Beyond Ethnicity: Thucydides and Sicilian Regional Identity

The year 424 BCE found the Greek cities of Sicily locked in a war that had already lasted at least three years and that had allowed Athens to send an army there. This war, as Thucydides tells us (3.86), was primarily an ethnic conflict: most of the Dorians were fighting against the Chalcidians (a Sicilian variant of the Ionians). Although ethnicity – a concept which I restrict to those groups claiming a common descent (Hall 1997; *contra*, Jones 1997) – was clearly an important motivation for political action, it was not always the most salient form of identity in ancient Sicily. Cutting across this ethnic divide was a different sense of identity that created a group in which all Sicilian Greeks participated. In 424, at a peace conference in the city of Gela, the Syracusan politician Hermocrates delivered a speech which, in the rendition of Thucydides (4.59-64), advocated that the Greeks of Sicily unite against the Athenian invaders. He did so by invoking precisely this pan-Sicilian identity, referred to as the Sikeliotai. This group was defined by different criteria than the Dorians and Chalcidians: Hermocrates points out that “taken all together, we are all of us neighbors, fellow-dwellers in the same country, in the midst of the sea, all called by the single name of Sikeliotai.” The Sikeliotai were not a new ethnic group, as some have suggested (Antonaccio 2001), but rather represent a different type of identity, one based on geography.

Although this speech is often dismissed as a rhetorical construct and its relevance for the concept of identity ignored, Hermocrates’ speech at Gela and his arguments based on Sicilian regional identity in fact had a demonstrable political effect: the Sicilian cities did make peace with each other and expelled the Athenian expedition. Thus, the Sicilian Greeks who made these decisions agreed with Hermocrates that they should reorient their views of what type of identity they considered most important: whereas previously they had gone to war with members of a different ethnic group, now they reconciled with those same communities because they were all Sicilians. Of course, the speech as given by Thucydides is almost certainly the creation of the historian, not of Hermocrates. But Thucydides claimed that his speeches recorded *ta deonta* (1.22), indicating that he thought the arguments presented would have succeeded in a real situation. Thus, it is reasonable to use the Athenian historian, who had a solid knowledge of Sicily and a strong interest in ethnicity (Hornblower 1996), as a source for the functioning of identity in Greek Sicily.

I therefore argue that this episode offers broader insights into the role of identity in Greek politics. Hermocrates could not invent a completely new identity and successfully impose it on an entire island full of people. Rather, he revived a form of identity that already existed. Sicilian identity had previously been fostered by the Deinomenid tyrants of Syracuse in the early fifth century to promote unity within their domains; the cult of Demeter and Kore, widely considered the patron deities of the island, became a symbol of this pan-Sicilian identity. Thus, communities in Sicily had multiple identities – both ethnic and regional – at the same time. In making political decisions, a community would sometimes consider its ethnic identity more important and act on that basis; its regional identity would then remain latent but could be activated at a later time. Hermocrates’ speech, therefore, constituted an attempt to influence this process, but its success shows that this framework of rapid switching between multiple types of identity was nonetheless a crucial – and overlooked – aspect of Greek political decision-making.

Bibliography

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