The many phases of gamma-ray burst afterglows
Leventis, K.

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Having been a member of the API for six and a half years now, I see this section as an opportunity to reflect on the people, events and circumstances that led me into this path, culminating now with the finish of my PhD research. Can’t promise laughs and name listing, but the text that follows is a sincere, albeit still hot-blooded assessment of this important part of my life.

It all started about 9 years ago, when I made my first trip to Amsterdam. I was a proper tourist, even did the Rijksmuseum and Rondvaart tour, which were arguably the lowlights of an uncultured 21-year-old’s trip. That trip, however, would prove illuminating on how a modern city should look and feel, in my opinion. Perhaps this is also a matter of taste, but anybody that has visited Athens (for example) at some point understands what I mean. Lots of things have been said the last few years about the socioeconomic state of Greece, the sudden negative popularity being a result of the default that led to the bailout(s) and the crisis we have all heard about. From my point of view, the most discouraging thing back home is that lots of people, despite their disagreement with the established mentality, will do little, if anything, to change it. I was one of them, and two years after my first trip to Amsterdam, had it not been for the push I got from people close to me (but even random ones) I wouldn’t have even thought of the possibility of doing a Master degree elsewhere than the University of Athens. After all, why would I leave a nice job (barman), nice weather (it turns out there is a point in this one), friends and family behind?

Well, lets start from the family. My parents, having had themselves the experience of living and studying abroad, made sure I got the message loud and clear: “It is a VERY good idea to go and study abroad at this stage of your life”. Once I saw the possibility, I jumped on it, head first, but the spark wasn’t there before these two people insisted on the benefits of such an undertaking. I am still realising today in how many ways they were right. Thank you both for that. This Thesis is a result of your encouragement and support.
Back then in 2004-2005, my ignorance and carelessness on the issue of scientific career could be brilliantly summarised by a question I asked Nektarios Vlahakis, my Bachelor-Thesis supervisor, during one of our slightly off-topic conversations: “You mean people get paid to do theoretical research in astrophysics?!” I was quite surprised by his affirmative answer. Nektarios, incidentally (?) working on GRBs, explained how the academia works and most importantly, helped me get a taste of what research is like. He, like many other Greeks with international experience in education and research, strongly supported my application to the UvA. Nektarios even wrote a reference letter! After all these years I can safely say, living abroad always has a lot to offer in many levels of a person’s development, but the academic aspect alone has been one of the greatest rewards.

Which brings us to the API. An institute that despite the constant reshuffling of people manages to feel like a family. I haven’t been the most social person around (apparently I’m the only one who finds 8-hour-long Sinterklaas parties of 30 people a bit dull), and, against tradition, I won’t start remembering stories from times we got drunk and did something embarrassing, mainly because I can’t remember much. But I can say I feel very lucky to have been part of this family. Working, discussing, playing, traveling, going out together with so many different people from all over the world is a unique and irreplaceable experience, more important than the degrees and jobs we get on the way. And what makes the API special is the warmth that everyone has, from the youngest bachelor students who visit occasionally, to the most senior members that are always there, like Ed and Martin. Important factor in this nice atmosphere has been the managing and secretary staff, currently Lide, Marieke, Minou, Milena, Natalie, but also Nicole, Esther, Eva from a long time ago, in an institute far far away (across the street).

Special mention should go to someone whose presence has been instrumental to my arrival and growth within the API. Ralph Wijers, Master coordinator back in 2006, for some reason thought it a good idea to accept me, a guy with low-ish grades (but with a letter from Nektarios, lets not forget), as a Master student. Two years later he offered me a PhD position under his supervision and the rest is history. Hasn’t been a very straightforward story, though. I’ve had my ups and downs in terms of productivity and motivation, and as if an unreliable student was not enough, for Ralph this period has been quite eventful. However, this story has a happy ending, and it is all down to Ralph’s perseverance. Sometimes sticking to plan is a good idea and the reward in the end only becomes greater if there are difficulties on the way. This is one of the most important things I have learned over these years. Ralph, thanks for not giving up on me, and this project as a whole.

Here is where my valiant effort to not list people ends, because, really, this section would be incomplete otherwise. During my Master years, I really enjoyed working,
learning and hanging out with Ben, Gijs, Mihkel and Sjoert. You guys are top mates. Special thanks also goes to Sera for having a nice Master project for me, which was the passage to the PhD. Not only did I learn a lot with you that year, I also made a good friend on the way. During the PhD years I got the chance to come close to more people, in no particular order Samia, Gerrit, Yuri, Maithili, Alessandro, Atish, Montse, Danai, Tulio, Evert, Eduardo, Theo, Thijs ($\times$ 2), Caroline, Pieter, Daniela, Ken, Daan, Joel, Salomé, Frank, Olga, Martin and many others that is impossible to list here. All of you have been there at good and bad times and I can’t even imagine how boring the experience would have been otherwise.

A special thanks should go to the collaborators I’ve had through these years which weren’t many, but were very important for the work presented in this Thesis. First and foremost, Hendrik. So many things I learned directly from you, so many times you came up with an idea that took us out of a dead end, and so many comments for each paper draft that it was a real challenge to keep up. Your contribution to this Thesis, direct or not, is immense, going way beyond the co-authorship of papers. Zakaria, our collaboration wasn’t as close (mainly because of the hundreds of kilometers separating us), but it was very productive. You are a genuinely nice guy with tons of altruism and working with you has been very enjoyable. Last, but not least, I would like to thank Alexander, whose arrival at the API coincided with me going full throttle on the last chapters of my Thesis. Great things came out of this collaboration, but most importantly it has been a real pleasure working with somebody whose heart is bigger than his stature, in Alexander’s case, quite a feat.

Last, but most of all, I’d like to thank you Thetis for standing by me throughout this period. You have shown me the true meaning of “we”.

Konstantinos Leventis,
Amsterdam, 12 January 2013