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Where was 1821? Space and Territory in the Greek Revolution



**Review of Dimitris D. Arvanitakis, Η Αγωγή του πολίτη: Η γαλλική παρουσία στο Ιόνιο (1797-1799) και το έθνος των Ελλήνων**

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**Dimitris D. Arvanitakis**

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[Educating the citizen: The French presence in the Ionian Sea (1797–1799) and the Greek nation]

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Dimitris D. Arvanitakis

*Η αγωγή του πολίτη: Η γαλλική παρουσία στο Ιόνιο*

*(1797–1799) και το έθνος των Ελλήνων*

[Educating the citizen: The French presence

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The ways in which the past is perceived and collective memory is shaped are complex processes that are closely connected to historians' skills, but also to factors like ideologies, mentalities and political priorities. In this study under review, Dimitris Arvanitakis attempts to tell a similar story: one of silences and univocal historical narratives both in public debate and in historiography. The study focuses on a "snapshot" in the history of a region limited by geography, yet rich in historical events: the islands of the Ionian Sea between 1797 and 1799, that is, at the crossroads between the *ancien régime* and modernity.

The French republican period (1797–1799) is truly a period not well studied by historians when it comes to Ionian historiography, since there are few original studies on the subject in question, despite the fact that the introduction of the ideas of the French Revolution into the Greek world by the French themselves, under the personal leadership of Napoleon Bonaparte, could be of cardinal significance in historiography.<sup>1</sup> On the basis of what we knew up to this point, the period in question is linked to the introduction of institutions founded on revolutionary ideology, to the granting of universal political rights and social freedom, but also to intense frustrations and discontent stemming from the fiscal, religious and social policies of the French and their ambiguous stance vis-à-vis the Ottoman Empire.

The author reckons that the initial French presence on the Ionian Islands involved much more than what is stated above and that the downplaying of the short-lived French revolutionary experience in the Ionian is due, among other factors, to the reactions of those who were adversely affected by the innovations introduced at the time and who managed, by taking advantage of the political situation, to impose their own historical narrative of the events of 1797.

So what was the Ionian 1797 anyway? What breaks did it bring about? Who reacted

to these developments and why? And, finally, how does the author believe we should narrate this French republican moment in the Ionian?

The detailed introduction to the book lays out the research questions, the main issues and the lines along which the text is structured. The thick, 782-page volume comprises four parts and a total of 15 chapters. The first part examines the last years of Venetian rule in the islands and the arrival of the French. The second part focuses on an analysis of the key concepts that were introduced via the French texts and those written in the Ionian region, as well as the establishment of the republican institutions through which an attempt would be made to educate the new citizens. The third part deals with the conflicts triggered by the French experiment in the islands. The last part refers to the conditions under which the Russians and Ottomans formed an alliance as a means of checking the advance of the French army in the Eastern Mediterranean and the dissemination of republican ideas throughout their respective territories, as well as to the rhetoric they employed in order to promote this alliance. The last pages of the volume contain detailed bibliographical notes on contemporary published and manuscript sources (707–36), a final bibliography (736–55) and an analytical index of persons, places and terms (757–82).

Upon studying the book, one is left with the feeling, among other things, that the Ionian region missed a great opportunity: the chance for political republicanism and the benefits of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution to enter the islands and, through them, the Greek world. The planning was there; the first steps had been taken, with the participation of people from the Ionian – members of the temporary municipalities and various political clubs. What seems to have been in short supply was time. However, given the reactions the French administration in the Ionian was beginning to provoke, as well as the anti-French coalitions that were forming in international circles, another hypothesis could also be put forward: that criticism of French policies and the overall malcontent expressed by the affected social groups would sooner or later lead to a rift. This hypothesis is supported by examples drawn from the Jacobin republics of Italy.

A further point concerns the republican texts themselves, which are examined here for the first time in their entirety and within their historical context. How original were they? How widely circulated were they in the Ionian? How many people, whom and to what degree did they influence? Except for part of the urban milieu, obviously those belonging to the higher-income strata, as denoted by the fact that they had studied at Italian universities, evidence shows that participation in the human geography of Ionian republicanism was numerically modest. Furthermore, the book allows us to examine the case of individuals who, though hailing from an aristocratic background, fervently embraced the republican ideals. After 1800, several of them (Spyridon Georgios Theotokis, the Narantzis brothers, and others) saw no difficulty in realigning their political orientation and joined the

Russophile circles.

