

ECONOMIC AND COMMERCIAL CONDITIONS OF THE ISLAND OF RHODES AT THE BEGINNING OF 20TH CENTURY ACCORDING TO THE REPORTS OF SIR ALFRED BILIOTTI *

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Abstract

An archaeologist as well as a British diplomat of Italian origins, Sir Alfred Biliotti was a man of curiosity. He entered the British Foreign Office in 1856 as the Vice-Consul for Rhodes and retired in 1903 after serving in the most conflict-prone districts of the Ottoman Empire. Although retired, Sir Alfred Biliotti continued to serve the British Foreign Office as acting Vice-Consul of Rhodes until his death in 1915. His consular reports on the island of Rhodes as well as other regions provide valuable information to scholars studying the economic and social history of the Ottoman Empire. The economic and commercial position of Rhodes, like the other islands of the Aegean, was much affected by developments in the Mediterranean trade as well as developments in the Anatolian mainland. When Sir Alfred Biliotti returned to Rhodes, the island was in the process of an economic recovery after a serious setback that it experienced towards the end of the 19th century. This article, therefore, aims to analyze the economic and commercial conditions prevailing on the island of Rhodes through the reports of both his predecessors and Sir Alfred Biliotti. Although the study covers a period between 1903 and 1912, in order to have a comprehensive understanding of the commercial dynamics of the island, 19th century developments will also be touched upon.

Keywords: Island of Rhodes, Ottoman Empire, Italy, Sir Alfred Biliotti, Britain.

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SIR ALFRED BILIOTTI'NİN RAPORLARINA GÖRE 20. YÜZYIL BAŞLARINDA RODOS ADASI'NİN TİCARİ VE EKONOMİK DURUMU

Öz

İtalyan kökenli bir diplomat olmanın yanı sıra bir arkeolog da olan Sir Alfred Biliotti, Britanya konsolosları arasında önemli bir yere sahiptir. 1856 yılında Rodos'ta konsolos yardımcısı olarak başlayan hizmeti, Osmanlı'nın en sorunlu bölgelerinde devam etmiştir. Sir Alfred Biliotti, 1903 yılında emekliye ayrılmasına rağmen 1915 yılında ölümüne dek Britanya'nın Rodos konsolos yardımcısı vekili olarak görev yapmaya devam etmiştir. Rodos adası ve görev aldığı diğer bölgelere ilişkin hazırladığı raporlar, Osmanlı Devleti'nin sosyal ve ekonomik tarihi üzerine çalışan araştırmacılar için değerli bilgiler içermektedir. Rodos'un ekonomik ve ticari durumu, Ege Denizi'ndeki diğer adalar gibi, hem Akdeniz ticareti hem de Anadolu'daki gelişmelerden oldukça etkilenmiştir. Sir Alfred Biliotti Rodos'a döndüğünde ada 19. yüzyılın sonunda yaşadığı ekonomik gerilemeden toparlanma aşamasına girmişti. Bu makale, Rodos'un ekonomik ve ticari durumunu, ağırlıklı olarak Sir Alfred Biliotti'nin raporları üzerinden değerlendirmeyi hedeflemektedir. Çalışma 1903-1912 dönemini kapsamakla birlikte, konuya bütüncül bir yaklaşım sergileme açısından Rodos'un 19. yüzyıldaki ticari dinamiklerine de değinilecektir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Rodos adası, Osmanlı İmparatorluğu, İtalya, Sir Alfred Biliotti, Britanya.

Introduction

As Daniel Goffman says in his book *Izmir and the Levantine World*, Izmir's and her sister ports' commercial destiny changed according to time and circumstances¹. The political and economic developments beginning with the conquest of Izmir by the Ottomans in 1425 gradually put it in a dominant position in terms of trade and commerce, extending its influence as far as Erzurum in the Anatolian mainland and the islands in the Aegean Sea. Despite the central administration's deliberate attempts to preserve Chios as the commercial center of Western Anatolia, by the end of the 17th century not only Chios but the other Aegean islands and the coastal towns of Western Anatolia were reduced to a position where they were compelled to conduct their commercial activities through an intensive network of commercial and financial relations established in Izmir². Lacking both the financial structure and economic sources, the islands

1 Daniel Goffman, *İzmir ve Levanten Dünya*, Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, İstanbul, 1995, p.2.

2 For analyses of factors carrying Izmir to a dominant position in the Western Anatolian trade, see: Necmi Ülker, "The Emergence of İzmir as a Mediterranean Commercial Center for French and English Interests, 1698-1740" *International Journal of Turkish Studies*, vol. 4, no. 1 (Summer 1987), pp.1-37; Daniel Goffman, *İzmir ve Levanten Dünya (1550-1650)*, çev. Ayşen Anadol ve Neyyir Kalaycıoğlu, Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, İstanbul, 1995; Suraiya Faroqhi, *Osmanlı'da Kentler ve Kentliler*, çev. Neyyir Kalaycıoğlu, 3. Baskı, Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, İstanbul, 2000; Frangakis-Syrett, Elena, *The Commerce of Smyrna in the Eighteenth Century (1700-1820)*, Center for Asia Minor Studies, 1992.

