Antigonid Macedonia

The Antigonid Dynasty ruled Macedonia from 277 BC until the Roman conquest of the region. The Antigonid kingdom was the smallest and most conservative of the Diadochi kingdoms; the fact that it ruled the original Macedonian homeland instead of distant foreigners new to Greek culture meant that it did not have to improvise nearly as much as the other major Diadochi kingdoms.

The Birth of the Antigonid Kingdom

The first founder of the Antigonid Dynasty was Antigonas I Monophthalmus (“the One-Eyed”). A general of Alexander the Great, he gained control of Asia Minor after Alexander’s death. He attempted to reunite the empire under his own rule and declared himself king, but he was defeated and killed by the other Diadochi at the Battle of Ipsus in 301 BC. His son Demetrius I and his grandson, Antigonus Gonatas, fled to Macedonia, where they made themselves rulers. Demetrius conquered many Greek cities and earned the nickname “the City-Taker,” but he shared his father’s ambitions of great conquests in the East. Demetrius was captured during an invasion of Asia and died as a hostage.

His son, Antigonas II Gonatas, soon lost control of the Macedonian kingdom to his father’s rivals. But in 277 BC, after a period of anarchy caused by an invasion of Gauls, Antigonas II retook the kingdom and made himself king. Thus, he was the second dynastic founder, establishing the Antigonids as the ruling dynasty of Macedonia.

The Macedonian Kingdom

The Antigonid kings ruled over a population of Macedonian subjects. Unlike the other Diadochi kingdoms, Macedonia had a fairly homogeneous population. Since there was not much need to deal with people of different cultural or religious practices, the Antigonid culture were fairly conservative. Nonetheless, the kingdom was also home to large numbers of people from Thracian, Illyrian, and other northern tribes. Some tribes remained enemies of Macedonia. The Illyrians and the Dardanians continued to raid the borders of Macedonia, as they had in the times of Alexander the Great and his father. The Dardanians, a people related to either the Illyrians or the Thracians, were a particular problem, and they defeated and killed the Antigonid king Demetrius II. Though his successor, Antigonus III Doson, defeated the Dardanians, he too died in the process.

To the south of Macedonia were the Greek city-states. Philip of Macedon and Alexander the Great had subjected all the Greek poleis, except Sparta, to Macedonian rule through the Hellenistic League (of which Philip and Alexander were each made hegemon, or ruler), but many of these cities yearned for autonomy and resented Macedonian control. The Antigonid king Antigonus II installed pro-Macedonian tyrants in many of the cities, backed up with garrisons of Macedonian soldiers, in order to ensure the loyalty and subservience of the Greek cities while avoiding direct
Macedonian control. Many of these cities, especially Athens, struggled to throw off their Macedonian-imposed tyrants, and often found aid in their rebellions from the Ptolemaic Kingdom in Egypt, which maintained friendly relations with the Greek cities and saw them as an effective way to undermine the power of their Antigonid rivals. Though in most cases the powerful and nearby Macedonian army managed to put down any rebellions by the Greek city-states, two important coalitions of free poleis formed: the Aetolian League and the Achaean League. These leagues fought the Macedonians, though the Achaean League eventually put aside its hostility and allied with Macedonia in order to fight other cities such as Sparta. Indeed, the hostility that existed among the city-states was perhaps Macedonia’s greatest ally in controlling them. The Macedonians continued to effectively control most of Greece until the Romans, under the guise of liberating the Greeks, seized the region for themselves. After their defeat of Philip V in 197 BC, they forced him to remove all garrisons from Greece, effectively ending Macedonian control of the city-states.

Government and Military

The Antigonid kings, like the Macedonian kings before them, held absolute sway over the government. The king was expected to conduct battle in person, especially as Antigonid authority rested on the loyalty of the military. When the king lost the support of his troops his power was essentially gone. The historian Plutarch records an example: When Demetrius I saw by the mood of his soldiers that he had lost their loyalty to Pyrrhus of Epirus, he took off his royal robes, put on the clothes of a commoner, and departed Macedonia like an actor leaving the stage. It would be years—long after Demetrius’s death—before his son recovered the kingdom. There was a Macedonian nobility, but it had little power to challenge the king, and its status rested on service to the king in war. The nobles served as the companion cavalry to the king, fighting beside him in battle. They were rewarded with land from the king, and these lands conferred their aristocratic status.

The Macedonian military changed little from the time of Philip of Macedon and Alexander the Great. It still depended on the phalanx, with their massive pikes, and the elite corps of the Companion Cavalry. Though the Macedonian army was feared in the Hellenistic world, it failed completely against the Romans, who did not yet even have a professional army. There are a number of reasons for this surprising failure. The phalanx was extremely effective on flat terrain in a unified formation, but the Romans learned that its weakness was its immobility. Since the Macedonian phalanxes could not be defeated by frontal assault, the Romans would lure them onto uneven terrain, causing them to break formation, and then move in too close for the long pikes to be effective and make fast work of the Macedonians with their expert swordsmanship. The Macedonians failed to make use of light infantry, which Alexander had utilized to protect his phalangites against such threats. For reasons unknown, but perhaps because of a weakening of the nobility that made up the Companions, the Companion Cavalry failed to perform as effectively in the later Antigonid period as it had in Alexander’s day. At the decisive Battle of Pydna, at which the Roman army cut down the immobile Macedonian phalanx, the Companion Cavalry did not even enter the fight.

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Summary

- The Antigonid Dynasty had two founders: Antigonas I, “the One-Eyed,” who built a powerful kingdom in Asia but was defeated and killed by his rivals, and Antigonas II Gonatas, who established the Antigonids as the kings of Macedonia.
- The Antigonid kingdom of Macedonia ruled the traditional Macedonian homeland, and thus was not as influenced by Eastern cultures as the other Diadochi kingdoms.
- The Antigonid kingdom’s primary adversaries were barbarian tribes from the north and the Greek cities to the south. In order to control the latter, the Antigonids installed pro-Macedonian tyrants in the cities and played the different cities against one another.
- Two coalitions of Greek city-states formed against the Macedonians: the Aetolian League and the Achaean League. The Achaean League eventually became friendly with the Macedonians.
- The Antigonids were reliant on the Macedonian military to maintain their power. The military, however, ultimately proved incapable of stopping the conquest of Macedonia by the Romans.