



Sicily: An Island at the Crossroads of History

By John Julius Norwich

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“Sicily,” said Goethe, “is the key to everything.” It is the largest island in the Mediterranean, the stepping-stone between Europe and Africa, the link between the Latin West and the Greek East. Sicily’s strategic location has tempted Roman emperors, French princes, and Spanish kings. The subsequent struggles to conquer and keep it have played crucial roles in the rise and fall of the world’s most powerful dynasties.

Yet Sicily has often been little more than a footnote in books about other empires. John Julius Norwich’s engrossing narrative is the first to knit together all of the colorful strands of Sicilian history into a single comprehensive study. Here is a vivid, erudite, page-turning chronicle of an island and the remarkable kings, queens, and tyrants who fought to rule it. From its beginnings as a Greek city-state to its emergence as a multicultural trading hub during the Crusades, from the rebellion against Italian unification to the rise of the Mafia, the story of Sicily is rich with extraordinary moments and dramatic characters. Writing with his customary deftness and humor, Norwich outlines the surprising influence Sicily has had on world history—the Romans’ fascination with Greek civilization dates back to their sack of Sicily—and tells the story of one of the world’s most kaleidoscopic cultures in a galvanizing, contemporary way.

This volume has been a long time coming—Norwich began to explore Sicily’s colorful history during his first visit to the island in the early 1960s. The dean of popular historians leads his readers through the millennia with the steady narrative hand of a master teacher or the world’s most learned tour guide. Like the island itself, *Sicily* is a book brimming with bold flavors that begs to be revisited again and again.

Praise for *Sicily*

“Suavely readable . . . The very model of a popular historian, [Norwich] writes to give pleasure to the common reader. And what pleasure it is.”—*The Wall Street*

Journal

“Entertaining on every page . . . There is something ancient and sorrowful in Sicily, ‘some dark, brooding quality,’ just as captivating as its spellbinding history or its beautiful and varied landscapes, from beaches to lemon groves, pine forests to volcanoes. . . . The most amiable and freewheeling of guides, Norwich will always find time for the amusing anecdote.”—*The Sunday Times*

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Editorial Review

Review

“Suavely readable . . . The very model of a popular historian, [John Julius Norwich] writes to give pleasure to the common reader. And what pleasure it is. . . . Even by European standards, Sicilian history is a crazy-quilt affair, and the nearly 3,000 years of it covered by Mr. Norwich—from the founding of the first Greek colonies in the eighth century B.C. through World War II—feature a ‘Who’s Who’ of powers, dynasties and civilizations.”—*The Wall Street Journal*

“Entertaining on every page . . . There is something ancient and sorrowful in Sicily, ‘some dark, brooding quality,’ just as captivating as its spellbinding history or its beautiful and varied landscapes, from beaches to lemon groves, pine forests to volcanoes. . . . The most amiable and freewheeling of guides, Norwich will always find time for the amusing anecdote.”—*The Sunday Times*

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“Sicily’s political history is full of so much turbulence it’s sometimes hard to keep track of the battles, murders and successions, but Norwich sketches personalities vividly: Emma Hamilton, for example, a glamorous former courtesan whose celebrated affair with Nelson began in Sicily; or Salvatore Giuliano, ‘Sicily’s most notorious but . . . best-loved bandit.’ Norwich calls this book his ‘valediction’ to Sicily: he does the island and the reader a generous service in providing such an amiable introduction.”—*The Sunday Telegraph*

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About the Author

John Julius Norwich is the author of more than twenty books, including the *New York Times* bestseller *Absolute Monarchs*. He began his career in the British foreign service, but resigned his diplomatic post to become a writer. He is a former chairman of the Venice in Peril Fund and the honorary chairman of the World Monuments Fund.

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Greeks

Not surprisingly for an island set virtually in the dead center of the Mediterranean, Sicily possesses prehistoric sites aplenty. There is, for example, on the island of Levanzo, off Trapani, a vast cave known unaccountably as the Grotta del Genovese, covered with neolithic wall paintings of bison, deer and even fish; these were discovered as recently as 1950. Others, a good deal earlier but somewhat less spectacular, were found a few years later on Monte Pellegrino, that great golden headland that rises only a kilometer or two outside Palermo on the Mondello road. Those interested will find all the information they require—and probably rather more—in the archaeological museum. For those of us, however, who are prepared to leave prehistory to the prehistorians, the first true culture we encounter is the Mycenaean, which extended from about 1600 b.c. It was probably around 1400 that Sicily was absorbed into an extensive mesh of trade routes, centered on Mycenae in the northeastern Peloponnese and reaching out as far as Cyprus and even beyond. But it was all too good to last. Mycenae perished—no one knows exactly why or how—around 1200 b.c., trade rapidly declined, and the Sicilians reverted to their old ways.

