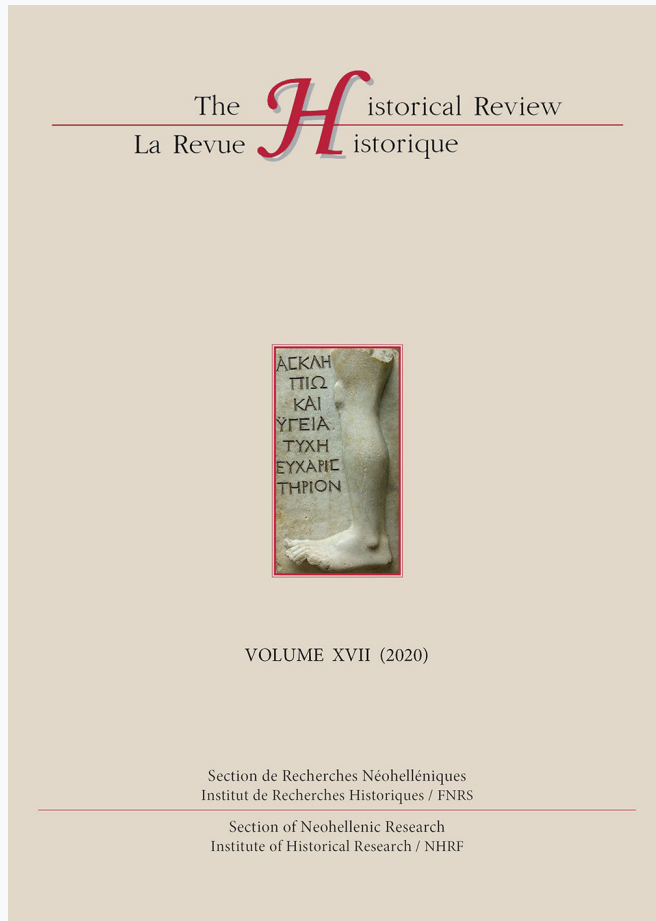


The Historical Review/La Revue Historique

Vol 17 (2020)



Mathieu Grenet, *La fabrique communautaire: Les Grecs à Venise, Livourne et Marseille, 1770–1840*

Lukas Tsipsios

doi: [10.12681/hr.27081](https://doi.org/10.12681/hr.27081)

Copyright © 2021, Lukas Tsipsios



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

To cite this article:

Tsipsios, L. (2021). Mathieu Grenet, *La fabrique communautaire: Les Grecs à Venise, Livourne et Marseille, 1770–1840*. *The Historical Review/La Revue Historique*, 17, 403–405. <https://doi.org/10.12681/hr.27081>

Mathieu Grenet,
*LA FABRIQUE COMMUNAUTAIRE: LES GRECS À VENISE,
LIVOURNE ET MARSEILLE, 1770–1840,*
Athens–Rome: Ecole française d’Athènes and
Ecole française de Rome, 2016, 456 pages.

As we approach the bicentenary of the Greek Revolution, this study by French historian Mathieu Grenet reconsiders this event and its context by focusing on the Greek diaspora, but in a way that is far removed from the dominant national narrative. This large volume is based on Grenet’s PhD dissertation at the European University Institute, Florence, which he conducted under the supervision of Anthony Molho and reworked and expanded during postdoctoral research (at Princeton, Columbia, Washington University in St. Louis and Paris 1). Specialised in migration and mobility in modern history, Grenet has written a social history of the formation of Greek communities in the diaspora, by taking three cases – Venice, Livorno and Marseille – three cities in the western Mediterranean, outside of the borders of both the Ottoman Empire and the modern Greek state. The “Greeks” he carefully studies are usually men, “gens de mer”, merchants, either Orthodox or Catholics (Eastern-rite Roman Catholics, also called Uniates), loyal to the empire or actively prorevolutionary, Greek-speaking or not. The diversity of actors is what makes this study particularly relevant to and useful for anyone interested in the history of the diasporas.

Grenet’s goals are to understand the formation of communities, commonly

used as a conceptual frame for a general analysis of the diaspora. Exhaustive monographs on Greek communities of the same period can be found since the works of Olga Katsiardi-Hering (1986) on Trieste, or Artemis Xanthopoulou-Kyriakou (1978) on Venice, for instance. Here, Grenet proposes to deconstruct the category of community using these three cases. He underlines the process of making community, rather than studying an already existing entity. Guided by a great variety of documents, *La fabrique communautaire* switches from one city to another, from precautions consuls to drunken sailors, alternating the scales of analysis from the macro point of view of a state or empire’s administration to some personal disputes. In this way, he shows the complexity of a historical reality that cannot be understood by using categories such as “nation”, “identities” or “community”. Thus, the book reveals the complexity and the ruptures of the sense of belonging according to different contexts.

