

Antiochus the Great: Deserving or Not?

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In history, there were very few people that had received the title of Great during their lifetimes such as Cyrus of the Persian Empire and later, Alexander of Macedonia. Their accomplishments were such amazing feats that people were unable to believe that it had been done. Cyrus had founded the first Persian Empire and Alexander had created the largest empire there was when he was only 30 years of age. Being granted or called the title of Great is not as simple as just going into battle and winning a war. The feats must be something that impossible or unbelievable that others would not be able to believe it until they had seen it themselves. Soon after Alexander, one person that was granted the title “Great” was Antiochus the Great, or Antiochus the III. Similar to Alexander, who everyone tried to copy and use to legitimize their

rule over each of their territories, Antiochus came to power at a young age. However, unlike Alexander, Antiochus was not bought up as a ruler. He was put into the position when unfortunate events happened to his family and he had to take up the role. From there, through his battles, court life, and other various events that he prevailed through, he would then gain the title of Great. Did Antiochus truly deserve his title of “Great” or was he simply lucky? Through his early life, his actions in battle and his court life, we can compare his actions with those before and after him to see if he did deserve the title that was given to him.

There is not much known about Antiochus’ early life. Since he was the second son and the king had already decided that his older brother was to be next in line, as king Antiochus was put into a position that he was not prepared for. He did not have the training that the next in line king would receive. Not only that, when he came

into power, the empire that he was ruling was in a state of fracture. The problems he dealt with included others trying to take over the kingdom for themselves and outside kingdoms trying to take land away. As Taylor outlines, “Indeed, as a young king he had inherited not simply control of territory or the loyalty of the army, but the heavy burdens of the past: old dynasties feuds, unfulfilled territorial ambitions and unavenged affronts.”¹ At a young age, he had to take over a kingdom that was breaking apart and he had to use what he could and the people that were under him to rebuild the fractured empire. According to Taylor, “Seleucus III's campaign quickly floundered, and he was murdered by his army, perishing without a son. Thus, the teenaged Antiochus assumed the diadem and became the basileus king) of a very troubled realm in 223 BC.”² Antiochus, the position came as a surprise to him, and he had to take

the throne simply because there were no other heirs. Antiochus was simply the brother of the current king and he had no idea that the king would die, and he would come into power as it was mentioned “Antiochus had none of this grooming or experience. He was the little brother of the king, a symbolic royal lieutenant rather than a trusted advisor, and the untimely death of Seleucus III thrust him unprepared into his new position.”³ Antiochus faced an uphill battle in trying to fix a broken kingdom and learn everything he could so he could to become someone fit to rule over the people.

Though Antiochus became king without any training and knowledge about how to rule, he did have the leisure to learn everything from the beginning. From then on, he went into war to rebuild and expand the broken empire that he was handed over. One of the more well-known battles that he

¹ Michael Taylor, *Antiochus the Great* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2013), 2.

² Taylor, *Antiochus*, 10.

³ Taylor, *Antiochus*, 26.

fought was the Battle of Raphia. This battle was fought in order to determine who was the rightful ruler of Coele, Syria. In the battle, he had to go against Ptolemy IV and his army of 75,000 troops. Before he could make it to the final battlefield, Antiochus had to bypass a mountain to reach his destination. It was guarded by a trusted Ptolemaic guard, but as it was written “Antiochus collected his royal army of 58,000 men and proceeded to hook around the Lebanon mountains and attack the Phoenician coast, still defended by the trustworthy Ptolemaic general Nicolaus the Aetolian... Antiochus prepared a three-prong assault of this pass... The plan worked perfectly. Antiochus' men killed 2000 of the defenders and captured 2000 more.”⁴ Though Antiochus had little to no training since he did not have the time to focus on learning, he had still managed to come up

with a plan and formation that was able to outmaneuver a seasoned and trusted general. Antiochus demonstrated that he was able to pull his own weight in the position. This was similar to what Seleucus had done in previous battles when “Seleucus, who was probably watching the developments from an observation post with the reserve forces, took eight elephants and some of the hypaspists, the infantry royal Guard, and outflanked the enemy (perhaps Demetrius' victorious flank) by way of a narrow unobserved pass.”⁵ Both had to go through narrow passes to flank the opposing army and win the battle.

By using the same tactic, Antiochus showed he was able to look back to what his predecessor had done and adapt it to his current situation. He was not over-reliant on others and could think for himself to make the decision which would benefit him and

⁴ Taylor, *Antiochus*, 58

⁵ Bezalel Bar-Kochva, *The Seleucid Army: Organization and Tactic in the Great Campaigns* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976) 116.

his army. Though he had begun the battle winning, one single mistake had costed him the war. He had to retreat due to the loss of his men and he wanted to hold a truce to be able to bury his soldiers. During the battle “... his charging horsemen shattered the cavalry on the Ptolemaic left. The young king, however, now made a critical tactical error.”⁶ Maybe in a moment of excitement or adrenaline, Antiochus, as a young leader, saw that the opposing army was being pushed back and commanded his troops to continue to charge and chase after the escaping army. However, this mistake allowed Ptolemy to break through Antiochus’ army and then proceed to march to his camp. Had Antiochus calmed down and looked at the bigger picture, which was the entirety of the battlefield, he might had been able to rally his troops to defend weakened points. The battle might have

gone in an entirely different direction with Antiochus as the winner of the war.