Who were they exactly? It is hard to say. Historians talk of the Sicans, the Sicels, the Ausonians and the Elymians, who Thucydides—writing in the fifth century b.c.—tells us were refugees from Troy (as were, traditionally, the Romans themselves). But little of them is known. For us, the all-important people are the Greeks, who reached Sicily in the middle of the eighth century before Christ. With them at last the island enters the historical age. Their earliest settlements were on the southern coast, where there are virtually no natural harbors, but they had no need of such things. Their custom in those early days was to beach their ships; what they looked for were long flat stretches of sand, and they found them—notably at Naxos, where settlers from Chalcis in Euboea landed as early as 734 b.c., at Acragas (the modern Agrigento) and at Gela, where the first permanent Greek-Sicilian settlement was founded in 688 b.c. In the years following they gradually dislodged—without actually eliminating—the indigenous inhabitants, together with a number of Phoenician trading posts; they introduced the olive and the vine, and rapidly built up a flourishing community. This soon became one of the major cultural centers of the civilized world, the home of poets such as Stesichorus of Himera—he whom the gods struck blind for composing invectives against Helen of Troy—and philosophers such as the great Empedocles of Acragas, who did much valuable work on the transmigration of souls and, having already served a long and tedious apprenticeship as a shrub, suddenly relinquished his mortal clay for higher things one morning in 440 b.c., when another branch of scientific inquiry led him too far into the crater of Mount Etna.

By this time the Greeks had colonized most of the eastern Mediterranean. They had civilized it too, with their art and architecture, their literature and philosophy, their science and mathematics and their manufacturing skills. But—and this is a point that cannot be overemphasized—Magna Graecia, as it was called, was never a nation or an empire in the sense that Rome was to be. Politically, it was simply composed of a number of small city-states; by 500 b.c. there were some 1,500 of them, extending from the Black Sea to the coast of Catalonia. Intensely proud of being Greek, they supported all manifestations of panhellenism, in particular the Olympic Games; despite this, they were often at war among themselves, occasionally forming temporary leagues and alliances but all essentially independent. Athens in those days was in no sense a capital, any more than, for example, Halicarnassus in Asia Minor, where Herodotus was born, or the Corinthian colony of Syracuse in Sicily, which was the birthplace of Archimedes, or the island of Samos, home of Pythagoras. St. Paul was to boast that he was a Roman citizen; such a thing could never have been said about Greece, which—not unlike the Arab world today—was a concept rather than a nationality. There was no precise definition: if you felt Greek and spoke the Greek language, then Greek is what you were.

One consequence of this broad diaspora is that there are as many superb Greek sites in Italy, Sicily and Asia Minor as there are in the area we now know as Greece. The greater part, inevitably, has been lost; and yet, in

Sicily alone, at Selinunte—formerly Selinus—there are at least seven temples of the sixth and fifth centuries b.c. in tolerable states of preservation, though most of those still standing do so only thanks to a long and ambitious program of reconstruction in the past half-century. Of the nine at Agrigento, five are more impressive still and, particularly around sunset, quite astonishingly beautiful. Loveliest of all is Segesta, set in a fold of hills an easy drive from Palermo (but just out of sight, thank God, of the motorway). It is actually unfinished—the projecting bosses used for shifting the blocks of stone were never filed away—but the general impression is one of quiet perfection, everything a late-fifth-century b.c. Doric monument ought to be. There is also, high on the opposite hillside, a beautifully preserved third-century theater, from which one can look down on the temple and marvel that such a sublime building should have survived virtually intact after two and a half thousand years.

Finally, the cathedral of Syracuse, one of the only cathedrals to have been built five centuries before the birth of Christ. Its splendid baroque façade gives no hint of what lies within, but the interior tells a very different story. The columns that support the building are those of the original Doric temple of Athena, erected by the tyrant Gelon to celebrate his victory over Carthage in 480 b.c. and famous for its magnificence all over the ancient world. Under the Romans, its greatest treasures were stolen by the unspeakably corrupt Governor Verres, against whom Cicero so famously thundered. The Byzantines converted it for the first time into a Christian church; the Arabs turned it into a mosque. Normans and Spaniards both made their own contributions; a series of earthquakes did their worst; and there was a major reconstruction in 1693 after the collapse of the Norman façade. Those ancient columns, however, survived all their tribulations, and still stand to prove once again that most curious of historical-religious phenomena: that once a place is recognized as holy, then, regardless of all changes in the prevailing faith, holy it remains.

