RELIGION IN SELEUKID SYRIA
GODS AT THE CROSSROADS (301-64 BC)

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, Macquarie University Department of Ancient History, 30th August 2010.
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SUMMARY

The dissertation *Religion in Seleukid Syria: gods at the crossroads (301-64 BC)* takes an integrative approach to the study of Hellenistic cult and cultic practices across the Levant during the period of domination by the Seleukid dynasty. It employs a synthesis of archaeological, numismatic and historical evidence in order to establish an overview of „religion” in a period and region which is often under-represented in standard historical accounts, both ancient and modern.

This study discusses religion on two principal levels, that of the state, and that of the individual communities which made up the state. An investigation of state attitudes towards religion discusses the manipulation of both Hellenic and indigenous beliefs by the king and his court in order to secure support among the military and the wider populace. It also places the establishment of the royal cult within this framework and illustrates how and why members of the royal family attained godhead in their own lifetime. With respect to individual communities, the study presents a series of case studies that explore the evidence for religious activity at a local and regional level. This principally takes the form of a study of cultic buildings, but encompasses issues of religious festivals and ritual activity where the evidence allows.

The investigation of Syrian cult under the Seleukids has three principal outcomes. It documents one of the principal aspects of the lives of the past communities. Secondly it outlines the development of religious practices and expression in the region which was the birthplace of the modern world’s three most influential monotheistic religions. Finally, the research methodology allows religion to be used as a lens through which the wider processes of acculturation and rejection within a colonial context may be explored – processes which continue to effect our own increasingly cosmopolitan world.
RESEARCH STATEMENT

This statement certifies that:

i. the following dissertation comprises only original research undertaken towards the award of a PhD except where indicated;

ii. due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used;

iii. ethics approval was not required for this research undertaking;

iv. the dissertation does not exceed 100,000 words exclusive of front matter, figures, footnotes, references and appendices as required by the Macquarie University Higher Degree Research Office.

____________________

Nicholas Luke Wright

30th August 2010
The title of this work, Religion in Seleukid Syria: gods at the crossroads (301-64 BC), although apparently vague, is all encompassing and has been chosen for a number of reasons. The main title covers two very different aspects of the religious experience: the manipulation of religion by the Seleukid regime in Syria, but also the popular practice of religion in Syria during the period of Seleukid rule. The crossroads referred to in the subtitle are a multifaceted metaphor which at different stages of the investigation may represent the geographic location of greater Syria at the crossroads between three continents; a cultural crossroads brought about by this geographic position; or a crossroads in history if one accepts that it was precisely the prevailing Hellenistic conditions of the Levant that gave birth to early Christianity and which has therefore impacted so strongly on the later history of the region and the wider world.

In writing this dissertation, I have attempted to compile a body of research that will benefit the wider community of scholars interested in aspects of the Hellenistic world. This dissertation synthesises evidence drawn from different aspects of ancient world studies, principally archaeology, numismatics and ancient history. In order to cater for a multidisciplinary readership I have tried to avoid the use of specialised terminology or jargon while trying not to undermine the complex issues discussed. To this end I have, for example, avoided the inclusion of large amounts of Greek text and provided the unabbreviated standard English translation for the titles of ancient literary works. Thus the reader will find reference to Lucian’s The Syrian Goddess rather than Luc. Syr. D., or Aelian’s On animals rather than Ael. NA. A list of the ancient sources used throughout this dissertation is provided after the appendices. Any references to specific modern editions of ancient texts have been cited in the relevant footnotes.

A special note must be made regarding the transliteration of names from non-Latin based alphabets. There are no fixed rules for transliteration with regards to the study of the Hellenistic world. This makes it difficult to be one hundred percent consistent with any single convention and any system employed is destined to estrange some. As is the author’s prerogative, I have opted for a system that is not flawless but which does have a sense of cohesive logic. With Greek names I have tried to be strict and adhere to a direct transliteration, maintaining the Hellenised rather than Latinised form. This follows the
practice employed by scholars such as John D. Grainger, Richard A. Billows, G.G. Aperghis and John Ma in their many works on the period. Thus, we have Seleukos II Kallinikos rather than the Seleucus II Callinicus, Koile-Syria rather than Coele-Syria, Laodikeia-by-the-Sea rather than Laodicea-ad-Mare and so on. Unfortunately, there are many exceptions, most of which are used where the familiarity of an anglicised name would make its Hellenisation distracting. Thus Alexander of Macedon is used rather than the more accurate rendering Alexandros of Makedon. The anglicised name Ptolemy is used for the rulers of Egypt whilst the less familiar but more accurate Ptolemaios is retained for the _strategos_ of Koile-Syria, the king of Kommagene and the tetrarch of Chalkis. Names of ancient authors are rendered in the form employed by the _Oxford Classical Dictionary_ to avoid any potential confusion of sources.

