important contribution to the overall picture of the most recent research on Agrigento and its surroundings.

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Roman to Late Roman

Laura Pfuntner, *Urbanism and Empire in Roman Sicily.* pp. 306, b/w ills. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2019. ISBN 978-1-4773-1722-8, hardcover €39.

Roman rule signalled radical changes in the urban systems of the Mediterranean. More complex is the understanding of the restructuring that occurred in the Greek speaking lands, where a dense network of *poleis* existed already since the Archaic period. In the province of Achaia, although the basic elements of its Classical past were maintained (e.g., a modular urban system with hundreds of self-governing poleis which were sustained mainly by surpluses produced in their territories), in the Roman period this area was characterized by a significantly smaller number of cities and rural sites, in respect to pre-Roman times. Of great importance was the establishment of a few highly-centralized administrative centres of free or colonial status and economically privileged, that now became the focus of Roman administration and wealth. The majority of minor centres had from now on a marginal role, and many of them remained completely outside the new economic system.[1]

Pfuntner's book deals with another area largely belonging to the Greek city-state world, which, like the Greek mainland mentioned above, presented similar symptoms in its urban system under Roman rule. Pre-Roman Sicily was highly urbanized: the Copenhagen Polis Center Inventory lists 47 poleis in Archaic and Classical times,[2] while the number of self-governing cities and hill-top settlements in the third century BC is estimated to be at least 74.[3] After this period, however, Sicily presented phenomena of deurbanization, as Wilson has shown long ago.[4]

According to current scholarship, the causes that led to these phenomena must not be sought only in the military activities that both mainland Greece and Sicily experienced in Republican times (leading to demographic and consequently urban decline). The explanations must also take into account other parameters (e.g., ecological factors), and more importantly, the economic system of the Roman Empire. This system was dominated by "a proto-capitalist, commercializing, and globalizing

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[1] For general surveys, see Alcock 1993; Bintliff 2012: 310-336; Rizakis 2014; Karambinis 2018.
[2] Fischer-Hansen *et al.* 2004.
[3] De Ligt 2020: 224.
[4] Wilson 1985; 1988; 1990.

elite",[5] which after the dissolution of the political boundaries of the cities (as state entities), and the unification of the Mediterranean under a single rule, influenced the fate of the cities.

Pfuntner investigates these matters, following the urban history of Sicily in the seven centuries in which the island formed part of Rome's overseas empire (ca. 250 BC – 450 AD). In the first two chapters Pfuntner examines the urban abandonment that occurred in the late Republic - early Principate (ca. 50 BC – 50 AD), and in the high Empire (ca. 50 – 250 AD), while in chapters three, four and five she discusses the 'successful' cities on the southwestern and north-eastern coast, and in eastern Sicily. In the last two chapters (six and seven) the author presents overall discussions of Roman urbanism in Sicily, and on the new forms of settlement that the island bore witness to in the imperial period.

Pfuntner develops her ideas using case studies. Sixteen cities are put under the microscope of the author: Heraclea Minoa, Phintias, Morgantina, Camarina, Ietas, and Calacte (concerning the towns that have been abandoned between 50 BC – 50 AD), Soluntum, Segesta, and Halaesa (concerning the cities abandoned in 50 – 250 AD), and Lilybaeum, Agrigentum, Tyndaris, Tauromenium, Centuripae, Catina, and Syracuse, which were the 'successful' cities on the southwestern and north-eastern coast, and in eastern Sicily. The selection of the cities chosen as case studies has been based on their archaeological exploration (only cities with adequate data have been included), and on their geographical location (they represent the north, south, east, west, coastal, and inland sides of the island). Additionally, an attempt has been made to include not only major but also minor urban centres, and to represent all the dynamics that affected the transformation of the urban pattern of Sicily in the Roman period.

The discussion of every site is rather detailed. The author presents summaries of the archaeological and epigraphic record, and comments on the political, juridical, economic and social aspects of the cities, trying to include in her discussions evidence from their territories. The result is successful: the presentations are relatively short (compared to the large amount of data that these descriptions include), the reading is pleasant, and the information that has been chosen to be presented is relevant to the topic of the book. The author reproduces plans of 13 cities that accompany the text, and she presents several images of their

public monuments. What are lacking are regional maps to help the reader to navigate, especially demanding for someone who is not well informed of the historical landscape of Sicily; the two general maps at the beginning of the book presenting the sites discussed in the text, and the sites named in the Antonine Itinerary are not sufficient.

