The Bull-Horned King

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"Bull horns, Great King?" Aeneas, son of Jacob, considered Antiochus' orders in puzzlement. He had once the honour of viewing his patron's father as he marched an endless cavalcade of beasts and men, brazen and battle-born, to victory against his former employer at Lysimachia (281 BCE). Still half a *stadion* away, Seleucus was plainly of Heraclean strength and stature – especially so for a man of seventy years.[1] He was, in truth, not dissimilar to the huge trumpeting war machines which accompanied him – massive, mighty, and majestic. But Aeneas could not recall ever spying bull horns erupting from his head.

"Would not an elephant headdress reflect his majesty more clearly? Like that which divine Alexander once wore?" The proposition elicited only a frown from Antiochus.

"Do you take me for a Ptolemy?"[2] His disapproval was immediately met by the fawning of the courtiers present at Sardis, each endeavouring to assure the king that he was, in fact, not a Ptolemy.

"Enough – spare me your grovelling and leave us." Antiochus spoke sternly, waving them away. "No, Aeneas, I think a painting of my father with bull horns will sufficiently demonstrate the righteous glory of our kingdom and honour my divine father's memory. As he himself said at my accession, 'what is decreed by the king is always right.'"[3]

Aeneas bowed his head in obeisance. "Your wish is indeed my command, Great King." The painter paused and wrinkled his nose before continuing, weighing his words carefully. "But, to paint is not to follow orders. A painting reflects oneself, his passion, his initiative. A painting ought capture the very *psyche* of its subject, so that your divine father's very lifeforce might imbue it, as the gods inhabit their likeness of marble and bronze. A painting ought fuse ideal and reality as it does the spirit of its creator and subject. And so – you will forgive my ignorance – but I must ask: Why bull horns, Great King?"

Before Antiochus could answer, however, winged words flew from the room's dark corner: "*Like a bull who stands supreme above the assembled herd of cattle, just so Zeus made the son of Atreus supreme that day among so many fighters, the greatest of them all.*"[4]

Aeneas had forgotten the poet Aratus was even present, veiled as he was by shadow and assiduous silence.[5] At this Antiochus smiled – a rare sight these days. Some years had passed

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[1] Appian, *Syriaca* 57.294.

[2] While the elephant-scalp headdress was common on Ptolemaic coins from 320 onward (e.g. Coins of the Ptolemaic Empire vol. 1.1, 26), the motif proved short-lived in the Seleucid kingdom. See, most recently, Lorber and Iossif 2022.

[3] Appian, *Syriaca* 61.325, trans. B. McGing.

[4] Homer, *Iliad* 2.575–579, trans. E. Wilson.

[5] Vita, *Arati* 1.8: Antiochus allegedly tasked Aratus with reproducing an unadulterated version of the *Iliad*. See also Vita, *Arati* 3.16.

since the king officially laid his father to rest at the royal *temenos* in Seleucia Pieria and commissioned Aeneas. And yet, internal disorder, unruly barbarian hordes, and diplomacy with the king of Macedonia had impeded him from honouring Seleucus befittingly.[6] Age and apprehension gnawed at his once youthful countenance.

"Just so, my friend," Antiochus responded, nodding at Aratus before returning his attention to the painter. "Very well, Aeneas. I shall tell you of bull horns and heroic exploits, but I am afraid Homer and Aratus express it more elegantly than I ever could." The king shifted forward on his seat and raised interlocked hands to his lips in contemplation.

He began: "Did that treacherous wretch Lysimachus ever deign to tell my father's story while you were under his employment?" Aeneas nodded and replied, "More or less. Though undoubtedly with some impassioned exaggerations on my late employer's behalf. Your father, I hear, was a man of noble birth, who, against all adversity, attained your kingdom through virtue and valiance. The one time I saw him – by the gods – I thought I spied Heracles himself." Such a statement seemed to please Antiochus, for it was spoken in truth and not flattery.

"Good, then we need not be here all day. As you say, my father was a mighty man. War had moulded his shape, as Hephaestus hammers a blade, and Alexander soon noticed his worth during the campaign against Porus. One day on campaign, Alexander had ordered a momentous sacrifice for Zeus – a great beast, more like the savage Cretan Bull than those 'splendid' and 'broad-browed' cattle of the Sun.[7] Alexander himself failed to comprehend the creature's wanton fury and it soon wreaked havoc among those present. Some soldiers drew swords, ready to claim Zeus' prize for themselves, but my father alone – pious as he was – charged the beast head-on and unarmed."

"What a sight to behold!" Aeneas blurted in astonishment.

