

Bridge or Divide? The Strait of Messana from the Time of Pyrrhus to the First Punic War

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1 Introduction

Located at the centre of the Mediterranean, between the northeastern tip of Sicily and the toe of Italy, the Strait of Messana (modern-day Messina) played a crucial part in the history of the Graeco-Roman world. From the eighth century BCE, its coasts received successive waves of Greek colonists, mainly of Chalcidian or, more generally, Euboean provenance, who founded the face-to-face *poleis* of Zankle (Messana), on the Sicilian side, and Rhegium (Rhegium), on the Italian side. Provided as they were with safe harbours, both *poleis* were soon involved in the region's web of maritime trade and became prosperous cities, leaving behind a fair amount of archaeological and literary documentation as they did so.¹ Accordingly, we know that they came to the forefront of military history during the Late Archaic and Classical periods because the control of the strait evolved into a bone of contention among various Greek *poleis* of Magna Graecia and Sicily, including Syracuse; it also captivated the interest of Carthage.² The strait's attractiveness became even more evident, however, when a new political actor, Rome, appeared in the area at the beginning of the Hellenistic period. Rome's intrusion into local affairs proved gradual but irreversible. In the aftermath of her wars against

- 1 According to ancient sources, the foundation of Zankle occurred prior to that of Rhegium: on Zankle, see Thuc. 6,4,5; Callim. *Aet.* 2, fr. 43 Pfeiffer = fr. 50 Massimilla, 58–83; Pseudo-Scymn. 283–286 (= 116 Marcotte); Strabo 6,2,3; Paus. 4,23,7; Euseb. 8o Schöne, 181 Helm; on Rhegium, see Antioch. *FGrHist/BNJ* 555 F 9; Heracl. Lemb. *Exc. Polit.* 55 Dils (= Arist. fr. 611,55 Rose); Diod. Sic. 8,23,2; Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 19,2; Strabo 6,1,6. For modern commentaries, see Vallet (1958) 59–80; Malkin (1987) 34–41; Domínguez (2006) 263–266; Morakis (2011) 473–476; Bianchi (2020) 11–23, 28–40; add Gras (2000) 19–28 and De Angelis (2016) 83–84, 96, 149, 259, 261–262 for material evidence documenting aspects of the economic and social life of the area.
- 2 Suffice it to remember here the Battle of Himera (480 BCE), the Sicilian front of the Peloponnesian War (especially in 427–424 BCE), and the expeditions into the area of the strait by the Syracusan tyrant Dionysius I (399/8–387/6 BCE). Useful overviews are found in Ampolo (1993) 59–71; Meister (1993) 73–81; Consolo Langher (2002) 251–267.

the Samnites, she began to look to the far-southern *poleis* of Magna Graecia and, by taking advantage of their fear of the Bruttians and Lucanians, pushed some of them to accept military garrisons (from 285 BCE onwards).³ Shortly afterwards, those *poleis* also found themselves facing King Pyrrhus, who invaded the territory of southern Italy and cast their recently established relations with Rome into crisis.⁴ The final Roman victory over Pyrrhus (and, of course, the Bruttians and Lucanians) was of critical importance for the political balance in the region because all of the Greek *poleis* were now forced to come to terms with Rome.⁵ Rhegion concluded a treaty of alliance with the Romans in 270 BCE, which fulfilled the necessary condition for Rome to commence her expansion overseas, with an eye on Sicily. It is worth noting, however, that this commencement was precipitated by the presence of the Mamertines across the strait, whose political conduct in Messana offered the Romans the opportunity to bring their weapons to Sicily and become involved in the First Punic War with the Carthaginians.⁶ With the hindsight of history, therefore, it was the strait where the Romans laid the foundations of their Mediterranean empire.⁷

In this chapter, I will investigate the role of the strait in the changing scenario of the third century BCE, initially focusing on its geographical and spatial dimensions and subsequently analysing how it was perceived and experienced by the political actors who were active there, including Pyrrhus, the Romans, and the very *poleis* that prospered along its coasts. Among those actors, I will also consider the military units, such as that of the Mamertines, which occupied Messana and Rhegion by force during that century. Ultimately, I aim to determine whether the strait was seen and lived during this period as a bridge or a divide between Sicily and Italy from a political, as well as a cultural, perspective.

3 Thuri in 285–282 BCE; Locri, Croton, and Rhegion (with the possible addition of Hipponion) in 282 or 280 BCE. In general, see Lomas (1993) 51–52; Cappelletti (2002) 111–116. For the specific case of Rhegion, see further below.

4 The classic works on Pyrrhus and his military achievements are those of Nenci (1953) and Lévêque (1957). One may add the contributions collected in *Pallas* 79 (2009) 147–266 and Kent (2020). See Miano's contribution in this volume for updated discussion and further references.

5 See Maniglia's contribution in this volume.

6 See below for further discussion and references.

7 Similarly e.g. Meister (1993) 92. That applies, of course, regardless of whether the First Punic War was planned by the Romans or not, for which see e.g. Hoyos (1998) 82–99. In the first century BCE, Cicero (*Verr.* 2.5,170) recognised the centrality of the strait within the context of Rome's Mediterranean expansion by defining Messana as “the entrance to Sicily” (*vestibulum Siciliae*).

2 The Mamertines and the *legio Campana*: The Strait as a Bridge

In contemporary English dictionaries, “strait” is usually defined as a noun indicating an arm of sea that joins two larger bodies of sea.⁸ This is exactly what the Greeks called a *poros*, a “channel”: the Strait of Messina was a *poros* because it was considered a channel linking the Tyrrhenian and Ionian Seas. From Thucydides onwards, however, the Greeks also used the word *porthmos* to define the strait, conceiving it as an arm of the sea between two areas of land, that is, Sicily and Italy.⁹ This point is crucial to the present analysis. The term *porthmos* did not imply an idea of separation but, like *poros*, expressed the idea of connection: both words are derived from the root of the verb *peraō*, which means “to cross (from one side to another)”. Indeed, the ferry boats that connected the Sicilian and Italian sides of the strait were called *porthmeia*.¹⁰ Consequently, the Strait of Messina, as a *porthmos*, properly comprised not only the arm of the sea between the northeastern tip of Sicily and the toe of Italy but also the coasts washed by its waters. From the Greek perspective, one can thus say that the strait appeared as a “crossing space” shared by the *poleis* that faced each other from its opposing coasts.

