

## Reconsidering local elites in Republican Sicily

### Abstract:

Study of Republican Sicily is frequently trapped in a vicious circle, caused by limited evidence and a Romanocentric perspective. The picture of the island under Roman rule is usually negative. New perspectives are possible. A survey of Sicilian epigraphic practice highlights patterns in the Republican period which suggest the importance of local élites and civic identity. Reconsideration of the taxation system points in the same direction. Combined with other recent studies, this suggests a picture of Republican Sicily in which local élites flourish, enabling communities to ‘negotiate’ successful existence under Roman rule.

L'étude de la Sicile sous la République romaine est la victime d'un cercle vicieux. Témoignage limité et l'optique romaine souvent se terminent par un tableau négatif de la province. Mais autres optiques sont possibles. Par un'enquête sur la culture épigraphique de l'île (qui révèle une structure alternative à cette période), et aussi par une réévaluation des impôts, on peut souligner l'importance des élites locales et de l'identité civique. Conjointement avec des autres études récentes, on peut suggérer une Sicile où les élites locales prospèrent et facilitent la ‘négociation’ pour une existence heureuse sous la Rome.

‘When the Sicilians, after the fall of the Carthaginians, had prospered in every way for sixty years, the Servile War broke out...’

(Diod. Sic. 34/35.2.1).

The opening of Diodorus’ account of the Sicilian Slave Wars is well known. But this sixty years’ prosperity is often seen as problematic – for most, the outbreak of the Slave Wars demonstrates that this was a false prosperity, that the true consequences of Roman rule were simply slow to appear. Scholars often write of optimistic and pessimistic readings of the island’s history in this period. But such descriptions are both value-laden and teleological. Instead, in this paper, I shall try to step outside the existing debates and offer material which is suggestive of new ways to read the period.

A. Pinzone, in a recent survey of the study of Romano-Italic immigration to Republican Sicily, observed that study has become trapped in a vicious circle (Pinzone 1999: 390). Interpretation is constrained by limited evidence and directed by external considerations. The evidence primarily employed consists of a small number of problematic inscriptions (e.g. *ILLRP* 320 = *CIL* I<sup>2</sup>.612: now lost), and the even more problematic texts of Livy, Diodorus Siculus, and Cicero, *In Verrem*. These literary texts are apparently contradictory (e.g. Verbrugge 1972, cf. Mazza 1981). Attempts to reconcile these texts are influenced not only by one’s opinion of the individual authors, but also by what one believes about the level of Roman intervention and presence, the juridical development of the Roman province over time, and more emotive subjects such as *latifundia* and slavery. The epigraphic evidence, and the minimal archaeological material (cf. Coarelli 1981), is then employed accordingly. But the element of chance in the evidence is made clear by A. Fraschetti (1981: 64), who observed that we know of as many named *equites* in Republican Sicily as in all the other Republican provinces together (Nicolet 1966, 1974) – and almost all of these are known only from the *Verrines*.

To break out of this ‘vicious circle’, I begin with a set of data that derives from an ongoing study of Sicilian epigraphy. The core of that project is a database of all inscriptions, in all languages, on stone, from Sicily between the C7th B.C. and the C7th A.D. Although the database is not yet complete, it is sufficiently advanced to permit useful quantitative analysis. Such a study obviously raises many problems, e.g., in the concentration upon stone inscriptions. But it is also designed to confront many of the problems surrounding epigraphic practice, e.g., how to interpret linguistic patterns in what is essentially cultural behaviour. Space does not permit discussion of these issues here (but see Prag 2002).

The data presented here divides all Sicilian stone inscriptions, irrespective of language, into broad epigraphic types: funerary, honorific, dedicatory, building, public, and 'other'. These are necessarily arbitrary divisions, with occasionally blurred boundaries, but they are adequate for this analysis. Figure 1 presents this division by type for all those inscriptions, C7 B.C. to C7 A.D., for which such categorisation is possible. Figure 2 repeats this division for the subset of all those inscriptions to which a date has been assigned. It is clear from figure 2 that the subset of dated inscriptions is not significantly biased away from the overall set presented in figure 1. Finally, figure 3 presents the subset of all those inscriptions dated between C3 B.C. and C1 B.C., i.e. the Republican period.

