

APPENDIX 2

On the sponge industry of Hydra [endless pain upon pain...]

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[Translated from *Hydra, Nisos enteles dryopon*, Ekdosi Dimou Hydraiōn, Hydra, 1998]

I would have liked to write a full history of the sponge fishing industry of Hydra, which would have been a reflection on Greek culture in its entirety. However I do not have the time, and the sources are very few, and are scattered and hard to find. I inquired from the mayors of Kalymnos and Symi, asking them what they had, but unfortunately they did not vouchsafe me a reply. However I do have a few historical elements to offer. These I owe to close family relations, since – like most of the families of Hydra – I come from a sponge-fishing family.

A brief history of Hydra shipping

The Hydriot ships, the large ships of the Greek Revolution, the war ships, were mainly grain-carrying cargo ships. The elements of their early days and their subsequent development are well documented.¹ Starting with small *trechantiris*, over a period of 30-40 years they developed into *karavosaites*. The shipowners – captains – also became furnishers, or *karavokyrioi* as they were called, in other words shipowners and traders. Trading on their own account. From here, also the *beriketia*. Naturally the Napoleonic wars also played a part, with Nelson's blockade and the breaking of it (by the Hydriots, mainly).

They were heavily and appropriately armed, and that with the permission of the [Ottoman] Sublime Porte, because of fear of pirates. On board the *moulochta* the 4 cannons became 16, and then, gradually, 20 or 24. There was also economic gain from the pirates. Let us not hide the facts: piracy brought much profit to Hydra.

So that is the “secret” of how the trading ships, in the run-up to March 1821, were found at the end of that month turned into actual war ships, fully armed and with crews skilled in the art of war.

Yes, they were small, far smaller than the Turkish warships. The “*delinī*” ships [*de ligne*, a ship of the line] like the Turkish flagship *Bourlota Samaizi* (“The Terror of the Bourlatis”), which Kanaris blew up in Chios (with Pipinos attacking the sub-flagship next to it), were huge vessels, with crews of 1,200-1,500 men and complements of 1,000-1,500 soldiers. They carried stores, food supplies and artillery. The *tsechpanes* or gunpowder store was located in the inner part of the ship, and connected to the deck via small holes just large enough for boys to pass through as they brought the gunpowder up to the deck. The use of larger holes was avoided, in case enemy shot managed to enter and cause an explosion.

However the size of the Greek ships – they were much smaller in comparison – also offered a great advantage. It made them easier to handle. Particularly in naval battles, when, in order to fire the cannons on the other side, ships would have needed to make a full turn, because the cannons were non-moveable.

Imagine how many manoeuvres with sail and rudder were required to turn around a ship of the line, whereas the Greek ships, being light and nimble, with plenty of sail, turned around very quickly, could gain the upper hand, even with a little wind, and had a clear advantage over the slow moving ships of the line.

When the Revolution finished with the Battle of Navarino – which would have finished at most around 1825-6 – very few ships were left in a good condition – and once again the old work restarted. Cargo, trading, but now without great opportunities. And to be honest, the maritime crisis had already begun in 1818. So there was poverty in Hydra, in the midst of the triumph of victory, in which she had played such a big part.

By the time of the Russian-Turkish war of 1878-8, the Greek – and naturally the Hydriot – maritime industry collapsed. No buying of ships, unemployment, poverty. This was the beginning of the collapse of the former trading (and post-war once again trading) power of the island.

Development of the sponge industry

Then came the sponge industry. I do not have precise historical details, and I do not write fairy stories. The only certain element is that it was the islands of the Dodecanese that showed the way, particularly with Hydriot ships that were travelling as far as the [North African] shores of Cyrenaica, Greater Sirte, Tripoli and Benghazi.

From there where they were moored (fully armed) in two rows in Hydra harbour and in Mandraki, and to a lesser degree on the Mole, opposite the mainland, there was created the sponge fishing fleet. The very big ships – which were old and in a bad state – disappeared. Now new ships were built – small sponge fishing boats – at first driven by sail and later with engines. And the larger mother ships, the “*tepozita*” (depot ships), filled the harbour in its entirety. They say that you could walk from kaiki to kaiki all the way from the Grand Casino (today the Merchant Bank) to the rocks, and from Nega (later Nevrouzou) to the yards below Francesco Boulgari (later to be the head of the Oikonomou family).

These boats had diving equipment (*skafandra*), and there were also *gangáves* and a few spear-fishing boats, and a very small number with naked divers, sometimes Hydriots, but also men from Symi and Kalymnos.

The years of prosperity were around 1880, and we can state that the sponges effectively revived us, because for about half a century they brought wealth to our island.

Doctor Thodoros A. Sachtouris writes as follows:

“Then the sponge industry began to grow. It raised hopes that Hydra, would once again find its road, from out of the depths of the sea, towards a new prosperity.

