SYRACUSE
in
ANTIQUITY

History and topography

RICHARD J. EVANS

University of South Africa Press
 Pretoria
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in
ANTiquity

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University of South Africa Press
Pretoria
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project was conceived after a visit to Syracuse in 2001. The photographic mate-
rial, the research for the CD Rom and the book were undertaken mostly in 2004, with
some additions made towards the end of 2005.

The book (that is the old technology of the written word) as a manuscript benefited a
great deal from the valuable input of two anonymous readers – they are not accountable
for any remaining inaccuracies which are the fault of the author. The newer technol-
ogy of the interactive CD Rom is the product of the input of a dedicated team. And it
is the members of that team, with their various outstanding contributions, who deserve
to be thanked first: Christopher Evans (photographs), Estelle de Kock (programming)
and Tersia Parsons (graphics). However, the work in its entirety would not have been
possible without the support of the University of South Africa – the travel bursary it
provided in 2004, enabled me to make two visits to Sicily and in particular to spend
some considerable time ‘walking the sites’ in and around Syracuse. Thanks are also due
to Cardiff University for providing further funds, which allowed a third visit to Syracuse
in December 2005.

The inclusion of the photographs of the temple models and other museum exhibits
was made possible by the consent of the Director of the Museo Archeologico Regionale:
Paolo Orsi and the Soprintendenza Beni Culturali on Ortygia. I should like to take this
opportunity to thank my Italian colleagues for their help in this venture. I should also
like to thank the staff of the British School at Rome for their help in organising visits to
archaeological sites in Sicily, southern Italy and Tuscany.

My thanks go out to the editorial staff at Unisa Press, especially Sharon Boshoff, for
all the kind help given to me in the preparation of this work.

I should also like to extend my thanks to Maria Paola (Ucello) and Marco and his
family for their hospitality on Ortygia, for their constant and friendly advice and wealth
of knowledge of the islands and Siracusa. Finally, I thank the people of the city that
is the subject of this study, for the respect they have for the Greco-Roman past, which
should be a model for us all. The book and CD are dedicated to them.

Cardiff and Pretoria
2007
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviation of ancient authors follows standard convention and should be easily explicable. References to journals are abbreviated according to usage in *L'Année Philologique*. Standard volumes and texts are abbreviated by name and date of publication. The following should also be noted:

- **CIL**  *The Cambridge Ancient History* (1st or 2nd editions)
- **LCL**  *Loeb Classical Library*
- **OCD**  *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* (2nd or 3rd editions)

References to the CD Rom visual material are by number, for convenience, and to avoid cluttering the footnotes in the book. However, this material is also catalogued by title and may appear so in the CD Rom when opened. Cross-referencing between the book and the CD Rom should also be easily manageable.
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PROLOGUE: ORIENTATION

I formed my first notion of this very momentary piece of topography from several walks on the spot ... to one who has got attached to the very ground of Syracuse there is a temptation to try to get a meaning out of every word of Thucydides, and to attach that meaning to some square yard or other of the soil which he has so often trod.

I first came to Syracuse (Siracusa) in August 1975 as a backpacking undergraduate student and, to be quite candid, cannot remember whether or not I then thought that this place had a special relationship with the world of ancient Greece or Rome. I do remember the heat, which as a twenty-year-old from Britain, I had never experienced before. When I returned to Syracuse in March 2001, more than a quarter of a century later, I was at once struck by the almost magical association of being instantly faced with Classical antiquity all around me, not least in being able to observe the people of this city living cheek by jowl with their remote past. I imagine that, by then, having taught Greek and Roman history for over two decades, it was highly unlikely that I would remain untouched in visiting what was one of the great cities of the ancient Mediterranean and of Greek and Roman civilisation. Of course, at the same time many of today’s Syracusans are indifferent to and even oblivious of their city’s history, yet every day they pass beside more visible signs of Greek and Roman culture than in any other European city with the exception, perhaps, of Rome; and Syracuse’s visible archaeological sites predate the imperial remains of Rome often by several centuries. For nearly three hundred years Syracuse was a major military and political

Figure 1: Sicily and Magna Graecia

1 E.A. Freeman, The History of Sicily, Oxford 1892, Volume 3, 653–54, in his discussion of the exact location of the first Athenian camp near the Olympicion. See also here in Chapter 2. For similar affirmations of empirical study see P. Green, Armada from Athens, London 1970, xiv; K.J. Dover, A Historical Commentary on Thucydides, Book 6, Oxford 1970, 466. For scepticism of Thucydides’ presence in Syracuse see Chapter 4 n. 7.
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player in the Mediterranean, and for some of that time was the most significant power in the west.² For a thousand years after that Syracuse was an important provincial city in the Roman empire.

