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The Seleucid Era and Early Hellenistic Imperialism

ABSTRACT: This article presents a new analysis of the origins of the Seleucid Era, and its relationship to early Seleucid imperialism. Contrary to recent assessments of the Era as a radical and early invention of Seleucus I, designed to promote imperial homogenisation, we argue that it emerged gradually out of diadochic competition and pre-existing temporal systems, as Seleucus and the other successors attempted to assert control over the territories conquered by Alexander. Moreover, even when the year count established by Seleucus became an Era, most likely to facilitate dynastic succession, it took two forms, adapted to the different calendrical systems of the empire. This undermines the idea that the early Seleucid rulers sought to repress local difference.

Keywords: Seleucid Era – Seleucus I – Diadochi – Hellenistic imperialism – Hellenistic kingship – Ancient calendars

The early Hellenistic age was a period of imperial experimentation.* As the diadochi fought to establish and retain control over the fragmenting empire of Alexander the Great, they were forced to grapple with challenges which were entirely new in a Graeco-Macedonian context: how to control and administer massive swathes of territory with limited military forces; how to manage politically and culturally diverse populations; how to create a stable and distinctive legitimacy for themselves and their families in the vacuum left by the death of Alexander's blood heirs and in a world of competing contenders for the diadem. During the final decades of the fourth century and the early years of the third, the first rulers of the major Hellenistic dynasties developed a variety of practical and ideological strategies in order to stake and solidify their imperial claims. Some of these were standard imperial techniques trans-historically: a 'chameleonic' approach to local diversity; the creation of initial royal legitimacy based on military prowess and personal efficacy.[1] Others were more unique, especially by contemporary

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1 On chameleon kingship, see below, note 15; on military success and personal charisma, Gehrke 1982.

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standards, such as the apotheosis of dead, and even living rulers, or the institution of co-regency.[2]

While some of these innovations were abandoned early, the most successful developments subsequently came to be so much a part of the toolkit of 'ancient imperialism' – deployed across the Hellenistic kingdoms, Rome, and beyond – that they can seem natural or inevitable in retrospect. At their inception, however, these imperial strategies were in some cases radical departures from what had come before. This makes the study of their emergence all the more important: how, when and why did the early rulers of the Ptolemaic, Seleucid and Antigonid kingdoms adopt these new imperial tools? In the last few decades, an increasing number of works on the age of the diadochi and the early Hellenistic dynasties have investigated these questions, shedding new light on the processes by which what we now understand as 'Hellenistic' imperialism took shape.[3] This article seeks to contribute to that ongoing project, focusing on one particular case: the Seleucid Era.

At some point between 312 BCE and 281 BCE, Seleucus I and/or his son Antiochus made a momentous decision. Rather than marking time in their empire using the regnal years of individual rulers, they would instead keep a continuous year count from 312/311, the year that Seleucus gained the upper hand in his struggle with Antigonus Monophthalmus, claimed the generalship of Asia and established in Babylonia what would come to be the powerbase of his fledgling empire. As Paul Kosmin has emphasised in his recent monograph, this count represented a new and transformative way of marking official time. All previous political entities had used regnal counts, year-names or eponymous dating by officials – systems which either restarted periodically or lacked forward motion altogether.[4] That changed with what we now know as the Seleucid Era. Decoupled from the regnal counts of individual kings and proceeding uniformly forward from its epoch point, it was 'a regular, numericalized measure of ever-deepening duration'.[5] It was also, potentially, a powerful and aggressive tool of imperialism. In Kosmin's view, the Era was disseminated across the empire at the cost of local time systems, and indeed designed for this purpose: it constituted a highly visible statement of continuous, and open-ended, Seleucid control – a statement which subject populations found so troubling that they resisted with various discourses of apocalypse and 'fantasies of finitude'.[6]

2 On ruler cult (selections from a vast bibliography), see in general Chaniotis 2003; for the Seleucids, see Sherwin-White 1983; Gruen 1999; Van Nuffelen 2004; Erickson 2018b; for the Ptolemies, see Koenen 1993; Hölbl 2001 chs. 3 and 6; for the Argeads and Antigonids, see Habicht 1996; Mikalson 1998 ch. 3; Mari 2008; Jim 2017. On the co-regency, Holton 2018 is the most recent careful treatment (preferring the term 'joint kingship'); Berzon 2014 argues for separate regions of influence (building on Bengtson 1944, 80); Hackl 2020 adds new evidence; Clement 2020 discusses the reign of Antiochus I in particular.

3 For some recent approaches, see Meeus 2020; Egetenmeier 2021, esp. 104–74; Hauben and Meeus 2014; McKechnie and Cromwell 2018 (Ptolemies); Erickson 2018a; and Kosmin 2018 (Seleucids).

4 Kosmin 2018, 19–20.

5 Kosmin 2018, 22.

6 This is the main argument of Kosmin 2018 ('fantasies of finitude' p.186).

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This reframing of the Era is highly relevant for ongoing debates on the nature and evolution of Seleucid imperialism. Most work on the Seleucids has emphasised the decentralisation of power and cultivation of local identities as a conscious and consistent strategy by the centre, to the point that this has been seen as a deliberate imperial policy and also as a core weakness insofar as the dynasty did not manage to create a coherent legitimate identity.[7] In cultural terms, the Seleucids have been seen as the chameleon kings of the Hellenistic world *par excellence*: we can find Antiochus I at one moment prostrating himself before the Babylonian moon god, and at another being honoured with the eponymous office of *stephanēphoros* in the ancient Greek city of Miletus.[8] At the same time, there have been important qualifications to this image. For example, a series of articles have reanalysed the Borsippa Cylinder of Antiochus I, previously seen as the apogee of Seleucid investment in local religion and scholarship, as a document that reconfigures Mesopotamian royal ideology with a distinctively Seleucid stamp,[9] while Philippe Clancier and Julien Monerie have exposed the Seleucids' increasing economic encroachment on the prerogatives of the Babylonian temple elites in the second century, with mounting evidence that this process began already under Antiochus III and that Antiochus IV was not an anomaly.[10] As the Seleucid Era is an imperial technology that was developed in the dynasty's early years and ultimately had a deep and widespread impact across the empire, understanding it – its invention, dissemination and function – is crucial for understanding the nature of the empire itself.

By the second century BCE, as Kosmin has demonstrated, the Era was everywhere in the Seleucid world, advertising dynastic control and continuity through its unbroken and unbounded count of years. It is easy to see it in this period as an aggressive, centralising imperial tool. Yet significant questions remain about the Era's earliest phases. First, how and when did it originate? Was it conceived by Seleucus I already in 305 BCE when he took the diadem and made the decision not to count his regnal years but instead mark the passage of time from his assumption of control in 312/311 – or was he even planning it in 312/311 itself? Or was it Antiochus I who, after his father's death, transformed what had been a simple count of satrapal/regnal years into a new temporal system? Previous scholarship has tended to view Antiochus I as the key agent,[11] but Kosmin makes a case for Seleucus I, arguing that the selection of 312/311 as the epoch date for the Seleucid Era was tied to Seleucus' relationship with Babylon, and designed to coopt the Babylonian *akītu* (New Year) festival as an imperial event.[12] Alternatively, was the Seleucid Era a joint creation of Seleucus I and Antiochus I, when the latter was ele-

7 On imperial policy, see e. g. Kuhrt and Sherwin-White 1991; Sherwin-White and Kuhrt 1993; Lavan, Payne and Weisweiler 2016, 19–22; Haubold 2016; Stevens 2016; Erickson 2018a. On the failure to create a dynastic identity, Chrubasik 2016, 226–43.

8 Prostration before Sin: *BCHP* 5 obv. 11–12; Miletus: *Milet* I 3, 123. 37.

9 Erickson 2011; Strootman 2013; Beaulieu 2014; Kosmin 2014a; Stevens 2014; Widmer 2019 (but see already Kuhrt and Sherwin-White 1991, 83–4 who highlighted the influence of dynastic ideology)

10 Monerie 2012; Clancier and Monerie 2015.

11 Most prominently argued by Sherwin-White and Kuhrt 1993, 22–3; see also below, n. 17.

12 Kosmin 2018, 30–35.

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vated to the co-regency and added to dating formulas which maintained a unified count after 295/4 BCE?[13] On that reading, the decision *not* to count Antiochus' regnal years separately was the catalyst for the conception of the Era. A second issue is what the Era was intended to achieve. If the aim was to impose a single imperial time and 'Seleucid' temporal identity on all subjects across the empire, it seems surprising that in fact the Seleucid Era had *two* calendars and epoch dates: the Babylonian era (SEB) with a spring epoch date of 1 Nisannu 311 (the first day of the Babylonian year), and the Macedonian (SEM), with an autumn epoch, most likely on 1 Dios 312.[14] This raises the question of the development and purpose of the double era counting. Did the different eras fulfil different functions, and should one be seen as primary and the other secondary, or was the Seleucid Era dual from the start?

These are not simply questions about calendrical technicalities. They have a direct bearing on central aspects of Seleucid imperial praxis and ideology in these crucial early years. One key issue is that of distinctiveness: should the Seleucid imperial project be seen as revolution or evolution? Was Seleucus I a radical reformer who – perhaps in an attempt to elevate himself to the level of the other diadochi – at once distanced himself from their developing styles of rule, broke with the conventions of all previous imperial regimes and opened a new chapter in world history? Or should what we now think of as the Seleucid Era be seen in its first years as simply one of several related experiments in imperialism by Alexander's would-be successors, in their attempts to stabilise their positions and create legitimacy? Were its radical aspects (as we see them today) more an artefact of gradual development than conscious planning?

The Era's design and development are also of great importance for our understanding of how the early Seleucids approached their imperial subjects. Whereas the co-existence of multiple eras would be in keeping with the traditionally 'chameleonic' view of the Seleucids and other Hellenistic dynasties, the intended primacy of a single era would stand in opposition to what otherwise seems to be an ability and willingness on the part of the early Seleucid kings to adapt to local conventions and expectations. The co-opting of the Babylonian *akītu* festival as an imperial event would represent a significant and early intrusion into local life, retrojecting to the beginning of the dynasty a level of imperial infringement not otherwise seen until the reforms of Antiochus III and his successors in the second century. At the same time, the idea that Seleucus' empire-defining innovation was so closely tied to Babylonian kingship and ritual also presents a challenge to the traditional view that despite rulers' chameleonic performance in local contexts, Seleucid kingship, like that of the other Successor kingdoms, was essentially Graeco-Macedonian at the core.[15]

13 Two recently published documents may suggest that there was some initial experimentation with separate counts. On this and the start date of the co-regency, see Hackl 2020, and also below, p. 166.

14 On the epoch date of the SEM, see below, section 2.2.

15 Succinctly articulated in Ma 2003, 187–91; Chrubasik 2016, 243. For Greek/Macedonian dominance at court, see Habicht 1958, qualified by Savalli-Lestrade 1998. Mehl 2003, Brüggeman 2010, and Strootman 2011 also argue plausibly for the participation of indigenous elites.

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All in all, then, understanding the Seleucid Era in its initial phases is fundamental for understanding the nature and development of the early Seleucid state; clarifying its origins is therefore of paramount importance. This article seeks to do just that. Part 1 investigates the origins of the Era in the context of Seleucus' diadochic career and his series of modifications to dating systems. It argues that Seleucus' initial temporal interventions did not represent a sudden and radical rupture with contemporary practice, but were part of a broader framework of diadochic experimentation with dating systems and simply expressed his claims to control and status. The Era only emerged late in Seleucus' reign and was connected with the creation of the dynasty. Further support for this reconstruction can be found in the dual nature of the Era, which is taken up in Part 2. We argue that both Babylonian and Macedonian eras existed from the outset, and, crucially, that both were an evolution of the preexisting counting systems inherited by Seleucus. This further undermines the radicalism of Seleucus' counting system in its early stages, and also encourages us to question the extent to which (early) Seleucid imperialism aimed at homogenisation and the suppression of local difference.

