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Forced population shifts in Crete under Venetian rule (13th-17th c.): a practice of imposing authority

ABSTRACT

Violent shifts of population were a standard practice of the Venetians throughout their domination of the island of Crete. Many of the instigators of rebellions or riots and outlaw leaders, the perpetrators of heinous crimes and fugitives were exiled from their homelands, the major cities of Crete and their regions, the whole island or even from the state of Venice. Similarly, the Venetians displaced many convicts to specific parts of the island, as a means of controlling people who were likely to cause upheaval and criminal acts on the island, with the relative isolation that the relocation offered.

Furthermore, the demolition of villages, evacuation and devastation, mainly in mountainous and inaccessible areas, were adopted by the Venetians over the centuries in order to deal with rebellions and riots. This practice also worked as a means of suppressing insubordination and as a measure for dealing with the action in these areas of groups of bandits and outlaws, whose delinquent activity was directed against both the authorities and the local people. The places of residence of the outlaws and their relatives, their hideouts, but also neighbouring hamlets whose residents aided them, became the recipients of the wrath and punishing attitude of the Venetians.

Similar methods of shifting populations and devastating areas, as well as resettling them with populations that can be controlled, are timeless standard mechanisms of imposing authority. In this paper an attempt is made at an overall review of this policy in the centuries of Venetian rule in Crete. Particularly interesting is the monitoring and study of the geography of the regions with problems and tendencies of delinquency that have characterised these areas until today, due to their isolation and inaccessibility, which consequently makes them difficult to control. Finally, we examine the areas of isolation and displacement of people whom the Venetians regarded as dangerous for the security and stability of the state, as well as for the protection and quiet living of the rest of the population of the island.

KEYWORDS: Crete under Venetian rule, violence, deviance, social control, exiles and fugitives (*banditi*), henchmen (*bravi*), population shifts, displacement, relocation, devastation of places, punishment, Sfakians, petitions for pardon

Immigration and refugee flows, persecutions and relocations, exchange of populations, minglings: violent or milder, population shifts are noted throughout history. Sometimes they are deliberate but necessary, to secure food and survival; on other occasions they take place after violent invasions, occupations or wars. They often occur for political, military, national, religious

or economic reasons; or they may be part of racial, state or international practices aiming at promoting specific interests and ultimately strengthening any given “authority” (e.g. with the exploitation of the particular manpower, security and control of an area). More specifically, a violent transfer of populations has always been and still is a standard means of imposing authority and exercising control in global history (Braudel 1977; Watson 1992; Bernstein – Milza 1994/1995; Idem 2017; Hooper 2003).¹

My presentation deals with the shift of individuals and groups of people in the context of law enforcement by the Venetian authorities in Crete. This mobility is examined on the basis of two main axes: on the one hand we have the authorities, which applied certain policies so as to remove the populations that posed a threat to them. A form of shift as well as a method of control by the Venetian authorities was exile, a standard practice of the Venetians throughout the period of their rule over the island. Sometimes the removal was violent and arbitrary, with the persecution of populations from certain areas of the island to achieve more effective control over them. On the other hand we have the persecuted, on their way to exile or choosing to flee as a means of avoiding punishment, preferring to lead a life as fugitives.²

The penalty of exile was already imposed on those participating in the major revolutionary movements of the 13th, 14th and 15th century and their families. Men were usually sent away from the island, while women were banished to other parts of the island, away from their place of residence. Exiles who returned despite their conviction faced the death penalty. Several were obliged to appear before the Duke at regular intervals. Punishments accompanying exile were the seizure of property and the revocation of feudal land, offices and privileges, the seizure and destruction of their villages, the destruction of their homes and crops, the seizure of livestock and movable property (Scafini 1907, 87-108; Zoudianos 1960, 99-189). Similar penalties can be found later on over the centuries. For example, the people who participated in the rebellion of Georgio Gadanoleo, alias Lyssogiorgis,³ in the 16th century were sent into exile not only in various parts of Crete but also in Cyprus and the Aegean islands, while their properties were seized (Zoudianos 1960, 208-220; Papadia-Lala 1983, 127-128).⁴

