to troops once more. If coinage was not reminted before putting it back into circulation, this would have freed mints up to concentrate on converting bullion into coinage. On Aperghis' interpretation, Seleukid minting would have served only to "top up" this existing money supply.³⁶ The "simplicity of exchange" applied not just in the regions under Seleukos' control, but across the whole of Alexander's old empire and thus may have made it easier to incorporate new regions and subjects into the Seleukid realm.

The alternative to this open system was the "closed" or "epichoric system" created by the Ptolemies and the Rhodians *inter alios*. These polities enforced lower weight standards, with two results. Firstly, coinage minted by the polity did not leave their realms, since it was literally worth less elsewhere. Thus, they did not have to fear a contraction of the money supply and their soldiers were less likely to desert (since their savings would be worth significantly less outside the bubble of the closed system). Secondly, the minting authority could profit from the exchange rate by taking Attic weight coinage and returning coinage in the lower weight. In the Ptolemaic realm after 294 BCE this meant a profit of 2.9 grammes of silver (17%) for every exchanged Attic tetradrachm. This profit took place at the point in time when the Ptolemies introduced the system, when all Attic weight silver in circulation was exchanged for lower-weight coinage, and continuously as merchants made harbor at

³⁵ Le Rider 1986, 14–32. Cf. Aperghis 2004, 228–236.

³⁶ Aperghis 2004, 230–231 and 235–236.

Alexandria and had to exchange their Attic weight coinage for local coinage.³⁷ By operating an open system, the Seleukids surrendered these opportunities for profit.

In a sense, the open system was the default: Antigonos, Lysimachos, Kassandros, and other contemporaries all allowed any Attic standard coins to circulate within their kingdoms. There were also practical factors that meant that it would have been harder for Seleukos to create a closed currency system than for Ptolemy. The scale of the Seleukid Empire would have made it significantly harder to recall and reissue all the coinage as the Ptolemies had done. Whereas merchants mostly accessed the Egyptian and Rhodian systems through a single large port (Alexandria and Rhodes-town respectively), which was easily monitored, the Seleukid Empire had a range of ports and land emporia that would have had to be monitored. Egypt produced large quantities of grain, a product heavily in demand in the Aegean, and Rhodes acted as a central hub for the trade of grain within the Aegean, ensuring in both cases that merchants willing to exchange Attic weight coinage for lower weight coinage would continue to come. By contrast, the breadbasket of the Seleukid Empire was Mesopotamia and it was not economically viable to bring grain from there to Aegean markets, even after Seleukos gained a Mediterranean port in 301 BCE.³⁸

Nevertheless, the open system was not simply a policy of *laissez faire*; it required that a single weight standard be enforced throughout the realm. Although the Attic weight standard—as the standard of Alexander’s coinage—was familiar in most of the Macedonian territories it was not the sole or main standard in much of what would become the Seleukid Empire. Coinage of multiple different weight standards had circulated in the Achaemenid empire and Alexander’s conquest did not change this.³⁹ Silver coinage on a “Persic” standard, now known as “lion staters” and weighing between 15.09 and 16.83 grammes were minted at Babylon (SC 88–91) on Seleukos’ return to power in 311 BCE, with further issues accompanied by gold double Darics weighing 8.35 grammes at Babylon (SC 101–104), Susa (SC 183), and Ecbatana (SC 219–221) in c. 300–298 and a final issue at Susa (SC 184–186) from 291–288 BCE. Alongside these issues, Attic-weight Alexander coinage continued to circulate and to be produced in all three cities.⁴⁰ Further east, the satraps in Bactria minted their own coinage from 306 BCE, some of it on the Attic weight standard and some of it on a local weight standard with a drachm of 3.5 grammes and with the drachm rather than the tetradrachm as the main unit. When Antiochos I was established as co-regent over the east in 290 BCE, he inaugurated a Bactrian coinage with

³⁷ Egypt: Von Reden 2007, 43–48; Lorber 2018, 24–32, and 37–46. Rhodes: Ashton 2001, 82–85 and 97.

³⁸ Aperghis 2004, 73–76; Graslin-Thomé 2009, 271–273.

³⁹ Joannès 1994; Howgego 1995, 51–52.

⁴⁰ Houghton and Lorber 2002, 43–49, 67–68, 74–75, 79, 87. Another issue (SC 144) may have been issued at Seleukeia-on-the-Tigris. Aperghis 2004, 243–244.

