



Spikes Daniel, *The first sacred war*, „Balcanica Posnaniensia. Acta et Studia” 1990, vol. 5, p. 115–122.

<https://doi.org/10.14746/bp.1990.5.9>

<https://pressto.amu.edu.pl/index.php/bp/article/view/52688>

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Społeczna
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Nauki II

THE FIRST SACRED WAR

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ABSTRACT. Spikes Daniel, *The first sacred war*. Balcanica Posnaniensia. Acta et studia, V, Poznań 1990, Adam Mickiewicz University Press. pp. 115 - 122. ISBN 83-232-0007-6. ISSN 0239-4278. Text in English.

The literary tradition imperfectly preserves an account of a war waged by Thessaly, Sicyon, and Athens early in the sixth century B.C. to gain control over the sanctuary of Delphi. An examination of the evidence for this event, generally known as the first sacred war, suggests motives for each of the belligerents. The territorial ambitions of Thessaly, the economic rivalry between Sicyon and Corinth, and the political needs of the Alcmeonidae at Athens converged briefly in this period and resulted in the institution of a new administration at Delphi. It is beyond doubt that the apologists of Philip II later turned this war to their own purposes. Nevertheless the first sacred war ought to be regarded as an authentic episode in archaic Greek history and not as an invention of the propagandists of a later age.

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The literary evidence for the first sacred war suggests that Sicyon, Athens, and Thessaly combined early in the sixth century to suppress the authority of a town known either as Crisa or Cirrha over the sanctuary of Delphi. The sources which form this tradition are poor in quality and contradictory in nature. Each tends to stress the role of one of the participants at the expense of the others. None is any earlier than the fourth century and most are partisan accounts. Modern interpretations have attempted to determine the reliability of the sources which describe the war. The results of the archaeological investigations conducted in the vicinity of Delphi have helped to clarify evidence which otherwise might remain ambiguous. Nevertheless the fundamental problems of the first sacred war depend upon an evaluation of the literary tradition for their explanation. Sicyon, Athens, and Thessaly waged and won the war. Their accounts survived to be manipulated by later writers. It is possible to determine the motives of the participants in the conflict by a critical examination of this evidence.¹

¹ The paper presented herewith is an abridgement of a thesis submitted at the University of Virginia in 1980. The reader interested in a full exposition of the subject, as well as a discussion

The source of the war, to the extent that it is preserved in the literary tradition, is reasonably clear. An allied army under the leadership of Eurylochus of Thessaly moved against Cirrha from the north in the middle of the first decade of the sixth century and put the city under siege.² The siege of Cirrha was incomplete until Cleisthenes of Sicyon placed the port under blockade by sea. These combined operations resulted in the surrender of Cirrha by 591.³ The isolation of Cirrha must have given the allies control of Delphi shortly after the investment by land was complete. Those who survived the capture of Cirrha transferred the war to the slopes of Mt. Kirphis from which guerrilla actions were conducted for six years. The guerrilla finally was broken in 586 under the direction of Hippias of Thessaly.⁴ The fighting in Phocis later came to be compared to the Trojan war both in origin and in duration. Little authority should be placed in such accounts, which also projected the events of the sacred war into the fourth century.⁵ The evidence consistently maintains that the war was fought to liberate Delphi from the control of an oppressive power. Nevertheless it is likely that the allies fought for reasons which had little to do with piety. It remains to consider the motives of the individual participants in the alliance against Cirrha.

Thessaly first appears south of the Malian Gulf at the end of the eighth century as the ally of Chalcis in the Lelantine war.⁶ The object of this intervention may have been to secure a land route to the south. The actions taken by Thessaly against Cirrha in the sixth century seem to have been directed towards obtaining an outlet on the Gulf of Corinth. The immediate cause of the war was a dispute over the administration of Delphi which has been obscured by its presentation as a holy war in the later tradition. After the destruction of Cirrha the Amphictyonic League assumed control of the sanctuary. Thereupon the Amphictyony divided its biennial meetings between Delphi and Anthela.⁷

of the geographical, chronological, and mythological problems of the first sacred war, should turn to that title for a review of the sources and their commentators.

² Hippoc. *Ep.* 27. 6ff; Strab. 9.3.10; Schol. Pind. *Pyth.* hyp. d; Polyaeus 6.13.

