3.1.2 Uprisings of Enslaved Peoples

From the end of the Second Punic War to the second half of the second century, Rome’s dominion over Italy went largely unchallenged. The majority of Rome’s military engagements were overseas or north of the Apennines. In 146 BCE, the symbolic destruction of both Corinth and Carthage pronounced Rome’s hegemony over the whole of the Mediterranean. Yet, there are consequences to empire. The complexity of these consequences included management of new material resources and the maintenance of human relationships. Rome had always been an enslaving society with a strict social hierarchy, but the broader their geographical control, the more cultures the Romans encountered among their allies, enemies, subject populations, and enslaved peoples. The ability of the Roman elite to exercise control over all these peoples, as well as the Roman lower classes, in peacetime proved limited. In the Republic, Rome’s militarism and its corresponding use of force and reinforcement of social hierarchies were capable of establishing an empire but were ill-suited for stable, peaceable maintenance of such an empire. A proverb attributed to Sinnius Capito, a late first century BCE grammarian, expresses just this anxiety: ‘as many enemies [as we have], so many slaves; as many slaves [as we have], so many enemies’.28

Prior to the Haitian revolution (1791–1804 CE), the largest and most successful historical acts of self-liberation by enslaved peoples had taken place at the end of the second century BCE in Roman Sicily. One leader of this uprising was Antiochus, originally from Apamea (Syria). After being enslaved, he was sold to Antigenes of Enna and was called ‘Eunus’. Discontent with remaining in bondage, ‘Eunus’ led his fellow slaves to overthrow the slave-owners of their city. Then, as leader of a combined force of both formerly enslaved peoples and free-born Sicilians, he captured the city of Tauromenium and defeated a Roman legion.29 For at least three years his control in Sicily was secure enough that he minted coins declaring himself ‘King Antiochus’ (Figure 3.17), a name and title later writers confirm.30 Finally, the Roman consul Publius Rupilius laid siege to Tauromenium in 132 BCE.31 Rupilius won the siege, and Antiochus’ men fled to the countryside. Antiochus died during the siege surrounded by the luxuries of his new station, including people he himself kept enslaved.32

Diodorus, a Sicilian historian writing about a century later, tells us that Antiochus pursued freedom and kingship because it was a fate revealed to