In the geographic descriptions and locations throughout the work, I have used the ancient names whenever these are known and the context makes their use possible. Appendix A provides a concordance of the Hellenistic period names with their modern locations including the name of the modern country within whose borders the site now lies. Where these sites lie within disputed territories, the terminology utilised follows the divisions maintained by the United Nations.

A number of bodies provided financial aid throughout the preparation of this thesis. I acknowledge thankfully that without their generous support much more of my research would have been restricted to the university library: Macquarie University Division of Humanities and its successor, the Faculty of Arts (Macquarie Research Excellence Scholarship 2007-2010, travel grants 2007, 2008); the Australian Centre for Ancient Numismatic Studies (Junior Fellowship 2007, grant-in-aid 2008); Macquarie International (travel grants 2007, 2008); the Society for the Study of Early Christianity (grant-in-aid 2008).

At times, the pursuit of reliable information on the Seleukid religious experience has brought to mind the memorable speech delivered by the former US Secretary of Defence, Donald Rumsfeld, at a Department of Defence briefing on 12 February, 2002:

“…because as we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns, the ones we don't know we don't know.”
Indeed the farcical brilliance of Rumsfeld’s speech is so appropriate that it might have been originally written to preface a study of Hellenistic cult rather than the so-called “War on Terror”.

In my quest to piece together a synthesis of an ephemeral subject in an enigmatic period I have benefited greatly from the assistance of my supervisory panel; Dr Peter Edwell (Macquarie University), Prof. Sam Lieu (Macquarie University), Dr Ken Sheedy (Macquarie University), Prof. Graeme Clarke (Australian National University) and Dr Ina Kehrberg (University of Sydney). Their expert advice has clearly informed many of the positions maintained in this volume – I know I could not have completed this research without their support.

In addition, of the numerous faculty members and colleagues who have provided advice and assistance over the years, or just provided stimulating conversation, I would like to give a few special acknowledgements: Dr Claudia Bührig (Deutsches Archäologisches Institut), Ross Burns (Macquarie University), Robert M. Chapple (Northern Archaeological Consultancy), Prof. Shimon Dar (Bar-Ilan University), Dr Kyle Erickson (University of Exeter), Dr Trevor Evans (Macquarie University), Oliver Hoover (American Numismatic Society), Dr Panos Iossif (Belgian School at Athens), Dr Heather Jackson (University of Melbourne), Dr Julia Kindt (University of Sydney), Assoc. Prof. Paul McKechnie (Macquarie University), Assoc. Prof. Ted Nixon (Macquarie University), Wendy Thorp (Cultural Resources Management), Karl Van Dyke (Macquarie University Museum of Ancient Cultures). Lastly I would like to thank my wonderful wife Laura for her love, enthusiasm, encouragement, practical assistance and all-encompassing support. She left her family and friends to come to Australia so that I could write this dissertation. I know how much of a sacrifice that has been and cannot express my gratitude enough. This dissertation is dedicated to you and to our baby son (forthcoming).

Nicholas L. Wright
August 2010
INTRODUCTION

MODERN APPROACHES TO THE SELEUKIDS AND THEIR WORLD

At its height, the Seleukid empire (312-64 BC) controlled a vast territory stretching from the Aegean Sea to beyond the Oxus River and from Armenia to the Sinai Peninsula. The heart of the empire, if not its centre, was the Syrian littoral, the strip of land between the Mediterranean and the Euphrates which connected its eastern domain with the wider Hellenistic world. For 250 years, the Seleukid kings and their Greco-Macedonian elite built cities and fortresses, raised massive armies and patronised temples but with the exception of a handful of sites, there is little archaeological evidence to show for this once mighty empire. The scant literary references are generally hostile, painting the Seleukid regime as everything from xenophobic Hellenes, effeminate eastern barbarians or cruel and impious tyrants, the kings were shown as easily outwitted and their servants cowardly. How then should the modern scholar approach aspects of the Seleukid dynasty and its empire, especially those of a religious nature?

