

The Cyprus Tribute and Geopolitics in the Levant, 1875-1960

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If the history of Cyprus pre-1974 remains a taboo -albeit one weakened with each passing year- the history of the early decades of British rule on the island remains hostage to this piecemeal approach observed in most engagements with Cypriot modern history. Even though there are few, but notable, exceptions the colonial history of Cyprus pre-1950 is heavily understudied. As indicated by the publishing years of the now classic works on this period,¹ there is clearly an urgent need today to revisit Cyprus' pre-independence history. Firstly, in order to benefit from the clarity gained by additional decades of distance between today and the early decades of the 20th century and, secondly, in order to use this clarity in further analysing the multilevel effects of 19th and 20th century imperialism and colonialism on Cyprus. Markides' book, which is the subject of the present review, achieves both of these objectives, not only with regard to Cyprus, but also in view of the history of the broader Eastern Mediterranean region; the Levant.

Even though the significance of the 'Cyprus Tribute', the revenue surplus payable to the Porte by the island's early British administration, is broadly recognised in the literature, the topic has usually been dealt with in a rather marginal manner within a broader context of events. This limited in-depth attention may be due to the highly technical and extensively specialised nature of the subject matter, since explaining and analysing the mechanics and the impact of the Cyprus Tribute requires an engagement with specialist terminology and a strong understanding of law and inter-

¹ Filios Zannetos F, *History of Cyprus Island: From the English Occupation until 1911 Vols 1-3* (*Ιστορία της Νήσου Κύπρου: Από της Αγγλικής Κατοχής μέχρι το 1911 Τόμος 1-3*) (First published 1910-1912, Nicosia: Epiphaniou 1997); George F. Hill, *A History of Cyprus Vols 1-4* (First published 1940-1952, Cambridge: CUP 2010); George S. Georghallides, *Cyprus and the Governorship of Sir Ronald Storrs: The Causes of the 1931 Crisis* (Nicosia: The Cyprus Research Centre 1985); George S. Georghallides, *A Political and Administrative History of Cyprus, 1918-1926: With a Survey of the Foundations of British Rule* (Nicosia: Cyprus Research Centre 1985); Rolandos Katsiaounis, *Labour, Society and Politics in Cyprus During the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century* (Nicosia: Cyprus Research Centre 1996).

national economics. As a result, the analysis can be ‘unfriendly’ to both researchers and readers. To the former because of the need to engage with detailed aspects of 150-year-old norms of what -in present terms- could be designated ‘International Economic Law’, and to the latter (especially readers who do not speak English as their first language) due to the need to navigate through a maze of technical terminology, multilateral and bilateral agreements, and a network of early international institutions from the second half of the 19th century onwards.

Despite the challenging task, Diana Markides has achieved to give us a detailed historical account which not only focuses on the Cyprus Tribute and its impact on the island, but most importantly (as indicated by the term ‘Geopolitics’ in the title of the book) also situates the relevance of the Cyprus Tribute in broader regional developments. The book looks at various historical junctures of major significance for the region, expanding from the Crimean War (1853-1856) and the Ottoman loan taken from Britain and France in 1855, to the apex of the period of decolonisation, in the early 1960s. Hence, it covers a period of 85 years. The book is undoubtedly, therefore, a significant addition to past authoritative accounts on the subject, all of which deal with a narrower chronological and geographical scope.

The monograph is divided into six chronologically-ordered chapters, supplemented by an Epilogue and eight Appendices, the majority of which reproduce a number of primary legal sources (Conventions and Statutes). As was the case with previous works by Diana Markides, the present book refers to an impressive range of archival materials, as well as rare secondary sources published in the first half of the 20th century. In addition, instead of a single lengthy bibliography at the end of the book, each chapter lists a separate short bibliography, which is especially helpful for those researching a specific chronological period.

Chapter 1 (1875-1878), sets the scene by illustrating the linkages between the Crimean War and the loan taken by the Ottoman Empire from France and Britain, juxtaposed with the economic, political and geostrategic priorities of the French and the British in the Levant in the second half of the 19th century. It therefore uncovers for the reader the deeper issues leading Britain to obtain the administration of the island in 1878, challenging the ‘oversimplified perceptions’ (p. viii) which usually dictate the narratives on the early days of British rule in Cyprus. One such example is Markides’ detailed illustration of how the British, before settling for Cyprus, had considered the possibility of expanding control over Western Asia through the port

cities of Alexandretta or Smyrna. A witness to the contingency of historical events, and a factor which is often overlooked in mainstream Cypriot historiography.

Chapter 2 (1878-1883) turns to the negotiations between Britain and the Ottomans regarding the exact amount to be annually paid as Tribute. The analysis does not omit to bring into perspective the relevance of other tributes in the region, such as Egypt and the Bulgarian territories at the time, also considering the conflicting politico-military interests in the Mediterranean, and the numerous macro- and micro-economic factors which impacted British policy. The chapter is also illustrative of how the high revenue figures and estimations regarding Cyprus were misleading, as a result of lack of any investment in the local infrastructure of the island during the last century of Ottoman rule. An issue which also had a direct adverse impact on the welfare of the local population well into the first half of the 20th century.

