

INTRODUCTION

Σικελία πασῶν τῶν νήσων καλλίστη ὑπάρχει, ὥς μεγάλη δυναμένη συμβάλλεσθαι πρὸς αὔξησιν ἡγεμονίας.

—Diod. 23.1–2

In the opening lines of the twenty-third book of his universal history, Diodorus Siculus praises his native Sicily as “the fairest of all islands, since it can contribute greatly to the growth of an empire.”¹ Sitting at the intersection of prevailing maritime routes, the island served as a natural landing for ships plying their way between the Mediterranean’s Eastern and Western Basins. Its broad coastal plains supported large urban centers and entrepôts that opened onto the Tyrrhenian Sea to the north, the Ionian Sea to the east, and the vast Libyan Sea to the south and west, inviting contacts from the Italian Peninsula, the Greek mainland, and North Africa. Indeed, located at the heart of the Mediterranean basin, Sicily has occupied an equally central place in the geopolitics of the region across much of the last three millennia.

By the time Diodorus composed his sweeping historical account in the late first century BCE, Sicily had certainly played host to its share of settlers, would-be rulers, and occupying forces eager to boost their political fortunes. Not surprisingly, the island factors with some regularity in ancient narratives of empire.² The disastrous invasion by Athenian forces in the 410s, as reported by Thucydides, was stoked by the Athenians’ desire to leverage the island’s vast wealth to defeat their Lacedaemonian adversaries.³ Two centuries later, Sicily

would become Rome's first overseas province, a proving ground for the imperial expansion that swiftly followed. From that point forward, the island was habitually extolled in Roman narratives that traced and legitimated the growth and development of their imperial power. Nowhere are such sentiments more clearly expressed than in the prosecutorial speeches written by Marcus Tullius Cicero for the trial of Gaius Verres, whose governorship of Sicily (73–71) was characterized by storied brutality and corruption. Throughout his speeches, Cicero asks that the jurors consider Verres' crimes against the backdrop of Rome's centuries-long relationship with the island and its residents. In doing so, he recapitulates the view that Sicily played an instrumental role in bolstering Rome's imperial efforts around the Mediterranean. The orator's second speech against Verres opens with a crystallization of the *mythos* that had developed around the island by the time of the Late Republic, nostalgically locating Sicily as fertile ground that bore the fruit of Roman imperial ambition. His remarks bear transcription in full:

atque antequam de incommodis Siciliae dico, pauca mihi videntur esse de provinciae dignitate, vetustate, utilitate dicenda. nam cum omnium sociorum provinciarumque rationem diligenter habere debetis, tum praecipue Siciliae, iudices, plurimis iustissimisque de causis, primum quod omnium nationum exterarum princeps Sicilia se ad amicitiam fidemque populi Romani adplicavit. prima omnium, id quod ornamentum imperi est, provincia est appellata; prima docuit maiores nostros quam praeclarum esset exteris gentibus imperare... itaque maioribus nostris in Africam ex hac provincia gradus imperi factus est; neque enim tam facile opes Carthagini tantae concidissent nisi illud et rei frumentariae subsidium et receptaculum classibus nostris pateret.

And before I begin to speak of the distresses of Sicily, it seems to me that I ought to say a little of the dignity and antiquity of that province, and of the advantage which it is to us. For as you ought to have a careful regard for all the allies and provinces, so especially ought you to have a regard for Sicily, Jurors, for many, and those the greatest, reasons: First, because of all foreign nations Sicily was the first who joined herself to the friendship and alliance of the Roman people. She was the first to be called a province; and the provinces are a great ornament to the empire. She was the first who taught our ancestors how glorious a thing it was to rule over foreign nations... From this province therefore it was that our forefathers took that great step in their imperial career, the invasion of Africa: for the great power of Carthage would never have been crushed so readily had not Sicily been at our disposal, both as a granary to supply us with grain and as a harbor for our fleets.⁴

