

The sponge fishing activity and community of the island of Kalymnos
by Evdokia Olympitou¹

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ABSTRACT: The ethnographer Evdokia Olympitou (1962-2011) was an Assistant Professor in the Department of History of Ionian University. Her book, entitled *Σπογγαλιευτική δραστηριότητα και κοινωνική συγκρότηση στο νησί της Καλύμνου (19ος - 20ός αι.)*, [“Sponge fishing activity and social formation of the island of Kalymnos (19th – 20th century)”], published in 2014 by the National Hellenic Research Foundation (in Greek) on the sponge fishing activity and maritime community of the island of Kalymnos is by far the best study written on the subject, combining both ethnography and history.

The aim of this paper is to present and discuss her methodology and analysis, which I consider important not only for sponge fishing but also for the examination of given Greek island maritime communities. The study evolves around seven axes. Olympitou sets the framework of the administrative environment of Kalymnos during the 19th and 20th centuries, under Ottoman, Italian and Greek rule, providing social analysis of the new town of Pothia in a comparative perspective. She analyses sponge fishing as a principal industrial activity of the island; the techniques of fishing; the boats; the shipowners, traders, sponge divers and seamen; and the fishing fields and sea routes, in a quantitative and qualitative way. She provides the history of sponge fishing technology and the effects that modernisation had, as regards the prosperity of the island. She analyses how the maritime community dealt with risk at sea, and puts the exaggerated divers’ problems in a wider perspective. She makes an inspired analysis of the women of Kalymnos, “women hard like men”. And she explores the perception of sponge fishing in art, literature and movies.

Evdokia Olympitou (1962-2011), known to her friends and colleagues as Evi, was an ethnographer, and an Assistant Professor in the Department of History of Ionian University. She was a talented scholar, an inspiring teacher and a beloved colleague. I shared a weekly seminar with her in the spring semester of the academic year 2010-11, called “Greek maritime communities”, in which we enjoyed very creative teaching, discussion, and feedback from our students. It was a sheer pleasure to discuss academically with her, and we found that we had many interests in common. Among those was our common interest in maritime communities and her new book on sponge fishing which she had almost finished. We had the seminar every Wednesday. She did not appear for the class on Wednesday 11 May 2011. She had died peacefully during her sleep at the age of 49, from heart attack.²

Her book, almost done, was completed by her husband and a group of her friends. They tried to intervene as little as possible, restructuring some parts and putting final touches in line with her notes. It was published in 2014 by the National Hellenic Research Foundation in Greek with the title *Sponge Fishing Activity and social construction on the island of Kalymnos (19th-20th centuries)*.³ I consider this by far the best book ever written on sponge fishing activity of any Aegean island, and the best study written on

the subject for any island maritime community in the Aegean, combining both ethnography and history. The aim of this paper is to present and discuss her methodology and analysis, which I consider important not only for sponge fishing but also for the examination of a Greek island maritime community.

With this book Evi Olympitou achieved three important goals. Firstly, she was able to combine successfully the two disciplines among which she had developed her academic career, history and ethnology. She often posed the question to herself: History or Ethnology. In this book, she managed both: History and Ethnology. Both are interwoven beautifully in her narrative. A narrative based on the tools of history. On the one hand, in a meticulous research at the archives of the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in other Greek private archives, in the Municipal and Port Authorities Archives of Kalymnos, along with the local, Athenian and Dodecanesian contemporary press. On the other hand, she used the tools of ethnology and its methodology, in tracing the mentality, the customs, the professional practices and techniques, by means of interviews and personal testimonies, all of course combined with the existing bibliography. Her second achievement was to write the first academic monograph on Greek fishing, and in this way her book is a major contribution to the Greek and Mediterranean Maritime History. Many a time when one writes a book, one does not realise its importance and its impact not only in one discipline but also in other disciplines. Olympitou managed to write a wonderful book on Maritime History, an accomplishment that was beyond her goals.

