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The Greeks and the Black Sea
from the Bronze Age until the beginning of the 20th Century
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(published without the maps and most of the figures)

CHAPTER III

The Polyonymous Thracian Bosphoros

Aeons ago, when the land that once joined Asia to Europe caved in and created the basin that is now the Black Sea, the rivers flowed south with irresistible impetus. They forced through the rocky hills that stood in their path; 'there was a resounding crash, the heaving earth was rent asunder', and the waters rushed through to join with those of the Propontis.

The width of the channel between the two continents varies, but never exceeds 2.5 miles. Its narrowness is implied in the name given it by the ancient Greeks, for *boos-poros* literally means ox-ford (and indeed oxen can cross the intercontinental straits). Bosphoros (pronounced *Vosporos* in Greek) is the channel's oldest and best-known name. But its morphology and its function as the only passage to the Black Sea have endowed it with several other descriptive names.

Herodotos called it a 'neck'; Aristotle, 'the gate of the Pontus'; Apollonios of Rhodes, 'the narrow winding ford'; Ptolemy, 'the mouth of the Pontus'; Strabo, 'the Byzantion channel'; and Arrian, 'the Thracian Straits'.

The Byzantines often called it simply 'Stenon' (narrow), or 'Reuma' (current), or 'Katastenon' (exceedingly narrow). The Crusaders of the First Crusade called it 'Brachium', which is how it is referred to in the anonymous contemporary Frankish chronicle, the *Gesta Francorum*, that recounts how in August 1096, the Emperor of Constantinople, Alexios Komnenos, 'hastened to dispatch beyond the channel' the Lombards, Germans, and Franks, who were 'destroying and burning the city's palaces and stripping the lead off the church roofs'.

After Constantinople was captured by the Ottoman Turks, local seamen called the Bosphoros *Boğazi*, Turkish for 'neck', 'sound', 'mountain pass', or 'river mouth'. This name was added to the Greek vocabulary, and thus the celebrated and polyonymous Bosphoros appears in Modern Greek sources under all these various names, but most frequently as the Steno, the Reuma (or Revma), and the Bogazi.

The most evocative of all the names for the Bosphoros, the one that best conveys its function in relation to the world of the Black Sea, was given us by Euripides in the fifth century BC: 'the key to the Pontus'. This conveys the essential strategic, political, commercial, and cultural significance of the Bosphoros. The 'key to the Pontus', controlling the passage from Europe to Asia, from the Mediterranean to the Black Sea, is one of the most beautiful and the most treacherous crossings in the world!



Rumeli Hisarı (the 'Castle of Rumeli' also known as the 'guillotine of the Boğazi'). Engraving, 1838

The castle was built by Mehmet the Conqueror on the European shore of the Bosphoros at its narrowest point. When the work was completed on 31 August 1452, Constantinople was entirely cut off from the Black Sea. The siege began seven months later. For the Ottoman Turks 'Rumeli' was the term designating the European lands of the Empire.

For those who have never sailed through the Bosphoros and beheld its many wonders, we shall give some basic information and try to present something of what travellers today experience as the Turkish pilot vessel guides the ship from its southern to its northern mouth – from the friendly embrace of the Sea of Marmara to the vast, sombre expanse of the Black Sea.

The Bosphoros is approximately thirty-one kilometres long (17 miles). Like an undulating sea serpent, it flows between lush green shores, low wooded hills, headlands speckled with wild flowers, deep gulfs and sheltered coves. It closely follows the configuration of the land as it glides between this coastal scenery. It narrows and widens, turns west, then north, southwest and east, and once again southwest; at times thrusting deep into Thrace or Asia Minor, at others letting the land insinuate itself into its perfidious bosom.

The *Katastenon* changes direction no less than seven times along its thirty-one kilometre course.

The strong current that streams down to the Sea of Marmara, churning the surface of the Bosphoros, is due to the great rivers of Russia and the Ukraine, Georgia, Turkey and the Balkans, which debouch into the Black Sea – channelling huge quantities of water into the Mediterranean –, and by the frequent north-northeasterly winds that are entrapped in the narrow passage and find no outlet. The winds rage against the rocks of the northern shore and pound on the hills all along the Lower Bosphoros, swirl around furiously and force the waters towards the southern mouth of the straits, causing their surface speed to reach three to five kilometres an hour.