Such a view was probably prompted by the very short distance between Sicily and Italy (only three kilometres at the strait’s narrowest point), which provided Messina and Rhegium with mutual visibility.¹¹ It was further guaranteed by the mutual relations Messina and Rhegium developed over the centuries, which were most intense in the areas of economic and social exchange.¹² It is necessary to ask, however, whether and, if so, to what extent this perspective was also facilitated by the fact that Messina and Rhegium were, at times, unified or associated on a political level, a situation which, as far as is known, first happened in the fifth century BCE. Notably, in the years 488–476/5 BCE, the tyrant of Rhegium, Anaxilas, managed to extend his rule to cover Zankle,

8 “A narrow area of sea that connects two larger areas of sea” (Online Cambridge Dictionary); “A narrow channel of the sea linking two larger areas of sea” (Online Collins Dictionary); “A narrow passage of water that connects two seas or large areas of water” (Online Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries).

9 The analysis by Prontera (1993) 128–129 remains fundamental; see also Gras (2000) 23. Thucydides calls the strait a *poros* at 6,48,1 and a *porthmos* at 4,24,5 and 6,2,4. Strabo (2,5,19–20) also uses both terms when referring to the strait.

10 Plut. *Tim.* 19,3.

11 This narrowest point lies between Cape Pelorus (on the Sicilian side) and Scyllaeum (on the Italian side) at the northern end of the strait.

12 See above, fn. 1. On the strait as a “mutual space” between Messina and Rhegium, see McKenzie (2022) 57.

creating what is often known in modern scholarship as the “Kingdom of the Strait”.¹³ To this end, he refounded Zankle as Messana, taking inspiration from the name of his old country, Messenia, in the Peloponnese.¹⁴ It is worth adding, also, that his successor Miccythus, who maintained his rule across the strait until 467/6 BCE, made a dedication at Olympia where he proudly declared himself a “Rhegian and Messenian” (*Rhēginos kai Messēnios*).¹⁵ Of course, the absence of a collective ethnonym indicates that Rhegion and Messana did not merge into a single political community in the early fifth century BCE; it is, nevertheless, evident that the strait functioned politically as a bridge between Italy and Sicily during this period, influencing how local rulers shaped and defined the relations between the two *poleis*. Later, a similar political situation only occurred in the third century BCE, after the death of the Syracusan tyrant Agathocles (d. 289 BCE),¹⁶ at which point Messana and Rhegion were, almost at the same time, taken over and subsequently ruled by military units from Campania. This situation now deserves to be thoroughly analysed.

Messana was the first to be militarily occupied. In *ca.* 287–282 BCE, the Mamertines, a unit of Oscan-speaking mercenaries previously recruited by Agathocles, left Syracuse, made their way to the strait, and were finally received by the Messanians into their city.¹⁷ Ancient (Greek and Roman) authors generally present the Mamertines as impious soldiers who betrayed the good faith of the Messanians by killing the majority of them and seizing their goods and families.¹⁸ Polybius is largely representative of this popular opinion when he states that “some [...] mercenaries of Agathocles, having

13 For extensive analyses, see Luraghi (1994) 187–224; Bianchi (2020) 100–150.

14 Thuc. 6,4,5–6; Paus. 4,23,6–9. Zankle was actually refounded by Anaxilas as Messene (with the vocal “e” typical of the Ionian dialect); the final spelling of the city’s name, Messana (with the vocal “a” typical of the Dorian dialect), was introduced some decades later (when the tyranny of Anaxilas’ heirs was overthrown), as coin legends demonstrate. See Caccamo Caltabiano (1993) 67–71.

15 Luraghi (1994) 224–229; Bianchi (2020) 150–163. Miccythus’ dedication at Olympia: *IOl* 267–269; Paus. 5,26,5; *SEG* 4, 794; *IGI Reggio* 65.

16 During the fifth and fourth centuries BCE, Athens (at the time of the Peloponnesian War) and Syracuse (under Dionysius I) sought to use the strait as a bridge between Sicily and Italy; however, Messana and Rhegion were never politically associated in a stable manner. The same was true of the period of Agathocles’ rule at Syracuse. For references, see above, fn. 2.

17 The number of Mamertines in Messana is unknown. Referring to the year 276 (or early 275) BCE, Plutarch (*Pyrrh.* 24,1) says that (more than) ten thousand of them attacked Pyrrhus, but this figure is probably exaggerated; see below.

18 Thus Polyb. 1,7,2–5, 1,8,1; Diod. Sic. 21,18,1–3; 22,1,3, 22,7,4; Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 20,4,4 and 8; Strabo 6,2,3; Cass. Dio 9,40,8. The exact date of the Mamertine occupation of Messana is unknown; at any rate, it must be placed after the civil strife that affected Syracuse

for some time cast greedy eyes upon Messana, owing to its beauty and wealth, no sooner got an opportunity than they made a treacherous attempt upon that city”.¹⁹ A significant exception is Alfius, the author of an (almost entirely lost) work on the Punic Wars, who, in corroborating the Italic origin of the Mamertines, offered a positive account of their takeover of Messana: according to a fragment preserved through Festus’ lexicon, he depicted them as “saviours” who came from Italy to aid the Messanians, then struggling with an unspecified war, and finally set the community on a new, peaceful course.²⁰ Alfius’ story is suspect, but a new course did, indeed, begin for Messana. Under Mamertine rule, it was possibly renamed *Mamertina* (in honour of the Italic war god Mamers) and became a Greek–Oscan city.²¹

The Mamertines originally came from inland Campania, a fact that is not only stated by a variety of ancient literary testimonies but also seems to be confirmed by the Oscan language they used in their inscriptions and coin legends.²² In light of this, scholars have investigated how the Mamertine occupation of Messana impacted the lives of its conquered Greek residents: the standard view is that these lives were severely disrupted, especially if one

because of Agathocles’ death (289–287 BCE): see Tagliamonte (1994) 191; Pinzone (1999) 122–124; Gómez de Caso Zuriaga (2009) 10–11, 35.

