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THE PARTHIANS' FAILED VASSALAGE OF SYRIA: THE SHORTSIGHTED WESTERN POLICY OF PHRAATES II AND THE SECOND REIGN OF DEMETRIUS II (129–125 BCE)

Summary: By 128 BCE the Parthians had emerged temporarily as the *de facto* leading power throughout the Hellenistic Middle East. Their defeat of Demetrius II's invasion of Mesopotamia in 138 BCE had furthered their heated rivalry with the Seleucids; however, their destruction of Antiochus VII's invasion of Mesopotamia and Media in 129 BCE finally ended the threat of the Seleucids to their eastern lands. For the first time in their history, the Parthians considered expanding their hegemony over Armenia, Syria, and the regions along the Eastern Mediterranean coast, thus firmly establishing their unrivaled hegemony. Yet any hopes of immediately occupying these regions quickly vanished because of calamities and miscalculations in the early 120s BCE. Although nomadic incursions ravaged the Iranian plateau in the east throughout the 120s BCE, in the west Phraates II's sudden release of Demetrius to contest the Seleucid throne in Syria before the death of Antiochus became a political debacle that hindered Parthian influence in the region. Despite the arguments of recent scholarship, Phraates' decision to release Demetrius was shortsighted and haphazard, and Demetrius never served in Syria as a Parthian vassal. This article is a reevaluation of the western policy of the Parthians in the early 120s BCE and the actions of Demetrius during his second reign concerning the Parthians.

Key words: Parthians, Arsacids, Seleucids, Syria, Phraates II, Demetrius II

With the failed invasion and death of Antiochus VII in 129 BCE and the destruction or capture of much of his army in Mesopotamia and Media, the Parthians finally damaged the strength and standing of the Seleucid state within the Hellenistic Middle East beyond repair. Antiochus' defeat not only guaranteed another civil war in Syria, but also, it was a major statement of Parthian power.¹ The Seleucids never again acted as world leaders, and even their hegemony along the Eastern Mediterranean

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¹ For Antiochus VII, see WILL, E.: *Histoire politique du monde hellénistique*. Nancy 1967, ii 410f.; SHAYEGAN, M. R.: On Demetrius II Nicator's Arsacid Captivity and Second Rule. *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 17 (2003 [2007]) 83–103, here 87–92; BING, D. – SIEVERS, J.: Antiochus. *Encyclopaedia Iranica* 6 (2011) 2017. <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/antiochus-1--thirteen-kings-of-the-seleucid-dynasty>; GRAINGER, J.: *The Fall of the Seleukid Empire 187-75 BC*. Barnsley 2016, chs. 7–8.

coast began to unravel.² The near complete loss of Antiochus' grand royal army in the east was particularly detrimental to the viability of the Seleucid state.³ Diodorus notes that every family in Antioch lost a family member in this immense failed expedition, stating,

When the death of Antiochus became known at Antioch, the whole city mourned, and every house was full of wailing, especially from women, who bemoaned this great loss. Three hundred thousand men had been lost, including those who did not serve in the ranks. Every family had some loss to grieve: among the women, some had to mourn the death of a brother, others that of a husband or a son; and many girls and boys, left as orphans, lamented that they were bereaved of their fathers.⁴

Although Diodorus exaggerates the casualties, the losses of Antiochus' campaign were catastrophic. The Seleucids lost nearly an entire generation of soldiers and exhausted their Greek and Macedonian recruitment pool, forcing successive Seleucid kings to rely increasingly on short-term levies and mercenaries.⁵ There were no more "grand" royal armies to assemble and no more great leaders to stabilize the state. Instead of making concerted efforts to rebuild the diminished Seleucid kingdom, no less than a dozen Seleucid claimants struggled for control over Syria for the next sixty-five years.

In 128 BCE Phraates II had the opportunity to follow up on his resounding victory over Antiochus VII to dominate the Seleucids completely by conquering northern Mesopotamia and Syria. Diodorus states, "Arsaces [Phraates], king of the Parthians, after defeating Antiochus expected to invade Syria and easily make himself master of the country, but he was not able to make this expedition, since fate had placed him in grave danger and many perils."⁶ Meanwhile, Justin adds, "After the death of Mithridates [I], king of the Parthians, Phraates his son was made king, who, having proceeded to make war upon Syria, in revenge for the attempts of Antiochus on the Parthian dominions, was recalled, by hostilities on the part of the Scythians [that is, the Saka and Yuezhi], to defend his own country."⁷ Thus, partly motivated

² For instance, the Jewish leader Hyrcanus began taking cities and subjugating communities in Judaea and southern Syria when he heard about Antiochus' death. *Jos. Ant.* 13. 254–258; *Jos. Bell.* 1. 62–63; Hieron. *Chron.* 165. 2.

³ Although exaggerated, Justin states there were 80,000 soldiers with 300,000 camp followers in Antiochus' army. Justin 38. 10. 1–2. Diodorus places the entire force at 300,000. *Diod.* 34/35. 17. For larger military figures, see Orosius 5. 10. 8; *Eus. Chron.* (Smith ed.) 255; *I Maccabees* 15. 13.

⁴ *Diod.* 34/35. 17. 1.

⁵ See HOOVER, O. – IOSSIF, P.: A Lead Tetradrachm of Tyre from the Second Reign of Demetrius II. *Numismatic Chronicle* 169 (2009) 45–50, here 48.

⁶ *Diod.* 34/35. 18.

⁷ Justin 42. 1. 1. Compare Justin 38. 9. 10. For the Saka, see PURI, B.: The Sakas and Indo-Parthians, *History of Civilizations of Central Asia*. Delhi 1999, 191–208; HARMATTA, J.: Languages and Scripts in Graeco-Bactria and the Saka Kingdoms. *History of Civilizations of Central Asia*. Delhi 1999, 397–416; CALLIERI, P.: Sakas: In Afghanistan. *Encyclopaedia Iranica*. 5 (2016) 2018. <<http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/sakas-in-afghanistan>>. For the Yuezhi, see ENOKI, K. – KOSHELENKO, G. – HAIDARY, Z.: The Yueh-chih and Their Migrations. *History of Civilizations of Central Asia*. Delhi 1999,

by vengeance, Phraates wanted to conduct a retaliatory campaign in the west to conclude the long hegemonic struggle between the Parthians and the Seleucids favorably and definitively. Phraates saw the need not only to defeat the Seleucids, but also to dominate them by punishing their aggression and subduing what remained of their kingdom.⁸ Even after the decisive defeat of Antiochus, Phraates viewed the Seleucids as a potentially dangerous rival within the Hellenistic Middle East, and it was his intention to end this threat.

