

Antigonas II Gonatas

Antigonas II Gonatas became king of Macedonia in 277 BC and was the founder of the Antigonid Dynasty, which ruled the powerful Macedonian kingdom until it was conquered by the Romans. Antigonas's life was mostly spent fighting other Macedonians and Greeks in order to carve out a stable kingdom. Antigonas's life embodies the chaos and violence experienced by the first few generations after Alexander, as the Greek world entered the Hellenistic period.

Family and Early Life

Antigonas II Gonatas was the son of Demetrius "the City-Taker," who in turn was the son of Alexander's famous general Antigonas I, "the One-Eyed." His mother was Phila, the daughter of the Macedonian regent Antipater, who had attempted to rule Alexander's empire until he was assassinated in 319 BC. Thus, Antigonas Gonatas was born into the families who were the successors of Alexander the Great. The meaning of "Gonatas" is unknown; it may be the name of the town where he was born, but it also might be an obscure nickname, as it comes from the Greek word for "knee."

Antigonas Gonatas's grandfather, Antigonas I, had been the successor with the best opportunity to reunite Alexander's empire under his rule. But in order to prevent this, the other Diadochi (Alexander's successors), led by Seleucus, united and defeated him at the Battle of Ipsus, in Asia Minor, in 301 BC. Antigonas I was killed in that battle, but his son Demetrius and his grandson, Antigonas Gonatas, escaped to Macedonia. While the Diadochi of the victorious coalition fell out with one another, Demetrius took the opportunity to kill Alexander, who had inherited his father Cassander's regency over Macedonia, and make himself king.

Demetrius reconciled with the Diadochi king Seleucus and married off his daughter (Antigonas Gonatas's sister) to him. The position of Demetrius and his son Antigonas was tenuous, however, as Pyrrhus, the king of Epirus (modern-day Albania) to the west, and Lysimachus, a former general of Alexander ruling Thrace from Byzantium (modern-day Istanbul) coveted the Macedonian kingdom. Demetrius was successful in fighting off these two rivals for a while, but encouraged by his success he began building up an army and fleet to cross into Asia and retake his father's dominions. Once again, all the other Diadochi united against this threat. At the same time, Pyrrhus and Lysimachus joined forces and invaded Macedonia simultaneously, intending to divide it between them. They persuaded Ptolemy, the Diadochi ruler of Egypt, to send a fleet to Greece and encourage the city-states to rebel. Demetrius left Antigonas in charge of putting down the rebellions in Greece while he marched against the armies of his invading rivals. He was, however, disappointed to find that his troops and people preferred the rule of Pyrrhus, who was famous for his courage and kindness and who, even though he was not Macedonian, was a cousin of Alexander the Great (through intermarriage between the Epirote and Macedonian ruling families). Demetrius fled to his son and wife in Greece.

In the meantime, with Ptolemy's support Athens had rebelled, and Demetrius joined his son in besieging the city. However, desperate to hold onto his kingdom,

Demetrius attempted a risky move—he left Antigonas in charge of the war against Athens, sailed across the Aegean, and, in an attempt to draw off another rival, attacked some holdings Lysimachus had in Asia Minor. He hoped that his son-in-law, Seleucus, who ruled most of Asia Minor, would help him. Seleucus, however, saw this invasion as a threat, and when Demetrius refused to leave, Seleucus attacked him. Demetrius was defeated in battle and surrendered to Seleucus.

In the meantime, Antigonas proved his military abilities in Greece by capturing Athens and driving off Ptolemy's fleet. He tried desperately to ransom his father from Seleucus, and even offered himself in exchange. Seleucus refused, and before any further deals could be discussed Demetrius died in captivity. Antigonas was on his own.

The Fight for Macedonia

By 283 BC, Antigonas Gonatas was a king without a kingdom, as Macedonia had been conquered by his father's rivals, Pyrrhus and Lysimachus. These two quickly fell out against each other over who would become king of Macedonia. Lysimachus drove Pyrrhus back to Epirus and made himself king. Lysimachus, however, was defeated and killed by Seleucus, who hoped to conquer Macedonia and finally reunite Alexander the Great's empire. When Seleucus crossed into Macedonia, however, he was assassinated by Ptolemy Keraunos, the son of Egypt's ruler, who also hoped to reunite Alexander's empire under his own rule. In the midst of this chaos Antigonas took what was left of his army and marched against Ptolemy Keraunos, but he was defeated. It seemed like the Antigonid Dynasty had come to an end.

However, in 279 BC a massive army of Gauls invaded Macedonia. The Greeks and Macedonians were caught totally unprepared for this barbarian invasion, and Ptolemy Keraunos was killed in battle against the Gauls. Macedonia was once again without a king, and the realm fell into anarchy. The Gauls pillaged as they liked, raiding deep into Greece and looting the treasures of Delphi. Antigonas Gonatas stepped into this chaos and led the defense of Greek cities against the Gauls. After the Gauls retired from Greece and headed east, Antigonas followed them with an army. He caught up to them by ship and ambushed a large contingent of Gauls, annihilating them. While the remaining Gauls crossed into Asia to plunder Seleucus's territories, in 277 BC Antigonas was hailed as a hero and made himself king of Macedonia.

