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## Seneca and Sicily's *Multa Mirabilia*\*

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*Abstract* – Seneca's description of Sicily has not been explored in detail. Although from Seneca's works emerges an interest in Sicily and the Aetna, Seneca avoids speaking of the province. At the core of this article is the analysis of the detailed description of Syracuse (*Marc.* 17.2-6) and Seneca's reference to Sicily in *Q. Nat.* 4a *praef.*, where the philosopher exhorts the procurator Lucilius to step back from the province, despite its *multa mirabilia*. Syracuse's ambiguous appearance, already underlined by Bartsch (2007), will be the starting point for investigating Seneca's treatment of Sicily.

### Introduction<sup>1</sup>

This article examines the presence of Sicily, Rome's oldest *provincia*, within the works of Seneca.<sup>2</sup> Through geographical, historical, and mythological references, Seneca's mixed attitude towards the island will be revealed: in the *Naturales Quaestiones*, despite recognising the island's *multa mirabilia*, and despite Lucilius' genuine interest in the

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<sup>1</sup> \* This paper was presented at the International Conference "Seneca 2022: What more can we say about Seneca?" held in Lisbon in October 2022. I would like to thank the organisers of the conference, plus Elena Giusti and Barbara Del Giovane for their stimulating feedback during the Q&A. I am also grateful to Francesca Romana Berno e Rita Degl'Innocenti Pierini for having read the paper and to the two anonymous readers for their insightful observations and suggestions.

<sup>2</sup> On Sicily as a Roman province, see Wilson (1990); Evans (2009); Pfuntner (2019).

geography of Sicily (cf. below), Seneca prefers to move on.<sup>3</sup> Below are tabulated Seneca's references to Sicily.<sup>4</sup>

<i>Sicilia</i>	<i>Syracusae</i>	<i>Scylla</i>	<i>Charybdis</i>	
<i>Ep.</i> 14.8	<i>Marc.</i> 17-18 (x3)	<i>Ep.</i> 31.9	<i>Ep.</i> 31.9	
<i>Ep.</i> 51.1	<i>Q. Nat.</i> 1.1.14	<i>Ep.</i> 92.9 (x2)	<i>Ep.</i> 14.8	
<i>Ep.</i> 79	<i>Q. Nat.</i> 3.26.5	<i>Ep.</i> 79.1	<i>Ep.</i> 79.1	
<i>Ep.</i> 88.6		<i>Ep.</i> 45.2	<i>Ep.</i> 45.2	
<i>Ept.</i> 90.6		<i>Herc.</i> O. 235	<i>Herc.</i> O. 235	
<i>Ep.</i> 114.26		<i>Thy.</i> 579	<i>Thy.</i> 581	
<i>Q. Nat.</i> 3.25.3		<i>Med.</i> 408	<i>Med.</i> 408	
<i>Q. Nat.</i> 3.26.5		<i>Herc.</i> F. 376	<i>Marc.</i> 17.2	
<i>Q. Nat.</i> 4a.1.1		<i>Q. Nat.</i> 3.29.7	<i>Q. Nat.</i> 3.29.7	
<i>Q. Nat.</i> 4a. <i>praef.</i> 1				
<i>Q. Nat.</i> 6.8.2				
<i>Q. Nat.</i> 6.30.3				
<i>Polyb.</i> 17.5				
<i>Brev.</i> 13.8				
<i>Brev.</i> 4.5				
<i>Clem.</i> 1.11.1				

This article focuses on two significant passages inside the Senecan corpus: *Marc.* 17.2-6 (§ 2) and *Q. Nat.* 4a *praef.* (§ 4), and offers an overview of Seneca's *Letters* (§ 3). It takes as its point of departure the controversial description of Syracuse in the *Consolatio ad Marciam* (17.2-6). Before the conclusion (§ 6), a brief digression on Sicily's history (§ 5) will be useful to understand Seneca's connotation of the island, which appears deceptive.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> In *Q. Nat.* 3.1.1, Seneca quotes a hexameter line from a poem of Lucilius concerning another feature of the island, the fountain of Arethusa, which was said to come from an underground river originating in the Peloponnese.

<sup>4</sup> In *Her. F.* 997; *Thy.* 407; 582; *Q. Nat.* 2.44.1 (quotation from Ovid's *Met.* 3.305-307) Seneca refers to Cyclops; in *Ep.* 114.7, is a reference to the inhabitants of Syracuse and Palermo; in *Brev.* 13.5 to *Messana* (modern Messina).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Bartsch (2007).

## Syracuse in the *Consolatio ad Marciam*

By the means of a *persona loquens* (*si quis diceret*), Seneca offers a description of Syracuse.<sup>6</sup> Seneca's report of the Sicilian city is ambivalent: on the one hand, he praises Syracuse's natural beauty; on the other, points out its imperilments.