1. The Origins of the Era

It could be seen as ironic that a dating system designed to linearise time should be difficult to anchor to a single point of origin. It must be stressed, however, that our evidence for chronology and chronography in the late fourth century BCE is fraught with difficulties. The main literary sources – Diodorus Siculus, Appian; Akkadian texts from Babylonia – are heterogeneous and fragmentary, and sometimes outright contradictory.[16] Furthermore, most of the Greek and Roman literary sources were composed considerably later than the events they describe, potentially offering us inception stories of the Seleucid empire that had been remodelled in the course of the late fourth and third centuries. One significant exception to these later accounts are contemporary legal and administrative documents in Akkadian, preserved on cuneiform tablets from Babylonia. These texts were traditionally dated using the regnal years of rulers of Babylonia, and in the wake of Alexander III's death continued to be dated after the individual that was perceived by the local scribes as in charge: first the kings Philip Arrhidaeus and Alexander IV, then Antigonus Monophthalmus (as 'the general (*stratēgos*)'), then Seleucus Nicator. Some scholarly texts from Babylon and Uruk also carry date formulas. The cuneiform sources therefore provide crucial evidence for the situation 'on the ground' in the late fourth century and for the beginnings of what we now know as the Seleucid Era. Once we enter the third century, Greek epigraphy from elsewhere in the empire also has a role to play, as the royal chancery and Greek communities and individuals in Asia

16 Modern scholarship attempts to reconcile these varying accounts. The most important for Babylonia is still that of T. Boiy (2004, esp. 125–7 and idem 2007, 111–20), with the qualifications of R. van der Spek (2014, esp 327–35). Our historical reconstructions are heavily indebted to these two works. Note also the recent commentary of Yardley, Wheatley and Heckel 2012 s. v. Justin *Epit.* 15. 4. 11.

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Minor used dating formulas in their inscriptions which illustrate the diffusion of the new time system.

Our earliest unambiguous evidence that the Seleucid Era existed is, of course, from the reign of Antiochus I. As long ago observed by Elias Bickerman, it is only when the year count did not restart with Antiochus' accession that we can see clearly that the years being counted were no longer those of an individual.[17] It is apparent from the uniformity of approach in the surviving Babylonian and Greek sources that the decision *not* to restart the count – if it was a decision at this point – was made and disseminated relatively rapidly across the empire. Seleucus I died in the second half of 281 BCE. While a dowry from Uruk dated to 10 Kislīmu, year 31 (2 December 281 BCE) still names Seleucus and his son Antiochus as kings (BRM 2 05, rev. 9),[18] the *Babylonian King List*, compiled in the second century, places the death of Seleucus I in the month of Ulūlu of that year (*CM* 4 obv. 8), which offers a range of 26 August – 24 September 281 BCE. It is therefore likely that the death of Seleucus in Thrace was as yet unknown to the scribes of Uruk in December 281. The first datable document to survive from the following period is a house sale, again from Uruk, which is dated to '24 Kislīmu Year 32, Antiochus and Seleucus [(as) kings]' (*OECT* 9 7 rev. 23), corresponding to 4 January 279 BCE. Antiochus, who had probably been co-king with his father Seleucus since 298/7 BCE (on the beginning of the co-regency see further below), had now made his own son co-king, so that another Antiochus-Seleucus pair ruled the empire. More importantly, instead of beginning a new count of his own regnal years from year one,[19] or from when he was made joint king with his father,[20] Antiochus continued the previous year count that had begun in 312/311. The first surviving example in the epigraphic documents from western Asia Minor also shows both the Era and co-regency already in operation: an inscription from Thyateira in Lydia dating to 276/5 BCE declares 'when Antiochus and Seleucus were kings in the thirty-seventh year' (*TAM* 5. 2. 881. 2–3). Although the immediate aftermath of Seleucus' death is as yet poorly documented, the uniform adoption of the established count (and co-regency) in our earliest surviving sources (which in Babylo-

17 Bickerman 1938, 206. See also Sherwin-White 1987, 27; eadem and Kuhrt 1993, 22; Kosmin 2014b, 100–103; idem 2018, 22, and most recently Hackl 2020, 561 and Hoover 2020, 20.

18 Boiy 2004, 140.

19 There is one possible piece of evidence for an 'Antiochus year 1' from Babylonia. A cuneiform text containing a compilation of planetary observations includes a reference to 'An year 1, Nisannu' (*AD* 5 53 'obv.' II 26'); 'An' is usually the abbreviation for the royal name Antiochus in Seleucid-period Akkadian texts. However, the tablet cannot be dated astronomically, so it is not clear whether the observations attached to 'An year 1' fit Antiochus I's first year (as co-regent or sole king); in addition, since the tablet itself is not dated it cannot be determined when it was written, and the statement could represent a later simplification or misunderstanding (Boiy 2009, 472). Another possibility suggested by Van der Spek is that 'An' here refers to Antigonus (Van der Spek 2005, 549), although this is not so far attested elsewhere as an abbreviation for this name. To us it seems very possible that Antiochus I is meant, but the interpretation of the tablet remains too uncertain to build any case from it.

20 As done by Ptolemy II just a couple of years earlier: Hazzard 1987, 152–55, but note the complications for his regnal years, below n. 70.

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nia especially show only a short time lag) is a strong indicator that the Seleucid Era was at the latest in operation very soon after Antiochus' accession.[21]

But did the Era in fact exist – albeit formally indistinguishable from a regnal count – before that, and if so, at what point? In order to identify the most likely possibility, we need to trace Seleucus' evolving chronographic and political career during this crucial period. We start with the events of the (later) epochal year, 312/11 BCE.

1.1 Seleucus and 312/11: a new beginning?

Clearly, the year 312/311 was very important in retrospect for the Seleucid rulers – for Seleucus Nicator himself, who later chose to start his own year count (whether regnal or Era) from that point, and for later kings, for whom it was considered the origin date of the Seleucid Era. It was also evidently critical for Seleucus at the time, because it was in this year that he first altered the dating system and added himself to dating formulas. But *why* was it important, and what was Seleucus aiming to achieve with his chronographic intervention? Can we see already here the first traces of the Era?

The year 312/11 was a significant turning point in Seleucus' diadochic career. In late 312, together with Ptolemy, he defeated Antigonid forces at the Battle of Gaza. In spring 311 he returned to Babylonia, which he now claimed as his territory, and began to establish a powerbase there. It was at this point that he made his first change to dating formulas. The *Diadochi Chronicle*, an Akkadian text describing events from the period of the diadochi which was likely written in the late fourth century BCE, refers to Seleucus making a proclamation in the month of Ayyāru (May 311) that 'year 7 of Antig[onus the general] you shall count as [year 6 of king Alexander, son of Alexander, and] Seleucus the general'.[22] While this text may have been written significantly later than the events it describes, contemporary corroboration is provided by the date formulas of documents from Babylonia. For example, a document from Babylon dated to 11 or 20 May 311 (BM 22022) gives the year as the sixth year of Alexander IV; this gives evidence that by mid-May, scribes (or rather this particular scribe) in Babylon acknowledged Seleucus' control by re-employing the count of Alexander IV's years which had been used by Seleucus when he previously held Babylonia.[23] Thus, by the middle of May of 311 BCE Seleucus had returned to Babylonia and established sufficient control to enact a change of dating system locally. Date formulas in tablets from the following years also attest to the addition of Seleucus' name.[24]

This cannot, *stricto sensu*, be seen as the start of the Seleucid Era, since Seleucus was not at this stage counting his own years alongside those of Alexander, but the addition

21 See below, p. 166.

22 *BCHP* 3, rev. 3'–4' (the restorations are secure given preserved date formulas in the rest of the text, as well as external evidence from contemporary documents). See also n. 54.

23 Boiy 2004, 126.

24 For example, the astronomical diaries AD -309 rev. 11', u. e. 1; AD -307 rev. 17', u. e. 1.

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of his name was a significant and deliberate change, and the fact that this point was later selected as the beginning of the Era indicates that it marked an important moment for Seleucus. What was that? The immediate context presents us with two options:

1. Seleucus' recovery of Babylon(ia) in itself
2. The change in Seleucus' position vis-à-vis the other diadochi in the year 312/11

Scholars have given varying weights to each of these in their reconstructions. Among others, the reconquest of Babylon(ia) is emphasised by Ogden, Mehl and now Kosmin; meanwhile, for Bevan, Capdetrey and Van der Spek, the true significance of 312/11 was the shift it saw in the emerging imperial landscape, elevating Seleucus to the first league of the diadochi.[25] Although both factors may be in play, it is worth looking more closely at the evidence for each; if one is primary, it would have implications for Seleucus' evolving approach to kingship and empire, and the Era's place within it.

1.1.1 Seleucus' return to Babylonia: an imperial kairos*?*

The traditional case for Babylonia's significance to Seleucus depends partly on timing – the proclamation of the date change seems to take place immediately after his return to the region – and partly on the assumption that the acquisition of territory was key for him and the other diadochi.[26] It would be hazardous to place too much weight on simple contiguity: after all, the Babylonian evidence only shows that a change took place *here* in spring 311, and it is entirely possible that changes to other local dating systems were enacted at different times in other regions and are simply invisible to us now because of a lack of other evidence. The significance of Seleucus' territorial claim to Babylonia is also questionable. If this was the key shift, then it is surprising that Seleucus later antedated his count to 312/11, not to 320 BCE, the year when he first acquired Babylonia as a satrapy (as Ptolemy Soter did with his year count in Egypt). In fact, Seleucus does not seem to have attached as much importance to his 'right' to Babylonia or his position as satrap as some modern historians would like.[27] It is notable that in his declaration in May 311 as recorded in the *Diadochi Chronicle*, Seleucus describes himself not as 'satrap' (^{lú}GAL ÉRIN^{meš}, Akkadian *muma''iru*) but as 'general' (^{lú}GAL.UKKIN, Akk. *rab uqu*), and this is acknowledged in the language of the chronicle, which from this point onwards uses only the latter title to describe Seleucus.[28] Regardless of whether this text was composed – as is usually assumed – in the late fourth century, or later, it was unquestionably created within an environment in which Seleucus or one of his

25 Ogden 2017, 15, 97 and 276; Mehl 1986, 145; mirrored in Sherwin-White and Kuhrt 1993, 9–10; Plischke 2014, 20; and Kosmin 2018, 30–5. Bevan 1902, 52–3; 312; Capdetrey 2007, 35–6; Van der Spek 2014. Similarly Griffith, Sherwin-White and Van der Spek 2016.

26 Still Bickerman 1938, 11–17. Note Kosmin 2014b, parts 1 and 2; Chrubasik 2016, 227–38.

27 See above n. 25, and also below, section 1.1.3, on the significance Seleucus accorded to his position as satrap.

28 For the general: *BCHP* 3 rev. iv. 4'; for the satrap: *BCHP* 3 obv. i. 28.

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successors was king. Even if we allow for the possibility that some of what this text offers is a retrospective reconstruction influenced by the chronicler's own day, the minimal attention given to Seleucus' satrapal rule from 311 onwards is remarkable. Here, as in the dating formulas, the satrapy of Babylonia was irrelevant. This undermines the idea that Seleucus' claim to Babylonia/territory *in itself* was the significant event that triggered the change to dating formulas.

