

## *Introduction*

### **The Legendary Seleucus**

At his lowest moment in 316–315 BC Alexander the Great's erstwhile general Seleucus found himself a fugitive with little more than a horse to his name. Building from that point, he contrived to make himself master of a vast empire that encompassed the great bulk of Alexander's conquests and, on paper at least, their Macedonian homeland too. The achievement was barely a lesser one than Alexander's and in personal terms it was a greater one. Accordingly, Seleucus' life, like Alexander's before it, was richly deserving of projection into the realm of legend, and projected it was in narratives developed between his reign and the early imperial period. This material was in part perpetuated because of, if not necessarily by, the enduring institutions he created, not least amongst these the 300-year-long 'Seleucid' dynasty he sired, fractious though it was, and the cities he founded, some of which are with us still.

We will summarise the impressive historical career out of which the legendary material was spun in the later part of this Introduction. But let us first pass the legendary episodes, or episode-groups, in review, insofar as we are able to access them, and in broadly biographical order (the numbers assigned here correspond to the chapters in which they will each be discussed):

- I. **Birth myth and omens of greatness.** Seleucus is sired by the god Apollo, who gives his mother Laodice an iron signet ring engraved with an anchor. When Seleucus is born, the same anchor symbol appears on his thigh, as it will also do on those of his descendants. Laodice is instructed to give the ring to Seleucus, and told that he will be king of the place in which he loses it. In due course, he loses it in the region of the Euphrates, and it is indeed from Babylon that he will begin to build his empire. There are several further indications of his future greatness. His ancestral hearth catches light of its own accord.

When the adult Seleucus consults the oracle of Apollo at Branchidae (Didyma), it addresses him anticipatorily as ‘King Seleucus’. The same oracle also tells him not to hurry back to Europe, for Asia will be far better for him. When Seleucus is sailing on the Euphrates with Alexander, the latter’s diadem blows off. Seleucus dives into the river and brings it back on his head to Alexander, thus giving an intimation of his own future kingship. After Alexander’s death, his ghost visits Seleucus to tell him again of this future kingship. As Seleucus sets out to recover Babylon from Antigonos, after the latter’s usurpation of his early rule there (see §2, next), he trips over a stone anchor lodged in the ground, which is revealed to be a token of his security.

2. **Seleucus’ escape from Babylon.** When Seleucus, as satrap of Babylonia, entertains the more powerful Antigonos in his capital of Babylon, he comes to realise that he is plotting to destroy him. He escapes from the city on horseback, with fifty other horsemen, making off with a golden helmet that is a token and indeed embodiment of Antigonos’ power, and flees to Ptolemy in Egypt for refuge. Babylon’s own astrologers, the Chaldaeans, warn Antigonos that, should he let Seleucus get away from him, then the latter is destined to kill him and acquire control over Asia. Antigonos belatedly sends riders in pursuit of Seleucus, but they return without success. Accordingly, the prophecy eventually comes to fruition in the battle of Ipsus, in which Seleucus triumphs and Antiochus is killed, perhaps even by Seleucus’ own hand.
3. **Omens and myths of city and cult foundation.** Seleucus contrives to found his city of Seleucia-on-the-Tigris at the right time, in astrological terms, to secure its greatness, despite the machinations of Babylon’s Chaldaeans, who try to deceive him in this matter. He is guided to the sites for the four great cities of his ‘Syrian Tetrapolis’ by Zeus-eagles that seize the flaming meat he is offering to Zeus on his altars and drop it, in the fashion of the thunderbolts they usually bear, in the designated places. The site for Seleucia-in-Pieria is further confirmed for Seleucus by the strike of an actual thunderbolt, which leads him to found a sanctuary there too, in its honour. His Syrian foundations are typologically aligned with a series of local but trans-cultural myths in which a thunderbolt-wielding storm god or his son defeats a dragon identified with the river Orontes, the river on which three of the four cities of the Tetrapolis sit. He founds the sanctuary of Apollo at Daphne, the Antiochene suburb, when he discovers the god’s golden arrowhead in the ground there during a hunting

expedition, and a dragon charges at him before meekly turning away upon recognising him.

