

The Corinth-Corcyra Conflict of the Seventh Century BC

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Abstract. *In the introduction to his historical treatise the Athenian historian Thucydides mentions the most ancient naval battle in Greek history that took place between the Corinthians and their colonists Corcyraeans around 664 BC, of which battle there is no account in other sources. Having analysed the information on the relationships between Corinth and Corcyra in the Archaic and early Classical periods provided by the written tradition of antiquity, the author of the article arrives at the conclusion that it was but one of many conflicts between the metropolis and its colony, which started as early as the end of the 8th century BC and by the end of the 5th century BC became one of the reasons for the Peloponnesian War that split the ancient Greek world into two camps.*

Rezumat. *În introducerea tratatului său istoric, istoricul atenian Thucydides menționează cea mai veche bătălie navală din istoria greacă care a avut loc între Corint și Corcyra în jurul anului 664 î.Hr., despre care există nicio relatare în alte surse. După ce a analizat informațiile despre relațiile dintre Corint și Corcyra în perioadele arhaică și clasică timpurie, furnizate de tradiția scrisă a antichității, autorul articolului ajunge la concluzia că a fost doar unul dintre numeroasele conflicte dintre metropolă și colonie, care a început încă de la sfârșitul secolului al VIII-lea î.Hr.*

Keywords: Ancient Greece, archaic age, Corinth, Corcyra, Thucydides.

In his *History's* introductory part, commonly known as the “*Archaeology*”, Thucydides, while highlighting the major events taking place prior to the Peloponnesian War, mentions a conflict between the Corinthians and Corcyraeans which is not recorded in other sources: “*Again, the earliest seafight in history was between the Corinthians and Corcyraeans; this was about two hundred and sixty years ago, dating from the same time (i.e., from the end of the Peloponnesian War — S.Zh)*” (I, 13, 4). The reason for the naval battle that happened ca 664 BC between the metropolis' and the colony's fleets, and whether it was an isolated incident or an episode in a prolonged armed struggle, cannot be inferred from Thucydides' words alone. To clarify those matters, one would have to resort to analysing the data provided by the written tradition of antiquity on the specific nature of relations between Corinth and Corcyra before the above-mentioned naval battle as well as after it.

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The extant sources inform us that the Corinthian colony on the island of Corcyra was established in the course of migration of a number of Corinthian settlers led by Archias to Sicily, where in 733 BC they founded Syracuse — the largest Greek settlement in the Western Mediterranean region. On their way to Italic waters they left a detachment under the command of Chersicrates who, similarly to Archias, was descended from the Bacchiads — the ruling clan of Corinth. After landing on Corcyra, Chersicrates expelled the Eretrians who had previously settled there (Plut. *Amat. Narr.*, II, 293b), as well as the local tribe of Liburnians (Str., VI, 2, 4), and founded a settlement sharing the name with the island. According to a later chronology compiled by Eusebius of Caesarea, the colony on Corcyra was founded not in 733 BC, as the earlier sources imply, but actually a quarter of a century later, in 708 BC (*Hier.*, II, p. 91 Helm). A. Graham and C. Roebuck are inclined to believe this later date, being of the opinion that the Corinthians should have become interested in the island after colonizing Sicily and recognizing the advantages for trading with Magna Graecia that Corcyra conferred.² However, the date provided by Eusebius is not in agreement with either the accounts by earlier authors or with the archaeological evidence.³

The colony on Corcyra that controlled the narrow strait between the mainland and the island was designed as an intermediary port where seafarers could take shelter from storms and replenish their stocks before continuing their voyage.⁴ Besides, the colony provided an excellent opportunity to control the trade routes connecting mainland Greece with the Western Mediterranean region.

Soon after gaining a foothold on Corcyra, the Corinthian settlers seem to have participated in the first known conflict between the metropolis and the colony. This can be inferred from the message from Scholiast to Apollonius of Rhodes about the decision of the Corinthians to deprive the Corcyraean oikistes Chersicrates of his civil rights (IV, 1216). Naturally, at the time when Corinth was under the complete domination of the Bacchiads, such a decision could not have been made by ordinary citizens of the metropolis and is likely to have been originated by the members of the ruling clan. The author of the *scholia* does not clarify what Chersicrates' offence against Corinth was. It is possible that the Corcyraean leader attempted to use the island's favourable location to seize control over the sea communications going along Corcyra coastline and connecting mainland Greece with its western colonies and Italic areas rich in natural resources. One cannot rule out the possibility that the Corcyraeans attacked Corinthian ships sailing past the island and transporting grain and ores from Italy and Sicily to the metropolis.