were in no position to compete with Izmir. In due time, even though some developments of the 19th century like the Convention of Balta Limanı or excessive quay dues of the Port of Izmir enabled the islands to conduct direct trade with the rest of the world, they never reached a level of commercial activity where they could even challenge Izmir's predominance. However, this is not to say that the islands of the Aegean should be ignored or eliminated from the economic life of the region. On the contrary, the economic life of Anatolia and the islands are always considered as an integrated whole. Accordingly, Suraiya Faroqhi states that even a superficial study of maritime transportation surrounding Anatolia should be conducted taking into consideration the nearby islands³. Furthermore, regardless of the developments carrying Izmir to a commercially dominant place in the region, the islands of the Aegean always maintained close ties with the coastal towns of Anatolia for the simple fact that they were islands and hardly acquired the necessary sources to lead a sustainable economy of their own. While some islands lacked enough water, almost all of them imported grain, cattle and livestock from the mainland.

Needless to say, the island of Rhodes is no exception to the phenomena mentioned above. However, a mid-sized island situated between the main trade routes of three important commercial centers of the Ottoman Empire; Istanbul, Izmir and Egypt, the island of Rhodes was commercially more prominent compared to the islands nearby. A number of developments in the 19th century, however, had detrimental effects to both the commerce and the economy of the island. By the beginning of the 20th century the island was trying to recover from this setback. It is the purpose of this article, therefore, to analyze the economic and commercial conditions of the island of Rhodes, how it was affected by both domestic and international circumstances, and its conditions at the beginning of the 20th century. Our main sources will be the reports of the British acting Vice-Consul of Rhodes, Sir Alfred Biliotti, who is renowned for the richness of his consular reports presented to the Foreign Office. Biliotti's reports describing the effects of Italian occupation of the island are worth noting in particular, for it demonstrates how the integrated relations between an island and the mainland could be cut off due to political reasons.

1. The Life and Career of Sir Alfred Biliotti

Theo Barker says, "*the British consular reports, readily available in print from the middle of 1850s, tell us more about the countries from which the consuls were reporting than about Britain's trade with these places*"⁴. Indeed, for scholars of Ottoman studies, British, as well as other countries' consular reports are one of the important sources of information as to the understanding of political, social

³ Faroqhi (2000), pp.94-95.

⁴ Theo Barker, "Consular Reports: A Rich But Neglected Historical Source," *Business History*, vol. 23, issue 3 (1981), pp.265-66.

and economic dynamics of a certain region⁵. One of these consuls was Sir Alfred Biliotti, born in Rhodes (1833) to an Italian family who migrated to the island from Livorno during the Napoleonic wars. David Barchard, who wrote the most comprehensive biography of Sir Alfred Biliotti says⁶,

“Now, by a fluke of history which he could never have imagined, in the age of the Internet Biliotti’s name is once more familiar as scholars in the Balkans, Turkey, and Greece turn to his consular reports for accounts of nineteenth century conditions in their subject areas which are often hard to match elsewhere.⁷ His consular reports are notable for their insight and their grasp of fields as different as politics, law, demography, anthropology, and farming, as well of course of diplomacy.”

Michael Meeker, on the other hand, criticizes Biliotti for merely stating the facts and not theorizing or analyzing a subject matter. In other words, Biliotti was not as keen as other consuls in making generalizations or pointing out to structural problems of the Ottoman administration. Meeker suggests that this flaw may be result of his Levantine background. Born and raised in the Ottoman lands, Meeker suggests that Biliotti, *“as an ‘Oriental,’ ... found it impossible to be an ‘Orientalist.’⁸* This is to suggest that while other British diplomats approached

5 This is also true for the island of Rhodes where British trade with the island almost disappeared at the end of the 19th century, but the reports provided by its consuls became valuable sources for historians.

6 David Barchard, *“The Fearless and Self-Reliant Servant. The Life and Career of Sir Alfred Biliotti (1833-1915) an Italian Levantine in British Service” Studi Micenei Ed Egeo-Anatolici*, vol. XLVIII (2006), p.5.

7 Following are a number of works produced by scholars who made use of Biliotti’s consular reports: Julian Brooks, *Managing Macedonia: British Statecraft, Intervention, and ‘Proto-peacekeeping’ in Ottoman Macedonia, 1902-1905*, unpublished doctoral thesis, Simon Fraser University, Department of History, British Columbia (Canada), Spring 2014; Philip Carabbot, *“A Country in a ‘State of Destitution’ Labouring Under an ‘Unfortunate Regime’: Crete at the Turn of the 20th Century (1898-1906)”* in Y. Hamilakis and N. Momigliano, *Archaeology and European Modernity: Producing and Consuming the Minoans*, Creta Antica (Rivista annale di studi archeologici, storici ed epigrafici, Centro di Archaeologica Cretese, Università di Catania), 7. Bottega d’Erasmus, Padua, 2006, pp.39-53; Teresa Carpenter, *The Miss Stone Affair: America’s First Modern Hostage Crisis*, Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, New York, 2004; Robert Holand, *“Nationalism, Ethnicity and the Concert of Europe: The Case of the High Commissionership of Prince George of Greece in Crete, 1898-1906,” Journal of Modern Greek Studies*, vol. 17, no. 2 (1999), pp.253-276; Michael Meeker, *A Nation of Empire: The Ottoman Legacy of Turkish Modernity*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2001; Hamdi Öziş, *“19. Yüzyıl sonlarında Trabzon Vilayetinde Muhacir ve Yol Meselesi Bağlamında İdari Taksimat,” Hacettepe Üniversitesi Atatürk İlkeleri ve İnkılâp Tarihi Enstitüsü, Cumhuriyet Tarihi Araştırmaları Dergisi*, yıl 4, sayı 8 (Güz 2008), pp.5-40; R. John Pritchard, *“International Humanitarian Intervention and Establishment of an International Jurisdiction Over Crimes Against Humanity: The National and International, Military Trials on Crete in 1898”* in John Carey, William V. Dunlap, R. John Pritchard (eds.), *Transnational Publishers*, New York, 2003, pp.1-88; David Rodogno, *Against Massacre: Humanitarian Interventions in the Ottoman Empire, 1815-1914*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 2012; David Shankland, *Archaeology, Anthropology, and Heritage in the Balkans and Anatolia: the Life and Times of F. W. Haluck*, vol. 2, Isis Press, Istanbul, 2004; Musa Şaşmaz, *“Alfred Bilotti’nin 1885’teki Raporuna Göre Trabzon Vilayetinde Eğitimin Durumu,” Tarih ve Toplum*, 163, 1997, pp.49-52.

