

The Historical Review/La Revue Historique

Vol 20, No 1 (2023)

The Historical Review / La Revue Historique

The *H*istorical Review
La Revue *H*istorique



VOLUME XX (2023)

Section de Recherches Néohelléniques
Institut de Recherches Historiques / FNRS

Section of Neohellenic Research
Institute of Historical Research / NHRF

Ioannis K. Hassiotis, Ο Οδυσσέας στις θάλασσες του νότου: Η ελληνική παρουσία στις υπερπόντιες κτήσεις της Ισπανίας (16ος–17ος αι.), [Odysseus in the south seas: The Greek presence in the overseas dominions of Spain (16th–17th century)]

Stathis Birtachas

doi: [10.12681/hr.40073](https://doi.org/10.12681/hr.40073)

Copyright © 2025



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:

Birtachas, S. (2025). Ioannis K. Hassiotis, Ο Οδυσσέας στις θάλασσες του νότου: Η ελληνική παρουσία στις υπερπόντιες κτήσεις της Ισπανίας (16ος–17ος αι.), [Odysseus in the south seas: The Greek presence in the overseas dominions of Spain (16th–17th century)]. *The Historical Review/La Revue Historique*, 20(1), 433–437. <https://doi.org/10.12681/hr.40073>

Critical Perspectives

Approches Critiques

Ioannis K. Hassiotis,

Ο ΟΔΥΣΣΕΑΣ ΣΤΙΣ ΘΑΛΑΣΣΕΣ ΤΟΥ ΝΟΤΟΥ: Η ΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΗ ΠΑΡΟΥΣΙΑ
ΣΤΙΣ ΥΠΕΡΠΟΝΤΙΕΣ ΚΤΗΣΕΙΣ ΤΗΣ ΙΣΠΑΝΙΑΣ (16ος-17ος ΑΙ.),

[Odysseus in the south seas: The Greek presence in
the overseas dominions of Spain (16th-17th century)],
Thessaloniki: University Studio Press, 2022, 444 pages.

Ο Οδυσσεάς στις θάλασσες του νότου by Ioannis K. Hassiotis, professor emeritus at the Philosophy School of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, deals with, on the one hand, European history in the early modern period and the colonial development of the countries and peoples of the New World and, on the other, the history of the modern Greek diaspora. The latter is a field in which the author has been exceptionally prolific for the past few decades, completing original studies, monographs and edited volumes. In this book, Hassiotis delves into a hitherto unexplored facet of Greek-Spanish relations and exchanges: the Greek presence in the Iberian peninsula itself, the transatlantic exploration missions as well as the Spanish dominions in the Americas and the Pacific. The discussion is based on both published and unpublished primary sources from Spanish and Spanish-American archives.

The author's endeavour to tell the story of the forging of Greek-Spanish relations finds its starting point in the contacts that had been developing between the two parties since the beginning of the fourteenth century, as a result of the Aragonese-Catalan campaign in the Byzantine East and the concomitant establishment of a political entity of the feudal type in the Greek mainland (which lasted for about a century), known as the duchies of Athens and Neopatras. Following that, and given the advantageous position of Spain in the Mediterranean and within the wider European geopolitical arena towards the end of the Middle Ages, a wave of individual and mass migration movements was set in motion in the latter part of the fifteenth century, which was fuelled by the appeal of Spanish protection. The migrants in question originated in Greek territories freshly

occupied by the Ottomans and made their way towards the Kingdom of Naples and Sicily, which was under Spanish dominion. These population movements intensified under Charles V and were driven by the usefulness of Greek and Albanian light cavalry officers from the Peloponnese in the Spanish army (*stradioti*, *estradiotes* in Spanish). The soldiers were given incentives to join, such as small fiefs and adequate pay. Part of the migrant population, particularly those from urban centres, occupied positions in the Spanish administrative and military apparatus. To some, their sojourn in the south of Italy would be the stepping stone to the Iberian Peninsula.

