

Conclusions

Alliances and Resilience across Borders*

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When addressing the topic of crisis, it is essential to distinguish between the emic and etic levels, as well as between the ancient and modern perspectives (two binary pairs that only partially overlap); in other words, it is essential to tackle the lexicon of crisis before examining the crisis of alliances and their resilience from different perspectives.¹ Following a thorough lexical investigation, Matt Kōiv has already shown that, to designate what we moderns call social and political crisis, the ancients used words other than the term *krisis*, such as *stasis*, *anarchia*, *anomie*, *dysnomia*, *kakonomia*, *metabole* and *neoterismos*.² It follows that, to study crises in the Greek world, it is necessary to analyze those passages in which a crisis is described even without resorting to the word *krisis* and its coradicals (as it often happens). That said, an investigation of the semantic evolution of the ancient Greek word *krisis* is necessary, too, and for various reasons: because it allows us to understand why we use the modern term ‘crisis’ to define situations that the ancients called by different names, and because it enables us to grasp some implications of this modern use of crisis. These implications are highly relevant with reference to the crisis of political alliances, since *krisis* does not only indicate a crisis, but also the decisions and the means taken to resolve it. Angela Ganter showed us, both in the introduction and in her contribution, how language use is a key to better understand Greek attitudes towards crisis and resilience in ancient Greek alliances.³ In Hesiod’s *Theogony*, *krinein* means “to have a dispute” (535–8); more generally speaking, in Archaic sources *krinein* seems to have the broad semantic spectrum that is also recognizable in classical times: “to separate, choose, decide, judge, interpret”.⁴ Pindar (*N* .4. 1–6) attributes a medical meaning to the term, which will be very popular in Hippocratic writings.⁵ When the body faces a crisis, it is

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necessary to understand, discern the various aspects and decide in one direction rather than another. In the Age of Enlightenment, Jean-Jacques Rousseau characterized the medical meaning of the concept of crisis as a metaphor for politics.⁶ He addressed the crisis that would strike the ‘body politic’, the state, generating a condition of anarchy and triggering unpredictable unrest and revolutions. In such situations, it is unavoidable to take critical decisions: *krinein* is necessary.

The ancients were keenly aware of this,⁷ especially in reference to interstate relations and relations between allies, even in cases where they do not directly use the term *krinein*. While the topic of resilience in crisis per se is not new,⁸ it may be innovative concerning relations between allies, whether they are part of a federal state or a military alliance system. In this volume, Ganter stresses how, for Herodotus, allies must endure crises daily, but they did not so much endanger an alliance as form it. Thucydides, on the other hand, focuses more on describing the evolution of the crisis and highlighting its dynamic and process-oriented nature. As Massimo Nafissi explains, the Athenian historian constructs a teleological narrative of the crisis in relations between Athens and Sparta based on the idea of a slow but progressive deterioration. In the aftermath of Plataiai and in the following decade, the two cities, which had been allies against the Persians in previous decades, still maintained a relationship that could not be defined as the subsequent aggressive bipolarism. It was only after the Messenian revolt of Ithome that the Athenians and Spartans entered into crisis. According to Katarina Nebelin, however, in Thucydides’s account, this happened at the very moment of the founding of the Delian League. Conversely, some Athenian oral memories for which their origin as intentional history can be demonstrated, retro-project these hostilities and make the crisis in relations between the allies Athens and Sparta begin in the aftermath of Plataiai. Future research needs to consider the implications that Nafissi’s analysis has for the study of Themistokles, the episode of the construction of the walls destroyed by the Persians and the treatment that the Spartans reserved for the Athenians at Ithome. But that is another story. Here, we are interested in ancient historiographical representations of crises between allies, and Thucydides has more to say on this subject, as Katarina Nebelin points out. Not only in reference to the relations between Sparta and Athens, allies at the time of the Persian Wars, but also in reference to the relations between allies of the Delian League. When these relations entered into crisis, Thucydidean Athenians attempted to overcome the crisis in various ways: by appealing to their common Ionian ancestry (a topic we will return to later), to the crucial role Athenians played in defending the Greeks from the Persians and to the motif of just rule, understood “not as subjugation of other Greeks but as governance over Barbarian-like people with an internalized slave-mentality: moral behaviour is only possible and sensible between equals or those of equal strength.”⁹ The issue of overcoming crisis is also addressed by Polybius on several occasions. In this case, the crisis in relations between allies is often the outcome of the unpredictability of their behaviour, as Maier’s analysis shows. And from Polybius’s perspective, this very unpredictability, which is a factor of crisis, can become an opportunity for innovation within the alliance and thus a factor of resilience.

