ACHAEUS, THE PTOLEMIES AND THE
FOURTH SYRIAN WAR

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TEXT FRAGMENT

The second half of the 3rd century saw the Seleucid monarchy weaken considerably. The reign of Seleucus II brought difficult battles against Ptolemy III Euergetes (the Third Syrian War) and attempts to overcome massive internal problems. During the war against Egypt, he ultimately managed to recapture northern Syria but Ptolemy III held on to the port of Seleucia Pieria, which was key for the Seleucids, and captured a number of places in Asia Minor. It was there that the Seleucids suffered their greatest territorial losses – they lost almost all their footholds on the coasts of Cilicia, Lycia, Caria and Ionia. The Egyptian king even seized Ainos and Maronea on the Thracian coast. What also had an impact on Seleucus II losing his influences in Asia Minor was his fratricidal war against Antiochus Hierax, backed by the kings of Pergamon, Capadocia and Bithynia. The defeated Seleucus had to reconcile himself with his brother’s independence in Asia Minor; the latter, however, subsequently suffered a defeat in his war against Pergamon, which ultimately led to the Seleucids losing their Asian Minor territories. The dynasty also faced enormous challenges in the East, where Bactria and Sogdiana seceded, and Parthia was seized by the Parni.

Keywords: history; ancient history; Seleucids
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The state’s situation did not improve during the short reign of Seleucus III Keraunos, Seleucus II’s son and heir. His assassination in 223 during a campaign against Attalus I, the king of Pergamon, became another destabilising factor. At this critical moment, the army offered the royal diadem to Achaeus. However, the experienced general, a close relative of the assassinated Seleucus, remained loyal and rejected the offer.4 As a result, Antiochus III, brother of the murdered Seleucus III, came into power at less than twenty years of age. He inherited a state whose territory was diminished and economy

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2 For the Antiochus Hierax see Ma 2000: 45–47.
4 Plb. 4.48.10. The nature of kinship between Antiochus III and Achaeus is uncertain. He might have been a cousin (Pbl. 4.51.4) or an uncle (Beloch 1927: 205–206; Meloni 1949: 536–537; Schmitt 1964: 30–31; Billows 1995: 96–99). Achaeus had been Seleucus II’s general during the war against Antiochus Hierax (Polyaen. 4.17) and taken part in Seleucus III’s campaign (Pbl. 4.48.7).
weakened after losing a considerable portion of lands in Asia Minor and Iran. Achaeus, meanwhile, was appointed to govern the dynasty’s dominions in Asia Minor.

The complicated situation did not allow the young king to take over immediate and full control of what his brother had left him. In Asia Minor, he left the concern for the dynasty’s interests to Achaeus. Polybius, describing Achaeus’ scope of power, writes that he was in command of the countries west of the Taurus Mountains. This naturally does not reflect the official terminology of the Seleucid monarchy, and determining his precise position in the power structure is made difficult by a lack of relevant sources. In any event, the arrangement at the time was nothing new in the history of the dynasty; such a division of duties had been applied before – due to the sheer size of the monarchy it had been virtually necessary. Now such a solution seemed to be appropriate again; the relative remained loyal and carried out an efficient fight with Attalus I, gradually rebuilding the dynasty’s reign in Asia Minor. The situation in the east was more difficult, with the satrap of Media, Molon, who had been given extensive authority as the governor of the so called ‘upper satrapies’ by Antiochus, starting a rebellion. Although sources seem to indicate that the reason for his revolt against the young king was a conflict with the grey eminence on Antiochus’ court, the chief minister Hermias, Molon also had suitable examples in the shape of Bactria and Parthia. It is therefore entirely possible that Hermias’ efforts (if he did indeed make such efforts) to exert more stringent control over satraps only hastened Molon’s rebellion. In Polybius’ account, Hermias is presented in unequivocally negative light, which incidentally leads us to suspect that for the Seleucid court historiography (from which Polybius likely borrowed his description of the minister) he had become a scapegoat that had to be found on the Antioch court following some political failures.

It was Hermias who was supposedly responsible for underestimating the threat posed by Molon and for encouraging the king to attack Coele-Syria, which ended in defeat. It was only in the autumn of 221 that Antiochus III went east and defeated the rebel in a major battle, and the following year forced Artabazanes, the king of Media Atropatene who had supported Molon, into submission. Soon afterwards, during the return to Antioch, Hermias’ fate was sealed when he was put to death with the king’s consent.

