

# Diodorus of Agyrion

**Diodorus Siculus** (c. [90 BC](#)– c. [30 BC](#)) was a [Greek historian](#), born at Agyrion in [Sicily](#) (now called Agira, in the [Province of Enna](#)).

[Jerome](#) writes that Diodorus flourished in [49 BC](#) (*Chronica*, s.a. Abraham 1968); this date is supported by Diodorus' own statements. The earliest date Diodorus mentions is his visit to [Egypt](#) in the 180th [Olympiad](#) (between [60](#) and [56 BC](#)). This visit was marked by his witnessing an angry mob demand the death of a [Roman](#) citizen who had accidentally killed a [cat](#), an animal sacred to the ancient Egyptians (*Bibliotheca historia* 1.41, 1.83). The latest event Diodorus mentions is [Octavian](#)'s vengeance on the city of [Tauromenium](#), whose refusal to help him led to Octavian's naval defeat nearby in [36 BC](#) (16.7). Diodorus shows no knowledge that Egypt became a Roman province -- which transpired in [30 BC](#) -- so presumably he published his completed work before that event. Diodorus asserts that he devoted thirty years to the composition of his history, and that he undertook a number of dangerous journeys through Europe and Asia in prosecution of his historical researches. Modern critics have called this claim into question, noting several surprising mistakes that an eye-witness would not be expected to have made.

C.H. Oldfather remarks on the "striking coincidence" that one of only two Greek inscriptions known to Diodorus from Agyrium (I.G. XIV, 588) is the tombstone of one "Diodorus, the son of Apollonius".

Diodorus' history, which he named *Bibliotheca historia* ("Historical Library"), consisted of forty books, which were divided into three sections. The first six books are geographical in theme, and describe the history and culture of Egypt (book I), of [Mesopotamia](#), [India](#), [Scythia](#), and [Arabia](#) (II), of North Africa (III), and of Greece and Europe (IV - VI). In the next section (books VII - XVII), he recounts the history of the World starting with the [Trojan War](#), down to the death of [Alexander the Great](#). The last section (books XVII to the end) concerns the historical events from the [successors of Alexander](#) down to either 60 BC or the beginning of [Caesar's](#) Gallic War in [45 BC](#). (The end has been lost, so it is unclear whether Diodorus reached the beginning of the Gallic War as he promised at the beginning of his work or, as evidence suggests, old and tired from his labors he stopped short at 60 BC.) He selected the name "Bibliotheca" in acknowledgement that he was assembling a composite work from many sources. The authors he drew from, who have been identified, include: [Hecataeus](#), [Ctesias of Cnidus](#), [Ephorus](#), [Theopompus](#), [Hieronymus of Cardia](#), [Duris of Samos](#), [Diyullis](#), [Philistus](#), [Timaeus](#), [Polybius](#) and [Posidonius](#).

This liberal use of earlier historians underlies the harsh opinion of the author of the [1911 Encyclopædia Britannica](#) article on Diodorus:

The faults of Diodorus arise partly from the nature of the undertaking, and the awkward form of annals into which he has thrown the historical portion of his narrative. He shows none of the critical faculties of the historian, merely setting down a number of unconnected details. His narrative contains frequent repetitions and contradictions, is without colouring, and monotonous; and his simple diction, which stands intermediate between pure Attic and the colloquial Greek of his time, enables us to detect in the narrative the undigested fragments of the materials which he employed.

Far more sympathetic is the estimate of C.H. Oldfather, who wrote in the introduction to his translation of Diodorus:

While characteristics such as these exclude Diodorus from a place among the abler historians of the ancient world, there is every reason to believe that he used the best sources and that he reproduced them faithfully. His First Book, which deals almost exclusively with Egypt, is the fullest literary account of the history and customs of that country after Herodotus. Books II-V cover a wide range, and because of their inclusion of much mythological material are of much less value. In the period from 480 to 301 B.C., which he treats in annalistic fashion and in which his main source was the *Universal History* of Ephorus, his importance varies according as he is the sole continuous source, or again as he is paralleled by superior writers. To the fifty years from 480 to

430 B.C. Thucydides devotes only a little more than thirty chapters; Diodorus covers it more fully (11.37-12.38) and his is the only consecutive literary account for the chronology of the period. ... For the years 362-302 B.C. Diodorus is again the only consecutive literary account, and ... Diodorus offers the only chronological survey of the period of Philip, and supplements the writers mentioned and contemporary sources in many matters. For the period of the Successors to Alexander, 323-302 B.C. (Books XVIII-XX), he is the chief literary authority and his history of this period assumes, therefore, an importance which it does not possess for the other years.

