

Comment

Big Powers, Small Islands, Real Displaced People. Response to Gettel, Eliza. Recognizing the Delians Displaced after 167/6 BCE. *Humanities* 2018, 7, 91

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Abstract: Eliza Gettel's paper on the displacement of the Delians in the second century BCE does an excellent job of examining an ancient case study of displacement through the lens of contemporary conceptions of displacement and asylum. In this paper, I try, as a modern historian of asylum, to reflect on the applicability of modern classifications to a case study over 2000 years old. First, I discuss the compatibility of the ancient with the modern. Subsequently, I engage much more deliberately with the arguments Gettel presents in her paper. Finally, I introduce a contemporary case study involving the displacement of people from the Chagos Islands in the Indian Ocean that I argue shares some similarities with that of the Delians, with both cases highlighting the often-neglected agency of the displaced.

Keywords: displacement; refugee definition; Delians; Chagos Islands

This Special Issue on the displacement of people from the ancient world to the present encourages authors to go beyond their comfort zones by attempting to “create dialogue across practices, disciplines and temporalities”.¹ Eliza Gettel's paper on the displacement of the Delians in the second century BCE does an excellent job of achieving just that by examining an ancient case study of displacement through the lens of contemporary conceptions of displacement and asylum. In attempting to take up this baton, I try, as a modern historian of asylum, to reflect on the applicability of modern classifications to a case study over 2000 years old.

1. Ancient and Contemporary Understandings of Displacement

My research focuses especially on migration history after 1945. My teaching, however, is much broader, and one course I gave in the past was ambitiously entitled “Seeking Asylum: From the Bible to Boatpeople”. After a couple of years of teaching the course, I felt that it covered too broad a timespan, especially since the emphasis lay on promoting students to use primary sources for their research papers. Therefore, I have since narrowed the course's focus so that students currently analyse how asylum has developed since 1900, with a particular emphasis on the role that refugees, NGOs and states have played in asylum's evolution. Reading Eliza Gettel's fascinating article and many of the other papers contained in this Special Issue on displacement and the humanities has made me think twice about such a change. The papers highlight how conceptions of displacement and asylum in the ancient world were often much closer to modern equivalents than biblical references from roughly the same time period and later conceptions of asylum from the medieval period. The Biblical origins of sanctuary in the Old Testament, for instance, classified “cities of refuge” as locations for those who committed manslaughter to be judged and potentially protected from blood vengeance by a member

¹ https://www.mdpi.com/journal/humanities/special_issues/Manifestos_Ancient_Present.

of the victim's family (Carro 1985, p. 752).² In the early medieval periods, churches became (often temporary) refuges for those fleeing wrongdoings (Lambert 2017). These were not really sanctuaries for the displaced. In the ancient world, by contrast, people sought protection not just because of the consequences of their own misconduct but because of external occurrences beyond their control, as exemplified by Gettel's case of the Athenians' expulsion of the Delians. Furthermore, displacement in the ancient world more closely resembles contemporary conceptions because people sometimes fled to other political jurisdictions rather than only defined internal religious sanctuaries.³ This meant that asylum could be political as well as religious (Price 2009, p. 14), as also applied to the Delians.

2. The Delian Case Study

In her paper, Gettel (2018, p. 2) clearly states that we should not "compare directly ancient and modern cases—[because] they are not the same". As Gray (2017, p. 196) notes, for instance, around 1000 city-states existed around the Aegean and the wider Mediterranean in the Classical period (c. 480–323BCE), and even more were established in subsequent centuries. This contrasts markedly with the contemporary global political structure. Nevertheless, Gettel contends that when one takes into account the notable "differences between the two political, structural landscapes", employing modern categories can help to "generate questions and reflections". For that reason, she discusses the Delian case in terms of "displacement" rather than "migration" because of the "involuntary nature of the movement" (Gettel 2018, p. 3). The Guest Editors of this Special Issue broadly construe displacement as "the involuntary movement of peoples from a place of belonging, whether due to forms of conflict, famine, persecution, or environmental disaster".⁴ In 167/6BCE, the Athenians, with the Roman senate's approval, expelled (most of) the Delians from Delos and replaced them with an Athenian community. This does appear to correlate with the broad definition put forward, since the Delians moved involuntarily from their place of belonging. Gettel (2018, p. 7) highlights the political nature of the Delians' reception by the Achaean *koinon*, which "likely acted out of self-interest in positioning themselves against Athens". This resembles the contemporary period. Loeschner (1989, p. 5) and Jacobsen (1996, p. 660), for instance, also identify international relations and national interest as important factors in determining states' refugee policies today. The relationships that destination states have with states of departure may influence how welcoming they are to people in search of asylum. The United States, for instance, often welcomed dissidents from Soviet Europe during the Cold War, because it served to undermine communism and bolster capitalism.⁵ Similarly, as Gettel argues, the Achaeans may have accepted the Delians to underline their supposed moral superiority over the Athenians.

