

# Transnational Island Museologies



Materials for discussion

Edited by  
Karen Brown, Jamie Allan Brown  
and Ana S. González Rueda

**ICOFOFOM** ICOM  
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**ICOFOM Materials for Discussion**

# **Transnational island museologies**

## ICOFOM MATERIALS FOR DISCUSSION

This publication brings together papers submitted for the 47th symposium organised by ICOFOM under the theme Transnational Island Museologies, to be held at the University of St Andrews, Scotland, 5-7 June, 2024.

The Materials for Discussion collection brings together, in an inclusive spirit, contributions selected for the symposium in the form of short articles, to prepare the ICOFOM Symposium. This publication has been made available before the symposium, in a very short time frame. In spite of the care given to the publication, some mistakes may remain.

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## Guest Editors / Editoras / Rédacteurs

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University of St Andrews, Scotland

Jamie Allan Brown  
University of St Andrews, Scotland

Ana S. González Rueda  
University of St Andrews, Scotland

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# Memory and heritage practices of the Greeks of Gökçeada (Imbros) Island in Türkiye

Gönül Bozoğlu

University of St Andrews – Scotland

In this paper, I will focus on the memories and heritages of the Greeks of the Island of Gökçeada (in Turkish)/Ἰμβρος/Imbros (in Greek), an island off the west coast of Turkey. The Greek community in Turkey are often called *Rum* in Turkish, which comes from the word Roman. This refers to the Eastern Roman or Byzantine Empire. There has been a presence of Greek Orthodox communities in what is now Turkey since the Byzantine period (including before conversion to Christianity by Constantine). They are the Indigenous communities to this country. It is confusing for people as these are not Greeks in the modern nation-state sense, so we need to think back to a time before nation states, when different ethnic groups had a presence in what is now modern-day Turkey. Prior to the establishment of the Turkish Republic with its current geography in 1923, the Ottoman Empire, the conquering successor of the Byzantine Empire, had extended its borders from the Balkans to the Middle East and North Africa. With the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire and the gradual establishment of nation-states, there were many migrations from Ottoman territories. After the conflicts between the Ottoman and Greek Powers from 1919 to 1922 that followed the Balkan Wars and World War I, the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923 was signed, officially settling the conflict and ending violent territorial disputes. Greece and the new nation-state of Turkey became the first signatories of the treaty, which stipulated one of the biggest mass forced displacements of people in the 20th century: the so-called Population Exchange, also known in Greece as the Great Catastrophe. The exchange centred on religion: about 1.5 million Greek-Orthodox people from Turkey were forcibly displaced to Greece, and about 350,000 Muslim Turks were displaced from Greece to Turkey. Thus, after over 2000 years of Greeks living in the present territory of Turkey, they were forced to abandon their homes.

However, together with the Greeks of Istanbul (*Constantinopolitans*), the Greek communities on the islands of Bozcaada (Tenedos) and Gökçeada (Imbros) in Turkey were excluded from this Population Exchange in the Treaty of Lausanne. In return, Muslim communities in Western Thrace in Greece were not included in this forced displacement. Although the islands in the Aegean were given to Greece, Turkey insisted on keeping the Islands of Bozcaada (Tenedos) and Gökçeada (Imbros) due to their proximity to Çanakkale and the Bosphorus (Dardanelles). This part of the Bosphorus is a highly important strategic gateway to the Marmara Sea, Istanbul, and the Black Sea and had been a critical theatre of war in 1915 in the fight for Gallipoli and later when Allies passed through the Dardanelles and landed in Istanbul. The two Islands had Turkish military bases and watch towers until recent years. Today, when you visit the Islands, you can see the ruins of the military towers.

Nevertheless, due to political persecutions and pressures, the population of these Greek communities in Istanbul and the islands declined dramatically. In recent research, I focused on the memories and heritages of the Greeks of Istanbul, including diaspora communities in Athens and Australia. During this, I have also met Imbrosians who expressed shared or similar experiences with the

Constantinopolitans. The Greeks who had to emigrate from the Islands and Istanbul continue to maintain their ties with these places through ongoing continuous communication with Turkey. They try to keep their languages, traditions, and cultures alive and to transfer these values to future generations. These communities' displacement and loss emphasize the importance of peace, friendship, and solidarity, and they look to the future with hope.

Like the Constantinopolitans, for the Greeks of Gökçeada/Imbros, the island is still an important site, and they faced the political pressure from the state politics especially regarding the tense relationship with Greece. The members of this community were forcibly but unofficially displaced in different ways in the 1960s, and their villages were ruined. Some left for Istanbul, some for Greece, and some as far as Australia. Diaspora groups have associations in each country. Until 1974, the population of the island was Greek and, in this year, following the crisis of the Cyprus Question, the state closed the Greek schools. The population was forced to migrate.

In recent years, some of the Greek Islanders have been returning to Gökçeada/Imbros despite the reduced population. Greek schools have reopened, the community has established an Association of Imbrosians, and some of the formerly abandoned Greek villages on the island have become popular destinations both for the domestic Turkish tourist market and for Imbrosian diaspora memory tourists, resulting in the development of hotels and restaurants. The current Greek villages of Tepeköy/Agrídia (Αγρίδια) and Zeytinli/ Άγιοι Θεόδωροι (Άγιοι Θεόδωροι) are particularly popular tourist destinations, with restaurants and cafés. Notably, the Patriarch of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople is from Zeytinli/Άγιοι Θεόδωροι.

