

Pat Wheatley, Charlotte Dunn, *Demetrius the Besieger*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2020. Pp. 528. ISBN 9780198836049. \$130.00.

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[Preview](#)

Demetrius, son of Antigonus the One-Eyed (Monophthalmus), the second ruler in the Antigonid line of Macedonian kings, was an enigmatic, complex and dramatic figure. Nicknamed ‘The Besieger’ (*Poliorcetes*) for his frequent, although not always successful, assaults on cities and his use of siege engines of ever-increasing size (note the *helepolis*), Demetrius was an individual of extraordinary vigour, charisma, stature, beauty, energy and attitude, an outstanding general who consistently turned failures into successes, and a would-be imitator of Alexander the Great. While he was not always successful in his campaigns (his withdrawal from the siege of Rhodes is often held against him), notorious for his profligate personal life, lost his kingdom twice in his lifetime, and died ignominiously in captivity, Demetrius left a large impression on the Hellenistic world and was a significant player in the development of kingship in the Mediterranean after the death of Alexander the Great. It might seem strange, therefore, that no scholarly biography on Demetrius has ever been attempted in English until now, and other than a small Italian volume by Eugenio Manni in 1951 no complete biography has been produced on the Besieger since Plutarch’s *Life of Demetrius* in the early second century AD.¹ The difficulties posed by the fragmentary, unreliable and muddled historiographical record, however, are the primary culprits for this deficiency, as they have long posed problems for scholars in determining chronological and geographical details. The huge effort required to decipher this material and collate it into a coherent and plausible narrative has now been successfully made, however.

After over thirty years of research and two doctoral theses, Wheatley and Dunn offer the first full-length and comprehensive historical and historiographical investigation of the life of Demetrius the Besieger. The authors work together to confront the copious problems thrown up by the evidence to offer a new timeline and narrative for this king and to reassess the unbalanced view among scholars that Demetrius was ‘The Besieger of Cities but the Sacker of None’, a flawed, fickle, and incompetent individual, and ‘a menace thrashing round the early Hellenistic world in a futile attempt to emulate Alexander’ (p. 7). Plutarch’s negative and theatrical portrayal of the king, which is the primary cause of this reputation, is unravelled and a more nuanced perspective on his life and career is offered in its place. The volume fills a significant gap in the scholarship on the *diadochoi* and *epigonoi*.²

The research and writing of Demetrius’ life was divided up between the two authors in equal parts, with Wheatley taking the king’s early years and Dunn his later life. There is a slight difference in style between the two scholars, as is only to be expected, although this does not reduce the work’s overall quality, direction or coherence. Moreover, it is hard to see the divide between the two parts unless you are looking for it and only chapter 17 (which may have been the transition chapter straddling each author’s work) feels a bit disjointed. The overall smoothness of the volume only goes to show the care and attention that the authors put into creating it.

Although there is a discussion and exhibition of the images and statues of Demetrius in chapter 1, the volume mainly focuses on the literature, coinage and epigraphic material relevant to the Antigonid king and his context. The now lost work of Hieronymous of Cardia, a contemporary of the king, remains a persistent shadow in these discussions which must inevitably rely on the variously problematic accounts of Diodorus, Plutarch and Justin. Diodorus' relatively reliable record becomes heavily fragmented after 302 and the second half of Demetrius' reign is consequently the most difficult to piece together as we are forced to depend on the highly contrived and condensed narrative of Plutarch, and the occasional episode from Justin's inconsistent *Epitome* of Trogus and Polyaenus' *Strategems*. Fortunately, however, a large body of surviving inscriptions and coins means that information about the king's movements in the problematic years between 301 and 282 BC can be teased out and in places reconstructed with reasonable certainty. Inevitably, a lot of Wheatley and Dunn's discussion focuses on establishing a plausible timeline for Demetrius' life and movements, and thereby addresses the long-running disputes between scholars about the chronology of the years 322-310. Wheatley and Dunn sit in the camp of 'High' chronology, rejecting the recent preference for 'Low' chronology advocated originally by Errington in 1970 and more strongly by Anson from 2002.³ A full timeline summarising these new dates is offered in Appendix 2. This reassessment of dates will, no doubt, have repercussions for future analyses of the period more broadly and reinvigorate this issue.

