

## 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 (*sunedrion*), 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 Dionysii 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.

It is possible that the answer can be found in the role of Heraclides and Sosistratus as commanders during the campaign. Their campaign was at least a moderate success – as can be discerned from a later passage (Diod. Sic. 19.10.3) – and victorious ancient war leaders increased their influence in their respective states. Moreover, as their own soldiers gained spoils from military success, their allegiance to their leaders increased. It can be assumed that part of Syracusan society also welcomed the outcome. Such newly found support in the end would only help elevate the influence of the Six Hundred even further, eventually leading to oligarchical domination of Syracuse.

This does not mean that the Syracusan people were completely unaware of the impending danger of oligarchical power, nor that they made no attempt to resist it in some way. Still, it was Agathocles who bore the brunt of the accusations that led to him being exiled (Diod. Sic. 19.4). It is unclear whether this exile was self-imposed, yet it is clear that other participants of the Croton campaign also remained in Italy because of political changes in Syracuse. This is another indication of the ongoing power struggle within Syracuse at that time. Agathocles' departure from the city could only strengthen the power of the victorious party. In the narrative of Diodorus this point marks the beginning of open conflict between the oligarchs and Agathocles.

Later, oligarchic rule weakened and eventually fell – we can only wonder whether subsequent military defeats had anything to do with this turn of events. It was the exiles led by Agathocles who helped prevent the capture of Rhegium by the Six Hundred. If indeed the foundation of power for the Six Hundred was military prowess and the spoils of a victorious war, such a rebuff must have been a significant setback. However, the conflict was not a short one, and it took more than one campaign to decide it. However, written sources are silent on any constitutional changes made by oligarchs during their rule – democracy appears to have re-established itself without too much difficulty.

Nevertheless, the fall of the Six Hundred had several implications for the immediate future. Diodorus' *sunedrion* of the Six Hundred became the *hetaireia* – the political terminology of this Greek historian certainly leaves much open to discussion. Still, an explanation of what he meant may be possible. The end of oligarchy, exile and eventually a pardon would certainly have led to a loss of influence in the city. On the other hand, attempts at reconciling the conflicting parties and the return of exiles clearly prove a fear of continued conflict like the one before Timoleon's intervention, marked by a lack of well-faring citizens. Unfortunately such attempts had also clearly failed to mitigate the inequalities that were the root cause of internal divisions in Greek *poleis* so many times before and after.

Democracy returned, and it seems that, in order to settle old internal divisions, the city turned to a traditional solution – an invitation to its mother-city, Corinth, to send an impartial man to adjudicate on disputes between its citizens. The mission of Acestorides in Syracuse is not clearly stated (other than that he was an “elected general” – Diod. Sic. 19.5.1; cf. Plut., *Timoleon* 38.2; Westlake 1949). As noted by Westlake, it is possible that the main aim of inviting foreigners to one's own city was to solve internal, not necessarily external problems. That reason would explain why the *strategos* would be fearful of influential citizens (a group to which Agathocles certainly belonged) and would send assassins to kill them. There is a telling silence in our sources about Acestorides – only a mention of conflict with Carthage (without a word about his participation in it) and an

assassination attempt instigated by the Corinthian. It is no help that after these brief episodes we do not hear anything about him – his mission was probably deemed fulfilled, either by exiling Agathocles – in fact for the second time – thus restoring the political balance in Syracuse, or by making peace with Carthaginians.

The Six Hundred returned once more to centre-stage when Agathocles, having been allowed to return from exile under oath, plotted their downfall. This was also the moment when Diodorus let us know that the political composition of Syracuse was more complex than he had earlier led us to believe – there are many *hetaireiai*, and at least some of them are against Agathocles (Diod. Sic. 19.5.6). Yet the main conflict seems to have been driven by a struggle between Agathocles and the Six Hundred. The outcome of the subsequent bloodbath and the number of casualties – more than 4000 killed, more than 6000 exiled – raise more questions. This brutal action was taken against the Six Hundred and their supporters. It is difficult to be clear about the exact numbers, as we have only a general description. Similarly, it is impossible to say whether all of them should be accounted for as being killed or exiled. The example of Deinocrates, *philos* of Agathocles (*sic!*), may prove otherwise.

The opinions of scholars as regards the coup are not unanimous. Some see the role of Agathocles as a leader of radical democrats and poor, disenfranchised Sicilians (Consolo Langher 1980); some just stress the conflict against the oligarchical group of the Six Hundred (Berger 1992: 49–50). It cannot be maintained, however, that it was anything but a purge by Agathocles before he took ultimate power in Syracuse. The main victims seem to have been Syracusan aristocrats, people with property and power. Yet the number of casualties probably suggests that the Six Hundred and their supporters were not the only targets of the purge. This leads to another question: to what degree was that violence controlled? Diodorus tells us that amongst the people involved in the slaughter were soldiers and poor citizens. After the leaders of the Six Hundred were dealt with, we also learn of an angry, armed mob, inspired by Agathocles himself. Suddenly the soldiers – the group that should at least theoretically have been the most trusted and reliable in such situations – vanish from the narrative and are replaced by an unruly mob. In the confusion many innocent people – individuals, families and small groups with no political allegiance – were probably harmed. Still, it was probably also an opportune moment for Agathocles to deal with any individuals or groups that he deemed to be likely opponents in the future.

