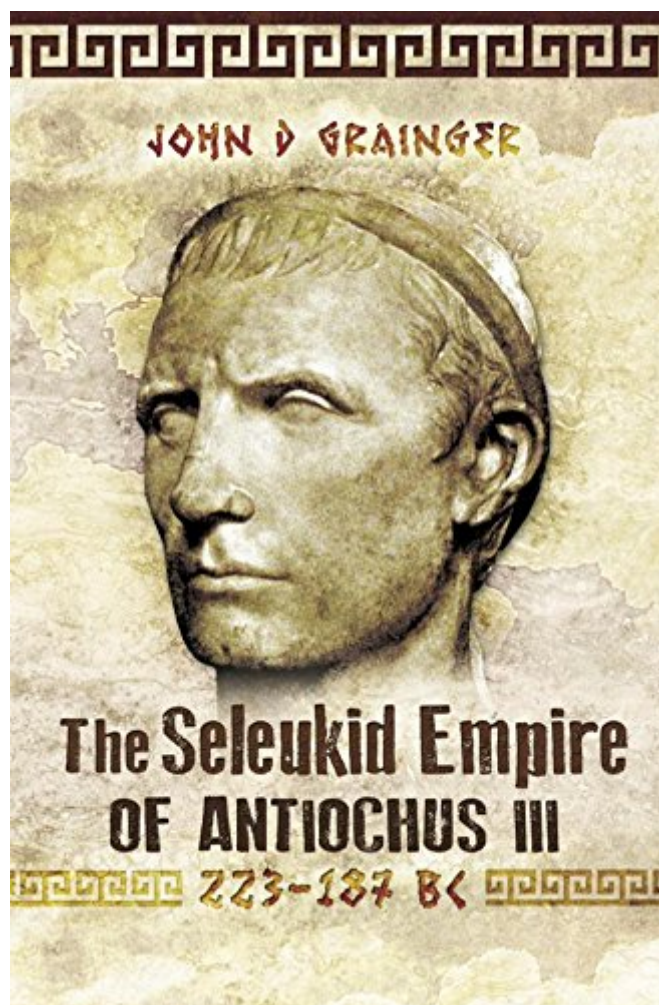


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The Seleukid Empire Of Antiochus III: 223-187 BC



Synopsis

The second volume in John Grainger's history of the Seleukid Empire is devoted to the reign of Antiochus III. Too often remembered only as the man who lost to the Romans at Magnesia, Antiochus is here revealed as one of the most powerful and capable rulers of the age. Having emerged from civil war in 223 as the sole survivor of the Seleukid dynasty, he shouldered the burdens of a weakened and divided realm. Though defeated by Egypt in the Fourth Syrian War, he gradually restored full control over the empire. His great Eastern campaign took Macedonian arms back to India for the first time since Alexander's day and, returning west, he went on to conquer Thrace and finally wrest Syria from Ptolemaic control. Then came intervention in Greece and the clash with Rome leading to the defeat at Magnesia and the restrictive Peace of Apamea. Despite this, Antiochus remained ambitious, campaigning in the East again; when he died in 187 BC the empire was still one of the most powerful states in the world.

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Customer Reviews

Once again John D. Grainger has written an exceptional book highlighting one of the most

overlooked empires in history and one of its greatest rulers who is widely misunderstood today thanks to ancient Roman propaganda and the all-too-eager willingness of modern day historians and readers to take the works of ancient writers at face value. My only disappointments with this piece of work is that Mr. Grainger didn't go into more detail regarding the inner workings of the Seleukid Empire during this time period. Topics such as how he reinvigorated the empire's economy after the Third Syrian War and Molon's rebellion, how the satrapies were reorganized following these conflicts or improved upon and how Antiochus III improved and reformed the Seleukid army with the introduction of the kataphracts and horse archers (the latter of which in admittedly limited quantity). Despite those critiques, this is an excellent book that will go a long way to enlightening people about the Seleukid Empire and to slowly restore some of Antiochus the Great's unjustly tarnished legacy.

Good read.

This is the second volume in John Grainger's history of the Seleucid Empire and it is entirely centred on the (long) reign of Antiochus III, perhaps the best documented Seleucid reign. For once, the "marketing blurb" of the cover page (and which figures on its sites) reflects some of the book's contents rather well. Antiochus is indeed "too often remembered only as the man who lost to the Romans at Magnesia" and this book does show him "as one of the most powerful and capable rulers of the age." However, it also shows that his defeat against the Romans was not a disaster, that the war was no "walk-over" for the Romans, and that they almost lost at Magnesia. The chapters on the Antiochus War against Rome are probably among the very best of the book and they largely draw from the author's more scholarly publication on the same topic. The description of the politics and how the premises of the war were rewritten by pro-Roman authors afterwards are particularly well shown. The mistakes of the Seleucid King are also well analysed. The rise of Antiochus to power, or rather how he had to fight to keep his throne and reconquer his Empire province by province, is also well told. Particularly well told are the parts related to the Fourth and Fifth "Syrian Wars" against the Ptolemy rivals and where, again, the author has published a much more complete by more scholarly and terribly expensive book. Also well-described is the re-conquest of Asia Minor which draws on a number of works, such as John Ma, but also some of the John

