

Ugo Fantasia

AMBRACIA
DAI CIPSELIDI AD AUGUSTO

Contributo alla storia della Grecia nord-occidentale
fino alla prima età imperiale



Edizioni ETS



www.edizioniets.com

Volume pubblicato con un contributo del Dipartimento di Discipline Umanistiche,
Sociali e delle Imprese Culturali, Università degli Studi di Parma.

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Distribuzione

Messaggerie Libri SPA

Sede legale: via G. Verdi 8 - 20090 Assago (MI)

Promozione

PDE PROMOZIONE SRL

via Zago 2/2 - 40128 Bologna

ISBN 978-884674680-1

CONCLUSIONI/ABSTRACT

The stretch of lowlands north of the Gulf of Arta where ca. 625 the Corinthian colony of A. was founded by Kypselos' son Gorgos – a *polis* that ancient geographers represented as the starting point of *Hellas* – has been affected by significant morphological changes mainly due to the alluvium of the two rivers that cross it, the Aphas-Louros and the Arachthos, whose actual low course is different from the ancient one (as evidenced by, among other things, the distance between the actual mouth of the Arachthos and the ancient port of A., Ambrakos). The site of A. was ideal both as a terminal of one of the routes leading to the hearth of Epirus and for the control of the vast plain south of the city, whose agricultural wealth was exalted by the ancient and modern sources. However, the parallel findings of Corinthian pottery of 8th century at Arta, the modern city that conceals the remains of ancient A., and at Vitsa Zagoriou (a mountain site in the upper basin of the Aous) suggest that the *apoikia* was preceded by a 'pre-colonial' nucleus of settlers at Arta that ceased to exist just in the period in which began the great Corinthian colonization in the West.

All evidence at our disposal (and especially Strab. 10, 2, 8) shows that A. was founded in the frame of the same colonial plan that gave rise to Anactorium and Leucas and had among its objectives the maintenance of an alternative access to Epirus and Illyria at a time of bitter rivalry with Coreyra. But A. is the only one of the Cypselid colonies in whose foundation no other Greek *polis* has ever claimed to have taken part (the myth of the Heraklid origin, as we shall see, is of course a thing apart). This particularly strong bond with Corinth is reflected in the fact that the only two tyrants that we know with certainty that ruled the city, the founder Gorgo and Periander (almost certainly Gorgos' son, nephew of the homonymous tyrant at Corinth and brother of the last Corinthian tyrant),

in fact belonged to the same family who ruled the mother-city. Indeed, in the light of what we know about Cypselids' fall in both cities and Plutarch's notice (*mor.* 859C-D) about the alleged role played by Sparta in it, it is not far-fetched to think that it might have been precisely the fall of the A.n Periander to trigger the aristocratic reaction that ended the Cypselids' dynasty also in Corinth.

The vacuum of evidence between the fall of tyranny and the Persian Wars is only partially filled by the great inscription of the *polyandrion* published in 1991 (SEG XLI, 1991, 540A). Despite some recent doubts, the celebration on the same memorial of the fallen of both A. and Corinth (whose name almost certainly was mentioned in the lacuna of l. 3) makes no difficulty. Moreover, several indications lead us to believe that, contrary to the opinion of all previous scholars, the scene of the ambush must be sought not south of A., but along the inner land route that put A. in connection with the other colony Apollonia. All this is a further confirmation of the very strong ties that existed between A. and her mother-city. They were based not so much on the legal constraints deriving from an alleged Corinthian *Kolonialreich* as the special closeness between the two cities in the period of tyranny and the continuation of this experience beyond the threshold of the fall of the Cypselids.

The Persian Wars saw the participation of A. alongside Corinth, but with a greater commitment than the other two Cypselid colonies both on sea and on land. Of far greater importance is the active and prominent role A. played in the first years of the Peloponnesian War, thanks to the dense network of relationships that she had woven with Epirotic *ethne* and beyond (Thuc. 2, 80, 5-7). One more reason for A. to take the initiative was her steady aggressive policy against neighbouring Amphilochean Argos, that on a date that unfortunately is indeterminable (perhaps 435, or shortly after the Thirty Years' Peace) had led her to clash with Acarnanians and the Athenians their allies: the A.n.s settled at Argos had been "enslaved" by the Acarnanians and the 30 Athenian ships commanded by Phormio (Thuc. 2, 68). Furthermore, as shown by the study of the coinage of A. and other Corinthian colonies, in the highest period of tension between Corinth and Corcyra A. had made a great rearmament effort to back the mother-city up against the rebellious colony.

