

BORDER NATURES

The Environment as Weapon at the Edges of Greece

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Ph.D. submission in Research Architecture

I hereby declare that the work presented in this thesis meets the full requirements of a doctoral dissertation in the Centre for Research Architecture (CRA) and is largely my own but also contains materials co-produced with Ifor Duncan, (PhD, CRA/Post-doctoral fellow at Ca' Foscari University, Venice).

Signed:

Stefanos Levidis, December 31, 2020

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Abstract

This practice-based PhD critically investigates the complex imbrications of political violence and environmental processes resulting in the construction of so-called “natural” borders: national boundaries where nature is understood to delimit and fortify the nation-state. Taking the frontiers of Greece as a case study, the thesis seeks to demonstrate that, contrary to conceptions of natural borders as spaces that operate devoid of human intervention, their materiality and natural processes are in fact hybridized and engineered by states to perform the specific, deadly tasks of deterrence, exclusion and erasure. Part I (Ghost Habitats) explores the mountainous, trilateral border area of the Prespa/Prespa/Prespës lakes between Greece, North Macedonia, and Albania, to consider how the delineation and enforcement of the border reconfigures regional ecosystems to render them into “wild” frontiers, subject to different legal orders than the remainder of sovereign territory. Part II (*Anáchoma*), co-researched with colleague Ifor Duncan (PhD, CRA/Post-doctoral fellow at Ca’ Foscari University, Venice) considers the Evros/Meriç/Maritsa river between Greece, Turkey and Bulgaria as an apparatus of border violence and obfuscation, as well as a body which records, stores, and occasionally reveals this violence through seasonal shifts in its hydrological cycle. Part III (Grey Rocks, Black Waves) examines the archipelagic border of the Aegean Sea between Greece and Turkey, to discuss how its geographically and historically dense materiality is mobilized as a defensive infrastructure against contemporary migration at sea, and to reflect on a spatial and visual practice that attempts to decode this matter to reveal traces of state violence. In each case sovereign power organises, and is organised around, specific ecological processes to disperse the causal agencies of violence enacted against disempowered border subjects, and aspiring crossers. Incorporating a methodology that borrows from disciplines as diverse as forensics, filmmaking, archaeology, botany, and oceanography, the thesis contests commonplace understandings of territorial limits as lines that are simply scripted over natural backdrops, to critically include the multiple human agencies and their insidious use of ecological dynamics for the work of border defence. To describe these hybrid boundary environments, and the complex causal relationships they engender, the thesis introduces the operative concept of “border natures”: a synthesis of nature, space, technology and law, and connecting actors as diverse as border authorities, fences, technologies of surveillance, political and legal orders, human and more-than-human forms of life - rivers, waves, and mountains.

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Introduction

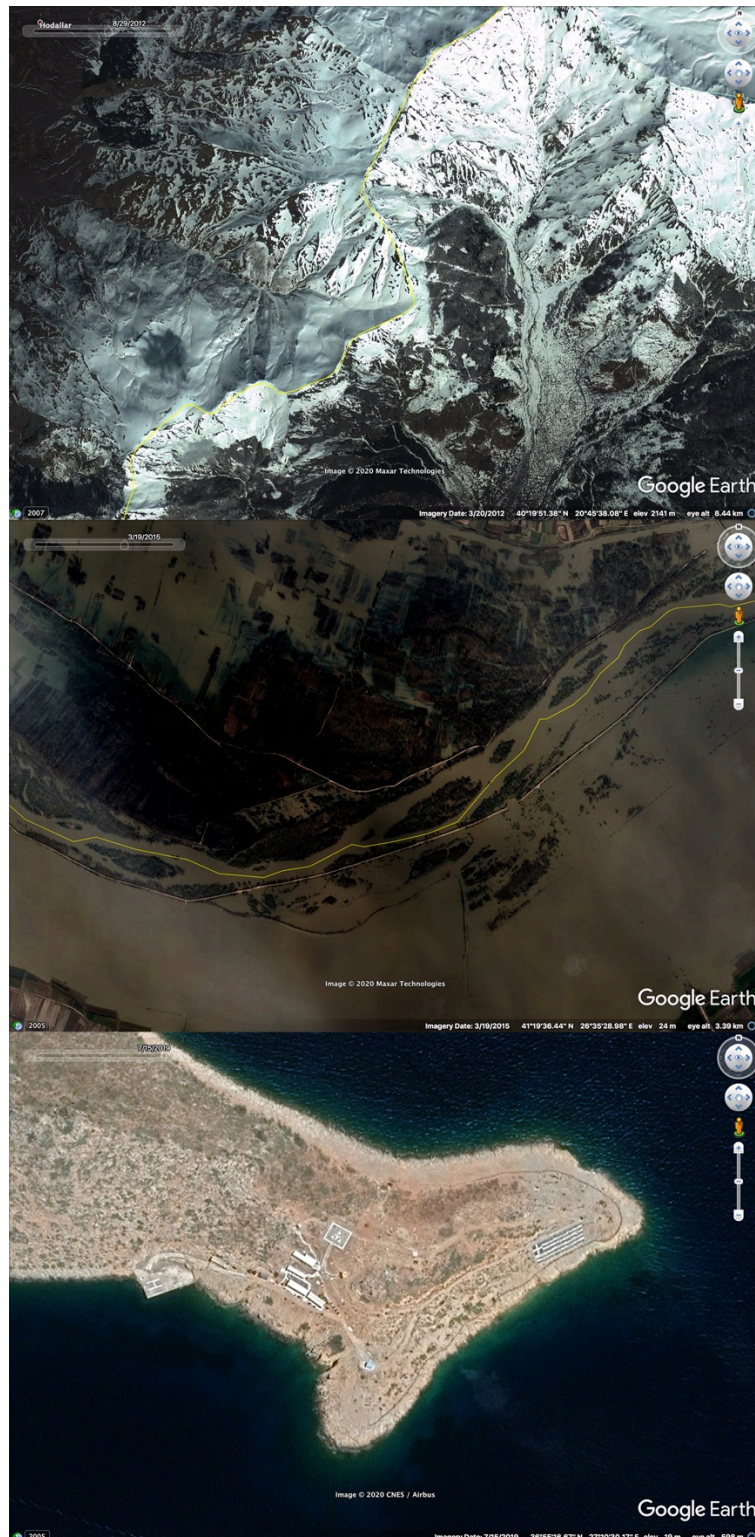
From Natural Borders to Border Natures

"The lie of the mountains, seas, and rivers [in Europe], which serve as boundaries of the various nations which people it, seems to have fixed forever their number and size. We may fairly say that the political order of the Continent is in some sense the work of nature."

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Extrait du projet de paix perpétuelle de l'Abbé de Saint Pierre*.

"But aren't we forgetting the world of things themselves, the sand, the water, the mud, the reeds of the marsh?"

Michel Serres, *The Natural Contract*.



The border between Greece and Albania along the ridge of Grammos/Gramoz mountain (top), the Greek-Turkish Evros/Meriç river border (middle), and a military base on the Greek island of Pserimos, in the SE Aegean Sea (bottom).

i. Natural Borders: Bounding Greece

"South of Albania, more mountains are the norm. The Pindus Range parallels the Ionian seacoast from the (Greek) island of Corfu to near the southern tip of the Greek Peloponnisos. In addition to its territory on the peninsula mainland, Greece also currently lays claim to 2,000 islands in the Ionian, Mediterranean, and Aegean Seas. Many of Greece's Aegean island holdings lie only a few miles off the coast of Turkey. Further south, Greece's Aegean seacoast is rocky and irregular and uninviting."

U. S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences.¹

The borderline delineating the Greek territory has been drawn, erased, and redrawn several times over since the collapse of the empires in the early 20th century. In the South, East and West, the border cuts over seas (the Libyan, Aegean and Ionian Sea respectively) and winds through archipelagos. In the North, it zig-zags along mountain crests, gorges, lakes, and a handful of valleys, where the six official crossing points to Albania, North Macedonia and Bulgaria, are located. In the North-East, it meanders along the river Evros/Meriç/Maritsa. With the exception of a newly erected "technical obstacle"² - the 12 km-long fence in the Evros region - the entire length of the Greek border coincides with what could be described as naturally determined barriers, or "natural borders". Over 60 percent³ of lands (and waters - lakes and rivers) along the northern border are designated as National Forests, National Parks, or Protected Wetlands, areas which – for the most part - are sparsely inhabited and owned and managed by the state. At places, these nature reserves overlap and alternate with military zones spanning the border, to an an extent where, I will argue, one is often constitutive of the other.

In Greece, as elsewhere, placing borders along natural markers has historically helped construct the idea of a unified and bounded space within which the politics of purity, nation, and history can unfold. Scripted over uninviting, and seemingly impenetrable terrains, these natural boundaries are thought to seal the nation – and, by extension, Europe's south-eastern extremities - from outside threat, and have historically performed as landscapes along which nationalist imaginaries of "Greekness" are inscribed. Fertile with antiquities⁴, and charged with historical references, the landscapes and seascapes

¹ Dawn Stram Statham, Monte Smith, Ric Holmes, *Cultural Landmines in the Balkans: How the Land and Its History Have Kept a People At War*, (Washington DC: U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences, 2001).

² As I will discuss in part two, *Anáchoma*, both the Greek and European border guard agencies refer to the fence in Evros as a "Technical Obstacle".

³ Approximately 942 kilometres of the 1485-kilometre-long boundary between Greece, Turkey, Bulgaria, the Republic of Northern Macedonia, and Albania, fall within nature reserves. Calculated by author, based on information provided upon request in the form of GIS files by the Geographic Society of the Hellenic Military.

⁴ The Greek anthropologist Eleana Yalouri describes how, in the Greek imaginary "The Greek earth is blessed because it is

contained within these borders offer themselves as canvases over which the dominant narrative establishes continuums between pre-classical and contemporary Greece; Ancient Greeks it is said, inhabited the same space that modern Greeks inhabit today, as did the empires of Alexander the Great, and the Byzantium⁵. It was over this same sea, the narrative goes, that the thalassocracy of classical Athens ruled, and it was from these mountains that the rebellion that ousted the Ottoman empire was launched, that the invading Italian forces were repelled in 1940, and the communist partisans were defeated in 1949. As I will discuss, “the mountains” or “the dry islands” are not only materially complex, and powerful, terrains, but also potent spaces within the Greek imaginary. To evoke them in domestic political discourse strikes sensitive chords, resonant with the troubled histories of the modern Greek nation. It is through such discourses, tangling history with myth, and the politics of the sublime, that natural landmarks are used to establish “essential links between politics, people, and the natural setting”⁶ and become technologies of territory in their own right. Ultimately, “natural borders” birth “natural subjects”⁷, ones that have a natural right over the territory, before others. To transgress these borders is an unnatural act undertaken by “aliens”.

This thesis will seek to trouble such naturalised understandings of borders and nationhood. Focusing on three sites along the “natural borders” of Greece - the mountainous, trilateral, lake borders of Prespa/Prespa/Prespës with North Macedonia and Albania; the river border of Evros/Meriç/Maritsa separating Greece from Bulgaria and Turkey, and the maritime border of the Aegean Sea with Turkey - I will think *through* border landscapes to explore the contestations and troubled histories these contain and sustain, and to interrogate emerging and past orders of state power. I will ask: how should “natural borders” be theorized and researched today, and how can a more capacious understanding of the seemingly stable, and opposing, ontologies of borders and nature, re-inform our understandings of agency, causality, and violence at the edges of nation-states? Ultimately, how can we sense, visualise, and challenge, these agentive forces and the violence these unleash on those who inhabit or attempt to cross it unauthorized. How do they register on the earth and sea’s body?

fertile, its fertility lying in its richness in antiquities. Antiquities are depicted as natural products of the Greek land” Eleana Yalouri, *The Acropolis: Local fame, global claim*. (Oxford; New York: Berg, 2001), 65-66. Drawing from Yalouri, the anthropologist David Sutton notes how antiquities as “natural products” of the land “ground the political body of the nation by demonstrating its emergence from that territory and its “natural” endowments”⁴ David Sutton, “The Concealed and the Revealed. Looking to the Hidden Bounty of the Land in Crisis Times”, in *Critical Times in Greece. Anthropological Engagements with the Crisis*, ed. Dimitris Dalakoglou and Georgios Agelopoulos, (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 86-101, 100.

⁵ To be sure, such imagined continuums cannot be contained within these rigid, and limited, boundaries. Irredentist imaginaries still speak of a larger Greece, from the Euphrates, to the “Pillars of Hercules” (the straits of Gibraltar), along the traces of Greece’s past.

⁶ Jean Gottman, *The Significance of Territory*, (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press 1973), 63-65, quoted in Stuart Elden, “The Significance of Territory”, *Geographica Helvetica* 68, no.1 (2013): 65–68.

⁷ This is by no means unique to the Greek national imaginary, and persists among settler colonial contexts, most notorious among which is the American imaginary of “nature’s nation”, whose citizens, according to Donald Pease, “believe, by way of the supreme fiction called natural law, that the ruling assumptions of their national compact [...] could be understood as indistinguishable from the sovereign power creative of nature.” Donald E. Pease, “National Identities, Postmodern Artifacts, and Postnational Narratives”, in *National Identities and Post-Americanist Narratives*, ed. Donald E. Pease (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994).

These are places that I know well. Growing up in Greece, I have hiked, sailed, or driven through all of these border landscapes, several times. However, my choice to focus on the Greek borders is not simply based on my familiarity, or proximity, to these terrains. Rather, it is dictated by their recent emergence as central nodes to a world-wide corridor of sovereign violence. As I will argue below, this is the result of a sudden, global shift that endowed these spaces with explicit powers. To be sure, this is not a potency that lies in their aforementioned mythic endowment alone, or, indeed, their sheer scale; seas here are not rougher than elsewhere, rivers are not wider or more rapid, mountains are not higher, steeper, or colder. Quite the opposite, the enclosed Aegean waters are significantly more tranquil than those of the open ocean or even the central Mediterranean; the Evros/Meriç pales in comparison to larger transboundary rivers like the Rio Grande in the US - Mexico border, the Mekong river separating Laos from Thailand and Myanmar, or the Ganges, emptying its waters in the Bay of Bengal and constantly reconfiguring the border between India and Bangladesh; the mountains of Prespa reach a maximum altitude of 2601 metres and are accessible with minimal equipment for several months of the year, significantly less rugged or hostile than other notorious border ridges like the contested Karakoram range in Kashmir, or the Alps, increasingly crossed by migrants on their way from Italy to France. Augmenting the capacity of these borders as impediments to movement, however, is the proximity at which these different terrains are located. Often, a border crosser has to intersect sea, river, and mountain, within the space a few kilometres. “In Greece” notes the French historian Fernand Braudel, “it is often possible to climb up above the belt of orange and olive trees, pass through all the European zones of vegetation and arrive practically at the point of all-year-round snow”⁸.

But, crucially, what makes these borders particularly powerful, and relevant to my research, is their location on the intersection of three continents - Europe, Africa and Asia - which places them at the nexus of various mobilities, and geopolitical contestations. When researching these borderlands, one never only interrogates isolated sites. Rather, planetary patterns of governance emerge, which speak to logistical routes and tropes of displacement that are intimately tied to armed conflict, environmental degradation, or financial collapse across different continents. Recent examples include planetary infrastructural projects such as the Chinese “Belt and Road” initiative and new pipelines for hydrocarbons⁹, and, importantly, what in 2015-16 came to be called the “refugee crisis”, or, more optimistically, the “long summer of migration”¹⁰, which saw more than a million people cross these borders into Europe, and several thousand more dying in their attempt to do so. These mass

⁸ Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, (Oakland: University of California Press 1992), 25. Braudel uses the term “vertical norths” to describe this steep topography where mountain ranges rise up from the sea, a condition which he, reductively, identifies as particular to the Mediterranean region.

⁹ Namely, the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline, 99 percent complete at the time of writing, which will transport Natural Gas from the Caspian Sea to Central Europe, and the Eastern-Mediterranean pipeline, which is planned to span from the Levantine oil fields off the shores of Cyprus and Israel, through Greece to Italy. The port of Piraeus, the biggest in Greece and one of the biggest in the Mediterranean was leased to China Ocean Shipping Company (COSCO) in 2009, and then privatised and sold in to COSCO in 2016. Close to the port, a large railway terminal is being constructed, transforming the area in a major logistical hub of the “Belt and Road” initiative.

¹⁰ Bernd Kasperek, Marc Speer, “Of Hope, Hungary and the Long Summer of Migration”, *Border monitoring*, September 9 2015. available at: <https://bordermonitoring.eu/ungarn/2015/09/of-hope-en/>, (accessed April 2019).

movements re-activated these borders that had for years been hibernating in a state of low intensity conflict¹¹ and thrust them into the central stage of global politics and academic research.

ii. Intersecting Temporalities

A Decade of Crises/One Hundred Years of State-Building/Border Tectonics

Upon their crossing of these borders, such intertwining global trajectories crosscut a series of layering temporalities. A few years before the “long summer” of 2015, these borders had garnered global attention due to another “crisis”: the global “financial” or “debt crisis”¹² of the late 2000s, for which Greece was one of the epicentres, and which has been dictating internal fiscal and social policy since¹³. These successive, and intersecting, “crises” amplified the existing internal divisions between the European core and its periphery, and confirmed the country’s position as Europe’s “Other within”¹⁴. Both were followed by a third crisis (this time without quotation marks), the global health crisis of the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic, which all but sealed the border. Following these crises, Greece, like many other countries along the European Southern periphery, is now a borderland: a liminal place between continents and vectors of movement; a testing ground for sovereign power; a post-colonial *frontier*¹⁵, for what has –not without debate– come to be called “Fortress Europe”. It is here, at the southern tip of the Balkan peninsula, that the threshold shoring up cultural-geographic binary divisions of West/East, North/South is most strenuously remembered and defended. It is also here that it is most permeable, and that borders are most volatile.

¹¹ The increasing securitization and lethality of the world’s borders can be described as a form of shadow conflict. Critical migration scholars such as Nicholas De Genova and Frances Webber have described this contemporary condition as a “war on migration”. Francis Webber, “The War on Migration”, in *Beyond Criminology: Taking Harm Seriously*, ed. Paddy Hillyard (Ann Arbor MI: Pluto Press 2004). Similarly, Sandro Mezzadra and Maurice Stierl write of a “Mediterranean battlefield of migration”. Sandro Mezzadra, Maurice Stierl. “The Mediterranean Battlefield of Migration”, *Open Democracy*, April 2019, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/mediterranean-battlefield-migration/>, accessed April 2019).

¹² I use quotation marks because this is a term which will not be taken for granted throughout this thesis, particularly when used to describe the movements of people fleeing conflict, poverty, or environmental degradation, or the structural, selective, recession of neoliberal capitalism.

¹³ The struggles against austerity imposed by a “troika” of International Monetary Fund, the European Central Bank, and the European Commission, have been called “the Greek Spring”. See Sandro Mezzadra “In the Wake of the Greek Spring and the Summer of Migration” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 117, no.4, (October 2018): 925–933.

¹⁴ Stathis Kouvelakis, “Borderland, Greece and the EU’s Southern Question”, *New Left Review*, March-April, 2018, newleftreview.org/issues/II110/articles/stathis-kouvelakis-borderland, (accessed September 2018)

¹⁵ Despite the two often being used interchangeably, the frontier is a radically different concept and spatial regime to that of the border. As the anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli points out, “the frontier is a concept, not a place. It is a way of imagining space so that various things can be done there. It attempts to govern action and things therein by describing the nature of the region as the limit to settled law, sociality, and meaning.” On the frontier, Povinelli notes, “ruthless tactics are justified; the law can be suspended in relation to them”. Elizabeth A. Povinelli, “Three Imaginaries of the Frontier with Illustrations”, *Frontiers Imaginaries*, <http://www.frontierimaginaries.org/organisation/essays/the-imaginaries-of-the-frontier-with-illustrations>, (accessed November 2017).

During the writing of this thesis alone, from 2016 to 2020, the border in question has undergone several transformations, and displacements. The signing of the infamous EU-Turkey deal in March 2016¹⁶ extended the border outwards – or “externalized” it - into Turkey, as it did inwards, to the numerous camps that were built in the Greek islands and mainland. In early 2019, the deployment of the first mission of the European Border and Coastguard Agency, Frontex, on non-EU soil, at the Albanian-Greek border, with the purpose of preventing migrants from fleeing Greece via the western Balkan route, furthered this double bind. Months later, in February and March 2020, the deteriorating relations between the EU and Turkey over their mutual involvement in conflicts in Syria and Libya, and the long standing Greek-Turkish dispute over their territorial waters and contiguous zones at the Aegean Sea, led to a standoff between the two countries. Turkey declared the EU-Turkey deal defunct, opened its borders, and assisted asylum seekers to cross into Greece, therefore overtly instrumentalising them as pawns to a geopolitical tug-of-war. Greece, backed by the EU, declared this a “hybrid invasion” and deployed large numbers of police and military along the border. This confrontation lasted for several days, leading to ever more violent practices of border defence, which, as I will discuss, culminated with the killings of border crossers by the Greek armed forces. Hot on the heels of this standoff came the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic to effectively seal the border and render the state of emergency all but permanent; migrants were now a threat to public hygiene and were to be prevented from reaching Greek soil at all cost. As I write these lines, in late 2020, a new border fence is being erected on the Greek banks of Evros, a floating barrier is being designed to be installed in the Aegean, several new detention facilities are being built in the islands, and asylum seekers who arrive in Greek islands are being arrested by the Greek Coast Guard, put on life rafts and left in mid-sea to drift back to Turkey¹⁷. Like the virus, over these four years, the Greek borders have gradually mutated into a more deadly configuration: in the words of the EU commissioner Ursula von der Leyen, they are now Europe’s “shield”¹⁸.

These successive, if accelerated, deformations of what is both the site and the subject of my research are not uncommon to scholars working on the consistently uneasy border areas. Interestingly, I found that even when I failed to wholly address these rapid changes in my writing, these usually came to corroborate the thesis, rather than throw it off balance. They emerged as instantiations of calculated power asymmetries that are deeply rooted in the histories and geographies of the region, ones that are, sadly, less contested than confirmed, and amplified, in times of emergency. This realisation called for an equally flexible approach to doing research, one that would be able to adapt along with the border

¹⁶ Under this deal, Turkey agreed to implement stricter border controls, in return for money in humanitarian aid and a promise to reopen talks of EU accession. Greece, in turn, was to accommodate the migrants that were -and still to this day are- stranded in its territory in camps (hotspots), and begin deportations to Turkey, which it thereby would recognise as a “safe third country”. See “EU-Turkey statement”, *European council*, March 18, 2016, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/03/18/eu-turkey-statement/> (accessed March 2016).

¹⁷ I call these pushbacks-by-proxy “drift-backs”.

¹⁸ Jeniffer Rankin, “Migration: EU Praises Greece as ‘shield’ after Turkey opens border” *The Guardian*, March 3, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/03/migration-eu-praises-greece-as-shield-after-turkey-opens-border> (accessed March 2020).

and recalibrate its gaze to respond to constant shifts in focus, geographical but also temporal.

To this effect, in this study, the social temporalities of the three aforementioned, recent and ongoing, “crises” of the past decade, are examined against the broader historical context of the last 100 years since the borders in question were demarcated, within which they are nested. I argue that the originary violence of border demarcation, and the equally violent practices that were subsequently deployed in order to foster cultural and ethnic homogeneity in border areas, contribute to the rendering of contemporary border environments into lethal frontier spaces. To theorize the residual effects of such unpast histories of state violence, I turn to the operative concept of “haunting”, or “ghosting”. In so doing, I follow the sociologist Avery Gordon, who uses the term to describe the way in which “abusive systems of power make themselves known and their impacts felt in everyday life, especially when they are supposedly over and done with [...] or when their oppressive nature is continuously denied”¹⁹.

Both the contemporary and historical, in turn, exist within the wider geological, telluric, botanical, and marine times of the respective natural environments that host them: if a long enough temporal perspective is taken, what is known as ‘geological time’ or what Fernand Braudel would describe as the “longue durée”²⁰ – an extended historical perspective that includes “the environment, topography, climate, and wind over centuries”²¹ – land itself changes, and along with it, so do border lines.

Scripted over mountain peaks, rivers and archipelagos, natural borders are therefore here understood not as immutable but in a state of continual becoming and transformation, constantly deforming, eroding, faulting, thrusting, subducting, moving laterally and vertically; folding. Some move faster, like the flow of Evros/Meriç river that carries sediment downstream, altering the banks and creating interstitial (is)lands over which Greece and Turkey lay equal claims and where migrants often find themselves abandoned by both border authorities. Some move slower, like the tectonic plates of Adria, Eurasia and Africa that collide under the Albanian-Pindos cordillera and the Aegean seabed, causing the mountains of Prespa to rise²², the landmasses of the Greek and Anatolian peninsulas to converge, and the island of Crete to drift South across the Libyan Sea and towards Africa at a pace of 4-5 cm/year²³. Others, like the liquid body of the Aegean Sea are in permanent periodical motion while rising, slowly but surely, along with the temperature of the planet. Excluding punctual geologic events, like volcanic eruptions, earthquakes and landslides, these movements leave little trace and are too slow for humans to perceive. Like the movements of the people that cross them, however, kinematics (as

¹⁹ Avery F. Gordon, “Some Thoughts on Haunting and Futurity” *Borderlands* 10 no. 2, (October 2011): 3. See also Avery Gordon, *Ghostly matters: Haunting and the sociological imagination*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

²⁰ Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean*.

²¹ Eyal Weizman, *Forensic Architecture*, 253.

²² Markos D. Tranos, et al, “Faulting Deformation of the Mesohellenic Trough in the Kastoria-Nestorion Region” *Bulletin of the Geological Society of Greece* 43, no.1, (January 2010).

²³ Crete is expected to touch the Cyrenaica in 5 to 6 million years. See Athanasios Ganas et al, “NOA faults: a digital database for active faults in Greece”, *Bulletin of the Geological Society of Greece* 47, no.2, (2013): 518-530.

geologists call them²⁴) are accelerated by anthropogenic climate change. Increasingly nervous, these movements of the earth's mantle put into question traditional "cartographic reason"²⁵, unsettling notions of place, localness, territory²⁶, and the very idea of "natural borders" as impermanent and immobile, as expressed by Rousseau in the opening quote of this introduction²⁷.

These different temporal scales and speeds of the border are "interrelated and convertible to one another"²⁸, as violence. When they *fold*, I will show, borders produce events as slow as mountains, or as fleeting as waves, enforced disappearances, and shootings.

iii. Border Agency: De-naturalizing Violence

In response to such cross scalar and sequential expansions of contemporary borders, recent critical border scholarship has meticulously mapped the ways in which national boundaries bleed away from the demarcation "line", or from the infrastructures – border markers, walls, fences, and checkpoints – that are used to enforce it. To be sure, the gesture of drawing a border line on a map remains a gesture of power and violence. However, lines - scholars propose - "convey a certitude not quite consonant with the messy reality of borderlands"²⁹. National boundaries should instead be understood as porous and permeable "border zones"³⁰, as "mobile, perspectival, and relational borderscapes"³¹, or as "regimes": contested spatialities that are the result of "more or less ordered ensemble[s] of practices and knowledge-power complexes"³². Increasingly, the border is also understood to be produced in digital space. It inhabits the "cloud" as much as it inhabits the ground³³, it becomes diffuse, invisible and portable - no longer localizable in one place of passage only but produced within urban and digital

²⁴ Tranos et al, *Faulting Deformation*.

²⁵ Denis Cosgrove, *Apollo's Eye: A Cartographic Genealogy of the Earth in the Western Imagination*. (Baltimore,MD:Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003)

²⁶ Doreen Massey, "Landscape as Provocation: Reflections on Moving Mountains", *Journal of Material Culture*, 11 no.1-2, (July 2006): 33-48.

²⁷ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Extrait du projet de paix perpétuelle de l'Abbé de Saint Pierre* (1756), quoted in Peter Sahlins. "Natural Frontiers Revisited: France's Boundaries since the Seventeenth Century", *The American Historical Review* 95, no. 5 (December 1990): 1423-1451.

²⁸ Weizman, *Forensic Architecture*, 114.

²⁹ Bhaskar Sarkar, "On no man's (Is)land: futurities at the border", *Transnational Cinemas*, 9 no.1, (June 2018): 47-67.

³⁰ Vassilis Tsianos et al., "Transnational migration Theory and method of an ethnographic analysis of border regimes", *University of Sussex, Centre for Migration Research* 55, (April 2009).

³¹ Prem Kumar Rajaram & Carl Grundy-Warr, *Borderscapes: Hidden Geographies and Politics at Territory's Edge*, (Minneapolis MN: University of Minnesota press, 2007),10.

³² Serhat Karakayali & Vassilis Tsianos "Border Regimes on the south-eastern border of Europe", *Melting Pot Europa*, March 3, 2005. www.meltingpot.org/Border-regimes-on-the-south-eastern-border-of-Europe.html#.X8kpSi2Q2K4, (accessed November 2020)

³³ Louise Amoore, *Cloud Ethics: Algorithms and the Attributes of Ourselves and Others*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2020).

spaces through daily, mundane discourses and practices. Such a border is porous and elastic, it multiplies, and seeps into the performances and intimacies of daily life. It is through these increasingly flexible bordering processes, not lines, that bodies are excluded - stopped, delayed, detained, deported, made to die, or killed - on the world's borders. And it is through these same processes that some, and not others, are often also included, yet always under specific conditions and subject to various hierarchies of power. While this critical scholarship offers a powerful ally and an invaluable point of departure for my thesis, it often overlooks, I argue, important questions regarding the physical experience of border crossings, and the material production (and deduction) of life on the edge of the nation state.

Increasingly, borders are "implemented within a complex set of relations with "nature""³⁴. Beyond shoring states off, border lines and fences assert a form of spatio-temporal control on mobility by making it "run through conduits"³⁵ - chosen routes and environments whereby movement can be regulated and subjected to varying, designed, interactions with the natural elements. Long known, and felt, by border crossers, and operationalised by agencies tasked with border security, the materialities of border zones remain vastly less explored by academics and, to a degree, activists. As several operational documents show, most prominent among which is the US Border Patrol's "Prevention Through Deterrence" policy³⁶, border *agencies* meticulously study and mobilize the *agency* inherent in the natural elements at the border: the cold, choppy waves of the Aegean Sea; the fast-flowing waters of Evros; and the thick foliage, the beasts, the steep ridges of the Prespa mountains; or, beyond the scope of this thesis, the scorching heat of the Sahara and Sonora deserts and the punishing cold of the Balkan route, the Alps, and the Anatolian plateau between Turkey and Iran, to name a few. As the unfathomable (and underrepresentative) statistics of people dying of "natural causes" (such as drowning, exhaustion or hypothermia) in borders suggest, here, the spatial "relationship between politics and death"³⁷ is reconfigured as a deep entanglement, whereby law, technology, military contingency planning and nature are drawn into violent, intentional assemblages, specifically designed to administer physical and mental harm at the border, and to hide its traces.

Mediated by the natural elements, this is a violence that is often indirect. As the American anthropologist Jason De León notes within the context of his research in the Sonoran borderlands: "No one individual is responsible for it. Moreover, it often occurs out of sight, many portray it as

³⁴ Hillary Cunningham, "Permeabilities, Ecology and Geopolitical Boundaries" in *A Companion to Border Studies*, ed. Thomas M. Wilson and Hastings Donnan, (Hoboken NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2012), 371-384.

³⁵ Timothy Cresswell, *On the move: Mobility in the modern western world*, (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), 49.

³⁶ the "Prevention Through Deterrence" programme makes explicit use of the harsh Sonora border terrain to deter migrants from crossing into US territory. The European Border Surveillance System (EUROSUR), established in 2013, fuses meteorological, satellite and other cartographic data in order to 'enhance situational awareness and improve the reaction capability of the Member States'.

³⁷ Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics", *Public Culture* 15, no.1, (January 2003): 11-40.

‘natural’ and it can easily be denied by state actors and erased by the (...) environment”³⁸. In order to discuss, and de-naturalize, this violence, we need to take into account the different beings and processes through which it is articulated, but also the various velocities and rhythms it might be operating in. It requires that we broaden our spatio-temporal horizon and, as Shela Sheikh points out,

that we reposition ourselves, philosophically, legally, politically and ethically, in the space between certain extremes, themselves built upon violent historical categorisations and exclusions: human/nonhuman, subject/object, culture/nature, physis/tekhnē, active/passive; the list goes on.³⁹

Such an undertaking requires that we reject dialectical boundaries and instead begin to think of power, and agency, as the product of lateral relations and collaborations between diverse human actors, forces, and discourses⁴⁰, as well as what the French theorist Bruno Latour describes as *actants*, “sources of action that can be either human or nonhuman”⁴¹, such as geological formations, waves, plants, insects, animal species, or selves. As I will discuss in the thesis, when it comes to border death, very rarely is there a visible thread tying victim to perpetrator. Consequently, border agency cannot be understood in linear terms. Instead, it must be theorized as a distributive, and spatially and temporally deep process, whereby “indirect forms of causality, multidimensional and distributed over extended spaces and time durations”⁴² act on border subjects, and crossers. Causality is here “more emergent than efficient, more fractal than linear. Instead of an effect obedient to a determinant, one finds circuits in which effect and cause alternate position and rebound on each other.”⁴³ To account for such complex causal structures, the British/Israeli architect Eyal Weizman, before me, has proposed the term “field causality”: “an inherently spatial form of causality whose employment seeks to reconnect the multiple threads that linear juridical protocols have torn apart.” Such an understanding of causality is extremely relevant to my work.

Saying that, I will also be conscious not to reproduce the dangerous argument that paints the border as a space of wilderness. No matter how non-hierarchical, cross-border movement is always subject to some degree of planning: neither border, nor nature operate independently. Border violence is therefore understood in this thesis not simply as an emergent effect of heterogeneous interactions, but also as the product of “*deliberate efforts* to endow things with new properties.”⁴⁴, that is, the result of design. I

³⁸ Jason De León, *The Land of Open Graves, Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail*, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2015), 16.

³⁹ Shela Sheikh, “Violence”, in *Postuman Glossary*, eds., Rosi Braidotti & Maria Hlavajova, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018).

⁴⁰ Michel Foucault, “The subject and power”, *Critical Inquiry* 8, no.4, (Summer, 1982): 777-795.

⁴¹ Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*, (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 232.

⁴² Weizman, *Forensic Architecture*.

⁴³ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 33.

⁴⁴ Noortje Marres, “Why Political Ontology Must Be Experimentalized: On Eco-Homes as Devices of Participation”, *Social Studies of Science* 43, no.3, (April 2013): 417-43.

will therefore discuss natural borders as “explicit contracts concluded with the natural world”⁴⁵: nature here furthers the capacity for border patrol while deflecting culpability from the institutional and military bodies responsible.

iv. Border Natures

It is only through a small and emerging subfield within border studies (which the Canadian anthropologist Hilary Cunningham has called the “ecology-border nexus”⁴⁶) that border and migration scholars have recently begun to consider the involvement of more-than-humans in bordering processes. These scholars have brought environmental thinking in a productive dialogue with border studies, introducing terms such as “hybrid geography”⁴⁷, “hybrid collectif”⁴⁸, “border enforcement collective” or “nature-inclusive collective”⁴⁹, “hostile terrain”⁵⁰, “hostile environments”⁵¹, “landscape as space of moral alibi”⁵², “border ecologies”⁵³, and “ecologies of power”⁵⁴ to describe the geo-political agency of natural environments and their hybridisation and weaponisation (not exclusively) in border contexts. It is within this scholarship that I position my own enquiry.

In my research, these hybrid boundary environments will be theorised as *border natures*. Crafted as a synthesis of nature, space, technology and law, and connecting actors as diverse as border authorities, fences, technologies of surveillance, political and legal orders, human and non-human forms of life - rivers, waves, mountains – border natures occupy a liminal position between states, mobilities, and species. They are the turning inside-out of natural borders; an inversal of the well-established socio-military concept, to critically include the multiple human agencies, and their insidious use of ecological dynamics for the work of border defence. The change in order here is not incidental. *Border* comes

⁴⁵ Michel Serres, *The Natural Contract*, translated by Elizabeth MacArthur and William Paulson (Ann Arbor MI: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 44. Serres calls this “geopolitics in the sense of the real Earth”, *physopolitics* (from Greek word for nature, “physis”).

⁴⁶ Cunningham, “Permeabilities”.

⁴⁷ Sarah Whatmore “Hybrid Geographies: Natures, Cultures, Spaces”, *Thousand Oaks* 56, no.1, (CA: SAGE, 2002).

⁴⁸ Michel Callon, et al., “Agency and the Hybrid Collectif”, *South Atlantic Quarterly* 94, no. 2, (1995): 481–507.

⁴⁹ Juanita Sundberg, “Diabolic Caminos in the Desert and Cat Fights on the Río: A Posthumanist Political Ecology of Boundary Enforcement in the United States–Mexico Borderlands”. *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 101, no.2, (March 2011).

⁵⁰ De León, *Open Graves*.

⁵¹ Lorenzo Pezzani, “Hostile Environments”, www.hostileenvironments.eu/hostile-environments/ (accessed October 2020)

⁵² Roxanne Lynn Doty, “Bare life: border-crossing deaths and spaces of moral alibi”, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 29, no.4, (January 2011), 599–612.

⁵³ Joshua Bolchover and Peter Hasdell, *Border Ecologies, Hong Kong's Mainland Frontier*, (Basil: Birkhäuser 2016).

⁵⁴ Pierre Belanger, Alexander Arroyo, *Ecologies of Power Countermapping the Logistical Landscapes & Military Geographies of the U.S. Department of Defence*, (Cambridge MA: MIT Press 2016).

before *nature*, precisely to render audible and emphasise the ways in which bordering processes actively reconfigure natural environments. Rather than describing territorial limits as simply scripted over natural backdrops, border natures refer to the agency of nature in border assemblages but also, inversely, to the agency of borders in shaping natural worlds, and in affecting both human and non-human forms of life, both directly and indirectly. When set next to each other, the two cross-pollinate to produce a potentially lethal hybrid.

Border natures go against anthropocentric approaches that understand nature as passive or inert matter – “merely the receptacle for human strivings”⁵⁵, but also sit uneasily with ecocentrist concepts that posit it as a separate realm that is entirely “external” to human society. Instead, with this term I propose a theoretical device that operates transversally across the natural and cultural domains⁵⁶ to place human worlds and constructs - like borders - within nature, but “as one of its constituent parts, rather than subject to its transcendental laws”⁵⁷. Returning to Rousseau with a critical attitude, therefore, boundaries scripted along geophysical features, and the “political orders” they engender, are here understood as never solely “the work of nature”. Rather, they form part of a collective within which both human and nonhuman communities intersect and interact. Borders are not “the work of”, but *part of*, nature.

Border natures are complex, variegated socio-material assemblages. The nature nested within them is, as the American ecofeminist scholar Donna Haraway suggests, an intricate mesh where political, economic, technical, cultural, mythic and organic dimensions “collapse into each other in a knot of extraordinary density”⁵⁸. Nevertheless, they inhabit a different kind of kinship to the one Haraway envisions. Border nature is “artifactual”⁵⁹, to be sure, albeit one that includes more-than-humans in human configurations, only to integrate them into systems of spatial exclusion. Therefore, while recognizing the value of posthumanist and neo-materialist thought in conceptualising border agency as immanentist, rather than strictly dialectical, I am conscious not to lose sight of the human inputs and underlying logics and orders that, actively and purposefully, shape border environments.

Coining the term, therefore, I argue for a wider, more inclusive and reflexive understanding of nature, one that accommodates the technological, the historical, the spatial, the biological and the socio-atmospheric under the same operative concept. This is not a nature that is passive, but one which has the capacity to act within the border assemblage, and to record and represent these actions, and the

⁵⁵ Bruce Braun, “Environmental Issues: Inventive Life”, *Progress in Human Geography* 32, no.5, (October 2018): 668.

⁵⁶ Felix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, (London: Continuum, 2007), 43.

⁵⁷ Bruce Braun, “Towards a New Earth and a New Humanity: Nature, Ontology, Politics” in *A Critical Reader: David Harvey*, ed. Noel Castree, Derek Gregory, (Hoboken NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006), 195.

⁵⁸ Haraway, “A Game of Cat’s Cradle: Science Studies, Feminist Theory, Cultural Studies”, *Configurations* 2, no.1, (Winter 1994): 63.

⁵⁹ Donna Haraway, “A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Social Feminism in the 1980s”, in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed., Linda J. Nicholson, (London: Routledge 1990), 190–233. Haraway argues for a disaffiliation from human/non-human manichaeist divisions, and instead proposes forms of kinship that construct an “artifactual nature”, or “natureculture”.

routes that sovereign power takes along different frontier landscapes. In order to intercept these recordings, I employed a methodology that is equally polyperspectival and flexible, and is attuned to more-than-human border dwellers⁶⁰, as it is to human stories and archives. Such a cross disciplinary and methodologically wide approach allowed me to engage with the spatial complexities that are involved in making and maintaining a border nature, and provided the tools to sense, and to represent, the violence it engenders.

v. Methodology: Border Matters

"There are lines of sedimentation, Foucault says, but also lines of 'fissure' and 'fracture'. Untangling the lines of an apparatus means, in each case, preparing a map, a cartography, a survey of unexplored lands - this is what he calls 'field work'. One has to be positioned on the lines themselves; and these lines do not merely compose an apparatus but pass through it and carry it north to south, east to west or diagonally."

Gilles Deleuze

The thesis is written from the "field" outwards. Standing on the Greek borders/European frontiers, a space that, as I have established, is located on the nexus of geopolitical vectors, and subject to constant and unannounced changes, I position myself "on the lines themselves"⁶¹: both those that demarcate the border, and those that cross and contest it. While located on specific ground (of water, for that matter), this is a research that is never simply local - it is only ever "hereish"⁶² - interrogating both the field itself, and the global dynamics that crush against it. In order to stay close to my research sites while, at the same time, remaining attuned to the leakages of power from, and through these sites, the research necessitated a constant shift between local and global scales, between current events and past histories, as well as between disciplines.

My cross-border field research took me wherever the border reaches. My field practice therefore included experiences as diverse as trekking rocky cliffs littered with the remains of vessels in the

⁶⁰ The American anthropologist Juanita Sundberg calls this a "more-than-human-methodology" Sundberg, "Diabolic *Caminos* in the Desert", 2011.

⁶¹ Gilles Deleuze, *A Thousand Plateaus*, translated by Brian Massumi, (London: Continuum, 2004), 338.

⁶² In Povinelli's words, "As we stretch the local across (...) seeping transits we need not scale up to the Human or the global, but we cannot remain in the local. We can only remain hereish". Elizabeth Povinelli, *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism*, (London and Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 13.

Aegean; driving through muddy dirt-roads to reach off-limits minefields and ad-hoc cemeteries along the Evros/Meriç river banks; scaling peaks, setting trap cameras along disused trails, and collecting botanical samples from abandoned villages in Prespa; visiting courtrooms, state archives, lawyers' offices and flats in which migrants had temporarily settled in Athens. Naturally, it also involved crossing these borders several times to understand them in their full, cross-cultural complexity. These, it should be noted, are sites that I have known well, long before engaging in this research project. As many compatriots of mine, I have grown up sailing the Aegean Sea, and am well versed to its materialities and territorial complexities. I am also lucky enough to own a house in a village of Prespa by the Greek border with Albania, called Oxia. It is there that my interest in borders, and my dislike towards their enforcement, was first manifest - their presence, behind the ridge, always eminent- and where this PhD was primarily written. My later involvement in social initiatives solidary with migrants arriving in Greece through the Aegean in 2015-16 furthered my understanding of the border regime and cemented this interest. Evros was somewhat more foreign to me, but even there I had travelled several times in the past. This research certainly drew from these past experiences, and it reconfigured my relationship with these sites.



Border Pyramid ¹⁶⁸₁ between Greece and North Macedonia, at 2334 metres altitude. Photo by author, July 2020.

Such an approach involves a physical encounter with the border which should, however, not be confused with the perils reserved for people who cross it forcefully and in conditions of utmost precarity. Nevertheless, it has frictions of its own. Despite my advantageous position as a Greek researcher, mostly placed on the “correct” side of the border, my physical presence in my sites of research was not always possible. I was often denied access to detention centres, police and border guard stations, or construction sites⁶³. The shipwrecks that I research happened in waters that are off-limits for civilian navigation and, for all my efforts, I was never permitted to visit one of the key locations

⁶³ Tellingly, in my last visit in Evros region I was –reluctantly- granted entry to the migrant detention centre in Fylakio but was not allowed to enter the construction site of the Trans Adriatic Pipeline compression station in Kipoi, on the basis of safety concerns.

of my research in the Aegean, the island of Farmakonissi. The entire length of the Evros's banks are inaccessible from the Greek side of the border, one only ever catches glimpses of the river while driving on the main road. During several of my field trips to these border zones, I was looked at with suspicion both by authorities and, sometimes, locals. One is not supposed to wander around in border zones ("here, it's the border" I was constantly reminded), much less in a black 4x4 that I happen to be driving. This urged me to find alternative entry points. Entanglements of borders with nature often offered a way in. Parts of the Evros Delta, a designated wetland and famous bird watching site, are tentatively accessible to naturalists. There, bird watching towers and military lookout points emerge from the trees. It is also not uncommon for bird watchers or hunters to stumble upon migrants' decomposed bodies. Similarly, in Prespa, trails that lead to the border are frequented by hikers, botanists, ornithologists, migrants and border guards alike. The few times I met border patrols in both sites, I pretended to be photographing wildlife and, for the most part, I was telling the truth. There was never much else to photograph. To respond to this disproportionate abundance of non-human life at the border, I explored means of gathering testimony that range beyond language, which I found that, when not altogether absent, can be malleable in border contexts, often skewed in media and historical portrayals of events, and undermined in legal and political forums. Similarly, built border architectures, like walls and barracks, were often relegated to the back of my visual practice, while in the foreground were precisely the natural elements that are harvested for their ability to turn border zones into death fields.

To this effect, along with the research work I conducted with migrants, lawyers, and human rights organizations I also formed alliances with organizations and scientists⁶⁴ that study the environment, and consulted relevant studies, in order to understand the physical processes (such as flood, river flow, vegetal growth, wave and current behaviour) that are involved in the making of each of the different border natures I am investigating. These collaborations also allowed me to gain access, both physically and digitally (through cartographic material, transboundary environmental legislation, data on animals' migratory routes and vegetation patterns etc.), into less visible areas of my sites. Last, and perhaps most important, they informed my understanding of *border matters* –plants, alluvial sediment, waves- as evidence.

I also pursued more traditional forms of historical, archival and ethnographic work, drawing from an extensive scholarship, and conducting semi-structured, both formal and informal, interviews with governmental and non-governmental institutional employees, border crossers, local inhabitants, attorneys, journalists, and fellow activists and scholars. During these interviews, I focused as much on the 'hard' information and situated knowledges that were provided by interviewees, as I did on the more nuanced kinds of information, that which is often not said, and which I tried to unearth and

⁶⁴ I am particularly indebted to the Oceanographer Dr Richard Limeburner, for his drift analysis of the Agathonissi shipwreck, and Botanist Fanourios-Nikolaos Sakellarakis, for joining me in the botanic survey of the ruins of Sfika/Besfina village, in Prespa.

triangulate through other areas in my fieldwork. My archival research involved obtaining and engaging a rich body of literature and imagery which was produced for operational purposes. These include protocols of territorial organisation (such as international and bilateral treaties, legislations for land use and civilian access) military reports, as well cartographic information, photographs, operational plans, contracts and tenders, most of which I obtained through Freedom of Information (FOI) requests.

I intended for my critical spatial to be equally broad. This is a practice that is concerned with the spatial imaging of traces of state violence as this registers on the non-built border environment. For each part of the thesis, I adopted a different approach that corresponds to the requirements, and limitations, of each site. In my enquiry into the borders of Prespa, the practice takes the form of documentary filmmaking, camera trapping, archaeology, three-dimensional imaging, and botany. Faced with the erasure of historical traces and human witnesses, I turn to the natural environment to narrate the troubled border histories of the region. For my work in Evros/Meriç, I consider tools through which to circumvent the limitations to visual representation imposed by the border regime. With a military buffer zone restricting access to the river border for academics far and wide, including conservation scientists, I consider oblique ways of sensing the border without ever accessing it. These include practices as diverse as collecting sound recordings of the river's ambient, militarized, acoustics, as well as hydrophone recordings of its tributaries⁶⁵, recorded interviews with locals who, in one way or another, are involved in the maintenance of the border regime, and slow-motion drive-by videos documenting border infrastructures. I also draw heavily from the practice of Forensic Architecture, where I am leading a series of investigations into incidents of profound border violence in the region. These collaborative investigations, which are, in turn, informed by my personal research, are not submitted here as part of my practice. For my last research site, I fuse archival and field research, documentary filmmaking, remote sensing technologies, and cartography, to produce a report which reconstructs the events that preceded and followed the deadly shipwreck of a vessel carrying migrants in the Aegean Sea. In keeping with techniques developed by the Forensic Oceanography research project, I develop a "disobedient gaze"⁶⁶ to monitor the remote workings of border agencies patrolling the maritime border, and to produce visual and cartographic evidence around which to forge legal claims in support of survivors.

These different approaches are all connected by a common thread: The subverting of border surveillance technologies, like satellite photography, motion triggered cameras, maps and meteorological reports, in order to sense and visualise material and other more-than-human processes as both causative agents and mnemonic devices for border violence.

⁶⁵ Hydrophone recordings were a central part of Ifor Duncan's practice, with whom I visited Evros in 2019 and co-authored the respective chapter.

⁶⁶ Charles Heller, et al., "Disobedient Sensing and Border Struggles at the Maritime Frontier of Europe", *Spheres: Journal for Digital Cultures* 4, (2017).

Here, by way of parenthesis, I need to acknowledge a danger that lurks in my choice of research methods, and vocabulary choices: directing the gaze to the terrain, rather than the human histories that cross and inhabit it, can serve to further displace personal stories and subjectivities in an environment that is already hostile to human testimony. Similarly, to speak of, “border natures” in the context of contemporary migration, risks reproducing the dangerous discourse that dehumanizes people on the move, describing them as “alien”, or “sheep” (*koyun* - as migrants are often referred to by smugglers in turkey)⁶⁷ to be run by “coyotes” (slang for smugglers on the US-Mexico border), moving in “waves”, “floods” and “surges”, and intercepted by RABITs (the acronym for Frontex “Rapid Border Intervention Teams”). Such a blurring of people with the natural terrains they inhabit (or in this case, cross) is a well-researched trope that has historically served to rationalise racism and justify colonial regimes. To say that this is not my intention is an understatement. On the contrary, I intend to demonstrate how the “wilderness” to which migrants are often directed, and physical processes like floods and waves, are carefully designed across time and space to be used against mobility.

While aligning myself with an array of scholars that understand migration as a movement ‘that possesses knowledge, follows its own rules, and collectively organises its own praxis’⁶⁸, I also strongly believe that the numerous people who appear in my study don’t need their stories told on their behalf. As Astrida Neimanis points out, “no representation would ever be adequate to the entity represented”⁶⁹. For Neimanis, Eduardo Kohn⁷⁰, and a number of posthumanist scholars, the same is true for non-human entities too. However, this is a visual practice that I am engaging with, precisely tasked with representing the different scales of border violence. Between choosing not to represent or not to engage, I choose to represent. At the very least, however, I am conscious at all times of the politics produced by my representational attempts. Representation, in my writing and practice is the product of a constant negotiation between notions of transparency, opacity⁷¹, and obscurity. As I will demonstrate, borders demand silence from those who inhabit and enforce them. They rely on the erasure of certain “unruly” populations and subjects, an erasure which is often predicated on race, national identity, or ethnicity. On the other hand, being visible on the border often equals being subject to systems of knowledge, power and, ultimately, to indexing, incarceration and deportation. Reflecting on this double-edged condition, rather than claiming to ‘shed light’ on the concealed territories I research, I try to mediate it, so that it can penetrate some surfaces – particularly those obscured by state practices - while leaving others opaque. This kind of condition requires critical visual practitioners to look for means

⁶⁷ Dimitris Papadopoulos and Vassilis Tsianos, “The Autonomy of Migration: The Animals of Undocumented Mobility”, in *Deleuzian Encounters: Studies in Contemporary Social Issues* ed. Anna Hickey-Moody and Peta Malins. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

⁶⁸ Dimitris Papadopoulos et al., “After citizenship: autonomy of migration, organisational ontology and mobile commons”, *Citizenship Studies*, 17, no.2, (April 2013): 178-196.

⁶⁹ See Astrida Neimanis, “No Representation without Colonisation? (Or, Nature Represents Itself)”, *Somatechnics* 5, no. 2, (Autumn 2015): 135-153.

⁷⁰ Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think, Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2013), 84.

⁷¹ for “the right to opacity” see Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, (Chicago: University of Michigan Press, 1997).

of procuring images of border violence, and founding political claims that go beyond the stereotypical portrait of the “vulnerable” refugee⁷². This is precisely why I argue that it is by foregrounding and “contaminating” natural processes, while at the same time relegating the more visible manifestations of border violence to the background, we can contribute towards an emancipatory politics at the world’s borders.



fig.3. Boats and life vests used in migrant crossings aggregating on the shores of Agathonissi island. Photo by author, May 2018.

vi. Thesis Structure

The thesis is organised in three different parts: *part I: Ghost Habitats. Prespa/Prespa/Prespës: A Border, Wilded*, *part II: Anáchoma. Weaponising a River: The case of the Evros/Meriç/Maritsa* and *part*

⁷² In a previous text, I have referred to this condition of visibility as *nyktopolitics*, the politics of the night (Nyx). See Embassy for the Displaced, “Nyktopolitics”, *The Photographers’ Gallery*, May 2017, unthinking.photography/articles/nyktopolitics.

III: Grey Rocks, Black Waves. The Aegean: A Border Archipelago. I organize the different chapters thematically, but also in relation to the geographical and material qualities they explore. The thesis follows an altitudinal structure, from the alpine meadows and the abandoned, forested villages on the ridges of Prespa, down the course of the Evros/Meriç/Maritsa river, to the surface, and seabed, of the Aegean Sea. This is a trajectory that is dictated by the different voluminous configurations of the border itself. Travelling downhill, I interrogate natural/legal processes that are involved in boundary demarcation, like the “watershed”, which deems that borders follow the catchment of mountain streams, or the “thalweg”, “accretion”, and “avulsion”, central to the legal heredity of boundary demarcation along rivers, all the way to the “territorial waters”, and the “contiguous” and “exclusive economic zones” which carve territories out the ocean’s surface and abyss. Importantly, from mountain, to river, to archipelago, this structure is also designed to highlight the different geo-physical elements that forge border natures, and render them hostile for certain crossers and border subjects.

The first part of the thesis, *Ghost Habitats*, ventures to the mountainous, cross-border area of the Prespa lakes, and the trilateral nature reserve that spans across Greece, Albania, and the Republic of North Macedonia, to research the ecological and historical processes that are involved into the gradual construction of what is today referred to as a “green border”⁷³. Divided into four sections, *The Ridge: Crumbling Impermanence*, *The Forest in Clouds*, *(P)lethe: The Village*, and *“Udhë Ujk”: The Wolf Trail*, the text follows the border downhill, from the ridgeline to the lake, to unearth traces of the violent processes that were central to its construction at the turn of the 20th century and which, I argue, still act on it today. Following animals that appear before a series of trail cameras that I have installed in different locations inside the park, I engage with more-than-human forms of witnessing to explore how the layered histories of the region shape contemporary border practices, like the “circular” migrations from Albania to Greece, the recent “Prespa Agreement”, the “Balkan route” and the trilateral park. Conversely, I also probe the ways in which the delineation and enforcement of borders along natural environments reconfigures regional ecosystems, to understand how these are eventually rendered into “wild” frontiers, subject to different legal orders and methods of policing than the remainder of sovereign territory.

The second part, *Anáchoma*, focuses on the Evros/Meriç/Maritsa river border between Greece, Turkey, and Bulgaria. The text (co-authored with Ifor Duncan) is structured in four main sections which follow the shifting geography of the river from the Rila mountains in Bulgaria to its discharge in the Aegean Sea: *Tributaries: Six Flooded Graves*, *The Main Course: A Fluvial Frontier*, *The Floodplain: An Ecology of Exception*, and *The Delta: Night, Fog and Mud*. Following the river downstream, we trace the ways in which the Evros floodplain has been rendered into a trench⁷⁴ against Turkish expansion, political “contamination” from the former socialist state of Bulgaria, and more recently, against migrants and

⁷³ The term “green border” refers to “natural” border areas which are unpopulated. The term will be unpacked further in Part I: *Ghost Habitats*.

⁷⁴ As I will discuss, *anáchoma* is the Greek word for embankment.

refugees seeking to reach the European north. Set against current migratory movements, the river is examined for its twofold function as an apparatus of killing, deterrence, and obfuscation, as well as a body which records, stores, and occasionally reveals this violence through seasonal shifts in its hydrological cycle. Through this enquiry, the fluvial frontier emerges as a space where seemingly contradicting elements like conservation, transboundary river management, military technology, the geopolitics of resource logistics, and border crossing, calculatedly coexist to enforce a condition of ecological exception where the state acts in violent excess.

The third, and final part of the thesis, titled *Grey Rocks, Black Waves*, examines the maritime border of the Aegean Sea. Through a close analysis of two deadly shipwrecks of vessels carrying migrants from Turkey to Greece, the Aegean archipelago is interrogated for its dense history and materiality, and for the effect these have on contemporary conceptions of territory, security, and agency. This is pursued through two main sections. The first section, *Grey Rocks*, maps the two shipwrecks against genealogies of state-sanctioned violence in this maritime region, to situate and discuss migration, detention and death in the Aegean in their full historical depth. The second section, *Black Waves*, interrogates the ways in which this interstitial and historically charged materiality is mobilized as a defensive infrastructure within the context of contemporary migration at sea. I enquire into the manoeuvres in which the very matter of the archipelago is enlisted to perform the work of border enforcement, and reflect on a spatial and visual practice that attempts to decode this matter to reveal traces of state violence. As I maintain throughout the thesis, I argue that the Aegean border functions less as a line on the sea and more as an ecology, one that is enforced through law and military strength, as it is through winds, waves, currents, temperatures and marine life; a *border nature*.

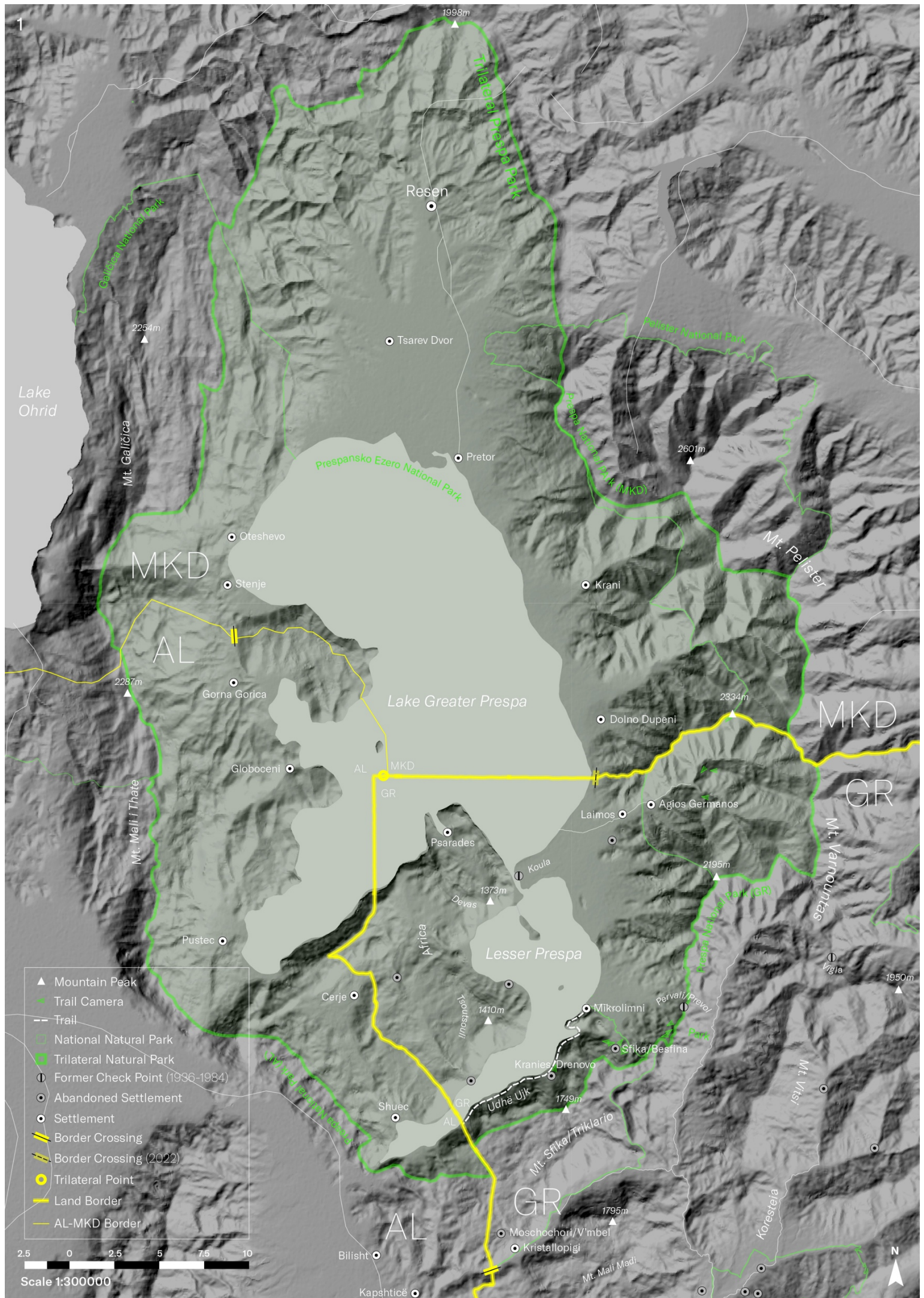
Maps



- 1.Prespa/Prespa/Prespës
- 2.Evros/Meriç/Maritsa
- 3.Aegean Sea



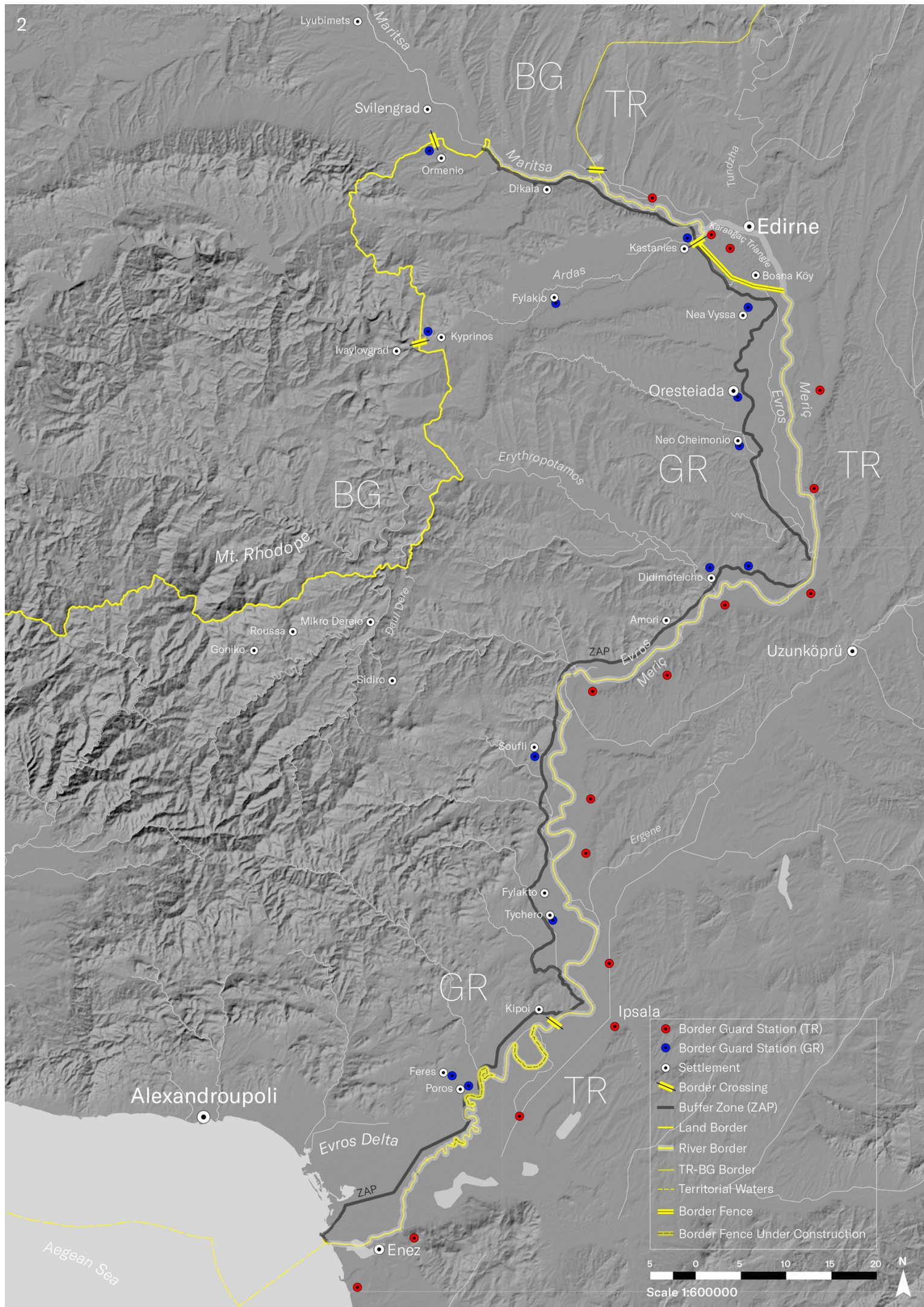
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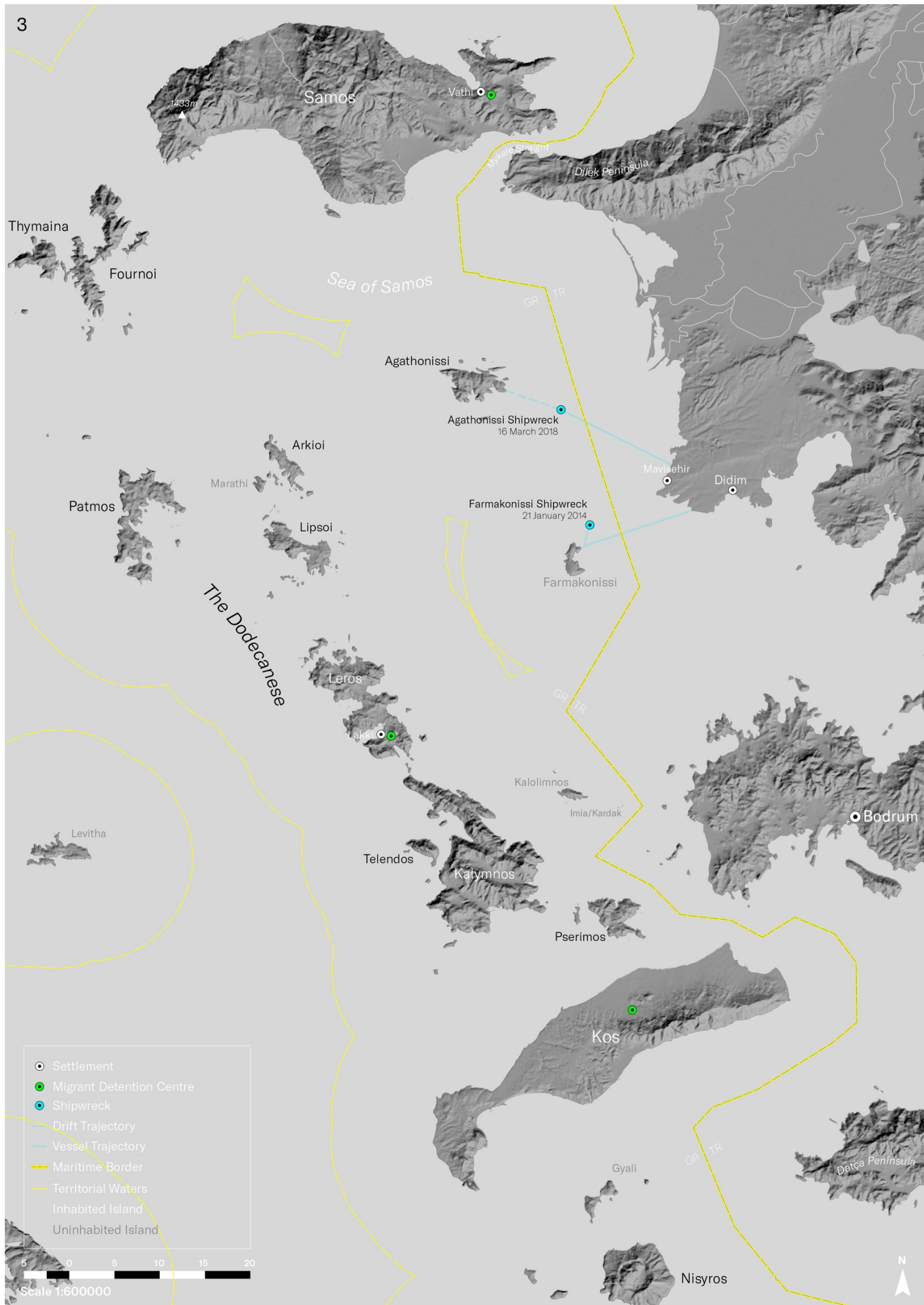


- ▲ Mountain Peak
- Trail Camera
- - - Trail
- National Natural Park
- Trilateral Natural Park
- ⊕ Former Check Point (1936-1984)
- Abandoned Settlement
- Settlement
- Border Crossing
- Border Crossing (2022)
- Trilateral Point
- Land Border
- AL-MKD Border

2.5 0 2.5 5 7.5 10

Scale 1:300000





Part I

Ghost Habitats

Prespa/Prespa/Prespës: A Border, Wilded

“Any movement needs to investigate their territory, interrogate their ghosts
and uncover the repressed memories and stories”

Roberto Bui (Wu Ming 1), lecture at “Disruption Network”, Berlin, September 2019.