Yet Phraates II quickly realized that preparing an invasion of Syria was not his only concern. The defeat of Antiochus VII had established the Parthians as the new hegemon within a much-expanded interstate system, what we may call the Iranian interstate system (which now stretched from the border of Syria to the Indus River); however, that hegemony was fragile and volatile.⁹ Although Diodorus goes on to blame the fickleness of Fortune for bringing about “such a reversal in the course of the whole war, that those who were previously successful were in the end brought low,” there emerged several serious domestic and foreign concerns that stifled the momentum of the Parthians in the 120s BCE.¹⁰

Like the consequences of Demetrius II's anabasis ten years prior, Antiochus VII's invasion had ravaged and destabilized the western lands of the Parthian Empire.¹¹ Phraates II could not hope to invade Syria without first reconsolidating his authority over Media and Mesopotamia and repairing the damages from the war.¹² Meanwhile, thousands of new prisoners of war and disgruntled mercenaries created major political and logistical complications for the Parthians that could not be resolved quickly.¹³ Moreover, the mounting vulnerability of the eastern frontier made further

171–190; BENJAMIN, C.: *The Yuezhi: Origin, Migration, and the Conquest of Northern Bactria*. Turnhout 2007; BIVAR, A.: Kushan Dynasty. i) Dynastic History. *Encyclopaedia Iranica*. 5 (2009) 2018. <<http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/kushan-dynasty-i-history>>; RTVELADZE, E.: Parthians in the Oxus Valley: Struggle for the Great Indian Road. *Anabasis* 2 (2011) 149–178, here 150; OLBRYCHT, M.: Eastern Bactria under Da Yuezhi Hegemony. *Glory of the Kushans*. New Delhi 2012, 79–86; LERNER, J.: Regional Study: Bactria – The Crossroads of Ancient Eurasia. *Cambridge World History*. Vol. 4. Cambridge 2015, 300–324, here 311–318; MCLAUGHLIN, R.: *The Roman Empire and the Silk Routes: The Ancient World Economy and the Empires of Parthia, Central Asia and Han China*. Barnsley 2016, 27, 41–91, 98–99, 101–102, 179, 188–190, 192–193, 199.

⁸ Note SHAYEGAN, M. R.: *Arsacids and Sasanians: Political Ideology in Post-Hellenistic and Late Antique Persia*. Cambridge 2011, 145.

⁹ Note OVERTOOM, N. L.: The Power-Transition Crisis of the 240s and the Creation of the Parthian State. *International History Review* 38.5 (2016) 984–1013; OVERTOOM, N. L.: The Power-Transition Crisis of the 160s–130s BCE and the Formation of the Parthian Empire. *Journal of Ancient History* 7.1 (2019) 111–155.

¹⁰ Diod. 34/35. 18.

¹¹ Note KOSMIN, P.: *Time and Its Adversaries in the Seleucid Empire*. Cambridge, MA 2018, 195.

¹² Severe brutality and destruction often accompanied Seleucid conquests. SHERWIN-WHITE, S. – KUHRIT, A.: *From Samarkhand to Sardis: A New Approach to the Seleucid Empire*. Berkeley 1993, 58–59. Babylonia seemingly suffered terribly from the 140s–120s BCE. See FISCHER, T.: *Untersuchungen zum Partherkrieg Antiochos' VII: im Rahmen der Seleukidengeschichte*. Tübingen 1970; OELSNER, J.: Randbemerkungen zur arsakidischen Geschichte anhand von babylonischen Keilschrifttexten. *Altorientalische Forschungen* 3 (1975) 25–45; OELSNER, J.: *Materialien zur babylonischen Gesellschaft und Kultur in hellenistischer Zeit*. Budapest 1986, 274–276; SHERWIN-WHITE–KUHRIT 225.

¹³ Justin 42. 1. 2–4.

aggression westward highly risky because warriors from the Central Asian steppe threatened the Iranian plateau.¹⁴ Finally, Phraates also suddenly faced a diplomatic fiasco in the west because of his decision to release Demetrius from custody late in 129 BCE.

DEMETRIUS' RELEASE

Phraates II had released Demetrius II to distract and delay Antiochus VII in Media at the height of the Seleucid invasion in early autumn 129 (probably August/September) as Antiochus threatened to invade the Parthians' homeland.¹⁵ However, with Antiochus' defeat and death in late autumn 129 (probably November), Phraates immediately regretted his decision to send Demetrius to Syria and ordered soldiers to cut off Demetrius' advance and return him to captivity.¹⁶ Justin states, "He [Phraates] then began to regret having sent away Demetrius, and hastily dispatched some troops of horse to fetch him back; but they found that prince, who had been in fear of pursuit, already seated on his throne, and, after doing all they could to no purpose, returned to their king."¹⁷ Thus, Phraates was unable to recapture Demetrius, who used his brother's death to secure support in Syria. Phraates ultimately lamented his initial decision to release Demetrius because the geopolitical situation by 128 BCE had changed drastically. Before Antiochus' death Phraates had hoped Demetrius could destabilize Syria to the Parthians' benefit; however, after Antiochus' death Phraates realized that Demetrius instead threatened to stabilize Syria to the Parthians' detriment.

Recently, scholars have tried to reconsider the political fiasco surrounding Demetrius II's return to Syria. Peter Mittag made a radical argument, rejecting that Phraates released Demetrius as part of a larger strategy to defeat Antiochus. Instead, Mittag argued that Demetrius finally escaped his captivity in late 129 BCE because of the Parthians' carelessness.¹⁸ Yet Rahim Shayegan later countered Mittag's arguments, reasoning that Phraates' release of Demetrius and the uprisings against Antiochus were two parts of a larger strategy.¹⁹ Shayegan instead concludes that Phraates released Demetrius because of a long-term, farsighted strategic policy to place him on the Seleucid throne as a Parthian vassal.²⁰

¹⁴ Note OVERTOOM, N. L.: Considering the Failures of the Parthians against the Invasions of the Central Asian Tribal Confederations in the 120s BCE. *Studia Iranica* 48 (2019) 77–111; OVERTOOM, N. L.: A Reconsideration of Mithridates II's Early Reign: A Savior Restores the Eastern Frontier of the Parthian Empire. *Parthica* 21 (2019) 9–21.