Maritime History

But let me give my own perspective. Some of you may know that I am a maritime historian. Maritime History is the study of history of the relation of human beings and the sea. The Dutch-Australian historian Frank Broeze, who is considered one of the patriarchs of Maritime History worldwide, in a classic article in 1989 entitled “From the Periphery to the Mainstream: The Challenge of Australia’s Maritime History”, gave the classic definition of Maritime History, mapping its conceptual framework, based on the different ways in which peoples exploit the sea and what the sea offers them.⁴ The first category is the use of the resources of the sea and its subsoil; it includes fishing industries, economic and social life of local communities. The second category is the use of the sea for transport; namely the sea as a means of communication, of carrying people and cargoes, of the development of ports and port cities for the development of the hinterland. This category is usually the largest in maritime history and includes sea-trade, ships, navigation, seafarers, island communities, port cities, shipowners/shipping companies and shipping institutions (insurance, banking, international registers, etc.). The third category is the use of the sea for power projection; this focuses on commerce-raiding, corsairing/piracy, naval power, strategy and technology, government policies. The fourth category is the use of the sea for scientific exploration; this includes oceanography and climatology, and current policies of governments regarding marine science and technology in a historical perspective. The fifth category is the use of the sea for leisure activities; this views, in a historical perspective, the seacoast as a regenerative environment, a place for recreation, swimming, surfing and yachting. And the sixth and last category is the use of the sea as an inspiration in culture and ideology; this includes the role of the sea in visual arts and literature, and the sea in the self-vision of a nation.

In this paper I shall deal with the first category of Maritime History. The first category – the use of maritime resources – includes mainly the fishing industry and the maritime communities involved in this activity. Apart from being an integral part of the economic and social lives of local societies and states, fishing has also raised issues of

international relations among nations. “The importance of fishing today,” Broeze wrote in 1989 from his university in Perth, Australia, “reminds us of intense political issues such as the position of traditional Indonesian fishermen in the waters of Western Australia, the Russian access to fishing vessels in Australian ports, Japanese investments in the fish processing industry in our industry, and so on.” The history of fishing through the development of maritime and environmental history has seen a significant development in the international academic world. In northern Europe, the North Atlantic Fisheries History Association leads the way with a biannual international conference and a large number of articles, chapters in books and monographs on fishing and fishing activities. From the beginning of the first decade of 21st century, a number of impressive research programmes in all seas and oceans took place titled “History of Marine Animal Population and Fisheries”, involving interdisciplinary approaches to the research and dynamics of the maritime ecosystems. Evi Olympitou and the historian Dimitris Dimitropoulos took part in an equivalent programme directed by the University of Haifa and the University of Southern Denmark. Both of them have provided Greek historiography with unique studies on fishing, and an edited volume on *Fishing in the Greek Seas*.⁵

The ethnological/anthropological dimension is very important in the analysis of the social history of fishing communities where centuries-long traditions and rituals in the local societies have survived to the present day whether in the Indian Ocean or in the Mediterranean. Broeze has pointed out the necessity of marrying history and anthropology to the study of fishing communities. In this respect, the contribution of Olympitou to the development of Maritime History in terms of the use of human resources in the Greek and Mediterranean fisheries is highly significant. What is not so well-known is that the impact of the know-how of sponge fishing activities of Kalymnos and the wider Dodecanese affected not only the southeastern Aegean but also the eastern Mediterranean. They also influenced the seas of Western Australia in the Indian Ocean, and the seas in the southeast of North America, the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean, as will be indicated later.

My interest in sponge fishing began in 1996, before I met Evi, and came from another Australian, Professor Malcolm Tull from Murdoch Business School, Western Australia. We were at the International Maritime History Conference at the University of Liverpool in 1992, and Tull pointed out to me the fishing activities of the Greeks, originating from the small Greek island of Castellorizo, in Australia. As he told me then, “we have at least 10,000 Greeks from this island in Perth and Freemantle.”⁶ As Greeks were excellent sponge divers in the eastern Mediterranean, in Australia they became among the best pearl divers. Some of the Greek families – people such as the Paspala brothers – developed tremendous pearl fishing activities and became among Australia’s largest pearl fishing businessmen and traders. Others acquired virtually a monopoly over fishing and fish products in Australia. In Australia presently, for example, there are three different companies run by Kailis brothers.⁷