But who, you may ask, was this tyrant Gelon, who started the whole thing? Of all the tyrants—those men who ruled their cities as virtual dictators and who played all too large a part in Greek-Sicilian history—Gelon could boast the most distinguished parentage. Herodotus claims that his ancestors had founded the city of Gela. The prototypes of these tyrants first make their appearance in the early sixth century b.c.—Panaetius in Leontini, Phalaris in Acragas and one or two others. About Panaetius we know next to nothing, and of Phalaris very little except that he greatly enjoyed eating babies and small children, and that he possessed a huge, hollow bull of bronze in which he tended to roast those who displeased him. We are a good deal better informed about Pantares of Gela, whose four-horse chariot was victorious in the Olympic Games of 512 or 508, and whose sons Cleander and Hippocrates ruled successively after him. It was on the death of Hippocrates in 491—killed in battle with the Sicels on the slopes of Mount Etna—that Gelon, his former cavalry commander, seized power. He ruled in his native city for six years, then in 485 moved to Syracuse, taking more than half its population with him. The move was sensible, if not inevitable. Gela, as we have seen, had no harbor; but no one beached ships anymore if they could avoid it, and in all the Greek world there were few harbors more magnificent than that of Syracuse.

But Syracuse was more than its harbor. It also possessed an island, separated from it by no more than a hundred yards, which could serve as a huge, self-contained fortress. It was here that the first Greek colonists founded their city, which they called Ortygia after one of the epithets of Artemis. Almost miraculously, the island possessed a seemingly inexhaustible spring of freshwater^[1] at the very edge of the sea; this they dedicated to Arethusa, one of the goddess's attendant nymphs.

Over the next few years Gelon transformed his new conquest into a powerful and prosperous city. In this he was greatly aided by an idiotic attack on Syracuse by another Greek city, Megara Hyblaea, some ten or twelve miles up the coast. Herodotus tells us the story:

[Gelon] brought to Syracuse the men of substance, who had instigated the war and therefore expected to be put to death, and he made them citizens. The common people, who had no share in the responsibility for the

war and therefore expected to suffer no evil, he also took to Syracuse and there he sold them into slavery for export outside Sicily.???. He did this because he thought the commons were the most unpleasant to live with.

It was not long before Gelon, with his ally, the immensely rich Theron of Acragas, had extended his power across the greater part of Greek Sicily. Selinus and Messina alone managed to preserve their independence; and it was Anaxilas of Messina who took what appeared to be the only course open to him if he and his people were to escape absorption. He appealed to Carthage.

At this point—and before we go any further—it might be a good idea to say something about Carthage. It was originally Phoenician, and the Phoenicians—the Canaanites of the Old Testament—were a very curious people indeed. Unlike their contemporaries in Egypt, they seem to have made little or no attempt to found a single, coherent state. The Old Testament refers to the people of Tyre and Sidon, and we read in the First Book of Kings how Hiram, King of Tyre, sent King Solomon timber and skilled craftsmen for the building of the Temple in Jerusalem. His people had developed one memorable home industry: gathering the shells of the murex—a form of mollusc which secreted a rich purple dye, worth far more than its weight in gold.[2] But their principal interest lay always in the lands to the west—with whom, however, they traded more as a loose confederation of merchant communities than as anything resembling a nation. Today we remember them above all as seafarers, a people who sailed to every corner of the Mediterranean and quite often beyond, setting up trading colonies not only in Sicily but in the Balearic Islands and along the shores of North Africa. Beyond the Strait of Gibraltar they had important settlements on the Atlantic coast of Morocco and on the promontory of Cádiz; they probably even crossed the English Channel in search of Cornish tin.

As for Carthage, it had gained its independence around 650 b.c., and by the fifth century it had developed into a formidable city-state, by far the most important and influential of all the Phoenician settlements in the Mediterranean, occupying the site of what is now Tunis. People are always surprised when they look on the map to find that Tunisia is not south of Sicily but due west of it, and that the distance between the two is barely a hundred miles. Carthage was highly centralized and efficiently governed. It was not, in short, a presence that could be taken for granted. It responded to Messina's appeal—and on a scale far beyond anyone's expectation or, indeed, understanding. The response was not immediate, but that was simply because the Carthaginians meant business. They were not interested in just helping out small-time tyrants in distress; they were aiming at something a good deal more ambitious. They spent the next three years amassing a huge army, not only from North Africa but from Spain, Corsica and Sardinia, while building up an equally massive fleet; and in 480, under the command of their Chief Magistrate Hamilcar, they landed at Palermo. From there they advanced eastward along the coast to Himera, and attacked.

