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“Athletes of the Nation or Local Stars? Sports Clubs and their Reception in Rhodes 1900-1940”

My paper was inspired by one of the sub-topics of the conference, namely youth and the public intervention around them. The intra- and intergenerational sociability being the backbone of my doctoral research, I hope that a case study on Rhodes during a political transition will contribute to a broader discussion on sport and practices normally associated with the youth. More specifically, the paper will be revised to become part of a chapter dealing with the connotation and functionality of “youth” in new practices of leisure as well as innovations in labour in the early 20th century. Before entering the empirical analysis, which today is limited to male agency, I will briefly introduce the local scenario and two theoretical concepts.

At the time of its occupation by Italian troops in May 1912, Rhodes was the centre of the Ottoman Vilayet of the Archipelago. It hosted a civil population fluctuating between 12.000 and 18.000 in the early 20th century, a balanced amount of Orthodox, Muslims and Jews, and a smaller but influent Catholic community. After 1912, Rhodes remained under Ottoman sovereignty, and the Italian military governors faced the difficult task of administrative integration with lack of international recognition. This achievement, sealed by the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923, gave way to growing policies of assimilation parallel to a political turn in Italy, where Fascism was shaping the country as a totalitarian society. A legacy of the Ottoman period was the administration along confessional lines, although at the micro-level the non-institutional interaction of individuals of different confessions was far less rigid. Together with a certain lack of cohesion within the religious communities, this leads me to the concept of ‘intercommunality’ as denoted similarly by Donald Quataert Nicholas Doumanis and Francois Georgeon for the Late Ottoman

period.¹ Stressing this concept does not imply that the relevance of community borders is denied, yet it suggests that most practices and discourses were consciously shared by the diverse population of Rhodes. This might lay the groundwork for a transcommunitarian local history, missing in the current state of research that focuses on the micro-physics of agency. As we will see, such approach fits well for sport associations, by no means reducible to single ethno-confessional groups.

A second premise refers to Pierre Bourdieu's reflection on the valence of sports, which he relates to a matter of practical taste producing social distinction. Being active in sports represents a portion of the social capital which individuals accumulate and invest for defining their status vis-à-vis others. In addition to this, the value of the social “currency” of sports depends on the background of the actors owning it: Shifting from an elitist fashion to a mass phenomenon, this currency is subject to inflations prompting the adoption of new practices that eventually undergo the same cycle.²

Combining this scheme with the lens of intercommunality, I will try to shed some light on the interplay between the propagation of a national, later political, identity and the social position and perception of sportsmen, embedded in a local figuration that involves the medial reception of the audience. I argue that the growing relevance of sports as a factor of sociality in Rhodes did not reflect a uniform growing ethnic or ideological allegiance as the top-down impulse wished, which implies cases of politicization among athletes coexisting with others of total disinterest. However, in both situations I argue that youth were not only the subject of sports, but also agents handling its public significance.

Two important sources I will lean on are the local newspaper *Il Messaggero di Rodi* and the work of a local sport journalist, Giorgios Sentakis, which, although rich of data, lacks in depth in the analysis of sport as a social phenomenon.³ Other precious sources are the personal files of the Italian police from the State Archive in Rhodes, which are part of a discourse of a semi-colonial repressive institution, providing nonetheless detailed information on the status of the individuals involved.

¹ See Donald Quataert, *The Ottoman Empire 1700-1922*, 2nd ed., Cambridge 2012, 142-143; Nicholas Doumanis, *Before the Nation. Coexistence and its Destruction in Late-Ottoman Anatolia*, Oxford 2012, 2, 7; François Georgeon, « Presentation », in François Georgeon & Paul Dumont (ed.), *Vivre dans l'empire Ottoman: Sociabilités et relations intercommunautaires (XVIIIè-XXè siècles)*, Paris 1997, 5-20.

² See Pierre Bourdieu, „Historische und soziale Voraussetzungen modernen Sports“, in Gerd Hortleder & Geebauer, Gunder (eds), *Sport – Eros – Tod*, Frankfurt/M. 1998, 91-112.

³ Giorgos Sentakis, *I Istoría tou rodiakou athlismou*, Rodos 1987.

The beginnings of organized sports in Rhodes date back to 1903, as Greek youngsters gathered in the football team Peisírodos. Written sources about its activities are quite scarce, but we know that it ceased to exist after only two years and, interestingly, only one of its founding members stayed active in other clubs later.⁴ Moreover, the fact that Peisirodos was founded in the upper class suburb of Neochori suggests that the wealthy youngsters saw football as an occasional free time activity with a highly elitist social value.

