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INTRODUCTION

Destruction, Survival, and Recovery in the Ancient Greek World

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FROM THE TROJAN WAR TO THE SACK OF ROME BY ALARIC, FROM THE fall of Constantinople to the bombing of European cities in World War II and now the devastation of Syrian towns filmed by drones, the destruction of cities and monuments and the slaughter of civilian populations are among the most dramatic events in world history. Since the beginning of literature and figurative art, authors, storytellers, bards, poets, artists, tragedians, historians, art historians, and archaeologists have been fascinated by the evocative power of destructions and ruined cities.¹

The ancient literary sources recount many incidents of destruction and slaughter in the Greek world. The fear of being attacked, enslaved, or annihilated was so real that almost all city-states increasingly built city-walls to protect their populations and economic assets, a process that started in the Archaic period.² Despite extensive fortifications and their power to repel invaders, however, the ancient historians report that Greek cities continued to be besieged, stormed, “looted,” “destroyed,” “annihilated,” and “razed to the ground.” For instance, Herodotus (6.101.3) states that the Persians burned down the sanctuaries of Eretria in 490 B.C. and took away its citizens as slaves. According to Livy (45.34.1–6) in 167 B.C., the Romans destroyed seventy

¹ For the reception of destructions and ruined cities in various cultures, see the collection of essays edited by Pretti and Settis 2015. On the theme of destruction in poetry and rhetoric, see Demoen 2001.

² Frederiksen 2011; Ducrey 2019, pp. 329–365.

towns and enslaved 150,000 people in Epeiros, an act of destruction with few parallels in the Ancient World (see B. Forsén, in this volume). But how reliable are these literary sources? Did ancient authors exaggerate the scale of destruction and the number of killings to create sensational narratives? What were the motives for destroying or “killing” cities? How can we measure the effects of destruction on their populations? Can we study the patterns of demographic and economic recovery? The volume aims to provide, if not definitive answers, at least an archaeological and historical framework for studying the impact of destruction on ancient Greek cities and the sequences of survival and recovery.

Archaeological data related to destructions are challenging (as discussed in P. Karkanas’ chapter in this volume), especially when one attempts to link archaeological horizons with a single event that unfolded in the span of a few days.³ In some cases, destruction layers do not survive, as they were cleaned away during a phase of recovery. Moreover, even if a destruction layer is well dated and documented in excavation, it remains difficult to assess its exact causes – not to mention the scale of destructions for an entire city and its impact on a region. The incompleteness, ambiguity, and complexity of archaeological data in relation to destructions data have been neatly analyzed by A. Snodgrass. A passage deserves to be quoted in full:

If an archaeologist reports that a settlement site that he is excavating was burned and then abandoned, the historian and the layman in general will understand him to mean the settlement as a whole, or at least very substantial parts of it. In fact, of course, such an inference is only secure when the settlement has been entirely, or very largely, excavated. Even in Greece, where some settlements have been under intermittent excavation for over a hundred years, this condition is very seldom satisfied. Even when it is, and a horizon of destruction is found everywhere, the conclusion that this destruction was synchronous, that it was all a single episode, is likely to be based on common sense inference rather than on demonstration: the degree of precision, in even the best-dated pottery series, is unlikely to justify a distinction between one day and, say, ten years. It may be unnecessary to remind ourselves that documented history offers cases of a settlement being destroyed twice within a very short time. Furthermore, destruction deposits frequently (and predictably) contain material that was far from brand-new at the time of the disaster. (. . .) The distinction between natural disasters, such as earthquake and accidental fire, and the results of military action becomes a crucial one in the context of historical reconstruction. Yet for the archaeologist excavating a site, it is often very obscure, even imperceptible. There is an area of especial doubt centered round the question of how far the military resources of the ancient world were capable of visiting *total* destruction on the whole

³ Driessen 2013b, pp. 12–16.

surface area of a settlement. Even the slaughter of an entire population, followed by permanent abandonment of the site, could easily be encompassed without leaving archaeologically traceable evidence.⁴