Cicero's words lay bare exactly the quality that made Sicily so *kallistē* in the eyes of Diodorus and would-be hegemonic powers and that which drew the Athenians to risk ruinous defeat so far from home. It was the island's renowned

agricultural wealth, the capacity of its fertile soils to produce grains and agricultural goods in remarkable abundance. The Roman orator leaves no room for doubt, as he further elaborates what made Sicily so instrumental to the growth of the Romans' own overseas empire:

ad omnis res sic illa provincia semper usi sumus ut, quicquid ex sese posset efferre, id non apud nos nasci, sed domi nostrae conditum iam putar-emus. deberet non ad diem dedit? quando id quod opus esse putaret non ultro pollicita est? quando id quod imperaretur recusavit? itaque ille M. Cato sapiens cellam penariam rei publicae nostrae, nutricem plebis Romanae Siciliam nominabat. nos vero experti sumus Italico maximo difficillimoque bello Siciliam nobis non pro penaria cella, sed pro aerario illo maiorum vetere ac referto fuisse; nam sine ullo sumptu nostro, coriis, tunicis, frumentoque suppeditando, maximos exercitus nostros vestivit, aluit, armavit.

[W]e have always so esteemed the island of Sicily for every purpose, as to think that whatever she could produce was not so much raised among the Sicilians as stored up in our own homes. When did she not deliver the grain which she was bound to deliver, by the proper day? When did she fail to promise us, of her own accord, whatever she thought we stood in need of? When did she ever refuse anything which was exacted of her? It is for this reason that Marcus Cato the wise called Sicily a storehouse of provisions for our republic – the nurse of the Roman people. Indeed, we ourselves experienced, in that long and difficult Italian war, that Sicily was not only a storehouse of provisions to us, but was also an old and well-filled treasury left to us by our ancestors; for, supplying us with hides, with tunics, and with grain, the island clothed, armed, and fed our great armies, without any expense to us at all.⁵

With its mild, wet winters and long, arid summers, Sicily was climatically disposed to intensive agricultural production, particularly cereals crops like wheat and barley, which thrived in the rich volcanic soils of the island's eastern lowlands.⁶ Throughout much of antiquity, the island's productive landscapes generated surpluses well in excess of what its resident population consumed. This capacity for consistent and abundant harvests allowed the island to become a major exporter of grain and other agricultural goods from as early as the sixth century BCE.⁷ Sicily's reputation as a perennial source of plentiful grain was so well established that the island regularly figured in etiological myths that traced the origins of agricultural practice. By some accounts, the inhabitants of Sicily were the first to receive the gift of grain from the goddesses Demeter and Persephone, who were said to count the island as their earthly home.⁸ In the ancient Mediterranean world, where food shortage was prevalent and arable land in high demand, ensuring a reliable source of grain took on immeasurable significance for the island's political and military leaders.⁹

The confluence of political authority and control over the island's agricultural wealth found ample expression in antiquity to the point where it had reached the status of a rhetorical *topos*.¹⁰ Decades before the Athenians attempted to annex the island into their overseas empire, the Deinomenid tyrant, Gelon of Syracuse, reportedly offered them an object lesson in the vast wealth and military power that flowed from command of the island's natural resources. According to Herodotus, the Athenians and Spartans sent envoys to the court of Gelon in the months leading up to Xerxes' invasion of Greece with a request that the Syracusan ruler send troops and aid in support of the unified Hellenic effort to stymie the Persian king's advance.¹¹ After giving audience to their request, Gelon replied with what was ultimately an unacceptable proposition for the Athenians and Spartans: the Syracusan ruler offered to send no fewer than 30,000 men together with 200 triremes and, most significantly, food and provisions to sustain the entire Hellenic force for the duration of the war (an enormous amount by any estimate) but only if he was made the supreme commander of the united Greek forces. Gelon's proposal is instructive, regardless of its historicity, for the underlying message it conveyed: Sicily's agricultural base could be effectively harnessed to achieve considerable political and military power. Was this not, after all, what ultimately brought the Athenians back to the island some 65 years later as would-be conquerors?