"Indeed, my friend. And so, they locked horns, and Seleucus subdued Zeus' prize, restraining its fury with his bare hands. This is why sculptors adorn my father's statues with horns. Have you seen such depictions?"[8]

"I am afraid not, Great King," Aeneas responded. "The only sculpted portrayals of Seleucus that I have seen are hornless.[9] Though, come to think of it, I do recall a tetradrachm with similar motifs." Antiochus smiled again and pulled a silver coin from a pouch at his waist, tossing it to

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[6] Appian, *Syriaca* 63.335–336; Malalas, 8.204.

[7] Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca* 2.5.7; Homer, *Odyssey* 12.380–382, trans. R. Fagles.

[8] Appian, *Syriaca* 57.294; *Suda* Σ 202, s.v. Seleucus; Libanius, *Orationes* 11.92 describes such a horned statue in 4th Century CE Antioch, though does not provide this story.

[9] The bust (a bronze Roman reproduction) on which my painting is based resides at the Museo Archaeologico Nazionale Naples. See inv. no. 5590.

the painter (fig. 1).[10] Aeneas caught the tetradrachm as Antiochus spoke: "One of mine, no doubt. Father minted a similar, albeit helmeted, portrait of himself after his victory at Ipsus (301). Its meaning was not lost on the soldiers."[11]

"I see," Aeneas replied, studying the coin. "So, the bull horns symbolise Seleucus' supernatural strength, but also that of your kingdom?"

"For the most part. My father was always cautious to ensure his imagery was open to diverse readings. Though not as bold to claim living godhead as my father-in-law Demetrius, Seleucus upheld an intimate relationship with the gods."



*Figure SEQ Figure * ARABIC 1. 25.5mm AR Tetradrachm of Antiochus I Soter. 276–274/1 BCE. Sardis Mint.*

"Ah, Zeus!" Aeneas interjected. "The horns symbolise Zeus through his connection to Io!" Antiochus nodded, and continued: "Zeus, Ba'al, Marduk, Ahura Mazda – call him what you will. The chief deity of all cultures under my yoke is bound up with taurine imagery."[12]

Aeneas was in awe of such ingenuity. "The gods certainly blessed you and your father with divine wisdom, Great King. Why destroy others' gods when you can gain their favour and strengthen your legitimacy as *kosmokrator*?"



Figure 2. 10mm Macedonian shield bronze of Antiochus I Soter. 281–261 BCE. Antioch Mint. SC 1.342. Horned elephant head with Heraclean club right. From the Jacobson Shield Coin Collection. Author's photo.

Antiochus reclined in seat, turning his palms up in agreement. "Needless persecution gains a king no friends among men or gods."

Realisation had dawned on Aeneas by now, and he began to contemplate the strange animalistic amalgamations he had seen on some of Antiochus' coins (fig. 2).[13] "So, the horned elephants and horses etched on your coins – they too must indicate the favour of Zeusian deities?"

"And other gods," Antiochus replied. "You yourself said that my father reminded you of Heracles. It may not surprise you that Temenid blood courses through our veins."[14]

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[10] The tetradrachm in question: Houghton & Lorber 2002, no. 323.2.

[11] See e.g. Houghton & Lorber 2002, no. 173; Marest-Caffey 2016, 21; The helmeted figure's identity is contested, but I think it most likely represents Seleucus in some way or another. Wheatley & Dunn 2021, 180.

[12] Libanius, *Orationes* 11.92; on these connections, see esp. Hoover 2011.

[13] See also Houghton & Lorber 2002, no. 340, 428.

[14] Libanius, *Orationes* 11.91.

"Remarkable." Antiochus' stories had stoked Aeneas' creative flair. Alongside a hornless bust and some coins, he now felt content that he could capture the late king's essence as if Seleucus himself guided his stroke. Though, one matter remained unresolved: "I understand the horns' significance, Great King. Shall I depict Seleucus in his old age? I believe this will adequately capture his sapience and sacr-"

Antiochus interrupted with a swift head shake and a raised hand. "There is wisdom in your suggestion, good fellow," the king responded, "but my father must be youthful, as if a deity."

Aratus' winged words flew once more: "*I am alone, and endlessly afraid of swift Aeneas, running towards me. He is very strong and very good at killing men in battle, and still retains the bloom of youth, when strength is greatest.*"[15]

Aeneas responded, but not before sighing. "Seleucus' portrait is to be youthful and horned then. Where is the reality to counter such idealism?"

Antiochus' lips curled up into a subtle smile. "My dear friend – the reality is what you make of it."

[15] Homer, *Iliad* 13.638–643, trans. E. Wilson.

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