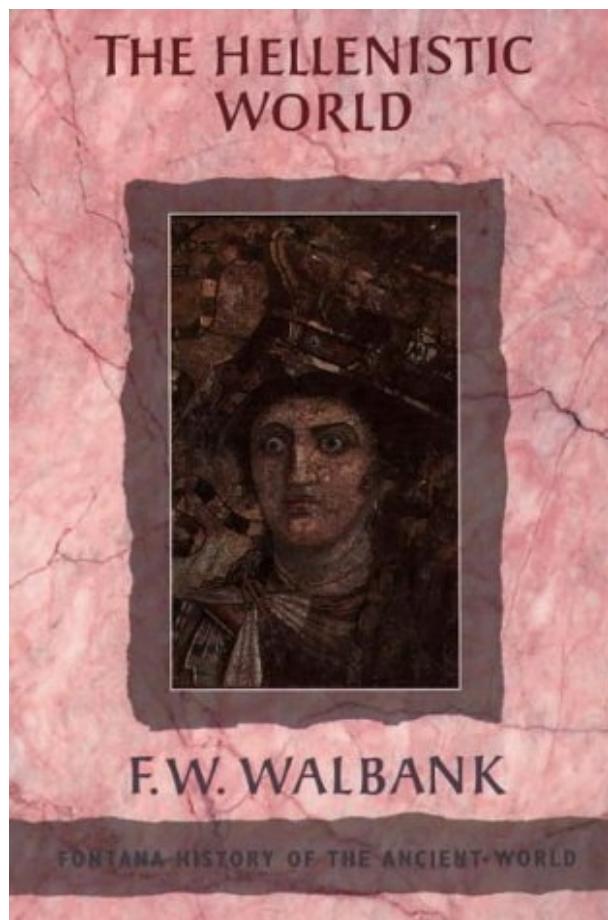
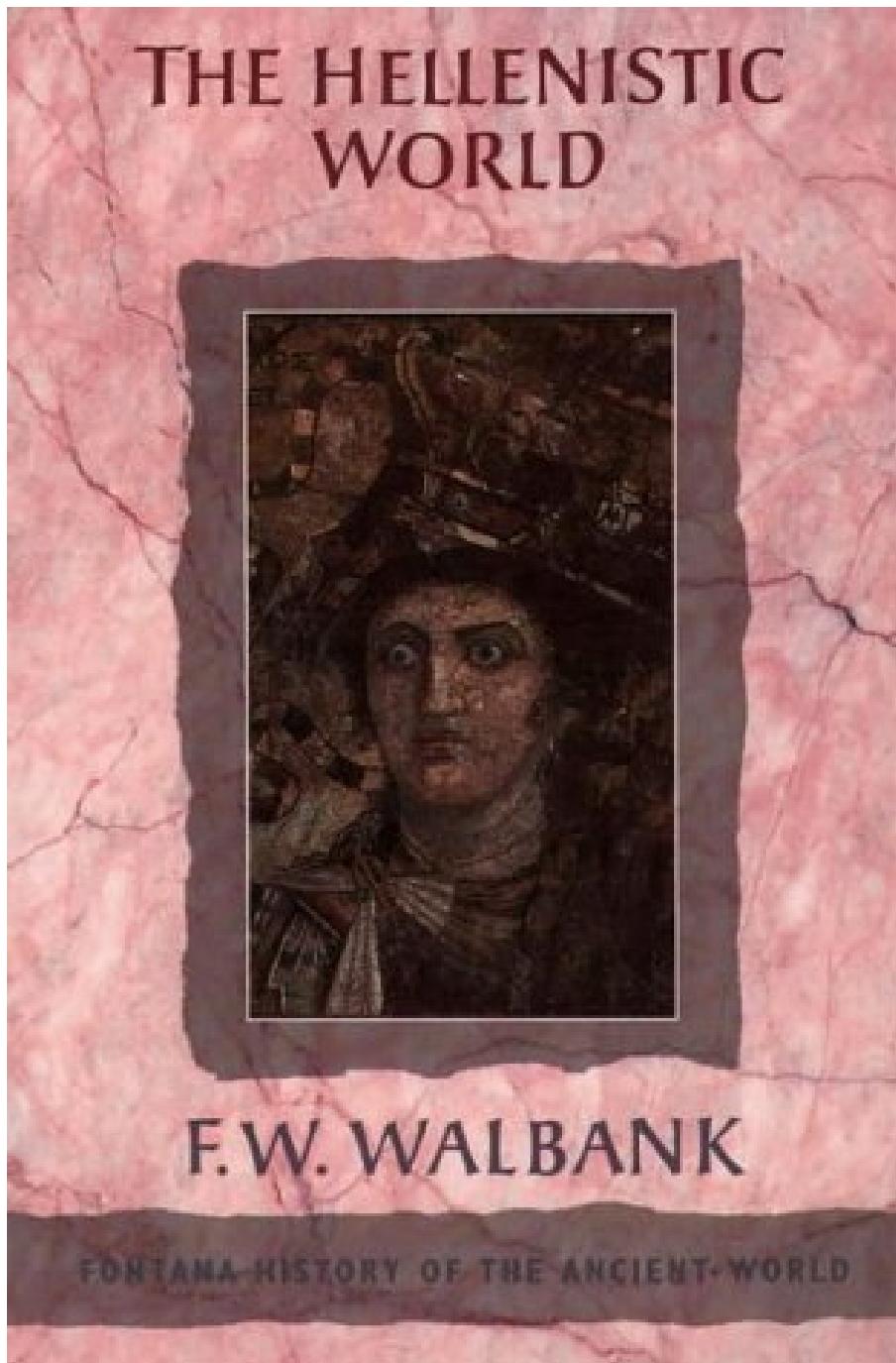