The surface waters flow down from the Black Sea to the Sea of Marmara, but undercurrents at a depth of about 40 metres flow in the opposite direction. This treacherous underwater stream, known as the *kanal* by Turkish pilots and fishermen, is so strong that, if it finds fishing nets in its way, it can drag an entire caique northwards against the surface currents rushing in the opposite direction.

Forcefully driving north, the *kanal's* momentum is eventually checked when it encounters the 'threshold' of the Bosphoros, a projection from the seabed at the north end of the straits. Here the

kanal mingles with the surface currents and turns southwards once again.

Though the two powerful currents of the straits behave in a fairly predictable way, there is another unpredictable factor to contend with, perhaps the most dangerous of all in the Bosphoros. This is the rapid change in the water's speed. In no time at all it can switch from fast to slow, then soon fall back to moderate. In the Bosphoros's endless circumvolutions, the waters often surge violently against the coast and then retreat, continually rolling forth and back.

As the traveller sails through the *Katastenon* he may well be horrified to see the middle current flowing impetuously downstream while currents on either side rush upstream. If a strong wind begins to blow – one of the sudden whims of the weather, a storm or a local squall scudding down from the hilly shore – then the waters turn into a veritable whirlpool, like the legendary Charybdis, the monster who 'spews up three times a day, and three times a day sucks in again'. The currents swirl and writhe like demented creatures. There is no hope of salvation here.

The race of the waters; the sudden changes in their flow; the battling currents; their occasional and local circular movements; the seven bends in the straits, which hinder visibility and hamper navigation; the north-northeasterly winds blowing off the Thracian shore; the humidity; the frequent mists; the whirlwinds; the storms; the shoals of fish that darken the water here and there; all these are the 'evil spirits' of the Bosphoros, the unique key that locks and unlocks two worlds and two seas.

'In Antiquity, sailing the Bosphoros was considered difficult and dangerous. Even today, making the Bosphoros from the Euxine is not without hazard, especially in winter, owing to the narrowness of the mouth, the rapidly changing winds and currents, and the frequent lingering thick fog. On dark and stormy nights, notwithstanding the existence of two lighthouses – Roumeli and Anatolfener – sailing-ships in particular often fail to make the entrance to the Bosphoros and are dashed against the rocks by the waves and strong currents.'

Apostolos Vasakopoulos,

Topography of Constantinople, Constantinople 1891

The verdant shores of the Bosphoros continue north for about twenty-five kilometres. Just beyond the ancient copper mines of the Chrysorroas River, at Rumeli Kavak, the landscape changes dramatically.

Tall, bare rocks, eaten away by the foaming waves; grim, deserted, rocky shores, the home of ravens and seagulls. This is the 'graveyard of the Greeks', the last resting place for the bones and memories of many a seafarer who first passed this way; the lost souls who still seem to haunt the northern end of the straits.

