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‘Bridging the Gulf’: Religion, Identity, and Cross-Border Interactions in the Gulf of Corinth (On the Earthquake of Helike in Polyaenus, *Strat.* 8.46)

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Abstract This paper re-examines the story of Themisto transmitted by Polyainos, showing how a seemingly late and marginal tradition can reveal unexpected historical potential. While embedded in a fictional framework, the narrative functions as an *aition* for the earthquake that destroyed Helike in 373. Its stereotypical elements situate the account within broader images of tyrants, *ethne*, and the cross-cultural dynamics of the Corinthian Gulf. The stratagem highlights the symbolic centrality of Helike’s sanctuary of Poseidon, shedding light on forms of religious, commercial, and diplomatic interaction across the Gulf.

Keywords Gulf of Corinth. Polyainos. Cross-border interaction. Earthquake of Helike. Greek religion.

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1 Introduction

Since Jonathan M. Hall's influential research, the relevance of ethnic discourse as a means of (re)presenting and asserting an identity rooted in a specific territory hardly needs to be stressed.[1] The construction of a symbolic narrative – one that foreshadows and legitimises existing socio-political structures – is a crucial component both in the (re) shaping of collective self-awareness and, to put it in Barthian terms, in the process of self-ascription and ascription to a given group.[2]

Within such identity-related elaborations, however, one may distinguish an array of places and natural spaces which played different roles in the narrative(s) of group identity and were therefore subject to multiple and shifting claims at different historical stages.[3] A peculiar case is represented by the Gulf of Corinth. While not a primary identity-forming space,[4] the Gulf of Corinth provided, as argued by Klaus Freitag, the geographical setting that framed inter-ethnic relations between the communities on either side and informed the symbolic narratives they developed.[5] This narrow stretch of water may thus be understood as a cross-border contact zone that fostered connectivity and, in a sense, stimulated multi-level communication,

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1 Hall 1997; 2002. It is nearly impossible to provide even a selective bibliography of the vast literature on ethnic identity in the ancient world that has appeared over the past three decades. A review up to 2006 is offered by Klaus Freitag (2007). Hall's approach has been criticised by Kostas Vlassopoulos (2015) and partly defended by Hall (2015). Among the pioneering studies on ethnicity in Antiquity, cf. at least Walbank 1951; Cassola 1953.

2 Barth 1969, 10-11, 13-15.

3 Hall 1997, 25 and 59-65 (for the case of the Dorians). Cf. Freitag 2011, 22-4.

4 An *identitätsstifender Raum* or, as Marc Augé has put it, a *lieu anthropologique* (1992, 57-9).

5 Freitag 2011. For the 'connecting function' of the Gulf (*verbindende Funktion*) in the saga of the Heraklids, for example, see Freitag 2000, 371-3.

competition and confrontation.[6] To adapt a formulation by Gary Reger – who explicitly draws on Frederik Barth's reflections on ethnic groups and boundaries – the Gulf of Corinth can be conceived as a geographic "boundary […] that establishes the interface where the groups meet and separate".[7]

In this context (as elsewhere in the Greek world), religion and ritual emerged as powerful engines of human mobility and cross-border interaction.[8] Cult practices had the capacity to 'bridge' the Gulf and bring its northern and southern shores into closer connection. This reality is evidenced not only by the ancient narratives elaborated on both sides of the Gulf, but also by the continuously growing body of material evidence unearthed in recent decades. By complementing literary evidence with archaeological documentation, the seminal study by Jonathan M. Hall and Catherine Morgan on Achaian identity has highlighted its composite and, in many ways, 'open' nature, partly as a result of the geographical and cultural fragmentation of Achaia.[9] As one of the *ethne* overlooking the Gulf, the Achaians thus offer an ideal case study for examining the trajectories, the regions and the actors involved in cross-border exchanges. Recent archaeological discoveries have shed fresh light on the religious dimension of Achaian identity, stimulating new reflections – both general and methodological – on the role of sanctuaries and cults in fostering interactions among individuals of different provenance.

6 See also Bonnier 2014, who emphasises the impact of hinterland areas on the connectivity of the Gulf of Corinth primarily through the lens of landscape archaeology. As in an earlier contribution (Biagetti, forthcoming), I prefer to make use of a flexible notion like 'contact zone' (instead of – for example – the more connotated expression of 'middle ground') to indicate an area of interaction and exchange among different groups, not necessarily involving phenomena of identity and cultural negotiation. In a similar vein, Freitag makes use of the term *Interaktionsraum* (2000, esp. 4). References to 'areas of contact' across the Gulf of Corinth can already be found in Morgan 1988. On the notion of 'contact zone' or 'contact area', viz. "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations power", see Pratt 1991 (quotation from 34). The phrasing (or its equivalent 'contact area[s]') has increasingly come into use in political science to designate regions of cultural and (geo)political interaction and confrontation (see, for example, Bufon 2006 and Csurgai 2021, 34, quoting Ratti, Reichman 1993, 23).

7 Reger 2014, 113 with reference to Barth 1969, 19-20. A different formulation is offered by Bommeljé 1988, 311-12: "As the evidence clearly indicates, and Kirsten rightly observes, the Corinthian Gulf was in historical times something less than a natural boundary | between the Peloponnese and the coastal region of the mainland to the north. The geography of the northern shores, which are mostly rocky and inhospitable, determined that the 'Aeolis' region […] was the most open to the south (Achaea) as well as to the west (Acarnania); perhaps even more than to the mountains of Aetolia in the north".

8 For some recent approaches to mobility and religion in the ancient world, see for example Horden, Purcell 2000, 438-49 and 459; Elsner, Rutherford 2005 (esp. *Introduction*, 1-38); Price 2012; Bonnet, Bricault 2016; Kristensen, Friese 2017; Collar, Kristensen 2020.

9 Morgan, Hall 1996.

This paper takes inspiration from a neglected stratagem of Polyainos, which highlights and exemplifies the dynamics of mobility and the nature of cross-border relations across the Gulf of Corinth. Therein, religion functions as an important catalyst for crossing, while social, economic and diplomatic factors likewise emerge to complete the kaleidoscope of interactions and exchanges that historically unfolded along the shores of the Gulf.

2 The *Stratagem* of Themisto and the Earthquake of Helike

The geography and the nature of contacts across the Gulf of Corinth are illustrated in a stratagem of Polyainos, which has not yet been explored from this perspective. It is first useful to reproduce the text in full (Polyaenus, *Strat.* 8.46) and then discuss its contents:

> Themisto was the daughter of Krithon the Oiantheian. Philon, the son of the tyrant Phrikodemos, was in love with her. The tyrant demanded the girl for marriage. The father refused. The tyrant dragged off the sons of Krithon and, in view of their father and mother, threw them to starving wild beasts. Then he dragged off the girl and accomplished the marriage. Themisto, of necessity playing her role as bride, carried a sword under her shift, lay down beside her bridegroom asleep in the bedchamber, and easily cut his throat, so there was not even a sound from the murdered victim. She escaped by night with all her deeds undetected, then descended to the sea, found a small boat, gained a favourable wind, loosened the mooring line, and all alone was carried out to sea. She sailed down to Helike, a city of Achaia, where there was a holy sanctuary of Poseidon and to which she fled as a suppliant.
>
> Phrikodemos sent the other of his sons, Herakon, the brother of the murder victim, to demand the girl from the Helikeans. They gave her up. But after they put to sea, a great storm drove the small ship to Rhion of Achaia, where two light ships of the Akarnanians, who were hostile to the tyrant, appeared while they anchored. The Akarnanians attached the small ship to their own and took it to Akarnania. When the people of Akarnania learned the course of events, they pitied the girl and handed Herakon in chains over to her. The tyrant sent a representative to her in behalf of his son, and she declared that if he released her parents, then she would restore his son. Phrikodemos believed her and sent off her parents. But the Akarnanians, nonetheless, cruelly tortured and killed Herakon. A few days later the citizens killed Phrikodemos. But the inhabitants of Helike, both the people and the city, were swallowed up not much later when there was an earthquake and

> a tidal wave. It seemed to be the wrath of Poseidon, because they gave up his suppliant maiden to her enemies.[10]

The epilogue of Polyainos' stratagem makes it clear that the story was conceived as an *aition* of the earthquake of 373 and the subsequent destruction of Helike.[11] Despite this firm *terminus post quem*, however, it remains difficult to reconstruct the literary, historical, and ideological background behind it. While the Oiantheian perspective that apparently informs the account suggests a West-Lokrian elaboration, contributions of a different origin cannot be ruled out.

