Introduction

During the Hellenistic Age—roughly the last three centuries BCE—the political history of the eastern half of the Ancient World was dominated by three Macedonian dynasties: the Seleukids, ruling a vast land empire in the Middle East and Central Asia (312–64 BCE); the Antigonal kings of Macedonia, who tried to control Greece and the Balkans until their kingdom was destroyed by the Romans in 168 BCE; and the Ptolemies (323–30 BCE), who ruled a maritime empire in the eastern Mediterranean from their capital Alexandria, an empire which comprised Egypt but was not therefore an Egyptian empire. In the second century BCE, the Attalid kingdom, based in Pergamon, emerged as the predominant state in the Aegean region, and around 100 Pontos on the Black Sea and Armenia temporarily became major Hellenistic powers.

Of these states, the empire conquered by Seleukos I Nikator (‘The Victorious’, ruled 312–281 BCE) was the principal successor state of Alexander the Great (336–323 BCE), who himself had taken over the dominion of the Persian Achaemenids when he defeated the last Persian king, Darius III. In the third century BCE, the Seleukid dynasty laid claim to an empire stretching from the Hindu Kush to the Aegean coast. In 188 the emergent Roman Empire forced Antiochos III to give up Asia Minor. About the same time, Khurāsān was lost to the Parthians. As a result of Parthian expansion the provinces further east became fully independent under Greek rulers. After the death of Antiochos IV in 164 dynastic strife caused a steady decline of the empire until in 64 BCE it disappeared from history almost unnoticed, its former territories being carved up by the Roman, Parthian and Kushan empires.¹

¹ On the empire in general see Elias Joseph Bickerman, Institutions des Séleucides (Paris 1938); Amélie Kuhrt and Susan Sherwin-White, From Samarkhand to Sardis.
In the Seleukid empire new forms of court culture and political ideology developed. A similar evolution took place in the Ptolemaic empire and, through intermarriage and diplomatic exchange, the two dynasties continually influenced each other in this respect. The Seleukid rulers adopted and reshaped the legacy of their Greek, Macedonian and Persian forebears to create a form of monarchy that was neither ‘western’ nor ‘eastern’. Appropriated by the Parthian kings and Roman emperors, the culture and ideology of the Hellenistic courts eventually formed the basis of royal ideology and court culture in both Western Europe and the Islamic East.2

Monarchical states, of course, were no new phenomenon in the Ancient world. Until recently, however, the Hellenistic Age has been studied almost exclusively by scholars trained as Greek historians who often tended to consider Hellenistic kingship in contrast with the world of the polis, the autonomous Greek city state. They either disregarded its eastern antecedents or accentuated eastern influences on Hellenistic kingship as perversions of Classical Hellenic culture. Since the 1980’s there has been a trend to place Seleukid kingship more thoroughly in an Eastern context, though at times this has led to minimising or ignoring its Greco-Macedonian aspects.3

Given the centrality of kingship in Hellenistic studies—traditional historiography sees monarchy as the principal defining element of

---


3 See e.g. the introduction in Kuhrt and Sherwin-White, From Samarkhand to Sardis, esp. p. 1: “[i]t is our firmly held view that the Seleukid kingdom was an eastern empire”; for an example of the completely opposite view, see Burkhard Meißner, Hofmann und Herrscher: Was es für Griechen hieß, Freund eines Königs zu sein’, Archiv für Kulturgeschichte 82 (2000) pp. 1–36, characterising the Seleukid, Ptolemaic and Antigonid courts as “Höfen im antiken Griechenland” (p. 36).