What happened next is almost as incomprehensible as the size and scale of the expedition itself. Theron—Gelon's principal ally—who had been carefully following the passage of the Carthaginian fleet and was now standing ready to resist the invaders, at first found himself hopelessly outnumbered; but he was able to hold the situation until the arrival of Gelon from Syracuse, with an army comparable in size to that of Hamilcar but infinitely better equipped and trained. Meanwhile, to their bewilderment, the Carthaginians found themselves entirely alone. Of Anaxilas and his Messinans—who had invited them in the first place—there was not a sign; nor was there any help from Selinus. In the desperate encounter that followed Hamilcar was killed—or, as some say, took his own life by leaping into a blazing fire; his ships, drawn up defenseless on the beach, were burned to cinders. Vast numbers of prisoners were enslaved, and Carthage was obliged to pay an immense indemnity, of which Gelon made excellent use, building not only his great temple of Athena but two lesser temples in a developing quarter of Syracuse, dedicated to Demeter and Persephone—the goddess of fertility and the harvest, and her daughter, queen of the dead.

After the Battle of Himera—which, Herodotus tells us, was fought on the very same day as the great Athenian victory against the Persians at Salamis—it was as if the Carthaginian expedition had never been. Carthage retired to lick her wounds; she made no attempt to take her revenge or resume hostilities, remaining quiet for the next seventy years. Anaxilas was allowed to continue in Messina as before; indeed, he felt secure enough to travel to Olympia, where he won a not very exciting race for mule carts at the Games. He seems gradually to have reconciled himself to Syracusan hegemony; a year or two later he married his daughter to Hiero, Gelon's younger brother and successor. As for Gelon himself, he died in 478 b.c. For many years he had been the most powerful figure in the entire Greek world—perhaps in all Europe. Despite Herodotus's nasty little story above he had shown himself, for a tyrant, unusually just and merciful; we are told that, as one of the conditions of the peace treaty, he insisted that the Carthaginians should give up their traditional practice of human sacrifice—which they somewhat regretfully did. It was not only in Syracuse, but in many other cities of Magna Graecia, that Gelon was deeply and genuinely mourned.

The immense popularity and respect in which Gelon was held should have rubbed off on Hiero, but it somehow failed to do so. Hiero meant well enough, but he possessed little of his brother's ability and intelligence. Some basic insecurity led him to establish a formidable secret police, which had little effect other than to make him more unpopular still. Like Gelon, he was a great mover of populations, transporting the people of Naxos^[3] and Catania to Leontini, and actually refounding Catania under a new name—Etna—and populating it with immigrants from the Peloponnese. He was ambitious too: in 474 b.c., in response to an appeal from Cumae, he sent a fleet across to the Bay of Naples, where it inflicted a crushing defeat on the Etruscans.

Perhaps his most attractive feature was his love of the arts: Pindar and Simonides, together with many other lesser poets and philosophers, were welcomed to his court at Syracuse, as was the tragedian Aeschylus,^[4] but somehow the old magic was gone. It is the inherent weakness of autocracies that their success depends entirely on the character and strength of the autocrat. Hereditary monarchy can take the occasional weak ruler in its stride; tyranny collapses. Hiero, alas, was found wanting. He survived long enough to win an Olympic chariot race in 468 b.c., but died the following year. He was briefly and ingloriously succeeded by two more of his brothers, who were thrown out one after the other.

At this point it was certainly on the cards that some new, unrelated adventurer might have seen his chance and staged a coup d'état; for some reason, however, tyranny suddenly dropped out of fashion. It was not only Syracuse—by far the most important city in Sicily—that reverted to a form of democracy, but almost all the petty tyrannies (whose fortunes we have no time, space or reason to follow here) across the island. This change of heart raised its own problems: so many local populations had been uprooted and transported to other cities that it was almost impossible to determine who deserved a vote and who did not, and the result was half a century of considerable confusion. It was this, perhaps, which in 415 b.c. emboldened the Athenians to launch against Syracuse what Thucydides described as the most splendid and costly fleet ever to have sailed from a single Greek city—more than 250 ships and some 40,000 men.