Banishment was initially the penalty in cases of high treason, rebellion, murder, sacrilege and fleeing from justice, but gradually it was imposed for a plethora of offences (possession and use of arms, blasphemy, adultery). Those charged with heinous crimes or fugitives were exiled (they were all called *banditi*), usually for several years or for life, away from their place of origin and away from the major towns of the island and their regions (Tsakiri 2008, 179-184).⁵ There are characteristic cases of family heads who caused a bloody feud (*vendetta*), who were sent away from the town where they lived and where they had caused a riot

¹ The bibliography is only indicative. In Hooper’s article there is an interesting comparative reference to population shifts in different periods of time and civilizations.

² On the penalty of exile in Crete see in detail Tsakiri 2008, 179-223, 295-300.

³ Georgios Gadanoleos was the rebellion ringleader of the mountainous villages of Chania in 1527, in social causes, against the tax oppression and the arbitrary administrative acts of the Venetians.

⁴ On the continuity in punishments see Tsakiri 2015a.

⁵ Regarding the notion of the *bandito* and the types of exile (*bando*) see Ferro 1845², 234-240 (*banditi*), 240-242 (*bando*); Povolo 1980, 220-232, especially 224 note 202; Tsakiri 2008, 179-183.

or clashed with a rival family (Tsakiri 2007, 174-175).⁶ Some of the perpetrators of atrocious crimes and many of the chiefs of illegal or bandit groups which were active on the island were exiled (even in absentia) not only from Crete but also from Venice and the lands bordering its region or even from the whole state of Venice (*Stato da Terra e da Mar*). Others, who participated in these illegal acts but were charged with minor offences, were condemned to exile usually from the whole of Crete. In some cases, the option of living in a particular place on the island was offered (Tsakiri 2014a, 580, 587-589; Eadem 2014c, 361-363, 381-386). Similar practices were applied, over the centuries, against the rowdy Sfakian families who inhabited the inaccessible and isolated mountain villages in the White Mountains, in the south of the Chania and Rethymnon districts (Tsakiri 2014a).⁷

Shifting populations, as mentioned above, also consisted of fugitives condemned to exile in absentia. I will only refer to the case of a woman, Elena Syropoulou, from the village of Brussa in the region of Temenos,⁸ who was banished as a fugitive in 1578 from the whole of Crete except the provinces (*castelli*) of Sitia and Ierapetra (the document does not mention her offence or her status, though. I suppose that she belonged to the lower socioeconomic strata) (Tsakiri 2003, 218, 239-240).⁹

According to the decrees of the authorities in Crete in the 13th and 14th centuries, exiles or fugitives who returned to the island or any place from where they had been banished and were arrested would be subject to the death penalty, imprisonment or corporal punishments such as mutilations and public whipping (Scafini 1907, 87-108; Tsakiri 1999, 144-146). Later on, in the 16th and 17th centuries, if people sentenced to banishment for serious crimes or wanted individuals were to be arrested, they would be brought to trial or for punishment before the Venetian official of the region where they had originally been convicted (Tsakiri 2008, 186). Under an act of 1531, an exile would be found guilty of insubordination to the Doge, for which offence the usual punishment suffered by exiles who illicitly crossed the borders was death (Ferro 1845², 235). Convictions by 16th and 17th century courts in Crete also imposed the death penalty, the galley, mutilation, public ridicule and the seizure of property in case of arrest (Tsakiri 2008, 184-185, 186-187; Eadem 2014a, 587-590).

