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Exploitation of Diversity:
Seleucid Strategy of Cultural Interaction in
Mesopotamia, 311 - 261 BC

By

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Abstract

In 323 BC, the Macedonian conqueror Alexander the Great died in Babylon. In his life, he conquered the powerful Achaemenid Persian Empire. With his death, however, he left the Macedonian Empire without an heir that could command the confidence and loyalty of the entire army. Shortly thereafter, the empire was torn apart between Alexander's ambitious generals. Seizing an opportunity in 312 BC, the Macedonian general Seleucus embarked on a daring journey to reclaim Babylon, laying the foundations for the Seleucid Empire in Mesopotamia. Eventually stretching from the Mediterranean Sea to Central Asia, this massive empire encompassed a diverse subject population, from indigenous Mesopotamians to Greek and Macedonian settlers.

My research seeks to explore the strategies that the early Seleucids employed to legitimize and consolidate their rule in Mesopotamia. Despite the growing body of literature on the Seleucid Empire, scholars of Seleucid history have tended to overlook the crucial formative years of the empire as well as the disturbances in Achaemenid rule of Mesopotamia prior to the arrival of the Macedonians. My research argues that, to secure their authority, Seleucus I and Antiochus I negotiated with pre-existing social structures—namely, the Mesopotamian temple elite—and rearranged interpersonal networks to muster popular support and facilitate social cohesion under Seleucid rule. To carry out the investigation, this research analyzes cuneiform documents, archaeological findings, and literary accounts by Greek and Roman authors.

Exploitation of Diversity:

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Following the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BC, the Macedonian Empire fragmented in the wars of Alexander's successors, as former colleagues turned on one another in pursuit of their own imperial aspirations. Seizing an opportunity in 312 BC, Seleucus returned to Mesopotamia and lay the foundations for the Seleucid Empire. In time, Seleucus I and his son, Antiochus I, reunited most of Alexander's Asian provinces, creating an empire that stretched from the Mediterranean Sea in the west to Central Asia in the east and that encapsulated a diverse community of populations and cultures—from native Mesopotamians and Persians to Greek and Macedonian settlers. Their success in the creation of the Seleucid Empire, which reigned as a major power in the Middle East from the late 4th to the 2nd century BC, raises various questions: How did the Seleucids govern their multiethnic subject population? And through what means were they able to maintain their grip over such a large expanse of territory?

In this thesis, I argue that Seleucus I and Antiochus I asserted imperial control in Seleucid Mesopotamia through strategically rearranging interpersonal networks and locally participating in symbolic discourses of imperial identity with members of the Mesopotamian urban elite. In particular, by actively engaging in negotiations with the local religious authorities, the Seleucids secured an influential base of support within the indigenous population. By selectively redistributing the Greco-Macedonian and native populations of Mesopotamia, the two Seleucid kings promoted social cohesion across ethnic divisions, centered in the regional capital of Seleucia on the Tigris. Investing in pre-existing social structures and establishing new cultural contact zones, Seleucus and Antiochus balanced continuity with innovation to legitimize their rule and their imperial projects to Greco-Macedonian and indigenous Mesopotamian audiences.

As the largest and most ethnically diverse successor state that emerged from Alexander's empire, the Seleucid Empire has been characterized in various ways among Greek and Near Eastern scholars. William Tarn in the mid 1900s championed a colonial Helleno-centric perspective, whereby the small Greek immigrant population fueled the regime's strength. Drawing on an analogy of a crustacean, Tarn proposes that "The Seleucid idea was to give to the framework of their empire substance and strength by filling it out with Greeks; Greeks were to supply its lack of living tissue."¹ By contrast, Amélie Kuhrt and Susan Sherwin-White advocate a Near Eastern approach. Portraying the Seleucids as the inheritors of the Achaemenid Persian Empire that Alexander had overthrown, they argue that the Seleucids absorbed pre-existing structures and continued the preceding Achaemenid Persian system of rule in its administration and architectural traditions.² More recently, Michel Austin proposes a military monarchy that centered on the king as a charismatic war leader. Seleucid kings gained legitimacy through military achievement, and the center of the empire moved to wherever the king happened to be.³

There is great insight in each of these perspectives. Yet, their conflicting views demonstrate the complexity of the empire's structure as a whole. The Seleucid Empire was not static, and the manner in which its kings behaved and interacted with their subjects varied from place to place and from time to time. The tendency for scholars to search for a uniform and sweeping pattern of rule, drawn from evidence scattered throughout the vast empire and its roughly two centuries of existence, may be misleading, as it risks overlooking the administrative

¹ William Woodthorpe Tarn, *The Greeks in Bactria and India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1951), 5.

² Amélie Kuhrt and Susan Sherwin-White, *From Samarkhand to Sardis: A New Approach to the Seleucid Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 38-39.

³ Michel Austin, "The Seleukids and Asia," in *A Companion to the Hellenistic World*, ed. Andrew Erskine (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 124-125.

innovations that the Seleucids employed during periods of uncertainty—such as the early years of the empire—as well as more locally specific approaches to rule.

Therefore, in this thesis, I concentrate on Mesopotamia and the strategies employed by the Seleucid Empire during the reigns of its first two kings: Seleucus I and Antiochus I (311 - 261 BC). My thesis is divided into three main sections. In the first, I examine the key role of Seleucid interactions with the traditional Mesopotamian religious authorities in legitimizing Seleucid rule. In the second section, I analyze the foundation myth, urban layout, and ethnic composition of Seleucia on the Tigris—the earliest and most prominent settlement that the two kings established in Mesopotamia—to better understand the social circumstances within and surrounding the new imperial center. In the third, I explore Seleucia within the rural context and its wide-reaching consequences in rearranging the socioeconomic center of gravity in the region.

Mesopotamia offers an insightful case study of early Seleucid strategies for a multitude of reasons. It was the first seat of power for Seleucus, making it the birthplace and ultimately the geographic center of the Seleucid Empire. While the strategies that the Seleucids employed in Mesopotamia might not be applicable elsewhere, they were the strategies that allowed the empire to acquire its foundation. Moreover, the diverse source material for early Seleucid Mesopotamia permits a multifaceted analysis. Classical texts by Greek and Roman authors offer an outside observer's perspective and may preserve Seleucid discourse propagated to the empire's subjects within and rivals abroad. Cuneiform texts inscribed on clay tablets, such as the Babylonian Chronicles and Astronomical Diaries, provide a window into contemporary, local responses to Seleucid policies in the region. In the meantime, excavations of key sites, such as Seleucia on the Tigris and Babylon, as well as archaeological surveys of Mesopotamia, reveal the urban architectural styles, land use, and settlement patterns of this region under the Seleucids—themes

infrequently discussed in textual sources yet equally important in comprehending Seleucid approaches to rule.

My analysis of early Seleucid strategies is also informed by two developments in academia: social network theory as developed by the sociologist Mark Granovetter and the “End of Archives” phenomenon observed in the field of Assyriology. Concerning the former, Granovetter explores, in his pioneering article “The Strength of Weak Ties,” how different types of micro level interactions and relationships can influence macro level phenomena. In particular, he argues that between strong ties (for example, the bond between long-term friends) and weak ties (for example, the bond between acquaintances), it is the weak ties that have been underappreciated for their higher probability to serve as local bridges, linking one isolated clique of individuals (bound by strong ties) with another distant clique.⁴ In this way, weak tie interactions can effectively lead to large patterns of human behavior, from the diffusion of information to the formation of social cohesion. Conversely, as Noah Friedkin puts it, “strong ties encourage triadic closure, which eliminates local bridges.”⁵ In other words, the social networks of two individuals or communities bonded by strong ties have a greater likelihood of already overlapping with mutual acquaintances, thus becoming redundant and alienated from information and connections farther afield. More recently, Stephen Borgatti and Daniel Halgin have further explored the nuances between ties by categorizing them into two basic types: state-type ties (such as ties in kinship, which can be measured by intensity and duration) and event-type ties (such as ties in correspondence, which can be measured by frequency).⁶

⁴ Mark Granovetter, “The Strength of Weak Ties,” *American Journal of Sociology* 78, no. 6 (1973): 1364.

⁵ Noah Friedkin, “A Test of Structural Features of Granovetter’s Strength of Weak Ties Theory,” *Social Networks* 2, no. 4 (1980): 417.

⁶ Stephen P. Borgatti and Daniel S. Halgin, “On Network Theory,” *Organization Science* 22, no. 5 (2011): 1170.

Granovetter's network theory is a useful lens through which to study the networks of relationships maintained or created by the early Seleucids. Although the ambiguity in distinguishing a strong tie from a weak tie has been criticized by David Krackhardt, who points out that “at some point making the ties stronger will theoretically decrease their impact,”⁷ for the purposes of this paper, ties (including intermarriage)⁸ between Greco-Macedonians and native Mesopotamians (hindered by cultural and language differences) will be considered weak, while ties within either ethnic group will be considered strong. To use Granovetter's terms, Greco-Macedonian (largely military) settlers and native Mesopotamian civilian populations can be considered communities “earmarked by ethnic, cultural, or other visible differences.”⁹ In this thesis, I investigate how Seleucus and Antiochus employed weak ties—especially of the event-type variety—to unify cliques divided by cultural or ethnic differences under Seleucid rule.

Concerning the latter development, the “End of Archives” phenomenon refers to the synchronous termination of cuneiform archives in 484 BC, during the reign of Achaemenid king Xerxes I and following a series of failed Babylonian rebellions against the Persian administration. In light of this phenomenon and subsequent findings surrounding its impact, recent works by Assyriologists, such as Caroline Waerzeggers, have called for a reinterpretation of Mesopotamia under Achaemenid Persian rule.¹⁰ Historians from the New Achaemenid History school, however, have generally been hesitant to accept evidence for harsh Persian reprisals

⁷ David Krackhardt, “The Strength of Strong Ties: The Importance of *Philos* in Organizations,” in *Networks and Organizations: Structure, Form, and Action*, eds. Nitin Nohria and Robert Eccles, (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1992), 217.

⁸ While marriage may normally be classified as a strong tie due to the intimacy implied in the relationship, for this paper, *intermarriage* shall be classified as a weak tie. After all, interethnic relationships between Greco-Macedonians and Mesopotamians would be unlikely to induce triadic closure as expected of typical strong ties, since each spouse hails from a distinctly separate (as opposed to similar) social network. Intermarriage, instead, can serve as a local bridge for its participants’ respective communities.

⁹ Mark Granovetter, “The Strength of Weak Ties,” *American Journal of Sociology* 78, no. 6 (1973): 1374.

¹⁰ Caroline Waerzeggers, “The Babylonian Revolts Against Xerxes and the ‘End of Archives,’” *Archiv für Orientforschung* 50 (2003): 150-151.

against the Mesopotamians. Championed by Amélie Kuhrt and Susan Sherwin-White, following their influential 1987 article that critically debunked earlier literature on Xerxes' retaliation against Mesopotamia,¹¹ New Achaemenid historians have tended to question assessments that threaten to align with negative cultural stereotypes of the Persians, propagated in biased Greek sources.¹² Despite the growing body of cuneiform evidence that would suggest otherwise, Kuhrt adamantly defends her landmark work, challenging accusations of her view as “revisionist” and decrying a “return to the pre-1987 position” as the return of an uncritical acceptance of anti-Persian sentiments ultimately derived from Greek sources.¹³ Yet, as the pioneers of the Near Eastern approach to Seleucid history as well, Amélie Kuhrt and Susan Sherwin-White have been credited with (or rather critiqued for) being “...*tout aussi prisonniers des sources cunéiformes que leurs prédécesseurs l'avaient été des sources classiques.*”¹⁴ (...just as prisoners of cuneiform sources as their predecessors had been of classical sources.) Their distrust of Greek sources—and along with it, evidence suggestive of Achaemenid oppression in cuneiform sources—has yielded a skewed representation of the cuneiform data that is overly eulogistic to Achaemenid Persian rule as a precedent for the Seleucid dynasty.

