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FOLIA ORIENTALIA
VOL. 35 1999
PL ISSN 0015-5675

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THE MOST IMPORTANT TRAIT OF THE SELEUCID KINGDOM'S HISTORY?

Through his book *The Seleucids · The Decline and Fall of their Empire*¹ and its Polish edition² simultaneously published by the Polish Academy of Arts and Sciences and The Enigma Press, Cracow, Józef Wolski, the Nestor of Polish Near and Middle Eastern Studies, has granted his colleagues and students the pleasure to read his new contribution on the meeting of civilisations in the Near East during a period of major importance for the histories of both European civilisations and Asiatic cultures. This is appreciated the more as Wolski takes a position decidedly apart from what he has called "exaggerated Eurocentrism".³

Thus, the strength of *Seleucids* is evidenced through Wolski's considerations regarding the connections of influences and contemporaneous events colluding in the wear and tear to which the huge kingdom had inevitably been subjected from without and within since its very beginnings in 312 B.C. until the time when Cn. Pompey brought the Seleucid monarchy to its end in 63 B.C. and made Syria into a Roman province, i.e., during the approximately 250 years of the Seleucid era. Consequently, Wolski characterised his history of the Seleucids by the subtitle "The Decline and Fall of their Empire".⁴

¹ = Polska Akademia Umiejętności: Rozprawy wydziału historyczno-filozoficznego (Kraków 1999) ISBN 83-86110-38-8 (bound) ISBN 83-86956-55-0 (paperback) 143 pp., with numerous illustrations & 3 maps [hence <Wolski> *Seleucids*]. This is a translation into English provided by Bruce Duncan MacQueen.

² With the slightly varying, yet more correct [see below] title *Dzieje i upadek imperium Seleucydów* "History and Fall of the Seleucid Empire".

³ *Seleucids* pp. 5, 21, 71 f. et al.

⁴ Not quite consistently, however, he notes on p. 9 of *Seleucids*: "In approaching the reconstruction of the history of the Seleucid state in a way that differs in many respects from earlier accounts, which are not satisfactory, it would be advisable, in my opinion to pass over

This subtitle reminds of Edward Gibbon's voluminous work covering in seventy and one chapters the history of the 'Roman Empire' in both the West and the East from the Antonines through the Middle Ages to the time of the fall of Constantinople (1453) and which includes what happened among its neighbours and in its aftermath. It appears, however, that the Polish title is more suitable to the contents the author of *Seleucids* intends to delineate in an otherwise masterly cut relief or outline.

Surely, in absolute terms the Seleucid era with its 250 years has been considerably shorter than the period of time Gibbon felt – in the latter half of the 18th century – he should treat as a distinct section of human and cultural history. Yet, as his definition did not befit the course of historical events and the achievements in the civilisations involved in the slightly more than 1400 years from Antoninus Pius (138-161) to the end of the Eastern Empire, the tremendous amount of information now available for the 250 years of the rule of the Seleucids and their symbiosis, to a certain extent,⁵ with their subjects⁶ and their interconnections and conflicts with peoples in their envi-

its foundation, which in any event does not give grounds for serious doubts and concentrate on its fall and the reasons for that fall, since such a retrospective may contribute to extracting the main problems that beleaguered the Seleucid Empire in the course of its history."

⁵ Notwithstanding the weight apportioned to the first marriage of Seleucus I Nicator to Apame, the daughter of Spitamenes, with whom he produced his vice-regent for the 'upper provinces' (mainly Iran) [since 293] and successor [281-261 B.C.], Antiochus 'Soter', and irrespective of features of Persian and other's incorporation in the organisation of the Seleucid state [cf. H. Bengtson "Die Bedeutung der Eingeborenenbevölkerung in den hellenistischen Oststaaten" *Welt als Geschichte* II pp. 135-142, cited from repr. in *Kl. Schriften zur Alten Gesch.* (Munich 1974) pp. 293-303], the differentiation between the autochthonous commoners of the kingdom and the upper layers of this state's society, not withstanding whether they were of Macedonian or Greek stock or indigenous barons, *continued*, principally, as in Ptolemaic Egypt.

⁶ Cf., e.g., Wolski's reference on pp. 21 f.: "Seleucus oriented his policy quite properly assessing the strength of the powerful Iranian equestrian order, and the weakness of his position in Iran, which was after the former center of two great powers, first the Medes, and then the Persians, while his own position was based solely on the Greco-Macedonian army (.....) From Heinz Kreissig's research^[*] it can be inferred unambiguously that neither Alexander nor the Seleucids carried out any economic or social reforms in the state, the structure of which also remained unchanged, with the obvious exception of new Greek colonies. The aristocracy, then, not only in Iran, but also in Armenia and Asia Minor, controlled considerable power, since they could make use of the rural population, their subjects, as an armed force." This is the more remarkable as the supreme rulers of this kingdom, i.e. the Greco-Macedonian element, as Wolski rightly pointed out (*Seleucids* pp. 10 f.) constituted only a fraction.