How was it possible for Agathocles, an individual of no distinctive background that we know of, to reach such a position of power? He was an outsider – his family did not originate from Syracuse. His father, Carcinus, brought him into the city when Timoleon was repopulating Syracuse and other Greek cities on the island of Sicily. It is not easy to discern the facts of the young Agathocles' upbringing and wealth. It may have been true that he was the son of a potter or a prostitute – or both – but such information could equally have been a slur, designed especially to denigrate political enemies (Polyb. 12.15; Diod. Sic. 19.2.7; Iust. 22.1.4–5). If such a lowly, working-class background was indeed his, it is difficult to explain how he would have developed relationships with men of high-standing, such as the one with Damas, one of the Syracusan *strategoí*. It is more probable that father and son owned a pottery workshop and thus were at least middle-class businessmen rather than mere craftsmen. Even more, we learn later that

Agathocles' brother, Antander, served the city as a *strategos*. This brings us to the matter of Heraclides, the leader of the Six Hundred. Agathocles had an uncle called Heraclides – is this a mere coincidence, or is it the same person? There is not enough evidence to support such a hypothesis or to reject it entirely. If it were true, it would, among other things, be a compelling argument against the tyrant's low birth.

Even with just his family wealth behind him, it would have been almost impossible for a son of Carcinus to reach such a prominent, high-status position. Somehow, a friendly or perhaps even intimate relationship with *strategos* Damas (or Damascon, as mentioned by Justin) began. Such a turn of events is not in itself as remarkable as the fact that Agathocles married the widow of Damas, enriching himself in the process. Diodorus passes over this marriage with a few words, but behind those words more conundrums are hidden. There was apparently no one to contest Agathocles' right to the hand of a widow – neither from the family of the deceased husband nor from the soon-to-be bride's family. Moreover, it seems that the entire property of Damas became that of Agathocles.

According to what is known about both the marriages of widows and their inheritances from their deceased husbands, it becomes clear that Athenian tradition could not have been applied in the case of Agathocles. The ease of remarrying in this case and the transfer of all the property of Damas' widow to Agathocles brings to mind Dorian women and their relative liberty in matters of marriage and ownership of property. The closest example available to us would be the Gortyn Law and its passages about brides. It is likely that a contract similar to that mentioned in this law took place here (Davies 2005: 319–322). Nevertheless, it is remarkable that no mention is made of any resistance to the second marriage of Damas' widow. One of our sources even describes an affair happening before the death of Damas, which would support the supposed licentiousness of Agathocles (Iust. 22.1.12). On the other hand, it makes this explanation somewhat suspect – as it is in the case of a young tyrant prostituting himself.

Having dealt with questions of wealth and marriage, it seems probable that money, relationships and licentiousness were not the main reason for Agathocles' power. First and foremost he was a military leader, having started his career as a soldier at an early age. He participated in several campaigns and seemingly excelled in martial prowess. Several times he had proven himself on the battlefield, yet the Croton campaign of 330 BC was the first step in the conflict with the influential Six Hundred, as mentioned above.

The reason for the subsequent exile of Agathocles is astounding. As an officer, he reported to the people of Syracuse that Heraclides and Sosistratus planned to overthrow democracy in the city. It is testament to the power and influence of the Six Hundred that the accuser himself is exiled. Later, democracy is indeed overthrown, as Agathocles had warned. The reason for the conflict between the leaders of the Six Hundred and Agathocles, according to Diodorus, was a personal one – a disagreement about the division of the reward for service during a campaign. It can be assumed that Agathocles was officially deemed “a poor soldier,” even if this were to denigrate his real achievements and undermine his influence.

Following the actions of Agathocles can give us some insight into his ambitions and aims – he tries in several cities of Southern Italy to achieve a superior position by military service, and every single time he is exiled on the same grounds. His attempts at

becoming a tyrant can be explained somewhat if we remember that each time he had no status as a citizen in each of those cities. So any attempt to advance one's position socially or politically can be described as being *neoterikos*, which itself is a term with a certain political weight.

The turning point was finally reached when the Syracusans under the Six Hundred attacked Rhegium. Agathocles joined with an assortment of exiles to fight in defense of his father's city. As before, this deed was carried out under the banner of the anti-oligarchy movement. It is difficult to say if, according to one hypothesis (Consolo Langher 2000), this clearly makes Agathocles and his supporters defenders of democracy. Naturally, the opposition to the Six Hundred could easily be called such, and it is possible to see Agathocles as a radical politician. After the fall of the Six Hundred, there was a period of personal danger for Agathocles, marked by conflict with Carthage and the presence of Acestorides of Corinth, as *strategos* in Syracuse. We can guess that this must have led to a struggle between the Corinthian and Agathocles, a renowned military leader with impressive achievements behind him. After all, the latter was a hero, having fought against the oligarchs, and it can be assumed that his influence had risen significantly after returning to Syracuse from exile. This could be reason enough for some citizens to suspect Agathocles of holding ambitions of tyranny. If so, Acestorides' decision to eliminate this danger to stability may have been Agathocles' reason for action he took against them. One needs also to consider the official position held by Agathocles during the *strategia* of Acestorides. Their rivalry could have arisen because Agathocles was either made a subordinate of Acestorides or given no position at all.