This discussion triggered great interest to me, and I began to look for material about Kastellorizo and sponges. It was in that period that I fatefully “met” the Dodecanesians and the Kalymnians. However, in the 1990s there was very little relevant literature. When Malcolm Tull and Frank Broeze organised a conference entitled “Maritime History beyond 2000: Visions of Sea and Shore” in Freemantle in December 2001, I presented, together with Maria-Christina Chatziioannou, a paper entitled “Transplanting maritime traditions: from the Aegean islands to Western Australia”, containing what little evidence we could find on sponge fishing in the Aegean. What became clear to me at that stage was the need for new archival research on fishing and sponge fishing in the eastern Mediterranean. So you can understand my enthusiasm

when. at Ionian University in 2003, I met my new colleague Evi Olympitou, who told me that she was thinking of writing a book on sponge fishing.

One chapter missing from Evi's book, because she did not manage to complete it, is the global dimension of the activities of Kalymnian sponge divers and merchants. She refers in her book, and more than once, to the establishment of the sponge fishing community at the other side of the Atlantic, the “little Kalymnos”, in Tarpon Springs, Florida in the early 20th century. There the Kalymnian “engineers”, as the divers with diving suits and helmets were called by the Greeks, swept the fishing grounds of the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean seas. Their intensive fishing activities destroyed the local traditional sponge-fishing communities, such as those of the Bahamas.⁸

The Kalymnians immigrated not only to the United States, bringing their sponge fishing skills to their new home country, but also to the Black Sea. For the first colonies of Kalymnians in Odessa and more widely to Southern Russia during the 19th century, Evi Olympitou was to carry out extensive research within the framework of the Black Sea project which I had submitted to the Greek Ministry of Education as a coordinator. It was the greatest irony that I learned the approval of this big project on the day of her death. I called her to tell her the news, as I knew it would enthuse her; a phone call she could not answer.⁹

The third achievement that Evi accomplished with this book was to give us a model for analysis of the maritime communities of the Aegean and the Ionian seas. Her book solves important issues of methodology. Let me explain. Up until now, economic and social studies of islands have usually used the sea simply as a backdrop, a scenery. There is no study that analyses the interaction of human beings and the sea, the activities of an island population that survives from economic activities related to the sea. A study that provides the political, institutional, technological and economic developments from these activities and outlines the social impact of the above on the island society. And all of that written within the wider context of a maritime space that simultaneously reflects its dynamics through the mobility, the attraction and the dispersal of its population in different directions. In the Aegean and the Ionian seas, there are some 6,000 islands, islets and rocky islets. Of these islands 120 are inhabited, and of these at least forty owed their growth and prosperity to fishing and shipping. One of my own research questions, which I had discussed with Evi, was how to find a methodology for approaching island maritime communities. The uniqueness of the maritime communities is that they had all developed their own cultures. Cultures that were crucial to the longevity and success of their businesses, whether in the island or beyond. Her analysis of the maritime community of Kalymnos evolves around seven axes.

Axes of analysis

The **first** axis is the delineation of a framework. Usually an analysis of the social economic or cultural activities of a given island is confined the particular island, as if it did not belong to a wider area or political and social entity. Olympitou has a superb first chapter where she sets Kalymnos within the framework of the political, social and economic frame of the Aegean, its institutional framework and its moving boundaries. She then focuses on the overall effects on the island of the development of the sponge fishing activities that expanded in the context of an industrialising western Europe. She tells us here that the “fruits of Kalymnos” do not come from the land but from the sea. In order to analyse the island she maps the administrative and institutional environment of Kalymnos, which up to 1910s belonged to the Ottoman Empire, then until 1947 to Italy, and since that time to Greece.

