

The Cultural Landscape of the Hyblaean Mountains between the 3rd Century BC and the 2nd Century AD in the Light of Multidisciplinary Research

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EN Abstract. Power in Syracuse was taken by Hiero II in 270 BC. Then the Hyblaean Mountains, much of which belonged to Syracuse, underwent changes and entered a period of transformations. When the First Punic War began Hiero II signed a treaty with Rome, which ensured long-term stabilization, economic growth and thorough development of the kingdom. His reign was the last period in which Syracusan territory flourished and enjoyed independence. After his death in 215 BC and the fall of Syracuse, the Romans confiscated Syracusan lands and annexed the towns allied with metropolis, also in the Hyblaean Mountains. It should be emphasized that this region represented a deeply-rooted Hellenistic heritage –evident in a variety of public and private buildings associated with developed culture, art, the self-confidence of the inhabitants. But new architecture, everyday objects, inscriptions and other components present already new influences. It is associated with the Roman migration to the newly conquered lands. Later, this region played a role during the conflict between Sextus Pompey and Octavian with its long-term consequences. Thanks to the archaeological sources can be assumed that the result was an influx of Roman veterans as settlers and new material culture, agriculture, breeding and know-how here.

Keywords: Sicily; Hyblaean Mountains; Late Republic; Early Roman Empire; Syracusan Kingdom.

ES El paisaje cultural de los montes Ibleos entre los siglos III a.C. y II d.C.: un estudio multidisciplinar

ES Resumen. Hierón II se hizo con el poder en Siracusa en 270 a.C., desencadenando un período de cambios y transformaciones en los montes Ibleos, buena parte de los cuales pertenecía a su territorio. Recién comenzada la Primera Guerra Púnica, Hierón II suscribió un tratado con Roma que garantizó la estabilidad a largo plazo, el crecimiento económico y el desarrollo integral del reino. Su gobierno, de hecho, coincidió con el último período de florecimiento e independencia de Siracusa. Tras su muerte en 215 y la caída de Siracusa, los romanos confiscaron las tierras siracusanas y se anexionaron las ciudades aliadas con la metrópolis, incluyendo las existentes en los montes Ibleos. Ténganse en cuenta que esta región se caracterizaba por una enraizada herencia helenística, visible en toda una amplia gama de edificios públicos y privados relacionados con el desarrollo de la cultura, el arte y el orgullo de sus habitantes. Sin embargo, los nuevos edificios, los objetos cotidianos, las inscripciones y otros elementos no tardaron en impregnarse de nuevas influencias asociadas con la llegada de inmigrantes romanos a las tierras recién conquistadas. Tiempo después, la región desempeñó un papel clave en el conflicto entre

Octaviano y Sexto Pompeyo, lo que tuvo para ella importantes consecuencias a largo plazo. Como revela el registro arqueológico, la resolución del conflicto significó para la zona un flujo de veteranos romanos reconvertidos en colonos, así como la irrupción de una nueva cultura material y nuevas técnicas agrícolas y ganaderas.

Palabras clave: Sicilia; Montes Ibleos; República tardía; Imperio romano temprano; Reino siracusano.

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1. Introduction

The Syracusan exploration of the Hyblaean Mountains, in south-eastern Sicily, from the first half of the 7th century BC brought with it the foundation and steady development of urban centers, which led to the settlements of the surrounding areas and required more land for agriculture as well as a road network. The history of this region is indeed a rich tapestry of history and natural beauty. While many factors have contributed to the importance of the region, one of the most important figures in its history was king Hiero II.

Hiero II played a decisive role in shaping the fate of the Hyblaean Mountains. When he seized power in 270 BC and proclaimed himself tyrant of Syracuse, the region of the Hyblaean Mountains underwent a series of important changes and entered a period of significant transformation that had a lasting impact on the fate of the region. His reign coincided with a turbulent period in Sicilian history and his decisions influenced the subsequent history of the region and its cities. Hiero was an illegitimate son of the Syracusan aristocrat Hierocles, who claimed to be a descendant of the tyrant Gelon I. During Pyrrhus time in Sicily, he served in his army as a general and mercenary captain and gained great renown and esteem. When Pyrrhus left the island in 276 BC, Hiero, who was around 30 years old at the time, was chosen as one of the commanders of the army that remained in Sicily. Thanks to his material and social status, he was soon accepted as a respected citizen of Syracuse, which led to him being given the title of supreme general. He secured and confirmed his position by marrying Philistis, the daughter of a Syracusan aristocrat, Leptines.¹ His lifelong dream was to establish a kingdom comparable to that of the Antigonids, Seleucids, and Ptolemies in political and cultural terms.² He therefore maintained close relations with various states around the Mediterranean³ and saw himself as an important figure in contemporary politics.

2. Punic Wars, Hiero II and conquest of Syracusan Kingdom

One of Hiero's first strategic decisions was to get rid of the Mamertines, who conquered Messina and its surroundings and gradually appropriated other territories in north-eastern Sicily and invaded the south of the island. With an army sent by Ptolemy II Philadelphus and Cretan archers, he defeated the Mamertines in 265 BC at the battle of the River Longanus and, after few years of

¹ Chamoux 2002, 93-94.

² Caccamo Caltabiano *et alii* 1997, 53-60; Serrati 2000, 118-119; Walbank 2003. About the Hellenistic monarchies, cf. Chamoux 2002, 75-98.

³ About relationship among Hiero II, Egypt and Asia Minor, cf. Caccamo Caltabiano (ed.) 1995; Bonacasa 1999; Carroccio 2001.

fighting, reconquered the other occupied territories.⁴ Diodorus Siculus says that: “[Hiero] invaded the territory of Messana, and encamped along the Loitanus [Longanus] River with ten thousand foot-soldiers and fifteen hundred cavalry”.⁵ The victory over the Mamertines, although it was not complete and did not eliminate the enemies of Syracuse,⁶ enabled Hiero II to declare himself king of Syracuse.⁷