*Si quis Syracusas petenti diceret: 'omnia incommoda, omnes voluptates futurae peregrinationis tuae ante cognosce, deinde ita naviga. Haec sunt quae mirari possis: videbis primum ipsam insulam ab Italia angusto interscissam fretto, quam continenti quondam cohaesisse constat; subitum illo mare inrupit et Hesperium Siculo latus abscedit.*

*Deinde videbis (licebit enim tibi avidissimum maris verticem stringere) stratum illam fabulosam Charybdin quam diu ab austro vacat, at, si quid inde vehementius spiravit, magno hiatu profundoque navigia sorbentem. 3. Videbis celebratissimum carminibus fontem Arethusam, nitidissimi ac perlucidi ad imum stagni, gelidissimas aquas profundentem, sive illas ibi primum nascentis invenit, sive inlapsum terris flumen integrum subter tot maria et a confusione peioris undae servatum reddidit. 4. Videbis portum quietissimum omnium quos aut natura posuit in tutelam classium aut adiuvit manus, sic tutum ut ne maximarum quidem tempestatium furori locus sit. Videbis ubi Athenarum potentia fracta, ubi tot milia captivorum ille excisis in infinitam altitudinem saxi natus carcer incluserat, ipsam ingentem civitatem et laxius territorium quam multarum urbium fines sunt, tepidissima hiberna et nullum diem sine interventu solis. 5. Sed cum omnia ista cognoveris, gravis et insalubris aestas hiberni caeli beneficia corrumpet.'*<sup>7</sup> (17.2-5)

If someone said to a man who was heading for Syracuse: "Find out beforehand about all the disadvantages and all the delights of your intended journey, and only then set sail. These are the things you might marvel at: first of all, you will see the island itself, separated from Italy by a narrow channel, but once, so it is thought, joined to the mainland; suddenly the sea burst in and 'split Hesperia's flank from Sicily's'. Then you will see the Charybdis of mythology (for you will be able to skirt the edge of that voracious whirlpool); it stays calm while it is unaffected by the south wind, but if a strong gale blows from that direction, it swallows ships in its broad, deep mouth. 3. You will see the spring of Arethusa, famed in poetry, with its sparkling pool, transparent right to the bottom, pouring out ice-cold waters, whether it finds them rising

<sup>6</sup> Cf. De Vivo (1996) 178; Bartsch (2007) 83-86.

<sup>7</sup> Quotations from Seneca's *Dialogi* and *Epistulae Morales* are from Reynolds' OCT editions (respectively, 1977 and 1965).

up there for the first time, or it restores a river that has flowed undiminished belowground, beneath all those seas, preserved from contamination with the tainted water. 4. You will see a harbour that is the calmest of all that have been formed by nature or improved by human hands for the protection of fleets, so safe that there is no access even for the raging of the mightiest storms. You will see where the power of Athens was broken, where that natural prison, carved out of the rocks to an immeasurable depth, incarcerated all those thousands of captives. You will see the immense city itself, whose layout covers a greater area than the entire territory controlled by many other cities. You will see very mild winters, and never a day without some sunshine. 5. But when you have made all those discoveries, the oppressive, unhealthy summer will spoil the advantages of the winter climate.<sup>8</sup>

Through the polyptoton *omnia/omnes* Seneca remarks on the multiplicity of *incommoda* and *voluptates*, which, in Stoic terminology, indicate pleasure and are, therefore, condemnable.<sup>9</sup> The language employed by Seneca is highly rhetorical: the philosopher seems to persuade his interlocutor through the sequence of two imperatives and the anaphora of *videbis* (5 times) not to commence a journey to Syracuse.<sup>10</sup> First of all, the voyager will see the island itself – even Seneca believes that Sicily was once attached to Italy and separated from the continent by an inundation. This belief is reported by ancient scientific writers,<sup>11</sup> and is also attested in the poetic tradition: to strengthen his assertion Seneca quotes a half-hexameter from Vergil (*Aen.* 3.418). Secondly, Seneca focuses on the presence of Charybdis, which is a dangerous vortex in the sea on the Sicilian side of the Strait.<sup>12</sup> The third element evoked by Seneca is the Arethusa fountain on the island of Ortygia, celebrated by many poets as a *locus amoenus*. In the first century, the myth of Arethusa was well-known in Rome: Artemis transformed the nymph Arethusa into a spring to preserve her virginity from the river god Alpheus. Seneca presents both versions: the mythological and the rational explanation. As a fourth element, Seneca mentions a harbour

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Manning (1981) *ad loc.* All translations of Seneca's texts are from the series *The Complete Works of Seneca the Younger* (Chicago).

<sup>9</sup> The term *voluptas* often has a negative connotation in Seneca's works: cf. Borgo (1998) 198-206.

<sup>10</sup> The anaphora of *videbis* may adumbrate a reference to the periegetic literature.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Mela 2.115; Plin. *HN* 2.204.

<sup>12</sup> Even in the *Letters*, Charybdis is synonymous with mystery and dangerousness, cf. § 3.

and then alludes to the terrible defeat suffered by Athens during the Sicilian expedition at the *Latomiae* in 413. After remarking on the exceptional climate of Sicily, characterized by warm winters but oppressive and unhealthy summers, Seneca remembers the tyranny of Dionysius II, who in 367 succeeded his father Dionysius I as tyrant of Syracuse until 357 when his maternal uncle Dion took the power.