Despite these difficulties, we were intrigued by the cases in which archaeologists had repeatedly failed to discover compelling evidence for destruction or abandonment. Not that we denied that the event ever took place, but it appeared increasingly evident that the magnitude and impact of the destruction had often been inflated by ancient and modern historians alike, as well as, in some instances, by archaeologists. Then, although we were struck by the high number of cities that allegedly sustained sieges and “destructions,” we were surprised to see how many of them seemed to have recovered in the span of one or two generations. Attacks can be quick and lethal, but not devastating enough to terminate occupation. For instance, P. Bruneau has shown that the impact of the attacks on Delos by the troops of Mithridates in 88 B.C. and the raid of the pirate Athenodorus in 69 B.C. had been exaggerated; these assaults did not provoke the abandonment of the island.⁵ Other destructions, despite their violence, end up having a modest impact in the long term. Many examples in this book demonstrate “miraculous” recoveries in the span of one generation. How could this happen?

The pattern of rapid recovery following devastating destructions appears to contradict the verdict of several economic historians. Did destruction from warfare truly inhibit economic growth in the Ancient Greek World? Violent episodes were disruptive in the short term, but perhaps not substantial enough to shake or devastate the economic and institutional foundations of cities. Moreover, many examples show that population evacuation was an effective survival tactic, destructions in the countryside resulting from pillaging and ravaging were limited in scale, ancient populations were surprisingly resilient, and demographic and economic recovery could be astoundingly rapid. Besides, because Greeks were aware that warfare could interrupt economic activity (in some cases factoring this possibility into their contracts), adequate measures were taken to recover from a disaster. In the course of our research, site visits, and extensive conversations, it became increasingly clear to us that there was another story of destruction to be told, one focusing as much on the immediate impact of the event as on the recovery phase in the long term. In an illuminating way, by studying the recovery phase of a Greek city following destruction, much can be said about its population, economic base, and institutions.

⁴ Snodgrass 1987, pp. 41–42. ⁵ Bruneau 1968, pp. 671–691.

THE STUDY OF NATURAL DISASTERS AND MILITARY DESTRUCTIONS

The topic of destruction and its impact on ancient populations is as old as the destructions themselves. Ancient authors reflected upon them, and Polybius even criticized the accounts of them made by his fellow historians (discussed below). Since the end of World War II, the topic has been studied from different angles and by different disciplines (ancient history, philology, archaeology, economic sciences), yet without much collaboration in most cases. Ancient historians, archaeologists, and philologists have different perspectives regarding destructions and tend to study them differently. Moreover, there has been a clear tendency to study human and natural destructions separately. A rapid review of the scholarship will help us frame the debate, situate our research questions, and specify the aim of the current volume.

Earthquakes, volcanoes, flooding, and landslides have attracted some scholarly attention in the nineteenth and most of the twentieth century. Since the 1970s, however, the concept of “natural disaster” has emerged as a proper field of research,⁶ and the last decades have seen the multiplication of studies devoted to natural disasters and their impact on ancient populations. The proliferation of studies on natural disasters can be attributed to their high relevance, as the number, frequency, and violence of these events have significantly increased in the last twenty years due to global warming (tsunamis, hurricanes, earthquakes, floods, droughts, wildfires). In 2006, J. Jouannat, J. Leclant, and M. Zink published *L’homme face aux calamités naturelles dans l’Antiquité et au Moyen Âge*, studying the reception of natural disasters and other calamities in literary sources.⁷ In 2016, L. Thély provided a historical study of natural disasters in ancient Greece, reviewing their impact and exploring the management of catastrophes by communities, as well as their resilience and the financial mechanisms for reconstruction.⁸ At the same time, archaeologists became increasingly interested in studying natural disasters and destructions, as well as their impact on ancient settlements, architecture, and populations. In 2000, a collection of papers entitled *The Archaeology of Geological Catastrophes* addressed the archaeological signature and cultural impact of large-scale geological events such as earthquakes and volcanic eruptions.⁹ Five articles of the volume were devoted to the Thera eruption, thus illustrating the vitality, this topic of inquiry would acquire in the following decades within the field of Aegean Bronze Age Archaeology.