“...it is very difficult indeed to determine the shares that the various influences contributed, from the conquests of Alexander to the Roman domination, to make Syrian paganism what it became under the Caesars. The civilization of the Seleucid empire is little known, and we cannot determine what caused the alliance of Greek thought with the Semitic traditions.”

Thus spoke Franz Cumont in the beginning of the last century. However, there has been much work on aspects of the Seleukid empire in the last 25 years, specifically in the field of numismatics, in the form of numerous regional studies and in terms of archaeological fieldwork. Although none of these surpass the likes of Bevan’s *The house of Seleucus*

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1 Cumont 1911: 121. However, the 1911 publication was a direct English translation of Cumont’s earlier *Les religions orientales dans le paganisme romain* originally published in 1906. Cumont’s alliance of thought and tradition is manifested in the religious phenomenon known as syncretism. The terms, syncretism/syncretic/syncretised are used throughout this study in reference to the process of reconciling two sets of competing belief systems through the merging or amalgamation of foreign deities with familiar or indigenous gods. It illuminates the religious and cultural acceptance of aspects of alien religious traditions without a whole-hearted adoption or conversion.
in regard to its comprehensive political narrative, they have proved vital in the reinterpretation of what it was to rule – or to be ruled by – the Seleukid state. Perhaps now it is becoming possible to critically challenge Cumont’s authority of the religious processes that took place under the Seleukids.2

An important attempt was made in 1990 at a conference held at Fuglsang Manor in Denmark investigating “the extent and character of the supposed process of Hellenization and movement towards a unified culture in the Seleucid kingdom in the 3rd and 2nd centuries BC, with special reference to religion and religious practice.”3 The latter focus of the 1990 investigation centred precisely on the topic of this present research although, enlightening as the resulting publication was, the volume was textually heavy and failed to fully divulge a proper understanding of the role of religion at its various social or political levels under the Seleukid kings. In an article published shortly after the Fuglsang conference, Tzaferis dismissed the complexities of syncretism under the Seleukids as a result of a “religious laxity” and “general indifference” towards the religious traditions of the Hellenic colonists.4 Such dismissive remarks can prove damaging to the study of both the period and the religious phenomenon and have tainted scholarly discourse for many years. One particularly illuminating remark found in Green’s Alexander to Actium – a volume often used as an undergraduate text for the study of the Hellenistic period – is symptomatic of the tenacity of the traditional approach: “If the word „degeneration“ has any meaning at all, then the later Seleucids ... were degenerate: selfish, greedy, murderous, weak, stupid, vicious, sensual, vengeful ... we also find the cumulative effect of centuries of ruthless exploitation: a foreign ruling elite, with no long-term economic insight, aiming at little more than immediate profits and dynastic self perpetuation ...”5

It will become quite clear that much of the colonial approach prevalent through the Bevan-Tarn-Green-Walbank generations of Hellenistic academia is outdated and laden with considerable Romanised bias when viewed beside the scholarship of the likes of Sherwin-White, Kuhrt, Downey, Grainger and Ma. That is not to dismiss the earlier works out of

2 However, note the underlying pessimism inherent in works such as Millar 1987: 130-1, “Given this absence of evidence, we cannot expect to know much about the culture of Syria in this period, or whether there was, except along the coast, any significant evolution towards the mixed culture which came to be so vividly expressed in the Roman period.”
3 Bilde et al. 1990: 7.
hand nor to say that I give myself wholly to the newer doctrines. The Hellenistic scholarship of the last two and a half decades, like so many disciplines, would not be possible were it not for the tremendous efforts of the giants of the early and mid-twentieth century – French and German as well as Anglophone. After all, who could deny the immense influence of scholars such as Droysen, Dussaud, Seyrig or indeed Cumont?