The exhaustive presentation of the French plans for the Ionian by the author produces two additional key questions. First, why did this first application of republicanism in the Ionian fail? Was it only the reactions and political weight of the church, with the opinion-making machinery at its disposal?

According to the author, it was because “the ideas of the Enlightenment and of republican political organisation were introduced in a problematic ... way” (18). Also, because the French presence was extremely brief, the obstacles it encountered were significant, not to mention the disillusionment and widespread disappointment at the failure of French policy, which was losing ground throughout Europe.

The issue and the question are open to fruitful discussions: what was so problematic in the introduction of republicanism? Was it the republican institutions themselves, the way they were shaped and/or applied on the islands? The people who were called upon to apply them and their theoretical and practical apparatus? Society in general and its failure to embrace this endeavour?

In the final lines of the volume, the author merges a concise answer to the first question with an approach to a second question, which could be phrased as follows: What remained of all that?

According to the author, the introduction – however brief and incomplete – of republican institutions into the Ionian led to a political reading of concepts such as homeland (a place of free political institutions), virtue (the highest attribute of every citizen) and antiquity (as a political role model), but also to the transformation of subjects into citizens and the perception of the past by reference to the freedom of the political institutions in times of slavery and times of liberty. Thanks to all these developments, the people of the Ionian came closer to their fellow countrymen, the rayah of the Ottoman Empire, and acquired an ideological skill set through which they would go on to approach the subject of national liberation. The Ionian would become a testing ground for the new political and philosophical ideas, as well as the main conduit which would disseminate those ideas to their fellow countrymen who lived under Ottoman rule. The convergence of the Ionian region and the rest of the Greek world also ran through the perception of the political approach of their common historical past and shared cultural affinity.

As the author notes:

As much as the republican ideas failed to find fertile ground to grow in the Greek world and leave their mark on subsequent national developments, the founding vocabulary and fundamental codes of the modern Greek state were born, to a great extent, out of the conflict that took place at this time. (705)

But did the stamp of the 17-month revolutionary experience in the Ionian Islands really leave such a faint footprint on future national developments?

In the Ionian region itself, the very next day witnessed highly revolutionary events

that were there to stay, even though the republican institutions that regulated political organisation and social egalitarianism were not preserved intact. Obviously the Septinsular Republic (1800–1807), a creation of the Russians and Ottomans, did not preserve the conceptualisations described by the author. It was, nevertheless, the first state of Greeks to implement institutions drawn from the political developments that originated from the French Revolution, albeit viewed through a different social and constitutional prism, given the state's dominant aristocratic character. The year 1797 was the first step in the “long process through which [the people of the Ionian] came closer to the rest of the Greek world [and] detached it from its Western coordinates”, and developments were precipitated by the Septinsular Republic.

After all, the fate of the French Revolution itself was not all that different. When Bonaparte, the main militant propagandist of its ideas, settled accounts with his main opponents on the domestic political front, he transformed the French Republic into the French Empire, maintaining or modifying old institutions and renewing both their content and social hierarchies. Similar developments also took place in the Italian states, which, after the short-lived Jacobin republics, witnessed the creation by the French of various kingdoms headed by Napoleon himself – now as emperor – and other members of his family circle. Many of the achievements of the revolution (constitutions, legal codes, etc.) were introduced to these new kingdoms under a different constitutional guise.

Beyond the appraisals regarding the mark that the republican experience left on the Ionian Islands, a subject that concerns a wide geographical region which was affected, either directly and indirectly, by the shockwaves of the French Revolution, in his book Dimitris Arvanitakis narrates a story that is known in theory, yet is essentially unknown in its entirety. A first opportunity, a missed opportunity. He skilfully handles a multitude of published and unpublished evidence, partly known but barely utilised, since we always lacked a theoretical elaboration on the key concepts contained in these texts. With his *Educating the Citizen*, the author offers the reader the ability to decipher the content of all those sources. He brings to the surface and painstakingly examines the ideological pathways taken by people who worked as individuals and, ultimately, in a collective fashion, sought to change the societies in which they lived and the world around those societies. And, in the end, he composes an attractive and demanding work which is further substantiated by the seamless integration of direct quotations drawn from the sources, either in the original or in translation, throughout the course of the text.

The year 1797 in the Ionian has its own reference work now, and research on everything that took place within this short (but rich in events and ideological ferment) chronological framework is expected to blossom thanks to Arvanitakis' book.

<sup>1</sup> Among the exceptions are studies by Nikos Karapidakis, George Leontsinis, Nikos Moschonas et al.