19 Polyb. 1,7,2: Μεσσήνην μὲν γὰρ [...] παρ’ Ἀγαθοκλεῖ μισθοφοροῦντες καὶ πάλαι περὶ τὸ κάλλος καὶ τὴν λουπὴν εὐδαιμονίαν τῆς πόλεως ὀφθαλμιῶντες ἅμα τῷ λαβεῖν καιρὸν εὐθὺς ἐπεχείρησαν παρασπονδεῖν. Transl. Shuckburgh, modified.

20 Fest. 150 Lindsay, s.v. *Mamertini* = *FRHist* 69 F 1: *Itaque ii iussi patria decedere, cum in parte ea Si<ciliae> (Si<ciliae> is to be emended to Si<lae silvae> (Cichorius (1922) 66–67) or possibly to It<aliae> (FRHist 69 F 1, Commentary, 570)) consedisent quae <adhu>c Tauricana dicitur, forte <labo>rantibus bello no<v>o Messanensibus auxilio venerunt ultro, eosque a<b eo> liberarunt †provinciales†: quod ob <me>ritum eorum, ut gratiam referrent, et in suum corpus communionemque agrorum invitarunt eos, et nomen acceperunt unum, ut dicerentur Mamertini.* Alfius was probably a Mamertine and lived in the late Republic or Augustan period, as a result of which his story seems to have mixed layers of local traditions developed from the third century BCE onwards: see e.g. Dench (1997) 44; Pinzone (2002) 117–120; Crawford (2007) 276–278.

21 Diod. Sic. 21,18,1. Although it cannot be demonstrated that the city was officially renamed *Mamertina*, “the ethnic became – and remained – Mamertinus”: thus Crawford (2007) 273.

22 According to Polybius (1,7,2, 1,8,1), Dionysius of Halicarnassus (*Ant. Rom.* 20,4,8), Strabo (6,2,3), and Cassius Dio (9,40,8), the Mamertines were of Campanian origin; according to Diod. Sic. 20,11,1, 20,64,2, and Alfius (in Fest. 150 Lindsay, s.v. *Mamertini* = *FRHist* 69 F 1), they came from Samnium. This discrepancy, however, should not be pushed too far, as “Campanian” and “Samnite” often appear to be interchangeable terms in ancient sources. On the inscriptions and coins, see *ImIt*, Messana 1–8. In Zair’s view (Zair (2020) 164–169), coin legends and inscriptions show North Oscan linguistic features typical of Campania and Samnium.

accepts the figure of only two hundred Greek citizens who apparently survived the Mamertine *coup d'état*.²³ This view should be nuanced, however, when one considers the long-term effects of the Mamertine presence. Oscan inscriptions from the city are very few and date to no later than the end of the third century BCE, thus pointing to Oscan's being rapidly superseded (at least as an official language) by Greek.²⁴ In addition, archaeological evidence from third-century Messana generally shows features similar to those of other cities of eastern Sicily at the time.²⁵ The Mamertines' coin issues are evocative in this respect, mainly on the iconographic level: they bear the symbols of Greek deities such as Ares (equivalent to Mamers), Heracles, Zeus, and (secondarily) Apollo, Aphrodite, and Artemis, thus indicating that the pantheon of Messana remained basically Greek in character.²⁶ Such continuity would hardly have been possible had the Mamertines been willing to exterminate the Greek population of Messana or obliterate their culture.

The real consequences of the Mamertine occupation of the city can be further appreciated when we assume a political perspective that focuses on the geography of the strait. However the Mamertines might have taken over the city, they did not do it by chance: according to Diodorus, they had previously agreed with the Syracusans to leave Sicily and return to their headquarters in Italy.²⁷ Their destination is not likely to have been Campania but was probably *Tauriana* or *Taurianum*, a place in Bruttium where, according to Alfius, they had first settled on their way from Italy to Sicily.²⁸ *Tauriana* was precisely on the Tyrrhenian coast of Calabria, not far from Rhegion and the strait, in an area where material traces of Oscan presence have been discovered.²⁹ It is thus interesting to inquire as to whether the Mamertines had a

23 See Diod. Sic. 22,13,4 (and Polyb. 1,7,3) with the commentary by Gómez de Caso Zuriaga (2009) 13, 26.

24 Zair (2020) 170 states that "a fairly rapid switch [from Oscan] to Greek took place".

25 See Mastelloni (2005) 285–292; Wilson (2013) 98–99.

26 Crawford (2007) 274. If one trusts the sequence of coin types (fully studied by Särström (1940)), Apollo assumed a primary role in the Mamertine pantheon in the second half of the third century BCE, reflected in Alfius' notice (Fest. 150 Lindsay, s.v. *Mamertini* = *FRHist* 69 F 1) that the Mamertines left Samnium following a *ver sacrum* (Sacred Spring) vowed to Apollo (and not, as one would expect, to Mamers). Apart from the classic analysis by Heurgon (1956), see Dench (1997) 44–48; Pinzone (1999) 126–128; Piegdoń (2014) 93–94.