Whether the Delians could be referred to as "refugees" according to contemporary definitions is more complicated, because Athens ordered them to leave; they did not, as far as we are aware, flee from persecution but rather from the threat of persecution if they remained. Gettel (2018, p. 8) notes that new powers often expelled the elites of a community in the ancient world, while allowing others to remain. The emphasis on individual persecution in the 1951 Refugee Convention for reasons of "nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group" means that elites fleeing Delos could be qualified as refugees according to modern definitions. For those not facing individual persecution,

² See, especially, Numbers 35: 9–28.

³ Gray (2017) notes that it was also possible in the ancient world to seek sanctuary internally at defined religious sites, for example, in the case of civil war.

⁴ Elena Isayev and Evan Jewell are the Guest Editors of this Special Issue on "Displacement and the Humanities: Manifestos from the Ancient to the Present". Their definition of displacement can be found at https://www.mdpi.com/journal/humanities/special_issues/Manifestos_Ancient_Present.

⁵ Carl Bon Tempo in his book about US refugee policy during the Cold War observes that the American decision to help Hungarian refugees in 1956 "was largely driven by foreign policy concerns. Specifically, the Eisenhower administration calculated that a commitment to Hungarians fleeing Soviet tanks was a strong and clear sign of support for the Hungarian Revolution that, at the same time, would not too greatly damage delicate American-Soviet relations or lead to a large superpower conflict". (See Bon Tempo 2008, *Americans at the gate: The United States and refugees during the Cold War*, p. 60).

applying refugee status may be more complicated. The examples [Gettel \(2018, pp. 9–10\)](#) provides of Delians who remained and attained Athenian citizenship suggest that their civic displacement may not have sufficed to demonstrate individual persecution. Considering Gettel's later global focus, it may be interesting to note that under the 1969 Organisation of African Unity Convention on Refugees, there would not be the same doubt over the Delians' status, since in addition to replicating the 1951 Refugee Convention, it also adds that

... the term refugee shall also apply to every person who, owing to external aggression, occupation, foreign domination or events seriously disturbing public order in either part or the whole of his country of origin or nationality, is compelled to leave his place of habitual residence in order to seek refuge in another place outside his country of origin or nationality.⁶

The Delians left because of Athenian aggression and the Athenians' subsequent occupation of their island. Similarly, the nonbinding 1984 Cartagena Declaration on Refugees in Latin America expanded the 1951 refugee definition to "persons who have fled their country because their lives, safety or freedom have been threatened by generalised violence, foreign aggression, internal conflicts, massive violation of human rights or other circumstances which have seriously disturbed public order". The arrival and takeover of the island by a foreign power seriously disturbed Delos's public order, as evidenced by the fact that so many left.

3. Parallels with the Chagos Islands?

What struck me when reading Gettel's article were the parallels that I felt existed between the plight of the Delians and that of the Chagossians more recently. The Chagos Islands are situated in the middle of the Indian Ocean between Africa, India and the Gulf states. The Delians' plight took place against a backdrop of salient imperial and political change as Roman authority expanded into the Eastern Mediterranean. In the 1960s, the Chagos Islands formed part of British Mauritius, but following the end of the Second World War, independence of India in 1947, the Suez crisis in 1956 and decolonisation in Africa, Britain's interest and power in the area had started to wane. The islands by then represented a strategic location for the increasingly powerful United States. In 1943, Harold Macmillan first made the classical analogy that the British were "Greeks in this American empire" and expanded on this after the Suez crisis in 1956 when he commented that the Americans "represent the new Roman Empire and we Britons, like the Greeks of old, must teach them how to make it go" (quoted in [Danchev 2003, p. 16](#)). Although Britain's influence in the Indian Ocean had diminished, they wanted to retain some influence in the area through their "special relationship" ([Reynolds 1985](#)) with the Americans. In 1965, the British granted Mauritius independence but they demanded in return the surrender of the Chagos islands in exchange for a £3 million "indemnity". This enabled the British to "offer the use of Chagos to the US and triggered the forced clearance of the entire population" to Mauritius and the Seychelles (a British colony at the time) ([Evers and Kooy 2011, p. 2](#)). [Kampmark \(2019\)](#) described this as being another example of the British being "keen to be in the good books as Greek advisor to all-powerful Rome".

