

## **From Suez to Jerusalem:**

### **Studying urban and social history through the Greek archives**

First of all, I'd like to thank Vincent for giving me the opportunity to return to Jerusalem and, of course, to participate in this project. I am going to present you here my work on Egypt and more precisely on the Suez Canal zone based on material in the Greek archives and then I will try to show how this work can be articulated with the Open Jerusalem project, that is, how I arrived from Suez to Jerusalem.

I was trained as a historian, specializing in the Greek diaspora and modern Egypt, at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (I received my master's degree in 2004) and the European University Institute in Florence, where I defended my thesis in 2011. I am currently a LabexMed Postdoctoral Fellow at the Institut de Recherches et d'Etudes sur le Monde Arabe et Musulman (IREMAM), in Aix-en-Provence. My work examines different forms of cosmopolitanism, urban societies and Greek diaspora communities in post-Ottoman Mediterranean settings, as well as migration around the Mediterranean and beyond during the 19th and 20th centuries.

## ***DOCTORATE***

My thesis, entitled “Leaving Egypt: Greeks and their Strategies, 1937-1967”, examines the conditions of departure of the Greek population from Egypt from 1937 to 1967 and the various, often contradictory, strategies adopted by them and the Greek state alike regarding not only their out-migration but also their continued residence in Egypt. From the mid-19th to mid-20th centuries, the Greeks in Egypt were the most significant non-Arab ethnic group in the country and one of the largest and influential Greek diaspora communities. The historical literature had traditionally discussed the matter of their definitive departure as a result of external factors (e.g. Nasserite policies; decolonization) or internal factors (e.g. failure of readjustment) to the community and has mainly focused on the exodus of the early 1960s. My study enlarged the picture in terms of space and time and analyzed the departure strategies at three different, but interrelated, levels: an individual one, focusing on the departees themselves and the state and community officials; an institutional one, looking at the Greek institutions functioning in Egypt and the international organizations that were involved in the migration process (World Council of Churches and Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration); and a state level, examining the policies of both the Greek and the Egyptian states.

The manuscript is already under contract with Berghahn Books, and the publication is scheduled for late 2015. The book will be an original

contribution to several historiographical debates: the history of the Greek diaspora; the history of modern Egypt; the causes of out-migration in moments of resurgent nationalism; the role of states in the relations between homelands and diasporas and the decolonization in the Near East. It will be the first research monograph regarding the Greek presence in Egypt after 1937 and one of the very few works dealing with the end of so-called “cosmopolitanism” in Egypt and the history of foreign populations during the Nasserite era. This latter dimension is studied through the examination of the French and the Maltese communities of Egypt.

This work also reveals the importance of the Suez Canal Zone, as a place of work and as a migration field for all foreign populations in Egypt, including the Greeks, a fact that was largely neglected by the historiography, which has concentrated on Alexandria and Cairo.

### ***SUEZ PROJECT***

The focus on the Suez Canal zone resulted from my participation during my doctorate in the ANR project "The Suez Canal: an invented space on the frontiers of Egypt", directed by Mercedes Volait, of the French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS). The project demonstrated the central role of the Canal Company and interethnic and interreligious relations in the construction of three major cities of the canal: Port Said, Ismailia and Suez. The purpose of my participation was to investigate the

role played in this context by the Greeks, the most important non-Arab ethnic group in the region in demographic terms.

Thanks to this collaboration, I had the opportunity to undertake fieldwork in the canal cities and to conduct interviews with Greeks who lived (or still live in the area) or their descendants. These testimonies were crucial in supplementing or correcting the fieldwork and in particular in identifying buildings constructed or belonging to foreigners. It also gave me the opportunity to discover various archives, such as those of the Greek communities of the cities of Suez, Port Said and Ismailia.