This analysis is necessarily quite 'blunt'. But the point I wish to make should be obvious. Funerary inscriptions dominate Sicilian epigraphy – over 2/3 of all inscriptions. This is hardly surprising, and would no doubt be reflected by similar analyses for most regions and periods of the ancient world – and many in the modern. But, in the Republican period, in Sicily, funerary epigraphy drops from c.2/3 of all inscriptions to less than 1/6. Honorific, dedicatory and public inscriptions on the other hand all increase significantly. Two additional points should be made. Firstly, the vast majority of these inscriptions are in Greek: of the 120 inscriptions in the subset of figure 3, fewer than 30 are Latin, Punic, or Oscan. Secondly, the frequency over time of inscriptions *increases* over this period, from an initial point of almost zero in the C4 B.C. (see figure 4: the same temporal gap appears in the corpus of lead *defixiones* from Sicily (Lopez Jimeno 1991), which suggests that this particular trend is not a feature of stone inscriptions only. Note that the datasets for figures 2 and 4 are not identical, but the overlap is almost complete.)

I do not suggest that there is a necessary connection between the increasing number of inscriptions and the actual prosperity, let alone 'happiness', of the island in this period. That is an old fallacy (MacMullen 1982). But a lively epigraphic habit in this period is nonetheless suggestive (consider the speedy gift of the Syracusan *boule* to Cicero and his cousin of a presentation bronze copy of their latest decree – Cic. *Ver.* 4.145). Instead, this trend should encourage us to move away from a Roman-oriented perspective and to focus upon the local practice rather than the relatively weakly attested immigrant Romano-Italic elements.

The idea that Sicily should be the home of a typically Hellenistic epigraphic culture is of course not so surprising. Cicero shows Sthenius of Thermae petitioning the Roman senate in defence of Sicilian tax rights (*Ver.* 3.18-19). Epigraphy provides evidence of other Sicilians performing similar roles (e.g. *IG* 14.952: Demetrios of Syracuse assisting the Agrigentines; cf. *SEG* 37.757). This is the sort of euergetic behaviour familiar from the period (for *euergesia*, e.g., *IG* 14.353 (=Manni Piraino 1973, no.127); *IG* 14.359; Manni Piraino 1963: 159-62). It is tempting to link the trend in figure 4 more directly to Roman rule, and to suggest a rising importance for local civic leaders in relation both to the local Roman magistrates and to Rome itself. Indeed, Sicily would appear to be a fertile ground for exploration of the overlap between euergetic practice and the workings of *clientela* (cf. Ferrary 1997; Tanner 2000, esp. 40ff). Romans are occasionally the object of these inscriptions, mostly towards the end of the period (e.g. *IG* 14.356, 367, 435; *CIL* 1<sup>2</sup>.612). Occasionally also they appear indirectly, in inscriptions concerning Sicilians (e.g. *AE* 1973.265; *IG* 14.282; and cf. Entella B1 (in Ampolo 2001 = *SEG* 30.1120)). But it is the local civic identities and the local individuals which emerge most clearly from the epigraphy of the period.

The importance of these local identities has recently been stressed in the context of the East (Jones 2001). It seems no less important here in the West. Local civic identities are everywhere, whether in relation to other communities (e.g. the notorious Entella decrees, for which see now Ampolo 2001), or in relation to Rome (e.g. *AE* 1990.437), or as part of individual identity (e.g. *IG* 14.282). The nature of the material means that local civic institutions are frequently attested (cf. Cordano 1999), but also that there is considerable evidence for more regular civic financial activity, outside of euergetic practice (cf. Migeotte 1997: 193-4). Material includes the Tauromenium accounts (*IG* 14.422-30, cf. Migeotte 1992: 277-82); the Halaesa cadastral inscription (*IG* 14.352 with Calderone 1961; cf. Prestianni Giallombardo 1998, 1999); and a cadastral list from Acrae (*IG* 14.217 = Pugliese Carratelli 1956, no.2)).

The prominence of the leading figures of individual communities, the *principes civitatum* in Cicero's account, has been emphasised before, in relation to the literary sources (Rizzo 1980). In the light of the epigraphic patterns illustrated, I wish to conclude by drawing together several recent observations in order to suggest a modification to the picture portrayed by a recent and influential model for Republican Sicily (Gabba 1986).