A closer look at the prosopography raises doubts as to whether the story reflects an authentic West-Lokrian tradition. The names of the characters appear to be 'speaking names', pointing to a fictitious and, as it were, a-historical nature of the account: Φρικόδημος is 'the one who shakes/terrifies the people'; Θεμιστώ and her father Κρίθων are linked to the sphere of justice; Φίλων, in turn, belongs to the realm of love, while Ἡρακῶν ('he who listens to Hera') evokes respect for family relations, and more specifically marital ones.[12] Taken together, these symbolic associations fit perfectly with the role of each *dramatis persona*. Accordingly, it is difficult to accept the prevailing view that

10 Transl. Krentz, Wheeler 1994, 2: 812-17 (with minor adjust.). Θεμιστὼ Κρίθωνος Οἰανθίου θυγάτηρ. Ταύτης ἦρα Φρικοδήμου τοῦ τυράννου παῖς Φίλων. ὁ τύραννος ἐξήτει πρὸς γάμον τὴν κόρην. ὁ πατὴρ ἀντέλεγεν. ὁ τύραννος τοὺς υἱοὺς τοῦ Κρίθωνος ἀποσπάσας ἐν ὄψει τοῦ πατρὸς καὶ τῆς μητρὸς παρέβαλε θηρίοις πεινῶσι, τὴν δὲ κόρην ἀποσπάσας ἐπετέλει τὸν γάμον. Θεμιστὼ διὰ τὴν ἀνάγκην ὑποκριναμένη ξίφος εἰσεκόμισεν ὑπὸ τῷ χιτωνίσκῳ καὶ τὸν νυμφίον καθεύδοντα ἐν τῷ θαλάμῳ παρακλίνασα τὸν τράχηλον εὐκόλως ἀπέσφαξεν, ὡς μηδὲ φωνὴν τοῦ φονευομένου γενέσθαι. ταῦτα δὲ πάντα νύκτωρ λαθοῦσα, πάλιν ἐπὶ θάλασσαν κατελθοῦσα, ἀκάτιον εὑροῦσα, πνεύματος ἐπιτυχοῦσα, τὸ ἀπόγειον ἐκλύσασα, μόνη ἀναχθεῖσα κατέπλευσεν ἐς Ἑλίκην πόλιν τῆς Ἀχαΐας, ἔνθα Ποσειδῶνος ἱερὸν ἅγιον ἦν· τούτῳ προσέφυγεν ἱκέτις. Φρικόδημος τὸν ἕτερον τῶν υἱῶν, ἀδελφὸν τοῦ φονευθέντος, Ἡρακῶντα, ἔπεμψεν ἐξαιτήσοντα παρὰ τῶν Ἑλικέων τὴν κόρην. οἱ μὲν δὴ ἐξέδωκαν, ἐπεὶ δὲ ἀνήχθησαν, χειμὼν μέγας ἐξέωσε τὸ σκάφος ἐπὶ τὸ Ῥίον τῆς Ἀχαΐας· οὗ προσορμισαμένοις ἐπεφάνησαν ἡμιολίαι δύο Ἀκαρνάνων ἐχθρῶς ἐχόντων πρὸς τὸν τύραννον, οἳ τὸ σκάφος ἐξαψάμενοι κατῆγον ἐς Ἀκαρνανίαν. τὸ πλῆθος τῶν Ἀκαρνάνων μαθόντες τὰ πεπραγμένα οἰκτείρουσι τὴν κόρην καὶ τὸν Ἡρακῶντα δήσαντες αὐτῇ παρέδωκαν. ὁ τύραννος πρεσβεύεται πρὸς αὐτὴν ὑπὲρ τοῦ παιδός, ἡ δὲ, εἰ τοὺς γονέας ἀπολάβοι, τότε ἀποδώσειν τὸν υἱὸν ἐπηγγείλατο. Φρικόδημος πιστεύσας ἐξέπεμψεν αὐτῇ τοὺς γονέας, οἱ δὲ Ἀκαρνᾶνες οὐδὲν ἔλαττον τὸν Ἡρακῶντα αἰκισάμενοι πικρῶς ἀπέκτειναν. τὸν δὲ Φρικόδημον οὐ μετὰ πολλὰς ἡμέρας οἱ πολῖται διέφθειραν. οἱ δὲ τὴν Ἑλίκην οἰκοῦντες οὐκ εἰς μακρὰν κατεπόθησαν αὐτοί τε καὶ ἡ πόλις, τῆς μὲν γῆς σεισθείσης, τοῦ δὲ πελάγους ἐπικλύσαντος. ἔδοξε τὸ μήνιμα γενέσθαι τοῦ Ποσειδῶνος, ὅτι τὴν ἱκέτιν αὐτοῦ παρθένον τοῖς πολεμίοις ἐξέδωκαν.

11 A list of sources can be found in Guidoboni 1989, 642-4; Lafond 1998; Katsonopoulou 2005, 26-9.

12 Pirenne-Delforge, Pironti 2016, 28-52.

the narrative reflects historical reality and that Oiantheia was ever ruled by a tyrant at some point in the fourth century.[13]

Signs of learned elaboration emerge in the traits associated with the different groups involved in Themisto's story, all of them settled along the shores of the Gulf. Within the *aition*, three different shades of identity interact with one another: the civic identity of the Oiantheians; the religious identity of the Helikeans; and the ethnic identity of the Akarnanians. The representation of each community is marked by ideological connotations and, at times, by stereotypical features – generally negative in character and in principle suggestive of the narrative's original matrix. The description of the Akarnanians is particularly harsh, echoing the commonplace that depicts them as a cruel and unreliable ethnos engaged in piracy.[14] The Helikeans too are portrayed in negative terms, as being regarded – as in many post-373 sources – as responsible for the offense to Poseidon, their poliadic deity, and thus deserving divine punishment for it.[15] In Polyainos' *aition*, after all, the Oiantheians themselves are initially subject to a wicked tyrant, later overthrown by an internal *stasis*, in some sense triggered by the 'just' Themisto.

Stereotypes associated with the West Lokrians also surface in the narrative and deserve separate discussion. On the one hand, the motif of a young Lokrian suppliant (Themisto) who goes to a sanctuary where sacrilege takes place (the *hieron* of Poseidon at Helike) evokes the violence suffered by Kassandra at the altar of Athena during the fall of Troy.[16] Ancient tradition connected this episode with the origins of the ritual of sending Lokrian maidens to Ilion, understood as a reparation for the outrage against Kassandra at the hands of the

13 Lerat 1952, 2: 45-6; Berve 1967, 1: 299, 2: 674; Freitag 2000, 102-3; Rousset 2004, 396-7. A recent overview on the history of Oiantheia, its 'multiple identities', and the cross-border activities between Lokris and Aitolia, see Franchi 2025.

14 See Thuc. 1.5.2-6.2, with Antonetti 1990, 71-6 and Mari 2011, 545-51 and 556-8. In addition, it is worth observing that the Akarnanian segment of the story entirely lacks any topographical detail.

15 Diod. Sic. 15.48.4 attests to the proliferation of accounts by philosophers and other intellectuals concerning the destruction of Helike, most of which follow a similar narrative pattern structured around sacrilege and divine punishment.

16 Lokrian Maidens as suppliants: Lycoph. *Alex.* 1164; Apoll. *Epit.* 6.20-22; *Schol. Lycoph.* 1167 (see also *Schol. Lycoph.* 1133, 1141). Kassandra as suppliant: Callim. *Aet.* 1 frg. 35 Pfeiffer (= 42 Massimilla) ap. *Schol. D Il.* 13.66; Philostr. *Her.* 31.4 (see also Procl. *Chrest.* 239, 15-18 Severyns = Arct. *Ilioup. Argum.* 89, 15-18 Bernabé; Alc. frg. 298 Voigt; Eur. *Tro.* 69-71). For a comprehensive discussion of literary and iconographic sources, see Mazzoldi 1997.

Lokrian hero Aias.[17] This episode, as well as the entire tradition of the Lokrian maidens, may well have been familiar in both Lokrides and particularly in Oiantheia, if the city is to be identified with modern Vitrinitsa, where the sole epigraphic evidence concerning the ritual (the so-called *Mädcheninschrift* from the first half of the third century) has been unearthed.[18] On the other hand, the epilogue of the *aition* – particularly the unexpected killing of Herakon – alludes to, and at the same time reverses, the popular saying Λοκροὶ τὰς συνθήκας or Λοκρῶν σύνθημα, used to denote deceptive pacts.[19] Driven to Akarnania by the pirates, Themisto – once freed by the Akarnanians from Herakon's yoke – promised to send Herakon back to Phrikodemos only in exchange for the release of her parents. The tyrant accepted this arrangement but – in line with the proverbial Λοκροὶ τὰς συνθήκας / Λοκρῶν σύνθημα – the promise was broken, and Herakon was killed by the Akarnanians.

