



Rosa Maria Delli Quadri. *Il Mediterraneo delle costituzioni: dalla Repubblica delle Sette Isole Unite agli Stati Uniti delle Isole Ionie, 1800-1817.* Milan: Franco Angeli, 2017. 224 pp. EUR 29.00 (paper), ISBN 978-88-917621-9-1.

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The Mediterranean and Constitutions

If we observe a map of the Mediterranean Sea, we can see that the Ionian Islands are undoubtedly its center. Yet, if we give that same map the political meaning it would have had in the early nineteenth century, we would not see a unified Mediterranean Sea. We would see a duality: West and East, Europe and Islam, European states and Ottoman Empire. From this perspective, the Ionian Islands become a double outskirt: from the west to the east and vice versa, from the east to the west.

In such a borderline context, the islands of Corfu, Paxos, Lefkas, Ithaca, Cephalonia, Zante, and Cythera were an important Venetian possession for centuries while, on an opposite and sometimes very near coast, there were territories subjected to a stable and long-lasting Ottoman dominion: two worlds practically touching each other. Starting from this fundamental geographical consideration, the work by Rosa Maria Delli Quadri traces the path of these seven islands from the end of the historical Venetian domination and the birth of the Septinsular Republic to the proclamation of the United States of the Ionian Islands, considering the brief yet intense years of French domination as well.

From the title it is clear that the aim of the author is to study in depth the *constitutional* aspect of the Ionian experience by following in particular the English strategy for those islands and the policy of the first lord high commissioner of the Ionian Islands of the British Crown, Thomas Maitland. A key moment in this path is

the treaty of Campo Formio, signed on October 17, 1797. This treaty, in fact, besides determining the end of the Italian campaigns, confirmed all the points established in Leoben: the transfer of the Austrian Netherlands, the Ionian Islands, and all the Venetian possessions on the nearby coast to France; the recognition of the Cisalpine Republic as an independent power; and the transfer of the remaining possessions of the former Republic of Venice to Austria.

The very possession of the Ionian Islands is something the young General Napoleon Bonaparte really cared for, considering them of fundamental importance for the plans of Revolutionary France. In a letter addressed to the French Directory, written in the headquarters in Milan on 29 Thermidor, Year V and mentioned by the author, the general Bonaparte is clear: "Les îles de Corfou, de Zante et de Céphalonie son plus intéressantes pour nous que toute l'Italie ensemble"; a look to the East, of which the Ionian Islands are considered both the key and the western boundary, and, therefore, the eastern boundary of the western Mediterranean Sea. Both center and outskirt, as mentioned above, according to the point of view.[1]

A clear strategic trace that France used again during its second domination (1806-10, Corfu excepted, which remained under the French dominion until 1815), interrupted by the particular experience of the Republic of the Seven United Islands, the first embryo of an independent

state in the Greek world. An experience, this one, worthy of further examination as well, becoming an important moment at the core of Delli Quadri's work.

Those years are, in fact, fundamental from the perspective of the following British protectorate. The British would take stock of the negative elements of the constitutions that followed one another between 1800 and 1803, which would be the starting point for the common and stereotyped statement about the "lack of preparation" of the Mediterranean people and their "need" for guidance.

Then, starting from the reorganization that followed the Congress of Vienna, a new phase of great interest for the history of the Ionian Islands and the Mediterranean Sea opens. Those islands became one of the many "laboratori di ingegneria costituzionale inglese" (p. 46). Not only that: the islands represent one of the first examples of the "figura giuridica del *protettorato*" (p. 61). They became in this way another piece of the "sistema strategico [inglese] fondato sulle grandi isole" (p. 21), an indirect English possession that, together with the direct one, was essential in order to "dominare il mare interno" (p. 21).

A figure as enigmatic as he is fascinating comes into play: that of Thomas Maitland, a man of great experience in the ranks of the army and in the administration of the colonies. He had already served in Santo Domingo and in Sri Lanka and since 1813 he was governor of Malta, which from that moment was officially considered a British colony. Supported by a very significant documentation and helped by the prolific and fluent pen of Maitland, Delli Quadri reconstructs not only the "official" events regarding the islands, but above all the aspirations of the Ionian people and the plans, sometimes disdainful, of both the lord high commissioner and the English government.