This does not exclude the possibility that Babylonia attained a new importance for Seleucus in 311, however. This is the interpretation of Paul Kosmin, who has adduced additional evidence in support of Babylonia's significance for Seleucus' kingship, and for the Seleucid Era. The source in question is a recently published fragment of a cuneiform tablet from Babylon (*BCHP* 3b, BM 35920). Following the editors' reconstruction of the broken sections, it reads 'Month Nisannu (I). In that month, S[eleucus], who in year 1 of Ant[igonus from Babylon] had fled, returned. Day 1 [….] battle (in?) Babylon […] between …' (col. 2. 2'–6').[29]

Based on this fragment, Kosmin argues that Seleucus' return to Babylonia coincided with the celebration of the Babylonian New Year, the *akītu* festival, in the spring of 311 BCE, and, crucially, that this *kairos* allowed Seleucus to 'gain cultural legibility from the key religious paradigm of first millennium Babylonia'.[30] He suggests that in 305, when Seleucus became king and sole calendrical reference point, he antedated his count to spring 311 precisely because of this *kairos*, and that this was the beginning of the Era. In this way the *akītu*, the most important festival of the Babylonian religious calendar, was co-opted as an imperial event from the beginning of empire, and the beginning of empire – Seleucus' return – was in turn assimilated to the ritual paradigm of the *akītu* festival:

> Thus it seems that Seleucus selected for the beginning of his empire and Era an event […] that could be understood within the symbolic logic of the Babylonian New Year festival. […] In other words, it reformatted recent political history to the *akītu* mythic-ritual paradigm, in which the return to Babylon was correlated with the first establishment of legitimate sovereignty.[31]

Kosmin sees this assimilation in *BCHP* 3b. He identifies verbal parallels between the fragment's account of Seleucus' flight and return, and the main cultic ritual of the *akītu* festival, in which the Babylonian chief god Marduk left and returned to the city; he underlines his case by stating that the Akkadian verb *târu* 'return', used by the scribe of the astronomical diary to indicate the returning Seleucus, is also used in some of the *akītu* ritual texts describing the divine re-entry into the city.[32]

In fact, the proposed links between Seleucus and the *akītu* of 311 – both at the time and in retrospect – turn out to be fragile. First, it is very unlikely that Seleucus' return

29 Note the alternative syntax of Van der Spek 2014, 342, and idem, Pirngruber and Finkel *forthcoming*: 'in that month, S[eleucus….] whom in year 1 (of Alexander?) Ant[igonus, the general, had deposed and who] from Babylon had fled, returned'.

30 Kosmin 2018, 31.

31 Kosmin 2018, 34.

32 Kosmin 2018, 33.

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did coincide with the *akītu,* which took place between the first and the eleventh day of Nisannu, the first month of the Babylonian year.[33] The fragment speaks of Seleucus' return to Babylonia in Nisannu, but unless he arrived on 1 Nisannu (which seems unlikely), he will have returned after the *akītu* festival was over, or at the very least while it was well underway. Second, the form and consequences of his arrival were problematic for any legitimising associations at the time. While the aim of the *akītu* was to reaffirm cosmic and political order and stability for the coming year, we know from the Greek and Latin sources and the *Diadochi Chronicle* that Seleucus' return to Babylonia was not a peaceful conquest. Rather, it marked the beginning of a new tug-of-war with the Antigonids that continued for two years, and even this fragment also notes a battle, possibly in Babylon, in line five.[34] Indeed, it is likely that Nisannu of 311 saw ongoing conflict: according to the *Diadochi Chronicle,* as we have seen, Seleucus' proclamation was made in month 2, Ayyāru (May 311),[35] and it is after this month that documents in the name of Antigonus cease and documents dated to the year count of Alexander IV (with Seleucus as general) are attested. This suggests that it was not until late in that month, or in the following month, that Seleucus established some control. In 311 and the immediate year that followed, therefore, it is improbable that any connection was made between Seleucus' arrival and the Babylonian New Year Festival, either by Seleucus, or the people of Babylonia, and any association that *was* made is likely to have been ambivalent at best.

Nor, when the language of the fragment is considered in full, does *BCHP* 3b provide persuasive evidence for parallels being drawn between Seleucus and Marduk, and hence between his return and the *akītu*. First, *târu* is simply the standard verb for 'to return' in Akkadian, and thus cannot be a strong verbal parallel. Second, for Seleucus' departure *BCHP* 3b uses the verb *abātu* which means 'to run away, to flee'; this is hardly appropriate language for divine movement and indeed is never used for Marduk's departure from the city during the *akītu*.[36] Finally, the mention of a battle (*ṣaltu*) and Babylon immediately in the following line distorts and inverts the supposed parallel: after Marduk's return, order should be established; in our fragment, chaos ensued.[37] Ultimately, it is difficult to decide what sort of information *BCHP* 3b can offer the historian, but regardless of whether it was written close to 311 BCE or decades later, it seems unlikely that this fragment draws any parallels between the chief rituals of the *akītu* festival and

33 Pongratz-Leisten 1999: 295 (who argues for a beginning on the 4th of Nisannu).

34 E. g. Diod. Sic. 19. 90–92 and 100. 3–7; Justin *Epit*. 15. 4. 10; App. *Syr*. 57 (273–4); *BCHP* 3 rev. iv. 6–38 (covering the years 311–309) makes regular references to battle, plundering by Antigonus' troops, and weeping and mourning in Babylonia. McTavish 2019, 80–1 also argues for limited Seleucid control of Mesopotamia.

35 Whether this can be classified as a speech-act, as Kosmin 2018, 29 argues, is impossible to ascertain since the verb is written logographically, thus neither the tense nor the person of the verb is known.

36 On the semantic range of *abātu* see *CAD* A1: 45, *abātu* B. The departure of gods (or rather, their statues) for religious processions and festivals is usually expressed in Akkadian chronicles and astronomical diaries using the more neutral verb (*w*)*aṣû*, 'go out, depart' (*CAD* A2: 362 *aṣû* 1j3'; for its use with Marduk and the *akītu* in particular see the *Akītu Chronicle, CM* 20, and the *Nabonidus Chronicle, CM* 26.

37 BM 35920: col. 2. 5'. This line is not quoted by Kosmin 2018, 31. If one wanted to push the line of the parallel argument further, one might be inclined to read the tablet as being critical of Seleucus, underlining his hasty departure and the chaos after his return.

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the return of Seleucus.[38] Nor can it offer us any information on Seleucus' interest in the Babylonian New Year celebrations.

If there is nothing to suggest that this text associated Seleucus with the New Year celebrations, do we have other evidence that either associates Seleucus with the *akītu* festival or indicates his interest in it? Tom Boiy has argued that Seleucus perhaps took the diadem on 1 Nisannu 305 BCE, making himself king as part of the *akītu* festival.[39] This reconstruction is not impossible, but it is entirely hypothetical – there is no evidence either way. When considering such reconstructions, it is important to underline that we do not know very much about the ritual calendar of the *akītu* festival before the Seleucid period; although references to the festival in a variety of texts indicate its importance in Mesopotamia throughout the first millennium, all the detailed evidence for the rituals it entailed is Hellenistic.[40] It is thus very difficult to know how the *akītu* festivals would have functioned during the early years of Seleucus' control of Babylonia, and therefore it is almost certainly impossible to assess Seleucus' involvement in or influence over the events.

In order to support his reconstruction of Seleucus I's link to the *akītu*, Kosmin offers additional evidence for a close relationship between the *akītu* festival and the royal family: sacrifices in Babylon in the late third century BCE for a 'king Seleucus' which may or may not refer to the dynasty's founder; [41] the participation of Antiochus III in the *akītu* festival,[42] and the existence of the so-called 'Day One Temple' (é u_4.1.kam), a rather enigmatic sanctuary in Babylon where royal sacrifices are sometimes recorded as taking place in the Seleucid period and which Kosmin suggests should be taken as an imperial temple associated with Seleucus' return on 'day 1' of the Babylonian year in 311 BCE[43]. All of these pieces of evidence are problematic. First, the attested instances of Seleucid involvement with the *akītu* are episodic and late; they do not offer evidence that the *akītu* festival was coopted by the Seleucid royal family in a programmatic manner, or at an early stage. While it is likely that for Antiochus III the performances in Babylon in

38 The dating of *BCHP* 3b is affected by its genre, which is debatable. Kosmin 2018, 244 n. 26 follows Van der Spek 2014 who classified it as an astronomical diary. Since astronomical diaries were usually compiled within a year of observation, this would make the fragment essentially contemporary with the events it describes (on the composition process of the Diaries, see Mitsuma 2015; on the Diaries in general, see Sachs and Hunger 1988, 1989, 1996 (editions); Pirngruber 2013 (historical sections), and the papers collected in Haubold, Steele and Stevens 2019. Yet the phrasing 'Month X' introducing historical information is almost unique for diaries (where the historical notes come at the end of the month), whereas it is standard for chronicles (see the commentary in *BCHP* 3b). As both diaries and chronicles are highly formulaic, this deviation is significant. If *BCHP* 3b is a chronicle, it becomes impossible to date with any precision; it could have been written at any point before the mid-second century BCE (the current *taq* for attested chronicles).

39 Boiy 2011, 11. Note Pongratz-Leisten 1999, 295, however, who argues that the king only took an active part in the ritual from 4 Nisannu onwards.

40 Noted by Smith 1976, 5, who interpreted the ritual as resisting foreign domination. For our lack of knowledge, see also e. g. Pongratz-Leisten 1994, 4.

41 *BCHP* 12. See below, n. 45.

42 *AD* -204C rev. 14–18.

43 Kosmin 2018, 39–41.

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205 mattered,[44] he is the only Seleucid king whose participation in the festival is clearly attested, and we cannot assume that this was therefore also the case for other kings.[45] Evidence for the late fourth century and even the early third century – the period under investigation for our argument – is absent. Second, J. Hackl has persuasively established that the correct reading of é u$_4$.1.kam is *bīt ūmakkal,* 'the temple of the whole day', and that this temple is unlikely to have been a Seleucid invention.[46] Moreover, its status as a 'privileged cultic location within Babylon for Seleucid actors and their imperial religion'[47] is further undermined by the fact that the majority of recorded sacrifices by officials or members of the royal family during the Seleucid period did not take place at this temple, but at locations in and around Esagila, as they still did in the Parthian period.[48] Even without the revised reading of the temple's name, the existence of other 'day X' temples in Mesopotamia long before the Hellenistic period would make it difficult to associate a 'Day One Temple' with the Seleucids.[49]

Where does this leave us? While it is conceivable that later Seleucid kings (occasionally) associated themselves and/or their predecessors with the *akītu* festival,[50] there is no evidence that this was the case during Seleucus' lifetime. While absence of evidence is of course not evidence of absence, the fact that Seleucus almost certainly arrived in Babylonia after the New Year festival had already commenced, the lack of evidence for a connection between his return and the *akītu* in surviving cuneiform texts, and the absence of direct evidence for Seleucus' involvement in Babylonian rituals at any point during his reign, make it more likely that Seleucus' main motivations in selecting the year 311 were focused on something other than the Babylonian New Year celebrations. Babylonia was at the geopolitical centre of Seleucus' ambition in 312/311, but ultimately

44 Kosmin 2018, 80–81. The suggestion that the celebrations of 205 and of 211 were a centennial, however, seems too far-fetched to warrant discussion. For Antiochus III's display in Babylonia in 187 BCE, see Haubold 2017, 121–9; see also idem 2013, 135–41. For royal behaviour and the genre of the Diaries more broadly, Visscher 2019.

45 Given the timing, it is possible that the sacrifices for 'Seleucus and his sons' in *BCHP* 12 took place as part of the *akītu* festival of 224/3, and hence that Seleucus III was involved to some extent (Mitsuma 2013), but the evidence is indirect and still does not show that Seleucus himself participated. Van der Spek 2016 plausibly argues that the phrase refers to Seleucus II and his sons.

46 Hackl 2021; accepted by Van der Spek, Pirngruber and Finkel *forthcoming*. Boiy 2004, 85–6; Linssen 2004, 85–6 n. 457; Schaudig 2001, 386 and van der Spek 1998, 225 had previously identified the temple as identical to the *akītu* temple, contra McEwan 1981, 135.

47 Kosmin 2018, 39.

48 Evidence for sacrifices in the Seleucid period at Babylonian temples is highly fragmentary. There are only fifteen instances where the context is clear enough. Esagila features in seven of these instances (*AD* -273 obv. 12; *AD* -249B rev. 3; *AD* -187 rev. 7–9; *AD* -187 rev. 17; *AD* -178C rev. 19'–20'; *AD* -158B rev. 18–20; *AD* -144 rev. 18); the 'Day One Temple' in four of them (*AD* -204 rev. 16–18; *AD* -187 rev. 10; *AD* -171B rev. 4'–7'; *AD* -158C obv. 6).