However, none of the three land expeditions promoted by A. in 430, 429, and 426, was successful. The first aborted in the bud and the second ended with the defeat of the barbarian troops mobilized by A. in front of the walls of Stratos on the same days in which Phormio beat the enemy fleet at the entrance of the Corinthian Gulf. As for the third campaign

(Thuc. 3, 105-114), it ended in a disastrous double defeat (not much less than 3.000 A.n.s died on the rugged Amphilochian ground) which endangered the very survival of A. The treaty of peace and alliance signed shortly after between Acarnanians and A.n.s lays bare the extremely weak position of A. Moreover, in the years before and after the 426 Athens managed to establish good relations with that same Epirotic background where previously A. had made its influence felt.

After the disaster of 426 (vividly Diod. 12, 60, 4, wrote that the city “became almost uninhabited”), A. continued to take part in the conflict until its end among the Spartan naval allies. We don’t know whether the *polis* undertook initiatives to recover, but the low property qualifications for public office known to Aristotle (*Pol.* 1303a21-25) are more likely to date back to this period, as a remedy to the decrease in the number of citizens (as e.g. Argos and Tarentum had done after equally terrible defeats), than to the years after the fall of Cypselid tyranny.

What little we know of A. in the period of Spartan hegemony speaks in favour of her constant alignment with the Corinthian positions. Things are less clear at the next major event in which the city is involved, that is the planned, but not put into effect, attack of Philip II against A. (and possibly Leucas) after the Macedonian king had invaded Epirus, deposed the Molossian king Arybbas and replaced him with Olympias’ brother Alexander. As we know through many hints in the Demosthenic *corpus*, the threat posed by Philip aroused the prompt reaction of Athens, where Demosthenes stood a broad alliance which included, in addition to the Acarnanian *koinon*, several Peloponnesian States. It is widely believed that Athens had been urged to do so by Corinth, directly alerted by Philip’s plans towards her colonies; however, there is positive evidence that Corinth didn’t share that alliance, despite the still relatively strong ties that she kept with A. The likeliest explanation for this seemingly surprising behaviour lies in Corinth’s simultaneous involvement in the decisive phase of Timoleon’s campaign in Sicily, that initially had received some assistance also from her colonies in north-western Greece, A. included.

One of the most interesting aspects of this *affaire* was the composition, in this same period, of a letter to Philip by Speusippus (*Socr. Ep.* 28, 7) in which the scholarch of the Academia supported the action of the Macedonian king in this and other regions of Greece by recalling their legendary conquest by Philip’s ancestor Herakles. This noteworthy piece of propaganda asserted also the original lordship of the Greek hero on A.’s territory. This legend was not Speusippus’ invention, since the earliest witness of Herakles’ deeds in southern Epirus dates back to Hecataeus

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(ca. 500). Furthermore a second text, from the late mythographer Antoninus Liberalis (*Met.* 4, 6-7), whose ultimate source was the local historian Athanadas, associates the hero with a pre-Corinthian origin of A. The connection between these two pieces of evidence shows that this tradition is a local, deep-seated one, that may preserve a core of historical memories about a pre-Cypselid Corinthian presence in this region.

Both A. and Corinth received a Macedonian garrison after Chaeronea – though that did not mean the loss of their political identity, as it is assumed (for A.) by those who place in 338 the end of the emissions of the silver *pegasi*. A. at least was forced to a constitutional change, since we know that by Philip's death the garrison was expelled and the traditional "democracy" restored (Diod. 17, 3, 3), a status that was confirmed by Alexander the Great and preserved until Alexander's death. This is probably the reason why A. does not seem to have taken part in the Lamian War. Likewise, it is very likely that the support granted by A.n knights to Olympias besieged by Cassander in Pidna, in the course of the Second War of the Diadochi (319-316), was due to the favour accorded by A. to the policy pursued by Polyperchon, of which Olympias was an ally, towards the Greek *poleis*. A. paid very dear for the support given to Olympias: there is little doubt that since 316, when Cassander imposed his domination over the whole region between Epirus and Acarnania, A. too lost her *autonomia*, becoming also the seat of the troops of Cassander's general Lyciscus.