8 Meeker, p.263.

the Ottoman state's weaknesses from a more structural point of view, having not experienced the capitalist mode of thinking, Biliotti was more inclined to blame individual administrators rather than the administrative structure itself. Therefore, we inevitably come to the point where we have to question whether Biliotti should be criticized for not being an Orientalist, the answer of which is outside the limits of this study. On the other hand, Meeker also gives Biliotti credit for his impartiality and states that, "[His consular reports] include an impressive body of details, more than are found in the reports of any other British or French consul."⁹ Apart from the thoroughness of his reports, one reason that the scholars are constantly referring to his reports may be the fact that he served as British consul in the most conflict-prone districts of the Ottoman Empire. A closer look at the studies that made use of Biliotti's reports reveals that most of these studies focus on either Crete or Macedonia, because he was serving in those districts when major crises broke out in 1896 and 1903 respectively.

Biliotti's diplomatic career began as early as 16, as a clerk at the British Vice-Consulate in Makry (Mekri/Fethiye), where his father Charles Biliotti served as Vice-Consul¹⁰. A year later, in 1850, he started working at the British Consulate in Rhodes as a dragoman. In the same year, within the framework of *Tanzimat* reforms, a new administrative organization was introduced in the Ottoman Empire. The islands of the Aegean were grouped under the *Eyâlet of Cezâir-i Bahr-i Sefîd* (Province of the Islands of the Mediterranean) with Rhodes becoming the capital of the province¹¹. This gave the British Foreign Office an opportunity to reorganize its consular establishments in the region. A new consular district covering the Aegean islands Rhodes being the center was formed¹² and Biliotti was appointed as the Vice-Consul of the island in 1856. After Rhodes he was appointed as the Vice-Consul of Chios and Mytilene (1867).

The breakthrough in Biliotti's diplomatic career was his naturalization as a British subject, which must have paved the way for higher posts in consular service. Shortly after becoming a British subject, Biliotti was appointed as the Vice-Consul for Trabzon and in 1879 he was promoted as Consul. He served six years in Trabzon and was then appointed as Consul for Canea (Crete) in 1885. Biliotti's last post in his official diplomatic career was Salonica, where he was appointed as Consul-General in 1899¹³. He retired in 1903 when he turned 70, a mandatory age for retirement from the British Foreign Office. From that year onwards, however, he continued to serve Foreign Office as the acting

9 Meeker, p.263.

10 Lucia Patrizio Gunning, *The British Consular Service and the Collection of Antiquities for the British Museum*, Ashgate Publishing Limited, Surrey, 2009, p.189.

11 İdris Bostan, *Ege Adaları'nın İdari, Mali ve Sosyal Yapısı*, Ankara, 2003, http://www.saemk.org/yayin_detay.asp?dba=016&dil=tr, 11.09.2004.

12 Patrizio Gunning, p.101.

13 Barchard, pp.15, 20; Uygur Kocabaşoğlu, *Majestelerinin Konsolosları*, İletişim Yayınları, İstanbul, 2004, pp.101, 149, 159.

Vice-Consul of his home town, Rhodes. Barchard states that, “after he retired in 1903 his name was quickly forgotten and when he died in 1915 he was more or less a forgotten figure”¹⁴. On the contrary, the occupation of Rhodes and the Dodecanese islands in 1912 by Italy must have put Biliotti in a prominent position since Britain was the nation most alarmed by Italy’s act in the region¹⁵. The British Consul of Izmir, Henry Barnham’s remarks on Biliotti, show that he was still a credible and respected figure in the Foreign Office circles: “no one knows the Islanders better than the writer [Biliotti] of this dispatch whose suggestions as to the future administration of the Sporades will I am sure be appreciated by His Majesty’s Government”¹⁶. As the acting Vice-Consul of Rhodes he continued to send reports about the commercial dynamics of Rhodes including the drastic changes that the island had gone through with the Italian occupation. Although Biliotti had some clashes with the ambassadors in Istanbul or other consuls, his reports had a high degree of credibility when taking a course of action in London, especially by Lord Salisbury, who granted him knighthood in 1896¹⁷.

