The Beginning of the First Punic War
And the Concept of Italia

Federico Russo*

1. Introduction

The beginning of the first Punic War was the centre of a historiographic debate already in ancient times, mainly in relation to the legitimacy of the Roman intervention in Messina. Here, the Mamertines, who were under siege by the Syracusans, had split into two factions: one pro-Roman and the other pro-Punic.1

Some of them appealed to the Carthaginians, proposing to put themselves and the citadel into their hands, while others sent an embassy to Rome, offering to surrender the city and begging for assistance as a kindred people (καὶ δεόμενοι βοηθήσειν σφίσιν αὐτοὺς ὁμοφύλοις ὑπάρχουσιν). The Romans were long at a loss, the succour demanded being so obviously unjustifiable. For they had just inflicted on their own fellow-citizens the highest penalty for their treachery to the people of Rhegium, and now to try to help the Mamertines, who had been guilty of like offence not only at Messene but at Rhegium also, was a piece of injustice very difficult to excuse. But fully aware as they were of this, they yet saw that the Carthaginians had not only reduced Libya to subjection, but a great part of Spain besides, and that they were also in possession of all the islands in the Sardinian and Tyrrenian Seas. They were therefore in great apprehension lest, if they also became masters of Sicily, they would be most troublesome and dangerous neighbours, hemming them in on all sides and threatening every part of Italy. That they would soon be supreme in Sicily, if the Mamertines were not helped, was evident; for once Messene had fallen into their hands, they would shortly subdue Syracuse also, as they were absolute lords of almost all the rest of Sicily.2

In the end they decided to send help to the Mamertines. However, the Romans were aware of being in an awkward position; they therefore tried to justify their intervention as an example of a bellum iustum.3

---

* University of Konstanz; russofed@libero.it.
2 Plb. 1.10.3–11.3. See Zon. 8.8: “The Mamertines, who had once conducted a colony from Campania to Messana, were now being besieged by Hiero, and they called upon the Romans as a nation of kindred blood.”
3 On this concept and its connection with the outbreak of the Punic war, see Marino (1996).
2. The Greek Concept of Syngeneia

Among all the ancient evidence relative to Roman motivations, Polybius' is particularly significant. According to him, the Mamertines claimed that the Romans were a 'kindred people'. Since this was an important pretext under which the Romans agreed to help the Mamertines, it is quite logical to think that the pretext of *homophylia* that the Romans put forth not only had to have a meaning in the Roman context, but it also had to be widely accepted and shared. The problem, at this point, is to understand exactly what this Roman-Mamertine *homophylia* consisted of. Furthermore, if, as some scholars maintain, it is true that the Mamertines decided to ask the Romans for help only after having driven the Carthaginians away, the idea of *homophylia* may have had, perhaps, above all, a particular anti-Punic value.

As far as Polybius' passage is concerned, in the modern critique there has often been a reference to 'kinship'. Homophylia mainly had an ethnic value attributed to it, suggesting that the connotations of this word are the same as those of the word syngeneia. This creates the assumption that at the outbreak of the Punic conflict the Romans maintained (or accepted) the idea of ethnic kinship with the Mamertines. It has been suggested that this is probably the reason why they decided to intervene; in support of this hypothesis, reference is made to the case of Segesta, whose *cognatio* with Rome, according to Cicero, was claimed by the Romans during the Second Punic War. According to some scholars, the supposed *cognatio* with the Mamertines would have its roots in the Trojan myth, through the figure of Capys, Aeneas' companion and founder of Capua.

---

4 See in particular Pinzone (1983, 106–8).
5 Battistoni (2009); for the Mamertines' case, p. 87.
7 Pinzone (1983, 99–101). According to Pinzone (1983, 107), the Roman-Mamertine *homophylia* should have an ethnic value, since it should indicate a precise *cognatio* between the Romans and the Mamertines, based on the myth of the Trojan origins of Capua, the metropolis of the Campanians (the Mamertines were Campanians according to Plb. 1.7.2; 8.1; Dion. Hal. 20.4.8; Strabo 6.2.3; Cassius Dio fr. 40.8). Rhomos, Aeneas' son, is said to have founded the city, giving it the name of Capys, forefather of Aeneas (Dion. Hal. 1.73.3). See Pinzone (1983, 95); Perret (1942, 309–11); Heurgon (1942, 143–5). According to Pinzone, the Mamertines were *cognati* of the Romans since they were Campanians, and the Campanians' metropolis was Capua, *urbs cognata* of Rome. For this reason they were *homophylai* of the Romans.