Once again, the future tyrant of Syracuse became a rootless one and turned to a life of brigandry. His actions became damaging to Carthaginians and Greeks alike. Finally, for better or worse, the resolution of the conflict with Carthage put an end to his exclusion from Syracuse. All exiles were brought back to the city – Agathocles among them. In his case, however, he was expected to make a special gesture. He was ordered to make an oath in the sanctuary of Demeter not to plan anything against democracy. He later took the office of “protector of the peace” (Diod. Sic. 19.5.5: *phylax tes eirenes*). The status of this position can be disputed – one may wonder if it was not similar to a position held earlier by Acestorides, namely to protect the city from strife, until all exiles returned to Syracuse. This was usually seen as one of the first steps necessary – or expected – on the way to becoming a tyrant, a voluntary act whereby the politician imposed his will on the citizens through shrewd persuasion (Meister 1984: 402). Yet it can also be seen in a different light, as compensation for him after the conflict with Acestorides. If the office of *strategos* could have been expected to be given to Agathocles, then making him, a recent exile, defender of the city, acknowledged his importance, awarded him a publically acknowledged status and removed the need for his hostility against his fellow citizens. Placing such trust in a person such as Agathocles can be seen by us as a mistake, yet we have to remember that he was bound by an oath sanctioned by religion. Moreover, the city of Syracuse lacked capable and influential citizens like him. Every once in a while a *polis* tried to return exiles and to end internal strife as soon as possible. Such a policy could not provide a long-term solution – the bloody end of the struggle between the Six Hundred and Agathocles is the ultimate proof in this regard.

Even this final episode in the history of democratic Syracuse finds an explanation in the defense of liberty. One can note that it is not the first time that Agathocles appeared as a supporter of democracy – he was, after all, the person that warned Syracuse of the plans of the Six Hundred. He campaigned against them during his exile. He had made an oath to do no harm to Syracuse. Of course, each of these acts furthered his own goals – with success, one must add. Because of the instability and periods of strife, the safest position in the Sicilian *polis* was the highest one – above the rivalry shared by holders of office or political opponents.

All solutions to the problems that haunted Syracuse after the death of Timoleon were rather unsuccessful – the banishment of citizens endangering internal peace could only be temporary. The ever-present need for social advance caused by inequalities and division between citizens can be seen both in the career of Agathocles himself and in the readiness of his supporters to acquire the properties of rich families. In this light, his tyranny seems to have been inevitable, because as one of the influential citizens he needed to secure his position in the city.

The instability of democracy during that period is also underlined by the manner in which the oligarchy triumphed temporarily until tyranny finally won domination. It was not achieved by implementing new laws or institutions – rather simply by one part of the whole system gaining ascendancy over another in power and influence. It can be ascertained from the sources that even before the Croton campaign the Six Hundred were held in high regard. Similarly, one may wonder how much Agathocles' position as a "defender of peace" differed from that of the Six Hundred after he had ordered death or exile for the representatives of Syracusan democracy. Those subtle but important shifts in influence are not usually marked by any significant changes in the institutions functioning in a *polis* during this period. On the other hand, the remaining literary sources present a particular point of view which serves particular goals but also emphasizes personal relationships and their role in shaping the turn of events.

A gap in our sources on the details of constitutional changes potentially made by either the Six Hundred or by Agathocles could be the result of intended omission. However the decision to help the city of Croton, supported by oligarchs, would prove that such changes were not necessary. The influence of victorious leaders could easily sway the general opinion of a city's citizens.

Diodorus version of the discussed events does not provide us with clear-cut political positions of Agathocles and the Six Hundred. Was their conflict – oligarchy against democracy – the driving force for the events during the period between 330 and 317 BC? It is difficult to accept either personal vendetta or being a radical democrat as a correct explanation in that case. The need for personal advancement can both be seen in the career of Agathocles and explain the motives of the participants in the bloody coup. It is a telling thing that the future tyrant, at first a relatively wealthy newcomer to Syracuse with one of his kin serving as a prestigious official, later himself one of the first citizens because of his marriage, is compelled to advance his position even further. Only after reaching a supreme position in the *polis* did personal safety seem to be guaranteed. The Timoleontic constitution, a "mixed" one, had not been able to maintain the peace in Syracuse. Stability, paradoxically – and even then only temporary – could be achieved under first a tyrant and later a king. At the same time, the lack of stability in the period

before Agathocles grasped power makes describing the Syracusan constitution a very problematic task.

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