*Erit Dionysius illic tyrannus, libertatis iustitiae legum exitium, dominationis cupidus etiam post Platonem, vitae etiam post exilium: alios uret, alios verberabit, alios ob levem offensam detruncari iubebit, arcisset ad libidinem mares feminasque et inter foedos regiae intemperantiae greges parum erit simul binis coire. Audisti quid te invitare possit, quid abstertere: proinde aut naviga aut resiste.' 6. Post hanc denuntiationem si quis dixisset intrare se Syracusas vellet, satisne iustam querellam de ullo nisi de se habere posset, qui non incidisset in illa sed prudens sciensque venisset? (17.5-6)*

There you will find the tyrant Dionysius, the destroyer of liberty, justice, and law, a man greedy for absolute power even after Plato for life even after exile; he will burn some people, he will beat others, he will order others to be beheaded for some trivial offense, he will send for males and females to serve his lust, and for the disgusting devotees of the palace's licentiousness it will not be enough to couple with just two people at the same time. You have heard what could attract you, and what could put you off: so either set sail or stop right here." 6. After this advice, if someone still said that he wanted to enter Syracuse, the only person he could fairly complain to would be himself, given that he had not just stumbled into the situation but had arrived with eyes open, and fully informed.

Seneca execrates Dionysius for his cruelty: he is stigmatized as a demolisher of freedom, justice, and laws, juxtaposed in asyndeton. The philosopher also remembers the failure of Plato, who visited Syracuse three times: during the first visit, Plato irritated Dionysius who allegedly sold him as a slave. In the seventh letter, Plato admits that also the second and third visits were a disaster. Despite Plato's teaching, Dionysius still longed for domination. At that point, Seneca envisions an alternative: *naviga aut resiste*. This couple of imperatives reminds the first couple of imperatives at the beginning of the description where Seneca exhorted the voyager to know (*cognosce*) both the positive and negative aspects of Sicily and eventually to sail (*naviga*). It is evident that Seneca discourages the voyager from taking on the journey: the

cons outdo the pros. Therefore, we may conclude that only on the surface Syracuse seems a good place to spend holidays. At the end of the description, through the noun *denuntiatio*, a juridical term that Seneca employs three other times and always in negative contexts, Seneca denounces the misleading appearance of the Sicilian city.<sup>13</sup> The final reference to Dionysius not only carries out a visual picture but more subtly implements a mental picture to move the reader to disclose the deceiving nature of Syracuse, whose description, as Bartsch has persuasively argued, is based on the conflict between alluring façades and grim reality.<sup>14</sup>

Seneca dwells on the description of Syracuse with an expansiveness that is surely redundant to his main topic.<sup>15</sup> As has been recently noted, in the *Ad Marciam* Seneca uses Sicily and its ineffaceable contradictions as a metaphor for human life.<sup>16</sup> Seneca's interest in Syracuse may also reflect the continued political relevance of the colony in the I century C.E.<sup>17</sup> Roman emperors, starting with Augustus, had a strong interest in Sicily.<sup>18</sup> As Pfuntner points out, "the periodic visits of emperors - documented beginning with Augustus in 22-21 BC on his way to eastern provinces (Cassius Dio 54.7.1; Suet. *Aug.* 47) reflect Syracuse's continued position at the top of the human hierarchy of Sicily. It remained the centre of Roman administration and an active port. The city's public and residential areas also continued to be used and embellished in the high and late Empire".<sup>19</sup> Seneca's effusiveness may have historical and political roots: as well-known, the *Consolatio ad Marciam* should be collocated in the first months of Caligula's reign:<sup>20</sup> Syracuse's decline mirrors precisely the kind of parabolic movement of human nature

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Sen. *Ep.* 67.14; 94.36; *Q. Nat.* 1.1.3; cf. *OLD* 1b 'a warning, threat'; *ThLL* VI.551, 9-34, s.v.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Bartsch (2007).

<sup>15</sup> This digression has brought Grollios (1956) to think that this excursus was a later interpolation and should be removed.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Tutrone (2023) 167.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Wilson (1990).

<sup>18</sup> According to Suetonius (*Aug.* 85), Augustus also wrote a poetic composition in hexameters devoted to Sicily, on whose content and aim we may only make conjectures; cf. Wardle (2014) 484-485.

<sup>19</sup> Pfuntner (2019) 176; the historical importance of Syracuse, a Roman colony since 21, also emerges from its urbanistic reconstruction in imperial Rome; cf. Evans (2009) 143.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Sauer (2014) 135. *Contra*, Griffin (1976) 397 argues a date after 39 in view of the laudatory references to Tiberius (3.2; 15.3).

from born to death envisaged here by Seneca to Marcia, sorrowful for the decease of her son Metilius: *ad hoc genitus es, ut perderes ut periret* (17.1).<sup>21</sup> Notwithstanding its natural *mirabilia*, Syracuse is doomed to evolve into a tyrannical power. Despite the argument remaining on a general level, the digression on Syracuse might suggest a parallel between Syracuse and Rome and Tiberius, whose final years of his reign evolve into tyranny, as the historical *exemplum* of Cremutius Cordus demonstrates. Indeed, the future tense in which are described the tyrannical conduct of Dionysius may suggest the actual presence of a tyrant in the visitor's time and draws attention to contemporaneity and Rome by implying continuity between past and present.