Biliotti’s diplomatic career also intermingled with his archaeological expeditions, which is not unusual for a 19th century diplomat who, among other responsibilities, was expected to collect information and even samples from ancient ruins¹⁸. One of the most famous of these diplomats was Sir Charles Thomas Newton, an employee of the British Museum, who was appointed as Vice-Consul to Mytilene in 1852. Newton, however, was an archaeologist who served as a diplomat rather than vice versa, which was usually the case. In his own words Newton described his duty: “to use such opportunities as presented

14 Barchard, p.5.

15 Britain’s traditional policy with regards to its interests in the eastern Mediterranean was shaped as not allowing any naval power to acquire any land or harbor that could be transformed into a naval base. The Ottoman navy was not considered as a naval threat since the destruction of most of its fleet at the battle of Navarino in 1827. The naval balance in the eastern Mediterranean was more or less preserved to the advantage of the British. Should there be any challenge to British supremacy in the region the British fleets in Malta were ready to act upon that threat. Therefore, the occupation of Rhodes and the Dodecanese by Italy meant the disruption of the naval balance to the detriment of British interests. Consequently, any information regarding the political and social developments on the island became crucial for Britain, hence the role of Biliotti as the British acting Vice-Consul. Bilal Şimşir, *Ege Sorunu: Belgeler*, cilt I (1912-1913) (Aegean Question: Documents, vol. I (1912-1913), Atatürk Kültür, Dil ve Tarih Yüksek Kurumu, Türk Tarih Kurumu Yayınları, Ankara, 2nd edition, 1989, enclosure in document no. 264, pp.202-203.

16 Public Record Office (hereafter PRO), Foreign Office (hereafter FO) 195/2396, No: 328-337.

17 Barchard, p.25.

18 For further information, see, Patrizio Gunning, chapters 3 and 4. Another example is presented by Yannis Galanakis, “On Her Majesty’s Service: C.L.W. Merlin and the Sourcing of Greek Antiquities for the British Museum” *CHS Research Bulletin* 1, no. 1 (2012). http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hlnc.essay:GalanakisY.On_Her_Majestys_Service.2012. (01.09.2014). In 1864, with a directive drafted by Charles Newton the British Consuls were formally instructed to, “identify, source and collect ancient specimens that may be of interest to the [British Museum].” Yannis Galanakis, *To Serve and to Source: a Trading Consul at the Service of the British Museum*, http://wp.chs.harvard.edu/chs-fellows/2012/11/29/to-serve-and-to-source-a-trading-consul-at-the-service-of-the-british-museum/#_edn2, (01.09.2014).

themselves for the acquisition of antiquities for the British Museum, and with this object I was authorized to extend my researches beyond the limits of my Vice-Consulship"¹⁹. A year later Newton was appointed to Rhodes as Consul where he must have met Biliotti. According to Barchard, Biliotti's acquaintance with Newton brought him two advantages: first, in his early thirties Biliotti became experienced enough to conduct an archaeological expedition on his own. Second, by working on behalf of the British Museum, he was able to get into "direct correspondence with the highest echelons of the government" which could have had an impact on his promotion to higher posts in consular service²⁰. Biliotti conducted excavations in his consular posts such as Rhodes, Crete, Satala (Sadak/Trabzon), but, unlike Newton, he always put his consular career and especially his political responsibilities as a diplomat, in the first place²¹.

2. The Commerce of Rhodes at the Beginning of the 20th Century

2.a. Export and Import Products of Rhodes

Although the soil on the island of Rhodes was poorly managed²² and only a third of land was arable, the island's main articles of export were mainly agricultural products. Among these, fresh fruits and vegetables brought the most income to the island. Because of the mild climate of Rhodes, fruits and vegetables ripened earlier than most parts of Anatolia and Egypt. Therefore the Rhodian farmers were able to put their products to market about a month earlier than the other regions, which in turn meant higher prices and income for them²³. The main customers of fresh fruits and vegetables were Istanbul, Izmir, Odessa and Alexandria. Other principal articles of export were dry fruits, olive oil, onions, potatoes, wines and spirits, leather and hides, honey and wax. The most lucrative export articles of the island were oranges, lemons and silk. However, in the 1870's both the fruits and the silkworm were severely attacked by diseases. As a result, the production of these items entirely disappeared²⁴. During the last decade of the 19th century both articles began to be produced and exported again²⁵.

19 C. T. Newton, *Travels and Discoveries in the Levant*, Day & Son Limited, London, vol. 1, 1865, p.1.

20 Barchard, pp.14-15.

21 Ibid, p.13. In 1871, a questionnaire survey was conducted by the British Foreign Office among the Consuls and Vice-Consuls, where, among other questions they were asked whether commercial or political activities of their consulates were dominant. Biliotti's reply was that his consulate's political functions outweighed the commercial ones. Kocabaşoğlu, pp.99-101.

22 *Parliamentary Papers, Accounts and Papers* (Hereafter, A&P), 1890, vol. 77, p.34. Ali Fuat Örenç states that in mid-1850's the Rhodian villagers have an average income from their farming activities. He also states that at the end of the 19th century the income of the villagers were lower than the previous decades because there was no investment on modern farming equipment and techniques, leading to the reduction of productivity of the soil. *Yakın Dönem Tarihimizde Rodos ve Oniki Ada*, Doğu Kütüphanesi, İstanbul, 2005, p.477, 479.

