BABYLONIAN, MACEDONIAN, KING OF THE WORLD:   
THE ANTIOCHOS CYLINDER FROM BORSIPPA   
AND SELEUKID IMPERIAL INTEGRATION

Rolf Strootman

‘Antiochos the Great King, [...] king of the world, king of Babylon, king of 
countries, [...] foremost son of Seleukos, the king, the Macedonian [...] am 
I’. Thus begins the Cylinder of the Seleukid ruler Antiochos I Soter. This 
beautifully preserved cuneiform document from Seleukid Mesopotamia 
dated to 268 BCE has long been recognized as a crucial source for under-
standing Macedonian imperialism in the Middle East. A foundation 
inscription found intact in the sanctuary of the Babylonian god Nabû at Bor-
sippa, the Cylinder offers a unique snapshot of the empire’s attitude 
towards indigenous populations and local culture. Attempts at analysis are still rare, 

1 *ANET* 317 = Austin 1981, no. 189, ll. i.1–6. Throughout the article I have used the 
translation of the Cylinder by M. Stol and R.J. van der Spek: preliminary edition online 
at www.livius.org. Abbreviations used in this paper: *ABC* = A.K. Grayson ed., *Assyrian and 
Babylonian Chronicles* (Locust Valley 1975); *ANET* 3 = J.B. Pritchard ed., *Ancient Near Eastern 
Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (3rd ed. Princeton 1969); *CAD* = A.L. Oppenheim et al., 
eds., *The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago* (Chicago 
1965); *BCHP* = R.J. van der Spek and I.L. Finkel, *Babylonian Chronicles of the Hellenistic Period* 
(forthcoming; preliminary edition online at www.livius.org); *BM* = British Museum, London; 
*SE* = Seleukid Era.

2 I define ‘empire’ with Barkey 2008, 9, as ‘a large composite and differentiated polity 
linked to a central power by a variety of direct and indirect relations, where the center exer-
cises political control through hierarchical and quasi-monopolistic relations over groups 
different from itself. These relations are, however, regularly subject to negotiations over the 
degree of autonomy of intermediaries in return for military and fiscal compliance’. Cf. d’Altroy 
2001, 125: ‘The outstanding feature of preindustrial empires was the continually metamor-
phosing nature of relations between the central powers and the societies drawn under the 
empire’s aegis’. New approaches to premodern empires emphasizing network relations, nego-
tiation and change go back to the basic notion of Mann 1986 that tributary land empires ‘are 
better understood as intersecting, often shifting networks of power than as rigidly structural 
polities’ (Hämäläinen 2008, 441), and supersede the ‘postcolonial’ association of premodern 
empires with the European national states’ colonial empires of the Modern Age, as was pop-
ular especially in the 1970s and 1980s (cf. Bang and Bayly 2011, ix, who dismiss this equation 
by simply speaking of ‘precolonial land empires’). With ‘imperialism’ I mean the actual prac-
tice of empire (conquest, war-making, control of resources, tribute collecting, gift exchange, 
negotiation, patronage etc.); see also the remarks on political diversity as a defining aspect 
of empires in n. 5, below.
however, as the Cylinder has been appropriated as evidence in support of the postcolonial paradigm that emphasizes the continuity of Near Eastern culture in the Hellenistic East. Only very recently have new readings of the Cylinder been proposed.\(^3\)

It is not my intention to give a full analysis of the Cylinder. I will take the Antiochos Cylinder as a point of departure to investigate the entanglement of the global and the local in an imperial context, viz., the Seleukid Empire. More specifically, the aim of this paper is to explore the hypothesis that the contact zone where the encounters between city and empire in the Seleukid Middle East took place was, apart from the court, the religious sphere, particularly local sanctuaries and local cults.

Taking my cue from Charles Tilly’s model of state formation, I understand the Seleukid Empire as basically a negotiated enterprise.\(^4\) The empire was in essence a tribute-taking hegemonial system overlaying a variety of different peoples, religions, and, most importantly, different polities.\(^5\)

In Tilly’s model for understanding the dynamics of early modern state formation, which in an adapted form can work for the Hellenistic world as well,\(^6\) the fundamental entanglement of monarchies and cities is emphasized and explained: monarchies can in principle coerce cities into submission but they are also dependent on cities because they need the surpluses collected at civic markets to finance and support their coercive means. The use of military force against walled cities, often disposing of their own military apparatus or protected by rival imperial powers, moreover is costly and time-consuming.\(^7\) Cities in their turn can be dependent on monarchies for

\(^3\) Erickson 2011; Kosmin forthcoming.
\(^4\) Tilly 1990; 1994.
\(^5\) As modern scholars often find characteristic of empires in general; cf. the definitions by, e.g., Sinopoli 1994, 159 (‘composed of a diversity of localized communities and ethnic groups, each contributing its unique history and social, economic, religious, and political traditions’); Howe 2002, 15 (‘by definition big, and they must be composite entities, formed out of previously separate units. Diversity [...] is their essence’); Barkey 2008, 9 (‘large composite and differentiated polities’); and Turchin 2006, 3 (‘given the difficulties of communication in pre-industrial times, large states had to come up with a variety of ad hoc ways to bind far-flung territories to the center. One of the typical expedients was to incorporate smaller neighbors as self-contained units [...] leaving their internal functioning alone. Such processes of piece-meal accumulation usually lead to complicated chains of command and the coexistence of heterogeneous territories within one state’). Pace Sommer 2000, who assumes a conscious choice for a policy of ‘indirect rule’ in Seleukid Babylonia: the Seleukids, like other imperial powers in the Ancient Near East, presumably did not have much of a choice in this respect.
\(^6\) Strootman 2007, esp. 26–30; 2011b.
\(^7\) In the Hellenistic Age, both the number of walled cities as well as the strength of civic fortifications increased greatly, notably in Greece, Asia Minor and the Black Sea region, as