Therefore, the Mamertines, fearing further Syracusan retaliation, asked Carthage and Rome for support. Carthage, unwilling to engage in the conflict, sent meagre reinforcements, which were only enough to postpone Hiero’s endgame with the Mamertines until the following spring. The Mamertines decided that the Carthaginian aid was not enough and turned to Rome to fight Hiero II more effectively.⁸ When the Romans appeared in Messina, Hiero II initially allied himself with the Carthaginians in order to fend off Roman imperial ambitions. Diodorus Siculus reports that the agreement between Hiero II and Carthage was to wage war against the Romans and drive them out of Sicily as quickly as possible.⁹ The treaty must have been concluded before the meeting between envoys of Hiero II and Hannon, Hannibal’s son, perhaps in *Lilybaeum*.¹⁰ It remains unclear what the territorial division was to be after the expected expulsion of the enemy from Sicily, but both sides were mainly interested in controlling the Strait of Messina. While the Carthaginians concentrated their ships at Cape Peloro, Hiero II’s army deployed south of Messina, at the foot of the Chalcidian Mountains.¹¹ The Romans initially tried to negotiate with Hiero II, perhaps even offering him an alliance.¹² However, the arrival of Roman reinforcements in 263 BC under the command of two new consuls –Manius Valerius Maximus Messala and Manius Otacilius Crassus– and a subsequent offensive against Syracuse¹³ forced the Syracusan ruler to change his strategy. Aware of Roman supremacy, he broke the alliance with Carthage in the same year.¹⁴ Polybius writes that “Hiero, observing both the confusion and consternation of the Sicilians, and at the same time the numbers and the powerful nature of the Roman forces”,¹⁵ made an extraordinary display of diplomacy and foresight by entering into an alliance with Rome and opposing Carthage.¹⁶ The Roman Republic imposed difficult conditions on Syracuse, but willing accepted the town’s independence, as this was very practical and advantageous at the time.¹⁷ This type of peace treaty concluded with the Syracusan ruler was a *sui generis* indication that the Romans were already planning to continue the war on the island and secure their hinterland through alliances. According to the new agreement, Hiero II undertook to supply food and military equipment (similar to the later *annona militaris*), to pay contributions and relinquish control of many Greek towns, thus retaining only the south-eastern part of his former kingdom. As a result, Hiero II lost fertile lands in the eastern part of Sicily between the rivers Dittaino and Simeto and his kingdom shrank to just six towns: *Acrae*, *Leontini*, *Mégara Hýblaea*, *Helorum*, *Neetum* and *Tauromenium*.¹⁸ The agreement also obliged him to release prisoners who had probably been taken during the siege of Messina and to cede the north-eastern corner of the island to Rome. Diodorus Siculus notes that the Romans “readily consented and concluded a fifteen-year peace”.¹⁹ The treaty was indisputably in

⁴ Karlsson 1993, 34; Prestianni Giallombardo 2004, 110.

⁵ D.S. 22.13.2.

⁶ Plb. 1.7-9; Bravo – Wipszycka 1992, 138.

⁷ Karlsson 1992, 18; Zambon 2006.

⁸ Plb. 1.10-11.

⁹ D.S. 22.13.9.

¹⁰ Caven 1980, 17.

¹¹ The name of the mountain was mentioned by Plb. 1.11.

¹² The negotiations and confrontation were described differently by Polybius, Diodorus Siculus, and Philinos.

¹³ Lazenby 1996.

¹⁴ Burton 2011, 142; Lazenby 1996, 60-61.

¹⁵ Plb. 1.16.4.

¹⁶ Bravo – Wipszycka 1992, 138.

¹⁷ Burton 2011, 150.

¹⁸ D.S. 23.4.1.

¹⁹ D.S. 23.4.1. The peace treaty was renewed in 248 BC, but whether its conditions were altered in any way remains unknown, cf. Karlsson 1993, 35, 44-45.

force until the death of Hiero II in 215 BC. His measures to stabilize the situation and secure peace for the Syracusan Kingdom can be seen as an achievement of great erudition and cunning.

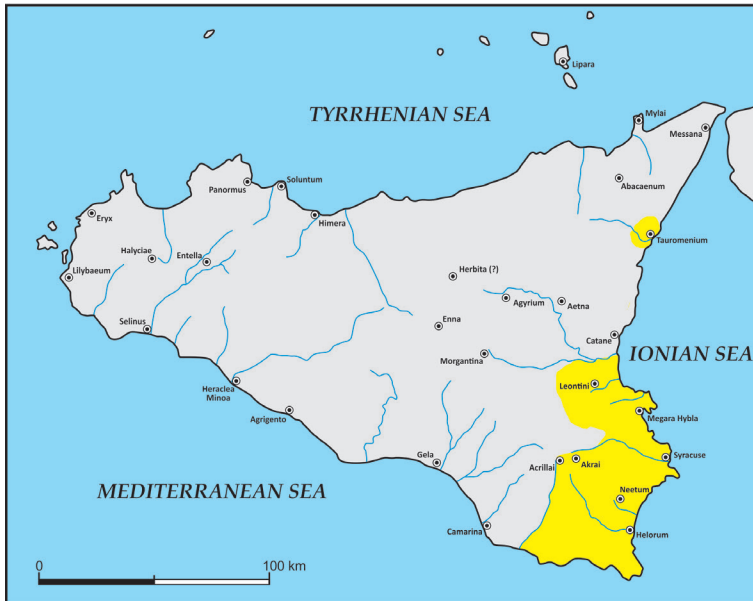


Fig. 1. Syracusan Kingdom after the agreement with Rome in 263 BC.

There has been much debate about the nature of the relationship between Hiero II and Rome.²⁰ In fact, it is largely unknown how these relations developed and whether they were based on a friendship defined by the treaty or whether Hiero II's kingdom was merely "a client state" for Rome.²¹ What is certain, however, is that Hiero II visited Rome in 237 BC, when Lucius Cornelius Lentulus Caudinus and Quintus Fulvius Flaccus were consuls. On his arrival, he presented the inhabitants with *ducenta milia modiorum tritici*.²² The visit can be interpreted as an expression of gratitude to Rome for its generous help during the First Punic War. Hiero II's position was undeniably very strong, especially in the early years of the Second Punic War, when the Romans began to call him Rome's most loyal friend (*fidissimus Romanae amicitiae cultor*) because of his loyalty.²³ Just how friendly these contacts were is proven by another fact, namely that after his death the rule over the Syracusan Kingdom was not taken over by Rome, but by Hieronimus, a grandson of Hiero II.

Hiero II's well-thought-out strategy enabled long-term internal stabilization, economic growth and thorough development of the kingdom. The coherent idea underlying his rule was evidenced by the fact that he stimulated activities in many areas of life, including those related to culture or technology. According to Cicero,²⁴ Hiero II introduced in his kingdom the payment of taxes –so-called *lex Hieronica*, based upon the assumption that all lands and animals belonged to the king, so people pay a 10% leasing fee for harvest and rearing rather than taxes.²⁵

²⁰ Karlsson 1993, 34-35; Serrati 2000, 118-119; Burton 2003, 352-353; 2011, 143-153, 164-172.

