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Introduction

The finances and financial administration of the Seleukid empire have usually been considered only briefly in general surveys of the Seleukids or the Hellenistic world.¹ Some attention has, however, been given to the subject in more specialized works dealing with Seleukid institutions, society and economy.²

There is a great deal that is unclear. How did the Seleukid kings derive their revenue? On what subject populations and activities were tribute and taxes assessed and what forms did these take? Was the system generalized or was it adapted to the specific conditions of each region? How large was the resulting income for the kings? What other incomes accrued to them? In what way did the kings exploit the land and the natural resources of their empire? What role was played by the new city foundations and the temples? Why were land grants made? What expenses were incurred by the Seleukids to run their empire? What was the purpose of coinage in the economy and what considerations determined the denominations minted and the levels of production at different mints? What was the organization that managed the finances of the empire and of the kings personally? And what was the bottom line? Was this a wealthy empire or did it live a hand-to-mouth existence, which developed into an acute financial crisis following its defeat by Rome at Magnesia (190 BC)? Finally, how did the Seleukid state compare, in the way it ran its economy, with a modern one?

This book is an attempt to answer these and other questions and to present as complete a picture of the finances and financial administration of the Seleukid empire as possible from the available source material. In time, it deals mainly with that period when one can justifiably speak of

¹ For example, the works of Tarn 1927; Rostovtzeff 1941; Préaux 1978; Will 1979 and 1982; Walbank 1981; Grant 1982; Gruen 1984; Musti 1984; Green 1990; Sherwin-White and Kuhrt 1993 and Shipley 2000.

² For example, the monographs by Bickerman 1938; Bengtson 1944; Musti 1965; Cohen 1978; Kreissig 1978 and Ma 1997 and 1999.

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an empire, from 311 BC, when Seleukos Nikator retook Babylon, up to the loss of Mesopotamia in 129 BC, but it also discusses briefly the situation down to the final extinction in 64 BC. In geographical range, it covers all the territories that at one time or another, if not concurrently, were ruled by the Seleukids: from the Aegean and the border with Egypt to Baktria and Sogdiane and the north-western frontier of India.

In Part I the available sources are discussed briefly. The existing classical literary and epigraphic material has been extended by much valuable cuneiform documentation, which throws new light on the Seleukid empire. A number of scholars have already pointed to continuity between Seleukid administrative practice and that of the Achaemenid empire,³ but this is looked into more closely, with the result that some older evidence can confidently be applied to the Seleukid period. To these sources are added the results of archaeological excavations and, particularly, settlement surveys. Furthermore, die studies of Seleukid coin issues and hoard analyses provide useful information on the output of mints and the circulation patterns of coinage.

Part I continues with a brief historical summary, which concentrates on the extent of the empire at different times and the problems it faced. This is essential for Seleukid finances and financial administration to be seen from the proper perspective. Finally, the cardinal problem faced by the early Seleukid kings is presented, as a hypothesis, and the measures they took to solve it are outlined; the remainder of the book addresses these measures in detail.

Part II is a brief overview of the underlying economy of the empire. In order to understand the system of taxation, one needs to know what forms economic activity took and the possibilities open to a governing power to extract a surplus for its own needs. The physical characteristics of different regions are described, along with the results of settlement surveys, which give some idea of population levels and trends, and a very rough estimate of population by wider region is attempted. Agriculture and animal husbandry, natural resources, trade and industry are all considered in order to establish their potential for generating taxation revenue for the administration. Of particular interest is the establishment of prices for different commodities, which are useful in linking production estimates to taxation revenue levels. The exploitation of land comes up in this part, in connection with the founding of new cities and the granting of land to individuals and temples, while the status of the peasants working the land is also briefly considered.

³ For example, Briant 1979, 1982c and 1990; Kuhrt and Sherwin-White 1994b.