For reasons not entirely clear, Athens had been showing a faintly sinister interest in Sicily since the 450s, when she had most improbably signed a treaty of friendship with Segesta—a diplomatic coup comparable, perhaps, to a pact today between China and Paraguay. A number of similar treaties followed, and when in 427 Leontini appealed for help in resisting an attack by Syracuse, the Athenians immediately sent twenty ships. This might have seemed generous enough at any time; during the fourth year of the Peloponnesian War, when Athens was fighting for her very existence, it was little short of astonishing. Thucydides claims, not very convincingly, that their object was to prevent the dispatch of grain to their enemies. The Peloponnesian War—which was basically a struggle between Athens and Sparta—had had little effect

on Sicily until 415; in the previous year, however, hostilities had flared up—not for the first time—between the two western cities of Segesta and Selinus. Segesta, being by far the weaker of the two, having appealed in vain for help to Acragas, Syracuse and Carthage, finally in despair sent an embassy to Athens. Athens was still technically at war, but warfare had given way to a period of uneasy truce and she had large numbers of bored fighting men who needed employment. She also had a dazzling young senator named Alcibiades—a former ward of the great Pericles—who enthusiastically championed the idea of a large-scale expedition to Sicily. He had no very high opinion of the Sicilians; and in a long speech to the Senate, he explained why:

Although the Sicilian cities are populous, their inhabitants are a mixed multitude, and they readily give up old forms of government and receive new ones from outside. No one really feels that he has a city of his own. They are a motley crew, who are never of one mind in counsel and are incapable of any concerted action.[5]

The Athenians believed him, and launched their expedition.

Almost immediately, the plight of Segesta seems to have been forgotten; the Athenians had bigger fish to fry. They may well have had in mind the subjection of all Sicily, but it was clear that their first objective must be the island's most important city, Syracuse. To Syracuse, therefore, they sailed; but the army had hardly landed before its commanders began to quarrel. Alcibiades, who was by far the ablest of them, was recalled to Athens almost at once to answer charges of profanation, and played no further part in the fighting; had he done so the expedition might have ended very differently. None of his fellow generals seems to have had any overall plan of attack; for weeks they shilly-shallied, giving Syracuse plenty of time to prepare a firm resistance—and to appeal for help. Sparta with its superbly trained army and Corinth with its magnificent navy were swift to respond, and the Athenians soon found that the conquest of Sicily, or even only of Syracuse, was by no means to be the walkover that they had expected.

Moreover, unlike Athens, Syracuse possessed a superb commander. His name was Hermocrates. He is described by Thucydides as highly intelligent, experienced in war and of conspicuous courage, and by Xenophon as thorough, diligent and, as a general, unusually accessible to his men. In 415 he had been among the first to warn his countrymen of the Athenian danger, and had made a determined attempt to unite all Sicily—together with Carthage—against Athens while there was still time. In this he had failed, being by some written off as an alarmist, by others reviled as a warmonger; and more than a vestige of these suspicions seems to have remained, as the Syracusans absolutely refused to entrust him with supreme command, electing him instead as merely one of three generals who would share the executive authority between them. This asinine arrangement meant that, to a very considerable extent, his hands were tied.

The fighting continued for two full years, and on at least two occasions the Athenians had the city almost within their grasp. In 414 a major slave revolt was narrowly averted, and later the same year Hermocrates was obliged to open peace negotiations; only the timely arrival, with substantial reinforcements, of the Spartan general Gylippus saved the situation. Gylippus was not initially popular in Syracuse, but he soon showed himself a thoroughgoing professional and Hermocrates, swallowing his pride, accepted him as his superior officer. It was these two men together who were ultimately responsible for the Athenian defeat—a defeat which Athens was to take a long time to live down.

But there were other causes as well. As time went by the Athenian soldiers became ever more homesick and demoralized, and thus increasingly vulnerable to epidemics, particularly of malaria—unknown in Athens but rampant in Sicily. At last the Athenian commanders accepted that they had failed and gave the order to withdraw. But they were too late. The Syracusans and their allies launched a sudden last-minute attack; the

Athenian fleet was trapped inside the harbor and annihilated. What followed was little short of a massacre. After it, the two principal Athenian generals, Nicias—despite being seriously ill—and Demosthenes, were executed, while some 7,000 of their men were captured and forced to work in those fearsome limestone quarries that can be visited just outside the city. The marks of their pickaxes can still be seen. In the next few months many of them were to die of cold and exposure. Countless others were branded on the forehead with the mark of a horse and then sold into slavery. (Plutarch's claim that a few lucky ones were set free because they could recite a chorus or two of Euripides can, alas, be discounted.) Thucydides summed it up: "the victors earned the most brilliant of successes, the vanquished the most calamitous of defeats."