23 A&P, 1901, vol. 85, p.16.

24 A&P, 1890, vol. 77, p.30.

25 A&P, 1890, vol. 77, p.32.

Table 1: Principal Articles of Export from Rhodes During 1901

Source: A&P, 1902, vol. 110, p. 18.

ARTICLES	VALUE (£)	DESTINATION
Fresh fruits and vegetables	8.333	Turkey, Egypt, Russia
Leather and hides	3.167	Turkey, Austria-Hungary, Cyprus, France
Wine and raki	2.667	Turkey, Egypt
Onions	2.500	Turkey, Egypt
Olive Oil	2.083	Turkey, Egypt, Cyprus, France
Dry fruits and Vegetables	1.667	Turkey, Egypt, Austria-Hungary
Valonia	667	Turkey, Austria-Hungary
Sundries	15.583
TOTAL	36.667	

Sponges generally ranked second in the island's export revenues. However, Rhodes mostly acted as a station for transshipment of this item because the greater quantity of sponges for exportation came from the nearby smaller islands of the Sporades namely Symi, Calymnos, Halki, Tilos, and Castellorizo. These islands often lacked enough arable land, and some were no more than barren rocks, which compelled the inhabitants to resort to this risky and dangerous occupation²⁶. Rhodes also acted as an emporium for products of both the nearby small islands and the opposite Anatolian coast to be transhipped to the other Ottoman and European ports. Items other than sponges for transshipment were valonia, sesame seed, and storax oil.

Table 2: Principal Articles Exported in Transit via Rhodes During 1901

Source: A&P, 1902, vol. 110, p.18.

Articles	Destination	Value £
Sesame seed	Turkey, Russia, Germany, France, Egypt	48.333
Storax oil	India, Austria-Hungary, France	5.333
Wax and honey	Turkey, Greece, Germany, Egypt	2.500
Sponges	Turkey	833
Valonia	Turkey	500
Sundries	50.833
	Total	108.332

26 Haydar Çoruh, "Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nda Sünger Avı" *Uluslararası Sosyal Araştırmalar Dergisi (The Journal of International Social Research)*, vol. 2/9, Fall 2009, pp.81 and 93; Sıtkı Yürekli, "19. Yüzyılda Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nda Süngercilik ve İzmir Limanı'ndan Sünger İhracatı (1850-1900)", *Ekonomik Yaklaşım*, 22/79, 2011, pp.84-85; Cihan Özgün, "Osmanlı Devleti'nde Teknik Bir Yenilik: Skafander Makinesi" *Turkish Studies*, vol 8/7, Summer 2013, pp.439-440 and 445; A&P, 1900, vol. 97, p.45.

As far as the imports were concerned, manufactured cotton and woolen goods ranked first and they were mostly of British origin. Britain, however, did not have direct trade with the island; almost all the goods were imported from Izmir, which is another demonstration of Izmir's domination on the trade of the island. Although some wheat was grown in Rhodes, like most of the Aegean islands, flour was imported from Izmir and from the opposite coast. Sometimes the wheat production was able to meet the demands of the local population, but still there was some import of flour. This was due to the poor condition of the roads in the interior, where carrying the products of the villages to the town of Rhodes was more expensive than importing flour²⁷. Cattle and livestock were also imported from the mainland. A small sailing vessel construction was carried out in Rhodes, which necessitated the import of some planks and timber, sailing cloth, ropes, and ships' gears.

Table 3: Principal Articles of Import to Rhodes During 1901

Source: A&P, 1902, vol. 110, p.18.

Articles	Origin	Value £
Manufactures	United Kingdom, Germany, Italy, Austria-Hungary, Turkey	36.250
Alcohol	Austria-Hungary, Russia	2.500
Colonials and agricultural produce	Turkey, Brazil, France, United Kingdom, Egypt, Italy, Belgium, Austria-Hungary, Russia	21.418
Flour, wheat, & c.	Turkey	18.333
Jute goods, &c.	United Kingdom, Belgium, India	2.333
Petroleum	Russia	1.667
Hardware	United Kingdom, Austria-Hungary, Germany, Turkey	3.167
Glass and china	Belgium, France, Italy, Germany, Austria-Hungary	2.033
Iron and ironware	Belgium, Turkey, United Kingdom, Germany, Austria-Hungary	2.917
Planks and timber	Turkey, Austria-Hungary	2.500
Leather and hides	France, Italy, Belgium, Turkey	2.500
Cattle	Turkey	2.250
Tobacco of the Regie	Turkey	7.083
Sundries	86.667
	Total	191.618

27 A&P, 1890, vol. 77, p.33.

The island of Rhodes, like the other islands of the Aegean archipelago, had strong ties with Izmir. Most of the exports of the island were sent to Izmir and likewise most of the imports were obtained from there. By the middle of the 19th century major steamship companies such as French Messageries Maritimes and Austrian Lloyd started calling at Rhodes, enabling the island to have more direct contact with the outer world. However, the main pattern of trade did not change and Izmir continued to preserve its dominant position in the Rhodian trade. Nevertheless, the inclusion of Rhodes in the itinerary of major steamship companies strengthened the island's commercial position. Both the nearby islands and the Caramanian coast of Anatolia brought their products to the island to be re-exported elsewhere and they bought import products from Rhodes. Consequently, the island became an emporium, a center of transit trade for the regions that did not have direct communication with Izmir.