² GRAHAM 1971, 219; ROEBUCK 1972, 113.

³ BOARDMAN 1964, 232; HAMMOND 1967, 414.

⁴ DUNBABIN 1948, 16; HAMMOND 1967, 414; BOARDMAN 1964, 232f.; ROEBUCK 1972, 113; MURRAY 1980, 104; GRAHAM 1982, 105.

Perhaps, Thucydides' account of the Corinthians attempting to put down piracy early on (I, 13, 5) reflects the information which was already obscure at the time of his writing the treatise, *i.e.*, about the Corinthian authorities trying first and foremost to eliminate the threat posed by their former compatriots. Yet, even if the Corcyraeans practiced maritime banditry, it is unlikely to have been a regular occurrence and in any case, it did not completely prevent the Corinthians' access to Magna Graecia. That is clearly demonstrated by the growing volume of Corinthian imports in the Western Mediterranean region starting from the end of the 8th century BC. The number of findings of Corinthian-produced merchandise dating back to the end of the 8th century BC or the beginning of the 7th century BC in this region exceeds the imports from all the other Greek poleis combined.⁵ Meanwhile, it should be noted that a certain conflict between the metropolis and the colony, although still latent, started to take shape.

The last third of the 8th century BC was the time when Corinth's political and economic power was at its zenith. However, by the end of the 8th century the standing of the isthmic polis was starting to noticeably worsen. A heavy blow to Corinth's prestige was dealt when the city lost control over a substantial part of Megarian territory in the course of a revolt led by the Olympian Orsippus (Paus., I, 44, 1; IG., VII, 52).⁶ But an even more significant factor contributing to the decline of Corinth was the rise of its long-time adversary, the neighbouring city of Argos, during the reign of Pheidon⁷. Apparently, the Argive kings preceding Pheidon were merely title holders inheriting the traditional rank passed down in the Temenid family, while decision-making authority rested with the local aristocracy. After inheriting the title of the king, Pheidon changed the state of affairs and became an unrestricted ruler, thus giving later authors grounds for reckoning him among tyrants (Arist. *Pol.*, V, 8, 4, 1310b).⁸

After strengthening his position in Argos, Pheidon launched an all-out attack on the neighbouring territories. The invasion mounted by the king of Argos was under the banner of recovering 'Temenus' inheritance' (Str., VIII, 3, 33), *i.e.*, the lands once allocated to this Heraclid according to the well-known myth about the division of Peloponnesus among the descendants of Heracles (Apollod., II, 8, 4–5; Paus., III, I, 5; IV, 3, 3–8).

According to Strabo, Pheidon's attacks were successful; as a result, a number of Peloponnesian cities came under his sway (Str., VIII, 3, 33), as well as the islands located along

⁵ BLAKEWAY 1932/33, 202 ff.; 1935, 144 f.; DUNBABIN 1948, 17 f.; HEICHELHEIM 1958, 503 n. 40; STARR 1961, 376; COLDSTREAM 1977, 242; BOARDMAN 1964, 29, 178 ff.

⁶ HIGHBERGER 1927, 101 ff.; HAMMOND 1955, 97 f.; BURN 1960, 88; STARR 1961, 347; JEFFERY 1976, 155; MURRAY 1980, 142.

⁷ WILL 1955, 352 ff.; FORREST 1966, 109; MOSSÉ 1969, 27 f.; JEFFERY 1976, 136; FINE 1983, 109; SALMON 1984, 71 f., 221; YAILENKO 1990, 96.

⁸ WILL 1955, 355; ANDREWES 1956, 41 f.; BURN 1960, 177; FORREST 1966, 104; MOSSÉ 1969, 30; FINLEY 1970, 106; ARNHEIM 1977, 66; SALMON 1984, 98 f.; ZHESTOKANOV 2005, 68.

South Greece coastline, Aegina being the largest of them (VIII, 6, 16). In Elis, the power was consolidated in the hands of the pro-Argive tyrants of Pisatis who were able to cement their position definitely not without the assistance of Argos (Paus., VI, 21, 1; 22, 2–4).⁹ In 669 BC Argive troops heavily defeated the Spartans in the battle of Hysiae, whereafter Pheidon invaded Elis and celebrated the Olympic Games there (Str., VIII, 3, 33).