Gabba stressed the degree of initial Roman intervention in Sicily, and the way in which this bound the Sicilian economy to that of Roman Italy. Urban decline and economic determinism were central to the Republican picture (1986: 73-5). A low level of epigraphy was cited in support of this negative picture (1986: 80). Fundamental to this picture was the re-directed taxation system, which now concentrated production upon grain and removed 10%+ of this from the island each year. This stress upon a centre-periphery model and the new dynamic of produce leaving the island is potentially misleading. So too, C. Nicolet (1994) has stressed that what was different about the Sicilian system, the *lex Hieronica*, was that the tax was not only collected in kind, but rendered to the Romans in kind. However, as Dominic Rathbone has recently pointed out (unpublished paper, 2000), the other fundamental difference was that the collection was contracted locally – and the consequence of this is that those who profit from the tax-contracts are *local*. This is a model which P. Ørsted (1997) has suggested for the Danube region in the high Empire, but which has not I think been considered in relation to Republican Sicily. I shall briefly attempt to explore this in more detail.

It has frequently been noted that anyone, Roman (e.g. *Ver.* 3.148), Sicilian (3.77), even public slave (3.86), could bid for the tithes in front of the praetor at Syracuse (Carcopino 1914: 84-6; Nicolet 1994: 217). It is also usually stated that Roman *publicani* could not do so – although as J. Carcopino's discussion makes clear, this is inference rather than certainty (1914: 89-107). What is less frequently considered is the actual mechanism by which a *decumanus* made his profit (probably because most assume the Asian example provides the answer – but, for precisely the reasons Nicolet (1994) has highlighted, this does not apply; Rome wanted the grain, not the original monetary guarantee pledged by the *decumanus*). Carcopino was perplexed (1914: 41-3). V. M. Scramuzza, in detail (1937: 256-9), and Nicolet, less clearly (1994: 217), both offer the most likely solution: that the *decumanus* bid an amount equal to less than 10% of the crop; he was required only to deliver the amount of grain equal to his bid to the authorities; the surplus grain, between his bid and the actual tithe which he was legally permitted to collect from the farmer, constituted his profit. But Scramuzza's hypothesis that a typical bid was for 9% of the crop, giving the *decumanus* 1% of the total crop and so c.10% 'profit', makes little sense, unless the *decumanus* actually received his original monetary guarantee back from the praetor when he delivered the grain – for which we have no evidence. On the other hand,

A. H. M. Jones noted a generally much higher rate of profit – *on average* 120% - when he collected the figures from the *Verrines* (1974a: 120 with n.35). This interpretation finds support in the apparent link between levels of extortion and the size of the bids: as the level of bidding rises (with Verres' encouragement), so the level of profit drops (from 200% to 15% in the case of Herbita: Cic. *Ver.* 3.75-6), and so the level of extortion rises; farmers can be seen bidding for their own tithes in order to protect their interests, which in turn pushes the profit margins down and encourages further extortion. The suggestion of Rathbone is that if the *decumani* are local, then price-fixing is inherently likely. Traditionally, the *lex Hieronica* protected the farmer effectively against the *decumanus* collecting more than the tithe (*Ver.* 3.20). Therefore it was in everyone's interest, except the Roman authorities', for the bids to remain as low as possible (but whether we should see an act of 'silent resistance' to Roman rule in this is certainly questionable). Underbidding both increased the potential profit of the *decumanus*, and reduced the likelihood of the *decumanus* attempting to extract more than a tithe from the farmer. We have a nice parallel for exactly this practice at Athens in the collusion described by Andokides (*De Myst.* 133). Cicero (*Att.* 6.2.5) attests to local corruption of a slightly different sort when collection is left in the hands of local authorities (on both of these, cf. Jones 1974b: 153-4, 164 with n.71 (Brunt)). Such practices suggest one possible reason for the decision to transfer the tithes of wine, oil and *fruges minutae* to the Sempronian system in 75 B.C. – and Cicero himself tells us that the change would have brought Rome greater revenue (Cic. *Ver.* 3.18-19; cf. Ørsted 1985: 166). As Rathbone observed, Verres' initial actions appear slightly less 'bad' when viewed in this light. Rome must have been receiving considerably less corn than might be expected. Verres' defence that he sold the tithes for a high price becomes much more understandable (*Ver.* 3.40, cf. 3.19). But, we should not go too far in defending Verres. The consequence of selling the tithes for a high price is that profit margins go down. But, if the governor colludes, as Cicero alleges, then it becomes possible for the *decumanus* to extort more than the tithe alone (cf. Jones 1974b: 164).

