

Christopher de Lisle, *Agathokles of Syracuse: Sicilian Tyrant and Hellenistic King*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. xxiv + 355 pages. ISBN 9780198861720.

“How are we to really understand the mind and character of a past leader?”, is one question that preoccupied this reviewer while reading *Agathokles of Syracuse*. De Lisle here analyzes the sources, reconstructed chronology, and career of Agathokles, and argues that earlier characterizations of his ruling persona and agenda do not fit his historical context, or the evidence. What results is not so much a “great man” biography as a reconstruction of Agathokles’ rulership from several vantage points, revealing more about how the leadership tropes generated by Classical literature and Sicilian and early Hellenistic politics directed his choices and shaped his legacy. For anyone interested in the history of Sicily, Carthage, Magna Graecia, or the Diadochoi, this volume is essential reading.

The central argument of this book concerns its subtitle: *Sicilian Tyrant and Hellenistic King*, with the emphasis on the *and*. According to de Lisle, previous Agathoklean scholars imagined his career as a “despot’s progress” from tyrant into king, abandoning the tyrannical identity once he embraced the new Hellenistic style of monarchy. Here, he appears as an autocratic ruler who was both a tyrant according to Sicilian traditions and at the same time a *basileus* on the Diadoch model, without any contradiction or confusion between the two. And why should there be? Constructs of power are multifarious and shifting, as rulers constantly need to maintain their footing amid warfare, local political resistance, and competition from peers and would-be contenders. De Lisle marshals the textual and numismatic evidence to convincingly demonstrate how Agathokles employed multiple tactics simultaneously for presenting himself as the supreme leader in his domain.

The volume is divided into four sections. The first includes an introduction, which is the part most reminiscent of the book’s origin as a dissertation, and a first chapter outlining the biography and chronology for Agathokles. The second section (“Part I Representations of Agathokles”) consists of three chapters examining different aspects of the evidence for Agathokles. One handles the historiographic side of things, essentially a survey of the (fragmentary) historians of Sicilian affairs. For those interested in a recent assessment of these authors—Antandros, Kallias of Syracuse, Douris of Samos, Timaios of Tauromenion, Diodoros, Justin-Trogus, Polyainos—this section has some useful remarks.

The next chapter (“Telling Tales about the King”) delves quite interestingly into the main literary tropes for remembering and describing the lives and behaviours of powerful men. After reading it, one suspects that the biographical details for Agathokles are of little utility in establishing ‘facts’. Rather, they convey the sense that in antiquity, and perhaps still now, people categorize leaders and forms of leadership in culturally meaningful ways, regardless of what the historical individuals themselves actually said and did. In Agathokles’ case, the tropes provide the building

blocks for de Lisle's argument that he was both a traditional Sicilian tyrant and a Hellenistic Diadoch.

The third chapter of Part I examines the numismatic evidence in considerable detail, with the aim of breaking down older arguments about "the despot's progress" from tyrant into king and demonstrating how Agathokles simultaneously continued to issue traditional Sicilian coin types as well as embrace iconography borrowed from the first generation of Hellenistic *basileis*. Part II ("The Rulership of Agathokles") contains just a single chapter: the amusingly titled "Tyrannosiculus Rex". Within lies the heart of the volume's argument on reassessing the nature of Agathokles' rulership. Part III broadens the analysis, in four chapters discussing Agathokles' relationships to the political contexts of Sicily, Carthage, Italy, and mainland Greece and the Diadochs.

A number of useful tables and appendices are included, which provide helpful context for the reader unfamiliar with either Agathokles or aspects of the evidence for him, especially numismatic. Among the frontmatter are four maps: of Sicily, Africa in the vicinity of Carthage, south Italy, and the central and eastern Mediterranean (from Sardinia and Corsica to the Levantine coast). All the major cities discussed in the book are indicated on the maps. There is a timeline listing events from the Deinominid dynasty's rule over Syracuse (c. 485-467 BCE) to the death of Agathokles (289/8 BCE). There is also a family tree for Agathokles, depicting his parentage, but most importantly his various marriages and progeny, information which is crucial for the later discussion of his participation in the Diadochic marriage market. Backmatter includes an excursus on the Lokrian Tablets (Appendix 1), in which de Lisle concludes that they relate to the reign of Pyrrhos, not Agathokles, hence their exclusion from the book's argument. Appendix 2 consists of a coin catalogue, complete with obverse and reverse images, of the gold, silver, bronze, and electrum issues by Agathokles, which provides a helpful reference guide to chapter 4's argument. The catalogue includes references to publications and coin hoards, as well as nine images detailing the findspot locations of the different coin types. An extensive bibliography and index complete the material.

While this is a volume all about Agathokles, it also serves as a case study for a broader purpose, outlined briefly in the introduction, but evident throughout the subsequent chapters. Hellenistic historians have always felt it incumbent on them to deal with the rise of Rome, and increasingly notice is being paid to the question of the Hellenistic west and its level of integration with the eastern Mediterranean playing field of the Diadochoi and their dynasties. The general approach, whether explicitly stated or simply assumed, has been that the west does not need to figure greatly in how we understand the development of Hellenistic kingship. This book demonstrates that this can no longer be the case. One can understand why the west is not generally within the scope of the Classics discipline, at least until Rome's dominance, since it involves the Carthaginians (and others) and thus an entirely new language(s) and documentary and material dataset to master. But considering that

eastern studies have and should deal with Demotic and Babylonian sources, Punic should not be such a stretch. More importantly, this new assessment of Agathokles, his royal persona, the stories about him, and his entanglements with events outside Sicily should convince us that the west is a rich field, not to be neglected. A fulsome understanding of early developments for Hellenistic political culture—both royal and civic—needs to include Agathokles, plus his contemporaries.

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