27 Diod. Sic. 21,18,1. On Diodorus' interest in the history of the strait, see Pittia (2011) 186.

28 Alfius in Fest. 150 Lindsay, s.v. *Mamertini* = *FRHist* 69 F 1.

29 *Tauriana* or *Taurianum* (modern-day Taureana di Palmi) was in the territory of the *Tauriani* (an area called *Tauricana*, if one is to trust Alfius), where a town called *Mamertium* (modern-day Mella di Oppido Mamertina) is also attested. Oscan material evidence (inscribed brick stamps with the legend TAYPIANOYM) from the third century BCE has

coherent political project in mind, centred on the strait. A further set of considerations suggests that they did. Firstly, the power of the Mamertines was basically exercised within the city of Messana and did not extend far into the territory around it (although they may have controlled a number of *phrouria*, fortresses, scattered across northeastern Sicily).³⁰ Secondly, the Mamertines were destined to face the threat of Syracuse (especially after Hiero II's rise to power there), which gave them little space to operate in Sicily.³¹ Finally, the Mamertines were in close contact with the troops of the so-called *legio Campana*, which the Romans put in charge of Rhegion in 282 or 280 BCE. They were, consequently, not detached from what was happening across the strait.

Regrettably, the history of the *legio Campana* is not easy to reconstruct, due to the contradictory state of the literary evidence. Apart from the episode's dubious chronology, scholars have generally debated the juridical status of the garrison members, disagreeing as to whether they were simply a band of Campanian mercenaries recruited by Rome for the occasion or were, in all respects, Roman citizens from Campania, thus forming a regular unit of the Roman army (i.e. a *legio* in the proper sense of the word).³² To complicate matters further, K. J. Beloch presented the influential theory that Rome might have reinforced the garrison with new troops when Pyrrhus crossed to Sicily in 278 BCE.³³ Whatever the composition of the garrison may have been, however, a few indisputable elements can help illuminate the significance of the whole affair. First, it is noteworthy that it was the Rhegians who requested

been discovered there: see De Franciscis/Parlangèli (1960) 18–20, 28; Arcuri (2002) 422–424; Cappelletti (2002) 227–228; *ImIt*, Tauriani 1. The area had previously been part of Rhegion's territory: see Settis (1987) 65–66; De Sensi Sestito (2005) 62–63.

30 See Diod. Sic. 22,13,1; Plut. *Pyrrh.* 23,1. For commentary, see Consolo Langher (2002) 269; Pinzone (2002) 123.

31 The hostility between the Mamertines and Syracuse resulted in the Battle of the Longanus (near Mylae, modern-day Milazzo), fought in 270/69 (or 265/4) BCE: see Polyb. 1,9,7; Diod. Sic. 22,13,1–6; further discussion below. The Mamertines, however, ventured as far as the south of Sicily (at an unspecified date) and destroyed the cities of Gela and Camarina: see Diod. Sic. 23,1,4 with the commentary by Tagliamonte (1994) 191.

32 Campanian mercenaries: see e.g. Heurgon (1942) 205–206; Lévêque (1957) 330–331; Cristofani (1968) 37, 39–40; Lomas (1993) 52. Roman citizens: see Tagliamonte (1994) 200, Crouzet (2002) 356–360; Bianchi (2021) 71–74, insisting on the fact that ancient authors present the troops of the *legio Campana* as *milites Romani*, *cives Romani*, or *Rhomaioi*. For the meaning of the term *legio* in this context, see also Bleckmann (1999) 127–129.

33 The theory of such a garrison reinforcement relies on a brief and questionable fragment of Diodorus (22,7,5): see Beloch (1927) 479–480; Heurgon (1942) 203, 205; Lévêque (1957) 419–420; Cristofani (1968) 38–39. In any case, the *legio Campana* should always have stayed within the figure of four-and-a-half thousand men (Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 20,16), almost equivalent to a proper *legio*.

Rome's protection, doing so either against the Bruttians and Lucanians (in 282 BCE) or against Pyrrhus (in 280 BCE).³⁴ Second, contrary to this peaceful beginning, it is to be emphasised that the *legio Campana*, commanded by the military tribune or prefect Decius Vibellius, suddenly revolted, massacred a significant part of the Rhegian population, and took over the city with the active aid of the Mamertines, a point Polybius specifies in his *Histories*.³⁵ Last but not least, Rome waited until 270 BCE to punish the rebellious garrison severely and restore Rhegion to its legitimate citizens.³⁶ Essentially, what happened at Rhegion was that Rome gave the city a Campanian garrison, but the garrison accomplished a *coup d'état* in agreement with (and in imitation of) the Mamertines of Messana, which Rome did very little to prevent or remedy. Polybius thus seems to be right when he compares the misfortunes of Messana and Rhegion and states that they were "peculiar in their nature and alike in their circumstances".³⁷

Unfortunately, the effects of the *legio Campana*'s revolt on Rhegion cannot be assessed on a material and cultural level, since only a few traces of the Campanian presence there have so far been discovered.³⁸ There is, however, no reason to doubt that, like Messana, Rhegion would have become a Greek–Oscan city had the Campanian garrison remained in control of the city for longer. The key events of the Pyrrhic War in the years 278–276/5 BCE demonstrate that the political repercussions of the Campanian presence at the toe of Italy were crucial for the strait as a whole. Due to the collaboration

34 According to Dionysius of Halicarnassus (*Ant. Rom.* 20,4,2), Rhegion appealed to the Roman consul C. Fabricius Luscinus for assistance in 282 BCE; by contrast, Polybius (1,7,6) and Livy (31,31,6) seem to consider 280 BCE the correct year for Rhegion's appeal. Puzzlingly enough, Polybius specifies that the Rhegians were afraid not only of Pyrrhus' army but also of Carthaginian sea power.

35 Polyb. 1,7,8, 1,10,4; 3,26,6. See also Diod. Sic. 22,1–2. The *legio Campana*'s revolt at Rhegion cannot be dated with certainty: see e.g. Crouzet (2002) 355–356; Bianchi (2021) 70, with further discussion and bibliographical information.

36 After being subdued by the Roman consul C. Genucius Clepsina (or his colleague, Cn. Cornelius Blasio), the (surviving) troops of the *legio Campana* were taken in chains to Rome and eventually executed in the Roman Forum. See Polyb. 1,7,9–13; Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 20,16,1; Liv. 28,28,2–6 (and Liv. *Per.* 15); Val. Max. 2,7,15; see also Degraffi, *Inscr. Ital.* 13,174–75, 546–547 (*Fasti triumphales*).

