

The Saviour

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Portrait of Antiochus I Soter



The Saviour

TIME and Fortune had treated the Great King Antiochus, son of Seleucus, poorly. As Aeneas, son of Jacob, approached his erstwhile employer, the beat of his footsteps ricocheted off the walls of Sardis' citadel chamber, where once the scurrying and sycophancy of courtiers drowned such sound.¹ Instead of lively, the hall felt tired – sick even – assailed on all sides by a ravenous dark, smothering what little light remained from the window out which Antiochus gazed.

Halting before the king, Aeneas hesitantly spoke up. “Great King, you summoned me?” His words shattered whatever reverie Antiochus had been lost in, and the man slowly turned his gaze toward the painter, inclining his head forward in acknowledgement of his presence. “Aeneas, my old friend, I am glad you accepted my summons.”

Were it 10 years prior, Aeneas might have expected a gentle smile. Now, only apathy accompanied his greeting. “You look not a year older,” the king observed in an almost contemptuous manner. “As do you, my king.” Aeneas lied. In truth, Antiochus looked as though he had aged some thirty years. Tears, trials, and tribulations had carved canyons through his face and silver gilded his once raven hair.²

“Flattery? You have been spending too much time with my brother-in-law and those Greek pets of his.” At this, Antiochus' abiding frown ever-so-subtly disappeared for a moment. “Alas, I did not summon you for ego boosting. I am undoubtedly reaching the end of my reign.” He paused, gripping his chin with index finger and thumb, and then continued. “And on the eve of war with Pergamum and that reprobate Eumenes, I must remind my many subjects that all I have done has been in service to them.”³

As Antiochus spoke these words, he returned his gaze to the landscape beyond the window, leaving Aeneas to infer his request. “You propose that I produce another painting, then, Great King? One which evokes your sacrifices?”

Antiochus nodded. “I was thinking that you might model me on Heracles.” He elaborated no more and awaited the painter's response.

“A wise decision, my king. Most certainly, I could depict you wrestling a barbarian as if he were the monstrous Nemean Lion or ... portray you beating back a hydra-like horde of barbarians with an ivory club?”⁴

Aeneas had heard the stories, mainly from Antiochus' brother-in-law, king Antigonus, who often remarked that Antiochus had boldly faced the barbarian invasion of Asia Minor to protect her people and peace. Many cities echoed this sentiment, such as Ilium, who decreed that he had ‘advanced his ... kingdom to a more powerful and more brilliant position.’⁵ “You are, after all, a saviour god,” Aeneas blurted out. Others had received such a title, Aeneas knew well – Antiochus and his father were worshipped as saviour gods for their liberation of those Asian cities under Lysimachus, and the Athenians even named the king's father-in-law, Demetrius, a saviour for ridding their city of tyranny.⁶ No doubt, if some man

¹Jacobson 2025.

²In contrast to the typical youthful (Alexandrine) portraiture of Hellenistic kings, Antiochus I was one of the only Seleucid kings whose advancing age is reflected in his later numismatic portraits. Though, this was not consistent throughout the entire kingdom, and the occurrence of ‘rejuvenated’ portraits (fig. 2 below) and depictions which blended youthful and elderly elements (Houghton & Lorber 2002, no. 437) suggests that the promotion of the king's youth was expedient in some regions of the kingdom. See Houghton and Lorber 2002, 115. With no extant sculptural representations of Antiochus I, my painting takes inspiration from his elderly numismatic portraits (specifically Houghton & Lorber 2002, no. 310).

³Eumenes succeeded one of Antiochus' closest allies, Philetaerus, who had remained loyal to the king during the chaos that followed Seleucus' death. On the Pergamene dynast Philetaerus, his nephew and heir Eumenes, and the latter's battle with Antiochus at Sardis, see Strabo 13.4.1–2. The sources provide no secure chronology, but the ‘war’ for Pergamum's independence probably occurred after Philetaerus' death in 263 BCE, and before Antiochus' in 261. See Kosmetatou 2003, 159–161.

⁴For Heracles and the Nemean Lion, see, for instance, Apollodorus *Bibliotheca* 2.5.1. For the Hydra, see Apollodorus *Bibliotheca* 2.5.2.

⁵Austin² 162.14–15.

⁶Plut. *Demetrius* 10.3; Wheatley & Dunn 2020, 131.

unfettered any Greek city from supposed subjugation, he would soon be styling himself as ‘saviour’.⁷ But, by Aeneas’ reckoning, none deserved it more than the king before him.