The War with Pyrrhus

While Antigonas was fighting the Gauls and laying claim to the Macedonian throne, his father's old rival Pyrrhus was busy in Italy. His help there had been requested by the Greek cities of Magna Grecia, especially Tarentum, to defend them against the growing strength of the Romans. Pyrrhus won a number of victories against the Romans, but he lost many of his men in the process, giving rise to the term *Pyrrhic victory*. In 275 BC, he was finally worn out by the Romans at the Battle of Beneventum, causing him to give up and return to Epirus. Hoping to make up for this embarrassment and to raise money to pay his troops, he invaded Macedonia again. Yet again, the Macedonians flocked to Pyrrhus's banner, and Antigonas had to flee his kingdom.

Pyrrhus, as mercurial as ever, embarked on a war with the Spartans before he took the time to consolidate his victories. Pyrrhus failed in his attempt to take Sparta. He turned against the nearby city of Argos, but he was killed there in street fighting (supposedly after a woman dropped a roof tile on his head). With the death of Pyrrhus, his army, and all of Macedonia, accepted Antigonas as king.

Later Years: Controlling the Greek Cities

As the undisputed king of Macedonia, Antigonas consolidated his power. He did not attempt to directly rule the Greek city-states, but instead appointed tyrants over them to rule as his puppets. He kept them in power with Macedonian troops, but left them some freedom in their governance. This gave the individual cities a semblance of autonomy while still allowing Antigonas to control them. He reaffirmed an alliance with the Seleucid Empire, now ruled by Antiochus I. This alliance threatened the Ptolemies in Egypt, however. They joined forces with a number of Greek city-states that were eager to throw off the Macedonian tyrants and rule themselves. Athens led the coalition of rebellious cities, as it was anxious to restore its democracy. An Athenian named Chremonides led the coalition, joining forces with the Athenians' traditional rival, the Spartans. An Egyptian fleet sailed into the Aegean to help the fight against the Macedonians. The alliance of Athens, Sparta, and Ptolemaic Egypt was a major threat, but Antigonas triumphed. The Spartan king fell in battle against Antigonas's forces, and Antigonas besieged Athens and drove off the Ptolemaic fleet. By 261 BC, Athens finally surrendered and lost its democratic government as a Macedonian garrison was installed.

Antigonas had successfully put down this threat from the two most powerful Greek cities, but there was still a great deal of hostility toward his garrisons and tyrants. In 251 BC, a rebellion led by a man named Aratus overthrew the tyrant in Sicyon, a Greek city near Corinth. Antigonas tried to discredit Aratus by sending him gifts and compliments (to make it look like he was taking bribes), but to no avail. Aratus and his rebels next seized Corinth. Sicyon joined the Achaean League, a new league of Greek city-states in the Peloponnese, which formerly did not have much power. As the new leader of the Achaean League, Aratus catapulted it to power and challenged Antigonas's domination of Greece. They sought to overthrow all the tyrants in the Peloponnese.

Antigonas Gonatas died in 239 BC at the age of 80, before he could do anything to check the growing power of the Achaean League. His son, Demetrius II, succeeded him. The Achaean League would continue to present a challenge to Demetrius II and his successors. Antigonas had fought his whole life to control Macedonia, with both great successes and great failures, and in the end he succeeded in founding a royal dynasty that would rule the kingdom until the Roman conquest. Whereas his father and his enemy Pyrrhus had attempted to imitate the boldness of Alexander the Great, embarking on great adventures and trying to conquer large empires, Antigonas was more cautious and practical. But this was effective, and he died in his own bed as king of Macedonia.

Summary

- Antigonas Gonatas was the grandson of Antigonas “the One-Eyed” and son of Demetrius “the City-Taker.” After the defeat of his grandfather at the Battle of Ipsus in 301 BC, he fled with his father to Macedonia.
- After seizing control of Macedonia and fighting for years to hold on to it, Demetrius was captured by Seleucid, leaving Antigonas Gonatas by himself and unable to hold Macedonia.
- After an invasion of Macedonia by Gauls, Antigonas stepped into the resulting power vacuum and made himself king in 277 BC. He thus founded the line of Antigonid kings of Macedonia.
- Antigonas attempted to control the Greek city-states by appointing tyrants over them and installing Macedonian garrisons. This strategy was largely successful, though some cities rebelled and found support from the Ptolemaic kingdom in Egypt.
- Toward the end of his life, Antigonas came into conflict with Aratus and the Achaean League. The Achaean League tried to overthrow Macedonian tyrants, which undermined Antigonas’s system for controlling the Greeks.
- Antigonas died in 239 BC after a reign of 38 years. His son Demetrius II inherited the kingdom.