

## Shipping and the diaspora

IT is well known that the Greek-owned merchant marine occupies the first place in the world. This enormous economic power depends very little on the Greek state. Quite the contrary: the state depends on revenue from shipping and on the turnover generated by Greeks who earn their livelihood from this occupation.

The image of Greek ship-owners is not always flattering. Shipping is a fiercely competitive, global activity, requiring talent and daring. Many magnates started from scratch, and succeeded through hard work and huge adventurism. The realm of commercial shipping has given rise to a peculiar society, caught in the limelight on account of its consumer habits and, frequently, its provocative excesses. Behind the external attributes of these elites there lies a hidden anthropology with conspicuously pre-modern traits. Family and local networks play a determining role no less than distinctive endogamous habits. Greek ship-owning society, in other words, behaves like a network. These attributes account for its success in the chaotic new world, and presage the survival and

development of Greek-owned shipping, despite the likely growth of the merchant fleets of emerging powers such as China.

Greek commercial shipping cannot form a unified power with political and economic influence proportionate to the sum total of the economic net worth of its members. Its reticular character discourages the centralisation that would at any rate deprive it of its comparative advantage and bring about its decline. Its contribution to Hellenism takes other, less obvious forms. Shipping capital continues the tradition of philanthropy, financing various activities and needs on different scales. The ‘small homeland’—the local roots—of ship-owning families are always foregrounded; local societies benefit thereby. Activities related to Hellenism rather than the Greek state are financed. This also paves the way for the creation of a global Greek society of citizens complementary to, and in some degree competing with, the power of the Greek state. This is a current trend that may grow still more in future.

In general, the enormous tonnage of Greek-owned shipping shatters the provincial horizon of Greek statism, thrusting Greeks onto the global stage. This trend was important in earlier times, too; in the current new era it becomes indispensable, as people must be able to perceive and understand events first-hand.

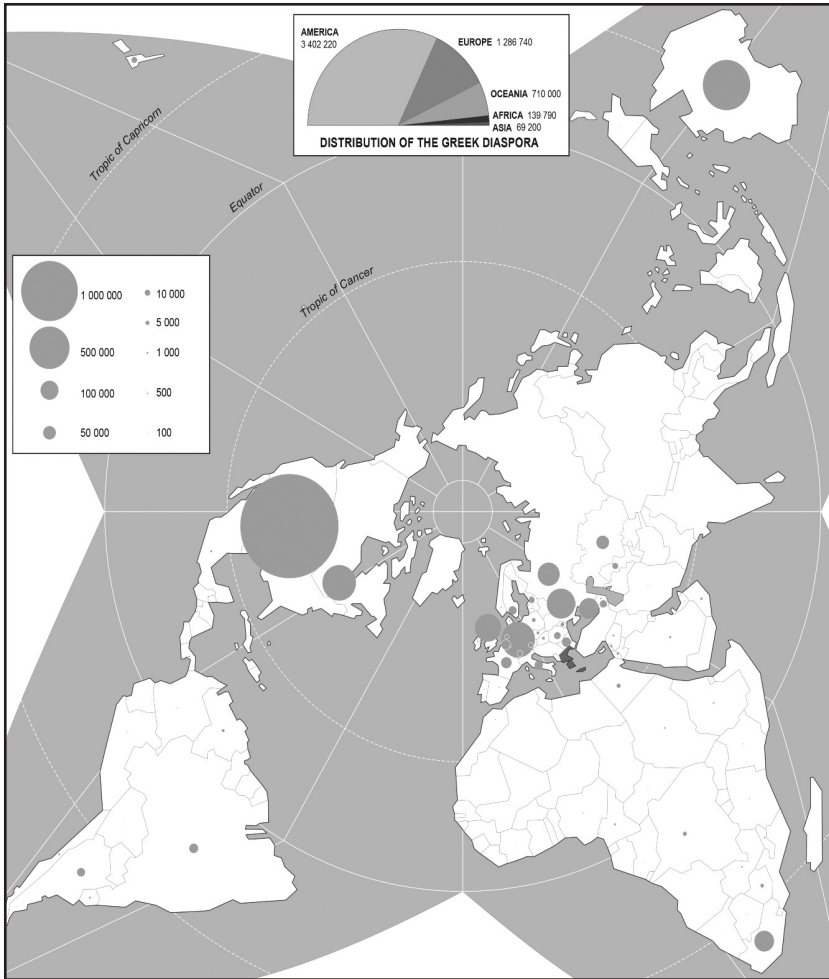
Globalising the presence of Hellenism, shipping may be considered to be part of the wider category of the diaspora. The Greek diaspora is not one of the largest in the world. But it possesses a rare advantage: it reaches back in time. Most of today’s diasporas have resulted over the past decades from increased circulation on a world scale. The roots of the Greek proclivity for forming diasporas, in contrast, trace back to antiquity. This longevity is a sure indication that the Greek diaspora will continue to exist when many current diasporas will have disappeared after the absorption of their members into surrounding societies. The Greek diaspora has after all shown resilience over the past two centuries, i.e. the ability to bend and then bounce back. Diasporic Greeks were up-

rooted from the Balkans, Asia Minor, East Europe, Egypt, and so many other parts. Many sought refuge in Greece, others moved to other countries. At the same time, emigration from Greece produced new diaspora centres, and strengthened the older surviving ones. This change, the recreation of a Greek diaspora, went unnoticed at first. Social scientists spoke in terms of migration, the state spoke of 'Greeks abroad'. In the aftermath of the Cyprus crisis and the *ad hoc* mobilisation of Greek-Americans, it became clear that there existed an entity other than the Greek state with clout in international affairs. Since then it has become acceptable to employ the term 'diaspora', hitherto used exclusively of the Jews, in referring to Greeks as well.