³ *Marm. Par.* ep. 37; Paus. 10.37; Polyaeus *Strat.* 3.5; Frontin. *Str.* 3.7.6; Schol. Pind. *Nem.* insc. a. Gote also Amphictyon at *Marm. Par.* ep. 5 (1521/20 B.C.). Jacoby *FGrH* IID Komm. p. 687 follows Plut. *Sol.* 11 and refers these identifications to the Pythian *anagraphe* of Aristotle.

⁴ *Marm. Par.* ep. 37; Schol. Pind. *Pyth.* hyp. a, b, d; Schol. Pind. *Nem.* 9 insc. a.

⁵ Callisth. *FGrH* 124 F 1; Schol. Pind. *Pyth.* hyp. a. Similar associations were made in connection with the third sacred war. Cf. Diod. 16.64 and Duris *FGrH* 76 F 2.

⁶ Plut. *Mor.* 760E. The allies of Chalcis, in addition to Thessaly, were Samos and probably Corinth. Eretria was supported by Miletus and perhaps by Megara. Cf. Hdt. 5.99 and Strab. 10.1.13.

⁷ Forrest *BCH* 80 (1956) 42 and Woodbury *Phoenix* 33 (1979) 101 for the dispute of administration. Sordi *La lega tessala* 51, Defradas *Themes* 153ff., Parke *Oracle* 103ff., and Fontenrose *Cult and myth* 204 put Delphi in the Amphictyony before 600. Forrest *BCH* 80 (1954) 42ff., Guillion *Bouclier* 58 and Woodbury *Phoenix* 33 (1979) 103ff. regard this as a consequence

There is some evidence to suggest that there was a reaction at Delphi against Thessalian interference shortly after the conclusion of the sacred war. A rival Amphictyony may have been formed with the support of Argos which served to circumscribe Thessalian influence.⁸ The most likely interpretation is that Delphi had developed in the course of the seventh century to the point that the oracle had become a shrine of panhellenic importance. Thus Apollo came to be the object of Thessalian ambitions first noted in the Lelantine war. These assertions from the north were short lived. By 571 the Thessalians suffered a reverse at the hands of the Boeotians at Kressos. Still later a Thessalian army was defeated by the Phocians prior to the Persian wars. The Thessalian state evidently suffered disintegration at this time characterized by social conflicts at home and by military failures abroad. The loyalties of the aristocratic houses of Larissa, Crannon, and Pharsalus were divided against themselves. None was strong enough to prevail against the others in order to maintain either a strong national state in Thessaly or to take a decisive role in the Amphictyony. The result of the first sacred war and its sequel was to confirm the Amphictyony in its possession of the sanctuary unfettered by the ambitions of a united Thessaly.⁹

The tyranny of Cleisthenes of Sicyon may be characterized by its pragmatic approach to the vagaries of Peloponnesian politics and by its aggressive conduct of foreign affairs. The evidence for the actions of Cleisthenes at home and abroad is for the most part circumstantial. An interest in western trade, for example, is implied in the nationality of the suitors of Agariste, and an attempt to establish commercial if not military connections with Thebes is suggested by the reception given to Melanippus, the Theban opponent of the Argive hero Adrastus, upon his arrival at Sicyon. The policy of Cleisthenes seems often to reflect the status of his relations with Argos and Corinth. These conditions in turn influence his conduct of international affairs. The participation of Sicyon in the first sacred war does little to conceal the motives of a tyrant adept at using religious pretexts to excuse his secular ambitions.

Pausanias attributes to Cleisthenes the Amphictyonic command against Cirrha otherwise associated with Eurylochus of Thessaly.¹⁰ It would be spacious to speak

of the war. The point is moot since Cirrha was a Phocian city and the Phocians were members of the Amphictyony in time enough for the tradition to develop. Sordi regards Thessalian participation as slight and refers their influence at Delphi to the end of the sixth century. Guillon regards the sacred war as a push from the north to counter Theban expansion. Cf. Forrest *JHS* 86 (1966) for a sympathetic review of Guillon and below for an alternative explanation.

⁸ Acrisius of Argos: Schol. Eur. *Or.* 1094 (Antipater *FGrH* 69 F 2) and Strabo 9.3.9 for the overthrow of Crisa (*sic*) by the Amphictyony.

⁹ Hdt. 8.27, Paus. 10.1, Plut. *Cam.* 19. For the internal dissensions of Thessaly see Westlake *Thessaly* 29ff. and Sordi *La lega tessala* 85 ff. The implications of this interpretation for Sicyon and Athens are considered below.