The post-colonial push of the 1990s to recognise the indigenous (eastern) contribution to the Seleukid empire, driven by Sherwin-White and Kuhrt among others, went a long way towards rectifying the traditional focus on the Greco-Roman and ancient Jewish written records. For Kuhrt and Sherwin-White the empire was not a culturally dominating colonial force but a network of co-operation between the ruling dynasts and the various indigenous elites – a system of control largely inherited from their Achaemenid predecessors.\(^6\) However, works such as Sherwin-White and Kuhrt’s *From Samarkhand to Sardis* (1993) are at risk of becoming „Babylocentric” in the same way that the study of fifth century BC Greece is so often „Athenocentric”. Obviously, the Seleukids considered Babylonia and Iran to be crucial components of their empire – the massive military force raised by Antiochos VII Sidetes (80-100,000 strong) to recover the region from the Parthians clearly indicates the area’s ideological and material value. However, the sheer volume of material relating to Seleukid Babylonia (preserved through the medium of inscribed clay tablets)\(^7\) leaves the impression that outside of Babylonia, all other parts of the empire were peripheral. The study and publication of these cuneiform texts continues and adds increasingly to our understanding of daily life in Hellenistic Babylonia. However, the Babylocentric view of the empire as a whole may be refocused through an illustration drawn from the reign of Antiochos III the Great – the Seleukid king whose reign is best documented. Although he had served as viceroy of the East during his brother’s short rule, presumably residing more or less permanently in Seleukeia-on-the-Tigris, during his own 36-year reign, the king spent parts of a mere three years in Babylonia (in 220, 204 and 188/7 BC)\(^8\).

By the same token, the excellent works of Grainger (especially *The cities of Seleukid Syria*, 1990) carry their own Mediterranean based prejudices, emphasising the colonising projects of the kings which saw large numbers of Hellenised migrants settling in

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\(^7\) See for example, Linssen 2004.  
\(^8\) Ma 2002: 7-8.
north Syria. Ma’s *Antiochos III and the cities of western Asia Minor* (2000, reprinted with addenda 2002), although necessarily focused on the far western fringe of the Seleukid empire, provides abundant information which impacts on our understanding of the wider empire. Ma freely acknowledges that his geographic unit was one of many foci within the state. What needs to be continually stressed is the extensive and diverse nature of the Seleukid empire from its inception and the fact that there was no centre except the person of the king and his itinerant court.\(^9\) We find time and again that the empire was broken down into separate “commands”, often held by members of the king’s immediate family, that saw viceroys set over Anatolia, Syria, Babylonia and Media.\(^10\) Each of these regions had their own centre and each region formed an integral part of the “whole”. The loss of Media caused just as much consternation in the court as the loss of the Anatolian satrapies. This holistic approach to understanding the dynamics of the Seleukid empire was championed by many of the scholars participating in a conference dedicated to the Seleukids held at the University of Exeter in 2008\(^11\) and such views are beginning to dominate in the scholarship of the early twenty-first century.

A significant step towards an understanding of Syrian religion under the sway of a Mediterranean based empire came in 2003 with the publication of Lightfoot’s *Lucian: on the Syrian Goddess*. Taking a holistic approach to the study of Lucian’s treatise on the sanctuary at Hierapolis-Bambyke, Lightfoot accumulated an impressive corpus of comparative material, both historical and archaeological, with which to support or reject the various statements of Lucian as pilgrim. Lightfoot’s work is so comprehensive that except for a few points of contention, it is hard to see how there could be any need for another reappraisal of Lucian’s *The Syrian Goddess* in the near future. Although Lucian flourished in the mid-second century AD, two centuries after the fall of the last Seleukid kings, much

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\(^9\) Austin 2003: 125.
\(^10\) Antiochos I was co-regent over the Upper satrapies from 293-281 BC (Diodorus Siculus *Library of History* 21.1.21; Plutarch *Demetrius* 38). Alexander, son of Achaios acted as *strategos* or viceroy of Anatolia beyond the Taurus for his brother-in-law, Antiochos II (*OGIS* 229.100-5 = Austin 2006: no.174) and Antiochos Hierax initially held the same position for his brother Seleukos II (Justin *Epitome* 37.2.6). Antiochos III seems to have acted as viceroy in Seleukeia-on-the-Tigris during the reign of his brother (Eusebius *Chronicle* Schoene-Petermann edition p.253; Polyaenus *Stratagems* 2.71.4). Under Antiochos III, Anatolia beyond the Taurus was held by the royal kinsman Achaios before the latter’s move to independence (Polyaenus *Stratagems* 5.40.7). Antiochos, son of Antiochos III was left as viceroy in Antioch-on-the-Orontes during his father’s Anatolian campaign in the early 190s (Appian *Syrian Wars* 4; Livy *History of Rome* 33.49.6) and was subsequently sent to administer the Upper satrapies (Livy *History of Rome* 35.13.5, 35.15.3) while the future Seleukos IV was established in the same period as viceroy at Lysimacheia (Appian *Syrian Wars* 3, Livy *History of Rome* 33.40.6, 33.41.4, Polybius *Histories* 18.51.8).