Sicily was victorious and, for the moment, safe from foreign invaders; but the Peloponnesian War was by no means over and Hermocrates, now unemployed, assumed command of a fleet of twenty triremes to fight for Sparta in the Aegean. For two years all went well; but in 410 fate turned against him. Perhaps he was less gifted as an admiral than he was as a general; at any rate, in the course of a grim battle off Cyzicus on the Sea of Marmara every one of his ships was destroyed by an Athenian fleet. He returned to Sicily, only to find the gates of Syracuse firmly closed against him—perhaps because, despite his excellent past record, the citizens mistrusted his obvious ambition and feared that he might make himself a tyrant. Their fears were probably well justified, but we shall never know: in 407, while making a determined bid to force his way into the city, he was surrounded and killed.

Among those at Hermocrates' side on that fatal day was a tall, red-haired young man of twenty-four named Dionysius. A recent biographer assumes him to have been "of well-to-do but undistinguished stock"; he is said to have recognized his destiny one day when a swarm of bees attached itself to his horse's mane.[6]

In fact we know next to nothing of his family or his origins—only that he was destined to achieve all the glory his former leader had sought, and much more beside. If Dionysius had looked back over recent events, it would surely have been plain to him that both the failure of the Athenian expedition and the narrow escape of his own city had had the same cause: the real or enforced incapacity of their leaders. The Athenian generals had all had their own ideas about how the operation should be conducted, while the senior of them, Nicias, had been far too ill to be capable of high command. Syracuse, on the other hand, had possessed in Hermocrates an outstanding military talent, but had then cravenly refused to give him his head. How had all this been allowed to happen? The fault lay, the young man would have reasoned, in the democratic system. Democracy meant disunity; only if he enjoyed absolute power could a great leader work at full capacity and achieve his highest ambitions.

It would have been pleasant to record that the ignominious departure of the Athenians restored peace to Sicily. Alas, it did nothing of the sort. The old hostilities between Selinus and Segesta were resumed, and in 410 b.c. a desperate Segesta once again appealed for aid, this time to Carthage. The Carthaginians responded—their catastrophic intervention of seventy years before had presumably been forgotten. In that first year they could manage only a small, hastily gathered force; but 409 saw the dispatch of a considerable army under their general Hannibal,[7] which in little over a week reduced Selinus to a pile of smoking rubble. Those of the city's inhabitants who had not fled for safety were slaughtered. Hannibal then advanced to Himera, where his men perpetrated a further massacre before returning for the winter to North Africa.

By now Carthaginian blood was up; they were not finished with Sicily yet. In the spring of 406 they were back, with a still larger army and a new objective—Acragas, perennially prosperous thanks to the neutrality it had been careful to maintain during previous hostilities. The Syracusans rallied to its defense; but, much to their disgust and despite their furious recriminations, the men of Acragas lifted scarcely a finger. Their life had been too easy for too long; perhaps they had grown too fond of the luxury for which they were famous, and of the supremely comfortable beds and cushions which they exported to every corner of the Greek

world. A contemporary military decree forbade soldiers to have more than three blankets or two pillows while on watch; in the circumstances, they were unlikely to put up much of a fight. As a result, their city was abandoned—its inhabitants transferred to Leontini—and then sacked and plundered by the victorious Carthaginians. Among the countless works of art with which they returned home is said to have been the bronze bull in which the tyrant Phalaris had roasted his victims.

The events in Acragas could not fail to have their effect in Syracuse, where an already uneasy political situation became still more confused; and it was now that Dionysius saw his chance. Without much difficulty—for he was already one of the rising stars of the administration—he had himself elected to the city's board of generals, from which it was only a short step to the supreme command. This, it need hardly be said, he had no hesitation in assuming. Carthage was still on the warpath—in the next few months Gela was to suffer a similar fate to that of Acragas—and it was more than likely that Syracuse would be next on the list. And so indeed it was; but suddenly the Carthaginians changed their minds and returned home. Why they did so we cannot tell. The ancient chronicler Diodorus speaks darkly of an outbreak of plague; but it may well be that Dionysius himself had something to do with it. He seems already to have been a remarkably impressive figure. He is unlikely to have been able to intimidate the Carthaginians, let alone to infect them; but his diplomatic skills may perhaps have been sufficient to persuade them that an attack on his city would simply be not worth their while.