¹⁰ Paus. 10.37. Sordi *RFIC* 81 (1953) 340 suggests that Cleisthenes could not have held the Amphictyonic command because of the fact that Philip II enjoyed a similar position in the fourth century. Thus Pausanias might have gotten the story from a Macedonian apologist like Callis-

of a single commander were it not for the fact that local traditions tend to give a leading position to local interests. There is nothing to prevent a command divided between Cleisthenes at sea and Eurylochus on land on the analogy of Themistocles and Eurybiades at Salamis. The scholia to Pindar add the important detail that the Amphictyony awarded Cleisthenes one third of the spoils of Cirrha for his contribution to the war.¹¹

It is possible that Cleisthenes, like the Thessalians before him, was alienated from Delphi after the conclusion of the sacred war. The evidence for this disaffection is problematic. The rebuke given to Cleisthenes when he sought oracular support for the expulsion of the hero Adrastus implies that Delphi was favourable to Dorian interests at the time of the inquiry. This situation might have obtained before the sacred war while the sanctuary was controlled by Cirrha. Delphi, however, was only then beginning to acquire serious political connotations. A better case for Dorian influence at Delphi may be made for a later date, after the installation of the Amphictyony and the displacement of Thessaly and Sicyon, when the ambitions of Argos, Corinth, and Sparta are in evidence at the sanctuary.

Cleisthenes is known to have suppressed the Dorian element at Sicyon in favour of his own tribe which seems to have been Achaean in composition.¹² This action, which replaced the old Dorian tribal names with new and uncomplimentary sobriquets, lasted sixty years after his death. Only then were the traditional names restored to the Dorian tribes. It is likely that this change occurred when Cleisthenes was firmly ensconced at Sicyon and when he had some reason to be hostile to Dorian interests. Cleisthenes, moreover, renamed his own and presumably Achaean tribe the *Archelai*. The changes in tribal names refer particularly to the internal affairs of Sicyon although they may represent hostility towards Argos as well.

There was opposition to Cleisthenes at Corinth from the outset. After the death of Myron of Sicyon there seems to have been a brief period of joint rule between his sons Isodemus and Cleisthenes. Evidently the two were incompatible, and Cleisthenes, accusing Isodemus of plotting with the Cypselids of Corinth, placed his brother under arrest.¹³ There is evidence to suggest that Thrasybulus of Miletus, whose relations with Periander are well known, made an attack on Sicyon.¹⁴ Even if these accounts are fictitious they nevertheless preserve a tradition of hostility between

thenes. This is precisely the inference of Robertson *CO* 28 (1978) 56. It is unnecessary to refer the story, which perhaps originated at Sicyon, to a Macedonian source.

¹¹ Schol. Pind. *Nem.* 9.2. That the Amphictyony was in a position to distribute the spoils of Cirrha suggests that the war was conducted on its behalf. The rest of the plunder may have been divided among the other participants or reserved by the Amphictyony for itself.

¹² Hdt. 5.67ff.

¹³ Nic. Dam. *FGrH* 90 F 61. Beloch *Gr. Gesch.* I, 1 285, Denicolai *Atti R. Accad. d. Torino* 51 (1916), Jacoby *FGr* 90 61 comm. *ad loc.*, and Wade-Gery *CAH* 3 570 each has proposed different stemmata for the Qrthagorids. Cf. the review by Hammond *CO* 50 (1956) 45ff.

¹⁴ Fontin. 3.9.7. Cf. Hdt. 1.20ff.

Sicyon and Corinth. The Cypselids are known to have maintained a close connection with Delphi which doubtless extended to Cirrha as well. Herodotus suggests that Delphi had supported the Cypselids against the Bacchiads, although this may be the result of a later and tendentious tradition.¹⁵ The failure of Corinth to come to the aid of Cirrha thus may be referred to her domestic difficulties and to her war with Proclus.¹⁶

The existence of a Sicyonian fleet and the action taken against Cirrha are strong arguments to support the western aspirations of Cleisthenes, who fought neither for the Amphictyony nor for Apollo but rather for his own commercial and political interests. This policy seems to have been at least initially successful due to the disintegration of Cypselid Corinth. The alliance of Thessaly and Sicyon was made to the advantage of both parties although each fought for a different reason. The later opposition of Delphi and of Corinth represents a reaction against these early successes. The reversal suffered by Sicyon in the north, characterized by the attitude of Delphi and by the reassertion of Corinth, prompted Cleisthenes to look elsewhere for support.

