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THE GREEK COMMUNITY IN TUNIS THROUGH 16th-17th CENTURIES

ANTONIOS CHALDEOS

The political, economic and social status in North Africa through 16th-17th centuries

The region of North Africa, because of its geographical position in the Mediterranean basin, was a perpetual field of cultural osmosis and religious syncretism. Since Tunisia is located in the centre of the Mediterranean Sea and the North African coast, people of different nationalities, races and religions used to live there. The 16th century, marked by the conflicts of the Spanish kings with the Ottoman Empire for supremacy in the Mediterranean Sea. In the early 16th century, the North Africa coast was the base for the pirates acting in the Mediterranean such as the Barbarossa brothers, who, after the conquest of Algiers, took the place of the trustee in the name of the High Port. In the second half of the 16th century, Spain took under control several coastal cities, but only for only a short period, since they were conquered by the Ottoman Empire. The first Ottoman conquest of Tunis took place in 1534 under the command of Barbarossa Hayreddin Pasha, the younger brother of Oruç Reis, who was the Kapudan Pasha of the Ottoman Fleet during the reign of Suleiman the Magnificent. However, only in 1574, Kapudan Pasha Uluç Ali Reis managed to integrate Tunisia into the Ottoman Empire (Spencer 1995: 73; Braudel 1976: 1066-1068). The Ottoman reign established permanently in the area, creating the eyalets of Algiers, Tunis and Tripoli (Hess 2010: 253). The expansion of the Ottomans in North Africa, from Libya to Algeria, and the suppression of the Admiral Sinan Pasha of the Knights of Malta

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also restored the influence of Islam in the region, which was weakened by
the Catholic Spain’s strong presence in the Mediterranean (Rossi 1968: 7;
of its inability to control the eyalets granted the administration to local elites
and later the Janissaries. Since most of them were also pirates their political
and economic power was increased. Through this procedure, the eyalets of
Tripoli, Tunis and Algiers acquired a peculiar autonomy as vassals of the
Sultan (Faroqhi 2009: 159). Vassal principalities were informally recognized
by the central government, and local rulers were appointed by the Sultan until
the late 17th century. The most famous of the local administrators was the
Hayreddin Barbarossa, who preferred the dependence on the Ottoman Porte
in order to confront the Spanish threat (Wolf 1979; Konstam 2008). As a
result, he was appointed the commander of the area and then Kapudan Pasha
(Shaw 1976: 131). In Tunis, the administrative status was somewhat different
since there was a kind of parallel and supportive Board consisted of corsairs,
captains and senior military officers.

The formation of the Greek community and its historical presence

The Greek presence in Tunisia dates back to the 12th century BC, when
a few settlers from Cyrene, established the colony of Neapolis (modern
Nabeul). The latest migration began around the 16th century, when the area
was part of the Ottoman Empire. Tunis, Algiers and Tripoli were among
the largest centres of the marine piracy from the middle Ages until the
first decades of the nineteenth century (Krandonelli 1991; Braudel 1998).
The corsairs attacked the ships sailing in the Mediterranean, grabbed
the goods transferred and sold them to the local markets at auction. The
captive passengers, after they were dispossessed what was valuable, they
were imprisoned (Vakalopoulos 1974: 78; Friedman 1980). The prisons,
which were called zandâla, belonged to the official representatives of the
Ottoman Porte and both the acquisition and the freedom of the slaves needed
large sums of money, which, most of the times, were unable to be paid
(Vakalopoulos 1974: 150). As a result, between the sixteenth and eighteenth
century, the Christians who were released, were far fewer than those who
were still in captivity. According to Jean Le Vacher who was the General
Consul of France in Tunis between 1647 and 1666, in the second half of the 17th century, there were thirteen prisons (Saadaoui 2003).

The evidence for the existence of Greeks among the slaves of Tunis is limited (Davis 2001; Valensi 1967). Starting from the 16th century and up to the early 19th century, historic sources reinforce the belief that some of those slaves, who remained in the area after their release, formed the Greek community. The oldest evidence thus found for the existence of Greek slaves dates back to 1579 and comes from an inscription on a tomb that was in the old Greek-Christian cemetery, where it is currently the holy church of St. George in Tunis (Firipides 1932: 6). Specifically, this inscription is referred to a pardon that was given to a Greek slave before he died. A few years later, on 06/07/1583, there is information about a payment of 202 gold crowns for the liberation of a slave by the name Victor Nicholou (Grandchamp 1920: 8). The continued existence of Greek slaves during the following centuries assured by the fact that the Patriarchs of Alexandria addressed their letters both to the captives and free men resided in Tunis (Firipides 1932: 10-11).