Prelude: A strange encounter



“Hello India”. An international calling card, March 2019. Photos by author.

Pictured is an international prepaid calling card for five euros. Such cards are common with migrants who live in Greece and want to call their families and friends abroad. I would normally not think twice about this card, had I not found it buried inside a tunnel dating back to the 1945-1949 Greek Civil War, in the mountains of Prespa/Prespa/Prespës⁷⁵, near the Greek borders with Albania and North Macedonia. The tunnel had been dug by communist partisans, possibly to store their ammunition, and keep it from being damaged during air raids. Given that this tunnel had not been unearthed before (at least not recently - I located it following testimony from locals and patterns on the ground and dug it open with a shovel), it is unclear how this card made it there. Could it have been carried there by the wind and rain until it seeped through a small hole on the ground? I don't think so, the card was not found by the entrance, but well inside the tunnel. Could a small animal - a fox or a weasel perhaps – have carried it there thinking it was an interesting object to take back to its nest? More likely. The question that I am most interested in, however, is not how the card got there, but what kind of movements, and ghosts, it conjures. What was this card doing in this forest in the first place? Why are there tunnels in the mountain?

As I will discuss in this chapter, and as the story of the card shows, the region of Prespa is one where borders meet and histories layer. Split between three sovereign territories, Prespa⁷⁶ has, like so many

⁷⁵ The region is called “Prespa” both in Greek and Macedonian, and “Prespës” in Albanian.

⁷⁶ From here on I will only use the Greek name, Prespa, as I will mostly focus on the Greek side of the border.

other “shatter zones”⁷⁷ of the Balkans long been a space of conflicts. These, however, are not conflicts that are past and gone. On the contrary, I will argue, they remain very much alive, and continue to shape the spatialities of the region to this day. From the mass Albanian migrations of the 1990s; to the opening of the “Balkan Corridor” in 2015, and its subsequent closing and shifting westwards, through Prespa, with the EU-Turkey deal in 2016; to the “Prespa Agreement” between Greece and North Macedonia in 2018 (all of which I will unpack in this part of the thesis), Prespa holds a central, if less celebrated, position among Europe’s borderlands.

Because of these layered histories, and the conflicting narratives, and silences, that these produce, this is also a region for which not much has been written outside of the official historical archives. To unearth the more nuanced histories of Prespa, and their present mutations, one needs to look closely at the landscape. Only then, I will show, do the traces of border struggles begin to reveal themselves.

Scattered at different altitudes within this landscape are a series of motion-triggered “trail”, or “trap” cameras, which I have installed. I will use these cameras to move between different locations in the basin – a ridge, a forest, an abandoned village, and a trail - to enquire into the forces – ecological, cultural, legal, and military - that converge over the landscape of Prespa to render it into a “green”, or “wild”, border in the eyes of the authorities. To trouble this dominant narrative, in this text I will read the landscape against a limited, but rich, historical and ethnographic bibliography. I will also bring in the voices of people who live here, pressed up against the border, as well as the movements of its more-than-human inhabitants who ignore it, but are, I will argue, conditioned by it. Crucially, I will consult the expertise of environmental scientists, with whom I will trek along the border line in search of non-discursive traces of violence.



The tunnel inside which the card was found, March 2019. Photos by author.

⁷⁷ The term will be explained further in the following pages.

1.1. The Ridge: Crumbling Impermanence

2334 m.

1.1.1. View from the Border



A black redstart lands on border pyramid $\frac{168}{1}$. Video still, full video available online at vimeo.com/490208957/d76959c919.

At an altitude of 2334m, a black redstart⁷⁸ is trying to balance itself against the wind. As it lands on an eroding concrete block marked $\frac{168}{1}$, with its back turned towards the trail camera, its right wing flaps in Northern Macedonia, its left in Greece. The bird is bisected by the 256.13 kilometre-long border line that runs along the ridge and cuts across the hostile, alpine terrain of mount Varnountas/Baba⁷⁹.

On Greek territory, mount Varnountas has twelve peaks above 2000 metres, the 2334 metre Despotiko/Kitchevo, where the bird is trying to land, being its highest⁸⁰. Below it, at an elevation of approximately 850 metres, and shared between the three littoral countries are the two Prespa lakes, Greater and Lesser Prespa, the highest tectonic water bodies in the Balkans. The lakes are connected to each other by a narrow isthmus, and surrounded by more mountains - Tsoutsouli, Devas and Mali i Thatë/Galičica to the West and Triklarion to the south - which define their 1300 square kilometre

⁷⁸ *Phoenicurus ochruros*, identified by the ornithologist Thanos Kastriniotis.

⁷⁹ The mountain is called Varnountas in Greek, and Baba in Macedonian. When cross-border terrain features are mentioned in the text, I will use all the placenames in the languages spoken on the respective side of the border. When I refer to a specific location, in a specific moment in history, I will use only the name it has in the territory where it falls at the respective moment.

⁸⁰ The bulk of the mountain range and its summit, Mt Pelister, reaching an altitude of 2601 metres, lies in Northern Macedonia.

catchment basin⁸¹. Along with the neighbouring lake Ochrid, into which they drain via karst channels, the Prespa lakes are considered by geologists to be the oldest tectonic lakes in Europe. As such, they host high numbers of endemic fresh-water species, including plants, invertebrates and fish. Due to their rich waters, combined with their location on a transitional climatic and geographic zone between the limits of Mediterranean and Central Europe, the lakes are a meeting point for avifauna, hosting the largest colony of Dalmatian Pelicans in the world and attracting species from diverse latitudes. The transitional climate, the geological composition, and the major altitudinal variations in the Prespa basin are also responsible for an equally wide diversity of plant communities in the catchment, ranging from alpine and subalpine meadows above the treeline, montane conifer forests and deciduous forests below 1800 metres, mixed broadleaf and deciduous oak forests below 1400 metres and reedbeds and wet meadows in the littoral zone⁸². As I will discuss, this altitudinal diversity and enclosed morphology of the area⁸³, and its liminal geographic, geological and climatic location, intertwine with the complex history of the region as a borderland to make Prespa a biodiversity “hotspot”⁸⁴.

Partitioned along the three sides of the border are four different national parks, one in Greece and Albania respectively, and two in Northern Macedonia⁸⁵. In February 2000, the Prime Ministers of Albania, Greece, and the (then) Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) agreed to establish Prespa as the first transboundary protected area in the Balkans⁸⁶. The lakes are also protected by the 1971 Ramsar Convention on Wetlands as well as the NATURA 2000 European Ecological Network, and were declared the 14th Transboundary Biosphere Reserve in the world by UNESCO in 2014.

As the need for cross-border conservation efforts suggests, the slightest movement in the Prespa basin, animal or material, entails the crossing of national boundaries⁸⁷. The same is often true for humans. Indeed, during my own ascents to the summit to set up my cameras, I continually zig-zagged between the two countries following trails carved in the alpine vegetation by high-altitude-dwelling animals. Apart from a few border markers (also referred to as “pyramids”) scattered every few hundred metres among

⁸¹ Konstantinos Panagiotopoulos, et al., “Vegetation and Climate History of the Lake Prespa Region Since the Lateglacial”, *Quaternary International*, (2012): 1-13.

⁸² More than 1800 plant species and subspecies have been recorded in the Prespa basin, making it a hotspot for phytodiversity in Europe and the Balkan peninsula. See Sakellarakis, F.N. et al, Flora of Prespa area database, NW Greece, Hellenic Botanical Society Congress, Athens.

⁸³ According to the most widely held belief concerning the origin of the name “Prespa” (from the latin “praespe” which means “manger”) this morphology is also responsible for the name of the basin.

⁸⁴ Norman Myers et al., “Biodiversity Hotspots for Conservation Priorities”. *Nature* 403, (2000): 853-858.

⁸⁵ The respective “Prespa National Parks” in Greece and Albania and the “Pelister” and “Galicica National Parks” in northern Macedonia.

⁸⁶ This agreement was further ratified in 2010, and a trilateral coordination committee was established to undertake conservation efforts on all three sides of the border simultaneously. For an example of cross-border collaboration in conservation efforts in Prespa see Giorgos Katsadorakis, et al., “Waterbirds Wintering at the Prespa Lakes as Revealed by Simultaneous Counts in the Three Adjoining Littoral States”, *Macedonian Journal of Ecology and Environment* 15, no. 1. (2013): 23-32.

⁸⁷ The axiom, common among conservationists, that animals do not respect borders has necessitated the creation of a sub-discipline in conservation called “movement ecology”. See Nathan Ran, “An Emerging Movement Ecology Paradigm”, *PNAS* 105 no.49, (December 2008): 19050-19051. Cross-border movements of certain protected animal species are also known to complicate the work of border enforcement. In the US-Mexico border, holes were made in the fence to allow for the endangered Ocelot to cross, and lights installed by the US border patrol were removed to minimise disturbance. See Sundberg (2011).

the slopes, I found little material evidence to demarcate the limits of the nation-state on the ridge. In the absence of fences, checkpoints, or official border crossing stations to either Albania or Northern Macedonia within the basin⁸⁸, the borders of Prespa are often elusive to the untrained eye.

I placed the first of my motion-triggered cameras on the ridge to document these ecologies of cross-border movement. Of the videos captured, none provided a better metaphor for the complex interactions between human infrastructure, environmental forces and the agency of non-human life that act upon the border, and which I will explore in this part of the thesis, more accurately than a beech marten scent-marking its territory on the border pyramid - the marker of territory *par excellence*. For the marten too, the mountain is territory.



A beech marten scent-marking border pyramid ¹⁶⁸₁. Video still, full video available online at vimeo.com/490208957/d76959c919.

⁸⁸ The nearest crossing stations to Albania and Macedonia are on the other side of the mountains, in Krystallopigi-Kapshtice and Niki-Medžitlija respectively.

1.1.2. Drawing the line

Mountains have historically been looked to by military cartographers tasked with drawing the contours of nation states. Beyond their significance as physical barriers, peaks have also been conscripted by nationalist imaginaries as sublime symbols for the nation to assert its “natural right to territory”⁸⁹. Reflecting specifically on the delimitation of the northern borders of Greece, in the capacity of Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs during the Greek Civil War, Panagiotis Pipinelis⁹⁰, suggested that geophysical and spiritual criteria should be preferred over questions of national identity. “The human factor represented by the inhabitants”, Pipinelis argues, “is usually of a transitory and unstable character.” Instead, the nation should be built on the basis of “geography, nature, the spirit of the inhabitants (...) the living past of countless centuries”⁹¹. Growing sceptical of the attainability of cultural homogeneity at the country’s newly annexed, northern, territories, Pipinellis instead proposed the imaginary of the “natural border” as a mythic space, endowed with natural powers and transcendental, spiritual qualities. As I will discuss in this section, however, the maintenance of a “natural” mountain border is somewhat of a less straightforward process, only as impermanent as the mountain itself.

When their physical and material qualities are examined, mountains emerge as more than merely passive receptacles for state sovereignty and national mythologies. Rather, they are inhospitable, hard to access spaces for the state apparatus, their voluminous, and geographically difficult terrain long offering “a refuge from soldiers”⁹², as Fernand Braudel notes⁹³. Indeed, throughout history, mountain communities have decidedly eschewed state governance, inviting the (not always peaceful) coexistence of diverse ethnicities, languages and other cultural practices⁹⁴. Such was the case of Prespa, and mountainous Macedonia at large, until the early 20th century.

Under the the Ottomans, the mountains of Prespa “fell within the *agrapha*, the “unrecorded lands” too

⁸⁹ Kenny Cupers, “Governing Through Nature: Camps and Youth Movements in Interwar Germany and the United States”, *Cultural Geographies* 15, no. 2, (2008): 173-205.

⁹⁰ Pipinelis, a former senior conservative Greek politician and diplomat, served as Greece’s ambassador in Budapest and Sofia, before he was made Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs during the Civil War. In the 50s he was Greece’s representative in NATO. He later served as interim Prime Minister in 1963 and as a Minister of Foreign Affairs for the military dictatorship of 1967-74.

⁹¹ Panagiotis Pipinelis, *Europe and the Albanian Question*, (New York: Greek Government Office of Information, Culture, Civilization, and Demarcation at the Northwest Borders of Greece), p.35, quoted in Laurie Kane Hart, “Culture, Civilization, and Demarcation at the Northwest Borders of Greece”, *American Ethnologist* 26, no.1, (1999): 196-220.

⁹² Braudel offers the example of the Kutzo-Vlachs who, “nimble as mountain goats” led a nomadic existence over what he calls the “free spaces in the Balkans, from Galicia to Serbia and the Aegean Sea”. See Braudel, *Mediterranean*, 31

⁹³ Braudel, *Mediterranean*, 32-33. For Braudel, the history of mountains is “to have none”. Though valid for certain cases, this view that holds all cultures that live in the shadow of the state as lacking history is a dangerous simplification that has allowed states to conveniently erase and claim populations at will.

⁹⁴ James Scott’s work is seminal in this regard. See James Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009). The Greek writer Akis Gavrilidis attempts a direct reading of Scott against the context of Macedonia in his text “Macedonicity as an Art of Not Being Governed”, November 5, 2016, nomadicuniversality.com/2016/11/05/macedonicity-as-an-art-of-not-being-governed/ (accessed July 2018).

rugged for imperial tax collectors”⁹⁵. As the Greek anthropologist Lenio Myrivili notes in her seminal treaty on the borderlands (and lakes) of Prespa, *The Liquid Border*, during the final decades of Ottoman rule, Macedonia “was the last space in Europe where different and overlapping ethnic, religious and linguistic worlds coexisted under the ecumenical auspices of a deteriorating Empire”⁹⁶. A true example of what the American political scientist James C. Scott calls a “shatter zone”⁹⁷, after the retreat of the Ottoman empire at the turn of the 20th century, the region was claimed by six different nation-states (Bulgaria, Greece, Serbia, Turkey, Albania and, to a lesser extent, Romania). In Myrivili’s words again, “Macedonia’ was being claimed and reclaimed as land, history, and people, as cradle of at least three civilizations, and as part of the newly formed nation-states surrounding it.”

It was only in 1913, in the wake of the successive Balkan Wars, when the former Ottoman region of Macedonia was divided between Greece, Serbia, and Bulgaria in Bucharest⁹⁸ that the first “lines” were sketched on its ridges, but these were quickly rendered obsolete by the Great War that followed. Due in part to the war, but also to the geographic and cultural complexity of the region, the borders of Prespa (both with Serbia and with Albania, which I will discuss later in this chapter) were left unresolved until several years later.



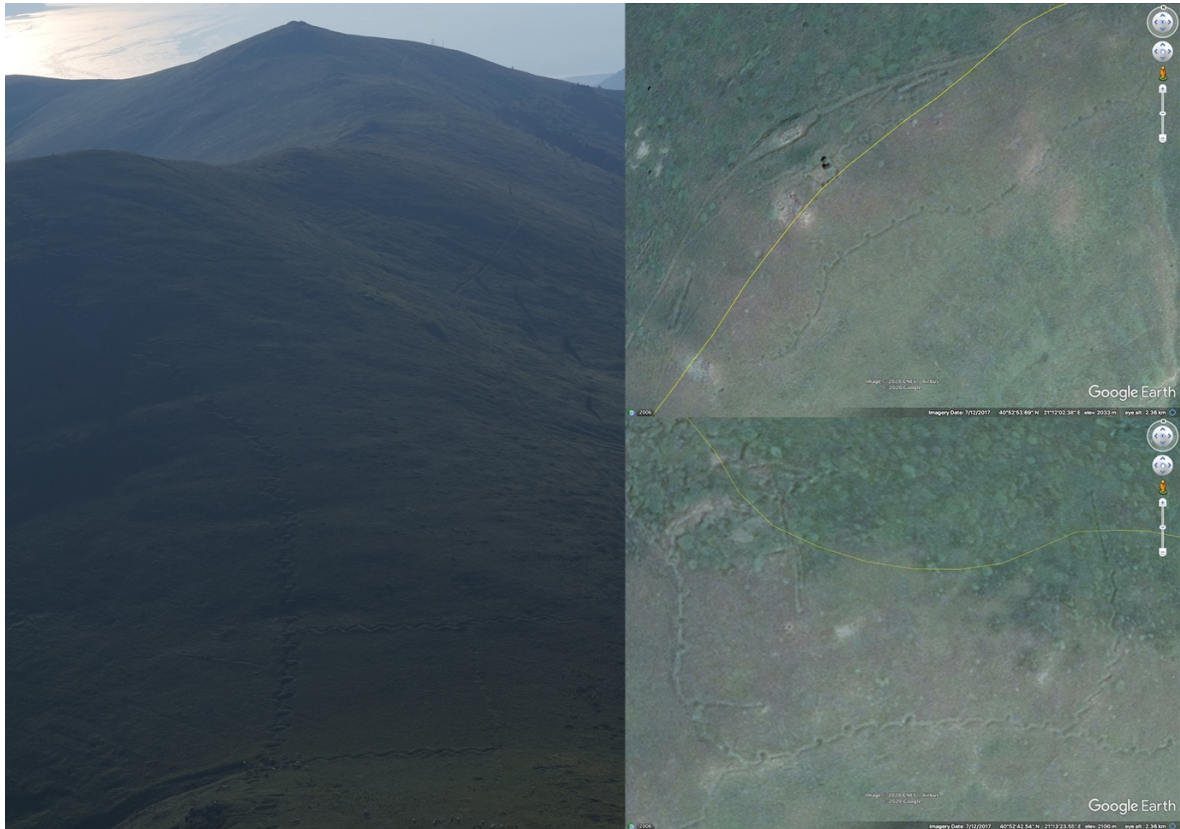
Conflicting territorial claims after the end of the Balkan wars. Prespa is annotated with a Green box. Source: Wikipedia.

⁹⁵ Rozita Dimova, “The Hollow Signifier “Prespa”: Some Reflections in the Lake, the Agreement, and the State”, In *Macedonia and Identity Politics After the Prespa Agreement* ed Vasiliki P. Neofotistos. (London: Routledge, December 2020). “Agrapha” literally translates as “unwritten”, not registered by the state logs.

⁹⁶ Myrivili, E. “The Liquid Border: Subjectivity at the Limits of the Nation State in Southeast Europe”, (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2004), 71.

⁹⁷ Scott speaks of “shatter zones”, geographically and materially diverse areas like “mountains, marshland, swamps and steppes, and deserts”, where “pattern[s] of state-making and state-unmaking produced, over time, a periphery that was composed as much of refugees as of peoples who had never been state subjects”. See Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed*, 6-9.

⁹⁸ The 1913 “Treaty of Bucharest” ended the second Balkan war, with Bulgaria conceding to Serbia, Greece, and Romania.



During the Great War, the Allied and Central powers met over the ridge. In anticipation of the confrontation, the French army, which administered Prespa between 1913 and 1919, dug a network of trenches on the mountain which are still visible today and, ironically, run parallel, if zig zag, with the border. Before the border was officially demarcated, it was etched on the mountain through the material imprint of armed conflict.

The line was finally demarcated on the ridge as late as 1930, when a joint Greco-Yugoslav committee installed 177 large pyramids, 503 smaller pyramids, and 695 landmarks⁹⁹ along the entire length of the border. From number 166 onwards, the line scales the slopes of Mt.Varnountas/Baba, before it is immersed in the waters of Greater Prespa Lake at pyramid 177, and from there, 11.4 kilometres later, it reaches the trilateral border between Greece, North Macedonia, and Albania. My first camera is installed on a granite rock facing what is left of (a type iii) pyramid $\frac{168}{1}$.

As the decaying pyramid facing the camera suggests, in this hostile terrain, the maintenance of border markers and geodesic elements that are necessary to measure and represent the border is a near impossible task¹⁰⁰. Each year, from November to June, the markers, 1.5m at their tallest, are hidden under metres of snow. Ice creeps into the concrete and the expanding water causes the markers to erode, break and fall. Originally made from boulders collected from the area and cast with cement, these symbols of the impermanence of borders eventually become indiscernible from the mountain, and the border itself illegible on the ground¹⁰¹. On harsh winters, the lakes below also freeze, and the buoys that have from time to time been installed as floating border markers¹⁰² are destroyed under the pressure of the ice. The violent seasonal changes and glacial processes that are typical of mountainous terrain therefore trouble “the triangulating logic central to the cartographic endeavour”¹⁰³, in the case of Prespa hiding and damaging the landmarks that were built to measure the state.

And yet, it is these same glacial processes that offered themselves for the delimitation of the border in the first place. When the snow melts in late spring and early summer, and the border is legible again on the back of the mountain, cold streams start running down the slopes and ravines. These streams define the “watershed” line (the line that follows the river catchments, which does not always coincide with the ridgeline) that the joint committee designated as the border. However counterintuitive, this legal-cartographic concept is common in the delimitation of mountain borders, for reasons to do with states’

⁹⁹ The border line was first agreed upon five years earlier, in 1925, with the “Florence Protocol”. Following the signing of the protocol, a joint Greco-Yugoslav border demarcation committee was set up in March 1927. The demarcation work finished in 1930.

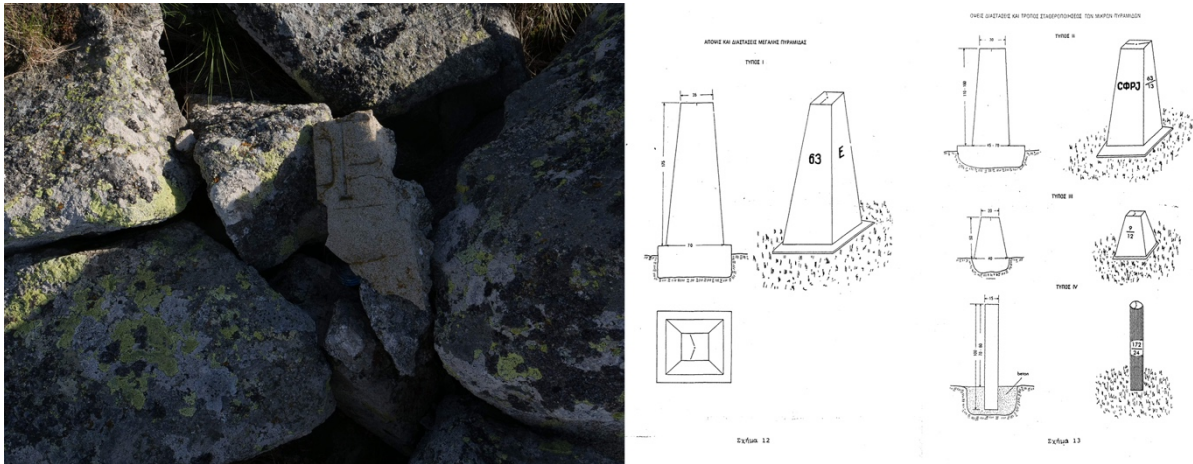
¹⁰⁰ In the past 70 years, the markers were only maintained twice: in 1958, to repair damages caused by the wars, and in 1984, when the 177 pyramids were complemented with 2366 smaller ones and 18 floating buoys in Prespa lake, 1.5m tall each, which are today gone. See the Hellenic Army Geographical Society, “Κατάλογος Γαιωδετικών Στοιχείων των Μεθοριακών Σημάτων της Γραμμής των ελληνο-Γιουγκοσλαβικών Συνόρων [Catalogue of Geodesic Elements and Border Markers along the Greek-Yugoslav Border]”, date of publication unknown.

¹⁰¹ To anticipate permanent damage of border markers, the foundations of these pyramids would usually be laid with coal. If the pyramid is destroyed, the coal is exposed to humidity and rain, painting the soil around it black, and, with it, drawing the border on the ground. See Elias Dimitrakopoulos, “Τα Χερσαία Σύνορα της Ελλάδας [The Land Borders of Greece]”, (PhD diss., Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, 1986), 48.

¹⁰² As the lake border transitions from liquid to solid, new cross-border routes open as well, while the operating capacity of patrol boats is effectively neutered.

¹⁰³ Francesca Hughes, “Inequalities of Ice: Francesca Hughes on the Seductions of Measure”, in ed. Marco Ferrari, Elisa Pasqual, Andrea Bagnato, *A Moving Border: Alpine Cartographies of Climate Change*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 129.

rights to water usage, and demonstrates the pervasiveness of water in attempts to delimit the nation state¹⁰⁴.



A fragment from a type II border pyramid, July 2020 (left). Photo by author. Different types of border pyramids used to demarcate the Greek-Yugoslav border (right). Source: Dimitrakopoulos, “The Land Borders of Greece”, 1986.

Upon its demarcation, the border intersected different linguistic and ethnic groups that inhabited Prespa at the turn of the previous century: Greeks, Albanians, Vlachs, Ottomans, and, overwhelmingly, people who self-identified as ethnic Macedonians¹⁰⁵, or *dopioi* (locals)¹⁰⁶. In so doing, it forced the nation-state upon populations who had until then maintained an ambiguous and fluid ethnic designation, abruptly separating families who inhabited villages on either side of the ridge¹⁰⁷.

Myrivili describes this process of state expansionism over the Macedonian territories as a moment of “originary violence”. The very term “New Lands”, as the territory acquired by Greece after the Balkan Wars is often referred to by Greek historians¹⁰⁸, she argues, is eerily reminiscent of the “New World” of

¹⁰⁴ This relationship between water flow and border delimitation will be explored further in the next part of the thesis, *Anáchoma*.

¹⁰⁵ At the turn of the century, the population of Florina prefecture was made up of 77% Macedonians, numbering 45.517 individuals. See Andromachi Solaki and Ifigeneia Vamvakidou, “Μετονομασίες Οικισμών στην Περιοχή της Φλώρινας του 20^{ου} Αιώνα: Ιστορικές Αναγνώσεις [Renaming of Settlements in the Florina Area in the 20th Century: Historical Accounts]”, (self published, date unknown).

¹⁰⁶ *Dopioi* (plural of *dopios*), translates as a person “born to the site”, an autochthone, indigenous. As the Greek anthropologist Marica Rombou-Levidi explains, the term was only introduced after the population exchanges of the early 20th century, for the locals to be differentiated from the refugees from Minor Asia and the Black Sea (*prosfighes*). See Marica Rombou-Levidi (2009) “Dancing Beyond the “Barre”: Cultural Practices and the Processes of Identification in Eastern Macedonia, Greece”, (PhD diss., University of Sussex, 2009).

¹⁰⁷ As the anthropologist Laurie Hart notes, the violent drawing and re-drawing of the Southern Balkan borders “generated a vocabulary of fragmentation and mutilation.” Consequently, “[s]ame-nation communities are visualized as severed by borders from their proper homelands and thus as withering or decaying. Other-nation communities are described by politicians in the terminology of the Freudian uncanny, as introjected limbs or externalized viscera of foreign bodies.” For Hart, these corporeal metaphors continue feeding nationalisms and irredentisms in the region. See Hart, “Culture, Civilization, and Demarcation”.

¹⁰⁸ “Nées Chóres” in Greek.

the Americas, and reveals the authorities' double bind between the potentialities of newly conquered territories and a fear of the unknown that lies there¹⁰⁹. Echoing this double bind is Charles Eddy, President of the League of Nations' Greek Refugee Settlement Commission, who, in 1931, described the mountainous region of East Macedonia, some 200 kilometres East of Prespa, as a place "as unknown as if it were in the centre of Africa"¹¹⁰. Fittingly, the Western part of Prespa, beyond the isthmus was at the time locally known as "Africa", presumably owing to its ground limestone soils and its sparser, savanna-like vegetation made up of centuries-old juniper trees, combined with its absolute remoteness from the remainder of Greek territory.

Despite the strong colonial resonances present in the multiple redrawings of the border under the arbitration of the so-called Great Powers¹¹¹, the Balkan states' attempts to claim and ethnically cleanse their "New Lands" are undoubtedly incommensurate with the genocidal violence unleashed against the "New World" or, indeed, Africa. Yet, what persists is the spatialized dimension of these violent state processes. Or, as described by Achille Mbembe, "the creation of the space through violence over which violence is then exercised".¹¹²

Indeed, in order to govern these different constituencies that inhabited its "New Lands", the Greek state implemented a series of severely discriminatory, and spatialized, policies. Most important, and directly associated with demographic "engineering", were two treaties dealing with population exchange: The Greco-Bulgarian "voluntary emigration" agreed at Neuilly in 1919 and the compulsory Greco-Turkish exchange, agreed at Lausanne in 1923¹¹³. The people of the "New Lands", both *dopioi* and "refugees", were also subjected to "inclusionary" measures intended to further eliminate ethnic and cultural difference. The harshest of these policies involved the establishment of a "Supervised Zone" or "Zone under Surveillance" along the border by the Ioannis Metaxas régime in 1936.

Two checkpoints were set up at the mountain pass that leads to the Greek side of the Prespa basin¹¹⁴, and one more at the narrow isthmus that separates the two lakes¹¹⁵. The checkpoints were controlled by the army, and special travel documents were required to cross them¹¹⁶. Far from being isolated structures, these checkpoints were nodes within a larger, 1212-kilometre-long and between five and one hundred kilometre wide infrastructure of "barres" that ran the entire northern border of Greece, and

¹⁰⁹ Myrivili, "The Liquid Border", 112.

¹¹⁰ Charles Eddy quoted in Rombou-Levidi, "Dancing Beyond the 'Barre'", 19.

¹¹¹ The six Great Powers of that time were Great Britain, France, Germany, Austria-Hungary, Russia and Italy

¹¹² Achille Mbembe, *On the postcolony*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001), 25.

¹¹³ Rombou-Levidi, "Dancing Beyond the 'Barre'".

¹¹⁴ The first checkpoint was at the 1500m "Vigla" pass in Mount Varnountas, and the second one at the 1150m "Pervali/Prevoli" pass, where Mount Varnountas meets Mount Triklario.

¹¹⁵ A location locally known as "Koula".

¹¹⁶ These documents were informally called the "white identifications cards".

contained four hundred and twenty towns and villages in Macedonia, Thrace, a large part of Epirus, and northern Corfu¹¹⁷. The “zone” was designed to isolate the unwanted, culturally “other” subjects living within it (the “insiders”) - Albanian minorities (Chams) in Epirus and Corfu, in the West, Macedonian and Bulgarian minorities in the North and Turkish and Pomak muslim minorities in Thrace in the North-East - and to recast the ethnically diverse areas adjacent to the border into a buffer against the Balkan socialist states in the North and Turkey in the East. The zone remained in the decades that followed the Second World War, when the northern borders of Greece represented the frontier between the Western bloc, and Communist Eastern Europe. In Prespa the barriers were removed in 1982¹¹⁸. For half a century, the slopes of Mount Varnountas therefore also delimited an internal border containing minorities living within the basin, regulating the movement out of, and into, this frontier area. The “iron curtain” here folded over mountains, forests, and lakes, extending both outwards and inwards and assuming a thickness that hosted a dual regime of exclusion and subordinatory inclusion.

Through these successive, violent zonations, the borders of Macedonia were rendered into a frontier on the edges of the Balkans and the margins of modern day Europe. As I will demonstrate in what follows, this spatiality was enforced further by the Civil War that ensued, and, to a degree, still dictates the ways in which this border/frontier functions today.

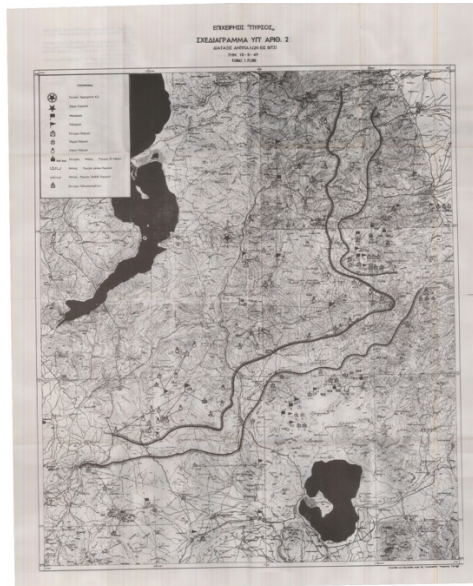
1.1.3. Higher Ground

The Greek Civil War of 1945-49 came as the tipping point to decades of state coercion. During the war the ridge was a stronghold for the communist partisans of the Democratic Army of Greece (ΔΣΕ), who established a “Temporary Democratic Government” within the Prespa basin from spring 1948 until August 1949. The mountains around Prespa were the theatre of major battles, and were the last to fall to the national army, along with the neighbouring mountain of Grammos. In the words of a former fighter, Dimitris Penis, during the Civil War “Prespa was a free territory which was the Caste and Symbol of the fight of the Democratic Army of Greece.”¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ Rombou-Levidi, “Dancing Beyond the “Barre””.

¹¹⁸ In the region of Thrace, as I will discuss in the next part of the thesis, they remained until as late as 1995.

¹¹⁹ Dimitris Penis, *Πρέσπα η Ελληνική [Prespa, the Greek]*, (Sofia: Elma, 2007). 20. Naturally, there are varied, more nuanced opinions about life in Prespa during the Civil War. What is generally accepted, however, is that ethnic discrimination had stopped and that Greeks and Macedonians coexisted on equal terms under the Democratic Government.



A map showing the defensive line set up by the partisans on the ridge. The map was produced in preparation of the final offensive of the national army codenamed “Operation Pyrsos”. Source: Hellenic Army General Staff, “*Operation Pyrsos*”.

The ridge, made of karstified dolomites, limestone and granite¹²⁰, and covered with thich forests in lower altitudes, offered the partizans not only the fundamental advantage of controlling the higher ground, but also an uneven karst landscape in which they could seek refuge, and which they could modify to impede the advance of the national army. Gastón Gordillo, in his text *Terrain as Insurgent Weapon*, describes how in mountain warfare this geographical asymetry “neutralizes the technological and arithmetic superiority of tactical armies, undermining their mobility and field of vision”, and amplifying the otherwise limited firepower of the insurgents¹²¹. A report drafted by geographers of the national army in preparation of Operation Pyrsos, the final offensive that ousted the partisans from Prespa and the nearby Mount Grammos in August 1949, describes the problems the terrain posed to army attempts to recapture the area:

The terrain of the region is deeply cut by steep ravines and rocky ridges. With the exception of the SW of the area, at the border passage to Albania, where the ground is relatively open, the rest of the region is densely wooded. The entire area is impenetrable by any kind of wheel.¹²²

During their four-year long occupation of the ridges, the partisans constructed a network of trenches, lookout points and defensive positions, which were referred to as “castles” in their own right. The same military geographers’ report describes these “castles”:

¹²⁰ Panagiotopoulos et al, “Vegetation and Climate History of the Lake Prespa”.

¹²¹ Gordillo, scrutinizing the role of geography in the conflict between the US army and the Taliban in the Korengal Valley in Afghanistan, describes this altitudinal unsettling of imperial power as “insurgent verticality”. Gastón Gordillo, “Terrain as Insurgent Weapon: An Affective Geometry of Warfare in the Mountains of Afghanistan”, *Political Geography* 64, (2018): 53-62.

¹²² Hellenic Army General Staff, *Οι Μάχες του Βίτσι και του Γράμμου 1949, Με το Συνθηματικόν «Επιχειρήσεις Πυρσός»*, [The Battles of Vitsi and Grammos 1949, Codenamed “Operation Pyrsos”], (Athens: Eleutheri Skepsis, 1993), 63 & 65. Translated by the author.

The partisans' defensive infrastructure consists of several pressure points installed on crucial high places and passes, and include trenches that can fit a man standing up, and shelters covered by 10 or more layers of tree trunks and thick layers of branches, as well as minefields. Many of these positions are fenced off with barbed wire.¹²³

For the partisans the ridges and forests of Mt. Varnountas offered a sheltering topography that allowed them to defend their positions despite their inferior numbers and equipment. For the national army, on the other hand, it was "a hostile, dense and restricting materiality, an added obstacle"¹²⁴ that needed to be overcome, or, preferably, avoided. To re-occupy the ridge, the national army, supported by the British and American air forces who were determined to prevent a socialist government in Greece, used "Spitfire" and "Dakota" aircrafts to attack the trenches from above with machine gun fire, parachute troops and incendiary bombs, "torching" the mountain, as the name of the final offensive, *Pysos*, suggests¹²⁵. For the first time since their initial deployment at the end of WWII, and before they gained prominence as a counter-insurgency tool in Vietnam and other counter-colonial struggles all over the world, Napalm bombs were used on these mountains throughout 1948-49 to devastating effect. As Gordillo notes of Afghanistan, "when insurgents "melt into the mountains," imperial militaries often have no other option but to target, randomly and blindly, the terrain."¹²⁶ To attack the insurgents "melting into the mountain" with Napalm, which burns at a temperature ranging from 800° C to 1200° C, is to make the mountain itself melt. Using military technology the army changed the very chemical composition of the Prespa terrain, merging body with rock, human and non-human, Bios and Geos¹²⁷. In a tragic twist of irony, "Greek fire"¹²⁸ had returned to its birthplace to eradicate what the state viewed as non-Greek within its own borders¹²⁹.

¹²³ Ibid, 67-68

¹²⁴ Gordillo, "Terrain as Insurgent Weapon".

¹²⁵ "Pysos" is Greek for "torch".

¹²⁶ Gordillo, "Terrain as Insurgent Weapon".

¹²⁷ Povinelli uses the term bios and geos to describe what she theorizes as biological life and geological non-life respectively, Elizabeth Povinelli, *Geontologies*.

¹²⁸ "Greek fire" was the name of what is considered to have been the first ever incendiary weapon, used in naval warfare by the Byzantine fleet.

¹²⁹ The successive waves of state oppression the local population had suffered meant that they were readily supportive of the cause of the Democratic Army. Within the DSE there operated a separate political and military organization, the National Liberation Front (HOΦ), with the aim of achieving independence for the Macedonian communities living in Greek territories.



Partisan positions on a peak surrounding Prespa named “Polenata” being battered by the artillery of the national army (left), and a damaged defensive position on “Polenata” (right), 10/08/1949, as photographed by Ioannis Papamarkakis, a soldier for the national army. Source: ww2wrecks.com

Remnants of bombs and craters still remain on these slopes as wartime scars, as do the defensive positions built into the mountain by the partisans. To the trained eye wandering above the treeline, these scars are visible as changes in the landscape of the alpine meadows; out-of-place decomposing trunks, large piles of rocks, and craters stand out of the shrubs and grass that dominate the landscape at these altitudes. The few trees that persevere in the sub alpine and alpine zones rarely exceed 50cm in height, compressed for months by the weight of snow and beaten by the wind year-round. Their roots, strained by the lack of space, hold the thin layer of soil in place and their branches carpet the floor, yet failing to conceal the topography beneath. If the war modified the terrain, the harsh mountain environment preserved these traces of wartime violence, years after the conflict ended. These modifications are now part of the mountain habitat, and the trenches have become corridors hosting a rich flora which shelters small mammals from predatory birds flying above¹³⁰.

Perhaps not incidentally, it is the same frictions¹³¹ which turned the mountainous terrain of Prespa into a weapon during the war that make them alluring as borders. It is also due to these frictions that illegalized border crossers prefer them to the more densely guarded plains below. As I will demonstrate in the final section, *Udhë Ujk*, from the mass Albanian migrations of the 90s, up to this day, migrants attempting to evade state surveillance, continue to be subjected to the same kinds of deadly perils that limited the capacity of the national army during the Greek Civil War.

¹³⁰ In Europe, Laos, and elsewhere, wartime “scars” have been studied by conservationists for their biodiversity. See Csaba Vad et al., “Wartime Scars or Reservoirs of Biodiversity? The Value of Bomb Crater Ponds in Aquatic Conservation”, *Biological Conservation* 209, (May 2017): 253-262.

¹³¹ “Friction of terrain” is a concept developed by James Scott to account for the obstacles that terrain may put on human mobility. See Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed*.



A bomb crater next to a border demarcation pyramid. Photo by author, July 2020.

1.1.4. Ghost Habitats

Those who settled in houses that were not in the center of the village, their women were scared. During the night they would hear birds screeching Kou Kou E - Kou Kou E and were terrified¹³². They thought they were the voices of deceased people killed during the Civil War. They were scared because of the tons of blood that had been shed. They came to my own house for a while, because it was situated in the center of the village, but afterwards they could not take it any longer here; they left. They went to Athens, Germany, Canada...

Vasso, a settler in a village of Prespa.

After the defeat of the partisans, entire villages were emptied, partially destroyed, and abandoned. Their ethnically “Other” inhabitants retreated with the Democratic Army to the neighbouring Balkan countries and from there they fled to Eastern Europe, Canada, the US, Australia, and the Central Asian socialist republics. As a result, diasporic communities of Macedonians from Prespa today exist in places as distant from Prespa –and from each other– as Toronto, Melbourne, Budapest, and Tashkent, in modern day Uzbekistan. Settlers were brought in from other corners of Greece to fill the void, and to provide a demographic buffer to the border. As the story told by Vasso reveals, this transitional period of the 50s was ripe with its own hauntings, for displaced and settler communities alike.

For Maria Rombou-Levidi, the anthropologist who collected Vasso’s testimony, Vasso’s narrative “indirectly refers to the intensified presence of ghosts in the deserted village. Vasso attributes this phenomenon to the sheer frequency and randomness of violent death within a very limited space and time.”¹³³ Indeed, in the Civil War alone, the villages of Prespa lost 307 of their inhabitants to battle with the partisans¹³⁴, and many more from other parts of Greece, both partisans and regular soldiers, died in the area. “Ghosts”, Rombou-Levidi continues,

are in fact often seen as the inevitable excess of the defilement which emerges from the flooding of social space with death. Evidently, this approach assumes that there is a “natural” balance between the quantity of death and spatial and temporal dimensions. The intensification of death within discrete units of space and time beyond the natural balance transgresses the classificatory order. This transgression is evidenced by the return of the past in the present in the reappearance of the dead and their voices as ghosts.¹³⁵

¹³² KKE, pronounced Kou-Kou-E, are the initials of the Greek Communist Party (Kommounistiko Komma Ellados).

¹³³ Marica Rombou-Levidi, «Εδώ Καπούτ»: Η Βία του συνόρου. Μετανάστευση, Εθνικοφροσύνη και Φύλο στην Ελληνοαλβανική Μεθόριο [*Here Kaputt: Border Violence, Migration, National Sentiment and Gender at the Greco-Albanian Frontier*], (Athens: Alexandria, 2017).

¹³⁴ The data was compiled by the author from a list of casualties in the Florina prefecture provided in Nikos Kentros, *Ο Εμφύλιος στη Φλώρινα* [*The Civil War in Florina*], (Athens: Vivliorama, 2011).

¹³⁵ Rombou-Levidi, “*Here Kaputt*”. Rombou-Levidi draws on the anthropologist Allen Feldman, and his analysis of political terror in Northern Ireland. See Allen Feldman, *Formations of Violence. The Narrative of the Body and Political Terror in Northern Ireland*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 67.

Within this ghostly space, the violent histories of the near past are today carried forward and expressed in nuanced forms, like whispered conversations in village squares, off-sounding hellenized surnames, cultural performances like dance-events and singing practices¹³⁶, as well as the terrain and natural environment of Prespa itself, which is the focus of my research. Eavesdropping on these half-whispered histories, the contemporary borders of Prespa read like a continuation of the enduring founding violence of the Greek state.

The border is itself also ghost. Destroyed buoys and pyramids aside, the demarcation of the nation state here is a largely immaterial endeavour, one that materializes less through open force, and more in secret, through “an expectation and a threat that lurks in the region”¹³⁷. In that sense, the policing of the borders is conducted in a manner that is unlike the other two border regions which I will discuss later in the thesis. Border patrols, unable to cover the entire mountainous border terrain of Prespa, are, as I was confided by local policemen, primarily conducted on high points which offer relatively clear views of the lakes and passages below¹³⁸. According to locals, the police has also placed cameras along certain cross-border paths in the mountain to monitor crossings, not far from where I have installed my own¹³⁹. Within the borders, policing is continued by ghostly undercover forces and civilian informers. In these ways, the border is internalized by the local populations. As Myrivilis argues,

The people in Prespa are disciplined by those invisible presences in their daily movements around the lakes. (...) Fishing in the lake, hunting or shepherding on the mountains, they have to know literally where they stand vis-à-vis the nation-state. Through this territorial type of knowledge and practice, a different sense of the limits of the nation occurs and different types of subject positions develop.

To read the traces of these hauntings in the space of the nature reserve, I turn to a term introduced by Rob Nixon in his seminal book *Slow Violence: ghost habitats*. As Nixon describes it, “ghost habitats is a term environmentalists refer to in order to describe those ecological shadows of a once powerful presence in the landscape, traces from which one can reconstruct what might otherwise appear to have vanished entirely.”¹⁴⁰ In theorizing the border natures of Prespa as a “ghost habitat”, two questions present themselves: what is the “once powerful presence in the landscape” and what could the “traces from which one can reconstruct what might otherwise appear to have vanished entirely” be?

¹³⁶ Maria Rombou-Levidi, *Επιτηρούμενες Ζωές: Μουσική, Χορός και Διαμόρφωση της Υποκειμενικότητας στη Μακεδονία* [*Lives Under Surveillance: Music, Dance, and the Formulation of Subjectivity in Macedonia*], (Athens: Alexandria, 2016).

¹³⁷ Myrivilis, “The Liquid Border”, 39.

¹³⁸ During my stay in Prespa, I discovered what looked like unexploded mortars from the war in the forest, and alerted the authorities to collect them. Riding in a police car to where I had found the mortars, and having gained their trust as a law-abiding citizen, I discretely asked the police men questions about their border patrol tactics. I unfortunately did not carry my camera when I discovered the mortars, and was not allowed to take photos when I returned in the presence of police. The next day, a convoy of vehicles - army, police and an ambulance – returned to the spot and removed the mortars.

¹³⁹ I visited a few of the locations where locals suggested that cameras had been placed, but I didn’t find any, nor did I find any documents online confirming their purchase. It is not unlikely that police are spreading these rumours to make locals believe their gaze reaches farther in the forest than it actually does. As I will discuss in Part II, trap cameras are certainly employed for border surveillance in the Evros/Meriç border, both by Greece and Turkey.

¹⁴⁰ Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 250.

In my analysis, the “powerful presence” is the border, igniting the violent nation building processes and conflicts of the first decades of the 20th century. In these processes, the conservationists who founded the park in the 1970s found a powerful, if unpleasant, ally. Half a century of war and state oppression rendered the area all but devoid of people. In 1940, 8080 people lived in the 16 Prespa villages, the overwhelming majority of whom were Slav Macedonians. During the Civil War, the fighters brought the population to around 13350 people. At the end of the 40s, many villages had lost most of their pre-war inhabitants while others, like Sfika/Besfina of Kranies/Drenovo to which I will return later in this chapter, were emptied completely¹⁴¹. More people left in the 60s and 70s due to economic hardship and persistent discrimination from the state. Today, a century after the demarcation of the border, and seventy years after the end of the Civil War, Greek Prespa is inhabited by some 1100 people, a measly 15% of the pre-war population. Spread across an area of 37 square kilometres and separated from either of the two nearest towns of Florina and Kastoria by more than 50 km of mountainous roads, the region is largely isolated from the rest of the Greek territory. Like Juanita Sundberg notes of parts of the US-Mexico border along the Rio Grande, in Prespa “the layering of ‘historico-geographical processes of dispossession and protected area legislation have produced vast areas where nonhumans are the dominant characters”¹⁴².



Communist (left) and Royalist (right) graffiti remaining on houses in the region. Photos by author, 2019-2020.

While highlighting the existing parallels with the well-documented use of enclosures and protected areas to inflict displacement and dispossession on selected populations is important, a distinction must be made: contrary to parks in settler colonial contexts like the USA, South Africa, or Israel/Palestine, the Prespa natural park was not actively set up to suppress and evict populations. Founded in 1974, it was established at a time when hostile state practices were de-escalating (the zone was abolished in

¹⁴¹ Penis, *Prespa the Greek*, 47.

¹⁴² Sundberg, “Diabolic Caminos”, 324.

the early 80s), and, to a large degree, played a reconciliatory, if obfuscating, role, casting “nature” as the protagonist in the Prespa landscape instead of the border. Years later, the trilateral border park continued this reconciliatory role, ushering in a narrative of cross-border collaboration and the “healing of wounds”, an aspiration which is nevertheless incommensurate with the lived experience on the ground. My argument is that the park, and the natural environment of Prespa at large, benefitted from past violences and, as I will show in the following sections of this chapter, inadvertently furthers the work of erasure. As Sundberg argues of the operations of dispossession along the Rio Grande border, “such processes have not *produced* the particular living beings and specific attributes constituting these landscapes, [but] their overall arrangement has been (re)configured.”¹⁴³ Or, in other words, the nature reserve, patrolled by police vehicles and possibly dotted with surveillance cameras, ghosts and mirrors the violent spatiality of the “Surveilled Zone”.

Sundberg’s analysis also provides an insight into how the question of traces can be interrogated. In the deafening absence of an official account, and the linguistic and material erasure of first-hand human testimony through exile and coercion¹⁴⁴, the main witness of the territorial struggles and projections of power and dominion over the ethnically liminal territory of Prespa is the environment itself: the surface of the mountain, the composition of the forest, or the local vernacular architecture. I therefore choose to turn to non-human forms of witnessing in order to examine human forms of territorial power as they register spatially in the materiality of the Prespa National Park¹⁴⁵. To do so requires engaging with complex ontological questions to do with the kinds of “nature” that are enclosed within the limits of the park, which in turn affect simplistic readings of the “natural border” that cuts it in three.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ To be sure, this was an erasure that was only effective within Greek territory. The memories and cultural practices of those exiled were carried and maintained abroad by diasporic Macedonian communities.

¹⁴⁵ As the French poet Paul Eluard wrote upon his visit to Prespa at the height of the Civil War: *L’homme (...) Inscrit son ombre au ciel et son feu sur la terre*. [Man (...) inscribes his shadow on the sky, and his fire on the earth]. His poem, titled “Dans la montagne vierge [In the virgin mountain]” narrates a landscape of immense natural beauty, one which is nevertheless permeated by scars and inscriptions. In so doing, the poet manages to capture the tension between the landscape and the long stories of violence it has hosted.

1.2. The Forest in Clouds

1650 m

1.2.1. Mist, Soil and Tephra

In the summer of 1948 the army launched a surprise attack against the partisans on the mountain of Bela Voda in an attempt to enter Prespa. The news spread like lightning among the villagers who grabbed what belongings they could carry and took to the hills of Varnountas, near the border with Yugoslavia to seek refuge. Within two hours, the gorge by the Greek-Yugoslav border was droning like a beehive with the voices of the elderly villagers. The sound of machine guns coming from the peaks of Bela Voda was resonating in the forest.

D.Penis¹⁴⁶

When the moist air masses from the lakes below scale the rising terrain of mount Varnountas/Baba - a process known in meteorology as *orographic lift* - the vapour cools, releasing the lake waters back onto the mountain. These vertical microclimates - higher altitudes receive up to 1400mm of rain and snow every year, double that of the lake shores - are responsible for a dense zonation of habitat types across the basin. Descending from the ridge to the slopes of Varnountas/Baba, the alpine and subalpine meadows that dominate the areas above the treeline give way to dense forests of Macedonian pine, silver fir, European beech, and oak mixed with several other broadleaved species that carpet the two sides of the border¹⁴⁷.

In the morning of June 18th, 2018, the forest was engulfed by a cloud of an altogether different chemical composition. When busloads of far-right and nationalist demonstrators trying to reach Prespa were stopped by police on the mountain, riots broke out and tear gas was used extensively. The demonstrators had gathered in response to a Greece-wide call to stop the signing of the “Prespa Agreement”, a bilateral treaty between Greece and, what was until then formally called the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM). The agreement, initiated by the momentum of liberal governments on both sides of the border, sought (and managed) to resolve the decades-long diplomatic stalemate surrounding the name of Greece’s northern neighbour. The demonstrators never reached Prespa and the agreement was signed across the two banks of the lake. Greece subsequently lifted its

¹⁴⁶ Penis, *Prespa the Greek*, 57.

¹⁴⁷ The treeline, itself ebbing and flowing in history with the changes in climate, is set at an altitude of approximately 1700 metres, which also serves as the limit for large mammals in these latitudes.

veto in the United Nations, allowing FYROM to be renamed “North Macedonia”¹⁴⁸. The riots of June 18th went down as the “Battle of Pisoderi”¹⁴⁹.



The “Battle of Pisoderi”, June 18, 2020. Photo: Vice News.

Empty tear gas canisters now litter the forest floor next to unexploded pieces of ammunition, leftovers of the second World War and the Civil War that, in previous decades, were known to kill and maim shepherds, lumberjacks, locals who used to collect copper shellings from the forest to sell as scrap, migrants who have been crossing the mountains, and, finally, large animals¹⁵⁰. Nowadays mines and unexploded remnants of war, are only an afterthought, but, are still regularly found by hikers, such as myself. As Nixon writes on the latent violence of Iraqi minefields, “the[y] have assumed the sedimentary character of the nation's layered conflicts.”¹⁵¹

The 2018 “Battle of Pisoderi” was both the product and a violent reminder of the layering of conflict upon the geography of Prespa. The signing of the Agreement itself proved a seminal moment in contemporary Greek politics, precipitating a change in government in line with the global turn towards far-right and, subsequently, affecting the way the country’s borders are managed¹⁵². Seventy years

¹⁴⁸ Also included in the treaty was a provision to open the long-disused border crossing point between Macedonia and Greece by the Greater Prespa lake. When I last visited that part of the border in autumn 2019, the army had cut a wide dirt road on the Greek side. On the Macedonian side, a group of workers was still weeding the area by the future checkpoint, somewhat more reluctantly than their Greek counterparts. And rightfully so. The works were abandoned by the new right-wing government who had been vocal against the agreement. At the time of writing, the border is set to open in 2022. Environmentalists in the area are torn about this prospect as the road that is planned to run across the border will make it harder for animals descending from the mountain to access to the lake. This is a space of constant conflicts. In this case, between pristine habitats and politics of recognition and loose borders.

¹⁴⁹ Pisoderi, or “Vigla” (which translates as “lookout”) is the name of the mountain pass where the protestors’ buses were stopped. The location also hosted one of the three checkpoints of the “Surveillance Zone”. During the Civil War it was occupied by the partisans and was fortified with heavy artillery.

¹⁵⁰ According to a 2007 study conducted by the Western Macedonia Prefecture, there are as many as 540 suspected minefields in Greek Western Macedonia alone. See <https://mines.pdm.gr> (accessed November 2018)

¹⁵¹ Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 225.

¹⁵² To claim that the agreement alone changed the course of politics in Greece would be reductive and inaccurate, as it would be to claim that the left-leaning government of SYRIZA of 2015-2019 followed a policy of open borders. For reasons of brevity, I will not get into more detail in this text.

after the end of the Civil War and the ethnic “disciplining” of this border region, the clashes between the police and protestors, opposing what they saw as a betrayal of Macedonian “land and soil”, that the nationalist imaginary sees as exclusively Greek, ghosted the deadly battles of the civil war that had taken place in the same mountain. In doing so, they reminded a forgetful Greek society that the wounds carved on the terrain of Prespa during the first half of the 20th century were still very much open¹⁵³.

Several of the protesters donned t-shirts with the slogan “Greece or Tephra”, a quote which belongs to the late 19th century writer and poet Periklis Yannopoulos and was popularised in the 2010s by the neo-nazi party of Golden Dawn. Its contemporary meaning within circles of the extreme-right is twofold, projecting violence both inwards, towards the Greek society which they see as weak and morally compromised (“Greece will either be great, or it should turn to ashes”), and outwards, towards Greece’s neighbours which they view as hostile nations founded on occupied, “naturally” Greek, land (“you will either succumb to Greece or you will be turned to cinders”). Soil, and its volcanic counterpart, tephra, were mobilized within the context of the Prespa Agreement as bounding materials of Greek nationalism. Perhaps to undo this “Greek soil”, and the borders that bound it “naturally”, requires looking at its material composition.

In November 2009, a team of palynologists¹⁵⁴ from the Institute of Geology and Mineralogy of the University of Cologne retrieved a composite sediment core from the bed of lake Great Prespa. Using tephra deposits from known volcanic eruptions to calibrate the core to geological time, it was found that the last 17000 years, spanning from the late Pleniglacial/Oldest Dryas to the present day, Late Holocene/Anthropocene periods were compressed in the upper 320cm of the core. Studying traces of pollen captured in the sediment, the scientists were able to determine movements in the Prespa treeline and changes in its composition. In their words, the various

colonizations of the prespa landscape by different plant species and their altitudinal migrations registered changes in climate such as cooling events, shifts in fire frequency and seasonality as well as a substantial restructuring of the Prespa landscape resulting from anthropogenic activities, such as animal husbandry, clearances and agriculture.¹⁵⁵

Through palynological analysis, the lake sediment becomes a telluric archive, holding and narrating the natural history of Prespa through paleobotanical evidence. At this resolution, the bounding principles of Greek nationalism fail to register. At a thickness of 0.076 millimetres per year, the history of modern Greek Macedonia since its annexation from the Ottomans in 1913 amounted to the top 7.296

¹⁵³ At the time of writing, two years after the “Battle”, a commemorative plaque stands in the location where the buses were stopped.

¹⁵⁴ Palynology is the study of pollen grains found in geological or archaeological deposits. Pollen extracted from such deposits may be used for radiocarbon dating and for studying oscillations in past climates and environments by identifying plants then growing. In so doing, palynological analysis reads planetary events but also human processes and patterns in land use such as agriculture, animal husbandry, and, in some cases, pandemics or prolonged conflict, as they register as layers in the silt, tephra etc. The Prespa lakes, surrounded by tall mountains forming a large catchment basin, offer an ideal location for conducting palynological research, their sediment concentrating pollen from afar.

¹⁵⁵ Panagiotopoulos et al., “Vegetation and Climate History of the Lake Prespa”, 11.

centimetres, or thirty-six pixels in the image generated by the equipment used to scan the core, operating at a resolution of 2 millimetres. 6.004 of these seven centimetres correspond to the 90-year period since the border was first cartographed and demarcated. The remaining 313 centimetres in that core stand to undermine Greece's "natural" right over these lakes, the forests and mountains that surround them, and Macedonia at large.

But can forest evidence be calibrated to a different temporal resolution to record events like the Napalm bombardments of 1949 or the 'Battle of Pisoderi and the tear gas cloud it was suffocated under? Beyond taking a bullet in the trunk, can trees register and archive conflict? Can these forests, their leaves, soils and non-human inhabitants speak to enduring processes of state violence in the region?

