The Elephant in the Room: Elephants on the Coins of Seleucus I

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While Alexander the Great made limited use of elephants on the battlefield and in his royal propaganda (Holt 2003), our appreciation of war elephants is decidedly influenced by later Roman historians (Trautmann 2025). Undoubtedly, however, elephants acquired considerable traction on the coinage of Seleucus I Nicator and remained identified with his dynasty's efforts to project royal authority (Kritt 1997; Alonso Troncoso 2013; Kosmin 2014). While scholars have discussed the employment of elephants by Seleucus as a result of his need to bolster his dynastic claims and remove himself from the shadow of Ptolemy who harboured him during his exile from Babylon (van Oppen de Ruiter), we also need to consider that the 500 war elephants that Seleucus received from Chandragupta Maurya in 303 BCE did not just go to the battlefield. They entered Babylonian administrative history, religious tradition, and literal physical space with many of them deployed to carry away the debris of the decayed temple of Marduk in Babylon during its renovation. Thus, in this paper I build on Aperghis' argument (2020) that the elephant coins were designed to appeal to the non-Greek soldiers in Seleucus' army. The coins were also a reminder of Seleucus' ability to bring the "chaos monster" of Babylonian tradition to the service of Marduk.

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