

Understanding an “Iliad of Woes”: Civic militarism and the course of the slave wars in Sicily 135-101 B.C.E.

The initial Roman response to the second-century Sicilian slave wars has been characterized by some scholars as dismissive and inadequate, the reaction of an imperial people who for ideological reasons did not consider rebellious slaves to be a significant threat. This supposedly half-hearted reaction allowed the insurgents to gain early victories which increased the slave bands as slaves previously unaffiliated with the rebellions flocked to the now-victorious rebels. Thus the blame for the unprecedented size and duration of the Sicilian slave wars has been placed upon the shoulders of the Romans, who might have ended the slave wars in their formative stages if more vigorous action was taken from the beginning.

I argue that the Roman military actions taken at the start of the two Sicilian slave wars were appropriate, given Roman expectations of the threat posed by rebel slaves, and were not without precedent. We can see in the fragments of Livy the shadows of a lost history of Italian slave uprisings that occurred throughout the second century B.C.E.; the state reaction to these earlier rebellions provided a standard for Roman officials to follow later when the slaves of Sicily rose in revolt. The praetors who marched to defeat against Eunus and Salvius at the end of the second century might therefore be absolved of blame, since they were taking the same actions that had ensured success against previous slave rebellions.

I suggest that Rome initially failed to suppress the slave wars in Sicily in part because of the prevailing military culture of the Sicilian city-states. Civic militarism was interwoven with the culture of the predominantly Greek cities of Sicily; the ideological construction of the citizen-soldier, drawn from the hoplite tradition of the Greek mainland, kept the idea of military service to the state alive while Roman domination was making such service obsolete. The local militia-armies of the Greek *poleis* were effective instruments of war only so long as a fractious political climate provided opportunities for the actual experience of battle. As Sicily grew more tightly incorporated into the Roman orbit over the course of the second century, opportunities for real battle experience—the on-the-job-training that made militia armies effective—disappeared. Roman praetors who led Sicilian troops into battle against the slave rebels were therefore relying on a military system that increasingly operated in the realm of ideology and memory, rather than reality. The Sicilian slave wars are therefore explainable not as a result of Roman ineptness in the short term, but as one consequence of larger structural changes stemming from Roman imperialism.