²¹ Ernst Badian believed that the term *amicitia* was simply another name for "a client state". *Per analogiam*, one may quote the agreement between Rome and Pinnes, ruler of the Ardiaei in Illyria, who became a Roman *amicus* in 228 BC, and whose kingdom became a client state for Rome, cf. Badian 1958, 13; Eckstein 1980, 190. Treating a subdued monarch with due esteem and respecting him as a king does not seem anything extraordinary and such measures were taken by the Romans long after Hiero II, until the end of the 3rd century AD, when they became replaced by the *foedus*, cf. Zack 2001; Burton 2003.

²² Eutropius 3.1-2.

²³ Liv. 26.32.4. For a broader discussion of the matter, cf. Soraci 2011, 8-11.

²⁴ Cic. *In Verrem* 2 3.14-15

²⁵ Bell 2007.

The Kingdom of Syracuse, including the Syracusan part of Hyblaean Mountains located west of Syracuse, in south-eastern part of Sicily, derived its power from various sources. Its strength was rooted in the vast outback, rich lands, thriving *garum* production and trade, as well as the export of fish and olives. Additionally, the kingdom boasted a well-organised system of transporting and storing of goods, exemplified by the impressive storehouses in Ortigia. Syracuse's products were in high demand across the Mediterranean, with Greece being one of the prominent destinations. Under the rule of Hiero II, breeding and agricultural production underwent significant reorganization, accompanied by the implementation of the aforementioned *lex Hieronica*. Despite the collection of taxes, they were not burdensome, particularly considering that the taxpaying towns received new adequate urban amenities in return.²⁶ Examples of Hieron II's policy of modernizing or constructing public buildings can be seen in various locations. For instance, in Morgantina, there were three large *stoas* or the eastern granary.²⁷ In *Akrai*, there was a theatre and a bouleuterion.²⁸ Syracuse had a *nymphaeum* and water-supply system.²⁹ Additionally, *Neetum* underwent a comprehensive redevelopment.³⁰ However, it was in *Tauromenium* where Hiero II's efforts were particularly evident, as the town lacked significant architectural structures prior his rule.³¹ Hiero II's aim was to enhance the town's infrastructure and create impressive public buildings.³² Similarly, it was crucial to strength defensive infrastructure through implementation of innovative solutions,³³ a task that gained even more significance following the loss of a part of the country due to the treaty with Rome in 263 BC. The ruler primarily entrusted military architects with various projects aimed at enhancing fortifications along the borders of the Kingdom of Syracuse and within specific towns. These fortified structures, constructed using the Hellenistic *emplekton* technique, known also as "the masonry chain",³⁴ proved to be exceptionally valuable during the Second Punic War.³⁵ Urban centres such as *Mégara Hyblaëa*, *Herbessus* (Greek *Herbessòs*, now Montagna di Marzo), Syracuse, or *Tauromenium*³⁶ witnessed the construction or restoration of town walls using this technique. Hiero II was widely recognized for his numerous accomplishments, including innovative waterworks, advancements in agriculture, a novel method for tiling roofs, and exquisite jewelry.³⁷ The system utilized carved courses in the rock to deliver water, capitalizing on natural sloped, water pressure, and a water mill.³⁸ Conversely, an experimental venture involved the use of dome-like roofs, resembling the later Roman *testudines alveorum*, which were created by overlapping cylindrical roof tiles. This technique was employed in public bathhouses in Morgantina,³⁹ Syracuse,⁴⁰ *Mégara Hyblaëa*,⁴¹ and potentially in *Akrai* as well.⁴²

²⁶ Although Frederick E. Winter gave the examples that Greek towns of Sicily produced Hellenistic architecture as great and huge (among others, the Euryalos fort in Syracuse, the North Gate at Selinunte, the theatre in *Tauromenium*) as the cities of the Eastern kingdoms. Nevertheless, the Sicilian towns were certainly devoid of new great sanctuaries, agorae, and palaces, cf. Winter 2006, 183-206.

²⁷ Deussen 1994; Wilson 2013, 90-92; Stone 2014, 8, footnote 11.

²⁸ Bernabò Brea 1956, 31-51; Chowaniec 2015. Roger J. A. Wilson suggested that building was built in the 2nd century BC rather in Hieronian period, cf. Wilson 1990a, 27.

²⁹ Wilson 2013, 93.

³⁰ Manganaro 2001, 76; Guzzardi 2001.

³¹ Winter 2006, 186.

³² Campagna 2006, 19.

³³ Defensive and offensive war machines were created for him by Archimedes, cf. Plu. *Marc.* 14.27-75.

³⁴ Karlsson 1993, 38-39; Scalisi 2010.

³⁵ Karlsson 1992, 112.

³⁶ Karlsson 1992, 126; Karlsson 1993, 39-41.

³⁷ Chamoux 2002, 96; Dummett 2010; Wilson 2013, 80-90.

³⁸ Wilson 2000.

³⁹ Lucore 2009.

⁴⁰ Cultrera 1938; Wilson 2013, 95.

⁴¹ Vallet *et alii* 1983, 56.

⁴² Wilson 2013, 95-96.



Fig. 2. Aerial photography of theatre and bouleuterion of *Akrai* facing the agora.

Highly important role of Hyblaeen Mountains could be described by Pliny the Elder⁴³ who reports that: “(...) King Hiero had two hundred and twenty ships wholly constructed in forty-five days”. Such boatbuilding investment required a wood which Hiero II had to obtain from the much-forested mountainous regions than Syracuse area, most likely from Hyblaeen region. It should be noted that Hyblaeen Plateau reaches from the alluvial valley of the the Simeto river and the Plain of Catania in the north up to the Dirillo river in the west, while to the east and the south –respectively– toward the Ionian and the Mediterranean Seas. The plateau is accompanied by the initial section of the Sicilian-Maghrebian Orogen, which stretches toward North Africa, and the Gela-Catania Foredeep. It is a mountain belt composed mainly of white limestone in the form of table-like elevations reaching the heights of between 600 and 800 metres above the sea level and carved by wide gorges shaped by watercourses.⁴⁴ For these reasons it played a major role in Syracusan economy and, partially, in that of Carthage and Rome.⁴⁵ For example all the five rivers picturesquely carving many deep canyons –the Tellaro, the Anapo, the Asinaro, the Cassibile (Latin: *Cacyparis*), and the Ciane– and exiting to the sea in Syracuse or to the south from the town have their sources in these mountains.⁴⁶ All them could be navigable in Antiquity and, presumably, made Syracuse’s exploration of the Hyblaeen Mountains easier as well as its transportation of grain or wood from the subdued territory.⁴⁷ Unfortunately, descriptions of the surrounding landscape appear only sporadically in ancient written sources. Much information, on the other hand, is brought by interdisciplinary research, including paleobotany, palynology, or geology, one may try to reconstruct the vegetation and geomorphology of the area.⁴⁸

⁴³ Plin. *NH* 16.74.192.