¹⁵ Note SHAYEGAN: Arsacids (n. 8) 129–130; BING–SIEVERS (n. 1).

¹⁶ Justin 38. 10. 8, 11; Justin *Prol.* 39; Diod. 34/35. 17. 2; Jos. *Ant.* 13. 253, 268, 271; Eus. *Chron.* (Smith ed.) 255, 257; Hieron. *Chron.* 163.1; Livy *Epit.* 60. 11. See ASSAR, G. R. F.: A Revised Parthian Chronology of the Period 165–91 BC. *Electrum* 11 (2006) 87–158, here 104; SHAYEGAN: Arsacids (n. 8) 134.

¹⁷ Justin 38. 10. 11.

¹⁸ See MITTAG, P.: Beim Barte des Demetrios: Überlegungen zur parthischen Gefangenschaft Demetrios' II. *Klio* 2 (2002) 373–399.

¹⁹ SHAYEGAN: Arsacids (n. 8) 143.

²⁰ Shayegan cites the Parthians' utilizing other captives as vassals. SHAYEGAN: Arsacids (n. 8) 144–145. Taylor also supports the argument that Phraates released Demetrius to rule as his vassal in Syria. TAYLOR, M.: *Antiochus the Great*. Barnsley 2013, 157.

Mittag's argument appears mostly untenable and does not correspond with any of the available evidence.²¹ It is undeniable that Phraates II released Demetrius II intentionally and that this decision served immediate strategic ends. However, Shayegan's conclusion that Demetrius' release was "the important component of an elaborate stratagem aimed at establishing Arsacid authority over Syria, once Antiochus Sidetes' campaign was thwarted" goes too far.²² Rather, although Demetrius' release was an intentional aspect of the Parthians' strategy to win the war against Antiochus, the strategy was shortsighted, and the consequences were haphazard.

After his defeat and capture in 138 BCE, Demetrius II acted neither as an outspoken enemy, nor as a compliant stooge toward the Parthians.²³ Instead, he found himself in a difficult situation full of complex relationships. Mithridates I had humiliated him in Babylonia but honored him in Hyrcania as a friend and son.²⁴ Demetrius had two children with his new Parthian wife and even began styling his beard in the Parthian manner, which he later featured on his coinage during his second reign in Syria.²⁵ Yet Demetrius did not otherwise embrace his captivity, nor his forced relationship with the Arsacids. Instead, Demetrius considered himself the true king of the Seleucid Empire and longed to return to his position of power. Despite lenient treatment, access to luxury, and his new Parthian family, Demetrius twice attempted to escape to Syria.²⁶ He first tried to escape soon after his capture in early 137 BCE when he heard that his younger brother Antiochus VII had defeated the usurper Diodotus Tryphon.²⁷ Justin claims that, before Demetrius tried to escape, Mithridates had "promised (*promittit*) to recover for him the throne of Syria, which Tryphon had usurped in his absence."²⁸ This statement appears quite suspect as it is unclear why Mithridates would make such a promise to Demetrius without the intention or the means to fulfil it. At most this statement illustrates that Mithridates recognized that Demetrius could be utilized to manipulate the geopolitics of Syria in Parthia's favor;

²¹ Jos. *Ant.* 13. 253; Appian *Syr.* 11. 68; Justin 38. 10. 7; Eus. *Chron.* (Smith ed.) 255.

²² SHAYEGAN: On Demetrius (n. 1); SHAYEGAN: Arsacids (n. 8) 145.

²³ Note DĄBROWA, E.: L'Expédition de Démétrios II Nicator contre les Parthes (139–138 avant J.-C.). *Parthica* 1 (1999 [2000]) 9–17.

²⁴ Justin 36. 1. 6; Appian *Syr.* 11. 67.

²⁵ For Demetrius' coinage, see LEAKE, W.: *Numismata Hellenica: A Catalogue of Greek Coins*. London 1856, 30, 32; GARDNER, P.: *Catalogue of Greek Coins: The Seleucid Kings of Syria*. London 1878, 58–62, 76–78; HOUGHTON, A.: *Coins of the Seleucid Empire from the Collection of Arthur Houghton*. New York 1983; LORBER, C. – IOSSIF, P.: Seleucid Campaign Beards. *L'Antiquité Classique* 78 (2009) 87–115, here 105. For Demetrius' second reign, see BEVAN, E.: *The House of Seleucus*. London 1902, 247–250; BOUCHÉ-LECLERCQ, A.: *Histoire des Séleucides (323-64 J.-C.)*. Paris 1913–1914, 388–394; BELLINGER, A.: The End of the Seleucids. *Transactions of the Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences* 38 (1949) 51–102, here 58–65; WILL (n. 1) ii 432–436; EHLING, K.: Seleukidische Geschichte zwischen 130 und 121 v. Chr. *Historia* 47.2 (1998) 141–151, here 144–147; EHLING, K.: *Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der späten Seleukiden (164-63 v. Chr.): Vom Tode des Antiochos IV, bis zur Einrichtung der Provinz Syria unter Pompeius*. Stuttgart 2008, 208–209; HOOVER–IOSSIF (n. 5) 48–49; SHAYEGAN: Arsacids (n. 8) 148; GRAINGER: The Fall (n. 1) Ch. 9.

²⁶ Justin 38. 9. 3–9.

²⁷ Justin 38. 9. 4–7. Justin incorrectly claims that Phraates recaptured Demetrius at this time and forced him into stricter confinement.