* Here Wolski refers to Kreissig's *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft im Seleukidenreich = Schriften zur Geschichte und Kultur der Antike* 16 (Berlin 1978).

ronment⁷ are not sufficiently described by the emphasis on the gradual disintegration of their kingdom as its characteristic trait.

Whatever the causes may have been, the loss of substantial parts of their domain on various grounds⁸ did not merely debilitate Seleucus I (312-281 B.C.) and Antiochus I (281-261) rule. Despite considerable territorial gains chiefly in the West and towards the north,⁹ the cessation of territories in the east beginning with the exchange of lands for elephants trained to be used in warfare left Seleucus and his successors without sufficient man-power to bring their wars to the desired success.¹⁰

Wolski Seleucids then relates how the decline *continued* under Antiochus II Theos (261-246) and Seleucus II Callinicus¹¹ (246-223) through revolts, the Syrian Wars, fraternal strife in ca. 241-239 between Seleucus II Callinicus and Antiochus Hierax, ruler in Asia Minor, and by further dynastic struggles and the like, and how the Seleucid kingdom, subsequent to the rebellion¹² of Andragoras tried to withstand the rise of the Arsacid Kingdom in Parthia. In ca. 232 an expedition of Seleucus II Callinicus into the Iran failed.¹³ In this confrontation "the Seleucids – a fact of which little account has been taken in the scholarly literature – had to contend with a power that imbued their call to battle with ideological elements", the Parthians¹⁴ "calling themselves the heirs of the Achaemenids."¹⁵ Consequently, Wolski partially relating to earlier studies of his continued that Arsaces' state "represented a significant power, and it could not have been otherwise, in view of the later military successes won by the Arsacids in the war with the Seleucids. the Seleucids

⁷ See, for instance, E. Yarshater (ed.) *The Cambridge History of Iran* vol. 3 in 2 pts.: *The Seleucid, Parthian and Sasanian periods* (Cambridge etc. 1983), usually referred to by Wolski through the siglum C.H.I. [henceforth *CHI* III,1 and 2].

⁸ Discussed in *Wolski Seleucids* on pp. 7 ff.

⁹ See through *CHI* III,1 pp. 18 f. *Seleucids* pp. 20 f.

¹⁰ Cf. *Seleucids* pp. 20 f.

¹¹ "Who has beautiful victories". Cf. E. Schwyzler *Griechische Grammatik* = *Handb. der Altertumswissenschaft* II.1.1 (Munich 1959) p. 429

¹² A "recurrent phenomenon" *Wolski Seleucids* p. 17.

¹³ To this venture Wolski devoted a special chapter, his seventh, on pp. 57-60. See again below.

¹⁴ Missing in *Seleucids*.

¹⁵ *O.c.* p. 52. One would wish Wolski had incorporated in the context of his pages 52 f. more information regarding the Parthians and their realm throughout the historical periods, especially as the histories of the Parthians and of the Seleucids and thereafter their Roman successors were inseparably interconnected [see, e.g., K. Schippmann *Grundzüge der parthischen Geschichte = Grundzüge* 39 (Darmstadt 1980), esp. ch. IV].

did not succeed, despite their periodically renewed efforts in the 3rd and 2nd centuries, in driving the Arsacids out of the territory they had seized, just as they failed to drive the Galatians out of Asia Minor. This constitutes an incontrovertible fact, regardless of the form relations took between the Seleucids and the Arsacids.”¹⁶

Wolski notes correctly the crisis of the years 246/45 - 239/38 and that “the statement of Appian, that the dynastic wars constituted an essential cause of the weakness and ultimate collapse of the Seleucid state, finds irrefutable confirmation in the situation”¹⁷ he discussed with the conclusion that “it was the events in Iran, however, that were the real catastrophe for the Seleucids. The rise of the dynast Andragoras, and initially of the dynast Diodotus as well, were telling signals of the weakness of the <Seleucid kingdom’s> state structure on its peripheries. The assumption of the title of king by Diodotus¹⁸ was a gauntlet openly thrown at the feet of the Seleucid kingdom; the invasion of Iran by Arsaces, the chieftain of the Parni, was an even greater challenge. Seleucus II Callinicus had to answer this challenge in arms.”¹⁹ However, Wolski maintains versus others that in the course of this venture and thereafter when Antiochus III ‘the Great’ (223-187) reached in ca. 207-205 an understanding with Arsaces II, the Arsacids’ control of Parthia and Hyrcania could not be relinquished, and the role of Diodotus I and II cannot

¹⁶ *O.c.* pp. 52-54.