of the historical material of his predominantly ethnographic study pertained to the lifetime of Seleukos I. In Lucian’s day, the standing temple was believed to have been funded by that monarch. The work is therefore a possible source for the Hellenistic period sanctuary at Hierapolis in lieu of any archaeological evidence. The most significant contentious belief of Lightfoot is that Lucian’s temple could not have been a Seleukid construction but must date to a later Roman-dominated period. This conviction obviously has significant ramifications for the use of Lucian as a source and serves to highlight the continued uncertainty that surrounds the study of Syrian religion.

As recently as 2005, Winfried Held attempted to collate archaeological material to form a comprehensive picture of sacred architecture under the Seleukid kings.\textsuperscript{12} Although the study resulted in several interesting observations regarding eastern traditions of worship from temple roof tops, the principal obstacle faced by Held’s research lay in the real dearth of architectural remains for the period, especially within the religious sphere. Unaware of the Jebel Khalid excavations at the time of publication, Held was forced to rely on Roman period material to extrapolate his findings.

The primary focus of the present study, the Syrian or Levantine satrapies (particularly Seleukis, Kyrrhestis and Koile-Syria), does not reflect my own sense of „centre“ or even the most important part of the empire. In contrast, it reflects the selection of just one of the centres of the kingdom and, pragmatically, it makes sense that the area under investigation was occupied by a Seleukid state (or often several Seleukid states) longer than any other part of the empire – between 301 and 64 BC. Of course the very nature of the Levant as a crossroads between Europe, Asia and Africa led to the region being susceptible to syncretism, in religion as in other facets of culture, and as such provides an illuminating microcosm in which to analyse the processes and effects of Hellenisation. Perhaps the most significant archaeological site in terms of the provision of new evidence for this study has been Jebel Khalid, situated on the Euphrates river on the border between Syria and Mesopotamia. An Australian team led by Professor Graeme Clarke of the Australian National University has systematically excavated select areas of the site since 1986. Of particular importance to the present study are the rather fine acropolis palace and the temple and temenos courtyard known together as Area B.\textsuperscript{13} As the

\textsuperscript{12} Held 2005.
\textsuperscript{13} The first ten years of excavation, including the acropolis, parts of the necropolis, fortifications and aspects of the domestic quarter have been published as JK 1. The terracotta figurines, predominantly from the
situation dictates (and more importantly, as the evidence allows), comparative material will be drawn from other sites within the Levant and where necessary, from further afield.

The site of Aï Khanoum in Afghanistan provides an invaluable insight into Hellenistic civilisation in Central Asia and Dura-Europos has provided a comparable basis of investigation for Hellenistic (Greco-Parthian and Roman) processes on the cusp of Mesopotamia. In like manner, it is hoped that in future, Jebel Khalid will be acknowledged as a flagship of Seleukid settlement analysis in northern Syria. However, in historical terms, Jebel Khalid played so small a role that its ancient name may not even have survived in the extant sources\textsuperscript{14} – the settlement was overshadowed by the great cities of the Syrian Tetrapolis and even by the provincial centres, Beroia (Aleppo) and Hierapolis-Bambyke (Membij). However, these larger settlements continued to prosper following the Hellenistic period and more than two thousand years of occupation obscures the Seleukid period settlements. Further, unlike the well preserved ancient remains of either Aï Khanoum or Dura-Europos, the urbanised occupation of Jebel Khalid was confined to the Seleukid period. The site was colonised in the early years of the dynasty and abandoned just before the demise of the last kings. The totality of evidence provided by the site is therefore relevant to the study of aspects of Seleukid colonisation.

A METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH TO SELEUKID RELIGION

Any examination of the religious beliefs and practices of past societies is plagued by a myriad of challenges. The usual problems of distance in space and time which afflict all modern interpretations of the ancient world are compounded when past beliefs are approached rationally from a culture versed in Judaeo-Christian monotheism and educated in twenty-first century cynicism.\textsuperscript{15} Further complexities of researching a population’s religious belief structures have been well summed up in a recent study of the political and religious history of seventeenth century Ireland. Although dealing with a subject geographically, culturally and chronologically detached from the focus of the present study, the basic problems remain unaltered.

\textsuperscript{14} However, on this matter see Appendix D.

\textsuperscript{15} Patrich 2005: 95.
“Measuring the impact of the intangible spiritual lives of contemporaries on their actions is fraught with difficulty, which is why historians have preferred to deal with belief in the organised, corporate form of religion. However, this is to ignore the untidy reality which belief represents. People were part of a religious grouping for many overlapping reasons. For some it was custom ... For others it was primarily a badge of belonging ... For others, religion was the result of emotionally charged experiences that convinced them of their need for supernatural assistance in their lives.”

Such a multifaceted understanding of religion provides a myriad of avenues of investigation, especially when it comes to cult in the Hellenistic world. However, the same multifaceted approach has the power to create a scholarly Will o’ the Wisp. The following study of Syrian religion under the Seleukid kings aims to avoid some of the pitfalls of too broad a subject whilst utilising a varied and comprehensive assortment of evidence to draw out a workable, adaptable but ultimately overarching hypothesis regarding the religious beliefs and practices maintained in Syria during the period of Seleukid rule.

With this aim in mind, it is important to establish a framework within which the wider study may evolve. Crucial to this is the definition of „religion”. Throughout this study the terms religion and cult, religious and cultic, are used more or less interchangeably and are not intended to carry any form of subjective bias. Both are used to refer to some form of structured or organised system of practices. Gillespie’s “untidy reality” of actual, personal, belief is much harder to pin down, especially in an era which has left few clues regarding cognitive processes. For the purpose of this study, the basic understanding of religion or of a religious complex may be identified as a combination of one or more of the following:

- A sacred topography;
- A physical delineation of the boundary between sacred and profane space;
- Veneration of some form of supernatural entity or entities;
- Group beliefs and ideological structures;
- A mythologically based narrative system, recorded or reported by a literary elite and/or depicted visually and thereby accessible to the wider (illiterate) community;
- Cultic practices including, but not restricted to, sacrifices, parades and pilgrimage;

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• Prayers, either liturgical or personal;
• Monumental architecture (especially for civic cult);
• Sculpture and other high status decoration;
• Material culture not normally associated with other types of sites;
• Architectural and other evidence paralleled at other known cultic sites;
• Spatial continuity of religious activity.  

Within the scheme of colonialism and imperialism that existed across the Hellenistic east, religion provided “a major, if not the main, area in which patriotic localism could coexist with allegiance to the centre”. Through the adoption, adaption or manipulation of indigenous belief systems, the ruling foreign power could reach a modicum of understanding with its native subjects. This Seleukid inclination to assimilate indigenous traditions resulted in the generally peaceful co-existence of otherwise alien social systems. The underlying Semitic religious practices found in the cities of Syria and Mesopotamia during the Greco-Roman period show distinct local variation within equally distinct universal patterns. Naturally, individuals in any cultic complex (ancient or modern) pay more or less observance to their religious systems in accordance with their means and personal beliefs – a concept epitomised in the sixth century BC by Drakon’s Law.

