

10. The fall of the Seleucid Empire

The new masters of Persia

The origins and history of the Parthians are as mentioned rather obscure. Having no chroniclers themselves, whatever notices remain come from other cultures, whose relationship to the Parthians was usually less than cordial. Consequently, the extant Parthian history seems to consist either of a prolonged series of wars with Greeks, Romans, Jews and the Chinese, or of what the foreign sources thought noteworthy about Parthian culture – usually some rather prejudiced anecdotes about their peculiar behaviour.

Well, let us not blame the ancient historians, who had to invent their own discipline more or less from scratch. In many cases their reports and analyses are of impressively high quality, but their main focus is on the higher strata of society, and those accounts are further biased by a tendency to lean on the sensational side. Our old friend Justin writes¹, regarding the Parthian lifestyle, that the men were polygamous in order to – as he dryly expresses it – ‘*gratify desire with different objects*’. Women were kept isolated from society and unfaithful wives were punished most severely. The army was mostly based on slaves, which the Parthians seem to have been able to keep as armed warriors without much trouble. They were respected but their children were never released. (These ‘slaves’ may in reality have been more like serfs, in a sort of feudal system.) The kings were obeyed out of fear. Further, according to Justin, the Parthians preferred action before speech and reflection. The burial customs were curious, probably of nomad origin – they preferred leaving their dead to be devoured by birds and dogs.

From these scraps of information, however few and unreliable, we can outline the Parthian society as hierarchic and authoritarian. Such unpleasant traits that have been common to many Oriental civilisations – polygamy, the prominent role of slaves, the isolation of women – seem to have appeared already among the Parthians. But in contrast to, for example, the Arabian civilisation, the Parthians rarely applied themselves to science and literature, though they came to govern countries that had been civilised for a long period already. On the other hand, their military organisation was outstanding. The Parthians remained faithful to their nomad origins, and were excellent horsemen who travelled on horseback even after having become sedentary. When other countries were subjugated, the ethnic Parthians moved in to make up a nobility stratum, where most men were raised as warriors. When necessary, the Parthian armies could evacuate vast territories and harass the invaders incessantly with well organised guerrilla raids.

The Parthian expansion began after the defeat of Antiochus the Great, when the Seleucid decline caused a power vacuum. Kings bearing Parthian names came to power in Armenia and Commagene north of Syria in the middle of the 2nd century BCE, and during the reign of Mithridates (from c. 170 BCE) the Parthian Arsacids developed into the leading Iranian kingdom. Justin writes that some time around the middle of the century, a war erupted between the Parthians and the Medians, a war that ended with the conquest of Media and Elymais. In the east, the Parthians and their allies, the Scythian

nomads, expanded on behalf of the Greeks in Bactria. Justin does not provide us with exact dates, and the territories he refers to are difficult to define closer. ‘Media’ probably referred to the southern part in northern Iran, where local kings who were Seleucid vassals seem to have established themselves in the mid-2nd century BCE. Parts of Elymais, south of Media, were on the other hand still a proper Seleucid province, and the local government in Susa was loyal to the Seleucids well into the 140s, for Alexander Balas struck coins there and a statue with an inscription from his time has been found outside Ecbatana, dated by the Seleucid governor to the year 149/8 BCE². It seems as though the Parthians fell upon the easternmost areas of the empire while the Seleucids were preoccupied with their civil wars. The rural areas were probably lost before the walled cities, since the Parthian cavalry was not suited for sieges. The better part of the Iranian territories thus fell to Mithridates I, either as provinces or as vassals, even though Justin does not mention what happened to Persis, or Carmania in eastern Iran. In 141 BCE, Mithradates’ forces even temporarily occupied Seleucia on the Tigris, the eastern capital³. Even though they withdrew after a few months, the Seleucids could no longer ignore the Parthians, civil war or not.

