

Seleukid Perspectives – Band 1

Franz Steiner Verlag

Auszug aus:

## Seleukid Ideology



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## CHAPTER 2

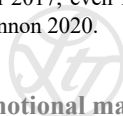
### ROYAL PROPAGANDA AND THE CREATION OF ROYAL STATUS FOR SELEUKOS I

*Kyle Erickson*

*Abstract:* Recent research has elucidated a variety of facets of Hellenistic ideology in general and Seleukid ideology in particular. The present chapter seeks to synthesize the major elements of myth creation and argues, using the fragmented narrative of Appian as a starting point, that it was actively pursued under Seleukos I. Emphasis is put on the historical context of each element of the narrative. A comparison is made to the models set by Alexander the Great, the Ptolemies, Antigonids and Lysimachos, to highlight how Seleukos engaged in the early Hellenistic dialogue on kingship to develop his own royal persona and succeeded in passing his empire intact onto his son.

One important priority for ruling elites after a change in the governing regime is establishing their new status as legitimate rulers. Even in modern democratic governments, where the legitimacy of the new government is less often in question, there still remains a series of performances and the careful use of symbols designed to showcase the legitimate transfer of power. Thus, in countries with strong traditions of governmental legitimacy, these traditional elements help to confirm the passing of power even after closely contested elections. The 2020 American elections tested the power of these symbolic acts of transferring legitimacy from one group to another, as outgoing-President Trump sought to undermine the credibility of the underlying process. The appearance of the outgoing President at the inauguration of the President ideologically underpins the notion of a continuity of legitimate government. Following the 2000 and 2016 American elections, the inaugural ceremonies successfully marked the transition of one President to the next, even if they did not end most of the political discussion about an illegitimate president.<sup>1</sup> Lest we consider that this is solely the result of the modern democratic tradition, a similar case could be made for ancient transfers of power, with the attendant ritual

1 For the process of establishing and attacking legitimacy in the vote counting in Florida see Agre 2001; see also Laden 2002. Following the 2016 election, Hillary Rodham Clinton conceded and attended Trump's inauguration in 2017, even if some figures continued to question the legitimacy of Trump's victory; see Cannon 2020.



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performances.<sup>2</sup> This chapter will explore how the early Seleukid court ‘exploit[ed] those means of representation and communication that they did have at their disposal’ to create the image of a legitimate Seleukid King.<sup>3</sup> I argue that this propaganda helped enable them to successfully transfer power from one generation to the next.

## I. ALEXANDER AND THE CREATION OF ROYAL LEGITIMACY UNDER THE SUCCESSORS

In states without institutionalised processes for transferring power, a wide variety of options are available to establish a legitimate new regime by demonstrating the status of the new elite as rightful rulers.<sup>4</sup> In cases where the new power has overthrown the establishment, as was the situation with Alexander in Persia, several options are available.<sup>5</sup> The old power structure can be presented as illegitimate in an effort to reduce its status, an older power structure can be revived to the status of a golden age that has now returned, or the new rulers can claim a new mandate to rule based on other factors.<sup>6</sup> None of these possibilities are mutually exclusive, nor does employing any of these methods require that they match the reality on the ground.<sup>7</sup> For example, the removal of the ‘Persian yoke’ from Egypt by Alexander in real terms did not require a wholesale dismantling of the prior system of rule or the complete removal of all of the major political players.<sup>8</sup> Thus the establishment of a new regime does not need to actually replace all of the old structures of power; the process needs primarily to elevate the status of the new ruling elite and to create the perception of change.

For the successors of Alexander the Great, these problems were more acute and more complicated. First, the king they sought to replace had developed an uneasy balance between the Macedonian and Persian dynastic traditions. Furthermore, he governed, much like the Achaemenids, through a range of subordinates, both

2 See Winter 1993 for the role Mesopotamian palaces played in ensuring the vitality of rule; see Price 1984 for the performance of legitimacy rituals by subjects in the provinces. The most viable Seleukid comparison in the first generations is the handing over of Stratonike from father to son (App. *Syr.* 59–61.308–327; Plut. *Demetr.* 38). See discussion below.