This brings us to the theme of the causes of crisis and the means to resolve or prevent it, a topic addressed by many contributions in this volume. However, it should first be emphasized that the crisis in relations between allies can be a more general, multisectoral crisis. Katarina Nebelin points out that during the Peloponnesian War, a time of crisis between Sparta and its allies, on the one hand, and Athens and its allies, on the other, there was also an internal political crisis in Athens. This was a crisis of democracy, civic cohesion and, more generally, a moral crisis. Claudio Biagetti draws attention to how the alliance itself can be a response to a more general epochal crisis. More specifically, he explores the crisis of autonomy of small state entities, which can be safeguarded precisely by a system of federal alliances such as the League of the Islanders. Furthermore, even in reference to interstate alliance relations, a crisis can be multilayered: in illustrating the history of the Aitolians from their defeat at Lamia to their victory over the Galatians, Sebastian Scharff highlights how the Aitolians had to overcome, on the one hand, the crisis in relations between the Aitolians, i.e., an intra-federal crisis, and, on the other hand, the crisis in relations between the Aitolians and other Greeks.

But what are the most frequent causes of crises in relations between allies in a military alliance system or between allies who are members of the same *koinon*? Many articles in this book reflect on this point. It should also be noted that an investigation into the causes of a crisis often leads to a discussion of the means of resolving or preventing it. Maier's analysis clearly highlights how, for Polybius, the cause of crises in relations between allies may be the unpredictability of their reliability. From a comparative perspective, Marian Nebelin draws attention to the power asymmetries (to which we will return) in the Delian League. If pushed beyond a tipping point, they could cause discontent among the weaker members and make the alliance unstable. Conversely, Katarina Nebelin points out that the correct and prudent management of these same asymmetries can become a means of resilience for alliances and thus of crisis prevention. Moving further, in a hegemonic alliance, the secession of one or more hegemonic leaders can throw the alliance itself into disarray: Marian Nebelin mentions the cases of Sparta and the Hellenic League, on the one hand, and France and NATO, on the other. A certain imbalance of power is to be expected and is often reflected in the alliance oath formulas analyzed by Hans Beck. Conversely, in the cases of crises in intra-federal interstate relations that I have investigated, the crisis itself offers an opportunity to adjust or control this imbalance, whether or not it is the cause of the crisis itself. After all, it could be in the interest of the *koinon* to promote a certain symmetry to control any hegemonic tendencies that may potentially subvert federal structures.

In the case of the Boiotians, it is precisely the ability to revisit power relations and boundaries (understood in an immaterial sense) between members of the *koinon* that allows it to resist after Mantinea, as Salvatore Tufano shows. On the subject of federal states, the failure to integrate newly conquered peoples and territories in an institutional form – e.g., through the establishment of *tele*, as in the case of the Aitolians – can become a cause of instability in intra-federal relations, as highlighted by Scharff.¹⁰ Nafissi's analysis has revealed how, in the Athenian intentional histories received and reoriented by Thucydides, the reaction to the

construction of the walls by the Athenians is perceived as hostile and therefore as a factor of crisis. The wall divides, creating a hard border that can put pressure on relations between allies (see below). That a crisis-oriented narrative can cause a crisis – and, conversely, that a narrative oriented towards solidarity, trust and affinities between allies can prevent or resolve a crisis – also emerges in Marian Nebelin's comparative analysis of the Delian League and NATO.

Oliver Grote highlights how the inability to tolerate ambiguity between cooperation and conflict in relations with an ally – or, in other words, intolerance of ambiguity *as such* – can trigger a crisis. Conversely, tolerance of this ambiguity, which would be the hallmark of the relationship between Spartans and helots – hostile relations marked, however, by some forms of cooperation – explains the resilience of that relationship. In analyzing the causes of the crisis, many authors in this volume have indirectly focused on the means to resolve them: positively managing, to the advantage of the alliance, the unpredictability of the ally's reliability, power asymmetries, integration strategies, the marking of boundaries, tolerance of cooperation-conflict ambiguity and the very narrative of the crisis (i.e., the solidarity, trust, and affinities of the allies). Other studies collected in this volume discuss more directly the strategies for preventing and resolving crises in relations between allies, examining others in addition to those just listed.

More than one contribution (Nafissi, Bonanno) highlights how Athens used the argument of common Ionian kinship to promote a sense of solidarity among allies. Bonanno adds that this could also have been promoted by opening up Athenian religious spaces (borders) to allies and involving them in certain Athenian festivals. This is how Bonanno interprets the Athenian invitation to the allies to pay *aparchai* ('first-fruits') at the sanctuary in Eleusis (GHI 141), as well as to send an ox and a panoply to the Great Panathenaea and a phallus to the Dionysia (GHI 142). Emma Aston shows that the sacred space itself – Anthela, Delphi – can be more than a space of competition; it can be a space where cooperation is cultivated and encouraged. The latter would mark the relations between members of the Delphic Amphiktyony more than conflict, also because, in her view, the Amphiktyony was not an instrument of Thessalian hegemony. Her analysis demonstrates that even myths and rituals connected to the Amphiktyony are functional, in many cases, to the promotion of cooperation. Indeed, there is a veritable mythology of articulating resolution.

