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Heritage

Agron: the king who gave the Illyrian kingdom the strongest fleet in the Adriatic

The kingdom of the Ardiaei in the third century BC, the victory of 231 BC at Medion against the Aetolians, Agron's sudden death and how it opened the way for Queen Teuta and the first clash with Rome

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When people speak of the Illyrians and Rome, the first name usually mentioned is that of Queen **Teuta**. But the power Teuta inherited, and with which she faced Rome, had been built by her husband, **Agron**. For the Greek historian Polybius, writing about a century later, Agron was the most powerful Illyrian king up to that time.

The kingdom of the Ardiaei

Agron was the son of Pleuratus and ruled over the **Ardiaei**, an Illyrian people that in the third century BC had extended its power along the eastern Adriatic coast. The centres of the kingdom lay in the area of Shkodra and the Bay of Kotor. Under Agron the kingdom also included other Illyrian peoples and controlled a large part of the coast, from southern Dalmatia to near Epirus.

Polybius writes that Agron "had greater land and sea forces than any of the kings of Illyria before him". This power rested on the **lembi**, light, fast ships with one or two banks of oars, well suited to the broken coast of the Adriatic. The Romans and Greeks would later adopt this type of ship for their own fleets.

The alliance with Macedon

In the middle of the third century BC the Greek world was divided between the kingdom of Macedon and the leagues of cities, such as the Aetolian League and the Achaean League. In 231 BC the Aetolians besieged the town of **Medion** in Acarnania, which had refused to join them. The Macedonian king **Demetrius II**, at war with the Aetolians, could not intervene himself and paid Agron to help the besieged.

The battle of Medion

Agron sent a hundred lembi with five thousand fighters. They landed at night near Medion and, according to Polybius, attacked at dawn in close formation. The Aetolians, who had grown overconfident after earlier victories, were routed. The Illyrians took great booty and sailed home. It was one of the best-known Illyrian victories on the Greek coast.

> *Polybius uses Medion as a lesson: the Aetolians were so sure of victory that they had already decided whose name would be written on the victory inscription.*

The lembi: the ship that made the difference

The lembos was a low, narrow ship with a small mast and around fifty oarsmen, who were often fighters as well. It could approach shallow bays, be pulled up on the beach and move quickly even without wind. On the eastern Adriatic coast, with its hundreds of islands, bays and straits, this was a great advantage over the heavy Greek warships. Polybius says that five thousand fighters were carried in a hundred lembi, which means around fifty men per ship. A few decades later the Macedonian king Philip V ordered a hundred lembi to be built on the Illyrian model.

Agron's death

When the ships returned and told him of the victory, according to Polybius, Agron was so delighted that he spent days feasting and drinking, caught a chill and died a few days later of a lung illness, perhaps pleurisy. This story should be read with care. Greek authors often presented "barbarian" kings as lacking self-control, and we do not know whether this detail is entirely accurate. What is known is that Agron died suddenly in 231 BC, at the height of his power.

Teuta and Pinnes

Agron's son, **Pinnes**, was a child. Power passed as regent to Teuta, Agron's wife. She continued the policy of maritime expansion, and shortly afterwards, in 229 BC, clashes with Italian traders and the killing of a Roman envoy became the trigger for the **First Illyrian War**. It was the first time Rome crossed with an army to the eastern shore of the Adriatic. Agron's legacy is thus directly linked to the beginning of the Roman presence in the Balkans.

Phoenice and Rhizon

Agron's maritime policy continued immediately after his death. In 230 BC an Illyrian fleet took **Phoenice**, the richest city of Epirus, near today's Finiq in southern Albania. Polybius describes this victory as shocking to the Greeks. When Rome later intervened, Teuta withdrew to **Rhizon**, today's Risan in the Bay of Kotor, a town protected deep inside the bay. This shows that the heart of the kingdom Agron had built lay on the northern coast, between Kotor and Shkodra.

"Pirates" or a sea power?

Roman and Greek sources present the Illyrians of this period mainly as pirates. Modern scholars such as Arthur Eckstein and Danijel Dzino have shown that this picture also reflects the interests of those who wrote the history. In the ancient world the line between naval warfare, raiding and control of trade routes was thin for all sides. Agron's kingdom was a regional power with alliances, diplomacy and an organised army, not simply a band of raiders.

What we know and what we do not

1. **We know** his name, his father's and his son's, the victory at Medion and the year of his death, thanks to Polybius.
2. **We do not know** exactly when he began to reign, the full extent of the kingdom or

where his capital was.

3. **We have no** inscription or coin with Agron's name. Coins bearing the names of Illyrian kings come from a later period, such as those of Gentius.

Sources

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