During the same period, archaeologists increasingly felt the need to theorize destructions in their field. In 2002, R. Torrence and J. Grattan published *Natural Disasters and Cultural Changes*, stressing the importance of past and

⁶ Thély 2016, pp. 17–23. ⁷ Jouannat, Leclant, and Zink 2006. ⁸ Thély 2016.

⁹ McGuire et al. 2000.

present disasters experienced by societies, their role as possible vectors of cultural change, as well as their importance for archaeological theory and practice.¹⁰ More recently, J. Driessen, a specialist of the Thera eruption and its impact on Crete, has conducted very stimulating work on the archaeology of destruction. In 2013, he published *Destruction: Archaeological, Philological and Historical Perspectives*, a broad and robust collection of topics by archaeologists, historians, and philologists engaging with theoretical and general patterns of destruction using different approaches and chronological scales. In 2017, he co-edited with T. Cunningham *Crisis to Collapse: The Archaeology of Social Breakdown*, a collection of essays investigating crisis and collapse narratives in archaeology using different case studies from Europe, the Levant, and South America.

In general, it is revealing to note that most archaeological and theoretical work regarding destructions in Greece deals with natural disaster during the Bronze Age. As a result, Aegean prehistorians have led the way on this topic. True, destruction layers play a crucial role in archaeology, as they provide convenient chronological horizons that mark the end of a period and the start of a new one. As shown by A. González-Ruibal, “archaeological periods, with its focus on the life of the material, *tend to privilege destruction*” (italics are ours).¹¹ The Thera eruption, the destruction of palatial complexes, and the collapse of the Mycenaean civilization due to societal and natural/environmental factors have, in many ways, defined the chronological landmarks of the Bronze Age used by Aegean prehistorians.¹²

On the other hand, the military destruction of cities and the fate of ancient populations have primarily been studied by ancient historians working in the domain of Greek warfare. P. Ducrey published in 1968 his University of Lausanne dissertation on the treatment of prisoners of war following the fall of cities in ancient Greece and the violence which civilians suffered.¹³ The book provided a social history of siege warfare seen from the perspective of the besieged and the vanquished. Using siege statistics, Ducrey was able to correct many *idées reçues* on the fate of populations and prisoners after sieges, to track down the realities of *andrapodismos*, and to outline the general terms of negotiation and capitulation. Interestingly, it appears that the massacre of populations following sieges were more common during the Peloponnesian War than during the Hellenistic period.¹⁴ Ducrey later published other essays on these topics, examining cases of cruelty and violence, and analyzing the global importance of city-walls as negotiation leverage and as a factor in negotiating

¹⁰ Torrence and Grattan 2002. ¹¹ González-Ruibal 2013, p. 41.

¹² Civilization collapse, in particular, continues to draw considerable scholarly attention and interest. See Cline 2014 and Murray 2017.

¹³ Ducrey [1968] 1999. For Hellenistic Asia Minor, see also Boulay 2014, pp. 253–272.

¹⁴ Ducrey [1968] 1999, pp. 56–74; Chaniotis 2005, p. 125.

favorable terms for the city's population after capitulation – thus avoiding massacres and limiting the range of destructions.¹⁵

The impact of warfare and destructions had mostly been studied in urban contexts, but in the 1980s, the attention progressively shifted to include the territory of Greek *poleis*. In *Warfare and Agriculture in Classical Greece*, V. D. Hanson analyzed in great detail the effects of conquest, military operations, and destruction on the rural landscape of Greek cities, mainly Athens during the Peloponnesian War. Contrary to prevailing assumptions, he was able to demonstrate that invasions and ravaging did not have a profound and lasting impact on the agricultural (and therefore, economic) backbone of most *poleis*, stressing the resilience of ancient communities. Hanson observed that the effects of destroying crops were generally short-term.¹⁶ It is very difficult to destroy olive trees without completely uprooting them, and fields of burnt crops can be quickly sown again. All the available evidence indicates that the economy of Athens recovered quickly after the Peloponnesian War.¹⁷ According to Hanson, “*permanent and systematic agricultural damage and subsequent economic collapse were difficult to achieve under the conditions of ancient warfare.*”¹⁸ The book was very well received and launched a new cycle of interest on the defense of territories, rural populations, and agricultural production in ancient Greece.¹⁹ Other scholars confirmed Hanson's conclusions. According to C. Chandezon, Greek warfare, in its traditional form, could not endanger the agricultural resources of the *polis*: war would indeed provoke a severe and sudden subsistence crisis, but it was followed by rapid recovery.²⁰