1.2.2. Traps

Not far from the location of the "Battle of Pisoderi", at an altitude of 1650m, I placed a second camera onto the trunk of an old beech tree. Designed to allow for the noninvasive observation of ecosystems, "trail cams", or "trap cameras" as they are called within the relevant community, are commonly used by conservationists¹⁵⁶ and hunters (and, it seems, border patrol) alike for the "gathering of data on the presence and abundance of life, wild or otherwise"¹⁵⁷. The camera comes with a weatherproof metallic casing coated with camouflage finish. A belt is used to tie the camera around a tree, and a steel, adjustable bracket helps mount it onto the tree trunk. It is motion triggered, with a sensor capable of detecting movement up to 25 metres at a trigger time of 0.15". Its "no-glow" infrared flash is undetectable to most animals and humans alike. The sensor is equally sensitive to large mammals that inhabit the region, like roe deer, wolf, bears, chamois, wild boar, and possibly the Balkan lynx which is rumoured to live in these mountains but is yet to be captured on camera on the Greek side of the border¹⁵⁸, but also to the movements of the forest itself: trees shedding their leaves in fall or releasing

¹⁵⁶ Indeed, my cameras are not the only cameras in the region. The environmental NGO 'Society for the Protection of Prespa' installs them to track animal populations in the park. This is not a technology that comes without conflict. In Iran, conservationists using such cameras to track the rare Asian Cheetah were arrested in 2018 and are facing execution as spies. See Kayleigh E. Long, "Jailed Researchers Trying to Protect Threatened Cheetahs in Iran Await Verdict", *National Geographic*, March 15, 2019, www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/2019/03/iran-wildlife-conservationists-jailed/ (accessed March 2019).

¹⁵⁷ Audrey Verma et al., "Imagining Wildlife: New Technologies and Animal Censuses, Maps and Museums", *Geoforum* 75, (2016): 75–86, 79.

¹⁵⁸ As the Prespa-based writer Julian Hoffman notes, the example of the Balkan Lynx offers a window into the entanglements of wildlife conservation efforts and conflict in the Balkans, with which the Lynx population has fluctuated in past decades. The lynx rebounded after the end of WWII from a nadir of 15-20 individuals, so that by 1974 they were estimated at 280 individuals. Due to prolonged conflict in Yugoslavia, their population dropped to 80-105 individuals by the year 2000. By 2012, their numbers had declined yet further, reduced to a mere 40-60, the shrinkage most likely triggered by the pervasiveness of guns and poaching after the collapse of the Albanian state in the 90s and the subsequent looting of its military depots. Today, the lynx has been confirmed to live and reproduce in North Macedonia, Albania, Kosovo, and is rumoured to live in Montenegro and Greece. In 2011 and 2020, lynxes were photographed in Macedonian Prespa by trap cameras set up by the managing bodies of Pelister and Galijcika National Parks. See Julian Hoffman, *Irreplaceable. The Fight to Save our Wild Places*, (London: Penguin Books, 2020).

pollen in spring, rain, hail and snow.

Trap cameras are called that for good reason. Designed in the shadow of the military¹⁵⁹ with the purpose of tracing routes and determining points of capture, they can expand the capacity of law enforcement and “turn a forest into a surveillance regime”.¹⁶⁰ The trap cam is a trap in and of itself. Its very mechanism is akin to the operating principle of traps, as described by the British Anthropologist Alfred Gell in his famous defence of traps as artworks, *Vogel’s Net*. Like Gell’s traps, each camera is “equipped with a rudimentary sensory transducer, sensitive to the animal’s touch” (or, in this case, movement), an “afferent nervous system [which] brings information to the automaton’s central processor which activates the efferent system”, producing “action-at-a-distance”¹⁶¹: the capturing of images.

Following Gell’s theorizing of traps, the trap camera and the landmine, both advanced mechanisms that enable remote, technologically-mediated encounters with bodies in the forest, are models of their human creators. But “each is also a model of its victim”¹⁶². Built to respond to life’s most vital function, movement, both mechanisms are concealed in the forest landscape, hidden under leaves or behind camouflaged coating and a flash calibrated against the eye’s retina. They both employ a sensor that is imperceptible to its victim - a tripwire for the anti-personnel landmine and a motion-detection sensor for the trail camera - a mechanism to receive and process information, and another one to activate it. At close inspection, trap cameras in the forests of Prespa are ghosting the minefiled, even if to a vastly less violent effect.



A trap camera installed on a beech tree in Mt. Varnountas, September 2019. Photo by author.

¹⁵⁹ For a history of the military roots of this technology see Etienne Benson, *Wired Wilderness: Technologies of Tracking and the Making of Modern Wildlife*, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2010). For a critical account of the overlaps between conservation and military optics see James Bridle, *Radar Ornithology* (Sage I-III), available at: <http://jamesbridle.com/works/radar-ornithology>, (accessed July 2019).

¹⁶⁰ Steph Yin, “Inside the Animal Internet: How digital surveillance is transforming our relationship with wildlife”, *Silica Magazine*, May 20, 2020, www.silicamag.com/features/inside-the-animal-internet (accessed June 2020).

¹⁶¹ Alfred Gell, “Vogel’s Net. Traps as Artworks and Artworks as Traps”, *Journal of Material Culture*, (March 1996): 15-38. 27.

¹⁶² Ibid.

This, however, is not an entirely benign exercise either. As critical conservation scholars point out, the monitoring and recording of non-human animal worlds can be interpreted as an extension of human domination over wildlife. However well intentioned, or indeed necessary for the preservation of certain species, such conservation efforts and technologies incorporate the natural realm into regimes of power and knowledge, often resulting in its quantification, mapping and curation¹⁶³. These, scholars point out, are the same tools – censuses, maps and museums - outlined by the British political scientist Benedict Anderson as the social instruments that enabled the ‘imagining’ of communities and laid the foundations for nationalism in the first place¹⁶⁴.

Operating, as I am, in this liminal space between nature and nation, it is therefore important to define who or what - whether this be a former partisan, a settler, a botanist, a leaf, a marten, tephra or a camera recording - is able to speak in my text and through what processes. Below I will attempt to address this question.

1.2.3. **Orography:** Mutedness and Natural Testimony

what happens to the physics of things, whether a sovereign subject or a rhizomatic object, when the frontier is viewed from the indefinable, crumbling, and corroding edges of things, where things become quasi things, only ever *thingish*? At the outermost edge the thing is nominal—any thing is always composed of a set of trailings and exfoliations of all sorts—the scent an animal leaves behind, the light off a lake, the sand raised up and sent across vast areas by the winds, smoke off a wild fire. Trailings are also the differently drawn effects of animal tracks, underground cables, and bitumen roads.

Elizabeth Povinelli, “Three Imaginaries of the Frontier with Illustrations”¹⁶⁵

On my way back to Athens from Evros/Meriç in March 2020, I made a diversion to Prespa to offload the material from my cameras. Considering their technical specifications, it came as both a surprise and a disappointment when I hiked to one of the cameras in the forest, only to find a trail of bear prints in the snow, but no recording of the bear itself. In the absence of an image, the orphan prints in the snow are the only remaining testimony of the animal’s passing in front of my camera. In this sense, they are what conservationists working on the same mountains as me have called bio-indices¹⁶⁶: signs

¹⁶³ Verma et al., “Imagining Wildlife”.

¹⁶⁴ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (London: Verso, 1991).

¹⁶⁵ Povinelli, “Three Imaginaries”.

¹⁶⁶ M. Petridou et al., *Assessing the Distribution and Relative Abundance of Large Mammals Using Camera Traps in the Aoos River Basin*, Technical Report (Self Published, 2019)

betraying the presence of a certain, elusive, species in an ecosystem. They serve as a reminder that, in the forest, “encounters between matters and events”¹⁶⁷ are continuously registered on the material composition of the forest floor. As Ralph Waldo Emerson elegantly (if a bit exaggerratedly) describes,

In nature, this self registration is incessant. All things are engaged in writing their history. The planet, the pebble, goes attended by its shadow. The rolling rock leaves its scratches on the mountain; the river, its channel on the soil...Not a foot steps into the snow, or along the ground, but prints, in a character more or less lasting, a map of its march¹⁶⁸.

As the battle of Pisoderi foregrounded, the latent violence of post-Lausanne nation building processes, enabled and perpetuated by the systematic silencing of alterity in official historical accounts, is still acting upon the terrain of Prespa and affecting politics on both sides of the border. Considered against this erasure, animal movements here have the capability to unsettle histories of conflict and migration, which are encoded and layered as organic and inorganic matter in the forest floor. This unsettling may be understood as the animals’ frequenting former human-made trails, trenches, or tunnels, which have since been abandoned; their crossing of borders, challenging the possibility of geographic division in the basin; their very presence in numbers which would not be possible had the area not been emptied during the long Balkan 20th century; or the more straightforward, and deadly, activating of a landmine with their body weight. The prints in my camera therefore become a powerful meditation on forms of witnessing and evidencing in conditions where human testimony is scarce, or actively muted, and non-human life is abundant. The forest floor then becomes what Susan Schuppli calls a “material witness”, a term she uses to describe “non-human entities and machinic ecologies that archive their complex interactions with the world producing ontological transformations and informatic dispositions that can be forensically decoded and reassembled back into a history.”¹⁶⁹

These natural processes, writing vectors of movement onto the mountain landscape, leave not only traces, but script onto the surface of the natural terrain. I somehow find myself returning to the scientific term *orography*, which has come to represent the impact of the topographic relief of elevated terrain on global climate. Recasting the term to its original etymology, which derives from the Greek words from mountain (ὄρος/oros) and script (γραφή/graphi), provides us with a term to discuss this vocabulary of traces; the scripture of the mountain. It offers a theoretical prism through which lines of flight across the mountain, in the form of broken twigs, disturbed or overgrown vegetation, tracks in the soil or snow, stream paths, trenches, trails and tear gas clouds can be considered for their testimonial value.

¹⁶⁷ Scuppli, *Material Witness*, 40.

¹⁶⁸ Ralph-Waldo Emerson, quoted in Eduardo Cadava, *Emerson and the Climates of History*, (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 4.

¹⁶⁹ Shuppli, *Material Witness*, 40.



Bear prints caught on a trail camera. Mt. Varnountas. Video still, full video available at vimeo.com/490159759/14fbe81c50.

As Shela Sheikh suggests in her text *The Future of the Witness*, looking to nature as a witness of anthropic processes entails an epistemological shift. It requires us to reconceptualise “the act of ‘testimony’ itself, the process whereby one ‘bears witness’, as a relational concept”, and to expand the figure of the witness “beyond the category of the human” to include ecological systems¹⁷⁰. For Sheikh, such a shift troubles established legal and testimonial protocols, as well as “categories of personhood, legal standing and voice” often reserved for humans alone. The question of voice, and the speech acts ascribed to it – witnessing, testimony, narration - is particularly interesting to consider against the seemingly “mute” forests of Prespa. The implications of such an enquiry are twofold, touching upon both with the presumed muteness of non-human nature in the modern imaginary (a passive backdrop against which politics is played out and history is written), but also with the historical erasure and physical destruction of a portion of the human population of Prespa and their languages, memories, and traditions.

As Sheikh points out, however, to claim that nature “witnesses” or “testifies” is inherently anthropocentric. This is a view that is taken further by the anthropologist of more-than-human worlds Eduardo Kohn, in his book *How Forests Think*, where he proposes that our understanding of nature and the vocabulary we use to describe it must be expanded to include forms of relation that are not bound by language. “Extending linguistic relationality to non-humans”, Kohn argues, “narcisistically projects the human onto that which lies beyond it [...] In the process, the properties that might permit a more capacious view of relationality are obscured”¹⁷¹. Instead of language, Kohn offers *representation* as a non-discursive form of relation forest worlds. Drawing from indigenous cosmologies of the Runa

¹⁷⁰ Shela Sheikh, “The Future of the Witness: Nature, Race and More-than-Human Environmental Publics”. *Kronos* 44, no.1, (2018): 145-162, 159.

¹⁷¹ Kohn, *How Forests Think*, 83-84

of Ecuador's upper Amazon, Kohn proposes to understand the inhabitants of the forest not simply as "non-human beings", a description which he sees as reductive, but as *selves* in their own right, who retain agency over their surrounding environment and are capable of representing both their interactions with it, as well as their own selves.

The question then again becomes one of ontological reckoning with the very concept of nature. What is the kind of nature that is enclosed and "self-represented"¹⁷² in the Prespa national park? Is it not one that is conflictual and relational itself? With human and non-human lives appearing intermittently and intersecting in my analysis of the Prespa border, and in line with my theorization of *border natures*, I attempt a relational reading of the park and its history, approaching both human and non-human with great caution, to avoid a methodology and a vocabulary that animalises the former and anthropomorphizes the latter.

Learning to read orographic scripture "against the grain" of the deep history of Prespa¹⁷³ is a complex endeavour that requires the cross pollination of different disciplines, ecological, historical, linguistic and spatial. Returning to Elisabeth Povinelli's quote above through the prism of orography, the bordered routes of governance become legible as exfoliating forest matter¹⁷⁴. Attached to this very forest matter - trees, boulders and village ruins - along cross-border routes of governance, my trap/trail cameras are here repurposed as orographic devices that record the residual histories of Prespa. The animals appearing before them and the prints that remain after their passing testify to decades of abandonment, displacement, and enclosure. They become "one of many parts" of what Sheikh has called a "witness collectivity"¹⁷⁵. They narrate Prespa as a "ghost habitat"

¹⁷² Astrida Neimanis, "Nature Represents Itself: Bibliophilia in a Changing Climate" in ed. V. Kirby, *What if Culture was Nature all Along?* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 179–198.

¹⁷³ James Scott, *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017)

¹⁷⁴ Povinelli, "Three Imaginaries".

¹⁷⁵ Sheikh, "The Future of the Witness", 148. For Sheikh "insofar as singular lives are violated within broader ecologies, the witness can no longer be a solitary figure; rather, the witness must instead be *but one* within a collectivity. *the witness must be one of many*".

1.3. (P)lethe: The Village

1200 m

1.3.1. **Allophony:** Domestic Space as Border

"The bulk of these peasants speak a Slav dialect...not Serbian...nor Bulgarian. It contains, as is natural, a large number of Turkish, Greek and Albanian words, and has some grammatical peculiarities"

Edith Durham, *The Burden of the Balkans*, 1905¹⁷⁶.

"They cut our tongue"

Yiannis Sekouloupoulos, Slav-speaking former resident of Prespa, 2020.

When the mixed broadleaf forests extending over the gentle slopes of Sfika/Triklario mountain caught fire in July 1988, the exploding ammunition - land mines, mortars, and aerial bombs - that remained scattered across the forest since the Civil War prevented firemen from accessing the area from the ground.¹⁷⁷ As a result, the fire smouldered for days, the slopes exploding in its wake. The latent energy that was stored in the ammunition that had been waiting, unexploded, for forty years and released by the exothermic reaction caused by the forest fire once more activated the archival nature of the the forest floor. The blasts served as indices of past violences, untreated and ever-ready to thrust their way into physical and social space.

This eruptive ability of the civil war-era bombs is strongly reminiscent of the way the people of Prespa themselves were understood by the state throughout the 20th century. A 1928 quote from the Greek envoy to Paris, Nikolaos Politis, helps bring the argument home. Albanian-speaking minorities in Greece, Politis claimed, were "foreign bodies, continually filled with explosive materials"¹⁷⁸. Like the bombs scattered in the forest, the people of the "Surveilled Zone", as Rombou-Levidi notes (echoing Foucault) were perceived as dangerous "at the level of their potentialities", not their actions¹⁷⁹. In this section, I will explore these (un)past violences as they collapse over the ruins of Sfika/Besfina village, a former Macedonian speaking community by the Greek border with Albania.

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During the negotiations of territorial limits between Greece and the newly-independent state of

¹⁷⁶ Edith Durham, *The Burden of the Balkans*, (London, 1905), 90.

¹⁷⁷ Angelos Sinanis, *Κορέστεια, τα χωριά της Λήθης*, [*Koresteia: The Villages of Lethe*], (Elati Triakallon: Self Published, 2015), 208.

¹⁷⁸ Politis in Hart, "Culture, Civilisation and Demarcation". The similarities with the contemporary xenophobic discourse which portrays all asylum seekers as potential jihadists, ready to detonate their explosives in European cities, are striking.

¹⁷⁹ Michel Foucault in *Power: The Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954-1984*, ed. J.D.Faubion, (New York: The New Press, 2000) in Rombou-Levidi, "Dancing Beyond the "Barre"".

Albania¹⁸⁰, it was decided by the Great Powers that the border be determined on the basis of “ethnological and geographical criteria”¹⁸¹. These ethnological criteria, in turn, were to be identified, as the anthropologist Laurie Hart notes, not according to the language spoken in public, but that which was “spoken in family life”¹⁸². As a result, a series of censuses were conducted in the fifteen-period over which the border took shape¹⁸³, with public servants going door to door to enquire about the language spoken in each house. In so doing, they diverted the border drawing exercise from the terrain of Prespa onto the space of the village, and that of the household where culture was more freely performed¹⁸⁴.

Beyond the more sinister exclusionary policies that the demarcation of the border entailed, the post-delimitation process of national incorporation was carried out through a subtler process of assimilation, which also revolved around language, and which, I will show, often required the recruitment of the natural environment in efforts to erase allophony. Over the three-year period of 1926-1928 that followed the demarcation of the border, 2479 non-Greek sounding placenames in the Greek territory were formally replaced by a committee comprised of geographers, archaeologists, historians and linguists¹⁸⁵. So were the names of rivers and mountaintops. In the Florina prefecture alone, 94 villages were renamed¹⁸⁶, including all of the villages of Prespa. “Besfina”, was renamed “Sfika” on 31/08/1926.



ΦΕΚ 346/1926 whereby “Besfina” was renamed “Sfika”. Source: Hellenic Parliament Library.

¹⁸⁰ The border was first discussed at the London “Conference of the Ambassadors” in August, 1913. As with the border with Serbia, talks were postponed until after the Great War, when a tripartite committee made up of one British, one French and one Italian colonel, observed by a Greek and an Albanian counterpart was charged with its precise delimitation. The border was finalized in 1925 with a treaty signed between Great Britain, France and Italy in Florence (known as “the Florence Protocol”), and ratified by Greece (and Yugoslavia) in 1926.

¹⁸¹ Dimitrakopoulos, “The Land Borders of Greece”, 112.

¹⁸² Hart, “Culture, Civilisation and Demarcation”.

¹⁸³ Three censuses were conducted in Sfika/Besfina during that period, each registering a steadily declining population. In 1913 there were 431 residents, in 1920, 348, and in 1928, 322. All census data for Sfika/Besfina are taken from www.florina-history.blogspot.com/2010/04/besvina.html (accessed October 2018).

¹⁸⁴ When, in 1929, the Greek minister of Exterior Andreas Michalakopoulos anecdotally complained to his French counterpart, Aristide Briant, about the committee’s decision to cede fourteen of Prespa’s villages to Albania, it is rumoured that he received the following answer: “Do not worry Minister, we will find a solution. Either the villages will be given to you, and the residents to Albania, or the villages to Albania, and the residents to you.” Whether true or not, the above anecdotal story attests to the scale and violence of demographic restructuring that took place in this border region during the first half of the 20th century. Vassilis Kondis, *Greece and Albania, 1908-1914*, (Thessaloniki: Self Published, 1976), 116-118.

¹⁸⁵ This process was initiated by a 1909 royal decree regarding the forming of a “Committee for the study of placenames in Greece and their historical justification”. A second decree, issued in 1926, extended this process over the “New Lands”.

¹⁸⁶ Solaki and Vamvakidou, “Renaming of Settlements”.

The new name, “Sfika”, Greek for “wasp”, was in line with that of the rest of the villages in Greek Prespa, which were almost entirely reterritorialized as plants or forest animals: “Bukovik” was renamed “Oxia” (beech tree), “Ornovic” was renamed Karies (walnut tree), “Drenovo” was renamed “Kranies” (dogwood), “Trnovo” was renamed Agathoto (thorny), “Trobicista” was renamed “Daseri” (wooded). “Popli” was renamed “Lefkona” (poplar grove), “Medovo” was renamed Miliona (apple grove), “Orovo” was renamed “Pyxos” (box tree)¹⁸⁷. For the first time in Prespa, even if only in the field of semantics, nature, and trees in particular were used as instruments of cultural erasure. It would not be the last.

Along with the villages, the state also changed the names of the people inhabiting them¹⁸⁸. Sekulov, the former resident of Prespa (and partisan) whom I quote above, was renamed Sekouloupoulos¹⁸⁹. Coming a few years after the Neuilly and Lausanne population exchanges, the renaming of settlements and people furthered a process of replacement, both corporeal and semiotic, along the border. As I will describe in what follows, these ethnocidal and memoricidal¹⁹⁰ policies were facilitated by the very domestic space the state sought to penetrate and discipline.



Roe deer grazing on moss that grows on an abandoned grave in Sfika. The names on gravestones were often changed to commemorate Greek subjects instead of Slavic ones. Video still, full video available at vimeo.com/490232396/72b8862840.

¹⁸⁷ In some cases, usually when placenames stemmed from landscape and vegetation features, the translation retained the original. More often, however, the original meaning was ignored and an altogether new placename, usually from ancient Greek culture, was introduced. Often, placenames that bore negative connotations were changed to signify something “pure”. In Prespa, for example, the village of Trobicista (cemetery) was renamed to Daseri (wooded) and Smardes (dirt) was renamed Krystallopigi (crystal spring). Solaki and Vamvakidou, “Renaming of Settlements”.

¹⁸⁸ See Loring M. Danforth, *The Macedonian Conflict. Ethnic Nationalism in a Transnational World*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995), 160.

¹⁸⁹ As Myrivili notes, “people had two names and two languages: one that was spoken indoors, (...) and another that was used in public. The presence of the Nation had infiltrated and articulated the very rooms of the house”, Myrivili, “The Liquid Border”, 85. See also Tasos Kostopoulos, *Η Απαγορευμένη Γλώσσα: Κρατική Καταστολή των Σλαβικών Διαλέκτων στην Ελληνική Μακεδονία* [*The Forbidden Idiom: State Coersion of the Slavic Dialects in Greek Macedonia*], (Athens: Mavri Lista, 2000).

¹⁹⁰ The French anthropologist Pierre Clastres defines the term “ethnocide” as the “cultural disappearance of the other”. The term “memoricide” has also been used to describe the erasure of the very recollection of the “other” within the context of the production of *terra nullius* in Israel/Palestine. See Pierre Clastres, *Archaeology of Violence*, (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2010) and Marcello Svirsky, “The Production of *Terra Nullius* and the Zionist-Palestinian Conflict”, in ed. Simone Bignall and Paul Paton, *Deleuze and the Postcolonial*, (Edinburgh: Edingurgh University Press, 2010).

1.3.3. Collapsing onto the Landscape

Due to the geology of the area, favouring terra rossa soils over stone, most buildings were built on plinths (locally known as *plithiá*) made of mud and straw, a vernacular style of adobe architecture that is characteristic of the region¹⁹¹. To prevent decay from the ground, the foundations, and the first couple of metres up to the ground floor windows were built with two rows of stone walls, of 60-70cm thickness¹⁹². The rest of the external walls were built with raw plinths made of clay soil, small pieces of rock and wheat straw at a thickness of 55-60cm. The mortar that was used to bind the plinths together was also made of earth and straw, as was the 2-6cm thick plaster layer that was used to protect the walls from the elements. The material composition of the plinths was designed so that the bricks gradually “melted” into each other, and formed a uniform, statically sound unit. The thinner internal partitions were usually also made of plints, or reeds from the lake woven together, and supported by wood. The floors were supported by beach, oak, fir or juniper tree trunks, 10-15cm thick, the edges of which were built into the mud walls. Onto the trunks, the mason laid branches or reeds and, on top of them, compacted earth. The roof was made of tree trunks and branches again and, depending on whether the building was used for dwelling, storage, or as a barn, it was covered with ceramic tiles or reeds and was built at a slight gradient to extend beyond the external walls, protecting them from the rain. Made from earthen materials, these houses required constant maintenance from their inhabitants, involving the regular plastering of walls, replacing damaged plinths and wood components¹⁹³.

The desertion of the village after the Civil War made this maintenance impossible. Before the Second World War, in 1940, its residents were 294, all of them ethnic Macedonians. In the 1951 census, two years after the end of the Civil War, the register was zero. The villagers, over 100 of whom had joined the ranks of the Democratic Army¹⁹⁴, had followed the partisans across the border, and the village had been emptied.

After a plinth building is abandoned, the plaster that covers the walls is the first to go. Exposed to the rain, the walls erode. They assume irregular textures and gradually become thinner, from the top

¹⁹¹ The houses provided shelter for an extended family, multinuclear family (*zadruga*) its members living under the same roof and taking up the same profession – in the case of Sfika the trade of timber or animal husbandry. The houses were relatively small, initially long, one storey buildings split in half to house the family on the one side, and their animals on the other. From the 19th century onwards, the houses were built in two floors, with the family inhabiting the top floor and the animals the ground floor. In some cases, rich families would build their houses from stone. Sfika had one such house, which used to stand until the 90s. Today, one of its walls is among the few remaining in the ruins of the village.

¹⁹² In cases where the subsoil was weak, a layer of beach or cedar tree trunks was laid under the first layer of stone.

¹⁹³ Beyond my own fieldwork, much of the architectural analysis provided here is based on Michalis Prodromou's Masters thesis, which he was kind enough to share with me. Michalis Prodromou, M. “Σεισμική και Θερμική Συμπεριφορά Κτιρίων από Ωμόπλινθους στην Περιοχή των Πρεσπών [Seismic and Thermal Behaviour of Adobe Buildings in the Prespes Area]”, (Masters diss., Metsoveion Polytechnic of Athens, 2016).

¹⁹⁴ Atanas Tane Naumovski, *Lerin in Mourning*, (Wareemba AUS: Politecon, 2014). Several of the villagers died in battle. The precise number of casualties is, however, unknown. A former partisan, Nikos Kentros names eight casualties from Sfika, offering different names to Naumovski.

downwards. When they reach a thickness that is insufficient to support the weight of the roof, the latter caves in. So familiar is this process to locals, that they share an axiom that states: “once the roof is gone, the building is gone”. Water enters from above, slowly eating away the walls and internal partitions. The wooden parts, floors, balconies and weight-bearing beams, rot and, when the external walls become too thin to support the floors, these fold inside the building. The rain then slowly melts what remains of the building.



Plinth houses at the village of Ano Kranionas at various stages of decay. Photos by author, April 2019.

Often, from stones dropping from the plum, apple, quince or cherry trees planted in the yard other trees grow inside the walls, accelerating the decay. In a few years, the building is reduced to a lump of earth; a small hill with trees growing on top of it. As a local told Michalis Prodromou, an engineer studying these buildings, “plinth houses melt like ice, and return to earth”. *(P)lethe*, the title of this section refers to this slow, natural process of concealment of otherness through architectural decay. A compound of the word *plinth* and *lethe* - the personification of forgetfulness in ancient Greek mythology - the term encompasses the tension between the two worlds, the *dopia* Macedonian culture, and the ancient Greek heritage, imposed by the state to claim Macedonia as Greek.

Indeed, today the village is indistinguishable from natural topographic features. Walking among the village ruins today, it is impossible to grasp how less than 100 years ago this settlement comprised 70

homes and was inhabited by more than 500 people. Slowly but surely, Sfika has become another ghost habitat. The Greek-Albanian border, after cutting into households through language, collapsed back onto the landscape, taking the entire village with it. Covering the former houses and alleys is now a mosaic of wilded orchards, mixing with low lying ruderal vegetation, mountain rivulets, and the young mixed broadleaved forest which gradually descends upon the village claiming the abandoned terraces and former pastures. This migrating treeline, rolling downwards from the slopes of mount Triklario into the village, creates a rich ecotone, which, as the cameras I have placed in the vegetated ruins show, is frequented by species, like roe deer and bears, that thrive on the forest edge, feeding on the fruit from the abandoned orchards¹⁹⁵.



A Brown Bear on a trail leading to the village ruins. Video still, full video available at vimeo.com/490172361/50e0100666.



Roe deer in the village ruins. Video stills.

¹⁹⁵ In conservation ecology these are called “edge species”. Leslie Ries and Thomas Sisk, “What is an Edge Species? The implications of Sensitivity to Habitat Edges”. *Oikos* 119, No.10 (October 2010): 1636-1642.

Like the animals that visit it, the village reveals itself differently with the seasons. Between May and October, when the trees that grow around and inside the village still hold their leaves, patterns of habitation are almost entirely erased by the forest. The ruins are so well hidden that hikers who look for them often come back empty handed. Far from being attributed to natural processes, this is an erasure that is equal parts human¹⁹⁶. It is only in the winter months, when trees shed their leaves, that one might see a wall here or there. The agencies of trees, their “abilities and tendencies (...) to grow, reproduce, spread and break up”¹⁹⁷ buildings are mobilised by the state apparatus to perform a slow violence that extends the reach of the state, and completes its memoricidal work, requiring little to no human intervention.



A drone photograph of Sfika in December 2019, laid on top of a 1945 aerial photograph. The forest has rolled downhill, now engulfing the church. Archive photo: Greek National Cadastre, Drone photography: author and Marianna Bisti.

¹⁹⁶ In other abandoned villages in the area this forest erasure was more actively pursued by the state. The village of Babsor/Vapsori, also a stronghold of the partisans, was burned and planted with black pine. This was done in the 1950s, masked under an initiative by the forestry department to plant belts of black pine above mountainous villages to protect them from landslides as well as from flood events. This practice of erasure through reforestation is widespread and well documented globally. See for example the secret reforestation plan to hide evidence of mass graves in the Nazi death camp located near Chełmno nad Nerem inside, Rżuchowski Forest in Poland. See the “Race and Forest” project, available at: biennalewarszawa.pl/en/rasa-i-las-2/ (accessed February 2020). For the replanting initiative by the Greek Forestry Service see Kalliopi Stara, “The impact of perceived land-use values on biodiversity conservation in the Vikos-Aoos National Park, Papigo, Greece”. (Masters diss., University of Wales, Bangor, 2000).

¹⁹⁷ Owain Jones, Paul Cloke, “Non-Human Agencies: Trees in Place and Time” in eds. Carl Knappett and Lambros Malafouris, *Material Agency. Towards a Non-Anthropogenic Approach*, (New York: Springer, 2008), 84.

1.3.4. Wild Archaeologies

In one of my visits to Sfika, in March 2019, I noticed two large holes in the ground. They were dug meticulously, revealing the knee-high stone walls of a building and running parallel to them, as if to unearth something that was adjacent. It was obvious that they had not been dug by an animal. Talking to Makis¹⁹⁸, a local from the nearest inhabited village who turned out to have been keeping guard during the dig, I learned that the holes were dug by looters – including a former army colonel and a priest - who had received a tip from the daughters of a former partisan now living in Bulgaria, claiming seven boxes of gold coins were buried there during the civil war. This news did not come as a surprise. Enchanted by tales of partisans hiding golden coins and weapons in the mountains, looters, equipped with metal detectors, often dig in these forested ruins in search of “concealed objects of value”¹⁹⁹. Based on rumours that partisans received support from Stalin and Tito in the form of gold, these beliefs are predicated on misinformed historical readings that carry to the present the state’s perception of the “other”, the partisan or the ethnic Macedonian, as an uncontrollably potent subject. Recognizing the destructive capacity of these rumours, the Greek state has shown profound tolerance towards these illicit excavations, particularly as these have intensified during the years of the financial crisis²⁰⁰. Unfettered by the state, looters destroy the little that is left of the houses and remove culturally significant objects from them²⁰¹, indirectly furthering the reach of the state and joining a long history of state-sanctioned destruction of heritage²⁰². Like the trees that cover the ruins, looters, are “harvested” for their destructive agency, and perform a kind of violence that is slow and structural, the violence of erasure.

¹⁹⁸ Not his real name

¹⁹⁹ Sutton, “The Hidden Bounty”, 86.

²⁰⁰ As David Sutton explains, during the financial crisis, the emerging discourse on hydrocarbons potentially hidden in the Greek undersoil echoed that on antiquities. This was a discourse that was “tied to the mystic powers of the landscape to produce wealth, with ‘depths’ serving as a metaphor uniting the geographical, the historical, and the spiritual”. *ibid*, 100.

²⁰¹ The American archaeologist Blythe Bowman Proulx defines looting as the “removal of culturally significant material from archaeological sites for commercial gain” see Blythe Bowman Proulx, “Archaeological Site Looting in “Glocal” Perspective: Nature, Scope, and Frequency”. *American Journal of Archaeology* 117, no.1, (2013): 111-125.

²⁰² As the architectural historian Robert Bevan has shown, in places like Bosnia and the West Bank, acts of looting have been deployed by invading and occupying armies as a means to demonstrate brutally and concretely the dominance of the conqueror. Robert Bevan, *The Destruction of Memory: Architecture at War*, (London: Reaktion Books, 2006).

the sediment core retrieved from the lake, the soil of Sfika holds a telluric archive that, once unsettled, troubles *jus soli* understandings of nationhood and with it, the very concept of the nation state as a bounded, linguistically and culturally uniform space, one which safeguards its continuity from classical Greece through rigid, impermanent and historically unaltered natural boundaries.

Engaging with the ghost habitat of Sfika through the prism of “wild archaeology” requires understanding the village as a complex archaeological record, and the material remnants of inhabitation held under the soil and in its very material composition as spatial codifications of the politics of the present. It also invites questions of how to best represent the entangled histories of violence that are encrypted in the material strata of the Sfika landscape²⁰⁵. Adding to the trap cameras that document the village being reclaimed by wildlife, I decided to map the ruins using aerial photography and three-dimensional scanning. Invisible from a ground-level perspective, the village reveals itself to the bird’s eye view. From above, the outlines of buildings and alleys are still clear, the orchards that conceal them now seemingly planted in rows. Using a drone to photograph the village from above, and compositing these photos through a process called photogrammetry, I create an accurate, three dimensional model of the village ruins. This shift in perspective from the ground to the sky is also largely shadowed by military technologies. As with the trap cameras and the minefield, the use of remote sensing and 3D scanning through drone photography ghosts the frequent surveillance flights the state army conducted over this unfriendly terrain during the civil war as well as the bombardments that ended it. The 3D scans of melting plinth walls, their subject no more stable than a photograph of a body in movement, capture this double violence of original displacement and destruction, and the quiet, gradual violence of replacement and erasure. They document what once was a village, before, soon enough, its spatial traces are forever lost.

²⁰⁵ Schuppli, *Material Witness*, 217



Aerial view of the ruins of Sfika, November 2019. Photo by author and Marianna Bisti.

1.3.5. Ruderal Evidence

"What kind of times are these, when
to talk about trees is almost a crime
because it implies silence about so many horrors?"

Bertolt Brecht, to Those Born Later

"Plants are sentient, sensing bodies. Shifts in their year-to-year patterns of vigor and decay record long-term transformations in the environment — changes in the climate, but also political transformations, the result of conflicts, as well as combinations of all the above."

Eyal Weizman²⁰⁶



A female roe deer inside the ruins of the St. Athanasius church of Besfina/Sfika. Video still, full video available at vimeo.com/490217456/0e3ebd7762.

The young, female roe deer seems alarmed. It runs, pauses, looks around wearily, runs again. Since it first walked through that door, it has been behaving as if it has walked into a trap, and for good reason. Surrounding it are the four walls of what was once St. Athanasius church of Besfina/Sfika. Located on a hill overlooking the village, at an altitude of 1215 metres, the church is completely surrounded by the forest. It was one of the only two buildings in the village made entirely of stone, and, consequently, it is the only one still half-standing. The church was intact until the late 1980s - early 1990s, when the roof caved in. Since then, the forest has slowly been making its way inside. Today, the church walls, 12.3

²⁰⁶ Weizman, *Forensic Architecture*, 119

metres wide, 21.5 metres long, and 7 metres tall, reveal the size of the community that once congregated inside them and now define the limits of an enclosed garden. The church walls protect the plants growing inside them from the winds descending from the mountain behind. The oak, beech, cherry and hop-hornbeam trees that now grow 10, 15, 20 metres tall, their canopy reaching above the walls, allow little light to penetrate and create a microclimate within the church, milder and more humid than the ruderal²⁰⁷ mosaic of abandoned fields and wilded orchards that dominate the rest of the village ruins. A carpet of ferns, orchids, iris and wild strawberries covers the church floor, and moss and mushrooms grow on the wood planks, stones, and ceramic tiles that fell inside the church after the roof collapsed. Lichens, clematis and ivy scale the walls and tree trunks. One cannot move within the church without tripping on their roots, which form a dense, entangled network that is reminiscent of the minefield. Like the many animals that enter the church to graze, the alarmed deer is feeding within a 30-year-old forest.



The church in 1992, shortly after the collapse of the roof. Photo: Nikolaos Moutsopoulos²⁰⁸.



Photo: The church seen from a bird's eye view, November 2019. Photo by author and Marianna Bisti.

²⁰⁷ The word “ruderal” comes from the Latin rudus, meaning “rubble”. While in botany the term is used to describe the first plant species that colonize disturbed lands, here I am using it somewhat more freely to encompass all the plant species growing on the rubbles of Sfika.

²⁰⁸ Nikolaos Moutsopoulos, *Εκκλησίες του Νομού Φλώρινας. Βυζαντινά και Μεταβυζαντινά μνημεία της Μακεδονίας*. [Churches of the Florina Prefecture. Byzantine and Post-Byzantine Monuments in Macedonia], (Thessaloniki: Malliaris, 2003).

The Sfika church is only one of the many blooming ruins of post 40s Europe. Abandoned in the 40s after the end of the Second World and Civil Wars, and collapsed in the early 90s, coinciding with the fall of communist regimes across the border, the church joins a nexus of abandoned and decaying spaces that span seven decades and extend from the German “rubble mountains”, or *Trümmerbergen*²⁰⁹, to the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone in, and the demilitarized zones at the edge of the iron curtain. Trees growing on this rubble are charged with the histories of abandonment that created the conditions for the forest to penetrate the church. Consequently, the role of the environmental disciplines in archiving these histories or, as Susan Schuppli phrases it, in “gain[ing] access to the informational quotient” carried by the “spatialized matter” of trees²¹⁰ is paramount. As the German novelist Heinrich Böll, who proposed that plants emerging from the rubble of WWII bombing in Cologne are used as temporal indices of time elapsed since an area was bombed, unearthing complex histories of violence here is often directly a “question of botany”²¹¹.

To access this “informational quotient” I collaborated with botanist Fanourios Nikolas Sakellarakis, a Tour du Valat scholar who has been researching flora in the Prespa region for years, to conduct a floristic study of the church forest. Conducting several field visits between May and August 2020, we registered 29 plant taxa²¹² growing inside this 12.3 m by 21.5 m grid. For each taxon a sample was collected, pressed, identified and catalogued in an herbarium, joining a growing archive that evidences the slow violence of the border. The space of the church, where the samples were extracted, was crucial for the demarcation and enforcement of this border. The building itself, architectural evidence of the Christian religion of the inhabitants of Sfika, was important in ceding the village to Greece. After the demarcation, the “divine power” to change the locals’ names was also vested to the space; both inside its walls, through baptism, and outside, through burial.

For the people entering (or leaving) the country through the mountain, the forest that surrounds the church extends the border, often in unexpectedly deadly ways. In July 2019, near the church of Sfika, the body of an unidentified Albanian man was found, dismembered by the forest animals. The young shepherd who found the body, Christos, later took me to the location. A few electronic devices and household objects were still lying nearby. These led the police to swiftly conclude that the man was a burglar who had crossed over from Albania and was returning home with his catch. The case was never resolved and the police closed the file without an identification, leaving the objects in the forest for me to collect. The anthropologist Michael Taussig describes this constant interplay of the nation state (and,

²⁰⁹ *Trümmerberg*, which translates as “rubble mountain” or *Schuttberg* (debris hill) is a term used to describe the hills that were created in German cities from amassed rubble caused by allied bombings. See Fernanda De Maio, “The Green Hills of Rubble in Black and White”, *Transactions on the Built Environment* 131, (2013): 531-541

²¹⁰ Schuppli, *Material Witness*, 208.

²¹¹ Heinrich Böll, *Der Engel Schweig* (*The Silent Angel*), trans. By Breon Mitchell (1995 (original 1949-50))

²¹² Species and subspecies. Full floristic catalog can be found in the appendix. More species of lichen, moss and fungi were collected as well.

by extension, its borders) between “ordered system and unstable agent of terror”, as “the nervous system”²¹³. Dig into the soil to uproot a plant (which we had to do several times in our botanical survey), prompt the network of roots that hold the soil in place, and this nervous system is activated.



“Forest Media”. One of the CDs found at the location where the unidentified man was found by Christos, July 2020. Video still, by author.

In his essay *In the Forest Ruins*, Paolo Tavares argues that in Amazonia “the natural environment itself—the content and distribution of plant species, the shape of the canopy, variations in topography and soil composition etc.—constitute archaeological records in their own right.” The forest, he continues quoting the ecologist William Balée, “configures a great archaeological archive that “harbors inscriptions, stories and memories in the living vegetation itself.”²¹⁴ Reflecting on indigenous understandings of the forest as a sacred entity with its own societal codes and structures, Tavares observes how, on the opposite side of the spectrum, “[i]n western thought the forest represents the threshold of the law, the space of the civic.”²¹⁵ Reading Tavares against the ruins of Sfika, I argue that the moving treeline is calculated to consume the civic space that was once inhabited by non-ethnic Greeks living within what became Greek territory. The violent border histories of Sfika are therefore encoded as “wild archaeologies” into the vegetative matter of the trees growing inside the church, their growth “branching” into politics and history and “acting as temporal indices that allow us to travel back in time” to the day the roof collapsed, or even further, when the border was carved on the slopes behind

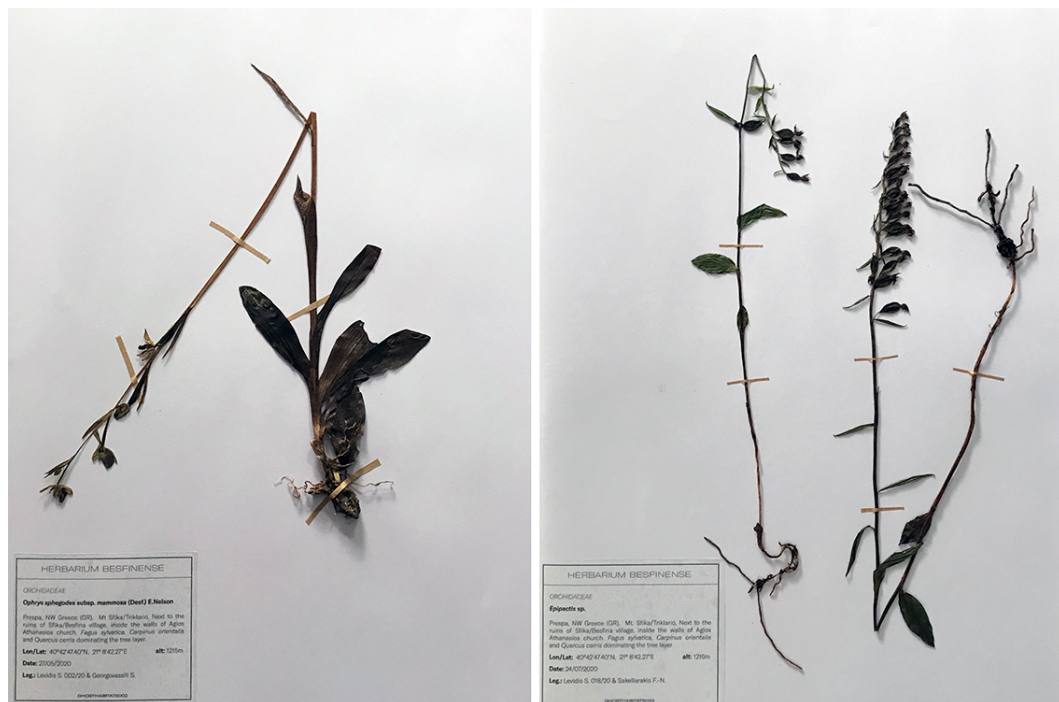
²¹³ Taussig quoted in Myrivili, “The Liquid Border”, 53.

²¹⁴ Paulo Tavares, “In the Forest Ruins”, *e-flux*, available at: <https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/superhumanity/68688/in-the-forest-ruins/> (accessed November 2017).

²¹⁵ Ibid.

the village²¹⁶.

Built from, and returning to, the forest soil, the vegetated ruins of Sfika trouble not only notions of identity and nationhood in Prespa, but also the very boundaries between culture and nature in the park itself. As the forest gradually engulfs the village, the “wild”, a concept central to the construction and governance of otherness by the western colonial imaginary is here conjured to assist in the spatial construction of the Greek and European frontier. In erasing patterns of habitation by the border, the constructed “wild” creates a forested buffer between Greece, Albania and Northern Macedonia and “naturalises” the border making it seem as if it was always there. As the subtitle of the part of the thesis suggests, following decades of coercion and abandonment, Prespa is now *a border, wilded*. As I will discuss in the following section, the area is now designated and policed as a “green border”.



Herbarium Besfinense, *Ophrys sphegodes* subsp. *mammosa* (Desf.) E. Nelson. (left), and *Epipactis* sp. (right). By author and Fanourios-Nikolaos Sakellarakis.

²¹⁶ Here I am drawing from Susan Schuppli's enquiry into trees "branching into law". In a chapter that goes under the same name, Schuppli details how the "arboreal signature" of a Lombardy poplar, a mulberry, and a walnut tree captured in a video and analysed by a dendrologist contributed to the prosecution of alleged war criminal Dokmanović in Bosnia. See Schuppli, "Material Witness" 200-208.



Herbarium Besfinense, *Iris germanica* L. (top). *Iris germanica* growing in space of the former the cemetery, outside the church walls, June 2020 (bottom). Photos by author. While the iris is native in the forest of Sfika, it's the density at which it occurs outside the church signals that it has clearly been planted there as a decorative plant, and has since multiplied. With the graves mostly gone, the Iris acts as evidence of the existence of the funerary space. By author and Fanourios-Nikolaos Sakellarakis.



1.4. ‘Udhë Ujk’: The Wolf Trail

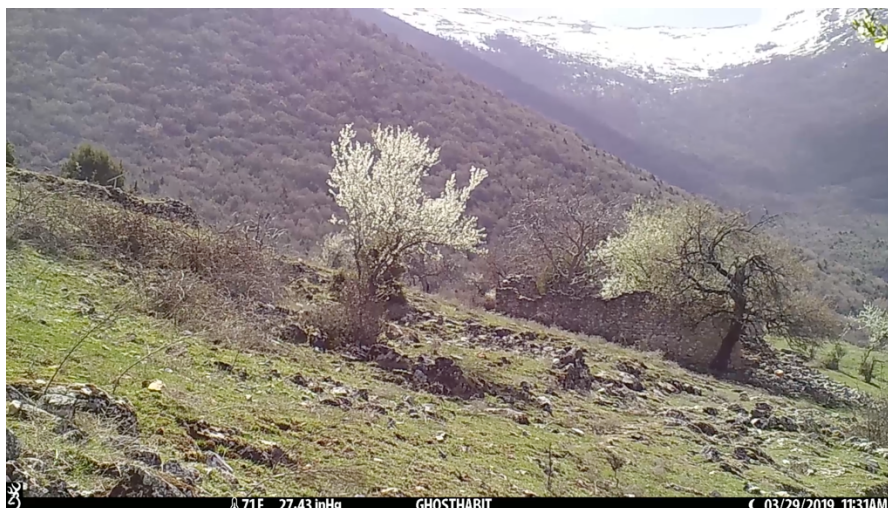
850 m

1.4.1. A Red Lake

"If, exceptionally, the demarcation line is followed by a trail, or a narrow, the citizens of the two littoral countries will have the right to use this trail or narrow."

Article 6 of the 1925 Florence Protocol, "Trails and narrows following the border"²¹⁷

Following the mountain streams down the ravines of Sfika, one finds the old trail that runs through another abandoned village, Kranies/Drenovo, along the southern shores of Lesser Prespa lake. When it was in use, the trail was called "Udhë Ujk", Albanian for "wolf trail"²¹⁸. Today, due to its location on the foothills of the north-facing, steep slopes of mount Sfika, the trail runs through thick Oak and juniper forests and is for the most part near impenetrable. Doing justice to its old name, it is overwhelmingly used by wildlife, with the exception of the occasional hiker or herders from the nearby Greek villages who bring their flocks to the lush pastures of Kranies during the spring and summer months. Wrapped around a prune tree in the abandoned orchards of Kranies along the trail is the last of my trail cameras.



The ruins of Kranies/Drenovo villages as seen from the trail camera, April 2019. Video still, full video available at vimeo.com/490205380/3dbd26ca26.

Until the end of the 19th century, the trail was part of the mule route that passed through Florina, Pisoderi pass, Prevol, Oxia in modern day Greece, into Biglista, Korce and Devoll, in modern day Albania, connecting not only the multi-ethnic communities living around the lakes but also forming part of a

²¹⁷ available online at www.sfeva.gr/E41C4090.el.aspx (accessed July 2020).

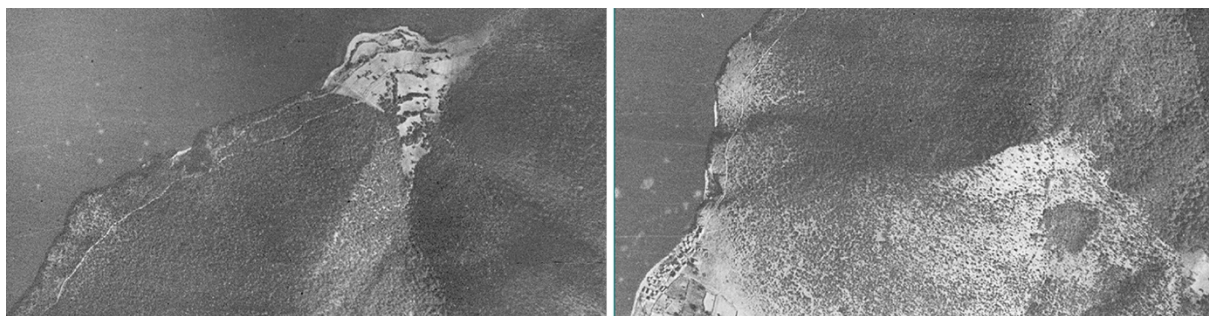
²¹⁸ Katsadorakis, G. (1996), 51-53.

network of roads that connected the Ottoman territories of the southwestern Balkans to Istanbul²¹⁹. When the cart road that connected Pisoderi to Krystallopigi and Biglista was built in 1872, the same road that today leads to the official border crossing station, the trail was largely abandoned, and was mainly used to reach the village of Kranies/Drenovo.

During the Civil War, the trail was used frequently once again as it connected the partisans to Albania, allowing them to move safely between the fronts of Prespa (Vitsi) and Grammos, to transport supplies and arms into Greece and to take their wounded to the hospitals they had set up in the Albanian side of the border. On the last day of the 'Pyrsos' offensive, August 16th 1949, the national army rolled downhill from Sfika to block the partisans' and locals' escape to Albania through the trail.²²⁰ From there, they also embarked on small boats to reach the peninsula across the lake and cut off the last possible route to Albania, through west Prespa.²²¹ The events of these days, narrated by the former partisan, Dimitris Penis, are harrowing:

From the early hours of the 10th, different types of airplanes started flying above Prespa in waves, so fast, and so low, that their wake forced the reeds to bend before them. Wherever one would look, they would see black smoke. In the six days that the bombardments lasted, over 100 air raids were conducted, thousands of 227-245kg bombs were thrown, 44 of which were Napalm. They shook the lake waters. The mountains between Mikrolimni and Oxia villages were burning. The small bay with the magnificent lake view and the meadows and reedbeds where the eggrets wintered was being battered by mortars and bombs. The water birds, scared, were trying to seek refuge in the reeds, while the travelling birds, breaking with their migratory patterns had to cut their stay short and left for unknown destinations. (...) Hundreds of thousands of dead fish were floating in the waters of the lake, which was painted red by the blood of both partisans and animals.²²²

In Penis's narration, the eruptive violence of the civil war is inscribed on the body of the lake. The bomb strikes fill the lake with blood, mixing human and animal and turning the waters of the lake into a photographic surface of sorts.



The trail seen in aerial photographs of 1945. Photo: Greek National Cadastre.

²¹⁹ See novazora.gr/arhivi/12779.

²²⁰ Hellenic Army General Staff, *Operation Pyrsos*, 79.

²²¹ Ibid, 98.

²²² Penis, *Prespa, the Greek*, 105.



Part of the clear segment of the trail, April 2019 Photo by author.

In the years that followed the Civil War, the village of Kranies/Drenovo was abandoned in the same manner as Sfika/Besfina, and so was the trail. While the trail itself was conceded to the forest, the rich lands around the lake that were left behind were confiscated and redistributed by the state²²³. This ushered in a new wave of engineering and disciplining, this time directed towards the lake waters themselves, and the land around them. The lakeside landscape of the entire basin was reconfigured: riparian forests were cleared, an irrigation network was constructed (which is being renovated at the time of writing), and lots were carved out of the fertile shores. During the 1980s, the agricultural production of Prespa was converted to bean monoculture through state subsidies and regulation. This shift coincided with Greece's entry to the European Economic Community (the predecessor to the EU) and is still effective today. Similar shifts in land use took place in the North Macedonian shores, where apples are cultivated as a single crop, and in Albania, where mass deforestation in the years of the Hoxha regime caused extensive soil erosion.

Joining the “wounded” ridges and expanding forests, this new riparian landscape was yet another spatial expression and consequence of state force at the border. It was also consistent with longstanding colonialist programmes to subject and regulate the terrain, and even climate²²⁴, in their

²²³ As the anthropologist Ricky Van Boeschoten has shown, this redistribution favoured the settlers over the dopyi who had stayed behind, therefore reinforcing the “stratification of the Prespa society along ethnic lines and criteria of national loyalty”. Riki Van Boeschoten, “When Difference Matters: Sociopolitical Dimensions of Ethnicity in the District of Florina” in ed. Jane Cowan, *Macedonia: The Politics of Identity and Difference*. (London: Pluto Press, 2000).

²²⁴ As Eyal Weizman notes, “the climate has always been a project for colonial powers, which have continually acted to engineer it”. Eyal Weizman, Fazal Sheikh, *The Conflict Shoreline: Colonialism as Climate Change in the Negev Desert*, (Göttingen: Steidl, 2015).

efforts to eradicate indigenous ways of life²²⁵. As Ros Gray and Shela Sheikh fittingly discuss in their text *The Wretched Earth*, “colonialism has always entailed the cultivation of lands as well as that of bodies and minds.”²²⁶

Today, the violence that turned the lake red in august 1949 is still carried by the body of the lake in more nuanced and slower forms. Pesticides and fertilizers from large-scale bean monoculture fill the lake waters with excess nutrients, causing their eutrophication²²⁷, and intensive irrigation joins karst drainage and diminishing levels of snowfall in the winter as one of the main reasons that contribute to the steady shrinkage of the two lakes. At the time of writing, in summer 2020, Greater Prespa lake stands some 10m lower than in the 1990s²²⁸.

In their eutrophic retreat, the lake waters change the very chemical composition of the liquid border - now a mixture of melting snow, sediment, aquatic life and fertilizers - and unevenly partition new arable territory to the three riparian countries, therefore directly altering the borders between them. As the water around it ebbs and flows in tandem with land use, earthquakes, and snowfall in the mountains, the 22.3 kilometre long border line separating the three countries over the waters of the two Prespa lakes²²⁹ is scripted on new “New Lands” emerging from the bottom of the lake and, in so doing, becomes an measuring device for both local and planetary earth-altering processes, and a reminder of the effect these have on attempts to demarcate state sovereignty.

²²⁵ For James Scott, there is a “permanent association” of the state with sedentary, fixed-field, plantation-style agriculture in the place of more diverse forms of cultivation. Scott, *The Art of not Being Governed*, 5-9.

²²⁶ Ros Gray and Shela Sheikh, “The Wretched Earth”, *Third Text* 32, no.2-3, (2018): 163-175.

²²⁷ Zlatko Levkov et al., “Ecology of Benthic Diatoms from Lake Macro Prespa (Macedonia)”, *Algological Studies* 124, (July 2007): 71-83, 71.

²²⁸ Thinking through the entanglements of hydrogeological and political shifts in Prespa within the context of the 2018 “Prespa Agreement”, the Macedonian anthropologist Rozita Dimova suggests that the fact that the lakes are shared by three countries “created conditions for producing alterity and phantasmic stories whereby the Other was always the culprit” for the receding waters. See Dimova, “The Hollow Signifier “Prespa””.

²²⁹ The Greek/Macedonia border over the Greater Prespa lake is 11.4 kilometres long, the Macedonian/Albanian border over the Greater Prespa lake is 4 kilometres long, the Greek/Albanian border over the Greater Prespa lake is 5.9 kilometres long, and the Greek/Albanian border over the Lesser Prespa lake is 1 kilometre long.

1.4.2. RABITs on the wolf trail: the “Green Border”

“Before Frontex started the Joint Operations, we used to apprehend more migrants in the urban areas; now thanks to their troops patrolling the green border, the migrants are located mainly on the border section with Greece,”

Albanian Border Police director Eduart Merkaj, to Reuters²³⁰

“The southernmost part of the European Green Belt hosts a hot spot of biodiversity and endemism. Predominantly located in the mountain ranges of the Balkan Peninsula, it forms an extremely heterogeneous mosaic of natural landscapes, including pristine alpine ecosystems, forests and steppe habitats, as well as lakes and coastal zones. The remote border areas and extensive forests are home to shy animals such as the Balkan lynx.”

The European Green Belt Association²³¹

In the 1980s, the trail was partially cleared up to a few kilometres from the border on the Greek side after French ornithologists discovered a cross-border habitat in the narrow tip of the lake: a shallow mosaic of half-submerged willow trees, reedbeds, wet meadows and patches of open water dotted with water lillies and inhabited by an incredible wealth of avifauna²³². On the Albanian side, throughout the Hoxha years the trail was cut on the border with electrified barbed wire and was guarded by armed soldiers. This fortification was equally to do with cross-border disputes between Greece and Albania²³³, and with preventing Albanian citizens from fleeing the insular regime.

Throughout the 1990s, after the Socialist regime in Albania collapsed in 1991, followed by the collapse of the economy in 1997, the trail, like so many other remote and treacherous mountain passages, was crossed daily by groups of Albanians who tried to reach Greece in search for seasonal work in Prespa, or continued South, looking for a new life in the Greek cities. Criminals, also mostly (but not exclusively) Albanian, set ambushes along these passages robbing the migrants returning to their villages on the

²³⁰ See Benet Koleka, “On Albania Border Patrol, EU’s Frontex Helps Tackle Migrant Flow”, Kathimerini, July 24, 2019, www.ekathimerini.com/242957/article/ekathimerini/news/on-albania-border-patrol-eus-frontex-helps-tackle-migrant-flow (accessed July 2020).

²³¹ The “European Green Belt Association” initiative, with the motto “borders divide, nature unites!”, envisions the establishment of a cross-border wildlife corridor along the demilitarized borders of the former iron curtain. The “Green Belt” runs from the Russian-Finnish border in the north, through the Baltic states, Germany, Central Europe and the Balkans (which it describes as “the mountainous Belt”), spanning the entire length of the northern borders of Greece. See www.europeangreenbelt.org (accessed July 2020).

²³² Giorgos Catsadorakis, “The Importance of Prespa National Park for Breeding and Wintering Birds”, *Hydrobiologia* 351, no.1 (August 1997): 157–174.

²³³ This infrastructural introversion, consistent with the logic of the bufferization of Prespa, was also true for the Greek side of the border. When, during the 60’s, the inhabitants of Greek Prespa asked the state to build roads in the region, they were told that this was not possible as it would “facilitate the advances of the invading enemies.” See Myrivilis, “Liquid Border” 105. Until 1985, the border pass of Krystallopigi, on the other side of Sfika mountain was the only operational border pass between Greece and Albania.

other side of Prespa of their seasonal earnings²³⁴. Greek border police patrolled for both. In her fieldwork notes, Myrivili describes the experience of driving around the mountains of Prespa at the time, to encounter “the Albanian as a flash, like a deer suddenly bounding across the road, disappearing just as quickly into the rocks, bushes and trees, never to be seen again.” Myrivili here mirrors the language of the police, recounting how “[a]mong (...) military men, myths run rampant about the Albanians’ toughness, their speed, and their ability to bear hardship and pain. This, of course, demeans them as it ennobles them: the Albanian both as superhuman and as primitive or animalistic.”²³⁵

Crucially, this “hunt” along the “wolf trail” was carried out within the context of the *Entry-exit, Sojourn, Employment, Deportation of Aliens, Recognition of Procedure of Foreign Refugees and Other Provisions* directive, which, issued in 1991, was the first immigration-related piece of legislation in Greece. Under this directive, a special border patrol force was established within the police, and was vested with the authority to decide who would get permission for entry and who would be returned, therefore circumventing well-established international asylum protocols.

The Greek border with Albania, and the “wolf trail” in particular, is therefore one of the loci where the contemporary border apparatus of Fortress Europe began taking shape in the aftermath of the 1985 Schengen Agreement. A close look at its recent history is critical in charting the origins of practices that are today widespread in the Greek borders, and external borders of the EU at large, like civilian paramilitary “hunts” of asylum seekers in the Evros river Delta, and illicit pushbacks in the Aegean Sea by the Greek Coast Guard, both of which I will explore in the following chapters.

Still, today, people who are not granted the necessary documents to cross through the Krystallopigi border passage, on the other side of the mountain, take to the trail, making it an important node in the informal natural-infrastructure network of cross-border pathways that enables what today is called the “circular migration” from Albania to Greece²³⁶. Consequently, over the past 30 years, the trail, intersecting a border that is selectively porous, but no less violent, has provided a route through which labor mobilities are filtered and governed, perpetuating a regime of “differential inclusion”²³⁷.

Even though in the last decade the necropolitical gaze of “Fortress Europe” has shifted eastwards, towards the Greek borders with Turkey, the Prespa border is by no means dormant. In parallel with the seasonal migrations of the “circular route” European authorities are now concerned by an emerging sub-route through Albania to Central Europe for “non regional migrants”, as Frontex call them. Since

²³⁴ Going for hikes as a child in Prespa, I still remember the locals cautioning me against taking that trail because it was frequented by the “Albanian Mafia”.

²³⁵ Myrivili, “The Liquid Border”, 50.

²³⁶ See Frontex, “Western Balkan Route”, <https://frontex.europa.eu/along-eu-borders/migratory-routes/western-balkan-route/> (accessed October 2020).

²³⁷ Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, *Border as Method, or, the Multiplication of Labour*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013).

the EU-Turkey deal of 2016, and the closing of what came to be known as the “Balkan Corridor”²³⁸, the borders of Prespa have been contested and crossed anew, this time in the opposite direction, by people fleeing conflict elsewhere in the world. Ghosting the movements of the Civil War armies and of the Greek border guards in the 90s are “guest officers” from Frontex who monitor and intercept these crossings within the context of Operation “Poseidon Land”. Though the trail itself is not actively patrolled today – police informally told me the dirt road that leads to the trail is too rough for their jeeps - it is here that they have allegedly hidden cameras in the rocks and trees.

Since May 2019, however, this border presents another particularity, once more casting it as a testbed for bordering practices to be implemented widely. It hosts Frontex’s first-ever operation carried out on the territory of a neighboring, non-European Union country. Frontex Rapid Border Intervention Teams (RABITs), made up of 50 officers from 12 EU countries²³⁹, patrol the Albanian side of the border jointly with Albanian officers, intercepting an average of ten people a day on Albanian soil²⁴⁰, in what is an outright performance of border externalization.

In the words of the director of the Albanian border police, Eduart Merkaj, Frontex’s presence on the “green border” of Prespa thickens it, transforming it from a line, back into a zone, within which migrants are intercepted before they reach the Albanian cities. This spatial arrangement mirrors similar zones that have historically been set up on the Greek side of Prespa, from the flexibly interpreted “deportation zone” within which Albanians were captured and summarily deported in the 90s, to the “Surveilled Zone” of the post-war decades, and the “shatter zone” that preceded and precipitated both.