Reconsidering its narrative features, the fictional and folkloric nature of Polyainos' *aition* appears hardly questionable. This, in turn, raises doubts about its origin, especially given the negative nuances attached to the Oiantheians and, possibly, to the Lokrian *ethnos* as a whole. In this sense, a significant aspect of the account is the gradual convergence between the Oiantheians and the Akarnanians: their initial antagonism – directed, from an Akarnanian perspective, primarily against the tyrant Phrikodemos rather than the entire Oiantheian community – eventually turns into a form of support

17 Lycoph. *Alex.* 1139-54; Callim. *Aet.* 1 frg. 35 Pfeiffer (= 42 Massimilla) ap. *Schol. D Il.* 13.66; Strab. 13.1.40; Plut. *Mor.* 557c-d; Ael. frg. 50a-g Domingo-Forasté; Iambl. *VP* 8.42; Quint. Smyrn. 13.420-9, 14.433-9; *Serv. Dan.* 1.41; *Schol. Lycoph.* 1133, 1141. The scholarly literature on Lokrian maidens and their ritual sending to Ilion is extensive. A collection of testimonia and an analytical discussion of sources can be found in Ragone 1996 (with earlier literature). On the ritual, see Bonnechere 1994, 154-63; Ragone 1999 and Mari 1997 (the latter also useful for a connection with the *hierodouleia* in Lokris Epizephyrioi).

18 *IG* IX² 3, 706 (the chronology of the inscription is not uncontroversial: see recently Petrochilos 2019, 56, and *status quaestionis* in Ragone 1996, 11-12 fn. 8). The identification of Oiantheia with Vitrinitsa is now widely accepted (see Franchi 2025, 49 fn. 6 with earlier literature). For the tradition of the Lokrian Maidens in both Lokrides, as well as the presence of the cult of Athena Ilias at Physkeis in West Lokris, see Bonnechere 1994, 159-63; Daverio Rocchi 2013 and 2015, 179-82. As Polybios attests (12.5.4), the tradition of the Locrian Maidens was still orally recounted in Lokris Epizephyrioi between the third and second centuries (σύνοιδα γὰρ τοῖς ἀνθρώποις ὁμολογοῦσιν ὅτι παραδόσιμος αὐτοῖς ἐστιν αὕτη περὶ τῆς ἀποικίας ἡ φήμη παρὰ πατέρων, ἣν Ἀριστοτέλης εἴρηκεν [= Arist. frg. 554.2 Gigon], οὐ Τίμαιος [= *BNJ* 566 T 19]: For I know that the Locrians themselves confess that the tradition handed down to them by their fathers concerning the colony is that given by Aristotle and not that of Timaeus; transl. Paton 1925, 4: 320-1).

19 Λοκροὶ τὰς συνθήκας: Arist. frg. 554 Gigon = Polyb. 12.12a.1-3; *Schol. Theoc.* 1.56b (51, 13-15 Wendel); Zen. 5.4 (*CPG* I 116, 4-8). Λοκρῶν σύνθημα: Zen. 4.97 (*CPG* I 114, 1-5); Diogenian. 6.17 (*CPG* I 272, 13-14); Hsch. s.v. Λοκρῶν ξύνθημα (λ 1254 Latte); Phot. *Lex.* s.v. Λοκρῶν ξυνθήματα (λ 668 Theodoridis).

and cooperation. From a historical perspective, this symbolic rapprochement is worth stressing, as it may offer a clue to the ideological background of the *aition* and to the circumstances of its elaboration. In general terms, the intercommunal relationships depicted in the story may be interpreted as an elaboration of the complex cross-border dynamics in the region of the Gulf. For much of their history, the Lokrians and the Akarnanians tried to resist Aitolian expansionism, at times siding together – as in the anti-Aitolian alliances led by the Athenians in the fifth and fourth centuries.[20] As Elena Franchi has recently pointed out, Oiantheia and West Lokris were among the hotspots of these cross-border exchanges and tensions, which reached an arrangement around 200 with the institution of the Λοκρικὸν τέλος within the Aitolian *koinon*.[21]

This Aitolian shadow looming over Polyainos' *aition* may elucidate not only the 'dissonances' in the representation of the Oiantheians but also some features of the narrative frame. The sanctuary of Poseidon at Helike, in particular, 'might' have served not only as a suitable scenario for renewing the mythographic pattern of the divine punishment of the impious (abuse against ἱκέται > vengeance of the deity) and for creating – in parallel – a new story around 'a' Lokrian maiden, but also as a means of evoking the traditional rivalry between the Aitolians and the Achaians, fuelled by the long-standing Achaian control over the areas of Kalydon and Naupaktos.[22] While at

20 In 426, for instance, the Athenian general Demosthenes undertook an expedition against the Aitolians with the support of the Lokrians, while the Akarnanians – though formally allied with Athens – refused to take part in the campaign (Thuc. 3.94.1-95.3). Some months later, however, the Lokrians switched sides, joining the army of the Spartan Eurylokos in an expedition against Naupaktos at the instigation of the Aitolians (Thuc. 3.100.1-102.2). In the same period, the Athenians turned to the Akarnanians, seeking their support in order to prevent the capitulation of the city (Thuc. 3.102.3-4). In 389, under pressure from the Achaians, Agesilaos led an expedition against the Akarnanians, who at the time were allied with the Athenians and the Boiotians (Xen. *Hell.* 4.6.1-13). At the end of the Spartan campaign, the Aitolians allowed Agesilaos' army to pass through their territory in order to reach Rhion (Xen. *Hell.* 4.6.14). A few years earlier, both the Lokrians and the Akarnanians had joined the anti-Spartan coalition in the battles of Nemeia and Koroneia (Xen. *Hell.* 4.2.17; 4.3.15).

21 For the Aitolian districts called *tele* (gr. τέλη), see esp. Funke 2015, 95-6 and Lasagni 2019, 147-59. For the Λοκρικὸν τέλος, attested in a group of second-century manumission decrees, see Mackil 2013, 380-2 (with further literature); Lasagni 2019, 147-59 (analytical discussion of the sources); Franchi 2025, 59 (on the Aitolian 'institutionalisation' of local identity). The internal tensions within the community of Oiantheia may, to some extent, have been elaborated – and mirrored – in the stasis that concludes Polyainos' *aition*.

22 Xen. *Hell.* 4.6.1 (Kalydon); 4.6.14 (Naupaktos); see also Diod. Sic. 15.75.2 on the liberation of Kalydon and Naupaktos from Achaian control by Epameinondas in 367. Naupaktos was still held by the Achaians under Philip II (Theopomp. *BNJ* 115 F 235a-b; Dem. 9.34, with Landucci Gattinoni 2004, 110-20 and Mackil 2013, 62-3 and 75-6). Strab. 9.4.7 attributes the transfer of Naupaktos to the Aitolians to Philip II, but no confirmation of this claim is available.

least the 'Naupaktos-affair' was definitively settled in favour of the Aitolians at some point between the fourth and the third centuries,[23] political and military cooperation between the two *ethne* remained elusive, achieved – if at all – only under conjunctural situations.[24]

Some implications for a more precise contextualisation of the tale may now be drawn. The only firm chronological anchor remains – as noted earlier – the reference to the earthquake of Helike (373), since the narrative provides no other literary, linguistic, or onomastic indications for dating.[25] Regarding the origin of the *aition*, the negative colouring of the Akarnanians and, to some extent, the Oiantheians suggests an erudite reworking and/or the interference of a third party, which is tempting to identify – as a tentative basis for further discussion – with the Aitolians. In broader terms, the tale may have been conceived from the outset within the symbolic framework of intercommunity relations typical of the Gulf of Corinth. In historical times, crossing the Gulf for religious, commercial, diplomatic, or military purposes must have been a common practice. Restricting the examples to the same route followed by Themisto (north-south-north), one may recall the winding itinerary of the Athenian delegation at some point after the Persian Wars (Boiotia > Phokis > Peloponnese > Lokris > Akarnania > Ambrakia),[26] the manoeuvres of the Corinthian and Athenian fleets in the strait of Naupaktos in 429,[27] and finally the use of Oiantheia as a base for the Aitolian attack on Achaian Aigeira in 219.[28] Conversely,

23 A firm *terminus ante quem* for the integration of Naupaktos into the Aitolian koinon is established by *SEG* 29, 600 (= Hatzopoulos, *Macedonian Institutions* II no. 44), a decree of 285/4 from Kassandreia in honour of Androbolos Αἰτωλὸς ἐκ Ναυπάκτου (l. 6).