AGRICULTURE AND POWER IN THE KINGDOM OF HIERON II

While the association between control of Sicily's agricultural resources and the ambitions of foreign powers is a well-established theme in both ancient and modern narratives, the role of agriculture as a currency of political power on the island itself has attracted far less attention. This book aims to redress the deficit by exploring what was arguably the most vibrant expression of this relationship, namely, the manifestation of autocratic rule in the person of Hieron son of Hierokles, better known to us as Hieron II (r. 269–215), who exercised political authority over much of southeastern Sicily for the greater part of the third century BCE. Although comparatively small when measured against the vast territorial kingdoms of the Seleucid and Ptolemaic dynasts, the Hellenistic kingdom of Hieron II nevertheless constituted a major economic and cultural force in the western Mediterranean at the time. Not coincidentally, it was during the period of Hieron's kingship that the island's famed agricultural resources were for the first time comprehensively taxed and mobilized through a sophisticated administrative system designed to extract an annual tithe on agricultural production from the cities of eastern Sicily. Hieron's remarkable success and longevity as a monarch hinged on exploiting agricultural resources to consolidate and maintain sovereign authority over his kingdom.

This is not the first book to take the kingdom of Hieron II as its principal subject. My own work builds on early studies such as Alexander Schenk Graf von Stauffenberg's *König Hieron der Zweite von Syrakus* (1933) and Helmut Berve's *König Hieron II* (1959), which were among the first to systematically review the ancient literary sources that relay aspects of Hieron's rule and, in effect, write political biographies of the king. Although rather limited in their scope, especially by today's standards, both von Stauffenberg's and Berve's works dealt with issues that remain subject to ongoing academic debate, issues such as Hieron's political status vis-à-vis Rome and the nature of his rule with respect to his contemporaries who ruled over the larger Successor kingdoms in the eastern Mediterranean. The publication of Giovanna De Sensi Sestito's *Gerone II: Un monarca ellenistico in Sicilia* (1977) broke new ground in its expansive approach to the Hieronian kingdom, particularly in the amount of consideration given to discussion of the royal economy and Hieron's foreign relations. Moreover, De Sensi Sestito would be the first to broadly engage with material culture and incorporate archaeological evidence in her study of Hieron II. Nearly three decades later, Caroline Lehmler's *Syrakus unter Agathokles und Hieron II: Die Verbindung von Kultur und Macht in einer hellenistischen Metropole* (2005) took up the baton from De Sensi Sestito and brought Hieronian Sicily into conversation with more recent academic discourse, particularly in arguing that Hieron's cultural policies are best understood when viewed within the mainstream practices of Hellenistic kingship.

My book keeps with Lehmler's views about the cultural politics of Hieron, but goes on to break new ground in two ways. First, my approach centers on illuminating aspects of royal administration that have long been omitted from discussions of the Hieronian kingdom. The blossoming of art, literature, and science at the Hieronian court has long attracted the attention of scholars, many of whom count Syracuse among the major cultural centers of the Early Hellenistic world, a rival even to Alexandria and Athens. Few, however, have attempted to grapple with the underlying roots that sustained Hieron's political power and made this cultural florescence possible. This is no minor omission as the mundane demands of administration (e.g., the payment of tithe grain to a tax-collector, the reporting of harvest data to a royal official) arguably held far greater relevance to the vast majority of Hieron's subjects than did the bucolic idylls of Theokritos or mathematical treatises of Archimedes. For this reason alone, the royal administration of the Hieronian court and its manifestation in the material world deserve our consideration. More so even as improving our knowledge of Hieron's administrative infrastructure promises to yield new modes for viewing how other Hellenistic kingdoms were run. Just as a growing number of scholars in recent decades have increasingly directed their attention to the royal economy and administration of Hellenistic kingdoms, the time has come to bring Hieron's Sicilian kingdom into the conversation.¹²

Second, I foreground archaeological evidence in my discussion to a far greater degree than previous scholars. From the rich volcanic soil of eastern Sicily, a veritable bounty of archaeological material has come to light over the past century, evidence that demands greater attention for what it reveals about the character and scope of Hieron's political authority. Doing so brings greater clarity to our view of the Hieronian kingdom, which should be appraised not only by the spectacular and museum-worthy monuments that have long captured our attention but in equal, if not greater, measure by artifacts of quotidian bearing, which have traditionally received far more limited consideration. When placed in conversation, the monumental and the mundane can reveal much about the manifestation of political power in the Hellenistic world. In Chapter 5, for instance, the analysis of ceramic measuring vessels found at several sites around southeastern Sicily sheds light on efforts taken by the Hieronian court to establish a unified system of volumetric measurement throughout the kingdom. This opens a window onto one of the more subtle mechanisms by which royal authority came to infiltrate the daily lives of those who lived in areas controlled by Hellenistic kings.

