
Emre Erol

Electronic version
URL: https://journals.openedition.org/cchyp/1323
DOI: 10.4000/cchyp.1323
ISSN: 2647-7300

Publisher:
Centre d’Études Chypriotes, École française d’Athènes

Printed version
Date of publication: 10 July 2023
Number of pages: 454-457
ISSN: 0761-8271

Electronic reference

Creative Commons - Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International - CC BY-NC-SA 4.0
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/

*Cultural Exchanges in the Eastern Mediterranean: Asia Minor, Cyprus and Egypt*, edited by Stelios Irakleous, Michalis N. Michael and Athanasios Koutoupas, brings together a group of scholars from different backgrounds and areas of specialization around one central theme: approaching the eastern end of the “liquid continent” as a meaningful unit of analysis. The temporal limit of the volume is primarily set in modern history, that is between 19th and 20th centuries, with the exception of Theoharis Stavrides’ contribution that includes aspects from the early modern era as well. “Contention and connection”, two keywords also expressed in the title of the opening contribution by Karène Summerer-Sanchez, sets the tone of the volume’s approach to connected histories of the Eastern Mediterranean. The book provides valuable new insights as to how peoples across this human geography, which constitutes a consistently and relatively well-connected part of the world, were exposed to, engaged with, and appropriated “the practices of others” as expressed in the preface of the volume. Knitting together disconnected histories of the Eastern Mediterranean shoreline, which are often separated with obstacles like methodological nationalism, into an academic narrative that makes the reader recognize the connections is no easy task. *Cultural Exchanges in the Eastern Mediterranean* delivers on this promise with the help of new research on migration, identity, ethnography, religion, newspaper publishing, language, and photographic archives.

The volume, however, is not an all-encompassing attempt to bring together scholarship from all components and corners of the Eastern Mediterranean space. It chooses to focus on a particular linguistic and geographical limit within that space and this choice bounds the work to a certain framework. *Cultural Exchanges in the Eastern Mediterranean*’s focus is primarily the Greek speaking world in the Eastern Mediterranean and the geographical focus is predominantly Cyprus. Nevertheless, more is offered outside this framework and that strengthens the claim about making connections between Asia Minor, Cyprus, and Egypt. Ahmet Yıkık’s work on the Turkish speaking Muslim habitats of Cyprus in the 20th century and Stelios Irakleous’ work on the history of the use of Turkish language among the Orthodox Christians of Cyprus shifts the linguistics focus on Greek whereas Athanasios Koutoupas and Eftychia Mylona’s works on Egypt shift the geographical focus on Cyprus.

At the first glance, this might be interpreted as contradictory to the claims of the volume about connecting the histories of the Eastern Mediterranean. However, that is not the case. The contributions of the volume are primarily selected from the pool of works that were presented at the conference titled “People, cultures, ideas and religion within and across empires: mobility in the eastern Mediterranean in the axis Asia Minor, Cyprus, Egypt, 19th-20th centuries: current and new approaches” hosted by the University of Cyprus in April 2021 during the pandemic. Therefore, the spatial focus of the volume is not a byproduct of any negligence or a shortcoming of scholarly scope. On the contrary, it is a conscious choice that in essence aims to situate Cypriot history within the larger historical dynamics of the Mediterranean. As indicated by Summerer in her introductory note, the volume “offers a new attempt to write
Cyprus's history into a ‘global moment’, and this choice is evident throughout the volume in the contributions of various authors who focus on Cyprus and the Greek speaking world or shift the focus away from Cyprus and the Greek language by exposing connections within the Mediterranean space. From this perspective the volume allows the reader to understand Cyprus as a part of a larger history in which connections between diverse religious communities and language groups (Cypriot Greek dialect and Turkish Cypriot) become visible.