24 One of the few instances of Achaian-Aitolian cooperation was their anti-Macedonian alliance in force between 239 and 222 (Polyb. 2.44.1-2; Plut. *Arat*. 33.1; see Mackil 2013, 105-8 and 116). Caution is needed regarding the possible historicisation of the anti-Helikean attitude that emerges from Polyainos' aition. The Achaian scorn for the unholy behaviour of the Helikeans is also attested in some accounts of the Ionian delegation to Achaia a few years before the earthquake of Helike. In these accounts, the Achaians appear to have intentionally shifted the blame onto the Helikeans, in order to absolve themselves from responsibility for having denied the Ionians the statue and the ἀφιδρύματα of Poseidon (Heraclid. Pont. frg. 46a Wehrli ap. Strab. 8.7.2; Diod. Sic. 15.49.2-3; see also Paus. 7.24.6 [Ἀχαιοῖς τοῖς ἐνταῦθα]).

25 In Polyainos' *Strategemata*, the *aition* appears in the section of Book 8 devoted to the deeds of distinguished women (see Schettino 1998, 277-80). No internal order is discernible in this section, nor can the sources be clearly identified.

26 Plut. *Per.* 17, 2.

27 Thuc. 2.83.1-84.5.

28 Polyb. 4.57.2-58.12. Like Polyainos, Polybios notes that the Aitolians left Oiantheia at night and crossed to Aigeira after waiting for favourable weather conditions.

the opposite route (south-north) was taken by Aratos in 245, when the Achaian army invaded the region of Kalydon and West Lokris.[29]

Developed from a conventional narrative repertoire, the *aition* of Themisto could be placed anywhere between the years immediately following 373 – when it might be seen as a contemporary counterpart to the accounts associated with the Ionian delegation to Achaia – and sometime before the publication of Polyainos' *Strategemata* around 161-163 CE.[30] However, the possibility of narrowing this broad timeframe rests on the assumption that the *aition* reflects the historical context of its author. In this case, it is possible to identify a period in which, beyond enduring local rivalries, interactions between the Akarnanians and the Oiantheians could have posed a threat to a third party – perhaps, the Aitolians.

The second half of the third century offers a plausible framework for the elaboration of Themisto's *aition*. Around 263/2 or 261, the Aitolians and the Akarnanians concluded an alliance that temporarily put an end to their traditional enmity.[31] The alliance lasted until the late 250s or the mid-240s, when the Aitolians and the king of Epeiros Alexander planned the partition of Akarnania.[32] The major effects of this Aitolian-Epirotic cooperation surface in the evidence from the 230s, with the incorporation of *poleis* such as Stratos and Oiniadai into the Aitolian *koinon* and the creation of the district of Stratos (Στρατικὸν τέλος).[33] In these years, Aitolian attempts to integrate Lokrian Oiantheia seem to have followed a similar trajectory. As a part of the gradual incorporation of West Lokris, Aitolian control over Oiantheia stabilised in the last quarter of the third century.[34] Within the *koinon*, the city became part of the district of Lokris

29 Plut. *Arat.* 16.1; Paus. 2.8.4. A strong interconnection between the shores of the Gulf of Corinth endures to this day, as Bommeljé 1988, 312 fn. 53, has pointed out: "In early modern days cross-Gulf contacts were very frequent. Even today the shepherds in the Aetolian mountain lands can recall that before WW II the flocks were taken across the Gulf to the market in Patrai, rather than to the less important towns of Agrinion and Naupaktos. Until the 1970s the northwestern Greek railroad ended at Kryonerion near the site of ancient Calydon, from where ferries crossed the Gulf. The blocks for the harbour of Patrai were quarried at the northern shore at the feet of Mt. Varasova, below the kastro of ancient Chalcis. The quays of modern Aigion on the Peloponnese are reported to have been built with ancient blocks transported from the site of Tolofon (ancient Oeanthea) on the northern shore".

30 For the composition of Polyainos' *Stratagemata*, see Schettino 1998, 31-3.

31 *IG* IX 1² 3A (see Klaffenbach 1955 for a dating to 263/2 and Freitag 2015, 76 supporting 261).

32 Polyb. 2.45.1; 9.34.7; Just. *Epit.* 28.1.1 (see Pascual 2017, 38-44 for a dating to 253-251, and Mackil 2013, 104-5 for a dating to the mid-240s).

33 See *IG* IX 1² 1.3B (ca. 239-231 or 235-232, found at Thermon).

34 For Οἰάνθεια τῆς Αἰτωλίας, see Polyb. 4.57.2 (with the discussion of further sources in Franchi 2025, 57).

(Λοκρικὸν τέλος), attested – as already pointed out – in a number of enfranchisement decrees from the early second century.[35] Against this background, the story of Themisto may have been elaborated during a period of strong Aitolian pressure on both the border communities of Akarnania and Oiantheia. The *aition* itself depicts Oiantheia torn by a *stasis*, resolved through negotiations initiated by Themisto. It is tempting to read this detail as a narrative elaboration of political debates between anti- and pro-Aitolian factions, which likely took place in Oiantheia in the final decades of the third century. Finally, it may be noted that the third- and second-century references to the disaster of Helike,[36] together with the enduring memory of the tribute of the Lokrian maidens,[37] would align with the proposed chronological framework for the origin of Polyainos' aition.

3 The Stratagem of Polyainos and the Sanctuary of Poseidon at Helike

Addressing the relationship between identity-related narratives and political discourse, two aspects of Polyainos' stratagem deserve particular attention. On the one hand, it is clear that the narrative stages a number of actors and relations that cut across the Gulf of Corinth and extend from east to west. The resulting cross-border interactions are of religious, politico-diplomatic, and – in a broad sense – commercial nature.[38] On the other hand, the account seeks to reactivate the memory of a period prior to 373, during which the sanctuary of Poseidon at Helike – the most authentic focus of the Polyainian stratagem – would have been frequented by visitors from the opposite shore of the Gulf. In fact, the supra-local projection of the *hieron* – which was the symbol of the city and at the same time came to symbolise its destruction – is emphasised above all by post-373 sources. The idea that the sanctuary constituted one of the ancestral focal points of the Achaian identity has been advanced in recent scholarship, and it has even been argued that the god of Helike bore the divine epithet Helikonios, in the same way as Poseidon of Cape Mykale in Ionia.

35 *SGDI* 2070 (189/8), from Delphi; *IG* IX I² 3, 618 (200-180) and 625a, from Naupaktos.

36 Posidipp. 20, 1-2 AB; Eratosth. frg. III B 103 Berger ap. Strab. 8.7.2; Polyb. 2.41.7.

37 Lycoph. *Alex*. 1139-54; Callim. *Aet*. 1 frg. 35 Pfeiffer (= 42 Massimilla); Polyb. 12.5.4-8 (with the reference to the παραδόσιμος φημή in Lokroi Epizephyrioi) and *IG* IX² 3, 706. A further attestation of the tradition of Lokrian maidens in Euphorion remains uncertain (Euph. frg. 53 Powell + frg. 429 Lloyd-Jones-Parsons).

38 The seizure of Themisto and Herakon at the Achaian Rhion and their forced transfer to Akarnania seem to acquire an economic dimension akin to that of the slave trade (on [slave] trade and piracy in ancient Greece, see, for example, Mele 1979, 58-78; Horden, Purcell 2000, 156-8; Gabrielsen 2003).