The weak financial condition of the island and the dilemmas this brought for its British administration and the British government in London, are further elaborated upon in Chapter 3 (1884-1900). The chapter is especially enlightening when it comes to explaining the economic factors behind the dire living conditions of the Cypriot population at the turn of the century, which further deteriorated due to the additional taxation towards the payment of the Tribute. In this chapter Markides skilfully oscillates between local politics, including the earliest antagonism between Cyprus' Christian Orthodox and Muslim communities at the newly-established Legislative Council, and the priorities of the British government in London, which was concerned with the potentiality of British taxpayers being burdened with the repayment of the Tribute, instead.

In Chapter 4 (1900-1925) Markides elaborates how during the First World War (WWI) the Treasury kept collecting Tribute contributions, even though the repayment of the 1855 loan was no longer necessary. Once again, this development is situated within a broader geographical context, with references to the other remaining tribute at the time, the one in Egypt. The analysis shows how, in both cases, the tributes became a point of internal political contestation, and yet, during the signing of the Treaty of Lausanne, contrary to Egypt, the issue of the Cyprus Tribute remained unaddressed. Of particular interest was also the discussion of the relevance of the international law doctrine of State Succession, which was used during negotiations to contest the allocation of responsibility for the bonds under the 1855 loan, indicating the longterm direct link and effect of financial agreements between States, and the use of public international law as a negotiating tool in such instances.

Chapter 5 (1924-1931), is perhaps the least innovative of the book, since it deals with the well-studied years surrounding the abolition of the tribute in 1927, up to

the *Oktovriana* revolt of 1931. Here, too, however, Markides does not only deal with the known synergies and rivalries among the Greek and the Turkish Cypriot representatives in the Legislative Council. She takes a step further by illustrating the tensions between the British administration in Cyprus and the government in London, in the former's efforts to exercise pressure for the Tribute's abolition. Hence, the book initiates a new dimension that is rarely acknowledged in literature on colonialism. Namely, the internal disagreements between the British government in London and the governors of the colonial territories, contradicting narratives which usually take a more uniform approach in describing the colonial policy of the colonising powers.

The same multidimensional approach is maintained in the next chapter. It is known that dissatisfaction with the handling of the Tribute by the British was a catalyst for the 1931 *Oktovriana* revolt, and it is also known that the revolt was followed by the oppressive decade of Governor Palmer's rule. Chapter 6 (1931-1945) sheds more intensive light on the years following the *Oktovriana*, with a particular focus on the efforts of the British to reform and improve the welfare and the local infrastructure. Palmer is not portrayed solely as the dictatorial governor he is so often described as. Instead, he is also illustrated as a reformer, who wanted to increase foreign investment and establish a naval base in Famagusta, in an effort to make up for the revenue taken away from the local population under the pretext of the Tribute in the previous decades. Though potentially controversial, there is no doubt that this approach opens another previously neglected aspect of the island's colonial history, by shifting the focus away from the nationalisms of the two dominant ethnoreligious communities, and onto the priorities, actions and omissions of the colonial administration and the British government during the *Palmerokratia*. In parallel, the book continues to link local developments with broader imperial considerations in the Aegean, Egypt, and Palestine.

The substantive chapters are brought in line with the more recent history of the island in the Epilogue, which brings into the picture developments from the 1950s and 1960s. Therein, Markides shares extensive information and concrete figures on plans for reform and military spending in Cyprus at the time, including a plan for an air base in the Mesaoria plain, and a naval harbour in Famagusta (p. 215). Projects through which the British hoped to keep the local population in control, and which, had they been implemented, would have changed completely the face of the territory of the island as we know and experience it today. During the 'troubled' 1950s and 1960s, internally the Tribute was not an issue any more, even though it briefly resurfaced as part of the 1956 Radcliffe proposals for the island's governance (p. 217).

It is impressive, however, that the issue did maintain ‘an ethereal and sometimes troubling presence’ (ibid.) for British governments, even after the establishment of the Republic of Cyprus in 1960, since it was not sooner than 1970 that the Treasury destroyed the last redeemed bonds of the 1855 loan (p. 226), burying the last traces of a chapter that had opened more than a century earlier.

Considering the breadth of the chronology and scope of issues addressed in the book under review, there is no doubt that the book would be of interest to anyone studying the politicoeconomic developments in the ‘Levant’ at the turn of the 20th century, regardless of disciplinary background. As an international lawyer, I found the book to be particularly informative on the financial and strategic machinations that impacted the last decades of Empire. The book is compatible with the ‘historical turn’ experienced in international legal research over the last two decades, some of which focuses in particular on the linkages between colonialism, international economic policy, and the impact the latter has to this day.² In that regard, I would be particularly keen to recommend the book to anyone researching colonial (pre-WWII) economic policy.

Even though at times the book could have taken a more critical position vis-à-vis the numerous actors the book engages with, Markides has written yet another well-researched, highly informative and exceptionally detailed historical account. The book’s broader geographical scope, which from my perspective constitutes its most significant innovation, offers important contributions to the interdisciplinary dialogues that need to take place if we are to improve our understanding of the subtle (often overlooked) connections that keep linking together the peoples of ‘the Levant’. Written a whole century after the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, and an even longer time since the Crimean War - two definitive historical events for the territories expanding from the Black Sea, to the Balkans, and the Eastern Mediterranean - the book is especially timely given the renewed levels of uncertainty across these regions, at the time of writing.

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² Antony Anghie, *Imperialism, Sovereignty and the Making of International Law* (Cambridge: CUP 2005); Sundhya Pahuja, *Decolonising International Law: Development, Economic Growth and the Politics of Universality* (CUP 2011).