



SELEUCID ECONOMY

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The Seleucid empire extended at its peak from the Mediterranean to the borders of [India](#), enduring from 312 to 129 BCE, after which it gradually broke up until its final submission to Rome in 64 BCE. In its vast area existed regions with quite different physical characteristics and climates: the Mediterranean coastal districts, the Mesopotamian alluvial plain, and the uplands of Iran and Afghanistan. The total population supported probably reached between 14 and 18 million inhabitants. Entire regions ([Mesopotamia](#), Syria, and coastal [Asia Minor](#)) became considerably urbanized as a result of a conscious policy of city foundation, but this also affected regions further east (principally [Media](#) and [Bactria](#)).

Economic activity was based mainly on agriculture, with dry farming (see [AGRICULTURE](#)) mostly practiced in the Mediterranean region and hilly areas with sufficient rainfall, while irrigation-based farming was the norm in areas of the interior with insufficient rainfall, but traversed by large rivers, such as the [Tigris](#), [Euphrates](#), and [Oxus](#), from which water could be distributed in canal networks. An alternative system existed in Iran, where water was brought to the cultivable areas via underground channels (*qanats*). The Seleucid administration controlled much of the water supply and other valuable natural resources, such as precious and utility metals, timber, and salt. The staple cereal crop was [barley](#), with some wheat grown in western Asia Minor, while the [olive](#) and vine flourished in the Mediterranean region. In Mesopotamia and further east the [date palm](#) was the main fruit crop, while



sesame oil replaced olive oil as the principal ingredient for cooking, lighting, and [cosmetics](#). [Animal husbandry](#) was present alongside agriculture almost everywhere, but it was more significant in the [nomadic](#) populations living in arid regions bordering on cultivable areas and in the Zagros, where the long-range seasonal movement of flocks was practiced (see [HERDS AND FLOCKS](#)).

Trade and industry in the Seleucid empire tended to be local, with cities and towns being supplied mainly with foodstuffs from the surrounding countryside and providing a few products of industry (principally textiles and metalwork) and services in exchange. Intra-regional and inter-regional trade in bulk commodities was difficult because of the high cost of land transport and the uniformity of production over large areas, such as Mesopotamia, even when the great rivers could facilitate the movement of goods. But some higher priced goods, e.g., textiles, did travel. Only along the Mediterranean coast was there an appreciable amount of bulk trade because of cheap transport by sea and significant variations in local conditions caused primarily by variable rainfall. Long-distance trade in luxury goods from southern [Arabia](#) and India, principally frankincense, myrrh, spices, ivory, precious wood, and stones, arrived at the capital, Seleucia on the Tigris, overland from the East or across the Arabian peninsula or by sea via the Persian Gulf, and much of it was carried to the Mediterranean.

One of the key objectives of the Seleucid kings was to derive as much revenue as possible from the underlying economy of their empire without damaging its future prospects. At its peak, this revenue probably reached 15,000 to 20,000 talents of silver (400 – 500 metric tons) annually. It was necessary that this sum be in coin as much as possible, since this was the medium required to pay the mainly professional armies used by the Seleucids to maintain their hold on power and defend their territory against threats from Greek rival kings in the Mediterranean region (Ptolemies, Attalids and Antigonids) and nomadic tribes beyond their borders.

The Seleucids achieved the conversion from mostly commodity-based revenue, as practiced in the Achaemenid empire, to coin-based mainly through the process of urbanization. They founded many cities, partly with Greek settlers, in areas that were relatively underdeveloped, but with rich agricultural potential or access to the sea and large rivers: principally in northern Syria, northern and eastern Mesopotamia, the Persian Gulf coast, Media and Bactria. Markets were thus established for the surrounding rural areas and exchange could increasingly be carried out in coin, something that



the Greeks settlers were used to. This policy of urbanization required the granting of parcels of royal land to the inhabitants of cities, as well as deserving individuals in the administration, with the requirement that the land become part of a city's land permanently. The previous system used by the Achaemenids, of temporary land grants to individuals for revenue only, continued to apply in some cases. Indigenous cities and temples also received land grants, with exactly the same objectives of strengthening local economies. At the same time the king was relieved from the burden of managing royal land and going to the trouble and uncertainty of exchanging surplus produce for coin. It was more efficient ultimately to collect tribute and taxes directly in coin, particularly in the form of a lump sum, from a city or village, which then shared out the cost among its members.