Demetrius II attacks Parthia

Soon after, there arrived an embassy from Bactria to the Seleucid court, asking for an alliance against the Parthian menace. Upon hearing this, Demetrius II gathered his forces, and reinforced them with auxiliaries from those states who still recognised or at least feared the Seleucids. Bactrian soldiers were said to have participated, which might imply that the land route via Iran was still open, but more probably the Bactrian forces, perhaps led by Heliocles, attacked the Parthians from the east. The armies of Demetrius were successful: they defeated Parthian forces in several encounters, and their onslaught forced the Parthians to retreat towards their craggy homeland in Iran.



Ill: Darius Soter, usurper in Susa (perhaps 130s BCE), had a Persian name, but his epithet and just about everything on his coin copies the Seleucids, including the Apollo reverse. Two other minor pretendents with Iranian names, Okkonapses and Tigraios, struck similar coins. They may have supported the Seleucids against the Parthians. Courtesy of cngcoins.com, (Triton XIII, Lot: 247, 2010).

The Parthians had difficulties standing their ground against the well-organised Greek army on the battlefield, but on the other hand they were not easily decisively beaten. After a failed encounter, their cavalry units disbanded, only to re-form once they were in safety. Demetrius had gone to great lengths to set up his army, especially with Diodotus Tryphon still a threat, and being a young and impatient man who had only recently become master of his own actions, he was eager to bring the war to a decisive victory. His great-grandfather Antiochus the Great had been able to penetrate the Parthian heartland and force them to submit completely, but since then the Parthians had grown stronger and better organised. When the forces of Demetrius reached the mountains of northern Iran they were ambushed: those who were not cut down fled in all directions and Demetrius himself was taken prisoner⁴.

Mithridates now headed west, and took control over the Seleucid province of Babylonia. There was no longer any government there – Tryphon’s authority did not extend that far east – and Mithridates could effortlessly occupy Seleucia-on-the-Tigris permanently. The fertile lands between the Euphrates and the Tigris were now Parthian, and the chocked Demetrius was paraded as a prisoner in the cities where he had once ruled himself. Mithridates was however shrewd enough not to kill him, but treated him with utmost courtesy. He married Demetrius to his daughter Rhodogyne and settled him in a castle by the Caspian Sea.

The demise of Diodotus Tryphon

Back in Syria Diodotus Tryphon tried to improve his position, but he had little success, even though there were no competing kings left. His murder of the young Antiochus VI, the son of Alexander Balas, was a rash act that had cost Tryphon much of his popularity, and as Josephus wrote⁵: Tryphon appeared to be a wise and moderate person as long as he was a private citizen, but after he became king ‘*he was the true Tryphon*’ – that is hardly a flattering verdict! Under such circumstances it was hardly surprising that Cleopatra Thea, who had fled from the Parthians back to Syria, gained widespread support. Her sons with Demetrius II, who of course were named Seleucus and Antiochus, were however far too young to act as kings, and public attention was therefore naturally centred on Demetrius’ brother Antiochus, nicknamed *Sidetes* after the city of Side in Asia Minor, where he had been quietly raised by the eunuch Craterus after the killing of his parents. Sidetes was a handsome and energetic young man, and his reputation had not been stained by the failures and atrocities associated with his brother.

This was precisely what Tryphon had feared, and he did all that he could to stop his rival: he bribed the Syrian troops and warned them that if Sidetes became king, he would punish all those who had seceded from his brother Demetrius. Though Tryphon managed to keep Sidetes from crowning himself in any of the coastal cities, this only made matters worse: Sidetes was instead summoned by Cleopatra Thea to join her. And so in 138 BCE Sidetes succeeded his brother not only on the throne but also in the royal bed: he married Cleopatra Thea as her third husband. Even though the marriage was clearly one of convenience to the advantage of both parties, she had every reason to be satisfied with her new husband who now became king Antiochus VII⁶. Cleopatra Thea was not yet thirty years old (Antiochus VII Sidetes was perhaps twenty), and she bore him several

children, among them a son named Antiochus who died young, at least one daughter named Laodice who perhaps did likewise, and also a younger son who would in due time become Antiochus IX. Let us for once not be too skeptical – they may well have been in love.



Ill: Antiochus VII Sidetes, tetradrachm portrait. Courtesy of www.sfagn.info.