### Sicily in Seneca's *Letters*

Apart from the detailed description of Syracuse in the *Consolatio ad Marciam*, there are no significant references to the Roman province in the rest of the dialogues. Seneca refers to Sicily especially in his last works devoted to Lucilius; the close connection between Sicily and Lucilius, stressed in the *Naturales Quaestiones* (*Q. Nat.* 4a, *praef.*) and the *Letters* (especially *Ep.* 14; 51; 79), makes him an alter Ulysses (31.9). The mention of Sicily seems strictly connected to the emergence of Lucilius in the second book.<sup>22</sup> The first reference to Sicily in the *Letters* occurs in *Letter* 14 when Seneca alludes to Lucilius' journey to Sicily in 62 to fulfil his role as *procurator* of the province:

*Cum peteres Siciliam, traiecisti fretum.*

When you travelled to Sicily you crossed the sea. (14.8)<sup>23</sup>

In *Letter* 19, Seneca exhorts Lucilius to step down from public offices to avoid getting old in *ista sollicitudine procurationum* (19.8) (*sollicitudo* "disquiet of mind" *OLD* 1). *Letter* 19 is remarkable because Seneca enumerates the negative elements which remove Lucilius from a *vita salubris*, that is, a life devoted to philosophy:

<sup>21</sup> Bartsch (2007) 85-86 interprets the ekphrasis of Syracuse as "a Stoic parable for our earthly existence".

<sup>22</sup> For a brief overview of Sicily in the *Letters*, cf. Henderson (2004) 31-32.

<sup>23</sup> On Lucilius' journey to Sicily, cf. Gowers (2011).

*Tulit te longe a conspectu vitae salubris rapida felicitas, provincia et procuratio et quidquid ab istis promittitur.*

The life of true health was in sight, and you have been driven far from it by your swift rise, your provincial governorship, and whatever promise those hold. (19.5)

Sicily, the province administrated by Lucilius, is identified by Seneca as one of the elements that jeopardize Lucilius' philosophical improvement. The anaphoric alliteration of *pro-* links Sicily, Lucilius' role, and his expectations and emphasizes the deceptiveness and false appearance of Sicily and Lucilius' *procuratio*. Again, as noted above, Seneca warns the reader, in this case, his friend Lucilius, of Sicily's deceptive appearance.

In *Letter 45*, Lucilius complains about the difficulty of finding books on the island (*librorum istic inopiam esse quereris*, § 1), and Seneca states that he would cross the strait and face Scylla and Charybdis to bring books to his friend (45.1-2).<sup>24</sup>

The most significant letter for Seneca's interest in Sicily is *Letter 79*.<sup>25</sup> In this letter, Seneca exhorts Lucilius to offer a description of Sicily and in particular of the Aetna, celebrated in a didactic poem of the same name whose author, if not identifiable in Lucilius himself, probably belonged to the Neronian age. According to some scholars, Lucilius' interest in Sicily led to the production of *Aetna*, a didactic poem in hexameters, whose attribution, as well as its date of composition, is still controversial. What is almost sure is that the *terminus ante quem* should be collocated before Vesuvius' eruption in 79, considering that the author depicts the region between Naples and Cumae as volcanically inactive.<sup>26</sup>

At the beginning of the letter, Seneca appears eager to receive news from Lucilius. The mystery of Sicily fascinates Seneca; in particular, Seneca asks for more specific information on the nature of Charybdis, defined in the *Consolatio Ad Marciam fabulosa*, an adjective that Seneca uses only in *Bene*. 1.4.6 to define a *sermo levis ac fabulosus* and in *Ep.* 45.2 where Seneca uses the attribute in reference to the strait of Messina, threatened by the presence of Scylla and Charybdis.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Graver (2023) 204.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Garbarino (1996) 279-280; Schöneegg (1999) 179-194; Montiglio (2006) 568-569.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. De Vivo (1989).



*Expecto epistulas tuas quibus mihi indices circuitus Siciliae totius quid tibi novi ostenderit, et omnia de ipsa Charybdi certiora. Nam Scyllam saxum esse et quidem non terribile navigantibus optime scio: Charybdis an respondeat fabulis perscribi mihi desidero et, si forte observaveris (dignum est autem quod observes), fac nos certiores utrum uno tantum vento agatur in vertices an omnis tempestas aequae mare illud contorqueat, et an verum sit quidquid illo freti turbine abreptum est per multa milia trahi conditum et circa Tauromenitanum litus emergere.*

I am looking forward to a letter from you describing what new information you have discovered on your sailing trip around Sicily; and in particular, some definite facts about Charybdis itself. For I am well aware that Scylla is only a promontory, and not especially dangerous to navigation; Charybdis, though, I would like to have described to me in writing. Is it like the Charybdis of legend? If you happen to have made any observations—and it is well worth the trouble—then fill me in. Is there only one wind that makes it billow up, or does every squall stir up the sea in the same way? And is it true that anything that is drawn into the whirlpool there at the strait is carried many miles underwater until it surfaces near the beach at Taormina? (79.1)

Then Seneca asks Lucilius to climb the Aetna in his honour (§ 2). The volcano Aetna, alongside the city of Syracuse, was among the main tourist attractions.<sup>27</sup> Throughout the letter, Seneca displays a scientific interest in the volcano which we may expect in the *Natural Questions*. Moreover, by asking Lucilius to offer the description of the volcano, Seneca gives Lucilius the possibility of inserting himself into a literary tradition, as others before him described it (§ 5).<sup>28</sup> Seneca refers to Vergil, Ovid, and Severus Cornelius; however, the fact that such important poets have devoted their attention to the Aetna does not have to discourage Lucilius:

*Qui praecesserant non praeripuisse mihi videntur quae dici poterant, sed aperuisse.*

The earlier writers have not exhausted the possibilities; rather they have opened up the way. (79.5)

<sup>27</sup> In 79.2, Seneca gives the impression that he made the ascent, like Caligula (Suet. *Calig.* 51) and the indefatigable Hadrian (*Vita Hadriani* 13).