My first ever arrival in torrid summer temperatures was at the train station in the days when trains were invariably late and, this being no exception, it was the siesta when it should have been breakfast time. The station deserves a mention for it is a welcoming building of the nineteenth century, cool and inviting inside where the smell of coffee dominated; and still does today.³ My later arrivals, more or less fraught, have usually been by car in a country whose drivers all seem to aspire to Formula One fame. Syracuse, like all Italian cities, is a forbidding place for foreign drivers unused to the congestion and abundant bad tempers. For all that, evenings on the island of Ortygia can be remarkably like those in Venice: peaceful, soporific, timeless.

From the station the visitor passes through what was once the hotel quarter – then rather downmarket – now, like everywhere else here, staggering towards gentrification, to the chaotic Piazza Mazzini, which is easier to cross as a pedestrian than in a car. There is not much to commend this square but lying adjacent as it does to the rather seedy Foro Siracusana – another place where one wants to leave rather than to loiter – this is the centre of ancient Akradina. Here once stood, says Cicero (Verr 2.4.119), a great agora with a very fine colonnade, an attractive council building and a suitably impressive senate house, not to mention several other temples and numerous private houses beyond. Today some columns remain about two metres below ground level to remind the viewer of what is lost. The mole to Ortygia (for the land here is man-made) fulfilled the ambition of Dionysius I to provide space to house himself and his family in suitable grandeur (Diod. 14.7.1). This stretch of land leads, in six Victorian-looking apartment blocks, to the Darsena or channel and one of three bridges which carries traffic to and from the northern end of the island. Filled with fishing boats, boats for tourist excursions and diving schools, this channel is more substantial than it was in antiquity. The ancient city gate labelled ‘Hellenistic’ lies to the right of the newest bridge (opened April 2004) behind the restaurant (painted a startling pink) called ‘Rambla’. The height of the island is hidden behind more modern buildings, as is the temple of Apollo two blocks to the left. The oldest bridge, the Ponte Umbertino leads via the Piazza Pancali directly to the temple, but the new one-way system does not allow this approach any longer except by foot. But none of the modern bridges gives a faithful entry onto ancient Ortygia. The bridge must have been closer to the Great Harbour on the extreme western side of the channel and funnelled traffic left towards the gateway.

The venerable temple of Apollo, oldest peripteral construction in Sicily, ranks among the oldest surviving Greek temples. Its age is apparent at once. Not many Greek temples visited today can boast upright monolithic columns; and Syracuse can boast

² On the possible origin of the name Syracuse as Phoenician for eastern see Freeman; 1891, 1.357–62.
³ See CD no. 582.
two. Although just two columns stand to their capitals, there are a sufficient number of
other broken columns, of various heights, and interior walls to present the viewer with a
good idea of the size and extent of the original. Again the site is viewed from above and
no entry to the former ground level is possible for the unaccompanied visitor. Moreover,
the east side of the temple abuts closely onto homes of modern Ortygia; and so only the
sides and rear of the temple can be viewed easily. The front, its steep stylobate made
accessible by entry steps and the carving on the top left of the crepidoma proclaiming
the architect or some other human involvement in the construction, can be read only by
hanging over the railing.

The Via Matteotti rises from the Apollonion to the modern Piazza Archimede with
its Fountain of Diana. The square is aptly named after one of Syracuse’s most famous
residents, and a short walk along the flat top of the hill brings the Piazza del Duomo,
dominated on the left-hand side by the cathedral in which the temple of Athena is pre­
served, and next door the Municipio under which is an Ionic temple, believed to be an
Artemision or temple to Diana. The entrance to the cathedral is at the rear of the temple.
So today the sight of a missing opisthodomos greets those who enter while the pronaos
at the high altar end has also disappeared, which also means that there is no longer the
aspect of the rising sun. Until the present century the interior of the cathedral was lavishly
decorated with the sort of baroque to be expected in churches of similar seniority. Then
to reclaim something of the ancient interior the decorations were stripped away to leave
the white of the local limestone, with the shallow fluted Doric columns. The exercise
was misplaced, for as Cicero clearly indicates the inside of this temple – probably like
most temples – was also richly decorated. The baroque would have given a better idea
of the original since Greek temples did not have a Calvinistic interior. They had more in
common, not less. Moreover, much of Syracuse’s modern history has no doubt been lost
in this transformation for the sake of spurious historicity. The square itself has become
an attractive meeting place of bars and restaurants, where cars have been banned, but
this is medieval Ortygia not its ancient predecessor. If any such square existed on the
island it would have been laid out on the east, not the west side.

