In this essay, I will discuss a lengthy note from a text published in England in 1628, entitled Marmora Arundelliana. The text is an edition of Greek marble inscriptions in the collection of Thomas Howard, fourteenth earl of Arundel. It was prepared primarily by the English polymath John Selden, who was well known for his classical and Biblical scholarship. Selden also sat in Parliament in 1628, where he was a vocal critic of royal policy.¹ He provided commentary for the edition drawn from his extensive knowledge of the classical world. The edition centered on a recent acquisition by the earl from Asia Minor. In 1627, one of his agents brought back to London marbles that contained a chronology of Athens as well as a series of treaties and decrees from the Third Syrian War (ca. 217 BC), involving the two Hellenistic-era cities of Smyrna and Magnesia-by-Sipylos. Selden’s work on deciphering the chronology has occasioned some scholarly interest, but my purpose here is to examine one of his notes on the treaty for what it can tell us about some neglected aspects of his thought.

The note refers to the phrase “agathe tuche,” which may be translated as “cum bona fortuna.”² Selden’s note complements his interest in the often unique ways in which formulas are used in the ancient treaty. As he shows in his note, the usage of “agathe tuche” here is unique because it was closely associated with the “fortune” of the Seleucid king (Seleucus II). Selden finds in this phrase evidence of an idea of monarchy that based itself on the divine body of the ruler and used his physical person to create


² Selden, Marmora Arundelliana; siue Saxa Graecè incisa ex venerandis priscæ Orientis gloriae rudibus… Publicauit & commentariolos adiecit Ioannes Seldenus I.C. (London, 1628), 25. All subsequent references to this work will be cited parenthetically in the text by page number.
legal contracts and obligations. Selden gathers references to explain this tradition and ultimately to dismiss it, along the way redirecting the scholarly investigation of fortune along new lines. The very length and depth of his note (it takes up five pages) reflects his unease at any kind of mystical, supernatural, and arbitrary kingship, as well as the necessity he saw in 1628 of stopping such concepts before they gained credence.

Selden begins to interpret the phrase by using an analogue from the Roman world. He relates a story from Suetonius about the emperor Vitellius and his astrologers. Vitellius issued a decree banning astrologers from Rome in October of 69 AD, at which point the astrologers responded with the pronouncement, saying that Vitellius would die before the end of the month, using a Latin version of “agathe tuche” in their pronouncement.3 As Selden explains it,

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\text{Ubi tamen non solum edictorum formulam eos irrisisse puto, sed etiam sive artis suae, cuius item amantior erat imperator, vocabulis rite servatis ipsis (si Graece scribierant, quod est satis simile veri) sive intellectis & indicatis (si Latine) homonymia acerius eum sugillasse. (129)}
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Here nevertheless I think that they were mocking not only the formula of edicts, but also of their own art, of which the emperor himself was a devotee, keeping the terms well guarded (if they wrote in Greek, which is likely enough) or, making them understood and made public (if in Latin) through an equivalent term, mocking him all the more fiercely.

Selden makes the point that the origin of this phrase “tam ex artis ritu quam ex edicti formula, petenda erat” (ibid.) (should be sought as much from the usage of an art as from the formula of the edict). In other words, Selden argued that in order to understand this formula, one must look to its intellectual and cultural origins and connotations.

Selden takes this opportunity to provide a lengthy discussion of astrology not only in the ancient world but also in the classical scholarship of his own day. He goes on in his note to link the formula in the treaty to the habit of swearing oaths on the “fortune” of the king, in this case King Seleucus II (called “Callinicus”). Selden writes that “Mos invaluit in Oriente iurandi saepius per Fortunam, Salutem, Vitam, Caput Principis. Neque inter haec in Gentilitatis Theologia discrimen erat” (147) (More often in the East the custom of swearing on the fortune, health, life,