4. **Combabus and Stratonice.** Seleucus' new young wife, Stratonice, daughter of Demetrius Poliorcetes, is instructed in a dream by Hera, i.e. Cybele-Atargatis, to go to Hierapolis-Bambyce and build her a temple. Seleucus sends his trusted companion Combabus with her to protect her. Combabus, fearing that court enemies will slander him as having seduced the queen, castrates himself before departure, giving his testicles to the king to guard in a sealed pot. During the Hierapolis sojourn Stratonice falls in love with Combabus, but her illicit desires cannot, of course, be consummated. Either she herself turns upon Combabus, accusing him of rape, or Combabus' enemies do indeed slander him before Seleucus in the fashion he has anticipated. Brought before the king to answer the accusations, he calls for the pot to be produced, and is both vindicated and rewarded for his loyalty and self-sacrifice.
5. **Antiochus and Stratonice.** Seleucus' adult son Antiochus then falls in love with his stepmother Stratonice and begins to pine to death in silence. The clever doctor Erasistratus is called in, and soon diagnoses the cause of the prince's malady to be love, identifying his love-object also. He finds a way to persuade Seleucus to hand Stratonice over to Antiochus by initially pretending that it is rather his own wife with whom the prince is in love.
6. **Omens of death, death and revenge.** Apollo at Branchidae tells Seleucus not to hurry home because Asia is far better for him than Europe (as in §1, above). This is both an omen of future greatness and, at the same time, an omen of death. An unspecified oracle further predicts that Seleucus will die before his time if he approaches a place called 'Argos'. Unbeknownst to him, as he finally crosses back into Europe to take control of Macedon after his victory over Lysimachus, he approaches an obscure 'Argos' and is assassinated there by the wicked Ptolemy Ceraunus. But Seleucus has his revenge: Ceraunus is plagued by dreams of the king summoning him to court before a jury of wolves and vultures, and surely enough he is soon killed in battle and savagely dismembered by the Galatians.

It can be seen at once that these legendary narratives are of a highly engaging nature and have the capacity to resonate far beyond the rarefied confines of Diadochic scholarship. The chief purpose of the six chapters that follow is to collate this material and to understand its significance

and symbolism in its ancient context. Along the way, it will be seen how closely Seleucus' legendary episodes align with other ancient Greek narratives of a traditional nature, and sometimes too with international folktales. It will be seen too that the process of comparison often holds the key to the symbolic meaning of any given episode, and that it has much to teach us about how the Greeks liked to remember (or construct) greatness.

Why should the episodes enumerated, as opposed to any others associated with Seleucus, be considered 'legendary' or 'mythical'?<sup>1</sup> What should 'legendary' mean in such a context? I readily confess to having no interest in the sub-philosophical aspects of the question, but I have brought within the frame of consideration material that meets at least one criterion from each of the two following lists. In terms of structure and content:

- Tales resembling those of the *Alexander Romance*
- Tales identifiable as traditional or as folktale on the basis of comparanda
- Tales incorporating divine intervention
- Tales built around omens, oracles, prophecies and dreams
- Tales of love and sex of a pathological or off-beat nature

In terms of function (three closely related criteria):

- Tales with an aetiological function for the dynasty, its cults or institutions
- Tales with a legitimating function for the dynasty, its cults or institutions
- Tales that articulate Seleucus' life or deeds in accordance with a sense of destiny

It is not a necessary condition for the application of the term 'legendary' that the episode in question has no basis in fact. The most cherished legendary episode of the Seleucus tradition was that of his handing over of his young wife Stratonice to his son Antiochus. So far as we are able to tell, the handover, narrative accretions aside, did in fact take place. Another of the most important legendary episodes associated with Seleucus is that of his flight from Babylon, but again the flight itself, narrative accretions aside, did, it seems, take place. Complementarily, the fact that an episode of the Seleucus tradition did not take place or is not accurately represented in it is not in itself sufficient grounds for designating it as legendary. To take a banal example, the tradition gives Seleucus no fewer than three

<sup>1</sup> In the immediate context of the life of Seleucus I mean nothing more by 'myth' than 'episode of the legend'. In some contexts, such as 'birth myth' and 'foundation myth', the term leaps more readily to the lips.

different years of birth: two of them at least must be wrong, but that does not in itself confer legendary status upon them (although as it happens one of them may actually have been determined by legendary considerations if it was, as has been suspected, manipulated to coincide with Alexander's year of birth).<sup>2</sup> Inevitably, the tradition preserves a number of curious or quirky claims in relation to Seleucus that may or may not be true but which cannot easily be designated legendary. One thinks, for example, of the material channelled to us by Athenaeus about the exotic gifts Seleucus received from Chandragupta: a tiger and aphrodisiacs that produced erections when applied to the feet.<sup>3</sup>

According to the criteria enunciated, many texts offer material of interest for the study, but the following, listed in chronological order of composition, may be recognised to be of a particular importance for it, and it is these that underpin the bulk of the episodes we have laid out above:

- Euphorion of Chalcis F119 Lightfoot (ca. 200 BC)
- Diodorus 19.55 (ca. 30 BC)
- Justin 15.3–4, 17.1–2 (fourth century AD?), after Trogus (ca. 20 BC)
- Plutarch *Demetrius* 31–2, 38, 47–52 (ca. AD 100)
- Appian *Syriake* 52.260–64.342 (AD 130s–160s)
- Lucian *De dea Syria* 17–27 (ca. AD 170s)
- Libanius *Orations* II (*Antiochicus*) 76–105 (AD 356)
- John Malalas *Chronicle* 197–203 (sixth century AD), after Pausanias of Antioch *FGrH* 854 F10 (before AD 358/9?)

Brief introductions to these texts will be offered at the appropriate points in the exposition that follows (which will not always be at their first mention). Most of the material in them and in other texts that qualifies for consideration does so under several of the structural criteria and the functional criteria outlined above simultaneously. Appian's *Syriake* is especially rich for our purposes.

<sup>2</sup> See n. 23 below.

<sup>3</sup> Athenaeus 18d–e (incorporating Phylarchus *FGrH* 81 F35b (aphrodisiacs)), 590a–b (incorporating Alexis *Pan of Coals* F207 K-A (tiger) and Philemon *Neaera* F49 K-A (tigress)). Cf. Olson 2006–12 *ad loc.*, whose notion that 'feet' should be read as a euphemism for genitals is clearly misguided: see Apollonius *Mirabilia* 14, who tells that in the eighth book of his *Histories* Phylarchus (*FGrH* 81 F17) told of a spring in the Arabian gulf. Any man that rubbed its water on his feet gave himself an extreme erection. Some men could never contract again, whilst others could do so only at the cost of prolonged treatment and suffering.

This material raises a series of questions, and the book also offers tentative answers to these, principally in the seventh and final chapter.

*Questions of Development and Chronology*

- When and in what contexts was this legendary material created?
- Are the legendary episodes strongly tied to place, and if so might that have any implications for the chronology of their development?
- Is there anything about the nature of the legendary episodes themselves that invites us to believe that they were formed at an early stage in the long duration of the Seleucid dynasty?
- More particularly, to what extent did the images and symbols deployed on Seleucus' coinage (and no doubt too on other media now perished), which correspond so strongly with the stuff of his legendary episodes, offer raw material from which these episodes could be fashioned or bricolaged? Or, conversely, to what extent did they document the legendary episodes as already in existence?
- At what point should the birth myth specifically be situated amid the developing documentary evidence for the conceit that Seleucus was the son of Apollo?
- Can we reconstruct any stages in the development of the legendary material during the Hellenistic period by source-criticism of the major extant imperial-period sources for it? Can we securely identify material in these later texts as deriving from the Holy Trinity of Diadochic historiographers, Hieronymus of Cardia, Duris of Samos and Phylarchus of Athens? Or from Agatharchides of Cnidus or others again?
- What role might Euphorion, the librarian of the great royal library of Antioch, have played in the development of the legendary material?

*Questions of Independence and Coherence*

- To what extent can the legendary material attaching to Seleucus preserved across a range of quite diverse texts be viewed as coherent in itself and consonant with itself? Or, to put it another way, to what extent are we justified after all in speaking of 'a legend of Seleucus' as opposed to 'legends of Seleucus'? We will begin, with proper caution, by speaking of 'legends' in the plural, but the singular title of this book hints at the direction in which our arguments will eventually tend.

- To what extent are the various legendary episodes linked together by the texts that preserve them or by the themes and motifs that they share with each other?
- Are there any signs that individual legendary episodes may once have formed part of more extensive legendary narratives beyond the ones in which they are preserved for us?
- Did the legendary material as a whole (or more or less as a whole) enjoy a life partly independent of genuinely historical material?
- What relationship did the legendary Seleucus material enjoy with the legendary material associated with Alexander, which was to find (coherent and largely independent) fruition in the *Alexander Romance*?
- To what extent, and in what way, may we endorse Fraser's hypothesis, based principally upon Appian's so-called 'Seleucus excursus', of a long-lost 'Seleucus Romance' text broadly in the style of the *Alexander Romance*?<sup>4</sup>
- Is it possible to think of a 'Seleucus Romance' established in tradition without full realisation in text, or in a single text?
- How might such a 'Seleucus Romance', oral or textual, and the *Alexander Romance* have developed alongside each other and impacted upon each other?
- Finally, can we detect any impact from the legendary Seleucus material upon the resurgent Persian culture that established itself in the Seleucids' former realm?