Beyond the ex-slaves, once victims of the pirates operating in North Africa, in the early 16th century, several Islamized Greeks from Mytilene (Lesvos) settled in Tunis (Hafedh 2008: 11). They were sailors of the legendary pirate and then admiral of the Ottoman fleet Hayreddin Barbarossa, who was originated from Lesbos. Indeed, after the death of Barbarossa, in recognition of their services to the Ottoman Porte, the Sultan gave them an area outside Tunis to settle permanently. As a result, they named this location, which is 60km far from Tunis, Metline, as a remembrance of their homeland Mytilene. Today, “Grekiya”, as the locals call them, have named the harbour of the city “Skala”.

Consequently, the first Greek community established in Tunisia in the middle of the 16th century, by ex-slaves, once victims of the pirates operating in North Africa. During the next century, several Greek merchants will be added, in the context of the internal migration within the boundaries of the Ottoman Empire (Firipides 1932: 6; Parthenius 1982: 10). Throughout the early period of the Ottoman rule, the massive population movements were extremely frequent. The main reason was the dramatic upheavals caused by the Ottoman expansion and their influence on the traditional economic and social structures, especially those connected with the ownership and social status. Therefore, this migration flow was motivated by the demographic
pressure on the Christian population caused by the influx of Muslim settlers in the lowlands and fertile parts of the Ottoman Empire (Chassiotis and others 2006: 20). In addition, there were migrations which resulted from economic factors. Actually, the Greek migration which was increased during the 17th century caused by the economic and politic crisis that the Ottoman Empire had faced. However, it should be noted that the Ottoman Empire favoured the trade activities within its boundaries extended from the Middle East to Northern Africa (Farroghi 1997). As a result, it was incorporated in the trade network operating in the Mediterranean. Due to the population increase in the western and central Europe and the subsequent cities’ development, there was a high demand for agricultural products. The Ottoman Empire provided Europe with agricultural products while it imported craft products (Asdrahas 1975: 188). Therefore, the migration flow of the 17th century, both in the Ottoman Empire and Europe, was related to the international policy and economic conditions which led to new sources of income. Under these conditions, Jews, Greeks and Maltese were mobilized and responded rapidly to the market needs. Soon they established trade networks, which offered a number of economic benefits to their members.

Tunis was integrated into the broader economic structures of the Mediterranean Sea and gradually become an important destination for retailers, merchants and sailors, who were active in the land and maritime transport hubs, linking the import and export trade of the Ottoman Empire with the southeastern and western Europe. Until the first half of the 17th century, the Genoese, Venetians and Florentines dominated the region’s trade (Bovill 1933: 179). Then, traders from the Netherlands, Britain and France began gradually to settle in Tunis. However, France was the first European country which took advantage of the capitulations system and established diplomatic relations with Tunisia in 1577, when the latter was still part of the Ottoman Empire. From the second half of the 17th century, the European political and economic penetration within the Ottoman Empire and the Maghreb region became more intense. The ports of Tunis, Tripoli and Algiers were integrated into the maritime commerce of the eastern Mediterranean ports of Marseille, Livorno, Genoa and Venice (Valensi 1977; Bachrouch 1977; Boubaker 1987; Boubaker 1995). The growing dependence of Tunisia from the European financial centres became more and more prominent as the country imported silver coins, mainly Spanish, and raw materials needed for the manufacture
of the headgear that was particularly prevalent among the Ottoman citizens. In return, Tunisia exported agricultural products such as wheat and olive oil, and some luxury textiles. It should be noted that many imported luxury goods, such as cotton, silk and dyes were often subject to resale discount rate before entering the market in Tunis, to become less expensive than if they were imported directly. As a result, the regency received a remarkable amount of positive trade balance of payments.

