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“A port and its people: Chania at the time of transition from sail to steam navigation”

The introduction of steam in the 19th century drastically affected shipping and transport around the globe. Travel became safer and faster, while at the same time goods could reach every corner of the globe much more easily. This created a chain effect that affected the production of goods, causing an increase in it, as well as labor on ships by creating new jobs and specializations. At the same time, the new reality also affected shipownership with the gradual decrease of investment in sailing ships. Research on the port cities of the eastern Mediterranean in the 19th century has focused mostly on bigger ports such as Istanbul, Smyrna, Piraeus and Ermoupolis, while smaller ports like those of Crete have not been examined thoroughly. At the same time, Greek historiography has concentrated on Greek Orthodox merchants, sailors and shipowners and neglected the role of Muslims in shipping, especially in port cities where the two groups co-existed as elements of the local population. An important ambition of mine is to highlight the activity of Muslim Cretans as shipowners and captains in the internal commerce of the empire, a phenomenon almost unique in Aegean shipping, as far as we know, in that transitional period.

To this end, the paper will focus on two topics: the main features of the port of Chania in terms of its social make-up and economy, and its role in the economy of Crete and Mediterranean trade during the period of transition from sail to steam. More specifically, I intend to discuss how the commerce of the island was affected by the arrival of steamships and the gradual dominance over sailing ships. In addition, I intend to discuss, on the one hand, how this transition created new economic and social realities that affected both the port and the communities (Christian Orthodox, Muslim, Jewish) active there as shipowners, sailors and port workers and, on the other, the social aspects of life in the port examining topics such as sociability and leisure and showing how these, too, were affected by the intrusion of steamships. In discussing these topics, I will also point out that, besides the transition to steam, political factors such as the granting of a semi-autonomous status to Crete at the end of the 19th century, the massive emigration of its Muslim population and the union of the island with the Greek kingdom in 1913 had an important effect on the port of Chania.

The paper will be based on unpublished material in Ottoman Turkish and Greek, as well as also in English and French. This material includes personal commercial registers, court registers, consular reports, correspondence and the local press. Focusing on the case of Chania, this paper aims to shed light on the history of the port cities of the eastern Mediterranean in the 19th century and the communities that were directly linked to shipping and trade, as the changes that we observe in Chania are connected to phenomena on a much wider scale that had an impact on all the port cities of this geographical region.

Petros Kastrinakis is a PhD candidate in History at the Department of History and Archaeology of the University of Crete in Rethymnon. He graduated from the same department and received his master's degree in Ottoman history from the same department and university in collaboration with the Institute for Mediterranean Studies. He has received several scholarships and has worked for several years on research projects at the Institute for Mediterranean Studies and at other universities such as Stanford University. His dissertation took place under the ERC Starting Grant SeaLit (Seafaring Lives in Transition) research programme in the Institute for Mediterranean Studies, and his research is now funded by State Scholarship Foundation (IKY). His main interests are the study of ports and islands, late Ottoman history, urban history and public health history.