49 For a Neo-Assyrian 'shrine of Day Seven (or Eight)' in the *akītu* complex of the temple of Nabû at Kalhu, see Postgate 1974, 63–7. For an é u$_4$.1.kam at Sippar, see Schaudig 2001, 386 who translates (on p. 392, ll. 30–31 '… und ergriff die Hand des Šamaš, der erhabene Herr, und ließ ihn im Akītu-Festhaus wohnen'), amending the translation of George 1985/86, 22, n. 38 and idem 1996, 392.

50 The suggestion of Ristvet 2015, 208 that the priests at Uruk and Babylon consciously wrote the kings into or out of the processions is possible, but hard to substantiate since we do not know how the festivals were performed previously.

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both the year and the region were secondary. The real significance we submit, was the change in Seleucus' position in relation to the other diadochi, and in particular, Antigonus.

1.1.2 Seleucus vs Antigonus

This significance becomes clear from a close examination of Seleucus' change to the dating system in 311. His dating formula was not radical in itself. Rather, it responded directly to the innovative dating formula that had been introduced by his opponent Antigonus Monophthalmus, who had abandoned the traditional regnal system.[51] A ration list from the Esagila temple (CT 49 13), dated to the third month of Alexander IV's second year, is the last document dated in his name until the resumption of his regnal count by Seleucus in 311. Cuneiform documents from Antigonus' period of control did not date after a reigning king, but rather – unusually – after Antigonus himself, with the title 'the general' (^{lú}GAL.UKKIN, Akkadian *rab uqu*), emphasising his role as *stratēgos* of the royal army of Alexander, a title he had apparently held since the arrangements of Triparadeisus (Diod. Sic. 18. 39. 7 and 50. 1).[52] Since Babylonian documents dating to Antigonus seem to begin in his third year, it is likely that Antigonus from the outset antedated his years of control so that they began immediately after the death of Philip III Arrhidaeus in October 317 BCE.[53] By making his year count subsequent to that of the previous ruler, and by ignoring the reigning Alexander IV, Antigonus equated his authority with that of kings in all but name.[54]

After his return, Seleucus responded to this innovation by partly reverting to the previous system. The regnal count of Alexander IV was restored (as if it had proceeded uninterrupted in the interim), so that 311/10 became Year 6. Documents were once again dated in the name of a king. But Seleucus also innovated: as we have seen, the dating formulas no longer featured the king alone, but now also Seleucus himself.[55] This change

51 For continuity of dating in the name of the dead Philip III and the changeover: Boiy 2004, 122–3.

52 For Antigonus' position, see Billows 1990, 81–109.

53 See Boiy 2004, 124; and Van der Spek 2014, 325–7. For the beginning of Antigonus' year count: Boiy 2001. Note also Anson 2015, 210–11 who favours the low chronology.

54 Later king lists differ in their reconstruction of royal authority in Babylonia during these years. The *Babylonian King List* (*CM* 4 obv. 3–4) states that during this period 'For [n] years there was no king in the country (or 'when the king was not in the country': Van der Spek, Pirngruber and Finkel *forthcoming*); Antigonus, general-in-chief of the army, ruled the land'. On the other hand, the *Uruk King List* adds Antigonus as if he was a king.

55 The Akkadian of the contemporary date formulas in the Diaries is asyndetic, leaving it ambiguous as to whether we should read 'Year X of Alexander IV *and of* Seleucus the general', or 'Year X of Alexander IV; Seleucus (was) general'. If this is not simply due to Babylonian scribal convention (no precedent for adding non-royal individuals to a regnal count) and reflects Seleucus' own formulation, then it provides further evidence for our reconstruction of events in 311 and the development of the counting system: Seleucus was not adding himself to the royal count in 311 (a bold move while Alexander IV was alive), nor initiating his own count as general at that time in parallel to that of Ptolemy; the addition of his name was a statement of his ongoing authority in the region. In contrast to the Diaries, *BCHP* 3 definitely includes 'and' in its dates for Alexander IV and Seleucus (rev. 14, 32; nb. in rev. 4, the proclamation regarding the change to dating

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looks highly deliberate, and reflects two key elements in Seleucus' developing strategy for asserting his place among the diadochi. On the one hand, Seleucus' new system reverted back to the previous count, drawing legitimacy from the restoration of the regnal years of Alexander the Great's blood successor. On the other hand, it also challenged the position of Antigonus with the inclusion of 'Seleucus the general', claiming the same title Antigonus had employed for his own authority.[56] Through this modification of the conventional dating formula Seleucus differentiated himself from his opponent, hearkened back to a previous count, staked a claim at least to Babylonia and likely to all of Asia (depending on how we understand the territorial range of 'stratēgos'), and inserted himself into the line of guardians of Alexander III's inheritance.[57]

1.1.3. Seleucus and Ptolemy

Further support for the idea that Seleucus' changes in 312/11, and the significance of that year as a whole, are related to the broader diadochic context can be found in the relationship between Seleucus' and Ptolemy's early dating systems. While Seleucus' change in 311 can be explained through his struggle with Antigonus, it also conforms remarkably well to broader diadochic dating practices in this period. At this point, Ptolemy seems to have formally acknowledged the reigning kings in the same manner as Seleucus: for example, a Greek marriage contract from July/August 310 is dated to 'the seventh year of Alexander IV, when Ptolemy was satrap in his fourteenth year' (P. Eleph. 1 1–2).[58] Yet as the formula shows, already at this time, when he had not yet taken the diadem, Ptolemy also maintained a separate count of his satrapal years, beginning with the death of Alexander III on 11 June 323 BCE.[59] As W. Huss argues, although the mention of a satrap in the dating formula has Achaemenid precursors, the year count of satrapal control was unprecedented, emphasising the satrap's own position.[60] What is critical for our argument is that this document and others from the same period not only offer a date that follows a regnal count, but also include a clear year count associated with Ptolemy's assertion of control over Egypt.[61]

formulas in 311, the sign *u* is not visible on photo collation and may not originally have been present). This indicates that some scribes in retrospect interpreted this count as years *of* both Alexander IV and Seleucus, but since the date of composition of *BCHP* 3 is uncertain, it is unclear how far this can provide evidence of usage at the time.

56 See Van der Spek 2014, 328.

57 For Seleucus as guardian, or – as he put it – Sachwalter: Mehl 1986, 146–7. See also Capdetrey 2007, 27. Van der Spek 2014, 329 adds that Seleucus' claim to the generalship was never accepted by the other diadochi.

58 On this date Huss 2001, 224–225. See also below, n. 67.

59 This was proposed by Samuel 1962, 13. Subsequent research confirms this: e. g. Grzybek 1990, 97 and 183; also accepted by de Marcellus 1996, 75.

60 Huss 2001, 225–6 with n. 11, with reference to *I.Mylasa* 1–3. The mention of the satrap seems to be a Hecatomnid speciality; the last securely attested document, from c. 318 BCE, is from Lagina in Caria under Asandros: *I.Stratonikeia* 503.

61 Diod. Sic. 18. 3. 1 later states that Egypt was given to Ptolemy. On the messiness of the arrangements at the time and the later reconstruction (on which Ptolemy's dating is also based): Thompson 2018, 6–7.

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Seleucus' actions are similar. In the (relatively small) territory within his control, he – just like Ptolemy – dated documents according to the reigning Alexander IV, even after the latter's death, while at the same time adding himself to the dating formula. The parallel between Seleucus and Ptolemy does not rest on the offices they held. As we have seen above, Seleucus seems to have attached little significance to his position as satrap of Babylonia. Rather, the key is control: for Ptolemy his control over Egypt as satrap; for Seleucus his claim to the generalship of Asia. Regardless of the legal statuses of the diadochi after Alexander III's death, after Egypt was given to Ptolemy his authority was no longer effectively challenged.[62] The same was true of Antigonus in 316–15: although he was first made *stratēgos* of Asia at Triparadeisus in 320, it was not until he had defeated Eumenes five years later that he was able to claim uncontested control of Asia (which he then backdated, as we have seen, to the death of Philip). When Seleucus assumed the generalship of Asia, he claimed a similar position. It is impossible to know whether Seleucus was inspired by Ptolemy's count of satrapal years,[63] but based on the Ptolemaic and Antigonid parallels, it seems most likely that what Seleucus began to count in 312/11, and kept counting, were years of supreme and unbroken control. His term as satrap from 320 had seen him technically subordinate to Antigonus, and had in any case come to an end when he was driven out of Babylonia in 315. By contrast, 312/11 marked the point at which Seleucus established himself as ultimate authority in Asia – a claim that at the time was more rhetoric than reality, but which he progressively reified over the next decade.[64]

In 312/11 then, Seleucus made a strong claim, one that was announced in Babylonia in May 311. That said, when considering individual variations, his approach seems perfectly in line with the actions and innovations of the other diadochs Antigonus and Ptolemy. For Seleucus, the year 312/311 was a new start – as 323 was for Ptolemy and for Antigonus the moment when he replaced the name of the king with his own – and hence a natural origin point for his later year count. It was not, however, the beginning of the Seleucid Era.

1.2 Becoming Kings and Co-kings: 306/5–295/4 BCE

In 306/5 BCE, another political transformation occurred: Seleucus took the diadem and proclaimed himself king. However, perhaps curiously, he did not establish a new count of regnal years. The last document dated to (the now deceased) Alexander IV is dated to the month Addaru (XII) of his eleventh year, corresponding to the period from 26 February – 25 March 305 BCE (CT 49 25). The next contemporary document – just over a

62 For a narrative of the period, see Hölbl 2001, 14–17; Thompson 2018.

63 The possibility of Seleucus being inspired by Ptolemy is noted by Mehl 1986, 147.

64 While this cannot be the place to discuss the relationship between Ptolemy and Seleucus, it is debatable whether this claim was part of Ptolemy's plan (Worthington 2016, 148–55), or if it challenged Ptolemy's aspirations for Asia.

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year later – is dated to '3 Nisannu, Year 8, King Seleucus' (CT 4 29d). Sometime between the writing of these two documents, Seleucus had made himself king and sole calendrical reference point. All cuneiform documents from this point onwards date to 'King Seleucus', but with one possible exception, they uniformly continue the previous year count.[65] Was *this* the beginning of the Era? Conceivably, this count could mean three things: 1) This *was* in fact a regnal count, but Seleucus found it germane to retroject the beginning and gloss over the fact that he did not have royal status in the early years; 2) For Seleucus, the key issue was his claim to continuous control over Asia, rather than his royal status, and hence 312/311 remained the starting point; 3) In effect, Seleucus had silently inaugurated the Seleucid Era; although it would not become fully visible until after his death, this was already an epochal count – from a specific point in 311 – rather than a year count tied to the authority of an individual king.

Again, comparison within the world of the diadochs may be productive, and once again, a key parallel is Ptolemy. When Ptolemy subsequently made himself king in 305/4 BC, he added his satrapal years to his regnal years. While Demotic documents in Egypt began dating in year 1 when he became Pharaoh,[66] in Greek documents, the satrapal years continued to be included in the year count after he took the diadem.[67] Thus Greek papyri, and also Greek inscriptions from overseas territories, speak for example of 'King Ptolemy in his thirty sixth year' (impossible with a strict regnal count, since he died in 282).[68] Both Seleucus and Ptolemy, then, on their assumption of kingship antedated their year counts to include the periods of their previous positions, but it is also conceivable that in neither case were they ever meant to create constructed memories of longer reigns, and that all that mattered was that these were years of control.[69] Either way, the Ptolemaic – Seleucid alignment does make scenario 3) less likely. Given the similarities between Ptolemy's and Seleucus' way of counting, it is reasonable to expect that both were counting the same thing. In the case of the Ptolemies, however, unless we assume that Ptolemy II deviated from his father's path in establishing a regnal count,[70] it

65 Mehl 1986, 144–5 offers the important remark that we do not know whether the year 311 was immediately set up as the only calendar year for Seleucus' years, or whether – at least for a time – competing systems counting from 305 and 311 existed. *AD* -302/301 rev.' 21 is a rare exception that underlines his point. This text, which otherwise contains no year date or royal name, refers at this point to a 'year 4'. The astronomical observations can be dated with confidence to the years 303–302 BCE, four years since Seleucus took the diadem. While this document clearly offers us an example of a competing count, however brief, no other document exists with years lower than year 8, suggesting strongly that by year 8 at the latest the antedating to 311 was standardised.