This policy leads inevitably towards Athens, the last of the three attested participants in the first sacred war, and finds its expression in the story of the courtship of Agariste which itself reflects the interest of Cleisthenes in both eastern and western affairs. Cleisthenes conducted the courtship of his daughter Agariste in the grand manner. He proclaimed her eligibility after winning a great victory in the chariot race at Olympia.

The suitors were to stay for a year at the expense of Cleisthenes while a decision was made. Agariste, however, was no languishing Penelope. The details of her courtship have been drawn vividly by Herodotus.¹⁷ The list of suitors is international, impressive, and suggestive. There are two candidates from Magna Graecia to betoken the interests of Cleisthenes in the west. From the Peloponnese came no less than six suitors from cities hostile to Corinth and Sparta. There were two Athenians, Megacles who won the bride and Hippocleides who danced her away, to suggest the political instability of Athens and to attest the rivalry between the Alcmeonid and Philiad clans.¹⁸ It should be noted that Hippocleides was related to the Cypselids of Corinth.¹⁹ This may have had more than his manners to do with his failure to win Agariste. Hippocleides and Megacles represent at any event the interest of Cleisthenes in Athens.

¹⁵ Hdt. 5.92, Nic. Dam. *FGrH* 90 F 57. Cf. Parke *Oracle* 133ff.

¹⁶ Hdt. 3.50ff. See the remarks of Forrest *BCH* 80 (1956) 47.

¹⁷ Hdt. 6.128ff.

¹⁸ Cf. Forrest *BCH* 80 (1956) 38 and McGregor *ÉAPA* 72 (1941) 268. Alcmeonid relations with Delphi are discussed below. For the Philiad connections of Periander cf. Hdt. 6.35 and and Dobesch, *Der kleine Pauly IV* (1970) 632.

¹⁹ Hdt. 6.128. This may be the Hippocleides who was archon during the reform of the Panathenaia in 566. Cf. Cadoux *JHS* 68 (1948) 104.

Thus the policies of Cleisthenes begin to come clear. Commercial ambitions in the west and the opportunity to profit from the preoccupations of Corinth led to participation in the first sacred war and to ephemeral success in the west. Cleisthenes, however, could no more resist a reunited Corinth than Eurylochus could maintain the Amphictyony and eventually Delphi was subverted from both. Relations with Argos deteriorated to the point of war and a series of reverses was sustained on the southern frontier. Cleisthenes accordingly turned to the east for new allies which he found at Athens and at Thebes.

The participation of Athens is perhaps the most complicated problem of the first sacred war. The subject involves the connection between Cylon, Megacles, and Solon and therefore concerns the exile of the Alcmeonidae and the establishment of an Athenian interest at Delphi. The nature of relations between the oracle and the Athenian state must be considered in association with the activities of Athenian families at Delphi. To discuss these matters in detail would require a complete review of archaic Athenian history. For the present purpose it must suffice to treat them as they refer to the tradition of the first sacred war.

The difficulties experienced in Attica towards the end of the seventh century are well known but imperfectly understood. It was a period of political rivalry and social discontent at home and of territorial conflict abroad.²⁰ In an Olympic year between 636 and 624 an Athenian aristocrat named Cylon, encouraged by his father-in-law Theagenes of Megara and ostensibly supported by the oracle at Delphi, endeavored unsuccessfully to gain control of Athens and to install himself as a tyrant.²¹

Apollo had implied that Cylon, himself an Olympic victor, might take Athens during a great festival to Zeus.²² That Cylon misinterpreted this as a reference to Olympia is not surprising, it indeed the oracle preserved is not in fact a later attempt to justify his failure, but it does not detract from the argument that Delphi favored Theagenes and Cylon. The oracle may well represent an attempt on the part of revisionists at Delphi after the first sacred war to assert their recent connection with the Alcmeonidae by developing an ambiguous response to account for the support formerly given to Cylon by Apollo. Thucydides describes the isolation of Cylon and his supporters on the acropolis at Athens. The siege was at first conducted by a large segment of the Athenian people who later wearied of the effort and authorized the magistrates, under the leadership of Megacles, the archon eponymous and the scion of the Alcmeonidae, to settle the affair at their discretion.²³ Cylon

²⁰ Arist. *Pol.* 1305; Plut. *Sol.* 8 - 10; *Ath. Pol.* 5E. Cf. Andrewes *Tyrants* 83ff., Berve *Die Tyrannis* 14f., and Forrest *BCH* 80 (1956) 39ff.