Besides all the proclamations following one another on the *Gazzetta Jonia*, in fact, the islands are just another piece of English Mediterranean strategy. From the perspective of the crown, their possession was subordinate to their geopolitical importance and "Nulla è lasciato al caso" (p. 76). Even the choice of the words—a slight difference between *constitution* and *constitutions*—hides far more profound meaning than simple semantics; shades of an actual strong domination that leaves no room for the aspirations of the inhabitants, subjecting the functioning and the administration of the islands to English intentions. In Corfu those intentions have, again, the name and the aspect of Lord High Commissioner Maitland.

In the letters he wrote there are no words of appreci-

ation for either the inhabitants or for the Mediterranean area. The descriptions are negative and full of stereotypes about Mediterranean people as unable to govern and to define themselves, inherently corrupt and corruptible, weak and less evolved than the English people. Hence, then, the need to *protect* them, always according to the British Crown interests. Not a benevolent protection then, but a "mano dura, usata per il 'loro bene'" (p. 95).

It is essential, however, to consider not only the external outlook—that of the dominator—but the internal one as well. The end of the Napoleonic Wars and the Congress of Vienna brought great expectations to the Ionian populations, and the English proclamations initially fomented such feelings. The return of such a republic in a moment when the European powers were restoring old monarchies around the continent, appeared as a *new* and *against-the-tide* choice. According to the Treaty of Paris, the United States of the Ionian Islands—this is the name chosen for the new state—was a "Stato unico, libero e indipendente" (p. 103) placed, however, "sotto l'immediata ed esclusiva protezione del re d'Inghilterra" (p. 103). The evident contradictions turn into an organization of the state in which—even though of liberal identity—the margins of local institutions are extremely reduced and the actual and effective power is concentrated in the hands of the lord high commissioner: a regimen that can be defined as "assolutista e autocratico" (p. 122).

The constitution of 1817, promulgated on December 28 and coming into force on January 1 of the next year, becomes the point of arrival of the path taken by the author. In the pages of her work, in the light of what has been previously said, this constitution is expounded in detail and the obvious consequence of Maitland's approach is revealed, with all its contradictions. The documents, constituting seven chapters, are the mirror of lord high commissioner's plans for the islands: the Legislative Assembly of the Ionian Islands becomes the first Parliament of the United States of the Ionian Islands; the powers are—it is fair to say *on paper*—divided into executive and legislative, the former entrusted to the Ionian Senate and the latter to the Assembly/Parliament. Actually, however, "tutto il potere restava, fondamentalmente, nelle mani dell'alto commissario, in quella che Foscolo avrebbe considerato l'onnipotenza politica" di Maitland" (p. 148).

Moreover, the constitution not only gives all the powers to the British officer but establishes that the military forces depend on the British Crown. In addition, the lat-

ter reserves for itself the right to manage foreign relations on behalf of the Ionian State and to sign potential treaties with other powers both regarding and on behalf of the islands. Once again, the initiative is left to the high commissioner, who has the power to control practically every aspect of public life in the new state: “non c’era nessuna libertà in quel sistema che Maitland aveva introdotto con la nuova carta” (p. 150). The sources demonstrate that the Ionian State was just an English “invenzione coloniale” (p. 150), full of all the classical prejudices, confirming once more the “regola della differenza coloniale” (p. 122). Therefore, the return to the republic the inhabitants wished for not only does not come into existence with the English protectorate, but the United States of the Ionian Islands becomes an evident step backward from the previous Republic of the Seven United Islands and, consequently, from the elitist and vaguely *ancien régime*-flavored constitution of 1803. In conclusion, it is significant to note the presence in the appendix of the complete text of the “Costituzione degli Stati Uniti delle Isole Jonie col preambolo ed atto di ratificazione di Sua Altezza Reale il Principe Reggente apposti alla medesima.”

Rosa Maria Delli Quadri sheds light on a previously little-studied state entity. Emptying herself of a certain literature reverence regarding the English Mediterranean experience and supported by a wide and solid documentary base—both archival and historiographical—she analyzes thoroughly all the contradictions of such domination on a particular space. The Ionian Islands are, in fact, not only a point of great strategic importance for the British Mediterranean strategy, but, despite its effective independence, the first embryo of a Greek state. It is a state that will come to life with a separate path and to which the islands will unite only in 1864, once again under the sign of the British Crown, which will prefer to exchange possession of these seven Mediterranean islands for a stronger influence on the totality of the Greek state.

Note

[1]. Napoleon to the French Directory, August 16, 1797, in *Correspondance de Napoléon Ier, publiée par ordre de l'Empereur Napoléon III* (Paris: H. Plon, J. Dumaine, 1869), vol. 3, 235.

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