Grainger's himself. I was less impressed by the sections on Antiochus's "Anabasis", as it has been called, that is his multi-year tour and expedition with his army in the Upper Satrapies to consolidate the northern (Armenia and Cappadocia), eastern and north eastern frontiers. While good, I found these pieces perhaps less impressive, although, to be fair, they are also those that are the least documented. Another strongpoint which comes across throughout the book shows to what extent it was a major and hugely difficult task to hold together the Empire. This required an indefatigable King rushing from one front to another and preferably backed by a younger heir who would keep control of the area where the senior ruler was not at the time. As with his predecessors, this was what Antiochus achieved first with Antiochus the Younger, who fought with him during the Fifth Syrian War, and then with Seleukos, his eventual successor, who took part in the war against the Romans in Asia. Particularly interesting is the author's assessment that, despite losing the war against the Romans, Antiochus III's Seleucid Empire at his death was certainly better off than when he became King. A related point was to show that while losing Thrace and Asia Minor was certainly a blow, it also removed a major source of distraction. The loss of Asia Minor meant that the Seleucid kings were longer embroiled in the multiple conflicts pitting its various smaller states and cities against each other. It was balanced, and probably ever more than balanced, by the re-acquisition of all of the rich Coele Syria and the destruction of the overseas Ptolemaic Empire and the weakening of the this perennial rival. Despite its many qualities, however, I did have a few issues with this title which I did not find it quite as good as the previous volume, nor quite as clear as Michael Taylor's biography on Antiochus III. One is that I had the impression that I was reading a watered down and simplified version because at least some of the chapters are condensed versions of more scholarly but also more complete, works. This shows in a number of cases throughout the book but particularly so when discussing campaigns and the Seleucid army. This is a topic where the author has heavily relied upon and borrowed from Bar Kochva's superb study. While acknowledging this through his notes (although, oddly enough, Bar Kochva's book does not manage to make it to the bibliography!), John Grainger does depart from it in a number of respects but never really gets to discuss these differences. One example is the author's choice to stick to a chronological narrative throughout the book. The consequence is the absence of thorough discussion on the Seleucid army (its recruitment, composition and performances, in particular), of the Empire's resources and of its government. There are bits and pieces on these three topics, and references to other more detailed books, but these are scattered throughout the

book. This leads to some odd and unexplained statements at times, such as the one where, according to the author, the kingdom's core field army was limited to some 35000 with this number seeming to be plucked out of thin air. The absence of a more detailed discussion on numbers at Magnesia also gives the impression that the Roman and allied forces were larger than that of the Seleucid King whose light troops seems to have been omitted. John Grainger does make a very valid point in underlining that Livy's assertion about the almost total loss of the Seleucid expeditionary force that accompanied the King to Greece is ludicrous and a gross exaggeration. Several thousand and perhaps as many as half or two-thirds of the slightly more than ten thousand - must have made their way back to Asia Minor with the King in what was an organised evacuation rather than a free for all escape. Also, while the author mentions that the Aetolians (Antiochus's allies in the war in Greece against the Romans) were able to provide perhaps more than ten thousand mercenaries to the Ptolemaic King against Antiochus some ten years before, he never gets to really explain how and why they were only able to field four thousand against the Romans at Thermopylae. There also seems to be missing or incomplete statements or even wrong ones when discussing some of the battles. The author does successfully explain the discrepancy in numbers, and the relatively small size of the Seleucid force at Thermopylae - some ten to eleven thousand plus about four thousand Aetolians facing more than twenty five thousand Roman and allies who were expecting further reinforcements. He does not really explain why the Hellenistic monarch chose to fight this battle when the odds were so unfavourable and what he expected to gain by a successful holding action. The description of the subsequent discussions and the naval war to obtain control of the Straits so that the Roman forces to cross to Asia are well shown, and so is the fact that Antiochus evacuated Thrace to concentrate all his forces. Also well shown is the fact that it is Antiochus who had the really innovative tactics and that these almost succeeded in crushing the Romans at Magnesia. However they failed, largely thanks to Eumenes' action on the Roman right flank so that John Grainger is in a way correct to state that, at Magnesia, it is the latter that was instrumental in the Roman victory rather than the Roman general and his Roman and Italian allies. However, contrary to a couple of strange statements, Antiochus's tactics also failed in part. Grainger does show that the intention was a dual cavalry assault, but one of these, on the Seleucid failed (and was not a success, contrary to the author's assertion) while the other, spearheaded by the King himself, broke through a Roman legion but then attacked the Roman camp and failed to rally and attack the Roman battle line from the rear and flanks. It is this failure to rally and control his victorious cavalry that cost the Hellenistic monarch the battle, more than anything else, just as it had

cost him the battle over a quarter of a century before when something similar happened to him at Raphia against the Ptolemaic army. For the reasons above, and if this had been possible, I would have rated this book somewhere in between three and half and four stars. Since it is not, I will assign it four stars

terrific read, I was there and knew ANTIOCHUS111 personally so I can tell you this book is spot on!!
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