The best known local sport society, Diagoras, celebrated by local historians as a key element for the ‘spiritual development of the nation’ (*πνευματική ανάπτυξη του λαού*),⁵ was founded in 1905. In this case we see a stronger ‘cultural’ element in the foundation of the society: Although its first president Anastasiadis, 42 years old at that time, was inspired by attending the Olympic Games in Athens, he was rather a man of letters than an athlete, being the director of the Astiki Scholi and from 1909 of the Greek Gymnasium. In the evolution of Diagoras we spot the same pattern of many clubs in late imperial contexts, where the cultural elite of a non ruling community aspired to combine political awareness, praise of the National culture and cult of a healthy body, as in the case of the Slavic Sokol movement in the Habsburg monarchy. Indeed some of Diagoras founding members, between 22 and 15 years of age in 1905, pursued a loyalty to Greek irredentism in the following decades, taking part in the Ethniki Epitropia demanding the Enosis of the Dodecanese in 1919.⁶ At this point, however, we should avoid mistaking their motivation and background for those of the athletes. As an example we can take into account an accident that contributed to the ban of ‘Diagoras’ by the Italian authorities in 1929. Three youths aged 15 to 18 were arrested for protesting after a track and field cup was awarded to another club, as they reportedly shouted slogans for Motherland Greece. The police deemed them manipulated by the Irredentist circles of the older generation, and indeed later reports in their files do not mention political activism, insisting on their rowdy character showed in various occasions instead.⁷ Interestingly, all of them owned –

⁴ For a list of players (without mention of the source) see Sentakis, *I Istoría*, 40.

⁵ Manolis Papaioannou, *Diagoras Olympionikis O Rodios – Gymnastikos Syllogos ‘Diagoras’*, Athena 2005, 77.

⁶ A list of founding members in Papaioannou, *Diagoras*, 49-50.

⁷ GAK DOD CC.RR. SP 682, 683, 690.

adopting Bourdieu’s terminology – little economic and cultural capital and we can thus assume that their practicing athletics and belonging to a club had a social meaning *per se*, with inner dynamics beyond ideological or patriotic references.

In order to frame the evolution of these dynamics we must stress the importance of the Italian occupation for the development of sports, since, for instance, most schools appointed soldiers as gymnastics teachers in the 1910s. However, the cultural transfer of modern sports gained momentum only from 1920, when football and cycling, not fitting the classicistic spirit of Diagoras, took over the stage. A clue for the growing allure of football is the fact that Catholic teachers used it to attract pupils from the Jewish School to their afternoon activities, as we read in the complaint by the director of the latter.⁸ Speaking more broadly, it would be hard to overlook the efforts by the authorities to divulgate the passion for football. In April 1920, the military organized the first match between Italian soldiers and a local team consisting of three Muslims, four Jews, one Orthodox and three Catholics. Although it is not known how they were selected, the fact that players do not appear in later teams suggests a very episodic form of transconfessional ensemble, not forced but prompted from above. Through the lines of an emphatic report in the local newspaper, *Il Messaggero*, we can infer some features of the early reception of sports. The improvised pitch was surrounded by a diverse crowd and the journalist stressed the presence of ‘elegant ladies’ beside the authorities, although he admitted that the atmosphere became ‘a bit turbulent’ due to the passion for the game, thus expressing a duality persisting in later years: The value of sport events for the self-representation of power and the fear of public disorder associated with the ‘vulgar’ nature of sports. Concerning the profiling of the players, they were mentioned individually but remained flat, anonymous characters. The journalist concluded, perhaps too optimistically, that: “The goal, namely an effective propaganda aimed at creating numerous fans of an extremely profitable and utmost interesting physical exercise, was achieved.”⁹ In fact, we can state that football was undergoing a transition from sporadic divertimento to phenomenon with public exposure, although the organizational framework as well as initiatives from the locals were yet to come. Moreover, the prominence of soldiers during

⁸ AIU France X F 18.06, Report from 11.08.1921.

⁹ “La prima gara di Football,” *Il Messaggero di Rodi*, 12.04.1920

a military occupation reflects a correspondence between social capital, rather than economic or cultural, and sport commitment.

