INTERNAL POLITICS IN SYRACUSE, 330–317 BC

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Abstract: There is a certain difficulty in attempts to describe the period in Syracuse between the death of Timoleon and the coming to power of Agathocles. It was a time of great turmoil and political instability – Syracuse would reappear after 317 BC as a tyranny. This article is a review of the events and causes that shaped the final outcome. The main points of interests are: an attempt to describe a type of government present in the given period, especially the function of the group of the so-called “Six Hundred Noblest,” and the career of Agathocles, an exemplary one considering the political realities of the time.

Keywords: Sicily, Syracuse, Agathocles, tyranny.

After the death of Timoleon in 333 BC democracy was restored in the polis of Syracuse. This period, however, was to last no longer than 13 years, with occasional bouts of oligarchy. Another tyrant, in this case Agathocles, would rise to power in 317 BC. This interim period is rife with questions and uncertainties. Modern scholars have usually concentrated on the later period, when Agathocles seized ultimate power, or just before then (Berve 1953). Still, even partial answers can shed light on our understanding of internal politics in Syracuse in general.

However, before I can deal with the events of that period, I need to review in brief the results of Timoleon’s actions and decisions, as they clearly had an impact on subsequent events. The “Timoleontic revival” (Talbert 1975; Smarczyk 2003) in Syracuse meant first and foremost an increase in the number of citizens, which was certainly important for a city ravaged by continuous fighting between Dionysius the Elder’s successors. Nevertheless, the expansion of the citizenry had its consequences: “new” citizens could be exiles returning to the city, some of them attempting to reclaim property acquired by others. Furthermore, newly arriving citizens would expect to be granted a share of the land. These were not new problems for Greek poleis. However, as Timoleon did not resolve tensions and inequalities between groups of old and new citizenry before his death, Agathocles was subsequently able to exploit these divisions in his attempts to gain power. Around this time, Syracuse’s population also became quite diverse, as volunteers were gathered from many other areas and settlements.

All the above gives an impression of the situation of Syracuse’s society at the moment of Timoleon’s death. Before continuing, it is necessary to consider two important
questions, both of them resulting from a critical approach to written sources (mainly Diodorus Siculus). Namely: where was the power to govern the city? Did the demos hold it, or did some other group take it for themselves? Secondly, anyone researching this period also needs to consider the exemplary career of Agathocles before he became a tyrant – how was it possible for him to gain such influence in Syracuse at that time?

Let us deal with the first question – it is generally assumed that the main result of Timoleon’s activities in Sicily was to overthrow tyrannies on the island and to restore democratic governments. In Syracuse, turning away from the past was marked by demolition of buildings connected with Deinomenid rule – especially Dionysius’ palace on the isle of Ortygia. Similarly, the temple of Zeus Eleutherios (Zeus the Liberator, whose cult was of special significance for democratic poleis) was built.

On the other hand, one particular group of citizens seems to have gained influence quickly in the city – the so-called Six Hundred Noblest. It is easy to connect the members of this group with the Syracusan military leadership of that time, as we are given names – Heraclides and Sosistratus – which are simultaneously the names of chief commanders during the campaign to relieve the city of Croton, which was being besieged by Bruttians. It is more difficult to point to its beginning. Was it created as a council (sundrion), for example, during Timoleon’s reforms? Later in Diodorus’ narrative, however, the group is called hetaireia. Could it have been just a “political club” of the most rich and influential citizens? Uncertainty is caused partly by the terminology used by Diodorus (Galvagno 2011). The answer is clearly connected with the form and function of government during the period between Timoleon and Agathocles. Based on Aristotle’s set of definitions, it would be a “mixed” constitution – unfortunately, this does not give us a clear picture, as nowhere in the surviving sources can we find solid information on the capabilities of such a “council.” Still, the presence of the Six Hundred alone would suggest that the Syracusan constitution at this time was not a pure democracy (Hüttl 1929: 128–130; Sordi 1980: 280–282).

Without doubt, the Six Hundred had political weight, and certainly such a group could function under a democratic government. Careful scrutiny of Diodorus will show that the aforementioned leaders, Heraclides and Sosistratus, were chosen for the Croton campaign. At that time, Croton was led by an oligarchy. Why should democratic Syracuse help oligarchical Croton? One could look for the answers in the work of Thucydides, who in one passage remarks that kindred constitutions of different poleis are likely to give support to each other (Thuc. 3.82). Naturally, Croton was an important city, both politically and economically, in Magna Graecia, but it was also a target of the campaigns of Dionysius and Agathocles. A democratic polis may have found it necessary to maintain good relations with such a city. Later events however – the takeover of the Syracuse by Heraclides and Sosistratus after their return from campaigning – lead the reader to question the motives behind the intervention in the siege of Croton. First, an oligarchical party was saved in Croton, and soon afterwards oligarchical rule took hold in Syracuse. Of course, oligarchs would be inclined to support oligarchy in other cities, and it seems reasonable to assume that such support is likely to have been reciprocated. Yet foreign support could not have been the sole reason for the success of the Six Hundred and their ability to stay in power.