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### The Seleucid Empire

The once powerful Achaemenian Empire fell at the hands of Alexander the Great of Macedonia, bringing about a period of Hellenistic, or Greek, rule in Iran. The Seleucid Empire was born during this time of Greek rule. This presentation will examine how the Seleucid Empire came to be; its rise and eventual decline from power, particularly in Iran; and its impact and legacy.

The story begins with the death of Alexander in 323 BCE. Alexander died at the age of thirty-two, only seven years after the burning of Persepolis. He left behind a vast empire, stretching all the way from Greece to India, but no clear heir to the throne. His wife, Roxana, was pregnant at the time, and so his only child was as yet unborn (“Alexander”). There was uncertainty as to who should take control of the massive empire he had built.

By some accounts, Alexander had, while on his deathbed, declared his will by giving his ring to Perdikkas, one of his senior and most trusted generals. In the end it was decided that Perdikkas would serve as “Regent of the Empire” and “supreme commander of the imperial army” (“Perdikkas”).

However, Perdikkas was not without rivals; and he soon proved to be intolerant, ruthless, and controlling. After a revolt leading to Perdikkas’ death, the empire was partitioned among five of Alexander’s senior generals, who became known as the Diadochi, or successors. Over the next several years the Diadochi were involved in a series of battles, called the Wars of the Diadochi, as they each tried to expand their own territories and limit the power of the others (“Diadochi”).

Among these Diadochi was Seleucus I, who came to be known as Seleucus Nicator. He was commander-in-chief under Perdiccas, but also among those responsible for the assassination of Perdiccas. Seleucus was given the satrapy, or province, of Babylonia, and he continued to expand his kingdom from there. Although he briefly lost this territory to his rivals, he re-conquered it in 312 BCE and established himself in Babylon, founding the Seleucid Dynasty.

Once he established himself in Babylon, Seleucus began an eastward expansion. By the time of the Battle of Ipsus, which ended the Fourth War of the Diadochi in 301 BCE, Seleucus controlled the entire eastern portion of Alexander's empire. His eastern expansion stopped at India, where he made a peace agreement with Emperor Chandragupta Maurya.

The outcome at Ipsus gave Seleucus control over eastern Anatolia and northern Syria as well. Seleucus formed a new capital at Antioch in northern Syria and an additional capital at Seleucia on the Tigris, near Babylon.

Seleucus continued his westward expansion over the years, with the ultimate goal of taking over the entire empire that Alexander had built. His empire reached its greatest extent when in 281 BCE he defeated Lysimachus and took the rest of Anatolia. Later that same year, when Seleucus tried to take Thrace and Macedonia, he was killed by Ptolemy, who ruled Egypt ("Seleucid").

Seleucus was succeeded by his son, Antiochus I, whose mother was a Persian noblewoman. Antiochus I as well as his son and successor, Antiochus II, had trouble controlling the vast empire built by Seleucus I. Distracted by conflicts with the Ptolemies of

Egypt and a Celtic invasion of Asia Minor in the western portion of the Empire, they had difficulty keeping together the eastern portions of the empire.

In 246 BCE, after the death of Antiochus II, Ptolemy III launched a successful attack against Seleucus II. This set the stage for the secession of Bactria and Parthia and the rise of the Parthian Empire ("Seleucid"). Although there is controversy over whether Iran was lost at this point or later in the next century, it is clear that the decline of the Seleucid Empire had begun.

The conquests and battles that dictate the timeline of the Seleucid Empire tell part of the story of this empire. The remainder of the story is about the rule of the empire and its impact on history. Seleucid rule consisted of a monarchy that was primarily legitimized by military victories. Winning battles qualified the king to be protector of his people, which is one reason why kingdoms seemed to be continually at war. The Seleucid monarchs also claimed to have divine associations, and expected to be honored as such (Strootman).

When dealing with individual cities, the monarchy acted according to local customs. However, the larger umbrella culture they maintained was a Hellenistic one. Their coins, for instance, contained Greek symbolism and text. In addition, the higher strata of the Seleucid court and army consisted primarily of Greeks and Macedonians (Strootman).

As under Achaemenian rule, the empire was divided into several large satrapies, renamed as provinces. Governors were responsible for collecting taxes and maintaining peace.

The Seleucids built many new cities based on the Greek model. Greek and Macedonian immigration was encouraged (Jakobssen). Cities were largely autonomous, and regionalism replaced the centralization of the Achaemenian Empire. Kings exerted their

influence in the cities by means of close associates known as the Philoi, or Friends of the King, who effectively acted as liasons between the monarchy and their cities (Strootman).

Due to the regionalism of the period, the Seleucid impact on Iranian culture was limited. The Greek cultural influence was mostly limited to the new cities, and old towns and villages were largely unaffected (Jakobssen). However, regionalism also meant that Zoroastrian religious practices in different regions would begin to diversify.

As for other influences, the Seleucids spread the idea of a coin-based economy. They were also responsible for a calendar system of counting the years, known as the Seleucid Era, beginning with the year 312, when Seleucus founded the dynasty (Strootman).

Perhaps the most lasting legacy of the Seleucids comes from the vastness and diversity of the empire that was formed. The Seleucid Empire was a melting pot of cultures and ideologies. Eastern thought influenced western ideas, which over time, were impacted still further by Islamic conquests of the region, and by the time of the Enlightenment many centuries later, many philosophies would have had a part to play in the ideas that developed ("Seleucid").

Thus, the Seleucid Empire, though its dominance over Iran may have been relatively short-lived, has merited a place in the study of our history.

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