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Part III deals with the surplus that was extracted by the Seleukid kings from the economy as tribute and taxation and with its expenditure. Here ps.-Aristotle's *Oikonomika* is used as the starting point, and each aspect of the royal and satrapal economies described there is examined. This work turns out to be very helpful, as it establishes the framework for a detailed discussion dealing with the different sources of imperial revenue, 'incomings' and 'outgoings' to and from royal lands and treasuries and the major expenses of army, provincial administration and court. The purpose and usage of coinage is also examined at some length. The information derived is put together in a very approximate quantitative model of the Seleukid royal economy, which links the main parameters: population, production, royal revenue and expenditure, and coinage. Finally, the system of financial administration is investigated, based mainly on epigraphic evidence, and this is found to owe much to Achaemenid prototypes.

The theme repeated throughout is that the Seleukid kings paid particular attention to developing the economic resources of their empire. These they tapped in an efficient manner in order to generate the funds required to retain their hold on power, which they were successfully able to do for more than two centuries. Many of their methods, perhaps surprisingly, were not totally unlike those of a modern state.

The title of this book is obviously borrowed from Claire Préaux's study of Ptolemaic Egypt, *L'économie royale des Lagides*. I too have tried to identify the different forms of revenue and expense of a Hellenistic king (the royal economy) and the system of financial administration. Préaux's *dirigiste* view of the Ptolemies – their active involvement in and direction of the economic life of Egypt – is to some extent valid for the Seleukids also, but the methods used by the latter were quite different. As can be seen from the outline given above, I have attempted to go further than Préaux. Starting with an overview of the major elements of the economy, quantified to some extent, I have constructed a more detailed model of its most important part, the royal economy.

In my view, any consideration of economic matters cannot really be useful unless it involves numbers, since it is no good discussing taxation revenue, for instance, unless one can say what the total amount may roughly have been. With regard to the Seleukid empire, this is a labour that historians have tended to shy away from, perhaps because, as Rostovtzeff put it, 'the information is miserably inadequate'.⁴ However, despite the uncertainty associated with numbers derived from the rather limited evidence, an attempt is made to quantify at every stage. This is obviously a risky

⁴ Rostovtzeff 1941: 422.

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procedure and will leave me open to much criticism. Indeed, as I cross many areas of specialization in search of useful data, experts in these fields will undoubtedly find fault with some of my choices and conclusions. But it might be helpful to wait until all the evidence has been presented, including that from totally different areas. To begin with, some figures, such as a population estimate, may appear very shaky indeed, but, in the course of the discussion, these are tested against new estimates derived from independent data, and the more the results converge, the more confidence there will be that the important numbers are roughly correct. When the final model is presented, it will be seen that its various parameters fit together reasonably well, which cannot solely be the result of chance. This will, it is hoped, provide support for the main ideas and conclusions of this book and might also prove useful to scholars assessing other ancient economies.

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PART I

Preliminaries

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CHAPTER I

Sources and methods

I. CLASSICAL LITERATURE

The classical authors usually employed as sources for Seleukid history have been exhaustively discussed by others¹ and so will not be treated here yet again, but only referred to where appropriate. However, the source net has been spread to include those writers reporting on the Achaemenid empire (e.g. Herodotos, Xenophon, the Alexander historians), and particularly on its administrative practices, because of the considerable degree of continuity that seems to have existed in this area between it and its Seleukid successors, as will hopefully be demonstrated.

2. PS.-ARISTOTLE'S *OIKONOMIKA*, BOOK 2

This economic treatise has been attributed to the school of Aristotle and is fundamental in any study of the economy of the Hellenistic world, despite its brevity and difficulty of detailed comprehension. A short theoretical section deals with the four types of financial administrations ('economies') that could be observed at the time, in decreasing order of importance: those of a kingdom, a satrapy, a city and a household. This is followed by a presentation of stratagems by which rulers or administrators solved specific financial problems.

In chapter 7 the theoretical section is translated and discussed at some length, including the question of its date. In chapters 8–11 the evidence from the Seleukid period for the different aspects of the royal and satrapal economies, as referred to by ps.-Aristotle, is presented and analysed in detail.

¹ For example: Rostovtzeff 1941; Préaux 1978; Will 1979; 1982; Davies 1984; Sherwin-White and Kuhrt 1993; Shipley 2000.