2.b. The Commerce of Rhodes at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century

By the time Biliotti returned to Rhodes, the island was struggling to recover from a major setback. This setback had both international and domestic reasons. First of all, the prevailing international economic conditions had an adverse effect on the island's commerce.

After the mid-Victorian boom had passed, and international trade temporarily decreased as a result of the Depression (1873-1896), economic ties between Smyrna and the Western Anatolian coastal ports and Aigaian [sic] islands increased as direct freights between the latter and the West decreased. Smyrna became once again one of their principal links with the international market, and in the case of the British frequently their only link.²⁸

By the middle of the 1880's, major steamship companies either stopped calling at Rhodes or they visited the island on a much more reduced scale because the companies no longer found it profitable to trade with the island²⁹. This was especially the case with Austro-Hungarian and Russian steamship companies which traded directly with Rhodes. Towards the end of the 1880's, The Austrian Lloyd Company was the only major steamship company that had regular services to the island, though on a reduced scale. The Russian steamship company stopped calling at Rhodes during the Russo-Ottoman war of 1877-78. After the war, the company started its regular services to the Syrian and Anatolian coasts, leaving Rhodes out of its itinerary³⁰. The French Messageries had also completely stopped its services to the island.

28 Elena Frangakis-Syrett, "The Western Anatolian Coast and the Aegean Islands in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries: An Economic Survey", in *The Hellenic Diaspora: From Antiquity to Modern Times*, ed. J. M. Fossey, Amsterdam, 1999, p.252.

29 A&P, 1890, vol. 77, p.28.

30 A&P, 1890, vol. 77, p.28.

The gap created by the absence of major European steamship companies was filled by the smaller steamship companies such as Greek Pandaleon, Ottoman (later American) Hadji Daoud and later Ottoman Hamidie. However, this development proved detrimental to Rhodian trade for two reasons: first, unlike the major steamship companies, the small companies extended their services to almost all of the small islands of the Southern Sporades and the Anatolian coast, which led to the establishment of direct communications with Izmir. As a result, Rhodes lost its dominant position as the center of transit trade in the region³¹. Second, the export of fresh fruits and vegetables, the main source of income for the island, was also badly affected. As mentioned earlier, Rhodes had an advantage in the export of fresh fruits and vegetables due to its favorable climate. Thus, the rapid export of these articles to major ports provided an important advantage to the Rhodian trade. However, since the small steamship companies called at almost every little port on their way to Izmir, it took more time for these articles to reach the market, causing the island to lose an important advantage. A great part of the fruits and vegetables destined for Alexandria were carried by sailing vessels. Hence weather conditions played an important role, and sometimes due to strong south winds the products were not able to reach Alexandria in a marketable condition³².

The attitude of the Ottoman government toward making Rhodes, *“a distributor of Western goods in a permanent way to its surrounding islands and to the near-by Western Anatolian coast”*³³ was not promising either. The government did not meet most of the demands from both the merchants and the local officials for the improvement of the infrastructure that would sustain the prominent position of the island. The poor conditions of the roads in the interior, harbors and the customs house facilities were seen as the major sources of both the poverty of the inhabitants and the decline of the trade of Rhodes³⁴. There were two harbors in Rhodes, and trade was generally carried out in the larger one. However, it was so shallow that the larger steamships anchored outside the harbor. During winter, strong north winds often prevented ships from anchoring, and the island was practically cut off from the rest of the world³⁵. As to the customs house facilities, the lack of adequate storage was the main problem. Only a small portion of the

31 A&P, 1900, vol. 97, p.28.

32 A&P, 1890, vol. 77, p.36.

33 Frangakis-Syrett (1999), p.252.

34 Rhodes Vice-Consul Jones, in his reports for the years 1888 and 1889 enumerates the causes for the poverty of the island. Although he points out to some structural problems, according to Jones the main cause of the poverty of the island is *“to be found in the idleness of the peasants, whose natural indolence is fostered by the system of frequent holidays observed by the Greeks (who form the vast majority of the population of the island). These holidays are so numerous as to leave only 200 working days out of the 313 week days in the year.”* Jones also accuses the peasants for not taking good care of the soil. After making a considerable effort to analyze the structural problems, it is quite confusing that Jones puts the sole blame on the peasants. A&P, 1890, vol. 77, p.34.

35 A&P, 1900, vol. 97, p.28.

goods were stored in the warehouses, a greater portion of them were left out in the open.

Another demand which came from the merchants and local officials, and also backed by the British consuls was granting Rhodes the status of free port like the Greek island of Syra.³⁶ During the 19th century not only Rhodes but Chios also demanded the same status, but it was never granted to any of these islands by the Ottoman government. This may be due to government's deliberate attempts to preserve Izmir's dominant position in the region's trade. Another reason may be the government's fear of losing income.

