

Pat Wheatley, Charlotte Dunn, *Demetrius the Besieger*,
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Demetrius Poliorcetes was one of the most colourful figures in the age of conflicts that erupted after the death of Alexander the Great; yet, few scholars have attempted to study this ancient ruler's life. Among those who did, we ought to note in particular the seminal works of G. Elkeles, E. Manni, and C. Wehrli, still relevant despite having been written several decades ago.¹ Given the continued development of scholarship on Demetrius, however, these texts can no longer serve as essential handbooks on the subject. Consequently, the new and timely biography of Demetrius (*Demetrius the Besieger*), published more than fifty years after the preceding one, fills a significant gap that yawned in the studies on the Besieger's life. The publication of this monograph falls into an emergent pattern observable in contemporary historiography: that is, to devote greater attention to the period following Alexander's death. This renewed interest, first noted in the 1990s, resulted in a number of biographies of leading figures associated with the Wars of the Successors: a number of studies, for instance, examined lives of Demetrius' father Antigonos, Seleucus, Cassander, Lysimachus, and Ptolemy.²

The reviewed biography divides into a Preface, List of Abbreviations, Maps and Figures, Introduction, 27 chapters, Conclusion, Bibliography, and an Index. It also features two Appendices: the first one discusses aspects of the construction of the Colossus of Rhodes (pp. 443–448), while the second one outlines the chronology of Demetrius' life (pp. 449–451), patterned after the "High chronology" of the Wars of the Successors. The monograph includes valuable addenda: maps of the key battles in which Demetrius took part (the battles of Gabiene, Gaza, and Ipsus), as well as a collection of photographs documenting the ruler's representations in sculpture and coinage. This iconographic material offers considerable assistance to the reader.

Dissatisfied by the current *status questionis* in studies on Demetrius, the authors of the volume sought to advance a more balanced understanding of this ruler (p. 7). They justly argue that the finale of Demetrius' rule in Macedonia and his inglorious death in captivity should not unduly influence the general evaluation of Demetrius' significant

¹ G. Elkeles, *Demetrius der Städtebelagerer*, Breslau 1941; E. Manni, *Demetrio Poliorcete*, Roma 1951; C. Wehrli, *Antigone et Démétrios*, Genève 1968.

² See e.g., A. Mehl, *Seleukos Nikator und sein Reich*, Louvain 1988; R. Billows, *Antigonos the One-Eyed and the Creation of the Hellenistic State*, Berkeley–Los Angeles–London 1990; H. Lund, *Lysimachus: A Study in Early Hellenistic Kingship*, London 1992; F. Landucci Gattinoni, *L'arte del potere: vita e opere di Cassandro di Macedonia*, Stuttgart 2003; I. Worthington, *Ptolemy I: King and Pharaoh of Egypt*, New York–Oxford 2016.

impact on the events in the Hellenistic world. The authors also contest the perception of Poliorcetes as an “unemployed king” or an “actor-king, some dazzling tragic figure, like a flawed god on a stage,” pointing to his high ambition, energy, and charisma (pp. 438–439). Furthermore, the authors underscore flaws in the surviving core sources on Demetrius—in particular, Plutarch’s *Life of Demetrius*—and them skewing Demetrius’ reception in historiography (cf. pp. 127–144). Building upon the earlier scholarship,³ W. & D. offer a more balanced perspective on one of the key events in Demetrius’ career: the siege of Rhodes in 305/304 BC (p. 201).

Among those who reviewed *Demetrius the Besieger*, only Robin Waterfield expresses doubt over some of the authors’ concepts.⁴ No reviewer of this book, however, highlighted the manner in which W. & D. approach issues essential to the evaluation of Demetrius as a ruler. The said issues include the influence of other rulers’ accomplishments on Poliorcetes’ actions (in particular, those of Alexander the Great), the appraisal of Demetrius’ rule in Macedonia (294–287 BC), and Demetrius’ legacy.