⁴⁴ Romagnoli et alii 2015.

⁴⁵ The Hyblaeen Mountains were an arena of warfare during the Second Punic War.

⁴⁶ Di Grande – Raimondo 1983.

⁴⁷ Crouch 2003, 89.

⁴⁸ Unfortunately, multidisciplinary research has not been conducted in this region, except in the town of *Akrai*, described below.



Fig. 3 . View of Hyblaean Plateau.

Following the death of Hiero II in early 215 BC, the relationship between Rome and the Syracusan Kingdom deteriorated significantly, eventually leading to a complete breakdown due to political decisions. Hiero II was succeeded by his inexperienced fifteen-year-old grandson, Hieronymus. Aware of his successor's young age and knowing that the power of Syracuse and the peace treaty with Rome, which he had worked tirelessly to establish, would be squandered due to Hieronimus' incompetence, Hiero II included a provision in his last will. This provision appointed advisors to guide Hieronimus.⁴⁹ However, Hieronymus quickly found himself surrounded by a group of self-interested supporters who were proponents of Carthage. These individuals relentlessly pushed for complete control over the ruler. For example, Livy recounts that Andronodorus and Zoippos, in collaboration with Kallon, a trusted associate of Hieronymus, conspired to eliminate Trazon, the sole king's guardian who favored maintaining the treaty with Rome.⁵⁰

Hieronimus was easily convinced to send diplomats from Syracuse to Hannibal, who reciprocated by appointing his own diplomatic and military representatives, including Hippocrates and Epicides, both of Syracusan origin.⁵¹ Sensing a negative turn of events, Appius Claudius Pulcher, the praetor of Sicily at the time, dispatched his own delegates to Hieronymus.⁵² Livy reports that Hieronymus greeted them with a sneer, questioning their credibility by asking how they had fared in the battle of Cannae, as the accounts provided by Hannibal's ambassadors were difficult to believe. Hieronymus expressed his desire to know the truth so that he could make an informed decision on which side to support.⁵³ Hieronymus's disregard for the Romans was further illustrated by Polybius: "He said [Hieronimus] he would adhere to the treaty if they [Romans] repaid him all the gold they had received from his grandfather Hiero; next if they returned the corn and other gifts they had had from him during the whole of his reign; and thirdly, if they would acknowledge that all the country and towns east of the river Himeras belonged to Syracuse".⁵⁴ These negotiations and Hieronymus's outburst ultimately led to the breakdown of the alliance between Rome and Syracuse, and the formation of an alliance between Syracuse and Carthage. This new alliance stipulated that Sicily would be divided between the two parties, with the *Himera* River serving as the border.

In a swift succession of events, war eventually reached Sicily in the year 214 BC. This proved to be rather inconvenient for Romans, and Rome did not need another conflict in Sicily and the resultant distraction.⁵⁵ But by sending a part of the Syracusan army commanded by Hippocrates and Epicides against the Roman troops and marching toward *Leontini* with the rest himself, Hieronymus left Rome out of options.

⁴⁹ Liv. 24.4.1-12.

⁵⁰ Liv. 24.5.15-37.

⁵¹ Plb. 7.2.1-4.

⁵² Lazenby 1998, 153.

⁵³ Liv. 24.6.12-15. It should be remembered that Rome suffered defeats at the beginning of the Second Punic War that caused some to switch sides. However, despite the catastrophe of the Battle of *Cannae*, Hiero II remained a loyal ally of Rome.

⁵⁴ Plb. 7.5.7.

⁵⁵ Ziólkowski 2008, 195-199.

Marcus Claudius Marcellus led the campaign against Syracusan Kingdom and skillfully secured various positions in Syracuse. One of the significant battles was one near *Akrillai*, situated close to the town *Akrai/Acrae* in the Hyblaean Mountains. Following this triumph, Marcellus persisted with the siege of Syracuse, ultimately achieving its capture in 212 BC.

3. The territory in the turbulent period

One of the major cities in the region was *Akrai*, which –until the 3rd century BC– was considered a peripheral town and appeared to be strongly influenced by Syracuse in terms of politics, culture and economy. During the reign of Hiero II in the second half of the 3rd century BC, however, the town underwent significant development. This progress was reflected in the construction of various buildings, including a small theatre⁵⁶ that was architecturally connected to a bouleterion.⁵⁷ There were also remains of a *stoà*,⁵⁸ which probably dates back probably to the Late Hellenistic Period.⁵⁹



Fig. 4. Orthophotomap of archaeological site *Akrai* with excavated structures.

The building boom in the 3rd century BC was not particularly exceptional, as it was also observed in other towns under the control of Hiero II,⁶⁰ and also documented by Polybius.⁶¹ The ruler's agenda focused primarily on the development of public buildings. This included either the

⁵⁶ Bernabò Brea 1956, 31-43; Mitens 1988, 84-87; A D-shaped orchestra and a semi-circular auditorium date the building to the times of Hiero II, cf. Polacco 1982, 433; Wilson 1990b, 69. L. Campagna suggested narrowing the dating to the terminal years of the reign of Hiero II arguing that it was impossible for the construction of the theatre in *Akrai* to pre-date the one in Syracuse, which was rebuilt in 238 through 215 BC, cf. Campagna 2006, 19.

⁵⁷ Bernabò Brea 1956, 44-51; Lehmler 2005, 169. R. J. A. Wilson conceded that the bouleterion might have been built later than the theatre, cf. Wilson 1990b, 72. In the last decade, there has been a renewed discussion regarding dating of bouleterions in Sicily, including the one in *Akrai*. Due to little data obtained from new excavations, it was decided, *per analogiam* to architecture, that some of them were erected in the second half of the 2nd century AD, cf. Campagna 2006, 27-29.

⁵⁸ Lehmler 2005, 166, footnote 39; Mertens 2006, 76.

