

Maria Intriери
HERMOCRATES: SICELIOT, STRATEGIST, EXILE

Moderate conservative, patriot and “man of complete integrity and high principles”, “member of the most extremist faction of the oligarchs”, “demagogue and failed tyrant”, “individual of such despotic inclinations”...

The variety of modern interpretations says a lot about the complexity of the traditions concerning Hermocrates and, at the same time, about the singularity of his personality and figure.

In my opinion, perhaps even more than for other historical characters, the at times distorting lens – that of Thucydides, positively or negatively, no less than that of Timaeus – through which we have looked at Hermocrates since ancient times, makes it difficult to identify his true face, and fully grasp the evolution of his political role.

What is beyond dispute, however, is that he always aspired to power, and certainly not in a secondary role, but it is less certain that his entire life was determined by the search for the affirmation of personal power.

I do not believe that his respect for legality, shown in more than one circumstance, can be exclusively understood as tactical, in other words a way to counteract the accusations of aspiring to tyranny. It appears, rather, as a constitutive trait of his political vision, which seems to fail only, and apparently as *extrema ratio*, in the last, fatal attempt to return to Syracuse. This seems to be even more probable in consideration of the great skills of psychological insight shown on several occasions that distance Hermocrates from professional demagogues and Dionysius, who was much more determined to attain power, in conditions not very different from those faced by Hermocrates. A careful comparison of the two figures shows the differences between Hermocrates and Dionysius: the former ready to bow to the city’s laws, the latter to delegitimize the institutions with demagogic cunning.

Learned, intelligent, capable of interpreting the evolution of events, Hermocrates represents not only one of the most important protagonists of

Ermocrate. Siceliota, stratego, esule

Sicilian history but also, for the breadth of his vision, a pivotal character in an era of transition.

His figure stands out significantly for his ambition to claim a broader political role for Syracuse for which he dreamed not only of a hegemonic position in Sicily, like the one covered in the motherland by Athens and Sparta, but also a more significant involvement in the Hellenic political scenario. Such ambition would explain the irreducible firmness in the confrontation with Athens, which leads Hermocrates not only to seek the total annihilation of the Athenian forces in Sicily, but also to push Syracuse to carry on the fight with its own fleet in the Aegean waters. This vision also explains his conduct at the head of a personal army in the western cusp of Sicily, which aimed at restoring to the Sicilian Greeks the territories devastated by the violent attacks of the Carthaginians.

Aside from some more or less plausible hypotheses, it is not possible today to establish what would have happened if, Hermocrates had been allowed to return to his homeland, or if his last, fatal attempt to return had been successful, but there is no doubt that, in his actions and in his political vision, the germs of subsequent, political innovations were sown. Regardless of the 'aristocratic' or 'tyrannical' interpretation of his character, Hermocrates can thus be seen, to some extent, as a forerunner of those politics, looking beyond the microcosm of the *poleis*, that would characterize the Hellenistic age.

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