Alongside chronological concerns, the volume includes full and detailed analyses of the military and political landscape, battle schemata, Demetrius' generalship and strategy, his development and use of war engines (notably, the famous *helepolis*), and urges scholars to think less critically of Demetrius' withdrawal from the siege of Rhodes. Inevitably the volume addresses aspects of Antigonus I Monophthalmus' and Antigonus II Gonatas' lives, as well as the actions and motives of the other *diadochoi*, when they overlap with the Besieger. There is also a thorough exploration of Demetrius' relationships with his wife Phila, mistress Lamia, and father, with whom he shared rule until 301, adding to the study of familial relations in the Hellenistic dynasties and royal women. Consideration of Demetrius' political relationship and excessive behaviour at Athens, his initiation into the Mysteries, and the Athenian bestowal of divine honours and the development of ruler cult also feature quite large and go some way to temper the extreme negativity of Plutarch's portrait of Demetrius in Athens. After recording Demetrius' defeat by Pyrrhus, loss of Macedonia, final wandering campaign in Asia Minor, Phrygia and Cilicia (286/5 BC), capture by Seleucus and death in the Syrian Chersonese in 282, we are urged in the conclusion "to not allow the end to colour the entirety of his reign and achievements". Despite losing his kingdom and ending his life in captivity, Demetrius was a crucial part in the development of the Hellenistic world, its four major empires, and the history of the Mediterranean, Persia and Middle East more broadly. He is often remembered as an "unemployed king" or an "actor-king, some dazzling tragic figure, like a flawed god on a stage" (p. 439), yet, as Wheatley and Dunn have shown, this is an unfair reputation. Demetrius was hugely ambitious and often successful, dedicated to war and conquest, a competent and agile commander, a charismatic and energetic king, and able to reverse seemingly catastrophic defeats on multiple occasions, if not his end.

This volume will be useful to both scholars and students alike. While it is rigorous and detailed in its analyses and offers valuable new insights into the field, its style is also smooth, compelling and free from errors, its approach to the topic is coherent and even, and the chapters are generally of a reasonable and consistent length (c. 10-15 pages), making for a comfortable reading experience. New and clear maps and battle illustrations (fig. 6 on the battle of Gabiene; fig. 7 the battle of Gaza; fig. 11 the battle of Ipsus), as well as images of coins and statues, offer helpful visual aids to the reader, and the choice to integrate them into the body of the text means there is less disruption of thought. In addition to the main work on the Antigonid king, alongside Appendix 2 which offers a new timeline for Demetrius' life, Appendix 1 branches outwards and supplies information on Demetrius' longest-lasting legacy, the enigmatic Colossus of Rhodes: its construction from the remnants of his siege machines used at Rhodes, its construction date, size and cost, method of construction, style, site and fate. A comprehensive bibliography and index complete the work.

Overall, Wheatley and Dunn have achieved an enormous feat in producing this volume, the first comprehensive biography of Demetrius the Besieger, and in overcoming the vast problems thrown up by the sources. It stands as a substantial contribution to the study of the Hellenistic world and will remain, for a good while, a must read for anyone interested in Demetrius the Besieger, the Antigonid dynasty, the Successor Wars, and Hellenistic history and monarchy.

¹ Cf. Manni, E. (1951) *Demetrio Poliorcete*, Rome.

² A recording of Wheatley and Dunn's discussion of this book and their future plans is available at [The Antigonid Network](#).

³ Errington R. M. (1970) "From Babylon to Triparadeisos: 323-320 B.C." *JHS* 90: 49-77; Anson, E. M. (2002/3) "The Dating of Perdiccas' Death and the Assembly at Triparadeisus", *GRBS* 43: 373-90; cf. (2014) *Alexander's Heirs. The Age of the Successors*, Malden, MA, 58-9. For a full survey of the chronological problems, see Boiy, T. (2007) *Between High and Low. A Chronology of the Early Hellenistic Period*, Frankfurt.