
Julian Wunsch, *Großmacht gegen lokale Machthaber. Die Herrschaftspraxis der Seleukiden an den Rändern ihres Reiches*, Harrassowitz Verlag, 2022, 430 pp. [ISBN 978-3-447-11905-4].

It is at least since the time of William Tarn (who, notoriously, in his major *The Greeks in Bactria and India* had likened the Seleukids to a shell devoid of its crustacean dweller) that historians have been engaged in assessing the nature and impact, local, regional, and on a broader, Afroeurasian scale, of the Seleukid Empire, unparalleled in extent until at least the rise of the Arsakids within the political chessboard of the post-Alexandrian world and capable of surviving (and more often than not thriving) for nearly two and a half centuries until the establishment of the Syrian province by Pompey in 63 BCE. Similar to the case of the Achaemenids, with whom the house of Seleukos has often been compared (not infrequently in order to stress, stereotypically, its –particularly pronounced– ‘Asiatic’ character compared to the other Hellenistic Empires, for many historians past and presents the ultimate smoking gun signaling the germs of an inevitable, incipient decline), in recent years several scholars have been hard at work on a patient deconstruction of the available sources, placing increasing emphasis on the weight, both quantitative and qualitative, of indigenous evidence (administrative texts and in languages other than Latin and Greek) in an attempt to propose a new, more nuanced and ultimately proactive picture of an Empire which, despite ups and downs, which ought to be taken as the bread and butter of every imperial history, and not as indexical of structural or personal shortcomings, remarkably succeeded in preserving a hegemonic status from Anatolia to Central Asia and from Armenia to Syria for the better part of its long trajectory. Now known among specialists under the name of *New Seleukid History*, this to date predominant historiographical trend began to assert itself with two seminal works edited by the late A. Kuhrt and S. Sherwin-White, significantly entitled *Hellenism in the East* and *From Samarkand to Sardis*¹. Since then, more contributions have been published, which addressed, sometimes in a comparative and/or long-term perspective, court dynamics, visual culture, the role of princesses and queens both closer to the king and further away across the Empire, administrative practices, literary production, and royal ideology. The upcoming issue of the second volume of the *Payravi Lecture Series* (edited by T. Daryaei, M. Canepa, and R. Rollinger) that singles out the Seleukid Empire as a pivotal moment in the process of transforming the imperial history of the Ancient Near East can rightly be identified as the (provisional) culmination of a long historical (and historiographical) debate, whose contribution to an interpretation from as holistic a perspective as possible of the history of pre-Islamic Eurasia cannot be underestimated.

Compounded not least by a particularly obstructive state of the evidentiary record (fragmentary and often sporadic tradition of narrative texts, documentary sources not always easily accessible, enormous linguistic variety, and sometimes considerable difficulty in acquiring archaeological literature, especially relating to contexts where geopolitical conditions made excavations arduous if not impossible), a systematic study of the different local realities over which the Seleukids claimed authority has been

¹ A. KUHRT – S. SHERWIN WHITE (1993): *From Samarkand to Sardis: a new approach to the Seleucid Empire*, Los Angeles.

lacking until now. In her recent, highly sophisticated *The Horde. How the Mongols Changed the World*², Marie Favereau has keenly observed that the investigation of frontier dynamics provides perhaps the most appropriate strategy to better understand the mechanisms underlying the functioning of an Empire as a whole (FAVEREAU 2021, 224). If this is true, one can more easily understand the significance for a comprehensive assessment of Seleukid history of a thorough examination of the dynamics at work along the immense frontiers of their Empire.

Hot from the press, Julian Wünsch's very recent, extremely ambitious, and exceedingly erudite monograph, tellingly entitled *Großmacht gegen lokale Machthaber. Die Herrschaftspraxis der Seleukiden an den Rändern ihres Reiches* sets itself the laudable, and daunting, task of filling this gap in the current Seleukid bibliography. The volume is divided into an introduction, five chapters, a short epilogue (359-362) and a set of fine grained indexes (of the literary, epigraphic, and numismatic sources, of names, places, and notable concepts: 363-430), which do both the interested general reader and the specialist a remarkable favour, for they offer an enormous help in navigating an exceedingly vast array of sources, oftentimes in multiple languages, not always part of any researcher skills set. As for the other chapters of the monograph, after the introduction the author addresses the sources providing the background of his treatment (9-41). Then, in chapter 2 (43-71), Wünsch addresses the prehistory of Seleukid local power by taking into consideration the satrapal system of the Achaemenids (although his discussion is remarkably constrained to Asia Minor, blending out everything East of Susa). The main body of the book is of course devoted to an exhaustive treatment of Seleukid powerholders. Chapter 3 is therefore divided in three further sub-sections: Asia Minor (75-158), Levante (159-200), and the Eastern satrapies (200-309). In chapter 4 (311-341), Seleukid strategies of frontier-zones management are compared against those of the Arsakid Empire and the late Roman Republic. The final chapter (343-357) is conceived as a commented overview of the findings presented in chapter 3, and provides the author's assessment of the Seleukid Kings' achievements, or lack thereof, in dealing with the local powerbrokers across their domains.