She examines the self administrative practices that developed on the island, and then its demographic growth and population movement. Pothia was a new city in Kalymnos, that grew entirely from the sponge fishing activity to become a large (by Aegean standards) city of 20,000 people by the end of the 19th century. Olympitou analyses the organisation and evolution of the urban space and the formation of the urban landscape, and she provides a comparative perspective by looking at the cities and towns of the other islands in the same maritime region, such as those of Symi or Chalki. She also follows the creation and formation of the port infrastructure as it developed in line with the needs of the professional sponge fishing sector.

She then goes on to provide a concise and overarching view of sponge fishing as an economic activity: (a) its geographical expansion; (b) quantitative analysis of the production through time; (c) its size and its importance in the Mediterranean, in the Aegean and in the Greek economy. In this way Olympitou is able to provide a comparative dimension of Greek sponge fishing on a national and Mediterranean basis. Here we learn that in the mid-20th century Greek sponge fishing represented 83% of global Mediterranean sponge production, and two thirds of this figure was from Kalymnos. And of course she refers to the dimension of immigration and later the growth of tourism. Thus the reader is provided with a full picture of what happened in the island, and around it, and in the wider maritime space that it belonged to, during the 19th and 20th centuries before then moving to the next chapters for more in-depth analysis.

The **second** axis that Olympitou develops is that of the sponge fishing industry. She integrates the fishing activities within the maritime regions that various states had under their jurisdiction, where they controlled and demanded taxes from the sponge fishing boats. “The depths of the sea,” Olympitou writes, “were regarded as submarine mines whose exploitation was owned by the states.” Italy, France, Turkey but also Great Britain in the Bahamas, did not accept the setting of their territorial waters at three miles from their coastlines but they imposed their control in all the maritime regions where sponge divers worked.¹⁰ She analyses the techniques, the evolution of the technology in the fishing practices, the knowhow, the scale of production, the distribution, which means the sponge trade and sponge merchants, the problems of exports, the taxes, the income, the expenditure, the debts, the capital. The institutional framework of the sponge businesses and their organisation, the rules and regulations, can very easily be compared with those of Hydra at the peak of her merchant shipping prosperity before the Greek revolution, under the Ottoman Empire. In writing this chapter Olympitou has written an excellent economic history, although she would not have liked me saying that.

The **third** axis regards the actual sponge fishing business. There is also a quantitative and qualitative analysis of sponge fishing: size of fleet, number of crews, labour relations, wages, remuneration, loans. Here Olympitou describes the growth of a multifaceted business culture that is formed in the island. “The business culture of the Dodecanesian sponge merchants,” she writes, “is similar to other shipowners of the time. Many of the sponge fishing businesses were family businesses. Sons, brothers, nephews participated in the same business, often dividing the responsibilities and the area of sponge fishing activities between the Dodecanese and abroad.”¹¹

Greeks had developed a very important entrepreneurial diaspora in grain trade and shipping from the eastern Mediterranean and the Black Sea to the West. Olympitou integrates the sponge trade activity within this existing entrepreneurial network. She writes: “Starting from Trieste, Odessa, Kiev and St. Petersburg, the sponge merchants

from Kalymnos established their own commercial networks only to expand to Livorno, Vienna, Brussels, Amsterdam, Leipzig, Frankfurt, Madrid, Munich, Moscow and Piraeus. Many will choose London, the largest sponge market in the world. There the sponge trading house of the Kalymnian Nikolaos Vouvalis was formed in 1882 and functioned up to 1985. At the same time, the mobility, trade-induced mobility and sponge fishing led, at the beginning of the 20th century, to the creation of diaspora sponge-based commercial communities, such as those at Sfax in Tunis and Tarpon Springs in Florida, United States. Here the creation of commercial companies followed the installation of sponge divers in the Tunisian seas and the Gulf of Mexico.”¹²

The **fourth** axis that Olympitou develops is the actual fishing of sponges and the change with the introduction of technology. This is a decisive chapter where she makes clear that Kalymnos did not lose the battle with technology and international developments; the island's sponge businesses adapted to the changes of the modern age and ultimately gained in prosperity. One could easily compare the adaptation of modern technology in sponge fishing with the adaptation of the modern technology in the shipping industry and the transition from sailing to steamships, also expressed in the abandonment of the traditional introversion and cohesion of the Aegean islands. The battle for the new technology was won by Kalymnos, like Andros, Ithaca or Kefalonia, a battle that was lost in other traditional maritime centres, such as Galaxidi, that were not able to make the transition from sail to steam.