¹⁷ *O.c.* p. 55.

¹⁸ Not Diodotus II as V. A. Smith [*Coins of Ancient India · Catalogue of the Coins in the Indian Museum Calcutta* Vol. 1 (Oxford 1906, repr. Delhi and Varanasi 1972) p. 7] considers likely. W. W. Tarn [*The Greeks in Bactria & India* (Cambridge 1951, repr. 1966) p. 74] acknowledges the royal title for Diodotus II only and claims that the coins show a “young man but the dates make it almost certain that he was not a son of the Seleucid princess; he must have been Diodotus’ son by a former marriage.” While Wolski *Seleucids* offers throughout portraits and pictures of coins [mainly in the National Museum in Cracow] showing Seleucid rulers and occasionally their spouse, also *inter alia* a Parthian ruler of the Arsacid period, no coin of Diodotus I giving evidence to the importance of his claimed status of king [see *o.c.* p. 12] is presented. For such see R. Göbl *Antike Numismatik* vol. 2 (Munich 1978) p. 209b and table 107, no. 2188 and 2189; for evidence of its genuineness cf. also O. Guillaume *Graeco-Bactrian and Indian Coins from Afghanistan = French Studies in South Asian Culture and Society* 5 (Delhi, Oxford, New York 1991) pp. 119-121 For further differentiation between the coins of Diodotus see already the great orientalist Horace Hayman Wilson’s (1789-1860) *Ariana Antiqua · A Descriptive Account of the Antiquities and Coins of Afghanistan* (repr. Delhi 1971), p. 219.

¹⁹ Wolski explains this Iranian expedition as a consequence of Seleucus II Callinicus’ successes in “stabilizing the situation in the western part of his state” (*o.c.* p. 56), but there does not seem to be any proof for this assumption.

but be considered as such of forerunners whose historical importance was to be merely destructive to the cause and condition of the *Seleucid kingdom*.²⁰ When Diodotus II reversed the policy of his father Diodotus I and turned around to make an alliance with the ruler of Parthia, the Parthian king was enabled to concentrate his forces against Seleucus II. While Diodotus II was successful to save his country, his interest and that of his successors was, hence, more directed to Central Asia and India.

Notwithstanding the lack of clarity caused - *inter alia* - by an obvious variation of the sources being extant -, Wolski comes to the conclusion that “in reality, from the last years of the 4th century B.C. and in the course of the 3rd, the Seleucids lost Paropamisades, Arachosia, Bactria, Sogdiana, Parthia, and Hyrcania, which is to say, half of Iran. However, “the losses incurred by the Seleucid state were not confined to Iran. ... the other, western periphery of the state was likewise the scene of serious territorial losses. Apart from Pergamum and its immediate vicinity, ruled ... by his cousins, the Attalids, and” the later ‘Galatia’ Wolski rightly mentions and characterises “several other regions”, <i.e.> Bithynia, Pontus, Cappadocia, and Armenia.”²¹

Surely, with Antiochus III, the brother of his predecessor Seleucus III Soter-Ceraunus (226-223), a new era of Seleucid history was to come, though one ought not to try to discover any improvement in the conditions of the rule through his royal house and in its realm. Again, Antiochus III had to cope with rebellions and war in *both* the West [climaxing in his defeat in 217 at Raphia through the hands of Ptolemy IV Philopator in the 4th Syrian war (219-217) forcing Antiochus to cede Coele-Syria and Palestine] *and* in the Eastern parts of what had once been conquered by Alexander and was claimed by the Seleucids, but had been lost for long.

Wolski is aware of the considerable strength the Seleucid forces had attained when Antiochus III turned to the East,²² and, likewise, using his own *L'Empire des Arsacides*²³ and with qualified reference to M. J. Olbrycht²⁴

²⁰ See, further, J. Wolski “Die Iranier und das graekobaktrische Königreich” [German transl. of “Les Iraniens et le royaume gréco-bactrien” in *Klio* 38 (Berlin 1960) pp. 110-121] in F. Altheim - J. Rehork (eds.) *Der Hellenismus in Mittelasien = Wege der Forschung* 91 (Darmstadt 1969) pp. 266 f.

²¹ *O.c.* p. 59.

²² *Seleucids* p.75.

²³ Louvain 1993.