Whatever the truth may be, a peace treaty was duly signed; and this treaty marked the first recognition by Syracuse of a Carthaginian province in Sicily. The Carthaginian settlements, all in the far west of the island, were to be the absolute property of Carthage. The conquered peoples were allowed to return to their homes on condition that they left their cities unfortified and paid an annual tribute. In Syracuse, by contrast, Carthage was powerless; Dionysius already had the city under his control. The second age of Sicilian tyrants had arrived.

Unwilling to trust his head to a barber, he taught his own daughters to shave him. Royal virgins were thus reduced to the servile trade of female barber, cutting their father's hair and beard. He went still further: when they grew up he took away the cutting instruments and decided that they should singe his beard and hair with heated walnut-shells. He had two wives, Aristomache of his own city and Doris of Locri, and before he came to them at night he had everything examined and searched. Around the bed he had a broad trench dug, traversed by a little wooden footbridge; after he closed the door of the chamber, he himself removed the bridge.

This passage, from Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations*—written, it must be pointed out, some four centuries after the death of its subject—should probably be taken not so much as a historical anecdote than as an example of the wildly extravagant tales that grow up around larger-than-life rulers, particularly if they remain so long in power as to acquire semi-iconic status. Dionysius I of Syracuse ruled for no fewer than thirty-eight years, a period of tyranny that Diodorus describes as “the strongest and longest of any in recorded history.” How did he do it? Certainly, he possessed all the obvious characteristics necessary for leadership—courage, self-confidence, high intelligence, determination and powers of oratory, this last always of immense importance in the Greek-speaking world. But there was clearly something else as well, later to be evident in a few—a very few—others: men like Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar and Napoleon. We may call it charisma, or star quality, or what we will. It is in fact impossible to define; all that can safely be said is that we know it when we see it, and that Dionysius of Syracuse had it in spades.

It is fascinating to see how delicately—there is no other word—Dionysius moved into the seat of power. He had allied himself neither with the aristocracy (to which he in no way belonged) nor with the people; never did he allow himself to be seen as a rebel, far less a revolutionary. His claims were principally based on the

security of the city and all who lived in it. The enemy was still virtually at the gates; another attack could be expected at any time, and after the poor showing at Acragas and Gela of the other Syracusan generals—several of whom, it was put about by his agents, were in secret negotiations with Carthage—he modestly suggested that he and he alone deserved the supreme command. To strengthen his position still further, he had taken to wife the daughter of Hermocrates,[8] to whose brother-in-law he had married off his own sister. Only when he was firmly established did he move against his potential enemies.

Dionysius's next step was to appropriate the entire island of Ortygia—which extends over very nearly a square kilometer and was always the most select area of Syracuse, containing as it did the relatively recent Temple of Athena—into his own personal fortress, including the houses of his closest friends and associates, together with extensive barracks for his standing army of mercenaries and part of his fleet.[9] It had the additional advantage that it was connected to the mainland by a bridge, which—just like the reputed one in his bedroom—could be rendered useless if the need arose.

He had one overriding purpose—to extend his dominions, acquiring as much power and wealth as possible on the way. Just what those dominions were is not easy to define: he was certainly tyrant of a good deal more than Syracuse. His rule extended all over Sicily except for the far western corner (which remained in Carthaginian hands), much of southern Calabria (the toe) and the Basilicata (the instep) of Italy, together with lands around the mouth of the Po and even one or two enclaves across the Adriatic on the Dalmatian coast. A treaty which he made with Athens in 367 b.c. promised Athenian help in the event of any war against Dionysius or his descendants, “or any place where Dionysius rules”—one of the few international agreements in history concluded with a head of state personally rather than with the state itself.

His principal enemy was of course Carthage. After a few years consolidating his position in Sicily he began serious preparations for war, bringing to Sicily numbers of specialist shipbuilders, craftsmen and military engineers who provided him with siege engines and catapults, now seen on the island for the first time; and by the end of 398 he was ready. Even before the formal declaration of war, he attacked and plundered the small Carthaginian merchant colony in Syracuse, destroying such of their ships as chanced to be in the harbor; and most of the other Greek cities on the island quickly followed his example. His first main objective was Motya,[10] a small island off the west coast which sheltered the largest and most populous Carthaginian settlement in Sicily. The causeway linking it to the mainland was cut by the defenders, as a result of which the island somehow held out until the late summer of 397; finally, however, it could resist no longer—and it paid the price of its resistance. Most of its population was massacred, while all Greeks who had remained loyal to Carthage were crucified.