It was at that time that Achaeus’ usurpation took place, which was surprising considering his hitherto loyalty to the king, in particular the fact that he had refused to accept the diadem after the death of Seleucus II. In 220, Achaeus left his residence in Sardes and marched towards Syria, assuming the title of king in the Phrygian Laodicea on the Lycus River.

Until then, Achaeus – using his extraordinary authority – had efficiently represented the dynasty’s interests in the complex Asian Minor region. He had recaptured a number of cities: Teos, Kolophon, Myrina, Temnos, Aigai, Aeolis, Phocaea. He had managed to

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5 Phl. 4.2.6, cf. Schmitt 1964: 158–160.
8 Phl. 5.53–55.
9 Phl. 5.56.
10 Phl. 5.57.
largely re-establish the Seleucids’ influences in Mysia and, presumably, also in Lydia, Phrygia and Lycaonia.

What, then, made Achaeus turn against the rightful king, for whom he had willingly refused the diadem in the critical moments after the previous ruler had died? Polybius (4.48.11) attributes this decision to Achaeus’ exaggerated ambition; he had supposedly become audacious following his successes in the war against Pergamon. Scholars have tried to explain the decision in various ways. It has been suggested that perhaps Achaeus borrowed the idea from Antiochus Hierax, who had had the royal title and had also resided in Sardes. It has also been pointed out that – as is indicated e.g. by the coins minted in Sardes even before the usurpation, which bore dynastic symbols – Achaeus might have truly believed in his right to the throne. The hypothesis that his fear of Hermeias’ intrigues or other unfriendly people surrounding Antiochus drove Achaeus to do such a thing is another guess. Further, it cannot be excluded that Achaeus received false news of the king’s death in the eastern provinces. The inspiration has also been thought to have come from the Ptolemaic diplomacy and this idea is worth reconsidering. The possible benefits that the Egyptians could have gained by winning over Achaeus seem quite clear and have been pointed out in research. However, Achaeus also could have made tangible profits by allying with the Ptolemies. His attempt to invade Syria, although failed, indicates that he had much greater ambitions than just to rule Asia Minor independently. His goal was to dethrone Antiochus III. When embarking on such an ambitious plan, it was worth finding allies. Although Antiochus III was in the east at the time, he had just quelled Molon’s revolt, which had considerably improved his prestige and made him a dangerous enemy. Even though Achaeus still had more experience than his younger relative, he was no longer facing an enemy completely unacquainted with war. However, establishing cooperation would have been particularly valuable for the Egyptian rulers, not only in the light of their Asian Minor policy at the time, but first and foremost because of the threat posed by Antiochus III in Coele-Syria – a land that had been the bone of contention between the two dynasties for several decades.

We do not know when the plan to recapture Coele-Syria was devised on the court in Antioch. According to some scholars, such a scheme had already been born under the rule of Seleucus III; others believe it was only Antiochus III who undertook this task. In fact, though, the question for these rulers based on the Orontes River was not ‘whether’ but ‘when’ to start a war. The territory was too important for the Seleucids to ever reconcile themselves with its loss, particularly after the humiliation they suffered in the Laodicean War. Even disregarding Coele-Syria, the Ptolemies’ mere presence in

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11 Plb. 4.48.2; 5.77–78; Robert 1937: 194–196; Holleaux 1938: 33–34; Ma 2000: 55–56. The case of the poleis of the Troad is more contentious: OGIS 219; Hansen 1947: 40; Meloni 1949: 536; Piejko 1991: 33. However, it follows from Polybius’ account (5.78) that in 218 Ilion, Lampsakos and Alexandra in the Troad were under the influence of Attalus, which indicates that he had not lost them prior to that.


13 Scholars usually reject the possibility of Ptolemy cooperating with Achaeus at the very beginning of the rebellion, cf. e.g. Schmitt 1964: 166–167; Holb 2001: 129; Holleaux (1942: 132) and Huss (1976: 35–36) subscribed to the theory of Ptolemy’s inspiration as one of the reasons for Achaeus’ usurpation.

14 Plb. 5.57.

15 Bevan (1902: 204–205) and Schmitt (1964: 152–153) were in favour of the former theory. According to Huss (1976: 26–27) the plan was only conceived under Antiochus III.