THE HELLENISTIC WORLD (FONTANA HISTORY OF THE ANCIENT WORLD) BY F. W. WALBANK



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Review

Walbank's erudition is predictably wide as well as deep, his mastery of the essential documents assured...He is also commendably up-to-date on many vexed questions of interpretation...Walbank is clear and perceptive. (Peter Green Times Literary Supplement)

Anyone with an interest in classical civilization would enjoy this...It is the best book [on the subject] available in English. (Robin Lane Fox Financial Times)

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With extensive use of quotations from original source material, this book examines the political events in the Hellenistic world from Alexander's death until his incorporation in the Roman Empire. It also describes the different social systems of the peoples under Greek rule, important developments in literature, science and technology and the founding of new religious movements. The author has assimilated all pertinent recent scholarship in the field, and fashioned an absorbing account of a vast and complex society whose ideas and achievements for the bedrock of present-day Western civilization.

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Most helpful customer reviews

17 of 20 people found the following review helpful.

Ok, but not the best source

By TammyJo Eckhart

Walbank's small book on the Hellenistic period is certainly well priced -- your students won't complain about that. However they might complain that the book hardly reads or is laid out like an introductory textbook, which it clearly is meant to be. Thus why it is interesting reading for the higher level historian, it is not the best for undergraduates or laypeople.

7 of 7 people found the following review helpful.

A bit disappointing for the expert or student

By Mark Stokle

Written over thirty years ago, F.W. Walbank's "The Hellenistic World" is intended to serve as a very brief overview of this historical period, accessible to both experts and newcomers. It generally succeeds in this objective, but is by no means an authoritative study. The book provides a brief summary of political events, and describes the wars of Alexander's successors (Diadochi). Its main focus, however, is on the three principal Hellenistic kingdoms (Egypt, Macedonia, Syria) - each given a chapter - and the cultural, economic, and religious developments in their societies. There is also an interesting chapter on "the frontiers of the Hellenistic World", which deals with Greek exploration. However, I found the maps and pictures provided were somewhat mediocre (except for one good photo showing coins).

Walbank's book has some very strong points. He produces a good survey of the scant primary sources recording this era (Polybius, Arrian, Plutarch, Quintus Curtius Rufus, etc.), and encourages his readers to consult them. His approach to Alexander is kept in context, emphasizing how his policies foreshadowed and later influenced those of Hellenistic rulers. This analysis highlights four distinct themes: Alexander's attitude towards Persia and his transformation of the Macedonian army, his increasing despotism, authoritarian relations with Greek city-states, and the establishment of his divinity cult as a propaganda tool. Walbank also pays much attention to the Greek settlement of Hellenistic states, and how this affected eastern civilizations.

On the other hand, even though this work is meant as an introduction, it still contains some glaring omissions. Pontus does not seem to exist for Walbank. The adventure of how Mithridates I came to found this kingdom in 291BC is not even mentioned. Neither are the wars of Sulla, Lucullus, and Pompey against the mighty Mithridates VI and his Armenian allies (see Mommsen's "History of Rome"). We know that Mithridates I's army included divisions of silver shields. It would have been interesting to examine how Greek culture influenced the lower Caucasus region. Moreover, there is practically nothing on the Greco-Bactrian kingdom. Yet this was an important and powerful realm, for its greatest king (Demetrius I) invaded India when his Mauryan allies were overthrown by the Sunga dynasty. The chapter on "the coming of Rome" is almost exclusively devoted to Rome's Macedonian wars. Attalus of Pergamum is scarcely addressed, and links between Egypt and Carthage are not discussed. In general, the book is dominated by Greco-Roman relations, and fails to properly investigate the effects of the rise of Parthia and the Mauryan Empire in India.

In Walbank's defense, it should be said that very little is understood about the Hellenistic period, and few English academics have published books on the subject. Most of the literature in the field discusses Ptolemaic Egypt, because that's where a majority of the evidence (papyri, inscriptions, etc.) comes from. If you are a student seeking a more in-depth analysis, then Peter Brown's "Alexander to Actium" remains by far the best reference in English. "The Cambridge Ancient History" volume 7 (Hellenistic Monarchs & Rise of Rome) and volume 8 (Rome & the Mediterranean 218-133BC) are also worth a look. French scholars have

done a very good job of researching this era. The classic work for them is probably Edouard Will's "Histoire politique du monde hellénistique" (which has unfortunately never been translated into English).

In conclusion, I must admit that having previously studied this subject I was a tad disappointed. Walbank is a serious scholar who writes in a pleasant style, but his work focuses too much on the triumvirate of the "big three" (Egypt-Macedonia-Syria) at the expense of other dynasties and nations whose histories are just as fascinating.

15 of 20 people found the following review helpful.

Tough going, better as a supplement

By J. Ott

I'm glad I read this along with the class that assigned it as a textbook. It is enormously informative, comprehensive, and concise.

Unfortunately, it is almost unreadable. Walbank assumes the reader has a familiarity with a lot of ancient persons (many with the same names) and customs (cult of Arsinoe, anyone?). If you want to know about Alexander the Great, I suggest you go straight to the horse's mouth and read Penguin's edition of Arrian's Life of Alexander.

Likewise, grab a book on the Ptolemies, one on the Macedonians, the Seleukids and the early Romans. Then maybe this book will make some sense.

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