One of the greatest problems encountered by Hassiotis was how to monitor the participation of individuals from Greek territories (mainly from Chios, the Cyclades, Rhodes, Crete, Cyprus, the Ionian Islands and the Peloponnese) in the Spanish exploration and conquest missions, as well as their range of activities in the Spanish overseas dominions in the Americas and the Pacific. The process of their identification is indeed a very difficult task, exacerbated by the fact that, overall, in this part of the world, they are frequently referred to solely as *griego* instead of by their family name. The term, however, was not used exclusively for Greeks and was pointed more generally at individuals from the eastern Mediterranean or could even refer to any non-Spanish military personnel. As noted by the author, there are some unambiguous references to one's ethnonym usually following one's first name ([...] *de nación griego*). In other cases, an individual's homeland might be referenced (for example, *de Candia* or

de Rodas). Further, the term *levantiscos* is used to denote experienced mariners recruited in the fleets bound for the Indies, originally hailing from the coastal and island areas of the Levant. Their traces become increasingly harder to discern when their surnames are Hispanicised either because of kinship ties established with Spanish-speaking families, or in order to avoid discrimination and proscriptions targeted at foreigners (*extranjeros*), who were not treated equally to their Spanish counterparts (soldiers, sailors, settlers). Given the above, it becomes clear that it was impossible for the author to create an accurate, quantitative record of the data pertaining to his field of study; to the contrary, his was an attempt to draw an acceptable picture of the life of his subjects and their activities through the veritable ocean of published and unpublished primary sources (official state correspondence, payroll records, judicial and notarised documents, memoranda by Greeks to the local authorities, etc.).

Against this background, the author begins by examining individuals and events that relate to seamanship, exploration and sea voyages. The Greek presence in the Spanish missions can already be traced in the second and third voyages of Columbus. It must be noted that since the middle of the sixteenth century, one third of the total number of crewmen in Spanish ships was of non-Spanish descent, mostly Italians and Greeks. These were employed as sailors, deckhands, mercenaries in both commercial ships and men-of-war, shipwrights and caulkers. As it was impossible to enforce the prohibition against the participation of foreigners in the voyages of exploration, a number of

Greek sailors rose to prominent positions within the ships' hierarchy, including captains, navigators, boatswains and quartermasters. Greek divers were also highly respected. Upon settling in the New World, Greek sailors often turned their attentions to trade, manufacturing and agriculture.

The conquest and first settlements constitute a separate field of study. In this respect, the case of Pedro de Candia, close associate of Francisco Pizarro, conqueror of Peru, is noteworthy. De Candia was actively involved in other exploration and conquest missions in Panama, Mexico and elsewhere. Despite the fact that very few *griegos* ever managed to climb the Spanish-American administrative and social ladder, thanks to the already noted social discrimination directed at foreigners, de Candia was the recipient of titles and important offices. More specifically, he was appointed "hidalgo" (*hidalguía*, 1529) and, subsequently, local governor (*regidor*) of the town of Tumbes (Tumbez), followed by general commander of artillery in Peru, with the exclusive right to make canons (1534). He was then promoted to mayor of the same city, Tumbes, exercising enhanced judicial powers (*alcalde ordinario*, 1534), finally undertaking the role of local governor of Cuzco (1535), the ancient capital of the Incas. In spite of his untimely death, his figure assumed mythological proportions and his name has been immortalised in Spanish and Peruvian literary works.

The author is also interested in issues of the reception of Greek migrants in their place of settlement. This is especially interesting given the negative stereotypes and distrust of ethnic differences, which were fuelled by ideological and

economic reasons, as well as the Greeks' divergent religious identity in the age of confessionalisation and in an empire known for its intolerance of otherness. While, in theory, these obstacles and problems acted as deterrents to integration in the new social environment, in practice administrative acts aimed at limiting the activity of foreigners were often circumvented due to shortages in human capital. What is more, the stance of the Inquisition towards the perceived Greek-Orthodox "schismatics" proved to be more lenient than that towards the heretics of the time, Protestants. The Inquisition, in any case, maintained an inclusive view of cultural differences. It is noteworthy that there are cases of Orthodox priests officiating in the New World. Most of the Greek settlers were male, who ended up marrying indigenous women. The offspring of such mixed unions generally assumed negative characteristics, despite Crown efforts to accept conditionally all foreigners as Spanish though the issuing of royal decrees. The status of such mixed-race individuals, however, gradually changed when they began identifying with the Spanish, as opposed to "Indians" (*indios*), black people from Africa (*negros*) and the progeny of white males married to black women (*mulatos*).

Greeks mainly appear in the sources as individuals. There are, however, traces of collective Greek settlements in the Spanish dominions in the Americas. The city of La Plata (Sucre) and its province in Bolivia contained the best documented Greek settlement, composed mainly of migrants of Cretan and Rhodian descent. It was a small, yet thriving Greek hub. In terms of economic prosperity and professional capacity, the majority of Greek settlers

there were subsistence workers (carriage drivers, tailors, fishermen, etc.); there were, however, a few merchants, shopkeepers and hoteliers, who grew to become important figures in their community. As regards land ownership, Greek soldiers who participated in the conquest of the New World, as well as in the foundation of cities, received as a reward small tracts of land (*encomiendas*), along with the indigenous peasants who cultivated them. There is evidence that Greek settlers cultivated wheat or cocoa, were involved in viticulture and winemaking as well as in the trade of agricultural products. Other areas of engagement were real estate and the mining of precious metals.