Actually, in the first half of the 20s, the predominance of the Italian military was contested by only two associations, respectively of Jewish and Greek youngsters. The first originated as a loose team, which asked the Governor for training permission in 1920.¹⁰ In a document of the Alliance Israelite Universelle, we find the names of two players, 16 years of age, who had just graduated from school. Thanks to their excellent marks, they were selected for the Ecole Normale of the Alliance in Paris.¹¹ This career horizon, compared with analogue cases, denotes a middle class background for a generation raising its parents' cultural, but not necessarily economic capital.

A similar social background was shared by the pharmacist Gavril Missios, who founded the club Dorieas in 1924. The other members of the board were mainly Greek 'intellectuals,' who were allegedly blamed by the rivals of Diagoras for being pro-Italian.¹² More likely, the contrast between the two clubs is a generational one, with Missios being 15 years younger than the president of Diagoras, and of attitude towards sports in general. Dorieas can actually be seen as a modern athletic society, in which sports had priority vis-à-vis the cultural and ideological superstructure. Moreover, comparing a roster provided by Sentakis with archival sources, we observe a strong tie between the team and the Greek Gymnasium of Rhodes.¹³ This suggests that secondary schools, as in the case of the Jewish team, played a key role in a sociality that stretched beyond the classroom, extending friendship ties to the football pitch. The school registers also tell us that many players performed below average and were sons of shopkeepers, masons and seamen. None of them were active in politics, and the only remarkable life trajectory is that of the top player Alexandros Diakos, who later moved to Athens and enrolled at the military school Evelpidon, eventually becoming the first Greek soldier to die on the Albanian front in 1940. The absence of remarks on his political commitment in the preceding years in documents dated 1934, seems to question the mainstream narrative

¹⁰ GAK DOD IDD 10 1920 11.

¹¹ AIU GRECE V E 23, report from 18.07.1920.

¹² Sentakis, *I Istoría*, 80.

¹³ VENETOK. Genikos Elegkos 1916/17 -1944/45.

about his biography and suggests that the process of politicization had little to do with his high school years and the activities in Dorieas.¹⁴

Under Fascism, a new perception of sports emerged in Rhodes and in Italy, including more medial echo, more coordinated efforts in organizing events, and professionalization of clubs. This led to the paradox of a regime striving for discipline while fostering the visibility of local ‘stars,’ who often diverged from the official codex of behavior. Such a phenomenon parallels other one-party State systems as was the Soviet Union of the 1950s, when the well known ‘affaire Strel’cov’ broke out. In the case of Fascism, this partly stems from the ambiguous relation to youth from the origins of Fascism, since many *squadristi* embodied a mixture of middle-class viveur, rowdies and fighters.

In the semi-colonial context of Rhodes this relates to indigenous sportsmen as well, such as Mustafa Boyaci, a Muslim who figured prominently in local cycling races in the late 20s. Cycling is considered by the historian John Foot to have become a mass sport at that time, a “battleground for the hearts and minds of the people” and “the glue which bound together the national identity.”¹⁵ Therefore it is easy to understand its functionality as element of cohesive simultaneity with the metropole in a peripheral, multiconfessional context. The *Messaggero* provided an echo – be it realistic or not – for the heroic deeds of the cyclists, that had now become round characters thanks to a more passionate, almost introspective narration of the races. This coverage both reflected and stimulated sympathy for local stars in a population which did not have the chance to see the national champions on their island. Boyaci, born in 1907, raced for the Greek club Dorieas, suggesting that communitarian boundaries in sports, even if relevant, were flexible, and that individuals could be integrated without stable bonds of loyalty or commitment. Upon ending his career, he had occasional occupations that can define him as working-class athlete, with complete lack of commitment in politics. But what strikes from the police records is his unconventional behavior: quarrels inside brothels, debts, alcoholism, car accidents, brawls and affairs with “women that blackmail him.”¹⁶ This ‘George Best-like’ profile might not be a standard but is symptomatic of the complex functionality of sportsmen, some of

¹⁴ GAK DOD CC.RR. 1 1 127 1933.

¹⁵ John Foot, *Pedalare! Pedalare! A History of Italian Cycling*, London 2012, 5, 57.

¹⁶ GAK DOD CC.RR. 17 ps 343 1932.

whom acquired exposure, or in other words, social capital, in spite, or maybe because of an eccentric lifestyle. As the professionalization of sport in the modern sense was still under way, though, this did not assure social mobility.