His liege’s icy silence hastened the painter’s heartbeat and forced words from his throat. “The singers tell stories of how you crushed every Gallic tribe with just twenty elephants and drove them from this land.”⁸

“Do they now?” Antiochus looked back at Aeneas. “And who do you suppose waits for me outside Pergamum’s walls? Eumenes’ men?” He shook his head. “What barbarian mercenaries do you suppose fight for Ptolemy? For Antigonus? Hades – for me? I fought many battles against those beastly men, but I am afraid I do not recall that specific one.” He snorted softly. “Though, it is reassuring that bards acknowledge my efforts abroad.”⁹ The king now pushed himself back from the window, turning to stare into the creeping dark which advanced from the room’s corners.

“I am no more a saviour god now than I was when Aegae in Aeolis dedicated a temple and cultic rites in my honour for a battle I did not even partake in.”¹⁰ Titles and tales benefit only dead men and their descendants, and I wish only to be remembered for that which I have always been.”

Aeneas approached Antiochus’ side with curiosity. “And what is that?”

Antiochus turned to him dour-faced before replying. “A son. A father. A king.”

For an instant, the darkness seemed to recede, but Aeneas was too perplexed by the king’s statement to notice. “Forgive me, Great King, but I do not understand. If you wish to be presented simply as a king, why would you be modelled on Heracles, a saviour god himself?”



Figure 1. Complete weary Heracles Statue from Perge. Late 2nd Century CE reproduction of 4th century BCE Lysippic original. Antalya Archaeological Museum, Türkiye, inv. no. 124. Photo by Carole Raddato, CC BY-SA 2.0.



Figure 2. 29mm AR Tetradrachm of Antiochus I Soter. 263–261 BCE. Magnesia ad Sipylum Mint. Diademed Antiochus I portrait / Bearded Heracles seated on a lion-skin-covered-stone, weary from his labours. SC 318. CNG Electronic Auction 517, lot. 234. Photo courtesy of the Classical Numismatic Group.

Antiochus placed his hand firmly on Aeneas’ shoulder and responded. “It is not the god I resonate with, but the man. While I was still young, I viewed a most splendid bronze statue by Lysippus, Alexander’s court sculptor. It depicted Heracles, youthful in form yet aged in countenance and psyche, resting on his

⁷On Graeco-Macedonian ‘saviour cults’, see esp. Jim 2022.

⁸The so-called ‘Elephant Victory’ of Antiochus I. See Lucian, *Zeuxis or Antiochus* 8–11. Lucian’s account is satirical and likely ahistorical. Yet, it was probably inspired by a lost epic poem on ‘Antiochus’ Deeds and Battle against the Galatians’, written under Antiochus III (r. 223–187). See Suda Σ 443, s.v. Simonides; Appian *Syriaca* 65.343.

⁹As Coşkun 2012 highlights, such a definitive victory over the Galatians cannot have occurred. Celtic tribes continued to act as mercenaries for various Hellenistic kingdoms throughout the third century BCE. See Strootman 2004.

¹⁰Malay & Riel 2009.

club and trophies from his labours (fig. 1).¹¹ He stopped, sighed, and exclaimed. “How finely it embodied the human condition and the inseparability of life and sacrifice!”

“Just a moment,” Aeneas hurriedly interrupted, forgetting that he spoke to a king. He pulled from the pouch attached to his belt a tetradrachm from Magnesia on Mount Sipylum (fig. 2) and inspected it. “That explains why you chose to depict a weary Heracles on this coin! I just reckoned it a celebration of your exceptional ancestry.”

“It could serve as both celebration and emulation, I suppose,” Antiochus responded. “Not so recently was that minted. It is designed to remind the poleis of Asia Minor that I forsook much for their sake.”¹²

It was clear that time had not diminished Antiochus’ political savvy. Aeneas’ mind was swimming with images of an aged Antiochus, nude, and trial-tested, resting over some trophy related to his exploits – perhaps a shield of those beastly barbarians. Though, he struggled to picture the king with a youthful body like that of Lysippus’ Heracles, given he was, in reality, gaunt with leathered skin.

“Shall I also fashion you with this youthful Heracleian form of which you speak?” Aeneas enquired uncertainly.

“Have you paid my words no heed, dear friend?” Antiochus repaid question with question. “Antigonos had the right of it. My subjects should understand that my ‘kingship is a glorious form of servitude.’¹³ Paint me as I am.”

¹¹The Lysippic Heracles, otherwise known as the Farnese Hercules or ‘weary Heracles’, was a popular type of Greek and Roman statue depicting the hero. Though many later examples survive, Lysippus’ original bronze does not. See Vermeule 1975. My portrait was inspired by the weary Heracles which the Antalya Archaeological Museum houses (inv. no. 124).

¹²Erickson 2019, 132.

¹³Aelian *Varia Historia* 2.20.

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