In 294 Pyrrhus king of Epirus acquired the possession of A., together with Acarnania and Amphilochia, in exchange of the aid given to Cassander's son Alexander, and made of her the capital of his kingdom. Historians like Polybius and Livy, and also Strabo, looked at this period as the most splendid of the history of A., though no one was able to recall precise facts in support of this (except the alleged King's fortified palace Πύρρειον/*Pyrrheum* and indirectly the works of art taken away by the Romans in 189). A. will have been tied to Pyrrhus by a personal bond; however, a few hints in our sources, and especially the tragic events that surround the end of the Aeacid dynasty (the last queen Deidamia was murdered at A. ca. 232) suggest that A.'s integration into the kingdom had been far from successful. Afterwards, probably already in 230, A. fell under the Aetolian control; it was certainly so in 219, when Philip V in the course of the Social War besieged and conquered Ambrakos, and then in 208, 198/7, and 191. It is generally held that this dependence extended uninterruptedly up to 189, but we cannot rule out that ca. 207-206 Philip V managed, at least temporarily, to get hold

of parts of Ambracian territory (though, despite some recent suggestions, no support for this can be found in the epigraphic evidence coming from the Delphic Amphictyony).

The famous Roman siege of A. (189), ended with the earliest great plundering of works of art occurred on Greek soil (more than 1,000 bronze and marble statues were brought to Rome as part of the booty), was, from several points of view, a major test case for relations that Rome was weaving with the Greek world. First of all, the issue of the legitimacy of the treatment meted out to A. by the Roman consul M. Fulvius Nobilior helped to unleash, two years later, the political storm at Rome that opposed Fulvius to M. Aemilius Lepidus. Moreover, the *senatus consultum* passed when an embassy of A. visited Rome stated, in addition to the “freedom” of the city, her right to collect her customs, provided that Roman and Italian traders were exempt. This *immunitas* granted to *negotiatores* is a unique measure in our sources on the Roman economic policy in Greece, that can be explained through the significant role that A. had assumed, maybe already for a long time, in the network of maritime exchanges between the two shores of the Ionian Sea. Lastly, the dedication (179) by Fulvius of a statuary group from A. representing the nine Muses (associated, perhaps not originally, to Herakles) in the *aedes Herculis Musarum* in the *Campus Martius*, is one of the most fascinating chapters of the history of the spreading of Greek culture in Rome and its intertwining with the domestic politics and the ideology of the Roman *élite*.

In the Third Macedonian War, and probably still in other circumstances in the 1st century BC, A. was home to a Roman garrison; likewise, every time that Rome considered it necessary, the town was employed as a logistic base along the supply line leading to Gomphi as the entry point in the Thessalian plain. Thanks to the good relations with Rome (we have no reason to think that her official status of *civitas libera* was ever modified, though actually it may have to a certain extent deteriorated over time), the city escaped the catastrophe that befell Epirus in 167. Indeed, three epigraphic documents – the earliest is the Athenian arbitrate between A. and Acarnania (IG II² 951: 167/6), almost immediately followed by the boundary regulations between A. and Charadros (SEG XXXV, 1985, 665) and, perhaps ca. 20 years later, by a Corcyrean arbitrate between A. and Athamanians – show that after 167 southern Epirus, and especially the region surrounding A., underwent, certainly under the supervision of Roman authorities, a powerful process of settlement of boundaries and disputes.

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The turning point of the ancient history of southern Epirus was the foundation of Nicopolis (30), that can be described as a real synœcism affecting primarily the cities around the Gulf of Arta. The birth of the new city involved the transfer of at least a part of the residents of A., as it is shown by the materials unearthed in Nicopolis' area, as well as of some of their cults. However, in the light of the archaeological remains within and outside the wall circuit of A., it is highly probable that a part of the population remained *in loco*, perhaps gravitating towards the underlying plain, affected by an impressive work of *centuriatio* necessarily related to Nicopolis' foundation. From the political point of view, some hints in the sources, e.g. the definition of "satellite" (*perioikides*) given by Strabo (10, 2, 2) to A. and the Acarnanian *poleis*, suggest that they all had lost their political identity. If so, and if the dedication of the *polis* of A. to *P. Alfidius* antedates the foundation of Nicopolis, the now lost dedication to Trajan by the (*boule* and?) *demos* of A. (CIG II 1801) would certify the successive restoration of A.'s independence. Anyway, it is worthy of mention, on the ideological plane, that the unique tradition of a visit of Aeneas to A. reported in Dionysius' *Roman Antiquities*, the several references to A. in the poets of the Augustan and early imperial age and Servius' commentary itself on Vergil's silence about A., are on the whole evidence that the memory of the most important *polis* of the region had been somehow integrated into the cultural and ideological identity of the "City of Victory".

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Finito di stampare nel mese di giugno 2017