<sup>28</sup> Lucilius' description might be influenced by earlier literary representations: Cicero's *In Verrem*; Lucretius' book 6.680-702, Vergil's *Aeneid* 3, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 5.346-356; 15.340-355 (on Aetna).

Lucilius is even favoured in comparison to eminent predecessors:

*Crescit in dies, et inventuris inventa non obstant. Praeterea condicio optima est ultimi: parata verba invenit, quae aliter instructa novam faciem habent [...] Aut ego te non novi aut Aetna sibi salivam movet; iam cupis grande aliquid et par prioribus scribere. Plus enim sperare modestia tibi tua non permittit.*

A topic grows over time; invention does not preclude inventiveness. Besides, the last to come has the best of it: the words are all laid out for him, but a different arrangement lends them a fresh appearance. [...] If I know you at all, you are absolutely drooling over Etna, wishing to write something great to equal your predecessors. For modesty does not permit you to hope that you might surpass them. (79.6-7)

Seneca is aware that he is urging Lucilius to do something that he longs for: the philosopher teasingly defines Lucilius' interest in poetic composition as *morbus* (§ 4).<sup>29</sup> He then praises Lucilius for his *modestia* (§ 7) and whets his inclination for poetry by praising his poetic skills. Only at this point, in the middle of the letter, Seneca starts his philosophical reflection, which is described in terms of an ascension (*inter cetera hoc habet boni sapientia: nemo ab altero potest vinci nisi dum ascenditur*, §8): the rise to the Aetna, which Seneca asks Lucilius to do in his honour (*in honorem meum Aetnam quoque ascendas*, § 2), might be a metaphor for the ascent toward philosophy.

In *Letter 31*, Seneca spurs Lucilius to continue his path toward wisdom, which is easy. Seneca lists several uncomfortable locations which may negatively influence Lucilius' philosophical path toward *sapientia*. It is recommendable that Lucilius abstain from some places if he does not want to compromise his journey.

*'Quomodo' inquis 'isto pervenitur?' Non per Poeninum Graiumve montem nec per deserta Candaviae; nec Syrtes tibi nec Scylla aut Charybdis adeundae sunt, quae tamen omnia transisti procuratiunculae pretio.*

You ask, "How do I get there?" You need not scale the Alps, at either the Pennine or the Graian Pass, or navigate the Syrtaean shoals, or traverse the mountain fastness of Illyria; you need not approach the straits where Scylla and Charybdis are; and yet you passed through all of these for no more reward than your paltry governorship. (31.9)

<sup>29</sup> For *salivam movere* cf. Cels. 4.2.8.

Among these places, Seneca mentions Scylla and Charybdis. In the *Letters*, Sicily's dangerousness is mainly represented through the reference to Scylla and Charybdis, both mentioned four times, who are the emblem of Sicily's insecurity as a perilous location. Especially Charybdis, the monstrous whirlpool, elicits fear unlike Scylla, who is transformed into a rock – as Seneca points out in Letter 79.1 – but before being a sea monster, who inhabited the straits of Messina, was a wonderful young woman in the upper body but girdled with the heads of baying dogs in the lower body.<sup>30</sup> Seneca may hint at the unpleasantness of Sicily also in another circumstance.

Even the reference to Aetna in the opening of *Letter 51* does not seem to be read positively. By starting the letter with the remark on Aetna, Seneca might suggest an implicit comparison between Sicily and Baiae. The Aetna, namely Sicily, might be read as the counterpart of Baia: Lucilius is in Sicily while Seneca is besieged in Baiae, in the area of Naples.<sup>31</sup>

*Quomodo quisque potest, mi Lucili: tu istic habes Aetnam, tet illuc† nobilissimum Siciliae montem [...], nos, utcumque possumus, contenti sumus Bais.*

We make do with what we have, dear Lucilius. You have Etna there, the tallest and noblest mountain in Sicily [...] And I content myself as best I can with Baiae. (51.1)

Considering what Seneca asserts in the *Naturales Quaestiones*, written in the same period as the *Epistulae Morales*, it is possible that Seneca may be drawing a comparison between two unpleasant, although for different aspects, locations. Like Baiae, Sicily is a dangerous location, which may jeopardize Lucilius' moral progression.

### **Lucilius' *procuratio otiosa*: Sicily in Seneca's *Natural Questions***

Let us move to the *Naturales Quaestiones*. At the opening of the preface to book 4a, Seneca interrupts the scientific investigation to address

<sup>30</sup> Sen. *Ep.* 79.1: *nam Scyllam saxum esse et quidem non terribile navigantibus*; cf. Ov. *Met.* 13.898-14.74.

<sup>31</sup> In *Ep.* 51.3 Seneca defines Baiae *deversorium vitiorum*; cf. Berno (2023) 165-171.

Lucilius, who seems happy with Sicily and his role as procurator of Sicily and warns him against the risk of flattery.