Engaging with the research of Assyriologists, including material less favorable to the Achaemenids, is necessary to comprehend the pre-existing social structures that the Seleucids could interact with during the transition from Achaemenid Persian to Seleucid Macedonian rule.

¹¹ Amélie Kuhrt and Susan Sherwin-White, “Xerxes’ Destruction of Babylonian Temples,” *Achaemenid History* 2 (1987): 69-78.

¹² Caroline Waerzeggers, “Introduction: Debating Xerxes' Rule in Babylonia,” in *Xerxes and Babylonia: The Cuneiform Evidence*, eds. Caroline Waerzeggers and Maarja Seire (Leuven: Peeters, 2018), 5. Waerzeggers provides a comprehensive summary on the present state of the debate between New Achaemenid historians and Assyriologists.

¹³ Amélie Kuhrt, “Reassessing the Reign of Xerxes in the Light of New Evidence,” in *Extraction & Control: Studies in Honor of Matthew W. Stolper*, eds. Michael Kozuh, Wouter Henkelman, Charles E. Jones, and Christopher Woods (Chicago: Oriental Institution of University of Chicago, 2014), 164.

¹⁴ Julien Monerie, “Les communautés grecques en Babylonie (VII e–III e s. av. J.-C.),” *Pallas. Revue d'études antiques*, no. 89 (2012): 349.

Although over a century and half separates the End of Archives in 484 BC from the advent of the Seleucids in 311 BC, the Achaemenid reprisals under Xerxes I had long-term political and cultural repercussions for Mesopotamian society, as shall be discussed. By drawing on social network theory and insights on local circumstances in Mesopotamia during the preceding Achaemenid period, we can better understand the strategies employed by the Seleucids during the crucial formative years of the empire and that led to their success in the creation of a dynasty.

1. Religious Networks of Collaboration: Temple Elite and Scribal Community

Seleucus and Antiochus' rise to power rested not only on their military victories but also in their ability to interact with key social structures embedded in Mesopotamian society. During the wars of Alexander's successors, Seleucus ingratiated himself with local urban populations by initiating ties with the influential Mesopotamian temple community. Building upon his father's work, Antiochus resumed mutually beneficial exchange with the traditional religious authorities, ushering in a hopeful renewal of Mesopotamian religion through restoration projects across Mesopotamia.

The creation of the Seleucid Empire was never a guarantee. Originally one of Alexander's infantry commanders,¹⁵ Seleucus was a latecomer to the contest for the crown. In 320 BC, through the Partition of Triparadisus, he was appointed the satrap (governor) of Babylonia, an important province within the geographic region of Mesopotamia. Despite the prestige of this post, Seleucus was evidently stripped of most military personnel.¹⁶ In 316 BC, Seleucus fled from Babylon to Egypt to escape the wrath of Antigonus I Monophthalmus, another of Alexander's former generals who was by then the most powerful of the successors.¹⁷ In 312 BC,

¹⁵ Arrian 5.13.4.

¹⁶ Diodorus Siculus 19.13.3.

¹⁷ Diodorus Siculus 19.55.5; Plutarch, *Life of Demetrius*, 7; Appian, *The Syrian Book*, 11.53.

Seleucus made a daring return to Babylon, with a small but growing army of supporters.¹⁸ In the Babylonian War (311 - 308) that ensued, he was ultimately successful in not only retaking his old satrapy but also fending off several Antigonid invasions. By 308, a truce seems to have been agreed upon, with Seleucus' authority recognized in Mesopotamia.¹⁹

While Seleucus' military victory over Antigonid forces certainly played a key part in the (re)-establishment of Seleucid power in Mesopotamia, his success also lay in his interactions with the local temple community. The Mesopotamian temple elite and scribal community traditionally possessed much political influence in Mesopotamian society. They had served as city officials and administrators during the Assyrian period in the early first millennium BC through to the Persian conquest of Babylon in 539 BC by the Achaemenid king Cyrus the Great.²⁰ As representatives of the local culture, the temple elite occupied a vital position as a conduit for contact between the population and the ruling authorities.²¹ Moreover, the deteriorating status of the Mesopotamian religious officials under the previous Achaemenid Persian administration meant that they too would have been keen to engage in re-negotiations of privileges under the Macedonian successors.

Due to its capacity to amass popular support, the Mesopotamian religious community had suffered to a considerable degree under Achaemenid Persian rule. During the reign of Darius I, Babylon and several other Mesopotamian cities, led by the pretenders Nidintu-Bêl in 522 BC and Arakha in 521 BC, rebelled against the Persian Empire. Documents dated to the reigns of the pretenders, for example in the Eanna Temple in Uruk and the Ebabbar Temple in Sippar, indicate

¹⁸ Diodorus Siculus, 19.90.3; Appian, *The Syrian Book*, 11.54.

¹⁹ Pat Wheatley, "Antigonus Monophthalmus in Babylonia, 310-308 B.C.," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 61, no. 1 (Jan., 2002): 45.

²⁰ Philippe Clancier, "Cuneiform Culture's Last Guardians: The Old Urban Notability of Hellenistic Uruk," in *The Oxford Handbook of Cuneiform Culture*, eds. Karen Radner and Eleanor Robson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 758.

²¹ Mathieu Ossendrijver, "Hellenistic Astronomy and the Babylonian Scribal Families," in *Hellenistic Astronomy: The Science in its Contexts*, eds. A. C. Bowen and Francesca Rochberg (Brill, 2020), 434.

that the temples supported the native revolts and recognized the royal authority of the rebel leaders.²² The Greek historian Herodotus preserves an account of one of the rebellions against Darius I, in which the city of Babylon managed to hold out against Persian forces for over a year.²³ After finally defeating the rebels in Babylon, Darius “destroyed their walls and reft away all their gates, neither of which things Cyrus had done at the first taking of Babylon; moreover he impaled about three thousand men that were chief among them...”²⁴ Deviating from Cyrus the Great’s precedent, Darius reprimanded Babylonian hostility with severe, public consequences.

While the details of his account of the war are difficult to prove, Herodotus appears to be correct in capturing the severity of the Persian reprisals under Darius I. Near modern Kermanshah, the multilingual Behistun Inscription, commissioned by Darius I, exhibits a monumental rock relief on the face of a mountain, depicting nine rebels with their necks tied by a rope and paraded before the Persian king. Among these captives are the two pretenders, Nidintu-Bêl and Arakha. The accompanying inscription publicizes that Darius defeated, besieged and killed Nidintu-Bêl,²⁵ while Arakha and his supporters were indeed impaled in Babylon²⁶—harsh punishments that actually pale in comparison to the attested treatment of some of the other rebels in the inscription.²⁷ An Aramaic translation of the same text in a papyrus in Elephantine suggests that Darius’ words were also propagated throughout the empire.²⁸ The implicit message of the Behistun Inscription could not be clearer; those affiliated with rebellion against the Achaemenid

²² Eleanor Robson, *Ancient Knowledge Networks: A Social Geography of Cuneiform Scholarship in First-millennium Assyria and Babylonia* (UCL Press, 2019), 174.

²³ Herodotus 3.150-152.

²⁴ Herodotus 3.159.

²⁵ TPE 5.A.1. ii. 20.

²⁶ TPE 5.A.1. iii. 50.

²⁷ TPE 5.A.1. ii. 32; TPE 5.A.1. ii. 33.

²⁸ David Brown, “Increasingly Redundant: The Growing Obsolescence of the Cuneiform Script in Babylonia from 539 BC,” in *The Disappearance of Writing Systems: Perspectives on Literacy and Communication*, eds. John Baines, John Bennet and Stephen Houston (London: Equinox, 2008), 79.

Persian Empire would be thoroughly punished. It is likely that many Mesopotamian religious officials were among those held accountable for their treasonous behavior.

The Mesopotamian temple elite suffered even greater repercussions for their role in supporting two Babylonian rebellions against Darius' son Xerxes I. Herodotus has little to say about these revolts, but in passing mentions that Xerxes removed a large golden statue from the temple of Babylon's chief god Bel-Marduk, killing a Babylonian priest in the process.²⁹ No Persian monument for Xerxes as a conqueror of rebels (akin to the Behistun Inscription) is known. Yet, cuneiform documents offer a glimpse of the native Mesopotamian revolts and the subsequent Achaemenid reprisals. Documents from Babylon, Borsippa, Sippar, Dilbat and Kish, dated to the reigns of the pretenders Bêl-šimânni and Šamaš-eriba, confirm that the temples of these cities pledged their support for the Babylonian rebellions against Xerxes, most likely in the summer months of 484 BC.³⁰ The revolt proved futile and was followed in the same year by the so-called “End of Archives” phenomenon, a widespread and seemingly simultaneous abandonment of both short-lived and several-generations-old cuneiform archives. Comparing the location and owners of both the archives that were terminated and those that continued uninterrupted, Caroline Waerzeggers points out that the phenomenon was restricted to the cities known to have participated in the rebellion. Moreover, the terminated archives belong to families of the urban elite that were demonstrably affiliated with the local temple institutions.³¹ Conversely, the archives from rebellious cities that appear unaffected by the break-off appear to belong to Mesopotamians that harbored some association with the Persians (and hence, may be

²⁹ Herodotus 1.183.

³⁰ Caroline Waerzeggers, “The Babylonian Revolts Against Xerxes and the ‘End of Archives,’” *Archiv für Orientforschung* 50 (2003): 152-153.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 157-158.

considered pro-Persian).³² In addition, cuneiform documents after 484 BC indicate that the position of *šatammu* (chief priest) for Babylon's Esagila Temple was abolished. This influential position was not restored until the end of Achaemenid rule, possibly during the reign of Darius III—roughly a century and a half after the rebellions.³³ Finally, Esagila's prebendary system, which had been a key source of income for Babylonian urban elites in exchange for cultic services, was replaced by a standard rations system. This change effectively deprived the priestly class of income, prestige and autonomy.³⁴ The rich cuneiform evidence thus conveys that the Persian administration under Xerxes conducted a targeted reorganization of the Mesopotamian priesthood in response to the rebellions of 484 BC. These reprisals aimed to root out the seeds of unrest, reducing the influence of the temple elite as a potential threat in the future.

The cities of southern Mesopotamia did not participate in the Babylonian rebellions in 484 BC and were thus spared from the “End of Archives” phenomenon. Nevertheless, repercussions from the upheavals in the north can still be detected. In Uruk, the old elite of the Eanna Temple—primarily composed of families that had migrated from Babylon—was replaced with local Urukeans, who were perhaps considered to be more reliable to the Achaemenid Persian administration.³⁵ Following Xerxes' reign, the Reš Temple of the local sky god Anu, which had previously enjoyed a minor subordinate status to the Eanna Temple, also experienced a rise in influence to become the most important religious institution in the city.³⁶ An ancient Sumerian deity, Anu was originally the head of the Mesopotamian pantheon, before ultimately

³² *Ibid.*, 160.