²² Hdt. 5.71, Thuc. 1.1 6, Plut. *Sol.* 12. The chronology of the attempt is discussed by Gomme *Commentary* I 42 ff. Cf. Lang. *CPh* 62 (1967) 243ff.

²³ Thuc. 1.126.

²³ Hdt. 5.70, Thuc. 1.126, *Ath. Pol.* 1, *Ep. Her.* 2, Plut. *Sol.* 12. Cf. Gomme *Commentary* 425ff. and Davies *Families* 371.

and his brother, leaving the rest of their supporters to come to what terms they could, managed not very gallantly to escape. Megacles and his associates then killed the conspirators, even when they assumed the posture of suppliants, and thereby lay themselves open to accusations impiety. It is interesting to note that Cylon gained no support from the populace at large in the initial stages of his attempted coup. This leads inevitably to the conclusion that his political connections lay elsewhere.²⁴ Certainly Cylon had the backing of Megara and Delphi. At Athens he can only have appealed to the aristocracy, presumably troubled by the same concerns which disturbed them a generation later, for sympathy if not for open assistance. This support, if it was forthcoming, was overwhelmed by popular reaction. Cylon fled, and his supporters, doubtless Megarians, personal associates, and, to judge from the sequel, some of the aristocracy of Athens, were given no quarter. The vigor with which the conspiracy was resisted makes its connection with Megara all the more significant not only as an article of public revulsion against tyranny but also an example of hostility towards any interference of a foreign power in Athenian affairs. Nevertheless there was a reaction against the family of the man who had conducted the operations against the conspirators. The result was the prosecution and the conviction of the Alcmeonidae, probably at the hands of a frightened and jealous mobility, which, though it failed to support Cylon, nevertheless united to discredit his opponent.

It is difficult to evaluate the situation of the Alcmeonidae at Athens before the conspiracy of Cylon. The names Megacles and Alcmeon occur in the later king and archon lists and the lexicographical tradition relates the family to Theseus. Apart from the geneological material the evidence for the family is curious. The Alcmeonidae clearly are a *genos* and, to judge from the archonship of Megacles, eupatrid as well.²⁵ But the family cannot be connected with any Athenian cult nor can it be asserted that they ever controlled one.²⁶ This is quite remarkable in a family with such an illustrious reputation. The actions of the Alcmeonidae in the sixth century suggest an attempt to compensate for this deficiency. The Alcmeonids were unable in the first instance to avoid a curse directed against them after the suppression of Cylon. Their participation in the first sacred war and their subsequent reliance on and support of Pythian Apollo suggests that the family was obliged to make good its lack of local religious connections by establishing close relations with Delphi.

The Alcmeonidae fought at Delphi for their own purposes, and it is clear that the family, regardless of its status at Athens at the time, enjoyed a special connection with Apollo as a result. Alcmeon may have fought to compensate for the lack of local religious authority in Attica and perhaps to avenge the hostility shown by the god who had supported Cylon against his father. The marriage of Megacles, the son of Alcmeon, to Agariste, the daughter of Cleisthenes, proves the close connection

²⁴ Forrest *BCH* 80 (1956) 40 with discussion and Gomme *Commentary* I 425ff.

²⁵ Hdt. 5.62, *Ath. Pol.* 1.

²⁶ Davies *Families* 369. Cf. Sealey *Historia* 9 (1960) 153ff.

between the Alcmeonidae and Sicyon at this time. The subsequent and well known history of the Alcmeonidae at Delphi may be characterized by their intervention on behalf of Croesus and by the provision of funds for the reconstruction of the temple of Apollo after the fire of 548/47.²⁷

The first sacred war, like so many episodes of archaic Greek history, is an event whose interpretation is fraught with difficulties of substance and evaluation. The reconstruction herein presented rests on delicate arguments which may be criticized in points of detail. Nevertheless the course of the conflict and the motives of the belligerents are essentially clear. The result is not completely satisfactory, but it is essential to try, within the limitations of the material at hand, to present a coherent and consistent account of events which does justice to the sophistication and importance of the period under review.

²⁷ Hdt. 6.124 and de La Coste Messeliere *BCH* 70 (1946) 27. See also Cromez, *L'antiquite classique* 47 (1948) 448ff.