To begin with matters of identity, it is inevitable to start with Herodotos' account. His representation of Achaia as a region organised into twelve *merea*, perceived as a geographically coherent entity, and united by a sense of shared identity,[39] likely reflects an ethnogenetic process that, in all probability, concluded between the late sixth and early fifth centuries, as suggested by Hekataios' reference to Dyme Ἀχαϊΐς.[40] The regional and ethnic cohesion emerging from Herodotos' narrative reverberates the initial stage of a political cooperation, which ultimately culminated in the establishment of the powerful Achaian *koinon* in the Hellenistic period.[41] The passage in the *Catalogue of Ships* is often regarded as a starting point for the construction of regional identity.[42] Homer mentions five centres on the northeastern coast of historical Achaia, all included in a single geographical space identified as Aegialos: Hypereia, Gonoessa, Pellene, Aegion and Helike.[43] A sense of shared identity thus appears to have coalesced around this core of Homeric cities and gradually spread from east to west, eventually extending even into parts of the Arkadian interior and reaching the boundaries of the Eleian territory.[44]

Without going into the details of the development of Achaian identity, attention may be drawn to Helike and to its renowned cult of Poseidon, which stands at the centre of Polyainos' *aition*. The cult of Poseidon at Helike was already known to the poet of the *Iliad* (8.203: οἳ δέ τοι εἰς Ἑλίκην τε καὶ Αἰγὰς δῶρ' ἀνάγουσι).[45] Its supra-local relevance is revealed by its capacity to establish connections with other traditions and communities both in metropolitan Grece

39 Hdt. 1.145; 7.94; 8.73.1.

40 Hecat. *BNJ* 1 F 121 (with Moscati Castelnuovo 2002). On the Achaian ethnogenesis, see Morgan, Hall 1996, 193-9. While it is entirely plausible that some fundamental components of the Achaian identity were elaborated during (the second half of) the sixth century, taking the Spartan recovery of Tisamenos' bones as a terminus post quem for such a chronology is, in my view, problematic (see, for example, Morgan, Hall 1996, 198-9; Hall 2002, 62-3). This widely held assumption is based on an interpretation of the only available source (Paus. 7.1.8) that is by no means incontrovertible, as Nafissi 2016 has pointed out. It is my purpose to return to this thorny issue in a forthcoming contribution.

41 Polyb. 2.41.1, 11-12; Strab. 8.7.1. About the early stages of the Achaian *koinon*, see, for example, Moggi 2002 and Mackil 2013, 341-3. An overview of the Achaian expansion during the third century can be found in Mackil 2013, 355-63 (see, more in general, Roy 2003).

42 Hom. *Il.* 2.573-7 (with Morgan, Hall 1996, 198; Hall 2002, 63).

43 See also Strab. 8.7.1, 4; Paus. 7.1.4; 26.2, 13.

44 Morgan, Hall 1996.

45 Hom. *Il.* 8.201-4: For shame, now, far-powerful shaker of the earth. In your breast / the heart takes no sorrow for the Danaans who are dying, / they who at Helike and at Aigai bring you offerings / numerous and delightful. Do you then plan that they conquer; transl. Lattimore 1951, 187 (ὢ πόποι ἐννοσίγαι' εὐρυσθενές, οὐδέ νυ σοί περ / ὀλλυμένων Δαναῶν ὀλοφύρεται ἐν φρεσὶ θυμός. / οἳ δέ τοι εἰς Ἑλίκην τε καὶ Αἰγὰς δῶρ' ἀνάγουσι / πολλά τε καὶ χαρίεντα· σὺ δέ σφισι βούλεο νίκην).

and in the Greek *apoikiai*.[46] The identification of the sanctuary in a plot of land at Nikolaiika (modern regional unit of Achaia) is a major archaeological discovery of the last quarter of the century.[47] While carried out within a limited area, the rescue excavations led between 2004 and 2011 by the sixth Ephorate of Prehistoric and Classical Antiquity of Patras have brought to light an impressive cult complex from the Late Geometric period, including two parallel 12 m and 11.5 m long walls,[48] three bases for wooden columns,[49] and a sandstone mudbrick altar from the mid-eighth century incorporated in the later apsidal temple.[50] The study of the potsherds has shown that the temple was in use between the late eighth and the seventh centuries, with strong indications of earlier cult practices dating back to the Protogeometric period (950-850).[51] An extensive deposit of tiles and terracotta architectural elements, dispersed all around the excavation spot, is suggestive of a Late Archaic phase of the sanctuary, even if no proper archaic structure has been unearthed so far.[52] Fragments of *skyphoi* from the early fourth century suggest that the cult practices must have continued in one way or another as far as 373.[53] After a longstanding unsuccessful quest for the sanctuary, the discovery of these structures, which are likely to be connected to a cult of a male deity,[54] provides a relatively precise clue about the position of the venerable cult of Poseidon.

46 Evidence has recently been collected in Hallmannsecker 2022, 86-91. In the framework of the Humboldt-Kolleg *Neighbourhood in the Greek Federal State: Cooperation, Competition and Local-regional Tension* organised by Elena Franchi (University of Trento), I have reexamined the evidence of the cult of Poseidon Helikonios, including the most recent epigraphical discoveries from the Pontos Euxeinos (Istria/Histros: Lițu, Bottez, Țârlea 2021, 148 fn. 63. Tomis: Buzoianu, Hălmagi, Mototolea 2023). The proceedings of the conference are forthcoming. For the discovery of an eighth-century bronze *Dragofibel* of (North-?)Italian production at the sanctuary of Nikolaiika (perhaps to be identified with Poseidon's *hieron* of Helike), see Kolia 2011, 227.

47 Kolia 2011; Kolia, Gadolou 2011; Gadolou, Kolia 2022.

48 Kolia 2011, 204-12.

49 Kolia 2011, 206-7.

50 Kolia 2011, 212-15, 231-6; 2024, 79-80, 83.

51 Kolia 2011, 224-5; 2024, 83-4; Gadolou, Kolia 2022, 287-8; Gadolou 2024, 87-8. A terracotta model of a roof with impressed decoration (Gadolou 2011a) and sixty terracotta wheels (Kolia 2011, 219-20) are some of the most impressive findings. A comprehensive review of the ceramic findings from Nikolaiika can now be found in Gadolou 2024.

52 Kolia 2014, 411-16; 2024, 84-5; Gadolou, Kolia 2022, 282-3.

53 Kolia 2011; 227-8; 2014, 411-12.

54 Votive terracotta chariot wheels, horse figurines, and the roof model depicting chariot races suggest an association of the sanctuary's deity at Nikolaiika with Poseidon (Gadolou 2011a, 267-8; 2015; see also Kolia 2011, 218-20).

Besides the invaluable work carried out at Nikolaiika,[55] scholarly literature still tends to conflate the cult of Poseidon at Helike with that of Poseidon Helikonios.[56] The designation of the Achaian god as Helikonios implies a connection with the well-known Homeric passage describing the bull sacrifice to Poseidon Helikonios, at time reflecting the neo-positivistic belief in a historical and ritual continuity with the Panionian cult of Poseidon on Mount Mykale.[57] This conflation of divine onomastics has a long history in scholarship,[58] and recent studies – deliberately or not – continue to perpetuate it. In fact, the attribution of Helikonios to the Poseidon of Helike derives from a literal reading of two parallel passages in Strabo and Pausanias, which need to be extensively contextualised and critically scrutinised. A reappraisal of both texts is, therefore, revealing.

On the one hand, Strabo states:[59]

> (1.) and then they began to add some of the twelve cities, except Olenus and Helicê, the former having refused to join and the latter having been wiped out by a wave from the sea. (2.) For the sea was

55 Archaeological investigations at the site have been resumed since 2019 (Gadolou, Kolia 2022).

56 See, for example, Morgan, Hall 1996, 74; Katsonopoulou 1998; 2009; Schilardi 1998; 2019; Mylonopoulos 2006, 121-9; Freitag 2009, 20; Rizakis 2013; Kolia 2014; 2024; Gadolou 2015; 2024; Gadolou, Kolia 2022.

57 Hom. *Il*. 20.403-6. For attempts to historicise the information provided by ancient sources in light of the archaeological data, see Katsonopoulou 1998; 2009; Schilardi 1998; 2019; Mylonopoulos 2006, 121-9. As for the sanctuary of Poseidon Helikonios on Mount Mykale, its location was identified in the vicinity of modern Güzelçamlı in the late 1950s (Kleiner, Hommel, Müller Wiener 1967). Despite the presence of late Archaic remains in the area, Hans Lohmann has argued for an alternative location of the Archaic Panionion at the mountain site of Çatallar Tepe in a series of publications (see at least Lohmann 2004; 2006; 2012 and 2022). Both his archaeological arguments and his historical reconstruction have been discussed and ultimately rejected by some scholars (see Herda 2006 and Ragone 2008). While a resumption of investigations at Güzelçamlı remains a scholarly desideratum, Lohmann's arguments are far from unquestionable. Ultimately, the traditional identification of the Panionion to the east of Güzelçamlı remains the most convincing.