Whole fleets, with their machinery [diving suits and air pumps], with *gagáves*, with divers, with *kamákia*, set off from Hydra, blessed by the icon of the Madonna of the Monastery, with flags flying, bells ringing, and with the sound of cannons.

On the sponge industry of Hydra

And when they returned they were similarly welcomed with bells and cannon fire, and they brought large quantities of sponges, which were sold at good prices. Money flowed, the taxes arrived at 24%, and Hydra residents began to move to Athens and Piraeus. People from Kalymnos and Symi came and lived in Hydra. The abandoned and half ruined houses were restored, and were inhabited again, and were lived in by well-off residents. The trading shops were back in business, and the selling of wine, the most fortunate being the taverna of the widow above, and the taverna of the widow below, honour be to them. Gunfire rang out day and night all over the island. Violin players were welcomed, and hundred drachma notes would be stuck to their foreheads, and in their enthusiasm the assembled public even knocked out the bungs of the barrels for the wine to pour.

Marriages, engagements, births, baptisms were announced with ringing of the church bells where the *koumbáris* was resident. Everybody believed that the work of sponge fishing would carry on, and the island would continue in relative prosperity, and the out-migration would cease...”

So, first, the question of the sponges themselves. We have an account from the study made by N. Tsenebi, at the time a lieutenant-commander in the navy and harbour master in the harbour of Greater Sirte in 1937-38 . He catalogues the definitions of sponges according to their usage:

From the commodity classification point of view:

1. The large sponges known as *kaládhika*, for the care of horse and motor cars;
2. The large bathroom sponge, for care of the body, similar in size and quality. These divided into “fine” sponges (round or oval), and “irregular”;
3. The smaller ones, soft sponges for use on the face. Quality sponges. In Hydra we call them “*meláta*”;
4. The *lagofyta* or *lafines*, rather irregular shaped;
5. The *tsimouches*, which are stiffer, and are used in Germany and Czechoslovakia in factory processes. In Hydra they are used for mopping;
6. The *skárta*, small and irregular, for washing windows and used by painters;
7. The *spongénia*, small with small holes, soft, for medical use and for using on leather, and particularly on shoes;
8. The *psallidhiés* (“offcuts”), for greasing wheels and oiling;

As children, when the underground warehouse at the Verveniotis factory was full, we used to dive into the sponges, and played with great enjoyment among the offcuts, which kept their characteristic smell – the scent of the sea. We enjoyed the smell of the sea and the gentle touch of those sponges.

The old sponge warehouse is now the Bratsera Hotel, run by Christina Nevrou, the granddaughter of Panos N. Verveniotis, and, by the way, the best hotel on the island. It had a wonderful collection of sponges. My granddaughter tells me that it is still there,

but not as good as the old collection. All kinds of sponges, with their strange and wonderful shapes, their different usages and qualities. We also had a small collection in our ancestral home in Hydra. We still have about fifteen pieces.

In passing I note that there are also other terms for the classification of sponges – the grand, the large, the first, the second, the third and the fourth. And also the in-between category of second-third. The extra special quality ones are called *fórmes*. Did you know that? Now we have learned it, given that once upon a time we were a sponge-fishing island.

I should mention that the “harvest” consisted not only of sponges. Sometimes, with a bit of luck, expeditions would return with gold and silver coins and ancient objects. A secret trade was established, and old sponge-fishing families often had “mementos” of this kind – although they got swallowed up during the bad times and during the cursed Occupation. Which also ate up masterpieces of craftsmanship, furniture, and other signs of prosperity and wealth.

I recall a Venetian secretaire, with silver marquetry, infills, and finely worked rare woods, sitting in the kitchen where it is now used for cleaning vegetables and *saliakous* (*salingaria*, as we call them).

And truly, some vulgar rich people of Hydra and Athens filled these craft objects, that had been brought from European and Russian ports, with jars of lentils and beans and olive oil!

I have said much about sponges in my *Lexicon of Hydra*, including testimonies by Thodoros Poulakos from Kamini, my home village. And here I offer a further account of the sponge industry, published in the fine journal of the late B.N., “*To naftiko mas*”. It is a long text, and here I offer only the beginning section:

“Did you ever think – you very civilised and well-educated people who wash your faces with soft sponges – that you are holding in your hands, and washing your bodies with, the skeleton of what was once a living creature? Don't worry. I shall explain shortly. Yes, my friends – the sponge is a living creature, and the object that we all recognise from the sponge trade is in fact its skeleton.

Call a man something associated with an animal, and he flares up and might even pull a knife on you. But, by general agreement, the poor old sponge has now come to be characterised as an animal. Some people have insulted it, placing it among the plants; others have called it a mix between a plant and a living creature; and a very few (but good) have baptised it an animal. I think we should give them recognition for this fact. Aristotle was the first. He was a sharp-eyed observer. He noted that sponges had feelings, and characterised them among animals. Pliny and Alainos called it a plant, and wouldn't take no for an answer. Pallas wrote that it was an animal. Lamuou said that the sponge was – spongelike (!). And Kuvieros said that it belonged among the polypods.