For the first centuries of the presence of the Greek community, data are limited, as the archives preserved are few and the reports on the Greeks are scarce. The information comes mainly from the reports of the French and English consulates, which had a long presence in the region, and the correspondence of the Patriarchate of Alexandria. The older recordings about the Greeks in Tunis covering the period 1582-1600, and originated from the French vice consul Antoine Borrilly (Grandchamp 1920).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Registry</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11/5/1583</td>
<td>The Turkish Gayt Aui was appointed lawyer by the Greek Konstantinos Nikolos.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/6/1583</td>
<td>John Dedina was appointed lawyer by the Greek Apostolis Nikolos.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7/6/1583</td>
<td>Payment of 202 gold crowns for the liberation of the slave Victor Nikolos.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/6/1588</td>
<td>The Greek Louizos Sergimis owes 6 ounces of gold to the Jacomo Dorlindo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27/4/1589</td>
<td>The Corsican Santo Pascallo has received 60 gold crowns from the Greek Louizos Gikalinos.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5/5/1589</td>
<td>The Corsican Santo Pascallo has received 20 gold crowns from the Greeks Costas Michael and Louizo Gikalinos.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23/8/1589</td>
<td>Jehan Anthoine Ziriotto was appointed lawyer by the Greek Maistros Stamatis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6/8/1590</td>
<td>The Greek Michael Marmaris, lawyer of Iheronimo de Gascon, received from the Mauritanian Alli Africano 150 gold Spanish crown for his transfer from Gallen Saida to Maras.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25/8/1590</td>
<td>The Greek Alouizos Siganinis recognizes the debt of 52 Spanish gold crowns to Morat Adabassi from Mallorca.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7/11/1590</td>
<td>The Greek Alouizos Siganinis recognizes the debt of 78 Spanish gold crowns to Assan Adabassi.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21/11/1590</td>
<td>Costas the Greek recognizes the debt of 12 Spanish gold crowns to Assan Adabaissi, which he will repay on his return.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22/11/1590</td>
<td>The Greek Christophoros Alokklonitis was appointed lawyer by Assan Adabaissi.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3/12/1590</td>
<td>The Greek Alouizos Siganinis was appointed lawyer by the Greek Konstantinos.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24/12/1590</td>
<td>Costas the Greek recognizes the debt of 23 crowns to Assan Oldach.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24/4/1591</td>
<td>The Greek Alouizos Siganinis recognizes the debt of 36 Spanish gold crowns to Jehan Andreà Sardo.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>27/8/1591</td>
<td>Martino Bruno from Calabria recognizes the debt of 36 Spanish gold crowns to Nicholas the Greek for the purchase of three barrels of wine.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31/1/1593</td>
<td>Simon Palmezan from Sicily recognizes the debt of 422 gold Spanish crowns to Konstantinos the Greek from Chios, and Francesco de Paris from Sicily, for the transfer to be done with the galleon of Arnoult Mamy Bey.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27/10/1593</td>
<td>The Greek Stamatis from the Black Sea recognizes the debt of 250 gold Spanish crowns for the transfer of the dragoman of janissaries.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27/10/1593</td>
<td>Alustafa, a Greek Islamized from Caïd Ali recognizes the debt of 33 Spanish gold crowns to Sebastiano Longobardo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/8/1598</td>
<td>Giuseppe Saniduineo recognizes the debt of 67 Spanish gold crowns to Konstantinos the Greek. The debt is related to a loan to be repaid in 15 days.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7/7/1599</td>
<td>The Greek Christophoros Tomazis recognizes the debt of 120 Spanish gold crowns to Ghelebi Sceriffo from Constantinople, for the transport of slaves on behalf of Gherif d'Alger.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5/10/1599</td>
<td>Nardo Penega and Christophoros Tomazis recognize the debt of 72 Spanish gold crowns to Lega from Palermo, for the transfer of Nardo Penega. Payment will be made upon arrival at Palermo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/10/1599</td>
<td>Nardo Penega from Palermo recognizes the debt of 120 Spanish gold crowns to Christophoros Thomas for the remainder of the acquisition of Romadan de Capraia.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18/1/1600</td>
<td>Vikentios the Greek recognizes the debt of 16 Spanish gold crowns to Vincensio di Lega, for the issue of a monthly loan.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on the registries of the French vice consulate, throughout the 16th century, the members of the Greek community were involved in the transport of goods and slaves between Tunis and the Italian ports of Palermo and Sicily. They owned boats or small vessels which traded products and they were in business both with Europeans and Ottomans. There is also a reference to a Greek slave acquisition of a compatriot.