Her political expectations on the marriage also turned out satisfactorily. Antiochus VII Sidetes gathered a huge army and set out from the port of Seleucia ad Pieria where Cleopatra's court was, and shortly after faced Tryphon in battle – the place is unknown – won the day and drove him out of northern Syria. Tryphon retreated to the mountain stronghold of Dora in Phoenicia, where he was besieged. Antiochus Sidetes contacted Simon, head of the Hasmonean state, for an alliance, one of the benefits being that Simon supplied Antiochus' besieging troops. The siege continued for a long time, but eventually Tryphon's situation became untenable, and being a headstrong man, he was not willing to go down quietly. He broke the siege with a small force and headed for the port of Apamea, but the troops of Antiochus were on his heels. They stormed the city and executed Tryphon; this probably happened in 137 BCE. Tryphon had been the first non-dynastic king in Syria, and he was able to seize power only because confidence in the Seleucids had been tainted by the civil wars.

As for Sidetes, he might have used this unpopularity to his own advantage: a key factor to his success could have been Roman support. Scipio Aemilianus, a descendant of Scipio Africanus, was sent on a mission in the eastern Mediterranean at this time, to settle political matters after Roman preferences, and he may have given Sidetes the thumbs up⁷. The civil wars had changed the Roman view of the Seleucids, who were no longer seen as a threat but as incompetent vassal kings whose rule was in fact an asset for Roman power, in accordance with the device 'divide and conquer'. Numismatic evidence suggests that Cappadocia might also have supported Sidetes, for curiously enough some of his issues seem to have been imitated there.

By and large, Sidetes appears to have been a fine – if somewhat carefree – ruler, especially given his traumatic background. According to Plutarch, Sidetes was highly fond of hunting, and once during a hunting-party he became separated from his entourage and got lost. Sidetes knocked on the door of a small cabin to ask for direction, and was welcomed in for a meal. As he did not reveal his identity, the inhabitants of the cabin freely discussed the government in his presence; they generally praised the king but complained that he was often tricked by his decadent counsellors – and he spent way too much time hunting! When Sidetes eventually was found by his hunting-companions, he praised his hosts, telling them that this was the first time he had ever been told the truth about himself⁸.

[Antiochus Sidetes spent the mid-130s BCE strengthening his kingdom. He fought against the Jewish dynasty of the Hasmoneans, who had become independent during the Seleucid civil war. After a successful siege of Jerusalem, the Jewish ruler John Hyrcanus paid tribute to Sidetes, but the Jews were allowed a certain autonomy, and most importantly, they remained in control of the temple.]

Antiochus Sidetes restores the empire

The right to the Seleucid throne was a complicated matter. Antiochus Sidetes held it in his brother's absence, but Demetrius II was still alive in his Parthian captivity. In addition, both brothers had children with Cleopatra Thea, and there was no knowing who was to inherit the kingdom. There is no evidence that Antiochus Sidetes intended to put his own line on the throne for good; then again, we cannot exclude it. In Pergamon there had been a similar dilemma half a century before, when king Eumenes II had been summoned to Rome to be interrogated by the Senate, who had become suspicious of him despite his heroic behaviour during the war against Antiochus the Great. On the way home, Eumenes II was the victim of an accident and was missing, with everyone thinking he was dead. His brother Attalus II then took over the Pergamene throne, but when Eumenes II was eventually found and returned home, Attalus ceded the kingship peacefully and was thus given the epithet *Philadelphus*, brother-loving (and Eumenes in his turn founded the city of Philadelphia, after which the American city is named to this day.)

Would Antiochus Sidetes have acted as nobly if his brother Demetrius had returned home? The new Parthian king Phraates II did not think so. His reason for keeping Demetrius in his comfortable prison seems to have been to keep up the threat to send him home to challenge Sidetes. Demetrius, for his part, was not content with being held prisoner. After a few years, he was secretly visited by his friend Callimander in his castle by the Caspian Sea. Callimander had disguised himself in Parthian garments and prepared an escape plan. Demetrius and his followers fled on horseback, but the Parthian pursuers were more familiar with the territory and able to intercept the fugitives. Callimander was however not punished, but instead rewarded his loyalty towards his master, though Demetrius was for a while kept under stricter surveillance. A few years later Demetrius and his Parthian princess had had children, but despite this he made another attempt to escape. When he was caught once more, the Parthian king was angered with Demetrius for being so untrustworthy and headstrong. Not only was Demetrius put

under stricter guard once more, he was also humiliated by a gift of golden dice, which the Parthian king gave him to imply that he behaved like a child and thus was in need of toys⁹.