37 Polyb. 1,7,1: ἴδιον γάρ τι συνέβη καὶ παραπλήσιον ἐκατέραις ταῖς περὶ τὸν πορθμὸν ἐκτισμέναις πόλεσιν. Transl. of the phrase ἴδιον γάρ τι ... καὶ παραπλήσιον by Shuckburgh.

38 Cristofani (1968) 49–53. In Cristofani's view, five Italic-type bronze statuettes found in Rhegion depicting Heracles confirm the Campanian presence there. It is worth adding that inscribed brick stamps from Rhegion bear the Oscan legend MAMEPTINOYM: see De Franciscis/Parlangeli (1960) 18, 27; Tagliamonte (1994) 201, 261–262; *ImIt*, Messana 2.

between the Mamertines and the *legio Campana*, the territories of Messina and Rhegion effectively represented an area that was off-limits to any external enemy. When the king of Epirus decided to leave southern Italy and move to Sicily to help the Siceliotes in their fight against the Carthaginians, he did not cross the strait but set sail from Locri and landed at Tauromenium, thus following an open sea route (summer/autumn of 278 BCE).³⁹ In other words, he made sure to keep well away from both Messina and Rhegion. Conversely, on returning to Italy (276 or early 275 BCE), he approached the strait and crossed it but suffered heavy losses: first, he had to face the Carthaginian fleet in a sea battle before reaching the Italian shore (probably in the waters off Rhegion); then, if one trusts Plutarch, he was almost blocked by (more than) ten thousand Mamertines who had crossed to Italy ahead of him and lined up to wait for him, probably not far from Rhegion and with the assistance of the *legio Campana*.⁴⁰ Understandably, Pyrrhus left the area of the strait as soon as possible and never returned.⁴¹

As this demonstrates, the strait served as a bridge between the Mamertines and the *legio Campana* at the time of the Pyrrhic War. The commander of the *legio Campana*, Decius Vibellius, is also reported to have served as a magistrate in Messina at an unspecified date.⁴² Certainly, as no collective ethnic name is attested in either literary or epigraphic evidence regarding the 270s BCE, there is no reason to suggest that Messina and Rhegion were formally unified into a single political community; nevertheless, it is beyond doubt that they operated jointly in various matters and shared common politics. This resulted in a military–political alliance (*symmachia*) between the two cities,

39 Diod. Sic. 22,8,2–3. The tyrant of Tauromenium, Tyndarion, was one of the Siceliote rulers who sided with Pyrrhus. In general, for Pyrrhus in Sicily, see the analyses by Lévêque (1957) 451–508; Garoufalas (1979) 97–112; Santagati Ruggeri (1997) 11–88; Zambon (2008) 97–175; Vacanti (2012) 3–14; Kent (2020) 82–99.

40 Thus Plut. *Pyrrh.* 24,1 (where one reads that the Mamertines attacked Pyrrhus ἐν δὲ ταῖς δυσχωρίαις, “on rough ground”); App. *Samn.* 12,2; Paus. 1,12,5; Just. *Epit.* 25,3,1; on the *legio Campana*’s assistance, Zon. 8,6,5. Commentaries in Lévêque (1957) 495–499; Garoufalas (1979) 113–114; Santagati Ruggeri (1997) 79–84; Crouzet (2002) 366–367; Kent (2020) 108–110. The figure of (more than) ten thousand Mamertines is probably exaggerated; see Gómez de Caso Zuriaga (2009) 16.

41 His next stop was apparently Locri, where he plundered the sanctuary of Persephone: see Diod. Sic. 27,4,3; Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 20,9; App. *Samn.* 12,3–6. The place where Pyrrhus disembarked in Italy and was almost blocked by the Mamertines is controversial among scholars: see e.g. Garoufalas (1979) 406–408, with full discussion and bibliographical information.

42 According to Diod. Sic. 22,1,2–3, Decius Vibellius was appointed *strategos* (i.e. general?) by the Mamertines. For the significance of the term *strategos*, see Tagliamonte (1994) 198.

which may have relied upon identity constructions focusing on the Campanian/Italic origins of their respective rulers (and, of course, the successful blending of the Oscan and Greek characters on a cultural level).⁴³ Alfius' story of the Mamertines' crossing the strait from Italy to Sicily is evocative in this respect: even though not all of its narrative elements date back to the early third century BCE,⁴⁴ it is plausible that cross-strait identity discourses already existed in Messina and Rhegium during the Pyrrhic War. At the same time, the area of the strait must have been experienced from the outside as a kind of political unity. This applies not only to Pyrrhus, who experienced to his own detriment the hostility of both Messina and Rhegium, but also to the Romans and Carthaginians, who signed an anti-Pyrrhic treaty of alliance (*symmachia*) in 279/8 BCE, with an eye on the strait.⁴⁵ Moreover, both powers seem to have had an interest in one or other of the two cities. It is true that the Carthaginians do not seem to have openly interfered in the *legio Campana* affair,⁴⁶ but they did form an alliance (*symmachia*) with the Mamertines in the same year.⁴⁷ The Romans, meanwhile, did not establish any formal alliances with the Mamertines but, as mentioned above, tolerated the violent conduct of the *legio Campana* towards the inhabitants of Rhegium for (at least) ten years.⁴⁸ The stable presence of the two Campanian military units on their respective sides of the strait likely appeared to both the Carthaginians and Romans to be instrumental in maintaining a firm barrier against the king of Epirus. What is more relevant for the present investigation is that at the time of the Pyrrhic War, a veritable network of alliances was centred on and had its *raison d'être* in the strait.⁴⁹

43 Polyb. 1,8,1; Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 20,4,8. Instead, App. *Samn.* 9,2 and Cass. Dio 9,40,11 report that the *legio Campana* ratified a friendship (*philia*) with the Mamertines.