Whether Corinth was part of “Temenus’ inheritance” which Pheidon laid claim to is not clear. However, it becomes obvious from the writings of Plutarch (*Amat. Narr.*, 2, 772c) and Nicolaus of Damascus (*FgrHist.*, 90 F 35) that the Argive ruler’s aggressive schemes included its territory as well.¹⁰

In the first half of the 7th century BC the position of Corinth in the international arena was weakened, thus providing Corcyra with an opportunity to undermine the total control exercised by the metropolis over the colony.¹¹ An attempt made by the Corinthian authorities to forcefully exert their influence in the north-western part of Greece might have triggered direct confrontation between the metropolis and its colony. As was mentioned at the beginning of the article, according to Thucydides, a naval battle between the Corinthians and Corcyraeans happened ca 664 BC (I, 13, 4). It is possible that the epitaph for Arniades perishing in the battle of the Ambracian Gulf, which was found in Corcyra and dates back to the 7th century BC (IG, IX, I, 868), also refers to the above-mentioned sea fight.

The loss of Corcyra must have dealt a major blow to the economic state of Corinth.¹² The city’s commercial interests were predominantly connected with the western colonies. Hence, the animosity on the part of the rebellious island greatly hindered, even if not fully stopped, Corinthian traders’ journey to the west. This circumstance must have played an important role in fuelling rising discontent with the rule of the Bacchiads. Several years later they were overthrown.¹³

Some members of the ruling clan took refuge in Corcyra after falling from power in Corinth. Among them was the famous Demaratus who later settled in Etruria and became the father of Tarquin the Elder, a future king of Rome (Cic. *De re pub.*, II, 34; Dion. Hal., III, 46; Str., VIII, 6, 20; Liv., I, 34, 1–2). The matter of the émigrés opposing the new regime in Corinth and settling on the island must have resulted in further deterioration in relations between

⁹ BRADEEN 1947, 240; JEFFERY 1976, 136, 168; SEALEY 1976, 44.

¹⁰ A. Burn equals the famous Argive king with a Corinthian legislator of the same name believing that Corinth was part of Pheidon’s state. See: BURN 1960, 179; cf. DOVATUR 1965, 375, n. 25; LENSCHAU 1938, 1940. A. Burn’s hypothesis is based on a report of the Scholiast on Pindar that Corinthian coins were first struck by Pheidon of Argos (*OL*, XIII, 27d). We think that there may be a mistake in this report since in other cases the Scholiast calls this Pheidon a “Corinthian” (*OL*, XIII, 17e; 21d). Aristotle who mentions both Pheidons never equals them anywhere (*Pol.*, II, 3, 7, 1265b; V, 8, 4, 1310b).

¹¹ BRADEEN 1947, 233, 238, 240; BURN 1960, 186; OOST 1972, 15; FINE 1983, 109.

¹² HAMMOND 1959, 136; HAMMOND 1967, 442 f.; MURRAY 1980, 141; FINE 1983, 109.

¹³ ZHESTOKANOV 2005, 72.

the metropolis and the colony; that spurred the new rulers of Corinth on to find a way of getting out of the present situation.

A solution to the existing problem was found in the course of the new phase of colonization initiated by Cypselus after strengthening his authority in Corinth. At least three settlements—Ambracia, Anactorium and Leukas—were established on the north-west coast of Greece during the reign of the first tyrant of Corinth (Str., VII, 7, 6; Nic. Dam. *FgrHist.*, 90 F 57, 7; Ant. Lib., 4).

The status of Corinthian colonies was rather unusual in regards to the colonization practice of the Hellenes of the Archaic period. While settlements founded by other poleis, as well as earlier Corinthian colonies, were autonomous communities, the colonies established by the Cypselids were fully dependent on the metropolis from the very start.¹⁴ As a rule, the leaders of colonists were relatives of Corinthian tyrants (most often their sons) who remained in the newly-established settlements as governors appointed by the Cypselids (Str., VII, 7, 6; Nic. Dam. *FgrHist.*, 90 F 57, 7; 59, 1; Ant. Lib., 4).

According to Strabo, the three colonies established during the reign of Cypselus were founded as part of a unified plan (X, 2, 8), the implementation of which was probably entrusted to Gorgos, the Corinthian tyrant's son. The ancient geographer argues that Gorgos along with his father was in charge of sending colonists off. It is known from other sources that Gorgos was also one of the oikistes (Ps.-Scymn., 453–463; Ant. Lib., 4).¹⁵

Initially the colonists settled on the coast of Leukas, which at that time was part of the mainland (Str., I, 3, 18). From *Periplus* ascribed to Scylax of Caryanda it is known that the Corinthians were invited to Leukas by the local residents who were suffering from internal strife. According to the author's report, the number of people of Corinthia participating in the colonization effort reached one thousand (Ps.-Scylax, 34). The fact that this number was definitely too large for the purpose of founding a single colony supports Strabo's hypothesis that Cypselus had plans of a massive expansion into the territories along the coast of Epirus.