*Delectat te, quemadmodum scribis, Lucili virorum optime, Sicilia et officium procurationis otiosae, delectabitque si continere id intra fines suos volueris, nec efficere imperium quod est procuratio.*

You are delighted with Sicily – so you write, Lucilius, excellent man – and with the duties of a procuratorship that leaves you leisure time; and that delight will continue, if you are willing to keep the duties within their limits and not treat a procuratorship as a governorship. (*Q. Nat.* 4a, *praef.* 1)

However, Lucilius' *officium procurationis otiosae* – significant is the oxymoron *procuratio otiosa* (§ 1), which remarks on the dichotomy between *otium* and *negotium* – and, implicitly, the province in which he works, pose a severe threat to his moral development.<sup>32</sup> As a result, at the conclusion of the preface, Seneca wants to remove Lucilius from Sicily (4a, *praef.* 21), despite its *mirabilia* (4a.1.1), and moves forward. The absence of a book devoted to volcanos and their eruptions may be explained on the basis of the presence of the *Aetna* which focuses on a similar topic, and also of Seneca's desire not to devote too much space to Sicily in his treatise. As Berno suggests, Seneca avoids dwelling on Sicily's marvels as they represent a threat to Lucilius' philosophical journey.<sup>33</sup> If we consider Lucilius' interest and connection with Sicily, we may infer that Seneca disappoints Lucilius when he evades speaking of Sicily. I shall argue that Seneca's apparent disregard for Sicily is rooted in political reasons and, in certain cases, autobiographical reasons.

Seneca mentions Sicily's *mirabilia* at the beginning of book 4a, after ending the *praefatio* to book 4a of *Natural Questions*, where the philosopher stops his scientific explanation to theorize the vice of flattery. Scholars still discuss why Seneca inserts this reflection on *adulatio* at this point. Nature itself, especially Sicily offering *multa mirabilia*, appears to naturally 'flatter' Lucilius by disclosing its extempore *mirabilia*.<sup>34</sup> Nature's natural charm jeopardises Lucilius' philosophical devel-

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Williams (2012, 96-97).

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Berno (2003) 135-136.

<sup>34</sup> On the use of *mirabilia* in Seneca, cf. Berno (2003) 135 n. 83.

opment; therefore, Seneca recommends Lucilius keep away from the province (*Q. Nat.* 4a.1.1). Actually, Seneca wants literally to remove Lucilius from the island. The philosopher uses *abduco* at the end of the preface (§ 21): *longe te ab ista provincia abducam* where the demonstrative pronoun *iste* has a deteriorative function, and the adverb *longe* reinforces *abduco*. Seneca wants to uproot Lucilius from Sicily to avoid his friend may boast of the historical relevance that the island had in the past.

*Longe te ab ista provincia abducam, ne forte magnam esse historiis fidem credas et placere tibi incipias, quotiens cogitaveris: 'hanc ego habeo sub meo iure provinciam quae maximarum urbium exercitus et sustinuit et fregit, cum inter Carthaginem et Romam ingentis belli praemium iacuit; quae quattuor Romanorum principum, id est totius imperi, vires contractas in unum locum vidit aluitque; <quae> Pompeii fortunam erexit, Caesaris fatigavit, Lepidi transtulit, omnium cepit'.*

I shall draw you far away from your province to ensure that you do not think you can place too much trust in history and do not begin to be pleased with yourself whenever you think, "I have under my jurisdiction this province, which has both supported and crushed the armies of the most powerful cities, when it lay between Carthage and Rome as the prize in a great war; the province saw the forces of four Roman leaders, that is of the whole empire, brought together in one spot, and it fed them; it raised up Pompey's fortunes, exhausted Caesar's, handed over Lepidus', and found room for all their fortunes. (*Q. Nat.* 4a, *praef.* 21)

Seneca remembers the first Carthaginian war when Sicily was at the odds at stake. Sicily was the theatre of Sextus Pompey's defeat at Naulochus in 36.<sup>35</sup>

At the beginning of the first chapter, before elucidating the topic of book 4a, Seneca repeats once more his intention to remove – *abduco* again – his pupil from Sicily, although he recognises that Sicily possesses *multa mirabilia* and defines the argument of the book: the floating of the Nile.

*Itaque, ut totum inde te abducam, quamvis multa habeat Sicilia in se circaque se mirabilia, omnes interim provinciae tuae quaestiones praeteribo, et in diversum cogitationes tuas abstraham.*

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Sen. *Brev.* 4.5.

So that I can get you completely away from there, even though there are many marvels within Sicily and nearby, for the moment I shall bypass all the questions associated with your province and shall draw your thoughts elsewhere. (*Q. Nat.* 4a.1.1)

I argue that Seneca, in book 4a, stresses a precise connection between Sicily and flattery: in other words, Seneca insinuates that flattery is a specific feature of Sicily. The historical tradition of Sicily, exposed to many tyrannies in its history, might represent a further threat to Lucilius' philosophical *iter*. In the next section, I go back to Sicily's history, which may have influenced Seneca's perception of the province.