58 Prandi 1989, 49 represents a notable exception.

59 Strab. 8.7.1-2; transl. Jones 1954, 4: 210-13 (εἶτα προσελάμβανόν τινας τῶν δώδεκα πλὴν Ὠλένου καὶ Ἑλίκης, τῆς μὲν οὐ συνελθούσης τῆς δ' ἀφανισθείσης ὑπὸ κύματος. ἐξαρθὲν γὰρ ὑπὸ σεισμοῦ τὸ πέλαγος κατέκλυσε καὶ αὐτὴν καὶ τὸ ἱερὸν τοῦ Ἑλικωνίου Ποσειδῶνος, ὃν καὶ νῦν ἔτι τιμῶσιν Ἴωνες, καὶ θύουσιν ἐκεῖ τὰ Πανιώνια. μέμνηται δ', ὡς ὑπονοοῦσί τινες, ταύτης τῆς θυσίας Ὅμηρος ὅταν φῇ…). No coincidence is the explicit reference to this passage in Strab. 14.1.20: "First on the seaboard is Panionium, lying three stadia about the sea where the Pan-Ionia, a common festival of the Ionians, are held, and where sacrifices are performed in honour of the Heliconian Poseidon; and Prienians serve as priests at this sacrifice, but I have spoken of them in my account of the Peloponnesus" (transl. Jones 1960, 6: 220-1; πρῶτον δ' ἐστὶν ἐν τῇ παραλίᾳ τὸ Πανιώνιον τρισὶ σταδίοις ὑπερκείμενον τῆς θαλάττης, ὅπου τὰ Πανιώνια, κοινὴ πανήγυρις τῶν Ἰώνων, συντελεῖται τῷ Ἑλικωνίῳ Ποσειδῶνι καὶ θυσία· ἱερῶνται δὲ Πριηνεῖς· εἴρηται δὲ περὶ αὐτῶν ἐν τοῖς Πελοποννησιακοῖς).

> raised by an earthquake and it submerged Helicê, and also the temple of the Heliconian Poseidon, whom the Ionians worship even to this day, offering there the Pan-Ionian sacrifices. And, as some suppose, Homer recalls this sacrifice when he says: [the quotation from Hom. *Il.* 20.403-4 follows]

On the other, Pausanias reports:[60]

> (5.) Here used to be situated a city Helice, where the Ionians had a very holy sanctuary of Heliconian Poseidon. Their worship of Heliconian Poseidon has remained, even after their expulsion by the Achaeans to Athens, and subsequently from Athens to the coasts of Asia. […] (6.) There are also passages in Homer referring to Helice and the Heliconian Poseidon.

Admittedly, both passages associate the cult of Poseidon Helikonios with the sanctuary of Helike. On closer inspection, their narratives reveal similarities in both contents and structure, and are likely to have been influenced by the learned debates of Homeric exegesis, as suggested by the explicit reference to the Iliadic scene of the bull sacrifice to Poseidon Helikonios.[61] In the attempt to clarify the meaning and origins of the epithet Ἑλικώνιος, Homeric philologists expressed different views, sometimes relying on sophisticated dialectological explanations.[62] Most of ancient scholarship was inclined to consider Ἑλικώνιος as a geographic divine name, however disputing as to its ultimate etymology and provenance either from Boiotia and Mount Helikon (as Aristarchos of Samothrace)[63] or from Achaia and the city of Helike.[64] As indicated by Homeric *scholia*, the latter was linked to Neleos son of Kodros and the myth of Ionian *apoikia* to Asia Minor, already alluded to in the *Histories* of Herodotos.[65]

60 Paus. 7.24.5-6; transl. Jones 1933, 3: 314-15 (ἐνταῦθα ᾤκητο Ἑλίκη πόλις καὶ Ἴωσιν ἱερὸν ἁγιώτατον Ποσειδῶνος ἦν Ἑλικωνίου. διαμεμένηκε δέ σφισι, καὶ ὡς ὑπὸ Ἀχαιῶν ἐκπεσόντες ἐς Ἀθήνας καὶ ὕστερον ἐξ Ἀθηνῶν ἐς τὰ παραθαλάσσια ἀφίκοντο τῆς Ἀσίας, σέβεσθαι Ποσειδῶνα Ἑλικώνιον· […] ἔστι δὲ καὶ Ὁμήρῳ πεποιημένα ἐς Ἑλίκην καὶ τὸν Ἑλικώνιον Ποσειδῶνα).

61 Both authors mention the Helikean cult, while at the same time referring to the worship paid to Poseidon Helikonios by the Ionians (τὸ ἱερὸν τοῦ Ἑλικωνίου Ποσειδῶνος, ὃν καὶ νῦν ἔτι τιμῶσιν Ἴωνες / ἐνταῦθα ᾤκητο Ἑλίκη πόλις καὶ Ἴωσιν ἱερὸν ἁγιώτατον Ποσειδῶνος ἦν Ἑλικωνίου). This is followed by a reference to Homer's verses (μέμνηται δ', ὡς ὑπονοοῦσί τινες, ταύτης τῆς θυσίας Ὅμηρος / καὶ Ὁμήρῳ πεποιημένα ἐς Ἑλίκην καὶ τὸν Ἑλικώνιον Ποσειδῶνα), and by accounts of sacrilege, with Poseidon's μῆνις / μήνιμα inevitable bringing divine sanction (Strab. 8.7.2; Paus. 7.24.6).

62 See, for example, Eust. *Il.* 4.427.3-12 Van der Valk.

63 Arist. Samothr. frg. 53 Schironi.

64 See esp. *Schol. D Il.* 5.422; 20.403; *Schol. bT* 8.203b-c; 20.404b-c.

65 Hdt. 1.145-7; 5.65.3-4, 76; 9.97.

Except for Strabo and Pausanias, however, no ancient sources employ the epithet of Ἑλικώνιος to designate Poseidon of Helike, in principle restricted – as also epigraphic evidence confirms – to the cult of Poseidon at Cape Mykale and its Ionian ramifications.[66] As the excerpt from Heraklides Pontikos suggests, the overlap may have been engineered – if not deliberately forced – by the Ionians themselves at the time of the refoundation of the Panionian cult in the 370s, or shortly thereafter, in order to account for, and in some sense reassert, the continuity of Achaian and Ionian ritual practices performed to Poseidon.[67] A well-established tradition, largely prevailing in the extant sources, maintains that a delegation of the Ionians underwent some disrespectful act in Helike and was ultimately rebuffed by the Helikeans.[68] After the earthquake of 373, the tensions that emerged between the Ionians and the Helikeans were regarded, at a symbolical level, as the premises for the disaster, taking the shape of a divine vengeance by Poseidon for the offence of the Helikeans.[69] Such a contention was accordingly elaborated in a tradition, which had in turn its own versions.[70] Despite the differences inherent in each version, the original narrative was arguably marked by an Ionian (or, at least, pro-Ionian) perspective, which is likewise reflected in the accounts by Strabo and Pausanias.

In the retrospective framework of a narrative elaborated *ex eventu*, the use of the divine name Helikonios should be understood in light of the actualising perspective that informs both texts and their sources. It is hardly accidental, then, that no other sources identify the Achaian Poseidon as Poseidon Helikonios, since the epithet was ultimately an onomastic prerogative of Panionian Poseidon in historical times. Correspondingly, it is unsurprising that concurrent *aitia* for the catastrophe of 373, as the one reproduced by Polyainos,

66 See above, fn. 46.

67 Heraclid. Pont. frg. 46a Wehrli; Diod. Sic. 15.49.1-3; see also Strab. 8.7.2; Paus. 7.24.5 and 25.4; Ael. *NA* 11.19.

68 Diod. Sic. 15.49.3; Strab. 8.7.2; Ael. *NA* 11.19.

69 More generally, all aitia associating the earthquake with divine vengeance tend to emphasise the relatively short lapse of time separating the impious act from the catastrophe itself (cf. Prandi 1989, 51-3).

70 According to Heraklides Pontikos (Heraclid. Pont. frg. 46a Wehrli ap. Strab. 8.7.2), the Ionians first turned to the Helikeans, who refused to provide either the statue of Poseidon (βρέτας) or a model of the sanctuary (ἀφίδρυσις); they then appealed to the Achaian koinon, which pressed the Helikeans to comply with the Ionians' requests. According to Diodoros (15.49.2-3), likely drawing on a fourth-century source, the Ionians first appealed to the Achaian assembly to obtain the models of the sanctuary (ἀφιδρύματα), a request that was later refused by the Helikeans. According to Pausanias (7.24.6), the Achaians at Helike killed some suppliants after driving them away from the sanctuary of Poseidon.

make reference to the cult of Poseidon at Helike without assigning any divine attribute to the god.