During the following year the fighting spread all over Sicily. A large army and a sizable navy arrived from Carthage, and a few cities made their peace; the majority, however, fought with all their strength. Messina was flattened, and it looked as though Syracuse was next on the list; but the city was saved, once again, by plague in the invading army. Dionysius took the initiative with an immediate attack, and the Carthaginians surrendered. They were allowed to return home unmolested on payment of 300 talents, which was all the money they had. Their allies, who included several contingents of mercenaries from North Africa and Spain, were left high and dry to fend for themselves.

The victory of Syracuse did not mark the end of the Carthaginian wars. There were further invasions in 393 and 392, which came to nothing: in the years following 383, on the other hand, Carthage got its own back. No one now knows the precise site of Cronion, where Dionysius suffered his first major defeat, losing much of his army—which included his brother Leptines. He was obliged to pay an indemnity of 1,000 talents and to accept several new frontiers, depriving him of Selinus and much of Acragas. In 368 he tried to get his revenge, and indeed managed to regain Selinus; but that winter he died, his work unfinished. There are

different theories regarding his death. According to one account, he was poisoned by his doctors at the instigation of his son and successor; according to another, he died after too enthusiastically celebrating the news that a play of his, *The Ransom of Hector*, had won first prize at a not very distinguished dramatic festival in Athens.

He had always fancied himself as a man of letters; in 388 his court was honored by a visit from the great Plato himself, while the historian Philistus and the poet Philoxenus were regular attenders—though Philoxenus had once been dispatched to the quarries for being rude about his master’s poetry. Shortly afterward, at the request of several friends, he was released—but alas, just in time for another poetry reading. This he suffered in silence, until the despot asked once again for his opinion. “Back to the quarries,” he murmured.

Dante consigns Dionysius—somewhat unfairly—to the seventh circle of hell, where he is immersed in the Phlegethon, a river of boiling blood and fire. In fact, the first or second circles would have been more than enough. He was ambitious, charismatic, flamboyant—cruel, perhaps, but no crueler than most of his contemporary rulers and, one suspects, a good deal more intelligent. He never succeeded in his primary objective, which was to drive the Carthaginians out of Sicily for good; had he done so, it has been suggested that he might have conquered the larger part of Italy itself and even put a stop to the growing power of Rome. By the time of his death, however, he was certainly controlling most of the island, to say nothing of his extensive dominions on the mainland. His greatest surviving monument is what remains of the line of fortifications around his city, which he completed in the four years between 401 and 397 and which culminates in the still vastly impressive *Castello Eurialo*; and his name is preserved for tourists by what the painter Caravaggio was the first to describe as “Dionysius’s Ear,” a curious rock formation thanks to which he is said to have been able to overhear his slaves as they worked in the quarries. There is, it need hardly be said, no conceivable way in which he could have done so.

[1] So fresh and copious was the water that in June 1798 Nelson used it to provision his fleet of fourteen ships. He wrote to Sir William Hamilton that in view of its source he felt assured of a coming victory. Two months later he defeated the French at Aboukir Bay.

[2] Purple was to remain an imperial color until the fall of Byzantium in 1453. The principal drawback of the murex industry was the appalling smell that it created; the piles of broken shells were always sited downwind of the town.

[3] Not of course to be confused with the Aegean island. Now known as *Giardini-Naxos*, it lies on the coast a few kilometers south of Taormina.

[4] It was while he was Hiero’s guest in Gela that Aeschylus is said to have suffered a unique accident when an eagle, flying above him, mistook his bald head for a stone and dropped a tortoise on it in an attempt to break its shell. The bird scored a direct hit, and Aeschylus was killed. The fate of the tortoise is unknown.

[5] Thucydides, VI.17.

[6] Bees and honey have always had a special significance in Sicily—ever since Daedalus, father of the ill-fated Icarus, dedicated to Artemis a golden honeycomb.

[7] Not to be confused with the great Hannibal Barca, who commanded the Carthaginian army in the Second Punic War.

[8] The two ladies mentioned by Cicero in the passage quoted on page 16 were later acquisitions, married

simultaneously in 399 or 398. Both marriages, we are told, were consummated in a single night. The resultant daughters were named Prudence, Virtue and Justice (Sophrosyne, Arete and Dikaiosyne)—perhaps to compensate for a mother named Doris.

[9] On Via XX Settembre the remains of Dionysius's main gateway, the Porta Urbica, may still be seen.

[10] Now Mozia. The island was owned by the Whitaker family (see the introduction), whose villa is now an excellent archaeological museum. It contains the celebrated Giovane di Mozia, a fifth-century statue of a young man which has been tentatively attributed to Pheidias.

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