

Theatre as Legitimizer: Agathocles, Pyrrhus, and Hieron II's use of Theatre in Hellenistic Sicily

This presentation argues that given the increased 'theatricality' of Hellenistic politics, Hellenistic kings in Sicily used theatre – through the staging of drama, the commission and construction of monumental architecture, and through the performance of politics within the space of the theatre – as a means of legitimizing their rule, reinforcing their titles, and emphasising their own self-presentation as Hellenistic kings. By legitimizing, I mean that many Sicilian Hellenistic monarchs had relatively weak claims to rule, with few military victories, few relations to Alexander or the Macedonian royal family, and/or little-to-no grounds for extra-constitutional rule, and thus used the theatre as a means of strengthening what claims they had.

Angelos Chaniotis has recently argued that during the Hellenistic period political life took on more and more theatrical traits, a phenomenon he has described as the "theatricality of politics." (Chaniotis, 1997) If we allow that viewers conceived of politics as a show, I would argue that it follows that the construction of large monumental theatres, which enable rulers to stage and control the narrative, could act as a form of political legitimization for Sicilian generals and rulers with tendentious claims to rule. Alexander – the obvious model for any and all monarchs following his death – famously put on theatrical performances while on campaign, and may have even dabbled in writing theatre himself. This means the staging and facilitating of drama put monarchs in the footsteps of Alexander, the Hellenistic king *par excellence*. The construction of many of these monumental stone theatres appears to date to a rather tumultuous time in Sicily's history. The main questions that inspired this paper are: 1. could it be that the construction of theatres – which were used both for political function and for theatrical performance – could act as a legitimizer of rule for monarchs' subjects? And 2. what role did

theatre(s), both the art form and the physical spaces, play in the sometimes-cutthroat politics of Hellenistic Sicily?

My argument is focused on three particular Sicilian monarchs: Agathocles of Syracuse, Hieron II of Syracuse, and Pyrrhus of Epirus. I limit my choices in this way due to the material remains and theatrical productions which can be reliably linked to their respective reigns, and on account of the feebleness of their respective rules: Agathocles was of the lower classes and gained power by means of a coup, Pyrrhus was an outsider general invited to the island to aid in the fight against Carthage and Hieron II was a former general of Pyrrhus' as well as an illegitimate child of a Sicilian noble (Zambon, 2006). Each of these kings also had claims to rule the rest, or, at a minimum, other parts, of the island of Sicily so that each of these three particular monarchs can be linked to material remains outside of the city of Syracuse. Ultimately, I hope to demonstrate that theatre played a pivotal role in strengthening these rulers' claims.

Bibliography

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