The Ionic temple next door to the cathedral is an interesting survivor for, although its
existence was suspected even in the nineteenth century, it was only excavated in the 1960s.
Earlier works on the topography of Syracuse are obviously ignorant of its presence and the
role it played in antiquity. The mere survival of parts of the under-structure suggests that,
even if unfinished (and who can say this with certainty) it was sufficiently whole to have
been used for cult practices; the most plausible deity to have been honoured here would
be Artemis. The island belonged to Artemis and a major cult to this deity is evident in the
sources and it is not entirely satisfactory to assign to this goddess a part of the Apollonion

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4 For a modern homage to Archimedes see the bust in the Latomia dei Capuccini, CD nos. 19–20.
5 See, for example, the discussion of M.P. Loicq-Berger, Syracuse, histoire culturelle d’une cité grecque, Brussels 1967, 80–84.
at the northern edge of Ortygia. Far more logical is its position on the highest point of
the island and within sight of the Fountain of Artheusa, one of the personifications of the
goddess. A temenos of Artemis is said to have stood near the fountain and it is, at least,
arguable that this, the statue and the temple are all related, possibly all belonging within a
precinct dedicated to the deity. A precinct extending down from the temple to the shore to
include the fountain means its length was about two hundred metres, which is perhaps not
excessive for a patron goddess of a city the size and power of Syracuse. However, it does
open up all sorts of interesting questions relating to the ancient population of the island.

It is perhaps too difficult to imagine that the main outlook on ancient Ortygia was
not — as it is today — towards the Great Harbour but towards Greece across the Ionian
Sea. The temples looked east and the eastern aspect linked the colonists in Syracuse
with their homeland. It is also perhaps difficult to imagine the domination of the two
temples at the highest point rising above the other buildings on the island, when there
were many buildings; it is again perhaps difficult to imagine, as one walks through one
of the narrow streets (say the Via Carceri Vecche — from the Piazza del Duomo down to
the Passeggio Adorno) that this entire stretch could have been attached to the temple of
Artemis as a garden. The Fountain of Arethusa is viewed from above and, therefore, the
perspective and approach have changed completely since antiquity. Visitors to the city’s
Aquarium, as they exit, can appreciate more fully the size and surge of the spring since
they are the only viewers at the ancient ground level. The sea wall between the spring
and the shore probably fairly reflects the size and position of the ancient defences and so
at least from this position some accuracy can be recaptured. The spring is six to seven
metres in diameter and roughly circular. In antiquity some observers believe that Arethusa
extended over a far greater area and formed a pond which came closer to the temple.
The rising ground to the centre of the island precludes that possibility, but a meandering
stream from the spring to a pool in an ornamental garden is an attractive idea.

Looking down from the height of the wall surrounding Arethusa, some idea of
the continuous occupation can be gauged from the line of masonry and later brickwork
which rises almost out of the sea. The detritus of habitation has added at least three (if not
four) metres to the height of Ortygia. The original living level can also be experienced in
the dungeons of the Castello Maniace, which must be built on something more ancient,
so crucial is this spot in the defences of the island and the whole city. It commands the
northern head to the Great Harbour and was surely one of the first areas to be occupied
on Ortygia. It lies little more than two hundred metres (600 feet) directly south of the

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6  Freeman: 1891, 1.356; D. Randall-Maclver, Greek Cities in Italy and Sicily, Amsterdam 1968, 140: ‘At some point near the
spring stood a shrine of Arethusa, who seems to have been often regarded as a local characterisation of Artemis.’
7  It seems that visitors were able to touch the waters until quite recently, L. Durrell, Sicilian Carousel, London 1977, 85–86. Even
today it is possible — if you escape the gaze of the attendant.
8  Fortifications surrounded Ortygia at least from the fifth century BC, and were strengthened by Dionysius I and later Agathokles.
The walls Cicero saw were not a late development, although Freeman: 1891, 2.354, seems to suggest this.
9  Randall-Maclver: 1968, 140: ‘... a large area extending towards the cathedral.’
Fountain where a temple to Hera may have been situated, opposite that of Zeus *Urion* across the Great Harbour.\(^{10}\) Dionysius – and probably his predecessors – had walled Ortygia, so a fort at some point here also seems a logical supposition.