44 As mentioned above, Alfius' testimony gives prominence to the role played by Apollo in the Mamertines' *ver sacrum*, a narrative element that cannot date from before the second half of the third century BCE. See above, fn. 26.

45 The treaty of alliance expressly established reciprocal military support against Pyrrhus. See Polyb. 3,25,2–5; Diod. Sic. 22,7,5; Val. Max. 3,7,10; Just. *Epit.* 18,2,1 with the extensive commentary by Scardigli (1991) 163–192. See also Lazenby (1996) 32–34; Serrati (2006) 113–114, 129–130. For the relationship between the 279/8 BCE treaty and the other Roman–Carthaginian treaties known to us, see further discussion below.

46 However, they took Roman soldiers on board their ships and transported them to Rhegium at some time (Diod. Sic. 22,7,5). See above, fn. 33.

47 See Diod. Sic. 22,7,4 with the commentaries by Meister (1993) 84 and Pittia (2011) 187.

48 Liv. 28,28,2: *legio* [sc. *Campana*] *interfectis per scelus principibus civitatis urbem opulentam per decem annos tenuit*. See above, fn. 34.

49 This is true despite the formal terms of each bilateral alliance, which I will not address in the present chapter. See also McKenzie (2022) 99, who speaks of “a chain of allied states mobilised against Pyrrhus”.

3 In View of the First Punic War: The Strait as a Divide

After Pyrrhus' final defeat and retreat to Epirus (275 BCE), Rome decided to punish the *legio Campana* at Rhegion and return the city to its legitimate citizens (270 BCE). Polybius and Cassius Dio specify that she did so in the hope of redeeming her good faith (*pistis*) in the eyes of her Greek allies, who had accused her of endorsing "barbarian" conduct against the Western Greek communities.⁵⁰ By contrast, nothing similar happened to the Mamertines at Messina. Rome had not been responsible for their takeover, so there was no (formal) reason for her to intervene directly on the other side of the strait. Effectively, the Mamertines were left at the mercy of the major political forces in Sicily.⁵¹ Rome, indeed, was on friendly terms with Carthage and had, for the moment, no interest in compromising that relationship by entering Sicily.⁵² Syracuse, meanwhile, remained a powerful city within the island, a status which had only been further confirmed since Hiero II became its ruler in ca. 275 BCE.⁵³ Thanks to his steady government, he had been able to establish initial positive relations with both the Romans and the Carthaginians:⁵⁴ as a result, he had enjoyed a free hand in embracing a policy of hostility towards the Mamertines, which culminated in victory at the Battle of the Longanus – a river near Mylae (modern-day Milazzo) on the north coast of Sicily, not far from the strait – in 270/69 (or 265/4) BCE.⁵⁵ It is thus no surprise that the strait began to play a different role from that of the Pyrrhic War years. Firstly, the cross-strait collegiality and identity shared by Rhegion and Messina suddenly vanished due to Rome's intervention against the *legio Campana*. This had a material and symbolic impact on both cities because the *legio Campana* was

50 Polyb. 1,7,12; Cass. Dio 9,40,12. See also Plut. *Pyrrh.* 23,1. For commentary, see Bianchi (2021) 75–80.

51 Polybius (1,8,1–2) recognises that the Mamertines suffered indirectly from Rome's decision to dismantle the Rhegion garrison. On Greek *pistis*/Roman *fides*, see e.g. Gruen (1982).

52 See above for the Roman–Carthaginian treaty signed in 279/8 BCE.

53 See Paus. 6,12,2; Just. *Epit.* 23,4,1; Zon. 8,6,15 with commentaries by De Sensi Sestito (1977) 22–24 and Hoyos (1985) 32–34.

54 Polyb. 1,8,1. Hiero probably signed a peace with the Carthaginians and an alliance with the Romans by 270 BCE (because of which, if one trusts Zon. 8,6,15, he assisted the latter in reducing the *legio Campana* at Rhegion): thus De Sensi Sestito (1977) 25–30, 38–40; for a different assessment, see Hoyos (1985) 45–53.

55 See Polyb. 1,8,2, 1,9,7 (along with Diod. Sic. 22,13,1–6) with commentaries by Walbank (1957) 56; Roussel (1970) 68–69; De Sensi Sestito (1977) 52–57; Hoyos (1985) 34–45; Laz-enby (1996) 36; and, recently, Bianchi (2024) for the geographical context.

not merely disciplined but annihilated,⁵⁶ as a result of which the Mamertines found themselves deprived of any opportunity to further project their ambitions onto the other side of the strait.⁵⁷ Secondly, it was at this time that Rome strengthened her conviction that Rhegion and the toe of the Italian peninsula should be an integral part of her sphere of influence, which must be kept and protected from outsiders.⁵⁸ In turn, the Carthaginians and Syracusans seemingly adapted to the new political balance in the area. The strait remained strategically important to them, but their potential reach was limited to Messana and the northeastern tip of Sicily. From this point onwards, the strait effectively became a divisive element for all political actors present in the region.

The events culminating in the outbreak of the First Punic War in 264 BCE demonstrated how and why that shift was to be a long-lasting one.⁵⁹ After their crushing defeat at the Longanus, the Mamertines were in serious political difficulties, so they requested and received a garrison from the Carthaginians.⁶⁰ Subsequently, however, they became annoyed at the Carthaginian troops' presence in the city and considered asking the Romans for help in getting rid of them.⁶¹ The situation was complicated because if Rome accepted such a request, an open war in the area of the strait would ensue, also involving Carthage. The Mamertines thus had to weigh their request carefully: according to Polybius and Cassius Dio, they offered Rome the formal surrender of Messana (*deditio in fidem*) and claimed that they descended from the same Italic stock as the Romans, that is, that they and the Romans were *homophyloi*, "kinsmen". This was one of the most famous cases of "kinship diplo-

56 See above, fn. 36.

57 Polyb. 1,8,2.

58 I mean by this that it was then that Rome strengthened her conviction that Rhegion should be part of "Roman" Italy. For the development of this concept, which undoubtedly started before the Pyrrhic War, see below.

