



## *The Making of a King: Antigonus Gonatas of Macedon and the Greeks*

by Robin Waterfield.

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Robin Waterfield is the prolific author of monographs, editions, and translations related to classical antiquity.<sup>1</sup> In *The Making of a King*, he examines the eastern Mediterranean world of the third century BCE,<sup>2</sup> when the successors of Alexander the Great (hereafter, “Alexander”) sought to reconstruct and rule the fractured empire he left behind in 323. He uses Antigonus Gonatas, king of Macedon (r. 284–239), as a protagonist to convert geographically “disparate material into a narrative” (xiii). He explains how the rise of the Achaean and Aetolian confederacies hindered Antigonus in his attempts to extend Macedonian dominion over central and southern Greece. He also describes how the Ptolemaic dynasty of Egypt, a competing remnant of Alexander’s conquests, connived against its Macedonian rivals and fostered the image of a divine ruler to project power across the sea. Noting the relative dearth of sources for the Hellenistic period, Waterfield deftly (and candidly) infers what may have happened when those records go mute. His limpid prose makes a confusing plot and rapidly changing cast of characters accessible for experts and general readers alike.

Confederacies play a major role in Waterfield’s narrative. While previous Greek confederacies had maintained a semblance of shared ethnicity, the Aetolians and Achaeans embraced ethnic diversity to counter Macedonian power: they “were prepared to break their ethnic bounds in order to maximize their potential for expansion” (5). *Koina*, or federal states, supplanted *poleis*, the classical-era city-states, as the dominant political organization as central powers extended citizenship to foreign communities. When Rome conquered Greece in the second century, it banned intermarriage among the four Macedonian statelets to stymie such political incorporation, a testament to the *koina*’s efficacy. In 280–279, “four Achaean towns ... expelled their tyrants and their Macedonian garrisons and formed themselves into a federal body” (85). When Sicyon petitioned to join the nascent Achaean Confederacy in 252–251, the Achaeans acceded to the admission of the ethnically distinct city, as “economic and defensive considerations outweighed those of ethnicity” (86). Likewise, “the Aetolians had taken over western Phocis ... by peaceful assimilation of these non-Aetolians into the confederacy” (88).

Achaea and Aetolia threatened Antigonus’s hold on the Isthmus of Corinth, which controlled access to the Peloponnesian peninsula in southern Greece. When Aratus of Sicyon became general of the Achaean Confederacy in 245, he tried to convert the entire Peloponnesus into a single Achaean state. When Aratus pried Corinth away from Macedonian control, Antigonus adroitly formed an alliance with the Aetolian Confederacy of central Greece, which was “preoccupied in these years with adapting their federal state to accommodate all the recently added non-Aetolian members” (197).

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1. See *Wikipedia*, s.v. “Robin Waterfield,” for a staggering list of his publications.

2. N.b., all dates herein, unless otherwise indicated, are BCE.

Without Corinth, Antigonos “could no longer control events in central and southern Greece, so he set the two protagonists there against each other” (199). This shrewd approach to balancing power in the Peloponnese did not outlast Antigonos’s reign. Both confederacies joined the Romans against Macedon in the second century. Once Antigonos lost Corinth, “he had no way to prevent the collapse of his policy in the Peloponnese and stem the vigorous rise of the Achaean Confederacy” (239).

Ptolemaic Egypt posed another threat to Antigonos’s pretensions as Alexander’s heir and ruler of a united empire. Third-century Greece, writes Waterfield, “became a region where Egyptians and Macedonians vied for influence” (4). The Ptolemies saw public relations as crucial to this competition. Ptolemy I purloined Alexander’s corpse and buried it in Egypt. “The point of this astonishing ... move was that it was the job of a new Macedonian king to see to the funeral of his predecessor” (95). Ptolemaic leaders sought to establish themselves as the rulers of the Greek world “by a powerful propaganda offensive” (97). Though the ancient Greeks stigmatized incest, Ptolemy II married his half-sister, Arsinoe II, and propagated cult worship of the “Sibling Deities” on his coinage. These deities resembled the Osiris and Isis duo and their cult thrived in the Hellenistic period.