The term “green border”, alluded to by Merkaj is an emerging trope used to describe the forested, mountainous and infrastructure-free former borders of the iron curtain. In border patrol, the term is used to convey the double-entendre of the softer, materially diverse “natural” border infrastructures, where the environment does the work of fencing. Made up of uneven forces and flows, the “green border” expresses the difficulties that the vegetated, hostile terrain poses on border surveillance efforts. At the same time the term is also indirectly mobilized to deflect blame for any deadly “frictions” this terrain imposes on the bodies of migrants, as was the case with the man who was discovered eaten by the animals near the church of Sfika, and with many more who continue to lose their lives during these treacherous mountainous crossings.

Examined against the context of the Prespa trilateral border, the “green border” hints to the ecological,

²³⁸ The term “Balkan Corridor” refers to the route asylum seekers would take during the “summer of migration” to go from Greece to Germany within the space of a few days, crossing several Balkan borders freely. The signing of the EU-Turkey deal closed that route. For weeks after the deal was signed, the Balkan borders shut in a domino-like effect, and thousands of migrants found themselves stranded at the Greek – Macedonian border of Idomeni/Gevgelija, not far from Prespa. Since, crossings have shifted westwards, through Albania, often through Prespa.

²³⁹ These numbers are for the final quarter of 2019. See www.frontex.europa.eu/media-centre/news-release/frontex-launches-first-operation-in-western-balkans-znTNWM (accessed June 2020)

²⁴⁰ According to data published by the Greek newspaper *Kathimerini*, 2,047 migrants were apprehended in 2015, then numbers fell to 915 and 1,047 respectively in 2016 and 2017, growing to 6,893 migrants in 2018. See Koleka, “On Albania Border Patrol”.

cultural, legislative, and military processes through which the border was demarcated, engineered, emptied, and “wilded”. It becomes a crucial theoretical tool that allows us to de-construct the deep histories of originary, perpetual border violence and their contemporary hauntings. Spanning large swathes of the external frontiers of the EU, the green border speaks to the intentional rendering of borderlands into “wild spaces”, ones that are “naturally” governed by violence. Spaces that at first glance appear to be wild or natural and thus outside the space of civil law, but in reality, as I will discuss further in the remaining chapters, are very much the result of a “flooding” of the space of the border with violence through law and operational assets.

Implying an absence of human life, the “green border” echoes the threats, whispers and silences that lurk in the thick foliage of the Prespa forests and that maintain the order of the nation state, shoring up its boundaries and hiding its unpleasant and undead pasts. In so doing, it presents researchers with important questions regarding the authority of historical archives to narrate this “ghost habitat”, and it calls for a closer reading of the environment as the medium upon which the untold is inscribed and codified.

My enquiry into the borders of Prespa has tried to respond to this challenge. Reflecting on a trilateral boundary that has been historically porous for people, animals, and water alike, I have shown that bordering is a process that has a duration, and which involves the hybridization of nature, whether direct or collateral. The environment, here, “belongs within the histories of violence”²⁴¹, and, when paid attention to, it speaks to a territorial divide that may be claimed as natural, but which fails to naturalize, the line incessantly refracted like the evening light on the lake’s surface. This was not only an enquiry into the past. Beyond piecing together what once was, and what is now muted, I tried to unpack and represent the contemporary spatialities of border power and the complex interrelations between human collectives, environmental forces and non-human forms of life that these set into motion.

In the remaining two chapters, *Anáchoma* and *Grey Rocks, Black Waves*, I will explore how the natural environment is itself not only sculpted to conceal and further past atrocities, but also is strategically rendered hostile and weaponised to perform an indirect, yet attritious, kind of violence against the bodies of border crossers.

²⁴¹ Weizman, *Forensic Architecture*, 118.

Part II:

Anáchoma

Weaponising a River: The case of the
Evros/Meriç/Maritsa.

This second part of the dissertation is co-authored with my collaborator Ifor Duncan, PhD (CRA), and Post-doctoral fellow at Ca' Foscari University, Venice. A first version of the text was written into Ifor's PhD following a joint visit to the region of Evros in early 2018. Ifor took the lead, adjusting the text to his overall thesis, and I contributed with edits. Different chapters from the text have since been edited, published and presented jointly and separately. The present text, primarily authored by myself and edited by Ifor, draws heavily from these past iterations, while also introducing new research and analysis, with an emphasis on dissecting the ways in which this river border has been rendered into a 'border nature', in keeping with the thesis of this dissertation.

In the minefields of Evros,
In the bottom of the Aegean,
lies the security of every European

2010

In the ~~minefields~~ fence of Evros,
In the bottom of the Aegean,
lies the security of every European

2013

In the ~~minefields fence~~ bullets of Evros,
In the bottom of the Aegean,
lies the security of every European

2020

Activist slogan in Greece

2.1. Tributaries: Death at the Fluvial Frontier

300 m

2.1.1. Six Flooded Graves

"I was expecting three bodies, I received seven legs. Instead of six, there were seven legs in the box. I said to the people from the mortuary 'guys, what is this'? They put one extra leg in the box... They didn't know who it belonged to, so they put it in anyway. We ended up burying all seven legs. We need to respect a dead body. People would say 'it's a spare leg, throw it away'. No, it doesn't work like this... In Gemisti, there is a minefield. Someone entered, he got killed. No-one would dare to go and collect the body. Several years later - because you could only see the bones and the skull by then - a person from a funeral parlour entered carefully, collected the bones, put them in a cardboard box and brought them here. I respected that."

Mehmet Şerif Damadoğlu, former Mufti of Evros prefecture²⁴²

It was early evening when we²⁴³ arrived at the "Cemetery for Illegal Aliens"²⁴⁴, a fenced area overlooking the village of Sidiro. The February sun was setting rapidly behind the gentle hills, where the Rhodope mountain fades into the plains of river Maritsa/Evros/Meriç²⁴⁵, and Bulgaria into Greece. The afternoon silence was only interrupted by the occasional dog barking from the village below. Except for the fencing, there was little in this pastoral landscape to betray this field as a site of border violence. We were unsure of the location as there were no immediate signs²⁴⁶ or gravestones.

Had we not eventually stumbled upon the sight of six deep, body-sized holes in the ground, flooded by winter rainwater, we would have turned back and left, thinking we had trespassed into some villager's field. Looking carefully around the six holes, and with the help of the long, late afternoon shadows, we began to discern several lumps of earth within the bramble berry bushes and weeds. The size of the lumps indicates that there are human bodies buried underneath them and their arrangement, in rows, betraying that these bodies are many. In one corner of the cemetery, tucked behind earth and vegetation are four²⁴⁷ small plaques demarcating the graves of two men who had been identified post-mortem, a Syrian from Aleppo and a Palestinian from the Yarmouk camp in Damascus.

²⁴² Translated from a recorded conversation in Greek by the author.

²⁴³ "We" refers to myself and my collaborator Ifor Duncan, PhD (CRA) (Post-doctoral fellow at Ca' Foscari University, Venice), with whom Part II of this dissertation is co-authored. Where key terms from our separate research appear, such as 'border natures', pertinent to my research, I will specify so.

²⁴⁴ "Illegal aliens" is a loose translation of the term *lathrometanastes*, a derogatory term used by xenophobic discourse to describe illegalized migrants. The use of the term was banned by law in 2018 but is still used widely, including from state officials.

²⁴⁵ In this text, the name used changes to reflect the cultural and geopolitical division of the region and the river. When the entire river catchment is discussed all three names will be provided. When just the river border between Greece and Turkey is referred to, this changes to Evros/Meriç. When one name is provided, the river is addressed from the context of the relevant side of the border.

²⁴⁶ The sign, pierced by bullets, has since been removed.

²⁴⁷ One at the person's head and one at their feet.



Flooded graves at the “cemetery for illegal aliens” at Sidiro, February 2019. Photo by authors.

Sidiro, Demirören in Turkish, is a predominantly Turkish Sunni Muslim village on the eastern slopes of the Rhodope, a large mountain range that spans the borders of Greece and Bulgaria. It is located 11 kilometres south-east of the Greek-Bulgarian border and some 15 kilometres west of the Greek-Turkish river border of Evros/Meriç. In this remote corner, Greece is only 20km wide, pressed in and crisscrossed by the Evros river and its tributaries descending the Rhodope slopes, the Daul Dere and the Erythropotamos/Kizil Dere/Luda Reka²⁴⁸. This is an area of ethnic and linguistic diversity. It is also one that is regularly crossed and, consequently, heavily policed.

The Evros/Meriç/Maritsa is the second longest river in the Balkans. It has its source in the Rila mountains in western Bulgaria and runs for 310 of its 528-kilometre-long course through Bulgaria, as the Maritsa. Its final 210 kilometres form a border, delimited by the 1923 Lausanne Peace treaty²⁴⁹, initially between Bulgaria and Greece, where the river is called Evros, and then for the last 192 kilometres between Greece and Turkey, where it is called Meriç, before reaching its delta and emptying into the Thracian Sea in the northern Aegean. This final stretch of the Evros/Meriç is frequently referred to as the “land” border or a “natural border” between Greece and Turkey²⁵⁰. Thrace²⁵¹, the cross border area through which the river runs, provides the only land crossing between Asia and Europe south of

²⁴⁸ As the river is called in Greek, Turkish, and Bulgarian, respectively.

²⁴⁹ from here on: Lausanne.

²⁵⁰ Evros is also part of the “European Green Belt” project that engulfs Prespa and the borderlands along the former Iron Curtain.

²⁵¹ Thraki in Greek, Trakya in Turkish, Trakiya in Bulgarian.

the Black Sea. Consequently, the Thracian plain, and the river that cuts across it, have been of strategic geopolitical importance for centuries. The history and memory of conflict in the region is engrained into the border landscape, and is still palpable through the ruins of Byzantine watchtowers and fortresses overlooking the river. In conservation ecology the area is also known as the “Thracian Bridge”, due to its importance as a corridor for migrating birds. It is the same geographical qualities of connection that attract border crossers to the river: since the late 80s the Evros/Meriç has become an established route for refugees travelling through Turkey from the Kurdish territories, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan and Pakistan, as well as from East Africa. Following the failed 2016 coup d’état in Turkey, Turkish asylum seekers are also increasingly crossing the river into Greece in response to President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s post-coup purges and repressive policies.

The completion of a 12-kilometre-long fence in 2012 along the only part of the border that is not delimited by the river made these crossings significantly more difficult. This meant that migrants had to cross the river rather than the safer land route, and also saw a major increase in crossings elsewhere such as the deadly Aegean route²⁵². The pattern changed again after the EU-Turkey agreement of 2016 which led to a decrease in the numbers of crossings along the Aegean sea route and saw the land route increase once more²⁵³. This increase was especially evident in 2018 where the number of crossings spiked along the river, exceeding those in the islands for the first time since the “refugee crisis” of 2015²⁵⁴. Many more who cross the river, however, are never registered. They are summarily arrested and detained and violently returned across the river to Turkey in secrecy, in an illegal practice widely referred to as “pushbacks”. Several human rights reports identify that pushback practices are systematic and embedded within the Evros/Meriç border regime, stretching back to before the millennium²⁵⁵.

In late February 2020, the Evros/Meriç river became a flash point once more, when the Turkish government opened its borders with Greece in an attempt to exert political pressure on the EU over the conflict in Syria, directing thousands of migrants and refugees to the Evros/Meriç border with the false promise of an open route to Europe. The Greek government responded by deploying large police and military forces to the region, and suspended its asylum system. Tensions lasted for several days, during which at least two asylum seekers lost their lives to Greek bullets²⁵⁶. Among the many politicians who visited either side of the border during the “March 2020 events” was the European commission

²⁵² Many, including activist group Stop Evros Wall consider the increases of drowning in the Aegean and Mediterranean Seas as the direct result of the fence. Stop Evros Wall, stopevroswall.blogspot.com/ (accessed May 2019).

²⁵³ *Land route* refers to crossing the Evros.

²⁵⁴ Giannis Papadopoulos, “Ξημέρωμα στην πόρτα της Ευρώπης [Sunrise at the Door of Europe]” *Kathimerini*, 29 April, 2018, www.kathimerini.gr/961340/interactive/epikairothta/ereynes/evros-3hmerwma-sthn-porta-ths-eyrwphs (accessed May 2019).

²⁵⁵ “Stuck in a Revolving Door: Iraqis and Other Asylum Seekers and Migrants at the Greece/Turkey Entrance to the European Union”, *Human Rights Watch*, 26 November, 2008, www.hrw.org/report/2008/11/26/stuck-revolving-door/iraqis-and-other-asylum-seekers-and-migrants-greece/turkey (accessed May 2019).

²⁵⁶ Muhammad al-Arab and Muhammad Gulzar. The Greek authorities to this day deny these deaths and denounce any such claims as fake news.

president, Ursula von der Leyen. Accompanied by the Greek Prime Minister, Kyriakos Mitsotakis, and three more EU leaders, von der Leyen gave a statement from Evros, in which she praised Greece for being Europe's *aspida*, using the Greek word for "shield", *ασπίδα (aspída)*²⁵⁷. Der Leyen's choice of vocabulary uncannily echoed local military discourse, in which the region is often called Greece's *ανάχωμα (anáchoma)*, or embankment, against Turkish invasion, and more recently against asylum seekers.



EU Commissioner Ursula von der Leyen flying over Evros on 3 March 2020. Source: news.gr.

The March 2020 events, with their eruptive force, shed a sudden light into what until that point was the slow and largely imperceptible weaponisation of the river. They were punctuating moments that brought to the fore the slower environmental processes mobilized against asylum seekers at the border and which, as we will discuss, contributed to its further and rapid militarisation. The river now forms an almost impenetrable fluvial barrier against those who attempt to cross into the EU to apply for asylum. The defunct "Surveilled Zone" that also included Prespa is here ghosted by an active military buffer zone which shadows the river, extending as far as the main roads and railway line at the edge of its floodplain. Access to this buffer zone is tightly controlled and photography is prohibited, creating a scarce image regime and clear limitations for research. This contributes to an ambiguous frontier zone with gaps in knowledge and observation within which extraterritorial violence takes place with impunity. Coinciding with the extents of the Evros floodplain, the buffer zone is maintained through a combination

²⁵⁷ Jennifer Rankin, "Migration: EU Praises Greece as 'shield' after Turkey opens border", *Guardian*, 3 March, 2020, www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/03/migration-eu-praises-greece-as-shield-after-turkey-opens-border (accessed March 2020). Tellingly, "Operation Shield (Aspída)" is also the name of the border patrol operation launched by the Greek government in 2012 to combat migration through Evros/Meriç.

of ecological, military and, at places, conservation processes that produce a fluvial border technology. This blurring of the floodplain and buffer zone is a particular focus of this chapter, as are the continuums of violence and zoning that produce the lethal spatiality of the Evros/Meriç border.

As such, the Evros/Meriç is a deadly border. Professor Pavlos Pavlidis, coroner of the Greek Evros prefecture and the authority on post-mortem conditions in the region, keeps a detailed archive of the bodies found on the Greek banks of Evros. When I visited him at the University hospital of Alexandroupolis in November 2018, his excel spreadsheet listed 359 casualties since the year 2000²⁵⁸. During our conversations, Pavlidis stressed the point that the numbers in his computer screen only accounted for the bodies found on the Greek side of the border and that, due to lack of communication with the Turkish authorities, there is no consensus on the total number of people who have lost their lives attempting this crossing. Pavlidis said that he can only assume that there are at least as many corpses on the Turkish side, and many more who have not been found. He therefore informally calculates the total number of casualties for these past twenty years to be well above 1000 people.

More than three hundred of these bodies are buried here, underneath our feet, in this bald patch of ground surrounded by young oak trees, across a ravine from Sidiro. Since the mid-90s, Mufti Mehmet, the former religious leader of the Muslim community of Evros²⁵⁹ and a resident of Sidiro has been administering burial rights for unidentified bodies recovered from the river in this cemetery. The first dead were buried in Sidiro in 1989. They were the mutilated bodies of three Turkish Kurds from the Anatolian province of Tunceli who had stepped into one of the many minefields that, until at least as late as 2008²⁶⁰, riddled the Greek banks of Evros. Their dismembered remains, and a seventh, unidentified, leg, were buried in the Muslim cemetery of Sidiro, next to deceased locals. The entire village gathered, the Mufti remembers, to pay their respects through prayer. In the years that followed, the Mufti buried more people in the Sidiro cemetery and in the cemeteries of the other Muslim villages of Evros²⁶¹. However, as the number of bodies emerging from the river grew²⁶², and the local cemeteries began running out of space, the residents complained that soon they “won’t have space for their own people”. It was decided that the dead migrants needed to be buried in a separate place and, following a lot of deliberation, the community deemed the current location appropriate, a field where the Mufti’s father used to grow barley, which is relatively flat and far enough from the village.

²⁵⁸ The vast majority of whom are men (326). A report published in late 2020 by the EU Fundamental Rights Agency lists 133 casualties for the period January 2018 - October 2020. Subtracting the 23 casualties listed on Pavlidis’s sheet for 2018, and adding the killings of Muhammad al-Arab and Muhammad Gulzar, which are refuted by authorities and not counted in the official statistics, this amounts to 438 deaths on the Greek side in the past twenty years. See EU Agency for Fundamental Rights, “Migration: Fundamental Rights. Issues at Land Borders”, December 9, 2020, fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2020-land-borders-report_en.pdf, (accessed December 2020), 18.

²⁵⁹ from 1988 to 2018. A mufti is an Islamic jurist qualified to issue a nonbinding opinion (fatwa) on a point of Islamic law (sharia). Sharia is still in effect in the muslim (Sunni, Alawite, and Bektashi) minority communities of Western (Greek) Thrace, in the Rhodope, Xanthi, and Evros regions.

²⁶⁰ Pavlidis’s spreadsheet did not list any deaths from minefields since 2008.

²⁶¹ In Alexandroupolis, Agriani/Ahrenpinar, Didymoteicho/Dimoteka, Megalo Dereio/Büyük Dervent, Sidirochori/Alren Pınar.

²⁶² The Mufti recalled burying twenty-six people, all from Pakistan, in one day.

Since then, and until 2016, unidentified bodies of people who had died trying to cross the river border would arrive at what came to be called the “cemetery for illegal aliens” after a process by which they were discovered in the river before being reported to the Police, who would in turn deliver the body to the Forensic Medical centre at Alexandroupoli General University Hospital. There, pictures and records of DNA and finger prints were taken for the purposes of subsequent identification. Bodies were kept in refrigerated chambers in the hospital morgue for a number of months²⁶³, and, in the case of non-identification or non-repatriation, these were prepared for immediate burial in Sidiro.

The Mufti told us how, following Muslim burial rites, he meticulously cleaned the bodies and wrapped them in white cloth. Once in the grave, he covered them with wooden planks – “so that the wild animals can’t dig them open” - and buried them with no more soil than that which had been taken out of the ground to dig the hole in the first place. According to the Qur’an, he said, the graves need to resemble “a camel’s hump”. The six flooded graves, the Mufti says, were the last to be dug in Sidiro. They were prepared in 2016 for a group who never came. Since then, the cemetery is no longer in use.

2.1.2. The “Camel’s Hump”

The existence of the cemetery has been the cause of scrutiny since it first opened. Anthropologist Kim Rygiel equates the original siting of the cemetery in Sidiro, 15 km from the river, as the extension or “diffusion” of the border²⁶⁴. Rygiel argues that solidarity shown to living relatives by local community mobilisation, such as at Sidiro, as well as transnational activism around the funerary treatment of the dead offers the potential for a transgressive politics that disrupts the physical and biopolitical borders of citizenship. Rygiel’s optimism cannot be faulted. State reliance on local, transnational and sometimes informal processes, however, reveals another politics of disregard at play, one that reproduces the very conditions where bodies wash up in the river in the first place.

²⁶³ In 2018 the bodies exceeded the capacity of the hospital to store them, and the International Committee for the Red Cross had to donate a refrigerated container. See Leo Dobbs, “Greek forensics professor finds missing links for grieving families”, UNHCR, 21 June, 2018, www.unhcr.org/news/stories/2018/6/5b28cdcf4/greek-forensics-professor-finds-missing-links-grieving-families (accessed July 2020). As we will discuss, the ambivalence regarding the precise number of dead bodies in the river contributes to an intended atmosphere of fear in Evros/Meriç. Fady, a Syrian refugee interviewed within the context of Forensic Architecture’s investigation, testified to having read reports that “commandos have 1,500 unidentified dead bodies in their refrigerators”. Global Legal Action Network, “Communication to the United Nations Human Rights Committee, in the case of FAJ against Greece”, November 17, 2020, available online at: [c5e65ece-003b-4d73-aa76-854664da4e33.filesusr.com/ugd/14ee1a_4e9dea36dd1043d48e6a50dbe5b78f04.pdf](https://filesusr.com/ugd/14ee1a_4e9dea36dd1043d48e6a50dbe5b78f04.pdf) (accessed November 2020).

²⁶⁴ Kim Rygiel, “In Life Through Death: Transgressive Citizenship at the Border” in Engin Isen and Peter Nyers, eds. *Routledge Handbook of Global Citizenship Studies* (London: Routledge, 2014), 68.

Border scholars who have been studying similar places of internment along the world's borders analyse them as spatial "reflections of care"²⁶⁵, or lack thereof, for those who die at the border. As Alexandra Délano Alonso and Benjamin Nienass note in their study of the politics of mourning and haunting at the US-Mexico border,

the invisibility and inaccessibility of the spaces where migrants are buried, reveal a profound inequality in the presence of death for migrants (...) This inequality reveals as much about the disregard for migrants as recognized members of a political community (...) as it does about the denial of state responsibility for these violations of rights, in life and in death.²⁶⁶

Echoing this analysis, and countering Rygiel's view, the activist group "Welcome to Europe" claim the Sidiro cemetery to be a site of mass burial, one that reflects the brutality of the border that "puts up with the death of those looking for protection."²⁶⁷ This claim is also in direct opposition to the Mufti's account, who exercised supervision of the burial process and insists that he has buried each in a separate grave, keeping a record of the location of each corpse.

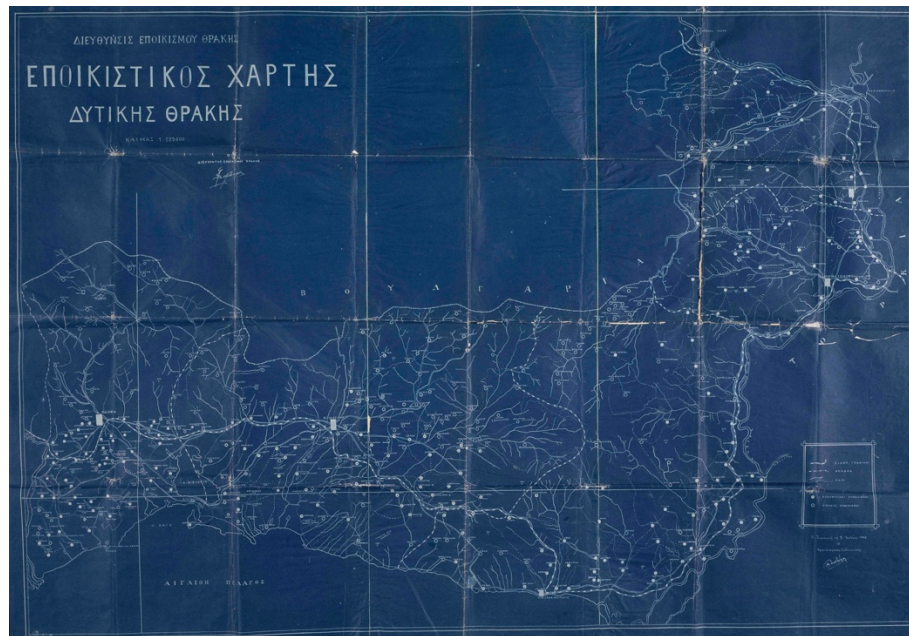
However conflicting, Rygiel's and "Welcome to Europe"'s positions on the cemetery both hold part of the truth. Nevertheless, each fails to locate this space within the continuums of state violence in the region. To do so would reveal this hillside, filled with dead bodies, as paradigmatic of a long standing politics of internal marginalisation in Thrace. These villages on the south eastern slopes of Rhodope are what remain of the Muslim community of Western Thrace after the population exchange of the 1920s. Where the river had been primarily a point of connection, since the post-Lausanne demarcation of the border, the Evros/Meriç/Maritsa has emerged as a space of control. With delimitation came the transfer of populations. This began with the transfer of Christian and Pontic Greeks, from what became Turkish territory along the coasts of the Aegean and Black Seas and the Anatolian mainland. In return, Turkish Muslim populations from Greek territory were moved to Turkey, although a significant minority population remains in western Thrace, including the Evros region.²⁶⁸ As with Prespa, the transfer along religious lines was an unambiguous, if incomplete, attempt to produce ethno-religious purity along the borders.

²⁶⁵ Alexandra Délano Alonso and Benjamin Nienass, "Deaths, Visibility, and Responsibility", *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 83, no. 2, (summer 2016): 421-451.

²⁶⁶ Ibid.

²⁶⁷ "Mass Graves of Refugees in Evros Uncovered", *Welcome to Europe Network*, 2010, web.archive.org/web/20101015082734/http://w2eu.net/2010/08/09/mass-grave-of-refugees-in-evros-uncovered/ (accessed April 2019).

²⁶⁸ With the exception of Didymoteicho/Dimetoka, the Muslim communities that remain are all in the foothills of Rhodope, close to the border with Bulgaria and purposefully away from the river and the Turkish border.



A 1926 map showing the new settlements established in western Thrace after the exchange of populations with the Lausanne treaty. New settlements are shown in white dots. Source: Archives for Contemporary Social History (ASKI)

In the century since, Turkish, Pomak (Slav-speaking, mostly Bektashi, muslims), Roma and other ethnic minorities in western Thrace have been the focus of multiple marginalising practices. The system of *barres* that run through Prespa ended here, in the Easternmost reach of the Greek Northern border. In these Muslim villages of Thrace, the “Surveilled Zone” functioned for fifteen or twenty years more than the rest of the territory and had added significance: beyond isolating these minoritarian communities from the rest of Greece, the *barres* were also meant to separate the Pomaks living in the hills of Rhodope from the Turkish speaking villages of the plains. This separation intended to prevent what is predominantly a Slavic-speaking minority to enter the Turkish sphere of influence²⁶⁹. The last of the “*barres of shame*”, as they came to be called, was finally abolished as late as November 1995, with its symbolic lifting by the then Minister of Defence Gherassimos Arsenis, outside the Pomak village of Echinos in the Prefecture of Ksanthi in Thrace²⁷⁰, some 100km west of Sidiro. During our visits to the region we saw the check points still standing, abandoned, as an ambient reminder.

It is in the context of this marginalization that unidentified border crossers (who are assumed to be Muslim) are handed to local communities for the performance of funerary rites. These villages, themselves ostracised by the Greek state, are expected to facilitate the burial of migrants because of the assumption of shared religious identity. Concealed from the rest of the Greek territory for decades, by way of legislative and infrastructural discrimination (many of these villages are still only accessible by dirt road, and there is little to none cell-phone reception) they safeguard the secrets of the deadly

²⁶⁹ Christos Iliadis, *Η Θράκη Απειλείται: Απόρρητη Αλληλογραφία, Τουρκική Στρατηγική – Μυστική Πολιτική – Μειονοτικές Ομάδες* [Thrace Under Threat: Classified Correspondence, Turkish Strategy – Secret Policy – Minority Groups] (Athens: Vivliorama, 2020)

²⁷⁰ Rombou-Levidi, *Lives Under Surveillance*.

border. The Sidiro cemetery therefore reflects this continued marginalisation and concealment of Muslim, and other non-Greek populations in its territory - both Greek citizens and migrants, both alive and dead. Further to this, it indicates the State's overall abdication of responsibility for the violence of the border, even beyond death.

Much like the melting houses of Sfika, the "humps of camels" poking out of the earth in the field outside Sidiro, of equal volume to that of the person they cover, are a spatial index of the scale and frequency of loss of life at the border²⁷¹. Taking the analogy further, the flooded graves, dug in anticipation of bodies found in the river, speak to death as a constant presence, as something to be anticipated at the border. Together, they serve as powerful spatial metaphors of the gradual lethality of the Evros/Meriç border apparatus and of the river waters themselves as vectors of border death. They tell (half) the tale of a river turned into a weapon.

2.1.3. Necro-Hydrology

As the slogan quoted in the opening pages of this section attests, in the past twenty years, border crossers in Evros have been losing their lives to different and interchangeable weapons or infrastructures of border defence, from minefields in the early 2000s, the fence in the early 2010s, and bullets in early 2020. Throughout these two decades, however, the river, like the Aegean Sea, has emerged as the only constant weapon. Beyond being a background against which the violent eruptions of border operations take place, it is the very liquid medium through which lethal border violence is enacted. Along with the dispersed military infrastructures, the processes of the river are also weaponized and incorporated into an architecture of border defence. Of the 359 people on Pavlidis's spreadsheet, 249 had died of either drowning and hypothermia, the first and second causes of death in Evros respectively. Seven more people died of "pathological causes" such as heart failure, eighteen more of "indeterminate causes", and fifteen more were found in a skeletal state, where the cause of death could not be determined. Official records attribute these deaths to "natural causes", deflecting responsibility for border deaths to the natural environment; the river, the rough terrain, the temperatures, and the wildlife. According to these records, people simply die there.

Achille Mbembe's concept of necropolitics or necropower is useful to understand the pervasiveness of death in the world's borderscapes, as in Evros or, indeed, the Aegean. Mbembe coins the concept,

to account for the various ways in which, in our contemporary world, weapons are deployed in the interest of maximally destroying persons and creating *death-worlds*, that is, new and unique

²⁷¹ Situated in opposing hills, the two settlements, one for the dead and one for those who are buried alive by the Greek state, are "camel's humps" in their own right.

forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to living conditions that confer upon them the status of the *living dead*.²⁷²

We argue that the way in which populations are governed and persons are destroyed in the Evros/Meriç border has a direct relationship with how the riverine border environment, and water in particular, is known and managed. Water management here produces new social exploitative formations and forms of water governance that reflect and facilitate wider social formations of violence at the river border. Thus, to perceive the border as constructed through water, allows for a nuanced understanding of the possible *death-worlds* that are produced in the hydrologic register. Theorizing Mbembe's necropolitics against the ways *death-worlds* are created in relation to the waters of Evros, we propose *necro-hydrology*²⁷³ as a theoretical prism which exists where the knowledge and corresponding management of water emerges as adversarial to life.

The identification of a relational space such as a river basin as a border speaks to what Mbembe refers to as "borderization," asking what the intention of "transform[ing] certain spaces into impassable places for certain classes of populations? What is it about, if not the conscious multiplication of spaces of loss and mourning, where the lives of a multitude of people judged to be undesirable come to be shattered?"²⁷⁴ As we will show, the case of the Evros necro-hydrology spans beyond the impassable banks of the river, to which border crossers are directed, to the entire river basin, incorporating the entire spectrum of the river's humidity such as the mud in the fields that weighs down the asylum seeker²⁷⁵, or the fog that hangs above the valley and contributes to the risks of hypothermia. These are less direct forms of river management but become obtuse elements of how a river becomes a weapon in more dispersed but just as deadly ways. All of the above contribute to the reality that those who manage rivers as borders identify, and maintain them as impassable spaces in the "shattering" of the lives of those deemed undesirable. The river as a "natural boundary", acts as an alibi²⁷⁶ that *lets* border crossers die.

Navigating from the Sidiro cemetery and the bodies held in its soil, in this chapter we will discuss the ways in which the river has been weaponised as a border infrastructure, and how the ambiguities produced within what we call the fluvial frontier enforce a condition of ecological exception where the state acts in violent excess. Opposing the material and discursive reproductions of both rivers and

²⁷² Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, trans. by Steven Corcoran (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 92.

²⁷³ "Hydrology" is key to Ifor's PhD thesis, titled "Hydrology of the Powerless". Here we use the term to describe the multiple ways of knowing and acting with water, incorporating a range from the scientific discipline to the local productive knowledges of fishing communities, but we also mean the riverine knowledges of military surveyors and engineers, as those of policing, and paramilitaries, that uphold borders.

²⁷⁴ Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 99.

²⁷⁵ Selma Mesic, "They Pushed us into the Mud", *Refugee Rights Europe*, December 19, 2019, refugee-rights.eu/2019/12/19/they-pushed-us-into-the-mud-we-were-trying-to-lift-the-kids-out-we-didnt-know-anything-it-was-in-the-middle-of-the-night/#_edn1 (accessed July 2020).

²⁷⁶ Roxanne Lynn Doty, "Bare Life".

borders as “natural”, this chapter identifies the Evros/Meriç/Maritsa as the result of multiple organisational technologies of territorial sovereignty, through which the river is constructed as both a deterrent and a weapon. As we will show, the fluvial frontier braids together multiple elements including conservation, transboundary river management, military technology, the geopolitics of resource logistics,²⁷⁷ and the divergently visible and opaque politics of border crossing.

Attempting to disentangle and read this braid, we will ask: What is the role of water in the politics of death at the border? How is this border made, enforced, but also contested at the intersection between social, material and “natural” processes? Finally, what methodological approaches can be adopted to perceive the subtle modes of bordering in such environmental weaponisation? These questions will be approached through four main sections which follow the shifting geography of the river from the Rila mountains in Bulgaria to its discharge in the Aegean Sea: *Tributaries: Six Flooded Graves*, *The Main Course: A Fluvial Frontier*, *The Floodplain: An Ecology of Exception*, and *The Delta: Night, Fog and Mud*.

Through a fieldwork practice focusing on the intersection of the river ecosystem and border violence conducted at Evros / Meriç through 2018-2020, this research takes the form of field notes, audio and video recordings, photography, and cartography. A multi-disciplinary approach is likewise adopted here through the bringing together of border theory with history, natural sciences and legal boundary literatures. Through this approach this part of the dissertation explores the strained border relationship between Greece, Bulgaria, the EU and Turkey as it manifests across ecological scales at the Evros/Meriç/Maritsa. In the foreground are tensions over irregular border crossings between Greece and Turkey²⁷⁸, a friction that spans across ongoing territorial disputes between the two. As we will show, these tensions have had environmental impacts, including the failures of transboundary river management and adequate flood prevention. The confluent politics of the fluvial frontier are, we will discuss, central to border defence strategies and affect the lives of both border crossers and the inhabitants of this cross-border region. Throughout the chapter we will refer to a series of investigations into human rights violations at the Evros/Meriç border which I coordinated within the context of his participation as a researcher within Forensic Architecture²⁷⁹. The relationship of this thesis with the

²⁷⁷ The Trans Anatolian and Trans Adriatic pipelines meet under the Evros river.

²⁷⁸ Irregular border crossings also take place between Bulgaria and Turkey and, less so, between Greece and Bulgaria, although this is not the primary focus of this chapter.

²⁷⁹ These include, in order of publication: “Pushbacks Across the Evros/Meriç River: Analysis Of Video Evidence”, December 12, 2019, forensic-architecture.org/investigation/pushbacks-across-the-evros-meric-river-analysis-of-video-evidence; “Pushbacks Across the Evros/Meriç River: The Case Of Ayşe Erdoğan”, February 8, 2020, forensic-architecture.org/investigation/pushbacks-across-the-evros-meric-river-the-case-of-ayse-erdogan; “The Killing of Muhammad Gulzar”, May 8, 2020, forensic-architecture.org/investigation/the-killing-of-muhammad-gulzar; “The Killing of Muhammad al-Arab”, July 3, 2020, forensic-architecture.org/investigation/the-killing-of-muhammad-al-arab; and “Pushbacks Across the Evros/Meriç River: Situated Testimony”, October 19, 2020, forensic-architecture.org/investigation/evros-situated-testimony. These investigations were discussed widely and submitted to several fora, including the Greek Ombudsman, the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture, and the European Parliament Committee for Civil Liberties, Justice, and Home Affairs. One of the cases, Fady’s, was submitted to the UN Human Rights Committee by the Global Legal Action Network and HumanRights360. See Global Legal Action Network, “Enforced Disappearance and Expulsion at Greece’s Evros Border”, November 17, 2020, www.glanlaw.org/enforced-disappearance-greece.

Forensic Architecture investigations is close and reciprocal: The investigations, which also ran through 2018-2020, draw heavily from the concepts and methodologies developed within this thesis. Often, material gathered within the context of our research fed into the Forensic Architecture project, and vice versa. Similarly, interviews and field trips often overlapped. These human rights investigations, however, are the result of collaborative work and their scope exceeds the breadth of this academic research, just as this academic research exceeds the conceptual framework of the investigations. Therefore, they are not submitted as part of the practice *per se* but will rather appear in the pages of this chapter to offer themselves for analysis, as will many other human rights reports.

2.2. The Main Course: Violent Waters

51 – O m

"The rushing river they call violent
But the riverbed pressing it in
Nobody calls violent"

Bertolt Brecht, "On Violence".

2.2.1. **Accretion and Avulsion:** Between Trespass Lines and Trespass Waters

The foundations for the Evros/Meriç/Maritsa border demarcation were laid by Article 2 (2) of Lausanne, which stated that from the village of Bosna-Keuy²⁸⁰ all the way to the Aegean the border would follow the median line of the river course. However, as the river braids, and at times splits, the two countries disputed which of the two main branches of the river should constitute the main course to be followed by the border. Greece argued for the eastern branch, while Turkey argued for the western. An international committee, headed by Dutch colonel J. Backer, was assembled with the task of determining the precise course of the border. Three years later, an agreement was finally reached, and ratified by the 1926 Athens Protocol: the border was to follow the eastern branch, granting Greece more space over the river waters. This was the first time the course of the border was drawn in detail: from the trilateral point to the Aegean Sea, the border follows the median line between the banks throughout the course of the river, or its eastern, main branch, when the river splits. Despite the impossibility of reducing a geography as volatile as the Evros river to legal text, the 1926 committee defined the border with a degree of clarity. The line was marked with red ink on ten maps, and the first 26 pyramids were installed. Islands were given names or letters from the Latin alphabet²⁸¹. The triangle of Karaağaç, a piece of land west of the river that was ceded to Turkey as a buffer to the city of Edirne and now hosts the border fence, was the only exception. The committee, however, deemed that the border should not follow the changes of the route of the river, but instead it decided that it be “definitely fixed by the position of the course or channel at the time when the present Treaty comes into force.”²⁸² Delimited in such an inflexible way, like many river borders, it could not respond to shifts in the course of the river and the median line.

The Evros/Meriç/Maritsa is fast, with a mean annual flow rate of 103 cubic meters per second (a rate which can increase twofold between December and April). Its course flows over sandy and malleable soil, and annually discharges approximately 3.2 million tons of sediment and 9.5 billion cubic meters of freshwater from the Rila mountains into the Aegean sea²⁸³, resulting in frequent erosions and accretions that alter the river banks. There is now almost one hundred years of geomorphological variation between the drawn border and the current course of the river. Islands that used to be there are no longer, banks have moved, and canalizations have directed the river in divergent ways. Two rivers and

²⁸⁰ Bosna is today the Turkish village at the edge of the border fence.

²⁸¹ Dimitrakopoulos, “The Land Borders of Greece”, 138.

²⁸² Ibid, 140.

²⁸³ T.D. Kanellopoulos, et al. “Geochemical composition of the uppermost prodelta sediments of the Evros River, northeastern Aegean Sea”, *Journal of Marine Systems* 63, (2006): 63–78, 65.

two borders exist at the Evros/Meriç: the cartographic border of the old median line (featuring now almost unmoving oxbow lakes) and the water of the new trespass line – but not the border. The capricious shifts of the river across a boundary geo-spatially tethered to the riverbed present an unintentional political agency. The shifts produce ambiguous spaces within and around which territorial processes become deadliest.

With 72,000 km of river and stream forming over a third of all international land boundaries it is clear that rivers, like mountains, offer characteristics that are attractive to those tasked with the territorial project of imposing “trespass lines”. However, as is highlighted by the gradual shifting of the river away from the 1926 boundary line, rivers as “natural borders” are mired in material, spatial and legal ambiguities. Due to these ambiguities, many legal scholars and geographers have considered rivers as inadequate political boundaries. Victor Prescott and Gillian Triggs highlight the paradox of the transitory flow of water between two states “while sovereignty imports the notion of permanence.”²⁸⁴ Oye Cukwurah, legal scholar of boundary delimitation, likewise identifies that a river “maps its own course and boundaries are merely delimited along its thalweg²⁸⁵, median or bank”.²⁸⁶ John Donaldson, a prominent legal scholar who has written extensively on the international law of river borders, words it more explicitly,

the presence of water makes a boundary river unstable, forceful and risky; incompatible with the legal fiction of a fixed boundary line that would prefer the stability of land over the dynamism of water.²⁸⁷

Donaldson places specific focus on *accretion* and *avulsion* as the key geo-legal terms to identify the spatio-temporal movements of river courses. For Donaldson the legal mechanisms behind avulsion and accretion reinforce the “land bias”, a bias made all the more problematic when addressing the vacillations of dynamic bodies such as rivers²⁸⁸. In his survey of the heredity of accretion and avulsion in International river law, Donaldson cites a number of Supreme Court rulings identifying accretion as the slow, and crucially, imperceptible movement of a river whereby the border shifts laterally with the central channel of the river. Avulsion, on the other hand, is a violent and perceptible deviation of a river’s course to produce, for example, a major change in deltaic plumes, the emergence of a large looping meander after floods, or, conversely, a “river cutting through the ‘neck’ of such a meander”²⁸⁹.

²⁸⁴ Victor Prescott & Gillian Triggs, *International Frontiers and Boundaries: Law, Politics and Geography*. (Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 2008), 215.

²⁸⁵ Many river borders (including the Rio Grande river at the US-Mexico border) specify the “thalweg” as the border demarcation. In science, this strange term, derived from the German for valley (“Thal”) and way (“Weg”), refers to the line of lowest elevation of a watercourse. In geopolitics it is often synonymous with international river borders, when a river is navigable. In Evros/Meriç the median line was preferred over the thalweg as the river was deemed non-navigable by the delimitation committee.

²⁸⁶ A. Oye Cukwurah, *The Settlements of Boundary Disputes in International Law* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1967), 189.

²⁸⁷ John W. Donaldson, “Paradox of the moving boundary: Legal heredity of river accretion and avulsion”, *Water Alternatives* 4, no. 2, (2011): 155-170, 167.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 155.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid*, 165

Elsewhere, Dilip Da Cunha has shown that the drawn line of the riverbank at the moment of mapping almost always takes precedence over the flow of water. Once the line has been drawn the water itself is no longer relevant. “After all”, Da Cunha argues,

rivers do not cease to exist when they are without water. It is accepted that they ‘run dry’, some seasonally and others exceptionally. What remains is a space between lines which continue to be seen and enforced as a ‘river’ or a ‘river bed’, suggesting that it is the line more than water that is essential to rivers.²⁹⁰

Indeed, Da Cunha claims that the lines themselves invented the concept of “rivers”: “without lines rivers are inconceivable, which is to say that to hear or speak the word ‘river’ is to think flow and see lines.”²⁹¹ The choice to see a river also involves the choice of the moment of representation, the abstract notion of a river in a “natural” state, being contained neatly between its banks²⁹². This choice, as with borderlines, requires seeing with the line already entrenched within the mind, and therefore credulously accepted as naturalised, de-political, and non-agentive.

The river’s agentive resistance to the line brings its own dangers as it contributes to a dynamic condition within which states can exert their muscles and enact violence with impunity within an uncertain terrain. In the case of the Evros/Meriç/Maritsa, the river’s shifts produce their own territorial ambiguities. Close to the Greek village of Feres a large meander neck has been cut through a straightening of the river course: there now exists an expanse of Turkish earth on the “wrong” side of the river. In another example upstream, in an area locally called “Melissokomeio”, land has been ceded by the river to Greece and Greek farmers still tend to the land on the Turkish side via yearly periods of sanctioned river crossing.

Consequently, efforts to enforce the 1926 line have long been hampered by the agency of the river itself. Often, due to the morphology of the river, the markers are not placed on the border to begin with, but on the nearest piece of “land”. No example better illustrates this than that of pyramid number 1 which is meant to demarcate the trilateral border between Greece, Turkey and Bulgaria in the river: since the trilateral point lies in the median point of the river, the pyramid was placed 60 metres north of the border, on the southern tip of the island that goes by the name “A”²⁹³. When markers were placed inside the river, these were short lived. As early as 1960, markers that had been installed by a joint Greek-Turkish committee the year before were quickly carried away by the water. Eight years later, in 1968 the two countries installed vertical railway beams along a two-kilometre stretch of the river to mark

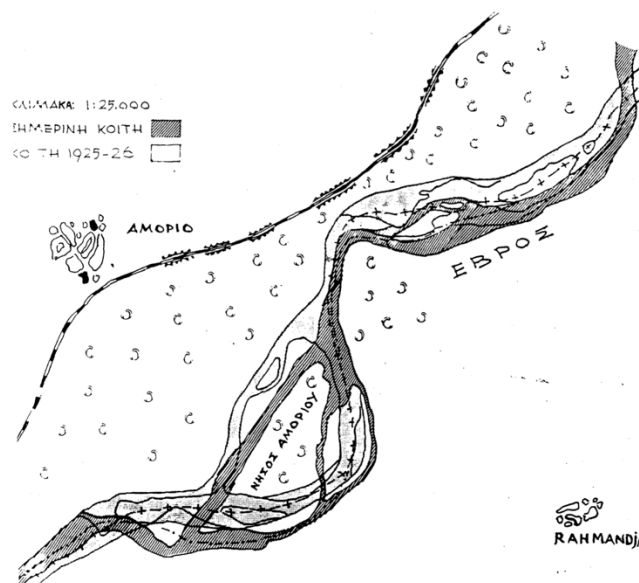
²⁹⁰ Dilip Da Cunha, *The Invention of Rivers; Alexander’s Eye and Ganga’s Descent* (Philadelphia PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 4.

²⁹¹ *Ibid*, 1. In *Deccan Traverses* Mathur and Da Cunha talk of a “cultivated eye”, what we might call a fluvial vision, Mathur, Anuradha & Dilip Da Cunha, *Deccan Traverses: The Making of Bangalore’s Terrain* (New Delhi: Rupha & co, 2006) viii.

²⁹² Da Cunha, *The Invention of Rivers*, 5

²⁹³ “A” belongs to the group of islands called “Kavak”. The location was determined against the distance between pyramid n.320 in the Turkish-Bulgarian border, which lies in the Northern bank of Evros, and pyramid n.320 A in the Greek Southern bank. The accurate position of the trilateral border is 60m south of pyramid n.1, at approximately 41 42’ N and 26 21’ E, inside Evros/Meriç/Maritsa. Dimitrakopoulos, “The Land Borders of Greece”, 151.

the old location of a shifting sandbank near Amori village called the “Amori island”, only to see them carried away too months later. During 1969-1971 a number of technical protocols were signed by both sides to demarcate the border on the ground, but these were never put into effect²⁹⁴. Overall, none of the plans for a fixed border demarcation were fully implemented and, after the Turkish invasion of Cyprus in the 1974, bilateral communication ceased for decades. More recently, in 2015, parts of the border fence were carried away by flood waters released from the Ivaylovgrad dam²⁹⁵ and, in October 2017, Turkish authorities dug trenches underneath the fence to prevent flooding²⁹⁶. As a result of these river movements, the precise location of the river border remains ambiguous on the ground over several kilometres of its length.



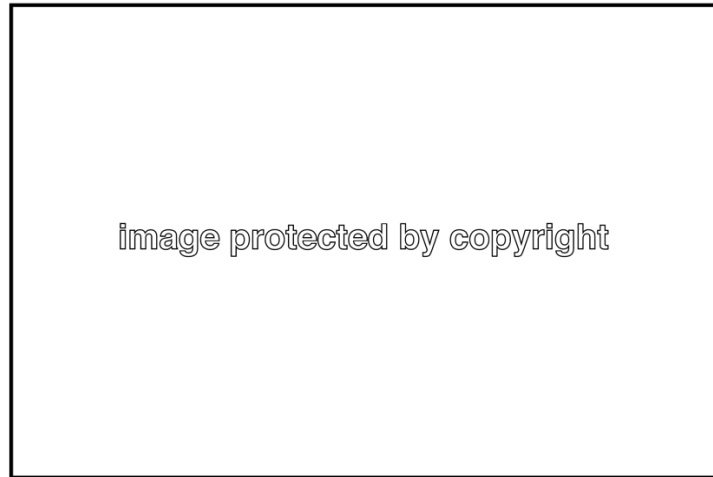
Σχήμα 2. Ο Έβρος κοντά στο ελληνικό χωριό Αμόριο. Χαρακτηριστικό παράδειγμα μετατόπισης της κοίτης του ποταμού. Το σύνορο παραμένει όπου χαράχθηκε το 1926 και δεν ακολουθεί τον ποταμό στη μετατόπισή του.

Shifts in the “Amori island” between the border demarcation in 1926 and 1986. Source: Dimitrakopoulos, “The Land Borders of Greece”.

²⁹⁴ These include the 1969 “Basic Protocol regarding the demarcation of the Thrace border” and the 1971 technical annexes describing how the works will be undertaken, titled “Protocol on the maintenance of the demarcation” and “Protocol on the prevention of border episodes”.

²⁹⁵ “Έπεσε ο φράχτης του Έβρου: Ο Σαμαράς τον έχτισε, η φύση τον παρέσυρε [The fence of Evros fell: Samaras built it, nature carried it away], *News* 24/7, February 3, 2015, www.news247.gr/koinonia/epese-o-frachtis-toy-evroy-o-samaras-ton-echtize-i-fysi-ton-paresyre.6325470.html (accessed March 2020).

²⁹⁶ “Ντοκουμέντο: Έσκαψαν τρύπα κάτω από τον φράχτη στον Έβρο [They dug a hole under the fence in Evros]” (23rd of October 2017), *Newsbomb*, www.newsbomb.gr/ellada/story/831290/ntokoymento-eskapsan-trypa-kato-apo-ton-fraxti-ston-evro (accessed March 2020).



Part of the border fence near Kastanies was carried away by flood waters in 2015. Photo: News 24/7.

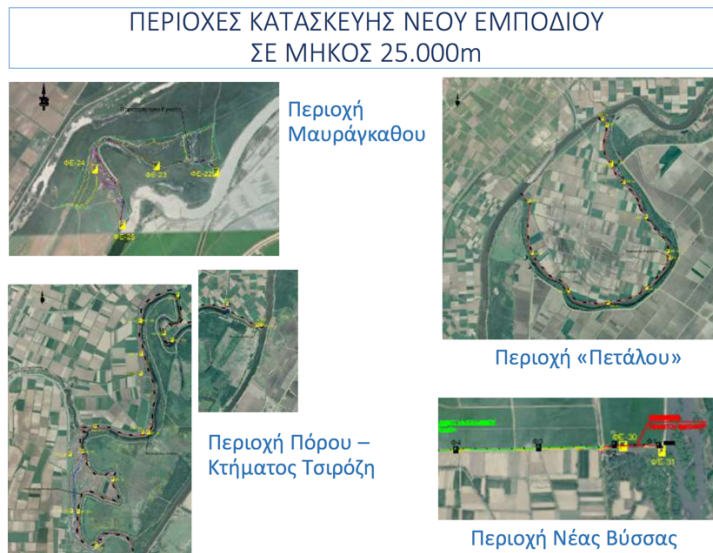
These movements of the river, and the subsequent attempts to stabilize it and demarcate sovereignty over it, also contribute to the territorial disputes between the riparian states. In 1963, after significant alterations of the river banks, provisions were made to exchange plots of land near Feres and Enez but the exchange was never implemented²⁹⁷. During Stefanos's last visit to the Evros in early March 2020, he witnessed trucks carrying fencing towards these contested—yet unfortified—parts of the river. At the time of writing, the area is being deforested to accommodate a new, 27 kilometre-long fence²⁹⁸. As recently as May 2020 reports emerged that Turkish soldiers had occupied one of these plots as a response to Greek military surveyors conducting measurements ahead of the construction of the new fence²⁹⁹. The new fence, which is expected to be completed by April 2021 at a cost of 62.9 million³⁰⁰, will stand five metres tall and its foundations will go six metres deep into the ground to prevent it being carried away by floods. In these ways, the river's movements compound and yet contribute to the further intensification of what is already a militarized terrain.

²⁹⁷ In January 1963 Greece and Turkey signed a protocol to “terminate and clarify the disputes over the undertaking of hydraulic works aiming to stabilize the course of Evros”.

²⁹⁸ “Επεκτείνεται ο φράχης του Έβρου στα Ελληνοτουρκικά σύνορα [The Evros Fence along the Greek-Turkish Border is extended]”, *To Vima*, March 5, 2020, <https://www.tovima.gr/2020/03/05/politics/epekteinetai-o-fraxtis-tou-evrou-sta-ellinotourkika-synora/> (accessed March 2020).

²⁹⁹ “Land Grab: Turkish soldiers Invade Greece and Occupy a small patch of land on contested border”, *The Sun*, May 22, 2020, www.thesun.co.uk/news/11681878/turkish-troops-invade-greece/ (accessed May 2020). As per standard practice in the Evros militarized floodplain, the reports were not verified and remain unconfirmed.

³⁰⁰ “New Evros fence to be completed by April next year, PM says during on-site inspection”, *Kathimerini*, October 17, 2020, www.ekathimerini.com/258187/article/ekathimerini/news/new-evros-fence-to-be-completed-by-april-next-year-pm-says-during-on-site-inspection (accessed October 2020)



A map showing the areas where the new fence will be installed. Pictured in the top top-left is the pocket of land where Muhammad al-Arab was killed in March 2020. Source: Greek Ministry of Citizen Protection.



The first piece of the new fence, installed and ceremoniously inaugurated near the village of Poros in October 2020. Source: Kathimerini.

2.2.2. Riparian Infrastructures

A week after the EU Commissioner, Ursula von der Leyen's statement, on the 10th of March 2020, while thousands of asylum seekers were still waiting on the banks of Evros to cross into Greece, news³⁰¹ circulated that at the request of the Greek government, Bulgaria had released water downstream from the Ivaylovgrad Dam on the Ardas³⁰², a tributary of the Evros. As we will discuss below, this alleged, and to this day unconfirmed³⁰³, release of water from the dam proves the more insidious use of the Evros as an ecological border infrastructure. Defensive architectures here extend beyond built and geo-engineered interventions, to include the river's entire catchment basin, from the tributaries to the delta.

Before crossing into Greece near the official crossing of Kyprinos/Ivaylovgrad, the Arda waters run along the border between Bulgaria and Greece for two kilometres. A few kilometres further downstream, they again serve as a border, this time for one kilometre, between Greece and Turkey, after which they meet the Evros/Meriç between the Greek villages of Marasia and Kastanies, at the north western point of the Karaağaç Triangle.

Due to its nature as the Evros's only actual land border, the Karaağaç Triangle has always been at the frontline of Greek military contingency, as well as one of the preferred crossing locations for asylum seekers. As a consequence, it has long played an important role in the shaping of the Evros/Meriç river border. Today, the area is a stretch of deforested arable land hosting the eleven-kilometre-long deterrent fence. Proposed in 2011 and completed in 2012, the fence has since directed border crossers to more dangerous routes, points in the river where the flow rate is perilously strong and unpredictable. Fittingly, the fence is mentioned as a "technical obstacle" in FRONTEX reports, an infrastructural hurdle that does not stop crossings, but only makes them more difficult.³⁰⁴ This is what the slogan in the opening page of this chapter refers to: the fence itself does not kill like minefields or bullets do, but forces asylum seekers to cross the river under conditions in which death is possible, probable even. Recently, Greece's defence minister, Nikos Panagiotopoulos, referred to the Evros fence as itself a,

³⁰¹ "България изпуска язовир Ивайловград, за да спре мигрантите през Марица [Bulgaria release the Ivaylovgrad dam to stop migrants through Maritza]", *Off News*, March 10, 2020, offnews.bg/politika/bulgaria-izpuska-iazovir-ivaylovgrad-za-da-spre-migrantite-prez-marit-723617.html (accessed March 2020).

³⁰² Arda in Bulgarian and Turkish, Ardas in Greek.

³⁰³ Neither the Greek or the Bulgarian government confirmed, or denied, the reports. According to informal conversations we had with locals, in the days following the 10th of March, the water levels rose but the river never eventually flooded. Satellite imagery analysis also failed to record a significant shift in water levels. However, the incident shows that riparian nations are able to control the river's width and volume. See "Articles falsely claim Bulgaria flooded a dam to stop migrants crossing", *Afp Fact Check*, March 16, 2020, <https://factcheck.afp.com/articles-falsely-claim-bulgaria-flooded-dam-stop-migrants-crossing> (accessed March 2020).

³⁰⁴ "Technical obstacle" is used as a catch all term for impediments applied against foreign military movement as well as irregular border crossers or smugglers. It is used in a similar fashion to the description of minefields and cluster-bombs as "situational obstacles".

“natural barrier” which had had “relatively [good] results in containing flows”³⁰⁵. What at first reads like a slip of the tongue (surely in the eyes of the authorities who built it, the fence is the only part of the Evros barrier which is decidedly non-natural) could indeed be understood as a clue to the ecosystemic role of the fence within the fluvial frontier. Directing crossers to the water, the fence blurs the boundary between nature and infrastructure, revealing the Evros/Meriç/Maritsa river border itself as the result of multiple organizational technologies of territorial sovereignty. Primary amongst these is the mobilization of major infrastructure: the fence, the dam, minefields and the contingent release of waters downstream are a direct threat to the lives of asylum seekers attempting to enter the EU. We will call these “riparian infrastructures”, situated adjacent to the river but also harnessing the river itself in predictable yet deadly ways.

Science and technology studies scholars Caspar Bruun Jensen and Asturo Morita suggest that infrastructures are relational forms that activate experimental ontologies in the production of new worlds. In this complex relational ontology, infrastructures are not only things themselves but the relations between them³⁰⁶. The river border of the Evros/Meriç is the confluence of just such a multiplicity of relations. The use of a fence to weaponise nature is of course not particular to the Evros/Meriç border. Jason De León has made a similar argument about the fences erected in urban areas along the US-Mexico border in Arizona directing crossers to the deadly Sonora desert. He asks: “How can we begin to understand the structure of a wall of deterrence that is equal parts human, animal, plant, object, geography, temperature, and unknown?”³⁰⁷. Thinking through this proposition, in this section we attempt to undo the definite ontological divide between the natural and the human produced in order to understand the relation of multiple forms of causal agency present within the bordering process in this region.



Warsaw, 13/03/2018

Serious Incident Report no. 407

Information/allegations
Evros LCC coordinator informed that on Saturday, 23rd of July 2016, there will be demonstration held by a group of anarchists in Kastanies (Text Removed - Justification 2) against the technical obstacle (fence) and in order to open the borders for the refugees.

Not for public dissemination

Frontex - European Border and Coast Guard Agency
www.frontex.europa.eu | Pl. Europejski 6, 00-844 Warszawa, Poland | Tel. +48 22 205 95 00 | Fax +48 22 205 95 01

FRONTEX Serious Incident Report n.407, detailing a demonstration of anarchists against the “technical obstacle” in July 2016.
Source: Frontex. Obtained via FOI request, edited by authors.

³⁰⁵ Helena Smith, “Greece Plans to Build Sea Barrier off Lesbos to Deter Migrants”, *Guardian*, January 30, 2020, www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/30/greece-plans-to-build-sea-barrier-off-lesbos-to-deter-migrants (accessed January 2020).

³⁰⁶ Caspar Bruun Jensen & Asturo Morita, ‘Infrastructures as Ontological Experiments’ *Engaging Science, Technology, and Society* (2015) pp.81-87.

³⁰⁷ De León, *The Land of Open Graves*, 39.

2.2.3. “Hybrid Warfare”

In March 2020, this hybrid function of the river border as a natural, and relational, infrastructure became more visible than ever. The Karaağaç Triangle was the first location along the border where refugees were directed by the Turkish government on the 27th of February 2020, and where they found themselves trapped against the fence, between Greek forces who would not let them cross and Turkish forces who prevented them from returning to the Turkish mainland. It was here, on the 4th of March 2020, that Muhammad Gulzar, a young man from Pakistan, was shot dead, and six more, including Mohamad Hantou, from Syria, and Zeeshan Omar, from Pakistan, were injured from live rounds fired from the Greek Special Forces³⁰⁸.

In the war of words exchanged by the two sides during the March 2020 events, the Greek government used the term “hybrid warfare” to describe what they perceived as a Turkish attempt to “intrude” on Greek territory through indirect means, here with refugee bodies instead of bullets³⁰⁹. However, in response to what they perceived as Turkey’s weaponisation of refugees, Greece and the EU also employed a form of hybrid warfare explicitly incorporating the river ecology itself. Giorgos Christides, a journalist for the German newspaper *Der Spiegel* took the following notes from live-streamed footage from the morning Muhammad Gulzar was killed by the fence:

09:02: a very large group of migrants moved along the fence. A group of heavily armed soldiers followed them along.
9:05: heavy use of tear gas coming from the Turkish side. Flocks of birds flying out in panic. More and more migrants move southwards towards Petalo.
9:09: the battle also erupted at the Greek outpost. Extensive tear gas thrown from the side of Turkey. Both police and military were on the spot.
09:19: loudspeakers from Greek side play warning: do not attempt to cross
09:20: more and more police and army vehicles and reinforcements coming to the Greek tower post.
9:21: 23 soldiers moving along the fence
9:32: Soldiers dispersed at regular intervals along the fence
9:41: Calm at checkpoint
10:00 Migrants return to gather at check point. Black smoke to the south, fire breaks out.
11:01: Greeks use water canon.³¹⁰

Where so many people were-trapped in spaces along the frontier, they were exposed to a hybrid form of border violence involving: teargas, and the deployment of large fans to direct it against the wind to

³⁰⁸ Forensic Architecture, Bellingcat, Lighthouse Reports, Der Spiegel, “The Killing of Muhammad Gulzar”.

³⁰⁹ This rhetoric was reproduced by EU officials, not least of which was the executive director of Frontex, Fabrice Leggeri, who spoke of Greece facing “hybrid threats” at its border. Frontex, “Letter to the President of the European Parliament”, November 11, 2020, available at: www.tinekestrik.eu/sites/default/files/2020-11/Letter%20to%20EP_Frontex%20maritime%20operations%20at%20EU%20external%20bord...pdf (accessed November 2020)

³¹⁰ The notes were shared with Stefanos within the context of the above collaborative investigation. They are reproduced here with permission

the Turkish side;³¹¹ loud speakers and SMS messages warning people against crossing; the use of water cannons to spray blue liquid across the fence so those who make it onto the Greek side can be easily identified;³¹² farmers spraying pesticides onto refugees across the fence;³¹³ and, possibly, the release of water from dams. In addition to these assembled elements, on the night of the 26th of March, the impromptu camp that had been set up in Pazarkule, on the Turkish side of the border, caught fire. In videos that were circulated, witnesses claim that the fires were lit by Turkish authorities (*jandarma*) in their attempts to remove asylum seekers from the border (a measure supposed to counter the spread of COVID-19)³¹⁴. In their exaggerated claims driven by nationalist rhetoric, the Greek government offered a clue into how methods of border defence in Evros/Meriç are unambiguously mobilizing environmental elements and, as we will discuss, are increasingly organised around deadly and hybrid structures: from biometric and digital surveillance, to fences, and the necro-hydrologies of river flow, flood defence berms, the thickness of mud, and freezing fog.

As I (Stefanos) discussed in the introduction, authors in critical border studies also refer to the mobilization of geophysical and environmental features in *hybrid* terms, a position which is consistent with what I refer to throughout the thesis as *border natures*. As we will discuss in the following section, “Arcifinious Waters”, the Evros/Meriç border nature is made possible by the river’s adaptability to both force and flexibility, and contributes to the production of an ambiguous space in which multiple modes of violence are perpetrated with impunity. As such, “nature” can no longer be an alibi but is directly incorporated in the production of death at the border.

2.2.4. **Arcifinious Waters:** Weaponizing the Evros/Meriç/Maritsa

The hydropolitical literature concerned with access to water resources has shown how water systems are used as a tool or weapon in a violent cross-border conflict, particularly within the context of climate change and the resulting water scarcity³¹⁵. Internationally, including in the Kurdish territories in south-

³¹¹ “Tear gas hits the fan during clashes on the Greece-Turkey border”, *AP News*, March 12, 2020, apnews.com/42098e08f6ca4e952bdea547dd6ef5d1 (accessed March 2020).