Returning to the mainland by way of one the bridges over the *Darsena* or channel, and then along the mole to the agora, it is striking that the modern nature of the urban landscape again has veiled so entirely an area which must have looked imposing in the time of Dionysius I and Agathokles. Even Charles V, in 1526, had huge battlements and defensive channels built on and into the mole. However, all these have been obliterated without so much as a trace and have left an unremarkable part of Syracuse. So too the more modern centre along the *Corso Gelone*, which consists of shops, offices and hotels. For those in search of antiquity a twenty minute stroll up the gradual incline towards Epipolai brings Neapolis, the new town of ancient Syracuse, today comprising mostly the archaeological zone.

This is where tourists, who have allowed themselves a day or two, come to see primarily the Greek Theatre and the stone quarries called *Latomia del Paradiso*, in which there is a limestone cavern named the ‘Ear of Dionysius’ and *Latomia dei Veneria* with its ‘Tomb of Archimedes’.\(^{11}\) From 9.00 am to 4.00 pm this is a busy place, with a number of refreshment bars and tourist stalls, and during the annual drama festival from May to June it is exceptionally hectic. The Greek theatre today seats about two thousand, but in antiquity many times that number, so the area was considerably busier when the plays of Aeschylus and the like were performed here.\(^{12}\) Next door was a shrine to Apollo and the theatrical performances may be connected with this deity as well as with Dionysos. A number of temples – to Demeter and Kore and Herakles – were situated in this quarter of the city. The great Altar of Hieron II to the south of the Greek Theatre stands looking a trifle forlorn, only its enormous base remains on a five-stepped stylobate extending two hundred metres (600 feet). Up to the sixteenth century its decorative superstructure still stood before its demolition by Spanish troops. Now the altar is out of bounds, inaccessible behind a chained gate. When the celebrations to Zeus *Eleutherios* took place – the Syracusans remembered and gave thanks to the gods for delivering them from the tyrant Thrasybolos (466 BC) – hundreds of cattle were sacrificed and the whole community was fed well. A festival of this sort would have drawn many thousands. Today’s crowds are paltry by comparison to the gatherings of Syracusans in Hieron’s day. And if that is not enough, next door is the amphitheatre with an arena floor as big as that of Verona, and only marginally smaller than that of the Colosseum. It probably had seating for about twenty thousand. It is not well kept and hurrying tourists often miss the half-hidden gate leading there. How many hot food stalls were erected, and how numerous

\(^{10}\) Freeman: 1891, 2.442.

\(^{11}\) The tomb of Archimedes in the Latomia dei Veneria, CD nos. 2—4.

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were the hawkers selling mementos around this structure when the gladiator and beast fights were held from the first century AD, can scarcely be guessed at.\(^\text{13}\) The quarries close by were obviously the source (one of several in the neighbourhood) of building material for the monumental structures which adorned Neapolis. Today this is a pleasant walk through an orchard of oranges and lemons, not forgetting the sight of a house cut out of the stone against the cliff edge.\(^\text{14}\)

In a straight line from the entry to the archaeological park along the *Via Teocrito* is the *Museo Archeologico Regionale - Paolo Orsi* in the centre of what was once Akradina.\(^\text{15}\) Orsi was the archaeologist responsible for much of the early excavations at Syracuse and throughout the province, towards the end of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. The museum is a fitting tribute. Here too are more quarries and Christian catacombs. The quarry of the Capuccine church very close to the sea is believed to have been the place of incarceration of thousands of Athenians following their defeat by the Syracusans in 413 BC. It is now another charming garden, but it possibly had a more brutal history.\(^\text{16}\)

Still inside Syracuse, but at its northerly limits, are the *Scala Greca*, on which today is the main road northwards to Catania. Going down it gives some idea of the extent of the fortifications of Dionysius I, and then by driving west parallel to the steep northern edge of the escarpment of Epipolai.\(^\text{17}\) Through the village of Belvedere and further along brings up the dramatic setting of the fort at Eurialos,\(^\text{18}\) and the Epipolai Gate (the western entrance) to the city now a full twelve kilometres away.\(^\text{19}\) The aspect here deserves comment, for looking out from inside the fort the city extends eastwards and below. Ortygia is plainly visible and the Great Harbour with Plemmyrion beyond is easily picked out. The Athenians came to Eurialos in the spring of 414 BC, and Lysimcleia (their eventual camp) lay at the northern end of the Great Harbour, a mere two kilometres (6 000 feet) from the agora. Two hundred years later the Romans stood on Epipolai, even in the Eurialos fort, and Marcellus their commander is said to have cried in part in joy at the accomplishments of such a great enterprise and in part in sorrow for the city’s ancient glory (Liv. 25.25; Plut. *Marc.* 19.1).\(^\text{20}\) The view is certainly wonderful, and not much visited so there is time to wander at leisure among the fortifications and the many tunnels without feeling that pursuing hordes may appear at any moment.