More significantly, the author does not visualize her data (e.g., using maps, tables or graphs), does not present tallies of the active cities in late Republican, early Principate and late antique times, and does not try to estimate the sizes of the cities in these time spans. In short, the author does not make any attempt to quantify the evidence. This seems to have been a deliberate approach by the author, who in this way has tried to avoid generalizations and possible mistakes. Although Pfuntner's decision is fully understandable, the lack of aggregated results deprives the reader of a general and 'concrete' picture that he would have wished to get after finishing the reading of the book. Actually, the reader of Pfuntner's study is also invited to consult De Ligt's recent paper on the impact of Roman rule on the urban system of Sicily,[6] where he provides such quantitative evidence to supplement Pfuntner's analytical discussion.

Despite that, Pfuntner highlights all the phenomena that occurred in the urban pattern of Sicily in the Roman period. She shows that hegemonic port cities (e.g., Agrigentum) provided economic competition to nearby minor coastal cities (e.g., Heraclea Minoa, Phintias), leading ultimately to the abandonment of the latter. She also shows that other hillside settlements near the coasts were abandoned and their populations shifted to existing port settlements a few km away (e.g., Camarina, Calacte). Additionally, Pfuntner illuminatingly explains how important inland settlements have been led into decay for a combination of reasons. Taking Morgantina as an example, she describes how the city was besieged and captured by the Romans in 211/210 BC, who deported its former population and resettled it with Spanish mercenaries. The cityscape bears signs of extensive destruction at the end of the third century BC, while the territory shows a significant drop in site numbers, indicating a decrease in rural population. However, the city was rebuilt and finally abandoned in the mid-first century BC. For Pfuntner the decisive factor for the abandonment of the city was not the destruction by the Romans. Hydrological research suggests a steady diminution in the settlement's water supply from the sixth century BC onwards, which most probably

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[5] Bintliff 2018: 415-417 (quote on 417).

[6] De Ligt 2020.

became acute in the mid-third century, when the city reached its greatest physical and demographic extent. Moreover, in the first century BC the ceramic industry (an important economic resource for the city) ceased, and imported Italian wares dominated. For Pfuntner, the potters of Morgantina could not cope with the growing competition posed by exports from Italy, and the inland location of the city would not have been helpful in this antagonism (42).

The author also shows that few other inland towns have been more fortunate. Centuripae, for example, presented an explosive growth of ceramic production in the third century BC that continued (in a lesser scale) into the early Principate. The growth of the ceramic industry was probably linked to the city's location along key transportation routes and its favourable political and economic status after the First Punic War (*civitas libera ac immunis*); a privilege given due to the historical links of Centuripae with Lanuvium, an ancient city in Rome's Latian heartland, showing the long history of Centuripae's loyalty to Rome. After the Second Punic War, the elite of Centuripae gained advantageous positions in agriculture and commerce, and after the destruction of Leontinoi in 214 BC, *aratores* from Centuripae acquired much of the former territory of that city. The advantageous position of the wealthiest citizens of the city in Sicilian agriculture and commerce continued into the Principate and enabled members of the local elite eventually to reach the ruling classes of the province and empire (145-154).

Despite these kinds of exceptions, the interior of Roman Sicily was basically devoid of its former cities, strikingly visible in the maps that De Ligt provides.[7] The 'big winners' in the urban system of the island were key port cities on the coasts (Lilybaeum in the west, Agrigentum in the south, Syracuse and Catina in the east, and Thermae Himerae in the north), that became centres of the trans-Mediterranean exchange networks. These cities attracted Roman and Italian merchants, administrators, and tax collectors and perhaps (according to De Ligt) the local elites of the declining towns.[8] Additionally, these cities administered sizeable territories that enhanced their (export) economic potential.

