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# Seleukid Ideology

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# CHAPTER 14

## DIPLOMATIC RESISTANCE TO SELEUKID HEGEMONY

*Richard Wenghofer*

*Abstract*: The peaceful capitulation of Greek city-states to the dictates of Hellenistic kings, together with the honorific decrees issued by citizens of those *poleis* in praise of those same kings, has long been seen as evidence for the acceptance of the legitimacy of royal claims to authority over the *polis*. However, in Plutarch's *Life of Demetrios*, the biographer notes that the citizenry of many Greek *poleis* often erected statues and issued various decrees honouring Hellenistic kings not so much out of enthusiastic support, but from fear, and often loathed those kings for accepting them. Plutarch's observation, echoed in other writers, such as Polybios, Pausanias, Appian, and Livy, must therefore compel us to reconsider how we read civic honours bestowed on Hellenistic kings. In this study, I undertake a reconsideration of three civic inscriptions that ostensibly honour Seleukid kings: *OGIS* 222, a decree from Klazomenai honouring Antiochos I, *OGIS* 229, a decree of *sympoliteia* between Smyrna and Magnesia ad Sipylum, which also expressed *eunoia* between the people of Smyrna and Seleukos II, and *OGIS* 223, a letter from Antiochos I or II to the people of Erythrai thanking them for bestowing gold and crowns to honour the dynasty. I argue that we must read such inscriptions in the context of the fear engendered by the vastly superior economic and military might of the Seleukid kings. Viewed in this light, I analyse these inscriptions as attempts to leverage the formulaic language of Hellenistic diplomacy and co-opt the carefully crafted public royal persona itself to resist the encroachment of royal authority into the *polis*, rather than as evidence for the acceptance of the legitimacy of royal claims to authority over the citizens of 'Seleukid' cities.

The body of scholarship on the extent and dynamics of Seleukid royal power is now quite large and continues to grow.[1] More recently, the question of how Seleukid kings attempted to legitimize their rule in the minds of their myriad and disparate

* I would like to acknowledge the invaluable efforts of a former student, Mr. Dylan Hall, in the gathering of some of the relevant bibliography for the epigraphic material addressed in this paper.

1 The references here are far from exhaustive, representing a mere sampling. See Bevan 1902; Bouché-Leclercq 1913 and 1914; Bickerman 1938; Kreissig 1978; Cohen 1978; Sherwin-White and Kuhrt 1993; Ma 1999; Aperghis 2004; Capdetray 2007; Ramsey 2011; Grainger 2014; 2015a; 2015b; Pirngruber 2017; Engels 2017; Erickson 2018; Coşkun and Engels 2019; Oetjen 2020.

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subjects has also garnered considerable interest from scholars.[2] However, Seleukid scholars have paid less attention to the rejection of, and active resistance to, Seleukid claims to legitimate authority,[3] and there is a tacit assumption across much Seleukid scholarship that Seleukid efforts to legitimize their rule in local contexts were more or less successful.[4] Two factors that feature largely in this assumption are, first, that the acquiescence of local polities, such as Greek city-states, to Seleukid claims to royal authority connotes an acceptance of the legitimacy of those claims, and, second, that civic decrees honouring Seleukid kings likewise suggest acceptance of royal claims to legitimate royal authority.

I would, however, contend that both of these assumptions are unwarranted. At times, Greek city-states, when confronted by the overwhelmingly superior military and economic might of Seleukid kings, might acquiesce in recognizing Seleukid royal authority out of strategic necessity, and not because they necessarily viewed Seleukid kingship as legitimate in any meaningful sense. Moreover, I will argue that sometimes city-states leveraged the carefully constructed public royal persona of Seleukid kings in order to resist the exercise of royal authority in the environs of the *polis*, creating the illusion of an acceptance of Seleukid claims to the legitimate exercise of royal authority in local contexts. Thus, assessing the reception of royal claims to legitimate political authority in Hellenistic Greek *poleis* presents scholars with certain methodological problems owing to the power differential between king and subject, and to the carefully constructed language of Hellenistic royal diplomacy itself.