The handling of the subject here by Olympitou is excellent. She analyses the "sponge fishing issue" in all its dimensions. Impressive was the intervention of the local government and the state, the Ottoman and the Greek authorities for the use of diving suits with the helmet (the "*skafandro*"), and all those who fought it furiously. We learn that the use of the *skafandro* and the diving suit was forbidden by both Ottoman and Greek legislation for at least forty years. During those years it was fully used by the Kalymnians, as Olympitou reveals: "it seems that from all the noise of the 'sponge fishing issue' the other side is missing. The point of view of those who understood the necessity of modernisation and the benefits that this brought even if there was reaction from those who tried to adapt. It seems, however, that the protests were louder than the silence of those who already measured profits and expanded their operations abroad."¹³ So one is skeptical about the enthusiasm and dedication of the Lithuanian professor of classics Karolos Flegel, established in the 1890s in Kalymnos, who fought for the abolition of the *skafandro* and the diving suits. Perhaps if it was not for him the issue would not have taken such a dimension, and maybe the Kalymnians would not have wanted such negative publicity of their profession.

And here comes the **fifth** axis of the analysis. How the maritime communities handled the dangers of the sea. Olympitou does not overstate the drama of the divers that were paralysed, the victims of sponge fishing from divers' disease, but, on the contrary, puts it in its proper dimension. She tries to measure with whatever evidence she has: between 1957 and 1965, for example, the annual losses of divers ranged between 4-7%. As the well-known Greek historian Vassilis Panagiotopoulos rightly points out in the preface to the book, "the painful losses were something acceptable, something like the acceptance of danger in the societies of the warriors."¹⁴ The battle with danger creates the legend about the spirit of sponge divers and, as she writes, heroism has to do with the need for survival. Maritime communities learn how to face death and mourn their victims silently within the community. Olympitou analyses in a penetrating and objective way the so-called "Black Book of sponge fishing" identifying the problems of the ignorance of the disease of the divers and the exaggeration of the informants as regards exploitation by the captains.

The **sixth** axis of the analysis of the maritime community of Kalymnos relates to social stratification on the island and social relations. Sponge, despite all the dangers brought wealth. “Lenders, investors, captains and sponsors were mainly those who formed a dynamic group,” writes Olympitou, “which has expanded the boundaries of its activities, improved the material conditions of its life while adopting ‘innovative’ attitudes, new mentalities and consumer habits”.¹⁵ Even the distribution of the population in the area was relatively clear. The group of *nouveau riche* families built splendid two-storey houses in a neoclassical architectural style on the flat part of Pothia just behind the harbour, while the popular neighbourhoods where the captains, sponge divers and seamen lived lay in the surrounding slopes of the hills. Occupational activity determined the social hierarchy in seafaring communities, whether fishing or shipping.

The other important dimension of the maritime communities is women. “Special women, distinct, hard as men,” she writes.¹⁶ Here Evi speaks with much more passion than she had allowed herself in the previous chapters about “this peculiar world of sponge divers, much harder than that of seafarers”.¹⁷ Any analysis of maritime communities without an analysis of women’s living conditions and the grid of values surrounding the local community would be inadequate. Had she lived, she would have analysed it in greater depth.

The **seventh** axis of her book is devoted to another fascinating and under-researched subject: the representation of sponge fishing and island communities in art, literature, and cinema.

Conclusion

So, to summarise, with this book on sponge fishing of the island of Kalymnos Evi Olympitou manages to provide a sound methodology for how to analyse a community that lives on, and depends on, its relation to the sea. She gives insights as to how this relation sculpts the relations on land, both in the island and beyond it.

NOTES

1. This paper is based on Gelina Harlaftis “Από την σπογγαλιεία στις θαλασσινές κοινότητες” [From Sponge Fishing to Maritime Communities], a tribute to the book of Evi Olympitou, *Sponge Fishing Activity and Social Formation of the Island of Kalymnos, Ta Istorika*, vol. 62, June 2015.

