

AIGAION TOM II



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Summary
Fretum Aegeum
Rome and the Aegean Islands
from the 2nd century BC to the 3rd century AD

The strong focus of previous studies on the history of the Aegean Islands in the Classical and Hellenistic periods inspired the authors of the book to tackle the Roman period in the history of the islands. The reader will find here many topics which had previously been underexposed in the literature on the subject.

The first chapter, 'Roman power over the islands: the administrative status of the Aegean Islands (129 BC – 294 AD)', is an attempt to find answers to the fundamental questions of which Roman province the individual islands belonged to and since when. The literature on the subject frequently presents the opinion that some of the Aegean Islands were incorporated into the province of Asia at the moment of its creation. The status of the other islands was, in turn, regulated by Augustus. The author, after a meticulous analysis of sources, shows that such an image is oversimplified. The administrative affiliation of the individual islands changed depending on the political circumstances and the good or bad will of the Roman generals operating in the East. The efforts of the islanders themselves were also not without significance. The locations of the individual Aegean Islands were

very different and some of them formally became part of the Roman Empire only during the Flavian rule.

The second chapter, 'Friends of the Romans: Greek euergetes and their relations with the Empire', shows the activity of two representatives of the elite of Mitylene, a small city on the island of Lesbos, against the background of dramatic historical events. Towards the end of the Roman Republic Mitylene, like many other insular communities, was experiencing ups and downs. At times it made wrong choices, which resulted in Roman generals imposing acute punishments on the city. However, unlike other Greek cities, Mitylene had a trump card which enabled it to get through even the greatest trouble. The trump card came in the form of two wealthy citizens who befriended influential Roman politicians and, as a result, gained some very tangible benefits for the city. The first one was Theophanes, a historian, soldier, and friend of Pompey the Great. Owing to his friendship with Pompey, Theophanes managed to obtain for his city the most valued privilege in Greece: freedom and independence. The second citizen was Potamon, who was also a writer and an outstanding rhetorician. His diplomatic missions, first to Caesar and then to Augustus, meant that Mitylene maintained the privileged status it had received from Pompey. The author analyses all available sources on Theophanes and Potamon, and then outlines the history of the small Greek city during the turbulent period of transition from the Republic to the Empire.

The next chapter, entitled 'Roman justice. Roman arbitration in the Aegean world: procedure, sources, significance', is an introduction of sorts to the mechanisms of Roman arbitration. Rome's expansion in the Hellenistic world had an impact on the use of various instruments of diplomacy by the Romans, including arbitration, commonly used by and popular among the Greeks. We should remember, however, that Rome came with its own political goals and methods of achieving them. The Romans

did not have the desire to become arbitrators of the Greek world, but it was important to them to take advantage of the situation they encountered there and to achieve their goals. The Greeks, who had been used to employing various, more or less sophisticated, diplomatic instruments, saw the Roman Republic, a new player in their world, like the other large and mighty powers which could be appealed to as arbitrators. We can, therefore, suppose that Rome did not become an arbitrator in Greek matters of its own will, but due to the fact that the Greek world itself appointed this role to Rome when it replaced Hellenistic monarchies. The Romans became involved in solving disputes in the Greek world only when they had to. Despite being offered this role, the Senate had no intention of being an 'arbitration court' for the conflicted Greek states. Roman arbitrators acted on the basis of the authority given to them by the Senate (*senatus consulta*), which first became familiar with the cause of the dispute. Disputes were usually solved by Roman officials (proconsul, governor) or specially delegated legates and *decemviri* with prepared instructions which gave them the authority to solve the matter on the spot and to enforce the decisions they made. The procedure applied both to the Greek world and the western part of the Mediterranean Sea, where Rome held power (North Africa, Italy). However, what differentiated the arbitration in Italy and the western part of Rome's dominion from the one in the Greek world was the Republic appointing other Greek states (*poleis* or leagues) to arbitrate on its behalf. Deciding to arbitrate, the Romans usually were not interested in the history of the dispute, but solved the disagreement or conflict on the basis of the *status quo*, without going into the details of who had been right previously. This was different from the rules of arbitration in the Greek world, where earlier mediation was taken into consideration. Perhaps this was a result of the difference between the Roman and Greek worlds in terms of property right. The Roman

law of property had an important distinction between legal ownership of a thing (*dominium* or *proprietas*), called property right, and the actual possession of a thing (*possessio*). For the Republic, this approach made it easier to side with their allies participating in a dispute, even if they were wrong. This attitude protected mainly the interests of the allied state, unless it was beneficial to Rome to act against them.

The last chapter, entitled 'Turbulent sea, calm islands: the image of the Aegean Sea in Roman literature during the Principate', is an attempt to recreate and trace back the changes in the image of the Aegean Sea and its islands in Latin literature during the Principate (until the mid-3rd century AD), starting from the Republican period and first Roman contacts with this area. The earliest associations which the Romans could have had in connection with the Aegean Islands were closely linked with the mythological context, especially the Trojan myths, particularly popular in Rome, which gave the successors of Aeneas and his companions a sense of belonging to the Mediterranean civilisation, and which Roman citizens learned at a very young age, not only during their studies but also from theatrical plays. The Romans' knowledge of the Aegean Islands increased with the Roman conquests in the East, closer diplomatic and trade relations, and more and more popular visits to Greece by members of the Roman elite. The most popular destination of travellers whose main goal was to acquire better education and refinement was Rhodes, with which Rome had close political and cultural contacts since the 2nd century BC.

Towards the end of the Republican era, the first literary topoi connected with the Roman perception of the Aegean Sea were shaped. On the one hand, connotations with rich islands such as Lesbos, Chios or Rhodes were still popular; they were associated with luxury, a calm and carefree life, artists, scientists, and high-quality products, especially excellent wine. On the other

hand, the image of the Aegean Sea as a wild and ruthless element was more and more present. This image was particularly strongly developed in the Augustan period, when literary writers tended to affirm their native Italic soil, and faraway and dangerous voyages were contrasted with a calm enjoyment of the fruits of the peace introduced by Augustus. At that time the previously generally positive image of the Aegean Islands gradually became increasingly negative.

The discord between the Aegean Islands and their terrible surroundings was expanded to include a new topos of island-prisons, where consecutive emperors, starting with Augustus, exiled first political prisoners and then common criminals as well. The islands to which undesirable persons were sent to settle were initially only the object of historians' interest, but with time the connotations attached to them were also used creatively by philosophers and poets. The islands situated far from the Empire's capital, lacking any comforts and surrounded by a horrible, unfriendly sea, became a symbol of isolation, obscurity and a punishment worse than death. This motif overlapped with the topos of small islands without any significance (such as Seriphos or Gyaros), previously unpopular among Romans, but long-known among the Greeks. These islands, ridiculed for hundreds of years, associated with depreciatory myths (if associated at all), were also given the context of exiles in Roman depictions. It was probably such connotations which were also one of the reasons why the islands were again used for penitentiary purposes in modern times.

The Aegean Islands were constantly present in Roman literature as a frequent point of reference, and the diametrically different connotations attached to them created a colourful vision of a land which was both dangerous and calm, rich and poor, faraway and close to the Romans through the cultural context, mythology, literature and art.