Although the material conditions of the island did not improve, Biliotti's reports points out to a sharp increase in the transit trade of Rhodes at the beginning of the 20th century³⁷. The reason for this was the heavy dues imposed on merchants both in Smyrna and Chios ports³⁸. Therefore the smaller islands and the towns of the opposite coast directed their trade once again to Rhodes, thereby causing an increase in both imports and exports. Furthermore, major European steamship companies included Rhodes in their itinerary again.

Attempts were also under way for the improvement of the structural difficulties that we mentioned above. Even though the condition of the harbor remained unchanged, in 1906 the warehouses were enlarged to overcome the problem of storage³⁹. During the same year, a lazaretto⁴⁰ was also built which enabled the vessels travelling between Izmir and Alexandria to perform their quarantine at Rhodes. During the year 1906, 81 steamers and 374 sailing vessels performed their quarantine at Rhodes⁴¹. Biliotti also mentions a deliberate attempt on the part of the Rhodian merchants aimed at reviving the trade of the island, that is, establishing branches in some islands and on the opposite coast and accepting easy terms of payment⁴². One of the results of these attempts was that the Rhodian merchants started establishing stocks in hand, which in turn caused some fluctuations in the island's trade. The establishment of branches on the opposite coast, on the other hand, resulted in decrease in transit trade. For instance, in 1905 there seems to be a sharp decrease in transit trade compared to the previous year. The sharp decrease occurred because there was a shift in the trade of the sesame seed. Until 1905 sesame seed, which was produced on

36 One of these local officials who demanded Rhodes be a free port was the famous poet and playwright Namık Kemal, who was exiled to Rhodes between 1884 and 1887. He sent letters to the central administration proposing solutions to the island's agricultural and economic problems. See, Fevziye Abdullah Tansel, *Namık Kemal'in Hususi Mektupları IV. Cilt - Rodos ve Sakız Mektupları*, Türk Tarih Kurumu, Ankara, 1986.

37 See, table 4. The report for the years 1897-99, 1901 and 1902 bear the name of Alfred Biliotti as acting Vice-Consul of Rhodes.

38 A&P, 1902, vol. 110, p.14.

39 A&P, 1908, vol. 116, p.23.

40 A *lazaratteeo* is a quarantine station.

41 A&P, 1908, vol. 116, p.21.

42 A&P, 1910, vol. 103, p.61.

the Anatolian coast and was exported to other ports via Rhodes by the Rhodian merchants. However, in 1905 this product was directly exported from Anatolia to other ports, by the Rhodian merchants' branches on the Anatolian coast. Therefore, although the transactions were still made by the Rhodian merchants the article did not show up in the export statistics of the island⁴³. In 1906 imports fell approximately 17% compared to 1905, the reason being Rhodian merchants having large stocks in hand and not feeling the need to establish more stocks.

As for demand for British goods, Britain was facing the same difficulties that it was facing all over the world. There was a diminution of Britain's share in manufactured goods because of competition from other countries such as Germany, Belgium and France. In the case of Rhodes, Biliotti argues that since the inhabitants of the island are poor they turned to Austro-Hungarian and German goods which were cheaper but of inferior quality⁴⁴.

Table 4: Trade of Rhodes (1900-1912)

Source: A&P (1901-1912)

	EXPORTS	IMPORTS	TRANSIT TRADE
1900	27.400	180.500	18.800
1901	36.667	141.668	108.332
1902	40.000	150.000	135.000
1903	35.000	180.000	103.000
1904	no data	200.000	122.000
1905	47.200	190.000	80.000
1906	50.000	163.800	76.650
1907	no data	no data	no data
1908	57.425	173.800	74.500
1909	71.100	180.100	84.150
1910	73.500	174.830	75.600
1911	57.000	194.000	60.000
1912	29.410	177.620	35.100

43 A&P, 1906, p.24.

44 A&P, 1906, p.24.

3. Italian Occupation and Its Effects

Towards the end of the first decade of the 20th century, political developments began to play a major role in the commerce of the island. The boycott of Austrian goods as a reaction to the occupation of Bosnia-Herzegovina diminished trade almost entirely with that country⁴⁵. The boycott of Greece because of the turmoil in Crete between 1909 and 1911 was another factor affecting the commerce of Rhodes. Finally, the occupation of the island by Italy resulted in drastic changes in the economic and commercial conditions of the island. In a report that he prepared about a month after the occupation, Biliotti described the conditions that the islanders had to endure. Naturally, the most important change was the breaking off all the relations with the mainland which Biliotti described as “*creating the most disastrous consequences for the inhabitants.*”⁴⁶ The relations of the inhabitants with the main land were not limited to simply providing basic needs. Over the centuries of Ottoman rule, the islanders, developed much more complex relations with the mainland which Biliotti states as,

*some Islanders own extensive landed property in Anatolia; others have important interests in mines, and many more are engaged in different undertakings, so that the least thing that might happen to them would be the necessity to suspend their operations, thus being deprived for an indefinite period of income they derive therefrom.*⁴⁷

Prior to the Italian war, the island’s basic needs such as flour, cattle and livestock were almost entirely provided by small sailing vessels carrying the Ottoman flag. The war brought this traffic to a full stop, making the islanders suffer. While the Italians distributed some flour, the Cadi began a daily distribution of 1.000 loaves of bread to those in need upon orders from Istanbul. Under strict regulations, the Ottoman Government allowed the importation of flour to Rhodes and the other islands under Italian occupation, but these measures were not sufficient to alleviate the miserable conditions that the islanders faced. Due to the additional Bill of Health fees and police regulations the major steamship companies stopped calling at Rhodes⁴⁸.