There could have been many reasons why Antiochus had done what he done at the Battle of Raphia; it might have been his inexperience and the thought and glory of chasing his enemy got to him or he might have thought that his army would be fine without him. One other reason, somebody had suggested, was that “he was trapped in the command philosophy of Alexander the Great... Alexander sought action always at the front line, thus validating his claim to lead the warrior aristocracy of Macedonia.”⁷ Because of Alexander’s reputation of being on the front line in almost all the battles and leading the charge himself, he was able to capture the heart of his soldiers and continuously win his battles. Antiochus might have tried to recreate this action with his own charge and his own leadership, but

⁶ Taylor, *Antiochus*, 61.

⁷ Taylor, *Antiochus*, 62.

it had backfired and made him lose the battle.

Antiochus, in his later years, recounted that if he had focused on the battle and not in the charge, he might have turned everything around and this was one of his regrets. Though he might have lost this battle due his mistake, it did not mean that he would repeat the same mistake in future battles. If he reflected on his mistake, he could learn from his mistake and correct it. One of his battles was against Achaesus. Though Achaesus had fewer troops than Antiochus, he had decided on a defensive battle against him and managed to stall Antiochus' army for 2 years. Annoyed that his fight had been dragged on for too long, one of Antiochus' soldiers told him of a plan that would be able to topple the defense. It was to let some of his troops scale the walls of the castle and so they could open the gates from the inside to let Antiochus' army

enter. Thinking that the plan would work, he allowed the plan to commence and told his soldiers about it. On the day of the plan, seeing that the plan was commencing smoothly, his soldiers got excited and as reported by Polybius, a Greek historian, "The King feared that these undisciplined cheers might betray the assault force as it scrambled up the ladders, and to divert the defenders' attention, he launched an impromptu diversionary assault at one of the other gates into town."⁸ With his quick thinking, the enemy was not able to intercept his troops that were scaling the wall, allowing them to open the gate. This battle demonstrated his quick thinking and his ability to listen to his soldiers and not just take command of the entire battle without listening to those that might have more experience than him.

This is almost the same with Seleucus when he fought against Demetrius. Having to fight

⁸ Taylor, *Antiochus*, 67.

under a disadvantage, he was still able to win by outflanking his enemy and overcoming the disadvantage. The battle “provides of Seleucus' strategic and tactical courage: his readiness to risk confrontation on an unfavorable battlefield that prevented his using his superiority in manpower and equipment in order to forestall disastrous political results.”⁹ Growing as a leader, Antiochus was able to incorporate the ideas of his soldiers and adapt to unexpected situation on a battlefield where one would not know where death might come from. Compared to when he had first started as a young king, he was able to overcome his problems and build up his forces to expand his empire.

Antiochus proved himself as a capable leader and general on the battlefield. Though he might have been inexperienced when he was younger, he learned from those

mistakes and corrected, making him even more formidable on the battlefield.

However, competence on the battlefield was not enough to rebuild his fractured empire.

The king also had to be involved in the workings of the court so he could oversee the events of the empire and come up with a solution in times of trouble. The Seleucid court was interesting in the fact that, as written, “For the Seleucids in particular, the obvious strategy was to pursue Alexander's policies... Seleucus (I) personally adhered to Alexanders’ concept of integration by remaining loyal to his marriage to Apama, a native Iranian...”¹⁰ Though the court was ruled by the Seleucids, it did not mean that everyone there was of the same ethnicity.

Because they had followed Alexander’s policy, it meant there was a mix of cultures in the court. This not only made it much more diverse, but with a variety of culture

⁹ Bezalel Bar-Kochva, *The Seleucid Army: Organization and Tactics in the Great Campaigns*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 116.

¹⁰ Boris Dreyer, “How to Become a “Relative” of the King: Careers and Hierarchy at the Court of Antiochus III,” *The American Journal of Philology* 132, no.1 (2011): 46.

together they could come up with ideas and solutions that if the court were only with one ethnicity would not have been able to think of. Antiochus had kept this policy since Seleucus I's reign. Though there was a mixture of ethnicities in the court of Antiochus, it did not mean that people were able to be in his court just because of their birth. As many people had betrayed the previous rulers and killed them, Antiochus had made it that "The criteria for access to the king and for a career at the court were invariably loyalty and skill rather than heritage and birth."¹¹ Rather than those that had nothing to their name besides their birth position, Antiochus would have rather taken those who had the skill to run the court and loyalty to him than those who had their own agenda. This can be seen as a meritocracy where one must have the skill to be able to advance into the court of Antiochus. Those that will do well will benefit Antiochus and

in turn, it will help the empire as well. Based on this type of system of government and Antiochus conquest of the land, "Antiochus III needed proven personal and reliable administrative structures to attain his ambitious aims and to organize the newly conquered territories under his rule. This made him a magnet for all those who were capable and eager to exert influence beyond their own cities."¹² Those who heard about his exploits and government would flock towards his empire and those talented enough would be able to enter the court regardless of their ethnicity because Antiochus' court is based on loyalty and skill. With his court filled with talented people and Antiochus himself overseeing them, it had helped the declining empire prop itself up and rebuild. Antiochus had started out as a someone who was placed onto the seat of King because there were no other heirs, and he was not prepared for it at

¹¹ Dreyer, "Relative," 47.