⁵⁹ The lack of publications renders dating the complex impossible, cf. Wilson 2012, 251. However, it may be assumed that since the public part of the town developed in circa the mid-3rd century BC, then perhaps the agora was established at the same time.

⁶⁰ Building activity was also registered among other towns like: *Tauromenium*, *Morgantina*, *Leontini*, *Casmenae*, *Mégara Hyblaica*, *Neetum*, and *Heloros*.

⁶¹ Plb. 1.16.8-26.

construction of new buildings or the renovation of existing ones.⁶² Therefore, the prosperity of *Akrai* during this period was entirely to be expected. The lively activity of the town during this period is also confirmed by an inscription, *IG XIV.217*, which mentions the leasing or division of land for craftsmanship and trade. These activities were carried out by both the citizens of the town and residents of the neighboring villages.⁶³

The small town of *Akrillai* was situated near *Akrai* and was already mentioned in the relation of the Second Punic War. It was located 20 kilometres southwest of *Akrai*, closed to the present-day Chiaramonte Gulfi in the Ragusa Province. *Akrillai* was established during the 6th century BC as part of Syracusan expansion toward the southeastern coast.⁶⁴ It was strategically situated on a hill overlooking the valley of the Ippari River, providing against potential raids from Gela. Similarly to *Akrai* and *Kasmenai*, it was situated next to the *via Selinuntina*, making it a hub along this important route. Livy also mentions that *Akrillai* served as a stronghold and military base during Syracusan campaigns against the Carthaginians. In 406 BC, when the Carthaginians advanced toward Syracuse and other towns fell (Agrigento and Gela), *Akrillai* suffered significant damage. However, Livy reports an important battle near *Akrillai* that occurred much later, in 213 BC. The above-mentioned confrontation involved Syracusan troops led by Carthaginian commander Hippocrates and the Romans led by Marcus Claudius Marcellus.⁶⁵ Hippocrates had left Syracuse and was marching westward to join forces with Himilco. Meanwhile, the Romans, who had marched from Agrigento to engage Himilco in battle, realized their forces were too weak and hastily took the direction of return to Syracuse. By chance, Marcellus encountered Hippocrates as he was setting up camp for the night. Caught off guard and unprepared for a fight, the Syracusans were scattered. Livy notes that

Hippocrates marched out of the city [Syracuse] in the night through an unguarded part of the Roman lines and selected a site for his camp near the city of *Acrillae*. Marcellus came upon them while they were entrenching themselves. (...) He caught them whilst forming their camp, dispersed and in disorder, and for the most part unarmed. The whole of their infantry were cut off, the cavalry offered but slight resistance and escaped with Hippocrates to *Acrae*.⁶⁶

Plutarch confirms the description of Livy and adds that Consul Marcellus defeated almost eight thousand soldiers led by Hippocrates, whom he surprised in the evening during setting up a camp.⁶⁷



Fig. 5. Location of *Akrillai*.

⁶² Lehmler 2005, 161, 163.

⁶³ Cordano 1997, 407; Manganaro 2004, 115-122. The previous interpretation stated that the land around *Akrai* had been divided into twenty-four parts, cf. Verbrugge 1972, 546.

⁶⁴ Di Vita 1998, 87; Manni 2004, 136.

⁶⁵ Chowaniec 2016, 46-47.

⁶⁶ Liv. 24.35.21-24.36.1.

⁶⁷ Plu. *Marc.* 18.5-8.

Although Marcellus captured most of the infantry as prisoners, Hippocrates himself managed to evade capture successfully with his cavalry. Some of his men sought refuge in the larger subcolony, although it remains unclear to what extent the inhabitants of *Akraí* helped them. According to Livy, Hippocrates eventually joined forces with Himilco in a camp near the river Anapo.⁶⁸ This suggests that the refugees either did not stay long in *Akraí* and moved further east the next morning, or that Hippocrates left some of his soldiers in the town before continuing his journey. However, there is also an alternative solution. The scattered Syracusan troops, who fled from *Akrillai* to the *Akraí*, decided in their haste to bypass the town.

In the meantime, Marcellus continued his march eastwards through the Hyblaean Mountains. It is assumed that he followed the *via Selinuntina*, and eventually reached Syracuse. It means he must have passed *Akraí* on this way there. If the Syracusan refugees had sought shelter here, the consul would probably not have stopped his pursuit and thus exposed himself to an attack from behind. Consequently, there are two possible scenarios for his actions. The first one suggests that he approached *Akraí*, which was only feasible from the east, i.e. from Syracuse, due to its natural strategic location. This would imply that the Roman army, marching from *Akrillai*, had to circumvent the Acremonte hill, where the town was located, and position themselves at the *porta Siracusana*. Subsequently, Marcellus may have instilled fear in the inhabitants⁶⁹ but did not get involved in any significant fighting within the town. This assumption is supported by the excavations, which did not uncover evidence of destruction or serious fires as a result of armed conflict.⁷⁰ If we accept this version, it would mean that the town handed over the fugitives to the Romans and possibly even surrendered.

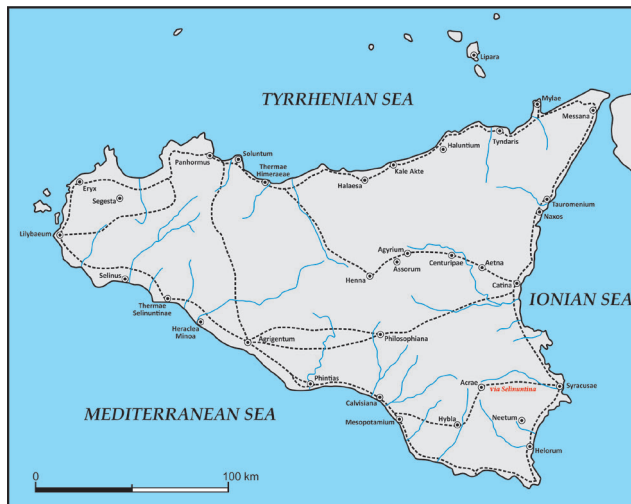


Fig. 6. Route of the *via Selinuntina*.

In contrast, the second scenario assumes that Marcellus stationed a troop of soldiers at the foot of the Acremonte hill and went with the rest of his army to Syracuse to join the troops already stationed there. Given the circumstances and the local topography, it would be impractical to encircle the entire town. Instead, it was sufficient to send a small troop of soldiers to patrol the eastern side. Consequently, the inhabitants of *Akraí*, who were trapped in the town and unable to move or cultivate their fields, decided to negotiate an agreement with the Romans.