59 See also McKenzie (2022) 102–103.

60 See Polyb. 1,10,1; Diod. Sic. 22,13,7. Commentaries: Walbank (1957) 57; Eckstein (1987) 74–75; Lazenby (1996) 36–37; Hoyos (1998) 34–35.

61 Polyb. 1,10,2. The chronology is open to debate, as Polybius claims that one faction appealed to the Carthaginians and another to the Romans at the same time. If this was really the case, the Mamertine appeal to the Romans was not primarily against the Carthaginians but against the Syracusans. For discussion and bibliographical information, see Eckstein (1987) 75–79; Hoyos (1998) 35–46. It should be stressed, however, that according to Florus (1,18,2), the Messanians (i.e. the Mamertines) complained to the Romans about the Carthaginians' excessive power in Sicily (*nec occasio [sc. populo Romano] defuit, cum de Poenorum inpotentia foederata Siciliae civitas Messana queretur*).

macy” in Mediterranean interstate relations of the third century BCE.⁶² Yet what is central to the present investigation is why Rome ultimately decided to support the Mamertines against Carthage. Made up as it was of a number of families originally from (or deeply connected to) Campania, the Roman ruling elite would probably have had no difficulties in valorising the concept of an Italic ancestry shared with the Mamertines,⁶³ but the *homophylia* theme was apparently dropped due to the poor reputation the Mamertines (and the troops of the *legio Campana*) enjoyed among the Western Greeks.⁶⁴ As a result, in 264 BCE, the Romans seem to have formally justified their intervention in Sicily through the Mamertines’ *deditio in fidem*. In fact, they were driven to such a decision by two strategic considerations: the first was the hope that the resulting war could bring new booty and lands to their city;⁶⁵ the second was the fear that if they did not face the Carthaginians in war, the latter would become masters of all Sicily (including Syracuse) and would soon use the strait as a bridge to set foot in Italy. In Polybius’ words, “the Romans saw all this and felt that it was absolutely necessary not to let Messina slip or allow the Carthaginians to secure what would be like a bridge to enable them to cross into Italy”.⁶⁶

Polybius’ phrase “to secure what would be [...] a bridge” (*gephyrōsai* in Greek) alludes to the strait as a geographical reality that connected the Sicilian and Italian coasts and that some power might use as a means of military–political unification, precisely as the Romans hoped to prevent the Carthaginians from doing. At the outbreak of the First Punic War, then, the Romans transformed the strait into a barrier to be used against the Carthaginians (and any other enemies). Such a conceptual redefinition, however,

62 Polyb. 1.10.2: οἱ δὲ πρὸς Ῥωμαίους ἐπρέσβευον, παραδιδόντες τὴν πόλιν καὶ δεόμενοι βοηθήσιν σφίσιν αὐτοῖς ὁμοφύλοις ὑπάρχουσιν; see also Cass. Dio 11.43.6; Zon. 8.8.4. See Battistoni (2010) 113–115; Prag (2010) 183–185; Vacanti (2012) 39–40; Bianchi (2021) 77–78.

63 Cass. Dio 11.43.6. According to Dio, common Italic ancestry was a good reason for the Roman legate C. Claudius to help the Mamertines: [C. Claudius] προσυπέσχετό σφισι βοηθήσιν καὶ διὰ τὸ γένος αὐτῶν τῆς Ἰταλίας ὃν καὶ διὰ τὴν αἰτησιν τῆς ἐπικουρίας ἦν ἐπεποιήντο. This concept was probably strengthened by diplomatic discourse involving claims of a common Trojan origin: see Bianchi (2021) 77–80 for discussion and references. *Contra* Russo (2010) 74–76. In Russo’s view, the term *homophylia* should not be taken as alluding to genealogical affinity.

64 Polyb. 1.10.3–4.

65 Polyb. 1.11.1–3.

66 Polyb. 1.10.9: ὁ προορώμενος Ῥωμαῖοι καὶ νομίζοντες ἀναγκαῖον εἶναι σφίσι τὸ μὴ προσέθαι τὴν Μεσσηνίην μηδ’ ἔασαι Καρχηδονίους οἰονεῖ γεφυρῶσαι τὴν εἰς Ἰταλίαν αὐτοῖς διὰβασιν. Transl. Shuckburgh, slightly modified.

would hardly have taken place had the Romans not already determined what “Italy” meant to them. As is well established, the notion of Italy was of Greek origin and had, in the sixth to fourth centuries BCE, essentially been employed (with some oscillation) to indicate the Greek *poleis* of the peninsula – Ἰταλία, in Greek.⁶⁷ The Romans had probably assumed and accommodated that view as early as the end of the fourth century BCE. While one should be wary of the supposed existence of the 306 BCE “Treaty of Philinus” that apparently sanctioned Italy as part of the Roman sphere of influence and Sicily as part of its Carthaginian counterpart,⁶⁸ it is not difficult to suppose that as a consequence of the Samnite Wars, the Romans had begun thinking of themselves as the prospective masters of the entire southern part of the peninsula and had resorted to the concept of Italy to indicate an area much larger than that occupied by the original coastal Greek *poleis* – a perspective probably already embraced by other (non-Greek but largely Hellenised) peoples of the peninsula such as the Lucanians and Bruttians. In other words, by the end of the fourth century BCE, the Romans had begun to feel part and parcel of that “enlarged” Italy.⁶⁹ The Pyrrhic War was decisive in continuing this trend. In his famous speech delivered to convince the Senate not to accept Pyrrhus’ peace offering in 280 (or 279) BCE, Ap. Claudius Caecus harshly attacked the king’s conduct and invited him to “leave Italy” because he was not entitled to remain there.⁷⁰ If authentic, this motif was meant to directly challenge the

67 The (nonlinear) development of the concept of Italy among the Greeks has been the subject of much scholarly debate, which has particularly focused on the testimonies of authors such as Hecataeus of Miletus, Antiochus of Syracuse, Hellanicus of Mytilene, and Damastes of Sigeum. See Hecat. *FGrHist/BNJ* 1 F 62–63, F 81, F 83–87; Antioch. *FGrHist/BNJ* 555 F 3, F 5; Hellan. *FGrHist/BNJ* 4 F 84; Dam. *FGrHist/BNJ* 5 F 3. A commentary can be found in Gély (1991) 22–29; see also, among recent contributions, Humm (2010) 37–48; Simon (2011) 65–79; Carlà-Uhink (2017) 97–111.