66 E. g. P.Berl.Dem. I 13568 (month three of year 2) and P.Loeb 15 (month six of year 2).

67 Wörrle 1977, 45. Hagedorn 1986, 68–9. It is conceivable that Ptolemy – like possibly Ptolemy II – experimented with the calendars later. The latter king's regnal count is beyond our scope here, but note the discussion in Van Oppen de Ruiter 2010, esp. 143–7, Bennett 2018, 61–2 and also Koenen 1993, 52 n. 61 who underlines some of the complications. Much of this discussion still relies on a by now (Bennett 2018 59 n. 48) outdated numismatic argument made by Hazzard 1987, 152–5. Therefore, the changes in Ptolemy II's regnal years must not have necessarily have taken place during his first year. See also below, n. 70.

68 Wörrle 1977, 44–5 line 1. See also Samuel 1962, 11–24.

69 Kosmin 2014b, 101 considers a count of 'independent rule'.

70 Ptolemy II would not be the first world ruler to create ideological difference in order to underline his own legitimacy and distinctiveness relative to his predecessors (Gotter 2015, 223–8, especially; for the Seleucid

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is clear that they only ever counted years of individual control or regnal years. This again leads to the conclusion that Seleucus did likewise. A further obvious factor, but one that should not be underestimated, is precedent. In a world where no era counting had previously existed, the simple format of a year count together with the name of a king arguably created a regnal year count by automatic semantic association in the dating formulas. If Seleucus was aiming to inaugurate an Era count during his own lifetime, we should perhaps expect a less ambiguous format for displaying it. Once again, then, the most likely interpretation is that this was not yet the Era.

The final alternative point of rupture/innovation in terms of the development of Seleucid kingship is 295/4 BCE, when Seleucus' son Antiochus began to be consistently added as co-king to date formulas. The latest document dated to Seleucus I alone is a tablet from Uruk recording a sale of prebend shares, which is dated to 9 Ayyāru of year 17, 13 May 295 BCE (YOS 20.10). Later in that year, or in year 18, the formula was permanently changed.[71] A Babylonian document dated to 18 November 294 BCE offers the following date formula: 'MU 18.KAM$_2$ ^{m}*se-lu-ku u* ^{m}*at-ta-i-ku-su* LUGAL^{meš}, 'year 18, Seleucus and Antiochus (as) kings' (Corò 2018, no. 4-P Plate IV obv. 25).[72] This form of dating is also taken up by other types of Akkadian text, including the Astronomical Diaries from Babylon in the following years (e. g. *AD* -288 obv. 1). From this point onwards in Babylonia, no dates survive that exclude Antiochus, indicating that this practice was widely and quickly adopted.[73] It should be noted that 295/4 BCE may not be the moment when Antiochus actually became co-king. A recent study by Johannes Hackl draws attention to two documents from Babylon that suggest that Antiochus had been made joint ruler with his father three years earlier, in 298/7. These documents seem to offer separate counts for each king, referring to the year 297/6 as 'year 16 of King Seleucus and year 2 of Antiochus' (LB 863 obv. 6–7 and rev. 1).[74] It may simply be the case that these two scribes in Babylon had difficulties interpreting the new co-king's role,[75] but it is also possible that the documents reflect official practice: that the Seleucids themselves experimented with different ways of incorporating Antiochus into the dating system, and that the co-regency was initially counted differently to the joint count attested from 294 BCE onwards.[76]

empire: Chrubasik 2016, 211–13). He also experimented with the calendar (Hazzard 2000, 3–79 with the qualifications of Lorber 2007, 110–17), but overall this seems extremely speculative.

71 See also Boiy 2004, 138–9.

72 The document has long been known under its BM classification: BM 109941; see also Oelsner 1986, 271.

73 Insufficient evidence survives to see whether the same holds for other regions of the empire, but it is striking that the royal letter *I.Nysa* 401 (previously published as Welles, *RC* 9), likely dated around the battle of Corupedium, only affords the title *basileus* to Seleucus.

74 Hackl 2020, 562–8.

75 This would not be surprising, since co-regency was a novelty in Mesopotamia; traditionally, the intended successor could be marked out with the title 'crown prince of the succession house' (Akk. *mār šarri ša bīt redûti*, see *AHw* I 134 s. v. *bītum* B; II 981 s. v. *ridûtum* 4b; *CAD* R 326 s. v. *ridûtu* in *bīt ridûti*) but was never elevated to the status of king before the current king's death. On the novelty of Seleucid co-regency in the Babylonian context, see the commentary to *BCHP* 5.

76 Not all aspects of Hackl's analysis are persuasive: for example, the title of *šar mātāti* (LUGAL KUR KUR) is unlikely to be connected to the Upper Satrapies (idem 2020, 563 n.8). Also, Hackl's use of data from the

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This cannot be the place to discuss in full the meaning of this Seleucid co-regency or its local reception,[77] but its inception and the incorporation of both kings into the official dating system had a crucial effect on nascent Seleucid imperial time. In the Seleucid counting system, the initial semantic fusion between year count and a single royal individual was distorted and overwritten when Seleucus added his son Antiochus consistently as co-king to the dating formula.[78] From 305 onwards, for all documents, scribes had written 'Year X Seleucus king', as in the following from a promissory note: 'MU 13-KAM$_2$ ^{m}*se-lu-ku* LUGAL', 'year 13, Seleucus (as) king' (*OECT* 9 3 rev. 9) visually combining the year count and Seleucus' kingship and thus perhaps semantically fusing the two. The new system, however, meant that this semantic fusion was no longer possible. The presence of a year number and the name of two kings in the dating formulas meant that now the year count was associated with both monarchs, or, inversely, it separated the year count from the names of the kings: already at this moment in time, individual kingship was no longer paramount in the dating formulas of the Seleucid empire. This was different from the Ptolemaic empire, where even once he became co-king, Ptolemy II was never added to his father's dating formula while the latter was alive.[79]

The changes of 295/4 were clearly a conscious modification of the previous system. While it is impossible to say for certain whether these changes were a calculated decision to create the Seleucid Era, they were undoubtedly a decision *against* a regnal count. This change also has to be interpreted in conjunction with the fact that from 295/4 onwards, there were now always two kings in the Seleucid empire. In its continued year count, the Era was immediately displayed after Seleucus' death in 281 (even if we only have evidence for it in the year that follows), and this continuity was underlined through the ongoing presence of two kings (whose names were the same but in reversed order). To us, therefore, it seems most likely that the Seleucid Era emerged out of the measures of 295/4, and the co-regency of Seleucus and his son.

later co-regency to explain the co-regency of Antiochus I (ibid, 565) does not take into account that the co-regency could have been quite fluid from one reign to another (see e. g. the discussion in Holton 2018, 121–3; Clement 2020, 427–9). Similarly, while his explanation of DT 189, lines 6–7 with the analogy of LB 863 ll 6–8 is persuasive (ibid, 568), his claim that year 2 of Antiochus could not possibly mean an independent regnal count is a circular argument. Experimentation in the reign of Antiochus I is at least conceivable; see also above n. 19 and n. 70.

77 On the semantics of the co-regency, see the careful account of Holton 2018. Engels 2017, 104 emphasises how fundamentally different this co-regency is to that of Demetrius Poliorcetes with his father Antigonus, but arguments are not offered. Ibid 125–127 offers speculations on the choice of year, but ultimately none of this can be persuasive. Berzon 2014 traces the development of the co-regency throughout the Seleucid period. She follows previous analyses for a continued regional separation of offices (e. g. p. 113). Note also Mehl 1986, 266–7. Naturally, all these accounts lack discussion of the two new documents.

78 Cf. Boiy 2004, 140 who writes that 'the name was simply added'.

79 On the co-regency of Ptolemy II with his father and the calendar, see Bennett 2018, esp. 61–4.

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2. The double Era problem

As we have seen, then, it is unlikely that in the fourth century Seleucus created – or aimed to create – a unique temporal system that constituted a sharp break from all previous time counts and announced an aggressive imperial identity for his fledgling dynasty and empire. Rather, the count that became the Seleucid Era emerged gradually and organically from the context of diadochic competition in which Alexander's would-be successors experimented with various forms of legitimisation and techniques of control. This already moves us some way away from the hypothesis of a radical and aggressively imperialist early Seleucid state, aiming to flatten local difference with its homogenising temporal regime. But that hypothesis also runs into a more basic problem: there was no single Era at all.

In its established state, and from the earliest point that we have evidence from beyond Babylonia, the Seleucid Era existed in two forms, with two calendars that only partially overlapped. In Babylonia, Judaea and probably non-Greek communities in the other territories of the former Achaemenid empire, the inhabitants used what historians today call the 'Babylonian' Seleucid Era (SEB), with its epoch in the spring, on 1 Nisannu 311 BCE, the traditional start of the Babylonian New Year. But alongside this, there existed another, 'Macedonian' Seleucid Era (SEM), in which the epoch point fell in the autumn of 312 BCE, probably on 1 Dios.[80] That meant that for six months of every year, the two systems (and those using them) were in different years of the Seleucid Era. This is very difficult to square with the idea that the Era was a tool designed to create a single new temporal regime.

In his study of the Era, Kosmin considers this issue and ultimately does not find it problematic, for three reasons: 1) The majority of the empire's population did not travel and hence their experience of time would be stable; 2) Those who did move travelled during the part of the year when the calendars overlapped, and 3) The Macedonian Era was 'certainly' a secondary phenomenon.[81] The first two of these seem to raise significant further questions: what about written communications between settled communities? Traders who moved between calendrical zones? Cities in close proximity using different calendars?[82] However, the third argument is important and worth pursuing. If the Macedonian era really was a secondary development and the primary Seleucid Era was Babylonian, this would give further weight not only to the model of homogenising imperial time but to the idea that the conquest of Babylonia in 311 was of primary importance in its own right – that Babylonia and its culture held special significance for Seleucus' developing imperial style. But was the Macedonian era really secondary? And how Babylonian *was* the 'Babylonian' era?

80 The development of the SEB has already been discussed above. For the epoch date of the SEM, see Bennett 2011, Appendix B, and also below.

81 Travel: Kosmin 2018, 36–7; secondary phenomenon: 35.

82 Ibid, 36. Kosmin wonders here about the likelihood, and problems, of Babylon using the SEB and its new neighbour Seleucia on the Tigris using the SEM.

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2.1 The SEB: 'Babylonian' or 'imperial'?

We have seen no compelling evidence so far that Babylonia in itself held a special importance for Seleucus I or his successors. A link between Seleucus' return and the *akītu* festival of 311 – either at the time or in retrospect – is unlikely, and it was not Seleucus I's return to Babylonia *per se* that was important for his evolving chronographic policy, but rather his overall successes in the diadochic arena and his claim to have displaced Antigonus as *stratēgos* of Asia and inherited the eastern territories of Alexander's empire. The fact remains, of course, that Seleucus and his successors chose to utilise the Babylonian calendar not only in Babylonia but also across their empire. Should this therefore be taken as an indication that the region and its cultural heritage were more important to Seleucus than we have so far allowed?

What is crucial to understand in this context is that the 'Babylonian' calendar had been widespread outside Babylonia for centuries before Seleucus' triumphant return in 311 BCE. In Babylonia itself, a standard sequence of months had been established by the middle of the second millennium BCE.[83] By the end of that millennium it had already spread north to Assyria and west as far as the Levant;[84] the expansionist Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian empires of the earlier first millennium likely brought it to further swathes of territory in the Near East, although a paucity of sources makes this hard to track with precision.[85] Most importantly for our purposes, in the Achaemenid period the Babylonian calendar was widely used across the Persian empire, where it functioned as an imperial calendar. First attested in administrative texts and royal inscriptions in Persia in the reign of Darius I,[86] the Babylonian calendar appears in imperial documents outside the heartland from the reign of Xerxes onwards: in Egypt in the papyri of the

83 On the development of a standard sequence in Babylonia, see Cohen 1993, 297–305 (arguing for standardisation in the eighteenth century BC); Britton 2007, 115–6.