These results raised new questions: if most invasions and ravaging did not destroy the agricultural and economic backbone of Greek *poleis*, what then was the real impact of conquest and destruction? A way to look at these dynamics is to review the sizeable literary evidence related to booty and conquest, and thus to indirectly collect data on the economic losses of the defeated. In 1991, W. K. Pritchett dedicated a large part of the fifth volume of *The Greek State at War* to war booty, the object of booty (including cities and sanctuaries), the fate of captives following sieges, and the profits of war. By collecting *testimonia* and organizing them into thematic tables, Pritchett provided the bases for studying the potential financial advantages of (siege) warfare from the victors' point of view.²¹ Many texts give the impression of total economic disaster following plunder, but the narrative of booty in ancient texts should often be parallel to that of destruction, which is often inflated to strike awe and inspire emotions. It remains that the actual economic consequences of booty for the defeated remain hard to quantify and that the real price of destruction is poorly

¹⁵ Ducrey 2019. ¹⁶ Hanson 1998. ¹⁷ See Hanson 1998, pp. 131–173.

¹⁸ Hanson 1998, p. xii. ¹⁹ Ober 1985; Fachard 2012.

²⁰ Chandezon 1999, p. 207 (with ref.). ²¹ Pritchett 1991.

understood. How much booty could be taken by the enemy? Similarly, how much capital could be hidden or saved by the defeated? How fast could a city recover economically from defeat and plunder? Was pillage extensive enough to shake the economic fabric of Greek *poleis*? Such questions remain unanswered and must be tackled only on a case-by-case basis. They illustrate again that the economic dimensions of Greek warfare must be studied more systematically.

In his social and cultural study of Hellenistic warfare, A. Chaniotis dedicated several sections to the economic impact of war, the fate of vanquished populations, and the economics of booty.²² He considered that the economic impact of siege warfare, particularly for sacked cities, was particularly heavy: “For a city, a foreign attack and a long siege not only meant the temporary loss of the countryside with all its resources, but also the substantial destruction of the urban center, especially as artillery device became increasingly effective (. . .) When a city was actually taken (*doriaotos*) – and this occurred quite often – the damage was more substantial.”²³ One might object that the use of artillery would undoubtedly damage the walls (especially the parapets and the towers), but the bombardment of the urban fabric with stone balls would provoke more terror than extensive and irreparable damage. Moreover, the destruction of public infrastructure and religious monuments would certainly come at a cost, but the latter could also be postponed to better times (as Athens did after 480 B.C., see J. Camp in this volume) and did not undermine the economic base of cities dramatically. Yet Chaniotis rightly points out that the impact of *repeated* conflicts could be heavy. Literary sources indeed refer to abandoned cities and rural landscapes due to *continual* wars, which, in turn, suggest a demographic and economic decline.²⁴ Many authors, ancient and modern alike, have attributed the general demographic decline of Greece in the late Hellenistic and Early Roman period to chronic warfare, which finally had an enduring toll on Greek demographics.²⁵ This phenomenon is, obviously, a complex one, and attributing the demographic decrease of the Greek countryside – well documented by survey archaeology throughout Greece – cannot be attributed to warfare alone, as already suggested by Polybius (36.17.5–7). Other factors were at stake (rural exodus, economic recession, a progressive weakening of institutions, Roman policies of occupation, economic opportunism of the conqueror), and many issues remain unresolved.²⁶ More recently, W. Scheidel studied the impact of mass warfare in World History as a leveling factor on ancient populations, following his “Four Horsemen” of violence and leveling: mass-mobilization warfare, transformative revolutions,

²² Chaniotis 2005. See also Boulay 2014, pp. 253–272. ²³ Chaniotis 2005, pp. 119–120.