³³ J. Hackl, “The Esangila Temple during the Late Achaemenid Period and the Impact of Xerxes’ Reprisals on the Northern Babylonian Temple Households,” in *Xerxes and Babylonia: The Cuneiform Evidence*, eds. Caroline Waerzeggers and Maarja Seire (Leuven: Peeters, 2018), 175.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 184.

³⁵ Caroline Waerzeggers, “The Babylonian Revolts Against Xerxes and the ‘End of Archives,’” *Archiv für Orientforschung* 50 (2003): 162.

³⁶ Eleanor Robson, *Ancient Knowledge Networks: A Social Geography of Cuneiform Scholarship in First-millennium Assyria and Babylonia* (UCL Press, 2019), 187.

being superseded by Babylon's chief god Bel-Marduk. Although the renewal of interest in Anu had been growing long before the Babylonian rebellions, as can be deduced from onomastic evidence since the mid 6th century BC, Paul-Alain Beaulieu suggests that the Achaemenid administration might have promoted Anu's rise in influence to further cultivate a rift between Uruk and the insufferable Babylon, which had by then become involved in multiple rebellions.³⁷ By manipulating and rearranging the Mesopotamian temple communities, the Achaemenid Persians limited the theological dominance of Babylon in Mesopotamian religion and curtailed Mesopotamia's ability to unify in rebellion.

The traditional religious authorities of Mesopotamia (and of Babylon in particular) therefore had much to gain in allying or negotiating with the Macedonian successors in the hope of creating a more favorable status quo. Indeed, cuneiform documents as well as classical sources indicate that the transition to Seleucid rule rested to a great extent on the complex interactions between the Macedonians and the native religious institutions. According to the 1st century BC Greek historian Diodorus Siculus, the Chaldeans (*Χαλδαῖοι*, a Greek term for the cuneiform temple scribes)³⁸ approached Antigonus I Monophthalmus in 316 BC, shortly after Seleucus had fled from Babylon:

When Antigonus learned of [Seleucus'] flight, he was pleased... But then the Chaldean astrologers came to him and foretold that if ever he let Seleucus escape from his hands, the consequence would be that all Asia would become subject to Seleucus, and that Antigonus himself would lose his life in a battle against him. At this, Antigonus repented

³⁷ Paul-Alain Beaulieu, "Uruk Before and After Xerxes: The Onomastic and Institutional Rise of the God Anu," in *Xerxes and Babylonia: The Cuneiform Evidence*, eds. Caroline Waerzeggers and Maarja Seire (Leuven: Peeters, 2018), 205.

³⁸ Philippe Clancier, "Cuneiform Culture's Last Guardians: The Old Urban Notability of Hellenistic Uruk," in *The Oxford Handbook of Cuneiform Culture*, eds. Karen Radner and Eleanor Robson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 758.

his former course and sent men to pursue Seleucus, but they, after tracking him for a certain distance, returned with their mission unaccomplished.³⁹

The Mesopotamian temple scribes revealed, seemingly out of their own volition, that Seleucus was destined to become king and Antigonus was doomed to fail. From hindsight, we know this to be true. Seleucus would eventually return to Babylon and create the Seleucid Empire, while Antigonus would die fighting against Seleucus and his allies at the Battle of Ipsus in 301 BC. Diodorus Siculus appears to be confident in the authenticity of the prophecy and follows the excerpt with a discussion on the Chaldaeans' reputation for predictions and astronomical observations. Diodorus demonstrates a fairly accurate knowledge of Babylonian scribal education and traditions in other parts of his work,⁴⁰ and it is thus reasonable to assume that he has similarly preserved here an earlier (perhaps even Mesopotamian) source.

Regardless of how we might treat the authenticity of the prediction, Diodorus' account clearly associates the Mesopotamian temple community with the political intrigues of the Macedonian successors. On the one hand, the Chaldaeans' decision to reach out to Antigonus may be interpreted as a pledge of their loyalty to Antigonus. By revealing their prophecy, the Chaldaeans exposed the true threat that Seleucus was destined to pose. On the other hand, if we consider their prediction to have been fabricated after the events had already taken place, then the story of the Chaldaeans' so-called prophecy might have been spread by the temple elite as propaganda in support of Seleucus, to legitimize his reign as divinely ordained and predicted by themselves.

³⁹ Diodorus Siculus 19.55.7.

⁴⁰ Mathieu Ossendrijver, "Hellenistic Astronomy and the Babylonian Scribal Families," in *Hellenistic Astronomy: The Science in its Contexts*, eds. A. C. Bowen and Francesca Rochberg (Brill, 2020), 433-434; For Diodorus Siculus on the education and traditions of Babylonian temple scribes and specifically of the *āšipu* (exorcist), see Diodorus Siculus 2.29.2-6.

Seleucus, in turn, appears also to have recognized the importance of currying favor with the local Mesopotamians. Diodorus Siculus expresses that Seleucus exhibited great confidence during his return to Antigonid-ruled Babylon in 312 BC:

...Seleucus, receiving from Ptolemy no more than eight hundred foot soldiers and about two hundred horse, set out for Babylon... he assumed that the Babylonians, on account of the goodwill that had previously existed, would promptly join him... While such was his own enthusiasm, those of his friends who accompanied him were no little disheartened when they saw that the men who were making the campaign with them were very few and that the enemy against whom they were going possessed large armies...⁴¹

The passage follows with Seleucus inspiring his companions with an uplifting and heroic speech, which must derive from a pro-Seleucid source, if not indeed from one of Seleucus' loyal followers that was present to hear it. Upon entering Mesopotamia, Seleucus was joined by Macedonian military settlers and, sure enough, was warmly received by the Babylonians, who flocked to his banner upon their former satrap's arrival in the city:

ὡς δ' εἰς τὴν Βαβυλωνίαν ἐνέβαλεν, οἱ πλείους τῶν ἐγχωρίων ἀπήντων καὶ προστιθέμενοι πᾶν ἔφασαν αὐτῷ τὸ δοκοῦν συμπράξειν· τετραετῆ γὰρ χρόνον γεγωνὸς σατράπης τῆς χώρας ταύτης πᾶσι προσενήνεκτο καλῶς, ἐκκαλούμενος τὴν εὐνοίαν τοῦ πλήθους καὶ πόρρωθεν προπαρασκευαζόμενος τοὺς συμπράξοντας, ἐὰν αὐτῷ δοθῆ καὶ αἰρὸς ἀμφισβητεῖν ἡγεμονίας.

When [Seleucus] pushed into Babylonia, most of the inhabitants came to meet him, and, declaring themselves on his side, promised to aid him as he saw fit; for, when he had been for four years satrap of that country, he had shown himself generous to all, winning

⁴¹ Diodorus Siculus 19.90.1.

the goodwill of the common people and long in advance securing men who would assist him if an opportunity should ever be given him to make a bid for supreme power.⁴²

The Greek historian Appian of Alexandria, writing much later in the 2nd century, provides a similar account:

Πτολεμαῖος δ' αὐτίκα τὸν Σέλευκον ἐς τὴν Βαβυλῶνα πέμπει, τὴν ἀρχὴν ἀναληψόμενον· καὶ πεζοὺς ἐς τοῦτο ἔδωκεν αὐτῷ χιλίους, καὶ τριακοσίους ἰππέας. καὶ σὺν οὕτως ὀλίγοις ὁ Σέλευκος τὴν τε Βαβυλωνίαν, προθύμως αὐτὸν ἅμα τῶν ἀνδρῶν ἐκδεχομένων, ἀνέλαβε, καὶ τὴν ἀρχὴν μετ' οὐ πολὺ ἐς μέγα προήγαγεν.

Ptolemy immediately sends Seleucus to Babylon to take back power, and gave him one thousand infantry and three hundred cavalry for the task. With this small army and at the same time the enthusiastic reception of the population, Seleucus recovered Babylon, and in a short time greatly extended the kingdom.⁴³

The minor discrepancy in the size of Seleucus' army suggests that Diodorus and Appian drew from different earlier sources. Furthermore, Appian's decision to present Ptolemy in the nominative, sending Seleucus to Babylon as a leader would do to a subordinate (“Πτολεμαῖος δ' αὐτίκα τὸν Σέλευκον ἐς τὴν Βαβυλῶνα πέμπει...”), may hint at Appian's use of a Ptolemaic source that intended to diminish Seleucus' stature as an equal to Ptolemy. Paul Kosmin makes a similar assessment of bias toward the Ptolemies in the Parian Marble, a Greek inscription from the island of Paros. Referring to the same event, the Parian Marble likewise relegates Seleucus to the role of Ptolemy's subordinate: “...Ptolemy prevailed over Demetrius in Gaza and dispatched Seleucus to Babylon...”⁴⁴ By contrast, Diodorus' account, which puts Seleucus in the

⁴² Diodorus Siculus 19.91.1.

⁴³ Appian, *The Syrian Book*, 11.54.

⁴⁴ Paul Kosmin, *Time and its Adversaries in the Seleucid Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), 43.

metaphorical driver's seat and emphasizes Seleucus' past benevolence as a satrap and present confidence in the face of near certain failure, likely derives from an authority more favorable toward the Seleucid house. Despite their potentially contrasting sources, the two accounts agree that Seleucus was heavily outnumbered and that his return to Babylon, which entailed marching through Antigonid lands, was met at the other end with local Babylonian support.

While we know very little of what Seleucus had actually done during his tenure as satrap to please the Babylonians, Diodorus' vague assertion that Seleucus had been “long in advance securing men who would assist him,” suggests that he had already begun identifying and forging weak ties with individuals in Babylon that could be trusted with potential sedition and possessed the ability to amass popular support. If members of the Mesopotamian temple community can be included in this circle of associates, it is possible that Seleucus resumed (or made promises to resume) Alexander's unfinished work in clearing the debris of the ziggurat Etemenanki.⁴⁵ This exchange might also have entailed bribing members of the indigenous urban elite. Classical sources record that Seleucus refused to submit to Antigonos an audit of his revenues as satrap, before fleeing Babylon.⁴⁶ This must remain speculative, unfortunately, as the relevant Babylonian astronomical diaries from the years of Seleucus' governorship have not been found.

Cuneiform evidence dated to after Seleucus' arrival, on the other hand, provides a closer examination of his reception in Babylon. The recently published cuneiform document BM 35920 captures what is believed to be the first appearance of Seleucus at Babylon, ever since he fled the city in 316 BC. According to a translation by Robartus van der Spek, the fragmentary text reads: “Month Nisan. In that month, S[eleukos...] who in year I (of?) Ant[igonos, the general...] from

⁴⁵ Diodorus Siculus 17.112.3; Arrian 7.17.3.

⁴⁶ Diodorus Siculus 19.55.3; Appian, *The Syrian Book*, 11.53.

Babylon had fled, returned. Day 1...”⁴⁷ Seleucus is reported to have arrived at Babylon in the month of Nisannu, in April of 311 BC. Paul Kosmin points out that this would coincide with the Babylonian New Year and the *Akitu* festival, celebrated in the first two weeks of Nisannu. The festivities centered around a ritual procession, whereby the cult statue of the chief Babylonian god Bel-Marduk was paraded out from and back into Babylon to signify the god's mythical battle with the primeval forces of chaos and the triumph of proper order to the world with his return.⁴⁸ Whether Seleucus purposefully coincided his return with this important festival is difficult to prove. The Babylonians that supported Seleucus, however, would most likely have noticed the auspicious omen of this coincidence. This may in fact be conveyed in BM 35920, whose anonymous author—potentially one of Seleucus’ Babylonian supporters—chose not only to record Seleucus’ return to Babylon but also to reference his earlier escape, effectively aligning Seleucus’ circular journey with “the *akitu*’s central ritual process.”⁴⁹ The recognition of the coincidence was probably popularized by the Mesopotamian temple community and, as shall be argued, was ultimately appropriated officially for the Seleucid cause.