### **PP Archives de Suez / Repérage des maison dans la ville. LabexWeek PP:**

#### **Archives of Suez**

This research experience, as well as the exchanges with historians of modern Egypt, architects, historians of architecture and photography made me fully aware of the importance of urban dynamics and space as an actor in the shaping of society .It also led me to my current project, entitled: “Vulgar cosmopolitanism: urban and social context of the Suez Canal Zone 1919-1956”, on which I’ve been working as a postdoctoral fellow since 2012. This project is situated at the crossroad of urban, social and political history. It involved a close examination of the people of the Canal Zone through the investigation of the complex urban reality. My ambition was to grasp the continuing dialectic between society and urban space within an extremely fluid political context. A thorough investigation

of the urban context allows me to discuss this cosmopolitanism from below, this “vulgar cosmopolitanism” which Will Hanley coined to describe the everyday, “true” cosmopolitanism of Alexandria (Hanley 2007: 28).

In this project, I defined three main axes of inquiry. The first one focuses on the city itself, while the other two examine the dynamics of the urban space, the city as a continuous process and as a product of individual and collective strategies.

#### **a) The ordinary urban context**

A central aim of the project was to reconstruct the ordinary urban context in the major canal cities - Port Said, Ismailia and Suez - over time. To do so, I used three different angles of observation: private construction work, commercial activity and the public buildings of the Egyptian and foreign institutions. My first concern was to map the distribution of the heterogeneous population of the canal zone in the urban context, locating its residential, workplace and recreational centres in order to establish whether different urban locations were differentiated according to their function or were polyvalent, at one and the same time workplaces, residences and places for social contact. The different associations, schools, and places of worship – essential points of reference for different population groups within the city limits – are also taken into account. **PP Suez / Greek population**

## **b) The political use of public space**

The intention of this project was not only to investigate the city as a static construction but also as a system of multiple spaces. Once the residential, professional and institutional geographies of the Suez Canal is mapped out, the purpose is to examine the public space – the streets, squares and ports – where political action unfolded during a period of intense politicization. The aim was to explore the urban space as its social actors, individual or collective, practiced it. Demonstrations, strikes and guerilla campaigns in the canal zone during the period under scrutiny offer a vantage point to investigate the way the local population appropriated the cities and their outskirts, the way they transformed the public space in times of labor mobilizations, during war and in times of the materialization of Egyptian national aspirations.

## **c) Mobility along the canal and beyond**

Urban space is not only defined by its permanent residents and the political uses of public space but, to a great extent, by the mobility of its population. The mobility of the population of the Canal Zone was salient throughout the period, enhanced as it was in a region historically favourable to the transit of resources, goods and people, and left its mark on the urban landscape. The duration of stay varied, from permanent settlement to the short stays of seasonal workers employed in the cities

and the numerous British barracks along the canal. This permanent flux induced constant urban transformations and the definition of new borders.

Much of this research has been conducted so far through the Greek archives I have already presented and leads me to a more specific inquiry: that of the Greek population as an “intermediary actor”, that is as a population that was not directly dependent on a colonial power in a colonial - or semi-colonial in the case of Egypt - setting and thus cannot fit the "dominant"/"dominated" scheme. This will allow me not only to rethink the place of the Greeks in Egypt, but also the French and British colonial domination in the eastern Mediterranean from the key figure of “intermediaries”, "middlemen", "go-betweens" and others whose social trajectories are situated beyond the scheme.

### ***OPEN JERUSALEM PROJECT***

All these different research experiences and approaches on the Greek population of the Suez Canal, studied either as part of a “cosmopolitan” entity or by themselves, are very helpful when considering the case of the Greek presence in Jerusalem. At the invitation of Vincent and the CRFJ, I undertook an initial research mission for almost two weeks last April in order to study the issue of the Greek community in Jerusalem, which is an underdeveloped research field. My mission’s objective was to identify the Greek archives in the city. This would allow me to judge whether it was

possible to conduct more thorough research on that community during the latter Ottoman and British Mandate periods.