Banishment resulted in a great number of people being shifted either within Crete or in the rest of the Venetian territory. Many exiles and fugitives moved of their own accord to the interior of the island, in areas neighbouring theirs, trying to make a living by finding jobs in villages, in farming or livestock breeding (e.g. as shepherds), while subject to various outstanding convictions for delinquent activity (Tsakiri 2014a, 595-596). Their delinquent actions did not usually stop in their new place of settlement, either. Some of them offered their services to feudalists and prominent families of the island, mainly in the countryside, which was harder to control, as paid murderers and henchmen (*bravi*) (Tsakiri 2014b).¹⁰ For example, in 1567

⁶ On the vendetta in Venice and other regions of Italy see Muir 1998²; Bianco 1994.

⁷ On Sfakia see Spanakis 2006³, vol. 2, 750-752.

⁸ Brussa: a village to the east of the town of Candia, in the district of Temenos, Spanakis 2006³, vol. 2, 569.

⁹ Ierapetra and Sitia are eastern districts of Crete, see respectively Spanakis 2006³, vol. 1, 308-312; vol. 2, 707-711.

¹⁰ Regarding the activity of persuaders (*bravi*) in Venice see Walker 1998.

a family from the countryside of Sitia hired an exile from a neighbouring village, who continued to live there despite convictions against him, to murder members of an enemy family of fellow villagers. With the same aim they approached a farmer from the area of Candia, “a stranger” (*forastiero*) in the area, as is stated in the verdict, “of poor reputation and also an exile, according to rumours” (*persona di mala qualità et, per quanto si dice, ancor lui bandito*) (Tsakiri 2007, 160, 164, 170-171).

Some outlaws resorted to other parts of the Venetian territory, where they continued their thieving and delinquent activity. For instance, in the early 17th century, a man called Maneas, from Crete, can be traced in Ithaca. Exiled by the authorities of Kefalonia, he sought refuge there as, after his request, he was allowed to live in Ithaca with his family, close to the castle so that the authorities would be able to check on him. This, of course, did not prevent his illegal activities, with raids, looting and theft of animals from the opposite coast, under Turkish rule. In fact, he became the leader (*caporione*) of a gang of outlaws in Ithaca, thus inciting others to delinquency as well (Tsakiri 2015b, 639). His action makes me wonder whether illegal activity in Crete was the reason why he left there (as a fugitive or exile) to end up in the Ionian islands, which were also under Venetian rule.

Displacement was also applied along with banishment. It was a particular type of exile to specific locations on the island, usually far from inhabited areas or the major towns, sometimes within controlling distance of them. Several of those relocated (*confinati, relegati*) were guilty of such serious charges as instigation to riot. Others were notorious criminals with extensive delinquent and criminal activity, mainly in the mountainous, inaccessible areas. Relocation, with the relative isolation it entailed, allowed the authorities to send away whomever they regarded as prone to causing upheaval or committing crimes on the island. As is proved by examples from modern Greek history, the penalty of displacement at large severely affected the bandits' nomadic relational networks. In our case, it was applied to the thieving Sfakian families (Tsakiri 2014a, 589; Theotokas – Kotaridis 2006, 173-174).¹¹

The places of isolation and relocation of people who the Venetians thought posed a danger to security, the stability of the state and the protection and undisturbed life of the rest of the population of the island appear to be specific throughout the Venetian domination of the island. Some of these areas, such as Merambelo, Ierapetra and Sitia, in eastern Crete, rocky and remote, were ideal places for isolation. The same holds for Gramvousa and Souda, fortress islands in the north of the island, in the administrative region of Chania. Many of these regions were closer to big towns, as was the case with the areas of Temenos and Pedia, in the region of the town of Candia, the headquarters of the administrative and military authorities of the island. But even so, they often had strong fortresses (e.g. in the 13th century the area of Temenos was characterised by the Venetians as a strongly fortified town: *oppidum fortissimum*) or were also mountainous and isolated places, like the area of Belvedere, similarly controlled by Candia. It is indicative that several of these fortified (naturally or artificially) and isolated areas were instrumental in the rebellions against the Venetian rule, either as the springboard of the rebels or as fortresses

¹¹ Concerning the concept of exile and displacement - confinement in Roman and Byzantine law see Cessi 1917, 12, 16; Troianos 1997, 38-41; Tourtoglou 2001, 149-150.