Shortly after arriving in Babylon, Seleucus accessed the network of the Mesopotamian religious community to gain their support. The Babylonian Chronicle BCHP 3, written by a temple scribe, reports that “[Seleu]cus spoke as follows: 'Year 7 of Antig[onus] the general as year 6 of Alexander, son of] Alexander and Seleucus the general you all will count.' Month Sim[anu...].”⁵⁰ Seleucus personally instructed the temple scribes to stop dating their documents in the year count of Antigonus. Instead, they were to begin dating documents to year 6 of

⁴⁷ Robartus van der Spek, “Seleukos, Self-Appointed General (*Strategos*) of Asia (311 - 305 B.C.), and the Satrapy of Babylonia,” in *The Age of the Successors and the Creation of the Hellenistic Kingdoms (323 - 276 B.C.)*, eds. Hans Hauben and Alexander Meeus (Leuven: Peeters, 2014), 341.

⁴⁸ Paul Kosmin, *Time and its Adversaries in the Seleucid Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), 31.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁵⁰ BCHP 3, rev. iv. 3'-4'.

Alexander the Great's son Alexander IV and himself as the king's general.⁵¹ Cuneiform documents with the corrected year count, dated just a month after Seleucus' arrival in Nisannu, indicate that the instructions were quickly implemented and disseminated.⁵² These instructions, however, are further revealing as Seleucus had not yet fully completed the capture of the city. In several lines below, the same chronicle notices, “He did not capture the palace... Month Âbu. Seleucus, in order to capture the palace, to... he leveled?? and he did not dam the Euphrates.”⁵³ The Antigonid garrison was holed up inside Babylon's fortified palatial district. According to the chronology of the Babylonian Chronicle, it would take several more months until Seleucus finally flushed them out, possibly by inundating their defenses with the Euphrates River. Yet, despite the presence of Antigonid forces in the city, Seleucus apparently lost no time in reaching out to the influential temple community to set the record straight and to ensure their allegiance.

In 305 BC, when Seleucus was at last crowned as a *basileus* (king), he once more made reference to his triumphant return to Babylon. The cuneiform Babylonian King List records, “Year 7, which is (his) first year, Seleucus (ruled as) king. He reigned 25 years.”⁵⁴ Instead of dating his reign from his coronation in 305, his coronation was dated to Year 7. In doing so, Seleucus projected back his Year 1 to his triumphant return to Babylon in 311 BC. As Paul Kosmin argues, this was likely a deliberate move on Seleucus' part to tie his return with the “symbolic logic of the Babylonian New Year festival.”⁵⁵ Although Seleucus had actually come

⁵¹ Alexander IV was little more than a figurehead, as he was a child in faraway Macedon at the time.

⁵² Robartus van der Spek, “Seleukos, Self-Appointed General (*Strategos*) of Asia (311 - 305 B.C.), and the Satrapy of Babylonia,” in *The Age of the Successors and the Creation of the Hellenistic Kingdoms (323 - 276 B.C.)*, eds. Hans Hauben and Alexander Meeus (Leuven: Peeters, 2014), 327.

⁵³ BHP 3, rev. iv. 6'-8'.

⁵⁴ Abraham J. Sachs and Donald John Wiseman, “A Babylonian King List of the Hellenistic period,” *Iraq* 16, no. 2 (1954): 205.

⁵⁵ Paul Kosmin, *Time and its Adversaries in the Seleucid Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), 34.

back in name as a general under Alexander IV (as documents dated to the period can attest), in retrospect, his reign was to be aligned with his arrival and resumption of power at Babylon.

Seleucus' decision to retroject the regnal year count was almost certainly the result of careful negotiations with the Mesopotamian temple elite. By overshadowing his ascension as *basileus* with his return to Babylon, an event that bore greater resonance in particular for his Mesopotamian supporters than for his Greek and Macedonian followers, Seleucus guaranteed the importance and centrality of Babylon and the Mesopotamian religious authorities in his new empire. In exchange, the temple community imbued his kingship and reign with local theological significance. Seleucus' return was to be subsequently commemorated as the return of the true king to Babylon and the restoration of proper order to the world. Furthermore, as he had previously done in 311 BC, Seleucus might have personally instructed the temple scribes to disseminate to the wider Mesopotamian public the decision to restructure the official year count.

Seleucus' son Antiochus I, in many ways, continued his father's legacy of negotiating with the temple elite. The Babylonian Chronicle BCHP 5, for instance, expresses that the young crown prince Antiochus made obeisance and offerings to the Mesopotamian moon god Sin:

...the crown prince at the instruction of a certain Bab[ylonian performed] regular [offerings] for Sin of Egišnugal and Sin of Enit[enna. Antiochu]s, the son of the king, [entered] the temple of Sin of Egišnugal and in the tem[ple of Sin of Enitenna and the s]on of the king aforementioned prostrated himself. The son of the king [provided] one sheep for the offering [of Sin and he bo]wed down in the temple of Sin, Egišnugal, and in the temple of Sin, En[itenna].⁵⁶

The chronicle describes Antiochus' display of piety in great detail. Following a ritualized procedure, he performed proskynesis and conducted offerings in both temples of Sin in Babylon.

⁵⁶ BCHP 5, obv. 8-12.

In addition, the Babylonian Chronicle notes that a Babylonian, most likely the *šatammu*,⁵⁷ was tasked with instructing the crown prince in the proper rituals. This elaborate show of reverence would likely have left a deep impression on Babylonian observers. While the sincerity and nature of Antiochus' faith remains a private matter, his veneration to Sin in the temples of Egišnugal and Enitenna, under the guidance of an indigenous religious official, demonstrates an effort on the part of the Seleucid prince to properly honor the Mesopotamian deity according to local religious customs.

Upon his own coronation, Antiochus is credited with a calendrical innovation: the Seleucid Era dating. Rather than restarting the regnal year count, as Macedonian, Achaemenid Persian and Babylonian kings had done formerly, Antiochus continued his father's count, as can be discerned from documents dated to his reign and those of his own descendants.⁵⁸ In this way, Year 1 continued to be 311 BC, forever hearkening back to Seleucus' return to Babylon in the month of Nisannu. Although the corresponding Babylonian Chronicle does not exist or has not been found, Antiochus must have announced his intention to the temple scribes, who would not otherwise have departed so radically in their chronological count. Every *Akitu* festival and every Babylonian New Year thus doubly served as an anniversary, celebrating the homecoming of both the god Bel-Marduk and that of his father, restoring proper order to the world.

In return for their cooperation, the temple elite and scribal community prospered under the reigns of Seleucus and Antiochus. The 2nd century Greek geographer Pausanias comments on the renowned piety of Seleucus I:

⁵⁷ Rolf Strootman, "Babylonian, Macedonian, King of the world: The Antiochos Cylinder from Borsippa and Seleukid Imperial Integration," in *Shifting Social Imaginaries in the Hellenistic Period*, ed. Eftychia Stavrianopoulou, (Brill, 2013), 80.

⁵⁸ Paul Kosmin, *Time and its Adversaries in the Seleucid Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), 22.

I am persuaded that Seleucus was the most righteous, and in particular the most religious of the kings. Firstly, it was Seleucus who sent back to Branchidae for the Milesians the bronze Apollo that had been carried by Xerxes to Ecbatana in Persia. Secondly, when he founded Seleucea on the river Tigris and brought to it Babylonian colonists, he spared the wall of Babylon as well as the sanctuary of Bel, near which he permitted the Chaldeans to live.⁵⁹

Pausanias' extremely favorable portrayal of Seleucus and knowledge of his policies in Babylon likely derives from a Seleucid authority.⁶⁰ At first glance, it seems strange for Pausanias to list Seleucus' willingness to "spare" the Babylonian sanctuary and city wall as evidence for the king's piety. Compared to the restoration of Apollo's statue to the Milesians, Seleucus' deeds toward the Mesopotamians appear shallow and passive. Nevertheless, the pious actions listed by Pausanias may bear greater meaning when observed in conjunction with one another rather than in contrast. When understood together, the details of Seleucus' pious acts are strikingly reminiscent of the actions attributed to the Achaemenid founder Cyrus the Great, following his conquest of Babylon in 539 BC. In the voice of the king, the cuneiform Cyrus Cylinder lists out the praiseworthy deeds that Cyrus performed in Babylon:

...the gods who dwelt there I returned to their home and let them move into an eternal dwelling. All their people I collected and brought them back to their homes. And the gods of Sumer and Akkad... I caused them to move into a dwelling-place pleasing to their

⁵⁹ Pausanias 1.16.3.

⁶⁰ It is, of course, also possible that Pausanias personally arrived at this conclusion after consulting multiple sources, including those without bias toward the Seleucids. Arrian of Nicomedia, for instance, similarly judges Seleucus to be the greatest of Alexander's successors, not only due to his massive empire but also because he had more of a kingly mind than that of his peers (Arrian 7.22.5). Even so, we know that Arrian was well acquainted with Ptolemaic sources, having drawn extensively from Ptolemy I's history, as Arrian states in the preface of his work.

hearts in their sanctuaries... To strengthen the wall of Imgur-Enlil, the great wall of Babylon [...] I took action.⁶¹

The Cyrus Cylinder celebrates the restoration of peoples to their homes and care for Babylon's walls as examples of the Achaemenid king's piety. Most importantly, repeated multiple times in the text, the cylinder praises Cyrus for returning the images and statues of the gods to their proper temples and sanctuaries. By returning the bronze statue of Apollo to its home in Miletus and associating himself with the preservation of Babylon's walls, the sanctuary of Bel-Marduk, and the Chaldeans' homes, it is likely the Seleucus intended to emulate Cyrus' piety, reviving a precedent for benevolent rule over Mesopotamia that had been abandoned by Achaemenid kings Darius I and Xerxes I. Seleucus' "sparing" of Babylon's walls and the temple of Bel-Marduk should not be interpreted as a lack of interest toward Babylonian affairs compared to Greek ones, but rather as a calculated display of piety that likely resonated with the Babylonian audience.

That the early Seleucids were interested in emulating the conduct of previous rulers of Mesopotamia is in fact corroborated in the writings of Seleucus' envoy Megasthenes and of the contemporary Babylonian priest Berossus. As Paul Kosmin points out, both Megasthenes and Berossus heap considerable praises on the early 6th century BC Neo-Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar II, who might have been introduced by these Seleucid subjects to Greek and Macedonian audiences for the first time.⁶² Their identical Greek rendering of Nebuchadnezzar's name to "Nabokodrosoros,"⁶³ as well as their shared praise for the monarch as a model king, hints at the popularity of reflections on past rulers of Mesopotamia in early Seleucid literary

⁶¹ TPE 3.E.a21. 32-38.

⁶² Paul Kosmin, "Seeing Double in Seleucid Babylonia: Rereading the Borsippa Cylinder of Antiochus I," in *Patterns of the Past: Epitēdeumata in the Greek Tradition*, eds. Alfonso Moreno and Rosalind Thomas (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 191.