Wilson (1990) had suggested that in the interior of the island 'agro-towns' emerged that replaced the former poleis, a development that, according to him, evinces the ruralization of Roman Sicily in the imperial period. Pfuntner argues that the picture of ruralization "must be nuanced and refined, particularly in light of recent archaeological work" (207), but she does not support this argument with strong evidence. On the contrary, elsewhere she confirms that in the interior of the island "settlement gradually concentrated in villages and large farms or villas at a distance from the former city centres, in well-watered valleys that were accessible to transport routes" (92). Moreover in Chapter 7 (new forms of settlement in Roman imperial Sicily), the only new inland settlement that discusses in detail is Philosophiana, a settlement first created in Augustan times. In Julio-Claudian times it covered approximately eight hectares and was equipped with an aqueduct and a bath. In a second phase of occupation (fourth – sixth centuries AD), the settlement expanded covering an area of ca. 21 hectares. Pfuntner argues that Philosophiana displays urban characteristics (in late antique times it had also a perimeter wall), but she admits that the settlement does not provide evidence for the existence of civic authority, as, at present, no public administration or government buildings have been identified (208-212). Based on that, it is difficult to attribute to Philosophiana any characterization other than a secondary-agglomeration, especially for its early phase of occupation. It seems reasonable to believe that in the interior of Roman Sicily there operated small market-places for the needs of the rural inhabitants of the surrounding districts.[9]

A critical matter related to the trajectory of the settlements in the interior of the island is the fate of the rural sites. Pfuntner, summarizing the evidence from the field surveys, indicates that in some cases the abandonment of the old urban centres was accompanied by a diminution of rural sites in their territories (e.g., Morgantina), in others that the culmination of the rural occupation took place at the time of the abandonment of the former town (e.g., Ietas), while in other examples (e.g., Segesta) archaeological surveys show a contraction of small and medium sized sites pointing to the concentration of properties in a few hands (91-92). Bintliff, in a recent article on rural Sicily and Achaia under Roman rule (which is also recommended to the reader for comparative study), suggests that "the decline of rural settlement in several regions of the island probably marks a depopulation and more extensive use of the land".[10] He also points to the possible growth of pastoralism as part of a low-cost investment by Italian elites.[11] For him, the

[7] De Ligt 2020: 225 fig. 8.1, 244 fig. 8.2.
[8] De Ligt 2020: 247-251.

[9] Bintliff 2018: 412-413; De Ligt 2020: 229.
[10] Bintliff 2018: 415.
[11] Bintliff 2018: 415.

massive contraction of towns in Sicily indicates that the local cities were no longer the dominant centres for regional products, or for their collection and commercial export, and that goods left and entered these regions via prominent ports (and inland nodes, I would add, attested in the Antonine Itinerary).[12]

In her overall discussion on Roman urbanism in Sicily (Chapter 6) Pfuntner makes interesting remarks, of which I quote "the divorce of landholding in the territory of a city from membership in the urban community" (200); or that "no simple geographic determinism lay behind the Augustan reordering of the Sicilian urban hierarchy or the subsequent development of cities under the Roman Empire. Rather, a combination of geographic and environmental factors and historical circumstances fostered (or hindered) the ambitions, means, and connections of urban residents from provincial and local elites down to freedmen and slaves and their ability to participate in and enhance the economic, political, and social life of cities" (205-206). Moreover, in her general conclusions she makes the (tentative for me) suggestion that the eastern and western coasts of Sicily retained a higher and more consistent level of integration throughout the Roman period, in contrast to the southern and northern coasts and the interior, which were subject to more variable and irregular integration into political, social, and economic networks of the Roman Mediterranean (231-232).

Despite the possible doubts to some minor issues, it is clear that the author has paid particular attention to avoid generalizations, to provide an accurate description taking into account all the available evidence, and to show the complexity that entails the attempt to analyse correctly the developments that occurred in previously highly urbanized zones of the Roman Empire. The book constitutes a very useful analysis for these transitions and is particularly stimulating for the conduct of similar studies for the other large islands of the eastern Mediterranean (Crete and Cyprus), where provisional data suggest that more or less similar symptoms are observable.

