

Mapping Frankish Euboea: Tracing the depiction of the island through the portolan charts and early maps from the 13th to 17th century

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Περίληψη

Η Ύστερη Μεσαιωνική περίοδος, περίοδος κατά την οποία η Εύβοια βρισκόταν υπό την κατοχή των Σταυροφόρων και των Βενετών και εκτείνεται χρονικά από το 1205 μέχρι το 1470, φαντάζει τόσο συναρπαστικά κοντινή αλλά ταυτόχρονα τόσο απογοητευτικά μακρινή. Αν και τα μνημεία αυτής της περιόδου είναι άφθονα στο νησί, κάτι που δεν ισχύει για την Κλασική περίοδο, υπάρχουν λίγες γραπτές μαρτυρίες που μπορούν να μας καθοδηγήσουν.

Ωστόσο μπορούμε να χρησιμοποιήσουμε μια πηγή που δεν είναι διαθέσιμη στους ερευνητές της Κλασικής περιόδου. Η Ύστερη Μεσαιωνική περίοδος ήταν μια εποχή κατά την οποία αναγεννήθηκαν οι πρωτοεμφανιζόμενοι 'πορτολανικοί' ναυτικοί χάρτες και τα πρώιμα διαγράμματα. Η εφεύρεση της πυξίδας και η εξέλιξη του αστρολάβου που χρησιμοποιούσαν οι ναυτικοί βοήθησαν να σχεδιαστούν πιο ακριβείς χάρτες, ενώ με την ανάπτυξη της τυπογραφίας κατά τον 15ο αιώνα έγινε δυνατή η αναπαραγωγή των χαρτών σε μεγάλο αριθμό αντιτύπων και η ευρεία κυκλοφορία τους σε όλον τον κόσμο.

Αυτό το άρθρο που στηρίχθηκε στις μελέτες του Koder¹ και του Τριανταφυλλόπουλου² καθώς και σε πιο πρόσφατες δημοσιεύσεις σχετικά με τη χαρτογράφηση της Ελλάδας, αποτελεί μέρος της έρευνάς μου για την τοπογραφία του νησιού κατά τη διάρκεια αυτής της περιόδου. Παρουσιάζει την εξέλιξη των χαρτών της Εύβοιας μέχρι το τέλος του 17ου αιώνα και διερευνά τα στοιχεία που δύνανται ή όχι να προσδώσουν πληροφορίες σχετικά με την τοπογραφία της περιόδου.

Οι ιστορικοί δικαίως επικρίνουν την ακρίβεια των έντυπων χαρτών της Μεσογείου του 16ου και 17ου αιώνα. Είναι ποικίλης ποιότητας και πολλοί έχουν δημιουργηθεί από χαρτογράφους σχεδόν δύο αιώνες μετά την προσάρτηση του νησιού στην Οθωμανική Αυτοκρατορία το 1470 – από χαρτογράφους που πολλές φορές είχαν λίγες ξεκάθαρες γνώσεις σχετικά με το νησί. Από την άλλη μεριά όμως οι μέχρι τότε αναξιόπιστοι 'πορτολανικοί' χάρτες και τα πρώιμα νησολόγια *isolarii* του 14ου και του 15ου αιώνα, ως απευθείας μαρτυρίες είναι όχι μόνο ακριβείς αλλά μπορούν να μας δώσουν και πολύτιμες πληροφορίες για τη ζωή εκείνης της περιόδου.

Introduction

Forty years have passed since Johannes Koder and Demetrios Triantaphyllopoulos provided the foundations in the early 1970s for the study of the topography of Euboea during the Frankish era, and

1. Koder 1973.

2. Triantaphyllopoulos 1974.

many of their conclusions were based on an interpretation of the maps of the period. But much has changed in the world of cartography since then. Many maps previously in private hands have come into the public domain, and those in museums and libraries are now much more accessible.³ In fact, so many printed maps are now in circulation that Zacharakis' latest catalogue of printed maps of Greece,⁴ which originally included just 707 maps in 1974, now includes no less than 3908.

I will briefly discuss the issues and problems surrounding the use of the 16th- and 17th-century printed maps, and then, looking at some examples, demonstrate how we can utilize the much earlier portolan charts and maps from the 14th and 15th centuries to enhance our knowledge of the Frankish and Venetian periods.