²⁴ Chaniotis 2005, p. 126. ²⁵ Alcock 1993, pp. 25–27; Chaniotis 2005, pp. 138–140.

²⁶ Bresson 2016, pp. 61–64; Rousset 2008; Bintliff in this volume.

state collapse, and catastrophic plague (which we have just experienced with COVID-19).²⁷ However, the military events described by Scheidel belong to major conflicts whose scales of destruction are not comparable with the conquests and “destructions” suffered by ancient Greek cities.

Overall, there is no doubt that war and looting provoked economic disruption, terror, and death – especially in cases of endemic warfare. However, it is essential to distinguish the narrative of destruction from the accurate scale and extent of military damage and to focus on the recovery phase of destroyed cities. In light of current research, we wish to find ways to measure the economic and demographic impact of such military destructions on a case-by-case approach and to study the recovery phase with greater care.

WAR AND THE ANCIENT ECONOMY

We often read that perpetual warfare among the Greek city-states inhibited the expansion of markets and virtually eliminated the possibilities for economic growth in the Classical and Hellenistic worlds. According to this belief, the best way for states and individuals to gain profits was by booty from conquest and by slave labor. For instance, P. Millett has asserted that “exogenous shocks of famine, plague, and war took a heavy toll in the smaller economy of the Greek world.”²⁸ As a result, “scope for sustained growth in the centuries B.C. was elusive or non-existent.” According to Chaniotis “the extensive destruction of cities and the surrounding countryside had ‘long-term consequences’ and caused a decrease in population.”²⁹ J. Ober has noted that “a Greek *polis* confronted a meaningful chance of being destroyed (...) as a result of the sack, of the central city and/or extermination, enslavement, or forced resettlement of the entire population.”³⁰ According to him, “a Greek *polis* confronted something like a 1:3 chance of suffering from destruction at some point in its archaic/classical history.” This would mean that hundreds of city-states out of the thousands listed in the *Inventory of Poleis* compiled by the Copenhagen Polis Project would have suffered destruction from 600 to 300 B.C. This would seemingly have had a devastating effect on the economy of the cities. One is often brought to this natural and logical conclusion when reading the ancient accounts of destructions. But how much of this was true? Did literary sources exaggerate the effect and scale of these “destructions”? What was the real economic and demographic impact of a “destruction” for an ancient Greek city? How could cities and states recover from “destructions”?

²⁷ Scheidel 2017. ²⁸ Millett 2001, p. 35. ²⁹ Chaniotis 2005, p. 138.

³⁰ Ober 2008, pp. 81–82.

The topic of destruction is very important at the moment because we are in the middle of a revolution in approaches to the economy of ancient Greece. In the 1980s, there reigned in ancient history what K. Hopkins of Cambridge University called the New Orthodoxy. Hopkins reduced this orthodoxy to a series of basic tenets: the primary basis of wealth was agriculture with most people busy growing food, there was little inter-regional trade and little specialization of labor, and markets were very limited and catered mostly to the desires of the elite for luxury goods. According to this view, most farmers lived to achieve self-sufficiency and never participated in markets. City-states aimed only at securing a supply of imports and did not promote exports. These basic tenets were repeated verbatim in the 2007 *Cambridge Economic History of the Greco-Roman World*.³¹