The settlement in Leukas received Pylades, son of Cypselus, as the oikistes (Nic. Dam. *FgrHist.*, 90 P 57, 7); he soon exterminated the Acarnanians who had dwelled there and annexed their lands (Ps.-Scylax, 34). The rest of the colonists, probably using Leukas as their base, reached the Ambracian Gulf and settled on both its shores (Str., X, 2, 8). Echiades, Cypselus' third son, established Anactorium on the southern shore of the Gulf (Nic. Dam. *FgrHist.*, 90 F 57, 7); while on the opposite shore Gorgos, who probably led the largest number of the colonists, founded Ambracia — the largest colony in the area

¹⁴ NILSSON 1936, 21; WILL 1955, 521 ff.; 526 f.; GRAHAM 1971, 30 ff., 250; MURRAY 1980, 144; FINE 1983, 112; SALMON 1984, 215; ZHESTOKANOV 1996, 93.

¹⁵ ZHESTOKANOV 1996, 91.

(Ps.-Scymn., 453–463; Str., VII, 7, 6; Ant. Lib., 4). A vast stretch of fertile land in the vicinity of Ambracia¹⁶ attracted significant numbers of colonists to the northern shore of the gulf.

The expansion of Corinth into the north-west coastal regions of Greece was often attended by confrontation with local residents. We have already mentioned the conflict between Pylades and the Acarnanians in Leukas. The Corinthian settlers probably encountered resistance from the local populace on the shores of the Ambracian Gulf. A golden bowl discovered in Olympia has the following inscription: “*The sons of Kypselos dedicated (this bowl) from Herakleia*”.¹⁷ Pliny the Elder locates this city in Acarnania to the east of Anactorium. (Plin. *N.H.*, IV, 5; Steph. Byz., s.v. *Apollōnia*).

Cypselus’ successor Periander continued his father’s policy extending the influence of Corinth further to the north. During his reign two more Corinthian colonies were established on the coast of Illyria — Epidamnus (Thuc., I, 24, 2) and Apollonia (Thuc., I, 26, 2; Ps.-Scymn., 439; Str., VII, 5, 8; Plin. *N.H.*, III, 145; Steph. Byz., s.v. *Apollōnia*).

The Cypselids’ colonization policy was probably meant to resolve several issues. One of them may have been alleviating the agrarian problem, which was ever relevant for mainland Greece, through moving impoverished peasants to the newly-acquired lands. The massive number of the first-wave colonists, as well as vast stretches of arable land in the vicinity of the Ambracian Gulf and near Epidamnus and Apollonia, seem to support this hypothesis.¹⁸

Perhaps, another important problem that Corinthian colonization was meant to solve was the necessity of re-establishing western communications that were impeded by the hostile actions of Corcyra.¹⁹ The construction of the canal that separated Leukas from the mainland may have indicated the inclusion of trade interests in the new phase of Corinthian colonization (Str., I, 3, 18; X, 2, 8). The canal was probably designed to shorten the distance on the route to the Ambracian Gulf and to make communication with colonies in Magna Graecia more convenient. The very location of the colony in mountainous Leukas which, unlike the other Corinthian colonies, did not have enough arable lands suggests the commercial nature of this settlement. It seems, Leukas was meant to play the role of an intermediary port on the way to the western colonies, thus replacing Corcyra that Corinth had lost control over at the end of the Bacchiads’ rule (Thuc., I, 13, 4). It is entirely possible that the settlement in Leukas was a starting point for the subsequent conquest of the adversary island.²⁰

The colonies of the Cypselids established along the western trade routes and united under control of the metropolis shaped Corinth as a sea power. For a period of time Corcyra remained independent. However, its fate was sealed. After conquering the island, Corinth

¹⁶ SALMON 1984, 210.

¹⁷ MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS BULLETIN 1922, 65 ff. Cf.: WILL 1955, 517 n. 1; HAMMOND 1967, 426 f.

¹⁸ ZHESTOKANOV 1996, 91.

¹⁹ O’NEILL 1930, 156; MOSSÉ 1969, 32; SALMON 1984, 216 f.; ZHESTOKANOV 1996, 91.