2. Evdokia Olympitou was born in Kavala in 1962 and died in Corfu in 2011. She studied at the School of Philosophy of the University of Athens, where she completed her PhD thesis on ethnography and folklore studies with the title “The organisation of space on the Island of Patmos (16th-19th centuries)”. From 1994 to 2003 she collaborated with the Centre for Neohellenic Research of the National Hellenic Research Foundation, and as from 1998 she participated as an academic collaborator in the program “Historical Research of the Settlements of Greece (15th-20th centuries)”. From 2003 she was an assistant professor of Ethnology at the Department of History of the Ionian University. Her main research interests were in material culture and pre-industrial productive activities. She also studied issues related to the organisation and use of living space and countryside in early and modern societies, combining sources from historical archival material and fieldwork research.

She published a large number of articles and books. Her books include *Ψαρεύοντας στις ελληνικές θάλασσες. Από τις μαρτυρίες του παρελθόντος στη σύγχρονη πραγματικότητα* [Fishing in Greek Seas. From the Testimonies of the Past to the Contemporary Reality] (in collaboration with Dimitris Dimitropoulos), *Tetradia Ergasias* 33, Institute of Neohellenic

Research/National Research Foundation, Athens 2010; Μπουμπουλίνα, Καίρη, Μανρογένους. *Οι γυναίκες του Αγώνα* [Bouboulina, Kairi, Mavrogenous. The Women of Greek War of Independence], Athens 2010; *Άνθρωποι και παραδοσιακά επαγγέλματα σε νησιά του Αιγαίου* [People and Traditional Professions in the Aegean Islands], (in collaboration with K. Korres Zografou), Athens 2003; *Το Αρχείο του Κεντρικού Συμβουλίου της ΕΠΟΝ. Συλλογή Αρχείων Σύγχρονης κοινωνικής Ιστορίας. Κατάλογοι και Ευρετήρια* [The Archive of the Central Council of EPON. Collection of Archives of Contemporary Social History. Catalogues and Indices], (in collaboration with D. Dimitropoulos), Athens 2000.

Her last book was published three years after her death and is titled *Σπογγαλιευτική δραστηριότητα και κοινωνική συγκρότηση στο νησί της Καλύμνου (19ος - 20ός αι.)* [Sponge Fishing Activity and Social Formation of the Island of Kalymnos], Institute of Historical Research-Department of Neohellenic Research/ National Research Institute, Athens 2014.

3. Evdokia Olympitou, *Σπογγαλιευτική δραστηριότητα και κοινωνική συγκρότηση στο νησί της Καλύμνου (19ος - 20ός αι.)* [Sponge Fishing Activity and Social Formation of the Island of Kalymnos], Institute of Historical Research-Department of Neohellenic Research/ National Research Institute, Athens 2014.

4. Frank Broeze, "From the Periphery to the Mainstream: The Challenge of Australia's Maritime History", vol. 11, no.1, 1989, *The Great Circle*, Journal of the Australian Association for Maritime History.

5. Dimitropoulos and Olympitou, *Fishing in Greek Seas. From the Testimonies of the Past*.

6. For Castellorizians in Australia see John N. Yiannakis, *Western Australia's Castellorizian Connection. The First 100 years, 1912-2012. A Commemorative History of the Castellorizian Association of Western Australia*, Writing Life Australia 2, Perth 2012.

7. H. Gilchrist, *Australians and Greeks*, volumes I-III, Hallstead Press, Rushcutters Bay, 1992-2004.

8. Loren McClenachan, "Social Conflict, Overfishing and Disease", in Poul Holm and David J. Starkey, *Oceans Past. Management Insights from the History of Marine Animal Population*, Routledge, London 2008, pp. 25-46.

9. Regarding the Black Sea project, see www.blacksea.gr.

10. Olympitou, *Sponge Fishing Activity*, p. 157.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 139.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 131.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 218.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 337.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 343.

17. *Ibid.*