The ensuing period has been characterised internationally by an increased interest in the phenomenon of diasporas. This interest is another indication that we are at a historical juncture. The western modernist model affords no room for the phenomenon of the diaspora. The various instances of nationalism, furthermore, have sought to destroy diaspora communities, the most tragic example being the Holocaust. But as we exit Westphalian logic, diasporas return. The Greek diaspora belongs to this trend, and has a potentially pioneering role.

As more and more transnational communities aspire to the status of a diaspora, it becomes necessary to arrive at a definition, to determine the criteria for a 'diaspora'. The answer to this question has a direct bearing on the relation of the diaspora to its country of origin or, at least, of reference, especially because (to cite an example) many Franco-Greeks descended from Asia Minor were neither born in Greece nor ever lived there. A diaspora is a means of organising people that allows them to resist the ruinous effects of space and time. In other words, a diaspora forms a network that preserves its coherence and maintains circulation among its elements, often in spite of the enormous distances separating them: neither space nor time can destroy this network. Surrounded by

THE NEW GREEK DIASPORA



This map, based on data from 1996, brings out the global presence of Hellenism.

Source: Prevelakis (2006), 317.

an alien environment, communities retain their particular cultural features, and do not become completely assimilated. Resistance to space and the preservation of circulation reinforce iconography, which serves to overcome the destructive effects of time.

Not all people have these abilities. We know that the historical diasporas possess this invaluable cultural capital. The new diasporas will have to prove that they possess this or are capable of creating it. The Greeks, along with the Jews, Armenians, Indians, and Chinese, belong to the privileged category of peoples with a time-honoured tradition of diaspora culture.

In addition to iconography, religious institutions carry considerable weight in a diaspora community. The Orthodox Church and, in particular, the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople have played and continue to play a decisive role in the preservation and development of the diaspora. The Church is aware that the diaspora makes up a polycentric network, a feature that gives it flexibility to adapt to global diversity. The Church therefore exercises its coordinating role only to the extent of not endangering the ties of the diaspora communities to their environment.

The position of state institutions is the complete opposite. Given over to the centralism of the nation state model, these institutions seek to subject the diaspora to the same logic as governs provinces of the state. The Greek state attempted such coordination in the past through the 'World Council of Greeks Abroad'. Despite the Council's lavish budget, the plan failed. Today such funding is out of the question. The Greek diaspora, fortunately, was saved from the mortal clutches of the state. Still, even this limited contact with the Greek state and especially Greek political parties introduced disunity, rivalries, and disputes. The attempt, moreover, to manipulate the Greek diaspora for purposes alien to its needs and priorities caused serious harm and pervasive acrimony. This is one more reason why the diaspora has hesitated to answer the appeals of the state for economic support during the current crisis.

## NETWORKS OF HELLENISM IN A WORLD OF NETWORKS

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The Greek diaspora is a great asset to Hellenism. It makes up the unsurpassable disadvantages of inertia on the part of the Greek state and attendant statism. The diaspora ensures a dynamic entry into the new era.

THE IMPORTANCE OF GREEK-OWNED SHIPPING

*According to the Hellenic Statistical Authority, in 2004 798 ships of over 1,000 tonnes were registered; the total capacity was 42,237 tonnes. The Greek-controlled fleet amounted to 3,885 ships with a capacity of over 1,000 tonnes. This represented 17% of the total world fleet (HIS Fairplay World Shipping Encyclopedia, January 2013). The fleet is the largest in the world. The fleet under the Greek flag is ranked 7th internationally and 2nd in Europe after the Maltese fleet. Most flags are actually 'flags of convenience'. The ships using these flags are Greek-owned in large measure. By the end of December 2014, Greek interests had commissioned 377 ships of over 1,000 tonnes capacity. These orders assigned the Greeks to first place internationally.*

*In 2014 Greece's profits in currency from shipping amounted to 13,183 million Euros, as against 12,089 in 2013; this was an increase of 9%. According to the Bank of Greece (Report 2011), Greece's profits from shipping were especially high compared with those of the other member states of the European Union: namely 6% of the GDP, while average shipping profits in the other EU countries did not exceed 1%. Continuing a trend observed from 2003 onwards, in 2010 profits in currency from shipping exceeded those earned by tourism (9,614 million Euros), and ranked second in the balance of payments after exports (17,081).*

*In the decade of 2000 to 2010 shipping contributed 140 billion Euros to the Greek economy (Bank of Greece, Report 2011). This figure represented half of Greece's public debt, which amounted to 280 billion Euros. This was also 3 ½ times the influx of funds from the European Union during the period from 2000 to 2013, which amounted to 46 billion Euros.*

Source: Anna Beredema