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3. GREEK INSCRIPTIONS, POPYRI, PARCHMENT AND OSTRAKA

Much of the evidence concerning the different forms of taxation and aspects of financial administration in the Seleukid empire comes from the **inscriptions** of Greek cities. Nowhere is the information direct, of course, as the intention of an inscription was not to provide a manual of current administrative practice, but to record something of particular interest to the city, for example a royal order or concession affecting it, the correspondence of officials called upon to implement the order, a decree honouring a citizen or Seleukid official.

The epigraphic evidence is heavily weighted towards the cities of Asia Minor, because these have been, on the whole, more thoroughly excavated than elsewhere and also simply because of the ‘epigraphic habit’ of the Greeks. However, one does have sufficient data from other areas, such as the important Ptolemaios dossier from Skythopolis in Palestine, the Baitokaike land grant from northern Syria, the Ikadion letter from Failaka in the Persian Gulf, the royal order for the appointment of a high priestess from Laodikeia-Nehavend in Media – which will all be referred to in due course – to be able to perceive similarities between the methods of administration in different parts of the empire.

Papyri are an extremely rare source for the Seleukid economy, the most important one being a papyrus from Doura-Europos.² However, papyri relating to Ptolemaic Palestine and Phoenicia or Ptolemaic possessions in Asia Minor can sometimes indicate financial structures that were left in place by later Seleukid administrations in these regions.

Parchment is also rare, of considerable interest being the early second-century BC administrative text on leather from Baktria, which records details of a transaction that probably has to do with taxation.³ There is also an interesting parchment from Avroman in Kurdistan.⁴

A neglected pottery sherd (*ostrakon*) from Babylon may well provide the key to pay in the Seleukid army,⁵ while other *ostraka* from Baktria are probably elements in a tax-collection procedure.⁶

One problem with all Greek documents is that translations can vary considerably. The Greek language possesses much variety in its use of words, whose meaning ultimately depends on the context. This may be relatively unclear to the translator, often a philologist, called upon to deal with a difficult military or economic text, and it can have misleading results. For this reason, I have provided my own translation of all Greek texts used.

² Welles, Fink and Gilliam 1959: no. 15; Saliou 1992.³ Bernard and Rapin 1994; Rea, Senior and Hollis 1994; Rapin 1996.⁴ Minns 1915.⁵ Sherwin-White 1982.⁶ Rapin 1983.

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As objective a translation has been given as could be managed, without ascribing preconceived ideas to the interpretation. Sometimes, a less specific expression has been adopted than that used by other translators, which may give an impression of somewhat imperfect English, but serves the purpose of leaving open the precise meaning until the analysis has been completed. A good example is the use of the terms ἐξαγωγίμια (*exagōgima*) and εἰσαγωγίμια (*eisagōgima*) in the *Oikonomika*, which have been crudely, but more generally, rendered by me as 'goods that may be sent out' and 'goods that may be brought in', rather than the more elegant, but incorrect in my view, 'exports' and 'imports' that have typically appeared in translations of this text.

4. LOCAL LANGUAGE SOURCES

Previous studies of the administration and economy of the Seleukid empire⁷ have relied almost exclusively on classical sources, both literary and epigraphic. Increasingly, however, cuneiform texts from the core of the empire, Mesopotamia, are being transcribed and translated and help to throw light on administrative practices in this region in the Seleukid period.⁸ Of these texts, particularly important are the *Babylonian Astronomical Diaries*, for a study of commodity prices, and the two collections of tablets known as the *Persepolis Texts*. Other cuneiform documents from Mesopotamia parallel the Greek inscriptions found elsewhere or provide what is almost totally lacking in classical sources, namely details of specific legal and administrative transactions.

a. The Babylonian Astronomical Diaries

These important cuneiform texts, written in Akkadian, are precisely dated records of meteorological and astronomical observations compiled in the temples of Babylon between 652 BC and 61 BC.⁹ They frequently contain market prices for five agricultural commodities and wool, and they sometimes note political, social or economic events. There is a heavy concentration of data in the Seleukid period, with some price(s) being quoted in 245 separate months of ninety regnal years.

But first, there is the question of the purpose of the *Diaries*. The astronomers who recorded their observations were primarily interested in

⁷ Birkman 1938; Rostovtzeff 1941; Bengtson 1944; Musti 1965; 1966; 1984; Kreissig 1978; Ma 1997; 1999.