3 Trampedach and Meeus 2020b, 13.

4 By legitimate power, I mean power that is not solely dependent on the use of violence to maintain it and may be recognized by other outside powers. This legitimacy must be confirmed through the acceptance of the status of the new elite as rulers. This process of creating a new power structure appears mostly concerned with crystallising the status of the new ruling elite. See Trampedach and Meeus 2020b, 9–11. See Briant 2002 for Alexander within a Persian context.

5 I consciously avoid the term ‘regime change’ given the modern political connotations.

6 See Zanker 1988 and Galinsky 1996 for Augustus’ use of the past in the creation of his new regime.

7 Ma 2013, 2.

8 See Badian 1965, 171f.



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Macedonian and non-Macedonian, whose loyalty he courted extensively or replaced.<sup>9</sup> In many cases, these subordinates had developed their own basis of power in the regions with their own long dynastic traditions. Above all, the new empire was bound together by Alexander's charisma and personal favour. As a result, after his death in Babylon on 11 June 323 BCE,<sup>10</sup> the ghost of Alexander continued to exercise an inordinate amount of influence over his successors' claims to power.<sup>11</sup>

Those successors were faced with the challenging options of establishing themselves in the traditional Macedonian ruling house, while lacking the essential Argead blood, or establishing their own power relying on local elites or by appealing to various pasts. Recent scholarship has demonstrated how the *Diadochoi* and *Epigonoi*, the first two generations of his successors, manipulated Alexander's image to establish their status as legitimate sovereigns.<sup>12</sup> Further, the vast array of new communities under Macedonian rule presented new opportunities to exploit different possibilities of kingship within a regional context. As a result, the development of royal propaganda for each of the kingdoms took place not in a vacuum but as part of a dialogue, not only between the dynasty and local populations, but between the emerging dynasties as well. In the Ptolemaic kingdom, a dual approach was taken depending on the audience; for the Greek audience they were presented as the legitimate successors to Alexander and for an Egyptian audience they were presented as the legitimate Pharaohs.<sup>13</sup> Another successor, Lysimachos, appears to have based his status mostly on his service as Alexander's bodyguard.<sup>14</sup> For the local elite who would have formed, at the very least, the lower echelons of the previous regime, the new regimes' attempts to legitimate their rule posed a different set of challenges in assimilating themselves into the new power structures or opposing them.

## II. SELEUKOS AND ALEXANDER

The legitimacy-building process developed a different narrative in the Seleukid Empire than the other empires. As is the case with all the other successors who served with Alexander, Seleukos likely claimed his status as a candidate for rule based on his personal service during the campaign, thus presenting himself as a legitimate claimant to at least a share in Alexander's empire.<sup>15</sup> As his own successes increased, he moved from attempting to present his tenuous status as Alexander's

9 Lane Fox 2007; Tuplin 2014.

10 Depuydt 1997; Boiy 2004, 116f.

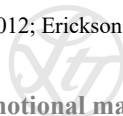
11 Meeus 2009.

12 Bieber 1964; Goukowsky 1978; Bohm 1989; Stewart 1993; Dahmen 2007.

13 For dual Greek-Egyptian imagery in the poetry associated with the Ptolemaic court, see Stephens 2003. For Ptolemaic strategies of legitimacy, see Hazzard 2000; Hölbl 2001, 92–98; Pfeiffer 2008, 64–70; Heerink 2010; Stadler 2012; Fischer-Bovet 2014; Pfeiffer 2014; Caneva 2016; Caneva 2018; Caneva 2020; Caneva and Lorenzon 2020. For the importance of intercultural interaction in Ptolemaic Egypt, see Moyer 2011; Caneva 2019.

14 Bosworth 2002, 274–278.

15 Austin 1986; Meeus 2009; Erickson 2012; Erickson 2019.



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