## Tyranny in Sicily

By recounting Alexander's choice in 327 B.C. to instate the *proskynesis* at the Macedonian court, the historian Curtius Rufus, in his *Historiae Alexandri Magni*, portrays the Greek Agis, the composer of the worst poems after Choerilus, and the Sicilian Cleon as antagonists of Callisthenes, who gives a speech against the introduction of *proskynesis*. On the contrary, Agis and Cleon, moved by the will to ingratiate themselves with Alexander, speak in favour of his divine honour.<sup>36</sup> Cleon is depicted as a flatterer, whose flattery – in Curtius Rufus' words – relies not merely on his *ingenium* but also on his *natio*: *et ex Sicilia Cleo, hic quidem non ingenii solum, sed etiam nationis vitio adulator* (*Curt.* 8.5.8.).<sup>37</sup> Doubts arise on the historicity of Cleon. As Arrian (*An.* 4.10.5) tells us that Callisthenes' opponent was Anaxarchus, we have to be careful about the identification of Cleon.<sup>38</sup> Even Plutarch does not refer to Cleon but features Anaxarchus who speaks in favour of the performance of *proskynesis*, but he is opposed by Callisthenes.<sup>39</sup> Plutarch (*Mor.* 781B) presents Anaxarchus in the guise of a flattering philosopher.<sup>40</sup> The crucial point

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Brown (1949) 243: "Cleo's speech is a triumph in the art of misrepresentation". On Cleon's adulation towards Alexander cf. *Plu. Mor.* 60B.

<sup>37</sup> Atkinson (2000, 497-498) suggests that Cleon could be a fictional character on the model of Aristophanes' character. Curtius Rufus himself was charged with flattery at *Tac. Ann.* 11.21.2: *adversus superiores tristi adulatione, adrogans minoribus*. Another example of a flatterer, hailing from Sicily, is Callias of Syracuse, whom Diodorus of Sicily (21.17.4) criticizes for excessively flattering the tyrant Agathocles.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Prandi (1985) 173-176; Gilley (2018) 318-319.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. *Plu. Alex.* 54-5.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Hamilton (1969) 146-150.

is not the presumed historicity of Cleon; rather, it is substantial to my argumentation that Curtius Rufus, a historian of the early empire – probably a contemporary of Seneca, as Lana has convincingly argued – draws a compelling association between flattery and Sicily.<sup>41</sup> *Adulatio*, defined by Curtius Rufus as *perniciosa* and *perpetuum malum regum* (§6), is a *vitium* specific of Sicily, where Lucilius carries out his role of *procurator*. So, Lucilius may attract *multi Planci* (*Nat. 4a, praef. 6*), namely many flatterers, not only for his role but also for the location where he has to perform his function. Avoiding describing Sicily, Seneca might refer to the tradition of Sicily as a land of flatterers and tyrants, given the association between flattery and tyranny. Another clue that Sicily may pay the price for a bad reputation could be found in Livy. By reporting the circumstances of the fall of the dynasty of Hieron at Syracuse, Livy remarks on the volubility of the crowd: *ea natura multitudinis est: aut seroit humiliter aut superbe dominatur; libertatem, quae media est, nec cupere modice nec habere sciunt* (24.25.8).<sup>42</sup>

By the means of a chiasmus, which opposes the adverbs *humiliter* and *superbe*, Livy condemns the nature of *multitudo*. This passage may be helpful to demonstrate the negative reputation of Syracuse's citizens, who are intrinsically inclined to servile obsequiousness.<sup>43</sup>

Hieron was not the only tyrant in the Sicilian land. In the first century B.C., the island had to face another domination, which can be read as a hybrid tyranny: the govern of Verres from 73 to 71, execrated by Cicero, who defends Sicily as *ornamentum imperi* (*Verr. 2.2.2*).<sup>44</sup> Cicero in the *Verrines* (2.4.15-28) clarifies why the city of Messana (modern Messina) had decreed an official eulogy of Verres by attacking the city itself. In *Verr. 2.4.111* Cicero claims that Sicilians would have endured in silence all other crimes against them: *omnia se cetera pati ac negligere dicebant*.<sup>45</sup> It is in the first action that Cicero defines the Sicilians as *homines miseri, antea socii atque amici populi Romani, nunc servi et supplices*

<sup>41</sup> Lana (1949).

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Lentano (1999) 37.

<sup>43</sup> Another example can be found in the narrative of the tyrant Dionysius and the flatterer Damocles, reported by Cicero at *Tusc. 5.61-62*; cf. Degl'Innocenti Pierini (2008).

<sup>44</sup> On the significance of this expression, cf. Frazel (2009) 188-190. On Cicero's attitude toward Hieron and Verres, see Grimal (2016).

<sup>45</sup> On Cicero's depiction of Sicily and Sicilians, cf. Vasaly (1993) 104-125; 213-721; Ricchieri (2020) 60-61.

(1.1.53). The contraposition between *antea* and *nunc* marks the anti-thetical condition of Sicilians, who before enjoyed the status of *socii* of Rome and now, because of Verres, are debased to the position of *servi* and obliged to ask for help from Rome. If we consider that, as Ann Vasaly has demonstrated, Cicero depicts Verres in the guise of the tyrant, marked out by all tyrant's stereotypical *vitia*, such as *libido*, *crudelitas*, *avaritia*, *inhumanitas*, we may infer that Sicilians are compelled to cope with tyranny and flatter Verres, as the eulogy decreed by Messana demonstrates.<sup>46</sup> Although Cicero does not depict Sicilians as flatterers, obviously the prosecutor of Verres sympathises with Sicilians, who designated him as their *patronus*, the alliterative couple *servi et supplices* may suggest Sicilians' necessity to adapt themselves to the despotic domination of Verres, including, in such circumstances, the necessity to flatter him, as the case of Messana points it out.<sup>47</sup> In Cicero's words, there is no condemnation of Sicilians' behaviour as *servi* of Verres; rather, an acceptance of their behaviour as inevitable; their degradation from *socii* to *servi* contributes to denounce of the Verres' misconduct, whose actions makes him worse than any other previous tyrant: *taetrior hic tyrannus Syracusanis [...] quam quisquam superiorum*.<sup>48</sup> In another passage, Cicero explicitly compares Verres with Phalaris and Dionysius: *versabatur in Sicilia longo intervallo alter non Dionysius ille nec Phalaris, - tulit enim illa quondam insula multos et crudelis tyrannos, - sed quoddam novum monstrum ex vetere illa immanitate quae in isdem locis versata esse dicitur*.<sup>49</sup>