¹² Dreyer, "Relative," 51.

all. But through all that seemed impossible for a young man that had no education on how to rule, he had managed to do what others had thought was impossible.

Antiochus had done much more than just oversee the court, he was also active in that he was promoting the production of literature that would benefit him and bolster his rule. He acted as patrons who produced works that detailed the deeds of the previous rulers and conquerors. As it was mentioned “the writers at the court of Antiochus III focused on producing historical works on the early rulers of the dynasty, describing the deeds and conquests of previous Seleucid kings and thus providing justification for Antiochus’s conquests.”¹³ Antiochus knew that if he was to be compared with what the previous kings had done, it would give him more power and legitimacy in his rule since he was not

supposed to be king in the first place. He was not just glorifying his own achievements but bringing up the past to make his achievements parallel to them. This would link him back to the previous rulers and conquerors and would also give him a reason for what he has achieved. Another court writer in the service of Antiochus was Simonides. Though he had not written about Antiochus III but a previous Antiochus. The work is a commemoration about the Seleucid Empire and its claim to the lands that it now owns and all those that had come before him and what they had done to build the empire to what it is and how he has added on to their achievements. As Visscher argues, “For Antiochus III, Simonides’ poem provided a welcome opportunity to remind the world that the Seleucid kings were the first to defeat the Galatian hordes and that the

¹³ Marijn S. Visscher, *Beyond Alexandria: Literature and Empire in the Seleucid World*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 172.

Attalids were merely aping his ancestors.”¹⁴
This is yet another piece that was not to glorify Antiochus but bring to bring up the justifications of Antiochus’ rule of the land. His ancestors had won and gained the land through battle and now Antiochus was doing the same, conquering lands through war.

Though Antiochus was not raised as a king, he became fit for the position after multiple battles for the expansion of the empire. What had started as a fractured and weakened empire then grew into the biggest and strongest empire under the rule of Antiochus. Though there were previous rulers that had grew the empire, they had not done as much as what Antiochus had done. Previous rulers had grown the empire, but it was either to due to their negligence or lack of power, they were not able to exercise their control over the land that they have conquered. Some even had their land stolen

by others such as Ptolemy, but Antiochus was able to reclaim it back. As it was mentioned, “According to the empire’s official ideology, the history of this southwestern border was simple: Seleucid sovereignty extended to the Sinai peninsula, but this remained unexercised until Antiochus III undid Ptolemy I’s theft of Coele Syria and Phoenicia at the battle of Panium in 200.¹⁵” Antiochus had taken back the land that was lost to Ptolemy and had kept it. Though Antiochus had done everything he had done to rebuild the empire, it would once again fall apart after his death. With the intervention of the Roman empire, the slowly began to fall apart. As Dreyer suggested, “The peace of Apamea in 188 brought grave losses. Antiochus III himself was killed the following year... His successor Seleucus Nicator was in turn humiliated by them and

¹⁴ Visscher, *Beyond Alexandria*, 166.

¹⁵ Paul J. Kosmin, *The Land of the Elephant Kings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 122.

was eventually murdered...”¹⁶ Similar but different to Antiochus, Seleucus Nicator had to take the throne when the previous ruler had died, but he had the training and education to be the king. Yet, even with that, he had failed to maintain the empire and was even killed. Continuing through, “Under Antiochus IV... weakened the king's authority, as well as bringing the loss of further territory.”¹⁷ The successor to Antiochus was not able to continue the legacy that was left by Antiochus. The power of the king was weakened, and they were humiliated by the Romans. The vast empire that was won under Antiochus was once again split apart and taken away by others. Compared to the empire that was under Antiochus III's rule, the succeeding heirs' rule brought the empire into decline.

Antiochus had a rough start when he first came to power. He inherited a fractured empire that had a lot of debts that were

unpaid. As a young king who had no training and education in how to rule, he had to get through everything with people that were loyal to him. Despite all the problems he had faced, he was able to rebuild the empire. As a leader, he took part in the first charge against the enemy, much like what Alexander had done and fought against others head on. Not only that, but he had also built his court based on loyalty and skill, not based on birth. He would rather have those that would be loyal to him than those that only got the position due to their birth and hold agendas of their own. He had done all that he could in his time as king until his untimely death. Even with such great achievements and great empire, it had all gone downhill after his death. His successors had been humiliated and the empire weaken, and they could not live up to what Antiochus III had done in his life. If one were to ask if what Antiochus had done

¹⁶ Dreyer, “Relative,” 49.

¹⁷ Dreyer, “Relative,” 49.

were deserving of his title of being called Great, there is no doubt that he was not just someone that got through everything by luck. He had done much more than others during his reign and had brought about a golden age for the Seleucid Empire.

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