⁶³ Geert de Breucker, "Berossos Between Tradition and Innovation," in *The Oxford Handbook of Cuneiform Culture*, eds. Karen Radner and Eleanor Robson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 651.

circles. Moreover, quotations of Nebuchadnezzar's inscriptions in Berossus' work convey that the ancient inscriptions themselves were made available for study at the time.⁶⁴ As such, it is quite plausible that Seleucus was acquainted with accounts which, like the Cyrus Cylinder, commemorated the pious actions of Cyrus the Great—an Achaemenid Persian king who had in any case already been held in high regard by Seleucus' former superior, Alexander.⁶⁵

Contemporary cuneiform documents support the notion of cultural and religious restoration under the early Seleucid kings. In a ritual text from Uruk, the temple scribe Šamaš-etir records that his ancestor Kidin-Anu discovered in Elam the missing tablets from the Reš Temple—tablets that contained instructions on the traditional rites for the care of the gods. The scribe explains that the Neo-Babylonian king Nabopolassar (who reigned in the late 7th century BC) had stolen these tablets centuries ago. The colophon of the text reads, “...Kidin-Anu the Urukean, the āšipu of Anu and Antu (and) descendant of Ekur-Zakir, the high priest of the Reš temple, saw those tablets in the land of Elam, and during the reign of Seleucus and Antiochus, the kings, copied (them) and brought (the copies back) to Uruk.”⁶⁶ Admittedly, the tablets' recovery is credited to Kidin-Anu rather than to the Seleucid kings, themselves. However, the fact that they had not been recovered sooner—during Persian rule, when the revival of Uruk's cult of Anu likely enjoyed the support of the Achaemenid administration⁶⁷ and when

⁶⁴ Paul Kosmin, “Seeing Double in Seleucid Babylonia: Rereading the Borsippa Cylinder of Antiochus I,” in *Patterns of the Past: Epitēdeumata in the Greek Tradition*, eds. Alfonso Moreno and Rosalind Thomas (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 191.

⁶⁵ Arrian 6.29.10; Plutarch, *Life of Alexander*, 69. Arrian and Plutarch, both probably drawing from Aristobulus' lost history, record that Alexander the Great visited Cyrus' tomb in Pasargadae. Upset to see that the tomb had been desecrated, Alexander ordered its restoration. The king entrusted Aristobulus (who was then one of his military engineers) with carrying out the proper repairs.

⁶⁶ Eleanor Robson, *Ancient Knowledge Networks: A Social Geography of Cuneiform Scholarship in First-millennium Assyria and Babylonia* (UCL Press, 2019), 189.

⁶⁷ Paul-Alain Beaulieu, “Uruk Before and After Xerxes: The Onomastic and Institutional Rise of the God Anu,” in *Xerxes and Babylonia: The Cuneiform Evidence*, eds. Caroline Waerzeggers and Maarja Seire (Leuven: Peeters, 2018), 205.

Mesopotamian religious officials are recorded to have routinely visited Elam⁶⁸—suggests a higher degree of freedom or interest in restoring the traditional ways during the reigns of Seleucus and Antiochus.

Close ties between the temple elite and the Seleucid kings were also maintained after the founding of the empire. A building inscription from 244 BC preserves the words of Anu-uballit, the governor of Uruk:

In Nisan of Year 68 (244) of King Seleucus, Anu-uballit, the son of Anu-iksūr, of the Ah'utu family, *šaknu* (governor) of Uruk, on whom Antiochus, King of Lands, bestowed the other name Nikarchos, completely built the Reš(-sanctuary), the temple of Anu and Antum... On 8 Nisan he made Anu and Antum enter and caused them to dwell for ever in the cella Enamenna in their shrines...⁶⁹

Commemorating the reconstruction of Uruk's Reš Temple, Anu-uballit maintains that Antiochus⁷⁰ gave him the Greek name Nikarchos (Νίκαρχος). Although the inscription does not explain why he was given the name, the account nevertheless conveys the governor's pride in receiving the honor, indicating a warm relationship with, or at least access to, the Seleucid king. Excavations in Uruk confirm that local religious buildings were not only maintained but also

⁶⁸ Caroline Waerzeggers, “The Network of Resistance: Archives and Political Action in Babylonia Before 484 BCE,” in *Xerxes and Babylonia: The Cuneiform Evidence*, eds. Caroline Waerzeggers and Maarja Seire (Leuven: Peeters, 2018), 113.

⁶⁹ Amélie Kuhrt and Susan Sherwin-White, *From Samarkhand to Sardis: A New Approach to the Seleucid Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 150.

⁷⁰ Amélie Kuhrt and Susan Sherwin-White, *From Samarkhand to Sardis: A New Approach to the Seleucid Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 151; Eleanor Robson, *Ancient Knowledge Networks: A Social Geography of Cuneiform Scholarship in First-millennium Assyria and Babylonia* (UCL Press, 2019), 181. It should be noted that Anu-uballit does not clarify whether it was Antiochus I or his son Antiochus II who conferred upon him the name Nikarchos. Amélie Kuhrt and Susan Sherwin-White prefer the latter while Eleanor Robson interprets the former. Either way, a personal connection between the Urukian governor and the early Seleucid royal family is attested.

substantially enlarged during the early Seleucid period.⁷¹ Furthermore, Seleucid support for the local cult of Anu differed from the precedent set by the Achaemenid Persians. While Achaemenid support of Anu served to divide the Mesopotamian religious community at the expense of Babylon's theological dominance, Anu-uballit's inscription bears a trace of Seleucid-sponsored Babylonian influence. The decision to bring the cult statues of Anu and his divine consort Antu into the renovated Reš Temple in the month of Nisannu—with all the theological significance that comes with the concurrent *Akitu* festival—may be indicative of the renewed religious influence of Babylon across Mesopotamia under the early Seleucids.

Cuneiform documents also attest to direct royal investment in rebuilding Babylon's religious institutions. A temple scribe in the astronomical diary from 274 BC observes, “That year, a large number of bricks for the reconstruction of Esa[ngila] were molded above Babylon and below Babylon...”⁷² Efforts to rebuild Mesopotamian temples are confirmed in the Antiochus Cylinder, discovered in Borsippa and dated to near the end of Antiochus I's reign. A cuneiform royal inscription written in Antiochus' own voice, the cylinder expresses that the Seleucid king took it upon himself to begin the reconstruction of the Esagila and Ezida temples in Babylon and Borsippa, respectively:

1. Antiochus, great king,
2. mighty king, king of the world, king of Babylon, king of
3. the lands, provider for (the temples) Esagil and Ezida,
4. foremost heir of Seleucus, the king,
5. the Macedonian, king of Babylon,

⁷¹ Philippe Clancier, “Cuneiform Culture's Last Guardians: The Old Urban Notability of Hellenistic Uruk” in *The Oxford Handbook of Cuneiform Culture*, eds. Karen Radner and Eleanor Robson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 759.

⁷² Abraham J. Sachs and Hermann Hunger, *Astronomical Diaries and Related Texts from Babylonia Vol. 1. Diaries from 652 B.C. to 262 B.C.* (Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1988), 347.

6. am I. When my heart urged me
7. to [re]build Esagil and Ezida,
8. I moulded the bricks
9. of Esagil and Ezida
10. in the land of Hatti (Syria) with my pure hands,
11. using the finest oil, and
12. for the laying of the foundations of Esagil and Ezida I
13. brought [them]. In the month Addaru, day 20, of year 43,
14. (27 March 268 BC), I laid the foundations of Ezida, the
15. true temple, the temple of Nabû which is in Borsippa.⁷³

A lengthy prayer to the Mesopotamian god of scribes Nabû follows the above excerpt. Assessing the royal inscription, Eleanor Robson questions the sincerity of Antiochus' support for the temple community. She points out that the Seleucid king was not present in Mesopotamia but instead in faraway Syria, as evident in lines 8-10 of the cylinder's inscription ("I moulded the bricks... in the land of Hatti").⁷⁴ Robson's assessment, however, may be an overly pessimistic evaluation. The inscription claims in lines 12-16 that the king himself brought the building material to Babylon and Borsippa. Judging from the date recorded in the cylinder, Paul Kosmin takes it a step further and states that Antiochus, upon setting the foundations for the Ezida Temple at Borsippa, must have attended the *Akitu* festival in nearby Babylon, which would have been

⁷³ Kathryn Stevens, "The Antiochus Cylinder, Babylonian Scholarship and Seleucid Imperial Ideology," *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 134 (2014): 68.

⁷⁴ Eleanor Robson, *Ancient Knowledge Networks: A Social Geography of Cuneiform Scholarship in First-millennium Assyria and Babylonia* (UCL Press, 2019), 204; 178. Robson also cites evidence from the Babylonian Chronicles for heavy taxation on Babylon under Antiochus I. Such a reading of the cuneiform text has been contested by Paul Kosmin and will be discussed in the next section.

scheduled to begin just ten days afterwards.⁷⁵ While the Seleucid king's attendance at the Babylonian New Year festival in 268 BC must remain speculative, let it suffice to say that the cylinder attests to Antiochus' presence in Mesopotamia for the reconstruction of the Esagila and Ezida temples.⁷⁶

At the same time, the Antiochus Cylinder subtly inserts the rhetoric of royal power behind the outward embrace of Mesopotamian culture. Noticing the emphasis on the Ezida Temple and the Mesopotamian god of scribes Nabû, Paul Kosmin and Rolf Strootman argue that the cylinder identifies Nabû with the Greek god of poetry and prophecy Apollo, who was frequently depicted on Seleucid coinage during Antiochus I's reign.⁷⁷ Envisioning the temple restoration as part of a pan-imperial agenda, Kosmin contends, "If King Antiochus was aware of Nabû's identification with Apollo, as he surely was, then at the same time as rebuilding Borsippa's Ezida he was honouring the favoured god of the Seleucid dynasty. This goes some way to explaining why, of all the temples of Babylonia, he chose to rebuild Ezida."⁷⁸ While the Nabû-Apollo syncretism is strongly evidenced by literary sources and material findings that conflate the two deities,⁷⁹ there are several issues with this interpretation of Antiochus' special favor towards Nabû. For one, it assumes that Antiochus—who was raised in Mesopotamia, spent

⁷⁵ Paul Kosmin, *Time and its Adversaries in the Seleucid Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), 80.

⁷⁶ Amélie Kuhrt and Susan Sherwin-White, "Aspects of Seleucid Royal Ideology: The Cylinder of Antiochus I from Borsippa," *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 111 (1991): 77.

⁷⁷ Paul Kosmin, "Seeing Double in Seleucid Babylonia: Rereading the Borsippa Cylinder of Antiochus I," in *Patterns of the Past: Epit̄deumata in the Greek Tradition*, eds. Alfonso Moreno and Rosalind Thomas (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 177-180; Rolf Strootman, "Babylonian, Macedonian, King of the world: The Antiochos Cylinder from Borsippa and Seleucid Imperial Integration," in *Shifting Social Imaginaries in the Hellenistic Period*, ed. Eftychia Stavrianopoulou (Brill, 2013), 88.

⁷⁸ Paul Kosmin, "Seeing Double in Seleucid Babylonia: Rereading the Borsippa Cylinder of Antiochus I," in *Patterns of the Past: Epit̄deumata in the Greek Tradition*, eds. Alfonso Moreno and Rosalind Thomas (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 178.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 177-178. An inscription from the Temple of Gadde in Dura-Europus, Strabo, and possibly Berossus identify Nabû with Apollo. A contemporary seal from Seleucia on the Tigris depicts a nude Apollo with Nabû's stylus and Babylonian astral symbols.

all of his life in Asia, and is attested to have learned sacred rituals from a native Babylonian⁸⁰—would have understood Nabû only through the lens of the Greek god Apollo. Secondly, cuneiform documents indicate that Antiochus was affiliated with numerous temples aside from the Ezida. As has already been discussed, he worshipped at the Egišnugal and Enitenna temples for the moon god Sin, possibly supported the reconstruction of the Reš Temple for the sky god Anu, and indeed *personally participated in rebuilding* the Esagila Temple of the god Bel-Marduk, as attested in lines 7-12 of the Antiochus Cylinder. To claim that Antiochus prioritized the Ezida out of all the Mesopotamian temples sets the Antiochus Cylinder on a pedestal, neglecting not only the fragmentary nature of the cuneiform record but also the surviving evidence.