The accuracy of early maps

Historians, quite rightly, have been dismissive of the value of the early printed maps as accurate historical documents. Many of the maps produced appear to have been destined not for practical use, but rather for the salons and walls of Italian high society, where artistic content not accuracy was the key selling factor. To make matters worse, intense competition between publishers forced them to cut corners.⁵ First-hand survey, too, was almost out of the question. Apart from the cost, the island was enemy-held territory,⁶ at least for the Italian cartographers, after its annexation by the Ottomans in 1470.

The result was that for 200 years after the production of the first printed map in 1477 there appears to have been not an improvement but, practically, a deterioration in the quality of the maps produced of the Aegean area, and Euboea in particular—a development sometimes referred to in cartographic circles as the 'Darwinian fallacy'.⁷ A multitude of coastlines of the island were drawn, we may even say invented, as publishers vied to produce 'new' cartographic interpretations, which invariably they were not. Rather, each compounded the mistakes of his predecessor.

A small number of maps, fortunately, are more accurate. These all have a remarkable similarity in terms of their coastline, and it can be noted that they form a family, having their roots in a master map from the 15th century, the analysis of which I will return to later.⁸ But even they have significant copying and interpretation errors. These range from simple copying mistakes such as treating a 't' as an 'l', to placing a town in the wrong position or even importing places onto the island, which are actually on the mainland opposite. Apparent spelling mistakes are rife although it is often difficult to distinguish error from linguistic differences or diachronic change. It would, however, be wrong to dismiss these maps outright without first understanding their provenance, the pedigree of the cartographers who produced them, and the rationale for their production. Two examples illustrate this.

In the early 16th century, Benedetto Bordone⁹ popularized the island chart tradition first invented by Cristoforo Buondelmonti in 1420, giving it the name *isolario*. Yet, although Bordone may be known

3. When Theodoros Skouras published in 2003 the results of his lifetime's work, cataloguing the Classical and medieval fortresses and towers of Euboea, he referred to 82 maps, most, apparently, from the Karakostas collection (this is now on display in the old Ottoman mosque in Chalkida). George Tolias's publication of the 1656 maps in the Samourka collection in 2008 was also a major landmark.

4. Zacharakis 2009.

5. Academic interest, too, during the 16th century seems to have been focused on an apparently blinkered reinterpretation of the rediscovered Ptolemaic maps of the 2nd century AD and not on developing, or at the very least exploiting, a proven cartographic tradition such as the portolan charts.

6. For a general history of Latin Greece, see Lock 1995. The most detailed history of the island of Euboea during this period still remains that by Bury, published in a series of three articles in the *Journal of Hellenic Studies* from 1886 to 1888.

7. Campbell 1994.

8. The map referred to here is that by Bartolomeo dalli Sonetti, produced c.1485.

9. Bordone 1528.

to archaeologists as a cartographer, this was not his only profession. He was, as art historians inform us, one of the most respected miniaturists and illuminators in Venice in the early 16th century.¹⁰ As such, we are the victims of our own attempts to categorize and pigeon-hole. Looking at him in this light, we should first understand the map he was copying (or the cartographer who created it) and not attempt to criticize his work except in artistic terms.

At the other extreme is the work of Vincenzo Coronelli from the late 17th century. His maps of Euboea are poor and exhibit considerable inaccuracy. Yet in 1685, just after the beginning of the 1684-1688 Turko-Venetian War, he was appointed cosmographer of the Venetian Republic. As such he was part of the military-administrative machine directing the Venetian War efforts and must have been privy to considerable information gathered by Venetian spies and engineers. From these sources he would have assembled the details to prepare his studies of the fortress of Negroponte. Given this background, we must not dismiss his work outright but, looking beyond his errors, try to identify those points that are original in his maps.

For our purposes, the printed maps of the 16th and 17th centuries, however, also have one final, fundamental problem. The first was only produced in 1477, after the Frankish-Venetian period, which spanned 265 years. Those by Coronelli, for instance, are up to 450 years out of date. They cannot by any means be considered contemporary, and much of their new information appears to have more relevance to the Ottoman rather than to the Frankish period.

