Meltem
Journal of the Izmir Mediterranean Academy
No. 5, Summer 2019, 90-92, DOI 10.32325/iaad.2019.6

The Mediterranean Economies as "Garden Economies"*

Elias Kolovos**

In a recent book,[1] I have discussed the idea of the Mediterranean economies as "garden economies". Facing the environmental risks of the Mediterranean climate, the poor people of the Mediterranean islands and coastlines used to base their subsistence on a diversification of their cultures, and especially on products which could not be taxed easily by the tax collectors: little vegetable gardens (*bostan*) just outside the doors of the Mediterranean households, and, trees all around (*bahçe*), constituted a poor but stable nutritional basket for survival.

My case study for this research was the Greek island of Andros, one of the Cyclades islands, under the Ottomans. I have investigated how the economy in the case of an Aegean island during the seventeenth century had to move beyond self-sufficiency and isolation and secure the com-

* This article is based on the presentation submitted to the third İncirin Akdeniz'deki Yolculuğu Conference organised by the Izmir Mediterranean Academy at Izmir Sanat Kültürpark on 22 September 2018.

** Department of History and Archaeology, University of Crete

1 Elias Kolovos, *ὅπου ἦν κῆπος: Η μεσογειακή νησιωτική οικονομία της Άνδρου σύμφωνα με το οθωμανικό κτηματολόγιο του 1670* ["There was a garden..." The Economy of the Mediterranean Island of Andros according to the Ottoman Land and Property Survey of 1670] (Heraklion: Crete University Press, 2017).

mercialization of particular surpluses, to survive. Through an analysis of the data extracted from the Ottoman land and property survey (*tahrir*) of the island of Andros in 1670, I assumed that its economy was able to reproduce itself with only *relative* self-sufficiency. Especially the production of cereals was under the level of subsistence in the case of this island. This was not a unique case in the world of the Aegean and the Mediterranean islands. In bad years, the islanders had to import cereals from outside. Thus, the islanders were forced to produce commercial commodities to obtain revenues and buy cereals from outside, at least during bad harvest years.

The commercial production of the island of Andros already from the late medieval times and in the seventeenth century was silk, which was "the main wealth of Andros" according to the French traveler Joseph Pitton de Tournefort in 1700. Men and especially women, and children of the peasant families specialized in the production of raw silk from the cocoons of the mulberry trees, which were dispersed all around the island. The island produced also wine and olive oil, "enough", according to Tournefort, "for the needs of the islanders". These products might also have had commercial value. Silk being the main commercial commodity of Andros, the analysis of the Ottoman survey of 1670 shows also that figs as well, which was a product of high nutrition value, might have been exported from the island in dried form.

The peasants on the island, according to the analysis of the Ottoman survey of 1670, had very small properties, not enough to sustain their subsistence at all. How did they manage to survive?

For the cash the peasants needed to pay their taxes, the peasant families had to produce raw silk to sell to the *archons,* the elite of the island. All peasant families on the island had at least one mulberry tree in their properties. For their survival, on the other hand, they could

Elias Kolovos's recent study on garden economies was published by Crete University Press in 2017.

have not been dependent on cereals. The Ottoman survey of 1670 shows that the islanders of Andros were also cultivating small gardens with legumes, beans, broadbeans, and chickpeas, vegetables, and various fruits; and of course, figs. They were also breeding domestic animals, pigs, poultry, goats, and sheep, to slaughter in case of need. Living on an island, the Andriots had also the opportunity of fishing. The tax value of this production was not big, according to the Ottoman survey of 1670, which reflected the priorities of the Ottoman imperial government. We can assume, however, that it was very important for the subsistence of the peasant families on the island of Andros. Thus, in a way, we could label the economy of the Mediterranean island of Andros as a "garden economy".

A "garden economy" means that the poor people used their small gardens, as well as the various other "small" products, legumes, beans, broadbeans, and chickpeas, vegetables, various fruits, and of course figs to manage to survive.[2] In 1670, the Ottoman surveyor (*tahrirci*) had counted on the island of Andros, with a total surface of 380 square kilometers and a population of around 6,000 souls, 17,914 fig trees. Besides, 8,339 other fruit-trees (*eşcar-ı müsmire*) were counted in the same register. They should have included orange and lemon trees, oak trees, etc. In comparison, only the mulberry trees were more than the fig-trees, 21,041. The island of Andros was the "island of silk" as we have already remarked. Olive trees, on the other hand, were only 6,939 on this particular island. Almost everybody had a fig tree on the island, in the margins of his fields, so that he could use the fruit for calories and sugar. Moreover, the peasants had also the opportunity to dry some figs they were cultivating especially for that purpose. All the household members, men, women, children, were engaged in drying the figs on the roof of their house. As a reward, dried figs could be sold and later exported.

According to Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell,

> Mediterranean production relies on diversification between wild and cultivated, animal- and plant-resources, intensive and extensive production; on quality of care in production, multiple varieties of animal or plant, processing and packaging for storage and redistribution. [...] The silk-mulberries of Reggio, the *silphion* and cumin of Cyrene, the storax of Gabala, and the mastic of Chios are, like the narcotics of the modern Biqa, not obscure accidents of Mediterranean production, but illustrate the acme of the intensification and specialization which are to be seen in the Mediterranean garden, and which represent one of the most important protections against omnipresent risk.[3]

Lucette Valensi has also remarked that "none of the specialized crops mattered in terms of the general macroeconomy of the country. Had there been a shortage of figs from the Jabal Matmata or melons from Sfax, the country would have remained unaffected. On the local level, however, that of microeconomy, such products were the safeguards without which people at the mercy of capricious climate and poor equipment would have been unable to secure their subsistence."[4]

It is a matter of further investigations to the local Mediterranean economies, and especially to the local societies of the Ottoman Empire, which have been surveyed in good detail by the Ottoman imperial administration, to verify the hypothesis of "garden economies" for other local cases as well.

---

2 According to Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers 2000), 210, "no major Mediterranean food-plant has been so unfairly neglected as the fig: weight-by-weight it is about five times so rich calorifically as cereals or olives. It offers a vital resource —sugar— at vastly less expense in social and environmental terms than does sugar-cane; and, like organized apiculture, it represents a way of making use of the margins, for it characteristically grows in unpromisingly arid corners of the cultivated ground."

3 Horden and Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea*, 223.

4 Lucette Valensi, *Tunisian Peasants in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*, trans. by Beth Archer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press and Paris: Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 1985), 110-116