⁶⁸ "A few days later Himilco, who had been joined by Hippocrates, fixed his camp by the river Anapus, about eight miles from Syracuse", cf. Liv. 24.36.2.

⁶⁹ A potential proof for it may be individual slingshot bullets, iron tripwires, and a pilum spearhead.

⁷⁰ Chowaniec 2015; Chowaniec – Fitula 2022.

Additionally, there exists another equally hypothetical solution. Marcellus, in his urgent need to reach Syracuse, as he was aware that Himilco was approaching with his army to relieve the town, left the remaining troops of Hippocrates' army in *Akraí* and marched eastward through the Anapo Valley with little regard for potential consequences of his decision.

4. Roman rulers and Hyblaean Mountains

The Roman Republic period was a significant shift in the island's history and the history of the Hyblaean Mountains as well. This time was marked by the expansion of Roman influence and the integration of Sicily into the Roman Republic. It is worth noting that the reign of Hiero II represented the final period in which Syracuse and its territories flourished and enjoyed independence.⁷¹ However, following his demise, Syracuse along with other towns of south-eastern Sicily, experienced economic, cultural, and political changes as they underwent a gradual transformation into a Roman province. Similarly, the towns in the Hyblaean region were classified among the *stipendiariae civitates*.⁷²

Following the capture of Syracuse, the Romans seized all the lands that belonged to the Syracusan Kingdom and added the towns allied with Syracuse, which had not previously taken their side, to their dominion.⁷³ Various ancient authors have provided different accounts of what happened to the land of the conquered Syracusan Kingdom. Livy states that the towns which did not surrender during the conflict in 214 to 212 BC had to accept the terms imposed by Rome. However, *Tauromenium* and *Neetum*, which switched allegiance and supported the Romans only after the fall of the Syracuse, were treated exceptionally well and benevolently. They signed the *foedus*, which granted them significant privileges. These towns became *civitates foederate* and, as autonomous urban centres united through an alliance with Rome, were able to enjoy certain benefits.⁷⁴ The fertile public lands of the former Syracusan Kingdom, specifically the area around *Leontini*, were incorporated into the *ager publicus populi Romani*,⁷⁵ and all taxes collected from there were sent directly to Rome. The remaining towns, including towns in the Hyblaean Mountains, like *Acrae*, belonged to the tribute-paying towns and should be considered as *civitates decumanae*.⁷⁶

From 212 BC onwards, the towns of the Syracusan Kingdom remained deeply rooted in the Hellenistic world enshrouded in the Sicilian Greek heritage for almost two centuries, until the end of the Republic.⁷⁷ The process of acculturation was slow there, as the local Greco-Sicilian traditions remained strong. However, this did not pose a significant problem for the Romans, as they were already heavily influenced by Greek culture and accepted it as the norm.⁷⁸ The privileged status of the Greeks in the region was not due to any inferiority complex felt by the Romans, but rather because Hellenic culture was inherently familiar to them and aligned with their own culture.⁷⁹ Additionally, during this period, Rome was not a dominant force on the island.⁸⁰ As Andrew Wallace-Hadrill aptly stated, this situation can be described as "cultural ambidexterity".⁸¹ Through the gradual conquest of *Magna Graecia*, Sicily, and other territories influenced by Greek culture, the Romans developed strong connections with the Hellenistic world. They were aware of the existence of highly developed towns and the diverse cultures that shaped them. By the 1st century AD, the Roman elites had fully embraced the Hellenistic heritage⁸². This cultural duality

⁷¹ Portale 2013, 32.

⁷² For a commentary, cf. Manni 2004, 25.

⁷³ Cic. *Phil.* 2.39.101.

⁷⁴ Serrati 2000, 120, 124; Prag 2015, 195-197.

⁷⁵ Prag 2015, 192-195.

⁷⁶ Plin. *NH* 3.8.9.

⁷⁷ Wilson 1990b, 67; Lomas 2000, 161-163; Chowaniec 2023.

⁷⁸ Lomas 1996; Gruen 2010.

⁷⁹ About the Greek traditions yet during the reign of Augustus, cf. MacMullen 2000.

⁸⁰ Perkins 2007, 34-35.

⁸¹ Wallace-Hadrill 2008, 5.

⁸² Lomas 1993, 3.

may have persisted until the rise of Octavian to power. Octavian's harsh expansionist policies and propaganda led to the granting of land to veterans⁸³, the proliferation of Latin inscriptions, the construction of Roman buildings, and the flooding of the market with standardized Roman mass-consumed goods (e.g. red-gloss terra sigillata)⁸⁴. This marked a significant shift away from the previous cultural dynamics. It is worth noting that Suetonius, in the more sympathetic account, summarized Octavian's policies to the provinces as a means of restoring order and stability: He writes that "certain of the cities which had treaties with Rome, but were on the road to ruin through their lawlessness, he deprived of their independence; he relieved others that were overwhelmed with debt, rebuilt some which had been destroyed by earthquakes, and gave Latin rights".⁸⁵ The changes implemented by Octavian's order proved advantageous for his successors. In Syracuse, Caligula orchestrated grand spectacles and local games.⁸⁶ According to Suetonius "at Syracuse he repaired the city walls, which had fallen into ruin though lapse of time, and the temples of the gods".⁸⁷

The study of the history of the Hyblaean Mountains region, which was once part of Syracusan Kingdom after the fall of the *metropolis* in 212 BC, poses significant challenges. Various factors, including state of research, historical complexities, and the state of publication, have influenced this situation. Among the Hyblaean towns, only the *Akrai/Acrae* has been extensively studied due to long-term excavations.⁸⁸ In other cases, evidence of Roman presence can be found mostly in the transformations of buildings and in inscriptions in Latin.⁸⁹ However, it is important to note that the existence of "Roman" buildings and writing does not necessarily imply that the local community succumbed to foreign cultural influences. Rather, it suggests their acceptance and incorporation of such manifestation and administration practices.⁹⁰

In the course of excavations in *Akrai*, the remains of houses from the Late Hellenistic-Roman period were discovered. These houses were inhabited until the 350s-370s AD and later repurposed for manufacturing activities in the late 4th century AD.⁹¹ The rooms varied in size and decorations, and significant number of "purely" Roman artefacts were found here. This suggests that a new group of settlers may have arrived in *Akrai* at the end of the 1st century BC or the beginning of the 1st century AD. These settlers possibly found the local living conditions and material culture unsatisfactory. Among discovered artefacts are: a carnelian gem with an intaglio image of a mature man in profile to the right with pointed beard, short hairs, elaborated in late wheel style of Augustan period; an almandine gem with a depiction of a bee in profile pollinating a flower cup; an iron ring with a gem made presumably of green-brown chalcidony and decorated with an embossed image of a leaping gryphon turned right, a bronze ring with Bonus Eventus standing frontally with the head facing left and holding a patera in his right hand, all dated to the 1st century AD; a cameo with an image of a Medusa's head with rounded face separated from surrounding border of hair, dated to the Early Imperial Period; a bone hair-pin with a head shaped as a woman's bust with a hairdo resembling the so-called "beehive" of the Flavian Period; and numerous everyday items like: terra sigillata vases, tweezers, ligulae, bronze and bone spatulae, decorated bone and bronze spoons and handles, a strigilla, fragments of mirrors, bronze rings and signets, and glass beads, including melon beads.