## I. THE NATURE OF THE PROBLEM

The asymmetrical power relations between king and subject community shaped how both interacted with one another. Seleukid kings, like other Hellenistic monarchs, built their kingdoms principally, though not exclusively, on war and violence. A Hellenistic king was, first and foremost, a general whose power rested upon his ability to make war, ostensibly for the benefit of those he would claim as his subjects.[5] The Hellenistic king was thus a warrior first, as is clearly pronounced in the Suda's definition of 'Basileia' and in Theokritos' encomium of Ptolemy II.[6]

2 Once again, the following list of references is far from exhaustive. See Tondriau 1948; Millward 1973; Sherwin-White 1991; Hoover 1996 and 2011; Erickson 2011; Stevens 2014; Strootman 2013 and 2014b; Kosmin 2014; Coşkun and McAuley 2016; Ogden 2017; Erickson 2019; See especially Fischer-Bovet and von Reden 2021; Anagnostou-Laoutides and Pfeiffer 2022.

3 An exception to this is the vast body of scholarship on the Maccabaean revolt specifically; however, important recent contributions to this area beyond the Maccabaean sphere include Eddy 1961; Ramsey 2011; Chrubasik 2016; Kosmin 2016; Taylor 2014; Krikona 2017; Honigman and Veïsse 2021; Wenghofer 2022; see most recently Kosmin and Moyer 2022.

4 Ehrenberg 1960, 176–178; Sherwin-White and Kuhrt 1993, 136–139; Shipley 2000, 294f. And see Coşkun, ch. 15 in this volume.

5 Bickerman 1938, 15f.; Sherwin-White and Kuhrt 1999, 129; Chaniotis 2005, 57–62; Eckstein 2006, 82f.; Strootman 2014a, 51–53; Capdetray 2017, 24f.

6 Suda *s.v.* 'Basileia' (2), cf. Austin[2] no. 45. Theokr. 17.73–130.

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However, while the ability to wield violence was a necessary prerequisite of Hellenistic kingship, this alone was insufficient. A king also had to display generosity, munificence, and piety.[7] The purpose of such displays was largely instrumental, aimed at garnering popular local consensus, and thus acceptance, of kingly authority. Kings displayed this munificence and piety through public generosity in acts of euergetism, as well as through courtly public displays of filial loyalty to family, friends, and acts of religious piety, all of which, together with martial prowess, formed the *sine qua non* of the Hellenistic royal image.[8]

But assessing how effective royal propaganda really was in cementing widespread consensus on the legitimacy of royal rule in local contexts is rather problematic and must not, on that account, be taken for granted. It is important to note that the economic and military resources of the Seleukid kings so vastly dwarfed those of any individual polity that open defiance of royal authority was often futile.[9] The Seleukid dynasty bore an essentially parasitic relationship to the communities they ruled, extracting capital resources in the form of taxes, tribute, revenues, and human resources from extensive royal land and royal monopolies, largely under threat of violent compulsion at the hands of soldiers in the king's pay.[10] For those polities unable to project sufficient power or command the requisite resources to resist, acquiescence to royal demands was a practical survival strategy. Prevailing local circumstances no doubt shaped the precise manner in which individual polities reacted to, or resisted, Seleukid power, although there is indeed no shortage of examples where local elites might even cooperate with Seleukid kings,[11] usually for purely local, pragmatic reasons of self-interest.

Still, as Boris Chrubasik argues, while there is every reason to suppose that Seleukid claims to power might have been 'accepted' by their subjects, this does not mean that the subjects viewed those claims as 'legitimate.'[12] Thus the mere fact of acquiescence to the demands of Seleukid kings on the part of Greek city-states does not necessarily suggest that they were welcoming of Seleukid authority. Moreover, as I shall demonstrate below, the civic decrees honouring kings for various benefactions that are typically read as evidence for the warm reception of Seleukid rule might actually mask hostility and could even constitute a form of resistance to royal authority in their own right.

Among the euergetic tools at a king's disposal were grants of autonomy and tribute-free status for cities. Seleukid kings often granted local autonomy and other benefactions to *poleis* in exchange for acknowledgement of royal authority, which typically included both expectations of political loyalty and the right of kings to

7 Bringmann 1994, 16f.

8 Bringmann 1994; Bilde et al. 1996; Ma 1999; Sherwin-White and Kuhrt 1999, 129–136; Kosmin 2014; Strootman 2014a; Ceccarelli 2017, 231

9 Baker 1995, 115f.

10 Ehrenberg 1960, 227–240; Aperghis, 2004, 88f.; Chaniotis 2005, 57–59, 68–72; Serrati 2007, 476; Strootman 2014a, 50f.; Capdetray 2017, 29f.