Despite the series of factors mentioned above, which inhibit the drawing of precise quantitative conclusions, the author makes some useful observations. First of all, the Greek presence in Spain itself was limited and short-lived. The Greeks who migrated there did so for political and financial reasons as well as to find employment. More specifically, they petitioned the Spanish Crown to organise military interventions against the Ottomans, or to launch fundraisers for the same purpose; they sought employment opportunities in the Spanish army or navy; finally, they aspired to participate in the exploration missions to the New World. Second, the number of Greeks in the overseas dominions was certainly negligible compared to the number of Spaniards. Compared to European settlers of other ethnic origins, however, their number must be considered exceptionally high. According to the author, the Greeks formed the most populous presence alongside the Genoese, Portuguese and Flemings.

As regards qualitative characteristics, namely the education level and skillsets of the Greek settlers in the Spanish-American dominions, it is estimated that in their majority, the Greek sailors and explorers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were illiterate, with very few exceptions. Nonetheless, as mariners, the Greeks were skilled navigators and well versed in the use of astrolabes, compasses and maps. They were also competent mapmakers. The author, however, additionally brings to the fore those cultivated individuals that formed the exception to this rule, that is, teachers, writers and artists (painters, sculptors, musicians).

In their majority, the Greeks who made the transatlantic journey to the Spanish dominions in the Americas and the Pacific in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries never returned home. Evidence from the wills of wealthier migrants reveals charitable initiatives, such as the foundation of a hospital in Lima. By the 1610s or 1620s, memorable cases of Greeks appearing in the records of Spanish America are few and far between. Compared to earlier periods, their level of activity is noticeably diminished. It is possible that this is largely due to the renewed xenophobia of the Spanish. For instance, in 1663 a royal edict was issued that decreed the expulsion of the “schismatic” Greek and Armenian merchants from the dominions and the metropolis. Regardless, the edict was bypassed on several occasions, depending on the needs of each province. At this point, however, it should be noted that the ecclesiastical authorities were largely receptive to the Orthodox iconographic

standards, naturally within the confines of the otherwise homogenised Roman Catholic milieu. Generally speaking, it can be argued that the “Easterners” (*levantiscos*), who Hispanicised their surnames, were gradually incorporated into the wider social group of “creoles” (*criollos*) of Spanish descent and were assimilated. Nonetheless, the Greeks did leave some traces in toponyms, particularly in New Mexico, Venezuela, Mexico and Chile (for example, the port of Juangriego on Margarita Island in Venezuela).

Finally, the author observes that the presence of Greeks in the area in question continued to decline until the last quarter of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. Since then, numbers have picked up due to the waves of economic migration that resulted in the establishment of today’s Greek communities in Latin America.

The book concludes with an appendix listing all sources and a bibliography, a useful chronology, extended summaries in English and Spanish, a convenient index of placenames, personal names and thematic terms, as well as certain documentary visual sources (maps, representations, monuments and documents).

In conclusion, Hassiotis’ book forms a very well-structured study, which fills an important gap in Greek and international historiography, and has been the recipient of the Academy of Athens Award. Although the language of

the sources on which this book was based is currently more familiar to researchers, and access to the relevant evidence is far easier than it was in the 1960s (which was when Hassiotis embarked on his academic work), tackling such a wide spectrum of primary and secondary source material that opens up an entirely novel field of study is an exceptionally demanding task. At the same time, it is immensely useful and interesting. It is certain that this pioneering book leaves a legacy for the advancement of research on the presence of Greeks in the Spanish exploration and conquest missions, as well as in the settlement of the New World under the sovereignty of the Spanish Crown at the height of its power. Despite the many aforementioned difficulties, which are predominantly methodological in nature, the author’s sharp thinking, skilful synthesis and deep knowledge of the subject matter have resulted in a rigorously structured and thoroughly argued book that is solidly grounded on historiographical evidence. As such, it is a given for this reviewer that his work will form a reference point for those studying the history of the modern Greek diaspora in the Spanish overseas dominions as well as of the colonial development of the countries and peoples of the New World.

Stathis Birtachas
Aristotle University of Thessaloniki