⁸³ Taylor 2008, 284-285. Cassius Dio reports that, in order to moderate tension in his army, Octavian granted land to his soldiers after the victorious battle against Sextus Pompeius, cf. D.C. 49.15.4-5.

⁸⁴ Millar 1993; Woolf 1998, 174 (an example of Roman Gaul); Pitts 2015, 71.

⁸⁵ Suet. *Aug.* 2.47.

⁸⁶ Suet. *Cal.* 4.20.

⁸⁷ Suet. *Cal.* 4.21. The range of these works and the exact sections on which they were performed remain unknown. For a commentary, cf. Lomas 2000, 166.

⁸⁸ Chowaniec 2016; Chowaniec *et alii* 2021; Chowaniec – Fitula 2022; Chowaniec – Fetner 2024.

⁸⁹ For a general discussion of the subject, cf. Lomas 2003; Uggeri 2004; Laurence – Trifilò 2015.

⁹⁰ The choice of possible investments depended on politics and a character of a given region, Jouffroy 1986; Laurence – Trifilò 2015, 108.

⁹¹ Chowaniec 2017, 106-198.

The arrival of new goods is most likely connected to the allocation of lands in Sicily to Roman veterans. This event took place after the Battle of the Naulochus,⁹² although it has only been discussed in relation to towns such as Syracuse, Taormina, or Messina. Through archaeological excavations, we have discovered that at the Hellenistic-Roman farmstead in Contrada Aguglia, located approximately 7 or 8 kilometres away from *Akrai*,⁹³ the presence of destruction layers and abandonment of houses can be seen as evidence of Octavian's retaliation for an alliance with Sextus Pompeius.⁹⁴ If we consider Contrada Aguglia, it is highly probable that the *Akrai* was also affected. If the town and its surrounding areas indeed supported Sextus, the theory of later inflow of Roman veterans as settlers becomes plausible. It is more likely that new elements of material culture emerged through peaceful settlement rather than through military conflict.⁹⁵

In fact, indications of the process of the incoming of settlers can be found among other archaeological artefacts found in *Akrai*, for example classical brooches of the Avcissa A242/Riha 5.2 type and their variants,⁹⁶ as well as Alesia-type brooches. Particularly the Avcissa-type fibulae were common in military camps of the so-called Augustan camps horizon. Due to their frequent appearance in military contexts, they are called "military brooches". Their presence is usually considered a proof that a given place was occupied by Roman army or veterans, and so they are also found in settlement or sepulchral contexts throughout the Empire.⁹⁷ During the excavations, several Roman seal-boxes were also discovered, which were used to protect wax seals,⁹⁸ usually used to seal the letters⁹⁹ written both on tablets and papyrus or to seal the soft containers (e.g. made of leather or textiles). They usually came in various sizes and forms and were decorated with enamel or simple imagine. Their primary task, however, was to guarantee authenticity of its content, since opening required breaking the seal or tearing the string with which it was attached. Two seal-boxes of copper alloy discovered in *Akrai* were egg-shaped and had a hinge mechanism joining their two parts (the base and the top), whereas three small holes were made in the middle of the base, so that they created a triangle.¹⁰⁰ These artefacts belong are the oldest variants of seal-boxes discovered so far, since they made a mass appearance as a tool for securing shipments only after the rise of Emperor Augustus and remained widespread throughout the 1st century AD.¹⁰¹ Regarding the interpretation of their use, it is possible that they played an official role within the *cursus publicus*;¹⁰² they should be associated with military letters, since the majority of surviving specimens were found in military camps or army-related sites;¹⁰³ or they protected *nuncupatio*.¹⁰⁴ It should also be added that they might have been used to protect private correspondence or moneybags.¹⁰⁵

The richness and diversity of material culture confirms that for the following three and a half hundred years settlement existed and developed in this town of Sicilian interior. Thousands of numerous imports from various directions, including a steady influx of pottery from various

⁹² For more on the battle, cf. Velleius Paterculus 2.79. On land distribution, cf. Stone 1983, 21; Millar 1993; Gowers 2010, 74, 82-85.

⁹³ Pelagatti 1970, 447-499.

⁹⁴ Similar traces of devastation were found in Morgantina circa 35 BC, which was associated by scholars with the punishing expedition undertaken by Octavian after his conflict with Sextus was brought to an end, cf. Stone 1983; Pfunter 2019, 32-33, 37-38.

⁹⁵ Chowaniec 2018.

⁹⁶ The fibula can be classified in the group of provincial Roman hinged brooches. The dating of the classical variants lies between the last quarter of the 1st century BC and the late 1st century AD, but they reached the peak of their popularity during the reigns of Augustus and Tiberius.

⁹⁷ Chowaniec 2018; Swift 2011, 212-213.

⁹⁸ For more on this category of finds, cf. Chowaniec 2022.

⁹⁹ There is a conviction that such finds are direct evidence of the use of Latin, cf. Cooley 2002, 12; Derks - Roymans 2002. However, their use to protect bags or other containers is not a proof of concept. Chowaniec 2018.

¹⁰¹ Derks - Roymans 2002, 27-28, 92; Andrews 2012, 72, 104.

¹⁰² Holmes 1995, 391-392.

¹⁰³ Derks - Roymans 2002, 99-100.

¹⁰⁴ Derks 1998, 224-231.