Thirdly, the special treatment for Nabû is taken out of context, since the Antiochus Cylinder was a foundation inscription made specifically for Nabû's Ezida Temple. On the contrary, comparing the inscription with its several centuries old counterparts from the Neo-Babylonian period, Kathryn Stevens notes that—despite the cylinder's use of archaizing cuneiform phrases—the lack of an epithet linking Antiochus to any particular deity deviates from the convention among former rulers of Mesopotamia. This irregularity is corroborated in the unorthodox absence of a divine actor credited with inspiring Antiochus to rebuild the Ezida Temple. Instead, the cylinder simply records in line 6, “When my heart urged me to build Esagil and Ezida...” Stevens interprets the absence of divine association to be a “subtle but deliberate shift in the representation of ruler and gods... in line with Seleucid royal ideology.”⁸¹ By leaving out a personal divine sponsor, the Seleucid king emphasized his own agency and initiative as king in supporting the Mesopotamian religious community. His involvement in rebuilding the

⁸⁰ BCHP 5, obv. 8-12.

⁸¹ Kathryn Stevens, “The Antiochus Cylinder, Babylonian Scholarship and Seleucid Imperial Ideology,” *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 134 (2014): 79.

Esagila and Ezida temples should not be viewed as a predetermined course of action but as an act of generosity from the crown, in exchange for the continued temple support of the dynasty.

Seleucus I and Antiochus I understood the importance of the Mesopotamian temple community and aspired to utilize its embedded network of influence to propagate their dynastic image as righteous and legitimate rulers to the indigenous population. In turn, the Mesopotamian religious authorities, having seen their influence decline following the native rebellions against Xerxes I, actively cooperated with Alexander's successors to restore and maintain their privileged status in Mesopotamian society. Through careful negotiation and collaboration, the early Seleucids and the Mesopotamian temple elite ushered in the creation of a new empire and an optimistic renewal of Mesopotamian culture, all made possible by the events of Year 1: when the prophesied king returned to Babylon.

2. Seleucia on the Tigris: Urban Contact Zones

Throughout their two reigns, Seleucus and Antiochus personally engaged in dialogue with the temple community. They employed its influence as a social network to define their rule as one of cultural restoration and to foster popular support for their kingship across Mesopotamia. To unify the empire's multiethnic subject population in a manner that could outlive their own lives, however, the two kings subtly experimented with and reorganized interpersonal networks to create new zones of cultural contact, centered in the Mesopotamian regional capital of Seleucia on the Tigris.

The challenge of navigating ethnic tensions between disparate cultural and ethnic cliques was in fact one of the difficult tasks that weighed on Alexander the Great during the final years of his reign. Having overthrown the Achaemenid Persian Empire, Alexander sought to unify the old Persian noble houses with the Macedonian elite of his new domain. Classical sources agree

that in Susa in 324 BC, Alexander arranged a mass wedding ceremony, in which he married his distinguished generals to brides mostly from Persian aristocratic families.⁸² Wedding gifts were also extended to the Macedonian soldiers that had already married Asian wives. According to the Greek historian Arrian of Nicomedia, the Persian style of the wedding, however, became a point of contention for many of the Macedonians. They perceived it to be yet another example of Alexander's favor towards the Persians. The training of Persian recruits in the Macedonian style of warfare as well as Alexander's adoption of Persian clothing only exacerbated such sentiments.⁸³ Dissatisfaction with Alexander's Persian tendencies quickly reached a boiling point and erupted in open mutiny at the Mesopotamian town of Opis.

Alexander's actions left a deep impression on his contemporaries and historians alike. The 1st century Greek moralist Plutarch argues that the Macedonian conqueror believed that “by a mixture and community of practice which produced goodwill, rather than by force, his authority would be kept secure while he was far away.”⁸⁴ Despite his romanticizing language, Plutarch quite astutely recognizes Alexander's marital arrangements, enlistment of Asian troops, and personal use of Persian attire as practical decisions to appease his new subjects and to consolidate his multiethnic empire. The culture shock and sense of betrayal, however, is better captured in Plutarch's near contemporary Arrian, who candidly condemns Alexander's adoption of luxurious Persian clothing as a moral failing, unbecoming of a Macedonian king.⁸⁵

⁸² Arrian 7.4.4-8; Plutarch, *Life of Alexander*, 70; Diodorus Siculus 17.107; Seleucus himself, in fact, was present for the occasion and paired with the Bactrian woman Apama. Their match would prove long lasting. Apama went on to become the first queen of the Seleucid Empire and the mother of Antiochus I.

⁸³ Arrian 7.6.2.

⁸⁴ Plutarch, *Life of Alexander*, 47.

⁸⁵ Arrian 4.7.4.

After executing the ringleaders of the mutiny and shaming the Macedonians for their ungratefulness in a fiery speech, Alexander reconciled with his army at the Banquet of Opis in 324 BC. Arrian preserves a detailed account of the banquet:

...Alexander sacrificed to the gods to whom it was his custom to sacrifice, and gave a public banquet, seated all the Macedonians round him, and next to them Persians, and then any persons from the other peoples... with the Greek soothsayers and Magi initiating the ceremony. Alexander prayed for various blessings and especially that the Macedonians and Persians should enjoy harmony as partners in the government.⁸⁶

Alexander hosted the banquet in an effort to diminish remaining tensions not only between his army and himself, but also between the Macedonians and Persians, who now jointly served him. Both Greek and Persian (Magi) religious practitioners conducted the rituals at the banquet. Before the combined assembly, the Macedonian conqueror called for a “partnership in empire” and strength through cooperation across ethnic divisions.

The task of securing the empire’s structure and guiding ethnic relations according to such ideals, however, would not be Alexander’s to oversee. The following year, in 323 BC, Alexander died in Babylon. Although the relationship between Macedonians and Persians under the Seleucid Empire remains beyond the scope of this paper, Seleucus and Antiochus faced the equally daunting challenge of unification in densely populated Mesopotamia. Learning from the shortcomings of Alexander's heavy-handed approach, the two Seleucid kings carefully facilitated weak ties between the native Mesopotamians and the Greco-Macedonian population through their new settlement of Seleucia on the Tigris.

Seleucus founded Seleucia on the Tigris sometime before 300 BC. According to Appian, the king consulted the Magi (Zoroastrian priests) for the auspicious hour to begin construction of

⁸⁶ Arrian 7.11.8-9.

the settlement. Opposed to the project, the local Magi “lied about the time, as they did not want there to be such a stronghold against their own influence.”⁸⁷ Nonetheless, Seleucus’ soldiers began construction at the proper time unintentionally, as if compelled by a divine voice. Troubled by his inability to hold back his men, Seleucus questioned the Magi of the city’s fate. In the end, the Magi revealed their plot to withhold the true hour and lamented, “ποῦ γὰρ ἔτι τὰ ἡμέτερα ἰσχύσει, δυνατωτέρου γένους παρφοκισμένου;” (“For where will our interests still prevail, when there is a more powerful people settled beside us?”)⁸⁸ They conceded that Seleucia was destined to prosper and were pardoned by the merciful king.

This detailed foundation story, reported by Appian, likely preserves a publicized Seleucid account of the imperial city’s origins. On the surface, the story celebrates Seleucia’s divinely sanctioned prosperity against all odds. Yet, it also conveys the uneasy ethnic tensions that surrounded the settlement from the beginning. As indicated by the Magi’s ruse, the settlement project was met with local hostility. To the native Mesopotamians, Seleucia was perceived to be “a stronghold” that threatened their freedoms. The Magi’s lament of having “a more powerful people settled beside us” and particularly the use of the term “γένους,” which can be interpreted as “race,” illustrates that the antagonism was ethnically charged—directed towards the prospect not simply of a military garrison but of a permanent Greco-Macedonian intrusion in Mesopotamia.

Seleucus, for his part, navigated indigenous apprehension toward the settlement by appeasing and downplaying his own prerogative to achieve his ends. He repeatedly consulted the Magi for their divine authority and later pardoned them for their deception. The story removes the agency of the Seleucid king by ultimately attributing the city’s construction to divine forces.

⁸⁷ Appian, *The Syrian Book*, 11.58.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

The settlement's very location, within the vicinity of Opis,⁸⁹ and the reference to the Magi instead of the Babylonian Chaldaeans might have been deliberate choices to reassert Alexander's precedent for promoting cooperation at the Banquet of Opis.⁹⁰ Even so, the guise of cooperation conceals the king's real sovereignty at work. The royal decision to found a settlement was not and could not be challenged, regardless of any reluctance on the part of the indigenous population. After all, Seleucus gave the local Magi only the judgment over *when* and not *should* Seleucia be built. Thus, although certainly a product of imperial Seleucid power, the settlement of Seleucia was portrayed as having manifested through local and divine rather than imperial forms of authority.

The intermixing of the foreign with the local to represent cooperation across ethnic divisions was also a key feature in the city layout of Seleucia. Much has been written on the settlement's Hellenic grid plan, defined by structured, perpendicular streets. Speaking generally of Seleucid cities, Matthew Canepa describes the urban plan as "rational and, to those within the Seleucid settler elite, familiar and easy to navigate, and for their administrators and military commanders, easy to control."⁹¹ Similarly, Paul Kosmin notes that the design was "ideally suited to an immigrant population and an itinerant court."⁹² The predictable layout of Seleucia's grid plan allowed the Seleucid king to easily organize and impose order upon the city's inhabitants, as well as to efficiently infiltrate the city by force, should the need arise.

⁸⁹ Clark Hopkins, ed., *Topography and Architecture of Seleucia on the Tigris* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972), 149-150.

⁹⁰ The use of the Magi instead of the Chaldaeans in Appian's account also conveniently attaches the treacherous behavior to the Iranian-originated Zoroastrian priesthood rather than to the traditional Mesopotamian temple elite.

⁹¹ Matthew P. Canepa, *The Iranian Expanse: Transforming Royal Identity through Architecture, Landscape, and the Built Environment, 550 BCE – 642 CE* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018), 47.

⁹² Paul J. Kosmin, *The Land of the Elephant Kings: Space, Territory, and Ideology in the Seleucid Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 205.

Alongside the foreign geometric logic of the Hellenic grid plan, Seleucia was localized through experimentation with Mesopotamian urban traditions. For example, Canepa notes that Seleucia resembled the old city of Babylon with its long rectangular shape.⁹³ I would add that further resemblances could have been observed in the settlement's use of its watercourses. Perhaps imitating Babylon, which was divided in two halves by the Euphrates River,⁹⁴ Seleucia appears to have been divided in two by a canal that ran through its main east-west artery. Just as Babylon was encircled by an extensive moat, excavation of the canal bed in the city as well as literary sources convey that Seleucia's canal also branched out to surround the city's exterior.⁹⁵ Within the city wall, in Seleucia's main agora, a massive fiscal archive building (*chreophylakeion*), built on a Babylonian plan, stood across from a parallel Hellenistic *stoa*. The nearby Tell Umar mound, which has been identified as a theater, bears traces of an attached temple with a "Mesopotamian-style ground plan."⁹⁶ While the dating of these structures remains a point of contention among scholars and might have been added to the city after the reigns of Seleucus and Antiochus,⁹⁷ the prominent position of these structures in the public space of the agora likely reflected the juxtaposition and synthesis of Greek and Mesopotamian architectural forms long ingrained in the city's public design. Defined by both a Hellenic grid plan and a Babylon-styled perimeter and water system, Seleucia was built upon an urban layout that was both foreign and highly localized to its surroundings.