The story of Themisto was evidently immune from Ionian (or pro-Ionian) implications, as it arose from different ideological and narrative premises and responded to more narrowly regional dynamics. The *aition* was constructed around the offence perpetrated by the Helikeans against a ἱκέτις, which triggered the wrath of Poseidon and led to the destruction of the city. A comparable framework can be found in Pausanias, who associates divine punishment with the rejection of otherwise unspecified suppliants by the Achaians (not the Helikeans in particular).[71] Given the reference to ἱκέται ἄνδρες, it seems hardly plausible – to say the least – that Pausanias is alluding to the *aition* preserved by Polyainos. Nor is it easy to reconcile Pausanias' version with that of Strabo, who – following an earlier elaboration by Heraklides Pontikos[72] – linked Poseidon's vengeance to the Helikeans' refusal of the Ionian requests concerning certain cult objects (either a divine image or, alternatively, a model of the sanctuary).[73] What is plausible, in the end, is that Pausanias' version of the Helikean sacrilege sought to interpret Poseidon's revenge within a purely local dynamic, not much differently than Polyainos' *aition*.

It is undoubtedly difficult to identify any clear relationship between the different accounts of Helike's disaster, or to recover the original ideological motives behind them. Judging from the interpretations of contemporary witnesses such as Heraklides Pontikos and Kallisthenes,[74] and by later visitors such as Eratosthenes and Pausanias,[75] some shared elements stand out. The traditional association of Poseidon with earthquakes and the presence of a renowned sanctuary of the god at Helike, one of the two most affected centres of Achaia (together with Boura), formed the common ground for various intellectual attempts to provide, as Diodoros points out, a 'reasonable' explanation for the event (πιθαναί τινες αἰτίαι τοῦ συμβάντος).[76] It is no coincidence that these elements became

71 Paus. 7.24.6 and 7.25.1. The identity of the Helikeans as responsible for the offence against Poseidon is not explicitly stated in Pausanias (see, in contrast, Prandi 1989, 54).

72 Heraclid. Pont. frg. 46a Wehrli.

73 Strab. 8.7.2. The two versions are frequently thought to trace back to one and the same tradition (see, for example, Freitag 2009, 21).

74 Heraclid. Pont. frg. 46a Wehrli; Callisth. *BNJ* 124 F 19 (to be read in the wider context of Sen. *QN* 6.23.4; see also Callisth. *BNJ* 124 FF 20-21). The fragmentary evidence from other fourth-century sources does not explicitly refer either to a specific divine agency or to the responsibility of the Helikeans (Ephor. *BNJ* 70 F 212; Arist. *Mete.* 1.6 343a-b; 2.7 368a-b). However, it should be noted that Diod. Sic. 15.48.1-49.6 is likely to draw on fourth-century literature.

75 Eratosth. frg. III B 103 Berger; Paus. 7.24.5-25.1.

76 Diod. Sic. 15.48.4.

the focal points of literary elaborations, whether semi-historical or fictional. On the one hand, the connection among the sanctuary, the earthquake, and the diplomatic mission of the Ionians – the historicity of which is indeed difficult to reject –[77] was recognised soon after the catastrophe, as contemporary sources attest. On the other hand, the evocative potential of Poseidon's sanctuary at Helike – perhaps, not much in terms of representation of the Achaian ethnicity,[78] but rather in terms of its historical implications – was evidently exploited in the vivid *aition* of Themisto. Considering the narrative of Polyainos as a diluted reworking of earlier accounts, however, forces us to assume a (more or less implicit) hierarchy of sources and traditions. In the absence of conclusive evidence, such a choice may result in overly simplistic and even deceptive solutions. An alternative, but equally speculative scenario is that two traditions were elaborated more or less simultaneously: one (semi-)historical and trans-regional, the other fictional and regional. What ultimately remains is that the versions involving offences against suppliants are preserved only by Polyainos and Pausanias, both writing in the Roman imperial period and drawing much of their material from Hellenistic sources.

4 Beyond Literature: Archaeology and the Cross-Border Contacts Between the Shores of the Gulf of Corinth

The account of Polyainos constitutes but a drop in the ocean of evidence concerning cross-border interactions within the Gulf of Corinth. Ancient sources provide invaluable, though fragmentary, insights into the realities of such contacts across the Gulf. Further indications derive from archaeological research and the study of material culture. Far from yielding a coherent or unified picture, the archaeological record contributes to delineating the dynamics of exchange between the two shores of the Gulf and beyond the Gulf.

About thirty years ago, Hall and Morgan proved the effectiveness of the interdisciplinary approach in the study of the Achaian ethnicity, publishing an extensive overview that is not only a brilliant example of academic cooperation but also a methodological landmark for a productive interaction between history and archaeology.[79] One of the outcomes of that work was the understanding of the geographical and cultural fragmentation of pre-Classical Achaia. Observing the local urban development from a diachronic perspective, Hall and Morgan

77 Cf. Prandi 1989.

78 See above § 1.

79 Morgan, Hall 1996. For an overview of the archaeological exploration of Achaia, see Petropoulos 2016.

identified four Achaian subregions approximately corresponding to four different settlement patterns: the first embraces the northeastern part of Achaia – the Homeric *Aigialos* – featured by the presence of urban or proto-urban settlements such as Aigeira and Aigion; the second corresponds to the areas around Cap Rhion including a restricted number of settlements of an ephemeral character; the third is centred on Dyme and encompasses dispersed rural villages; the fourth lies on the borders with Arkadia and consists of three urban cores, inhabited by a limited number of individuals.[80]

Since 1996, the body of archaeological evidence has expanded significantly, owing to a number of discoveries that include such impressive Late-Geometric complexes as those at Nikolaiika and Trapeza Aigiou.[81] Research on Archaic pottery, such as Elizabeth G. Pemberton's studies of small and miniature vases from Corinth and Anastasia Gadolou's work on Thapsos Ware, has greatly enhanced our understanding of the dynamics of interaction across the Gulf of Corinth.[82] The overview offered by Hall and Morgan must therefore be revisited and reassessed in light of the new evidence and recent interpretations concerning the history and archaeology of Achaia.

With regards to contacts between the shores of the Gulf of Corinth, archaeological investigations indicate – up to the present – the existence and persistence of cross-border activities primarily in the northern sub-regions of Achaia, namely the areas corresponding to the Homeric *Aigialos* and the region around Rhion, at the foot of Mount Panachaikon.[83] These lands appear to have been the most dynamic in terms of urban organisation, social hierarchisation, and transregional mobility since the Dark Ages. They embrace urban centres which played a role, according to ancient tradition, in the colonial movements toward southern Italy (viz. Rhype, Aigion, Helike, and Pellene).[84]

A recent study by Panagiotis Michalopoulos on prehistoric ceramic materials from Aigion has demonstrated that exchanges across the Gulf were already taking place on a regular basis from the Early Bronze Age onwards.[85] In the Geometric and Late Geometric periods, fragments

80 Morgan, Hall 1996, 169-93.

81 On the excavations of Nikolaiika, see above § 3. For the Late-geometric sanctuary of Trapeza Aigiou, unearthed in 2012, see Vordos 2019, 144-8. Archaeological surveys across the Homeric *Aigialos* were carried out in the 2000s by Michalis Petropoulos, Angela Pontrandolfo and Athanasios Rizakis (2002; 2003; 2004; 2005; 2006; 2007). The results of the Graeco-Italian surveys are collected in Pontrandolfo 2016.

