

The Mediterranean World

The Idea, the Past and the Present

Editors

KUDRET EMİROĞLU

OKTAY ÖZEL

EYÜP ÖZVEREN

SÜHA ÜNSAL



i l e t i Ő i m

The Insular World of the Aegean (15th to 19th century)

EVANGELIA BALTA

Fernand Braudel, describing the Mediterranean in his *magnum opus* of that name, observes that: 'La Méditerranée n'est pas une mer, mais une succession de plaines liquides communiquant entre elles par des portes plus ou moins larges. Ainsi s'individualisent, dans les deux grands bassins Ouest et Est de la Méditerranée, entre les diverses avancées des masses continentales, une série de mers étroites, de *narrow-seas*. Chacun de ces mondes a ses caractères, ...ses lois propres d'histoire....' (Braudel, 1979⁴, 99). I have chosen to speak here about the narrow sea of the Aegean. Specifically, my paper is a summary overview of certain evident realities in the Aegean islands in recent times.

At the beginning of the period under consideration, the fifteenth century, the *terminus post quem* for the Middle Ages in Greece (Tolias, 1999, 17), the Aegean region was fragmented into small administrative and geographical entities under the control of Western dynasts (Genoese, Knights of the Order of St John of Jerusalem, Venetians) and Ottoman Turks. At the end, for which the conventional *terminus ante quem* adopted, the nineteenth century, a determinant complex of political conjunctures and technological changes redefined the role of

societies and economies in the Aegean. The five centuries that intervened are marked by the continuous presence of and rivalry between the Catholic Westerners and the Muslim Ottomans, as well as, from the second half of the eighteenth century, the Orthodox Russians, to secure their geopolitical and economic interests in the Aegean and, by extension, the Mediterranean Basin. During the period examined, the Mediterranean was a focus of conflicts and strategic realignments, since Mediterranean trade continued to be the principal factor of international economic relations.

The crucial inquiries of historical research involved with the island region are the study of the demographic development and settlement pattern in the various islands, in parallel with the structure and orientation of their economic activities, or their reorientation to sectors dependent on prevailing international economic circumstances. The answers, for there is more than *one* answer, to these basic issues are indirectly articulated with the diversity of the islands, as defined by the combination of geophysical and cultural factors. As in the Mediterranean as a whole, so in the Greek islands, there is no single uniform physiognomy; there are common features, common historical courses, even common economic functions. Islands large or small, with one or many settlements, looked towards the mainland opposite, far or near, and established economic transactions with it, since it was from there that they were supplied with grain and it was to there that islanders went for seasonal employment. Samos, for example, was a single area with the opposite Asia Minor littoral until the creation of Modern Turkey by Atatürk.

The ethnic-cultural composition of the island population was related to the Latin and Albanian colonization, as well as to the migration to and settlement on the islands of inhabitants from both shores of the Aegean. The personal names of the taxable population in the censuses attest to the internal Aegean diaspora with the characteristic Cretan contributions. The same is true of the place names. There was an influx of

population to islands but also an outflow. From the mid-eighteenth century, islanders settled in Constantinople and other large cities of the Ottoman Empire, as well as in major trading centres in the Mediterranean.

Climatic conditions determine the zones of olive and vine cultivation, alongside the few cereals that are grown everywhere but barely cover the subsistence needs of the population on the small islands, which are the overwhelming majority in the Aegean. The role of the olive and the vine, present in the Aegean since Antiquity, differs over time in the island economies, initially on account of a colonialist policy of the foreign overlords and subsequently of international demand. For example, the Venetians took measures to boost olive cultivation in Crete, motivated by the desire on the one hand to free the Serenissima Republic from its dependence on the olive oil production of Apulia, and on the other to revive the island's economy after the crisis in viticulture experienced in the late sixteenth century. The Venetians' far-sighted policy began to bear fruit when Crete had fallen into Ottoman hands. As is well known, in the eighteenth century the olive oil trade dominated the Archipelago, since olive oil was a basic raw material for manufacturing soap, a product in great demand in the textile mills of Europe. In the pre-industrial age, olive oil, to a lesser degree, wine more so, and silk primarily, were expensive commodities. Renowned are the eponymous wines imported from Cyprus and the islands of the Archipelago, the production and trade of which was regulated according to the cultural and political realignments. The vineyards of Cyprus declined when the Venetians left; from the late eighteenth century the Morea took over the baton from Crete in the olive oil trade with Marseilles.