Seleukid iconography, but still on this system of dual weight standards (SC 276–283). It was not until around 285 that minting in the local standard ceased.⁴¹

Essentially, both the “Persic” zone and Bactria were operating on a mixed system, with a lighter epichoric standard that would only circulate locally, ensuring that the local silver supply remained intact, and a heavier standard for inter-regional payments (for example, to soldiers who were not intending to stay in the area). This mixed model was a viable system that proved successful in many contexts in the Hellenistic period, notably in the Attalid kingdom and the *poleis* of western Asia Minor.⁴² But by the end of Seleukos’ reign, he had eliminated the epichoric weight standards in his realm and brought the regions into the open circulation system. Two plausible reasons can be offered for this. One is political: the effort to reduce the independence of Bactria and the “Persic” zone. Indeed, regional secession would be a recurring theme in Seleukid history.⁴³ Support for this interpretation is the fact that the suppression of the regional weight standard went along with the introduction of particularly Seleukid coin iconography might support this interpretation. A The other reason is financial: if Seleukos needed silver to pay for campaigns and city foundations elsewhere in his empire, these light-weight coinages would have to be melted down and restruck before he could use them, which would have been inconvenient, particularly in an emergency. For Seleukos, the political and financial advantages of the open system for his control of the empire as a whole trumped the local advantages of these epichoric standards.

Iconography

That same balance between local and empire-wide concerns that has been discussed so far with respect to mints, mint officials, and weight standards is also illustrated by the iconography of Seleukid royal coinage.⁴⁴ Seleukos’ mints did not all employ the exact same iconography, but there was a clear set of motifs and images, reflecting the developing Seleukid dynastic myth, which appear on royal coins throughout the empire. Key motifs are the anchor, the horned horse, the horned horseman, the elephant, and bronze coinage with Medusa on the obverse and a butting bull on the reverse. The exact significance of many of these motifs is the subject of discussion, but their connection to Seleukos is beyond doubt. Some of them were connected with specific episodes or alleged events of Seleukos’ career. Others presented ideological links—with Alexander, the gods, virtues of rule—that served to legitimize his rule. Ex-

⁴¹ Houghton and Lorber 2002; Bopearachchi 2005.

⁴² Howgego 1995, 54–56; Meadows 2013; Thonemann 2015, 119–121.

⁴³ Holt 1999; Chrubasik 2016; Strootman 2018.

⁴⁴ On Seleukid coin iconography: Houghton and Lorber 2002, 5–9; Erickson 2018a, with bibliographies. Cf. Lorber 2018, 46–59 on Ptolemy I. On the system of stories that grew up around Seleukos: Visscher 2016; Ogden 2017.

cept for the anchor, which is present on Babylonian coinage from 311 BCE (SC 80), these motifs first appear around 305, simultaneously with the adoption of the royal title,⁴⁵ and its appearance on coin legends at Susa (SC 173). The introduction of Seleukid motifs at other mints is accompanied by the introduction of the legend there as well. Thus, the introduction of these motifs is clearly linked to Seleukos' assumption of royal authority.

There is a methodological question about the amount of significance that can be given to the legends and iconography of these coins. Coins are small objects, and their primary purpose was not to propagate images but to act as economic instruments. Moreover, coinage with Seleukid iconography was a minor part of the coinage in circulation compared to the masses of Alexander coinage which continued to be minted in the Seleukid kingdom until the late third century BCE, long after Seleukos' death. These issues can be overstated. Although coins were small, most were very high value objects and they were closely observed, precisely because of this economic value—close inspection was essential to distinguish good coinage from forgeries. The dominance of the Alexander coinage makes the decision to mint any coinage with Seleukid motifs a significant one—the desire to propagate the iconography was so strong that it overcame the economic argument for producing money in the established type.⁴⁶ This was not inevitable: contemporaries of Seleukos, like Antigonos Monophthalmos and Kassandros never introduced iconography or legends on their precious metal coins which communicated messages about themselves.⁴⁷

Two examples from opposite ends of Seleukos' career illustrate the seriousness with which this iconography was taken and the amount of central direction that could be exercised by Seleukos over coin iconography across the whole empire. After Seleukos recaptured Babylon in 311 BCE, a small anchor—Seleukos' personal symbol—was added to the reverse of the posthumous Alexander coinage that was minted there. At some point in the following years, this symbol was carefully erased from the die and, in one case, from a coin already in circulation (SC 94, Fig. 1). Arthur Houghton and Catharine Lorber propose that this took place during the brief period around 311 BCE, when Demetrios recaptured Babylon.⁴⁸ If they are correct, this episode demonstrates the power of coin iconography to communicate Seleukos' authority and the degree to which his rivals saw it as a threat to their own authority even at the very beginning of his reign. The second example comes from the period very shortly after Seleukos' assassination, when Antiochos I was fighting to reconstitute his father's realm. In the midst of this, around 279 BCE, Antiochos introduced a new tetradrachm design throughout the realm, which depicted his own face on the obverse and Apollo seated on an omphalos on the reverse (SC 310, 323, 327,

⁴⁵ Boiy 2011, 7–11.