84 The standard Babylonian calendar was adopted in Assyria under Tiglath-Pileser I (1104–1076 BC), and at Alalakh by 1500 BCE (Cohen 1993, 298–302; 372–4). Tablets from Ugarit and Ḫana in the fourteenth and thirteenth centuries show knowledge of it (Cohen 1993, 377–81); in Elam, Babylonian influence on the calendar seems to have waxed and waned from the second to the first millennium according to the political dynamics between the two states (Basello 2002).

85 For example, month names of the standard Babylonian calendar only occur in the post-exilic books of the Hebrew Bible, which provides a *terminus ante quem* for its adoption by the Jews (Cohen 1993, 299–300; 386 with n.3). Although in theory this could be an Achaemenid period adoption, the Babylonian exile is perhaps a more likely context. A small archive of c6th cuneiform tablets from Neirab, northern Syria, written by what seems to have been a group of deportees to Babylonia whose descendants then returned to their homeland with the archive several generations later, provides a striking contemporary analogue (texts: Dhorme 1928; analysis: most recently Tolini 2015). Although the use of the Babylonian calendar in these texts, which were written in Babylonia, does not show its adoption in Syria, the case provides a clear example of how such cultural transfer could work.

86 Under Darius I, the Bisitun inscription (translation: Lecoq 1997, 187–217 (Old Persian version, noting variants from other versions)) and the Persepolis Treasury and Fortification Tablets (published by Cameron 1948 and Hallock 1969 respectively) include Babylonian calendar dates, and attest to the assimilation of the Old Persian calendar to the Babylonian. As observed by Stern (2012, 170–1), the fact that the Bisitun inscription dates events to the same day in the Old Persian and Babylonian months across the different versions need not mean that the calendars were fully synchronised, but only that the translators assumed an equivalence.

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garrison at Elephantine (411–408 BCE) and other Aramaic texts; in Lycia in the Aramaic text on the trilingual stele which provides for the establishment of a new cult at the Letoon near Xanthos (337 BCE); in Bactria in the cache of Aramaic documents from Bactria relating to the satrap Akhvamazda (353–324 BCE).[87]

In these cases, the Babylonian month names were replaced with local equivalents: thus Akkadian Nisannu, month I, became Old Persian Hadukannaš in tablets from Persepolis, or Nisan in Jewish and imperial Aramaic texts (the Aramaic month-names are loans from Akkadian).[88] Yet the calendrical link with Babylonia is clear from double dates, where attested – for instance, at Elephantine, where many of the papyri have dates in both the Babylonian (using Aramaic month names) and Egyptian calendars.[89] It is also visible from the pattern of intercalations: the Elephantine papyri and Persepolis tablets consistently display the same intercalations as cuneiform tablets from Babylonia.[90] This would be impossible unless the underlying calendars were the same, or at least synchronised, and the fact that the intercalations remained in step even after the introduction of a new, 19-year intercalation cycle in Babylonia during Xerxes' reign confirms a continued link to Babylonian time-keeping.[91] As Ossendrijver notes, the promulgation of this standardised intercalation cycle also attests to the involvement of the Persian authorities in the calendrical reform: the change would have required the support of the highest echelons of the Persian administration for its wider implementation.[92] Intercalation elsewhere was not always exactly in sync with Babylonia; occasional omissions of intercalary months at Elephantine and Persepolis suggest that intercalations were not always communicated, or were not fully predictable to local administrative

87 Egypt: Porten 1990 (plus Stern 2000 for Elephantine); Bactria: Shaked 2004, 42–5 (for the documents: Naveh and Shaked 2012, 35–6). Letoon trilingual: Dupont-Sommer 1974; Fried 2004, 140–54; only the Aramaic text containing the satrap Pixodarus' response (which is original, not a translation of the Greek or Lycian versions – Lemaire and Lozachmeur 1996, 111, followed by Fried 2004, 141) contains a date, 'Siwan, year 1 of Artaxerxes'. This again underlines the official use of the Babylonian calendar for Achaemenid administration.

88 Persepolis month names: Hallock 1969, 74–5 (Fortification Tablets); Cameron 1948, 41 with Table 4 (Treasury Tablets); Basello 2002, 22–4. Although the Persepolis tablets were mostly written in Elamite, the month names are usually (and always for the Treasury Tablets) Old Persian, reflecting the language of the imperial elite. On Aramaic month-names, see Kaufman 1974, 114–5.

89 Porten 1990; Stern 2000. On the imperial rather than 'Jewish' nature of this calendar see Stern 2000, 159–160.

90 Elephantine: Stern 2000, 167–8; Persepolis: Walker 1997, 23–4; Stern 2012, 171 with nn. 10–11; Stolper 2018. At Persepolis, there is insufficient evidence to be confident that the Old Persian and Elamite month-names were consistently correlated with those from Babylonia by this stage (Stern 2012, 170–1), but the fact that all the intercalations happen in the same years as in Babylonia indicates at least a significant degree of calendrical assimilation.

91 On the 19 year cycle see Stern 2012, 99–114; Ossendrijver 2018, 138–51. Both conclude (independently) that the cycle was probably in use from the 470s BCE, although it was not fully stabilised until either Darius II (Stern) or Artaxerxes II year 24, 379/8 BCE (Ossendrijver).

92 Ossendrijver 2018, 150. It is possible that the reform was driven by imperial purposes; the use of a standard scheme removed the difficulties of communicating *ad hoc* intercalations across the empire (Stern 2000; 2012, 115–23; Ossendrijver 2018, 150–1). An alternative theory is that the aim was to stabilise the year with respect to the vernal equinox (Britton 2007, 122–3; Ossendrijver 2018, 148–9 – but Stern is very sceptical (2012, 115–119)).

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functionaries.[93] Yet, overall, there is a high degree of correlation, which demonstrates the ongoing – and necessarily imperially sustained – link between Babylonia and other regions of the Achaemenid empire.

In the Achaemenid period, and likely facilitated by its imperial usage, the Babylonian calendar was also used by local populations outside Mesopotamia for texts that were not directly connected with imperial administration. In Egypt, double Babylonian-Egyptian dates appear in private contracts and stone inscriptions written in Aramaic dating from 473 to 402 BCE.[94] Babylonian dates that appear in the post-exilic books of the Hebrew Bible indicate its use in Judaea (possibly a survival from the Neo-Babylonian period), while the adoption of some Babylonian month names in Sogdia and Bactria is likely to have occurred in the Achaemenid period.[95]

At the time of the Macedonian conquest, therefore, the Babylonian calendar was a calendar of imperial administration from Asia Minor to Bactria, and was also used by many inhabitants of the eastern Mediterranean and Near East for local documents. When Alexander entered Babylonia in 331 BCE this did not spark a sudden confrontation between the chaotic heterogeneity of Greek local calendars and the astronomically regulated superiority of the Babylonian calendar, as sometimes implied by historians.[96] As soon as Alexander set foot in Asia, he and his forces were already moving through a unified timescape that, while Babylonian in origin, was by now fully imperial and international. At the same time, this timescape was also locally inflected to varying degrees, through the retention of month names from the pre-existing local calendars and, at least in some places, through the use of local methods for determining the start of the month.[97] Given the degree of both imperial and local agency in its application by this point, the extent to which the 'Babylonian' character of this calendar was still felt by users beyond Mesopotamia is questionable. The fact that the inhabitants of Judaea chose to retain or adopt it despite their traumatic historical memory of the Exile, to give just one example, invites caution about assuming too strong a 'Babylonian' cultural coding. Meanwhile in Egypt, the chronological coincidence between the cessation of Babylonian–Egyptian double-dating in private texts and the country's revolt from Achaemenid control rather suggests that if anything this calendar was perceived as Persian and imperial.

The Achaemenid generalisation of the Babylonian calendar facilitated efficient imperial administration across a large territorial expanse. Retaining it was simply a logical pragmatic choice for administrative purposes, and this seems to be what Alexander and his successors in Asia did. This was also, of course, fully in keeping with the Macedo-

93 Persepolis: Stolper 2018, 307–11. Elephantine: Stern 2000, 167–8; Ossendrijver 2018, 145.

94 Porten 1990.

95 Judaea: see above, n. 85. Bactria and Sogdia: the evidence from these regions is later, but the pattern of correspondence between Sogdian and Babylonian months suggests the equation of the calendars happened in the late fourth or even early third centuries BCE: Sims-Williams and de Blois 2005; eidem 2018: 21–7; Stern 2012: 181 with n. 47.

96 Thus e. g. Samuel 1972, 139–40: 'When Alexander the Great marched his army into Babylonia he brought the Macedonians into contact with a calendar better than any used for civil purposes in any Greek city'.

97 On local determination of the start of the month (a practical necessity, given the distances involved), see Stern 2000, 163–6 on Elephantine; Stern 2012, 93–4 with nn. 74–6 for Idumaea and Bactria.

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nians' general approach of retaining or adapting Achaemenid imperial structures and practices where convenient. It was even more logical considering that the Babylonian calendar had also already had a deep imprint on local dating systems, whether through full adoption or influence on the local calendar: allowing or encouraging subjects to continue to use this calendar could therefore also be framed as an act of local patronage.

In this light, the 'Babylonian' version of the Seleucid Era with its epoch date on 1 Nisannu 311 emerges as simply a natural result of the Seleucids' retention, via Alexander and his successors, of the existing chronographic apparatus of the Achaemenid empire – a choice governed by imperial governance rather than cultural patronage. This was not a privileging of Babylonian scholarship or a particular celebration of the New Year of 311 BCE, but the most economical choice for administrative and political reasons. Communities from the Mediterranean coast to the eastern provinces were used to regulating the administrative (and in some cases local) year in the spring with the standardised Babylonian calendar and its New Year on 1 Nisannu; retaining this allowed for smoother bureaucracy and a sense of continuity and stability at the local level. The years of Alexander IV, Seleucus and eventually the Seleucid Era gradually accumulated across the Near East, transformative in their open-ended numerical count but traditional in their structure, turning from one Nisannu to the next as they had done for as long as memory served.

2.2 The Macedonian Era: a secondary development?

Where Alexander and his successors *did* innovate was in their introduction of the Macedonian calendar to the eastern territories of the former Achaemenid empire, and at some point also a separate Seleucid Era with its epoch date in the autumn of 312 BC. Since this was not only innovative but also required coordination from the imperial centre, the possibility immediately arises that the use of this calendar, and the Macedonian Era, might be politically or culturally freighted. The critical question for us here is how important this Era was in the early Seleucid period, and at what point it was introduced. Answering this question is not straightforward, since the lack of contemporary Greek and Macedonian sources from Seleucus' period as satrap and the earliest part of his kingship do not enable us to determine directly whether or not a Macedonian count was in use at this time. A two-pronged approach can, however, allow us to make a strong case that it was. First, by working back from the Seleucid and post-Seleucid evidence we can establish that the Macedonian Era was independent and widespread in Greek and Macedonian communities across the empire by the mid-c3rd at the latest, and likely earlier. Second, a re-examination of the use of the Macedonian calendar by the last Argead kings and the diadochi provides strong grounds for supposing that the Macedonian count was not secondary, but was initiated by Seleucus at the same time as the Babylonian count.

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2.2.1 The Macedonian calendar and Era in the Seleucid period

Individual pieces of evidence from the Seleucid period itself are on the surface frequently ambiguous in terms of the era and calendar they reflect. From the early third century onwards, there are numerous examples of royal letters, coins, and inscriptions from Greek and Macedonian communities which contain dates with a Seleucid Era year number.[98] Yet, since most of these dates either do not specify the month, or do not give any indication of the point at which the New Year falls, it is at least conceivable that the Babylonian Era is being used: for example, a date of 'Year 30' could refer to either 292/1 BCE (SEM) or 291/0 BCE (SEB). Even where dates contain a Macedonian month name, we cannot necessarily assume that we are dealing with the Macedonian calendar; an inscription with a single reference to 'Dios of Year 45' could in theory refer to either the beginning of Year 45 (Macedonian Era), i. e. autumn 277 BCE, or halfway through Year 45 (Babylonian Era), i. e. autumn 276 BCE.