¹⁰⁵ Examples of such use are known thanks to finds from Trier or Kalkriese, cf. Derks 2010, 725.

production centres,¹⁰⁶ depending on the time-period: from Pantelleria, northern Africa, Gaul, Etruria, Campania, and eastern parts of the Mediterranean. Generally, supply of pottery in towns located inland, including *Akraï*, similarly to other goods, depended on what was available for sale in ports. Therefore, it comes as little surprise that these items were very similar to their counterparts from Syracuse, since the Syracusan port was a gateway for the commodities imported by the sea. Beside the Italic terra sigillata, the eastern type continued to appear throughout the 1st century AD and until the early 2nd century AD. The Eastern sigillata B (ESB) was also imported from the western coast of Asia Minor (the Meander Valley) in the end of the 1st century AD and in the 2nd century AD. The terra sigillata was represented also by pots produced in the south of Gaul (the late 1st century AD through the early 2nd century AD); fragments of Eastern sigillata C (ESC) from Pergamon or Pitane; fragments of glazed Central-Italic pottery from the late 1st century AD through the early 3rd century AD and thin-walled Aegean pottery from the 2nd century through the mid-3rd century AD), as well as glassware windows panes, glass lamps (among others unguentaria [Isings 42a] from the second half of the 1st and the 2nd century AD; bottles decorated with an application of glass thread arranged in a snaky pattern from the 2nd through the 3rd century AD, needles with an almond-shaped eye dated to the third quarter of the 1st century AD). Dynamic functioning of *Akraï* in the Late Republican and the Early and Middle Imperial periods was confirmed by presence of olive lamps, of which 40 to 50% belonged to material dated to the 1st through the mid-3rd century AD. The lamps were represented by high-quality imports from Campania, Central Italy, Asia Minor, and Egypt.¹⁰⁷

In order to describe the situation in Hyblaeen Mountains in this period, is necessary to mention the changes in agriculture and breeding. Hyblaeen region is steep and rugged, making it difficult to plant everywhere, therefore a monoculture-based farming approach would have been highly dangerous.¹⁰⁸ Already Greek Sicily produced vegetables, fruit, beeswax, honey, and animal items including wool, hides, and cheese from cows and ovine in addition to grain, olives, and grapes. For example for the Romans, already since the Republican period, the Hyblaeen Mountains appeared the main source of excellent thyme honey.¹⁰⁹ Pliny the Elder confirms that “the honey is always best in those countries where it is to be found deposited in the calix of the most exquisite flowers, such, for instance, as the districts of Hymettus and Hybla, in Attica and Sicily respectively”.¹¹⁰

The advance in farming practices, which could be observed since the Early Imperial period, allowed to cultivate the new species and change the composition of domesticated crops. Since the beginning of 1st century AD the number of fruit trees increased,¹¹¹ and in the 5th century AD Macrobius mentions much more names for fruit trees than any writer between the 1st century BC and the 1st century AD. In the same time main taxa of “Mediterranean triad” –*Olea europaea*, *Vitis vinifera* and cereals– were still cultivated, but in the Roman Imperial period also a rise in the number of weed plants can be noticed, which may indicate weeds and leaving fields.¹¹² In the Late Antiquity the cultivation changed, and the increase of cereals and the appearance of flax, instead of olives and grapes, can be observed.¹¹³ Analogous similar changes can be registered in animal species, being bred and eaten. Through the archeozoological research and stable isotope analysis, it can be seen that in the Late Hellenistic-Early Imperial periods, the most numerous specie was pig (47.0%), followed by sheep and goat (30.0%), and cattle (23.0%). In the archaeological levels of the Imperial period, the above-mentioned percentages of animals varied. Pig bones and teeth was estimated at 35.0%, cattle at 34.0%, but sheep and goat remained almost the same amount –32.0%. In the deposits from the end of 4th to the 8th century AD, the

¹⁰⁶ More information about pottery, cf. Chowaniec (ed.) 2015, 2018; Chowaniec – Fitula (eds.) 2022.

¹⁰⁷ More information about lamps, cf. Chowaniec (ed.) 2015, 2018; Chowaniec – Fitula (eds.) 2022.

¹⁰⁸ Stella – Fiorentino 2022, 297-298.

¹⁰⁹ Bortolin 2008, 46-47.

¹¹⁰ Plin. *HN* 11.13.32.

¹¹¹ Plin. *HN* 15.19(18).72.

¹¹² Chowaniec *et alii* 2021.

¹¹³ Stella 2022.

number of pig decreased from 35% to 24%, while at the same time the number of cattle and sheep/goat increased (cattle was 38.0%, sheep/goat 37.0%). The highest number of wild fauna was registered in the Late Hellenistic-Early Imperial strata and estimated at 10.0%. In the 4th century AD their amount was much smaller and estimated around 0.5%.¹¹⁴

From the 1st century BC a new organization of rural space is perceptible. Small farms first spread outward, but a number of sizable Roman farms were founded on the island after the Roman conquest and the rule of Augustus, particularly following Sextus Pompeius's uprising in Sicily. All of these had an impact on plants' and animals' groups as forests size and water availability, as well as the introduction of new agriculture technologies (e.g. the falx, wheeled coulter, harrow, and oxen or donkey-driven harvesters), which increased farming productivity and reduced labor costs.¹¹⁵ On the one hand, this technological advance allowed the soil to be plowed deeper and cultivate areas previously unsuitable for growing crops. On the other hand, it also led to accelerated erosion and forest degradation.¹¹⁶

5. Conclusion

The Syracusan exploration of the Hyblaean Mountains brought foundation and constant development of urban centres, which resulted in population of surrounding regions. Very important role played *via Selinuntina* from Syracuse to Gela and then to Agrigento and Lilybaeum, through the Hyblaean Mountains, because the road enabled swift communication between particular towns and later, in the Roman Imperial period, connected villas scattered along the coast with the interior which provided them with food products.

The great development of the Hyblaean region took place during the reign of Heron II. Later during the Second Punic War it became the arena of hostilities between Marcellus leading the Roman troops and Hippocrates commanding the Syracusan army. After the conquest of the Syracusan Kingdom, including Hyblaean territory, the region was incorporated into the Roman province, and despite having to pay taxes for Rome, was continually populated and functioning well enough in the new political structure.

The Roman presence in the region caused traceable changes in the habitat through the intensive exploitation of farming land, constant grazing, deforestation, and horticulture.¹¹⁷ The Romans brought many new techniques and tools which influenced ergonomics of farming (it became possible to plough more land in a shorter amount of time).

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¹¹⁴ Chowaniec *et alii* 2021.

¹¹⁵ Kolendo 1968.

¹¹⁶ De Angelis 2016, 231; Stella – Fiorentino 2022, 305-306.

¹¹⁷ Heinzl – Kolb 2011.

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