³¹² “Μπλε μπογιά στους αλλοδαπούς για να εντοπίζονται εάν περάσουν τον φράκτη [Blue paint used against migrants to detect if they cross the fence]”, *Reportal*, March 2, 2020, reportal.gr/2020/03/02/μπλε-μπογιά-στους-αλλοδαπούς-για-να-εν/?fbclid=IwAR3bYEZrBSt9CngEISurtvFFLqxoiuxs-dwwSt3dACLisYofBkpMwr82Ku4 (accessed March 2020).

³¹³ “Εβρος: Αγρότης ψεκάζει μετανάστες και οι αστυνομικοί παρακολουθούν [Evros: Policemen watch as farmer sprays migrants]”, *DocumentoNews*, March 8, 2020, www.youtube.com/watch?v=R0AsiZIDXuA (accessed March 2020).

³¹⁴ Along with water, fire has emerged as another element used to deter and further displace refugees. The “Smouldering Grounds” project by Dimitra Andritsou offers a lucid example of fire as both actant and symptom of border violence in the refugee camp of Moria, in Lesbos. See smouldering-grounds.com (accessed September 2019).

³¹⁵ Most prominent among this literature is Gleick’s understanding of “water as a weapon of conflict”. Heather Cooley & Peter H. Gleick, “Climate-Proofing Transboundary Water Agreements” *Hydrological Sciences* (2011) 56:4, 711-718.

eastern Turkey, dams are increasingly constructed as, and overtly referred to, as weapons³¹⁶. The argument for the weaponisation of Evros/Meriç as a border nature, however, takes us beyond concerns of access to water and questions of scarcity commonly considered in more orthodox literatures, and instead it considers how this discourse shifts when it encounters specific riverine locations as weaponised technologies of conflict.³¹⁷ With the EU commissioner's description of Greece as a 'shield' in mind, we ask how is the Evros river a weapon and under what arrangement does the floodplain become a shield?

i. Flow

While we do not directly pursue the argument through orthodox understandings of weaponry, such as ballistics, it is, nevertheless, possible to read rivers in such a way. The mechanics of flow, for example, include calculations of velocity, gravity, volume, and friction³¹⁸. John Collins addresses these weapon-like qualities of rivers in his compendium of military geography:

Current velocities, usually stated in feet or meters per second, depend primarily on the steepness of the stream bed. The deepest, fastest flow normally follows the main channel well above the bottom, because stream banks and beds function as friction brakes.³¹⁹

Following Collins, the most directly lethal part of a river is often the border "line" itself. Whether it follows the main channel (thalweg), or the median line between the river banks, as is the case with Evros/Meriç, the border is more often than not located on the deepest and fastest flowing part of the river. Pavlidis goes into further detail as to how the morphology of the Evros contributes to its weaponisation:

at one-meter distance from the riverbank [the river's] depth is 50 cm; the next step that one might take is at a depth of three meters because the vortex of the river creates so called holes. A second factor increasing the danger is that migrants usually cross at night, in fear and anxiety. They don't see where they are going which makes them panic easily. Many of them don't know how to swim. If they fall into the water, they will lose the feeling of space and they might drown. Finally, the migrants are often not allowed to carry their bags with them due to lack of space in the inflatable boats, which results in one person wearing three shirts, three pairs of trousers one on top of the other. If they fall in the water the weight of the wet clothes will pull them down.³²⁰

³¹⁶ Zeynep S. Akinci & Pelin Tan, "Water Dams as Dispossession: Ecology, Security, Colonization" in James Graham, ed., *Climates: Architecture and the Planetary Imaginary* (Columbia Books on Architecture and the City, Lars Müller Publishers, 2016), 142-148.

³¹⁷ Gleick, Peter H., "Water as a Weapon and Casualty of Conflict: Freshwater and International Humanitarian Law", *Water Resource Management* (2019) 33:5, pp. 1737–1751, 1744.

³¹⁸ David Knighton, *Fluvial Forms and Processes: A New Perspective* (London: Arnold, 1998), 97.

³¹⁹ Collins, *Military Geography*, (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1998), 32

³²⁰ Pavlidis in ProAsyl, The Greek Council for Refugees, and Infomobile, "Walls of Shame: Accounts from the inside: The Detention Centre of Evros", April 2012, available at: https://www.proasyl.de/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/PRO_ASYL_Report_Walls_of_Shame_Accounts_From_The_Inside_Detention_Centers_of_Evros_April_2012-1.pdf (accessed may 2019). p. 88.

In this one paragraph, Pavlidis assembles elements of the river's complex spatiality to outline the many threats posed by its fluvial characteristics, processes and volumes. In an interview we conducted in Athens with Kuzey³²¹, a Turkish national who swam across the Evros/Meriç river 5 times and was pushed back on each occasion within the space of nine days in May 2019, he confirmed the dangers these elements posed in his attempts to cross the border:

The first time, I was with my clothes on, I never tried swimming with my clothes on before. It was very difficult. The clothes take you down and the river don't push you up like the sea. I was not sure if I can make it. I tried to swim freestyle, but in the middle of the river I thought "I can't manage this, I am tired...". I thought "ok should I take off my clothes here? Can I make it?" So I tried on my back. It was easier, but the flow push you like fifty metres, one hundred metres [downstream].

During another crossing, this time on an inflatable raft he had found on the banks:

It starts immediately the flow. Maybe it gets stronger in the middle, but I always felt it immediately (...) I couldn't cross the river with that boat. The flow was very strong, it made me turn around myself. When I hit the oars, sometimes I went towards the Turkish side of the river. When I reached the middle of the river, the flow hit me two-hundred metres to the... South I guess. And there was a Greek border bridge on there, and I was afraid of being seen by them. So I jumped in the middle of the river.

As is evidenced in Kuzey's words, people who attempt to cross the river are exposed to the disorientation of the turbulent forces of the river. It is in these moments of spatial confusion that drowning often occurs, either through the capsizing of boats or exhaustion during an attempt to swim across. It is exactly afloat the river's vortex where the imagined line has been drawn between the two banks of state territory that the fluvial frontier becomes most lethal.

If rivers are always an assemblage, of volumes of water, its contents, and the communities and geomorphologies of which it is co-constitutive, then the weaponisation of rivers always occurs as part of an assemblage of speeds, contents, and actors. in specific locations and socio-political contexts. Scholars of warfare studies Antoine Bousquet, Jairus Grove and Nisha Shah in their text *Becoming Weapon* argue "against the understanding of weapons as static material objects" but rather as "technical beings in perpetual formation, transmuting in tandem with their ambient milieus"³²². "An arrangement of things becomes a weapon", they argue,

through relational changes in intensity and context such that its motive force, density, potential energy or mechanical capability comes to make events of death and dismemberment. And beyond the immediate

³²¹ Not his real name. Kuzey was also interviewed separately for the purposes of the Forensic Architecture investigation. See Forensic Architecture, 'Pushbacks Across the Evros/Meriç River: Situated Testimony'. The excerpts used here are from our own interview with him, unless otherwise stated.

³²² Manuel DeLanda, *War in the Age of Intelligent Machines* (New York, NY: Zone Books, 1991), 64.

occasion of a weapon's terrible work lies a wider network of relations that condition its emergence and support its operation.³²³

For Bousquet, Grove and Shah, it is through relational processes that “objects, ideologies, practices, bodies and affects get drawn into specific assemblages of violent intentionality”³²⁴. A river (or a mountain, a sea, a desert) is therefore never inherently a weapon but is made one in the specific assemblage within which it, as an assemblage in its own way, is nested³²⁵. It is when the river assemblage is nested within the border and its antagonistic geopolitical and material qualities, that its characteristics of speed and volume are weaponised. In other words, the Evros/Meriç/Maritsa (and its tributaries) does not become a weapon on the basis of its speed, width, or depth alone. It is the specific condition of the river as a border which turn its waters into “vector[s] of bodily harm or lethality”³²⁶.

³²³ Antoine Bousquet, Jairus Grove & Nisha Shah, “Becoming Weapon: An Opening Call to Arms”, *Critical Studies on Security* 5, no. 1, (2017): 1-8, 2.

³²⁴ *ibid*, 3.

³²⁵ Manuel DeLanda, *Assemblage Theory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 83.

³²⁶ Bousquet et al, “Becoming Weapon”, 1.



The waters of the Ardas river, shortly before they reach the Evros in the Karaağaç triangle, February 2019. Photo by authors.

ii. Flexibility

This relational approach to theorizing weaponry is consistent with our understanding of borders as spaces that themselves are relational, and where the state's power to know, stop, exclude (and, sometimes, include), hurt and kill, is not only projected vertically, but also dispersed laterally. This, as I have argued throughout this thesis, is especially true for so-called natural borders, as material spaces that are in a constant process of re-definition. In Evros, these fluctuations of non-static "physiographic political boundaries"³²⁷ are chosen by design not only as modes of deterrence but as weapons through their very ambiguity.

Within the calculations of river flow and sediment transportation discussed in this section, is concealed a deadly politics of bordering that incorporates the full spectrum of the Evros's hydrology and manipulates the ambiguities produced by rivers. The de-naturalised condition of the river can itself be extrapolated from the way international law conceives of rivers as "arcifinious" borders. Foundational amongst this literature is eighteenth-century Dutch jurist Hugo Grotius, author of the 1715 treatise "Of the Rights of War and Peace". Grotius identifies the notion of the weaponised border within the "Arcifinious" state, as a state with "natural" boundaries "fit to keep the Enemy out"³²⁸, writing:

such lands as are occupied or possessed, either as being vacant, or else by the power of the sword... in arcifinious lands, the river, by gradually altering its course, does also alter the borders of the territory; and whatsoever the river casts up to the opposite side, shall be under his jurisdiction, to whom the augmentation is made.³²⁹

Derived from the legal heredity of international border law, the term "arcifinious" is the territorial concept whereby a state is bounded by geophysical limits with defensive capabilities, or "natural" boundaries "fit to keep the Enemy out" such as seas, rivers, deserts, and mountains. According to Grotius and his followers, rivers are "part of 'arcifinious' or 'natural' military frontier zones that are 'indetermined,' and flexible based on the application of force."³³⁰

The understanding of rivers as flexible to force resonates with Eyal Weizman's analysis of linear borders, a legacy of the military cartographic imagination, becoming elastic³³¹. As Weizman emphasizes In *Hollow Land*, the elastic border is constantly being remade, it shifts and reforms and is as, or even more, deadly than static borders³³². While Weizman develops his theory of elasticity with respect to the various architectural elements – separation walls, roads, blockades, turnstiles and more

³²⁷ Martin Glassner, *Political Geography* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1993), 77.

³²⁸ Donaldson, "Paradox of the moving boundary", 159.

³²⁹ Hugo Grotius, *Of the Rights of War and Peace* (London: Brown, Ward, Meares, 1715).

³³⁰ Donaldson, "Paradox of the moving boundary", 159.

³³¹ Eyal Weizman, *Hollow Land: Israel's Architecture of Occupation* (London: Verso, 2007), 6.

³³² *ibid*, 7.

- deployed to maintain the Israeli occupation of Palestine, his elastic approach to bordering is relevant for theorizing the materially elastic border of Evros/Meriç.

Reflecting on the territorial elasticity of rivers, Stephanie Kane, geographer of the political ecology of water, has made the claim that the construction or failure to build water-control engineering is crucial in establishing or losing territorial power. Kane, however, adds that “even as flood waters confound attempts at constructing territory, their forces, and the forces deployed to control them, can themselves be enlisted as territorial technologies.”³³³ In this way she postulates that both river infrastructures, and the lack thereof, are paradoxically incorporated into riverine territorial regimes. More importantly, she states that floodwaters are themselves territorial technologies.

The rumoured opening of the dam shows how, in the mind of military engineers, right-wing nationalist politicians, or far right militia, the river/border assemblage offers the possibility to control flow but also has the capacity to bring death to humans exercising their right to claim asylum. The intentional, if unconfirmed, flooding of the valley, and its entanglement with border defence strategies, emphasized the river not as “natural” but, to the contrary, always flexible to force. Flooding to prevent crossings and receding to its measured and (b)ordered banks, the Evros/Meriç is multiple, both smooth and striated, as it is both an obstacle and a route for the border crosser.

As Ursula von der Leyen’s statement pre-empted, the material movement of water out of place is here not perceived as a threat that must be contained. Instead, it is deployed in the very efforts to both delineate and ‘shield’ the space of the nation-state. As we will discuss further in the following section, the absence of any real transboundary river management of the Evros/Meriç/Maritsa is not only indicative but imbricated in the intentional ambiguities of the river border region. While flooding is undesirable in its damage to property, it is, by contrast, this very unpredictability that is necessary in the design of the border. The very flexibility of the river—its interstitial condition between water and sediment—is useful in the production of an “indeterminate” space that is materially porous, shifting, and thus difficult for trespassers to cross. The fluctuations in flow rate, the consequent unevenness of the riverbed, its depths and changing banks, are necessary to the production and maintenance of the ambiguities of the fluvial violence of the border. In Evros/Meriç, floodwaters and shootings are not distinct but are in continuity with the long-term, albeit previously lower intensity, weaponisation of the river.

Indeed, the aforementioned, shifting and contested, “pockets” of land near Feres have long been points where fatalities become concentrated. Pavlos Pavlidis and Maria-Valeria Karakasi have identified a particular parcel of land as the location where 72 bodies were recovered between 2000 and 2014³³⁴.

³³³ Stephanie C. Kane, ‘Floodplains: Where Sheets of Water Intersect: Infrastructural Culture – From Flooding to Hydropower in Winnipeg, Manitoba’, in Peters, Steinberg, & Stratford, eds. *Territory beyond Terra* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018) 107-126, 107.

³³⁴ Pavlidis, Pavlos & Maria-Valeria Karakasi, “A Retrospective Statistical Review Of Deaths Owing To Migration Through The

Recently, it was in these stranded parcels where refugees were directed by geographers aligned with Turkish authorities during the March 2020 events³³⁵, and where a young man from Aleppo, Muhammad al Arab, was shot dead by Greek soldiers³³⁶ standing inside the dry river bed of the 1926 border, which now acts as little more than a vegetated trench³³⁷. At the time of writing, the area is being deforested to accommodate the new fence. Kuzey, our interlocutor, describes how, after his last pushback he accidentally crossed the border – but not the river - into Greece and found himself trapped in one of these pockets:

I didn't know that I was on the Greek side of the border. I was just walking in the forest, thinking I was on the Turkish side of the border. I see a bridge. That shocked me because I never think that there would be a bridge in the river. I carefully crossed the bridge. I found a hut. I saw some farmer things, bags with fertilizer. The writing on them was not Turkish. They were in Greek language. That time I noticed I may be in the Greek side of the border, but I know I was in the Turkish side of the river, but I was not sure.

Kuzey had crossed the border but not the trespass line. He spent two days stranded in that parcel of land, hiding inside an irrigation plant without food or the ability to light a fire, too exhausted to swim again and too scared to cross the bridge on foot. On the second day, he found an abandoned raft and crossed the river, only to be carried downstream by the river and forced to jump back into the water to avoid arrest. Kuzey is an able bodied man in his 20s, who had served as a police officer in Turkey. As he told us, he was trained to survive such hostile circumstances and had studied the area extensively before he embarked on his journey. Despite that, he continuously described struggling to orient himself in the river maze, he had difficulty coping with the elements and the exhaustion and was continuously wondering “if he is going to make it”. During a nine-day-long pushback, he crossed the border five times and the river six times swimming, holding onto floating trees, barrels, or on rafts. He was violently pushed back to Turkey across it five more times. In total, he covered over 300 kilometres on foot, boats and in police vehicles, and travelled the entire length of the border. He was detained, beaten, he fell in the water, got stuck in the mud, lost in the fog and tangled up in the thorny branches of the riparian forest. He barely ate and slept during this time:

I can't lay on the ground because it was very cold so I literally sleep on my feet or my knees all the time. One night I couldn't sleep because of the cold. All night I waited and stood still in the forest. It was really bad, I saw some hallucinations because of the cold. I thought I was hearing voices in the forest...

Kuzey was strong, and lucky enough to have crossed in May instead of the winter months. He made it, and was kind and brave enough to share his story with us. His story of survival is one of many, but

Southeasternmost Land Borders of The European Union, Greece 2000–14”, *Disasters* (2019) 43:3, 459–477, 469. Since the publication of the paper this number has grown. In 2019 alone, the IOM placed 3 separate fatalities in the area, the highest concentration on the river for that year. IOM, *Missing Migrants: Tracking Deaths Along Migrant Routes*, available at: <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/region/europe> (accessed August 2019)

³³⁵ Dr Yüksel Hoş, Twitter Post, February 28, 2020) available at: <https://twitter.com/jxlhs/status/1233458340564520962> (accessed March 2020).

³³⁶ Forensic Architecture, “The Killing of Muhammad al-Arab”.

³³⁷ Similar to the abandoned trenches on the ridges of Prespa.

survival is not always the case. Another witness Stefanos talked to within the context of his work with Forensic Architecture is Fady, a young man from Syria who travelled legally to Evros, as the holder of asylum from Germany. He travelled to find his younger brother, a minor, who had gone missing after falling into the river in his attempt to cross it. Fady had a different story to tell. Upon arrival to Evros, the police arrested him, confiscated his documents, and pushed him across to Turkey. Unable to return to Germany legally, Fady tried to enter Greece only to be pushed back to Turkey fourteen times over the space of two years. He eventually managed to enter Greece, where he spent two more years in hiding before he finally reached Germany. For Fady, as with so many others, the border assumed a thickness not only in space, but also over time, violently illegalizing him and forcing him to a life in limbo. Four years after his disappearance, his younger brother has not been found³³⁸.

iii. Concealment

The ability of the river to deter, kill, but also to make bodies disappear raises questions that require us to think of the river waters not only as vectors of harm³³⁹, but also as agents of concealment. This concealment is twofold. On the one hand, as we have discussed, the hostile characteristics of arcifinious riverine boundaries are mobilized in a practice that enables states to obscure their agency in relation to border violence. On the other hand, the same fluvial properties and the river's capacity to transport is here mobilized not only to hurt, but also to obfuscate the very existence of this violence, to erase traces and ensure impunity for government actors. Mobilised as both weapons and sewers, rivers simultaneously kill, and carry away trace.

This weaponisation of water as concealment is visible in the state in which bodies arrive at the cemetery in the Alexandroupolis Hospital morgue or the cemetery in Sidiro. As professor Pavlidis explains, unlike in the salty waters of the Aegean Sea, the murky waters of Evros decompose bodies quickly while holding them inside the river for longer periods, a process which is directly connected to the ecology of the river itself. Pavlidis says that many bodies, particularly the smaller bodies of children, like Fady's missing brother, held in the river by sediment and trees, are never found. "The bottom of the river is very muddy," he explains. "There are a lot of branches from the trees and the bodies get stuck... And the fish – we have all kinds of fish in the river, and they eat the skin post-mortem."³⁴⁰ The process whereby bodies get disentangled from twigs and mud and surface downstream is also connected to the river's hydrological cycle. Even though border deaths are most common in the winter months when the river is swollen and temperatures may fall several degrees below zero, many bodies of border crossers

³³⁸ For both cases see Forensic Architecture, "Pushbacks Across the Evros/Meriç: Situated Testimony".

³³⁹ Bousquet, et al, "Becoming Weapon".

³⁴⁰ Florian Elabdi, "The Untold Refugee Stories on the Edge of Europe", *Refugee Today*, www.refugee.today/stories/the-untold-refugee-stories-on-the-edge-of-europe (accessed July 2020)

are found in the spring and summer months, when the floods recede and bodies re-emerge from the river amongst the shoals, sandbanks and islands of the river, most commonly downstream, near the delta.

During his narration of the brief history of the cemetery, Mufti Mehmet lamented how, over time, the profound trauma of witnessing and attending to disintegrating corpses caused the locals to stop attending the burials. Justifying themselves to the Mufti, many said that the smell and sight of the bodies “didn’t let them eat for a week”. “In the summer”, the Mufti whispered, a “melting (sic) body smells from kilometres away”³⁴¹. As the Mufti’s stories, and Pavlidis’s archives reveal, when bodies are found in the river — if they are found at all — they are in a state where identification is almost impossible. Of the 359 bodies Professor Pavlidis had received in his morgue when Stefanos visited him in November 2018, only 103 had been identified. In addition to biometric and bureaucratic obstacles, like the lack of comprehensive transboundary DNA databases, attempts to match remains with families searching for a relative are often unsuccessful, because there are no personal effects to help link the remains to a place of origin or destination³⁴². For this reason, Pavlidis keeps a detailed archive of objects found on or near the bodies he receives, hoping that one day it might help relatives tie the bodies to a missing person³⁴³. More often than not these include objects worn directly on the body, and made from materials that withstand decay from the water, like rings and lockets. According to Pavlidis this is because the fluvial processes themselves destroy most of the material evidence of the identity of the victim. Over time, the fibres of the clothes disintegrate, and get torn apart by the river animals or the bloating body itself. With them, disentangled from the body and covered by the mud are smaller objects that the people carried in their pockets, like identification papers, credit cards, and phones.

Through his ground-breaking research of migration over the Sonora, Jason De León has interrogated the capacity of corpses to testify to the political nature of migrant fatalities³⁴⁴. For De León, “the political afterlives of bodies” - decomposing bodies, bodies scavenged by animals, missing bodies - perform a certain kind of agency within the border space of the “Sonora hybrid collectif”. There, “seemingly

³⁴¹ Indeed, the smell of rotting flesh emanated throughout my border work, from the Mufti’s account, to my field visits with the young shepherd who had found the body of the Albanian man in the forest of Prespa, and the testimonies of fishermen who salvage drowned bodies from the Aegean Sea. It became a powerful trope that testified to the violence of the border regime; like the Sidiro locals, I am also left with a bad taste in my mouth.

³⁴² Jenny Edkins, “Missing Migrants and the Politics of Naming: Names Without Bodies, Bodies Without Names”, *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 83, no. 2, (Summer 2016): 359-389. Edkins notes how this post-mortem disjunction of body and name is a continuation of a practice that is common during undocumented migration, in death as in life. Cutting the cord that ties body and name, Edkins argues, undocumented migrants challenge their knowability vis-à-vis the state. Indeed, making Pavlidis’ work more difficult is the fact that many crossers who come from countries dispose of their passports before they cross the river. Many, who come from countries that the Greek government does not deem asylum-worthy, often throw them in the river directly, while others, fearing that the police will confiscate and destroy them, hide them in plastic bags in the bushes by the river with the hope of retrieving them one day.

³⁴³ This archiving of objects retrieved from migrant bodies can be understood as another form of a “wild” or “contemporary archaeology”. Recently, scholars have increasingly begun to consider the objects left behind by migrants as forming part of a contemporary archaeology of migration. See Yannis Hamilakis, ed., *The New Nomadic Age, Archaeologies of Forced and Undocumented Migration*, (Sheffield: Equinox Publishing., 2019).

³⁴⁴ De León, *The Land of Open Graves*, 72.

‘natural’ physical, chemical, and biological processes of decomposition”³⁴⁵ perpetrate a second form of violence, this time against the evidence of border deaths. As a result, De León argues, “Corporeal destruction is often a deeply political act”. De León calls this operationalization of post-mortem bodily harm, *necroviolence*³⁴⁶, a force that departs from Mbembe’s concept of *necropower* and is “specifically about corporeal mistreatment and its generative capacity for violence”³⁴⁷.

In the Evros, it is the river waters that act against evidence, both to do with the identity of the deceased and the event of death itself. The forces of the river, holding bodies in the mud or twigs, and releasing them, if at all, and transporting them downstream after large flood events, inscribe a timeline between the event and its reemergence as evidence. This combination of stasis and movement, periodically organized by the forces of the river, dislodges the event from its locale: the deadliest crossings are not necessarily where most bodies are found. The still waters in the empty graves at Sidiro remain as reminders of this double violence and as unintentional and temporary memorials to those buried close by, those still submerged and yet to surface, and those continuing to cross the turbulent currents of the river.

Following the line that cuts the Evros/Meriç waters in two, this section enquired into the ways the waters are conscripted into the project of border defence. In the following section we will discuss the ways in which both the border, and the river, thicken. We will explore the border processes that come to play when the water shifts and floods beyond the cartographic line of the banks, blurring delimitation to scale the border up to the entire floodplain/buffer zone.

³⁴⁵ Ibid, 74.

³⁴⁶ Ibid, 68-72.

³⁴⁷ Ibid, 69.

2.3. The Floodplain

67 – 3 m

2.3.1. **A Spectre:** Floodwaters and Hydrodiplomacy

A man kicks the ground trying to uncover the “blood of Greeks” in the soil. He demands that this blood was shed in order for Greece to be “free” and as such needs to be respected. His exasperated shouting makes much of what he says difficult to comprehend. Descending into a fit of nationalist fervour he is filmed secretly from behind a wire fence by a group he identifies as “Kurds, Syrians, Iraqis, Pakistanis”. These people are detained at the Fylakio registration and pre-removal detention centre in the very north of Evros. According to his lanyard, the man is an employee of the centre³⁴⁸. Kicking the ground, he mobilizes the soil as that which is to be defended. Towards the end of the short video the official³⁴⁹ utters the pivotal words: “Ok, Zagros going to go out. Go out, takes him, going to Turkey now.” In his broken English he suggests that these men should stop complaining about their detention because when they are released they will be picked-up once more and clandestinely pushed-back to Turkey across the Evros/Meriç river. As the official intimates, those who make it across the deadly waters do not necessarily escape the river’s ambiguous frontier, but are instead illegally sent back by masked operatives under the cover of night.

Fylakio, Greek for “outpost”³⁵⁰, located near the Ardas river, is one the first villages reached when onrushing water from the Ivaylovgrad dam crosses the Bulgarian-Greek border. Some days before March 10th, word had been circulating among guards working in the detention centre that the dam would be opened to make the river more difficult to cross³⁵¹. Whether the dam did open or not remains uncertain. The rumours circulating among border guards, and the alarm it sparked in riparian communities and migrants alike, speak to both the possible and the already present mobilisation of the river as an agent of terror³⁵². If the release of water would have been a direct act of weaponisation of water against asylum seekers, the real or fake news of its release, surging across all three sides the Evros/Meriç/Maritsa valley and spreading over social media, do the work of deterrence.

³⁴⁸ Anna Nini, “Εθνικιστικό παραλήρημα υπαλλήλου του Υπ.Μετανάστευσης στο κάμππροσφύγων του Έβρου [Nationalist Delirium of Employee of Ministry Migration to the Evros refugee camp]” *Vice News Greece*, January 11, 2019, www.vice.com/gr/article/59v73a/e8nikistiko-paralhrhma-ypallhloy-toy-yp-metanasteyshts-sto-kamp-prosfygwn-toy-ebroy (accessed January 2019).

³⁴⁹ On a field trip to Fylakio in November 2018, Stefanos visited the Centre and interviewed the same man, identified as Chris Michaelidis, then acting deputy director of the Centre. At the time he made the assurance that he was doing everything within his powers to ensure that human rights are respected within the centre. He gave Stefanos his business card, with the address of a hotel room in Orestiada, where he is still staying to this day. His presence in Evros, it seems, is as fleetingly permanent as that of the refugees he was tasked with keeping outside Greek territory.

³⁵⁰ Like Prespa, several of the Evros’s villages were renamed during the early 20th century. Many of the new names (Akrinó/Frontier, Fylaktó/Guarded etc.) reflect their new role as frontier settlements.

³⁵¹ Stefanos was relayed this information by an Evros local who works inside the detention centre for a human rights NGO based in Athens. They were having dinner in a local restaurant and, although he was cautious about the people in the tables around them, he talked normally, yet always whispering the word “river”.

³⁵² In his work on the Paramilitary disposal, and downstream surfacing, of bodies in the Cauca river in Colombia, Ifor calls this mobilisation of the river as a mediator of fear “fluvial terror”.

The spectre of water surging downstream to consume the Evros/Meriç/Maritsa border was not an unusual concern for a region that is in a constant state of flood alert. Major flood events have increased in frequency over the last twenty-five years, leading to a once in a thousand-year flood in 2005, severe events in 2006, 2007, 2011, 2014, and 2015, and a “state of emergency” announced by the Greek Government in March and April 2018.³⁵³ Flooding in the region is closely tied to the transboundary politics of hydro-electric infrastructure. The majority of large dams and reservoirs in the basin are concentrated on Bulgarian territory (as many as seven hundred and twenty two),³⁵⁴ while Turkey has built sixty,³⁵⁵ and Greece just five (mainly for irrigation purposes, as opposed to energy production).³⁵⁶ Flow variability is a central concern for hydrodiplomatic relations between Greece, Turkey, and Bulgaria and has been the subject of many transboundary agreements whereby upstream riparian nations either force or allow downstream riparians to adapt to seasonal changes in both wet and dry conditions. As we shall show in what follows, it is not only the flooding of the existing water course, however, which is involved in Greece’s watery border imaginary.



A dam in Erythropotamos, a tributary of the Evros near the Greek / Bulgarian border, February 2019, Photo by authors.

³⁵³ Kostantinos Chouvardas, Christos Papapostolou, “Ποτάμεις Πλημύρρες και Διασυνοριακή Συνεργασία: Η Περίπτωση του Ποταμού Έβρου [River Floods and Crossborder Cooperation: The case of Evros River]”, *Geographies*, (2016) 27, 44-71.

³⁵⁴ Angeliki Mentzafou, Vasiliki Markogianni, & Elias Dimitriou, “The Use of Geospatial Technologies in Flood Hazard Mapping and Assessment: Case Study from River Evros”, *Pure and Applied Geophysics*, (2017) 174, 679–700, 680; Bulgarian dams are “mainly for hydropower production and secondarily for irrigation purposes and fish-breeding”.

³⁵⁵ *ibid*, 680.

³⁵⁶ Because of its significance as a border, and with little transboundary water management, the main course of the river in the Greece/Turkey section has no dams or artificial barriers. Rare for such a large river, this may make it an important habitat for fish. See Stamatis Zogaris et al., “Assessment of Riparian Zone And River Island Conditions In A Trans-Boundary Greenbelt: The Evros/Meriç River (Greece-Turkey)”, *Fresenius Environmental Bulletin*, (2015) 24:1, 269-277, 275.

-They acknowledge that cooperation in the field of tourism is of great importance for both countries and welcome the signing of the "Joint Declaration on Cooperation in the Field of Tourism between the Alternate Minister of Economy, Development and Tourism of the Hellenic Republic and the Minister of Culture and Tourism of the Republic of Turkey". To this end, they are committed to strongly encouraging joint projects targeting important overseas markets. The two countries also welcome the results of the Pilot Project (1 April 2015–31 October 2015) aiming at facilitating the short-stay tourist visits from certain Turkish coast areas to seven (7) Greek islands in the Eastern Aegean under simplified entry procedures.

-Taking into consideration the escalated migration crisis both sides agreed that the implementation of the Turkey-EU Joint Action Plan on Migration, which was activated at the Turkey-EU Summit held in Brussels on 29 November 2015, remains a priority in order to stem migration flows and to tackle traffickers and smugglers networks. Recalling also that the Plan builds on and is consistent with commitments taken by Turkey and the EU in the context of the Visa Liberalization Dialogue, both sides agreed to advance their cooperation aiming at its full and speedy implementation. They have also agreed on more effective implementation of the bilateral Turkish-Greek Readmission Protocol, also by initiating a new fast-track procedure, to ensure the swift return of migrants who are not in need of international protection to their countries of origin. The Coast Guards of Greece and Turkey agreed to establish a system of electronic exchange of information. An experts meeting will be convened for the technical details to allow for the functioning of the system as soon as possible.

-Turkey and Greece aim at further promoting their cooperation in the field of energy, in particular natural gas pipelines and electricity interconnection networks. Both countries are committed to supporting the timely realization of the Trans Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP) and the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) projects which are interlinked within the Southern Gas Corridor. These pipelines, representing the most efficient route for bringing Caspian gas to Europe, will have a significant role for the regional energy supply security.

-Floods in the Evros /Meriç River Basin are causing damages every year, especially during rainy and snow melting periods. The Joint Declaration signed between the relevant Ministers of the two countries on 14 May 2010 in Athens, along with Water Directive 2000/60/EC and Flood Directive 2007/60/EC, provide the framework for water management and prevention of floods in the Evros /Meriç River. In light of the above, Turkey and Greece express their commitment to strengthen their collaboration aiming to address and mitigate the impact of the floods in the Evros /Meriç river, welcoming any goodwill cooperation from other relevant parties involved in water management and flood protection in the Evros /Meriç River Basin.

-Both countries expressed their determination to fight against the scourge of terrorism in all its forms and manifestations, and agreed to increase their cooperation bilaterally and at the international platforms, including in the framework of the global coalition to counter the terrorist threat stemming from the situation in Syria and Iraq.

-The two countries desire to further consolidate their cooperation in the field of justice.

Recent attempts at hydrodiplomacy in the region include the 2016 "Joint Declaration Between the Government of the Hellenic Republic and the Government of the Republic of Turkey" signed by Prime Ministers Alexis Tsipras and Ahmet Davutoğlu as an annex to the EU-Turkey deal of the same month.³⁵⁷ This agreement incorporated multiple political and hydrographical issues that fold onto the fluvial frontier, including a Joint Action Plan to "stem migration flows". Source: Hellenic Parliament Library.

2.3.2. *Anáchoma*: Geoengineering the Border

During the planning of the fence in 2011, the Hellenic Army General Staff also proposed a "120km long, 30mt wide and 7mt deep" moat³⁵⁸. Officially an "anti-tank trap" functioning primarily as a defence against Turkish invasion, it is evident in the context of the increased crossings in 2011 that it would be a further technical barrier for border crossers. The plan imagines the conversion of what is already an anthropogenic river into a moat. The scale and form of this project is symptomatic of a medieval imaginary of violence pervasive of global border regimes. Where the river itself was not considered to

³⁵⁷ The EU-Turkey deal only referred to migration towards the Aegean islands. See "Joint Declaration Between the Government of the Hellenic Republic and the Government of the Republic of Turkey", Izmir, March 2016, available at: <http://www.jeanpierrecassarino.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/GR-TURK-Joint-Declaration-03-2016.pdf>. (Accessed May 2019).

³⁵⁸ ProAsyl, et.al, "Walls of Shame", 8.

be quite deadly enough, this imaginary conceives of altering its course into a yet more deadly weapon. As a statement issued at the time by asylum rights NGO ProAsyl reads:

These barriers will not keep people in need of international protection from trying to cross the border. Instead, they increase the danger of border-crossings and can lead to more persons losing their lives while trying to reach European territory and international protection.³⁵⁹

The river and its imagined doubling as a moat instrumentalises the already treacherous route beyond the scale of 'deterrent' into an explicitly engineered space unconcerned with fatalities. Stepping back from the General Staff's imagined moat, we argue that the Evros/Meriç already performs the arcifinious role of a moat at the EU's fluvial frontier. The drawing of a fixed, yet imaginary line along the central course of the river effectively produced the river as a frontier, whereby its movements and muds become spaces where sovereign territorial imaginaries are projected with horrifyingly real effects. The proposed moat then features merely as a fantasy of the control of nature, while the river itself is produced as weapon by the imaginary of the bounded state. It also speaks to Evros as an engineered space and reveals the border regime's deployment of the environment as metaphor and defensive technology.

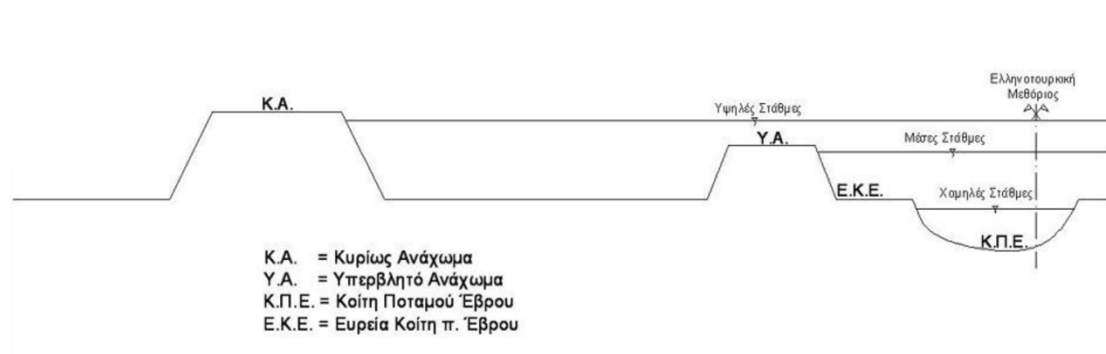
Where the river appears at first glance as a "natural" course it is, to greater and lesser extents, the result of centuries of small and large-scale engineering interventions. Beyond the river's volitional shifts, the Evros/Meriç has been visibly straightened and engineered at numerous points. In 1936, an "agreement regarding the settlement of hydraulic works on both banks" was signed in Ankara³⁶⁰. Fifteen years later, in 1951, the two countries invited the Chicago-based Harza Engineering Company to undertake a study for flood defence in Evros. The study was completed in 1953 and signed and set in effect in Istanbul in 1955, along with a "Plan for the construction of flood defence works" and a "Settlement of the methods of mutual overview of the construction of flood defence works on Evros river"³⁶¹. The first draining and alignment works were undertaken in the Evros Delta the next year, but the Harza plans were only partially implemented before their abandonment in 1964, leaving the banks of the Evros/Meriç to be engineered unilaterally and without coordination.

³⁵⁹ Ibid, 3.

³⁶⁰ ΦΕΚ Α' 474/27.10.1936 "regarding the settlement of hydraulic works on both banks of the Evros".

³⁶¹ Archive of treaties and agreements of the Hellenic Ministry of External Affairs, reference number 1999.

Driving through this cross-border landscape, one quickly understands that the floodplain of the Evros/Meriç/Maritsa is sculpted to either contain or facilitate movement, be it of military personnel, civilians, or water. Part of this manipulation comes in the form of flood defence berms, raised embankments that often act as roads in the floodplain. There are multiple types of berms, each of which is designed to perform distinct functions. Cutting through fields are raised, muddy roads that are designed as surpassable embankments (also referred to as “summer berms”) to enable movement during mild floods, which we often found ourselves driving over, playing hide and seek with border patrols and local vigilantes. These roads often double as military and anti-tank installations, with concrete tunnels running within and intermittent foxholes on either side of the raised berm. The rail line, also raised, that runs from Alexandroupolis to Ormenio, and into Bulgaria, and which features so prominently in Pavlidis’s spreadsheet of casualties, is designed as the main embankment³⁶². Should this be breached, there is a system of tertiary berms, levees and canals to slow the movement of water into the plain. The concrete bridges that cross these canals are often built with gun emplacements and always have signs designating the maximum weight and number of armoured vehicles they can withstand. The new, 26 km-long fence will also, according to the Greek Minister of Citizens’ Protection Michalis Chrysochoidis, “take into account the geomorphology of the region, and will be constructed to act as a flood defence infrastructure for the protection of settlements and fields”³⁶³.

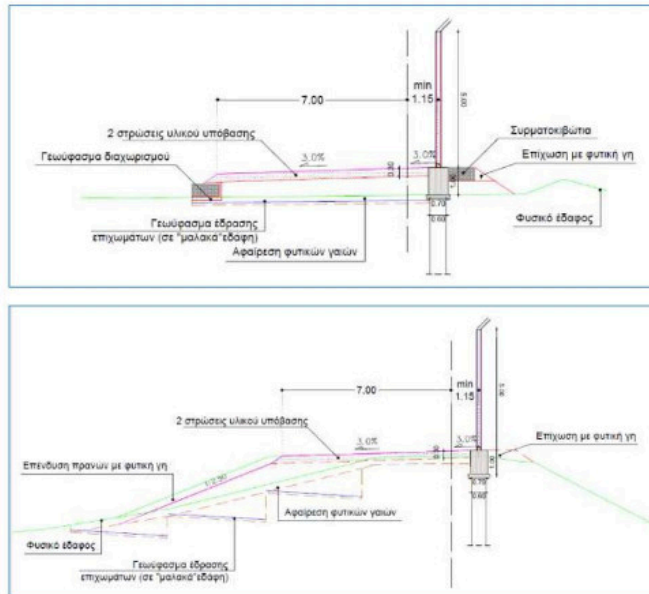


Cross-section showing the hierarchy of flood-defence works in the Greek side of the Evros. Source: Greek Ministry for the Environment, Energy and Climate Change, Special Secretariat for Water.

³⁶² The Orient Express used to run along these tracks, entering Greece at Ormenio, crossing into Turkey and back into Greece at the triangle of Karaağaç, and back into Turkey through Pythio.

³⁶³ “Μ.Χρυσοχοΐδης, Εντός 8 μηνών ο Φράχτης στον Έβρο [M.Chrysochoidis: The Evros fence will be ready within 8 months]”, *Status fm*, May 5, 2020, 1077statusfm.gr/news/99-news/9292-m-xrysochoidis-entos-8-minon-o-neos-fraxis-ston-evro-prostithentai-antivalistika-paratitiria.html (accessed May 2020)

ΜΟΡΦΗ ΝΕΟΥ ΕΜΠΟΔΙΟΥ ΣΕ ΣΥΝΟΛΙΚΟ ΜΗΚΟΣ 25.000 m



Cross-section of the design for the new fence incorporating a berm. Source: Greek Ministry for Citizen Protection

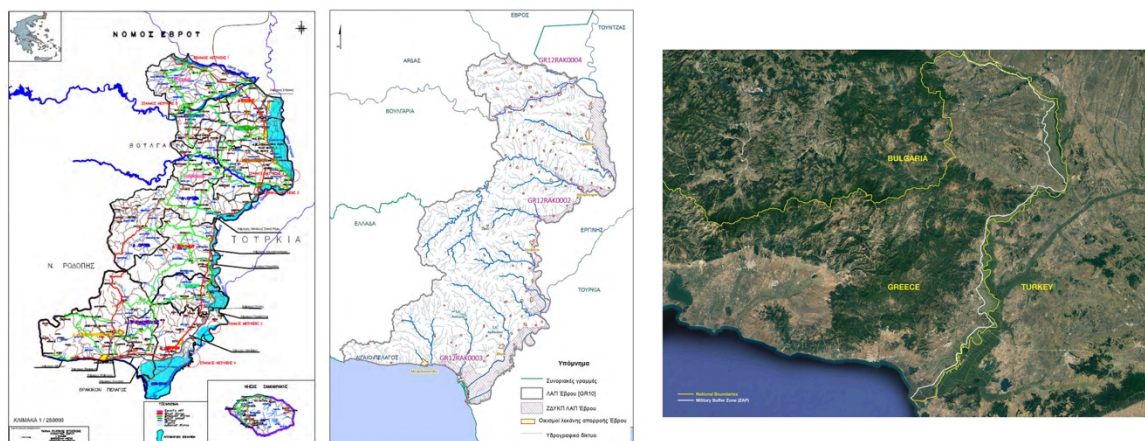
It is evident from these examples that a hierarchy is designed into the system of flood/border control to allow water, armies, and civilians to penetrate the frontier space to varying degrees. After almost a century of geoengineering processes, flood control and defence infrastructures in Evros are so intensely braided that they are impossible to disentangle one from another³⁶⁴. This spatial arrangement is consistent with the region's reputation as Greece's *ανάχωμα* (*anáchoma*), or embankment, against Turkish invasion, and more recently against asylum seekers – a reputation which was doubled down and amplified beyond the Greek borders when Ursula von der Leyen described Evros as Europe's “shield”.

While von der Leyen was referring to the Greek armed forces successfully sealing the border against asylum seekers, it is the berm, a versatile and ambiguous military-ecological technology, that is the physical embodiment of the *ανάχωμα*. But the military imaginary of Evros as an *ανάχωμα* also refers to the more nuanced politics of demographic engineering which we discussed in the opening section of this chapter, and which intends to produce a Greek Orthodox Christian population along the border as a demographic buffer — or embankment — against invasion and ethnic contamination. To a degree,

³⁶⁴ Tellingly, the construction of the new fence was inaugurated to coincide with the announcement of a new programme to monitor flood in the Evros. See “Τοποθετείται Πληροφοριακό Σύστημα Έγκαιρης Προειδοποίησης Πλημμυρών στον ποταμό Έβρο με πιλοτική λειτουργία [Pilot Informational Flood Warning System is being installed in Evros river]”, *Evros News*, October 17, 2020, www.evros-news.gr/2020/10/17/τοποθετείται-πληροφοριακό-σύστημα-έ/ (accessed October 2020)

the buffer zone which extends across the floodplain haunts the “Surveilled Zone” which shadowed the border until 1995, just like the berm haunts the “barre” that regulated movement. Checkpoints have since migrated from the roads connecting the Muslim villages on the hills of the Rhodope mountains to the riparian zone adjacent to the border. Corresponding to the engineered limits of the floodplain, border check-points are today almost always placed directly on top of berms to designate the edge of the military buffer zone that runs along the Greek side of the Evros border, also known as ZAP (Zoni Asfaleias Prokalypsis, Greek for ‘Zone of Security and Coverage’).

As embankments of wet earth, berms are concentrations of these politics of containment. They are ground engineered in excess. They are routes of control through the floodplain for the Police, military and local farmers and yet they figure within a medieval imaginary as obstacles for invading forces.



The above diagrams show the extent of recent floods in 2010 (left, light blue area) and areas with high flooding risk in the Greek Evros catchment basin (right, hatched area), compared against a map approximating the extents of the military buffer zone that runs along the Greek side of the Evros border, also known as ZAP (Zoni Asfaleias Prokalypsis, white line). An oblique look at the diagram above helps to clarify the overlapping relationship between the infrastructure of flood defence, and military strategy in Evros. Source: Greek General Secretariat for Civil Protection. Map of ZAP by authors.

2.3.3. “ZAP”: The Floodplain as Buffer

Spanning from the trilateral border in the North, to the Aegean Sea in the south, and with a thickness that varies from a couple of hundred metres to a few kilometres from the river, the 10.000 km² buffer zone is a densely surveilled space. Entry to the ZAP is strictly prohibited for civilians (except for a handful of locals who cultivate fields inside it), making it impossible to access the main course of the river without alerting suspicion and risking arrest. As humanitarian organisations have been reporting for years, where the floodplain/buffer zone broadens, the river becomes a site where human rights

violations occur, including the repeated failure to rescue asylum seekers in distress, illegal forceful expulsions (pushbacks) of border crossers to Turkey, and shootings.



A Trap Camera set up by the Turkish authorities near the river. Photo: Sent to author by P. (anonymised)

A case on May 8, 2018 involving a group of fourteen people attempting to cross during a flood event speaks directly to the overlapping of flooding with the operations of the border. The attempt failed and resulted in one fatality. Once the group returned to Turkey, they attempted to contact Greek authorities with a picture of the ID card and the GPS location of the body. Greek police stated that the flooding was too severe to attempt a recovery, and over the next few days, no confirmation of the recovery of the body was received³⁶⁵. In other examples, the police have refuted the possibility of pushbacks because the water level is too high or the geomorphology makes it impossible³⁶⁶. In this way, the behaviour of water in excess is co-opted as an obviatory device; a mask in the construction of denial. The flood is an alibi for border violence. Consequently, the berms that mark the limit of the flood act as containers for this riverine geography of exception.³⁶⁷ The very flexibility of the river here contributes to the

³⁶⁵ Watch the Med, “14 Travellers attempt to cross Turkish-Greek land border, one dead person”, May 8, 2018, www.watchthemed.net/reports/view/859# (accessed May 2019.)

³⁶⁶ Dimitris Angelidis, “Μου πήραν τα χαρτιά, με πήγαν στο ποτάμι, και με πέρασαν απέναντι [They took my papers, took me to the river, and passed me across]”, *EfSyn*, February 12, 2018, www.efsyn.gr/ellada/dikaionomata/140103_moy-piran-ta-hartia-me-pigan-sto-potami-kai-me-perasan-apenanti (accessed March 2019)

³⁶⁷ As Pavlos Pavlidis told us in an informal interview, seasonal floods often also perform the opposite role. The rising waters untangle bodies that had been caught in twigs or swallowed by the mud for months and render death in the Evros - Meric visible.

production of an “indeterminate” space, both materially porous and shifting and thus difficult for trespassers to cross, and in which multiple modes of violence are perpetrated with impunity.

The territorial and material ambiguity of this zone is further enhanced by the multiple actors – many unidentified – operating within the uncertain floodplain. Joint Operation Poseidon Land, Frontex’s Evros operation, began in 2011. The name conjures a pathologic mythology, casting border crossers as mortals committing the hubris of seeking refuge in Europe, while Frontex claims the role of chastising deity. Here, Poseidon, god of both the sea and rivers, intervenes at the land/water divide. In mythology where his trident struck the land, earthquakes, flooding, and drowning ensued. Echoing a crude sketch of the hydrologic cycle, Operation Poseidon Land transposes border violence in liquid form from the Aegean—where, as Stefanos will describe in the following part of the thesis, “Grey Rocks, Black Waves”, Operation Poseidon is enacted — to the headwaters of the Evros/Meriç/Maritsa and back down along its course³⁶⁸. The intentional flooding of the valley from the Ivaylovgrad dam brings Frontex’s troubling mythological sensibility into unequivocal reality. Within the floodplain, the trident takes the form of Frontex’s RABITs, the shadowy forces suspected of multiple cases of pushbacks and violence. As a 2012 ProAsyl report states: “There are many actors involved in the procedures of border patrols and screening, so ambiguity over the respective roles and responsibilities creates a gap in accountability and potentially permits impunity.”³⁶⁹ In addition to the multiple actors, impunity is likewise produced by the buffer zone’s folding of the excess represented by floodwaters into the excesses of sovereign territorial power. Here beatings are customary, official documentation is thrown into the river and, after seasonal floods, bodies wash up in the accretions of the border.

This might be understood as the construction of an ecology of exception, adapting political philosopher Giorgio Agamben’s definition of the state of exception as the ambiguous zone between law and fact where the demands of a constructed *status necessitas* produce a space where state violence is enacted with impunity³⁷⁰. Likewise, critical border scholars Prem Kumar Rajaram and Carl Grundy-Warr suggest that the exposure of border crossers to fatal forces is the operation of “the zones of exemption” where “sovereign power cease[s] to function.”³⁷¹ However, in relation to the fluvial frontier, rather than a space of exemption, sovereign power does not cease to function but incorporates the river’s ambiguities in the production of impunity. The frontier reveals itself as an excess of law rather than its absence. Consequently, this is not the cessation of power’s function but its very purpose. The very drawing of a fixed yet imaginary border line along the central course of the river, and a second one along the limits

³⁶⁸ In March 2020, Frontex operations were scaled up to Rapid Border Intervention Evros 2020. 100 Frontex officers were deployed to the region on 12/03/2020. See Frontex, “Frontex launches rapid border intervention on Greek land border”, March 13, 2020, frontex.europa.eu/media-centre/news-release/frontex-launches-rapid-border-intervention-on-greek-land-border-J7k21h?fbclid=IwAR1aiVP0_GvuzkpuAsjZol-qVnk-74Or0H9G59fudmlihx7sYihFaEoij9Y (accessed March 2020).

³⁶⁹ ProAsyl et al., “Walls of Shame”, 8.

³⁷⁰ Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. by Kevin Attell (Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005) p.29.

³⁷¹ Rajaram & Grundy-Warr, “The Irregular Migrant as Homo Sacer: Migration and Detention in Australia, Malaysia, And Thailand”, *International Migration* (2004) 42, 33–63, 38.

of its floodplain to delineate the buffer zone, effectively produce the river as a frontier, whereby its movements and muds become spaces where sovereign territorial imaginaries are projected. It is such a legal-territorial imaginary that turns the vectors and fluid dynamics of the river into a weapon.

2.3.4. **“Like a Stone”:** Regimes of Visuality in the Floodplain

There are floodwaters in the meadow to the East leading down to the river. At intermittent points we can see the river from the road. This is a territory of wetness. The border is waterlogged. The tyres of all of the cars are thick with mud.

South of Soufli and visible from the main road there is a sand stone landscape inhabited by shepherds and quarries.

We stop at Pythio beneath a Byzantine fortress. It is positioned at a bend in the Evros with a perfect view of the floodplain. The floodplain produces a space of surveillance.

Ifor's field notes, February 2019.

While we did eventually make it to the river in the delta, posing as birdwatchers³⁷², as well as near the village of Dikaia, accompanied by M.³⁷³, a local activist whose family owns fields by the river, the sense of jeopardy was always palpable. Regular army bases and the constant relay of camouflaged trucks maintain an atmosphere of tension, and the sensation of being continually watched, or at the very least having our presence regularly noted.

Indeed, the shallow gradient of the floodplain lends itself to military surveillance against the threat of Turkish invasion. Lookout points and outposts are installed on every other hill and elevated observation stations tower over the riparian vegetation on all sides of the border. Despite the importance of the river as a conservation area, large tracts of the banks are deforested. Ostensibly the trees are cut for agricultural purposes but as with all activity in the area, deforestation fits into military needs. Tellingly, the main periods of deforestation correspond to periods of hostility with Turkey, specifically following tensions in Cyprus during the 1960s, after 1986 in response to a skirmish between Greek and Turkish forces near Feres³⁷⁴, as well as at the time of writing, following the February/March events. For theorist Paul Virilio, in his work on the pervasive influence of speed on contemporary culture, land clearance and cultivation are part of “the receding of forest darkness” in the production of a militarised “field of

³⁷² Parts of the Delta are accessible to the public, mostly through guided tours, due to its importance as a wetland and a sanctuary for avifauna.

³⁷³ M. did not want to be named.

³⁷⁴ Zogaris et al., “Assessment of Riparian Zone”, 274.

vision.”³⁷⁵ Likewise, it is evident that the floodplain itself, in its gently rising topography, and its cultivation and deforestation, offers a relatively uninhibited view from the military border stations punctuating the riparian area.

The bordering process of the bufferzone is not only exercised through deforestation but through botanical growth entangled in the presence of landmines within the floodplain. Although anti-personnel landmines were supposed to have been removed by 2008³⁷⁶, it is suspected, however, that annual flooding has dispersed mines downstream³⁷⁷. Here the river contributes its own unpredictable agency to the weaponisation of the landscape. While driving on the berms close to the river near Dikaia, we came across overgrown thickets of brambles and stunted trees surrounded by metal flags indicating the presence of mines. This botanical growth once again brought to mind Henrich Böll’s “question of Botany”. Here, however, the barbed undergrowth of the minefield measures the latency that precedes an explosion rather than the time that has passed since the destruction.³⁷⁸



An anti-vehicle minefield in the buffer zone near the village of Dikaia, February 2019. Photo by authors.

³⁷⁵ For Virilio surveillance aims to “occupy, then organize, in a space dominating the trajectories of movement, keys to communication, river, sea, road, or bridge”. Paul Virilio, *Speed and Politics* (Édition Galilée, Paris.1977) trans. by Marc Polizzotti (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2006), 94.

³⁷⁶ It is estimated that over 25000 anti-personnel and anti-tank landmines riddled the Greek banks of Evros between 1974 and 2008. Niki Kitsantonis, “Land Mines and a Perilous Crossing into Greece”, *New York Times*, January 6, 2009, www.nytimes.com/2009/01/06/world/europe/06iht-mines.4.19133102.html (accessed October 2018).

³⁷⁷ Pavlidis and Karakasi, “Review Of Deaths Owing To Migration”.

³⁷⁸ Böll, *Der Engel Schweig*.

In military jargon landmines are “situational obstacles” or “area denial weapons”. Rob Nixon identifies the association of mines with the concepts of terror, toxicity, and, indeed, as an “environmental and ethical pollutant.”³⁷⁹ Contributing to what Lfor describes in his own work as the construction of “fluvial terror”, the indeterminate yet lethal violence of minefields is evident in the Mufti’s story where he describes the burial of dismembered limbs that outnumbered those of the bodies buried, as it is in Pavlidis’s calculations: since 2000 forty-nine border crossers lost their lives to injuries sustained from landmine explosions³⁸⁰. Through flooding, the river has unintentionally performed an agency of unearthing and then dispersing causality across geographic and temporal scales. In this way, the river becomes a mediator of the border regime’s more orthodox weaponisation. As we pass by the minefields M, our companion tells us: “Heavier than 40 kilos the anti-personnel mine blows, vehicles are 250.” This seems to be common knowledge for anyone who has fields in the region, or indeed lives by the river. The river’s unintentional dispersal of mines, alongside the 40 kg exerted weight of one leg, symbolises another violent confluence of the floodplain / buffer zone. Where elsewhere the body is susceptible to the inclination of the riverbanks, the point that a leg stops touching the river bottom, which Pavlidis describes as the second step from the bank when the water becomes 3 metres deep, here it is the weight of 40 kg that is calibrated against the human body.

Amongst the minefields, and all over the floodplain, we met regular signs prohibiting photography which we tentatively ignored³⁸¹. From the road parallel to the river where these signs are placed it is hard to see the water, other than as a break in the ploughed furrows of the fields below. Part of the surveillance regime is the control of images and image circulation. By restricting physical and, to a degree, digital, access to the river (beyond the restriction of photography, large areas of Evros are blurred in online mapping platforms to conceal military structures), the border regime intends on making any study of the floodplain and river beyond military purposes impossible. Indeed, this is the case in much of the scientific literature related to the region. Environmental studies in particular attest to restricted access, hence many of those consulted here specify methodological limitations and reliance on satellite imagery to assess riparian conditions³⁸².

³⁷⁹ Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 221-227. Nixon Describes the slow violence whereby he “earth itself must be treated [...] as armed and dangerous.”

³⁸⁰ Pavlidis and Karakasi, “Review Of Deaths Owing To Migration”, 466. This accounts for nearly 15% of all bodies retrieved until November 2018, although none of these occurred after the landmine clearance of 2008. A rare post from 2003 on the activist forum [athens.indymedia](http://athens.indymedia.org/post/80790/), available at: athens.indymedia.org/post/80790/ (accessed January 2020), includes photographs of migrants injured by landmines in Evros.

³⁸¹ To avoid having images deleted if stopped by the Police (a customary practice) we often chose specific routes to avoid interception. Similarly, we often hid our SD cards within loose parts of the internal plastic body of the car, and made the decision to offload and delete images from devices each night before returning to the field the next morning. When Stefanos visited the region in March 2020 he did not take a camera with him. When he used his phone to record, he sent the material over an encoded chat app and deleted it instantly.

³⁸² Angeliki, Mentzafou, Vasiliki Markogianni, Elias Dimitriou, “The Use of Geospatial Technologies in Flood Hazard Mapping and Assessment: Case Study from River Evros”, *Pure and Applied Geophysics*, (2017) 174, 679–700, 681. The denial of hydrologic study beyond military purposes also maintains an opacity in relation to civilian knowledge of the river. This is not only in terms of research but also in the implementation of non-military policy, for example the proposed greenbelt along the Evros corridor has never been sufficiently researched for its biodiversity values. See Zogaris, et al., “Assessment of Riparian Zone”.

Consequently, it is impossible to study the river, much less the border violence unfolding across it, without employing a practice tailored to circumvent these restrictions. As is often the case research limitations demand alternative entry points offering new and frequently enlightening perspectives on this complex material, political condition. One of the ways this limitation manifests in our research is through the materials we collected, such as concealed super-slow-motion filming through windows driving past police stations, audio recordings in the place of video, and very rare, if at all, shots of the river.



"PHOTOGRAPHS ARE PROHIBITED" sign in the buffer zone, February 2019. Photo by authors.

The control of access and image circulation within the floodplain/buffer zone is particularly potent within the context of illegal and often violent expulsions, or pushbacks, of crossers back into Turkey. Overwhelmingly, asylum seekers are arrested within the floodplain/buffer zone before they are able to register their asylum application and have their fingerprints taken in the Fylakio “reception centre”³⁸³. They are then arbitrarily detained for hours, until nightfall, in border guard stations or abandoned buildings inside, or on the edge of the floodplain/buffer zone, before they are taken to the river in military trucks and violently ferried across by masked and armed operatives. Despite several testimonies, including our own investigative work with Forensic Architecture³⁸⁴, the Greek government strenuously denies this practice, and has repeatedly denounced any such reports as “fake news”³⁸⁵.

³⁸³ Reception centres (KEPIs) were established in 2013, Fylakio as the pilot, with the aim of “screening” the nationality and validity of claims of new arrivals and aiding the process of removal.

³⁸⁴ These limitations were also crucial in shaping the methodological approach employed in the investigations conducted by Forensic Architecture. Employing an interview technique called “situated testimony”, we used 3D modelling and game engines to aid witness memory in reconstructing obscure detention spaces, vehicles, officials’ uniforms, as well as the natural landscape and weather conditions the witnesses had experienced during their pushbacks. See Forensic Architecture, “Pushbacks Across the Evros/Meriç: Situated Testimony”.

³⁸⁵ One of these denials, from the Greek Union of Border Guards, is particularly illuminating as to the role of image circulation within the floodplain. Accusing Forensic Architecture of serving the interests of the Turkish authorities and those of smugglers, the response comments on how the “so-called ‘evidence’ captured in the video investigation does not correspond to pushback operations because it shows migrants being calm throughout, disembarking in an orderly fashion “In broad daylight, [in front of] cameras that happened to be there”. Beyond the implicit confession that pushbacks do take place in Evros, albeit in a more chaotic and violent manner and at night, the border guards’ Union response makes it clear that it is unfathomable for cameras to

Perhaps nothing symbolises this design of obscurity within the floodplain more than the object of the smartphone. Testimony in Evros consistently recounts border police forcefully taking mobiles and throwing them into the river at the point of being arrested or during pushbacks. Before being pushed back to Turkey, Sarah and Soheila³⁸⁶, two Afghani citizens Stefanos interviewed with Forensic Architecture, a mother and a daughter, relayed that their belongings and mobile phones were confiscated by the police. A relative of theirs was able to hold on to her phone by hiding it in her child's diaper. In another example, Kuzey describes how his mobile phone was thrown into the river in front of him:

After we were taken to the Turkish banks we asked for our phones back. One of the police officers said, "ah yes your phones", and threw both of them in the river. They jumped on the water like stones.³⁸⁷

These testimonies, amongst others, demonstrate how the river has been deployed as a rudimentary mode of digital erasure. By breaking the electric device, the owner's movements become difficult to trace. As the mobile enters the water the GPS signal cuts, all the photographs and contacts stored in its memory are wiped, the phone becomes inanimate, "like a stone" thrown into the river entering into its turbulences, and into its sediment life. Here the river, bearing perhaps thousands of mobile telephones, itself becomes an archive of digital erasure.

In the case of the Evros, the submergence of the phones symbolises non-reception as the denial of access to the infrastructures of communication³⁸⁸. Pushbacks are exactly processes of non-reception: not having finger prints taken, denied the three-month leave-to-remain cards, unable to claim asylum, violently beaten, and exposed to the river and the mud of the river bank as they are left on the other side without a means of navigation. The pushback is the exact denial of reception - physical, administrative, emotional, and digital. Carried downstream in the sediments of the delta, at the threshold of the Aegean, smashed and waterlogged mobile phones accrete with the sands of shifting islands, while lithium from their batteries seeps into the freshwater ecosystem.

"be there" during operations within the floodplain/buffer zone. See Panhellenic Union of Border Guards, "Απάντηση των συνοριοφυλάκων στην προπαγάνδα των διακινητών - Δελτίο Τύπου Π.Ο.ΣΥ.ΦΥ. [Reply of borderguards to the smugglers' propaganda – press release]" December 13, 2019, available at: posyfy.gr/deltia-typou/item/895-diakinhtes (accessed December 2019).

³⁸⁶ Soheila and Sarah are not their real names.

³⁸⁷ see Forensic Architecture, [chaptered-video.forensic-architecture.org/kuzey](https://www.forensic-architecture.org/kuzey); "First Pushback".

³⁸⁸ Olga Demetriou, *Capricious Borders: Minority, Population, and Counter-Conduct between Greece and Turkey* (New York: Berghahn, 2013).