Today, as in antiquity, the kingdom of Hieron II is overshadowed by the Attalids, Ptolemies, and Seleucids. Wider surveys of the Hellenistic Mediterranean rarely deal with the Sicilian monarch, and those that do usually treat him as a minor figure obscured in the penumbra of the Successor kingdoms.¹³ The Hieronian kingdom was, after all, relatively slight on the scale by which Hellenistic empires are commonly measured – the size of one's army, territorial possessions, and cash reserves. Moreover, the surviving literary and documentary sources that touch on Hieron's political activities are rather limited, thwarting the kind of in-depth study that can be achieved for the royal court of the Seleucids or epistolary practices of the Attalids.¹⁴ And yet there can be no doubt that Hieron himself behaved as an equal to the kings of the eastern Mediterranean and, accordingly, fashioned his *basileia* (kingship) after that of contemporary cultural and political models. The time has come for a wider reappraisal of the Hieronian kingdom, one that brings the kingship of Hieron II into dialog with recent scholarship concerning the nature of Hellenistic monarchy. Doing so may also help to shine a brighter light on Sicily, which has itself been largely omitted from general historical treatments of the Hellenistic period.¹⁵

THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

In its broad structure, this book is divided into two parts, each of which seeks to advance one of two interconnected aims. I discuss these aims below along with a brief summary of the chapters in each part of the book.

The three chapters that form Part I ("Fashioning a Kingdom") of this book aim to situate the *basileia* of Hieron II within mainstream discussions of

Hellenistic monarchy, with regard to both political ideology and actual statecraft. As I argue throughout, Hieron's fashioning of autocratic rule is best understood when viewed through the lens of contemporary developments taking place in the larger Hellenistic kingdoms of the eastern Mediterranean. In this point of view I am not alone, as a growing chorus of voices has emerged in recent decades to express this same idea.¹⁶ Nevertheless, a fundamental ambiguity persists in scholarship surrounding the nature of Hieron's rule.¹⁷ Establishing Hieron's *bona fides* as a Hellenistic monarch requires first confronting the fact that scholars have long diverged in their characterization of the king's political standing and the nature of his rule.¹⁸ Unsurprisingly, these diverse opinions tend to reflect the historical lens through which one views Hieron, who – with rare exception – generally appears as only a minor character in much larger historical narratives.

One such lens, often encountered in works focusing on Sicilian history, situates Hieron's political authority within the ambit of autocratic rule characterized by the Syracusan tyrants of the fifth and fourth centuries BCE. It is not only that these individuals wielded vast power over large swaths of the island as Hieron would later come to do, but that the manifestation of autocratic rule persisted on Sicily for far longer than elsewhere in the Greek world. It is partially on account of this proximity in space and time that some scholars have found it preferable to classify Hieron as a "tyrant" or even "tyrant king," presenting him as a successor to the Classical tyrannies of the Deinomenids and Dionysii.¹⁹ Hieron, after all, followed a long line of Syracusan strongmen in his rise to autocratic rule by first seizing power through established institutional structures, initially as *stratēgos* (military general) and then later as *stratēgos autokrator* (military general with broad powers) of the Syracusans. He would even come to magnify his own, presumably fictitious, hereditary connection to the Deinomenid clan.²⁰ But such details should not distract from the very nontraditional foundations behind his claim to legitimate rule as a sovereign *basileus*, a claim that found no immediate basis in Syracusan institution or custom but instead rested squarely with contemporary forms of autocratic rule that could be found within the Successor kingdoms of the eastern Mediterranean. While not to wholly dismiss the potential influence that these earlier, Sicilian expressions of autocratic rule might have had on Hieron's approach to kingship, they do not ultimately provide a compelling model for the self-styled monarchy of Hieron II.²¹ Failure to acknowledge those typically Hellenistic qualities of his rule only serves to prolong the tendency to relegate Hieron and, by extension, the Hieronian kingdom to parochial or, at best, peripheral status on the wider Mediterranean stage.