The British excised the Chagos islands from the British colony of Mauritius and established instead the British Indian Ocean Territory, the last colony that Britain created ([Vine 2011, p. 32](#)). The United States paid \$14 million to the British to deport the Chagossians and establish a military base on the biggest island, Diego Garcia ([Vine 2011, p. 33](#)). The British barred Chagossians leaving for medical treatment the right to return to the islands from 1968 onwards and ensured that conditions on the islands deteriorated in order to encourage more to leave. When the Americans began to build their military base in 1971, they ordered the British to complete the deportations ([Vine 2011, p. 34](#)). By 1973,

⁶ Article 1.2, 1969 Organisation of African Unity Convention governing the specific aspects of refugee problems in Africa on refugees.

the British had expelled approximately 1600 Chagossians who had lived on the islands (Sand 2009, p. 317). Since the expulsion, Diego Garcia “has grown into what many consider the most important US military installation outside the United States” as it lies “within strategic distance from Africa and the Middle East to South Asia and Russia, Southeast Asia and China” (Vine 2011, p. 34). Today, between 3000 and 5000 troops and support staff are stationed on the island.

The Chagossians challenged their expulsion in a variety of courts. In 1982, a private action was taken against the British government from an expelled Chagossian (Allen 2011, p. 129). After it later became apparent that Chagossians were citizens of the UK and its colonies at the time of their displacement, it became possible for them to institute public law proceedings against their permanent expulsion (Allen 2011, p. 129). Olivier Bancoult, born on the islands and later denied re-entry after travelling with his family to Mauritius for medical reasons, challenged the decision to banish the Chagossians. The court upheld his claim in 2000, with the presiding judge stating that the islanders were “belongers in the Chagos Archipelago” (quoted in Jones 2009, p. 19). The British government first accepted the right of Chagossians to live on the islands, but later reneged on its decision to recognise Chagossians’ right of abode on the islands in 2004 (Allen 2011, pp. 131–34). The House of Lords and the UK Supreme Court (2016) ruled in favour of the British government in later appeals (Bowcott 2016).

Whereas the Delians had turned to Rome as a last resort to attain compensation for their displacement, the Chagossians asked the International Court of Justice (ICJ) to decide on the legality of the separation of the Chagos Archipelago from Mauritius. The Delians had been supported in their endeavour by the Achaeans, who had provided them with asylum. Similarly, Mauritius, the country to which the British deported the majority of islanders, represented the Chagossians before the ICJ, which found in February 2019 that “the process of decolonization of Mauritius was not lawfully completed”.⁷ In May 2019, the UN General Assembly voted overwhelmingly in favour of adopting a resolution to welcome the ICJ advisory opinion and demanded that the United Kingdom unconditionally withdraw its colonial administration from the area within six months.⁸ The UK has since ignored the resolution, which is nonbinding, and insists that it retains sovereignty over the islands.⁹

The ongoing dispute involving the Chagossians and the UK and the Delians’ attempts in the second century BCE to make the Athenians accountable for their own exile clearly demonstrates what Gettel refers to as “the creative agency” of the displaced, something which the literature on refugee studies has continually underplayed (Gatrell 2017; Isayev 2017). Gettel explains that the outcome of the Delian affair was not recorded. The end result of the Chagossian case is still in doubt. Nevertheless, the agency of the displaced is clear in the actions of the Delians and the Chagossians. The Chagos Refugees Group, established in the early 1980s to challenge what one of the cofounders, the aforementioned Olivier Bancoult, refers to as the “forced exile” of Chagossians,¹⁰ has continually managed to embarrass the UK on the world stage. Indeed, one former British envoy to Mauritius claimed in early 2020 that defying the UN’s highest court may jeopardise Britain’s UN Security Council seat (Doward 2020). Not bad for a group that the Americans referred so disparagingly to in 1966 as a few “Tarzans or Men Fridays” (Kampmark 2019).

Bloemraad (2013, p. 41) contends that comparative research in the study of migration can “challenge accepted and conventional wisdoms” and “lead to innovative new thinking”. Although Gettel cautions against comparing ancient and modern cases directly, she does make a convincing case

⁷ International Court of Justice press release, ‘Legal Consequences of the Separation of the Chagos Archipelago from Mauritius in 1965’, 25 February 2019 (available at <https://www.icj-cij.org/files/case-related/169/169-20190225-PRE-01-00-EN.pdf>; last accessed on 30 June 2020).

⁸ UN General Assembly plenary seventy-third session, 83rd & 84th meetings, 22 May 2019 (available at <https://www.un.org/press/en/2019/ga12146.doc.htm>; last accessed on 10 February 2020).

⁹ BBC, ‘Chagos Islands dispute: UK misses deadline to return control’, 22 November 2019 (available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-50511847>; last accessed on 30 June 2020).

¹⁰ See Olivier Bancoult’s TED talk entitled ‘Right to Go Home’, 8 May 2018. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W88lXtRWkic> (last accessed on 30 June 2020).

for the validity of introducing and reflecting upon contemporary conceptions when discussing ancient case studies because of how it generates refreshing and inventive ways of thinking about the past and the present. Scholars have to tread carefully when comparing across such vast expanses of time and space, and must be conscious of the specifics of each period when doing so—no easy undertaking. Nevertheless, when done with care and precision, such research can open up new ways of thinking for studies on ancient and contemporary displacement, which is an undertaking that should be welcomed.

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