

A woodcut by Bordon (1537) showing the island of Calogero and its crane.



A map of Euboea by G. Rosaccio (1598).

Descriptions of the Aegean and its islands began to appear early in the Renaissance and constituted a separate literary form. Most of these works appeared under titles such as *Chorographia dell' Archipelago*, *L'Archipelago con tutte le Isole o Description des Isles de l'Archipel* and so on.

From the titles, it can clearly be seen that these descriptions were the work of Western European writers, and that they sprung from a need to obtain information about the Greek Aegean. Why were they not compiled by Greeks? The reason is not hard to find. At about this time the barbarous attacks on the Greek lands by the Turkish hordes had begun, and the Greek populations were far too busy fighting them off to have time to write geography books.

The contents of the books makes it plain that in the West they were interested in everything they could possibly find out about life in the Greek

Aegean: all the historical, geographical, cultural and economic facts are given, and even stories about the islands and their people are related. Among the most typical

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works of this period are those of Christoforo Buondelmonti, Benedetto Bordon (1534), Marco Boschini (1658), Francesco Piacenza (1688), V.M. Coronelli (1687) and Olfert Dapper (1703).

Buondelmonti was the forerunner and master of all these. Buondelmonti was a cleric from Florence who lived in the early 15th century, and he made the collection of information about the Greek islands of the Aegean his life's work. And the book he eventually produced served as a model for all those who came after him.

Although the works produced by the Western authors are not of the same accuracy as the existing Greek descrip-

tions, they are nevertheless a valuable source of information about the Aegean in the 15th, 16th, 17th and 18th centuries, particularly as they contain large numbers of maps which are vital in confirming our knowledge of the cultural geography of the area.

All these descriptions start by taking the island of Delos as the center of the Aegean. Delos is the point from which all distances are measured, and the entire topography of the complex of islands focuses there. This is important, partly since it continues an ancient and Byzantine tradition of seeing Delos as the center of the Aegean islands, but mainly since it implies that the focal point of the Aegean is within that same area; in other words, that the Aegean is a separate entity and not a periphery of some other, more important, region.

Nor does this view spring from some mere ignorant handing down of a tradition, for the geographers of the time were in full possession of all the necessary information

about the Aegean: the coastline of each island, the shallows, the bays, the mountains, the springs, the rivers, the monasteries, the crops, the population and the cultural identity of the area.

The conclusion which arises overwhelmingly from these descriptions is that despite the raids of pirates and the havoc wreaked by the Turks, the Aegean continued to be Greek throughout this period. The Turks are presented as mere conquerors, a foreign element with no organic links to the Aegean, whose presence could with advantage be dispensed with.

It is indicative of this that even in Buondelmonti's day, along with references to the economic condition of the islands, to their agriculture, trade and fishing, we frequently encounter the phrase "the Turkish hazard", as equivalent in gravity to "the hazard of pirates". What was meant by this can be seen by the story of the island of Calogero, which is related in nearly all the descriptions of

the Aegean dating from this time.

Calogero

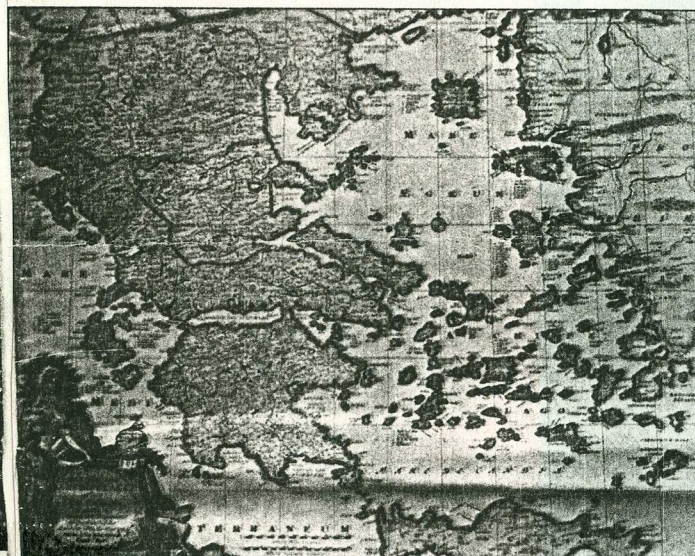
The place referred to is a rocky islet to the west of Nisyros, not the island of the same name between Euboea and Chios. Today it is known as Candeliusa, the island of the single candle.