Consequently, in order to study the diversity of the Aegean islands and to classify this in a typology, it is necessary to examine the socio-economic and cultural influences of the foreign dominators, as well as the changes brought by the circulation throughout the Mediterranean of men, goods and ideas,

and to evaluate these in relation to certain characteristics of the island region which remained constant in the *longe durée*. And I do not mean those characteristics determined by geomorphology. According to Spyros Asdrachas, the history of the Western and Ottoman dominions in the Aegean is transformed into a history of receptions by the local population and not into a history of conquests. For this reason the island world of the Aegean is also a research case for understanding the mechanisms of conquest, as these operate at the level of the conquered. Both the existence of common elements in the islands, which allude to the continuity and the unity of the Mediterranean space, and the formation of different local identities in the limited space of the Aegean are the result of cultural interaction. Concurrently, certain constants in the material and intellectual culture which remained unaffected in the *longe durée* are clearly visible. For example, the aristocracy of Western rule remained a foreign element among the Orthodox inhabitants of the Aegean islands, which was not assimilated even though a percentage of the population of some Cycladic islands embraced Catholicism. In this sense Orthodoxy constitutes a constant in the spiritual-intellectual culture on most islands, just as corresponding constants in the sector of material culture are the archaic economic structures, the devotion to agriculture and animal husbandry regardless of the terrain and regardless of involvement or not with the sea, a *par excellence* capitalist sector. This synoptic reference to the historical canvas woven by the events concerns no more than the evaluation of the political and the international economic conjunction in the island region.

Western sovereignty in the islands goes back to the years after the Sack of Constantinople by the Crusaders (1204), when the Western powers gradually consolidated their presence in the fragments of the Byzantine world, creating an early colonial and insular annexe of Western feudalism in what was hitherto the Greek East. Sole antagonistic presence from the thirteenth century until their submission to the Ottoman Empire,

was that of the Turkish Emirates. The Aegean Islands were governed by various independent and semi-independent Latin rulers, from whose hands they passed to the direct or indirect sovereignty of the Venetians. The Latin and Venetian conquest left its traces on the settlements, with buildings and fortifications of Western style. The Venetian conquest, furthermore, established urbanism – towns – on the larger islands, and the social stratification of their population, influencing through sovereign institutions the function of the island societies. Spyros Asdrachas likens the Aegean Islands to a dispersed city built upon waterways. He recognizes in these urban phenomena, such as the clear distinction of their space into towns and villages, and all that this dichotomy entails for the economy as well as other functions. He also ascertains urban stratifications in island societies: the maintenance of a noble class, created by Western domination, as elsewhere, where maritime trade had created properties, the population is classified exactly in the tax registers: householders, priests, labourers, master craftsmen etc. (See Asdrachas, 1985, 235-248). The islands' practice of keeping community and notarial archives is due to Western rule; a practice that did not exist in the rest of Greece and which was maintained in the islands throughout the subsequent Ottoman Occupation. Community documents refer to taxation and in these are recorded the taxes to be submitted by the community; in these is recorded also the allocation of tax on an individual basis. They are documents of singular demographic, economic and social significance, yielding information that enhances the stratification of the societies to which they refer. The notarial documents preserve the rates of birth and death in a society and yield information on the mentalities associated with, for example, the life cycle, or the study of familial and other behaviours in the island societies. These categories of archival material have been the basis of several doctoral theses in Greek and foreign universities. The islands of the Aegean also appropriated some elements of the culture of the foreign dominators. For example, both Cypriot

poetry and Cretan theatre owe their origins to the Western literary tradition, if we accept that these islands too should be included in the Aegean.

The slow but sure expansion of the Ottomans, to the detriment of the Westerners, in the islands and the coastal fortified sites of the Eastern Mediterranean began in the fifteenth century, lasted throughout the sixteenth and most of the seventeenth centuries. The wars and clashes are more or less known to all and it is not our intention here to deal with the military or diplomatic events. The penetration of the Western powers and the establishment of their presence in the Aegean are studied (see B. J. Slot, 1982). The recent endeavour by a group of Turkish historians to publish a preliminary corpus of Ottoman sources in which events of the conquest and the administration of the Aegean by the Ottomans are recorded should also be considered a contribution (see Kūçük, 2001). It is noteworthy that the Ottomans' and the Westerners' claims to the Aegean during these centuries stimulated interest in its island world and contributed to the investigation of this geographical area and its inclusion in the horizon of knowledge of the age, through *isolaria*, *portolans*, maps, travellers' accounts.

The Ottoman conquest did not change radically, in the *longe durée*, the function of the Aegean. The special conditions of the conquest of most of the islands, as confirmed by the granting of privileges, the payment of taxes in a lump sum and their farming to locals, the absence from most islands of permanently settled Turkish populations, with the exception of the presence of military garrisons and officials on the larger ones, contributed to this. It should be noted that for the first time the majority of the Aegean Islands were included administratively in one unity, that created by the fiscal system of the Ottoman Empire. The Ottoman treasury levied from the islands, as from all the provinces of the empire, part of the agricultural production only, through taxation that was paid in money. In order to meet its tax obligation to the Ottoman State, which was collective, the island society developed a system

of solidarities which allowed it, through control of properties, to determine the tax each family had to pay.

