



Economy and Trade in Ancient Chios

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Chios, the famous Greek island of the Northeastern Aegean, was always very famous for her farming, especially in the areas of softer soil, but also for her hunting in antiquity, since back then, Chios was characterized by her forests, which in the modern times were almost eliminated, by arson incidents and fire accidents.

Strabo called Chios "πιτυούσα", as she had many pines (XIII, 1, 18). Forests, fruit trees and mastic bushes were always abundant in Chios. Forests attracted hunters, and hunting was still favored even in our days. The agricultural production of Chios was great, especially in Kampos (literally meaning "valley"), Central, and South Chios and her products were exported in the Mediterranean. Famous and basic agricultural products were wine, honey, figs, olives and mastic.





Mastic was a product found only on Chios, resin gum secreted from pixari or skins, a bushy short tree and it crystallized and used in food industry, cosmetics and pharmaceuticals from the ancient times to the present and we moderns use mastic in the form of chewing gum, as an ingredient in cosmetic and pharmaceutical products, especially for its aromatic properties and its healing property of treating stomachache and acid reflex and also as a seasoning in culinary arts. Skinos that successfully produces mastic can grow only in Chios. In other places, the tree may grow, but cannot produce the famous resin. Mastic was particularly found in the twenty four Mastichochoira (villages of mastic) of South Chios, such as Pyrgi, Emporio, and Kallimasia. Therefore Chios monopolized it and used it not only as her main product, an expensive one, but also as her emblem and symbol for her prestige.[1]

Viticulture was very important for trade and domestic consumption and the Chian wine was very expensive and as a result it was circulated in small quantities, than in Rhodes, for instance, and most famous was especially the Ariousian wine (from Arious or Aria in N. Chios). Today,

Ariousian wine is still produced by local producers and nationally and internationally distributed companies. [2] In prehistory there were fewer farms and farm houses, while in the Classical and Hellenistic times the farms and the land cultivation flourished, as the trade became even more dominant[3]. Ariousian wine was the favorite wine of Alexander the Great who both ordered great quantities of it as well as promote its trade to Asia and the Mediterranean [4].

As a result of the flourishing agricultural trade, the Chian coins, which had the sphinx and the amphora, as the island's emblems, were found in many cities with which Chios had sea trade exchange. The silver coinage production in Chios was great, while in Ionia the electrum coinage was more popular.[5] Tetradrachms with the image of Alexander the Great were minted on the mint of Chios after the defeat of the king Antigonos the Great at the battle of Magnesia (190/189 BC.), as a propaganda of unity of the Macedonian power. The Chian mint was very active in the minting of copper coins, and its copper Chian coins were used to the Roman times.[6]



Chios was until today, first of all a commercial city, just like Aegina or Marseilles, selling not only agricultural products, but many other, such as slaves, textiles, and manufacturing products M.A. Finley talked about slaves trade, while Aristotle in his Politics listed Chios and Aegina in the deme of greater and broader opportunities in trade (129, 1b, 22-25).[7] Naval bases existed on Chios during the Peloponnesian war, when she excelled. Finley thought that Thucydides was even more convincing on the existence of slave trade in Chios, just as Theopompus was later in the fourth century, when the slaves were numerous (40.40.2).





As Athenaeus (6.264C-266F) informed us, that Chiotos or Chians were the first Greeks to buy slaves.[8] K. E. Fragomichalos considered Athenaeus' testimony as very important and thought that Chians became very antipathetic and were much hated by the other Greeks, because of their slave trade. Truth was that even until today they were considered cold businessmen who cared only for making money.[9]

Other authors testified the Chian naval power, such as Demosthenes.[10] Manufacturing was essential for commerce and the Chian ceramics, carpets, woolen fabrics and shoes were famous in the Mediterranean.[11]. The most important peak of the Chian seafaring was in the fourth century BC., the century of Alexander the Great. Finally, it is not an accident that Isocrates said that the key to become a sea ruler is to become an ally with the Chians (Panegyricos, 139).[12]

In conclusion, Chians were in commerce, sea trade, and transit trade all around the Aegean and the Mediterranean since prehistory and reached their apogee in the Classical and Hellenistic times. Their economy was primarily agricultural as well as most of their products they traded. However, manufacturing was an essential part of their trade, as well, including the famous Chian ceramics. Mastic was and still is a unique product of Chios, since mastic trees that are able to produce the famous resin can successfully grow only in Chios. Coinage and slavery were some of the basic features that characterized ancient Chians. Chians' inclination to and passion for business and commerce in addition to their leading role in the use of slaves and slave trade caused jealousy and reaction by their rivalries and that stigma haunts them even today. Nevertheless, Chians still continue their maritime tradition and succeed in business and trade.

Notes

- [1]. Koraes, A. Atakta, 1974, p.58.
- [2]. Ibid., p.50 - Sarikakis, Chian Prosopography, 1986, pp.122-123 –
- [3]. Ibid., pp.14-15.
- [4]. O'Brien, Alexander the Great: the Invisible Enemy, 1994.
- [5]. Gardner, 1920, The Financial History of Ancient Chios, JHS 40, pp. 160-173.
- [6]. Sarikakis, 1998, p.17.
- [7]. Finley, M.I. Ancient Economy, 1973, p.136.
- [8]. Ibid., p.131.
- [9]. Fragomichalos, K. 1993, p.54.
- [10]. Demosthenes, On the Freedom of the Rhodians, 3.
- [11]. Sarikakis, Th. Chios in Antiquity. 1998, p.16.
- [12]. Ibid., pp.16-17.