According to Buondelmonti, "until recently" Calogero was the home of two Greek hermits. Other writers (Bordon, Boschini, Piacenza) relate that the Turks decided to dispose of the monks and made every effort to do so. But the monks were more cunning than the Turks had given them credit for being. What they did was to build a wooden crane; when they saw the Turk's approaching, they hauled their boat up out of the sea and turned their islet into an impregnable fortress. Thus their candle continued to burn on in their chapel, and life, the ancient Greek tradition of the Aegean, was able to go on. Yet not for ever: one day the Turks managed to land on



I.B. Hillaire: Women of Patmos, copper engraving, 1682

Wherever you go in the Aegean, you are in Greek lands



N. Visscher: Map of the Aegean Sea, copper engraving, 1682

Calogero. The monks were arrested and later slaughtered, the chapel and the boat were burned. That is a typical example of Turkish action in the Aegean. Yet Calogero, with its two martyrs, remained in the memory of the West as a symbol. None of the descriptions is without its mention of the tale, and most have an illustration.

Western geography, then, was able, as in the case of Calogero, to discern plainly the real situation in the Aegean. The travelers and geographers of the period saw clearly the violent expansion of the Turks and knew well that it meant for Greece and Europe. For that reason they did their best to keep the West informed about what was happening in the Aegean. (At this point I should like to express my thanks to Dr George D. Farantos, who was kind enough to allow me to make use of an unpublished text of his on the Calogero story).

The place-names

In these *Descrizioni dell' Archipelago* the question

of place-names is treated with considerable care. Not only are the names of the islands and their principal towns given in the Greek forms which they had always borne, but much smaller places, some of them merely points on the map, are also given Greek names. This is the case with all the works from the time of Buondelmonti and dalli Sonetti (1480) to the liberation of the Aegean from the Turkish yoke in the early 19th century.

This shows the continuity of the Greek presence in the Aegean; despite the looting and destruction of the Turks during the darkest period of history in the Aegean, there is not a corner of the archipelago which is not full of the memory of Greek history and the living presence of the Greeks. The Turks, by way of contrast, left only one memory behind them when they were driven out of the Aegean: a memory of cruelty and barbarism, which has stayed, as is natural, in the minds of the free Greeks in order to

highlight the value of their freedom.

Travelers' journals

As for the population of the Aegean, most of our knowledge springs from the travelers' journals of various writers who happened to pass through. Among the earliest of these writers are Merschulam ben Menahim from Volterra and Obadiah da Bertinoro, who visited the Aegean in the late 15th century. The latter writer has a description of the siege of Rhodes by the Turks, during which the Jewish population of the island (in which both are naturally interested) was "eliminated".

The journals of the 16th, 17th and 18th century make extensive reference to the unspeakable oppression of the Greek population of the islands and also to that population's refusal to bend the knee. The Greeks of the islands, after a long process of re-grouping, rose against the Turks in the 19th century and liberated their homelands.

Much of this resistance focused on the monastic centers of the Aegean, Mount Athos and Patmos being the most important (though it should be noted that the monasteries of the Aegean described by travelers of the period are mostly still in place and operating today).

During the period of Turkish rule in the Aegean, the Orthodox Church may have had to endure the harshest oppression but it continued to be intellectually and culturally omnipotent. At that period, as before and since, the Greek Aegean was an Orthodox Christian sea.

The Chronica Minora

The *Chronica Minora* are the personal narratives of travelers of the events and scenes which they happened to encounter: descriptions of Greek towns, of sieges, historical and statistical information, eyewitness accounts of the martyrdom of Greek monks, and so on (Greece was, of course, the only country in Europe which continued to produce martyrs of the

Faith at this late date, victims all of Turkish barbarism).

The *Chronica Minora*, to be found in manuscript form scattered throughout the libraries of Europe, contain some of the most fascinating details about life in the Aegean.

Of even greater interest is the work of Turkish geographer Piri Reis (1521), whose guide to the conquest of Rhodes is one of the most cynical and spine-chilling footnotes to history. Never have fanaticism and cunning been united in such a macabre form as in Reis's text.

The descriptions of the Aegean, whether in the form of maps or of texts, are all definite on one point: that the sole guarantor of peace, civilization and liberty in the Aegean is the people whose home it has been since ancient times – and that is best seen at periods during which the natural unity of Greece and the Aegean has been disturbed.

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