The term *Alexander Romance* (*AR*) refers to an anonymous, fantastical and ever-evolving popular biographical tradition of Alexander that first becomes properly manifest for us in a version compiled in the third century AD, though it evidently had roots in the early Hellenistic period.<sup>5</sup> This earliest accessible version, and the one to which we shall refer by default in the course of this book, is the so-called 'α recension.' The α recension is represented on the one hand by a single Greek manuscript, 'A', in Paris' Bibliothèque Nationale, which reports an incompetent version of the original text and is furthermore badly damaged, and on the other by a well preserved and highly competent ca. AD 500 Armenian translation of the original text.<sup>6</sup> We shall also refer to a limb of the originally Greek

<sup>4</sup> Fraser 1996: 37.

<sup>5</sup> The main evidence for this is briefly discussed in Chapter 7.

<sup>6</sup> Codex B (an MS of the β recension) alone attributes its text, absurdly, to the authorship of Callisthenes, whom Alexander executed in 328 BC, five years before the end of his own life! See Stoneman 2007–: i, 467 (on 1.1). This is why, historically, the *Romance* has been referred to the authorship of 'Pseudo-Callisthenes', a convention I see no value in perpetuating.

δ recension that, albeit Christianised, was closely related to the α recension, and is now represented for us by a competent seventh-century AD Syriac translation. Just occasionally we shall refer to two later Byzantine Greek recensions, β (fifth-century AD?) and γ (eighth-century AD or after). In the medieval age versions of the *Romance* flowered in many of the major languages of Europe, the Near East and North Africa, including Latin, French, Spanish, German, English, Persian, Arabic, Ethiopic and Hebrew.<sup>7</sup>

We will proceed in the following way. As we work through each legendary episode in the following chapters, we will offer display translations of all the relevant sources in a clearly differentiated font, thereby allowing the reader to extract a repertorium of sorts, should one be desired.<sup>8</sup> We shall be selective with the available source material only in the case of the tale of Antiochus and Stratonice (Chapter 5), where the tradition is too expansive and repetitive to justify reproduction in full.<sup>9</sup> We will then attempt to bring out the full significance of the episode under consideration by contextualising it against the broader Seleucus tradition, the Alexander tradition, the *Alexander Romance* especially, other ancient narratives and sometimes comparanda from beyond the Graeco-Roman world. Occasionally we will find that a proper understanding of the legendary material for what it is obliges us to adopt a new historical understanding of underlying events (as in the case of the traditions bearing upon Philetaerus and Arsinoe; Chapter 4). Chapters will vary greatly in length: each will be as long as it needs to be given the material available to discuss and the nature of the problems associated with it.

<sup>7</sup> For texts and (where available) translations of the various recensions referred to here, see the preliminary pages. For general introductions to the nature and problems of the *Alexander Romance* tradition, see Jouanno 2002 and Stoneman 2008.

<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, only texts of primary interest for the legendary Seleucus are given in a differentiated font: quotations of texts bearing on Seleucus without a significant legendary element (the distinction is admittedly not always easy to make) and comparative texts with other subjects are given in the default font.

<sup>9</sup> I did think hard about the alternative option of gathering up all the source-translations and confining them to an appendix: this would have had a less disruptive effect on the main text, and the appendix could then have functioned conveniently as a mini-sourcebook for the subject. But on balance this seemed less desirable: I would, in that case, have felt obliged to include, more exhaustively, translations of all the quite repetitive sources for the Antiochus and Stratonice story; the logistics of exposition would have meant that the translations would have to have been replaced in the main text by inefficient paraphrases or summaries, necessarily less accurate but seldom much less long; it would have been irritating for readers to have to flip constantly back and forth between chapter and appendix; and we would have been faced with the unwelcome paradox that quotations of texts of primary interest were relegated to an appendix, whilst those of secondary interest, but nonetheless essential for exposition, were retained in the main text.