²⁸ Justin 38. 9. 3.

however, Mithridates did not implement a concerted new strategy to establish a Parthian vassal over Syria. In fact, Demetrius' attempted escape demonstrated to Mithridates that Demetrius was self-serving and potentially dangerous, forcing the Parthians to place him under stricter confinement.²⁹ Several years later Demetrius again attempted to escape, likely after the death of Mithridates in ca. 132 BCE had created temporary disorder at court; however, Phraates II recaptured him, sparing his life because of their familial ties.³⁰

Justin emphasizes that boredom and frustration, rather than malice toward the Parthians motivated Demetrius II's attempted escapes; however, the relationship between Phraates II and Demetrius was distant and distrustful.³¹ Justin then argues that the Parthians mostly showed Demetrius clemency because they intended to utilize him against the threat of Antiochus VII because "they had designs on the kingdom of Syria."³² Justin even claims that the Parthians' intentions toward Syria forced Antiochus to attack the Parthians preemptively.³³ Yet Justin here utilizes heightened drama, foreshadowing, and hindsight to manipulate his account. Justin knew that the Parthians eventually released Demetrius to contest Antiochus' throne and that the Parthians ultimately became involved in the geopolitics of Syria, and therefore, Justin here projects the consequences of the war back upon its beginnings.

Phraates II in fact did not trust Demetrius II and did not have any intention to release Demetrius until the successes of Antiochus VII in 129 BCE forced his hand. Meanwhile, Antiochus clearly wanted to gain control over his brother; however, this was not the primary motivation for his grand anabasis to restore the eastern hegemony of the Seleucid Empire.³⁴ When Phraates released Demetrius under guard in late 129 BCE, he did so cautiously and out of desperation to accomplish an immediate strategic objective, namely the delay and derailment of Antiochus' invasion of

²⁹ Justin 38. 9. 7.

³⁰ Justin 38. 9. 8–9. For the recently revised chronology of Mithridates' reign, which places his death in 132 BCE, see ASSAR, G. R. F.: Genealogy and Coinage of the Early Parthian Rulers II: A Revised Stemma. *Parthica* 7 (2005) 29–63, here 41–45; ASSAR, G. R. F.: The Terminal Date of the Reign of Mithridates I of Parthia. *Bulletin of Ancient Iranian History* 2 (2006) 1–16; ASSAR: A Revised Parthian Chronology (n. 16) 88–98; ASSAR, G. R. F.: Iran under the Arsacids, 247 BC-AD 224/227. *Numismatic Art of Persia*. Lancaster and London 2011, 117; OVERTOOM: The Power-Transition Crisis of the 160s-130s (n. 9). Compare DĄBROWA, E.: Les Aspects politiques et militaires de l'invasion de la Mésopotamie par les Parthes. *Electrum* 10 (2005) 73–88, here 73; SHAYEGAN: Arsacids (n. 8) 76. A cuneiform tablet from ca. 132 describes sacrifices being made in Babylon for the life of Mithridates. FINKEL, I. – VAN DER SPEK, R.: Astronomical Diary Concerning Bagayasha and Timotheos. *BCHP*. 9 (2017). http://www.livius.org/cg-cm/chronicles/bchp-bagayasha/bchp-bagayasha_c1.html, BCHP 18C. For the traditional date of Mithridates' death in 138 BCE, see WROTH, W.: *A Catalogue of the Greek Coins in the British Museum*, vol. 23, *Catalogue of the Coins of Parthia*. London 1903, xxi; MCDOWELL, R.: *Coins from Seleucia on the Tigris*. Ann Arbor 1935, 201; DEBEVOISE, N.: *A Political History of Parthia*. Chicago 1938, 26; BIVAR, A.: The Political History of Iran under the Arsacids. *Cambridge History of Iran*. Vol. 3.1. Cambridge 1983, 21–99, here 36; ASSAR, G. R. F.: Recent Studies in Parthian History: Part II. *The Celator* 15.1 (2001) 17–27, here 21; GRAINGER: The Fall (n. 1) 107.

³¹ Phraates put Demetrius under guard and reproached him for his "childish levity (*puerilis levitatis*).” Justin 38. 9. 9.

³² Justin 38. 9. 10.

³³ Justin 38. 10. 1.

³⁴ Diod. 34/35. 15.

Parthia proper. Phraates had made no long-term strategic plans to use Demetrius as a puppet in Syria, which his immediate efforts to recapture Demetrius after Antiochus' death clearly demonstrate. Further, Demetrius had no intention of ruling over Syria as a Parthian vassal, which explains his immediate efforts to escape his Parthian guards and secure his throne against Phraates' wishes.³⁵

DEMETRIUS REGAINS THE THRONE

Demetrius II's actions while on the throne in Syria also strongly support the conclusion that he was not a cooperative Parthian vassal.³⁶ Although he did not make war against the Parthians during his second reign, he did not act on their behalf nor to their benefit in the west. For example, the evidence does not support Shayegan's conclusion that Demetrius made war upon Ptolemaic Egypt because of a "tacit entente with Frahād II that limited the sphere of Demetrius II's operations to the west."³⁷ Rather, Demetrius went to war with the Ptolemies and avoided further conflict with the Parthians to suit his own agenda.

Demetrius II entered Syria in ca. September/October 129 BCE, and most of what remained of Antiochus VII's household, including his youngest son (later known as Antiochus IX), fled to Cyzicus (modern northwestern Turkey) in fear of Demetrius' approach.³⁸ Demetrius found no resistance in Antioch and easily seized the vacant throne, remarrying his former wife Cleopatra Thea as news of Antiochus VII's disaster reached the city in ca. November/December 129 BCE.³⁹ Demetrius used his new position of power to distance himself from his Parthian guards and then blocked the Parthian horsemen sent to recapture him, compelling all Parthian forces in Syria to return to Phraates II in Mesopotamia.⁴⁰ Finally free from his captors, Demetrius immediately decided to make war against Ptolemaic Egypt in early 128 BCE. Justin records,

After Antiochus and his army were cut off in Persia, his brother Demetrius, being delivered from confinement among the Parthians, and restored to his throne, resolved, while all Syria was mourning for the loss of the army, to make war upon Egypt, (just as if his and his brother's wars with the Parthians, in which one was taken prisoner and the other killed, had had a fortunate termination). Cleopatra [II] his mother-in-law promised

³⁵ Justin 38. 10. 11.