In order to identify religious elements within Seleukid Syria, a variety of evidence has been utilised. As already mentioned, the excavated remains at Jebel Khalid will be used to provide one primary set of material evidence. In addition to Jebel Khalid, archaeological data will also be utilised from other significant sites across the Levant – principally Hierapolis-Bambyke, Seleukeia-Pieria, Baitokaike, Umm el-Amed, Gadara, and Gerasa. The study is therefore informed by sites ranging from the north-eastern Mediterranean coast, inland to the Euphrates and south to Jordan and Israel. Where necessary, other sites from across the wider empire such as Edessa or Dura-Europos in Mesopotamia, and Aï

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17 Coogan (1987: 2-3) reduced the requirements to identify a cultic site to one or more of four criteria: isolation, exotic materials, continuity and parallels. While his criteria may suit the needs of Iron Age sites in the southern Levant, they are too restrictive for the nuances of the Hellenistic period.
18 Lightfoot 2003: 207.
19 Drijvers 1980: 6. Semitic/Semitic are used here and throughout as general terms to discuss the indigenous populations of the Levant (west Semitic) and Mesopotamia/Babylonia (east Semitic).
20 “People should worship the gods and the local heroes, communally in accordance with ancestral laws, privately in accordance with their means.” In Porphyry On Abstinence 4.22 translation from van Straten 1993: 261.
Khanoum in Baktria will also be called upon for supplementary data. By narrowing the focus of study to a small number of sites, the body of evidence can be collated with greater cohesion than might otherwise be possible. Although it is sometimes difficult to avoid, the extrapolation of information from post-Seleukid phases of sites will be kept to a minimum.

Apart from excavation material, information from the accounts of early modern European travellers has been used to supplement what is known materially of specific sites (especially important for Hierapolis-Bambyke) and of course ancient written sources have been scrutinised to assist in the cognitive understanding of the material culture. When dealing with ancient written evidence it is unfortunately even harder, and at times impossible, to resist the need to extrapolate information from sources of different periods. The great dearth of surviving literature written during the Hellenistic age is no secret to any scholar of the period but the problem is accentuated when it comes to the Seleukids and their empire, the more so in regards to religious material. The modern scholar is forced to rely on the biased and often hostile views expressed by Appian, Polybius, Diodorus Siculus, Justin, Josephus, Eusebius, Athenaeus and the books of the Maccabees. It is only in Lucian’s treatise on Hierapolis-Bambyke that we are provided with any attempt to discuss religious observances within the kingdom and even he is of the most dubious reliability.\footnote{See Chapter 4.5 below.}

State documentation of religious matters is restricted to a small number of inscriptions naming holders of priesthoods and the numismatic record. Often an under-utilised resource, royally-authorised coinage provides an insightful keyhole through which to observe changing state attitudes towards religious matters. While the obverses of most Seleukid coins bore the image of the king (often religious images in themselves), the majority of reverses held iconography of religious significance – state deities or those of local prominence that had gained state patronage. Much of the study of the Seleukid patronage of specific deities and the development of the royal cult may be established through numismatic evidence.

In summary, this dissertation takes an integrative approach to the study of Hellenistic cult and cultic practices in an important part of western Asia by employing a combination of archaeological, numismatic and historical evidence. Although any thorough investigation of Seleukid religion would prove illuminating in itself, this research uses
religion as a lens through which to explore the processes of acculturation and rejection within a colonial context. It discusses the state attitude towards, and manipulation of, both Hellenic and indigenous beliefs and places this within a framework developed out of a series of case studies exploring evidence for religion at a regional level. The thesis outlines the development of religious practices and expression in the region which formed the birthplace of the modern world’s three most influential monotheistic religions.

Without a detailed analysis of the political and cultural history of Hellenistic Syria there can be no basis on which to build an understanding of the religious climate of the Seleukid kingdom nor of the relationship between the kings and the belief systems of their subjects. Therefore, this study begins with a narrative account of the Hellenistic occupation of, and the continued Seleukid control over, Syria (Chapter 1). The first chapter includes a brief enquiry into the nature of the perceived ethnic groupings within the region and how these may have influenced the assimilation or rejection of religious beliefs. A more comprehensive consideration of religion under the Seleukids follows, beginning with a review of deities patronised by the kings (Chapter 2) and continuing with an analysis of the development of the royal cult in which the kings initially received posthumous deification but which grew to include the worship of not only the living king and queen, but even their living children (Chapter 3). Devolving from a state to a regional level, the popular worship conducted at various Levantine sites, both civic and rural, is investigated, divided geographically into northern (Chapter 4) and southern (Chapter 5) groupings. The concluding chapter evaluates the available evidence and attempts to refute the statement by Cumont with which this introduction opened. A century on, it is possible to determine with some confidence the cause which allied Greek and Semitic traditions in the last three centuries BC.