The opening contributions from Athanasios Koutoupas and Eftychia Mylona takes the reader to two different eras of Egypt between 19th and 20th centuries and the central theme for both is migration. The demographic, spatial and the cultural transformation of Alexandria, which Koutoupas demonstrates with great clarity and structure reminds the specialist reader other port-cities and port-towns of the Eastern Mediterranean at the turn of the century. This alone provides a strong point in favor of further studying similar patterns of transformation in the Mediterranean. Koutoupas is able to show how the local population is outnumbered by migrants when the city was growing just as it was the case for similar places for instance on the Western Anatolian shoreline during the same period of incorporation into capitalist markets. A fragile “cosmopolis” seems to be emerging based on the observations of Koutoupas where segregated neighborhoods existed side by side with public spaces and practices that promoted mobility, mixing and a strong local identity. The author convincingly describes the framework of the transformation that turned Alexandria into a ‘migrant-magnet’, but the reader is left without enough number of accounts reflecting the voices of those who transformed the city. Probably dictated by lack of sources, the contribution leaves one wandering about how this aptly described monumental transformation of space was perceived by the many ‘neighborhoods’ of Alexandria.

Eftychia Mylona’s focus takes the reader forward in time to 1960s Egypt and the departure of the Greeks because of the Nasser era legislations that practically undermined their position in the Egyptian labor market. Unlike other scholarly approaches that primarily deal with the reasons behind migration, Mylona also discusses the strategies of staying, belonging and survival of those who do not choose to leave. This makes this contribution a particularly strong and fresh one for those who are interested in migration studies where the focus is often on the push factors. Mylona, relying extensively on her field work, can show the “stories of remaining”, as she describes them, to the reader in detail. Dual “longing and belonging” perfectly encapsulates the purgatory that is experienced by those who choose to remain in Egypt. Mylona’s piece is a welcome reading for anyone interested in diaspora identities and many parallels could easily be drawn with Greeks in Egypt and many other migrant communities (Armenians, Muslims, and Jews) in the port-cities and port-towns of the late-Ottoman and post-Ottoman Mediterranean. Author’s choice of focusing on Egyptian Greeks is very understandable but at least hinting on the possible connections and similarities with other migrant groups in the Eastern Mediterranean is a missed opportunity.

Matthias Kappler’s contribution resonates most strongly with the volume’s general focus on connections. Kappler’s narrative of how the history of words, and thus the history of language connects cultural context is in itself a testament to the connections across the Mediterranean geography. With examples like the Venetian cariola or the Arabic farfāra, which
is a very specific word about cotton production, Kappler skilfully shows how loanwords are used in Cypriot Greek and Cypriot Turkish, but also in Anatolian Turkish and hints to the possibilities of further linguistic connections. The world of connections and interaction discussed through language is complemented by two other works in the same volume.

On the one hand, in his most interesting piece, Stelios Irakleous brings the linguistic connections into life by tracing the history of Turkish speaking Orthodox Christians of Cyprus who migrated from Anatolia. Relying extensively on personal accounts, most of which are from the Archive of the Centre of Asia Minor Studies, Irakleous convincingly demonstrates the dynamics of the gradually decreasing function of Turkish among the migrants from Asia Minor. Most surprisingly, this piece also sheds some new light onto the history of education of the Orthodox population in the late Ottoman Empire by briefly discussing dynamics of the use of language in these institutions. In Irakleous’ account, Turkish of the Orthodox communities becomes a vector of cultural exchange and mobility across the Mediterranean. This is a welcome reminder for the scholars of the late Ottoman world that there is still much to be learned from the cultural history of the use of Turkish by non-Muslim communities in the empire such as Karamanlı Greek in Cypriot Turkish or Karamanlidika.

On the other hand, Gulshen Sakhatova analyses a particular verbal system of Cypriot Turkish that is used to define actions soon to happen. Sakhatova’s work is primarily focused on a single lexical-grammatical formation. She discusses its use, and makes comparisons to standard Turkish. However, the author points out to the need for further research and thus falls slightly short of demonstrating how this linguistic culture could be analyzed as a vector of mobility and interaction across the larger Eastern Mediterranean framework that the volume sets as its unit of analysis.