³⁶ Note NABEL, J.: The Seleucids Imprisoned: Arsacid-Roman Hostage Submission and Its Hellenistic Precedents. *Arsacids, Romans and Local Elites*. Oxford and Philadelphia 2017, 25–50.

³⁷ SHAYEGAN: *Arsacids* (n. 8) 145.

³⁸ The Parthians likely still controlled Media Atropatene, at least nominally, late in 129 BCE, making it probable that Demetrius and his Parthian escort rode to Syria following a northerly route to avoid Antiochus' men in southern Media and Mesopotamia. Eus. *Chron.* (Smith ed.) 257. For the date, note BING–SIEVERS (n. 1).

³⁹ Jos. *Ant.* 13. 253, 268, 271; Justin 38. 10. 11; Justin *Prolog.* 39; Eus. *Chron.* (Smith ed.) 257; Hieron. *Chron.* 163. 1; Livy *Epi.* 60. 11.

⁴⁰ Justin 38. 10. 7, 11.

him the kingdom of Egypt, as a recompense for the assistance that he should afford her against her brother [and husband, Ptolemy VIII].⁴¹

Demetrius had several potential targets that he could have pursued in 128 BCE. He could have retaliated against the Jews, who were aggressively expanding their power in Judaea, or the Parthians, who had tried to recapture him; however, there was greater opportunity for success and reward if Demetrius attacked the much disliked and vulnerable Ptolemy VIII.⁴²

Cleopatra II had used her brother's unpopularity to seize control of Egypt in 131 BCE, forcing him to escape to Cyprus; however, in 129 BCE Ptolemy VIII reclaimed his position of power in Egypt and forced Cleopatra to flee to Syria where her daughter Cleopatra Thea was queen.⁴³ Justin continues, "Ptolemaeus [Ptolemy VIII], king of Egypt, too, who was threatened with a war by him [Demetrius II], having learned that his sister Cleopatra [II] had put much of the wealth of Egypt on ship-board, and fled into Syria to her daughter [Cleopatra Thea] and son-in-law Demetrius, sent an Egyptian youth [Alexander Zabinas], the son of a merchant named Pro-tarchus, to claim the throne of Syria by force of arms."⁴⁴ Thus, not only had Cleopatra II offered Demetrius control over the Kingdom of Egypt, she also brought with her from Egypt a large war chest to entice Demetrius to action.

The Ptolemies' longstanding rivalry with the Seleucids in the Eastern Mediterranean also enticed Demetrius II to action since the Seleucids, even at this late stage, remained primarily focused on political entanglements in the west. The Seleucids and Ptolemies had fought six major wars, known as the Syrian Wars, to control the Eastern Mediterranean from 274–168 BCE, and during a period of crisis in the 160s–130s BCE, the Ptolemies had meddled frequently in the civil wars within Syria.⁴⁵ Considerable tension remained between these two dynasties in the early 120s BCE as Demetrius looked to stabilize his kingdom, and the family ties between the Seleucid and Ptolemaic dynasties made further conflict unavoidable. Demetrius' sons with Cleopatra Thea had the pedigree to wear both crowns; and once Cleopatra II offered Demetrius control over Egypt, he had a justified cause to seize Alexandria and install one of his sons as the new king of Egypt.⁴⁶

⁴¹ Justin 39. 1. 1–2. Compare Justin 38. 8. 2, 9.1; Eus. *Chron.* (Smith ed.) 257; Diod. 33.6a, 34/35. 14; Jos. *Ant.* 12. 388, 13. 63–64, 69–70, 20. 236.

⁴² Demetrius considered retaliating against the Jews, but the war against Ptolemy VIII took precedence. Jos. *Ant.* 13. 254–258, 267–269; Jos. *Bell.* 1. 62–63; Hieron. *Chron.* 165. 2. Ptolemy was notoriously cruel and hated by many of his subjects. Note Justin 38. 2–15; Diod. 33. 6–6a, 12; 34/35. 14. For a recent evaluation of Ptolemy VIII, see NADIG, P.: *Zwischen König und Karikatur: Das Bild Ptolemaios' VIII. im Spannungsfeld der Überlieferung.* Munich 2007.

⁴³ Livy *Epit.* 59. 14; Justin 38. 3. 11.

⁴⁴ Justin 39. 1. 4.

⁴⁵ Note GRAINGER, J.: *The Syrian Wars.* Leiden 2010; OVERTOOM: The Power-Transition Crisis of the 160s–130s (n. 9).

⁴⁶ Cleopatra Selene later claimed the throne of Egypt for her sons from her Seleucid husband, Antiochus X; however, the illegitimate Ptolemy XII seized the kingdom. Cic. *Ver.* 4. 61; Dio 39. 12–14. Note LLEWELLYN-JONES, L.: Cleopatra Selene. *The Encyclopedia of Ancient History.* Vol. 3. Malden 2013, 1572–1573.

Another leading reason Demetrius II immediately attacked Ptolemy VIII is that in early 128 BCE Demetrius desperately needed a military victory to secure and bolster his prestige and position as king. Factionalism within the Seleucid court during the crisis period of the 160s–130s BCE had begun to undermine the state, and Demetrius not only faced stiff resistance from the former supporters of his brother, but also the former supporters of Diodotus Tryphon. Meanwhile, Demetrius' campaign against the Parthians in 140–138 BCE and his decade-long captivity had been a humiliation that had severely damaged his military reputation and legitimacy as a ruler. Although Demetrius had seized the throne during the chaos that immediately followed his brother's death, his influence within the court was limited and tremendously vulnerable. In fact, within a year the usurper Alexander Zabinas challenged Demetrius for his throne and found many supporters within Syria.⁴⁷ It is perhaps ironic that Demetrius' attack on Ptolemy facilitated Alexander's rebellion; however, the considerable pressures facing Demetrius in 129/128 BCE left him little choice. It is not surprising that Demetrius acted aggressively against a similarly vulnerable enemy in 128 BCE. He wanted to use his war against Ptolemy to win over the army, regain his reputation, and protect his throne.

WHY WAR WITH EGYPT?