Greeks imagined these Egyptian deities to be more responsive to human needs than their Olympian counterparts: “There was an increased demand in the Hellenistic period for salvationist and other kinds of cults designed to appeal to the individual [and] the Ptolemies responded to this need” (105). After defeating a force of Celtic mercenaries who had ransacked mainland Greece in 275, Ptolemy added a Celtic shield to his coinage. “In a world without mass media, coins were frequently used for propaganda purposes” (124). Archaeologists have unearthed a wealth of these Ptolemaic coins in and near Sparta, suggesting the Egyptians sponsored resistance to Antigonid rule in the Peloponnese (163).

Waterfield compensates for the relative lack of literary sources on the Hellenistic period with imaginative guesswork based on epigraphical and numismatic evidence. Polybius’s “universal history” of the Roman conquest of Greece commences in 220, two decades after Antigonos’s death. Though several of Plutarch’s *Lives* relate to Waterfield’s subject, they were written in the late first and early second centuries CE, long after Antigonos’s reign. Hence, “given the dearth of relevant literature, inscriptions become a vital source” (8). Waterfield makes intriguing conjectures from the extant evidence. Plutarch ridiculed Spartan support for a Boeotian rebellion against Macedonian rule in the late fourth century. Waterfield responds:

In order to reach Boeotia by land from Sparta, Cleonymus must have led an army past the Macedonian garrison at Corinth. This was a strong garrison, and it was usually able to prevent such excursions by creating a line of defense across the narrow Isthmus. Unmentioned by Plutarch, then, a battle probably took place between Cleonymus’ forces and the Macedonian garrison, in which Cleonymus prevailed. (52)

Waterfield speculates that Stratonice, Antigonos’s sister and wife of the Seleucid king Antiochus, helped unite the Antigonid and Seleucid branches of Alexander’s empire in 278: “I wonder whether Stratonice ... played a part in brokering the pact. Antigonos was fond of his sister—he named a town after her and founded a festival in her name after her death—and Antiochus was famously in love with her” (116). Waterfield infers successful Antigonid resistance to Celtic incursions from a Demetrian inscription thanking Antigonos for allowing citizens to resume celebrating festivals (136). He detects Antigonos’s curt epistolary style in a letter inscribed on the walls of

Dium commanding residents not to conduct business without the assent of a royal appointee (139).

The ubiquity of Antigonid coinage in Asia Minor indicates to Waterfield that trade thrived under Antigonos (141). To explain why so little evidence exists for the fighting between Ptolemaic and Antigonid forces in Attica during the 260s, he notes the standoff between Antigonos and the Ptolemaic general Patroclus around the walls of Athens, where “there was probably less action than the threat of action” (169). Since Antigonid garrisons surrounded Athens for most of the third century, Waterfield deduces from Athenian inscriptions chronicling the appointment of generals that “there may have been a prior intervention by Antigonos, which out of pride the Athenians omitted from the inscribed decree” (180). To explain Antigonos’s alliance with the Aetolian Confederacy towards the end of his reign, he observes: “I can only think there was trouble on Macedon’s northern borders, so that Antigonos was preoccupied in the last years of the 240s with repelling raids by the Dardanians and other tribes” since his successors grappled with the Dardanians shortly thereafter (199–200). We cannot verify any of these inferences, but Waterfield’s guesswork represents a logical and welcome effort to reconstruct a poorly documented period in history.

Though chap. 1’s rapid survey of names and places succeeds in evoking the chaos of the wars between Alexander’s successors, Waterfield’s tactic of immersing readers in the time does not spare the general reader. The following, on the disarray that reigned in the early third century is a case in point: “Arsinoe, a daughter of Ptolemy, came out on top, and Agathocles, Lysimachus’ son by Nicaea, the daughter of Antipater, the former viceroy of Macedon (and therefore a cousin of Antigonos), was assassinated” (36). Eventually, the vigor of Waterfield’s narrative style asserts itself. Use of the first person and scattered English expressions will help engage his readers, as when he notes that the Aetolian Confederacy allowed Ptolemaic Egyptians to “jump the queue” when consulting the Delphic oracle (131). Though Waterfield’s political allusions are a bit on-the-nose—Agis, a Lacedaimonian reformer, “believed that Sparta could be great again” (204), and Antigonos’s “subjects did not take kindly to too much trumpery” (210)—readers of all backgrounds will profit from studying his latest book.