Annual tribute was levied on cities, rural communities and ethnic groups and assessed as a fixed amount mainly on the productive capacity of their land for agriculture and animal husbandry. Apart from this, taxation was also applied to agricultural produce from royal, city and temple land as the value of different proportions of the harvest depending on the commodity and the region. Thus barley production in an irrigated region such as Mesopotamia would be more heavily taxed than in a dry-farming area, sometimes even at a rate of 50 percent. Animal husbandry was taxed separately, not only according to the size of herds and flocks, but also sometimes for pasturage rights on royal land. Taxes were regularly levied on the movement of goods at the borders of royal land and provinces, when entering cities or passing through ports or even on ships on the great rivers. Sales taxes were applied both in city marketplaces and when goods were sold directly. This included the sale of slaves, where a special additional tax applied and a distinction was made between imported slaves and those 'home-grown.' There were also taxes for a variety of legal transactions, e.g., related to property or slave registrations. In some cases head taxes were also imposed on individuals, usually males above a certain age, in different segments of the population, while industry was sometimes burdened by a tax on artisans.

Though taxation was extremely varied and applied in many different ways in different regions, it does not seem to have been an abnormally heavy burden and the Seleucid kings regularly conceded tax reductions or exemptions for political or economic reasons. These might be permanent or temporary, e.g., to ensure the loyalty of a newly conquered Greek city or to help a city recover from destruction after a war or to support a local festival.



The Seleucid kings also received *ad hoc* income from indemnities imposed on defeated enemies, war plunder, the granting of charters to cities, sales of royal land, etc., but this represented only a small proportion of regular royal income from the economic activities of the subject populations.

Seleucid expenditure was mainly incurred for the armed forces, probably around 50 percent of the total budget in peacetime and considerably more in wartime. The army was essentially a professional force paid mainly in coin and augmented during major campaigns by levies of native troops and allies. The two other major items of regular expenditure were the cost of the satrapal administration in the twenty or so satrapies (cf. [ACHAEMENID SATRAPIES](#)) and the maintenance of the king and his court. There was also a substantial amount of *ad hoc* expenditure for benefactions to cities and temples, both within and outside the empire, in order to project the image of the Seleucids as powerful, wealthy, god-fearing, and benevolent kings. There was also the cost of city building and the initial support of colonists, although much of this was incurred in kind from the quarries, forests, and granaries of royal land. After their defeat in 190 BCE, the Seleucids also incurred a substantial cost in the indemnity of 15,000 talents of silver (400 metric tons) imposed by Rome.

The use of coinage was key to the Seleucid economy. Because of the need to pay their mainly military expenses in coin, the Seleucids required their taxes to be collected increasingly in coin. At the time the empire was founded in 312, by far the most common gold and silver coins circulating were those of [Alexander the Great](#), minted by him and, after his death, by his generals from the treasures captured from the [Achaemenid](#) kings amounting to the equivalent value of about 5,000 metric tons of silver. The Seleucids made no attempt to replace the international 'Alexanders' with their own coins, but allowed them to circulate freely within their empire, along with all other foreign coins of the same (Attic) standard, including 'Alexanders' minted by other states. What the Seleucids simply did was to issue their own precious metal coins, mostly silver, when it was necessary to make payments either locally ('peacetime coinage') or because of some major military campaign ('wartime coinage') and sufficient coins were not available in the appropriate treasuries. This meant that the share of Seleucid silver coins circulating within the empire increased only very gradually to reach about 50 percent by ca. 164 BCE. After this, however, as the empire entered a phase of warring rival dynasties and territorial reductions, the coins became increasingly debased in their silver content and lighter in weight, which caused purer and heavier



foreign specimens to be withdrawn from circulation by hoarders. But rival kings also melted down coins of their opponents and re-minted them in their own names for propaganda reasons. Throughout, the major coinage issues were those of tetradrachms (e.g., The management of royal land, revenues, and expenses was the function of a body of financial administrators in each satrapy who were independent of the civil/military administrators there and reported directly to the king. They were responsible for the collection of tribute and taxes, for the treasuries where these were stored in the form of coin or commodities and for the issuing of coin for payment purposes to the civil/military administrators, the ones who mainly needed it. This was an efficient system of control and had probably been inherited at the lower administrative level from the Achaemenids. The Persepolis Fortification texts (see [PERSEPOLIS ELAMITE TABLETS](#)) show how the commodity expenses of the Persian kings in Fars were jointly controlled by financial officials responsible for storehouses and administrators responsible for the labor and sustenance of groups of workers and animals.

That the Seleucid empire endured for nearly 200 years is due both to its sound economic base and the manner in which this was efficiently exploited by successive Seleucid kings.

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