As indicated, Diodorus' immense work has not survived intact: we have the first five books and books 10 through 20. The rest exists only in fragments preserved in [Photius](#) and the excerpts of [Constantine Porphyrogenitus](#).

The *editio princeps* of Diodorus was a [Latin](#) translation of the first five books by [Poggio Bracciolini](#) at [Bologna](#) in 1472. The first printing of the Greek original (at [Basel](#) in 1535) contained only books 16-20, and was the work of Vincentius Opsopoeus. It was not until 1559 that all of the surviving books, and surviving fragments of books 21 to the end was published by H. Stephanus at [Geneva](#).

## Diodorus of Agyrion

**Diodorus of Sicily:** Greek historian, author of the *Library of World History*. His activities can be dated between 60 and 30 BCE.

The year of Diodorus' birth and death can not be established exactly, but his work offers several clues. For example, he mentions that Caesar (i.e., [Octavian](#)) "removed the citizens of Tauromenium from their native state and the city received a *colonia*" (*World History* 16.7.1). This almost certainly refers to an incident during or shortly after the war between the members of the [Second Triumvirate](#) and Sextus Pompeius, in 36 BCE. Diodorus must have died after this event.

Diodorus also mentions that in his days, the [Macedonians](#) were still rulers of Egypt, which suggests that he published his work shortly before 30, when Octavian defeated Marc Antony and [Cleopatra](#), the last [Ptolemaic](#) queen, and conquered the ancient country along the Nile.

On the other end of the spectrum, Diodorus mentions how he witnessed that a group of Egyptians lynched a Roman who had accidentally killed a holy cat (*WH* 1.83.8). This happened "before king [Ptolemy XII Auletes](#) had been recognized by the Romans". He was, however, called "friend" in the year of the consulship of [Julius Caesar](#) (59), so we can be confident that Diodorus was in [Alexandria](#) by then. If we assume that he did his historical research and writing between 65/60 and 35/30, we can not be far off the mark.

We don't know much about other aspects of his life either. He was born in Agyrium on Sicily, which was, according to the Roman orator Cicero, an impoverished town. Our writer understood some Latin, although he continued to make mistakes. He visited Egypt and Rome, and claims to have traveled extensively, but he nowhere shows acquaintance with important cities like Athens, Miletus, Ephesus, or Antioch. His description of Nineveh as a city on the [Euphrates](#) is simply wrong, and so is his statement that Chalcidice is near the Hellespont (*WH* 2.3.2 and 16.53.2).

On the other hand, he must have been a rich man, because he mentions no literary patron and could afford to spend thirty years reading and writing (*WH* 1.4.1). He makes no reference to any occupation of public offices, so he seems to have been a bookish man, a historian who carefully studied, excerpted, and reworked the works of earlier scholars. This method is not unlike that of his younger Roman contemporary [Livy](#), who started to write more or less at the moment when Diodorus published the *Library of World History*.

For a man who lived through the decade between 70 and 60, the theme of a world history was obvious. As a young man, Diodorus had seen how the entire Mediterranean world had been united by the Romans, with campaigns

conducted by general Pompey the Great, who had pacified large parts of Hispania in the west and the entire east, where he had defeated the [Cilician pirates](#), conquered large parts of Anatolia, added the remains of the once powerful [Seleucid empire](#) to the Roman empire, an annexed [Judaea](#) as well.

Although Diodorus twice announces that he wanted to continue his *World history* until the moment that Caesar had conquered Britain and reached the [edges of the earth](#), it seems that the end was in fact the year 59: Caesar's consulship, the ratification of Pompey's oriental acts, the conclusion of [First Triumvirate](#), and the beginning of Caesar's Gallic war and rise to power. The ratification of Pompey's eastern measures was a fitting conclusion: from now on, the world was a unity. Telling the story of later events (the Roman civil wars) was politically unsafe for a man writing in the 30's.