The portolan charts

Fortunately, however, good, hitherto-unrecognized sources do exist from the 14th and 15th centuries, which provided the foundations for the printed maps. The earliest of these were the portolan charts. These were the tools of the trade for professional mariners, who depended for their livelihood and even their very lives on the accuracy of their charts. Unsurprisingly, few have survived the damp conditions and rigorous use on board ships. They are also generally small scale although they do exhibit significant detail.

One of the earliest, a portolan chart of the Aegean by Pietro Vesconte produced in 1313, at first glance appears worthy of little interest for our purposes. Its scale of c.1:3,000,000 reduces most Aegean islands to little more than unidentifiable shapes. Fortunately, however, both Crete and Euboea, as prized Venetian possessions, are highlighted, and significant settlement and coastline features are noted.

When the section around Euboea is magnified and enhanced slightly (Fig. 1), we find a map remarkable for its accuracy, which, even with its small scale, withstands comparison to any of the 17th or even 18th century.

The compass bearings of the shoreline are generally accurate, something which is not true for even the best 16th- and 17th-century maps. The proportions are also close to reality, although the north-western section is too wide, whilst the south-eastern tail needs to be expanded. Places are named in their correct positions, with *Nig[ro]po[n]t* (Chalkida)¹¹ as an important regional town being noted in red on the original chart—a defining feature of the portolan tradition.

The regional towns of *oreo* (Orei), *velona* (Avlonari), *caristo* (Karystos) and *castri* (Kastri) are correctly positioned, although the bay of the last is somewhat over-emphasized. The detail, too, opposite *ratiza* (Kammena Vourla?) in the north-west, around modern-day Lichada and Aidipsos, is also very

10. Armstrong 1996, 65-92.

11. Hereafter the contemporary name is written in italics, followed by the modern name in brackets.

good: even the small islands just off the cape are noted. By amalgamating data from a number of such portolans we can produce a map of Euboea for the 14th century that is not only contemporary but, if this Vesconte portolan is representative, also accurate.¹²

The isolario tradition

In the early 15th century, the first relatively large-scale map of the island¹² was developed, with the invention of the island chart (or *isolario*) format by Cristoforo Buondelmonti in 1420 (Fig. 2).¹³ His map appears decidedly amateurish by comparison with that of Vesconte, produced a century earlier. It is oriented to fit the page—note the direction of north is actually towards the south-west—and thus looks alien to our modern view. Yet, it is actually slightly more accurate than it appears at first glance.

Following the portolan tradition, he writes the island's capital in red ink, and notes both its Byzantine and Frankish/Venetian names *egrippo sive nigroponte*. Graphics in the shape of a castle with two turrets are shown for what appear to be the fortress of Castello Rosso at *caristo* (Karystos), the fortress of *oreo* (Orei) and possibly the castle of *Rizocastro* or *Protimo* (Aliveri), although the latter could also be *velona* (Avlonari) as per Vesconte's portolan chart (Fig. 1).

The coastline, although stylized, is recognizable. If capes are treated as stops on a subway map, it is easy to find one's way around. The bays of Petries, Almiropotamos and Aliveri in the south, and Aidipsos in the north are easily recognizable. But Buondelmonti was no seasoned navigator. He treats the shoreline as a passenger on board a ship might, not understanding the significant change in bearing between the south-eastern cape Kymē coast and the north-eastern Kymē-Pondiconisi coastline. Clearly, too, he was aided by a portolan chart, since he continues the portolan traditions of using red colour for important regional towns, points for headlands and concave lines for the bays, and his treatment of the towns marks the first tentative steps towards the use of symbols on maps.

The value of Buondelmonti's *isolario* lies, however, not in this map, which really adds little to our knowledge, but in its popularity. It was hand-copied for nearly 100 years, even after the introduction of printed maps in 1477. There are 64 known copies in existence and three versions of the written text;¹⁴ most importantly for us, many copyists gave their own interpretation of the map of Euboea. For instance, a copy dated c.1470 has significant changes.¹⁵ *Rizocastro* (if that is what it was) has disappeared, and symbols for two new towns (or towers) to the south of Karystos have been introduced. The relative sizes of *Athene* (Athens) and *Thebe* (Thebes) in relation to *Negroponte* (Chalkida) have also changed. In the 1420 map, *Negroponte* (Chalkida) was relatively small compared to the first two, but now both have diminished in size sufficiently for *Negroponte* (Chalkida) to be the largest city on the map.