Considering the sway other rulers held over Demetrius, W. & D. note that “historians of our own time have been unable to avoid falling into the Plutarchean trap of measuring all subsequent lives against the model of Alexander the Great”; in contrast, W. & D. claim that Demetrius was “his own man” (pp. 437–438). Although this assessment is not unjustified, the authors themselves frequently voice opinions that undermine their own argument. For example, W. & D. assert that Demetrius in his youth was “heavily influenced” and “consciously strove to model himself on Alexander” (p. 13). In the following part of the book, we read that the son of Antigonos was a “fervent emulator of Alexander in every respect” (p. 56, n. 35), whereas in the Conclusion we find a remark that Demetrius’ establishment of a dynasty was an achievement by which “he really did surpass Alexander” (p. 438). In other words, the authors continuously juxtapose Demetrius and the son of Philip, ascribing to the former the inspiration by the actions of the latter and listing their striking similarities (pp. 9; 13; 30, n. 10; 39–40; 56; 69; 71; 99; 133, n. 35; 150; 153, n. 34; 200, n. 78; 211–212; 215; 218, n. 61; 225–226; 273–277; 338, n. 22; 341; 349, n. 22; 356, n. 57; 358; 362, n. 1; 375; 385; 421, n. 44). Thus, Alexander’s shadow follows us throughout the narrative, advancing the impression that his actions largely influenced Poliorcetes. In consequence, the authors play a trick very similar to that of Plutarch, whose work brings up Alexander’s name while describing events of Poliorcetes’ life, emphasises similarities between their traits, deeds and life stories and, in consequence, induces the reader to draw parallels between these two rulers.⁵

Their excessive focus on Alexander by necessity detracts from attention W. & D. should give to other rulers who could have influenced Demetrius. On the one hand, sources accentuate that Antigonos played a major role in the life of Poliorcetes, leading some scholars to suggest that the ruler might have striven to imitate the actions of his

³ See e.g., O. Murray, *The Age of Titans: The Rise and Fall of the Great Hellenistic Navies*, Oxford–New York 2012, 118–119.

⁴ R. Waterfield, *Heythrop Journal* 62, 2021, 361–362.

⁵ S. Asirvatham, The Memory of Alexander in Plutarch’s Lives of Demetrius, Pyrrhos und Eumenes, in: T. Howe, F. Pownall (eds.), *Ancient Macedonians in the Greek and Roman Sources*, Swansea 2018, 215–255.

father.⁶ On the other hand, one ought to note that Alexander is not the only Argead whom Plutarch mentions in the *Life of Demetrius*: the writer often brings up Philip II, whom he compares with Poliorcetes on several occasions.⁷ Numerous studies demonstrate that Plutarch's parallels between Philip II and Demetrius stem from demonstrable influence that Alexander's father may have had over some of Demetrius' actions.⁸ The lack of W. & D.'s acknowledgment of other possible role models for Demetrius is rather surprising, as they themselves allude to the similarities between Philip II and Demetrius (pp. 143, 291, 338, n. 22). Nonetheless, just as in the case of the well-documented tradition of comparisons between Demetrius and Alexander, it bears repeating—as aptly noted by A. Meeus—that any researcher willing to juxtapose actions of the Successors and the Argeads should ponder whether the Successors were consciously inspired by Philip and Alexander (and if so, to what degree) or perhaps the Successors followed the Argeads' example because they were convinced by their asserted effectiveness.⁹ Furthermore, perceiving Demetrius as a follower in his predecessors' footsteps obscures his actual intentions and accomplishments.

Another vital issue not sufficiently addressed in W. & D.'s work pertains to the depiction of Demetrius' rule in Macedonia. Given the authors' promise of delivering a more balanced image of the ruler, we would expect a deeper analysis of this period, especially since its perception has had a profound impact on the way Demetrius is viewed in historiography. It suffices to quote here the pronounced opinion of W. Tarn, who went as far as to claim that Macedonia “never had a worse king, and many must have regretted Cassander.”¹⁰ Contrarily, the chapters dedicated to Demetrius' rule (pp. 333–436) concentrate on four issues only: Demetrius' sieges of Thebes, the *Ityphallic Hymn*, his wars against Pyrrhus, and the preparation for the great expedition to the East, once again interpreted by W. & D. as Demetrius' attempt to “emulate Alexander's grand military vision” (p. 358). This argument structure largely falls into Plutarch's juxtaposition pattern, with the authors failing to direct sufficient attention to other aspects of Poliorcetes' rule in Macedonia. W. & D. skim over Demetrius' relations with Agathocles, Poliorcetes' marriage to Lanassa, and its effect on his politics (pp. 342–344). Likewise, the authors overlook the evidence brought forth by archaeological research in Pella and Demetrias, which likely would have shed new light on Demetrius' self-presentation as a ruler, especially given I. Nilsen's concept of the correspondence between the style of kingship and

⁶ Elkeles, op. cit., 86–87; Manni, op. cit., 62; V. Alonso-Troncoso, Antigonus Monophthalmus and Alexander's Memory, in: C. Bearzot, F. Landucci Gatinnoni (eds.), *Alexander's Legacy. Atti del convegno Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milano 2015*, Roma 2016, 113–114.