\(^{13}\) There seems to be some doubt about the date of construction (see Chapter 6). For the first century see E. Grady, *Sicily*, London: 2003, 328; for the third century see M. Guido, *Sicily: An Archaeological Guide*, London 1967, 180, but for an incisive argument for an Augustan foundation see R.J.A. Wilson, *Sicily under the Roman Empire*, Warminster 1990, 81–83.

\(^{14}\) CD nos. 329, 331, 513.

\(^{15}\) This sector of the modern city has street names of Greek literary figures cf. the *Via Demostene*, CD no 1. See also near the station the *Via Ermocrate*, CD no 581.

\(^{16}\) The *Latomia dei Capuccini*, CD nos. 14–22, 533–38.

\(^{17}\) For views of the *Scala Greca* and Epipolai see CD nos. 75, 67–68, 77–78.


\(^{19}\) The Epipolai Gate, CD nos. 77, 79–84, 516–20.

\(^{20}\) See Chapter 4.
North of Epipolai is the plain of Megara on the coast of which is the Thapsos peninsula, site of early habitation, and Megara Hyblaia beyond, one of the earliest Dorian colonies in Sicily, destroyed by Syracuse in 483 BC.\textsuperscript{21} Behind Epipolai rises Monte Climiti, as dramatic a bluff of rock as can be seen anywhere. Beneath the cliff and out of sight is the valley of the River Anapo. Both mountain and river had significant roles in the history of Syracuse.\textsuperscript{22} To the south lies the Hyblaean (Ibla) mountains — the boundary of Syracusan territory — with their outposts Akrai (Palazzolo) Kasmenai (Bucheri) and Eloros. Beside the harbour stands the temple of Zeus at Polichne. The temple is almost as venerable as the Apollonion on Ortygia and was dedicated to Zeus Urios, protector of shipping and sailors. As vessels approached the entrance to the Great Harbour, guided there by the shining light of the bronze shield adorning the eastern end of Athene’s temple, the first sight was the Olympieion within its sanctuary on the hill. And that sight promised safety. But the harbour was not always safe, of course. Numerous naval battles were fought here in the confined space, between the Syracusans and the Athenians, and after them the Carthaginians and finally the Romans. Carnage was almost a commonplace in a spot that today rather boasts holiday homes, motor boats and beaches. Again out of sight, but hidden among cultivated fields lies the Fountain of Ciane, one of several legends associated with Syracuse — another place not often visited, but one where the past is almost tangible.

History leaves a record which is most often reflected, on the one hand, by material remains, usually man-made in and around an urban area, and, on the other hand, by visible effects on the surrounding countryside. Over a long period of time (the entire epoch which is called ‘antiquity’) the face of Syracuse changed, sometimes drastically, as did the ambitions of its rulers and the expectations of its citizens. This history, with its emphasis on the topography, seeks to examine those features of the city and its territory which made it famous: temples, places of entertainment, fortifications and harbours. Where appropriate, comparative material to emphasise or place into perspective Syracusan achievements has been included. Moreover, where those historical monuments, whether man-made or natural, played a particular role in Syracuse’s history or are mentioned in the (mostly literary) sources they become integral to understanding the events and even the motives and outcomes as they affected both rulers and the ruled.

We explored Epipolae. I am convinced that Thucydides knew the ground, and that no μεχρί is to be omitted in vii.7, and no ες to be inserted in vi.101. Everything seems perfectly plain when read on the spot.\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{22} See especially Chapter 4, and Monte Climiti, CD nos. 377–78, 539–40, 543–45, 631, 647, 668; the Anapo valley, CD nos. 629–30, 634–35, 541–42, \textit{video clip: Anapo valley}.
Syracuse in antiquity

Figure 2: Hellenistic Sicily

Figure 3: Magna Graecia and Sicily