of the Venetians. On other occasions they became dens of pirates and hideouts for those who were exiled or persecuted by the authorities.¹²

However, the island of Crete also became a place of confinement for Venetian and other Italian criminals convicted by the supreme courts of Venice and the authorities (*Rettori*) of the Venetian hinterland (*terraferma*). Venetian officials, in charge of the galleys that transferred these exiles to the island, escorted them before the local authorities of the town to whose region they would be confined. The exiles were obliged to appear before the authorities of the island at regular intervals, sometimes as often as once a week. The authorities in turn had to constantly report to those of the metropolis as well as the authorities of the town within the Venetian territory where the conviction had been issued (Tsakiri 2008, 298).

These practices resulted in the concentration of exiles and fugitives at the edges of the Venetian state, the shift of populations and the rapid increase in the crime rate in the 16th century. The growing number of exiles posed a threat to society and social peace (Povolo 1986; Davidson 1986; Laven 1994).

Accordingly, such mobility, increase and activity of outlaws is found in Crete from the 16th century on. In 1549 the Venetian authorities in Crete report an increase in the number of exiles who team up in gangs (*bande*). Twenty years later, in 1568, in their correspondence with the metropolis, the authorities of Crete complain that the exiles keep increasing on the island, show no respect whatsoever for justice, violate the limits of their restriction and commit many offences.

The areas of concentration and illegal action of the exiles were mainly mountainous and far from the administrative centres, hard to police and varying from one period to another. For example, in 1563 the areas particularly afflicted by the outlaws are the bays of Almyros and Kissamos and the fertile plateau of Omalos, in the region of Chania,¹³ with subsequent problems in supplying the town with grain. In 1575 several exiles from Chania and its region sought refuge in the fortress of Souda, arguing that it was not a forbidden place for them, thus forcing the authorities to forbid the exiles from crossing over to the rocky island of Souda from then on (Tsakiri 2008, 297-300).

It is quite probable that the expansion of the penalty of exile for minor offences, but also its imposition in cases of fugitives, led to a gradual loss of the effectiveness of the measure. Exiles started to increase dangerously during the 17th century, posing a threat to social stability. For this reason, in 1675 Venice recommended its officials impose banishment only in cases of murder (Tsakiri 2008, 184-185).

Let's see some of the consequences of exile and displacement. From the sociological point of view, it is interesting that such practices mean expulsion of the evil from the body of the rest of the Community. Living in a state of flight from justice, banishment or relocation entailed

¹² On the places of isolation see indicatively Tsakiri 2003, 218, 220-221; Eadem 2014a, 589; Eadem 2014c, 362-363, 385. On each region see www.kastra.eu; Spanakis 2006³, vol. 2, 526-529 (Merambelo), 563-566 (Belvedere), 618-623 (Pediás), 730 (Souda), 758, 759-761 (Temenos). See also here above, note 9.

¹³ Spanakis 2006³, 819-822; <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Omalos>.

the political and economic isolation of the persecuted from the Community. The exiles were the considered politically dead. They could not hold any state office or testify as witnesses, nor could they instigate cases of civil law except by proxy, and they were not allowed to draw up a contract. They were also excluded from commercial activities. Over the centuries they were generally excluded from the social body, stigmatised and likened to the excommunicated. Even after their death, they could not be transferred within the forbidden borders to be buried, without the permission of the ruler, with penalties provided for the perpetrator (Ferro 1845², 234-240). Penalties were also provided for those who helped them and gave them shelter or refuge, a job or any other aid (Ferro 1845², 234-235; Tsakiri 2008, 221-223; Eadem 2014a, 590). On the other hand, Venice provided initiatives (financial and other) to the hunters of those wanted (Bassaglia 1979-80; Idem 1985; Povoletto 1980; Tsakiri 2008, 190-195, 204-209; Eadem 2014a, 584-587). This measure is understood to have led exiles to constant flight.