In other words, the logic of the Sicilian taxation system suggests that, except when confronted with a Verres, the Sicilians were likely to be the ones making a profit – and the individuals likely to do so are the local élites. Recent work suggests that the traditional image of Sicilian urban decline in this period is misplaced (e.g. Wilson 2000). And a number of scholars have recently drawn attention to the potential role of statuary in the Sicilian civic activity of the Republican period (Wilson 2000: 154-7; Lomas 2000: 167; Tanner 2000: 32-3, 48; cf. Jones 2001, Bonacasa 1999). In the light of the epigraphic patterns highlighted above, it would seem that a reappraisal of civic life, and the activities of local élites, in Republican Sicily, is due.

#### **Acknowledgements:**

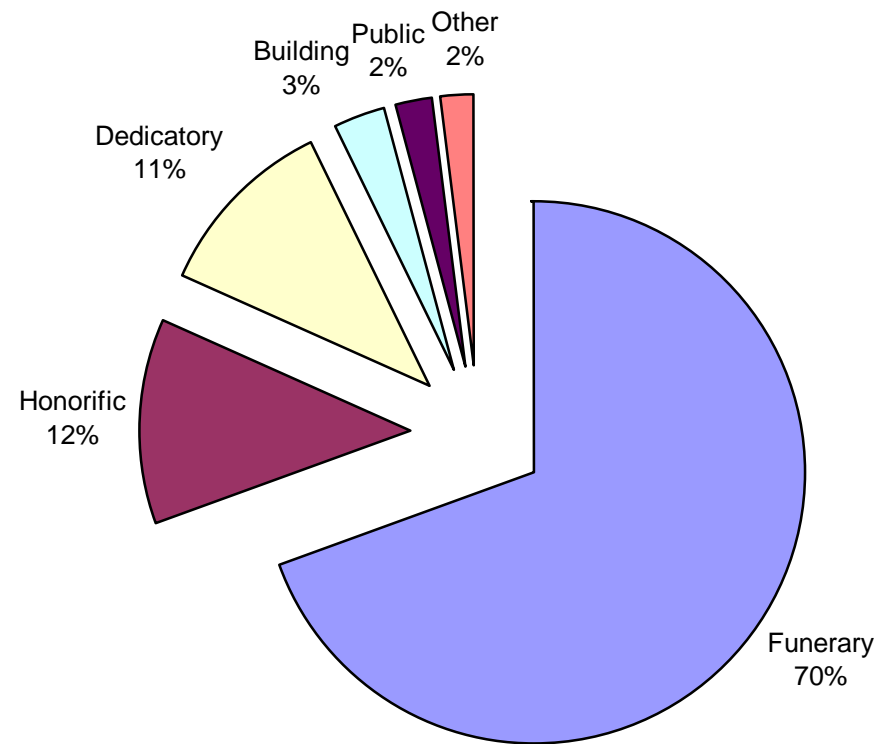
I am very grateful to Professors M. Cébeillac-Gervasoni and J. Andreau for inviting me to participate at the colloquium, and to the other participants for their comments. This is not the paper as it was originally delivered, but the development of one part of it. It owes much to the ever-provocative ideas of Dominic Rathbone, and to conversations with him – although he is of course not responsible for the content. I would like to thank Michael Crawford and Valentina Arena for their comments on earlier versions.