For the achievement of this comparative frame, the book is divided in four thematic parts and seven chapters. Each chapter questions assumptions about what communitarian practices and representations are. The structure follows the issue of “presence”, “space”, “community”, and “recompositions”. It ends

with an epilogue on the same question as the one posed in the first chapter: “who is Greek?” This is the central issue of the whole analysis: how can someone be considered as Greek even before the emergence of the Greek state? How can allegiances to different empires, states or realms in different contexts, as a result of multiple migrations and connections, produce the same “Greek” reality and affiliation? The reader encounters a vast diversity of documents, in various languages, produced by many different actors and contexts. This may lead to intricate paths on how the merchants of a certain “nation” gather and elect representatives, or on long digressions on the importance of some religious matters, like the issue of burial for Orthodox people in a Roman Catholic country. Furthermore, if the numerous names referred to may indeed personify (and even enliven) the narrative, the superposition with other more institutional scales may require a very careful reading, however. For a non-specialised public, the chronological jumps from Venice to Livorno and Marseille through different themes could be confusing. But, indeed, the choice of Venice – a much older “Greek” trading colony – required some contextual explanations that were eventually relevant in order to paint a diachronic picture of trading and religious institutions in different temporal dynamics. Moreover, the connections between trading groups in the Mediterranean often lead Grenet to some digressions through the Ionian Islands, Paris, Trieste, Vienna and many important ports of the Ottoman Empire.

Nevertheless, the complexity of the narrative has a purpose: it constantly reveals heterogeneous objects that a sim-

plistic analysis would gloss over. And Grenet’s aim is certainly to complexify what the doxa presents as homogenous and already nationalised diasporic communities. Although his empirical materials are very detailed and precise, Grenet’s writing remains clear and avoids unnecessary jargon. So, if there is a constant reference to a deep theoretical frame, the whole remains balanced by his ability to keep a living connection between the general issues he raises and the documents he is questioning. Grenet found a mass of documents in the archives of Venice, Florence, Livorno and Marseille, but also in the French, British and Greek state archives and their respective foreign ministries. His merit lies in combining official documents with the various correspondence from across Europe to make a narrative of this communitarian reality, built first on ties and acquaintances rather than on any fixed national feeling. It would be relevant to mention here the important figure of Adamantios Korais and his correspondence with the diaspora from Chios all over Europe, which Grenet refers to many times. Korais’ life (1748–1832) is suited perfectly to the chronology of the book. However, even though he was a central intellectual figure of his time as a philologist, his political ideas on Hellenism or on the Greek language were not hegemonic. Through Korais’ letters and the controversies he raised from Paris against people like Panayiotis Kodrikas between 1815 and 1821, the author points out the antagonisms on various issues that constituted this very fragmented diaspora.

La fabrique communautaire reveals networks and their organisation across the Mediterranean and beyond. Thanks

to many maps and the extended sociospatial analysis, it was possible to represent the reality and the evolution of the Greek colonies in Venice, Livorno and Marseille. Even though Grenet has not presented a proper prosopography (that would in a way “unify” the group of individuals he studies), the very detailed microanalysis brings us very close to every action of the protagonists in each colony: we discover their names (some were famous, others forgotten), streets and even the apartments they lived in. This rediscovery of a real and complex social life also reveals the deep cleavages that existed, especially during the last part of the “recompositions” (chapter 7), where the issue on whether to support the Greek insurrection divided them profoundly. This last part will probably appeal to historians of modern Greece. Indeed, beyond the narrative of a strong philhellenism and a united wealthy diaspora struggling for the Greek cause, we discover here divided opinions according to different interests. Grenet’s focus goes beyond the well-known philhellene committees and sheds light on groups of merchants or even Greek Orthodox officials of the Ottoman Empire that remained loyal. Moreover, in his analysis of the aftermath of independence, he com-

pares the “diaspora” with the Greek state. However, this angle needs to be further examined, especially given that the bicentenary of independence is equated with the celebration of the state.

There is no doubt that *La fabrique communautaire* deserves to be read, studied and translated. However, I would like to think that a crafting experiment in history would be possible considering the uniqueness of the documents presented in this book. In view of the interest of the greater public in Greek independence and this transnational revolutionary period, why not produce a lighter edition of the subjects explored in this book? I personally enjoyed the intimate stories Grenet discovers. Based on his knowledge of the 1832 revolution, Thomas Bouchet semi-invented the letters that made his book *De colère et d’ennui: Paris, chronique de 1832*. Following this example, I would assume that the various correspondence found by Grenet would be a wonderful opportunity to reinvent the way we perceive Greek identity and the 1821 Revolution.

Lukas Tsiptsios

École normale supérieure, Paris