In 130 BCE, Antiochus Sidetes had been king for eight years, and finally thought his position strong enough to attempt to exact revenge on the Parthians. The official reason for the war was to liberate Demetrius, but as mentioned, it is impossible to know whether Antiochus actually wanted this. According to Justin, his army was immense: 80 000 men, not counting the auxiliaries from vassal rulers such as John Hyrcanus and Arabian chieftains, but once again Justin is not very credible, for he claims that more than 200 000 civilians travelled with the army: cooks, confectioners and actors! Justin claimed that the Syrians were so effeminate that they were more prepared for going to a banquet than to a field of battle, and so luxuriously dressed that even their sandals were made of gold¹⁰. He was not alone in this verdict: the philosopher Posidonius wrote that the Syrian soldiers

'brought daggers and short spears encrusted with dirt and rust; they wore helmets with visors to bring shadow but open around the throat to breathe easily, they brought drinking-vessels of wine and all kinds of food, and beside these lay flutes and horns, instruments for drinking, not for battle.'

The view that the inhabitants of Syria and Egypt were decadent weaklings is found throughout many ancient works of history, used as the default explanation for why the Hellenistic kingdoms fell, by historians who cherished the allegedly more puritan Romans as their ideal. It is little short of a prejudiced, almost racist rationalisation. Even though the courts of Egypt and Syria indeed saw many wanton luxuries, efficient fighting forces was an absolute necessity for their kings. There were perhaps occasions when mercenaries would gain too much influence over a weak king and live in debauchery – as such as the Cretan troops of Demetrius II – but this also occurred in Rome during the era of the feared Praetorian guard. The bottom line is that the Seleucid army was generally a fearsome and well-disciplined war-machine. How else could the empire have been sustained for as long as it actually was? Those troops who left Antioch in 130 BCE to deal with the Parthians once and for all were definitely neither cowardly nor effeminate, and they were under the command of a king, who, just like many of his ancestors, was a prominent general.

And their success was indeed not long in coming. Antiochus advanced into Babylonia and was met with open arms by the population, who had grown weary of Parthian rule – their takeover had been marked with temple lootings and other outrages. The Parthian vassals seceded in large numbers and renewed their allegiance to the Seleucids. Antiochus Sidetes met Parthian detachments in three battles and won them all, the largest by the river Lycus against a Parthian general named Indates, and he was already compared to Antiochus the Great. According to Josephus, Antiochus maintained good relationships with John Hyrcanus who had been brought along with his soldiers, and allowed two days of rest after the battle of Lycus in order for the Jews to celebrate their *Pesach*. He also built a victory monument.

Alexander's last successor

As the war slowed down towards the autumn of 130 BCE, the whole of Babylonia and western Iran was more or less secured. Antiochus was unwilling to wage war during the cold winter months¹¹ and so distributed his troops amongst different cities to have them provisioned. This seems to have been an unwise move, even though one asks what the alternative was, for the heavy burden of provisioning all these soldiers soon cooled down the native enthusiasm about the Seleucid return. Very likely the troops of Antiochus were all too keen to enrich themselves and began pillaging, for many of them would probably have been mercenaries without the same personal loyalty to the Seleucids as before. Given that Antiochus had been king only of Syria and parts of Mesopotamia it is impressive that he managed to gather an army that seems to have measured up to those of his predecessors, but despite his successes, he was unable to restore the unity of the empire, such as it had been before the civil wars began.