In Cyprus a collapse of inland and hilltop towns in favour of the coastal ones seems to have begun in the first century BC – first century AD.[13] Moreover, archaeological evidence suggests a general settlement contraction and abandonment in Cyprus from the second century AD onwards, with only a few urban coastal centres – Nea Paphos, Kourion, and Salamis – maintaining a thriving life. This collapse was combined with fading connectivity, especially with the western part of the Mediterranean.[14]

Crete presents a slightly different figure: coastal cities acquired a prominent role (e.g., Hierapytna, Chersonesos, Kissamos), but this does not mean that the importance of all the inland towns was diminished. Gortyna, the capital of the province, was in the interior of the island, while other inland towns (e.g., Lappa, Eleutherna, Sybrita) also seem to have been prosperous in Roman times. This at least until the mid-second century AD. After the mid-second century, present evidence suggests that with the exception of Gortyna, Knossos and perhaps Eleutherna, the few cities that continued to present new (or renovated) public buildings were coastal (e.g., Kissamos, Kydonia, Chersonesos and Hierapytna).[15]

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[12] Bintliff 2018: 416.
[13] Lund 2015: 244; Gordon 2018: 29.

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Walter Scheidel, *Escape from Rome. The Failure of Empire and the Road to Prosperity.* pp. xviii + 670, 29 b/w ills, 5 tbls, 36 maps. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2019. ISBN 978-0-691-17218-7, hardcover £30, paperback £19.

This is a long book with a big theory: that innate features in Europe's geography and culture made it peculiarly empire-proof after the collapse of Rome, and that it is the failure of any empire to control Europe that best explains the exceptional technological, scientific and economic development which gave us the world we have today, in which the majority of us are 'so much richer, healthier and better educated than our ancestors used to be' (p. 1). The principal driver of this change is for Scheidel the persistent polycentrism in Europe after Rome, and the consequent thriving of competition, not only between numerous independent states but also within states, between different groups competing for wealth and influence – merchants, lords, bishops and kings. While Europe enjoyed these conditions, conducive to innovation and growth, more or less continuously after the disintegration of the western Roman empire, most of the rest of developed Eurasia remained under the dead hand of empire. A 'First Great Divergence' occurred around AD 500, with

Europe freed from empire, and the rest of Eurasia trapped within it.

The argument for the importance of European polycentrism is not entirely new, as Scheidel readily admits, though he presents it with exceptional thoroughness and detailed comparison between Europe and parts of the world where massive hegemonic empires remained the norm – above all China (whose history Scheidel knows well), but also the Indian subcontinent and the Middle East. More novel is the explanation that Scheidel offers for the persistence of polycentrism in Europe against the persistence of unified empire in China and elsewhere. For him the exceptional trajectory of European history, differentiating it from what happened in China, can only be explained in terms of deep-rooted structural differences, some of them immutable: topographical fragmentation in Europe (with peninsulas, islands and divisive mountain ranges), cultural and ideological divisions (in particular a religion, the Christian Church, that had its own power structure and ideology, separate from those of the state), and, above all, an accident of geography and ecology that separates western Europe from the steppe, the great belt of grassland, inhabited by horse-borne pastoralists and warriors, that once stretched from Manchuria to the Ukraine. The steppe, Scheidel argues, has been central to the creation of the large majority of land-based empires: not only those directly instituted by steppe-peoples (like the Huns, Avars, Mongols and Turks); but also those that emerged amongst settled agriculturalists, by encouraging them to develop strong unified states against the threat of the formidable armies of horsemen that the steppe could produce. Thus China was almost always unified by rulers from the north, because their core territory bordered on the steppe, necessitating the development of an exceptionally powerful military and state machine. Western Europeans, spared this danger, had the luxury of being able to fight bitterly amongst themselves; but, ironically, out of this turmoil came technological and economic development (as well as other things, such as competitive overseas expansion from the fifteenth century onwards).

To argue this case effectively Scheidel has to explain away an obvious anomaly – the Roman empire, which very effectively unified almost the whole of western Europe for some four centuries – and he devotes three chapters to 'Why Rome?', explaining that Roman power emerged in wholly exceptional circumstances, which would never reoccur: a society geared for war, that had the good fortune to sit on the edge of a more developed eastern Mediterranean, and with less well-organised polities