

An Asiatic Minority or Majority? Rethinking Army Composition in the Early Seleucid Empire

Of all the major Hellenistic kingdoms, the Seleucid empire has arguably received the least amount of attention in modern scholarship when compared with its size and duration, often viewed as the “Sick Man of the Hellenistic World” (Kosmin 2014). Fortunately, in the last few decades the rhetoric surrounding the Seleucids has largely shifted, with new approaches bringing recognition of its sophistication and overall importance. The recent boom of the last few decades in Seleucid scholarship has largely been made possible due to both a critical reanalysis of classical sources and due to the increasing accessibility and awareness of Near Eastern history and sources. Yet, perhaps surprisingly, very little recent work from a Near Eastern perspective has been done regarding the Seleucid army, upon which the empire depended for the preservation of its rule.

Relatively little, if any, attention has been devoted to the presence of Asiatic peoples within the Seleucid army. The term Asiatic here refers to the regions the Greeks and Macedonians referred to generally as Asia, the area extending from Asia Minor and Syria east across Mesopotamia and Western Central Asia to the western fringes of the Indian subcontinent—lands under Seleucid control up until the early second century BCE. Unlike scholarship concerning other Hellenistic armies (e.g. Fischer-Bovet 2014; Hammond 1996), the focus of modern scholars – like that of the extant ancient accounts – has largely been on the Greco-Macedonian contingents within the Seleucid army.

This paper will thus focus on the Seleucid army, yet it will avoid the “kings and battles” approach to military history that has contributed to a diminished scholarly interest in war (Fischer-Bovet 2014). War must be considered along with the social and cultural matrices to which it is imbedded. Currently, no in-depth analysis exists of Asiatic peoples within the armies

of the Successors and early Seleucids. This paper will aim to provide such an analysis. This paper will explore the possibility that the early Seleucids depended considerably more on indigenous manpower than previously supposed for the security and sustainability of their rule. I will argue that these Asiatic peoples comprised the majority of Successor and early Seleucid armies.

The only two modern works specifically devoted to a study of the Seleucid army are those of Bezalel Bar-Kochva (1979) and Nick Sekunda (1994). Bar-Kochva's work is the only modern work to examine the Seleucid army in its entirety, including its early period (early Seleucid defined in this paper as ca. 305-223 BCE). Although the work is in many ways admirable, in its approach to the composition of the Seleucid army – particularly regarding the role of Asiatic troops – it is lacking, due in part to assumptions made in the tradition of western-centric arguments of past classical scholarship.

Much of the extant evidence concerning the Seleucid army comes from the reigns of Antiochus III and Antiochus IV in the accounts of Livy and Polybius. Understandably, the few modern attempts to examine the Seleucid army focus primarily on these later periods. What has not been thoroughly examined in relation to the Seleucid army is the the period of the Successors, arguably the most important period for an understanding of early Hellenistic armies and of early Hellenistic empires in general. Diodorus Siculus serves as our primary account for this period, as he is often our only surviving source concerning the events of the turbulent but important years following the death of Alexander. Through a close examination of Diodorus combined with an examination of the accounts of Livy, Polybius, Arrian (among others), and of relevant Near Eastern sources, a new picture can be drawn of the early Seleucid army and its composition.

This paper will aim to argue that Asiatic peoples played a vital role in the armies of the Seleucids and Successors which has yet to be recognized. Although they are often dismissed as peripheral within our surviving sources, the extent to which these Asiatic peoples were exploited and relied upon in these periods should finally be recognized.

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