Diodorus' *World history* was, in his own words, "an immense work" that consisted of forty books, of which 1-5 and 11-20 survive completely. (The last complete copy vanished when the Turks sacked Constantinople in 1453.) Fragments from the other volumes are known from Byzantine excerpts and sufficiently well understood to know that Diodorus used histories by [Polybius of Megalopolis](#) and the Stoic philosopher [Posidonius of Apamea](#). The first half of the *WH* can be summarized as follows:

	Subject	Sources
1	Myths and kings of ancient Egypt	Hecataeus of Abdera
2	<a href="#">Assyria</a> , India, <a href="#">Scythia</a> , <a href="#">Arabia</a>	<a href="#">Ctesias</a> ; Megasthenes
3	Ethiopia and Libya; birth of the gods	Dionysius Scytobrachion
4	Greek gods and heroes	Dionysius S. & Euhemerus
5	The islands and peoples of the west	Timaeus of Tauromenium
6	Greek legends	Dionysius S. & Euhemerus
7	The Trojan war	Dionysius Scytobrachion
8	Archaic age	?
9	Archaic age (until c.540); the <a href="#">Seven sages</a>	a/o <a href="#">Herodotus</a>
10	Archaic age (c.540-481)	a/o Herodotus
11	Persian war; Pentacontaetia (480-451)	Herodotus; Ephorus
12	Pentacontaetia; <a href="#">Archidamian War</a> (450-416)	Ephorus
13	<a href="#">Sicilian Expedition</a> ; <a href="#">Ionian War</a> (415-405)	Ephorus
14	Corinthian war (404-387)	Ephorus
15	Rise of Thebes (386-361)	Ephorus
16	<a href="#">Philip of Macedonia</a> (360-336)	Ephorus & anonymous
17	<a href="#">Alexander the Great</a> (335-324/3)	<a href="#">Cleitarchus</a>
18	<a href="#">Diadochi</a> (323-318)	Hieronymus of Cardia
19	<a href="#">Diadochi</a> (318-311)	Hieronymus of Cardia
20	<a href="#">Diadochi</a> (310-302)	Hieronymus of Cardia

All these books contain digressions on events in the west, for which Diodorus used good sources: Timaeus of Tauromenium for Sicily, and an excellent Roman annalist for the history of Italy. Although the table above usually mentions one source for each book, it should be noted that Diodorus felt free to introduce bits and pieces from other sources, and reworked his information considerably.

Nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholars (e.g., Mommsen, Schwartz) have criticized Diodorus, who was, in their vision, an uncritical maker of excerpts and a poor historian. Indeed, the Sicilian makes strange mistakes in the chronology of ancient Rome and makes other errors. Yet, this criticism is ill-judged and the latest research offers something of a rehabilitation, stressing that the Sicilian author did what he wanted to do - write an easily accessible world history. The title, *Library of World History*, proves that Diodorus did not pretend to offer more than a collection of summaries. As a historian, he is simply as good as his sources.

Besides, he knows how to tell a story, although he lacks the speeches that make other ancient historians so entertaining. Yet, he writes in a clear and unaffected style that is usually easy to understand. One brief example of his nice, well-balanced sentences may suffice, a remark about Agathocles, the [tyrant](#) of Sicily:

Conferring benefits on many, making encouraging promises to not a few, and by conversing in a friendly fashion with everyone he gained great favor.

[\[full story\]](#)

Diodorus' theme, how disunited cultures were growing to one Mediterranean civilization under Roman rule, is well-worked out and was certainly appreciated by his contemporaries. For example, we know that among his readers were [Pliny the Elder](#) (who says that unlike other anthologies, the work of Diodorus has an honest title), Aelian, Athenaeus, and the Christian author Eusebius.

Why did Diodorus spend 30 years writing a not highly original work? He explains it in his introduction. History is useful. It is the teacher of humankind because it transmits experience. Readers are inspired by noble examples, and will understand the true power and justice of the gods, who punish evil acts. Therefore, a historian is a benefactor to society: he tells a delightful story and instructs. In other words, Diodorus is like any other wealthy Greek or Roman: he accepted his responsibility for his community, and although he never occupied an office and is not known to have donated a nice building to his hometown, he gave his fellow-man something important.

To us, he is a very important source. After all, the remains of the *Library of World History* are the largest surviving corpus of any ancient Greek historian, yes, books 11-20 are the *only* surviving continuous account of the Greek 'classical' age. It would be impossible to write a history of Sicily without Diodorus, and for the period 480-431 (the *Pentacontaetia*) and the age of the [Diadochi](#) he is our main source. His description of [Alexander](#)'s last weeks in [Babylon](#) is high-grade material, and it has recently been shown by assyriologists that no other Greek author shows so much understanding of Babylonian civilization and the teaching of the [Chaldaeans](#) (which is also a compliment for Diodorus' source, [Cleitarchus](#)). Finally, it should be noted that although he makes mistakes in synchronizing Greek and Roman chronology, Diodorus' list of Roman magistrates is the best one we have. The Sicilian historian may not be among the greatest authors of Antiquity, but no ancient historian can afford not to read the entire work.

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