2.3.6. **Beyond water:** Other “Flows”

The overlaps between a river that regularly floods and a territory where border crossers are at the mercy of systematic violence resonates troublingly with nationalist media and governmental rhetoric of “flows”, “floods”, or “surges” and the “stemming” of migrants movement.³⁸⁹ Naturalizing metaphors such as these emerge wherever border regimes are discursively or materially constructed to ensure the illegality of movement across borders, and in doing so, racially “other” border crossers. Indeed, hydrologic metaphors are evoked to draw a distinction between those who do not belong and those who do within an earthbound notion of territory. Returning to this form of nationhood evident in the Fylakio detention centre official’s exasperated cries evoking an earth bound by historic blood against the detainees who have crossed the river, and whose detention is conditioned by the continual possibility of forced return back across the river. In so doing, this particular detention regime feeds into the construction of the example of earth domesticated with blood against the exception: the river in which the “other”, prejudiced as “undomesticated”, emerges, dies, or through which is pushed-back. The sound of the soil scraped by the official’s foot, covered by his shouts, brings into sharp focus the paradoxical combination of ground and liquid engineered in excess and mobilised as defensive boundary of the earthbound, and blood-bound, notion of Greekness.

Through our analysis, we are attempting to disambiguate the naturalizing metaphor by critiquing land-based epistemologies and ontologies that produce ecological and human othering of movement deemed to be out of place. As we will discuss in the following, last section of the chapter, nowhere is this conflict between soil and water, state and “other” more evident than in the river’s Delta. There, the floodplain thickens and the riverine characteristics of flow, erosion, meander, mud and even airborne water particles are braided with military presence, agriculture and environmental conservation producing a further complex border environment.

³⁸⁹ Sandro Mezzadra analyses this metaphor within public discourse as the use of terminology from communication theory and sociology to render migration “objective” and separate from the “actions of subjects”. Sandro Mezzadra, “The Right to Escape”, *Ephemeria* (2004) 4:3, 267-275.

2.3. The Delta: Night, Fog and Mud

3 – -3m

2.4.1. “Rotten Water”: Beyond the River Banks

"In the morning, in the forest, there is a fog in the river and it makes you feel even more cold."

Kuzey

South of the Greek village of Ferres and the Turkish town of Ipsala the river splits to form the Evros Delta. The Delta, where the river meets the Thracian Sea, covers a surface area of 188 square kilometres, most of which lies within Greek territory³⁹⁰. Except for the Turkish town of Enez, built directly at the river's mouth, a series of military barracks built on both sides of the border, and a handful of DIY hunting and fishing cabins on the Greek side, the area is completely uninhabited. A protected conservation area, designated, like the Prespa lakes, as a wetland of international importance by the 1971 Ramsar Convention³⁹¹, the Delta's saline waters, ponds, and islands are home to a number of migratory bird species.

In March 2020, while the storks and pelicans were flocking in and the flamingos were preparing to head south for the summer, the Delta hosted a different kind of migration, with army and police units operating side by side with local, self-proclaimed “frontiersmen”, “guardians of the border,” and hunting clubs from all over Greece arriving to prevent what they understood to be an “intrusion” of “illegals” into Greece. Joining them were far-right and neo-Nazi militants from all over Europe and the US who had flocked there to demonstrate their support to the Greek and European border forces, and help them “safeguard Europe's borders”. Showing little regard for human life, rifle in arm, these militias described their operations as “hunting” for refugees.³⁹² Throughout March 2020, the Delta was the *anáchoma* in full action. A densely braided space of border violence and death, incorporating military personnel, neo-Nazi paramilitaries, local farmers and hunters, as well as the very ecology of this deltaic marshland. An ecology which includes, but extends beyond, the waters of the river, into its mud, the cold temperature at night and meteorological conditions.

It is during the winter and spring months that the morning fog that Kuzey describes shrouding the deltaic landscape is at its thickest. In March 2020 this fog conjured an old and menacing metaphor. As reported

³⁹⁰ As the 1926 Athens Protocol designated the eastern branch of the river as the border.

³⁹¹ The Delta is also protected by the 1975 Barcelona Convention, the 1979 Bern Convention the EU Directive 79/409 and the NATURA 2000 EU directive.

³⁹² The ongoing dehumanization of asylum seekers using both language and physical force permeates the region. Detainees in the recently exposed border guard centre at Poros, have described guards treating them “like animals.” Matina Stevis, Patrick Kingsley, ““We Are Like Animals”: Inside Greece's Secret Site for Migrants”, *New York Times*, March 10, 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/03/10/world/europe/greece-migrants-secret-site.html?fbclid=IwAR23oG8A32LMnmnB6Y0E8T-C6Ji4COEAs1Fmzl8eo344A7IOMnwlUX7ePls (accessed March 2020).

in the media at the time, the paramilitaries who were drawn to the area to hunt crossers “at night and in the fog”, were transposing the old Nazi directive “*Nacht und Nebel*” (“Night and Fog”) onto the Evros Delta³⁹³. Journalists on the ground also spoke of an “informational fog” covering the truth around events, referring to diverging accounts emerging from the two sides of the border and their inability to corroborate them due to the border being inaccessible to journalists and civilians³⁹⁴. As we have discussed, this clouded mediatic landscape is symptomatic of the floodplain/bufferzone, and is purposefully maintained to make the Evros unintelligible to non-military bodies. The fog analogy is particularly potent when considered against the numerous reports of secret pushbacks, arbitrary detention, torture and death in the Evros floodplain, which have been legally framed as “enforced disappearances”³⁹⁵. As in Nazi Germany in the 1940s, people in the Evros disappear at night and under fog, be it physical or informational, often “*nulius nomen*”: without trace or name³⁹⁶.

Rather than being a “natural” border, the Delta is an exemplary case of a *border nature*, where environmental elements, which are not deadly on their own, are made deadly by forcing people to traverse them under treacherous conditions. The diplomat Elias Dimitrakopoulos, in his 1988 treaty *The Land Borders of Greece*, describes this deltaic terrain:

The Delta is unnavigable during spring and winter. The median depth of the river at the Delta is 2-3 metres deep and the flow rate is 3200 cubic metres/hour during the summer. The Greek bank is almost entirely swamp, while the Turkish bank is somewhat higher and steep, until the point where the Evros meets the Ergene river, where there is a swamp as well.³⁹⁷

The demarcation committee’s decision to place the border on the eastern branch of the river is significant for border crossers today who are attracted to the area due to its remoteness and looser patrolling compared to the inhabited parts of the river banks. Fifteen kilometres wide, and filled with marshes and ponds, the Delta can take days to cross. Returning to Sarah and Soheila, who spent three days in late November sub-zero temperatures at once trying to exit the Delta and evade the police. They detailed how they walked during the night and slept at day.

Soheila: We used to walk during the night, the weather was very cold. It would rain, there was mud, we had children with us. There were many reeds along the way.

Sarah: There are reeds, and there is a swamp underneath them, where rotten water gathers...

³⁹³ Nello Scavo, “Tra Turchia e Grecia. Cani, doppiette, trattori e neonazi: la caccia ai profughi [Between Turkey and Greece. Dogs, shotguns, tractors and neo-nazis: the hunt for refugees]”, *Avvenire*, March 12, 2020, www.avvenire.it/attualita/pagine/cani-doppiette-trattori-e-neonazi-per-dare-la-caccia-ai-migranti-nuovi-scontri-al-confine-tra-grecia-e-turchia (accessed March 2020).

³⁹⁴ “Η ομίχλη της ενημέρωσης στον Έβρο [The informational fog in Evros]”, *Avgi*, March 6, 2020, www.avgi.gr/article/10838/10791589/d-tosides-e-omichle-tes-enemerose-ston-ebro-echetiko- (accessed September 2020).

³⁹⁵ GLAN, “Enforced Disappearance in Greece”.

³⁹⁶ “*Nacht und Nebel*” was a directive issued by Adolf Hitler on 7 December 1941 targeting political activists and resistance members in World War II to be disappeared, imprisoned, or killed, while the family and the population remained uncertain as to the fate or whereabouts of the missing. The designation “NN” was also used to refer to prisoners and deportees (“NN-Gefangener”, “NN-Häftling”, “NN-Sache”) at the time. The abbreviation “NN” was otherwise well known in German to mean “*nullus nomen*” (“without name”).

³⁹⁷ Dimitrakopoulos, “The Land Borders of Greece”, 162.

Soheila: Again, we stayed from morning to night in the forest. It was a huge forest and it was very cold. We couldn't make a fire because the police would find us.

Sarah: And then, two more nights, we were walking. And during the day we were sleeping. There was a lot of rain and snow. When we woke up, one night, the snow had set on us.

Soheila: No matter how much we walked, we wouldn't get closer...

Kuzey, who also spent several days in the Delta, confirms the frictions posed by the deltaic terrain in his attempts to enter Greece:

I crossed the first river, it was 80-90 metres wide, but I know that I need to swim one more river. It was two parts of river. When I reached the second river it was much deeper and longer than the first one, 110-120 metres, something like that. The sun is getting down, it is really cold, I had nowhere to dry my clothes... I don't want to cross the river again but I had to, because where I was there was nowhere to spend the night. In the morning I noticed that I was actually in a little island.

As the above testimonies reveal, more so than anywhere else along the river course, in the Delta the border also exists beyond the river banks. It is in the reeds and "rotten water", in the mud of the expanded flood meadows, as well as in the impenetrable riparian vegetation. For the border crosser, here drowning is not the only threat posed by the river. There is also the slower threat of wetness when emerging on the other side. In combination with night time temperatures, exhaustion, and the wearing of multiple layers of clothing that are drenched during crossings, wetness becomes deadly beyond the river channel. This is an ecosystem border constructed as a relational zone of flows, currents, ground and river water, mud, floods, and irrigation technologies.



Sarah's muddy shoes during her attempt to cross the Delta. Photo: Sarah/Forensic Architecture.

Mud, in particular, recurs in many crossers' testimonies, who describe the point of stepping onto the ground as saturated and difficult to walk through and is often an unaccounted element in the arcifinious capacity of the river. Kuzey kept returning to these dispersed border elements in his story:

The first area I crossed the river has mud all over. It was mud all over my shoes, my clothes. I walked on the mud. Sometimes my feet go under the ground to my knees. It was hard to walk, there are plants everywhere. I grabbed some trees, I pushed myself out of the river using the branch, but that area had so many thorns, that's the more difficult part, I need to walk in the forest. It was night, I couldn't see, and *whatever I touched it hurt me*³⁹⁸.

There is perhaps no more fitting a line to describe the weaponisation of the river ecosystem than Quzey's memory of being hurt by 'whatever he touched'. As he describes, this is an environment that is designed to hurt those who attempt to navigate it unauthorized.

In the Delta, the river (and the border) take many forms. As Kuzey recounts in the opening quote, the border river is also in the air in the form of fog. Fog, like clothes sodden from swimming across the river, and combined with freezing winter temperatures, contribute to the threat of hypothermia for border crossers, which, after drowning, is the second highest cause of death at Evros. The violence of the deltaic border is one that has both a physical and temporal thickness, a latency. Kuzey explained to us how he did not want to leave the Delta with his clothes covered in mud and thorns because they would single him out as a refugee and undoubtedly lead to his arrest. He was thus aware that he was wearing the river/border apparatus on him and with it, evidence of his crossing it irregularly. We could even argue that, like the planned moat that was never realised, the blue paint sprayed on crossers during the March 2020 events is also redundant, and merely a facsimile of riverine processes already always in place and calibrated to perform the same task.



The impenetrable riparian vegetation near the Evros Delta, February 2019. Photo by authors.

³⁹⁸ emphasis added

2.4.2. Where Land Meets Sea

In her book *The Black Shoal: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies*, Tiffany Lethabo King introduces the geological formation of the shoal, “a place where the water is of little depth; a shallow, a sand-bank or bar”, as a spatial metaphor through which to disrupt what she perceives as a problematic binding of Indigenous studies to “imaginaries of land as territory” and their implied opposition to Black diaspora studies in the Americas, which she identifies as “overdetermined by rootlessness and only metaphorized by water”. Lethabo King sees the shoal as an interstitial and emerging space of becoming where the two “hermeneutical frames that have conventionally been understood as sealed from each other” can meet, a friction which can be used to offer new approaches to theorizing racial violence. For King, shoals open up a space of indeterminacy, unknowability. In their shifts, they create new, unexpected, topographies which are always in excess of attempts to map them. “The shoal requires new footing, different chords of embodied rhythms, and new conceptual tools to navigate its terrain.”³⁹⁹

Even though we have purposefully steered clear of metaphors, choosing instead to scrutinize the rich and unrelenting materiality of the river and its tangible connections with systems of border defence, to think of the Delta as a “shoal” is an enticing, and geographically valid, proposition. In Evros, and most visibly in the Delta, the violent discriminations reproduced by bordering states attempt to limit epistemological scope to stark divisions that maintain naturalised ethnic difference through equally naturalised boundaries: land and sea, inside and outside, citizen and intruder. Through our analysis of the Evros/Meriç riverine frontier we attempted to engage such forms of fluvial and riparian thinking to disentangle it. As we have discussed, water and border knowledges here overlap and fold into the management of the entire floodplain itself. Therefore, to think of the border *through* the Delta uncovers its production as a simple geographic and ethnic demarcation when it has always operated in dispersed and muddy ways beyond the reductive binarisms it tries to sustain.

Through the heavy waters occasionally released by the dam, amongst the impacted earth of the berms, and under the veil of the heavy airs of teargas and pesticides, complex forces are deployed and emerge from the fog of the Evros/Meriç/Maritsa. The Deltaic shoreline, with its militarized banks and shifting sandbanks in which the chemicals that are released in the Evros waters upstream accrete⁴⁰⁰, is where these forces are most densely braided. It therefore becomes a prism through which we can attempt to understand the complexity of the river as a weaponized border nature.

To confront the far-right that is currently assembling its forces rhetorically, environmentally, and in person in the Evros delta and all along the fluvial frontier, and to counter the obfuscating tactics long

³⁹⁹ Tiffany Lethabo King, *The Black Shoals, Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2019), 4.

⁴⁰⁰ D.I. Giannouli et al., “Morphological evolution of the Evros River Deltaic shoreline” (2014) Available at: [geolib.geo.auth.gr › index.php › pgc › article](http://geolib.geo.auth.gr/index.php/pgc/article) (accessed May 2019).

deployed by the police in their use of the river as alibi, requires perceiving the extent of the elements of the river incorporated in the violence of the border. This, in turn, involves a beholding eye that sees water (and border) beyond the river channel as clearly as it sees water flowing between the riverbanks themselves. An eye which sees the river as a *spectrum*, as dew in the field, as freezing fog, dried oxbow lakes, as mud and thorns in the riverbanks, and carried on the clothes and the bodies forced to cross. This mode of perception understands borders beyond the cartographic lines that power chooses to represent itself but as an always already expanded material and infrastructural spectrum of power, which, mobilised in the ways discussed here, is experienced as a space pervaded by violence. Through our enquiry into the Evros/Meriç/Maritsa, we tried to unpack these varying watery states for what they are: the riverine arsenal of a deadly defense architecture, humid instantiations of an entire region designed as a violent *anáchoma*.

~

Projecting the median line of the Evros/Meriç's main branch beyond the estuary, three nautical miles south into the Thracian Sea, the 1926 Athens protocol extended the border into the Aegean Sea. One hundred years later, the Evros fences, existing and planned, perform the same function, directing migrants into the Aegean waves.

Part III

Grey Rocks, Black Waves

The Aegean: A Border Archipelago

“to the archipelagos laden with palpable death”

Édouard Glissant, The Poetics of Relation

Foreword: A Lament

i. Mawwāl

"Ah, sea, give us love. Look at what is happening to us

Don't send your waves against us. We are Syrians. I swear, our story is a sad one

Ah, you will not believe it, but our tears could drown even you

Ah, sea, stop the waves. There are children on these boats, they are our memories. Our lives are on these boats. I swear, our tears could fill all the seas in this world

Our children lost their innocence by your waves, they were killed in them

Ah, sea, let your waves have mercy on us and let them treat us like they would treat a mother"

Alaa [unknown surname], 12th of March 2016, Southern Lesbos, Aegean Sea⁴⁰¹

The above words, with which I choose to introduce the final section of the thesis, were vocalised in the form of a mawwāl, a slow and rhythmic lament, improvised and sang by Alaa, a Syrian refugee, shortly after he had landed on a pebble beach of the southern shores of Lesbos, an island in the north-east Aegean Sea. The early morning sun, which for so many migrant crossings marks the moment of arrival on the Greek shores (vessels typically leave Turkey before the break of dawn and, assuming all goes well, arrive an hour later, shortly after sunrise) is slowly rising behind the person singing. The video was filmed at 07:40 in the morning, on the 12th of March 2016, at the height of "the refugee crisis", and only four days before the signing of the infamous EU-Turkey deal that starkly reduced Aegean crossings.

Alaa, singing, was one of the last people to cross the Aegean and continue onwards to northern Europe without waiting in limbo in the Greek islands. As the camera pans around him, one can see all the actors and material markers of "the crisis": white rental cars and mini vans with logos of humanitarian organisations; buses parked, their engines running, waiting to take the newly arrived to a reception centre; groups of refugees, and people with high-visibility vests walking among them, offering dry clothes, thermal blankets, cups of tea and bottles of water. On the beach behind lay piles of discarded life jackets and deflated dinghies, which are being scavenged by locals, the so-called "crows". And cameras, many cameras, turned towards the sea and the man singing.

⁴⁰¹ The song was recorded in a cell-phone video and sent to me by Salam Aldeen, a humanitarian worker. It has since been uploaded on Youtube and is available under the title "Τραγούδι-θρήνος Σύριου πρόσφυγα [Mourning song of a Syrian refugee]", in the following link: www.youtube.com/watch?v=4-0rGkx1OWI (accessed January 2019).

Alaa is singing his Mawwāl facing the Aegean Sea. He occasionally gestures towards it, pleading it to stop sending its waves against the boats carrying Syrians across the border. In the background, one can see coast guard vessels patrolling this very border, and behind them, within touching distance, the Turkish shores.

During the “crisis”, the Aegean islands became the main entry point to the European continent and the remain one until this day; a dangerous landing site and an unwanted but necessary stopover on the way North. Sites for the documentation, interception and holding of migrants and refugees were established on both sides of the Aegean border, and a dense system of surveillance is now operational on these shores. The sea, the shores around it, and the skies above it⁴⁰², are surveyed, recorded and narrated by a number of optic and sensory regimes. The Aegean, like the the entire Mediterranean basin - a sea that historically “signal[ed] a world of mobilities, betweenness, instabilities, encounters and becomings”⁴⁰³ - is increasingly militarised by European authorities, and as such it has been rendered into a a “moat” to “Fortress Europe”. As I will discuss in this part of the thesis, it has been made to absorb, to deter, to hurt and to kill.

Implied by the lament, but left outside the frame is the story of the man’s crossing of the sea. A second video, filmed during Alaa’s first, unsuccessful attempt to cross into Greece by boat, helps provide some context. Before the group entered the Greek territorial waters, the Turkish Coast Guard caught up with them and started hitting their dinghy with spear-like batons in their attempt to puncture it. While they didn’t manage to sink the vessel, they eventually forced them to return to Turkey, only for the group to leave again a couple of days later. Seen in this context, the “sea” to which Alaa sings is, like the Evros/Meriç river, a constellation of actors and fields of agency. A liquid assemblage itself, it is transformed by its nesting inside the border assemblage, battered and moulded into shape by the natural elements, patrolled by coast guards and met and crossed under specifically dangerous circumstances, fleeing war, in hiding and under attack.

When the man sings about waves, which ones does he mean, I wonder? Those that pushed his vessel to the Greek shores, or those caused by the Turkish coast guard vessel that forced them back? It is precisely on this blurred threshold between nature, law and military technology that this chapter will tread.

I will approach this threshold through a close examination of two shipwrecks involving vessels that carried would-be asylum seekers to Greece, namely those that occurred between Farmakonissi island, and its neighbouring Agathonissi island, in the south-east Aegean Sea, in January 2014 and March

⁴⁰² Drones, helicopters, airplanes and zeppelins are used to monitor the crossing from above.

⁴⁰³ Philip E. Steinberg, “Of Other Seas: Metaphors and Materialities in Maritime Regions”, *Atlantic Studies*. No 10:2 (2016): 156.

2018 respectively. Due to their differing circumstances and their proximate location in the most heavily militarized and densely contested stretch of the Aegean border, I will argue, the two events provide a prism through which one can begin to interrogate the dynamics of sovereignty, mobility, and death in this maritime space.

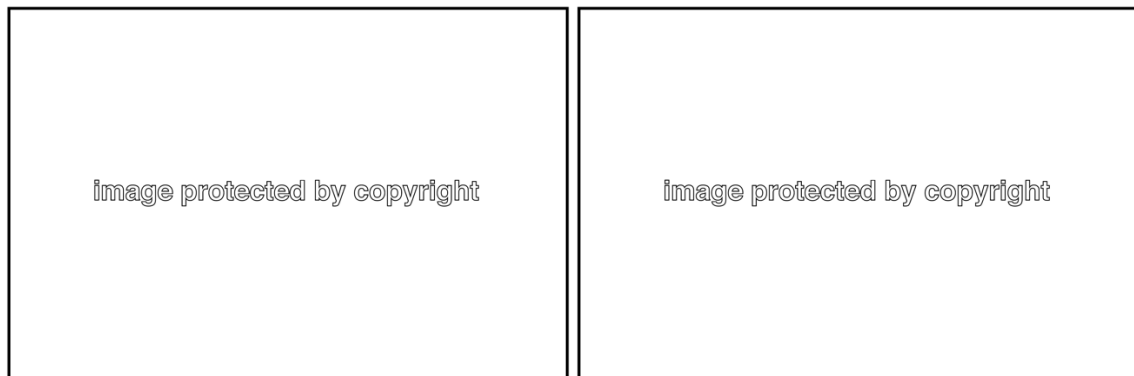


Still from a video taken during Alaa's first, unsuccessful crossing. Source: Alaa via Salam Aldeen.

ii. Two Shipwrecks: Summary of Events

“They Were Towing Us”

Farmakonissi, 37°19'35.85"N, 27° 7'33.60"E



Survivors' sketches of the towing process, January 2014. Source: Farmakonissi case file.

Bariali Kadiri, from Afghanistan was sat on the deck. “About two hours after leaving Turkey, we arrived within 80-100 metres from the island [of Farmakonissi]. We were so close we could hear the waves break against the rocks. Then, the engine stopped. [...] It was then that the [Greek] Coast Guard vessel approached us. They shone a searchlight towards us and gestured to us to go back. We tried to explain, waving, that the engine is broken. We held our babies up in the air, to show we were in need of help. The Coast Guard fired 4-5 warning shots to scare us off. Their vessel then circled us once, creating big waves, and then moved with great speed, first parallel and then diagonally to our bow, causing our vessels to collide.” What Kadiri is describing here is an operation of “aggressive deterrence”. The term (*epithetikí apotropí* in Greek) is colloquially used by the Greek Coast Guard to describe the process whereby their patrol speedboats manoeuvre dangerously close to the smaller, migrant vessels, with the purpose of creating waves that will act as a deterrent “wall”. Faced with the risk of sinking, migrants are eventually forced to turn back towards Turkey, without the Coast Guard ever having touched their vessel. This is an effective, if extremely dangerous patrol technique, that permits the Coast Guard to deny responsibility in the case of an accident. The boat Kadiri was on, however, with its broken engine, could not turn back. “The two vessels came side by side, with the Coast Guard’s engine facing our bow. Two people disembarked on our boat, pointing their guns at us. They ordered us to move away from them, towards the stern. They then tied a rope to our bow, and started towing us with speed towards the Turkish coast, and away from the Greek island, that was just in front of us. This lasted for about 15

minutes”⁴⁰⁴. What started as “aggressive deterrence” quickly escalated to a pushback operation, or, as is the case here, a “tow-back”.

Another survivor, Ahmadi Mirwais continues: “The two coast guards stayed on our boat and kept pointing their guns at us. We were going so fast, our bow was almost in the air, and the waves caused by the Coast Guard started hitting our small vessel, which was taking in water from the sides and from the stern. In the end, the bow broke off, from the force of the towing.” Mirwais continues:

The coast guards tied the rope again and left our vessel. They started towing us again really fast towards the Turkish coast, this time going in Zig-Zag. We were yelling, trying to make them understand that these manoeuvres were causing our boat to take in more water. I could hear the women and children in the hold scream that water was seeping in.⁴⁰⁵

Then, according to all witness testimonies, the Coast Guard vessel stopped, approached the migrants’ small wooden vessel again –a 9-metre-long Turkish fishing boat called the *Göznuru*- and cut the rope. The *Göznuru* capsized and sank instantly, at 02:17, in the dark waters off the coast of Farmakonissi island, and about 500m inside the Greek territorial waters, in the Dodecanese archipelago. Once overboard, the migrants –Afghan and Syrian nationals- were treated with extreme violence; the coast guard crew reportedly kicked those who tried to climb onto their vessel back to sea and repeatedly told them to “fuck off” and “die”⁴⁰⁶. Eventually, 14 people made it onto the Coast Guard vessel – the 24-metre-long combat boat ΠΑΣ-136 - before the rope that was used for the towing, loose as it was in the sea, got pulled in by the jet and caused the left engine to overheat and catch fire. It was then that the captain left the scene, abandoning the rest of the migrants to drown. Twelve bodies were eventually retrieved from the sea of Farmakonissi; three women and nine children⁴⁰⁷.

The *Göznuru* was retrieved from the seabed and was forensically examined for signs of contact with the ΠΑΣ-136. Local engineers and naval architects were contracted, who deemed that no such signs were found, and that the *Göznuru* was liable to sinking, regardless of the conduct of the Coast Guard⁴⁰⁸. Other crucial pieces of possible evidence, such as radio and telephone communications, video footage, or GPS data for the Coast guard vessel, were never included in the court files. In assessing the case, the investigator-only took into account the statements and information provided by the coast guard and

⁴⁰⁴ Maritime Court of Piraeus, “Testimony of Bariali Kadiri to Military Judge B”, January 30, 2014. Translated from Greek by the author.

⁴⁰⁵ Maritime Court of Piraeus, “Testimony of Ahmadi Mirwais to Military Judge B”, January 31, 2014. Translated from Greek by the author.

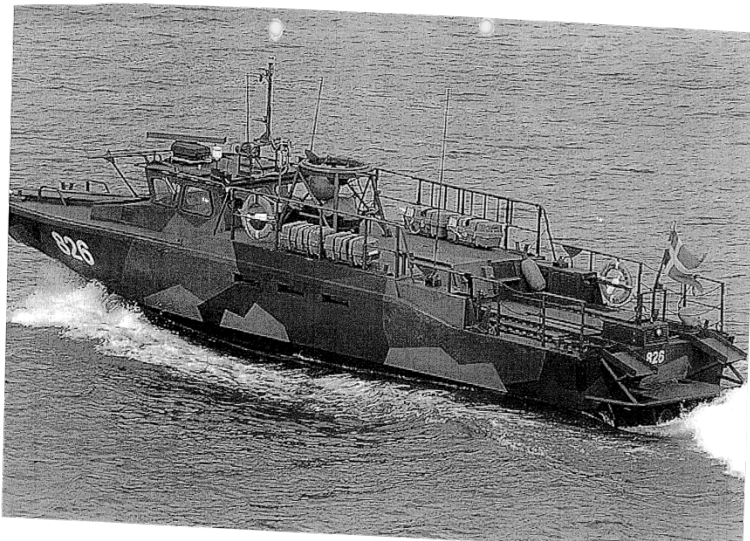
⁴⁰⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁷ Death in Farmakonissi was extremely gendered. This is owing to the fact that, according to survivors’ testimony, women and children were stowed in the hull, while men were on the deck. When the vessel capsized, the door to the deck was blocked and most women and children got trapped in the hull. In the central Mediterranean, a similar typology is seen to function through race. More affluent refugees from the Arab countries pay a higher fare to travel on the deck, while sub-Saharan Africans travel in the hull.

⁴⁰⁸ Psarobas, Vassilios & Sliman, Fotios, “Report on the ΠΑΣ-136 and the *Göznuru*” February 7, 2014.

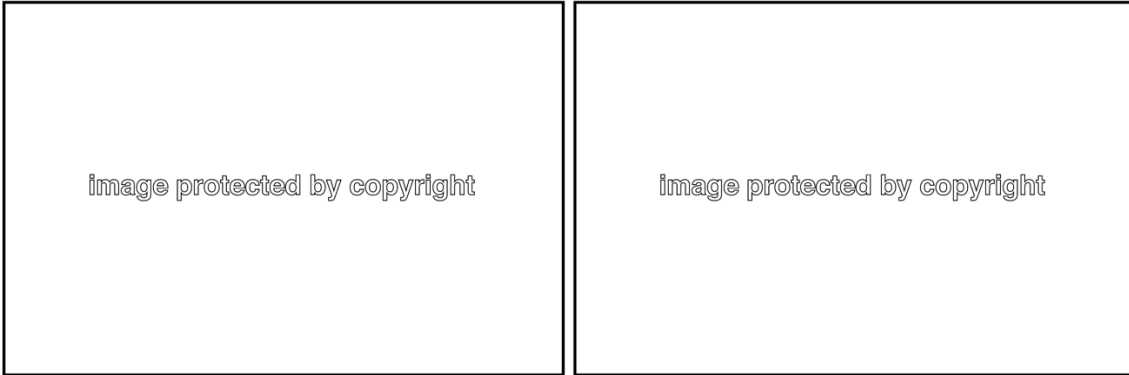
the military officers, while considering the survivors' testimonies as “factually imprecise and lacking any substantial evidence”.

Later that year, the human rights monitoring group “Migreurop” released a report referring to the Aegean as “the border of denial”⁴⁰⁹. It was on this same border of denial, four years later, that the Agathonissi shipwreck occurred.



The PLS-136 (left) and the Göznuru (right). Source: Farmakonissi case file.

⁴⁰⁹ FIDH, Migreurop, and EMHRN, “Between Greece and Turkey: At the Border of Denial”, *Frontexit*, May 2014, available at: <https://www.frontexit.org/en/docs/49-frontexbetween-greece-and-turkey-the-border-of-denial/file>.



The broken bow of the *Göznuru*, and the burnt engine of the *PLS-136*, evidence of the violence of the towing. forensic examination by naval architects and engineers.
Lakki, Leros, 07/02/2014. Source: Farmakonissi case file.



Maps showing the locations where different bodies and objects were retrieved.
21/01/2014. Source: Farmakonissi case file.

“This Day, you Have to Forget it”

Agathonissi, 37°25'54.91"N, 27° 4'37.03"E

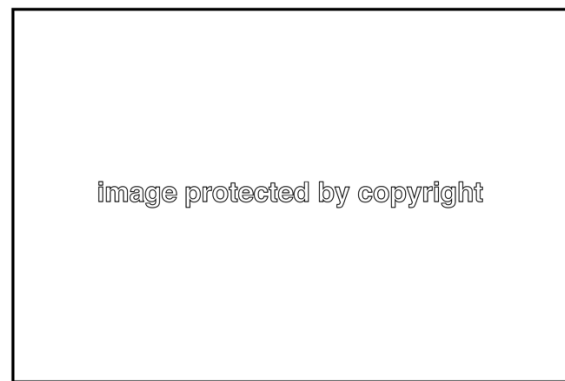
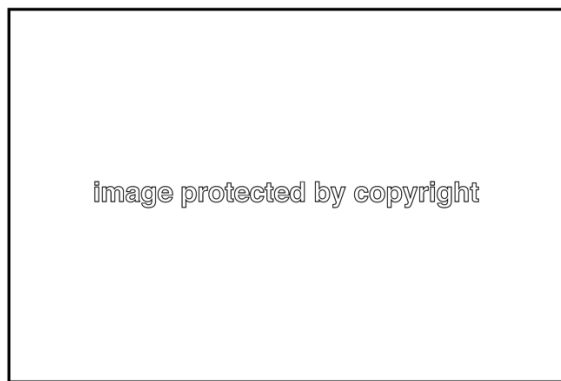
"I tried to speak about this day, they say "this day, you have to forget it". They say "you called us today, not Friday". They were fighting between each other. They shout to each other. You can understand they were saying to each other, "why didn't you help?" You could tell they have a problem. We were saying to them "it was Friday", they were saying "no, it was Saturday".⁴¹⁰

By “they”, here, Quassim, a man from Iraq, refers to the Greek Coast Guard on the small island of Agathonissi, also in the Greek Dodecanese, some ten nautical miles north of Farmakonissi. Quassim is one of the three survivors from a shipwreck that occurred in the early hours of Friday 16th of March 2018, in the waters south east of Agathonissi, and only 6 nautical miles north of the sinking location of the *Göznuru*.

According to Quassim, their small fiberglass vessel left the Turkish coast near the port village of Mavisehir at around 05:45, setting its course to the Greek border. On board were 22 people: a family from Iraq, sitting at the bow, another family from Afghanistan, at the stern, and two Turkish smugglers. They were told the crossing to the island would take 10', without knowing exactly which island they were headed to. The sea was calm: winds in the Aegean usually subside at night, and pick up again in the morning. A few minutes after they left, they were spotted by a patrol vessel of the Turkish Coast Guard. At 06:35, the smugglers told them they had crossed the maritime border. Minutes later, about an hour after they had left the Turkish shore, and some 1.5 nautical miles inside the Greek territorial waters, the boat engine stopped. The vessel, which had already taken in water from the chase with the Turkish Coast Guard, started taking in even more. The passengers panicked, one of the smugglers fell in the sea, and, at around 06:45, the boat capsized.

Darab, a relative of the Afghan family who was following the vessel's location live on Whatsapp from his tent in the camp of Samos, where he had arrived a few months earlier, got in touch with the Greek authorities, to little avail. It was later revealed that three patrol vessels were deployed to the region, but these conducted a brief, and patchy, search and rescue operation. A full-scale operation was launched only after a local fisherman found bodies washing ashore the following morning, on March the 17th. By that time, nineteen of the twenty-two passengers had died, and three survivors had made it to the shore on their own. One of the three survivors, Fahima, lost her four children in the shipwreck, Quassim lost his wife, his year-old daughter and his 6-year-old son.

⁴¹⁰ Author's interview with Quassim. The excerpt is available at: vimeo.com/332802115/e7b340786c.



Messages sent by Darab to the Greek Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre reflect the geographical confusion that is the result of a combination between the authorities' unwillingness to rescue, and the complex and contested geography of the archipelago. Source: Agathonissi case file.

Contrary to the shipwreck of Farmakonissi, where the Coast Guard violently towed the *Göznuru* into sinking, the sea in Agathonissi was weaponised in a more indirect and subtle way, after the boat's sinking, in the form of a deadly drift. As Fahima described in her testimony before the prosecutor,

We tried to stay close to each other but the pressure of the water caused us to drift apart. When the dawn broke I saw 4-5 life vests floating on the sea, without bodies. I didn't know how to swim, I just stayed afloat. Every one hour, I saw someone let go and disappear in the water. When the sun was high above our heads I realised that no-one from my family was alive.⁴¹¹

During their recollection of the events, the survivors used the position of the sun to situate events in time. In their perceptual frame, distorted by the forces of the sea but contained by the rhythmic movement of the sun, this deadly drift lasted for twelve hours, from sunrise to sundown. After they made it to the shore, they spent another twelve hours unassisted, from sundown to sunrise. This duration, from sunrise, to sundown, to sunrise again, is erased in official records: to cover for their insufficient response, the Greek authorities to this day deny the shipwreck occurred on Friday the 16th, and officially register it as having occurred the next day, Saturday the 17th. Where in most maritime regions, such a denial could be credited to a lack in communication, the same is not possible in the dense, militarized, and thickly surveyed geography of the south-east Aegean. On the contrary, all three survivors to this day insist that a grey military vessel wearing a Greek flag approached them approximately one hour after they shipwrecked and stayed at a distance for hours, without offering assistance⁴¹².

⁴¹¹ Maritime Court of Piraeus, "Testimony of Fahima Malek, with translator", July 18, 2018. Translated from Greek by the author.

⁴¹² They did not know if the vessel had seen them or not, but they made several attempts to approach it and attract the crew's attention.

ε. στις 19 Μαρτίου 2018
Καιρός: Νεφώσεις παροδικά αυξημένες τις πρωινές και βραδυνές ώρες.
Άνεμοι: Νότιοι Νοτιοανατολικοί μέτριοι(5) με ριπές έως ισχυροί(6), σταδιακά έγιναν νότιοι νοτιοδυτικοί σχεδόν μέτριοι έως μέτριοι(4-5).
Ορατότητα: Καλή

2. Στον παρακάτω πίνακα αναφέρονται οι ώρες Ανατολής-Δύσης ηλίου για τις 15 έως και 19 Μαρτίου 2018 για την Σάμο και το Αγαθονήσι.

	Σάμος (37.711038, 26.8111032)		Αγαθονήσι (37.454393, 26.966760)	
	Ανατολή Ηλίου	Ανατολή Ηλίου	Ανατολή Ηλίου	Ανατολή Ηλίου
15-Mar-18	06 22' 29"	18 19' 23"	06 22' 27"	18 19' 26"
16-Mar-18	06 20' 58"	18 20' 19"	06 20' 57"	18 20' 22"
17-Mar-18	06 19' 28"	18 21' 15"	06 19' 27"	18 21' 17"
18-Mar-18	06 17' 57"	18 22' 11"	06 17' 57"	18 22' 12"
19-Mar-18	06 16' 26"	18 23' 07"	06 16' 27"	18 23' 08"

3. Οι αριθμοί που είναι στις παρενθέσεις για τον άνεμο αναφέρονται στη διεθνή κλίμακα Μποφόρ.

4. Τυχόν διαφοροποιήσεις λόγω τοπικών αιτίων ή καιρικά φαινόμενα πολύ μικρής κλίμακας χώρου και χρόνου δεν μπορούν να εκτιμηθούν γιατί δεν διαθέτουμε τόσο πυκνό δίκτυο παρατήρησης καιρού.

5. Το παρόν χορηγείται στον ενδιαφερόμενο ύστερα από αίτησή του για κάθε νόμιμη χρήση σύμφωνα με το Π.Δ. 529/30-7-75 (ΦΕΚ 173/75).

ΠΕ-MET Παναγιώτης Σκριμτζέας
 Αναπληρωτής Διευθυντής ΕΜΥ/Β

Meteorological report confirming the time of sunrise and sunset on March 15-19, 2018. Bullet point number four reads “Possible differences due to local causes or weather phenomena occurring at a very small space and time scale cannot be calculated because we do not have such a dense weather monitoring system”. As I will show, this density of the Aegean geography, and the gaps in scientific knowledge these produce, contribute to ambiguities which are used to obfuscate the responsibility of coast guards for the death of migrants at sea. Source: Agathonissi case file.



Quassim and Fahima both identified the same vessel, the British-built Vosper Thornycroft Open Sea Patrol Vessel “ΠΛΣ-50 Arkioi” as the vessel who approached them and did not offer assistance. To this day, the presence of this vessel in the vicinity of the shipwreck is unconfirmed. Source: Video stills, by author. Full videos are available at vimeo.com/332805558/5f589f2bd5 (Quassim) and vimeo.com/332798392/2743d8b375 (Fahima).

The two shipwrecks, located six nautical miles and four years apart, span the entire duration of what came to be called the “refugee crisis”, and, however similar their outcome, they demonstrate a shift in the ever-volatile migration management policies in the region. With push-back operations no longer occurring in the Aegean at the time⁴¹³, and set against a society that had grown accustomed to the sight of death at sea after years of “crisis”, the more recent Agathonissi case demonstrates that non-assistance, as sanctioned by what I will describe as the “deep-state” of the Greek navy and coast guard, emerged as the closest alternative. As Lorenzo Pezzani and Charles Heller have noted through their work on a different, but similar case, that of the “left-to-die-boat”⁴¹⁴ in the central Mediterranean, abandonment at sea in Agathonissi suggests a shift from the more direct violence of the towing in Farmakonissi to “a form of violence that is exercised less by effecting a destructive force onto a given actor, than by creating the conditions in which the sea becomes a liquid trap and refraining to help those who are caught in it.”⁴¹⁵

Crucially, the two shipwrecks are among the most prominent incidents for which legal cases have been opened in the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) against the Greek Coast Guard. The Farmakonissi case, formally known as *Safi and others v Greece*, or *no.5418/15*, was submitted to the Maritime court of Piraeus⁴¹⁶ by a consortium of lawyers representing the survivors in January 2014, and was dismissed by the prosecutor two months later, in March 2014. It was submitted again for litigation, this time at the ECtHR where, at the time of writing, almost seven years later, the case is still pending resolution. In 2018, within my role as a project coordinator at Forensic Architecture, I held a series of meetings with the lawyers and began to research the court files and design the contours of a spatial investigation that would look into the role of the Coast Guard in the shipwreck. The project, which was to be undertaken in collaboration with human rights NGOs Refugee Support Aegean and Greek Council for Refugees never materialised, largely to do with Forensic Architecture shifting its focus to the Evros/Meriç river border. Having studied the court files thoroughly, and with permission from the lawyers and survivors to digitise and use the material in my research, I decided to attempt a close reading of the documents. Far from being a legal scholar myself, I chose to focus specifically on how questions of “natural” agency and violence appear in the files, and how these, I will show, are more often than not summarily absorbed by the body of the sea⁴¹⁷. Despite the investigation never being completed, my engagement with the Farmakonissi case informed my understanding of the entanglement of border

⁴¹³ As I mentioned in the introduction, this pattern has now changed one more, with pushbacks, or “drift-backs” being a daily occurrence in the Aegean. Drift is today weaponised even more explicitly, enlisted in the pushback process. This new technique is, for lack of space and time, not addressed further in this text.

⁴¹⁴ Forensic Oceanography, “The left-to-die-boat”, April 11, 2012, available at: forensic-architecture.org/investigation/the-left-to-die-boat, (accessed 2013).

⁴¹⁵ Lorenzo Pezzani, “Liquid Traces” in *Forensis, The Architecture of Public Truth*, ed. Forensic Architecture, (Sternberg, 2014), 671.

⁴¹⁶ Piraeus is the main port of Athens, where the Ministry of Maritime Affairs and the headquarters of the Hellenic Coast Guard are based.

⁴¹⁷ The material from both cases is not in the public domain and is exhibited presented here solely for the purpose of this PhD thesis.

defence with the natural environment of the Aegean, and in many ways laid the groundwork for the investigation into the shipwreck in Agathonissi that followed.

When the Agathonissi shipwreck occurred in March 2018, I met with two of the three survivors (the third, Saymaa, a woman from Iraq, asked to be repatriated immediately after the shipwreck) and a third relative and conducted filmed, semi-structured interviews⁴¹⁸ in an attempt to reconstruct the events, identify those responsible, and further support the survivors' testimony in court - the same court that had examined and dismissed the case of Farmakonissi four years earlier. I also collected evidence like GPS positions and chat histories from their phones that could be used as evidence. In early May 2018 I travelled to Agathonissi, and the neighbouring, larger islands of Samos and Leros from where the criminally negligent rescue operation had been launched. Posing as an early-bird tourist, I trekked the island to understand the terrain, document military infrastructures that could have been used to spot and assist the shipwrecked people at sea⁴¹⁹, and look for identifiable features in the survivors' testimonies - to "ground truth"⁴²⁰ them - so as to prevent them from being discarded again as untrustworthy. In July 2018 I produced a preliminary field report and in June 2019 I completed a second, 103-page-long investigative report which attempted a spatio-temporal reconstruction of the shipwreck and the subsequent drift of migrants at sea. Both reports were submitted to the Maritime court of Piraeus. In July 2020 the case was dismissed in usual fashion and, with local legal remedies exhausted, it was submitted anew to the European Court of Human Rights in October of the same year. The testimony, maps, and photos presented as my practice here are part of the evidence submitted.

The analysis that follows is structured in two main sections. The first section, *Grey Rocks*, maps the two shipwrecks against the conflicts and violent state practices that have historically played out in this maritime region, as well as the Aegean's carceral pasts and geologic presents, to demonstrate how the lines that are drawn and redrawn over the surface of the sea⁴²¹ intersect with the interstitial and charged geography of the Aegean Archipelago to create an unstable maritime territory. I place particular focus on the "Sea of Samos", a stretch of sea in the South-East Aegean that engulfs the islands of Farmakonissi and Agathonissi. This sub-archipelago of the Greek Dodecanese spans from the southern shores of Samos island in the north, to the island of Pserimos in the south. It is delimited by the islands

⁴¹⁸ I call the interviews semi-structured because even though I arrived there with a camera, a tripod, a set of questions written down on a piece of paper, a translator and a lawyer, the interviews were conducted in the survivors' intimate spaces, in the temporary flats they had been allocated from the asylum services. They chose where to sit, so as to feel more comfortable while revisiting a traumatic experience, and I intervened with the space as little as possible. I was offered tea, and as I was let in the people's grief, the interview often turned to a conversation. I was rarely behind the camera, I paid little attention to the shot or the sound, I just made sure from time to time that the camera was running. A deliberate choice was made not to film the peoples' faces, both due to the current ambiguity of their asylum applications, and to respect their right to opacity at a vulnerable moment.

⁴¹⁹ I was surprised to find that the main military base of the island, which hosts a radar, was looking directly towards the location of the shipwreck.

⁴²⁰ "Ground truth" refers to the process of corroborating a piece of evidence (be it testimony or a satellite photograph) from a ground perspective, in this case, on-site.

⁴²¹ Suvendrini Perera, "Oceanic corpo-graphies, Refugee Bodies and the Making and Unmaking of Waters", *Feminist Review* 103, no.1, (March 2013): 65.

of Patmos, Leros, and Kalymnos, in the west, and by the coast of Turkey in the east. Removed from larger islands but filled with small rocks and islets, this small area is largely restricted to civilian navigation due to continuous disputes between Greece and Turkey and, like the Evros floodplain, has in recent years emerged as a hotspot of state violence and obfuscation thereof. As in Evros, tensions between littoral authorities here create a frontier that is governed by both an overlap and a vacuum of responsibility and jurisdiction, one that allows for the deflection of blame for migrant deaths. Any incident that occurs there -including migrant crossings- is considered a matter of “national security” for both littoral states and therefore a deep mantle of secrecy covers these waters⁴²². Out of civilian view and access, this maritime space, like Evros, can be policed in ways that would not be possible elsewhere in the Aegean. It is through this entanglement of geography, law and history, I argue, that migrant death in the Aegean is rendered possible today.

The second section, *Black Waves*, examines how this interstitial and historically charged materiality is mobilized as a defensive infrastructure within the context of contemporary migration at sea. I enquire into the manoeuvres, legal, operational, and military, in which the very matter of the archipelago –its waves, temperatures, rocks, and currents- is enlisted to perform the work of border enforcement, and reflect on a spatial and visual practice through which this matter can be decoded to reveal traces of state violence. As I have maintained throughout this thesis, I argue that the Aegean border functions less as a line on the water surface and more as an ecology, one that is enforced through law and military strength, as it is through winds, waves, currents, temperatures and marine life; a *border nature*.



The passengers onboard the vessel that sank outside Agathonissi recorded a video upon departure, stating the date and place, anticipating its evidentiary value. They were instructed to do so by people who had crossed before them. Video Still, by author.

⁴²² Indeed, the scarce images of Farmakonissi come from videos of military drills or visits paid by high ranked army and government officials. When I called the Leros Coast Guard to ask for permission to go spearfishing there, it resulted in them taking my details and aggressively advising me to “go to one of the other rocks instead”.

3.1. Grey Rocks

1433 – 0 m

3.1.1. **“Sharp like Razors”:** Spaces of Conflict and Exile

Prosecutor: In which territorial waters did the shipwreck take place?

Quassim: As I mentioned above, at 06:35 the ones who steered the boat told us we had crossed into Greek waters.

Prosecutor: Do you know where Greece and Turkey are?

Quassim: I don't know where Greece and Turkey are.

Prosecutor: How did you then know you had crossed from Turkey into Greece?

Quassim: I know because the two (2) drivers of the boat told us we had crossed the border.

Prosecutor: How do you know they were not lying to you?

Quassim: I don't know if they were telling the truth or if they were lying.⁴²³

In their testimonies before the prosecutor, the survivors of the Agathonissi shipwreck remembered the rocky shores where they beached. “When the three of us finally made it to the shore the sun was setting”, Quassim recalled. “Since none of us could swim any longer, the waves and currents pushed us all to this rocky shore” Fahima continues. “The man was the first to get out of the sea. Then he helped the Iraqi woman and me. Then he pulled the dead children...The man left to seek help, we couldn't follow.”⁴²⁴ During our interview, Quassim and Fahima both described the rocks as sharp like razors, difficult to hold onto and even harder to walk on, sculpted as they were from the forces of the sea⁴²⁵.

As with most rocky shores, the aegean islets are certainly hostile when approached from the sea, or when walked on without the necessary equipment. However, as I will discuss below, beyond their material make up, what makes these rocks particularly treacherous within the context of at-sea migration is their contested status between two sovereign states, as well as their long history as spaces of extraterritorial state violence. More than the waves that break against them, it is these rocks' engulfment in territorial disputes and histories of exile that sharpens them into razors, dictating the way they are patrolled and managed against migrants today.

⁴²³ Maritime Court of Piraeus, “Testimony of Qassim Kadhim Saad Saad with translator”, July 17, 2018. Translated from Greek by the author.

⁴²⁴ Maritime Court of Piraeus, “Testimony of Fahima Malek, with translator”, July 18, 2018. Translated from Greek by the author.

⁴²⁵ The divers that were sent to look for the remaining bodies the next morning also described these same shores as “dangerous to dive in, filled with caves and reefs”. Testimony of K.I. before the prosecutor of Samos, July 3, 2018.



The shores where the survivors of the Agathonissi shipwreck beached. In the background are the Turkish shores. May 2018.
Photo by author.



Lifejackets hanging from olive trees on the eastern shores of Agathonissi. May 2018. Photo by author.

3.1.2. A Carceral Archipelago

i. 74 BC - 1974 AC

"The Romans knew what they were doing when they exiled criminals to this island. There is not a place that is more barren and unpleasant. There aren't even the most common of plants in this place. We saw but big rats, perhaps of the same kind as the the ones that forced the inhabitants of this island to abandon it, as Pliny reports. Some other writers, to describe how miserable this place is, claimed that the rats resorted to chewing on the metal that came out of the mines. This is how we know that there must have been metal mines in Gyaros, but the soil seemed too harsh even for that."⁴²⁶

Thus wrote the French botanist Joseph Pitton de Tournefort of Gyaros, a small island in the Aegean archipelago. Tournefort travelled through the Aegean for two years, between 1700 and 1702. He was assigned to this task by King Louis XIV of France, and was accompanied by the German botanist Andreas Gundelsheimer and the botanical illustrator Claude Aubriet; the team was tasked with documenting the Aegean flora. Indeed, in his treaty 'Relation d'un voyage du Levant' Tournefort went on to describe a number of endemic plant species⁴²⁷, while offering a lucid account of his travels through what he often described as horrible, barren rocks 'separated by great tempests'. However, Tournefort did not stop at recording plants. For each island the team visited, he offered thorough descriptions of the topography, military infrastructure, demographic composition, and history of the place. Under the guise of science, Tournefort took on a side-mission, one of early military reconnaissance, highlighting the strategic and long contested character of the Aegean Sea, which the very title of the report positions beyond his familiar European territory, and in the *Levant*. Beyond the superficial similarities to my mode of border research, the above passage is especially relevant here because Tournefort, with the sensitivity of a botanist and the vigilance of a military surveyor, lays bare the contingency of centuries of island incarceration to the harsh terrain of the Archipelago.



A map of "Gattonisi, Fermako et altre" in, Marco Boschini, *L' Archipelago*, 1658. Source: Gennadius Library of Athens.

⁴²⁶ Joseph Pitton de Tournefort, *Relation d'un voyage du Levant*, (Amsterdam: Aux dépens de La Compagnie, 1718).

⁴²⁷ Many of these species were recorded for the first time by Tournefort, and hence still bear the name *tournefortii*.

Some seventeen centuries earlier, in 74 B.C., the ancient Greek historian Plutarch in his *Parallel Lives* tells that a young Julius Caesar “was captured, near the island Pharmacusa [Farmakonissi], by pirates from Tragaia [Agathonissi], who already at that time controlled the sea with large armaments and countless small vessels”. According to Plutarch, Caesar was held in Pharmacusa for 38 days. During his imprisonment, he promised his captors that, once freed, he would have them all crucified. Indeed, once the ransom was paid, and he eventually arrived to the coast of Asia Minor, Caesar put together a fleet, and returned to Pharmacusa to crucify every last one of them. However anecdotal, Plutarch’s story offers what an early example of imperial force exercising its right to kill in this sub-archipelago. It also introduces a long history of Aegean islands as places of exile and confinement⁴²⁸.

Attempts to extra-territorialize captivity in islands, away from sovereign, but also from social, territory have been well documented by historians and geographers alike. From leper colonies, to slave ships and floating detention centres run by the US Department of Defence and Coast-Guard⁴²⁹, or off the shores of Italy⁴³⁰, or in Lesbos⁴³¹, captivity at sea has historically been used internationally as a means of incarcerating “the politically intransigent who need to be kept out of vision, hearing and access”⁴³².

In the Aegean archipelago, island prisons multiplied in the 20th century, as the islands became the quarantine zones *par excellence* of the successive military governments that assumed power in Greece from the 1920s onwards. There, “undesirables” – Pontic Greek refugees who fled Turkey after the 1922 Greek defeat in the minor Asian campaign; partisans of the DSE in the Greek Civil War; ethnic and religious minorities, and other dissidents were exiled, and held under a status that was officially described as “administrative displacement”. These islands, most notable among which was the island of Makronissos⁴³³, a stone’s throw from Attica, often also functioned as forced labour camps, with inmates being forced to construct their own prisons, or monuments glorifying the Greek state. This coercive task had a “corrective” character, seeking to exorcise through labour what the state saw as deviant political beliefs, and replace them with a nation-oriented ideology. Following the WWII, these were the only camps in Europe “this” side of the iron curtain, prompting media at the time to report of a “Greek Dachau”⁴³⁴. The practice survived until the fall of the colonels’ junta in 1974, when the last camp

⁴²⁸ Plutarch, *The Parallel Lives*, Caesar, (Vol.VII of the Loeb Classical Library edition, 1919), 443.

⁴²⁹ Seth Freed Wessler, “The Coast Guard’s Floating Guantánamos” *New York Times*, November 20, 2017, www.nytimes.com/2017/11/20/magazine/the-coast-guards-floating-guantanamos.html (accessed April, 2019).

⁴³⁰ Richard Braude, “Italy has turned cruise ships liners jails for migrants”, *Jacobin*, November 14, 2020 www.jacobinmag.com/2020/11/italy-migrants-cruise-lines-ships-prisons-coronavirus (accessed November 2020).

⁴³¹ “Greek Navy ship on Lesbos houses latest island migrants”, *Arab News*, March 4, 2020 www.arabnews.com/node/1636936/world, (accessed March 2020).

⁴³² Laleh Khalili, “Carceral Seas”, in *Okeanos* ed. Cory Scorzari, Daniela Zyman (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2017), 51.

⁴³³ Tournefort also visited Makronissos and wrote that it ‘must have been separated from [the neighbouring island of] Evoia by great tempests’.

⁴³⁴ Georges Rigassi, “Makronissos, le «Dachau» des communistes grecs: Des expéditions punitives et des tortures en 1949 sur l’île des déportés opposants au regime”, *Le Temps*, October 23, 2015, www.letemps.ch/monde/makronissos-dachau-communistes-grecs (accessed April 2019).

in Gyaros island, that hosted dissidents to the regime, closed permanently, and the inmates were transferred to the mainland. Some of these islands, like Gyaros, remain off limits to the public, with the structures built by inmates still standing as architectural testimony to this not-so-distant exiled past⁴³⁵. Yet their residue haunts contemporary Greek life and politics: In Greece, the phrase “to the dry islands” still survives as the synonym of isolation and exile, and, as I will discuss in what follows, it is increasingly evoked against migrants⁴³⁶.



The cover of Georges Lambrinos' *Le Dahau Americain en Grèce*, 1949 (left) and a photograph of Makronissos camp in the 40s (right) source: Archives of Contemporary Social History (ASKI).

ii. Hauntings: #makronissos

Hours after the infamous refugee camp of Moria, in Lesbos, was destroyed in a devastating fire in September 2020, #makronissos became the number one trending hashtag on Greek twitter. It was used by thousands of far right accounts who demanded that the government rehouse the people who had been displaced by the fire, over 15000 of them, in closed detention centres in the “dry islands” like Makronissos. The infrastructure was already there, people claimed, all it would take is some renovation, and migrants would be out of sight for good. These horrifying cries had not emerged out of nowhere.

⁴³⁵ This isolation means that today these islands have become a sanctuary for endangered marine and bird species, like the *monachus monachus* monk seal which thrives in Gyaros. Their use as spaces of detention across history has also contributed to unique ecologies developing in these rocks, which are now hotspots for biodiversity and endemism. A striking example is the presence of a black snake (*hierophis viridiflavus carbonarius gyarosensis*) in Gyaros. The island is the only recorded habitat for the species in outside Italy or Croatia, and it is widely accepted that it was introduced by the Romans who used the island as a prison, in order to control the mice population, which Tournefort so graphically refers to in his accounts. See Herpetofauna.gr, 'hierophis viridiflavus: black snake of Gyaros' available at: www.herpetofauna.gr/index.php?module=cats&page=read&id=159 (accessed August 2020).

⁴³⁶ Dimitris Christopoulos, “Exiles in the Aegean: a year after the EU–Turkey deal”, *Open Democracy*, March 17, 2017 www.opendemocracy.net/en/exiles-in-aegean-year-after-eu-turkey-deal/ (accessed March 2017). Just as the phrase “to the mountains” is the synonym of resistance against the Axis forces in the Second World War, and the royalist forces in the Greek Civil War.

Over the past decade, in the Aegean, the archipelago of island prisons of decades past had been haunted through the securitization of contemporary migration. Following the increase in refugee crossings, these islands emerged as ideal sites for the containment of migration, mainly due to their function as sites of “first arrival” and interception, and their relative distance from the Greek mainland. Today, asylum applicants who are accommodated in the Aegean islands are not allowed to travel to the mainland until their asylum application is assessed, a process which can take from several months, up to a couple of years. More than the *hotspots* – camps for the registration and detention of migrants - that are operational in the islands neighbouring the Turkish shore, it is the islands themselves that function as a camp. In this process, the border is displaced from the sea between the islands’ eastern shores and the Turkish coast, to the heavily policed ports and ferry terminals, and the entire island⁴³⁷. At the time of writing, there are five present-day “island prisons”⁴³⁸ in the Aegean, one of which is on the island of Leros⁴³⁹, some 8 nautical miles west of Farmakonissi, and another in Samos, some 10 nautical miles north of Agathonissi.

Long before the Moria fire, the narrative of installing reception facilities in uninhabited islands was being reproduced by the media⁴⁴⁰ and in the parliament⁴⁴¹. When a new, closed reception centre was eventually set up to accommodate (and contain) the refugees displaced by the fire, this was built on top of a former army shooting range next to the sea, in a small peninsula battered by the wind and waves. After a few days in the facility, migrants began to unearth used bullets and unexploded mortars. It was later revealed that the site is contaminated with lead, once again stressing the latent potentiality of state violence in these borders, from the scattered munition in the hills of Prespa, to the minefields of Evros, all the way to the Aegean⁴⁴².

⁴³⁷ This is a condition that is subject to constant change. In an effort to decongest the islands, the geographic limitations were temporarily lifted in 2018, allowing some refugees whose asylum application had been processed and approved to travel to the Greek mainland, only for the islands, and the camps themselves, to “close” again with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

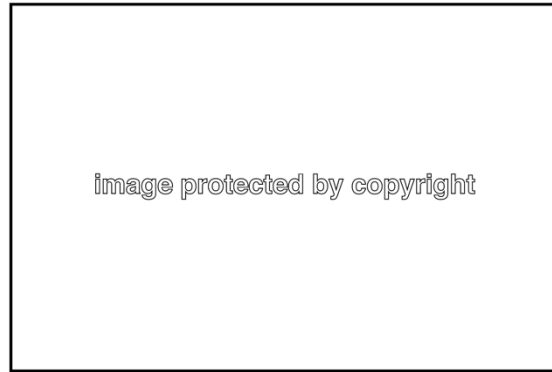
⁴³⁸ By “island prisons” here I refer to the five islands of Leros, Lesbos, Chios, Kos and Samos, where the so-called “hot-spots” have been set up.

⁴³⁹ Leros is an island that has been marked by a succession of stories of confinement and imprisonment. From the Italian colonial rule, to camps for political prisoners and violently displaced children from mainland Greece (including Prespa), to its notorious mental healthcare facilities, to active off-limits military sites and, of course, the hotspot, Leros persists as a disciplinary apparatus. These are sites that haunt the Farmakonissi tragedy. The Coast Guard vessel that sank the Göznuru was stationed in the gulf of Lakkí, where all the aforementioned facilities are located. The survivors’ testimonies were taken and falsified in Leros, inside the Coast Guard’s headquarters in Ayia Marina, housed in a rare architectural specimen of Fascist rationalism, that functioned as the police headquarters during the later period of Italian rule. In Partheni, a military facility in the north of Leros that staffs the outpost of Farmakonissi, some 500 left-wing citizens were kept as political prisoners during the 1967-74 colonels’ dictatorship. One of the two vessels that responded to the distress call of the Agathonissi shipwreck also left from Leros. For an excellent analysis of the layering of violence in Leros, and the role of Architecture in maintaining it, see the catalogue from “Leros, Island of Exile” exhibition, by Platon Issaias, Beth Hughes and Yiannis Drakoulidis, in Manifesta 12, Palermo, where a preliminary version of this research was also presented in November 2018. See also Félix Guattari, *De Leros à la Borde*, (Paris: Éditions Lignes, 2012).

⁴⁴⁰ “Exotic Greek islet off Lesbos proposed as migrant detention center” *Greek Reporter*, February 21, 2020 greece.greekreporter.com/2020/02/21/exotic-greek-islet-off-lesvos-proposed-as-migrant-detention-center/ (accessed February 2020).

⁴⁴¹ Including the neo-nazi Golden Dawn, who, in 18/03/2016, two days after the signing of the EU-Turkey deal, proposed for asylum seekers to be held in Makronissos for two years upon entry.

⁴⁴² Human Rights Watch, “Greece: Lead Poisoning Concerns in New Migrant Camp”, December 8, 2020 www.hrw.org/news/2020/12/08/greece-lead-poisoning-concerns-new-migrant-camp (accessed December 2020).



Vice-Minister of Defence, Alkiviadis Stefanis, presents an architectural plan of a “model facility” drawn over the uninhabited Dodecanese island of Levitha. November 20, 2019. source: Efsyn⁴⁴³.

As I have argued earlier in this thesis, *haunting* can be a powerful prism through which to understand the agency these layerings of state violence have on contemporary migration. For the geographer Alison Mountz, reflecting on what she calls the “enforcement archipelago” of island detention spaces, haunting “does geographical work that reveals dimensions of sovereign power enacted offshore, well beyond mainland territory”⁴⁴⁴. The same can also be argued for the opposite: the sovereign power enacted offshore always returns back to mainland territory. Indeed, the American historian Lauren Benton locates island penal colonies as focal points within a larger imperial project. “Island solutions to problems of imperial sovereignty” Benton points out, are part of “dispersed attempts to construct a legally coherent disciplinary order.”⁴⁴⁵ Specifically within the context of political exile in the Aegean, the Greek archaeologist Yannis Hamilakis has documented how islands like Makronissos were rendered into spaces where the regime “exorcised” left-wing beliefs from the inmates through force and ideological indoctrination, and replaced them with the the essentialist discourse of national continuity and ancestral glory. In Makronissos, also known as “The New Parthenon”, Hamilakis argues, “the panopticism of classical antiquity (the watchful eye of History and Destiny) merged surveillance with spectacle.”⁴⁴⁶

Therefore, while it is certainly important to consider the Aegean islands as “bounded” spaces designed to exclude bodies and ideas from the public sphere, one should not lose sight of the network that is an archipelago. The Aegean islands communicate with each other and with the mainland of Greece and Turkey respectively, and the violence enacted there seeps outwards. It is perhaps not incidental that,

⁴⁴³ Dimitris Terzis, “Πρόσφυγες εξόριστοι σε ξερονήσια [Refugees exiled in dry-lands]”, *Efsyn*, November 21, 2019 www.efsyn.gr/ellada/dikaionomata/219850_prosfyges-exoristoi-se-xeronisia (accessed November 2019).

⁴⁴⁴ Alison Mountz, The Enforcement Archipelago: Detention, Haunting, and Asylum on Islands, *Political Geography* 30, no.3, (March 2011): 119.

⁴⁴⁵ Lauren Benton, *A Search for Sovereignty: Law and Geography in European Empires, 1400-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 212.