Moreover, it is also indicative that on several occasions exiles and fugitives could petition for pardon only after a certain period of time and under certain circumstances (Tsakiri 2003; Eadem 2008, 195-201). Of course there were those who, despite their convictions, kept moving around and worked in their place of residence for quite some time, as was already mentioned above (Tsakiri 2014a, 580-581, 595-596). Many sought refuge in pirate galleys or the Ottoman territory, where they started a new life, denouncing the Christian faith and offering their services and skills to the Turks (Preto 2013, 120-123; Dursteler 2006, 61-73). Others, often after wandering for years, decided to seek pardon from the authorities of the island as well as the metropolis itself or from officials who had the relevant jurisdiction, such as the *Provveditore General da Mar* or the Venetian *Bailo* in Constantinople, so that they could return to the island and be brought to trial. On other occasions they asked for their penalty to be mitigated or petitioned for pardon afresh (Tsakiri 2003; Eadem 2008, 215-220; Eadem 2014c, 374-376, 386-388; Eadem 2015c). It is indicative that over the centuries those who seek pardon so as to be repatriated are treated by the Venetian authorities more as refugees than as exiles (Tsakiri 2015c, 353).

The displaced, away from their family, strangers in a new place, had difficulty assimilating into the local society. In 1586, ten years after her conviction, the aforementioned Elena, now in her eighties, begged for bread in her place of isolation. Her relatives petitioned for pardon to the authorities of Crete, stating that her exile had contributed to the break-up of her family and the neglect of her personal affairs. As the end of her life drew near, “at the obvious risk of dying out in the open and nobody will be there to bury her and she will be eaten by dogs and other animals” (*perché, morendo in queste parti, potria morire sopra le strade, et non trovar che gli dasse sepoltura, et restar cibo di cani et altri animali*), the authorities appointed the *castello* of Temenos, closer to her village, as her place of confinement. In this way, she would be close to her relatives and “it will be possible for her to be aided by her own people, among whom she will die and she will have the opportunity to be buried as a Christian” (*per poter, in questa sua ettà, esser agiutata da qualch'uno delli suoi, fra li quali al meno possi finire il restante degl'anni suoi, et che possi esser sepolta come Christiana*) (Tsakiri 2003, 218, 239-240).

Most of the petitions for pardon are just as dramatic. The convicts, away from their families for 12, 15 or 20 years, confess to having squandered the best part of their fortune during their

exile. This money should have been invested in feeding and sustaining their families, which often comprised many members. The petitions also refer to their miserable and abandoned children, to the detriment and break-up of their families, as they had ceased their professional activity. Many of them were favourably allowed to work in areas near their families, so that they could contribute to their sustenance. For example, when it comes to exiles from Candia and its region up to 15 or 20 miles away, they were usually allowed to live and work in the district of Temenos (Tsakiri 2003).

Another aspect of the violent transfer of populations was the razing of villages to the ground, the evacuation and devastation of mainly mountainous and inaccessible places, which was regularly used by the Venetians over the centuries to cope with rebellions and riots. This practice also functioned as a measure of suppressing insubordination and countering the activity of robbing and outlaw gangs, whose delinquent activity was directed against both the authorities and the local population (mainly through stealing animals and looting). The abodes of the outlaws and their relatives, their hideouts but also neighbouring hamlets whose inhabitants aided them, became the recipients of the wrath and punishing attitude of the Venetians. Their villages, which in the verdicts are mentioned as “dens of outlaws” (*ricetacolo albergo*), were completely destroyed according to the policy of Venice which aimed at devastating fortified sites with a stated prohibition of rebuilding. These places were initially devastated and their population was persecuted, and therefore scattered, or transferred elsewhere, to villages away from each other or to controllable areas, close to the administrative centres (Tsakiri 2014a, 590-591). After an agreement and truce with the authorities, the displaced population returned to some of these places (Xanthoudides 1939, 142-146); on most occasions, however, resettlement was not possible. Some of the devastated areas were later granted as feudal land or plots of land to people who would contribute to their development. I will mention the case of the plateau of Lasithion, an inaccessible mountainous area in eastern Crete, far from Candia: the haven and starting point of rebels in almost all rebellions of the 13th, 14th and 15th centuries, it was completely destroyed by the Venetians. The authorities prohibited building, cultivating the land and breeding animals there, while the population was displaced. The area, which due to its role in the rebel movements was termed “a thorn in the heart of Venice” (*una spina nel cuore di Venezia*), remained desolate for centuries, until the settlement of refugees from Nafplion and Monemvasia, who were given plots of land for cultivation, under a resolution of 1543 (Xanthoudides 1939, 108-110; Spanakis 1957, 9-20; Koliva – Moatsos 1977-1984, 375-452).¹⁴