Bonanno and Beck emphasize the role of oaths. As the former demonstrates, the appropriate revision of the chronology of many inscriptions concerning Athens and its allies with embedded oaths now dated to the period of the Peloponnesian War is, first of all, an argument in favor of the use of oaths as a means of resolving relations between allies in crisis (precisely, in times of war). Second, she shows that the oath itself does not guarantee the solidity of the alliance if there is no kinship between the allies themselves. Beck, for his part, draws attention to the material aspects (movable objects used during oath-taking, such as swords, shields, scepters, *kerkeion*) and epichoric aspects of the oath, both of which contribute to making it more binding. Concerning the second aspect, it is interesting to note that, following a request for help from the Boiotians to the Aiginetans, an alliance was sealed

by an oath, most likely pronounced in the presence of the Aiakids and the nymphs Thebe and Aigina, daughters of Asopus.

Several scholars then explore the topic of the memory of joint ventures, alliances and conflicts. Nafissi stresses how the memory of the joint Panhellenic venture against the Persians provides a critical basis to prevent an immediate resurgence of hostility between the Athenians and the Spartans in the aftermath of Plataiai. Similarly, Scharff stresses how the Aitolian representation of the defeat of Lamia as an Aitolian commitment to a Panhellenic cause was intended to foster alliance relations between the Aitolians and the other Greeks.¹¹ Maria Osmer offers numerous examples in which the memory of common endeavours is reworked and evoked to promote the sanctioning of an alliance between two cities that was unprecedented in some respects. One need only think of the fact that, to promote an alliance between Athens and Thebes, Demosthenes constructs a line of descent from the eponymous hero Oineus of the phyle Oineis to Cadmus, the mythical founder of Thebes.

Conversely, Grote stresses how the transmission of memories of a border conflict, such as that between Eleusis and Athens, for example, through Euripides's drama *Erechtheus*, can serve to provide a model for resolving relations between neighbours, a model that is particularly important in a historical context in which these same neighbours find themselves integrated into a model that encompasses the whole of Attica.

If animated by a well-oriented agency, certain spaces may then lend themselves better than others to promoting cooperation and solidarity among allies. This is the case of the contact zones between Hellenistic kingdoms studied by Biagetti as places of aggregation that can stimulate processes of federalization. The picture of the means aimed at preventing and resolving crises is completed in a comparative perspective by Marian Nebelin: density of communication, degree of institutionalization in politics and administration, ability to learn, experience due to the alliance's antiquity, storytelling of trust and affinity.

Finally, many contributions address the role that material and immaterial borders and their management play in the resilience or dissolution of relations between allies and members of the same koinon. It goes without saying that the very need to define the border between neighbouring political communities can be a factor of crisis.¹² We have already seen above, commenting on Nafissi's contribution, how a narrative that stages the perception of hostility in the action of rebuilding walls by an alliance partner can be connected to (and in this case be the effect of) a crisis aimed at backdating a break that has not yet actually taken place (but will take place shortly thereafter). The border can be and was perceived as an element of rupture, as Beck also clearly emphasizes on the example of the various border disputes involving Thebes, Athens and some places on the border between the Boiotians and the Athenians. However, numerous contributions in the volume highlight that careful management of borders can become a factor in the resilience (and not crisis) of the alliance, in intentions and sometimes even in practice. As mentioned above, the opening of Athenian religious spaces to allies, as studied by Bonanno, is intended to promote cohesion.¹³ It is to teach and therefore promote strategies of cohesion

that the conflict between Eleusis and Athens continues to be recounted, as shown by Grote. Being *periktiones* (neighbours) and sharing borders becomes a resource for some Boiotian cities in the decades after Mantinea. It is then no coincidence, perhaps, that joint dedications to Delphi are documented in this context, as argued by Tufano. Moving from the Boiotians to the Aitolians, is the creation of *tele* for the newly annexed ethne not perhaps a form of integration resulting from an effective border management strategy, given that the newly annexed ethne constitute the external border territories of the *koinon*? As for internal, intra-federal borders, they were managed in a manner functional to the resilience of the *koinon*, and therefore of the alliance, by the Achaians in the controversy between Epidaurus and Corinth, by the Boiotians in the dispute between Lebadeia and Koroneia and by the Aitolians in the border dispute between Melitaia and Pereia. It can be concluded that, to a certain extent, the ancient Greeks understood how to promote the resilience of alliances across borders, despite borders and through borders.

Notes

- 1 See, most recently, Longhi 2023. Further literature in Ganter's introduction to this volume.
- 2 Kõiv 2023: 43; see also Longhi 2023.
- 3 Ganter in this volume.
- 4 See already Goeze and Strobel 2012: 511. Further literature in Ganter's introduction to this volume.
- 5 See, most recently, Fink and Rollinger 2023b: 2 with previous literature.
- 6 Rousseau 1762 II, 8: 94; cf. Colozzi 2015: 106.
- 7 Piepenbrink 2020. Further literature in Ganter's introduction to this volume.
- 8 Salzman 2021; Fink and Rollinger 2023b: 2 with bibliography.
- 9 Cf. the contribution by K. Nebelin in this volume.
- 10 On integration strategies, see also van Wijk 2025.
- 11 See also Scharff 2023a.
- 12 See Franchi 2024 with further literature.
- 13 See Scharff 2023b; Biagetti 2024; Franchi 2025 for religious and political cross-border activities.

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