⁹³ Matthew P. Canepa, *The Iranian Expanse: Transforming Royal Identity through Architecture, Landscape, and the Built Environment, 550 BCE – 642 CE* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018), 47.

⁹⁴ Strabo 16.1.5.

⁹⁵ Clark Hopkins, ed., *Topography and Architecture of Seleucia on the Tigris* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972), 3, 149.

⁹⁶ Matthew P. Canepa, *The Iranian Expanse: Transforming Royal Identity through Architecture, Landscape, and the Built Environment, 550 BCE – 642 CE* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018), 49.

⁹⁷ Matthew P. Canepa, *The Iranian Expanse: Transforming Royal Identity through Architecture, Landscape, and the Built Environment, 550 BCE – 642 CE* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018), 385; Paul Kosmin, *Time and its Adversaries in the Seleucid Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), 55.

In populating Seleucia on the Tigris, Seleucus and Antiochus deliberately created a mixed ethnic composition for the city. Macedonians certainly settled in the city, as Macedonian families living in Seleucia after the fall of the Seleucid Empire are known to have taken pride in identifying as descendants of the original colonists.⁹⁸ Since most of these Macedonians were soldiers from Seleucus' army, however, it is perhaps reasonable to assume that the Mesopotamian settler population, which could draw from a nearby and far larger pool of potential inhabitants that contained both men and women in roughly equal proportions, formed the majority of Seleucia's initial population. In fact, the Roman author Pliny the Elder records that Babylon was “drained of its population by the proximity of Seleucia, founded for that purpose by Nicator...”⁹⁹ In other words, Seleucus actively sought to include the indigenous peoples residing in Babylon into his new settlement. Likewise, Pausanias reports that Seleucus “founded Seleucea on the river Tigris and brought to it Babylonian colonists (συνοίκους)...”¹⁰⁰ Pausanias’ use of the term “συνοίκους,” which can be interpreted as “fellow inhabitants,” suggests a degree of partnership in the settlement project and may preserve the language of official Seleucid discourse. Moreover, the Greek geographer Strabo expresses that the term “Babylonians” was often used broadly to describe Mesopotamians¹⁰¹ and did not necessarily specify the inhabitants of the namesake city. Hence, Pausanias’ reference to “Babylonian colonists” leaves open the possibility that local populations of Mesopotamian cities other than Babylon were also encouraged to populate the new imperial center.

Antiochus, as crown prince, also participated in populating Seleucia on the Tigris. The Babylonian Chronicle BCHP 5 bears the crucial albeit fragmentary report: “That month

⁹⁸ Matthew P. Canepa, *The Iranian Expanse: Transforming Royal Identity through Architecture, Landscape, and the Built Environment, 550 BCE – 642 CE* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018), 45.

⁹⁹ Pliny the Elder 6.122.

¹⁰⁰ Pausanias 1.16.3.

¹⁰¹ Strabo 16.1.16.

Antiochus, the crown [prince], settled [the Mace]donians, as many as there were in Babylon, [whom king Alexander? into Babylon] had forced to enter, from Babylon [into Seleucia which is o]n the Tigris... a heavy taxation upon Babylon [he imposed...].”¹⁰² Antiochus allegedly relocated the entire Macedonian population in Babylon to Seleucia. The relationship between the migration and the taxation referenced at the end of the excerpt is unclear. Eleanor Robson, in keeping with her pessimistic outlook on Antiochus' relationship with the Mesopotamians, interprets that the crown prince placed the burden on the Babylonians “to pay for the new Greek city.”¹⁰³ Alternatively, Paul Kosmin argues that the heavy tax might have been imposed to encourage the Macedonians to migrate.¹⁰⁴ Regardless of the nature of the heavy tax, the removal of the Macedonian population was likely a welcome change for the Mesopotamians. Such a response is hinted at by the chronicle's unflattering description of the Macedonians as having originally been “forced to enter” Babylon. Philippe Clancier similarly proposes that their relocation likely meant a renewal of autonomous privileges for the local elite—namely, the Babylonian religious authorities.¹⁰⁵ At the same time, the transfer of the Macedonians to Seleucia probably benefited the Seleucid crown. In one fell swoop, Antiochus was able to not only populate the new settlement but also to counteract the substantial Mesopotamian population that already dwelled in Seleucia with a state-sponsored influx of Macedonian residents.

By establishing and cultivating Seleucia on the Tigris, the two Seleucid kings were able to foster social cohesion through the creation of an interconnected network that could facilitate social and economic interaction across ethnic divisions. Unlike in Babylon, no demographic

¹⁰² BCHP 5, rev. 6'-10'.

¹⁰³ Eleanor Robson, *Ancient Knowledge Networks: A Social Geography of Cuneiform Scholarship in First-millennium Assyria and Babylonia* (UCL Press, 2019), 178.

¹⁰⁴ Paul J. Kosmin, *The Land of the Elephant Kings: Space, Territory, and Ideology in the Seleucid Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 193.

¹⁰⁵ Philippe Clancier, “‘Le šatammu, l’assemblée de l’Esagil, et les Babyloniens’. Les notables de Babylone: du relais local à la marginalisation,” *Communautés locales et pouvoir central dans l’Orient hellénistique et romain*. Nancy (2012): 304.

group could be accused of being forced into the city, as both Greco-Macedonians and native Mesopotamians participated in the city's creation. Rather than imposing a wholly foreign environment on their subjects, as Alexander had at the Susa Weddings, the Seleucids constructed a setting that took delicate care not to outwardly favor one cultural identity over another but instead to promote a hybrid imperial identity. By deliberately introducing a mixed community to Seleucia, the two kings permitted at least weak ties between members of different ethnic cliques to develop naturally as between fellow inhabitants. This could take the form of event-type ties, such as new acquaintances through trade and other high frequency face-to-face interactions, encouraged by the close proximity of residence for Greco-Macedonian and Mesopotamian populations. Moreover, the shared environment of Seleucia could be considered conducive to forging state-type ties as well. Considering the gender disparity of the Macedonian military population, intermarriage was likely a natural result, with married partners serving as local bridges for their respective families and communities. While data concerning interethnic marital patterns in Seleucia is unfortunately lacking, surviving inscriptions from Uruk indicate that Mesopotamian elites there married Macedonian wives, if we assume their names are indicators of their ethnicity.¹⁰⁶ By transforming the imperial center of Mesopotamia from the ethnically homogenous Babylon to the cosmopolitan Seleucia, Seleucus and Antiochus cultivated the notion of multiethnic cooperation as a hallmark for the empire's internal structure and of Seleucia not as a stronghold of outsiders but a microcosm of Mesopotamia's present diversity.

3. Seleucia on the Tigris: Rural Exploitation and Centralization

While Seleucus and Antiochus balanced change with continuity by carefully inserting Greek with local cultural forms in the urban environment, Seleucia on the Tigris also exercised

¹⁰⁶ Matthew P. Canepa, *The Iranian Expanse: Transforming Royal Identity through Architecture, Landscape, and the Built Environment, 550 BCE – 642 CE* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018), 57.

imperial authority in the rural context through the manipulation of pre-existing irrigation systems. Seleucia was located on the west bank of the Tigris River, north of the irrigated lands that defined Lower Mesopotamia—the southern alluvial plains that contained Babylon, Uruk and the other traditional urban centers of Mesopotamia. To avoid the confusion of using the opposite term “Upper Mesopotamia,” which is normally employed by archaeologists to define the rain-fed steppe further north of Seleucia,¹⁰⁷ I shall use the term “Central Mesopotamia,” when referring to Seleucia’s surrounding countryside or *chora*. Strategically situated, the new Seleucid settlement influenced and exploited the rural landscape of both its nearer *chora* of Central Mesopotamia and its farther *chora* of Lower Mesopotamia.

Lower Mesopotamia was a densely populated area with a long history of habitation primarily along the Euphrates River. Estimates drawn from average site sizes suggest that the region experienced over fivefold population growth from the Middle Babylonian to the Parthian period (700 BC - 200 AD). The most rapid growth took place during the Neo-Babylonian and Achaemenid periods that preceded Seleucid rule.¹⁰⁸ Agriculture in the lower Mesopotamian plains was also extremely productive, capable not only of sustaining the local population but also of reaping surplus yields.¹⁰⁹ The Murašû Archive, a collection of cuneiform business transactions from the Mesopotamian city of Nippur, dated to the late Achaemenid period, sheds light on the great variety of crops that were grown in the region. These records provide numerous references to barley and wheat. While the cultivation of grapes is only attested once, the archive conveys the large-scale regional production of dates.¹¹⁰ Writing after the Seleucid period, Strabo offers a

¹⁰⁷ T. J. Wilkinson, “Regional Approaches to Mesopotamian Archaeology: The Contribution of Archaeological Surveys,” *Journal of Archaeological Research* 8, no. 3 (September 2000): 222.

¹⁰⁸ Robert McC. Adams, *Heartland of Cities: Surveys of Ancient Settlement and Land Use of the Central Floodplain of the Euphrates* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 178.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 176.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 186.

similar appraisal: “The country produces larger crops of barley than any other country (bearing three hundredfold, they say), and its other needs are supplied by the palm tree; for this tree yields bread, wine, vinegar, honey, and meal...”¹¹¹ His account of the country’s agricultural self-sufficiency suggests that the rural productiveness of the land was maintained during Seleucid rule. Indeed, low market prices for agricultural commodities from 300 - 141 BC, recorded in the Babylonian astronomical diaries, indicate that Babylon (at least) could normally be sustained by its hinterland throughout the Seleucid period.¹¹²

Due to the low rainfall in the region, extensive irrigation of the Tigris and especially Euphrates Rivers was a crucial component to the fertility of the lower Mesopotamian plains. The Murašû Archive indicates that water was one of the more expensive resources to acquire, seemingly due to its heavy demand.¹¹³ At the same time, close regulation of irrigation schedules was necessary to avoid excessive irrigation and salinization of the soil.¹¹⁴ Neo-Babylonian and Achaemenid rulers, aware of the importance of irrigation control to the Mesopotamian countryside, introduced an interlocking “grid of watercourses that broke large, contiguous areas of cultivation into polygons of fairly uniform size and shape.”¹¹⁵ This grid layout and network of canal levees allowed for more efficient control over water supplies in Lower Mesopotamia, promoting extensive local agricultural production.

The construction of Seleucia on the Tigris in Central Mesopotamia, however, drastically altered the topography of the central and lower Mesopotamian *chora*. In contrast with the populated lands to the south, Central Mesopotamia had been sparsely settled prior to Seleucid

¹¹¹ Strabo 16.1.14.

¹¹² Robartus van der Spek, “Feeding Hellenistic Seleucia on the Tigris and Babylon,” in *Feeding the Ancient City*, eds. R. Alston and O. M. van Nijf (Leuven: Peeters, 2008), 42.