The isolario of Bartolomeo dalli Sonetti

Fifteen years later, in 1485, Bartolomeo dalli Sonetti, thought to be a Venetian captain, published a new survey of the Aegean (Fig. 3). He claimed to have visited the islands no less than 15 times, meas-

12. The identification and deciphering of the surviving portolans, pursuant to the preparation of such a map, is a prime focus of my thesis (I am registered at the Centre for Byzantine, Ottoman and Modern Greek Studies at the University of Birmingham, UK).

13. Travelling around the Aegean with a copy of the 2nd-century Ptolemaic maps, which had been recently rediscovered and translated into Latin, he prepared what was in essence a 15th-century travel guide to the islands of the Aegean, containing not only a map but also a simple description in slightly stilted prose of each island.

14. Turner 1987, 11-28.

15. Buondelmonte 1465-1475.

uring them, as he writes, with ‘compass and divider’. For the first time we see a map of Euboea that is recognizably modern.¹⁶ Drawn to a scale of approximately 1:1,000,000 and using sophisticated symbols, he was able to include considerably more detail than either the early portolan charts or Buondelmonti.

It has a modern northerly orientation with compass points. Rivers are shown in blue in symbolic form excluding, interestingly, a number that dry up in the summer such as the Lilas just to the east of *Negroponte* (Chalkida). A number of shoals, too, around the coastline, which can be verified even today, have been noted by ‘+ + +’ symbols.

Settlements are depicted in various sizes, with one, two or three towers, possibly reflecting their importance. *Valona* (or *Velona*, probably modern-day Avlonari), known to be the main administrative centre in central Euboea,¹⁷ is second in size only to *Negroponte* (Chalkida), although slightly smaller than *Thebe* on the mainland. Their geographical position is also hinted at by positioning certain ones on a symbolic hill. This makes the castle of Castel Rosso above *Caristo* (Karystos), for instance, easily recognizable.

The map’s delineation of the coastline, whilst generally reflecting the shape of the island, does, however, exhibit some problems. The Aegean seaboard suffers from the same problem as that of Buondelmonti’s and is drawn incorrectly as an approximate straight line running north-west to south-east.¹⁸ Bays tend to be over-emphasized, and the area around *Negroponte* is much larger proportionately compared to the rest of the island. This latter point may have been deliberate. Sonetti’s potential customers were very much members of the upper echelons of Venetian society. He thus emphasized certain features in the way that modern tourist maps might, and, in so doing, also helped mariners navigate the approaches to *Negroponte* which, with its ever-changing currents and fickle winds, would have been a dangerous passage even for the best of navigators sailing the relatively unsophisticated ships of the era.

Despite these drawbacks, Sonetti’s map is a milestone in the cartographic representation of the island, so much so that it was copied and re-copied again and again over the following 200 years. It was not until the French and British naval charts of the late 18th century that anything more accurate was drawn up.

A detailed analysis of the settlements noted is not the subject of this paper, but one feature is worthy of mention. Sonetti provides alternative names for a number of towns. Thus, for Thebes he notes *Stives Su Tebe*, both the medieval and Classical names. He provides similarly *eretria dita chochies*—‘Eretria called Chochies’. This gives us an invaluable cross reference, and confirms the previously unrecognized name of *cochies*, which is to be found in a portolan chart by Vesconte dated 1320. It is also reconfirmed in the mid-16th century by the cartographer, Battista Agnese,¹⁹ again with the spelling *chochies*. We therefore have in 1320, albeit under another name, what appears to be the earliest non-Classical reference to Eretria.²⁰

Reviewing this map and the two copies of that by Buondelmonti we can also draw one final tentative conclusion. During the period since Buondelmonti first surveyed the island, the treatment of *Negroponte* changed radically. Initially, in 1420 it was simply another town. By 1470 it had grown larger

16. His work is a synthesis of Buondelmonti’s *isolario* (he gained the sobriquet ‘Sonetti’ for transforming Buondelmonti’s prose into verse) and a portolan chart, a copy of which he must also have owned. It is a hand-drawn map with a green wash colouring and symbols in red, blue and black.