The agreements of the prominent Sfakian families with the authorities offer us invaluable evidence concerning the control of populations. In addition to a statement of repentance for their previous offences, they were obliged to appear before the authorities of the town every six months as guarantors for the members of their extended family. In case of living away from their place of residence, they were obliged to draw up a certificate with the priest of their village which they were to carry with them, or else the authorities would turn against them (Tsakiri 2014a, 578-580). Their relatives were isolated in just the same way or were taken hostage, until

¹⁴ The bibliography is only indicative. For more details see my paper on Lasithi (forthcoming).

the fulfillment of their pledges or obligations arising from their agreements with the Venetians. For example, in a relevant agreement of the early 17th century, several heads of families leave sons and brothers as hostages until they deliver what they have agreed on with the authorities, namely the arrest of criminal members of their extended family and their turning over to the Venetians. In this way they prove their obedience practically (Tsakiri 2014a, 582-584).

Finally, a form of shifting populations and sending troublemakers away from the island was also their condemnation to rowing in the galleys (mainly as of the latter half of the 16th century, when rowing in the galleys was established as a penalty). Many died in the galleys during a long and painful journey under inhuman conditions and various hardships (Viaro 1978; Idem 1980; Tsakiri 2008, 224-241).

Venice tried to maintain its sovereignty through the persecution of people and groups as well as the violent or voluntary shifts and relocations of the population. Similar regulatory methods of removing populations and devastating places and then resettling them with populations that were easy to control are pinpointed early on in history. Over time, they are standard practices of imposing authority, a measure of prevention and suppression. And it is not only the shift but also its prohibition that is adopted as a means of control. For example, the Venetian authorities imposed house arrest and movement restrictions on people who had been involved in conflicts (Tsakiri 2007, 165, 175).

It is very interesting to study the geography of the areas that were devastated and whose population was persecuted. These areas were hotbeds of turmoil against the Venetians throughout the period of their rule over the island, due to the isolation and inaccessibility and therefore the difficulty of controlling these places.¹⁵ A typical example was the mountainous areas inhabited by the Sfakian families, whose delinquent behaviour troubled the authorities on numerous occasions over the centuries. These areas were actually also associated with problems and tendencies of delinquency later on, while many of these places have continued troubling the authorities until the present day. Researching the structure of the gangs of outlaws and a portrayal of their leaders is also particularly important (Astrinaki 2003; Tsandiroopoulos 2004; Tsakiri 2014a).

To sum up, I would like to point out that the archive material, mainly from the latter centuries of Venetian rule over the island, suggests that a significant part of the population is constantly on the move (although it is not easy for anyone to provide a specific number). Fugitives, exiles and other outlaws, robbers and henchmen, criminals and abominable murderers go to extremes, moving on the margin (literally and metaphorically) of Cretan and Venetian society and territory. The state authority imposes or incites their expatriation and relocation as a means of pressure. In a vicious circle, the violence of the one part reinforces the violence of the other, resulting in more people being wanted and persecuted or in the unsolicited shift of those who choose (often unable to do otherwise) to lead their life fleeing from justice as a means of escaping punishment.

¹⁵ For a more thorough study of the subject see my paper on Lasithi.

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