The Parthians did not pass up this opportunity; they sent agents to the cities of Babylonia and fuelled the discontent there. Meanwhile Phraates II played what he thought was his trump: he released Demetrius II, hoping this to cause a fraternal war. We do not know if that would have happened. When Antiochus Sidetes, who had settled for the winter in Ecbatana in Media, heard about rebellions in several of his cities, he hastened to put them down with his royal guard and those troops he had at his disposal. On his way there he rode straight into the main Parthian army, led by king Phraates II himself. Antiochus Sidetes was the heir of seven generations of Seleucids and the last successor to Alexander in the east, and he was not intimidated by the Parthians. Gambling all, he launched a lightning attack against their superior forces and fought with all his courage, and when the remnants of his guard turned and fled he remained on the battle field.

The battle outside Ecbatana in the spring of 129 BCE is not one of the more famous in ancient history, but it still marks the end of an era. There and then the concept of the empire of Alexander the Great definitely ended. The people of Persia and Babylonia would come to forget the Greeks and identify themselves with the Parthian kings, who became increasingly Persian themselves, and the borders between east and west would close and never again open up in the same fashion. Around this time, the Greek empire in Bactria had also collapsed, and the Indo-Greeks were but an isolated parenthesis.

Antiochus Sidetes was the last great Seleucid king, and also the last who claimed to be *Great king*, the title of the old Persian rulers. He had inherited the skill and courage of his ancestors, but he also possessed an impatience that led to his demise. Like many other Macedonian kings, he may well have been drinking. When the corpse of the Seleucid king was brought to him, it is said that Phraates II proclaimed that Antiochus had been vaingloriously trying to drink Parthia in one draught but choked on the potion¹². Apart from this remark, he treated his dead enemy with all due respect. Phraates also pursued Demetrius II, but he had already made good his escape back to Syria. Other members of the royal family had joined the campaign and fell into Parthian hands, among them Laodice, the daughter of Demetrius II, whom Phraates II married, and a prince named Seleucus whose paternity and fate historians are uncertain about.

Most of the headless and disorganized remaining Seleucid forces surrendered to the Parthians, but their allies seem to have marched back home again with no further care for the Seleucid cause. John Hyrcanus definitely survived the campaign. The people of Antioch were paralysed with grief over the lost war, the brave king and all the dead or captured men. When the army collapsed, the territories that Sidetes had won back were lost – this time for good.



Ill: This is Phraates II, even though the legend reads Arsaces. The language is Greek and the style imitative of the Seleucid. As many of the better Parthian coins, this tetradrachm was struck by Greek celators, in this case in Seleucia-on-the-Tigris. A difference is that the Parthians styled themselves Great King (sometimes even Great King of Kings) – the Greek culture can credit itself for its self-criticism, which with some exceptions kept its kings from assuming excessively magnanimous titles on their coins. Courtesy of cngcoins.com, (Electronic auction 150, lot 171).

Notes

¹ Justin, *Epitome*, 41. The chronology of this chapter is largely based on Alfred Bellinger's *The end of the Seleucids*.

² Le Rider, *Suse sous les Séleucides et les Parthes* and Bivar, *The Political History of Iran under the Arsacids*

³ Edward C.D. Hopkins, www.parthia.com website, discussion under Mithridates I of Parthia.

⁴ Justin, *Epitome*, 36:1. The year was probably 138 BCE, as shown by Mark Passehl, *Demetrios Nikator's Second Arsakid War*, published online on the Yahoo Hellenistica Group, 2005.

⁵ Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, book 13, throughout this chapter.

⁶ Named so after the city of Side in Asia Minor, where he was raised by a eunuch named Craterus after being orphaned. His official epithet was in fact *Euergetes*, the Benefactor. Appian (*Roman history*, 11.67) wrote that Cleopatra Thea married him out of jealousy over Demetrius II being remarried to the daughter of the Parthian king, but there is no need to believe such gossip.

⁷ Livy, *Periochae*, 57.8

⁸ Plutarkos, *Moralia* 207-8

⁹ Justin, *Epitome*, 38.9

¹⁰ Justin, *Epitome*, 38.10

¹¹ The harsh winter climate in Iraq/Iran is well known. Compare for instance with the two Gulf wars, where the American land offensives did not begin until springtime.

¹² Poseidonius of Apamea, *History* XVI