Now, where it lives in the depths of the sea, the sponge is not white or honey-coloured, soft and lovely, as you know it. It is a thick, black, sticky mass, and it comes in many shapes, rooted like a plant on the rocks and in the muddy deep.

The large and small holes that you are familiar with are filled with a kind of thick

mud, and they use this for the circulation of sea water inside the sponge. This is the way it feeds itself and breathes. Its food consists of tiny organic beings.

With time, that thick mass grows, and thus the sponge develops. This mass creates the elements of the skeleton, which, as I said, is the sponge as we know it. That is how the sponge is created. The process of working, cleaning, trimming it, etc comes later. The reproduction of the sponge happens with eggs. In other words, it is an egg-bearer. And when these eggs incubate, they become larvae, with *flagella* or *colia* that enable them to move. These then settle on the seabed, and there they await the arrival of the diver to harvest them.”

But then the times changed, and the sponge industry, both generally and in Hydra, began to take a downturn. See the following article from “*To Mellon*”, assuredly by our friend Mr Antonakis. The catastrophe is described in clear terms, at a time when the future for humanity looked decidedly bleak – the article was written in November 1932.

Crisis of the sponge industry

“The sole remaining resource of our island, the sponge fishing industry, is facing its ultimate peril. The global economic crisis that is engulfing the whole of humanity has brought it to a dead end.

Because of the lack of demand for them, the sponges are left piled up in the warehouses, and for this reason the shipowners, deprived of a flow of income, are reducing in numbers, from year to year, the number of diving boats. If this situation continues, they will abandon the working of sponges entirely, and thus a whole population that lives on the sponge industry will be deprived of this source of income.

We ask the people who run the island of Hydra: what measures have they taken in order to deal with the situation?

And we ask the State: is it aware that there exists a sponge industry, which not only supports a whole population in the island environment, but also supports the government’s economic policy, by bringing in foreign currency through the sale of sponges?

Before we too become ‘sponge-struck’ and extend begging hands, like so many others, [...] we have to awake from our lethargy and seek some radical solutions from the authorities, to deal with the situation that has been created.

And all of this has to be done quickly, because the sponge fishing boats are sitting tied up in the harbour, and we are throwing out boat oars into the fire, because we don’t have the energy to use them as clubs against our own heads and against the heads of those who govern us.”

A further series of articles, notes and research studies was also written by Panos K. Kalligas, the lawyer, and Francisco Kokkos, the sponge trader, and also by others, in the proceedings of the Dodecanese (when Zigdis was minister). The situation was

pitiful, particularly after the worldwide economic crisis of 1929-32.

The trade in Greek sponges

“Greece, as is well known, exports the largest share of harvested sponges worldwide. Here are the figures for the Greek output of sponges during the past four years:

	1928	1929	1930	1931
France	5,914	3,119	1,603	1,283
Germany	1,921	1,233	1,636	741
Dodecanese	5,955	2,872	2,608	1,850
USA	3,831	1,826	1,125	1,002
Italy	6,492	4,324	3,685	3,570
UK	2,009	3,732	10,563	4,790
Others	5,494	1,734	1,258	1,916
TOTAL:	31,671	18,485	22,478	15,152

From these figures it is clear that Italy, with its occupation of the Dodecanese, accounts for about one third of the Greek sponges. Followed by the United Kingdom, Germany and France, with a consumption of 2,000-3,500 kilos per year. Out of these one can observe generally that the Greek sponge industry is going through a fairly serious crisis, as is shown by the significant reduction of our production by year-end 1931. As regards the previous year’s production, the statistics have not yet been produced by the relevant department of the Ministry of National Economy. We shall publish them as soon as they become available.”

The matter also reached the Athenian press. Worthy journalists concerned themselves with it. The president of the Nautical Agency, Savvas M. Papadopoulos (my father-in-law), travelled to the island in August 1949, and wrote a detailed research article in *To Mellon tis Ydras*, which I am happy to reprint here. (Greetings to you, Kyr-Antonaki).

“How will the Hydra sponge-fishing industry be saved from catastrophe?

Here is a little known fact – leaving aside the fact that it holds the crown of the Greek sponge fishing industry, the island of Hydra is the oldest sponge fishing centre of the Mediterranean.

But the glories of the Hydra sponge fishing industry may be becoming a thing of the past. The industry is not just passing through a transitional crisis; it is facing full-on catastrophe.

The statistics predict a gloomy future for the Hydra sponge fishing industry, but also in general for the future of this holy rock where the sponge fishing industry is carried out, implying the collapse of its fishing fleet, its only means of support.