¹¹³ Robert McC. Adams, *Heartland of Cities: Surveys of Ancient Settlement and Land Use of the Central Floodplain of the Euphrates* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 187.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 186.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 188.

rule. Cuneiform records and archaeological surveys of the Diyala plains, located on the opposite bank of the Tigris River from Seleucia, suggest that the settlement's nearer *chora* was a provincial backwater, consisting of only villages and small towns.¹¹⁶ Clark Hopkins, citing Pliny the Elder's report of a Euphrates channel known as the "Royal Canal" (*Nahr Malcha*), interprets Seleucia as being situated on this ancient canal, which connected the Euphrates to the Tigris.¹¹⁷ By contrast, Robert Adams, who is doubtful of an earlier canal, argues that Seleucia was situated beyond the existing lattice of watercourses and thus required an easterly extension of the Euphrates towards Seleucia.¹¹⁸ Regardless of the origin date for Seleucia's Euphrates-Tigris canal, the unprecedented need to direct water from the Euphrates and toward Central Mesopotamia resulted in a shift in the Mesopotamian water supply.

The change in the canal system had long-term repercussions on the habitation of local and settler populations in Seleucia's nearer *chora*. The central Mesopotamian plains were made desirable to Greek and Macedonian settlers through the redistribution of available resources. Conservative estimates for the productive output of the Diyala region alone suggest that Seleucia could have fed a population several times larger than even Pliny the Elder's estimate of 600,000 city inhabitants.¹¹⁹ It is likely that Seleucus partitioned and distributed the rural lands around Seleucia as agricultural estates (*kleroi*) to the veterans in his army as payment for their services and to foster economic and population growth in the undeveloped land.¹²⁰ While Strabo speaks

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 192, 194.

¹¹⁷ Clark Hopkins, ed., *Topography and Architecture of Seleucia on the Tigris* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972), 149.

¹¹⁸ Robert McC. Adams, *Heartland of Cities: Surveys of Ancient Settlement and Land Use of the Central Floodplain of the Euphrates* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 192, 351.

¹¹⁹ Robartus van der Spek, "Feeding Hellenistic Seleucia on the Tigris and Babylon," in *Feeding the Ancient City*, eds. R. Alston and O. M. van Nijf (Leuven: Peeters, 2008), 41; Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, 6.30.

¹²⁰ Paul J. Kosmin, *The Land of the Elephant Kings: Space, Territory, and Ideology in the Seleucid Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 195.

of Macedonians bringing the vine to Babylon,¹²¹ it is plausible that Macedonian settlers also introduced viticulture to the countryside around Seleucia to take advantage of the untapped local market opportunities. In the meantime, Mesopotamians already living in Seleucia's nearer *chora* would have experienced an upheaval to traditional forms of life. As a result of *kleroi* distribution, Paul Kosmin asserts, "By necessity, the indigenous peasantry would have been dispossessed of their estates and, if they remained on site, reduced to a form of dependent labor for their colonial masters."¹²² Because the limited evidence from Seleucia cannot prove the degree of exploitation, it is perhaps more reasonable to assume that some rural Mesopotamians were forcibly displaced but resettled within the new city, much like Pausanias' Babylonians that were relocated to Seleucia as fellow inhabitants (συνοίκους). Others might have been left to their own devices beyond the city, yet they too would be incentivized to engage with the burgeoning rural economy of the area. If the indigenous population of the Diyala region was predominantly pastoral, as Kosmin assumes,¹²³ then they might have contributed to the growing agrarian community through trade, by furnishing livestock and dairy products.

The implementation of a new irrigation grid also redefined the topography of power in Lower Mesopotamia by shifting the socioeconomic center of gravity to the new Seleucid settlement in the north. Robert Adams argues that the diversion of water from the Euphrates to the plains around Seleucia stripped indigenous agriculturalists in the south of a reliable source of water. The water that they did receive was excess from upriver competitors and tended to arrive irregularly "at levels frequently too low to command the available land for large-scale and canal

¹²¹ Strabo 15.3.11.

¹²² Paul J. Kosmin, *The Land of the Elephant Kings: Space, Territory, and Ideology in the Seleucid Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 196.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 199.

irrigation.”¹²⁴ More recently, T.J. Wilkinson interprets findings of off-site pottery scatters, discovered near canals at Abu Salabikh and Abu Duwari and dated from the Seleucid/Parthian period onward, as evidence for fertilization of the land through mixtures of manure and domestic waste.¹²⁵ It is therefore plausible that local agriculturalists in Lower Mesopotamia were adapting to deteriorating conditions for extensive irrigation agriculture by employing intensive farming practices. Even so, the local population was gradually pressured to migrate northward to the nearer *chora* of Seleucia. Following the Seleucid precedent, the Parthian and Sassanian empires founded their own administrative capitals (Ctesiphon and Veh Ardashir) within the vicinity of Seleucia, in a region still referred to in Arabic as “*al-Mada’in*” (“The Cities”).¹²⁶ By Middle Islamic times, one could witness “the complete abandonment of the entire southern portion of the Euphrates floodplain.”¹²⁷ While the northward shift in the rural Mesopotamian population was not an immediate consequence, Seleucus’ exploitation of the canal system deliberately diverted resources at the expense of traditional agrarian bases in Lower Mesopotamia. By controlling the crucial water resource, the Seleucid king effectively rendered the indigenous rural population dependent on the needs of the settlers in Seleucia.

Intensive canalization in the central Mesopotamian plains was a Seleucid strategy of rural exploitation that not only redistributed the regional water supply but also altered the focal point of socioeconomic interactions in the region. By furnishing an adequate water supply to Central Mesopotamia through extensive irrigation, Seleucus I was able to incentivize migration of Greek

¹²⁴ Robert McC. Adams, *Heartland of Cities: Surveys of Ancient Settlement and Land Use of the Central Floodplain of the Euphrates* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 196.

¹²⁵ T. J. Wilkinson, “Regional Approaches to Mesopotamian Archaeology: The Contribution of Archaeological Surveys,” in *Journal of Archaeological Research* 8, no. 3 (September 2000): 231.

¹²⁶ Cristina Bonfanti, Filiberto Chiabrando, Carlo Lippolis, and Vito Messina, “Mega-Sites’ Impact on Central Mesopotamia. Archaeological and Multi-Temporal Cartographic Study of the Al-Mada’in Area,” in *9th International Congress on the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East*, vol. 3 (Harrassowitz Verlag, 2016), 252.

¹²⁷ Robert McC. Adams, *Heartland of Cities: Surveys of Ancient Settlement and Land Use of the Central Floodplain of the Euphrates* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 196.

and Macedonian settlers to cultivate the countryside around Seleucia. Canalization of the Euphrates toward Seleucia, however, did more than simply feed the royal city. The strategic placement of the settlement and the subsequent infrastructural and logistical centralization effectively rearranged and unified social cohesion of imperial subjects across Mesopotamia, embedding Seleucia not simply as another branch but as a central node in the region's important irrigation network. So effective was this strategy that later Middle Eastern empires positioned their own imperial centers in Central Mesopotamia as well. By redirecting water from the densely populated Lower Mesopotamia to Seleucia on the Tigris, Seleucus redefined the locus of regional power, as indigenous agriculturalists became dependent on resources from and gradually migrated to Seleucia's nearer *chora*.

Conclusion

By the late 2nd century BC, Seleucid rule in the Middle East had finally fallen, and Mesopotamia was on the verge of conquest by the growing Parthian Empire in the east. Astronomical diaries during the 130s and 120s BC record panic in the land and, in the midst of widespread religious hysteria, the arrival of the anonymous "boatman" in 133 BC, whose popular movement (as confessed by the temple scribe) even challenged the authority of Babylon's Esagila Temple.¹²⁸ Recognizing the waning power of the Seleucid house to impose order, the Seleucid governor Hyspaosines declared independence and founded the kingdom of Characene (Mesene) on the southern Mesopotamian coast of the Persian Gulf. A now lost cuneiform tablet records that in 127 BC the Esagila Temple of Babylon dispatched Itti-Marduk-balatu, one of its temple astronomers, to Hyspaosines. Itti-Marduk-balatu was accepted by Hyspaosines, received income from the governor-turned-king, and was reportedly "still there,"

¹²⁸ Paul Kosmin, *Time and its Adversaries in the Seleucid Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), 195-197.

by the time the cuneiform document was written.¹²⁹ Moreover, the astronomer remained affiliated with the Esagila Temple, as he left two sons to fulfill his astronomical duties in Babylon.¹³⁰ While we do not have evidence for a temple scholar that directly received pay from Seleucus I or Antiochus I,¹³¹ the temple's decision to reach out to Hyspaosines likely reflects its desire to restart anew the fruitful negotiations that the Mesopotamian religious authorities had once enjoyed with the Seleucid crown during the early years of Seleucid rule. In a last ditch effort, the temple elite once again looked outward to find a rightful king, willing to preserve their position in Mesopotamian society and to restore order to the world.

The creation of Seleucid Mesopotamia was a collaborative effort that rested on Seleucus and Antiochus' careful interactions with pre-existing Mesopotamian social structures. By gaining the support of the local temple elite and scribal community, which had suffered under the previous Achaemenid Persian administration, Seleucus and Antiochus were able to propagate their dynastic image as righteous through Chaldaean prophecies and calendrical adjustments that legitimized Seleucus' reign as divinely ordained and imbued his arrival in Babylon in 311 BC (as well as the inauguration of the Seleucid Era) with theological significance. In return, the native Mesopotamian religious community flourished under the two Seleucid kings, who personally participated in the worship of the Mesopotamian gods and oversaw (directly and indirectly) the restoration of local temples and other items of religious importance.

In addition to actively negotiating with the Mesopotamian temple community, Seleucus and Antiochus rearranged the cultural, socioeconomic and demographic landscape of

¹²⁹ Eleanor Robson, *Ancient Knowledge Networks: A Social Geography of Cuneiform Scholarship in First-millennium Assyria and Babylonia* (UCL Press, 2019), 180.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 227.

¹³¹ Philippe Clancier, "Cuneiform Culture's Last Guardians: The Old Urban Notability of Hellenistic Uruk" in *The Oxford Handbook of Cuneiform Culture*, eds. Karen Radner and Eleanor Robson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 761.

Mesopotamia in a manner that promoted social cohesion, centered around Seleucia on the Tigris. Navigating ethnic tensions, the two Seleucid kings transformed the regional capital into a deliberately cosmopolitan settlement that was not only indebted to, but also capable of, facilitating natural bridges of weak ties across ethnic divisions, reflected in Seleucia's foundation story, hybrid urban design, and mixed ethnic composition. At the same time, the strategic upriver placement of Seleucia on the Tigris in the provincial backwater region of Central Mesopotamia allowed the Seleucids to reconfigure the regional topography of power to the new settlement, by exploiting through intensive canalization the untapped potential of Seleucia's nearer *chora* and redirecting resources from the traditional Mesopotamian urban centers of Lower Mesopotamia. Serving as charismatic bridges with the local religious authorities and creating networks of weak ties between the Greco-Macedonian settlers and the indigenous population of Mesopotamia, the early Seleucids embraced the diversity of their multiethnic subject population as a crucial component for the establishment of social cohesion under Seleucid rule in Mesopotamia.

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Abbreviations

BCHP: Finkel, Irving and Robert van der Spek. *Babylonian Chronicles of the Hellenistic Period*, published online at <https://www.livius.org/sources/about/mesopotamian-chronicles/>

TPE: Kuhrt, Amélie. *The Persian Empire: A Corpus of Sources from the Achaemenid Period*. Routledge, 2013.