Religion follows migration and language as another main theme of the volume thanks to the contributions from Michalis N. Michael and Theoharis Stavrides who respectively discuss the history of an Orthodox Monastery of the Ottoman world and the practices of pilgrimage among the Greek Orthodox from Cyprus. Michael’s work is another contribution of the volume that resonates strongly with the central theme of connections and mobility through its examination of the imperial Ottoman framework within which the Orthodox Church is able exert its own hegemony among the Orthodox Christian peoples of the empire. It is fascinating to learn about the functions of the church, the case of the Kykkos Monastery, as an economic and cultural hub across the Mediterranean space. Michael’s work is a strong contribution to the study of religious institutions under imperial regimes in general on top of being very relevant for the history of the modern Eastern Mediterranean. The discussion of the practice of ziteia, that is charitable giving, by Michael clearly demonstrates that the role the church in economic history is often overlooked by more conventional histories of the economic transformation in the Eastern Mediterranean that focus on histories of capitalist development.

Stavrides’ contribution is not only complimentary to Michael’s but also expands it by focusing on the practices of pilgrimage among the Cypriot Orthodox Christians. This way one gets a better picture about the role of the church as an institution that is actively promoting, influencing, and reproducing connections across the Mediterranean space. Two additional perspectives could have made these subsequent contributions more interesting: the discussion of how the Ottoman bureaucracy saw, documented, and
influenced the role of the church across the then Ottoman-space and the relationships (collaboration or competition) of other religious networks and institutions outside the Cypriot Orthodox world within the same Ottoman-space.

Finally, we have the works of Ahmet Yıkık and Christina Roditou, which despite being well-written and interesting do not explicitly make connections with the central theme of the volume: cultural exchanges. However, a closer look at the contributions reveals that the stories behind them all point out to the fact of Cypriot history being embedded within the larger framework of the Mediterranean world and its cultural and diplomatic dynamics. Yıkık's work is a welcome contribution to the study of nationalisms in the Ottoman Empire and the post-Ottoman Middle East. Yıkık convincingly demonstrates the significance of İrşad newspaper among the Turkish speaking Muslims of Cyprus at the time, but falls short of situating the strategies, language and aims of the newspaper within the wider world of nationalisms in the post-Ottoman space. A comparative perspective and an analysis of parallels with other nationalists and their publications in İrşad (like the poems referred by the author) would most certainly improve the already convincing points of the author.

Where Yıkık’s work opens a vista to the history of Turkish nationalism in Cyprus, the contribution from Roditou does the same for Greek nationalism by focusing on the photographic archive of Apostolos Veremis. Veremis was born in the Ottoman port-city of İzmir or Smyrna and had to move to Alexandria in 1922 following the Greco-Turkish War of 1919-1922. In 1948, amid the turmoil of a changing Egypt, he permanently moved to Athens. In summary, he was very much a product of ‘the Mediterranean world’ that was being transformed at the hands of nationalists ‘on both sides of the shore’ during his lifetime. In 1954 he is assigned on a propaganda mission to collect photographic evidence that would underline the Hellenic cultural heritage of Cyprus to strengthen claims of self-determination. Roditou’s work exposes what was deemed as worthy of display in the eyes of the 20th century Greek nationalists. It also provides a thorough analysis of the formative process of this valuable cultural heritage. Roditou’s meticulous work could be enhanced with the help of current GIS methods in Digital Humanities and provide a visual reconstruction of Veremis’ journey, route and photographs on the island. This, in return, can shed light to what was deemed worthy and not in the places that he visited. Such knowledge would be of great interest to the scholars of nationalism and those who study history of Cyprus.

The edited volume opens with Mona Savvidou-Theodoulou poem “The Voice of the Mediterranean” and quotes the following line: “Knots are destined to connect people from one shore to the other”. This was indeed the central theme throughout the volume and the knots that connected were mostly visible in each contribution. The volume provides equally interesting and valuable insights for historians and linguists who are interested in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Emre Erol