⁷ Plut. *Demetr.* 10.3; 25.4–5; 42.6–7; *Comp. Demetr. Ant.* 4.1.

⁸ See e.g., M. Mari, A «Lawless Piety» in an Age of Transition: Demetrius the Besieger and the Political Uses of Greek Religion, in: C. Bearzot, F. Landucci (eds.), *Alexander's Legacy*, Rome 2018, 169–172; A. Meeus, The Strategies of Legitimation of Alexander and the Diadochi: Continuities and Discontinuities, in: K. Trampedach, A. Meeus (eds.), *The Legitimation of Conquest Monarchical Representation and the Art of Government in the Empire of Alexander the Great*, Stuttgart 2020, 302–303.

⁹ Meeus, op. cit., 316.

¹⁰ W. Tarn, The New Hellenistic Kingdoms, in: *Cambridge Ancient History*, vol. VII: *The Hellenistic Monarchies and the Rise of Rome*, Cambridge 1928, 80.


the spatial arrangement of the royal palace.¹¹ Finally, W. & D. omit Strabo's testimony on Demetrius' diplomatic mission to Rome and leave out Poliorcetes' bold decision to transfer the Pythian games from Delphi to Athens, and the consequences thereof.¹² This mass of omissions translates to an incomplete representation of Demetrius' rule, which renders the final evaluation of him as a Macedonian king much harder.

The third and final problem of *Demetrius the Besieger* stems from the manner in which the authors discuss Demetrius' legacy (pp. 437–439). In their analysis, W. & D. put excessive emphasis on Demetrius' establishment of a dynasty, relegating S. Müller's essential observation about Demetrius' relationship with Aphrodite as a model for later rulers to a single footnote (p. 355, n. 50).¹³ Therefore, W. & D.'s evaluation of Poliorcetes' career once again falls into the limited pattern of comparisons with Alexander. Their argumentation prompts the reader to assume that Demetrius' legacy ended with his son, who took control of Macedonia upon his father's death and stabilised the rule of the Antigonids. In a sense, W. & D.'s argument is yet another reiteration of Plutarch's account, who appears to picture Demetrius' rule over Macedonia as a mere aberration, corrected by his successors.¹⁴

And yet, Demetrius' impact on the later kings of Macedonia deserves our attention. A particularly illustrative example thereof is found in two representatives of the Antigonid dynasty, Philip V and Perseus, who resumed Demetrius' practice of placing their portraiture on coins and acting as defenders of Delphi;¹⁵ as such, they were in all likelihood inspired by their predecessor. The likely impact of the son of Antigonus is palpable also outside of Macedonia; due to the limited space, we unfortunately cannot delve into this subject here.

To conclude, we need to grant that the biography of *Demetrius the Besieger* authored by P. Wheatley and Ch. Dunn fills an immense gap in the scholarship dedicated to this figure; nonetheless, as fittingly summed up by R. Waterfield, "this is not a book to set the world alight," for its authors focus "on action and events rather than analysis." The book's limitations signal that Demetrius' political goals and his royal self-fashioning require further research.

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¹¹ I. Nielsen, *Hellenistic Palaces: Tradition and Renewal*, Aarhus 1999; on the archaeological excavations in Demetrias, see e.g., M. Stamatopoulou, Demetrias: The Archaeology of a Cosmopolitan Macedonian Harbour, in: M. Kalaitzi et al. (eds.), *Βορειοελλαδικά. Tales from the lands of the ethne. Essays in honour of Miltiades B. Hatzopoulos*, Athens 2018, 343–376.

¹² Strab. 5.3.5; Plut. *Demetr.* 40.7–8.

¹³ S. Müller, In the Favour of Aphrodite: Sulla, Demetrius Poliorcetes, and the Symbolic Value of the Hetaira, *The Ancient History Bulletin* 20, 2009, 38–49.

¹⁴ Plut. *Demetr.* 41.6–8.

¹⁵ F. Lefèvre, *Traité de paix entre Démétrios Poliorcète et la confédération étolienne (fin 289?)*, *BCH* 122, 1998, 140–141; J. Kroll, The Emergence of Ruler Portraiture on Early Hellenistic Coins, in: P. Schultz, R. von den Hoff (eds.), *Early Hellenistic Portraiture: Image, Style, Context*, Cambridge 2014, 118.