Although my research has focused primarily on the Greeks of Istanbul, one of my participants, Stelyos Berber, led me to engage more closely with Gökçeada/Imbros. Stelyos was born in Istanbul, but his family was from this island. His family was “one of the few that didn't migrate to Greece or elsewhere”. As part of this research, I made a documentary film about the memories and heritages of the Greeks of Istanbul, *Life after Life: The Greeks of Istanbul* (2021). When I met him, Stelyos was a high-status figure within the community and the church, a senior cantor of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople in Istanbul, regularly leading the singing of monodic chant of the Byzantine liturgy during services. He also established Cafe Aman Istanbul with his wife, Pelin Suer, in 2009, performing traditional music of Istanbul in Greek and Turkish. My co-director, Cem Hakverdi, filmed him in Istanbul for our documentary *Life after Life*, and during filming he returned to Gökçeada/Imbros and became a music teacher in the Greek primary and high schools there. In the film, he talks about why he went back and the importance of reviving their language and culture in the Island:

I will be here for the first time this winter. To start life here again, to hear again our mother tongue [Greek], to revive the songs, the folk songs, festivals ... that is the responsibility of our generation, I think. Because unless you do this, the values in these lands will keep being lost. Of course, we don't want this and don't believe that anyone does. (Bozoğlu, 2021)

When I visited the island, I also met older people who had left the Island for Greece when they were very young. They spoke with me in Turkish, although they told me that they had forgotten Turkish as they left a long time ago. Some told me that they found it very difficult to live on their

native island since things were very different from when they had left, and island life today was also different compared to their experiences of living in Greece. I visited the Association in the Greek village where Stelyos is from and where he lives now. They organise community gatherings and events. The Greek language and the culture of the island are being revived. However, tension is still present. In August 2023, Turkish journalist Melike Çapan curated an exhibition *We will meet again: The memory of Imbros 1964* about the experiences of Greek communities of the island, including their experience of suppression and forced displacement. Some Turkish nationalist groups on the island targeted the exhibition and, due to this pressure, the decision was made to cancel it. Çapan stated:

Unfortunately, as a result of the targeting of some groups and institutions, we decided to cancel the exhibition, which [was intended as] a step to confront the past and rebuild a common future. Our priority is that society is not harmed in any way, regardless of language, religion or identity. We express our regret. (Duvar.English)

Conversely, the head of Gökçeada City Council, Bülent Aylı, told local news media that the exhibition was targeting the Turkish state and was “enthusiastically applauded by Greek and Greek-loving writers, illustrators and intellectuals; it offends the Turkish nation living on the island.” He then argued about how the Greeks of the islands betrayed the Turkish state:

If we are going to discuss 1964 in 2023, let’s investigate the Ottoman Turks who disappeared suddenly on the island. Let’s investigate the Greek islanders who gave *de facto* support to the British in the Gallipoli wars. If we see an offensive approach against our state and nation in this exhibition, we will bring the issue to the judiciary. No one can humiliate our state and our nation, especially on our land. Our state should also review the rights it has given to the Greeks. (Duvar.English)

This is a typical Turkish nationalist discourse that has argued that the Greeks were allies with the enemy. Notably, the comment “No one can humiliate our state and our nation, especially on our land” is not mere posturing but refers to the notorious Article 301 of the Turkish Penal Code that criminalises criticism of the Turkish nation. This has been used against high-profile cultural figures such as Orhan Pamuk and Elif Şafak and others of non-Turkish origin, such as Noam Chomsky, as well as political activists such as the Turkish-Armenian newspaper editor Hrant Dink (just before his assassination in 2007). So, this statement can be understood as a serious threat, especially given the following sentence – “Our state should also review the rights it has given to the Greeks”. Nevertheless, the exhibition had support from some Turkish people from the island. Eventually, the exhibition was opened in a historic Greek high school in Istanbul.

This is still ongoing research that will discuss the current heritage and memory practices of this community on the island who are negotiating between a complex past of geopolitical relations, a history of displacement and privation, and the return and reconstitution of community life. There are several key issues to explore. One of these is the generational and intergenerational dynamics of the memory of displacements that occurred decades ago but have continued to shape the communities. Those displaced because of the Cyprus Question (whether directly or indirectly) are now older, implicating anxieties about intergenerational transmission and forgetting. Another key issue is the

tension between diasporic memory tourism (that is, by diasporic Greek Imbrosians living elsewhere who are seeking to engage with ancestral villages and homes) and the questionable motivations of other tourists attracted by ruined settlements. We may also consider this in relation to theories of nostalgia in memory and heritage studies. As is well known, nostalgia means “longing for a lost home”. In one sense we can think about what happens when a group regains its lost home, and how people negotiate this circumstance. On the face of things, this might look like a rare success story for what Svetlana Boym (2001) called “restorative nostalgia”. On the other hand, the *home* of nostalgia is not simply a place but also a temporality and an assemblage of memory that cannot be regained as it was. So what, precisely (if anything), has been regained? The opposition to the exhibition discussed above also shows that the revival of historic inhabitancy of a group is not some seamless process, but one of living with animosity and undisguised hatred. Finally, we need to enquire into the island dynamics of these contests, both in geopolitical terms insofar as Turkey and Greece share and tussle over their island territories and heritages, and in cultural terms of grasping the intersection of island life, alterity, and cultural marginality and suppression.

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