82 Pemberton 2020 (see esp. 309-12); Gadolou 2003; 2010; 2011b; 2017.

83 For some overviews, see Morgan 1988; Gadolou 2010; 2017; Bonnier 2014; 2016.

84 Cf. Mele 1995 and 2002, with Giangiulio 2021, 153-7.

85 Michalopoulos 2023.

of fine impressed ware – a typically Achaian production[86] – have been found at Delphi in a deposit near the *bouleuterion*.[87] A considerable number of fragments belonging to the same ceramic class have also been unearthed in Achaia (Ano Mazaraki,[88] Aigion,[89] Trapeza Aigiou[90]) as well as in Arcadia, close to the border with Achaia (Lousoi).[91] This pottery typology was commonly employed in the production of votive objects and has been discovered within sacred enclosures. Achaian-style *kantharoi*, in use from the Middle-Geometric period throughout the Archaic age, have been found in Akarnania (sanctuary of Spathari, near Stratos)[92] and on the Ionian Islands, in Ithaka (Polis 'Cave')[93] and Kephallenia (Drakaina Cave).[94] Evidence of miniature pottery, likely of Achaian production, has been found in the precinct of Artemis Laphria at Kalydon, suggesting that Achaian visitors may have crossed over the Gulf for cult purposes.[95]

Notable finds, however, have also been uncovered in funerary contexts. A black-glazed vase from Ano Kastritsi,[96] a village near Patras overlooking Rhion, shows striking similarities to artefacts discovered at Delphi[97] and at Galaxidi in Lokris.[98] An Achaian-style *kantharos* has been recovered in a burial at Palaimanina in Akarnania, lying at a short distance from Astakos.[99] Further *kantharoi* are reported to come from burials located in the territory of Agrinion[100] and some more examples were found in Pleuron.[101] Rescue excavations carried out in this area have recently yielded

86 Gadolou 2003.

87 Amandry 1944, 37, fig. 3.

88 Petropoulos 1987-88, 86-7, with pl. 1, figs 6-7.

89 Dekoulakou 1982, 228-9, with 230, figs 20-21.

90 Gadolou 2003, 309 and 322, nos. 36-37, with pl. 31 (b).

91 Schauer 2014, 242-4, 251-2 with 256, Taf. 1, Abb. 9-10.

92 Lang, Sieverling 2017 (410 and 412); Fuchs 2020.

93 Deoudi 2008 with Morgan, Hayward 2021 (with further references). For the Achaian influence over Ithaka, cf. Papadopoulos 2001, 435.

94 Karadima 2024, 285-90. For the Achaian and Achaian-style *kantharoi*, cf. Papadopoulos 2001.

95 Barfoed 2024, 311-13.

96 Dekoulakou 1982, 228-9, with fig. 19.

97 Lerat 1938, 216-7, fig. 13.6.

98 Themelis 1983, 232-7, with fig. 31 (from a funerary context).

99 Mastrokostas 1961-62, 184 with pl. 212α, nos. 7-10; Papadopoulos 2001, 386-8.

100 Vokotopoulou 1969, 74-6, pl. 46α, nos. 1-3; 46β, no. 1.

101 Dekoulakou 1982, 219-24.

further ceramic and bronze objects, comparable with finds from Galaxidi,[102] from Aitolia[103] and from various sites across Achaia.[104]

Returning to the starting point of this paper, it becomes clear that even in cases of largely fictitious narratives, such as the tale of Themisto, the contacts between the northern coast of Achaia and the Lokrian-Phokian territories suggest experiences and movements of people and objects that did in fact occur over the *longue durée*. Religion and cult practices played a crucial role in fostering interregional mobility, as well as in promoting trade routes and the circulation of products widely distributed across the Gulf.[105] While the Achaian sanctuaries of the Geometric period, such as those of Ano Mazaraki and Nikolaiika, may to some extent have stimulated crossings of the strait at Rhion, the presence of the sanctuary of Delphi on the opposite side of the Gulf must certainly have constituted a far more powerful factor of attraction.[106] Although the accounts concerning colonial movements toward Magna Graecia cannot be regarded as an indisputable reflection of historical reality, one may nonetheless consider that certain forms of interaction with the milieu of the Delphic sanctuary did indeed take place.[107]

A similar interaction can also be observed in other traditions involving Delphic intervention, such as the request of Aigion concerning hegemony over the Peloponnese (1 P.-W. = Q 26 F.).[108] According to the response transmitted by Photios, earlier known to Ion of Chios and Mnaseas of Patara (or Patrai), the Aigeians' inquiry was elicited by a military event, namely a naval victory over the Aitolians in the strait of Rhion.[109] As Polyainos' stratagem suggests, the Gulf was also an arena of conflict among the *ethne* inhabiting

102 Themelis, 1983, 236-7, with figs 35-6 (diadem).

103 Stavropoulou-Gatsi 2010, 83-4 (overview of the Proto-geometric and Geometric burials to the south-east of anc. Kalydon); Maniaki, Moutafi 2019, 311-16 (ceramic) and 319-22 (jewelry) (with further literature).

104 For the Geometric finds from Agios Vasileios near Chalandritsa, see Aktypi 2014, 138-9, nos. 4, 6, 8 with figs 11-12, 148-50, and 147, nos. 44-45, with fig. 18 (*kantharoi* with a horizontal zigzag); 142 no. 25, with. fig. 14, and 151 (*oinochoe*). For the findings in Drepanon, see Maniaki, Moutafi 2019, 292 (Cat. 35), 316-17, with 303, fig. 22 (*oinochoe*); 295-6 (Cat. 82), 324-5 with 306, fig. 42 (bronze diadem). For the investigations of a chamber tomb in Toskes near Pharai, see Argyropoulos 2019, 37, no. 7 with 55, fig. 12 (*oinochoe*). For the *pithoi* burials from Mavriki near Aigion, see Gadolou 2021, 13-15 with fig. 4 (black glazed *oinochoe*).

105 Morgan 1988, 336; Gadolou 2010, 234-41 (on the findings from Achaia); 2011b.

106 See, for example, Bonnier 2016, 82-4.

107 On foundation stories involving an oracular response from Delphi, see Giangiulio 2014.

108 See Cappelletto 1999; Palmisciano 2014, 280-4.

109 Ion. *PMG* 743 Page (= frg. 88 Leurini) and Mnaseas *FHG* III, 157 F 50 (= frg. 53 Cappelletto) ap. Phot. *Lex.* s.v. ὑμεῖς, ὦ Μεγαρεῖς, οὔτε τρίτοι οὔτε τέταρτοι (υ 47 Theodoridis).

its shores. War undoubtedly remained a major driver of human mobility.[110] Herodotos records that, at the time of Xerxes' invasion, the Delphians resolved to send their women and children to Achaia.[111] In the opposite trajectory, the Achaians crossed to the northern side as allies of the Athenians during Perikles' expedition against Oiniadai and the Akarnanians in 454/3.[112] These examples demonstrate once more that the Gulf of Corinth must be conceived as a highly interconnected space, where exchanges across its shores were not always cooperative, but also – quite predictably – competitive, frequently degenerating into open war.[113]

5 By Way of Conclusion

The tale of Themisto, as transmitted by Polyainos, is a perfect example of how a tradition regarded as late and obscure can reveal unexpected historical potential. While the narrative is largely fictional, it serves as an *aition* for a historical event, such as the disaster that struck Helike in 373. Interestingly, the *aition* enshrines stereotypical traits, already evident in the speaking names, which align not only with traditional images of certain characters (such as the tyrant) and *ethne* (such as the Achaians and the Akarnanians), but also with the 'timeless' depiction of the Gulf of Corinth as a space shaped by stories of crossings and interethnic exchanges. In this context, the story provides some insights into the nature of the cross-border activities across the Gulf over time, highlighting religion, trade, and diplomacy as major factors of interaction.

Another peculiar feature emerges from the symbolic dimension of Polyainos' stratagem. As already emphasised, its ultimate aim was to provide an explanation for the devastating earthquake of 373. This scope was achieved through the well-established connection between one of the most affected *poleis* and its most renowned sanctuary. While the traditions reported by Heraklides Pontikos and others can perhaps betray – regardless the differences in details – an inter-ethnic cooperation between the Ionians and Achaians in elaborating a common scenario for the destruction of Helike, Polyainos, however, makes no clear allusion to either federal entity, ignoring or eluding the relevance of Helikean Poseidon for the Achaian and Ionian identity, as well as the erudite manipulation of the divine name Helikonios. The tale of Themisto contributes to depicting Achaia

110 Cf., for instance, Chaniotis 2004.

111 Hdt. 8.36.2 (with Freitag 1996).

112 Thuc. 1.111.3 (with Fantasia 2006).

113 Cf. also Freitag 2000, 330-68.

as an authentic 'multiple' territory, part of a highly interconnected space – the Gulf of Corinth – where both cooperation and competition fostered processes of religious, economic, and political interactions increasingly revealed and illuminated by archaeological research.

Abbreviations

Hatzopoulos, *Macedonian Institutions* II = Hatzopoulos, M.B. (1996). *Macedonian Institutions under the Kings*. *II. Epigraphic Appendix*. Athens. Μελετήματα 22.

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