⁸ Kuhrt 1996. ⁹ Sachs and Hunger 1988; 1989; 1996; Del Monte 1997.

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establishing over generations a set of data from which astronomical predictions could be made and probably also forecasts of good or bad harvests. They were not interested in political or economic matters as such, except in their possible dependence upon natural phenomena. If something did not occur in Babylon itself, it was carefully recorded with the phrase 'It was heard.' The Babylonian astronomers, with no political axe to grind, come through as completely dispassionate writers, having absolutely no reason to falsify the record, in particular with regard to what is of most interest here: commodity prices.¹⁰

In chapter 5.6a commodity prices from the *Diaries* are plotted graphically and trends observed during the Seleukid period. Changes are noted that may have been due to political events or administrative decisions, which are dealt with in chapter 13.10.

b. The Persepolis Texts

During the excavations of Persepolis in the 1930s, two collections of cuneiform tablets, written in the Elamite language, were discovered. They are a product of Achaemenid administration in the Persian homeland, the later Hellenistic satrapy of Persis.

The larger of the two archives, the *Persepolis Fortification Texts (PFT)*, consists of 2,120 published texts¹¹ and at least as many unpublished ones, and deals mostly with the collection, storage and distribution as rations of various commodities at storehouses in an administrative area centred on Persepolis, between regnal years thirteen and twenty-eight of Darius I, that is, 509–494 BC. The recipients of these rations were the king, members of the royal family, officials, travellers, animals and, principally, workers engaged in many activities, not least the construction of the royal palaces at Persepolis. Included are 96 larger tablets, which contain either lists of the individual commodity issues of particular storehouses in a given year (journals) or summaries of movements in and out of the storehouse and balances remaining (accounts) or, occasionally, both types of information.

The smaller archive, the *Persepolis Treasury Texts (PTT)*, contains 129 texts dating from between regnal year thirty of Darius I and year seven of Artaxerxes I, that is, 492–458 BC.¹² Each text details payments made in silver to officials or workers in place of part of their barley, wine or meat rations.

¹⁰ Spek 1993a.¹¹ Hallock 1969; 1978.¹² Cameron 1948.

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II

One may justifiably ask what these two sources, nearly two centuries older than the start of the Hellenistic period, have to do with Seleukid financial administration. It will hopefully be demonstrated in chapters 9 and 13 that the *PFT* especially, but also the *PTT*, show continuity between Achaemenid and Hellenistic administrative practice and help to throw more light on what, in their absence, would have been rather uncertain interpretations of a number of Greek documents.

c. Legal and administrative cuneiform tablets from Babylonia

A number of such tablets, written in Akkadian, have been found in official or clandestine excavations in Babylonia, but by no means the larger number has been translated and published. There is a reasonably comprehensive review of these sources up to December 1986.¹³

Most of this material comes from two centres, Babylon and Uruk, but other Babylonian cities also provide some evidence. The essential difference between Babylon and Uruk is that the former has produced mainly administrative documents and the latter mainly legal texts. This is quite a serious shortcoming, as one does not thus possess a comprehensive picture of what went on at each centre and it is quite possible that administrative and legal procedures may have differed somewhat in different cities. What interests one, however, is whether they were applied under a common Seleukid administrative 'umbrella'.

A few cuneiform texts from Babylonia play exactly the same role as inscriptions do in Greek cities: they constitute a public record of privileges or commitments granted to a city or temple (which in Babylonia were inextricably linked).

d. Other documents

An interesting indirect source for the Seleukid empire is a Sanskrit work, the *Artaśāstra*, a treatise on administration by, reputedly, Kautilya, the prime minister of Chandragupta, the Mauryan emperor.¹⁴ Taken in conjunction with fragments of Megasthenes appearing in Strabo, Diodoros and Arrian's *Indika*, it can throw light on how similar problems were managed in a contemporary neighbouring imperial state, with which the Seleukids were in contact.

¹³ Oelsner 1986.¹⁴ Stein 1922; Sharma 1988: 4.