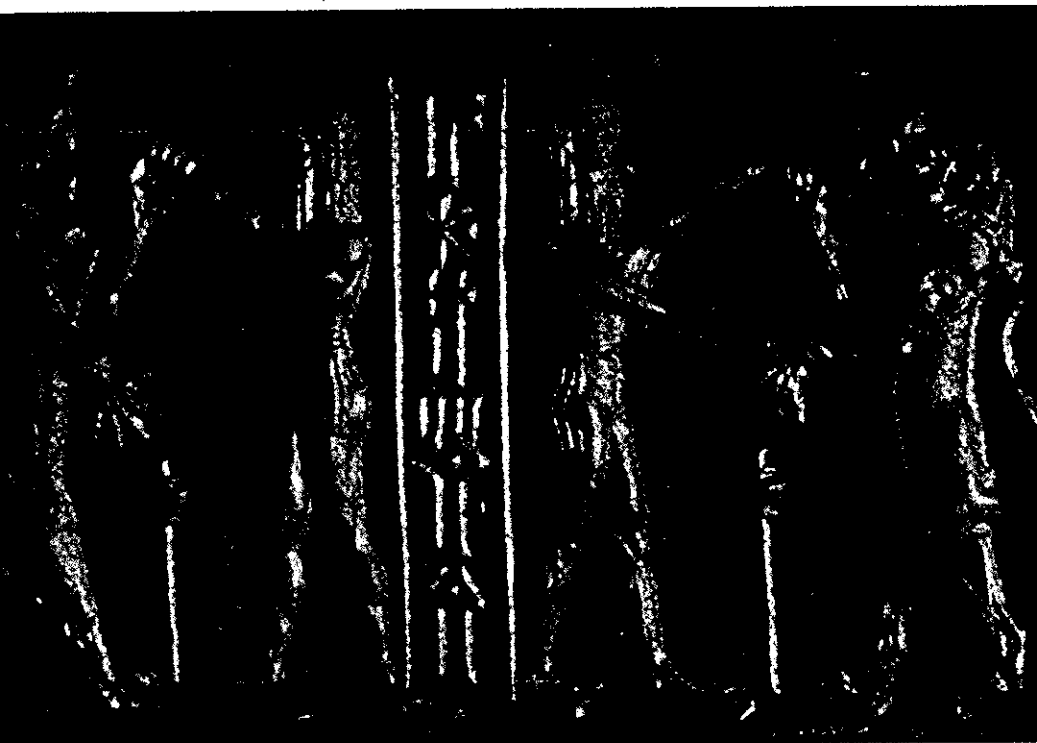


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# The Concept of Eras from Nabonassar to Seleucus

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Seleucid history and ancient chronology formed the warp and woof of the late Elias J. Bickerman's many scholarly interests. It thus seems fitting to dedicate to his memory an investigation into the origins and background of the Seleucid Era.<sup>1</sup>

The eras of the great monotheistic religions are a tremendous convenience for dating purposes, but they are relative newcomers in the arsenals of chronology. The Christian Era was introduced in the early sixth century by a monk, Dionysius Exiguus, living in Syria.<sup>2</sup> The Moslem Era was inaugurated in the first half of the seventh century, traditionally under the Caliph Omar (A.D. 634–644).<sup>3</sup> The Jewish Era of Creation is first mentioned in texts and on tombstones of the eighth and ninth centuries.<sup>4</sup>

All these denominational eras were anticipated by various dynastic and provincial eras of more limited scope, and all of them ultimately go back to Hellenistic precedent and more particularly to the Seleucid Era whose "epoch" or starting-point was either the fall of 312 B.C. (in Syria) or the spring of 311 B.C. (in Mesopotamia and Palestine), depending on a variety of local circumstances and preferences.<sup>5</sup>

Among Jews (and Syrians), the Seleucid Era was known as "the dominion of the Greeks"<sup>6</sup> or as the "counting of (years for) documents."<sup>7</sup> It remained the preferred system of dating among the Jews until the introduction of the Era of Creation—and in

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1 The substance of this paper was presented to the American Academy for Jewish Research (New York) on November 20, 1983, under the title "The Concept of Eras in the Ancient Near East." For an earlier version of some of the themes struck here, see Hallo, "Dating the Mesopotamian Past: the Concept of Eras from Sargon to Nabonassar," *Bulletin of the Society for Mesopotamian Studies* 6 (1983), 7–18. My thanks to David B. Weisberg for a critical reading of the manuscript.

2 Cf., e.g., Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Discoverers* (New York, 1983), 597.

3 Franz Rosenthal, *A History of Muslim Historiography* (2nd ed., Leiden: Brill, 1968), 11f. and 378–88: "The introduction of the Muslim era."

4 Judah M. Rosenthal, "Seder Olam," *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 14 (1972), 1091–93.

5 Cf., e.g., Elias J. Bickerman, *Studies in Jewish and Christian History* (Leiden, 1980), 2:142–44 for some of the details.

6 *basileia Hellênôn*; cf. I Macc. 1:10. For the "Era of the Greeks" among the Persians, see Hildegard Lewy, *JAOS* 64 (1944), 199, n. 26 (end).

7 *minyân š'fārôt*; cf. above, n. 4.

some cases even thereafter. For in certain Near Eastern communities, Jewish and other groups continued to date by the Seleucid Era well into medieval or even modern times.<sup>8</sup>

For all its long and widespread attestation, however, we are curiously in the dark as to the origin of the Seleucid Era. Much attention has been paid to the precise "epoch," or starting date of the Era.<sup>9</sup> But other questions remain open. Did it originate by accident or design? Was it wholly a new invention or did it have antecedents? Was it the inspiration for all other experiments in starting up Near Eastern and Classical eras, or did it in fact imitate one or more of them? Not all of these questions have even been raised in the past, let alone satisfactorily answered.

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8 Cf. already F. K. Ginzel, *Handbuch der mathematischen und technischen Chronologie . . .*, II (1911), 59f. Yemenite Jews and the Syrian church use the Seleucid Era to this day.

9 Cf., e.g., E. Cavaignac "Le début de l'ère des Séleucides," *RA* 23 (1926), 5-11.