An example: The processing of two registers for Santorini, of 1670, one of head tax and one of harvest tax, revealed the community's strategy in the vertical distribution of tax within its fold. In order to protect the economically weaker members of the community, it divided them into two parts: half paid the harvest tax and the other half the head tax. This explains why one part of the economically weak stratum is recorded in the register of tax on agricultural production and the other half in the register of head tax. (see Evangelia Balta, 1997, 97-113). Naturally, the Ottoman authority was interested solely in collecting the total amounts due and not in the manner of allocation to individuals. This protective measure was devised to maintain equilibrium within the community and to avoid social tensions. Moreover, all customary rules for the inheritance of family properties, which were adopted and strictly observed, were aimed at maintaining economic balances. In order to prevent fragmentation of the few tracts of cultivable land, which threatened the community directly with debt, the island communities regulated ordinances as the case demanded, concerning the right of first-born offspring to or the exclusion of women from the patrimony.

Already from the late sixteenth century and mainly during the seventeenth, an unprecedented commercial traffic developed in the East, not only with the Italian cities but also, primarily, with the new mercantile powers of the Western world, the Dutch, the French and the English. The islands participated in many ways in the maritime trade between the Eastern and Western Mediterranean. They participated because through these voyages their produce was exported and other goods were imported. They participated directly too by using their own ships for transportation, securing connections with the capital of the empire, the major ports of the Mediterranean and the harbours of the Black Sea. The islands, which had been occupied for centuries by the Genoese and the Venetians, and participated in their economic activities, had created su-

itable preconditions for their ever increasing participation in trading and shipping activities. In some islands local merchants transported local products with their own ships, but it was not always these that determined the cargoes. Sometimes the island sailors were carriers and sometimes they were at the same time merchants and financiers, with prime example the Hydriots and others in the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth century. Greek mercantile activities in the Aegean veritably took off from the mid-eighteenth century, when the commercial competition between the French and the English for dominance of the Mediterranean, the French Revolution, the Napoleonic Wars, the Continental Blockade (blockade of the French coasts by English ships), and Russia's successes against the Ottoman Empire, favoured the rapid rise of navigation. With the Ottoman Empire's recognition of Russia's right to protect the Orthodox Christians and the concession of freedom of navigation in Turkish waters for ships flying the Russian flag, those islanders involved in the grain trade benefited tremendously, and it is not fortuitous that they created significant communities in South Russia.

Some comments should be made here on the islands' relationship with the sea. The lack of raw materials, the extremely restricted agricultural yields on small islands, which are also the majority in the Aegean, did not make all the islanders, nor the population of all the islands, turn to seafaring activities, the transport and trade of products. Not all the islands had fleets, but all of them were served by the ships of other islands or by the caravans of Western ships. Furthermore, it should be noted that shipping in the Aegean did not always concern the islanders, because fleets or single ships sought refuge in the islands for supplies or for shelter from bad weather. Of course it concerned them when it meant piracy or raids by corsairs.

The contribution of the Aegean islands to the Greek Struggle for Independence is considered decisive in many respects, either by supplying ships and crews, or by making capital available (see Leontaritis, 1981, 62). Moreover, in historiography

the view prevails that the existence in the islands of a nucleus of stratified bourgeoisie determined also their role in the political course of the Revolution, from the very moment the problem of power was posed and in the development of political life in the early years of the independent Greek State. After the ratification of the borders of the Greek State in 1832, the greater part of the Aegean remained outside the frontiers of Greece. About one century was to pass before the rest of the islands were included in the Greek State. However, the interlude of the War of Independence did not interrupt their economic and cultural evolution, nor did the establishment of the Greek State affect its rhythm. Until the mid-nineteenth century the Aegean islands continued dynamically to be in direct contact with the capitalists in the most important centres of the Ottoman Empire and their counterparts in the Greek diaspora communities of the Balkans, Russia, Egypt and Western Europe. The introduction of steamships and the international economic crisis brought recession in the economic activities of the islands towards the end of the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, until that time the Aegean continued to be the link uniting the Balkan North and the East with the Greek Peninsula. As we have already said the Greek Revolution of 1821 did not introduce any essential changes into the life of the Aegean. Life on the islands at least of those located closer to Asia Minor will be transformed radically with the Asia Minor Disaster of 1922 and the Greeks' abandonment of the eastern shores of the Aegean. The islands will cease to function as the bridge connecting Europe and Asia, a role which they maintained from the days of Antiquity until the first decades of the twentieth century.

To recapitulate; the acentric world of the Aegean formed communication and economic networks with the islands and the neighbouring coasts of the Mediterranean, absorbing and diffusing persons, goods and ideas. The history of the islands of the Archipelago is the most illuminating way of explaining comprehensibly why each part of the Mediterranean managed to keep such uniqueness within an ethnic and cultural pot-pourri. But, isn't

that what its mainland, Europe, is? A world of cohesions as well as intense differentiations, of archaisms and innovations?

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