In the face of the breath-taking scope of the book and the commendable mastery of the primary documentation showcased by the author, the volume's conclusions can be described as remarkably conservative, while the overall impression the reader gets of Seleukid affirmative action resembles Tarn's much more than the current historiographic trend. The monograph's polemical focus (made explicit right from the start) is an essay by David Engels³ devoted to what he calls the feudalization of the Ancient Near Eastern world, whose underlying thesis, later taken up and further considerably polished by Engels himself and numerous other representatives of the *New Seleukid History*, takes the existence of numerous, seemingly (semi-) autonomous local strongmen, sometimes even dynasties, such as in Elymais or Baktria, not as a weakness, but as a strength and a remarkable proof Seleukid power's flexibility, resilience, and adaptive capabilities in the face of at times seemingly overwhelming challenges. As becomes clear from the discussion in Chapter 5 (especially 346-355), Wünsch comes to essentially opposite conclusions. The inability of both ruling Kings and their appointed heirs to maintain a constant presence in the territories they claimed to rule (a common trend of almost any other Empire in world history, all the more so given the

² M. FAVEREAU (2021): *The Horde. How the Mongols Changed the World*, Cambridge (Mass.).

³ D. ENGELS (2011): "Middle Eastern 'Feudalism' and Seleucid Dissolution", in K. ERICKSON – G. RAMSAY (eds.): *Seleucid Dissolution. The Sinking of the Anchor*, Wiesbaden: 19-36.

limitations of pre-modern logistics), the recurrence of inter-dynastic conflicts, by the way far from alien to the other Empires discussed in the volume, from the Achaemenids to the Sāsānids, which by no means seem to have affected the effectiveness of dynastic rule across the respective territories and finally, the emergence of equally if not more competitive military powers –Arsakids and Romans– within the political horizon of Seleukid power would have contributed from the very beginning of the dynasty to considerably and increasingly weaken its ability to maintain effective control over its frontier-zones, the more so as distance and topography made what the author calls “direkte Herrschaft” (direct rule) particularly challenging, if not impossible. From this standpoint, even those cases in which the literary sources openly refer to massive imperial intervention in the dynamics of local politics (as it is the case, for example, with Xerxes of Armenia and Euthydemos of Baktria during Antiochos III’s Eastern campaign) are interpreted by the author, again in controversy with Engels, as tactical solutions or even downward compromises on the part of a King whose power was limited either by logistics, insufficient warfare capacity or by the privileged position of the Seleukid *pars Occidentis* within the imperial framework (the latter, it might be worth noting, perhaps a direct consequence of the existence of perennially active adversaries such as the Ptolemaic Empire more than of a lack of commitment in the Irānian territories, as well argued among others by Sonja Plischke in her *Die Seleukiden und Iran*⁴), when not by a blend of all the above.

Such an approach, it should be noted not without some regret, appears inadequate and self-limiting, dependent as it is on an understanding of power relations in the ancient world as a zero-sum game whose theoretical foundation can be found in the so-called realistic school of political thought. However, as irrefutably demonstrated by the debate around the so-called *Imperial Turn*, whose major insights have recently been summarized in a towering *prolegomenon* (over five hundred pages) to the monumental *World History of Empire*⁵ edited by Bang, Bayly, and Scheidel emblematically entitled *The Imperial Experience*, Empires, not only ancient ones, are not nation states, but first and foremost networks of social, familiar, and economic ties, within which situations of overlapping, intersecting and simultaneous competition are not the exception, but the current state of affairs. On top of that, the emphasis on the necessity on the part of the (Graeco-Makedonian) Seleukid rulers to move with sometimes exasperating caution in an attempt not to antagonize local population whose representatives are more often than not taken as, at best, tactically supporting and, at worst, openly defying, an alien government (this is allegedly the case, for example, of the *fratarakā* dynasty in Pārsa/Persis) betrays the influence of a way of thinking about cultural contact and categories of sociopolitical belonging in the ancient world, particularly during the so-called Hellenistic period, the flaws and paradoxes of which have been discussed and effectively challenged in recent monographs, among which special mention should be made, given the topic they deal with, of *Visual Style and Constructing Identity in the Hellenistic World* by Miguel John Versluys⁶, and *Eurasian Localisms* by Milinda Hoo⁷).

It follows that *Großmacht gegen lokale Machthaber* undoubtedly represents an important, comprehensive, and therefore extremely welcome annotated repertoire of

⁴ S. PLISCHKE (2014): *Die Seleukiden und Iran: die seleukidische Herrschaftspolitik in den östlichen Satrapien*, Wiesbaden.

⁵ P. F. BANG – C. A. BAYLY – W. SCHEIDEL (eds.) (2021): *The Oxford World History of Empire*, Oxford.

⁶ M. J. VERSLUYS (2017): *Visual Style and Constructing Identity in the Hellenistic World*, Cambridge.

⁷ M. HOO (2022): *Eurasiam Localisms*, Stuttgart.

primary, secondary sources and bibliographical material for the study of a subject, the local, on-the-ground nature of Seleukid imperial rule, which is still waiting to be approached from a solid theoretical and methodological background in order to fruitfully contribute to the burgeoning scholarship on Eurasian empires in antiquity, especially from a comparative, global perspective.

M. FERRARIO
Università degli Studi di Trento
Marco.Ferrario@unitn.it