Today, both in Egypt and Jerusalem, the Greek presence only numbers a few hundred inhabitants. In both places, there is still, however, three forms of institutional organization of the Greek populations: there is a community/religious organization (ie the Greek Orthodox patriarchates of Jerusalem and Alexandria), a secular one (the koinotites which constitute their political, cultural and social reference point) and finally state organisations (consular delegations of the Greek state). From these three institutional pillars, I managed during my stay in Jerusalem to locate archives still largely unexplored. The first results of this mission left me optimistic about the possibilities of a thorough research on the Greek case in the Open Jerusalem project. This optimism has proved to be justified by a still limited number of archives already collected by Merav and Vincent from the ecclesiastical court of the Greek-Orthodox Patriarchate (the wedding records for the late 1910s and early 1920s and the baptism records from many different periods, and a number of testaments. I'd like to share with you the preliminary results of this research.

## **EXAMPLE**

I've tried to present my itinerary from Suez to Jerusalem - and I thought it was a unique one, but recently I realized that I'm not the first one who did it.

As you very well know, Palestine Railways was a British government-owned railway company that ran all public railways in the territory of Palestine from 1920 until 1948. Its main line linked Qantara in Egypt with Haifa, with branches serving Jaffa, Jerusalem, Acre and the Jezreel Valley. Qantara (meaning bridge in Arabic) is one of the cities along the Suez Canal, maybe the least known, at the eastern side of the canal. Palestine Railways developed a daily Haifa –Qantara mixed traffic service. Palestine lacked a deep-water seaport until 1933, when one was built in Haifa. Before that, any cargo that Palestine ports were unable to handle would pass through Port. Egyptian State Railways carried the freight between Port Said and Qantara and Palestine Railways carried it between Qantara East and Palestine. No bridge was built across the Suez Canal until 1941, so freight was ferried across the canal between the ESR and PR stations on the opposite banks at Qantara. Wagon-lits provided restaurant and sleeping cars three days *per* week until 1923, when this luxury service was increased to daily. One of these services could have used Gerasimos Vatikiotis, a 23-year-old telegraph operator, a British public servant of Greek origin, for his trip to Jerusalem in early 1920s.

On 17 August 1923, Vatikiotis married Paraskevi Meimaraki at the Greek club of Jerusalem. The bride's family was from Jerusalem but the groom's one from Qantara, where he also came from. When the wedding took place, his father had already died but his mother, an Egyptian housewife named Zameela, was still alive. Gerasimos and Paraskevi settled in Jerusalem and five years later, in 1928, they had a boy, Panagiotis. Panagiotis grew up in Palestine (here and in Haifa) and was educated in Greek and British private schools. Thanks to his father's close associations with the British, Panagiotis enjoyed privileged access to British education system and after the Second World War and subsequent graduation, he went to Egypt, from where his father was from, to study political science and history at the American University in Cairo.

Vatikiotis was of Greek origin but never lived in Greece. He was born in Jerusalem and raised here and in Haifa, he had a native competence in Arabic in its various dialects. His colleagues described him as a typical "Levantine" in the best sense of the term – a man of cosmopolitan tastes and outlook. He started his academic career in the United States and moved to the School of Oriental and African Studies in London in 1964, where he remained until his early retirement in 1989. He died in 1997. Most of his research dealt with modern Egyptian history, but one of his last books is an autobiography entitled: "Among Arabs and Jews: A Personal Experience, 1936-1990" (1991).

I was aware of Vatikiotis' works on Egypt as well as of the fact that he was born in Jerusalem. However his involvement with Egypt always baffled me. The kinship networks and the complex relationship of his family with the British and Egypt were revealed thanks to the wedding certificates found in the ecclesiastical court of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate **PP**. Vatikiotis' example provides a case study regarding the position held by the Greek population in Jerusalem and elsewhere among Arabs and Jews, but also between them and the British, a position that could be studied through the prism of a cultural or of any other type of middleman or intermediary. Even if he moved from Jerusalem at an early age, Vatikiotis' story also provides an interesting case study about circulation, mobility, and short or long-term migration between different Greek diaspora settings, all of which certainly requires further investigation. This more dynamic approach will help examine Jerusalem not as a static construction but integrated in a wider geographical and political context: that of the Ottoman Empire or semi-colonial Eastern Mediterranean that followed on from it. How mobility within this context and temporariness of residence in Jerusalem affected the urban space, public policies and social connectedness remains an open question and the answer or the answers depend a lot on the archival research in the following months.