Histories of the Roman Republic, both ancient and modern, provide the second lens through which we have come to commonly view Hieron's rule. Framed within the larger narrative of Roman hegemony, Hieron helps set in

motion a series of events that would precipitate the decades-long conflict with Carthage and eventually Rome's rise to power throughout the Mediterranean. In this role, Hieron is generally cast as a "client king," a faithful and loyal ally of the Republic whose political authority was principally defined by his relationship to Rome.²² This is an attitude shared by many of our surviving historical and literary accounts composed in the second and first centuries BCE, which tend to characterize Hieron as being nothing less than the archetypal client king. Yet this should be understood for what it truly was, an anachronistic characterization made for the benefit of a contemporary Roman audience of the first century, who were familiar with a much different species of foreign king than the Romans of the mid-third century BCE. That Hieron acted in a fashion that later Romans would come to expect from their royal clientele cannot be taken as evidence that either Hieron or, for that matter, his Roman contemporaries would have viewed their relationship in such terms. This is not to suggest that Rome did not loom large in shaping Hieron's behavior, but simply to challenge attitudes like that expressed by Peter Green in his influential work on the Hellenistic period, wherein the Sicilian king's political authority is described as wholly circumscribed by Roman policy.²³ While Rome's growing intervention in Sicily from the time of the First Punic War certainly had a hand in shaping the political character and territorial expression of Hieron's rule, simply labeling him as a client king misconstrues the relationship between the monarch and Rome as one of political dependency, falsely stripping Hieron of agency. Moreover, it projects a teleological view of a situation for which there was yet no precedent.²⁴

To be sure, the character of Hieron's rule was not fashioned *ex nihilo*; it was influenced by Sicily's historical relationship with autocratic rule no less than by the growing political and military presence of Rome in Sicily over the course of the third century BCE. The island had long been a middle ground for cultural syncretism, and there is no reason to believe that the conditions inside the sociopolitical cauldron from which Hieron's kingship had emerged were in any sense different. Yet neither lens offers truly sufficient or convincing grounds to serve as the basis of Hieron's style of monarchic rule. Instead, we should be looking to the Successor kingdoms, where Hieron himself clearly looked when establishing the grounds for his rule.

Chapter 1 ("From General to King") sketches the events that transpired in eastern Sicily during the turbulent years leading up to Hieron's ascension to power, as would-be tyrants and bellicose kings grappled for political and military control of the island. We first meet Hieron in the year 276 when he emerges in our historical sources as a *stratēgos* of the Syracusan army; there follows a selective narrative of his long reign as a *basileus* (king) from 269 until his death in 215. I begin this account *in medias res*, so to speak, with the death of Agathokles in 289 and the political turmoil that erupted across eastern Sicily in

the following decades. Doing so foregrounds the immediate political and social context of Hieron's rise to power, while intentionally omitting a lengthy historical narrative geared toward outlining the broader arc of Sicilian history. Readers who wish to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the island's rich history can avail themselves of several excellent books that have appeared in recent years.²⁵

In Chapter 2 ("Fashioning Kingship"), I place Hieron's kingship in conversation with the Hellenistic monarchies of the eastern Mediterranean and go on to explore the qualities of his rule that set Hieron's *basileia* ahead of its time – as, for example, in his diplomatic dealings with Rome. I argue that Hieron fashioned his brand of autocratic rule in conformance with contemporary modes of legitimate monarchy that germinated within the Successor kingdoms, while also displaying a degree of creative adaptation. To demonstrate this point, I follow Hieron through three periods of his political career, three acts in which our protagonist successively establishes and refashions the ideological grounds upon which he founds his autocratic authority. Each act unfolds in the wake of a momentous political event: his victory over the Mamertines in the year 269, the conclusion of a peace treaty with Rome in 263, and the elevation of his son, Gelon, to the position of co-regent around the year 240. Following each of these episodes, we can observe – by way of the surviving literary, epigraphic, and archaeological evidence – the steps taken by the king to redefine the terms of his autocratic authority, often in ways that simultaneously show an embrace for contemporary practices deployed by the Ptolemaic and Seleucid kings and a flexibility shaped by geopolitical events taking place in the western Mediterranean.