We know that in Ptolemaic Egypt, the Macedonian calendar became fully assimilated to the Egyptian calendar by the mid-second century BCE, even though Macedonian month names and a different new year were still retained.[99] A degree of assimilation seems to have happened in the Seleucid empire too, but its extent is debatable. An important piece of evidence is a group of Babylonian astronomical observations quoted in Claudius Ptolemy's *Almagest,* which equate dates 'according to the Chaldaeans' (*kata Chaldaious*) with Egyptian months.[100] It is evident from Ptolemy's phrasing and from the dates themselves that these are actually Babylonian months, given Macedonian names: when the dates are converted into the Julian calendar and compared with Babylonian dates from contemporary cuneiform documents, they show exact and consistent correlation with Babylonian months.[101] Yet as Sacha Stern has observed, these reports do not prove that the Macedonian calendar had ceased to exist. These documents are essentially translations of Babylonian astronomical reports, and so all they demonstrate is that the translators had a consistent way of rendering Babylonian month names into Macedonian equivalents.[102] At the same time, it is significant that the system of month correlations remained consistent over the decades covered by the reports, and that it is

98 An inscription from Thyateira dated to the 'thirty-seventh year' of kings Antiochus and Seleucus (276/5 BCE) is the first attestation of the Era in Greek documents (*TAM* 5. 2. 881. 2–3). Kosmin 2018, ch. 2, collects a broad range of second-century attestations of the Era on measures, weights, coins and jars. For coins, see below, n. 127.

99 Assimilation of the Macedonian to the Egyptian calendar: Samuel 1962, 129–38; Bennett 2008, 527; Bennett 2018, 47–8 (Samuel dated the change to the end of the c3rd; Bennett shows that the process was completed by the mid-second century).

100 Another piece of evidence sometimes pressed into service here is Malalas' statement that Nicator ordered 'the months of Syria to be named according to the Macedonian [months], because he discovered that giants had once lived in that country' (8.16); even leaving aside the giants, this is still too ambiguous to be helpful, since it could be taken to mean either that the Babylonian calendar was retained with a Macedonian veneer, or that the Macedonian calendar was imposed.

101 Stern 2012, 239–40. On the Babylonian sources of Ptolemy's data, and intermediary processes of conversion, see Jones 2006; Steele 2011.

102 Stern 2012, 241.

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also consistent with dates for the death of Alexander III recorded by earlier Babylonian and later Greek sources.[103] The degree of stability this implies between Macedonian and Babylonian months does suggest that the Macedonian calendar (which was lunisolar and lacked fixed intercalation) had been partly assimilated to the Babylonian calendar with its 19-year intercalation cycle.[104]

This does not mean, however, that the Macedonian calendar no longer existed in a meaningful sense. Since few users of ancient calendars would have been aware of the astronomical intricacies of their operation, even the use of Macedonian month names for a structurally Babylonian calendar would still be a significant choice, coding the calendar as 'Macedonian' for those who encountered its dates.[105] Moreover, pragmatic considerations make it likely that the calendars in practice operated independently at the level of individual months – both in terms of the start of the month and the start of the year. As the start of the month was determined by lunar observation, it is probable that, as in the Achaemenid empire, this was done locally, so that in terms of users' everyday experience, these calendars *were* local and independent.

More importantly, there is a cluster of evidence to suggest that these Macedonian month dates in the Seleucid empire also reflect a different new year and epoch date. The most important contemporary document for the Macedonian calendar and an autumn new year is a royal letter of Antiochus II from 254 BCE dealing with the estates of Laodice, which specifies that three payments should be made in year 60 in the months Audnaios, Xandikos 'and the following three months'.[106] The phrasing of the letter implies that these months belong to the same calendar year, which is only possible if the Macedonian calendar and Era are being used, since Xandikos was equivalent to the last month of the Babylonian calendar, Addaru.[107] Since no conversion or disambiguation is given in the letter, there can have been no ambiguity for either sender or recipient, prompting the further inference that the Macedonian Era was by this point standard for the Seleucid court and Greek and Macedonian communities across the empire, and that the Era dates we find on coins and inscriptions should also be read as Macedonian. One document from early third-century Babylonia further supports this view, insofar as it attests to the early existence of a Macedonian count in Babylonia – crucially, *before* the point when we have argued the Era was created. The receipt, likely from Babylon, which we discussed above for its separate counting of Antiochus' years (DT 189, Hackl 2020, 569), also refers to two year counts. When describing months 7 to 12, the receipt is

103 Alexander died on 29 Ayyāru (11 June) 323 according to an astronomical diary from Babylon (*AD* -322A obv. 8'), while the various Greek sources place it at the end of the Macedonian month Daisios (although they disagree on the exact date; see Depuydt 1997 for discussion).

104 Stern 2012, 238–41. The date of this synchronisation is impossible to pin down. A number of scholars have suggested Alexander, e. g. Bickerman 1980, 38; Samuel 1972, 141; Assar 2003, 174. Alternatively, this may be what Malalas is referring to in his enigmatic report about Seleucus and the months of Syria (above, n. 100). By the Parthian period the synchronisation had shifted by a month so that Dios was equated with Araḫsamnu rather than Tašrītu (Assar 2003, 178–80; Stern 2012, 249–50).

105 Stern 2012, 241 notes the political importance of keeping Macedonian month names.

106 Welles, *RC* 18, ll. 21–3.

107 Bickerman 1980, 71; Hannah 2005, 93.

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dated to 'year 16 of [Seleucus the king] which is also year 17 of [Seleucus and] year 2 of Antiochus' (DT 189, 5–6).[108] . Even if the two counts are not explicitly labelled, the conclusion that the second year count uses the Macedonian calendar and an autumn New Year seems inescapable, particularly since the document explicitly notes that the second half of the Babylonian year (autumn to spring, the precise period where the two eras differed) is 'year 17'.[109] While only a single document, it underlines that for this scribe in the early 290s BCE, the co-existence of two separate counts was understood.

The hypothesis that these texts provide rare glimpses of the Seleucid norm is also supported by a significant amount of later evidence. In the Roman period, many attested calendars from Greek and Macedonian communities in the Near East use Macedonian months and begin the year in the autumn.[110] By late antiquity, Syrian and Jewish calendars also use an autumn new year and Seleucid Era epoch of autumn 312 BCE, even in Babylonia.[111] The most logical explanation for all this is that it represents a survival from the Seleucid period. Further support comes from the kingdom of the Seleucids' successors in the East: Greek documents from Parthian Babylonia contain double dates using the Arsacid Era and Seleucid Era which can only be rendered consistent by assuming that the former began in the spring and the latter in the autumn.[112] These documents are particularly significant as they imply that the Macedonian Era was used by Greek/Macedonian communities even in Babylonia itself. A further piece of indirect evidence is furnished by 1 Maccabees, where certain dates are only compatible with external evidence if we assume that some, if not all, dates in the text are based on the Macedonian Era with an autumn 312 epoch.[113] This assumption does not resolve all the chronological inconsistencies in 1 Maccabees, and Stern rightly cautions that on its own this is insufficient to prove the existence of an independent Era.[114] Taken with the other sources, however, it adds further corroboration.

On a full consideration of the evidence, then, it is likely that the Macedonian calendar in the Seleucid empire was more independent than the surviving material often permits us to see, and that the autumn new year and 312 epoch were the norm in Greek and Macedonian contexts. The crucial question, then, is at what stage and how it came into existence. Was it merely a later offshoot of a dominant Babylonian count, as Kosmin suggests? As we have seen, there is no direct evidence from the early period of Seleucus I's reign for his use of the Macedonian calendar, even if many of the earlier attested dates are compatible with a Macedonian count and autumn new year. There is, however, a

108 Strikingly, Antiochus' kingship is only mentioned in the Macedonian count; this warrants further investigation. Rost 1897, p. 4–5, n. 2 discusses the use of *šá ši-i-tu* 'which is also'.

109 The fact that Berossus also used Macedonian month names in his work (*BNJ* 680 Berossus F2, F4b) lends further credence to the Babylonian elite's familiarity with the two calendars.

110 Samuel 1972, 174–86; Stern 2012, 236 n. 8 (although in the case of communities with a 23 September date, this likely reflects Augustus's birthday).

111 Stern 2012, 237 with n. 12.

112 Samuel 1972, 142–3; Assar 2003, 176–7.

113 For a combination of SEB and SEM: Stern 2012, 235–6. For an argument that all dates are based on the Macedonian Era: Bringmann 1983, 15–29.

114 Stern 2012, 236.

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strong indirect case to be made that the Macedonian Era – or more strictly speaking, for Seleucus I, a Macedonian count with a new year in the autumn – came into existence at the same time as the Babylonian one. The most likely possibility is that it was simply inherited from the Argeads.

2.2.2 *The Macedonian count and Era: an Argead inheritance*

The first point to make here is simple: based on pre-Hellenistic practice and what is known of the other diadochi, it is extremely unlikely that Seleucus was *not* using the Macedonian calendar, at least for official purposes, during his time as satrap, and later king. First of all, during Alexander III's reign, the Macedonian calendar was used both at court and in the empire. The court usage can be seen from the *Ephemerides* quoted by later Alexander historians, which use Macedonian month dates; despite ongoing uncertainty about the authorship and publication of the different items attributed to this source, it attests at a minimum to the use of the Macedonian calendar by those who were part of Alexander's court.[115] The degree to which the Macedonian calendar was introduced into Alexander's subject territories is less clear due to the lack of contemporary documents, although a number of historians have assumed its use.[116] This would be in keeping with Macedonian imperial practice elsewhere; both before and after Alexander there are examples of the Macedonian calendar being imposed on Greek cities after conquest – at Amphipolis after it was taken by Philip in 357, and at Cassandreia in 276 after Gonatas revoked its freedom.[117]

After Alexander's death, we are hampered by a lack of sources for some of the Successors' calendrical practices in Greek and Macedonian contexts, but all indications are that the Macedonian calendar was used by Philip Arrhidaeus and then the diadochi as a royal/imperial calendar, alongside their engagement with Achaemenid and local dating systems. For Philip Arrhidaeus, the use of the calendar outside Macedon proper is attested in a decree from Carian Koaranza, which gives the date in the Macedonian cal-

115 For dates in the *Ephemerides*, see Plut. *Alex.* 76 (death of Alexander in Daisios; Arrian's summary of the same events does not give the month name); Aelian *VH* 3.23 (Alexander's drinking bout in Dios, attributed to 'Eumenes').

116 E. g. Samuel 1972, 141 (Babylonia – but with assimilation of Macedonian to Babylonian months); Bickerman 1980, 38 (Egypt). In a suggestive but difficult passage from *Indica* 21.1, Arrian writes that Nearchus began his expedition in Boedromion 'as Athenians reckon', and 'as Macedonians and Asians reckoned [on day x of the month Hyperberetaeus]'. If, as seems likely from the wording, this refers to the Macedonian calendar and goes back to Nearchus' account, it implies that some inhabitants of Asia (perhaps only Macedonians and Greeks) were using it already under Alexander, although it cannot be excluded that the phrase reflects the introduction of the Macedonian calendar to Asia between Alexander's death and Nearchus' own. On the difficulties of the dates in Arrian see Bennett 2011, 147–8.

117 Hatzopoulos 1996 I, 157–65, 202–4 (Cassandreia), 182 (Amphipolis); Bennett 2018, 51 (both). 'Free' cities founded by Macedonian kings, including Cassandreia before its conquest by Antigonus, all used calendars whose names were named after the Olympian gods – as Bennett (ibid) notes, it is unclear how autonomous these calendars were, but the imposition of the Macedonian calendar after conquest should definitely be read as an imperial act.