68 Polybius (3,26) reports that according to the historian Philinus, the Romans and Carthaginians signed a treaty “in virtue of which the Romans were bound to keep away from the whole of Sicily, the Carthaginians from the whole of Italy” (transl. Shuckburgh). Polybius himself denies its historicity. The situation is complicated because Livy (9,43,26) seems to allude to a similar treaty signed in 306 BCE but does not mention Philinus. Among modern scholars who accept the treaty’s historicity, see e.g. Scardigli (1991) 129–153; Palmer (1997) 16–17; Mazzarino (2003) 86–118; Serrati (2006) 120–129; Russo (2010) 79–86; among those who deny it, see e.g. Walbank (1957) 354; Eckstein (1987) 77–78; Hoyos (1998) 9–16.

69 Humm (2010) 48–56.

70 Plut. *Pyrrh.* 19,1–4; App. *Samn.* 10,6. It is to be stressed that the outbreak of the Pyrrhic War was formally caused by the violation of a treaty signed between Rome and Taras in 303–301 BCE, which had established the division of the two cities’ spheres of influence in southern Italy. See Diod. Sic. 20,104,3; Liv. 10,2,1–2; App. *Samn.* 7,1.

position of Pyrrhus, who, according to a fragment of the *Ineditum Vaticanum*, was willing to make peace with Rome while emphasising that he wished to defend the freedom of Italy, that is, of the Greek inhabitants of the peninsula.⁷¹ In the view of some scholars, both the Romans and Pyrrhus regarded Italy as a political concept, but in different ways. Pyrrhus still conceived of Italy as the collective of the Greek *poleis* of southern Italy; by contrast, the Romans firmly embraced a more comprehensive view, which also included the non-Greek communities of the peninsula.⁷²

After defeating Pyrrhus, the Romans were able to impose their conception of Italy, which, geographically speaking, embraced all the parts of the peninsula then under their rule and had one of its boundaries at the Strait of Messina.⁷³ As Polybius shows, that view was assimilated at the beginning of the First Punic War and was never again abandoned.⁷⁴ Indeed, it was further sanctioned in the aftermath of the war, when the strait became the dividing element between Italy and the newly established *provincia Sicilia*, whose magistrate exercised authority not only over the territories of the island formerly controlled by the Carthaginians but also, de facto, over Messina.⁷⁵

71 *FGrHist/BNJ* 839 F 1,2: τὸ μὲν Ἑλληνικὸν τὸ ἐν Ἰταλίᾳ πᾶν ἐλεύθερον εἶναι καὶ αὐτόνομον; see also App. *Samn.* 10,3. The chronology of the peace negotiations between Rome and Pyrrhus is notoriously debated: see e.g. Garoufalas (1979) 193–198. What is certain is that the king of Epirus wished to appear as the guardian of Hellenic identity: see Thatcher (2021) 222–226.

72 See Humm (2009) 203–220; Russo (2010) 88–93; Simon (2011) 90–92.

73 See Polyb. 1,6,6 with the commentary by Gargola (2017) 83–84. For Italy's northern boundary, see Carlà-Uhink's contribution in this volume.

74 Polyb. 1,10,9 alludes to the fact that Messina was not part of Italy in the Roman view. In contrast, one should remember that in Valerius Maximus' words (2,7,4), the Roman consul C. Aurelius Cotta went to Messina *ad auspicia repetenda* during his 252 BCE campaign in Sicily. According to some scholars (Catalano (1978) 529–532; Pinzone (1999) 82–85; Russo (2010) 77), Valerius means to indicate that Messina included a piece of *ager Romanus* – which could be used to take the auspices – and was deemed to be part of Italy. Valerius does not, however, explicitly state that Cotta planned to take the auspices at Messina itself, whereas Zonaras (8,14) says that the consul went home (i.e. to Rome) for the occasion. For a re-evaluation of Zonaras' testimony, see Konrad (2008) 349–353; Carlà-Uhink (2017) 189.

75 On the establishment of the *provincia Sicilia*, see, among others, Crawford (1990) 91–96; Pinzone (1999) 1–37; Prag (2012) 53–65, with further references. Messina was a *civitas foederata* with the Romans (probably from 241 BCE onwards), but the Roman governor of Sicily was entitled to *reddere iura* there (Liv. 31,29,8–9); see Pinzone (2002) 111–113.

4 Conclusion

The analysis above has demonstrated how crucial the Strait of Messina was within the ever-changing historical tableau of the third century BCE, which is why it was perceived and experienced in a variety of ways by the political entities active in the area. On a practical level, it is possible to identify two distinct phases following Agathocles' death: the first roughly corresponds to the Pyrrhic War years, in which the strait functioned as a political (and cultural) bridge between Messina and Rhegium, a situation that was jointly realised by the Mamertines and the *legio Campana* and was not opposed by the Romans and Carthaginians; the second, by contrast, corresponds to the years that followed the Pyrrhic War, culminating in the First Punic War, in which the strait began to function as a firm dividing line between Sicily and Italy. This does not imply, however, that all the political actors involved began to perceive it as a barrier only after the Pyrrhic War: a lengthy and complex process was at play. In particular, it is likely that the Romans started thinking of the strait as a potential barrier while developing their idea of Italy. It was their success in the First Punic War that eventually enabled them to impose this view, precisely at the time when the *provincia Sicilia* became an administrative entity separate from Italy.

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