These views started to be challenged twenty years ago, and in the past decade there has been a growing consensus that the economy of ancient Greece was not stagnant but dynamic and that the expansion of markets that started in the Archaic period led to economic growth and a rise in living standards. A leading proponent of this challenge was A. Bresson, who, as early as the late 1980s, showed that Greek city-states were concerned about both exports and imports. Bresson made a groundbreaking contribution in his *La cité marchande* published in 2000 and in 2007–2008 published his impressive synthesis *L'économie de la Grèce des cités*, which has now been translated into English.³² In an essay published in 2002, Harris demonstrated that the level of specialization was far higher than scholars like Finley and Hopkins had previously assumed and that this led to the creation of a permanent market in Athens and other Greek cities and extensive trade with other communities.³³ In the *Ancient Greek Economy*, E. M. Harris, D. M. Lewis, and M. Woolmer published essays by scholars stressing the importance of markets in the Greek world and their contribution to economic growth.³⁴ Recent work on the Roman Economy directed by A. Wilson and A. Bowman at Oxford University has drawn on the evidence of archaeology for the study of the rural economy and the importance of markets.³⁵

As stressed by Bresson, Greece experienced a period of growth between the Archaic and Hellenistic periods.³⁶ However, during this period of sustained growth, warfare was endemic, marked by extreme violence, enslavement, and urban destructions. Was the level of destruction as high as many ancient and modern historians claim? This brings us back to the issues to be addressed in this

³¹ Scheidel, Morris, and Saller 2007, with the criticism of Harris and Lewis in Harris, Lewis, and Woolmer 2016, pp. 1–40.

³² Bresson 2000, 2007–2008, 2016.

³³ Harris 2002, with Lewis' updated list in Stewart, Harris, and Lewis 2020, pp. 129–174.

³⁴ Harris, Lewis, and Woolmer 2016. ³⁵ Bowman and Wilson 2009, 2013.

³⁶ Bresson 2016, p. xxii.

volume: what was the economic impact of the destruction of cities? Was it pervasive? Could it have placed a major brake on economic growth?

ANCIENT ACCOUNTS OF DESTRUCTIONS: BETWEEN LITERARY TOPOS AND REALITY

There can be no doubt that some Greek cities were extensively destroyed in the Classical and Hellenistic periods. The fear of being attacked and the threat of destruction were a constant concern for their populations. For anyone questioning this, it is sufficient to look at the thousands of fortifications that dot the Greek landscape. R. Frederiksen has shown that Greek *poleis*, starting in the Archaic period, invested massively in building fortifications to protect their urban population and economic resources.³⁷ In later periods some of them took concrete measures to defend and secure the countryside and its resources.³⁸ At the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War, it would have been difficult to attack a city without having to breach its walls first. In the Classical period, over 60 percent of the 870 located *poleis* were fortified, and J. Ober has shown that almost all large cities were fortified by the end of the fourth century.³⁹ City-walls offered the best protection against loss of life, enslavement, the destruction of urban infrastructure, pillaging, loss of capital, and even state collapse and death. Yet, in many cases, they were just not enough to prevent a city from falling to the enemy and suffer destruction.

One of the most notorious examples was the destruction of Olynthus by Philip II of Macedon in 348 B.C., which is discussed in greater detail by S. Psoma and C. Gatzolis in Chapter 6. The site of the city was extensively excavated from 1928 to 1938 by a team from the American School of Classical Studies at Athens, under the direction of D. Robinson. Evidence for the siege was found in numerous sling-bullets, including one inscribed with the name of Philip's general Hipponicos and an arrowhead with Philip's name on it.⁴⁰ Many of the houses on the site showed traces of intense burning, and the excavations led by Robinson turned up very few valuable objects, which were no doubt looted by the Macedonian soldiers.⁴¹ In general, the site appears to have been abandoned after 348 B.C. It does appear that some houses in the Northwest quarter were reoccupied after the siege, which reveals that the claim of Demosthenes (9.26) that Olynthus was "so ruthlessly destroyed that a traveler would find it hard to say whether they (i.e. the cities of the Chalcidice) had even been inhabited" is somewhat exaggerated.⁴² In general, however, the literary evidence lines up with the archaeological finds. There can

³⁷ Frederiksen 2011. ³⁸ Ober 1985; Fachard 2012. ³⁹ Ober 2015, p. 43.

⁴⁰ Cahill 2002, p. 46. ⁴¹ Cahill 2002, pp. 48–49. ⁴² Cahill 2002, pp. 49–57.