⁴⁴⁶ Yannis Hamilakis, “The Other Parthenon: Antiquity and National Memory at Makronissos”, *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 20, no.2 (October, 2002).

as Mountz explains, “islands and archipelagos recur in critical thought to spatialize understandings of power and politics beyond the spaces of islands.”⁴⁴⁷ From Solzhenitsyn’s “Gulag Archipelago”⁴⁴⁸ which referred to the network of forced Soviet labour camps in Siberia; to Foucault’s “carceral archipelago”⁴⁴⁹, a metaphor for the mechanisms of knowledge and discipline related to the modern carceral system, and its repurposing by the geographer Derek Gregory⁴⁵⁰ to describe the dispersed “Black Sites” of the US Department of Defence; to Eyal Weiman’s archipelago of extraterritorial occupations in Israel/Palestine⁴⁵¹, and to recent academic and journalistic work on island detention speaking of a “refugee archipelago”⁴⁵², the archipelago functions as a spatial device to understand landscapes of state control. It is through maritime migrant crossings that all of these forms of state violence fold into the Aegean: An archipelago within an archipelago within an archipelago within an archipelago within an archipelago (ad infinitum).

⁴⁴⁷ Alison Mountz, Political geography II: Islands and archipelagos, *Progress in Human Geography* 39, no.5 (October 2015): 636–646.

⁴⁴⁸ Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, (Paris: Éditions du Soeil, 1973).

⁴⁴⁹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 293-304.

⁴⁵⁰ Derek Gregory, “Vanishing points: Law, violence, and exception in the global war prison”, in *Violent Geographies*: ed. Derek Gregory. and Alan Pred. (New York: Routledge, 2007), 205–236.

⁴⁵¹ José Luis Pardo, Thomas Keenan, Shimon Naveh, Keller Easterling, Lluís Ortega, Tariq Ali, Giorgio Agamben, Rafael, Vilasanjuan, Eyal Sivan, Teddy Cruz, Eyal Weizman, Stephen Graham, Zygmunt Bauman, Josep Ramoneda, Anselm Franke, *Arxipèlag d'excepcions / Archipelago of Exceptions, Sobiranes de l'extraterritorialitat / Sovereignities of Extraterritoriality* (Barcelona: CCCB, 2007).

⁴⁵² Daniel Howden, Apostolis Fotiadis, “The Refugee Archipelago: The inside story of what went wrong in Greece” *Refugees Deeply*, March 6, 2017, <https://www.newsdeeply.com/refugees/articles/2017/03/06/the-refugee-archipelago-the-inside-story-of-what-went-wrong-in-greece> (accessed March 2017).

3.1.3. A Contested Archipelago

i. Isole Italiane Dell' Egeo, 1912 – 1947

As in the Evros Delta, in archipelagos like the Aegean, binary divisions between land and water are never entirely possible⁴⁵³. Locked as it is between the mainlands of Greece and Turkey, the Aegean resembles a big lake, one that covers 214,000 square kilometres in area, and measures about 600 kilometres longitudinally and 300 kilometres latitudinally. Seafarers in the Aegean almost never lose sight of land. At their nearest - the 800-metre-wide Mycale Strait between Samos and the Turkish Dilek peninsula - the Greek islands come so close to the Turkish mainland that border crossers who wanted to avoid smugglers have successfully attempted to swim it⁴⁵⁴.



A map of the Mycale Strait with sketched-in territorial waters and swimming directions (left)⁴⁵⁵, and a photo of Mycale strait (right), with Samos on the left, and Turkey on the right, May 2018. Photo by author.

In order to understand ongoing maritime events in this dense space – never entirely sea, nor entirely land - whether these involve shipwrecks of vessels carrying migrants, the movement of container cargo, or hydrocarbon prospecting, one indeed needs to first understand the ways in which this uneasy space between Greece and Turkey has historically been configured.

⁴⁵³ The American geographers of the ocean Philip Steinberg and Kimberley Peters have shown how territorial manoeuvres that are deployed to enclose maritime spaces are often confounded by the materiality of water. Their oceanic epistemology is developed in stark contrast to jurist Carl Schmidt's famous axiom that "the sea resists *charaxis*", arguing that oceans, lacking in clear points of reference and resisting permanent habitation, cannot host a lasting legal order and will always deflect state attempts to establish sovereignty over its surface. See Philip Steinberg, Kimberley Peters, "Wet ontologies, fluid spaces: Giving depth to volume through oceanic thinking" *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 33, no.2 (April 2015) 247 – 264, and Carl Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of the Jus Publicum Europaeum* (New York: Telos Press, 2003) 46-47.

⁴⁵⁴ The same is true for animals. In the early 20th century a leopard, a species that had been extinct in Greece for centuries swam across the channel, only to be killed by locals. It is now embalmed and exhibited at the Samos museum. The story is referenced in the novel "To Kaplani tis Vitrinas" by the Greek writer Alki Zei. See Alki Zei, *To Kaplani tis Vitrinas* (Athens: Metaichmio, 2011).

⁴⁵⁵ The map was posted on facebook and archived by Thomas Keenan and Sohrab Mohrebi's "It is obvious from the map" research project.

The Dodecanese waters, shores, islands, and rocks have always been sites of intense contestation. Their present territoriality, however, is specifically dependent on the arrangements that came into being after the 1912 Italo-Turkish war, when they were occupied by the Kingdom of Italy and were administered as *Isole Italiane Dell' Egeo* (Italian Islands of the Aegean)⁴⁵⁶. Italian interest in the Dodecanese was rooted in strategic purposes. The islands were intended to further Italy's long range imperial policy, with the deep coves of Leros and Patmos used as bases for the Italian Navy. Under Fascist rule, from 1923 onwards, the juridic state of the islands was an intermediate one between a colony and a part of the Italian motherland: *a possedimento* (a possession). The Italian language was compulsory, and Italian Racial Laws were introduced. Seeking to establish a Mediterranean-wide continuum between the Roman empire and the Fascist regime, Mussolini held that the islands had merely returned to its ancestral home after being annexed by Italy, and conducted a series of ambitious infrastructural and archaeological projects in the archipelago.



Residents of the Dodecanese island of Astypalaia in traditional costume to welcome the Italian King Vittorio Emanuele III.
Source: astypalaia.wordpress.com



Italian maps showing military positions and weapons range in Leros. Source: "Leros, Island of Exile" exhibition catalogue.
Courtesy of Thanassis Paraponiaris.

⁴⁵⁶ The annexation was formally recognized by Turkey some ten years later, with article 15 of the 1923 treaty of Lausanne. Following WWI, Italy agreed twice, in the Venizelos–Tittoni agreement of 1919 and the Treaty of Sèvres in 1920, to cede the islands to Greece. However, due to the Greek defeat in the Minor Asia campaign of 1919–22, these agreements were never implemented. The isolated island of Kastellorizo was temporarily occupied by France in 1915 and eventually came under Italian control in 1921.

However, the precise location of the maritime border between the Italian *possedimenti* and Turkey, was never fully clarified. As elsewhere, the 1923 Lausanne treaty left the two countries disputing sovereignty over a number of islets, and the territorial waters around them. These disputes were addressed in the 1932 “Convention between Italy and Turkey”, or the “Ankara Convention”, and, crucially, in an appendix signed in December of the same year. In this appendix, the two countries drew the border on a map following thirty-seven points which were equidistant between Italian and Turkish territory⁴⁵⁷. The appendix, however, was never deposited at the League of Nations in Geneva, and as a result Turkey rejects its validity to this day.

The Dodecanese changed hands when Italy capitulated in the World War II in 1943. They were temporarily occupied by Nazi Germany until the end of the war, after which they came under provisional British administration. In 1947 they were the last territory to be ceded to Greece with article 14(1) of the Paris Treaty of Peace. The inconclusive nature of these recurring treaties is still audible within what international diplomacy has come to call “the Aegean Dispute” between Greece and Turkey⁴⁵⁸.

Section V—Greece (Special Clause)

ARTICLE 14

1. Italy hereby cedes to Greece in full sovereignty the Dodecanese Islands indicated hereafter, namely Stampalia (Astropalia), Rhodes (Rhodos), Calki (Kharki), Scarpanto, Casos (Casso), Piscopis (Tilos), Misiros (Nisyros), Calimnos (Kalymnos), Leros, Patmos, Lipsos (Lipso), Simi (Symi), Cos (Kos) and Castellorizo, as well as the adjacent islets.

2. These islands shall be and shall remain demilitarised.

3. The procedure and the technical conditions governing the transfer of these islands to Greece will be determined by agreement between the Governments of the United Kingdom and Greece and arrangements shall be made for the withdrawal of foreign troops not later than 90 days from the coming into force of the present Treaty.

Treaty of Peace with Italy, Section V, Article 14, Paris, 10 February 1947, ceding the Dodecanese islands to Greece.

⁴⁵⁷ Points 33 to 37 refer to the waters between Farmakonissi and Agathonissi. ‘Agreement between Italy and Turkey of January 4, 1932’ and ‘Agreement between Italy and Turkey of December 28, 1932’, available at: www.hri.org/MFA/foreign/bilateral/italtunc.htm (accessed March 2019).

⁴⁵⁸ Andrew Wilson, “The Aegean Dispute” *The International Institute of Strategic Studies* 19, no.155 (1979), 23.

ii. The Aegean Dispute, 1947 – Present

Zonations

During the series of negotiations that sought to translate these vague colonial-time maritime boundaries to a contemporary legal map of the sea, the border line that separated the Kingdom of Italy and the Ottoman empire was inherited by the young nations of Turkey and Greece (which was considered to be the successor state to Italy), on the basis of *uti possidetis*⁴⁵⁹. To this day tensions arise over inconsistencies in the Paris treaty, and the Ankara convention upon which it was premised. As the lasting tensions between the two countries show, sections of the maritime border remain de facto *grey*: unresolved, overlapping, and only unilaterally respected⁴⁶⁰.

The two first provisions in the treaty of Paris have become central to the dispute⁴⁶¹. First, Italy agreed to cede sovereignty for fourteen inhabited islands named in the treaty, “as well as their adjacent islets”. Given the abundance of uninhabited rocks in the Aegean, and the disputed 1932 border line, the term “adjacent islets” is interpreted differently by both countries, and, as a consequence, the island chain slips away from attempts to order, map and claim it. Of the thousands of islands and rocks⁴⁶² in the Aegean Sea, only two hundred and twenty seven sustain permanent habitation. As a result, Greek territorial claims over many are contested, particularly the ones that are equidistant, or closer, to the Turkish mainland, like Farmakonissi. The territorial waters that surround these rocks are also heavily contested. These contestations are particularly important to consider within the context of migrant crossings, as they also dictate the ways in which search and rescue (SAR) operations are conducted in the Aegean. The two states have registered largely overlapping SAR zones, claiming a monopoly not only on violence but also on the right to rescue migrants at sea⁴⁶³.

Tellingly, on March 17, 2018, one day after the Agathonissi shipwreck, Turkey issued a NAVTEX (Navigational Telex)⁴⁶⁴ restricting access to a plot of sea around the Agathonissi shipwreck, primarily

⁴⁵⁹ *uti possidetis* (translating ‘as you possess’) is the principle in international law under which newly independent states inherit the boundaries of colonial division. Suzanne N. Lalonde, *Determining Boundaries in a Conflicted World: The Role of Uti Possidetis*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s university press, 2002).

⁴⁶⁰ The Greek government strenuously denies the existence of “grey” areas in the Aegean, maintaining that the border is resolved and only unilaterally contested by Turkey. See Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Issues of Greek-Turkish Relations”, available at: www.mfa.gr/en/issues-of-greek-turkish-relations/relevant-documents/maritime-boundaries, (accessed May 2018).

⁴⁶¹ Treaty of Peace with Italy, Paris, February 10, 1947, Article 14, Section V-Greece (Special Clause), available at: <https://www.loc.gov/law/help/us-treaties/bevans/m-ust000004-0311.pdf> (accessed May 2017).

⁴⁶² Estimates regarding the number of islands in the Aegean vary depending on how an island is defined.

⁴⁶³ In an informal conversation I had with a former Chief of Staff of the Greek Ministry of Migration (anonymised here at their request), they recounted how, during the governmental debriefings, their delegation was always “treated as the child in a room full of adults”: ministers of Defence, Energy, External Affairs, Admirals, Intelligence Service. According to the interviewee, these “adults” were delighted with Greece being the host country for FRONTEX *Operation Poseidon*, as it functioned as what they thought to be further legitimization of Greek sovereignty over these waters.

⁴⁶⁴ A Navtex is a service for delivering navigational and urgent maritime safety information to ships.

inside Greek territorial waters. Greece responded with a NOTAM (Notice to Airmen)⁴⁶⁵ of its own, launching one of the largest rescue operations in recent memory. Ironically, this mobilisation came twenty-four hours after the shipwreck, when most of the people on board had already drowned.

As Lorenzo Pezzani notes within the context of the central Mediterranean, also in the Aegean, “complex and overlapping jurisdictions at sea play a fundamental role in creating the conditions that structurally lead to the death of migrants.”⁴⁶⁶ In this dense maritime space, attempts to place vessels and, indeed, blame for human rights violations often hinge on cartographic resolution. Such is the indeterminacy of these waters that the precise position of the border line itself is often subject to cartographic imprecisions, and therefore elusive to GPS navigation devices and the various online map platforms routinely used by migrants crossing it. As becomes evident in the dialogue between the prosecutor and Quassim with which I open this section, the location of migrant vessels vis-a-vis the border, and the assigning of responsibility for rescue (or non-rescue) is a tricky task. This is confirmed by Darab, the relative of the Afghan family who was tracking the trajectory of the vessel from the Turkish coast to Agathonissi on Google Maps:

Darab: When I saw this point here (points to map), I thought that they passed [the border]. Because I was just imagining with myself, I didn’t know how much water was in the Turkish side and how much in the Greek side.

Me: You didn’t have a line [on your map]...

Darab: No, there was no line⁴⁶⁷



Darab plotting the course of the vessel on a map of the maritime area between Agathonissi and the Turkish coast near the village of Mavisehir. Video still by author.

⁴⁶⁵ The Athens Flight Information Region (FIR) coincides with the Exclusive Economic Zone claimed by Greece. Therefore, when Greece exerts its right to perform rescue from the air in this region, it indirectly claims sovereignty over both the sea surface and the seabed underneath. See Christos Sazanidis “The Greco-Turkish Dispute over the Aegean Airspace”, *Hellenic Review of International Relations* 11, (1980) 87–122.

⁴⁶⁶ Pezzani “Hostile Environments”.

⁴⁶⁷ Author’s interview with Darab. The excerpt is available at: <https://vimeo.com/332791899/c4493d523e>.

Militarisation

The second, contested, provision in the treaty of Paris states that the Aegean islands ‘shall be and shall remain demilitarised’. After Paris, the islands remained demilitarized for a decade. Since the 1960s, however, the Aegean, along with Evros, is where the majority of Greek troops have been stationed. A series of military facilities -outposts, airports, naval bases, missile launching sites and radar stations- are operational in most of the Aegean islands, including a handful of NATO bases, which have played an active role in the “war on terror”, and the less celebrated “everywhere wars”⁴⁶⁸ of the US Department of Defence⁴⁶⁹.

The militarization of the Aegean dispute peaked in early 1996, with the incident in Imia/Kardak, a pair of rocks lying 3.8 nautical miles west of the Turkish coast and 3 miles North of the Greek island of Pserimos, over the jurisdiction of which the two countries came on the verge of armed conflict after the running aground of a Turkish bulk carrier on one of the rocks⁴⁷⁰. Already heavily militarized, facilities in the Aegean rocks have since multiplied: the military outposts of both Farmakonissi and Agathonissi were built in 1996, immediately after the Imia/Kardak crisis.

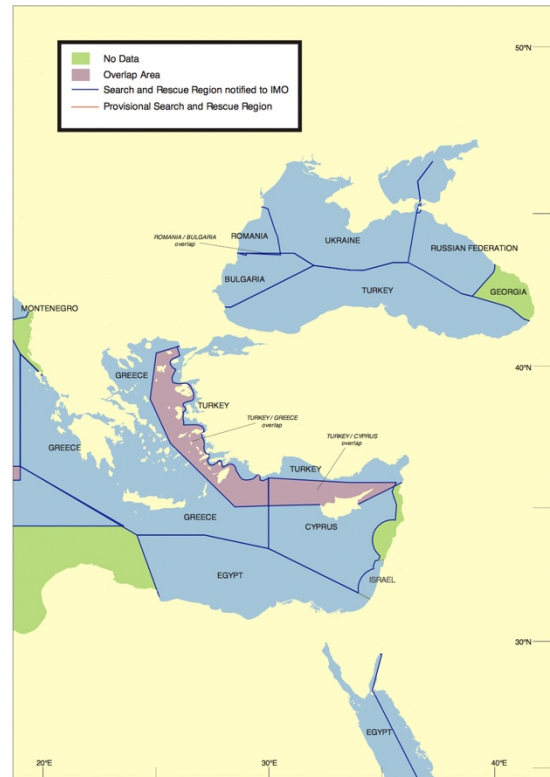
Imia/Kardak therefore marks a turning point in the construction of the contemporary militarized regime in the Dodecanese archipelago. As such, this specific period in the recent history of the Aegean merits a closer look in this thesis. Below, using the Imia/Kardak rocks as a prism, I will dwell on that brief moment in the mid 1990s, in order to discuss how this space is so effectively kept out of public view, and to enquire into the ways that non-human ecological and geological processes play into technologies of territoriality in the region today. This, I hope, will shed further light into the processes whereby this same border materiality is activated against border crossers.

⁴⁶⁸ The geographer Derek Gregory uses the term “everywhere war” to describe the less overt, durational and geographically dispersed wars of the US government. Derek Gregory, “The Everywhere War” *The Geographical Journal*, 177, no.3, (September 2011) 238-250.

⁴⁶⁹ Most important among them is the Souda Bay Naval Base in Crete, the largest and most prominent naval base for the United States and NATO in the eastern Mediterranean Sea, featuring the only deep water port in Southern Europe and the Mediterranean Sea that is suitable and capable of maintaining the largest aircraft carriers.

⁴⁷⁰ For an account of the incident from the Greek side, see the memoirs of Admiral Christos Liberis, Christos Liberis, *Πορεία σε Ταραγμένες Θάλασσες [Setting Course in Turbulent Seas]*, (Athens: Ekdoseis Poiotita, 1999), 527-594.

A POSSIBLE DELIMITATION OF AEGEAN WATERS



Maps demonstrating the spatial dimension of the “Aegean Dispute” (left), and the overlap in SAR areas in the Aegean. Source: Wikipedia and US Coast Guard. Despite the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) granting countries the right to extend their territorial waters to a twelve-mile distance from the nearest land, territorial waters in the Aegean are still set at six miles for both countries. Turkey has opposed a possible extension that, according to their view would lead to a disproportionate increase in Greek-controlled space, and would all but deny Turkish ships access to international waters. As a result, Turkey has refused to become a signatory member of the UNCLOS and does not consider itself bound by it, thus treating it a *res inter alios acta*, that is, a treaty that can only be binding to the signing parties but not to others⁴⁷¹.

⁴⁷¹ See, Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “The Outstanding Aegean Issues”, available at: www.mfa.gov.tr/maritime-issues---aegean-sea---the-outstanding-aegean-issues.en.mfa, (accessed May 2018), and “US Coast Guard manual for SAR areas”, available at: www.dco.uscg.mil/Portals/9/CG-5R/nsarc/IMO%20Maritime%20SAR%20Regions.pdf, (accessed May 2018).

3.1.4. “Vrahonisides”: A More-than-Human Frontier

Imia/Kardak, along with many of the Aegean rocks, lack human habitation, not only owing to their location at the heart of the Dispute, but also due to the same qualities that made these rocks attractive as spaces of exile: their adverse geomorphology and meteorological conditions. Rough seas separate them from larger, inhabited islands, most of them lack a natural port, receive little to no rainfall and hold no water or soil. They are the only places in Europe that classify under Köppen Desert climate⁴⁷². In Greek language, these islets are called *Vrahonisides*, an ambiguous geography between a rock (*vrahos*) and an islet (*nisida*).

It is through the Imia/Kardak crisis that the role of the natural environment in the conflict was first foregrounded: representatives of both governments in international fora unearthed maps and arguments, conjured from the disciplines of history, geology, and marine biology to trace a lineage of sovereignty on these rocks and water. In a document carried by the Greek Prime Minister at the time, Costas Simitis, after scrolling through pages of Russian, Turkish, Italian, British, French, and American historical maps that ascribe the islets to Greece, one finds a page containing a memorandum on “the environmental dimension” of Imia/Kardak. It reads:

1. Since 1984, Greece has conducted studies in the area of the rocky islets of Imia, either on private or national basis, without Turkey having ever expressed any reaction whatsoever. These initiatives have instigated the registration of this area, as a community biotope, that is, a region requiring ‘special managing measures’ for its protection.⁴⁷³



Naval charts of Imia region submitted by the Greek government to international fora, 1996.
Source: Costas Simitis Foundation Repository.

⁴⁷² The Köppen climate classification, is named after the Russian climatologist Wladimir Köppen.

⁴⁷³ Untitled Document, Costas Simitis Foundation Repository.



image protected by copyright

Greek Minister of External Affairs Georgios Pangalos (middle), joined by Minister of Defence Gerasimos Arsenis and government spokesperson Athanassios Reppas during a televised press conference produce a Turkish map that shows Imia in Greek territorial waters, January 1996. With his finger on the islets, Minister Pangalos said: "Of course this map does not show the islets themselves, but the border line [on the map] is even closer to the Turkish coast than in our own maps"⁴⁷⁴.

Source: ΑΠΕ/Ρ. Saitas.

More recently, Greece's inclusion of Imia/Kardak in the EU "Natura 2000" programme stirred reactions from the Turkish side, prompting the spokesman for the Turkish Foreign Ministry to comment that "this is not the first time Greece has sought to exploit [environmental] programmes in the Aegean"⁴⁷⁵.

Indeed, in the mid-90s the Greek government had drafted a programme that aimed at establishing a number of marine protected areas in the Aegean with the intent to secure territory in the archipelago⁴⁷⁶. The plan was drafted during the Administration of Prime Minister Andreas Papandreou in 1994-95, but was never actualised, partly due to the severity of the Imia crisis. The obvious goal of this venture was to claim sovereignty over these rocks and the territorial waters around them as a *fait accompli*, without ever resorting to military means. It involved setting up basic infrastructures on every single rock of the Aegean: a metal flag with the Greek colours, basic docks, huts, a small church, and a few tanks filled with water and gasoline, enough to accommodate environmentalists and students who wanted to study their unspoilt flora and fauna. Eventually, the goal was to settle a permanent inhabitant/guardian on every rock. This plan was drafted jointly by the Ministries of Defence, Internal Affairs, Maritime Affairs, as well as the Ministry of Agriculture, which conducted a series of meteorological and botanical studies to determine what types of plants and crops could survive in these harsh terrains to secure the "insisting presence of unique ecosystems"⁴⁷⁷.

⁴⁷⁴ The press conference is available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s0S3QcJlo_0.

⁴⁷⁵ "Greece Exploits EU's Natura 2000 program through new law", *Ahval News*, April 1, 2018 ahvalnews.com/greece-turkey/greece-exploiting-eus-natura-2000-program-through-new-law-turkish-foreign-ministry (accessed May 2018). Sometimes, however, the "environmental dimension" highlighted by the Greek government acts against the militarisation of the rocks. In 2005 the islets of Anydro and Petrokaravo, belonging to the same Wildlife Refuge as Imia/Kardak and Farmakonissi, became the first areas in Greece where military exercises using live ammunition were stopped for environmental reasons, due to their importance as breeding grounds for the endangered Eleonora Falcons. See "Live ammunition threatening biodiversity" *Archipelagos Institute*, www.archipelago.gr/en/combating/live-ammunition-threatening-biodiversity/ (accessed May 2019).

⁴⁷⁶ The use of marine conservation zones as instruments of territoriality is a well documented practice worldwide. See, for example, Gray J. Noella, "Charted waters? Tracking the production of conservation territories on the high seas", *International Social Science Journal*, 68 no. 229-230 (October, 2018).

⁴⁷⁷ "Εστησαν Ελλάδα στις βραχονησίδες / Installing Greece on the rock-islets", *To Vima*, January 20, 1996.

In researching state-making technologies deployed on these rocks, I am reminded of the work of Eyal Weizman and Fazal Sheikh on a different shoreline, the “conflict shoreline” of the Negev Desert in Israel/Palestine. “The threshold of the state”, Weizman argues, “is not only a natural condition but is defined as an interplay between meteorological data, patterns of human use, and plant species”.⁴⁷⁸ Not too dissimilar from Israeli state attempts to “make the desert bloom”⁴⁷⁹, the rock-island colonization project was pitched as a romantic retreat to the natural, untamed Greek extremities, and, of course, a nation-constructing endeavour. A “Union of Rock-Island Frontiersmen” was founded and a number of incentives were offered for people to apply, which many did. Farmakonissi, which was at the time without a military barracks and therefore uninhabited, was included in this plan. The programme was short lived. It was abandoned after the Imia incident, and, to this day, it remains largely unknown. Beyond a handful of cut outs from newspapers at the time that enthusiastically report on its progress⁴⁸⁰, an interview that was reportedly given by then Greek minister of Defence Manolis Beteniotis to the CNN, and, one would imagine, some decaying concrete docks and rusting flagpoles, there is no other evidence of its existence or its completion status⁴⁸¹.

The conversation was recently revived due to increasing speculation on the presence of hydrocarbons in the Aegean seabed, and was once again masked as a conservation effort. In a 2017 communiqué to the press, the Greek Vice-Minister of Maritime Affairs at the time, Nektarios Santorinios, stated that:

The Secretary of the Aegean and of Island Affairs is making great efforts to populate twenty-eight small islands in the Aegean Sea, with the ultimate goal that these islands will develop some independent financial activity, mainly for reasons of national security. Our target is to use the existing infrastructures from the 1990s, of course adding some minor works, in order to render these islands inhabitable, so that they can sustain activities like the observation of natural wealth, the facilitation of the work of environmental organizations, groups, researchers from abroad, with the ultimate goal of adding to the touristic development of Greece.⁴⁸²

As vice-minister Santorinios almost gives away, if these rocks could be proven to sustain human life and permanent financial activity through environmental tourism, that would mean that the Greek

⁴⁷⁸ Eyal Weizman, Fazal Sheikh, *The Conflict Shoreline: Colonialism as Climate Change in the Negev Desert*, (Göttingen: Steidl, 2015), 10.

⁴⁷⁹ “make the desert bloom” refers to the state-sanctioned agricultural programme to cultivate parts of the Negev desert in Israel/Palestine. This land modification programme involved casting the desert landscape as previously uninhabitable, and therefore, erasing the Bedouin populations that had lived in it for centuries.

⁴⁸⁰ Generously provided to me by the historian and investigative journalist Tasos Kostopoulos.

⁴⁸¹ When, in 2011, two members of parliament asked the relevant ministries to confirm its existence, the request bounced around different offices for weeks, only for the MPs to receive one-liner replies stating that none of the ministries had knowledge of such a plan. My own attempts to locate documents confirming its existence have so far been unsuccessful. See for example the Ministry of Internal Affairs’ reply to a question posed by my far-right MP Kyriakos Velopoulos: <https://www.hellenicparliament.gr/UserFiles/67715b2c-ec81-4f0c-ad6a-476a34d732bd/7325332.pdf>.

⁴⁸² Communiqué from the Greek Vice-Minister of Maritime Affairs, Nektarios Santorinios, 12/07/2017, translated from Greek by the author.

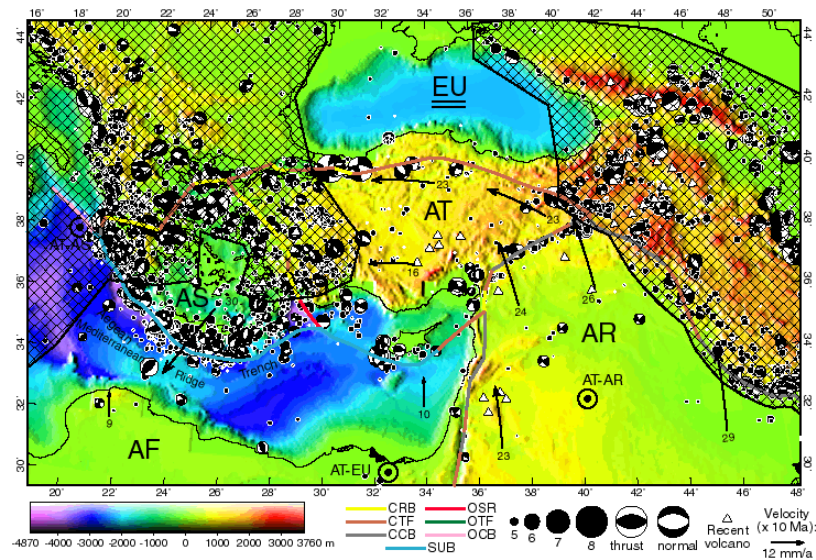
Government could lay claim on the continental shelf around them⁴⁸³. Further than securing Greek sovereignty on the rocks, the frontier that the “frontiersmen” would tame would extend vertically, out to the sky and into the ocean floor.



Setting up metal Greek flags in the rock-islets of Kalolimnos, Vatos, and, then-uninhabited, Farmakonissi, southeast Aegean Sea. The article reads: “Installing Greece on the rock-islets”, *To Vima* newspaper, 20/01/1996. Source: Tasos Kostopoulos private archive.

⁴⁸³ This is according to the provisions set forth by the 1997 UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS), available at: www.un.org/Depts/los/clcs_new/clcs_home, (accessed April 2019). See also Nevin Asli Toppare, *A Legal Approach to the Greek Turkish Continental Shelf Dispute at the Aegean Sea* (Ankara: Unpublished Master's Thesis, Department of International Relations Bilkent University, 2006).

3.1.5. Below the Surface: Territory as Volume



The tectonic plates of the Aegean Sea (AS) and Anatolia (AT), surrounded by the Africa (AF), Arabia (AR), and Eurasia (EU) plates. Source: Bird, P. (2003) "An updated digital model of plate boundaries"⁴⁸⁴

Taking Minister Santorinos's cue, I want to break from simplistic understandings of the Aegean dispute, and migrant crossings, as events that simply play out in the two-dimensions offered by traditional cartography, and instead "dive" underneath the water surface to close this section with a brief note on the importance of geology in these contexts.

While Greece founds its claims on the political geography of the archipelago, claiming a cultural and historical continuum of Greek habitation, Turkey resorts to geology. As a manual of the Turkish military academy claims, the Turkish position is that "there is scientific proof that the Aegean Sea was formed by the submersion of part of the Anatolian peninsula".⁴⁸⁵ Turkey therefore understands the Aegean islands as what Deleuze would call continental islands, born out of, and belonging to, the Asian continent. For Deleuze, "continental islands are accidental, derived islands. They are separated from a continent, born of disarticulation, erosion, fracture; they survive the absorption of what once contained them".⁴⁸⁶

"A distinct line in the seabed", the manual continues, "which forms an 'S' from north to south, splits the

⁴⁸⁴ Peter Bird, "An updated digital model of plate boundaries", *Geochemistry Geophysics Geosystems*, 4 no.3, (March 2003).

⁴⁸⁵ "Hizmete Özel Har Akademileri Komutanlığı Yayınlarından, Ege Ada, Adacık Ve Kayalıklarının Coğrafi-Tarihi-Hukuki Durumu Ve Uygulanan Politikalar", May 1996, Turkish Military Academy manual, Annex 6, 123-137, in Alkis Kourkoulas, *Ιμια, Κριτική Προσέγγιση του Τουρκικού Παράγοντα*, [Ιμια, A Critical Account of the Turkish Factor], (Athens: I.Sideris, 1997), translated from Greek by the author.

⁴⁸⁶ Gilles Deleuze, *Desert Islands and Other Texts 1953–1974*, (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2015), 9.

Aegean Sea in two. This zone (...) forms the boundary that separates the two tectonic plates⁴⁸⁷. Therefore, for Turkey, the Greek islands that are east of this line are not entitled to a *continental shelf* – a term understood differently by geologists and jurists, but generally denoting the continental margin which is between the shoreline and the shelf break - and instead form part of the Turkish/Anatolian continental shelf. As such, Turkey holds that expressions of sovereignty over the Aegean surface cannot directly “confer control of the resources beneath”⁴⁸⁸, over which it lays an equal claim. In the Aegean, politics, as the geographer Kathryn Yusoff notes, are “subtended by geology”⁴⁸⁹.

It is through this entanglement of geology with politics, that the right to explore the Aegean seabed, mostly for hydrocarbons, recurs as a point of contestation between the two countries. As early as 1976, when the Turkish oceanographic vessel *RV MTA Sismik 1 “Hora”*, under the escort of warships, entered the Aegean to conduct seismic surveys, the prominent Greek politician at the time, and later Prime Minister, Andreas Papandreou, asked for it to be sunk⁴⁹⁰, prompting Henry Kissinger, then US Minister of Foreign Affairs to intervene, and assure his Greek counterpart that,

the exploration of “Sismik 1” will not affect the legal claims of the two countries over the continental shelf. Moreover, Turkish exploration in the contested areas *will not involve contact with the seabed*.⁴⁹¹

At the time of writing, in late 2020, tensions between the two countries over the right to explore for hydrocarbons in the Aegean seabed are as high as they have ever been. Compounded by successive global financial crises, war sirens rang anew when the Turkish oceanographic vessel *Oruç Reis* began conducting seismic surveys off the Greek island of Kastellorizo.

The above historical cartography of the “Grey Rocks” of the Aegean serves to illustrate how this maritime space, wedged between tectonic plates and nation states, and materially multiple, is constantly configured across three dimensions. In this archipelago, to borrow from Stuart Elden, “Struggles for space and resources are no longer fought on a planar level”. Rather, “contestation has depth, and

⁴⁸⁷ The Aegean Sea Plate is a small tectonic plate located between southern Greece and western Turkey. Its southern edge is a subduction zone south of Crete, where the African Plate is being swept under the Aegean Sea Plate. To the north is the Eurasian Plate. See Meier, T., et al. “A Model for the Hellenic Subduction Zone in the area of Crete based on seismological investigations”, in *The Geodynamics of the Aegean and Anatolia*, ed. Tuncay Taymaz and Yildirim Dilek (London: Geological Society, 2007), 194–195.

⁴⁸⁸ Jon Phillips, Order and the Offshore: The territories of Deep Water Oil Production, in Peters et al., *Territory Beyond Terra*., 51-68.

⁴⁸⁹ Kathryn Yusoff, “Geologic subjects: nonhuman origins, geomorphic aesthetics and the art of becoming *inhuman*” *Cultural Geographies*, 22 no.3 (2015): 383–407.

⁴⁹⁰ “«Βυθίσατε το Χόρα»: Όταν Ελλάδα και Τουρκία έφτασαν στα πρόθυρα πολέμου στις 6/8/1976, ‘Sink The Hora’: When Greece and Turkey Came on the Brink of War on 6/8/1976”, *To Vima*, August 6, 2020 www.tovima.gr/2020/08/06/politics/vythisate-to-xora-otan-ellada-kai-tourkia-eftasan-sta-prothyra-polemou-stis-6-8-1976/ (accessed October 2020).

⁴⁹¹ US Minister of Foreign Affairs Henry Kissinger to Greek Minister of Foreign Affairs Dimitrios Bitsios, 09.08.1976 (Wikileaks STATE 196890). Emphasis added.

territory has volume”⁴⁹². The question of contact, as Henry Kissinger’s letter revealed, is crucial in interrogating notions of territory, agency and sovereign violence in this archipelago. Whether involving oceanographic vessels and the sea bed, or coast guard vessels and migrant dinghies, as is the case with the two shipwrecks under examination, and the more recent “drift-backs” which are not covered in this thesis, *contact* emerges as yet another point of contention, and a threshold for the violence enacted between states and bodies to be recognized as such.

As I will demonstrate in the following section, “Black Waves”, these questions of agency, compounded by territorial disputes and ghostly histories of island detention accompany migrant vessels over the surface of the sea, and, in the case of an accident, follow them to the seabed, where objects, legislations and extractive imaginaries meet, and wherein, according to the slogan, “lies the security of every European”.

⁴⁹² Stuart Elden, “The Significance of Territory”, *Geographica Helvetica*, 65, no 1, (2013): 68. Airspace in the Aegean is also severely contested, but, for lack of space, will not be analysed here in depth.

3.2. **Black Waves**

3.2.1. (To) Surface

"What is the word for bringing bodies back from the water? From a 'liquid grave'? [...] The gravestone or tombstone marks the spot of internment, whether of ashes or the body. What marks the spot of subaquatic death?"

Marlene NourbeSe Philip, excerpt from the poem *Zong!*⁴⁹³.

The wreck of the *Göznuru* was lifted from its resting ground at a depth of seventy-four metres in the Aegean seabed, 2.4 nautical miles north-east of Farmakonissi, on February the 18th by the oceanographic vessel *Φ/Γ ΘΕΤΙΣ*⁴⁹⁴. When the naval architects who were contracted to forensically inspect the *Göznuru* for signs of contact with the Coast Guard vessel entered its hold, they found the body of a child that had been trapped there during the sinking. Eight more bodies of women and children had been retrieved by divers from inside the same hold and another two, belonging to a woman and a child, had been found floating a few miles north of the sinking location a day after the shipwreck, by the Turkish Coast Guard. A last body, belonging to a woman, was found several days later on a southern shore of Samos island, having been carried some 20nm north by the prevailing south-eastern winds. The coroner's reports describing the state these bodies were in after their month-long encounter with the sea are gruesome: they detail missing flesh, fish bites and accumulations of algae.

Necroviolence, which, as I discussed in the previous chapter, refers to Jason De Leon's analysis of the corporeal mistreatment of migrant bodies⁴⁹⁵ here does the work of erasure, to be sure. But when examined against the geography of the Aegean Sea, it can be also understood to perform a second, more nuanced, task. Contrary to the vast Sonora desert, other Mediterranean crossing routes that occur through open sea, or Evros/Meriç, with its twigs and muds holding bodies inside the river, in the dense Aegean archipelago it is very rare for people to disappear altogether. Even in the uncommon cases where they are not immediately retrieved from the sea or carried by currents to a nearby shore, drowned bodies almost always eventually *surface*, albeit often at a stage of decomposition where they cannot be identified by their relatives. As Haglund and Sorg note on maritime taphonomies, after drowning,

the body sinks to the sediment surface of the benthic zone. As decay ensues, gases are generated in the body and it ascends to the surface, which may take days or weeks, depending on the season and the

⁴⁹³ Philip NourbeSe, *Zong!*, (Conneticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), 201. The idea of the Mediterranean Sea being conceptualized as a grave has not been without debate. For a critique see Naor Ben-Yehovada, "Is the Mediterranean's Seabed a Grave?" *Brown University*, March 13, 2017 www.youtube.com/watch?v=CINCo-aizOM.

⁴⁹⁴ A similar request to retrieve the vessel in Agathonissi in order to determine the precise location of the shipwreck was rejected by the authorities.

⁴⁹⁵ De León, *The land of Open Graves*, 69.

water temperature. While submerged, then in various parts of the water column, and again once raised, the body will be scavenged by large and small animals, as well as algae.⁴⁹⁶

In the context of maritime migrations, these surfacing bodies carry with them the embodied testimony of the perils of these crossings and the violence that is inherent to the European border apparatus. Rather than performing a “politics of disappearance”⁴⁹⁷, necroviolence is here tasked precisely with making death visible. It produces a harrowing exhibit that haunts would-be border crossers waiting on the shores of Turkey and often deters them from attempting a similar route. A subtler form of “aggressive deterrence”, but a horrific one at that.

In the watery edges of the European Union bodies are not simply submerged, I argue, they are *subsumed*, both by the sea itself, and by the “excess of law”⁴⁹⁸ that is produced at the European Frontier, in the Aegean, as in Evros/Meriç. In this way, bodies become constituent, and constitutive, of the larger ecology that is the European external border assemblage. Tragically, this is also true in the material sense. As the American theorist Christina Sharpe points out in her seminal work “In the Wake”, drowned bodies dissolve into organic chemical substances and stay in the water for long periods of time, a duration which she calls “residence time”. Reflecting on death by drowning in the middle passage, Sharpe claims the bodies of black slaves who were thrown overboard into the Atlantic are still materially present in the ocean in the form of nutrients⁴⁹⁹.

Dissolving into the contested materiality of the Aegean sea, the bodies of asylum seekers drowning in this external border of Europe, whether trapped inside the hull of Göznuru, or washing up in the coves of Agathonissi, represent what cultural studies scholar Joseph Pugliese terms “geocorpographies”, a “violent enmeshment of the flesh and blood of the body within the geopolitics of war, race [...] empire”⁵⁰⁰. As such, they are locatable within the complex territorial processes in the Aegean region, pertaining both to the European project of security, and to littoral disputes between Greece and Turkey. Returning to NourbeSe Phillips’s verse at the top of this section, they also become legible through their embeddedness within longer histories of forceful displacement across not only the Aegean and Mediterranean Seas, but also across maritime regions globally. To *exaqua* them (as Phillips coins the aquatic equivalent of exhumation) is to probe these entangled histories, both global and local, and to

⁴⁹⁶ William Haglund and Marcella Sorg, “Human Remains in water Environments”, in *Advances in Forensic Taphonomy: Method, Theory, and Archaeological Perspectives*, eds., William Haglund and Marcella Sorg, (Boca Raton: CRC Press, 2001), 201-218, quoted in Elaine Stratford and Theresa Murray, “The Body of the Drowned: Convicts and Shipwrecks”, in Peters et al., *Territory Beyond Terra*, 171-172.

⁴⁹⁷ De León, *The Land of Open Graves*, 69.

⁴⁹⁸ Julie Evans, “Where Lawlessness is Law: the Settler-Colonial Frontier as a Legal Space of Violence”, *Australian Feminist Law* 30, no.1, (2009): 3-22.

⁴⁹⁹ Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: on Blackness and Being*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016), 58.

⁵⁰⁰ Joseph Pugliese, “Geocorpographies of Torture”, *ACRAWSA e-journal* 3, no.1, (2007): 12.

“reveal the violent, material effects of state practices that analysis at different scales renders invisible.”⁵⁰¹

3.2.2. Continuums: The “Black Aegean”

The distribution of dead bodies inside the wreck of the *Göznuru* seems to reflect a continuum in typologies of involuntary maritime border crossings, which is best explained by a people smuggler interviewed by the Italian anthropologist Maurizio Albahari: “Passengers have to stay below deck, even if they vomit” he says. “The centre of gravity on the boat has to stay low. One has to be tough with them, because if they come up there is a risk of sinking.”⁵⁰² It is this embodied feeling of claustrophobia, sickness and fear, and the imminence of death by drowning that connects the bodies trapped in the hold of the *Göznuru* to those that were crammed and shackled inside the slave-ships of the middle passage. Edouard Glissant’s description of the slave-ship hold as “the belly of the of the boat [...] pregnant with as many dead as living under the sentence of death”, a “womb abyss”⁵⁰³ echoes in the Aegean.

As Christina Sharpe proposes, “what we are facing today is a new declination of an old and repressed issue that haunts and composes the European project of modernity itself: the ‘black Mediterranean’ is a constituent unit of analysis for understanding contemporary forms of policing Europe’s borders”.⁵⁰⁴ For Sharpe, here recasting what Paul Gilroy has called the “Black Atlantic”⁵⁰⁵, “the semiotics of the slave ship continue”⁵⁰⁶ through contemporary racialized existence. They are ghosted by refugee crossings (and deaths by drowning) in the Mediterranean, as they are by mass incarceration and police killings of black people in the US⁵⁰⁷.

⁵⁰¹ Kate S. Coddington, “Colonial Territorial Imaginaries: Maritime Mobilities and the ‘Tow Backs’ of Asylum seekers” in *Territory Beyond Terra*, eds. Kimberley Peters, Philip Steinberg, Elaine Stratford, (London & New York: Rowman & Littlefield 2018).

⁵⁰² Maurizio Albahari, *Crimes of Peace, Mediterranean Migrations at the World’s Deadliest Border*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 97.

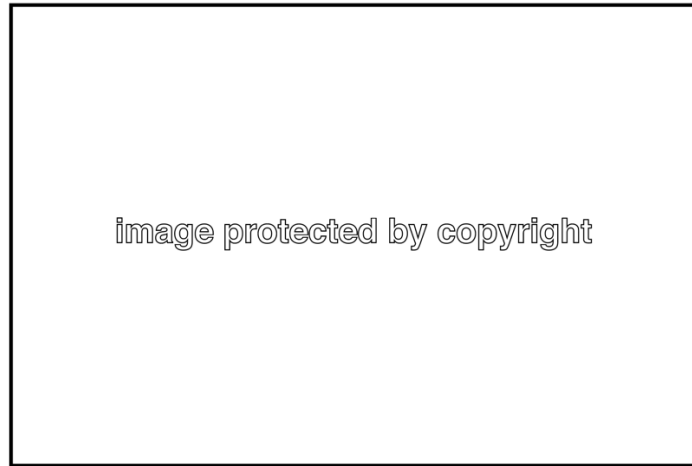
⁵⁰³ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 6.

⁵⁰⁴ Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 58.

⁵⁰⁵ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic. Modernity and Double Consciousness*, (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

⁵⁰⁶ Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 21.

⁵⁰⁷ Following the killing of George Floyd by the Minneapolis Police in June 2020, activists and scholars were quick to point to the continuums between the predicament of black and other racialized and illegalized bodies in the US and the Mediterranean. See for example Achille Mbembe, ‘Le Droit universel à la respiration [The Universal Right to Breathe]’, *AOC Media*, April 6, 2020, aoc.media/opinion/2020/04/05/le-droit-universel-a-la-respiration/ (accessed June 2020). And Judith Sunderland, “Under Water or Under Knee, We Can’t Breathe” *Human Rights Watch*, June 11, 2020, www.hrw.org/news/2020/06/11/under-water-or-under-knee-we-cant-breathe?fbclid=IwAR1FwUnmS0qwVIT_4eEXDSmBhQi_gtdD3xF4VN9AICw2ExZyY0LE7fL81wk (accessed October 2020). In Athens, a graffiti painted by the train tracks read: I can’t breathe, in Minneapolis, in Evros, in Omonoia (Omonoia being a notorious police station in Athens where several migrants have mysteriously died in custody).



The entrance to the hold of the *Göznuru*, Lakki, Leros, 07/02/2014. Source: Farmakonissi case file.

If, in this section of the chapter, I choose to place particular emphasis on the consonances of the contemporary migrant condition with the history of the transatlantic slave trade, it is not to attempt direct, and reductive, parallels between the horrors of the Middle Passage and the perils of forced displacement across the Mediterranean. Such an attempt would be reductive for both, relativizing slavery and denying the agency of people who manage to flee war zones⁵⁰⁸. Instead, and in full knowledge of my own delicate position as a white (albeit arguably on the “wrong” hues of white) European researcher situated on the safe side of the border, I attempt to draw from, and build upon, the extensive black and postcolonial literature that has for years been concerned with understanding the entanglements of ships, racialized bodies and the materiality of the sea, to inform my own perception of this entanglement within the context of contemporary migration across the Aegean, an archipelago that is, like the “Black Atlantic”, unambiguously “laden with palpable death”.

Oceanic processes recur across post-colonial studies as analytical devices, metaphors for tropes of existence beyond the earth, and its bounded notions of territory and nationhood. However, if one is to read this literature against the unforgiving materiality of the Aegean border archipelago, or what we might reluctantly attempt to call the “Black Aegean”, two displacements are necessary. First, the binary division between earth and water must be undone, as it fails to capture the interstitiality of this uneven geography. Second, one must move beyond the metaphor, and the charged histories of the sea, and instead engage with the physical, material and geographical properties of the different components that make up this harsh terrain; the waves that sink migrant’s vessels, the rocks, cliffs, beaches and reefs, where drowned bodies and wrecks wash ashore, and the currents that carry them there. This reading of the metaphor *through* materiality is what lends this section of the thesis its title: “Black Waves”.

⁵⁰⁸ Maurice Stierl, “Of Migrant Slaves and Underground Railroads: Movement, Containment, Freedom”, *American Behavioral Scientist*, 64 vo.4, (2020): 456-479.

An archipelagic practice also requires looking at the body itself, however painful a sight that might present, and to examine its multiple entanglements with the ground, or the water, vis-à-vis state attempts to control, cartograph and legislate over it.

3.2.3. Archipelagic Causality: “Drowning Inside Sea Water”

However gruesome, the reports drafted by the forensic pathologists who examined the eleven bodies of the *Göznuru* in the island of Leros, lack a perpetrator. They determined the cause of death as “drowning in water” or “drowning due to excessive inhalation of water” without enquiring into how this drowning occurred⁵⁰⁹. Four years later, and within the context of the preliminary investigation into the Agathonissi shipwreck conducted by the Coast Guard of Samos, the coroner at the General Hospital of Samos was asked to determine “a) whether the deceased had died from natural, sudden, or violent causes and b) If their death was found to be violent, what is the evidence towards it”. Using a blue ball-point pen to fill in the few blank spaces in a standardized form, the coroner filed the deaths under category 21, titled “regarding a violent death”. This category had three subcategories in multiple-option-style boxes. The box ‘accident’ was checked.

- ☒ Accident
- ☐ Suicide
- ☐ Homicide

Under “cause”, he, like the coroner who had examined the *Göznuru*’s bodies four years prior, wrote: “drowning inside sea water”⁵¹⁰. The answer, confined within the pre-determined linguistic boundaries and boxed-in answers of medico-operational bureaucracy, seemed pre-determined. Upon receiving these forms, the Coast Guard in Samos wrote to the registry office in Agathonissi to close the case: “His/Her death seems to have been *caused by* sea water”⁵¹¹. At long last, the perpetrator had been found. Reading through these seemingly mundane documents, one can begin to see the contours of the anxiety of state institutions to conceal their responsibility for deaths at sea. Questions of violence and agency are addressed and summarily answered, photocopied and scanned time and again by court clerks to the point where they are barely legible. Following Susan Schuppli, the papers themselves serve as “material witnesses”⁵¹² to the event of evidence; they are mundane analogue codifications of border violence.

⁵⁰⁹ Death Certificates issued in the island of Leros, 22/01/2014-17/02/2014. Translated from Greek by the author.

⁵¹⁰ Death Certificates issued in the island of Samos, 20/03/2018. Translated from Greek by the author.

⁵¹¹ Letter from the Greek Coast Guard to the Agathonissi registry office, 23/03/2018. Emphasis added.

⁵¹² Schuppli, *Material Witness*.



Part of the Samos coroner's report, listing the deaths as an accident (left). Cropped photo showing the gloved hand of a Coast Guard officer holding a tag for body No.9 from the Agathonissi shipwreck (right). Source: Agathonissi case file.

A few days after the Farmakonissi incident, an anchorman of the most popular channel at the time in Greek TV commented in the evening news: "I do not accept the responsibility. It is not our fault if they take their families and try to cross the Aegean in a flimsy boat in mid-winter. Of course they will drown. I am not saying they *should* drown, but it isn't our fault". "After all it is the smugglers that put them into these vessels", his co-host agrees⁵¹³. As Maurizio Albahari comments on the trial that followed the shipwreck of the *Katër i Radës*, a vessel that sank in similar circumstances to the *Göznuru*, while carrying Albanian migrants to Italy across the straight of Otranto in 1997,

Relationships of causality are here simplified; causes of death are conveniently conflated and responsibility is shifted from the border agencies to smugglers, to the flimsy boats, to the unforgiving elements.⁵¹⁴

Death "inside sea water" is to be expected, the anchorman shouts in the TV screen. However questionable his motives and rhetoric, the anchorman is not far from the truth. From 2014 to 2020, drownings constituted 70 percent of global migrant deaths⁵¹⁵. In the Aegean sea alone, 1224 people have drowned since 2014⁵¹⁶. And yet, to claim that the sea alone is to blame for these deaths, to attribute it with full personhood and agency, is an act akin to Persian King Darius's mythical flogging the waters of the the North Aegean with 300 hundred lashes, after his invading armada was destroyed in a storm in the waters off Mount Athos⁵¹⁷. As is the case with Evros/Meriç, operational and medical language here work in tandem with the sensationalist language of the media to register the saline waters

⁵¹³ Mega Channel news, January 23, 2014, available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=sKRK3Zvmh3w. In Greek, translation by the author.

⁵¹⁴ Albahari, *Crimes of Peace*, 96.

⁵¹⁵ Laura Lo Presti, "Like a Map Over Troubled Water: (Un)mapping the Mediterranean Sea's Terraqueous Necropolitics", *e-flux*, May, 2020, www.e-flux.com/journal/109/330800/like-a-map-over-troubled-water-un-mapping-the-mediterranean-sea-s-terraqueous-necropolitics/ (accessed September 2020).

⁵¹⁶ Per IOM data, Tracking deaths along migratory routes, *Missing Migrants*, missingmigrants.iom.int/region/mediterranean?migrant_route%5B%5D=1377 (accessed November 2020).

⁵¹⁷ This story is related by the 5th century BC writer Herodotus, in his "Histories".

of the Aegean as the victimizer of border crossers, and use it to obfuscate the actions, policies and legislations that work to weaponise it. Concealed by these reports are the ways in which sea water is actively enlisted in territorializing practices, and vested with violent agency to expand the capacities of border defence. As Pezzani and Heller note of the central Mediterranean, “migrants do not only die at sea but through a strategic use of the sea”⁵¹⁸.

In the Aegean, the “pressure of the water” that Fahima described pulling the group apart in the sea off Agathonissi, carries not only bodies apart from each other but also contact further apart from trace⁵¹⁹, distancing perpetrator from victim, and event from evidence in a similar way to the flow of Evros carrying bodies downstream. As I argued earlier in this thesis, in any attempt to discuss these complex relationships of border causality, a dialectic approach will always fall short. One needs to stay close to the “melting” of cause and effect into each other, but also, specifically within the context of the archipelago, into the viscous body of the sea, over which these pelagic crossings (and stoppages) occur. To do that we need to replace dialectics with what the Barbadian poet Kamau Brathwaite has described as *tidalectics*⁵²⁰: a mode of enquiry that is cyclical rather than lineal, rhythmic, oceanic and abyssal rather than fixed in land, and encompassing the multiple intersections between bodies, sites, regions, legislations, territories and situated histories and presents of exile. Only then can we begin to *exaqua* the power relations that constitute the archipelago. Drawing from Eyal Weizman’s concept of “field causality”, I will call this form of causality, both situated and mobile, and specific to the materially viscous “field” that is the Aegean archipelago, *archipelagic causality*.

In what remains, I will attempt to flesh out this proposal. I will attempt an analysis of these archipelagic forces that converged to weaponise the sea on the night of January the 20th, 2014, and in the early morning hours of March the 16th, 2018. These, I will discuss, include (but are not limited to) designed architectures, specific operations of border patrol, as they do oceanic processes.

⁵¹⁸ Pezzani, *Liquid Traces*, 659.

⁵¹⁹ See Adrian Lahoud “Floating Bodies” in Forensic Architecture (ed.), *Forensis*.

⁵²⁰ Kamau Brathwaite, *The Arrivants: A New World Trilogy*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981).

3.2.4. **A Sea Wall:** Winds, Currents, Temperatures, Waves, Operations

On 24 January, 2020, six years after the sinking of the *Göznuru*, the Greek military issued an invitation to tender for the construction of a “floating defensive system” with the purpose of addressing the “urgent need to repel increasing refugee flows”. According to the description, the floating barrier, would be 1,5 kilometres long. It would rise at least 50 centimetres above the sea surface on a calm day, and would continue for another 60 centimetres below it. It would be modular, made of 25-50 metre pieces, and orange in colour, with reflectors to make it visible in the sea both during the day and at night. Its net would have an opening of 20 millimetres and could withstand a force of 130 kilopond, the equivalent of a one-tonne vessel hitting it at a speed of 13 knots⁵²¹. Its anchors would go 120 metres deep into the sea bed, allowing it to be installed as a pilot project off the northern shores of Lesbos island, with the plan to extend it along several other parts of the maritime border⁵²².

Following the publication of this tender, several human rights organisations criticised the project as dangerous and inhumane⁵²³. Moreover, the geography and geopolitics of the Aegean, with a border line that spans over a thousand, contested, kilometres, and is continuously intersected by global maritime trade routes, render the project all but impossible. Even though the government pledged to have this floating fence installed by July 2020, at the time of writing, in late 2020, the plan remains unrealised. Given its incomplete status, it is likely that the Greek government’s announcement of this floating barrier was yet another moment in what the American border scholar Nicholas De Genova has called “the border spectacle”⁵²⁴: a performance of state sovereignty and exclusion at the nation’s confines. As is the case with the unrealised, 120-kilometre-long moat along the Evros border, and many other border fences, I argue that this floating barrier is merely the rendering-visible of an architecture of border defence that is already in place and which relies on the very forces this barrier will be designed to withstand: the forces of the sea.

Whichever metaphor one goes with, a wall, a shield, or a moat, the Aegean Sea is an interstitial defensive architecture in and of itself. To paraphrase Jason De Leon’s enquiry into a more-than-human

⁵²¹ I thank Yankos Pasmazoglou for this calculation and for being available to answer all my thermodynamics-related questions.

⁵²² Greek Supreme Military Command, “Πρόσκληση Συμμετοχής σε Διαπραγμάτευση για την Προμήθεια Πλωτών Προστατευτικών Συστημάτων προς Κάλυψη Κατεπείγουσας Ανάγκης Οφειλομένης σε Γεγονότα Απρόβλεπτα στην Αναθέτουσα Αρχή, Εξαιτίας της Αδίρητης και Επείγουσας Ανάγκης Ανάσχεσης των Αυξημένων Προσφυγικών Ροών [Invitation to Tender for the Supply of Floating Protective Systems to Cover the Urgent Need Resulting from Events Unforeseen to the Tendering Authority, Due to the Urgent Need to Repel the Increasing Refugee Flows]”, January 24, 2020.

⁵²³ “Greece: “Floating wall” to stop refugees puts lives at risk”, *Amnesty International*, January 30, 2020 www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/01/greece-floating-wall-to-stop-refugees-puts-lives-at-risk/ (accessed January 2020).

⁵²⁴ Nicolas De Genova, “Spectacles of Migrant Illegality, the Scene of Exclusion, the Obscene of Exclusion”, *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 36, no. 7, (2013).

border wall to which I alluded in the previous chapter, the Aegean border is equal parts military, infrastructure, and law as it is waves, currents, temperatures, and marine life.

i. Archive of Operations⁵²⁵ : Xenios Zeus, 2012-2014

"We must make their lives unliveable. They should know, as they come in [the country] they are going to be imprisoned. Otherwise we are ineffective, we are becoming the most attractive place for immigrants."

The quote, uttered a month before the Farmakonissi shipwreck, famously belongs to the chief of Greek police at the time, Nikos Papagiannopoulos, from a leaked briefing he gave to police officers⁵²⁶. Papagiannopoulos' words were meant to clarify the scope of Operation *Xenios Zeus*. First implemented in 2012 and named after the ancient Greek god Zeus – patron of the stranger and God of hospitality (the Operation literally translates as "Hospitable Zeus"), the operation was designed to "restore order and security" in the centre of Athens and to "close the country's borders" to flows of "low quality illegal aliens" (*Iathrometanastes*)⁵²⁷. Document checks based on racial profiling were initiated in the streets, detention centres and the Evros fence were built and push-back operations in the Aegean and Evros/Meriç regions became routine practice⁵²⁸. The xenophobic rhetoric unleashed by Xenios Zeus responded to a displacement of the public opinion towards the far-right during the austerity years, which was epitomized by the emergence of the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn⁵²⁹. In so doing, the government sought to appease the frustration of a growing body of financially strained and unemployed electorate, and deflect it onto the bodies of racialized "others". At the apex of the financial crisis, therefore, migrant death and incarceration under Operation *Xenios Zeus* served as a decoy, a ritualized spectacle through which the state reinforced its power over its citizen and non-citizen subjects. With fascist ideals not only gaining electoral ground, but at the same time penetrating the Greek security and armed forces –

⁵²⁵ Frontex used to maintain a, now defunct, "Archive of Operations" page on their website. The use of the term here nods to that.

⁵²⁶ translated from Greek by author. See Amnesty International Press Release, December 19, 2013, 3.bp.blogspot.com/-oVlQEFzYSdU/UrPjVUGTqkI/AAAAAAAAADRG/DCc_rph7DSM/s1600/DELTIO+TYPOU+AMNESTY.jpg, (accessed April 2019).

⁵²⁷ All quotes belong to Nikos Dendias. Minister of Internal Affairs at the time. See "Δένδιας: Ο Ξένιος Ζεύς δεν έχει τέλος [Dendias: no end in sight for Xenios Zeus]" *Kathimerini*, October 2, 2012 www.kathimerini.gr/15521/article/epikairotha/politikh/dendias-o-3enios-zeys-den-exei-telos (accessed April 2019).

⁵²⁸ Pro Asyl, "Pushed Back: Systematic Human Rights Violations Against Refugees in the Aegean Sea and at the Greek-Turkish Land Border", November 2013, available at: <https://www.proasyl.de/en/material/pushed-back-systematic-human-rights-violations-against-refugees-in-the-aegean-sea-and-the-greek-turkish-land-border/>.

⁵²⁹ For many activists, and human rights organizations, the three-day-long "pogrom" unleashed by Golden Dawn battalions against migrants in the streets of central Athens in May 10-13, 2011, was the seed that birthed 'Xenios Zeus'. See Human Rights Watch, "Hatred in the Streets: Xenophobic Violence in Greece", July 2012, <https://www.hrw.org/el/report/2012/07/10/256338>.

including the Coast Guard - to a great degree⁵³⁰ the Farmakonissi shipwreck came as little surprise. Rather, it is locatable in the overlap of the two “crises” that defined political modalities in Greece during the 2010s: the “financial crisis”, and the “refugee crisis” for which it served as a predecessor and a warning.

This anti-immigrant climate produced new ecologies of living that were felt as acutely in the centres of Greek cities as in the country’s borders. Already militarised within the context of the dispute between Greece and Turkey, with “Xenios Zeus” the Aegean archipelago was further configured into what Lorenzo Pezzani and Charles Heller have critically called a “hostile environment”⁵³¹. For Pezzani and Heller, expanding a term that was used to describe anti-immigration legislation introduced by the UK home office at the same time as “Xenios Zeus”,

the environment, understood as a political effect rather than a simple ‘natural’ background to human action, stops being simply a site of power, and becomes one of its modes of operations. It is not only that the weather itself is being weaponised, as migrants are made to die of cold or heat; but that forms of racialised violence have become, in a certain sense, as pervasive as the climate.⁵³²

These socio-atmospherics of power are similar to what Christina Sharpe describes as the “weather”: “the totality of our environments”⁵³³. For Sharpe, writing on black existence in the US, this is a weather that is anti-black, and anti-blackness is today as pervasive as climate. At the external borders of the EU, the skin colour palette expands to include (or exclude) other hues of non- white.

Uncannily, when asked to explain why they were towing the *Göznuru* towards the Turkish coast, the crew of *ΠΑΣ-136* replied that it was due to the weather, which made the towing towards Farmakonissi dangerous. To be sure, the crew was referring to the strong southerly winds blowing that day, but their statement could also be interpreted against the operational framework of “Xenios Zeus”. Indeed, the waves that sunk the *Göznuru* that night were birthed by both weathers. After spending a month in the depths of the Aegean Sea both the wreck, and the bodies trapped inside it, also *weathered*, bearing the corporeal testimony of the intended hostility of Operation “Xenios Zeus”.

⁵³⁰ Polling stations in Athens where policemen vote registered upwards of 50% for the Golden Dawn. see Barnaby Phillips, “High police support for Greece’s Golden Dawn”, *Al Jazeera*, December 20, 2012, www.aljazeera.com/blogs/europe/2012/12/52586, (accessed April 2019).

⁵³¹ part of this research was presented at an homonymous exhibition curated by Lorenzo Pezzani. See www.argekunst.it/en/2018/10/30/lorenzo-pezzani-hostile-environments/.

⁵³² Pezzani, “Hostile Environments”.