Unlike Cicero, who does not remark on Sicilians' flattery for evident reasons – after all, under such a tyrannical governor, it is inevitable to resort to flattery – Seneca explicitly refers to this aspect of Sicily, which experienced a long list of cruel tyrants. In his works, Seneca devotes considerable attention to Phalaris, tyrant of Akragas (modern Agrigento) from approximately 570 to 554 B.C., who was renowned for his excessive cruelty.<sup>50</sup> While Cicero contrasts the virtuous Sicilians,

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Vasaly (1993) 104-130; Frazel (2009) 166-173.

<sup>47</sup> Cicero in 75 was quaestor in Sicily: cf. *Verr.* 2.1.40; 2.4.27.

<sup>48</sup> *Cic. Verr.* 2.4.123.

<sup>49</sup> *Cic. Verr.* 2.5.145.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. *Ir.* 2.5.2; *Clem.* 2.4.3; *Ben.* 7.19.5-7. In Greek and Roman literature, Phalaris became the archetypal tyrant and a widely used emblem of cruelty; almost a grotesque *exemplum* of such cruelty that it is scarcely believable: cf. *Pi. P.* 1.94-96; *Call. Aet.* 2; *Fr.* 45-46 Pfeiffer; *Arist. Rh.* 2.20.5; *Pol.* 5.8.4; *Cic. Off.* 2.26.1; *Rep.* 1.44.10; *Ver.* 2.4.73; *Ov.*



civilized by the Romans, with the other non-civilized Greeks, Seneca seems to attribute to Sicilians a characteristic vice of Greeks: namely, flattery.

Considering that Sicily, from Seneca's perspective, is a burrow of tyrants, hence, of flatterers, Lucilius, surrounded by flatterers, is under siege: flattery risks transforming Lucilius' self-praise (*Q. Nat.* 4a, *prae*f. 14), which is positive, into destructive self-flattery. In the *De tranquillitate animi*, Seneca himself alerts his beloved Serenus that self-flattery, spurred by flatterers, is more threatening than flattery from others.<sup>51</sup> Lucilius must avoid flatterers even if this means leaving his cherished province.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that the presence of flatterers in Sicily might be ingrained in the history of the island, which has experienced a long tradition of tyranny, as we have seen in the *Ad Marciam*, where Seneca remembers Dionysius II, whom Plato tried to educate, but sadly failed. Plato's attempt to educate Dionysius II will be echoed by Seneca, who attempted to instruct Nero in *De clementia*, thanks to which he achieved the title of τυραννοδιδάσκαλος.<sup>52</sup> Seneca's disregard for Sicily, I suggest, might have autobiographical reasons other than historical and philosophical roots. In addressing Lucilius, Seneca makes an implicit comparison between himself and Plato on the one hand and Nero and Dionysius on the other. Although it does not seem that Nero had any particular interest in Sicily,<sup>53</sup> Seneca might avoid speaking of Sicily even because it reminds him of his previous failure.

To conclude, Sicily is drawn with a wry ambivalence of tone: Seneca exploits this tension between Sicily as the object of naturalistic investigation on the one side and Sicily as a dangerous location on the

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*Ars* 1.653-654; *Trist.* 3.11.51; 5.1.53; *Ib.* 439; *Plin. HN.* 34.89.4. Lucian wrote *Phalaris* to defend the tyrant's cruelty.

<sup>51</sup> *Tranq.* 1.16: *puto multos potuisse ad sapientiam pervenire, nisi putassent se pervenisse, nisi quaedam in se dissimulassent, quaedam opertis oculis transiluissent. Non est enim quod magis aliena <nos> iudices adulatione perire quam nostra. Quis sibi verum dicere ausus est? Quis non inter laudantium blandientiumque positus greges plurimum tamen sibi ipse adsentatus est?*

<sup>52</sup> Cf. *D.C.* 61.10.2.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. *vulgarissimum senatus consultum* in 58, which authorises exceptional gladiatorial games in Syracuse; cf. *Tac. Ann.* 13.49.

other, and discloses Sicily's deceitful appearances, which may depend on the existence of tyranny itself.<sup>54</sup> Therefore, tyranny might establish a link between Sicily and flattery, which is only one aspect, definitely the most remarkable, of the dichotomy between enthralling appearance and reality, which surfaces as the *fil rouge* throughout Seneca's work. What emerges is a complex depiction of the island which generates fascination and repulsion in the same breath. However, Seneca chooses to avoid dwelling on Sicily for the benefit of Lucilius and his own sake.

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<sup>54</sup> Cf. Bartsch (1994) 190-191.

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