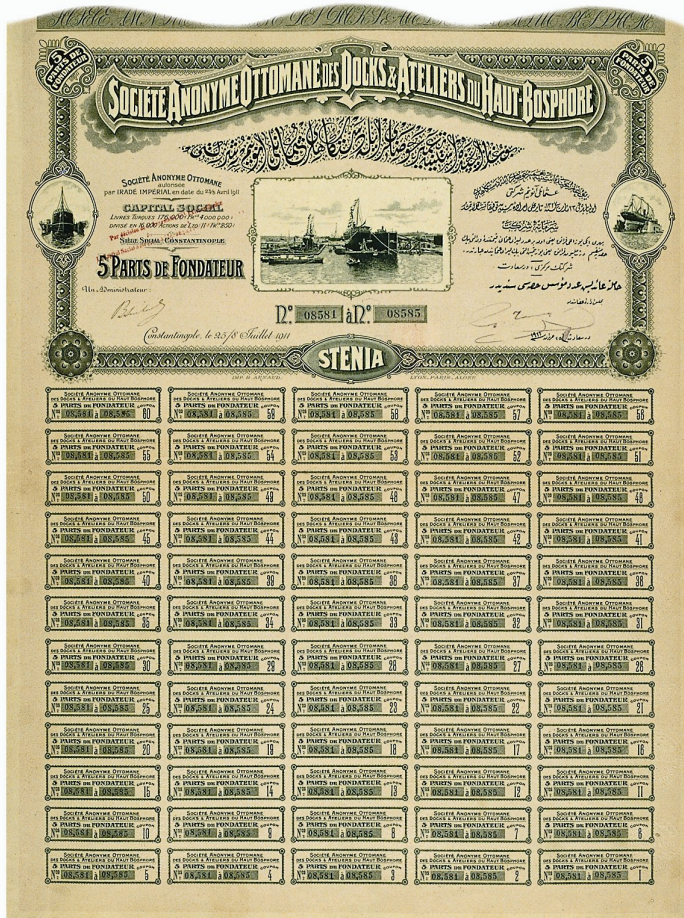
Here on the Thracian shore, in mythical Gypopolis, falcon city, there lived an old king named Phineas. Endowed with the gift of prophecy, he instructed the Argonauts how to overcome the last obstacle on their way to the Pontus – the Symplegades, or Clashing, Wandering, Blue Islands – free-floating rocks clashing together and whipping up the water into a seething turmoil.

'No man has yet succeeded in sailing through them. Once you reach there, let a dove loose; if it gets through to the Pontus, hasten promptly in its wake. Your success will depend on the strength of your arms and the speed of your oars.' Thus spoke Phineas.

With assistance from the goddess Athena, the Argonauts sailed through the Symplegades, which, thereafter, remained rooted to the spot, affording passage to all seafarers, for the gods had decreed that the Symplegades should remain apart if a mortal ever succeeded in passing through them.

**'Black land-locked sea,
Oh my distant plains
Lying beyond the Symplegades.'**
Dionysis Savvopoulos, 'Black Sea'

A new world opened up for the Greeks. They were to explore it step by step and to colonize it to its furthest limits. Successive waves of Greek settlers were to people its shores and hinterland throughout the ages, until even the early decades of the last century.



Constantinople, July 1911
«Société Anonyme Ottomane des Docks et Ateliers du Haut-Bosphore.
Constantinople, le 25 Juillet 1911. Stenia»

Five shares of the *Société Anonyme Ottomane*, which was responsible for the docks, wharves, and warehouses of the Upper Bosphoros. The company was based in Stenia (or İstinye). Stenia is a corruption of the ancient Greek name Sosthenion, the largest and safest harbour on the European side of the Bosphoros. For this reason, the bay of İstinye had been transformed into the biggest shipyard in the Bosphoros, with two huge floating dry docks. The removal of all shipping installations and cleaning of the bay was completed in 1994.

It was here that the Argonauts founded a sanctuary to Zeus Sosthenios or some winged daemons that had helped them conquer the hostile natives. In the 5th or 6th c., the famous monastery of Saint Michael in Sosthenion was built on the site of the ancient sanctuary. Worship of the Archangel and commander of the winged hosts replaced the worship of the benign ancient winged spirits. The fame of the miraculous Michael spread throughout Byzantium after Emperor Anastasios made a pilgrimage here in 515.

The monastery was rebuilt in the 9th c. by Emperor Basil I the 'Macedonian' (867-886) and is last mentioned in 1337, in connection with the monk Ignatios Kalothetos.



In the Greek Orthodox Church of the Taxiarches (Archangels) at Sosthenion-İstinye, Upper Bosphoros (November 1999)

The donation box, with the calligraphic inscription carved in 1885, reads 'FOR THE SCHOOLS'. Education was always in the mind of the Greek Community.

The existing church (on the site of the Byzantine monastery?) was built and renovated during the Ottoman period.

The İstinye Orthodox parish belongs to the Bosphoros district of the Archbishopric of Constantinople of the Ecumenical Patriarchate.