⁵³³ Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 104.

ii. Archive of Operations: Poseidon Sea, 2008-Present

Xenios Zeus drew on a long-standing nationalist discourse that produces the modern Greek state as the descendant of Ancient Greece⁵³⁴ and rightful inheritor of the Aegean Sea. This discourse is today carried forward through Frontex's Operation *Poseidon Sea*, named after the ancient Greek god of the sea, and brother of Zeus. The first *Poseidon* Operations, *Poseidon Sea* and *Poseidon Land*, were launched in 2008, with a focus on safeguarding Greece's –and by extension, Europe's external- sea and land borders respectively. The roots of Operation *Poseidon*, however, like those of FRONTEX itself, can be traced back to the 1985 Schengen agreement which aimed at “abolishing checks on the movement of persons at [the] ‘internal’ borders [of Europe] by transferring checks to [its] ‘external’ frontiers”⁵³⁵, therefore introducing a regime of differentiated mobility between the European core and its margins, and “frontierizing” the Mediterranean region. Following the erection of the Evros/Meriç fence in 2012, and the subsequent increase in maritime crossings, the agency scaled *Poseidon* up to what is at the time of writing called Operation *Poseidon Rapid Intervention*.

The infamous EU-Turkey deal of March 2016 further served to solidify the Aegean Sea. With this agreement, the rocky shores of the Greek islands and the Turkish coast were to be the walls of “fortress Europe”, and the Aegean Sea, its moat.

Coming four years after the *Göznuru*, the shipwreck in Agathonissi is the direct result of this solidification of the Aegean. By 2018, crossing this stretch of sea had become an extremely difficult and, by extension, dangerous endeavour. More military assets from countries all over Europe were deployed to the Greek Aegean, while the Turkish side of the border was suddenly patrolled with equal intensity (a change which is reflected in the witnesses testifying that their vessel took in water while being chased by a vessel of the Turkish coast guard). With Greece and Turkey being equal partners in the agreement, pushbacks were no longer a possibility for the Greek coast guard. Abandonment at sea emerged as the closest alternative.

When considered against the deadly drift of the two families from Iraq and Afghanistan towards the eastern coasts of Agathonissi, or against the waves that sunk the *Göznuru*, the very name of the Operation, *Poseidon Sea*, points to a force that is not simply assembled to patrol and operate on the surface of the sea, but also, like Poseidon himself, aspires to harness the very matter of the archipelago, and to form it into shape to materialize forms of territory and agency.

⁵³⁴ See Katerina Rozakou, “Solidarians in the land of Xenios Zeus, Migrant deportability and the radicalisation of solidarity”, in *Critical Times in Greece*, ed. Dimitris Dalakoglou and Georgios Agelopoulos.

⁵³⁵ William Walters “Mapping Schengenland: Denaturalizing the Border” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 20 no. 5 (October 2002): 561-580.

Poseidon's operational mythopoetics echo the very etymological origin of the Aegean Sea. According to one account, the sea took its name from the ancient Greek word *αἶξ* (pronounced *aix*), which stands for goat. This is because, according to linguists, the ancient Greeks used to describe the breaking waves of the Aegean as goats, in the same way that in English they are described as “white horses” and in French as “moutons” (sheep). A second, more obscure explanation of the name holds that the word comes from the ancient Greek *αἶγίς* (aegis). Aegis is a word which can assume many meanings. Coming from the verb *αἶσσω* (*aïssō*), meaning “to rush or move violently”, aegis can stand for “violent windstorm”. In ancient Greek mythology, Aegis was also Zeus’s protective shield. Through this etymological ambiguity, the Aegean, both wave and shield, emerges as a materially unruly space, the violent movements of which are explicitly integrated into strategies of border defence. They enhance the capacity of border agencies and they shield, to use the EU commissioner Ursula von der Leyen’s words, European territory from unwanted visitors.

It was the latter myth that prompted the US navy to name its Lockheed Martin-produced integrated naval weapons system “Aegis”⁵³⁶. Also forming part of NATO’s European missile defence system, the Aegis system is today carried on over 100 NATO ships, several of which take turns to patrol the Aegean against migrant crossings: full circle.

A 2014 US Navy recruitment poster, featuring US warships and airplanes arranged in V shape and cutting through the sea and sky respectively, best captures this double bind between tempest and defensive weapon. It reads:

Sometimes we rush in after the storm,
Sometimes we are the storm

Reflecting on this poster, critical geographers and authorities in the field of “landscape infrastructures” Pierre Bélanger and Alexander Arroyo comment in their book *Ecologies of Power* how “it is this cross-scalar capacity and trans-media fluency that distinguishes [the US Army’s] multi dimensionality and mutability from any other forms, forces or fields of operations in the world.”⁵³⁷ I argue that, in the last decade, this ability to shapeshift between elements and scales, to mutate from culture to nature and back, has also become a key component of mechanisms of border defence at Europe’s frontiers. As I will argue below, operational capacities under *Poseidon* are nowadays equally calculated in military assets as they are in winds, currents, temperatures and waves.

⁵³⁶ Lockheed Martin, “Aegis: The Shield of the Fleet”, www.lockheedmartin.com/en-us/products/aegis-combat-system (accessed December 2020).

⁵³⁷ Bélanger, Arroyo, *Ecologies of Power*, 18.

Frontex Situation Centre

Eurosur Fusion Services: environmental

- Past, current, and forecasted weather and oceanographic conditions
- Depiction of meteorological trends
- Weather alerts for predefined criteria

- 31 Incident Reporting
- 32 Vessel Monitoring and Tracking
- 33 Tracking Vessels of Interest
- 34 Vessel Detection
- 35 Waves**
- 36 Vessel Data Dictionary
- 37 Maritime Simulation
- 38 Satellite Imagery
- 39 Airborne Surveillance
- 310 Visualisation Tools
- 311 Coastal Monitoring
- 312 Risk-Register Monitoring
- 313 Multisensor Imageport / Mapping

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EFIS Weather application

Weather data: “winds”

- Wind speed:
 - wind flow velocity
- Wind (barbs):
 - Graphic that represents both wind speed and direction
- Wind gusts:
 - Sudden, brief increase in the speed of the wind followed by a lull.
 - Duration is usually less than 20 seconds
 - Highest 3 seconds duration wind speed at 10 metres

EFIS Weather application

Weather data: “temperatures”

- Air temperature 2m:
 - 2 meters above the ground
- Apparent temperature:
 - Perceived by humans,
 - Caused by the combined effects of
 - Air temperature,
 - Relative humidity
 - Wind

EFIS Weather application

Weather data: “waves”

- Swell
 - Wind-generated waves that are not significantly affected by the local wind at that time.
 - They have been generated elsewhere or some time ago.
- Wind wave
 - Generated by local winds
- Significant wave height
 - Mean wave height (trough to crest) of the highest third part of all waves
 - Used as a measure of the height of ocean waves

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FRONTEx EUROPEAN BORDER AND COAST GUARD AGENCY

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Slides from a power point presentation of the European Border Surveillance System (EUROSUR), which combines meteorological, oceanographic, satellite and other cartographic data in order to “enhance situational awareness and improve the reaction capability of the Member States”. Source: Frontex.



Frontex executive director, Fabrice Leggeri, gesturing over an operational map of the Aegean. Source: Frontex.

iii. **Winds, Currents, Temperatures:** A Deadly Drift

Prosecutor: Do you know how many hours you stayed in the sea?

Quassim: Yes, I know that I stayed from 07:00 in the morning until just before it got dark,

Prosecutor: This time of the year, the sea temperature is 16 degrees Celsius. How do you explain the fact that you survived for so many hours in the water?⁵³⁸

The strategic use of the body of the sea to effect harm, and erase trails of responsibility for such harm, is evident in both court files. In the case of Agathonissi, as the above dialogue demonstrates, the main preoccupation of the state from the outset was to disprove the survivors' claim that the group could have spent twelve hours in the water, and twelve more on the rocky shore. In what evolved more like an interrogation and less like the gathering of testimony, arguments to do with the material makeup and the bodily effects of the archipelago were used to frame the survivors' feat as an impossibility. Scrutinized against meteorological and cartographic data, the group's deadly drift was also used to contest the time and location of sinking. Pages upon pages of forecasts of wave heights, wind speeds and current directions were fed into a software designed for search and rescue, called SARIS⁵³⁹, to plot the possible drift trajectories of the survivors. The model determined that the coordinates given by the migrants as the location where their vessel sank were not correct, because in this case the people would have drifted north instead of west, to the island.

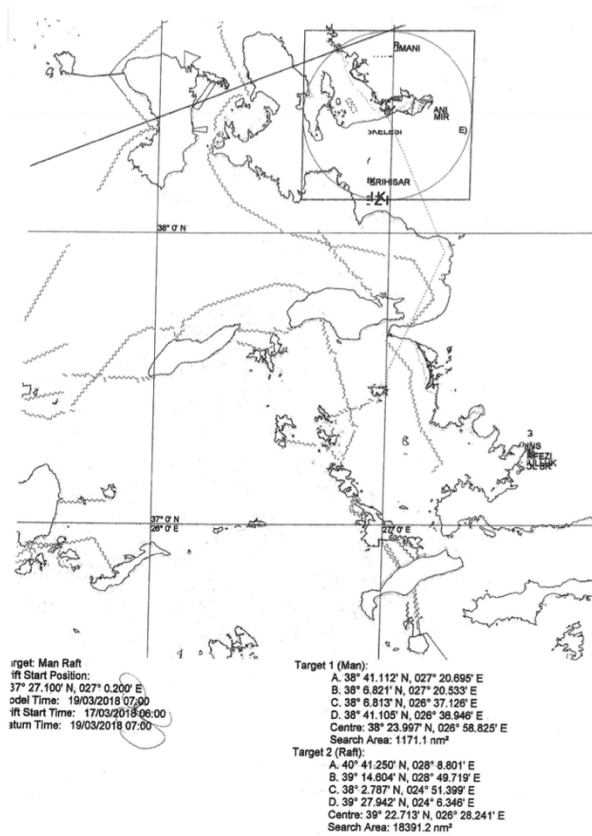
However, both the software and the weather reports that were fed into it failed to take into account the dense geography of the Aegean, and the effects of the scattered land masses on the forces affecting the drift. Designed for coast guards that operate in the open sea, the software returned trajectories of drift that cut over peninsulas and islands, continuing north-east into the Turkish mainland. Similarly, the weather reports covered large areas of the Aegean, not accounting for the microclimatic conditions between the different islands. Pursuing accountability became again a matter of resolution. With the help of a physical oceanographer⁵⁴⁰, Dr. Richard Limeburner, we determined that the tool used by the Coast Guard to calculate the drift was inaccurate, and that the drift of the shipwrecked people to the eastern shores of Agathonissi was possible, occurring at a speed of 0.32 knots (0.16 metres per second)⁵⁴¹.

⁵³⁸ Maritime Court of Piraeus, "Testimony of Qassim Kadhim Saad Saad".

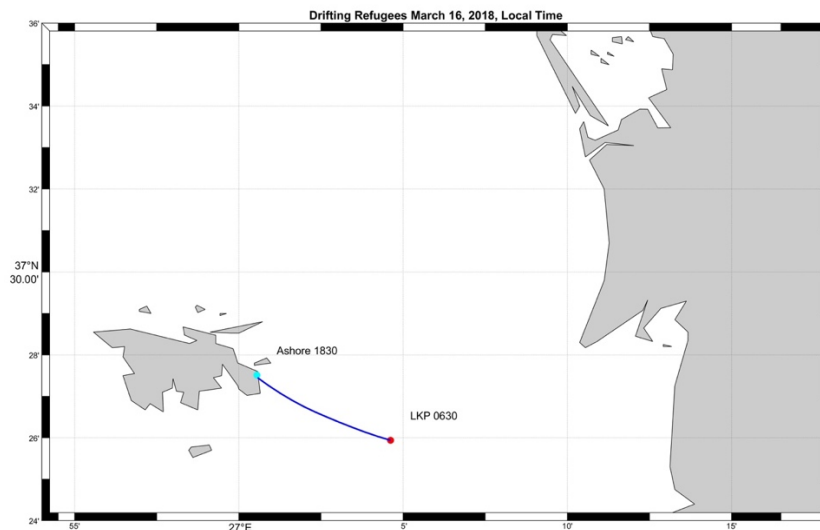
⁵³⁹ The "Search and Rescue Information systems" (SARIS) v2.0x. SARIS is a search planning tool designed for coastguards to plot search areas and target trajectories at sea according to oceanographic and meteorological data.

⁵⁴⁰ Dr. Limeburner is Physical Oceanographer Emeritus, at Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, MA, USA.

⁵⁴¹ Our findings were unsurprisingly dismissed by the prosecutor as "subjective".



Drift model produced by SARIS software, plotting a course that cuts over the Turkish mainland. Source: Agathonissi case file.



Drift model produced by Dr. Richard Limeburner, plotting the course of the bodies in the sea towards the coasts of Agathonissi. In Dr. Limeburner's model, Windage amounts for 1.2 nautical miles and near surface currents for the remaining 2.6 nautical miles. Windage describes the drift of a body with a lifejacket at sea. It is calculated according to the wind direction as 2% of the wind speed in miles per hour.

Further than the drift trajectory, the three survivors' very ability to survive for so long in the cold sea was presented to them as evidence to counter the veracity of their claims, as was their spending a night on the rocky shore with wet clothes and without the tools to start a fire. The wetness of their clothes was perused, and deemed excessive for people who alleged to have spent 12 hours ashore. The *weathering* of the bodies that had drowned in the cold water was also used as evidence against the claims of the three survivors⁵⁴². When the coroner was asked to determine how long a period the bodies he examined had spent in the sea, he responded:

According to forensic bibliography, a person can last a maximum of seven hours in a 16-degree Celsius sea. In 24 hours in the water (sea) the maceration in the palms and feet is so advanced that the skin begins to detach from the flesh. In the bodies that I examined, I did not see this. On the contrary, maceration was still in the initial stages. This is evidence that the bodies stayed in the water for some 8 to 12 hours.⁵⁴³

A resident of Agathonissi and captain of the fishing trawler "Agios Nikolaos" echoed the coroner's analysis. He claimed,

Over the years I have collected over 60 bodies, in different bodily conditions, in rigor mortis, decomposed bodies, dismembered bodies. But these ones were freshly drowned.⁵⁴⁴

The legal question became one of bodily thresholds vis-à-vis the forces of the sea. Conjuring and assessing different types of knowledge, both epistemic and situated, the prosecutor concluded that the shipwreck had happened twenty-four hours later than when the survivors claimed, and that the people had drowned and drifted ashore a mere couple of hours after that⁵⁴⁵. The only knowledge that was not heeded was that of the people that experienced this deadly drift.

Both survivors I spoke to remembered the cold vividly. They both separately recounted how, after hours of holding on to an inflatable ring, waiting for the currents to take them to the shore, their limbs went numb. Darab, who was in the island of Samos, told me that, as the hours passed, he was getting increasingly worried that his family would not survive in the cold water, and decided to go into the sea to feel the temperature for himself,

In the evening, once I got to the Samos beach, I wanted to check the water, how cold it is. So I go into the water, I put my head three times in the water, I realised it is very cold.

⁵⁴² No photos from the forensic examination were included in the court documents, making it impossible for the lawyers to examine the veracity of the forensic reports. They only photos included were the ones taken by the Coast Guard upon rescue, which I choose to not reproduce here.

⁵⁴³ Death Certificates issued in the island of Samos.

⁵⁴⁴ Testimony of A.K. before the Prosecutor of Samos, March 27, 2018.

⁵⁴⁵ This conclusion was also inconsistent with coroner's report who calculated that time to 8-10 hours.

When I visited the island a month and a half later, I also went into the sea. The waters were still freezing, causing pins and needles across my limbs.

iv. **Waves:** Liquid Topographies of Border Defence

In the Farmakonissi case, with sovereign violence being mediated by the forces of the sea, the threshold shifted away from interrogations of bodily endurance, to more straightforward questions of agency. Did the 1.5-metre-high waves of the Aegean Sea sink the small vessel, as the coast guard claimed? Was death in the rough, 7 beaufort, winter seas off Farmakonissi “to be expected”? Or were the waves released by the 24-metre-long coast guard vessel’s 1400hp hydro-jet engines in full throttle to blame for the sinking, as the survivors claimed? And, if so, were these waves products of nature, or of culture? Can the two be distinguished in the context of the Aegean *border nature*?

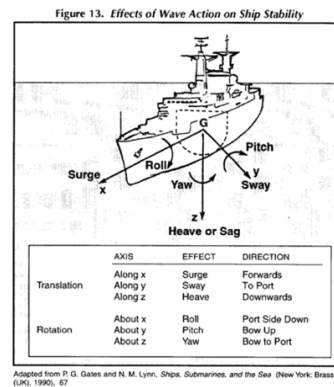
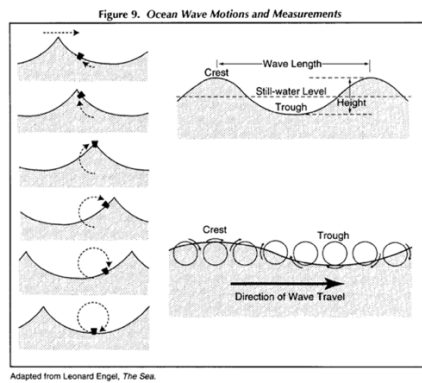
Since oceanography emerged as a distinctive field of military study with the publication of U.S. Navy Lieutenant Matthew F. Maury’s *The Physical Geography of the Sea*, in 1855⁵⁴⁶, the ability to quantify and calculate waves as liquid topographies had been central to military projects. Through technologies like Argo floats, remote-sensing satellites, wave buoys, and ship sensors⁵⁴⁷, and despite their temporal and physical volatility, waves are researched as physical objects and are, to a degree, treated as structures in their own right. They are indexed vertically, in strata, from crest to trough, and measured for their “significant wave height” (the vertical distance between crest and trough), “wave length” (the distance between successive peaks or depressions), velocity and “wave period” (the average time it takes for two consecutive wave crests to pass through a fixed point)⁵⁴⁸. A separate vocabulary exists to describe these deformations: “swelling”, “wave breaking”, “white-capping”, “bottom friction”, “refraction” and “shoaling” are a few of the terms used. As the military geographer John Collins notes, “waves and winds not only make ships surge, sway, heave, roll, pitch, and yaw in heavy seas, but introduce great structural stress.”⁵⁴⁹ Such was the structural stress that caused the bow of the *Göznuru* to break during the zig-zagged towing, and the vessel to ultimately capsize. One can only presume that the well-trained coast guard crew were aware of the effects their manoeuvres would have on the smaller *Göznuru*.

⁵⁴⁶ Matthew Fontaine Maury, *The Physical Geography of the Sea*, (London: Sampson, Low, Son & Co, 1855).

⁵⁴⁷ Jennifer Gabrys, “Ocean Sensing and Navigating the End of this World”, *e-flux*, www.e-flux.com/journal/101/272633/ocean-sensing-and-navigating-the-end-of-this-world/ (accessed October 2019).

⁵⁴⁸ Copernicus, “Ocean surface Waves Indicators for the European Coast for 1977 to 2100 Derived from Climate Projections”, available at: cds.climate.copernicus.eu/cdsapp#!/dataset/sis-ocean-wave-indicators?tab=overview (accessed August 2020).

⁵⁴⁹ Collins, *Military Geography*, 60.



“Effects of wave action on ship stability”. Source: John Collins, *Military Geography*.



A patrol vessel of the Greek Coast Guard performing an aggressive deterrence manoeuvre against a dinghy filled with migrants. Source: Youtube.

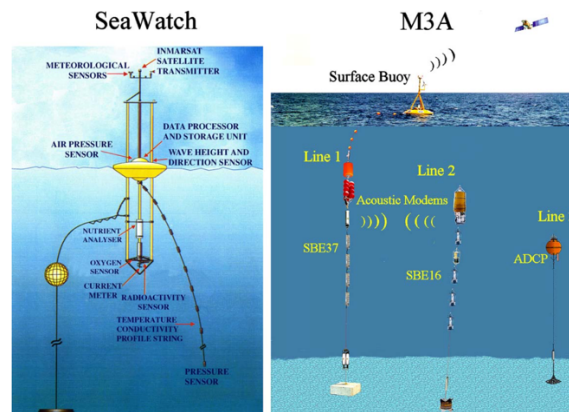
Waves in the south-eastern Aegean, where the two shipwreck occurred, are claimed and measured separately by both littoral countries. During the period of 1994-2000, Turkey carried out a NATO-funded project, called NATO TU-WAVES project, with the purpose of establishing “a reliable wave atlas” of the Turkish coast⁵⁵⁰. On the Greek side, the Hellenic Centre for Marine Research also uses a combination of buoys, Argo floats, ferry box data and satellite imagery to “record the physical, biological and chemical parameters of the Greek seas”. This system is, unsurprisingly, also called “Poseidon”⁵⁵¹. As these studies suggest, the shading effect of the Turkish coast and the Dodecanese island chain means that waves along the south-east Aegean border are smaller and less powerful than in those that occur in the central and southern Greek Aegean⁵⁵². These border waves are therefore less like mountain ridges

⁵⁵⁰ This was done through a wave gauging network of six stations of directional wave buoys. See www.medcoast.net/modul/index/menu/NATO-TU-WAVES/91 (accessed June 2020).

⁵⁵¹ Hellenic Centre for Marine Research, <http://poseidon.hcmr.gr> (accessed November 2016).

⁵⁵² Maximum wave heights, above a mean height of 0.96m and a mean power of 5.2 kW/m, have been found to occur more frequently in the central Aegean, between the islands of Ikaria and Mykonos, some 50nm west of the location of the two shipwrecks, as well as at its the southern edge, between the islands of Karpathos, Kasos and Crete. Navid Jadidoleslam et al., “Wave power potential assessment of Aegean Sea with an integrated 15-year data” *Renewable Energy*, 86, (February 2016): 1056.

and more like a rugged terrain of hills, depressions and ravines. The analogy is therefore less one of an unsurpassable sea wall, as it is one of an attritional, slow, and repetitive defensive architecture that, activated against littoral disputes and border patrol operations, turns this liquid topography into a trap.



The SeaWatch buoy used in the Poseidon network (left) and the multi-parametric M3A station of the Cretan Sea (right). Source: Hellenic Centre for Marine Research.

When it comes to examining the provenance of certain deadly waves, I argue, the loaded recent history of the archipelago renders futile any attempt to distinguish nature from culture. Waves in the Aegean are always some kind of *natureculture*. Or, better yet, to use the term coined by the American anthropologist of science Stefan Helmreich to describe “those processes commonly understood to be organic, biological, meteorological, geological, and oceanic that [are] tailored to social projects and endeavours”⁵⁵³, waves here become a kind of *infranature*. Helmreich indeed describes waves as objects that have long been mutated by human activities. They belong to “an oceanic infrastructure for travel, commerce, or energy exchange”⁵⁵⁴ while also functioning as markers of anthropogenic climate change on a planetary scale. In encounters like the one between ΠΑΣ-136 and the Göznuru, waves are merely “sculpted into further infrastructural form”⁵⁵⁵. Molded by the coast-guard, they assume the role of “*architectural materials*, physical processes folded into systems of communication and control”⁵⁵⁶, in this case tasked with regulating mobility along the external borders of the EU.

Waves are therefore not only physical, but also political objects: they have a history. If they are understood in their full complexity, Philip Steinberg and Kimberley Peters argue, “as forces, as vectors, as assemblages of molecules and meanings, as spaces of periodicity, randomness, instability and

⁵⁵³ Stefan Helmreich, “How to Hide an Island” in Daniel Daou and Pablo Pérez-Ramos (eds.) “New Geographies 8: Island”, Cambridge MA: Harvard Graduate School of Design, (2017): 86.

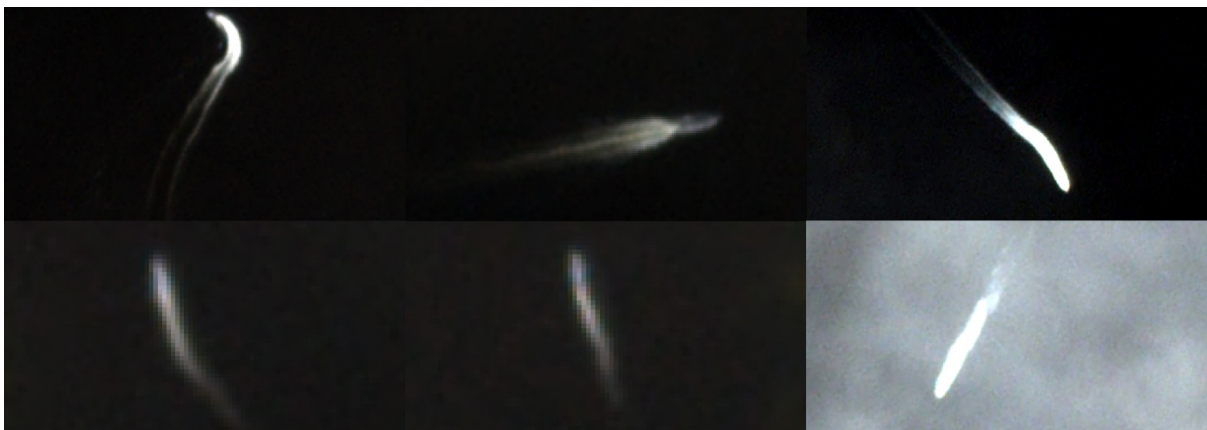
⁵⁵⁴ Stefan Helmreich, “Waves. An anthropology of scientific things” Transcript of the Lewis Henry Morgan Lecture given on, *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic theory* 4 no.3, (October 2014): 265–284.

⁵⁵⁵ Helmreich, “How to Hide an Island”, 84.

⁵⁵⁶ Ibid.

transformation, and as volumes (depths) and areas (surfaces)—then waves, and the wet ontology they exemplify, may be exceptionally well suited for understanding the politics of our watery planet.”⁵⁵⁷ It is this quality of waves as prisms of history and politics that keeps me close to the waves of Farmakonissi here. Rearranging the liquid matter of the Aegean, giving it depth and shape, they present themselves as key analytical devices for this thesis, which I use to “solicit questions about (...) whose stories will be heeded or dismissed”⁵⁵⁸.

3.2.5. Wakes: Waves as Evidence



Wakes of coastguard Vessels on the sea around Agathonissi island, 16-17/3/2018. Photo: Planet Labs

On March 16th, 2018, between 10:21:02 and 10:40:29 am local time, two small satellites belonging to Planet Labs’s fleet of “doves”⁵⁵⁹ flew over Agathonissi, and snapped a series of pictures of the island and the sea around it. One of these pictures, taken at 10:22:17, about four hours after the shipwreck, captured three vessels; two of them circling the island and one moving parallel to the border, inside Turkish territorial waters. At a resolution of 3 metres per pixel, the 10 to 20-metre-long vessels are hardly visible in the photographs, occupying all but three or four pixels. Instead, it is their movement that registers in the photograph, visible by the tracks the vessels leave on the water surface.

In fluid dynamics, these tracks are called wakes. Like a wave, a wake has its own architecture. It consists of a characteristic wave pattern in the form of a V-shaped region behind the ship, known as the “Kelvin wake”⁵⁶⁰, and a “turbulent wake” along the track of the ship. Around and directly behind the

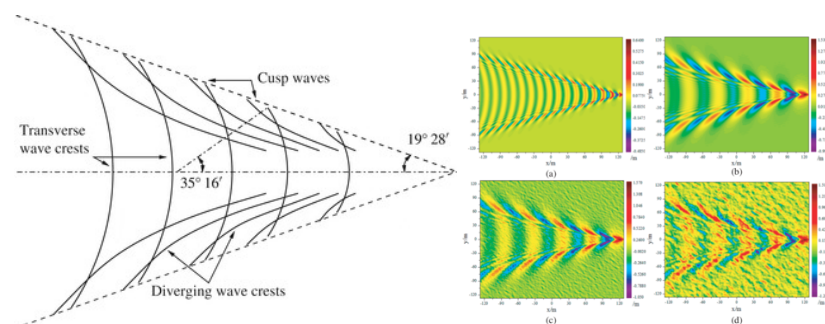
⁵⁵⁷ Steinberg and Peters, “Wet Ontologies”, 261.

⁵⁵⁸ Schuppli, *Material Witness*, 5.

⁵⁵⁹ Planet Labs is a private earth imaging company. They deploy small satellites which they call “doves”.

⁵⁶⁰ Named after the British Physicist Lord Kelvin who first explained the physics of ship wakes in 1887.

ship (what is known as the “local wave disturbance region”), the wake is a complex combination of bow and stern waves, eddies, currents, and foam. At the outer edges of this wedge (called the “cusp line” or “Kelvin arm”), the waves are often highest. From about 3 ship lengths behind the ship (known as the “free wave pattern region”), the Kelvin wake consists of two kinds of waves: “transverse waves” (crests across the ship's track) and “divergent waves” (crests roughly parallel to the ship's track, moving outward). Underneath the water surface, a wake is comprised of an equally complex stratification of internal waves and vortices⁵⁶¹.



The hydrodynamic structure of wakes (left), and simulations of wake heights based on different sea and vessel speeds (right).
Source: Melsheimer, “Ship Wakes Observed with ERS and SPOT”.

When seen from the point of view of a satellite, this wake architecture becomes an index that allows us to reverse engineer the characteristics of the machine or body that birthed it. The shape and opening angle of the wake, for example, betrays the vessel speed and shape⁵⁶². Combined with aerial photography, wakes offer themselves for purposes of maritime surveillance, as diverse as military planning, the control of fisheries, or, as is the case here, human rights investigations. When examining cases of shipwrecks in the Aegean, where the precise trajectories, or the very presence of coast guard vessels at sea, are often undisclosed by authorities, wakes become a ripple on the sea surface through which we can contest the obscurity that covers these militarized and off-limits waters. They become what Pezzani and Heller have described as a “liquid trace”⁵⁶³, the inscription of a migrant crossing, or a shipwreck and its aftermath, on the sea’s surface.

I scrutinised the satellite photograph from that morning in order to understand and identify the vessels visible. Based on their calculated speed and size, and trajectory. We therefore attempted a taxonomy of the wakes visible. The choice of the term taxonomy is deliberate here, as it captures this double-

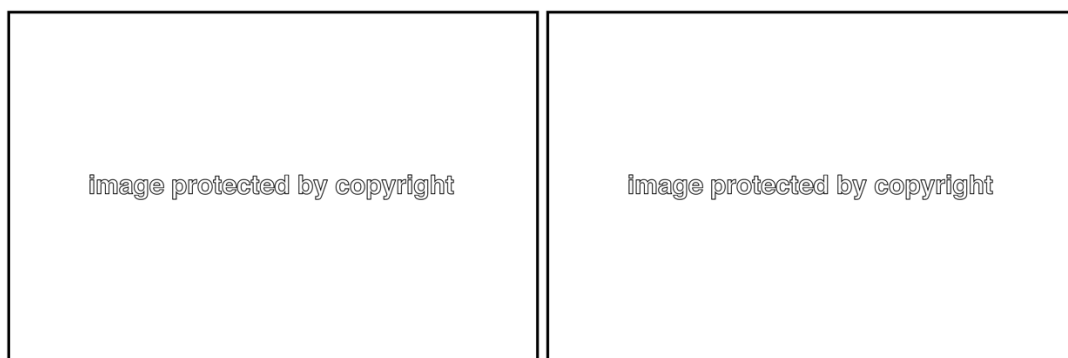
⁵⁶¹ Christian Melsheimer, “Ship Wakes Observed with ERS and SPOT, Centre for Remote Imaging, Sensing and Processing”, 2001, crisp.nus.edu.sg/~research/shipwakes/shipwakes.htm (accessed April 2020), and Trond Helge Torsvik et al, “Identification of ship wake structures by a time–frequency method” *Journal of Fluid Mechanics*, 765 (February 2015).

⁵⁶² Björn Tings et al “Extension of Ship Wake Detectability Model for Non-Linear Influences of Parameters Using Satellite Based X-Band Synthetic Aperture Radar” *Remote Sens.* 2019, 11 no. 5, (March 2019): 563.

⁵⁶³ Pezzani, “Liquid Traces”, 2014.

entendre of wakes as physical objects that are created at the intersection of natural and machinic processes. Taxonomy traditionally refers to the categorization and partition of nature for the purpose of scientific research. As a tool at the disposal of colonial naturalists, taxonomy has historically been deployed to rationalize racism and to create distinctions between the colonisers and the natural environment, as well as colonial subjects. A lesser known use of the term, however, lies in military vernacular, where the term is used as an indexing tool to encompass the domains of weapons, equipment, and tactics⁵⁶⁴. Encompassing both worlds, a wake taxonomy therefore refers to the analysis of physical wave processes with the purpose of indexing and identifying military assets.

Through this analysis, I found that the wakes visible belonged to two vessels of the Greek coast guard, ΠΑΣ-171 and ΠΑΣ-612, and a third, unknown vessel of the Turkish coast guard, all three of which had been deployed to look for the survivors of the sunken vessel. None of the vessels carried AIS⁵⁶⁵ tracking data transponders, an omission which is common among coast guards in the Aegean, who prefer to operate in the shadows of optic systems and far from civilian scrutiny. I compared these wakes to the trajectories the commanders of the Greek vessels had manually plotted before the prosecutor, and found them to be often more than a nautical mile apart. Such an inconsistency prompted questions regarding the veracity of the commanders' claims, as well as the prosecutor's conclusion that, had there been a shipwreck on March the 16th, these vessels would have had located it. These questions were left unanswered. Manipulating the image further in order to look through the clouds that obscured part of the sea surface, longer wakes that were invisible in the raw image, began to surface⁵⁶⁶. A recent history of movement presented itself in the form of waves.



The trajectories of Coast Guard Vessels ΠΑΣ-171 and ΠΑΣ-137 as plotted by their commanders before the prosecutor.
Source: Agathonissi case file

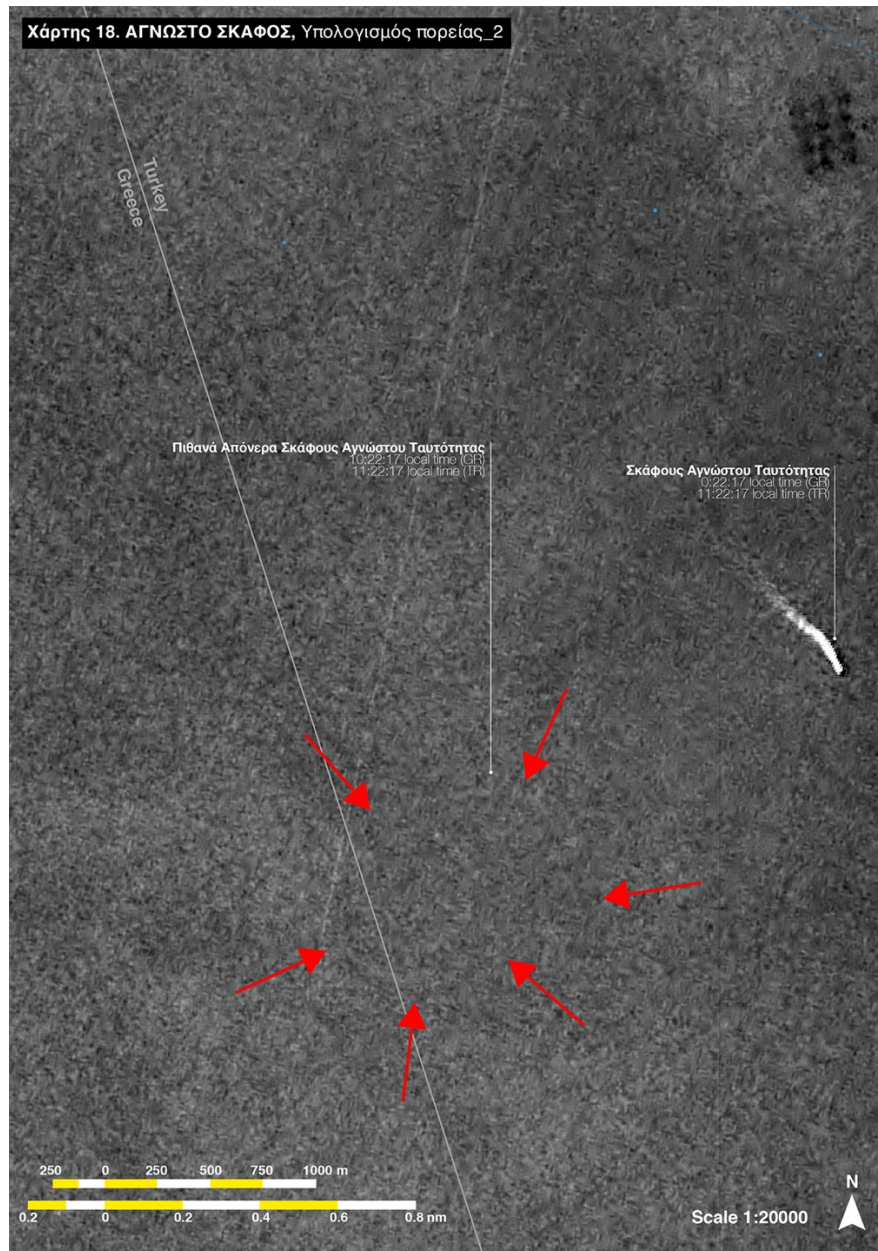
⁵⁶⁴ Russel W. Fenske, "A Taxonomy for Operations Research", *Operations Research*, 19, No.1 (February 1971): 224-234.

⁵⁶⁵ Automatic Identification System (AIS) is a standard automated tracking system used for vessel navigation.

⁵⁶⁶ This analysis was undertaken in collaboration with Jamon Van Der Hoek, assistant professor at the school of Earth, Ocean and Atmospheric, Oregon State University, and expert in satellite imagery analysis. The technique used is called Principal Component Analysis (PCA). It is a process that filters the three bands of the image (red, green, blue) and removes any unnecessary noise, like clouds, producing the equivalent of an x-ray of a satellite photograph.



The trajectory drawn by the commander of Coast Guard Vessels ΠΛΣ-171 (in blue) compared to a satellite image from that morning reveals an inaccuracy of 0.89 nautical miles, or 1.68 kilometres. GIS analysis by author, satellite photograph by Planet Labs.



Principal Component Analysis of a satellite photograph reveals a circular wake cutting across the border. This serves as further proof that this unidentified vessel belonging to the Turkish Coast Guard could have been performing search and rescue. Through further analysis it was found that the vessel was cruising at a speed of 29.02 knots. GIS analysis by author and Jamon Van Der Hoek, satellite photograph by Planet Labs.

A wake, for Christina Sharpe is more than “the track left on the water’s surface by a ship; the disturbance caused by a body swimming, or one that is moved, in water; the air currents behind a body in flight; a region of disturbed flow; in the line of sight of (an observed object); and (something) in the line of recoil of (a gun)”. Wakes “are processes; through them we think about the dead and about our relations to them; they are rituals through which to enact grief and memory. Wakes allow those among the living to mourn the passing of the dead through ritual (...).” “In the wake”, for Sharpe, “the semiotics of the slave ship continue”.⁵⁶⁷

Through encounters like the one between the ΠΑΣ-136 and the *Göznuru*, or non-encounters like the patchy search and rescue operation conducted by ΠΑΣ-171, ΠΑΣ-612 and ΠΑΣ-137, waves (and wakes) emerge as a fundamental component of the larger infrastructure that defines the Aegean carceral archipelago. Following Sharpe, I argue the wakes of the Coast Guard vessels captured in the satellite photo are two dimensional representations of the contemporary military-humanitarian complex that sustains the necropolitical architecture of Fortress Europe. These turbulent inscriptions on the sea’s surface therefore churn the situated violent and contested histories of the Aegean with the residue of past colonial regimes and recent military interventions in Africa and Asia. They are, in this sense, part of the imperial legacies that shape the politics of European migration today.

In the context of Aegean crossings, these legacies are manifest in the form of an ever-increasing securitization of the archipelago, be it through murderous coast guard patrols and push-back operations, modern forms of strategically prolonged incarceration and quarantine in remote islands, or, finally, the externalisation of the very border and its displacement beyond European territory, to the Turkish shore, via the EU-Turkey deal. The wakes examined here are both ripples of the “war on terror”, of past and present histories of colonial occupation and state violence, and building materials of the contemporary “war on migration”⁵⁶⁸. They contain the *longue durée* of state violence in the Aegean.

This part of the thesis sought to offer a critical reflection of such a practice.

⁵⁶⁷ Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 21.

⁵⁶⁸ Webber, “The War on Migration”,

Epilogue: Pharmakon-nissi

Farmakonissi is a compound place name. The word *farmakon*, or *pharmakon*, in Greek, stands for “remedy”, but it can also mean “poison”, or “colour”. The second component, *-nissi*, stands for “island”. According to the legend, Farmakonissi took its original name, *Farmakoussa* - she who holds remedies (or poisons, or colours) - from Hippocrates of Kos, the ancient Greek “father of medicine”, who used to visit the island to collect herbs. The French philosopher Jacques Derrida, in his text *Plato’s Pharmacy*, addresses this double etymology of the word *pharmakon*. “The pharmakon would be a substance”, Derrida writes, “with all that that word can connote in terms of matter with occult virtues, cryptic depths refusing to submit their ambivalence to analysis.”⁵⁶⁹ It is in liquid – “the element of the *pharmakon*” - that, for Derrida, “opposites are more easily mixed. [...] And water, pure liquidity, is most easily and dangerously penetrated then corrupted by the *pharmakon*, with which it mixes and immediately unites.”⁵⁷⁰

This section sought to demonstrate how different jurisdictions and violent histories in the Aegean Sea layer and overlap with the interstitial materialities of the archipelago to produce an uneven geography, where the circulation of both people and information is subject to violent state practices. The two shipwrecks of Farmakonissi and Agathonissi were chosen as paradigmatic objects of study, as folds on the Aegean surface upon which the forces and contestations discussed above crystallize and become legible. Both incidents in turn testify to a deep state continuum that “refuses to submit its ambivalence to analysis”.

Indeed, as I was going through the Agathonissi court files, I stumbled upon a piece of paper, the site of which made me shiver. It was the testimony of one of the high-ranked coast guard officials who were in charge of coordinating the rescue operation from inside the maritime rescue and coordination centre (MRCC) in Piraeus. His name was Ioannis Myloulis. He was the captain of the *ΠΛΣ-136* that, four years before the failed rescue operation in Agathonissi, had sunk and abandoned the *Göznuru* in the dark waters off Farmakonissi. Having been found innocent from the maritime court of Piraeus, he had been transferred to the search and rescue coordination centre where he presumably still works. If anything, this culture of impunity has only made matters worse for border crossers. Two years after the Agathonissi shipwreck, and six years after that in Farmakonissi, in October 2020, the human rights monitoring NGO “Mare Liberum” stated that “the Aegean Sea has become the stage of daily human rights violations and a black box of information”⁵⁷¹.

⁵⁶⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson, (London: Continuum, 2004), 150.

⁵⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁷¹ Mare Liberum, “The daily horror of pushbacks”, October 7, 2020, mare-liberum.org/en/news/the-daily-horror-of-pushbacks/ (accessed November 2020).

Occasionally, the surfacing of bodies and boat remains from the “cryptic” Aegean depths disrupts this equilibrium of obfuscation and confronts researchers with non-discursive traces that lend themselves to analysis, as well as with a set of ethical questions to do with one’s response to witnessing the routinization of loss of human life at sea. To paraphrase Hans Blumenberg, and his seminal treaty into the sea as a metaphor for human existence⁵⁷², this surfacing renders us, researchers, activists, humans, into spectators to these shipwrecks. In order to take up the task of upholding truth claims and calls for accountability in this archipelago we must develop a type of political and spatial practice that can account for the multiplicity of actants that make up the Aegean border nature, human and non-human alike. An epistemological turn is therefore necessary; a reciprocal shifting of attention from subject to object (and back); from object to field (and back); from figure, to ground or, rather, to sea (and back), through the body of which violent acts are enacted and upon which they register. When prompted with the right tools, rocks, winds, temperatures, currents and waves can be read against the grain to corroborate or negate human testimony, and can offer a ripple through which the obscure silences that cover these militarized and off-limits waters can be contested.



Farmakonissi island observed from the shores of Agathonissi island, May 2018. Photo by author.

⁵⁷² Hans Blumenberg, *Shipwreck with Spectator, Paradigm of a Metaphor for Existence*, (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1996).

Conclusion

Moving between different locations in an otherwise continuous corridor of border violence, this thesis has considered the complex and violent relationship between border enforcement, non-human nature, and border communities. The main line of inquiry investigated the concept of the “natural border”, which is often understood to be a passive, yet impermanent, backdrop against which territory is “naturally” partitioned, and is thought to occupy the opposite side of the operational spectrum than border fences and armed border guards. Contrary to these beliefs, this thesis argued that nature holds a certain agency within the border apparatus and is not separate from, but deeply entangled with built border architectures and military force.

Refraining from essentialist and immanentist readings of agency as “natural”, this thesis argued that contemporary border regimes are enforced not just *by* nature, but by a constellation of legislations and technologies that penetrate, rearrange, and weaponise natural environments. The hybrid results of these interactions were theorized in this thesis as “border natures”. Through this enquiry, the notion of the “natural” border emerges as a volumetric, multiscalar, sequential and atmospheric construct, wherein relationships of causality are deep, multidirectional and entangled, involving an array of actors and actants. These, I have shown, are relationships crafted across space, as they are across time: the border has both geographical breadth, and duration, and is constantly evolving.

Crucially, these relationships, or kinships, between borders and nature, are unevenly distributed across different occupants of border zones. Not all lives and bodies are violated equally at the world’s borders. It is the dispossessed, displaced and “othered” communities that endure the results of this lethal entanglement, and it is states that cultivate it to further their reach and to obscure their responsibility for the violence it unleashes. Such a power imbalance is contingent upon an equally asymmetrical access to knowledge of border zones, to their nuanced histories and materialities, as well as to the technology required to survey them. State bodies that measure, delineate, and guard borders are the ones that know them best. While this may be a sad realisation, a parallel, collective knowledge of borders has emerged in recent years. This is a knowledge which is situated, and is assembled first and foremost by the people who cross them, and further enriched by those who stand in solidarity.

A critique such as the one offered in this thesis is important for forging radical political claims within and across this collective. As Gaston Gordillo notes, “what may feel intuitive for a body facing a mountain [or a wave, or a river – in this case that it is not the mountain/wave/river *per se* that kills, but the conditions under which it is met] does not necessarily translate into theoretical clarity”⁵⁷³, or collective action. And yet, it is precisely through such a material and corporeal understanding of borders that

⁵⁷³ Gordillo, “Terrain as Insurgent Weapon”, 61.

states design their deterrence strategies. This theoretical enquiry seeks to mediate the distance between what is felt and what is archived, and in so doing, to counterbalance the power asymmetries between border agencies and border subjects.

Considering such non-linear forms of violence, the practice-based component of this thesis revolves around questions of trace, accountability, and solidarity. This has necessitated a diverse approach, ranging from forensics, cartography, film making, archaeology, camera trapping and botany. The result is a critical spatial practice that attempts to draw upon the theoretical arsenal developed in the thesis in order to sense, dissect and render visible (or audible) the ways border violence is enacted through, and concealed behind, environmental processes.

The thesis initially asked the question: how does a border reconfigure an entire ecosystem? Probing the thick, variegated cross-border landscape of Prespa/Prespa/Prespës, I investigated the ways in which “nature” has been allowed to flourish at the expense of historical memory and cultural “otherness”. I considered how the mountainous environment responds to historical events related to the construction of the modern Greek nation, and examined the traces these environmental rearrangements leave behind to unearth part of the region’s troubled, and undead, pasts. Different forms of life, both human and more-than, appear in the text and practice as witnesses to testify to the state processes by which they are affected. Through this enquiry, Prespa emerges as a space where seemingly contradicting elements like transboundary conservation efforts, technologies of surveillance, and border crossing, coexist to create a laboratory of sorts for different forms of border violence, and a prism through which contemporary processes can be understood. Several strategies that are today central to efforts to weaponise nature at the Greek border, I show, were first introduced and implemented here.

In part II, in my collaboration with Ifor Duncan, we enquired into the role of river water in the politics of death at the border. We considered how a complex collection of riparian infrastructures, shifting riverbanks, flooding, evaporating, and ongoing hydro-diplomatic impasse has been mobilised to make the Evros/Meriç/Maritsa river a strategic and durable obstacle, not only for invading forces, but also for border crossers. Playing on the “naturalness” of the river, the border regime here folds together environmental and military technology to de-humanise those neglected by states and the EU. By investigating the inundating design of the fluvial frontier, this part attempted to identify the invisible engineering of the ecosystem, which incorporates the river’s own flow, muddiness, fog and seasonal flooding in its production of a “naturally” hazardous frontier.

The final part of this dissertation has explored how the interstitial and historically charged materiality of the Aegean archipelago is mobilized as a defensive architecture against contemporary migration at sea. Reflecting on a spatial and visual practice that attempts to decode this expressive materiality to reveal the histories of border violence it might hold, the thesis enquires into recent, explicit efforts to weaponise it, and contests prevailing imaginaries that paint the sea as the sole victimiser of border crossers. As I maintain throughout the thesis, this shows that very drawing of a line on the sea surface sets into motion

a lethal ecology, one which holds the *longue durée* of state force in the archipelago, and which is presently enforced through law and military strength, as it is through winds, waves, currents, temperatures and marine life.

Despite the profound specificities that each of these liminal border spaces presents, what remains consistent is a condition of deadly violence that is produced and erased by an overlap of social, historical, geopolitical, territorial and material conditions. Across mountains, rivers, and seas, the border regime shatters lives and bodies⁵⁷⁴, hides their material traces, and when these surface as corpses (or ruins from within a forest), it employs a naturalising rhetoric that casts death and decay as an expected natural outcome, rather than its inherent prerogative. In all three cases, the way in which populations are governed and persons are destroyed at the border has a direct relationship with how the natural border environment is known and managed.

This condition is, lamentably, not unique to the cases presented in this thesis. As more walls are erected across the world's borders, and the technologies for their enforcement multiply, border crossers are pushed deeper into hostile terrains than ever before.

On the 28th of February 2020 thirteen people died in a snowstorm in the Anatolian plateau in the province of Van, between Iran and Turkey⁵⁷⁵. A couple of months later, on the 1st of May 2020, 45 border crossers drowned in the Hari river between Iran and Afghanistan, after being forced there by Iranian border guards⁵⁷⁶. Many of the people who contested the borders this thesis examines, would have had to cross both the above to reach here. Should they manage to leave Greece, the treacherous "green" route of the Balkans awaits. Alternative routes into Europe involve the arctic route that takes asylum seekers from Russia to Finland through the thick, freezing taiga forest, the Atlantic crossing from southern Morocco to the Canary Islands, or, what is perhaps the deadliest of all, across the Sahara Desert, through the central Mediterranean, and over the Alps, where mountain guides double as rescuers for migrants because, in their words, they "want to avoid finding bodies when the snow melts."⁵⁷⁷ Beyond Europe's fortified borders, between the mid-1990s and 2019, over 3200 people have lost their lives crossing the Sonora Desert from Mexico into Arizona⁵⁷⁸, and countless more have drowned in the Rio Grande river and the Caribbean Sea on their way to the US, or crossing the Indian Ocean and the Timor Sea into Australia.

⁵⁷⁴ Mbembe, *Necropolitics*.

⁵⁷⁵ "13 migrants froze to death on Turkey-Iran border", *Ahval News*, February 9, 2020, www.ahvalnews.com/turkey-migrants/13-migrants-froze-death-turkey-iran-border (accessed February 2020)

⁵⁷⁶ Marion McGregor, "Iranian border guards drowned 45 Afghan migrants, investigators say", *Info Migrants*, May 8, 2020, www.infomigrants.net/en/post/24615/iranian-border-guards-drowned-45-afghan-migrants-investigators-say (accessed May 2020)

⁵⁷⁷ Saskya Vandoorne and Melissa Bell, "Snow may hide dead migrants on Alps route", *CNN*, January 18, 2018, edition.cnn.com/2018/01/18/europe/alps-migrants-border-crossing-intl/index.html (Accessed December 2020)

⁵⁷⁸ "Hostile Terrain 94", *The Undocumented Migration Project*, www.undocumentedmigrationproject.org/hostileterrain94 (accessed September 2020)

The same operationalization of geography is fast becoming a pattern for states seeking solutions to their “problems” of migrant detention. In December 2020, the government of Bangladesh began relocating Rohingya refugees from Myanmar to a fourteen-year-old sandbank in the mouth of the Ganges river⁵⁷⁹. In September 2020, faced with an increase in “small boats” crossings of the English channel, and drawing from the Australian government’s notorious offshore detention programme⁵⁸⁰, the UK Home Secretary explored the construction of asylum processing centres in the British overseas territories of Ascension and St. Helena islands in the South Atlantic⁵⁸¹.

Inversely, when such camps are installed outside the remit of the state, nature is enlisted, and often modified, to suppress them. After the notorious Calais “Jungle” in France was cleared of people and structures in 2016, the area it was built upon was proposed to be “returned” to a neighbouring nature reserve so as to prevent the return of migrants⁵⁸². A few kilometres away from the “Jungle”, an area which hosted a smaller camp is currently being deforested to prevent migrants from seeking shelter in the woods again⁵⁸³. Deforestation also presently occurs in the US-Mexico border, where centuries old organ pipe cacti are being felled⁵⁸⁴, springs are drained⁵⁸⁵, habitats are splintered⁵⁸⁶ and mountains are levelled in the wake of Donald Trump’s border wall. In the Western Sahara, the earth is being moved by the Moroccan government to construct a 2,700 km sand berm that will separate Moroccan-controlled territories from the partially recognized state of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic. These global entanglements of natural environments and anti-immigration policies corroborate the notion of a “border nature”.

⁵⁷⁹ Bhashan Char, as the island is called, surfaced only in 2006. See “Bangladesh: halt relocation of Rohingya refugees to remote island”, *Amnesty International*, December 3, 2020, www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/12/bangladesh-halt-relocation-of-rohingya-refugees-to-remote-island/ (accessed December 2020)

⁵⁸⁰ Australia maintained offshore detention facilities in Nauru and Manus islands until 2018 and 2017 respectively, and still maintains one such facility on Christmas island in the Indian Ocean.

⁵⁸¹ “Priti Patel looked at shipping UK asylum seekers to south Atlantic”, *Financial Times*, www.ft.com/content/ff1dc189-5531-4d81-8d17-7f332596f2cd (accessed September 2020)

⁵⁸² Hanna Rullmann, “Fort Vert: Nature conservation as border regime in Calais”, *Statewatch*, February 2020, www.statewatch.org/media/documents/analyses/no-353-calais-hostile-environment.pdf (accessed March 2020)

⁵⁸³ Calais Food Collective, Twitter Post, “Deforestation continues in another camp in Calais, meters away from refugee’s living space”, December 1, 2020, www.twitter.com/CalaisFood/status/1333858600561872902 (accessed December 2020)

⁵⁸⁴ Mia Jankowicz, “Contractors working on trump’s border wall are pointlessly blowing up chunks of Arizona that they will not have time to actually build on, campaigners say”, *Business Insider*, December 6, 2020, www.businessinsider.com/arizona-mountains-blasted-for-trump-wall-no-time-build-2020-12 (accessed December 2020)

⁵⁸⁵ Logan Williams, “The Disappearance of Quitobaquito Springs: Tracking Hydrological Change With Google Earth Engine”, *Bellingcat*, October 1, 2020, www.bellingcat.com/resources/2020/10/01/the-disappearance-of-quitobaquito-springs-tracking-hydrologic-change-with-google-earth-engine/ (accessed October 2020)

⁵⁸⁶ Samuel Gilbert, “Trump’s border wall construction threatens survival of Jaguars in the US”, December 1, 2020, *Guardian*, www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/dec/01/trump-border-wall-threatens-jaguars-revival-arizona-sky-islands?CMP=share_btn_tw (accessed December 2020)

“When The Snow Melts”: Towards Border(less) Futures

The emergence of migrant bodies from the melting snow in the Alps can also be interpreted to allude to a broader condition: that of climate change. Border natures, contingent as they are upon interactions between landscapes, humans and other life forms, offer a prism through which to evaluate this shared planetary predicament.

This has been, I acknowledge, the “elephant in the room” for this thesis: too important to ignore and too big to address in passing. I have only tangentially touched upon it, preferring to dedicate the limited space granted by the format of the PhD to the present condition, and the layered histories that enable it. At the very least, I can begin to address it in this final part of the text, therefore signalling a potential future direction for this work.

While I have chosen to probe plants, waterways, ice, sediments, and waves, to reveal their agency in violent acts that take place in the present such an enquiry can equally be calibrated to signal towards the future. Changes are already visible in the border environments that I investigated in this thesis, and these will only accelerate. As the Rila Mountains where the Maritsa springs receive less and less snowfall every year, the flow of the river will become increasingly unstable, and, by consequence, the territory scripted on the basis of its median line will be harder to define. New islands will be revealed, to be claimed by the tree littoral countries. The same is true for the Prespa lakes, where the recess of lake waters is increasingly felt. As the sea levels rise the river will become saline farther upstream from the Delta, in turn affecting the plants and animals that populate it, as well as the process whereby bodies decompose in its waters. Some of the “grey” Aegean rocks will eventually become reefs. An ongoing spike in water temperatures creates unprecedented anomalies on the surface of the Aegean, affecting wave and current patterns, and inviting “invasive” species that had previously been unable to cross the Suez Canal into the Mediterranean⁵⁸⁷. Such is the impact of climate change on the mobility of marine life that in 2020, the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, a document which features centrally in the “Aegean dispute”, was updated to include a provision for the establishment of mobile marine protected areas, the boundaries of which will be flexible across national jurisdictions so as to respond to the movements of the species they would be designed to protect⁵⁸⁸.

As the emerging figure of the “climate refugee” suggests, this new climatic regime will necessitate movement on an unprecedented scale not only for plants and animals, but for human communities as well, in turn affecting how borders are crossed, and enforced. Consequently, a de-naturalised critique of “natural” borders, which focuses on the geographies on which they are established, but which also

⁵⁸⁷ Fittingly, marine scientists call these species “Lessepsian migrants”, named after Ferdinand de Lesseps, the French engineer who designed the Suez Canal.

⁵⁸⁸ I am indebted to James Bridle for sharing his upcoming, yet untitled, book with me, from where I sourced this information.

extends to include the political model of national sovereignty these bound and engender, is as imperative as it has ever been. Ultimately, to think against, and beyond, borders is to think beyond the state. But, crucially, this is a critique that is preoccupied with the defence of the inalienable right to movement and self-determination for all living organisms, humans and non-humans alike. A simple axiom, therefore, lies at the heart of this study: if there is one thing that is natural about the world's borders is their very transgression.

Appendix: Portfolio of Practice*

*The Practice for this thesis employs an array of different media. For reasons of brevity the portfolio only includes one photo for each piece, along with a brief description. For the full portfolio of practice visit the website www.border-natures.xyz, built specifically for the purpose of this PhD submission, using the password: border-NATURES_2021-JAN

Ghost Habitats – Traps

Video Installation (in progress)



Traps is an ongoing project which explores the use of “trail” or “trap” cameras as a filmic medium for evidencing state violence in the trilateral Pespa/Prespa/Prespës national park. With human testimony either coerced or exiled, the project employs the tool of the trap camera, commonly used by conservationists and border guards alike, to represent the effects state governance has had on the communities and the natural environment in this border region. In doing so, the project considers the entanglements between nature, culture and technology in border zones, and probes the role of non-humans - animals, forest communities and changes in meteorological conditions - in bearing witness to violent, yet gradual, border processes.

Selected videos can be accessed at: www.border-natures.xyz/ghost-habitats.

Ghost Habitats – Wild Archaeologies

3D survey (in progress – title TBC)



Wild Archaeologies (title TBC) is an ongoing project concerned with the documentation of the ruinous infranatural landscapes of Prespa. Using drone and ground photography, the project employs a 3D scanning technique called photogrammetry to create accurate three dimensional models of several human-modified, and presently abandoned, locations in the Greek Prespa region. The locations “scanned” at the time of submission include the former villages of Sfika/Besfina, Kranies/Drenovo, Moschochori/V’mbel, as well as a number of defensive positions from the Greek civil war. The project interrogates the capacity of 3D imaging technologies to document spaces that have undergone nuanced, so called “natural”, erasure, and to create a digital archaeological counter-archive which will carry the unpast pasts of the region to the present.

Drone Photography with Marianna Bisti.

Samples from the in-progress project can be accessed at: www.border-natures.xyz/ghost-habitats.

Ghost Habitats - Herbarium Besfinense

Botanical Collection, 33 samples



Herbarium Besfinense is a floristic survey of the plants growing inside the ruins of the Saint Athanasius church in the former village of Sfika/Besfina, on the Greek-Albanian border of Prespa. It comprises 33 botanic samples, collected between May and August 2020. This collection, which includes a diversity of plant taxa, both wild and cultivated, prompts the information held in the vegetative matter of the young forest growing inside the church walls to interrogate the conditions which led to the abandonment of the village in the 1940s. As the forest expands across the village, the flora growing inside the church ruins serves as “ruderal evidence” to the recent existence of an extensive human community, as well as the violent processes that let the church collapse, and which today cast the Prespa mountains as a “green border”.

The collection was assembled with Botanist Fanourios-Nikolaos Sakellarakis. It can be accessed in full at: www.border-natures.xyz/ghost-habitats.

Sounding the Arcifinious

Audio Documentary, 58'



Sounding the Arcifinious is an audio documentary which investigates the border region of the Evros/Meriç/Martisa river as a de-naturalised and expanded fluvial frontier. Braiding text with hydrophone recordings, interviews and field recordings, it considers the type of water and nature produced in the transboundary river at the border of the EU. Echoing the conception of rivers as “arcifinious” - geophysical characteristics deemed to be inherently defensive or “fit to keep the enemy out” - the piece renders audible the riverine overlaps between social and environmental processes (flooding, fence-building, unregulated pollution, deadly velocities, the dampness of the clothes worn by border crossers) to bring into focus the territorial and spatial politics of conflict at play in the Evros/Meriç/Martisa border region.

The piece was commissioned by Onassis Stegi, in the context of Movement festival, February 2020, and was produced jointly with Ifor Duncan. It can be accessed in full at: www.mixcloud.com/movement_radio/stefanos-levidis-ifor-duncan-sounding-the-arcifinious-the-evrosmericmaritsa-river/

Report on the Agathonissi Shipwreck of 16/03/2018

Forensic Report, 19/06/2019, 103 Pages



This 103-page long investigative report offers a cartographic analysis of the shipwreck that occurred in the waters off Agathonissi island, on the Greek/Turkish maritime border of the SE Aegean Sea, in March 2018. The report scrutinizes evidence included in the case file against information gathered during a series of filmed interviews with the survivors and during fieldwork in the island of Agathonissi, as well as satellite photography, GPS, AIS, and oceanographic data to reconstruct the trajectory of the shipwrecked boat, the subsequent deadly drift of migrants at sea, and the patchy rescue operation that ensued. Through this analysis, the report confirms that the shipwreck occurred on March 16, 2018, as the survivors claim, a claim which the Greek authorities deny. The report features drift analysis that was undertaken with Dr. Richard Limeburner of the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute, and satellite analysis, done in collaboration with Dr. Jamon Van Der Hoek.

The report was commissioned by the Human Rights NGOs Refugee support Aegean and ProAsyl, and was submitted as evidence to the Maritime Court of Piraeus in July 2019, and the European Court of Human Rights in October 2020. It can be accessed in full at: border-natures.xyz/grey-rocks-black-waves.

Grey Rocks, Black Waves

Plinth at “Hostile Environment”(s) exhibition, 19/06/2019, AR/GE Kunst, Bolzano/Bozen



Grey Rocks, Black Waves (photo on the right, part of the plinth facing the wall) is an installation piece exhibited within the context of the “*Hostile Environment*”(s) group exhibition in Bolzano, Italy. The piece brings together different archival documents such as official communications of the Greek government to international legal fora, newspaper cut-outs, and maps to consider the ways in which the long history of disputed territories and geographies of exile spanning the entire Aegean Sea affect present-day territorial tensions and migration in the area.

The exhibition was curated by Lorenzo Pezzani, for AR/GE Kunst Bolzano. The exhibition catalogue *Atlas of Critical Habitats* can be accessed at:

https://www.argekunst.it/wp-content/uploads/AtlasofCriticalHabitats_Web.pdf

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