Several times in the body of this book we will have occasion to invoke the concept of typology. The term was originally developed to describe a form of biblical exegesis in which individuals of the Old Testament are taken to prefigure ones from the New Testament in significant ways. Its best known use in a Classical context is to describe the principal technique Virgil exploits in the *Aeneid* to legitimate Augustus and to give teleological justification to his reign. Aeneas' story across the *Aeneid* as a whole is manipulated to project this great figure from Rome's mythical past as a destiny-affirming analogue of Augustus, as an Augustus *avant la lettre*. But Virgil plays the game in more elaborate ways too. In the eighth book of the poem in particular he develops multiple layers of prefiguring analogues for Augustus in his specific role as (re-)founder of the city of Rome: as Augustus walks in the footsteps of his distinguished predecessors, in reverse order Romulus, Aeneas again, Evander, Heracles and even the god Saturn, so his rule is shown to be right, to be inevitable, to conform with a recurring pattern of destiny, and to be determined by something rather greater in the universe than his own contingent ambition and opportunism.<sup>10</sup> In the course of our investigations we shall encounter a number of instances in which pairs of stories appear to have been manipulated (at either end) in order to construct a legitimating analogy between Seleucus on the one hand and Alexander, Perseus, Heracles or even Zeus on the other. The typological layers corralled or developed to underpin Seleucus' foundation of the cities of the Syrian Tetrapolis (Chapter 3) are hardly fewer than those Virgil devises for Augustus. As already indicated, we will frequently draw attention to parallels between legendary episodes and motifs associated with Seleucus on the one hand and the stuff of the *Alexander Romance* on the other. These comparisons have a double function in the context of our project: not only do they help to demonstrate the traditional nature of the story-types in question (though this is seldom in doubt), but they also expose, with particular force, the typological relationship constructed for Seleucus with Alexander.

Relatively little scholarly attention hitherto has been devoted to the legendary material bearing upon Seleucus in its entirety.<sup>11</sup> The two principal modern biographies of Seleucus, Mehl's (1986) and Grainger's (1990a),<sup>12</sup> pay only limited attention to legendary material.

<sup>10</sup> See Gransden 1973–4, and especially 1976: 14–20.

<sup>11</sup> It is with regret that I must abandon over the next four paragraphs my usual practice of keeping author-date-style references out of the main text.

<sup>12</sup> Grainger 2014: 1–126 treats the life of Seleucus on a hardly lesser scale, where a broadly similar view of the man and his achievements is expressed.

Mehl deferred his treatment of Seleucus' city foundations to a second volume that never appeared,<sup>13</sup> whilst the militarily minded Grainger tends to be bluffly dismissive of legendary material as 'propaganda'. Some passing interest has been taken in a range of the legendary episodes by Kosmin in his recent 'cultural history' (as I think some of my more modern colleagues would term it) of the Seleucid empire (2014a): this creative volume can offer interesting insights but is also prone to fantasy.

There is much useful discussion in commentaries devoted to the key imperial texts. As noted, Appian's *Syriake* is by far the single most important text for the legendary material, and it has benefited from the work of three commentators since the 1980s, the good Marasco (1982), the better Brodersen (1989; cf. also 1991)<sup>14</sup> and the disappointing Goukowsky (2007). The relevant portion of Justin now boasts a superb historical commentary by Wheatley and Heckel (in Yardley *et al.* 2011). Our understanding of Lucian's *De dea Syria* has been transformed by Lightfoot's outstanding 2003 commentary on the text. Libanius' *Antiochicus* is the subject of a detailed if somewhat intractably presented commentary by Fatouros and Krischer (1992).<sup>15</sup> Some of the legendary episodes receive incidental treatment in Primo's broad 2009 study of the historiography of the Seleucids.

Some more focused attention has been given to individual episodes. As to the birth myth and the prodigies, Hadley published a pair of influential articles in 1969 and 1974(a), though these are somewhat compromised by dated assumptions about Hieronymus of Cardia; the articles of Bearzot (1983) and Iossif (2011) on this theme should also be noted. Considerable light has been shed on the foundation myth of Antioch and the other cities of the Syrian Tetrapolis by Downey's monumental 1961 volume on the history of Antioch, and more recently by the Cohen's admirable 2006 book on the Hellenistic settlements in Syria; Garstad's 2005 piece on the Tetrapolis foundations also deserves attention, as does McDowell's 1972 piece on Seleucia-on-the-Tigris. On Combabus and Stratonice we have the standard articles of Benveniste (1939) and Krappe (1946). The most famous of Seleucus' legendary episodes, that of Antiochus and Stratonice, has understandably received a degree more of special attention: *inter alia*, one may consult the articles of Mesk (1913), Breebart (1967), Landucci

<sup>13</sup> However, he returned briefly to the Syrian foundations in Mehl 1991.

<sup>14</sup> The 1989 volume offers commentary on the Seleucus excursus that concerns us; addenda and corrigenda to this volume are printed at Brodersen 1991: 241–2.

<sup>15</sup> An honourable mention goes also to the brief commentary Downey appended to his 1959 translation of the speech.