Wherever you go in the Aegean, Greek lands

LI. Mlake: Women of Patmos, copper engraving.


A view of Patmos, copper engraving.

A woodyard by Bordone (1537) showing the island of Calegoro and its crane.

A map of Euboea by G. Rossetti (1596).

D
crcriptions 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, I'Archipelago con tutta o Budicii in Descrizione de Isole delchip
and so on.

From the titles, it can clearly be seen that these
descriptions were the work of Western European writers,
and that they sprang 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 Tur
cish hordes had begun, and the Greek populations were
far too busy fighting them off to have time to write geog
raphical books.

The contents of the books makes plain that in the West
they were interested in ev
everything they could possibly find out about life in the Greek
Aegean: all the historical,geographical, cultural and econo
mic facts are given, and
even stories about the islands
and their people are related.

Among the most typical
works of this period are those of
Christoforo Bundel
monti, Benedetto Bordone
(1534), Marco Boschini
(1608), Francesco Piovaro
(1688), V.M. Cornellesi (1688)
and Oliver Dapper (1710).

Bundelmonti was the
forefather and master of all
these. Bundelmonti was a
native of Florence, who died
in the early 16th century, and
he made the collection of in
formation about the Greek
lands of the Aegean his life's
work. And he was even pro
duced as a model for all those who came after him.

Although the works pro
duced by the Western authors
are not of the same accuracy as the existing Greek de
dscriptions, they are nevertheless a valuable source of in
formation about the Aegean in the 15th, 16th, 17th and 18th cen
turies, particularly as they
contain large numbers of
maps which are vital in con
ferring 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 because it contains an
ancient and Byzantine tradition
of seeing Delos as the center
of the Aegean islands, but also
because it implies that the fixed
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 mere ignorance, but
rather from theographers of the
time being in full possession
of all the necessary information
about the Aegean: the coastline of each island, the
shallows, the bays, the moun
tains, the springs, the rivers,
the monasteries, the towns,
the population and the cul
tural identity of the area.

An example of this that
even in Bundelmonti's day,
along with references to the
economic condition of the
lands, to their agriculture,
trade and fishing, we
frequently come across
the phrase "the Turkish hazard,
accompanying us in all our
dangerous peril of pirates.
" What was meant
by this can be seen by
nearly all the descriptions
of the Aegean dating from
this time.

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 Gondriona, the island
of the single candel.

According to Bundel
monti, "it seemed recently to Cale
cro that the house of two
Greek hermits. Other writers
(Bordone, Boschini, Pio
varo) 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 vessel, when
they saw the Turks approaching,
they lowered their boat
out of the sea and turned their
into an impracticable fur
ture. Thus their chance con
verted from being 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
Calegro. The monks were
arrested and later
slaughtered, the chapel and
the boat were burned. This is
a typical example of Turkish
action in the Aegean. Yet
Calegro, with its two mar
tys, remained in the memory
of the West as a symbol. None
of the descriptions is without
its mention of the tale, and
must have an illustration.

Western geography, then,
was able, as in the case of
Calegro, to discern plainly
the real situation in the
Aegean. The travelers and
gographers 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 hap
pening in the Aegean. (At this
point I should like to express
my thanks to Dr. George D.
Foran, who was kind
enough to allow me to make
use of an unpublished text
of his on the Calegro story.)

The place-names
in these Descriptions
of the 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 form which they had always borne,
but many 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
period of Bundelmonti and
dall Sonnino (1489) to the
literature of the Aegean from the
Turkish rule 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 his
story in the Aegean, there is
not a corner of the archi
pelago 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 mem
ory behind them when they
were driven out of the
Aegean: a memory of cruelly
and barbarism, which has stayed,
as is natural, in the minds of
the free Greeks in order to
highlight the value of their
freedom.

Travellers' journals
As for the population of the
Aegean, most of our know
ledge springs from the travel
ners' journals of various writers
who happened to pass through.
Among the earliest of these writers are
Merschel
leben Mandonat from Vot
erra and Oddi da Bertini
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
natural
interest) was "elimin
ated."

The journals of the 16th,
17th and 18th century make
extensive reference to the
unspoken oppression of the
Greek population of the
Aegean, and also to that popula
tion'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 fo
ocused on the monastic centers
of the Aegean, Mount Athos
and Patmos being the most
important (thought 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 en
sure the barest oppression
but it continued to be intellec
tually and culturally ompro
test. At that period, as before
and since, the Greek Aegean
was an Orthodox Christian
sea.

The Chronic Minora
The Chronic Minora is the
personal narrative of travelers
and events and scenes which
they happened to encounter:
descriptions of the Greek
towns, of sieges, hist
ical and statistical informa
tion, eyewitness accounts
of the martyrdom of the
Greeks, and so on (Greece
was, of course, the only coun
try in Europe which continued
to produce martyrs of the
Faith at that late date, victims
of Turkish barbarism).
The Chronic Minora, to be
found in manuscript form
scattered throughout the li
braries of Europe, contains
some of the most fascinating
details about life in the Ae
gean of even greater interest is the work of Turkish geog
rapher Flint Reis (1525), whose
guide to the conquest of
Rhodes is one of the most cy
tical and spine-chilling foot
notes to history. Never have
fanaticism and cunning been
united in such a macabre for
Ren's text.

The descriptions of the
Aegean, whether in the form of
maps or of texts, are all de
fined over one point: that the
sole guarantor of peace, civil
ity and liberty in the Ae
gean 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
turbated.