

Seleukid Perspectives – Band 1

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## Seleukid Ideology



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## CHAPTER 3

### THE KING-SHIP OF THE SELEUKIDS: AN ALTERNATIVE PARADIGM FOR THE ANCHOR SYMBOL

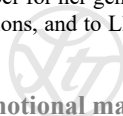
*Eva Anagnostou-Laoutides*

*Abstract:* The anchor has been one of the most puzzling Seleukid symbols, introduced by the dynasty's founder, Seleukos I. Historical sources of the Roman era refer to it in connection with certain oracles and divine omens designed to confirm Seleukos' Apolline ancestry and his preordained rise to the throne. A less mythological explanation refers to Seleukos' time as Ptolemy's admiral: according to this interpretation, Seleukos' naval victories during this time inspired him to employ the anchor as symbol of his naval superiority. After reviewing the extant textual and numismatic evidence and summarizing the scholarly arguments on the issues arising from them, I explore an additional cultural paradigm regarding the Babylonian god Marduk and his safe mooring of the ship of state, celebrated during his New Year festival. Following Marduk's divine example, earthly kings, including Nebuchadnezzar II whom the Seleukids admired, were able to halt the ships of their enemies and claim divinely sanctioned victories. In my view, this paradigm accords with Seleukos' conciliatory cultural policies designed to appeal to both his Greek and non-Greek subjects, especially since the ship-of-state metaphor was ubiquitous in the Greek culture but also popular, as the evidence indicates, in Babylon and Kilikia, a region largely exposed to the cultural influence of Babylon during the Neoassyrian period. The concept of safe anchoring was amply promoted in Near Eastern royal inscriptions and advocated in the magnificent state boats which decorated the temples of Marduk and Nabû in Babylon and Borsippa. Seleukos and his son Antiochos I were known to have participated there in local cultic activities. Thus, Near Eastern lore about Marduk's ship of state likely encouraged Seleukos' choice of the anchor as a symbol of his royal legitimacy, a symbol employed more systematically after his final victory against Antigonos in 301 BCE.

#### I. INTRODUCTION: QUIZZING THE ANCHOR AS A SELEUKID SYMBOL

Seleukos Nikator favoured the anchor as the symbol to be represented on two of his coin types: the SUSA WREATH coins that bear the name of Alexander and are now dated to the period from 311/310 to 309/308 BCE;<sup>1</sup> and on his Alexander

\* I am deeply grateful to Catharine Lorber for her generous comments on an earlier draft of this paper and her bibliographical suggestions, and to Lloyd Taylor for sharing drafts of his then-



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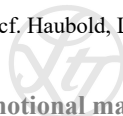
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tetradrachm issues, which first appeared around 308/307 BCE until the time Seleukos assumed the royal title in 305 BCE,<sup>2</sup> and then again after his decisive battle at Ipsos. His choice has puzzled and divided students of Hellenistic history for nearly half a century,<sup>3</sup> during which, however, our understanding of the cultural milieu of the early Seleukids has changed considerably. As a result, we have increasingly moved away from a Hellenocentric reading of the dynasty and toward the view that the Seleukids, in line with the spirit of cultural interface advocated by Seleukos' (refusal to repudiate his) marriage to the Baktrian Apama,<sup>4</sup> were keen to appeal to both their Greco-Macedonian and eastern subjects everywhere in the empire, but notably so in Babylon, where Seleukos first rose to power.<sup>5</sup>

In revising our approach to the Seleukids, alongside a thorough review of the numismatic evidence,<sup>6</sup> we have sought insights from cuneiform sources, including the *Babylonian Chronicles from the Hellenistic Period*,<sup>7</sup> the *Babylonian Astronomical Diaries*,<sup>8</sup> the Cylinder of Antiochos I, where he famously addresses a long prayer to the god Nabû in the traditional style of Babylonian kings,<sup>9</sup> and from Berossos' *Babyloniaka*.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, we have not yet attempted to explain Seleukos' choice of the anchor as his royal symbol in the context of his appreciation of Babylonian lore, especially in light of the temporary erasure of the symbol from coin dies from about 305 BCE, when Seleukos proclaimed himself king, until after the battle the Ipsos.

forthcoming papers and teaching me so much about Seleukid coinage. I'm also thankful to Andreas Pappas for sharing his work with me and to Panos Iossif for alerting me to an idea he is currently working on regarding the role of the anchor in the founding myth of the Delphic oracle and the arrival of Dionysos on the site. For further acknowledgments for assisting me with the transliteration and translation of Akkadian inscriptions, see ns. 98 and 117.

