

UPRISINGS IN SICILY

MORTON (P.) *Slavery and Rebellion in Second-Century BC Sicily. From Bellum Servile to Sicilia Capta*. Pp. xviii + 225, ills, maps. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2024. Cased, £95. ISBN: 978-1-3995-1573-3. doi:10.1017/S0009840X24001136

In this provocative monograph M. argues that the First and the Second Sicilian Slave Wars ought to be reclassified as the First and the Second Romano-Sicilian Wars. He points out that our literary sources about the two revolts reflect the perspective of the opponents of the rebels and not of the rebels themselves. Therefore, he prioritises the coins of Antiochus, the leader of the first revolt, as well as accounts of the religious activities of both rebellions. On M.'s reading, this evidence suggests that resistance to Rome and to the elite was based on Sicilian rather than slave identity. Despite a variety of hedges about the role played by enslaved persons in the revolt (e.g. pp. 14, 67), the main thrust of the argument is clear: the description of these events as slave revolts is a misnomer contrary to the self-representation of the rebels.

The first chapter begins with the crucial numismatic evidence. M. discusses the nineteen bronze coins in four issues, attributed to the first revolt because of the inscription 'of King Antiochus', which is how its main leader styled himself. Developing the arguments of previous scholars (p. 45), he finds evidence in the coins' imagery that they reflect local numismatic traditions and thus represent an appeal to Sicilian identity: most strikingly, Demeter, an important cult figure in south-eastern Sicily, and an ear of barley appear both on Antiochus' coins and on earlier coins from nearby cities. Endorsing the argument of J.N. Dillon (p. 62), M. also believes that a delegation from Rome to Enna and around Sicily in general aimed to counter this aspect of the rebels' propaganda. He concludes that the direct evidence we have for how the rebels presented themselves suggests a Sicilian rebellion more than a slave revolt. But he grudgingly admits the value of linking the rebels' Antiochus coins with Diodorus' description of the rebels as identifying themselves as Syrians (pp. 22, 44–5) – not as Sicilians. This assertion of ethnic identity, as well as the choice of Antiochus, a royal name from the other side of the Mediterranean, fits perfectly an uprising of slaves, many of whose origins lay in the Hellenistic eastern Mediterranean.

The second chapter provides a critical analysis of the literary accounts of the first war. M.'s goal is to move away 'from a slave-owner-led narrative that denies agency to the rebels and attempts to eliminate their self-definition' (p. 95). M. argues that one leader of the revolt, Eunus/Antiochus, is portrayed as a fraudulent miracle worker and an effeminate coward and that Kleon, the other leader, is represented as a violent bandit. Further, M. notes that Diodorus often writes as a 'covert external narrator', to ascribe base or simplistic motivations to the rebels (p. 87). The final distortion that M. finds in the literary sources, crucial to his argument, is a fixation on slave–master relations (pp. 85, 91). Of course, if this was a slave rebellion, as I believe, the focus on slave–master relations would be unobjectionable, a viewpoint shared by both rebelling former slaves and their opponents. And, despite M.'s repeated straw-man attack, no recent historian naively accepts the ancient accounts of the revolts; historians generally read these narratives critically as shaped by slaveholder ideology in ways both simple and complex.

M. next turns to the second rebellion, but here the most direct evidence, consisting of the inscribed lead sling bullets of the rebel forces, does not evince the Sicilian nature of that uprising: when they spell victory, *nikē*, the bullets show the *eta* of Koine/Attic, at home in

the eastern Mediterranean, instead of the Doric *alpha* of Sicilian dialects, *nikā* (pp. 112–13). Furthermore, the rebel leader used the name Tryphon. Most of the explanations for this also rest on either his own or his followers' origins in the eastern Mediterranean (p. 115). M. notes these issues, but focuses on a story about Tryphon's dedications at the shrine of the Paliki. He convincingly takes this as symbolising Tryphon's larger goal of appealing to the Sicilian population as a whole, rather than limiting his perspective to the shrine's role as a refuge for mistreated slaves, which Diodorus stresses (pp. 109, 117–21).

In the next chapter M. widens his scope considerably and surveys all ancient references to slave revolts and the literary purposes to which these contribute. Rebellious or fugitive slaves are used in aetiologies. The accusation that a movement was a slave war was often employed to dismiss or denigrate those of whom the author of a speech or history disapproved. Finally, slave revolts could be used as a commentary on free society. This analysis reinforces M.'s argument that we cannot take these accounts at face value (p. 151): perhaps, the description of the Sicilian rebels as slaves reflected the use of the slave revolt motif to dismiss rivals, much as Augustus describes his war against Sextus Pompeius as a *bellum servile* (p. 137 on *Res Gestae* 27.3). I am more optimistic: historians can make the distinction between invective and Diodorus' accounts, which include many specific details that become, not only distorted, but incomprehensible, if the events described were not slave revolts.

The last chapter argues that the Sicilian slave revolts do not fit the pattern of modern slave revolts, which usually fail quickly, and that they do not have parallels in the ancient record either. Two weaknesses in this argument are at once apparent. Most slave revolts did fail quickly, but that does not mean that all did. Conditions in late Republican Sicily, other preoccupations of the Romans and good luck allowed the Sicilian uprisings to last much longer than the norm. Equally problematic is M.'s decision that neither the Spartacus War – because it deserves 'its own, extended analysis on its own terms' (p. 7) – nor the Haitian Revolution can count as parallels: in the latter case, the reasons for the success of the slaves and former slaves on Haiti are complex (pp. 184–7), but it is generally and rightly considered as a slave uprising.

M. is correct to emphasise that rebellious slaves attempted to win over local support, probably from the most resentful of the free poor. Some free Sicilians do seem to have joined both revolts – at least in looting and arson (pp. 58–60, 120). Whether the rebel slaves succeeded in convincing many Sicilians to join a movement likely to end with the horrible deaths of all participants is more dubious. Alas, we have virtually no evidence pertinent to the class of people so deeply alienated and resentful as to consider throwing in their lot with rebellious slaves. The low status and probably small numbers of the free adherents bring us to a key problem with viewing these as Romano-Sicilian Wars: their lack of success in controlling Sicily. M.'s maps show almost 50 cities in Sicily; the second revolt captured six of them whereas the first revolt did not even do that well (pp. 21, 114). Rome was not forced to send large armies because it needed to reconquer Sicily with its many cities, but rather it had to confront desperate and determined former slaves fighting for their freedom in the countryside and in the few strongholds they captured or constructed. No more contemporary evidence for more widespread Sicilian discontent seems to be available than the defections 80 years earlier, during the Second Punic War (pp. 54–5). The total of regional uprisings against the Romans described in the historical sources may run into the hundreds: why are only these three – I include the rebellion led by Spartacus – described as slave revolts, if not for the fact that that is what they were? In contrast, none of the evidence, including the coinage and sling bullets of the rebels themselves, is inconsistent with these being essentially slave revolts in terms of their

origins in resistance to slavery, the original status of a large majority of the participants and the way in which the Romans treated the rebels when defeated. These objections notwithstanding, M. is to be praised for his thorough research, his clear writing, his bold thesis and for forcing historians to justify explicitly long-held and assumed positions.

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