The problem of emigrant workers was another issue. Most of the inhabitants of the Aegean islands were poor, and lacking enough land to cultivate, every year in spring a certain amount of people emigrated to the mainland in the spring to work in the agricultural or construction sectors and in winter they came back to their islands to spend their earnings which brought livelihood to the islands’ economies. Out of a population of around 26.000, the number of

45 Two years before the occupation the Austrian-Lloyd company struck Rhodes out of its itinerary with no apparent reason.

46 PRO, FO, 195/2396, no. 210-214.

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid.

inhabitants who worked as emigrant laborers from Rhodes was around 2.000-3.000, all of whom were Greek subjects and they travelled as far as Aleppo to work in the construction of the Bagdad Railway. The Italian occupation had two negative effects in this respect. First, under the circumstances of war, some laborers could not travel to the mainland. Second, the ones that did manage to reach the mainland were treated by Muslims as traitors, since a considerable amount of the Greek population of Rhodes extended a warm welcome to the Italians because they saw the occupation as a first step towards union with Greece. Biliotti gives the example of Rhodian laborers who worked in Aleppo on the Bagdad railway. *"The labourers were called traitors and boycotted by the Muslims, and they were not allowed to go out of the Hans they lived in, until they were sent on board steamers bound to the island."*⁴⁹ Biliotti feared that the arrival of these workers would be another cause of distress and tension between the Greek and Muslim populations.

The treatment of the Muslim population by the Italians was another issue that could escalate to a crisis according to Biliotti. The island's Italian civil commissioner's previous post was Salonica, where he served as Consul-General of Italy was treated badly during the Macedonian events of 1903. Thus he was already prejudiced against the Muslim population of Rhodes. Together with the exaggerated stories of Greeks, how they suffered under the hands of the Muslims, every pretext was ready to justify the maltreatment of the Muslim population. However, Biliotti found the exaggerated stories baseless given the fact that the Muslim population constituted only one fourth of the total population of the island⁵⁰. With the signing of the peace treaty with Italy, there was a positive change in the attitude of the Italian administrators' towards the Muslim population on the island. However, Biliotti this time feared that the Muslim population was under greater threat since there were rumors that the Greek population of the island would rebel rather than going under Turkish sovereignty again. Although Biliotti argued that these were just rumors, he nevertheless pointed out to the disadvantageous position of the Muslim population; while the Greek population was fully armed the Muslims were provided with no arms since the Italians collected all their arms and ammunition following the occupation of the island⁵¹.

In the face of the upcoming Balkan War, the Ottomans signed the Treaty of Ouchy with the Italians, which eased the economic situation of the island to a certain extent. According to the treaty the Italians were to evacuate the islands as soon as the complete withdrawal of Ottoman troops from Tripoli was realized. However, the Ottoman Government was not so keen on taking back the islands from Italy fearing that they would be occupied by Greece. Although faced a great

49 PRO, FO, 195/2396, no. 210-14.

50 Şimşir, vol. 1, no. 229, June 4, 1912, pp.160-161.

51 Şimşir, vol. 1, no. 374, enclosure 2, October 22, 1912, pp.294-95.

deal of maltreatment by the Italians, Biliotti states that the Muslim population of Rhodes was not so keen on returning to Ottoman sovereignty either. With the signing of the treaty the Italians modified their behavior against the Muslim population, and the Muslims feared that with the departure of the Italians they would have to pay an exoneration tax to the Government, or worse they may be called as conscripts to the ongoing Balkan War⁵².

Conclusion

The physical characteristics of a given geographical space determine its political, economic and strategic destiny. Islands as one of these geographical spaces usually seem easier to define in terms of these factors yet each have a unique dynamic of their own, making it harder and problematic even to define the term. Throughout history, variables such as size, availability of resources and degree of insularity shaped the Aegean islands' relations with the mainland. The mainland's relations with the islands were mostly shaped by the mainland's capacity of engulfing the island's independent commercial activities. As mentioned above Aegean islands, throughout history, developed intricate relations with the Anatolian mainland. With the establishment of Ottoman sovereignty over the region the islands' activities slowly and against the wishes of the central administration entered into the orbit and became subordinate to İzmir's commercial activities.

The island of Rhodes, being situated between the main trade routes of major Ottoman ports had a comparative commercial advantage with regards the smaller islands and even the coastal towns of the Anatolian mainland. Nevertheless, the island showed a degree of insularity and dependence on the mainland Anatolia. Thus, the island of Rhodes is yet another example that demonstrates the complex relations between the Aegean islands and the mainland, which were affected by a number of factors. İzmir's dominance on the one hand and the insufficient economies of the islands on the other hand, defined these complex relations for almost 300 hundred years. At the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century political as well as technological developments redefined these relations. The island of Rhodes was one of the first islands to experience the hardships of being politically cut off from the main land followed by other Aegean islands that were lost to Greece during the Balkan Wars.

52 PRO, FO, 195/2396, no. 210-14.

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