During the 17th century, the number of the Greeks resided in Tunis has increased since more merchants based in Greece expanded their activities in Africa. This situation led the Greek of Tunis to establish a community and take initiatives to erect a holy temple. In 1930, Pieridis published the letter that the Greeks of Tunis had sent to the Greek Patriarch around 1640, asking for a priest (Pieridis 1955: 10). Indeed, in 1647, an Orthodox Church was built and the Greek community was officially recognised by the Patriarch of Alexandria. Actually, it is the oldest organized Greek community in Africa. According to the Patriarch Ioannikios (1645-1657) handwritten notes, the Patriarch of Alexandria sent immediately a priest by the name Paphnoutios (Firipidis 1932: 5). The Orthodox Church was dedicated to Saint George, the “liberator of the prisoners”. It should be noted that during this period churches were erected in Tripoli and Algiers (Agathangelidou 2003: 74).
Unfortunately, the church of 1647 does not exist today, so we can only speculate about its position. The most likely scenario places it within the walls of the old city, which seems reasonable, because of the topography of Tunis in the 17th century.

Of course, there are additional sources that assure the presence of the Greeks in Tunis during the 17th century. Apart from the inscriptions found in 1901 during the foundation of the church of St. George and are related to this period (Poulos 1926: 152), there are also Darmon’s references (Darmon 1930). In the mid 17th century and as the number of the Europeans settled in Tunis was increased, Jean Le Vacher, an apostolic vicar who acted as the French consul, managed to obtain permission to build a house in the French fondouk (Grandchamp 1928). This area formed the core of the "Frankish zone", which also included citizens from other European countries, such as British, Dutch, Swedish and Greeks. Gradually, near the small French community which was mainly formed by merchants, artisans, priests and travellers arriving in the city, several European fondouks created, each of whom paid an annual tax for the use of the area concerned (Saadaoui 2003). Since the French Consulate was recognised as the institution which protected the French citizens and their property, France was responsible for all the Christians lived in Tunisia. Therefore, the Greeks of Tunis were under the protection of the French consular authorities, as it comes out from the treaty signed by the Marquis de Martel with the Tunisian Bey on 10/05/1662 (Pechot 1914: 169). A few years later and specifically on 28/06/1672, a new treaty between Tunisia and the French King Louis XIV, put the Greeks lived in Tunis under the protection of the French until the independence of their country, according to Article 17 of the Treaty. Finally, at the end of the 17th century, the English consulate took over the protection of the Greek sojourns (Lambert 1890: 288).

In the late 17th century, the trade’s bloom and the increasing presence of Europeans in Tunis created numerous ethnic communities (Chassiotis 1993: 50). Tunis evolved into a cosmopolitan city, where someone could encounter Arabs, Turks, Jews and Europeans. As Vuillier reports “in the streets of Tunis, one could hear Arabic, Greek, Turkish, Spanish, Italian and Maltese and see a combination of people and clothing” (Vuillier 1896: 4). Tunis was the place that connected people from different ethnic and religious backgrounds who had the same economic aspirations. Between the late 17th and the first half of the 18th century, the Greeks had separate privileges that had been granted by
some local rulers of Greek origin. Specifically, it was Husainid dynasty that was established in Tunis in 1705 by Al-Husayn I ibn Ali at-Turki, a Cretan Islamized and officer of Janissaries (Hédi 1986). According to a firman that dated back to 1740, we are informed that Abu l-Hasan Ali I Bey gave the Orthodox Greeks a piece of land to create a cemetery (Kazdagli 2007: 452). According to Poulos, this land was given to the Raftopoulos, a representative of the Greek community, in return for his services to Bey (Poulos 1926: 153). During this period, the Greeks continued to remain under the protection of the European consulates.

**Conclusion**

The Greek community of Tunis established in the late 16th century by freemen who were victims of pirates, and traders. The latter, members of the wider Greek commercial Diaspora, settled in Tunis, which was an important trade station within the 17th commercial networks of the Mediterranean Sea. In 1647, they formed an organized community and erected a temple asking for the protection of the Patriarchate of Alexandria. The Greeks, acting in a multinational environment, took advantage of the favourable geographical and economic status of Tunis and established successful commercial enterprises. Under the protection of both the Tunis rulers and the European consuls, they managed to establish a community which, although it was not numerous, it was extremely active.

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