To complete the narrative I will now move to the early 30s, when the local Federation of Sport Association (FRATRES) was established by the government. All clubs had to submit to the police their bylaws to be admitted, stating that they did not pursue any political aim. Sentakis argues that it was a decision of the fascist government to divide teams on ethnic lines.¹⁷ On the contrary, the rulers believed that not only the members of a club were relevant public figures, but feared that the increasing number of followers could develop ethnic or political loyalties by cheering for a team. For this reason, they imposed the neutralization of ethnic affiliation for clubs in 1935. At first however, there was a certain tolerance in admitting to FRATRES. In 1933, the first local league consisted of a Jewish team, one Muslim, two Greek, one of the Fascist party, and one of the State high school. Here the very concept of voluntary association becomes more difficult to denote. Even in bottom-up established clubs like the Jewish GER, Gioventu' Ebraica di Rodi, we see that the original subscribers, four youngsters aged between 25 and 22, was rapidly sided, or better said replaced in the board by older notables of the community, proving that the authorities demanded reliable loyalty to tolerate an association on ethnic basis.¹⁸ Confession, however, was not the only criterium in funding clubs. A good example is ASTERIA, founded by two Italians, three Jews and one Greek. Not only did they differ in confession, but also in their political views, ranging from active members of the Fascist party to alleged opportunists and even one suspected of anti-Italian sentiments. Thus, the binding factor was rather their social position, as all practised liberal professions.¹⁹

As already mentioned, the fear of nationalist propaganda among the supporters of the clubs, especially the Greek and to a minor extent the Jewish, was expressed by the press and the police in reports full of suspicion and concern. Although these radicalized minor fringes could not be considered ultras' in the contemporary connotation, they should not be overlooked. Football events especially apparently became a channel for

¹⁷ Sentakis, *I Istoría*, 141.

¹⁸ GAK DOD CC.RR. 2 9 2 1933.

¹⁹ GAK DOD CC.RR. 2 9 5 1934.

expressing ethnic identification, but again I argue that these expressions could hardly be detached from the inner dynamics of sports sociality, as we can infer from two episodes. The first is a complaint about the fact that some Jewish youngsters allegedly cheered for a visiting British team instead of the local Italian in a match in September 1933. The head of the police related this accident to “youthful naivety [and] (...) the level of tension reached by the sentiments of those who practice football, after the last championship” and mentioned as a concurring element of discontent an article of the MESSAGGERO about a previous match, which had been, in the eyes of Jewish supporters, unjust toward the team. In order to neutralize this discontent, he warmly recommended “the formation of football teams regardless of religious Communities.”²⁰

This idea was put forward because of similar accidents related to the Greek club *Ροδιακός αθλητικός Σύλλογος*. In August 1933, a wave of discontent rose after allegedly partial decisions by the Italian referees, and many members asked for the boycott of the league. This sentiment, reportedly spread among young Orthodox, was interpreted by the police as an anti-Italian plot of a notable, who: “incites dissent and criticism and cunningly and dishonestly uses the passion that football inspires, especially in his coreligionists”.²¹ Such episodes led the authorities to dismember all the clubs’ boards and delegate the whole administration to the umbrella-association ‘Marechiaro,’ while its new ‘sport sections’ were established within neighborhoods and became forcedly transconfessional.

At this point we can end our analysis, and sum up some of the results it might suggest:

1) The semi-colonial rule marked by increasing police repression isolated Rhodes from the resonance of sports in Italy. Transfers and local integration, however, affected all communities, thus confirming the value of intercommunality.

2) Although many clubs remained dominated by soldiers and officers with a high social capital, especially cycling and football saw an increasing involvement of youth from lower classes, although the boards consisted of older individuals with a high cultural and a middle economic capital.

²⁰ GAK DOD CC.RR. 20 ps 2 1932.

²¹ GAK DOD CC.RR. 2 9 5 1933.

3) Sport clubs are perhaps the most relevant novelty of the period for the socialization of youth, although pre-existing networks such as schools were often crucial for founding societies and athletic activism, especially until the mid 1920s.

4) Although they had little stake in the proper decision making, the local youth could develop an autonomous attitude towards sports as athletes as well as supporters. In many cases their behavior and lifestyle was in contrast to the propagated models, and the authorities had to cope with this while trying to foster the popularity of sportsmen through media and public events.

5) The term voluntary associations reveals its high complexity in this context. After spontaneous but not occasional beginnings in Ottoman times we observe an increasing government control parallel to a rise in engagement of the locals. Whereas practicing sports remained a voluntary act, any form of association which offered a potential alternative loyalty to Fascism was gradually suppressed, increasing the ‘vertical’ relationship between power and athletes.