²⁴ *O.c.* p. 76. Wolski relates here to M. J. Olbrycht’s *Parthia et ultiores gentes. Die*

he reasonably assesses the sources to avail on the Parthian side.²⁵ However, the adventurous long march to the East²⁶ brought about naught but “demonstrated the resilience with which the Seleucids, in this case personified by Antiochus the Great, fought for their position as a world power, to recover the lands inherited from Seleucus I Nicator”.²⁷

Other than in the initial and former periods of the Seleucid kingdom, the Greek and the Hellenised elements had greatly increased in this realm,²⁸ and Antiochus III had thoroughly reformed the kingdom being, by its sheer size, still enormous. Yet, doubtless, his involvement with the fugitive Roman arch-enemy Hannibal, whom Antiochus III put in command of his naval forces and their operations in the Aegean,²⁹ not only lent a pretext to the clash with Rome but, likewise, to the Romans’ attack upon and conquering his vastly superior forces in the great battle at Magnesia in 190 or 189 B.C. This brought about the effect of the motion of pliers, i.e. of Rome and her “allies” or rather subjects in the west and the Parthians and others in the east to choke the Seleucid state to its end. There cannot be any doubt that one should speak of the period beginning with Antiochus’ last years and his succession by Seleucus IV Philopator (187-174) as the period of the decline of the Seleucid kingdom leading to the actual fall and extinction of this dynasty in 63 B.C.³⁰

In the *eleven* chapters of his condensed treatment of the history of the Seleucid dynasty and its kingdom Józef Wolski has presented with great skill what he considers significant, i.e., the gradual decline of an Empire being more or less identical with its history, of an empire that had never become solidly stabilised. While there is no doubt that Wolski has recognised and described a significant, though just not unique³¹ trait among the ancient po-

politischen Beziehungen zwischen dem arsakadischen Iran und den Nomaden der eurasiatischen Steppen (Munich 1998).

²⁵ O.c. p. 76 ff.

²⁶ See *Seleucids* pp. 78-81 with reference to Tarn (via n. 16) and A. K. Narain *The Indo-Greeks* (Oxford 1957).

²⁷ O.c. p. 79.

²⁸ See the relevant sections in the bibliographies of J. Seibert *Das Zeitalter der Diadochen = Erträge der Forschung* 185 (Darmstadt 1983) pp. 241-245 [missing in Wolski *Seleucids*] and *CHI* III,2.

²⁹ On this important affair see J. Seibert *Hannibal* pp. 506 ff. and his *Forschungen zu Hannibal* pp. 407 ff. (both Darmstadt 1993) ff.

³⁰ A last attempt of Philip II in 56 B.C. to reestablish his dynastic power was crushed by Gabinius. (Missing in *Seleucids*).

³¹ One might think of the Assyrian Empire or the Chaldaean and Hittite kingdoms.

litical bodies of major size, he appears to have unintentionally overemphasized this aspect of the Seleucid history at the expense of a sufficiently extensive presentation of the cultural achievements in the Seleucid kingdom. Meant are here the administrative organisation, artistic productions, and educational measures.³²

Tarn and Griffith have noted correctly “The interest of Seleucid history lies in the attempt made by the early kings of the dynasty to colonise most of western Asia with Greek cities and settlements, one of the most amazing works of the ancient world. The material for this history has long been imperfect and often controversial; and though excavation has helped, the bulk of recent³³ work, putting aside the old Greek cities of Asia Minor, has illumined the later Parthian and Roman periods rather than the constructive reigns of Seleucus and his son.”³⁴

Attachment:

- 1) The book has been laid out with great care, a few typographical errors notwithstanding, such as on p. 53 in line 1 ‘new’ instead of ‘news’; on p. 68 in paragraph 2 replace in line 3 ‘vicegerency’ by ‘viceregency’ and in line 7 ‘vicegerent’ by ‘viceregent’; in the seventh line of the main body of the text on p. 75 strike one of the duplicated word ‘had’.
- 2) Notwithstanding the attached explanations, the map *Państwa hellenistyczne w II wieku p.n.e.* should not remain Polish in the English version of Wolski’s work. Its usefulness at the international scene would be considerably enhanced.

³² Several works of concern are recommended. See, e.g., E. Bickerman *Institutions des Séleucides* (Paris 1938); H. Bengtson *Die Strategie in der hellenistischen Zeit II* (Munich 1944, repr. 1964), his *Griechische Geschichte* (4th ed. Munich 1969) pp. 426 ff. and Bengtson’s paper of 1970 “Das Seleukidenreich” in *Kl. Schr.* [see n. 5] pp. 334-342, and O. Neugebauer *The Exact Sciences in Antiquity* through p. 238 (index) and the brief survey of H. Luschey on pp. 297 ff. in K. Schefold (ed) *Die Griechen und ihre Nachbarn = Propyläen Kunstgeschichte* (Berlin 1990).

³³ This relates to the years of publication of Tarn’s and Griffith’s book, at least as in its 3rd edition of 1952.

³⁴ W. Tarn and G. T. Griffith *Hellenistic Civilisation* (repr. of 3rd ed. [1952] London 1966) p. 126.