Unfortunately for Demetrius II, his poor generalship and immense unpopularity quickly removed any hope of salvaging his second reign. In 128 BCE, he marched his army along the coast into Egypt, perhaps reaching Pelusium before his soldiers mutinied and forced him to retreat to Syria.⁴⁸ The sudden failure of Demetrius' expedition and the mutiny of his soldiers severely damaged his already vulnerable authority, leading to several rebellions in Syria and the rise of Alexander Zabinas as a rival.

Although our other ancient accounts blame the mutinies and rebellions against Demetrius II on his unpopularity and poor reputation, Justin offers an interesting take on the widespread rejection of Demetrius in 128 BCE, stating,

Yet, as is often the case, while he [Demetrius] was grasping at what belonged to others [that is, Egypt], he lost his own [kingdom] by a rebellion in Syria. For the people of Antioch, in the first place, under the leadership of Trypho, and from detestation of the pride (*superbiam*) of their king (which, from his intercourse with the unfeeling Parthians (*Parthicae crudelitatis*), had become intolerable), and afterward the Apamenians and other people, following their example, revolted from Demetrius in his absence.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Jos. *Ant.* 13. 267–268; Justin 39. 1. 3–5; Justin *Prol.* 39; Eus. *Chron.* (Smith ed.) 257.

⁴⁸ Eus. *Chron.* (Smith ed.) 257; Justin 39. 1. 1–2.

⁴⁹ Justin 39. 1. 3. Note Jos. *Ant.* 13. 267; Eus. *Chron.* (Smith ed.) 257.

Justin here argues that, from his perspective and from the perspective of the Syrians, Demetrius chose to pursue the wrong war. Thus, Justin underscores the weaknesses plaguing Demetrius' reign and his own critical opinion of Demetrius.

Demetrius II's lack of authority because of his past abuses and failures meant that his people did not respect him, making it easy for them to criticize his judgment and rebel against his rule. In particular, the Syrians detested Demetrius' pride, which appeared worse since his captivity. It is important to remember that early in 128 BCE almost all of Syria was in mourning following Antiochus VII's disastrous defeat and death at the hands of the Parthians, and Demetrius' sudden return with Parthian guards and a large beard in the Parthian style did little to curry favor with the Seleucids.⁵⁰ Even though Demetrius escaped his Parthian guards, the taint of his captivity under the Parthians remained in part because the Parthians were a despised enemy of the Seleucids, which brings us to our final and most important point. Both Justin and the Syrians detested Demetrius, not because he started a war, but because he started the wrong war. For them, Demetrius had failed to seek necessary vengeance against the Parthians, which was unforgivable.

Justin's contempt is clear when he snipes, "While all Syria was mourning for the loss of the army, [Demetrius decided] to make war upon Egypt, (just as if his and his brother's wars with the Parthians, in which one was taken prisoner and the other killed, had had a fortunate termination)."⁵¹ For Justin and the Syrians, Demetrius had a duty to avenge the recent disasters in the east, and they considered the conflict against the Parthians unresolved. Justin adds to this sentiment when he then criticizes Demetrius for "grasping at what belonged to others" when he attacked Egypt instead of Parthia.⁵² Thus, Justin justifies the rebellions in Syria against Demetrius because Demetrius ignored the *real* enemy, the Parthians. Justin and the Syrians did not criticize Demetrius' aggression; rather, they criticized his misplaced aggression. Despite the resent disasters, Justin and the Syrians wanted Demetrius finally to punish the Parthians and reclaim the lost eastern territories; they wanted another anabasis.

Thus, we should consider again why Demetrius II did not pursue another eastern expedition in 128 BCE. There simply is no good evidence to support the conclusion that Phraates II controlled Demetrius' actions in Syria and encouraged him to attack Egypt while avoiding a new war in Mesopotamia.⁵³ Further, the suggestion that Demetrius relied on Parthian support in his conflict with Ptolemaic Egypt is unfounded and contrary to the available evidence.⁵⁴ If Phraates released Demetrius late in 129 BCE to establish a tributary kingdom in Syria, the plan was shortsighted and failed immediately. By 128 BCE Demetrius had numerous good reasons and pressing concerns that pushed him into war against Ptolemy VIII instead of against Phraates. Perhaps the least convincing explanation is that Demetrius was a vassal of the Parthians.

⁵⁰ Diod. 34/35. 17. 1. Note LORBER–IOSSIF (n. 25) 105.

⁵¹ Justin 39. 1. 1–2.

⁵² Justin 39. 1. 3.

⁵³ Note SHAYEGAN: Arsacids (n. 8) 145.

⁵⁴ See EHLING: Seleukidische Geschichte (n. 25) 144; EHLING: Untersuchungen (n. 25) 208; SHAYEGAN: Arsacids (n. 8) 145.

Despite Justin's harsh criticisms of Demetrius II and the anger of the Syrians for Demetrius' failure to retaliate against the Parthians, another war against Parthia was a military, logistical, and political impossibility in 128 BCE. Even if Demetrius had wanted to invade Mesopotamia in 128 BCE to punish the Parthians at the behest of his people, he lacked the forces and funds to do so. Antiochus VII's ruinous anabasis finally had exhausted the Seleucid state. The tens of thousands of soldiers and immense wealth that Antiochus had lost in 129 BCE were never recovered.⁵⁵ Demetrius gained control of the soldiers that had remained in Syria (perhaps 15,000–20,000 men); however, to invade Egypt he had to hire mercenaries that he struggled to pay even with Cleopatra II's financial support.⁵⁶

The Seleucid Empire was not the Roman Republic, with its seemingly inexhaustible recruitment pool and unique ability to absorb catastrophic defeats; rather, the Seleucid army relied on the recruitment of emigrated Greeks and Macedonians, and once these men were lost in battle, it was difficult to replace them.⁵⁷ In fact, Demetrius II had conducted his own anabasis in the early 130s BCE in part because he had hoped to gain more Greek soldiers in the east.⁵⁸ It is quite astonishing that the Seleucid state was able to recover from Demetrius' disaster so quickly in the 130s BCE. Antiochus VII's ability to mount a major eastern expedition later in the decade is a testament to his capabilities as a ruler and the continued strength of the Seleucid state before his defeat. In theory the Seleucids could have recovered their strength even after Antiochus' defeat to reemerge as a major force in the geopolitics of the Hellenistic Middle East; however, they needed stability, good leadership, and time to do so, none of which was available to Demetrius.