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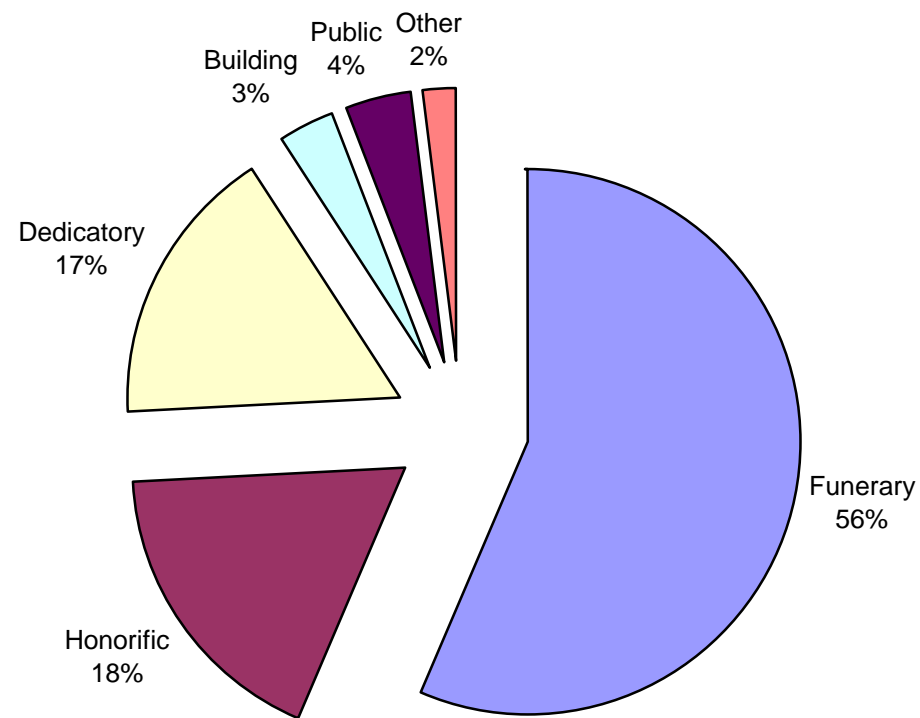
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**Fig.1. Epigraphic categories, where known, for all lapidary inscriptions, C7 B.C. - C7 A.D.**  
(1472 from total set of 1617)

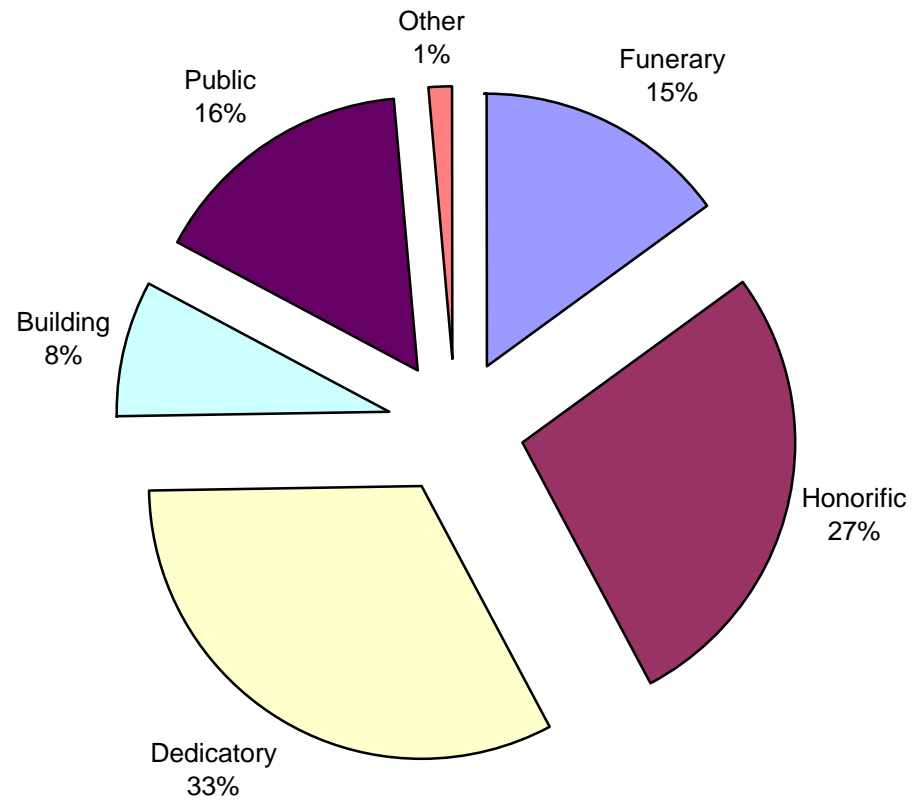


**Fig.2. Epigraphic categories of dated lapidary inscriptions, C7 B.C. - C7 A.D.**  
(806 inscriptions, subset of the 1472 in figure 1)





**Fig.3. Epigraphic categories of dated lapidary inscriptions, C3 B.C. - C1 B.C.**  
(120 inscriptions, subset of the 806 dated and typed of figure 2)



**Fig.4. Incidence of dated lapidary inscriptions in Sicily over time**