²⁰ SALMON 1984, 216; ZHESTOKANOV 1996, 92.

established almost complete maritime domination over the routes between Italy and Greece which is confirmed by the prevalence of Corinthian imports in the Western Mediterranean region.²¹ Corinthian leadership in the trade with the West declined under pressure from the expanding economic might of Athens.²² But that happened in the 6th century BC after the tyranny of the Cypselids was overthrown — their fall probably marked the start of the collapse of the “sea empire” they had created.

A number of researchers hold the opinion that it was in the era of the Cypselids that the coastal cities of Aetolia and Acarnania—Chalcis, Molycreium and Sollium²³—came under the sway of Corinth. Thucydides writes of these cities’ dependence on Corinth terming Chalcis a Corinthian polis (I, 108, 5), Sollium a Corinthian polisma (II, 30, 1), and Molycreium a Corinthian apoikia (III, 102, 2).

After gaining independence from Corinth during the rule of the Bacciads (Thuc., I, 13, 4) Corcyra was brought back to the fold by the metropolis, at least during Periander’s reign.²⁴ The island, similarly to the other colonies of the Cypselids, was ruled by the governors appointed by the tyrants of Corinth. During the reign of Periander the ruler of the island was one Lycophron, the second son of the tyrant of Corinth (Hdt., III, 53; Diog. L., I, 94–95; cf. Nic. Dam. *FgrHist.*, 90 F 59, 1–2). The island’s joining the “sea empire” of the Cypselids probably happened before 627 BC. This is the date Eusebius of Caesarea provides for the founding of Epidamnus (*Hier.*, II, p. 97 Helm). It is known from other sources that the colony was populated through the joint effort of the Corinthians and Corcyraeans (Thuc., I, 24, 2). However, there is evidence that Corcyra had already been subjugated in the time of Cypselus.²⁵ According to Thucydides, the establishment of Anactorium—another Corinthian colony—was carried out by the Corinthians in concert with the Corcyraeans (I, 55, 1). Nicolaus of Damascus writes that the settlement was founded during the rule of Cypselus (*FgrHist.*, 90 F 57, 7).

At the end of Periander’s rule Corcyra once again seceded from Corinth, with the island’s inhabitants assassinating the governor Lycophron in the process. According to ancient writers’ reports, the popular uprising was triggered by elderly Periander’s intention to transfer power over Corinth to his son Lycophrone while he took his son’s place in Corcyra (Hdt., III, 52; Nic. Dam. *FgrHist.*, 90 F 59, 2; Diog. L., I, 95). The explanation offered by the written tradition of antiquity does not seem plausible, however, to discover the genuine reasons behind the Corcyraeans’ revolt appears impossible for the lack of other data.

²¹ URE 1922, 186 f.; BLAKESWAY 1932/33, 204 ff.; NILSSON 1936, 15; 23; COOK 1946, 81 ff.; HEICHELHEIM 1958, 503 n. 40; COLDSTREAM 1968, 374 ff.

²² NILSSON 1936, 23; ROEBUCK 1972, 125.

²³ GEYER 1927, 932 f.; O’NEILL 1930, 153 f.; OLIVA 1954, 216; WILL 1955, 520; JEFFERY 1976, 147; HAMMOND 1982, 335. Cf.: SALMON 1984, 213.

²⁴ BURN 1929, 24; BERVE 1967, 21; GRAHAM 1971, 31; JEFFERY 1976, 148; MURRAY 1980, 147; SALMON 1984, 218.

²⁵ NILSSON 1936, 82; SALMON 1984, 219.

The uprising was crushed by Periander who had fifty prominent citizens of Corcyra executed and three hundred young men from noble families captured and sent to Lydia to be castrated (Hdt., III, 48; Plut. *De mal.*, Herod., 22, 859f). They were probably supposed to serve at the court of the Lydian king Alyattes as eunuch slaves that had always been valued in the East.

Periander's nephew Psammetichus was appointed the governor of the retaken Corcyra. Later he would succeed Periander in Corinth (Nic. Dam. *FgrHist.*, 90 F 59, 4). The last Corinthian tyrant retained the power for three years only; after he was overthrown, Corcyra once again regained its independence. However, despite the fall of the tyranny in Corinth and the collapse of the "sea empire" of the Cypselids, the relations between the metropolis and its former colony were still strained. That can be inferred from a report of Plutarch about Themistocles' participating in settling a dispute between the Corinthians and Corcyraeans as an arbitrator (Them., 24).

Eventually, the long-standing conflict between the kindred poleis resulted in an armed confrontation, when at the end of the thirties of the 5th century BC they became embroiled in the strife that broke out between different social strata in Epidamnus. Later, Athens' interference in the conflict provided one of the reasons for the Peloponnesian war (Thuc., I, 24–55).

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