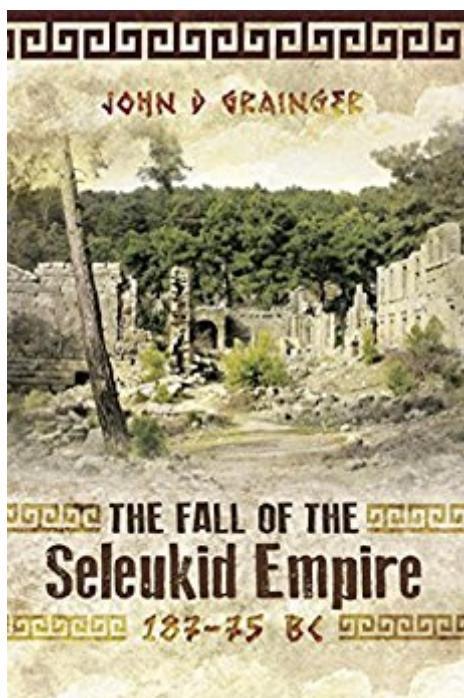


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# The Fall Of The Seleukid Empire 187-75 BC:



## Synopsis

The concluding part of John D Grainger's history of the Seleukids traces the tumultuous last century of their empire. In this period it was riven by dynastic disputes, secessions and rebellions, the religiously-inspired insurrection of the Jewish Maccabees, civil war and external invasion from Egypt in the West and the Parthians in the East. By the 80s BC, the empire was disintegrating, internally fractured and squeezed by the converging expansionist powers of Rome and Parthia. This is a fittingly, dramatic and colourful conclusion to John Grainger's masterful account of this once-mighty empire.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Good read.

Review first posted on .co.uk on 14 December 2014 This is the third and last volume of John Grainger's history on the Seleucid Empire. It covers a period of a bit more than a century and it is probably the less known (and perhaps also the less studied) part of their history.

The book, and the little-known story of the decline of a once-powerful Empire, has several considerable merits, and perhaps also a couple of problems. I have already mentioned the first of these merits. There are few, if any, modern and accessible accounts in English on the last century of the Seleucid Empire. The second merit is to show that the decline and fall was not engineered by Rome, contrary to what is often still believed. One of the qualities of this book is precisely to show that the loss of Asia Minor and the peace treaty that Antiochus III had to sign following his defeat did not cripple his Empire. Asia Minor was not one of the core provinces of the Empire. The clauses of the treaty seem to have been largely ignored by the Seleucid King and his immediate successors and not enforced by the Romans, at least initially. In addition, the last Seleucid king was not deposed by the Romans but by Tigrane, King of Armenia, which was a kingdom that was once a vassal of the Seleucid Empire. The third merit is to identify the root cause of the Fall: the inability to resist and check the expansion of the Parthians, also once a vassal kingdom. However, John Grainger shows that this inability had little to do with military weakness. Instead, he identifies the main cause of the decline and fall as being the breakdown of the normal order of succession by which the King nominated his successor → almost always his eldest surviving son. This lead to multiple bouts of debilitating civil war with the crown becoming up for grabs from whoever commanded sufficient military support to take it. As well shown by the author, the precedent for this was set with the reign of the rather ruthless Antiochus IV Epiphanes who displaced and disposed of his much younger nephew whose father had died while he was still young. Another interesting feature is to show to what extent the Jewish sources on the rebellions of the Maccabees can be misleading in several respects. The main point made here is that these rebellions were for a long time mere sideshows for the Seleucids, at least up until they had lost both Media and Mesopotamia, that is two out of the three core regions of the Empire. This left the Seleucids with only the third (Syria), which also started to fragment and was torn by further civil wars between various pretenders to the crown. As mentioned at the beginning of this review, the book also has a couple of problems. The first cannot be blamed on the author and has to do with the rather complex narrative with multiple Kings and pretenders bearing the same names and something competing for the throne (several Antiochus, for instance). This can make the book somewhat difficult to read and the story difficult to follow at times, especially for a general reader. A genealogy of the Seleucids partly addresses this point although it unfortunately does not include the dates of reign of the various monarchs. A second, perhaps more controversial, point is one of the ones made in the conclusion. The author does emphasise, and quite correctly, that the Seleucid Empire is the only of the great Hellenistic kingdoms to have suffered a kind of disintegration in slow motion. However, I