Demetrius II understood that he could not hope to conduct another major eastern expedition against the Parthians without first consolidating his power along the Eastern Mediterranean coast because he did not have enough men and supplies to protect Syria while he campaigned in the east. Moreover, the uprisings in Babylonia and troop mutinies in Media against his brother had demonstrated that the Seleucids could no longer expect to gain military and financial support in this region without difficulty, and therefore, if Demetrius ever wanted to invade Mesopotamia again, he needed to secure other sources of support. The war against Ptolemy VIII was Demetrius' best option to reestablish his power because he stood to gain Cleopatra II's wealth and, if successful, the immense resources of Egypt.

Further, Demetrius II's family ties to the Ptolemaic dynasty meant that he could not simply ignore the pleas of his mother-in-law to go to war. To do so immediately would have strained his already precarious relationship with his wife Cleopatra Thea,

⁵⁵ Josephus records that Demetrius III commanded 17,000 soldiers in ca. 89. *Jos. Bell.* 1. 93. Compare *Jos. Ant.* 13. 377–378. He only commanded 11,000 by 87. *Jos. Ant.* 13. 384.

⁵⁶ Note HOOVER–IOSSIF (n. 5) 48.

⁵⁷ See BAR-KOCHVA, B.: *Seleucid Army: Organization and Tactics in the Great Campaigns*. Cambridge 1987, 19–48; GRAINGER: *The Syrian Wars* (n. 45) 40, 83, 205–207, 233, 257, 261; GRAINGER, J.: *Kings and Kingship in the Hellenistic World 350–30 BC*. Barnsley 2017, Ch. 9. For the Romans, note ECKSTEIN, A.: *Mediterranean Anarchy, Interstate War, and the Rise of Rome*. Berkeley 2006, Ch. 7.

⁵⁸ *Jos. Ant.* 13. 186; *I Maccabees* 14. 1.

who was an influential and ambitious woman within the Seleucid court.⁵⁹ His remarriage to Cleopatra Thea after his return to the throne had lent Demetrius much needed legitimacy because she reconnected him to his sons and helped reinstitute his line of the Seleucid dynasty. Demetrius had little choice but to rely on the political and financial support of his strong female relatives, and therefore, he could not refuse Cleopatra II without alienating his wife.

PHRAATES' FAILED VASSALAGE OF SYRIA

There is one final important point to consider that further discredits the argument that Demetrius II was a strategically placed agent of the Parthians during his second reign. The Parthians actively worked against Demetrius' rule in Syria. Phraates II had released Demetrius to start a civil war in Syria; however, after Antiochus VII's death, Phraates tried to recapture Demetrius. With the death of Antiochus, Demetrius' release was no longer necessary, and therefore, Phraates tried to abort his short-term strategy to destabilize Syria during Antiochus' invasion and instead considered a more permanent solution through an invasion of the region. Once Demetrius escaped his Parthian guards and established himself on the throne, he became a potentially dangerous liability. Thus, Demetrius' vulnerable regime was in fact the intended target of Phraates' expected invasion of Syria.⁶⁰

After Antiochus VII's death, there is simply no evidence that Phraates II influenced Demetrius II's policies to the benefit of Parthia. Phraates also never provided Demetrius with any money or soldiers, which Demetrius desperately needed to attack Ptolemy VIII, combat Alexander Zabinas, and put down the rebellions in Syria.⁶¹ In fact, after Demetrius retreated from Egypt to Syria, Alexander eventually arrived with an army and defeated Demetrius near Damascus in ca. 126 BCE.⁶² Phraates not only made no effort to aid his supposed vassal in Demetrius' greatest hour of need, but he also chose this moment to send the body of Antiochus back to Syria. Justin records,

Meanwhile the body of Antiochus, who had been killed by the king of the Parthians, arrived in Syria, being sent back in a silver coffin for burial, and was received with great respect by the different cities as well as by the new king, Alexander, in order to secure credit to the fiction [of his legitimate rule]. This show of affection procured him extraordinary

⁵⁹ For Cleopatra Thea, see *I Maccabees* 10. 51–58; 11. 12; 15. 10; Diod. 32. 9c; Jos. *Ant.* 13. 80, 109, 116, 270, 365; Appian *Syr.* 11. 68; Justin 36. 1; 39. 1. 2, 7, 9; 39. 2. 7; 39. 2. 8.

⁶⁰ Diod. 34/35. 18; Justin 42. 1. 1. Compare Justin 38. 9. 10.

⁶¹ Parthian troops were quite active in Mesopotamia at this time. SACHS, A. – HUNGER, H.: *Astronomical Diaries and Related Texts from Babylon: Diaries from 164 B.C. to 61 B.C.* Vol. 3. Vienna 1996, no. -126A, no. -126B, no. -125A.

⁶² Eus. *Chron.* (Smith ed.) 257; Justin 39. 1. 7; Jos. *Ant.* 13. 268. Soon after defeating Demetrius, Alexander made an alliance with the Jewish leader Hyrcanus and captured Laodicea in Syria. Jos. *Ant.* 13. 269, 273; Diod. 34. 22. 1.

regard from the people, everyone supposing his tears not counterfeit but real.⁶³

I agree with Shayegan's argument that Phraates did not send Antiochus' body back to Syria to lend legitimacy to Alexander; however, I would like to offer an alternative to Shayegan's speculative conclusion that Phraates sent Antiochus' body, under the escort of Antiochus' captured son Seleucus, to replace his "pro-Parthian" vassal, Demetrius, with a new candidate.⁶⁴

Shayegan questions the validity of Justin's passage because he finds it illogical that the Parthians would have sent Antiochus VII's body back to Syria "against the interests of their own protégé Demetrius II", and therefore, Shayegan concludes that, before Alexander Zabinas captured Antioch and gained control over Antiochus' body, Phraates II sent Seleucus under guard with his father's body to win over support in Antioch as the new pro-Parthian vassal of Syria.⁶⁵ Shayegan convincingly uses the jumbled comments of John of Antioch to establish the likelihood that Seleucus accompanied his father's body to Syria to act as a Parthian vassal before enemy forces compelled him to flee back to Parthia, where he remained the rest of his life.⁶⁶ However, the major issue with Shayegan's reconstruction is that Demetrius clearly was not a Parthian "protégé", and therefore, Phraates indeed sent Seleucus to Syria with his father's body in direct opposition to Demetrius *and* Alexander in an attempt to establish an actual vassal on the Seleucid throne.⁶⁷