⁴⁶ On these methodological issues: Elkins and Krmnicek 2014; Erickson 2018a, chapter 0.5.1.1–4.

⁴⁷ Price 1991, 88, 130–131 and 208–209.

⁴⁸ Houghton and Lorber 2002, 43. Bosworth 2002, 210–245 for this reconquest. On the anchor: App. Syr. 56.286–287; Kosmin 2014, 96–99; Ogden 2017, 45–49.

331, 335, 378, 409, 437). This motif emphasized the idea of the dynasty's divine descent from Apollo and probably also the idea that Antiochos as a new Apollo was the inevitable successor to Seleukos as a new Zeus.⁴⁹ That Antiochos was able to change the iconography of all the coinage in the empire—in the midst of a major crisis—is indicative of the amount of central control that these first Seleukid kings were able to exercise over coinage iconography. That he considered it worthwhile to do so indicates the ability of coin iconography to communicate a consistent ideology about the ruling power to the whole empire.⁵⁰



Fig. 1: Reverse of SC 94.3d, Silver Coin of Seleukos I Nikator with erased anchor, Babylon II, 311–305 BCE.

Alongside this, though, some of Seleukos' coinages seem to have been issued with iconography that reflected the local interests of the area in which they were minted. Often these coinages only circulated within specific areas of the Seleukid Empire.⁵¹ The earliest and most significant example are the low-weight 'lion staters' of Babylon, Susa, and Ecbatana mentioned above (SC 88–91, 183–186, 219–221, Fig. 2). They deployed types with Ba'al seated on the obverse and a lion on the reverse, which had originally been minted by the satrap Mazdai/Mazaios in the 340s as satrap of Kilikia and Syria under Artaxerxes in the 340s and continued by him as Alexander's satrap of Babylon from 331 to 328 BCE. In this case, the iconography had developed local currency, so Seleukos made the practical economic decision to retain it.⁵² As with the non-Attic weight standard, Seleukos seems to have made an effort to phase this sort of iconographic variation out as soon as he was able to.

The low-weight Bactrian coinages discussed above are significant for this point. The low-weight coins issued by the satrap Sophytes had depicted a victorious general on the obverse (Sophytes? Seleukos?) and a rooster on the reverse and imitations of Athenian tetradrachms. When Antiochos as co-regent initially retained the Bactrian weight standard in SC 276–283, he issued it with Seleukid types rather than using

⁴⁹ Wright 2018; Erickson 2018a, chapter 2.

⁵⁰ Cf. Chrubasik 2016, 146–178 on the use of coinage iconography by usurpers in the second century BCE.

⁵¹ Mørkholm 1991, 72.

⁵² Nicolet-Pierre 1999 and also, see n. 40 above.



Fig. 2: SC 88, Silver Stater of Seleukos I Nikator, Babylon II, 311–305 BCE.

the old iconography—an example of the political desire for a unified iconography trumping the economic value of a type with local recognition (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3: Silver Drachm of Sophytes, Uncertain, 315–305 BCE. SC 278, Silver Hemidrachm of Seleukos I Nikator, Antiochos I Soter, Ai Khanoum/Bactra, 285–281 BCE.

Imagery reflecting a local economic context is very limited in the coinage with Seleukid iconography. The only possible examples are the very small mint symbols (*parasēmata*) that consistently appear on coins from some mints: the horse's head on the coinage of Ecbatana, which recalls the famous Nisean horses that were bred in the region and the dolphin on the coinage of Laodikeia-by-the-Sea (examples in Fig. 4). These symbols indicate that there was some value in making the particular source of these coinages clear to those who inspected them closely. In the Laodikeian

case, this is usually connected with the currency's use in Mediterranean commerce and a desire to communicate its reliability to merchants.⁵³ Thus, the degree of variation permitted for economic reasons seems to have declined over time.



Fig. 4: Detail of SC 202, Silver Tetradrachm of Seleukos I Nikator, Ecbatana, 311–295 BCE. Detail of SC 36, Silver Tetradrachm of Seleukos I Nikator, Laodikeia ad Mare, 300–280 BCE.