- 1 Taylor 2019, esp. 64 and 78–80; also see Taylor 2022, 15f.
- 2 The *Babylonian King List*, BM 35603, p. 53, obv. 6 refers to 305 BCE or SE 7 as the first year of Seleukos' reign. See Sachs and Wiseman 1954, 203 and 205; also Boiy 2000, 116, citing (in his n. 19) Grzybek 1992, 191f.; Taylor 2015, 70f. notes that Seleukos was on campaign in the East and therefore absent from Babylonia when he was pronounced king.
- 3 Newell 1938, 109f. (nos. 290–297) with discussion on p. 112; also 171–173 (nos. 461–471) with discussion on pp. 175–181 (nos. 496–506) and 181f.; pls. XII.11–19, XXI.5–23, and XXV.4.
- 4 See Plut. *Demetr.* 31.3–4; Arr. *Anab.* 7.4.6 (on Seleukos' marriage to Apama); Grainger 1990, 12; Wright 2010, 41–46 (on the mixed ethnic background of the Seleukids); Wright 2012, 17f. On Apama as an important Seleukid queen, see Sherwin-White and Kuhrt 1993, 127; Sherwin-White 1987, 7f.; Mehl 1999, 19f. For further references, but also for some caution against an ethnic interpretation, see Coşkun, ch. 4 (on Miletos) in this volume.
- 5 See Anagnostou-Laoutides 2013; 2017, 148–150; 2022a and 2022b; Beaulieu 2014; Kosmin 2013 and 2014a.
- 6 Wright 2005; Erickson 2019.
- 7 Finkel, van der Spek, and Pirngruber 2020.
- 8 van der Spek 1993; cf. Haubold, Steele, and Stevens 2019.
- 9 Erickson 2011; Strootman 2013; Stevens 2014; Kosmin 2014a; Anagnostou-Laoutides 2017, 160f.
- 10 Beaulieu 2006; van der Spek 2008; cf. Haubold, Lanfranchi, Rollinger, and Steele 2013.



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In response to these gaps in our knowledge, I offer here a review of the ancient sources and modern scholarly interpretations of the anchor for the first Seleukid king before drawing attention to a different paradigm regarding the importance of cultic boats in the ancient Near East and their metaphorical meaning from the earliest times down to the Hellenistic period. In this context, I argue that the sacred boats which decorated the temples of Marduk and Nabû in Babylon, and are mentioned in a clay barrel of Nebuchadnezzar II, housed in the University of Pennsylvania Museum, advocated the role of the gods as helmsmen of the state. The king, who typically posed in Babylon as ‘the beloved of Marduk and Nabû’,<sup>11</sup> was understood to emulate their role on earth, and was thus entrusted by the gods with the task of navigating the ship of state to safe mooring. The metaphor of the king as a helmsman at the wheel of the ship of state was fittingly re-employed as part of Seleukos’ royal ideology as it could readily resonate with his Greco-Macedonian subjects, who were familiar with its rich imagery in Archaic lyric and elegiac poetry,<sup>12</sup> Athenian tragedy,<sup>13</sup> and the works of Plato.<sup>14</sup> In fact, as the ancient scholiast of Aristophanes notes, the metaphor was pervasive in ancient Greek literature.<sup>15</sup>

## II. THE SCHOLARLY RECEPTION OF THE SELEUKID ANCHOR

In his study of the western Seleukid mints, Newell<sup>16</sup> argued that some of the earliest representations of anchors on Alexander type coins had been minted at Arados in Phoenicia in 316 BCE when Seleukos possibly raided the city and took control of its mint as Ptolemy’s admiral.<sup>17</sup> He based his argument on the affinity of these coins with issues from Arados minted by Philip III Arrhidaios, who reigned from 323 BCE until his death in 317 BCE. Newell also argued that some other Alexander type coins with anchors were minted at Marathos.<sup>18</sup> However, both suggestions have been challenged by Houghton who divided these coins into four groups. Of these, Groups III and IV are dated around 300–301 BCE.<sup>19</sup> Group I of these coins consists of tetradrachms, drachms, and fractions and is dated from around 311–

11 See Cyrus Cylinder, ll. 22: LUGAL-ú-tu ša <sup>d</sup>EN u <sup>d</sup>AG *ir-a-mu pa-la-a-šu a-na tu-ub lib-bi-šú-nu iḫ-ši-ḫa* L[UGA]L-ut-su (‘whose rule Bēl (= Marduk) and Nabû dearly love, whose k[in]gship they desired for their own delight’); trans. Schaudig 2019, 23; translit. Finkel 2013, 131. Cf. [https://www.cais-soas.com/CAIS/History/hakhmaneshian/Cyrus-the-great/cyrus\\_cylinder\\_complete.htm](https://www.cais-soas.com/CAIS/History/hakhmaneshian/Cyrus-the-great/cyrus_cylinder_complete.htm)

12 Archil. F 105 and 106 (on the Homeric overtones of the simile, see Page 181f.); Alkaios fr. 6a (also in Herakl. *Alleg. Hom.* 5) and 208; Thgn. 667–682, 857–860.

13 Aisch. *Ag.* 1003–1006; *Eum.* 16; *Sept.* 1–3, 109–116, 208–210, 795f., 1072–1078; *Soph. Ant.* 175–191, 1096f., 1344f.

14 Plato *Resp.* 488a–489d; *Euthyd.* 291d; *Pol.* 302a–b; *Leg.* 641a, 758a–b and 945c.

15 *Schol. Ar. Vesp.* 29: ἀεὶ οἱ ποιηταὶ τὰς πόλεις πλοίοις παραβάλλουσι.

16 Newell 1941, 192f. with his n. 4.

17 Cf. Ogden 2011, 100f. claiming on the basis of this suggestion that perhaps Antigonos was the first to mint anchor coins, a view he later rejected; see Ogden 2017, 49 with n. 94.

18 Newell 1941, 194.

19 Houghton 1991, 116.



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