By 127 BCE the Parthians' eastern frontier had collapsed as the Saka invaded the Iranian plateau, ending any plans Phraates II had to invade Syria to contest Demetrius II's position and forcing Phraates to implement a new plan to establish Seleucus as a Parthian vassal on the Seleucid throne.⁶⁸ Again, this was not part of a long-term strategic policy, but rather, another short-term reaction to immediate geopolitical circumstances. While Phraates tried to restore his eastern frontier, continued chaos in Syria was to his great benefit. As much as possible Phraates wanted to keep Mesopotamia safe from possible Seleucid retaliation. Although Phraates had failed to control Demetrius in late 129 BCE, Demetrius' unpopularity and mismanagement had led to another Seleucid civil war in 128 BCE. Phraates recognized that sending Seleucus to Syria with his father's body was an opportunity to exploit this developing situation. Phraates could hope to secure the region in his favor at little cost, and even if that plan failed, Phraates could hope to further destabilize the region, thus diminishing any possible threat the Seleucids posed to the Parthians' western frontier.

⁶³ Justin 39. 1. 6.

⁶⁴ SHAYEGAN: *Arsacids* (n. 8) 149–150.

⁶⁵ SHAYEGAN: *Arsacids* (n. 8) 149.

⁶⁶ SHAYEGAN: *Arsacids* (n. 8) 150. Note ROBERTO, U. (ed.): *Ioannis Antiocheni Fragmenta ex Historia Chronica: Introduzione, Edizione Critica e Traduzione*. Berlin and New York 2005, i F 144. Compare BOUCHÉ-LECLERCQ (n. 25) i 393 n. 2; FISCHER (n. 12) 54. For John of Antioch and the Parthians, see HACKL, U. – JACOBS, B. – WEBER, D. (eds): *Quellen zur Geschichte des Partherreiches: Textsammlung mit Übersetzungen und Kommentaren*. Vol. 2. Göttingen and Oakville 2010, 199–202.

⁶⁷ Note NABEL (n. 36).

⁶⁸ Note OVERTOOM: *Considering the Failures* (n. 14); OVERTOOM: *The Power-Transition Crisis of the 160s–130s* (n. 9).

Thus, Phraates II instructed Seleucus to take his father's body through several cities that had rebelled against Demetrius II's authority until he reached Antioch. Again, Shayegan likely is correct that Phraates and Seleucus hoped that these communities, and especially the Antiochenes, would show sympathy and affinity toward Seleucus because of their hatred for Demetrius and their continued mourning after Antiochus VII's defeat.⁶⁹ However, Phraates and Seleucus had not anticipated the sudden arrival of the usurper Alexander Zabinas in northern Syria.

Ptolemy VIII had supplied Alexander Zabinas with an army at the behest of Demetrius II's mutinous soldiers and the rebellious Syrian communities. When Alexander entered Syria in ca. 127 BCE, he found little resistance as he marched north toward Antioch and Apamea, at which point he seized the caravan transporting Antiochus VII's body. Seleucus was able to escape back to Mesopotamia; however, Alexander used Antiochus' body to secure his position in Antioch. With a strong base of support in the north, Alexander then defeated Demetrius near Damascus in ca. 126 BCE. Demetrius first fled to Cleopatra Thea's stronghold at Ptolemais before attempting to flee to the fortress city of Tyre, where he was betrayed and killed in 125 BCE.⁷⁰

Unfortunately for Phraates II, his decision to send Seleucus to Syria with Antiochus VII's body failed to accomplish either of his primary objectives, namely to establish Seleucus as a vassal on the throne or further complicate the Seleucid civil war. In fact, Alexander Zabinas used Antiochus' captured body to help secure the Seleucid throne for himself, and Phraates never successfully established a vassal in Syria. He had released Demetrius II and Seleucus to destabilize the Seleucid state; however, Phraates did not commit the military or financial support necessary to make these short-term strategies successful. To be fair, his difficult conflicts, first, with Antiochus VII and, second, with the Saka did not allow him to make a major military commitment in the west. However, the haphazard conduct of these strategies illustrates their shortsightedness. In the 120s BCE, the Parthians began to intervene in the geopolitics of Syria for the first time; however, they had not yet committed to a viable, long-term strategy to dominate this region.⁷¹ Such a strategy was impossible until the newly formed Parthian Empire was stable, and the empire was anything but stable in the aftermath of Antiochus' anabasis.

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⁶⁹ SHAYEGAN: *Arsacids* (n. 8) 149. Note Diod. 34/35. 17. 1.

⁷⁰ Jos. *Ant.* 13. 268; Justin 39. 1. 7–8; Eus. *Chron.* (Smith ed.) 257.

⁷¹ For later possible political interventions in Syria by the Parthians, see BELLINGER, A.: *Seleucid Dura: The Evidence of the Coins. Berytus* 9.1 (1948) 51–67, here 65–67; BELLINGER: *The End* (n. 25) 67; EHLING: *Untersuchungen* (n. 25) 228; SHAYEGAN: *On Demetrius* (n. 1) 97; SHAYEGAN: *Arsacids* (n. 8) 150 n. 449; OVERTOOM, N. L.: *Challenging Roman Domination: The End of Hellenistic Rule and the Rise of the Parthian State from the Third to the First Centuries*. Diss. Louisiana State University 2016, Ch. 3; OVERTOOM, N. L.: *A Reconsideration* (n. 14); OVERTOOM, N. L.: *Reign of Arrows: The Rise of the Parthian Empire in the Hellenistic Middle East*. Oxford, 2020, Chs. 5–6; OVERTOOM, N. L.: *Logistics and Strategy in the Greek Army: The Importance of Babylonia in Hellenistic Warfare*. In BRICE, L. (ed.): *Brill's Companion to Food and Drink in the Armies of Ancient Greece and Rome*. Leiden (forthcoming 2022).