Discussion shifts in Chapter 3 ("Cities in the Kingdom") to the broader political landscape of the kingdom and to the nature of Hieron's relationship with the cities of southeastern Sicily that recognized his political authority as a *basileus*. Although well-defined in antiquity, the borders of the Hieronian kingdom are today the subject of ongoing discussion, and so I begin by addressing the varying scholarly positions on the subject. Both textual and material evidence offer valuable insight into the size of the territory under Hieron's control, which I argue was considerably larger than has been previously recognized. Recognizing the contours of the kingdom is a necessary starting point for appreciating the material resources that Hieron stood to exploit through taxation, a topic explored in depth in Chapter 4. I next consider the legal status of cities vis-à-vis the king, asking what limitations were placed on their civic autonomy and what benefits were accrued by acknowledging Hieron as a king. As emerged in Chapter 2, there is ample evidence to suggest that Hieron's interactions with the cities of southeastern Sicily followed closely on the model set by the rulers of the Successor kingdoms. This is abundantly clear thanks to the survival of a partially intact

inscription that is believed to transcribe a letter written by Hieron to the Syracusan *polis*.

Ultimately, my aim in the first part of the book is to highlight the qualities of Hieron's kingship that made his rule much like that of contemporary Hellenistic monarchs while also drawing attention to those aspects that set him apart. In documenting Hieron's own dynamic and evolutionary approach to establishing the legitimacy of his rule, we can draw valuable conclusions about the nature of Hellenistic kingship and the inherent elasticity in the political rationale used to justify autocratic power at the time. Such elasticity, or resilience, is especially evident in Hieron's early interactions with Rome, and, in many ways, his actions foreshadowed those taken later on by monarchs of the Successor kingdoms whose own military might would eventually come to be challenged and diminished by the growth of Roman power in the eastern Mediterranean.²⁶

Building on the foundations of Part I, the chapters that form Part II ("Measuring a Kingdom") center on the administration of the Hieronian state with a particular focus on the taxation of agricultural goods. Like most Hellenistic monarchs, Hieron relied on the revenue generated from taxation to maintain the mechanisms of state that served to reinforce his status as king. While the tax laws of Hieron have been the subject of academic interest for over a century, scholarship has largely focused on their Roman afterlife as the *lex Hieronica*, the details of which come to us almost exclusively from the courtroom speeches of Cicero. This is chiefly due to the paucity of contemporary third-century sources that preserve details about the operation of the tax system in Hieronian Sicily. We lack, for instance, the rich documentary record that is available to us from the territories subject to the Attalid, Ptolemaic, and Seleucid kings. I expand our frame to include a wide spectrum of material evidence (i.e., standardized grain measures, coins, monumental granaries) that pertain to the original, third-century operation of Hieron's administrative armature. Such instruments of fiscal administration have long been treated in isolation or simply overlooked within the broader context of the king's political authority and the governance of his kingdom, yet they surely played an essential role in sustaining the Hieronian state. In addition to addressing the role of these instruments from a top-down perspective of the royal state, I also explore the broader social repercussions stemming from the introduction of the royal tax administration in southeastern Sicily and, in particular, the widespread availability of new, standardized tools of exchange.

Chapter 4 ("Seeing the Hieronian State") focuses on an institution central to the administration of the Hieronian state: the agricultural tithe collected annually from the *poleis* subject to Hieron's authority. After a brief overview of the evidence related to agricultural taxation in Sicily during the fifth and fourth centuries BCE, I turn to the tax laws established during Hieron's reign.