could not help feeling that explaining this away by simply stating that the Empire was doomed to fail from the start was a bit superficial. Moreover, claiming that such a failure occurred because its power was based on a very narrow Greco-Macedonian population base may also be a bit of an oversimplification, especially if one considers that a large portion of the Seleucid heavy cavalry was made up of Persian and Median nobles. Four stars for a valuable book, even if some of the author's statements and positions may seem a bit controversial or even questionable at times.

The book is the third in a series that covers the Seleucid Empire. I mention this because the author assumes knowledge of the rise of the empire and its most important leader Antichus III, and does not provide much information on these subjects, assuming that the reader has read the two proceeding books in the series. I did not read these books, as I was already familiar with this material; however, I feel that this book would have benefited greatly from a short (10-20 pages) prologue to bring the reader up to speed. I definitely do not recommend this book to someone who is not familiar with the rise of Seleucid Empire and Antichus III. (Note - the author does not use the typical Latin based transliteration from the Greek, using the letter k instead of c as is used in most other books, and os instead of us, but I am using the spelling of Seleucid rather than Seleukid and Antichus rather than the author's spelling Antichos as this conforms to the more common usage.) The book begins in 187 BC, with the reign of Seleucus IV, followed by Antichus IV (the Antichus of the bible). It contains two maps and a chronology of the kings of the Seleucid Empire, starting with Antichus III. The book is well written and is replete with details about numerous battles and dynastic wars that led to the ultimate fall of the empire. The book paints a vivid picture of how and why the empire fell, showing the influence of how these dynastic struggles, and struggles with Ptolemaic Egypt, sapped the empire's strength, allowing it to fall the Romans and the Parthians. I recommend it to anyone with the aforementioned background knowledge on the rise of the empire and the empire at its peak.

This is a brief review of Vol. 3 of John Grainger's three volume work on the entire course of the Seleukid Kingdom. The full title is *The Fall of the Seleukid Empire 187-75 BC* by John D. Grainger; Pen and Sword, 2015. The third volume was a tougher read for me than the first two, mainly because of the unremitting series of disasters it chronicles. From the time Antiochus IV (of Biblical infamy) killed his nephew and seized the throne, there began what seems to have been an endless series of pretenders and rebellions, sometimes with as many as three or four candidates for the

throne slugging it out at once. The institutions unifying the kingdom were enough to hold it more or less together for roughly 100 years, but the constant corrosive effect of the complete absence of any real legitimacy ultimately doomed the state. Grainger manages, somehow, to find what is interesting to tell about this slow-motion disaster. By painstakingly assembling the scant evidence, he manages to present a coherent chronicle of events, complete with fascinating glimpses into the character and motivation of the various participants. This book does provide a really thorough answer to that age old wargamer's question; if the Seleukid army was really as tough as most rules make it seem on the table, why did the Kingdom fall apart? The answer, according to Grainger, is that so long as the Kingdom was able to control its main sources of money and recruits, the army remained effective. Eventually, the constant friction caused by the unremitting civil wars eroded the manpower pool and tax base beyond what was sustainable. If you, like me, are fascinated by the Hellenistic period in general and the Seleukids in particular, I urge you to get ahold of this series (The Rise of the Seleukid Empire and The Seleukid Empire of Antiochos III are the other 2 volumes) as soon as you can. These books are far superior to what we wargamers usually get from our specialty presses like Pen and Sword. This is not another book written by an intelligent, well read amateur. Grainger is the real thing; a scholarly, erudite writer who dumbs nothing down, gives you all the evidence and detail, yet writes with a wonderful clarity that even ignoramuses like your humble servant can understand. Again, I cannot recommend this series highly enough. It is magnificent

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