17. Marino Sanudo in the early 13th century writes that Licarios, when he invaded Euboea at the head of a Byzantine army in the 1270s, fortified the castle ‘*Della Cuppa in la Vallona*’ (Papadopoulou 2000, 137). It was also one of the bishoprics of Euboea noted by Pope Innocent III, who writes *Episcopatum . . . Abelonensem, Zorconesem, Caristiensem* (Bury 1886, Inn. Ep. xi. 256). *Abelona* appears to have been the original Latin spelling, which was corrupted over time into *Avelona* and *Velona*.

18. This, coupled with the lack of place names on this coast, may indicate that he never personally sailed the whole length of the Aegean coast, but drew his information from elsewhere or simply interpreted it as best he could.

19. Agnese 1555.

20. Over a century prior to that by Ciriaco of Ancona in 1436 (Ducrey 2004, 55).

than Athens and Thebes, and in Sonetti's final 1485 map it dwarfed both of them. In a reprint of the same map in 1532 the draftsman, for whatever reason, even omitted Athens altogether!

This limited cartographic evidence thus reflects the metamorphosis of Negroponte over 70 years during the late 15th century, at least in cartographic terms, into the most important city in the region, whilst Thebes has been relegated to a secondary role, and Athens was fast becoming little more than a small country town. This same treatment was to be continued on nearly all the relatively accurate maps of the 16th and 17th centuries.

The reality, however, was somewhat different. With the annexation of *Negroponte* by the Ottomans and the establishment of their administrative and naval base there, the strategic importance of the city was clearly enhanced, just as that of Thebes was reduced. Both Athens and Thebes, however, remained important economic centres.²¹ We must therefore look beyond this.

It may be chance that *Negroponte* and its environs were over-emphasized by Sonetti for cartographic reasons, but more likely this was one of perception. The fall of *Negroponte* became a *cause célèbre* throughout Western Europe in the 1470s and galvanized states to take the Ottoman threat seriously. The new printing presses developed in the immediate aftermath of *Negroponte's* annexation were quickly put to use decrying its fall.²²

A more sinister rationale might also be suggested. Sonetti claimed to have journeyed around the Aegean no less than 15 times, an expensive undertaking on the whim of writing a book of island charts accompanied by descriptions in rhyming verse.²³ We know that the *Dieci*, the secretive Committee of Ten of the Venetian Republic, had ordered maps to be drawn up of the Venetian possessions some years before.²⁴ The preparation of such a work would have been a considerable propaganda achievement. Can we therefore conclude that Sonetti's work was possibly sponsored by the state?

Conclusions

It is not the intent of this paper to analyse such scenarios in depth, but to demonstrate with these few examples that, at least as regards the late medieval topography of Euboea, there is still much to be gleaned from detailed analysis of hitherto unrecognized contemporary maps of the Frankish and Venetian era. We should not be bemused by the deluge of low-quality 16th- and 17th-century printed maps produced by the desk cartographers of the time, as even these can sometimes provide nuggets of valuable information. Not only do the manuscript charts and maps of the 14th and 15th centuries provide an accurate topographical record within the constraints of the technology of the time, but they can also help us better understand the economic and geopolitical developments in the region during this period.

21. Machiel Kiel has demonstrated using Ottoman population statistics and household taxation records that substantial economic growth occurred during the period in both Attica (total households: for 1395, the figure is 1000; for 1506, 1600; and for 1570, 3200) and Boeotia (household numbers for 16 villages: for 1466, the figure is 584; for 1506, 843; and for 1570, the figure is 1591) (Kiel 1987 and 1997). John Bintliff, outlining the results of survey in Boeotia, also notes an improvement in the quality of pottery finds in this period, another indicator of increased prosperity (Bintliff 2012).

22. Meserve 2006, 440-480.

23. He actually obtained his sobriquet 'Sonetti' for just this very reason. Much of his travel was most likely undertaken as a passenger or member of the crew, thus slightly reducing the impact of his claim.

24. MacKay 2011. These maps have never been identified but could potentially have been a source for Sonetti, even if he himself had not been active in their preparation.

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Figures



Figure 1: Vesconte (1313), part of portolan chart of the eastern Mediterranean.
In Fig. 1, place names have been annotated next to the original and the coastline of mainland Greece has been enhanced to facilitate comprehension.



Figure 2:
Buondelmonti, island chart of Euboea (1420?).