A major aspect of the iconography chosen by Seleukos for his coinage was its polyvalence—it was designed to communicate messages about Seleukos' authority simultaneously in a variety of different local contexts. For example, a butting bull appears on the reverse of most of Seleukos' bronze coinage, while horses, horsemen, and elephants with bull's horns are found on bronze and silver coinage. This bull referred to a specific story about how Seleukos wrestled down a sacrificial bull that had escaped from its pen during Alexander's campaign with his bare hands. This story presented Seleukos as a superhuman figure and emphasized Seleukos' connection to Alexander. The bull was one of the animals most closely associated with Zeus in Greek thought, so it served to associate Seleukos with the king of the gods and with the Macedonian king's traditional role as priest of the Zeus-cult. At the same time, the bull was also linked to kingship in Babylonian and Persian thought.⁵⁴ Thus, the same motif would communicate the message that Seleukos' authority was legitimate and divinely ordained to audiences from the Aegean to the Iranian plateau for quite different reasons. This was not limited to coinage, but was part of a broader iconographic programme—statues of Seleukos also bore bull's horns—and it is part of a wider policy of cultural polyvalence that has been well-studied since the work of Kurht and Sherwin-White.⁵⁵ Coinage thus played an important role in the effort to construct a kingdom in which all subject peoples, not just those conversant with Greco-Macedonian culture, were cognizant of Seleukos' royal authority and understood it in as similar a manner as possible.

⁵³ Houghton 1999, 180–181; Houghton and Lorber 2002, 25.

⁵⁴ App. Syr. 57; Ogden 2017, 61–63, 109, and 274; Erickson 2018a, chapter 1.4.

⁵⁵ Bull's horns: Smith 1988, 40–41. Polyvalence: Massina 2011; Kosmin 2014b; Strootman (forthcoming).

Standardization and Variation

Over the course of Seleukos' reign, then, we see an increasing amount of standardization in his coinage, in terms of mint organization, weight standards, and iconography. There were probably practical reasons for pursuing standardization. The existence of a coherent iconography and a single standard made it easier to requisition coinage from one region for use elsewhere. Perhaps it was hoped that the single standard would encourage the economic integration of the Mediterranean littoral with the Seleukid territories in Babylonia and further east.⁵⁶ Limiting local autonomy and distinctiveness was probably also a factor. Recent research has challenged the old idea that the investment of local actors with significant authority was a result of the decline and weakness of the Seleukid monarchs. These scholars have argued that not only was devolution the only plausible way for an empire on the scale of the Seleukid kingdom to operate, but that it was actually a source of strength and dynamism.⁵⁷ Pseudo-Aristotle's *Oeconomica* makes clear the degree to which this was true in financial matters. For this decentralized system to be effective, there had to be centrifugal forces which held these local actors into the Seleukid kingdom. Coinage was a key aspect of this. The royal oversight exercised over mints and the establishment of a single weight standard integrated local actors into an economic system that was dominated by Seleukos, while the iconography of the coins emphasized the relevance of the Seleukid dynasty to local religions, ideologies, and identities.

Paul Kosmin has stressed the importance placed—already under Seleukos I—on marking out and defining the empire as a Seleukid space.⁵⁸ For all that Thomas Martin has demonstrated that the right-to-coin and sovereignty were not linked concepts in Antiquity, there *was* a link between coinage and the assertion of royal power in the Seleukid Empire. The enforcement of a single weight standard that applied to the whole Seleukid realm helped to define that space, in a way that would have had a tangible impact on the lives of the wealthy throughout the empire. A number of standardized mina weights survive, mostly from the second century BCE, which use Seleukid symbols of the elephant, the anchor, and often the Seleukid era-system (Fig. 5 and 6).⁵⁹ No such weights survive from the reign of Seleukos I himself, but they had nevertheless the impact of enforcing a standard. The king claimed the power to define value itself and that had a tangible effect on how people traded in their local marketplace. The weights also show that that same iconography was deployed in other media as well as coinage, but the fact that coins were valued and were exchanged between people made them a particularly significant tool for the propagation of this Seleukid iconography. The presence of Seleukos' name and

⁵⁶ If so, this hope was largely disappointed: Le Rider 1991; Duyrat 1994.

⁵⁷ For example, Strootman 2018; Mitchell 2018; McAuley 2018. Dissenting: Chrubasik 2016.

⁵⁸ Kosmin 2014.

⁵⁹ True and Hamma 1994, 200–205.

symbols on his coins emphasized that they came from him. Each coin thus became a concrete symbol of relationship of benefaction between the king and the recipients of coinage—both Seleukos’ direct payees and those who subsequently received the coinage.



Fig. 5: Mina weight with elephant, Seleukeia-Pieria, second half of third century BCE.

Fig. 6: Hemi-mina weight with Anchor and Dolphins, Seleukeia-Pieria, 151–150 BCE.

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