On the sponge industry of Hydra

There was a far-off time, that finished with the outbreak of war, in which Hydra, in terms of income and population, was the richest part of the world, a veritable Colorado, as the island was characterised by the ever-remembered Nikos Verveniotis, one of the creators of the Greek sponge fishing undertaking. The number of sponge fishing crews reached the figure of 50. In the pre-War period they went and gathered their precious harvest from the rich “banks” of Cyrenaica, Lampedusa and Tunisia. A whole fleet of sponge fishing ships, mobilised by private individuals, raised this golden bridgehead towards the shores of Africa.

And today? As we have shown, the figures are wretched. At this time the Hydra sponge fishing industry is represented in African waters by only 6 crews. The reduction in the numbers of the fleet from 9 boats to 6 is inescapably due to the fact that a large part of the sponges produced in 1948, about 12,000 ok., remained unsold, due to the sharp competition which Greek sponges met on the international market. Apart from the high quality sponges, which were offloaded in the American market (they swallowed at one time almost the whole of our production), there were already appearing new sponge fishing entrepreneurs on the African environment. Because of their lower costs of production, they were able to offer prices that were lower than the corresponding Greek products.

In conditions such as these, as regards sales in 1948, only 4,500 ok. were sold. The rest were left unsold in the warehouses of Hydra, and the sponge fishing community was burdened with debt in the shape of the three million drachmas loan from the Agricultural Bank, with interest rates of 8% and insurance running as high as 1 million drachmas!

In parallel with this ongoing misery, there was also the question of frozen investments of about 400 thousand drachmas, which was a big problem for the financiers of the sponge fishing fleet that had been hit by the war.

The sponge dealers sought an easing of their position, because they were not the ones responsible for the delay and the difficulties of 1948. Rather the fault lay with (a) the slow arrival of the money and (b) the delay in getting permission from the British military powers. This attempt at a prompt resolution of the whole sponge fishing question went in parallel with the fact that the Ministry of National Economy turned, via Switzerland, to the German market (a former customer for Hydra sponges), to advance a credit line of 160,000 dollars.

While addressing the general questions of the sponge fishing industry in Hydra (also in relation to the sponge question of Greece as a whole), the parties concerned were looking for ways to benefit from the Marshall Plan, in order to protect the sponge industry and develop its shipping and other technical attributes. Only thus could they develop the lucrative bridgehead from Hydra to the “sponge banks” of the Barbary coast. Only in this way could the historic ‘*Trim Sokaki*’ [‘Street of the Heroes’] of Hydra once again echo with the doings of the sponge divers, where today we only have mournful lamentations for a ghost of a past...”

[Savvas Papadopoulos]

Sadly, to cut a long story short, the situation was a disaster. The new laws in the newly liberated Dodecanese (which reduced the cost of harvesting of sponges in that region);

the closure of the German market (and others); reduced usage of sponges in Greece; the arrival of plastic sponges; and above all the very bad government policies, with the Agricultural Bank sucking up interest... all this meant that unused boats were burdened with the weight of debt, and were left to rot in Mandraki. Debt was rampant, and began to eat up property, houses and people alike. Hence the disappearance of the whole economy that was directly or indirectly dependent on the sponge industry.

In the end not a single boat was left, and only the Verveniotis “Warehouse” continued working sponges – alas, not of Hydriot provenance, but from foreign parts, even from Turkey. And eventually that too came to an end.

The old *fabrika* (factory) also fell into ruin. The Venizelou factory later became the biscuit factory of Yiannis Verveniotis. Regrettably, certain “houseowners” decided to help themselves – notably certain carpenters, who for nights on end went stealing the wood. Even also anchors. The fine terracotta statues also disappeared, as did the roof tiles, particularly the large one at the peak of the roof. What is there now is the El Greco hotel, where my friend Lykourgos Keramidas has preserved the architectural shape of the building.

It was something perfect for its time and it even had a magnetic air phone to connect between the office and the workshops, because the founder, my grandfather on my mother's side, Venizelos I. Verveniotis, founded and managed the factory (although he himself did not work, because he did not know the technique of the ovens, and the manufacture of biscuits (*galetas*)). That period was the heyday of Neos Kosmos (the name given to the area) when the factory was built, and when our relation, Mayor Stavros Tsipis, planted the pine trees which grow there – a fact forgotten by the unmindful Hydriots who live there.

The powerful sponge fishing period of a wealthy Hydra was gone forever. And now the festivals are forgotten, and there was loss of property, and houses changed hands – big houses – and men died, sometimes also tragically. Now all that is left is mournful memories. Take a honey coloured sponge – whose harvesting has cost blood and sweat and a wasting of the body and the soul – and even for the moments of high life and joy – take it, and wipe it all out.

*Journalist and writer, late of the Island of Hydra

Translation: Ed Emery