11 Aperghis 2011, 68; Coşkun 2011; McAuley 2017; Engels 2017, 136–155; Clancier and Gore 2021, 86–105; Wenghofer 2018. Cf also Coşkun, ch. 4 and ch. 15 in this volume.

12 Chrubasik 2016, 9.

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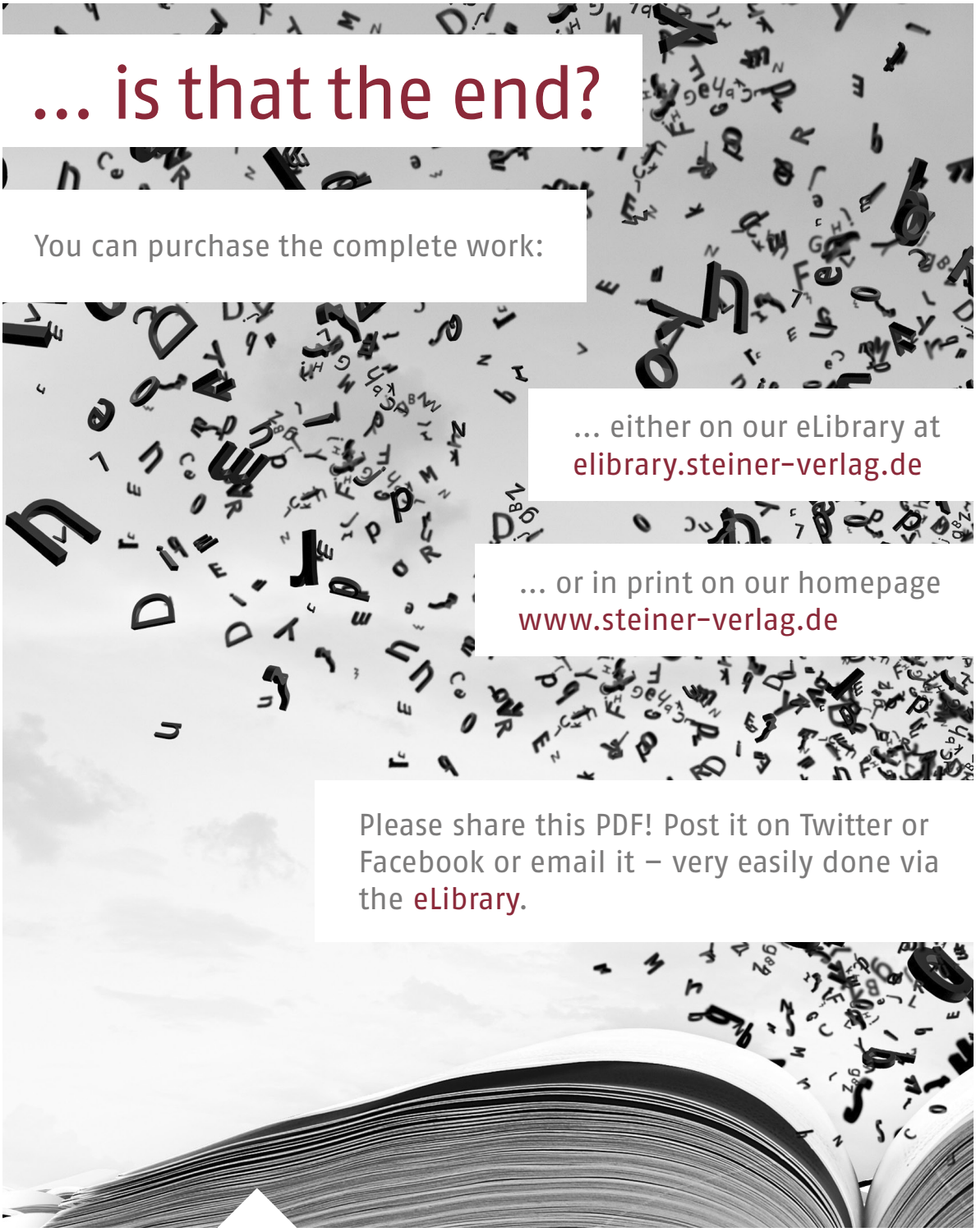

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