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endar (Philip year 6, Dios), alongside the names of the satrap and local magistrates.[118] In Egypt, the few surviving Greek papyri from Ptolemy Soter's reign demonstrate that the Macedonian calendar was in use, in this early period, with no influence from or synchronisation with the Egyptian calendar.[119] If an inscription from Kaunos dated to the month Apellaios in year 15 of 'Antigonus' (as well as to the eponymous local priest) refers to Monophthalmus, then there is unambiguous evidence for the Macedonian calendar being applied there under the first Antigonids; even if, as Kuzmin and others suggest, this inscription is to be dated to Gonatas, then it is still more likely to represent continuity than innovation.[120] Taking into account this pre-Hellenistic and early Hellenistic background, the most logical interpretation is that the use of the Macedonian calendar by the later Seleucids represents continuity from Alexander's time and aligns with the practice of the other diadochi. To posit otherwise requires us to imagine that Seleucus I abandoned an established Macedonian calendar, used the Babylonian calendar as a tool for control in his nascent empire, and subsequently reintroduced the former – with all the attendant disruption this would cause for administration, and for Macedonian diaspora communities in the empire.

There is one final issue that bears on the question of continuity or innovation: the timing of the new year. Although all the Hellenistic dynasties used the Macedonian calendar and Macedonian regnal counts, they did not all use the same year. In the early Ptolemaic system, the Macedonian year was tied to the king's accession date (or, for Soter, the date of his assumption of control) and hence the start point changed between rulers – Philadelphus' year began in Dystros, and Soter's apparently in late Daisios (the anniversary of Alexander's death). In contrast, the SEM new year seems to have been fixed in the autumn by at least the 290s, based on the dual counts attested in the Babylonian documents published by Hackl. The situation for the Antigonids is still not fully clear: recently, epigraphic evidence from Thessaly has suggested that the later kings had a Dios-based year, but it is not certain when they adopted it.[121] Therefore, it remains unclear which of these systems reflects Argead practice; the Macedonian calendar is scantily attested before the Hellenistic period, and so reconstructions of its structure necessarily depend on a degree of retrojection from its Hellenistic applications.[122] This has led to two divergent interpretations of the structure of the Argead year: those who

118 *I.Stratonikeia* 503 (Lagina).

119 Bennett 2018, 53–7 (noting, p.57, that despite the small corpus of Greek documents from this period, the fact that none shows a double date is likely significant: 'Soter's Macedonian calendar was … of the Macedonians, it was for the Macedonians, and it was used by the Macedonians'). Although it is sometimes assumed that the Macedonian calendar was introduced to Egypt by the Ptolemies (e. g. Stern 2012, 154), the paucity of Greek papyri from Alexander's reign means we cannot rule out an earlier start date.

120 *I.Kaunos* 4. Marek 2006, 133–6 cautiously seems to prefer Antigonus Monophthalmus; an argument made more strongly by Bennett 2013 n. 14; Kuzmin 2015 argues for Antigonus Gonatas.

121 As Bennett 2013 No. 18 underlines, a newly published series of letters by Antigonus Doson (discussed in *BE* 2011, No. 399 and *SEG* 60, 586) not only offer clues to the regnal years of Antigonus Doson, but also strongly suggest that the Antigonid new year started on 1 Dios. Bennett rightly points out (ad loc), however, that this does not necessarily tell us anything about the Argead year.

122 Samuel 1972, 139.

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have worked back from the anniversarial early Ptolemaic system have retrojected this for Macedon as well, while others, giving more weight to the Seleucid and new Antigonid evidence, have favoured a Macedonian year that always began in the autumn (or more specifically on 1 Dios).[123]

On either system, a case can be made that Seleucus followed Argead precedent. If the Argead Macedonian year began on 1 Dios, then the case is straightforward: Seleucus' practice would represent the natural continuation of the ancestral system used by Alexander, inherited through Philip Arrhidaeus and Alexander IV / Antigonus. If, on the other hand, the original system was that the year began at the new ruler's accession or assumption of control, it also leads to a Dios new year for Seleucus. Philip Arrhidaeus died in Dios 317, 'after a reign of six years and four months' (Diod. Sic. 19. 11. 5). We have already seen above that Antigonus antedated his count of control to Philip's death; due to the distribution of surviving documents this is only visible in the Babylonian calendar, where the year changed in Nisannu, but following an Argead pattern where the new year began at the accession of the new ruler, Antigonus's *Macedonian* calendar years (whether or not they formally acknowledged Alexander IV as king) would have begun in Dios.[124] They would then have proceeded in parallel but slightly out of step with his Babylonian years (which began, as traditional, on 1 Nisannu in spring). When Seleucus proclaimed himself general of Asia in 312/11, the new year date in the Macedonian calendar would remain the same, because the reigning king was Alexander IV, and the relevant preceding royal death was still that of Philip Arrhidaeus in autumn 317. Regardless of which system we reconstruct as inherited, it yields an autumn new year date for the Macedonian calendar in 312/11.

Thus, when in that year Seleucus declared himself 'general of Asia', and returned to Babylonia, he inherited two calendars with different new year dates – one in the spring, and one in the autumn. Originally, neither 1 Dios nor 1 Nisannu were conceived as *epoch* dates. They were simply the current starting points of the year in each calendrical system. Here, it is critical to recall once more the distribution of the surviving source material, and the dominance of the cuneiform record for the early Seleucid period, which means that by default the Babylonian calendar is the one that becomes visible to us at an early stage – yet as we have seen, the cuneiform material also attests to the presence of a Macedonian year count by 298/7 BCE. If Greek sources survived from early Seleucid Babylonia, we contend, they would show that the Macedonian calendar, and then Era, were in existence alongside the Babylonian versions from the very beginning. Rather than introducing a Macedonian count secondarily, we submit that at some point between October 312 and spring 311, Seleucus made one universal change to reflect his defeat of Antigonus and his new status vis-à-vis the other diadochi: the year was now year 7 of Alexander IV and Seleucus, everywhere. To us the declaration from May 311 seems the likeliest candidate for this universal change, although other points cannot be

123 Bennett 2011, 131–62 (with Appendix B) surveys the debate and attested sources up to that date; see in addition Bennett 2013, No. 18.

124 A possibility already suggested by Grzybek 1993, 526.

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ruled out, and it is also possible that an earlier declaration was simply repeated in Babylonia at this point. The existing structure of the calendars did the rest, with the count of the doomed Alexander's regnal years, and what would become the count of Seleucid imperial control, ticking upwards one after another as the years turned.

The fact that the Macedonian count represented continuity rather than innovation does not mean that its retention was insignificant. Calendrical choices are never neutral acts; moreover, maintaining a Macedonian year for court purposes and probably *polis*/colony administration across the empire was the marked choice that required modification and innovation, and it took effort to synchronise the Macedonian and Babylonian calendars sufficiently for them to work together. The fact that the Seleucids did this suggests that using the Macedonian calendar, at least in certain contexts, *was* an important part of their imperial style. It may have been more suitable for their developing international royal image, and in keeping with their competitors for *ta hola*. Nor should we forget that at this point the Seleucids had probably not given up hope of regaining Macedon; the maintenance of a Macedonian royal calendar was also an important link/claim to the homeland.[125] Meanwhile, allowing subject populations to continue using the 'Babylonian' calendar was more an issue of imperial pragmatism.

3. Conclusion: The Era and early Seleucid imperialism

All this brings us back, finally, to the question with which we began: the Seleucid Era's function as part of the broader toolkit of Seleucid imperialism. As we noted at the start of this article, the early Hellenistic period was an age of diadochic experimentation. Over twenty years, we have argued, the Seleucid Era emerged – like many elements of Hellenistic kingship – from the adoption and adaptation of pre-existing systems and as part of an organic process of empire building. This reconstruction is at odds with Kosmin's recent model of the Seleucid Era, and of the empire more broadly. He argues that the Era provides a key piece of evidence that, rather than a loosely coordinated structure, the imperial centre was from the outset a far more regulated system that flattened local diversity by a 'pervasive time regime'.[126] This case may be stronger for the later third and second centuries, particularly from the reign of Antiochus III onwards where the frequency of Era dates even on everyday objects becomes very striking and we also find them in some royal letters.[127] By this point the Era's message – despite its double form – may well have been one of imperial reach and the erosion of local diversity, a model that may explain some of the more aggressive movements in the reigns of Seleucus IV and

125 One that was not given up; cf. Kosmin 2014b, 79–87.

126 Kosmin 2018, 16.

127 For royal letters, e. g. I.*Sardes Suppl. II* 1 (*SEG* 39, 1283). Kosmin 2018, 64–66 collects other objects (see above, n. 98. The dating of coins was an adaptation from Ptolemaic practice and began under Antiochus III (Hoover 2008, 275); arguably this adoption facilitated the spread of the Era in the second century. A tetradrachm under Antiochus I dated to 'year 15' (*SC* Ad104) has often been discussed as a first dated issue, but Hoover 2020, 21 now reads the legend as 'year 50'.

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Antiochus IV.[128] We have seen, however, that there are difficulties with this reconstruction of the Era's origins, and, consequently, with the proposed radicalness and aggression of early Seleucid imperialism.

The most plausible reconstruction is that what later became the Era was at the beginning simply a count of Seleucus' years of control – a count that was quite typical in a context where multiple successors of Alexander were experimenting with ways of establishing authority and utilising existing chronographic systems to express it. The decoupling of the count from the individual – the move from charting a single ruler's control to a count of overall Seleucid control – *was* a significant innovation, but this decisive step likely took place only in 295/4 with its ultimate confirmation in 281, as Seleucus and Antiochus sought to stabilise the succession and establish a sense of dynastic legitimacy and continuity. Viewed in the broader political context of these years the Eras, like the institution of co-regency with which they were tied, seem to be driven more by a need to emphasise continuity and stability at the fledgling empire's point of greatest potential vulnerability – the first succession – than by a desire to homogenise the empire and erase local difference. It is also worth noting that in the early period the Era is more visible in texts produced by subject communities than in public communications *from* the centre. For example, early Seleucid royal letters rarely use Era dates,[129] in keeping with the light-touch imperialism and civically inflected image the kings generally sought to cultivate in this medium. If the aim from the beginning was to promulgate the Era as a tool of imperial control and homogeneity, it is surprising that it is conspicuously absent from these highly public documents and hence from many of the speech-acts that constituted empire. This lack of interest in homogenisation, and toleration or even encouragement of local heterogeneity, is also suggested by the fact that the Seleucid Era was dual from the start: two Eras that emerged as counts when Seleucus originally asserted his control over Asia, morphed into two Eras and were never abandoned.

This new history of the Seleucid Eras, then, offers us new insights not only into the origin of Seleucid imperial time, but also into Seleucus I's place within the world of the diadochi and the early Seleucids' approach to empire. The Eras were a product of imperial ingenuity, but were grounded in established ways of marking time: they were locally comprehensible, new and yet familiar, and offered a strong assertion of dynastic continuity with, in the early period, a light imperial footprint. Indeed, the Eras' gradual development into their 'high imperial' form also highlights the dynamic nature of the Seleucid imperial enterprise. Our limited evidence naturally tempts the historian to ap-

128 The poliadisations of Jerusalem and Babylon have recently been interpreted as indicators of a new approach by the Seleucids to their empire. See e. g. Clancier 2017 (building on Clancier and Monerie 2015); Honigman 2014; Feyel and Graslin-Thomé 2014 with Chrubasik 2018, 563–4.

129 No dates appear in the letter from Seleucus to the city of Miletus (*I.Didyma* 424) or in the letters by Antiochus I concerning gifts of crown land (Welles, *RC* 10–12). Of course, many documents have not survived and it is conceivable that these early letters also contained dates which were just not inscribed by the receiving community. From the reign of Antiochus I onwards dates become more prominent in the surviving evidence, proliferating under Antiochus III, and it is also from the latter's reign onward that kings frequently ordered the publication of letters (Bencivenni 2014, esp. 151).

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proach Seleucid imperialism synchronically. The history of the Seleucid Eras adds to the mounting evidence that this is misguided. From the imperial aspirations of its rulers to the everyday experience of its subjects, the Seleucid empire of the second century may yet turn out to be very different from that of the third.

4. Bibliography

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AD: Sachs and Hunger (1988, 1989, 1996);
BCHP: Van der Spek, Pirngruber and Finkel (forthcoming);
DT*:* Tablets in the Daily Telegraph Collection of the British Museum.

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